



**Alliance for  
Peacebuilding**



# **Assessing the State of U.S. Democracy, Rule of Law, and Social Cohesion**

*Perceptions from leading peacebuilding and conflict experts*

December 2022

## Overview of the report:

Due to the increasing conflict and political violence in the United States in early 2022, the Alliance for Peacebuilding has been increasingly concerned about the growing conflict dynamics in the US. This report presents findings from 160+ leading peacebuilding and conflict experts to the *Assessing the State of Democracy, Rule of Law, and Social Cohesion in the U.S.* survey conducted by the Alliance for Peacebuilding between November 2021 – January 2022. The top line findings from this survey show Americans have escalating conflict dynamics.

## About the Alliance for Peacebuilding:

The Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) was named the “number one influencer and change agent” among peacebuilding institutions worldwide and is an award-winning nonprofit and nonpartisan network of 170+ organizations working in 181 countries to prevent and reduce violent conflict and build sustainable peace. AfP cultivates a network to strengthen and advance the peacebuilding field, enabling peacebuilding organizations to achieve greater impact—tackling issues too large for any one organization to address alone.

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## Acknowledgements:

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## Key Findings

1

Ninety-three percent of participants reported that it is extremely important to them that the U.S. is a democracy; yet **88% are not satisfied or extremely not satisfied with the way democracy is working in the U.S.**

2

Survey participants identified “**the dissemination and abuse of dis/misinformation**”, “**toxic partisan polarization**”, and “**ongoing systemic racism affecting our country**” as the top three major issues contributing to democratic decline and conflict in the U.S.

3

Mounting and high pressures affecting political participation include low voter turnout and the belief that **American society is extremely polarized in antagonistic political camps**. Rising pressures can be offset by strong civil society engagement since CSOs can freely form and operate. However, **participants perceive that CSOs are not regularly consulted for decision-making purposes**.

4

While Americans have a greater perception of trust in local governance and within their political groups, trust in the national government, legal system, and Congress are at considerably low levels and demonstrate strong pressure warnings. **Trust across political groups is at a severely low level demonstrating extreme pressure and warrants immediate attention**.

5

While Americans have access to a wide variety of news, their **overall low trust in the media potentially offsets any gain to be made in wide accessibility**.

6

While there is a belief that Americans enjoy access to freedom of expression, movement, religion, association, and assembly, **it is not equally nor equitably shared**. Socio-economic factors, identity, and immigration status contribute to an individual’s perceived access to and inclusion in formal justice systems, voting, and civil liberties. **Economic inequality overall was highlighted as a significant contributor to the decline of American democracy**.

7

While there is a shared perception of respect for the Constitution, mounting pressures affecting government efficiency are driven by **questions of Congress’ effectiveness, judicial independence, and fears of external influence on local democracy**.

8

Respondents perceive a **severe inequality in distribution of political power in the U.S.** across all key identity subgroups, **particularly related to socio-economic demographics**. Furthermore, respondents believe elected representatives are not reflective of the wide diversity of Americans.

9

Fifty-five percent of survey respondents **believe Americans trust election results only if their candidate wins the election**, whereas only 21% perceive that Americans trust the election results irrespective of who wins the election. However, those surveyed see **greater transparency and accuracy at the local electoral level compared to the national level**.

10

Fifty-five percent of the responses indicated dissatisfaction with the electoral system in the U.S. Survey participants identified “**gerrymandering in congressional districts**”, “**voter suppression**”, and the “**media’s portrayal of election legitimacy, processes, and results**” as the three biggest threats to free, fair, accurate, and transparent elections.

11

Seventy-three percent of senior peacebuilding and conflict experts reported an **elevated or extreme risk of politically motivated violence in the U.S. for the 2024 presidential elections**.

12

The highest priority mitigating factors in which to invest to strengthen democracy and prevent conflict in the U.S., were identified as “**election reform including voter protection**”, “**strengthening social cohesion between urban and rural populations**”, “**civic education and engagement**”, and “**investing in news literacy efforts to help Americans become better consumers of news**”.



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## Introduction:

The Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) [has been increasingly concerned](#) about the growing [conflict dynamics](#) and political violence in the United States. To prevent and reduce violent conflict and build sustainable peace, it is vital that we analyze and apply the learnings that drive violent conflict and political violence in the U.S. The peacebuilding field has a long history conducting conflict assessments to systematically examine the political, economic, social, historical, and cultural factors that shape actual or potential conflict. Conflict assessments include an analysis of the underlying causes of conflict as well as an assessment of the actors and institutions that either encourage or discourage violence. It can also serve as a significant tool in identifying high pressure points, early warning signs, and strong resiliencies in conflict environments that inform approaches to address conflict and prevent violence.

Leveraging this skillset, AfP surveyed our peacebuilding members and leading experts to collect data on their perceptions assessing the state of U.S. democracy, rule of law, and social cohesion. Through these perceptions, this report aims to highlight key pressure points and relevant solutions

to strengthen the resiliency of U.S. democracy. This report presents findings from 160+ leading peacebuilding and conflict experts to assess the state of democracy and social cohesion in the U.S.

## Materials and Methods:

### A. Survey

Data were collected from the AfP's *Assessing the State of Democracy, Rule of Law, and Social Cohesion in the U.S.* online survey instrument conducted in English. This survey aimed to gain a better understanding of senior policy and conflict experts' perceptions on the current state of democracy, rule of law, and social cohesion in the U.S. Key themes and resulting questions posed in the survey were informed by a variety of instruments including:

1. [V-DEM Codebook v11.1](#)<sup>1</sup>, Varieties of Democracy Project
2. [The Global State of Democracy Indices](#) (GSoD Indices)
3. [NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist Poll](#) of 1,209 National Adults
4. [The World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index 2021](#)
5. [Afrobarometer Round 8](#), The Quality of Democracy and Governance in Kenya

6. [Towards a Social Cohesion Index for South Africa using SARB data](#), The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.

The closed sampling frame of senior policy and conflict experts came from a combination of AfP's listservs, including AfP's membership base, senior fellows, board members, and strategic partners. Strategic partners include policy and advocacy technical experts, learning and evidence technical experts, and members of AfP's [U.S. Peace, Justice, and Democracy Working Group](#).

The survey explored and captured data on several aspects of democracy across five sections. The first section asked participants to respond to general questions related to their perception of the state of U.S. democracy, major issues contributing to the decline of democracy in the U.S., and mitigating factors that could halt this decline. Questions were posed in Likert scales, closed, and open-ended formats. The second section asked participants a series of closed matrix questions that assessed in-depth their perceptions of various factions of democracy, rule of law, and social cohesion in the U.S. The third section explored participants' perceptions of the U.S. electoral system, including trust and factors affecting the freeness and fairness of elections through Likert scales and closed-ended questions. The fourth section explored the impact of the U.S. government's response to COVID-19 on participants' opinions. Lastly, the fifth section collected participants' demographic information.

### B. Participants:

The survey received 163 independent responses from peacebuilding and conflict experts between November 18, 2021 – January 5, 2022. Respondents averaged 15 or more years of experience working in peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and most respondents (67%) currently hold positions at the Senior and Executive Levels.

Participants predominantly reside in the U.S. with only 8% outside; however, the majority of respondents (68%) work for organizations that operate both inside and outside the U.S. Only 20% of respondents work within the U.S. only, and 12% outside the U.S. only.

There was relatively balanced gender representation with 53% of participants identified as female, 42% male, 1% Genderqueer, nonbinary, genderfluid, or transgender, and 4% preferred not to answer.

Years in Fields Related to Peace	#	%
0-2	12	7.36%
3-5	21	13.50%
6-10	31	19.02%
11-15	25	15.34%
15+	73	44.79%

Career Level	#	%
Entry	9	5.52%
Mid-level	38	23.31%
Senior	59	36.20%
Executive	50	36.67%
N/A	7	4.29%

Geographical Scope of Organization	#	%
In the U.S. only	32	19.63%
Outside the U.S. only	20	12.27%
Both in and outside the U.S.	111	68.10%

Current Sector	#	%
Academic	21	12.88%
Think-tank or research NGO	12	7.36%
Peacebuilding NGO (not grantmaking)	60	36.81%
Government agency	2	1.23%
International governmental organization	2	1.23%
Private sector	13	7.98%
Philanthropy, foundation, or grantmaking	8	4.91%
Other NGO	28	17.18%
Prefer not to say	6	3.68%
Other	8	4.91%

Current Role	#	%
Academic	16	9.82%
Senior leadership	75	46.01%
Program staff	34	20.86%
M&E staff	5	3.07%
Political staff	3	1.84%
Departmental policy lead	8	4.91%
Prefer not to say	11	6.75%
Other (contractor)	4	2.45%
Other (please describe)	7	4.29%



Photo by Shaziya DeYoung

<sup>1</sup> Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, Agnes Cornell, M. Steven Fish, Lisa Gastaldi, Haakon Gjerløw, Adam Glynn, Allen Hicken, Anna Lührmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Kyle L. Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Valeriya Mechkova, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Johannes von Römer, Brigitte Seim, Rachel Sigman, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, Aksel Sundtröm, Eitan Tzelgov, Luca Uberti, Yi-ting Wang, Tore Wig, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2021. "V-Dem Codebook v11.1." *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project*.

**Figure 1: Conversion Chart - Survey Data to Pressure Measurement Scale**

	Statement A		Statement B		
<b>Clean Elections (Local)</b>	Local elections are not free, fair, accurate, and transparent		Local elections are free, fair, accurate, and transparent		Questions posed to survey participants
<b>Electoral Participation</b>	There is not a good voter turnout for elections		There is a good voter turnout for elections		
<b>Clean Elections (Local)</b>	-2	-1	0	1	Questions converted to a 5-point scale (-2 to 2) for analysis
<b>Electoral Participation</b>	-2	-1	0	1	

Participants predominantly work in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), with 38% in peacebuilding NGOs and 18% in other NGOs. Following NGOs, 13% of respondents were from academia, followed by 8% respectively in the “think tank or research NGO” and the “Private sector”. A few responses were received from other sectors, including “Government agency” (1%), “International government organization” (1%), and “Philanthropy, foundation, grantmaking” (5%). When looking at current professional settings, many participants (46%) reported working in “Senior leadership” roles currently. A substantial number of participants (21%) reported working in “Program staff” positions, followed by 10% working in academic settings.

**C. Data Analysis:**

Survey data was collected across a variety of different formats, including closed-ended, open-ended, Likert scales, and matrix questions. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for closed-ended and Likert scales. Answers to open-ended questions were analyzed by two separate researchers using a card-sort model for theme extraction. Any major differences between identified top-line themes were directly resolved by discussions between coders, resulting in a final coding scheme applied to the data.

The matrix question format collected data in response to 44 different elements to compare perceptions of democracy, rule of law, and social cohesion. The discrete data collected from these questions was transformed to continuous data and two different scores were calculated: 1) a per-question mean score [ $\mu(x)$ ] and 2) a per-theme mean score [ $\mu(t)$ ] for each of the seven themes reflected in the 44 questions. Refer to Technical Appendix A for a list of all the questions and their resulting score.

For each matrix question, participants were presented with two dichotomous statements and were asked to choose the statement that most closely aligned with their personal perception.<sup>2</sup> One statement referenced positive perceptions on various elements of democracy and the other statement referenced negative perceptions on those same elements. For each set of statements, participants were given four options without a central or neutral opinion (refer to Figure 1 above). The responses to each of these questions were then converted to a 5-point scale of -2 to 2 to facilitate analysis. A “0” value on this scale was not offered as an option to participants in the survey, forcing participants to pick a preference for either statement extreme.

Once each response was converted to continuous data according to the scale reflected above, the

<sup>2</sup> Perceptions collected as part of this survey are meant to reflect the perceptions of the individuals who took the survey and not the organizations with whom survey participants are associated.

mean score (with equal weights) was calculated for each question. The mean score is defined as:

$$\mu(x) = \frac{\sum V(x)}{n}$$

where  $V(x)$  refers to the values coded for each response and  $n$  refers to the total number of responses received for the question.

Each of the 44 matrix questions were then thematically organized into seven themes relevant to democracy, rule of law, and social cohesion: political participation, government efficiency, fundamental rights, media integrity, distribution of political power, access to basic public services, and trust in political institutions and groups. The mean score calculated for each of these seven themes is defined as:

$$\mu(t) = \frac{\sum V(x)}{n}$$

Where  $t$  refers to the theme,  $V(x)$  refers to the values coded for each question in the theme, and  $n$  refers to the total number of questions represented in the theme. Irrespective of the number of questions

reflected in each theme, the straight mean was used. Various attempts were made applying weighting analyses to the means of each theme, but in the end, it did not significantly affect the findings and the straight mean was used.

**D. Data Interpretation:**

For analysis purposes of matrix data, individual scores for both  $\mu(x)$  and  $\mu(t)$  are interpreted on a pressure measurement scale and presented as a visual pressure gauge. Scores that appear in the red [ $-0.5 > (\mu(x) | \mu(t)) \leq -2$ ] indicate that pressure is extremely high and warrants immediate attention. Scores that appear in the yellow [ $-0.5 \leq (\mu(x) | \mu(t)) \leq 0.5$ ] are early warning signs of potentially mounting pressure. Finally scores that appear in the green [ $0.5 < (\mu(x) | \mu(t)) \leq 2$ ] indicate strong resilient systems that may or may not be offsetting other mounting pressures.

This approach to interpreting the data allows for more accurate data analysis without hyperinflating or ascribing specific meaning to the actual statistics that were developed while transforming this discrete data into continuous data. These statistics are only valuable to interpret trends within the closed dataset. Actual statistics on the -2 to 2



Photo by Andy Feliciotti on Unsplash



scale should not be misinterpreted as comparable to other established scales such as V-Dem Indices or representative of an actual value outside of this scale.

Scores represented in the visual pressure gauge pinpoint areas where mounting pressure has the greatest potential for outbreak of violence and/or system failure alongside areas where strong resiliencies could best be strengthened to mitigate potential breakdowns.

**E. Limitations:**

There are several limitations to this study. The sample was intentionally not random. The targeted sampling methodology included only peacebuilders and conflict prevention experts with technical experience identifying and addressing the impacts and root causes of conflict before, during, and after violent conflict. Since the survey was administered online in English, only participants who had the required technological and linguistic capacities could participate. The voluntary nature of participation means these results represent the perspective of only those people who thought the topic was interesting or valuable enough to participate.

The findings depict participants' perceptions at a specific moment in time. The data was collected between November 2021 – January 2022. In such a rapidly changing political climate, these responses only reflect a unique snapshot of perceptions on democracy, rule of law, and social cohesion as perceived in this timeframe.

The survey instrument was informed by multiple evidence-based tools; however, it was developed to be administered in a rapid format, particularly the matrix questions, rather than a comprehensive assessment of democracy, rule of law, and social cohesion. As such, individual statistics should not be taken as indicative of a comprehensive assessment of any singular aspect of democracy or social cohesion but should inform discussions on key trends and indications.

The results of the survey identify areas of democracy and social cohesion that peacebuilding and conflict prevention experts perceive as potential factors that could most critically affect violent conflict in the U.S. - as both triggers and mitigating factors.

**Findings:**

**A. Democratic Significance and State of Conflict in the U.S.**

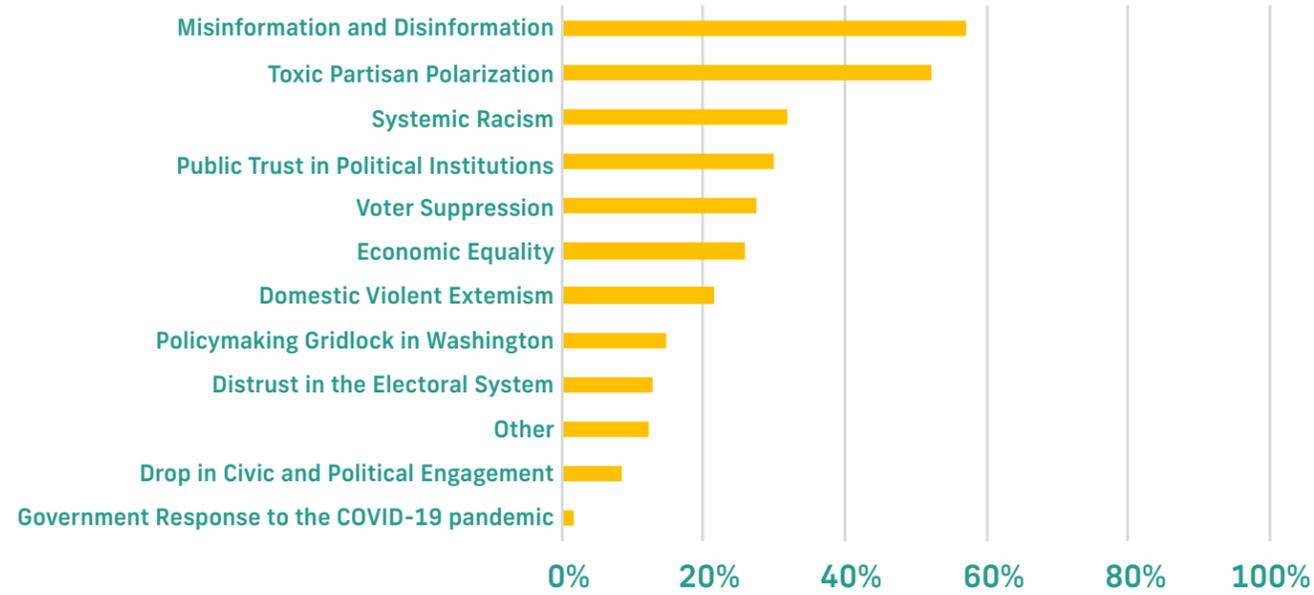
The survey instrument asked participants to provide their perceptions on the importance of the U.S. being a democracy. Overall, participants were very supportive of the U.S. being a democracy but were extremely dissatisfied with how democracy is currently working in the U.S. Most participants (93%) reported that it is extremely important to them that the U.S. is a democracy; yet an alarming **88% are not satisfied or extremely not satisfied with the way democracy is working in the U.S.** Only 4% of participants expressed satisfaction with the way democracy is currently working in the U.S.

How important is it for you that the U.S. is a democracy?	#	%
Extremely Important	12	93.25%
Important	10	6.13%
Neutral	1	0.61%
Not Important	0	0%
Extremely Not Important	0	0%

How satisfied are you with the way democracy is functioning in the U.S.?	#	%
Extremely Satisfied	0	0%
Satisfied	6	3.68%
Neutral	13	7.98%
Not Satisfied	90	55.21%
Extremely Not Satisfied	54	33.13%

While V-Dem's dataset shows an improvement in the liberal democracy index score for the U.S. from 0.70 to 0.74 between 2019 and 2021, only 41% of our sample perceived the state of U.S. democracy since President Biden was sworn into office as improving, whereas 40% indicated no change and 20% indicated it is declining or rapidly declining. It is critical to note these figures are indicative of respondents' perceptions between November 2021 – January 2022. According to current Gallup polling, [President Biden's term average approval rating](#) to date across the entirety of his term is 46% (compared to a historical average of 53% for all U.S. presidents for which there is extent data).

**Figure 2: Major Issues Contributing to Democratic Decline in the U.S.**



The survey instrument asked participants to provide their perceptions on factors contributing to the state of conflict and democratic decline in the U.S. by selecting from a closed list of eleven issues. Survey participants identified “the dissemination and abuse of dis/misinformation” (57%), “toxic partisan polarization” (52%), and “ongoing systemic racism affecting our country” (32%) as the top three major issues contributing to democratic decline and conflict in the U.S. “Public trust in political institutions” (30%), “Voter suppression” (28%), “Economic Inequality” (26%), and “Domestic Violent Extremism” (21%) all received substantial support as well.

Some emergent themes represented in the “Other” section reflect societal polarization that goes beyond partisan lines, corruption across political processes, and resource driven influences on political processes.

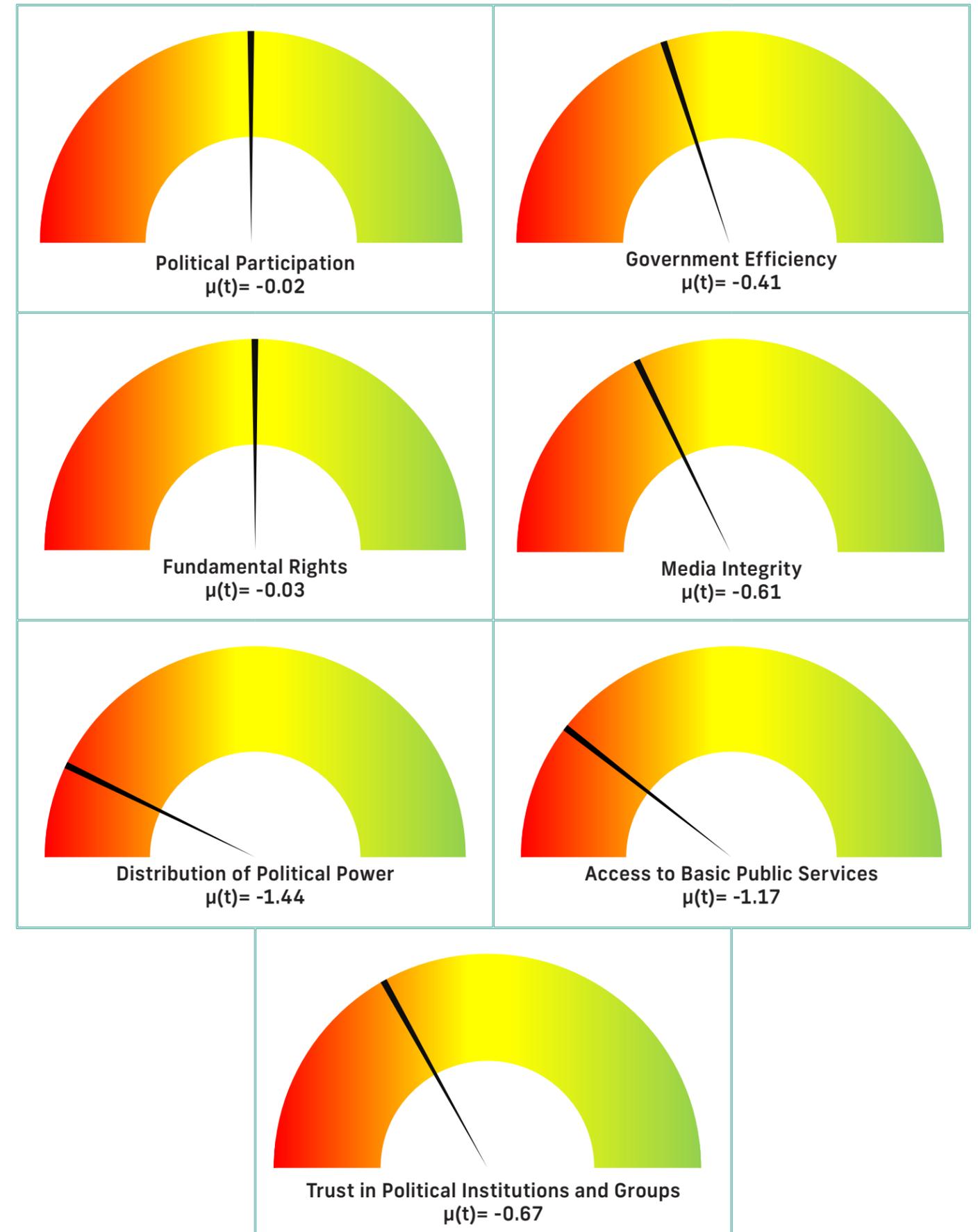
**B. General Perceptions on Democracy, Rule of Law, and Social Cohesion in the U.S.**

The survey instrument collected matrix data on 44 different elements of democracy, rule of law, and social cohesion across seven themes: political participation, government efficiency, fundamental rights, media integrity, distribution of political power, access to basic public services, and trust in political institutions and groups.

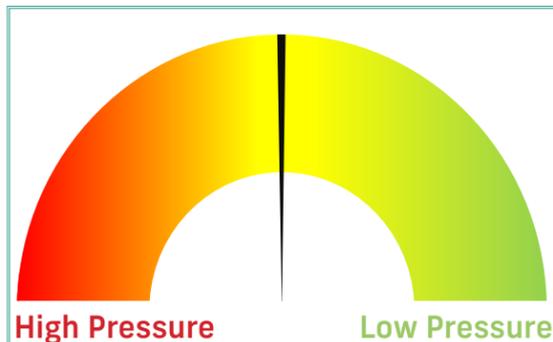
For the following section, scores represented in the visual pressure gauges pinpoint areas where mounting pressure has the greatest potential for outbreak of violence and/or system failure alongside areas where strong resiliencies could best be strengthened to mitigate potential breakdowns. When assessing  $\mu(t)$  for the seven themes, **all the themes reflect mounting to high pressure scores.** (Refer to Figure 3) When looking at the extremes, *Distribution of Political Power* and *Access to Basic Public Services* returned severely low scores, demonstrating extreme pressure. *Political Participation* and *Fundamental Rights* returned the highest scores; however, they both fall within the negative early warning signs range.

Of the 44 matrix questions, **70% (31/44 questions) received a negative score, reflecting a majority of early warning signs of mounting pressures and extremely high-pressure areas.** The remaining 30% (13/44 questions) received a positive score, reflecting resilient systems in U.S. democracy. (Refer to Technical Appendix A for a full list of questions and relevant scores).

**Figure 3: Pressure Gauge Metrics for Democracy, Rule of Law, and Social Cohesion Themes**



(i) Political Participation:



**Political Participation**  
 $\mu(t) = -0.02$

**Eight questions were asked to assess perceptions on society's political participation in the U.S.**

**There were mixed findings across these questions leading to an early warning score demonstrating both high mounting pressures and strong resiliencies.**

*Please refer to Technical Appendix A to see how participant responses correlate to individual scores on Figure 4.*

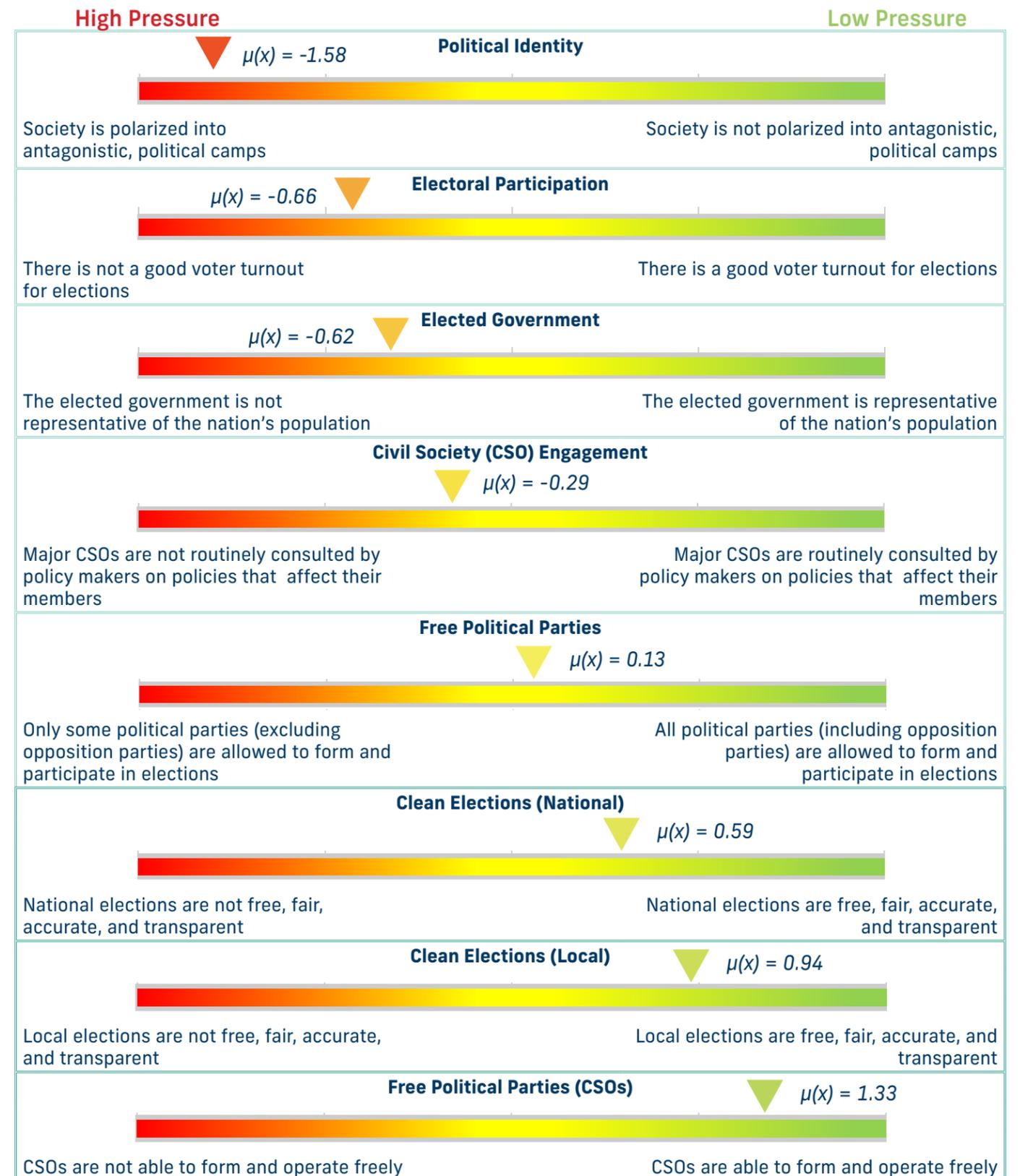
The question related to *Political Identity* exhibited the greatest pressure. When participants were asked their perceptions of American society being polarized into antagonistic political camps, 67% of responses strongly identified with this statement and 29% somewhat identified with this statement. No single response strongly disagreed with this statement.

On the other end of the spectrum, perceptions related to the freeness of civil society demonstrated the highest resiliency in this section, where 89% of responses strongly or somewhat agreed with civil society's ability to form and operate freely. However, when asked if CSOs are routinely consulted on policies regarding their members, the question resulted in a negative score, indicating that while CSOs can form and operate freely, they are not well integrated in formal decision-making processes.

Both questions regarding the free, fair, accurate, and transparent nature of elections at the local and national level returned positive but low scores. *Elected Government* also returned a low score with 66% of respondents believing that the elected government was not representative of the nation's population. At the same time, *Electoral Participation* received a low score where 69% of responses reflected the belief that there is not a strong voter turnout.

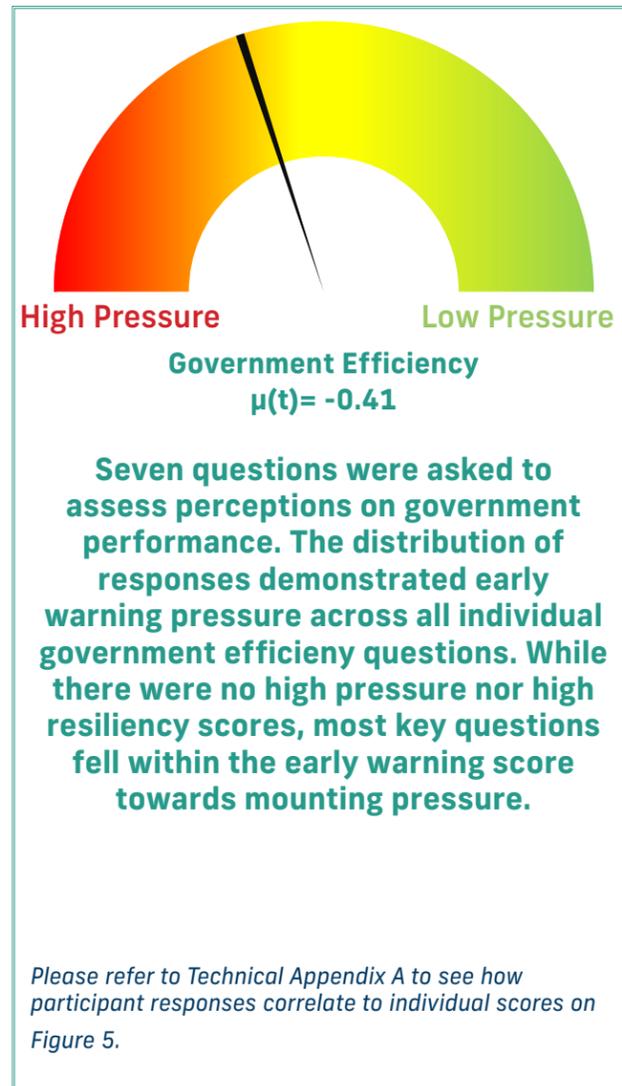
Overall, these findings indicate early warning signs as well as high pressure areas offset by resiliencies. Mounting and high pressures affecting political participation include the belief that American society is extremely polarized in antagonistic political camps, Americans see greater transparency and accuracy at the local electoral level compared to the national, and Americans believe the elected government is not representative of the nation's population. This is compounded by low voter turnout. This pressure is being offset by strong political participation by civil society, where CSOs can freely form and operate, even if they are not regularly consulted for decision-making purposes.

Figure 4: Political Participation Scores



*"We have fewer spaces where people with different views interact meaningfully with each other. Increasingly, we choose to live in communities with people who think as we do. Making it more intentional to talk across difference is now more important than ever"*

**(ii) Government Efficiency:**



Respect for the Constitution by members of the Executive returned the only positive but low score. It demonstrates some shared common ground focused on respect for the American Constitution that could be leveraged as a resiliency factor.

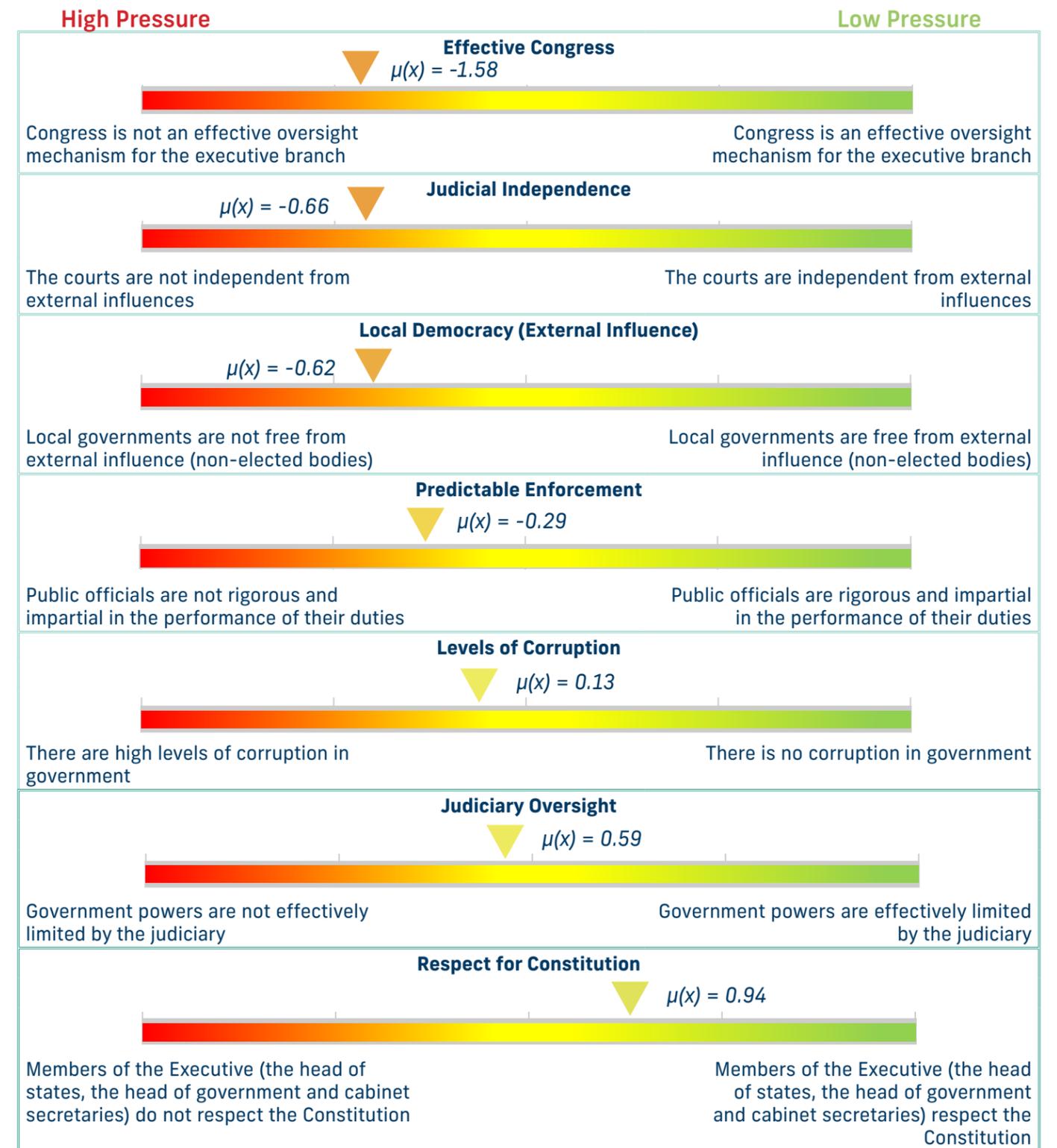
Mounting pressure was shown in relation to questions on *Effective Congress* and *Judicial Independence*, with 77% of responses reflecting negative scores for both. Additionally, perceptions on local governments being free from external influence also highlighted mounting pressure with 72% of responses reflecting a negative score. *Judicial Oversight* and *Predictable Enforcement* were both negative and low but within the early warning scale; however, perception on *Levels of Corruption* was on the cusp of mounting pressure.

These findings overall indicate mounting pressures and early warning signs across the efficient functioning of government that warrant attention. While there is a shared perception of respect for the Constitution, mounting pressures affecting government efficiency are driven by questions of Congress' effectiveness, judicial independence, and fears of external influence on local democracy.



Photo by Hansjörg Keller on Unsplash

**Figure 5: Government Efficiency Scores**



**High Pressure** **Low Pressure**

**Effective Congress**  
 $\mu(x) = -1.58$   
Congress is not an effective oversight mechanism for the executive branch Congress is an effective oversight mechanism for the executive branch

$\mu(x) = -0.66$  **Judicial Independence**  
The courts are not independent from external influences The courts are independent from external influences

$\mu(x) = -0.62$  **Local Democracy (External Influence)**  
Local governments are not free from external influence (non-elected bodies) Local governments are free from external influence (non-elected bodies)

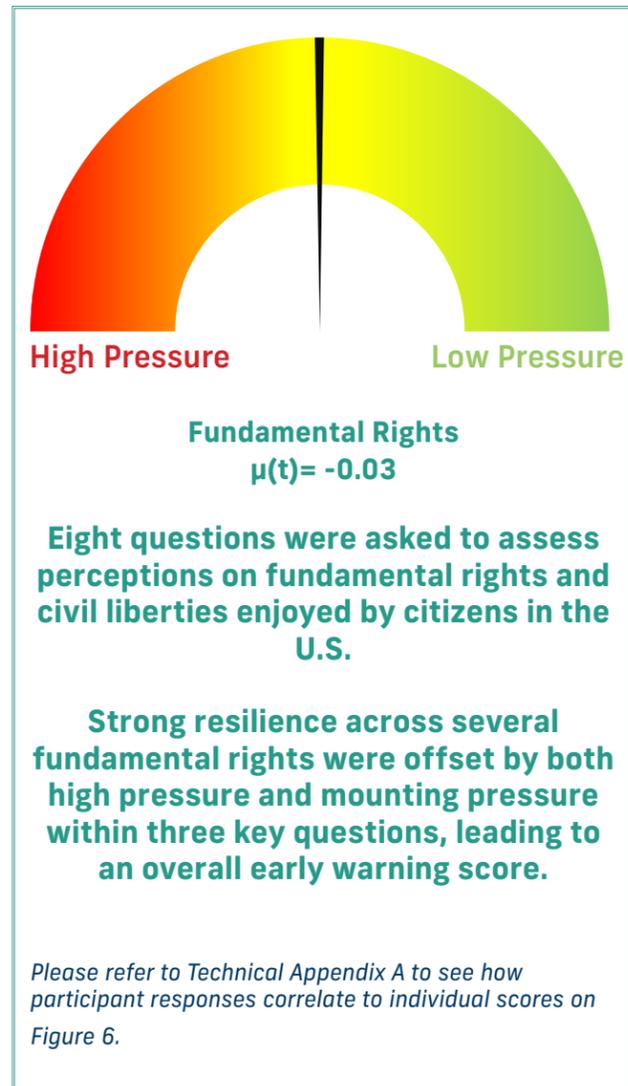
$\mu(x) = -0.29$  **Predictable Enforcement**  
Public officials are not rigorous and impartial in the performance of their duties Public officials are rigorous and impartial in the performance of their duties

$\mu(x) = 0.13$  **Levels of Corruption**  
There are high levels of corruption in government There is no corruption in government

$\mu(x) = 0.59$  **Judiciary Oversight**  
Government powers are not effectively limited by the judiciary Government powers are effectively limited by the judiciary

$\mu(x) = 0.94$  **Respect for Constitution**  
Members of the Executive (the head of states, the head of government and cabinet secretaries) do not respect the Constitution Members of the Executive (the head of states, the head of government and cabinet secretaries) respect the Constitution

(iii) Fundamental Rights:

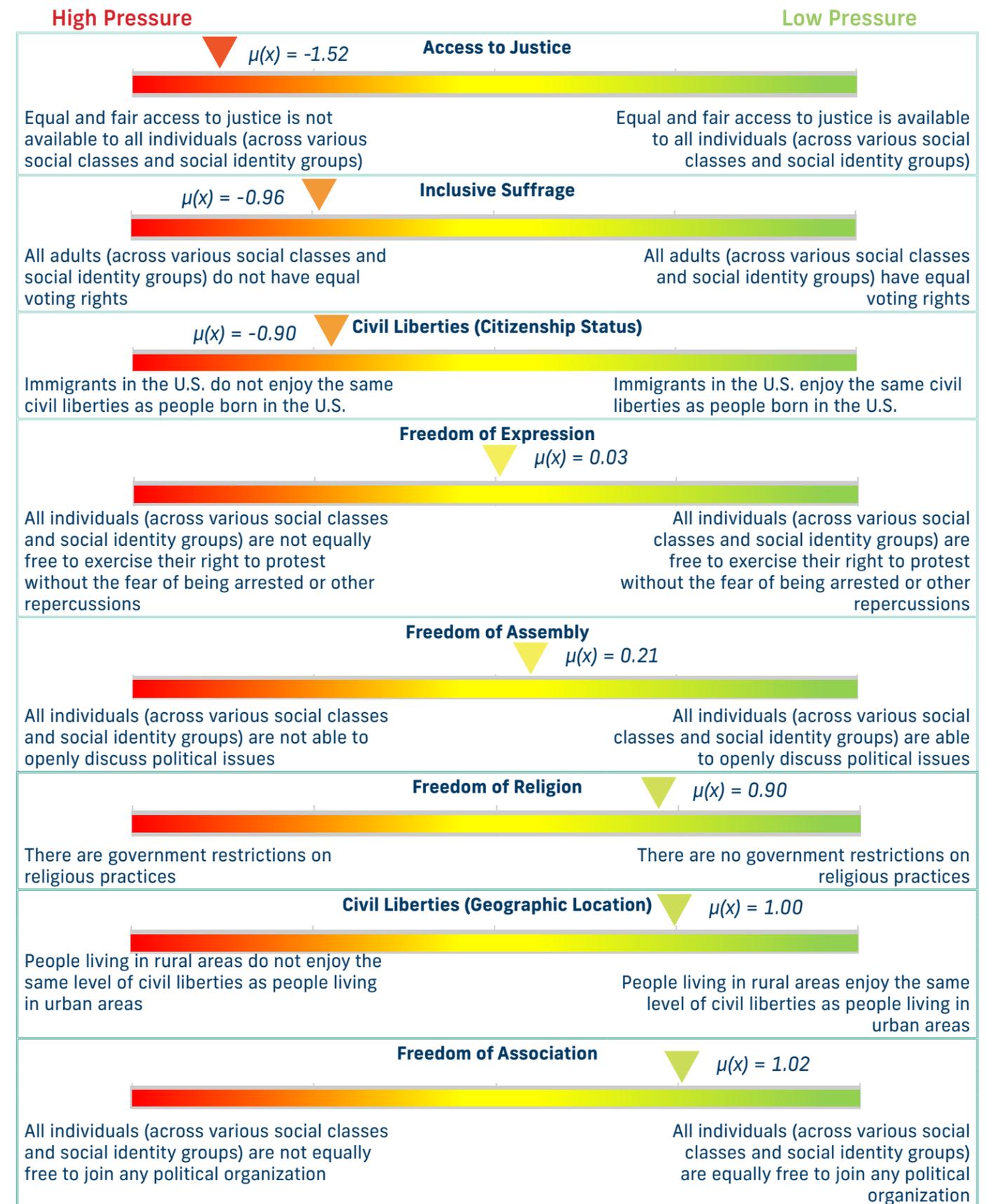


Most questions in this section returned positive scores and serve as resiliency factors. Respondents believe that individuals in the U.S. enjoy equal access to freedom of expression, movement, religion, association, and assembly, irrespective of urban or rural divides. This was particularly strong for *Freedom of Religion* and *Freedom of Association*. However, *Freedom of Expression*, as assessed by all individuals' ability to openly discuss political issues, is significantly lower and in the early warning scale. This finding warrants further assessment when combined with other findings on growing polarization across political divides in the U.S.

Mounting pressure was driven strongly by a lack of equal and fair *Access to Justice* for all individuals, a lack of equal voting rights for all individuals, and the belief that immigrants do not enjoy the same civil liberties as people born in the U.S. The question related to *Access to Justice* highlighted extremely high pressure, with 92% of responses reflecting a negative score. Questions related to *Inclusive Suffrage* for all individuals in the U.S. and *Civil Liberties* by citizenship status also highlighted high pressure, with 79% and 77% of responses reflecting negative scores respectively.

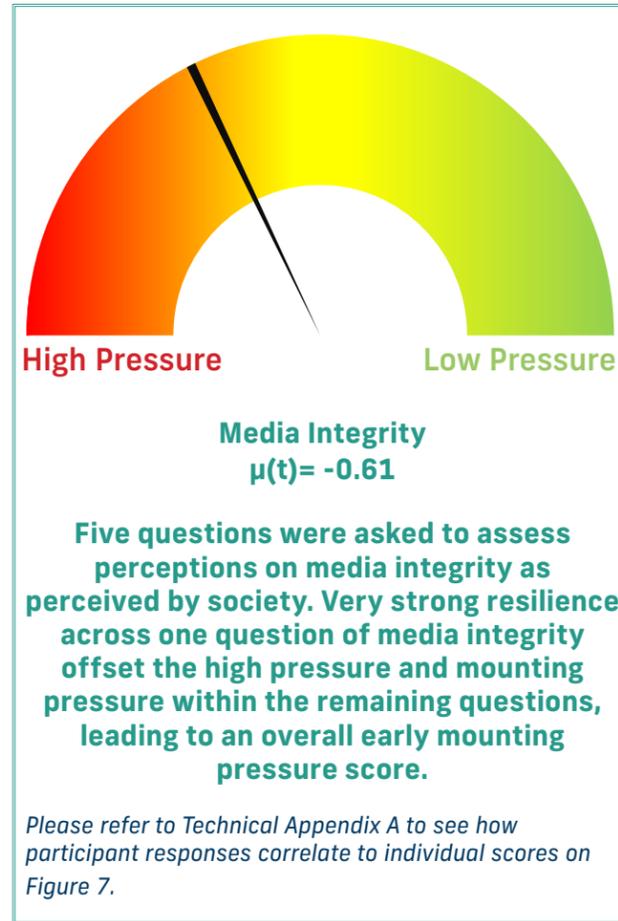
These findings indicate early warning signs across fundamental rights and civil liberties enjoyed by citizens in the U.S. While there is a belief that Americans enjoy access to freedom of expression, movement, religion, association, and assembly, it is not equal nor equitably shared. Socio-economic factors, identity, and immigration status contribute to an individual's perceived access to and inclusion in formal justice systems, voting, and civil liberties.

Figure 6: Fundamental Rights Scores



"Systemic racism has been at the heart of our democratic dysfunction from the very beginning."

(iv) Media Integrity:



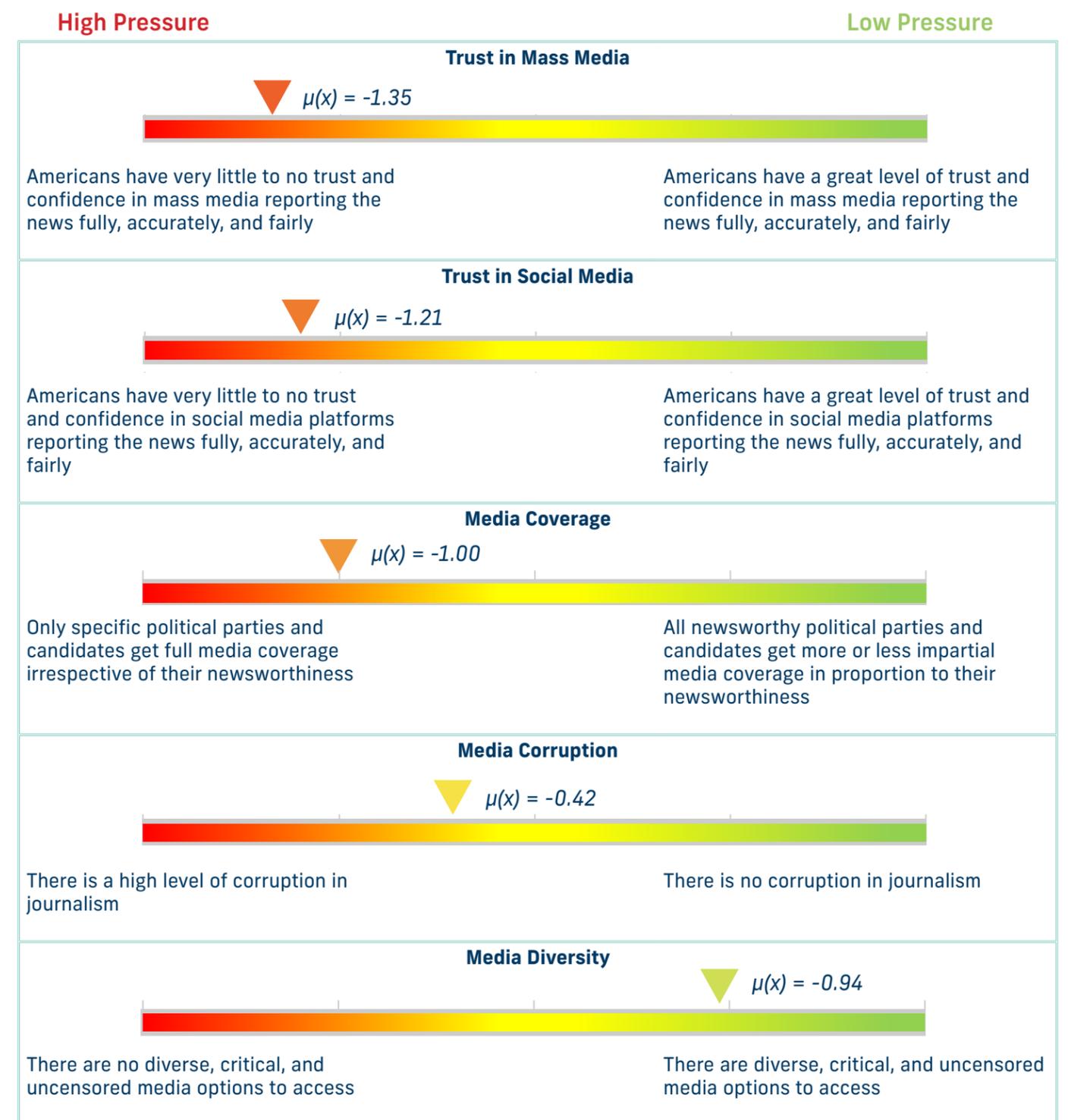
Findings indicate that the U.S. has *Media Diversity* with 77% of responses indicating a strong resiliency score; however, trust in mass media and social media is incredibly low. With 93% of responses and 87% of responses reflecting very little to no trust in mass media and social media respectively, both *Trust in Mass Media* and *Trust in Social Media* exhibit mounting to high pressure. Additionally, the newsworthiness of current *Media Coverage* also exhibited a mounting pressure score. While *Media Corruption* received a higher score in comparison, it still reflects an early warning to mounting pressure score

These findings collectively indicate early mounting pressure. While Americans have access to a wide variety of news, their overall trust in it potentially offsets any gain to be made in wide accessibility. It also requires consumers to invest more time in finding and accessing trustworthy news and/or consuming media from a wide variety of sources. It further places a heavy burden on consumers and requires strong consumer capacity to identify trustworthy and ultimately newsworthy media sources.

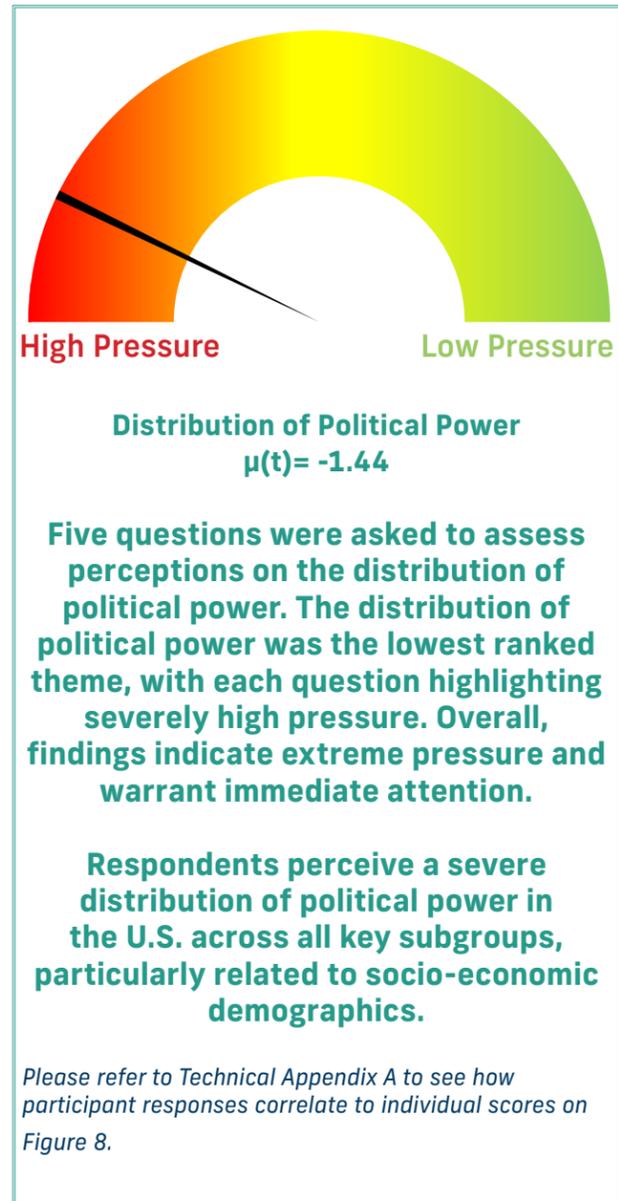


Photo by Jon Tyson on Unsplash

Figure 7: Media Integrity Scores



**(v) Distribution of Political Power:**

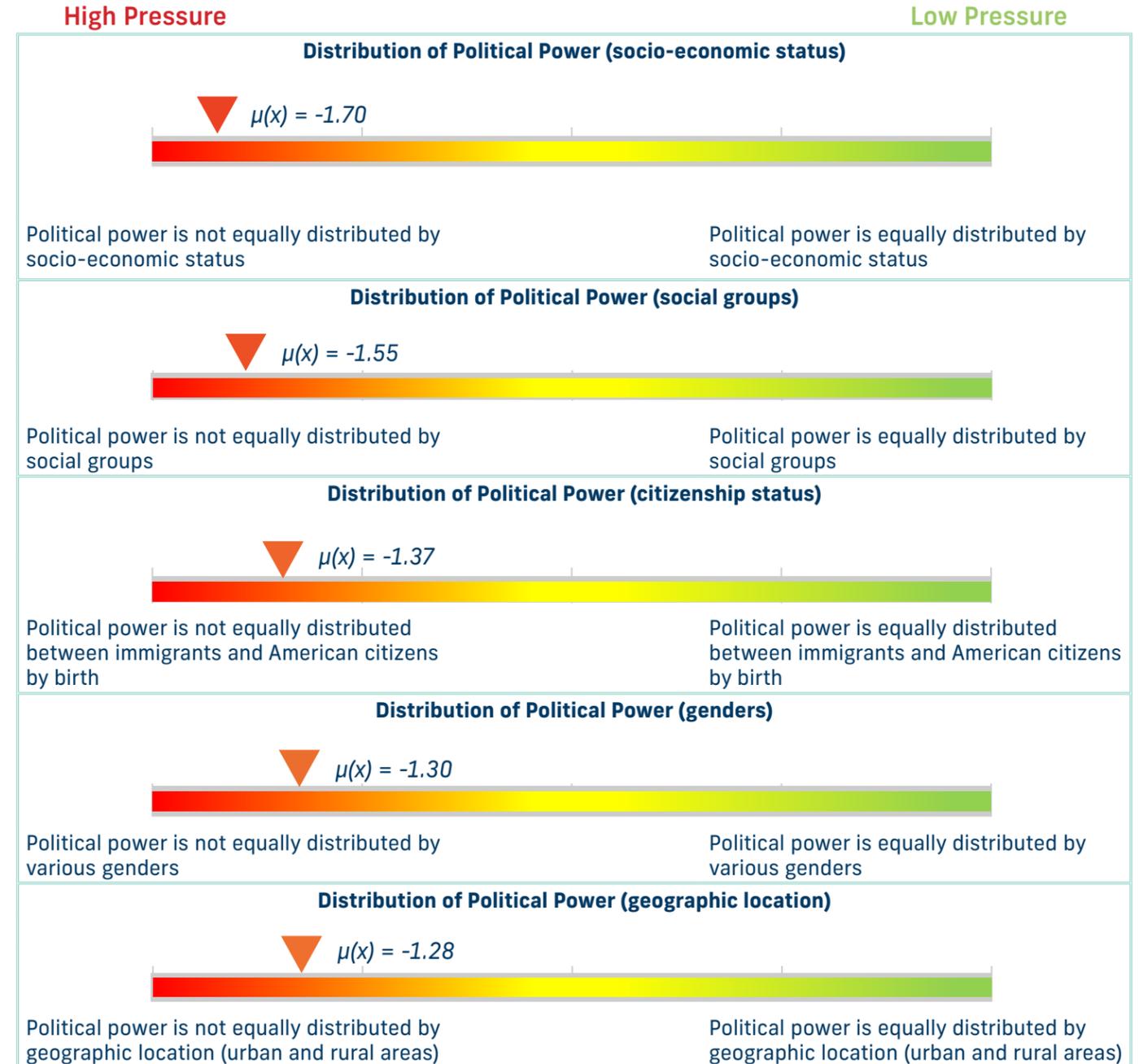


For the purposes of this research, the definition of political power was adopted from V-Dem as including the extent to which individuals can: (a) actively participate in politics (by voting, etc.), (b) be involved in civil society organizations, (c) secure representation in government, (d) set the political agenda, (e) influence political decisions, and (f) influence the implementation of those decisions. Respondents were asked to assess distribution of political power across five different subgroups: socio-economic, social groups, gender, geographic location (urban versus rural areas), and citizenship. All five demonstrated severe pressure.

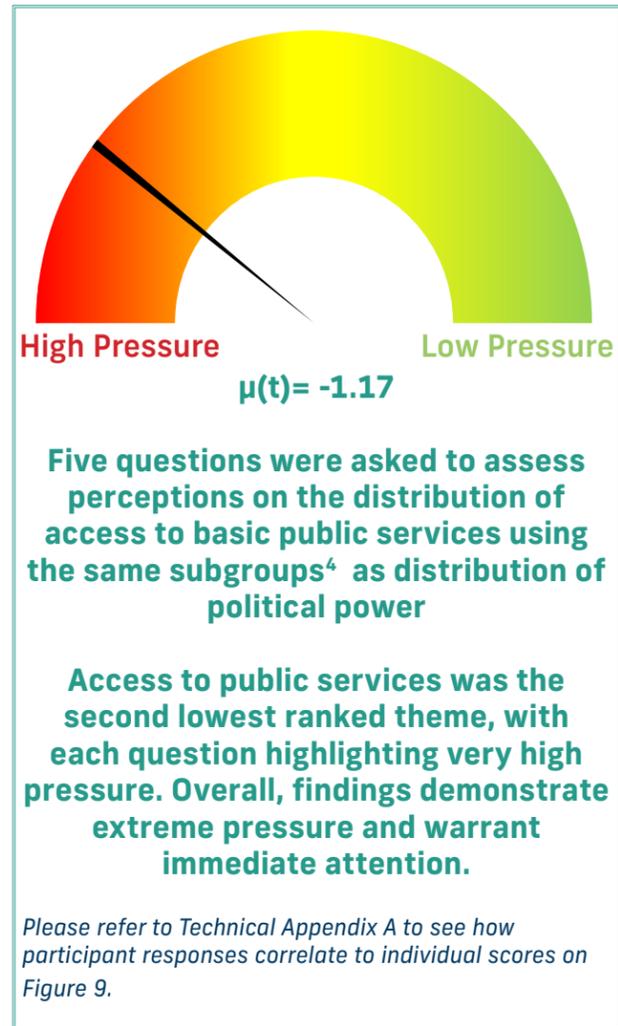
**Respondents scored distribution of political power by socio-economic status as the lowest with 96% of responses reflecting a negative score and only 4% reflecting a positive score. It received the lowest negative  $\mu(x)$  across all questions, demonstrating the most pressurized factor.** Following socio-economic status was social groups with 93% of responses reflecting a negative score. The final three subgroups were assessed as equally highly pressurized. Citizenship status, gender, and urban/rural geographical location presented with 90%, 87%, and 88% of responses reflecting disparity respectively.

These findings indicate extreme pressure and warrant immediate attention. Respondents perceive a severe inequality in distribution of political power in the U.S. across all key subgroups, particularly related to socio-economic demographics. These findings are supported by the Political Participation finding above that 66% of respondents believed that the elected government is not representative of the nation's population. They are further supported by findings of mounting to high pressure related to fundamental rights and civil liberties. As such, respondents believe that not only do Americans lack access to political power equally, but their elected representatives are not reflective of the wide diversity of Americans. This inequality is further compounded when reflecting on citizenship status and ongoing immigration debates in the U.S.

**Figure 8: Distribution of Political Power Scores**



**(vi) Access to Basic Public Services:**



For the purpose of this report, basic public services include access to clean water, healthcare, education (primary and secondary), and overall social security that contributes to enabling/disabling individuals to exercise basic political rights as adult citizens.

Access by socio-economic status exhibited the highest pressure with 93% of responses reflecting mounting to severely high-pressure scores, followed by social groups with 86% of responses highlighting mounting to high pressure. The following two subgroups, urban/rural geographical location and citizenship status returned similarly low and mounting pressure scores. However, gender exhibited the lowest pressure in relation to access to public services, albeit still low, negative, and within the early stages of mounting pressure.

When comparing the influence of these 5 subgroups (socio-economic status, social groups, geographic location, citizenship status, and genders) on the distribution of political power and the access to basic public services, there are some interesting similarities and dissimilarities. Geographic location was perceived to have more of an influence on access to public services than on the distribution of political power (albeit still low and negative). However, socio-economic status and social groups reflected the highest perceptions of influence across both themes further emphasizing the state of inequality in the U.S. On the other end of the spectrum, gender was perceived to have one of the least (in comparison) influences on both themes, perhaps indicating the rise of other key identities and socio-demographic statuses of greater significance to Americans that might have more of an influence on either the distribution of political power or the access to basic public services or both.

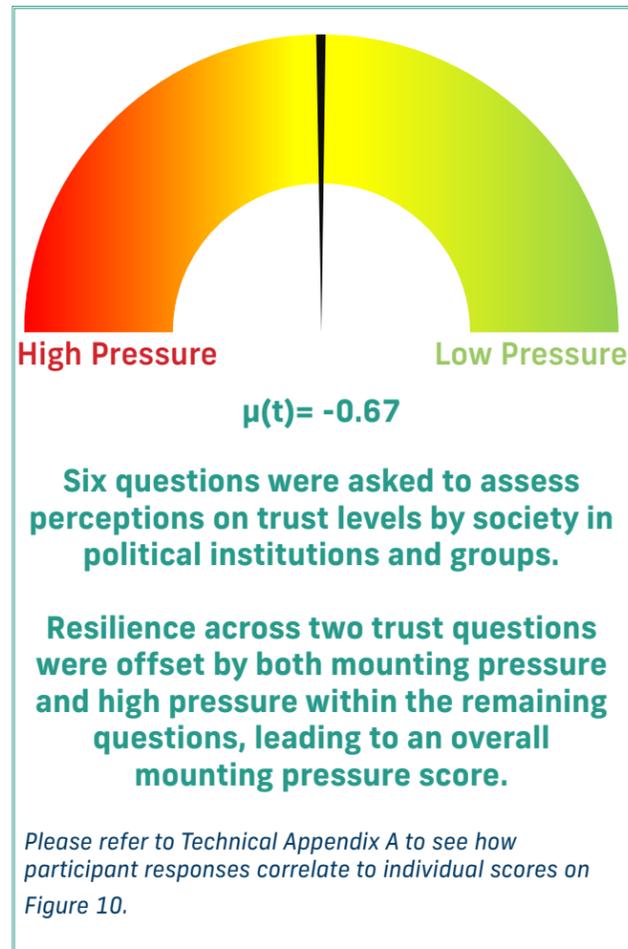
These findings collectively indicate extreme pressure and warrant immediate attention. Respondents perceive a severe inequality for access to public services across subgroups with socio-economic status and social groups indicating the greatest disparity.

<sup>4</sup> Subgroups: socio-economic status, social groups, gender, geographic location, and citizenship status.

**Figure 9: Access to Basic Public Services Scores**



(vii) Trust in Political Institutions and Groups:



Four questions looked at trust in political institutions and the remaining two looked at trust across and within political groups. No specific definition of trust was provided to participants.

Across all the institutions, local government had the highest perceived level of trust however, it still returned an early warning score. If addressed, *Trust in Local Government* could prove to be a strong resilient factor in offsetting some of the other extreme pressures. This finding is supported by the *Political Participation* theme above that perceived a strong resiliency related to the free, fair, accurate, and transparent nature of elections at the local level. *Trust in Congress* exhibited severely high pressure with 89% of responses reflecting a negative score and only 11% of responses reflecting a positive score. Perceived trust in the national government and the legal system overall also returned low, negative scores reflecting mounting pressure.

Considering trust as it relates to political groups, while perceived *Trust within Political Groups* returned an early warning score, perceived *Trust across Political Groups* exhibited extremely high pressure with 93% of participants believing there is very little to no trust across members of different political groups. **It received the second lowest negative  $\mu(x)$  across all matrix questions, second only to distribution of political power by socio-economic status, demonstrating a highly pressurized factor.** This finding is supported by the political participation finding that 96% of respondents share the perception that American society is being polarized into antagonistic political camps.

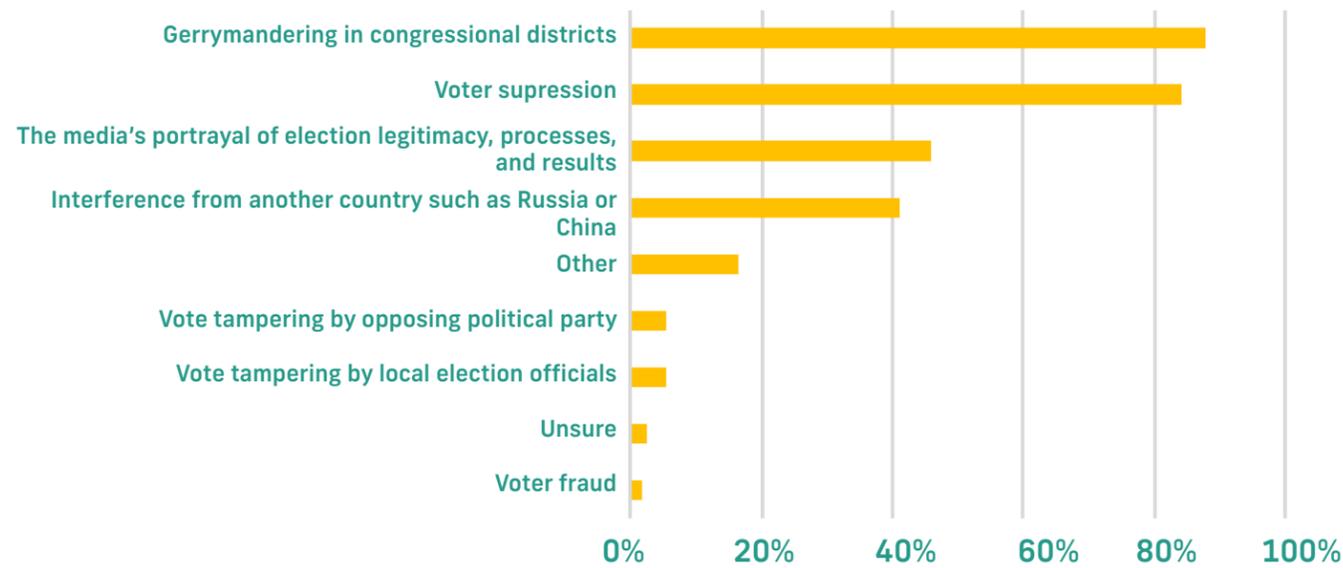
These findings collectively indicate early mounting pressure. While Americans have a greater perception of trust in local governance and within their political groups, trust in the national government, legal system, and Congress are at considerably low levels and demonstrate strong pressure warnings. **Trust across political groups is at a severely low level demonstrating extreme pressure and warrants immediate attention.**

Figure 10: Trust in Political Institutions and Groups Scores



*“The existing mediators of social dialogue (political parties, traditional media, social media) are hopelessly polarized, with each camp distrusting the other. We need some sort of process of engaging in a sustained national conversation to help re-forge a consensus.”*

**Figure 11: Biggest Threats to Free, Fair, Accurate, and Transparent Elections**



**C. Elections and Potential for Violence**

The survey instrument collected data on election integrity and the propensity for political violence through a series of Likert scales and closed questions. When survey participants were asked how satisfied they were with the current electoral system in the U.S., 55% of the responses indicated dissatisfaction with the electoral system (40% “Not satisfied” and 15% “Extremely not Satisfied”) and only 5% of participants expressed “Extremely Satisfied” with the system.

Furthermore, 55% of survey respondents believe Americans trust election results only if their candidate wins the election, whereas only 21% perceive that Americans trust the election results irrespective of who wins the election. The remaining 8% perceive that Americans do not trust election results regardless of who wins the elections, and 15% are unsure. These findings align the early mounting pressure findings shown in the trust in political institutions and groups.

The survey instrument asked participants to provide their perceptions on the three biggest threats to free, fair, accurate, and transparent elections. Survey participants identified “Gerrymandering in congressional districts” (88%), “Voter Suppression” (84%), and the “media’s portrayal of election legitimacy, processes, and results” (46%).

Within this pressurized climate, it is not unexpected that 73% of senior peacebuilding and conflict

Trust in Elections	#	%
Americans do not trust election results, irrespective of who wins the election	13	7.98%
Americans trust election results only if their candidate wins the election	90	55.21%
Americans trust election results irrespective of who wins the election	35	21.74%
Unsure	25	15.34%

Satisfaction with the Electoral System	#	%
Extremely Satisfied	8	4.91%
Satisfied	46	28.22%
Neutral	19	11.66%
Not Satisfied	66	40.49%
Extremely Not Satisfied	24	14.72%

Expected Risk of Violence for the 2024 Presidential Elections	#	%
No risk of violence	2	1.23%
Some risk of violence	39	23.93%
Elevated risk of violence	66	40.49%
Extreme risk of violence	53	32.52%
Unsure	3	1.84%

experts reporting an elevated or extreme risk of politically motivated violence in the U.S. for the 2024 presidential elections. These perceptions from the end of 2021 however should be considered delicately following the peaceful 2022 mid-term elections.

**D. Impact of government responses to COVID-19 on respondent’s answers:**

Globally, [democracy has struggled with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic](#), including various government’s responses to the pandemic. Since the survey was conducted and administered amid the COVID-19 pandemic, participants were asked to assess the impact of the pandemic on their perceptions of democracy. While 74% of respondents stated that U.S. government responses to COVID-19 did not affect their assessment for the questions, it is notable that 24% reported the U.S. government’s COVID-19 response caused them to provide some or mostly lower estimates to their responses than they would in the absence of COVID-19.

**E. Solutions for strengthening democracy and preventing conflict in the U.S.:**

Participants were asked to select the highest priority mitigating factors in which to invest to strengthen democracy and prevent conflict in the U.S. Of the eight options presented, participants believed that “Election reform including voter protection” (61%) and “Strengthening social cohesion between urban

and rural populations” (39%) were significant factors that could contribute to strengthening democracy in the U.S. Participants also believed that “civic education and engagement” (37%), and “investing in news literacy efforts to help Americans become better consumers of news” (37%) were of equal importance to build resiliency in the U.S.

Other peacebuilding efforts, such as racial healing and reconciliation processes (33%) and local conflict resolution programs (29%) were identified. Participants believed that police reform, as it pertains to re-imagining public safety, could be key to preventing conflict in the U.S. [While civil society can be a catalyst for social, political, and economic progress](#), only 10% of survey participants identified “engaging with domestic CSOs on key issues” as an effective solution to strengthen democracy and prevent conflict in the U.S.

Participants also provided factors for strengthened resiliency not included within the eight options presented. Half of the participants that selected “other” as an option suggested mechanisms for better media accountability, including regulations posed on media, reforming social media platforms, increasing different forms of independent public media, and limiting the spread of mis/disinformation and polarizing content through media outlets. Participants also identified legislative measures, such as constitutional reforms and amendments, reforms to gun control laws, filibuster reforms, budgetary

**Figure 12: Factors Enabling Strengthened Resiliency**

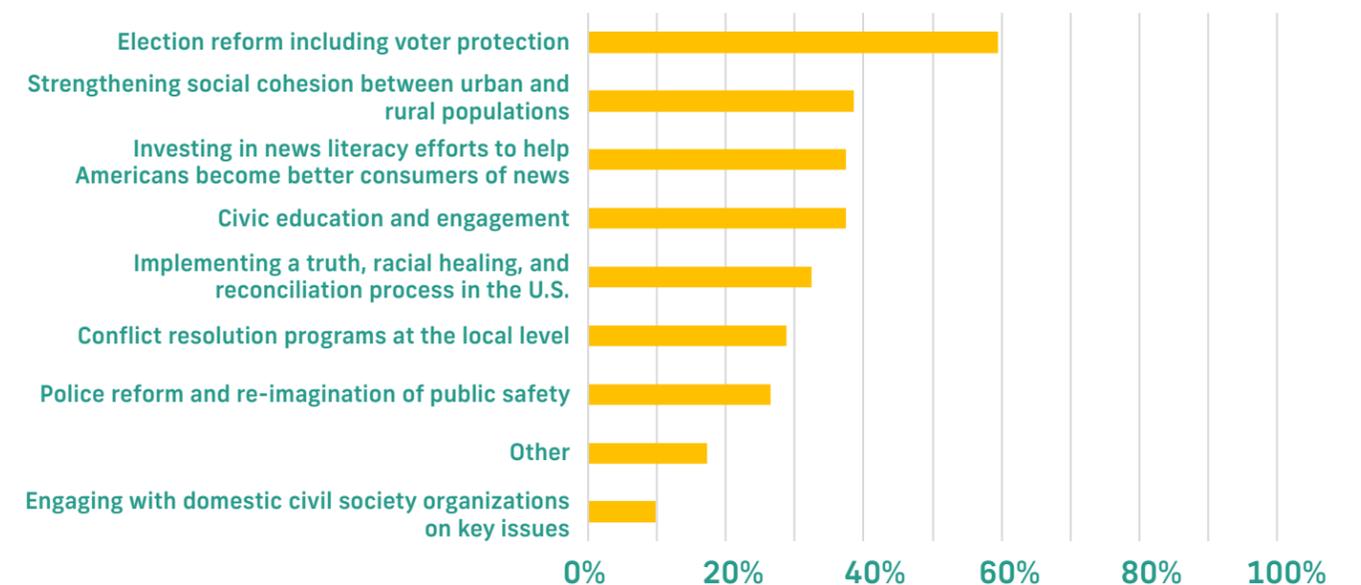




Photo by Dyana Wing So on Unsplash

reprioritization, and measures to depoliticize the judiciary as factors that can contribute to overall resiliency in the U.S.

A recurring theme that also surfaced was in relation to education reform. Participants believe that a more holistic education system that encompasses civic education, historical injustices, and social sciences, including a trauma conscious approach to education, can strengthen U.S. democracy.

While strengthening social cohesion between urban and rural populations surfaced as one of the main priorities for strengthened resiliency in the U.S., 4% of participants highlighted social cohesion across all Americans and not just urban and rural populations as imperative to a strong democracy. Participants also highlighted creation of dialogue spaces for people of different opinions to come together to reduce polarization across American societies.

Other solutions that surfaced include addressing inequality and wealth gaps to enhance social security amongst all Americans, especially working-class Americans; investment in public services such as public health, paid leave, housing, and education; increasing counter-disinformation initiatives; and reforming political campaign financing including limits placed on lobbying.

## Conclusion:

**The findings from this survey show that Americans have an escalating conflict problem, but peacebuilding has the tools, knowledge, and ability to solve it.**

Overall, as perceived by senior peacebuilding and conflict experts, there are many challenges confronting the state of democracy, social cohesion, and rule of law in the U.S. While there was no question on the importance of the U.S. being a democracy, perceived satisfaction on the functioning of democracy and the electoral system in the U.S. were extremely low.

While systemic racism is an endemic problem in the U.S., respondents identified an alarming disparity across socio-economic statuses and social groups specifically as it pertains to the distribution of political power and the access to basic public services. Economic inequality overall was highlighted as a significant contributor to the decline of American democracy. This disparity is further exacerbated due to the lack of equal access to justice by individuals across social classes and social identity groups; as well as the lack of equal voting rights experienced in the U.S. Among other solutions, when addressing inequality in a democracy, there needs to be adequate representation across all demographics and strong civic engagement to enable change. However, the respondents of this survey do not believe that the U.S. government is representative of the nation's population and low turnout at the polls further highlights the public's general disengagement from politics.

To offset the high pressure these challenges are creating, inequality and wealth gaps need to be addressed and investment in public services (such as public health, paid leave, housing, and education) are required to enhance social security amongst all Americans. Participants identified the role a more holistic, trauma conscience education system that encompasses civic education, historical injustices, and social sciences, could play in strengthening U.S. democracy. Initiatives are also needed to foster racial healing and reconciliation, including reparation efforts. Respondents identified strong resiliencies across fundamental rights and civil liberties, such as the freedom to assemble and the freedom to associate with political groups, which can be leveraged to support change and strengthen democratic systems. The existence and freedom of

civil society is also a strong resiliency that can be used to encourage greater civic engagement.

Participants also believe that American society is deeply divided along partisan lines. Furthermore, voter suppression and gerrymandering in congressional districts are realities threatening the free and fair nature of elections. Perceptions of trust overall - in political institutions, political groups, and election results - are all facing high pressure. One of the critical political institutions of the U.S., Congress, received the lowest levels of perceived trust and effectiveness within the survey. Leading peacebuilding and conflict experts are also concerned that local governments and the judicial system are not entirely free of external influences. Participants identified interference from other countries, such as Russia or China, as one of the major threats facing the free and fair nature of American elections.

Low levels of trust overall, coupled with the belief of external influences in political processes, offer an explanation to why participants perceive many Americans trust election results only if their candidate wins. To offset these rising pressures, many participants recommended focusing on election reforms, especially around protections for voters. Higher levels of perceived trust in local government, including local elections, can be leveraged to bring about these reforms. Participants further recommend constitutional amendments and reforms would help strengthen democracy in the U.S. given a shared belief in the U.S. Constitution. Measures to depoliticize the judiciary as well as campaign financing reforms and limitations on corporate influence, such as lobbying efforts, could also offset some of the building pressures.

While participants perceive a rich diversity in media options, trust in mass media and social media were extremely low. Low trust could be attributed to the rising levels of mis/disinformation or the media's portrayal of election legitimacy, processes, and results. Both were perceived as the biggest threats to democracy, particularly in relation to maintaining the free and fair nature of elections. The lack of newsworthy coverage by media platforms might also serve as an explanation into lower levels of trust. To offset this mounting and high pressure, both proactive and reactive measures would be required. Reacting to the current rampant mis/disinformation landscape, news literacy efforts to help Americans become better consumers of news would require

*“Working with democracy also means working with those you disagree with”*

immediate investment. Proactively, to curb rising levels of low trust in media over time, investment in media accountability and transparency reforms are required. Initiatives that counter disinformation, support media regulations while honoring free speech, and increase different forms of independent public media have the potential to limit the spread of mis/disinformation and polarizing content.

Overall, when looking at the pillars of social cohesion (trust, identity, and equality) and rule of law (accountability, just law, open government, and accessible and impartial justice), all relevant datapoints across this report exhibit high pressure. Challenges to American democracy and the functioning of government are bleeding into

the cohesiveness of American society, reducing resilience to weather these challenges. It is therefore unsurprising that senior peacebuilding and conflict experts perceive an elevated to high risk of violence following the 2024 presidential elections if these circumstances remain unaddressed. Participants believe that while strengthening social cohesion between urban and rural populations can offset some of this mounting to high pressure, they also believe that social cohesion across all Americans, not just across urban and rural populations, is imperative to a strong democracy. Creation of safer spaces for people of differing opinions and backgrounds to converse with one another can reduce polarization across American societies and strengthen American democracy.



Photo by David Everett Stickler on Unsplash

# Appendix:

## A. Technical Appendix

### 1. Political Participation

Statement A	-2	-1	1	2	Statement B	Resulting Score
Society is polarized into antagonistic, political camps	66.87%	28.83%	4.29%	0.00%	Society is not polarized into antagonistic, political camps	-1.58
Local elections are not free, fair, accurate, and transparent	5.52%	15.34%	37.42%	41.72%	Local elections are free, fair, accurate, and transparent	0.94
There is not a good voter turnout for elections	36.81%	31.90%	23.31%	7.98%	There is a good voter turnout for elections	-0.66
Major Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are not routinely consulted by policy makers on policies that affect their members	14.11%	46.63%	33.13%	6.13%	Major Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are routinely consulted by policy makers on policies that affect their members	-0.29
National elections are not free, fair, accurate, and transparent	15.34%	14.72%	35.58%	34.36%	National elections are free, fair, accurate, and transparent	0.59
Only some political parties (excluding opposition parties) are allowed to form and participate in elections	22.70%	23.93%	24.54%	28.83%	All political parties (including opposition parties) are allowed to form and participate in elections	0.13
Civil Society Organizations are not able to form and operate freely	3.68%	7.36%	30.67%	58.28%	Civil Society Organizations are able to form and operate freely	1.33
The elected government is not representative of the nation's population	39.26%	26.99%	23.93%	9.82%	The elected government is representative of the nation's population	-0.62

# Appendix:

## 2. Government Efficiency

Statement A	-2	-1	1	2	Statement B	Resulting Score:
Congress is not an effective oversight mechanism for the executive branch	36.20%	41.10%	17.79%	4.91%	Congress is an effective oversight mechanism for the executive branch	-0.86
Government powers are not effectively limited by the judiciary	13.50%	41.72%	35.58%	9.20%	Government powers are effectively limited by the judiciary	-0.15
The courts are not independent from external influences	38.04%	38.65%	15.95%	7.36%	The courts are independent from external influences	-0.84
Members of the executive (the head of states, the head of government and cabinet secretaries) do not respect the constitution	4.91%	26.38%	48.47%	20.25%	Members of the executive (the head of states, the head of government and cabinet secretaries) respect the constitution	0.53
There are high levels of corruption in government	20.86%	45.40%	33.13%	0.61%	There is no corruption in government	-0.53
Public officials are not rigorous and impartial in the performance of their duties	18.40%	36.20%	39.26%	4.91%	Public officials are rigorous and impartial in the performance of their duties	-0.24
Local governments are not free from external influence (non-elected bodies)	36.20%	36.20%	25.15%	2.45%	Local governments are free from external influence (non-elected bodies)	-0.79

# Appendix:

## 3. Fundamental Rights

Statement A	-2	-1	1	2	Statement B	Resulting Score
People living in rural areas do not enjoy the same level of civil liberties as people living in urban areas	4.29%	16.56%	33.13%	46.01%	People living in rural areas enjoy the same level of civil liberties as people living in urban areas	1.00
Immigrants in the U.S. of America do not enjoy the same civil liberties as people born in the U.S. of America	41.10%	35.58%	19.02%	4.29%	Immigrants in the U.S. of America enjoy the same civil liberties as people born in the U.S. of America	-0.90
Equal and fair access to justice is not available to all individuals (across various social classes and social identity groups)	68.71%	23.31%	6.75%	1.23%	There is equal and fair access to justice for all individuals (across various social classes and social identity groups)	-1.52
All individuals (across various social classes and social identity groups) are not able to openly discuss political issues	17.79%	30.67%	33.74%	17.79%	All individuals (across various social classes and social identity groups) are able to openly discuss political issues	0.03
There are government restrictions on religious practices	3.68%	15.95%	47.24%	33.13%	There are no government restrictions on religious practices	0.90
All individuals (across various social classes and social identity groups) are not equally free to exercise their right to protest without the fear of being arrested or other repercussions	13.50%	30.67%	33.13%	22.70%	All individuals (across various social classes and social identity groups) are free to exercise their right to protest	0.21
All individuals (across various social classes and social identity groups) are not equally free to join any political organization	4.29%	14.72%	36.81%	44.17%	All individuals (across various social classes and social identity groups) are free to join any political organization	1.02
All adults (across various social classes and social identity groups) do not have equal voting rights	47.85%	31.29%	11.04%	9.82%	All adults (across various social classes and social identity groups) have equal voting rights	-0.96

# Appendix:

## 4. Media Integrity

Statement A	-2	-1	1	2	Statement B	Resulting Score
There are no diverse, critical, and uncensored media options to access	3.07%	19.63%	34.36%	42.94%	There are diverse, critical, and uncensored media options to access	0.94
Americans have very little to no trust and confidence in mass media reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly	50.92%	41.72%	6.13%	1.23%	Americans have a great level of trust and confidence in mass media reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly	-1.35
Americans have very little to no trust and confidence in social media platforms reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly	50.31%	36.81%	9.20%	3.68%	Americans have a great level of trust and confidence in social media platforms reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly	-1.21
There is a high level of corruption in journalism	20.25%	41.10%	37.42%	1.23%	There is no corruption in journalism	-0.42
Only specific political parties and candidates get full media coverage irrespective of their newsworthiness	38.65%	43.56%	14.72%	3.07%	All newsworthy political parties and candidates get more or less impartial media coverage in proportion to their newsworthiness	-1.00

## 5. Distribution of Political Power

Statement A	-2	-1	1	2	Statement B	Resulting Score:
Political power is not equally distributed by socio-economic status	77.30%	19.02%	3.68%	0.00%	Political power is equally distributed by socio-economic status	-1.70
Political power is not equally distributed by social groups	69.94%	23.31%	5.52%	1.23%	Political power is equally distributed by social groups	-1.55
Political power is not equally distributed by various genders	56.44%	30.67%	12.27%	0.61%	Political power is equally distributed by all genders	-1.30
Political power is not equally distributed by geographic location (urban areas and rural areas)	53.99%	33.74%	11.04%	1.23%	Political power is equally distributed by geographic location (urban areas and rural areas)	-1.28
Political power is not equally distributed between immigrants and American citizens by birth	59.51%	30.67%	7.36%	2.45%	Political power is equally distributed between immigrants and American citizens by birth	-1.37

# Appendix:

## 6. Access to Public Services

Statement A	-2	-1	1	2	Statement B	Resulting Score
Access to basic public services is not equally distributed by socio-economic status	68.71%	23.93%	7.36%	0.00%	Access to basic public services is equally distributed by socio-economic status	-1.54
Access to basic public services is not equally distributed by social groups	57.06%	28.83%	11.04%	3.07%	Access to basic public services is equally distributed by social groups	-1.26
Access to basic public services is not equally distributed by all genders	34.97%	33.74%	24.54%	6.75%	Access to basic public services is equally distributed by all genders	-0.66
Access to basic public services is not equally distributed by geographic location (urban areas and rural areas)	49.08%	38.65%	11.04%	1.23%	Access to basic public services is equally distributed by geographic location (urban areas and rural areas)	-1.23
Access to public services is not equally distributed between immigrants and American citizens by birth	47.85%	37.42%	11.66%	3.07%	Access to public services is equally distributed between immigrants and American citizens by birth	-1.15

## 7. Trust in Political Institutions and Groups

Statement A	-2	-1	1	2	Statement B	Resulting Score
There is very little to no trust in local government	3.68%	29.45%	62.58%	4.29%	There is a great level of trust in the local government	0.34
There is very little to no trust in national government	35.58%	47.24%	15.95%	1.23%	There is a great level of trust in the national government	-1.00
There is very little to no trust in the legal system overall	19.63%	53.37%	23.31%	3.68%	There is a great level of trust in the legal system	-0.62
There is very little to no trust in Congress	56.44%	32.52%	9.82%	1.23%	There is a great level of trust in Congress	-1.33
There is very little to no trust amongst members of the same political group	7.36%	33.13%	47.85%	11.66%	There is a great level of trust amongst members of the same political group	0.23
There is very little to no trust across members of different political groups	79.75%	13.50%	5.52%	1.23%	There is a great level of trust across members of different political groups	-1.65



# Alliance for Peacebuilding

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