

Battleground Civility Poll **A Challenging Political Environment, but Solutions Remain Abundant**

Republican Analysis
By: Ed Goeas and Brian Nienaber

Introduction and Overview

This latest edition of the Georgetown University Institute of Politics and Public Service national poll on political civility, which fielded March 9-14, 2024, continues to find a frustrated and concerned electorate. A majority of these voters have majority unfavorable views of both President Biden and President Trump, so no unifying leader is on the horizon. However, these voters do favor solutions, even imperfect ones, to most pressing issues. These voters also see a variety of methods to improve our democratic system. While things look challenging and bleak now, there remains a clear path for bold leadership to improve voter sentiment about the country.

A Political Environment Full of Challenges

At the most basic level, more than seven-in-ten voters (72%) think the country is on the wrong

track, including more than six-in-ten voters (61%) who strongly believe this. This measure used to have a correlation with Presidential job approval and sentiment among partisans about whether their party was in power at the federal level. Now, while Republicans (96% wrong track) and Independents (74% wrong track) do have a higher level of dissatisfaction about the direction of the country, even fifty percent (50%) of Democrats think the country is on the wrong track.

At a more fundamental level, more than eight-in-ten voters (81%) think democracy in our country is being threatened. As will be seen later, partisans might see different causes for this threat, but strong majorities of Republicans (77%), Independents (76%), and Democrats (86%) think democracy is being threatened.

In a similar way, a strong majority of voters (68%) say that they are not happy with the way democracy works in our country. While one would expect Republicans (79%) and Independents (73%) to be unhappy, given their lack of power in the White House and Congress, even most Democrats (56%) report being unhappy with the way democracy is working.

This lack of satisfaction leads voters to have notable levels of concern about the 2024 elections. Just thirty-eight percent (38%) of voters are extremely (19%) or very (19%) certain that the 2024 elections will be conducted fairly. In contrast, thirty-two percent (32%) of voters are not at all certain these elections will be conducted fairly.

In fact, more than two-in-five rural area voters (40%), Republicans (49%), conservatives (47%), parents (41%), white Evangelicals (43%), and those with a favorable view of Donald Trump (51%) are not at all certain that the 2024 elections will be conducted fairly.

Voters also are concerned about the possibility of violent activity due to the 2024 election. More than three-in-four voters (78%) are at least somewhat concerned about this possible violence. These concerns are driven by Democratic voters (89% at least somewhat concerned) though more than six-in-ten Republicans and more than seven-in-ten Democrats are at least somewhat concerned about violence as a result of the 2024 election.

In addition, more than six-in-ten (61%) voters are extremely or very concerned about their freedoms being taken away. Majorities of Republicans, Independents, and Democrats are extremely or very concerned about this possibility, including forty-eight percent (48%) of Republicans who are extremely concerned.

Voters were given a variety of items and asked to assess if this item is an extremely, very, somewhat, or not at all serious threat to democracy. As seen below, voters also see threats to democracy in a myriad of places.

| Perceived level of threat to democracy | Extremely | Very | <i>Extremely + Very</i> |
|---|------------------|-------------|------------------------------------|
| Donald Trump | 38% | 13% | 51% |
| MAGA Republicans | 34% | 15% | 49% |
| Major news media organizations | 24% | 23% | 46% |
| Social media | 23% | 20% | 43% |
| The radical left | 26% | 16% | 42% |
| Republicans in Congress | 23% | 19% | 42% |
| Our election system | 19% | 18% | 36% |
| Courts and our justice system | 17% | 18% | 35% |
| Joe Biden | 25% | 10% | 35% |
| Democrats in Congress | 18% | 17% | 34% |
| People with views opposed to your own | 10% | 6% | 16% |

Indeed, six choices – Donald Trump, MAGA Republicans, major news media organizations, social media, the radical left, and Republicans in Congress – all have at least two-in-five voters who think they are an extremely or very serious threat to democracy.

Some of these ratings are clearly proxies for partisan frustration. Eighty-six percent (86%) of partisan Democrats think Donald Trump is an extremely or very serious threat to democracy and a similar number of partisan Democrats (81%) have high levels of concern about MAGA Republicans. In contrast, concerns about the threats posed by the radical left are driven by high level of concerns among partisan Republicans (72% extremely or very concerned).

In addition, in a question we have been asking since 2019, voters are asked to rate the level of political division in the country on a scale from 0-100 with 0 being no division and 100 being on the edge of a civil war. The mean score for this measure on this survey is 70.85, meaning many more voters believe we are closer to civil war than a country with no political divisions.

No Heroes on the Horizon

One solution to these voter doldrums and concerns would be a bold, inspiring, charismatic leader who could inspire confidence and optimism among the electorate. Sadly, as seen below, that type of national leader only exists in fiction these days. The chart below shows the name identification scores for key national political figures.

| Name | Favorable | Unfavorable | No Opinion | Never Heard of |
|------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Donald Trump | 42% | 56% | 3% | 0% |
| Joe Biden | 44% | 53% | 3% | 0% |
| Kamala Harris | 42% | 48% | 6% | 5% |
| Cornel West | 15% | 10% | 20% | 55% |
| Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. | 42% | 33% | 22% | 3% |

Barring a cataclysmic change in our national politics, either Donald Trump (56% unfavorable image) or Joe Biden (53% unfavorable image) are going to be elected President in November. While a novel occurrence in the 2016 Presidential election, this will be the third consecutive Presidential election in which a key swing group will be voters who hold an unfavorable view of both Presidential candidates. These so-called “double haters” comprise thirteen percent (13%) of the electorate. Tens of thousands of voters having to decide which candidate they find less offensive is a less than ideal outcome for the selection process for Presidential candidates.

Indeed, this survey finds political environment in which:

- Most voters think the country is on the wrong track.
- Most voters think democracy is being threatened.
- Most voters are unhappy with the workings of democracy.
- Many voters have serious concerns about fairness and possible violence in the 2024 elections.
- Many voters see a notable number of prominent individuals and entities as serious threats to democracy.
- Both major party Presidential candidates have majority unfavorable images.

This is not a political environment for the faint of heart or the weak in spirit. However, this survey finds voters are willing to embrace solutions and see many ways to improve democracy. Things may be dark now, but there are many sources of light available.

Embracing solutions

On a variety of issues, voters were given two options: having their elected official fight for their values even if it means not getting a solution OR getting the best solution possible even if it means not getting everything they want.

As seen below, voters preferred the best solution possible over continuing to fight. This includes issues like health care reform, border security and immigration, climate change, crime, and artificial intelligence. Some of these issues have been the source of heated debate, incendiary rhetoric, and mass action this very year.

| Preference on this issue | Fight/even if no solution | Best solution even if not everything |
|---|----------------------------------|---|
| Balancing the federal budget and dealing with the national debt | 31% | 63% |
| Reforming health care | 33% | 56% |
| Dealing with inflation | 32% | 59% |
| Dealing with border security and immigration | 36% | 58% |
| Protecting Social Security and Medicare | 46% | 48% |
| Providing tax credits for families and small businesses | 33% | 60% |
| Abortion | 54% | 32% |
| Dealing with climate change | 31% | 55% |
| Dealing with crime and public safety | 42% | 53% |
| Dealing with artificial intelligence | 28% | 56% |
| Providing paid family leave | 40% | 50% |
| Voting rights | 51% | 39% |

Many of these issues have led to all manners of divisive rhetoric and appalling political behavior. Both polling firms on this project have seen the heated debate on immigration firsthand in our collaborations on this issue dating back many years. Combining two of these issues, a Member of Congress once disrupted a State of the Union speech due to a disagreement about whether health care benefits were being provided to illegal immigrants. Debates on climate change, crime, and AI are often led by the loudest voices spouting the most apocalyptic language.

However, what voters clearly want on almost all these issues is not winning debate points or deciding this issue is so important that only a solution that delivers it all is acceptable. What they clearly want is the best solution possible even if it is an imperfect one. Looking down this list, one can certainly imagine voter sentiment improving dramatically with a national debt that seems to be less of a burden to the next generation or health care reform that serves patients better or immigration reform that deals more effectively with border crossings or tax credits that provide relief to families and small businesses.

The two notable exceptions to this desire for solutions are abortion and voting rights. Given the political climate on abortion with every state across the country trying to find the appropriate policy solution for this issue through a mixture of legislation, initiatives, and court cases, it is not surprising that voters want to protect their values through this fight. Indeed, majorities of both very liberal Democrats (60%) and Evangelicals (60%) prefer to keep fighting on abortion rather than accept the best solution.

On voting rights, a majority of voters (51%) want to keep fighting. Given the strong concerns much of the electorate expressed about the current state of democracy and their concerns about the 2024 election, it is reasonable that a majority of voters do not want to compromise on the issue of voting rights. If you are concerned that you might lose a right, then your willingness to compromise about the administration of this right is limited.

Embracing ways to strengthen democracy

Voters were offered a list of ways to strengthen democracy and asked if they thought this item was an extremely, very, somewhat, or not at all important way to strengthen democracy. As seen on the next page, voters embraced every one of these items. Every item tested had a majority of voters saying it was an extremely or very important way to strengthen democracy.

| Way to strengthen democracy | Extremely Important | Very Important | Extremely + Very Important |
|---|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Better local news coverage | 29% | 22% | 50% |
| Elected leaders willing to make deals | 33% | 23% | 55% |
| Protecting voting rights | 60% | 28% | 87% |
| Elected leaders willing to take a stand against the other party | 28% | 24% | 52% |
| More informative news coverage about important issues | 33% | 32% | 65% |
| Having more well-informed voters | 53% | 31% | 84% |
| Having open primaries that allow all voters to participate | 40% | 24% | 64% |
| Limiting racism and sexism on social media | 38% | 22% | 59% |
| Elected leaders willing to work with the other party | 48% | 29% | 77% |

All these solutions are challenging to implement. Local news services face budget and funding challenges across the country. Our current political and news climate often does not reward deal makers or those willing to work across the aisle. Placing limits on social media is more challenging in practice than in theory.

However, one could certainly imagine how quickly things in our political climate might change with some successes and positive attention for deal making political leaders. The most successful and resilient political leaders often reach these heights by moderating their behavior to match the political environment of the times. It would not take a massive change in our political environment, but rather the prominent and earned media praise of a few courageous deal making leaders to generate and create a whole political cycle of deal- making leaders. Any electoral observer can certainly recall cycles where an ideology or political style came in vogue and a series of candidates followed this example and rode this wave into office.

Conclusion

As we head into a general election campaign in which the vast majority of the electorate will have an unfavorable impression of one or both major party candidates and a significant number of voters have significant concerns about the security and safety of the election process, the axiom that it is always darkest before the dawn seems particularly apt. Despite all these reasons for concern, voters are willing to embrace political leaders who seek solutions. Voters can see a variety of ways that our democracy can be strengthened. This strengthening will certainly present challenges, but with bold leadership, willingness to compromise, and a more informative and better regulated media, we can see that a morning in America's political culture can arrive that will provide a much brighter culture to inspire more confidence and optimism in the electorate.