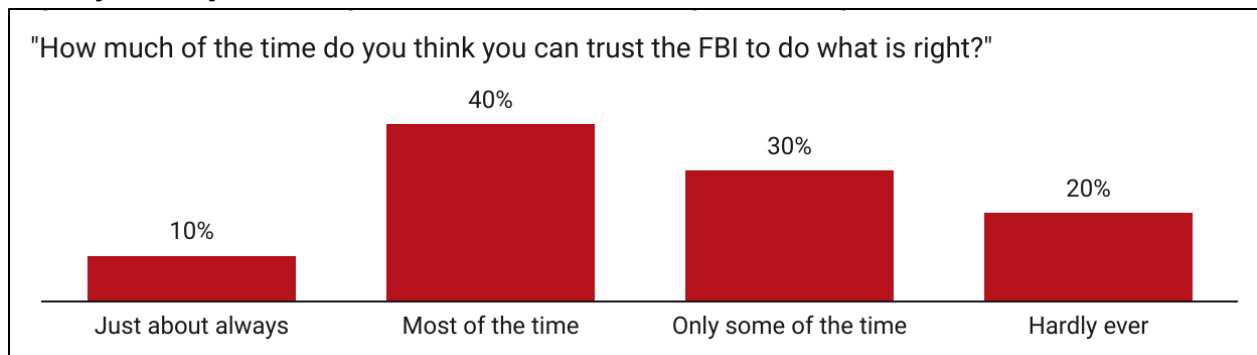


Mood of the Nation: Trust in the FBI

January 4, 2023

Half of American adults trust the FBI "most of the time" or "just about always"; one in five say "hardly ever"



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 14-18, 2022. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.6 percentage points.

Summary and key findings

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy's latest Mood of the Nation Poll, conducted with 1,000 American adults November 14 through 18, 2022, included questions aimed at better understanding trust in the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Key findings include:

- Half of Americans trust the FBI either most of the time (10%) or “just about always” (40%).
 - This is significantly higher than trust in the federal government more generally; about one-quarter of Americans trust “the government in Washington” to do what is right either “just about always” or “most of the time.”
 - Trust in the FBI is significantly higher among Democrats than either Republicans or political independents.
 - Only 4% of Republicans indicate that that they “just about always” trust the FBI to do what is right, compared with 17% of Democrats.
 - Only 7% of Democrats indicate that they “hardly ever” trust the FBI to do what is right, compared with 30% of Independents and 32% of Republicans.
 - Considering the margin of error associated with this survey there are relatively few group-to-group differences in levels of trust for the FBI.
 - Millennials appear to have somewhat higher levels of trust than either the younger Generation Z or the older Generation X.
 - Trust in the FBI also appears higher among Black Americans than white Americans.
 - A higher proportion of those with at least a college degree indicate trust in the FBI than is the case among those with some college but no degree.
- When asked to choose between four statements about reasons for their level of trust in the FBI, a two-in-five plurality of Americans indicate that that believe FBI agents are fair.
 - Here again, the largest group-to-group differences follow political allegiances.
 - Half of all Republicans indicated that the statement “Many FBI agents do not enforce the law fairly, because they are biased against former President Trump and his agenda” was closest to their view.
 - Among Democrats, over half favored the statement, “Most FBI agents enforce the law fairly, and criticisms of the FBI are unfair.”
 - Generational differences in perceptions of FBI agents are also fairly pronounced:

- Only 31% of Generation Z indicated that they feel FBI agents are fair, compared with 50% of the Silent Generation.
- Thirty-eight percent of Generation Z indicates that FBI agents are biased against groups on the left, an option chosen by none of the respondents from the Silent Generation.
- Americans' trust in the FBI at the end of 2022 is very similar to the level of trust found in a 2018 Mood of the Nation Poll.
 - The 2018 poll found lower levels of trust in the federal government.
 - The 2018 poll also found a somewhat higher proportion of respondents indicating that FBI agents are fair, and a somewhat lower proportion indicating that the FBI is biased against groups on the left than is the case in the late 2022 poll.

Introduction

Penn State's nonpartisan McCourtney Institute for Democracy regularly conducts the nationally representative Mood of the Nation Poll to gauge how Americans are feeling about various aspects of American politics and society.¹

to assess Americans' trust in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), survey respondents were asked to respond to the following questions, starting with a comparison question about trust in the government:

1. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?
 - a. Just about always
 - b. Most of the time
 - c. Only some of the time
 - d. Hardly ever

2. How much of the time do you think you can trust the FBI to do what is right?
 - a. Just about always
 - b. Most of the time
 - c. Only some of the time
 - d. Hardly ever
 - e.

3. Still thinking about the FBI, which of the following comes closest to your opinion (even if none are exactly right)?
 - a. Many FBI agents do not enforce the law fairly, because they are biased against former President Trump and his agenda
 - b. Many FBI agents do not enforce the law fairly, because they are opposed to liberals and groups like Black Lives Matter
 - c. Many FBI agents do not enforce the law fairly, because they are poorly trained and not very competent
 - d. Most FBI agents enforce the law fairly, and criticisms of the FBI are unfair

Note that the order in which the options were presented was rotated to avoid possible question order effects.

These questions were also asked in a Mood of the Nation Poll fielded Feb. 5-8, 2018. Some limited results from that survey are presented in this report for purposes of comparison.

¹ For additional information about the Mood of the Nation Poll see the appendix to this brief. For additional details about this survey's methodology, please see <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/mood-of-the-nation-poll-motn>

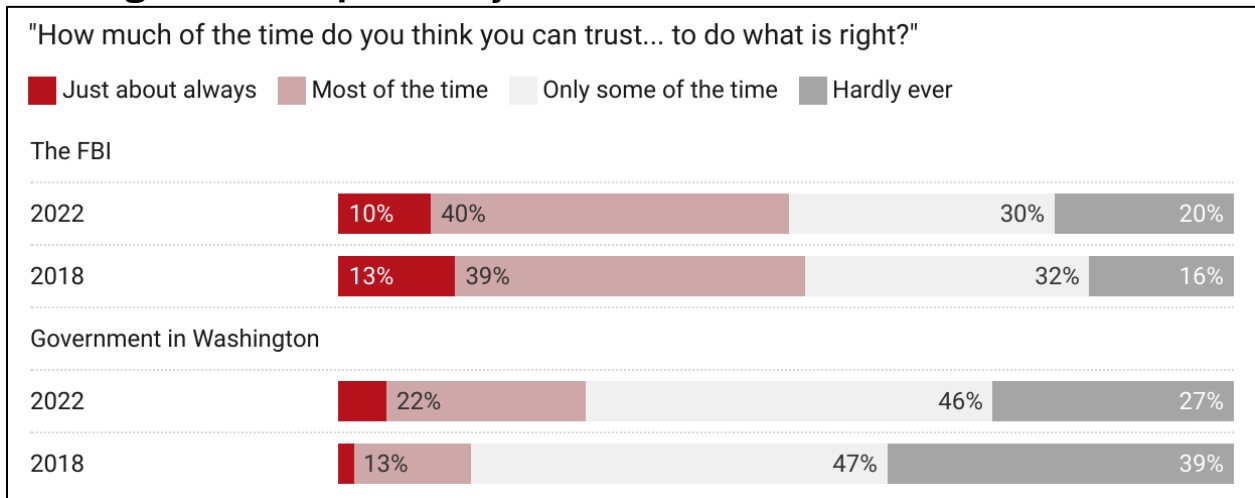
To see whether Americans’ opinions on these topics vary according to demographic, social and economic characteristics, we analyzed the results of each question by gender (women, men), generation (Silent or Boomer; X; Millennial; Z), race and ethnicity (four groups are available in this survey: White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; Other), educational attainment and political affiliation (self-identified Republican, Independent, Democrat, as derived from self-placement on a seven-category scale ranging from “Strong Democrat” to “Strong Republican”).

The number of respondents in each group are detailed in the methodology report that accompanies this brief.

Trust in the FBI is higher than trust in the federal government

Today, half of American adults trust the FBI to do what is right either "most of the time" (40%) or "just about always" (10%), whereas only about one-quarter of Americans say they have that level of trust for the "government in Washington."

Trust in the FBI is higher than trust in the federal government, and is unchanged over the past four years



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Feb. 5-8, 2018 and Nov. 14-18, 2022. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older in each survey; the overall margin of error in both 2018 and 2022 is ±3.6 percentage points.

Since 2018, Americans have gained some trust in the federal government, with the proportion indicating that they “just about always” trust it to what is right growing from 2% to 5%, and the proportion indicating “hardly ever” dropping from 39% to 27%.

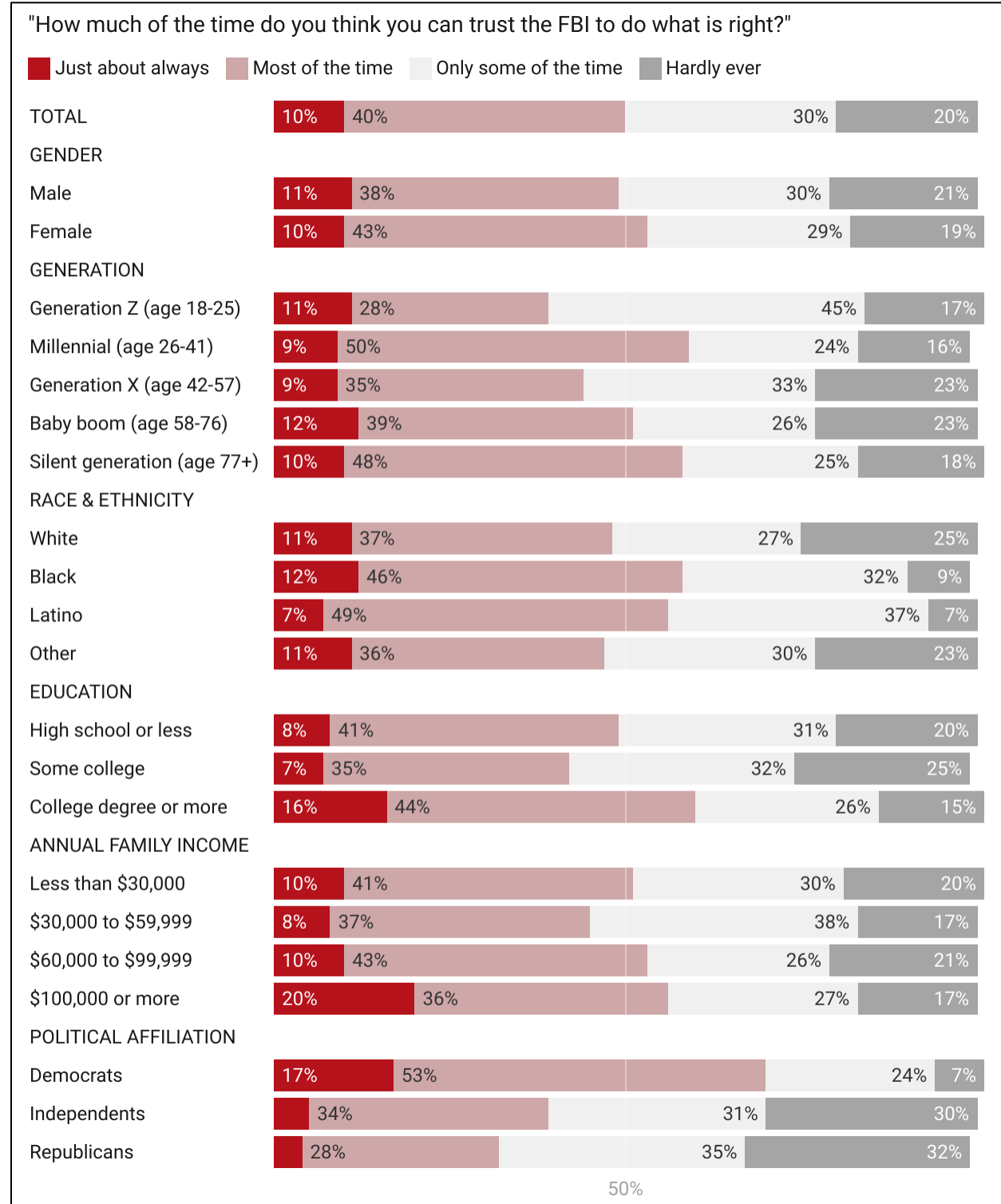
Trust in the FBI has not increased from 2018 to 2022, with statistically similar proportions in each category of trust for both years.

Trust in the FBI is higher among Democrats than Independents or Republicans

Considering the margin of error associated with this survey there are relatively few group-to-group differences in levels of trust for the FBI. Millennials appear to have somewhat higher levels of trust than either the younger Generation Z or the older Generation X. Trust in the FBI also appears higher among Black Americans than white Americans, and a higher proportion of those with at least a college degree indicate trust in the FBI than is the case among those with some college but no degree.

The largest difference in FBI trust follows political lines. Only 4% of Republicans indicate that they “just about always” trust the FBI to do what is right, compared with 17% of Democrats; conversely only 7% of Democrats indicate that they “hardly ever” trust the FBI to do what is right, compared with 30% of Independents and 32% of Republicans.

Trust in the FBI by group



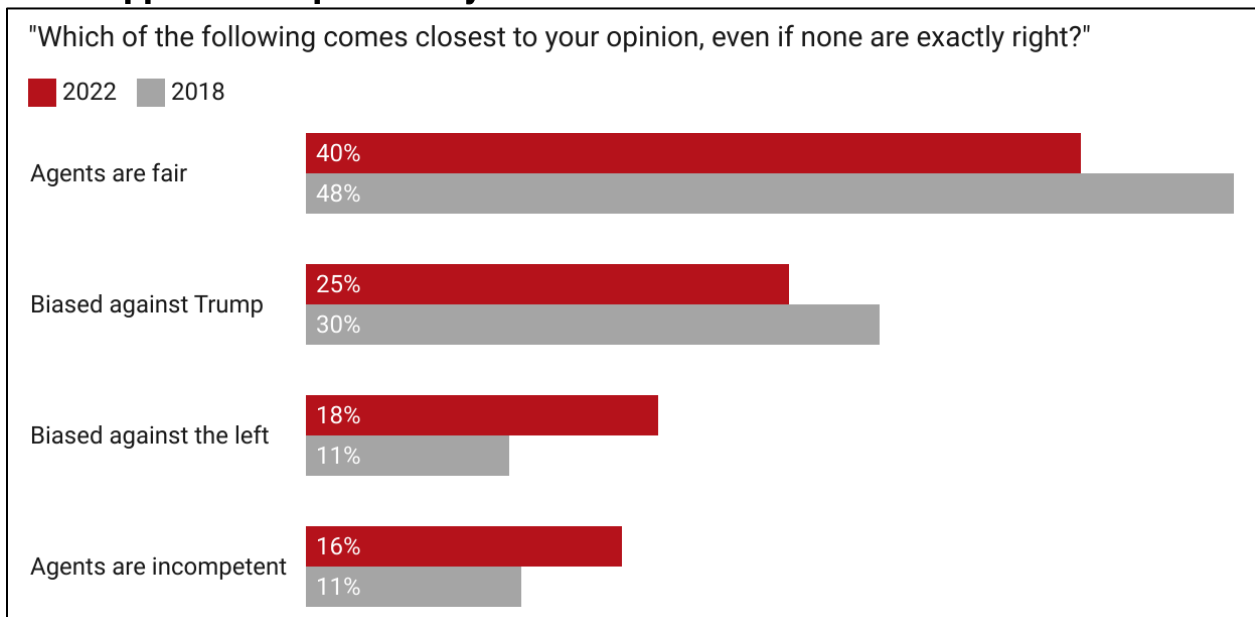
Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 14-18, 2022. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.6 percentage points, larger for sub-groups.

A plurality of Americans think FBI agents are fair

When probed more about opinions related to the FBI, a plurality of two in five Americans indicate, “Most FBI agents enforce the law fairly, and criticisms of the FBI are unfair.” This is down somewhat from just four years earlier, when nearly half indicated that they thought FBI agents were fair in response to the same question.

Perhaps most surprising, given the FBI’s much noted raid on former President Trump’s Mar-a-Lago residence this past summer, is that the proportion indicating that they thought, “Many FBI agents do not enforce the law fairly, because they are biased against [former] President Trump and his agenda” dropped somewhat from 30% in 2018 to 25% in 2022.²

A plurality of Americans indicate that FBI agents are fair, but that proportion has dropped in the past four years



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Feb. 5-8, 2018 and Nov. 14-18, 2022. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older in each survey; the overall margin of error in both 2018 and 2022 is ± 3.6 percentage points.

The drop in proportion indicating they think FBI agents are either fair or biased against Mr. Trump was made up for in the increases in the proportions favoring the statements, “Many FBI agents do not enforce the law fairly, because they are opposed to liberals and groups like Black Lives Matter” and “Many FBI agents do not enforce the law fairly, because they are poorly trained and not very competent.”

² See for example, “F.B.I. Searches Trump’s Mar-a-Lago Residence in Florida” by Maggie Haberman, Ben Protess and Adam Goldman, New York Times, first published Aug. 8, 2022 (<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/08/08/us/trump-fbi-raid>).

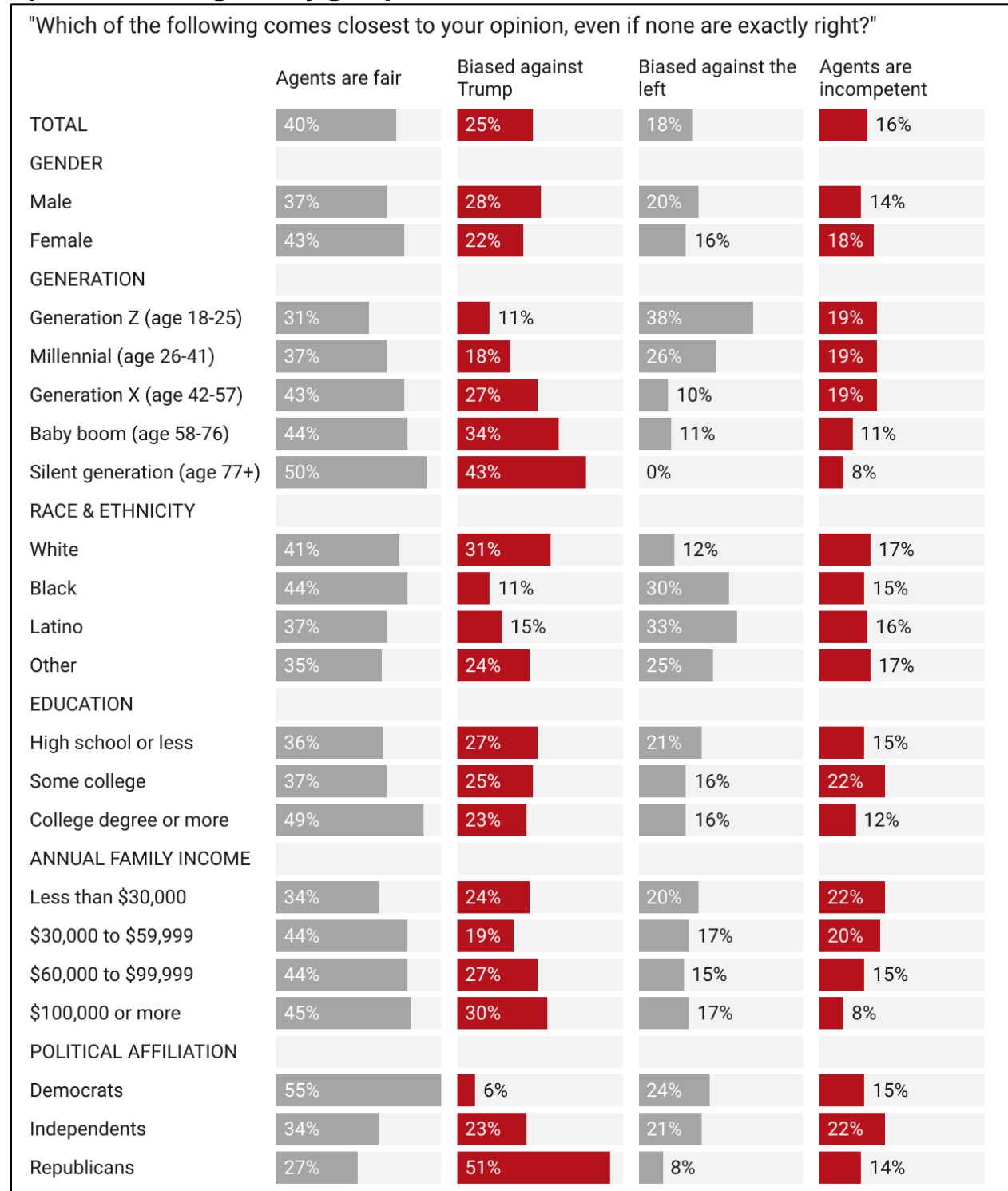
As shown in the table below, opinions of FBI agents differ in interesting ways. For example, the proportion of respondents indicating that FBI agents are fair increases by age, with only 31% of Generation Z opting for that position, compared with 50% of the Silent Generation.

That step-like progression is even more apparent in the proportion indicating that agents are biased against former president Trump: only 11% of Generation Z opted for that position compared with 43% of the Silent Generation. On the other hand, 38% of Generation Z indicates that FBI agents are biased against groups on the left, an option chosen by none of the respondents from the Silent Generation.

Opinions also vary notably by race and ethnicity, with 31% of white Americans indicating that FBI agents are biased against Trump, compared with only 11% of Black Americans and 15% of Latino Americans. The proportion of Black and Latino Americans who indicate that FBI agents are biased against groups on the left is double the proportion of white Americans who hold that position.

The largest differences in opinions on FBI agents follow political allegiances. Half of all Republicans indicated that the statement “Many FBI agents do not enforce the law fairly, because they are biased against former President Trump and his agenda” was closest to their view. Among Democrats, over half favored the statement, “Most FBI agents enforce the law fairly, and criticisms of the FBI are unfair.”

Opinion of FBI agents by group



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 14-18, 2022. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.6 percentage points, larger for sub-groups.

About the APM Research Lab

The APM Research Lab is a department within the American Public Media Group that informs the public about challenges and opportunities facing families, communities and organizations throughout the nation. Our mission is to foster an engaged democracy by inspiring curiosity, inquiry and discussion through fact-driven, credible research and analysis. Our Values: Independent, Useful, Informative, Non-partisan. Our tagline is *bringing facts into focus*.

The Lab is a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative and abides by its standards. See <https://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/Transparency-Initiative/>.

Contact: info@apmresearchlab.org | apmresearchlab.org

About the McCourtney Institute for Democracy

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State promotes scholarship and practical innovations that defend and advance democracy in the United States and abroad. Through teaching, research and public outreach, the Institute leverages the resources of Penn State and partners around the world to foster a model of deliberation, policymaking and responsiveness that is passionate, informed and civil.

The Mood of the Nation Poll offers a unique approach to public opinion polling. It allows Americans to speak in their own words through open-ended questions that focus on emotions like anger and hope, as well as commitment to constitutional principles.

Contact: democracyinst@psu.edu | democracy.psu.edu

About the survey

Data collection for this Mood of the Nation Poll was conducted online by YouGov (<https://today.yougov.com/>). The YouGov panel includes over 1.8 million individuals who agree to complete occasional surveys. The 1,000 individuals who completed the May 2022 Mood of the Nation Poll were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file).

For additional details about the sample and survey methodology, as well as transparency disclosures relevant to the American Association of Public Opinion, the Roper Center and CNN, please see:

<https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>.

Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab. The survey questions were designed by the McCourtney Institute, particularly Mood of the Nation Poll Director Eric Plutzer who also provided input on the reporting.

Media contacts

APM Research Lab: Craig Helmstetter (chelmstetter@apmresearchlab.org; 651-290-1219)

McCourtney Institute for Democracy: Jenna Spinelle (jenna@psu.edu; 570-617-5667)