



Center for Communication and
Civic Renewal at the University of
Wisconsin-Madison

What Divided 2024 Party Convention Delegates?



RNC & DNC Delegate Views on Party Strategy, Democracy, Media, & More

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FOR MORE INFORMATION
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Cover Photo Caption & Credit: Kamala Harris and Tim Walz hold a rally at the Fiserv Forum during the second night of 2024 Democratic National Convention. Link to photo & licensing: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kamala_Harris_and_Tim_Walz_IMG_5238.jpg
Cropped from original photo for page fit.



Introduction

The 2024 U.S. national party conventions took place amidst unprecedented political circumstances, and the two major parties imagined starkly different futures for America.

Republicans nominated Donald Trump for president, who had helped incite a violent insurrection following his 2020 election loss. Trump was subsequently convicted of three dozen felonies for falsifying business records to influence his 2016 presidential election. Trump’s campaign promised retribution against his perceived political enemies, the unpopularity of which we reported [here](#).

Democrats nominated Kamala Harris for president, who replaced Joe Biden after he withdrew from consideration. Biden had won the nomination through party primaries and caucuses but faced opposition from many party leaders and voters due to his public mental lapses, including a widely panned performance in a June debate with Trump, which called into question his ability to perform the job for another four years. Democrats also worried his lapses might cause them to lose a winnable election.

CCCR’s research group joined a rare scholarly collaboration to field a non-partisan survey of national convention delegates from both parties. The 2024 Cooperative Convention Delegate Survey was organized by Professor Barry Burden at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The 656 complete online survey responses include 443 of 4,695 Democratic delegates (9.4%) and 213 of 2,429 Republican delegates (8.8%). The survey methods appendix at the end of this report provides more details.

	Democratic Delegates	Republican Delegates
Surveyed Delegates (complete)	443	213
Total Delegates	4,695	2,429

CCCR’s research group contributed a module of 10 questions to the omnibus survey. In this report, we investigate party their views about party strategy, democratic values & reforms, media trust, and perceptions of threats to themselves. The analysis and interpretation here are our own.

Key Findings

Party Strategy Views

- **Mobilizing or Persuading?** Delegates in both parties were evenly split when forced to choose an election strategy of mobilizing existing supporters versus persuading undecided voters. Delegates were more likely to perceive their political opponents doing better by focusing on persuasion compared to their own party.
- **Nomination Authority:** Delegates saw greater prospects for party electoral success if the party gave greater discretion in nomination voting rather than having their votes bound by their state's election results.
- **Party Platforms:** Large majorities in both parties endorsed continuing to write party platforms for the public, with greater support among Republican delegates.
- **Seeking Common Ground?** Majorities in both parties agreed that the parties should spend more time finding common ground on policy-making. Democratic delegates were substantially more likely to agree with this idea than Republican delegates.

Goals for America

- Democratic delegates were dramatically more supportive of equal representation, equal rights, and well-being for all as important national goals than Republican delegates. Nearly half of Republicans said “none of these” compared to 1% of Democrats. The two parties were closest on well-being for all, but still with a 26-point gap with Democrats supporting more.

Support for Greater Representation & Rights

- More than 90% of Democratic delegates supported a popular vote for President, Puerto Rico statehood, and limiting harm to workers and consumers, compared to support ranging from 7 to 23 percent among Republican delegates.
- Half of Democratic delegates supported popular referenda to amend the U.S. Constitution compared to 15 percent of Republican delegates.

Media Trust & Distrust

- **Trust:** Democratic delegates trust mainstream news most, particularly the New York Times and National Public Radio. Republican delegates trust Fox News and other conservative sources most.

- **Distrust:** Democrats distrusted conservative media most, while Republicans distrusted sources few Democrats trust most: CNN and MSNBC (MSNOW).

Perceptions of Threats to Self

- **Overall:** Over half of delegates in both parties said they had felt unsafe because of their politics.
- **Sources of Threats:** Most perceived threats to safety came from the opposing party/ideology.

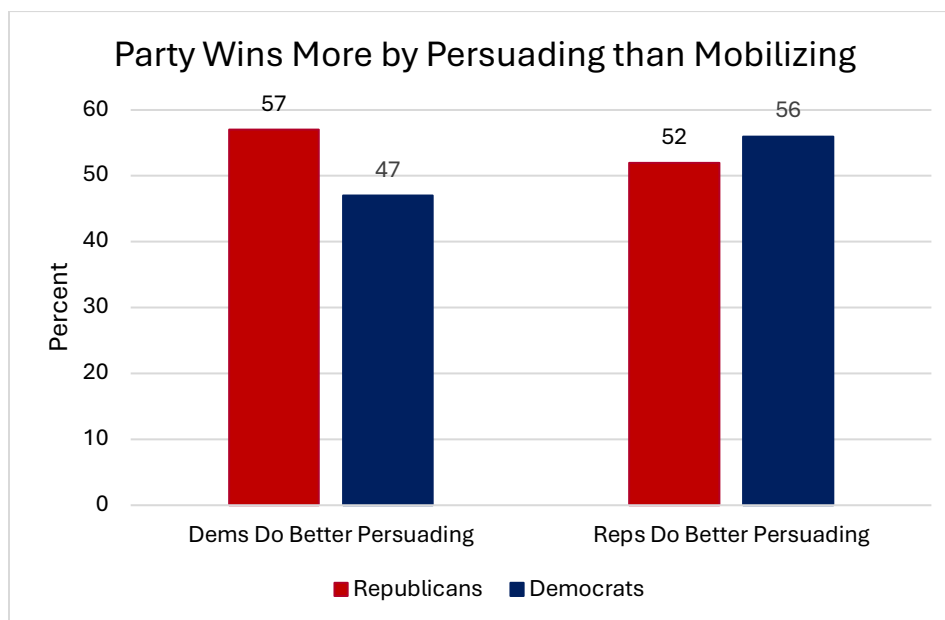
1. Party Strategy Views

We begin with delegate views on party strategy in elections and governance, including longstanding debates about persuading versus mobilizing, the role of delegates in deciding presidential nominees, the value of public party platforms, and whether the parties should find more common ground when making policy in government.

Delegates gave survey responses in early 2025 following Republicans winning the presidency and control of both houses of Congress, which probably shaped how many people in both parties responded to these party strategy questions based on what apparently worked (or didn't) in the 2024 elections.

Should Parties Pursue Base Turnout or Persuading Undecideds?

We begin with a question about party election strategy from Prof. Barry Burden's module: "Which of the following is more important for the [Democrats/Republicans] to do to perform well in elections – get their existing party's supporters to turn out to vote, or persuade undecided voters to vote for them?"



Responses about the best strategies for each party were similar, and responses from delegates in each party were similar. Delegates split similarly between persuading and mobilizing when forced to choose.

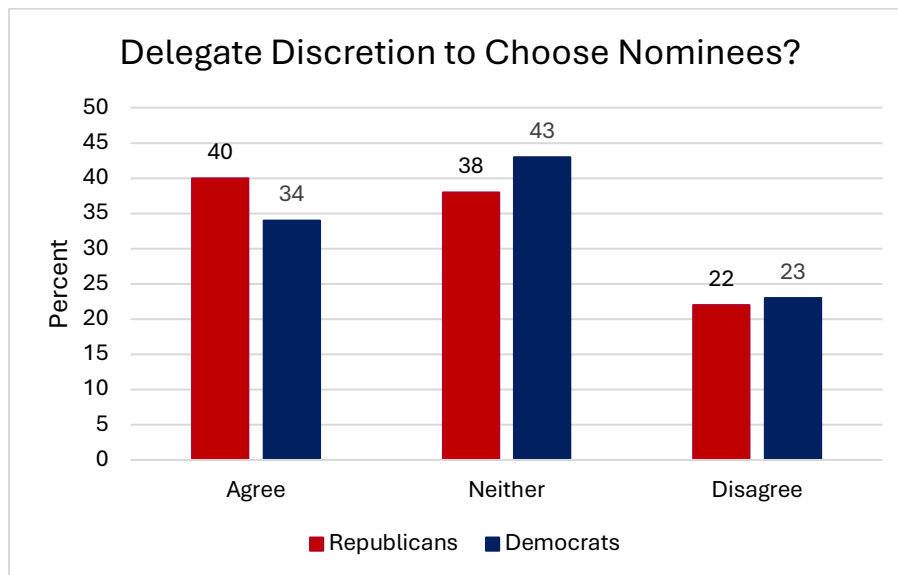
There are some small patterns of difference. One is that delegates were more likely to say the other party does better through persuasion than for their own party. Republicans were 10 points likelier than Democrats to say that Democrats benefit by focusing on persuading their base, while Democrats were 4 points likelier than

Republicans to say that Republicans do better in elections when they focus on persuasion.

Delegates' Role in Presidential Nominations?

Before 1972, presidential nominations were decided by delegates who were chosen by state parties, and those delegates chose the nominee. Since 1972, those delegates have been chosen by party voters through primary elections and caucuses, and those delegates were often bound to support a specific candidate rather than having discretion to make their own choice. Some political science research has shown that even in the post-1972 era, delegate endorsements are a key to winning party nominations, but many scholars and commentators have noted that popularly chosen nominees circumvent the vetting process of party organizations, which simultaneously makes them more democratic but could also nominate candidates with worse electoral prospects.

With that history in mind, we asked delegates whether giving them more discretion in nomination votes would improve the party's election chances. "Agree or disagree? My party's presidential candidates would be more likely to win the general election if my party's delegates truly selected the nominee."



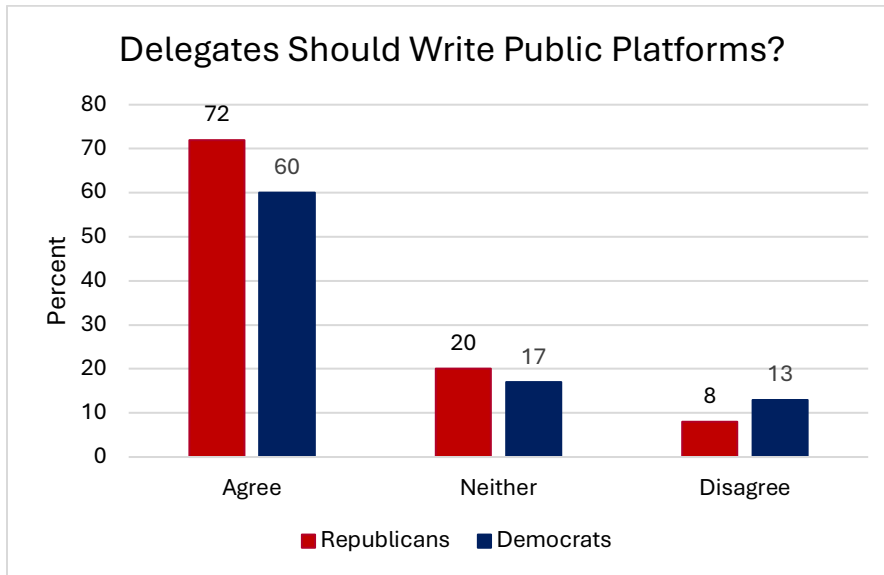
Delegates in both parties were much more likely to agree than disagree that their party would do better with greater delegate autonomy in choosing nominees. Roughly as many chose the neutral option as agreement.

Should Parties Create Public Platforms?

Political parties usually make public platforms that outline shared values and policy proposals for the party and its candidates. Those documents can help the party

coordinate its messaging and help inform the public about their choices, but few voters see those documents directly.

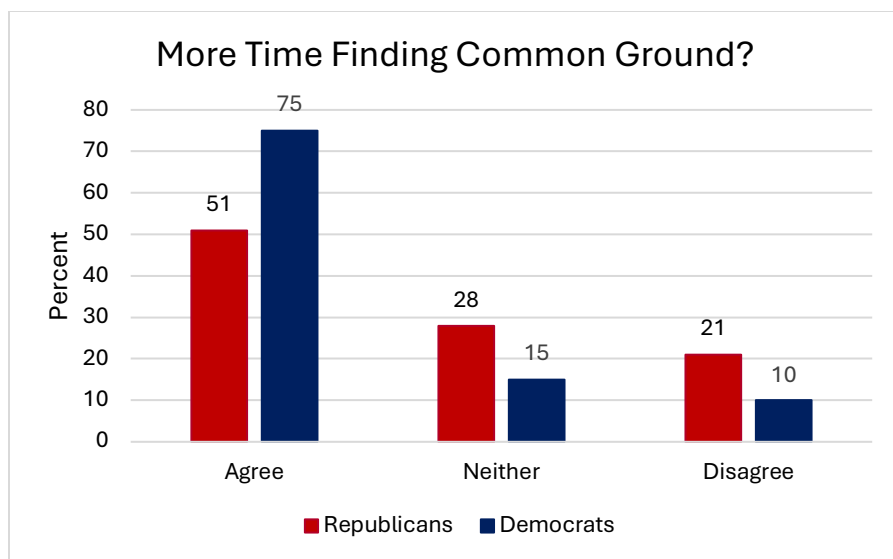
We asked delegates what they think about writing party platforms: “Agree or disagree? Party convention delegates should create public platforms describing party positions and proposals.”



Large majorities of delegates in both parties agreed that delegates should write public platforms, but Republican delegates were 12 points more likely to agree than Democratic delegates. In 2020, Republicans did not produce a platform, renewing the 66-page platform passed in 2020. In 2024, they produced a shortened, 16-page version of a platform. Democrats produced 90 + page platforms in 2020 and 2024, consistent with their historical behavior.

Finding Common Ground on Policy?

To assess delegate views on seeking areas of policy agreement for governance, we asked, “Agree or disagree? Lawmakers in both parties should spend more time looking for common ground on public policy.”

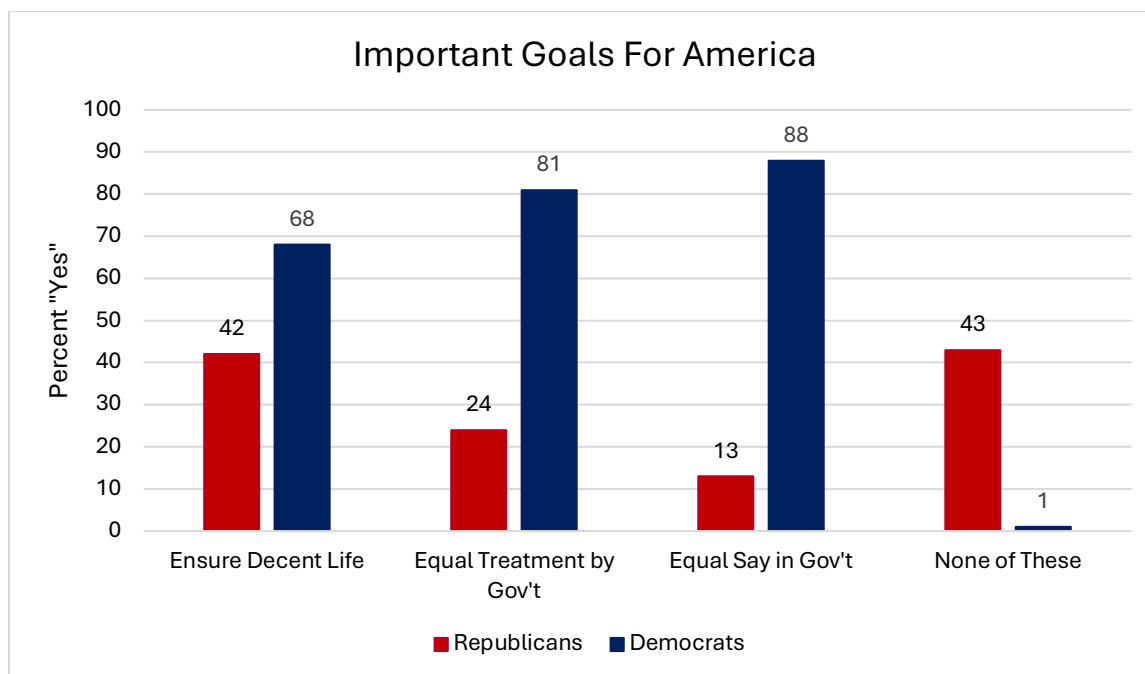


Majorities of delegates in both parties endorsed spending more time looking for common ground on public policy, but Democratic delegates were 24 points more likely than Republican delegates to agree.

2. Goals for America

Some of the foundational principles of democracy include ensuring everyone has an equal say in choosing leaders so that government is representative of the people, and that governments treat all their people equally under the law. These democratic procedural values tend to produce more well-being for more people than systems that lack equality of voice and rights, according to political scientists.

We asked the delegates, “Which of these (if any) should be important goals for America?” We gave three options: Ensuring all people have what they need to live a decent life. Governments should treat every group of Americans equitably. Every American should have an equal say in what governments do.” Delegates could choose as many of these as they wished, or they could indicate “None of these.”

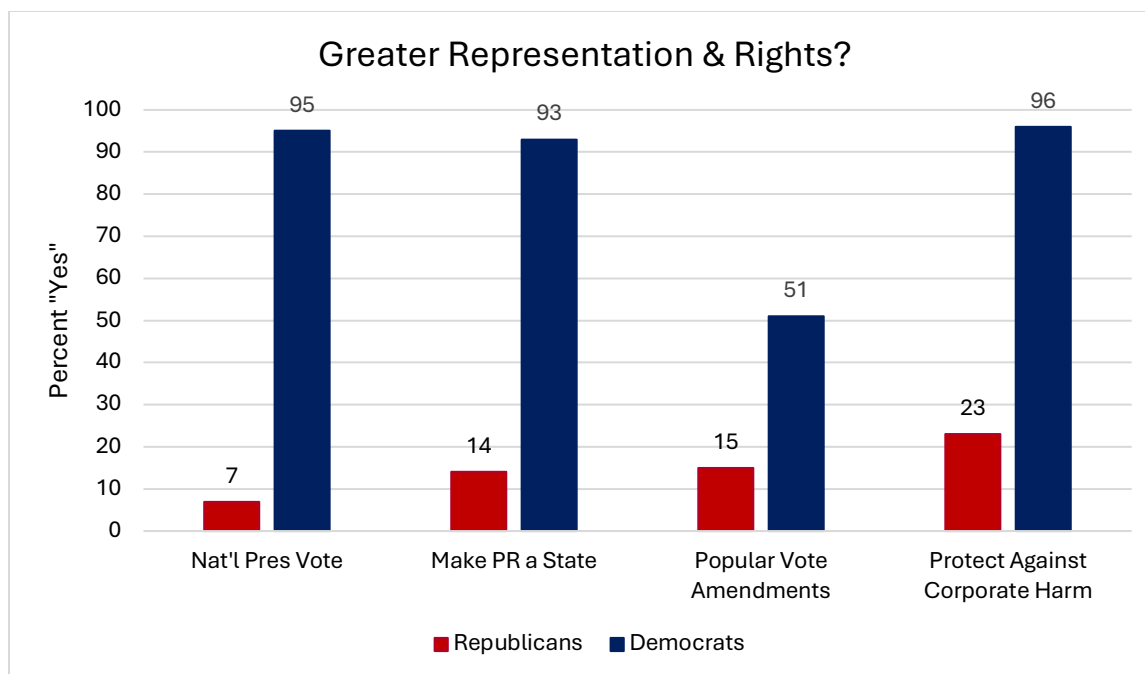


Democratic delegates were dramatically more likely than Republican delegates to endorse equal say in government, equal treatment by government, and efforts to ensure everyone a decent life as important goals for America.

Eighty eight percent of Democratic delegates and 13% of Republican delegates said equal say in government is an important American goal. Eighty one percent of Democrats and 24% of Republicans supported equal treatment by government. Sixty eight percent of Democrats and 42 percent of Republican selected “ensuring all people have what they need to live a decent life.” 43% percent of Republican delegates and 1% of Democratic delegates endorsed “none of these.”

3. Support for Greater Representation & Rights

Given big partisan gaps in endorsement of democratic values among the delegates, we expect to find big partisan gaps in endorsing specific changes to democratize American politics, including electing presidents by a national vote, giving the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico representation in federal government by becoming a state, changing the constitutional through popular sovereignty, and efforts to protect workers and consumers from corporate harms. We find that the partisan gaps for specific democratizing changes are even larger than gaps for national goals. The figure below summarizes the results across four questions, which we detail below.



Presidents Elected by the People: Presidents are formally elected by the Electoral College, representing voting results in each state or district, and with several times more say given to voters in small-population states compared to voters in moderately large-population states. The president was elected while getting fewer votes from the public five times, including two of the past seven elections (Republicans George W. Bush in 2000 and Donald Trump in 2016).

We asked delegates, “Should the president be elected by national popular vote or the Electoral College?” Ninety five percent of Democrat delegates endorsed popular elections for president compared to 7% of Republican delegates.

Statehood for Puerto Rico: Puerto Ricans are American citizens but lack any say in the federal government because Puerto Rico is a territory rather than a state. In other words, Puerto Ricans lack the federal voting rights that most other Americans have. Puerto Rican statehood has been floated by many Democrats (75% of Puerto Ricans voted for Kamala Harris in a symbolic Election Day vote).

We asked delegates: “In a 2024 referendum, 58% of Puerto Ricans said Puerto Rico should become a state. Should Congress admit Puerto Rico as a state so that those 3 million Americans get representation?” Delegates could choose yes, maybe, or no.

Ninety three percent of Democratic delegates and 14% of Republican delegates said yes. One percent of Democrats and 58% of Republicans said no.

Constitutional Amendments through Popular Sovereignty: America’s first constitution required all states to endorse any constitutional change for that change to

be ratified. The second constitution was ratified by ignoring the existing constitution's amendment procedures by requiring only 9 of 13 states to endorse the new constitution.

To justify the change, James Madison, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and other supporters identified the people as the ultimate sovereign and used popularly elected constitutional conventions to ratify the new constitution in each state. Many state constitutions can be changed through popular referenda or initiatives. Neither party has elected leaders proposing federal amendments in this way.

We asked delegates, "Should the American people be able to amend the U.S. constitution with a national popular vote, as we do for many state constitutions?" We gave them three options: "No, no change. Yes, if 60% approve. Yes, if a majority approve."

Fifty one percent of Democratic delegates and 15% of Republican delegates endorsed popular votes for constitutional amendments at one threshold or the other. The supermajority threshold of 60% received the bulk of that support in both parties (five-sixths of Democratic supporters, two-thirds of Republican supporters).

Worker & Consumer Protections: Big corporations can cause harms to workers and consumers in their efforts to make bigger profits, and government can choose to play a role in mitigating those harms while still promoting commerce. While traditionally a focus among Democrats over the past ninety years, some Republicans have recently adopted more populist language that sometimes criticizes big corporations among other elites.

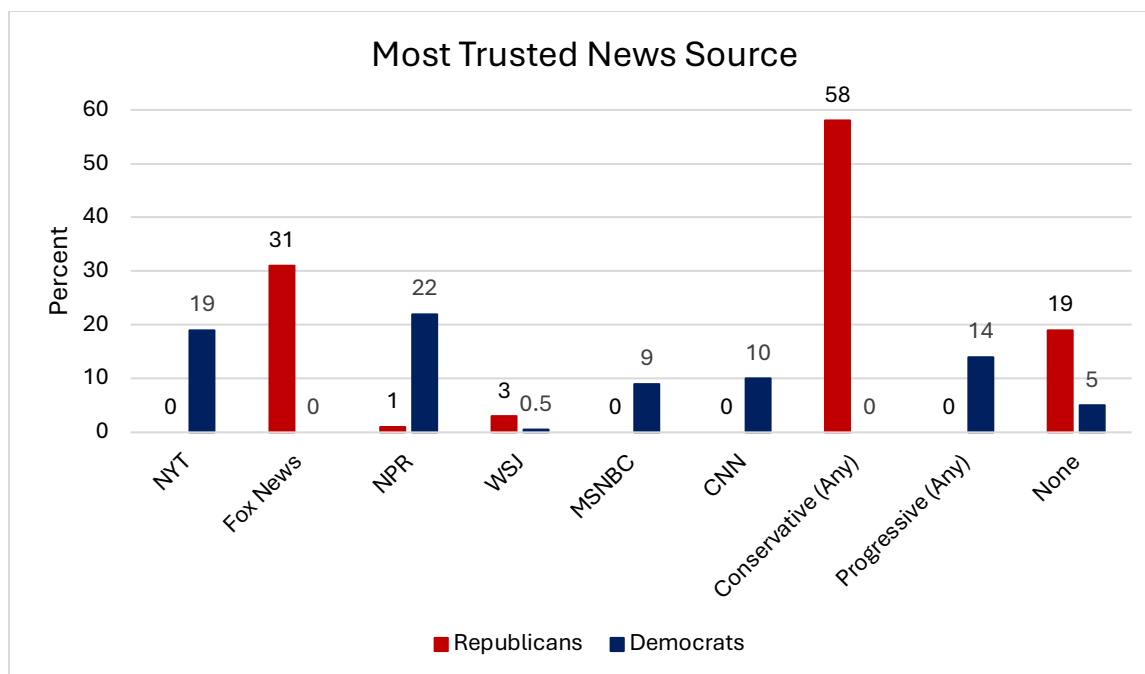
We asked delegates, "Agree or disagree? Government needs to do more to protect American workers and consumers from getting hurt by big corporations."

Ninety-six percent of Democratic delegates and 23% of Republican delegates agreed. Though support among Republicans is much lower for than Democrats, this is the most popular of the four proposals among Republicans, attracting one in four.

4. Media Trust & Distrust

Partisan asymmetries in media trust and distrust are well-understood in the public – Democrats generally trust mainstream news while Republicans are far less trusting, and that distrust is reflected in far higher consumption of pro-Republican news. And we know what party leaders *say* about various news outlets to their followers. But what sources do those leaders trust most? And which do they trust least?

We asked delegates, "What national news source do you trust most?" and we gave them space to type their answer. A large number listed multiple outlets despite the question's focus on one.

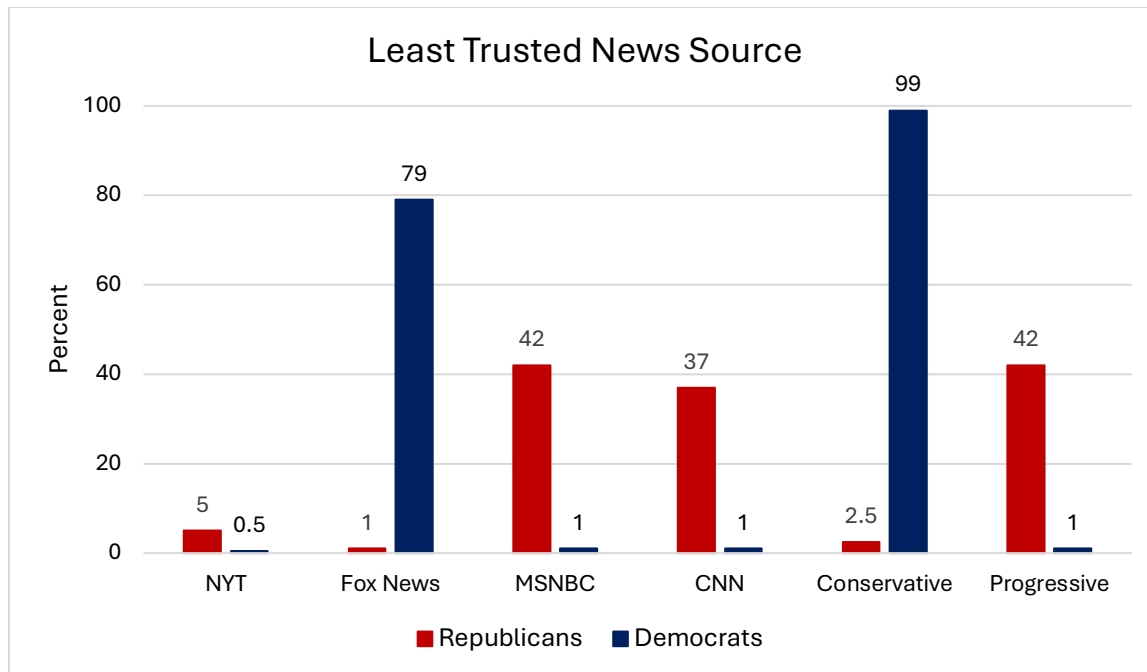


Note: “conservative” and “progressive” are aggregations that include Fox News and MSNBC, respectively.

A large majority of Republican delegates listed conservative news sources as the ones they trust most, and 19% of Republicans who wrote that they trusted none. Republicans mentioned trusting Fox News (31%), Newsmax (12%), and Epoch Times (4%). Others mentioned include OAN, Breitbart, and various conservative media personalities.

In contrast, Democratic delegates predominantly trusted mainstream news most, including the New York Times, National Public Radio, and CNN. Only 14% said that progressive sources were among their most trusted, including 9% trusting MSNBC (now MSNOW).

We also asked delegates, “What national news source do you trust least?” Once again, the question elicited multiple answers from many delegates.



Democratic delegates focused their distrust almost entirely on the sources Republicans trust most – Fox News and other conservative outlets. Republicans predominantly focused their greatest distrust on outlets that Democrats *don't* trust most: MSNBC (MSNOW) and CNN.

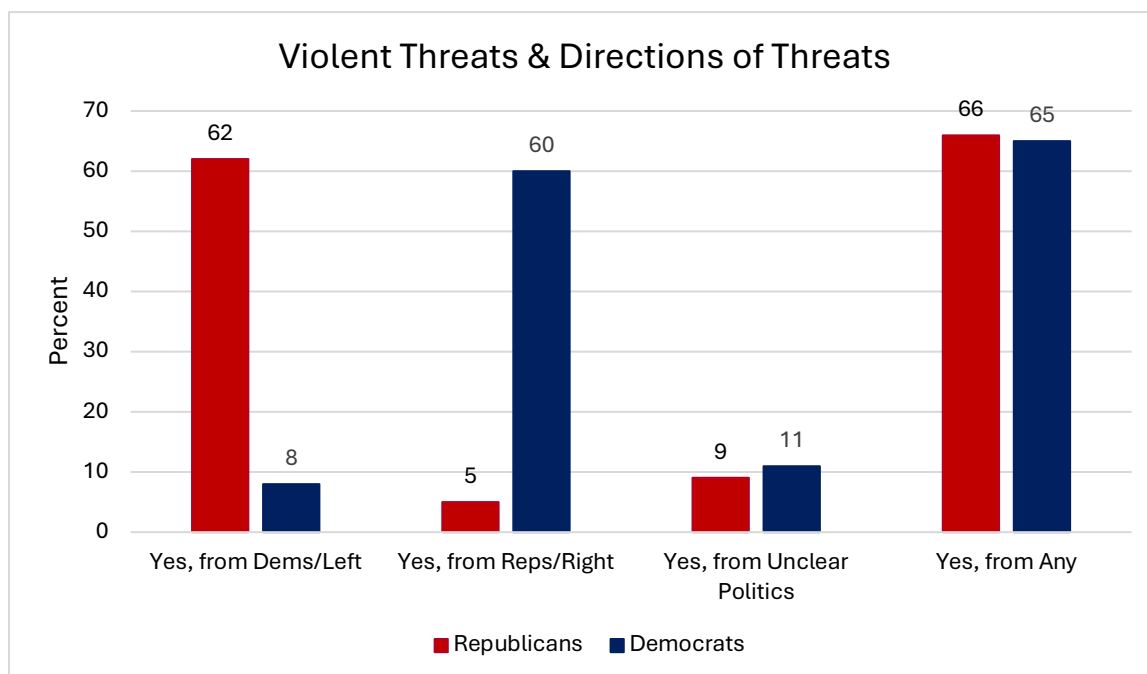
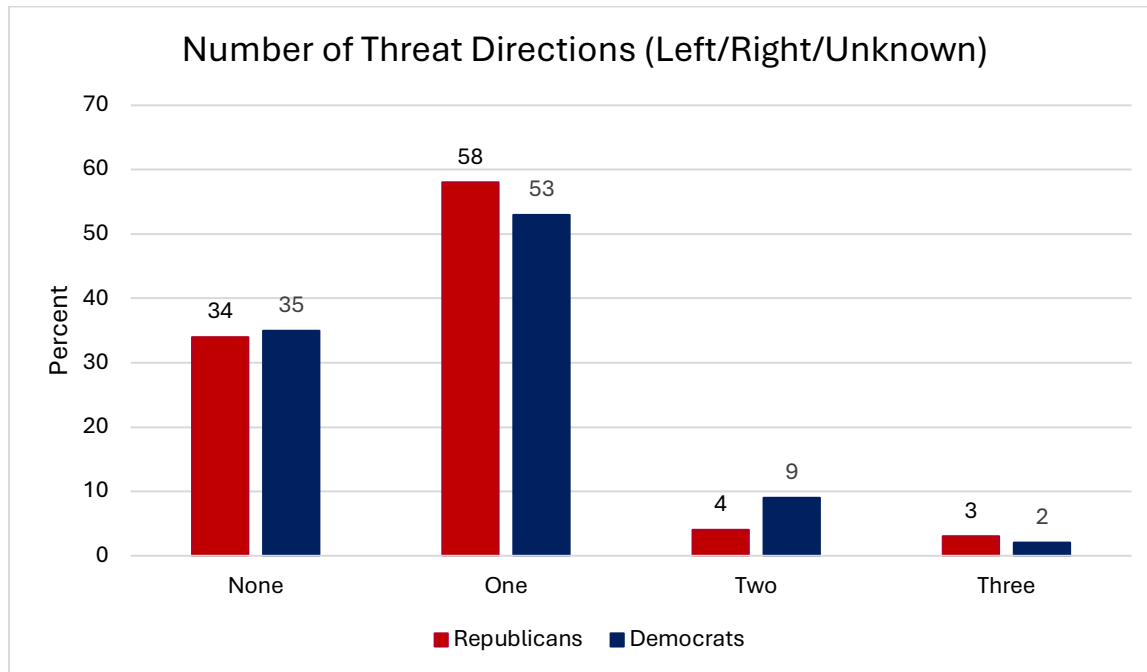
5. Perceptions of Threats to Self

Political leaders are facing massive increases in threats to their physical safety and the safety of their families. Those threats sometimes change how they govern, which is antithetical to democracy. Threats also push leaders out of public service, and those threats tend to target women and minorities more than others.

We asked delegates, “Because of your political views or your role, has anyone ever made you feel physically unsafe? Choose all that apply.” We gave them four options: 1) No, 2) Yes, unsafe from Democrats/left-wing, 3) Yes, unsafe from Republicans/right-wing, and 4) Yes, unsafe from unclear party/ideology. In other words, the one question combines a yes/no response with their perceptions of the political views of their perpetrators.

Although the question describes feeling physically unsafe, most of these responses probably don't rise to the level of credible threats, and they may include feeling of insecurity caused by general perceptions of threat or hostile interactions rather than explicit physical threats.

Two-thirds of delegates reported threat experiences, at similar levels in both parties. Each party's delegates perceived the vast majority of threats as coming from people aligned with the opposing party. Four percent of Republican delegates and 6% of Democratic delegates reported feeling physically unsafe due to people from both parties.



About the 2024 Cooperative Convention Delegate Survey

The 2024 Cooperative Convention Delegate Survey was fielded between March 21st and June 7th, 2025. The research cooperative sent postcards with QR codes to all Democratic and Republican delegates. The QR codes directed respondents to a 15-minute self-administered survey programmed on the online Qualtrics platform. Non-responders received follow-up postcards reminding them of the survey. A final email reminder for non-responders went out after to delegates for whom we had email addresses.

914 delegates started the survey and 640 finished it. 656 delegates answered the party question near the middle of the questionnaire, and all the questions above are from the first half of the survey.

Survey responses with complete data include 443 Democratic delegates out of 4,695 (9.4% of the population) and 213 Republican delegates out of 2,429 (8.8% of the population). These response rates are much higher than commercial surveys of the general public, which are usually in the low single digits.

Percentages for Democrats have margins of error of +/- 4.4% percentage points. Percentages for Republicans have margins of error of +/- 6.4 percentage points. The latter is larger due to the small number of Republicans in the sample.

The survey was designed by a non-partisan team of researchers from multiple colleges and universities including the University of Arkansas, Barnard College, Clark University, Georgetown University, George Washington University, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and the University of Wisconsin.

About the Center for Communication & Civic Renewal

The Center for Communication & Civic Renewal (CCCR) is an interdisciplinary research team housed in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. CCCR's research aims to understand Wisconsin public opinion and the state's broad political communication ecology, drawing upon frameworks and methods foundations in communication, political science, sociology, psychology, and computer science. Dr. Michael Wagner leads the Center as Faculty Director, Dr. Dhavan Shah is the Center's Research Director, and Dr. Nathan Kalmoe serves as Executive Administrative Director for the Center.

The Center's public opinion polling is one of three analytical components in its broader efforts studying political communication in Wisconsin, the Midwest, and beyond. Over the years, we have also conducted in-depth interviews with hundreds of citizens throughout the state to understand how they're talking and thinking about politics. And we have conducted large-scale computational analyses of social media and news media content throughout the Wisconsin, the United States, and the world.

Some of CCCR's past research is synthesized in the book, [*Battleground: Asymmetric Communication Ecologies and the Erosion of Civil Society in Wisconsin*](#), published by Cambridge University Press in 2022, along with several peer-reviewed articles published in academic journals, and public-facing essays published in national news outlets including the *Washington Post*, *Vox*, and *TechStream* as well as local outlets like the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the *Capital Times*, and the *Wisconsin State Journal*

Our March 2023 report, "[Civic Fracture & Renewal in Wisconsin](#)," assessed the public's civic attitudes and behaviors and found worrisome signs of social and political conflict in 2022 Wisconsin and U.S. midterm election survey comparisons. These included ending relationships over politics, safety fears in politics, and views supporting for political violence among a minority of citizens – but we also identified vital agreement across divides in ways that may help repair American democracy.

Our December 2024 report, "[Understanding 2024 Voters in Midwest Battleground States](#)," assessed Midwestern voting patterns, group and policy divides, and the nature of political conversations and news consumption. The study found lower anticipated voting levels among Democrats, low-income people, and people of color; large party divides in views of marginalized groups; some surprising levels of party agreement on many policy views, and substantial echo chambers for political talk and news.