

PewResearchCenter

Political Polarization and the American Public

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- Internet, Science & Technology
- Religion & Public Life
- Hispanic Trends
- Global Attitudes
- Social & Demographic Trends



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Three Observations About American Politics Today

Many Americans – though perhaps not most – are highly polarized by politics, and becoming more so. The most engaged are the most polarized, which means they have the most influence on what happens (or doesn't happen).

Americans are divided almost equally between the parties and their views about policies. Despite Democratic advantages in party affiliation, public opinion on key issues is split.

Republicans continue to have a large advantage in many elections and other forms of political engagement by virtue of their greater financial security and its correlates. The financial situation of Americans is very strongly related to their likelihood of voting and participating in other ways.

Is America Coming Apart?



The Mischiefs of Faction

“Among the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction. The friend of popular governments never finds himself so much alarmed for their character and fate, as when he contemplates their propensity to this dangerous vice.”

James Madison
Federalist #10

Four Notions of Political Polarization

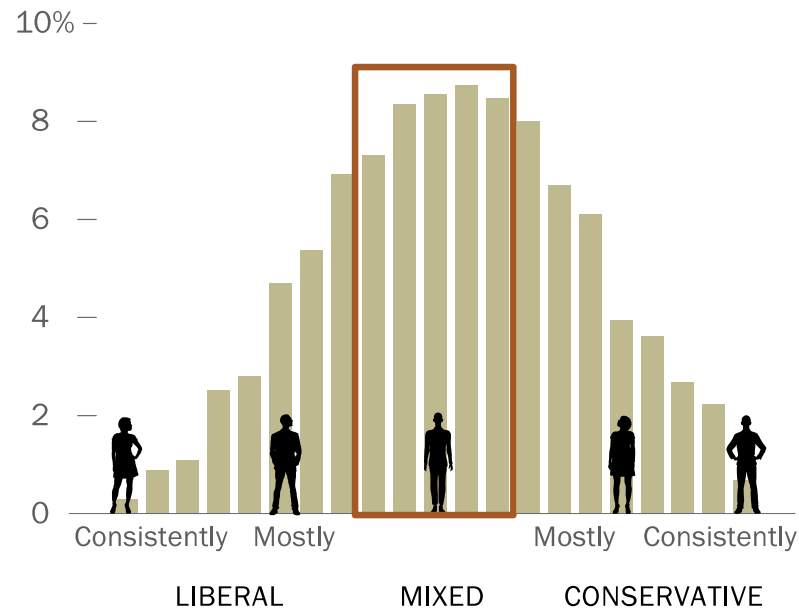
Increased presence of “extreme” political attitudes?

Growing ideological consistency?

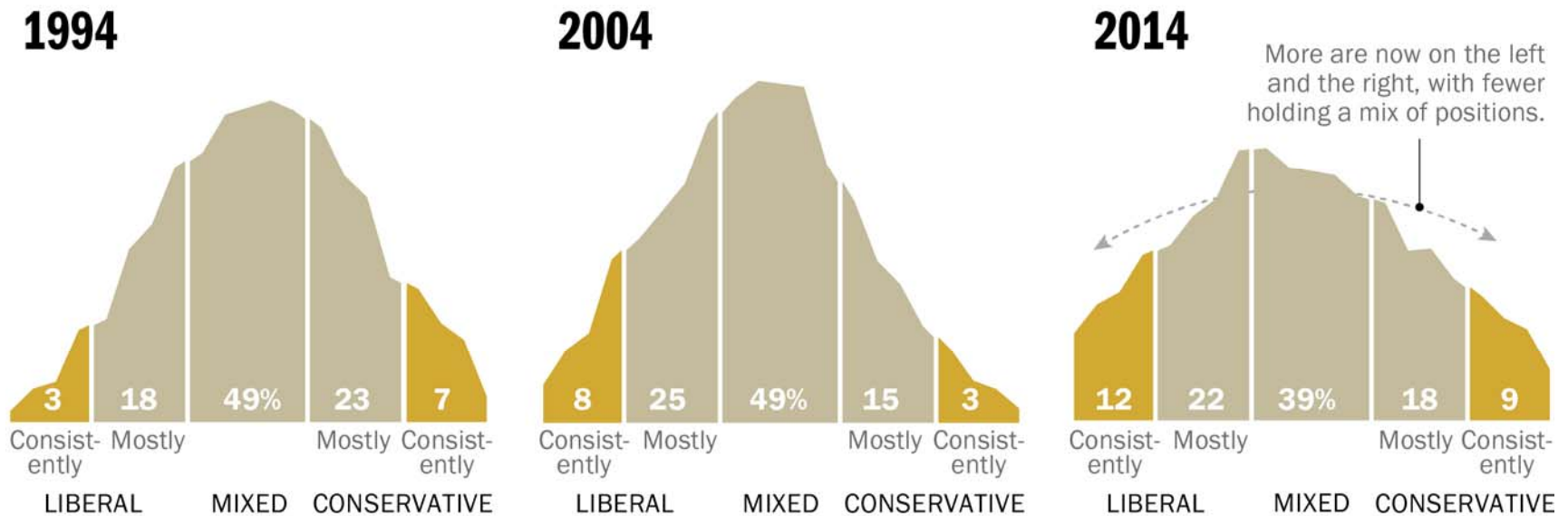
Ideological sorting by party?

Rising partisan antipathy?

In 1994, 49% of Americans held a roughly equal number of liberal and conservative positions — their ideological views were “mixed.”



What Polarization Looks Like: Growing Minority Holds Consistent Ideological Views



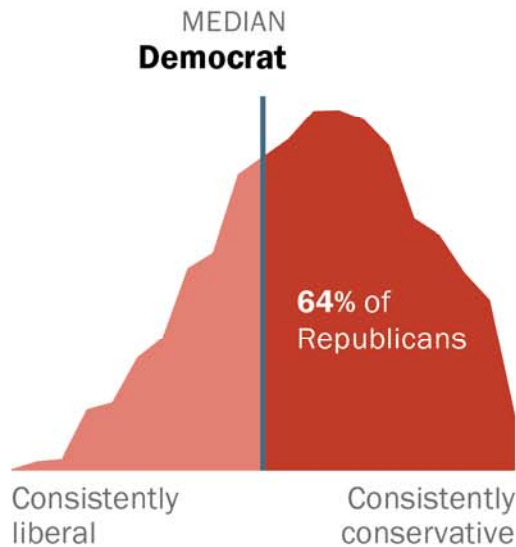
Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public.

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

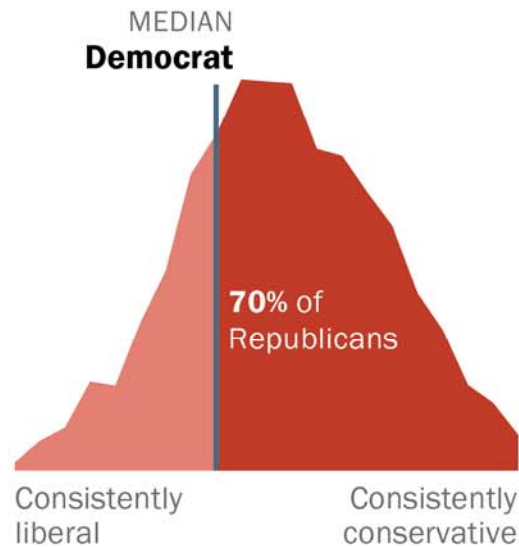
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Republicans Shift to the Right

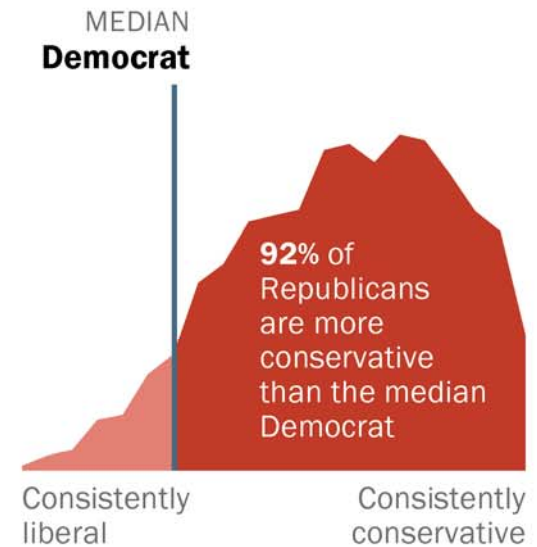
1994



2004



2014

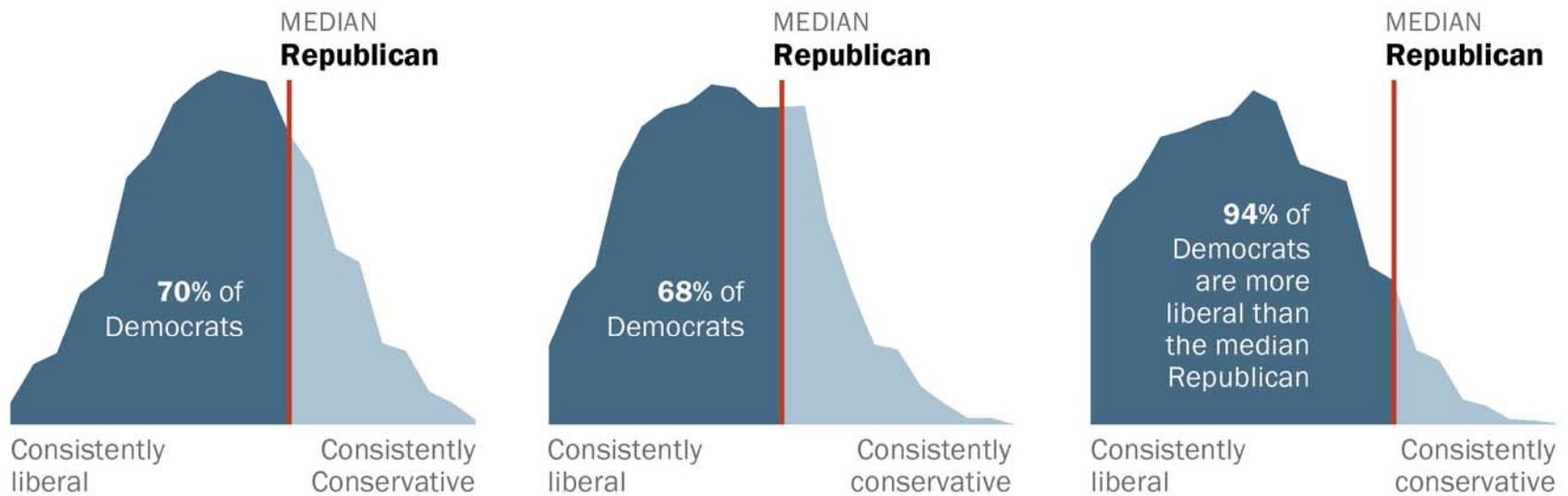


Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public.

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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Democrats Shift to the Left

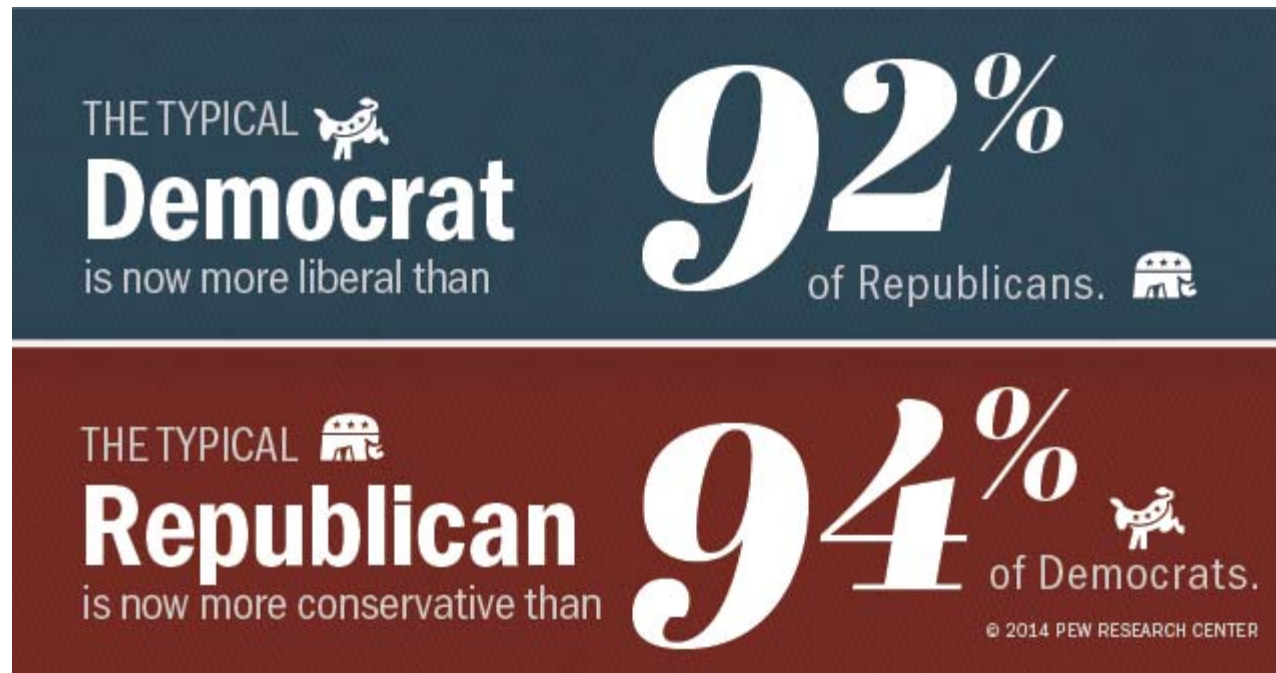


Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public.

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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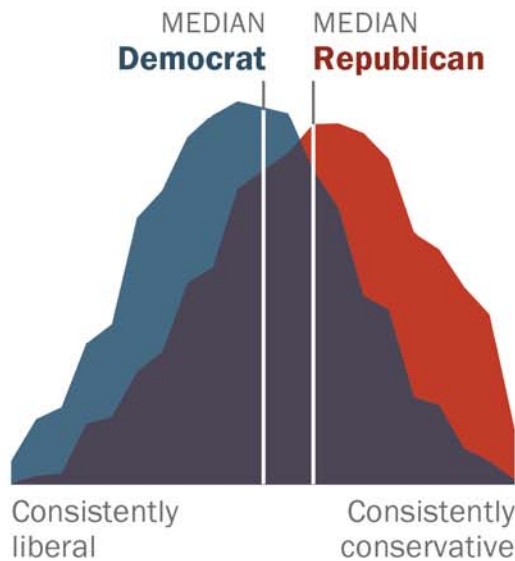
Political Polarization in the American Public



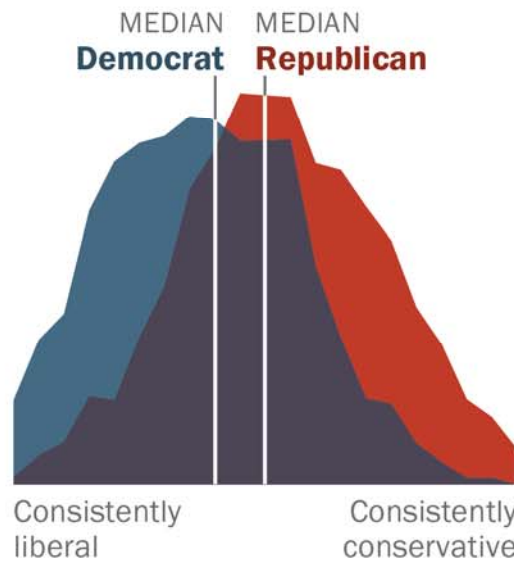
It was 64% and 70%, respectively, in 1994!

Putting the Republican and Democratic Mountains Together

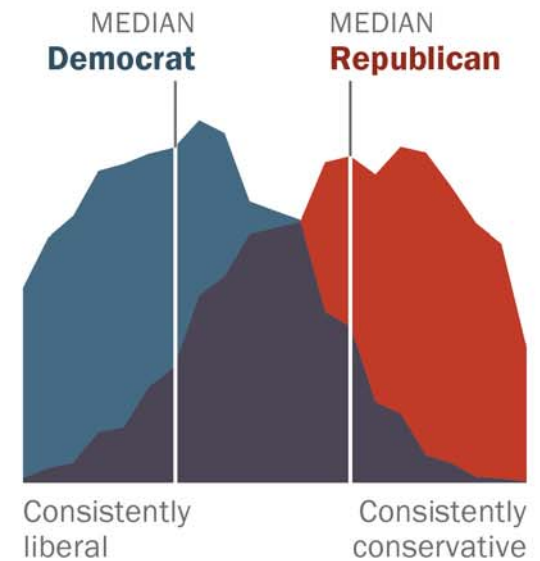
1994



2004



2014



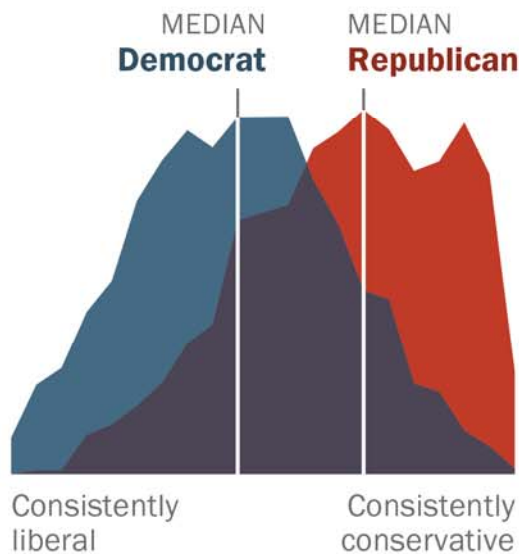
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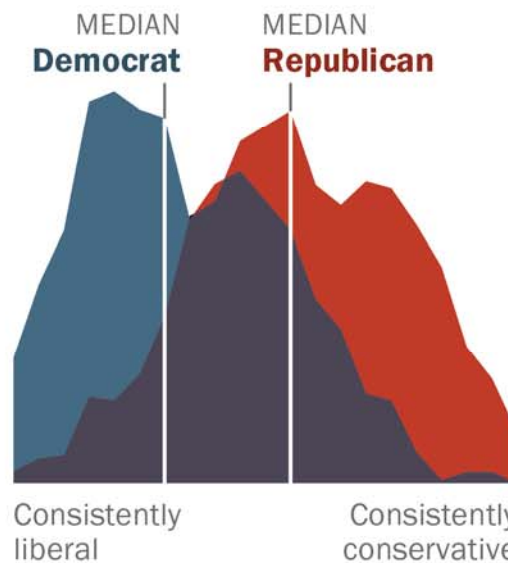
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Partisan Polarization Even More Pronounced Among the Politically Engaged

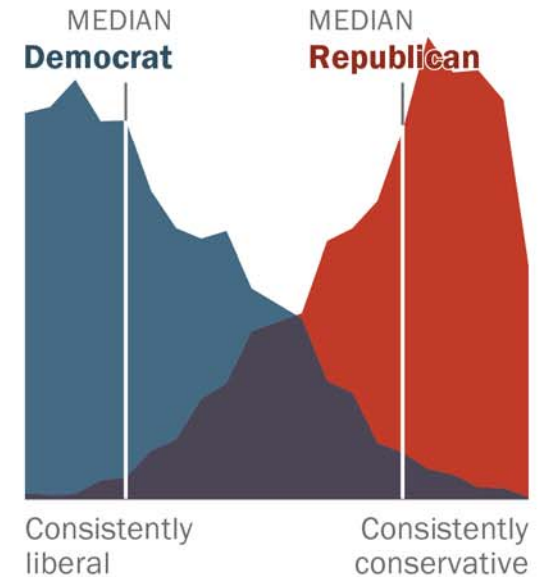
1994



2004



2014



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public.

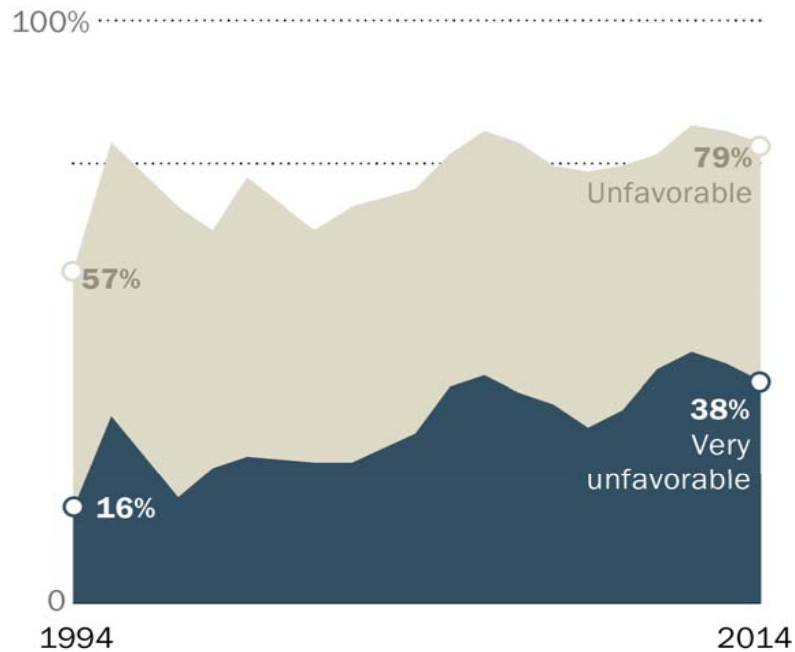
Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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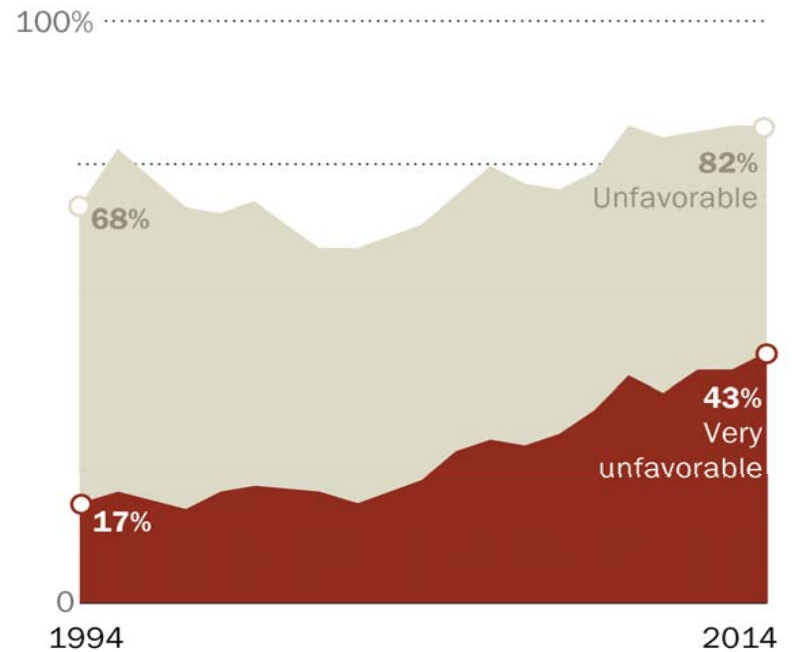
Growing Partisan Antipathy

In both parties, highly negative views of the opposing party has more than doubled since 1994.

Democratic *attitudes about the Republican Party*

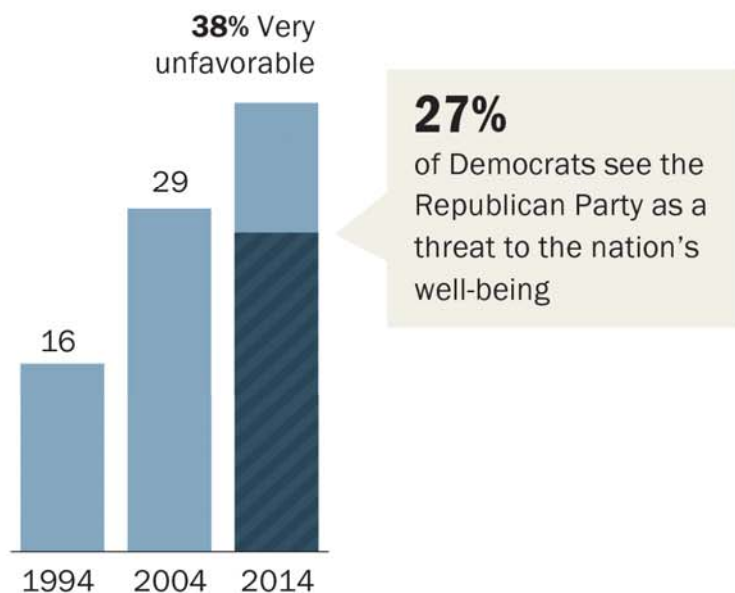


Republican *attitudes about the Democratic Party*

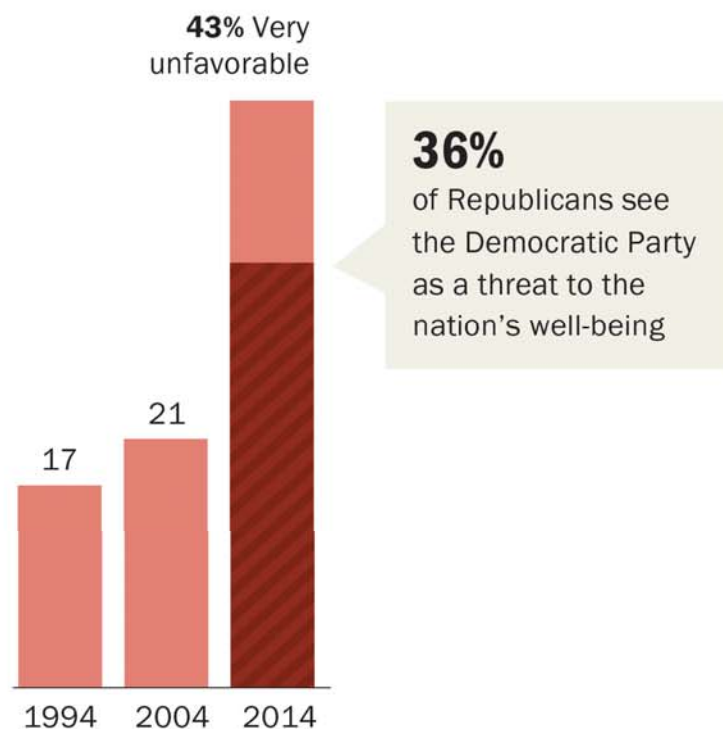


Beyond Dislike: Viewing the Other Party as a 'Threat to the Nation's Well-Being'

Democratic attitudes about the Republican Party



Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party

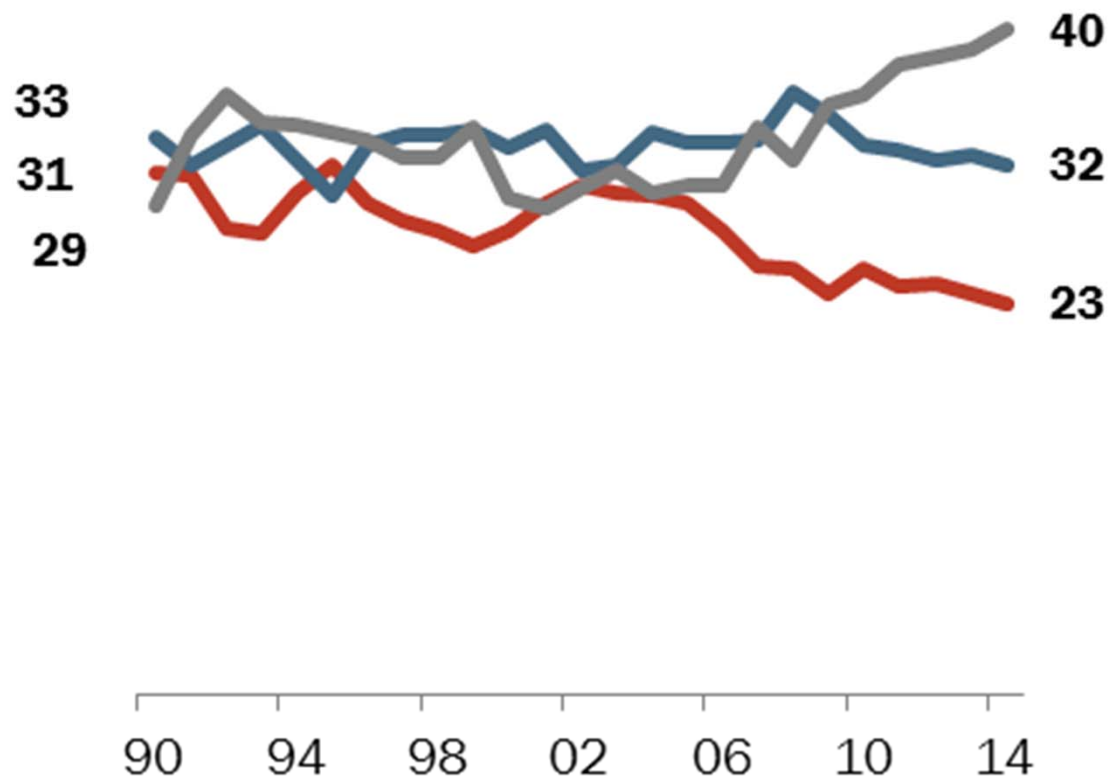


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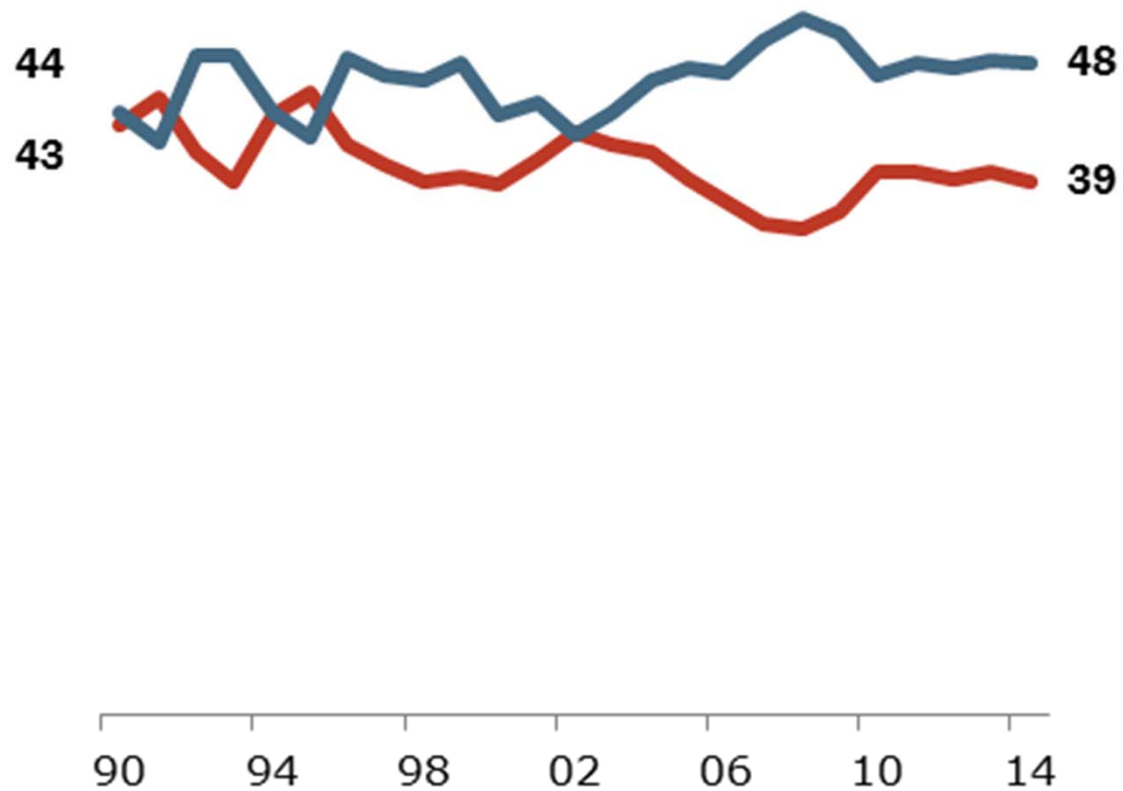
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Where Are We Today?

More Democrats Than Republicans, But Independents on the Rise

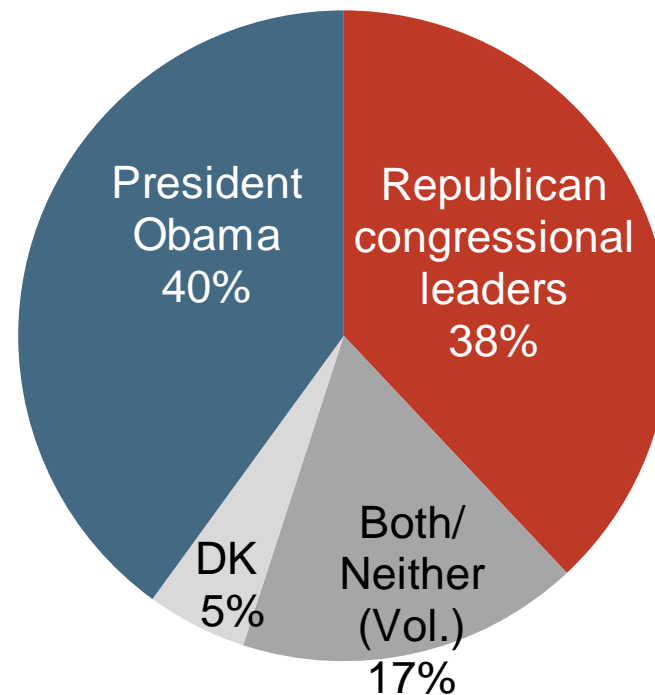


Democrats Retain an Advantage in “Leaned” Party Affiliation



Public Divided Over 'Who Should Take the Lead'

Who in Washington should take the lead in solving nation's problems?



Survey conducted Feb. 18-22, 2015.

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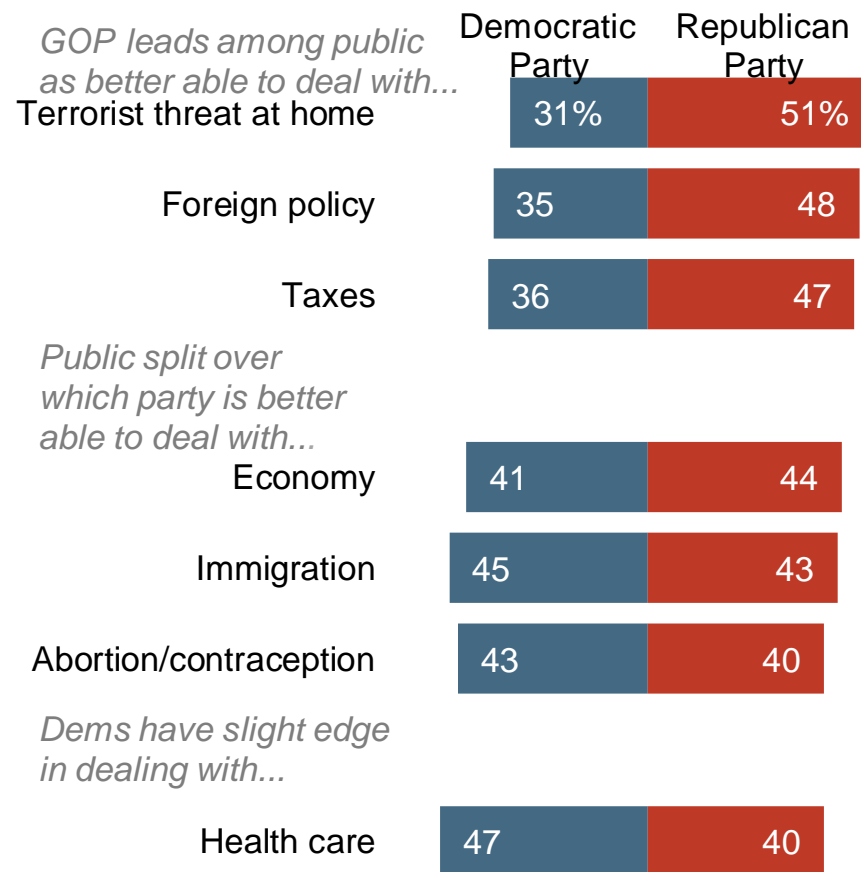
Democratic Party Has Edge on Image

	Republican Party	Democratic Party	Gap
Has strong principles	63	57	R+6
Has good policy ideas	48	52	D+4
Cares about the middle class	43	60	D+17
Tolerant and open to all groups of people	35	59	D+24
Is too extreme	50	36	R+14

PEW RESEARCH CENTER survey conducted Feb. 18-22, 2015

Republicans Preferred on Dealing With Terrorism, Foreign Policy, Taxes

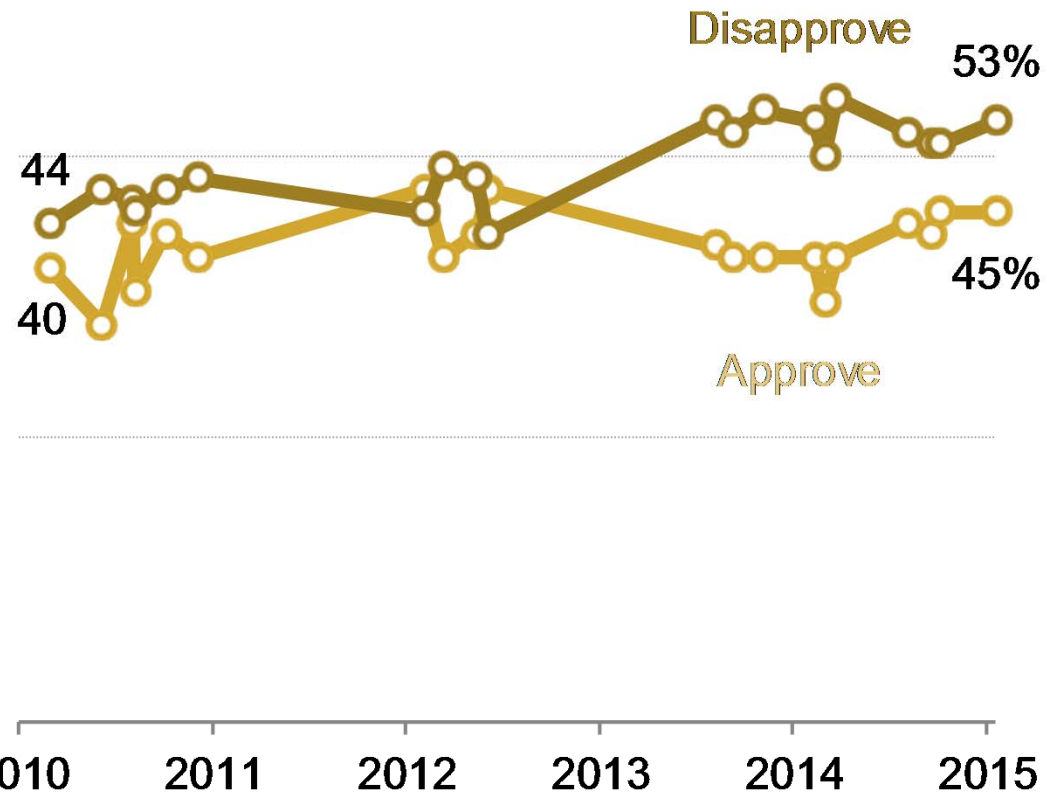
Which party could do a better job ...



Survey conducted Feb. 18-22, 2015. Both/Neither/Don't know volunteered responses not shown.

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No Change in Views of Health Care Law

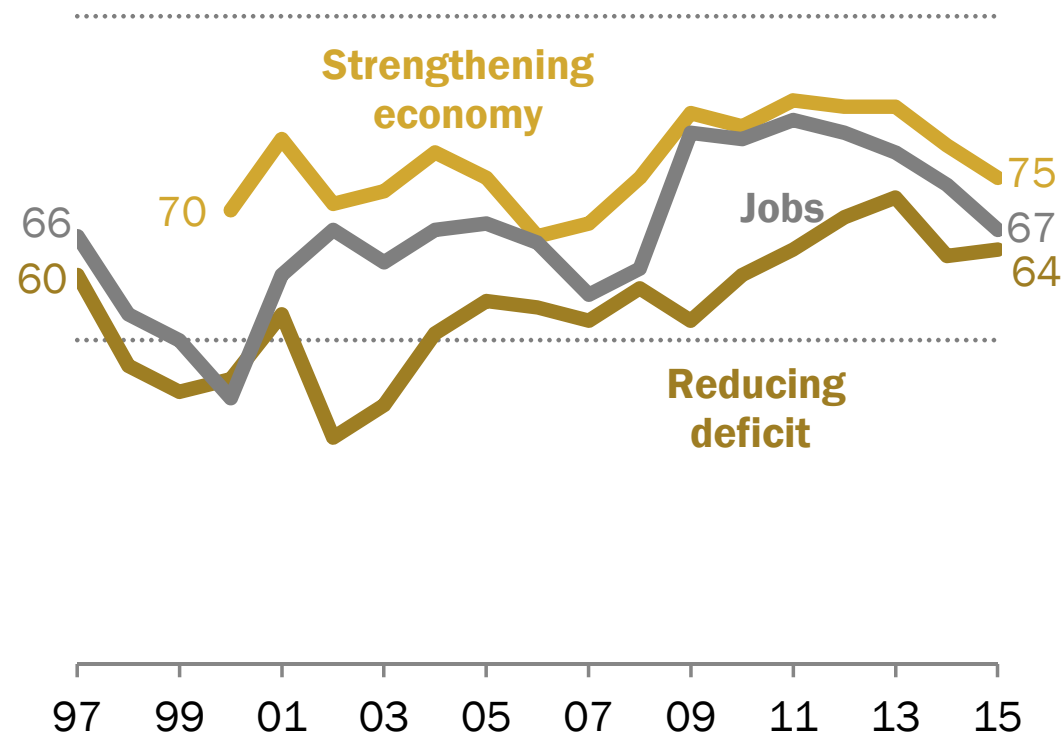


Survey conducted Feb. 18-22, 2015. Don't know responses not shown.

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Economic Issues Rise and Fall on Public's Agenda

% who say each is a top priority ...

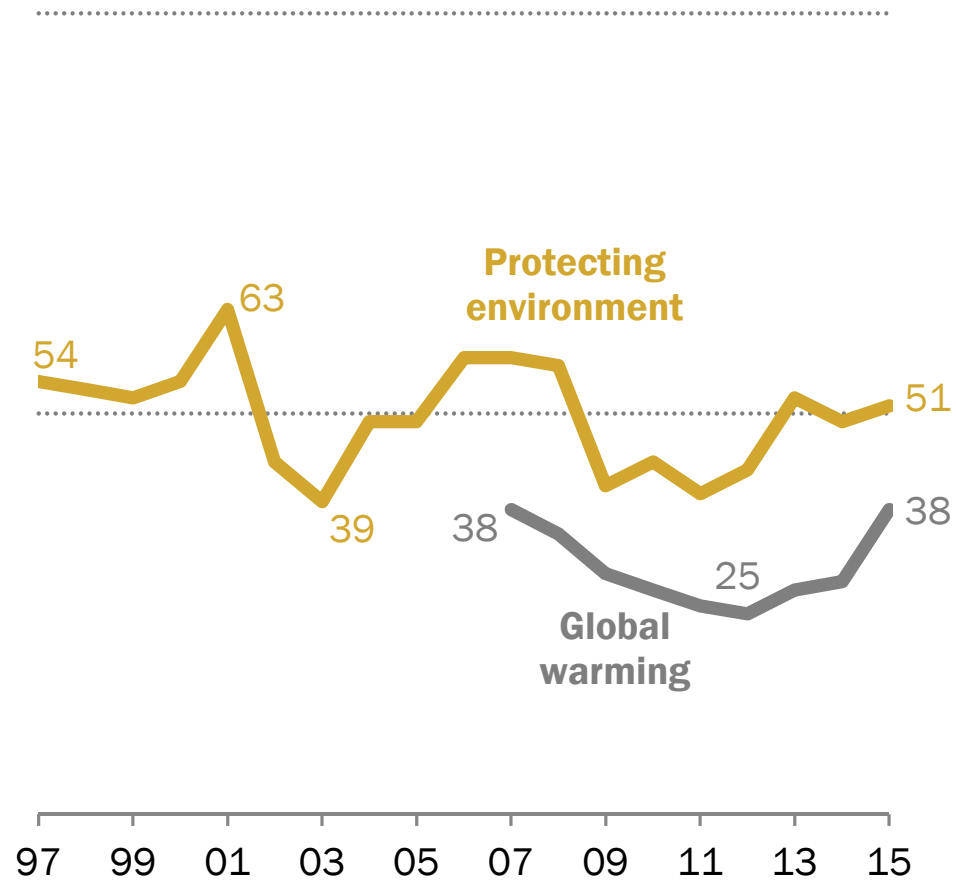


Survey conducted Jan. 7-11, 2015. From 1998-2001 the question asked about "Paying off the national debt."

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Environmental Priorities

% saying each is a top priority ...



Survey conducted Jan. 7-11, 2015.

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The Politics of Financial Insecurity

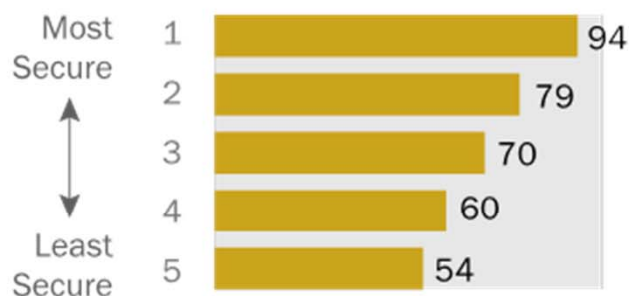
A Democratic Tilt, Undercut by Low Participation

- Measured financial security and insecurity across 10 dimensions, including assets, financial stress, means-tested benefits
- Divided the public into five groups according to their level of financial security

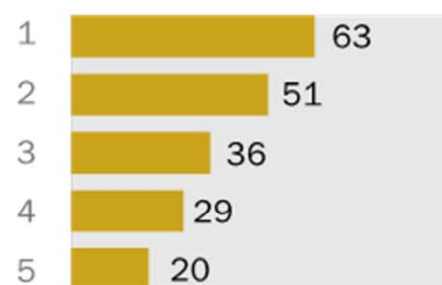
Least Financially Secure Less Likely to Vote or to Otherwise Engage With Politics

% of each group who ...

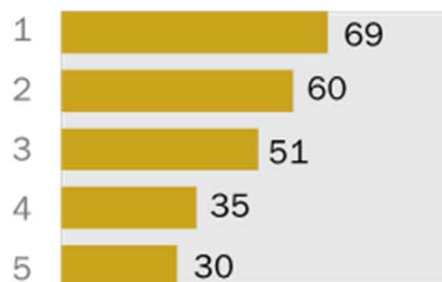
... WERE REGISTERED TO VOTE IN 2014



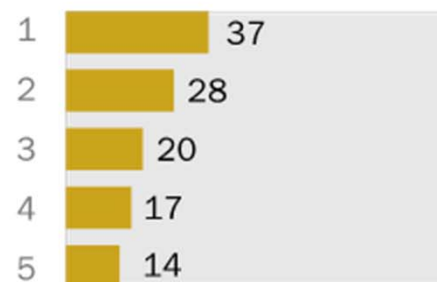
... WERE LIKELY VOTERS IN 2014 ELECTION



... VOTED IN 2010 ELECTION



... VOTED IN 2010 PRIMARY

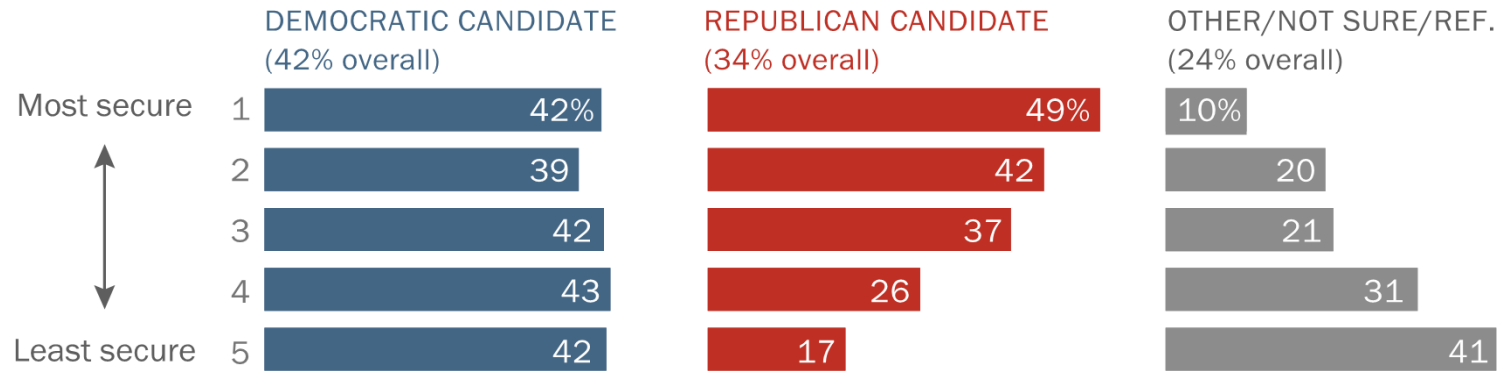


American Trends Panel (wave 7). Survey conducted Sept. 9–Oct. 3, 2014.

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The Least Financially Secure Preferred Democrats in 2014, But Many Had No Preference ...

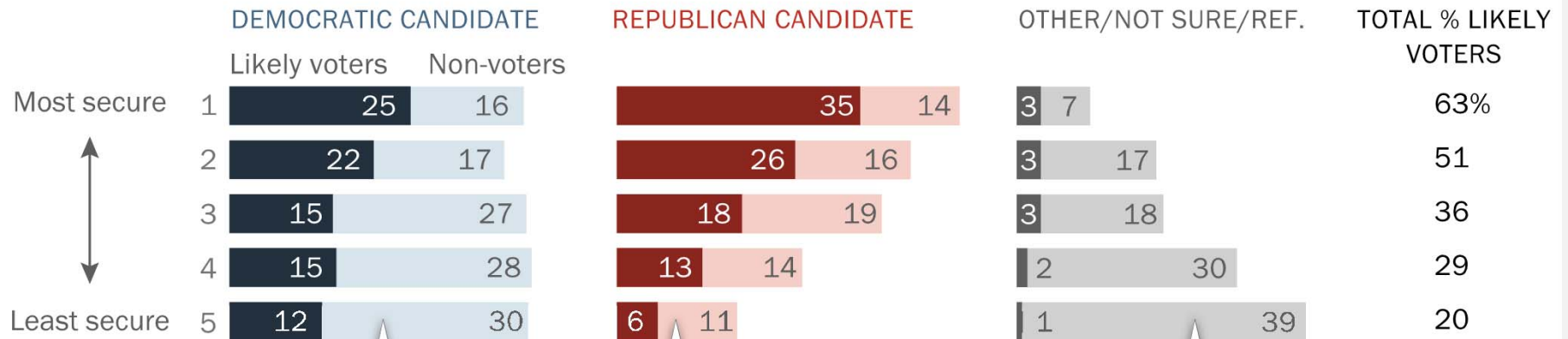
2014 candidate preferences among the general public, by level of financial security



Source: American Trends Panel (wave 7). Survey conducted Sept. 9-Oct. 3, 2014. Based on general public.

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... and Most Were Unlikely to Vote



Among the least financially secure, fully 30% supported a Democratic candidate but were unlikely to vote; just 11% supported a Republican candidate and were unlikely to vote.

Most of those who did not express support for either a Democratic or a Republican candidate were unlikely to vote.

Note: Figures in bottom charts may not add up to totals in top charts and total % likely voters column because of rounding.
 Source: American Trends Panel (wave 7). Survey conducted Sept. 9-Oct. 3, 2014. Based on general public.

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