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REPORT | JUNE 12, 2014

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Political Polarization in the American Public

How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise and Everyday Life

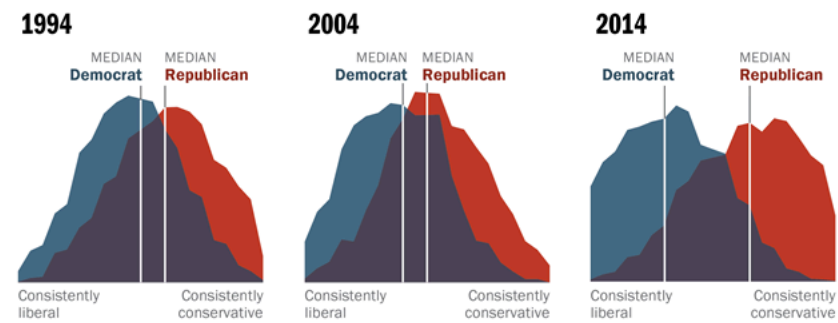
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Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines – and partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive – than at any point in the last two decades. These trends manifest themselves in myriad ways, both in politics and in everyday life. And a new survey of 10,000 adults nationwide finds that these divisions are greatest among those who are the most engaged and active in the political process.

Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past

Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public
Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats; the red area of Republicans. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple. Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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The overall share of Americans who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions has doubled over the past two decades from 10% to 21%. And ideological thinking is now much more closely aligned with partisanship than in the past. As a result, ideological overlap between the two parties has diminished: Today, 92% of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, and 94% of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican.

Partisan animosity has increased substantially over the same period. In each party, the share with a highly negative view of the opposing party has more than doubled since 1994.

REPORT MATERIALS

- Report PDF
- Topline
- Detailed Tables
- Key Shareable Findings
- Interactive: U.S. Political Polarization: 1994 – 2014
- 2014 Political Polarization Survey

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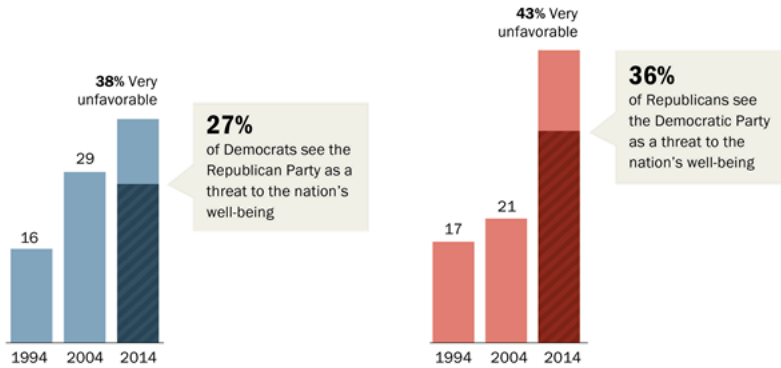
Most of these intense partisans believe the opposing party's policies "are so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being."

Key Shareable Findings

Beyond Dislike: Viewing the Other Party as a 'Threat to the Nation's Well-Being'

Democratic attitudes about the Republican Party

Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Notes: Questions about whether the Republican and Democratic Parties are a threat to the nation's well being asked only in 2014. Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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"Ideological silos" are now common on both the left and right. People with down-the-line ideological positions – especially conservatives – are more likely than others to say that most of their close friends share their political views. Liberals and conservatives disagree over where they want to live, the kind of people they want to live around and even whom they would welcome into their families.

And at a time of increasing gridlock on Capitol Hill, many on both the left and the right think the outcome of political negotiations between Obama and Republican leaders should be that their side gets more of what it wants.

These sentiments are not shared by all – or even most – Americans. The majority do not have uniformly conservative or liberal views. Most do not see either party as a threat to the nation. And more believe their representatives in government should meet halfway to resolve contentious disputes rather than hold out for more of what they want.

Yet many of those in the center remain on the edges of the political playing field, relatively distant and disengaged, while the most ideologically oriented and politically rancorous Americans make their voices heard through greater participation in every stage of the political process.

The rise of ideological uniformity has been much more pronounced among those who are the most politically active. Today, almost four-in-ten (38%) politically engaged Democrats are consistent liberals, up from just 8% in 1994. The change among Republicans since then appears less dramatic – 33% express consistently conservative views, up from 23% in the midst of the 1994 "Republican Revolution." But a decade ago, just 10% of politically engaged Republicans had across-the-board conservative attitudes.

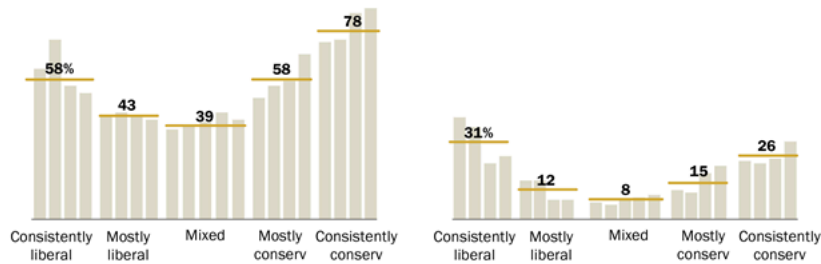
Political Activism Gap: Right and Left More Likely to Vote, Donate to Campaigns



Percent who **always** vote



Percent who contributed to a **political** candidate or group in the past two years



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Note: Bars represent the level of participation at each point on an ideological consistency scale of 10 political values questions. Figures are reported on the five ideological consistency groups used throughout the report (see Appendix A).

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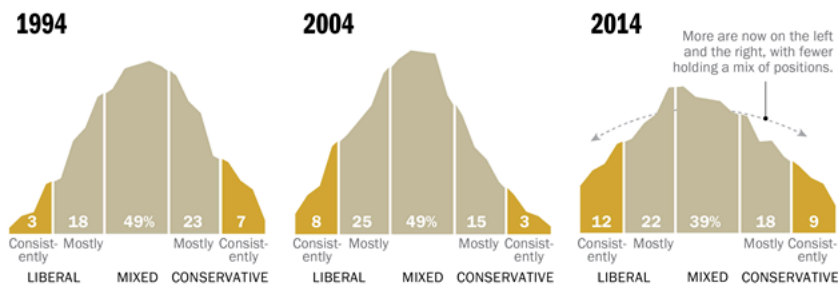
On measure after measure – whether primary voting, writing letters to officials, volunteering for or donating to a campaign – the most politically polarized are more actively involved in politics, amplifying the voices that are the least willing to see the parties meet each other halfway.

These are among the findings of the largest study of U.S. political attitudes ever undertaken by the Pew Research Center. Data are drawn from a national telephone survey of 10,013 adults, conducted from January through March of this year, and an ongoing series of follow-up surveys. This rich dataset, coupled with trends and insights from two decades of Pew Research Center polling, reveals a complex picture of partisan polarization and how it manifests itself in political behaviors, policy debates, election dynamics and everyday life.

What Polarization Looks Like

Growing Minority Holds Consistent Ideological Views

On a 10-item scale of political values, % who are...



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions. (See Appendix A for details on how the scale is constructed and how scores are grouped.)

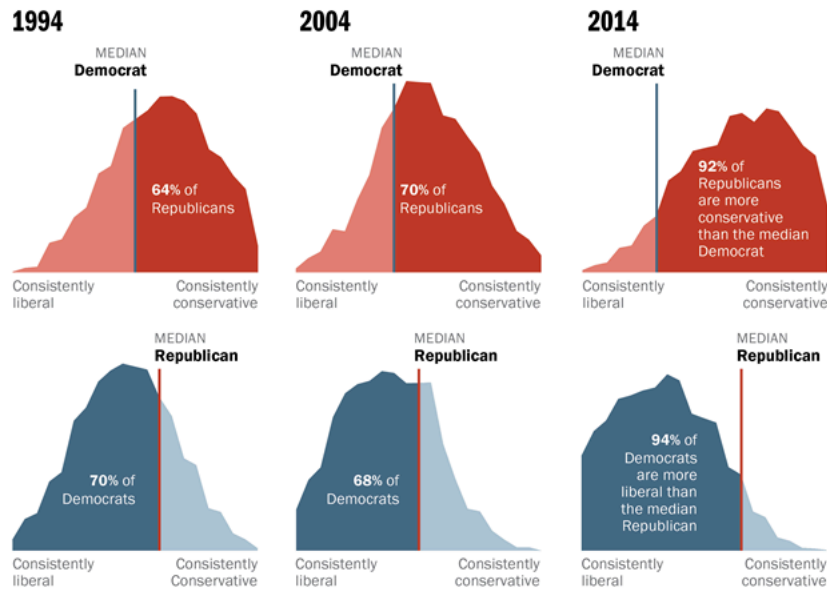
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To chart the progression of ideological thinking, responses to 10 political values questions asked on multiple Pew Research surveys since 1994 have been combined to create [a measure of ideological consistency](#). Over the past twenty years, the number of Americans in the “tails” of this ideological distribution has doubled from 10% to 21%. Meanwhile, the center has shrunk: 39% currently take a roughly equal number of liberal and conservative positions. That is down from about half (49%) of the public in surveys conducted in 1994 and 2004.

And this shift represents both Democrats moving to the left and Republicans moving to the right, with less and less overlap between the parties. Today, 92% of Republicans are to the right of the median (middle) Democrat, compared with 64% twenty years ago. And 94% of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican, up from 70% in 1994.

Republicans Shift to the Right, Democrats to the Left

Distribution of Republicans and Democrats on a 10-item scale of political values



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public.

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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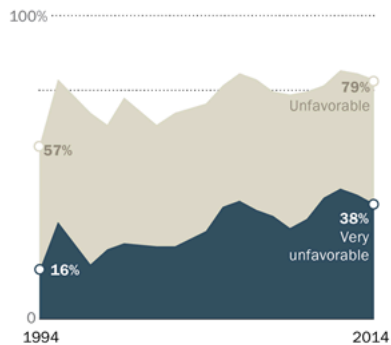
More Negative Views of the Opposing Party

Beyond the rise in ideological consistency, another major element in polarization has been the growing contempt that many Republicans and Democrats have for the opposing party. To be sure, disliking the other party is nothing new in politics. But today, these sentiments are broader and deeper than in the recent past.

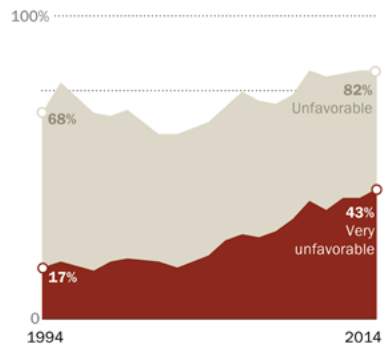
In 1994, hardly a time of amicable partisan relations, a majority of Republicans had unfavorable impressions of the Democratic Party, but just 17% had *very* unfavorable opinions. Similarly, while most Democrats viewed the GOP unfavorably, just 16% had *very* unfavorable views. Since then, highly negative views have more than doubled: 43% of Republicans and 38% of Democrats now view the opposite party in strongly negative terms.

A Rising Tide of Mutual Antipathy

Democratic attitudes about the Republican Party



Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Note: Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents.

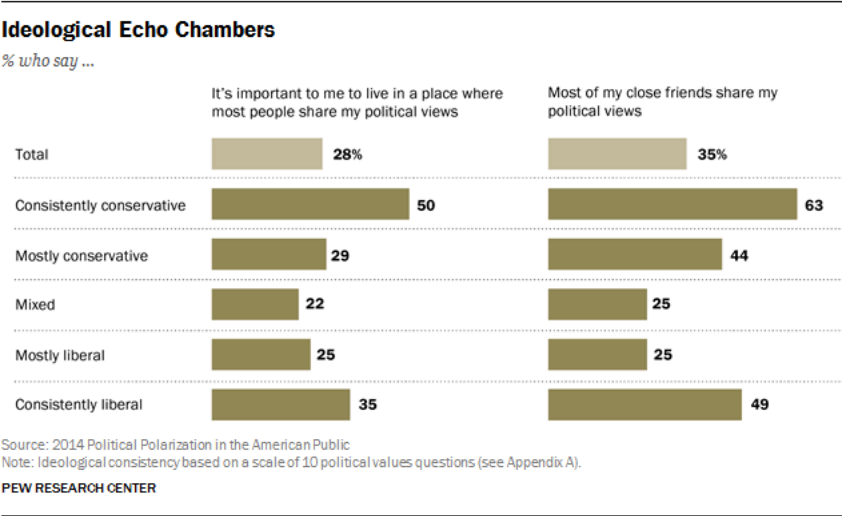
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Even these numbers tell only part of the story. Those who have a very unfavorable impression of each party were asked: "Would you say the party's policies are so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being, or wouldn't you go that far?" Most who were

asked the question said yes, they would go that far. Among all Democrats, 27% say the GOP is a threat to the well-being of the country. That figure is even higher among Republicans, 36% of whom think Democratic policies threaten the nation.

Politics Gets Personal

Liberals and conservatives share a passion for politics. They are far more likely than those with more mixed ideological views to discuss politics on a weekly or daily basis. But for many, particularly on the right, those conversations may not include much in the way of opposing opinions.



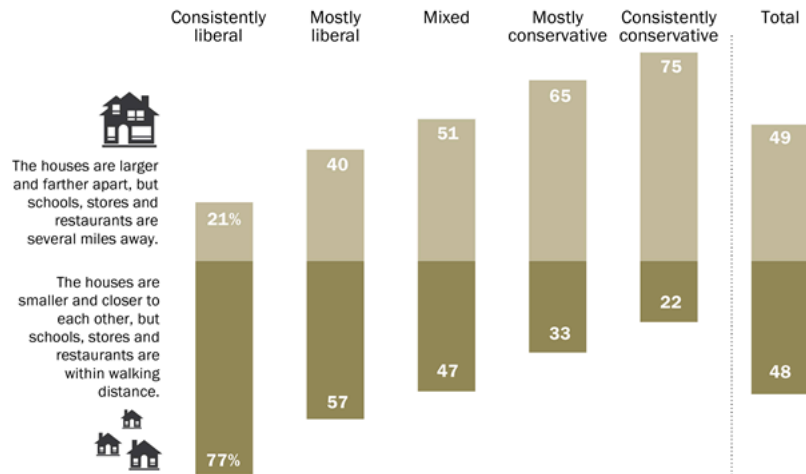
Nearly two-thirds (63%) of consistent conservatives and about half (49%) of consistent liberals say most of their close friends share their political views. Among those with mixed ideological values, just 25% say the same. People on the right and left also are more likely to say it is important to them to live in a place where most people share their political views, though again, that desire is more widespread on the right (50%) than on the left (35%).

And while few Americans overall go so far as to voice disappointment with the prospect of a family member marrying a Democrat (8%) or a Republican (9%), that sentiment is not uncommon on the left or the right. Three-out-of-ten (30%) consistent conservatives say they would be unhappy if an immediate family member married a Democrat and about a quarter (23%) of across-the-board liberals say the same about the prospect of a Republican in-law.

To be sure, there are areas of consensus. Most Americans, regardless of their ideological preferences, value communities in which they would live close to extended family and high-quality schools. But far more liberals than conservatives think it is important that a community have racial and ethnic diversity (76% vs. 20%). At the same time, conservatives are more likely than liberals to attach importance to living in a place where many people share their religious faith (57% vs. 17% of liberals).

Liberals Want Walkable Communities, Conservatives Prefer More Room

Would you prefer to live in a community where...



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). "Don't know" responses not shown.

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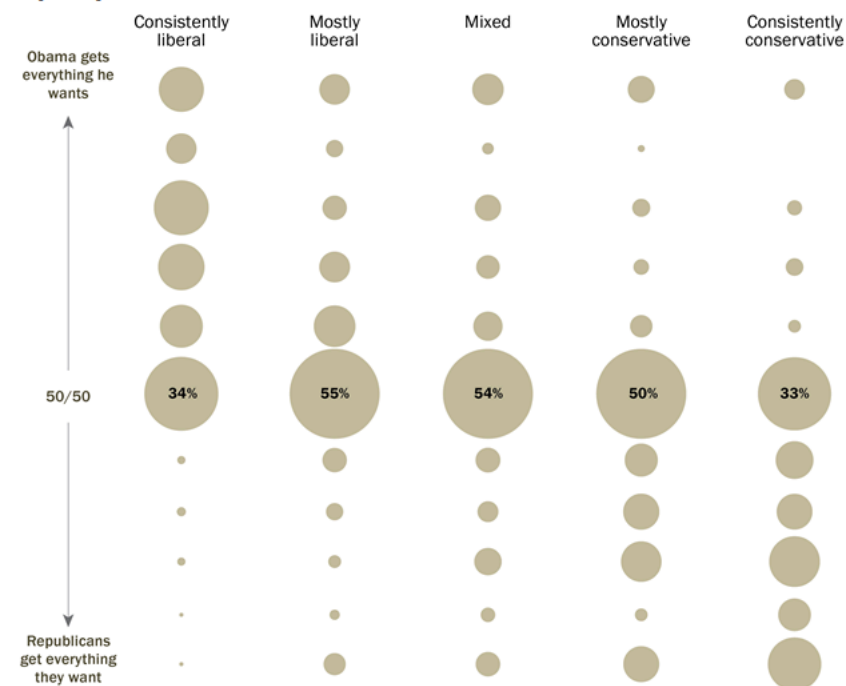
And the differences between right and left go beyond disagreements over politics, friends and neighbors. If they could choose anywhere to live, three-quarters of consistent conservatives prefer a community where “the houses are larger and farther apart, but schools, stores, and restaurants are several miles away.” The preferences of consistent liberals are almost the exact inverse, with 77% saying they’d chose to live where “the houses are smaller and closer to each other, but schools, stores, and restaurants are within walking distance.”

Polarization's Consequences

When they look at a political system in which little seems to get done, most Americans in the center of the electorate think that Obama and Republican leaders should simply meet each other halfway in addressing the issues facing the nation.

Compromise in the Eye of the Beholder

When Barack Obama and Republican leaders differ over the most important issues facing the country, where should things end up?



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public
 Notes: Question asks respondents where, on a scale of zero to 100, Obama and Republican leaders should end up when addressing the most important issues facing the country. See topline for complete question wording. Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A).

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Yet an equitable deal is in the eye of the beholder, as both liberals and conservatives define the optimal political outcome as one in which their side gets more of what it wants. A majority of consistent conservatives (57%) say the ideal agreement between President Obama and congressional Republicans is one in which GOP leaders hold out for more of their goals. Consistent liberals take the opposite view: Their preferred terms (favored by 62%) end up closer to Obama's position than the GOP's.

Polarization in Red and Blue

The signs of political polarization are evident on both ends of the political spectrum, though the trajectory, nature and extent differ from left to right.

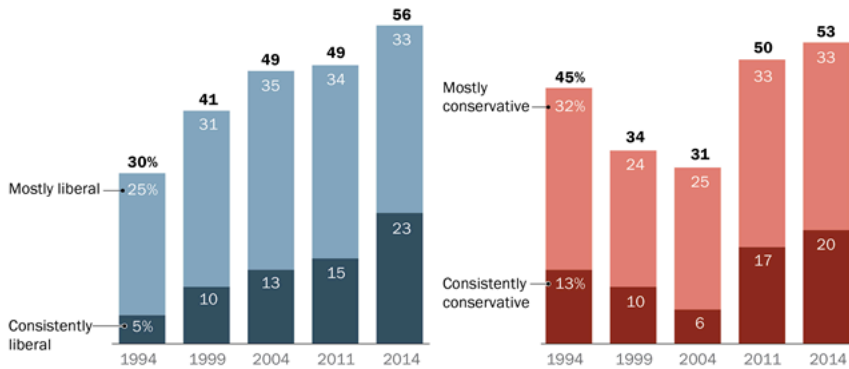
With Barack Obama in the White House, partisan antipathy is more pronounced among Republicans, especially consistently conservative Republicans. Overall, more Republicans than Democrats see the opposing party's policies as a threat and the differences are even greater when ideology is taken into account. Fully 66% of consistently conservative Republicans think the Democrats' policies threaten the nation's well-being. By comparison, half (50%) of consistently liberal Democrats say Republican policies jeopardize the nation's well-being. Conservatives also exhibit more partisan behavior in their personal lives; they are the most likely to have friends and prefer communities of like-minded people.

However, there is as much ideological uniformity on the left as the right. The share of Democrats holding consistently liberal views has grown steadily over the past 20 years, quadrupling from 5% in 1994 to 23% today. Social issues like homosexuality and immigration that once drove deep divides within the Democratic Party are now areas of relative consensus. And Democrats have become more uniformly critical of business and more supportive of government.

More Democrats Take Liberal Positions, More Republicans Take Conservative Positions

Percent of Democrats with political values that are...

Percent of Republicans with political values that are...



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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Changes in ideological consistency on the right have followed a different course. In 1994, during the “Republican Revolution,” 13% of Republicans were consistent conservatives. That figure *fell* to 6% a decade later during George W. Bush’s presidency, before rebounding to 20% today. This increase has come despite more moderate views among Republicans on issues like homosexuality and immigration, as GOP thinking on issues related to government and the economy has veered sharply to the right.

About the Study

This is the first report of a multi-part series based on a national survey of 10,013 adults nationwide, conducted January 23-March 16, 2014 by the Pew Research Center. The survey, funded in part through grants from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and supported by the generosity of Don C. and Jeane M. Bertsch, is aimed at understanding the nature and scope of political polarization in the American public, and how it interrelates with government, society and people’s personal lives.

The second report, coming in a few weeks, is the new Pew Research Center *Political Typology*. The typology – the sixth such study since 1987 – looks beyond Red vs. Blue divisions to gain a clearer understanding of the dynamic nature of the “center” of the American electorate, and the internal divides on both the left and the right.

Later, the project will explore the various factors that contribute to political polarization, or stem from it. A September report will examine how political polarization is linked to people’s information environments: Their news sources, social media habits and interpersonal communication networks. Other reports will look at how political polarization relates to where people live, to their political environments, to how they view themselves and others around them, to their socioeconomic circumstances, to generational changes and to broader sociological and psychological personality traits.

The current report is divided into five parts: The first two focus on measuring the *nature and scope* of political polarization, emphasizing the difference between growing ideological consistency and rising partisan antipathy. The third looks closely at how polarization manifests itself in people’s *personal lives*. The fourth looks at the relationship between polarization and *practical policymaking*, and the fifth digs deeper into how *political participation* both amplifies and reflects polarization.

About the Data








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