

# The 2021 American Institutional Confidence Poll: A Report Summarizing Key Findings

Sean Kates, Jonathan Ladd, Joshua A. Tucker

## Executive Summary

We highlight 7 key findings from the 2021 American Institutional Confidence Poll:

1. Americans lost confidence in every institution between 2018–2021
2. There were huge gaps between confidence among Democrats and Republicans, but these gaps were biggest for confidence in news organizations and the CDC
3. Republicans lost confidence in institutions across the board
4. Democrats' confidence in institutions changed from 2018-2021 largely as we would have expected given the 2020 election results
5. There was a major loss of confidence in big tech, across both parties
6. Support for democratic principles held steady, and remains stronger among older people
7. Differences between the parties in support for democratic principles remain small

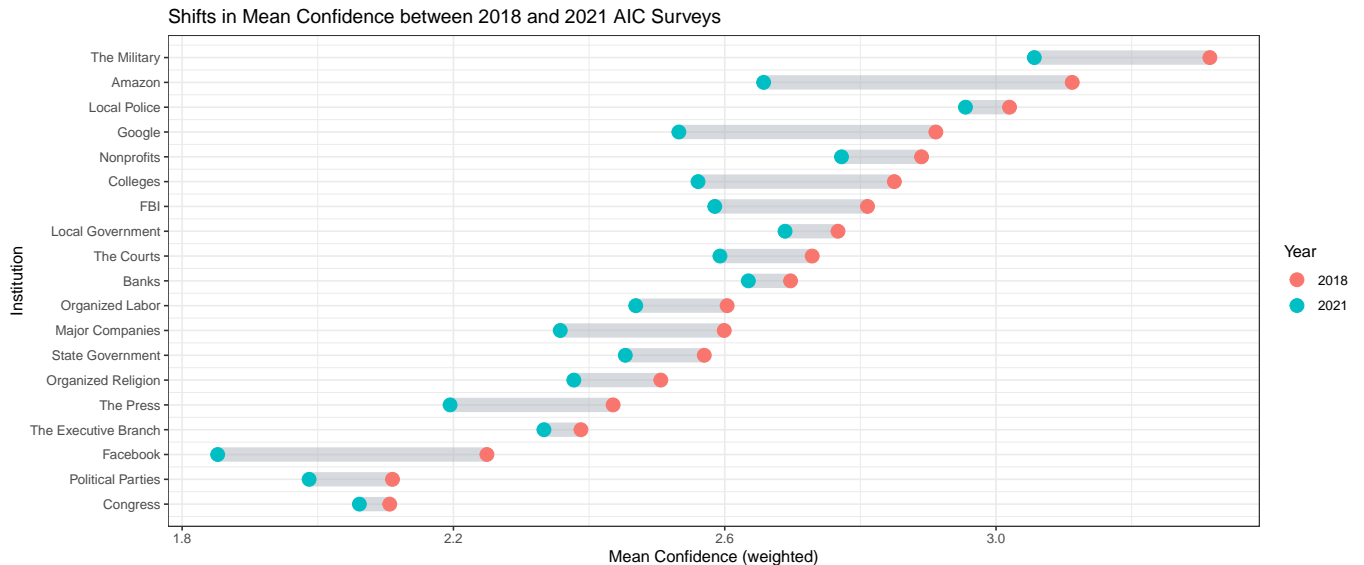
*The American Institutional Confidence (AIC) Poll is a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults, conducted in 2018 and 2021. The 2021 survey included both panel respondents who were first interviewed in the 2018 survey wave and fresh respondents. More information about the AIC Poll is available at [www.aicpoll.org](http://www.aicpoll.org).*

# 1 Americans as a whole lost confidence in every institution we asked about between 2018–2021

The 2018 AIC Poll found varying levels of confidence in different institutions in American society. The military and local police were near the top of the list, along with two of the major technology companies that dominate the American economy: Amazon and Google. At the bottom were Congress, political parties, the executive branch, and the press, as well as the technology company that had been vilified for different reasons by liberals and conservatives: Facebook (now Meta). Of the American institutions (broadly defined) that we asked Americans about, these were the least popular.

Figure 1 compares the confidence levels in 2018 with 2021. Strikingly, overall confidence in every institution that we asked about in both years went down from 2018 to 2021. While confidence in some institutions declined more than others (and as we will see there are also differences across types of people in how confidence changed), the overall trend is stark. And this occurred despite the fact that overall confidence in institutions was not particularly high in 2018.

**Figure 1:** Change between 2018 and 2021



In this three year period, the American people lost substantial confidence in some of the institutions that were the most popular in 2018, including the military, colleges and universities, and the technology companies Amazon and Google. Yet Americans *also* lost substantial confidence in institutions that were already near the bottom of our list in 2018, such as the press and Facebook. Looking at the 3-year change, the pattern that stands out (beyond the general decline) is that confidence declined the most among the three technology

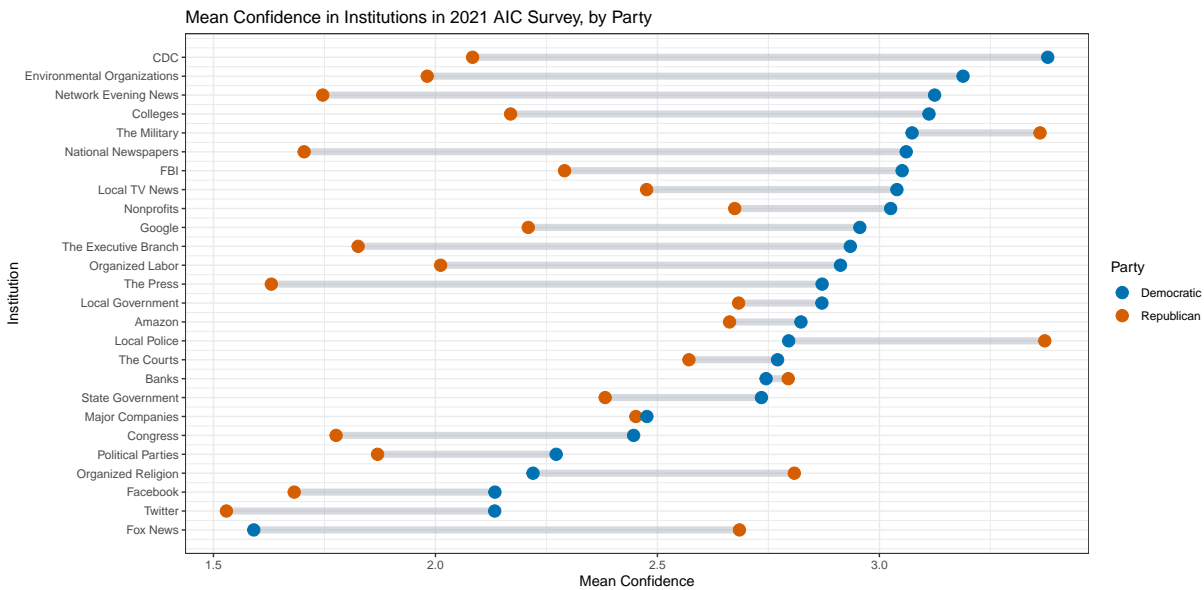
companies that we tracked. The decline in confidence in Amazon is particularly surprising given the importance of the company to people during the pandemic. People also lost substantial confidence in “major companies” and “the FBI,” both of which started out in 2018 in the middle of the pack.

In 2018, Congress was the least popular institution about which we inquired. But it declined relatively little in the following three years. As a result, in 2021, our least popular institution was Facebook, followed by “political parties,” with Congress coming in third to the bottom. The military was the most popular institution in our survey in both 2018 and 2021. The second most popular institution in 2018, Amazon, took a plunge in the rankings, falling to the 5th most popular institution out of our 19.

## 2 There were huge gaps in confidence between Democrats and Republicans, with the biggest gaps seen in news organizations and the CDC

The gaps between Republicans and Democrats in which institutions hold their confidence was large in 2018, but it grew even wider in the following three years. Figure 2 shows the gaps in confidence in institutions between Democrats and Republicans in 2021. (This allows us to consider a few more institutions than we did in the analyses that compared 2018 and 2021, because we added additional institutions to the survey for the 2021 wave.)

**Figure 2:** Party Differences in Confidence in Institutions



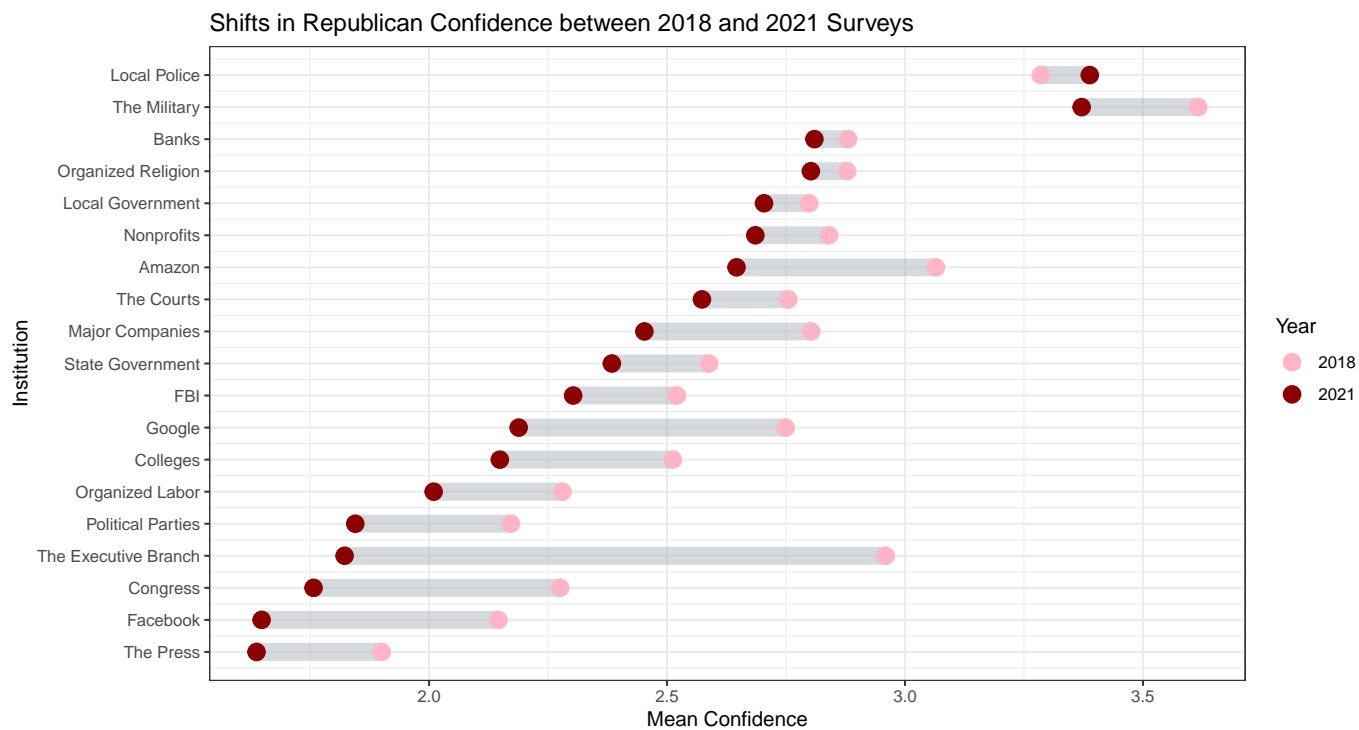
Democrats had more confidence than Republicans in most institutions. This has been a consistent finding

in both years of the AIC Poll, and it matches what other major surveys like the General Social Survey and the World Values Survey have found. In 2021, Democrats had dramatically more confidence than Republicans in national newspapers, the network evening news, the press in general, the CDC, and environmental organizations. Perhaps less surprisingly given the results of the 2020 elections, Democrats also had much more confidence than Republicans in the Executive branch and in Congress.

The institutions with relatively small partisan gaps were the military, local government, banks, major companies, and Amazon. The only institutions we asked about where Republicans had more confidence than Democrats were the military (a small gap), local police and organized religion (large gaps), and Fox News (a massive gap).

### 3 Republicans lost confidence in institutions across the board

**Figure 3:** Change among Republicans



Perhaps that most alarming finding of the 2021 AIC Poll is the across the board decline in confidence in institutions among Republicans, visualised in Figure 3. Since we had last surveyed respondents in 2018, the Republican president in office continuously positioned himself as a general outsider to a wide range of American institutions inside and outside government and frequently battled with these institutions. These conflicts climaxed in the January 6 insurrection, and continued thereafter with claims of institutional bias and

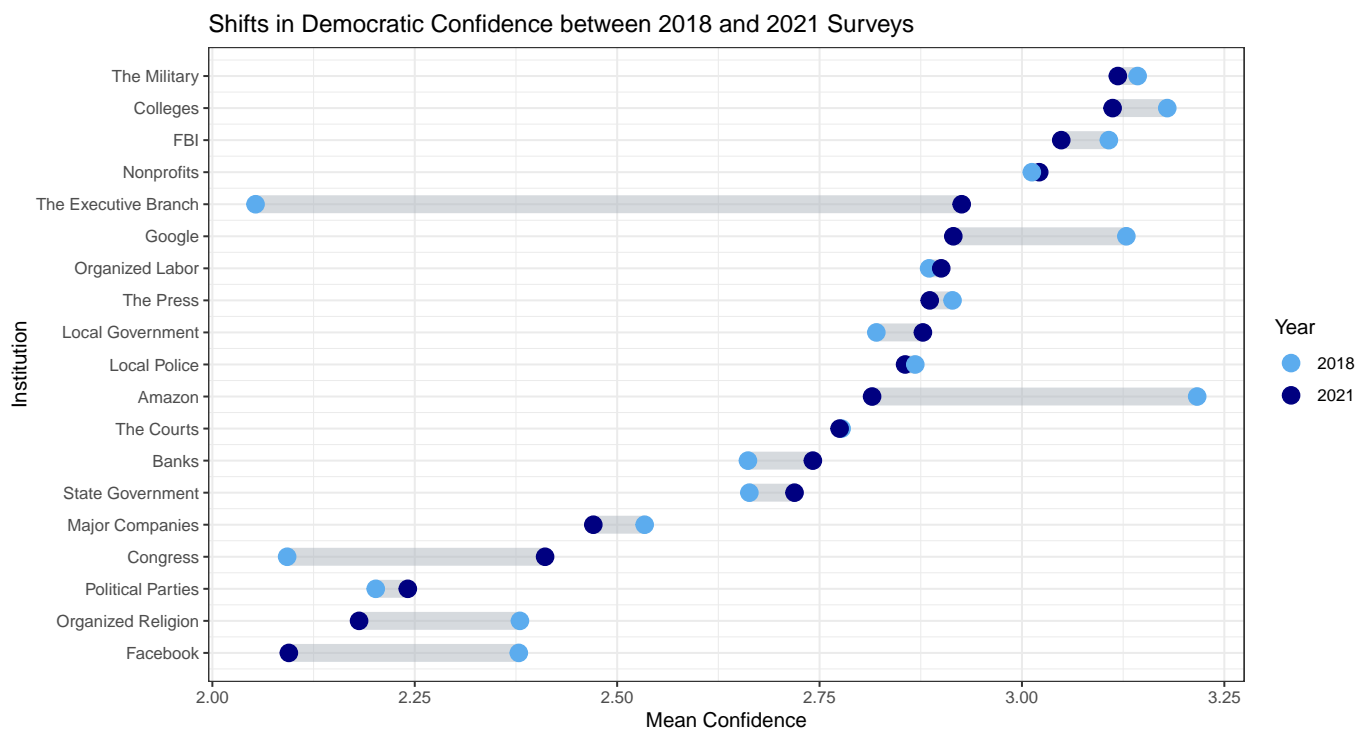
collusion by the now former President Trump. We naturally wondered whether Republican partisans turned more negative in their views of national institutions as a result.

The answer appears to be yes. The only institution in which Republicans became more confident since 2018 was local police, perhaps reflecting the conflicts between liberals and conservatives about incidents of police brutality and the criticisms of police conduct made by the Black Lives Matter movement. But even this increase is very small.

The large decline in confidence in the executive branch can be dismissed as a normal consequence of a new Democratic president taking office. But the decline across other institutions can't be explained away as a normal response to the change of administrations. Republicans have become more disaffected with a wide range of institutions in American society.

## 4 Changes in Democratic confidence in institutions were more consistent with expectations

Figure 4: Change among Democrats



In contrast to Republicans, there was not a general decline in confidence among Democrats. The major changes in confidence among Democrats fall into two main categories. First, Democrats' confidence in the political branches of the national government in DC changed in understandable ways after the 2020 election.

Democrats became much more confident in the executive branch as Joe Biden succeeded Donald Trump as president. Simultaneously, Democrats became less confident in Congress, perhaps because moderates in the closely divided Congress of 2021-2022 had become the main obstacle to Biden and Democratic leaders passing their preferred liberal legislation. In the second major grouping, Democrats lost substantial confidence in the technology companies Amazon, Google and Facebook, mirroring Republican shifts. Outside of these two broad groupings, confidence levels among Democrats were remarkably similar to those in 2018.

## **5 There was a major loss of confidence in big tech**

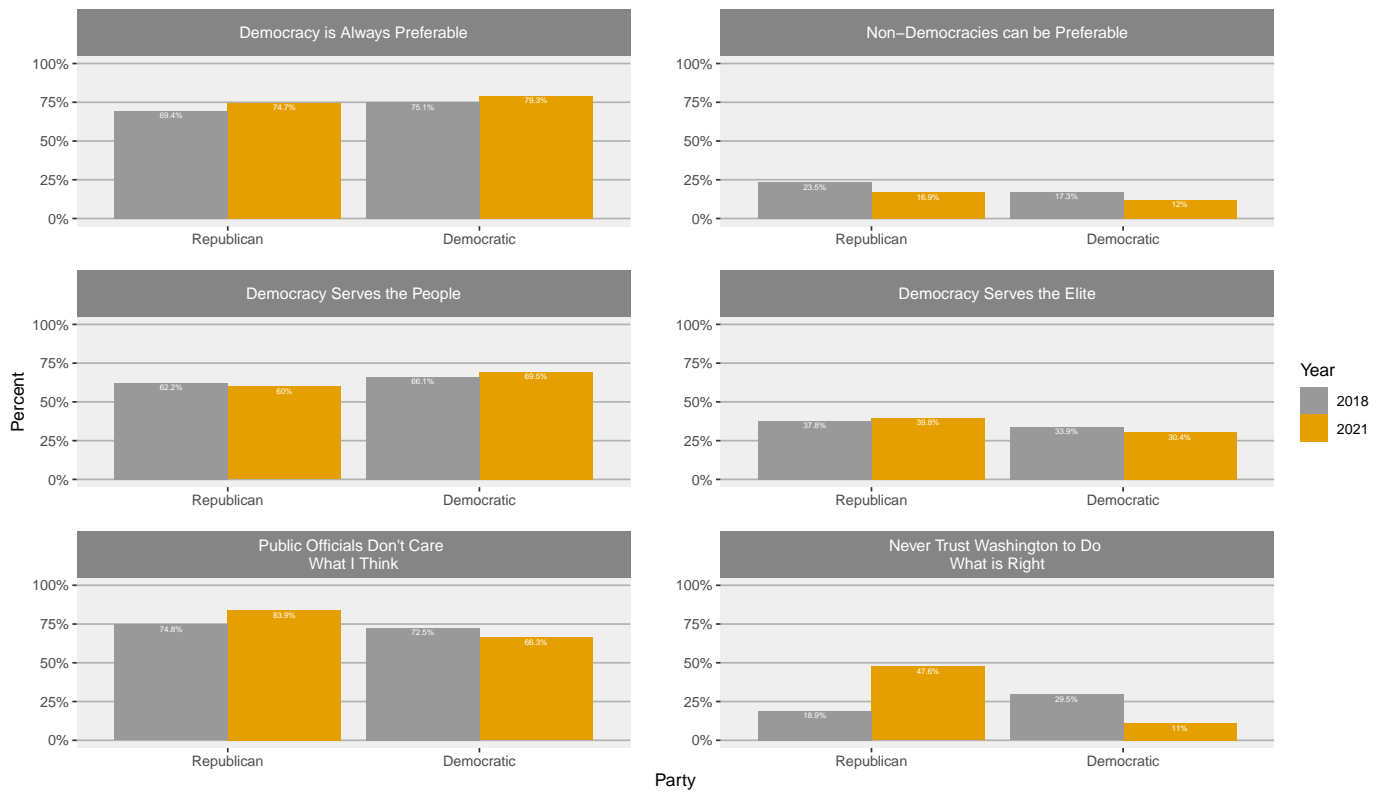
Figure 1 (above) makes clear that one of the biggest shifts in institutional confidence during these three years was the relatively large decline in confidence in big technology companies. The AIC Poll does not ask about a long list of technology companies, but is the only major academic survey on confidence in institutions to ask about any big tech firms. In 2018 and 2021, the AIC Poll asked about confidence in Amazon, Google and Facebook.

In 2018, this produced a divided story. Amazon and Google were quite popular compared to other institutions, placing second and fourth, respectively. However, Facebook was near the bottom of our ranking, as the third least popular institution, above only political parties and Congress. Clearly, the public has lost confidence in all three of these tech giants since 2018. The declines in confidence in Amazon and Google dropped them from among the most popular institutions back to the middle of the pack, and Facebook took over the mantle as the least popular institution in our survey.

## **6 Support for democratic principles held steady, and remains stronger among older people**

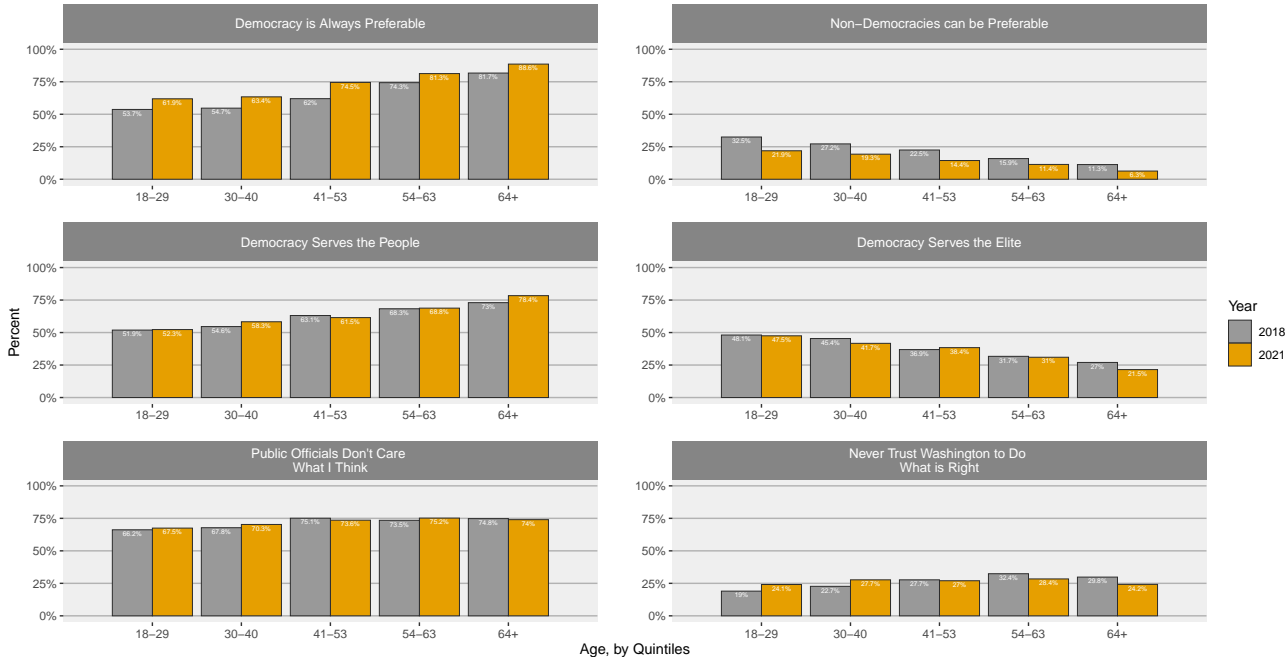
The good news? Despite President Trump's undermining of democratic norms, support for the January 6th insurrection, and continued false claims that the 2020 national elections were fraudulent, support for abstract democratic principles changed very little between 2018 and 2021, with the gaps between Democrats and Republicans remaining small. As Figure 5 shows, the percentage of Americans saying the "democracy is always preferable" to other systems of government actually increased slightly since 2018. It was 74.7% among Republicans and 79.3% among Democrats. There was similarly little change in the percentage of Americans who said that democracy serves the people, compared to serving the elite. In this section of questions, the biggest change was in how many people believed that they could "trust the government in Washington to do what is right." Compared to 2018, more Republicans and fewer Democrats said they would never trust the

**Figure 5: Support for Abstract Democratic Principles by Party**



government. But given that there was little change in the other questions about democracy, this is likely just a common response to the party of the president changing, not a long-term shift in support for democracy.

**Figure 6:** Support for Abstract Democratic Principles by Age



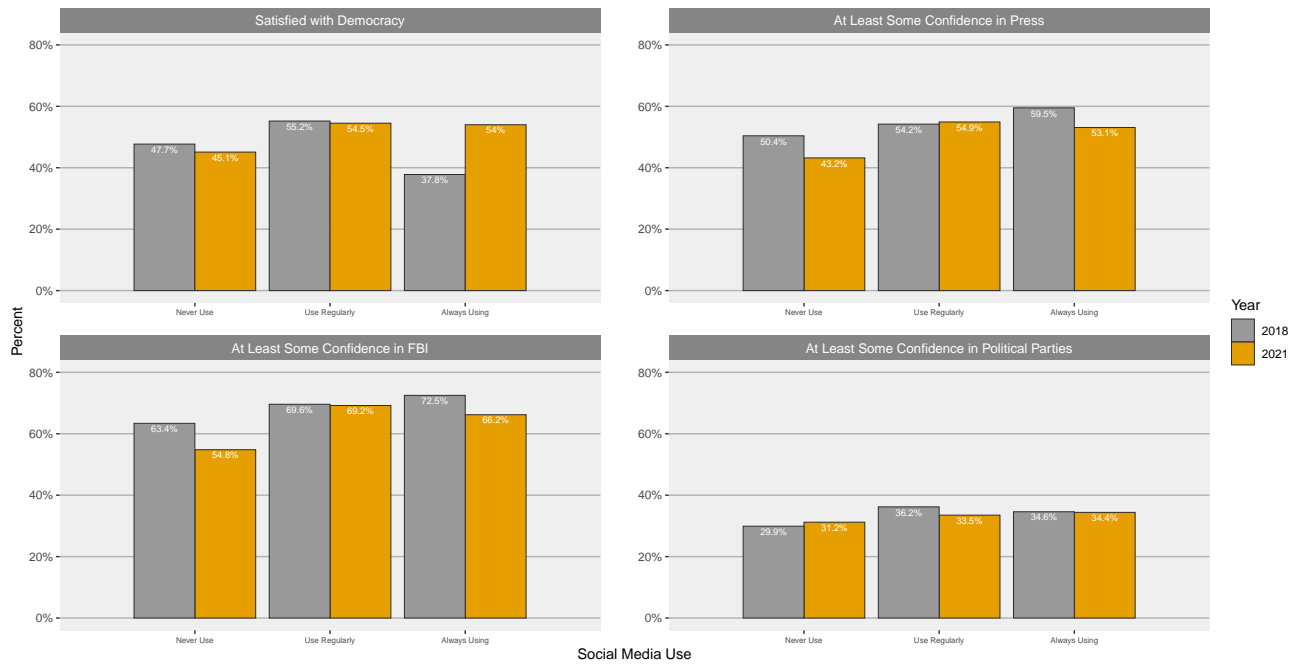
Another thing we have found consistently since 2018 is that older Americans are more supportive of democratic principles than younger ones. As Figure 6 shows, in both rounds of surveys, we have consistently found that a higher percentage of older Americans than younger ones believe that democracy is always preferable to other forms of government, that democracy serves the people over the elite, and that public officials care what they think. These two panel waves do not allow us to disentangle how much of this pattern is an age effect (in which Americans always tend to get more supportive of democracy as they get older) and how much is a cohort effect (current older generations have always been more supportive of democracy and younger generations will persistently be democracy skeptics).

**7 It appeared in 2018 that the heavy social media users were less supportive of democracy. That went away by 2021.**

Finally, we found a relationship between social media use and support for democracy. Between 2018 and 2021, those who report always using social media became *more likely* to be satisfied with democracy (increasing from 38% to 54%). Along the same lines, in 2021, 53% of those who used social media all the time trusted



**Figure 7: Social Media and Democracy**



the press, compared to 43% of those who never used social media. Also in 2021, 66% of those who used social media all the time had confidence in the FBI, compared to 55% of those who never used social media. We there do not find evidence that social media use is correlated with widespread anti-democratic populist attitudes.

## **Background of the American Institutional Confidence Poll**

This is a panel study measuring confidence in institutions, support for democratic principles, and related concepts in the United States population. The first round of interviews was conducted June 12 to July 19, 2018. The second round of interviews took place July 30 to August 19 and September 28 to October 11, 2021. In 2021, we re-interviewed all of the original 2018 respondents whom we were able to recontact, plus added fresh respondents.

Over a tumultuous period in which Donald Trump ran for reelection, people attempted to stop the Electoral Vote count on Jan 6, 2021, the party of the president changed hands, the job market heated up but inflation soared, President Biden's popularity plummeted, Roe vs Wade was overturned, and much more, the AIC Poll has been tracking Americans' confidence in institutions and support for democracy, with a sample size large enough to examine differences by party, race, gender and region.

Additional information about the AIC Poll is available at the following website: [www.aicpoll.org](http://www.aicpoll.org).

## **Author Bios and Contact Information**

The primary contact person for information about the AIC Poll is Jonathan M. Ladd. He is an associate professor in the McCourt School of Public Policy and Department of Government at Georgetown University. His email address is [jonathan.ladd@georgetown.edu](mailto:jonathan.ladd@georgetown.edu) and his mailing address is Jonathan M. Ladd, McCourt School of Public Policy, 100 Old North, Washington, DC 20057.

Sean Kates is a co-director of the AIC Poll. He is the Associate Director of Programs in Data Analytics at the Penn Program on Opinion Research and Election Studies (PORES) at the University of Pennsylvania. His e-mail address is [skates@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:skates@sas.upenn.edu)

Joshua A. Tucker is a co-director of the AIC Poll. He is Director of the Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia and the Co-Director NYU Center for Social Media and Politics(CSMaP), and a professor in the Department of Politics, Department of Russian and Slavic Studies, and Department of Data Science at New York University. His e-mail address is [joshua.tucker@nyu.edu](mailto:joshua.tucker@nyu.edu).

Publication Date: December 20, 2022.