



2023

# The Power of Partisanship



A joint polling project among researchers at Arizona State University, Stanford University and the University of Houston

## **Executive summary:**

The foundational strategy for Republican and Democratic presidential candidates to reach the 270 Electoral College votes needed to be elected president consists of carrying historically loyal states with a large number of electors while also winning a key number of “battleground states.” The largest prize for Democratic candidates is California. California has 54 Electoral College votes, largest in the nation, and has voted for the Democratic candidate continuously since 1992. In 2020, Biden defeated Trump in California 63.48% to 34.32% with over 17 million votes cast. The biggest prize for the Republican candidate is Texas, with 40 Electoral College votes, and Texas has voted for the Republican candidate continuously since 1980. In 2020, Trump defeated Biden in Texas 52.06% to 46.48% with over 11 million votes cast. These are the largest states in the Electoral College. One of the most intense battleground states is suddenly Arizona. It has 11 Electoral College votes and in 2020 Biden defeated Trump 49.36% to 49.06% with over 3.3 million votes cast. The last time a Democratic candidate carried Arizona was 1996.

These three states are interesting examples of the state-by-state electoral strategy needed during presidential elections. The 2024 election is fast approaching. Several questions arise regarding the electoral strategies in these states. First, do Democrats in Arizona, California and Texas look similar in terms of strength of party attachment, ideological fervor and policy positions on current and perplexing issues? And, how about Republicans, are they similar to one another across these states on the same three concepts? Similarities among citizens of the same party would be expected in this contemporary age of polarization. But it is possible that there could be notable differences between partisans living in one state versus another. That is, it is possible that there are differences between Democrats in California and Democrats in Texas, for example.

Second, are Independents similar or different on these same criteria across Arizona, California and Texas? The voting behaviors of Independents are crucial for building winning coalitions when elections are highly competitive, for example, in Arizona in 2020. It is important for campaign strategists to understand if citizens who identify as Independents look similar to one another across Arizona, California and Texas in terms of their ideological leanings and views on political issues. After all, the fact that they identify as Independents suggests they may be far from homogenous on political attitudes across states.

In the end, the work of building coalitions across states in elections bounded by a federal structure, like the Electoral College, requires a clear understanding of how similar or different partisans look across key states. For example, can the same campaign messages, via TV ads, speeches and social media outreach, resonate with Democrats across these three states, or do messages need to change by media markets? Can Republicans deliver strategies that look generally the same for Phoenix, Los Angeles and Dallas? Candidates and campaign strategists are working now to raise money to calibrate and fine-tune campaign efforts. We have access to recent survey data of citizens in these states and can begin to answer some of these key questions.

The survey used to present this report was conducted between May 31, 2023 and June 6, 2023 among a representative sample of Arizona, California and Texas residents age 18 and older. In all, 3,163 respondents were surveyed across the three states: Arizona (1,051), California (1,045) and Texas (1,067). The margin of error for each state is +/- 3.0%.

A brief foreshadowing of the findings indicate there are no dramatic differences among citizens of the same party across Arizona, California and Texas for Democrats or Republicans. Democrats living at addresses in any of these three states do not see the political world differently from one another in terms of strength of party attachment, ideology, spending on key issues or support for highly relevant and contentious issues. The exact same pattern is evident for Republicans. In the age of polarization, Democrats are Democrats and Republicans are Republicans irrespective of where they live in these three important political states in the Electoral College for the 2024 election. To be sure, there are whopping differences between partisans of the two quite different parties. But this is not newsworthy. In addition, consistent with partisans, Independents, too, are not unique across these states. They look similar to one another and they sit somewhere between their partisan counterparts in terms of ideology and issues.

The practical storyline is a highly expensive TV commercial aimed at Democrats, about supporting abortion or action on climate or support for K-12 education, can be cast as nearly identical in Los Angeles, Phoenix and Houston. The same strategy is relevant for the Republicans. If the GOP nominee wants to communicate to their base, on limiting access to abortion, for example, a similar message can be sent across the media markets in Arizona, California and Texas. Still, let us review the findings for our conclusions.

*Setting the Baseline for Patterns on Party Attachment:*

The findings reported in Figures 1, 2 and 3 present survey respondents by seven-category party identification in Arizona, California and Texas. These findings resonate with the voting outcomes in the 2020 presidential election. Biden's advantage in California is significant with approximately 50% of citizens reporting they are strong or not very strong Democrats. The Republicans, strong and not very strong, constitute 30% of the sample, giving Democratic candidates a substantial advantage. This advantage produced a strong win for Biden in 2020 and should be a bellwether for Biden if nominated a second time in 2024.

The party makeup in Texas is reverse compared to California, with more GOP identifiers than Democrats, but the advantage is not nearly as large. Strong Republicans and not very strong Republicans constitute 47% of the sample, compared to Democrats with 37%. This advantage for a Republican candidate, although important, is far less than the Democratic edge in California and helps explain why Trump's win in Texas was far narrower than Biden's in California.

Turning to Arizona, the difference between Democrats and Republicans is much narrower than in California and Texas, with strong Republicans and not very strong Republicans constituting 42% of the sample, compared to 37% Democrats in the same categories. Not surprisingly, this points to why Arizona's election was far closer than the elections in California and Texas in 2020.

Figure 1: Political party identification in Arizona

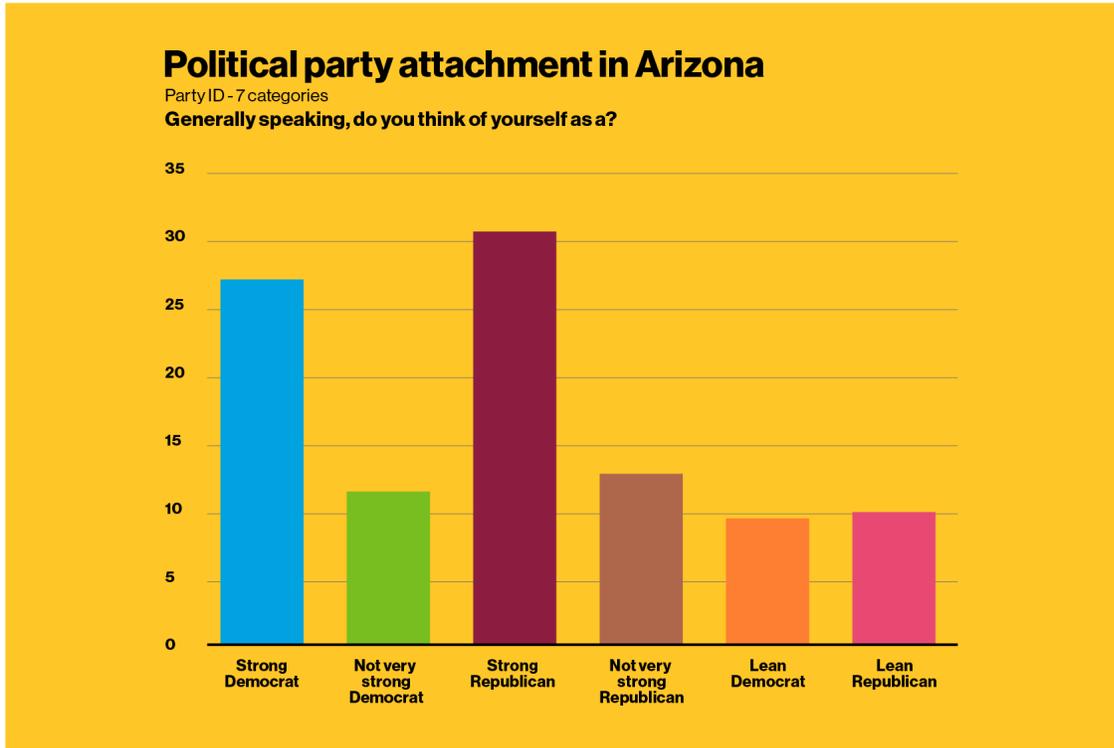


Figure 2: Political party identification in California

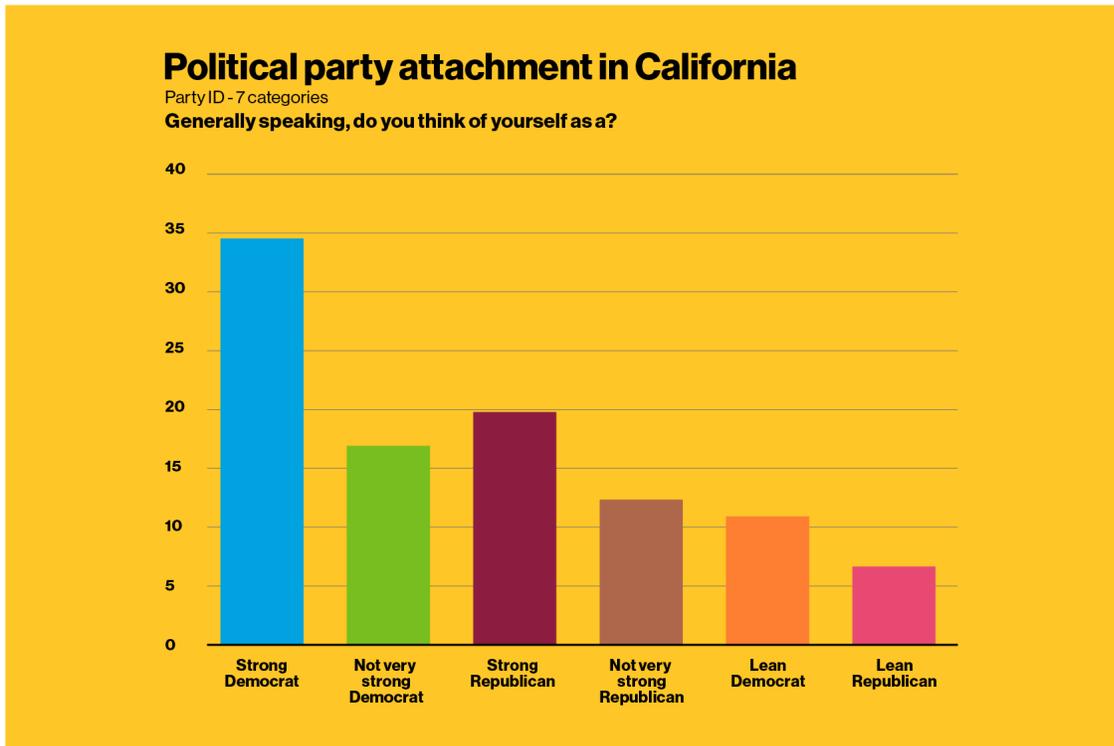
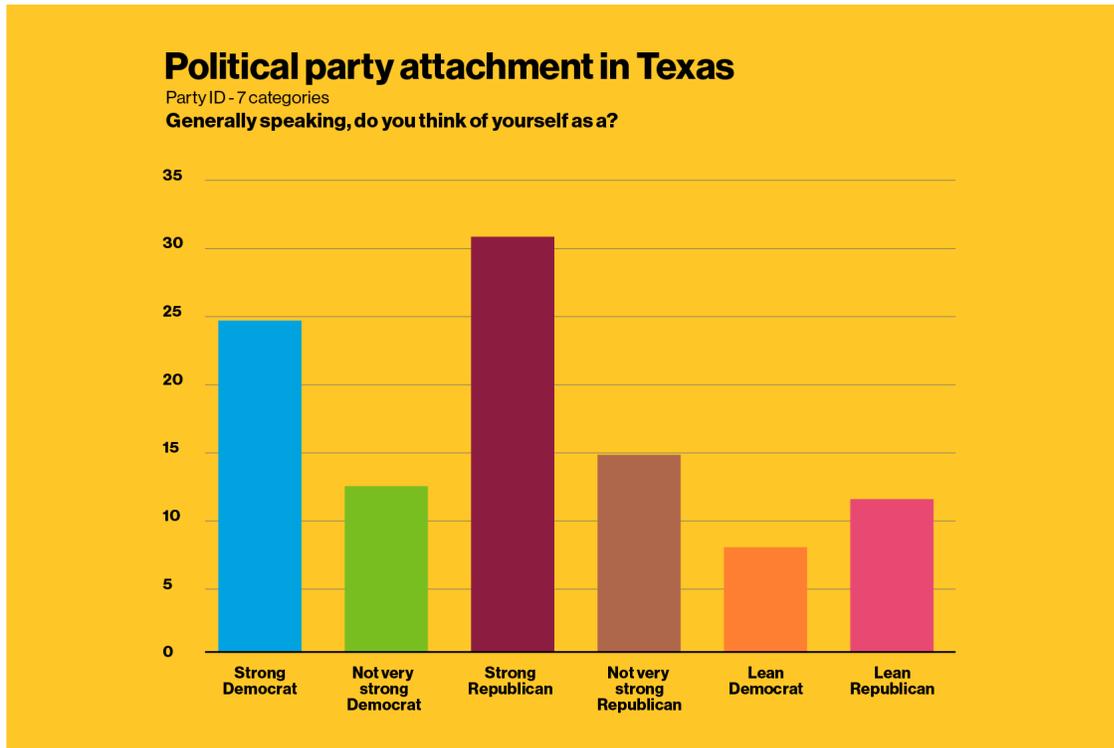


Figure 3: Political party identification in Texas



*Findings and patterns for ideology:*

With the breakdown of party attachment in hand across the three states, we turn to see if there are ideological differences among similar partisans across the states. That is, for example, are Democrats more liberal in California than in Arizona and Texas? Or are Republicans more conservative in Texas than in California and Arizona? The findings are displayed in Figures 4, 5 and 6, where we present citizens' placement on a seven-point ideology scale by party attachment across the three states.

The findings for Democrats are strikingly similar. The percentage of Democrats who report being very liberal or liberal in Arizona and California are nearly identical at 60%. Texas Democrats, on the other hand, are approximately 47% very liberal or liberal. And it appears the difference is that Democratic Texans are more likely to identify as moderates. Democratic Texas respondents are 12% more moderate than Arizonans and 8% more moderate than Californians. The percentage of Democrats identifying as conservative or very conservative is less than 10% in all three states. In summary, the only appreciable difference among Democrats across Arizona, California and Texas regarding ideology is Texas Democrats are somewhat more moderate than in Arizona and Texas.

The findings for the Republicans are also quite similar across the three states. Seventy-eight percent of Texas Republicans report they are very conservative or conservative. This drops to 75% among Arizona Republicans and 70% for California Republicans. Republican respondents

who consider themselves moderate on the seven-point ideological scale range from a low of 12% in Arizona to a high of 20% in California with Texans landing at 18%. And less than 10% of Republicans in each of these three states identify as very liberal or liberal. To summarize, the ideological leanings of GOP partisans across Arizona, California and Texas are remarkably similar. Texans are slightly more conservative or very conservative than in the other two states, but only by 5% on average.

The fundamental takeaway for ideology among partisans in Arizona, California and Texas is Democrats are primarily very liberal and liberal and Republicans are essentially very conservative and conservative. We do not find evidence that Democrats in California are strikingly more liberal than in Texas, or for that matter that Republicans in Texas are considerably more conservative than Republicans in California. To be sure, there is an overall difference between the parties regarding ideological fervor. That is, a higher percentage of Republicans identify as very conservative or conservative than Democrats identify as very liberal or liberal. The difference ranges from approximately 10% to 18% depending on the specific state comparison. Collectively, the evidence for ideological makeup among partisans indicates, at least across Arizona, California and Texas, partisans are polarized along ideological lines irrespective of where they live. Approximately 50% of Independents respond that they are moderate and an additional 20% or so report that they are conservative. This pattern holds across all three states.

Figure 4: Political party attachment in Arizona

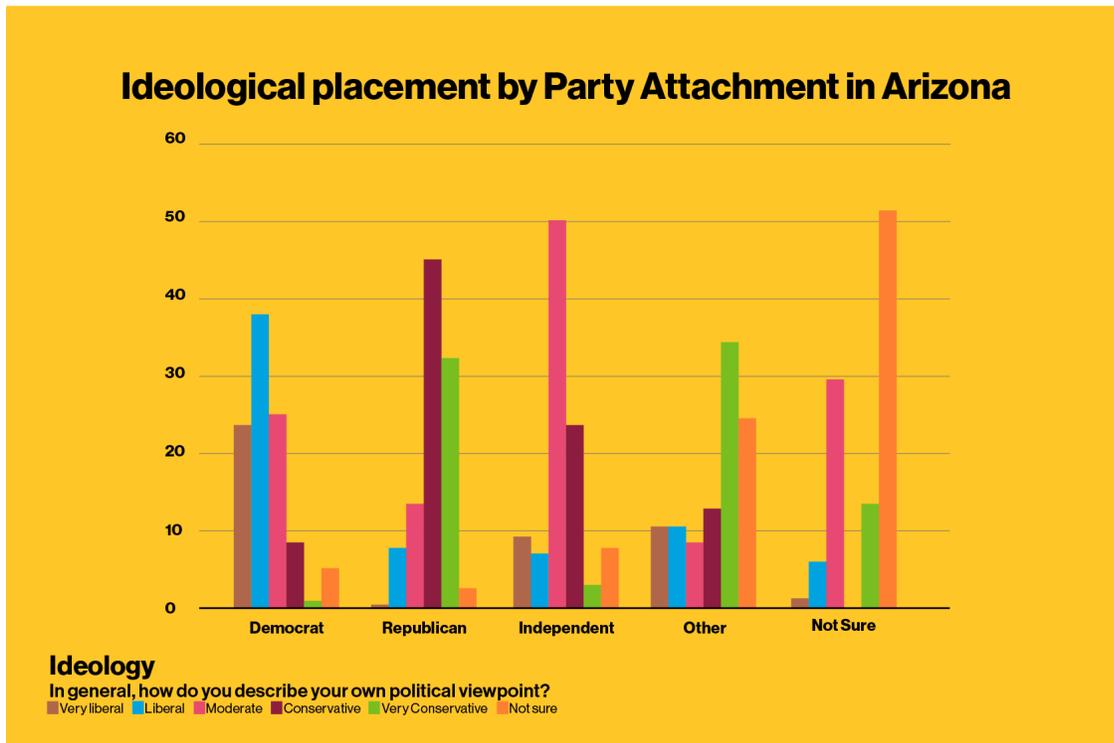


Figure 5: Political party attachment in California

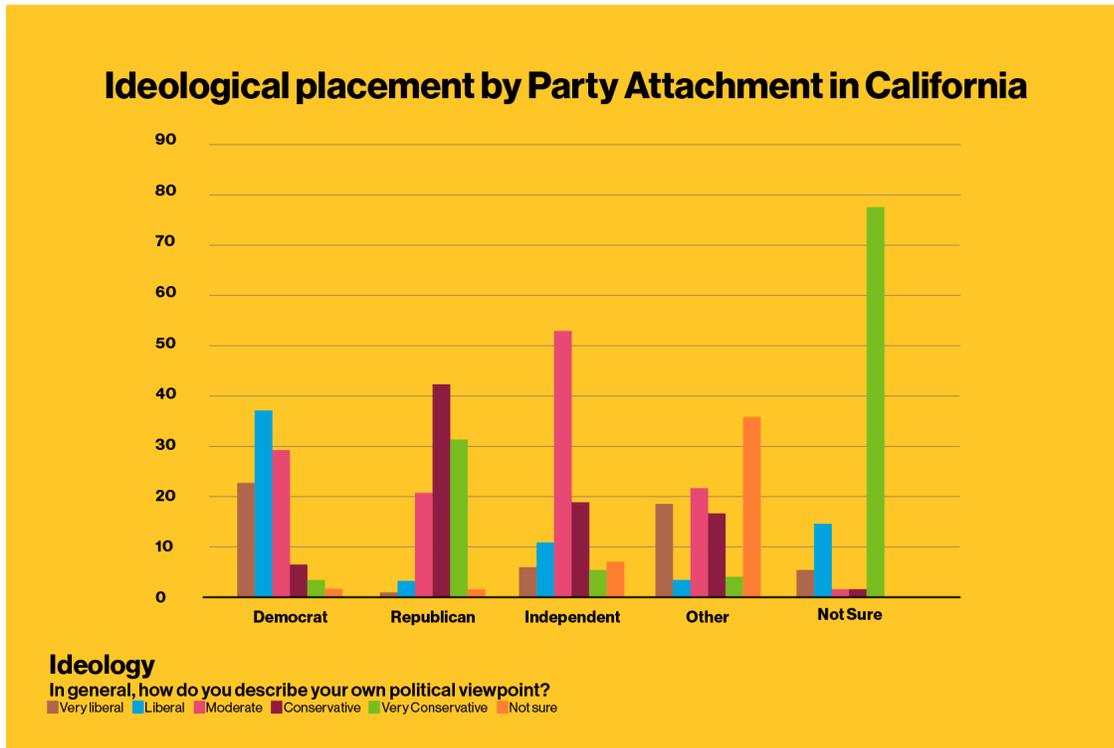
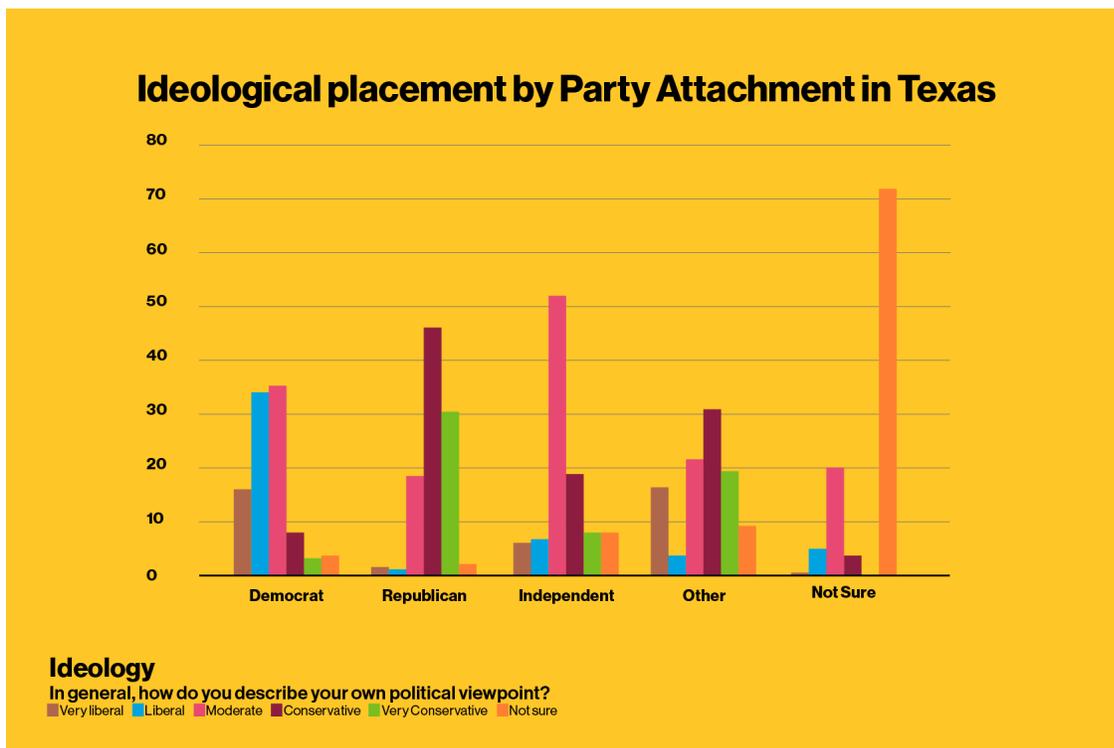


Figure 6: Political party attachment in Texas



*Findings and patterns for spending on key issues:*

We turn next to an examination of citizens' attitudes about increasing spending on important issues by party attachment across the three states. The findings are presented in Table 1 for five policy areas: elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, police and fire departments, aid to the poor and health care. We have known for a long time that Democrats and Republicans have different spending priorities across policy issues. But do Democrats differ on their level of support for increasing spending in these key areas depending on whether they live in Arizona, California or Texas? The same question is relevant for Republicans.

The findings for Democrats reveal two clear patterns. First, the proportion of Democrats in Arizona and California who support an increase in spending are quite similar on each issue. The only notable differences are spending to aid the poor and on health care. Democrats in Arizona support increases in spending on both of these issues by 7% and 8% more than Democrats in California. However, these differences are small considering that Democrats in both states are overwhelming supportive of increasing spending on these two issues, ranging from 69% to 83%.

Second, a higher proportion of Democrats in Texas support increasing spending on each of the five issues compared to Democrats in Arizona and California. These differences range from 7% to 17%. The largest difference is in health care. Ninety-two percent of Democrats in Texas support increasing spending on health care compared to 75% in California.

The findings for Republicans are simpler. There are essentially no significant differences among Republican identifiers regarding increasing spending on each of the issues across the three states. One exception is for spending on health care. Fifty-five percent of GOP partisans in Texas support increasing spending on health care compared to 38% in California.

Independents look quite similar to Republicans. It does not matter where they live. They support increasing spending on these five issues at approximately the same level, especially once sampling error is accounted for in the data.

To be sure, the expected differences between the two parties are on display. A far higher percent of Democrats support increasing spending compared to Republicans on K-12 schools, universities and colleges, aid to the poor and health care. The biggest differences tend to be on increasing spending for aid to the poor and health care. The exact opposite is true regarding increases in spending for police and fire. Republicans are far more supportive of increasing spending than Democrats for these two public services.

In summary, the expected partisan divide is clearly evident on spending priorities across the three states. Republicans are far less interested in increasing spending on any issue compared to Democrats, irrespective of where they live. And Democrats across Arizona, California and Texas are similar regarding increasing spending on key policy topics. The one noteworthy exception is a higher percentage of Texas Democrats call consistently for higher spending compared to their colleagues in Arizona and California. Republican preferences for more spending on these issues are similar across the three states. It does not matter, on average, where Republicans live across these three states.

Table 1: Support for increasing spending by party attachment in Arizona, California and Texas

Increase spending on	Arizona			California			Texas		
	Dem %	Rep %	Ind %	Dem %	Rep %	Ind %	Dem %	Rep %	Ind %
Elementary and secondary schools	70	53	61	70	56	57	81	56	53
Colleges and universities	42	22	27	44	23	33	55	19	28
Police and fire departments	36	70	33	37	68	41	43	70	46
Aid to the poor	76	32	62	69	37	53	84	38	55
Health care	83	42	69	75	38	68	92	55	64

*Findings and patterns for highly relevant issues:*

The survey also explored citizens' attitudes regarding support for four highly relevant issues on national, state and local political agendas: the border wall, immediate action on climate, abortion ban after 15 weeks and prohibiting trans individuals from school sports. The findings are presented in Table 2. The differences on these issues between Democrats and Republicans are dramatic, once again driving home the consistent and stark differences between the rank-and-file party members of America's two dominant parties.

The more interesting questions are: Do Democrats see these issues in similar ways across the three states? And how about Republicans, are there differences depending on where they call home? The answer for Democrats is straightforward. There are no sharp differences among Democrats in Arizona, California and Texas, especially once sampling error is taken into account, except in one observation. Texas Democrats are far more supportive of an abortion ban after 15 weeks (44%) compared to Arizona and California Democrats (26% support in both states).

Republicans, too, are similar on these issues across the three states. There are only two noteworthy differences. California Republicans are less supportive of a border wall compared to their counterparts in Arizona and Texas, although overall support across the three states is over 75%. And Texas Republicans are less supportive of an abortion ban after 15 weeks (58%) compared to Republicans in Arizona (71%) and California (72%).

There are not striking differences for Independents across the states. Their levels of support for these issues falls between partisans' attitudes, as would be expected. There is one noteworthy exception when comparing Independents in California and Texas on abortion. Independent Texans (53%) support a ban on abortion after 15 weeks by 23% more than Independent Californians and 13% more than Independent Arizonans.

Table 2: Support for relevant issues in Arizona, California and Texas

Support for	Arizona			California			Texas		
	Dem %	Rep %	Ind %	Dem %	Rep %	Ind %	Dem %	Rep %	Ind %
Border wall	16	88	38	22	75	34	25	82	43
Immediate action on climate	84	25	52	85	25	55	74	28	42
Abortion ban after 15 weeks	26	71	40	26	72	30	44	58	53
Prohibiting trans individuals from school sports	31	78	48	26	69	45	36	73	56

In conclusion, political polarization between partisans of the two parties in the United States, at least captured in Arizona, California and Texas, is highly correlated with a significant amount of homogeneity of viewpoints among Democratic and Republican partisans on ideology, spending priorities and support for key issues approximately six months ahead of the presidential primaries for the 2024 election. This is not unexpected, but there is remarkably little divergence among Democrats, irrespective of whether they live in Arizona, California and Texas. The same is true among Republicans. These findings simplify candidate, party and interest group strategies regarding the crafting and implementation of political messages sent to base supporters. It is possible to speak to GOP partisans about the same topics and in the same manner across all three states. This is equally true for Democrats. And, predictably, these partisan-motivated messages are sure to annoy and antagonize the members of the opposite party.

The flow of campaign information aimed at Independents, in this age of sophisticated targeting by advertisers, is more complex. Independents do sit somewhere between partisans of the two parties on the attitudes examined in the survey. However, sometimes they are closer to Democrats and other times they are closer to Republicans. And there is some variance

regarding proximity to one of the parties across the states. Locating the best messages aimed at Independents by campaign architects will be especially crucial in Arizona and possibly in Texas.

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