



**AMERICAN  
PERSPECTIVES  
SURVEY**

# **Public views of political compromise and conflict and partisan misperceptions**

Findings from the September 2019 American Perspectives Survey

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## Most Americans Do Not Believe Political Disagreement Precludes Finding Common Ground Elsewhere

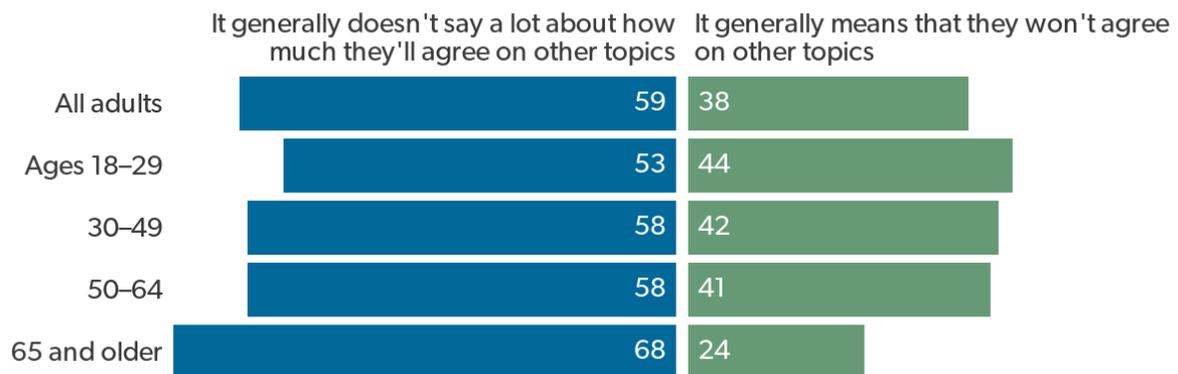
Most Americans believe that political differences do not preclude agreement on other topics. Nearly six in 10 (59 percent) Americans say that when people have different views about politics, it does not generally indicate how much they will or will not agree on other topics. Thirty-eight percent of the public believe that political differences generally signal broader disagreements.

The outlook of Democrats and Republicans is remarkably similar. Nearly six in 10 Democrats (58 percent) and Republicans (59 percent) say that political differences do not preclude agreement on other issues.

There is greater disagreement across generations. Younger Americans are more likely than older Americans to say that having political differences means agreement on other topics is unlikely. Forty-four percent of young adults (18- to 29-year-olds) say political disagreement signals wider differences in world view, while only 24 percent of seniors (age 65 or older) share this view.

## Most Americans Do Not Believe Political Differences Preclude Agreement on Other Topics

Percentage who say that when people hold different views about politics . . .



Survey of US adults [N=1,004] conducted September 6-8, 2019.  
Source: American Perspectives Survey, September 2020.

## Is Politics a Struggle Between Good and Evil?

Close to half of Americans say that politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil. Forty-five percent of Americans see politics as a conflict between good and evil while 53 percent disagree.

Less than half of Democrats (45 percent) and about half of Republicans (51 percent) believe that politics is a struggle between good and evil. There is a significant gender divide among

Democrats, with about half (48 percent) of Democratic women saying politics is a contest between good and evil, compared to 42 percent of Democratic men.

There are considerable differences of opinion among religious groups. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of non-white Protestants—a category that includes Hispanic, black, and Asian Protestants—believe that politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil. Half of white evangelical Protestants also agree, but just as many (50 percent) reject this view. Less than half of Catholics (45 percent), white mainline Protestants (37 percent), and religiously unaffiliated Americans (33 percent) believe politics is forces of good and evil.

Views are sharply polarized by level of education. Nearly six in 10 (58 percent) Americans without any college experience believe that politics is a struggle between good and evil, a view shared by less than a third (31 percent) of those who have at least a four-year college degree.

### **Political Compromise and Weakness**

Americans have a generally favorable view of political compromise. Only 22 percent of the public agree that being willing to compromise is evidence of a weak position. More than three-quarters (77 percent) disagree.

Republicans are more likely than Democrats to believe that willingness to compromise signals weakness (32 percent to 19 percent, respectively), but a majority of those who belong to either party disagree.

College graduates view political compromise more favorably than do people with less formal education. Only 10 percent of Americans with a college degree see compromise as a sign of a weak position, compared to roughly one-third (32 percent) of those without any college education.

### **Do Democrats and Republicans Both Want What's Best for the Country?**

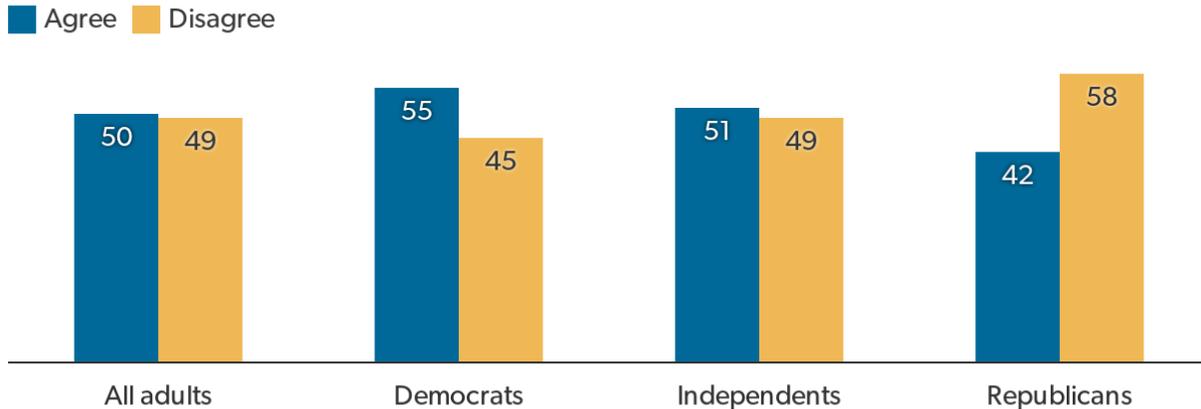
While most Americans take a positive view of compromise and think people with different political views can find common ground on other topics, they are less convinced that people on both sides of the aisle have America's best interest at heart.

Only half (50 percent) the public agrees that both Democrats and Republicans want what is best for the country even if they disagree on policy specifics. Nearly as many (49 percent) do not believe that to be the case.

Democrats are generally more optimistic than Republicans that both parties are looking out for what's best for the United States. A majority of Democrats (55 percent) but less than half of Republicans (42 percent) believe that the two major political parties are both working to make the country better. About half (51 percent) of political independents agree that both Democrats and Republicans want what is best for the country even if they disagree on specific policies.

# Only Half of Americans Believe Both Political Parties Want What is Best For the Country

Percentage who agree or disagree with the statement . . . "Democrats and Republicans both want what's best for the country, even if they disagree on specific policies"



Survey of US adults [N=1,004] conducted September 6–8, 2019.  
Source: American Perspectives Survey, September 2020.

There are stark generational divisions in views of the political parties. Young adults (57 percent) are much more likely than seniors (43 percent) to believe that the major political parties are fighting for what's best for the country even if they have different ideas about how to do it.

## Republican and Democrat Disagreement with Their Parties

[Recent surveys](#) show that partisans largely agree with their party's platform. When pressed to identify the issue on which they most disagree with their own party, Democrats and Republicans give a range of answers. Among Democrats, the area of most significant disagreement with their party is on federal taxes and spending, with one in five Democrats saying they most disagree with the Democratic Party on that issue. Fourteen percent say they most disagree with their party on gun laws. Fewer Democrats mentioned abortion (10 percent), foreign policy (9 percent), immigration (7 percent), health care (7 percent), racial inequality (7 percent), or trade (7 percent). The top issue on which Republicans say they most disagree with the Republican Party is climate change and the environment (16 percent). Fewer Republicans mention they disagree with their party on federal taxes and spending (12 percent), health care (12 percent), trade (11 percent), abortion (9 percent), gay rights (8 percent), and gun laws (7 percent). Notably, roughly one in four Republican-leaning independents say climate change is the issue on which they most disagree with the GOP.

*"Roughly one in four Republican-leaning independents say climate change is the issue on which they most disagree with the GOP."*

## Perceptions of Democratic and Republican Identity

Misperceptions about the demographic makeup of each party—social class, religion, age, and racial and ethnic background—are fairly common among both Democrats and Republicans. Both Democrats and Republicans perceive the Democratic Party as significantly younger than survey estimates indicate. On average, Democrats estimate that 41 percent of the party is under 30, compared to 48 percent estimated by Republicans. Only 22 percent of Democrats are under the age of 30 according to the [2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study \(CCES\)](#). Democrats and Republicans are about equally likely to view the GOP as being much older than it is. Democrats and Republicans alike estimate that about half of Republicans are age 65 or older (Democrats estimate 52 percent and Republicans estimate 48 percent). The CCES indicates 27 percent of Republicans are in that age group.

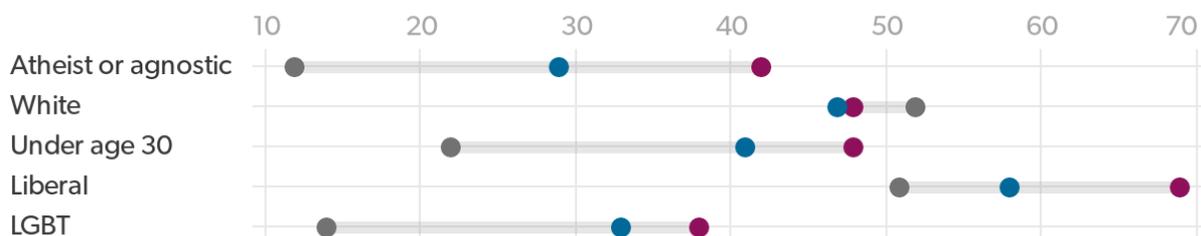
Misperceptions were also evident in estimates of the LGBT composition of the Democratic Party. Again, both Democrats and Republicans considerably overestimate the share of Democrats who identify as LGBT. On average, Democrats report that one-third of the Democratic Party identifies as LGBT, while Republicans estimate 38 percent. According to the CCES, only 14 percent of Democrats identify as LGBT.

On no characteristic are partisans more likely to misjudge the other party’s composition than on religion. Democrats estimate that roughly one-third (29 percent) of their party is atheist or agnostic, while Republicans estimate that atheists and agnostics make up 42 percent of the Democratic Party. According to a [2018 Pew Research Center Survey](#), only 12 percent of Democrats identify as atheist or agnostic, although a larger proportion are religiously unaffiliated. Partisans are more accurate in estimating the religious makeup of the GOP. Both Democrats and Republicans believe that slightly more than half of Republicans are evangelical

## How Americans Perceive the Composition of the Democratic Party

What percentage of Democrats are . . . ?

- Response given by Republicans (mean %)
- Response given by Democrats (mean %)
- Estimated actual percentage



\*Estimated actual percentages based on self-identification data from other surveys. For religion and race, Pew Research Center, June 2018; for age and LGVT, Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, 2018; for ideology, Gallup, 2018. Survey of US adults [N=1,004] conducted September 6–8, 2019.

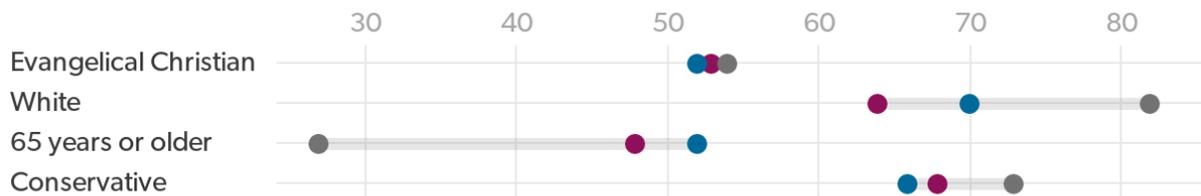
Source: American Perspectives Survey, September 2020.

Christian (52 percent vs. 53 percent, respectively). According to the Pew study, 54 percent of Republicans identify as evangelical Christian.

## How Americans Perceive the Composition of the Republican Party

What percentage of Republicans are . . . ?

- Response given by Republicans (mean %)
- Response given by Democrats (mean %)
- Estimated actual percentage



\*Estimated actual percentages based on self-identification data from other surveys. For religion and race, Pew Research Center, June 2018; for age and LGVT, Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, 2018; for ideology, Gallup, 2018. Survey of US adults [N=1,004] conducted September 6–8, 2019.

Source: American Perspectives Survey, September 2020.

Across the political divide, Democrats and Republicans provide much more accurate estimates of the racial composition of the Democratic Party, but both overestimate the racial diversity within the GOP. Democrats and Republicans believe that close to half of Democrats are white (47 percent vs. 48 percent, respectively). A recent Pew Research survey shows that 52 percent of Democrats are white, non-Hispanic. Perceptions of the racial composition of the GOP more widely miss the mark. Democrats estimate that 70 percent of self-identified Republicans are white, while Republicans estimate the white membership of their party slightly lower at 64 percent. Both estimates significantly overestimate the diversity evident in public opinion polls. According to the Pew survey, 82 percent of Republicans are white, non-Hispanic.

Finally, Republicans generally believe the Democratic Party is more liberal than it is, while partisans on both sides believe the GOP is less conservative than surveys suggest. Democrats estimate that 58 percent of the Democratic Party is liberal, compared to 69 percent estimated by Republicans. According to [Gallup](#), 51 percent of Democrats are liberal. Both Democrats and Republicans estimate that the GOP is about two-thirds conservative (66 percent and 68 percent, respectively). The same Gallup survey finds that 73 percent of Republicans identify as conservative.