

# The **Political Alienation Barometer**

An in-depth look at Americans who feel alienated from politics and politicians.

October 2022





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# INTRODUCTION

When democracies face challenges, the key to their survival are citizens believing in their own institutions. As our democracy experiences increased strain due to leader and activist polarization, we must shift focus to the public. Are members of the public committed to democracy? Will they stand up for our institutions when the chips are down? What do these Americans think must change?

Nearly one-third of Americans are completely politically alienated—not because their preferred party isn't in power, but because they don't think their voice matters. A majority of these alienated Americans believe our democracy is in crisis. They say the solution is to revamp our democracy to make it work better.

**Understanding why these Americans feel alienated gives us a critical opportunity to reach them.**

*Based on interviews with over 2,017 American adults across the country, this research explores the extent of political alienation, what alienated people think about problems in our democracy, their views on political extremism, and what they believe needs to change.*



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### 01 Nearly one in three Americans are completely politically alienated:

This includes 34% of Republicans, 29% of Independents and 25% of Democrats.

### 02 An increasing number of Americans think our democracy is in crisis:

Half of Americans think our democracy is in crisis, up 14% points from 2021.

### 03 More Americans call for structural reform:

56% of Americans say the design and structure of our nation's government needs to change, up from 40% in 2019. Alienated Americans especially say they want change.

### 04 Politically alienated Americans consider the nation's problems more serious than the non-alienated Americans:

Alienated Americans see problems such as partisan gridlock and government corruption as particularly serious.

### 05 Independents consider political extremism a serious problem across the political spectrum:

Two-thirds of alienated Independents view extremism in the Republican and Democratic parties as a major issue.

### 06 Alienated Americans say giving ordinary people more of a voice and having politicians work across the aisle - would boost their political participation:

71% of them also say that Congressional term limits would motivate them to get more involved.

# Public Agenda is a research-to-action non-partisan organization dedicated to creating and sustaining a stronger democracy.

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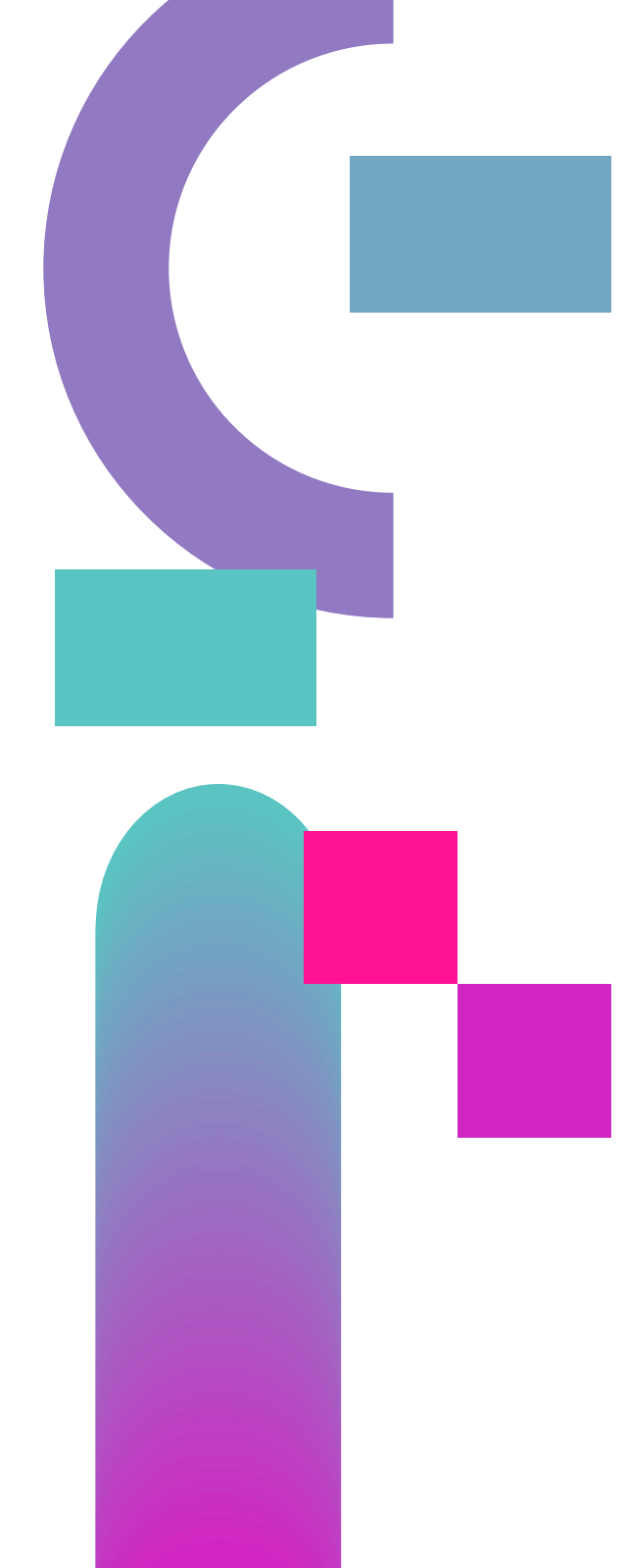
- Qualitative and quantitative public opinion research
- Public engagement to encourage action



[GET INVOLVED](#) →

# 02 Who Are The Politically Alienated?





# Who Are The Politically Alienated?

Defining political alienation: explaining our methodology.

To measure alienation, the survey asked Americans how much they agree or disagree with three statements adapted from [research on the British electorate](#):

- **“Politicians don’t care what people like me think,”** to measure feelings of external political efficacy
- **“Politicians in Washington cannot be trusted to put the interests of the country ahead of the interests of their party,”** to measure feelings of political trust
- **“Politics and government can seem so complicated, I find it hard to understand what is going on,”** to measure feelings of internal political efficacy

## WHO ARE THE POLITICALLY ALIENATED?

While most Americans are politically alienated in some way, nearly one in three are completely alienated.

29%

Agree with all three statements and can be described as completely political alienated.

*This includes*

34% of Republicans  
29% of Independents  
25% of Democrats

55%

Agree with any one or two statements and can be described as politically alienated in some way.

17%

Do not agree with any of the statements and can be described as not politically alienated.

\*Numbers may not add up to 100% due to rounding.



## WHO ARE THE POLITICALLY ALIENATED?

### Three Dimensions of Political Alienation:

Clear majorities of Americans say that politicians cannot be trusted and don't care about what ordinary people think. A substantial minority feel that politics is too complex.

#### TRUST

73%

Agree politicians in Washington cannot be trusted to put the interest of the country ahead of the interest of their party.

*This includes*

82% of Republicans

69% of Democrats

67% of Independents

#### EXTERNAL EFFICACY

64%

Agree that politicians don't care what people like them think.

#### INTERNAL EFFICACY

41%

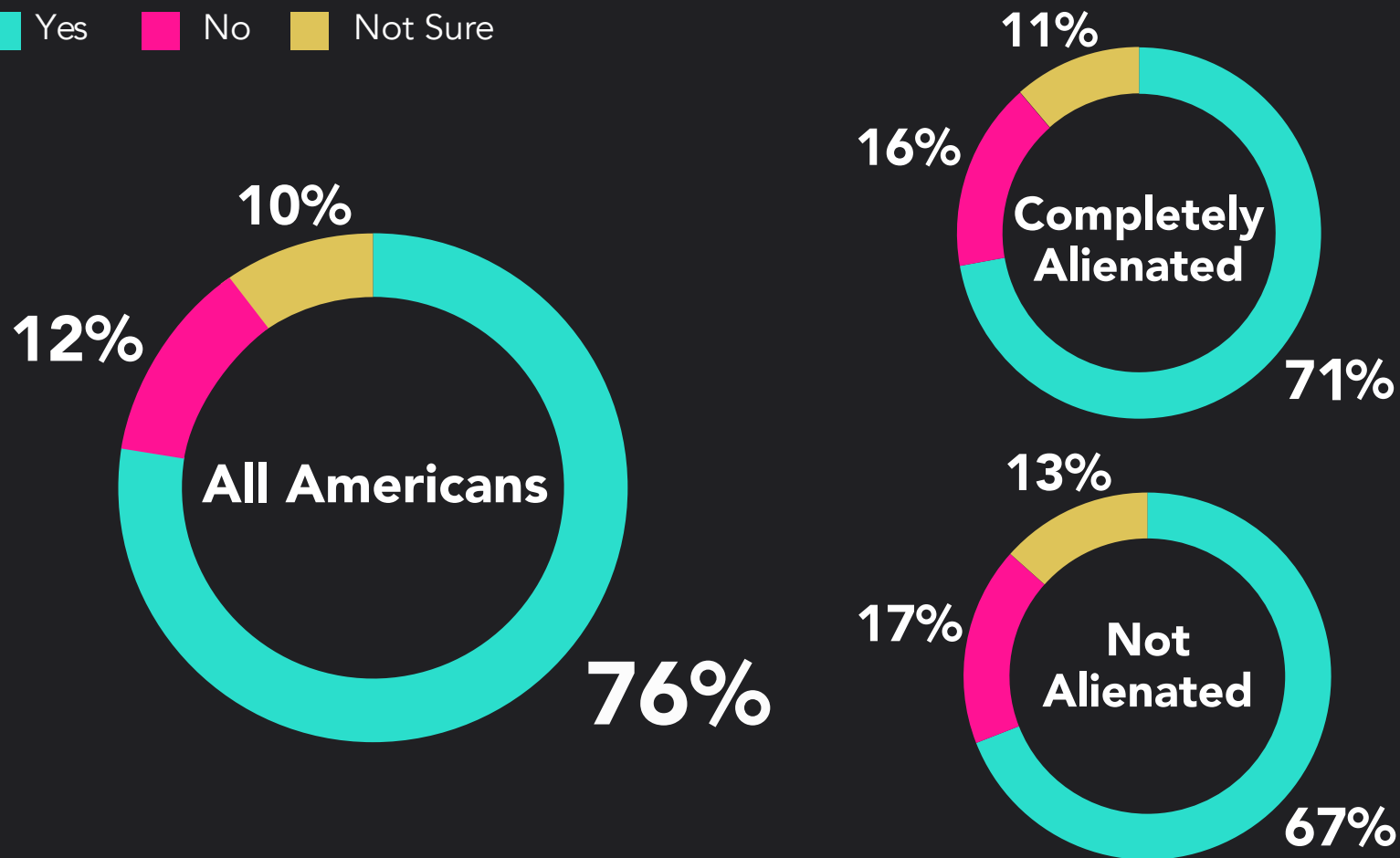
Agree that politics and government can seem so complicated, they find it hard to understand what is going on.

## WHO ARE THE POLITICALLY ALIENATED?

Despite feeling disaffected, most politically alienated Americans say they plan to vote in the 2022 midterm elections.

PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO DISCLOSE WHETHER THEY ARE PLANNING TO VOTE IN THE UPCOMING 2022 MIDTERM ELECTION, BY POLITICAL ALIENATION:

Yes No Not Sure



## WHO ARE THE POLITICALLY ALIENATED?

### In their own words...

"I'm not so and so, I'm not the other guy. They always say more jobs, lower taxes, but they never say how they're going to do that. It doesn't matter who it is—Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, they're all the same."

**Male, Republican, 59**  
**Mobile, AL**

"Politicians don't represent me. They are only responsible for corporations and large funders."

**Female, Democrat, 29**  
**Sioux Falls, SD**

"Politicians before to politicians now, they tend to butt heads more and try not to work together."

**Female, Independent, 43**  
**Schaumburg, IL**

"I don't believe any politician on either side. Everybody votes on party lines and with so much polarization, nothing ever gets done. Politicians are solely focused on their own interests."

**Female, Republican, 23**  
**Norman, OK**

"They (politicians) don't care how many people their policies impoverish...so long as their donors are happy. This is frustrating because I care about others."

**Male, Democrat, 35**  
**Riverside, CA**

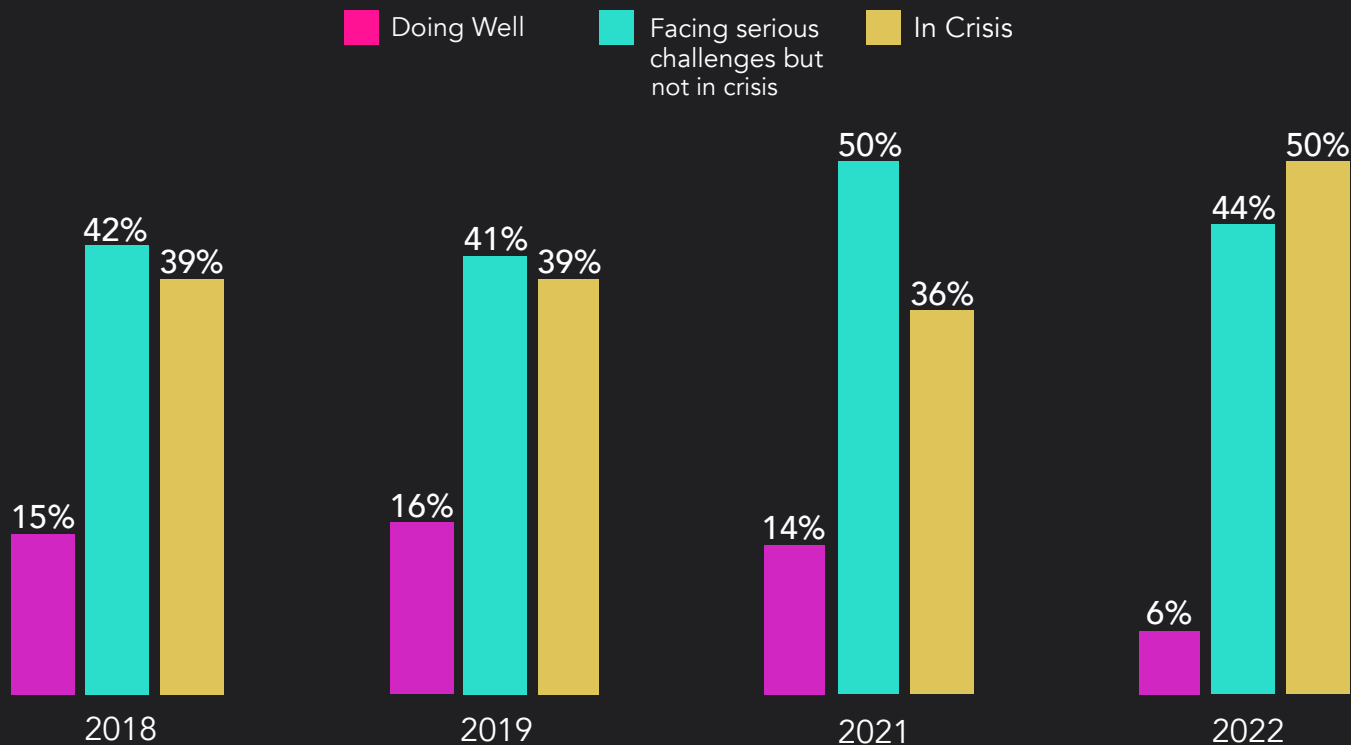
# 03 The State of Our Democracy



## THE STATE OF OUR DEMOCRACY

50% of Americans think our democracy is in crisis, up 14 percentage points from 2021.

**WHEN TOLD THE UNITED STATES IS MEANT TO BE A DEMOCRACY, WHERE CITIZENS HAVE A VOICE, RIGHTS ARE PROTECTED, AND LAWS ARE FAIRLY ENFORCED, THE FOLLOWING PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS SAY OUR COUNTRY'S DEMOCRACY IS:**

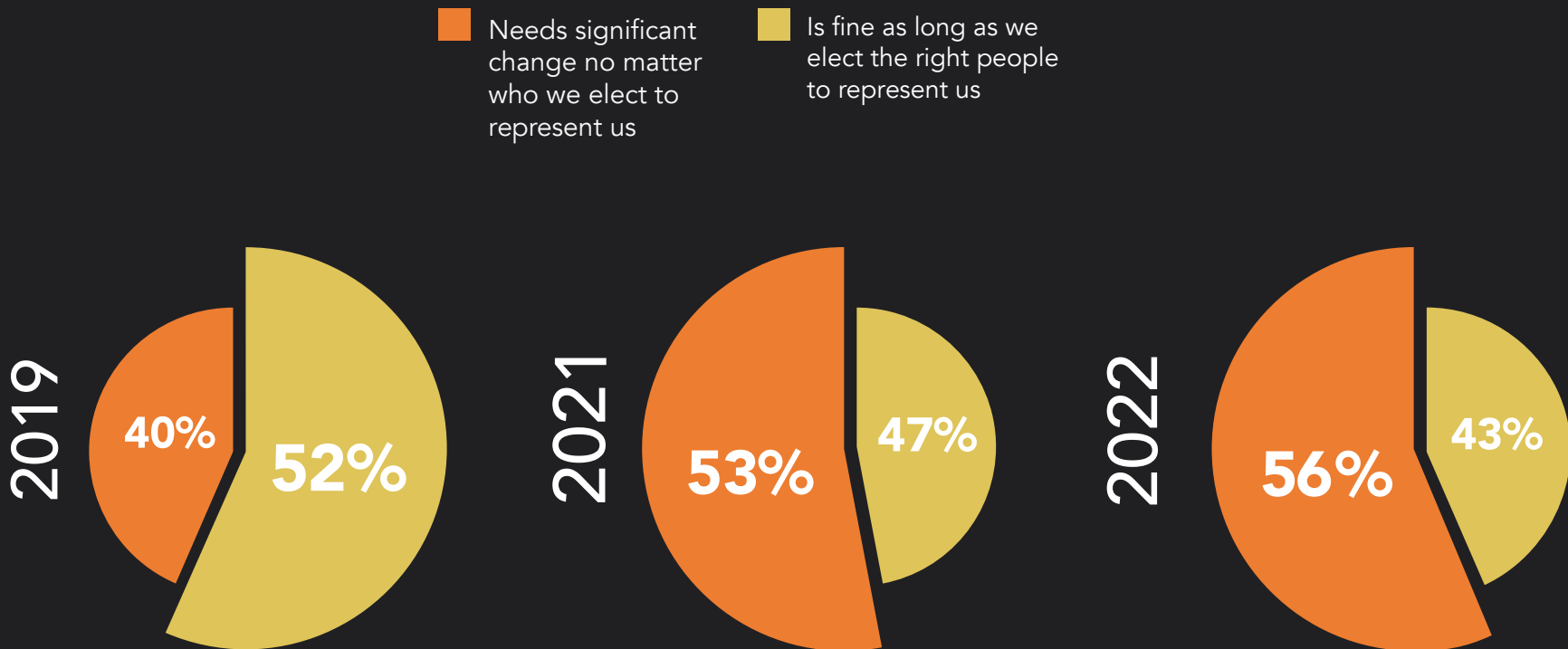


\*Findings include trend data from Public Agenda surveys fielded online [in 2021](#); fielded by telephone and online [in 2019](#); and fielded by telephone and online [in 2018](#). While trends over time may reflect changes in public opinion, the shift from telephone and online fielding to entirely online fielding may have impacted responses.

## THE STATE OF OUR DEMOCRACY

56% of Americans say the design and structure of our nation's government needs to change no matter who is elected to office, up from 40% in 2019.

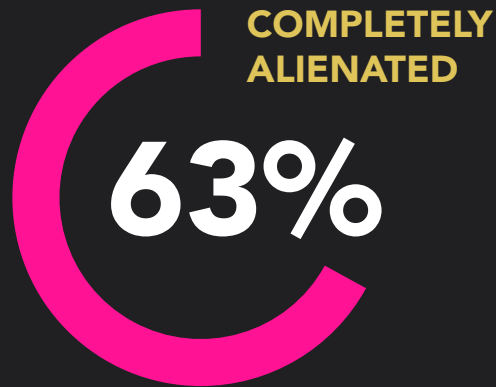
### PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SAY THE FOLLOWING ABOUT THE DESIGN AND STRUCTURE OF OUR NATION'S GOVERNMENT:



\*Findings include trend data from Public Agenda surveys fielded online [in 2021](#) and fielded by telephone and online [in 2019](#). While trends over time may reflect changes in public opinion, the shift from telephone and online fielding to entirely online fielding may have impacted responses.

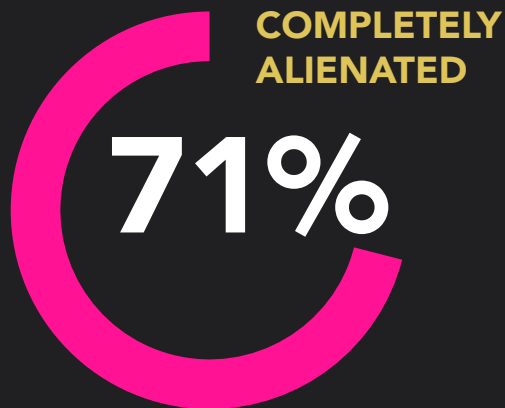
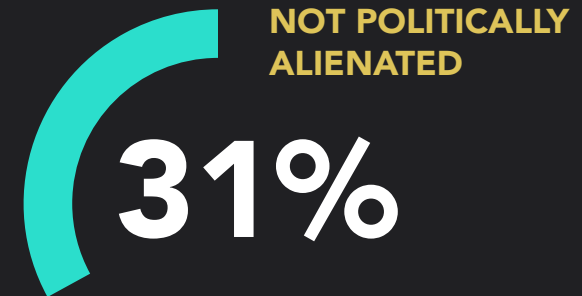
## THE STATE OF OUR DEMOCRACY

Politically alienated Americans are especially likely to think democracy is in crisis and want structural government reform.



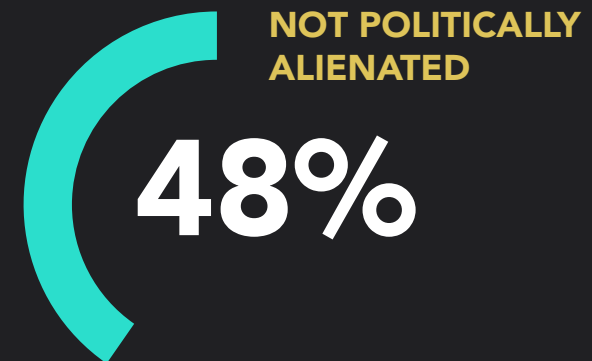
Think democracy is in crisis

**VERSUS**

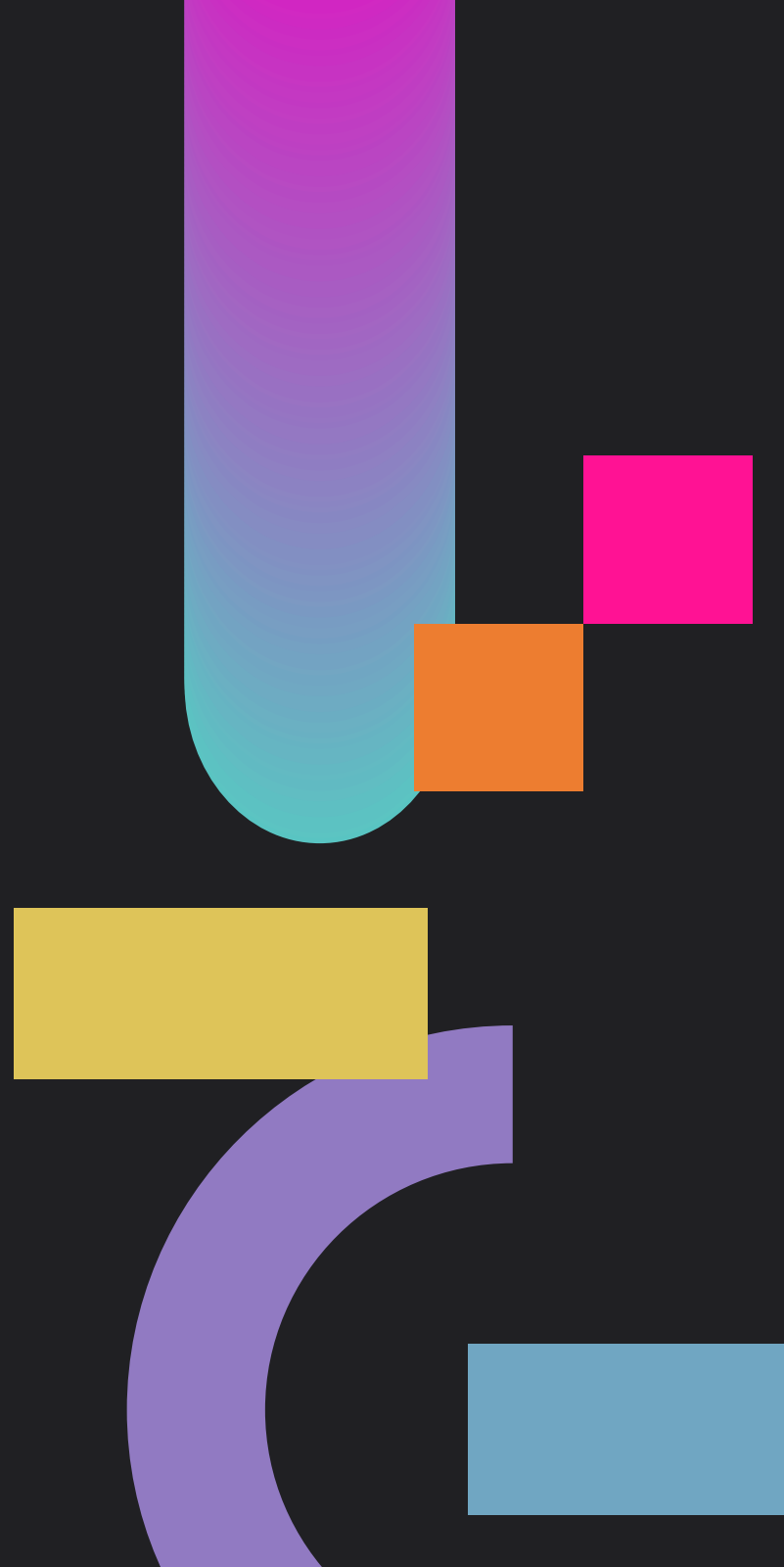


Believe the design and structure of our nation's government need significant change

**VERSUS**



# 04 The Nation's Most Serious Problems

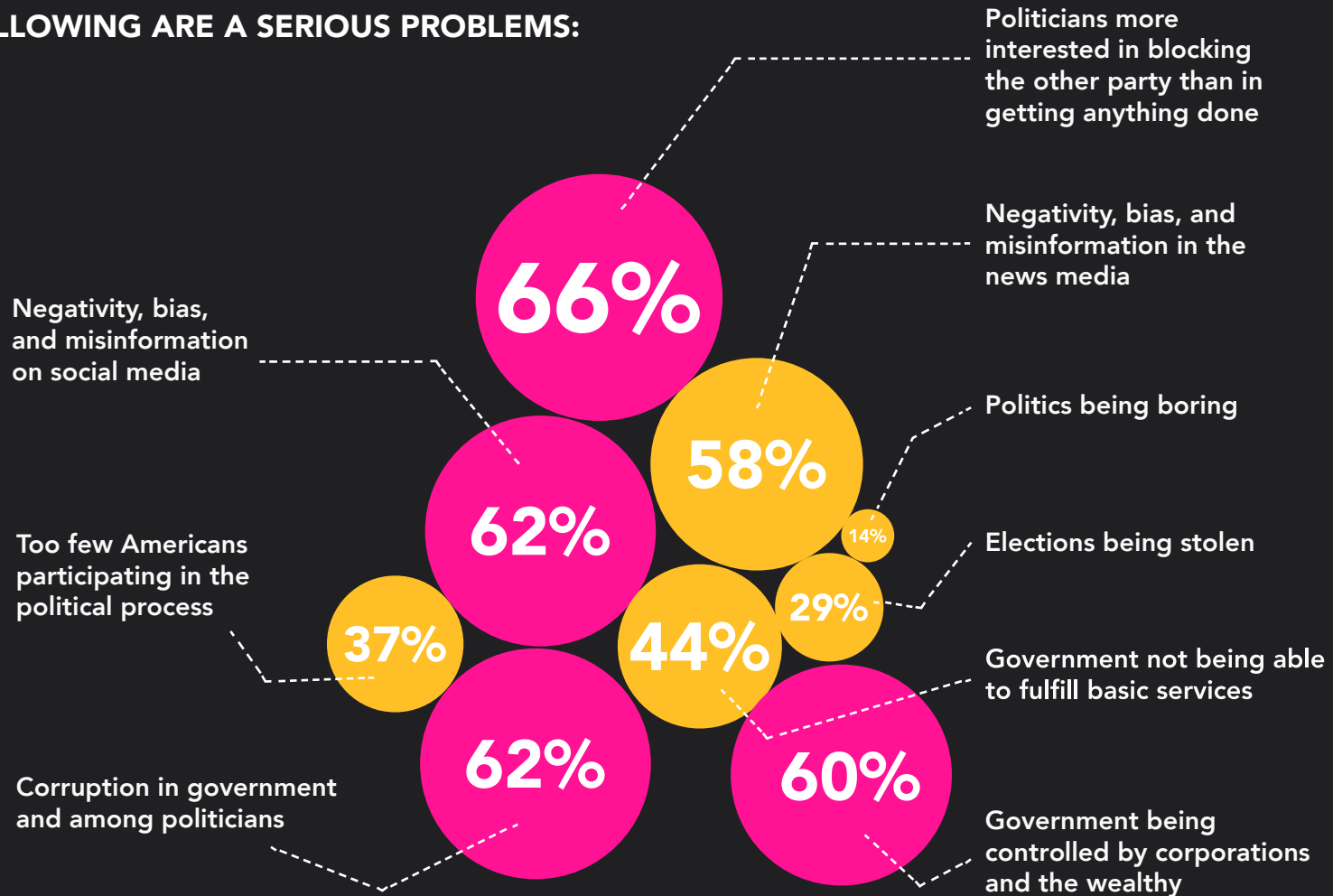




## THE NATION'S MOST SERIOUS PROBLEMS

Americans see partisan gridlock, bias and negativity on social media, lack of political participation, and government corruption as especially serious problems.

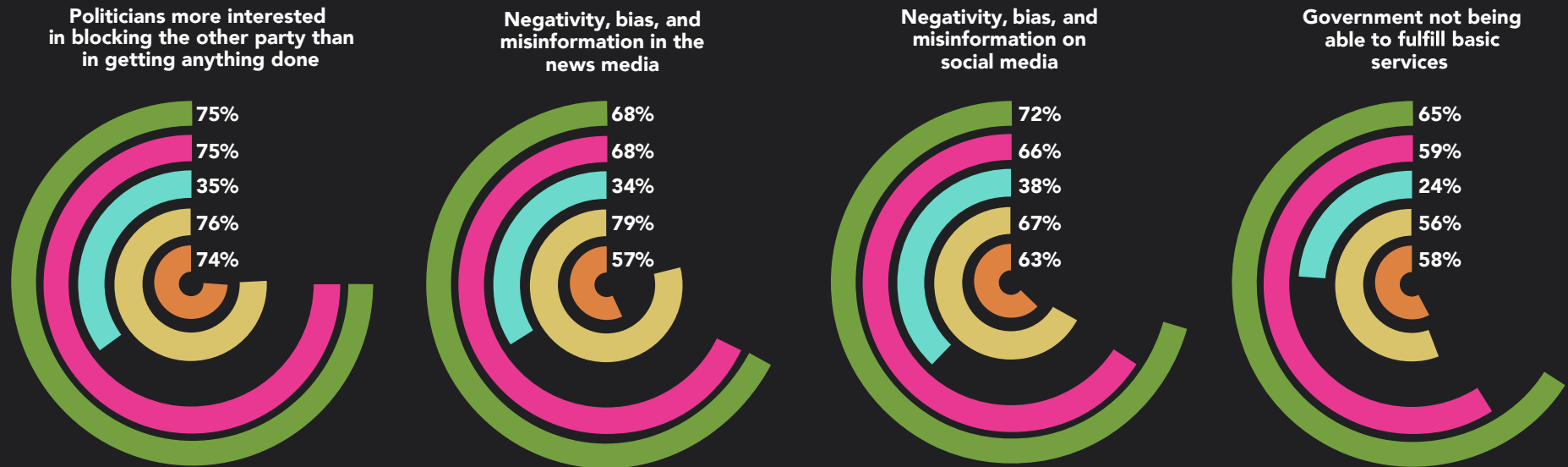
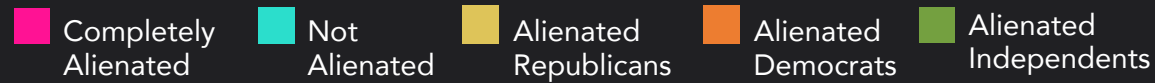
### PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SAY THE FOLLOWING ARE A SERIOUS PROBLEMS:



## THE NATION'S MOST SERIOUS PROBLEMS

Politically alienated Americans view the nation's problems as more serious than non-alienated Americans.

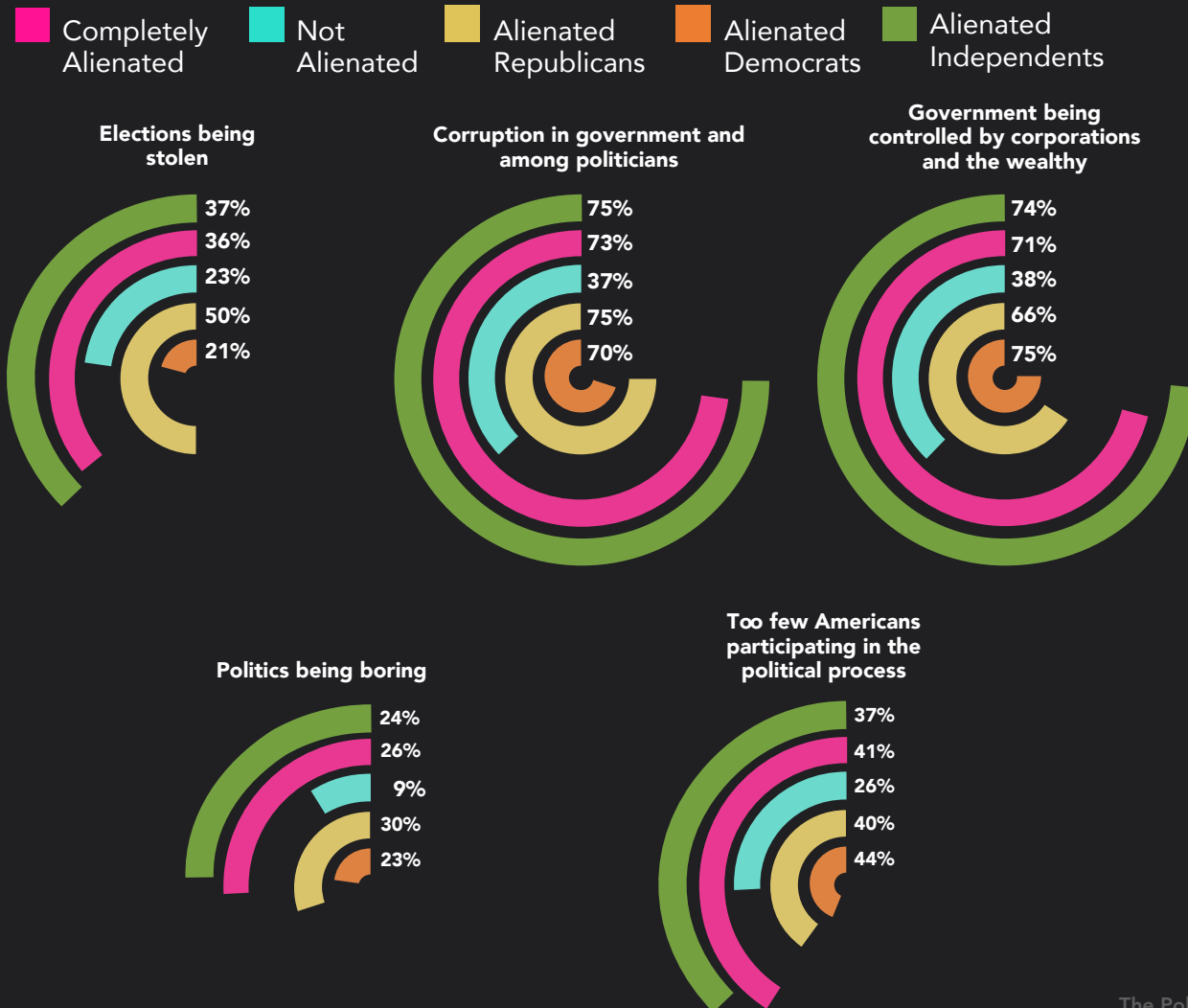
### PERCENTAGE OF ALIENATED AND NON-ALIENATED AMERICANS WHO SAY THE FOLLOWING ARE SERIOUS PROBLEMS:



## THE NATION'S MOST SERIOUS PROBLEMS

Politically alienated Americans view the nation's problems as more serious than non-alienated Americans.

### PERCENTAGE OF ALIENATED AND NON-ALIENATED AMERICANS WHO SAY THE FOLLOWING ARE SERIOUS PROBLEMS:



# 05 Perceptions of Political Extremism



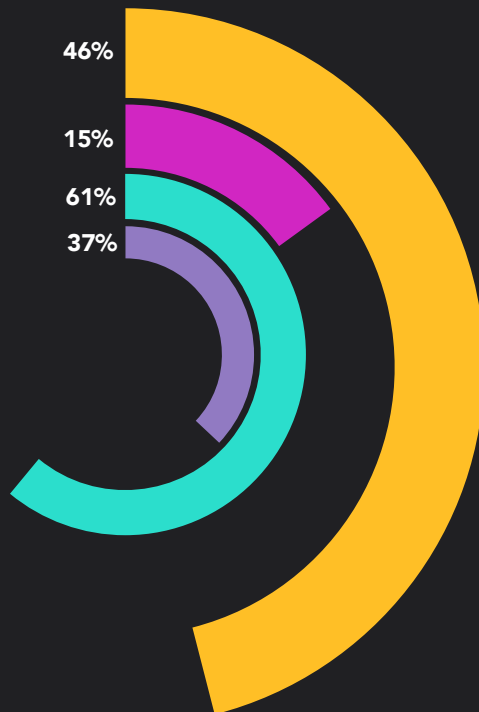
## PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL EXTREMISM

Nearly half of Independents see extremism as a serious problem in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

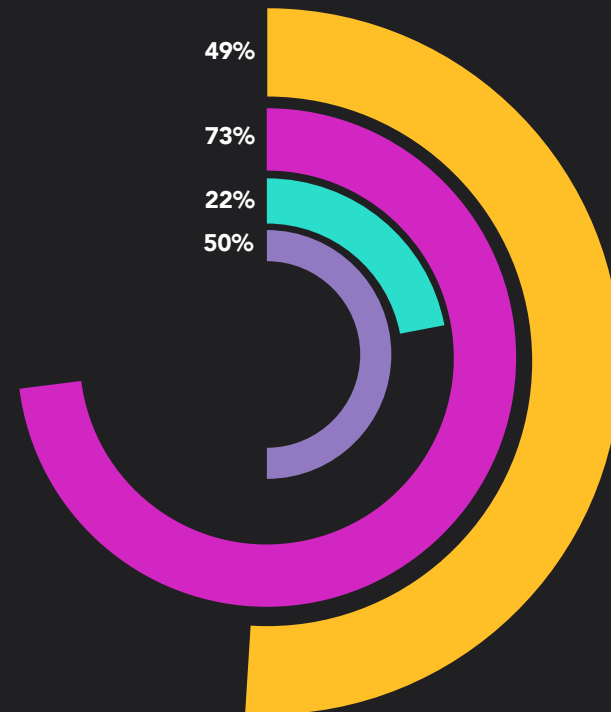
PERCENT OF AMERICANS WHO SAY THE FOLLOWING ARE SERIOUS PROBLEMS,  
BY POLITICAL AFFILIATION:



### Extremism in the Democratic Party



### Extremism in the Republican Party

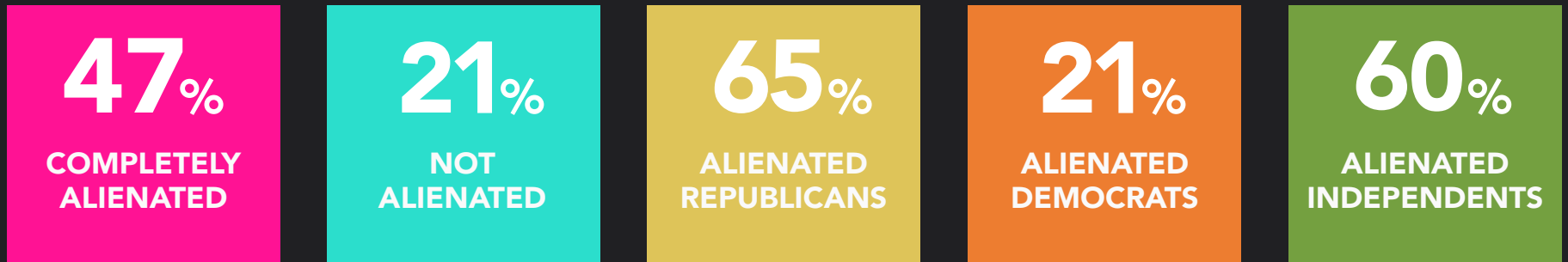


## PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL EXTREMISM

Alienated Independents are equally concerned about extremism in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

PERCENTAGE OF ALIENATED AMERICANS WHO SAY THE FOLLOWING ARE SERIOUS PROBLEMS, BY POLITICAL ALIENATION AND AFFILIATION:

### Extremism in the Democratic Party



### Extremism in the Republican Party



## PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL EXTREMISM

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### In their own words...

"I am concerned about the direction of the Democratic Party. I feel discouraged that the Progressive social agenda is more important to the party than improving the economy, addressing immigration, and reducing inflation and taxes."

**Male, Democrat, 26**  
Syracuse, NY

"Everybody is extreme. Nobody is normal, there's no middle ground. It's a hugely divided country, more than it has been before. We need someone who appeals to the entire country. It feels like anybody who would be good to lead wouldn't want to, though. I've voted for Democrats, I've voted for Republicans before, but I always feel like I'm voting for the lesser of two evils."

**Female, Independent, 43**  
Schaumburg, IL

"When Bill Maher becomes the voice of reason, it's scary. Both parties have gone the other way, to the extreme, just to appease the more radical people in their party. They're all just putting on a show. Now would be a great time for a normal Independent candidate, someone who appeals in the middle."

**Male, Republican, 59**  
Mobile, AL

# 06 Deepening Political Participation

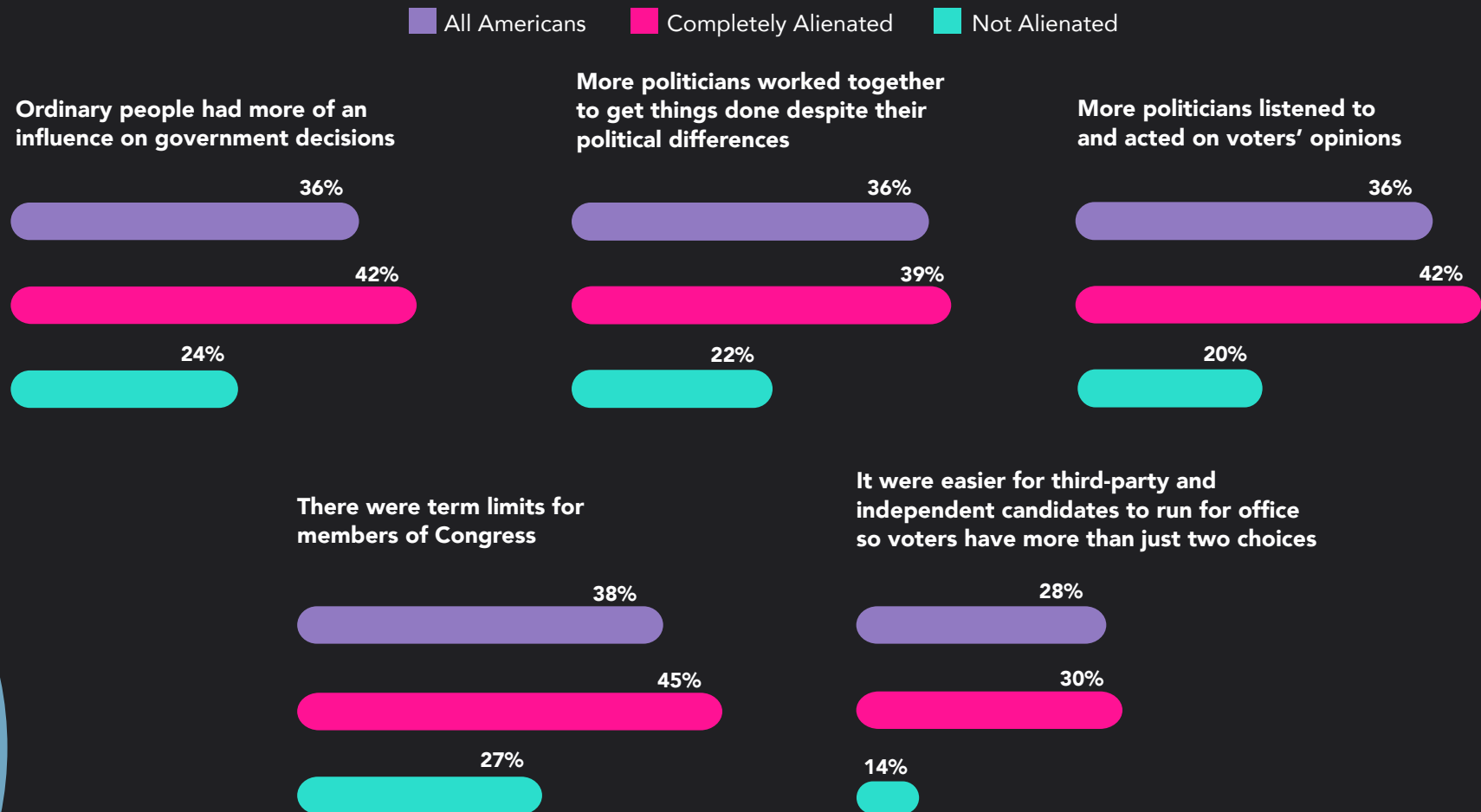




## DEEPENING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In each instance, alienated Americans say they would get a great deal more involved at rates higher than non-alienated Americans when asked about specific changes.

**PERCENT OF AMERICANS WHO SAY THEY WOULD GET A GREAT DEAL MORE INVOLVED IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS IF EACH OF THE FOLLOWING HAPPENED:**



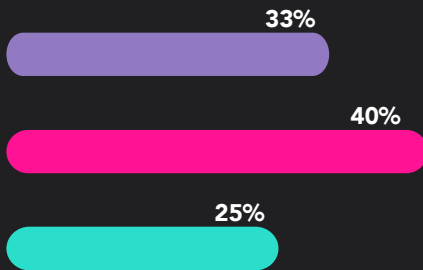
## DEEPENING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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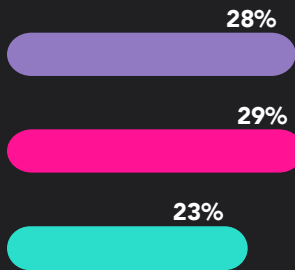
### PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SAY THEY WOULD GET A GREAT DEAL MORE INVOLVED IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS IF THE FOLLOWING HAPPENED:

■ All Americans   ■ Completely Alienated   ■ Not Alienated

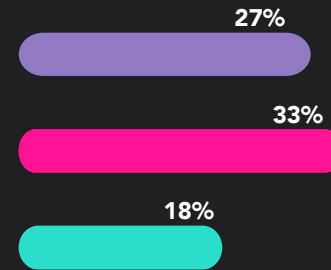
The President was elected based on the popular vote and not the electoral college



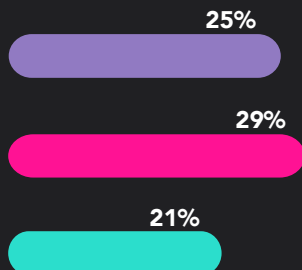
There was a standard, non-partisan process for drawing election district maps



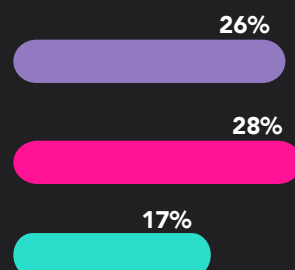
The voting process was easier (for instance, through early voting, voting by mail, weekend elections, or by opening more polling places)



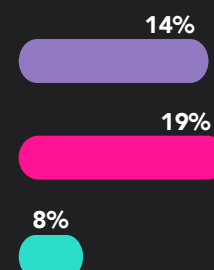
All Americans were automatically registered to vote when they turn 18 years old



Election security was improved (for instance, by requiring picture identification at polling places, regularly purging voter rolls, etc.)



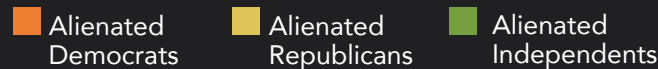
More politicians refused to compromise with their opposition



## DEEPENING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

While alienated Democrats and alienated Republicans would get a great deal more involved in the political process at similar rates for many of the proposed changes, they differ in response for voting procedure reforms and election security reforms.

### PERCENTAGE OF ALIENATED AMERICANS WHO SAY THEY WOULD GET A GREAT DEAL MORE INVOLVED IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS IF THE FOLLOWING HAPPENED, BY PARTY AFFILIATION:



Ordinary people had more of an influence on government decisions



There were term limits for members of Congress



More politicians worked together to get things done despite their political differences



It were easier for third-party and independent candidates to run for office so voters have more than two choices



More politicians listened to and acted on voters' opinions



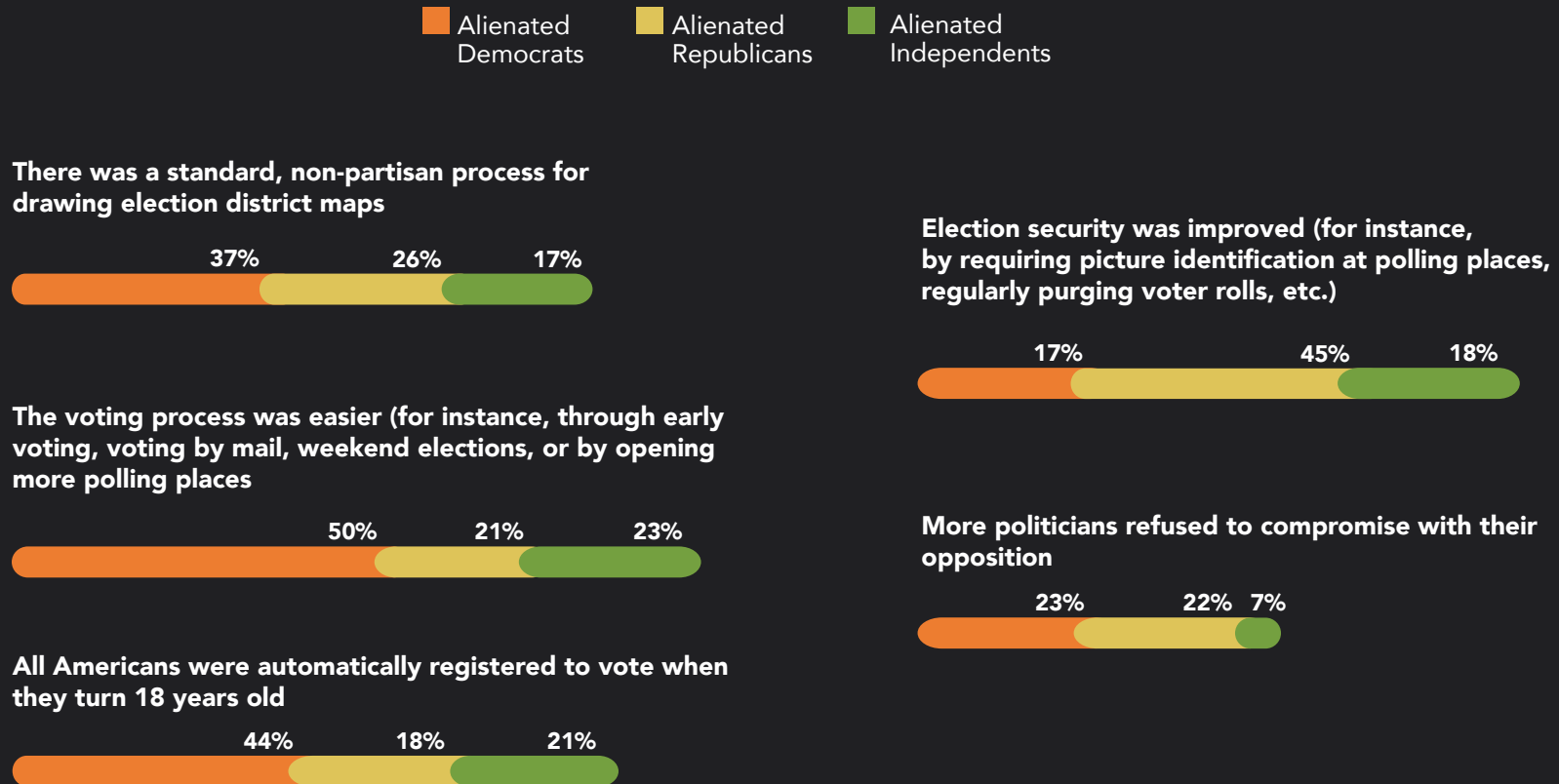
The President was elected based on the popular vote and not on the Electoral College



## DEEPENING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

While alienated Democrats and alienated Republicans would get a great deal more involved in the political process at similar rates for many of the proposed changes, they differ in response for voting procedure reforms and election security reforms.

### PERCENTAGE OF ALIENATED AMERICANS WHO SAY THEY WOULD GET A GREAT DEAL MORE INVOLVED IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS IF THE FOLLOWING HAPPENED, BY PARTY AFFILIATION:





## METHODOLOGY IN BRIEF

Findings are from two national surveys of adult Americans ages 18 and older. Both surveys were administered in English, online and by telephone. The survey of 1,003 Americans was conducted from August 25 to August 29, 2022 and has a margin of sampling error of +/- 4.35 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The survey of 1,014 Americans was conducted from September 9 to September 12, 2022 and has a margin of sampling error of +/- 3.97 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Both surveys were fielded by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC).

This research was solely supported by Public Agenda. When referencing this report, please cite Public Agenda. For a complete methodology and topline with full question wording, email [research@publicagenda.org](mailto:research@publicagenda.org) or [click here](#).



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