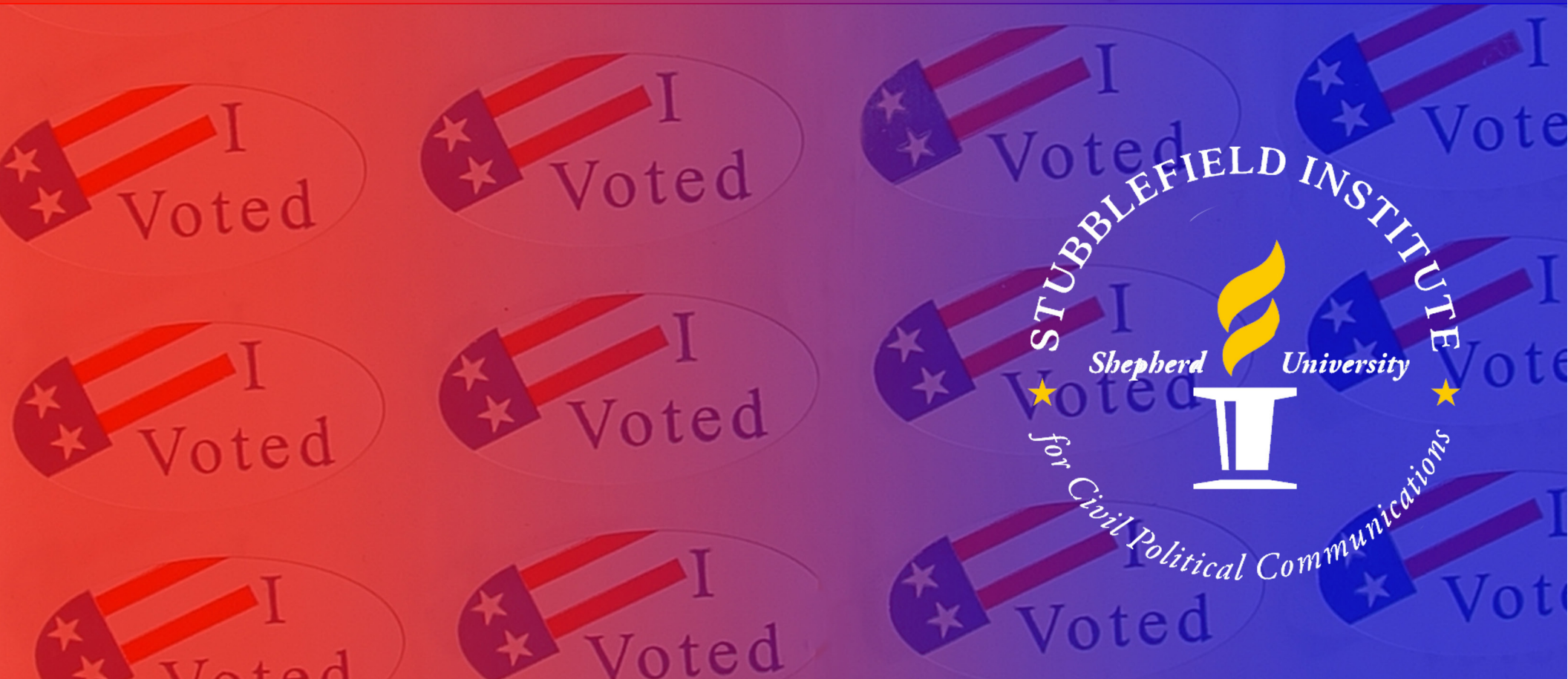


Civility and Civic Engagement Research and Data Report

Sponsored by the Bill and Bonnie Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communication



A Message from the Director of the Bonnie and Bill Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communication



David R. Welch, Director
Stubblefield Institute for
Civil Political Communications
Shepherd University

When the Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communications was established in 2019, developing a robust research program was at the top of our ambition agenda. This is one reason we are very excited about our first research project, “The Civility and Civic Engagement Survey.” Directed by Shepherd University professor of political science and the Stubblefield Institute’s Senior Fellow for Research, Dr. Stephanie Slocum-Schaffer, we are confident that our rigorous methodology measures favorably to any academic test. It will now be a benchmark to future studies in this space. Most importantly, we believe that understanding how we got to a point of such great national division and polarization is the first step toward charting a more positive course for civility and constructive debate in the future. More studies related to political discourse and civic engagement are now being planned. But we will always hold our first research project close to our hearts.

About the Stubblefield Institute

The mission of the Bonnie and Bill Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communications at Shepherd University is to serve as an active center for the study and promotion of civil political discourse, inspire intelligent, authentic and constructive debate, and encourage positive civic engagement for both students and the public alike. We seek to demonstrate that when opposing viewpoints are respected and legitimized in ways that avoid negative labeling, alienation, and silencing, it can strengthen our nation’s ability to better face challenges and solve problems. The Stubblefield Institute was founded in 2019, by a generous grant from the Stubblefield family. The Institute’s Inaugural Director is David Welch.

**Civility and Civic Engagement
Research and Data Report**



A Message from our Research Project Director and PI Dr. Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer



Dr. Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer
Professor of Political Science
Stubblefield Institute Senior Fellow for Research

It is incredibly exciting to share these results from the Stubblefield Institute's very first foray into the world of public opinion about civility in American public life. The "Civility and Civic Engagement Survey" comes at an important moment as our country struggles to understand both the causes and the appropriate responses to what many scholars see as increasingly high and troublesome levels of incivility and division in American politics. This study also offers a much-needed examination of not just perceptions of civility but also the impact of those perceptions on citizens' civic engagement; indeed, many researchers have bemoaned the lack of empirical tests that address widespread concerns about the effects of incivility on the electorate. So while I am pleased to be able to add our findings to the small (but growing!) pool of current and rigorous explorations of attitudes about civility, I am especially proud to be able to share high quality data that also investigates some of the implications of those attitudes for participation in the American political process.

Understanding the linkages among political incivility, political polarization, and political participation is central to our ability to craft suitable responses and, ultimately, effective solutions to what is surely one of the most important and pressing challenges facing American democracy today. In that respect, the good news from the "Civility and Civic Engagement Survey" is twofold. First, the results presented here suggest that even though substantial majorities of Americans view incivility in public life as epidemic and highly problematic, most have not given up on the American political system. In fact, many Americans are actively engaging in the political life of their communities and in political discussions with one another. The second piece of good news is that this report is really just the first step in the Institute's effort to understand, explore, and address the issues associated with incivility in political discourse – with deeper and more sophisticated examinations of these relationships already underway. Taken together, these make an excellent starting point for many future explorations of civility, civic engagement, public trust, and the health of our political world.

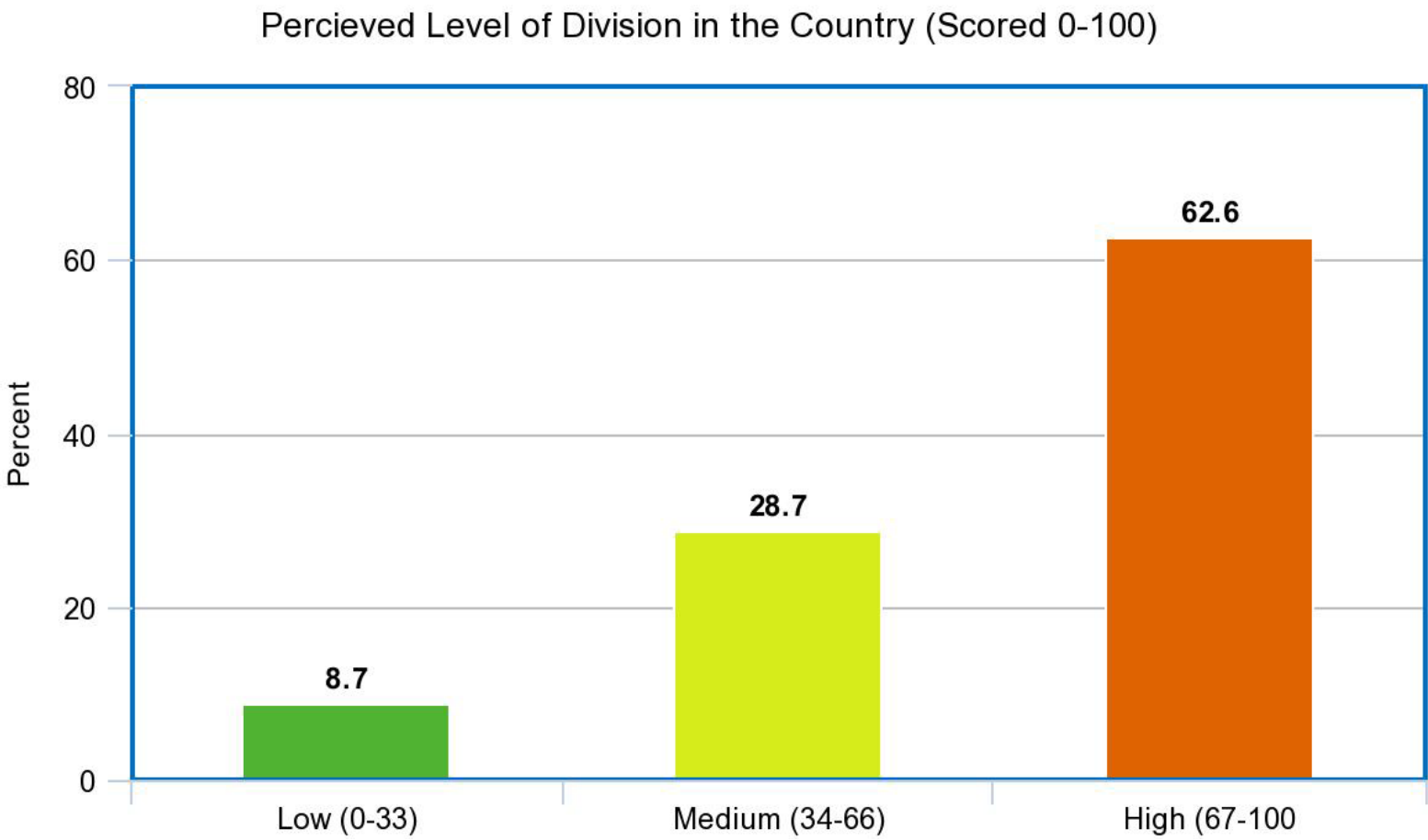
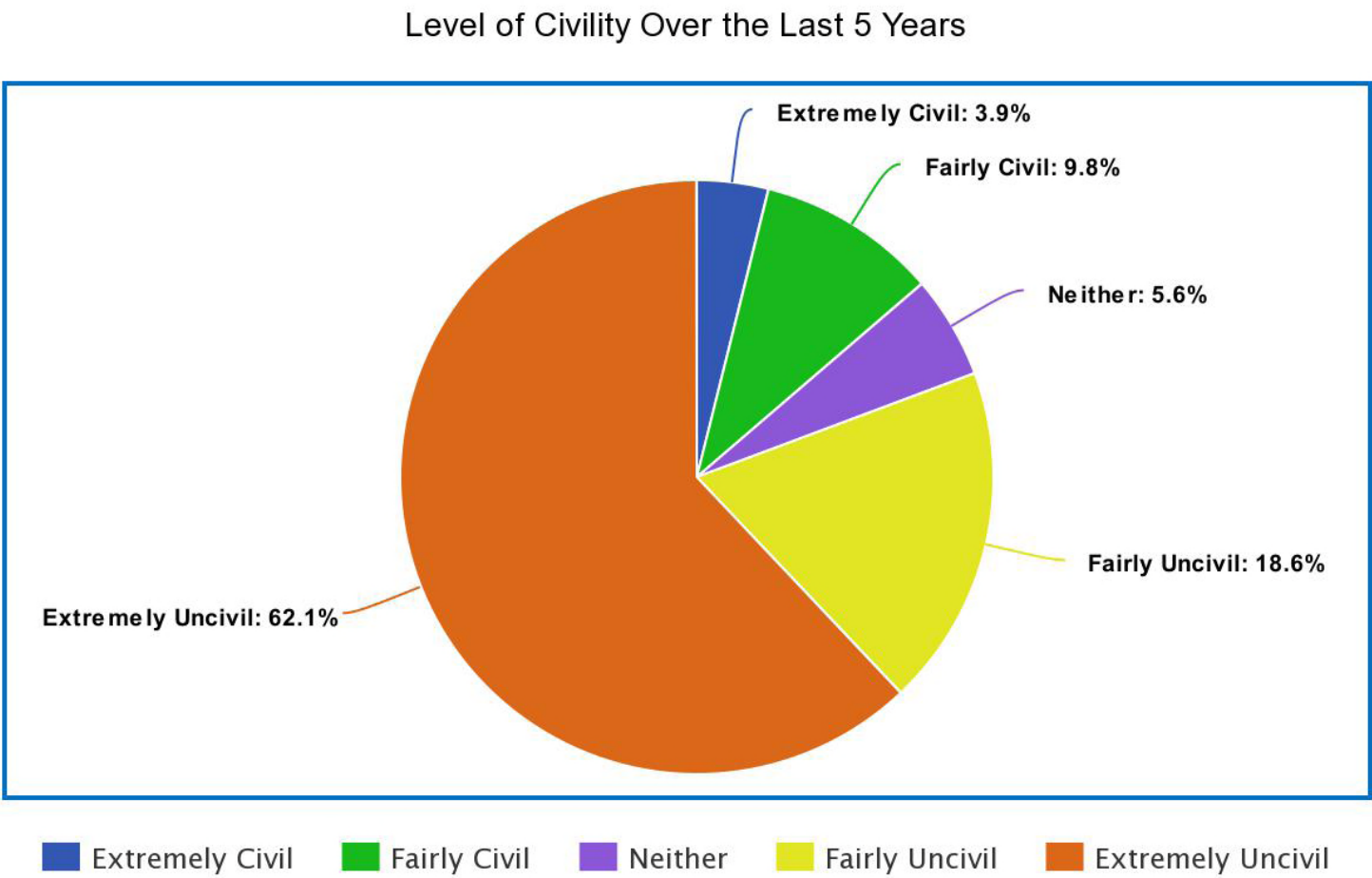
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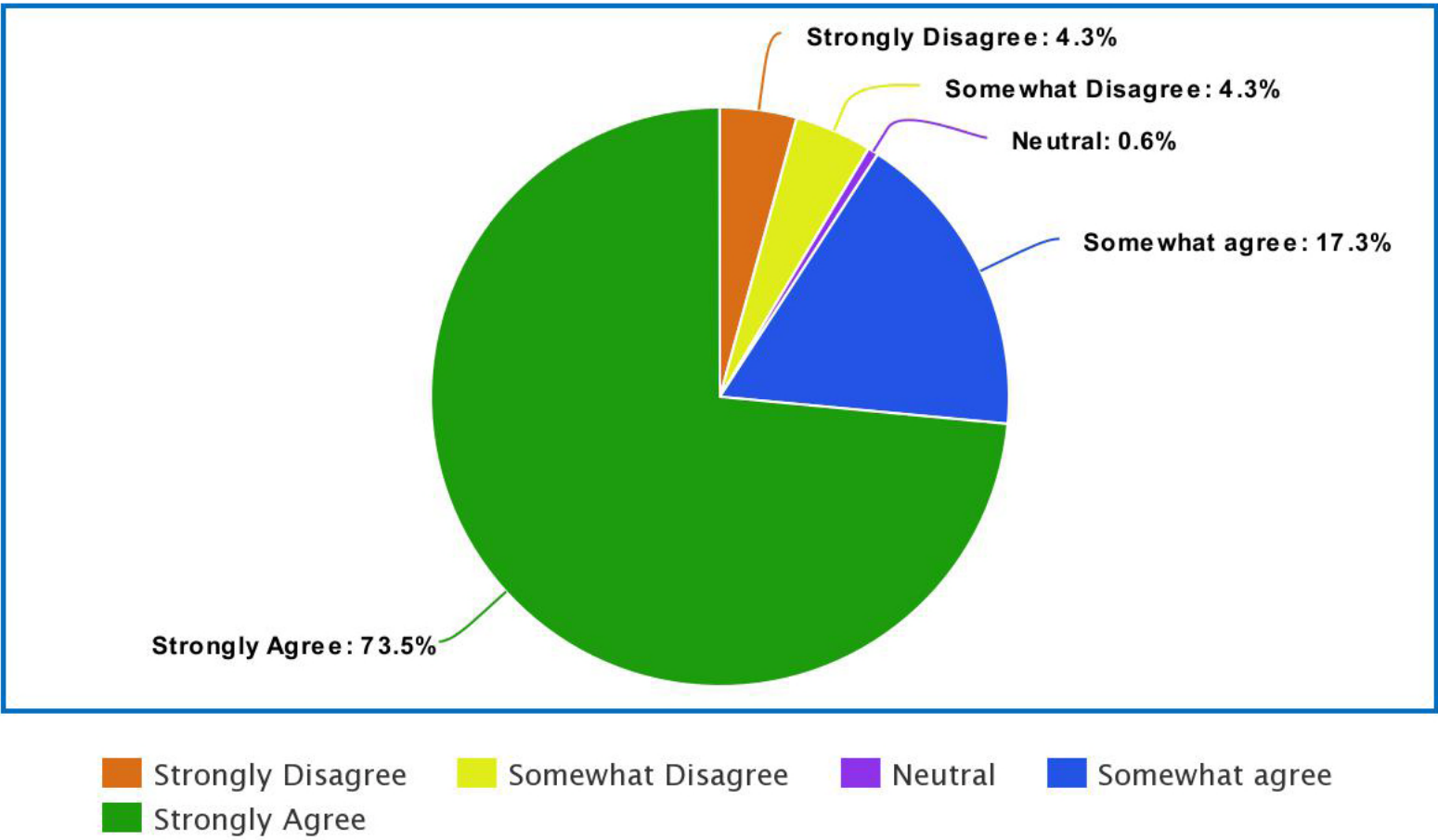
Survey Highlights:

Americans Believe U.S. Has as a Civility Problem but Haven't Given Up on the System

- American politics has always been relatively rough-and-tumble, but the vast majority of Americans today view politics in the country as fairly or extremely uncivil and believe this to be a serious problem. In fact, two-thirds of our nation's citizens characterize political division as "high." Somewhat alarmingly, one in ten Americans believe we are "on the edge of a civil war."

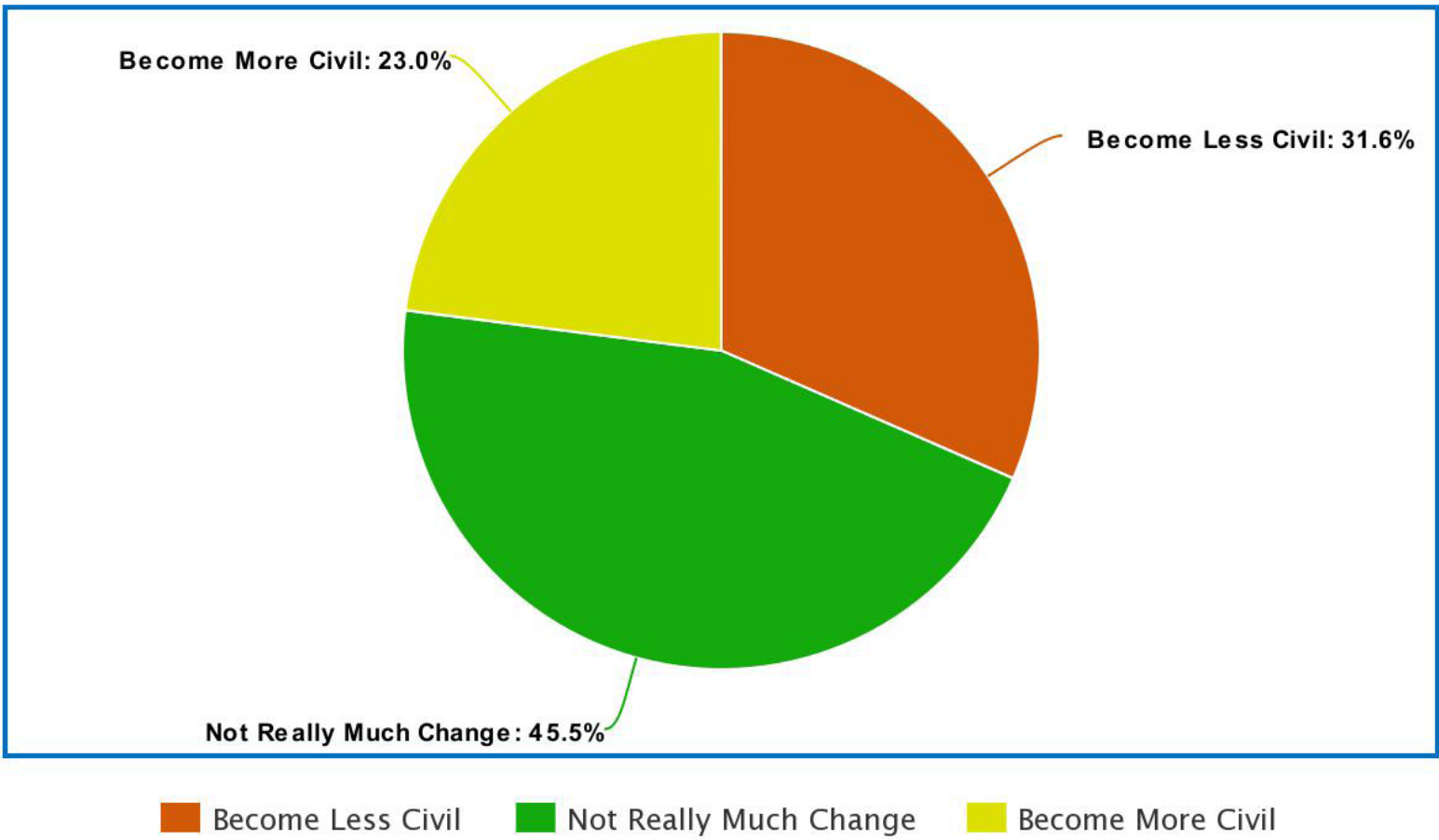


Lack of Civil Discussion in Political System is a Serious Problem



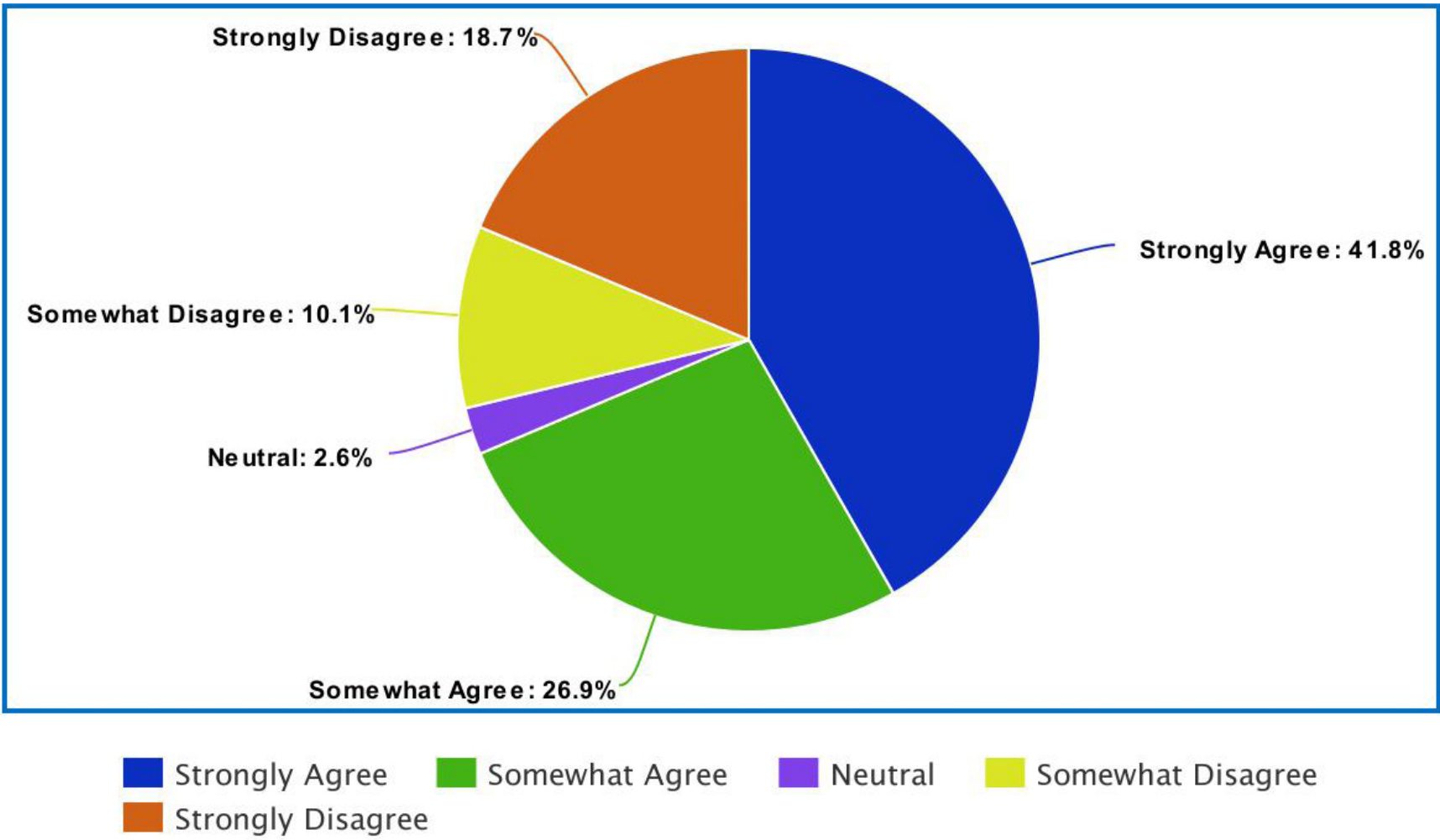
- More than two months after a change of leadership in the White House, an equally large majority of Americans are not hopeful that things are going to get any better in 2021. Almost half expect that civility in American politics is not likely to change much at all, and almost a third report that they expect political discussion in the country to become even less civil over the next year.

Expect Political Conversation to Become Less Civil or More Civil Next Year?

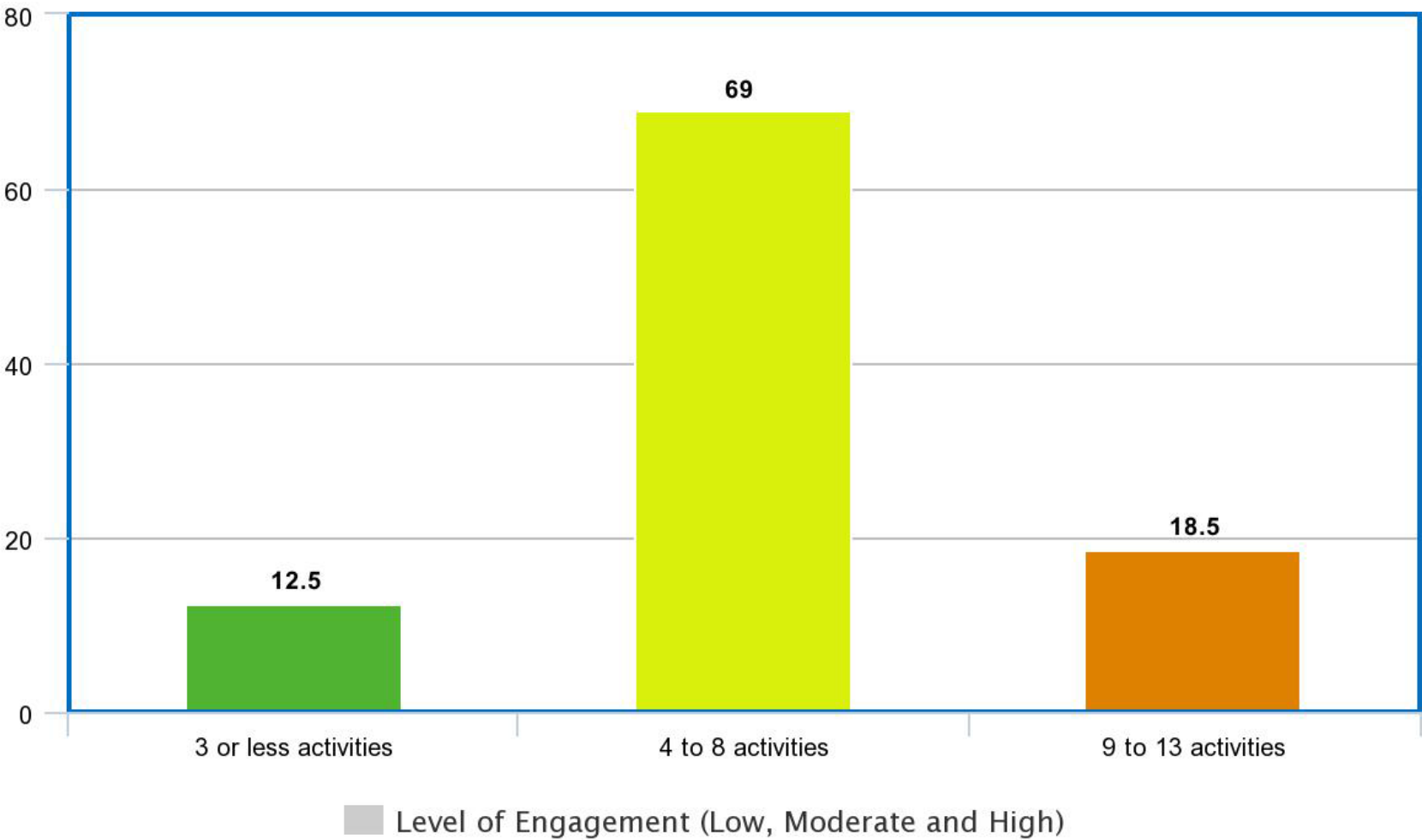


- Americans are not ready to give up on the system, however. Large majorities say that they are strongly engaged in public life and that they are willing to talk politics with others. The study also found that the more uncivil a person perceives politics to be, the more likely he or she is to vote, to seek out information about a candidate or an issue, and to participate in a greater number of civic activities.

"I am Willing to Talk Politics with Others"

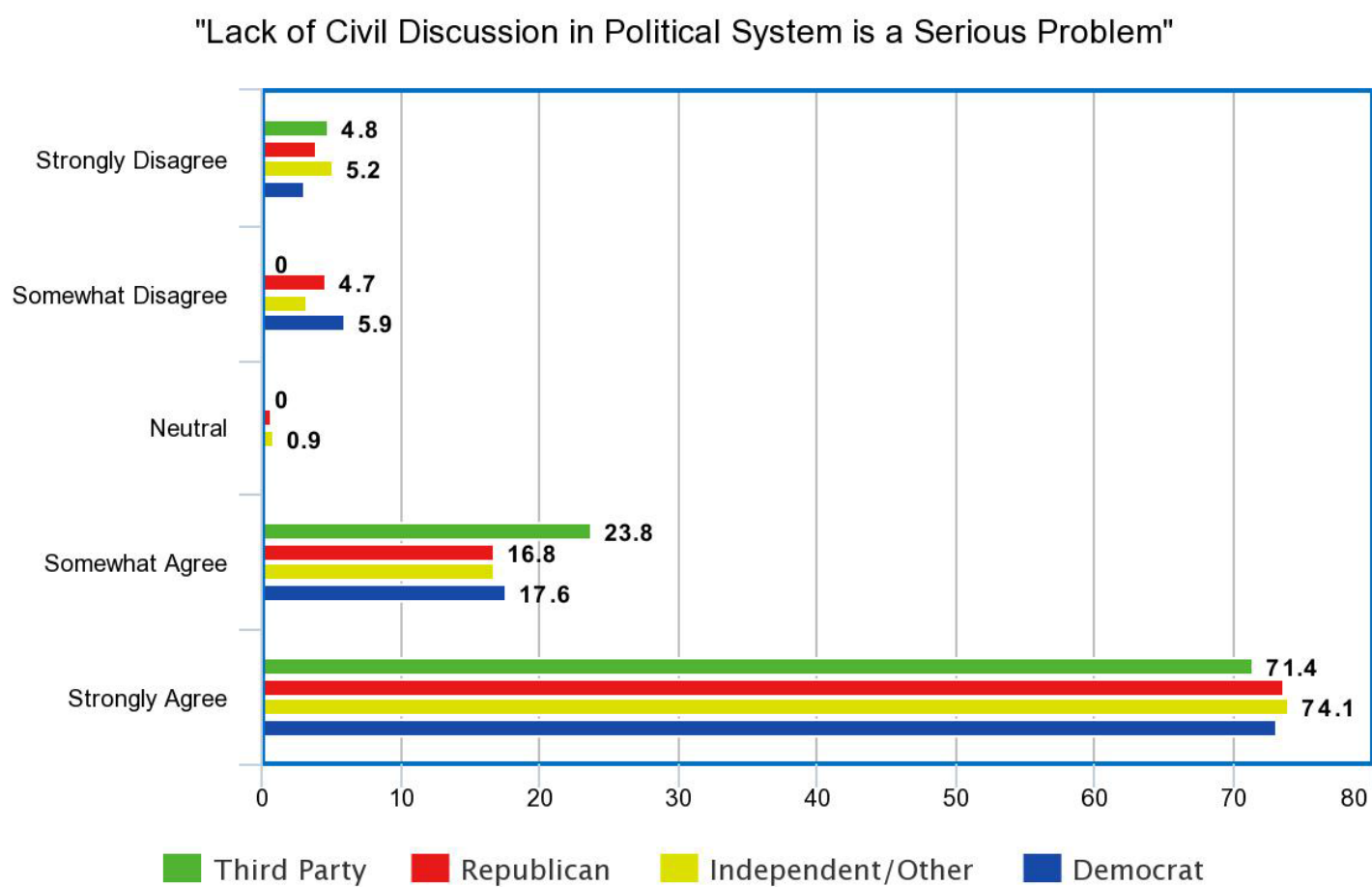
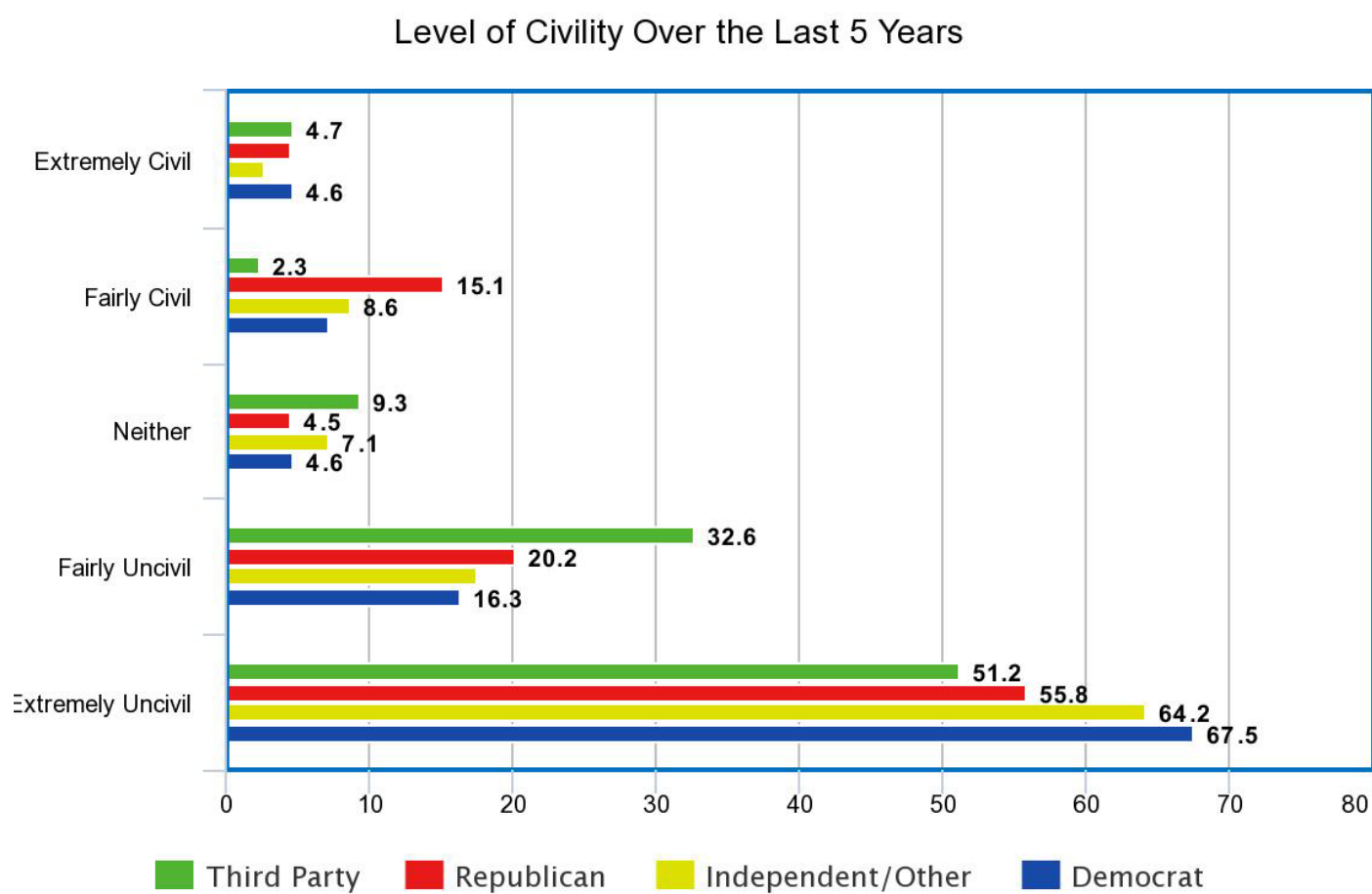


Level of Engagement in Civic Activities

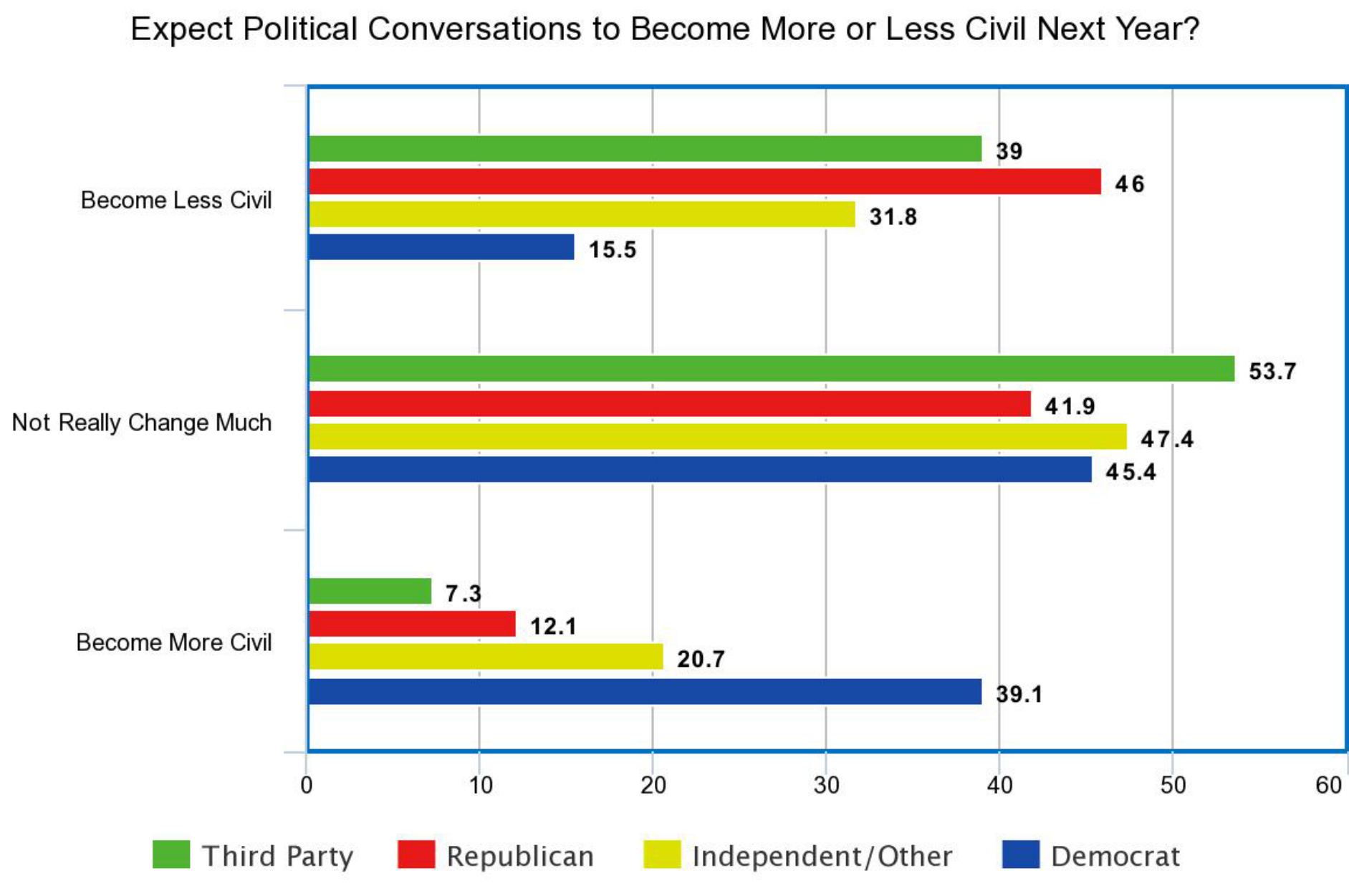


Democrats and Republicans Still Don't Totally Agree – Even When It Comes to Civility

- Although a majority of all partisans believe politics has been uncivil and that the lack of civility in America is a serious problem, differences persist between Democrats and Republicans. Those who identify as Democrats and Independents were more likely than those who identify as Republicans to view American politics as uncivil. In particular, Democrats were much more likely to view recent politics as “extremely uncivil” as compared to Republicans.



- There are even bigger differences among partisans in terms of their expectations for the coming year, with Democrats three times more likely than Republicans to believe that political conversation will become more civil in 2021. In fact, strong Democrats were nearly four times more likely than strong Republicans to say that political conversation in America would become more civil in the next year.



- Results of the survey also showed that the more strongly an American identifies with a political party – regardless of which one – the more willing he or she is to talk politics with others. Among partisans, Republicans are slightly more willing than Democrats to engage in political discussions

Executive Summary

A recent national survey of over 1,000 American adults conducted by the Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communications at Shepherd University discovered that the vast majority of Americans believe that politics in the country have been very uncivil, that the lack of civil political conversation is a serious problem, and that there is little hope that things will improve in 2021.

Indeed, 81% of American adults reported that they viewed politics in the US as either fairly uncivil or extremely uncivil over the last five years when thinking about politicians, the media, and their fellow citizens.

Over 90% agreed that the lack of civil discussion in the American political system is a serious problem, and almost 2/3 of all American adults characterized the level of political divisions in the country as high (greater than a score of 66 on a scale of 0-100). In fact, over 11% of adults in the US scored the level of political division in the country at the highest possible level, indicating that they believe the country is “on the edge of civil war.”

More than two months after the presidential inauguration, almost a third of American adults (32%) still report that they expect political conversation to become even less civil over the next year, and a little less than half (46%) expect that civility in American politics is not likely to change much at all.

Although a majority of all partisans believe that politics has been uncivil over the last five years, those who identify as Democrats and Independents were more likely than those who identify as Republicans to view American politics as uncivil – with 84% of Democrats, 82% of Independents, and only 76% of Republicans saying that politics over the last five years have been fairly or extremely uncivil. In addition, self-identified Democrats (68%) and Independents (64%) were much more likely to view recent politics as “extremely uncivil” as compared to Republicans (56%). Regardless of party identification, however, the vast majority of American adults (greater than 90% in all cases) view the lack of civil discussion in American politics as a serious problem.

The greatest difference among party identifiers was reported for Americans’ expectations for the coming year: many more Democrats (39%) than Independents (21%) believe that political conversation will become more civil in 2021, while only 12% of Republicans feel the same. In fact, strong Democrats were nearly four times more likely than strong Republicans to say that political conversation in America would become more civil in the next year.

The more educated a respondent is, the more likely they are to view politics as uncivil, with 63% of those who have less than a high school degree viewing US politics as uncivil versus 91% of those with graduate or professional degrees. While the youngest adults (Gen Z, aged 18-24 years) were the least likely to view politics as uncivil and the most likely to expect political conversation to become more civil in 2021, other factors such as strength of party affiliation, race, gender, degree of urbanization, marital status, and income do not appear to influence views on incivility.

Unsurprisingly, the belief that American political life is highly polarized appears to be closely related to attitudes about civility; those who perceive high levels of polarization in the country are about one and half times more likely than those who think political division is low to view politics as “extremely uncivil” and to believe strongly that the lack of civil discussion in the political system is a serious problem.

Executive Summary Continued

This group was also much less hopeful for any kind of improvement in political discussion, with 39% of them reporting that they expect political conversation to become less civil in the next year.

There are also encouraging results from the survey, however. More than two thirds of Americans say that they read a newspaper regularly, that they sought out information about a candidate or issue in the last year, and that they are very interested in politics and elections. Over 80% reported that they voted in the 2020 presidential election, and 88% said that they had participated in four or more civic engagement activities in the last year, from registering to vote to contacting an elected official about an issue to volunteering for a political campaign. Indeed, 18% of those surveyed reported a high level of civic engagement in the last year – participating in anywhere from nine to thirteen different activities in their community and in public life.¹

Furthermore, those who believe that recent politics have been uncivil are more likely to vote and more likely to have sought out information about a candidate or issue. In fact, the survey results demonstrate that the more an American views recent politics as uncivil, the more civically engaged they are likely to be. Those who believe that the American political environment is uncivil, for example, are almost twice as likely to be highly engaged in public life (participating in nine or more different activities) than those who view it as civil. Similarly, Americans who express the highest level of concern about incivility – those who believe politics is very uncivil and also see it as a very serious problem – are more than twice as likely to be highly engaged in public life than are those who have the least concern.

Perhaps most importantly for those who worry that the current climate might shut down political conversation in America, almost 70% of American adults indicated that they are willing to talk politics with others, with more than half of those saying that they are very willing to engage in these kinds of conversations. Results of the survey also showed that the more strongly an American identifies with a political party – regardless of which one – the more willing he or she is to talk politics with others; for example, 76% of strong party identifiers are willing to talk politics with others versus only 55% of Independents. Among partisans, Republicans (78%) are slightly more willing than Democrats (72%) and Third Party (62%) adherents to engage in political discussion. Additionally, Americans who believe the country’s politics is very uncivil and also see incivility as a very serious problem are more willing to talk about politics than those who are not concerned, and people who are hopeful that the political environment will become more civil in the next year are also slightly more willing to engage in political conversation with others.

1 Civic engagement activities were selected based upon the results of scholarly research about political participation and civic engagement and include the following: being registered to vote; voting; donating money to a political candidate, party, or cause; participating in a protest or demonstration; expressing an interest in politics and elections; contacting an elected official about an issue; being willing to talk with others about politics; participating in a civic or religious organization; reading a newspaper regularly; seeking out information about a candidate or issue; volunteering or working for a political campaign or party; attending a meeting or rally for a political candidate; and displaying a button, yard sign, or bumper sticker for a political candidate



Survey Methodology:

The Civility and Civic Engagement Survey was conducted by the Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communications at Shepherd University to examine the public's perceptions of civility in American politics and the extent to which those perceptions influence civic engagement. The study was directed by Dr. Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, Associate Professor of Political Science at Shepherd University and a Senior Fellow for Research, Recruitment, and Retention at the Stubblefield Institute. Results are based on telephone interviews conducted by live interviewers, March 2-10, 2021 with a random sample of 1,001 adults, ages 18+, in all 48 states of the continental US and the District of Columbia. For results based on this sample of national adults, the margin of sampling error is +/- 3.1 percentage points with 95% confidence.

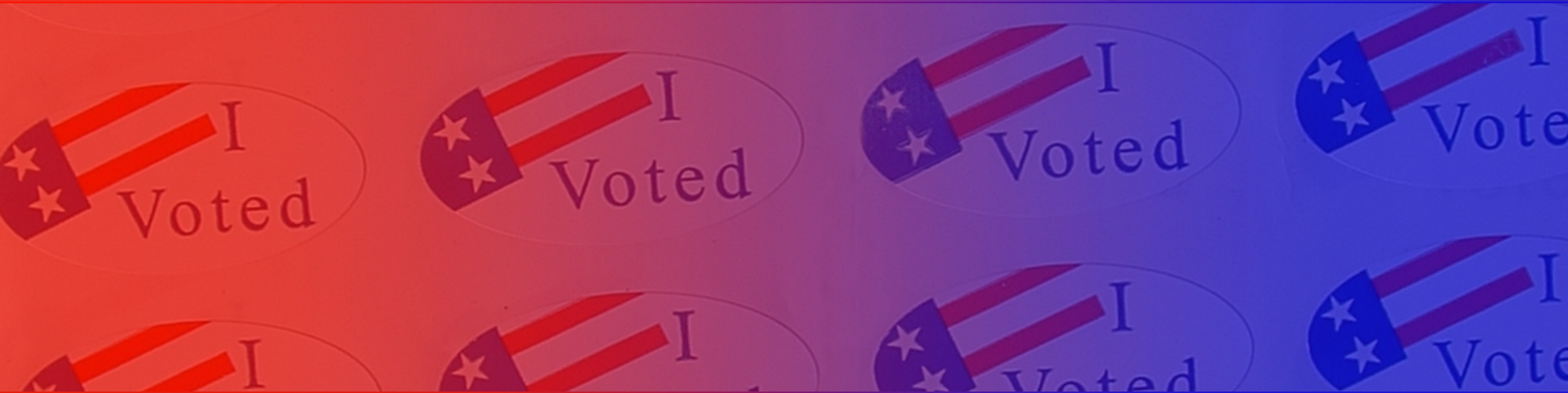
Interviews were conducted with respondents on landline telephones and cellular telephones, with a quota of 50% cell phone respondents and 50% landline respondents. Demographic targets for age, gender, and party identification were used to correct for non-response, and the sample was weighted for age by gender and for educational attainment in a multi-step process to further adjust for non-response. Population estimates for age by gender came from the U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, June 2020. Population estimates for educational attainment were drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 Current Population Survey. In addition to sampling error and non-response, challenges in conducting surveys, question wording, and question order can all introduce error into the findings of public opinion polls.

The Stubblefield Institute consulted with Orion Strategies in preparing the study questions and partnered with Oasis Marketing Solutions, who conducted the telephone surveys.



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