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FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Thursday, February 1, 2024

Independents and Soft Partisans on
Democracy and Donald Trump



Methodology

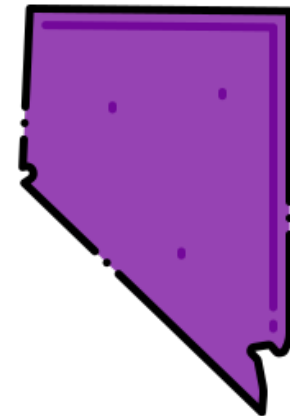
On January 24, 2024, GBAO conducted three online focus groups with Independents and soft partisans to understand their perceptions of democracy and Donald Trump's legal challenges. All three groups were "democracy non-prioritizers," defined as voters who do not view democracy as a top issue for them but are concerned an event like January 6th could happen again.



Independents and soft partisans in Georgia who are democracy non-prioritizers, over 35



Weak and Independent-leaning Republicans in Wisconsin who are democracy non-prioritizers and unfavorable of Trump



Independents and soft partisans in Nevada who are democracy non-prioritizers, under 35

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Key Takeaways

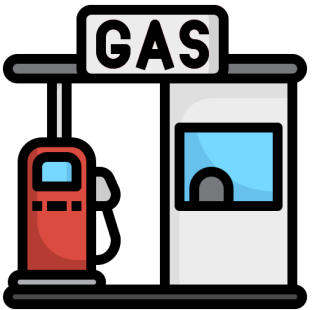
- More are optimistic about their communities than the country, yet some report improvement in the national mood.
- There is not a shared definition of “democracy,” yet there is a shared sense it is vulnerable.
- Worries of political violence and election integrity are mixed—by design.
- Yet Trump’s record on democracy is weak, and his indictments and position on total immunity are alarming.
- Those who support him are willing to give him the benefit of the doubt even if they disagree.

Some Participants Report Good News Like Job Creation and Gas Prices Dropping



"I do think the job market [is doing well], because I am transitioning from my own business back into the job market, even at my old age, but I do see the job market as positive too." – GA woman, Independent lean Democrat

"The gig economy has made jobs or at least earning income readily available, at least non-traditional gigs." – GA man, Independent lean Republican



"So I'll be looking for a new job within the next couple of years and I have colleagues who have recently gotten jobs and they've been telling me how flexible things are for my current profession. And I guess I look forward to that process to where I find a job myself and feel I can feel out which job is the most [flexible]." – WI man, Independent lean Republican



"I've been noticing that they're [gas prices], I would say more steady versus there was where they would shoot really high and then they would shoot lower, what we would think was low because they had just been so high." – WI woman, weak Republican

"The first thing that comes to mind is, I filled up my gas tank today and it's still relatively low, so I appreciate that." – WI man, weak Republican

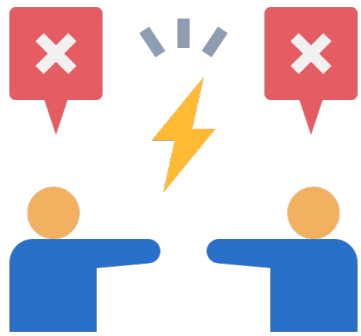
"Just the jobs, I feel like more jobs are opening, people are getting a job better, faster." – NV woman, Independent lean Republican

"Well, gas prices have started to drop. I think that's amazing." – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat

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Yet National Mood Continues to be Grim, With Widespread Worries About Dysfunction and Division

Moderator: What is not going well in the country today?



“Definitely gun violence, like crimes and stuff. Having easier access to getting guns and not knowing the consequences of having a gun. Especially I feel like kids now as well, I've seen a lot of kids shooting, accidental kids shootings because parents aren't locking the gun and keeping it safe.” – NV woman, weak Democrat

“I've actually seen the opposite [of food prices going down], especially around the basics. For example, my son's lactose intolerant and the price of lactose free milk just keeps little by little, like 10, 20 cents at a time, but it keeps increasing.” – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat

“I do remember a time when you could have conversations with people who had different ideas and different opinions on things, or maybe different affiliations, but you found the common ground because what America used to be about, what was good for everyone, not this side or that side. **We didn't treat America like rooting for a sports team, and I think that's what we do now.”** – GA man, Democrat

“For the country itself, inflation, and things of that nature, [the] housing market, of course, wasn't the best the last few years.” – GA man, Independent lean Republican

“I see a lot of just partisan politics and it's really sickening. And the tactics that are used to divide us and make us feel like we're enemies, it kind of gives me that sort of pessimistic, I guess, overall feeling.” – WI man, Independent lean Republican

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“Democracy” Evokes Different Things for Different People, Although Some Mention Voting and Representation

Moderator: *What comes to mind when you think of the word “democracy?”*

“Everyone is supposed to have a say in how the country is run.” – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat

“I feel like they say we have a say, but I don't feel like anybody's say is being said.” – NV woman, weak Democrat



“When you say democracy, I think about Democrats, which I'm sure is probably odd for me because typically, if you're Black, you're a Democrat...” – GA man, Independent lean Republican

“I feel like it's failing... I don't know. I don't see it how I used to. When I was young, I thought that we were a very... Democracy was everyone really had a choice, and I don't see it that way anymore. I feel like it's all an illusion just ran behind the scenes.” – GA woman, Independent

“It used to mean freedom. **But, it's a one-sided thing now.**” – WI woman, Independent lean Republican



“Democracy to me used to feel like it was our choice, the people get to make the decisions and things like that. But now when I think of democracy, and maybe it's my old age... I feel like now it's starting to just be a huge show of... So I'm a Christian, I'll put that out there. I feel like anything that's against Christianity almost is like now that's the cool thing. And it's just a little over the top.” – WI woman, weak Republican

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Yet Most Agree That it's Under Threat, as a Patient, it's Under Duress

Moderator: Let's say you're a doctor and our democracy is a patient coming in for a checkup. What would you say? Would you say, "Hey, you're healthy. See you next year for your annual exam," or would you say, "We need to run some tests," or would you say, "I have some bad news...?"

"You got six months to live, buddy." – GA woman, Independent lean Democrat

"You're going through a whole lot of growing pains. I haven't given up hope, but there's going to be... it'll get worse before it gets better." – GA woman, Independent lean Democrat

"I would ask why you were bringing me a corpse for a checkup." – NV man, Independent lean Democrat

I feel like it's like on its last limb, we have a limited amount of years left before it just collapses... I feel like because so many people feel like their vote doesn't matter, then it's just going to spread like wildfire... Then who knows? People might stop voting altogether." – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat

"I think it might be a psychiatrist instead of a doctor." – WI man, Independent lean Republican



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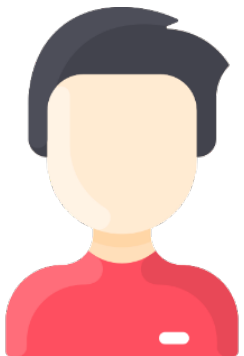
Media and Social Media are Considered Major Culprits in our Country's Challenges and Polarization

Moderator: Who do you blame for things not going well in the country?

"I absolutely think it's the media. Since becoming a father, I just haven't had access to the TV very much. So I've become unplugged really from a lot of different things. And to just see the way that issues are presented, the way that it's suggested that there's such simple actions that can be taken place to fix everything or such simple answers to everything. And it creates this, if you're not with me, you're against me mentality. Very much a Packers, Bears thing." – WI man, Independent lean Republican



"Mainstream media plays a huge role [in democracy not working]. Well, a lot of that stuff, especially with the elections and everything for the past few years. And then, we have too much real information in the news for the people who actually wants to go and look it up, find it. You could find it now easier if you want, if you're a person who actually looks into it compared to just watching the news, the mainstream media." – GA man, Independent lean Republican



"Social media, the access to information, all the things that we're going through as a whole is redefining democracy and the way that we receive information. We have to learn how to discern what's true and not. We have to learn how to not jump on every bandwagon that comes by. I think that we're just going through serious growing pains because of the way the information is flooded out to us." – GA woman, Independent lean Democrat

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Political Violence has Very Little Specific Meaning Beyond January 6th

Moderator: What comes to mind when I say "political violence?"

"Well, I guess... I don't know, the January 6th stuff." – GA woman, Independent

"[Besides January 6th] the only other thing I could think about is just the infighting between people over politics where you have families falling apart, friends, friendships ending, and things like that." – GA man, Independent lean Republican

"I would describe it as the illegitimate child of what we used to call civil disobedience. It goes way back to the Boston Tea Party, the Civil Rights Movement. These were movements and these were events that were about advancement of the nation as a whole. And I think when we speak about political violence, I think political violence is about serving a particular movement just for the sake of that movement." – GA man, weak Democrat

"Not sure if anybody's from Kenosha here, but there's been political violence there within the last couple of years too. And I think we can expand the definition of violence too, there's tons of violence against people's reputations and whatnot as well." – WI man, Independent lean Republican

"I think I would agree that it's people in power abusing or not using their power to do what the people want, or just intentional acts of violence. Some people could claim the new abortion laws are acts of political violence. Some would disagree, but that's just one example." – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat

"The deliberate use of power to get your way politically to achieve a political goal." – NV woman, Independent lean Republican

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Trump Seen as Largely to Blame for January 6, but Some Wonder if They Have all the Facts

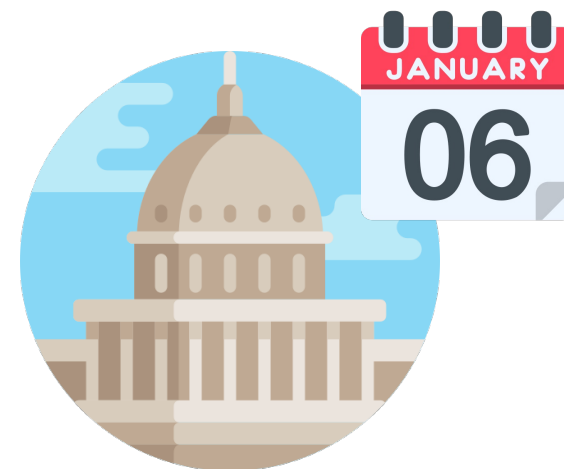
Moderator: What is your understanding of what happened on January 6?

“Trump. He told them to go there. He didn't even bother to show up, and he didn't stop it. At that point, he was still the president, yes? He could have done something and he didn't. He was proud of them, he was glad they were there.” – WI woman, Independent lean Republican

“The media tells the story. We only get what the media tells us, and they can tell us whatever they want, and then we have to believe that. **And then we speculate who's at fault and we believe that Trump is at fault, but that's what the media has told us and we don't really know the truth at the end of the day.**” – WI man, Independent lean Republican

“Trump was being a baby, that he lost the election, and after he had it recounted what, 60 something times, **he decided to hold a rally, form a mob and send them to the White House.**” – NV man, Independent lean Democrat

“I come from a very Fox News family, but I'm not so much that way, but **my entire family thinks it was all staged and fake, but it seemed like legitimate incited violence to me.** And I think that Donald Trump likes to incite. He just wants people to do whatever for him. He doesn't really care. That's how I see it.” – GA woman, Independent



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Participants View Support for January 6th Negatively

Moderator: If there was a member of Congress or other candidate who said that they supported the actions of the people who rioted at the Capitol on January 6th, what would you think of that? What would that tell you about that person?

“To me that's disgusting. That goes against the foundation of this country, the foundation of democracy. I don't care what side you're on, there's just no place for something like that. I guess I shouldn't say there's no place since we were founded off of a rebellion, but that's definitely not what I would call that.” – WI man, Independent lean Republican

“They're not the best. I don't think that it was okay. No matter what you're doing or what the outcome of the situation was. I don't think it was okay no matter what.” – NV woman, Independent lean Republican

“Well, violence is never a good option. So I feel like if they support the violence that that whole situation was, that it just shows what kind of person they are and that's not someone you want in office.” – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat

“I wouldn't support going to the extreme, you know what I mean? I believe in protests and everything, but taking it to the next level, yeah, I don't agree.” – GA man, Independent

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More are Worried About Smooth Elections Than Attempts to Overthrow Results

Moderator: Are you more concerned about elections running smoothly and fairly or attempts to overthrow election results?

"I think I'm more worried about the elections being run smoothly not **because I think that there's been issues with the way that it's run, besides mail-in voting is complicated.**" – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat

"If I had to pick one, having it run smoothly would be more concerning... **Those are machines and those are people, those are human beings that are running all that,** things could happen." – WI woman, Independent lean Republican

"I think **there's fear of cheating...**" – WI man, Independent lean Republican

[More concerned about elections being run smoothly] **"Because as we integrate technology more and more into the election process, things can be manipulated.** And I think I read a report the other day about [how] they're trying to take the, what do you call it? The QR code out of it now in our state, so technology makes it easy for it to be manipulated." – GA man, weak Democrat

[Moderator: Why are you more concerned about people trying to overthrow the results?] **"Well, I feel like people are going to be upset no matter what. Some people are on one side, some people are on the other side, someone's going to be upset...** No matter what happens, someone's going to be upset. And I feel like someone's going to think that it's rigged, that just like the last election, someone's going to feel like their vote didn't matter because it was rigged." – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat

"[Concerned about election results being overthrown] **Because that's what happened. That's what instigated January 6th, and I feel like the fact that nothing went the way that it was supposed to when they went to the Capitol means that they're waiting to try on a bigger level.** If it's Trump and Biden again and Trump loses, I'm afraid that it's going to be a big problem, that people are going to hit the streets, and people are going to be very angry and very violent." – GA woman, Independent lean Democrat

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Congress' Role in Election Certification Almost Completely Unknown

Moderator: What is the role of Congress in certifying the election results?

"The Vice President? The Secretary of State of each state has that role, but the Congress doesn't have that role in certifying elections, I don't think, unless they never do." – GA woman, Independent lean Democrat

"I think it's wise to have officials go over it. I have a little bit of distaste for the electoral college because of the way that they can completely do the opposite of what the people are saying. But I think that's the only point I have to make from Congress specifically." – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat

"I would think they should have no role. Shouldn't just the numbers speak for themselves? I don't know." – WI man, Independent lean Republican

"I feel like I should know... feel like I'm in ninth grade civics and I should know that answer, but I don't think I do. I don't want to make something up either so I'll just say, I don't know." – WI man, weak Republican



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Trump's Record on Democracy is Weak, Even With His Supporters

"I think for democracy in general, I think that just his general approach is negative for it. So I don't think it's helpful... January 6th would be the extreme version of it, I think. But I think I'd say that what **he tries to do is to, in general, just to rile people up and make you dislike the other side more to gain followers, to gain strength in numbers.** So just that general approach is the opposite of what I believe in." – WI man, Independent lean Republican

"Well, on democracy, I feel like that part's a little bit more negative because for instance, with, **we'll say January 6th, if he was even involved, we don't know that. But if he was and instigated it and was part of that, then I think that that shows poor decisions in regards to democracy because it's almost like a tantrum against what the people had chosen.** So that would be my take on that." – WI woman, weak Republican

"If there was an F and [he would get an F minus]. **He doesn't respect our constitution, the rule of law or democracy at all, so F minus.**" – GA woman, Independent lean Democrat

"I don't think he knows or cares about democracy at all. I don't think he cares about... He only cares about himself, bottom line. That's just it. He doesn't care about democracy. **He doesn't care about America. He just cares about himself.**" – GA woman, Independent

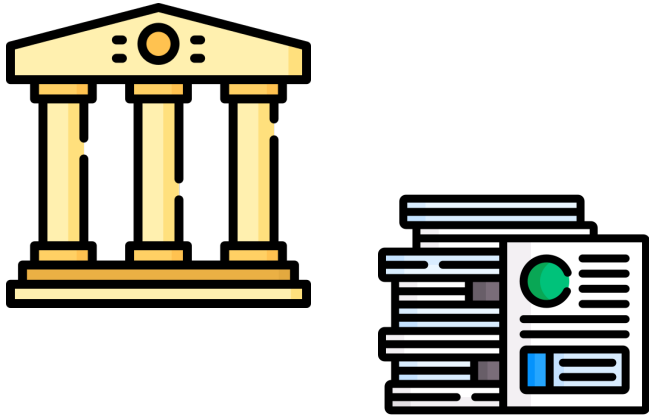
"It's kind of hard to tell because there is room to grow with him in the office for our democracy. But obviously there's a lot of things that he did the first time around that didn't sit well with the people here in America for a lot of reasons... And there was a point in America that it was changed, it was running smoothly, it was running right. There were jobs, there was low prices in inflation, there was low gas prices. So it wasn't all bad, but at the same time, it wasn't all good." – NV man, weak Republican

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Trump's Indictments are Both Familiar and Alarming

[Moderator: So, as you may know, Trump is facing 91 felony indictments.] "Jesus Christ."- NV woman, weak Democrat

"I mean, we could go through the list of things that he went through trial for, and if I'm not wrong, I believe it's anywhere from taxes to fraud, things like that." – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat



"Well, the easiest one and the most obvious was the beginning, the Emoluments Clause. If anybody, I mean, poor Jimmy Carter gave up his peanut farm so he didn't have any things. And so, he had run our country like a business. He had charged all those people at the hotels, all that stuff. So one, and it's very obvious that everybody knows, everybody who walks in both sides know, and they just let it go, and millions of dollars. So that's one, without looking at all the others that we don't even scratch the surface besides the documents that he has in his bathroom and the secrets." – GA woman, Independent lean Democrat

"It certainly is shocking to think that... this is crazy." – WI man, Independent lean Republican

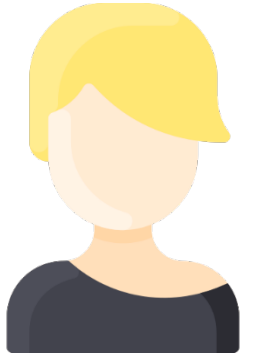
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Giving Trump Total Immunity Worries Many, Who— Unaided—Ask if it Includes Murder

Moderator: Trump has argued that every president should have immunity for everything they do as president, unless they have been impeached and convicted by Congress. What do you think of that?



"It's ridiculous. So he's saying if he killed somebody, he'd be immune." – WI woman, Independent lean Republican



"Yeah, I think that's crazy too. That's too much power." – GA man, Independent lean Republican

"No matter what? So a president could kill somebody, and they should have immunity? That's crazy." – NV woman, weak Democrat

"I feel like to an extent maybe, but where do you draw the line on crimes that you feel that you should get away with just because you're president? I feel like because you're president, you should show citizens what an upstanding citizen should look like. You should lead by example." – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat



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Most Oppose Pardoning January 6 Rioters, And Worry About Its Future Implications

Moderator: Trump has floated the idea of pardoning some or all of the January 6 rioters. How does that make you feel?

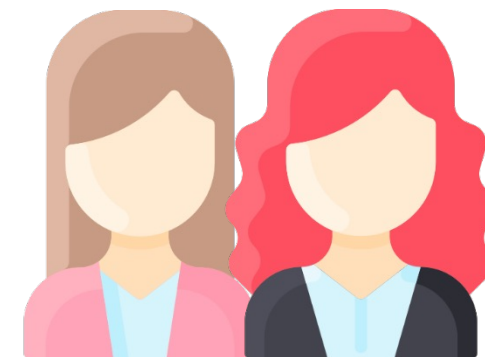
"I don't like the idea of it. I think people all the time are given opportunities to secondary trials during their sentence. **So I don't agree with Trump helping them specifically if they're still serving their time.**" – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat

"Yeah, they probably should serve out their sentence like everybody else has to." – NV woman, Independent lean Republican

"So I think that it's purely a way for him to just say, 'You know what? You support me. You can kill some people. You can break the law. You can do what you want to do. It's cool, I'll pardon you. Just support me. Go Trump.'" – NV man, Independent lean Democrat

"You can pardon whoever you want. **But it's just setting a really bad example and precedent because then if that were to happen again, it could just be a lot worse.** If you can storm the Capitol of the United States, then how should we all feel? We're going to feel afraid, we're going to feel that we're not secure" – WI woman, Independent lean Republican

"I think that's one of the most dangerous things that he's said because **he's telling the people that haven't gotten in trouble yet, 'Don't worry. Go out there and burn the country down and do whatever you want because I got your back.'**" – GA woman, Independent lean Democrat



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Being a Dictator, Eliminating the Deep State, or Going After Biden Seen as Simply the Same Trump Playbook Rather Than Scary

"I think that's just him playing to his base a little bit. He's just trying to stir up the people that want to hear that rhetoric from him that [there] would be vengeance." – GA man, Independent

"That's him pandering to his base, talking about the deep state stuff, but he's just a professional conman. Most things he says, for his entire life, not just for his political career, but I take the dictator thing seriously. That's the only thing I think he's ever told the truth about." – GA woman, Independent

"I don't know exactly what I think about that, I guess. But that kind of goes to the side of things where one of the things I think that people were drawn to Trump for, myself included to some extent." – WI man, Independent lean Republican

"It's political posturing, it's ridiculous. I can think of a hundred bad things to say about Joe Biden's presidency, but I really don't think calling him the most corrupt president, it's just silly. And along with floating the idea of pardoning the people that did this, it's just a way to rally support to his side. And the more feverish of a pitch it reaches, the more successful it seems to be for him." – WI man, Independent lean Republican

"I think we all know he tries to say he'll do the biggest, baddest things. He's definitely an extremist politician, so to hear him say that is not surprising at all." – NV woman, Independent lean Democrat

"I think that if that's what he thinks is best, then I guess that's what he's going to do." – NV woman, Independent lean Republican

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Some Give Trump the Benefit of the Doubt on his Anti-Democratic Positions and Outbursts

“Overall, I know he does have his ways of saying things, which is political or out there, but I think he does it to get the votes and just to have conversation.” – GA man, Independent lean Republican

“He really puts emphasis on his wording. I think even if he wanted to take care of everything that Biden did, even stuff that we don't know about, his wording is not good. You could simply just say, ‘I'm going to appoint someone in charge of taking care of the wrong Biden did to our country.’ Even that sounds better than the crazy way he says it. If you say it that way, then oh, you have my interest.” – WI woman, weak Republican



“I just feel like a lot of the times he does that, he just says whatever's coming out of his... I feel like a lot of the times Trump just says things and don't think what he's saying. But then he doesn't do it or he doesn't mean what he said in that context. You just have to go and figure out what he actually means and what he's saying at that moment. Sometimes he's saying things, but it's not the real context.” – NV woman, weak Democrat

[Moderator: Do you think a president should have immunity from prosecution if they use the military to assassinate a political rival?] “I don't think that people are going to accept he goes out and kills somebody. I don't think that that's accepted, but I actually don't know how I feel about it because in one hand I accept it and it's fair, and then the other hand I really don't. But I don't know, I'm really stuck in the middle.” – NV woman, Independent lean Republican



Some Suggest Creative Ways to Reduce Division Like More Political Parties or Redrawing the Nation's Borders

Moderator: What could be done to protect democracy?

"I don't know, maybe get rid of the two-party system." – GA man, Independent

"I would shut down Fox News. I would make news be for real actually, make them have huge fines for lying and entertainment, or whatever it is. I still feel like the mainstream news is a huge, huge problem." – GA woman, Independent

"That's where we're culpable as a nation, because we fail to push things like term limits. We fail to push things like campaign finance reform. We fail to push things like not having career politicians and eliminating the two-party system and electoral college. We don't want to fathom these things because it's change, and because we're so ingrained in certain traditions and the way things have always been, we are scared to try something new that works for everyone, not just one side or the other." – GA man, weak Democrat

"Well, to vote, obviously. But right now I'm so undecided about everything, but you still have to vote." – WI woman, Independent lean Republican

"I think that the solution might actually be to divide the country. I think that we're too big, too many people, 50 states, one person to rule them all." – NV man, Independent lean Democrat

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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: Jessica Floyd, The Hub Project; Christina Reynolds, EMILY's List; 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 three online focus groups January 24, 2024 with Independents and soft partisans who are democracy non-prioritizers in three states: GA, WI, and NV. Some quotes have been lightly edited for brevity. Qualitative results are not statistically projectable.

For Press inquiries contact:

press@navigatorresearch.org

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