

The 2023 Polarization Index

A Holistic Analysis of the State of U.S. Political Strife

Katie Langford Sonder
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WRITTEN AND ANALYZED BY

Katie Langford Sonder, Associate Director and Fellow

Pell Center for International Relations at Public Policy, Salve Regina University

Katie Langford is Associate Director and Fellow at the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina University. Langford's current research involves applying conflict resolutions best practices to U.S. political polarization. Langford earned her M.A. in International Peace and Conflict Resolution from American University in Washington, DC and her B.A. in Philosophy from New York University. She has lived and worked abroad in Thailand through the Princeton in Asia fellowship and in Ethiopia as a Peace Corps volunteer.

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UNDERSTANDING POLARIZATION

REPORT METHODOLOGY

Polarization is both a buzzword and a tangible indicator of the state of our nation. We hear how polarized the American public is from our politicians, the media, and our friends and family. We have also experienced the effects of voter suppression, election denial, cancel culture, the January 6th attack on the Capitol, and congressional gridlock.

This Polarization Index was created to help us better understand how polarized the American public is *really*. Grasping the ways in which we are polarized – to what degree and over what issues – and identifying the areas of bipartisan agreement, will give us a stronger foundation from which to make progress.

The following report presents data from a multitude of reputable sources to provide a holistic understanding of partisan polarization in the United States. All analyzed data is weighted to better represent the American public. Links are provided at the bottom of each page and the full source list is at the end of the report.

This report is Part III of four parts. It tackles polarization in the federal government, with a section dedicated to each of the three branches. Parts I and II (September 2023), cover affective and ideological polarization. Part IV, which will be published by the end of 2023, will cover media and disinformation.

The reports will be updated annually to track progress (or the lack thereof) in these areas.

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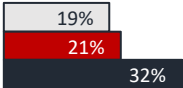
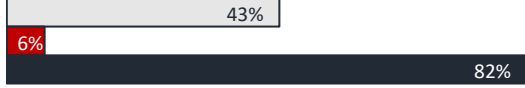
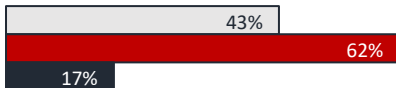


POLARIZATION INDEX: PART III

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Trust and confidence in the federal government has declined among Americans over the past two decades. In 2022, only 20% of Americans trusted the government to do what is right most of the time (compared to 44% in 2002 and 77% in 1964). Most indicators – like approval ratings, trust, and confidence – vary between Democrats and Republicans depending on which party holds power. A Democratic president tends to generate low approval ratings among Republicans, and vice versa. Likewise, Democrats believe the conservative-majority Supreme Court currently has too much power. These partisan gaps – which change over time depending on party power – are indicative of affective polarization: Americans view the opposing party as a detriment to U.S. democracy.

■ Democrats □ Independents ■ Republicans

THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH	THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH	THE JUDICIAL BRANCH																								
<div>Congressional approval rating <i>Gallup, 2023</i></div> <div><table><tr><th>Party</th><th>Approval Rating</th></tr><tr><td>Democrats</td><td>32%</td></tr><tr><td>Independents</td><td>19%</td></tr><tr><td>Republicans</td><td>21%</td></tr></table></div> <div><p>Americans have been critical of Congress for decades, but confidence has reached a low in the last few years. In 2023, 90% of Americans had <i>some or very little</i> confidence in the legislative branch (Gallup, 2023).</p><p>Americans are also skeptical that representatives can pass bipartisan legislation over the next 2 years, though about 90% want to see bipartisan cooperation on the economy, healthcare, and immigration (Morning Consult and BPC, 2022).</p><p>Congress has a long history of passing bipartisan legislation, but its ability to do so has degraded over the last two decades. Between the 87th and 110th Congress (1961-2006), the largest proportion of legislation passed in both chambers had majority partisan support. In the 117th Senate (2021-2022), the majority Democrats forced through over half of the legislation passed, a record high since 1945 (Pell Center analysis).</p></div>	Party	Approval Rating	Democrats	32%	Independents	19%	Republicans	21%	<div>President Biden approval rating <i>Gallup, 2023</i></div> <div><table><tr><th>Party</th><th>Approval Rating</th></tr><tr><td>Democrats</td><td>82%</td></tr><tr><td>Independents</td><td>43%</td></tr><tr><td>Republicans</td><td>6%</td></tr></table></div> <div><p>For decades, Americans have been more likely to approve of presidents who belong to the same party as they do. Bipartisan gaps have grown wider, however. Average percent approval ratings from the in-party have been in the 80s since Raegan (1981-89) (Dunn, 2022). Out-party approval, however, was below 10% for the first time during the Trump administration. It has remained below 10% during Biden’s time in office as well (Gallup, 2023).</p><p>Perceptions of the Biden administration are starkly divided along partisan lines, but both parties are increasingly skeptical that he will be a successful president or that he has changed political rhetoric for the better.</p><p>Projections for the 2024 presidential election show that Biden and Trump are nearly tied for votes. Independents could be the deciding factor and are currently leaning toward Biden.</p></div>	Party	Approval Rating	Democrats	82%	Independents	43%	Republicans	6%	<div>Supreme Court approval rating <i>Gallup, 2022</i></div> <div><table><tr><th>Party</th><th>Approval Rating</th></tr><tr><td>Democrats</td><td>17%</td></tr><tr><td>Independents</td><td>43%</td></tr><tr><td>Republicans</td><td>62%</td></tr></table></div> <div><p>In 2023, the percent of Americans who hold <i>unfavorable</i> views of the Supreme Court is greater than those with favorable views for the first time (Pew Research, 2023).</p><p>Republicans are more likely than Democrats to approve of the current Supreme Court, which has 6 conservative-leaning justices. Over half of Democrats view the court as conservative, while over half of Republicans consider it ‘middle of the road’ (Pew Research, 2022). Over half of Democrats (compared to 12% of Republicans) believe the justices are letting their personal political beliefs influence major case decisions (Pew Research, 2022).</p><p>Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Democrats believe the Court currently holds too much power (vs. only 23% in 2020) and nearly half view it as a threat to democracy (Pew Research, 2022; New York Times, 2022).</p></div>	Party	Approval Rating	Democrats	17%	Independents	43%	Republicans	62%
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Sources: Dunn, [Pew Research Center](#), Oct. 2022; [Gallup](#), 2023; [Gallup](#), 2023; [Gallup](#), 2022; [Morning Consult and Bipartisan Policy Center](#), Feb. 2022; [New York Times](#), Oct. 2022; [Pew Research Center](#), Apr. 2023; [Pew Research Center](#), Sept. 2022.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

AMERICAN TRUST IN THE THREE BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT

Section highlights

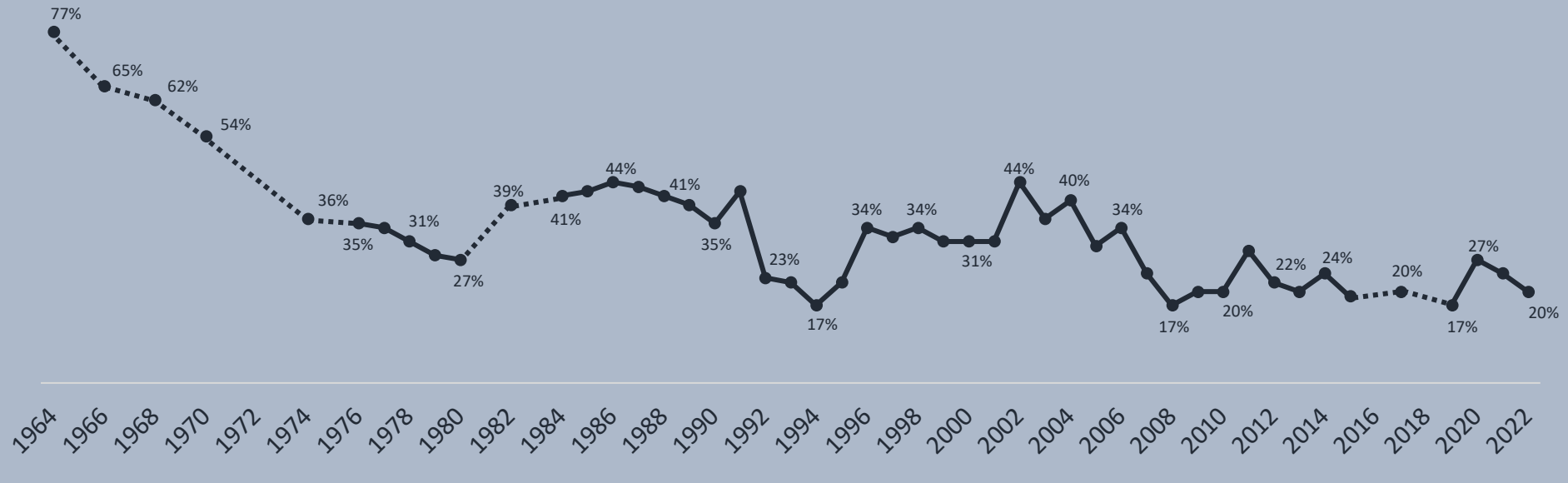
- American trust in the federal government has steadily declined since the late 2000s. In 2022, only 20% of Americans trusted the government to do what is right always or most of the time.
- Trust in the federal government is divided along partisan lines depending on which party holds power in the executive office. However, trust has not reached over 50% of the population since 2004, regardless of party affiliation.
- In 2022, Americans' trust was under 50% for the executive, judicial, and legislative branches. Trust in the judicial branch (47%) is at an all-time low.
- While trust in the government is low among most Americans, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to believe the federal government is not a threat to U.S. democracy, likely because they hold executive power.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TRUST IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

American trust in the federal government has ebbed and flowed throughout the last six decades, often in response to major political events. Since 2002, however, trust has been steadily declining. In 2022, only 20% of Americans said they trust the government to do what is right *always or most* of the time.

% of Americans who say they trust the government to do what is right just *about always/most of the time*

Pew Research Center, 2022



In 1964, over three-quarters (77%) of Americans agreed that the government did what was right most of the time. By the early 1970s, trust began to decline as the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, race relations, and poor economic performance rocked American politics; only 36% of Americans trusted the government to do what is right in 1974. Trust dropped to 27% in 1980 and then rose as high as 34% in the 1990s as the economy grew. The uptick that began in the 1990s reached a high of 44% in 2002, shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Since then, trust has dwindled; it hasn't risen above one-third of the population since 2006 (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Americans adjust their level of trust in the federal government depending on critical contextual factors like economic health and international relations. The explanation for the steady decline in the last few decades is likely more complicated, however. Between 2006 and 2022, a period of 17 years, trust reached over 25% only once. In the 17 years before that, 2005-1989, trust was over a quarter 13 times. Americans generally have less trust in the federal government regardless of the current political situation, which may point to a cultural shift.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TRUST IN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT BY PARTY

TRUST AND POWER

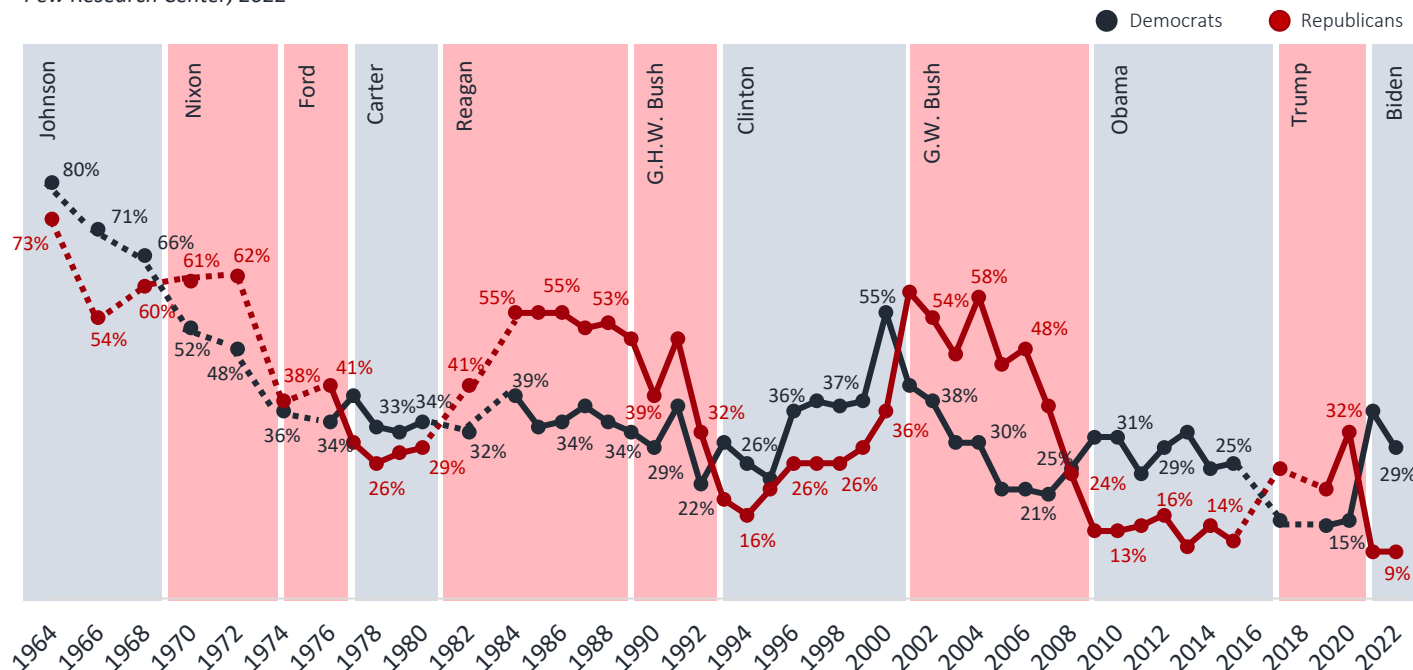
Democrats and Republicans tend to assess U.S. democratic performance according to which party holds power in the executive branch (see Polarization Index Part I, p. 12). In 2022, with President Biden in office, 89% of Republicans believed the country was heading in the wrong direction but only 34% of Democrats agreed (Morning Consult and Bipartisan Policy Center, 2022).

This partisan loyalty has existed since at least the 1960s. For Republicans and Democrats, trust in the government to do what is right spikes when a member of their party holds executive office and dips when the opposition does.

While there were times over the last six decades when levels of trust were similar between the parties, neither party ever exhibited higher levels of trust in executives from the opposition vs. their own party.

% who say they trust the government to do what is right just *about always/most of the time*

Pew Research Center, 2022



Gaps of over 20 percentage points in the level of trust between the two major parties have occurred seven times since 1964; five of these were in the last 20 years. Three of the biggest gaps were in 2004, 2005, and 2006 under George W. Bush's presidency, at 29, 24, and 28 percentage points, respectively.

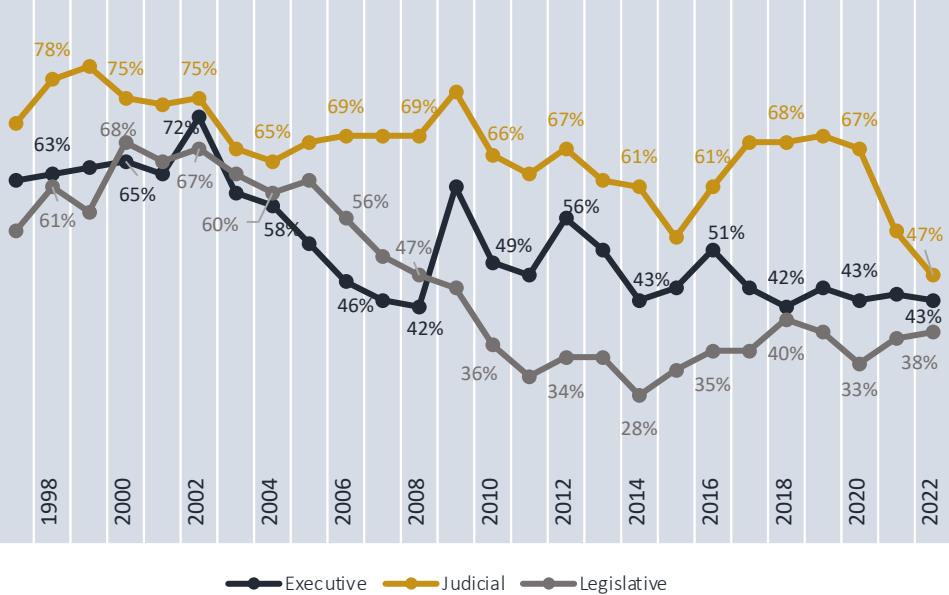
The most recent example of a large gap (27 percentage points) occurred in 2021 at the start of the Biden presidency; 36% of Democrats and only 9% of Republicans expressed trust in the federal government.

Trust has declined in both parties since George W. Bush was president, regardless of the political affiliations of the president; it has not reached over 50% in either party since 2004. Democrats' trust in the federal government dropped 7 percentage points between 2021 and 2022 even with a Democratic president. This mirrors the graph on the previous page, which displays a steady decline in Americans' trust in government.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TRUST IN THREE BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT

In the late 1990s, the majority of Americans trusted the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of the U.S. government a *great deal* or a *fair amount*. By 2022, less than 50% trusted the three branches, as shown in the graph below.

% of Americans' who trust the three branches of the government a great deal/fair amount
Gallup, 2022



Of the three branches, trust has been lowest in the **legislative branch** since 2009. It reached a low of 28% in 2014; while it has risen slightly since then (to 38% in 2022), under half of Americans report trusting Congress.

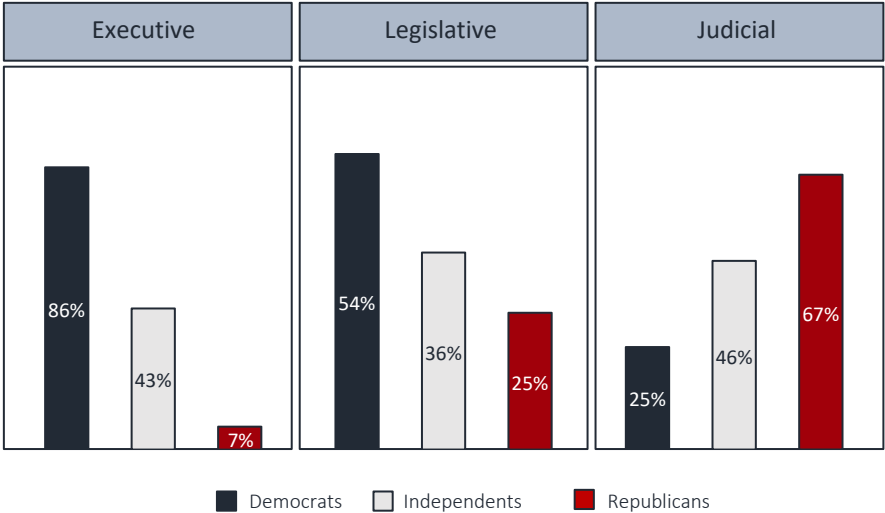
Executive branch trust was well over 50% in the late 1990s and early 2000s before a 4-year decrease during George W. Bush's second term. There was a spike to 61% at the beginning of Obama's first term, but trust has since tapered off with a few minor upticks, landing at 43% in 2022.

Trust in the **judicial branch**, which has remained relatively high since the 1990s, has dropped significantly since 2020. Trust in the Supreme Court dropped below 50% in 2022 for the first time since Gallup began measuring the indicator, to a record low of 47%. The dip is likely caused by recent controversial rulings and several scandals related to the justices' personal relationships.

Partisan gaps in the levels of trust are stark between the three branches. In October 2022, when Biden was president and the Democrats controlled both chambers of Congress, Democrats were much more likely than Republicans to trust the executive and legislative branches. The gap was 79 percentage points for the executive branch and 29 points for the legislative.

Republicans are more likely to trust the judicial branch given its conservative leanings. The 42-percentage-point gap is the largest Gallup has ever measured.

Trust in the three branches of the federal government by party
Gallup, 2022



FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

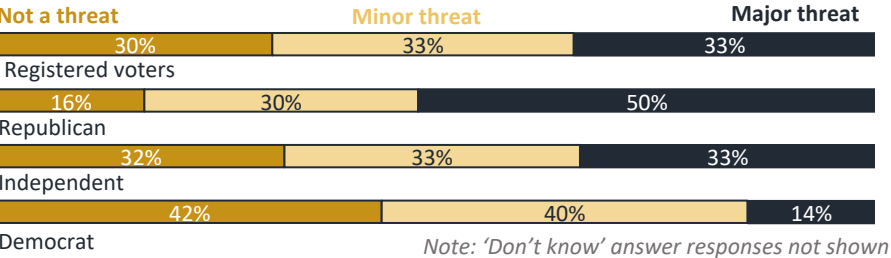
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND DEMOCRACY

Trust in the federal government has been declining among all Americans since the early 2000s. In 2022, only 20% said they trust the U.S. federal government to do what is right just *about always* or *most of the time*. Less than half said they trust the executive, judicial, and legislative branches and trust in the judicial branch is at an all-time low.

While trust among all Americans is low, there are stark partisan divisions. In 2022, Democrats were more than three times as likely as Republicans to trust the government, though both were under 30%. That same year, Democrats reported higher levels of trust in the Democrat-controlled executive and legislative branches, but Republicans had more trust in the conservative-leaning judicial branch.

% who think of the federal government as a ____ to democracy

New York Times, 2022

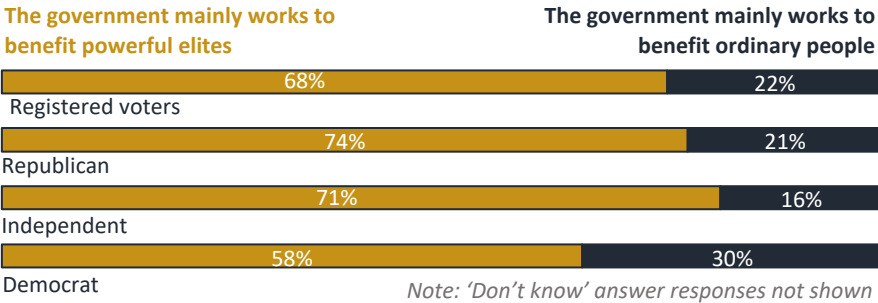


While Americans are nearly evenly split on whether the federal government is a threat to U.S. democracy, Republicans (50%) are over three times more likely than Democrats (14%) to believe it is a major threat.

Partisan divisions recede slightly in some indicators, however. In October 2022, more than half of Republicans, Independents, and Democrats agreed that the government mainly works to benefit powerful elites rather than ordinary citizens. Democrats were slightly less likely than Republicans and Independents to agree – again, likely because they held power in the executive and legislative branches at the time.

Americans' beliefs about who the government benefits

New York Times, 2022

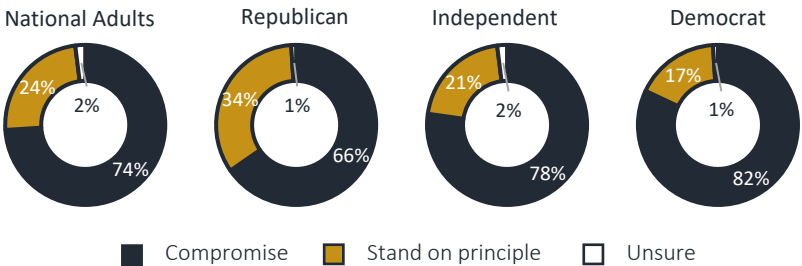


Most Americans, regardless of their party affiliation, agree it is more important for government officials to compromise to find solutions to challenges than to stand on principle, which can lead to administrative and congressional gridlock.

% who think it is important for government officials in Washington to ____

Marist, 2022

Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding



Partisanship certainly shapes Americans' views of the federal government, but most believe the government is not working to benefit ordinary people and that government officials should compromise to address the country's most pressing issues.

THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

PERCEPTIONS OF (AND ACTUAL) BIPARTISANSHIP IN CONGRESS

Section highlights

- Confidence in Congress has been low for decades but has dropped even further in the last few years. In 2022, only 7% of Americans had *a great deal or quite a lot* of confidence in the legislative branch.
- Approval and favorability ratings have increased among Republicans and decreased among Democrats over the last year, though percentages remain low.
- In 2022, over half (58%) of U.S. adults had no confidence that Democrats and Republicans in Congress could work together in a bipartisan manner in the 118th Congress. However, nearly 90% of Americans believe it is important for Congress to pass bipartisan legislation on the economy, healthcare, criminal justice, and immigration.
- Pell Center analysis of bipartisan legislation passed by Congress since 1945 shows that the legislative branch has a long history of bipartisanship, though it has declined over the last two decades. Between the 87th and 110th Congress, a period of 47 years (1961-2006), the largest proportion of legislation passed in Congress was *very bipartisan*. Since 2009, the percent of highly partisan legislation passed has increased. In the 117th Congress (2021-2022), over half of the legislation passed by the Senate was *not bipartisan*, a record high.

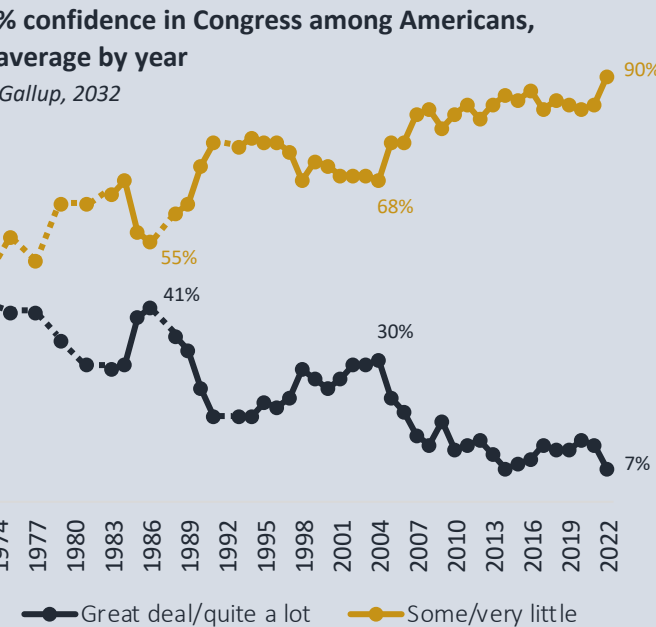
LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

PERCEPTIONS OF CONGRESS

CONFIDENCE IN CONGRESS

Confidence in the legislative branch is low and has been declining for decades. In 2022, only 7% of Americans had *a great deal or quite a lot* of confidence in the branch, while 90% had *some or very little*.

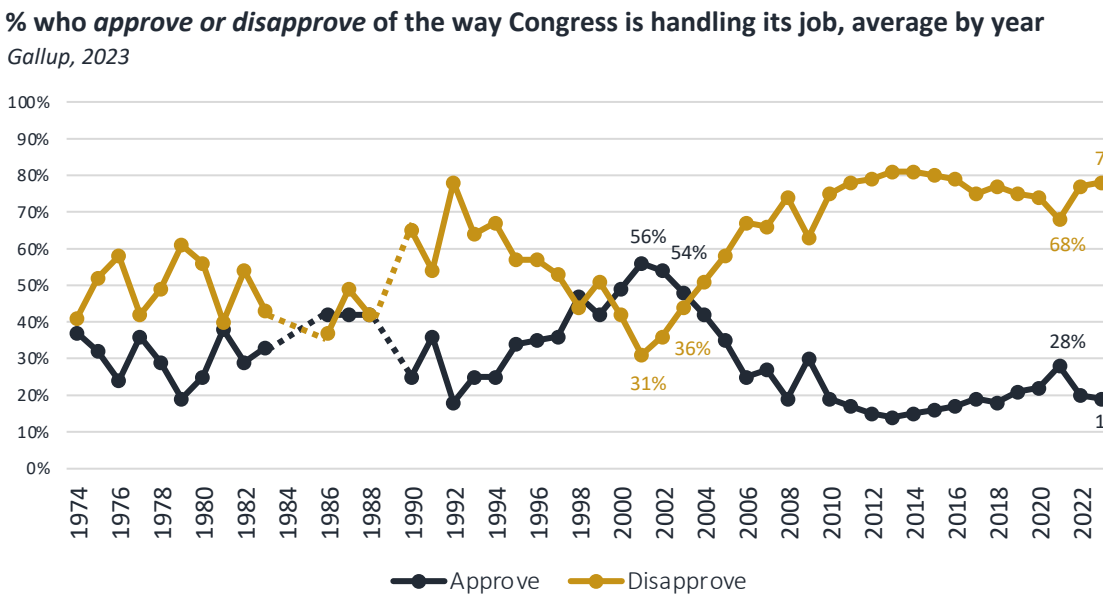
The last time the percent of those with *a great deal/quite a lot* of confidence broke 25% was 2004; it has not exceeded 40% since 1986. At no point since 1974 has the percent of those with *great* confidence in Congress been higher than those with *some or a little*.



APPROVAL OF CONGRESS

The chart below depicts the average approval rating of Congress since 1974. In 2023, over three-quarters of Americans disapproved of how Congress is doing its job; only 19% approved, down from 28% in 2021.

Since 1974, the average approval rating has reached above 50% only twice: in 2001 (56%) and 2002 (54%). In the 50 years since Gallup has been recording this measure, average approval ratings have been 25% or below in almost half of those years (22 times).



Disapproval ratings have been historically high over the last few years: they have averaged 75% or above 12 times in the 13 years since 2010. In the 35 years before that (1974-2009), average disapproval reached over 75% only once, in 1992.

LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

PERCEPTIONS OF CONGRESS

Congressional ratings by party

Gallup, 2023



APPROVAL RATINGS

As the data on the previous page shows, congressional approval ratings have been low since at least since the 1970s. They also tend to change between parties depending on which has control over the House or Senate.

The graph on the left depicts annual average approval and disapproval ratings by party. Information below the graph indicates the congressional session and which party had a majority in the House and Senate.

When Republicans controlled both the Senate and House between 2015 and 2018, Republicans’ approval ratings were 17 percentage points higher than those of Democrats on average. An exception was in 2016, when Democratic approval was 3 percentage points higher than that of Republicans, despite Republican control. Throughout the years of total Republican control, Republican disapproval ratings were still higher than their approval, however.

In 2019, when Democrats took control of the House, Democratic approval ratings increased. When the party had control of both houses in 2021, Democratic approval and disapproval ratings nearly evened out. Like Republicans, Democrats tend to have higher levels of disapproval even when their party has majority.

Between 2022 and 2023, Republicans’ approval ratings increased by 12 percentage points and Democrats’ decreased by 3 points, though Democrats still had higher approval ratings.

FAVORABILITY

In April 2023, 72% of Americans had an *unfavorable* opinion of Congress, up from 64% in August 2019 (Pew Research Center, 2023). This shift was driven by Democrats and Democratic-Independents. Their favorable views of Congress dropped 14 percentage points between 2019 and 2023 (42% to 28%). Republicans increased their approval of Congress during this time (from 21% to 26%).

LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

PERCEPTIONS OF BIPARTISANSHIP

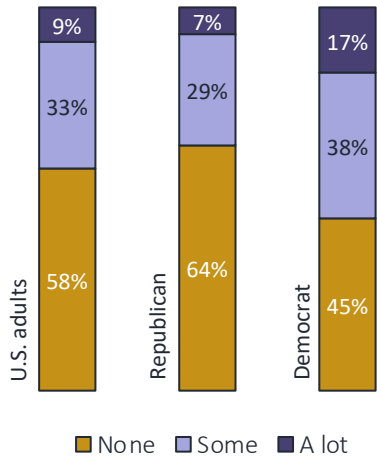
CONFIDENCE IN CAPACITY FOR BIPARTISANSHIP IN CONGRESS

According to a 2022 Marist poll (highlighted on page 10), three times as many Americans believe it is more important for government officials to compromise (74%) than to stand on principle (24%). Over half of Republicans and Democrats agreed on the importance of compromise, though over twice as many Republicans believed it was more important to stand on principle.

The same Marist poll asked participants if they were confident that Democrats and Republicans in the 117th Congress could work together in a bipartisan manner. Over half (58%) reported *no confidence*. In 2008, only 23% had *no confidence* and nearly half had at least *some confidence* in the members’ ability to work across the aisle.

% confidence Democrats and Republicans in Congress will work together in a bipartisan way over the next 2 years

Marist, 2022

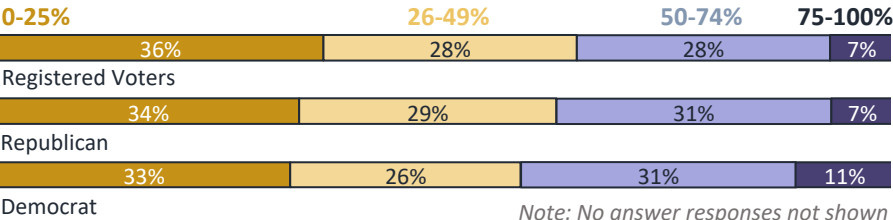


Republicans were more likely than Democrats to have no confidence in bipartisanship. When this data was collected, Democrats controlled both houses of Congress. Given the data on the previous slide from 2023 which shows declining Democratic opinions of Congress, this bipartisanship data may look different if collected today.

In 2022, 36% of Americans estimated that less than a quarter of the legislation passed by Congress is bipartisan; Republicans (34%) and Democrats (33%) agreed at similar rates.

Estimate of bipartisan legislation passed by Congress

Morning Consult and Bipartisan Policy Center, 2022

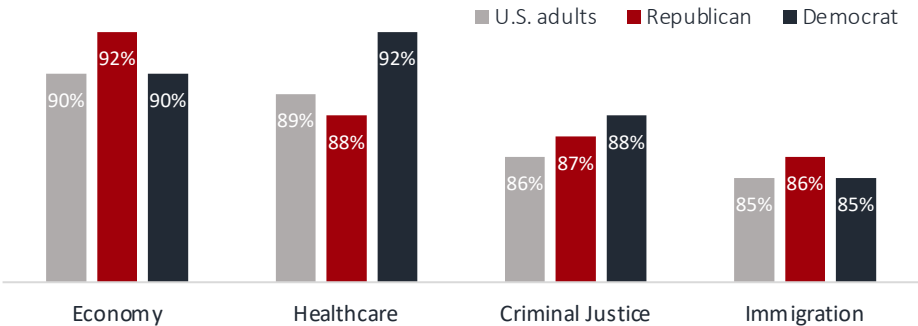


Note: No answer responses not shown

Despite this perception of Congress’ inability to work together, Americans want to see compromise on several important issues. Nearly all Americans (90%) think it is *very* or *somewhat* important for representatives to work together to pass legislation on the economy, for example.

% who believe it is important for Congress to pass bipartisan legislation on the following issues

Morning Consult, Bipartisan Policy Center, 2022



LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

FROM PERCEPTION TO REALITY

CALCULATING BIPARTISAN SCORES

Americans perceive Congress’ effectiveness as low. They have low confidence, little approval, and a mounting distrust that representatives can work together, even though compromise on major issues is a high priority.

Perceptions and beliefs can provide important information about the American psyche, especially since national and international factors like the economy or war can change opinions (see p. 7). Americans also adjust their support for Congress depending on whether the party they support holds a majority. This points more to the malleability of ideological beliefs than Congress’ actual ability and history of bipartisan legislation, however.

The Pell Center calculated bipartisan scores for every session of the House and Senate between 1945 and 2022 to assess the record of Congress’ capacity to work in a bipartisan manner. A bipartisan score was calculated for every piece of substantive legislation passed using the formula below. Procedural votes and failed legislation were excluded to focus on the bipartisan process of passing major legislation. Failed legislation fails mostly along partisan lines and therefore adds no additional nuance to the analysis. The graphs on the following pages display the results of this assessment.

The formula:

$$\frac{(\text{Republican yea vote} \times \text{Democratic yea vote})}{(\text{total Republican votes} \times \text{total Democratic votes})} = \text{bipartisan score}$$

Each bipartisan score ranges between 0 (not bipartisan) and 1 (very bipartisan). If almost every representative of one party voted ‘Yea’ and everyone in the opposing party voted ‘Nay’, a vote is scored 0; 1 indicates that every representative in each party voted ‘Yea.’

We created a tiered system to categorize the results within this scale:

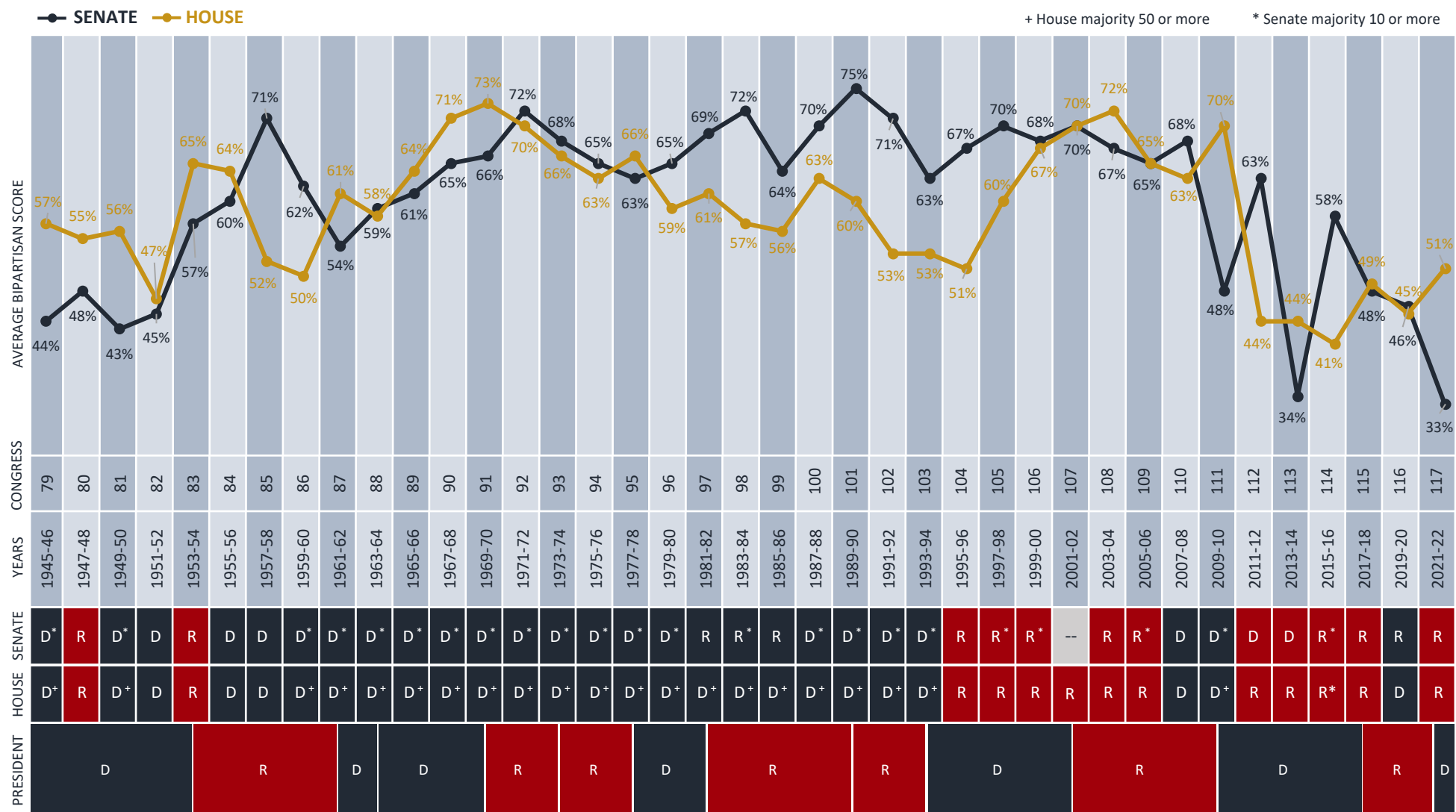
- **Not bipartisan** (0-0.25): all (or nearly all) of the majority party voted ‘Yea’ and nearly all of the opposition voted ‘Nay’
- **Somewhat bipartisan** (0.26-0.5): more than three-quarters of one party and about one-third of the other voted ‘Yea’
- **Bipartisan** (0.51-0.75): nearly all of one party and over two-thirds of the other party voted ‘Yea’
- **Very bipartisan** (0.76-1): the majority or entirety of each party voted ‘Yea’

For each session, the percent of each tier was calculated. For example, in the 79th Congress (1945-1946), 11% of the legislation passed was *very bipartisan*, while 13% was *not bipartisan*.

Average bipartisan scores were calculated for each congressional session back to 1945 by dividing the sum of bipartisan scores for each session by the total number of substantive bills passed (see figure on the following page).

While the average bipartisan scores do not provide as much detail as the tiered breakdown for each session, they offer a useful baseline from which to begin the analysis.

SENATE AND HOUSE AVERAGE BIPARTISAN SCORES



LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

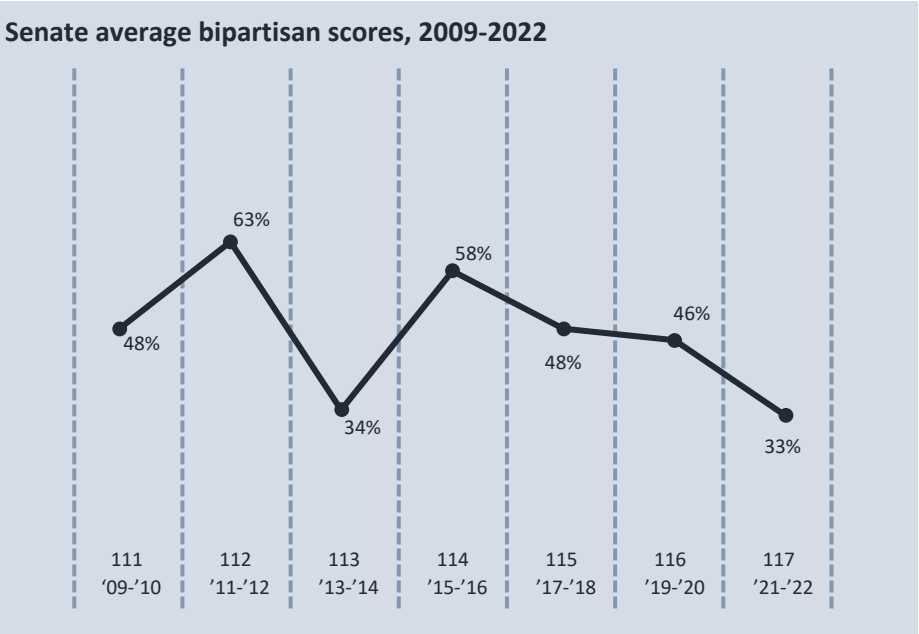
SENATE AVERAGE BIPARTISAN SCORES

AVERAGE BIPARTISAN SCORES

The most recent Senate session, 2021-2022, received the lowest average bipartisan score (33%) of all 39 Senate sessions examined.

Yet the Senate has a long history of bipartisanship. About three-quarters of the sessions between 1945 and 2022 received an average score of *bipartisan* on the tiered scale, i.e., 30 sessions averaged bipartisan scores of 51%-75%. The average reached into the 70s eight times, though never high enough to be considered *very bipartisan*.

The average score dropped to *somewhat bipartisan*, or below 50%, nine times – never low enough to be considered *not bipartisan*. The first four occurrences happened in the late 1940s just after World War II.



Source: Pell Center analysis.

A period of relative stability in bipartisan legislation followed. Average scores stayed stable between the high 50s and low 70s, peaking at 75% in 1989-1990.

The scores dropped below 50 again during the 2009-2010 session, when Congress was notoriously gridlocked during the Obama administration and debates over the Affordable Care Act.

More recently, between the 111th and 114th Senate sessions (2009-2016), the average fluctuated drastically, changing an average of 23 percentage points from session to session. Between the 112th and 113th Congresses, the average bipartisan score dropped 29 points.

Since a peak of bipartisanship during the 114th Senate in 2015-2016 (58%), the average percent has been declining. The 2021-2022 session averaged 33%, the lowest recorded, after dropping 35 percentage points in 7 years.

PARTY CONTROL

Democrats controlled the Senate in 25 of the 39 sessions analyzed. Of those, 20 sessions (80%) received a score of *bipartisan*. In 18 sessions, Democrats held a majority of 10 members or more, and all but one of those sessions received an average of *bipartisan*. Democrats held a majority of less than 10 members seven times. Of those, four sessions were *bipartisan*. **Put another way, when Democrats held a majority of 10 or more, 94% of the sessions were bipartisan; when the majority was less than 10, only 57% of the sessions were bipartisan.**

Republicans held a majority 13 times, 10 (77%) of which averaged to *bipartisan*. The party held a majority of 10 or more members five times, all of which averaged *bipartisan*. They held a majority of less than 10 members eight times, five of which averaged *bipartisan*. **When Republicans held a majority of more than 10, 100% were bipartisan; when they had a majority of less than 10, 62% were bipartisan.**

Historically in the Senate, there is more *bipartisan* legislation when either the Republicans or Democrats holds a majority of 10 or more.

LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

HOUSE AVERAGE BIPARTISAN SCORES

AVERAGE BIPARTISAN SCORES

In the House, 85% of the 39 sessions from 1945-2022 averaged scores of *bipartisan*; i.e., 33 sessions averaged between 51% and 75%. The peak was the 1969-1970 session (73%) when the Senate was also on an upward swing of passing bipartisan legislation. Like the Senate, most House sessions averaged *bipartisan* scores, and none fell at either end of the spectrum. Unlike the Senate, the average scores in the House have increased since the lowest recorded average of 41% in 2015-2016.

The average dropped below 50% (*somewhat bipartisan*) six times. The first was in the 82nd Congress, 1951-1952, at 47%. This session was sandwiched between two peaks: 56% during the 1949-1950 session and 65% in 1953-1954.

The average did not fall below 50% again until the 112th Congress, 2011-2012. Between the 111th and 112th Congresses, the average in the House dipped 26 percentage points – from 70% to 44% – the most precipitous drop in all 39 House sessions. **The average for the 2021-2022 session, 51%, was the first time the average reached over 50% since the 111th session in 2009-2010.**

PARTY CONTROL

The Democrats controlled the House in 26 of the 39 sessions studied. Of those, all but two – 92% – received a score of *bipartisan*. Democrats held a majority of 50 or greater 21 times; 20 of these sessions averaged to *bipartisan*. The majority was less than 50 five times, two of which were *bipartisan*. **When Democrats held a majority of over 50, 95% averaged *bipartisan*; when the majority was less than 50, 40% were.** Democrats in the House have a history of passing more bipartisan legislation when they have a larger majority, as they do in the Senate.

The Republicans controlled the House in only 13 of the 39 sessions in the sample, nine of which averaged to *bipartisan*. The Republican majority was over 50 in only two of those sessions, one of which was *bipartisan*. Of the 11 sessions in which the Republicans held a majority of less than 50, eight (72%) were *bipartisan*.

Though House Republicans have held a majority less often than Democrats, a smaller majority hasn't stopped them from passing more bipartisan legislation.

Bipartisan Averages: Senate vs. House

In both the Senate and House, average bipartisan scores were generally in the range of *bipartisan* over the last 7 decades. There were significant changes in average scores beginning in the 2009-2010 Congress, however: the House scored an average of 70%, or *bipartisan*, and the Senate scored 48%, *somewhat bipartisan* – the largest recorded gap of average bipartisan scores between the House and Senate.

Since then, Senate averages have dropped and risen precipitously, changing an average of 23 percentage points between the 111th and 114th Congresses. Since the 114th, averages have steadily declined, reaching a record low in the 117th. In the House, average bipartisan scores dropped 29 percentage points between the 111th and 117th Congresses, but increased between the 116th and 117th by 6 percentage points.

The Democrats have held a majority in both the Senate and House in 22 the of 39 sessions analyzed. Of those, the House and Senate received scores of *bipartisan* 17 times, or 77% of the sessions. Republicans held a majority in both the Senate and House nine times. Bipartisan averages in both houses were *bipartisan* during six of those sessions, or 67%.

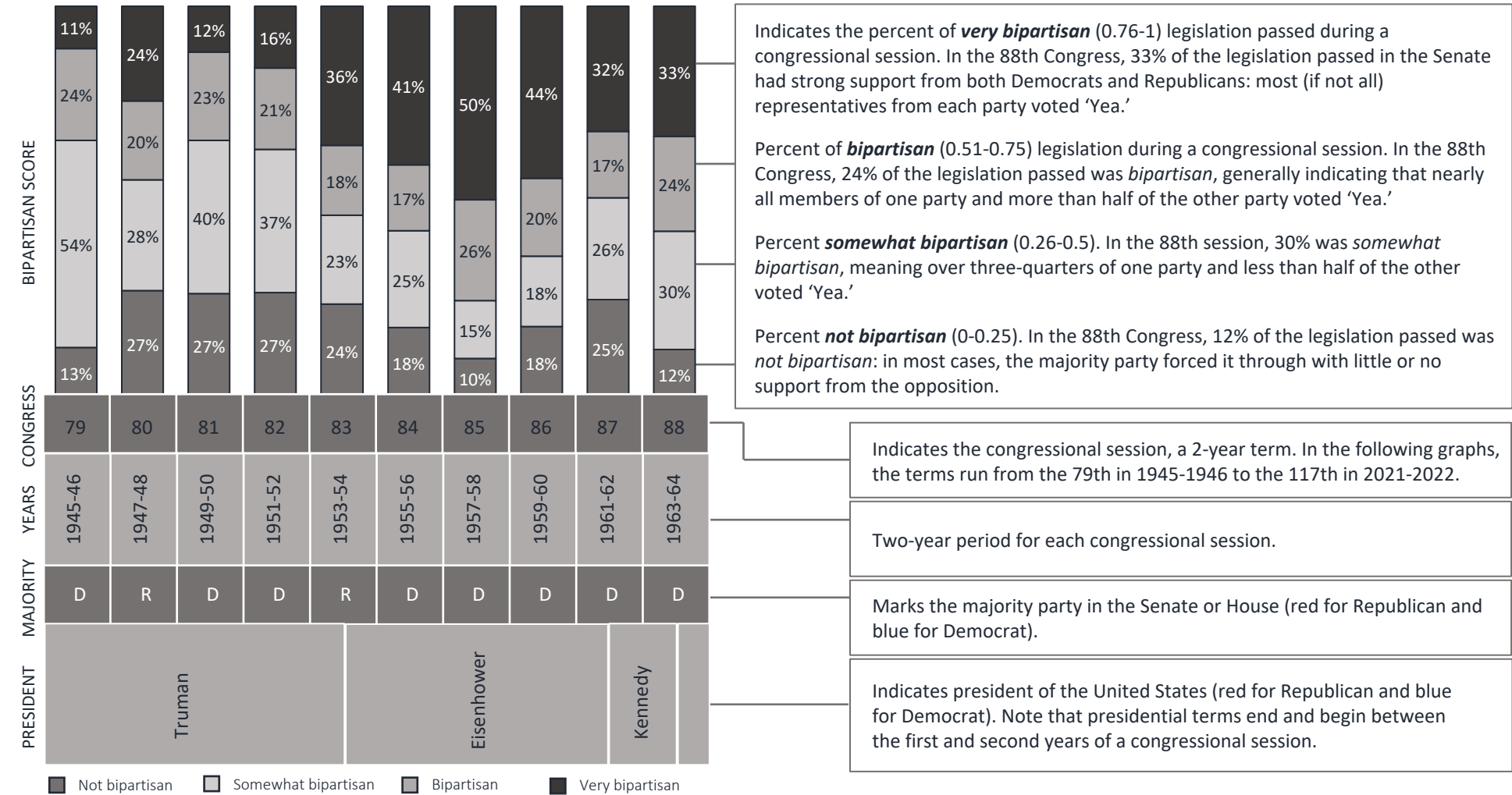
The Senate and House were controlled by different parties with a clear majority seven times. The first three times, between 1981 and 1985, averages in both houses were *bipartisan*. This hasn't happened in the most recent four instances (112th, 113th, 116th, and 117th), for which one or both of the houses of Congress averaged below 50%.

LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

BIPARTISAN SCORES

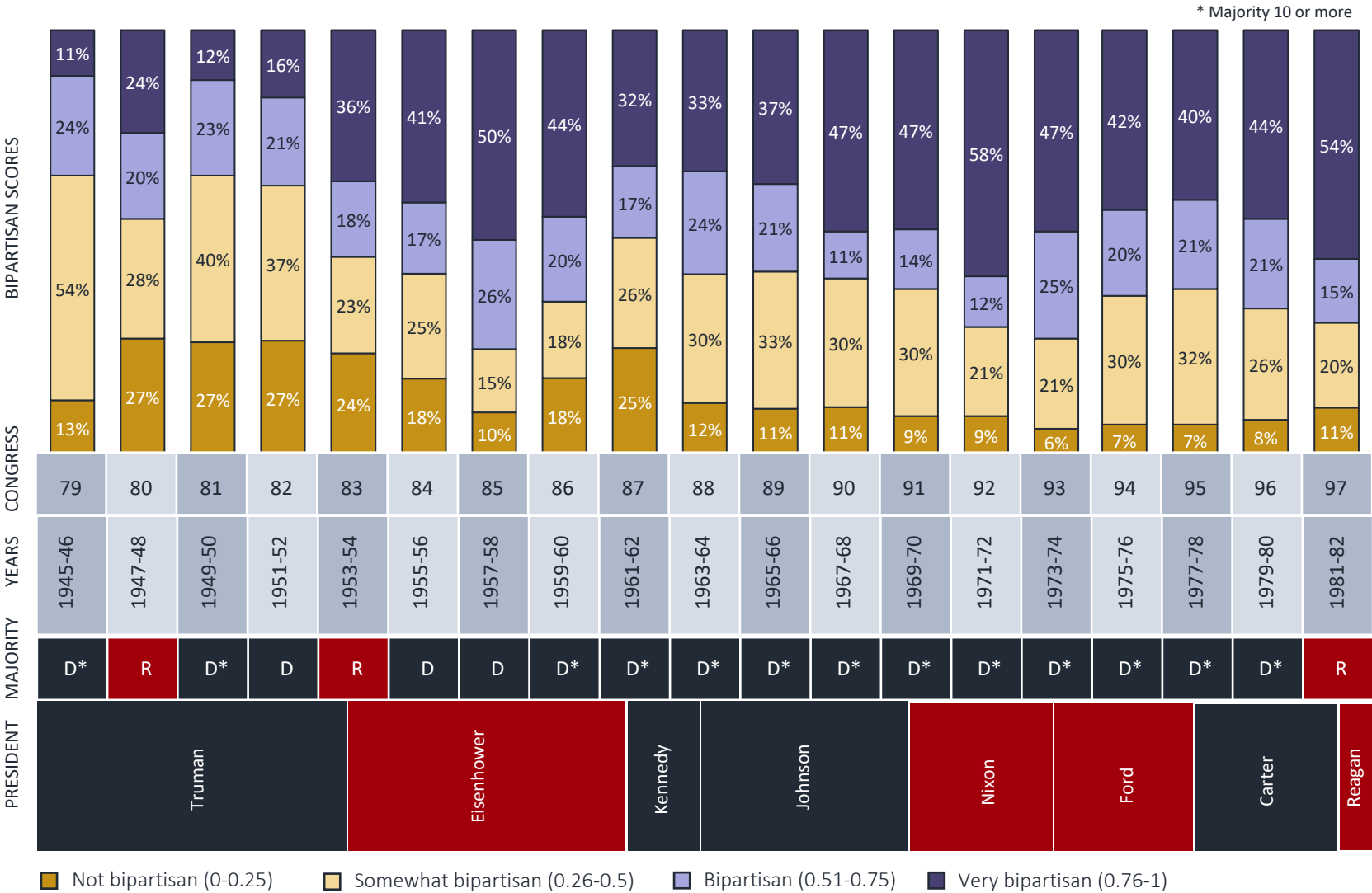
READING BIPARTISAN SCORE GRAPHS

The following graphs display the percent of legislation in each session of Congress that was *very bipartisan*, *bipartisan*, *somewhat bipartisan*, and *not bipartisan* on the scale from 0-1.



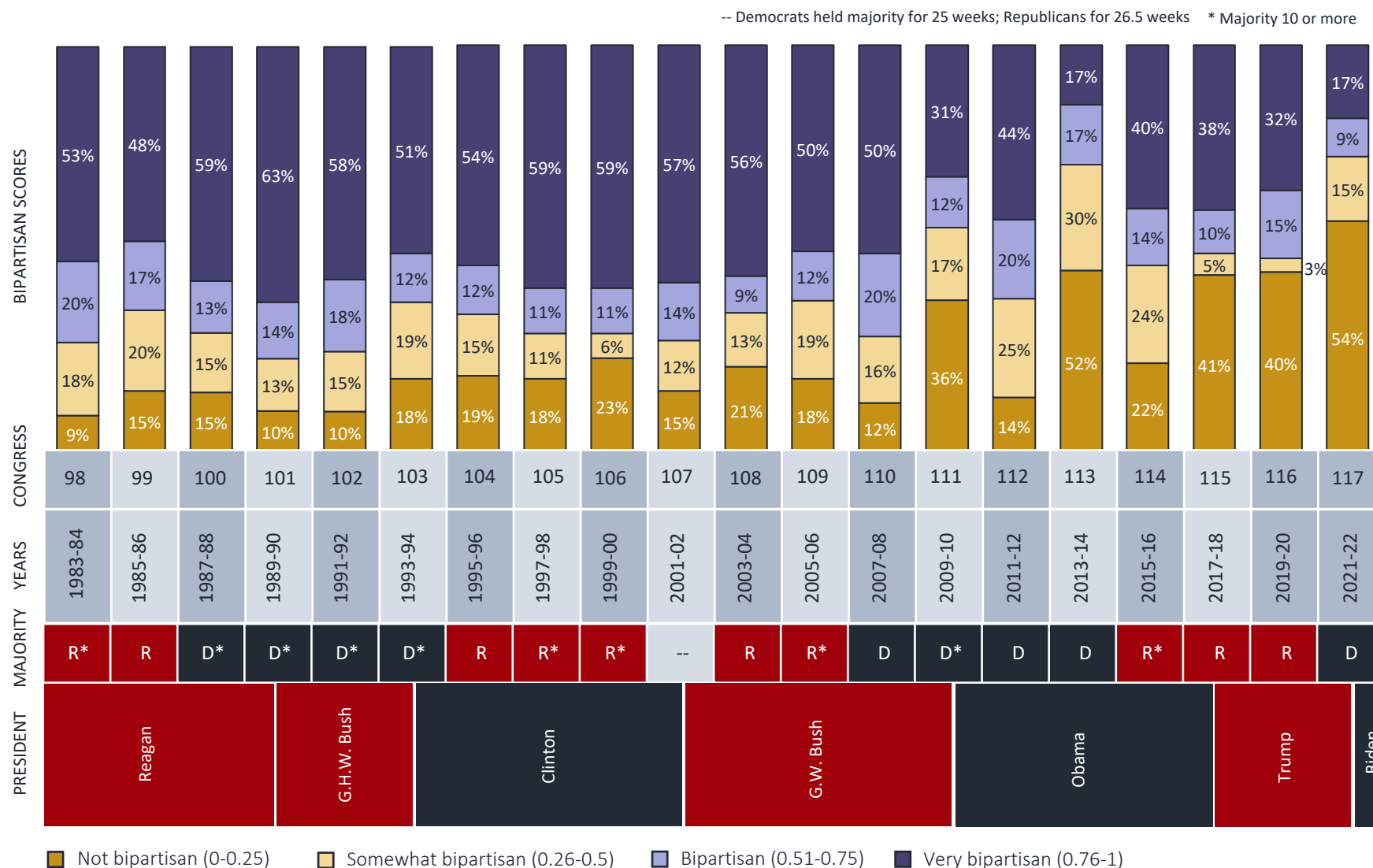
LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

SENATE BIPARTISAN SCORES



LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

SENATE BIPARTISAN SCORES



LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

SENATE BIPARTISAN SCORES

BIPARTISAN SCORES

The Senate has a long history of passing bipartisan legislation. In over three-quarters (30 out of 39) of the sessions between 1945 and 2022, *very bipartisan* legislation represented the largest percentage of the four categories. From the 83rd to the 110th sessions (1953-2008), the largest proportion of legislation was *very bipartisan* without exception.

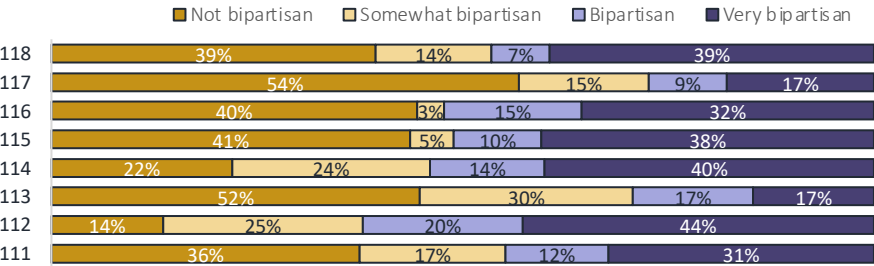
In 15 sessions of those sessions, the percent of *very bipartisan* legislation was 50% or more. In the remaining 15, the percent of *very bipartisan* was less than 50% but still represented the largest amount of legislation. For example, in the 112th Congress 44% of the legislation was *very bipartisan* and the remaining three categories fell under 25%.

A shift occurred beginning with the 111th Congress (2009-2010), when the percent of *not bipartisan* legislation was the largest proportion of the tier (36%) for the first time. Before then, between 1945 and 2008, the percent of legislation considered *not bipartisan* remained at or under 25% all but three times. Not until the 113th session (2013–2014) did it exceed 50%. In the seven sessions since the 111th, the percent of *not bipartisan* legislation was the largest five times.

The highest percentage of *not bipartisan* recorded in the Senate occurred in the 117th session, 2021–2022, at 54%. For the first time, the percent of *not bipartisan* legislation was higher than that of *very bipartisan* and *bipartisan* legislation combined.

The analysis is similar for average bipartisan scores. The Senate has a history of bipartisanship, but it has declined in the last decade. The average bipartisan score of 33% in the 117th session (2021-2022) was the low point. The 118th Senate (2023-), which has only passed 22 pieces of legislation so far, shows an upward trend of bipartisanship, however: 39% of the legislation passed was *very bipartisan* and 39% was *not bipartisan*.

Senate bipartisan scores, 2009-2022



PARTY CONTROL

The size of the party majority affects bipartisanship. The majority was over 10 a total of 23 times. The largest proportion of legislation was *very bipartisan* in 20 of those 23 sessions (87%). In the remaining 16 sessions, the majority was under 10; the largest proportion of legislation passed was *very bipartisan* in only 10 (63%) of those sessions.

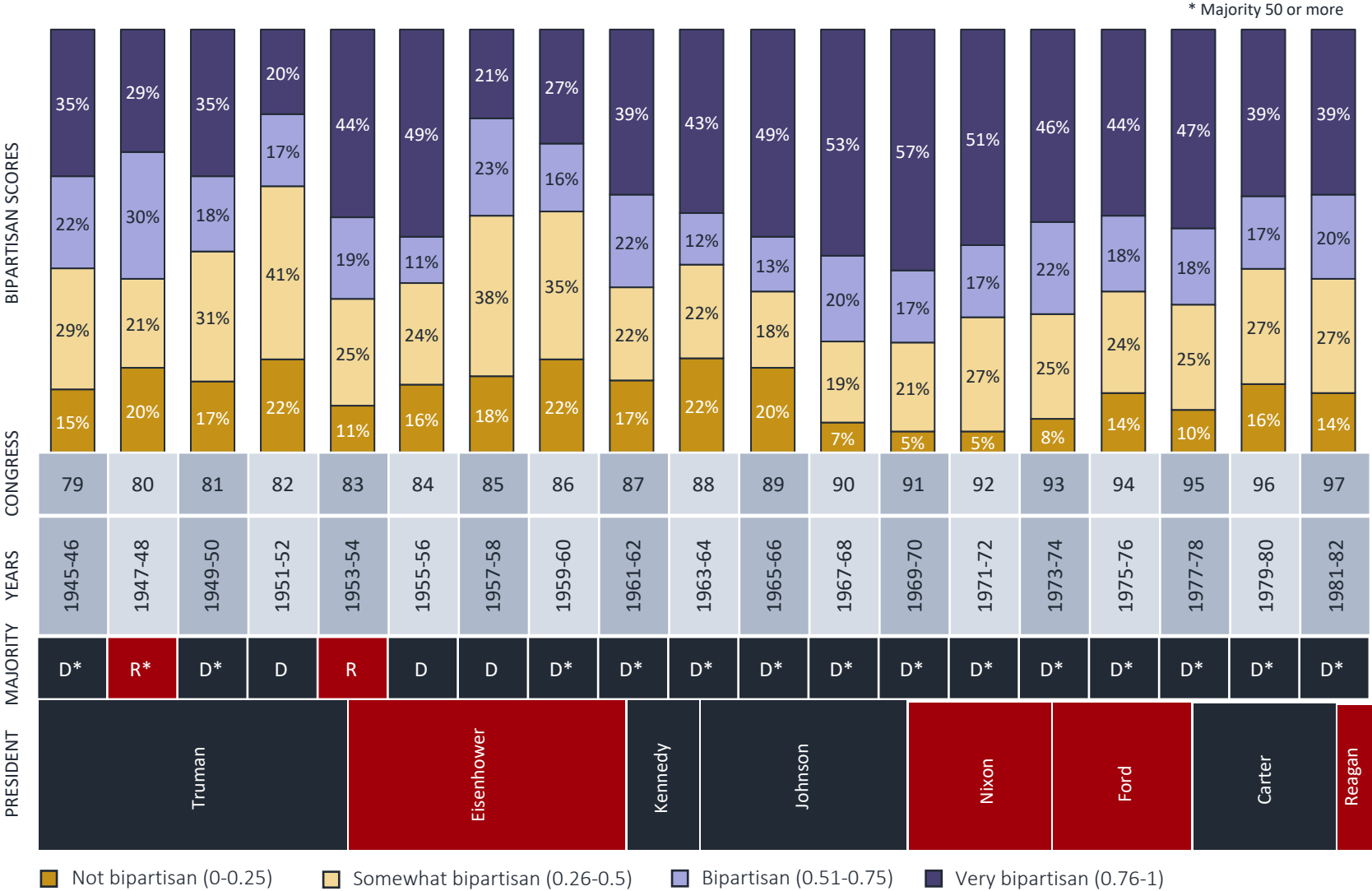
Democrats controlled the Senate in 25 of the 39 sessions. Of those 25 sessions, *very bipartisan* was the largest proportion 19 times (76%). Of the 18 sessions in which Democrats held a majority of 10 or more, the largest proportion of legislation was *very bipartisan* in 11 (83%). When they had a majority of less than 10 (7 sessions), only 40% of the legislation passed was *very bipartisan*.

Republicans controlled the Senate in 13 of the 39 sessions. Of those 13 sessions, *very bipartisan* was the largest proportion 10 times (77%). *Very bipartisan* legislation was the largest proportion for 100% of the sessions in which Republicans had a majority of 10 or more. When they had a majority of less than 10 (8 instances), 62% of the sessions did.

For both Republicans and Democrats, a majority of 10 or more increases the likelihood of *very bipartisan* legislation by about 40 percentage points.

LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

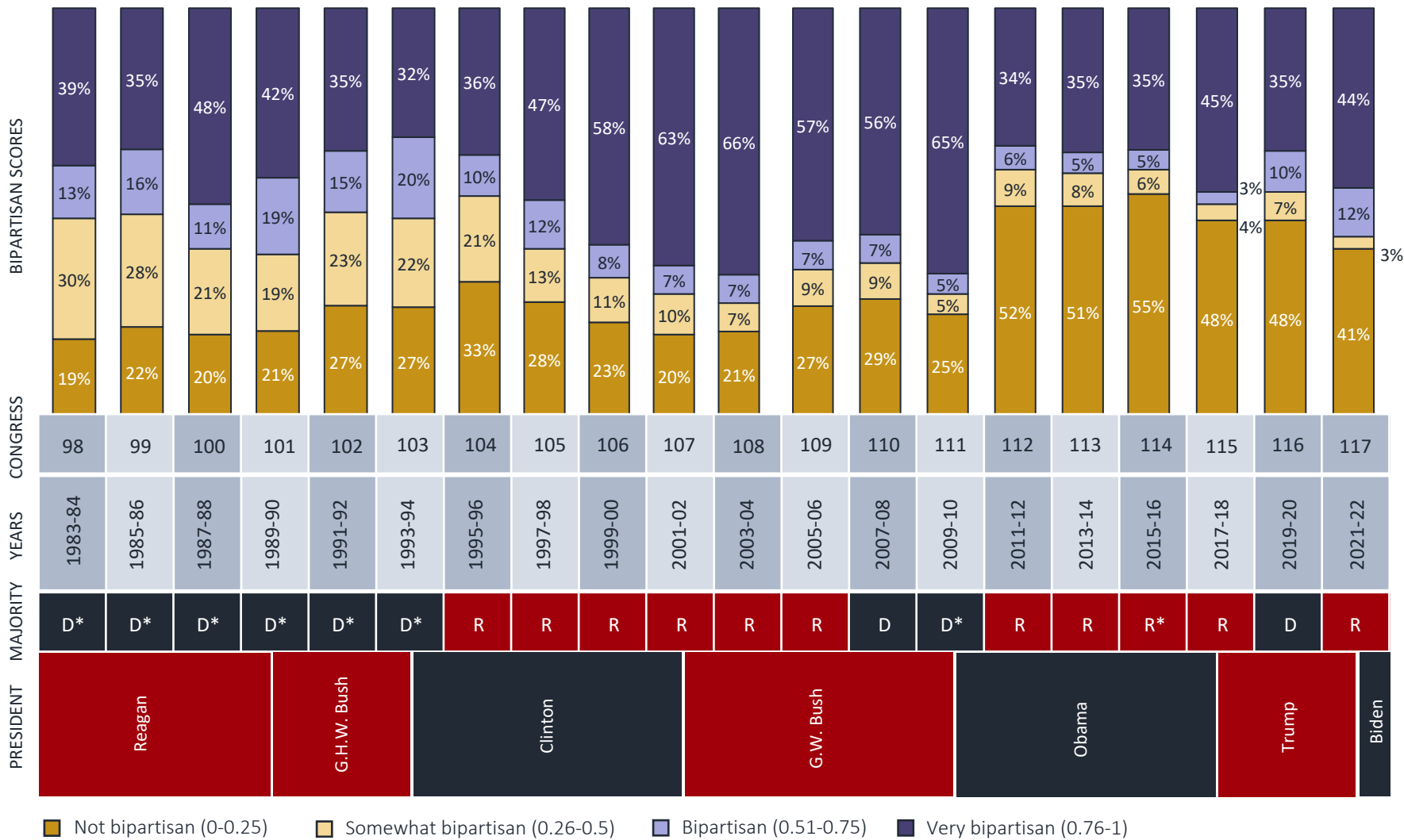
HOUSE BIPARTISAN SCORES



LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

HOUSE BIPARTISAN SCORES

* Majority 50 or more



■ Not bipartisan (0-0.25) ■ Somewhat bipartisan (0.26-0.5) ■ Bipartisan (0.51-0.75) ■ Very bipartisan (0.76-1)

LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

HOUSE BIPARTISAN SCORES

BIPARTISAN SCORES

The House also has a long history of passing bipartisan legislation. In 30 of 39 (77%) of the sessions, over half of the legislation passed was *very bipartisan* or *bipartisan* and the largest proportion of legislation was ***very bipartisan*** continuously for 49 years (between the 87th and 111th sessions, 1961-2010). It was the largest proportion for 77% of the 39 sessions and was over 50% nine times, most recently in the 111th session (2009-2010).

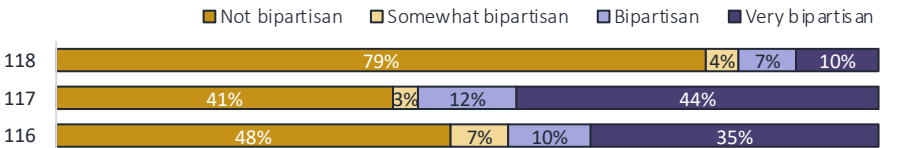
As in the Senate, the shift away from bipartisanship began in the 112th session (2011-2012): for the first time, the proportion of *not bipartisan* legislation was the largest (52%). Before that, the percent of *not bipartisan* legislation was consistently under a third.

Between the 112th and 116th sessions, *not bipartisan* legislation remained the largest proportion, was equal to or greater than the percent of *very bipartisan* and *bipartisan* combined and was over 50% in three sessions.

An uptick toward bipartisanship occurred during the 117th session (2021-2022). The percent of *very bipartisan* legislation (44%) was higher than that of *not bipartisan* (41%), and the combination of *very bipartisan* and *bipartisan* was over 50% for the first time since the 111th session.

Bipartisanship is declining in the House yet again, however. Of the 136 pieces of legislation and amendments passed so far in 2023 for the 118th session, 79% were *not bipartisan* – the largest percentage of *not bipartisan* legislation recorded in either the House or the Senate.

House bipartisan scores, 2019-2023



PARTY CONTROL

Party control also seems to impact legislation in the House, at least for the Democrats, who have controlled the House twice as much as the Republicans.

Democrats controlled the House in 26 of 39 sessions. In 21 (81%) of those sessions, the largest proportion of legislation was *very bipartisan*. During the 21 instances in which they held a majority of 50 or more, 95% of the sessions had the largest proportion of *very bipartisan* scores. When they held a majority under 50 (five times), only 40% did.

Republicans controlled the House in 13 of 39 sessions; *very bipartisan* was the largest proportion eight times (62%). They held a majority of more than 50 only twice; the largest percentage was not *very bipartisan* in either session. In the remaining 11 Congresses when the party held a majority of less than 50, 72% of the sessions had *very bipartisan* as the largest proportion.

Bipartisan Scores: Senate vs. House

Between the 87th and 110th Congresses (1961-2006), the largest proportion of legislation in both the House and the Senate was *very bipartisan*.

Over the last two decades, both chambers have hit a record high of *not bipartisan* legislation. During the seven sessions from 2009 to 2022, the largest group of legislation was *not bipartisan* in either the Senate or the House; in three of those sessions, the largest group of legislation was *not bipartisan* in both chambers.

Less than a year into the 118th Congress, the Senate has a higher percentage of *very bipartisan* legislation passed than in the 117th (39% vs. 17%). The House, however, is on track to have the highest percent of *not bipartisan* legislation recorded, currently at 79%.

The lack of confidence Americans have (58% have none and 33% have some) in the representatives' ability to work in a bipartisan manner in the 118th Congress is perhaps justified (see page 14; Marist, 2022).

THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

PARTISAN APPROVAL AND SUPPORT OF THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

Section highlights

- For decades, Americans have been more likely to approve of presidents from their own party. The percentage gap between party approval ratings has increased over the last few years, however.
- Perceptions of the Biden presidency are divided along partisan lines, but both parties have become increasingly critical of the administration.
- Trump has strong Republican support, even among those who believe he has committed serious federal crimes.
- Projections of the 2024 presidential elections show Biden and Trump are nearly even for votes along party lines and are polling far ahead of their competitors. Independents could be the deciding factor and are leaning toward Biden (41% for Biden over 33% for Trump).

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

APPROVAL RATINGS OVER TIME

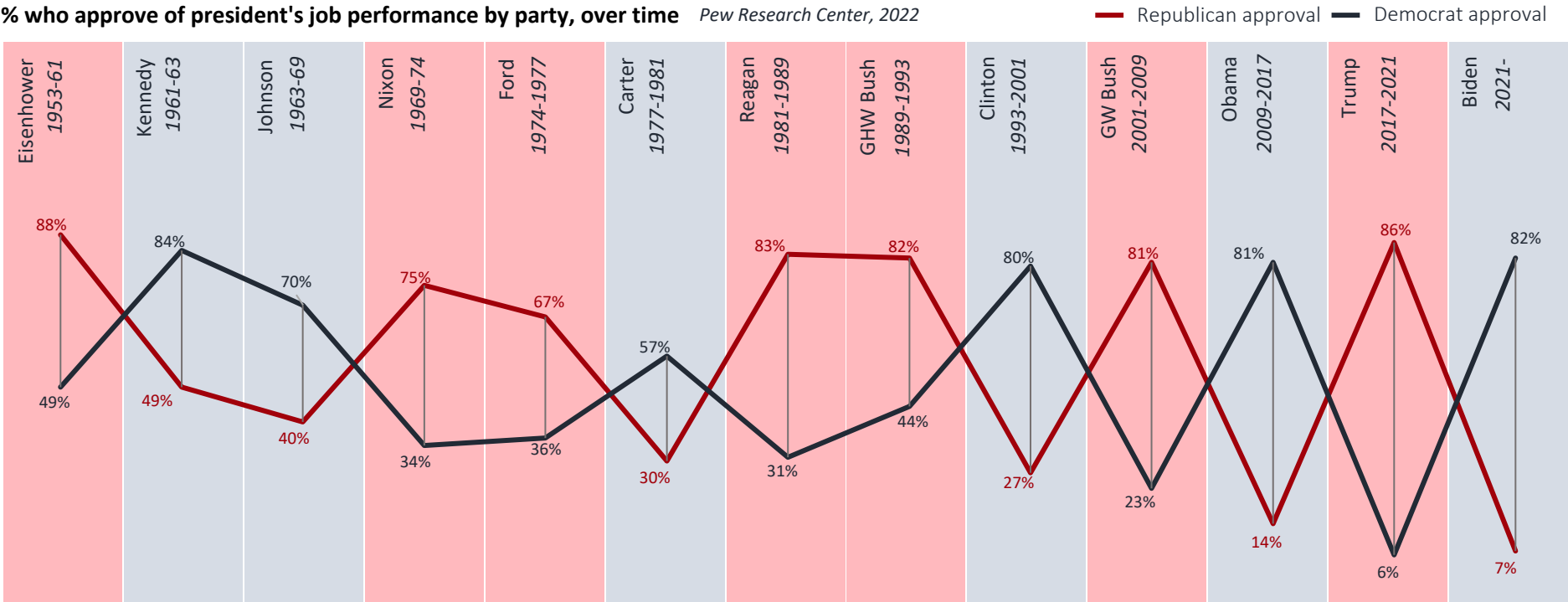
The figure below shows the *average* Republican and Democratic approval ratings for every presidential administration from Eisenhower to Biden. In each case, the average approval rating for presidential co-partisans was higher than that of their political counterparts. The average percentage-point gap between party approval from 1953 to 2021 was 48.

The last five presidents, from Clinton to Biden, have had the steepest approval gaps of all 13 administrations listed. The largest gap – 80 percentage points – occurred during Trump’s term. The second largest was during Biden’s administration between January 2021 and October 2022 (75 points).

Support for a president from an opposition party has been under 50% for the last 70 years, but it was at its lowest during the Trump and Biden administrations (below 10%).

These levels of varied bipartisan support continue throughout the analysis of this section. Support for former President Trump remains high among Republicans and support for Biden among Democrats, despite a slight decline in Democrats’ belief that Biden will have a positive impact on American democracy.

% who approve of president's job performance by party, over time *Pew Research Center, 2022*



Source: Dunn, [Pew Research Center](#), Oct. 2022.

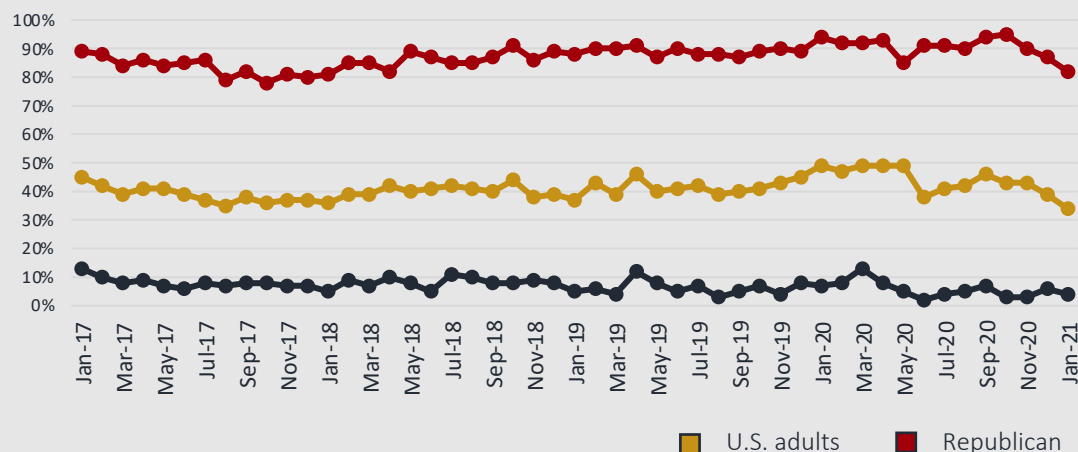
EXECUTIVE BRANCH

APPROVAL RATINGS: TRUMP AND BIDEN

More detailed monthly data also indicates that approval ratings follow bipartisan lines. During Trump's presidency, approval ratings from Republicans ranged from the high 70s to the mid-90s, while Democrat ratings were never over 13%. The opposite is true for Biden's presidency thus far. Democrat approval has reached as high as 98% and only as low as 78%. Republican approval has remained below 10% since August 2021.

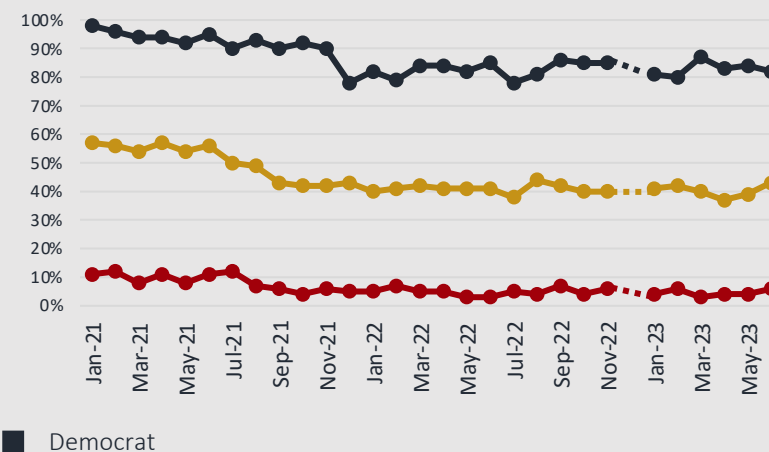
Donald Trump's presidential approval rating

Gallup, 2021



Joe Biden's presidential approval rating

Gallup, 2023



Bipartisan divides are also stark in survey data from Pew Research Center, which asked Americans if they approved or disapproved of the way Biden and Trump were handling their jobs.

Between May and April 2023, 27 months into Biden's administration, 36% of Americans approved of the way he was handling his job. Over two-thirds of Democrats agreed (67%), while only 7% of Republicans did (Pew Research Center, April 2023).

In 2019, 27 months in Trump's presidency, 38% of Americans approved of the way he was handling his job. Republicans overwhelmingly approved (81%), while only 6% of Democrats agreed (Pew Research Center, January 2021).

By the end of Trump's presidency in 2021, 60% of Republicans approved of the way he was handling the job, down from 80% in 2020. Democrat approval reached its lowest that year at 4% (Pew Research Center, January 2021).

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

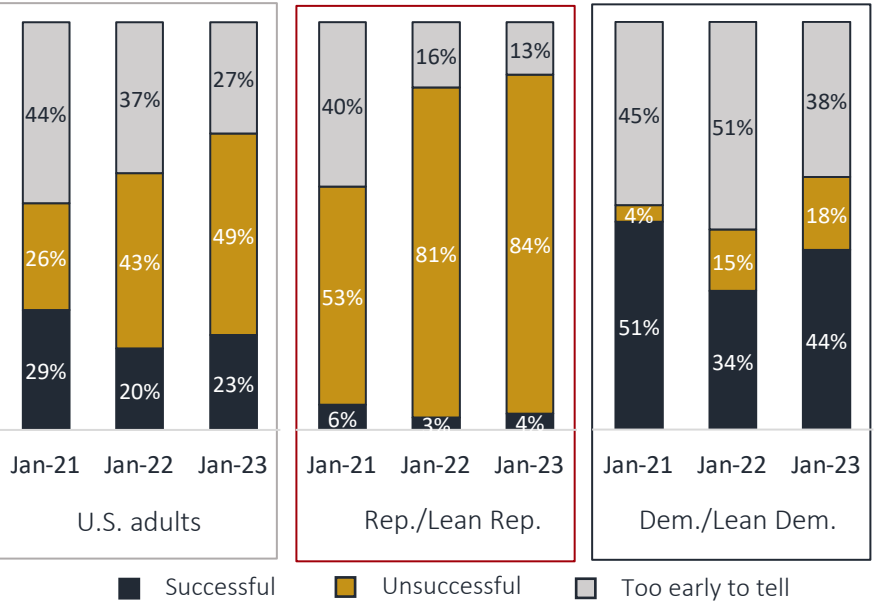
PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN

Perceptions of the Biden administration are divided starkly along partisan lines. For example, 78% of Republicans view Biden as a *major* threat to democracy, while 68% of Democrats believe he is *not* a threat (*New York Times*, 2022). While the degree of approval is divided between the two parties, both have grown more critical of the Biden administration over time.

% who say Biden will be a(n) ___ president in the long run

Pew Research Center, Jan. 2023

Note: No answer responses not shown

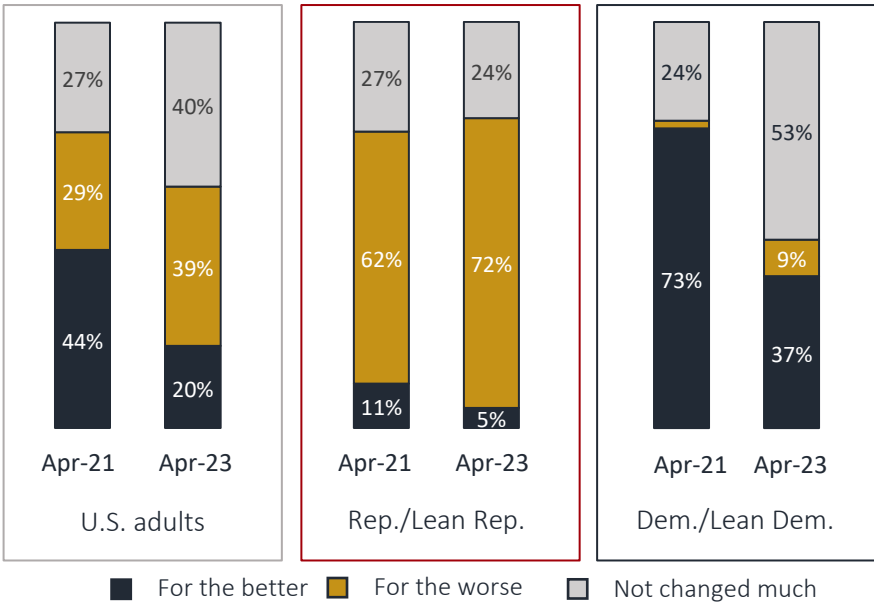


While Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to believe Biden will be a successful president in the long run, both parties are increasingly skeptical. In January 2023, nearly four-fifths of Republicans agreed he will be unsuccessful, up from a little over 50% in January 2021. About 50% of Democrats thought he would be successful in 2021, but by 2023, only 44% did.

% who say Biden has changed the tone and nature of the political debate in the US ___ since taking office

Pew Research Center, April 2023

Note: No answer responses not shown



The same pattern emerged when Americans were asked if Biden has changed the political debate in the U.S. since taking office. In 2023, nearly three-quarters of Republicans thought Biden had changed the tone of the political debate *for the worse*, up 10 percentage points since 2021. Between the same years, Democrats have grown more agnostic. At the start of his presidency, nearly three-quarters believed Biden had changed the debate *for the better* but by 2023, only about one-third did. Over half believe little has changed.

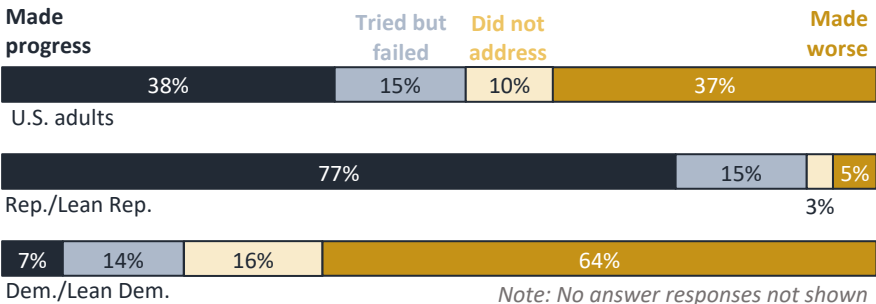
EXECUTIVE BRANCH

FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP

Similar to views on President Biden, opinions of former President Trump are clearly divided by party. In 2022, Democrats (84%) overwhelmingly viewed Trump as a *major* threat to democracy, while 65% of Republicans believed he was *not* a threat. A few months after Trump left office in 2021, over three-quarters of Republicans agreed he had made *progress* toward solving major problems facing the country; 64% of Democrats believed he had made things *worse*. Almost three-quarters of Republicans said Trump was a *great* or *good* president, while 89% of Democrats said he was a *terrible* or *poor* one (Pew Research Center, 2021).

% who say Trump ____ toward solving major problems facing the country

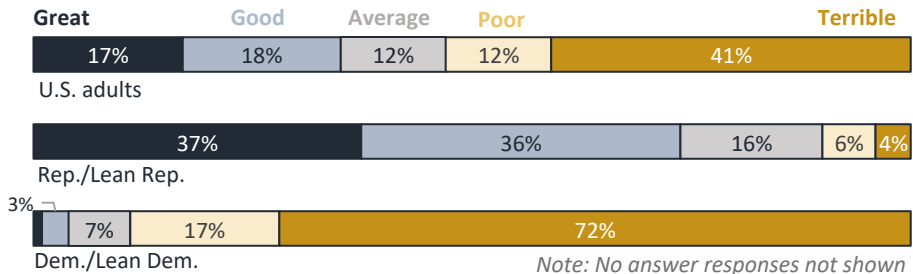
Pew Research Center, Mar. 2021



Note: No answer responses not shown

% who say Trump was a ____ president during his time in office

Pew Research Center, Mar. 2021



Note: No answer responses not shown

INDICTMENTS AGAINST TRUMP

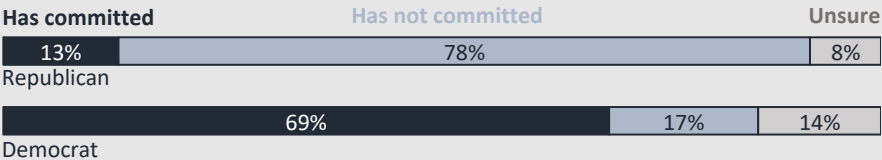
The former president currently faces four indictments: one in New York for hush money payments prior to the 2016 election, one in Georgia on election interference, a special counsel's case for the handling of classified documents at Mar-a-Lago, and another special counsel's case prompted by the January 6th investigation.

In a 2023 Quinnipiac Poll, 54% of Americans believe Trump should be prosecuted on criminal charges for allegedly attempting to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. Nearly all Democrats (95%) and only 12% of Republicans agreed.

Accordingly, two-thirds (69%) of Democrats and only 13% of Republicans think Trump committed serious federal crimes (*New York Times*, 2023).

% who say Trump has or has not committed serious federal crimes

New York Times, July 2023



Former President Trump is ahead in the polls among Republican candidates for the 2024 presidential election. He leads over Ron DeSantis, his closest competitor, 54% to 17%. Of Republicans who believe he has committed serious crimes, 22% of those polled are still willing to vote for him (Goldmacher, 2023).

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

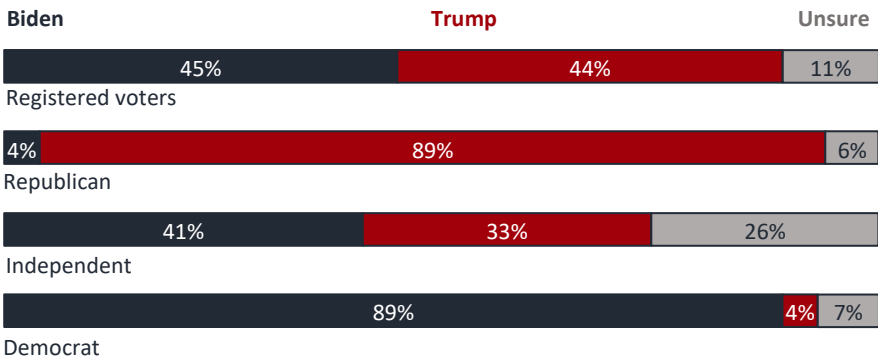
2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

LET THE POLLS BEGIN

Among Republican presidential candidates for the 2024 election, Trump leads DeSantis by 37 percentage points. In the Democratic Party, Biden has the lead, polling at 64% as of August 2023. He enjoyed a 51 percentage-point lead over his closest competitor, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who declared in October 2023 that he was running as an Independent (*Race to the White House*, 2023). FiveThirtyEight (2023) reports similar numbers.

% who plan to vote for ____ in the 2024 presidential election

Echelon Insights, 2023



Trump and Biden are nearly tied for votes, with overwhelming support from their parties. This coincides with levels of favorability, as shown on the next page.

Nearly two-thirds of Republicans (65%) have favorable views of DeSantis, while nearly three-quarters of Democrats do not. More Republicans have a somewhat favorable view of Kennedy Jr. (42%) than of DeSantis (39%).

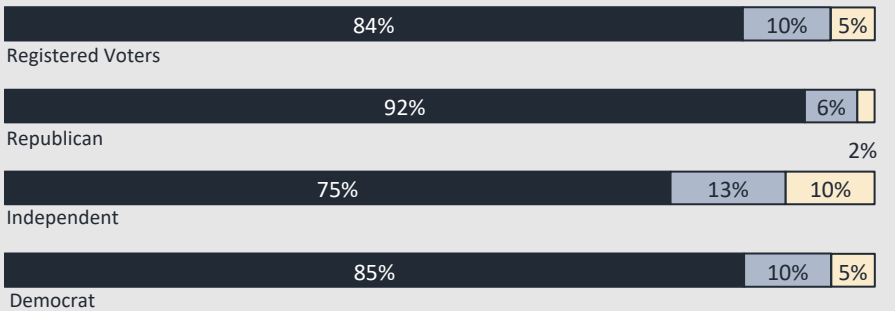
Independents may thus be the deciding factor in the presidential election. They lean toward Biden (41% vs. 33% for Trump). Biden also has a slight lead among Independents in terms of favorability: 42% have a *very* or *somewhat* favorable view of the current president, compared to 35% for Trump.

MOTIVATION TO VOTE

The majority of Americans, regardless of their political affiliation, are *extremely* or *very* motivated to vote in the upcoming election. Bipartisan differences aside, Americans are seemingly engaged in the democratic electoral process.

% who are ____ motivated to vote in the 2024 presidential election

Echelon Insights, 2023



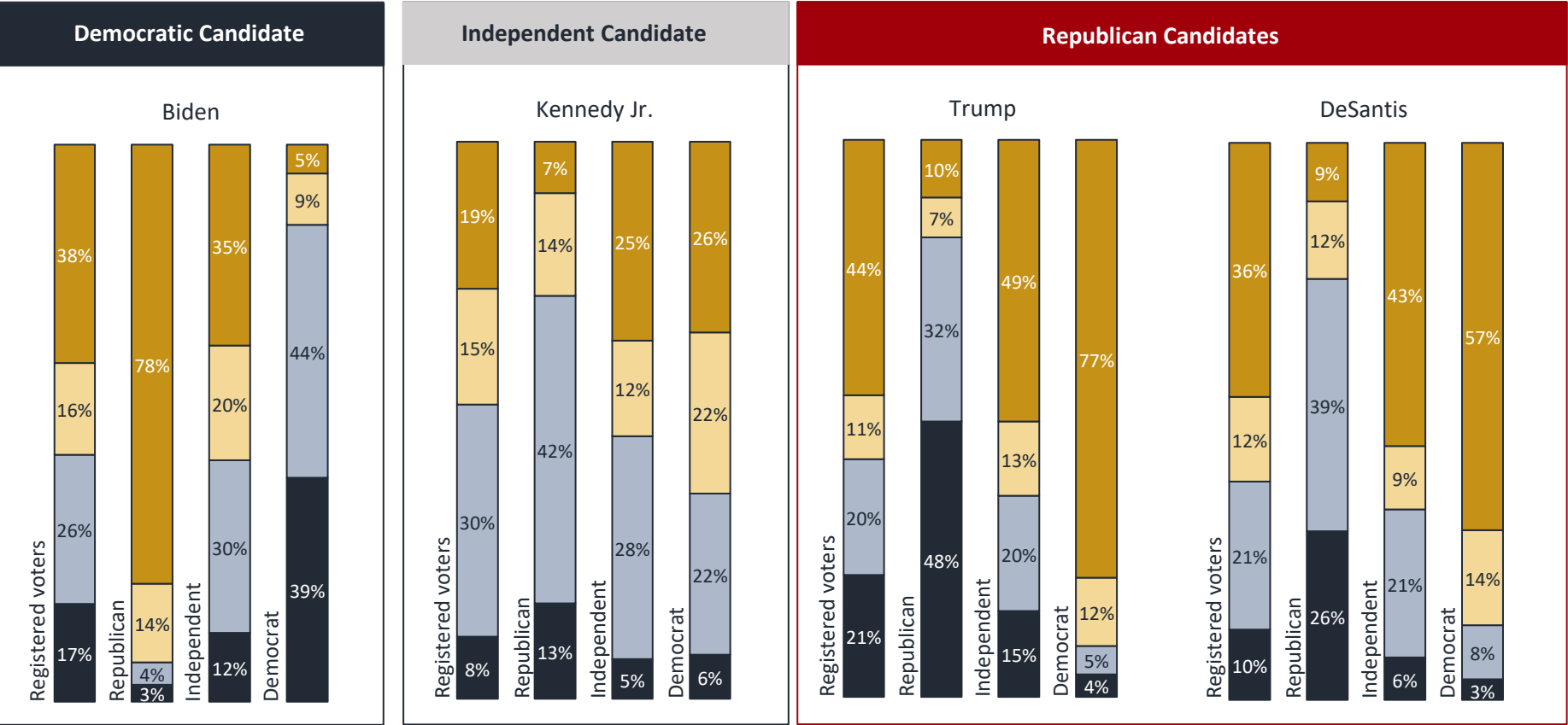
■ Extremely/very ■ Somewhat □ Not very/not at all

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

% who have a *very favorable*, *somewhat favorable*, *somewhat unfavorable*, or *very unfavorable* opinion of ____.

New York Times, 2022



Note: 'Don't know' and 'Haven't heard of' answer responses not shown

■ Very favorable ■ Somewhat favorable ■ Somewhat unfavorable ■ Very unfavorable

THE JUDICIAL BRANCH

PARTISAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE SUPREME COURT

Section highlights

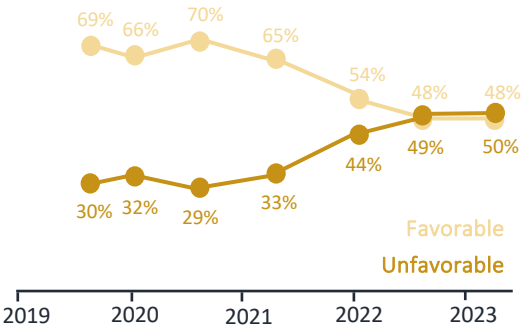
- More Americans now hold unfavorable than favorable views of the Supreme Court for the first time since the Pew Research Center began collecting data on this metric (1987). In 2022, 55% of Americans disapproved of the way the Court is handling its job.
- Democrats are more likely than Republicans to view the Court unfavorably, to think it has too much power, and to believe it is a major threat to democracy. This partisan divide is not surprising, given that the Court currently has twice as many conservative as liberal-leaning justices.
- Over half of Democrats (51%, vs. 12% of Republicans) believe the justices are doing a poor job keeping their personal political beliefs out of major case decisions.

JUDICIAL BRANCH

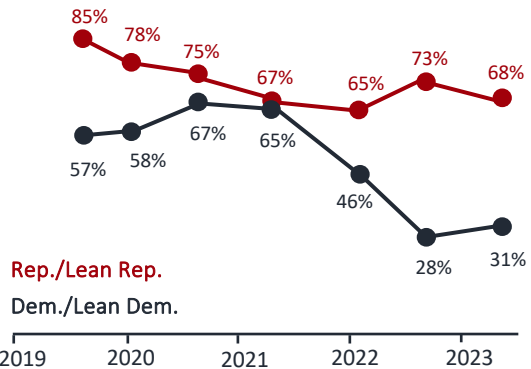
APPROVAL RATINGS OF THE SUPREME COURT

In the mid-1990s, over three-quarters (80%) of Americans held favorable opinions of the Supreme Court. This percent dropped to 57% in the mid-2000s before rising to 70% in 2019 (Pew Research Center, September 2022). In the 3 years since then, favorability has decreased by 21 percentage points. America is now about evenly split, though those with unfavorable views of the Supreme Court outnumber those who have favorable views for the first time since Pew Research began measuring this indicator in 1987.

% who have a(n) ___ opinion of the Court
Pew Research Center, 2023



% who have a *favorable* opinion of the Court
Pew Research Center, 2023



Opinions of the Court are also more polarized than they have ever been. In 1987, 80% of Republicans and 75% of Democrats had favorable opinions of the Supreme Court. In 2023, nearly three-quarters of Republicans have favorable views, compared to only one-third of Democrats. Until 2022, Democrats' favorable views had stayed over 50% since the late 1980s. Between 2021 and 2023, their favorability dropped by 34 percentage points.

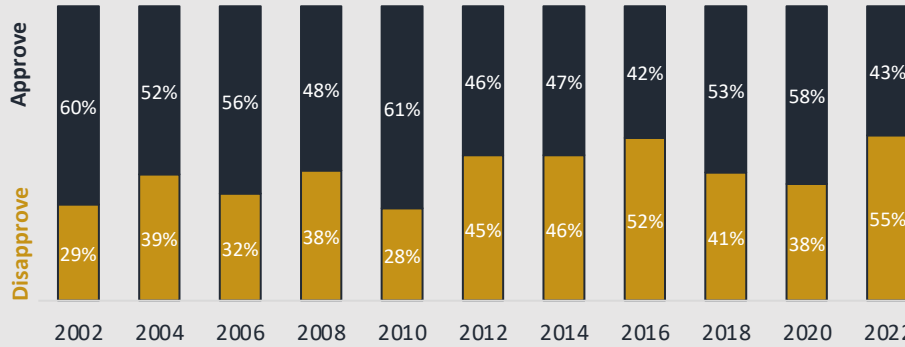
After a drop to 33% for Republicans around 2016, favorable opinions in that party rose to a high of 85% in 2019. Since then, the party's favorability has declined, but not nearly as precipitously as for Democrats.

American confidence in the Court is historically low, likely driven down by Democrats. In a 2022 Gallup survey, 47% of adults expressed a *great deal* or a *fair* amount of confidence, a 28-percentage-point drop in 20 years and the lowest rating ever recorded.

More than half of Americans *disapprove* of the way the Court is handling its job, an increase of 26 percentage points in 20 years. Nearly two-thirds of Republicans (62%) *approve* compared to 17% of Democrats (Gallup, August 2023)

A branch of government that had wide approval from both parties 20 years ago has become politicized and widely disapproved of, especially by the Democrats.

% of adults who *approve or disapprove* of the way the Court is handling its job
Gallup, 2022



Note: 'No opinion' answer responses not shown

JUDICIAL BRANCH

THE POLITICIZATION OF THE COURT

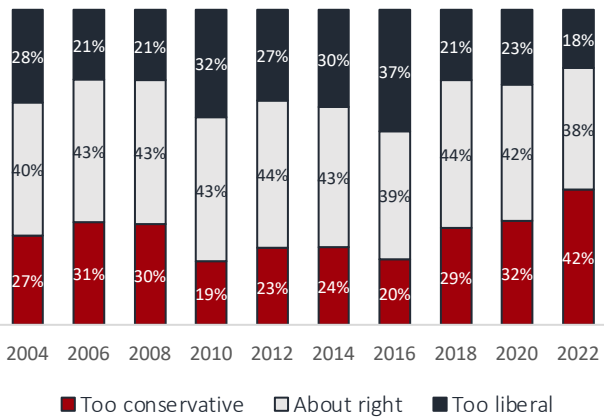
The Supreme Court’s neutrality has recently come under scrutiny, prompted by decisions that overturned established precedent (e.g., on abortion, elections, and voting law), incidents such as the leaked decision in the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* case, and moral quagmires like Justice Clarence Thomas’ acceptance of gifts from a Republican donor.

The Court now has twice as many conservative justices as it does liberal-leaning ones. Since 2018, conservatives have outnumbered liberals 6-3. During the first 18 years of the 21st century, the Court was nearly evenly split. For the most part, there were four conservative justices and 3-4 liberal ones, plus a couple of swing votes or moderates.

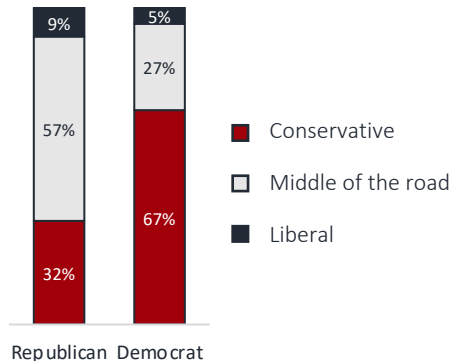
In 2022, 42% of Americans believed the Court was too conservative, the largest percent in 18 years and an increase of 22 percentage points since 2016 (Gallup, 2022).

Democrats are unsurprisingly more likely than Republicans to view the Court as conservative. In 2022, over two-thirds of Democrats (67%) thought of the Supreme Court as conservative, compared to 57% of Republicans who viewed it as ‘middle of the road’ (Pew Research Center, 2022).

% who think the current Court is ____
Gallup, 2022



% who say the current Court is ____
Pew Research Center, 2022



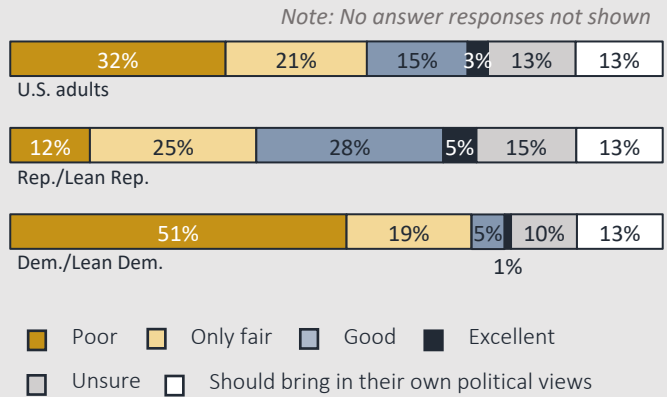
PERSONAL POLITICAL BELIEFS

While the Court may not have been strictly politically neutral since its creation, there is a general consensus that its politicization can lead to greater political polarization and weaken the system of checks and balances.

Over half of Americans (53%) believe the justices are doing a *poor* or *only fair* job of keeping their political views out of case decisions. Democrats (51%) are more likely than Republicans (12%) to believe the justices are doing a *poor* job.

Only 13% of U.S. adults believe justices should bring personal beliefs into the courtroom. However, more Republicans (15%) than Democrats (10%) were unsure of their views on this issue.

% who say justices are doing a ____ job keeping their own political views out of how they decide major cases
Pew Research Center, 2022

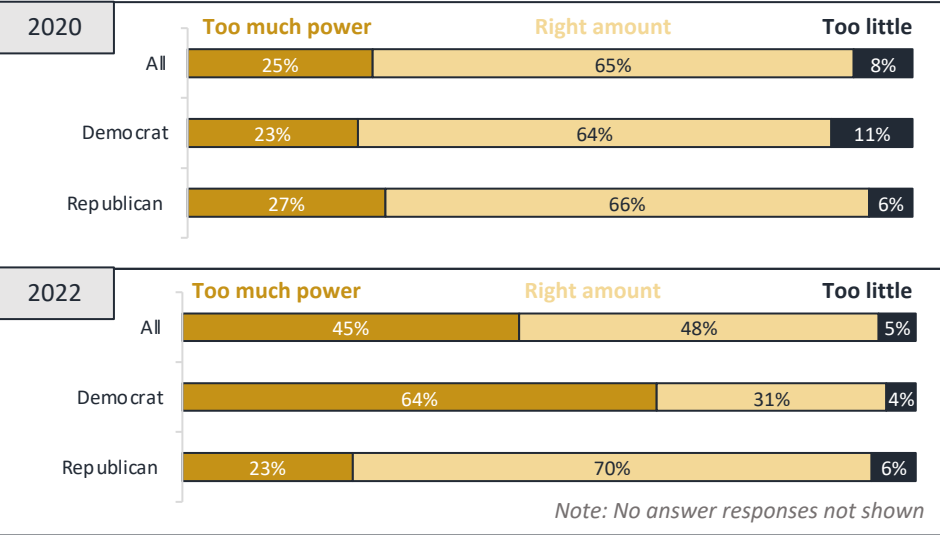


JUDICIAL BRANCH

THE BIPARTISAN GAP

As of 2022, Democrats (64%) are also more likely than Republicans (23%) to believe the Supreme Court has too much power. The percent of Democrats who believe this increased 41 percentage points in two years. In the same time frame, Republicans have become more likely to believe the Court has the right amount of power, increasing from 66% in 2020 to 70% in 2022.

% who say the Court has ____
Pew Research Center, 2022

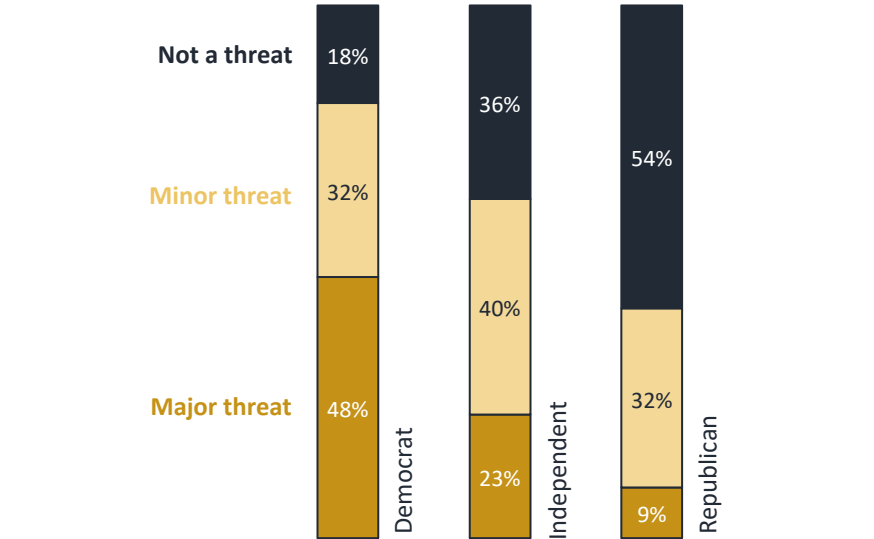


Bipartisan views of the Supreme Court, similar to opinions of the executive branch, are an example of confirmation bias. Conservative interpretations of the rule of law which overturn legal precedents are viewed by Republicans as ‘middle of the road’ or neutral interpretations. The rulings of the Court have been consistent with conservative beliefs and therefore, approval and confidence in the Court remains relatively high among Republicans.

The disparity in Supreme Court support may also be explained by affective polarization (the deep dislike and distrust of those on the opposing end of the political spectrum, absent major ideological shifts). Democrats have begun to distrust the Court because many of the justices were nominated by former President Trump, and some of those justices have highlighted their political beliefs through decisions of the Court.

One outcome of these partisan differences is that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to view the Court as a threat to democracy. Nearly half of Democrats view the Court as a *major* threat, while over half of Republicans see the court as posing *no* threat.

Public view of Court as a threat to democracy
New York Times, 2022



Note: ‘Don’t know’ answer responses not shown

POLARIZATION INDEX: PART III

CONCLUSION

Americans tend to change their degree of support for the federal government based on which party is in control. Democrats trust the government more when there is a Democratic president and Republicans when there is a Republican president. The same is true for majority in Congress and political leanings in the Supreme Court. Republicans were three times more likely than Democrats to believe the government was a *major* threat to democracy in 2022, likely because there is a Democratic president and a Democratic majority in the Senate (*New York Times*, 2022).

However, Americans from both parties have become increasingly distrustful of the federal government since the start of the 21st century: 20 years ago, trust in the government was double what it was in 2022. For the first time since Gallup began measuring the indicator in 1997, trust in each of the three branches of government was below 50%. Trust in the judicial branch is at an all-time low (47%), dropping 20 percentage points between 2020 and 2022 (Jones, 2022).

These indicators are based on perceptions, which are swayed by in-group motivations, biases, and past experiences. To determine whether the government was functioning in a bipartisan manner, the Pell Center analyzed bipartisan legislation in Congress.

In the last decade, the Senate and House have hit record highs for the percent of non-bipartisan legislation passed. In the 177th Congress (2021-2022), over half (54%) of the legislation passed in Congress was not bipartisan, i.e., the majority party forced it through. This was the highest percentage of non-bipartisan legislation recorded in the Senate between 1945 and 2022.

These high percentages of non-bipartisan legislation come at a time when most Americans, regardless of their political party, want government officials to compromise to find solutions to America's most pressing problems rather than stand on principle to get what they want (Marist, 2022). Over 85% of Democrats and Republicans want Congress to pass bipartisan legislation on the economy, healthcare, immigration, and criminal justice (Morning Consult and Bipartisan Policy Center, 2022).



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