Public Opinion

American National Government
Topic Six

Overview

- Public Opinion
  - What is public opinion's role in American democracy?
  - How is public opinion measured?
  - How do political ideologies structure public opinion?
  - How does partisanship shape public opinion?

I – What is public opinion's role in American democracy?

What is Public Opinion?

- ## What is Public Opinion?
  - V.O. Key: "those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed"
    - All governments, whether democratic or authoritarian, have reason to pay attention to public opinion, if only to forestall revolution
  - Public opinion is the aggregation of the people's views about political issues, situations, & public figures

Public Opinion and Democracy

- The democratic principle of popular sovereignty implies that the opinions of the people should control or at least affect what the government does
  - This marks a key distinction between democracies and other forms of government
    - Authoritarian governments only heed key supporters (or "selectorates") like the military, big corporations, a specific ethnic or tribal group, the rich, etc.
  - Free and fair elections force democratic governments to pay attention to the opinions of everyone, not just elites
    - Public opinion expresses the opinions of all

Effects of Public Opinion

- But does public opinion actually influence government policy? Does government really care about your voice?
- Yes! Research demonstrates that opinion matters
  - Evidence: Changes in public mood are followed by changes in public policy about 75% of the time
  - Evidence: Public opinion shapes votes cast by members of Congress
- This is because, in a well-functioning democracy, leaders benefit politically from heeding public opinion
  - So political leaders pay attention, spend lots of money and time probing it (via polling), and try to manipulate it

Effects of Public Opinion

- Limitations and Problems
  - There remain areas where US policy and public opinion diverge
    - Example: Large majorities (80-90%) want more restrictive gun regulations, but don't get them
  - Many American political institutions insulate government from popular pressure (ex: courts; Senate)
    - Not clear this can be justified today
  - Not everyone's opinion matters equally
    - Senate and Electoral College
    - Special interests
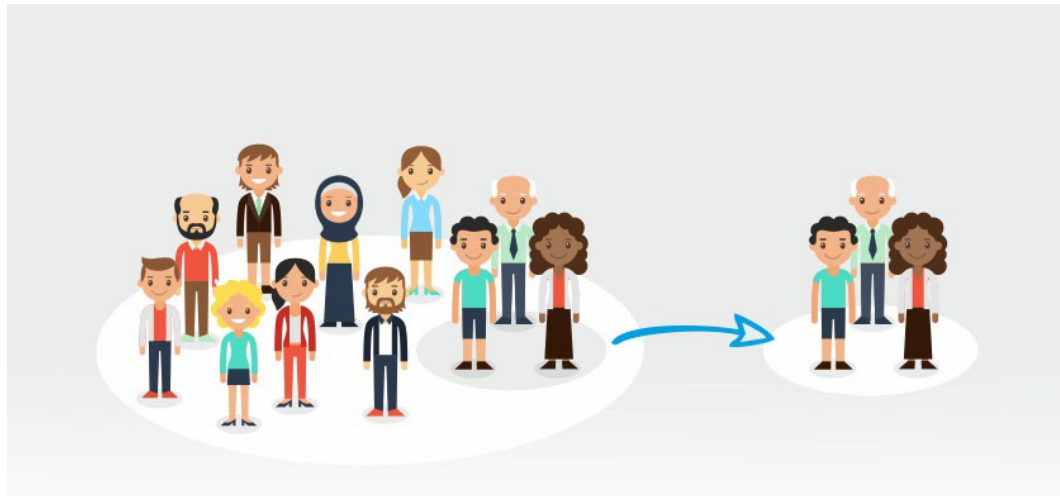   - Wealthy

II – How is public opinion measured?

Measuring Public Opinion

- How do we learn what public opinion is?
- Scientific polling (which uses random sampling!)

Measuring Public Opinion

- Basic technique of scientific polling:
  - Select a <u>random</u> sample of the population
  - Ask the people in the sample questions about their views (interviews)
  - Count up their answers

Measuring Public Opinion

- The larger the sample, the more closely the sample's answers will reflect the answers the pollster would get if everybody in the population were polled
  - Question: Does a sample get better the larger and larger it grows?
    - Technically yes, but after about 1200—1500 interviews, additional ones don't improve accuracy very much and so often aren't worth it given the cost

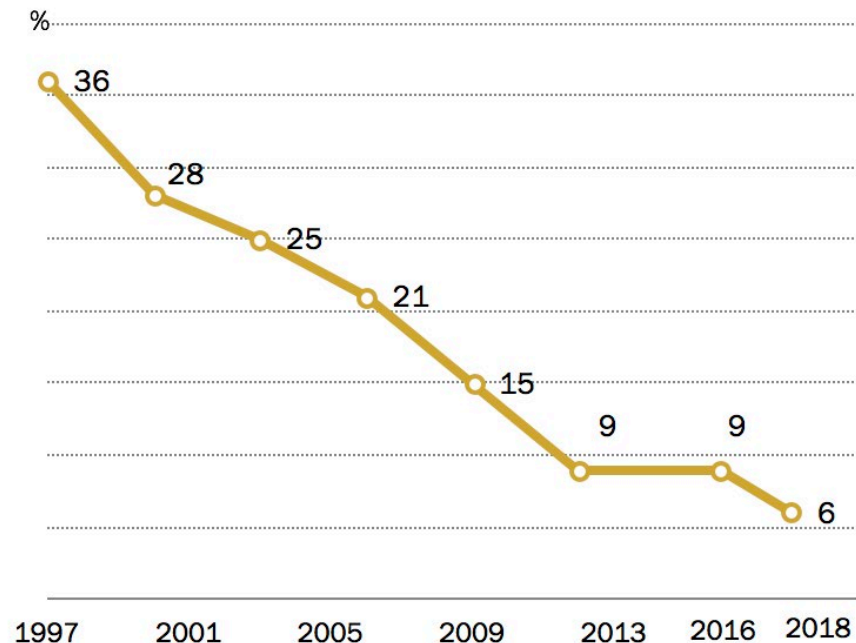# Measuring Public Opinion: Challenges

- Problems measuring public opinion:
  - A truly random sample is rarely possible
    - There's no list of everyone to randomize
    - So pollsters use sophisticated methods like weighting to approximate it and fix a biased sample
    - But these are imperfect!
  - Sampling error (or selection bias in a poll)
    - Not everyone has a phone or picks up when a pollster calls
      - Those who do tend to be richer, more educated, more politically knowledgeable
    - Weighting used here too
  - Measurement error (or bad questions)
    - Even the most carefully designed question is subject to measurement error
      - because the fit between words and concepts used in questions and how people actually think about issues is never perfect
    - Respondents may not understand them or may answer incorrectly

Measuring Public Opinion: Challenges

- Sampling error:
  - Low and declining response rates
  - When you get this few responses, it's hard or impossible to correct via weighting to approximate a random sample

After brief plateau, telephone survey response rates have fallen again

Response rate by year (%)

Note: Response rate is AAPOR RR3. Only landlines sampled 1997-2006. Rates are typical for surveys conducted in each year.
Source: Pew Research Center telephone surveys conducted 1997-2018.

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Measuring Public Opinion: Challenges

- Weighting problems:
  - Pollsters use weighting to correct for sampling error
  - But sometimes pollsters "guess" incorrectly about who will turn out
  - Weights can be wrong, give misleading results
    - Example: Jesse Ventura in 1998 won Minnesota governorship by attracting low-propensity voters (younger & less educated) that pollsters discount

Measuring Public Opinion: Challenges

- Measurement error:
  - Confusing questions: The Holocaust Poll Fiasco
    - Roper survey
      - Read this question aloud to yourself: "Does it seem possible, or does it seem impossible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened?"
        - Isn't that confusing?
      - 22% said they thought it <u>possible</u> that the Nazi extermination of the Jews <u>never happened</u>
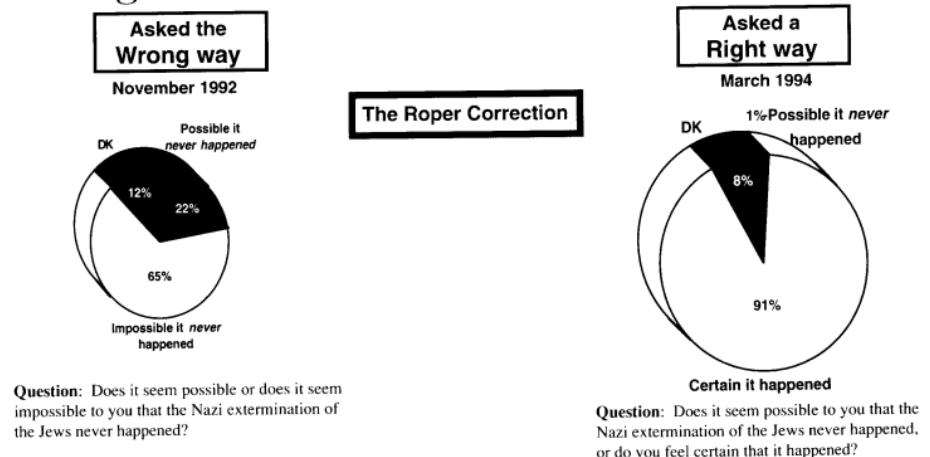   - 12% were unsure

Might the Holocaust Have Never Happened?

Asked the Wrong way
November 1992

The Roper Correction

Possible it *never happened*
DK
12%
22%
65%
Impossible it *never happened*

Question: Does it seem possible or does it seem impossible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened?

Asked a Right way
March 1994

1% Possible it *never happened*
DK
8%
91%
Certain it happened

Question: Does it seem possible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened, or do you feel certain that it happened?

Source: Surveys by the Roper Organization.

  - People freaked out: is America full of holocaust deniers???
  - So Gallup conducted a new poll
    - "Does it seem possible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened, or does it seem certain to you that it happened?"
    - Found <u>only 1%</u> thought it was possible that the Holocaust didn't happen

Measuring Public Opinion: Challenges

- Measurement Error
  - Framing
    - The practice of highlighting different dimensions, concepts, or ideas to form an opinion about a political issue or phenomenon.
    - Example:
      - "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name a few problems and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we are spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount."
    - When the public was asked about "welfare"
      - Too little = 13%; About right = 25%; Too much = 62%
    - When asked about "assistance to the poor"
      - Too little = 59%; About right = 25%; Too much = 16%
    - But these are the same thing!
      - Welfare has acquired a negative meaning in the US, and is a racialized term, meaning it is used as code or a 'dog-whistle' for policies which benefit black Americans
    - Framing can therefore determine what the public's opinion on an issue is going to be

III – How do political ideologies structure public opinion?

Political Ideologies

- How is public opinion structured? Are people's opinions about politics all higgledy-piggledy or are they ordered somehow?

- Political attitudes are often structured into political ideologies
  - Ideologies are elaborate organizations of opinions on specific issues

Political Ideologies

- In theory, ideologies work to promote the consistency of public opinion by connecting specific attitudes to something greater, a more general principle or set of principles
    - So conservative opinions on size of government and welfare get linked to values like self-reliance, while liberal ones are linked to equality, justice
- But in practice, ideologies combine attitudes linked more by coalitional politics (the need to build a coalition that can win elections) than by principle
    - Policy positions associated with ideological labels do not have a strong logical connection
        - Why should support for welfare go with supporting LGBT rights? Or small government go with banning abortion?
        - Examples: modern conservatism as fusion of libertarianism and social conservatism; liberalism as social welfarism plus pro-capital

Political Ideologies

- The main ideological labels used in American politics are liberal and conservative
  - And there are some others, like libertarianism and socialism
- But the opinions of most people do not fall neatly into one ideological category or the other. Also liberalism/conservativism does not guide the thinking of many Americans
  - Many do not even understand the distinction
- The meaning of these labels changes over time
  - Let's see examples

Political Ideologies

- What policies and attitudes do we usually associate with conservatives? (IN FLUX)
  - Distrust government
    - and have (had*) greater faith in private enterprise and free markets
    - So they oppose regulation of the economy by government*
    - *In recent years, rising distrust of the media, schools, universities, 'woke capital,' major social institutions of all kinds & favor 'nationalist' economic regulation/interference
  - But willing to use government to enforce traditional moral standards
    - Ex: school prayer, anti-racial justice, anti-feminism, anti-abortion, anti-LGBT rights
  - Favor* a larger military and a more assertive & unilateral pursuit of national self-interest
    - *Trump-era foreign policy more isolationist, friendly to authoritarians (Russia, Saudi)
  - Advocate lower taxes, especially on investment income, to stimulate growth & restrict the government's capacity to finance social welfare programs
    - Low taxes, small government
  - Opposition to immigration
   - Trump-era addition to conservative orthodoxy; some still disagree

Political Ideologies

- What policies and attitudes do we usually associate with liberals?*
    - Today liberals typically favor using government to:
        - secure a basic level of well-being (welfare) for all,
        - champion the rights and well-being of the disadvantaged & historically oppressed (i.e. women, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBT, etc.)
        - protect the environment and combat climate change.
    - Tolerate social change and more diverse range of lifestyles & social behaviors
    - Generally favor acting in cooperation with allies and international organizations abroad; promote human rights
    - Believe the rich should be taxed at higher rates to finance social welfare programs
    - Reduce economic inequalities? Guarantee universal health insurance?
        - These issues are currently being debated by liberals

    - * = what we call "liberalism" in the US would be called "social democracy" in Europe. Liberalism there means what we call libertarianism here, i.e. light regulation of markets and social tolerance.

Political Ideologies

Political Ideologies
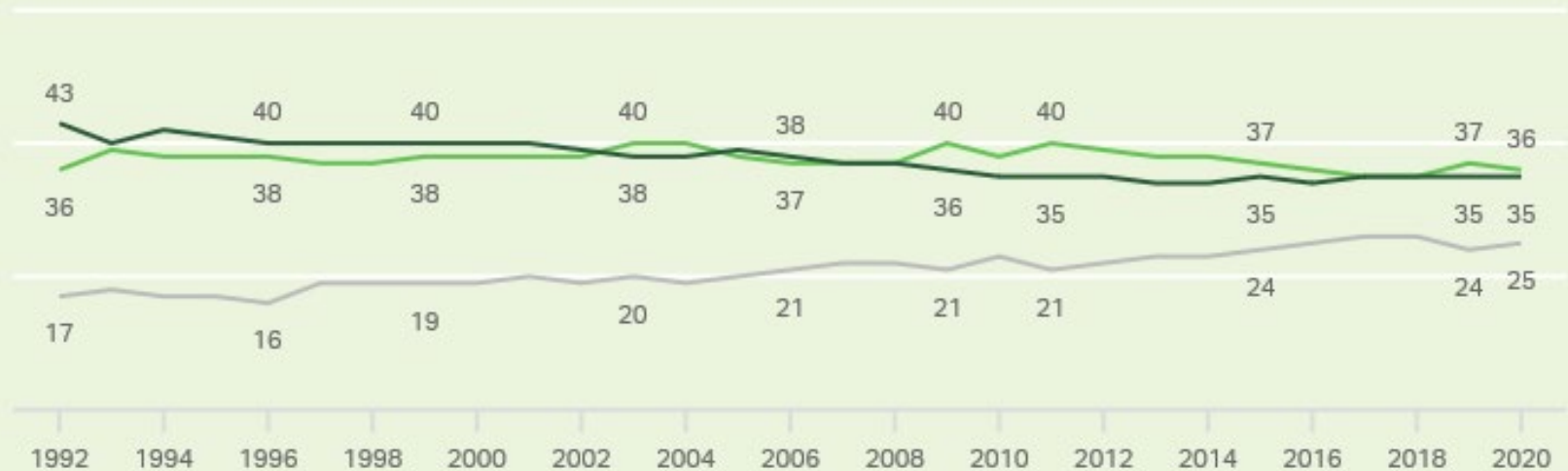

THE 2016 ELECTORATE
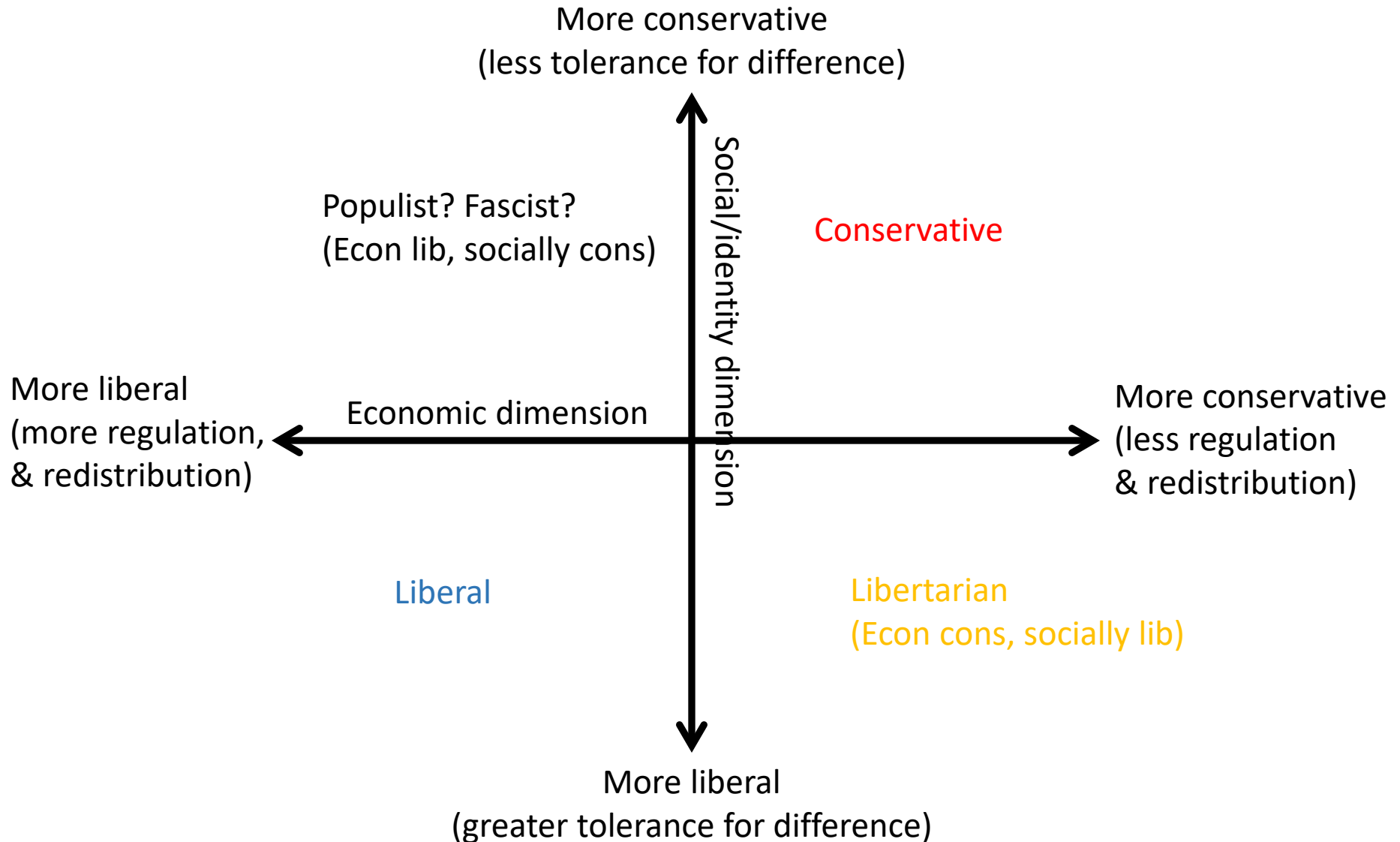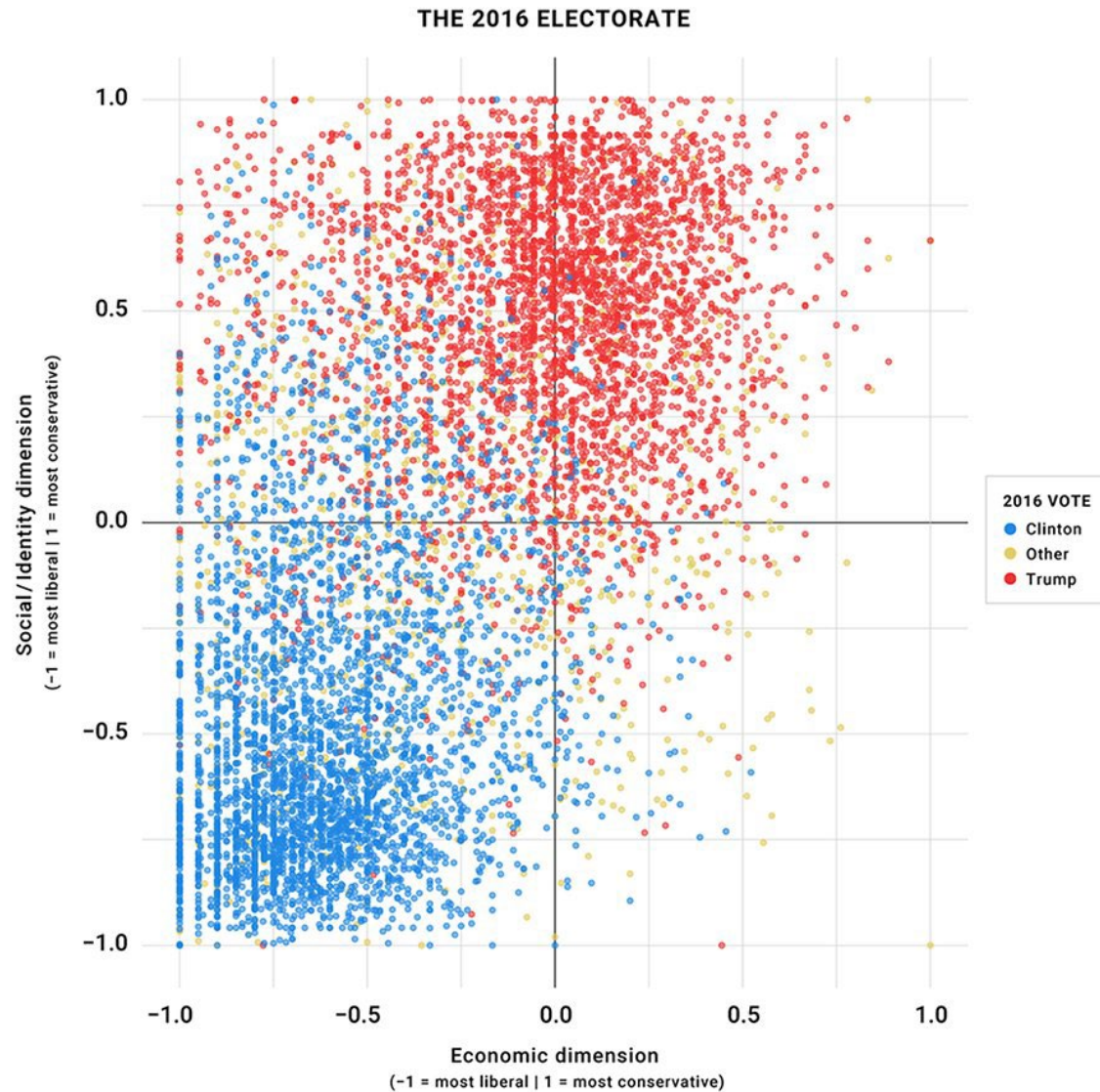
Where do Americans stand?

- Even though not many citizens think about politics ideologically, it is still an important predictor of political behavior, especially among politically knowledgeable voters
  - Why? Partisanship! The parties became more ideologically homogeneous after civil rights, remember?
  - Now, voting for Republicans means voting conservative, and voting for Democrats means voting liberal

Where do Americans stand?

Americans' Ideological Views, by Year

How would you describe your political views -- very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal or very liberal?
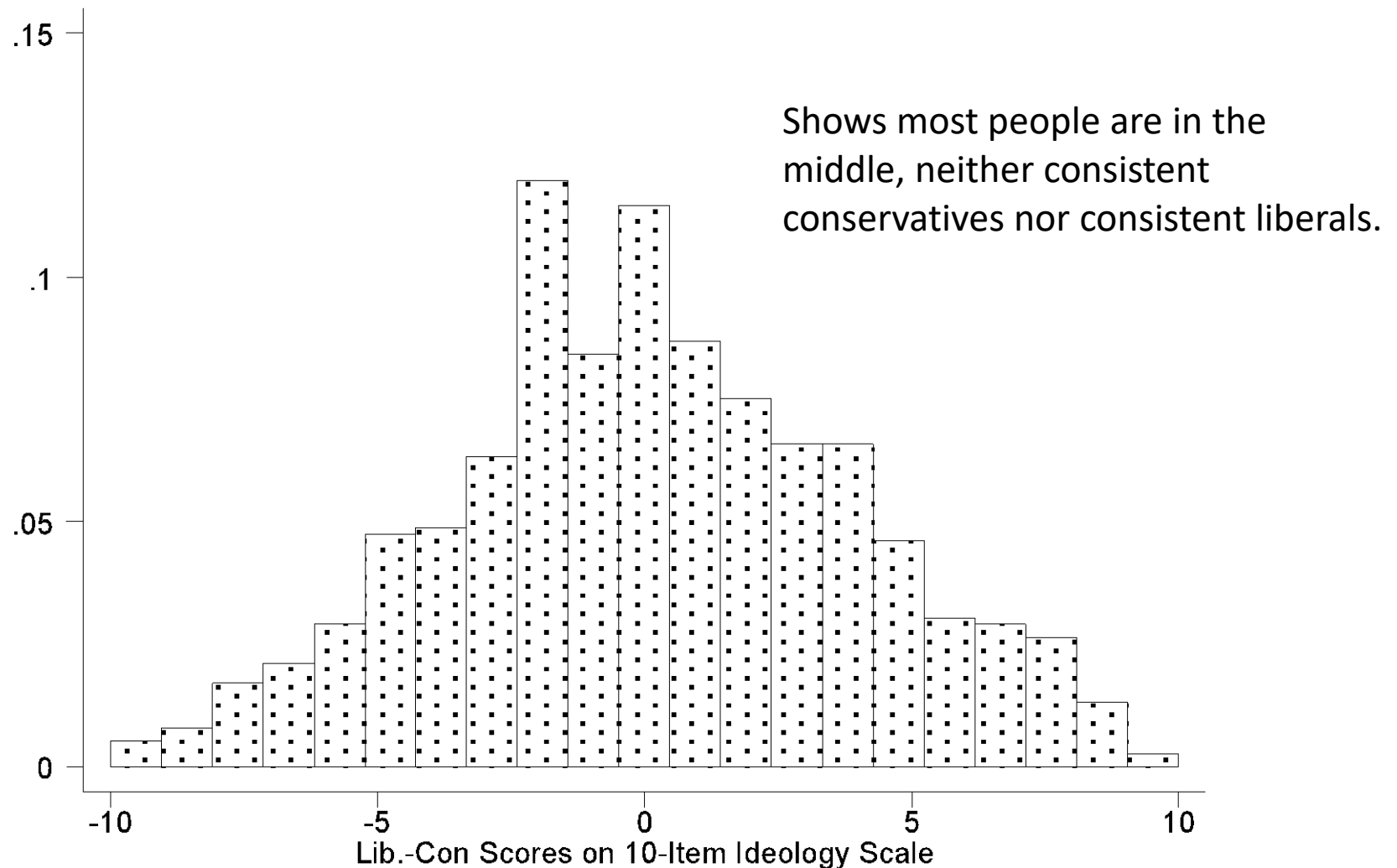
Total % conservative   Total % moderate   Total % liberal

Based on annual averages

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# Left-Right opinion, 10 item scale, National Election Study

Shows most people are in the middle, neither consistent conservatives nor consistent liberals.

IV – How does partisanship shape public opinion?

Partisanship and Public Opinion

- Partisanship
  - Disposition towards political parties; often identification with one party or the other
- Partisanship is <u>the most powerful</u> determinant of political attitudes
  - It is relevant across all levels of political sophistication, education, etc.
- Partisanship and ideology are strongly correlated, but they are NOT the same thing
  - Correlation between the two has grown over time (sorting)
    - Conservatives have become Republicans and liberals have become Democrats

Partisanship and Public Opinion

- Partisanship determines opinions because people learn what they're supposed to think about issues from listening to co-partisan elites
  - Many people like to think they're free, independent thinkers, but almost none are; everyone just listens and copies what their partisan leaders say
  - 'Partisan elites' does not just mean elected officials; increasingly, it means media figures, entertainers
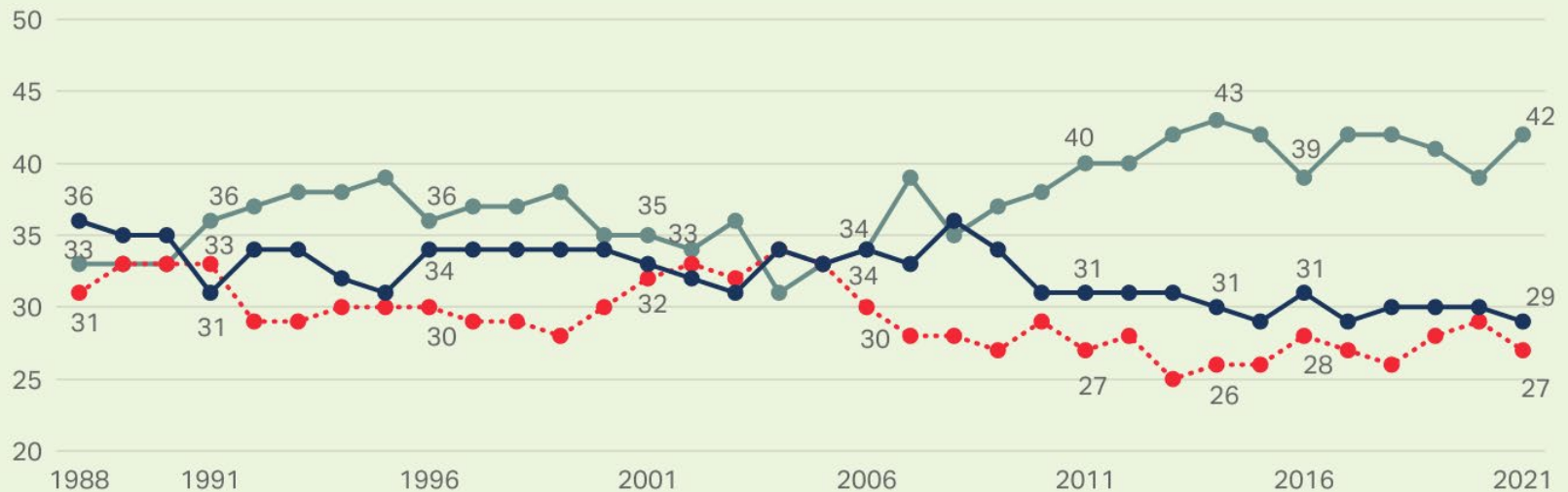 - There is feedback, but it can be weak & unreliable
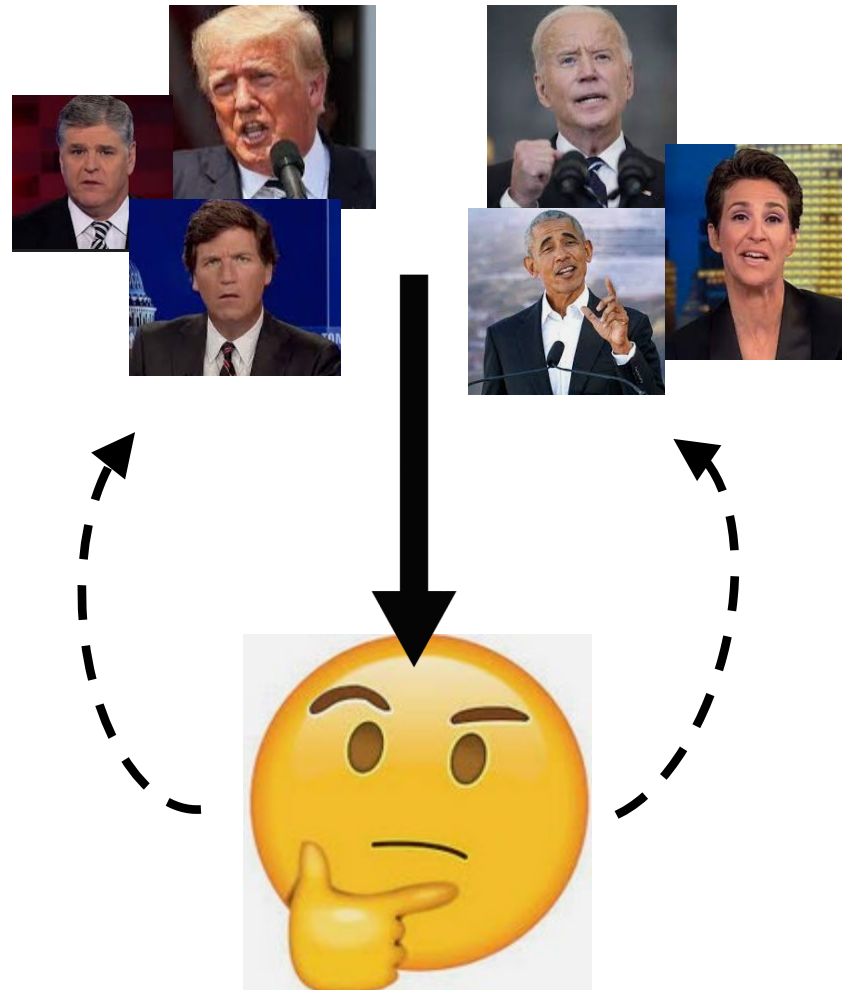
Trends in Partisanship

Party Identification, Annual Averages, 1988-2021

In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself -- [a Republican, a Democrat]] -- or an independent?

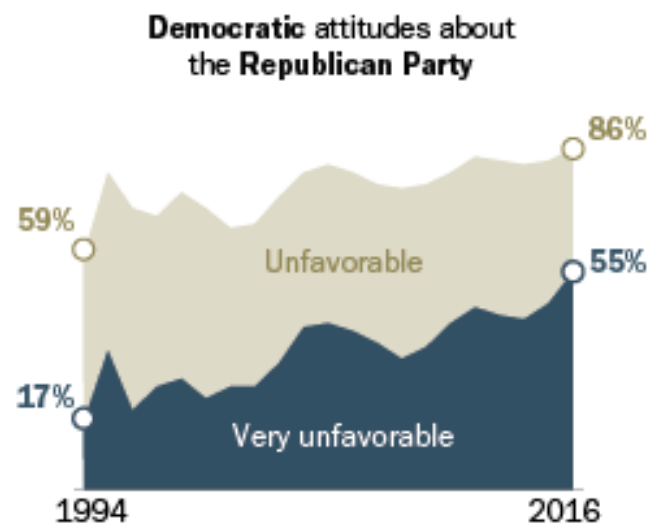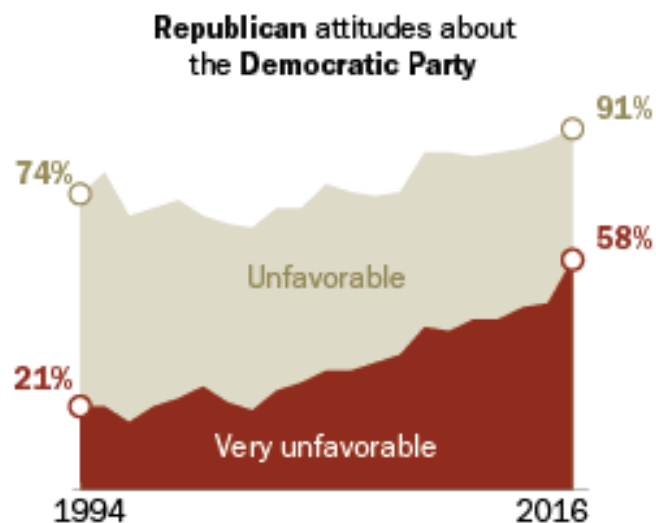— % Democrat   — % Independent   ···· % Republican

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Partisanship and Public Opinion

- A few important trends…
  - Growing antipathy between the two parties (negative partisanship)
  - Growing partisan differences by age
  - Growing partisan polarization on values/policy preferences
  - Growth among Independents

Public Opinion: Negative Partisanship
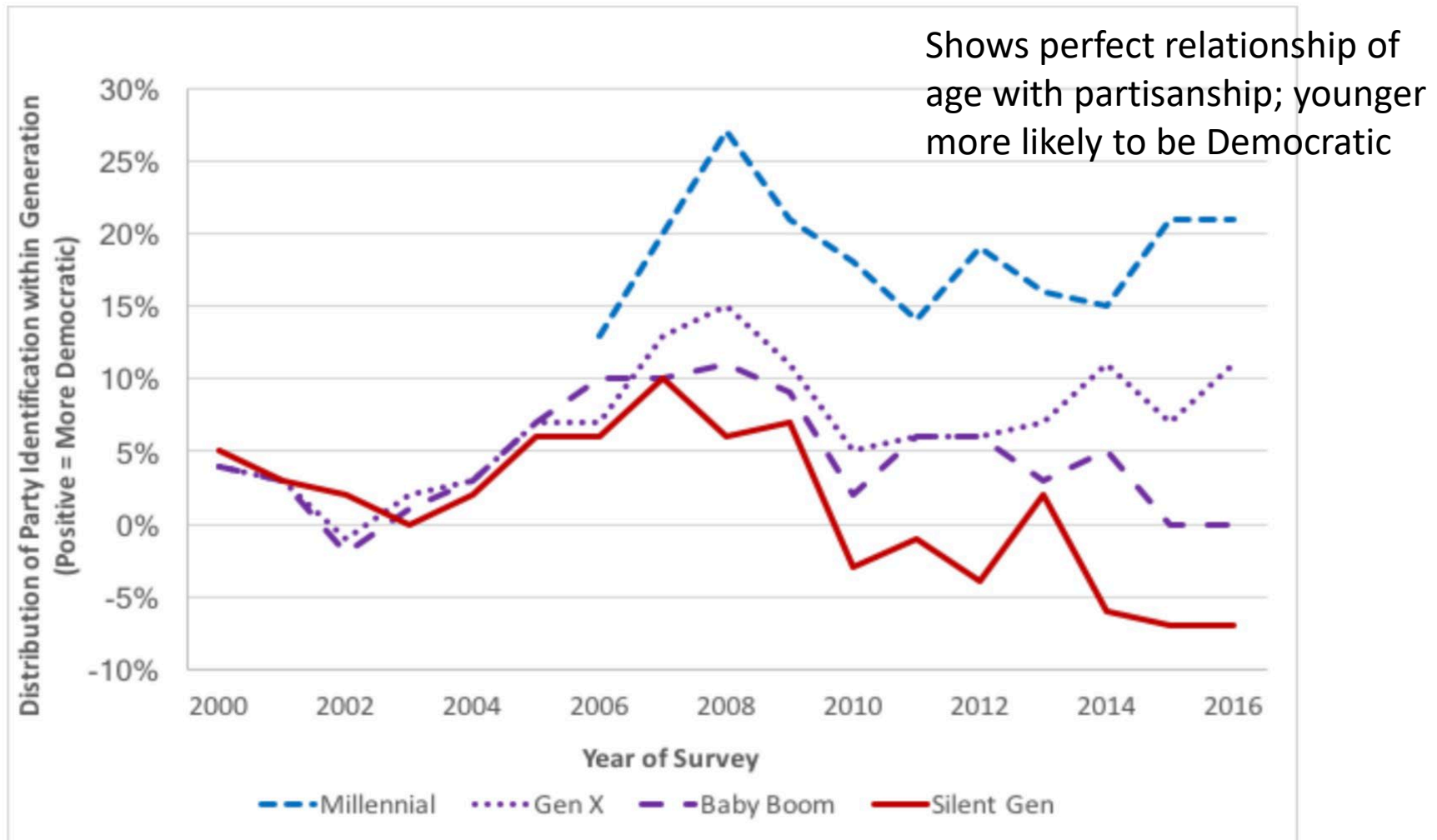
Majorities have deeply negative views of other party

Republican attitudes about
the **Democratic Party**

91%

74%

Unfavorable

58%

21%

Very unfavorable

1994   2016

Source: Survey conducted April 12-19, 2016.

Democratic attitudes about
the **Republican Party**

86%

59%

Unfavorable

55%

17%

Very unfavorable

1994   2016

Polarization in Public Opinion

Party Identification by Generation, 2000–2016

Shows perfect relationship of age with partisanship; younger more likely to be Democratic
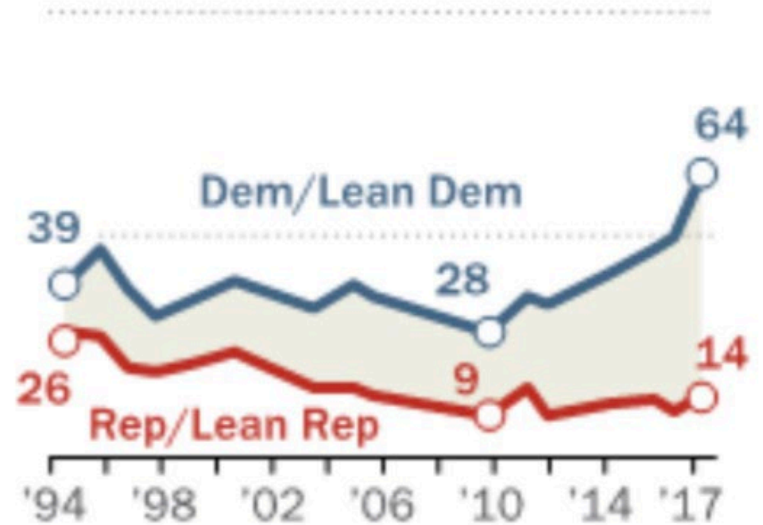
Polarization in Public Opinion

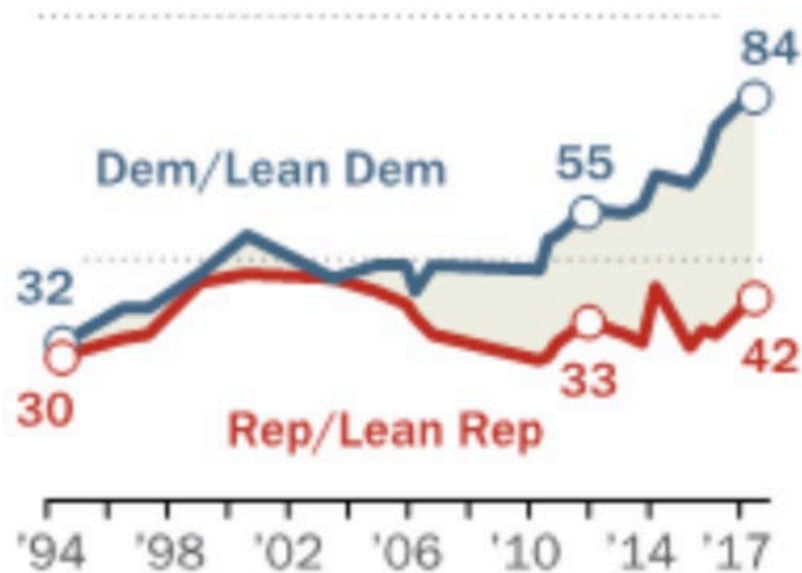Government should do more to help the needy
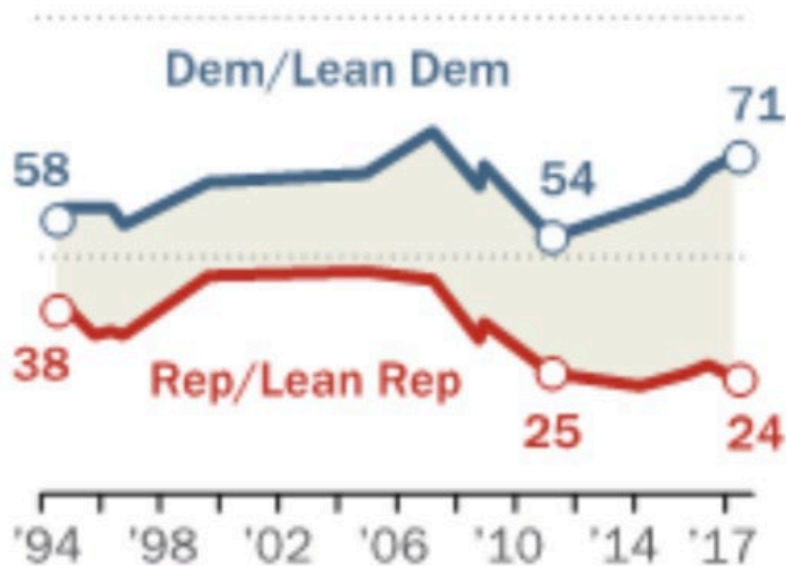
Racial discrimination is the main reason why many black people can't get ahead these days

Shows a growing divide between the parties on welfare and race

Polarization in Public Opinion

Immigrants strengthen the country with their hard work and talents
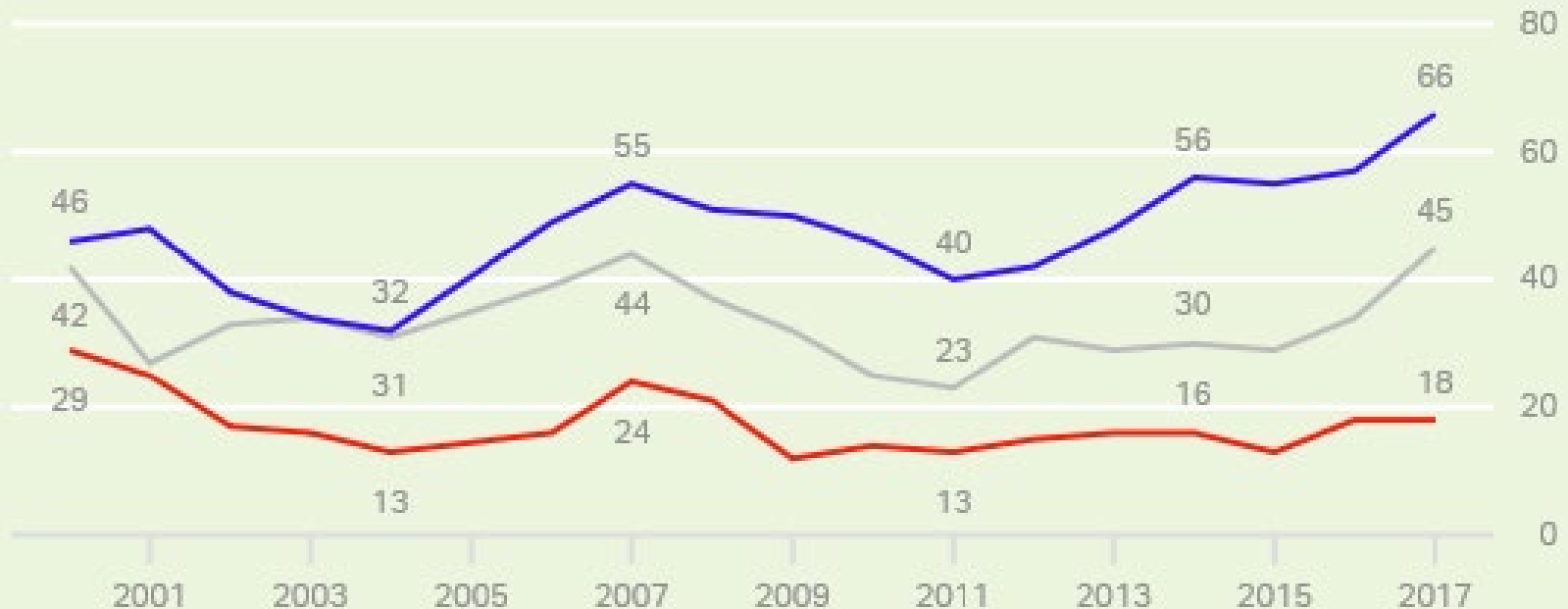
Shows growing divide between parties on immigration
(but notice the relatively high level—42%—of support among Republicans)
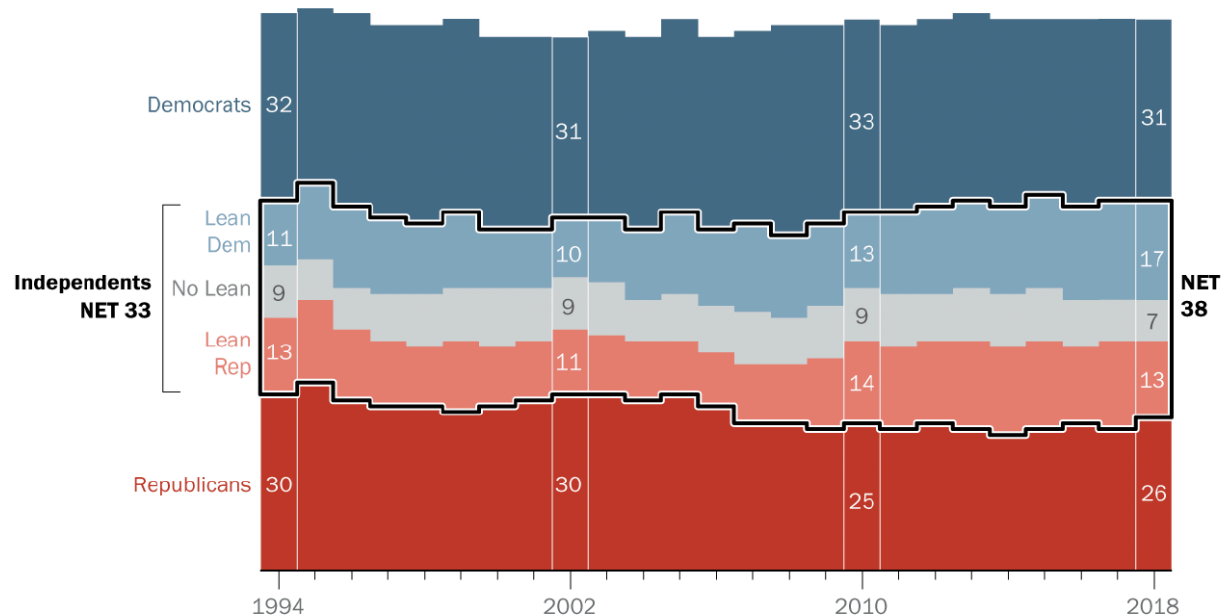
Polarization in Public Opinion

Shows growing divide between parties on climate change

Growth Among Independents

- Independents are largest 'partisan' group

- Vast majority are "leaners"
  - Vote and have mostly similar opinions as partisans
    - Are basically secret partisans
  - Some differ on key party issues
    - GOP leaners like immigration, marriage equality

Independents outnumber Republicans and Democrats, but few are truly independent

% who identify as ...

Democrats 32 | 31 | 33 | 31

Lean Dem 11 | 10 | 13 | 17
No Lean 9 | 9 | 9 | 7
Lean Rep 13 | 11 | 14 | 13

Independents NET 33

NET 38

Republicans 30 | 30 | 25 | 26

1994   2002   2010   2018

Note: Other party/Don't know responses not shown.
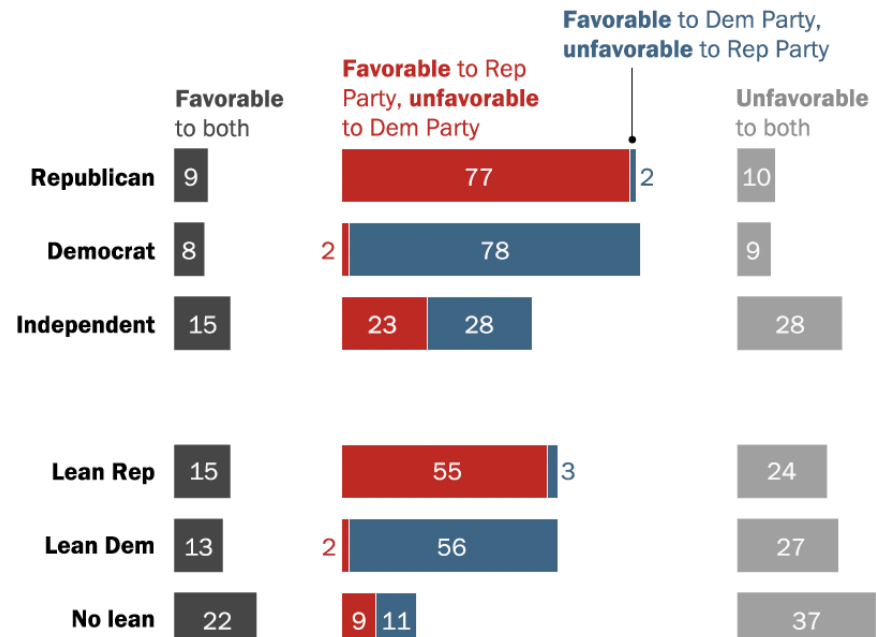Source: Annual totals of Pew Research Center survey data (U.S. adults).

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Growth Among Independents

- Independents more likely to dislike the parties
  - Many alienated by perceived 'bickering'
- Much less connected to politics
  - Less likely to be registered, or to vote
  - "Pure" independents most disconnected; Leaners more than partisans

Independents who do not lean toward a party are more likely to have unfavorable views of both parties

% who are ...

Favorable to Dem Party, **unfavorable** to Rep Party

Favorable to Rep Party, **unfavorable** to Dem Party

Favorable to both

Unfavorable to both

	Favorable to both	Favorable to Rep/unfav Dem	Fav Dem/unfav Rep	Unfavorable to both
Republican	9	77	2	10
Democrat	8	2 / 78		9
Independent	15	23 / 28		28
Lean Rep	15	55	3	24
Lean Dem	13	2 / 56		27
No lean	22	9 / 11		37

Note: Don't know responses not shown.
Source: Annual total of 2018 Pew Research Center survey data (U.S. adults).

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