



# (Dis)Trust in Elections

Identifying Who Distrusts the  
Election Process & Why

CLC

ad Research  
COUNCIL INSTITUTE



## Research Team:

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### **Derrick Feldmann**

Managing Director, [Ad Council Research Institute](#) and the [Ad Council Edge Strategic Consultancy](#)

### **Colleen Thompson-Kuhn**

Research Project Manager, Ad Council Research Institute and Director, Strategic Partnerships and External Engagement, The Ad Council

### **Ben Dorf**

VP Communications and Marketing, The Ad Council

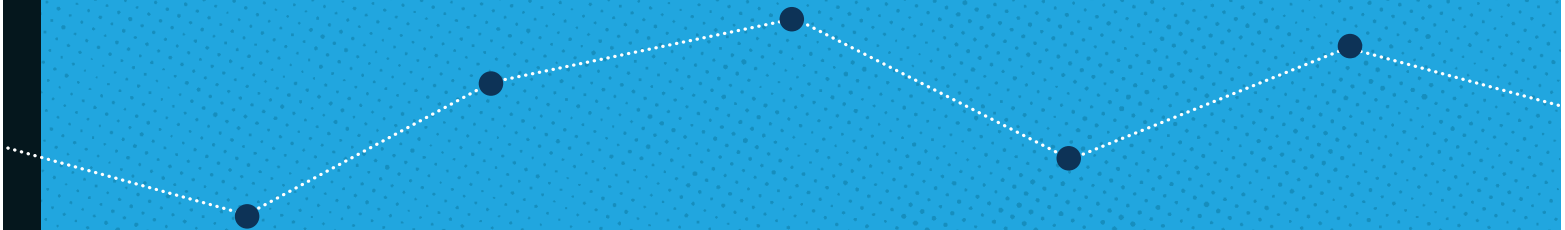
### **Hannah Lushin**

Copywriter

### **Tyler Hansen**

Designer

*With Research Support from Ahzul + Social Listening Analysis by Influential*





# Introduction

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The [Election Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council](#) called the 2020 general election “the most secure in American history.” This reassurance by the nation’s top election security organizations, however, has done little to dissuade states from drafting (and often passing) voter suppression laws, or quell claims of widespread election fraud. Notably, it also failed to instill confidence in many conservative-leaning or independent voters, or to alleviate their fears and concerns about the fairness and accuracy of our country’s election process.

Though the stolen election narrative was a primary focus of President Trump’s bid for re-election, allegations of election fraud and corruption in the U.S. much predate the 2020 election cycle. As *The Washington Post* [put it](#), “The spectacle of a closely fought presidential contest whose outcome is challenged as illegitimate is almost as old as the republic itself.”

In other words, distrust in the U.S. election process isn’t a new problem. It has been simmering and growing over time.

And while it may be those Americans with more extreme views who sometimes take drastic, even dangerous actions—like the January 6 attempt to overthrow the 2020 presidential election—there are plenty of Americans who are concerned or lack confidence or have legitimate questions about the logistics, fairness and accuracy of elections: How vote collection and counting works. The requirements for voting. How in-person differs from mail-in or absentee. When and how a winner is reported. The personnel in charge of such processes, and the checks and balances involved.

As a new election cycle dawns, now is the time to do the work—to educate, provide transparency and rebuild Americans’ confidence in our elections. But how do we do this? How do we identify the voters who crave more knowledge, and whose attitudes are moveable? What is causing such distrust, so we—organizations, government entities, election boards and officials—have a better understanding of how to build it back up?





# Purpose

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The Campaign Legal Center (CLC) commissioned a study by the Ad Council Research Institute (ACRI) to determine Americans' trust in the election process. Informed by a dual-phased, mixed-methods research study, ACRI and CLC targeted seven key states: Arizona, Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Nevada, North Carolina and Georgia.

## Why these states?

The qualitative and quantitative phases focused specifically on residents in seven key swing states: Arizona, Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Nevada, North Carolina and Georgia. Why? These states ordered recounts after collecting and counting votes during the 2020 presidential election due to (unfounded) allegations of election fraud, which is yet another potential driver of distrust among voters in the election process. These states will again be swing or battleground states during the 2024 presidential election as candidates from both sides vie for the White House.

ACRI, along with research partner Ahzul, conducted a mixed-methods research study to:

- Understand and validate the demographic (social, economic and political) profile of people in America who distrust elections and election officials at all levels.
- Uncover the factors creating and breeding distrust in elections.

The findings in this report provide a deeper look into voter distrust in the U.S. election process.

# Methodology

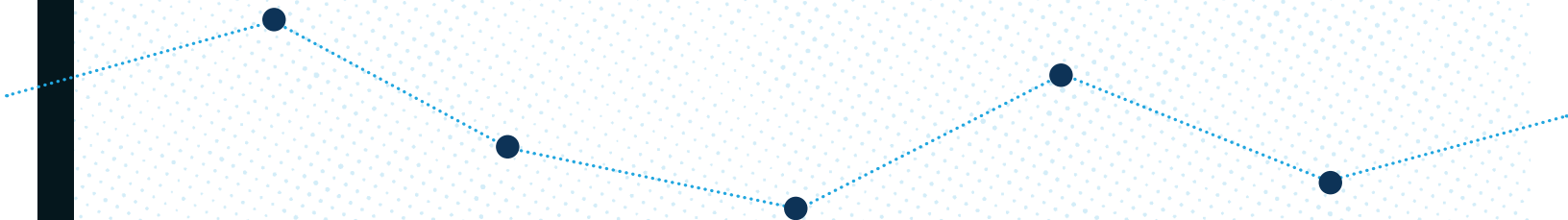
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This study consisted of four phases with various research methods:

- An **environmental scan** of recent disinformation campaigns, voter suppression efforts and campaigns targeting trust or mistrust in the voting process;
- A **social listening analysis** exploring online conversations around voters' trust in the general election and general voting processes;
- An **online qualitative study** examining attitudes, perceptions and trust around elections; and
- An **online quantitative study** to validate prior research.

This report focuses primarily on the key findings from the qualitative and quantitative phases, which were informed, in part, by an environmental scan and social listening analysis. Key findings from the environmental scan and social listening analysis that helped inform later research are included below.



# Key Findings | Environmental Scan & Social Listening Analysis

## Environmental Scan

The environmental scan identified two primary creators of disinformation campaigns: Russian Internet Research Agency, and GOP candidates who directly reject the legitimacy of elections where GOP candidates lost (including former President Donald Trump) or who said their elections (where they were candidates) were fair and accurate but still stirred doubt. The primary targets of such efforts are Republicans: self-described Christian patriots; supporters of the Republican party and of Trump.

While some campaigns have been developed and implemented to diminish trust in U.S. elections, these efforts are not officially sponsored (publicly, anyway) by any specific group. However, this review includes evidence that suggests responsibility by former President Trump's supporters and foreign actors. Meanwhile, campaigns created and disseminated to establish greater trust in the election process (e.g., addressing voter suppression) are more targeted to communities of color.

## Social Listening Analysis

Through social listening, ACRI and partner Influential qualitatively and quantitatively assessed conversations over the past 10 years (2012-2022) among those who publicly discussed the general elections and distrust in the voting process, as well as various subtopics.

From this analysis, the team identified three key takeaways:

- **Users above the age of 45 were the leading force of opinion within the general election and voting process conversation.** Users ages 45 and up were more vocal around the election result, their state's voting policy, voter fraud, and senators from both the Republican and Democratic parties. In contrast, conversations from users aged 18-44 focused on voting logistics and were less vocal about trust in the election or voting process.
- **Over half (56%) of users believed that the election result was rigged, while 23% held concerns around the voting system.** Out of the 50 states, the highest volumes of mentions relating to voter fraud came from users in Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Virginia, Georgia and the Carolinas, stemming from dissatisfaction around the election result to influence from news media and politicians. In opposition, 23% did not question the legitimacy of the election result but instead questioned the efficiency of the current voting system.
- **Distrust around the current voting system stemmed from both 2016 election results and politically driven statements.** In addition to politically fueled, biased commentaries and accusations regarding vote recounts and mail-in ballots, other issues users claimed that helped fuel belief in the distrust included fake ballot registrations, late ballot acceptance, Dominion Voting Systems and the electronic voting system.



# Qualitative Phase

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In a two-day online qualitative discussion, ACRI sought to better understand the attitudes, perceptions and trust around elections.

This conversation took place among 38 voting-eligible Americans across a mix of demographics (age, political ideologies and affiliations, race/ethnicity, etc.) living in the following states: Arizona, Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Nevada, North Carolina and Georgia.

Only U.S.-eligible voters could participate in this phase, and they must have voted in the past and/or be interested in voting in the future. Among qualitative participants, half voted in the last U.S. presidential election, and half did not. Participants also must have had some level of distrust of elections and/or election officials.

## Quantitative Phase

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A 15-minute online survey was conducted in October 2022 among U.S. adults ages 18-75. Respondent requirements included:

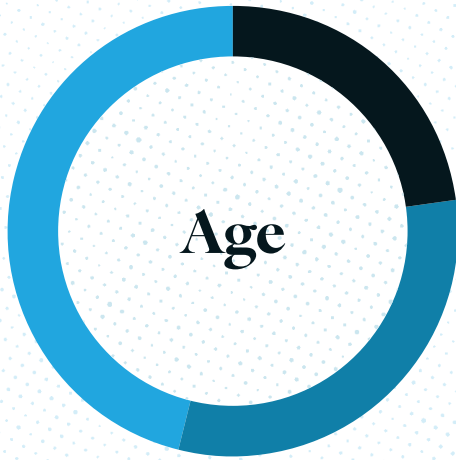
- Must be eligible to vote in the U.S.
- Must have voted in the last presidential election.
- Have some distrust of elections and/or election officials.
- Must live in the following states: Arizona, Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Nevada, North Carolina or Georgia.

Overall, n=2,572 surveys were completed, which were made up of **1,310 conservative-leaning and 1,262 independent respondents** (defined according to self-reported political views).

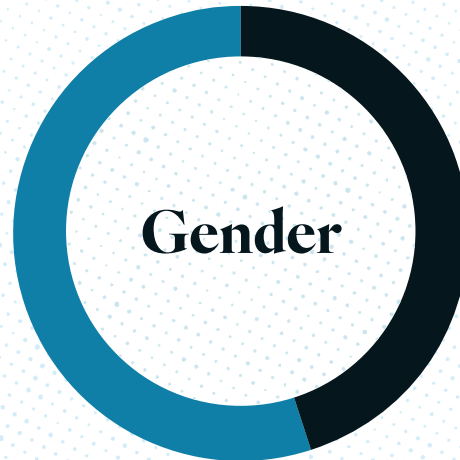
Total respondents were representative of the U.S. General Population of conservative-leaning and independent Americans based on age, gender, race/ethnicity, income and region; data is weighted by gender within generation and race/ethnicity groups to be representative. This survey was offered in English, Spanish and Mandarin. Based upon this fielding and recruiting, ACRI estimates an incidence rate of 23% of the general population reflecting conservative-leaning and/or independent views of distrust in the election process or election officials.

# Demographics |

## Conservative-leaning



- 23% \ 18-34
- 31% \ 35-54
- 46% \ 55-75



- 45% \ Male
- 55% \ Female



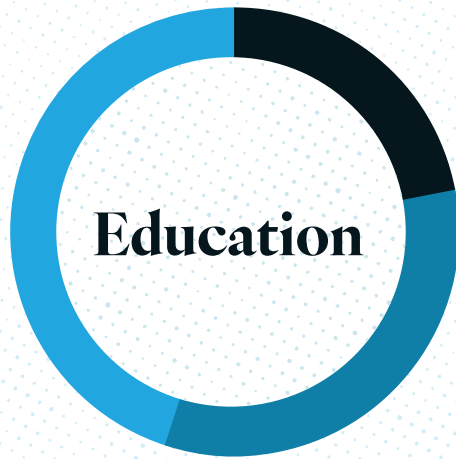
- 16% \ Urban
- 48% \ Suburban
- 35% \ Rural



- 83% \ Non-Hispanic Whites
- 9% \ Hispanic
- 5% \ African American / Black
- 4% \ Asian/NA/NH/PI/Others



# Demographics | Conservative-leaning

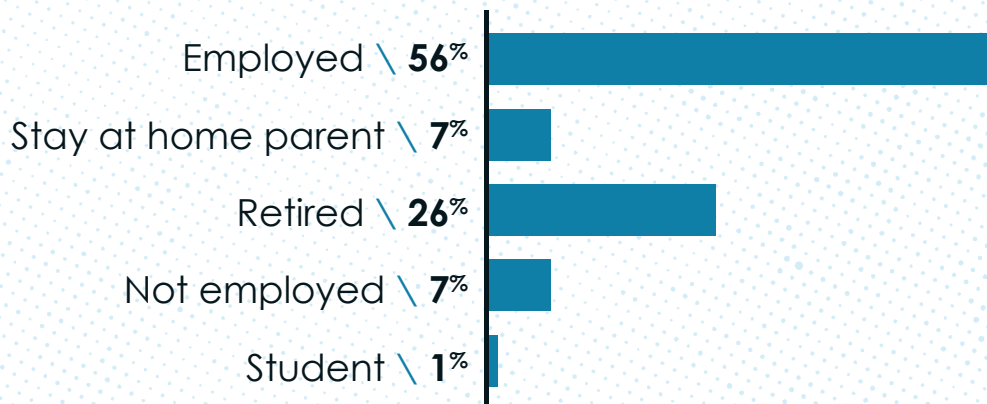


- 22% \ High school or less
- 33% \ Some college / AA
- 45% \ College or more



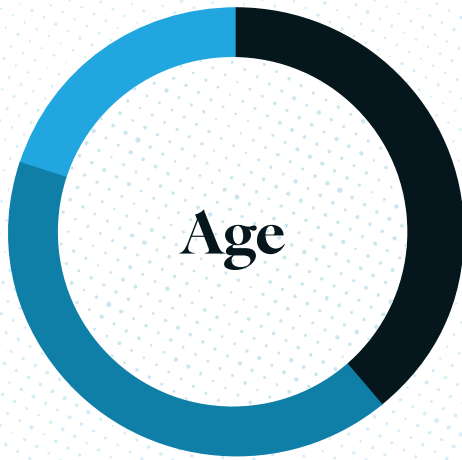
- 34% \ <\$45K
- 29% \ \$45K TO <\$75K
- 17% \ \$75K TO <\$100K
- 18% \ \$100K +

## Employment Status

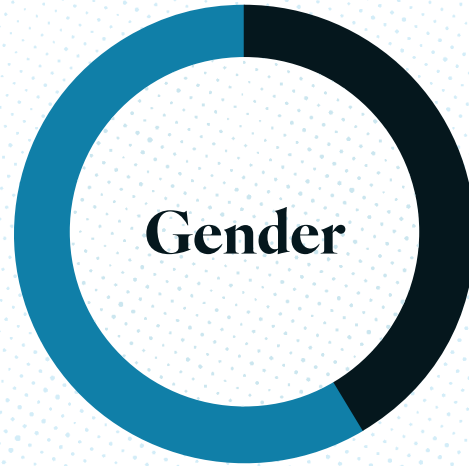


# Demographics |

## Independent



- 39% \ 18-34
- 41% \ 35-54
- 20% \ 55-75



- 41% \ Male
- 58% \ Female



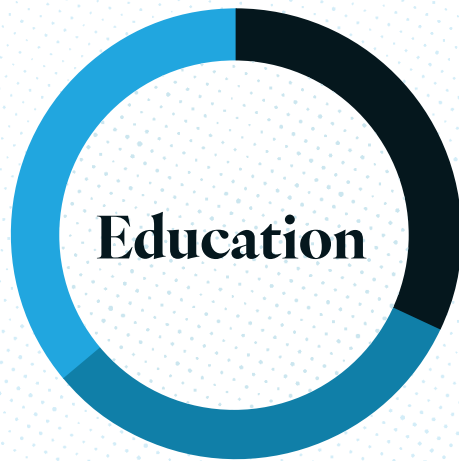
- 31% \ Urban
- 43% \ Suburban
- 26% \ Rural



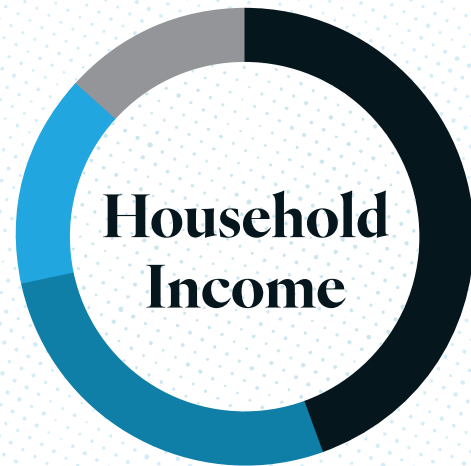
- 62% \ Non-Hispanic Whites
- 17% \ Hispanic
- 15% \ African American / Black
- 6% \ Asian/NA/NH/PI/Others

# Demographics |

## Independent

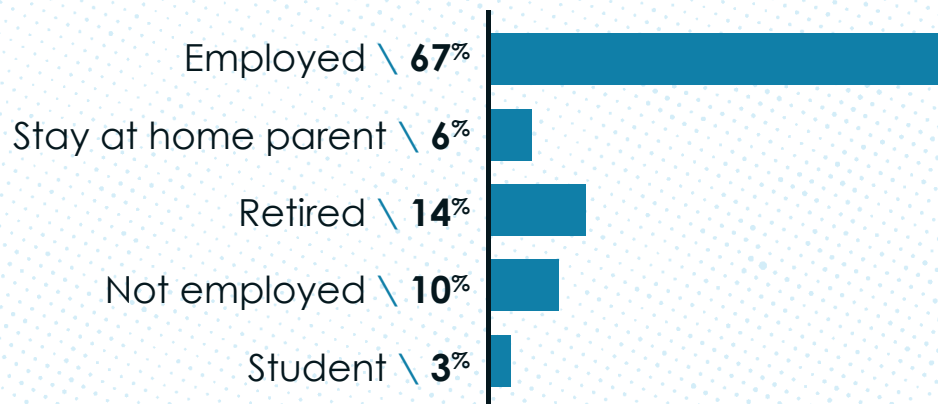


- 32% \ High school or less
- 32% \ Some college / AA
- 36% \ College or more



- 44% \ <\$45K
- 27% \ \$45K TO <\$75K
- 15% \ \$75K TO <\$100K
- 13% \ \$100K +

## Employment Status



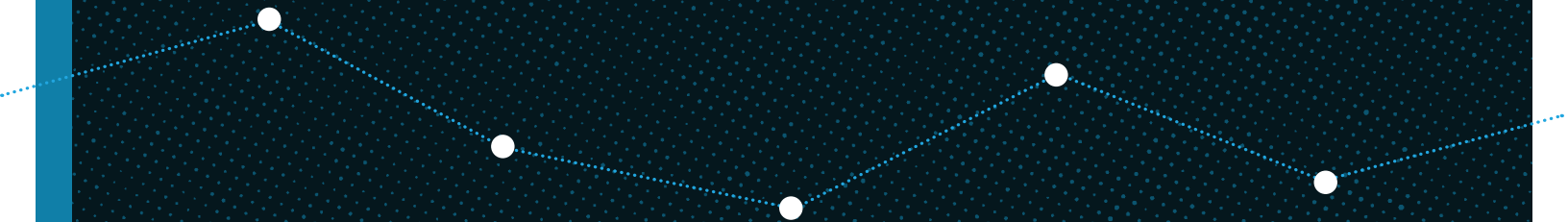


# Findings |

This report is segmented into the following sections:

- 1. Audience Identification for Confidence-Building Efforts**
- 2. Factors Contributing to Distrust**
- 3. Reasons for Optimism**

It should be noted that the research team looked at all findings across each phases' sample and by political leaning, as well as for noticeable trends by state/location and key demographic categories (age, gender, race/ethnicity, urbanicity, employment level and more). Throughout the report, significant differences above 5% by such categories have been noted; if no differences are noted, there was nothing significant to report for any demographic category compared to the total sample.



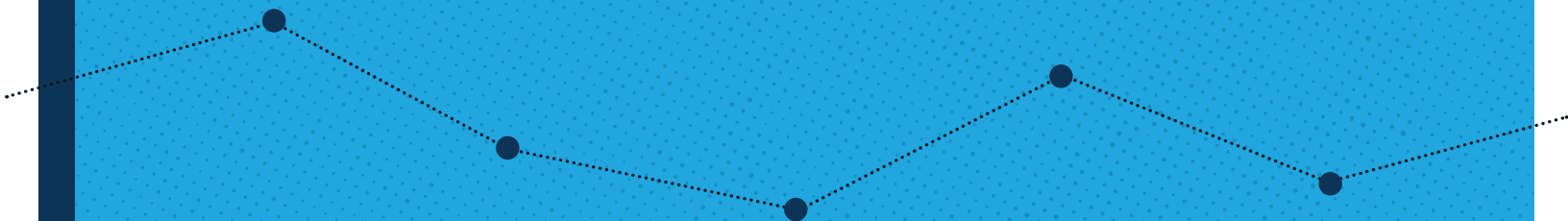
# SECTION 1 | Audience Identification for Confidence-Building Efforts

**In the qualitative phase of this study, we sought to identify not only the profiles of Americans who distrust the U.S. election process, but also which groups could potentially be moved to regain or rebuild that trust. Unique profiles emerged based on political leaning and voter status.**

## **Conservative vs. Liberal**

Among conservative respondents in the qualitative phase, distrust was stronger and spread across the entire election process. Most conservative respondents were found to believe that voting fraud is widespread and calculated, and that it happens frequently enough to sway elections. These respondents were more likely to feel that many aspects of the process are untrustworthy, from ways of voting (like mail-in ballots) to election workers (who can be “bought”) to voting machines that count the ballots (which they believe can be rigged).

Conversely, liberal-leaning respondents (especially voters) reported less distrust in the election process. Among more liberal-leaning respondents, most attributed errors in elections to either a few instances (i.e., individual people committing fraud) or human error/miscounts. But most also feel that this happens infrequently and is not enough to sway the outcome of an election. There is greater distrust, however, about other systemic issues related to voting and elections (like the electoral college, voter suppression, etc.).



## Voters

Conservative voters pointed to direct experiences that have caused or reinforced their distrust: Receiving multiple ballots, their ID not being checked at the polling station, a winner being declared when they saw people still in line to vote, etc. However, despite having distrust in the process, these voters believe it is their civic duty to vote. **Most report that they will continue to vote (for now) despite not believing that the system is trustworthy.**



### Key Target: Conservative-Leaning and Independent Voters

As we found in the qualitative phase, liberal-leaning respondents had some distrust in the election process, but they don't believe it's widespread or calculated like those on the opposite side of the aisle.

Because of our findings from the qualitative phase, **the quantitative phase focused solely on conservative-leaning and independent voters**—a distrusting but moveable audience—to understand where their distrust comes from, and what factors related to elections they distrust and why.

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The quantitative phase specifically looked at trust in elections among voters who are conservative-leaning (meaning not outright or extreme) or independent.



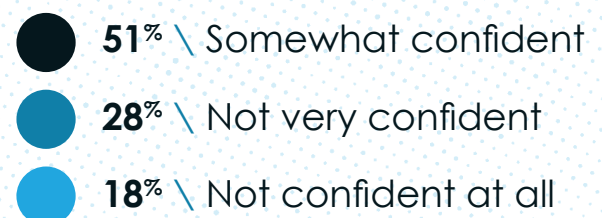
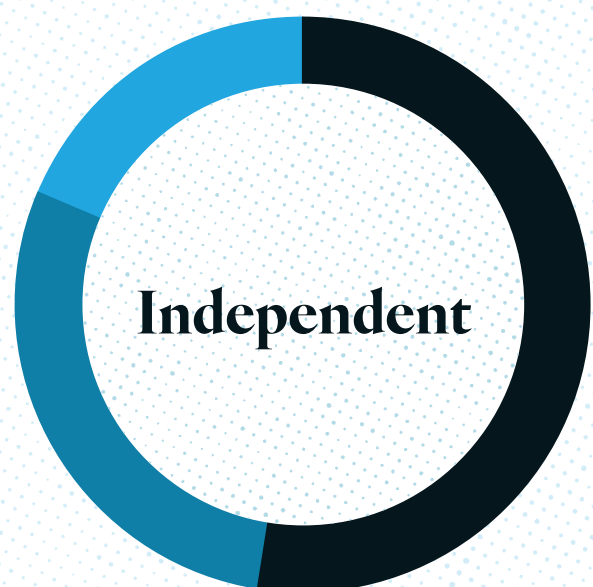
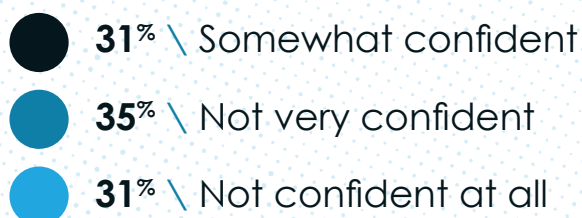
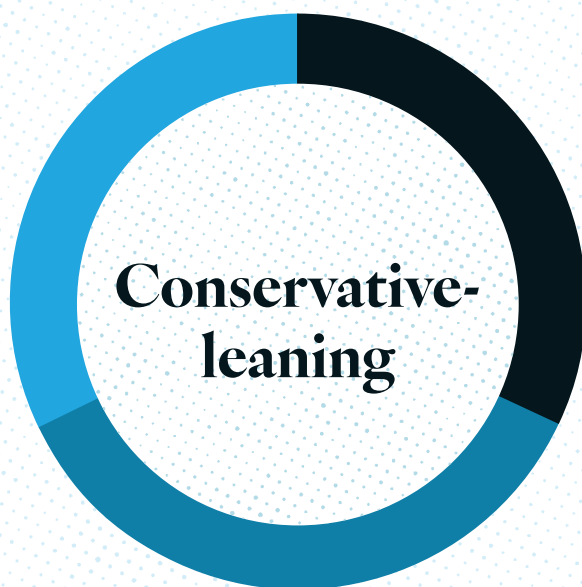
## SECTION 2 |

# Factors Contributing to Distrust

Voter fraud, illegal voters, issues with counting/tallying/auditing and delays in results all contribute to building skepticism and distrust among both conservative-leaning and independent voters. These same issues are also concerns for future elections across both audiences. During the voting process, distrust is more prevalent after one's ballot has been cast (when votes are collected and counted, and a winner is announced).

And in general, people think they know more than they actually do about the electoral process. In the quantitative survey, most voters claimed to know a fair amount or a lot about the process—despite significant evidence from qualitative research that this isn't the case.

**Conservative-leaning voters were less confident than independents that the 2020 presidential election was conducted fairly and accurately.**



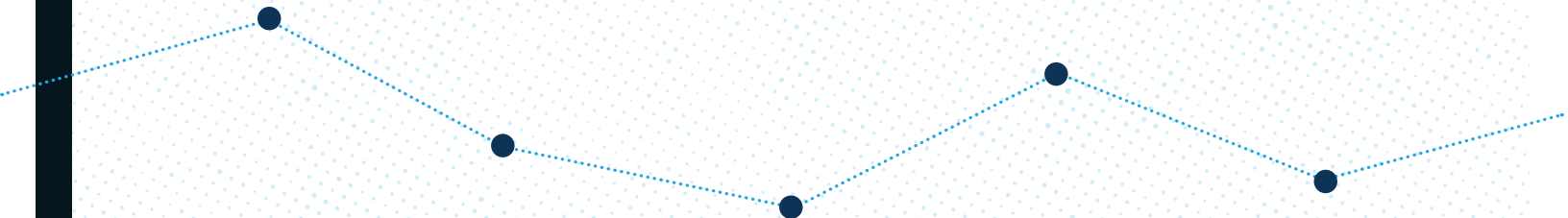
Only about a third (31%) of conservative-leaning voters in the sample believe the 2020 presidential election was conducted fairly and accurately. Another third (35%) are not very confident, and 31% are not confident at all. Half of independent voters (51%) were somewhat confident, with 28% not very and 18% not at all confident in the fairness and/or accuracy of the election.

Specific to the 2020 presidential election, concerns over voter fraud, unregistered voters, multiple ballots cast by the same voters, and auditing of and delays in results were heightened among conservative-leaning voters, but prevalent across both audiences.



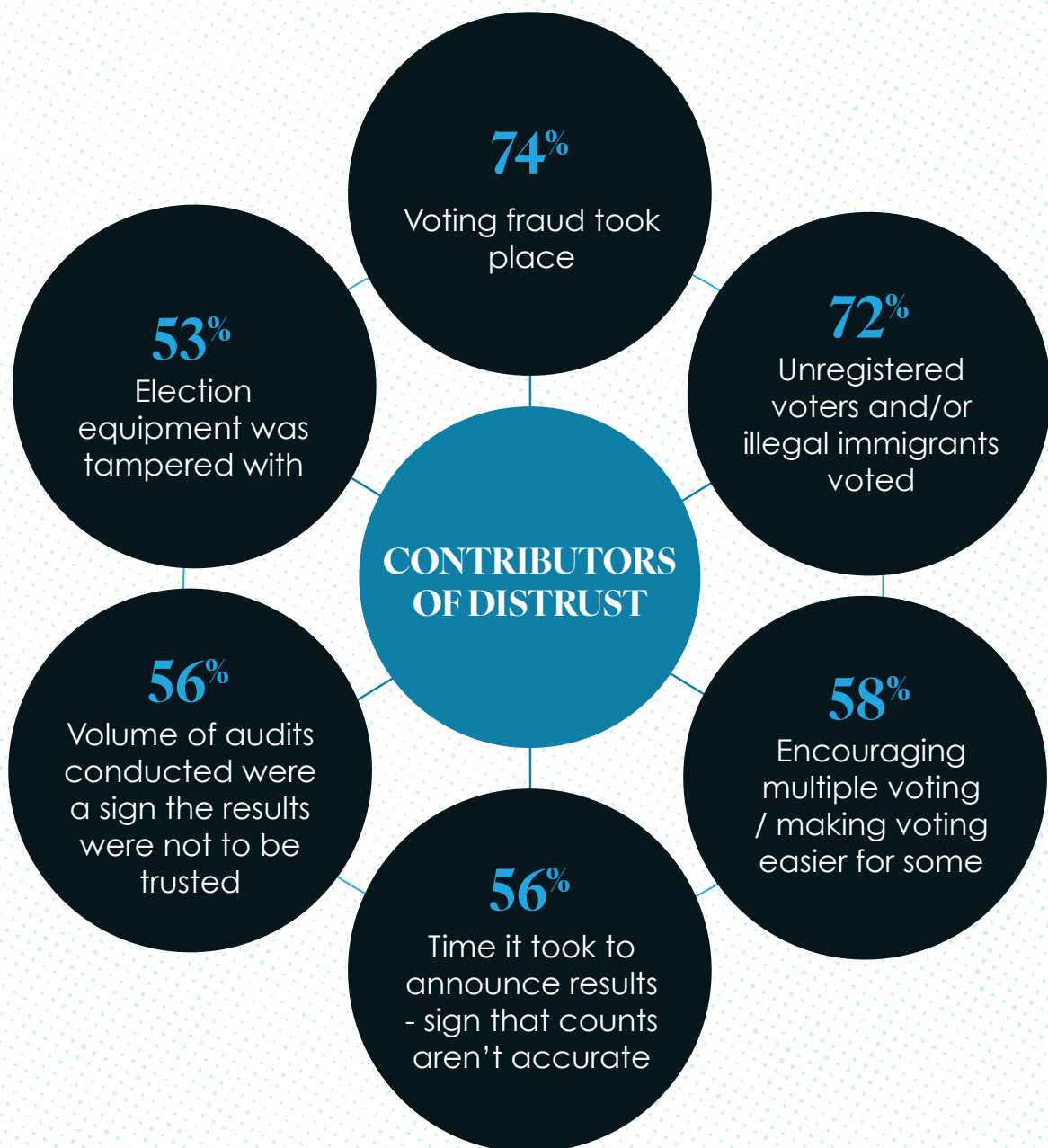
“Politicians are bought and paid for. Most of them. Democrat. Republican. They all serve a master, and that’s profits. Don’t get me wrong, there’s some good and honest politicians, especially more at the local level, but many of the Washington politicians are tied to profit and lobbyists.”

**- Independent voter from Arizona**



# Conservative-leaning

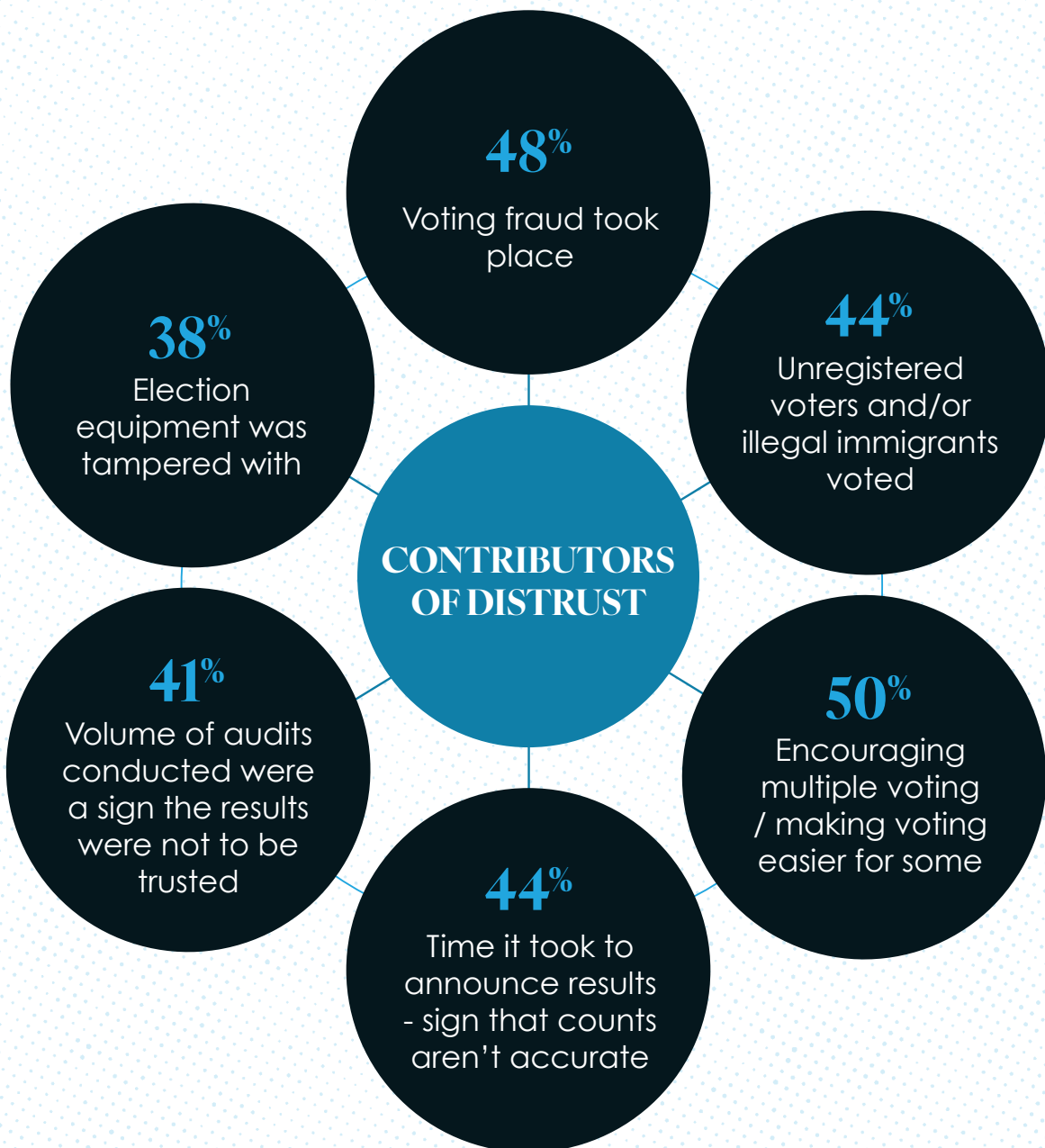
## Reasons for distrust







# Independent | Reasons for distrust

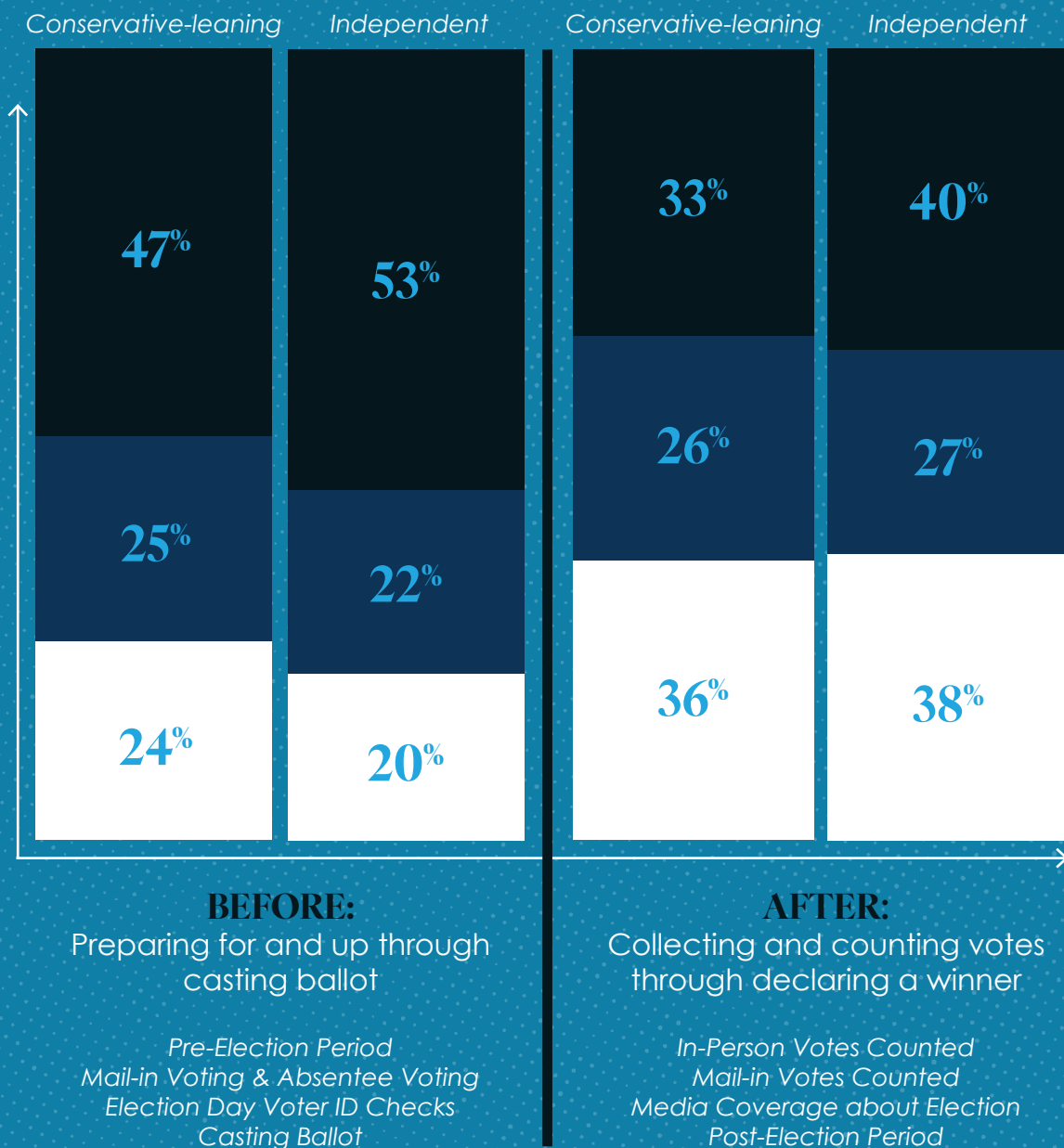


## Distrust in the election process is driven more by actions after votes are cast than leading up to it.

Across political views, voters in the sample have more trust before voting—the time they're preparing for and up through casting a ballot. After voting, distrust grows, specifically during the collecting and counting of votes and through declaring a winner.

Voters with conservative-leaning views have greater distrust of the election process leading up to and after votes are cast than voters with independent views. However, a quarter of respondents claim to neither trust or distrust each phase of the election process, suggesting that greater trust can be built.

Higher level of trust
  Neither trust nor distrust
  Lower level of trust



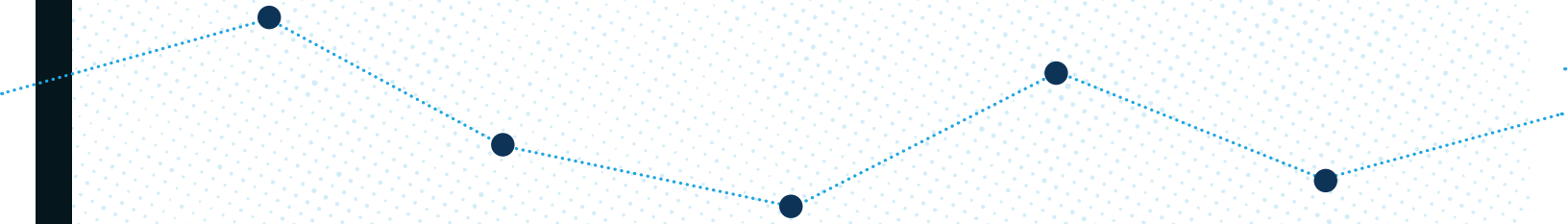
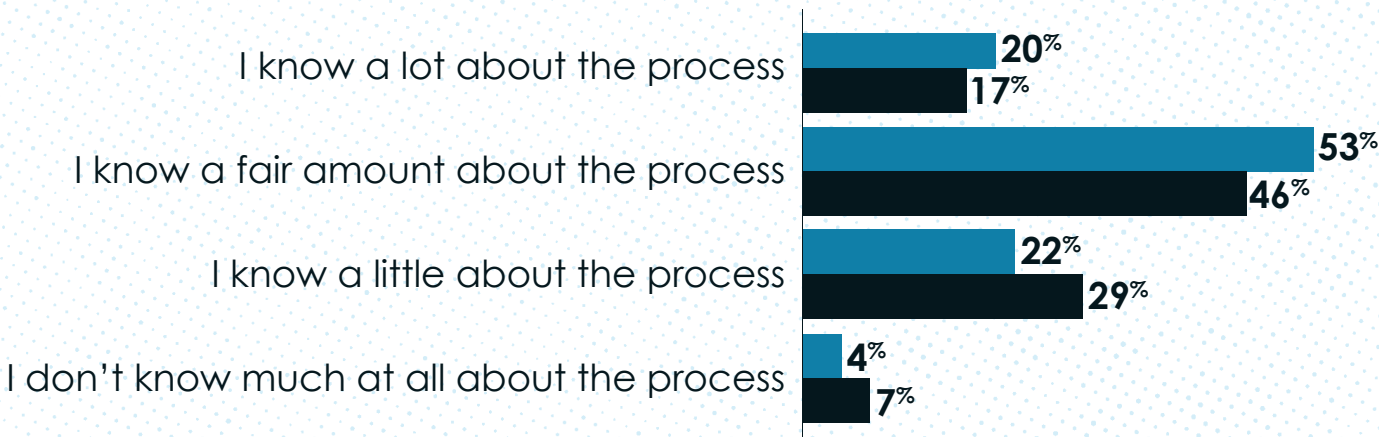
# Most voters in the sample claim to know a fair amount about the election process—despite significant evidence from the qualitative phase to the contrary.

Three quarters (73%) of conservative-leaning voters and two-thirds (63%) of independent voters say they know a lot or a fair amount about the election process, and a further 22% of conservatives and 29% of independents say they know at least a little about the process. Demographically:

- 77% of men believe they have a lot or a fair amount of knowledge about the election process, compared to 60% of women.
- Among ethnicities, Hispanic and Asian voters are most likely to claim to know a fair amount or a lot about the election process.
- Knowledge differences are also evident by urbanicity, where claimed knowledge increases with density.
- Perceived knowledge also increases with income.

## Knowledge in the election process

● Conservative-leaning ● Independent





However, qualitative research uncovered that most respondents have **very little understanding of the election process** beyond the idea that people vote, the votes are counted, and a winner is named. This lack of understanding was present across all political segments in the qualitative phase.

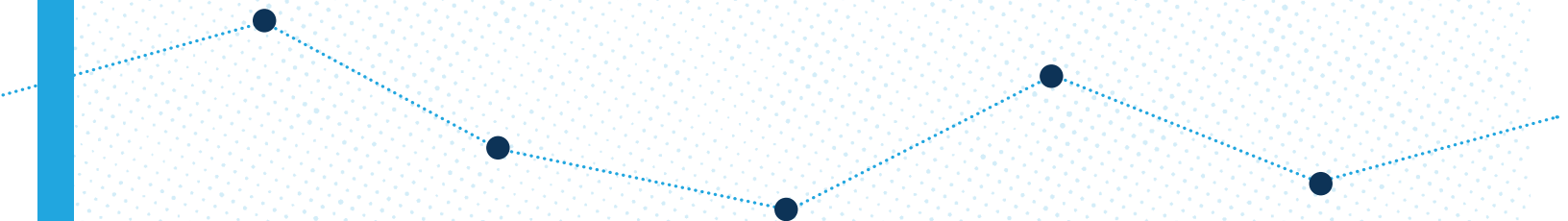
This lack of understanding also extends to *who* is involved in the election process. Most qualitative participants identified that they don't know who is involved in the process beyond local poll workers. Most are especially hazy on details around requirements for voting, how and whether identity is validated, mail-in ballots, when and how a winner is reported, audits/recounts and the timing associated with all of these aspects of the process.

In the absence of true understanding, misinformation often fills in the gaps.



“On election day, votes are counted from either digital or paper ballots (or mail-in ballots). Honestly, I'm a little embarrassed, I don't know much more about how they're counted or who they're counted by, and exactly how they're entered in the system.”

**- Republican voter from Wisconsin**





## SECTION 3 | Reasons for Optimism

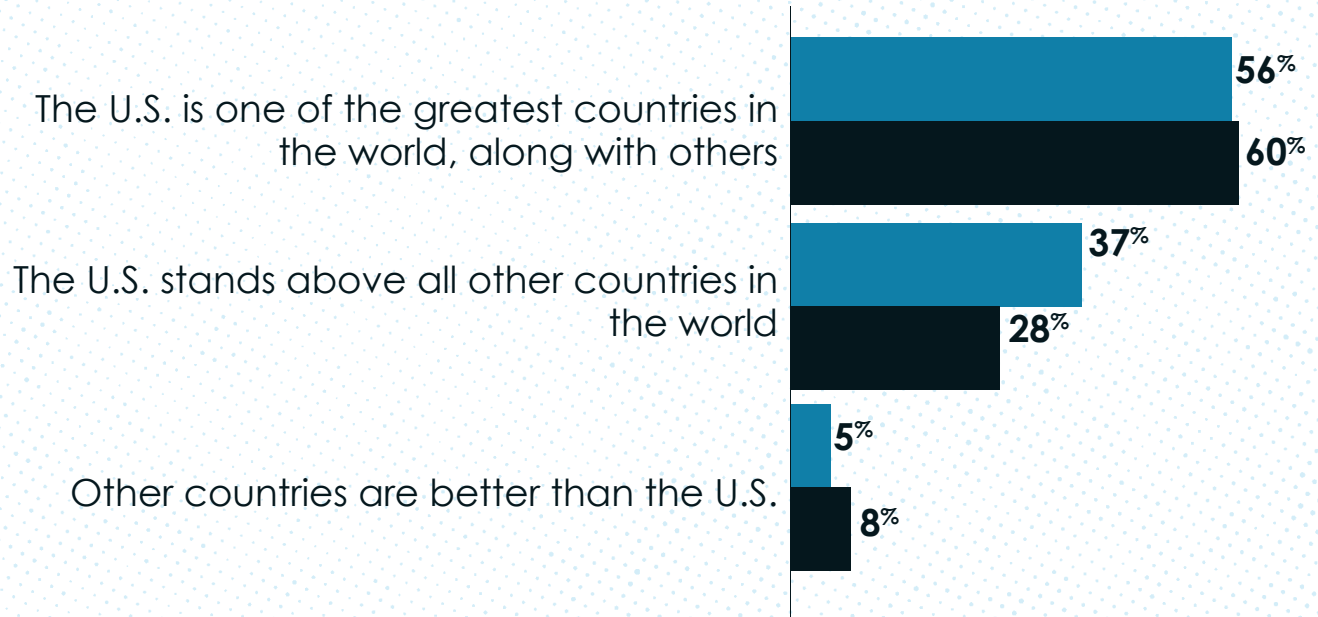
**Distrust in the U.S. election process exists for conservative-leaning and independent voters, so both groups should be targeted with messaging focused on building/rebuilding trust. However, despite distrust and the current divisive political climate, people still support the country and believe in the U.S., and say they plan to continue to exercise their right to vote in the future.**

### **In general, voters think highly of the U.S.**

Conservative-leaning voters have stronger positive feelings toward the U.S. than independent voters: A third (37%) of conservative voters say the U.S. stands above all other countries in the world (compared to 28% of independents), and 56% of conservative voters (compared to 60% of independents) says the U.S. is one of the greatest countries in the world, along with others.

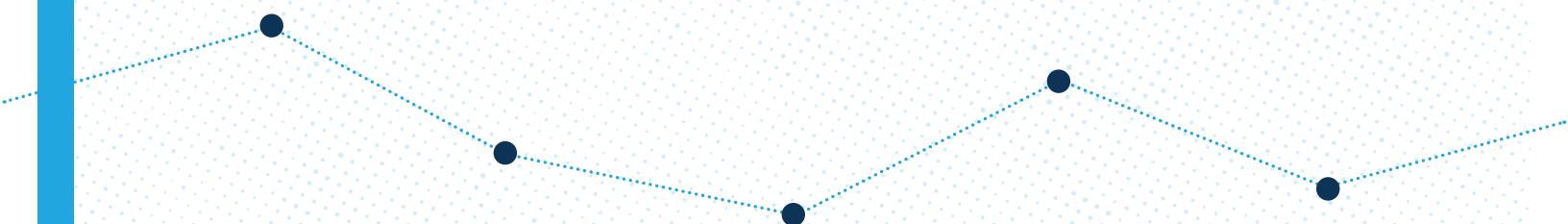
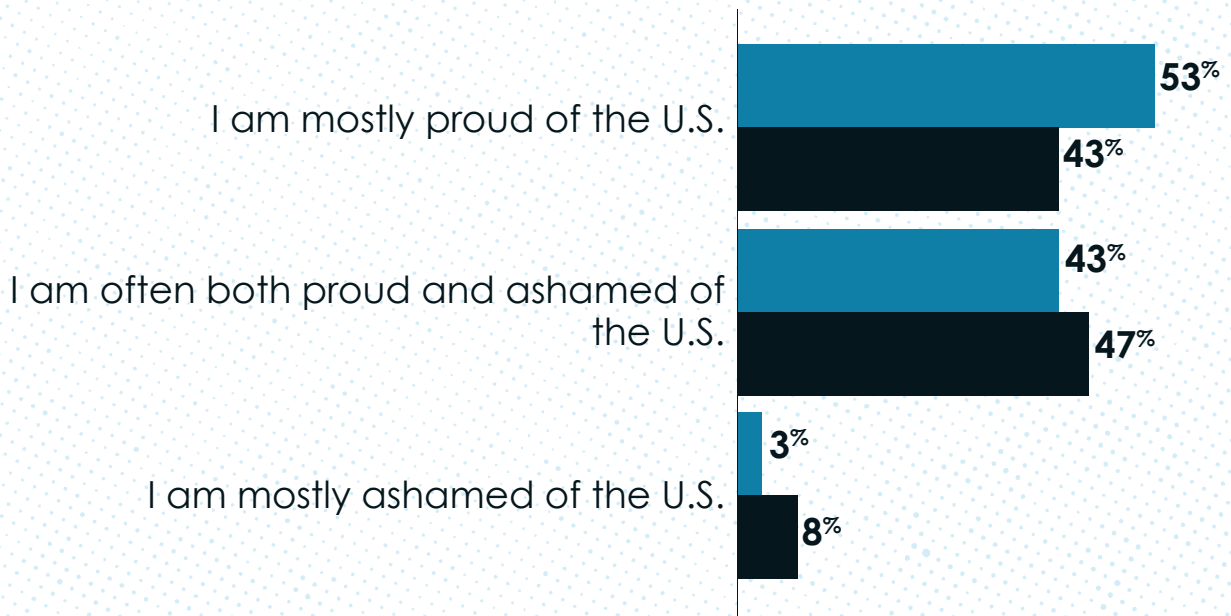
More conservatives say they are mostly proud of the U.S. (53%, compared to 43% independents), while more independents than conservatives say they're often both proud and ashamed of the country (47% independent vs. 43% conservative).

# Opinion of the United States



● Conservative-leaning ● Independent

# Pride in the United States





## Current distrust doesn't deter participation in future elections—and for many voters, it actually **heightens their likelihood of voting.**

When asked how their confidence in the voting process from the last presidential election (in 2020) would impact their likelihood to vote in future elections, voters from both political ideologies said it has no impact, or it would make them much more likely to vote in the future. That being said, the same concerns that contributed to building distrust will persist for future elections, particularly among conservative-leaning voters.

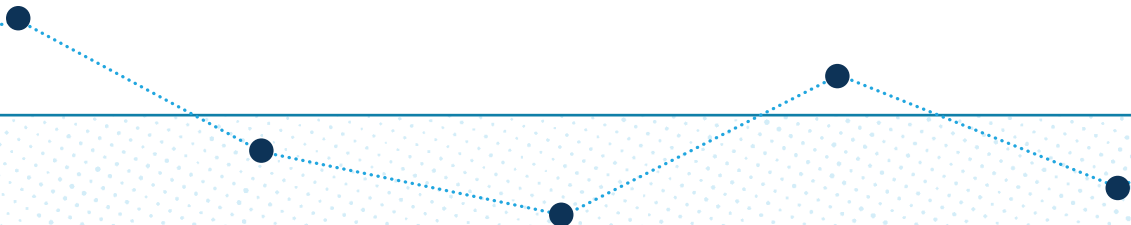


“I consider myself a regular voter and stay up-to-date on candidates and issues in my area. I often feel that local elections are more important than nationwide ones because they affect my personal community. I also feel like my vote counts more here.”

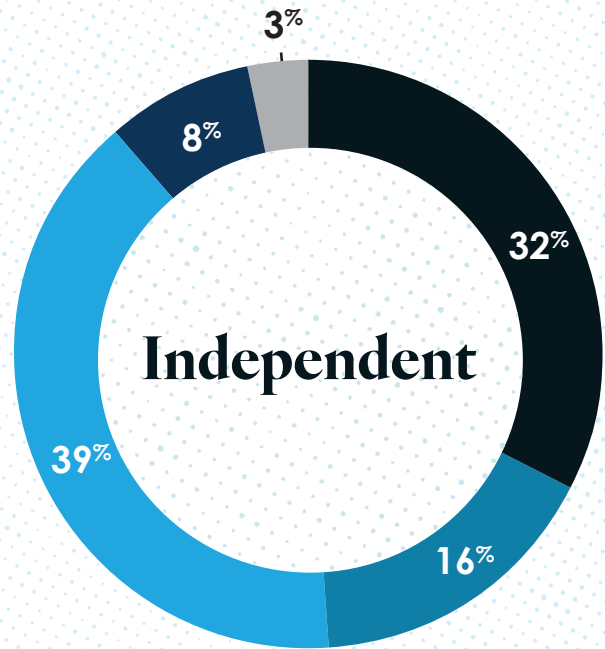
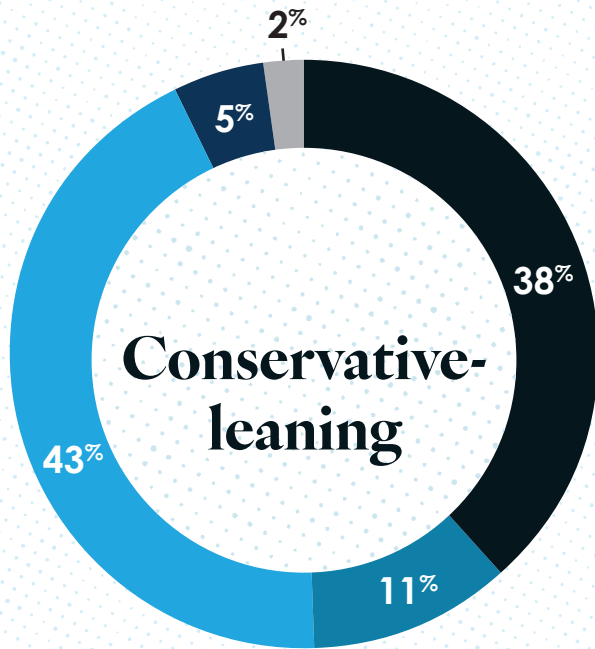
**- Independent voter from North Carolina**

“I will definitely vote. I still consider it a privilege and an opportunity to vote. If nothing else, I hope it offsets some of the voting fraud.”

**- Republican voter from Wisconsin**



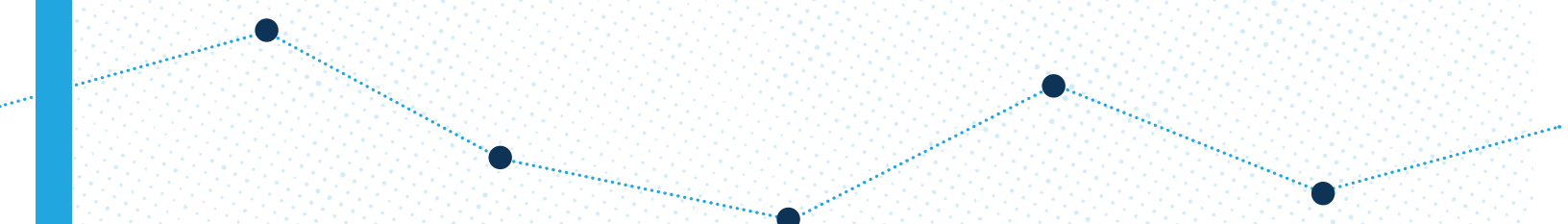
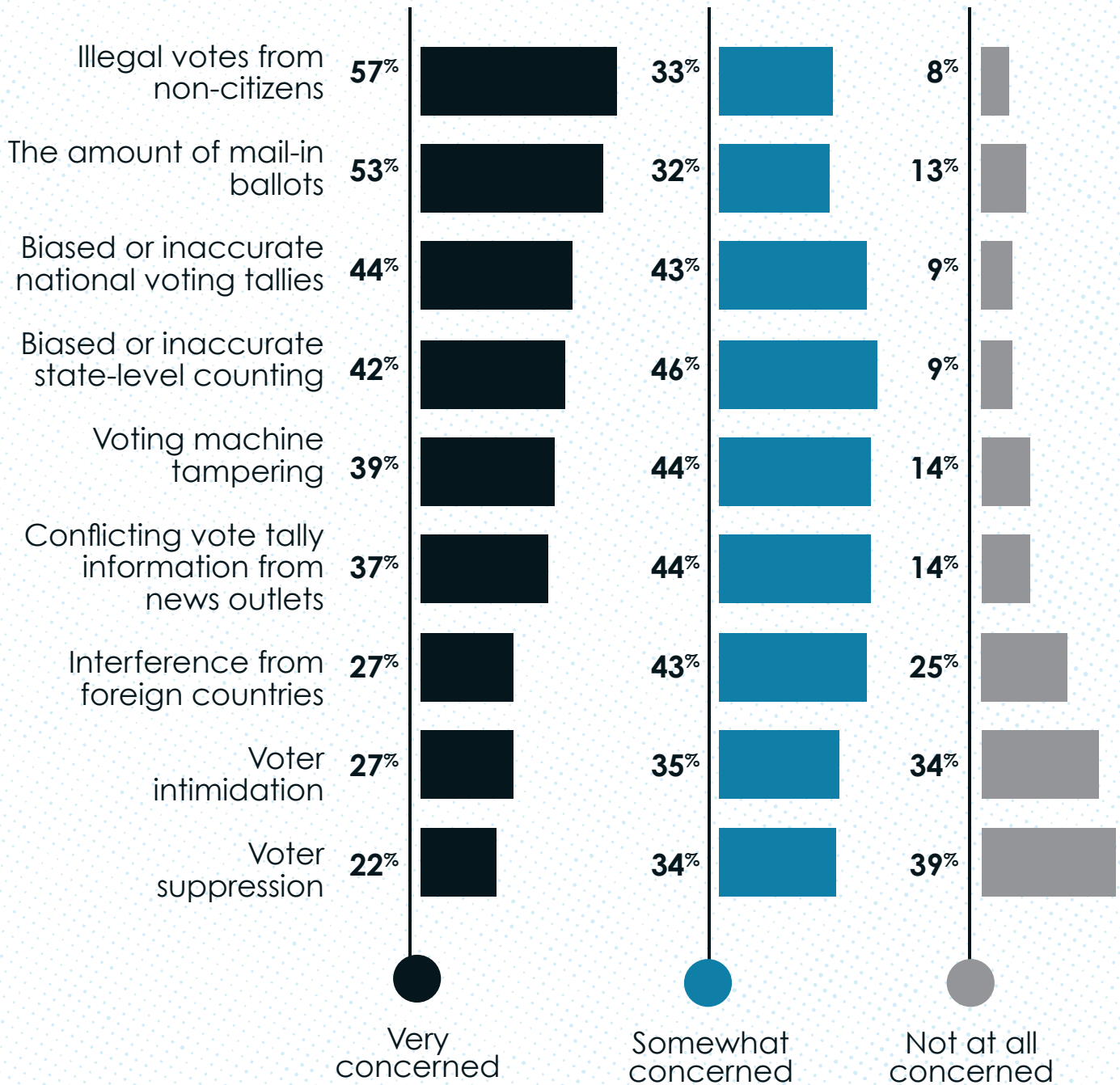
## Likelihood of voting in future elections



- Much more likely to vote
- A little more likely to vote
- Doesn't impact my likelihood to vote
- A little less likely to vote
- Much less likely to vote

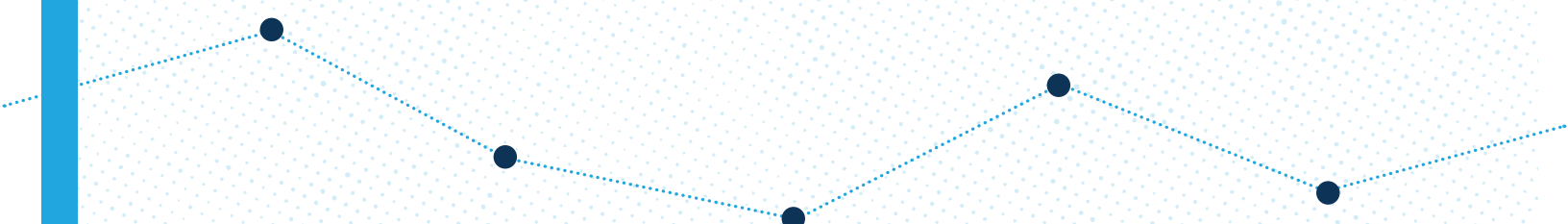
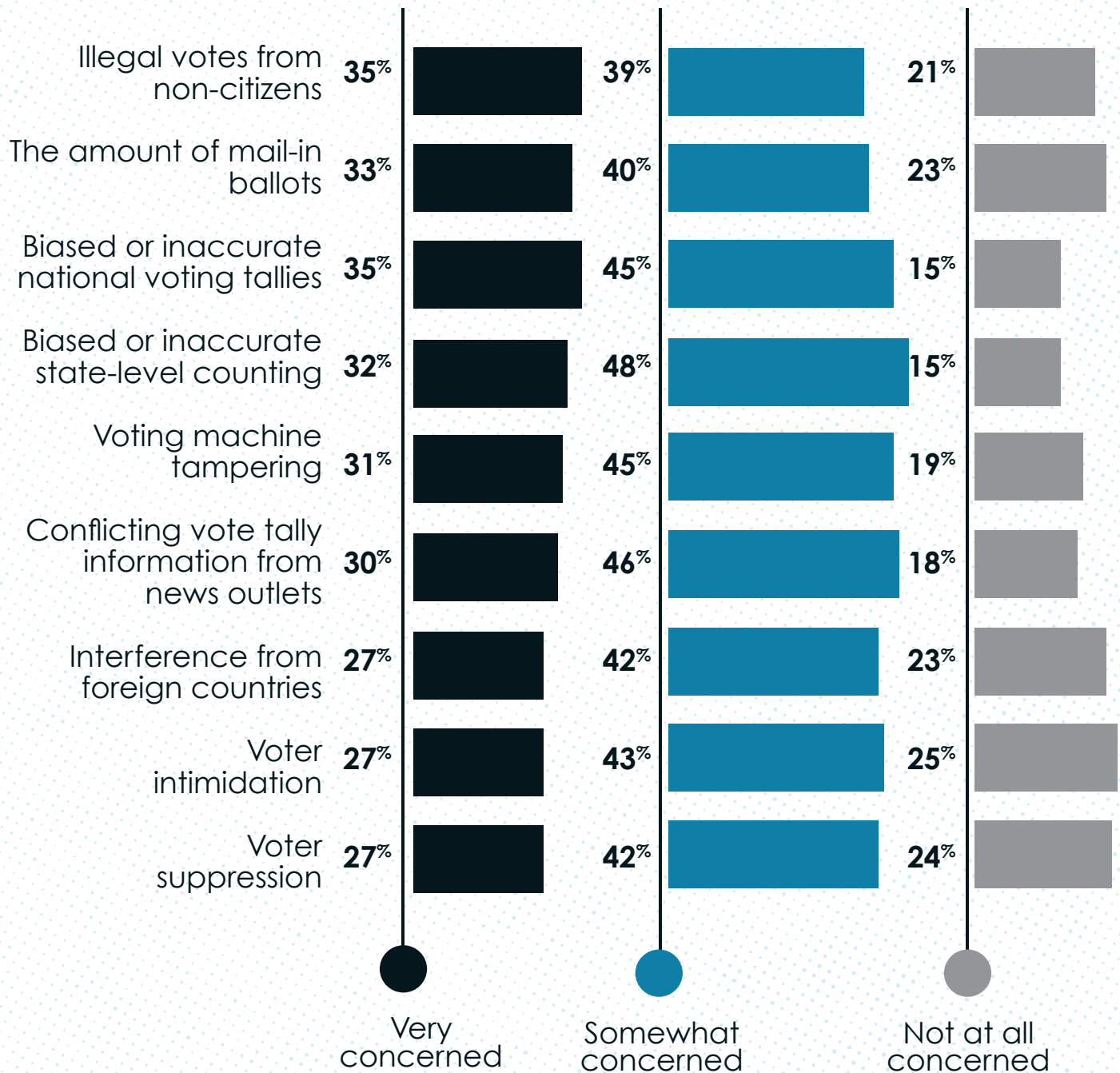
# Concerns for upcoming elections

## Conservative-leaning





# Concerns for upcoming elections | Independent





[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

## Conclusion

Distrust in the election process isn't a new problem, and it will take more than a quick fix to reverse.

Distrust among conservative-leaning and independent voters is highest after votes are cast (when they're collected and counted, and when a winner is chosen). As such, efforts to rebuild voter confidence and trust should focus on informing and reassuring voters about the process after ballots are cast and the protections that are in place to preserve integrity. However, these efforts should take place **in the time leading up to elections** to preemptively begin building trust in the process as early as possible.

Remember: Building trust with these voters will take time. Rather than a one-and-done strategy, it will be key to reach these voters with strategic messaging, delivered by sources they trust, consistently and over time.

This report provides a clearer understanding of the root cause(s) of this distrust among our ideal and potentially moveable audience (conservative-leaning and independent voters).