America's common ground: Democrats and Republicans alike want transparent, objective elections

Sixteen months after the assault on the U.S. Capitol, candidates who most aggressively questioned electoral integrity scored big wins in last Tuesday's primaries, and trust in democratic governance remains at or near historic lows. Restoring some measure of national unity to repair and bolster our democracy is a herculean task. But despite unprecedented levels of polarization, there are glimmers of agreement across the political spectrum. Perhaps most importantly, Democrats and Republicans alike want elections that are transparent and objectively administered.

We are conditioned to view Americans as hopelessly polarized, and not just on hot-button issues such as the future of abortion rights in an anticipated

post-Roe era, but even on fundamental questions about the functioning of our democracy.

Perhaps the clearest example is the intensifying [polarization](#) over who bears responsibility for the Jan. 6 insurrection, whether those who stormed the Capitol should be prosecuted and what steps, if any, should be taken to ensure such an attack never happens again. In a house so divided, can there be any patches of common ground that at least open a door for bipartisan solutions to shore up American democracy?

To find out, we conducted [a unique survey](#) combining a general population national sample with two representative samples in targeted swing congressional districts, Michigan-8 and Texas-15. This sampling strategy allows us to examine whether the political divides or points of intersection observed in the country as a whole are also mirrored in the battleground districts that decide the balance of power in Washington.

To be sure, we found plenty of evidence of a polarized public. For example, just one in four Republicans responded that Jan. 6 was a major threat to democracy, versus 83 percent of Democrats. Similarly, while more than two in three Democrats supported reforms to expand permanently early voting and voting by mail, just 16 percent of Republicans did so. But we also found important, if narrower, points of broad consensus.

Most importantly, wide swaths of Americans from across the political divide expressed concern about and backed efforts to address the integrity of electoral processes themselves. Democrats and Republicans alike recoiled against [efforts](#) by state legislatures to strip election oversight and vote counting responsibilities from civil servants and government workers and instead open the door for machinations by political operatives. Super-majorities of both Democrats (63 percent) and Republicans (69 percent)

strongly supported reforms that would require all election officials and poll-watchers to be nonpartisan. And while support was stronger and more intense on the Democratic side, majorities in both parties supported reforms that would remove the redistricting process from politicians and instead entrust it to independent commissions.

The survey offered some surprises with important implications for would-be reformers on both sides of the aisle. Among Republicans, perhaps the most unexpected result was the degree of support for a restoration of the pre-clearance provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which were struck down by the Supreme Court in [Shelby County v. Holder](). More than two in three Republicans supported increased federal oversight of elections laws in states that have a history of discrimination against minority voters or voting rights violations. One in three strongly supported it.

For Democrats, perhaps the most illuminating finding was the extent of support and emphasis many Democrats place on protecting another cornerstone democratic value — freedom of speech. More than 70 percent of Democrats (and more than 80 percent of Republicans) agreed that the "canceling" of journalists and university faculty for expressing views some find offensive is a major or medium threat to democracy. Just under 80 percent of Democrats approved of reforms to strengthen the right to free speech, even when offensive to some; 70 percent of Democrats supported strengthening free speech in an alternate wording of the question that explicitly mentioned "cancel" culture, often seen as a [cause celebre]() of the ideological right.

Finally, concerns about election security also span the partisan divide. As expected, an overwhelming majority of Republicans, 95 percent, supported reforms to require a photo identification to vote, with 84 percent strongly supporting such a reform. But just under 75 percent of Democrats also

supported requiring a photo ID to vote (with 43 percent strongly supporting such a reform). Moreover, support for stronger voter ID requirements were strongest among Democrats in TX-15 (57 percent strongly supporting the reform in this district versus 40 percent among Democrats nationally), a majority-minority district.

The [Freedom to Vote Act](#) and [John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act](#) both remain stalled in the Senate with little hope for passage. And yet, core components of both bills enjoy broad bipartisan support. Further compromises, for example greater guarantees of equitable access to the ballot coupled with greater electoral security, could appeal to even broader majorities in both parties. Such a victory could go some way toward restoring public faith in democratic institutions — if political elites find the will to seize the opportunity.

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