



National Voter Research: Opinions on Democracy

Conducted September and October 2022



MORE PERFECT



David Binder Research

Research details

Focus Groups

- Seven voter focus groups, with 6-7 participants in each session
 - September 28: Livonia, MI—White Independent Women, White Republican Men
 - October 4: Philadelphia, PA—White Democratic Women, White Democratic Men
 - October 6: Austin, TX—Any Race/Ethnicity Democratic and Independent Millennials, Hispanic Democratic and Independent Men and Women
 - October 19: Jacksonville, FL—African American Democratic Women and Men

Survey

- National voter survey, conducted October 8-11
 - Sample of 600 adults who have voted in the 2016 presidential election or any election since
 - Survey conducted online, with respondents recruited by text message from voter file info, or from online survey panel
 - Margin of error is $\pm 4.0\%$ for the full sample and larger for subgroups
 - MAGA Republicans are defined as those saying they are a conservative or Republican who approves of Trump and the MAGA movement



Thinking about Democracy



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Voters associate democracy with elections, individual freedoms, and checks on government power

When you hear the word
“democracy,” what comes to mind?
(survey responses)

Defining Democracy

- Voters agree on the basics of what makes democracy, which many say they learned in school:

Free elections, checks and balances on governmental power, adherence to the Constitution, personal freedoms

<i>Participation in the process</i>	<i>Accountability, Checks and balances</i>	<i>Accountability</i>
<i>Three branches of government</i>	<i>Equal voting rights</i>	<i>More voices/parties</i>
<i>People with different opinions</i>	<i>Opportunity for all</i>	<i>Everyone is equal</i>
<i>Civility/respect for one another</i>	<i>Ability to listen to all opinions without retribution</i>	<i>Freedom of the press</i>
<i>Transparency</i>	<i>Evolving Constitution</i>	<i>Freedom</i>
<i>The Bill of Rights</i>	<i>Checks and balances</i>	<i>Choices</i>
<i>Equality</i>		
<i>People have a say</i>		



Voters easily conflate “democracy” with our country in general; some say the term “democracy” has been politicized

Thinking about democracy

- Asked about democracy, voters tend to think of the United States, and many are critical
- Asked what would make a good democracy, many talk about what would make a better country:
 - Universal healthcare, fair wages, a strong military, securing the border are mentioned

“Fairness. All men are created equal, and we should all be treated as equal. I don't know if that really happens in this country.” –Livonia Female Independent

Some Perceived Politicization

- Some say “democracy” has become a political term
- Conservatives and some moderates say Democrats and media are overhyping “threats to democracy”
- Trump supporters feel they are unfairly being labeled as enemies of democracy

“It's always some politician saying it. What does it mean?”
–Philadelphia Male Independent



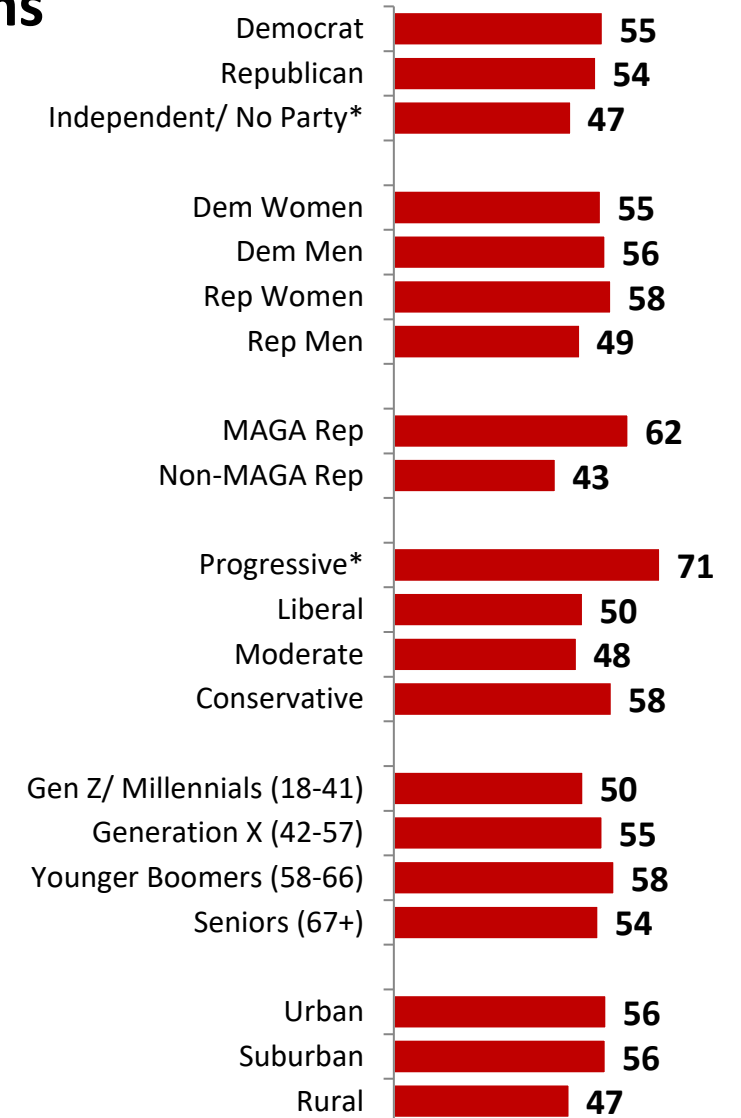
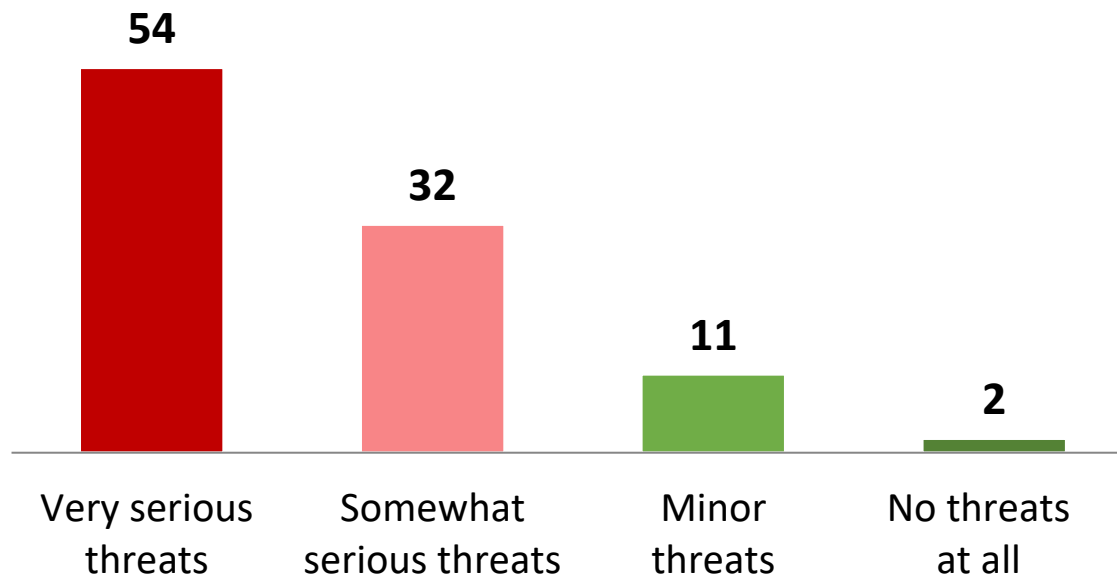
Concerns about Democracy



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A majority say our democracy faces very serious threats, including nearly equal shares of Democrats and Republicans

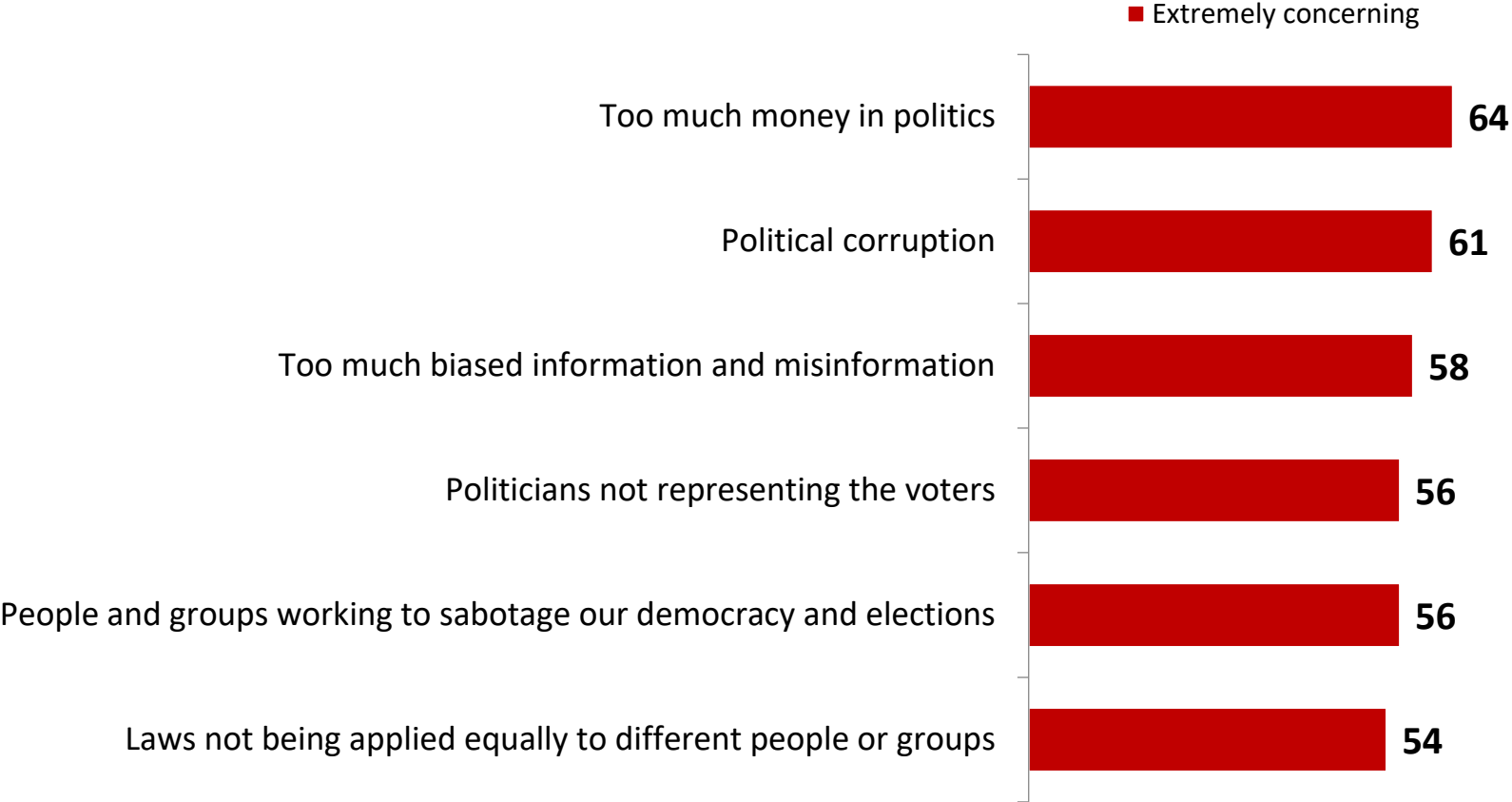
Do you think democracy in the United States today faces...



*small sample size

Concerns about money in politics and political corruption reflect voter feelings that their own voice is far outmatched

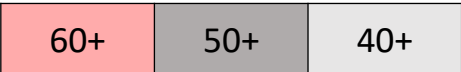
Concerns about Democracy in the United States



% Extremely Concerned

All Voters	Dem	Rep	Ind*
64	63	65	62
61	53	71	48
58	55	64	48
56	52	63	43
56	56	59	49
54	52	55	57

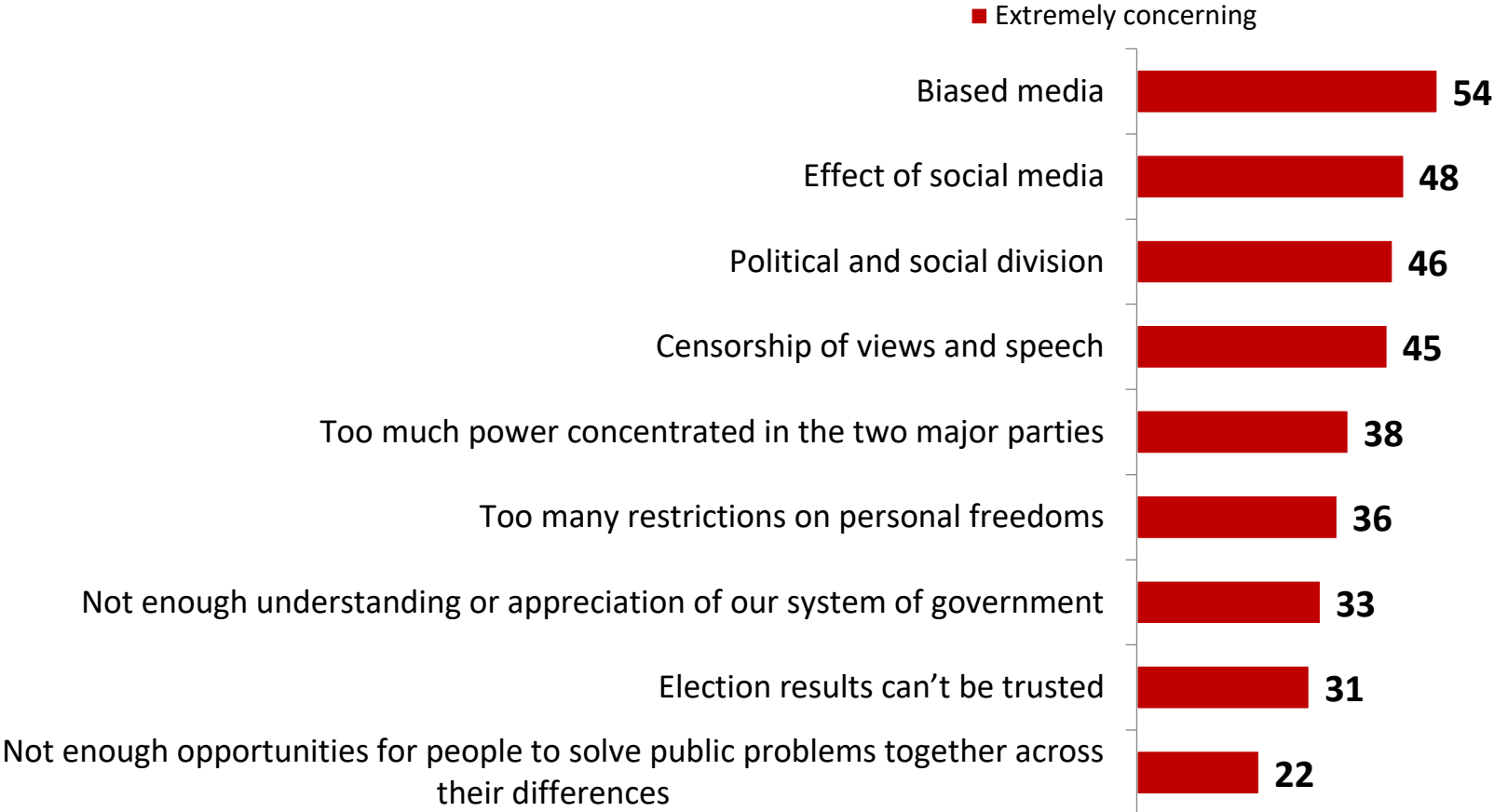
Republicans generally show higher levels of concern about democracy in the U.S.



*small sample size

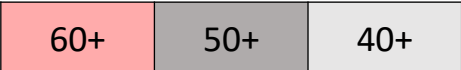
Republicans are more concerned than other voters about media bias and censorship

Concerns about Democracy in the United States



% Extremely Concerned

All Voters	Dem	Rep	Ind*
54	38	72	44
48	43	55	44
46	48	45	42
45	32	61	31
38	36	37	47
36	26	49	23
33	30	37	19
31	22	41	26
22	24	20	15



Conservatives and Republicans in focus groups emphasize the bias and censorship they perceive in social media

*small sample size





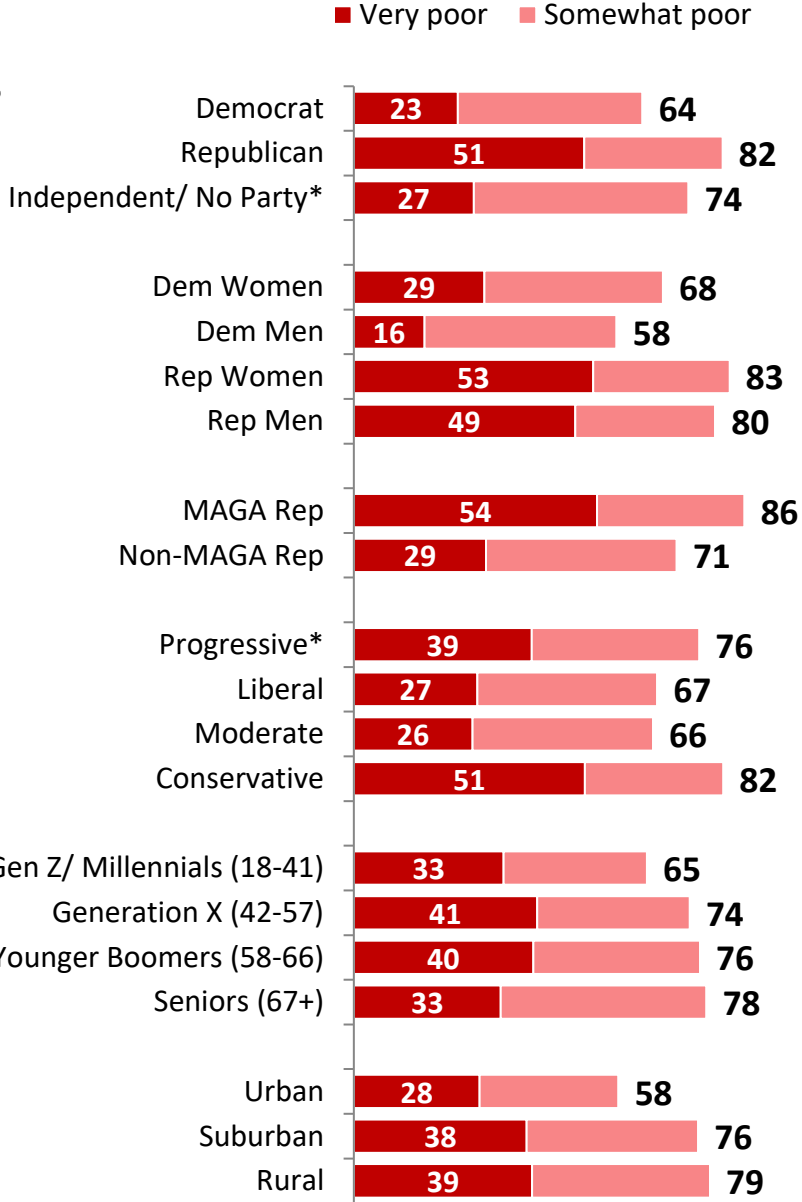
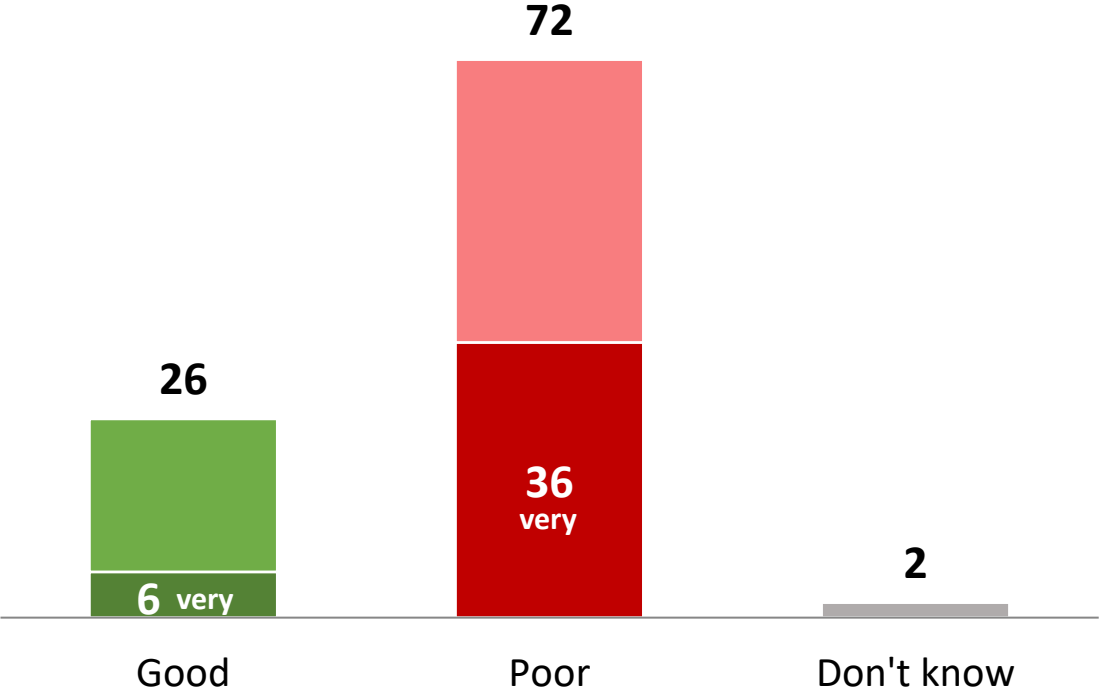
Health of Democracy



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72% rate the health of democracy in this country as poor, with progressives and conservatives most likely to say this

How would you rate the health of democracy in the United States today?

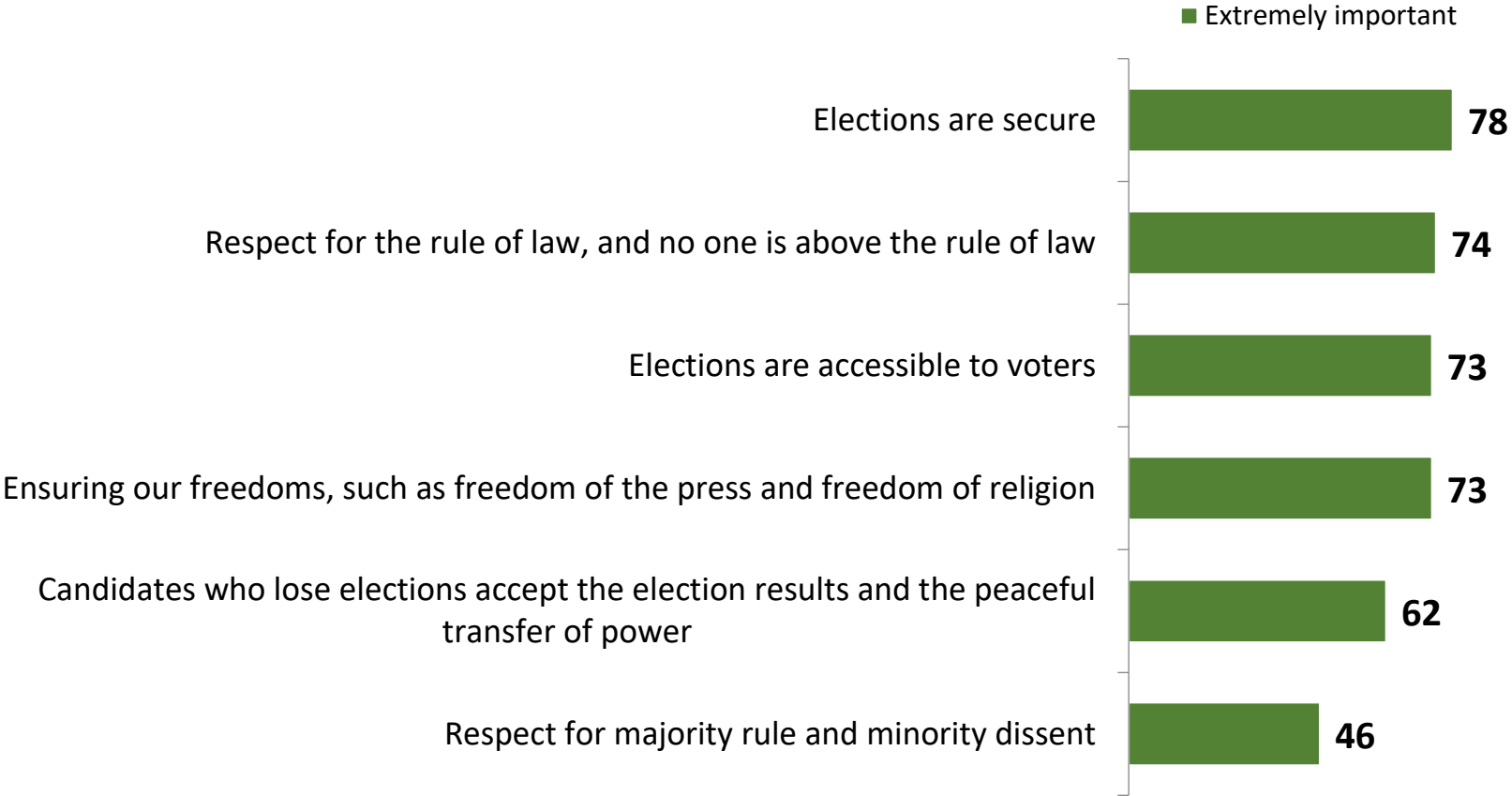


*small sample size



Security and accessibility of elections, rule of law, and ensuring freedoms are seen as most important in a democracy

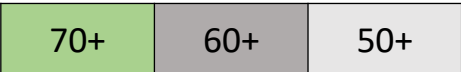
Elements of Democracy: Importance



% Extremely Important

All Voters	Dem	Rep	Ind
78	77	82	61
74	77	74	52
73	86	61	67
73	73	75	59
62	85	41	52
46	54	40	36

Compared to other voters, Democrats give much higher priority to accessibility of elections and the peaceful transfer of power

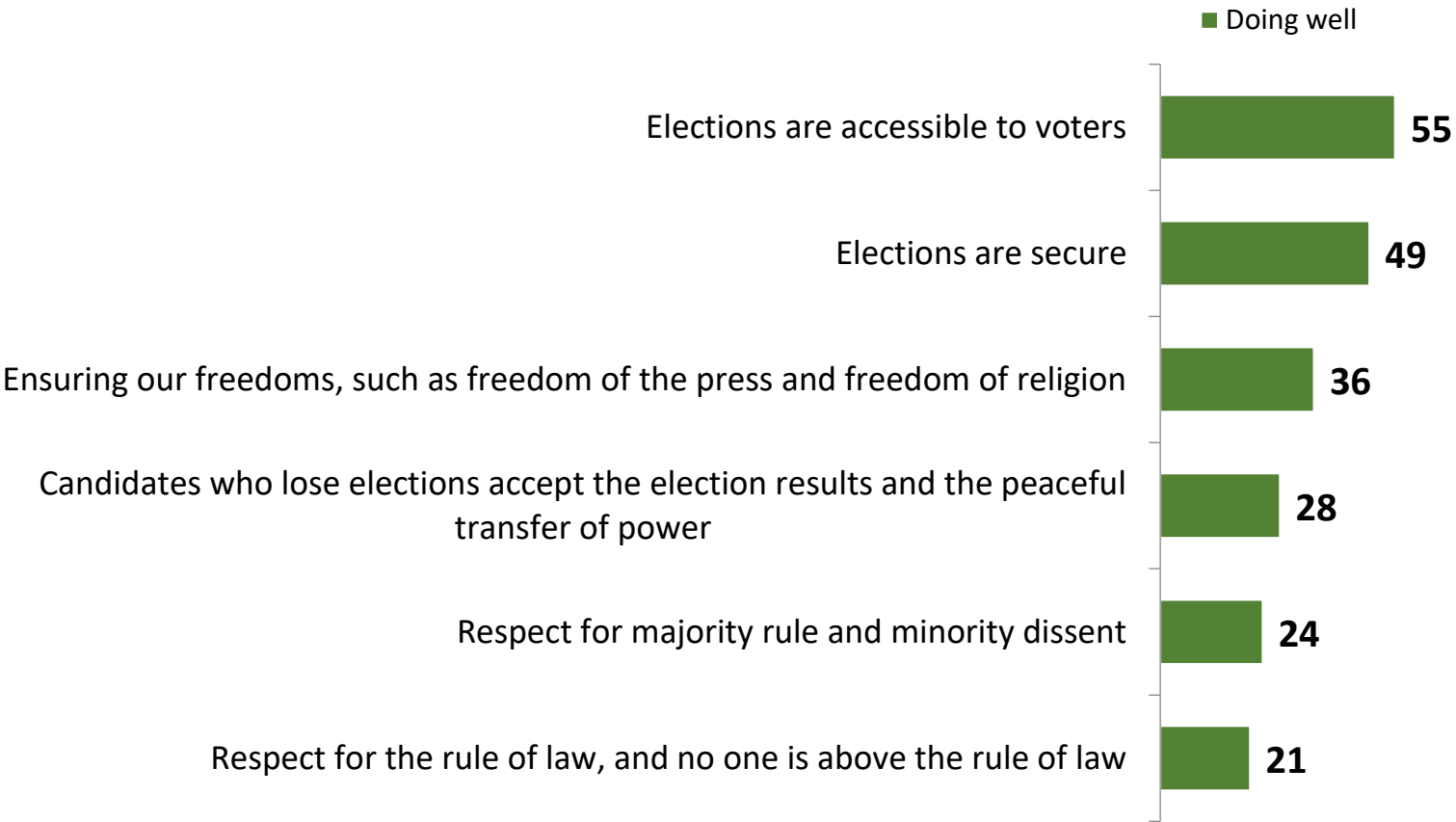


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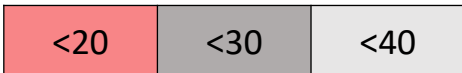
Voters give low ratings to our performance on most elements of democracy

Elements of Democracy: How We are Doing



Democrats give higher ratings on election security, while Republicans give higher ratings on election accessibility

	% Doing Well			
	All Voters	Dem	Rep	Ind*
Elections are accessible to voters	55	41	69	50
Elections are secure	49	74	22	49
Ensuring our freedoms, such as freedom of the press and freedom of religion	36	51	22	28
Candidates who lose elections accept the election results and the peaceful transfer of power	28	24	32	25
Respect for majority rule and minority dissent	24	28	21	17
Respect for the rule of law, and no one is above the rule of law	21	31	14	8



*small sample size



Conservatives and MAGA Republicans give the lowest performance ratings on election security, freedoms, and rule of law

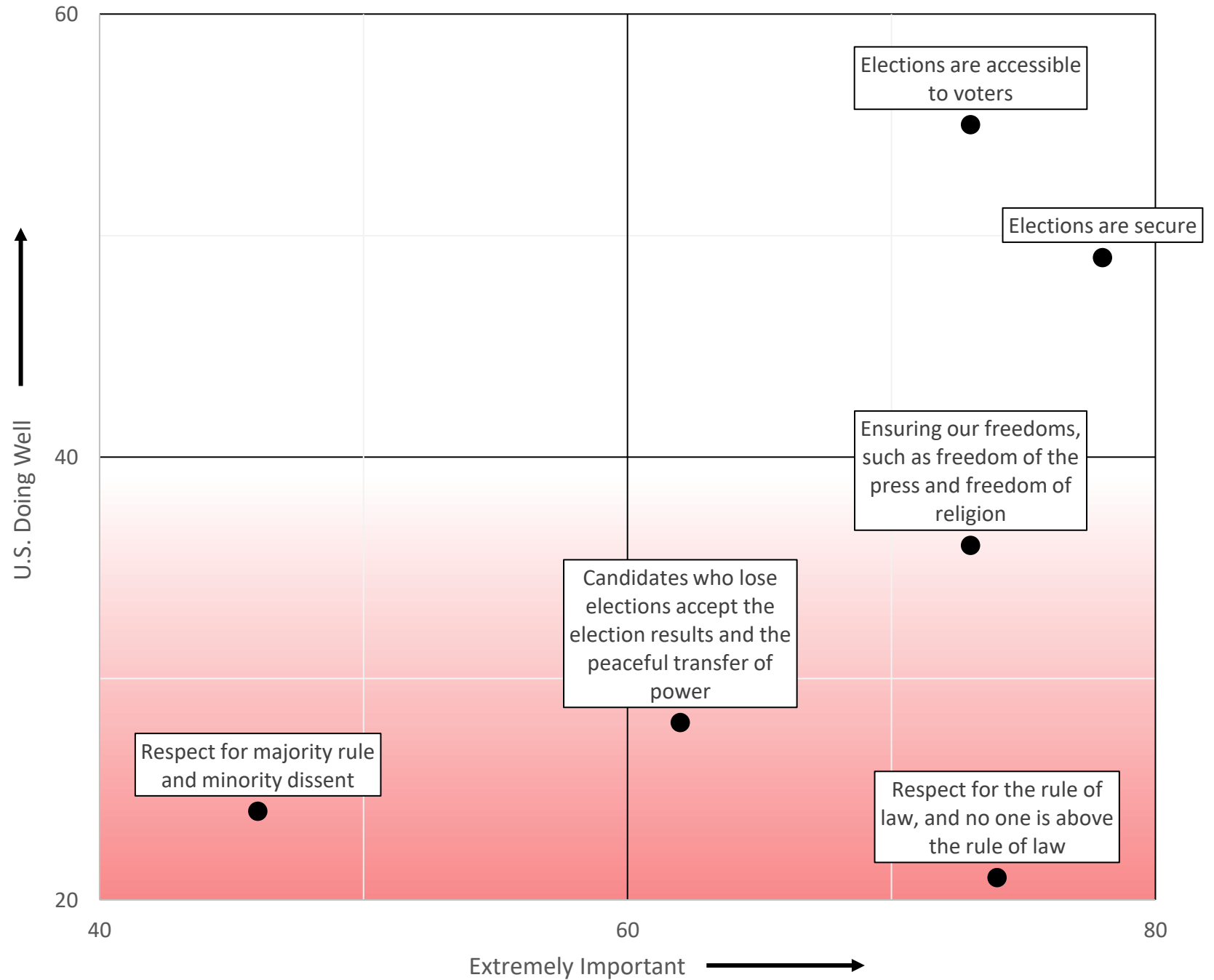
Elements of Democracy: How We are Doing

<i>% saying well</i>	Elections Accessible	Elections Secure	Ensuring Freedoms	Peaceful Transfer of Power	Majority Rule	Rule of Law
All Voters	55	49	36	28	24	21
Progressive*	28	77	47	24	21	21
Liberal	44	72	46	28	28	31
Moderate	56	58	46	28	25	24
Conservative	69	19	18	31	24	14
MAGA Rep	61	13	17	31	21	9
Non-MAGA Rep	68	53	43	28	23	25
Gen Z/ Millennials	57	50	41	37	27	27
Generation X	52	43	29	26	22	16
Younger Boomers	50	45	33	20	19	17
Seniors	57	57	40	23	25	21
Urban	60	60	49	37	30	32
Suburban	52	51	35	27	24	21
Rural	58	35	28	22	19	13



Rule of law gets a high rating on importance and the lowest rating on performance

Respect for majority rule also gets a low performance rating, but is seen as less important



In focus groups, voters agree there are major problems with democracy but differ sharply on what they see as the symptoms

Health of democracy

- Voters share strong feelings that our democracy is not working as well as it should
- Views differ sharply on what the symptoms are, often along partisan lines
- Sadness and concern that there are not clear paths for improvement

Major Problems

- Elected leaders do not act on behalf of the people
- Laws are not applied equally or fairly
- Too many people are misinformed or underinformed

“Crime, inflation, everything. Nobody offers up any rational solutions on anything. The whole system is corrupt. Nothing gets done.”

–Philadelphia Male Independent

“People are turning their backs on the basics of truth.”

–Philadelphia Female Democrat

“People in a position of power think the rules don't apply to them.”

–Livonia Female Independent

Voters agree the wealthy and powerful can act above the law —but the examples voters give differ greatly with partisanship

Rule of Law

- Voters say the law does not apply equally to those with money and influence
- But participants do not volunteer this as a concern about democracy before being asked about it

“If Sally Sue gets in trouble, it won’t be the same as for someone with status and power. That’s how the justice system is set up. Money and influence dictate a lot.”
—Austin Millennial

Politicians Above the Law

- Participants say politicians can act above the law —but they point to different examples:
 - Liberal-leaning voters and some moderates cite January 6th and Trump’s possession of classified documents
 - Republicans say the FBI is being weaponized against Trump and his supporters but giving a pass to Hunter Biden and Hillary Clinton

“I used to hold the FBI in high regard, but they have their own agenda. They don’t have our best interest in mind.”
—Livonia Male Republican

Voters across the political spectrum are worried about future elections and say politicians do not represent them well

Confidence in Elections

- Left-leaning voters fear damage Trump has done, and what other Republicans may do if elected
- Moderates have similar concerns but are less likely to see an existential threat
- Republicans are skeptical of election outcomes they don't see as reflecting their interests

"I'm worried about January 6th and the potential precedent that sets. One side lost the election and unfortunately they took it in their own hands."

–Livonia Female Independent

Representation

- Perceived problems:
 - Inaction on major issues, low participation in elections, barriers to voting, money in politics, two-party system
- Voters say outcomes don't reflect their will:
 - Overturning Roe, status of gay and transgender people—either losing or gaining rights
- Voters more interested in compromise than "majority rule"
- A few say their local government works better than the federal government

Voters say media is failing at giving accurate, unbiased information, and it is worsening divisions

Getting accurate info

- Many say it is difficult to get unbiased truth from the media
- And many say it is other voters who are misinformed and misled:
 - Moderates, liberals, and progressives are frustrated that Trump's followers believe whatever he says (Fox News gets similar criticism)
 - Conservatives are confident they are the ones getting the truth that others are missing
- Conservatives criticize social media companies for "censoring" conservative views

For-profit media

- Several say profit-driven media will do anything to increase viewership and clicks
- Media owners' agenda and profit motive are seen as being at odds with getting truly unbiased information
- Voters also see profit-seeking media as a major driver of division in the country
- Some think media consolidation will make problems with media worse



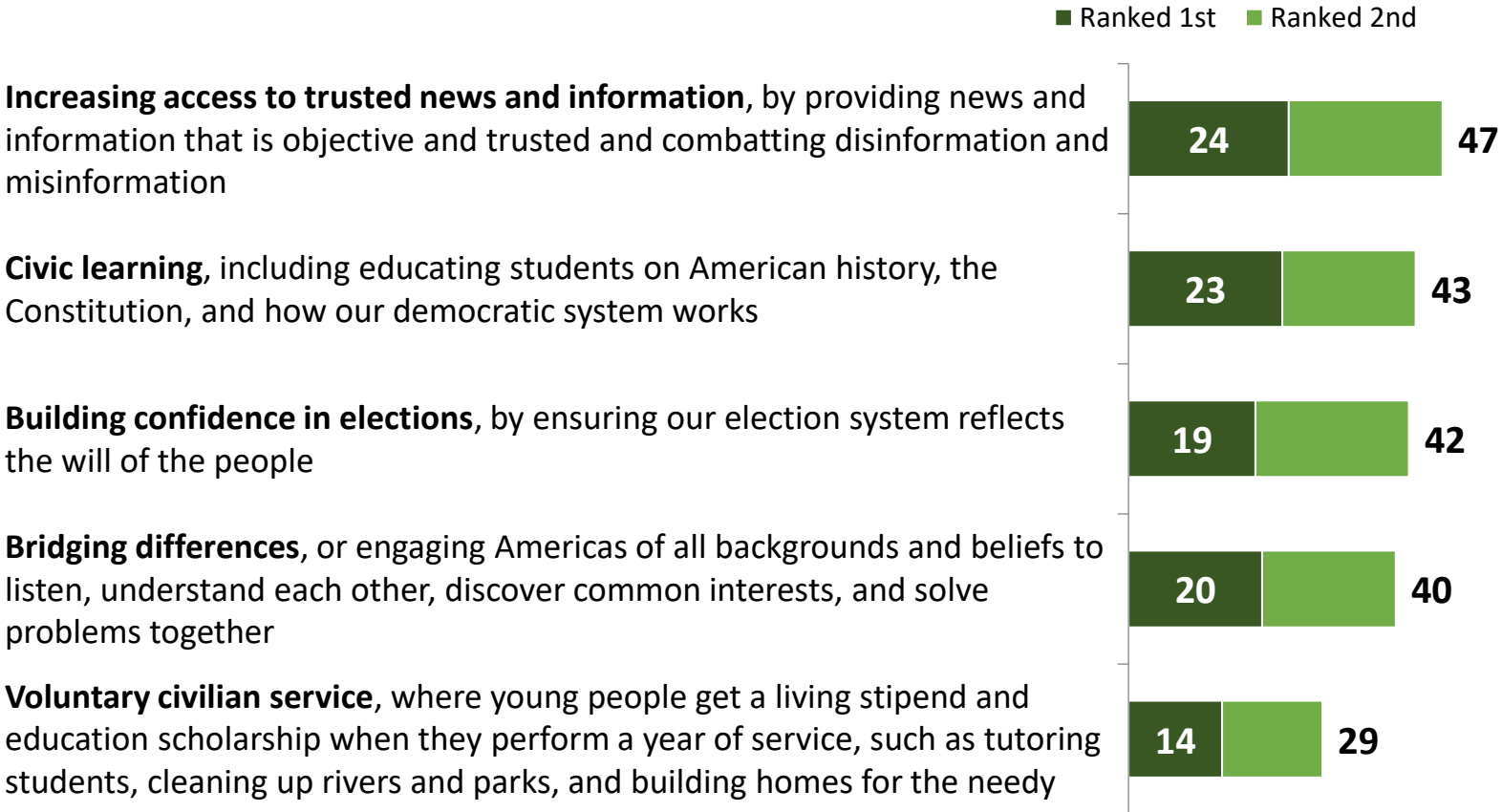
Ways to Improve Democracy



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Desire for trusted news and info is high across party, but other priorities for improving democracy vary with partisanship

Ways to Improve Democracy: Ranking Importance



% Ranked 1st or 2nd

All Voters	Dem	Rep	Ind*
47	47	46	56
43	37	49	46
41	40	45	33
40	47	34	33
29	29	26	32

Between the parties, Republicans give greater priority to civic learning and building confidence in elections, while Democrats give greater priority to bridging differences



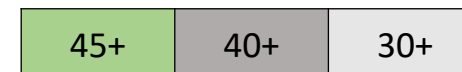
*small sample size



Trusted news and info gets high rating across most groups

Ways to Improve Democracy: Ranking Importance

<i>% ranking 1st or 2nd</i>	News and Info	Civic Learning	Confidence in Elections	Bridging Divides	Civilian Service
All Voters	47	43	42	40	28
Dem Women	47	37	40	48	29
Dem Men	47	37	40	45	30
Rep Women	46	48	41	38	28
Rep Men	47	51	49	29	24
Progressive*	46	30	31	46	46
Liberal	53	31	39	49	28
Moderate	47	44	42	42	25
Conservative	45	52	44	29	29
MAGA Rep	42	50	55	29	23
Non-MAGA Rep	49	48	28	44	30
Gen Z/ Millennials	52	43	36	40	29
Generation X	50	43	41	39	26
Younger Boomers	45	44	43	37	32
Seniors	40	43	48	41	28
Urban	50	40	39	38	32
Suburban	44	44	42	43	27
Rural	52	44	41	35	29



*small sample size



Voters have low confidence that we can bridge differences or increase access to trusted news and info

Ways to Improve Democracy: Confidence that U.S. Could Achieve

Civic learning, including educating students on American history, the Constitution, and how our democratic system works

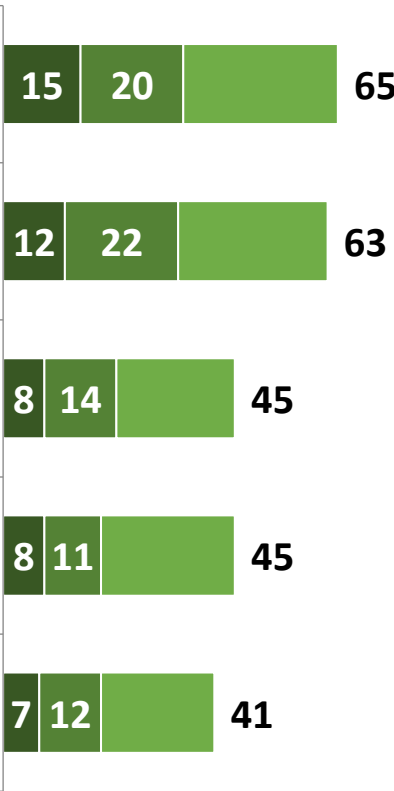
Building confidence in elections, by ensuring our election system reflects the will of the people

Voluntary civilian service, where young people get a living stipend and education scholarship when they perform a year of service, such as tutoring students, cleaning up rivers and parks, and building homes for the needy

Bridging differences, or engaging Americas of all backgrounds and beliefs to listen, understand each other, discover common interests, and solve problems together

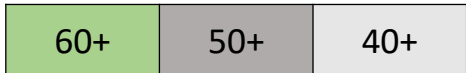
Increasing access to trusted news and information, by providing news and information that is objective and trusted and combatting disinformation and misinformation

■ Extremely ■ Very ■ Somewhat



% Extremely, Very, Somewhat Confident

All Voters	Dem	Rep	Ind*
65	74	55	70
63	73	51	71
45	53	40	32
45	51	40	46
42	53	30	40



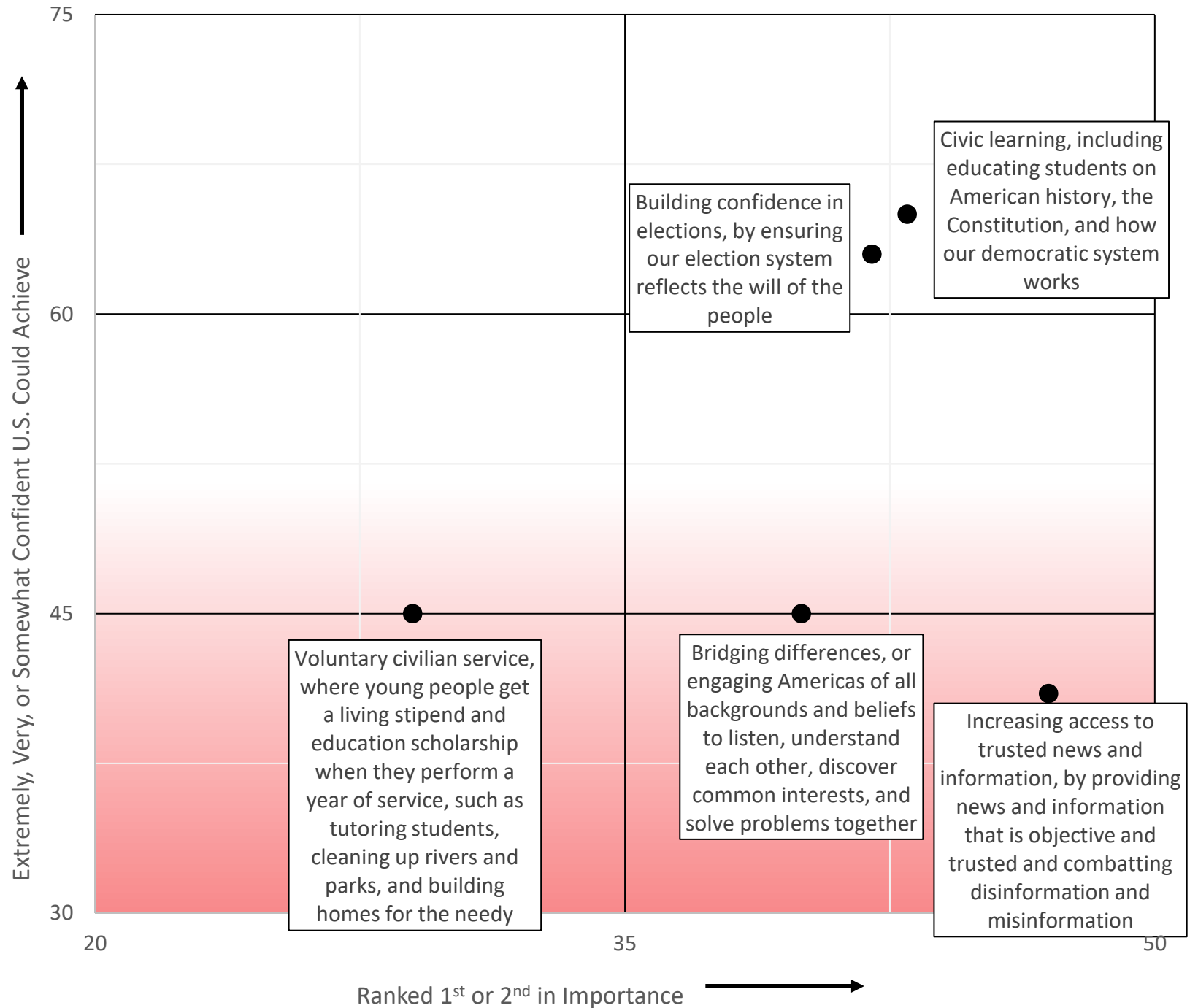
Between the parties, Republicans give greater priority to civic learning and building confidence in elections, while Democrats give greater priority to bridging differences

*small sample size



Trusted news and info and bridging divides are seen as important but unlikely

Confidence in election and civic learning get high importance rankings, and voters have more confidence these are possible



In focus groups, voters prioritize confidence in elections and trusted news and info

Building confidence in elections

- Given a list of ways to improve democracy, a top choice in focus groups is building confidence in elections
- Voters say this is the most tangible and implementable of the potential goals tested, making it most appealing to pursue

Trusted news and info

- Voters say access to trusted news and information is a basic foundation of democracy
- Many say accurate information is necessary for forming sound political opinions.
- Assuring access to trusted news and information addresses one of the biggest complaints from voters, which is a biased and ratings-chasing media

“I just wish there was one website that only had the facts and left the opinions out of it.”

–Livonia Female Independent

Voters see value in civic learning and bridging divides, but have doubts about implementation

Civic learning

- Some say our schools don't teach important facts about our country as well as they once did
- Conservatives say schools have become too politicized and to give a fair and neutral civics education
- Others say agreement on a curriculum is unlikely

"Who's teaching it? Is it going to be someone neutral, or someone swayed the wrong way?" –Livonia Male Republican

Bridging divides

- Political and social division are major voter concerns
- Bridging divides is seen as necessary for our future but also hard to imagine, and maybe out of reach

Voters have concerns about a national service program, but become more supportive after hearing details

Concerns about national service

- Some say national service could help teach respect and build patriotism
- But many interpret it as a compulsory service program, which they oppose
- Voters think about compulsory military service and refer to countries like Greece and Israel with mandatory military training
- Even some who see benefits wonder how this will be helpful for the health of democracy

Value of context

- Given more details, voters become more supportive
- Details include the types of programs that would be included and a stipend
- Some compare it to programs like the Peace Corps, which they see as an excellent training and learning opportunity



Research Implications



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Implications

Majorities across party, age, and gender say our democracy is under threat, with overwhelming majorities saying our democracy is in poor health. But voters differ sharply in how they perceive these problems, often along partisan lines. Therefore, messaging on these issues must either be specifically targeted, or be broad and general enough to appeal to all types of voters.

With voters hearing a lot about threats to democracy in political ads, even those who agree may start to tune such messages out as noise. Rather than leading with threats to democracy, it may be more effective to lead with solutions and hope for the future.

A major concern about democracy is that elected officials do not represent their voters well. Voters want changes that would make politicians more accountable and increase confidence in elections.

Voters also want more accurate and unbiased information for themselves and their fellow citizens, but it is unlikely that voters across the political spectrum will accept any source as neutral—especially if it faces partisan criticism. Similarly, actions against disinformation will be interpreted by Republicans and some Independents as censorship and having their free speech taken away.

Political and social divisions are major voter concerns, and they want to bridge divides. But they need to see leadership on this and evidence that it is possible.

Discussion of national service opportunities should emphasize the voluntary nature and any stipend or tuition benefits and give examples of the type of work that would be performed.