



DEMOCRACY IN THE BALANCE

Public attitudes in a shifting
political landscape

CONTENTS

3 Behind the Research

7 Key Findings

11 Democracy in Crisis

16 Deconstructing Democracy

22 Donald Trump's Threat to Democracy

BEHIND THE RESEARCH



WHY RESEARCH DEMOCRACY?

Democracy is a commonly used term to describe a whole bunch of different ideas – but what does it mean to different people? Is “democracy” the right word to capture their concerns?

SOME PEOPLE SAY THAT DEMOCRATS SHOULDN'T FOCUS ON DEMOCRACY BECAUSE IT'S NOT BREAD-AND-BUTTER ECONOMICS.

In their eyes, democracy is an abstract concept that too few voters outside the Democratic base really care about.

OTHERS SAY DEMOCRACY IS THE WHOLE BALLGAME.

They believe Democrats must focus on democracy, because if democracy falls, everything else does, too.

BUT HOW DO VOTERS SEE IT?

We wanted to dive in and see what Americans actually think about democracy, what it means, and what they think is threatening it.



GSG INNOVATION



In the last few months, GSG has been focused on a series of projects showcasing new and innovative work.

Given the complexity of the topic of “democracy,” we found this to be a perfect topic to showcase our innovative research techniques.

FACTOR ANALYSIS

We deployed a statistical tool we can use to make sense of lots of information by finding hidden patterns or themes. It helps us group similar things together and see what they have in common underneath the surface. Think of it like sorting puzzle pieces into groups so you can build the full picture.

ADAPTIVE INTERVIEWS

We used a new, AI moderated interview platform to conduct one-on-one interviews with survey respondents. GSG programmed the initial questions, but the AI moderator could engage with the respondents, asking them follow-up questions unique to their answers to help us uncover broad themes across our interviews.

THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY: A TIMELINE

JANUARY 2025

Donald Trump is inaugurated as president

- Trump pardons thousands of January 6th rioters
- Trump calls for an end to birthright citizenship
- Trump fires perceived disloyal employees

FEBRUARY 2025

- Trump administration officials question the judiciary's authority to serve as a check on the president
- Trump calls for an end to birthright citizenship
- Trump takes control of independent government agencies
- Trump fires tens of thousands of federal employees without Congressional approval
- Trump cuts Congressionally-mandated federal funding
- Trump begins to target law firms

MARCH 2025

- Trump administration deports legal US residents because of their activism
- Trump administration ignores a court order to halt hundreds of deportations
- Trump calls for the removal of a judge
- Trump administration deports Kilmar Abrego Garcia because of an administrative error
- Trump discusses running for a third term
- Trump directs DOJ to investigate public critics
- Trump suspends security clearances of his critics

APRIL 2025

- Trump refuses to bring back Kilmar Abrego Garcia, despite Supreme Court Order to facilitate his return from El Salvador
- Trump entertains sending U.S. citizens to prison in El Salvador

MAY 2025

GSG fields Democracy in the Balance Survey

KEY FINDINGS



In voters' minds

“DEMOCRACY”

is a multidimensional
concept underpinned
by four distinct pillars

REPRESENTATION

The will of the people

SPEECH

The freedom to dissent/criticize/inform

BALANCE OF POWERS

Institutional independence

ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

Voting and engagement



Majorities of voters across groups see American Democracy in decline, and a plurality would even describe it as

IN “CRISIS.”

This is a sharp contrast from even 10 years ago, when those same voters would describe American democracy as strong.

Voters point to Trump and his “authoritarian” leadership style as the biggest threat to American democracy—though government corruption and economic concerns also rise to the top.

Free debate is the dimension of democracy really driving Trump’s negative ratings beyond partisanship and ideology.

Voters point to Trump’s eagerness to silence critics creating an echo-chamber in Congress and government. There is a desire among voters—even those who approve of the job Trump is doing—for Congress to curb some of Trump’s power.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Future research should explore the impact of messages focused on Trump's actions to silence critics and weaken free speech and press to continue to drive down his ratings.

Moreover, this analysis suggests there is value in exploring the connection between Trump's unpopular economic policies and silencing his critics/dissent.

THE WARNING

While voters want to see Trump's power reined in, they also don't mind if he breaks a few rules to get things on track.

This is especially true for Republicans who prioritize immigration.

DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS

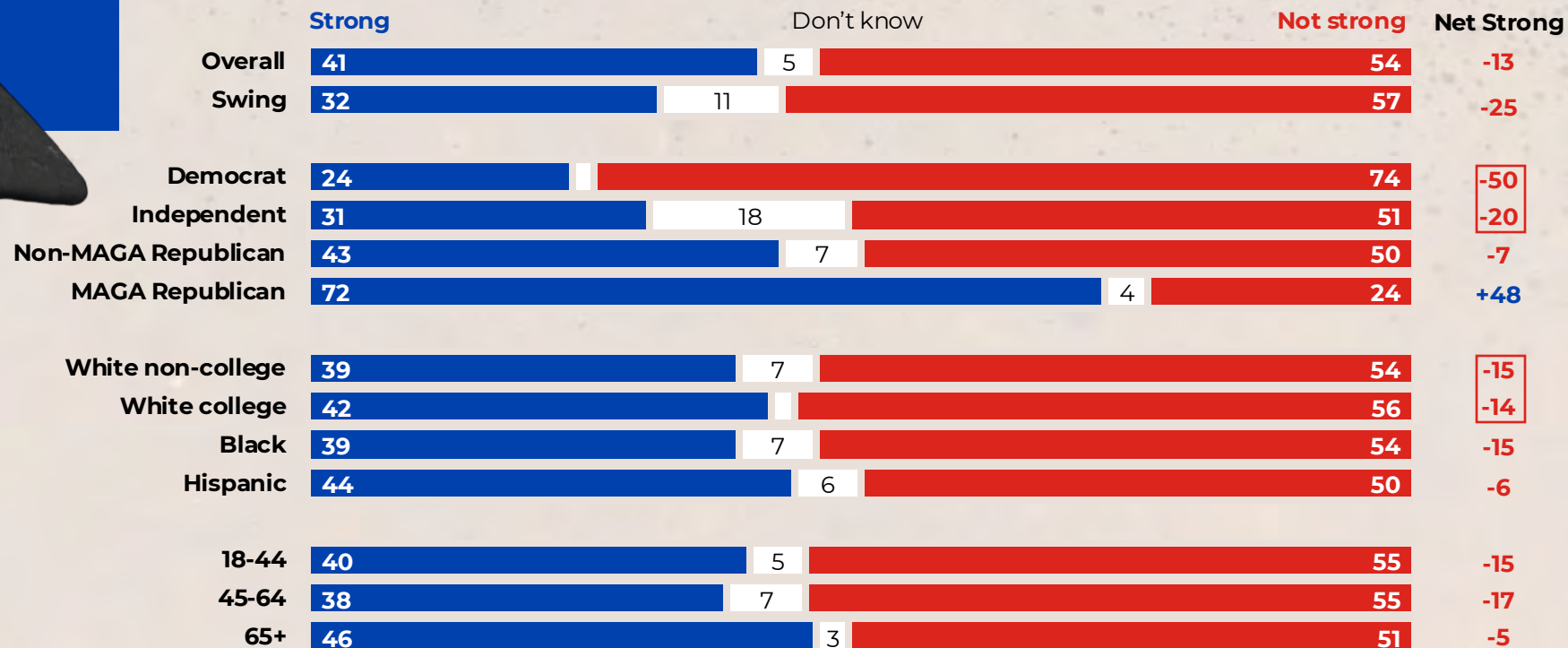




ONLY MAGA REPUBLICANS

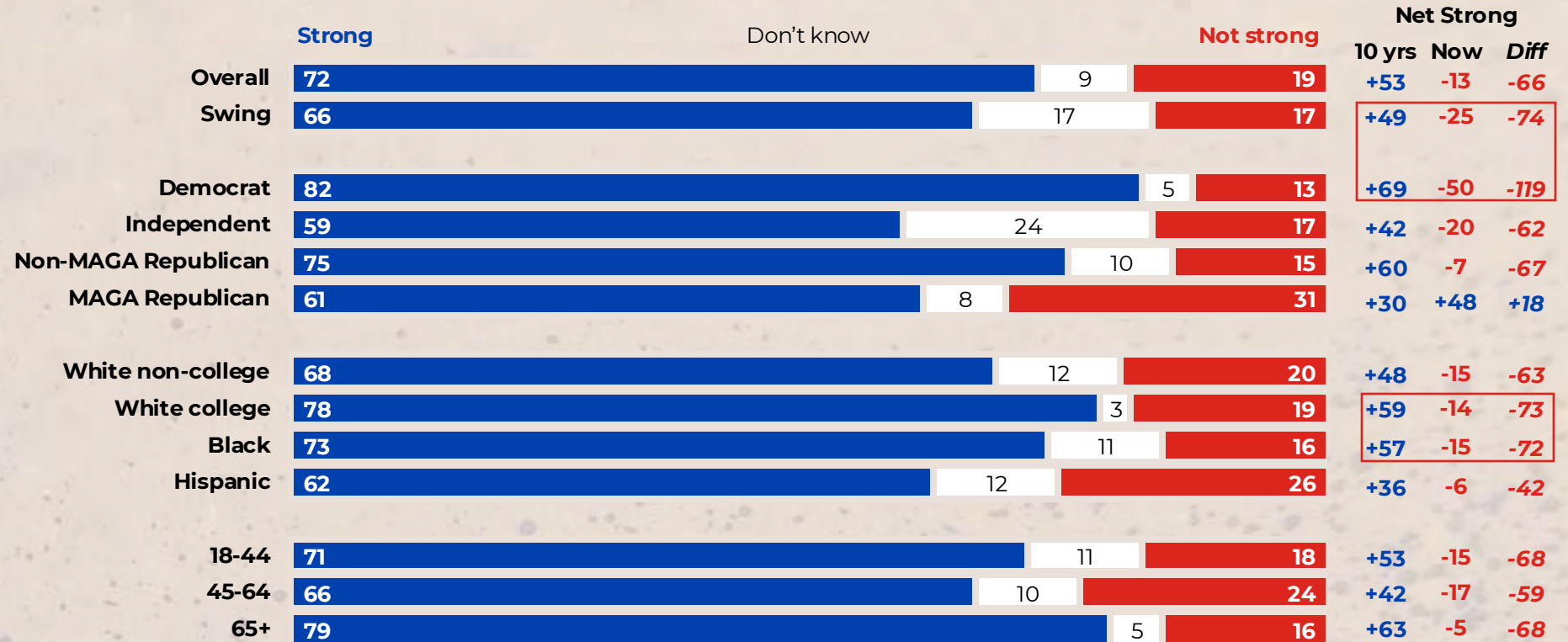
view American democracy as strong

How would you rate the overall strength of American democracy today?



This pessimism around AMERICAN DEMOCRACY represents a sharp decline from even ten years ago

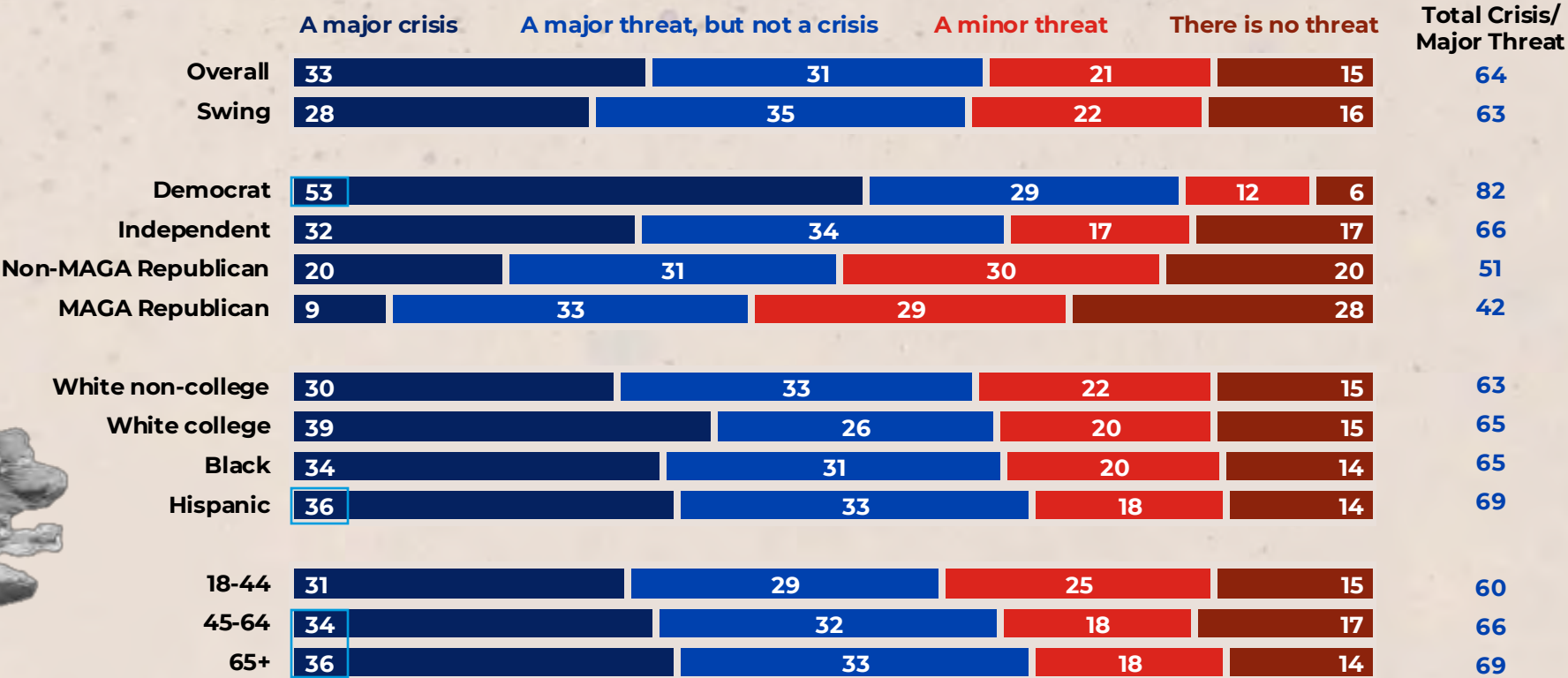
How would you rate the overall strength of American democracy 10 years ago?





Most voters would describe the current threat to American democracy as **MAJOR**

How would you describe the current threat to American democracy?



“

“Trump is the biggest threat to Democracy.”

“Donald Trump and the MAGA movement.”

“Republicans and Trump acting above the law.”

“Corruption in the government.”

“The biggest threat to America is the economy.”

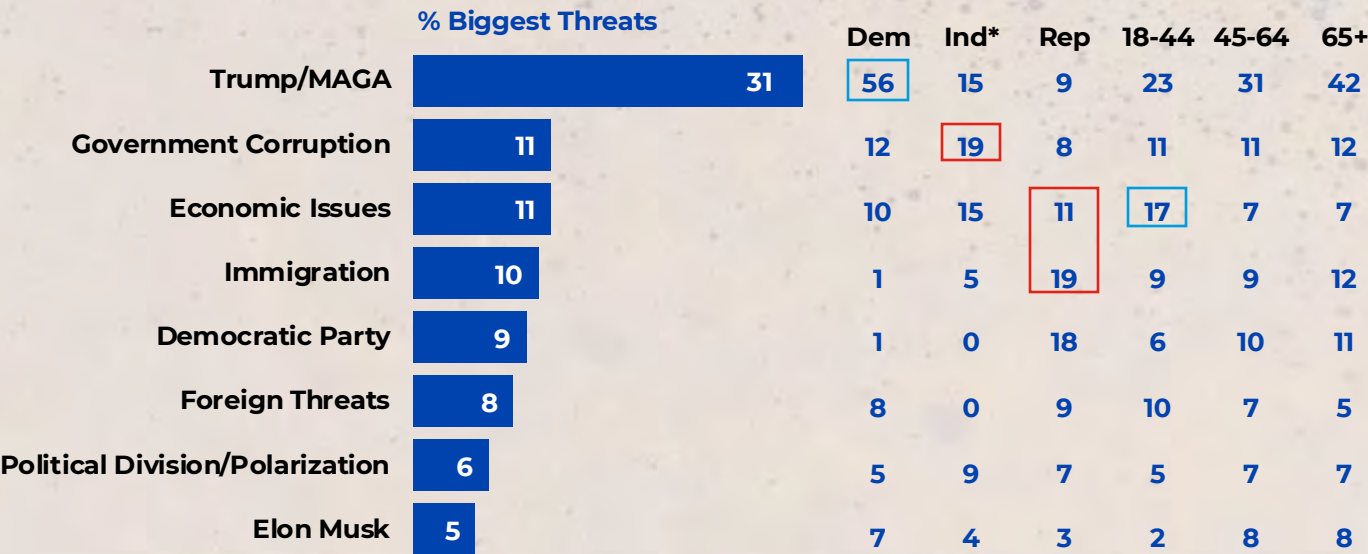
”

In an open-end format, a plurality of voters volunteer

TRUMP AS THE BIGGEST THREAT

to American democracy, followed by corruption and economic issues

What do you believe is the biggest threat to American democracy at the moment? (OPEN END)



DECONSTRUCTING DEMOCRACY

The Hidden Framework
Behind Public Opinion



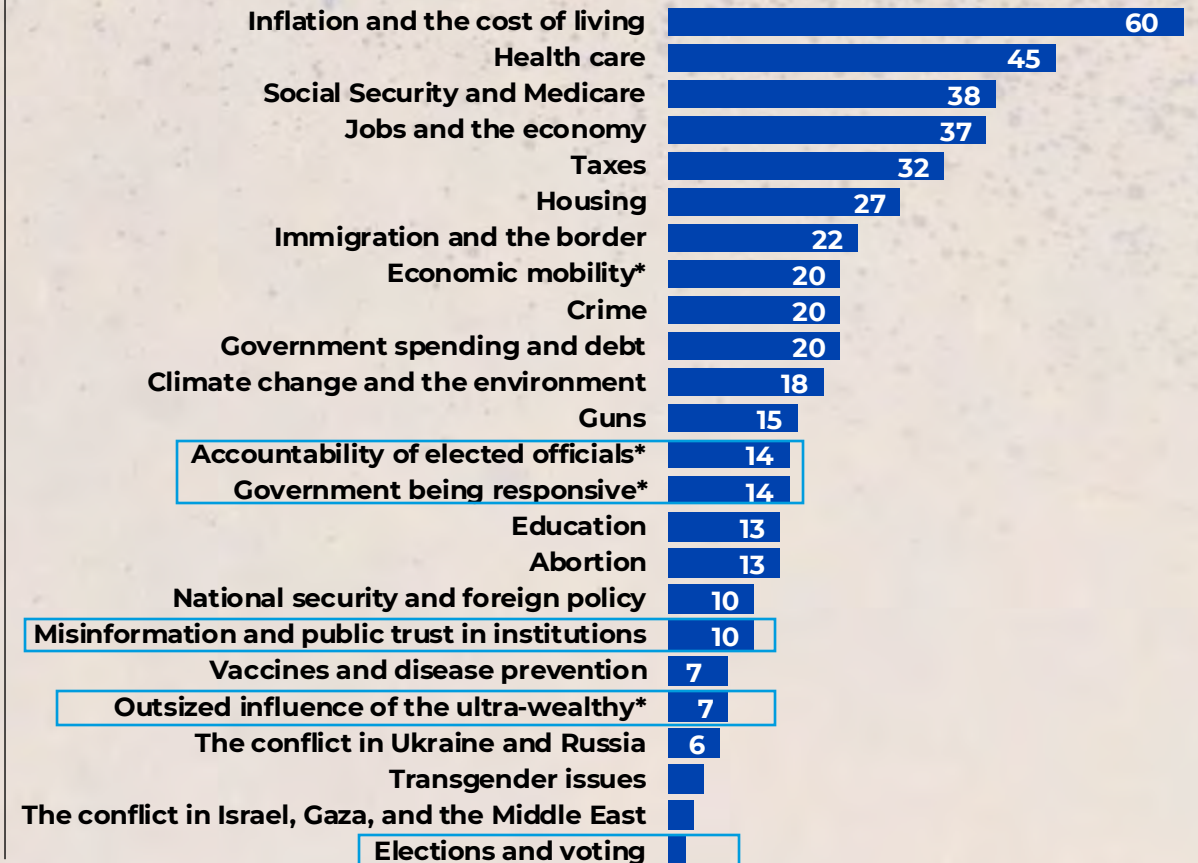
Democracy is a multi-dimensional concept; different measures capture DISTINCT SENTIMENTS

Which do you feel are most important for the President and Congress to focus on? (SWING)

Top 5 Issues – Democracy Alone



Top 5 Issues – Democracy Components



FACTOR ANALYSIS

Factor analysis is a statistical tool we can use to make sense of lots of information by finding hidden patterns or themes.

It helps us group similar things together and see what they have in common underneath the surface. Think of it like sorting puzzle pieces into groups so you can build the full picture.



We included 35 potential metrics and asked how important they were to a

STRONG DEMOCRACY

Secure and fair elections	Citizens' rights and due process are respected	Elected leaders who respect election results	A balance of powers between the three independent branches of government	The rights of all groups, including ethnic, religious, and political minorities, are protected	The ability of citizens to vote on issues important to them through ballot measures or referendum	A press and political system free from the influence of billionaires and the wealthy spending tons of "dark money"	Active and informed citizenry	High voter turnout and participation
Freedom of speech	Transparency in government	The rule of law	A media that is not biased	A court and judicial system independent from elected officials and special interests	Respect for constitutional norms	Lawmakers that are independent of special interest groups	Economic mobility, which can be defined as the chance to improve your economic situation, no matter where you start	Competitive elections
Accountability of government and elected leaders	Peaceful transfers of power, without violence or coercion	Elected officials who have respect for established rules, processes, and laws	A government that is representative of all groups	Easy access to voting for eligible voters	The ability to speak out against elected officials like the president	The absence of domestic election interference harming our democratic process	Economic inclusion, where everyone can participate in the economy	The lack of conspiracy theories
A government that is responsive to the will of the people, not corporations or special interests	Policymakers who listen and hear what voters are saying	Accountability mechanisms that minimize corruption and misuse of power in government	Elected leaders who respect judicial decisions	The absence of foreign election interference harming our democratic process	The freedom to peacefully dissent or disagree with government or elected officials	A free press	Trust in government institutions and agencies	

The factor analysis produced

FOUR DIMENSIONS

REPRESENTATION

The Will of the People

SPEECH

The Freedom to Dissent/Criticize/Inform

BALANCE OF POWERS

Institutional Independence

ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

Voting and Engagement

While all dimensions are important to democracy, voters tend to slightly prioritize

REPRESENTATION AND SPEECH

Dimensions	Most Important Characteristics in each Dimension (highest loading variables)				Mean Score*			
					Overall	Base	Swing	Oppo
Representation: The Will of the People	Secure and fair elections	Accountability of government and elected leaders	Policymakers who listen and hear what voters are saying	A government representative of all groups	84.3	87.6	82.0	82.6
Speech: The freedom to Dissent/Criticize/Inform	The ability to speak out against elected officials like the president	A free press	The freedom to peacefully dissent or disagree with government or elected officials	Freedom of speech	83.9	89.4	81.2	80.2
Balance of Powers: Institutional Independence	A court and judicial system independent from elected officials and special interests	Lawmakers that are independent of special interest groups	Absence of domestic election interference	A balance of powers between the three independent branches of government	79.9	84.2	76.2	78.4
Electoral Participation: Voting and Engagement	High voter turnout and participation	Competitive elections	Absence of foreign election interference	The lack of conspiracy theories	74.4	79.2	70.3	72.6

* Mean on a scale from 0 to 100, where 100 signals the highest observed value for those who think accurate and accountable representation is important to democracy.

DONALD TRUMP'S THREAT TO DEMOCRACY



Outside of the economy
and costs, Trump's

“AUTHORITARIAN”

leadership style has voters most
concerned about the Trump
Presidency

Adaptive Interviewing – where within our survey, respondents were asked open-ended questions written by AI that changed depending on respondent answers – uncovered the following: While both younger and older voters were most concerned about Trump's impact on the economy/costs, notably, across different political and ideological groups, older voters were more likely to prioritize authoritarian behavior and concerns about democracy than their younger peers.

Younger Swing Voter

What, if anything, has
concerned you most about
Trump's presidency so far?

“His tariff fees are outrageous. It has made many usual products that were affordable become unattainable now. I have a hobby that I like, and it involves purchasing from overseas but now I see it'll be a lot more expensive than it has ever been and with inflation going up too I can no longer afford to purchase what I like to do for a hobby.”

Older Swing Voter

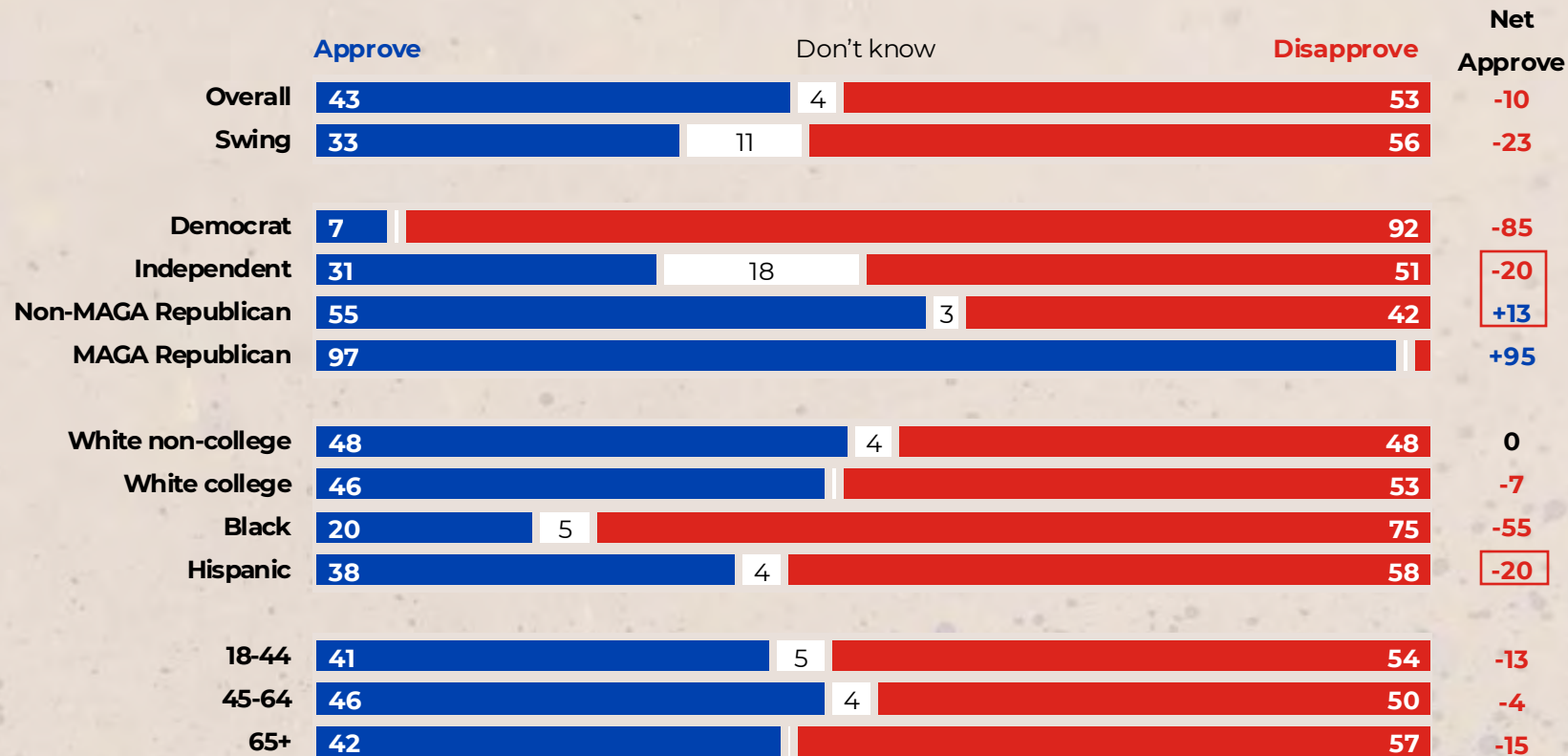
Can you elaborate on how
you think Trump's approach
to leadership impacts the
country?

“The American Constitution is built with checks and balances, yet Trump's bully, extortion, and basic narcissistic approach has sidelined anyone who would think to stand up to him because they're afraid. He will cut their funding, he will throw them in jail, he will deport them. It creates a country of fear as opposed to a country working together to get better.”

VOTERS DISAPPROVE

of the job Trump is doing with respect to democracy

Do you approve or disapprove of the job Donald Trump is doing with respect to democracy?

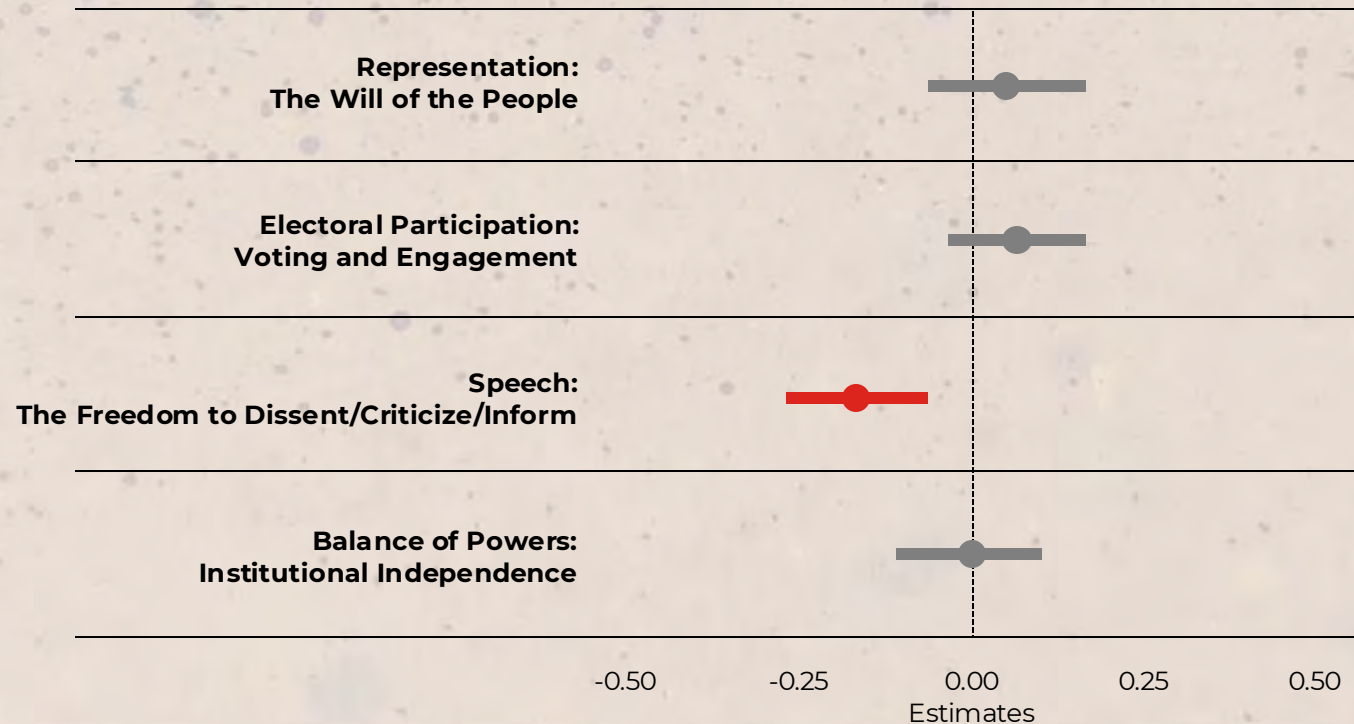


THE FREE SPEECH DIMENSION

is driving negative
evaluations of Trump when
it comes to democracy
even when controlling
for partisanship

REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Association Between Factor Analysis and Trump Approval



Blue = Significant positive correlation with approving of Trump.

Red = Significant negative correlation with approving of Trump.

The model control for standard demographic and attitudinal variables gender, age, race, education, partisanship, and ideology.

ADAPTIVE INTERVIEW

There is a sense among voters that Trump's attacks on those who criticize him have created

AN ECHO CHAMBER

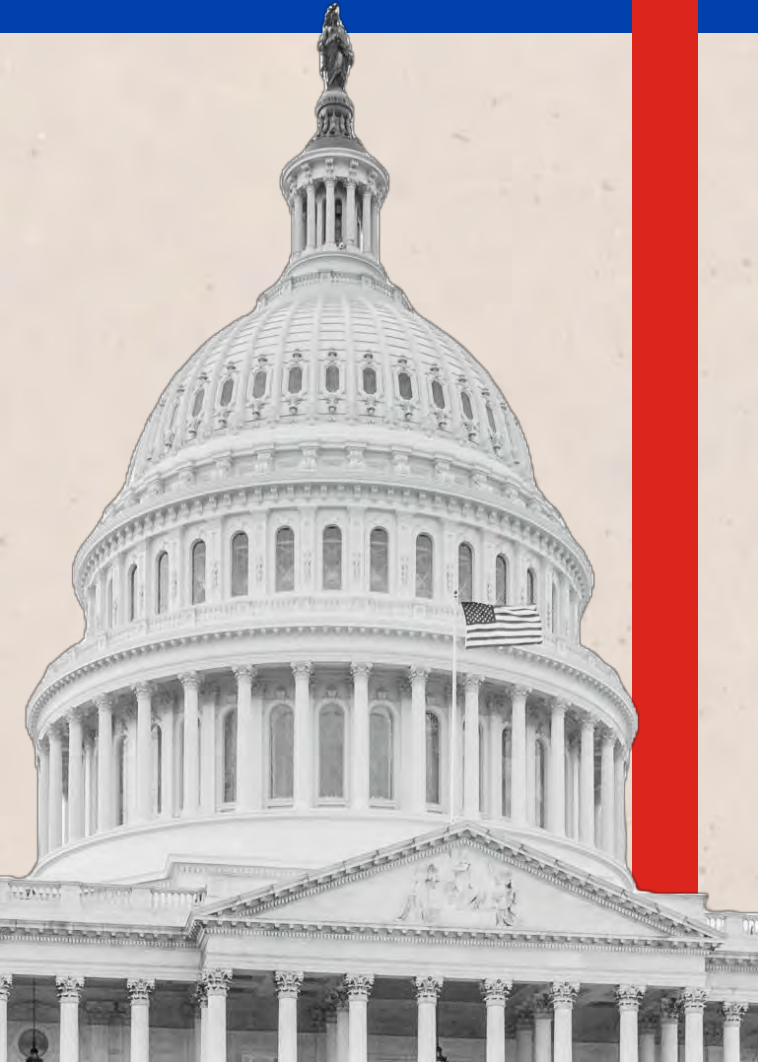
in government

“

Swing Voter

What, if anything, has concerned you most about Trump's presidency so far?

The way that they have treated everyone outside of the administration and the MAGA base, the fact that they're going after NPR and PBS by trying to cut funding to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, is disgusting. The fact that they kicked the AP out of the press corps, essentially, ...the fact that we have these big photo ops where the president sits at a table with his cabinet and **they all spend most of their time thanking him as opposed to talking about what's going on and having any kind of honest conversation about the issues that are facing our nation.** But mostly just the weird love affair type dialogue that we're seeing, because it speaks more to what you saw Stalin surround himself with, what you saw the dictators of North Korea, dictators in Africa, and yes, to a lesser degree, even Adolf Hitler and Mussolini. Not to say that they are directly fascist, but the way they're behaving is pretty one-to-one in comparison. **So, I don't like the rhetoric that surrounds the way that they talk about him and his infallibility. When you can clearly see that things are not going well and that he has done things wrong,** and yet they keep finding ways to justify it and say things like what's happening is the best, America's never been better, blah, blah, blah. This is not supposed to be a team sport. We're supposed to be realistic. Everybody's supposed to be adults, and when things aren't working, we're supposed to change them.



Most voters—even many of those who approve of Trump—would like to see Congress

STEP UP AND REIN IN

some of this administration's power

Do you agree or disagree that “checks and balances in government are important. I would like to see both Republicans and Democrats in Congress curtail some of the Trump administration’s power.”



Trump Supporters who are:

- Not MAGA
- More moderate
- Young
- Men
- Voters of Color
- Non-college

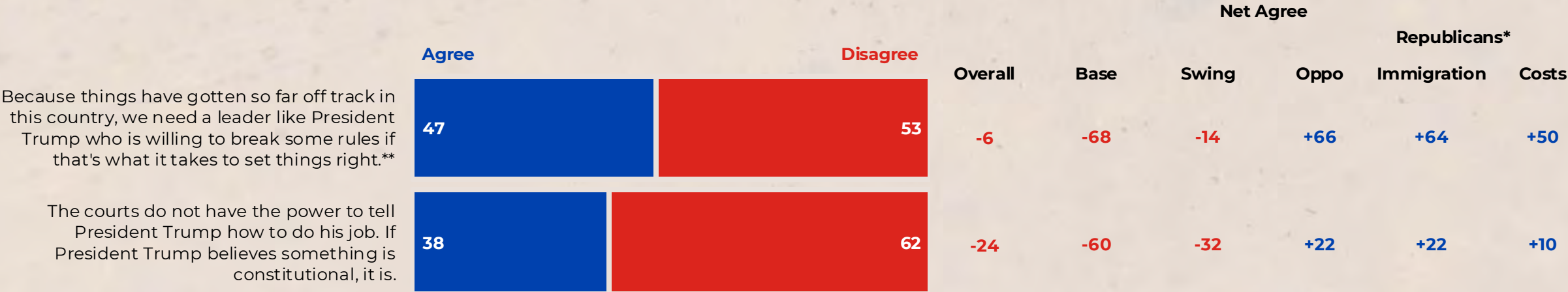
are most likely to want Congress to curb some of the Administration’s power.

While voters are frustrated with Trump’s stifling of dissent and debate, more than four out of ten don’t mind if he

BREAKS SOME RULES

if that is what it takes to get the country back on track. But the Constitution and the courts have an important role to play in fighting back

TRUMP STATEMENTS



* Signifies Republicans whose most important issue is immigration or inflation and the cost of living.
** This question was inspired by a [PRRI question](#) that they have been tracking since 2016.



DEMOCRACY IN THE BALANCE

CONTACT:
mbell@globalstrategygroup.com