

Salve Regina University

Digital Commons @ Salve Regina

US Political Polarization

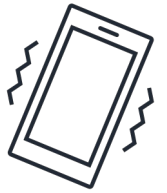
Pell Center for International Relations and
Public Policy

2023

Voices of Values 2023 Survey Report

Katie Sonder

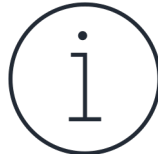
Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/uspp>



SALVE
THE PELL CENTER

VOICES of VALUE

2023 Survey Report



COMPILED BY

Katie Langford Sonder, Associate Director and Fellow
Pell Center for International Relations at Public Policy
Salve Regina University

Katie Langford Sonder is Associate Director and Fellow at the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina University. Langford's current research involves applying conflict resolution best practices to U.S. political polarization. Langford earned her M.A. in International Peace and Conflict Resolution from American University in Washington, DC and her B.A. in Philosophy from New York University. She has lived and worked abroad in Thailand through the Princeton in Asia fellowship and in Ethiopia as a Peace Corps volunteer.



**SALVE REGINA
UNIVERSITY**

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The following is an analysis of a Rhode Island state survey conducted by the Pell Center at Salve Regina University. The survey, fielded by Embold Research between October 12-17, 2023 via the web, gathered responses from 887 registered voters in Rhode Island, with a modeled margin of error of 3.3%. Demographics of survey participants can be found at the end of the report. Additionally, survey questions were modeled after surveys from a number of reputable sources. Sources are listed at the end of the report.

HEALTH OF U.S. DEMOCRACY

Registered voters in Rhode Island view their American identity as extremely important, followed closely by party membership. Over two-thirds of Rhode Islanders believe being American is very or extremely important to their identity. About half of Republicans, Independents, and Democrats label party affiliation as just as important.

High levels of national pride notwithstanding, half of registered voters in Rhode Island believe U.S. democracy is unhealthy and they are generally skeptical of the state and federal government's ability to work in the best interest of the common citizen. Rhode Islanders also overwhelmingly believe the country has become more politically polarized in the last five years and nearly two-thirds think political division will increase.

Rhode Islanders possess high levels of American pride and low levels of confidence in the health of U.S. democracy. The causes of concern in the American system are divided along partisan lines, however, which suggests Rhode Islanders hold varying perceptions of what it means to create a thriving American democracy.

THREATS TO DEMOCRACY and CONTRIBUTORS TO POLARIZATION

Rhode Islanders cite various threats to U.S. democracy along party lines. For example, Rhode Islanders are generally concerned that elections are free and fair, but the roots of these concerns differ between political parties. Over three-quarters of Republicans believe voter fraud is a threat to democracy, while voter suppression is the primary concern for Democrats and Independents.

Despite partisan divisions, voters find agreement in their view of disinformation and fake news as one of the top contributors to polarization; it earned the highest percentage out of any indicator from each party. Republicans are generally concerned about partisan media and Democrats with Donald Trump and money in politics. Independents agree with both parties.

Less than a third of each party tagged political polarization and the 'state of democracy' as one of the most important issues facing the country today in spite of these concerns over the health of democracy and increasing political division. Instead, over half of Rhode Islanders believe inflation and the cost of living is of top importance. This suggests that the quality of life among Rhode Islanders is impacted more by the economy than by political division.

That said, state Democrats and Republicans hold deeply negative views of their political counterparts. Nearly two-thirds of Republicans and Democrats view their political opponents as very close-minded. Independents are less likely to judge their counterparts as harshly: most would not label Republicans as lazy and nearly half view Democrats as intelligent.

Rhode Islanders agree on the symptoms of an unhealthy American democracy, but not on the root causes. Republicans are generally concerned about voter fraud while Democrats and Independents worry over voter suppression. Republicans and Independents view the partisan media as a major threat to democracy, while Democrats see Trump and Republicans officials as a hindrance. Concern for the state of our nation is bipartisan but the cause for concern is not.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

NEWS MEDIA CONSUMPTION

More Rhode Islanders trust local than national news, but Republicans and Independents are less trusting than Democrats, given their concerns of partisan media as a threat to democracy. All parties are skeptical of news from social media sites as they are concerned with fake news and disinformation.

Perhaps because of these concerns, most registered voters avoid the news at least some of the time. Of those who disengage, over half avoid national politics coverage.

Partisan differences exist beyond this fatigue of national politics. Republicans are the most likely party to distrust the news media and the least likely party to say they avoid the news. Over half receive most of their news from Fox News. Democrats are the most likely party to say they trust the national and local news but almost half sometimes avoid it. They are three times more likely than Republicans to tune in to CNN and six times more likely to watch MSNBC. Independents tend to trust local news more than national but are the most likely party to avoid the news.

Despite a habit of avoidance, Rhode Islanders tend to be confident in their ability to verify news sources and information. Over half asked critical questions about something they read or watched in the news and over one-third searched for different viewpoints on a news story more than 5 times in the previous month.

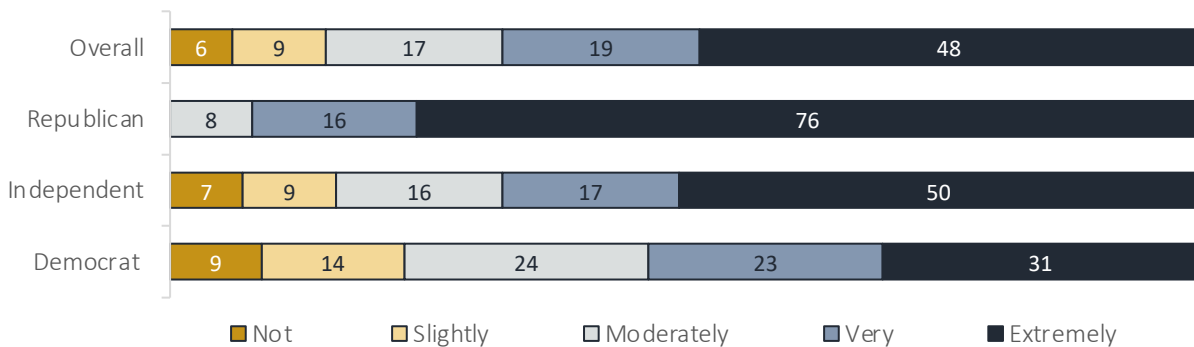
Rhode Islanders have a complicated relationship with the news media. Most are reluctant to trust news sources, and thus have the tendency to avoid the news, at least on some topics. All political parties are concerned about partisan media's impact on increasing political tensions, but each party tends to get most of their news from partisan news sources.



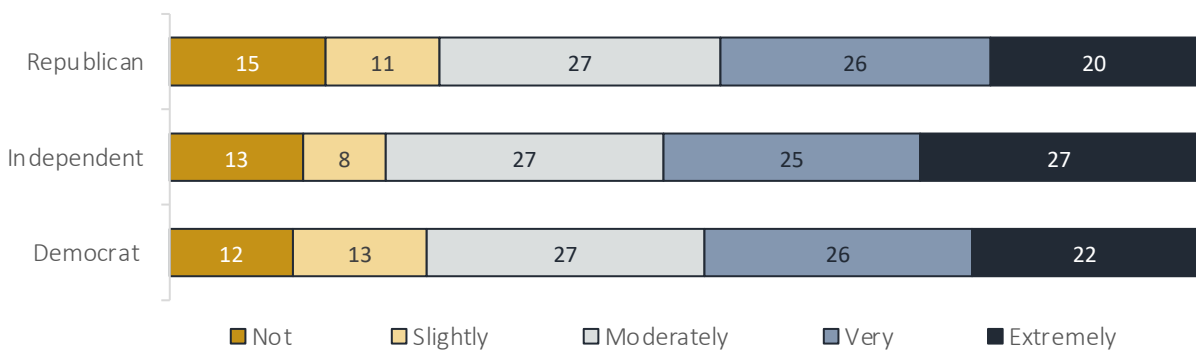
IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY

Being an American is an important identity for most Rhode Islanders, followed closely by party membership.

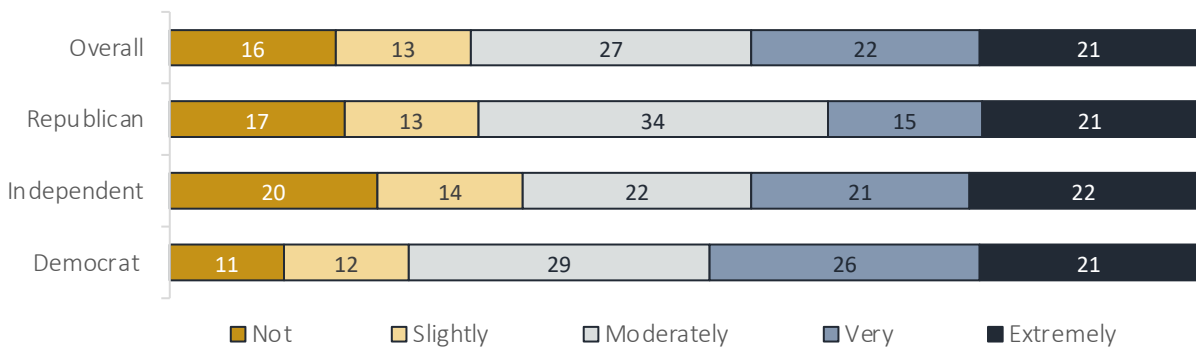
% importance of American identity



% importance of party affiliation identity



% importance of Rhode Island identity

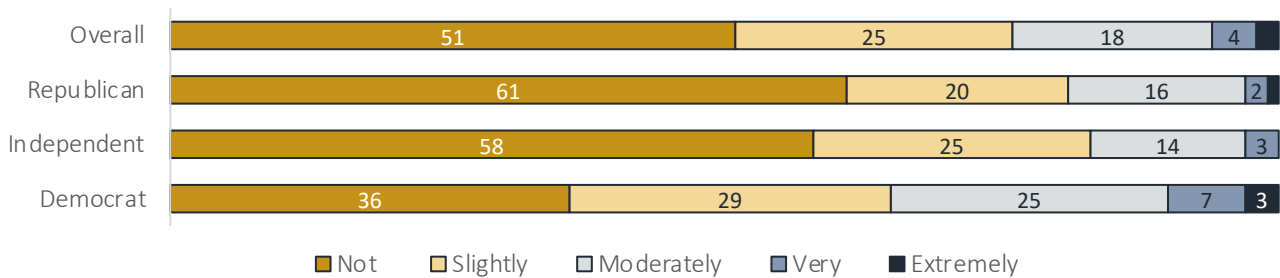


Note: totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

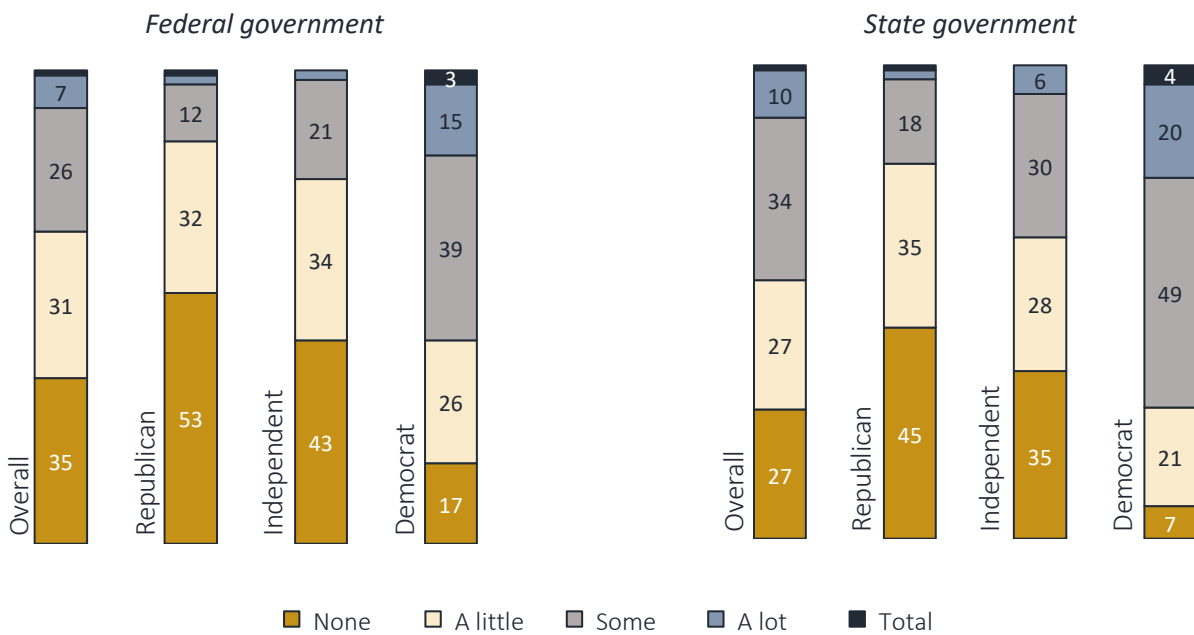
PERCEPTIONS OF U.S. DEMOCRACY

Though most Rhode Islanders have high levels of national pride, half of registered voters in the state believe U.S. democracy is unhealthy and most have little trust in the state and federal government.

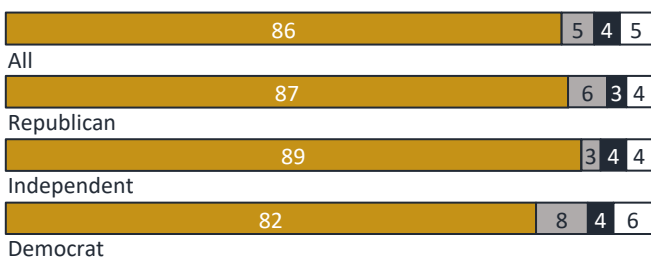
% who believe U.S. democracy is ___ healthy



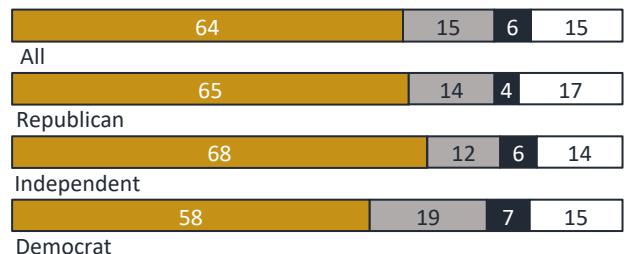
% trust in the ___ to work in the best interest of the common citizen



% who believe the level of political polarization has ___ in the last five years



% who believe the level of political polarization will ___ in the next five years



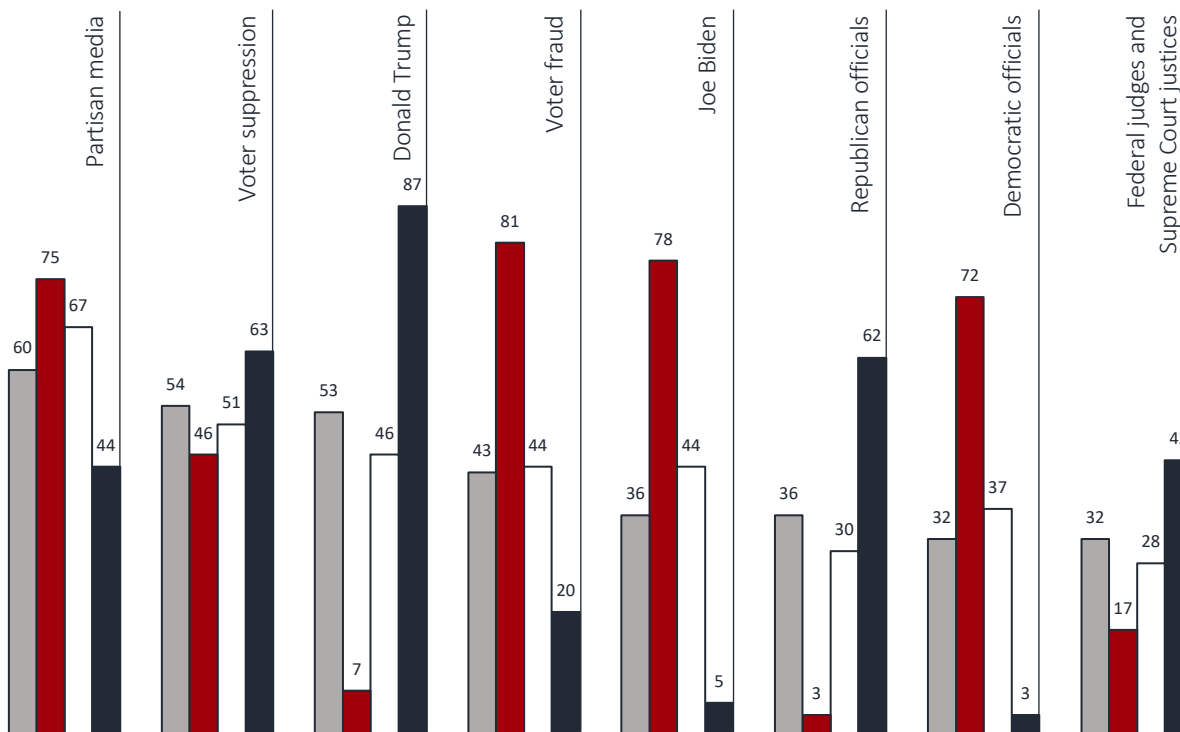
Legend: Increase (dark blue), Stay the same (light blue), Decrease (dark grey), Unsure (white)

Note: totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

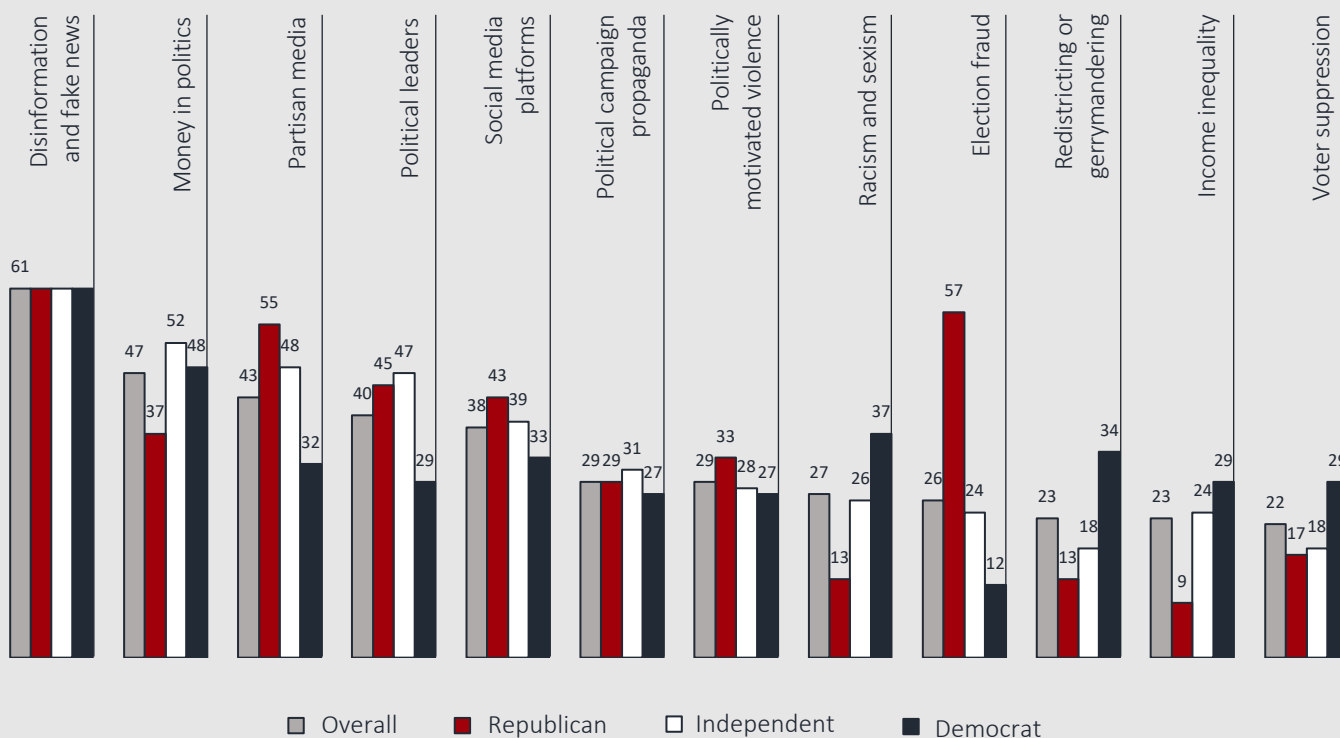
ROOT CAUSES OF DIVISION

While voters agree that democracy is suffering in the United States, beliefs in the key threats to democracy and the major contributors to polarization are starkly partisan.

% who think each of the following is a very big threat to democracy



% of voters who chose the following as a top three contributor to political polarization



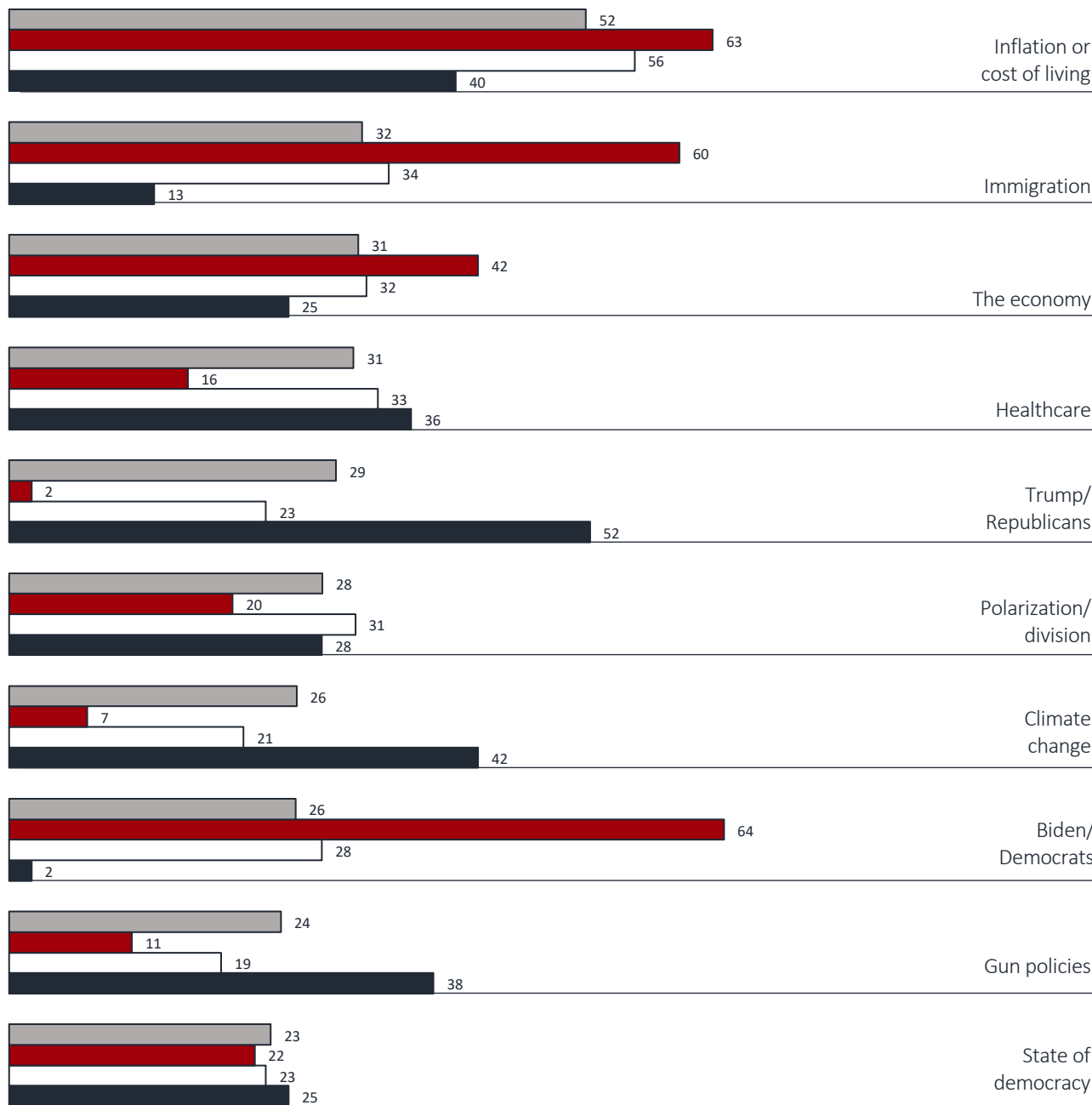
Legend: Overall (grey), Republican (red), Independent (white), Democrat (black)

Note: totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

IMPORTANT ISSUES

Registered voters, no matter their political party, view the cost of living and inflation as one of the most important issues facing the nation today.

% of voters who chose ____ as one of the top three most important problems facing the country today



Overall
 Republican
 Independent
 Democrat

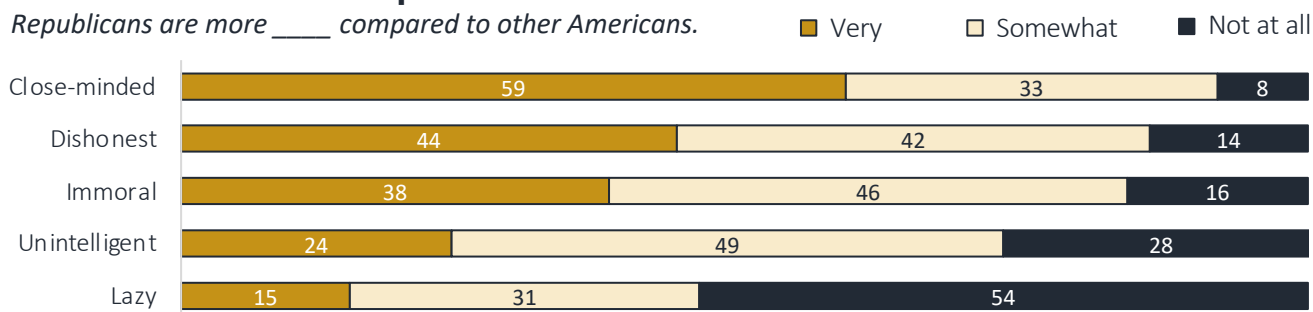
Note: totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

VIEWS OF THE 'OTHER'

Republicans and Democrats in the state hold deeply negative views of their political counterparts, while Independents are less likely to judge as harshly.

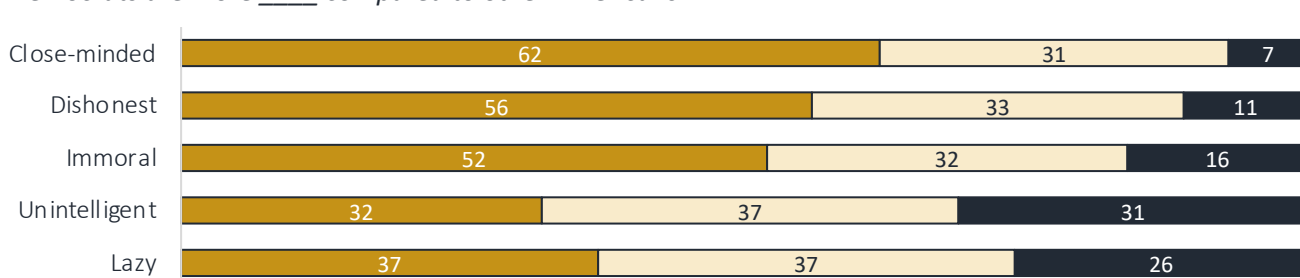
Democrats' views of Republicans

Republicans are more ____ compared to other Americans.



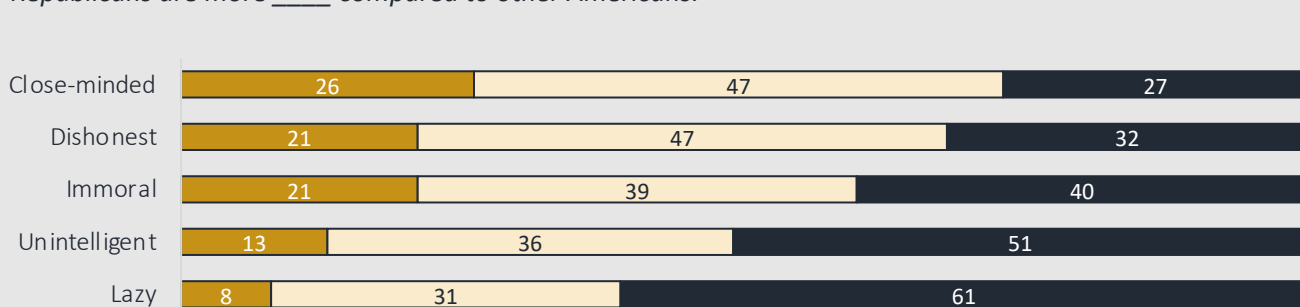
Republicans' views of Democrats

Democrats are more ____ compared to other Americans.



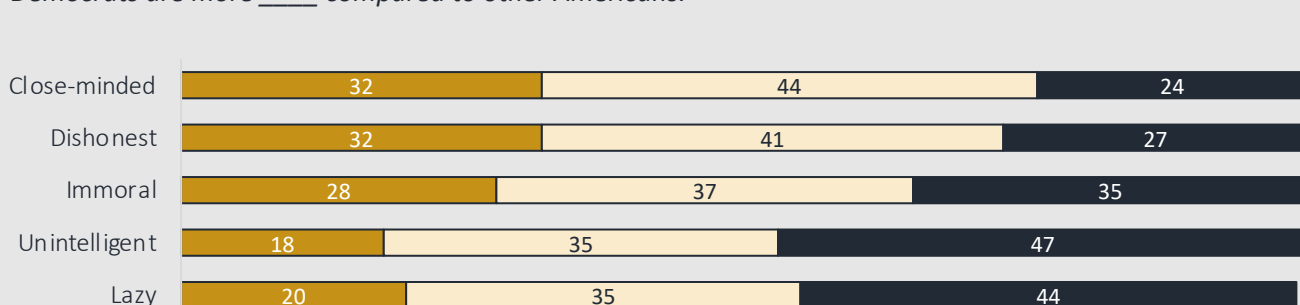
Independents' views of Republicans

Republicans are more ____ compared to other Americans.



Independents' views of Democrats

Democrats are more ____ compared to other Americans.

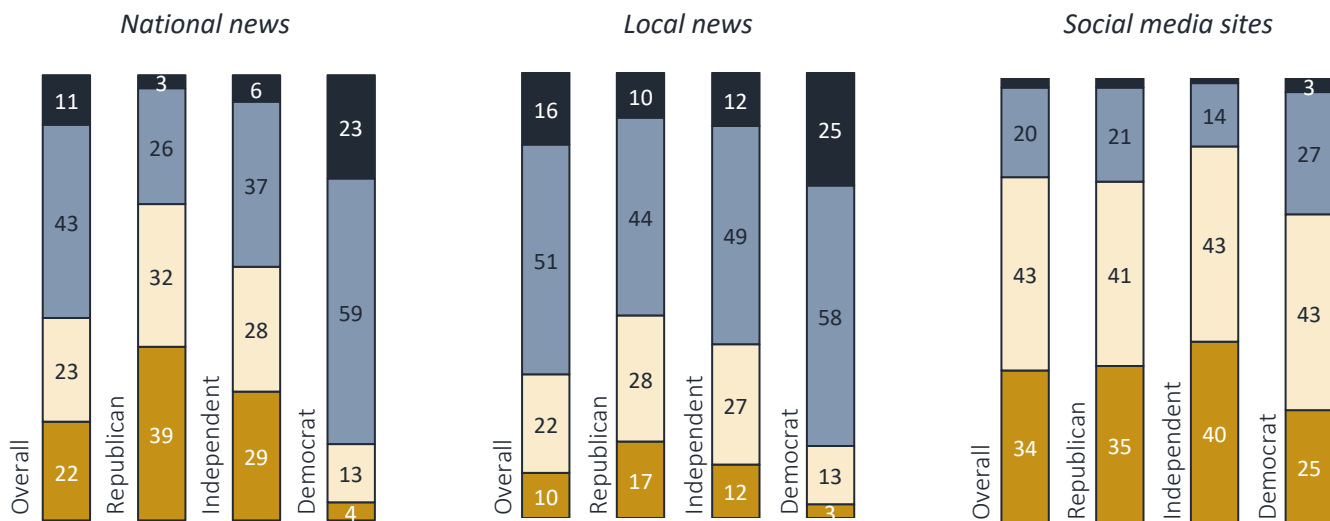


TRUST IN THE MASS MEDIA

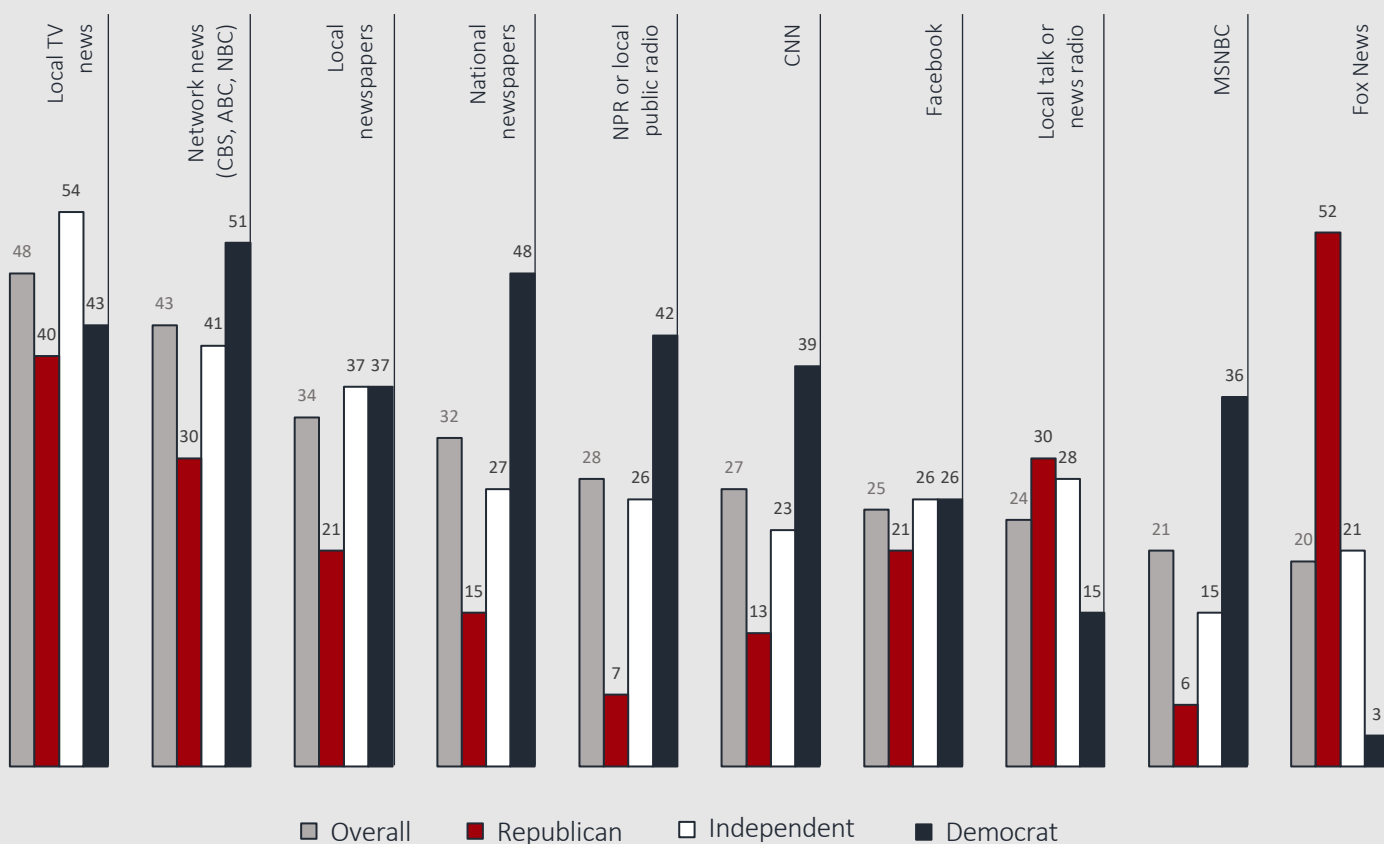
Rhode Islanders get most of their news from local TV, which they are more likely to trust than national news.

% who have ___ trust in the information from

■ No
 ■ A little
 ■ Some
 ■ A lot



% who get most of their news about national and local politics from ...



■ Overall
 ■ Republican
 ■ Independent
 ■ Democrat

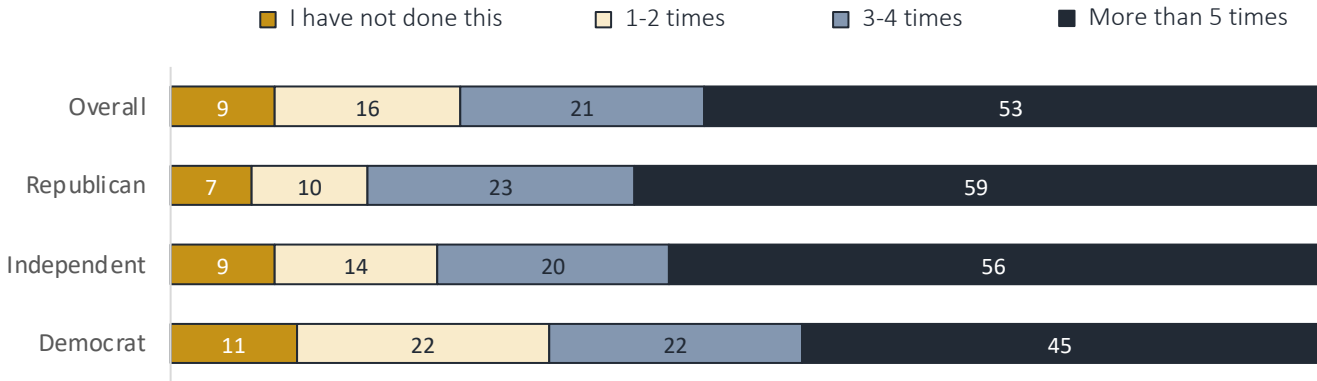
Note: totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

MEDIA DISCERNMENT

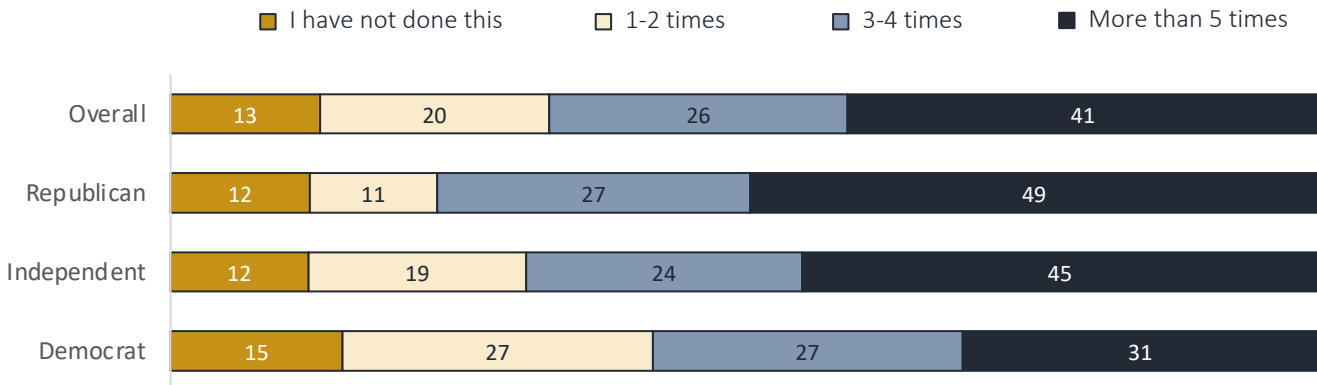
Despite concerns of fake news and disinformation, Rhode Islanders are generally confident in their ability to discern the validity of news stories.

In the last month ...

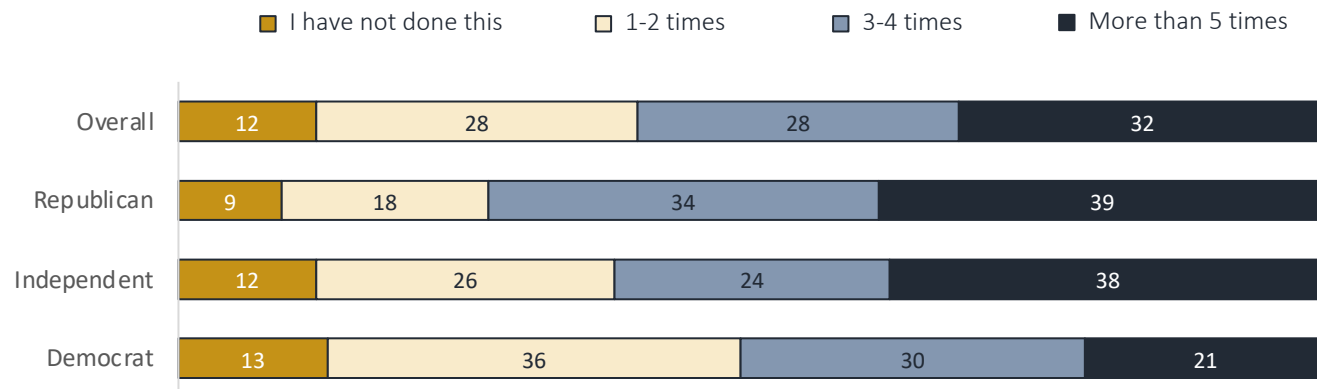
% who asked critical questions about what they watched, read, or heard in the news



% who searched for different points of view about a news or current events topic



% who talked with someone with a different background or life experience about a news or current event topic

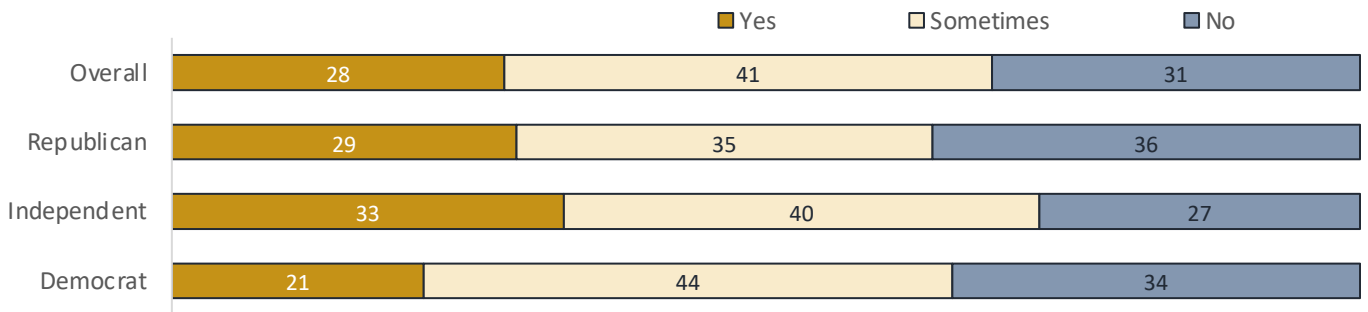


Note: totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

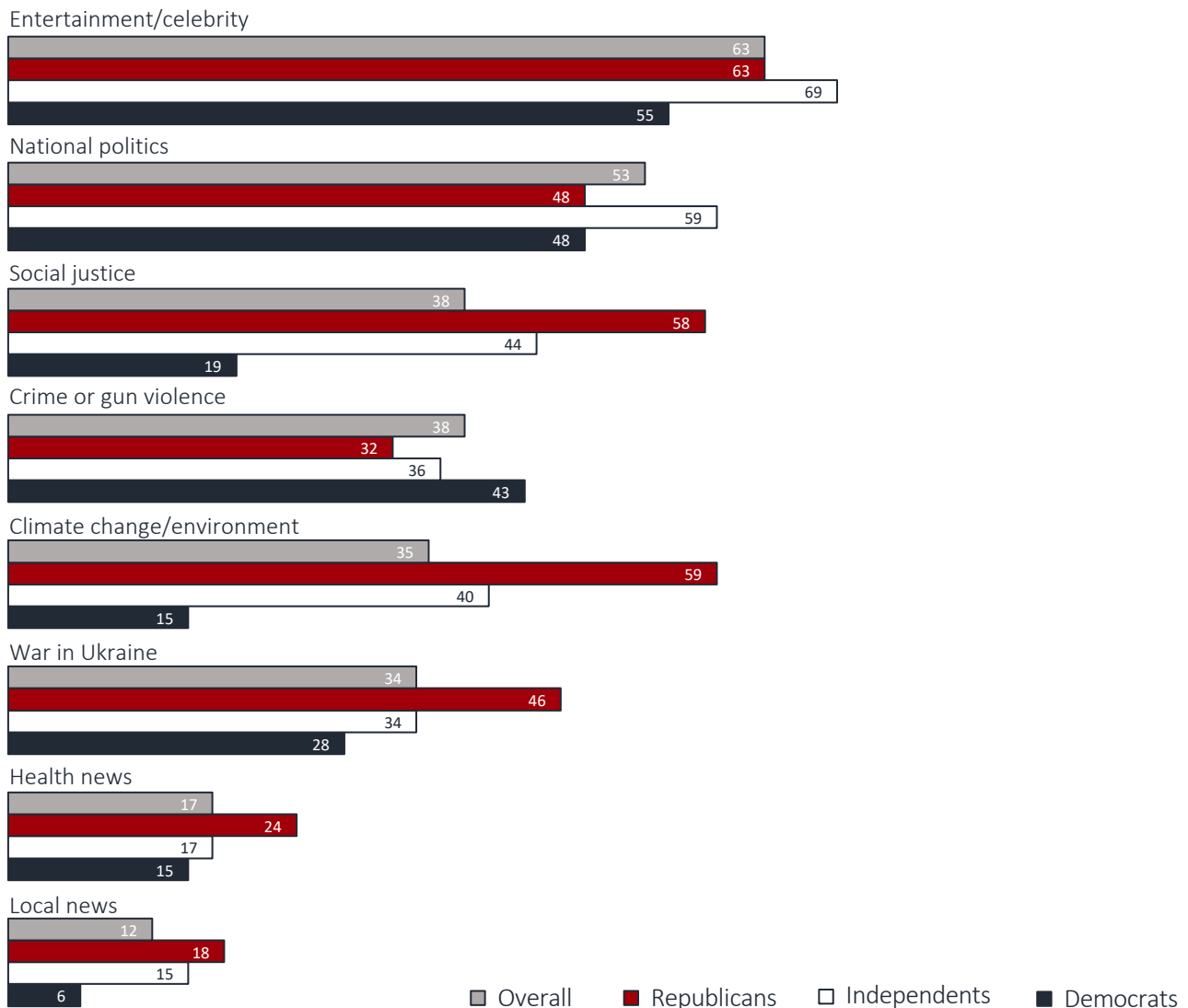
NEWS AVOIDERS*

Given frustration with partisan news and disinformation, registered voters are likely to avoid the news, at least sometimes.

% who find themselves actively trying to avoid news these days



Among news avoiders, % total who say they avoid news about the following topics



*News avoiders is a term borrowed from the [Reuters Institute's Digital News Report](#)

Note: totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Rhode Islanders have high levels of national pride but low levels of trust that the government works in the best interest of the common citizen. Half of registered voters believe U.S. democracy is unhealthy.



Registered voters in the Ocean State overwhelmingly believe political polarization has increased over the last five years and will only continue to increase.



Voters are generally concerned that election processes are free, fair, and transparent. The reasons for these concerns are partisan, however. Democrats and Independents view voter suppression as a threat to democracy, while Republicans see voter fraud as a primary concern.



No matter political party affiliation, Rhode Islanders view disinformation and fake news as a major contributor to polarization. About two-thirds also believe partisan media is a threat to U.S. democracy. Republicans and Independents are the most likely to believe this; only 44% of Democrats agree.



Registered voters are more likely to trust the local news than the national news, and they have very little trust for news they see on social media sites. Given their concerns about partisan media, Republicans and Independents are less likely than Democrats to trust the news media.



A majority of voters avoid the news, at least sometimes. Of those who do, about half avoid news on national politics. Despite this, Rhode Islanders regularly check the validity of news information they come across. Over half asked critical questions about what they heard, watched, or read and over one-third searched for different points of view over five times in the last month.

REPUBLICANS

INDEPENDENTS

DEMOCRATS

Threats to U.S. democracy

- voter fraud (81%)
- Joe Biden (78%)
- partisan media (75%)

- partisan media (67%)
- voter suppression (51%)
- Donald Trump (46%)

- Donald Trump (87%)
- voter suppression (63%)
- Republican officials (62%)

Contributors to polarization

- disinformation and fake news (61%)
- election fraud (57%)
- partisan media (55%).

- disinformation and fake news (61%)
- money in politics (52%)
- partisan media (48%)

- disinformation and fake news (61%)
- money in politics (48%)
- racism and sexism (37%).

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

	Registered Voters
Party	
Base Republicans	20%
Independents + Leaners	44%
Base Democrats	36%
Age	
18-34	25%
35-49	23%
50-64	25%
65+	27%
Race	
White	77%
Hispanic	9%
Black	5%
AAPI	4%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
Other	3%
Gender	
Female	52%
Male	47%
Other	1%
Highest level of education completed	
High school diploma or less	15%
Some college, no degree	28%
Associate's degree	11%
Bachelor's degree	26%
Graduate degree	19%
Congressional district	
1	43%
2	52%
Region	
Bristol/Newport	13%
Kent	17%
Providence	56%
Washington	13%

Note: 'not sure' responses not shown

SURVEY QUESTIONS

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

1. Are you
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other
2. In what year were you born?
3. In what ZIP code do you currently live?
4. Here is a map of Rhode Island's two congressional districts. In which district do you live?
 - 1
 - 2
 - Not sure
5. What is your race?
 - White/Caucasian
 - Hispanic or Latino/a
 - Black or African American
 - Asian/Pacific Islander
 - American Indian or Alaska Native
 - Other (please specify)
6. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 - High school diploma or less
 - Some college, but no degree
 - Associate's degree, or two-year college degree
 - Bachelor's degree, or four-year college degree
 - Graduate degree
7. Are you registered to vote in Rhode Island?
 - Yes
 - No [terminate]
 - Not sure [terminate]
8. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a:
 - Democrat
 - Republican
 - Independent/Other

[IF DEMOCRAT/REPUBLICAN] Do you consider yourself a:

 - Strong Democrat/Republican
 - Not so strong Democrat/Republican

[IF INDEPENDENT/OTHER] Do you consider yourself closer to: [RANDOMIZE DEM/REP]

 - The Democrats
 - The Republicans
 - Neither

VOICES OF VALUE SURVEY QUESTIONS

9. How important are the following aspects to your identity? [Extremely important | Very important | Moderately important | Slightly important | Not important at all] [RANDOMIZE]
 - Being a Rhode Islander
 - Being an American (*ANES, 2022*)
10. And how important is being a [Republican / Democrat / independent - based on answer to Q7] to your identity?
 - Extremely important
 - Very important
 - Moderately important
 - Slightly important
 - Not important at all (*ANES, 2022*)
11. In your opinion, how healthy is the U.S. system of democracy? [RANDOMLY FLIP]
 - Not at all healthy
 - Slightly healthy
 - Moderately healthy
 - Very healthy
 - Extremely healthy (*ANES, 2022*)
12. How much trust do you have in each of the following to work in the best interest of the common citizen? [None | A little trust | Some trust | A lot of trust | Total trust]
 - The federal government
 - The Rhode Island state government
13. Looking back over the last five years, do you think the country has... [ROTATE]
 - Become more politically polarized
 - Stayed the same
 - Become less politically polarized
 - Not sure (*Orth, 2022*)
14. Looking ahead to the next five years, do you think the amount of political divisions/polarization is more likely to... [ROTATE]
 - Increase
 - Stay the same
 - Decrease
 - Not sure (*Orth, 2022*)

15. How big of a threat to our democracy are each of the following? [A very big threat | A somewhat big threat | Not a big threat | Not a threat at all] (*New York Times, 2022*)

- Democratic officials
- Republican officials
- Partisan media
- Voter fraud
- Voter suppression
- Federal judges and Supreme Court Justices
- Donald Trump
- Joe Biden

16. What are the strongest contributors to polarization? Please select your top three. [RANDOMIZE] (*Morning Consult and Bipartisan Policy Center*)

- Disinformation and fake news
- Partisan media
- Social media platforms
- Lack of civic engagement
- Lack of exposure to diverse perspectives
- Income inequality
- Neighborhood segregation
- Racism and sexism
- Politically motivated violence
- Political leaders
- Money in politics
- Political campaign propaganda
- Voter suppression
- Redistricting or gerrymandering
- Election fraud
- Foreign interference in elections
- The filibuster
- The electoral college
- Other (please specify)[textbox]

17. What do you think are the most important problems facing the country today? Please select your top three. [RANDOMIZE] (*New York Times, 2022*)

- Economy
- Inflation or cost of living
- Reproductive rights (abortion)
- Immigration
- Crime
- Gun policies
- Healthcare
- Education
- Climate change
- The state of democracy
- Election integrity
- Polarization/division
- Racism/racial issues
- Trump/Republicans
- Biden/Democrats
- War in Ukraine
- Relations with China
- International terrorism
- Domestic terrorism
- Other (please specify)

18. Would you say: [Very | Somewhat | Not at all] [RANDOMIZE] (*Pew Research Center, 2022*)

- Republicans are ___ close-minded compared to other Americans.
- Democrats are ___ close-minded compared to other Americans.
- Republicans are ___ immoral compared to other Americans.
- Democrats are ___ immoral compared to other Americans.
- Republicans are ___ dishonest compared to other Americans.
- Democrats are ___ dishonest compared to other Americans.
- Republicans are ___ unintelligent compared to other Americans.
- Democrats are ___ unintelligent compared to other Americans.
- Republicans are ___ lazy compared to other Americans.
- Democrats are ___ lazy compared to other Americans.

19. How do you get most of your news about national and local politics and issues? Please select all that you watch, read or listen to for at least an hour per week.

- CNN
- MSNBC
- FOX News
- Network news (CBS, ABC, NBC, PBS)
- Local TV news
- Newsmax
- Local newspapers (like The Providence Journal or The Newport Daily News)
- National newspapers (like The Washington Post or New York Times)
- NPR or local public radio
- Local talk or news radio
- Local Spanish-language radio, newspapers, or television
- National Spanish-language radio, newspapers or television
- Facebook
- Twitter/X
- Threads
- Instagram
- TikTok
- YouTube
- Somewhere else (please specify)

20. How much trust do you have in the information you get from... [A lot | Some | Just a little | Not at all | Not sure]

- National news media
- Local news media
- Social media sites

21. How many times in the last month have you: [1-2 times | 3-4 times | More than 5 times | I have not done this] [RANDOMIZE]

- Asked critical questions about what you watched, read, or heard in the news
- Talked with someone with a different background or life experience about a news or current event topic
- Searched for different points of view about a news or current events topic

22. Do you find yourself actively trying to avoid news these days? (*Reuters, 2022*)

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No

23. [IF YES OR SOMETIMES] You said that actively try to avoid news these days. Which of the following news topics do you try to avoid? Please select all topics that you try to avoid.

- National politics
- Social justice news
- War in Ukraine
- Climate change and the environment
- Entertainment/celebrity
- Health news
- Local news
- Crime or gun violence
- Other (please specify)[textbox]

24. If the 2024 election for president were held today, and the candidates were the following, who would you vote for? [RANDOMIZE CANDIDATES]

- Donald Trump, the Republican
- Joe Biden, the Democrat
- Not sure
- Another candidate (please specify)

[If not sure] If you had to choose, who would you vote for? [RANDOMIZE CANDIDATES]

- Donald Trump, the Republican
- Joe Biden, the Democrat
- Not sure
- Would not vote

25. [IF RI-01] If the November 2023 special election for U.S. House Rhode Island District 1 representative were held today, who would you vote for? [RANDOMIZE CANDIDATES]

- Gerry Leonard, the Republican
- Gabe Amo, the Democrat
- Not sure

[If not sure] If you had to choose, who would you vote for? [RANDOMIZE CANDIDATES]

- Gerry Leonard, the Republican
- Gabe Amo, the Democrat
- Not sure
- Would not vote

26. In what language did you complete this survey in?

- English
- Spanish

SURVEY QUESTION CITATIONS

ANES: American National Election Studies, “2022 Pilot Study,” 2022, <https://electionstudies.org/data-center/2022-pilot-study/>.

Orth, Taylor. “Two in Five Americans Say a Civil War Is At least Somewhat Likely in the next Decade.” YouGov, Aug. 2022, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/08/26/two-in-five-americans-civil-war-somewhat-likely>.

Morning Consult Bipartisan Policy Center, “Tracking Bipartisanship,” Feb. 2022, https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BPC-Bipartisan-Tracker_Feb-2022_Wave-1.pdf.

New York Times, “Cross-Tabs for October 2022 Times/Siena Poll of Registered Voters,” Oct. 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/10/18/upshot/times-siena-poll-registered-voters-crosstabs.html>.

The Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2022,” 2022, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/>.

Bright Line Watch, “American Democracy on the Eve of the 2022 Midterms: Bright Line Watch October 2022 Surveys,” Oct. 2022, <http://brightlinewatch.org/american-democracy-on-the-eve-of-the-2022-midterms/>.

Pew Research Center, “As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System,” Aug. 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/>.

Reuters Institute, “Digital News Report 2023,” 2023, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf.