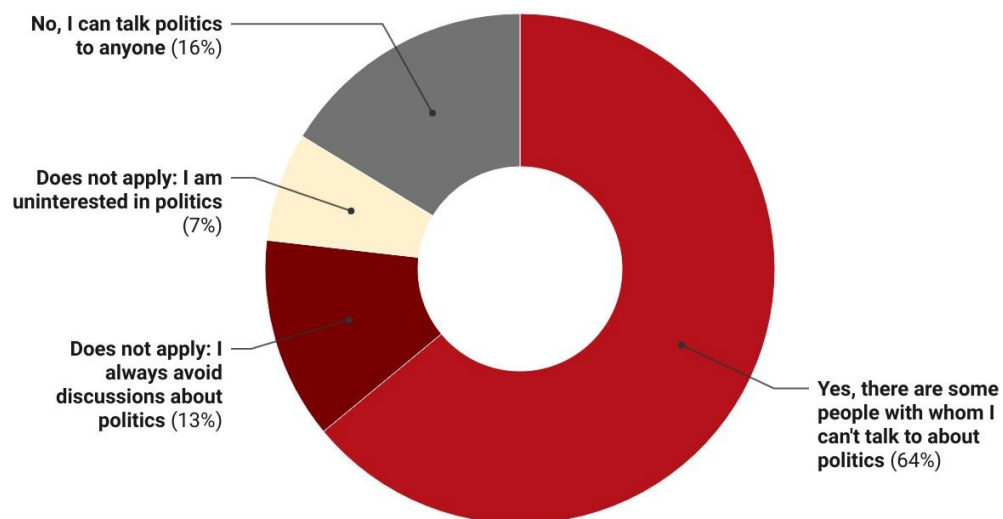


# Mood of the Nation: Americans strongly favor democracy, but most avoid talking about politics with coworkers and family

July 3, 2023

## One in six American Adults can talk politics with anyone; three-quarters self-censor with at least some others

"If you wanted to discuss political and governmental affairs, are there some people you definitely would not turn to? That is, people with whom you feel it is better not to discuss such topics."



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023.  
N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is  $\pm 3.6$  percentage points.

Created with Datawrapper

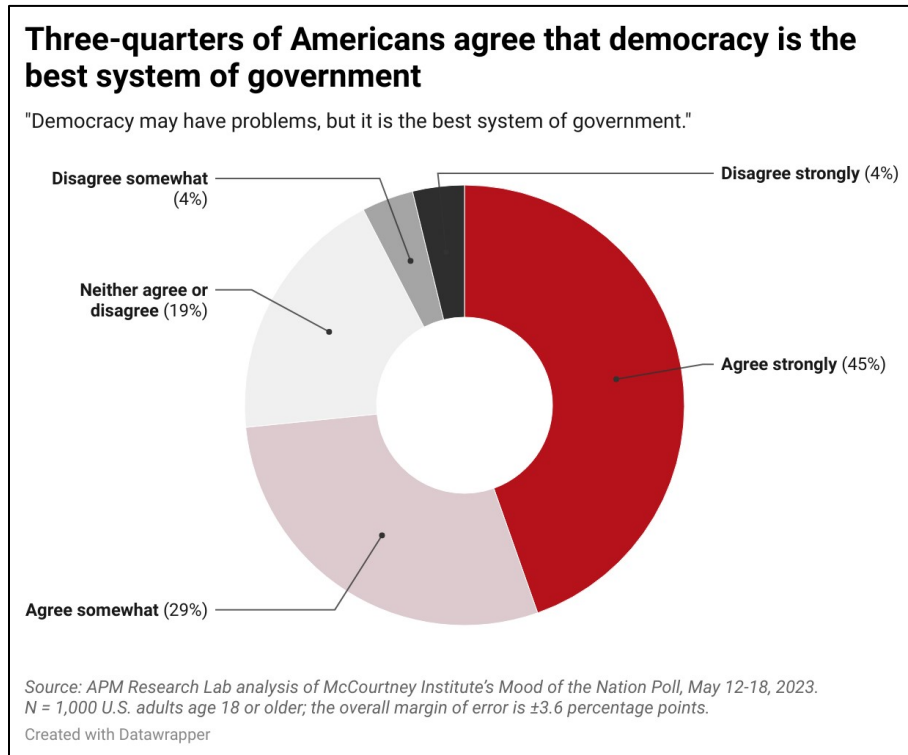
# Summary and key findings

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy's latest Mood of the Nation Poll, conducted with 1,000 American adults May 12 through 18, 2023, included questions aimed at understanding both American adults' opinions about democracy as well as the degree to which American adults censor themselves when it comes to discussing politics.

- Three quarters of American adults indicate that they agree with the statement “democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government,” including the 45% who agree strongly.
  - Unlike many political opinions, the proportion of Republicans and Democrats agreeing with the statement is very similar.
  - Six earlier Mood of the Nation polls, starting in September 2019, have included this question and the results have consistently shown that approximately half of U.S. adults agree strongly that democracy is the best system of government.
- Only sixteen percent of American adults, about one-in-six, say they feel comfortable talking about politics with anyone. A majority, 64%, indicate that there are some people with whom they cannot talk about politics. Another 13% indicate that they always avoid discussions about politics, bringing the total who self-censor to 77%.
  - When asked “please tell us why you avoid these political discussions,” responses generally falling into major themes around (1) wanting to avoid the conflict, at least with certain people; (2) the inappropriateness of talking about politics in certain settings, most commonly work; and (3) those with whom I disagree are too close-minded. Several answers touch on more than one of these themes.
  - Twice the proportion of men than women say they can talk about politics with anyone (22% and 11% respectively).
  - The proportion of Americans who selectively self-censor increases by age group, growing from 51% of adults under 30, to 56% among those age 30 to 44, to 67% among those age 45 to 64, to 80% among those age 65 and older.
- The proportion who selectively self-censor is highest among co-workers (71%), closely followed by family members (67%). About half indicated that they selectively self-censor among their close friends, and 13% indicate self-censoring with their spouse, domestic or romantic partner.

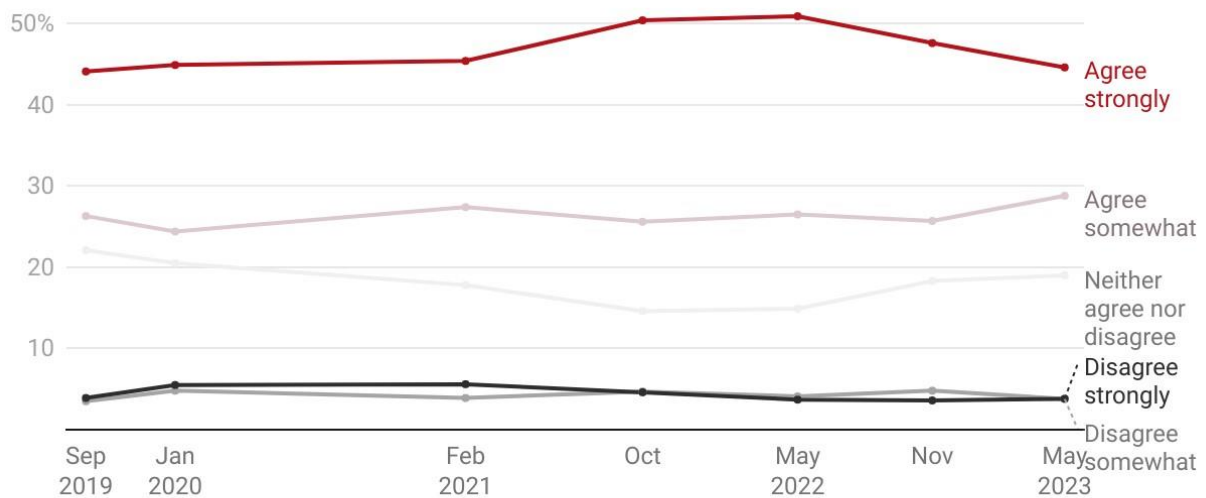
# A strong majority believe that democracy is the best system of government

Three quarters of American adults indicate that they agree with the statement “democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government,” including the 45% who agree strongly. Most other Americans neither agree nor disagree with the statement, and the remaining eight percent disagree.



This is similar to findings from previous surveys. Six earlier Mood of the Nation polls, starting in September 2019, have included this question and the results have consistently shown that approximately half of U.S. adults agree strongly that democracy is the best system of government.

## Since at least 2019 roughly half of American adults agree strongly that democracy is the best system of government



Question: "Democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government."

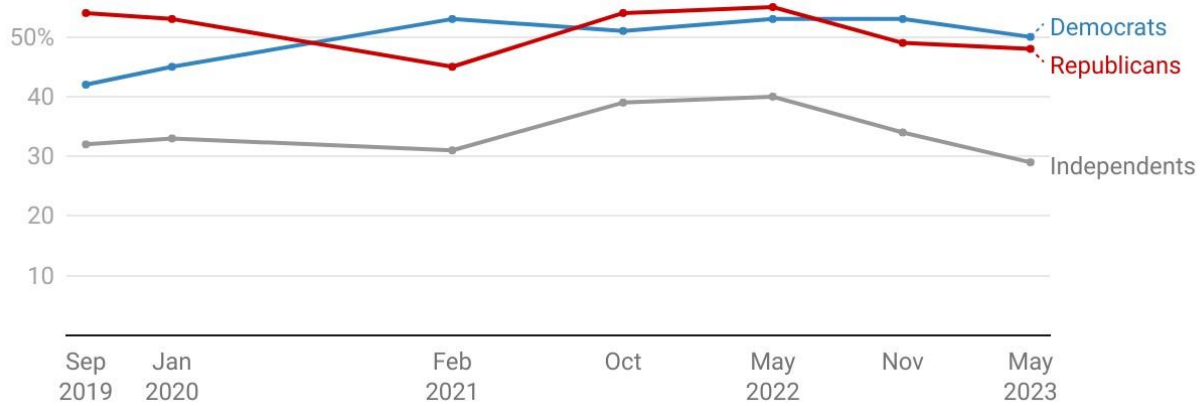
Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Polls, September 2019 through May, 2023. N = at least 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older for each survey; the overall margin of error for each survey is approximately  $\pm 3.6$  percentage points.

Created with Datawrapper

Further, unlike many political opinions, the proportion of Republicans and Democrats agreeing with the statement is very similar. Among independents who do not lean toward either major party, a consistently lower proportion than those identifying with the major parties believe democracy is the best system of government.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a more in-depth look at Americans' opinions about democracy, see, "A strong majority of Americans endorse democracy, but some—especially among younger generations—are skeptical," published January 18, 2023, based on the November 2022 Mood of the Nation Poll (<https://www.apmresearchlab.org/motn/poll-americans-belief-in-democracy>.)

## A similar proportion of Republicans and Democrats agree strongly that democracy is the best system of government



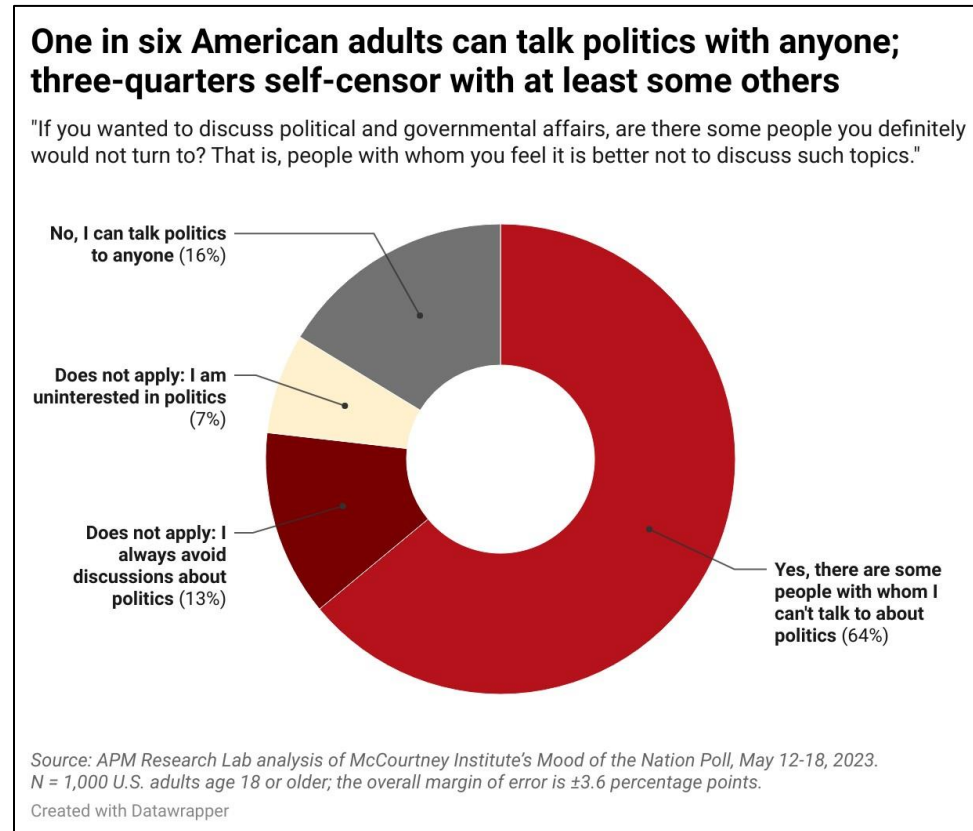
Question: "Democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government." (Graph shows percentage indicating "agree strongly.")

Note: "Republicans" and "Democrats" include those who identify as independents but indicate that they generally lean toward one of the two major parties. Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Polls, September 2019 through May, 2023. N = at least 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older for each survey; the overall margin of error for each survey is approximately  $\pm 3.6$  percentage points, larger for subgroups (including political affiliations).

Created with Datawrapper

# Self-censorship in discussing politics

Only sixteen percent of American adults, about one-in-six, say they feel comfortable talking about politics with anyone. A majority, 64%, indicate that there are some people with whom they cannot talk about politics. Another 13% indicate that they always avoid discussions about politics, bringing the total who self-censor to 77%. An additional seven percent also avoid the topic, but they indicate their avoidance of political discussion stems from a lack of interest in the topic.



Hesitancy to discuss politics may have increased over the years. In response to a similar question in the 1959 Civic Culture Study 28% of American adults indicated that could talk about politics with anyone, 53% indicated that they avoided political discussions with at least some others, and 18% indicated that they always avoided talking about politics.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The 1959 question text was: "If you wanted to discuss political and governmental affairs, are there some people you definitely wouldn't turn to—that is, people with whom you feel it is better not to discuss such topics? About how many people would you say there are with whom you would avoid discussing politics?" Almond, Gabriel A., and Sidney Verba. *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Princeton university press, 1963. Data available via Roper Center [Gabriel Almond/Sidney Verba Survey: Civic Culture Study, 1959-1960,

## In their own words

When asked “please tell us why you avoid these political discussions,” responses generally falling into major themes around (1) wanting to avoid the conflict, at least with certain people; (2) the inappropriateness of talking about politics in certain settings, most commonly work; and (3) those with whom I disagree are too close-minded. Several answers touch on more than one of these themes. Examples include:

*“Some people only get their political news from heavily biased sources. They're spoon-fed what to believe, and they refuse to consider they may have been lied to.” – 50-year-old white male from Florida.*

*“No point in getting someone upset if they disagree with you and some are so set in their ways, they will vote for a party right or wrong.” – 74-year-old white male from West Virginia.*

*“I don't want to seem as if I'm imposing. Also, our current political climate does not lend to the ability to have fruitful conversations.” – 25-year-old Black American female from South Carolina.*

*“For work, it's an echo chamber and saying one thing they disagree with can result in being cancelled or worse, losing my job.” – 39-year-old Asian American male from Washington.*

*“Because the people that can't have a civil discussion about politics cannot actually engage in a discussion of politics - only political personalities they admire and people they hate. Not ideas, not policy, not philosophy. It's like modern day rip and read but no depth.” – 64-year-old white female from Wisconsin.*

*“At work, it is disruptive. We have a job to do, and we aren't paid to discuss politics. Some people cannot have a discussion without becoming upset. Best to just avoid it.” – 56-year-old white female from Texas.*

*“I have some family members who just parrot what they hear on Fox News or talk radio without questioning the veracity of what they're being told. There's no point in getting involved in a discussion with people like that.” – 61-year-old white female from Tennessee.*

*“Other person holds intractable views, and is more like a monologue with them, not a conversation. They do not let others speak.” – 71-year-old white male from Pennsylvania.*

---

Question 14, USNORC.60ALM.R13A, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1959)].



*“People are set in their ways and refuse facts.” – 31-year-old Native American woman from Alaska.*

*“Some people don't understand the rules necessary for democracy to work and survive. Some are to ignorant or bigoted or unable or unwilling to respect ideas differing from their own.” – 86-year-old white male from Kansas.*

*“Mainly because specific people can't discuss politics without getting angry or almost violent. I like to discuss, not argue. But we are all so convinced that the other side is evil and beyond redemption that engaging them is useless.” – 73-year-old white male from Texas.*

*“Most of my family that are my age or older tend to be very conservative. I'm not.” – 62-year-old Hispanic female from Alabama.*

*“Everyone is entitled to their opinion and views, but I don't have to agree with them. So, to avoid disagreements, I don't talk politics.” – 63-year-old white female from Pennsylvania.*

*“Some people align their religion with politics, which makes discussion impossible if we disagree.” – 63-year-old white woman from Indiana.*

*“I can't discuss reality and truth with people who don't know what they are. People who believe what they are told by dishonest and power-hungry politicians and public figures are unwilling to discuss reality. I can't help but correct misinformation and that leads to arguments.” – 52-year-old white female from Florida.*

*“There is too much division right now, and many people following radical leaders, like Trump & some other Republicans. I do not wish to risk danger to myself or others as a result of risking the anger of those radical thinkers.” – 70-year-old white male from Michigan.*

*“They are completely wrapped up in cable news tv. They use the same phrasing and "lingo". They have a difficult time "explaining" the concepts when pressed for details or examples and become agitated. I decided it was best to let things be and not question how opinions or thoughts are formed. It is a free country, and you may believe as you wish.” – 57-year-old white male from North Carolina.*

*“I am a moderate independent thinker and voter. Some of my friends are extreme, right or left. It's simply impossible to find any kind of middle ground. And I don't like extremes.” – 85-year-old white female from Georgia.*

*“With some people, discussion is not possible; statements and opinions are made without basis in fact, without a source. And then I find myself knowing that there are facts and sources about issues, but I don't have them at hand.” – 63-year-old white female from Pennsylvania.*



*“Opinions are currently very polarized, and I receive feedback that further discussions will not further inform, but instead further polarize. Democracy does honor for each member to have right to their opinion as long as it does not impede on rights and safety of others. Therefore, I honor those to have differing opinions than my own, again, as long as it does not impede my rights nor my safety.” – 50-year-old white female from Colorado.*

*“For me, I have reached the point where I no longer believe I can change people's mind. I have a number of family members who I disagree with who I have argued/debated with a lot in the past, who I don't believe are ever going to shift their beliefs. They don't respect my point of view, and in order to maintain some kind of basic family relationship with them I avoid the topic.” – 34-year-old white female from Washington.*

*“The brainwashed members of the new left get too upset.” – 53-year-old Hispanic female from Maryland.*

*“I will talk about it with people that I agree with, but I am intolerant of people that have xenophobic, hated-based ideas.” – 63-year-old white female from South Dakota.*

*“Far too many young people and relatives are completely against my Conservative political opinions.” – 61-year-old white male from California.*

*“Due to media influences, and lack of critical thinking skills within all generations currently, the discussions of political views almost always devolve into emotional arguments that are not relevant to the outcome or possible outcomes of political actions, debates or elections.” – 62-year-old white male from Michigan.*

*“I feel anxious and tense when discussing politics with certain people, question my competence to discuss some topics; and fear being steamrolled or seen as a fool or a bad person. I also don't like creating a tense atmosphere during the few times per year that our extended family actually gets to be together. We'd all rather focus on bonding and enjoying each other's company.” – 38-year-old white female from Ohio.*

*“I am an Independent voter, sharing many of the same ideas with Libertarians, which seems to greatly upset people who are affiliated with the two main political parties.” – 57-year-old white female from North Carolina.*

*“Some people get upset with you if they don't agree... it's best, for me usually, to just not argue with people that would never change their mind.” – 46-year-old white male from California.*

## Self-censorship differences by demographic group

A statistically similar proportion of both men and women say they selectively self-censor when it comes to politics, avoiding political discussions with “some people” (62% and 65%, respectively). An identical proportion, seven percent of each, indicate they are uninterested in politics. Interestingly, men and women differ on the proportion who say they always self-censor in political discussions, with women doing so at a notably higher rate than men (16% compared to 9%). Additionally, twice the proportion of men than women say they can talk about politics with anyone (22% and 11% respectively).

The proportion of Americans who selectively self-censor increases by age group, growing from 51% of adults under 30, to 56% among those age 30 to 44, to 67% among those age 45 to 64, to 80% among those age 65 and older. Conversely, the proportion indicating that they are uninterested in politics successively shrinks with age, from 15% among those age 18 to 29 to only one percent of those age 65 or older.

Only seven percent of those in the oldest age group say that they can talk about politics with anyone, compared to 20% of those under age 45.

Differences in response pattern by racial and ethnic group are only suggestive due to relatively smaller samples of Black and Latino respondents, as well as those in the catch-all “other” category.

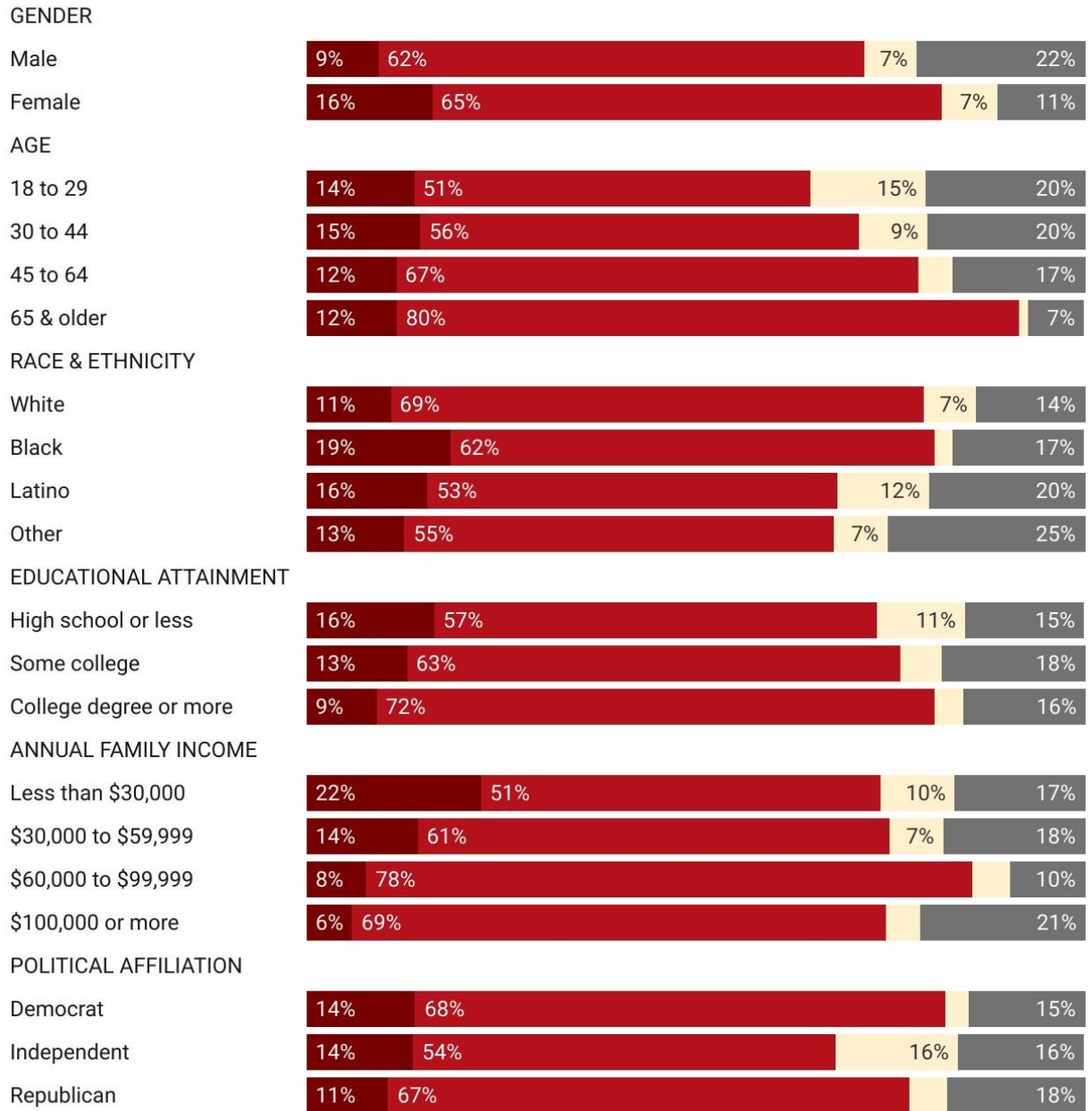
A higher proportion of those with a high school diploma or less education say they always self-censor about politics than is the case among those with at least a college education (16% compared to 9%). This pattern is magnified along lines of income: a much higher proportion of those with an annual family income of less than \$30,000 always avoid political discussions than is the case among those with annual family incomes of \$100,000 or more (22% compared to 6%).

A higher proportion of those with a high school diploma or less education indicate that they are uninterested in politics (11%) than is the case among those with at least a college degree (4%).

Republicans and Democrats self-censor at statistically identical rates. The bigger difference is between those identifying with the two major parties (which includes independents who say they lean toward either major party for purposes of this analysis) and those who indicate that they are politically independent. Sixteen percent of political independents indicate that they are uninterested in politics, compared to three percent of Democrats and five percent of Republicans.

# A majority of various demographic groups selectively self-censor their political discussions

■ I always avoid discussions about politics 
 ■ I can't talk to about politics with some people 
 ■ Does not apply: I am uninterested in politics 
 ■ I can talk politics to anyone



Question: "If you wanted to discuss political and governmental affairs, are there some people you definitely would not turn to? That is, people with whom you feel it is better not to discuss such topics."

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023.

N=1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points; larger for subgroups.

Created with Datawrapper

# Americans most often self-censor among co-workers and family

Nealy two-thirds of survey respondents say that they selectively self-censor about politics, by indicating that “there are some people with whom I can't talk to about politics.” The poll followed up to see which of four groups Americans are most likely to self-censor among: co-workers; family members; close friends; or spouses, domestic or romantic partners.

Note that several respondents selected out of responding to one or more of these categories. For example, some respondents may not have co-workers or a romantic partner.

Among those who felt they were able to respond to each category, the proportion who selectively self-censor is highest among co-workers (71%), closely followed by family members (67%). About half indicated that they selectively self-censor among their close friends, and 13% indicate self-censoring with their spouse, domestic or romantic partner.

## Two-thirds or more of Americans selectively self-censor among co-workers and family

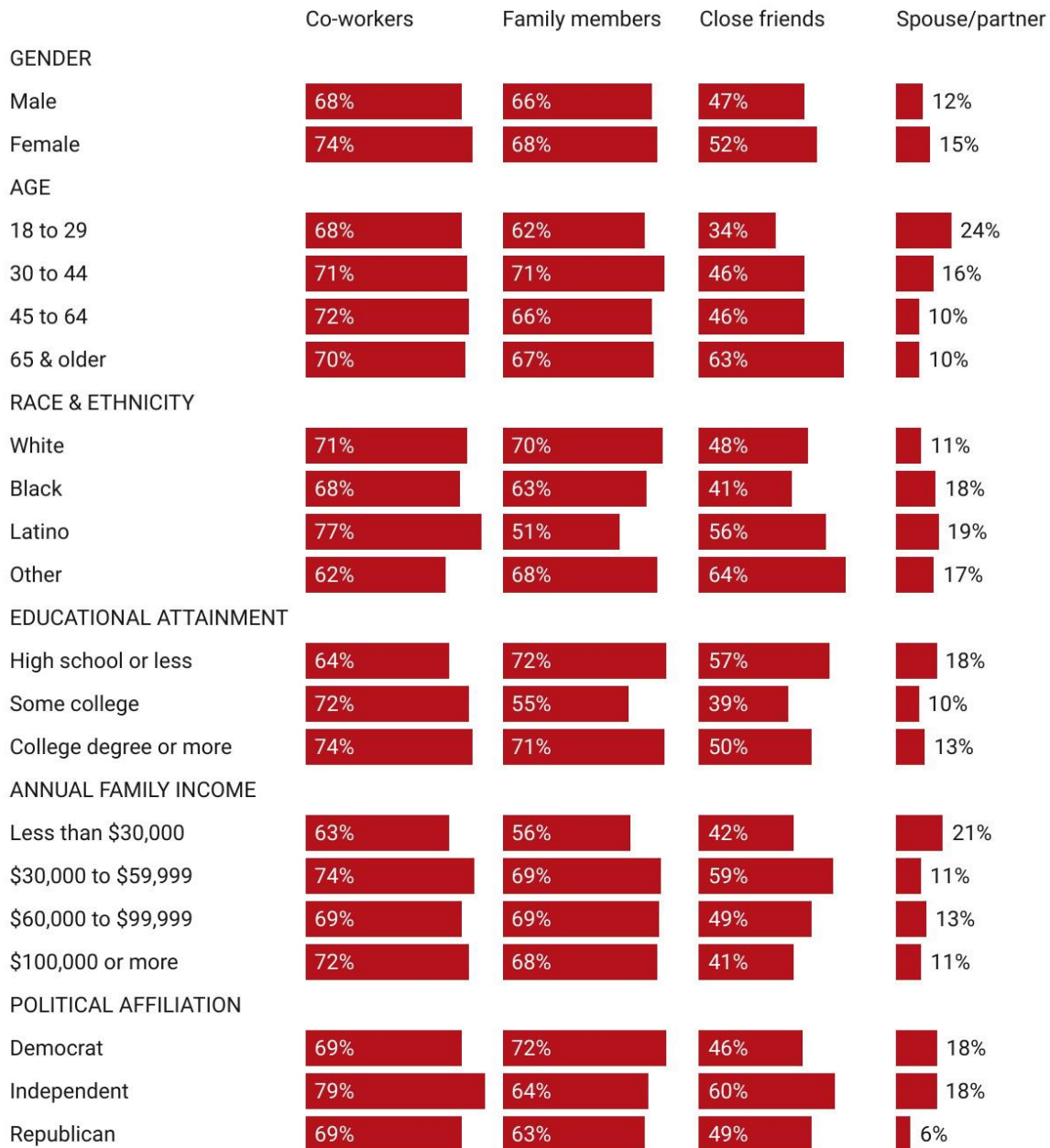
"Which of the following fall into the group of people with whom you avoid discussing politics?"



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023. Total eligible unweighted n = 675 respondents who indicated that they self-censored among some people. Additional respondents skipped some categories due to lack of applicability to their situation; 407 responded to co-workers, 645 responded to at least one of three questions about family members of different generations, 619 responded to close friends, and 482 responded to spouse, domestic or romantic partner (all ns unweighted; data are weighted for purposes of analysis).

Created with Datawrapper

## A majority of many large groups of Americans avoid discussing politics with co-workers and family members



Question: "Which of the following fall into the group of people with whom you avoid discussing politics?" Figure represents the proportion indicating "I avoid politics with one or more" of the people in the named groups (co-workers, family members, close friends, spouse or romantic partner).

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023.

Total eligible unweighted n = 675 respondents who indicated that they self-censored among some people.

Additional respondents skipped some categories due to lack of applicability to their situation; 407 responded to co-workers, 645 responded to at least one of three questions about family members of different generations, 619 responded to close friends, and 482 responded to spouse, domestic or romantic partner (all ns unweighted; data are weighted for purposes of analysis).

Created with Datawrapper



# About the survey

Data collection for this Mood of the Nation Poll was conducted online by YouGov (<https://today.yougov.com/>). The YouGov panel includes over 1.8 million individuals who agree to complete occasional surveys. The 1,000 individuals who completed the May 2023 Mood of the Nation Poll were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file).

For additional details about the sample and survey methodology, as well as transparency disclosures relevant to the American Association of Public Opinion, the Roper Center and CNN, please see: <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>.

## Survey questions used in this report

Penn State’s nonpartisan McCourtney Institute for Democracy regularly conducts the nationally representative Mood of the Nation Poll to gauge how Americans are feeling about various aspects of American politics and society.<sup>3</sup>

To assess American adults’ opinions about democracy as well as the degree to which American adults censor themselves when it comes to discussing politics, survey respondents were asked to respond to the following questions in May 2023:

1. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government.
  - a. Agree strongly
  - b. Agree somewhat
  - c. Neither agree or disagree
  - d. Disagree somewhat
  - e. Disagree strongly
  
2. If you wanted to discuss political and governmental affairs, are there some people you definitely would not turn to? That is, people with whom you feel it is better not to discuss such topics.
  - a. Yes, there are some people with whom I can't talk to about politics.
  - b. No, I can talk politics to anyone.
  - c. Does not apply because I always avoid discussions about politics.
  - d. Does not apply because I am uninterested in politics.

---

<sup>3</sup> For additional information about the Mood of the Nation Poll see the appendix to this brief. For additional details about this survey’s methodology, please see <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/mood-of-the-nation-poll-motn>

3. Which of the following fall into the group of people with whom you avoid discussing politics? [For each: I avoid politics with one or more; I don't avoid discussing politics; Not applicable]
  - a. One or more of my co-workers
  - b. One or more of my close friends
  - c. My spouse, domestic or romantic partner
  - d. Family members of older generations
  - e. Family members of younger generations
  - f. Family members of my own generation
  
4. Please tell us why you avoid these political discussions: (open-ended)

Note that the order in which the answer options were presented was rotated to avoid possible order effects. Also note that the survey included other questions, some of which will be reported separately, but this is the order in which these questions were asked.

To see whether Americans' opinions on these topics vary according to demographic, social and economic characteristics, we analyzed the results of each question by gender (women, men), age (four groups), race and ethnicity (four groups are available in this survey: White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; Other), educational attainment (three categories), family income (four categories), and political affiliation (self-identified Republican, Independent, Democrat, as derived from self-placement on a seven-category scale ranging from "Strong Democrat" to "Strong Republican").<sup>4</sup>

The number of respondents in each group are detailed in the methodology report that accompanies this brief.

---

<sup>4</sup> As a nationally representative sample with no oversamples this survey is unable to adequately represent the experiences and opinions of smaller groups such as those identifying as LGBTQ, Indigenous Americans, or those affiliating with smaller political parties. The opinions of people from these and other small groups are represented in the findings, but we generally do not separate out the responses from groups with fewer than 100 respondents since the margin of error associated with small samples is so large as to render the associated findings (point estimates) potentially misleading.



## About the APM Research Lab

The APM Research Lab is a department within the American Public Media Group that informs the public about challenges and opportunities facing families, communities and organizations throughout the nation. Our mission is to foster an engaged democracy by inspiring curiosity, inquiry and discussion through fact-driven, credible research and analysis. Our Values: Independent, Useful, Informative, Non-partisan. Our tagline is *bringing facts into focus*.

The Lab is a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative and abides by its standards. See <https://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/Transparency-Initiative/>.

Contact: [info@apmresearchlab.org](mailto:info@apmresearchlab.org) | [apmresearchlab.org](http://apmresearchlab.org)

## About the McCourtney Institute for Democracy

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State promotes scholarship and practical innovations that defend and advance democracy in the United States and abroad. Through teaching, research and public outreach, the Institute leverages the resources of Penn State and partners around the world to foster a model of deliberation, policymaking and responsiveness that is passionate, informed and civil.

The Mood of the Nation Poll offers a unique approach to public opinion polling. It allows Americans to speak in their own words through open-ended questions that focus on emotions like anger and hope, as well as commitment to constitutional principles.

Contact: [democracyinst@psu.edu](mailto:democracyinst@psu.edu) | [democracy.psu.edu](http://democracy.psu.edu)

## Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab, with contributions from the Lab's Ten Across data journalism fellow, Rithwik Kalale, Mood of the Nation Poll Director Eric Plutzer, who also designed of the questions.

## Media contacts

APM Research Lab: Craig Helmstetter ([chelmstetter@apmresearchlab.org](mailto:chelmstetter@apmresearchlab.org); 651-290-1219)

McCourtney Institute for Democracy: Jenna Spinelle ([jenna@psu.edu](mailto:jenna@psu.edu); 570-617-5667)