

Understanding Pro-Democracy Conservatives

**A Report on Current Levels of Election Trust
and Partisan Identity**

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Executive Summary

At a moment in time in which many are questioning the parameters, rules, and institutions of the American republic, the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University has been co-leading a new initiative to explore and build the contours of a conservative pro-democracy movement.

The rationale for the launch of the initiative stemmed from the fact that the majority of democracy reform efforts predominantly consist of practitioners and scholars from the left — occasionally with token conservatives at the table. This is not due to a lack of interest in democracy reform on the right. In fact, one reason for this imbalance is the severe political and personal costs that right-of-center individuals pay for undertaking pro-democracy activities — making it difficult to create a credible- and large-enough cohort for pro-democracy conservatives to collaborate and act.

Crucially, for the conservative movement—and for the viability of a functioning, two-party system of self-governance in the United States—it is critical that pro-democracy elements of the right mobilize. These individuals believe in the importance of a liberal society and free and fair elections and decry the increasingly prevalent anti-democratic faction of the Republican party. They need a space to test ideas and assess whether a common agenda is possible. A viable pro-democracy agenda on the right must be translated and supported, from conservative grassroots to conservative grassroots movements and leaders.

The work to date has focused on:

- » **Convening** conservative experts and officials at the local and national level to discuss, explore, and outline a pro-democracy agenda;
- » **Conducting** research to better understand the motivators of election trust and distrust in the country, with a focus on differentiating between conservatives who deny the results of the 2020 election and those who believe those results;
- » **Catalyzing** effective follow-on action from the members of this community.

This report is the first planned in a series of studies to be done over the course of 2024 and beyond. Based on polling run by Gallup, our project looks at the electorate in a new way. Rather than simply comparing Democrats and Republicans against each other, we compare three different groups of Americans:

- » Republicans who still believe in the legitimacy of the 2020 election (or are unsure about it),
- » Republicans who continue to deny the legitimacy of the 2020 election outcome, and
- » Democrats and Independents.

We wanted to explore the factors — such as personal characteristics, behaviors, and opinions/attitudes — that distinguish Republicans who believe Biden won the 2020 election or aren't sure who won (believers) from those who believe Trump won the 2020 election (deniers). Our initial findings make it clear that conservative election believers are a unique political group. They consume more traditional sources of information, hold more progressive societal perspectives, and are more likely to believe in democratic values, such as conceding when candidates lose elections. They are a group that is more supportive of democracy — though they often feel politically alone. This report provides initial insight into the differences between these two groups of Republicans in comparison with the rest of the electorate.

Methodology

We worked with Gallup to conduct a web survey, administered October 3-12th, 2023. The survey included a non-probability, opt-in panel of US adults aged 18+. The total sample included 2,012 individuals, including an oversample of 300 Republicans, Republican-leaning independents, and conservatives.

The research goals included:

- Measure current levels of trust in U.S. presidential elections.
- Explore factors — such as personal characteristics and opinions/attitudes — that distinguish conservatives who believe Biden won the 2020 election from those who believe Trump won the 2020 election.

Methods Notes

- General margin of error (MoE) is ±2.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.
- MoEs for subgroups are higher.
- Demographic quotas were used to ensure the sample of respondents was broadly representative of the adult U.S. population based on ACS 2021 data.

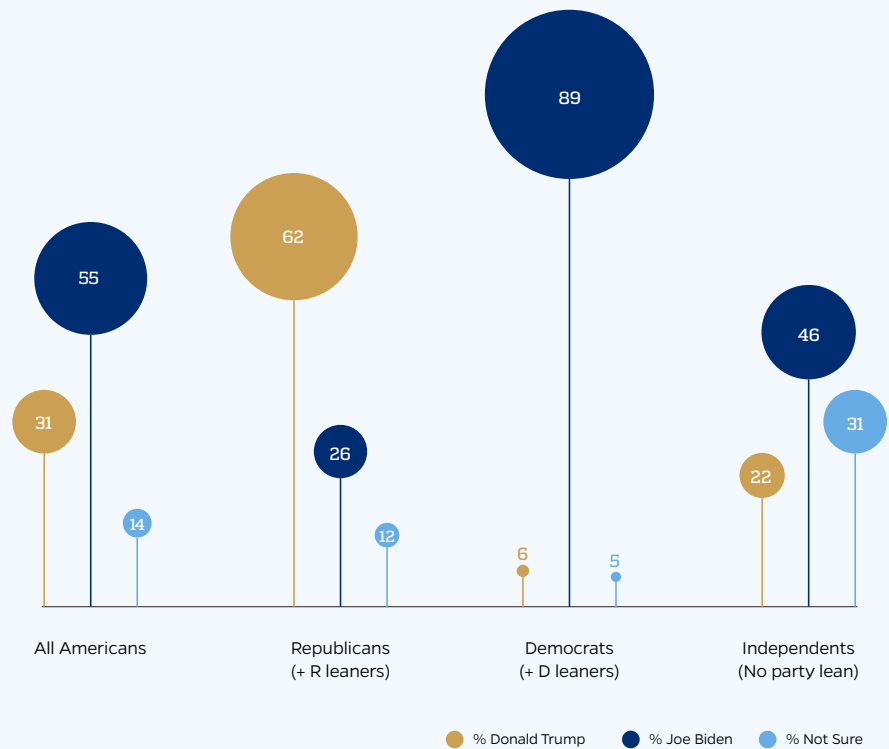
Republican 2020 Deniers	Republican 2020 Believers	Democrats/Independents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Unweighted N = 528 » Republicans/Conservatives » Independent Republican leaners » Independent conservatives » Non-party conservatives » Believed Trump won the 2020 election 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Unweighted N = 371 » Republicans/Conservatives » Independent Republican leaners » Independent conservatives » Non-party conservatives » Believed Biden won or were unsure of the 2020 election results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Unweighted N = 1,100 » All Democrats/Liberals » Independent Democratic leaners » True independents » Independent moderates and liberals » Non-party moderates and liberals

Election Beliefs

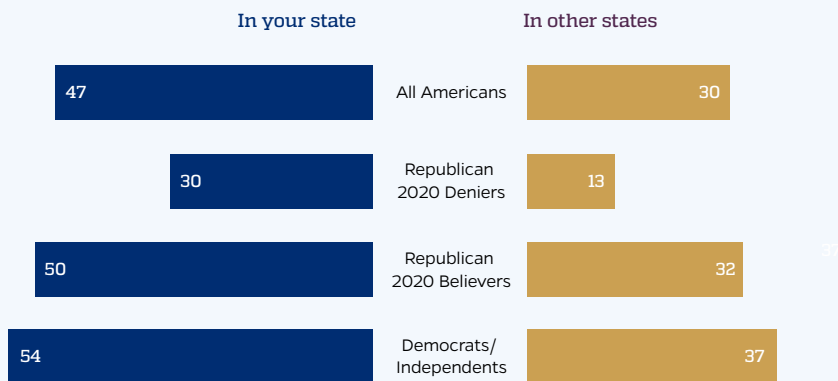
Consistent with other recent surveys, we found about 62 percent of Republicans believing that Trump was the legitimate winner of the 2020 election, 26 percent of Republicans believing that Biden won, and 12 percent unsure. In comparison, 89 percent of Democrats (and 46 percent of Independents who do not lean toward either party) believe that Biden won.

In your view who was the legitimate winner of the 2020 presidential election?

There is a wide partisan divide in who Americans believe won the 2020 presidential election.



How much do you trust the accuracy and integrity of elections?



Republican believers are more trusting of elections in their state and other states than Republican deniers.

% A lot of confidence

Republican Beliefs About the 2020 Election are Not Uniform

In comparing Republican “believers” and “deniers” we found some notable differences. Republican 2020 deniers were slightly more white overall, more strongly identified as Republican or conservative, slightly younger, claimed to be moderately or very religious, more likely to report that they own a gun, and rely more on social media and friends and family for political news.

Republican 2020 believers were slightly more college educated, reported slightly higher income, had a higher interest in news and relied more on television for political news, were more likely to say they talk about politics with both Democrats and Republicans, and more likely to trust local government, the Supreme Court, and science.

Republican 2020 Deniers	Republican 2020 Believers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Slightly more White respondents+ More likely to identify as Republican or Republican leaning+ More “conservative” Republican+ Political identity is more important to them+ Slightly younger, more millennials+ Moderately or very religious+ More likely to own a gun+ Rely more on social media and friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Slightly more college educated+ More “moderate” Republican+ Slightly higher income+ Slightly older: average age of 53 compared with 46 for Trump believers+ Higher interest in news+ Rely more on TV for election news+ More likely to say they talk about politics to a good mix of Democrats and Republicans

Republicans are lacking confidence in elections, but in different ways.

Republican 2020 believers are concerned about

- » Prevention of voter fraud
- » Prevention of voter obstacles

Republican 2020 deniers are concerned about

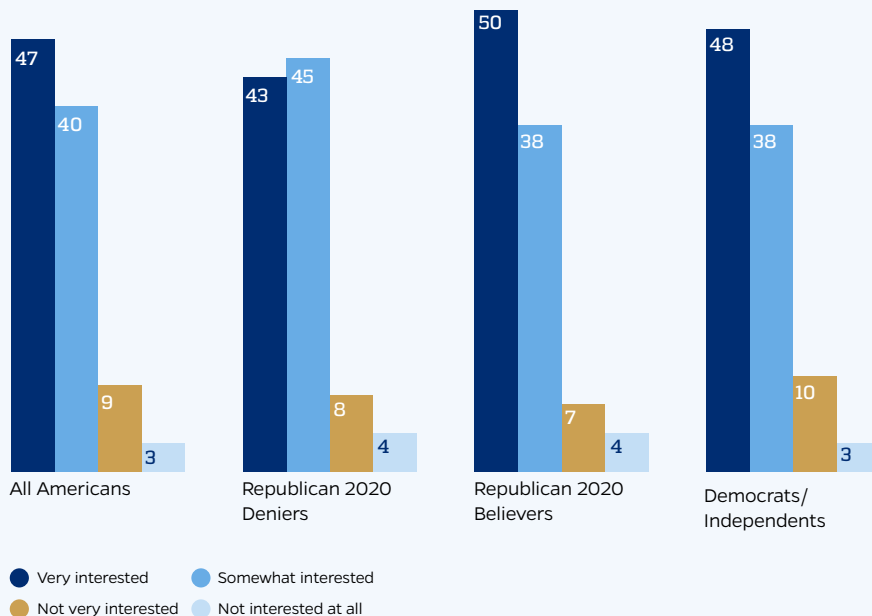
- » Prevention of voter fraud
- » Counting accuracy
- » Democrats cheating
- » Election misinformation

*For the analysis throughout this report, weighted data were used.

Media Consumption

Believers and deniers have different levels of interest in the news. Republicans who believe Biden won in 2020 are more likely to be “very interested” in the news.

In general, how interested are you in the news?*



Republican believers rely less on social media or friends and family for election news.

Most people turn to Facebook and YouTube to access news via social media. Among those who selected social media as a top three source they rely on for news about politics and elections, these are the top five social media platforms they say they use to access news:

Republican 2020 Believers



Republican 2020 Deniers



What type of social media?

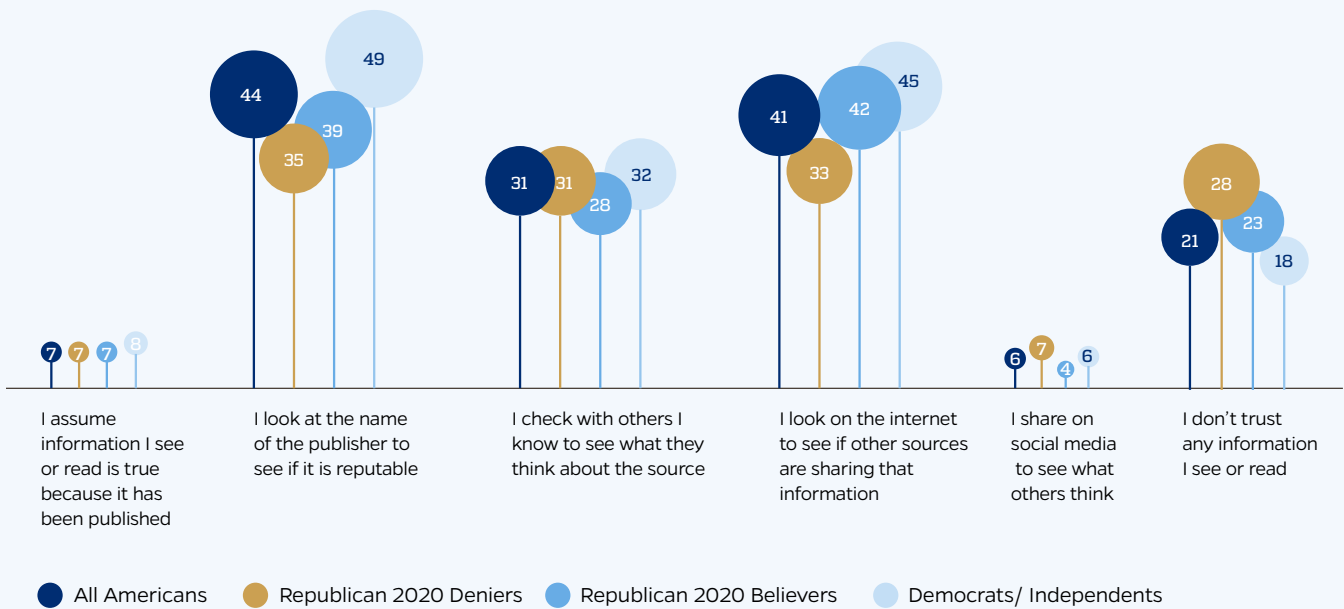
Republican 2020 Deniers	Republican 2020 Believers	Democrats/Independents
» Facebook (75%)	» Facebook (79%)	» Facebook (62%)
» YouTube (57%)	» YouTube (65%)	» YouTube (61%)
» TikTok (39%)	» Instagram (45%)	» Instagram (54%)
» Instagram (38%)	» TikTok (42%)	» TikTok (43%)
» Twitter (35%)	» Twitter (26%)	» Twitter (41%)

Beliefs on Misinformation

When searching for reliable political information, Republican 2020 believers are more likely than deniers to consider the reputation of the publisher and to check on the internet to see if other sites are sharing the same information. They are less likely to report that they “don’t trust any information I see or read”.

Republican believers are more likely to check additional sources to verify information as trustworthy.

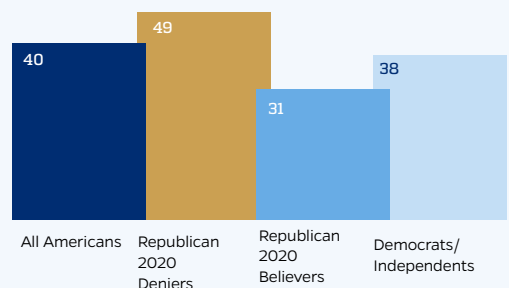
Please select which of the following you do to determine if information you see or read about politics in America is trustworthy. Please select all that apply.



But Republican 2020 deniers are the most concerned about misinformation in elections.

Republican 2020 election deniers are the group most worried about the influence of misinformation in American elections. Forty-nine percent of Republican 2020 deniers are concerned “quite a lot,” compared to 31% of Republican believers and 38% of Democrats/Independents.

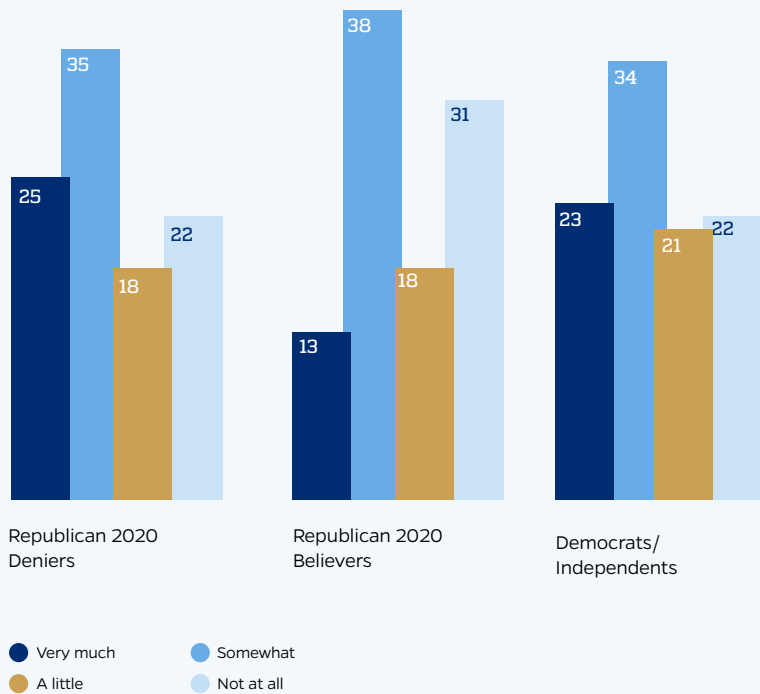
To what extent are you concerned about misinformation in US elections?



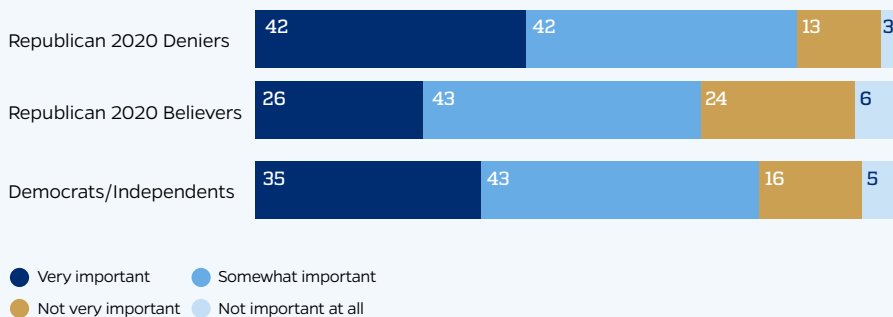
Political Identity

Republican believers are less likely to refer to Republicans as “we” than deniers.

When talking about [Self-identified political party affiliations] how much do you use “we” instead of “they”?



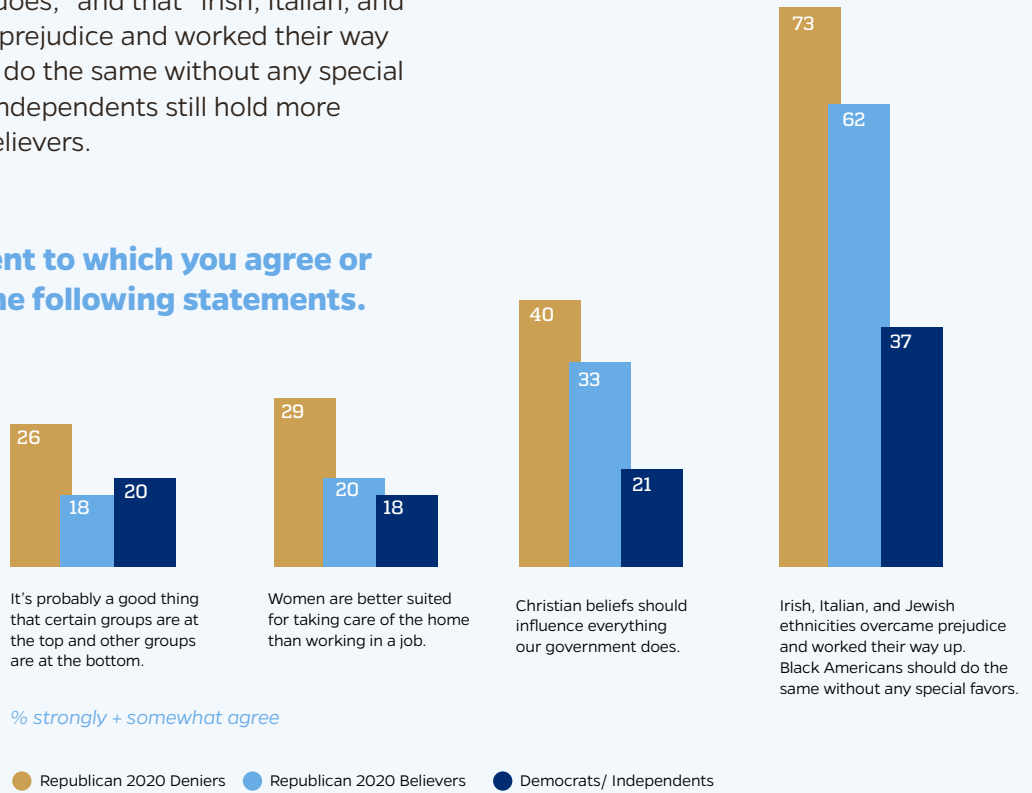
To what extent is being a(n) [Self-identified political party affiliation] important to you?



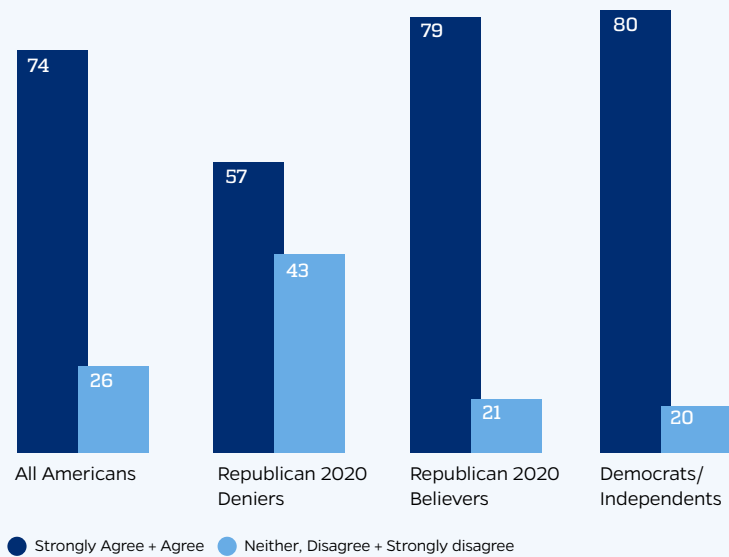
Political identity is less important to Republicans who believe Biden won in 2020 than those who believe Trump won.

Republican 2020 believers also have less discriminatory views about social groups in American society than deniers do. They are less likely to agree that “it’s a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom”, that “women are better suited to taking care of the home than working in a job,” that “Christian beliefs should influence everything our government does,” and that “Irish, Italian, and Jewish ethnicities overcame prejudice and worked their way up - Black Americans should do the same without any special favors.” Though Democrats/Independents still hold more progressive attitudes than believers.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.



Generally speaking, I believe it is important to accept the outcome of elections even when my preferred candidate loses.

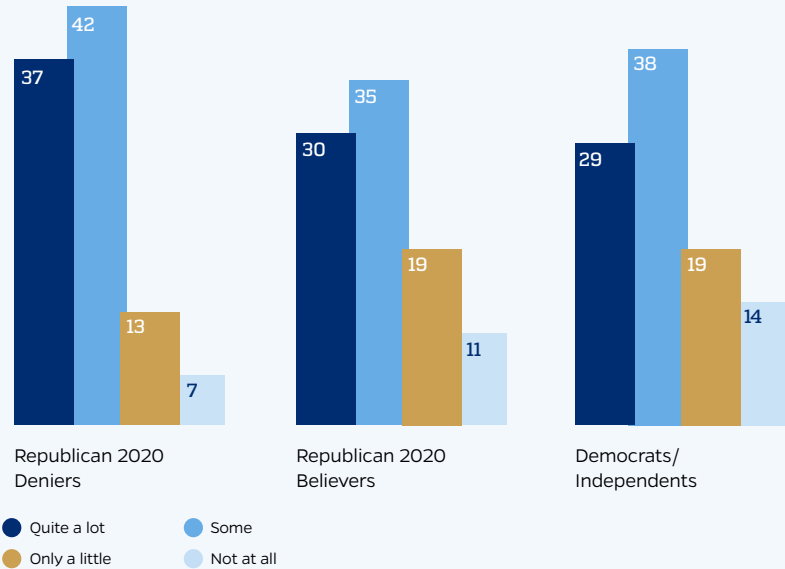


Republican believers are more committed to conceding elections when they lose. Republican 2020 deniers are the least likely to agree that “it is important to accept the outcome of elections even when my preferred candidate loses,” with 57% of deniers agreeing compared to 79% of believers and 80% of Democrats/Independents.

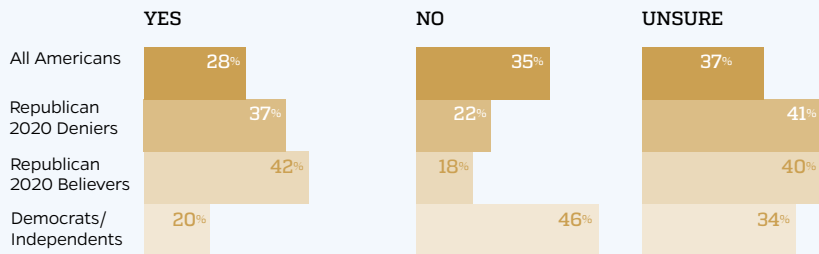
Looking Ahead to 2024

Republican 2020 believers are thinking about the 2024 national elections less than deniers – with 30% thinking about it “a lot” compared to 37% of deniers.

How much have you thought about the 2024 national elections?

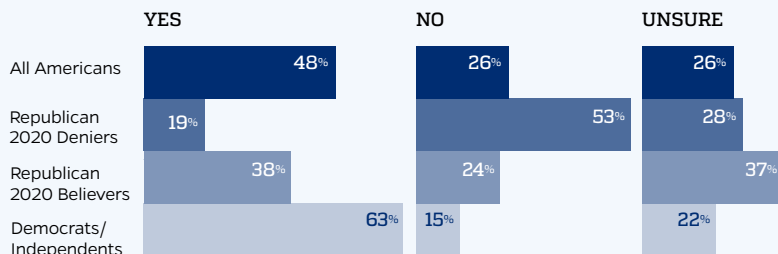


Do you think Republicans will accept the 2024 presidential election result if they lose?



54% of Republican 2020 deniers are convinced that Democrats will not accept the 2024 presidential election result if they lose (compared to 24% of Republican believers)

Do you think Democrats will accept the 2024 presidential election result if they lose?



A large percentage of voters are prepared for a contested election irrespective of the 2024 results. Fifty-four percent of Republican 2020 deniers are convinced that Democrats will not accept the 2024 presidential election result if they lose (compared to 24% of Republican believers). This is higher than the 46% of Democrats/Independents who believe that Republicans will not accept the result if they lose, although faith is low across the board.

Conclusion

A political party that has undermined its own voters' faith in elections is a destabilizing force in a democracy – especially one in which only two parties are realistically competing. The strong viewpoints that deniers hold, and the distinctive identity that they have formed, demonstrate that reviving our democracy will require more than any given result at the ballot box, or providing accurate information to voters on how the election process works. It will require a functioning, responsible conservative party that still believes in democracy.

Right now, only a fraction of conservatives are still committed to the democratic process. But we hope that by identifying and describing the 25 to 40 percent of Republicans who still believe in America's electoral system, we might identify a reservoir of good faith and responsible citizenship that could provide a counterweight to the party's anti-democracy drift.

These Republican believers are, in fact, different from their denier counterparts. They are more interested in finding evidence-based news; less discriminatory when it comes to race, gender, and religion; more willing to accept electoral defeat and try again next time; and more trusting of their fellow Americans, regardless of party.

While the vast majority of Republicans still deny the results of the 2020 election, these pro-democracy conservatives are a crucial part of the American body politic. Understanding their political motivations, their identities, and how they receive information may help to counteract the weight and identity of deniers.



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