

November 1, 2023

**TO:** Katie Langford, Pell Center  
**FROM:** Jessica Mason, Embold Research  
**RE:** Rhode Island Survey Results



On behalf of the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy, Embold Research conducted a poll among 887 registered voters in the state of Rhode Island in order to understand voters' perceptions of polarization and the health of democracy in the United States.<sup>1</sup> This research found that while a majority of voters highly value their American identity, trust in the government, both at the state and federal levels, is notably low. This mistrust is exacerbated by strong partisan divisions, with Democrats and Republicans identifying different threats to democracy. This research also found a strong concern for increasing polarization, with most voters believing it has intensified over the last five years and expecting it to worsen in the future. Moreover, in addition to these concerns, Democrats' and Republicans' perceptions of both the causes of polarization and of each other are deeply partisan.

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## Trust and Identity in Politics

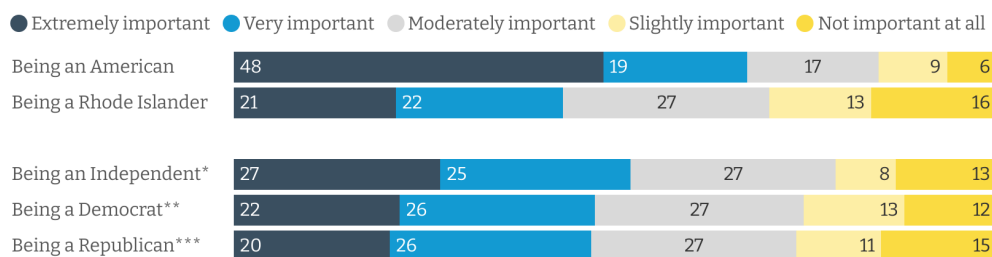
**National, state, and political identity is a central component of many voters' identities.** Two-thirds of Rhode Island voters say that being an American is highly important to their identity, with 48% saying that it's "extremely important." A strong majority also believes that being a Rhode Islander is an important part of their identity, however, this sentiment carries less intensity than does national pride: 43% say that it is an extremely or very important aspect of their identity, while 27% say it's moderately important and 13% say it's only slightly important. Political identity also forms a key part of personal identity for a significant portion of Rhode Island voters, regardless of their political affiliation: 48% of Democrats, 52% of independents, and 46% of Republicans say that their political affiliation is extremely or very important to their identity.

**Despite a strong sense of national pride, a majority of voters do not have faith in the current systems of American government.** Just over half (51%) of voters say that the US system of democracy is "not at all healthy." Smaller, but still significant, portions say that our democracy is slightly (25%) or moderately (18%) healthy. In contrast, just 6% believe that it is extremely or very healthy.

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<sup>1</sup> On behalf of the Pell Center, Embold Research surveyed 887 registered voters in the state of Rhode Island from October 12-17, 2023. Respondents were recruited via dynamic online sampling and SMS text-to-web sampling to attain a sample reflective of the electorate. Post-stratification weighting was performed on age, gender, ethnicity, education, region, and 2020 presidential vote/party affiliation. Weighting parameters were based on voterfile data. The modeled margin of error is +/- 3.3%.

## Key Aspects of Identity



Q: How important are the following aspects to your identity?

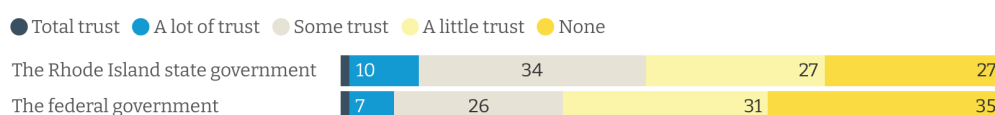
\* Asked only of self-identified Independents

\*\* Asked only of self-identified Democrats

\*\*\* Asked only of self-identified Republicans

**Rhode Islanders are hesitant to trust the state and federal government.** When asked how much they trust the Rhode Island state government to work in the best interest of the common citizen, a plurality of voters (34%) say they have some trust, while 27% say they have a little trust, and another 27% say they have no trust. Only 11% of Rhode Islanders report having a lot or total trust in their state government. This lack of faith in government to be able to work in the best interest of the common citizen is even stronger at the federal level: Only 8% of voters say they have total trust or a lot of trust in the federal government, while 26% say they have some trust, 31% say they have a little trust, and 35% say they have no trust in the federal government at all.

## Trust in Government

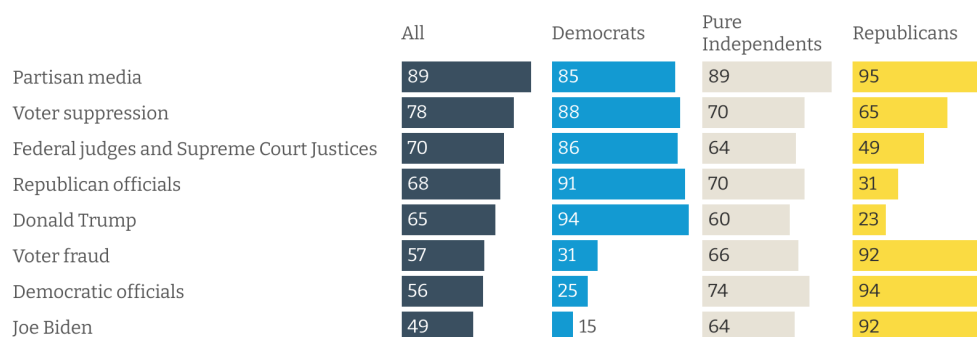


Q: How much trust do you have in each of the following to work in the best interest of the common citizen?

**While voters are relatively united on the poor health of American democracy, identifying the threats that cause that poor health is a deeply partisan issue:** Overall, majorities of voters on both sides see partisan media (89%) and voter suppression (78%) as big threats to democracy. However, partisanship dictates what is perceived as a top threat. For Democrats, the biggest threats to democracy are Donald Trump (94% very/somewhat big threat), Republican officials (91%), and voter suppression (90%). In comparison, Republican voters believe Joe Biden (95%), Democratic officials (94%), partisan media (94%), Democratic officials (94%), and voter fraud (94%) are the biggest threats to democracy.

## Top Threats to American Democracy

Total very/somewhat big threat



Q: How big of a threat to our democracy are each of the following?

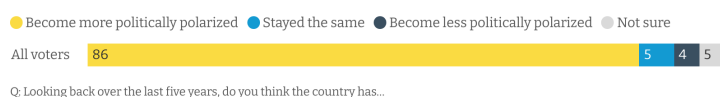
## Polarization

**A significant majority of voters believe that polarization has increased over the last five years, and many voters believe that these political divides will only deepen as time goes on.**

Most voters (86%) believe that over the last five years, the country has become more polarized, while only 5% say that polarization has stayed the same, and 4% say that polarization has decreased.

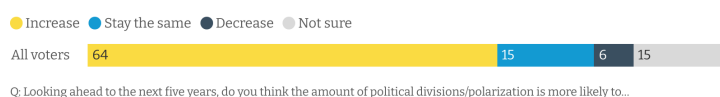
Moreover, voters are doubtful that polarization will ease in the short term: 64% of voters believe that the level of political polarization will increase in the next five years, 15% say it will stay the same, just 6% believe it will decrease, and 15% are unsure.

### Polarization in the US



Q: Looking back over the last five years, do you think the country has...

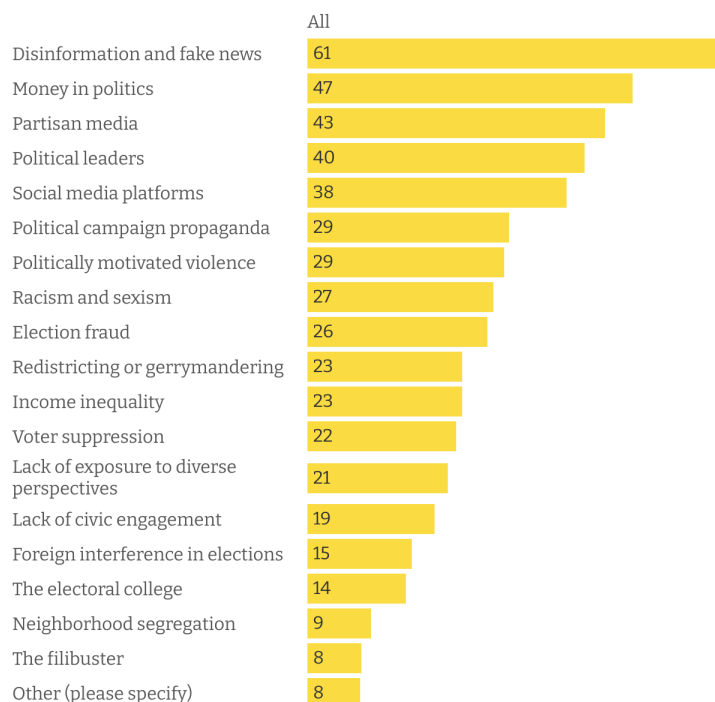
### Future of Polarizaion



Q: Looking ahead to the next five years, do you think the amount of political divisions/polarization is more likely to...

**A strong majority of voters, regardless of political affiliation, see disinformation and fake news as one of the strongest contributors to polarization.** When asked what are the strongest contributors to polarization, 61% of voters select disinformation and fake news as one of the top three factors. Significant groups of voters also select money in politics (47%) and partisan media (43%) as top factors of polarization. While these factors are considered top contributors by voters in both parties, 57% Republicans believe that election fraud is also a top contributing factor to polarization, compared to just 12% of Democrats.

## Strongest Contributors to Polarization



Q: What are the strongest contributors to polarization? Please select your top three.

**Across all demographic groups, and regardless of party affiliation, cost of living and inflation concerns are top of mind:** 52% of voters select it as one of the most important problems facing the nation today. Concerns over the cost of living are especially prevalent among voters under 35 (63%) and voters of color (57%). However, other priorities for the country remain a partisan issue: outside the cost of living, Democrats are most likely to select Trump/Republicans (52%), climate change (42%), and gun policies (38%), and healthcare (36%) as top issues, while Republicans are most likely to select Biden/Democrats (64%), immigration (60%), and the economy (42%).

**Voters are also united in believing that an open and transparent government is one of the most important principles of democracy.** Among all voters, “The functioning of government is open and transparent” is most frequently selected as one of the top three most important principles of American democracy (41%). Notably, significant groups of both Democrats (37%) and Republicans (36%) ranked this aspect as a top principle of American democracy. Significant portions of voters also select, “All adult citizens have an equal opportunity to vote” (39%) and “All adult citizens enjoy the same legal and political rights” (38%) as one of their top three most important principles.

## Democrats and Republicans alike are most likely to be considered more dishonest and close-minded than other Americans, but the relative intensity varies: 75% of all voters say that Republicans are

somewhat or very close-minded, and 69% say that Republicans are somewhat or very dishonest. In comparison, 66% of voters say that Democrats are somewhat or very close-minded, and 65% say that Democrats are somewhat or very dishonest. On the flip side of the coin, majorities of voters hold Republicans in high regard for their work ethic, and Democrats in high regard for their intelligence: 62% of all voters say that Republicans are not at all lazy compared to other Americans, and 54% say that Democrats are not at all unintelligent compared to others.

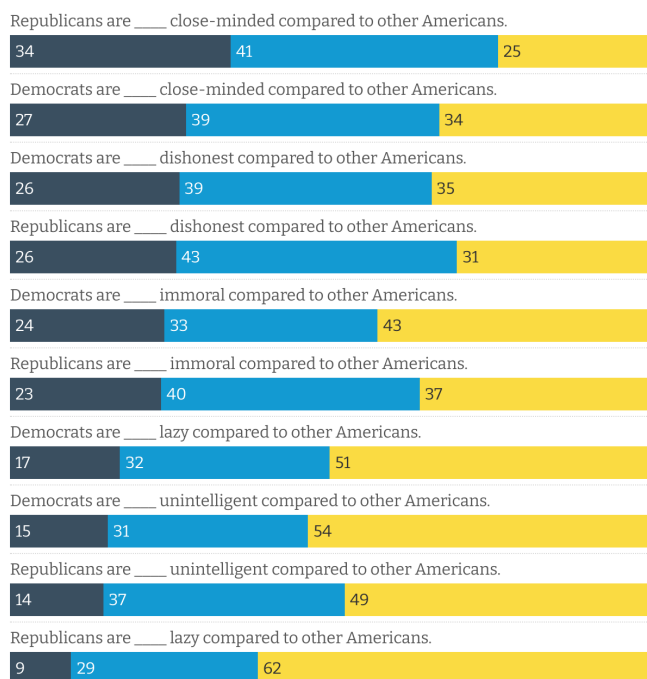
## Democrats and Republicans alike are much more likely to have a favorable opinion of their own party compared to others.

Similarly, each party is likely to consider members of the other party in a much more negative light. For example, 62% of Republicans see Democrats as very close-minded, while only 4% see members of their own party to be very close-minded. In contrast, 59% of Democrats believe it is Republicans who are very close-minded, and only 2% of Democrats believe that those of their own party are very close-minded.

## Perceptions of Democrats and Republicans

Sorted descending by very

● Very ● Somewhat ● Not at all

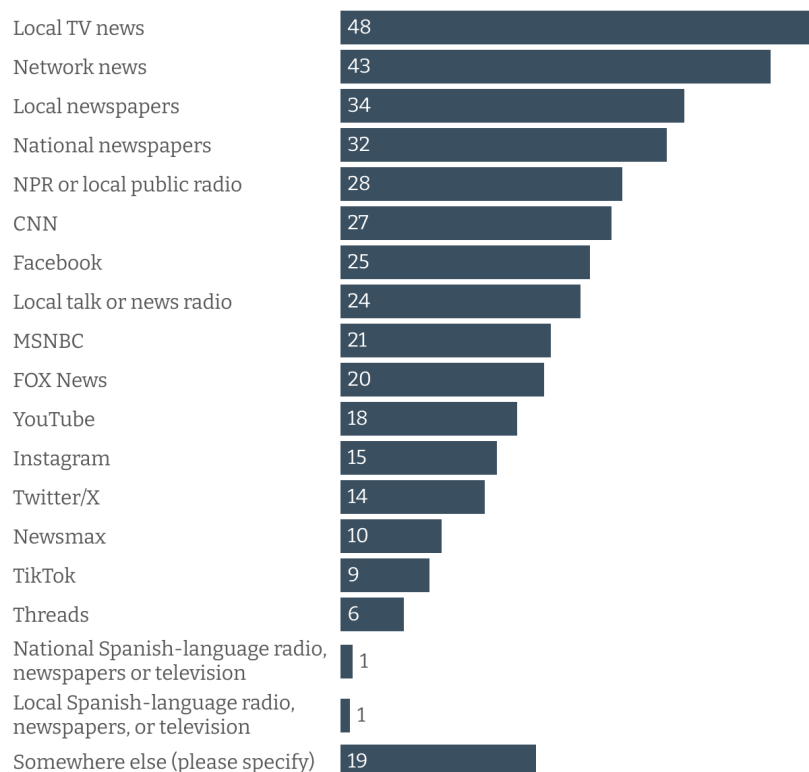


Q: Would you say:

## News Consumption

**Rhode Islanders get their news through a variety of sources.** Significant groups of voters say they get most of their news through traditional mainstream sources such as local TV news stations (48%), network news stations (43%), and local newspapers (34%). Notably, nearly one in five voters say they get most of their news outside of common social media and news outlets, most often citing international publications (such as Al Jazeera and the BBC) and podcasts as go-to sources. Where voters turn to for their news varies by gender and age: women are much more likely to consume network news than men, and a significant portion of voters under 35 turn to social media sites like Instagram (42%), YouTube (34%), Twitter/X (30%), and TikTok (25%) for news, while very few voters over 35 do the same.

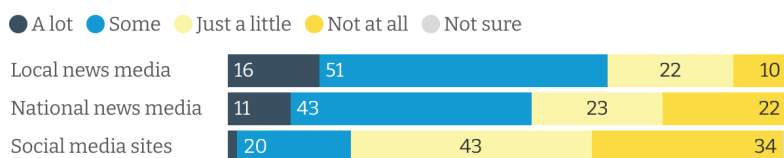
## Most Consumed News Sources



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

**Despite the variety of news sources voters access, there is widespread hesitancy among voters to trust what they see, hear, and read.** Voters are most trusting of local news media, however, this trust is tenuous: just 16% of voters say that they trust local news media a lot, while 51% trust it some, 22% trust it a little, and 10% don't trust it at all. Voters show similar, but slightly lower levels of trust for national news media: 11% trust it a lot, 43% trust it some, 23% trust it a little, and 22% don't trust it at all. Voters are most wary of social media: only 2% of voters say that they trust social media sites a lot as a news source, while just over a third (34%) don't trust social media at all.

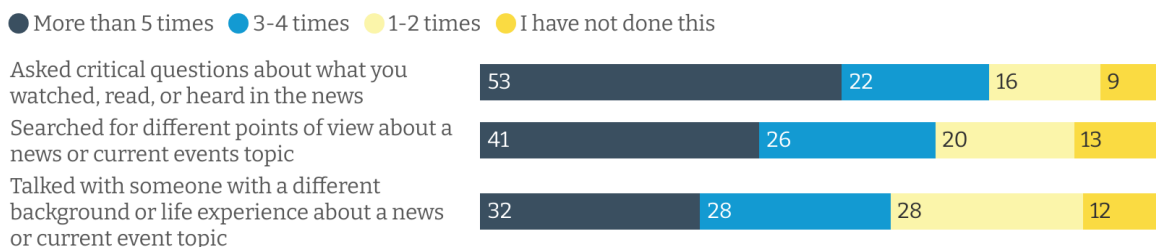
## Trust in News Sources



Q: How much trust do you have in the information you get from...

**While a majority of voters have frequently asked critical questions about the news they are consuming, a significant proportion of voters have had minimal experience interacting with different viewpoints and backgrounds on current events topics.** Just over half of voters (53%) say they have asked critical questions about what they watched, read, or heard in the news at least 5 times, while 21% say they have done so 3-4 times, 16% say they have done it 1-2 times, and 9% say they have never done so. In comparison, 41% report searching for different points of view about a news or current event topic more than five times, and 32% say they have talked with someone with a different background or life experience about a news or current event topic more than five times. Interestingly, Republicans report higher levels of engaging in news outside their bubble: Republicans are nearly twice as likely (39%) to say they have talked to someone of a different background or life experience about current events compared to Democrats (21%).

## Interactions with Other Viewpoints



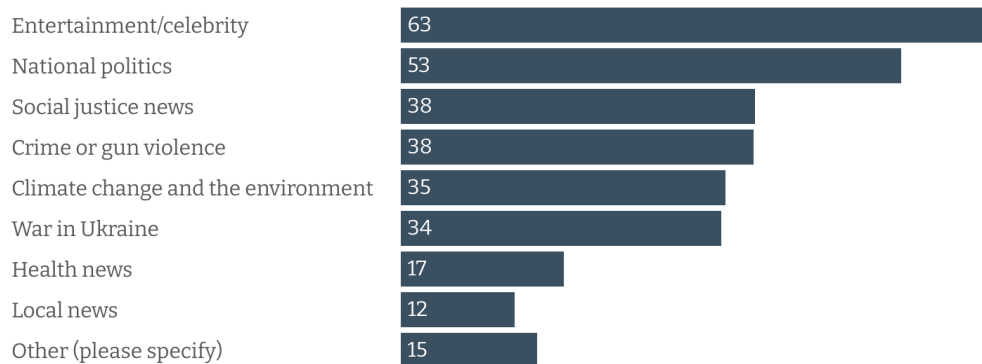
Q: How many times in the last month have you:

**A majority of voters (69%) find themselves avoiding the news at least some of the time.** When asked if they actively try to avoid the news, 28% of voters say yes, 41% say sometimes, and 31% say no. Women and voters under 50 are more likely to avoid the news than their counterparts. Additionally, independent voters are more likely to avoid the news compared to voters with a partisan affiliation.

**When asked what news topics they choose to avoid, entertainment news (63%) and national politics (53%) rise to the top among those who say they avoid the news.** A significant proportion of voters also select social justice news (38%) and crime or gun violence (38%) as topics they purposely avoid. Topics most commonly avoided differ by party affiliation: outside of entertainment news, Republicans are most likely to say they avoid news focused on climate change and the environment (59%), social justice (58%), and national politics (48%). Democrats, meanwhile, are most likely to avoid news on national politics (48%) and crime or gun violence (43%).

## Avoided News Topics

Among those who say they at least sometimes avoid the news



Q: You said that actively try to avoid news these days. Which of the following news topics do you try to avoid? Please select all topics that you try to avoid.

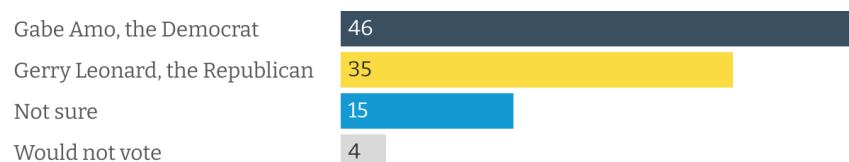
## Upcoming Elections

**In a 2024 election trial heat, 43% of voters say they will vote for Joe Biden, 30% say they will vote for Donald Trump, 19% say they will vote for another candidate, and 9% are not sure or would not vote.** College-educated voters (53%), women (50%), and voters under 35 (48%) are more likely to support Biden, while men (40%) and non-college-educated voters (35%) are more likely to support Trump. Among the nearly one in five voters who opt to support another candidate, the most common write-ins are Nikki Haley and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.; however, a majority of those seeking a third option do not have a candidate in mind.

**In a trial heat of the 1st Congressional District special election taking place this November, 46% of voters say they will vote for Democrat Gabe Amo, 35% of voters say they will vote for Republican Gerry Leonard, and 19% are unsure or would not vote.** Women (58%), college-educated voters (54%), and voters of color (53%) show the highest level of support for Gabe Amo. In contrast, men (49%), non-college-educated voters (40%), and white voters (39%) are most likely to support Gerry Leonard. The results of this trial heat also fall heavily on partisan lines: Only 4% of Democrats say they are considering voting for Republican Gerry Leonard, and 0% of Republicans vote for Democrat Gabe Amo.

### 2023 Special Election

Among 1st congressional district voters





## Conclusion

Rhode Island is currently experiencing a concerning trend of political polarization. Most voters (86%) believe that the United States has become more politically polarized in the past five years, and nearly two-thirds believe that this polarization will only increase in the short term. Additionally, the perspectives of Rhode Islanders on topics such as top issues facing the nation, the current biggest threats to democracy, and key contributors to polarization are deeply partisan. While Republicans and Democrats can both agree that democracy is in peril, they have starkly different views on what threatens American democracy and who is to blame for increased polarization. Moreover, Republicans and Democrats have poor views of one another, each thinking that members of the opposing party are much more close-minded and dishonest than the average American.

In addition to an increase in political partisanship, there is strong resistance to trust the government and media. A majority of voters are hesitant to trust the state and federal government to act in the best interests of the average citizen, and minorities of voters say they have a lot of trust in the news they consume on social media, on national news media, and on local news media.