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2023

## **2023 Polarization Index Part II: Issue Polarization**

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# The 2023 Polarization Index

A Holistic Analysis of the State of U.S. Political Strife

Katie Langford  
September 2023



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PHOTO CREDIT: Getty Images



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# UNDERSTANDING POLARIZATION

## REPORT METHODOLOGY

Polarization is both a buzzword and a tangible indicator of the state of our nation. We hear how polarized the American public is from our politicians, the media, and our friends and family. We have also experienced the effects of voter suppression, election denial, cancel culture, the January 6th attack on the Capitol, and congressional gridlock.

This Polarization Index was created to help us better understand how polarized the American public is *really*. Grasping the ways in which we are polarized – to what degree and over what issues – and identifying areas of bipartisan agreement, will give us a stronger foundation from which to make progress.

The following report presents data from a multitude of reputable sources to provide a holistic understanding of partisan polarization in the United States. All analyzed data is weighted to better represent the American public. Links are provided at the bottom of each page and the full source list is at the end of the report.

This report is Part II of four parts. It tackles issue polarization, comparing and contrasting the major political parties' beliefs on the most pressing issues in the United States. Part I (September 2023), covers perceptions of the stability of U.S. democracy, perceptions of partisan polarization, and affective polarization. Parts III and IV, which will be published by the end of 2023, cover the three branches of U.S. government, media and disinformation, and election integrity.

The reports will be updated annually to track progress (or the lack thereof) in these areas.

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# POLARIZATION INDEX: PART II

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### THE MOST PRESSING ISSUES

Part I of the Index demonstrates that Americans from both major political parties are concerned about the health and efficacy of U.S. democracy. They view members of the opposing party as a threat to democracy, however, and increasingly perceive the ‘other’ as close-minded, immoral, and unintelligent. Therefore, the causes for concern regarding American democracy can be at least partly attributed to the rise of affective polarization (a deep dislike and distrust of those in the opposing political party absent major ideological shifts).

While there is strong evidence of affective polarization, proof of ideological polarization between the major political parties of the American public is contested and debated.

Ideological polarization refers to the differences in views between the parties on political topics and policy issues.

Americans generally agree on which major issues are the most important and most impactful to their lives. In 2022, they were most concerned about the economy and inflation; 83% of the public believes these issues present a serious threat to U.S. democracy.

The figure below represents a spectrum of *relative* polarization between these issues, highlighting major points of agreement and contention between the two major political parties. The following sections use data to further unpack each party’s views on these topics, which are ordered from least to most polarizing.

### SPECTRUM OF PARTISAN POLARIZATION

#### ECONOMY

There are high levels of concern about the economy across all parties; 68% of Americans believe Congress should raise the debt ceiling if failing to do so would cause the U.S. to default on debts.

#### GUN RIGHTS

Most Republicans believe protecting the right to own guns is extremely important, but only 12% of Democrats agree. There is bipartisan support for stricter gun policies, however, including requiring background checks for all gun purchases.

#### POLICE REFORM

Most Americans agree that changes are needed in police procedures, and 60% are not confident that police are adequately trained not to use excessive force. Republicans are about twice as likely as Democrats to report feeling protected by the police and three times as likely to believe they are well trained.

#### LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

About 60% of Americans (but only 15% of Republicans) agree that legalizing same-sex marriage is *very good* for society. While 64% of Americans favor laws protecting transgender people, there is little bipartisan support for policies on transgender access to bathrooms, sports teams, and protections against discrimination in housing and jobs.

#### CLIMATE CHANGE

Most Americans who have experienced extreme weather (e.g., wildfires) agree climate change contributed. While most Democrats support the Biden administration’s response to climate change, nearly four-fifths of Republicans disagree. The parties do agree on some policy options, like tax credits for businesses using carbon capture.

#### IMMIGRATION

The desire to limit immigration has risen in the last few years in all parties but is strongest among Republicans. Over three-fourths (83%) of Americans agree increasing security at the U.S.–Mexico border is important.

#### REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Only 12% of Americans believe abortion should never be permitted. However, 63% of Republicans and only 28% of Democrats favor the decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

#### RACE AND RACISM

Twice as many Americans are very dissatisfied with the state of race relations in the U.S. as in 2001, but Democrats are eight times more likely than Republicans to say White people benefit from advantages in society that Black people do not have.

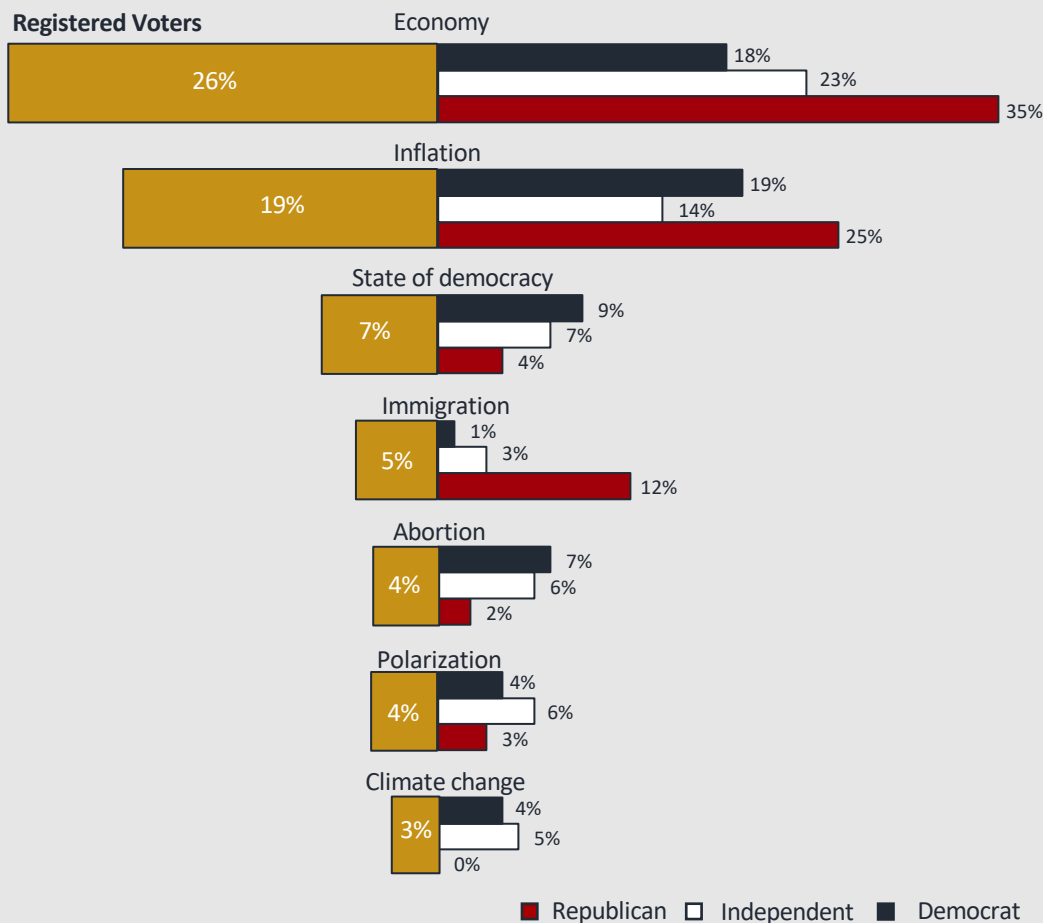
Least polarized

Most polarized

# ISSUE POLARIZATION

## IMPORTANT TOPICS RANKED

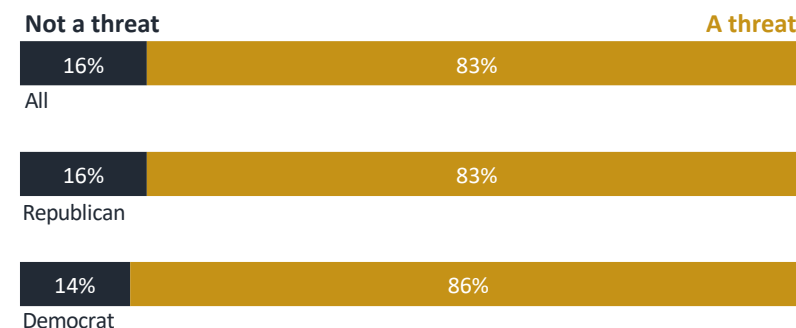
**% of Americans who deem \_\_\_\_ as the most important issue facing the country**  
*New York Times, 2022*



The U.S. public generally agrees on the major issues facing the country today. Americans view the economy and inflation as the two most pressing issues requiring action from the state and federal governments. However, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to be concerned about the economy and immigration, while Democrats are more likely to tag abortion and climate change as important.

Most Americans view these issues as a threat to democracy, heightening the need for laws and policies to make progress against them.

**When thinking about the issues that divide the nation, % who think there is or is not a serious threat to the future of democracy**  
*Marist, 2022*



These are complex issues with multiple avenues for policy change. To better understand where each party stands on the issues, this report explores the nuances of American opinion on these most pressing topics.

# ISSUE POLARIZATION

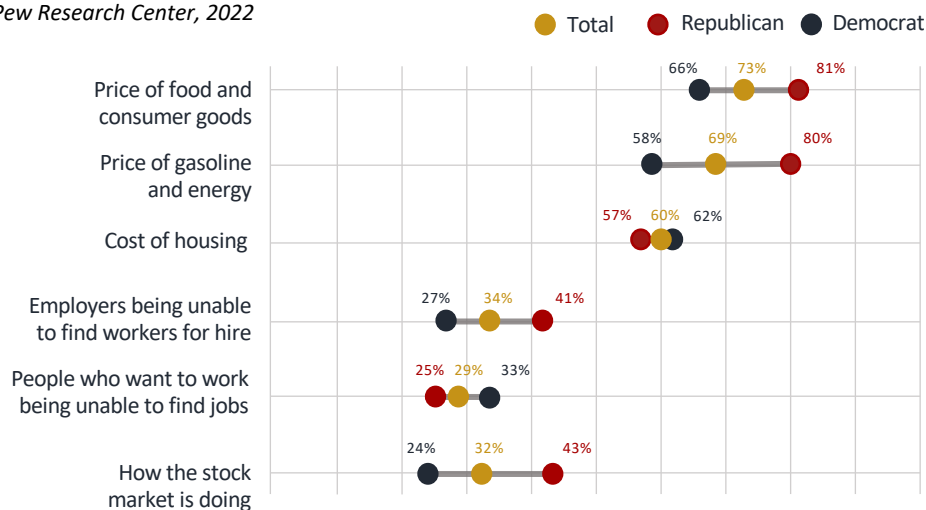
## ECONOMY

### MAJOR ECONOMIC CONCERNS

The majority of Americans are *very concerned* about the cost of living, including the prices of consumer goods, the price of gas and energy, and the cost of housing.

#### % of Americans who say they are *very concerned* about...

*Pew Research Center, 2022*



Republicans are more concerned than Democrats for four of the six indicators listed above. The largest gaps of concern regard the price of gas and energy (22 percentage points) and stock market performance (19 percentage points). Democrats are more concerned about the cost of housing and unemployment, but Republicans aren't far behind, suggesting greater unease among Republicans about the state of the economy. The average difference between levels of Republican and Democrat concern across these indicators is only 14 percentage points.

### POLITICAL POWER AND THE ECONOMY

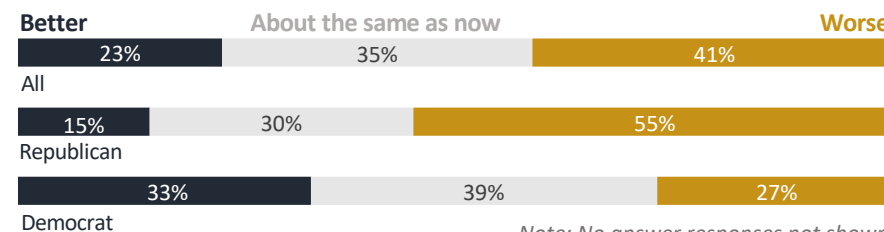
Concerns about the economy ebb and flow, as does economic health. These worries tend to align with presidential party affiliation.

- In 2020 during the Trump presidency, 79% of Democrats (but only 37% of Republicans) expected the economy to be worse in the next year.
- In 2012 during the Obama years, 57% of Republicans (but only 16% of Democrats) anticipated an economic downturn within the year.
- In 2004 during the Bush administration, 66% of Democrats (but only 18% of Republicans) were concerned about the economy (ANES, 2020).

The chart below indicates that this trend continues. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to believe the economy will be worse next year, perhaps partly because there is now a Democratic president. According to CBS News data, 65% of Democrats (but only 14% of Republicans) approve of the way Biden is handling the economy.

#### % who say they expect economic conditions in the country will be \_\_\_ a year from now

*Pew Research Center, 2022*



*Note: No answer responses not shown*

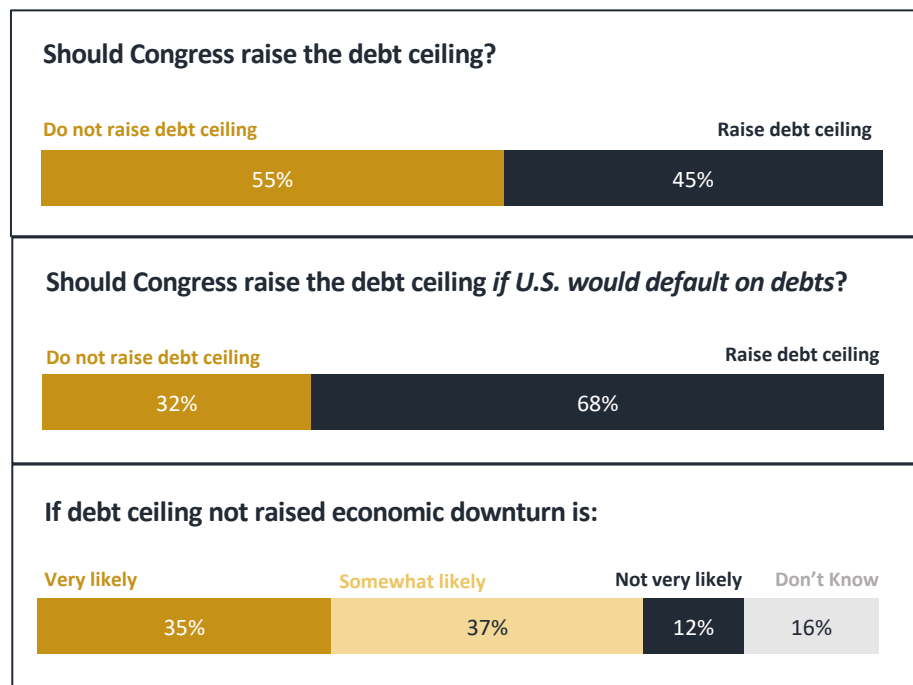


# ISSUE POLARIZATION ECONOMY

## THE DEBT CEILING

Americans found closer agreement on the February 2023 debate over whether to raise the debt ceiling, especially when they considered the possibility of default. Over two-thirds (68%) believed Congress should raise the debt ceiling if failing to do so would cause the United States to default on its debt.

And only 12% believed an economic recession was unlikely if the debt ceiling was not raised.

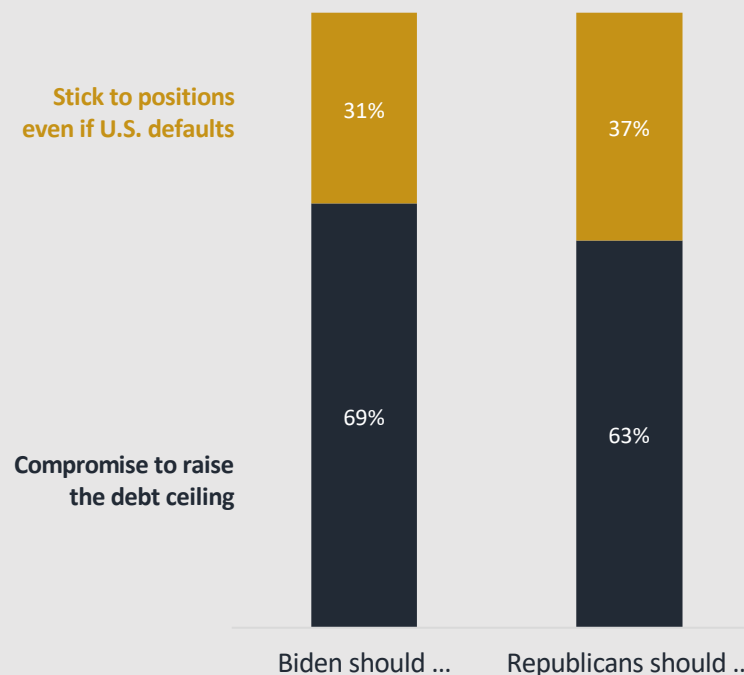


CBS News Poll/YouGov, Feb. 2023

Americans also support compromise in debt ceiling negotiations, despite strong opinions on President Biden’s economic approach. This signals that the American public ranks economic health over political party affiliation.

### % who think Biden and Republicans should \_\_\_ during debt ceiling negotiations

CBS News Poll/YouGov, 2023



# ISSUE POLARIZATION

## CLIMATE CHANGE

### SEVERE WEATHER AND CLIMATE CHANGE

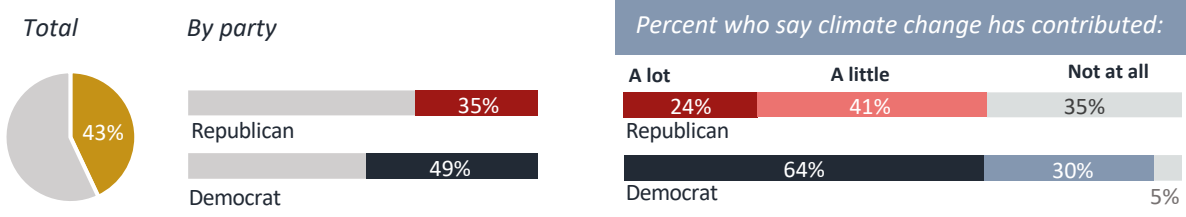
A Pew Research Center poll from 2022 found the majority of Americans from both main parties who have experienced severe weather within the past 12 months linked the event to climate change.

The degree to which respondents link the weather to climate change varies by party, however. Democrats overwhelmingly make the connection between severe weather and climate change. At least two-thirds of Democrats (but only a third of Republicans) said climate change contributed *a lot* to the four weather conditions featured in the graphs to the right.

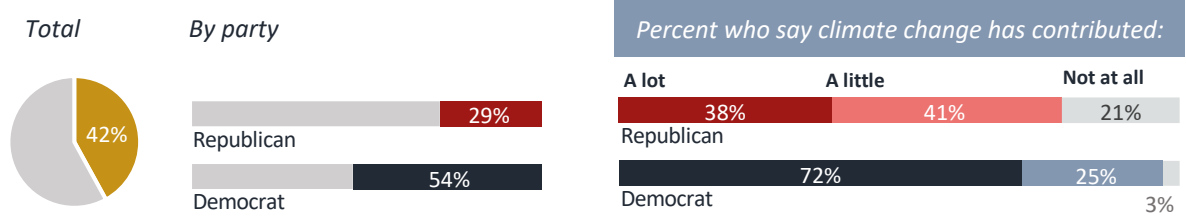
Republicans do associate severe weather with climate change, though to a lesser degree: 65% connect severe weather, 79% unusually hot weather, 71% droughts, and 73% wildfires to climate change either *a little* or *a lot*.

This data can help break the stereotype that Republicans do not believe climate change is an important issue or that they question the validity of the science behind it.

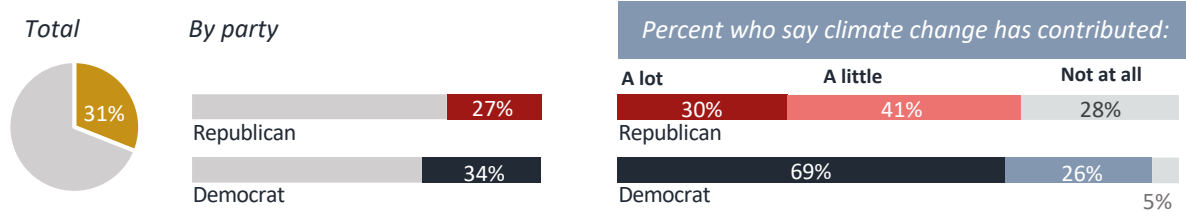
#### % who have experienced severe weather, e.g., floods and storms Pew Research Center, 2022



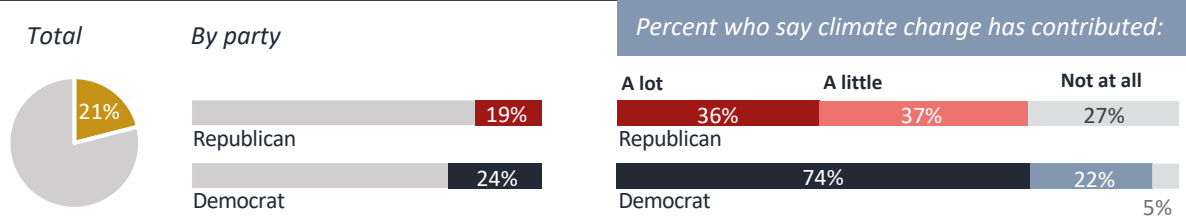
#### % who have experienced unusually hot weather



#### % who have experienced droughts/water shortages



#### % who have experienced wildfires



Note: No answer responses not shown

# ISSUE POLARIZATION

## CLIMATE CHANGE

### SUPPORT FOR CLIMATE POLICIES

Climate change has been a top priority for President Biden’s administration. The United States has rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement, and the Inflation Reduction Act promotes green and renewable energy in the infrastructure sector.

However, over half (58%) of Americans believe the federal government is not doing enough to address climate change. The push is coming from Biden’s own party: while nearly 80% of Democrats believe the administration’s policies are taking the country in the right direction, more than three-quarters (82%) believe the government could and should be doing more. Only 28% of Republicans agree (Pew Research Center, 2022).

#### % of U.S. adults who think the Biden administration’s politics on climate changes are taking the country in the \_\_\_\_.

*Pew Research Center, 2022*

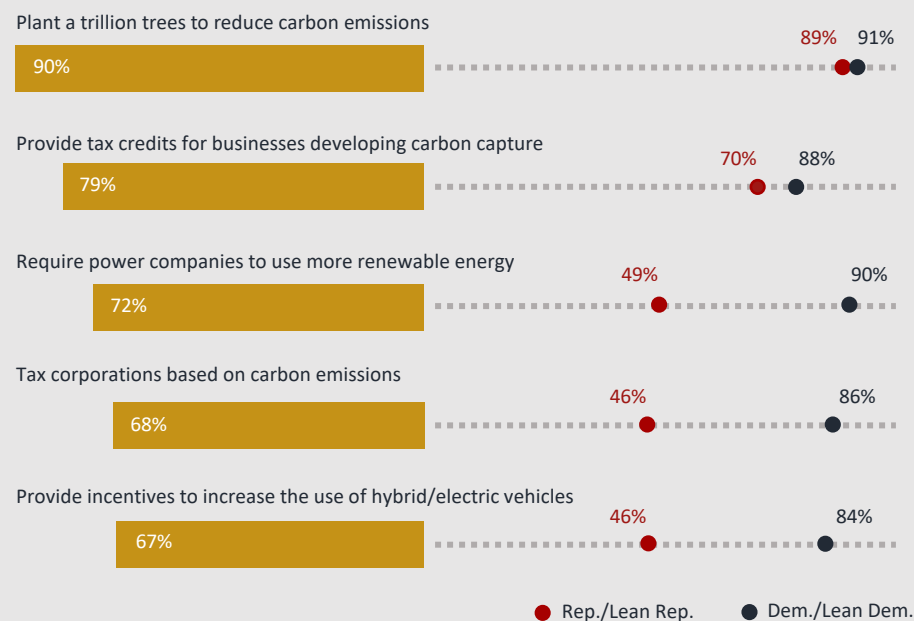


*Note: No answer responses not shown*

The partisan variance is somewhat political, but it is also rooted in the question of government oversight. Planting trees and providing tax credits for businesses developing carbon capture technology have overwhelming support from both major parties. They disagree, however, on increased government regulation such as taxing corporations based on carbon emissions: 86% of Democrats (but only 47% of Republicans) support such a policy.

#### % of adults who say they favor the following proposals to reduce the effects of climate change

*Pew Research Center, 2022*



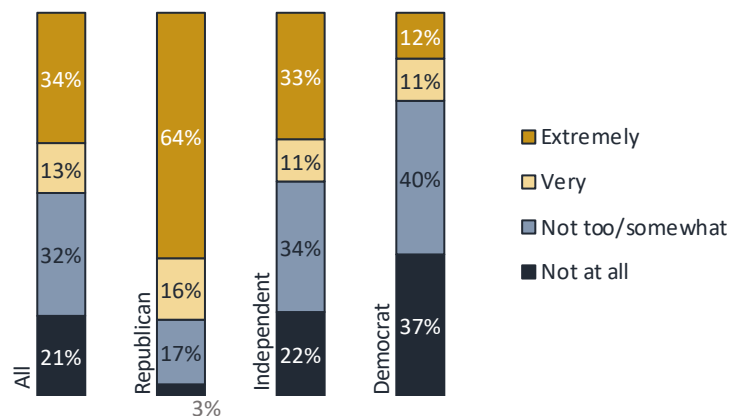
● Rep./Lean Rep. ● Dem./Lean Dem.

# ISSUE POLARIZATION

## GUN RIGHTS

### THE RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS

**% who say it is \_\_\_ important to protect the right to own guns**  
ANES, 2022



Support for the right to own personal firearms is divided along partisan lines: 64% of Republicans (but only 12% of Democrats) say it is *extremely* important.

Roughly half (52%) of Americans believe they would be less safe if more people carried guns. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of Republicans would feel safer, but 91% of Democrats and 50% of Independents would feel less safe (Quinnipiac, 2022).

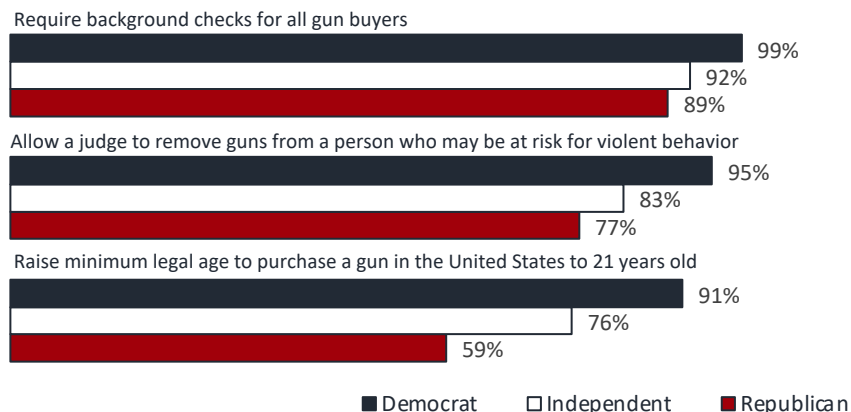
A nuanced understanding of American opinion on the right to own guns is necessary given the rise in gun-related deaths, particularly mass shootings, and the Constitutional protections of the right to bear arms.

### STRICTER GUN POLICIES

There is bipartisan support, however, for several policies to tighten restrictions on buying and selling guns.

The majority of Americans support requiring universal background checks, removing guns from those at risk of violent behavior, and raising the minimum legal age to buy a gun.

**% of Americans who support the following gun policies**  
Quinnipiac, 2022



Americans are divided along partisan lines regarding an assault weapons ban, however. Over two-thirds (67%) of Republicans and nearly half (49%) of Independents oppose a ban, while 89% of Democrats support one.

Gun rights have become a cultural issue in American politics, complicated by the power of gun lobbyist groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA).

# ISSUE POLARIZATION

## GUN RIGHTS

### 2022 GUN LEGISLATION

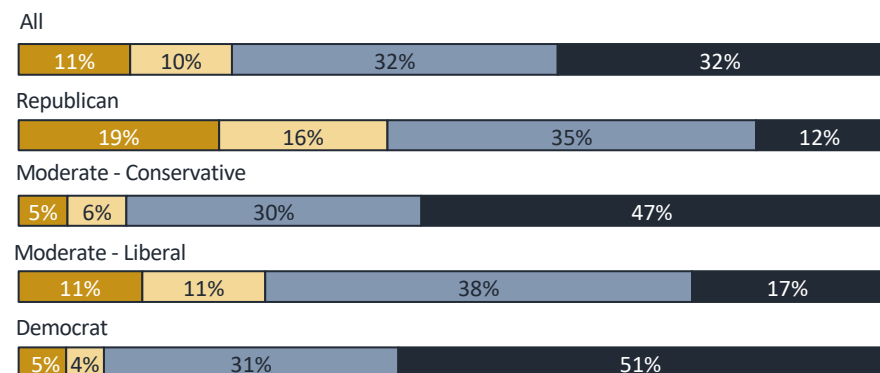
In June 2022, Congress passed a new gun law that President Biden signed into law. The legislation includes incentives for states to implement laws that allow groups or individuals to petition courts to take weapons away from individuals who are deemed dangerous to society. It also expanded laws that prevent felons charged with domestic abuse from legally obtaining guns.

About two-thirds of Americans (64%) approve of the new gun law. There is strong Democratic support (82%) and weaker Republican support (47%).

#### % who \_\_\_ of the new law to address gun violence passed by Congress and signed into law by Biden

Pew Research Center, 2022

Strongly disapprove Somewhat disapprove Somewhat approve Strongly approve



Note: No answer responses not shown

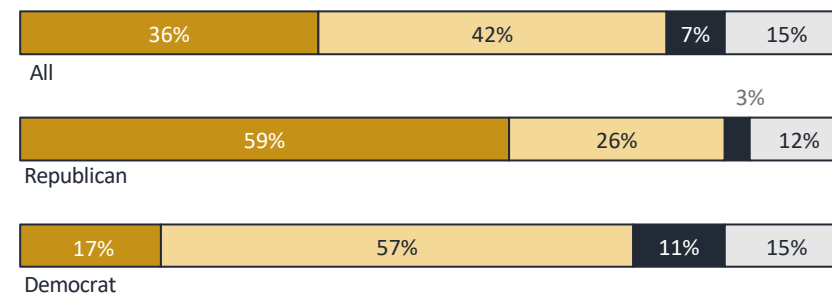
Despite strong levels of approval, over one-third (36%) of Americans believe the law will do nothing to reduce gun violence. Republicans and Democrats generally agree that it will not be effective.

Three-quarters of Democrats think it will do *nothing* (17%) or *a little* (57%), while nearly two-thirds (59%) of Republicans think the law will do *nothing at all*. This is somewhat paradoxical, given that 77% of Republicans and 95% of Democrats support the provision that individuals and groups can petition a judge to remove firearms from those who are deemed a violent threat (see graph on p. 11).

#### % who say the new gun law will do \_\_\_ to reduce gun violence

Pew Research Center, 2022

Nothing at all A little A lot Unsure



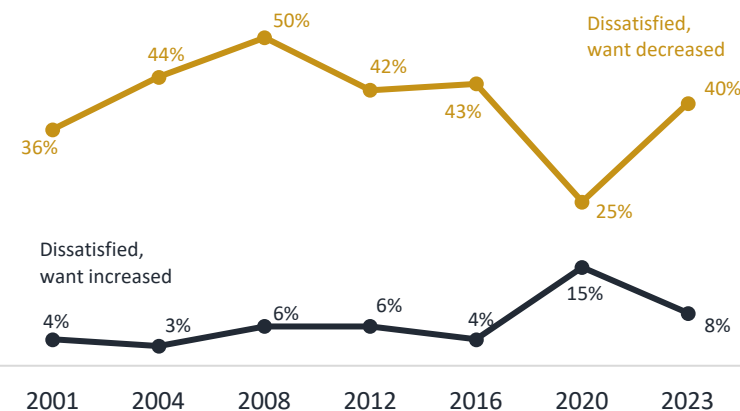
Though both parties seem to agree the law will do little to stop gun violence, the reasoning from each side likely varies. Most Democrats think the new law doesn't go far enough: almost 90% would like Congress to pass another round of legislation to address gun violence. Only 32% of Republicans favor another law, despite wide support for its main provision (see graph on p. 11) (Pew Research Center, 2022). The lack of Republican support is likely caused by other complicating factors, including NRA disapproval of the bill and its signing by a Democratic president.

# ISSUE POLARIZATION IMMIGRATION

## (DIS)SATISFACTION WITH LEVELS OF IMMIGRATION

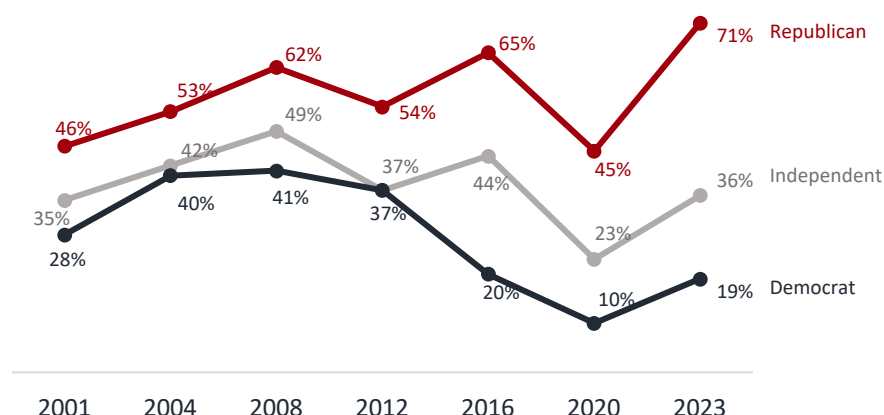
In January 2023, only 28% of Americans were *very* or *somewhat* satisfied with the levels of immigration in the United States. Down 6 percentage points since 2022, it is the lowest rating in 10 years (Gallup, 2023). These low levels of satisfaction are likely caused by the influx of migrants at the U.S. southern border and the seemingly overwhelmed and under-resourced immigration systems and procedures in place.

**% of U.S. adults dissatisfied with level of immigration to the U.S.**  
Gallup, 2023



Since 2020, the percentage of Americans who are dissatisfied with U.S. immigration levels and want to see a decrease has risen by 15 percentage points. The 2023 percentage is lower than those recorded in 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016, however.

**% dissatisfied with level of immigration and wanting it decreased**  
Gallup, 2023



The desire to limit immigration has risen in all parties since 2020 but is starkest among Republicans. Republican dissatisfaction in 2023 is 18 percentage points higher than in 2004, soon after the 9/11 attacks which caused many Americans to view immigration with unease.

Republicans commonly believe that Democrats see the issue as a Southern problem, rather than a national one. Red states like Texas and Florida experience the bulk of border crossings, legal or otherwise. With these systems and services overwhelmed, there is a perception that Democrat leadership could do more but chooses not to since the migrants are not coming into their states in such overwhelming numbers.

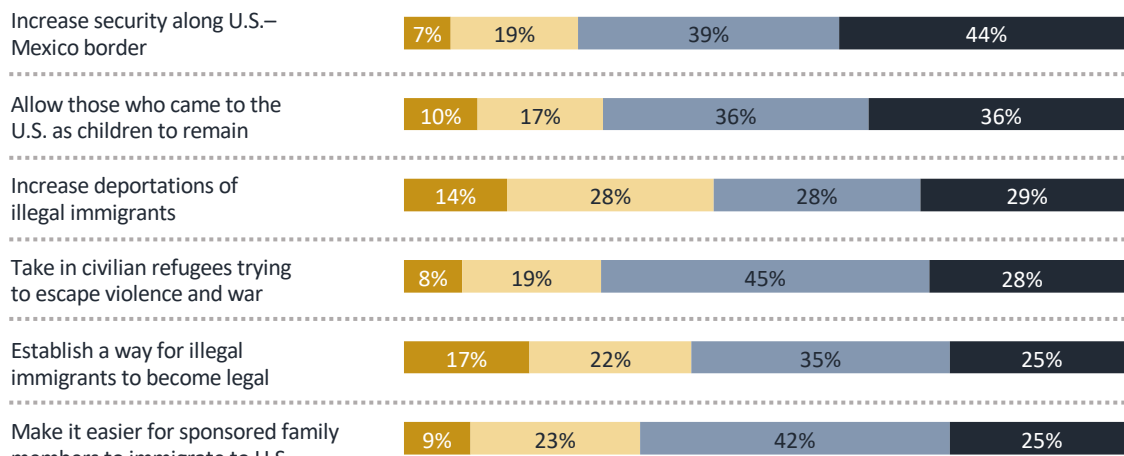
# ISSUE POLARIZATION

## IMMIGRATION

### SUPPORT FOR IMMIGRATION POLICIES

#### % who say \_\_\_\_\_ is an *important* goal for U.S. immigration policy

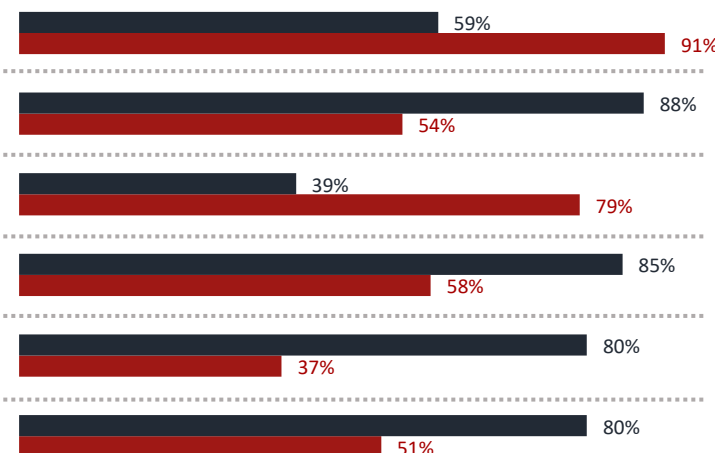
Pew Research Center, 2022



Note: No answer responses not shown

■ Not at all ■ Not too ■ Somewhat ■ Very

#### % who say the following is a *very or somewhat* important goal for U.S. immigration policy



■ Democrats ■ Republicans

For all six policies listed above, over 50% of Americans believe they are *somewhat* or *very* important goals for U.S. immigration policy. About three-quarters (83%) of Americans say increasing security along the U.S.–Mexico border and taking in civilian refugees trying to escape violence (73%) are *somewhat* or *very* important goals for U.S. immigration.

The average difference between Republicans and Democrats in ranking these policies was 34 percentage points. Democrats ranked four of the six categories – all of which referred to pathways for legal immigration – as higher priorities than Republicans.

The parties were furthest apart on creating a way for illegal immigrants to become legal (43-percentage-point gap): 80% of Democrats (but only 37% of Republicans) ranked it as *very* or *somewhat* important. Accordingly, Republicans ranked increasing deportations of illegal immigrants as *very* important. Republicans are also largely in favor of increasing security at the U.S.–Mexico border.

The parties were closest together (27-percentage-point difference) on support for accepting refugees escaping violence and war.

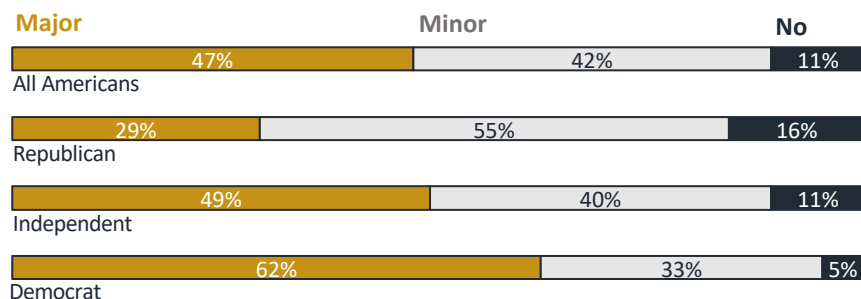
# ISSUE POLARIZATION

## POLICE RELATIONS AND REFORM

### POLICE REFORM

**% who say \_\_\_ changes needed to police procedures in the U.S.**

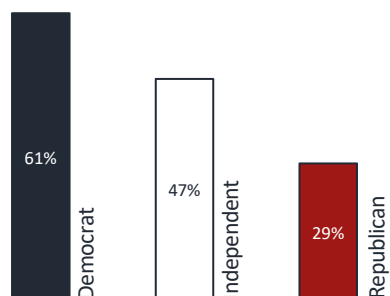
CBS News Poll/YouGov, 2023



Americans generally agree that changes to police procedures are required. Nearly 50% of Americans believe *major* changes are needed. Democrats (62%) are about twice as likely as Republicans (29%) to say *major* changes are needed; Independents fall in between at 49%. Only 11% say no changes are necessary.

**% who say police reform should be a high priority**

CBS News Poll/YouGov, 2023

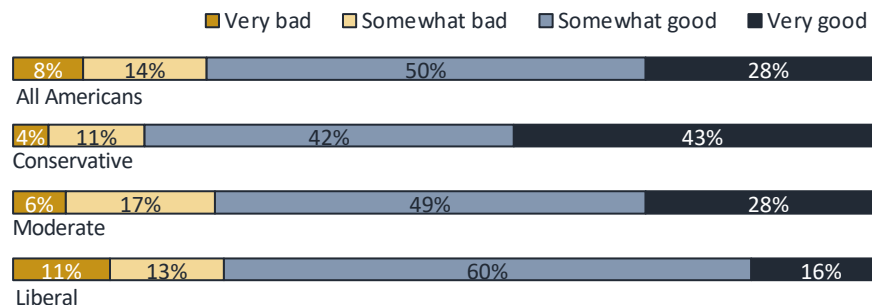


Over half of Democrats believe police reform should be a high priority, while only about 50% of Independents and one-third of Republicans agree. This matches the parties' general viewpoint on whether major or minor changes are needed.

Over three-quarters (78%) of Americans believe their local police are doing a *somewhat* or *very* good job in their community (76% of liberals and 85% of conservatives). Nearly three times as many conservatives as liberals say police do a *very* good job (43% vs. 16%).

### Ratings of local police

CBS News Poll/YouGov, 2023



### POLICE PROTECTION

A little under half (45%) of Americans feel *protected* by the police; nearly two-thirds (64%) of Republicans agree (see graph on p. 16). Democrats are the least likely to feel protected (37%); 40% of Democrats feel a mix of *protected* and *threatened*.

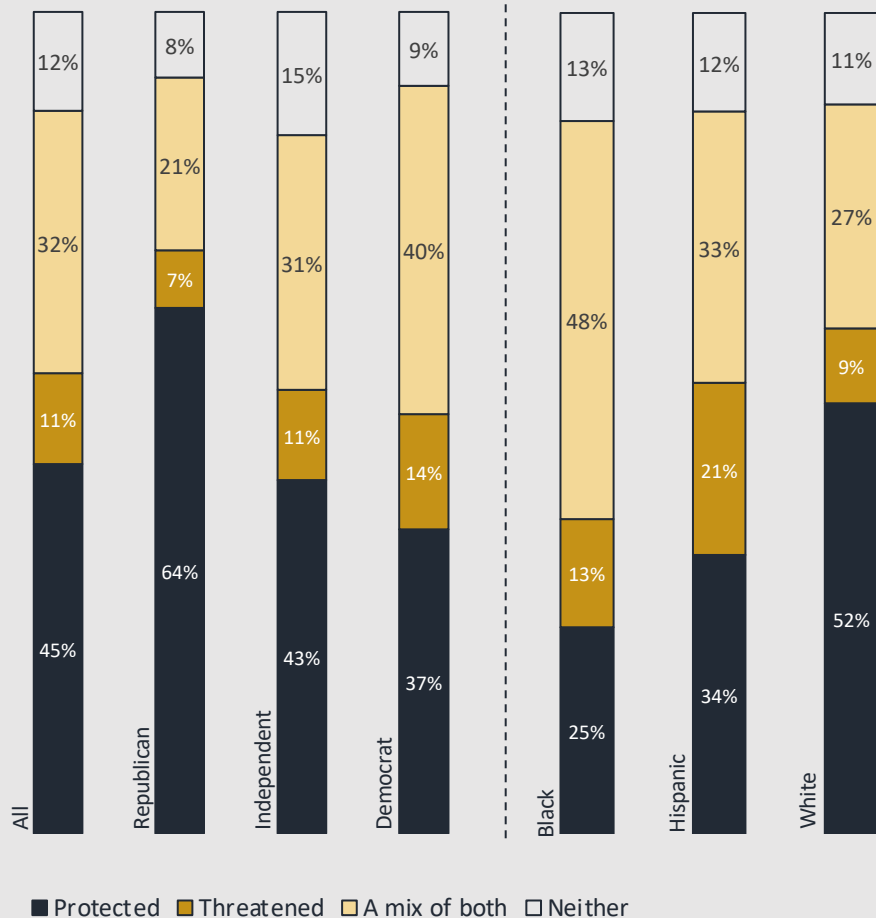
Over half of White people feel protected by the police, but only 25% of Black people and 34% of Hispanic people feel the same way. Almost half of Black people and one-third of Hispanic people feel a mix of *threatened* and *protected*. This generally tracks with data on ideology and race from Part I of the Polarization Index (p. 8). Nearly half of Republicans are White and are thus more likely to feel protected by the police. About a third (34%) of Black and Hispanic people reported being Democrats, the least likely groups to feel protected.



# ISSUE POLARIZATION

## POLICE RELATIONS AND REFORM

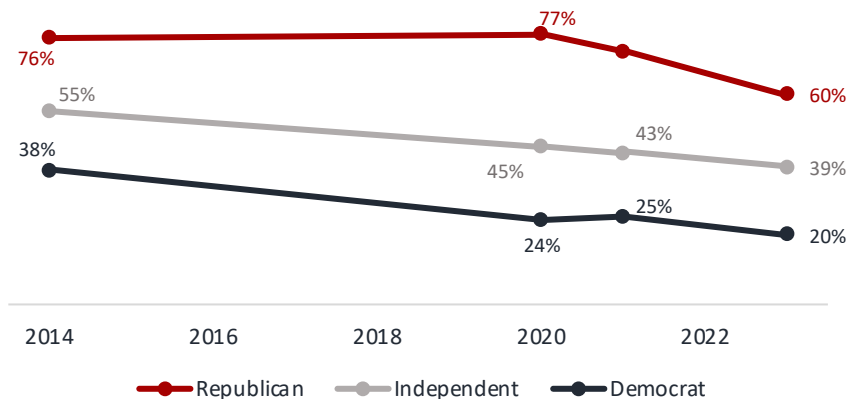
**% who say the police make them *feel protected, threatened, or both***  
CBS News Poll/YouGov, 2023



### POLICE TRAINING

In 2023, 60% of Americans are not confident the police are adequately trained to avoid excessive force, up from around 50% in 2020 after the death of George Floyd. The percent of White and Hispanic people who are very or somewhat confident that the police are properly trained has declined steadily since 2015. In 2015, 62% of White people and 44% of Hispanic people were *very/somewhat* confident compared to 46% and 34% in 2023, respectively. Black peoples' confidence has stayed below 30% since 2015 and is currently 20% (CBS News Poll/YouGov, 2023).

**% very or somewhat confident police in the U.S. are adequately trained to avoid the use of excessive force**  
CBS News Poll/YouGov, 2023



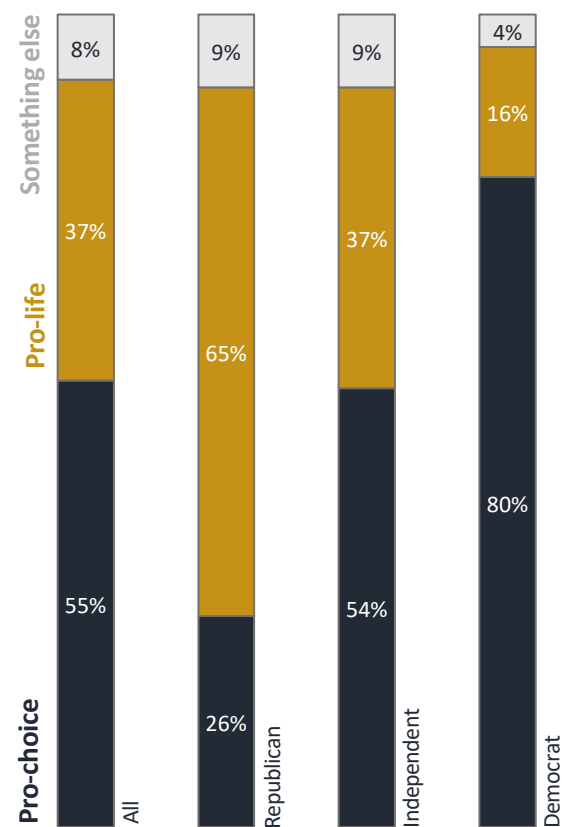
Republicans are the most that confident police are trained well, Democrats the least, and Independents fall in between. This echoes Democratic feelings of a lack of protection, lower ratings of local police, and support for major police reform.

# ISSUE POLARIZATION

## REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

### ABORTION STANCES AND IDENTITY

% of U.S. adults who think of themselves as pro-choice, pro-life, or something else  
ANES, 2022



Over half of Americans are pro-choice. Republicans tend to be pro-life, over half of Independents are pro-choice, and Democrats are overwhelmingly pro-choice.

**Over half (54%) of Americans believe the issue of abortion access is *extremely* or *very* important.**

Two-thirds (67%) of Democrats (but 48% of Republicans and 43% of Independents) rate the issue of abortion as *extremely* or *very* important.

Americans are split over how important being pro-life or pro-choice is to their identity: 43% rate it as *very* or *somewhat* important, while 41% believe it is *a little* or *moderately* important. More Democrats and Republicans view their stance on abortion as *moderately* important than *extremely* important.

**Extreme importance**

- 20% of Democrats say being **pro-choice** is *extremely* important to their identity
- 29% of Independents say being **pro-choice** is *extremely* important to their identity
- 19% of Republicans say being **pro-life** is *very* or *extremely* important to their identity

ANES, 2022

**Moderate importance**

- 27% of Democrats say being **pro-choice** is *moderately* important to their identity
- 24% of Independents say being **pro-choice** is *moderately* important to their identity
- 23% of Republicans say being **pro-life** is *moderately* important to their identity

ANES, 2022

Polarization levels are often high when identity is closely tied to an ideological stance. But in this case, Americans are not connecting their stance on abortion to their identity. This may be an indicator of progress, especially when combined with the shared belief that abortion is an important issue.

# ISSUE POLARIZATION

## REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

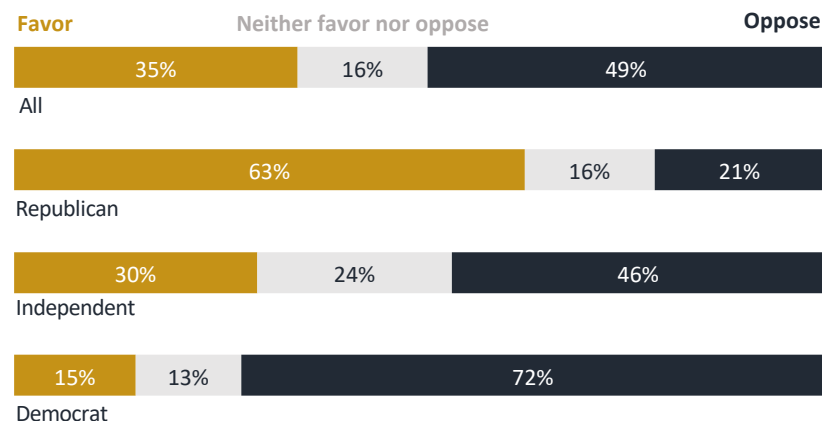
### ROE V. WADE

The Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe v. Wade in 2022 heightened attention on reproductive rights.

About 50% of Americans oppose the decision to overturn Roe v. Wade. Nearly two-thirds of Republicans (63%) favor the decision, compared to only 30% of Independents and 15% of Democrats.

#### % who favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose the Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade

ANES, 2022

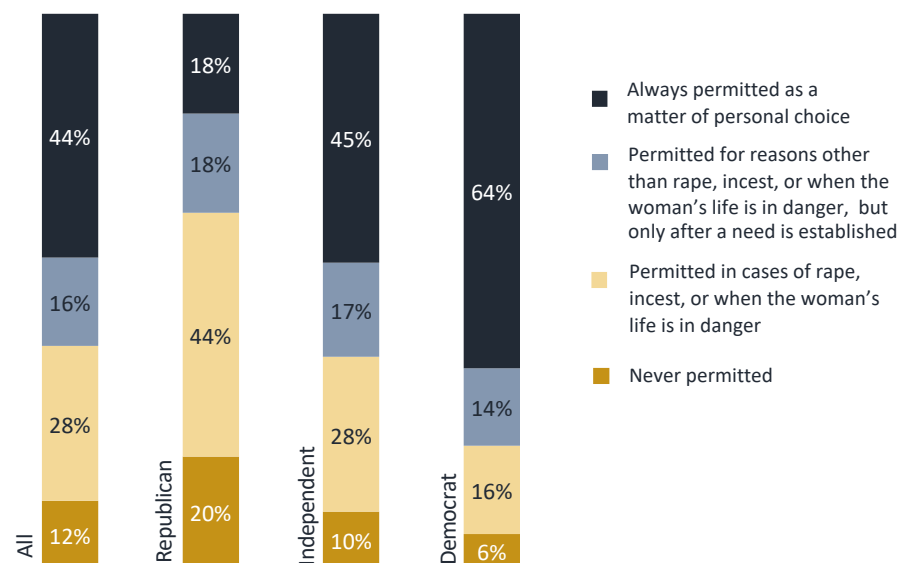


Over half (61%) of Americans agreed abortion should be legal in all or most cases; only 37% said it should be illegal in all or most cases (Pew Research, 2022). These stances have remained stable for decades, indicating there has not been a major ideological shift in opinion.

Only 12% of Americans believe abortion should never be permitted (ANES, 2022). A fifth of Republicans think it should never be permitted, while 62% believe abortion access should be contingent on certain circumstances. Nearly half (45%) of Independents and 64% of Democrats believe it should always be permitted.

#### % who hold the following opinions about abortion access

ANES, 2022



Republicans support the overturning of Roe v. Wade, but the majority believe abortion access should be permitted in some cases. Republicans may therefore want more regulations on abortion access and prefer those decisions to be made at the state level. Independents and Democrats tend to view abortion as a matter of personal choice.

# ISSUE POLARIZATION

## LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

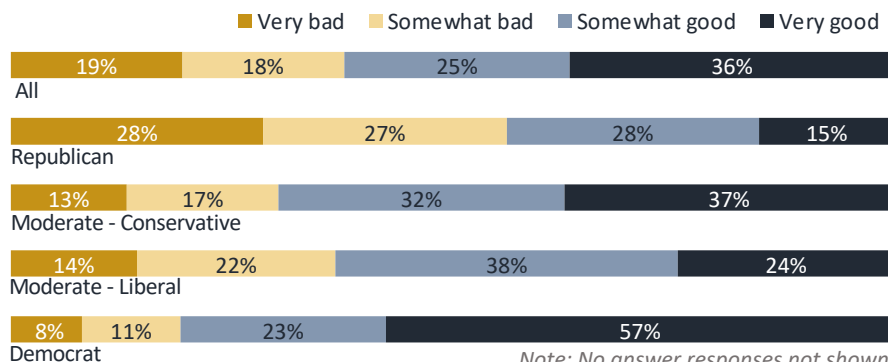
### SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

In December 2022, President Biden signed the Respect for Marriage Act into law. It had the support of 39 House Republicans and 12 Senate Republicans (Politico, 2022).

The majority of Americans (67%) *strongly favor or favor* the legalization of same-sex marriage. Democrats overwhelmingly approve (87%), while Republicans are nearly split: 43% *strongly favor or favor* it and 54% *strongly oppose or oppose* (Marist, 2022).

#### % who say same-sex marriage now being legal in the U.S. is \_\_\_\_ for society

Pew Research Center, 2022



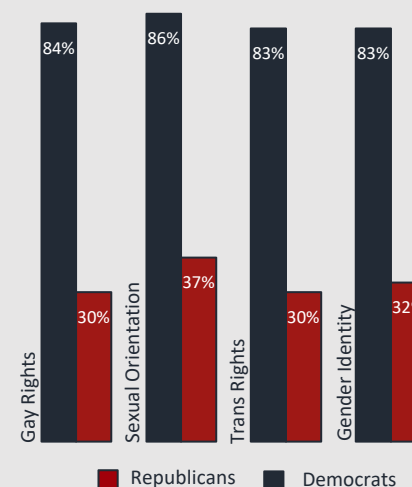
Note: No answer responses not shown

About six in ten Americans believe legalizing same-sex marriage is good for society. While only 43% of Republicans say it is good for society, nearly 70% of moderate conservatives agree. Democrats overwhelmingly believe it is good for society (80%), while moderate liberals are about 20-percentage points less likely to say so (Pew Research Center, 2022).

### TEACHING LGBTQ+ TOPICS

#### % of national adults who agree these civic education topics should be taught in high school

Brookings Institution, 2022



The partisan divides are larger when it comes to teaching high school students about LGBTQ+ topics.

Over 80% of Democrats support teaching gay rights, sexual orientation, trans rights, and gender identity in high school.

Only about one-third of Republicans agreed. Independents were in the middle with 59–66% support.

# ISSUE POLARIZATION

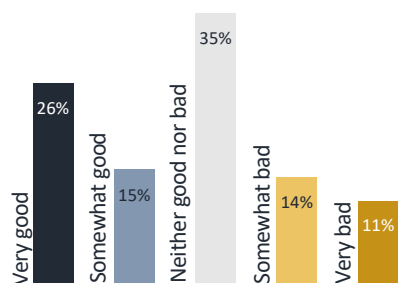
## LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

### TRANSGENDER RIGHTS AND PROTECTIONS

In 2020, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that federal civil rights law protects LGBTQ+ employees from workplace discrimination (Liptak, 2023). The Court may soon hear a new, broader case – West Virginia v. B.P.J. – on whether the Constitution disallows any government discrimination against transgender people. If the Court rules such protections are in place, trans people would be guaranteed equal treatment in all 50 states (Millhiser, 2023).

The Court will rule based on jurisprudence and an interpretation of the Constitution, but Americans’ views on transgender rights are an important consideration as this topic rises into public consciousness and debate.

**% of U.S. adults who believe the greater social acceptance of transgender people is \_\_\_ for society**  
*Washington Post, 2022*

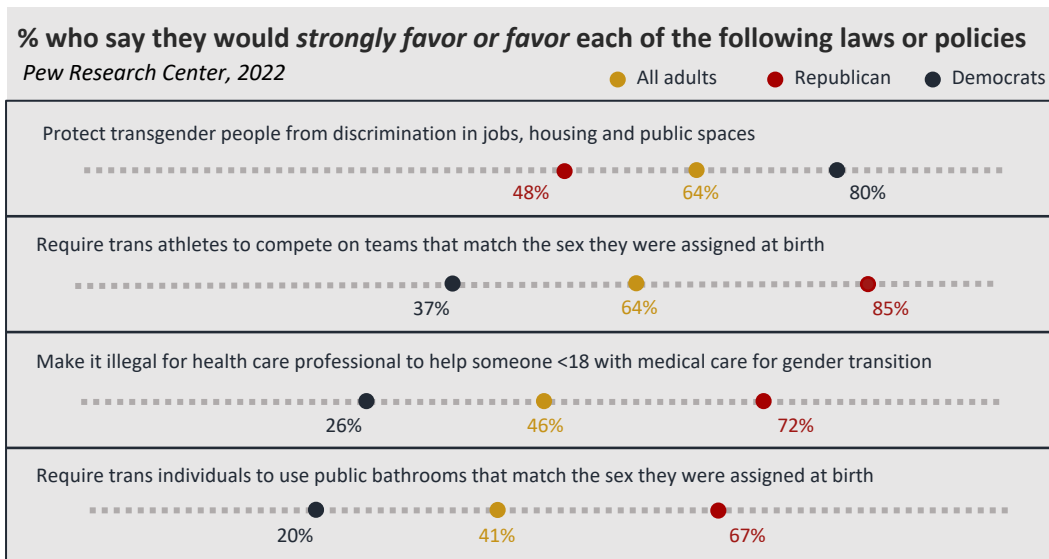


A third of Americans believe social acceptance of transgender people is neither good nor bad for society, despite recent heated debates (e.g., over access to bathrooms and sports teams).

Over a third (41%) of Americans believe acceptance is good for society, and only 25% say it is bad. This may signal turning tides of opinion, though acceptance remains split along party lines.

**Over three-quarters (86%) of Republicans and only 38% of Democrats believe a person’s gender identity is determined by sex at birth (Parker et al., 2022), up from 80% and 34%, respectively, in 2017 (Brown, 2017).** The debate over trans rights may be rooted in this disparity. Whether a person believes gender identity can change after birth affects their support for enhanced protections for transgender people.

While 64% of Americans say they would favor laws or policies to protect transgender people from discrimination (Parker et al., 2022), they are generally split on whether society has gone too far in accepting them. Over a third (36%) say society has not gone far enough and 38% say it has gone too far. Over half of Democrats (59%) believe the U.S. has not gone far enough and 66% Republicans say we’ve gone too far.

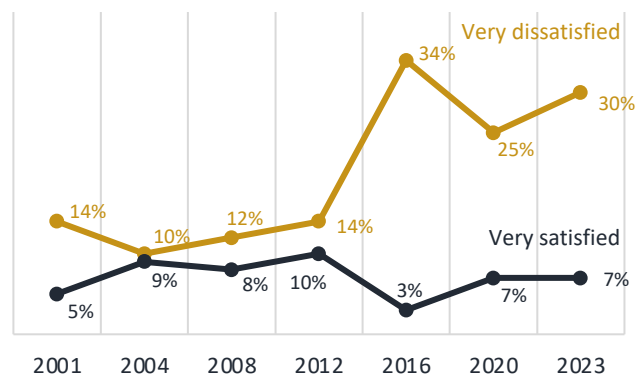


Sources: Bahrampour et al., [Washington Post](#), June 2022; Brown, [Pew Research Center](#), Nov. 2017; Liptak, [New York Times](#), Jan. 2023; Millhiser, [Vox](#), Mar. 2023; Parker et al., [Pew Research Center](#), June 2022.

# ISSUE POLARIZATION RACE AND RACISM

## % of Americans who are very satisfied or very dissatisfied with race relations

Gallup, 2023

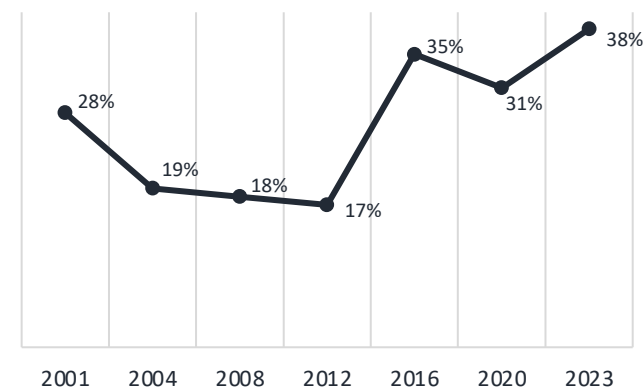


The percent of Americans who are very dissatisfied with the state of race relations in the United States has doubled since 2001. The percent of those who are very satisfied has stayed below 10 percent since 2001.

Those who personally worry about U.S. race relations has grown by 13 percentage points since 2001, with a spike from 31% to 41% between 2020 and 2023.

## % of Americans who personally worry about race relations a great deal

Gallup, 2023



## PARTISAN DIVIDES OVER DISCRIMINATED GROUPS

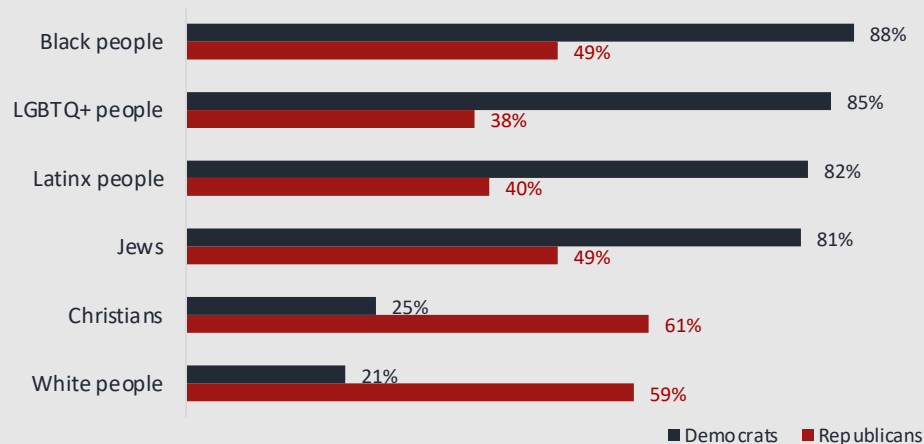
According to a Wall Street Journal survey (2022), Republicans and Democrats disagree on which groups of people experience prejudice against them.

Democrats are more likely to say Black, LGBTQ+, Latino and Latina, and Jewish people experience discrimination. The largest percentage gap is 47: 85% of Democrats (but only 38% of Republicans) believe LGBTQ+ people experience prejudice. Republicans are nearly three times more likely than Democrats to say Christians and White people experience prejudice.

These vastly different perceptions of discrimination help explain the intensity of debates around, for example, access for transgender athletes, critical race theory teachings, and even abortion access as a religious issue.

## % who say discrimination or prejudice against each group is a problem

Wall Street Journal, 2022



# ISSUE POLARIZATION

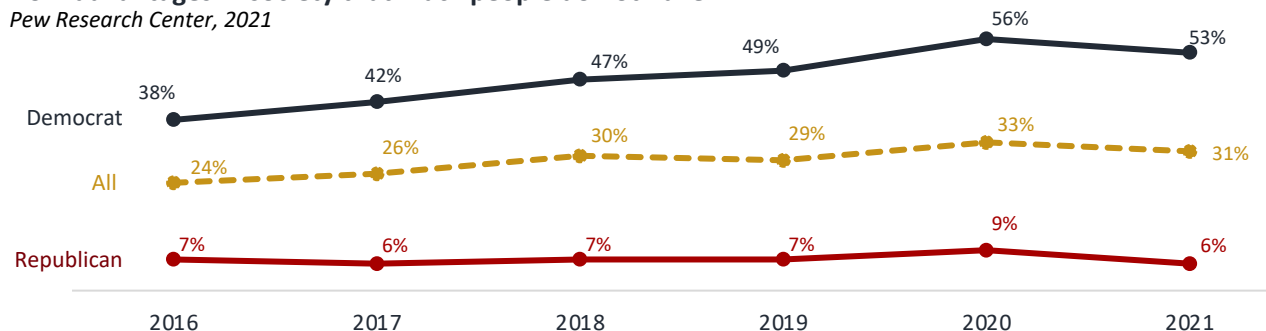
## RACE AND RACISM

### PRIVILEGE AND EQUAL RIGHTS

In 2021, 31% of Americans believed White people benefit from advantages not afforded to Black people, up from 24% in 2016.

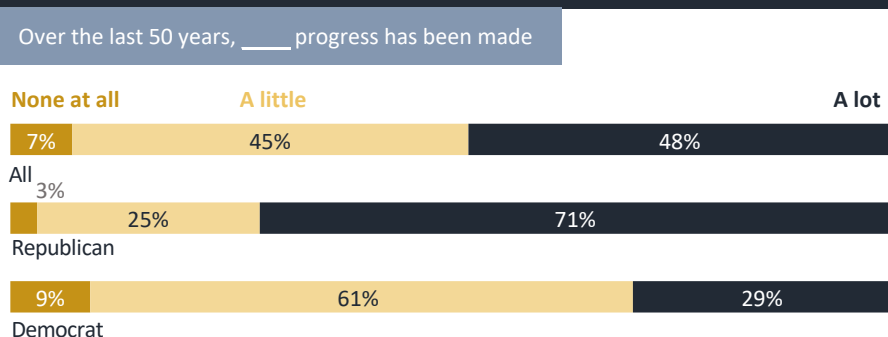
Democrats were about eight times more likely to agree; their belief has increased over time, from 38% in 2016 to 53% in 2021. Republicans have remained under 10% during this period.

**% of U.S. adults who say White people benefit a great deal from advantages in society that Black people do not have**  
*Pew Research Center, 2021*

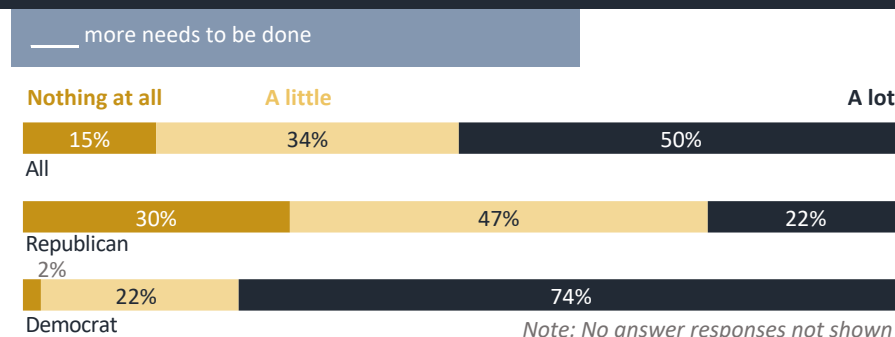


### When it comes to ensuring equal rights for all Americans regardless of their racial or ethnic background, % of U.S. adults say...

*Pew Research Center, 2021*



Americans are nearly split on how much progress has been made over the last 50 years in ensuring equal rights for all Americans: 48% percent say a lot has been done, while 45% say only a little progress has been made. Republicans are more than twice as likely as Democrats to say a lot has been done.



Similarly, Republicans are less likely than Democrats to believe a lot more needs to be done to create an equitable society, with 30% saying *nothing at all* needs to be done. In contrast, 50% of Americans believe *a lot* more needs to be done to ensure access to equal rights for all Americans, no matter their ethnic background.

# POLARIZATION INDEX: PART II CONCLUSION

The issues discussed in Part II of the Polarization Index are nuanced and complex. To help clarify the takeaways from the data, the following chart highlights the areas of partisan agreement and the points of starkest partisan divisions, arranged from least to most polarized. The economy, which Americans placed as the most important issue facing the country today, has the most overlap in agreement.

## AREAS OF AGREEMENT

## POINTS OF CONTENTION

ECONOMY

Americans are generally concerned about the economy, including the impacts of the price of food, energy, and housing. About three-fifths of Americans believe Biden and the Republicans in Congress should compromise to raise the debt ceiling and avoid an economic downturn.

Republicans are about twice as likely as Democrats to believe the economy will worsen in the next year, most likely because of current Democratic political power.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Well over 50% of Americans from both parties who have experienced severe weather in their communities saw a link to climate change. Over 50% of Republicans and Democrats support tax credits for businesses developing carbon capture technology.

More Democrats than Republicans support policies like requiring power companies to use more renewable energy, taxing corporations based on carbon emissions, and introducing incentives to buy and use electric vehicles. Republicans generally oppose policies that increase federal government oversight.

GUN RIGHTS

Over half of Republicans and Democrats support the following gun policies: require background checks for all gun buyers, allow a judge to remove guns from a person who may be at risk of violent behavior, and raise the minimum legal age to purchase a gun to 21.

Republicans are much more likely than Democrats to say the right to own guns is extremely important. While over half of Americans supported the 2022 gun law, nearly 90% of Democrats and a third of Republicans want more gun legislation passed.

IMMIGRATION

Nearly 40% of Americans are dissatisfied with the current immigration levels and want to see it decrease. Over three-quarters (83%) think increasing security along the U.S.–Mexico border is a somewhat or very important goal for U.S. immigration policy.

Republicans are much more likely than Democrats to want to decrease immigration (71% and 19%, respectively). Most Republicans want to increase border security and deport more illegal immigrants. Democrats largely favor policies that create pathways to citizenship.



# POLARIZATION INDEX: PART II

# CONCLUSION

## AREAS OF AGREEMENT

## POINTS OF CONTENSION

POLICE  
REFORM

Nearly 50% of Americans believe major police reform is needed.

Democrats are more likely than Republicans to believe major police reform is necessary. Over half of Republicans (60%) in 2023 are confident the police are adequately trained to avoid the use of excessive force. Though this is down from 77% in 2020, Republicans are three times more likely than Democrats to believe this.

ABORTION

Only 12% of Americans believe abortion should never be permitted; 20% of Republicans and 6% of Democrats agree.

Democrats tend to see abortion as a matter of personal choice, while Republicans would like more regulations on access – perhaps preferably at the state, rather than federal, level.

LGBTQ+  
RIGHTS

Most Americans favor allowing same-sex couples to marry, and the majority agree that the legalization of same-sex marriage is good for society.

Opinions on transgender rights have stark partisan divides: 59% of Democrats think the United States has not gone far enough to protect transgender rights, while 66% of Republicans think it has gone too far.

RACE AND  
RACISM

Twice as many Americans are very dissatisfied with the state of race relations compared to 2001.

Democrats are more likely than Republicans to agree that discrimination against Black people, LGBTQ+ people, Latinos and Latinas, and Jews is a problem. Republicans are three times more likely than Democrats to say discrimination against White people is a problem.

# POLARIZATION INDEX: PART II

## CONCLUSION

There is no single issue on which there is overwhelming partisan agreement and overlap. Instead, Democrats and Republicans agree on certain aspects of each issue. On some issues they agree on policy options, while on others they both acknowledge that changes are needed.

Studies in political science and psychology have shown that personal biases likely shaped the survey participants' responses in at least three ways.

First, most people's ideological beliefs are malleable. They often choose a political party or politician they like, and then adapt their viewpoints accordingly. People's beliefs will thus shift depending on the current state of national politics, what their political representatives espouse, and which party is in power.

Second, people are susceptible to partisan-motivated reasoning. This includes the lure of confirmation bias, prior attitude effect, and disconfirmation bias. Put another way, people tend to like ideas, opinions, and facts that confirm their opinions, and to ignore those that do not.

Finally, people like to avoid complexity. Partisanship during these times of high tension and polarization offers the ease of a ready-made belief system and the comfort of an in-group.



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