

Unpacking Political Life in America

The Skeptics Society's Social and Political Attitudes Study

BY MARSHALL MCCREADY, ANONDAH SAIDE, AND KEVIN MCCAFFREE

FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS, THE SKEPTICS SOCIETY HAS been dedicated to promoting science, reason, and rationality. Its members have endeavored to debunk conspiracy theories, contest pseudoscience, and share the best available scientific research. The Skeptics Society is always striving to find new avenues for discussing and promoting science. The latest project, the Skeptic Research Center¹ (SRC), is an effort to directly engage readers with the process of survey data collection and analysis. As researchers associated with this newly established center, we are pleased to present the results of our initial reports.²

The findings of our first collaboration, called the *Social & Political Attitudes Study* (SPAS), were released across 10 separate reports from July 2020 through September 2020. The study was conducted by members of the Worldview Foundations Research Team, composed of sociologist Kevin McCaffree, psychologist Anondah Saide, and graduate student Marshall McCready. The survey was drawn from a nationally representative sample of adults in the United States in October 2019. Survey respondents were asked about their political views, feelings towards those with opposing perspectives, opinions about the role of language in constructing reality, and more. All reports are freely accessible on the SPAS page³ of the Skeptic Research Center website.

Our first ten reports included the following titles:

- Viewpoint Diversity and Political Bias (#10)
- Political Disagreement and Emotional Closeness (#9)
- Political Orientation and Political Attitudes (#8)
- Political Orientation and Information Sources (#7)
- Political Orientation and Decision-Making (#6)
- Political Affiliation and Attitudes about Language (#5)
- Attitudes on Inequality and Political Affiliation (#4)
- A Paradox of Tolerance? (#3)
- Political Affiliation and Political Intolerance (#2)
- Division in the Democratic Party (#1)

We will briefly review five of the themes that emerged in our reports below, and we encourage every-

one to check out the reports themselves and email research@skeptic.com with comments or questions. We welcome your own interpretation of the data.

Theme 1: Prevailing Political Disagreements

Unsurprisingly, relative to liberals, moderates and conservatives were less likely to agree that the United States government should open its borders to all immigrants in need.⁴ Almost three quarters of liberals endorsed this position compared to a little over a third of moderates, and 15.5% of conservatives. On the question of whether “abortion should always be a women’s choice,” 85% of liberals agreed it should, 61% of moderates, and 38% of conservatives (see Figure 1). Climate change was also, predictably, a point of disagreement: only 40% of conservatives affirmed that human actions are increasing global temperatures compared to 74% of moderates, and 89% of liberals. These hot button issues continue to serve as litmus tests dividing most conservatives from most liberals.

Theme 2: Support for Science

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and the run-up to the 2020 election, we have seen all kinds of contradictory and pseudoscientific claims circulating in the news and on social media. People may often use the latest scientific paper as a political cudgel against their ideological opponents, but the very attempt to do so belies an assumption that science is (or ought to be) authoritative in our social and political conversations.

Our study results showed that liberals, moderates, and conservatives all agreed that they base their political opinions on scientific evidence and reason (see Figure 2).⁵ Liberals were, on average, a bit more likely to report premising their political opinions on science, compared to moderates or conservatives. However, an important caveat to keep in mind is that we surveyed peoples’ *self-reported* reliance on scientific

evidence (versus emotion) in political judgements, so we should be cautious about making any inferences about how people actually form their political opinions in their daily life. Also, these data were collected last October, and views may have changed due to science's politicization during the pandemic.

Another finding from the study was that people across the political spectrum supported the dissemination of scientific research, even if it contained controversial findings.⁶ In our survey, we set up a thought experiment for respondents. The scenario involved a hypothetical study analyzing the effects of teaching both liberal and conservative perspectives in university classrooms. Specifically, respondents were told that researchers examined whether or not presenting diverse political points of view increased or decreased violence against ethnic minority groups on campus. We then asked participants how important they thought it would be for the results to be shared with the public. Liberals, moderates, and conservatives all reported that they believed the results should be shared, regardless of whether it increased or decreased violence. Compared to the other two groups though, liberals were more likely to emphasize the importance of sharing the results with the public if those results indicated violence against minorities increased, but this difference between groups was small.

Theme 3: Disunity Among Democrats

Our study also found some evidence of disunity within the Democratic Party. In response to the question, "If you had to choose, which political group do you think is most different/opposed to your own political views, currently?" Democrats were statistically as likely to select the Democratic Party as they were to pick the Republican Party.⁷ In other words, there was a 50/50 chance a randomly selected Democrat would report disagreeing more with his or her own party than the Republican Party. This degree of party division was only characteristic of the Democratic Party; Republicans were considerably more unified in their opposition to Democrats. Responses to the survey items on political orientation (i.e., how conservative or liberal a person is) supply further evidence of disagreement among Democrats. Almost half of Democrats reported being moderate or conservative, while only about a third of Republicans reported being moderate or liberal (see Figure 3).⁸ This means Democrats were less likely to self-identify as liberal than were Republicans to self-identify as conservative, another indication the Republican Party is comparably more unified.

Figure 1. Agreement with the statement, "Abortion should always be a woman's choice."

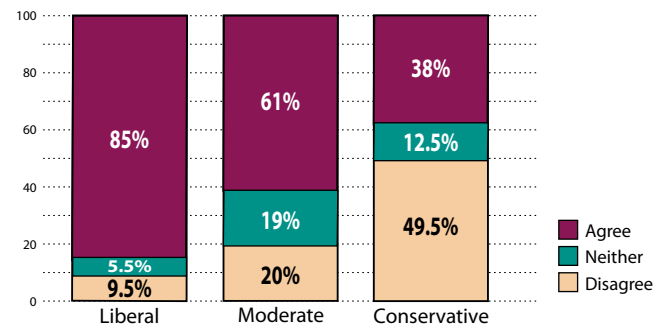


Figure 2. Agreement with the statement that, "My political opinions are based on scientific evidence and reason."

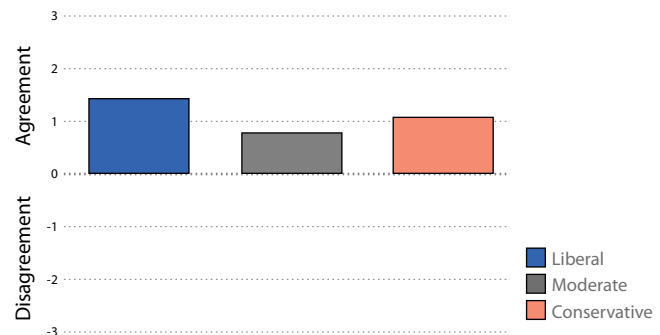
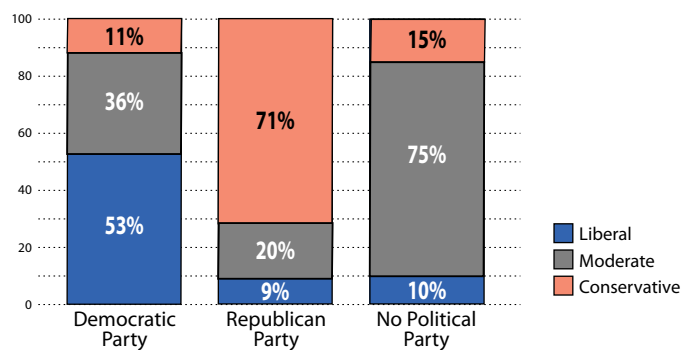


Figure 3. How Democrats, Republicans, and those with no political party affiliation identify themselves.



Theme 4: Bipartisan Political Tolerance

In contrast to the sensationalistic depictions of political tribalism one gleans from mainstream cable news coverage and social media feeds, the results of our study revealed a reassuring degree of partisan tolerance.⁹ Respondents were asked whether they would be irritated if a member of an oppositional political group

Figure 4. How irritated would you be if a member of the opposite political group was your neighbor, co-worker, local elected official or someone dating a member of your family?

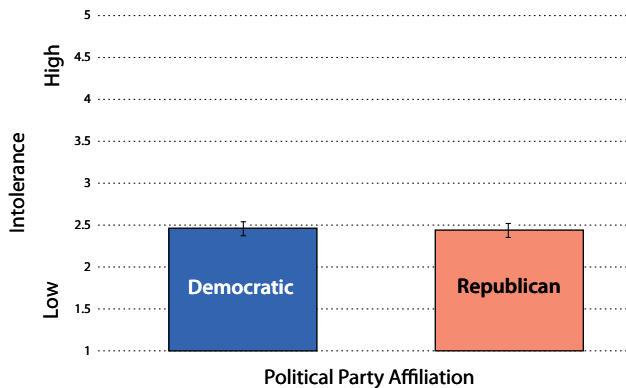
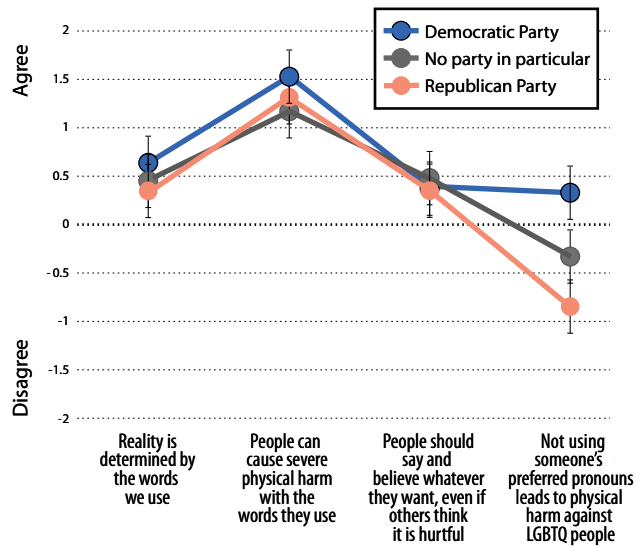


Figure 5. Attitudes towards language and political affiliation.



was dating a member of their family, was their neighbor, co-worker, or local elected official. Their answers to all four questions were then averaged into a single composite tolerance score. On average, both Democrats and Republicans indicated low levels of political intolerance (see Figure 4). Moreover, researchers found no significant relationship between respondents' emotional closeness to their family and friends and the degree of political disagreement in their social circles.¹⁰ Despite all the sociopolitical turmoil on cable news and social media, most people in our survey reported feeling close to those with whom they disagree politically.

There were additional interesting results. The only significant demographic difference between the most politically tolerant group and the least tolerant was gender, with males more likely to fall within the

most intolerant group.¹¹ Other demographic characteristics such as education, age and income did not predict tolerance/intolerance. Tolerance/intolerance was also correlated with political attitudes in interesting ways. Those in the most politically intolerant group were more likely to agree that: (a) the U.S. government should provide financial assistance to foreign countries, (b) the U.S. government should open its borders to immigrants in need, and (c) political conflict poses a major threat to society. Perhaps counterintuitively, the most and least tolerant groups both largely agreed that the U.S. government should do more to help female and ethnic minority American citizens.

Theme 5: Consensus that Speech can Harm

The results of our survey additionally uncovered a consensus among political groups about the role of language.¹² On average, Democrats, Republicans and those who are politically unaffiliated, all slightly agreed with the statements, "Reality is determined by the words we use," and "People should say and believe whatever they want, even if others think it is harmful." All three groups also agreed that people can cause "severe physical harm" with the words they use. The only notable disagreement among political groups in their responses to questions about language arose over whether or not using someone's preferred pronouns leads to physical harm against LGBTQ people. The average differences were still quite small, with Democrats in slight agreement, political unaffiliates in slight disagreement, and Republicans in only slightly stronger disagreement than political unaffiliates (see Figure 5).

These results appear to fly in the face of multiple political stereotypes echoed frequently in the media: the consensus about the ability of words to cause physical harm raises the possibility that the free speech debate is more about the risks of regulation than the possible harmfulness of language. If those in favor of regulating speech have been trying to persuade free speech supporters by illustrating how words can hurt, they may want to rethink their strategy in light of this evidence.

Implications of the Social and Political Attitudes Study (SPAS)

In our view, the results of the Social and Political Attitudes Study are on the whole encouraging. The findings regarding support for disseminating scientific research and relying on science as a basis for political opinion suggest most Americans believe in the value of empirical evidence, even if they may not have the skills to evaluate it. While what people say they want on a survey and how they actually behave can certainly

differ, the fact that respondents reported an abstract appreciation of science is reason for optimism.

The results of the political tolerance measures are also cause for optimism. Those of opposing political and partisan orientations get along better and agree more than political elites suggest. While the country is no doubt more effectively polarized than in previous decades,¹³ the SPAS indicates the existing tension in the country does not necessarily match that portrayed on social media.

This is timely news. Talking politics with friends and family of different political persuasions may be especially important right now. Fewer interactions with people holding different perspectives combined with increased Twitter scrolling and news consumption cannot be conducive to keeping an open mind or reaching rational conclusions. The insignificant relation in the SPAS data between emotional closeness and political disagreement indicates that we can still have contentious discussions with those close to us.

It is not all harmonious, however. The relationship between Democrats and Republicans may be better off than expected, but the one between Democrats and Democrats might be in more jeopardy. According to our data, the Democratic Party is more divided than the Republican Party, and this could make it more difficult for Democrats to mobilize voters in the 2020 election. On the other hand, Trump may be so disliked that high Democratic Party unity isn't necessary for them to win the election. Our next study will delve deeper into these important questions.

Forthcoming Skeptic Research Center (SRC) Studies

The SRC is excited to continue collecting and analyzing new data. In fact, multiple studies are already underway.

Our next project is titled the *Civil Unrest and Presidential Election Study (CUPES)*. Using data collected in September and October of 2020, this study examines political and social attitudes about timely issues including the George Floyd protests, alleged police brutality, the Coronavirus pandemic, and the 2020 presidential election. Additionally, a new survey assessing peoples' endorsement of various conspiracy theories and paranormal beliefs is in development for early 2021. We are tentatively calling it the *Paranormal and Conspiratorial Ideation Study (PCIS)*. Results from past and current research, as well as updates about forthcoming studies, are all available on the SRC website.¹⁴

Get Involved

If you wish to help the *Skeptics Society* in our efforts

to promote rational conversation by providing the public with new public opinion data, there are three ways you can get involved.

First, you can help fund our research through monetary contributions.¹⁵ Conducting research is expensive and any donation you can make goes a long way. Second, you can share your feedback about existing research like the SPAS by filling out our short form.¹⁶ Third, you can submit ideas for future studies, opinion editorials, and/or videos. Submit your ideas via email to: research@skeptic.com. We welcome suggestions, constructive criticisms and anything else that can help us improve the work we do.

Your contributions, whether concrete or abstract, are essential. Science is fundamentally a *collaborative* endeavor, a fact which bears upon the meaning of "skeptic." Skepticism entails questioning claims and subjecting them to scientific and logical scrutiny, but no one person has all the tools, skills, or time to perform complete investigations of the vast majority of the important claims echoing around us every day. Indeed, most people do not have the resources for a single such analysis. This is where we hope the Skeptic Research Center can provide value: rigorous and transparent research on topical issues, motivated by the goal of improving the quality and carefulness of some of our most important conversations. **S**

REFERENCES

1. <https://www.skeptic.com/research-center/>
2. The SRC is a collaboration with researchers across scientific disciplines, to create substantive and easy-to-read reports drawn from proprietary polling and survey data. The mission of the SRC is to empower you with a data-driven understanding of the beliefs and behaviors characterizing American culture. What makes this endeavor special is that we are explicitly focusing on researching issues you care about: science literacy, health and medicine, cults and conspiracy theories, changing political worldviews, religion, secularism, and morality.
3. <https://www.skeptic.com/research-center/social-political-attitudes-study/>
4. Report # SPAS-008
5. Report # SPAS-006
6. Report # SPAS-010
7. Report # SPAS-001
8. Report # SPAS-008
9. Report # SPAS-002
10. Report # SPAS-009
11. Report # SPAS-003
12. Report # SPAS-005
13. Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., and Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129-146.
14. <https://www.skeptic.com/research-center/>
15. https://www.skeptic.com/get_involved/donate/
16. <https://forms.gle/VuDaPGXZ7M23jZ6J6>