Most Americans Think Social Media Sites Censor Political Viewpoints

Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to say major tech companies favor the views of liberals over conservatives. At the same time, partisans differ on whether social media companies should flag inaccurate information on their platforms.

BY Emily A. Vogels, Andrew Perrin and Monica Anderson
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How we did this

Pew Research Center has been studying the role of technology and technology companies in Americans’ lives for many years. This study was conducted to understand Americans’ views about the role of major technology companies in the political landscape. For this analysis, we surveyed 4,708 U.S. adults from June 16 to 22, 2020. Everyone who took part is a member of the Center’s American Trends Panel (ATP), an online survey panel that is recruited through national, random sampling of residential addresses. This way nearly all U.S. adults have a chance of selection. The survey is weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population by gender, race, ethnicity, partisan affiliation, education and other categories. Read more about the ATP’s methodology.

Here are the questions used for this report, along with responses, and its methodology.
Most Americans Think Social Media Sites Censor Political Viewpoints

Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to say major tech companies favor the views of liberals over conservatives. At the same time, partisans differ on whether social media companies should flag inaccurate information on their platforms.

Americans have complicated feelings about their relationship with big technology companies. While they have appreciated the impact of technology over recent decades and rely on these companies’ products to communicate, shop and get news, many have also grown critical of the industry and have expressed concerns about the executives who run them.

This has become a particularly pointed issue in politics – with critics accusing tech firms of political bias and stifling open discussion. Amid these concerns, a Pew Research Center survey conducted in June finds that roughly three-quarters of U.S. adults say it is very (37%) or somewhat (36%) likely that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints that they find objectionable. Just 25% believe this is not likely the case.

Majorities in both major parties believe censorship is likely occurring, but this belief is especially common – and growing – among Republicans. Nine-in-ten Republicans and independents who lean toward the Republican Party say it’s at least somewhat likely that social media platforms censor political viewpoints they find objectionable, up slightly from 85% in 2018, when the Center last asked this question.

90% of Republicans say it is likely that social media sites censor political viewpoints – a slight uptick since 2018

% of U.S. adults who say it is ___ likely that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints they find objectionable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>U.S. ADULTS '18</th>
<th>U.S. ADULTS '20</th>
<th>REP/LEAN REP '18 '20</th>
<th>REP/LEAN REP '18 '20</th>
<th>DEM/LEAN DEM '18 '20</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NET likely</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>62</td>
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<td>Very</td>
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<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NET not likely</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
“Most Americans Think Social Media Sites Censor Political Viewpoints”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER
At the same time, the idea that major technology companies back liberal views over conservative ones is far more widespread among Republicans. Today, 69% of Republicans and Republican leaners say major technology companies generally support the views of liberals over conservatives, compared with 25% of Democrats and Democratic leaners. Again, these sentiments among Republicans have risen slightly over the past two years.

Debates about censorship grew earlier this summer following Twitter’s decision to label tweets from President Donald Trump as misleading. This prompted some of the president’s supporters to charge that these platforms are censoring conservative voices.

This survey finds that the public is fairly split on whether social media companies should engage in this kind of fact-checking, but there is little public confidence that these platforms could determine which content should be flagged.

Partisanship is a key factor in views about the issue. Fully 73% of Democrats say they strongly or somewhat approve of social media companies labeling posts on their platforms from elected officials as inaccurate or misleading. On the other hand, 71% of Republicans say they at least somewhat disapprove of this practice. Republicans are also far more likely than Democrats to say they have no confidence at all that social media companies would be able to determine which posts on their platforms should be labeled as inaccurate or misleading (50% vs. 11%).
These are among the key findings of a Pew Research Center survey of 4,708 U.S. adults conducted June 16-22, 2020, using the Center’s American Trends Panel.

Views about whether social media companies should label posts on their platforms as inaccurate are sharply divided along political lines

Americans are divided over whether social media companies should label posts on their sites as inaccurate or misleading, with most being skeptical that these sites can accurately determine what content should be flagged.

Some 51% of Americans say they strongly or somewhat approve of social media companies labeling posts from elected officials on their platforms as inaccurate or misleading, while a similar share (46%) say they at least somewhat disapprove of this.

Democrats and Republicans hold contrasting views about the appropriateness of social media companies flagging inaccurate information on their platforms. Fully 73% of Democrats say they strongly or somewhat approve of social media companies labeling posts on their platforms from elected officials as inaccurate or misleading, versus 25% who disapprove.

These sentiments are nearly reversed for Republicans: 71% say they disapprove of social media companies engaging in this type of labeling, including about four-in-ten (39%) who say they strongly disapprove. Just 27% say they approve of this labeling.
Liberal Democrats stand out as being the most supportive of this practice: 85% of this group say they approve of social media companies labeling elected officials’ posts as inaccurate or misleading, compared with 64% of conservative or moderate Democrats and even smaller shares of moderate or liberal Republicans and conservative Republicans (38% and 21%, respectively).

In addition to measuring public attitudes about flagging potentially misleading content from elected officials, the survey explored Americans’ views about whether this practice would be acceptable to apply to posts from ordinary users.1 Some 52% of Americans say they strongly or somewhat approve of social media companies labeling posts from ordinary users on their platforms as inaccurate or misleading, while 45% disapprove.

Again, views vary widely by party. While seven-in-ten Democrats approve of these sites labeling posts from ordinary users as inaccurate or misleading, that share falls to 34% among Republicans. Americans’ support – or lack thereof – for flagging content on social media is similar whether applied to posts by politicians or everyday users.

But the public as a whole does not trust that these companies will be able to decide on which posts should be labeled as misleading. Overall, a majority of Americans (66%) say they have not too much or no confidence at all in social media companies being able to determine which posts on their platforms should be labeled as inaccurate or misleading, with 31% saying they have a great deal or some confidence.

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1 Respondents were randomly assigned questions about whether social media companies should label posts from elected officials or ordinary users.
Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to express skepticism that social media companies could properly determine which posts should be labeled in this way. More than eight-in-ten Republicans say they have no (50%) or not much (34%) confidence regarding social media companies’ ability to determine which posts on their platforms should be labeled.

Democrats are more evenly split in their views: Some 52% of Democrats say they have no confidence at all or not too much confidence in social media companies to determine which posts on their platforms should be labeled as inaccurate or misleading, while 46% say they have a great deal or fair amount of confidence.

Beyond that, there are notable differences along partisan and ideological lines. Six-in-ten conservative Republicans say they have no confidence in social media companies’ ability to determine which posts on their platforms should be labeled as misleading, compared with 34% of moderate or liberal Republicans and 11% each of conservative or moderate Democrats and liberal Democrats.

Americans who approve of social media companies labeling posts express more confidence that these sites could properly flag inaccurate content. Indeed, 54% of those who approve of labeling elected officials’ posts as misleading say they have at least a fair deal of confidence in social media companies to determine which posts to label, while only 9% of those who disapprove of labeling elected officials’ posts say the same. A similar pattern is present when asked about this type of labeling for ordinary users.
The confidence gap between Republicans and Democrats remains present even among those who approve of this type of flagging. Some 56% of Democrats who approve of social media platforms labeling elected officials’ posts as inaccurate say they have at least a fair amount of confidence in these companies to determine which posts to label, compared with 42% of Republicans who approve of labeling elected officials’ posts as misleading or inaccurate. This partisan gap is even larger among those who approve of labeling ordinary users’ posts. Roughly six-in-ten Democrats (58%) who approve of labeling ordinary users’ posts express a great deal or a fair amount of confidence in social media companies to determine which posts to label, while 30% of their Republican counterparts say that.

**Majorities across parties – but particularly Republicans – say it is at least somewhat likely social media sites censor political views they find objectionable**

Americans by and large believe social media companies are censoring political viewpoints they find objectionable. Roughly three-quarters of Americans (73%) think it is very or somewhat likely that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints they find objectionable, including 37% who say this is very likely.

**Majorities across parties say social media sites likely censor political views, but conservative Republicans stand out for thinking this is very likely**

| % of U.S. adults who say it is ___ that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints they find objectionable |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| U.S. adults | **85** | **90** | **93** | **78** | **85** |
| **72** | **54** | **60** | **63** | **70** | **78** | **41** | **44** |
| **73** | **62** | **59** | **61** | **65** | **19** | **18** | **20** |
| **35** | **42** | **40** | **47** | **41** | **40** | **38** |
| **37** | **18** | **18** | **18** | **18** | **56** | **NET likely** |
| **36** | **Very likely** | **Somewhat likely** | ****

Note: Those who did not give an answer or who gave other responses are not shown.
*Most Americans Think Social Media Sites Censor Political Viewpoints*
Larger shares in both parties think it’s likely that these sites engage in political censorship, but this belief is especially widespread among Republicans. Fully 90% of Republicans say that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints that they find objectionable – with 60% saying this is very likely the case. By comparison, fewer Democrats believe this to be very (19%) or somewhat (40%) likely.

Republicans – but not Democrats – are divided along ideological lines on the issue. Conservative Republicans are far more likely than moderate or liberal Republicans to say it is very likely that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints they find objectionable (70% vs. 44%). Similar shares of moderate or conservative Democrats (20%) and liberal Democrats (18%) express this view.

While these overall views about censorship are on par with those in 2018, there has been a slight uptick in the share of Republicans who think censorship is likely the norm on social media. Today, 90% of Republicans believe it is very or somewhat likely that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints – a modest yet statistically significant increase from 2018, when 85% expressed this view. The share of conservative Republicans who say this is very likely the case rose 7 points, from 63% in 2018 to 70% in 2020. Views among moderate and liberal Republicans, as well as Democrats across the ideological spectrum, have not significantly changed since 2018.
Roughly seven-in-ten Republicans say major technology companies tend to support the views of liberals over conservatives

While most Republicans and Democrats believe it’s likely that social media sites engage in censoring political viewpoints, they do diverge on which views they think major technology companies tend to favor.

On a broad level, a plurality of Americans say major technology companies tend to support the views of liberals over conservatives, rather than conservatives over liberals (43% vs. 13%). Still, about four-in-ten (39%) say major tech companies tend to support the views of conservatives and liberals equally. The share who say major technology companies equally support the views of conservatives and liberals has slightly decreased since 2018, while the other two sentiments are statistically unchanged.

Public attitudes on this issue are highly partisan. Today, 69% of Republicans say major technology companies favor the views of liberals over conservatives, while 22% say these companies support the views of liberals and conservatives equally. Few Republicans (5%) believe that conservative sentiments are valued more than liberal ones by these companies.

By comparison, one-quarter of Democrats say major technology companies support liberal views over conservative ones, while 19% say conservative sentiments are the ones that are more valued. About half of Democrats (52%) believe tech companies treat these views equally.
There are also large differences when accounting for political ideology. For example, 81% of conservative Republicans say big technology companies favor liberal views, compared with half of moderate or liberal Republicans and even smaller shares of conservative or moderate Democrats (24%) and liberal Democrats (26).

When asked about the preference of conservative views, 23% of liberal Democrats – a slightly larger share than the 16% in 2018 – say that major technology companies favor these views over liberal ones, compared with 10% or fewer of moderate to liberal and conservative Republicans.
Acknowledgments

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals. Find related reports online at pewresearch.org/internet.

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In addition, the project benefited greatly from the guidance of Pew Research Center’s methodology team: Courtney Kennedy, Andrew Mercer, Nick Bertoni, Dorene Asare-Marfo, Nick Hatley, Ashley Amaya and Arnold Lau, as well as from feedback by the following Pew Research Center staff: Jocelyn Kiley, Hannah Hartig and Bradley Jones.
Methodology

The American Trends Panel survey methodology

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. Panelists participate via self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access at home are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by Ipsos.

Data in this report is drawn from the panel wave conducted June 16 to June 22, 2020. A total of 4,708 panelists responded out of 6,080 who were sampled, for a response rate of 77%. This does not include one panelist who was removed from the data due to extremely high rates of refusal or straightlining. The cumulative response rate accounting for nonresponse to the recruitment surveys and attrition is 4.3%. The break-off rate among panelists who logged on to the survey and completed at least one item is 1.4%. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 4,708 respondents is plus or minus 1.8 percentage points.

This study featured a stratified random sample from the ATP. The sample was allocated according to the following strata, in order: tablet households, Mexican-born Hispanics, U.S. born Hispanics, other foreign-born Hispanics, Cuban-born Hispanics, non-internet, high school education or less, not registered to vote, nonvolunteers, people ages 18 to 34, non-Hispanic Black adults, and all other categories not already falling into any of the above.

The ATP was created in 2014, with the first cohort of panelists invited to join the panel at the end of a large, national, landline and cellphone random-digit-dial survey that was conducted in both English and Spanish. Two additional recruitments were conducted using the same method in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Across these three surveys, a total of 19,718 adults were invited to join the ATP, of which 9,942 agreed to participate.

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American Trends Panel recruitment surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recruitment dates</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Invited</th>
<th>Joined</th>
<th>Active panelists remaining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014</td>
<td>Landline/cell RDD</td>
<td>9,809</td>
<td>5,338</td>
<td>2,307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015</td>
<td>Landline/cell RDD</td>
<td>6,004</td>
<td>2,976</td>
<td>1,335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 25 to June 4, 2017</td>
<td>Landline/cell RDD</td>
<td>3,905</td>
<td>1,626</td>
<td>684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 8 to Oct. 31, 2018</td>
<td>ABS/web</td>
<td>9,396</td>
<td>8,778</td>
<td>6,407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 19 to Nov. 30, 2019</td>
<td>ABS/web</td>
<td>5,900</td>
<td>4,720</td>
<td>4,682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>35,014</td>
<td>23,440</td>
<td>15,415</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves or who did not complete an annual profiling survey are removed from the panel. Panelists also become inactive if they ask to be removed from the panel.
In August 2018, the ATP switched from telephone to address-based recruitment. Invitations were sent to a random, address-based sample (ABS) of households selected from the U.S. Postal Service’s Delivery Sequence File. In each household, the adult with the next birthday was asked to go online to complete a survey, at the end of which they were invited to join the panel. For a random half-sample of invitations, households without internet access were instructed to return a postcard. These households were contacted by telephone and sent a tablet if they agreed to participate. A total of 9,396 were invited to join the panel, and 8,778 agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey. The same recruitment procedure was carried out on August 19, 2019, from which a total of 5,900 were invited to join the panel and 4,720 agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey. Of the 23,440 individuals who have ever joined the ATP, 15,415 remained active panelists and continued to receive survey invitations at the time this survey was conducted.

The U.S. Postal Service’s Delivery Sequence File has been estimated to cover as much as 98% of the population, although some studies suggest that the coverage could be in the low 90% range.² The American Trends Panel never uses breakout routers or chains that direct respondents to additional surveys.

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Weighting

The ATP data was weighted in a multistep process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents’ original selection probability. The next step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that aligns the sample to population benchmarks on the dimensions listed in the accompanying table.

Sampling errors and test of statistical significance take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Weighting dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Benchmark source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>2018 American Community Survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Hispanic origin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born inside vs. outside the U.S. among Asians</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of birth among Hispanics</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years lived in the United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>Home internet access</td>
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<tr>
<td>Region x</td>
<td>2019 CPS March Supplement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan status</td>
<td>2019 CPS Metropolitan Supplement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteerism</td>
<td>2017 CPS Volunteering &amp; Civic Life Supplement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter registration</td>
<td>2018 CPS Voting and Registration Supplement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party affiliation</td>
<td>Average of the three most recent Pew Research Center telephone surveys.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Estimates from the ACS are based on non-institutionalized adults. Voter registration is calculated using procedures from Hur, Achen (2013) and rescaled to include the total U.S. adult population.
The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Unweighted sample size</th>
<th>Weighted percentage</th>
<th>Plus or minus ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total sample</td>
<td>4,708</td>
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<td>1.8 percentage points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half sample</td>
<td>At least 2,353</td>
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<td>2.5 percentage points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep/Lean Rep</td>
<td>1,994</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2.7 percentage points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Half sample</td>
<td>At least 983</td>
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<td>3.8 percentage points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dem/Lean Dem</td>
<td>2,545</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>2.5 percentage points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half sample</td>
<td>At least 1,258</td>
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<td>3.6 percentage points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

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Topline questionnaire

THE QUESTIONS PRESENTED BELOW ARE PART OF A LARGER SURVEY CONDUCTED ON THE AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL. OTHER QUESTIONS ON THIS SURVEY HAVE BEEN PREVIOUSLY RELEASED OR HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE.

NOTE: ALL NUMBERS ARE PERCENTAGES UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED. THE PERCENTAGES LESS THAN 0.5% ARE REPLACED BY AN ASTERISK (*). ROWS/COLUMNS MAY NOT TOTAL 100% DUE TO Rounding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Margin of error at 95% confidence level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. adults</td>
<td>4,708</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ASK FORM 1 ONLY (N=2,353):
TECHREG1F1 Do you approve or disapprove of social media companies labeling posts on their platforms from elected officials as inaccurate or misleading?

June 16-22, 2020
30 Strongly approve
22 Somewhat approve
23 Somewhat disapprove
23 Strongly disapprove
2 No answer

ASK FORM 2 ONLY (N=2,355):
TECHREG1F2 Do you approve or disapprove of social media companies labeling posts on their platforms from ordinary users as inaccurate or misleading?

June 16-22, 2020
25 Strongly approve
28 Somewhat approve
22 Somewhat disapprove
23 Strongly disapprove
3 No answer
ASK ALL:
TECHREG2  How much confidence do you have in social media companies to determine which posts on their platforms should be labeled as inaccurate or misleading?

June 16-22, 2020
4  A great deal of confidence
27  A fair amount of confidence
38  Not too much confidence
29  No confidence at all
2  No answer

ASK FORM 1 ONLY (N=2,353):
TC6b  Do you think major technology companies tend to support the views of...
 [RANDOMIZE 1 AND 2, ITEM 3 ALWAYS LAST]

June 16-22, 2020  May 29-June 11, 2018
43  Liberals over conservatives  43
13  Conservatives over liberals  11
39  Both equally  43
4  No answer  3

ASK FORM 2 ONLY (N=2,355):
SM7  How likely, if at all, do you think it is that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints that they find objectionable?

June 16-22, 2020  May 29-June 11, 2018
37  Very likely  35
36  Somewhat likely  37
19  Not very likely  19
6  Not at all likely  8
2  No answer  1

ASK ALL:
PARTY  In politics today, do you consider yourself a:
ASK IF INDEP/SOMETHING ELSE (PARTY=3 or 4) OR MISSING:
PARTYLN  As of today do you lean more to...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Something else</th>
<th>No answer</th>
<th>Lean Rep</th>
<th>Lean Dem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Party and PartyLn asked in a prior survey.