

A black and white photograph of the dome of the United States Capitol building, showing the intricate architectural details of the dome's exterior, including the columns and the American flag flying on a pole in the foreground.

navigator*

G B A O

A Guide For Advocates:
**Framing the Discussion
Around Democracy Reform**

October 28, 2020

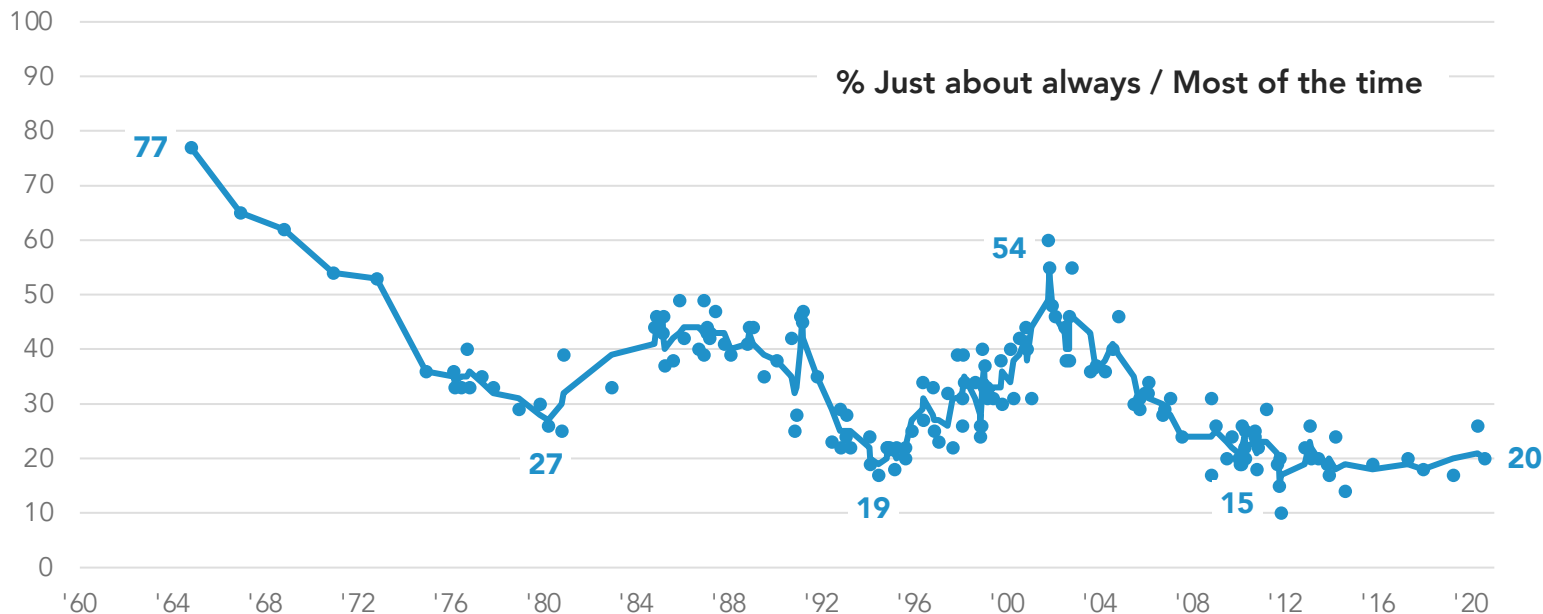
- **Qualitative Research – September/October 2019**
 - Thirteen focus groups conducted September and October 2019 across four cities (Newark, NJ, Minneapolis, MN, Houston, TX, and Jackson, MS).
- **Multi-stage Quantitative Research – July/August 2020**
 - Online web surveys of registered voters conducted July 9-14, 2020, and August 24-27, 2020.
 - Each survey contained a base sample of 1,000 interviews, with 150-interview oversamples each among African American, Latinx, and Asian American voters.
 - The margin of error of each survey is +/- 3.1 percentage points.

- Most Americans desire “major change,” and believe various reforms such as elimination of the filibuster, voting rights reforms, and even some SCOTUS reform would have a positive impact on government.
- Despite decades of weakening trust, many Americans remain optimistic about the future. Democracy reform advocates can break through by combining optimism and historical context to discuss the need for reform.
- The specifics matter less than the bigger picture. Navigating thin levels of awareness and understanding requires using accessible language such as framing the filibuster as a “loophole.”
- Messaging can be multifaceted. Democrats respond to COVID urgency, and Republicans respond to messages around gridlock and checks and balances. Many voters respond to messaging around elitism, and Black voters respond to reform’s historical context.

Trust In Government Has Settled At Well Below The Historical Average

Government Trust

How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right? (Just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, never)



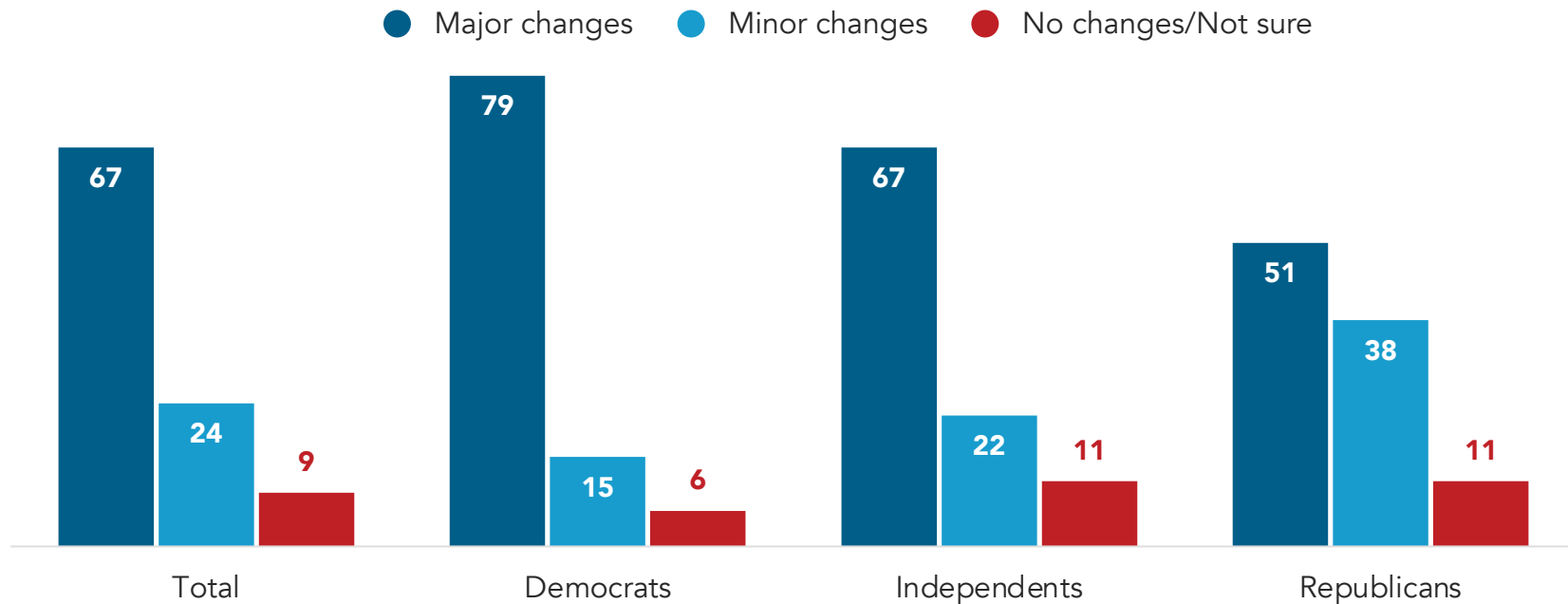
Compiled by Pew Research. References polling from Pew Research, NES, Gallup, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and CNN polls.

“Major” Change Seems Necessary, Even To Republicans

5

Government Changes

Generally speaking, do you think we need to make major changes in the way our government works, minor changes, or no changes at all?



Nationwide survey of 1,450 registered voters, including 150 interview oversamples each among African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; August 24-27, 2020. For more info, visit navigatortresearch.org.

People of Color and Americans Across Generations Embrace “Major” Change

6

Government Changes

Generally speaking, do you think we need to make major changes in the way our government works, minor changes, or no changes at all?

● Major changes ● Minor changes ● No changes ● Not sure



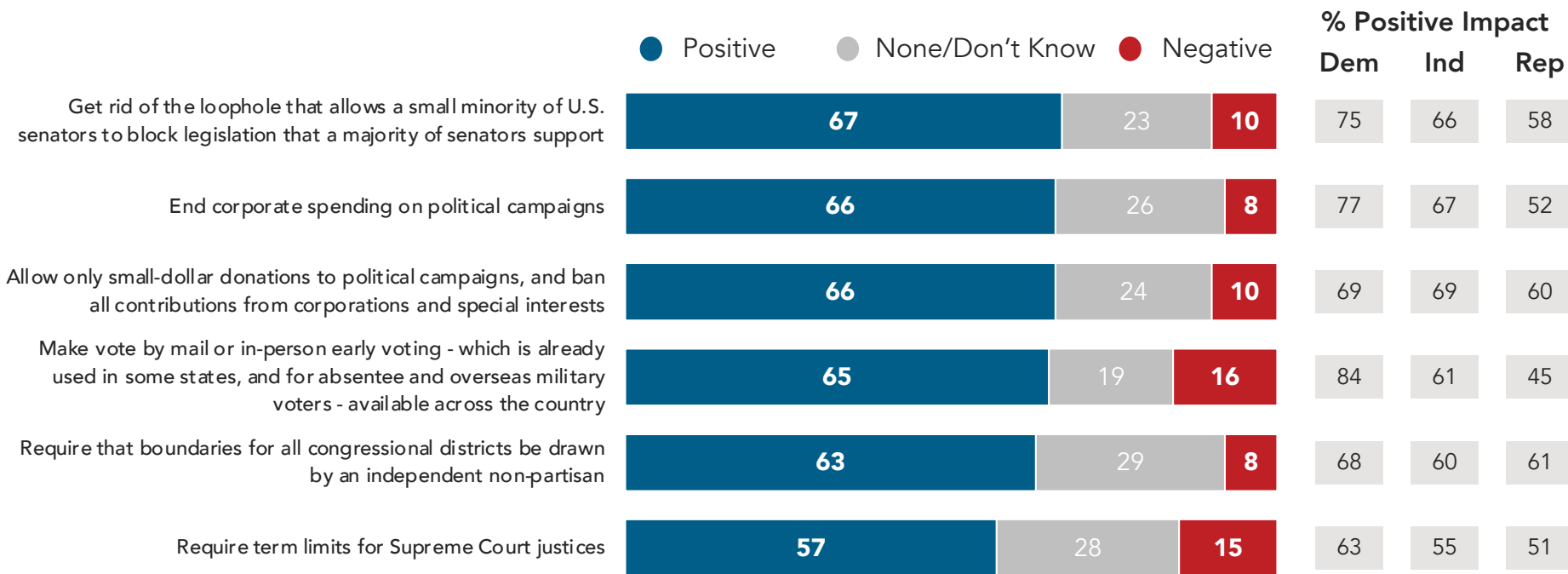
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Americans – Even Republicans – Perceive Filibuster, Campaign Finance, Voting, Redistricting, And SCOTUS Reforms As Potentially Beneficial

7

Solutions

Please indicate what kind of impact you think each of the changes described below would have in making our government work better for the people it represents.



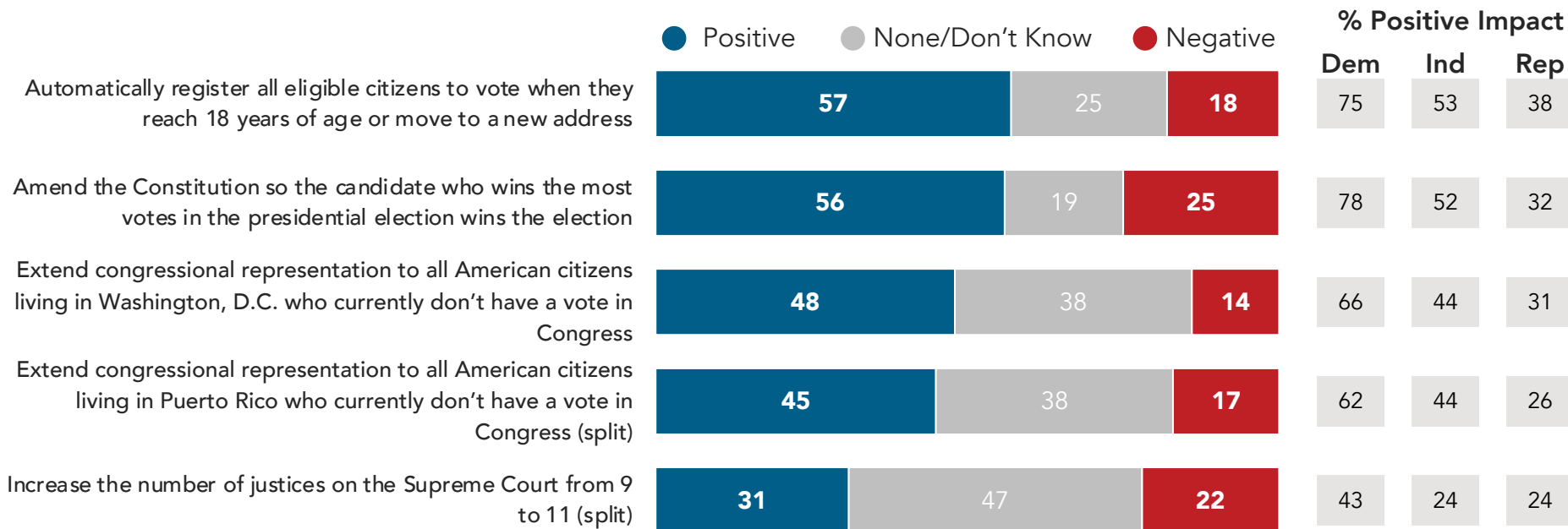
Nationwide survey of 1,450 registered voters, including 150 interview oversamples each among African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; August 24-27, 2020. For more info, visit navigatortresearch.org.

Electoral Reforms Are Viewed as Potentially Positive Among Non-Republicans; Even Views on Court Expansion More Positive Than Negative

8

Solutions

Please indicate what kind of impact you think each of the changes described below would have in making our government work better for the people it represents.



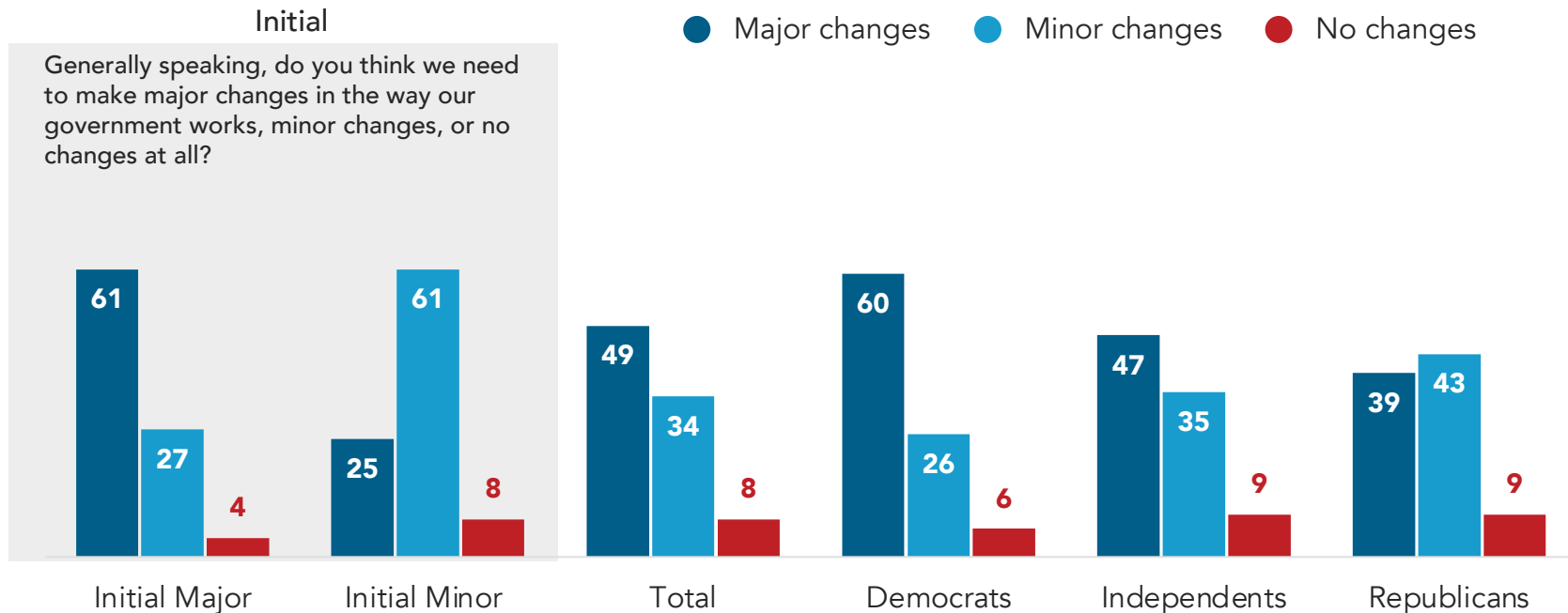
Nationwide survey of 1,450 registered voters, including 150 interview oversamples each among African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; August 24-27, 2020. For more info, visit navigatortorresearch.org.

Taken Together, These Proposals Represent Major Changes To Half The Electorate, More So With Those Who Initially Want Major Change

9

Post-Proposals Changes

Taken as a whole and regardless of how you rated each individual proposal, do you think the set of eight proposals you just saw would represent a major change in the way our government works, a minor change, or no change at all?



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2019 Focus Groups

Verbatim reactions to obstacles to reform.

“I understand a filibuster, but I’m not exactly sure how it really comes into play. I just know what a filibuster is. That’s all I know about.”

– White, non-college, non-Dem, Jackson

“I don’t know if it would have a positive or negative impact, but if you got the majority of votes, I think you should be able to pass the law.”

– AAPI voter, Houston

“Well, one side effect of it is, and one of the reasons why we don’t have term limits is because then you don’t have to worry about them running for re-election. Because I mean, let’s face it: a four-year term, three years of that, you’re running for re-election and not focusing on your job. So the Supreme Court, they don’t have to run to stay, so they can actually just focus on their job and not worry about, if I answer this way, they’ll vote me out. They can actually make a decision.

– White, college, Dem, Houston

“I think there’s something about... Depending on how money is tied up to the vote, if I remember correctly. I don’t know the specifics, but I think that changes it. But certain things have to be two-thirds and certain things can be majority just depending on how the money is tied into it, if I remember correctly.”

– White, college, Dem, Houston

“Because 50% of the Congress, 50 is this way, and then this one guy is like, ‘hey man, if you vote this way, I’ll give you \$5.’ And he wants that. And that’s the reason it passes.”

– Latinx, college, Democrat, Newark

Framing The Filibuster As A "Loophole" Helps More Voters to Connect the Dots on Reforms

11

Solutions

Please indicate what kind of impact you think each of the changes described below would have in making our government work better for the people it represents.

● Major changes

● Minor changes

● No changes

% Positive Impact

Dem

Ind

Rep

August 2020: Get rid of the loophole that allows a small minority of Senators to block legislation a majority of Senators support.

67

23

10

75

66

58

July 2020: Get rid of the filibuster rule in the Senate that allows a small minority of Senators to block legislation a majority of Senators support (split).

58

30

12

69

57

46

August 2020: Make vote by mail or in-person early voting - which is already used in some states, and for absentee and overseas military voters - available across the country.

65

19

16

84

61

45

July 2020: Make vote by mail or in-person early voting - which is already used in some states, and for absentee and overseas military voters - available across the country.

66

18

16

84

64

48

Nationwide surveys of 1,450 registered voters, including 150 interview oversamples each among African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; Conducted July 9-14, 2020 and August 24-27, 2020. For more info, visit navigatortresearch.org.

On Filibuster, Mitch McConnell Could Be A Proofpoint Of Both Bad Actor & Structural Obstacle

12

2019 Focus Groups

Verbatim reactions to obstacles to reform.

"He's the Majority Leader so he needs to be changed. We really need people who know about the struggle."
– Black, non-college, 50+, Jackson

"I think McConnell is the problem myself because I think that if the gun reform bill actually went to the Senate, I actually think it would pass, but McConnell won't ever let it go to vote."
– White, college, Dem, Houston

"They're passing things in the House, but McConnell won't take them up. So there's things being passed there, and then they're not even coming to a vote in the Senate, so it does get lost."
– White, non-college, Dem, Minneapolis

"What I would like to see personally happen is a different Senate rule on why the Majority Leader gets to decide what goes to vote, period. Because currently, McConnell just blocks everything and protects the president from ever using a veto. As far as I'm concerned, let the president veto it and let us see where he really lies on some of these issues."

– White, college, Dem, Houston

Minneapolis Exchange with White, non-college, Dem

Moderator: "Making sure laws can be passed if they have majority support in the House and Senate." What does this sound like?

Participant "That sounds like democracy to me."

Moderator: Does anyone know why that's not the case now?

Participant: "Checks and balances."

Participant: "Mitch McConnell."

Americans View Human Behavior, Not Institutions or Structures, as the Key Impediment To Progress

13

Changing Rules vs. People

For each pair, please tell me which statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right.

Putting new people in office won't fix the problems with our **democracy today.** We need to change the rules so we can shift power away from the wealthy and politically connected.

39

Dem – 42%
Ind – 38%
Rep – 36%

51

Dem – 51%
Ind – 49%
Rep – 52%

The problems with our **democracy today come from the kinds of people who get elected.** If we elect different kinds of leaders, we can solve some of our country's biggest challenges.

Putting new people in office won't fix the problems with our **country today.** We need to change the rules so we can shift power away from the wealthy and politically connected.

42

Dem – 50%
Ind – 41%
Rep – 33%

49

Dem – 45%
Ind – 52%
Rep – 53%

The problems in our **country today come from the kinds of people who get elected.** If we elect different kinds of leaders, we can solve some of our country's biggest challenges.

Nationwide survey of 1,450 registered voters, including 150 interview oversamples each among African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; July 9-14, 2020. For more info, visit navigatortresearch.org.

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However, Most Reject the False Choice Between Changing Our Leaders And Making Structural Change To Our Broader System

14

Messaging

Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

● Agree

● Not Sure

● Disagree

% Agree

Dem

Ind

Rep

We shouldn't have to choose between changing the rules and changing our leaders. In order to tackle the current challenges we face, we need to do both.

70

7

23

78

70

58

The challenges our country is facing right now show how fragile our government and its institutions have become.

69

4

27

79

68

58

Our current health and economic crises provide a unique opportunity to make the kind of bold changes we need to address long-term, systemic problems like institutional racism, income equality, climate change, and health care inequality.

68

4

27

86

61

53

If we don't take major action now to address long-term, systemic problems like institutional racism, income equality, climate change, and health care inequality, our country will not be able to fully recover from our current crises.

65

4

31

90

62

39

The challenges our country is facing right now show how fragile our government and its institutions have always been.

65

4

31

75

60

55

Trump isn't really the cause of our country's current troubles. Instead, his presidency is the result of a broken political system.

44

6

49

25

48

65

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Despite Views About Decline, Americans Are Optimistic Our Democracy & Government Will Recover, Albeit With Some Black and Latinx Skepticism

15

Democracy Direction

As you may know, the United States has faced major issues recently like coronavirus, economic decline, and the protests after the death of George Floyd. In thinking about these issues, do you think these issues are...

Signs **our system of democracy and government is fundamentally failing** and may never recover.

28

Total

Signs we are undergoing a period of difficulty, but ultimately **our system of democracy and government is resilient and we will recover.**

62

43

Black

51

35

Hispanic

51

28

AAPI

58

35

Democrat

57

30

Independent

56

17

Republican

73

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Framing the Debate Around How Fragile Government Institutions “Have Become” Resonates More Broadly Than Saying “They’ve Always Been”

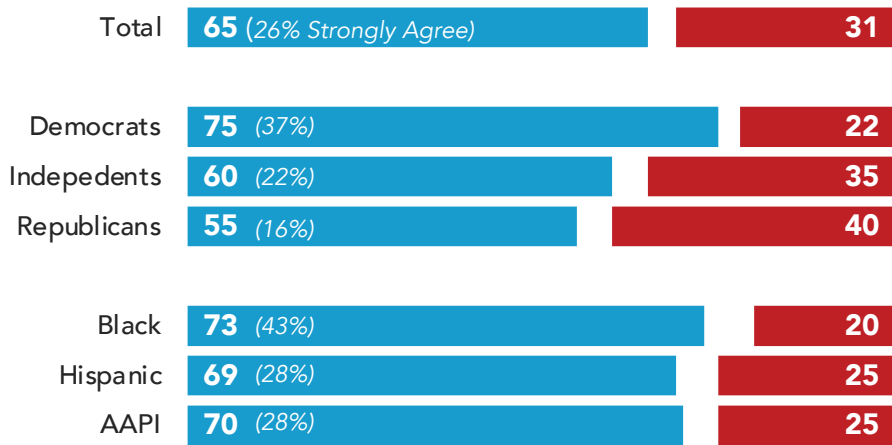
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Nation's Challenges

Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

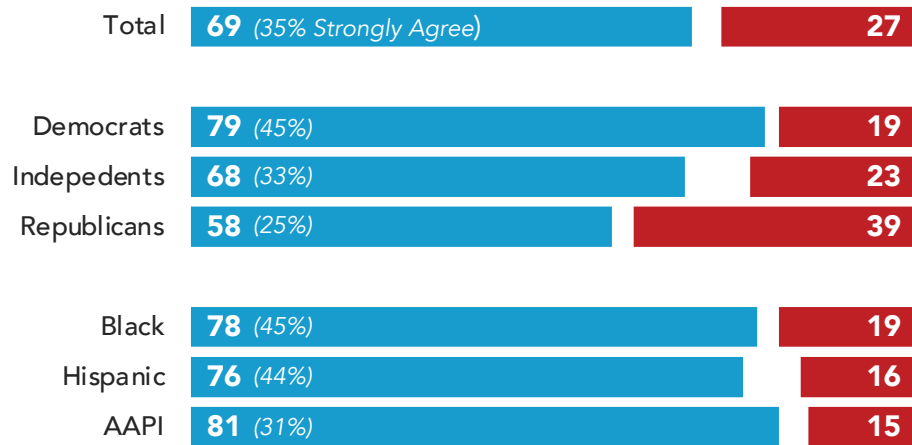
The challenges our country is facing right now show how fragile our government and its institutions **have always been**.

● Agree ● Disagree



The challenges our country is facing right now show how fragile our government and its institutions **have become**.

● Agree ● Disagree



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Framing The Current Crisis As An Opportunity Over A Cause For Alarm Brings More Republicans Into Agreement With The Need For Bold Change

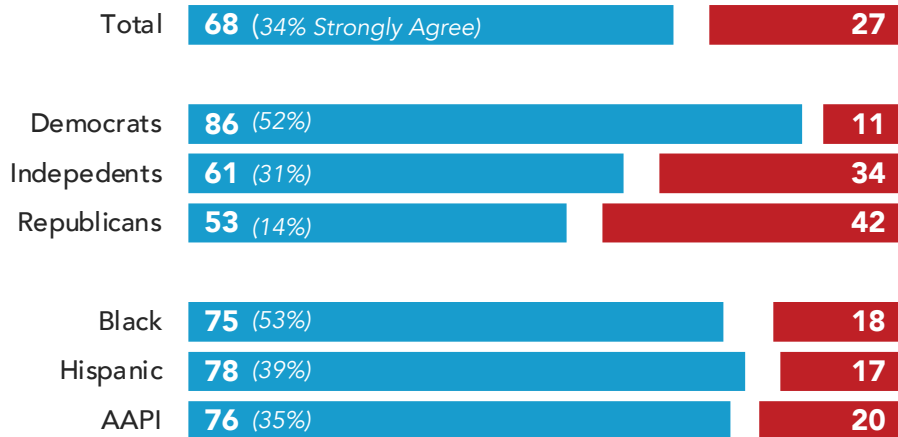
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Making Bold Change

Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

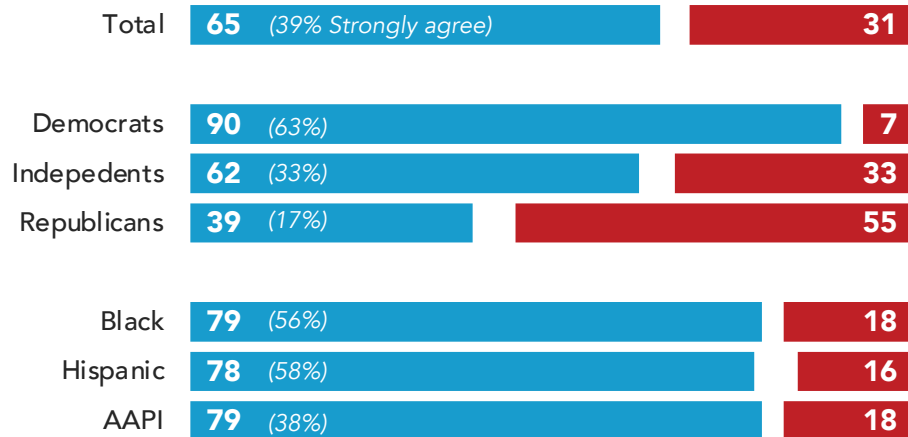
Our current health and economic crises provide a unique opportunity to make the kind of bold changes we need to address long-term, systemic problems like institutional racism, income equality, climate change, and health care inequality.

● Agree ● Disagree



If we don't take major action now to address long-term, systemic problems like institutional racism, income equality, climate change, and health care inequality, our country will not be able to fully recover from our current crises.

● Agree ● Disagree



Nationwide survey of 1,450 registered voters, including 150 interview oversamples each among African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; August 24-27, 2020. For more info, visit navigatortorresearch.org.

Overall, Inequality, COVID, And Gridlock Frames Work Best With Some GOP Pushback On COVID; Historical Context Works Well With Black Voters

18

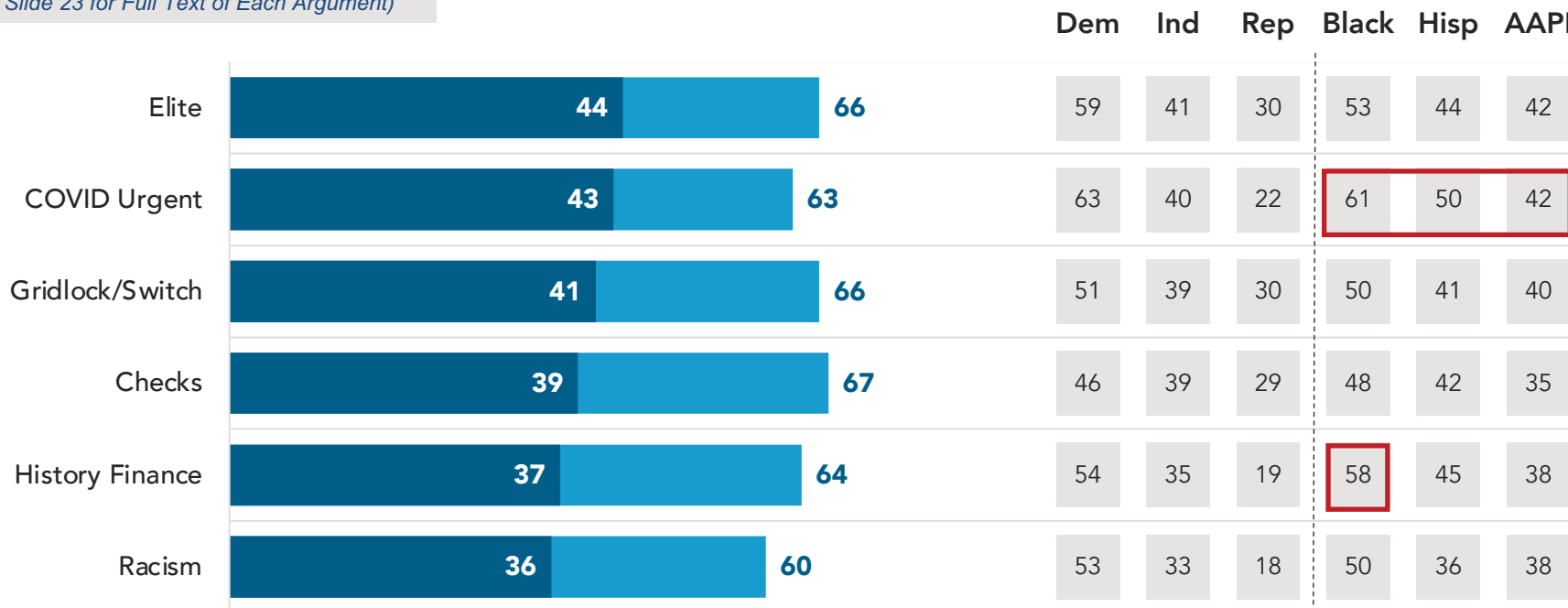
Reform Arguments

(See Slide 23 for Full Text of Each Argument)

● Very convincing

● Total convincing

% Very Convincing



Nationwide survey of 1,450 registered voters, including 150 interview oversamples each among African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; August 24-27, 2020. For more info, visit navigatortresearch.org.

Checks & Balances Argument In Particular Resonates With Non-Democrats Who Believe These Reforms Are Important

19

Reform Arguments

(See Slide 23 for Full Text of Each Argument)

% Very Convincing	Democrats		Non-Democrats	
	View Proposals as Major Change	Proposals Most/Very Important	View Proposals as Major Change	Proposals Most/Very Important
Elite	72	70	52	58
COVID Urgent	77	75	46	55
Gridlock/Switch	63	61	48	49
Checks	57	56	47	55
History Finance	67	65	42	51
Racism	68	65	42	47

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Text Highlighting Exercise Shows That Emphasizing Inequality, Politicians' Greed, and the Need to Restore Balance Resonate Most

20

● Most like/strongly agree ● Somewhat like/agree ● Mixed reaction

Over the last 40 years, **wealth has transferred from the poor and the middle class to a tiny wealthy elite**, who in turn **pour billions of dollars into elections and lobbying to make sure that politicians work for them, instead of for us**. And it's not just a few bad apples—the **checks and balances in our political system have failed**, with special interests and **career politicians using the system to enrich themselves at our expense**.

Most liked
by Dems,
disliked by
Republicans

We need to use the **democratic processes in our Constitution to create new, stronger checks to restore balance to our government**. The good news is, we have done this before. When African-Americans and women were denied the right to vote, we changed our Constitution. After the Great Depression, we transformed our banking laws. After Watergate, we updated our campaign finance laws. **Our history demands we make major changes when our government no longer responds to our needs**.

Only liked by
Dem & Ind
voters

It's not enough to just elect better leaders; **we need to improve our political system overall**. We've tried voting in new people. The last five presidents were of a different party as the president before them. Party control of the House and Senate keeps changing hands. But our government is still out of touch and run by special interests. Only by also making major changes to our political system can we make our government work for all of us and **put power back in the hands of ordinary people**.

All Americans Agree On Gridlock, COVID Is Divisive

21

● Most like/strongly agree ● Somewhat like/agree ● Mixed reaction

Partisan gridlock in Washington is preventing our government from doing its job and passing things most voters want like **background checks for every gun purchase or access to health care for everyone. Voters care about change**, not parties and politicians, and no matter which party is in charge, the gridlock remains the same. **We need leaders willing to make the changes needed to deliver results rather than playing partisan games.**

Understanding the broken aspects of our government helps explain how we got to where we are today. A small handful of senators used obscure rules to block the 1964 Civil Rights Act for months, hoping to stop its passage. In the decades since, politicians have exploited that same loophole to stop progress – not just on issues like racial inequality and police brutality, but also on health care, voting rights, and background checks for gun purchases. It's unrealistic to think anything will change on these issues if we don't change the rules that reward these kinds of abuses.

The **coronavirus pandemic provides even further proof of how flawed our government is today. Because our government failed to act quickly**, almost 200,000 Americans have died from COVID – more than the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan all combined. And now Congress can't even agree to extend unemployment insurance for people who just lost their jobs. A government is only as good as its response in an emergency, and this failure shows we need to make major changes to how our political system works. If Washington gridlock continues to get in the way of solving our biggest challenges, changing the rules that allow this gridlock needs to be one of the first things done after the election.

Republicans disagree, and Ind too on "quickly"

- We need not shy away from a conversation around democratic reforms—both in the broad and the specific. Americans are ready for big political reforms, and the base is especially open to pushing for a full suite of specific reforms.
- Despite decades of weakening trust, many are nonetheless optimistic about the future. Therefore, advocates resonate most when they combine optimism and historical context without attacking our history.
- Advocates should also link bad actors to bad rules, since most want to improve both. Mitch McConnell could be an ideal avatar.
- Republicans will be more reluctant, to be sure, but many are compelled by a “checks and balance” argument or concern about elites and special interests.

Elite	Over the last 40 years, wealth has transferred from the poor and the middle class to a tiny wealthy elite, who in turn pour billions of dollars into elections and lobbying to make sure that politicians work for them, instead of for us. We need real change that puts power back in the hands of ordinary people.
Gridlock/Switch	Partisan gridlock in Washington is preventing our government from doing its job and passing things most voters want like background checks for every gun purchase or access to health care for everyone. Voters care about change, not parties and politicians, and no matter which party is in charge, the gridlock remains the same. We need leaders willing to make the changes needed to deliver results rather than playing partisan games.
Checks	It's not just a few bad apples – the checks and balances in our political system have failed, with special interests and career politicians using the system to enrich themselves at our expense. We need to use the democratic processes in our Constitution to create new, stronger checks to restore balance to our government. We don't need to just elect better leaders; we need to improve our political system overall.
Racism	A small handful of senators used obscure rules to block the 1964 Civil Rights Act for months, hoping to stop its passage. In the decades since, politicians have exploited that same loophole to stop progress – not just on issues like racial inequality and police brutality, but also on health care, voting rights, and background checks for gun purchases. We need to get rid of this loophole immediately so we can overcome the major challenges facing our country today.
History Finance	When African-Americans and women were denied the right to vote, we changed our Constitution. After the Great Depression, we transformed our banking laws. After Watergate, we updated our campaign finance laws. Our history demands we make major changes when our government no longer responds to our needs.
COVID Urgent	The pandemic has shown us how flawed our government is today. Because our government failed to act quickly, almost 200,000 Americans have died from COVID, more than the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan all combined. And now Congress can't even agree to extend unemployment insurance for people who just lost their jobs. A government is only as good as its response in an emergency, and this failure shows we need to make major changes to how our political system works.



About Navigator

In a world where the news cycle is the length of a tweet, our leaders often lack the real-time public-sentiment analysis to shape the best approaches to talking about the issues that matter the most. Navigator is designed to act as a consistent, flexible, responsive tool to inform policy debates by conducting research and reliable guidance to inform allies, elected leaders, and the press. Navigator is a project led by pollsters from Global Strategy Group and GBAO along with an advisory committee, including: Andrea Purse, progressive strategist; Arkadi Gerney, The Hub Project; Joel Payne, The Hub Project; Christina Reynolds, EMILY's List; Delvone Michael, Working Families; Felicia Wong, Roosevelt Institute; Mike Podhorzer, AFL-CIO; Jesse Ferguson, progressive strategist; Navin Nayak, Center for American Progress Action Fund; Stephanie Valencia, EquisLabs; and Melanie Newman, Planned Parenthood Action Fund.

About the Study

GBAO conducted public opinion surveys among 1,450 registered voters per wave on July 9-14, 2020 and August 24-27, 2020. Each wave included an additional 150 interviews each with African American, Latinx, and Asian American voters. The survey was conducted online, recruiting respondents from multiple opt-in online panel vendors. Special care was taken to ensure the demographic composition of our sample matched that of the national registered voter population across a variety of demographic variables.

GBAO also conducted 13 focus groups in 2019 in Houston, Jackson (MS), Minneapolis, and Newark (NJ). Groups were segmented by race/ethnicity, party, education, and age.

For Press inquiries contact:

press@navigatorresearch.org

**To learn more about
Navigator:**

<http://navigatorresearch.org>

[@NavigatorSurvey](#) on Twitter