



2018 AMERICAN INSTITUTIONAL CONFIDENCE POLL



THE HEALTH OF
AMERICAN DEMOCRACY
IN AN ERA OF HYPER
POLARIZATION

SPONSORED BY

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
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INTRODUCTION

The 2016 presidential election and the primary cycle of 2018 have been defined in large part by the success of outsider candidates in both parties. These outsiders constitute a diverse group, from President Donald Trump and his close allies on the right, to Bernie Sanders and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez on the left. The surprising success of these candidates, who were not (at least initially) aligned with their parties' establishments, raises the question of whether Americans are looking for outsiders because of a deep dissatisfaction with the American establishment.

Most people agree, and previous surveys have demonstrated, that Americans have lost confidence in many of our institutions in recent decades. Some observers go so far as to argue that some portion of Americans are losing faith in our democratic political system. Historian Yuval Harari wrote in his recently published book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, “[M]any people in Kentucky... now have come to see the liberal [democratic] vision as either undesirable or unattainable.” And some speculate that anti-establishment, or even anti-democratic, views are taking root among certain demographics across American society, in particular younger voters; lower-educated white voters, especially in the industrial Midwestern states (who made up a strategically significant part of the Trump base); and people of all backgrounds who are heavy users of social media (which is believed to be a driver of potentially anti-democratic views).

The 2018 American Institutional Confidence Poll, sponsored by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and Georgetown University's Baker Center for Leadership & Governance, seeks to test these assumptions about Americans' views. Specifically, through a large national online survey conducted by YouGov in June and July 2018, we looked to assess whether, in fact, support for President Trump and other anti-establishment candidates reflects a loss of confidence in institutions, or even a more serious underlying alienation from liberal democracy.

The study also takes a deep dive into particular demographic groups to assess how age, race, education, geography, and social media use correlate with confidence in American institutions, views on how well our democracy is working today, and support for democratic norms.

In examining these questions, this survey seeks to contribute to the crucial dialogue about how best to understand the current state of American democracy and how to nurture it in the future.

OVERVIEW

Is America's democracy healthy?

It is a question asked with increasing frequency and urgency over the past several years.

In particular, observers want to know if Americans are embracing outsider, anti-establishment candidates due to a fundamental change in their views on how our democracy should work, or even on the importance of democracy in general.

The results of our survey reflect the complexity of our social and political systems, but the most important finding is unambiguous: **the central dynamic in our current politics is not so much a drift away from support for democracy as a drive toward a state of hyperpolarization**, in which views of our democracy and its institutions are filtered through a partisan lens. Self-reported adherents of the two major political parties increasingly evaluate the current state of America's political system and national institutions differently, and see the party they don't belong to as a fundamental threat to the country.

“People are voting based on their hatred of other groups rather than facts or competence. As a result they have elected people who are incompetent and extremely dangerous and refuse to deal with the consequences.”

A 63-YEAR-OLD LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC WOMAN FROM PENNSYLVANIA
WHO IS “VERY DISSATISFIED” WITH AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

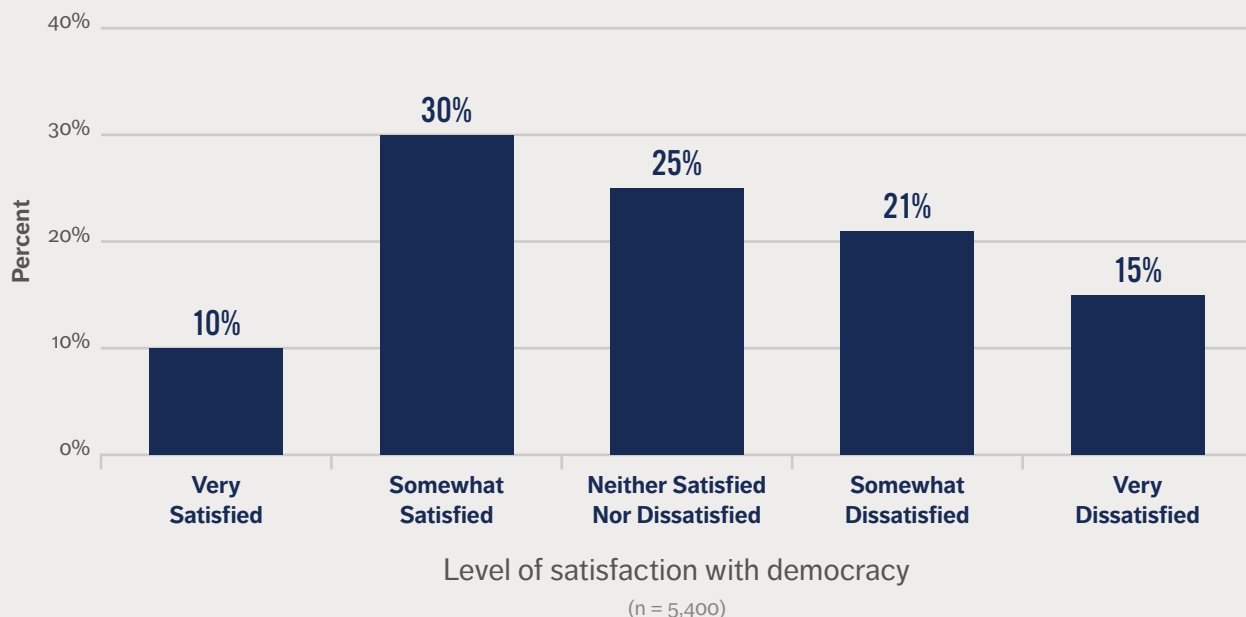
“The Democrats are freezing our democracy. They hate Trump so much they support the country failing economically or hav[ing] a nuclear war rather than work with the Republicans to pass new immigration and health care legislation. In cases like this, President Trump should be able to force through legislation he supports even if he does not get 60 votes, as long as he has 51 votes.”

A 53-YEAR-OLD CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN WOMAN FROM CONNECTICUT
WHO IS “VERY DISSATISFIED” WITH AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Only 40% of respondents say they are “somewhat” or “very” satisfied with “how democracy is working in the United States.” When we look at who is satisfied and who is dissatisfied, it seems that partisan affiliation — rather than race, education levels, age or any other demographic characteristic — drives current views of our democracy.

HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH HOW DEMOCRACY IS WORKING IN THE UNITED STATES?

FIG. 1



Despite widespread speculation that President Trump's supporters are dissatisfied with our democracy (or with democracy in general) and that their support for him is an act of revolt against the system, Republicans are actually **far more satisfied** than the public as a whole today. In fact, 76% of Republicans are satisfied with American democracy right now, compared to just 44% of Democrats.

“I think people’s voices are heard well today.”

—
A 45-YEAR-OLD CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN WOMAN FROM CALIFORNIA
WHO IS “SOMEWHAT SATISFIED” WITH AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

“I’m scared for this country right now. If Trump is allowed to keep going the way he is, we will become like Nazi Germany.”

—
A 51-YEAR-OLD LIBERAL INDEPENDENT WOMAN FROM FLORIDA WHO
IS “SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED” WITH AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

In other words, it appears that satisfaction with American democracy is changing from a general assessment Americans make about the political system as a whole to a much narrower reflection of their feelings about the last election.

This partisan filter extends to views of institutions. For example, Democrats in this survey rank the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) among the institutions in which they have the highest degree of confidence — greater than their confidence in nonprofits, organized labor or the press. Conversely, they rate the executive branch among the institutions in which they have the least confidence. The opposite holds for Republicans, who rank the FBI near the bottom of the list of institutions in which they have confidence, while ranking the executive branch as one of the highest, just below the military and local police.

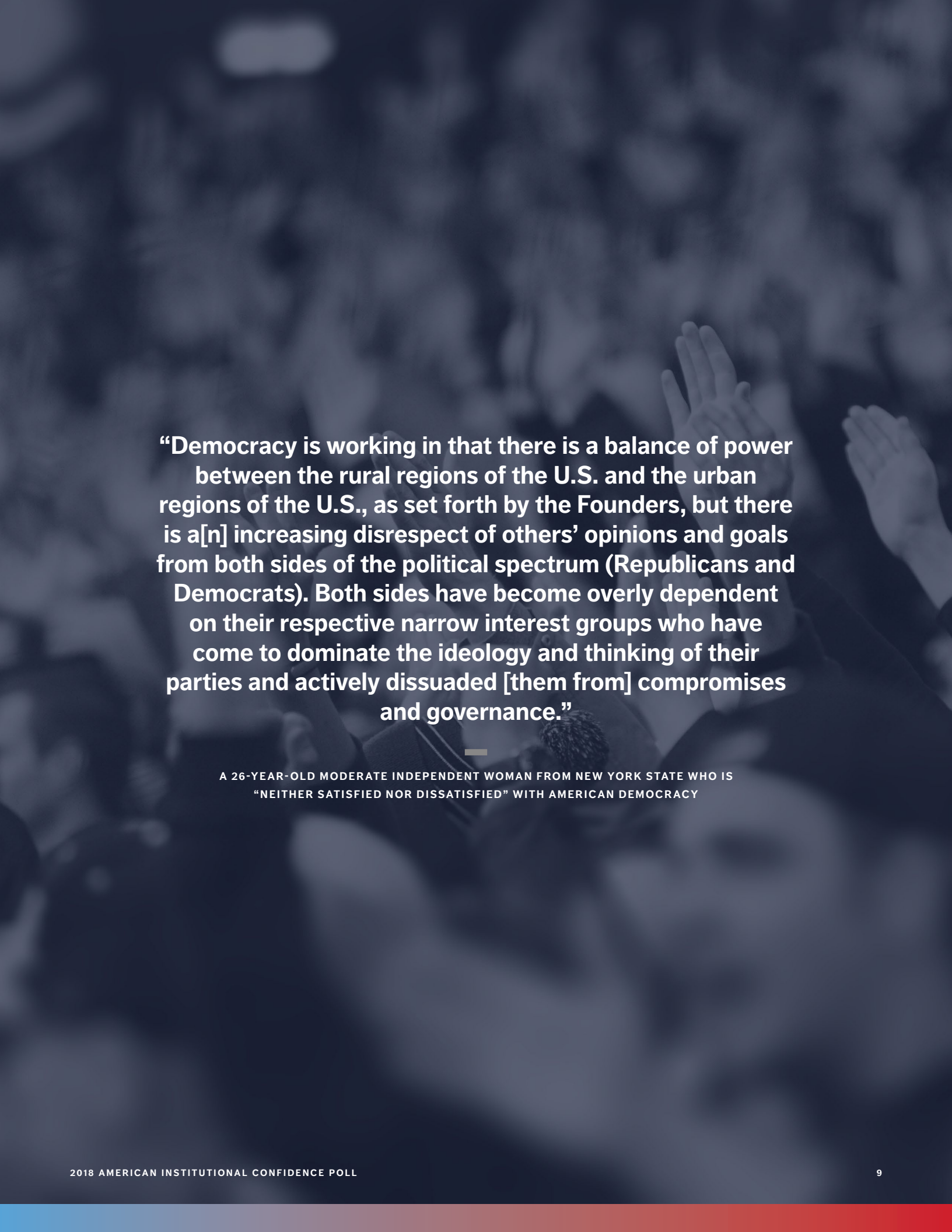
Contrary to common narratives in the media, characteristics other than partisanship do not often appear to drive respondents' views on democracy. Younger Americans are just as satisfied with our democracy as older voters (although it is worth noting that a somewhat larger share of younger voters also express openness to non-democratic systems of governance). White people who didn't finish college in the Midwest are no more dissatisfied with our system of governance than white people of all education levels on the coasts. Similarly, social media usage shows no correlation with views on democracy, with regular users, heavy users and non-users of social media showing roughly equivalent levels of satisfaction with democracy.

The conclusion that hyperpartisanship is shaping our political environment, rather than a fundamental reconsideration of democracy among certain demographic groups, is bolstered by the depth of polarized feeling voters express in the survey. For example, fewer than one in five respondents in both parties believe that people in the opposite party have the country's best interests in mind "most" or "all of the time," while well over one-third of respondents in both parties believe that those in the other party never have the country's best interests in mind.

To be sure, these findings do not suggest that America's democracy is healthy.

Our system depends on citizens whose feelings toward the political order and its underlying institutions don't swing from positive to negative with each election cycle. Liberal democracy is rooted in the idea that voters honor the legitimacy of election outcomes regardless of whether their party wins or loses, and have confidence in our institutions no matter who runs them.

But this survey does indicate that Americans across demographic groups are not presently moving toward an anti-democratic worldview — that is, they are not moving closer to a rejection of the concept of democracy, or of democratic norms such as regular elections and eschewing violence to settle political disputes. Although the extreme degree of polarization found in this survey is troubling, there remains a foundation of belief in democracy upon which to build.



“Democracy is working in that there is a balance of power between the rural regions of the U.S. and the urban regions of the U.S., as set forth by the Founders, but there is a[n] increasing disrespect of others’ opinions and goals from both sides of the political spectrum (Republicans and Democrats). Both sides have become overly dependent on their respective narrow interest groups who have come to dominate the ideology and thinking of their parties and actively dissuaded [them from] compromises and governance.”

**A 26-YEAR-OLD MODERATE INDEPENDENT WOMAN FROM NEW YORK STATE WHO IS
“NEITHER SATISFIED NOR DISSATISFIED” WITH AMERICAN DEMOCRACY**

FOUR KEY FINDINGS

NO. 1

Satisfaction with our democracy
depends on political party

NO. 2

Confidence in our institutions is
driven by party affiliation

NO. 3

Demographic characteristics other
than partisanship do not strongly correlate
to satisfaction with democracy

NO. 4

Social media use is not strongly associated
with dissatisfaction with democracy and
national institutions

KEY FINDING NO. 1

Satisfaction with our democracy depends on political party

Americans' satisfaction with the current state of our democracy is strongly correlated to partisan affiliation.

The survey finds 76% of Republicans are satisfied with American democracy right now, compared to just 44% of Democrats. This difference is likely a result of President Trump's election and Republicans' control of the executive and legislative branches of the federal government.

Compared to the divide between political parties, differences among other groups in satisfaction with American democracy are modest. Males and those who did not complete college are more satisfied than others; this is consistent with Trump's base being more satisfied, as these two groups are more likely to be Trump supporters. (Notably, Asian Americans are more satisfied with American democracy than other racial groups, which is striking because they are not disproportionately likely to be Trump supporters.)

Beyond that, **there are almost no other differences in satisfaction with American democracy by race, age, region of the country or education level.**

HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH HOW DEMOCRACY IS WORKING IN THE UNITED STATES?

FIG. 2

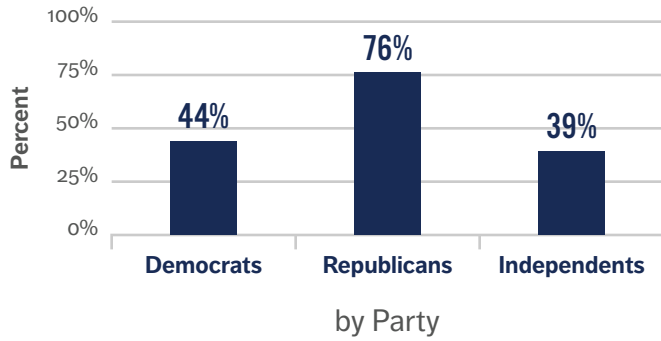


FIG. 3

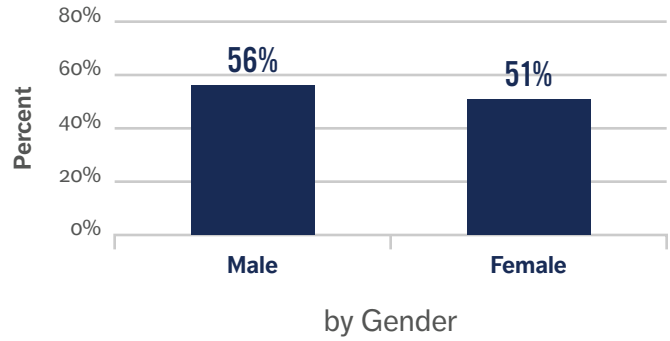


FIG. 4

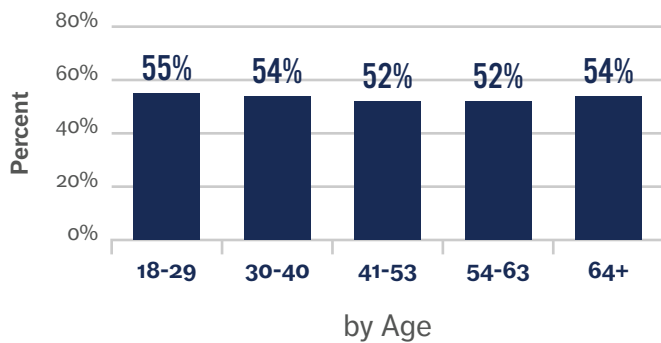


FIG. 5

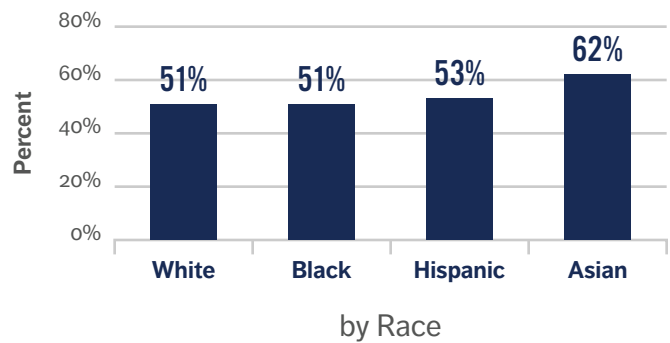


FIG. 6

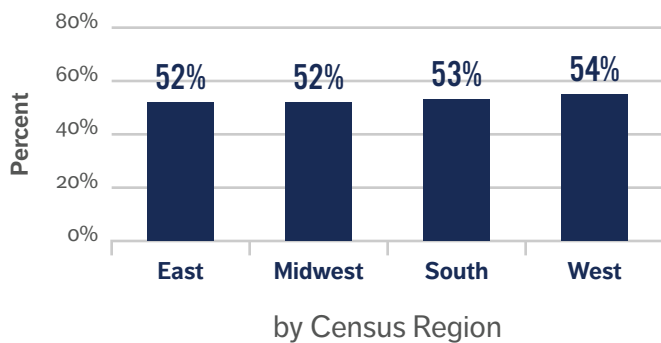
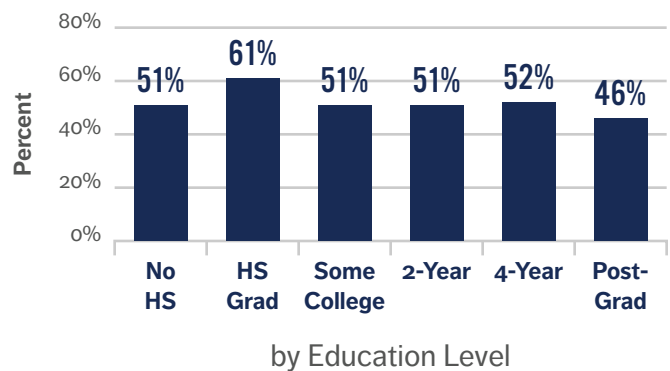


FIG. 7



Percent responding "very satisfied" and "somewhat satisfied"
(n = 5,400)

In addition to asking respondents how satisfied they are with democracy, we asked them to tell us in their own words why they feel this way. Depending on their level of satisfaction, respondents tend to take one of two approaches. Those satisfied with democracy frequently express a very *general* belief, using all-purpose words like “work” or “working,” that democracy in America can be, and is getting, better.

Those dissatisfied with democracy, on the other hand, tend to express stronger emotions in their answers and to have specific grievances, focusing on what they think are broken systems. We find frequent mentions of the role of money in politics and the failure of voting in keeping democracy healthy. Their language is far angrier and more anxious than that of the satisfied group.

“We have gotten toxic, tribal. There is no tolerance, no agreement on a basic set of facts.”

—
A 63-YEAR-OLD LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC WOMAN FROM PENNSYLVANIA WHO IS
“VERY DISSATISFIED” WITH AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

“The U.S. gives out the illusion that this country has a democracy. But the truth is that money controls everything.”

—
A 34-YEAR-OLD LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC MAN FROM GEORGIA WHO IS
“NEITHER SATISFIED NOR DISSATISFIED” WITH AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

“Our political parties are way too polarized, the media is totally out of control and making the polarization worse, I just hope the rest of the thinking country feels the same as me and not the extremist wackos on either side or the wackos in media. At least when watching Fox News I am not being talked down to, told I am a bad person for thinking for myself, and I can disagree with something and still like people.”

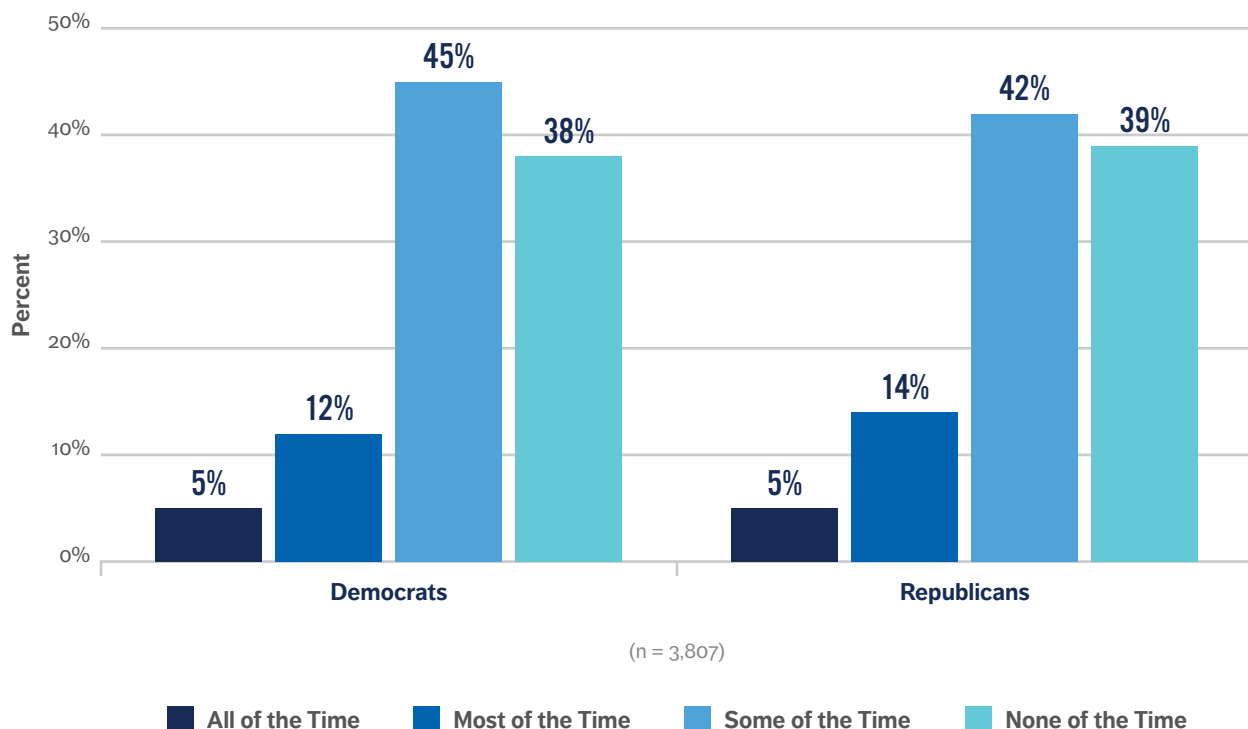
—
A 42-YEAR-OLD CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN MAN FROM ARIZONA WHO IS
“SOMEWHAT SATISFIED” WITH AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Both satisfied and dissatisfied respondents view the state of American democracy through a partisan lens. Respondents often blame the opposing party for the problems they see in our democracy.

This finding is reinforced by respondents' answers to questions that assess the depth of their feelings toward members of the other parties. We find that a large majority of partisans fundamentally distrust their political counterparts. Large majorities of both parties think that the opposing party rarely or never has the best interests of the country at heart, and that it constitutes at least a somewhat serious threat to the country and its people.

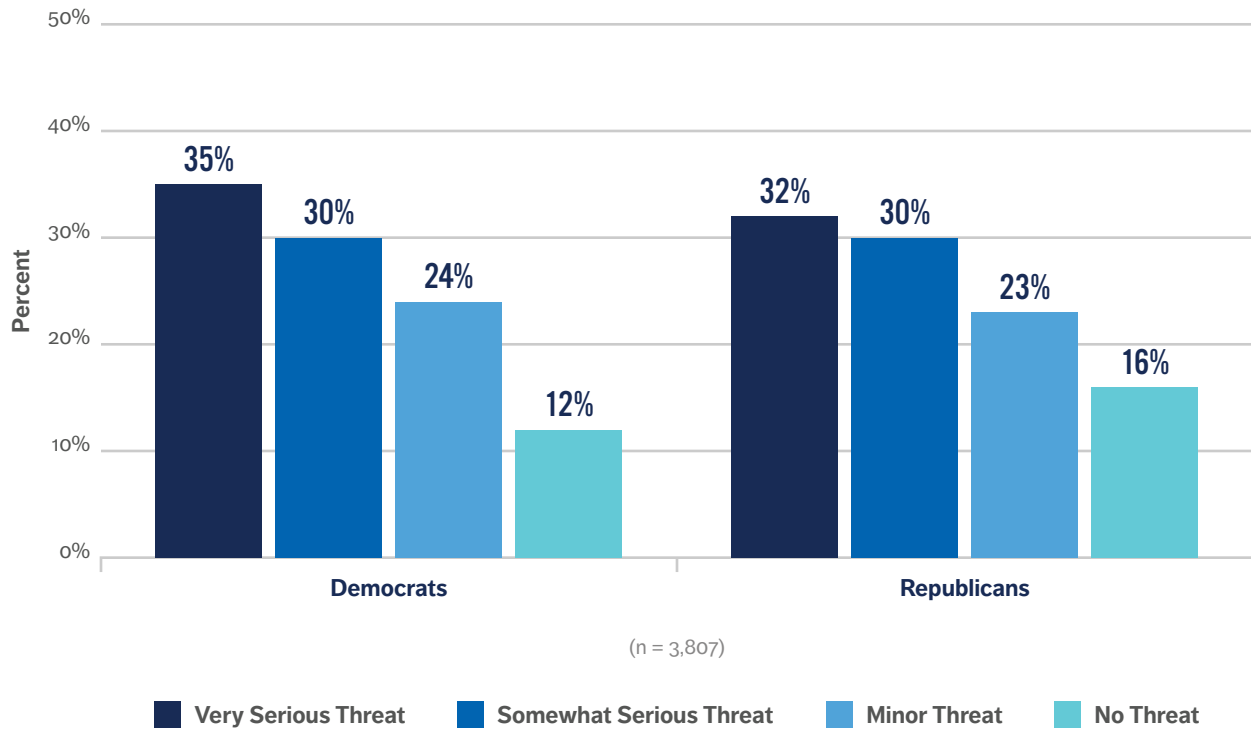
HOW OFTEN DO YOU THINK THAT THE MEMBERS OF THE OPPOSING PARTY STILL HAVE THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE COUNTRY IN MIND?

FIG. 8



DO YOU BELIEVE THAT MEMBERS OF THE OPPOSING PARTY ARE A THREAT TO THE UNITED STATES AND ITS PEOPLE?

FIG. 9



KEY FINDING NO. 2

Confidence in our institutions is driven by party affiliation

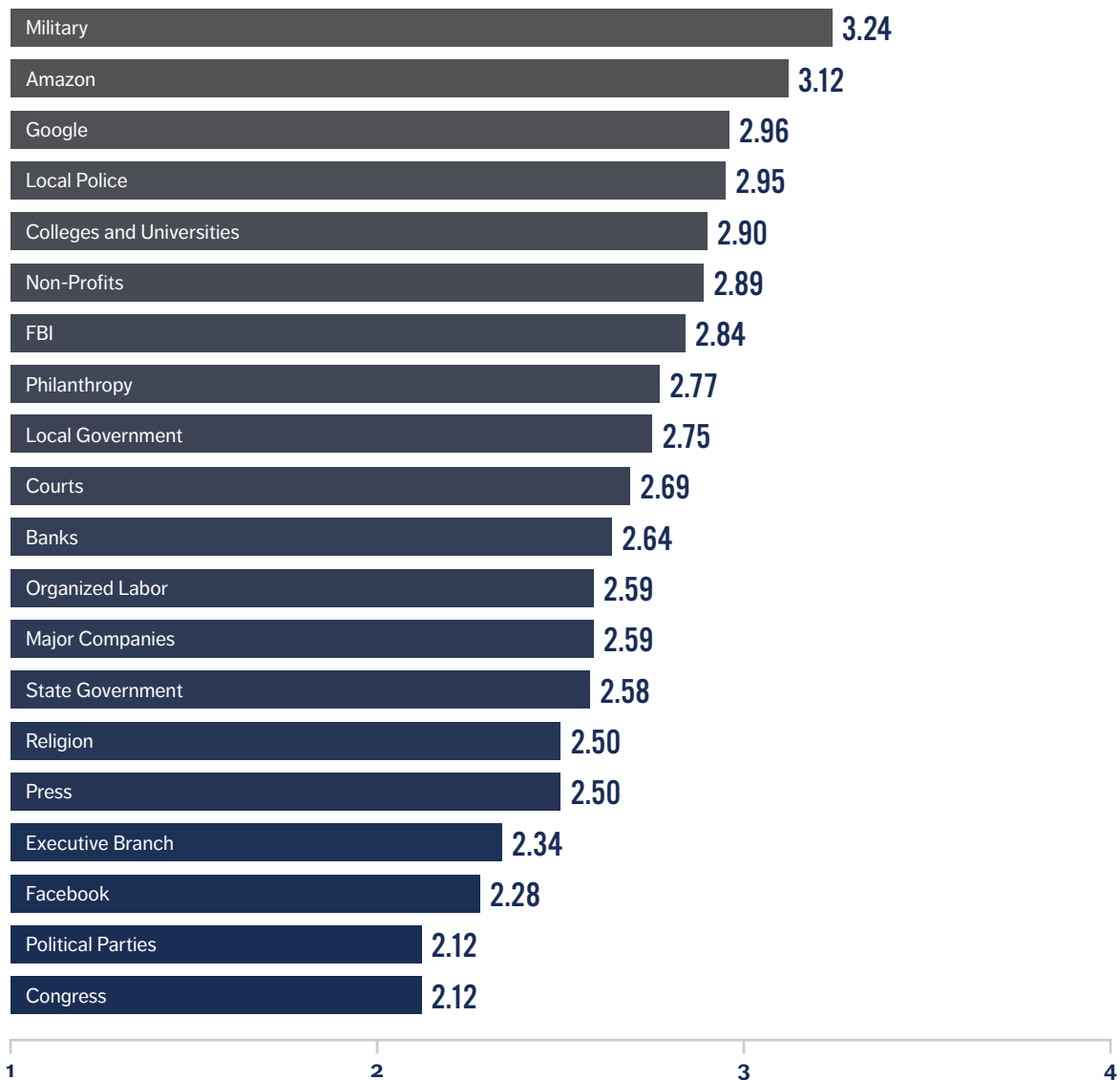
Similar to satisfaction with democracy, the survey finds that confidence in institutions is largely driven by party affiliation.

We asked respondents to indicate their level of confidence in 20 U.S. institutions. The list includes traditional political institutions such as political parties, the courts, and local government; economic institutions such as banks, organized labor, and major companies; civil society organizations like organized religion, colleges and universities, and philanthropic and private foundations; tech companies like Amazon, Google, and Facebook; and the press.

In all cases, respondents were asked to indicate their level of confidence on a four-point scale ranging from “a great deal of confidence” to “no confidence.” These figures show confidence in institutions for the population as a whole, along with the results broken down by party affiliation.

HOW MUCH CONFIDENCE DO YOU HAVE IN THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS? INSTITUTIONAL CONFIDENCE, ALL RESPONDENTS

FIG. 10

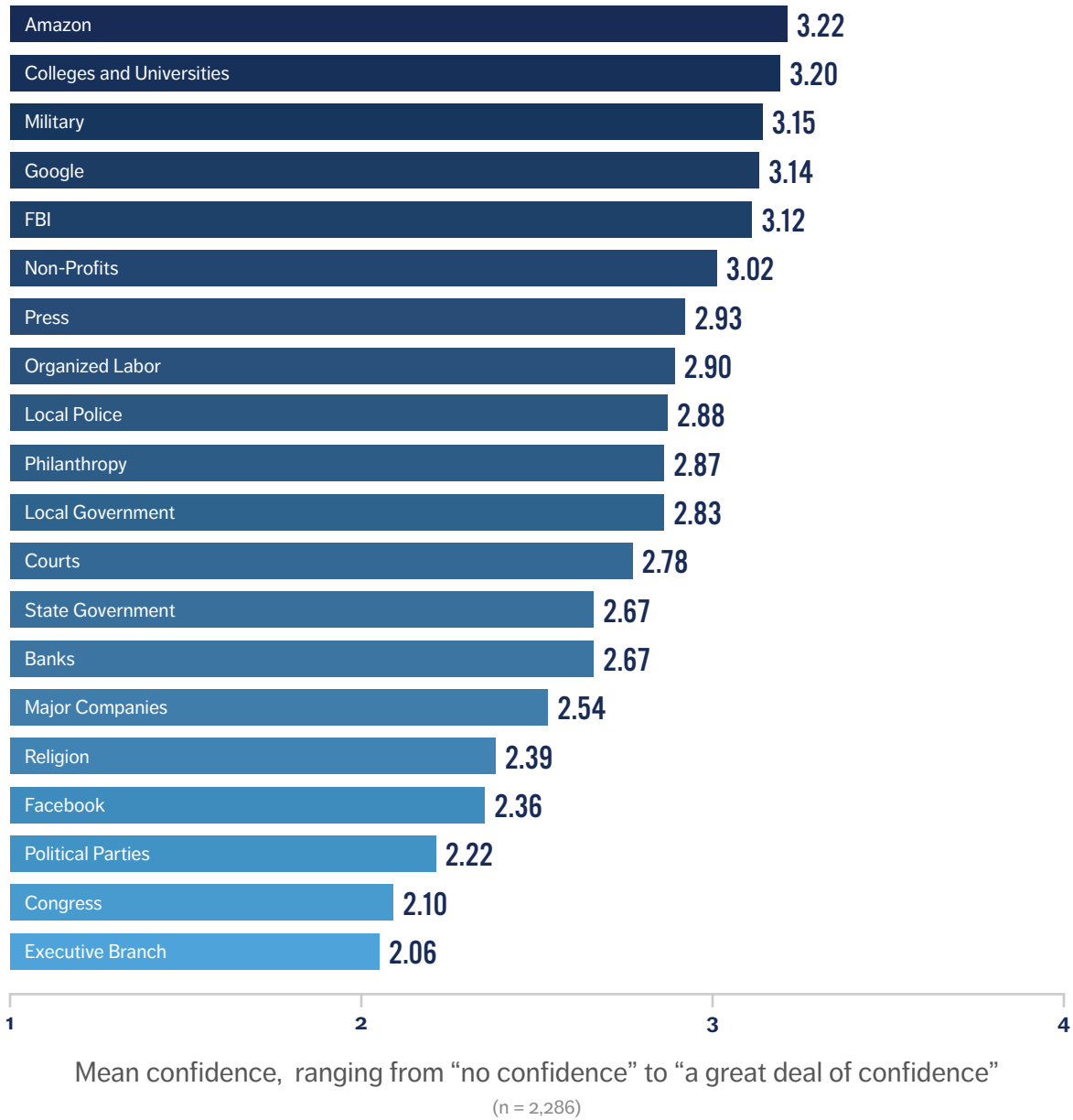


Mean confidence, ranging from “no confidence” to “a great deal of confidence”

(n = 5,400)

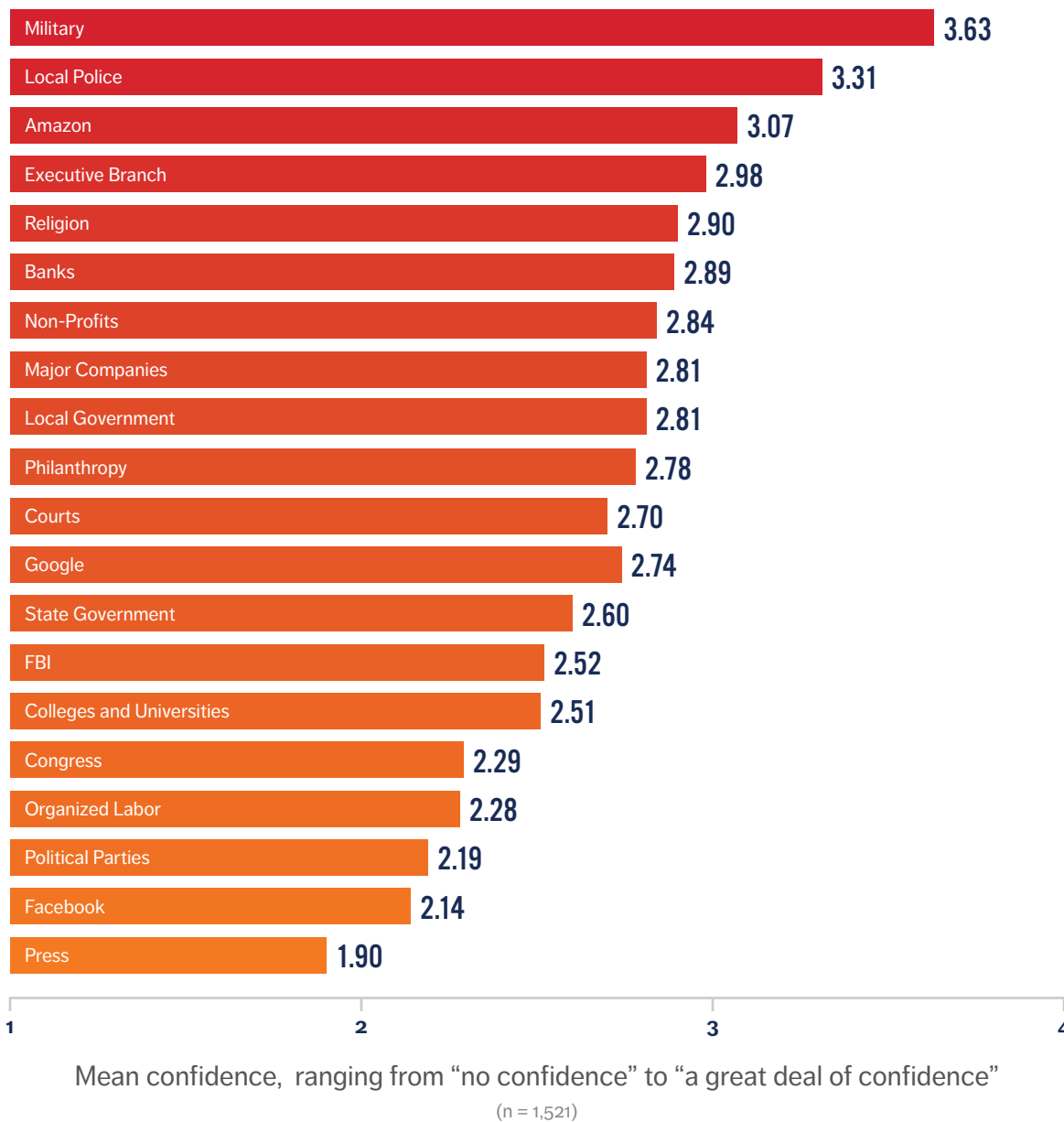
INSTITUTIONAL CONFIDENCE, DEMOCRATS ONLY

FIG. 11



INSTITUTIONAL CONFIDENCE, REPUBLICANS ONLY

FIG. 12



However, several stark differences in confidence in institutions emerge between respondents based on partisan affiliation.

The **executive branch** is the institution in which Democrats have the *least* confidence, while Republicans rank it the fourth highest. This suggests that voters no longer make any meaningful distinction between the executive branch as a permanent institution of government and the identity of the temporary occupant of the White House.

The **press** is the institution in which Republicans have the *least* confidence, while it is the seventh highest institution in which Democrats have confidence. This is perhaps one of the strongest indicators of the effect President Trump seems to have had on his supporters, suggesting that his frequent attacks on the press have had a significant impact on how Republicans think about the institution.

“The President is undoing illegal and unconstitutional actions of his predecessor and as a result the economy is roaring.”

A 70-YEAR-OLD MODERATE REPUBLICAN MAN FROM CALIFORNIA WITH “A GREAT DEAL OF CONFIDENCE” IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

“The executive is an incompetent, greedy, narcissistic sociopath.”

37-YEAR-OLD LIBERAL INDEPENDENT MAN FROM MICHIGAN WITH “NO CONFIDENCE” IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

“The press are liberals ... who will do anything to post negative stuff [on] Trump or Republicans..”

A 43-YEAR-OLD CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN WOMAN FROM CALIFORNIA WHO HAS “NO CONFIDENCE” IN THE PRESS

“Except for Fox News, I have a lot of confidence in general towards news services.”

A 61-YEAR-OLD LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC MAN FROM CALIFORNIA WHO HAS “A GREAT DEAL OF CONFIDENCE” IN THE PRESS

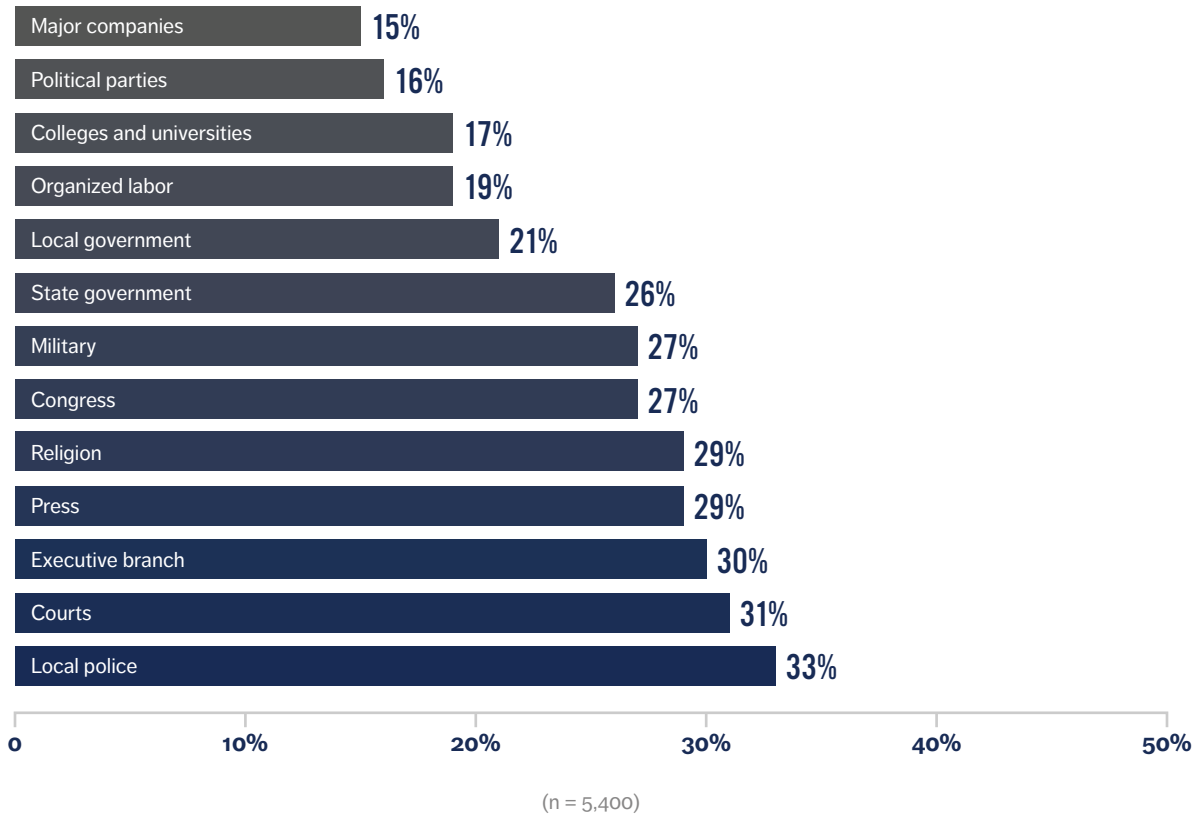
Democrats have much higher confidence in the **FBI** and in **colleges and universities** than Republicans. As both groups have been the target of the president's ire since he took office, this could be further evidence of the power of the bully pulpit. Republicans' low level of confidence in the FBI suggests, furthermore, that the durability of confidence in institutions may be less than we have previously imagined, although it will be interesting to see if Republicans — traditionally a “law and order” party — remain skeptical about the FBI in a post-Trump era.

“Colleges and universities are not doing a good job getting young adults to be prepared for the real world by coddling students with things like safes spaces. Far too many universities are indoctrinating young people with far left ideologies such as communism and socialism. Schools are also charging more but are teaching less.”

A 42-YEAR-OLD CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN MAN
FROM TEXAS WHO HAS “HARDLY ANY CONFIDENCE”
IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

PERCENTAGE OF NEGATIVELY CHARGED RESPONSES, BY INSTITUTION

FIG. 13

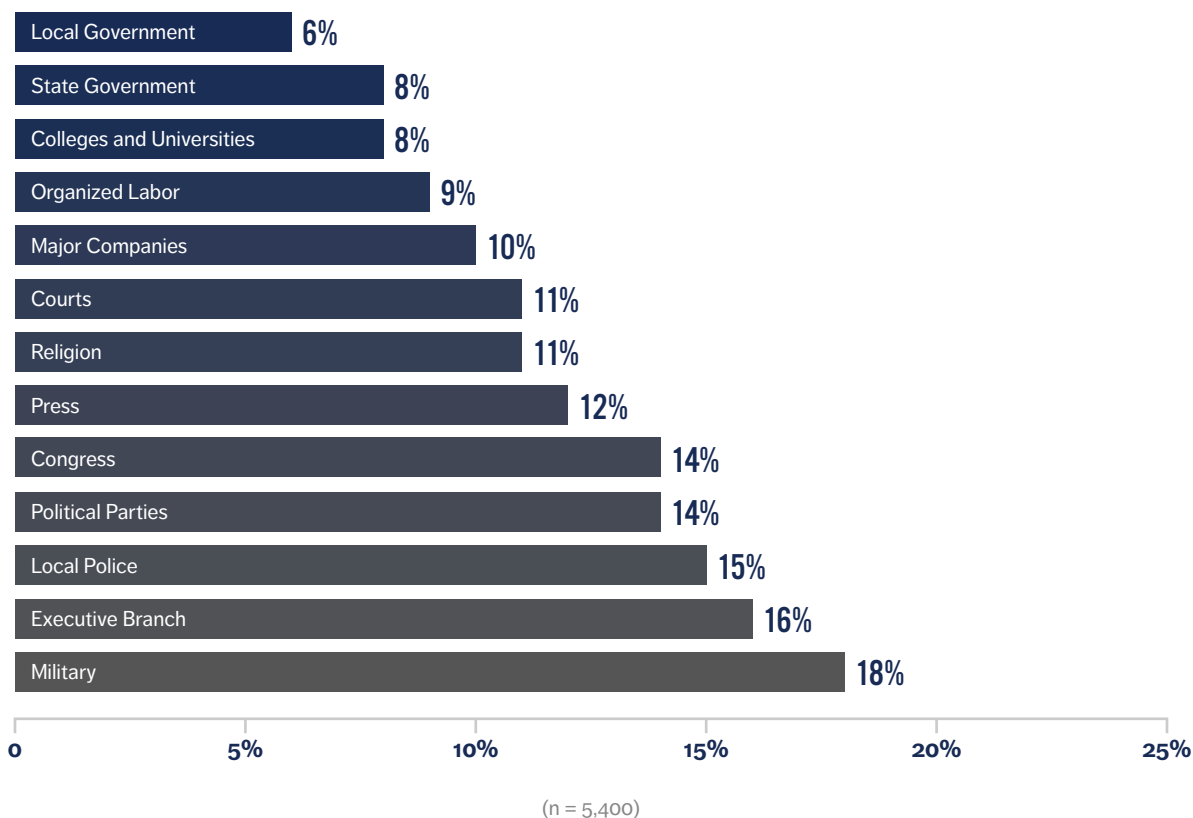


A major contribution of this survey is the number of open-ended questions we posed. By analyzing why individuals feel the way they do about democracy and its institutions, we can develop a deeper understanding of the underpinnings of Americans' support (or lack thereof) for each. On balance, the levels of negativity and anger in their answers are striking.

Open-ended answers allow us to assess the strength of positive or negative feeling about these different institutions. Every institution garners a healthy minority of negatively charged responses, but many respondents have strong negative sentiments about the executive branch, the courts, and their local police in particular.

PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES INCLUDING ANGER, BY INSTITUTION

FIG. 14



We find a similar picture when we analyze the level of anger in the responses. Respondents show anger toward local police and the executive branch at higher-than-average rates, but we also see that even institutions receiving broad support, like the military, can arouse strong feelings of anger from those in the minority who lack confidence in them.

An institution that receives wildly divergent levels of confidence across racial groups is local police. African-Americans are more than three times as likely as other ethnic groups to use words like “brutality,” “murder,” or “racist.”

KEY FINDING NO. 3

Demographic characteristics other than partisanship do not strongly correlate to satisfaction with democracy

A great deal of ink has been spilled on the question of whether there is less support for democracy among young people (ages 18-29), as well as among lower-educated white people in the Upper Midwest and frequent users of social media.

A number of our survey questions shed light on this debate. We looked at several demographic characteristics and, other than partisanship, none seem to be a strong indicator of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with democracy in the U.S.

Here we explore in more detail two demographic markers: age and lower-educated white people in the Upper Midwest. (For our analysis of social media use, see Key Finding No. 4 later in this report.)

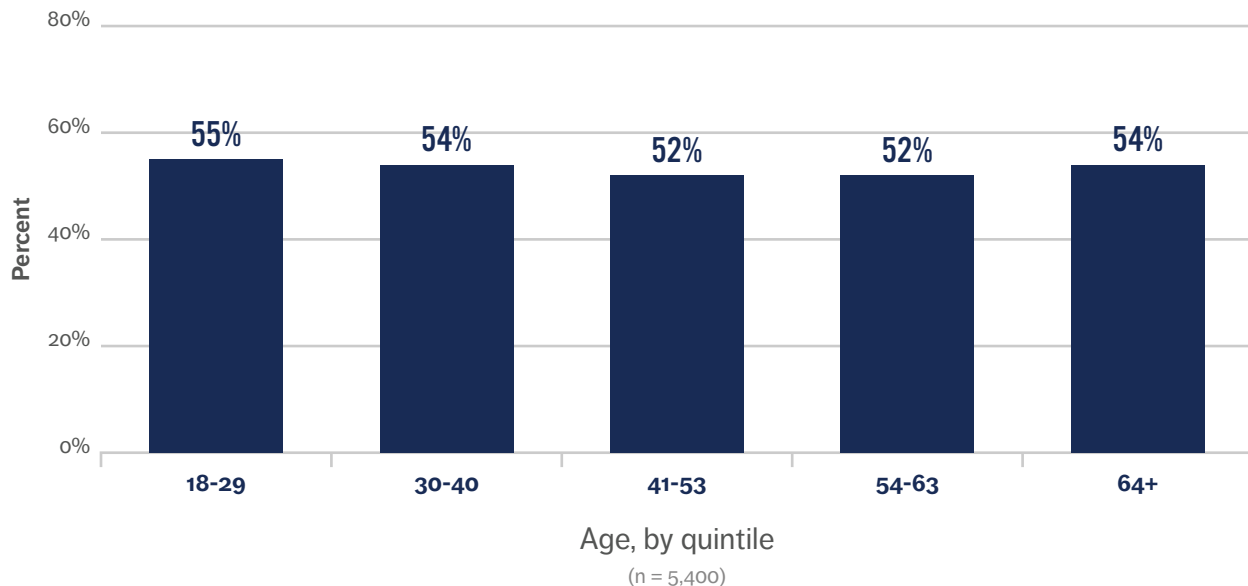
There is no age gap in Americans' satisfaction with democracy.

As the chart shows, the young are no less satisfied with democracy than any other age cohort. In fact, the least satisfied age groups are ages 41-53 and 54-63 while the young show the highest level of satisfaction with democracy (although all of the age groups are quite close to one another).

But while younger Americans are no less satisfied with democracy today than any other age group, they do show certain trends that diverge from those in other age groups.

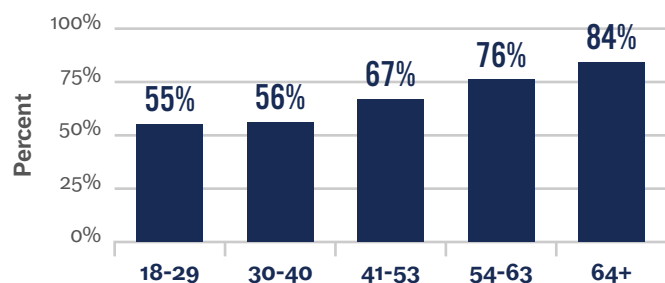
HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH HOW DEMOCRACY IS WORKING IN THE UNITED STATES?

FIG. 15

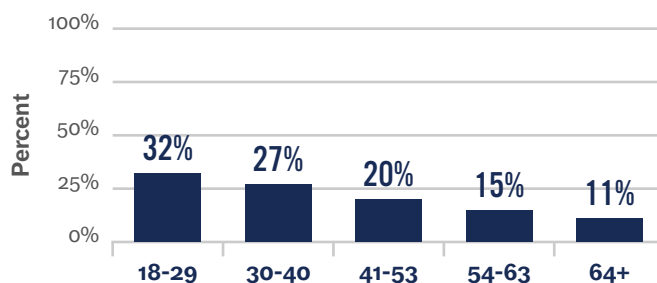


SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVES BY AGE

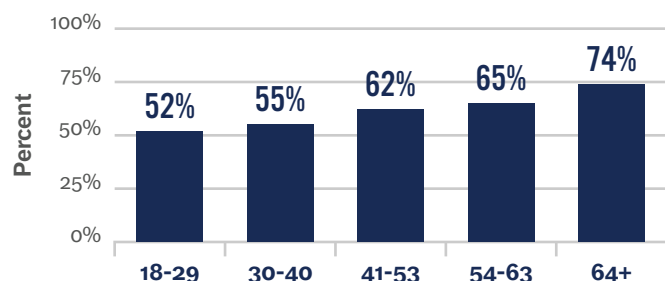
FIG. 16



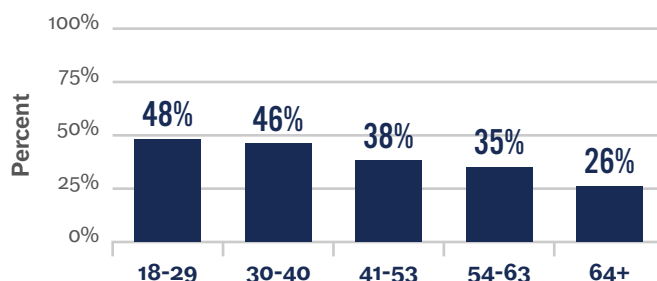
Democracy is always preferable



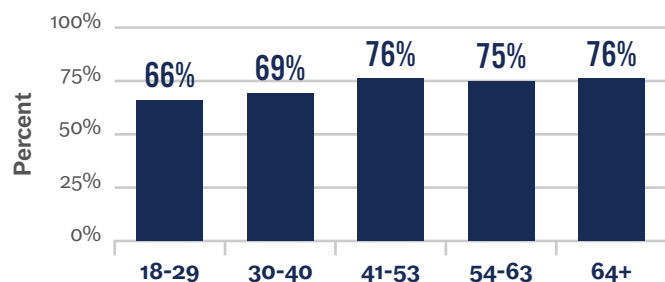
Non-democracies can be preferable



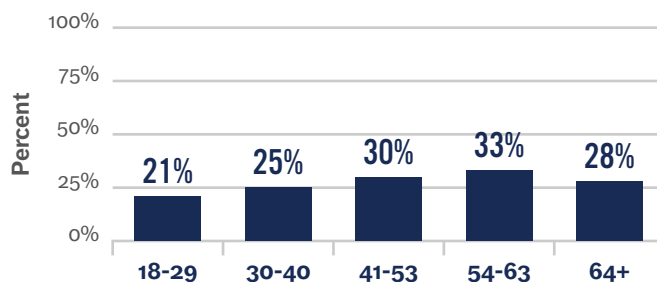
Democracy serves the people



Democracy serves the elite



Public officials don't care what I think



Never trust Washington to do what is right

(n = 5,400)

The first row in the chart shows that the young are far less likely to say democracy is always preferable to any other type of government.

Just 55% of those aged 18-29 say that democracy is always preferable to other forms of government, compared to 84% of those aged 64 and older. Similarly, 32% of young people agree with the statement, “In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable,” as opposed to only 10% of those 64 and older.

We asked respondents a series of questions about attitudes we thought might be connected to support for democracy. In two cases, the young are the age group least likely to hold the attitude consistent with support for democracy: they are the least likely to believe “democracy serves the people” and the most likely to think “democracy serves the elite.” However, the young are also the least likely to believe that “public officials don’t care what I think” and to “never trust Washington to do what is right.”

Thus, our survey findings give us mixed messages about the relationship between age and support for democracy. One interpretation is that young people, by virtue of their youth, are naturally more inclined than older people to consider unconventional alternatives. Some of these findings may also be driven by the fact that President Trump is more popular among the old than the young. If support for the president or lack thereof is driving views on whether democracy serves the interests of the people or that of the elites, this could explain away the two results that could be interpreted to mean young people are less committed to democracy. It will be interesting to see if this pattern changes when the current occupant of the White House changes.

White Midwesterners without a college degree do not have less confidence in institutions and satisfaction with democracy than other Americans.

Similar to our results on younger respondents, when we examine white Americans from the upper Midwest with lower levels of education (the group that helped swing the Electoral College to Trump in 2016), they are not especially disillusioned with American institutions and democracy.

We compare this group with several other groups that one might expect to be especially different than them. These comparison groups include 1) Americans overall, 2) non-white Americans, and 3) white Americans of all education levels who live in stereotypical coastal elite (and Democratic-leaning) states. These states include California, Oregon, Washington and East Coast states in the “Acela corridor” (New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island).

The figure compares these groups on the following metrics:

- percentage that trusts the government in Washington “most of the time” or more
- percentage that is “somewhat” or “very” satisfied with American democracy
- percentage that has “some” or “a great deal of” confidence in the press and political parties

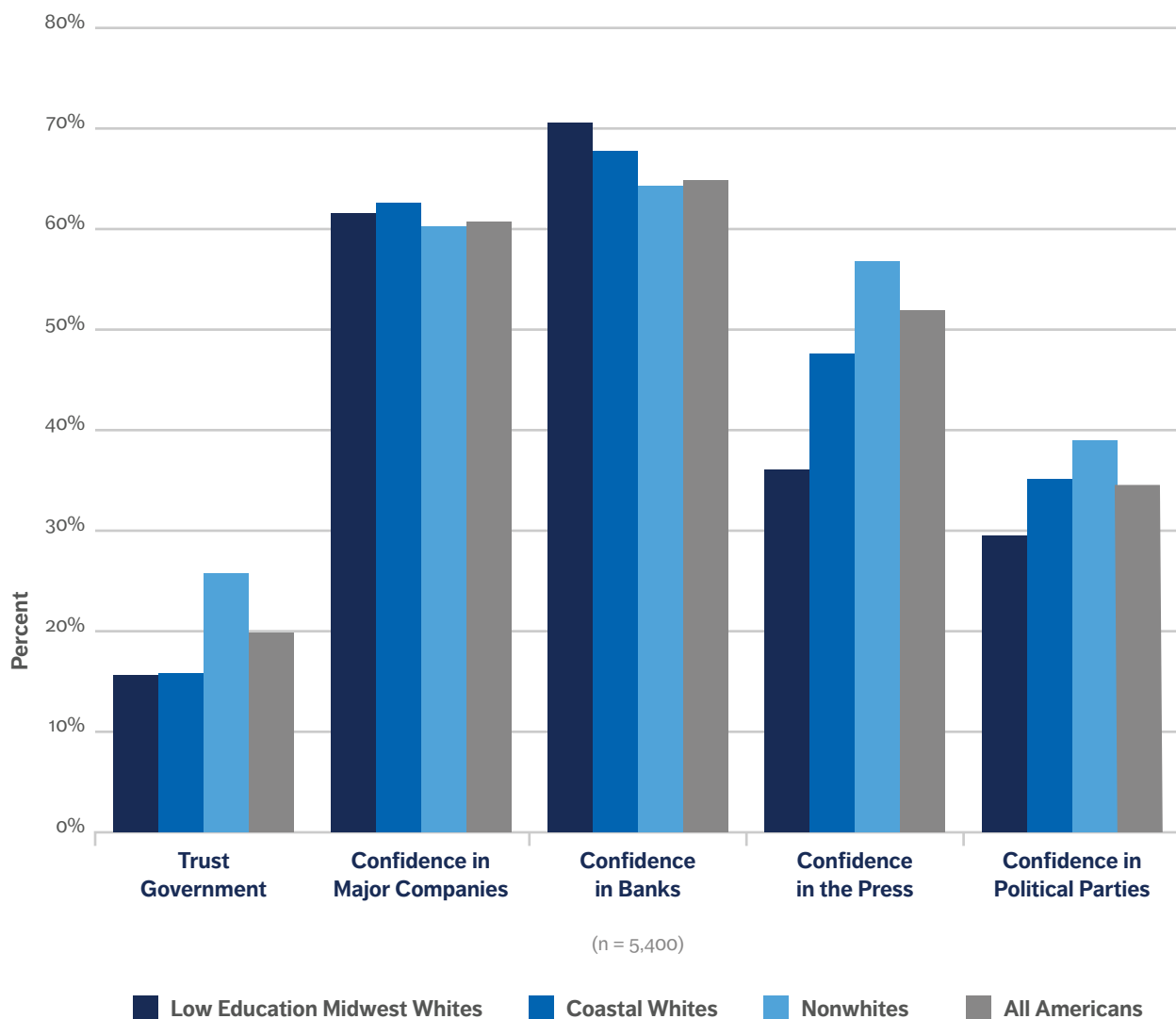
On the whole, Midwestern white voters without a four-year college degree are very similar to the national average in overall trust in government and confidence in major companies and banks. Less educated Midwestern white voters do stand out in having lower levels of confidence in the press and political parties compared to the nation overall. Nonwhite Americans have a little more confidence in the press and political parties, and more trust in government, than other Americans. Notably, coastal whites don’t stand out much in any of our comparisons.

“If people would give the president a chance, instead of putting him down at every opportunity, democracy might run a little better. But our elected officials don’t work together to make things in this country better for all...”

A 64-YEAR-OLD CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN WOMAN FROM PENNSYLVANIA
WHO IS “NEITHER SATISFIED NOR DISSATISFIED” WITH AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

WHITE MIDWESTERNERS WITHOUT A COLLEGE DEGREE COMPARED TO THE REST OF THE COUNTRY

FIG. 17



KEY FINDING NO. 4

Social media use is not strongly associated with dissatisfaction with democracy and national institutions

Finally, we looked at social media usage and the spread of disinformation.

In 2017, *The Journal of Democracy* published an article titled “Can Democracy Survive the Internet?” While we cannot conclusively answer that question in the context of this report, our survey allows us to examine the relationship between frequency of self-reported social media usage ¹ and satisfaction with democracy and democratic institutions.

We divide our respondents into three groups: those who use at least one social media platform more than 10 times a day (“always using,” 19%); those who do not use any social media platforms (“never use,” 14%); and everyone else (“use regularly,” 67%). We then compare support for democracy, confidence in the press, confidence in the FBI, and confidence in political parties across these three groups.

¹ While there is always the danger of respondents’ misrepresenting their media usage while answering survey questions, recent research from the NYU Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) lab suggests that answers to survey questions regarding social media usage do a fairly good job of capturing objective measures of social media usage.

SOCIAL MEDIA USE

FIG. 18

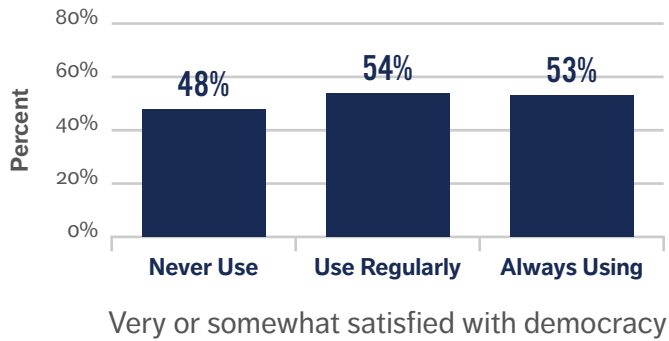


FIG. 19

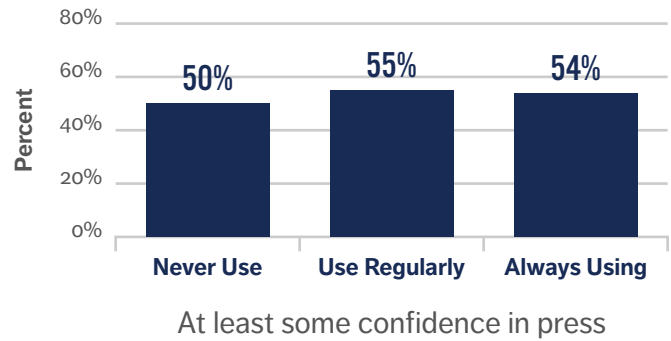


FIG. 20

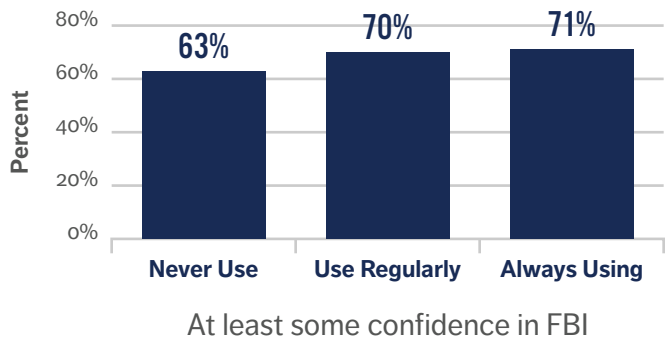
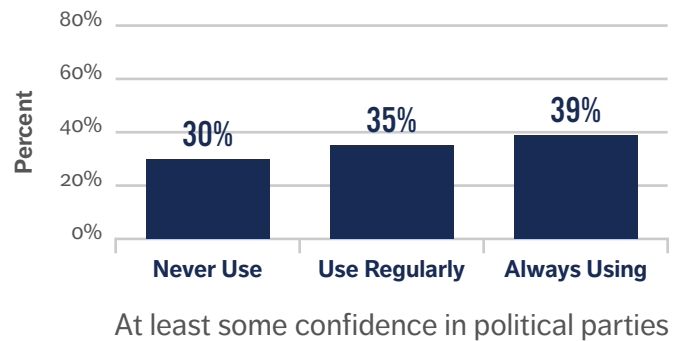


FIG. 21



(n = 5,400)

The prediction we sought to test was whether or not increased social media usage would be associated with less support for democracy and democratic institutions. However, we find no evidence to support that conclusion. **The connection between social media and satisfaction with democracy is slight and, to the extent that there is a relationship, it is non-users of social media who have the lowest level of satisfaction with democracy.**

This finding is replicated with respect to trust in the press, the FBI, and political parties. In all three cases, it is non-users who have the lowest level of trust in the institution. In fact, we included the FBI in our survey because we thought the president's criticisms of it, many of which have been voiced on Twitter, might find their greatest resonance on social media. But it is heavy users of social media who have the highest level of confidence in the FBI, as well as in political parties.

Beyond the question of general trust in institutions, social media has been implicated in a very specific threat to a healthy democracy: the spread of disinformation. With this in mind, we asked respondents two questions of fact on which a great deal of disinformation can be found online: whether U.S. intelligence agencies agree that Russians attempted to sway the 2016 election in favor of Donald Trump (they do), and whether millions of illegal votes were cast in the 2016 election (they were not).

Again, we split our respondents into three groups based on frequency of social media usage. We then sought to determine whether increased social media usage is associated with a greater belief in what is factually incorrect ("disinformation").

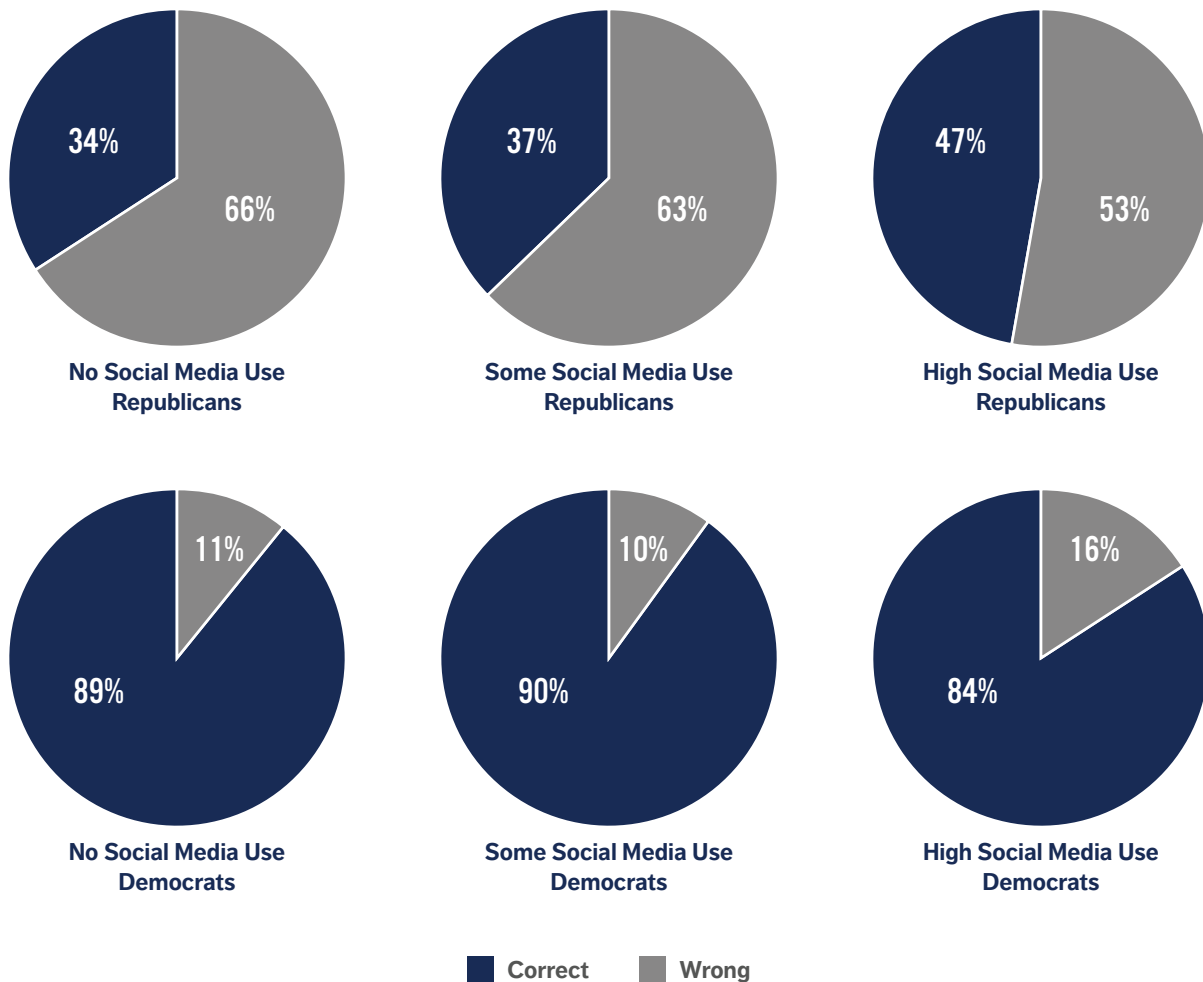
In the figure below, the correct answer to the question "True or false: United States intelligence agencies agree that Russians attempted to sway the 2016 election in favor of Donald Trump" is "True." The most striking result is that respondents' views are primarily a function of partisanship: the vast majority of Democrats provide the correct answer ("True"), while more than 60% of Republicans give the incorrect answer ("False").

But the results on social media usage do not exactly match received wisdom. Among Republicans, those who use social media more often are actually *less* likely to give the incorrect answer. This undercuts the argument that social media is where people pick up incorrect information. Among Democrats, however, the opposite effect holds. High social media usage Democrats are 50% more likely to give the wrong answer to the question than moderate or non-social media usage Democrats.

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN 2016 ELECTION

FIG. 22

True or False: United States intelligence agencies agree that Russians attempted to sway the 2016 election in favor of Donald Trump (TRUE)



(n = 4,118)

The results are broadly similar when we examine belief in whether millions of illegal votes were cast in the 2016 election (although it is worth noting that 42% of our entire sample believed — incorrectly — that this was the case). Again, the major determinant of variation is partisanship. There is little relationship between social media usage and the incorrect belief that millions of illegal votes were cast among Republicans, but there is a noticeable effect among Democrats, where heavy social media usage is associated with a greater likelihood to believe false information.

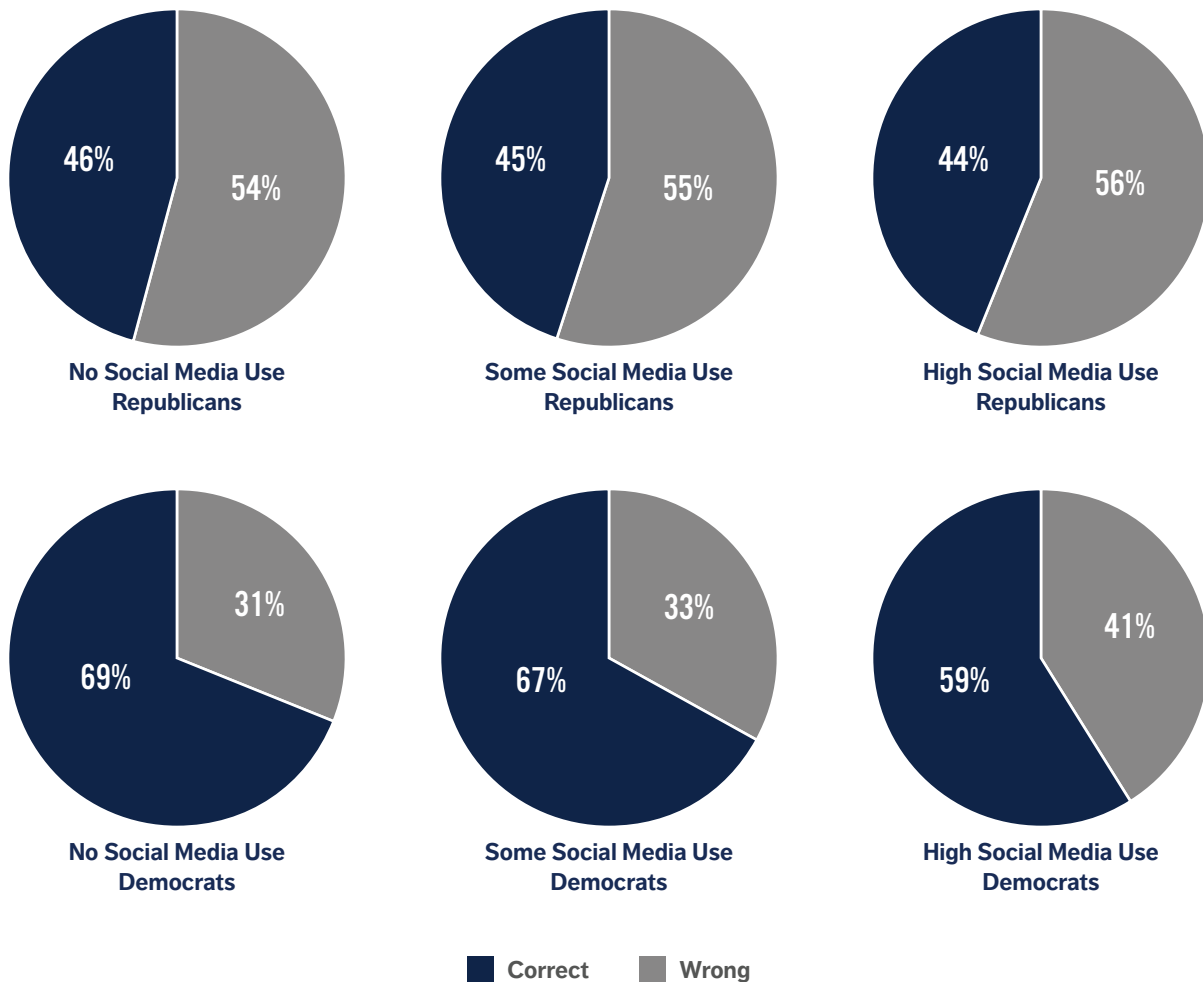
Taken together, these preliminary findings offer a less pessimistic view about social media's power to undermine support for democracy and democratic institutions, and to increase belief in factually incorrect information.²

² This point on disinformation conforms with recent research suggesting that exposure to fake news follows a pattern known as a power law: disinformation gets little exposure among most of the population, while the vast majority of its exposure is concentrated among a small portion of the population.

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND ILLEGAL VOTES CAST IN 2016 ELECTION

FIG. 23

True or False: Millions of Illegal Votes Were Cast in the 2016 Election (FALSE)



(n = 4,118)

CONCLUSION

Partisanship, more than any other characteristic, drives views on our democracy

As the data throughout this report suggests, it is partisanship — far more than age, race, education, social media usage or other characteristics — that explains Americans' views of our democracy.

This is clear in the results of our close-ended questions about confidence in institutions and satisfaction with American democracy. In many cases, Democrats and Republicans express confidence in different institutions. The answers to open-ended questions further reveal that attitudes toward the American system and many national institutions are suffused with hyperpartisanship and ideological conflict. The ideological and political vitriol of what pundits often call the “culture wars” permeates people’s thoughts about many different parts of American government and society.

While one might hope that some national institutions would enjoy popularity across the board because people would see them as non-partisan agents for the good of the entire country, that seems very rare today. What “side” they are on in cultural and political conflicts is the most powerful influence on how Americans view their most important institutions.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The 2018 American Institutional Confidence Poll, sponsored by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and Georgetown University's Baker Center for Leadership & Governance, surveyed a large **sample size of 5,400 Americans**, more than five times larger than the typical political poll. It includes over-samples of African-Americans, Latinex Americans, and Asian Americans.

These samples allow us to break down confidence in institutions, satisfaction with American democracy, and support for democratic principles across a series of demographic categories.

The survey also includes both close-ended and open-ended questions about confidence in specific institutions and satisfaction with American democracy, enabling us to go beyond quantitative snapshots of respondents' views and form qualitative insights into their underlying reasons and feelings.

The interviews were conducted online from June 12 to July 19, 2018, by the survey firm YouGov. The sample includes 3,000 respondents from the U.S. general population. Additionally, the poll includes samples of 800 African-Americans, 800 Latinex Americans, and 800 Asian Americans. The over-sampling allows us to analyze these racial groups separately and to make comparisons. We applied separate weights for analyzing each racial group separately and for using the combined sample to approximate the overall U.S. population.

The poll has a margin of error (i.e., 95% confidence interval) of plus or minus 1.3 percentage points. This is the margin of error when analyzing the 5,400-person sample (using the weights) to draw conclusions about the entire population. For responses in a smaller subset of the sample, the margin of error is larger because the sample size is smaller. For instance, when separately looking at an 800-person sample of a specific racial minority group, the margin of error (i.e., 95% confidence interval) is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

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SURVEY SPONSORS

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

This report highlights major findings from the 2018 American Institutional Confidence Poll. For more information, visit [**bakercenter.georgetown.edu/AICPoll**](https://bakercenter.georgetown.edu/AICPoll)

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Knight Foundation or the Baker Center for Leadership & Governance at Georgetown University, or any of their officers or employees.

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