

The Battleground: Division at the Core of American Politics, a Democratic Perspective

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Democratic Strategic Analysis:

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Americans' outlook on the state of the country continues to be quite negative according to the most recent Battleground Poll. Voters simply do not like how they perceive the country to be moving, no matter what issue they focus on, from the exorbitant cost of living to frequent tragic news stories to the continued political division in America. Every demographic group now net believes the country to be on the wrong track. Just as it was in the last Battleground survey, the pessimism that Americans have about the state of the country is plainly reflected in this survey, principally in the towering proportion of voters who say the country is moving in the wrong direction and in Joe Biden's low job performance rating.

Voters continue to be concerned about the level of divisiveness in the country. The average rating of the seriousness of political division in the country remains strikingly high, having inched up since the last survey in January. Many voters continue to believe that the nation is on the edge of a civil war. **This survey sheds a light into one of the principal sources of the political division in the country: Americans tend to mostly interact with people like them. In almost every category of life, voters tend to interact with people who are similar to themselves. Importantly, in January, a majority of voters expressed that they had faith in the next generation because of their commitment to making the country a better place for everyone. Since January, it appears voters have become more divided on how optimistic they are that young people will build a better future, with the decline coming from partisans on both sides of the aisle, younger voters, and seniors.**

This survey also tackles January 6th and the issue of election integrity. The committee investigation has penetration among a remarkable number of Democrats and independents. A

majority of voters have faith that the next elections will be free, fair and violence-free, but an alarmingly high portion of voters are not so optimistic.

Voters' Mood and Issue Agenda

Not only do Americans remain abysmally depressed about the way things are going in the country, but they have become even more pessimistic since the last Battleground survey conducted in January. Just 17% of voters say things are heading in the right direction (including only 7% who feel that way strongly). In contrast, a 77% majority believes the country is on the wrong track, including fully two-thirds (67%) who feel that way strongly. These numbers represent a large drop since January, when 32% said the country was heading in the right direction and 62% said it was on the wrong track.

Republicans are especially unhappy about the direction of the country (6% right direction, 93% wrong track), which represents virtually no change since January (6% right direction, 92% wrong track). A majority of independents are pessimistic as well (13% right direction, 78% wrong track) and have become marginally more pessimistic since January (19% right direction, 72% wrong track). Democrats' views have changed the most since January. They are the least pessimistic but are still extremely pessimistic. Today, just 28% of Democrats say the country is moving in the right direction, while 62% believe it is on the wrong track, which is a huge drop from January (59% right direction, 32% wrong track). Usually, the party in power believes the country is moving in the right direction but dissatisfaction is widespread.

The overall portion of voters who say the country is moving in the wrong direction has increased since January, when voters overall were already extremely pessimistic about the direction of the country, because a substantial higher portion of Democrats say the country is on the wrong track. In January, the first Omicron wave was causing a ruckus and the price of living was rising. Since then, the cost of living has gotten worse and COVID has begun to tick up again. The portion of independents and Republicans who said the country was on the wrong track did not have much further to fall, but the portion of Democrats did, as over half said the country was moving in the right direction. The recent news cycle has damaged the Democrats' optimism.

We are seeing record high temperatures both in the United States and globally. There was recently a white supremacist shooting in Buffalo and school shooting in Uvalde, Texas. Then, the Supreme Court had a spate of far-right rulings, ending New York's concealed carry laws, overturning Roe v. Wade and overturning EPA authority, among other things. These are the types of policies and events that the Democrats voted Biden to end, but fifty-two senators and the Supreme Court have blocked a lot of what Democrats wanted.

Joe Biden and the Midterms

Joe Biden's job performance rating has suffered from the same factors that are causing the country to feel even more down on the direction it is moving. His job performance is most highly correlated with feelings about the economy. Forty-two percent of voters approve of the job Joe Biden is doing as President, including 18% who approve strongly, while 55% disapprove, including 46% who disapprove strongly. Unsurprisingly, Republicans do not like the job he is doing (6% approve, 93% disapprove). A majority of independents do not like the job he is doing either (33% approve, 62% disapprove), while a majority of Democrats approve (77% approve, 18% disapprove). Black voters approve of the job that Biden is doing (67% approve, 25% disapprove), while white voters (36% approve, 62% disapprove) and Latino voters (45% approve, 53% disapprove) disapprove. Men (36% approve, 61% disapprove) disapprove of and women are split on (47% approve, 50% disapprove) the job the President is doing.

While the President's job performance ratings have suffered, voters do not appear to be as intent on punishing the Democrats for his job performance as one may expect. In the upcoming House race, 48% of voters say they will vote for the Democratic candidate in their district (including 45% strongly), 46% say they will vote for the Republican (42% strongly) and 6% of voters are undecided. To put this two-point Democratic lead into perspective, it is well within the margin of error of the 2020 vote, when Democrats won the national House of Representatives vote by 3%, which was enough to retain their majority.

Unsurprisingly, Republicans overwhelmingly plan on voting for the Republican candidate (3% Democratic candidate, 93% Republican candidate, 4% undecided) and Democrats

overwhelmingly say they plan on voting for the Democratic candidate (92% Democratic candidate, 4% Republican candidate, 4% undecided). **Independent voters narrowly favor the Democrats as well (41% Democratic candidate, 37% Republican candidate, 22% undecided).** There is a large gender gap. Men plan on voting for the Republican candidate (41% Democratic candidate, 53% Republican candidate, 6% undecided) while women plan on supporting the Democratic candidate (55% Democratic candidate, 40% Republican candidate, 5% undecided). Looking at age, voters 18-34 are much more likely to support the Democratic candidate, (59% Democratic candidate, 35% Republican candidate, 7% undecided) as well as seniors (51% Democratic candidate, 43% Republican candidate, 6% undecided). Voters age 45-64 are much more likely to support the Republican candidate (43% Democratic candidate, 52% Republican candidate, 6% undecided), while voters age 35-44 are almost evenly split (47% Democratic candidate, 48% Republican candidate, 5% undecided). Black voters (81% Democratic candidate, 14% Republican candidate, 5% undecided) plan on supporting their Democratic candidate while Latino voters (44% Democratic candidate, 47% Republican candidate, 8% undecided) and white voters (44% Democratic candidate, 52% Republican candidate, 5% undecided) say they will vote for the Republican. Also looking at 2022 vote likelihood by party identification, Republicans currently have a 2% lead over Democrats among those who say they are extremely likely to vote.

This begs the question: given that voters think that the country is moving in the wrong direction, perceive the cost of living to be spiraling out of control and give Joe Biden negative job performance ratings—all of which conventional wisdom says leads to large losses for the incumbent’s party in midterm years—how are the Democrats still narrowly ahead in the generic house vote? Firstly, voters say that they do not think Joe Biden is doing a good job, but this does not mean they are unsympathetic to the task he has at hand. For instance, they understand that part of the cost-of-living increase is rooted in the war in Ukraine and supply chain issues, both problems that exist because of factors that are literally halfway across the world. They may conclude that while Biden may not be doing a good job of keeping down the cost of living, there is only so much of it he can control, and, moreover, they do not expect their Member of Congress to fix the entire world economy. Secondly, many voters believe that the GOP is not providing a good alternative to the Democrats, and on many issues still prefer the Democrats.

Voters do not like either party, but dislike Republicans even more than Democrats and since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, favorability towards the Republicans has declined. For instance, a strong majority of voters disapprove of the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, but even if they may want more from Biden, they are hardly going to vote for the GOP if they want to expand abortion rights. Voters may not think the firefighters have done a good job extinguishing the flames, but that does not mean they will vote for arsonists.

Views on Division and the Future

As has been the trend in the past several years of this poll, voters believe that divisions in this country are running dangerously high. Overall, on a scale of 0 to 100, where "0" means there is no political division in the country and where "100" means there is political division on the edge of a civil war, Americans give a mean score of 71.74 which is very similar to, though slightly up from, the average number of 70.36 in January. In the current survey, the mean score of division is similar among Republicans (72.59), independents (66.13), and Democrats (72.06).

When asked how bad division in the country will be a year from now, Americans overall think that the division will be slightly reduced, but still soberingly high, with an average mean on the same scale of 68.93, compared to 71.74 for the perceived mean on division today. Republicans believe that the division in the country will be slightly lower one year from now than it is now (69.49 mean, compared to the current division mean level of 72.59) compared to independents (64.62 mean on the same scale, compared to the current division mean level of 66.13) and Democrats (69.23 mean on the same scale, compared to the current division mean level of 72.06). **These predictions of future division have become slightly more optimistic among Republicans and independents, but slightly more pessimistic among Democrats.**

When we polled in January, we said in our memo that "easily the most positive piece of news out of the whole survey" was the high percentage of voters who agreed with the statement "I am optimistic about the future because young people are committed to making this country a better place to live for everyone." Unfortunately, this has diminished greatly. In January, over half of voters agreed (58% agree, 38% disagree). In the latest survey, 47% of voters agree while

50% disagree, a net 23-point drop. The drop has come more so among partisans than independents. In January, 34% of Republicans agreed with the statement, while 61% disagreed. Today, 23% of Republicans agree with the statement while 74% disagree. In January, 82% of Democrats agreed with the statement while 15% disagreed. Today, 70% of Democrats agree with the statement while 28% disagree. Independents have actually maintained their marginal optimism about young people in the future. In January, 51% of independents agreed with the statement while 44% disagreed. Today, 51% of independents agree with the statement while 46% disagree. Looking at this statement by age, voters age 18-34 (55% agree, 43% disagree) have experienced the largest drops in agreement since January (74% agree, 23% disagree). There has also been a significant drop for voters age 45-64 (39% agree, 57% disagree) from January (57% agree, 38% disagree). There has been only modest negative movement for seniors (Now 57% agree, 40% disagree; January 61% agree, 32% disagree) and no movement for voters 35-44 (45% agree, 53% disagree).

Sources of Division

What is the source of America's continued division? Bill Bishop suggests in *The Big Sort* that we as Americans are increasingly moving to live among likeminded people and interacting with people similar to ourselves and this is driving society apart. This is born out in this survey.

A majority of voters say that their close friends and families are remarkably similar to themselves. A majority say that all or most of their friends (53%) "share the same religious beliefs" as they do while 45% say some or none do. Similarly, a plurality or majority of voters say that most of their close friends and family "share the same political beliefs" (60% all/most, 38% some/none), "are in the same ethnic group" (67% all/most, 32% some/none), "are in the same economic class" (51% all/most, 47% some/none), "vote for the same candidates" (55% all/most, 37% some/none) and "are in the same political party" (57% all/most, 40% some/none) as they are. And with the exception of sharing their economic class, Republicans and Democrats are both more likely than independents to have "a lot" or "some" of their friends fit all of these aforementioned criteria than independents.

The one item that a majority of voters say “some” or “none” of their close friends and family share is “have the same type of job as you” (14% all/most, 83% some/none). **While this does mean that most voters are exposed to others who in some ways are not like them, if a lawyer and an accountant vote for the same candidates, are in the same political party, are in the same social class, are the same race, and attend religious services together, their friendship will probably not expose them to vastly differing views on political and social issues.** In order to unroot political divisions in our country, Americans will need to do a better job mingling with people from very different walks of life with very different views and beliefs, and this is not happening.

The tragic everyday impact these divisions have on Americans are also made clear in this survey. **Nearly half of voters (49%) agree with the statement “I often avoid bringing up politics with my friends and family to avoid conflicts” while 50% disagree.** This trend exists across the political spectrum, though Republicans (43% agree, 57% disagree) are more likely to disagree than independents (51% agree, 46% disagree) and Democrats (54% agree, 45% disagree).

And 28% of voters agree with the statement “I have family members with whom I can no longer talk because their views about politics and current events are so different than my beliefs” while 71% disagree. This is also more apparent among Democrats (35% agree, 65% disagree) than independents (24% agree, 73% disagree) and Republicans (22% agree, 77% disagree), but is still tragically common across the board.

January 6th

A majority of voters are at least aware that the January 6th committee exists, with only a third not following the hearings at all. Fifteen percent of voters say they are following the committee’s work extremely closely, 18% say they are following it very closely, 29% say they are following it somewhat closely and only 37% say they are not following it at all. But unsurprisingly, there are deep political divisions in the who is following the hearings. Twelve percent of Republicans say they are following the work of the committee extremely or very closely, while 60% say not at all closely. Thirty-one percent of independents say they are following the work of the committee

extremely or very closely, and only a third of independents are not following at all closely. That is a surprising level of penetration among independents. But 53% of Democrats are following the work of the committee extremely or very closely, while only 16% say they are not following it closely at all.

A majority of voters agree with the statement that “even though there were some problems in 2020, I think the elections in 2022 are going to be peaceful” (58% agree, including 22% who agree strongly, 35% disagree, including 17% who disagree strongly). There are few partisan differences in responses to this question. A majority of Republicans (55% agree, 38% disagree), independents (61% agree, 31% disagree) and Democrats (60% agree, 34% disagree) agree with the statement.

Two-thirds of voters agree with the statement “I believe the 2022 elections will be fair,” including 36% who agree strongly with that statement, while 28% disagree with that statement, including 18% who disagree strongly. But this masks partisan divides on the question. Fifty-three percent of Republicans agree with the statement, while 39% disagree. Sixty-five percent of independents agree, while 26% disagree. And 79% of Democrats agree, while 19% disagree.

The reason that so many Republicans believe that the next election will not be fair is the rhetoric that Trump and the Republicans have been espousing for years, including during the 2020 election campaign, even after it was clear that the voters chose Joe Biden. For example, even after the events of January 6th, a majority of Republicans in the House of Representatives still voted to not certify the election results, and even fewer voted to impeach Trump for his role in encouraging the violent mob and openly trying to convince Georgia’s Secretary of State to find more ballots. A large faction of the Republican voter base still disagrees with independents and Democrats because they continue to hear false claims about the 2020 election from conservative media and figureheads like Trump.

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