

# Politics and Public Trust: Local Institutions as Anchors in a Divided Age

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# **POLITICS AND PUBLIC TRUST**

## **LOCAL INSTITUTIONS AS ANCHORS IN**

## **A DIVIDED AGE**

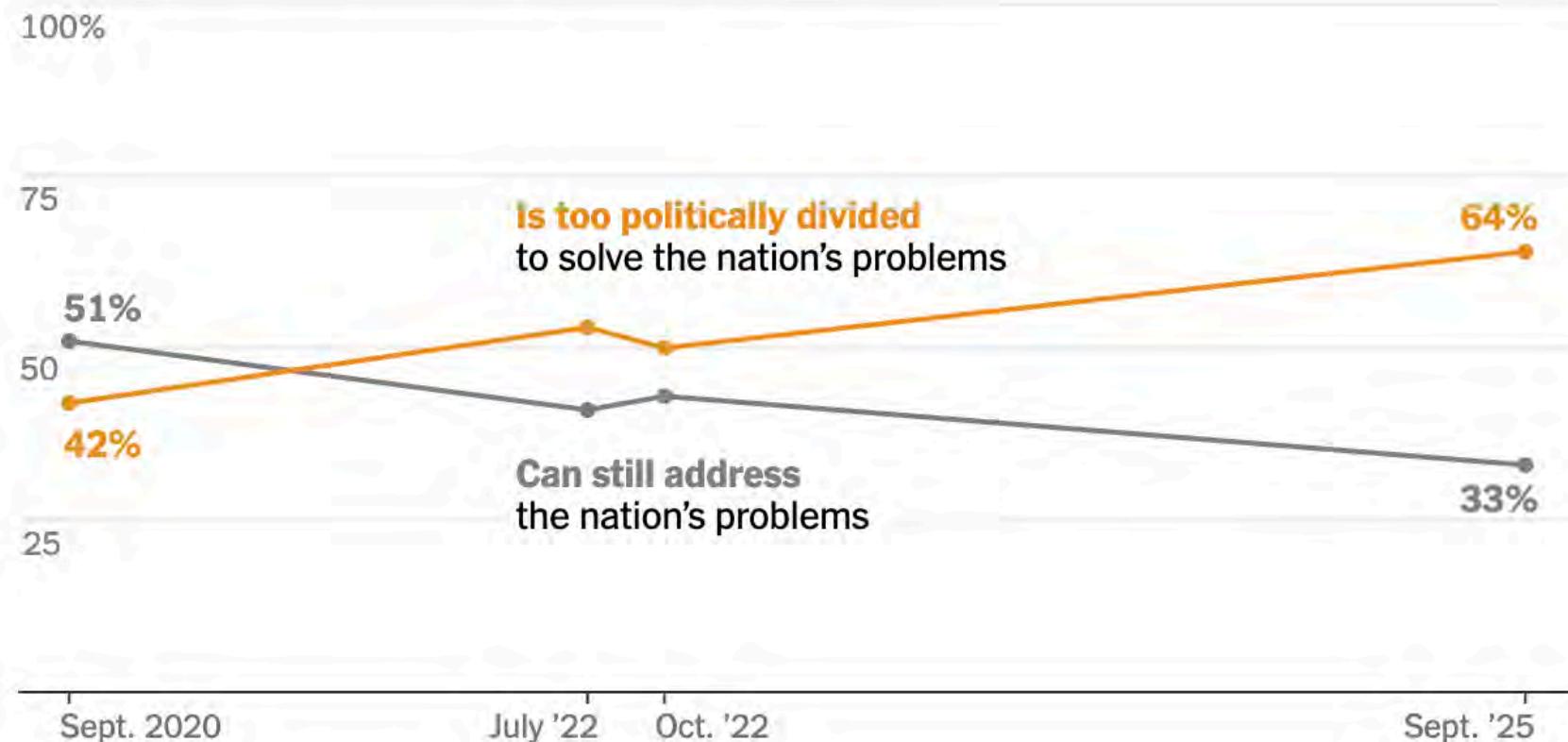
**Colin D. Moore**

**University of Hawai‘i**

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# HOW DEEP IS THE CRISIS OF TRUST IN OUR DEMOCRACY?

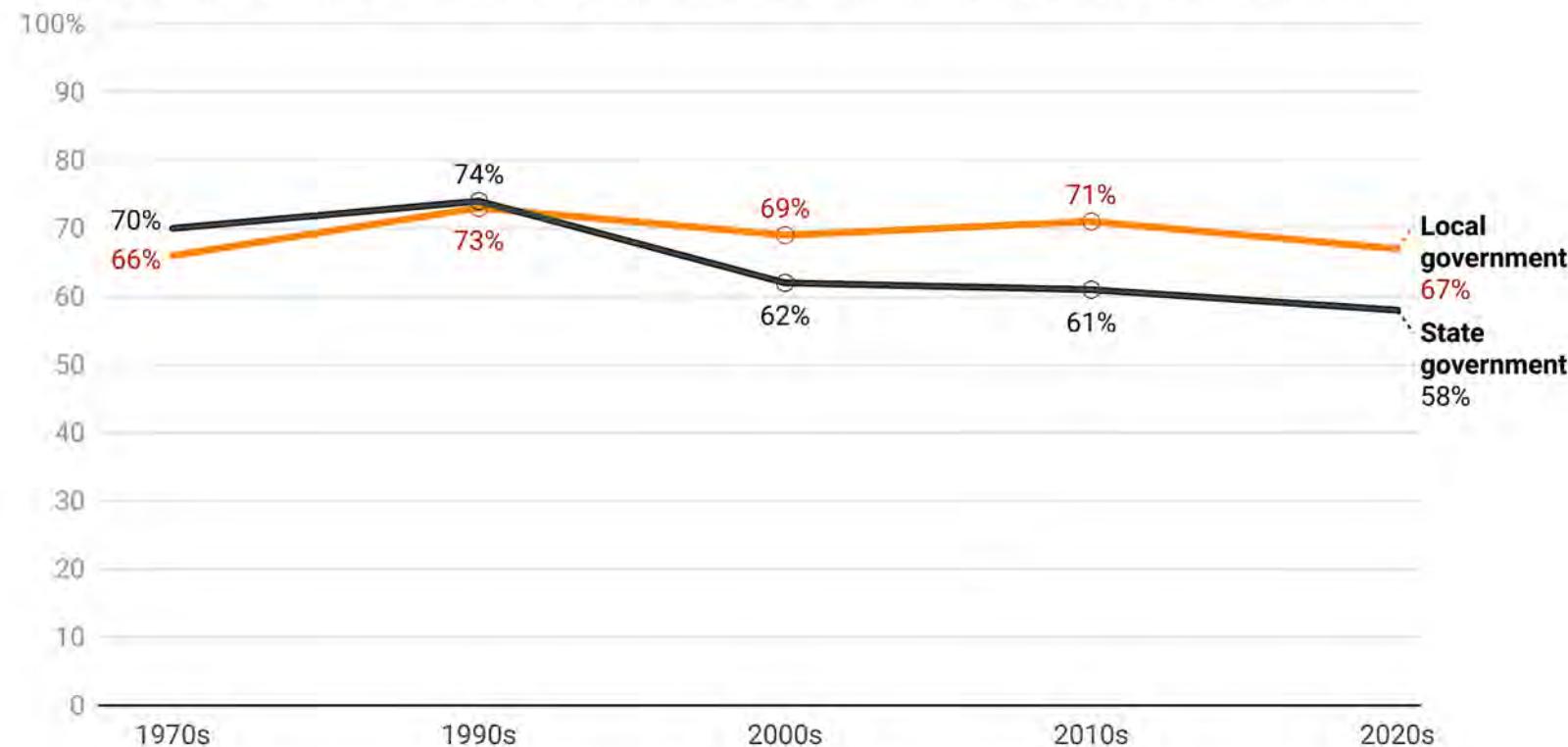
Voters who think America's political system ...



# LOCAL CIVIC LIFE: A QUIET FOUNDATION OF RESILIENCE?

## Trends in Americans' Trust in State and Local Governments

Figures are the percentages who have a great deal or fair amount of trust, averaged by decade



# WHAT WE'LL COVER



## TRUST

The evolving trust and civic landscape in the U.S.



## THE RESEARCH

Insights from political science on legitimacy, social capital, and polarization



## HOW IT ERODES

How our civic life is threatened, as well as reasons for optimism



## RESPONSES

How community-based institutions can help

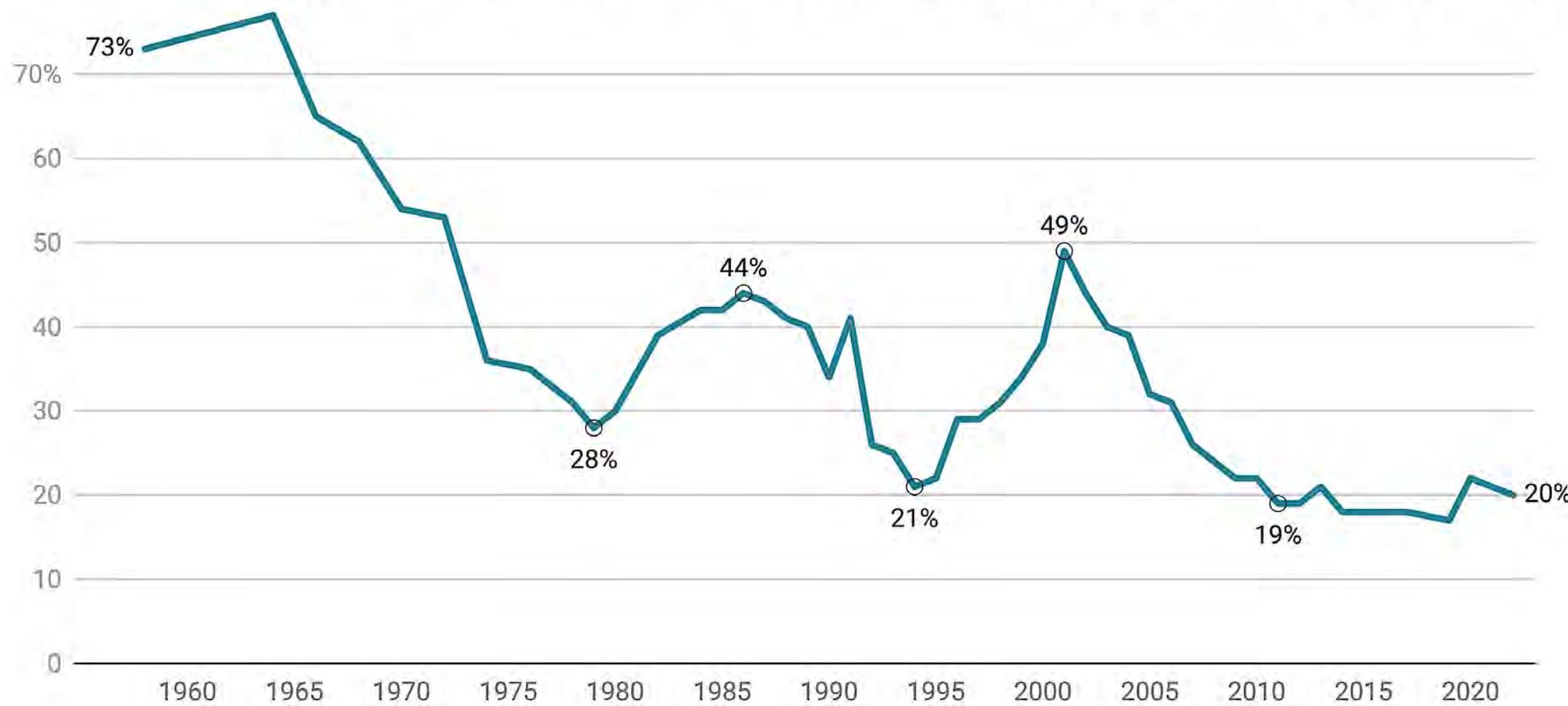
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# SECTION 1: THE EROSION OF INSTITUTIONAL TRUST



# TRUST IN GOVERNMENT IS NEAR HISTORIC LOWS

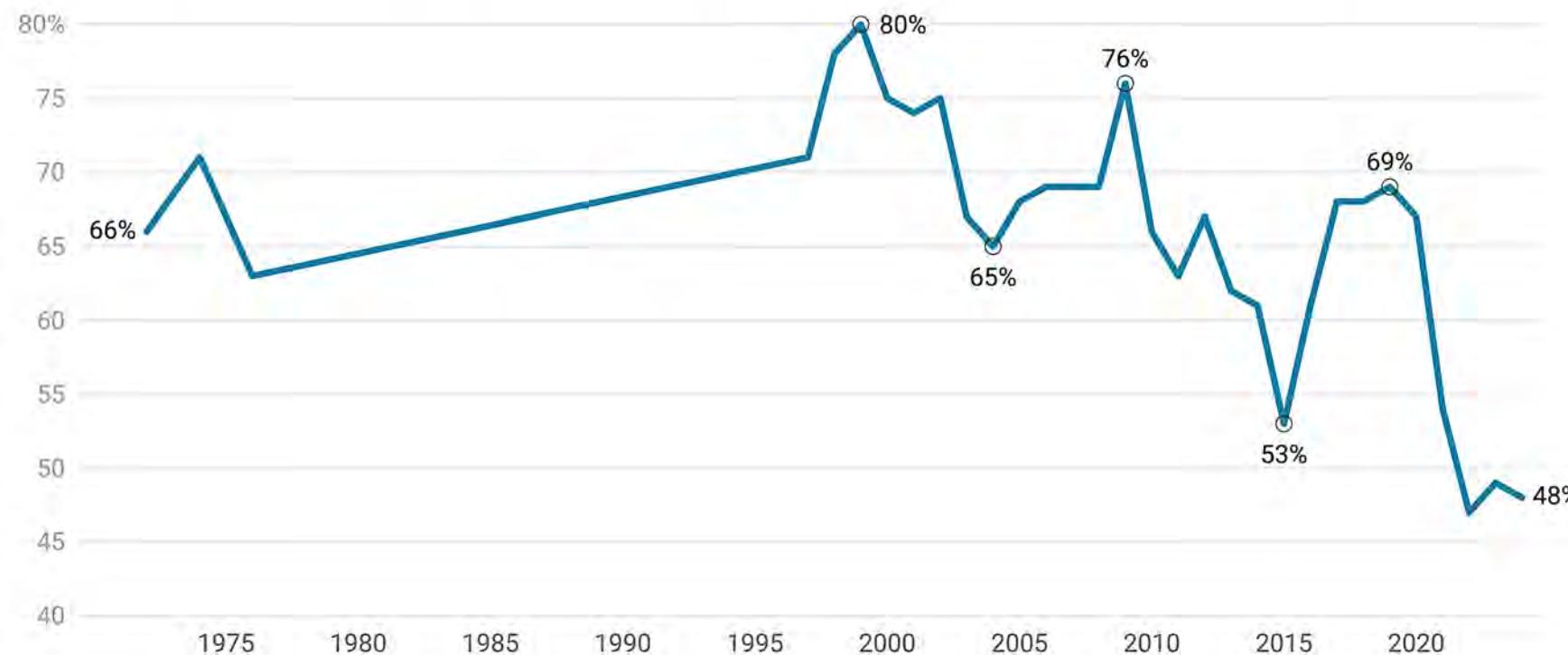
Percentage who trust the federal government always or most of the time



# EVEN THE JUDICIAL BRANCH HAS SEEN TRUST DECLINE

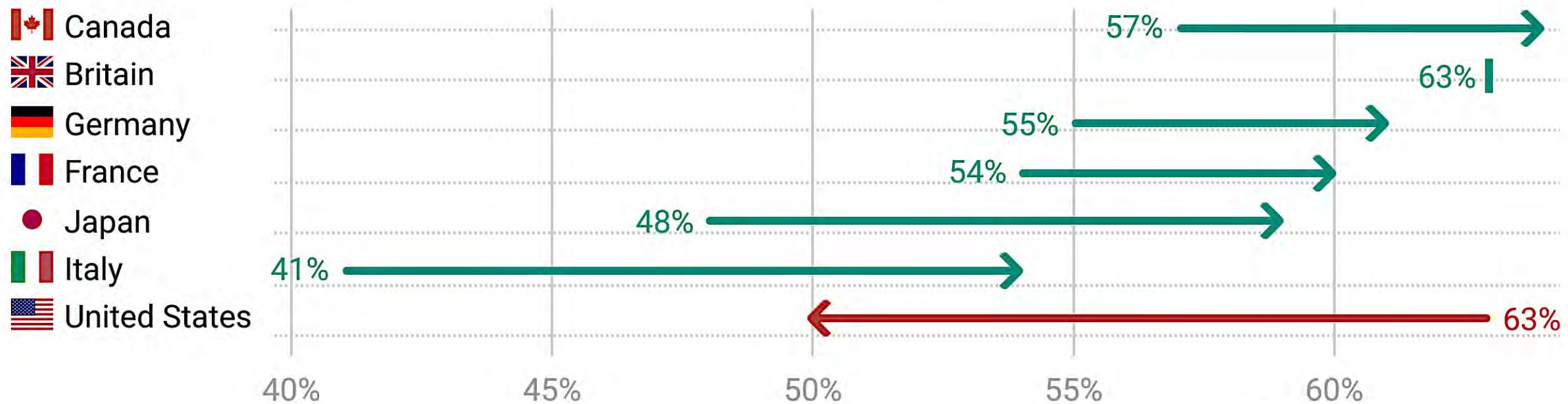
## Percentage of Americans who have a great deal/fair amount of trust in the judicial branch, 1972 - 2024

How much trust and confidence do you have at this time in the judicial branch headed by the U.S. Supreme Court – a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?



# TODAY, THE US IS AN OUTLIER AMONG WEALTHY NATIONS

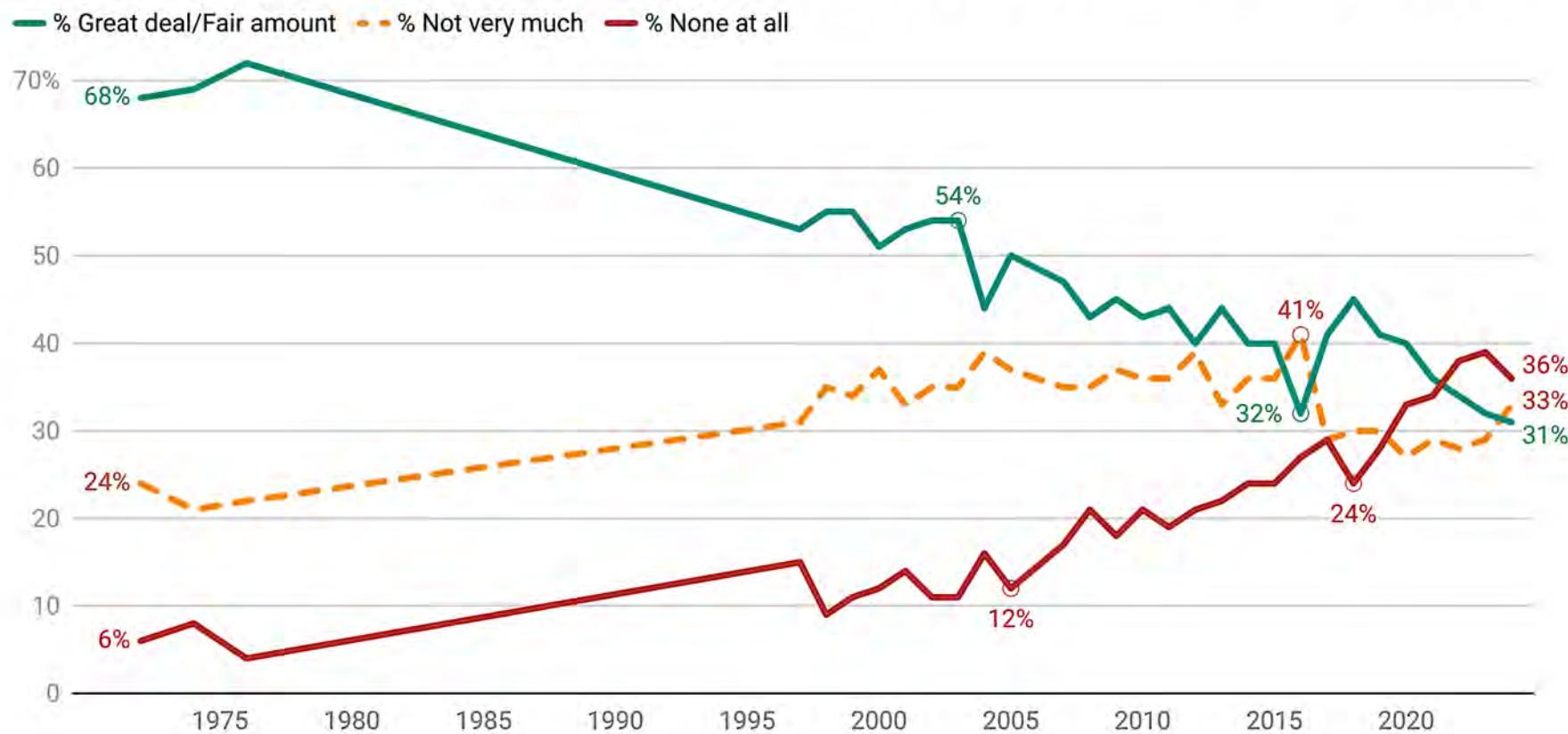
## G7 nations, confidence in national institutions: 2003 v. 2026



# DRAMATIC COLLAPSE IN CONFIDENCE IN THE MEDIA

## Trust and confidence in the media, 1972 - 2024

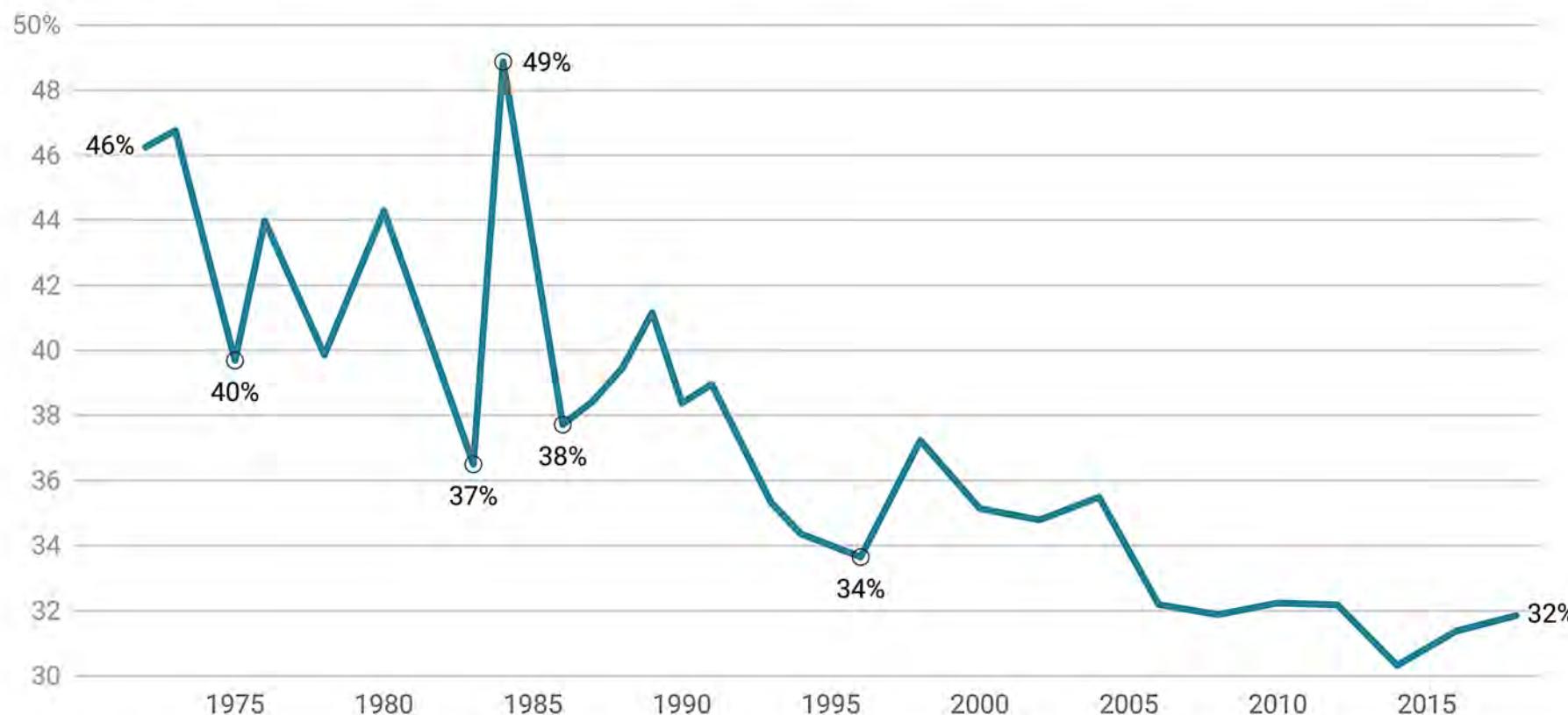
In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?



# ONLY 32% SAY MOST PEOPLE CAN BE TRUSTED

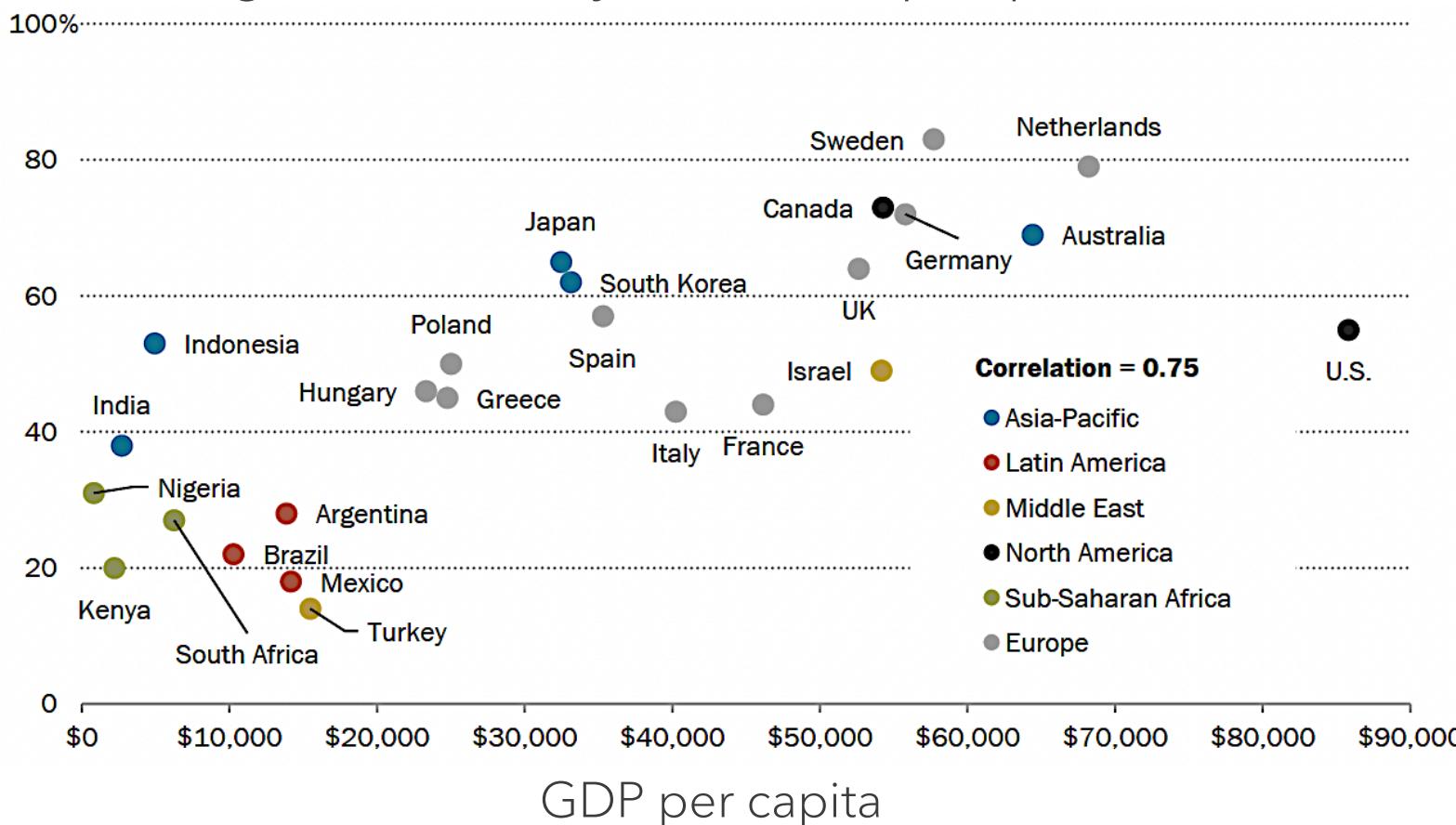
## Percentage of Americans who believe that most people can be trusted

Q: Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?



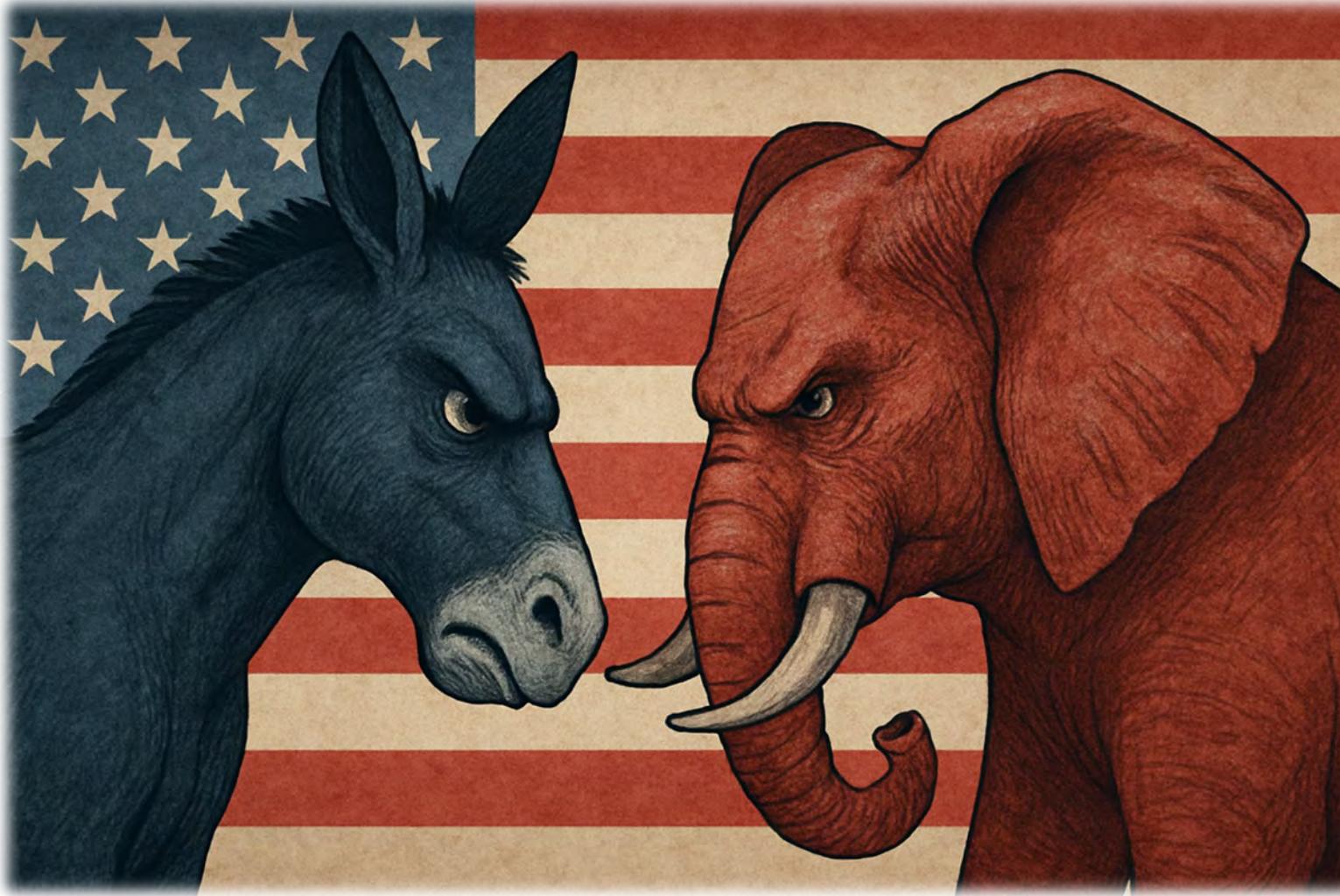
# WHERE PER CAPITA GDP IS HIGHER, MORE PEOPLE SAY THAT MOST PEOPLE CAN BE TRUSTED

Percentage for who say that most people can be trusted



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## SECTION 2: POLARIZATION



# “LIBERAL” FAST FOOD

When you are in the market next to purchase food or drink, from which of the following would you consider purchasing?

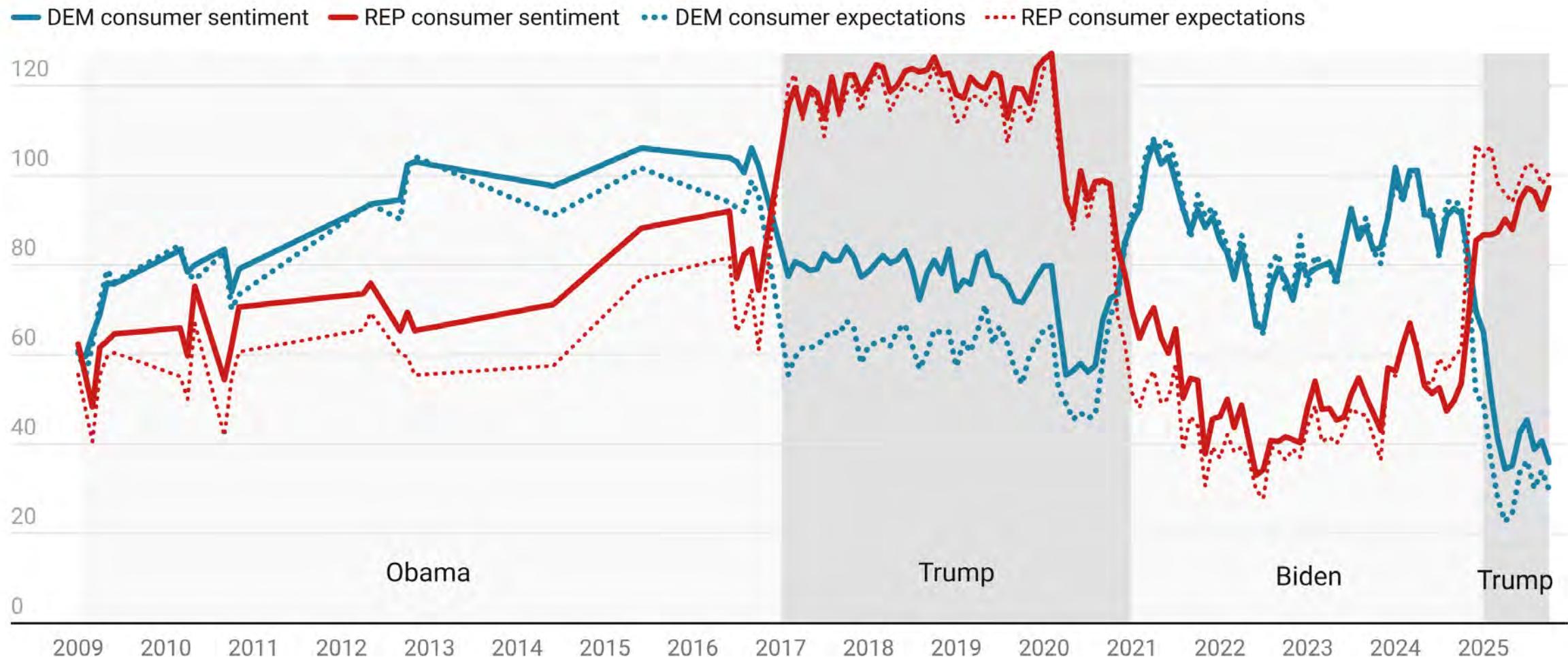
Brand	US liberals considering	US conservatives considering	Difference
1 Starbucks	33%	20%	13%
2 Chipotle	30%	19%	10%
3 Panera Bread	35%	27%	9%

# “CONSERVATIVE” FAST FOOD

When you are in the market next to purchase food or drink, from which of the following would you consider purchasing?

	Brand	US conservatives considering	US liberals considering	Difference
1	Chick-fil-A	45%	24%	21%
2	Arby's	28%	22%	7%
3	Papa John's	20%	14%	6%

# TODAY, POLARIZATION SHAPES VIEWS OF THE ECONOMY



# EXPECTATIONS ARE DOMINATED BY A PARTISAN GAP

## Index of Consumer Expectations



## Unemployment Expectations

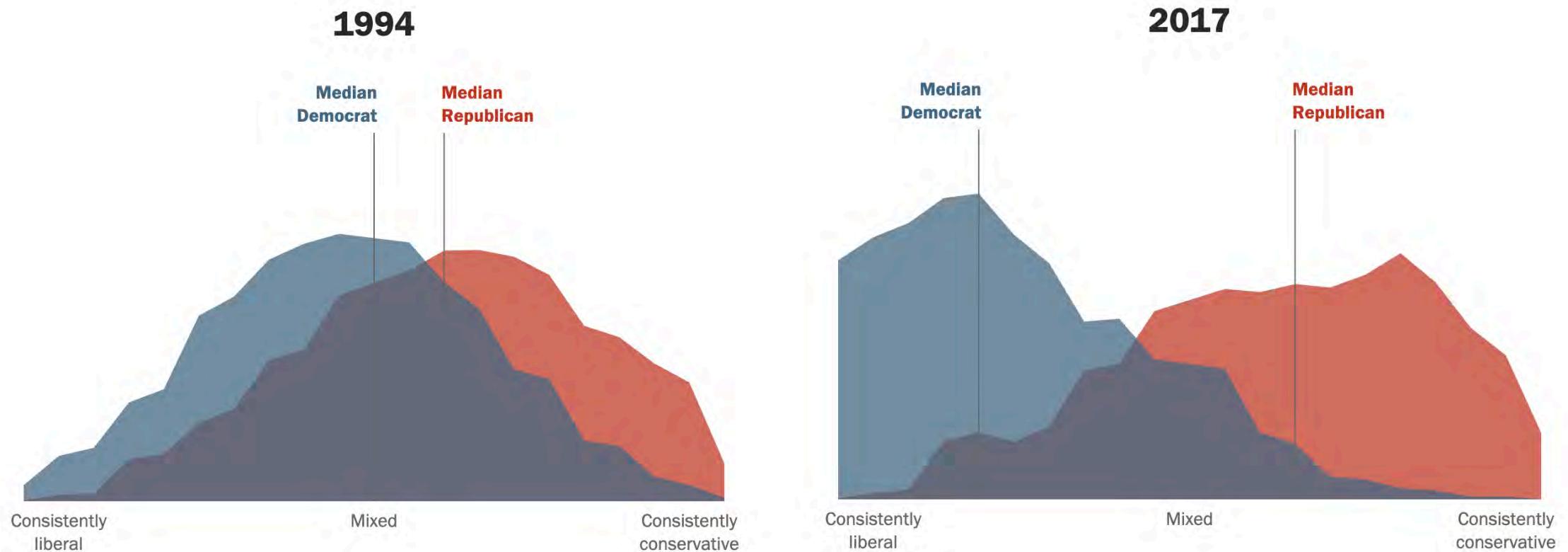


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# **POLARIZATION:**

# **IS IT WORSE THAN IT USED TO BE?**

# THE PARTISAN SORT: OR, THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CONSERVATIVE DEMOCRATS AND LIBERAL REPUBLICANS



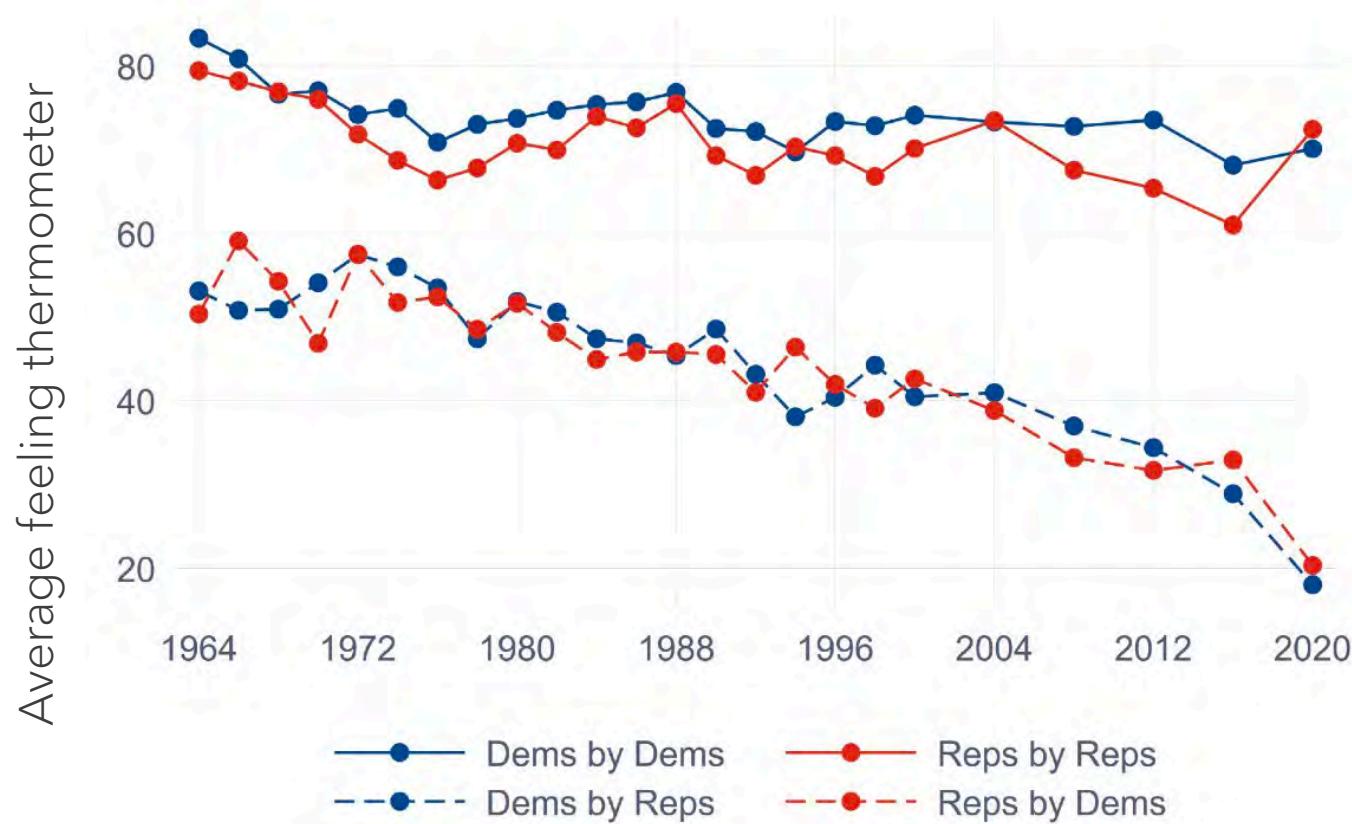
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# WE ARE NOW IN AN AGE OF “AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION”

- Polarization has shifted from policy differences to personal hostility, a phenomenon called **affective polarization**
- Increasingly, Republicans and Democrats dislike and distrust each other. Many are unwilling to socialize together
- The percentage of people who would be unhappy if their child married a member of the opposing party has increased by 35 percentage points over the past 50 years
- Families tend to be partisan enclaves; spousal agreement on party ID is now greater than 80%; largest since the 1960s

# AMONG PUBLIC, AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IS INCREASING

How Warmly Partisans Feel Toward Their Party and the Opposing Party



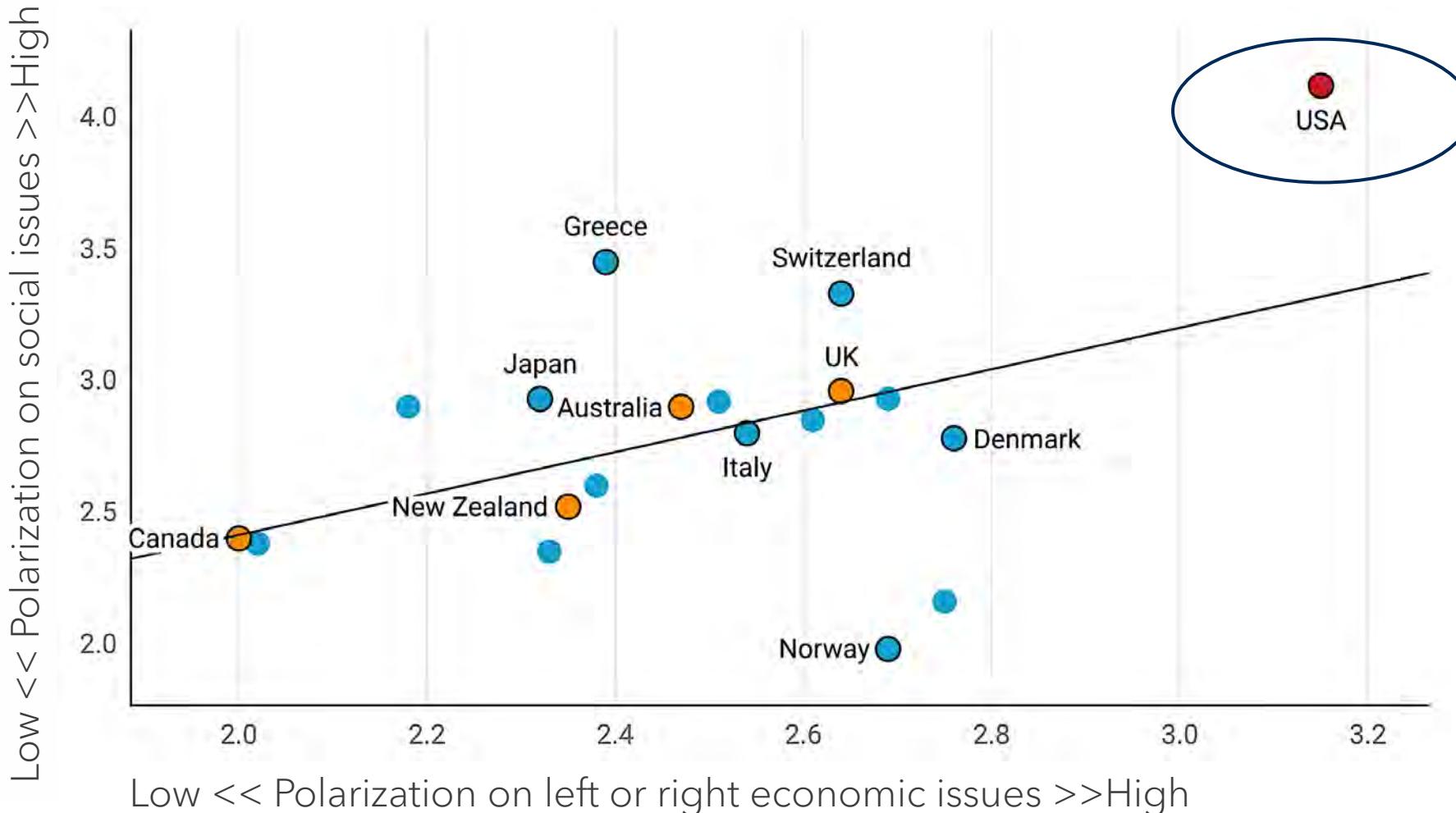
Source: American National Election Studies Survey Data and Kleinfeld (2023)

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# **POLARIZATION:**

## **IS IT WORSE THAN IN OTHER ADVANCED NATIONS?**

# PARTY POLARIZATION ON ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL VALUES



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# **POLARIZATION:**

# **WHAT ARE THE CAUSES?**

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# MAIN CAUSES OF POLARIZATION

- Number of partisans who identify with the party closest to their ideology has dramatically increased
- People don't socialize with members of the opposite party; this causes them to assume they are more extreme than they are.
- Not everyone watches partisan news, but they are often exposed to these views through peers or family members.
- As partisan animus increases, people are even less likely to have real relationships or discussions with members of the opposing party.

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# POSSIBLE REMEDIES

- Correct the widespread misperceptions about members of the opposing party.
- Upper-middle class and well-educated Americans drive polarization more than any other group; they also have the means to push back.
- Make politics about policy, not personal identity or party. Our focus should be on wicked problems, not wicked people.

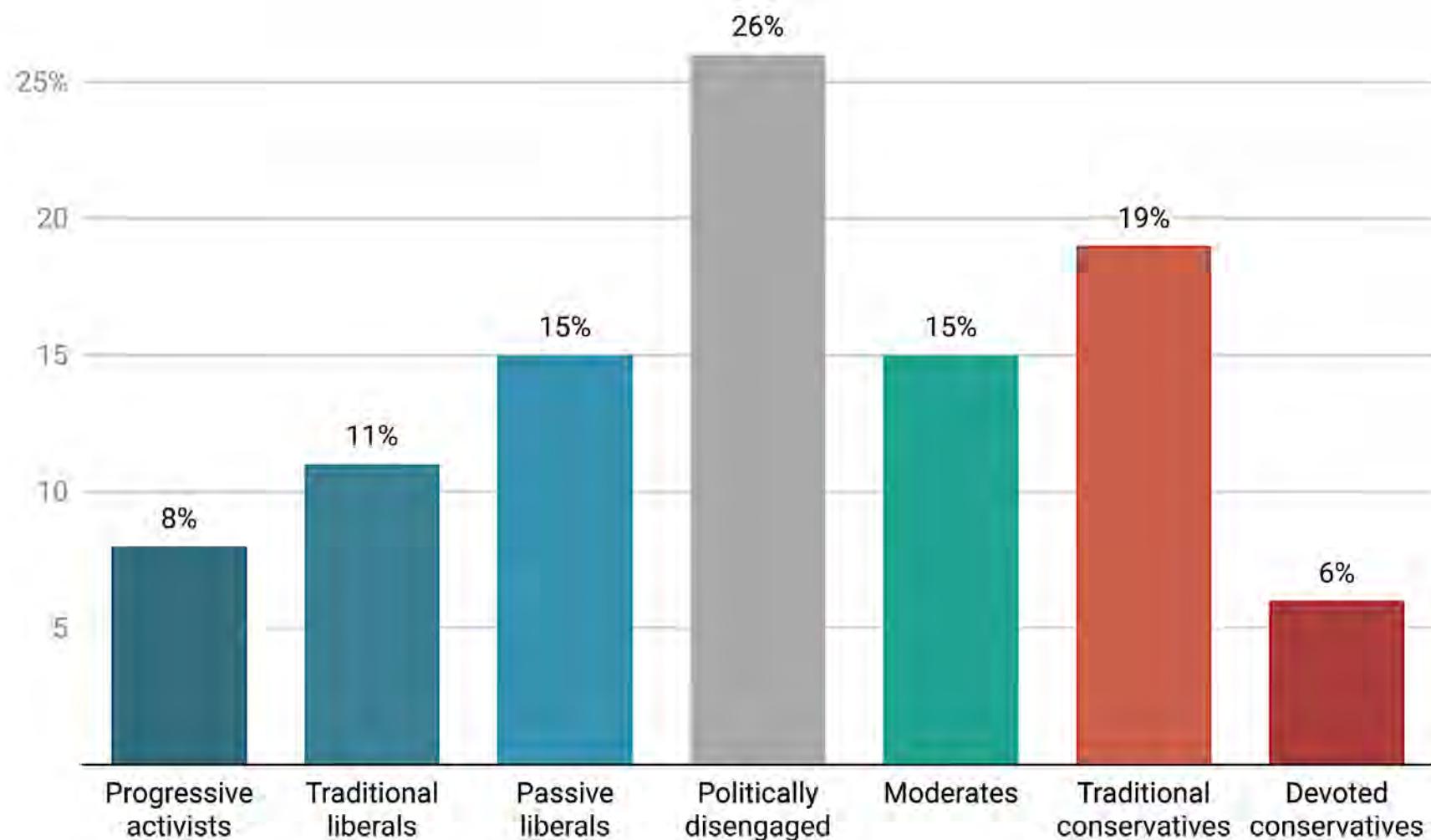
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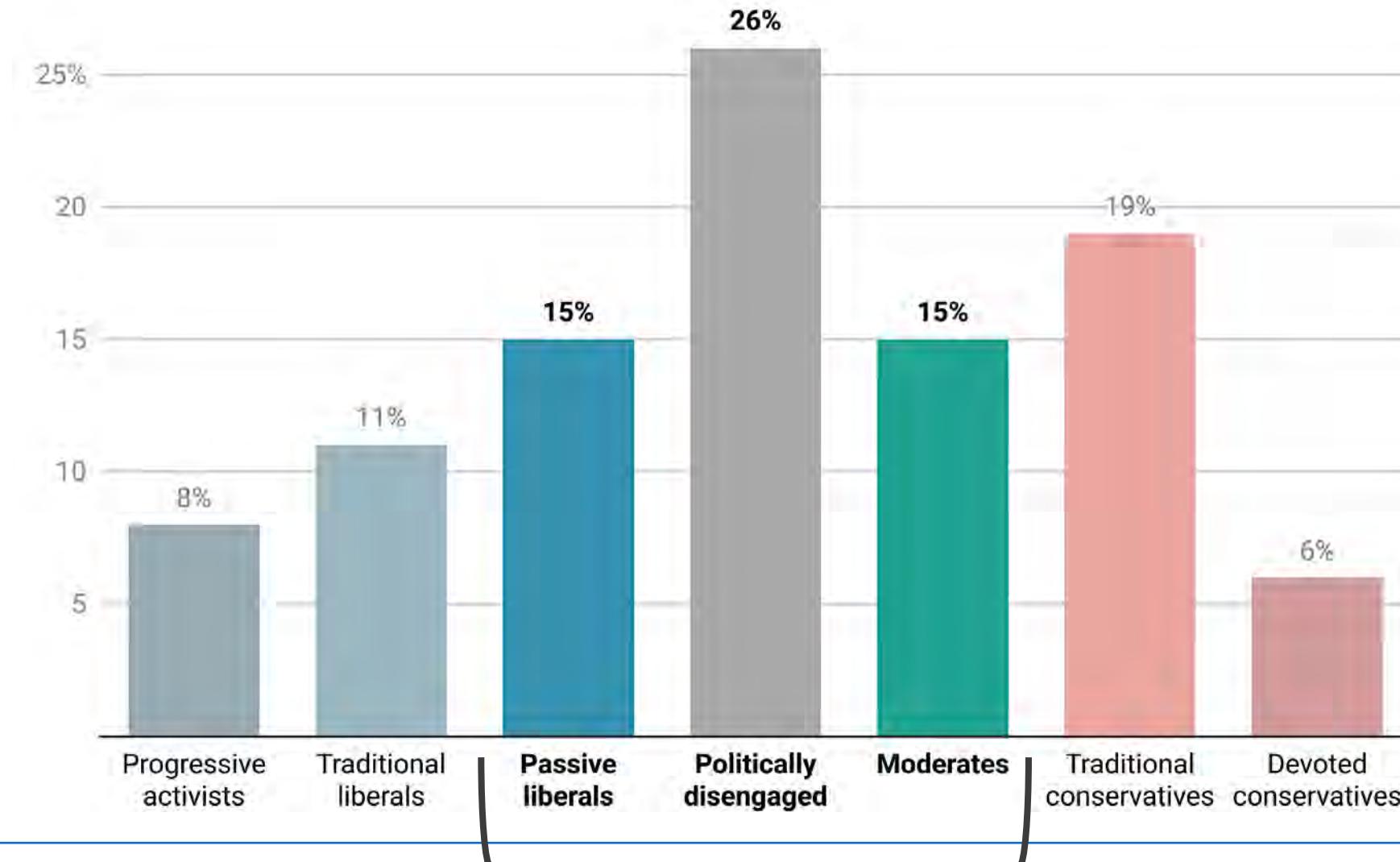
## SECTION 3: REASONS FOR OPTIMISM



# THE “HIDDEN TRIBES” OF AMERICAN POLITICS



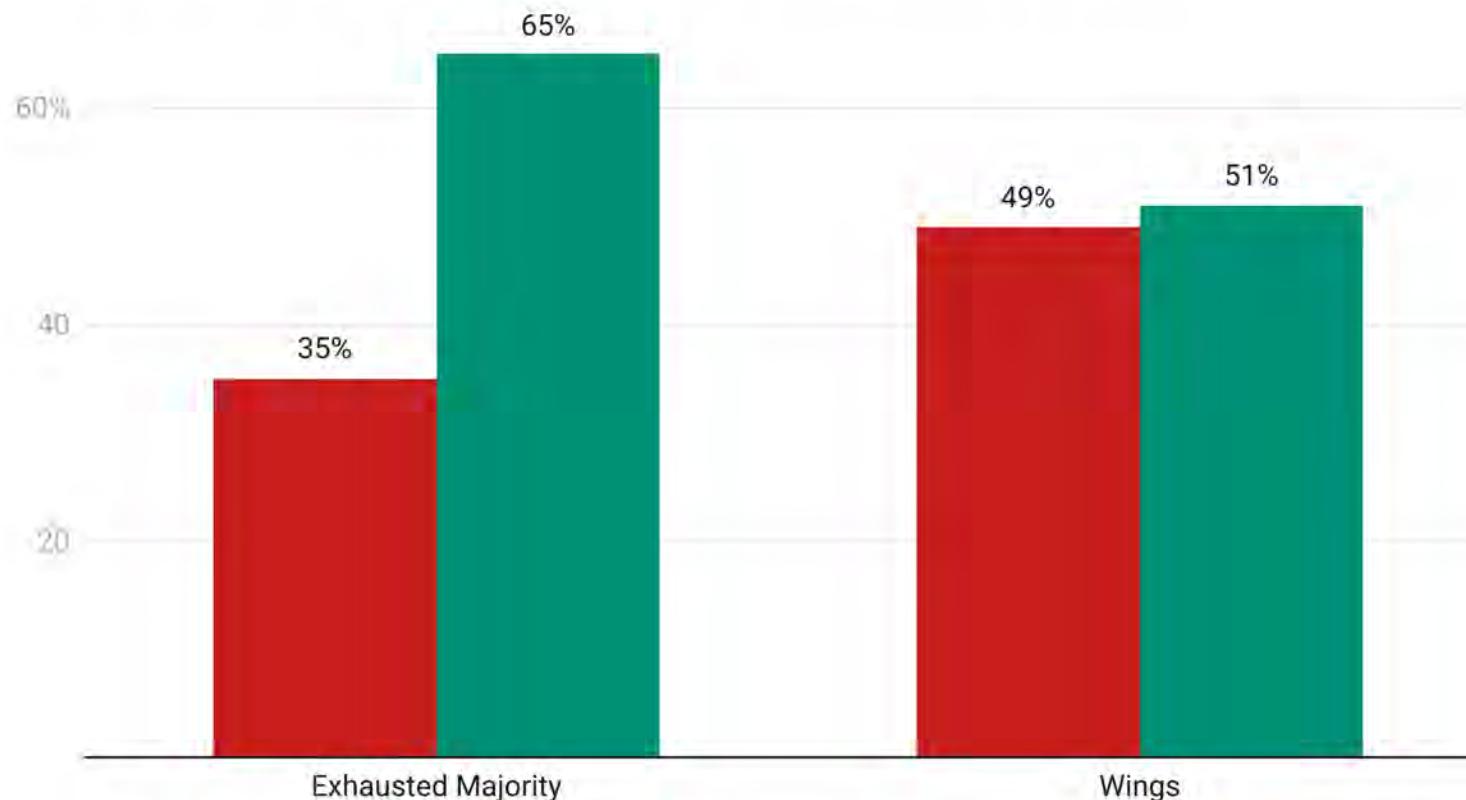
# MOST ARE PART OF THE “EXHAUSTED MAJORITY”



# THESE CITIZENS SAY THEY VALUE COMPROMISE...

**Which of the following statements do you agree with more?**

- People I agree with politically need to stick to their beliefs and fight
- The people I agree with politically need to be willing to listen to others and compromise



# WIDESPREAD AGREEMENT ON CORE DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Percentage of Americans who agree with the following statements:

Political leaders should compromise with the other party to get things done, even if they don't like some parts of the compromise.

80%

Political leaders should stick to their beliefs and avoid compromise, even if little gets done.

18%

It is never OK for people to use violence to achieve a political goal.

83%

It is sometimes OK for people to use violence as a way to achieve a political goal.

16%

There are facts and then there are opinions.

88%

"Facts" are just opinions and points of view.

10%

# CONTENTIOUS POLITICS MAY HAVE IMPROVED CIVIC KNOWLEDGE: 70% CAN NAME ALL THREE BRANCHES

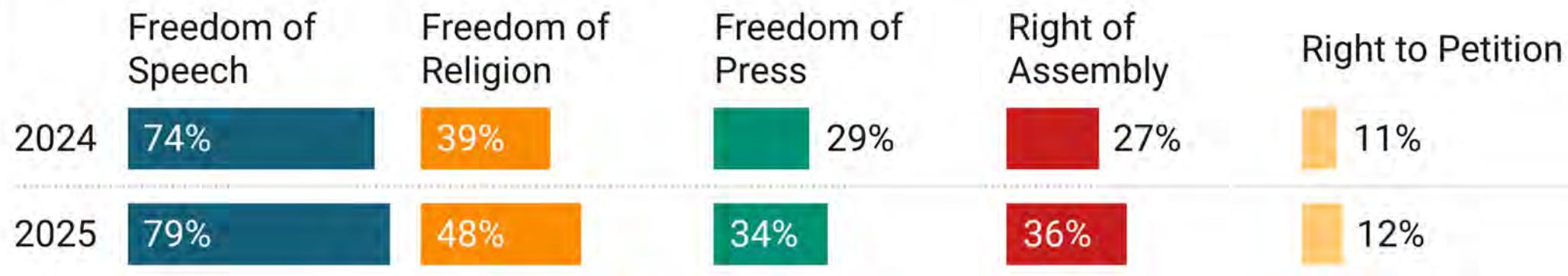
**Percentage of Americans who can name all three branches of government**



# KNOWLEDGE OF CORE CONSTITUTIONAL VALUES HAS IMPROVED: 79% CAN NAME FREEDOM OF SPEECH

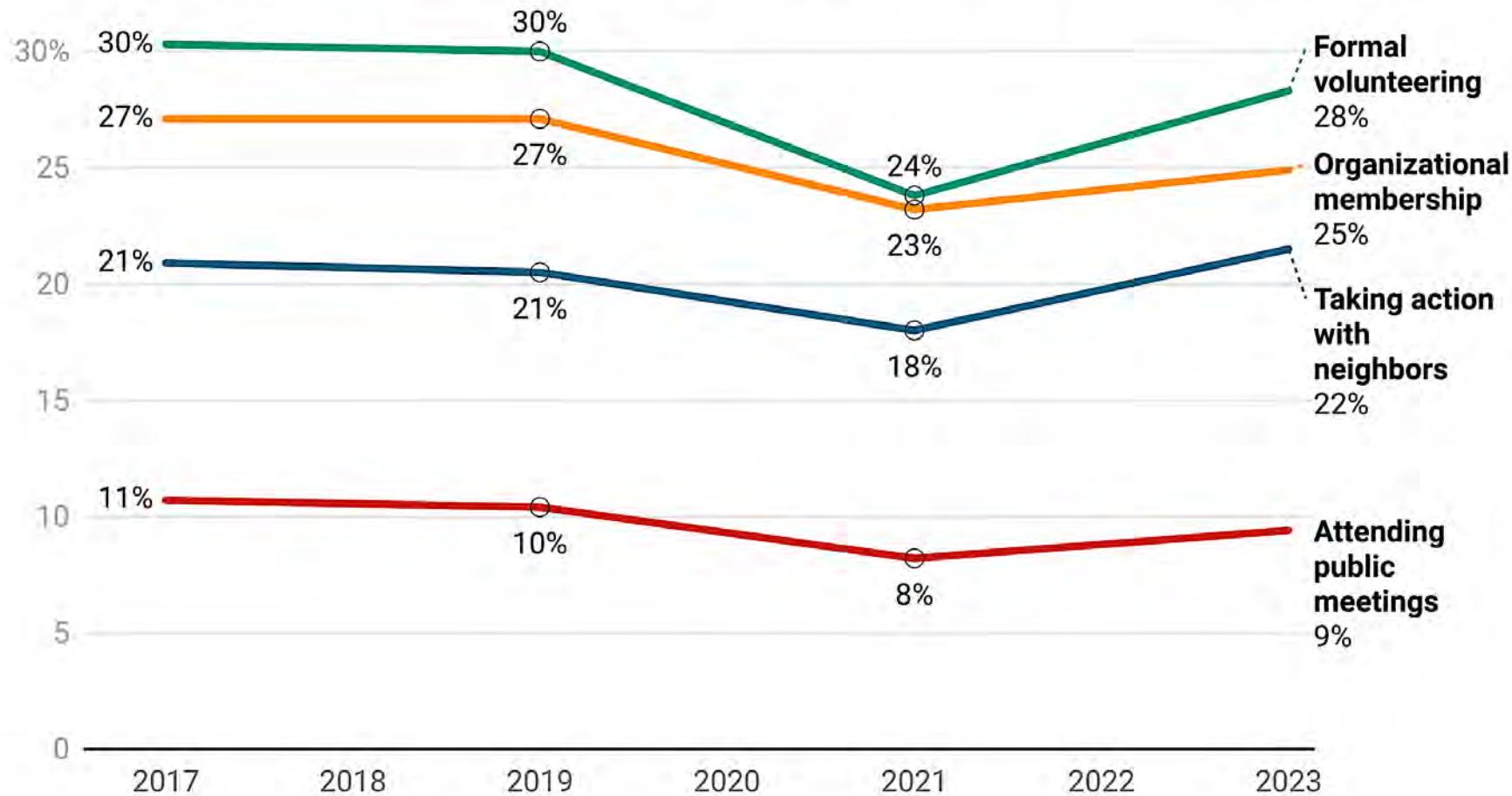
## Knowledge of First Amendment Protections

Percentage of respondents who named the specific protections



# RATES OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT HAVE BOUNCED BACK

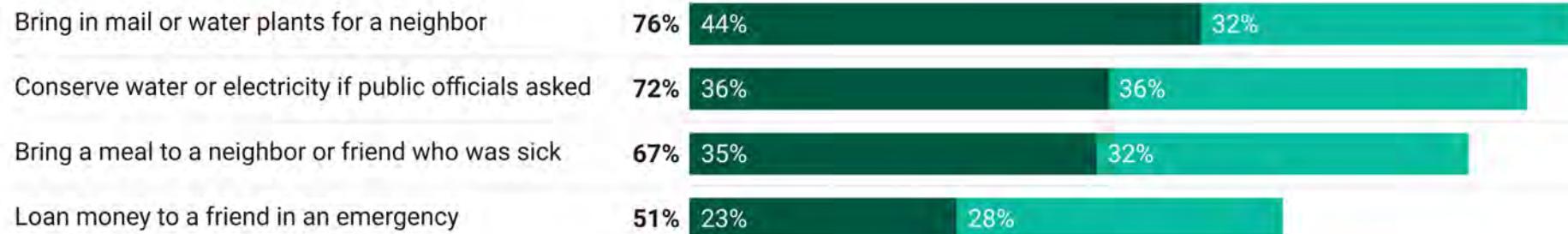
## National Rates of Select Civic Behaviors, 2017 - 2023



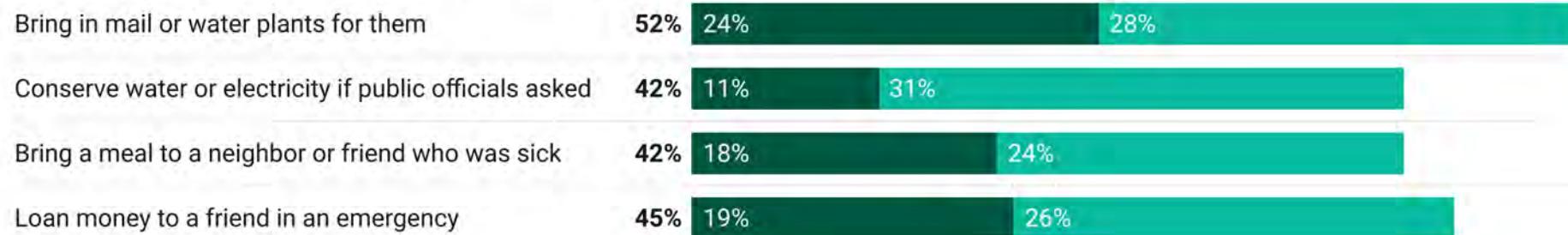
# AMERICANS ARE MORE LIKELY TO SAY THEY'D DO THINGS FOR OTHER PEOPLE THAN VICE VERSA

Percentage of people who say THEY are likely to...

■ Extremely likely ■ Very likely



Percentage who say OTHER PEOPLE are likely to...



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## SECTION 4: HOW DO WE RECLAIM LOCAL CIVIC LIFE?



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**INCREASINGLY, ALL  
POLITICS IS NATIONAL**

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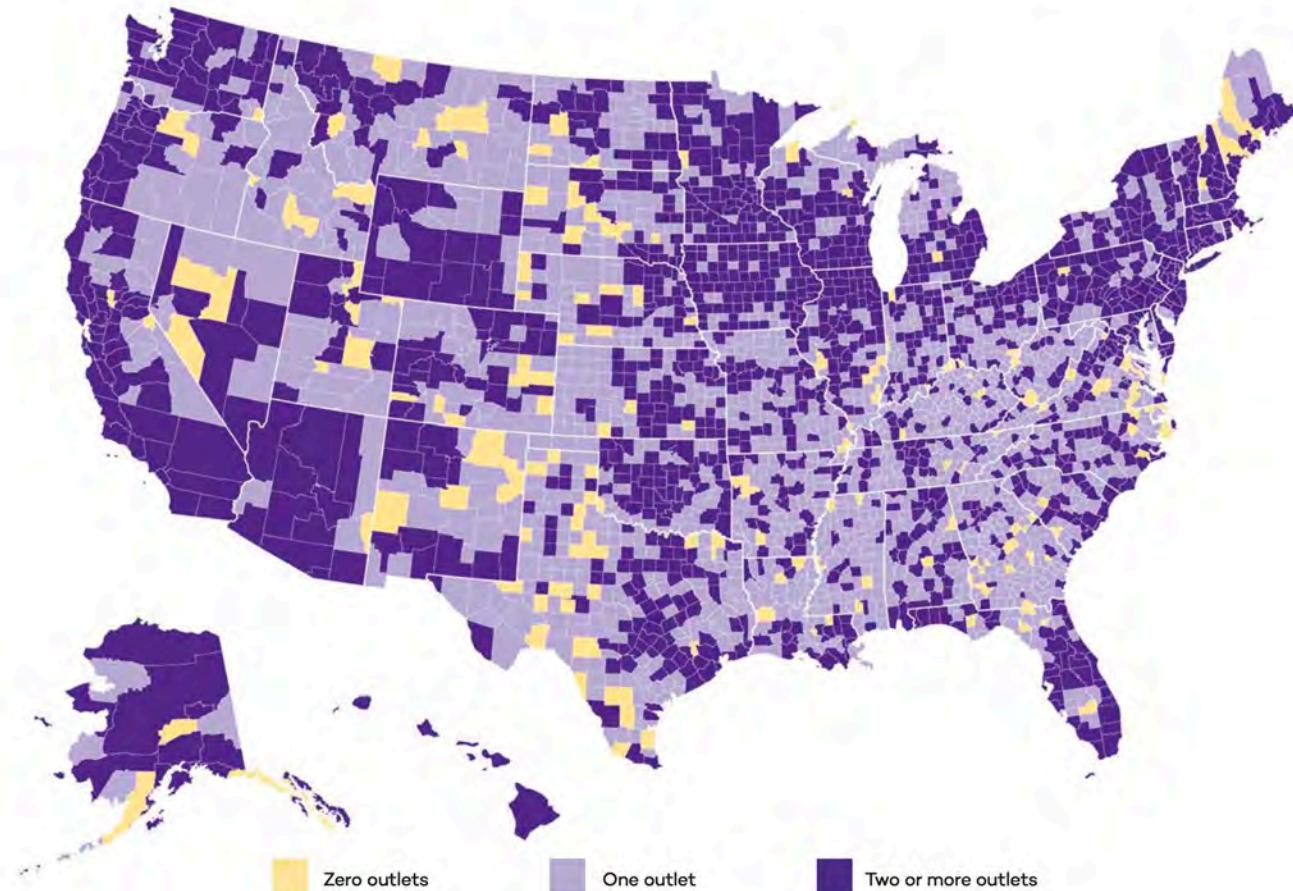
**OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS, THE NUMBER OF LOCAL NEWSPAPERS HAS DECLINED BY NEARLY 40%**

**Total number of local U.S. newspapers in 2005 and 2025**

■ Nondaily Papers ■ Daily Papers



# NEWS OUTLETS BY COUNTY: 212 COUNTIES HAVE NONE; 1,525 HAVE ONLY ONE



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**WHO'S VOTING FOR  
AMERICA'S MAYORS?**

**HARDLY ANYONE  
~20%**

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# THE LOCAL PARADOX: TRUST WITHOUT ATTENTION

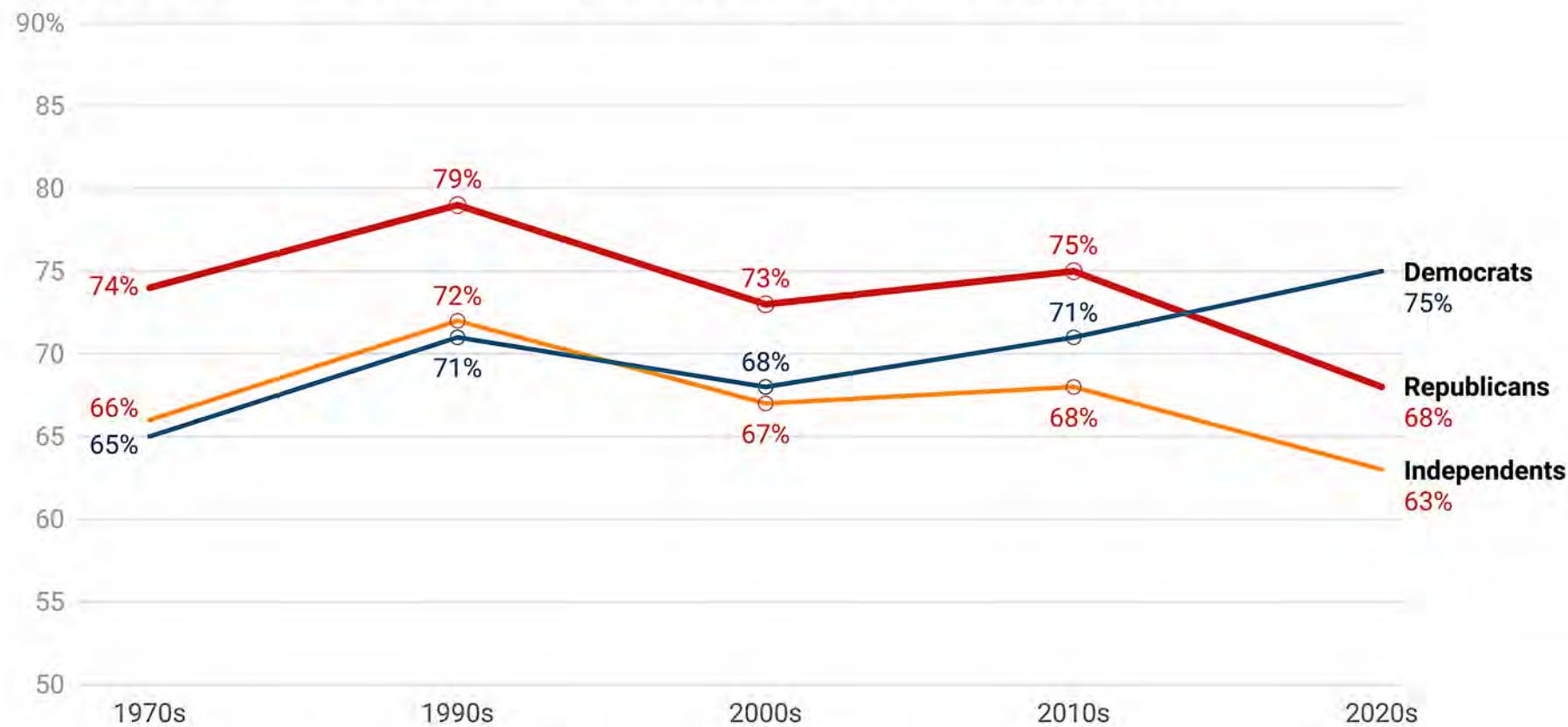
- The U.S. has ~90,000 local governments collectively electing nearly half a million officials—yet turnout in these elections is strikingly low.
- While national political engagement remains high, local participation has steadily declined, creating a mismatch between where power lies and where attention goes.
- This imbalance weakens local accountability and civic trust, but also opens space for community-based institutions to help rebuild civic infrastructure.

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# TRUST IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IS HIGH AND BIPARTISAN

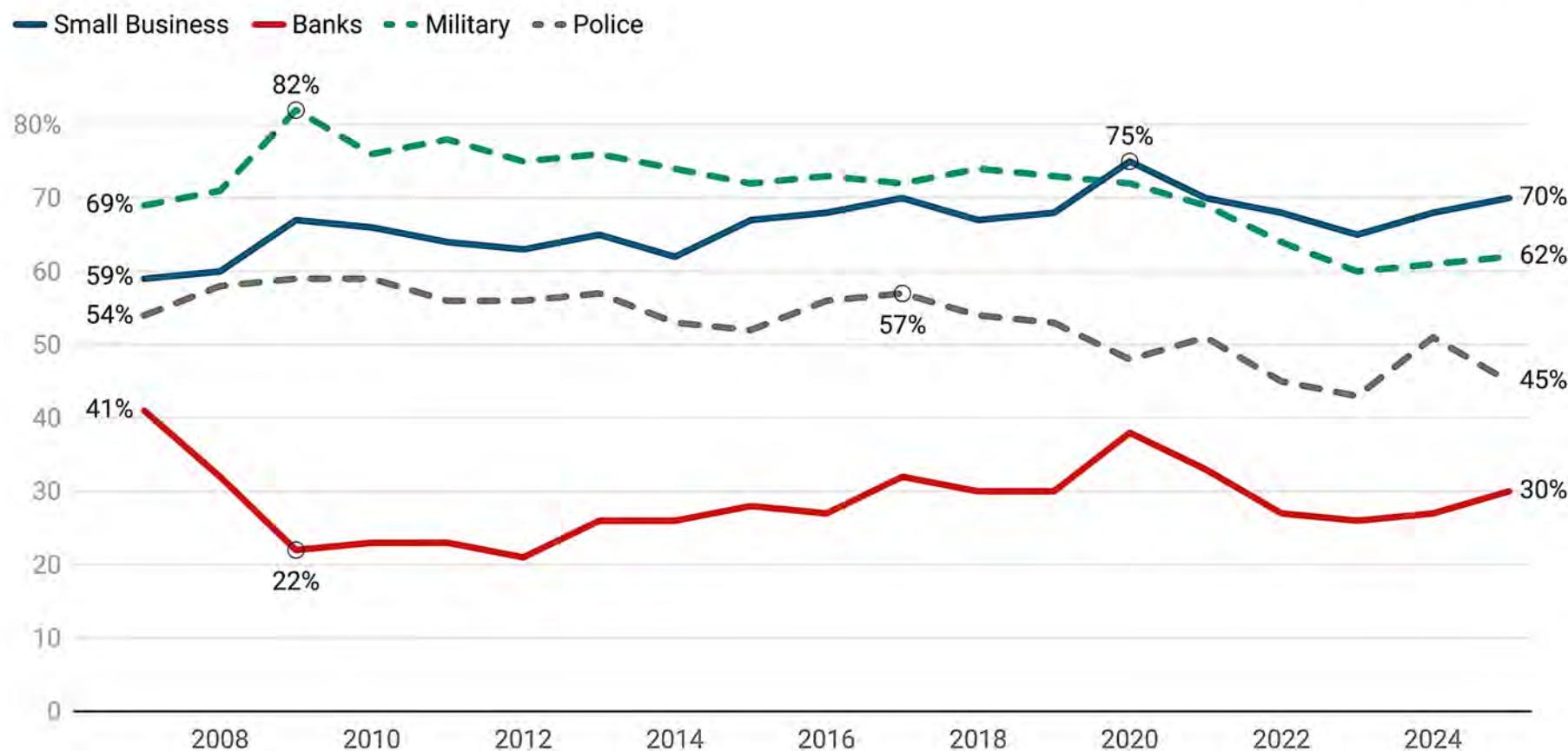
## Trust in Local Governments, by Political Party

Figures are the percentages with a great deal or fair amount of trust, averaged by decade.



# SMALL BUSINESS IS THE MOST TRUSTED INSTITUTION

Percentage who have a great deal/fair amount of trust in the following institutions, 2007 - 2025



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# ANCHORS IN THE STORM: LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

- Locally rooted organizations can help depolarize civic life by offering nonpartisan spaces and shared experiences.
- These institutions are often seen as trustworthy precisely because they are grounded in everyday community needs, not national ideological battles.
- Even small actions—hosting public discussions, supporting local partnerships, or simply modeling civic respect—can shift norms.

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# WHAT CREDIT UNIONS CAN DO

- You represent institutions that people still trust—and you are local by design
- Encourage civic involvement by supporting employees' engagement in local boards, nonprofits, and community events.
- Offer occasional, neutral civic forums that help demystify local government.
- Safeguard institutional trust by staying grounded in mission and values, not partisanship—and modeling a different way of being civically engaged.

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# REBUILDING TRUST BEGINS LOCALLY

- Local institutions still work—they remain among the most trusted parts of civic life.
- But trust doesn't rebuild on its own. People need support, permission, and visible examples to re-engage.
- This must happen from the ground up. Locally rooted organizations—like yours—can lead the way by helping people reconnect, rebuild, and believe in civic life again