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2023

## **2023 Polarization Index Part I: Unpacking Perceptions of U.S. Polarization**

Katie Sonder

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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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COVER PHOTO CREDIT: Getty Images

# 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 the 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. Sources can be found at the end of the report.

This is Part I of four parts. It covers perceptions of the stability of U.S. democracy, perceptions of partisan polarization, and affective polarization. Part II (available in October 2023) tackles issue polarization, covering topics like the economy, climate change, and gun rights. 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 I

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### U.S. POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Belonging to a certain political party is a powerful social identifier. While the U.S. population is nearly evenly divided between the major political ideologies – Republican, Democrat, and Independent – other salient social identities have begun to morph with political identity, including race, religion, and age. For example, over one-third of Hispanic people identify as liberal; Christian-Protestants are nearly twice as likely to identify as Republicans as they are Democrats; and about half of those over the age of 65 identify as conservative (Morning Consult, 2022).

That said, about one-third of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents say being a member of their political party is only *moderately* important to their identity (ANES, 2022).

**People in the United States are more likely to label being American, over their membership of a certain political party, as an important part of their identity.** Over three-quarters (83%) of Republicans and more than half of Democrats (53%) and Independents (53%) believe being an American is *very* or *extremely* important to their identity (ANES, 2022).

### PERCEPTIONS OF THE STABILITY OF U.S. DEMOCRACY AND PARTISAN POLARIZATION

Concerns over political divisions are high in all groups.

- 66% of Americans believe partisan polarization has increased since 2021 and 63% think it will increase in the coming years.
- 29% of U.S. adults believe a civil war is *somewhat likely* in the next decade and 14% think it is *very likely* (YouGov, 2022).

Nonetheless, there is minimal support for political violence and great support for staying within the law to fix America's problems.

Americans, regardless of their political ideology, tend to agree on the contributors to polarization, though their degree of concern varies by party. Americans agree that money in politics, the spread of disinformation, and the media are major contributors to polarization. Democrats are more concerned than Republicans about issues like voter suppression and gerrymandering, while Republicans are most worried about election fraud (Morning Consult and Bipartisan Policy Center, 2022).

When asked which party is the bigger threat to democracy, however, political divisions are stark.

- 80% of Republicans view Democrats as a bigger threat.
- 84% of Democrats view Republicans as a bigger threat.
- 38% of Independents view Republicans as a bigger threat, and 49% see Democrats as the threat (Marist, 2022).

### AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

**This view of the 'other' is a symptom of affective polarization, which is a deep dislike and distrust of those in the opposing political party absent major ideological shifts** (Iyengar et al., 2013). In 2022, 83% of Democrats viewed Republicans as close-minded and 64% viewed them as dishonest; 69% of Republicans viewed Democrats as close-minded and 72% saw them as dishonest (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Americans are overwhelmingly concerned about the health of U.S. democracy and the increased threat of partisan polarization. They also report their American identity as more important than their political one, and the parties find some agreement on the contributors to polarization. The belief that the opposing party is a threat to democracy is strong, however, and dangerous. It can be manipulated to garner support for anti-democratic behavior to stop a real or perceived threat from the opposing party.

# U.S. POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

## PARTY AFFILIATIONS AND SALIENT SOCIAL IDENTITIES

### Section highlights

- Since 2017, more liberals have become moderate or unsure of their political leanings, while the percentage of conservatives has remained steady, challenging common understandings of a shrinking middle.
- Political ideology is increasingly tied to other salient social identities, like race and religion.
  - Nearly half of white people identify as conservative, over one-third of Black people as moderate, and over one-third of Hispanic people as liberal.
  - Republicans are nearly twice as likely as Democrats to identify as Christian-Protestant.
  - Nearly half of individuals over 65 years old are conservative, and over one-third of 18-34 year olds are liberal.
- U.S. citizens are more likely to say their identity as an American is more important than their political party affiliation, though the percent of those expressing extreme pride in being American is close to the lowest on record since 2001.



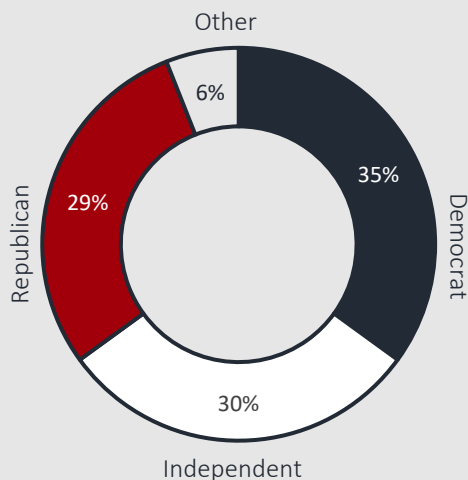
# U.S. POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AFFILIATIONS OVER TIME

## AMERICAN IDEOLOGY

As of 2022, Americans were nearly evenly split between the three major political ideologies: Republican (29%), Democrat (35%), and Independent (30%).

### Political ideology in the U.S.

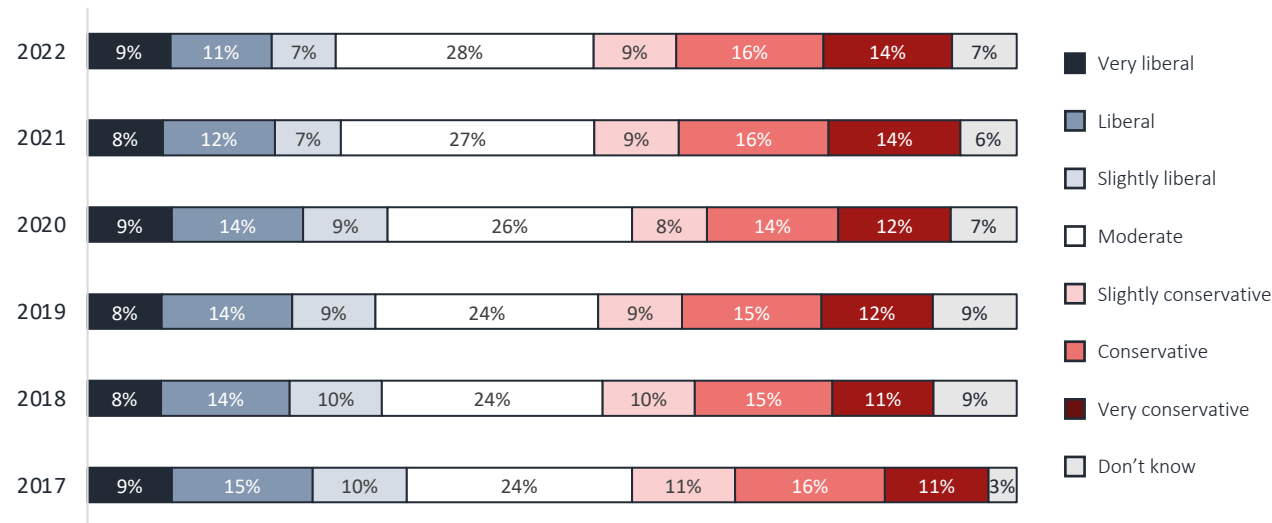
ANES Pilot Study, 2022



The graph below represents a seven-point ideological scale with shifts over time, adding more nuance to the political leanings of the American electorate. Since 2017, the percent of liberals declined but the percent of conservatives remained steady. More people have become moderate and the percent of those who are unsure where they land on the ideological scale has more than doubled.

### In-depth ideological scale

Morning Consult, 2022



The percent of those who identify as *very liberal*, *liberal*, and *slightly liberal* dropped by seven percentage points between 2017 and 2022, but the percent of *very conservative*, *conservative*, and *slightly conservative* individuals only increased by one point. The group of moderates and those who do not know each increased by four points. The shift has landed mostly in the middle and outside of the two-party divide.

This data challenges the common understanding of a 'shrinking middle' sandwiched between increasingly extreme ends.





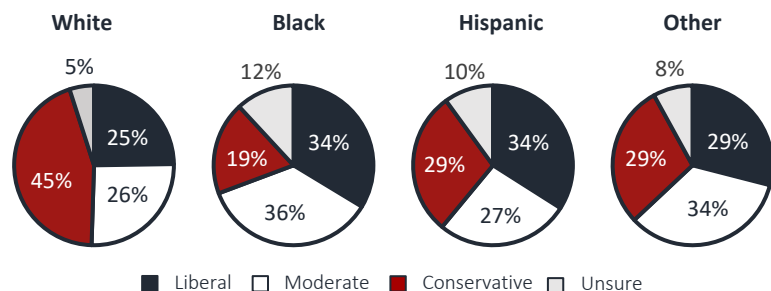
# U.S. POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

## IDEOLOGY AND SALIENT SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Political ideology is a powerful social identifier, and over the last few decades in the United States, other salient social identities have begun to morph with it. As political identity becomes a vacuum for other important identities, the divisions between parties often widen and people begin to see the ‘other’ as socially distant.

### Ideology by race

*Morning Consult, 2022*



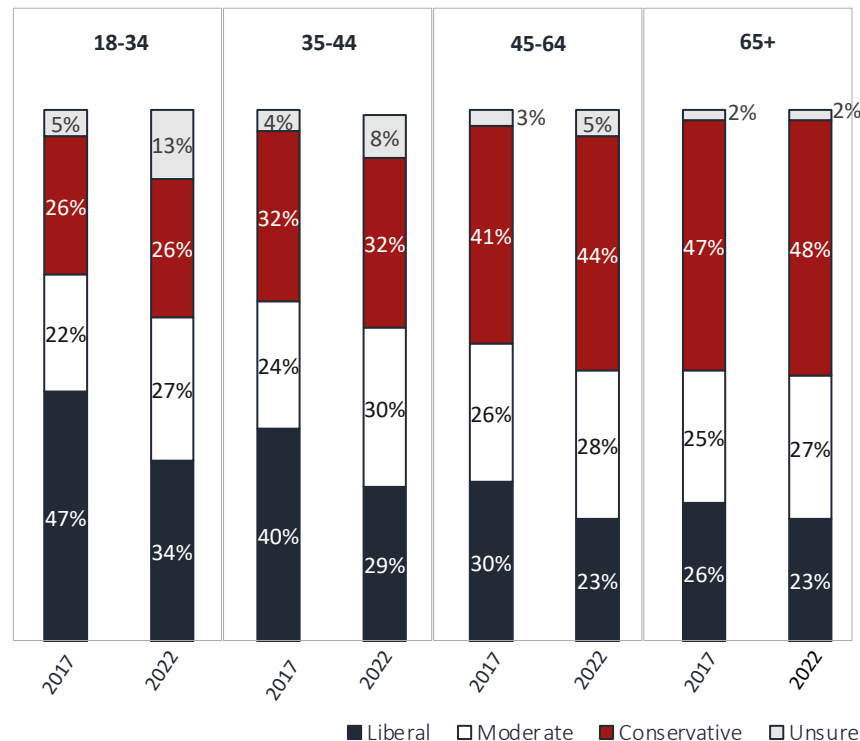
Nearly half of white Americans identify as conservative (45%), the largest percentage for that group. Moderates are the largest political identity representing Black people (36%) and American Indians, Asian Americans, and all others (34%). Over one-third of Hispanic people identify as liberal (34%).

### Ideology by religion

According to data from a 2022 *New York Times/Sienna* poll, nearly twice as many Republicans as Democrats identify as Christian-Protestant (45% vs. 24%). Independents are the most likely to have no religious affiliation (39%) and Democrats are a close second (34%).

### Ideology by age

*Morning Consult, 2022*



Nearly half (48%) of Americans over the age of 65 identified as conservative, compared to only 26% of those aged 18-34. The percent of liberals was highest among 18 to 34 year olds in 2022, though that age group experienced the sharpest decline of liberals compared to 2017.

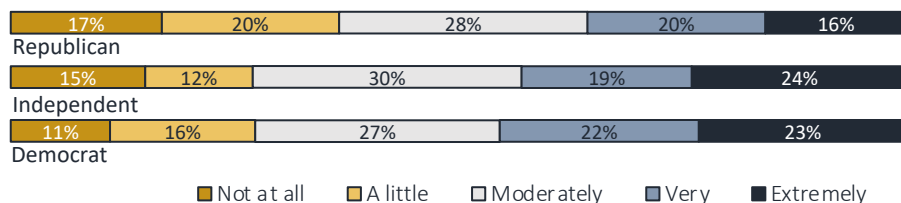


# U.S. POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

# AMERICAN AND PARTY IDENTITY IMPORTANCE

## How important is being a *Republican, Democrat, or Independent* to your identity?

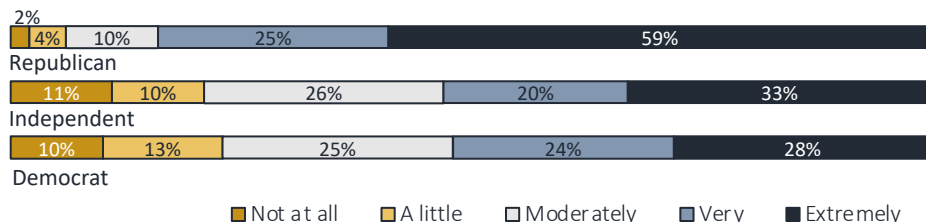
ANES Pilot Study, 2022



Roughly one-third of Republicans, Independents, and Democrats say being a member of that political party is *moderately important* to their identity. Democrats and Independents are more likely than Republicans to say party membership is *very* or *extremely* important. Only 16% of Republicans consider it *extremely important* compared to 24% of Democrats and 23% of Independents.

## How important is being an *American* to your identity?

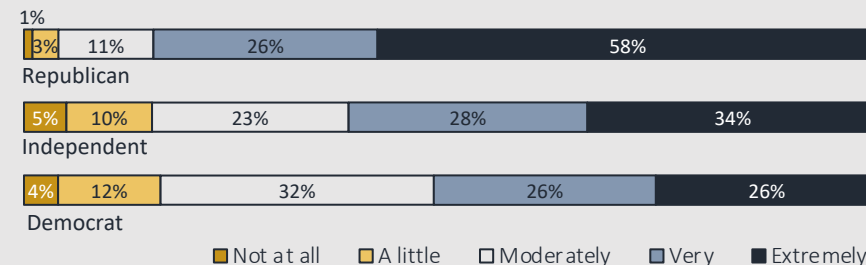
ANES Pilot Study, 2022



More Americans view their identity as an American as more important than that of their political party affiliation. Over three-quarters (84%) of Republicans say being an American is *extremely* or *very important* to their identity, compared to only 36% who say their Republican identity is. Just over half of Democrats and Independents believe their American identity is *very* or *extremely important*.

## Partisan pride in being American

Gallup, 2022



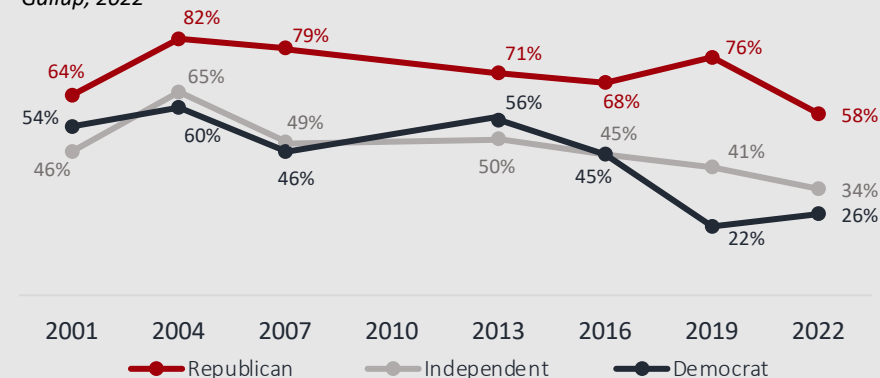
Note: Those with no opinion not shown

Over a third (38%) of Americans are *extremely proud* to be American and 27% are *very proud*. Republicans are the most likely to report *extreme* pride (58%), though this percent is the lowest on record since 2001.

Independents also hit a record low for extreme pride at 34%, and at 26%, Democrats came near their low of 22% in 2019.

## Partisan extreme pride in being American

Gallup, 2022



# PERCEPTIONS OF THE STABILITY OF U.S. DEMOCRACY

AMERICANS' VIEWS OF THE HEALTH AND RESILIENCE OF THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM

## Section highlights

- Nearly one-third of Americans say U.S. democracy is *not healthy at all* and only 14% are *satisfied* with the way democracy is currently working in the country. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say democracy is not healthy, but both parties are generally dissatisfied.
- Over three-quarters of Americans perceive extremism from within the United States as a greater threat than international extremism.
- About three-quarters of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans report that democracy is under threat, but Democrats are much more likely to say the country is heading in the right direction.
- Around 30% of Americans believe a civil war is somewhat likely in the next decade, but support for political violence is very low.

# PERCEPTIONS OF THE STABILITY OF U.S. DEMOCRACY

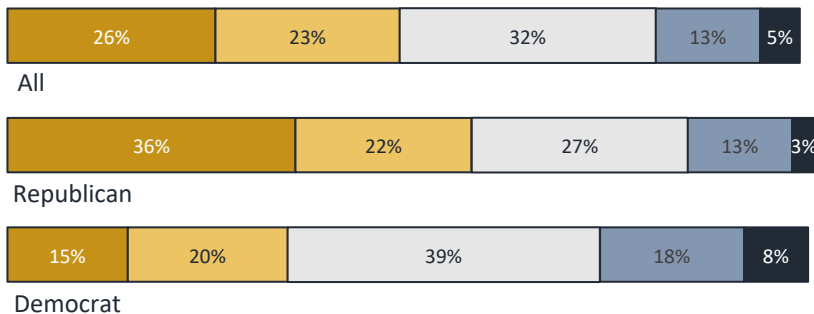
## SATISFACTION WITH U.S. DEMOCRACY

Since 2016, the Economist Intelligence Unit's (2022) Democracy Index has labeled U.S. democracy as flawed, based on the categories of electoral pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. The U.S. received the same score in 2021 and 2022 but dropped four ranks as other countries improved.

Skepticism regarding the efficacy of the American system of government is high among U.S. citizens as well. **Only one-third of the population believes the U.S. system of democracy is moderately healthy and over one-quarter think it isn't healthy at all.** Republicans are more likely to state that American democracy is *not at all healthy* (36%) than their Democrat counterparts, 39% of whom believe it is *moderately healthy*. Generally, Americans are currently disappointed with the way U.S. democracy operates. Only about a third of Republicans and Democrats are *moderately satisfied* with the way democracy is working, with 27% of Republicans and 22% of Democrats reporting *no satisfaction at all*.

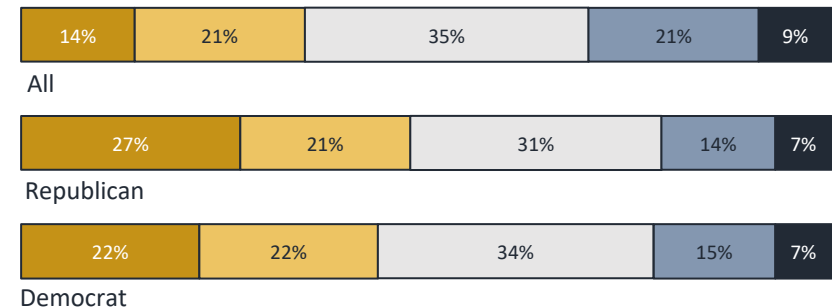
### How *healthy* is the U.S. system of democracy?

ANES Pilot Study, 2022



### How *satisfied* are you with the way democracy works in the U.S.?

ANES Pilot Study, 2022



■ Not at all   ■ Slightly   ■ Moderately   ■ Very   ■ Extremely

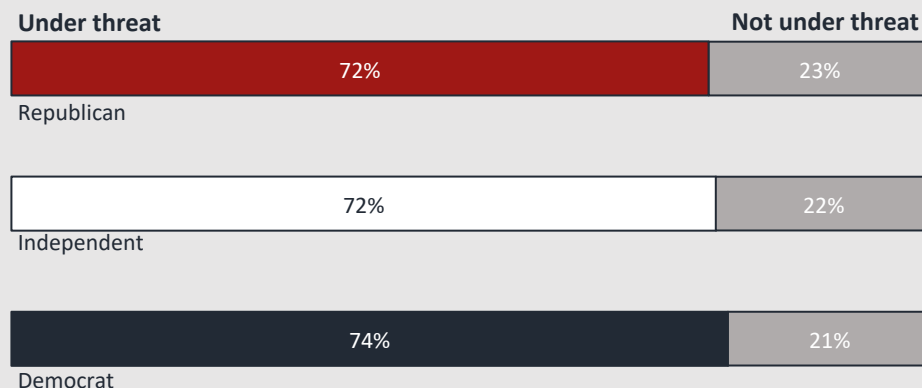
**Over three-quarters (77%) of Americans believe domestic extremism is a larger threat than international extremism** (Quinnipiac, 2022). While there is general agreement between parties that U.S. democracy is under threat, each party's belief in the cause of that threat varies and is unpacked on the following slides.

# PERCEPTIONS OF THE STABILITY OF U.S. DEMOCRACY

## THREATS TO U.S. DEMOCRACY

### % of voters who think democracy is at risk

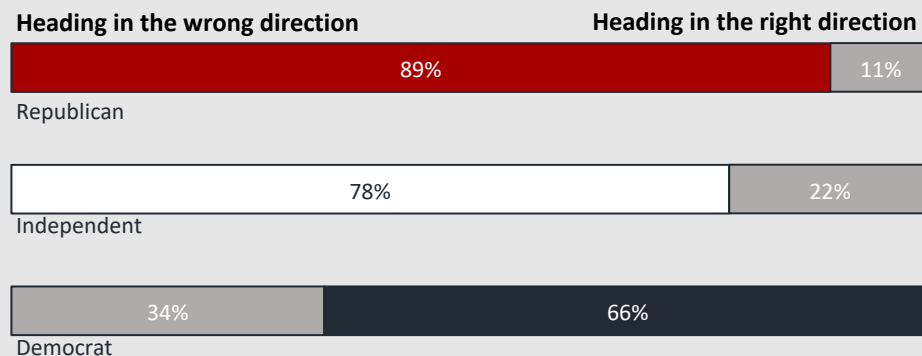
*New York Times, 2022*



*Note: Those with no opinion not shown*

### % of voters who think U.S. is heading in the right or wrong direction

*Morning Consult and Bipartisan Policy Center, 2022*



**Nearly three-quarters (71%) of all registered voters in the United States believe Democracy is at risk (New York Times, 2022) and 65% think the country is heading in the wrong direction (Morning Consult and Bipartisan Policy Center, 2022).**

There is general partisan agreement that democracy is under threat but party divergence on whether the United States is making progress against that threat.

Two-thirds (66%) of Democrats believe the country is heading in the right direction but only 11% of Republicans and 22% of Independents agree. This is likely because the country has a Democratic president and Democratic control over the Senate. If the reverse were the case, Republicans would likely believe the country was making strides and the Democrats would disagree.

Bright Line Watch surveys, which ask the public to rank the quality of U.S. democratic performance on a 100-point scale, illustrate that perceptions of democratic performance shift with a change in party power. While Trump was in office between 2017 and 2020, Republicans rated the country's performance in the 60s, while Democrats landed in the mid-to-low 50s. The rankings flipped when President Biden took office. Democrats averaged a rating of 60 in 2022, and Republicans dropped to 54.



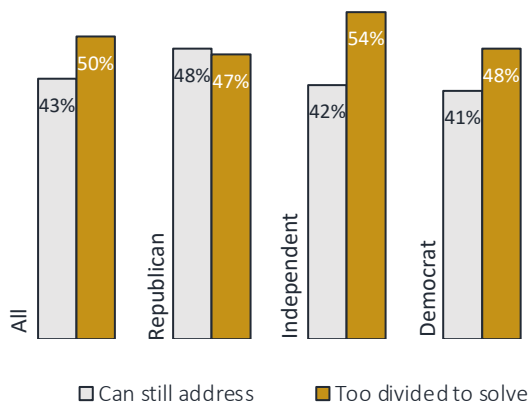
# PERCEPTIONS OF THE STABILITY OF U.S. DEMOCRACY

## LIKELIHOOD OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

More Americans believe the political system is too divided to solve the nation’s problems than those who think it can still overcome the current polarizing challenges.

### Belief that political system can address nation’s problems

*New York Times, 2022*

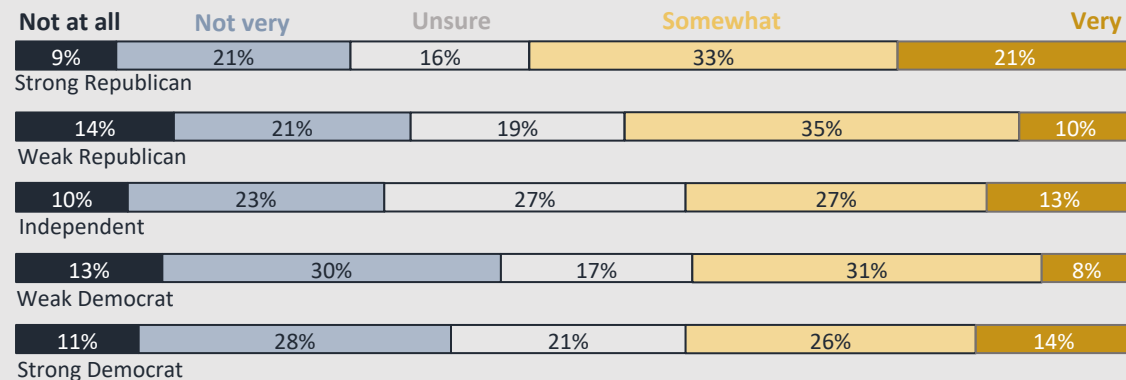


Note: Those with no opinion not shown

Additionally, nearly one-third (29%) of U.S. adults believe a civil war is *somewhat likely* and 14% think it is *very likely*. Republicans are more likely to believe a war is possible. One in five self-described ‘strong Republicans’ believe it is *very likely*. For every group except ‘weak Democrats,’ more respondents believe civil war is *somewhat* or *very likely* than *not very* or *not at all likely*.

### Likelihood of civil war in next decade

*YouGov, 2022*

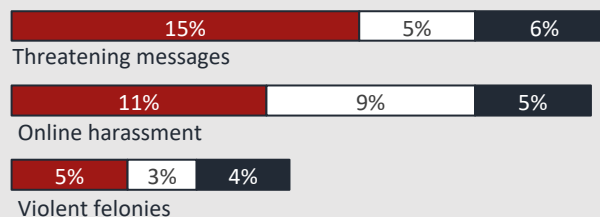


Additionally, well over half (62%) of Americans say the amount of political violence is likely to increase over the next few years. Only 9% believe it will decrease (*YouGov, 2022*).

Despite belief in a potential civil war and an increase in political violence, the overwhelming majority of Americans do not support unlawful tactics to fix the nation’s problems: 81% believe changes should be made within the law (86% of Republicans, 78% of Independents, and 81% of Democrats) (*New York Times, 2022*). Relatedly, very few Americans support political violence or aggression.

### Support for political aggression and violence

*Bright Line Watch, 2022*



■ Democrat □ Independent ■ Republican

# PERCEPTIONS OF PARTISAN POLARIZATION

AMERICANS' VIEWS OF THE POLITICAL DIVISIONS  
BETWEEN MAJOR U.S. PARTIES

## Section highlights

- 66% of Americans believe polarization has increased over the last 2 years, but Republicans were 20 percentage points more likely than Democrats to say so.
- Republicans are also more likely than Democrats to believe polarization will continue to increase over the next few years (72% vs. 58%).
- Americans agree on some of the contributors to polarization, including money in politics, the spread of disinformation, and the media. There are wider party disagreements over other contributors like voter suppression and election fraud.

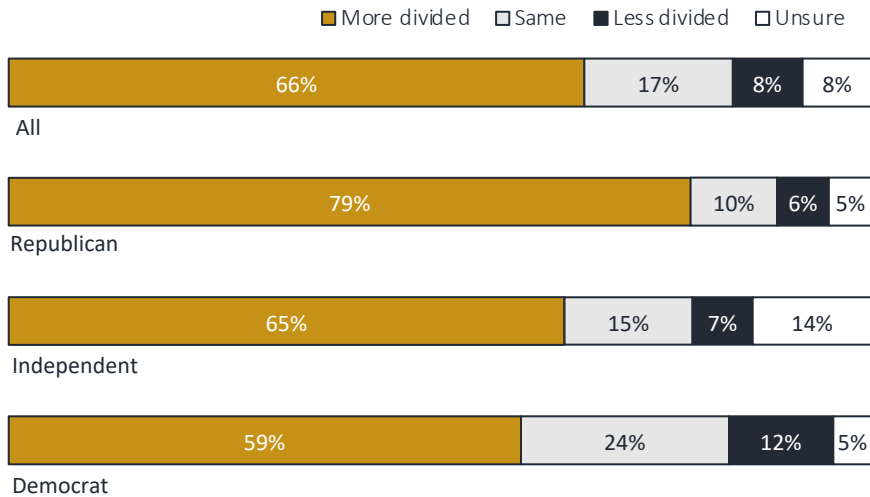


# PERCEPTIONS OF PARTISAN POLARIZATION

## ESTIMATES OF POLARIZATION LEVELS

Voters tend to believe polarization has increased over the last few years and will only continue to grow. **In 2022, over two-thirds of Americans believed the United States had become more divided over the previous year.**

**Since the beginning of 2021, do you think this country has become \_\_\_?**  
*YouGov, 2022*

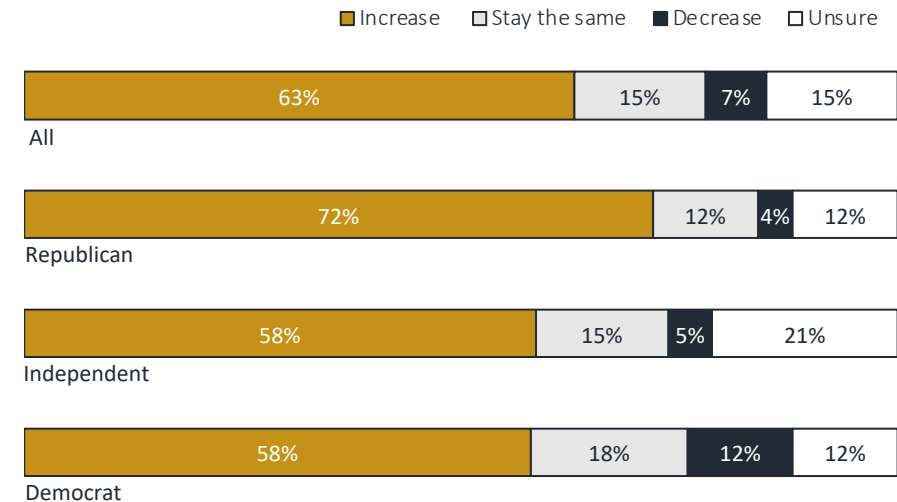


Republicans were the most likely to believe the country had become more divided (79%). Nearly two-thirds of Democrats believed the country had become more divided and 12% believed it had become less so, making them the most optimistic group. Independents fell in between Republicans and Democrats on both metrics.

While there is general agreement that divisions have increased, the 20-percentage-point difference between Republicans and Democrats can likely be explained by the Democrats' control over the executive branch and Senate.

A similar majority of Americans believes political divisions will increase over the coming years (63%). While Republicans are more likely to say so over the coming years (72%), nearly 60% of Independents and Democrats agree.

**Looking ahead to the next few years, do you think the amount of political divisions is more likely to \_\_\_?**  
*YouGov, 2022*





# PERCEPTIONS OF PARTISAN POLARIZATION

## CONTRIBUTORS TO POLARIZATION

### AREAS OF AGREEMENT

**% total of Americans who believe \_\_\_ contributes to partisan polarization**

*Bipartisan Policy Center, 2022*

Money in politics



Spread of disinformation



Media



Over 50% of the respondents to a Morning Consult/Bipartisan Policy Center survey rated each of the three contributors on the left – money in politics (56%), the spread of disinformation (55%), and media (50%) – as contributing *a lot* to political polarization in the United States.

The graph represents the total percent of each political party's belief that the issue contributes to partisan polarization. There is general agreement between Republicans and Democrats for these top three. The largest difference relates to the spread of disinformation, but Democrats are only 4 percentage points more likely than Republicans to say it contributes to polarization.

### POINTS OF CONTENTION

**% total of Americans who believe \_\_\_ contributes to partisan polarization**

*Bipartisan Policy Center, 2022*

Voter suppression



Redistricting and gerrymandering



Electoral College



Filibuster



Election fraud



■ Democrat □ Independent ■ Republican

This graph depicts the issues on which the difference between Republicans and Democrats is at its greatest. The average percentage-point difference is 20, compared to 2.3 in the graph above.

Democrats rank voter suppression, redistricting and gerrymandering, the Electoral College, and the filibuster as more impactful contributors to polarization than Republicans. Republicans think election fraud is of greater concern than Democrats, likely due to the tensions over the 2020 elections and the misinformation on topics like electronic voting systems and mail-in ballots.

# AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

AMERICANS' DISLIKE AND DISTRUST OF THOSE ON  
THE OPPOSITE END OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM

## Section highlights

- Affective polarization is a deep dislike and distrust of those in the opposing political party absent major ideological shifts.
- Since the 1990s, negative ratings for those in the opposing party have sharply increased.
- Democrats and Republicans are increasingly likely to label those in the other party as dishonest, immoral, and close-minded.
- About 80% of Democrats and Republicans view the opposing party as a bigger threat to democracy.

# AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

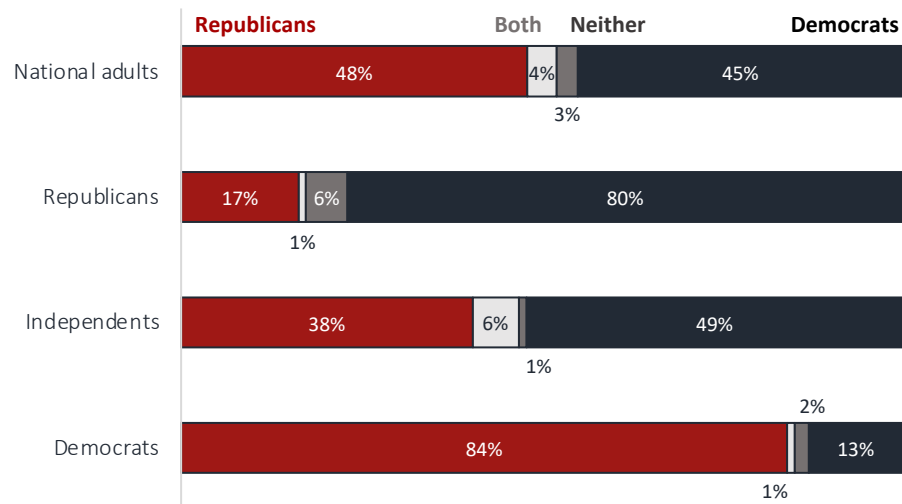
## VIEWS OF THE 'OTHER'

Perceptions of polarization are high among nearly all Americans. Americans agree on several contributors to polarization, some of which are not partisan in essence (money in politics, the spread of disinformation, etc.), though the degree to which respondents believe these factors affect polarization varied.

When asked an inherently polarizing question, such as “Which party is the bigger threat to democracy in the United States?” partisan lines become starker.

### In general, which party do you think is the bigger threat to democracy in the United States?

Marist, 2022



Note: Unsure answers not shown

The graph indicates that people view the other political party as the greater threat to democracy. This is a dangerous outlook. It can be used to justify illiberal behavior, like voter suppression, to secure a party's interests against a perceived but unfounded threat. The perceived threat can therefore sustain support for political “elites” who disregard democratic norms.

### THE RISE OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

The belief that the other party is a risk to U.S. democracy is a symptom of **affective polarization – a deep dislike and distrust of those in the opposing political party absent major ideological shifts.**

Evidence of this growing dislike is evident in the graphs on the following page. For decades, ANES has asked survey participants to rate those in the opposing party on a scale from 0 (the worst) to 100 (the best). Ratings have steadily worsened since the mid-1990s.

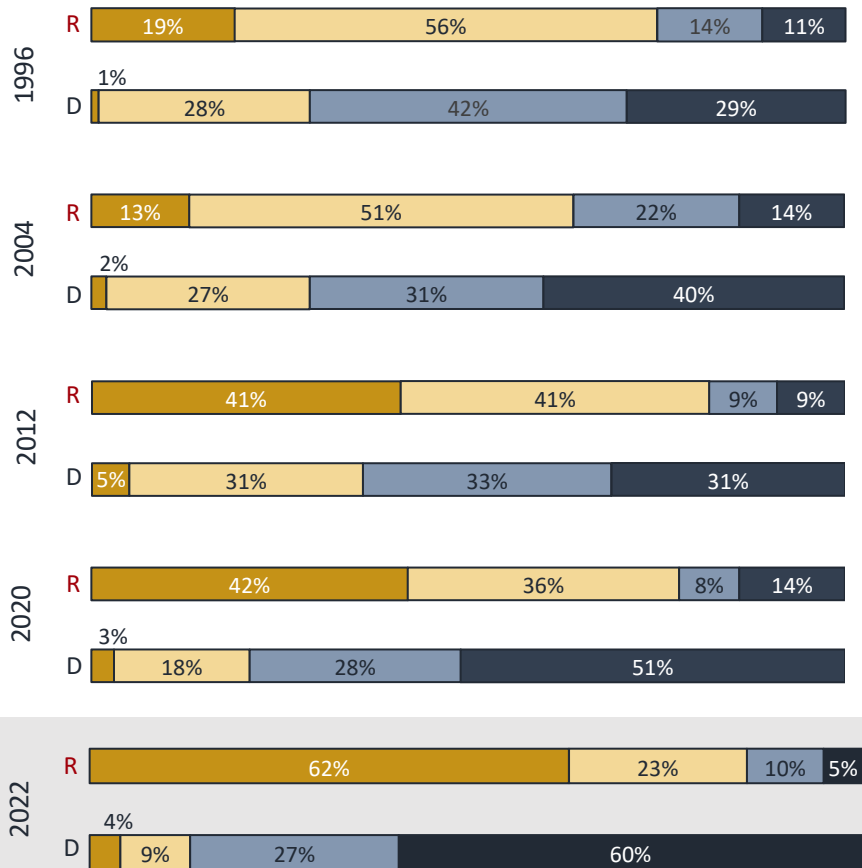
- In 1996, only 19% of Republicans rated Democrats between 0-25. By 2022, 62% did.
- In 1996, 5% of Democrats rated Republicans between 0-25. In 2022, 55% did (ANES, 2022, 2020)



# AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION VIEWS OF THE 'OTHER'

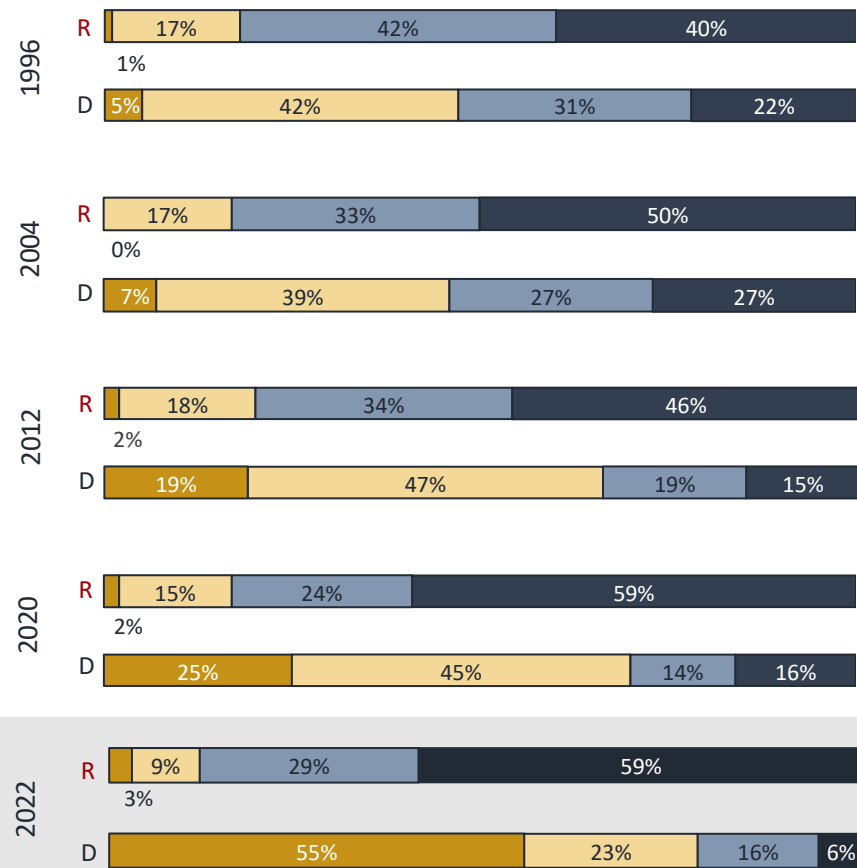
## RATINGS OF DEMOCRATS

ANES



## RATINGS OF REPUBLICANS

ANES



R: Republican D: Democrat

0-25 26-50 51-75 76-100

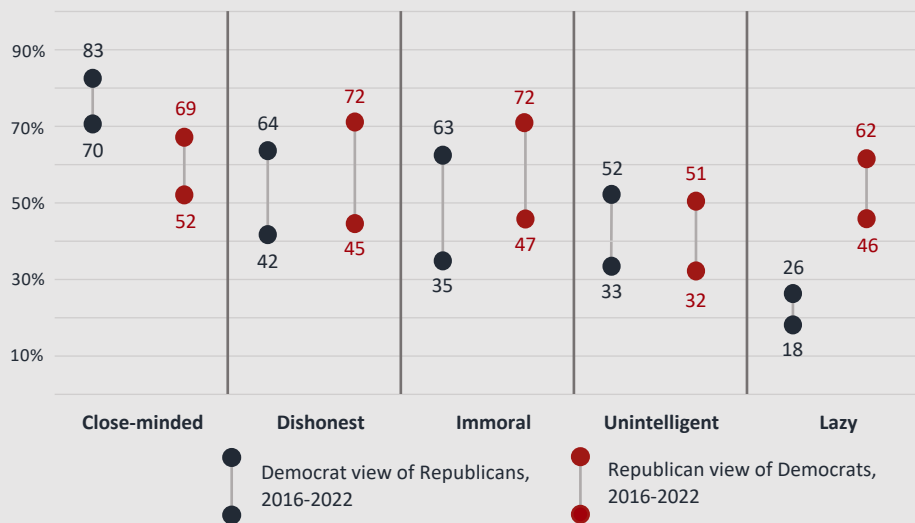


# AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION STEREOTYPES OF THE 'OTHER'

## INCREASE IN NEGATIVE VIEWS OF THE 'OTHER'

**% of Americans who say the other party is a lot/somewhat more \_\_\_\_\_ compared to other Americans**

*Pew Research Center, 2022*



**In 2022, 72% of Republicans viewed Democrats as dishonest and 83% of Democrats saw Republicans as close-minded.**

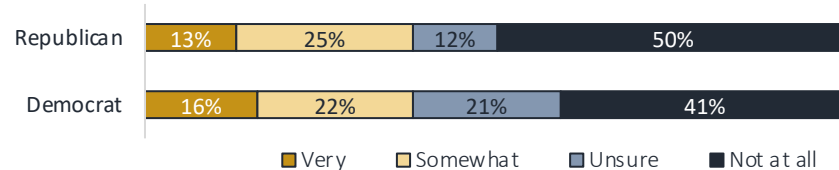
The graph above depicts the rise of affective polarization. Since 2016, the opinions of those in the opposing political party have become more negative. The average increase in Democrats' views of Republicans in these categories was 18 percentage points; for Republicans, it was nearly 21. Democrats' view of Republicans as immoral has increased by 28 percentage points in 6 years. Republicans' view of Democrats as immoral increased by 25 percentage points.

## DATING ACROSS THE AISLE

In 2020, Republicans (50%) were less likely than Democrats (41%) to be upset if their child married someone from the opposite party. About 40% from each party would be *very* or *somewhat* upset if that happened.

**% of Americans who would be upset if child married someone of the opposing party**

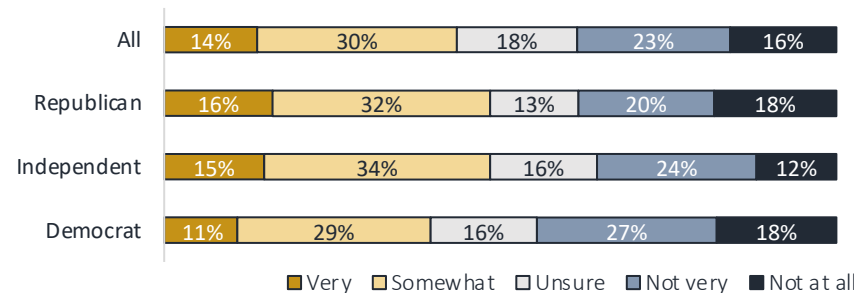
*YouGov, Sept. 2020*



Accordingly, Republicans are more willing than Democrats to date someone from the opposing party. Nearly half of Republicans are *very* or *somewhat* willing to date across the aisle while 38% are *not very* or *not at all* willing. Democrats are more likely to be unwilling (45%) to date someone with different political views compared to those who are willing (40%).

**% of Americans who would be willing to date someone with different political views**

*YouGov, Aug. 2020*





# POLARIZATION INDEX: PART I

## CONCLUSION

Polarization is integral to the health of democracy. It can promote competition, increase accountability, and represent a variety of viewpoints. It is not an uncommon phenomenon in the history of the United States.

However, the country is experiencing a time of heightened polarization, which has the potential to become even more toxic. Toxic polarization is the result of distilling a multitude of social identities into one all-encompassing distinction (in this case, party membership). People organize themselves along dividing lines with over-simplified and singular labels, like Republican or Democrat, which creates a vacuum for other salient social identities and multidimensional human behaviors (McCoy et al., 2018). As a result, people rely on stereotypes to understand the monolithic 'other' and view the opposition as socially distant, close-minded, and dangerous.

These indicators overlap with those of affective polarization, for which there is strong evidence in the United States. Many Americans view those in the opposing party as dishonest and immoral; through the lens of stereotypes, the opposition seems far removed from one's daily life and understanding. Viewing the opposing party as a threat to democracy is particularly dangerous. The January 6th attack on the Capitol shows how the power of rhetoric and misinformation about the opposition can lead to violence in extreme cases.

Some efforts to reduce affective polarization have proven effective, however. These include strengthening our common identity as Americans and correcting misguided beliefs about the opposing party, like over-inflated stereotypes and perceived notions of widely held extreme beliefs (Voelkel et al., 2023).

While it is clear that Americans are affectively polarized and have become increasingly so over the last few decades, there is a lack of clarity on the degree to which the public is ideologically polarized. Part II of the Polarization Index unpacks partisan divides on the most pressing issues, including the economy, abortion, race, and gun rights.

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