

AMERICA'S RULE OF LAW

Contradictions
& Crossroads



**Trust in
Justice
Project**



OCP
ONLINE
COURTROOM
PROJECT

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OVERVIEW



Most governments suffer from delusions of permanence. The United States is no different. The ability of any democratic government to persist involves a consensus on the part of its citizens about the ideals and values of its culture. Americans' beliefs about the U.S. government -- how it works now and how it should work ideally -- can be an important indicator of the health of our democracy.

How do Americans feel about the fundamental rights and principles enshrined in the United States Constitution? How do Americans feel our current President, Congress, and the Supreme Court are doing in upholding the Constitution? Are Americans turning away from the values of a democracy in favor of an authoritarian form of government? To answer these questions, and to better understand the public's views on recent changes and challenges to the rule of law in this country, the *Online Courtroom* and the *Trust in Justice Projects* recently conducted a national survey with *Ipsos* and a series of online focus groups. The results of that survey and those focus groups are presented in this report along with an analysis of those results.

Here are our key findings:

- About half of Americans think that President Trump and the current Congress do a **poor job of upholding the Constitution** they are sworn to protect. One third thinks the Supreme Court does a poor job of upholding the Constitution.
- Almost 60% think Congress, as an independent branch of the government, is **controlled by President Trump**. Two-thirds of the country think the Supreme Court is influenced by or makes decisions based on what President Trump wants. Less than a third think the Supreme Court makes decisions based solely on the Constitution and prevailing law.
- More than a third of the country thinks President Trump should be able to **suspend due process rights in limited circumstances**, and more than a quarter of the population think that ICE should be able to deport anyone they believe is a threat without a court hearing. Fourteen percent of Americans believe that ICE should be able to use deadly force whenever they feel they are being prevented from doing their jobs.
- On equal rights guaranteed by the Constitution, 65% think that **non-citizens should have fewer legal rights than citizens**, and around 20% think *birthright* citizens should have fewer legal rights. Seventeen percent believe straight people should have better legal rights than LGBTQ people; 9% of the population thinks men should have better legal rights than women; and another 9% believe that white people should have better legal rights than persons of color.

Here are our key findings:

- Despite language in the First Amendment of the Constitution, about a quarter of Americans think that government **should be able to restrict free speech and a free press** if they believe it is harmful. The same number believe the U.S. should have a national religion despite the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment.
- After an explanation of the restrictions of authoritarian governments, 18% of Americans **would favor authoritarian over democratic rule.**
- More than half of Americans believe that President Trump and the current Congress do a **poor job of acting in their best interests.**
- There is a definitive **difference between how Republicans and Democrats view these core Constitutional principles** in survey results, yet many of those differences are diminished when our focus group participants discussed these issues in person. Americans are less polarized than has been widely reported.
- There are a number of **attitudes that seem to cause the public's growing disenchantment with democracy** and our government: cynicism about politicians, confusion about the complexities of government, awareness they are being manipulated to take sides, reduced trust in objective facts, and the personalization of political issues.
- There are a number of **recommendations to improve the public's trust and engagement with our democracy:** forums to facilitate respectful discussion of political differences, awareness of shared identity and values, civics education, political accountability and transparency, as well as critical thinking and media consumption training.

Introduction

The opening lines of the United States Constitution read,
“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

To date, it has been 239 years since this was written. In our history, the United States has had forty-seven Presidents, 119 sessions of Congress, 116 Supreme Court Justices, and twenty-seven Amendments to the Constitution. In establishing a democratic government, it has long been presumed that those who live in our country subscribe to the values set forth by the Founding Fathers. However, as history has repeatedly proven - from Roman rule to the French Revolution to the Weimar Republic in Germany to the U.S.S.R. - governments can experience significant changes in societal structures in relatively short periods of time.

In 2025, the U.S. experienced numerous unprecedented challenges to traditionally held Constitutional principles, legal concepts, and the roles of various government agencies. While the media extensively reported on these challenges, there was little reporting on how the public felt about these changes aside from whether they *approved or disapproved* of these changes. Approval polling presumes a passive public who are subject to the actions of the government and the courts, as opposed to active participants (*“the People”*) listed in the Constitution who are charged to form a more perfect Union and establish Justice.

The Rule of Law Project was established to study how citizens in our democratic system feel about these foundational Constitutional concepts, legal principles, the role of government, and the current actions of the Trump administration.

Development of the Rule of Law Project

In 2023, polls demonstrated a substantial drop in public trust in the justice system following a series of controversial Supreme Court rulings and the political debate over those rulings. In response to these polls, *The Online Courtroom Project*, along with the *American Board of Trial Advocates* and the *American Society of Trial Consultants*, initiated a project called the *Trust in Justice Project*. The project included a national poll and thirteen focus groups to discover how the general public views the courts, the legal profession, and the justice system as a whole. The report from that project discusses those findings, including a number of systemic and cultural reasons for the observed drop in public confidence. The report¹ also discusses potential improvements that would help to restore public trust.

Starting in early 2025, President Trump and his administration posed a number of challenges to long-held Constitutional principles as well as governmental institutional norms. A representative democracy assumes that citizens elect officials to represent their interests, yet, as numerous polls suggest, up to half of the American public does not believe that the representatives they elected do in fact represent their interests.

Very little research has been done to study what “the People” think of our core Constitutional principles and the role of government in running our democratic system. The *Rule of Law Project* was initiated to give the public a voice about how they see the Constitution, government, and the legal principles that form the basis of our democracy.

¹ [TJ report](#)

Development of the Rule of Law Project

As part of the *Rule of Law* Project, in September and October of 2025, we conducted six online focus groups with participants from around the country. We specifically recruited two groups of strongly conservative Republican voters to get feedback from them on how they saw the Trump Administration policies. These groups were specifically recruited to be supportive of President Trump's policies. We also recruited two groups of Latin/Hispanic representatives to gauge their reaction to the immigration policies of the Trump Administration, and two mixed demographic groups. In those groups, we discussed a number of topics with our participants, including their views on:

- What they love most about living in America
- Concerns about the current state of the country
- The respective jobs of the President, Congress, and the judiciary
- Immigration, ICE, and citizenship
- Due process rights
- Use of the military to deal with domestic unrest
- Whether different demographic groups should have different legal rights
- The independence of different agencies like the FBI and the Department of Justice
- Exercise of presidential power through executive orders
- The First Amendment right to free speech and a free press
- The role of religion in government
- Different states redistricting to achieve political goals

Development of the Rule of Law Project

In March of 2026, we designed a national poll where we explained America's constitutional system, various amendments to the Constitution, and traditional governmental roles.² We then asked our survey respondents for their opinions about these constitutional principles and the current government's performance on these issues. The survey issues included opinions on:

- The three branches of power
- The Supreme Court
- Due process and birthright citizenship in the Fourteenth Amendment
- The search and seizure provisions in the Fourth Amendment
- Equal rights
- Presidential power
- The independence of the FBI and DOJ
- The First Amendment
- Elections
- The preference for a democratic or authoritarian government
- How the current President, Congress, and Supreme Court affects the lives of citizens

The findings in this report are based on a nationally representative sample of 1,000 Americans and intended to reflect broader trends in public opinion. The methodology that Ipsos used to conduct its non-probability sampling for the survey can be reviewed in the posted link. The focus groups were conducted to add context and depth to the survey findings.

² [Rule of Law Ipsos Survey](#)

OVERALL FINDINGS



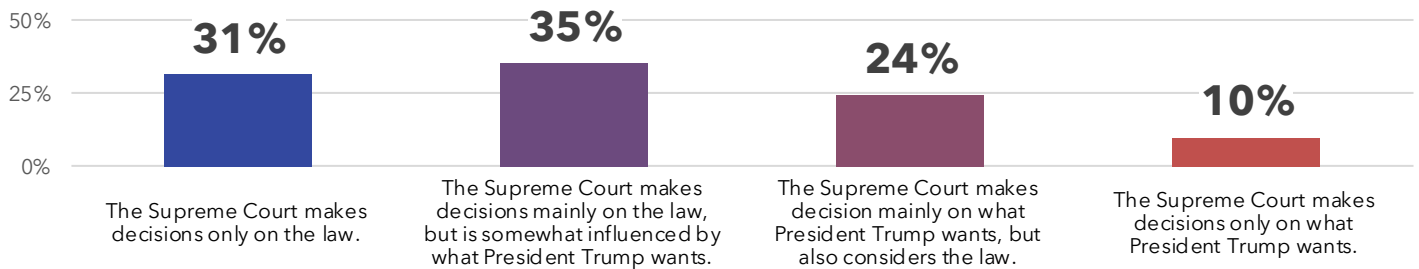
OVERALL FINDINGS

The Role of Government

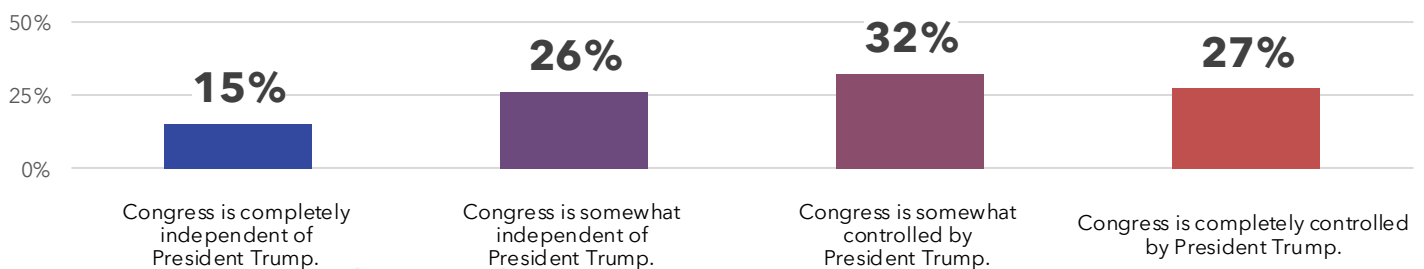
After explaining the separation or balance of powers between the three branches of government, we asked our survey respondents about what they thought the balance of power should be in running the country. Despite the express intent of our Founding Fathers, only 54% of the population felt that the branches should share equal power. Another 20% said Congress should have more power, 17% believe the President should have more power and 9% believe the judiciary should have more power. When asked about the independence of the different branches, almost 70% believe that the Supreme Court is influenced by President Trump instead of making decisions only on the law, and almost 60% believe that Congress is controlled by President Trump.



How much do you think the current Supreme Court makes decisions based on the law vs. what President Trump wants?



In making laws and passing legislation, how independent or controlled is the current Congress by President Trump's political agenda in your opinion?



Focus Group Participant Stefani

"I think this is why we have the three branches, right? Because power does something to a man. We know this and our forefathers knew this. A nice guy gonna help the world, gonna help the community. You give them a little bit of power, a little bit of money, it goes to the head. I have a concern that the checks and balances, the judicial system, the executive branch and the congress, that aspect is starting to fracture. So, you don't have the confidence that you used to have in one or the other trying to balance things out."

OVERALL FINDINGS

Job Performance

When we asked about the job performance of officials who are sworn to uphold the Constitution, only 36% of Americans believed that President Trump does a good job of upholding the Constitution, with 51% believing he does a bad job. Similarly, only around 35% of Americans believe that members of Congress do a good job of upholding the Constitution regardless of party affiliation. Only 43% of Americans believe the Supreme Court does a good job of upholding the Constitution.

When asked about their opinion of Supreme Court decisions, 57% believe that the Supreme Court should consider how their rulings affect people and the way they live their lives, as opposed to only considering the Constitution and existing law. Nearly a third of Americans think the Supreme Court makes decisions according to their personal beliefs as opposed to only considering the Constitution and established law.

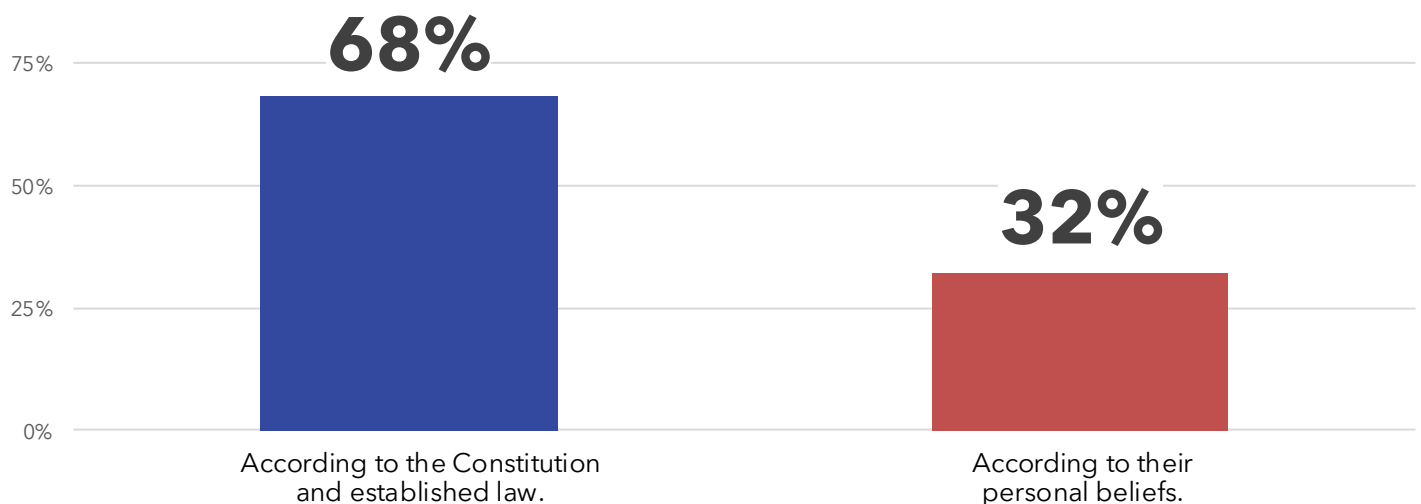


Brent

"As to the rule of law, we start to question it because everything starts to fall into a political basket as compared to a true interpretation of the law.

And so, for me, that's frustrating. A Supreme Court justice rules on the Constitution, and that's their job. When you have certain Justices that can consistently rule a certain way that's not based on law, that's based on political belief."

Which of the following statements BEST reflects your opinions about the way the Supreme Court makes decisions?

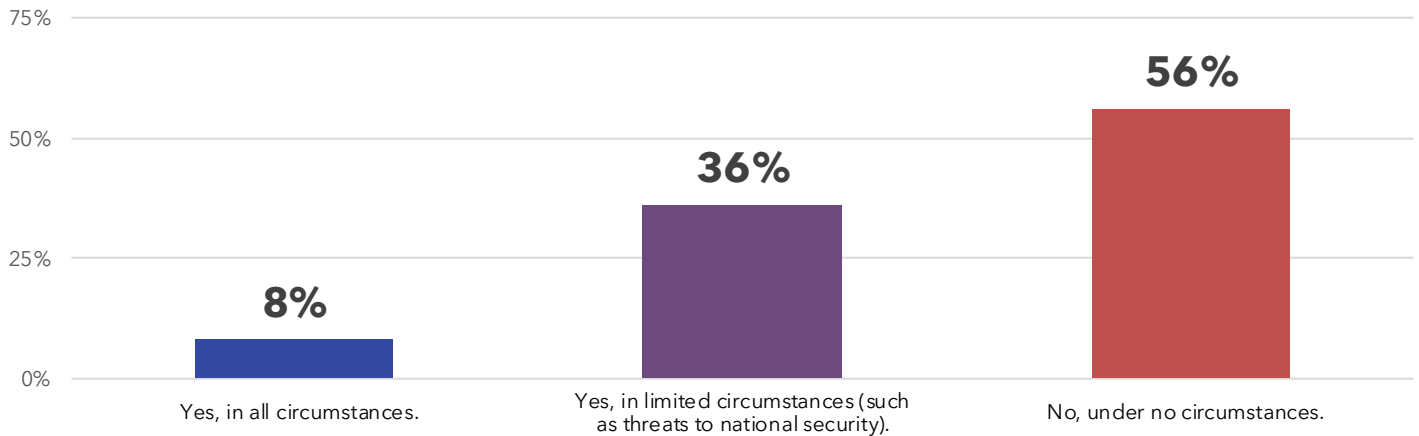


OVERALL FINDINGS

The Fourteenth Amendment and Equal Rights

In our survey, we described the Due Process Clause in the Fourteenth Amendment and asked when President Trump should be able to suspend due process rights, if at all. Forty-four percent said that the President should be able to stay or stop these rights in all or limited circumstances.

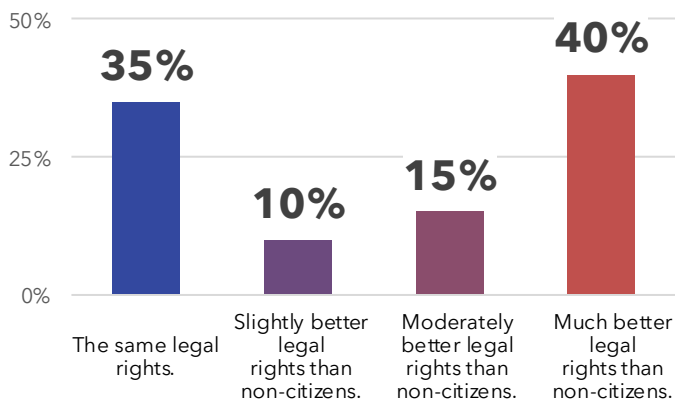
Do you think President Trump should be able to suspend or stop due process rights?



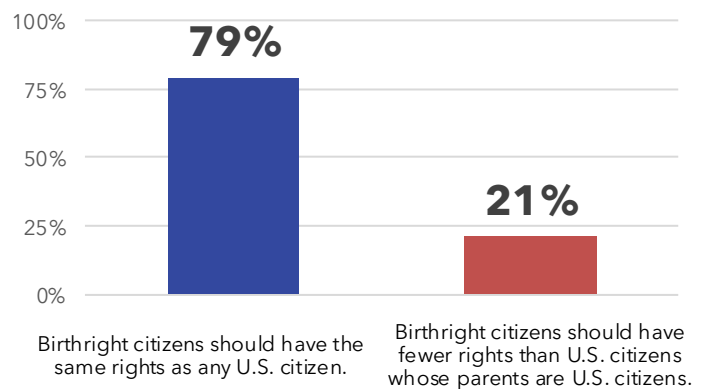
We also asked about equal rights guaranteed by the Protection Clause in the Fourteenth Amendment. Only 35% of survey respondents believed that non-citizens should have the *same* legal rights as U.S. citizens with the rest of the respondents believing that U.S. citizens should have slightly, moderately, or much better legal rights.

When asked about the birthright citizenship clause in the Fourteenth Amendment, 21% believed that birthright citizens should have fewer rights than U.S. citizens whose parents are U.S. citizens.

As compared to non-citizens, U.S. citizens should have:



The Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution also guarantees that all people born in the United States are U.S. citizens, even if their parents are not U.S. citizens. They are called "birthright citizens".



The Fourteenth Amendment and Equal Rights cont'd

Seventeen percent felt that straight people should have better legal rights than LGBTQ+ people. Ten percent think rich people should have better legal rights than poor people, 9% believe men should have better legal rights than women and that white people should have better legal rights than people of color.



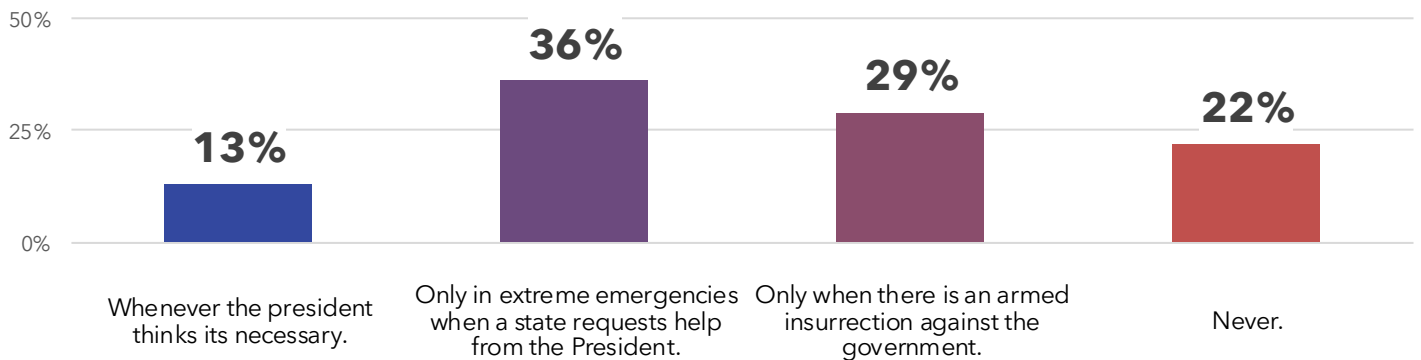
Chris

"I think there's a right way and a wrong way to do it, but I don't think they [illegal immigrants] should be afforded the same rights as US citizens."

Presidential Power

When we described how executive orders were traditionally used, two-thirds believe that the President should only use executive orders to ensure the laws that are passed by Congress are carried out, while a third believe the President should be able to overturn or change laws if he feels it is in the country's best interest. People had mixed opinions about when the President should be able to use military force on U.S. citizens with only 22% stating the President should never have that power.

When is it appropriate for a President to order the use of military force on U.S. citizens?



Owen

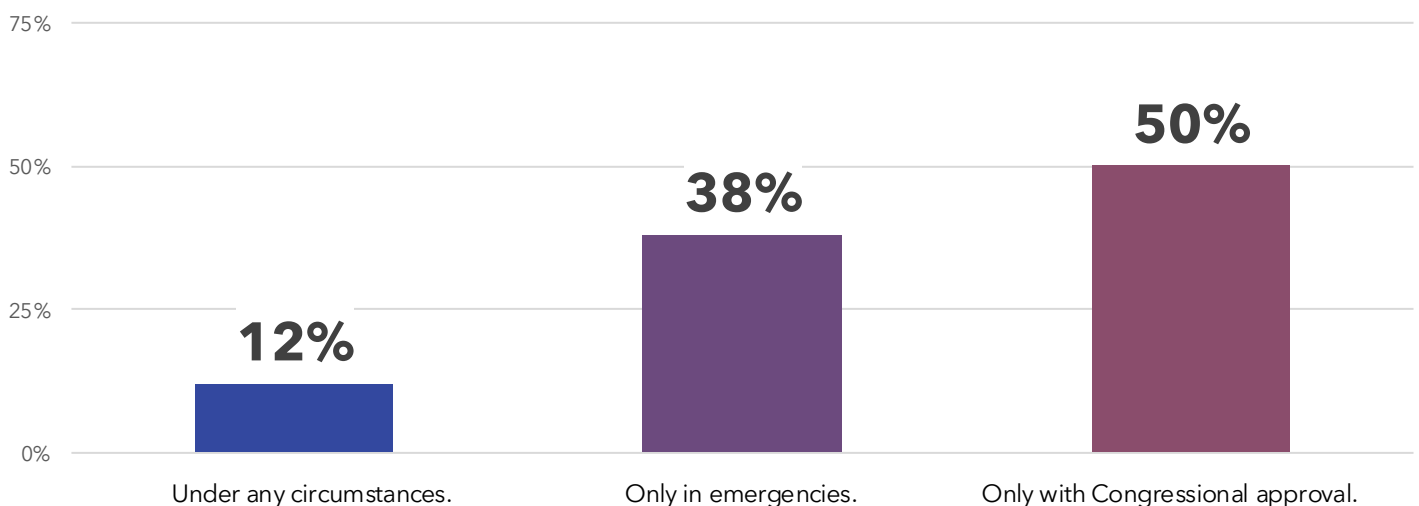
"Executive orders are an important way to make change happen when Congress is not doing their job."

Presidential Power cont'd

When we described Presidential immunity that the Supreme Court ruled on in 2024, 14% think the President should have complete immunity for all actions while in office, 41% think the President should have limited immunity for a President's official duties, and 45% think the President should be held to the same laws as any normal person. Eighty-six percent of Americans felt that President Trump should be required to follow court rulings even if he feels they are incorrect. Twenty-eight percent believe that judges who have ruled against President Trump's policies are disregarding the law to politically block his policies, and 17% believe that President Trump should be able to change laws he sees as improper or unjust.

When told that only Congress can declare war under the Constitution, 50% believe that the President should be able to order military action against countries or individuals with Congressional approval, with 50% believing that the President on his or her own can order such actions in an emergency or under any circumstance. When asked specifically about the bombings in Iran and the drone strikes on boats near Venezuela, 70% felt President Trump needed to get Congressional approval for military action, while 30% felt he should be able to order the military interventions without approval.

According to the United States Constitution, only Congress can declare war. Under what circumstances should the President be able to order lethal military actions against countries or people he believes are enemies or threats to the U.S. without approval?

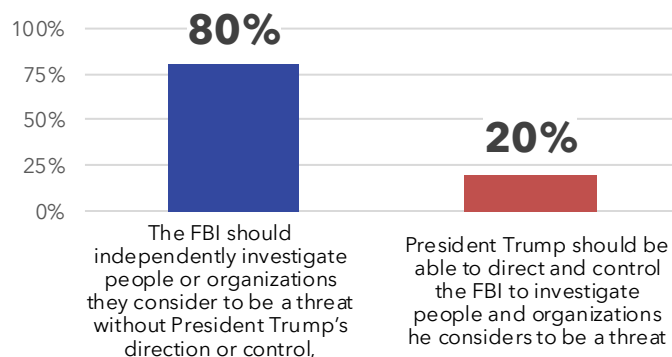


OVERALL FINDINGS

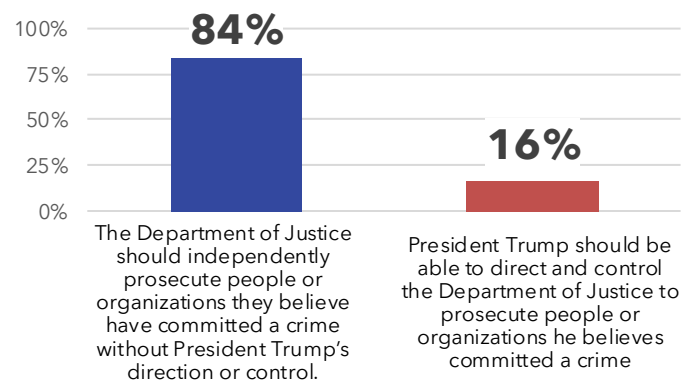
The Use of Government Agencies

On the use of government agencies, 80 – 84% believe that the FBI and the Department of Justice should independently investigate and prosecute threats and crimes without President Trump’s direction or control.

Which of the following statements BEST reflects your opinion?



Which of the following statements BEST reflects your opinion?



When asked about ICE’s ability to deport people, 27% believed they should be able to deport *anyone* they believe to be a national security threat without a court hearing as opposed to deporting *only* illegal immigrants after a legal proceeding. Fourteen percent of survey respondents felt that ICE should be able to use deadly force whenever they feel they are being prevented from doing their job.

The First Amendment & Elections

When describing the First Amendment to the Constitution, 26% of survey respondents stated the government should be able to restrict both speech and the press if it believes the speech or the reporting to be harmful. Despite the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment, 25% believe that Christianity or another religion should be a primary religion promoted by the United States.

When describing how the Constitution establishes that states control their own elections, 27% think the federal government should control election procedures in the states.



Stefani

"I think that's the power of what we see at the moment. It's not like it's freedom of speech or freedom of free thought or ideas or anything like that. It's, "I'm gonna overpower you. I'm stronger than you, and you will lay down because I'm just stronger than you." And that is really upsetting to me because I think people can't catch up with the velocity and speed that everything is moving. It just keeps moving and moving and moving."

OVERALL FINDINGS

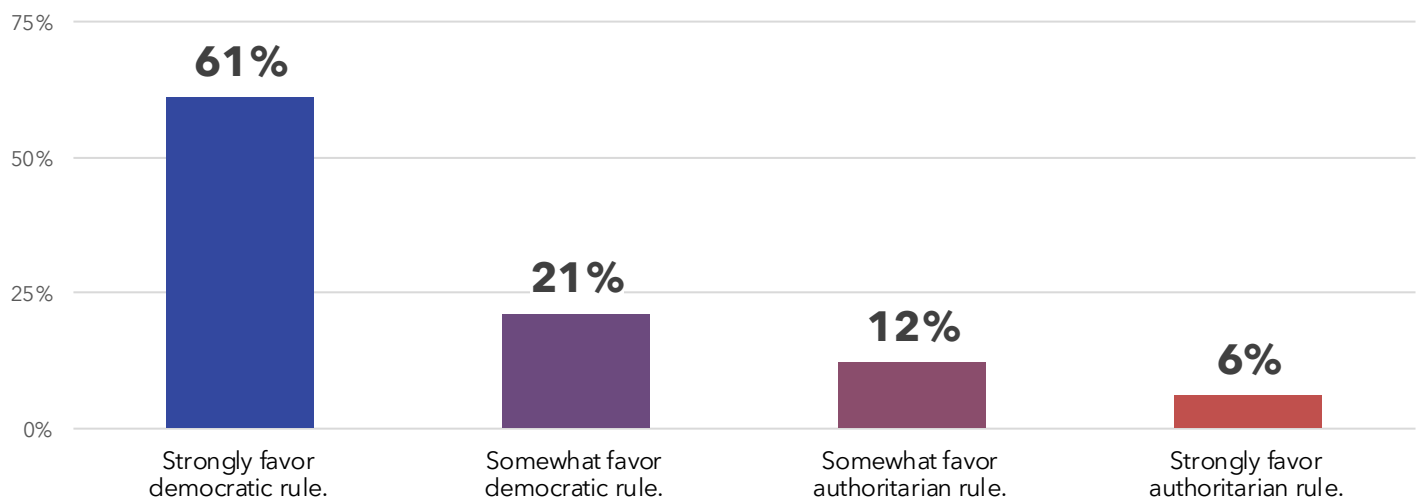
The Choice Between Democracy and Authoritarianism

In the next part of our survey, respondents read the following explanation of authoritarianism:

“Even though the United States is a democracy, there are other forms of government. Authoritarian governments are typically led by one strong leader or group of leaders who make decisions for the entire country with little accountability to the citizens of that country. These leaders often serve an unlimited time in office, pick all of the judges and government officials, and control all of government institutions, including the military, the media, the courts, and education. They often favor nationalistic and religious ideals over immigrant and minority populations.”

We then asked which of these forms of government they believed would be the best way for the United States to run its government. The majority preferred democratic rule (82%), while the remaining 18% somewhat or strongly favored authoritarian rule.

Which of these forms of government do you feel would be the best way for the United States to run its government?



The Personal Impact of Government on Citizens

We finally asked our survey respondents how good or bad a job that Congress and President Trump were doing in acting in the survey respondents' personal best interests. When asked about Congress, 23% felt that Congress did a somewhat or very good job, and 52% felt they did a somewhat or very bad job, with 25% stating they did neither a good nor bad job. When asked about President Trump, 35% of our respondents felt President Trump did a good job, 52% felt he did a bad job, and 13% felt he did neither a good nor bad job in acting in their best interests and what was important to them.

We then asked how much the decisions made by the Supreme Court and the laws passed by Congress affected our respondents' personal lives. Seventy-nine percent of Americans believe that the Supreme Court's decisions affect them a moderate amount to a great deal, and 85% feel that Congressional laws affect them a moderate amount to a great deal. Eighty-seven percent believe that President Trump's actions affect them a moderate amount to a great deal.

When asked about providing the public with the reasoning for actions taken by the Trump administration, 81% of the survey respondents believe that the Trump administration should provide factual and scientific reasoning for the actions they take, as opposed to acting in what *they* think is best for the country without providing reasoning.



Drew

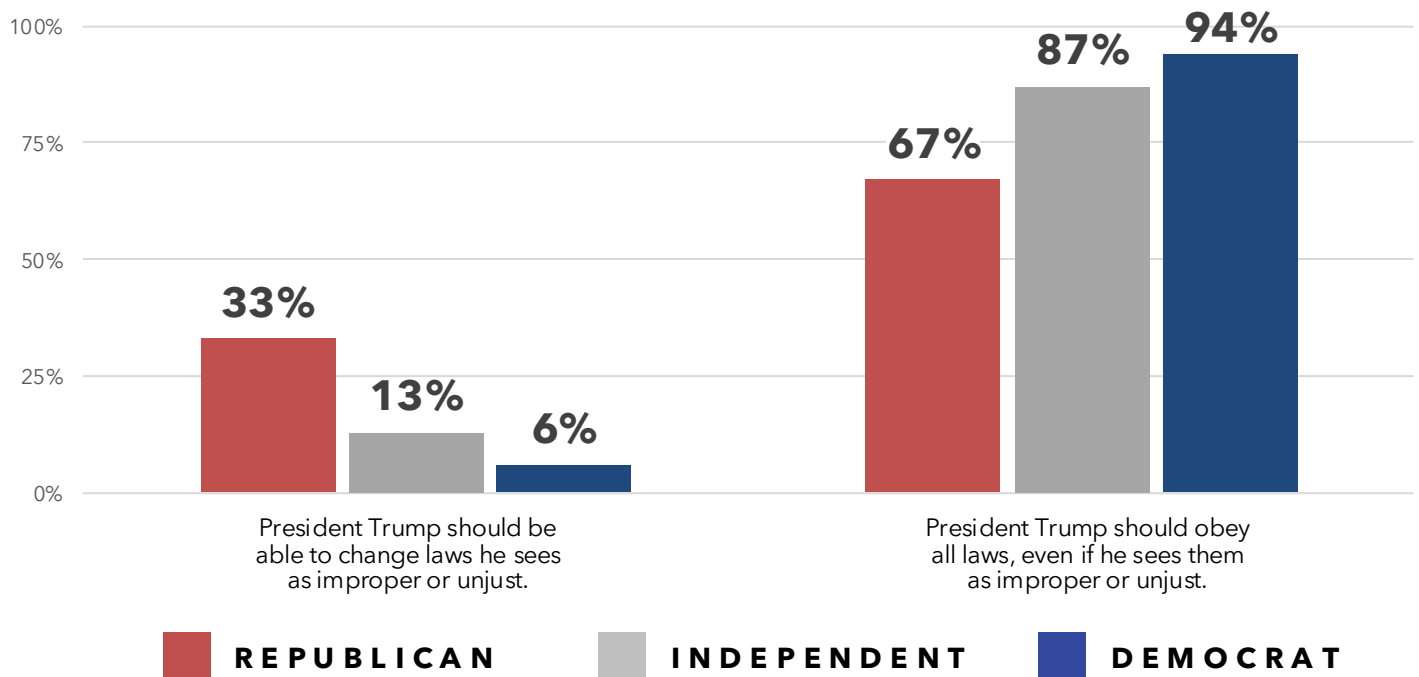
"The people that we're electing will say, I'll do this for you, and when you elect them, they do a complete 180. It's like a complete betrayal. And then in the end, do you really have a democracy? Are you really voting for what you want? Or are you voting for people who will say they'll do what you want? And will they actually end up doing that? Who knows? You could have completely just wasted your vote. You could have been completely lied to just for the sake of getting your vote. I think it's way too easy to be corrupted."

OVERALL FINDINGS

Political Differences

In designing this survey, we intentionally sampled for roughly equal Republican, Democrat, and Independent respondents. In looking at the results, there were significant statistical differences between how all three of these groups responded to certain questions, yet other questions drew very similar responses from the groups. Republicans rated President Trump's challenges to more traditional Constitutional principles and government norms more favorably than Democrats, with Independents consistently between the two groups. However, it should be noted that Republicans did not overwhelmingly support the President's views on many of these issues. A summary of the key differences in responses between Republicans, Democrats, and Independents is contained at the back of this report. Not every survey question is represented in this section, only those where Republican and Democratic respondents differed the most. Independents were included in the full survey and typically fell between the two parties on most issues. Their responses are noted where the differences were most relevant.

Which of the following statements BEST reflects your opinion?



ANALYSIS OF PROJECT FINDINGS



Analysis of Project Findings



Ed

It's not a left wing or a right wing if it's the same bird."

The United States is often described by our political leaders as a shining beacon of democratic values, yet numerous world institutes and scholars have documented precipitous declines in the quality of its democracy since 2017.³ A recent Pew Research Institute study demonstrates that nearly 70% of Americans are dissatisfied with the way democracy is currently working in this country, including majorities from both parties.⁴ While democratic health scores are often measured by a country's electoral process, governance, civil liberties, and political participation, the constituents in these countries are mainly asked whether they approve of or are satisfied with the politicians and policies in their country. They are rarely asked what *they* think of the founding principles of their country or how they think their country should be run.

While the Magna Carta may be considered one of the oldest existing constitutions, the U.S. Constitution is widely thought to be the world's first modern codified constitution to establish a framework for governing the country. The *Rule of Law* project aimed to measure how Americans feel about our Constitutional principles as well as *why* they felt the way they did.

The term "polarized" has been extensively used to describe the political environment in this country. While polarization tends to suggest two equal and opposed extremes, our research has shown that a strong majority of Americans believe in the main democratic principles in our Constitution, yet feel overwhelmed, confused, and marginalized by the government, politicians, and the media. In looking at our polling results and speaking to our focus group respondents, we noticed five sources of this disenfranchisement.

³ V-Dem Institute, "Press Release: Democratic Backsliding Reaches Western Democracies, with U.S. Decline 'Unprecedented,'" March 17, 2026, <https://www.v-dem.net/news/press-release-democratic-backsliding-reaches-western-democracies-with-us-decline-unprecedented/>.

Freedom House, "United States: Freedom in the World 2026 Country Report," 2026, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-states/freedom-world/2026>.

Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2025: Democracy Stabilizes after Eight Years of Decline* (London: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2026), https://image.b.economist.com/lib/fe8d13727c61047f7c/m/1/909ba67b-5fd4-43f3-a7ad-c53ea71c50eb.pdf?utm_campaign=MA00015348&utm_medium=email-owned&utm_source=eiui-marketing-cloud&RefID=&utm_term=20260510&utm_id=2179039&sfmc_id=00QWT000010N0Rq2AK&utm_content=cta-button-1&id_mc=293124449.

⁴ Jonathan Schulman and Richard Wike, "Multiple Indicators Show a Decline in the Health of America's Democracy in 2025," Pew Research Center, April 15, 2026, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/04/15/multiple-indicators-show-a-decline-in-the-health-of-americas-democracy-in-2025/>.

ANALYSIS OF PROJECT FINDINGS

Americans are profoundly cynical about the politicians that are supposed to represent them.

They believe that most elected officials serve themselves and the special interests that fund their campaigns. They see most politicians as corrupt and willing to say anything to get elected without any intention of carrying through on their promises. Despite popular and bipartisan support for different aspects of environmental, subsidized health and reproductive care, gun control, and political reform issues, citizens see little motivation on the part of politicians and judges to enact policies for the issues that are important to Americans.

This long-standing belief in political corruption and failure to promote the best interests of the average American applies to both the main political parties. Our focus group respondents believed that Congress intentionally made bills complicated and maintained adversarial positions because, as one focus group participant stated, *"As long as they have something to fight about, they get to keep their jobs."* Across all the groups, our respondents stated they wished there were term limits for all politicians and judges, as well as restrictions on lobbying.



Nancy

"You know, they could be having a great law come through, but we're seeing everyone fight like it's on social media. I'm seeing everyone in Congress fighting, and the fighting in the Supreme Court, and the Supreme Court fighting with individual states. It's really very overwhelming to get put in the middle of that. It almost makes me, and a lot of people I know, turn off a lot of that noise."

Americans feel overwhelmed by the complexities of government with little real understanding of how government operates in a democracy.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center⁵ and the American Bar Association⁶ have conducted polls to test Americans' civic knowledge, but these surveys mainly test whether respondents have a knowledge of the most basic terms in the Constitution or functions of the different branches of the government. Without a working knowledge of the values behind the Constitution and their intrinsic meaning in the everyday lives of Americans, it is difficult for citizens to become invested in maintaining these principles.

⁵ Annenberg Public Policy Center, "Americans' Knowledge of Civics Increases, Annenberg Survey Finds," University of Pennsylvania, September 11, 2025, , <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-knowledge-of-civics-increases-annenberg-survey-finds/>

⁶ American Bar Association, "ABA 2025 Survey of Civic Literacy," accessed May 19, 2026, https://www.americanbar.org/news/reporter_resources/civic-knowledge-survey/.

ANALYSIS OF PROJECT FINDINGS



Stefani

"The government is always changing. It's very volatile. You have no idea. The citizen doesn't have any idea of what's normal, you know, what they can expect. So, when I turn on the news and go, okay, what am I going to expect today? I have to really ask myself, is this a smoke and mirror moment? Is this to throw me off balance? Do I know who I am and what I believe?"

Americans know they are being manipulated by political rhetoric and sensationalized media.

Americans recognize they are being divided and forced into adversarial positions yet remain susceptible to these polarizing messages. This pervasive horserace mentality transforms American politics into a sporting event, with headlines that label Republican and Democrat candidates as "winners" and "losers" in campaigns and in negotiating legislation. *Social identity theory*⁷ tells us that people tend to identify with certain groups in order to validate their sense of self or self-concept. They then tend to favor themselves favorably (*in-group*) compared to other groups (*outgroup*), which can lead to stereotyping, bias, and prejudice against the outgroup. While as humans, we have always needed to feel a sense of belonging, the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid pace of technological and social change these days may have increased our need to identify with our in-group to cope with the anxiety of an ever-changing world. When political rhetoric characterizes the other party's behavior as a threat, the amygdala center of the brain activates emotional responses in an individual which bypass conscious, logical thought. This exacerbates a cognitive blind spot social psychologists call *myside bias*,⁸ where people only search for information to validate their "team's" position. The result is binary thinking, where every legislative action or court ruling is seen as a win for one political party and a loss for the other.

True governing is the result of cooperation and compromise over differences. However, compromise is seen as weakness in today's political environment rather than the foundation of good governance. The media's fixation on winners and losers

⁷ Saul McLeod, "Social Identity Theory in Psychology (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)," Simply Psychology, updated October 5, 2023, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html>.

⁸ Keith E. Stanovich, *The Bias That Divides Us: The Science and Politics of Myside Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), <https://direct.mit.edu/books/monograph/5183/The-Bias-That-Divides-UsThe-Science-and-Politics>.

ANALYSIS OF PROJECT FINDINGS

focuses on the political outcomes for the parties rather than the consequence for the American people, furthering the belief that elected officials serve their team's interests rather than the public's interests. This in turn further alienates the public from the very institutions meant to serve them. In our focus groups, both sides of the political spectrum have felt unfairly vilified and judged because they have been labeled "woke" or "fascists" for opinions instead of anyone asking them why they felt a particular way. This has caused many to become defensive, positional, and to be reluctant to engage in a healthy dialogue about differences.



Brent

In our climate today, there's a tribalism of wanting to identify with the winners or the team. And there's almost a perception of weakness if you don't take a side or if you don't stand up for your belief."

Americans have become less trusting of objective facts.

Public trust in science was stable for more than fifty years but is now 10% lower than before the pandemic.⁹ While science still holds higher trust ratings than other institutions, part of this decline has resulted from politicized rhetoric around vaccines, women's health, gender issues, and climate change.¹⁰ Additionally, Harvard and Stanford education researchers have described a "learning recession" that has been present since 2013 where "student progress in math and reading have stalled and achievement began to decline."¹¹ This pattern extends to the public's poor knowledge of civics and government functions. While some people know there are

⁹ Alec Tyson and Brian Kennedy, "Public Trust in Scientists and Views on Their Role in Policymaking," Pew Research Center, November 14, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2024/11/14/public-trust-in-scientists-and-views-on-their-role-in-policymaking/>.

¹⁰ Manjana Milkoreit and E. Keith Smith, "Rapidly Diverging Public Trust in Science in the United States," *Public Understanding of Science* 34, no. 5 (2025): 616-627, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625241302970>.

Erik C. Nisbet, Kathryn E. Cooper, and R. Kelly Garrett, "The Partisan Brain: How Dissonant Science Messages Lead Conservatives and Liberals to (Dis)Trust Science," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 658, no. 1 (2015), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002716214555474>.

¹¹ Daniel C. Dewey, Erin Fahle, Thomas J. Kane, Sean Reardon, and Douglas O. Staiger, *From Learning Recession to Learning Recovery: Understanding the Sources of U.S. K-12 Improvement* (Education Scorecard, May 2026), https://educationscorecard.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Education_Scorecard_May_2026_Report.pdf.

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three branches of government¹² or that Congress is responsible for making laws, very few understand exactly how these government functions actually work. This knowledge gap creates the opportunity for disinformation or political mischaracterization, which can further the decay in trust in our government systems.

There has also been a proliferation of cable news programming and a vast network of news outlets, social media sites, podcasts, Substack articles, and blogs that have created a flood of curated information about the world which has made it difficult for the average American to discern objective, factual news from the commentary, analysis, and opinion pieces that are tailored to their existing beliefs. This environment, compounded by the spread of misinformation and disinformation by political operatives and foreign influences with AI and bots, along with the political rhetoric of “fake news” has degraded confidence in a shared set of national values. In this media environment, we have a great deal more information, but a great deal less knowledge. A great deal more data, but a great deal less wisdom.

While Americans have always disagreed over plans and policies, they are now routinely exposed to misinformation and disinformation that calls into question the validity of established science on climate change, Covid-19, and vaccines. The distortion of truth has not been limited to science. Up to thirty-seven states have adopted restrictions on discussing our country’s history of racism and slavery. The term “fake news” is now bandied about freely by politicians across the political spectrum to discredit any information that disfavors a candidate, official, policy, or action.

In 1951, historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt identified the proliferation of misinformation and declining trust in a shared objective reality as *the* mechanism by which leaders create totalitarian rule:

“The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.”

“In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true. ... Mass propaganda discovered that its audience was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow. The totalitarian mass leaders based their

¹² U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, “New Study Finds Alarming Lack of Civic Literacy Among Americans,” February 12, 2024, <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/civics/new-study-finds-alarming-lack-of-civic-literacy-among-americans>.

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propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness."

-The Origins of Totalitarianism¹³

The availability of information in news and social media feeds has personalized the world for Americans.

The proliferation of internet access in the last fifteen to twenty years has meant that at any moment, we can pull out our phones or open a laptop and access controversial issues in communities far from our own. In our focus groups, many of the respondents who had the strongest reaction to crime and immigration issues lived in areas without high crime rates or any large immigrant populations. The strongest reactions to perceived racist legislation in Southern states came from respondents in more liberal venues. Yet, with alerts and algorithms that channel articles and news alerts to our pockets continuously during the day, a single clicked on article or video can channel additional stories to our feeds. Then, with the 24/7 news cycle, these news stories are accompanied by opinion pieces discussing the implications of the news story and inform the reader, listener, or viewer that they may well want to feel the same as the commentator. Most of these news stories tend to highlight the negative aspects, as it is well documented that outrage and anger tends to drive the clicks and views that produce higher ad revenue than positive news¹⁴. Thus, a single story about a transsexual athlete or a Confederate monument, amplified by the news and politicians, can become a larger social, moral, and deeply felt issue for an individual that previously has not given the issue much thought.

While these five attitudes tend to be the main influences on how our focus group respondents reacted to the discussed issues, there were a number of additional Constitutional, democratic, and governing principles that are important to discuss.

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, with a new introduction by Anne Applebaum (New York: Mariner Books Classics, 2024).

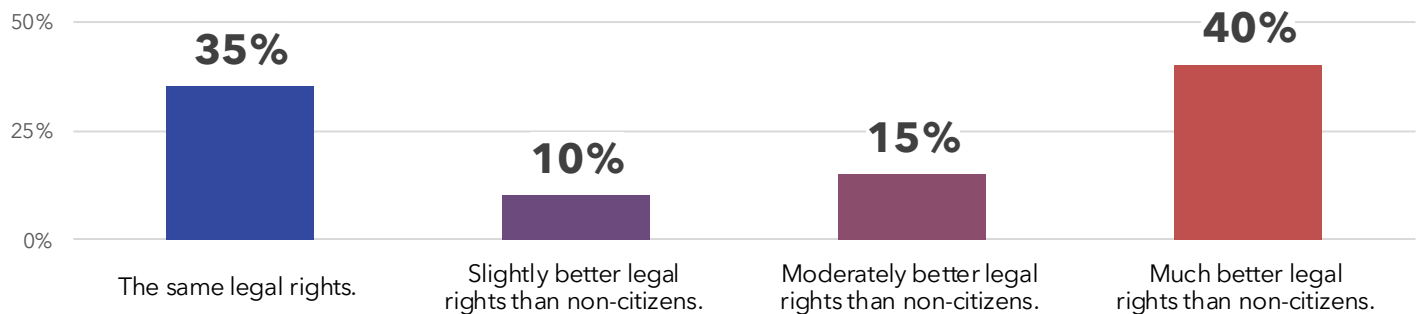
¹⁴ Claire E. Robertson et al., "Negativity Drives Online News Consumption," *Nature Human Behaviour* 7, no. 5 (2023): 812-822, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10202797/>.

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Immigration

One of the most significant differences between Republican and Democrat respondents in our focus groups and our survey was the issue of immigration. Our country was founded by immigrants, and an estimated 100 million immigrants have come to our country since 1783¹⁵. Yet 65% of our survey respondents believe that U.S. citizens should have better legal rights than non-citizens, and more than 20% feel that *birthright* citizens should have fewer legal rights.

As compared to non-citizens, U.S. citizens should have:



For those who are most troubled by immigration, many feel that immigrants should come to this country “the right way” – but are refusing to do so. Many of these respondents believed that most immigrants come here to take advantage of the system rather than understanding the reasons that may cause a person to emigrate to the U.S., including poverty, persecution, and corruption they may have faced in their country.

Some of these same respondents believe that this country is too diverse, and that sentiment is expressed across respondents of various races, ethnicities, nationalities, and religions. As one focus group participant said, “*We’re the United States of America, not the Diverse States of America. Too much diversity limits your strength.*”

However, the respondents in our Hispanic groups decried the violence of ICE targeting Central/South American immigrant communities. They also criticized the Supreme Court’s allowance of racial profiling by immigration officials¹⁶ and expressed feeling scapegoated to give President Trump’s voter base an easy target to fear in order to serve his political agenda.

¹⁵ David J. Bier, “Over 100 Million Immigrants Have Come to America Since the Founding,” Cato Institute, October 4, 2018, <https://www.cato.org/blog/over-100-million-immigrants-have-come-america-founding>

¹⁶ *Noem v. Vasquez Perdomo*, No. 25A169, 606 U.S. ___ (2025) (Kavanaugh, J., concurring), https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/24pdf/25a169_5h25.pdf.

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Religion

Three quarters of our respondents do not believe that the United States should promote Christianity or any other religion as the country's primary religion. Yet some voiced concern that Christianity itself was under attack and in need of more governmental protection. This perception may have prompted President Trump to establish a White House Faith Office¹⁷ to "protect religious liberty", as well as a White-House-backed prayer rally (Rededicate 250) on the National Mall in Washington D.C., and the administration establishing a Justice Department Task Force on Anti-Christian Bias¹⁸. Additionally, numerous states, including Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Utah, have implemented religious study into their school curriculum¹⁹. At the same time, there have been increasing incidents of prejudice against Muslim and Jewish faiths²⁰ some of it fueled by the October 7, 2023, Gaza attacks and war.²¹



Eva

"I'm a Christian, but I don't believe it should be pushed on these people, these children whose parents might have different religions. Religion is equal. We all can have different religions. One of you guys could be Muslim, a Satanist, or other things, and guess what? That's okay. I don't care. I believe everybody should be given the right to choose their own religion."

¹⁷ The White House, "Protect Religious Liberty," accessed May 19, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/priorities/faith/>.

¹⁸ The White House, "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Eradicates Anti-Christian Bias," February 6, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-eradicates-anti-christian-bias/>.

¹⁹ National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, "Where This Has Been Implemented," accessed May 19, 2026, <https://www.bibleinschools.net/Where-This-Has-Been-Implemented.php>.

²⁰ Shibley Telhami, *Trends in Prejudice Toward Jews and Muslims: Comparison to Other Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Groups*, Study no. 14, University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll (University of Maryland, December 17, 2025), <https://sadat.umd.edu/sites/sadat.umd.edu/files/Critical%20Issues%20Poll%20December%2017%202025.pdf>.

²¹ Avery Ruxer Franklin, "Religious Discrimination Toward Jews and Muslims Rose After Oct. 7 Attacks, Study Shows," Rice University News and Media Relations, December 15, 2025, <https://news.rice.edu/news/2025/religious-discrimination-toward-jews-and-muslims-rose-after-oct-7-attacks-study-shows>.

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Free Speech and Free Press

Most focus group respondents believe strongly in the First Amendment right to free speech and a free press, but as one participant stated, “*freedom of speech is not freedom of consequences.*” Some of the respondents in the specifically recruited strongly conservative Republican focus groups believed that some restrictions were appropriate to keep the media in check. However, most were responding to the current heated political rhetoric and what some believed were unfair attacks on President Trump. Many of the respondents in our survey and our groups advocated for constitutional reforms, not understanding the ramifications of how restrictions on free speech or a free press would operate if a Democratic President or Congress was in office.

When the United States Constitution was signed in 1787, there were approximately sixty newspapers serving approximately four million people in thirteen states. Today, there are over 5,400 newspapers, 700 hundred stand-alone digital sites and 850 network operated sites, 349 television stations, more than 900 radio stations affiliated with public media,²² as well as countless podcasts, Substack articles, and streaming social media feeds. Now add chatbots and artificial intelligence, which raise an entirely new question about whether AI or non-human communication qualifies as free speech. Social media platforms are so large that if, as a private company, they choose to edit the content of any of their users, they are accused of censoring free speech. The term “fake news” is now routinely used by government officials and the general public to describe reporting that contradicts their individual world view, eroding the integrity and credibility of objective fact.

We arguably have more free speech and more free press now than at any point in our history. This vast trove of available “news” and “opinion” in every pocket can create information overwhelm in the average American. This drives people to selectively choose their information channels to validate their own personal world view and to dismiss news sources or opinions that contradict that view.

In 1789, unless you stood on a soapbox on a street corner or wrote a letter to the editor of the New York Daily Gazette, you did not have much of a public voice. Now, we need only pull out our phones, type a few characters, and can potentially be heard by millions of people. As a public, we have been encouraged by news sites and social media to have opinions on the news we hear. When we issue those opinions, others may have opinions about our opinions. As a result, many feel caught between wanting to freely speak their minds yet being afraid to state their opinions because of the permanence, judgement, and backlash that can occur from

²² Zach Metzger, *The State of Local News 2025* (Evanston, IL: Medill Local News Initiative, Northwestern University, 2025), <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2025/report/>.

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potentially viral internet “speech.” This tension may be driving some to seek some sort of regulation of speech and press, while still wanting to preserve the value of freedom of expression.

Presidential Power

While the three branches of government share equal power under the Constitution, the public hears more about the President than Congress or the judiciary. This leads many to believe that the President runs the country, so by necessity, he or she should have the most power. Our more conservative survey and focus group respondents were more receptive to giving President Trump unilateral decision-making power, believing a President should be able to carry out his or her agenda, despite Congressional or judicial wishes. These days, we do not have many models on the national level for collaboration and compromise. As most in the general public do not understand the arduous and complicated process of passing bills, making laws, and testing those laws in court, it is easier for them to think of a primary decision-maker, the President, as the one who makes, bends or shapes the law. The Supreme Court’s grant of broad immunity for a President’s official acts²³ has reinforced this perception for many, suggesting an ability to challenge or reshape existing laws, despite our survey respondents’ views that a President should obey existing laws. For some respondents, President Trump was elected to do the job he wanted to do. They see either Congressional or judicial opposition to his agenda as impediments to the President’s stated job, as opposed to a natural part of the governing process.

Many respondents believe that the FBI and the Department of Justice *should* operate as independent agencies yet feel these agencies will always be influenced by the whims and preferences of a sitting President, Republican or Democrat. Many drew a parallel between President Trump’s explicit desires to prosecute his political enemies and what they saw as politically motivated prosecutions in the Biden administration.

Use of Military Force and Criminal Justice

Following the deployment of federal troops in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Minneapolis to support the Trump administration’s immigration enforcement efforts, the American public is unsupportive of the administration using military enforcement for domestic situations. Some respondents felt this was an effort of the administration to control the public and a fundamental breach of trust in local

²³ Trump v. United States, No. 23-939 (2023). https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/23pdf/23-939_e2pg.pdf

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government. As one participant put it, "It's controlling. It's like we are prisoners." Others, however, expressed concern about political violence and the perception of crime ridden cities touted by the Trump administration. Some more conservative members of our survey and focus groups believed that homelessness, drug addiction, and state governments that are "soft on crime" have contributed to a crime crisis overwhelming local police, necessitating the involvement of the military or federal law enforcement. This also points out the continued disparity between public perception of crime and the significant drop in actual crime statistics.²⁴ Some felt that ICE and law enforcement officers were being wrongfully attacked and need the protection of the military to calm down volatile situations. A few were willing to entertain the suspension of due process rights in times of a perceived national crisis.

Some of our more conservative participants expressed a desire for stricter criminal punishment measures to exert control and act as a crime deterrent, although research has clearly shown that harsher sentences such as the death penalty have never acted as a deterrent.²⁵ At the same time, all groups expressed a desire for criminal justice reform.

Judges and the Judicial System

Despite the judiciary's concerted efforts to appear independent and impartial, a majority of the public believes that Federal judges are political appointees and are ideologically aligned with whomever appoints them to the bench. Because they serve lifetime appointments, our respondents believe they are more likely to make political decisions to support whatever administration has appointed them. While our survey showed that two-thirds of Americans believe the Supreme Court makes decisions only on the Constitution and established law, two-thirds also believe that the Supreme Court is influenced by what President Trump wants and a third believe that the Justices make decisions according to their personal beliefs. They believe the Supreme Court is willing to overturn precedent to accomplish ideological or political goals. This is illustrated by Justice Clarence Thomas, who recently cited progressivism as a threat to American democracy,²⁶ and the frequent news reports that discuss how the "conservative vs. liberal" justices have voted. Many of our more progressive respondents in the focus groups saw the Supreme Court as creating

²⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "FBI Releases Historic Early Look at Annual Crime Data," May 13, 2026, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/fbi-releases-historic-early-look-at-annual-crime-data>.

²⁵ Death Penalty Information Center, "Deterrence," accessed May 19, 2026, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/policy-issues/policy/deterrence>.

²⁶ The University of Texas at Austin, "U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas Delivers Special Lecture at UT Austin," YouTube video, 1:33:49, posted April 17, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OI0igGDF9-Q>.

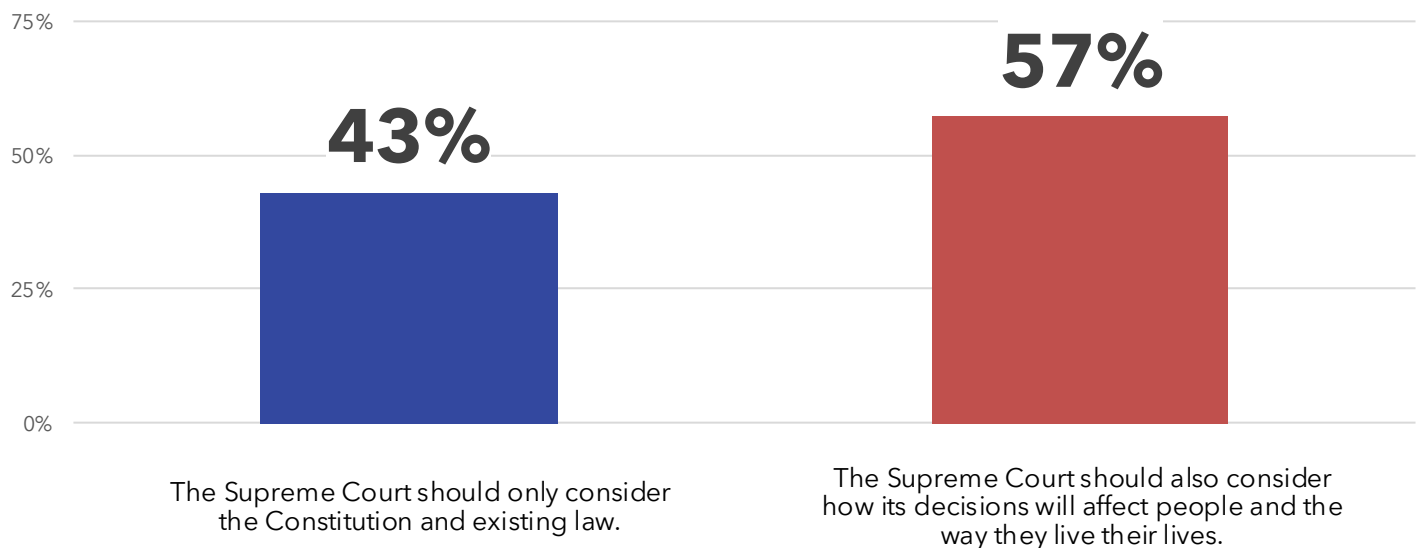
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what they saw as ideological rather than legal rulings on a number of social issues such as abortion rights, voting rights, and money in politics.

A majority of Americans believe the Supreme Court should consider how their decisions will actually affect people and the way they live their lives today, as opposed to being focused on what the Founding Fathers intended when they wrote the Constitution. Thomas Jefferson believed that the U.S. Constitution should be constantly updated, stating, *“We seem not to have perceived that, by the law of nature, one generation is to another as one independent nation to another... Every constitution, then, and every law, naturally expires after nineteen years. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force and not of right.”*

His belief was that previous generations of lawmakers should not be able to use a “dead hand” to bind future generations. Today, most Americans believe that judges in general are out of touch with how most Americans live their lives. Several of our respondents cited the “arrogance of black robe syndrome” in how judges see regular people. As many feel judges are old and remote from the experiences of citizens, all of our focus group participants voiced the need for term limits for federal judges as well as the Supreme Court.

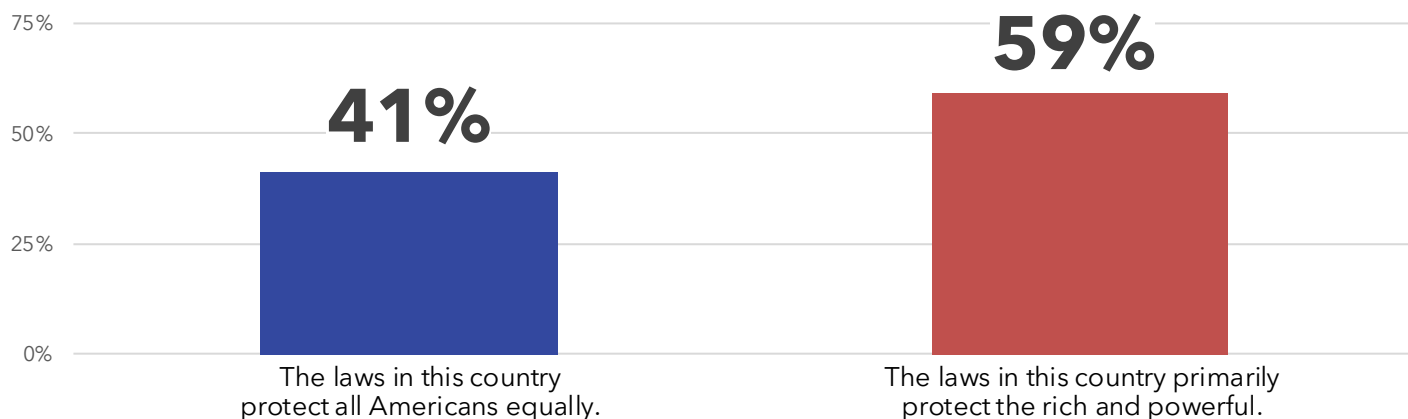
Which of the following statements BEST reflects your opinion about Supreme Court decisions?



These opinions also mirror the findings in our 2024 Trust in Justice report. In both projects, our respondents believe the justice system is far from just. They believe that money and race affect almost all case outcomes and the system does not adequately address mental illness that is present in many criminal cases. As one focus group participant said, *“With the justice system, you’re ok if you’re rich and white.”*

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Which of the following statements best reflects your opinion?



Authoritarianism

One of our more striking survey findings is that nearly one in five Americans (18%) would somewhat or strongly favor authoritarian over democratic rule. This response was *after* a description explaining how a single leader would control all government institutions including the military, the media, the courts, and education, as well as favoring nationalistic and religious ideals over immigrant and minority populations. Today, nearly 70% of Americans are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in the United States²⁷ and two-thirds believe that a weakened democracy is a critical threat to United States' interests.²⁸

History offers lessons on how populations become receptive to changes in government. In the 1930s, mass unemployment and poverty during the Great Depression led many Americans to question our capitalist system; this fueled the growth of Communism in the United States to protect worker's rights and level the economic disparity between wealthy and poor Americans, as well social welfare programs such as the Social Security Act and the Unemployment Compensation system. On a darker historical note, after World War I, many Germans were outraged at the reparations they had to pay per the terms of Versailles Treaty. It created rampant inflation and dire financial conditions in Germany during the 1920s. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 then halted American loans to Germany, leading to mass bankruptcies and unemployment in that country. The financial ruin in Germany destroyed the public's faith in the centrist government and allowed Adolph Hitler to come to power, blaming the Jewish financiers, Communists, and suspending civil liberties under an emergency decree.

²⁷ Jonathan Schulman and Richard Wike, "Multiple Indicators Show a Decline in the Health of America's Democracy in 2025," Pew Research Center, April 15, 2026, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/04/15/multiple-indicators-show-a-decline-in-the-health-of-americas-democracy-in-2025/>.

²⁸ Lama El Baz and Debi Jin, "Americans Fear Weakening Democracy in the United States," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, November 20, 2025, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americans-fear-weakening-democracy-united-states>.

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Governments rely on the self-sustaining mythology they build around their founding documents, and the United States is no exception. The United States Constitution was in part inspired by the Magna Carta. But while the document that was signed in a field in Runnymede, England in 1215 is commonly known as the birth of common law, its origins were far narrower than its legacy suggests. The Magna Carta was drawn up to protect the rights of rebel barons in England after King John attempted to extort taxes from them to fund his disastrous war to reclaim land he had lost in France. Neither King John nor the rebel barons intended for the document to apply to the common subjects in their baronial lands. Recently, historian Heather Cox Richardson was interviewed about the Declaration of Independence. In that interview, she makes it clear that the phrase, "All men are created equal" was intended to mean that all *white landowning men were created equally*.²⁹

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison debated the tension between majority rule and minority rights when they were creating the Constitution and echoes of that tension still sound today in Presidential elections, Supreme Court rulings, and voter redistricting. Madison believed in the plurality of the United States, writing in Federalist No. 10, "*Extend the sphere, and you will take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens.*"³⁰

The preamble to the Constitution states, "*We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union...*" The size of the first three words tells us whom the Founders believed were important.



Any founding document is by definition aspirational. When the Founders wrote, "*...in order to form a more perfect Union...*", they had little to draw on beyond the writings of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the tumultuous rule of Athenian democracy and the Roman Republic as a model for our country.

²⁹ C-SPAN, "Heather Cox Richardson on 'contradiction at the heart of who we are as Americans,'" posted May 7, 2026, YouTube Short, 1:28, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/onniGNN0n6E>.

³⁰ James Madison, "The Federalist No. 10," in *The Federalist Papers*, November 23, 1787, Avalon Project, Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp#:~:text=If%20a%20faction%20consists%20of,the%20rights%20of%20other%20citizens.

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Dissatisfaction with the direction of the United States has been building for years, fueled by economic disparity, lack of opportunity and advancement, disillusionment with government, rapid technology growth, social isolation, an adversarial political environment, and lack of consensus about basic values and objective facts. A recent Gallup poll found that people who spend more time on social media have less faith in democratic ideals.³¹ While a vast majority of Americans still believe in the basic tenets of democracy, when they don't see the promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" fulfilled, the public can easily look at alternative government structures like authoritarianism to, as one respondent said, "*Maybe it will make it work better.*" Authoritarian structures are also somewhat familiar to Americans. In business and education, a boss or teacher essentially makes all the rules and requires performance without any buy in or say so from workers or students.

Democracy is complicated. Democracy takes dedication and patience. It involves compromise and collaboration with people whom you sometimes vehemently disagree. Democracy is an imperfect governing mechanism in constant search for that more perfect union.

Democracy requires both discipline and hard work. It is not easy for individuals to govern themselves."

- Eleanor Roosevelt

³¹ Ellyn Maese and Jeffrey M. Jones, "Social Media Use Linked to Mixed Views on Democracy," Gallup, March 31, 2026, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/704198/social-media-linked-mixed-views-democracy.aspx>.

What Can We Do?

Any evaluation of public sentiment on such broad issues as democracy, the Constitutional principles, and governance is bound to be incomplete. And it is easy to be cynical and fatalistic in today's political and social climate. However, the goal of this report is to recognize the numerous influences on public opinion and to provide ideas and recommendations, no matter how impractical, to improve the comprehension, participation, and choices of American citizens.

1. Conversation is the Cure

While the internet and news media amplify the appearance of differences and division among the American public, we believe there is hope for greater unity through engagement. Our focus groups participants said they found it comforting to be able to have an open, civil, and respectful conversation about tough social issues with others that both agreed and disagreed with their positions. In these discussions, the participants naturally looked for and found areas of agreement instead of engaging in issue-driven invective and positional conflict. Within a group, relationships form between members, and with that relationship comes an interest in finding common ground.

This parallels one of the most elegant designs of our 6th and 7th Constitutional Amendments: the jury trial - where a representative cross-section of the community listens to a case and decides its outcome in deliberations. When people sit down in a real or virtual room to discuss their respective positions face-to-face - which on paper appear to be insurmountable differences of opinion - their positions start to soften as they seek to find more common ground. One of the greatest frustrations expressed by our groups is that the leaders of our country in Congress and on the Supreme Court cannot seem to work together for the common good of their constituents.

Moderated community forums can provide an opportunity for citizens to learn from leaders about governance and legal systems and respectfully discuss their concerns.³² Research has consistently shown that positive intergroup interaction reduces in-group/out-group stereotypes and prejudice.³³

³² Living Room Conversations, "Home," accessed May 19, 2026, <https://livingroomconversations.org/>.

Braver Angels, "Home," accessed May 19, 2026, <https://braverangels.org/>.

³³ Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006): 751-783, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>.

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2. Awareness of Shared Identity

When negotiators attempt to resolve disputes between parties, they look to find areas of common agreement. Despite the widespread belief that Americans are hopelessly polarized, most actually agree on a great number of the fundamental values enshrined in the Constitution. When we asked focus group participants what they loved most about America, three distinct themes emerged: freedom, opportunity, and diversity. Promoting shared values among different political factions can reduce bias toward that group.³⁴ Additionally, setting shared goals (such as political transparency, bipartisan cooperation, accountability, etc.) can also reduce intergroup conflict.³⁵



Drew

"I feel like it really comes down to a lack of empathy and lack of human compassion to realize that people on the other side are, at the end of the day are just like you. They might not believe what you believe. They're still people, they still got families they still gotta provide for, they still gotta go to work. They're really not that different from you at all."

3. Education

Many of the responses in our focus groups and in the survey reflected a misunderstanding of Constitutional principles or government operations. It is important to redesign our civics instruction to help the public understand the working mechanics of government as it functions in their lives, as opposed to the simple facts and figures about historical dates and number of Congressional representatives, branches of government, Supreme Court justices, etc.

For example, at present, we are engaged in a conflict in Iran. Seventy percent of our respondents believe that President Trump should get Congressional approval before ordering bombings or drone strikes on other countries. But most don't know

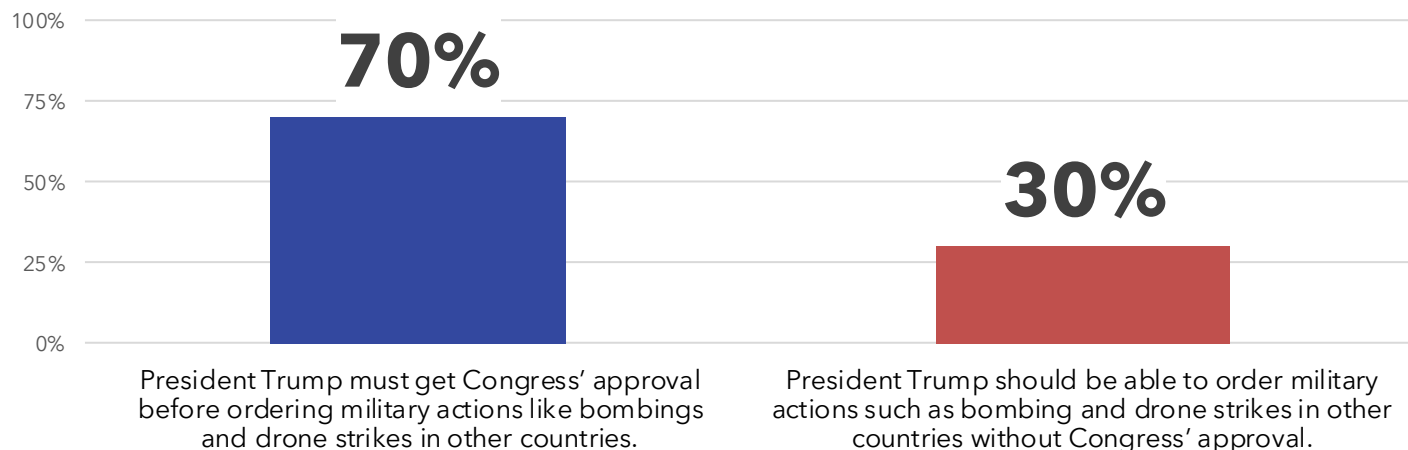
³⁴ Samuel L. Gaertner et al., "The Common Ingroup Identity Model: Recategorization and the Reduction of Intergroup Bias," *European Review of Social Psychology* 4, no. 1 (1993): 1-26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779343000004>.

³⁵ Muzafer Sherif, O. J. Harvey, B. Jack White, William R. Hood, and Carolyn W. Sherif, *Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robbers Cave Experiment* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Book Exchange, 1961), https://www.academia.edu/37438218/Intergroup_Conflict_and_Cooperation_The_Robbers_Cave_Experiment_Classics_in_the_History_of_Psychology_An_internet_resource_developed_by_Intergroup_Conflict_and_Cooperation_The_Robbers_Cave_Experiment.

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how a President goes about getting Congressional approval or how Congress debates giving that approval. Having context for these decisions will help the public better understand how they feel about a war in Iran where the President has not gotten Congressional approval.

Under the U.S. Constitution, only Congress can declare war on another country. President Trump has recently ordered bombings in Iran and drone strikes on boats in Venezuela without Congress' approval. Which of the following do you MOST believe?



The burden of education should also fall on the media reporting on individual news stories such as the war in Iran or Supreme Court decisions, as well as the politicians who are passing legislation or laws. While C-SPAN may stream live Congressional debates, the general public will generally only get the spin about why a particular law or decision is a good or bad idea rather than the decision-making process that led to the decision. The media can also refocus its coverage on how these issues affect the public rather than the horserace commentary about how these Presidential decisions, bills or legislative actions aid or hurt the political parties. While many in the public may not be interested in "how the sausage is made," the availability of context for the public will elevate the debate above the binary good/bad characterization and help the public better understand how that law or legislation will affect their lives. Celebrities should also be encouraged to make public interest videos explaining the Constitution and the operations of government. For example, a celebrity or prominent leader like actor Andrew Garfield or Secretary of State Marco Rubio telling their personal stories of birthright citizenship can help citizens better understand the 14th Amendment.

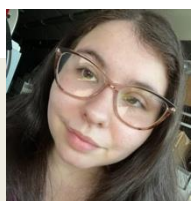
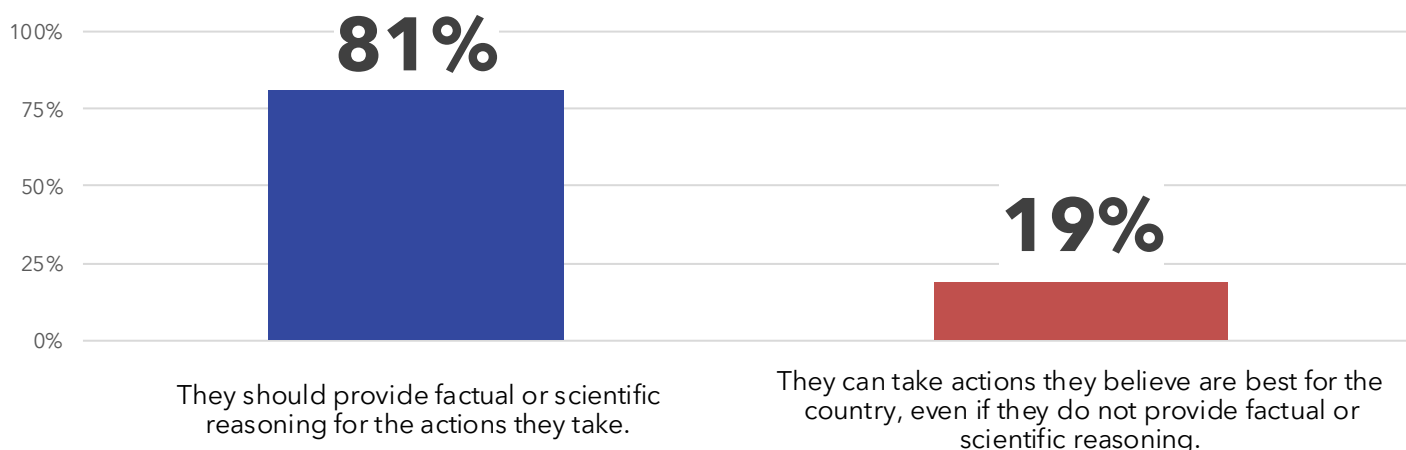
Additionally, all Senators, Congressional Representatives, Supreme Court Justices, and federal judges should have to answer questions from middle and high school students at least twice a year. The decisions that are made by these

ANALYSIS OF PROJECT FINDINGS

representatives affect future generations, and they should be answerable for these decisions.

While the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*³⁶ decision by the Supreme Court has not put any limits on campaign spending, Congress could pass a bill that mandates that half of all contributions go toward educating the public on the issues being decided.

In actions taken by the Trump administration, such as health care, education and climate change, which of the following do you MOST believe?



Eva

"I'd rather be educated than convinced."

4. Accountability and Transparency

The current 119th Congress has had difficulty passing meaningful legislation or intervening when President Trump has made unilateral decisions that bypass the legal role of Congress. Past Congresses have encountered similar political gridlock, resulting in public frustration and historical lows in trust ratings. Many legal disputes are resolved through mediation. Instead of accepting unproductivity as a Congressional norm, international mediators or arbitrators could be brought in to resolve disputes between the parties on legislation provided they have no partisan ties. Mediation is by definition about looking for compromise solutions. If partisan politics prevents legislators from voting for a bill they believe is a good idea, a neutral third party should be employed to help negotiate a solution for the American people.

³⁶ *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, No. 558 U.S. (2010), https://www.fec.gov/resources/legal-resources/litigation/cu_sc08_opinion.pdf

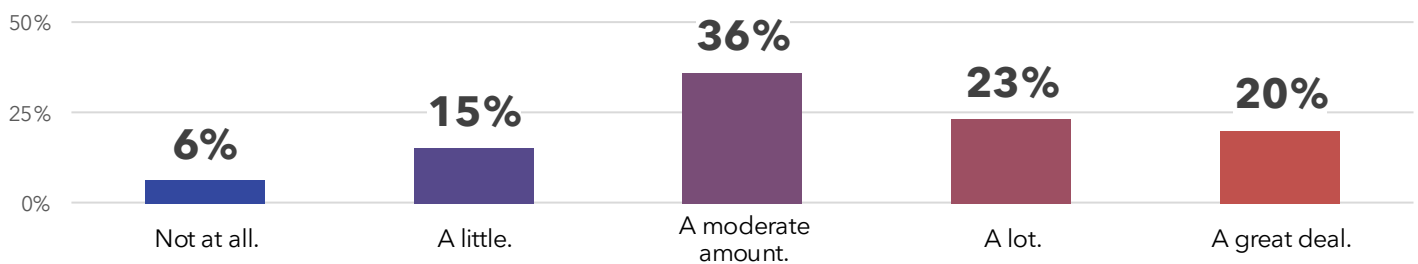
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In order to restore some measure of credibility to our elected representatives, there must be consequence for political statements that are clear misrepresentations or lies. Lawyers can be held in contempt of court for false statements because all statements made in court are made under penalty of perjury. While the First Amendment and the shadow of political retribution would prevent any criminal action against a politician, public censure or a docking system should be in place to prevent political lies, misinformation, or disinformation. The public is reliant on the accuracy of our representatives' statements. There should be a consequence when those statements are false.

While it has been resisted by the Supreme Court, it is time to allow cameras in to record and livestream Supreme Court arguments. Seventy-nine percent of Americans believe that Supreme Court decisions affect them and the people in their lives a moderate amount to a great deal. They should be entitled to see the arguments that are made by the different interested parties and the questions that the Justices ask that may inform their ultimate decision.

The Supreme Court has also increasingly used the shadow docket to make decisions while providing little or no reasoning for those decisions. Parameters should be put in place to reduce the use of this practice. The public is entitled to know the reasoning behind these decisions.

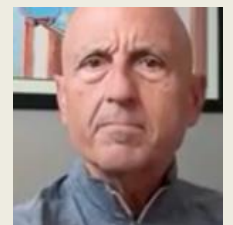
How much do decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court affect you or the people in your life?



Francis

"We're all held to the standard. And even if you are the president, a congressman, a senator, a lawyer, you're held to an even higher standard because you're supposed to be following the law to show others how they should follow the law."

"And then unfortunately, we've lost the art of compromise, and we've lost the art of listening and considering other viewpoints to be, to be able to make things better. It's almost sad to hear that compromise isn't even in the vocabulary anymore. And if you could institute some sort of way to have members in our government be forced to develop relationships with each other, I think you'd find more progress, because it forces understanding. America has always been based on feedback, communication and consideration."



Brent

5. Fostering Critical Thinking and Media Consumption

We all need to become more skilled at understanding the news and media we consume. We know how certain foods affect our health, yet we are less discerning when it comes to our cognitive and emotional health. It starts with asking ourselves basic questions. Is what I'm reading opinion or fact? Does the statement or headline want to elicit an emotional reaction from me? Does the article want me to take a side? How does it apply to my life? Does it make sense? Does it provide a thorough enough factual basis to support the proposition? Is this statement or article even coming from a person, or is it AI? These are the types of questions we need to ask ourselves to start becoming more sophisticated and healthier in our media consumption, as well as more informed as citizens. In order to see, you have to really look. In order to hear, you have to really listen.



Stefani

"The only thing I can rely on is who I am. So, when media or different politicians come at me, and try to manipulate that mindset for me, I, as a citizen have to be very firm and really ask myself, am I being overpowered by something?"

Conclusion

When the United States Constitution was signed on September 17, 1787, there were three million people in thirteen states and voting was restricted to white male landowners, roughly 6% of the population. At that time, there were 89 lawmakers in Congress and six justices on the Supreme Court. The values laid out in the Constitution applied to a small portion of the population, which made participatory democracy more localized. Now, there are 342 million people in fifty states, 155 million people cast their ballots in the 2024 election, and there are 535 voting members of Congress and nine Supreme Court Justices.

July 4th of this year marks the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The founding of this country and the writing of the Constitution was an extraordinary act of imagination on the part of the thirty-nine men who signed their names to that document at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. All government is an exercise in social order, and the Constitution was an attempt to express the identity of a new country and how its people wanted to live and be treated. Over more than two centuries, that document has been interpreted in various ways to express how Congress, the President, and the Supreme Court believe this country should be run. But what has become clear in this research is that the leaders of the country have grown increasingly detached from the people they represent. The power that comes with leadership is addictive, blinding, and delusional.

The question for the American people is whether we are electing and appointing men and women for how *they* want to run our country, or how *we* want them to run our country. And what do we really want? Who do we really want to be? Do we want to be defined by our fear and anger, or by our hope and promise? Do we want to live more isolated lives or build more connected communities? Do we believe more in scarcity or abundance? Do we want to be defined by division or unity? Would we be willing to give up certain freedoms to feel safer from perceived threats? The answers to these questions create choices. We can choose a more authoritarian path. But we should know what we are choosing.

The United States Constitution begins with the words "*We the People...*", yet most Americans do not have the experience of how the Constitution, democracy, or how the rule of law truly operates. As long as we are a democratic republic, it is incumbent on our leaders to see the American people and to listen to their needs. And it's up to us to decide how we want to be defined as Americans.

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Response Differences by Political Party Affiliation

Presidential Power and Control

- 12% of Republicans strongly favor authoritarian rule over democratic rule, a view shared only by 4% of Democrats.
- 46% of Democrats think Congress is completely controlled by President Trump, among Republicans, that number drops to 8%.
- 51% of Republicans think the Supreme Court makes decisions only on the law, compared to only 13% of Democrats.
- 35% of Republicans think President Trump should be able to direct the FBI to investigate people and organizations he considers a threat, while only 9% of Democrats agree.
- 29% of Republicans, but only 6% of Democrats, think President Trump should be able to direct the Department of Justice to prosecute people he believes have committed a crime.
- 55% of Republicans think President Trump should be able to use executive orders to overturn laws passed by Congress if he believes it is in the country's best interest, versus 18% of Democrats.
- 23% of Republicans think President Trump should be able to order lethal military actions against other countries under any circumstances without Congressional approval. Conversely, 71% of Democrats think Congressional approval should always be required.
- 59% of Republicans think President Trump should be able to suspend due process rights in limited circumstances. However, 78% of Democrats believe due process right should be suspended under no circumstance.
- 29% of Republicans think a President should be able to order military force on U.S. citizens whenever he thinks it is necessary, while only 5% of Democrats and Independents agree.
- More Republicans (39%) than Democrats (21%) and Independents (19%) think the government should be able to restrict speech it considers harmful.
- 42% of Republicans think the government should be able to restrict press coverage it considers harmful, only 16% of Democrats and 22% of Independents say the same.

Response Differences by Political Party Affiliation

Presidential Power and Control

- 38% of Republicans think the government should promote Christianity or any particular religion as the country's primary religion, versus 15% of Democrats.
- 44% of Republicans, but only 16% of Democrats, think the federal government should control election procedures in the states.
- 53% of Republicans think ICE should be able to deport anyone they consider a national security threat without a court hearing. Far fewer Democrats agree, at 10%.
- 24% of Republicans think ICE should be able to use violent or deadly force whenever they feel stopped or prevented from doing their job, a view only shared by 9% of Democrats and Independents.
- Republicans and Democrats see the balance of power very differently. 35% of Republicans believe the President should have more power than Congress and the courts. 29% of Democrats believe Congress should have the most power. 53% of Democrats and 64% of Independents favor equal power across the three branches, compared to 45% of Republicans.

Upholding the Constitution

- 71% of Democrats think President Trump does a very bad job of upholding the Constitution, while 74% of Republicans think he does a somewhat or very good job.
- 57% of Democrats think Congressional Republicans do a very bad job of upholding the Constitution, while 69% of Republicans think they do a somewhat or very good job.
- 32% of Republicans think Congressional Democrats do a very bad job of upholding the Constitution, while 61% of Democrats think they do a somewhat or very good job.
- 63% of Republicans think the Supreme Court does a somewhat or very good job of upholding the Constitution, while 48% of Democrats think it does a somewhat or very bad job.

Response Differences by Political Party Affiliation

Equal Rights

- 62% of Republicans think citizens should have much better legal rights than non-citizens, while 54% of Democrats think citizens and non-citizens should have the same legal rights.
- 39% of Republicans think birthright citizens should have fewer rights than citizens whose parents are U.S. citizens. The number drops to 9% of Democrats who agree.
- 17% of Republicans think straight people should have much better legal rights than LGBTQ+ people. Among Democrats, only 3% say the same.
- 12% of Republicans and 7% of Democrats think men should have better legal rights than women.
- 13% of Republicans think white people should have better legal rights than people of color, while only 7% of Democrats agree.
- Republicans (87%) and Democrats (89%) agree that people with more money should have the same legal rights as those with less money.