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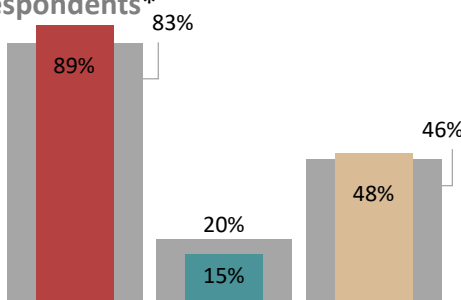
Study No. 8

# Public Dissonance Over The State Of U.S. Democracy And Issue Priorities Of A Polarized Electorate

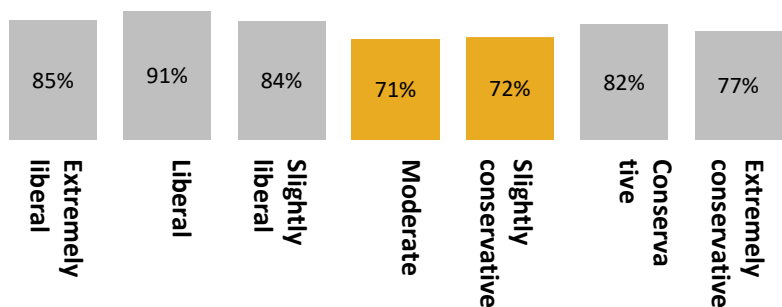
*Shibley Telhami and Stella Rouse, Principal Investigators*

This report focuses on two issues: the emerging dissonance about the state of U.S. democracy following the assault on Congress on January 6th, 2021; and how Americans prioritize top issues in a polarized political environment. Overall, individuals who are dissatisfied with the state of U.S. democracy or consider themselves to be on the far ends of the political spectrum are more likely to have polarized views on key issues. Additionally, how individuals prioritize issues is highly dependent on party affiliation and other demographic and socio-economic factors. While Democrats rank racism, followed by inequality as their top priorities, Republicans rank crime and insecurity, followed by corruption as their top priorities. Notably, while poverty is ranked as the second top priority overall, it is ranked fourth among Black Americans largely because it is superseded by pressing issues such as Racism, Inequality, and Police Brutality.

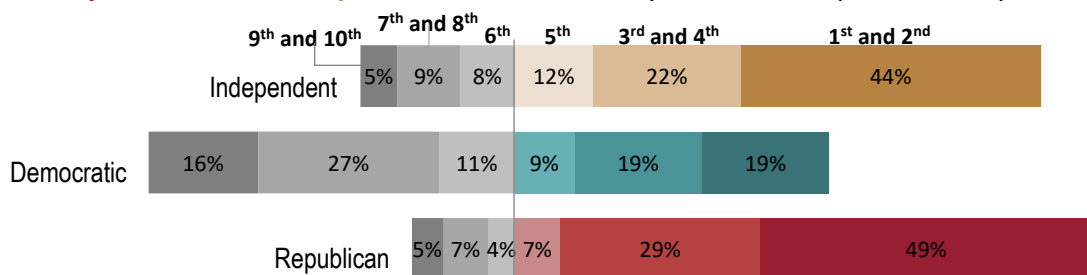
Dissatisfied **Republicans**, **Democrats**, and **Independents** have more polarized opinions on mail in ballots than the **average respondents\***



**Moderate** voters are less likely to report that their party is reflective of their views\*\*



**Republicans** and **Independents** are more likely to rank corruption as a top issue



\*Grey color indicates the average respondent

\*\* Moderate Democrats and Republicans are also less likely to report their values are reflected than their more liberal and conservative co-partisans respectively



# Public Dissonance Over The State Of U.S. Democracy

In the Critical Issues Poll fielded in March 2021, we asked several questions related to the health of American democracy and individuals' satisfaction with it, along with questions related to the attack on the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021. We find that partisans who are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the state of U.S. democracy often hold more polarized views on several issues, deviating from the overall average views of all respondents.

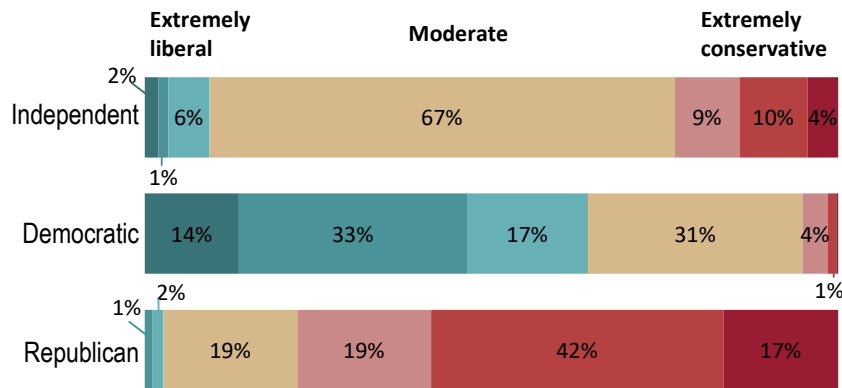
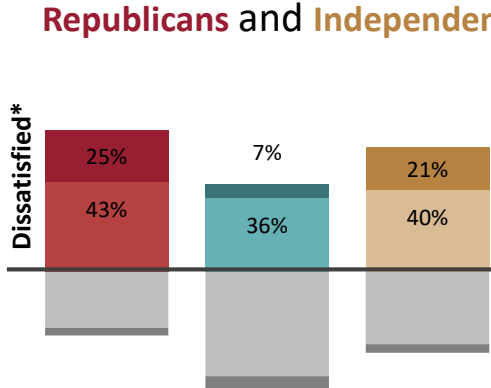
As anticipated, respondents identifying themselves as being on the extreme ends of a 7-point political spectrum tend to hold more polarized views on issues than those closer to the middle, regardless of party affiliation.

By comparing respondents based on their self-identification on a range from extremely liberal to extremely conservative, we gain a better understanding of how extreme party polarization impacts issue polarization. The identification on a 7-point scale differs from the traditional two-party analysis. Both parties incorporate a range of views which is better represented by examining the individuals' self-identity based on the political scale.

Analyzing the polling data with an eye to the degree of respondent dissatisfaction with the state of U.S. democracy and how individuals identify themselves in terms of the political spectrum, we explore the variation in the attitudes of the polarized American electorate.

On average, **Democrats** are more satisfied with the way democracy works in the United States than **Republicans and Independents**

A higher percentage of Republicans identify as extremely conservative, while a smaller percentage of Democrats identify as extremely liberal\*\*



\* The following sections combine respondents who said they were dissatisfied and very dissatisfied with the state of U.S. democracy and will refer to them as dissatisfied.

\*\* 0% of Republican stated that they were extremely liberal and 0% of Democrats stated that they were extremely republican



## Views on the political parties and approaches to governing

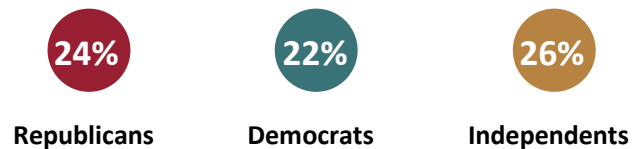
Overall, we found that more Democrats say their party is reflective of their values compared to Republicans. This is likely influenced by the hard-right shift the Republican party has taken in the last few years. When looking at the political spectrum, those who identify as liberal are more likely to agree that their party reflects their values. However, both slightly conservative and slightly liberal respondents stated their views are less likely to be reflected in their party than those closer to either end. This indicates that party values reflect the more extreme views of its partisans.

Notably, there is also a polarization within the two parties. Those who are more moderate are less likely to say that their values are reflected by their own political party. Moderate Democrats and Republicans are less likely to say that their

values are reflected in their party than their more liberal Democrat and conservative Republican co-partisans respectively.

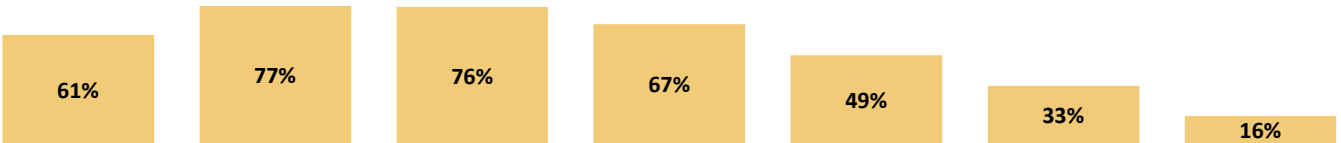
Additionally, we see that those respondents who are dissatisfied with the state of U.S. democracy are more likely to think that people from different parties are less similar to their own.

Comparing similarities across parties, **Democrats** think the values of different parties are the least similar to their own. **Republican** and **Independent** respondents also ranked similarity low between parties

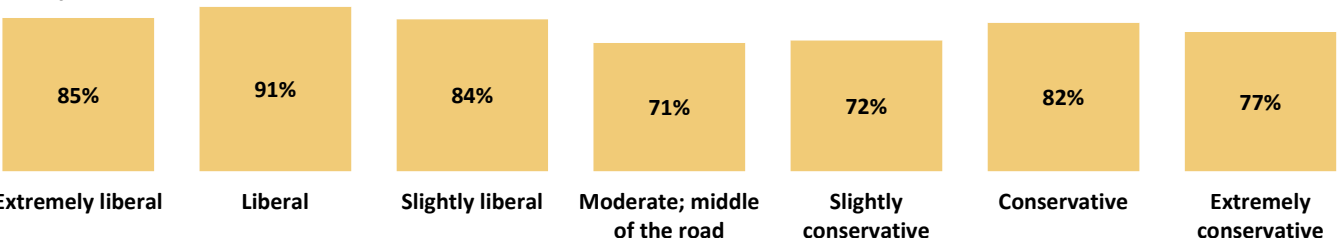


Those who are more conservative are less likely to want their representatives to compromise to pass legislation

Representatives should compromise to pass legislation



Party is reflective of their values





## Voter's dissatisfaction and polarization on voting rights

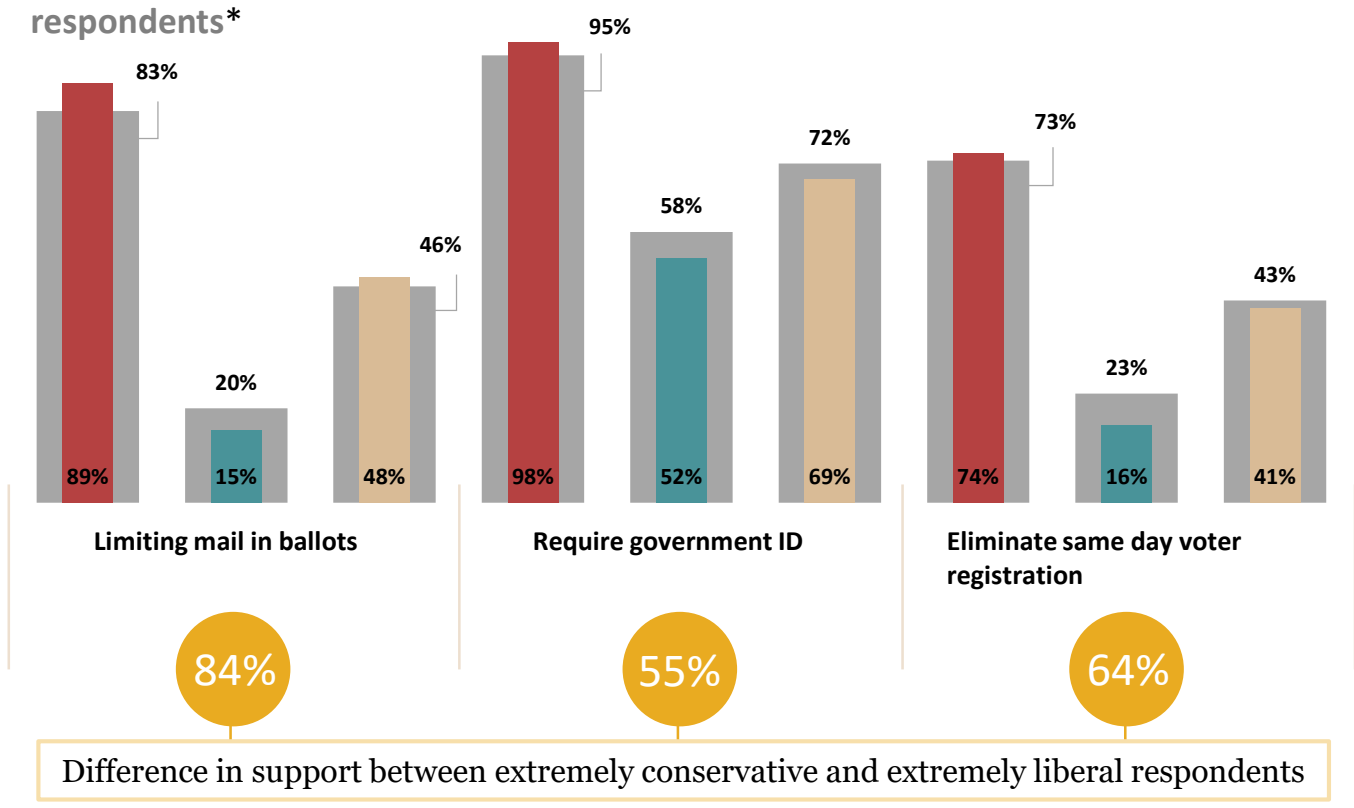
As expected, Republicans and Democrats are divided ideologically on voting rights, with Republicans supporting stricter voting regulations while Democrats oppose further voting restrictions.

In our analysis, Republicans dissatisfied with the state of U.S. democracy are more likely to support voting restrictions than other co-partisans. In contrast, Democrats dissatisfied

with the state of U.S. democracy are the inverse, being more likely to oppose voting restrictions than other co-partisans.

The support by Republicans for stricter voting laws are likely linked to fears of voter fraud, a heavily debated topic in the 2020 presidential election. Out of the Republicans who believed voter fraud was a major issue, 78% of them are dissatisfied with the state of U.S. democracy.

**Republicans, Democrats, and Independents** that are dissatisfied with the state of U.S. democracy have more polarized opinions on voting rights issues than the **average respondents\***



\*Grey color indicates the average respondent



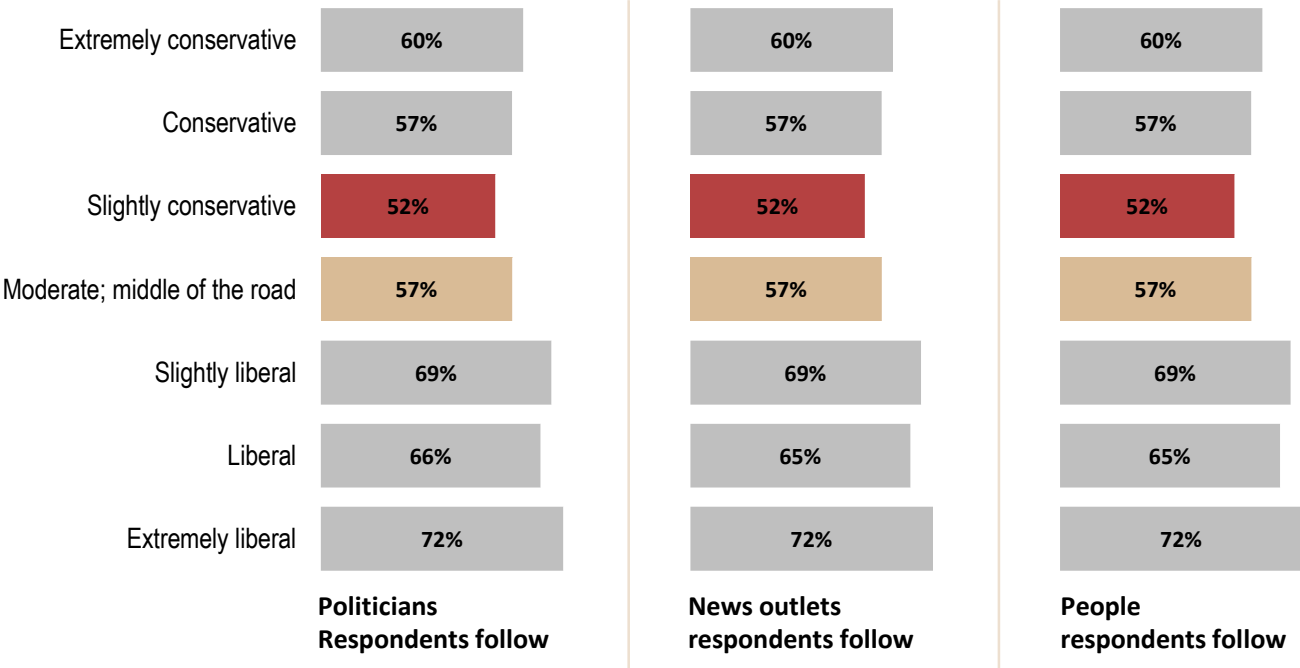
## Misinformation and media consumption

Overall, Americans are concerned about misinformation. Over 90% of all respondents' report either being very concerned or somewhat concerned about the spread of misinformation. Independents mainly get their political information from the internet, Democrats from network TV news or CNN, and Republicans from Fox News. Some of the largest misinformation campaigns during the last two elections were carried out via [social media](#), a

place where all three groups indicated they received political information.

Respondents at the extreme ends of the political spectrum are more likely to trust the information they received from social media, despite any general concerns about misinformation.

**Moderate** and **slightly conservative** respondents were the least likely to believe information from social media was accurate





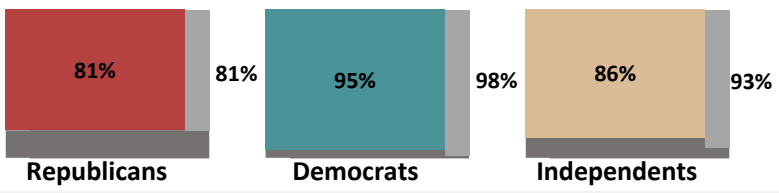
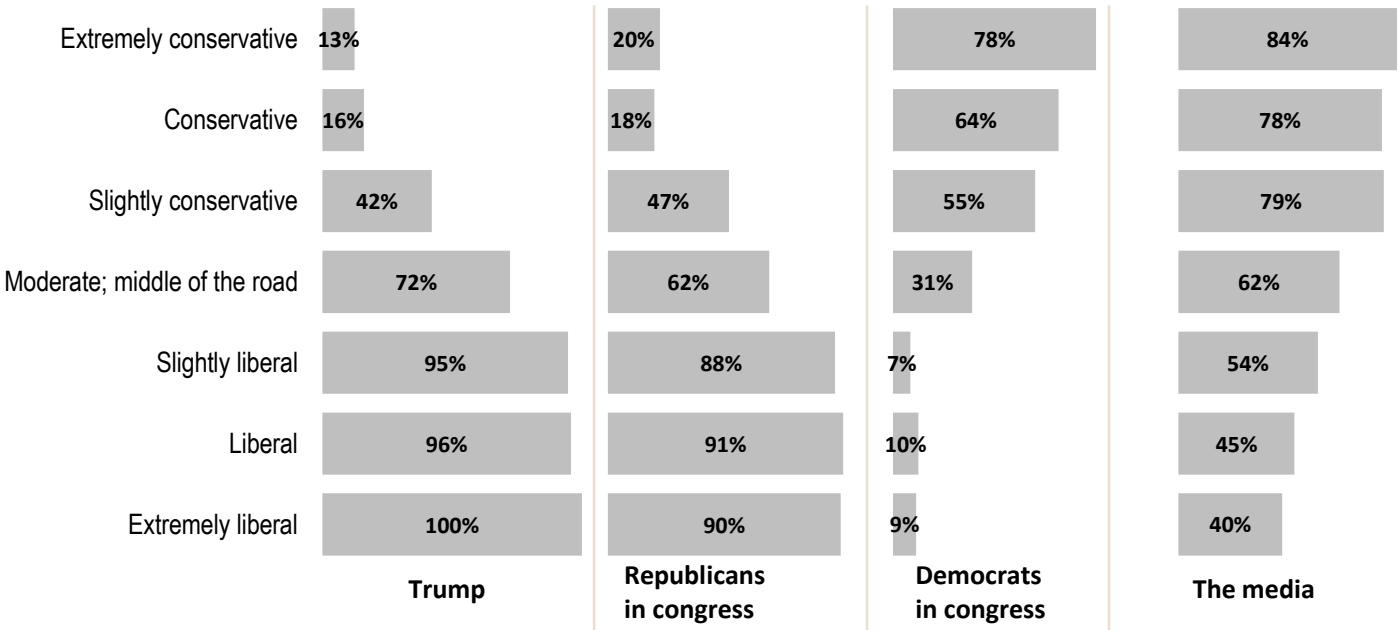
## Respondent's views on the riots of January 6th

The assault on Congress on January 6th, 2021 was steered by [groups](#) of people citing misinformation from top [government](#) officials as their motivation. Most respondents blame the opposing party when asked who was responsible for the attacks on the Capitol. Conservatives are more likely to blame Democrats in Congress and the media, while liberals are more likely to state that Trump and

Republicans in Congress were at fault.

Overall, Americans found the actions of the January 6th rioters unjustifiable. Notably, however, Democrats and Independents dissatisfied with the state of U.S. democracy are less likely to agree the rioters' actions were unjustifiable than their co-partisans.

Respondents are ideologically polarized on who they believe is responsible for the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021



Most respondents do not think the actions taken on January 6<sup>th</sup> were justifiable\*

\*Back most colors indicate the average of all respondents. 81% of Republicans, 98% of Democrats and 93% of Independents, overall, did not approve of the actions taken on January 6<sup>th</sup>



## The Prioritization of Issues and the Impact of Partisanship

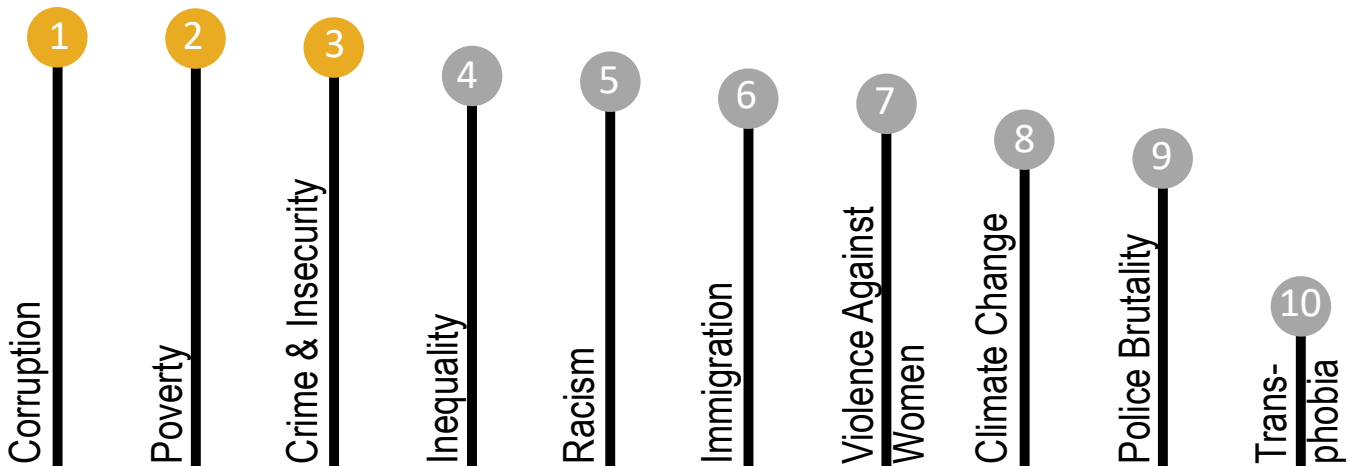
The previous section analyzed how respondents' satisfaction level with the state of U.S. democracy impacted their opinions on other areas of policy. This section will look at what issues the public prioritize.

The rankings of top issues are analyzed from a question that asked respondents to rank ten issues in order of most important. Calculations were based on the respondents' average ranked placement. Respondents ranked Corruption, Poverty, and Crime and Insecurity as the most important issues to them today. These three

issues will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

In analyzing how respondents ranked the issues, we look not only at responses by political party, but also at different demographic groups to gain a sense of how these groups prioritize various issues.

**Corruption, Poverty, and Crime & Insecurity** are the Top Issues in America\*



\* Calculations are done based on the average placement when ranked by respondents.



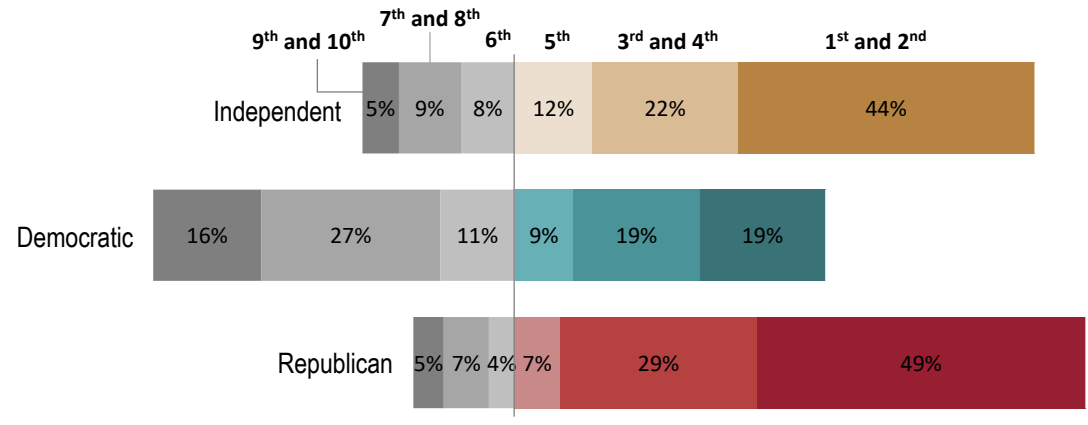
# Corruption is a priority overall for Americans but Racism is a top priority for Democrats and Crime and Insecurity is a top priority for Republicans

Overall, Americans rank corruption is the most important issue followed by poverty. However, Democrats rank Racism as the top issue to them followed by inequality. Respondents whose primary news sources were either Christian news radio, Fox News, or Internet/Social Media were more likely than others to rank corruption as a top-three issue.

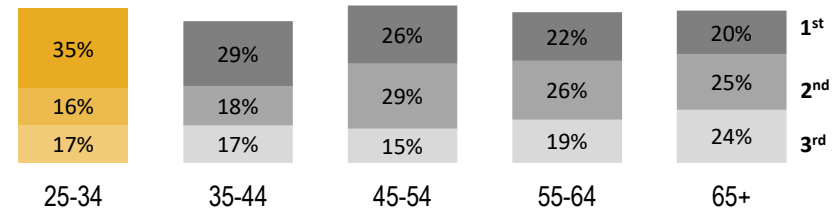
Examining the March 2021 polling data, a majority of Republicans say it was likely the

outcome of the 2020 presidential election was impacted by voter fraud. In comparison, almost all Democrats found this unlikely. As one might expect given the fact that the claims of voter fraud originated from then-sitting President Donald Trump and his refusal to [acknowledge](#) the loss.

**Republicans** and **Independents** are more likely to rank corruption as a top issue



**Younger** Republicans and Independents most frequently place corruption as a number one issue



**52%** of **White** respondents report that corruption is a top three issue.

**46%** of **Hispanic** respondents report that corruption is a top three issue.





## Poverty: A leading issue facing Americans today

According to the latest census data, the [poverty rate](#) is 10.5%. Despite this being the lowest rate since 1959, Poverty is a top issue for Americans according to the summer of 2021 Critical Issues Poll.

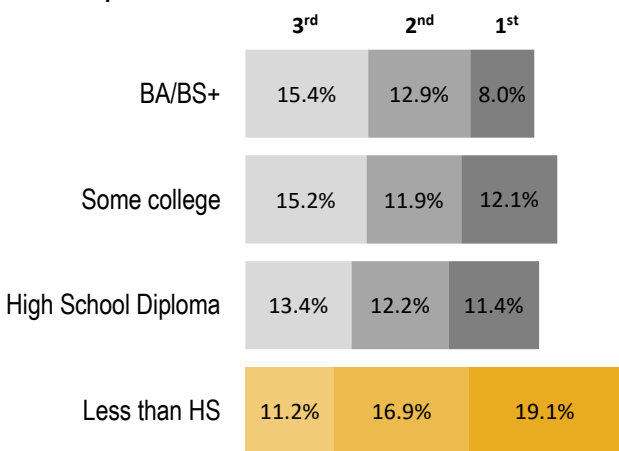
Respondents with fewer years of education or lower incomes are more likely to rate poverty as a top-three issue. This is likely due to the fact

that respondents with lower income or lower levels of education experience poverty at higher rates than other respondents.

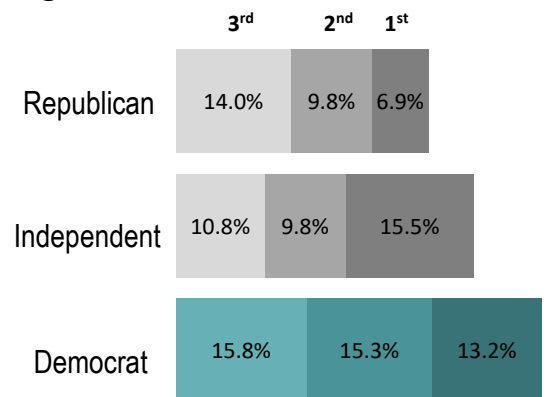
Additionally, Democrats more likely to identify poverty as a top issue compared to Independents and Republicans.

The group least likely to rate poverty as a top issue are those 18-24 years of age.

People with **less than a High School** diploma are most likely to rank poverty as a top three issue



Poverty is most likely to rank top three among **Democrats**



**39%**

of **White** respondents report that poverty is a top three issue.

**36%**

of **Black and Hispanic** respondents report that poverty is a top three issue.

Even though Black Americans, on average, have higher rates of poverty, they were less likely than White Americans to rate poverty as a top 3 issue. This does not mean that Black respondents do not think poverty to be a highly important issue. Rather, there were other issues that were more pressing. Black respondents were more likely to rank **racism, inequality and police brutality** as the top 3 issue. Poverty ranks 4<sup>th</sup>.

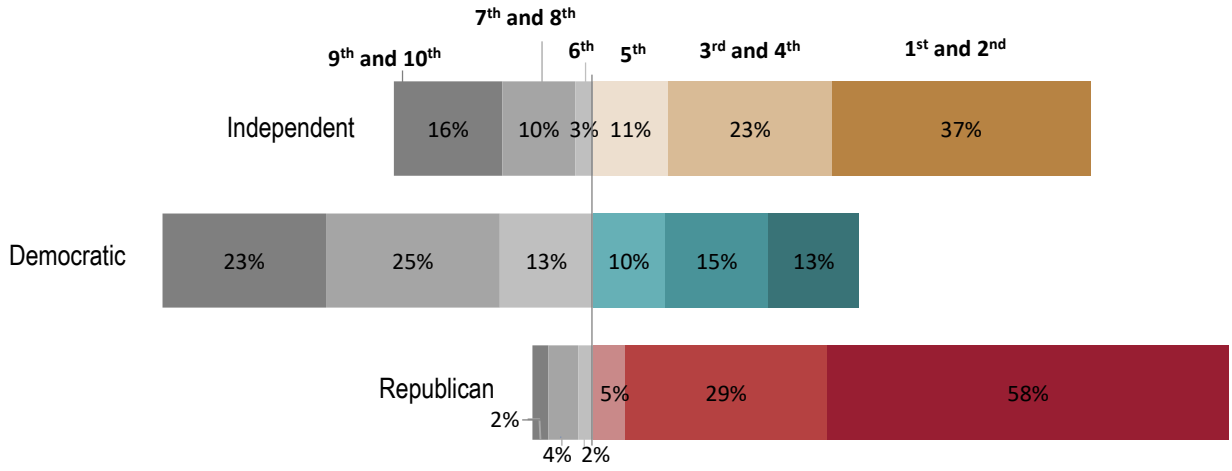


## Crime and Insecurity, especially important for Republicans

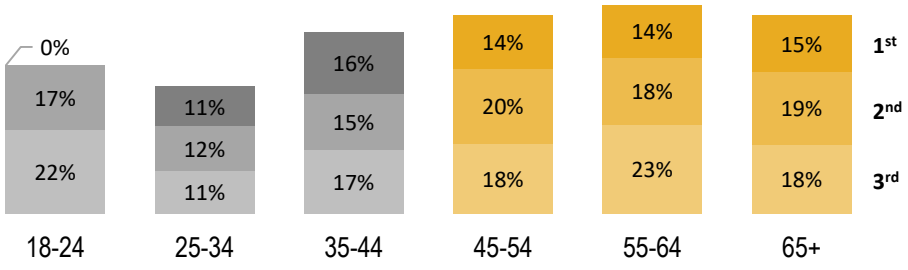
Over the past few decades, crime (violent crimes and property crimes) has [decreased](#). Despite this, crime ranks as a top issue among respondents, largely due to its importance for Republicans. Republicans ranked this issue as the most important issue to them. Democrats, on the other hand found, other issues to be more important, ranking Police Brutality, Violence against Women, and Climate Change before Crime and Insecurity.

Being “tough on crime” has been an important part of the Republican [platform](#) for [decades](#). Most recently, during the presidential election in 2020, then-President Trump vowed to solve the “[American carnage](#),” [incorrectly](#) stating that crime rates were rising. Therefore, it is not surprising that Republican voters rank crime as a top priority since it has been a significant part of the party's platform.

### Crime and Insecurity is a top issue for **Republicans & Independents**



### **Older** Respondents rate Crime and Insecurity as a top issue\*



\* 0% of respondents ages 18-24 placed Crime and Security as their number one issue.



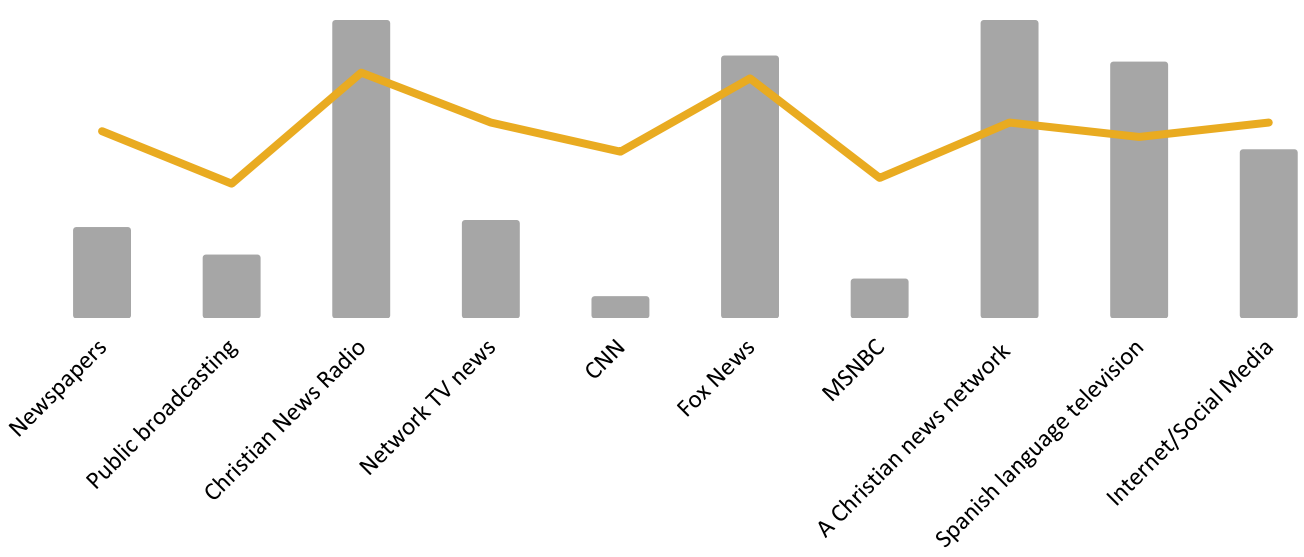
## Crime and Insecurity During the 2020 Election

Looking at voter fraud, Republicans were more likely (82%) to say that vote-by-mail would lead to greater instances of voter fraud, whereas Democrats disagreed (89%) vote-by-mail would lead to increased levels of voter fraud.

Interestingly, 86% of Republicans who primarily got their political information from Fox News stated vote-by-mail led to greater instances of voter fraud whereas only 9% of Democrats who watched Fox News strongly agreed with this.

In previous years, [polling](#) has shown that typically the party that is not in power tends to hold an increased perception of crime. Therefore it is interesting that in [recent years](#), Republicans ranked crime to be one of the most pervasive issues in the United States despite the party controlling both the presidency and Congress.

There is a similar trend with those who ranked **Crime and Insecurity** as an important issue and those who say **voter fraud was likely** across the two polls\*



\*Crime and Insecurity data is from the Summer of 2021 poll. It was calculated by taking the respondents' average ranked placement by respondents. The voter fraud data is from the March 2021 poll



## Leadership for the Critical Issues Poll



Shibley Telhami is the Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland, College Park, and Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. Professor Telhami has also been active in the foreign policy arena. He has served as advisor to the US Mission to the UN (1990-91), as advisor to former Congressman Lee Hamilton, more recently as senior advisor to George Mitchell, President Obama's United States Special Envoy for Middle East Peace (2009-2011) and as a member of the U.S. delegation to the Trilateral US-Israeli-Palestinian Anti-Incitement Committee. Professor Telhami has contributed to *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* and regularly appears on national and international radio and television. His bestselling book, *The Stakes: America and the Middle East* was selected by *Foreign Affairs* as one of the top five books on the Middle East in 2003. He has been a principal investigator in the annual Arab Public Opinion Survey, conducted since 2002 in six Arab countries.



Stella Rouse is a professor in the Department of Government and Politics and director of the Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement. Professor Rouse earned her Ph.D. from Louisiana State University in 2008. In 2010, she was a visiting scholar at the Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity and Gender in the Social Sciences (REGSS) at Duke University as a Ford Foundation Post-Doctoral Fellow. Rouse's book, *Latinos in the Legislative Process: Interests and Influence*, published by Cambridge University Press, was named by *Huffington Post* as one of the "Best Political Science Books of 2013." Her second book, *The Politics of Millennials: Political Beliefs and Policy Preferences of America's Most Diverse Generation*, with Ashley D. Ross, was published in August 2018. She has a forthcoming book, titled "Citizens of the World: Political Engagement and Policy Attitudes of Millennials across the Globe," which will be published by Oxford University Press in 2022.

**Analyst: Elin Berlin**, Doctoral Student in the Department of Government and Politics  
**Coordinator and Analyst: Kirsten Langlois** Program Coordinator and Executive Assistant for the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development; Coordinator for the University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll



## Methodology

### Summer 2021 Survey Methodology

The survey was carried out June 22 - July 21, 2021 online from a nationally representative sample of Nielsen Scarborough's probability-based panel, originally recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of adults provided by Survey Sampling International. The poll was conducted among a national poll of 3379 respondents, with a margin of error of +/- 1.69%. Overall, the sample was adjusted to reflect population estimates (Scarborough USA+/Gallup) for Americans. The survey variables balanced through weighting by age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, level of education, census regional division, and political party affiliation.

Note: Percentages may not always add to one-hundred due to rounding.

To view the full questionnaire for this poll, please click [here](#). For more information, please visit: [criticalissues.umd.edu](http://criticalissues.umd.edu)

### March 2021 Survey Methodology

The survey was carried out March 17-22, 2021 online from a nationally representative sample of Nielsen Scarborough's probability-based panel, originally recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of adults provided by Survey Sampling International. The poll was conducted among a national poll of 2,393 respondents, with a margin of error of +/- 2%. Overall, the sample was adjusted to reflect population estimates (Scarborough USA+/Gallup) for Americans. The survey variables balanced through weighting were: age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, level of education, census regional division, and political party affiliation.

Note: Percentages may not always add to one-hundred due to rounding.

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