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NORMS

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DOS ESTADOS UNIDOS



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E TECNOLOGIA PARA ESTUDOS  
SOBRE OS ESTADOS UNIDOS  
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## AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE IN TRANSITION: THE EROSION OF CONSENSUS AND DEMOCRATIC NORMS

By Wayne A. Selcher\*

*For a complementary earlier analysis, see my article “Is the United States ‘Exceptional’?,” available in PDF, posted [here](#) on the Social Science Research Network, and originally published in August 2021 in [English](#) on the Brazilian academic site [OPEU](#) (Political Observatory of the United States) and [in Spanish](#) in PDF in January 2022 in an academic journal of the University of Guadalajara, Mexico, [Contextualizaciones Latinoamericanas](#). Also useful for the current topic is my article for OPEU, [“Suggested Cost-Free Online Sources for U.S. Politics and Foreign Policy.”](#)*

### **Abstract**

This article identifies and examines the major characteristics, trends, and tendencies in American political culture and political performance that have been evolving in recent years, for a comprehensive picture of how Americans perceive and believe about their country and its political system. The analysis places the findings in a comparative perspective, provides relevant insights from other Western democracies, and discusses the implications of the findings for American democracy. Many links to high-quality, cost-free online sources are offered to facilitate further study of relevant aspects of the contemporary situation of the United States.

### **An Ongoing Crisis of National Unity, Identity, and Self-Confidence**

The concept of “[political culture](#)” in [political sociology](#) can be defined as “*The attitudes, beliefs, and values which underpin the operation of a particular political system. These were seen as including knowledge and skills about the operation of the political system, positive and negative emotional feelings towards it, and evaluative judgements about the system*” ([Oxford Reference](#)). Political culture goes beyond short-term public opinion about particular events and personalities of a moment in time to examine the more enduring, broader, and deeper perceptions, norms, understandings, identities, and patterns that a population or a sector of that population develop and rely on in their political behavior. Political culture is the attitude environment within which political perception and activity take place. It changes over time, as both cause and consequence of concrete social, economic, and political events and forces.

When considering the many national poll results of attitudes used as references in this article, it is vital, for the sake of balance from the standpoint of the individual, to note from the outset that [Pew Research](#) found in May 2023 that family time is by far the most important aspect of life for Americans, not politics. Also to observe that, as demonstrated by [Gallup](#), American polling exhibits a long-standing tendency for individuals to rate the quality of their personal lives and opportunities differently and much more favorably than they rate aspects of the national situation (at a ratio of five-to-one in January 2022), although the degree of difference varies over time.

At the national level, the validity of the formerly common nationalistic designation of the United States as “exceptional” has come into serious question in the last decade or so, as the country struggles with a crisis in national unity and self-confidence. The national unity implied by the “United We Stand!” slogan after the terrorist attacks of [September 11, 2001](#) completely disappeared by the [2010s](#). In fact, the domestic aftermath of the terrorist attacks helped to create the current misinformation and conspiracy theory atmosphere that is skeptical of official narratives. A [Washington Post-ABC poll](#) on the twentieth anniversary of the attacks summarized: “*Ahead of the 20th anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on Saturday, more than 8 in 10 Americans say those events changed the country in a lasting way. Nearly half (46 percent) say the events of 9/11 changed the country for the worse, while 33 percent say they changed the country for the better.*”

The two resultant major wars did not turn out well for the United States or in [American public opinion](#)—the military mission in Afghanistan failed embarrassingly after two decades, as the [Taliban](#) returned to power in August 2021, while [Iran](#) now has more influence in Iraq than the United States does. The “Long War” against terrorism has been replaced as a central concern by rising competition with [China](#) and reactions to the ongoing 2022 Russian invasion of [Ukraine](#). The 2008 and 2023 bank failures and the post-COVID inflation rate made many Americans question the basic health of the financial system and the economy. The COVID pandemic of 2020 into 2022 had the net effect of sharply dividing the country ideologically, pro and anti-vaccination and regarding government mandates during the pandemic, with a consequent challenging of the overwhelmed governmental and health care institutions.

In mid-2023, according to Gallup, a “near-record low” of 39 percent were “extremely proud” to be Americans, with 60 percent of Republicans, 29 percent of Democrats, and 33 percent of independents expressing that level of feeling. [Younger generations](#) (18 to 29 years of age) tend to be more critical of the current national situation and to show less pride in being American, given the experiences of their lifetimes.

**Challenges to Governance and Performance-** The U.S. ranks fourth in the world in territory and third in population. The size and [growing diversity](#) of the country on many measures present serious challenges to democratic and representative governance. The central place of liberty, individualism, and suspicion of central authority in American political culture, combined with localism and the way federalism disperses power in the country, tends to make governing more difficult at the national level. There are major differences within the country by region, social class, race, education level, religious preference, and urban vs. suburban vs. rural settings, among other variables. To take regional variations as an example, Bill Schneider [expressed](#) the regional clash of values succinctly in his 2018 book "[Standoff: How America Became Ungovernable](#)," as "People in Kennesaw [a small town in Georgia] worry about their children getting into heaven. People in Bethesda [a Maryland suburb of Washington, DC] worry about their children getting into Yale."

[Colin Woodard's](#) best-selling 2012 [book](#), "American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America" classified the United States as a "[Balkanized federation](#)," divided by history into [eleven regions](#), or "nations."

*"North America was settled by people with distinct religious, political, and ethnographic characteristics, creating regional cultures that have been at odds with one another ever since. Subsequent immigrants didn't confront or assimilate into an 'American' or 'Canadian' culture, but rather into one of the eleven distinct regional ones that spread over the continent each staking out mutually exclusive territory."*

As a result, in early 2023, [Woodard](#) found significant regional variations in a survey that asked about perceptions regarding ten alleged [threats to democracy](#) in the United States today, in [voting patterns](#) relative to Trump, and in [frequency](#) of incidents of [gun violence](#). Further, [he argues](#), "The United States' civic narrative—the pursuit of the American Experiment in liberal democratic self-government—is the glue that holds it together. Without it, the federation has always been vulnerable to collapse because it is in reality a Balkanized federation of rival regional cultures—'stateless nations' if you will—that otherwise agree on very little."

That American civic narrative, traditionally the key uniting element of American political culture, is under serious strain today. The national motto of E Pluribus Unum ("From Many, One") is becoming more difficult to put into practice. There is a widespread feeling that the country has "[lost its way](#)" (although not just a recent sentiment), but there is major disagreement about what that national "way" or purpose should be or just where being "lost" has taken the country. In May 2023, [Gallup](#) noted that only 18 percent of Americans were satisfied with the way things were going in the nation. A June 2022 [Pew Research](#) summary poll on American attitudes toward their democracy showed that

*“About six-in-ten U.S. adults (58%) say they are not satisfied with the way democracy is working in America, according to a spring 2021 survey of people in 17 advanced economies around the world. A median of 41% across all the publics surveyed said the same about their own democracy. In addition, the vast majority of Americans (85%) said that the U.S. political system either needs major changes (43%) or needs to be completely reformed (42%). Among U.S. adults who say they want significant political reform, 58% said they are not confident the system can change.”*

An April 2023 [CBS News poll](#) noted that 72 percent of the public believed that things were “out of control” in the country, with politics and the economy being the objects of greatest concern. Gallup observed in [May 2023](#) that “Americans lack confidence in a variety of key U.S. leaders on economic matters.” Republican House Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (Georgia), known for her tendentious comments, made a [suggestion](#) on Twitter in February 2023 that “*We need a national divorce. We need to separate by red states and blue states and shrink the federal government.*”

A poll taken in response to that radical statement by [Economist/YouGov](#) found that 23 percent of respondents agreed and that 21 percent would support the secession of their state from the union, reactions that included both parties and independents. However legally and geographically unfeasible the proposal or however serious the poll’s responses, the results indicate remarkable national disunity on a very fundamental matter.

**Comparative Insights-** When Americans compare their country with the rest of the world, contrast is nearly always drawn superficially with troubled developing countries or failed states in dire conditions, in a deliberately self-congratulatory way. However, some more comparable, standard international statistical references are far more useful to place the current American situation in a [broader context](#) to understand more fully how things have gone awry, some of the “whys” of the national [discontent](#) that is now a very prominent part of the political culture, more so than in many Western democracies. The Twitter postings of [John Burn-Murdoch](#), renowned [data journalist](#) and columnist for the [Financial Times](#) of London, are quite well-informed, documented, and revealing about social conditions in the United States and about the contrasts between the U.S. and the U.K. on many points, such as the great difference in [conservative politics](#)—“*UK Cons are \*way\* more liberal than US Reps on ~every measure.*”

In spite of its unusually [resilient economy](#) with a high [per-capita income](#), [innovation](#), and output (at about [25 percent](#) of world GDP), the United States ranked [tenth](#) in international competitiveness in the World Competitiveness Center’s [survey](#) in 2022, down from the first rank in 2018. The United States has [relatively high](#) spending on [health care](#) and [education](#), but has fallen behind many other industrialized democracies on key measures of [well-being](#), such as [education](#), [public health](#), and [life expectancy](#).

The United States ranks [far behind](#) most high-income countries in life expectancy, and its average life expectancy is [declining](#). This public health deficiency long [predates](#) the COVID-19 pandemic and affects all social categories, but especially [working-age adults](#) and [persons of color](#). A study, “[Falling Behind](#),” in the [American Journal of Public Health](#) (2023) concluded that, relative to other countries, “*The US life expectancy disadvantage began in the 1950s and has steadily worsened over the past 4 decades. Dozens of globally diverse countries have outperformed the United States. Causal factors appear to have been concentrated in the Midwest and South.*” As [Burn-Murdoch](#) states it, citing standard statistics: “*\*The average American\* has the same chance of a long and healthy life as someone born in the most deprived part of England, a place with the highest rates of relationship breakdown and some of the highest rates of antidepressant prescribing.*”

The [United States](#) scores higher on most measures of inequality, such as [income distribution](#), than do the other major Western democracies. U.S. [income inequality](#) is higher than that in all West European democracies, Japan, and Israel, and not far below that of Bulgaria, with a [long-term tendency](#) toward [greater concentration](#) of [income](#) and net worth at the [very top](#). [Pew Research](#) noted in 2020 that

*“The growth in income in recent decades has tilted to upper-income households. At the same time, the U.S. middle class, which once comprised the clear majority of Americans, is shrinking. Thus, a greater share of the nation’s aggregate income is now going to upper-income households and the share going to middle- and lower-income households is falling... The share of American adults who live in middle-income households has decreased from 61% in 1971 to 51% in 2019.”*

A 2023 [working paper](#) from the Rand Corporation showed graphically the nearly constant faster growth of incomes in the top five percent of the population, contrasted with slower growth of those in the lower percentiles, relative to GDP growth during and after the mid-1970s.

*“In other words, over these 43 years [1975 to 2018], per capita GDP grew 118 percent, but at the bottom, income only rose 13.5 percent; at the top, it grew by 166 percent... The difference between 1975 and 2018, in terms of the share of income taken home by the bottom 90 percent, is 17 percentage points—or \$2.5 trillion in a single year. Over the whole 43 years, it’s \$47 trillion. That’s so large, it becomes difficult to interpret. But that’s what happens when incomes at the bottom grow at a rate that’s about 20 percent of GDP, and top incomes grow at 300 percent of GDP over four decades.”*

[Working-class Americans](#) (defined as those without a four-year college degree) are in a [disadvantaged position](#) relative to the level of protections and benefits that workers in most other developed countries enjoy. Many U.S. workers are increasingly stressed and suffer precarious or desperate [financial situations](#), increased health issues, and [shorter life spans](#), especially with the immediate post-COVID inflation rate. Upward [social mobility](#) has become far more difficult because of the high degree of [income inequality](#), including as

compared with several key Western democracies. The [OECD](#) notes *“In five OECD countries (Chile, Costa Rica, Israel, Turkey and the United States), more than 20% of children live in relative poverty.”* The U.S. child poverty rate is similar to those of Bulgaria and Chile in OECD statistics. [“Downward mobility”](#) is a [concern](#) among the young.

The [Legatum Institute](#) (UK) in 2023 ranked the [United States](#) at 19<sup>th</sup> among 167 countries on its Prosperity Index, a composite of many measures of well-being; the country ranked only 69<sup>th</sup> in the “safety and security” and “health” categories and 29<sup>th</sup> in “personal freedom.” The [Social Progress Imperative](#) NGO ranks the [United States](#) at 25<sup>th</sup> place among 169 countries in its Social Progress Index, a composite measure of 60 social and environmental outcomes. Sub-nationally, there are [major differences](#) between Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics in regard to life expectancy, infant mortality, homicides, and imprisonment.

In its [2022 Human Freedom Index](#) report, the Cato Institute ranked the United States 23<sup>rd</sup> among 165 jurisdictions for 2020 in human freedom, *“a broad measure that encompasses personal, civil, and economic freedom,”* made up of 83 indicators. According to the [Global Gender Gap Report 2022](#) of the World Economic Forum, the United States ranks 27<sup>th</sup> among the 146 countries analyzed in its achievements in closing the gender gap in economic opportunities, education, health, and political leadership. Transparency International ranked the [United States](#) at 24<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in its 2022 report on perceptions of public sector corruption, on a scale from 1 (least corrupt) to 180 (most corrupt).

The U.S. has a [much higher](#) rate of [death by firearm](#) ([homicide](#) and suicide) than any other [developed democracy](#), with frequent [mass shootings](#) (many with racial or ethnic motivations or involving children), less-publicized [neighborhood shootings](#) with a higher [total impact](#), and increasing [threats](#) of violence against [public officials](#), including [election officials](#) and workers. The FBI [reported](#) in 2021 that [hate crimes](#) in 2020 were at a [12-year high](#). The FBI report covering the year of [2021](#), with more complete data, showed another record high, including a several-year spike in anti-Jewish incidents.

As of 2023, the United States had the [highest total number](#) of persons in prison and the [sixth](#) highest incarceration rate in the world, measured as the [percentage](#) of the population in prison, behind El Salvador, Rwanda, and Cuba, among others, and very far above other Western democracies. Those in prison are [disproportionally](#) persons of color, an aspect of both U.S. racial and ethnic tensions and the failure of decades of drug policies, including about marijuana. Police procedures have become a major and divisive issue. For context, according to the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), *“The United States far exceeds most wealthy democracies in killings by police [per capita], and officers seldom face legal consequences... Black Americans are... about three times more likely to be killed by police [than Whites].”*

The [2022 World Happiness Report](#) placed the U.S. at 16<sup>th</sup> in life satisfaction among the more than 150 countries surveyed in polls. A [Pew Research](#) survey in December 2022 concluded that “At least four-in-ten U.S. adults (41%) have experienced high levels of psychological distress at least once since the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak.” The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [noted](#) in January 2023: “Nearly 1 in 4 adults 18 and older, and 1 in 3 among adults aged 18 to 25, had a mental illness in the past year.”

In May 2023 the U.S. [Surgeon General](#) issued an [advisory](#) stating that the country was suffering an “[epidemic of loneliness](#),” deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic, a “public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection,” which weakens the social fabric, in addition to its individual health risks. (One can only wonder what the longer-term effects on personality and citizenship will be of the large-scale [immersion of youth](#) into virtual reality and [social media](#) platforms.). [Mental health](#) is becoming a major [national concern](#), particularly among [youth](#), as is [substance abuse](#), including growing [deaths](#) from [fentanyl](#). An October 2022 “[Stress in America](#)” survey by the American Psychological Association concluded that “a majority of adults are disheartened by government and political divisiveness, daunted by historic inflation levels, and dismayed by widespread violence.”

**Challenges to Traditional Values-** In contrast to traditional American optimism, an [April 2023 poll](#) by Pew Research discovered that

*“Sizable majorities of U.S. adults say that in 2050—just over 25 years away—the U.S. economy will be weaker, the United States will be less important in the world, political divisions will be wider and there will be a larger gap between the rich and the poor. Far fewer adults predict positive developments in each of these areas... And when Americans reflect on the country’s past, the present looks worse by comparison. Around six-in-ten (58%) say that life for people like them is worse today than it was 50 years ago...”*

An American Perspectives survey done in [January 2021](#), by the American Enterprise Institute soon after the attack on the Capitol, turned up widespread dissatisfaction and a considerable questioning about the realities of American life and democracy, a rejection of past platitudes.

*“There is a great deal of skepticism among the public about how well democracy reflects the interests of everyday Americans as opposed to the wealthy and well-connected. The view that the political system is rigged against conservatives and people who hold traditional values is also widespread, particularly on the political right.... There is bipartisan agreement that the American system of democracy is failing to address the concerns and needs of the public. Nearly seven in 10 (69 percent) Americans agree that American democracy serves the interests of only the wealthy and powerful. Seventy percent of Democrats and 66 percent of Republicans hold this view... The belief that the political system works against the interests of conservatives*

also finds considerable support among the public. Nearly half (48 percent) of Americans believe the political system is stacked against conservatives and people with traditional values. Roughly as many Americans (47 percent) disagree with this statement...

A majority (56 percent) of Republicans support the use of force as a way to arrest the decline of the traditional American way of life. Forty-three percent of Republicans express opposition to this idea. Significantly fewer independents (35 percent) and Democrats (22 percent) say the use of force is necessary to stop the disappearance of traditional American values and way of life. Although most Americans reject the use of violence to achieve political ends, there is still significant support for it among the public. Nearly three in 10 (29 percent) Americans completely or somewhat agree with the statement: 'If elected leaders will not protect America, the people must do it themselves even if it requires taking violent actions.' More than two-thirds (68 percent) of Americans disagree with this statement."

Fundamental ("bedrock") values once considered vital to the national character and success are being challenged and are changing rapidly at the societal level in ways that are unsettling for some Americans and encouraging for others. A Wall Street Journal-NORC [poll](#) in March 2023 stirred [commentary](#) because it [concluded](#) that

*"Patriotism, religious faith, having children and other priorities that helped define the national character for generations are receding in importance to Americans... Some 38% of respondents said patriotism was very important to them, and 39% said religion was very important. That was down sharply from when the Journal first asked the question in 1998, when 70% deemed patriotism to be very important, and 62% said so of religion. The share of Americans who say that having children, involvement in their community and hard work are very important values has also fallen. Tolerance for others, deemed very important by 80% of Americans as recently as four years ago, has fallen to 58% since then... Aside from money, all age groups, including seniors, attached far less importance to these priorities and values than when pollsters asked about them in 1998 and 2019. But younger Americans in particular place low importance on these values, many of which were central to the lives of their parents."*

A June 2022 [Gallup poll](#) found that

*"A record-high 50% of Americans rate the overall state of moral values in the U.S. as 'poor,' and another 37% say it is 'only fair.' Just 1% think the state of moral values is 'excellent' and 12% 'good'...Beyond consideration of others, racism, lack of faith/religion, lack of morals, sense of entitlement and lack of family structure were mentioned by the respondents as causes of the moral decline... Americans' views of the state of moral values in the U.S. are dismal, and their expectations for the future are grim. This has generally been the case over the course of the 20-year trend, but negative ratings of the current state of moral values are the worst they have ever been."*

One of the most distinctive ways in which the U.S. has differentiated itself from other wealthy democracies is in its higher degree of [religiosity](#). An Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll found in [July 2023](#) that 79% of adults say that they

believe in God or a higher power, 69% say that they believe in angels, and 56% believe in the existence of Satan. But, according to [Pew Research](#) in late 2021, “Self-identified Christians make up 63% of U.S. population in 2021, down from 75% a decade ago.” Given this continuing decline, religious commitment has taken on a strong political significance in the last several decades, in terms of both liberal and (especially) conservative denominations, as each one responds to the changing national society according to its own interpretation of Christianity, religious pluralism, and secularization. In the minds of many, especially conservatives, being an American and being a Christian are related.

A major [October 2022 poll](#) by Pew Research on American attitudes toward religion stated that

*“Overall, six-in-ten U.S. adults—including nearly seven-in-ten Christians—say they believe the founders ‘originally intended’ for the U.S. to be a Christian nation. And 45% of U.S. adults—including about six-in-ten Christians—say they think the country ‘should be’ a Christian nation. A third say the U.S. ‘is now’ a Christian nation... but the survey also finds widely differing opinions about what it means to be a ‘Christian nation’ and to support ‘Christian nationalism.’”*

Even so, the [character and morality](#) of candidates in their personal lives does not carry as much weight as it used to in voters’ assessments of candidates for office, including even among conservatives and [evangelical Christians](#), who were traditionally demanding in that respect, but readily [made their peace](#) in 2016 with former President Trump’s rhetoric, behavior, and character flaws because of his policies. Evangelicals are heavily White and made up [14 percent](#) of the public in 2020, with a tendency for that percentage to decline. They and [Christian nationalists](#) made considerable progress under Trump and with the federal judges and Supreme Court justices that he nominated.

Uncomfortable with America’s growing [religious diversity](#) and multiculturalism, the decline in church membership (now [under 50 percent](#) of the public), the straying from traditional values, and the growth of the religiously-non-affiliated in the public (about [30 percent](#)), evangelicals and [Christian nationalists](#) remain among Trump and the [Republican Party’s](#) most [faithful supporters](#). Concern about discrimination against Christians is a major worry of this group, backed up by some public support. In 2021, [Pew Research](#) found that “In the U.S., for example, nearly half say Christians face at least some discrimination, though fewer than a third say the same in the European countries surveyed.”

A major Public Religion Research Institute and Brookings Institution [survey](#) of the topic in 2023 stated that “10% of Americans are avowed Christian nationalists, what the survey calls ‘adherents,’ while an additional 19% are sympathetic to Christian nationalist ideals.” Their [goal](#) is to make America an officially Christian nation to promote more conservative values, even though that legal step appears to contradict the [First Amendment](#) of the Constitution and

is opposed by most [Protestant denominations](#) and a [majority](#) of Americans, especially among the young, who tend to hold weaker religious ties. Bills to promote Christianity in the [public sphere](#), including in schools, such as with “In God We Trust” mottos and posting the Ten Commandments, are being presented in some state legislatures and locally, particularly in Republican-dominated states. A common rationale employed is that the long-standing legal doctrine of “separation of church and state” is contrived and contrary to the principles of the founders of the republic.

Threats to national unity, traditions, and social peace were dramatized worldwide by [international alarm](#) at the violent assault on the U.S. Congress by a pro-Trump mob trying to prevent a peaceful transition of power to Joe Biden on [January 6, 2021](#) and the subsequent lack of [Republican](#) concern about Trump’s role in encouraging the riot and his other well-documented attempts ([judicial](#) and [otherwise](#)) to reverse the 2020 election that he lost. The Republican Party has shown unwillingness to come to honest terms with the threat to constitutional government and democracy that the startling event and the election denial process represented, instead denying any wrongdoing on Trump’s part and preferring to “move on” from the 2020 election, even as Trump’s dominant position in the 2024 party nomination process continued in mid-2023. Heated partisan arguments in 2021 and 2022 about whether the attack was an “insurrection” or not seem far from the main point for scholars of democracy in the Western world. Republican attempts to ignore or to excuse it, trying to deflect public attention elsewhere, are much worse.

In somewhat the same historically revisionist vein motivated by partisanship, there are “political correctness” attempts by both liberals and conservatives to discredit or “[cancel](#)” historical persons, political stances, [books](#), school curricula, speech, or actions that they consider unacceptable or offensive to their vision of what the country should be. After years of condemning liberal “[judicial activism](#),” “[government overreach](#),” “[indoctrination](#),” “[cancel culture](#),” “[political correctness](#),” “[identity politics](#),” “[weaponization of government](#),” and “[victimology](#),” many conservatives have eagerly adopted and implemented their own versions of the same styles, without any apparent sense of irony.

Both Republicans and large corporations are [reconsidering](#) their historic relationship of cooperation, as some major corporations adopt more progressive public stances. Some conservatives are calling for resistance to [companies](#) who have “given in to the left,” an effort led by Florida governor Ron DeSantis against the Disney corporation, who [affirmed](#), “*Old-fashioned corporate Republicanism won’t do in a world where the left has hijacked big business.*”

## The Permeation and Supremacy of Polarized Partisanship

**The Negative Effects of Polarization on Democracy-** This malady is so relevant and severe that Pew Research maintains a useful section with its surveys about [political polarization](#) in American politics. According to [Gallup](#) in January 2023, “Americans’ party preferences were evenly divided in 2022, with 45% of U.S. adults identifying as Republican or saying they were Republican-leaning independents, and 44% identifying as Democrats or saying they were Democratic-leaning independents.” A repudiation of the two-party system is implied in the fact that “since 2009, independent identification has grown and reached levels not seen before. Now, political independents (41%) greatly outnumber Republican (28%) and Democratic (28%) identifiers.” But many of the independents, although often seen as “swing voters,” tend to vote regularly for one party over the other. Each party also has its own [internal factions](#) and shifting intra-party coalitions. For example, persons of color who identify as Democrats are more conservative on some key social issues (including immigration, free trade, and abortion) than are the college-educated White liberals in the party.

“Political polarization in a range of social issues” was confirmed in an April 2023 [NBC News](#) poll, showing significant ethnic and age differences. “Three in four Republicans say the country should promote traditional social and moral values, while 67% of Democrats want greater tolerance of diverse lifestyles and backgrounds. Independents are split, with 49% picking traditional values and 41% siding with greater tolerance.” In its [June 2023 values survey](#), Gallup found an increase in conservative attitudes (rising especially among Republicans) and a center-right norm in public attitudes on social issues, by the self-definition of respondents.

*“More Americans this year (38%) say they are very conservative or conservative on social issues than said so in 2022 (33%) and 2021 (30%). At the same time, the percentage saying their social views are very liberal or liberal has dipped to 29% from 34% in each of the past two years, while the portion identifying as moderate (31%) remains near a third.... The last time this many Americans said they were socially conservative was 2012, during a period when consistently more U.S. adults identified as conservative rather than liberal on social issues... The survey comes at a time when many states are considering policies regarding transgender matters, abortion, crime, drug use and the teaching of gender and sexuality in schools.”*

Much [political science research](#) supports the idea that voters as a whole lack internally coherent or sophisticated ideologies and an informed command of the issues. However, voters do show rather consistent identification with a political party, hold issue positions, and have a vague sense of liberal, moderate, and conservative on the political spectrum. Independents tend to tilt either one way or the other rather consistently. But it is not unusual for poll respondents who express “conservative” or “liberal” inclinations in

principle to also state preference for some actual outcomes at odds with that chosen philosophical category. Accurate ideological classification also eludes many voters. Even though Trump has cast himself consistently and loudly as the foremost champion of conservative Americans, a July 2023 [YouGov poll](#) for [The Economist](#) found that “nearly a third of Americans with an opinion said they thought he was moderate or liberal. Among independents, it’s been more than a third. Among moderates, about half of those with an opinion think he’s a moderate or liberal.”

Gallup has assembled a national [map by states](#) from its attitude polling data (as of 2018) that shows that “The residents of most U.S. states are more likely to identify as conservative than as liberal in their political ideology. In 25 states, the conservative advantage is significantly greater than the national average, including 19 ‘highly conservative’ states in which conservatives outnumber liberals by at least 20 percentage points. Meanwhile, in six states, there are more liberals than conservatives.” [Ballotpedia](#) has shown, with a helpful map, that there is a high level of stability in party loyalty and divisions in voting patterns at the local level, with the Democratic counties at a considerably greater population density than the more numerous Republican ones.

*“Almost nine in 10 Americans [87.2%] live in a county that has voted for the same party in the past three presidential elections [2012, 2016, 2020]. We describe these counties as either Solid Democratic or Solid Republican... A majority of Americans live in a Solid Democratic county. There were 459 of these counties after the 2020 presidential election, home to 171 million people (52%). There were 2,368 Solid Republican counties, home to 118 million people (36%).”*

Thus, the usual strictly geographical national map of presidential election [results by county](#) shows most of the area of the country by far in red (Republican), with the blue (Democratic) results clustered in scattered, largely urban areas that have a much higher population density. The usual red and blue geographical election results [map by states](#) distorts the demographic reality even more. For other visualizations of the relationship, consult a [dynamic map](#) of presidential election results by county for 2016, which can be better understood with graphic information about [population density](#) (2020 election). Graphs of votes for president in 2020 by [county populations](#)—urban, suburban, and rural, including their demographic groups—are also insightful in a similar way to map out partisan divisions in the culture by location and social characteristics. [Pew Research](#) provides a fine analysis of the results of the 2020 presidential election, by many geographic and socio-economic variables relevant to the political culture of the national electorate.

In a comprehensive and insightful November 2021 poll on “[Cultural Change and Anxiety in America](#),” the Public Religion Research Institute noted “Most Republicans (70%) say American culture and way of life have changed for the worse since the 1950s. By contrast, a majority of Democrats (63%) think that American culture and way of life have changed for the better, much the same as in 2020 (62%).”

*Independents closely resemble the general population (48% better) and have also declined in this view since 2020 (57% better).” Whereas Democrats tend to see an evolving national identity, Republicans tend to see an established culture under attack.*

A June 2023 [Monmouth poll](#) identified these disparate partisan differences in concerns about threats to the fundamental American values of freedom and personal rights:

*“While both Republicans and Democrats express concern about risks to their freedoms, the specific types of rights they worry about losing are very different. Among Republicans, 38% say their freedom of speech or First Amendment rights are under threat and an identical 38% say the same about their Second Amendment right to bear arms. Other concerns Republicans mention include specific references to freedom of religion (12%) and concerns about government overreach and Fourth Amendment infringements such as illegal search and seizure (6%). Democrats, on the other hand are most concerned with restrictions to abortion access along with other women’s rights (36%). They also mention threats to freedom of speech (14%), voting access and the election process (12%), freedom from gun violence and other safety issues (8%), as well as LGBTQ+ rights (8%).”*

According to an Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll, as of [early 2023](#), divergences in priorities were quite apparent—*“Both Democrats and Republicans cite economic issues as top priorities, but their top issues diverge from there. Democrats are most concerned about climate change and guns, while Republicans tend to prioritize immigration and inflation.”* In a [June 2023 poll](#), Pew Research showed wide disparities between Republican policy preferences and those of Democrats on a broad range of current issues, although both sides agreed that the inability of the two parties to work together was a major concern.

*“Inflation remains the top concern for Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, with 77% saying it is a very big problem. The state of moral values, illegal immigration and the budget deficit also are seen as top problems by at least two-thirds of Republicans. For Democrats and Democratic leaners, gun violence is the top concern, with about eight-in-ten (81%) saying it is a very big problem. The affordability of health care ranks second (73% say this). Democrats are more than four times as likely as Republicans to say that climate change is a very big problem in the country (64% vs. 14%). Democrats are also much more likely to say gun violence and racism are very big problems. By contrast, Republicans are more than twice as likely as Democrats to say that illegal immigration is a very big problem (70% vs. 25%). They are also about 30 percentage points more likely than Democrats to say that the state of moral values and the budget deficit are very big problems.”*

To expand on one outstanding example of the divergences cited above, amidst concerns over constant mass shootings, and rising public support for stricter gun laws, the sharp partisan divide and rhetoric about gun ownership, rights, and policy persist. It should be noted that a 2008 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court ([District of Columbia v. Heller](#)) determined that the “Second Amendment

*protects an individual right to possess a firearm unconnected with service in a militia, and to use that arm for traditionally lawful purposes, such as self-defense within the home.” In June 2022, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the individual right to [carry a firearm in public](#) for self-defense. But these rulings did not reject all forms of regulation of access to, ownership of, and carrying of firearms, which are the areas where debate continues.*

Regarding current public attitudes by political affiliation, according to a [YouGov poll](#) in March 2023

*“More than half (55%) of Americans believe gun laws should be more restrictive than they are today, but Democratic and Republican views differ starkly on the matter. Democrats (79%) are 24 percentage points more likely than the average American to say gun laws should be more restrictive as compared to 29% of Republicans who believe the same. Beliefs regarding gun rights in the country are similarly divided across party lines. Most Democrats (56%) say that the Constitution only protects access to guns for militias while just 20% of Republicans agree; 80% say the Constitution protects unrestricted access to guns for everyone.”*

As a general rule, Democrats are more likely to lean toward enhancing collective responsibilities, and Republicans toward preserving or expanding personal freedoms. On many issues, Democrats tend to favor a larger role for the federal government, while Republicans tend to favor solutions through the state and local governments or the private sector. This preference holds true even though states that tend Republican (“Red”) tend to receive more in benefits from the federal government than the amount that they pay in, compared to states that tend Democratic (“Blue”). The Washington Post’s [Department of Data](#) notes with charts for the 2021 Fiscal Year that, largely because of average income differentials among states, *“Eight of the 10 states that get the most money back from the federal government per dollar they pay into the system voted for Trump in 2020. Nine of the 10 states that got the least voted for Biden. The typical red state gets back 19 cents more for each dollar sent to Washington than its blue-state friends.”*

Gallup registered these considerable partisan differences in attitudes toward the role of the federal government in [November 2022](#)

*“A 54% majority of Americans say the federal government has too much power, while 39% say it has about the right amount of power and 6% say too little. These figures have generally been stable throughout the Donald Trump and Joe Biden presidential administrations. Since 2005, no less than 50% of Americans have said they believe the federal government is too powerful, with some of those readings reaching 60%... Currently, 74% of Republicans, 32% of Democrats and 54% of independents believe the federal government has too much power... Consistent with their party platforms, most Republicans (75%) currently say the government is doing too many things, and most Democrats (66%) believe the government should be doing more. Independents’ views mirror the national average.”*

With a close party split in the electorate, a diminished political center, and a [nearly bimodal](#) configuration between the two major political parties in their self-definition, [terminology](#), narratives, [ideologies](#), issue concerns, and style, it is becoming harder to generalize accurately about the country's [value consensus](#) as a [whole](#). [For example](#), in 2023, conservatives are enthusiastic about Republican-run Texas and Florida (both gaining population) as desirable models to emulate, while liberals turn to Democratic-run California and New York state (both losing population) as positive frames of reference. [Pew Research](#) found in November 2021 that Republicans and Democrats differ even in some aspects of the ways they find or value meaning in life, beyond their common family attachments, friends, careers, health, and hobbies.

*“In the United States, even the meaning of life can have a partisan tinge... In fact, even some of the words that partisans use to describe where they draw meaning in life differ substantially. Republicans, along with independents who lean to the Republican Party, are much more likely than Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents to mention words like ‘God,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘country,’ ‘Jesus’ and ‘religion.’ Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to mention words like ‘new,’ ‘dog,’ ‘reading,’ ‘outside,’ ‘daughter’ and ‘nature.’”*

Generational change is also at work. According to [demographic statistics](#) compiled by the Washington Post about the U.S. Congress, *“The current class of lawmakers is one of the oldest in history, with an overall median age of 59. The median age of senators is 65, the highest on record. In the House, the median age has hovered between 57 and 58 for the past decade, higher than in any year before that period.”* And in the public, according to [Pew Research](#), *“... older voters rule both parties. In 2022, 6 in 10 Democrats and 7 in 10 Republicans were 50 or older.”* Younger generations (say, 18 to 29 years of age), reflecting the main events of their lifetimes, tend to hold [more progressive](#) views than older generations in the current controversies about religion, climate change, LGBTQ+ rights, gun control, public health, and economic inequality, among others, according to the annual [Harvard Youth Poll](#). Greater youth engagement in politics will change some issue-oriented aspects of the national political culture.

For insightful attempts to paint the big picture accurately and with nuances, consult the Gallup Poll's [Ideology](#) section, Pew Research's 2021 analytical study [“Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology,”](#) the Public Religion Research Institute's 2021 report [“Competing Visions of America”](#) and its [American Values Atlas](#), and the American Enterprise Institute's [American Perspectives Survey](#). Harvard's Kennedy School conducts yearly surveys of the attitudes of [American youth](#). In January 2021, [Pew Research](#) posted a fine comprehensive summary of the effects of Trump's presidency on US public opinion and political culture. For serious study of American elections and their campaigns, trustworthy sources include the [Electoral Knowledge Network](#), [Ballotpedia](#), [Polls and Votes](#), [Gallup Poll](#), [Pew Research](#), [FiveThirtyEight](#), [The Cook Political Report](#), and [Sabato's Crystal Ball](#). The [Political Dictionary](#) is a good source for the definition of political terms in American usage.

**A Crisis of Trust and Confidence-** Partisan symbols and personal or group identity markers contributing to a sense of “belonging” have become vital to many voters, as a form of partisan “identity politics.” Decades of heavily negative political advertising have taken a toll. Each political party blames the other for national problems, decline, and threats to democracy, even though the broader causes are very bipartisan over decades, such as in immigration reform, educational quality, public health, poverty, drug abuse, trade policy, illegal immigration, failed wars, national debt, government inefficiency, and infrastructural decay. Each side refuses to own up to its own accountability and to correct its own defects, failures, and corruption, but instead wrangles rules for advantage, indulges in a “what about...?” style of accusations of the other, and calls for investigations only of the other side.

A June 2023 [AP-NORC poll](#) stated that

*“In the survey, respondents were asked to rate the importance of six principles: personal responsibility, fair enforcement of the law, representative government, government accountability, compassion and respect across differences, and learning from the past. In each case, about 90% of both Democrats and Republicans rated these values as very or extremely important. When asked if members of the opposing party thought those values were very or extremely important, however, about two-thirds of respondents said no.”*

Both parties claiming that “the other side is worse” and to blame for government paralysis and threats to democracy (for example, relative severity of the January 6 attack vs. the southern border immigration crisis, or ongoing threats of federal government shutdown) is not a strong public endorsement for the worth or effectiveness of negative partisanship. This high level of antagonism and distrust is worrisome, because the critical role of mutual inter-party trust in maintaining the rules and norms of democracy in spite of policy disagreements is well-known.

This was demonstrated by an [academic study](#) in the journal Nature Human Behaviour (2023) that focused on the major question, “*Why voters who value democracy participate in democratic backsliding.*” The authors concluded from an experimental observational survey using scenarios that both Democrats and Republicans were somewhat willing to condone anti-democracy measures to favor their own party, if they believed that their opponents were going to do the same to favor their party. Willingness to violate democratic norms in the experiment was increased by the fact that each side, in distrust, attributed to the other more anti-democracy intentions than that side actually demonstrated. On the other hand, with confidence that the other party would respect democratic norms, “*the partisans became more committed to upholding democratic norms themselves and less willing to vote for candidates who break these norms.*” Therefore, accusations or beliefs that the other party is engaged in subverting democracy, as is common in some partisan rhetoric today, or actual attempts to subvert democratic norms, are corrosive to the political culture of trust in the norms on which democracy depends.

A base-driven trend among Republicans of antagonism and intransigence instead of compromise has been growing around the country. The aggressive drive to roll back liberal programs and ideas has been [carried down](#) as far as the [elected](#) local [school board](#) level in small towns, a “clean house” conservative approach that has been called “[Total Politics](#)”—“*maneuvers [that] enlist every aspect of government, including ostensibly neutral, nonpartisan elements, into a ruthless battle.*” Winning at whatever cost has become far more important in some zealous activist sectors than observing norms of civility. “Scoring points” and pursuing partisan advantage rather than bipartisan cooperation to break the stalemate further disillusion the already heavily skeptical public about the effectiveness of democratic government, the possibility of even-handedness, and the quality of judgment of the public.

An [AP-NORC poll](#) done in December 2022 found

*“While the public has a wide-ranging agenda for the federal government, they are not confident that it will be able to address these concerns. Seventy-three percent have very little confidence in the ability of the federal government to make progress on important issues facing the country, including 39% who are not confident at all.”*

A large April 2023 [Pew Research poll](#) stated that “a majority of Democrats (58%) and 52% of Republicans view the country as unable to solve key problems.” The [same poll](#) discovered low levels of confidence in the public about the wisdom of fellow citizens:

*“Nearly identical shares of Republicans (23%) and Democrats (24%) say they have a very great deal or a good deal of trust in the political wisdom of the American people; most in both parties (77% of Republicans and 75% of Democrats) express not very much or no confidence in the political wisdom of other Americans.”*

An [October 2020 poll](#) by the American Enterprise Institute showed the extent of partisan distrust and mutual suspicion:

*“38 percent of Americans see the GOP being dangerous to the nation’s future, but a similar number (37 percent) feel the same way about the Democratic party. In contrast, only 31 percent of Americans believe that the policies of the GOP move the country in the right direction and another 27 percent feel the same way for the Democratic party. Talk about a vote of no confidence: That leaves a plurality of Americans who think that neither party will move the country in the right direction.”*

A December 2022 [Gallup](#) poll concluded that

*“For the seventh year in the past decade, Americans name dissatisfaction with the government as the nation’s top problem in 2022, especially Republicans. Further, in that poll, Americans’ satisfaction with the way things are going in the U.S. has tumbled nine percentage points, to 18%, from last year’s average. The 2022 figure is the lowest point since 17% in 2011 and just the fourth time since 1979 that annual satisfaction has been below 20%.”*

Public trust in government and the institutions necessary for democracy continues to decline to worrisome lows, with “*record-low confidence across all institutions*,” according to Gallup in mid-2022, and “near-historic lows” of trust in government in a time series of polls from 1958 to 2022, according to Pew Research. The American Institutional Confidence Poll surveyed public confidence in American institutions, including three key tech corporations, first in 2018 with replication in 2021. The results showed drastic drops in the period regarding nearly all institutions among Republicans, but relatively little change in either direction among Democrats—“*Republicans are losing confidence in everything, and everyone is losing confidence in ‘big tech.’*”

The effects of January 6, 2021 and the change from Trump to Biden as president may have accounted for some of the dramatic surge in Republican distrust, but Democrats remained rather steady regarding political institutions. The authors observe that “*Much of U.S. democracy relies on bipartisan support for norms and institutions. Large shifts like this deserve ongoing scrutiny.*”

To cite one major institutional example, the U.S. Supreme Court has positioned itself since Marbury v. Madison (1803) as the ultimate arbiter of the Constitution. Contrasted with the high courts of most other developed democracies, the U.S. Supreme Court has a higher public profile, unusually broad power and reach to declare legislation and executive acts unconstitutional, a highly fraught and partisan/ideological appointment process (while usually feigning neutrality), and lifetime appointments. In recent years, the Court, like most U.S. institutions, has come to be seen as merely partisan rather than objective and guided by legal principles and precedent (stare decisis). Senate votes on nominations of candidates for the Court have been heavily along party lines.

One in three Americans in a 2021 Annenberg poll said they “*might be willing*” to abolish or limit the Supreme Court, largely because it makes decisions of which they disapprove, or has “too much” power. Negative sentiment increased in the public after the reversal of Roe v. Wade in June 2022 had the effect of restricting access to abortion services, to the approval of Republicans, but contrary to national public opinion. Questions about ethics among the Court’s justices in 2023 further tarnished the reputation of the Court, although the justices at the time saw no need to adopt a formal code of conduct. All of these factors weaken public confidence in the impartial and fair rule of law upon which a healthy democracy depends.

Yet, for context, as pollster *Professor Emeritus* Charles Franklin notes, the public knowledge about the Court, its role, and procedures is weak—“*Despite a long standing Republican-appointed majority on the Court, and the current 6-3 majority, 30% of the public believes a majority of the justices were appointed by Democratic presidents. About 40% say a majority was ‘probably’ appointed by Republican presidents, and just 30% say a majority was ‘definitely’ appointed by Republican presidents.*” This

misperception holds in spite of Trump’s frequent [boasting](#) about creating a [conservative supermajority](#) on the Court with his appointments, which he and most conservatives consider perhaps the greatest achievement of his presidency.

[Public trust](#) is especially lacking for the [mass media](#). A [2021 survey](#) by the American Press Institute found that many Americans do not agree philosophically with some of the five core values or principles of the journalistic profession that were tested, such as “a good way to make society better is to spotlight its problems.” Those who valued authority and loyalty, for example, were less convinced that the press should act as a “watchdog” on those in power, the traditional “[Fourth Estate](#)” role.

A 2021 [poll](#) by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford showed that Americans ranked the lowest among 46 countries in trust in the mass media. The annual [Digital News Report](#) by that Institute in 2023 concluded that “*The US remains well in the bottom half of [the 46] countries surveyed in terms of news trust.*” One [summary](#) of this report called attention to a growing tendency of many to avoid news consumption (“news avoidance”) because of the stress that it causes: “38 percent of U.S. respondents say they sometimes or often avoid news, including 41 percent of women and 34 percent of men... the proportion of people who are ‘extremely’ or ‘very interested’ in the news continued to sink. In the United States, this group was in the minority (49 percent) for the first time in the survey’s short history, down from 67 percent in 2015.”

An October 2022 [Gallup poll](#) analysis registered very large declines in public trust in the mass media since the 1970s on the part of Republicans and independents.

*“Just 7% of Americans have ‘a great deal’ of trust and confidence in the media, and 27% have ‘a fair amount.’ Meanwhile, 28% of U.S. adults say they do not have very much confidence and 38% have none at all in newspapers, TV and radio... Americans’ trust in the media remains sharply polarized along partisan lines, with 70% of Democrats, 14% of Republicans and 27% of independents saying they have a great deal or fair amount of confidence. Notably, this is the first time that the percentage of Americans with no trust at all in the media is higher than the percentage with a great deal or a fair amount combined... The current level of public trust in the media’s full, fair and accurate reporting of the news is the second lowest on record.”*

**Challenges to Civil Discourse and Consensus-based Democracy-** A [New York Times](#)-Sienna College [poll](#) in October 2022 found that 71 percent of respondents believed that American democracy is “*under threat*” and 81 percent believed that “*We can fix our democracy within our laws and institutions.*” However,

*“59 percent of voters view the media as a ‘major threat to democracy,’ while 25 percent said the press is a ‘minor threat’ and only 15 percent said it poses no threat. The divide fell sharply along partisan lines, with 87 percent of voters who supported former President Trump in 2020 indicating they view the media as a major threat, while 33 percent of Biden voters during that election cycle said the same thing.”*

Conservative [politicians](#) and [commentators](#) with a wide audience have been encouraging a backlash of populist outrage, [anti-intellectualism](#), mistrust of “experts,” and skepticism of the liberal establishment or privileged entrenched “elites” who are accused of “suppressing the truth” for their own self-interest. This distrust extends to and impacts public policy on election integrity, government trustworthiness and fairness, official corruption, the honesty of the mainstream media, and the relationship between science and public policy (including in public health and climate change), among other basic issues.

Many conservative voters (especially) have turned to more openly partisan [“alternative” media](#) for a counter-narrative, to sources which describe themselves as truth-seekers and defenders of free speech, in pursuing ideas, leads, and conspiracy plots that are ignored or quashed by the liberal mainstream media. Such sources are often sensationalist, alarmist, combative, and full of allegations that turn out to lack proof. But they deliberately provide a sense for their audience of being “in the know,” belonging to a patriotic political community, while the majority of the population is still being deceived by the “establishment” media. News sources countering the mainstream narrative are definitely more common, visited, and influential on the right than on the left, for example, [Fox News](#), [Newsmax](#), [One America News](#), [The Daily Caller](#), [The Gateway Pundit](#), [Patriot News Alerts](#), and the [Right Side Broadcasting Network](#) on YouTube.

Standard journalistic principles such as accuracy and substantiation of claims are often [minor considerations](#) with such sources, relative to keeping the audience emotionally engaged. It was well-established in the evidence in a [defamation lawsuit](#) against [Fox News](#) by Dominion Voting Systems that Fox News continued to push [false narratives](#) claiming fraud in the 2020 elections well after the network commentators themselves [disbelieved](#) them and no substantial evidence was uncovered, because that is what the conservative audience base wanted to hear. The net result is a nation with essentially two disparate and divergent streams of focus, narratives, information, analysis, and worldviews– the largely liberal “mainstream” and the conservative “alternatives.”

In mid-2023, Fox News continued to be a vital and influential apologist for and defender of Trump against his criminal indictments by federal and state law enforcement systems, following his line that the real danger to democracy is the Biden administration’s “corruption” and alleged “weaponization” of the Justice Department for partisan purposes. Like Trump, Fox deflects from the growing legal charges against Trump by highlighting Republican charges against and investigations of the Biden administration and Biden’s

son Hunter, to discredit the even-handedness of the legal systems themselves and to question the legitimacy of the criminal indictments rather than assigning any guilt to Trump or acknowledging the seriousness of the charges. Fox's constant theme is that Trump did nothing wrong, or nothing at a level of seriousness that Democrats have not done, but is an innocent man who is being unjustly persecuted by his political opponents to cripple his chances of winning the presidency in November 2024.

A [July 2023 poll](#) by the [New York Times and Sienna College](#) found that A) those registered Republicans and Republican-leaning independents who relied on Fox News as their main news source were far more likely than B) those registered Republicans and Republican-leaning independents with a more varied range of more mainstream sources to believe that Trump did not commit any serious federal crimes (91% vs. 52%), that he was just properly contesting the results of the election of 2020 after election day (83% vs. 58%), and that Republicans must continue to support Trump (85% vs. 49%). Those who heavily followed other conservative sources mirrored the same attitudes as the Fox devotees.

In the [online-driven](#) 2024 [election campaign](#), widespread [artificial intelligence-created](#) news and opinion content and AI-fueled deepfake videos, [faked images](#), and massively generated [bot-driven](#) election propaganda, [false narratives](#), or misleading or outright false news, with [ready sharing](#) without regard to accuracy, would threaten what credibility the already distrustful and [confused public](#) would still find in whatever news flows on which they rely. The dangers of starkly clashing [partisan perceptions](#), dialogues, and news flows on race relations and the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement, for example, were dramatized in summer 2020 at a tense time of sometimes violent [demonstrations and counter-reactions](#) over racial issues and the high-profile deaths of Blacks at the hands of police.

An April 2022 [Economist/YouGov poll](#) revealed drastically sharp disparities in the news sources and media personalities trusted and favored by Republicans, those by the Democrats, and those by the public as a whole. The poll concluded that *“there are very few [news] organizations that are trusted by more than a small proportion of Americans on both sides of the political aisle.”* Media bias and the extent of the large disparity in what is covered and given meaning by the conservative versus the liberal media (almost separate dialogues or two versions of “the truth”) is shown graphically by [Ground News](#), especially in the [“Blindspot”](#) section. The large [AllSides](#) website is excellent for a broad objective introduction and guide to hundreds of American news sources and their [left-center-right biases](#), if any. This site also has a useful [Red-Blue Translator](#) to explain common phrases in partisan usage.

Most-used “fact-check” sites include [Rumor Guard](#), [News Guard](#), [AFP Fact Check](#), [Snopes](#), [Media Bias/Fact Check](#), [PolitiFact](#), [Washington Post Fact Checker](#), and [FactCheck.org](#). The [News Literacy Project](#) (“A future founded on facts”) strives in a practical way to help its users

*“determine the credibility of news and other information and to recognize the standards of fact-based journalism to know what to trust, share and act on.”* Regarding ongoing partisan-oriented fact-checkers, the [Media Research Center](#) focuses on criticism of the left-wing media and popular culture, while [Media Matters for America](#) is a critic of the right-wing news media and reporting.

Almost all basic issues suffer from gravitation toward a strong partisan spin and conformity, with sharply [conflicting priorities](#), narratives, and positions, including about the [January 6, 2021 attack](#) on the Capitol, evaluation of former President Trump, how [national history](#) should be taught, rights of LGBTQ and trans persons, abortion, the state of moral values, school shootings, high-profile self-defense shootings, monuments to historic figures, election laws, integrity, and results, reports of official investigations (such as the May 2023 [Durham report](#)), climate change, viruses, and [vaccines](#). The wide-ranging dispute over basic national values, even over the nature of the country itself, is often called the *“[culture wars](#).”*

As an example, July 2023 produced extreme weather in the U.S. and elsewhere and was registered as the hottest month on record in the world. A July 2023 Washington Post-University of Maryland [poll](#) found that 85 percent of Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents believed that climate change was a factor in those extremes, but only 35 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents did so. Democrats were also far more likely to say that weather extremes are becoming more severe (87 percent) than were Republicans (37 percent). In addition to disputing the science involved, Republicans tend to see the [climate change](#) issue mainly as an unwanted opportunity for Democrats to create a far larger government, with huge new expenditures, bureaucracy, and regulations.

Results of most public opinion polls vary substantially by political party identification, and events or institutions are given partisan twists, even on topics that would previously have been considered “non-political,” such as the teaching of [mathematics](#). Republicans have much less faith in the [scientific community](#) than do Democrats, a long-standing skepticism that predates Trump’s influence on the party.

There are strong partisan divides on many key aspects of the [ailing public education system](#), as shown graphically by [Pew Research](#). Reflecting Republican suspicions that higher education is “indoctrinating” students into being liberals, [Pew Research](#) also discovered that *“Between 2015 and 2017, the share of Republicans who said colleges and universities were having a negative effect on the way things were going in the U.S. rose from 37% to 58%, even as around seven-in-ten Democrats continued to say these institutions were having a positive effect.”* Sharp partisanship encourages focus on emotion-laden matters during political campaigns, such as debating *“[wokeness](#)”* in public schools, instead of addressing the many serious academic, social, and staffing [weaknesses](#) in the American [public education](#) system, as [shown](#) by [international comparisons](#), among [other measures](#).

Current reforms of the structure of civic education in the schools, essentially defining “What it means to be American” within attempts to change the political culture, are becoming more controversial and now include debates about even the date and essential characteristics of the nation’s very origin. There is a [curricular clash](#) between the contrasting [critical concepts](#) from [The 1619 Project](#) (stressing the date when African slaves were first introduced into the colonies and consequent continuing racism) and the [patriotic concepts](#) from [The 1776 Project](#) (stressing pride in the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the formal establishment of the Republic, and the Constitution).

Discussion of racism in American history and current society is complicated by [white ambivalence](#) (especially among Republicans) about who the “victims” of racism are: “A majority (51%) of white Americans... think racism against people who look like them is a problem—but overall, far more white Americans (72%) say racism against Black Americans is a problem.” ([Yahoo News/YouGov poll](#), July 2023) The revision of civic education now even brings up a [partisan debate](#) about such fundamental questions as whether the U.S. is a “democracy” (for Democrats, re universal participation and inclusion) or a “republic” (for Republicans, re order, constitutionalism, and rule of law), as well as how the overall flow and the details of [negative aspects](#) of national history should be presented. (Note how the contrasting nomenclatures align with the names of the respective political parties.)

Partisan preference and [information selection](#) played a huge role in how individual Americans responded to the COVID pandemic. In policy tendencies, Republicans were concerned about protecting the economy and freedom of individual choice regarding vaccination, while Democrats focused strongly on public health aspects, with some use of government mandates. Even after Trump as president [boasted](#) about his successful “[Operation Warp Speed](#)” project to develop vaccines against COVID, vaccine hesitancy among Republicans morphed into [vaccine rejection](#), ironically as an anti-Democratic sign of support for Trump. [Anti-vaccine myths](#) and partisan debates about the [origins of COVID](#) spread, with Republican attempts to [fix blame](#) on the Democrats for the pandemic and a “cover-up” of its origin.

Positions on public health issues were determined for many (but not all) Republicans by [Trump’s statements](#) or what they thought about the Democrats, not by standard medical science or independent personal prudence. Among many conservatives in 2020 and 2021, selecting information only from [anti-vaxxer sources](#), belittling “science,” [heavily criticizing](#) or demonizing Dr. Anthony Fauci (chief medical advisor to then-President Trump), and [rejection of vaccination](#) and [government mandates](#) for shutdowns during the pandemic became a badge of pride that was still a [valid credential](#) for many politicians in 2023.

[Polls](#) consistently showed that Democrats had the highest vaccination rates, followed by Independents, and then Republicans. As a result, in September 2021, the [data indicated](#) that “Of the 23 states that have new case totals per capita higher than the nation overall, 21 voted for Donald Trump in November [2020]. Sixteen are among the 17 states that have the lowest rates of vaccination. Of the 18 states that have new death totals higher than the national ratio, 14 voted for Trump and 12 are among the 17 least-vaccinated states.” An [NPR study](#) of about 3000 counties across the country in 2021 found that “Since May 2021, people living in counties that voted heavily for Donald Trump during the last presidential election have been nearly three times as likely to die from COVID-19 as those who live in areas that went for now-President Biden,” a disparity that NPR attributed to health care misinformation, including after controlling for differences in local age profiles.

In calculating the relationship between partisan differences in reactions to the pandemic and COVID survival outcomes in the April 2021 to March 2022 period, a study done covering all U.S. states and congressional districts and published in [The Lancet Regional Health-Americas](#) in December 2022 concluded that

*“During the study period, the higher the exposure to conservatism across several political metrics, the higher the COVID-19 age-standardized mortality rates, even after taking into account the CD’s [congressional district’s] social characteristics; similar patterns occurred for stress on hospital ICU capacity for Republican trifectas [governor and both houses of legislature in Republican control] and U.S. Senator political ideology scores. For example, in models mutually adjusting for CD political and social metrics and vaccination rates, Republican trifecta and conservative voter political lean independently remained significantly associated with an 11%–26% higher COVID-19 mortality rate.”*

There is scant evidence, if any, that such a clear disparity in health outcomes, as shown in many medical surveys, had any learning effect on subsequent party alignments in the public. Each side tended to continue to proudly regard its own pandemic emphases and responses as the correct ones, at the national, state, and local levels.

The partisan divide over the government response to the COVID pandemic was [far greater](#) in the U.S. than in any of the other thirteen democracies surveyed by Pew Research in August 2020, as was the sense that the country was [further divided](#) than before the outbreak. According to [Pew Research](#), “Over the summer [of 2020], 76% of Republicans (including independents who lean to the party) felt the U.S. had done a good job dealing with the coronavirus outbreak, compared with just 29% of those who do not identify with the Republican Party.” Internationally, one [major study](#) indicated that resistance to masking during the pandemic was far greater among American conservatives than among conservatives in 113 other countries.

Regarding the general public, independents included, a [time-series study](#) by the American Enterprise Institute in November 2022 concluded that *“It appears at this point that the vast majority of Americans think their votes will be counted accurately in elections across the country.”* But also before the November 2022 elections, a [Gallup](#) poll on whether *“the votes will be accurately cast and counted,”* showed that 85 percent of Democrats thought that they would, but only 40 percent of Republicans did.

There is even a major partisan split on the “bedrock values” of the culture, what they are, and how valuable they are for future guidance. A May 2021 [Pew Research](#) poll noted that

*“While Britons are as ideologically divided as Americans on issues of pride, when it comes to every other cultural issue asked about in this report, Americans stand out for being more ideologically divided than those in the Western European countries surveyed. For example, on whether the country will be better off in the future if it sticks to its traditions and way of life, the gap between the left and right in the U.S. is 59 percentage points – more than twice the gap found in any other country (the UK is the next most divided country, at 28 points).”*

Regarding “What it takes to be an American,” essentially, the meaning of America, the [same survey](#) showed that, with respondents choosing elements of “belonging” from four requirements (sharing American customs and traditions, speaking English, being a Christian, and having been born in the country): *“The differences between partisans is especially stark in the U.S., where Republicans and those who lean toward the Republican party are significantly more likely than their Democratic counterparts to see all four qualities as crucial to American identity.”* This distinction is quite pertinent to partisan differences in ethno-religious identity and concerns about the cultural assimilation challenges presented by the large number of immigrants who have been entering the United States illegally or legally on the southern border.

Whites (those not Latino or Hispanic) made up 59.3 percent of the [population in July 2022](#), Hispanics and Latinos 18.9 percent, Black or African-American (those not Latino or Hispanic) 13.6 percent, and Asian 6.1 percent, with the remainder from other origins. Foreign-born persons made up 13.6 percent of the population. Referencing data from the U.S. Census, [Phillip Bump](#) observes, with insightful graphs, that *“... most White residents of the U.S. are older than the country’s median age, while most Asian, Black and Hispanic residents are younger than it. Whites make up 52 percent of the population under the median age—and two-thirds of the population over it.”*

[Population growth](#) and the country’s demographic future are now very heavily driven by the non-White population. As an example of the shift, according to the [U.S. Department of Education](#), *“Between fall 2010 and fall 2021, the percentage of public school students who were Hispanic increased from 23 to 28 percent. The percentage of public school students who were White decreased from 52 to 45 percent, and the percentage of students who were*

*Black decreased from 16 to 15 percent.” But the [U.S. Government Accountability Office](#) notes that “Schools remain divided along racial, ethnic, and economic lines throughout the U.S.—even as the K-12 public school student population grows more diverse.”*

In this context of the ongoing shrinkage of the percentage of Whites in the population and their older age profile relative to all other ethnic and racial groups, there is considerable [ethnic and racial antagonism](#) at play in the White Republican base, which is older than the national average. According to a Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) [poll](#) in 2022, 29 percent of Americans agreed that “Immigrants are invading our country, and replacing our cultural and ethnic background.”

The more conspiratorial version of why this growing ethnic and racial diversity is happening is called the “[great replacement theory](#),” held especially by [conservatives](#), the far right, and White nationalists. In some versions, liberals are deliberately “[importing](#)” non-White populations to undercut White America (that is to say “mainly Republicans,” in that narrative). [Further analysis](#) of PRRI survey data concluded

*“... a majority of Democrats strongly disagree with components of the great replacement theory. Republicans, however, are much more divided. A majority agree that efforts for diversity come at the expense of White people and that immigrants are replacing American culture. Additional analysis suggests that an increasingly non-Christian, non-White nation bothers them.... Our evidence suggests that roughly 6 percent of U.S. adults—which is not a trivial portion—lament diversity and endorse violence. More broadly, nearly a third of White U.S. adults are apprehensive about demographic replacement.”*

To confuse the emotional aspects of the public discourse on such matters even more, fundamental census-based facts about U.S. society that are central to current national debates are poorly understood and distorted by the public. A March 2022 [YouGov survey](#) noted that “When people’s average perceptions of group sizes are compared to actual population estimates, an intriguing pattern emerges: Americans tend to vastly overestimate the size of minority groups;” that is, minorities of all sorts, not just racial or ethnic.

The Oxford Dictionary designated the phrase “post-truth” as [Word of the Year](#) in 2016, signifying “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Tom Nichols, Professor of National Security Affairs at the U.S. Naval War College, referred to this anti-intellectual revolt of distrust and dispute over facts as “[The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters](#)” in his [2017 book](#) of that title. An interesting and ongoing RAND Corporation project refers to this erosive social process as “[truth decay](#).”

The concomitant trend toward politics as theater, entertainment, or “[angertainment](#)” is coherent with popular culture’s focus on entertainment for those with [short attention spans](#). In public

discourse now, including with YouTube videos and [interest-based feeds](#), there has evolved the fulfillment of what Neil Postman warned about in his 1985 book [Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business](#): “... what happens when politics, journalism, education, and even religion become subject to the demands of entertainment.”

This cultural combination meshes particularly well with former “[reality TV](#)” showman Trump’s skillful use of TV (including constant and ample coverage by all networks), his current [Truth Social](#) platform, his river of bombastic [Twitter posts](#) when president, and his trademark working of a crowd or audience at a [rally](#) or a [TV interview](#), with norm-challenging antics, anger, denunciations of the establishment, defiance, frequent name-calling (i.e., “the Biden crime family”), and [exaggerations](#) for the delight of his followers. Social media allows his fans to feel that they are dialoguing with him in real time. This performance style of high emotional engagement with supporters while president has been termed the “[emotive presidency](#)” by Good and Wallach. While the theatrics and drama go over very well with Trump’s followers, the consequences of infusing that method into American politics generally may not be healthy for a large and very diverse democratic polity that must seek broader consensus and solve a wide range of practical problems.

[Misinformation](#) and [disinformation](#) are most common and effective in times of social stress, and have been identified by many groups as dangerous for democracy and [public health](#). See, for example, the [2021 report](#) of the Aspen Institute’s carefully-named Commission on Information Disorder. The public overwhelmingly [recognizes](#) that [misinformation](#) is encouraging political extremism and violence, and [threatens democracy](#), but diverges on just which ideas are misinformation or encourage violence. Citizens are more concerned about bias in the news sources of [others](#) than any bias in their own sources. To many, “bias” means “does not agree with my point of view.”

As [Adrian Bardon](#), author of the 2019 book “[The Truth about Denial](#),” puts it, regarding the questionable practical efficacy of fact-checking, “*Humans are hardwired to dismiss facts that don’t fit their worldview... The failure of various groups to acknowledge the truth about, say, climate change, isn’t explained by a lack of information about the scientific consensus on the subject. Instead, what strongly predicts denial of expertise on many controversial topics is simply one’s political persuasion.*” This perceptual blockage and its [motivated reasoning](#) in support of pre-determined conclusions are in operation regardless of which political inclination the individual holds. [Bardon](#) notes that “*liberals are less likely to accept expert consensus on the possibility of safe storage of nuclear waste or on the effects of concealed-carry gun laws.*”

The [Brookings Institution](#) stated that “*Recently, emerging neurological research has shown clear links between despair and vulnerability to misinformation, right-wing radicalization, and violence.*” They created an [open-access “tool”](#) “*which demonstrates*

*the links—and intermediating channels—between despair and misinformation at the level of populations and places.” This data identifies “the places and populations that are most vulnerable to despair and misinformation... The interactive presents county level information on despair, access to credible local news, cognitive skill levels for high school graduates, COVID vaccination rates, and access to higher education opportunities.”*

The task of labeling online “disinformation” or “misinformation” accurately and fairly is difficult enough, including because of its volume, multi-faceted presence, and the [First Amendment](#) protection of free speech, but it has been politicized to a high level because of the inevitably partisan implications of whatever its results may turn out to be. Conservatives see a consistently liberal bias in the focus and conclusions of many fact-checking organizations, and liberals accuse conservatives of frequently lying or distorting the truth.

As of mid-2023, [Republicans in Congress](#) are aggressively investigating disinformation research, claiming that the heavily academic-based effort violates First Amendment rights of conservatives, particularly if the federal government is involved in any way and if conservative positions are more consistently flagged or censored as a result of that “fact-checking.” Some key information researchers are also being personally harassed and intimidated by conservative activists.

According to [Pew Research](#) in September 2022, “Today, half of U.S. adults get news at least sometimes from social media,” but many were [unsure in 2020](#) which sources did original reporting or just dissemination. [Social media](#) deliberately “rewards” more emotional, negative, and [provocative responses](#) and “shares” over mere “likes” in its algorithms, to increase traffic and user time on-site (“[engagement](#)”) This practice increases revenue, but tends to promote [similarity](#) in one’s [content feeds](#), [negative posts](#), and [division of groups](#) in ways that [threaten democracy](#).

In January 2022, YouTube’s CEO received a widely-publicized [letter of appeal](#) from more than 80 [fact-checking organizations](#) around the world about its content-moderating failures, calling the platform “one of the major conduits of online disinformation and misinformation worldwide.” In many such cases, rather few [political influencers](#) with many followers, and sometimes in coordination, are responsible for the spread of [most of the circulation](#) of questionable items on several platforms at once.

A [study](#) on the spread of fake news, based at Duke University in 2021, concluded that promoting wider anger and outrage is the chief user motivation for spreading fake news.

*“Both liberal and conservative participants displayed a reduced tendency to share fake news that was discordant with their views... The researchers also found evidence that the indiscriminate desire to cause chaos was associated with sharing fake news, and low conscientiousness conservatives tended to have a greater desire to cause chaos compared*

*to high conscientiousness conservatives and liberals... We found consistently that a subset of conservatives—those who are low in conscientiousness and driven by a desire to cause chaos—explained the majority of the sharing of fake news. High conscientiousness conservatives weren't to blame for this behavior in our studies.”*

Another [study](#) based at Indiana University and published in May 2023 concluded that “*In American adults, more social media use is tied to lower empathy and higher narcissism,*” which differed from results in Europe, where social media use tended to raise empathy. A 2022 [Pew Research survey](#) showed that Americans were considerably more negative about the [divisive effects](#) of social media on democracy and societies than the publics in numerous other countries. Republicans were somewhat [more critical](#) of social media’s impact on democracy than Democrats, and “*Those on the ends of the ideological spectrum—conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats—are more likely than moderates in their party to say social media is politically divisive and that it has made people less civil in the way they talk about politics.*”

[Angry rhetoric and grievances](#) have been encouraged and normalized, the extremes have been energized, divisive disinformation and [conspiracy theories](#) abound, caricaturizing and demonizing the opposition are rewarded within partisan bases, and anti-government violence is openly hinted at on the far right. A [February 2022](#) survey by the Public Religion Research Institute thoroughly analyzed the pro-Trump, violence-approving [QAnon conspiracy theory](#) ([openly amplified by Trump](#) in 2022-2023) and the demographically widespread acceptance of its core beliefs among various sectors of the public.

*“While followers of the QAnon movement claim a variety of different beliefs, the main threads of QAnon’s core theory are that a network of Satan-worshipping pedophiles control the government and media, and that a coming “storm” will sweep them out of power. The QAnon movement centered former President Donald Trump as its key leader, and said he was secretly fighting to unmask the evildoers who controlled the political and economic systems of power... Across the four surveys [by PRRI, 2021], around one in five Americans mostly or completely agree that there is a storm coming (22%), that violence might be necessary to save our country (18%), and that the government, media, and financial worlds are controlled by Satan-worshipping pedophiles (16%)... Even when controlling for partisanship and ideology, media consumption is the strongest independent predictor of being a QAnon believer. Americans who most trust far-right news outlets like One America News Network (OANN) and Newsmax are nearly five times more likely than those who most trust mainstream news to be QAnon believers. Also, Americans who most trust Fox News are about twice as likely as those who trust mainstream news to be QAnon believers. Partisanship and ideology are also major factors in predicting QAnon beliefs. Americans who identify as conservative are nearly three times as likely as those who identify as liberal to be QAnon believers. Moderates are almost twice as likely as liberals to be QAnon believers. Republicans are about two times more likely than Democrats to be QAnon believers... When looking at race and ethnicity, around six in ten believers (58%) are*

*white Americans. Hispanic Americans account for around one in five (20%) and Black Americans for just over one in ten (13%) QAnon believers. Less than one in ten believers are of other races or ethnicities (6%) or multiracial (2%).”*

Overall, [interpersonal trust](#) has become [problematic](#), and general social behavior and public dialogue seem [more coarse](#), with shorter tempers and more verbal abuse. A search for “consensus” usually involves expecting the “other party” to agree with “your side.” A [July 2020](#) Cato Institute/YouGov poll revealed that “62% of Americans say the political climate these days prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive... Majorities of Democrats (52%), independents (59%) and Republicans (77%) all agree they have political opinions they are afraid to share.”

An October 2019 [Georgetown University Politics Civility Poll](#) (pre-COVID) noted that adherents of each party tended to blame exactly the pillars of the “other side” for the deterioration of civil discourse: “Majorities of Republicans say Democratic political leaders, social media, large newspapers, CNN, and MSNBC are very responsible for our political division. Meanwhile, majorities of Democrats say Republican political leaders, social media, Fox News, wealthy special interests, and President Trump are very responsible.” Further, the poll stated that “the average voter believes the U.S. is two-thirds of the way to the edge of a civil war” because of partisan anger. This stark assessment about greater political violence may just be a reflection of the tendency in recent years to describe national divisions in sensationalist or “existential” ways, such as warnings of [“incipient insurgency.”](#)

In 2018, a [national poll](#) out of Penn State University noted that both Republicans and Democrats had a difficult time figuring out what really motivates the “other side.” Even more difficult was trying to take the perspective of the other side, to empathize with those fellow citizens, and see virtues in their preferences. Animosity toward the other side ([“lethal partisanship”](#)), more than identification with one’s own side, now drives partisan sentiment, furthering national polarization in “good vs. evil” terms. In the words of columnist [George Will](#), the country suffers a “solidarity-in-animosity,” an existential conviction that “*I despise, therefore I am.*” As Will also [observed](#), “*Instantaneous digital interactions encourage superficiality, insularity and tribalism.*” According to a 2022 [Pew Research survey](#),

*“Increasingly, Republicans and Democrats view not just the opposing party but also the people in that party in a negative light. Growing shares in each party now describe those in the other party as more closed-minded, dishonest, immoral and unintelligent than other Americans. Nearly half of younger adults say they ‘wish there were more parties to choose from.’”*

In September 2021, the University of Virginia’s [Center for Politics](#) concluded from its numerous surveys that (excepted here)

*“A strong majority of Trump voters see no real difference between Democrats and socialists, and a majority of Biden voters at least somewhat agree that there is no real difference between Republicans and fascists... Significant numbers of both Trump and Biden voters show a willingness to consider violating democratic tendencies and norms if needed to serve their priorities... Many Trump and Biden voters believe the deck is stacked against them, and their commitment to democracy is wavering. Widespread disillusionment with the other side, and perceptions of a system that is rigged to favor the wealthy and powerful, has undermined faith in our representative democracy:*

— *On one hand, roughly 80% of Trump and Biden voters view democracy as preferable to any non-democratic kind of government.*

— *On the other hand, more than 6 in 10 Trump and Biden voters see America as less a representative democracy and more a system that is run by and rigged for the benefit of the wealthy.*

— *Overall, more than two-thirds support—and one-third strongly—emboldening and empowering strong leaders and taking the law into their own hands when it comes to dealing with people or groups they view as dangerous.*

— *And their willingness to consider violating democratic tendencies and norms extends beyond the hypothetical and to a dangerous and alarming finding: Roughly 2 in 10 Trump and Biden voters—or more than 31 million Americans — strongly agree it would be better if a “President could take needed actions without being constrained by Congress or courts” (as extrapolated from the results of this survey). Roughly 4 in 10 (41%) of Biden and half (52%) of Trump voters at least somewhat agree that it’s time to split the country, favoring blue/red states seceding from the union.” “The divide between Trump and Biden voters is deep, wide, and dangerous. The scope is unprecedented, and it will not be easily fixed,” said UVA Center for Politics Director Larry J. Sabato.”*

Even personal [dating and relationship decisions](#) have been affected by inter-party and social conflicts. A 2020 [Economist/YouGov poll](#) discovered that “38 percent of Democrats and 38 percent of Republicans said they would feel somewhat or very upset at the prospect of their child marrying someone from the opposite party.” This [partisan gap](#) persists at a level a bit above the [international average](#), in spite of current strong acceptance in the U.S. of formerly controversial interracial marriage (at [94 percent](#) in 2021, according to Gallup) and of same-sex marriage (at [71 percent](#) in 2022, according to Gallup). In fact, same-sex marriage, once a major conservative target, has become so widely accepted in the public and in law that Republican politicians and the [far-right](#) have ceased to attack it, but focus instead on LGBTQ and transgender issues in the “culture wars,” where more of the [public](#) supports conservative views.

**The Role of Donald Trump and the MAGA Movement-** Both parties have moved away from the traditional center in the last decade or so, broadening the active range across the political spectrum (especially on the far right), a [definite contrast](#) from the

1990s. The Republican Party has shifted [far more so](#), taken over from the more moderate former leadership by Trump and the populist, highly personalistic [Make America Great Again \(MAGA\)](#) movement under his sway. Political scientist [Pippa Norris](#) demonstrates, using an internationally comparative attitudes survey on two current [wedge issues](#) in American politics, that there is a strong [conservative backlash](#) against certain social attitude changes in the U.S.

*“...we need to examine party polarization in socially liberal and conservative attitudes among voters. In this regard we can focus on comparing public opinion among supporters of 115 political parties in a range of 19 equivalent Western liberal democracies and affluent post-industrial societies. Attitudes towards abortion can also be compared with approval of homosexuality, as a closely related benchmark of moral values. As illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, the results of the comparison suggest that the position of voters in the Republican Party is one of the most conservative on these issues compared with party voters across almost all other Western democracies, except for Greece, where the Orthodox church has long been vigorously opposed to reproductive rights. By contrast, party voters in the Democratic Party, far from being extremely liberal, as sometimes claimed, are in fact mainstream on these issues when compared with most parties in Western democracies, **including both left-wing and conservative parties.**” [Emphasis added.]*

An international survey study in 2021 by [Morning Consult](#) concluded that authoritarianism is notably higher in the American right than in that of several other comparable democracies.

*“A scale measuring propensity toward right-wing authoritarian tendencies found right-leaning Americans scored higher than their counterparts in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. 26% of the U.S. population qualified as highly right-wing authoritarian, Morning Consult research found, twice the share of the No. 2 countries, Canada and Australia... The 39-point gap in right-wing authoritarian scores between America’s left and right was more pronounced than it was in any of the other countries included, though the test also revealed a 30-point gap between the right and left in Canada and 28-point differences between the two groups in Australia and the United Kingdom.”*

The late Jerrold Post, a psychiatrist, was the founder of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Center for the Analysis of Personality and Political Behavior and profiled the personalities of many key world leaders for the U.S. government. After retiring from serving five presidents, he wrote (with Stephanie Doucette) [“Dangerous Charisma: The Political Psychology of Donald Trump and His Followers”](#) (2019), warning of the dangers to democracy of the personalistic, semi-charismatic MAGA movement that highly narcissistic Trump marshalled and leads. Among many other [negative traits](#) for leadership, a narcissist has a fragile sense of self-worth, no empathy, does not accept accountability, overestimates his own abilities, resists advice, cannot accept loss, and is slow to recognize his mistakes.

As a [Kirkus](#) reviewer of Post's book noted: *"The only loyalty a person with his malignant or pathological narcissism has is to himself and his own survival," Post writes, and never mind the fate of those around that person, since loyalty flows only in the direction of Trump and not the other way. Paranoia, insecurity, bluster, constant aggression, and utter lack of empathy are other components of the template."*

Among other major effects on the political culture, Trump [redefined](#) for Republicans what "[conservative](#)" means in the U.S., based on highly personalistic populist loyalty to him. He had a [tenacious hold](#) on most Republican voters and the party in mid-2023, even with the [report](#) of the Select January 6<sup>th</sup> Committee investigating the [January 6, 2021 attack](#) on the U.S. Capitol, Trump's several state and federal [legal troubles](#), his [constant lies](#) and misleading statements to keep his base agitated and loyal to him, and his insulting and bombastic style of petty put-downs and focusing heavily on his own [personal grievances](#). Trump has convinced his followers that there is an existential crisis for the soul of America and that all U.S. federal government institutions, including the [Department of Justice](#) and the [FBI](#), are merely partisan and corrupt, controlled by the "[deep state](#)," with the liberals in ruinous control of most (plus dominating the U.S. cultural and media elite). Many Republican politicians have successfully emulated him.

Along with other extremist rhetoric on their part, Trump and other radical Republicans freely call the Democrats "[communists](#)," a [very inaccurate](#) label that has emotional resonance within MAGA. One telling indication of Trump's egomania and authoritarian bent was his December 2022 rant on his "Truth Social" account that the Constitution and other rules and regulations should be "[terminated](#)" to allow him to assume his rightful place as president because he actually won in November 2020.

Trump regularly [protests his innocence](#), refers to accusations against him as "hoaxes," to official investigations and criminal indictments as "witch hunts" ("greatest of all time!") and "election interference," and to critical press reports as "fake news," all designed by political enemies to keep him from winning in 2024. Loyal Trump supporters and many Republicans follow suit and [discount](#) the controversies and lawsuits as "just (stirred up by) the Democrats," or because he's "a fighter and a disrupter" un beholden to the political establishment and the "deep state." They see a "[weaponization of government](#)" by the Democrats which is unfairly and selectively persecuting front-runner Trump to weaken the MAGA movement and to benefit Joe Biden in 2024. This argumentation usually involves Republican mention of the ongoing federal criminal investigation of corruption charges against President Biden's son—"What about Hunter Biden...?"

Trump's personalistic authoritarian outbursts against democratic institutions should not be easily dismissed as merely odd personal quirks, given the context of other aspects of Trump's discourse and behavior, such as his angry themes of "vengeance" and "revenge" in

his campaigning in mid-2023, as at the Conservative Political Action Conference in March 2023: “[I am your justice... I am your retribution...](#)” His [rhetoric](#) became more radical and confrontational as 2023 progressed, always with the long-standing [underlying theme](#) designed to encourage strong personal identification of his followers with himself, his grievances, his enemies (“they”), and his sense of “victimization” expressed through [rambling speeches](#) and repeated slogans at rallies, such as “*They’re not after me, they’re after you... I’m just standing in the way... I’m being indicted for you...*”

Although a multi-billionaire, he consistently and very successfully requests contributions by followers to his legal defense or campaign funds at [dramatic moments](#), such as after [criminal indictments](#), even as little as five dollars, as a way of strengthening their emotional ties to him and giving them a sense of voice and participation.

A [CBS News/YouGov poll](#) in May 2023 showed clearly why many (but not all) Republican voters still supported Trump so strongly and why at that time he was the overwhelming front-runner for the party’s nomination in 2024. Republican voter preferences for 2024 were heavily for a candidate who challenges “[woke](#)” ideas, opposes gun restrictions, says that Trump won in 2020, and makes liberals angry. (“[Owning the libs](#)” by making them angry is a major aspect of MAGA, and “[woke liberal agenda](#)” is used as a derisive and catch-all [major putdown](#) of the despised liberal programs.) Republicans who supported Trump for 2024 in this poll like his past performance in office, feel that he stands up for people like them, think he would beat Biden, and like how he deals with political opponents. They also tend to see him as he regularly paints himself, an “innocent victim” of “leftist hate” for Trump and for America. Many also tend to like him personally.

By using data from various polls, the [Washington Post](#)’s Aaron Blake profiles some [key ways](#) in which Republicans who consider themselves “MAGA” differ from other [i.e., “party-first”] Republicans, an analysis that reveals the major split within the party. Blake notes that “*4 to 5 in 10 Republican-leaning voters identify as MAGA.*” In contrast to more traditional Republicans, MAGA identifiers show highly personalistic loyalty and devotion to Trump (more so than to the Republican Party), detest and immediately attack any Republican who criticizes Trump in any way, and are more evangelical, conservative, conspiracy-minded, and fully intransigent against the Democrats (rather than ever compromising). They are more extreme on Trump’s “stolen” electoral victory in 2020, events of January 6, their favorite news sources, and coronavirus vaccines. They are especially angry with former Vice-President Mike Pence, because he did not stop the Congressional certification of the November 2020 election results on January 6, 2021, as Trump had asked him to do.

Further MAGA authoritarianism is shown in that Blake comments, “*a recent poll from Vanderbilt University showed a particularly pronounced gap on the question of who was the better president, Biden or Russia’s Vladimir Putin. While 70 percent of non-MAGA Republicans said Biden was better, [52 percent of MAGA](#)*”

*Republicans preferred Putin.”* Trump, at [various times](#), [has expressed admiration](#) for Putin’s leadership skills.

Some Republicans are concerned about Trump’s style and electability in the general elections of 2024, but the Republican leadership in Congress avoids frontally criticizing him as much as they can. They do not wish to antagonize the party’s activist base, heavily MAGA, upon which they must depend in their own [primary elections](#) (intra-party), in the context of a tight national and key-state party competition. In these primary elections, the conservative party activists, including MAGA, tend to show up to vote in greater percentages than do the more moderate party members. Republican leaders are also aware that Trump could start a separate party in his name, if denied the Republican nomination in 2024. There is [little indication](#) that Republicans or Republican leaders are turning against him openly because of his character defects, brash behavior, extremism, or mounting legal troubles. In fact, a [serious case](#) can be made that his [narcissism](#) (with his non-politician, free-speaking style) is attractive to the followers who identify most closely with him psychologically. But, interestingly, few of the [former members](#) of Trump’s cabinet, who worked closely with him, have come forward publicly to endorse him for the Republican nomination.

Two-thirds of [Republican](#) primary election voters rallied behind Trump in April 2023, as he faced several legal troubles, but the general public is strongly [set against](#) a Trump-Biden [rematch](#) in 2024, and “*substantial majorities*” were against either one running for president at all. Many voters cite the advanced age of both candidates. This negative sentiment is reminiscent of the high rejection rates in the 2016 presidential race, in which, as of [September](#) of that year: “*Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton are the two most unpopular major party presidential candidates on record. Both of them have unfavorability ratings of more than 50 percent.*” The two major American political parties are failing to nominate broad consensus candidates for president, if that is even possible anymore.

Trump’s high level of [narcissism](#), self-obsession, and semi-charismatic appeal to his base prevent him from publicly acknowledging any defeat whatsoever or losing face to his base, even to the demonstrated extent of blaming the electoral and legal systems and challenging the Constitution itself after he lost re-election in November 2020. On January 7, 2021, Trump, still president, [stated](#), under pressure from advisors, that the event of the day before was a “*heinous attack*” and “*The demonstrators who infiltrated the Capitol have defiled the seat of American democracy. To those who engaged in the acts of violence and destruction, you do not represent our country. And to those who broke the law, you will pay.*”

As a measure of his shifting opportunism over time, Trump gradually came to [praise the rioters](#), because they were his supporters. For the same self-seeking reasons, he robustly defended the “innocence” of his supporters [arrested](#) for [criminal activities](#) on January 6, 2021, belittled their trials, and promised to

[pardon them](#) and issue an official apology for their “unfair” treatment, if elected in 2024. Key Senate Republicans [strongly condemned](#) that idea. In March 2023, Trump even tried to [shift blame](#) to his Vice-President Pence for the attack, because Pence did not send all of the electoral votes back to the state legislatures on the grounds of election fraud, as Trump had wanted him to do.

In light of such consistently erratic behavior, and even with his clear defiance of the law and the Constitution and his [veiled threats](#) of violence from his followers in his defense, it is a measure of the psychological [strength and danger](#) of Trump’s continuing power of persuasion over his followers and the party, that in mid-2023, [63 percent](#) of Republicans still believed on Trump’s word, [mere suspicion](#), doubtful claims, distrust of the Democrats, and conspiracy theories that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump by widespread fraud and that Biden was therefore not a legitimate president. This doubt persists in spite of [scores](#) of [lost court cases](#), numerous failed election recounts (all of them) down to the county and precinct level, the official [January 6](#) investigation [results](#) (including the [committee’s vote](#) to refer Trump to the Department of Justice for criminal prosecution), and two post-election [investigations](#) sponsored by Trump’s own election campaign that discovered no significant proof of the fraud claim.

A detailed “[Lost, not Stolen](#)” report in July 2022 by eight [prominent conservatives](#) with distinguished records concluded that fraud did not determine even a [single outcome](#) at the precinct or state level in 2020, in regard to all 64 of Trump’s claims against results in 6 states. Still, [Republican](#) election “[deniers](#),” following Trump’s lead in promoting his “[Big Lie](#),” ran in many [electoral races](#) in [2022](#), with the same message of fraudulent elections in 2020. [Most](#) were defeated, but the demagogical tendency continues toward November 2024, still encouraged by Trump, down to the county and local levels.

The current pressure toward continuing, antagonistic dualism in the U.S. two-party system encourages either-or thinking and disregard for shared perspectives in the citizen debate about public policies. Weakness in establishing a shared middle ground in public debate is one of the defects of the current U.S. party system. There is a bias against the success of third parties in the [single-member](#) district electoral system in which a large majority of Congressional districts are now dominated by a single party, often by the manipulation ([gerrymandering](#)) of the redistricting that is required after every national census. The public is used to being presented with a disparate and boxed-in “either-or” framing of persons, issues, alternatives, and solutions.

There is some ongoing interest in a third alternative, but, beyond the overwhelming structural obstacles of single-member electoral districts, it is unlikely that an emerging one would get enough actual voter support to be viable. In [October 2022](#), Gallup noted that “*The 56% of Americans who currently believe the country would benefit from a third major party roughly matches the average 55% holding this view across Gallup’s trend, since 2003.*”

Strongly-held partisanship or other group membership may become a major element of personal identity, and a subsequent “truth filter” of perceptions with a deliberately narrow selection of news, analysis, and self-reinforcing explanatory theories to bolster one’s own convictions and sense of righteousness (called “[confirmation bias](#)”). Sound bite analysis, sensationalism, ridicule of the opposition, and virtue signaling in the chosen communications flow add to the pressure to conform to the group standard, especially when under stress from the opposition.

Such habits of constant selection, a strong wish to continue to believe and to belong, make it easier for a person to fall into a social media “[echo chamber](#)” of like-minded individuals and to divide the country into irreconcilable “[us vs. them](#)” categories, or “tribes.” Yale Law School Professor Amy Chua noted in [Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations](#) (2019) that, as population dynamics are shifting, *“Today, no group in America feels comfortably dominant. Every group feels attacked, pitted against other groups not just for jobs and spoils but for the right to define the nation’s identity. In these conditions, democracy devolves into zero-sum group competition—pure political tribalism.”*

This divisive tendency is easily exploited by politicians, however dangerous it may be for the system as a whole in engendering [political violence](#), especially around elections. “Supporting the team” (a form of “political correctness”) becomes far more compelling than believing in any objective truth that goes against the party or group line, as events are re-framed in ways favorable to the interests of the party or group, whether the embarrassing topic be overwhelming immigration on the southern border, destructive urban riots, and urban decay and crime (for Democrats) or January 6, massive fraud in COVID relief funds disbursed during the Trump administration, and Trump's several indictments (for Republicans).

Regarding systemic factors, this re-interpretation process is illustrated by [decreasing disapproval](#) (and the rise of [approval](#)) of the events of January 6 among [Republicans in the public](#) as [months passed](#). In a June 2022 [Reuters-Ipsos poll](#), “55% of the Republicans polled said they believed the riot was led by violent left-wing protesters,” for which there was no proof whatsoever in any official investigations. [Views on the seriousness](#) of the January 6 events remain largely [divided by party](#), with only small changes around the edges, in spite of the findings of the major Congressional investigation. Each party holds basically to its original interpretation, including about the degree of Trump’s role in encouraging the attack or whether the “rioters” or “protestors” were “attacking” or “defending” democracy. Ongoing [election denialism](#) around the country, plus more general doubts raised about the integrity and legitimacy of the electoral system, thanks to the events of 2020 into 2021, present a major threat to American democracy, at the heart of that form of government and far beyond the formerly usual mere policy differences.

## Concerns about the Health of American Respect for Democratic Norms

**Pessimism about America and Democracy-** The worrisome shift toward a more conflictful political culture in the country [preceded](#) Trump's Republican nomination in 2016, and the dissatisfaction in society is much deeper and lasting than his or his skillful role in harnessing and encouraging that discontent in national politics. A Yahoo News/YouGov [survey](#) in June 2022 stated that *"Half of Americans now predict U.S. may 'cease to be a democracy' someday."* An [NPR/Ipsos poll](#) in early 2022 showed broad concerns in the public about the future of democracy in the U.S., concluding, *"Overall, 64% agree that American democracy is in crisis and at risk of failing. Even more, 70%, feel the same about America itself."* This sentiment is stronger among [Republicans](#), many of whom accepted Trump's unproven and increasingly discredited claim that he won the November 2020 election. A 2022 Quinnipiac University [national poll](#) found that *"nearly six in ten think the nation's democracy is in danger of collapse,"* which instability the respondents saw as a bigger threat to the country than foreign adversaries.

Many voters in both parties want to ["upend" the system](#) (part of the populist, anti-establishment appeal of Trump's MAGA movement), to see real structural change from the current stagnation, but are divided about what sort of change is necessary and how to achieve it. For some of these highly discontented citizens, left or right, measures taken to strengthen the current democratic system may just entrench the power of the establishment that they wish to unseat. In the context of that frustration, a [Washington Post-University of Maryland poll](#) in January 2022 noted that one-third of Americans agreed that violence against the government can be justified.

A significant driver in various sectors of public opinion now, although still a minority view, is that democratic norms may have to be infringed or sacrificed in order to "save the country," as those various groups understand that term. This sense of urgency against an "existential threat" to the country is the broader context and reference point of Trump's well-tuned (i.e., semi-ambiguous) [statement](#) to a large crowd of supporters just before the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021: *"We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."* Of course, some Republicans (at least initially) and most Democrats and independents understood that rally itself, the speech, and the subsequent invasion of the Congress as a threat to the existence of American values, norms, and democracy.

**The Threat of Authoritarianism and Violence-** In the greater public acceptance of authoritarianism in the context of the two sharply competing divergent visions for America's future, a key risk for American democracy lies in the polarizing feeling that so much of

ultimate worth is at stake in American society, and now threatened by the “other side,” that preserving democracy may become of lesser importance than “saving America” from the ruination caused by the highly-distrusted “other side.” Such “threats” are interpreted quite differently by both sides. At the moment, the feeling of extreme urgency and doubt about election integrity is definitely [stronger](#) on the [political right](#) and could easily be activated as a threat in a tightly-contested electoral situation [full of rumors](#) and conspiracy theories, given the extent of general [concern](#) about [election integrity](#) and [election denialism](#) already exhibited at all levels of government. A George Washington University [Politics Poll](#) in July 2021 found that

*“Over half of Republicans (55%) supported the possible use of force to preserve the ‘traditional American way of life,’ compared to 15% of Democrats. When asked if a time will come when ‘patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands,’ 47% of Republicans agreed, as opposed to just 9% of Democrats.”*

A University of Chicago [Project on Security and Threats/NORC survey](#) in April 2023 found “truly disturbing” levels of [propensity to violence](#) on the right and the left, a stark and careful assessment that deserves a verbatim presentation of the summary in full:

- 1. The size of the pro-Trump “Insurrectionist Movement” remains highly stable. In September 2022, 5% of Americans believed force was justified to restore Trump to the presidency. Today that number is the same, at 5%. In our new survey, we also asked those who neither agreed nor disagreed about their leaning, and found 12% of these or 4 million lean toward agreeing that force is justified to restore Trump. This suggests our previous surveys have underestimated the true level of force for Trump by effectively counting all the ambivalent as not agreeing. When we add these 4 million from the ambivalent to the explicit support for force to restore Trump, we now have a more accurate estimate of the size of the insurrectionist movement—as of April 2023, about 17 million.*
- 2. Support for violence in addressing causes on the Left is also stable from September 2022 to April 2023 across a variety of grievances (restore abortion rights, protect minority voting rights, prevent police brutality against minorities), remains sizable, and comes predominantly from Democrats. Overall, support for political violence continues to extend across party lines.*
- 3. Support for political violence against members of Congress and on government officials grew from 9% (equivalent of 23 million adults) in January 2023 to 12.5% or (the equivalent of 32 million adults) in April 2023 and continues to come almost equally from the Right and Left. The 32 million breaks down as 10 million Republicans, 8 million Democrats, and 5 million Independents.*
- 4. Our new survey asked questions about commitment of the public to the US Constitution and remaining politically united as a nation and found disturbingly: 12% or 31 million adults agree that the “US Constitution should be ignored” (about evenly across parties), while 16% or 41 million adults favor the “United States having a national divorce.” Importantly, support for national divorce remains at disturbing levels when high consequences are added, with 7% (18*

million adults) favoring a national divorce even if “thousands of people are injured or killed” and 7% (18 million adults) even if it means “China would replace the United States as the world’s only superpower.” Republicans are more than twice as likely to favor national divorce across all these questions.

5. There is also good news. Our April 2023 survey found that 77% of the public supports bipartisan solutions to American political violence, a stable level since January 2023 and indicating that Americans are **not** polarized on this crucial issue and pointing the way forward for political leaders to work together to prevent political violence in the future.

To determine the sources of the most serious ongoing threats of political violence, an earlier NORC and University of Chicago Project on Security and Threats [survey](#) in August 2021 sought to identify the number and characteristics of those hard-core adherents who were most resolute about the need for violence or insurrection in American politics, a [continuing threat](#).

*“We found, most strikingly, that nine percent of Americans believe the ‘Use of force is justified to restore Donald J. Trump to the presidency’. More than a fourth of adults agree, in varying degrees, that, ‘The 2020 election was stolen, and Joe Biden is an illegitimate president.’ We also learned that 8.1 percent—that equates to 21 million American adults—share **both** these radical beliefs. From a statistical point of view, this number is extrapolated from a range between 6% (15 million) to 11% (28 million), where we have 95% confidence that the true number falls within... The research shows, two central beliefs occur among adamant insurrectionists statistically significantly than more commonly found in the general population:*

*63% believe in the Great Replacement: ‘African American people or Hispanic people in our country will eventually have more rights than whites.’*

*54% believe in the QAnon cabal: ‘A secret group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles is ruling the U.S. government.’*

*...We are dealing with a mass movement with violence at its core that does not fit earlier patterns of right-wing extremism. For example, we are not dealing with disaffected and unemployed young men, but mainly highly competent, middle-aged American professionals... Concerning political affiliation, the adamant insurrectionists are not only Republicans. While 51% self-identify as members of the Republican Party, 34% see themselves as Independents and 10% as Democrats.”*

Regarding the public as a whole, a team of political scientists from the [Allegheny College Center for Political Participation](#) (PA) measured authoritarian attitudes and tendencies in a nationally-representative [sample](#) of adults. They [concluded](#) that authoritarianism can be found in adherents of both parties.

*“Across the political spectrum, Americans seek ‘tough leaders who will crack down.’ Majorities of every political stripe agree or strongly agree with the idea that solving the nation's problems depends on strong leaders who will take action against those who would undermine American values. The exception is those who ‘lean Democratic’—but still, 49% of them support that idea too... For*

*example, around 90% of Republicans would support tough leaders who crack down on groups that ‘undermine American values’—however the survey respondents define those values. More than half of Democrats take the same position. Perhaps even more notably, nearly half of citizens who strongly support the Republican Party and over a third of those who strongly support the Democratic Party endorse the view that it is acceptable to bend the rules’ for people like themselves to achieve political goals. ...Many citizens prefer leaders who are willing to undermine democracy if it means protecting people like themselves from groups that threaten their values or status. Although most Americans do not subscribe to these beliefs, a substantial portion of the country does.”*

A September 2022 [Axios-IPSOS poll](#) highlighted the results that

*“About one in three Americans prefers strong unelected leaders to weak elected leaders and says presidents should be able to remove judges over their decisions... In this poll, significant minorities of Republicans and Democrats supported non-democratic norms in about equal percentages—and Democrats were more likely than Republicans to say presidents should be able to remove judges when their decisions go against the national interest.”*

As another worrisome internationally comparative measure of growing authoritarianism on both sides and tolerance for extra-constitutional solutions, and amid occasional derisive and often frivolous references to “[Third World politics](#)” in the [national discourse](#), the longstanding [Americas Barometer](#) project at Vanderbilt University in their [2021 survey](#) of the Western Hemisphere highlighted the irony that

*“The share of Americans willing to tolerate a [military] coup increased from 28 percent in 2017 to 40 percent in 2021. That’s a 43 percent increase, and the highest rate we’ve seen in the United States since we began asking the question more than a decade ago. It’s also one of the largest increases we’ve seen in this measure across the Americas. Compared to other countries we study, the U.S. now ranks near the middle on this measure, just higher than Brazil and Mexico—countries with relatively recent histories of authoritarian rule.”*

For another international perspective relative to such casual “Third World” references, the 2023 [Edelman Trust Barometer](#), a business-oriented annual survey of 28 countries by a global communications firm, placed the United States as one of six in the “Severely Polarized” category, along with such fractured developing countries as Argentina, Colombia, and South Africa, and more so than Brazil. There was a large gap (23 points) in the United States in the percent of trust in NGOs, business, government, and the media between the high-income earners (higher trust) and the low-income earners (lower trust), the second largest income-based trust gap among all countries in that aspect of the survey. Overall, Republicans were definitely more pessimistic than Democrats about overcoming the differences in the country.

Explicit concerns about maintaining or strengthening democracy are normally rather abstract to voters and usually rank [relatively low](#) in

citizens' minds when they go to the polls. The degradation, simplification, and emotionalization of political discourse, overheated rhetoric, and acceptance of misinformation and authoritarian solutions to break the partisan impasse are aggravated by impatience and a widespread general lack of knowledge in the public about the characteristics, rules, nuances, and uncertainties of the democratic system and how elections are conducted and how laws are enforced. The Annenberg Public Policy Center's [Civics Knowledge Survey](#) observed in September 2022 that, among other basic civic weaknesses:

*“Less than half (47%) of U.S. adults could name all three branches of government (executive, legislative, judicial), down from 56% in 2021. One in 4 respondents could not name any. Asked to name the five rights protected by the First Amendment, fewer Americans could name any of the five than in 2021. For instance, less than 1 in 4 people (24%) could name freedom of religion, down from 56% the prior year.”*

**The “Big Picture”-** Internationally-respected organizations (NGOs) that track and analyze democracy in the world have noted a sharp decline in the quality of American democracy in recent years, a [democratic backsliding](#), in a globally comparative context, and have expressed alarm at the events of January 6, 2021, their sequel into the following years, and other events and trends that do not bode well for the health of American democracy. Their observations and conclusions provide good comparative insight into American political culture today, from a systemic perspective seldom considered objectively from within the turbulence of the intensely partisanship-obsessed social atmosphere of the United States.

**Freedom House** (U.S.A.) noted about the U.S., in its 2023 report on [“Freedom in the World,”](#) *“...in recent years its democratic institutions have suffered erosion, as reflected in rising political polarization and extremism, partisan pressure on the electoral process, bias and dysfunction in the criminal justice system, harmful policies on immigration and asylum seekers, and growing disparities in wealth, economic opportunity, and political influence.”*

**The Fund for Peace's** (U.S.A.) [Fragile State Index](#) for 2021 observed that *“the country which saw the largest year-on-year worsening in their total score [is] the [United States.](#)”*

**The Economist Intelligence Unit** (UK) in its [2022 “Democracy Index”](#) classified the United States as a *“flawed democracy”* and ranked it as the 30<sup>th</sup> most democratic country in the world, trailing well behind Canada at the 12<sup>th</sup> spot and down four places from the previous year. This widely-used global comparative index is based on the evaluation of five categories: electoral process and pluralism; the functioning of government; political participation; political culture; and civil liberties. The functioning of government was cited as a weak spot in recent reports, and the deterioration of American political culture has been the U.S.'s weakest point.

**The European Council on Foreign Relations** polled [many European countries](#) in January 2021 and concluded *“although a majority of Europeans are happy with Biden’s election, many do not trust the American electorate not to vote for another Donald Trump in four years. Looking at the results for Europe as a whole, 32 per cent of all respondents to ECFR’s poll agree that, after voting for Trump in 2016, Americans cannot be trusted—and only 27 per cent disagree with this statement (the rest do not have an opinion on the issue) Most strikingly, 53 per cent of German respondents say that, after Trump, Americans can no longer be trusted—making them clear outliers on this point.”*

**The Varieties of Democracy Index** (Sweden) [Democracy Report 2023](#) referred to the United States as undergoing *“substantial autocratization”* over the last 10 years (one of 33, along with Indonesia and Brazil among the other most populous states, and Greece among established European democracies), also noting a decline in academic freedom in the United States. The United States was ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> in the world on their Liberal Democracy Index for 2022, with a significant decline from its assessment in 2012. (“Liberal” is used here in the European rather than the American sense, referencing “liberty.”)

Western Europe’s **Alliance of Democracies’** [Democracy Perception Index](#) for 2023 questioned national samples of the populations of 53 countries about the state of democracy in their countries. The results noted in a graph that, among the publics in 53 countries responding to the question *“Is there enough democracy in your country?”* the United States fell well below the middle level in satisfaction (i.e., heavily *“not enough”*), near Mexico, Chile, and Italy. The broad global survey also noted that the United States was one of the five countries in which concern for the negative effects of inequality on democracy grew the most from the previous year.

Among other issues, Americans scored above the survey average on concern about corruption’s negative effects on democracy in their country, fifth in the survey in concern about the negative effects of global corporations on democracy in their country, fifth in concern about foreign interference in elections, among the most critical regarding negative effects of social media, and above the world average in concern about unfair elections. Ironically, *“Out of all the democracies labelled as ‘free’ by Freedom House, the U.S. has the highest share of people who fear the influence of Big Tech companies (65%).”* [Number 3 among all countries surveyed, right below India and the Philippines and above Pakistan.] *“Across the 53 countries surveyed, an average of 51% of people say that the United States has a positive impact on democracy around the world, while 33% say it’s negative... in most Western European countries, as well as in Canada and Australia, opinion is very evenly divided.”*

**The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance** (Sweden) in its [Global State of Democracy Initiative](#) noted in 2023 that, in comparing 2021 to 2012, while the country was definitely categorized as *“democratic,”* there were [declines for the United States](#) in several

key attributes of democracy over the period: representative government, fundamental rights, checks on government, impartial administration, and participatory engagement.

**Wither American Democracy?**- A scholarly look at system changes over time can show the great extent to which national unity (and hence democracy) has been weakened by the events, characteristics, and trends noted earlier in this paper. The Vanderbilt University [Project on Unity and American Democracy](#) created the [Vanderbilt Unity Index](#) to attempt to measure the levels of [American unity](#) over time in a comparable way, by calendar quarters since 1981, based on “five inputs, including publicly available survey data on strong presidential disapproval, political and ideological extremism, social trust, political and social unrest, and measurements of Congressional polarization.” Graphs of the results over that time period ([Figures 6 and 7](#)) show a continual decrease in the level of national unity after 1993, albeit with some quarterly variations in the general downward trend over the decades. There is a greater slope of the curve after about 2005 and wild fluctuations start in 2017. [The authors](#) refer to the latter period as “consumed with divisive political rhetoric and critique of democratic institutions.” [Work](#) on refining the Index is [ongoing](#).

In a world context, except under Trump’s business and personal relationships-oriented transactional style of foreign policy, democracy has been a major component of American foreign policy since World War II under both parties. Domestic political polarization and dysfunction are weakening the [American position and effectiveness](#) in the world, and diminishing the position of the [United States](#) as a [model](#). [Authoritarian alternatives](#) are presenting [democracy](#) with steep [challenges](#) worldwide, as well as in the U.S. Authoritarian rivals, especially [Russia](#) and [China](#), have [picked up on](#) and [exploited](#) the confusion, dysfunctions, and vulnerabilities of the troubled American democracy by using [social media](#) worldwide to [spread](#) their message and undercut the United States, particularly regarding the [genuineness](#), worth, and effectiveness of its democratic system.

American domestic discord facilitates the effectiveness of [disinformation operatives](#) from rival countries who attempt to influence U.S. public opinion in [negative ways](#). One startling measure of how far American political alignments have shifted on the right is that when [Tucker Carlson](#), a conspiracy-minded talk show host, commentator, and admirer of hard-right leaders overseas (Viktor Orbán, Jair Bolsonaro, etc.), and highly popular among the conservative base, was [fired](#) from the [Fox News](#) TV network in April 2023, he was [offered a job](#) (which he did not accept) by state-run Russian media and [praised](#) by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov for his criticism of US policy in Ukraine.

American and some foreign scholars of [comparative democracy](#) and comparative [instability and violence](#) have issued [statements of concern](#) about [threats](#) to American democracy. Considering the power held by the states in the federal system, and some authoritarian tendencies at that level, Grumbach devised ways to measure levels of democracy, a “[State Democracy Index](#)” using 51 indicators and covering all 50 states for 2000 to 2018. [Respected organizations](#) are measuring and analyzing the [malaise](#) of U.S. democracy, threats of [gradual breakdown](#) (a key scenario to avert), and possible [reforms](#). The degree of severity led Professors Suzanne Mettler (Cornell) and Robert C. Lieberman (Johns Hopkins) [to warn](#) that “*Scholars who study the rise and fall of democracy elsewhere recognize four conditions that pose threats to the sustainability and survival of democracy: political polarization; conflict over who belongs as a member of the political community (particularly along lines of race, ethnicity and national origin); high and growing economic inequality; and excessive executive power,*” noting that the United States is currently facing all four factors, for the [sixth time](#).

From the global perspective of the business and financial world, Ian Bremmer, President of the Eurasia Group, an international political-risk consulting firm, [noted](#) in his January 2023 global outlook that “*the U.S. remains one of the most politically polarized and dysfunctional of the world’s advanced industrial democracies heading into 2023,*” which he considered one of the top ten global risks for 2023. In August 2023, Fitch [downgraded](#) the U.S. national long-term [credit rating](#) from AAA to AA+, citing “*a steady deterioration in standards of governance,*” such as “*the expected fiscal deterioration over the next three years, a high and growing general government debt burden, and the erosion of governance relative to ‘AA’ and ‘AAA’ rated peers over the last two decades that has manifested in repeated debt limit standoffs and last-minute resolutions.*”

Such warning assessments in internationally comparative contexts should make Americans aware, going into the campaigns and elections of 2024, that their country is entering dire straits and is not as unique, exceptional, stable, and forever democratic as the nationalistic myth has proclaimed for so long. Democracy is not the default method of dealing with authority and conflict in human history. It cannot be taken for granted. Blaming the “other side” in a partisan manner is not the answer for systemic repair. Americans customarily thank military veterans for the freedoms they enjoy, but should be aware that most democracies that fail do so because of internal causes, such as violation of democratic norms, institutional weaknesses, high inter-group animosity, sharp domestic conflicts, subversion, or failure to deliver, not because of foreign invasion.

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