

# **Our Precarious Democracy: Extreme Polarization and Alienation in Our Politics**



As Independence Day approaches, **more than one in four Americans are so alienated from their government that they believe it may “soon be necessary to take up arms” against it**, according to a new poll released Thursday by the **University of Chicago's Institute of Politics (IOP)**.

That startling finding, which comes in the midst of congressional hearings into the January 6th insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, was just one of several reflections of the dangerous level of estrangement many Americans feel from each other and our democratic institutions.

The survey of 1,000 registered voters, conducted last month by Republican pollster **Neil Newhouse** and Democratic pollster **Joel Benenson** with input from students at the **IOP**, was designed to probe polarization and its relationship to the news sources upon which Americans rely in a fractionated media environment.

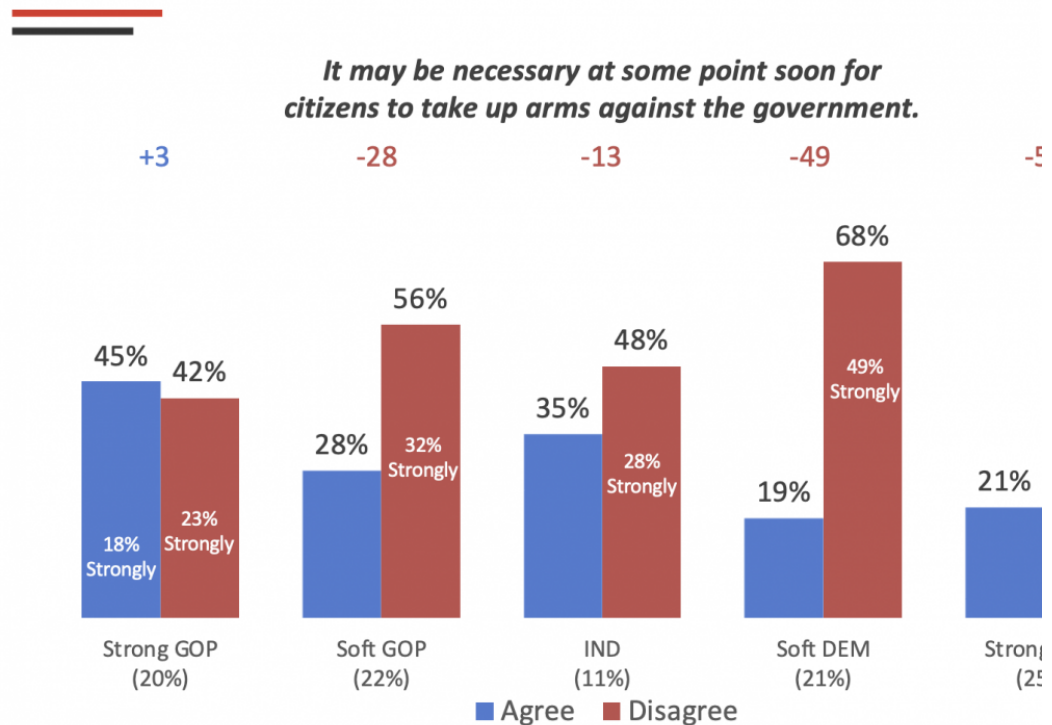
The portrait that it paints reveals not only the growing divides we have witnessed in recent years but strong sentiments that the majority of media outlets contribute to these divisions by

intentionally misleading their audiences to promote a political point of view.

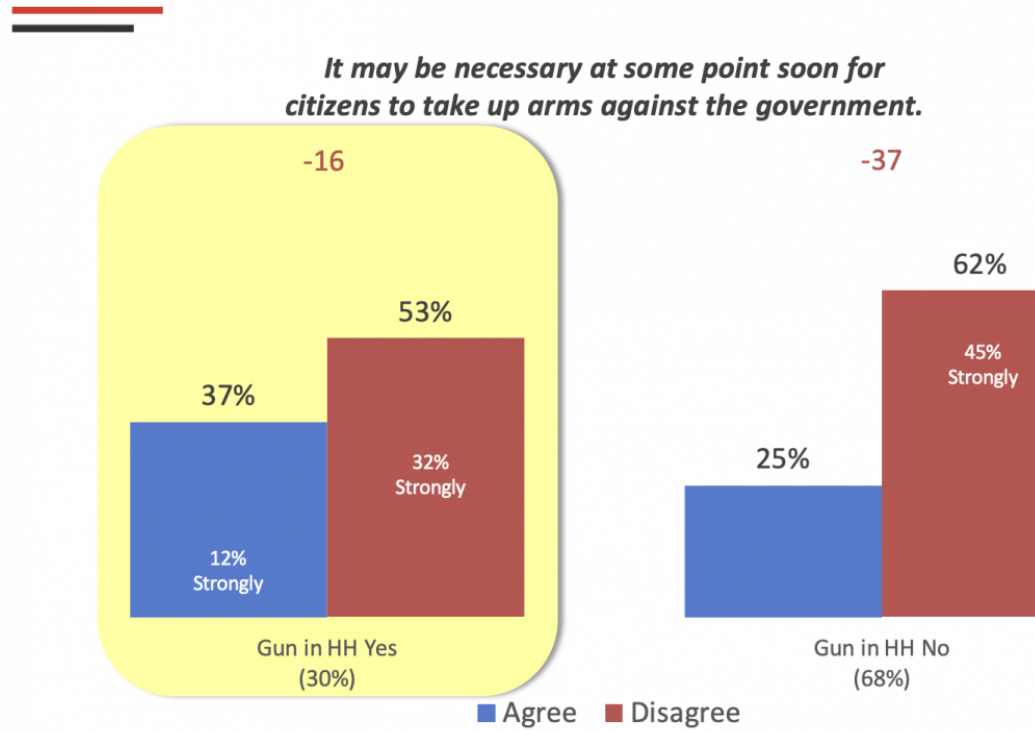
Among the poll's findings:

- **A majority of Americans agree that the government is “corrupt and rigged against me,”** including 73 percent of voters who describe themselves as a “strong Republican,” 71 percent who called themselves “very conservative” and 68 percent of rural voters. A bare majority (51 percent) of voters who call themselves “very liberal” also agreed. Overall, two-thirds of Republican and Independent voters agree that the government is “corrupt and rigged” against them, while Democrats are evenly split.
- With the debate raging about the integrity of our elections, a majority (56 percent) say they “generally trust elections to be conducted fairly and counted accurately.” But that view is deeply divergent by party. Four in five Democrats (78 percent) say they generally trust our elections to be fair and accurate. Half (51 percent) of Independent voters but just 33 percent of Republicans agree. Among those who reported voting for Donald Trump in 2020, the number who say they generally trust elections is 31 percent.
- **Nearly half of Americans (49 percent) agreed that they “more and more feel like a stranger in my own country,”** with 69 percent of strong Republicans and 65 percent who call themselves “very conservative” leading the way. Fully 38 percent of strong Democrats agreed.
- And 28 percent of voters, including 37 percent who have guns in their homes, agree that “it may be necessary at some point soon for citizens to take up arms against the government.” That view is held by one in three Republicans, including 45 percent of self-identified strong Republicans. Roughly one in three (35 percent) Independent voters and one in five Democrats agreed.

At least one-fifth of voters across party lines agree.



## More than one-third of voters with guns in their households



## The Partisan Divide

While Republicans and Democrats may hold distinct views on many things, there is one area in which they precisely mirror each other: their contempt for members of the opposite party.

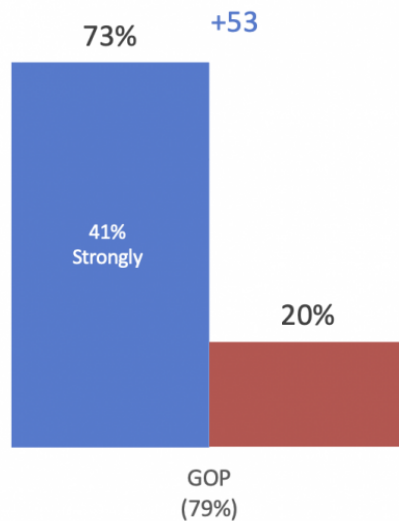
About three-quarters (73 percent) of voters who identify themselves as Republican agree that “Democrats are generally bullies who want to impose their political beliefs on those who disagree.” An almost identical percentage of Democrats (74 percent) express that view of Republicans. A similarly lopsided majority of each party holds that members of the other are “generally untruthful and are pushing disinformation.”

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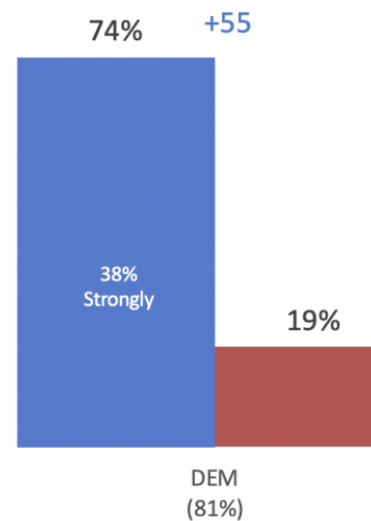
R's and D's share the opinion that partisans from the other party "are generally bullies who want to impose their political beliefs on those who disagree."

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***Democrats are generally bullies who want to impose their political beliefs on those who disagree.***



***Republicans are generally bullies who want to impose their political beliefs on those who disagree.***



■ Agree ■ Disagree



“While we’ve documented for years the partisan polarization in the country, these poll results are perhaps the starkest evidence of the deep divisions in partisan attitudes rippling through the country,” said **Newhouse**, who, along with **Benenson**, served as a Pritzker Fellow at the IOP this spring.

The poll also revealed the degree to which the acrid nature of today’s politics has affected our relationships and behavior.

Nearly half (49 percent) of those surveyed said they have “avoided political discussions with others because I don’t know where they stand.” **A quarter reported losing friends—and a like number said they have avoided friends and relatives – over politics.**

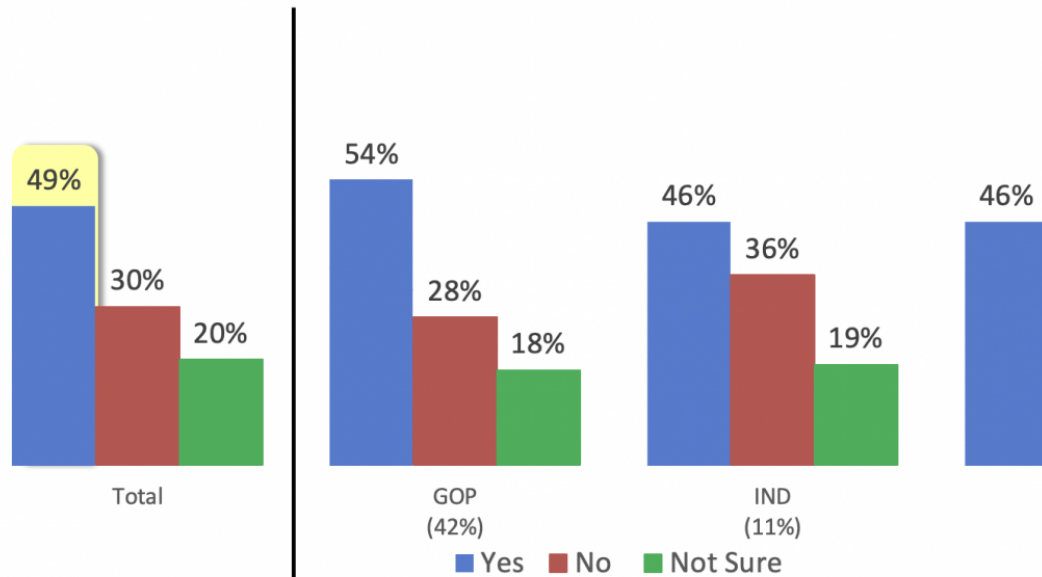
Some 38 percent say they have “unfriended or stopped following someone on social media because of their political views.” One in five said they have quit social media altogether because of the tone of political conversation. And 26 percent say they have stopped doing business with a brand or company because of a political stance they have taken.

## **Where we get our news**

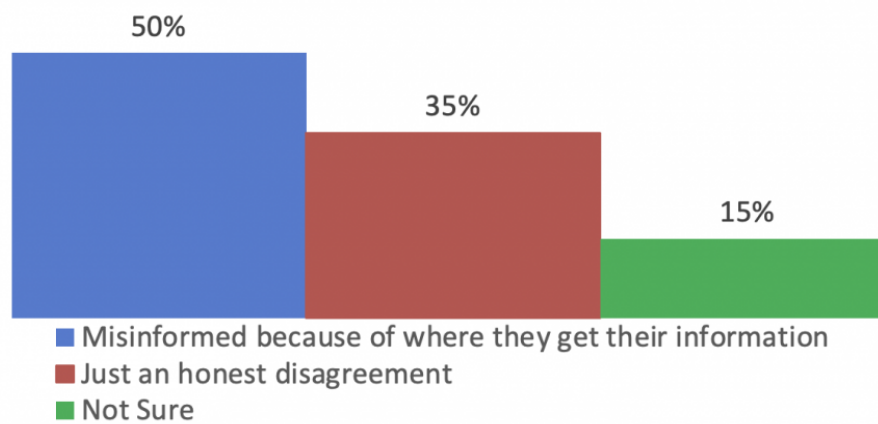
Even as our country is deeply polarized, voters of all stripes point to sources of news and information as one of the main causes of our divisions.

Fully half say they have friends or relatives “who have changed because of the media they consume.” And in today’s media environment, where Americans can choose from a plethora of sources for news and information, a majority of Americans (50 percent) believe that when they have political differences, it is less caused by “honest disagreement” than that those who disagree are “misinformed because of where they get their information.”

Half of Americans say they have friends or relatives who have been affected by the media they consume.

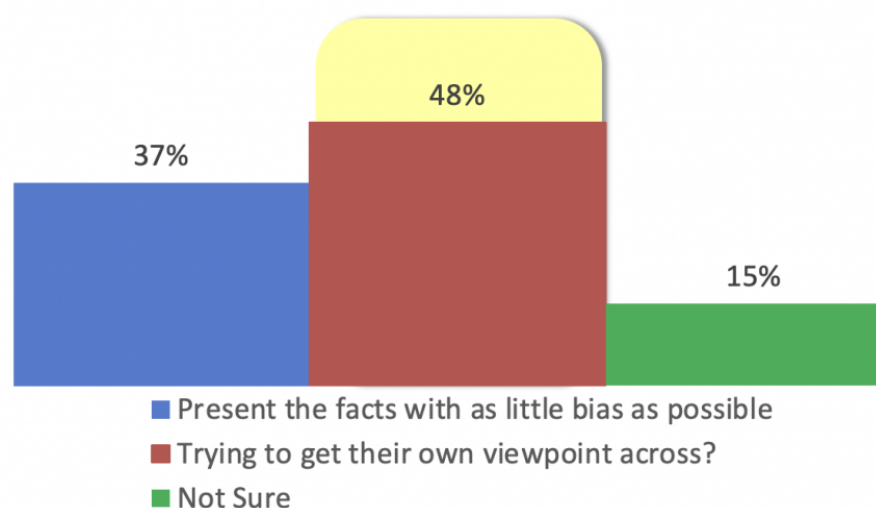


Most voters believe that the root of disagreement with others on political issues is because of ***misininformation***, not due to honest disagreement.



That skepticism is reflected in another number: A plurality of Americans (48 percent) believes the creators of news content—reporters, editors and newscasters—are “trying to get their own viewpoint across,” rather than “presenting the facts with as little bias as possible,” a view taken by just 37 percent.

Underlying these numbers is the clear sense from voters that the people who created the news content are “trying to get their own viewpoint across” rather than presenting “the facts with as little bias as possible.”



“A free media and broad sharing of facts are essential to a healthy, functioning democracy,” **Benenson** said. “What this survey shows is how isolated we are in media silos and the degree of skepticism people feel about the integrity of news sources. It’s one of the many challenges reflected in this data that are red flashing lights.”

Most Americans across the political spectrum, 78 percent in all, report regularly turning to their local news as a source for information. Almost as many, 66 percent, point to the major national network newscasts. And each get relatively high marks when voters are asked whether these news sources “make a good faith effort to report the news,” rather than “intentionally trying to mislead their viewers and readers to persuade people to take a political point of view.” National newspapers like the Washington Post, The New York Times and the Wall Street Journal also are given good marks as a group, with 58 percent saying these outlets make a “good faith effort” to report the news.

But the various cable news stations and social media platforms, which draw more niche audiences, score less well in the survey as

good faith conveyors of information. And stark divisions appear by party and philosophy in voter evaluations of them.

CNN is rated by 47 percent as making “a good faith effort to report the news,” while 41 percent opined that the network intentionally tries “to mislead their viewers to persuade people to take a political point of view.” Yet underneath these topline numbers, Democrats break 73 percent to 14 percent in ascribing “good faith” to CNN’s coverage. Republicans take the opposite view, 68 percent to 19 percent. Independents divide evenly. MSNBC’s numbers are roughly the same.

Fox News Network, a dominant news source among Republicans and conservatives, fares less well on the “good faith” test. Only about one in three Americans surveyed (35 percent) credit the network with a good faith effort to cover the news. A majority (52 percent) say Fox News intentionally tries to mislead viewers to promote a political point of view. Republicans side with Fox News, but only by a 12-point margin (51 percent to 39 percent.). Democrats (26 percent to 64 percent) and independent voters (30 percent to 53 percent) strongly agree Fox skews its coverage.

The harshest credibility judgment came from social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok, which have become a significant source of news and information, particularly for younger Americans. Voters under 34 name social media platforms as primary news sources. These sites, which aggregate – but do not edit – posts, and promote them selectively according to the profile of users, are ranked poorly for “good faith,” even among many who claim them as frequent sources of information.

**A majority of Americans, 52 percent, say they frequently glean information about news and politics from Facebook,** spanning partisan and ideological lines. Yet just 22 percent credit the social media giant with a good faith effort to cover the news. In comparison, 56 percent say in presenting news posts, Facebook is more apt to “mislead in order to persuade people to take a political view.”



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