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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' viewsf 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.
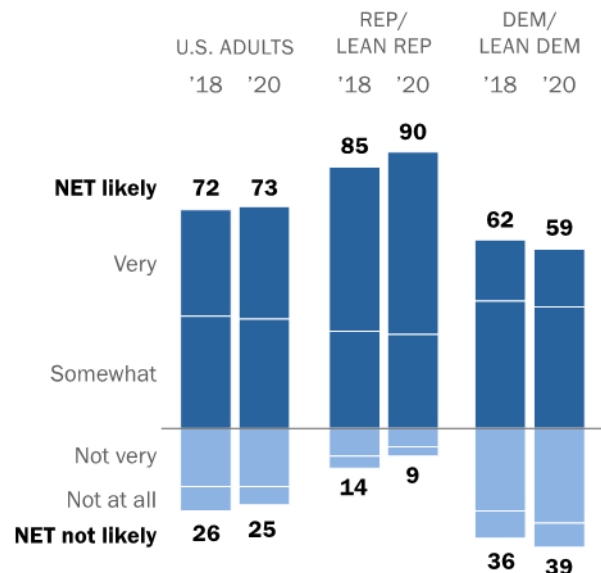
Americans have complicated feelings about their relationship with big technology companies. While they have appreciated the [impact of technology](#) over recent decades and rely on these companies' products to communicate, [shop](#) and [get news](#), many have also [grown critical](#) of the industry 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

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

Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-22, 2020.
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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.

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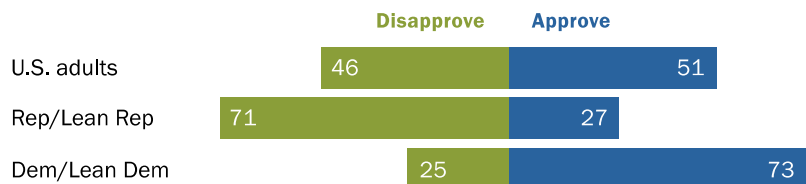
This survey finds that the public is fairly split on whether social media companies should engage in this kind of fact-checking, but there is little public confidence that these platforms could determine which content should be flagged.

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

Wide partisan differences in views about social media companies labeling posts from elected officials as misleading or inaccurate

% of U.S. adults who say they ___ of social media companies labeling posts on their platforms from elected officials as inaccurate or misleading

% of U.S. adults who say they have ___ (of) confidence in social media companies to determine which posts on their platforms should be labeled as innaccurate or misleading

Note: Strongly/somewhat approve or disapprove responses are combined. Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-22, 2020.
"Most Americans Think Social Media Sites Censor Political Viewpoints"
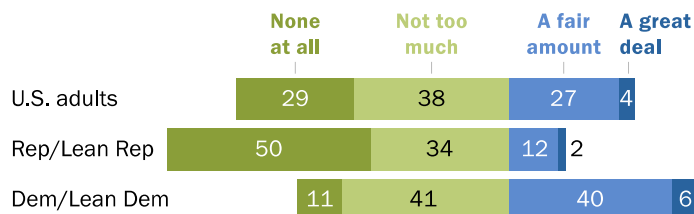
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as inaccurate or misleading. On the other hand, 71% of Republicans say they at least somewhat *disapprove* of this practice. Republicans are also far more likely than Democrats to say they have no confidence at all that social media companies would 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.
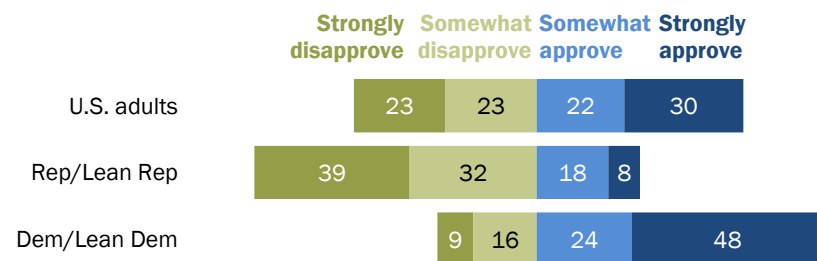
Some 51% of Americans say they strongly or somewhat approve of social media companies labeling posts from elected officials on their platforms as inaccurate or misleading, while a similar share (46%) say they at least somewhat disapprove of this.

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.

Democrats more likely than Republicans to approve of social media companies labeling posts from elected officials or ordinary users as inaccurate, misleading

*% of U.S. adults who say they ___ of social media companies labeling posts on their platforms from **elected officials** as inaccurate or misleading*

	Strongly disapprove	Somewhat disapprove	Somewhat approve	Strongly approve
U.S. adults	23	23	22	30
Rep/Lean Rep	39	32	18	8
Dem/Lean Dem	9	16	24	48

*% of U.S. adults who say they ___ of social media companies labeling posts on their platforms from **ordinary users** as inaccurate or misleading*

	Strongly disapprove	Somewhat disapprove	Somewhat approve	Strongly approve
U.S. adults	23	22	28	25
Rep/Lean Rep	37	27	24	10
Dem/Lean Dem	11	17	30	39

Note: Respondents were randomly assigned questions about whether social media companies should label posts from elected officials or ordinary users. Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-22, 2020.
"Most Americans Think Social Media Sites Censor Political Viewpoints"
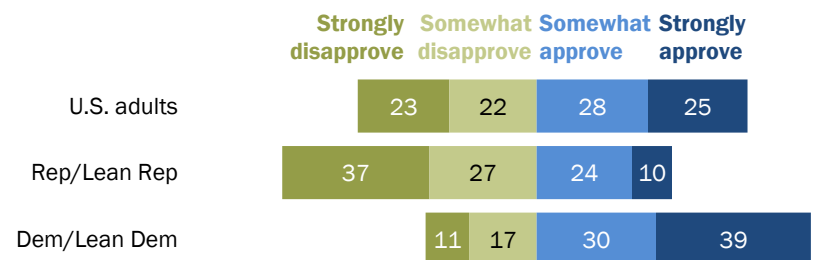
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These sentiments are nearly reversed for Republicans: 71% say they disapprove of social media companies engaging in this type of labeling, including about four-in-ten (39%) who say they strongly disapprove. Just 27% say they approve of this labeling.

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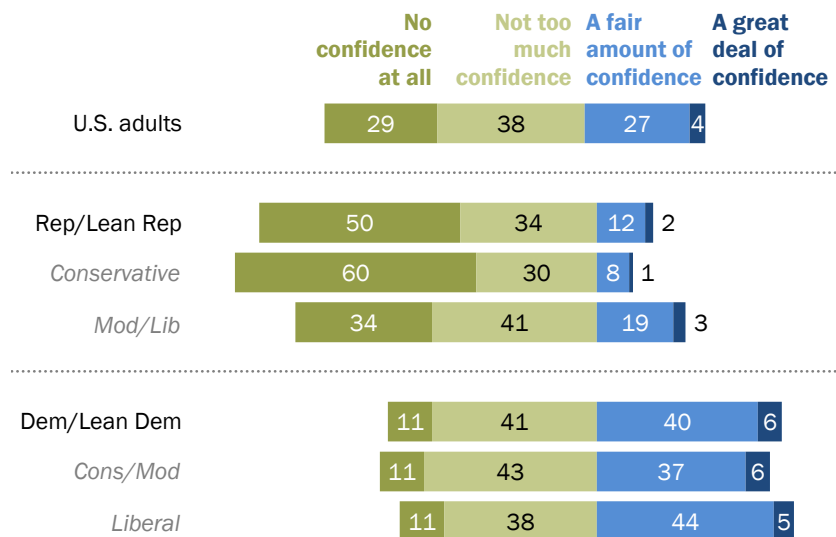
Democrats are more evenly split in their views: Some 52% of Democrats say they have no confidence at all or not too much confidence in social media companies to determine which posts on their platforms should be labeled as inaccurate or misleading, while 46% say they have a great deal or fair amount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

A majority of conservative Republicans have no confidence in social media companies to determine which posts should be labeled as inaccurate

% of U.S. adults who say they have ___ in social media companies to determine which posts on their platforms should be labeled as inaccurate or misleading

	No confidence at all	Not too much confidence	A fair amount of confidence	A great deal of confidence
U.S. adults	29	38	27	4
Rep/Lean Rep	50	34	12	2
Conservative	60	30	8	1
Mod/Lib	34	41	19	3
Dem/Lean Dem	11	41	40	6
Cons/Mod	11	43	37	6
Liberal	11	38	44	5

Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-22, 2020.
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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.
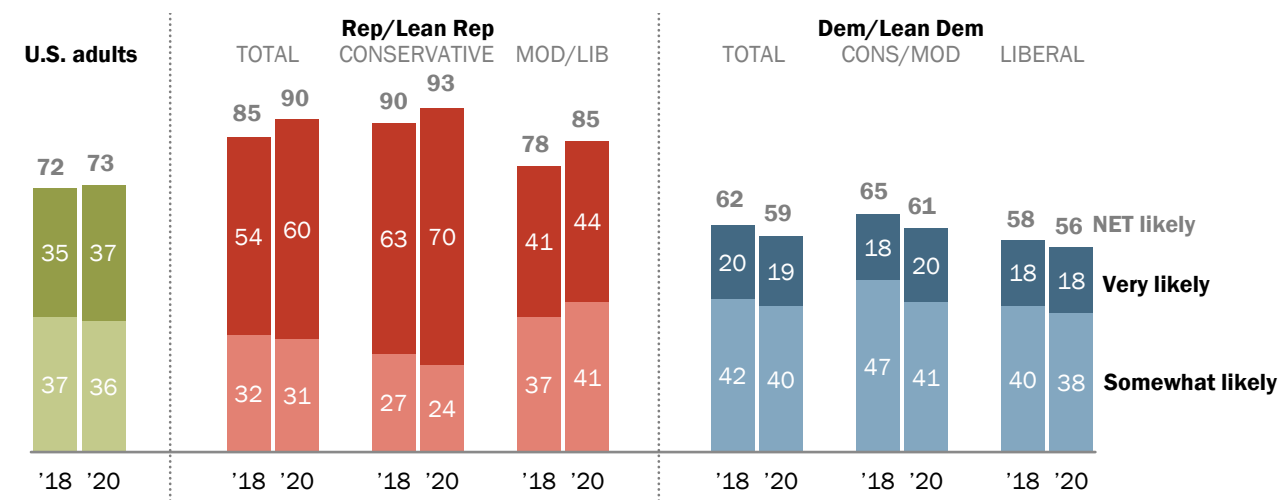
The confidence gap between Republicans and Democrats remains present even among those who approve of this type of flagging. Some 56% of Democrats who approve of social media platforms labeling elected officials' posts as inaccurate say they have at least a fair amount of confidence in these companies 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

Note: Those who did not give an answer or who gave other responses are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-22, 2020.
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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.
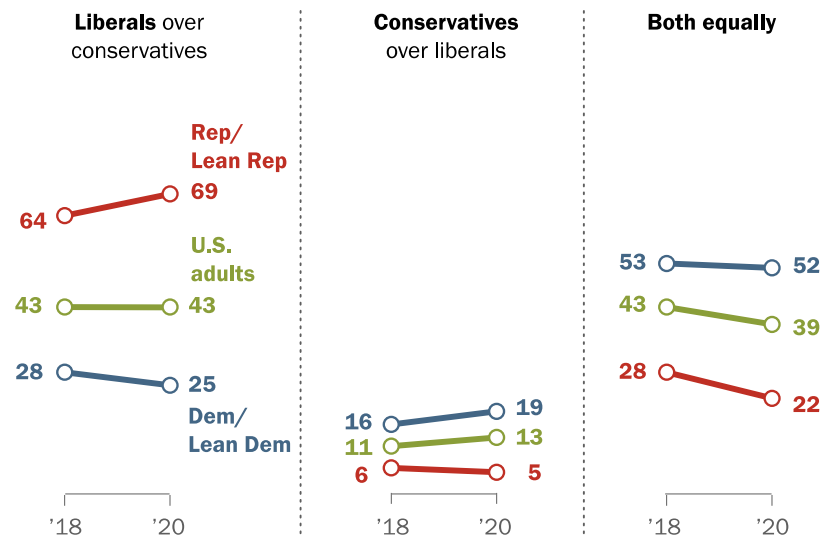
On a broad level, a plurality of Americans say major technology companies tend to support the views of liberals over conservatives, rather than conservatives over liberals (43% vs. 13%). Still, about four-in-ten (39%) say major tech companies tend to support the views of conservatives and liberals equally. 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

Slight increase in share of Republicans who believe major tech companies support the views of liberals over conservatives since 2018

% of U.S. adults who say major technology companies tend to support the views of ...

Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-22, 2020.
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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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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.

American Trends Panel recruitment surveys

Recruitment dates	Mode	Invited	Joined	Active panelists remaining
Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014	Landline/ cell RDD	9,809	5,338	2,307
Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015	Landline/ cell RDD	6,004	2,976	1,335
April 25 to June 4, 2017	Landline/ cell RDD	3,905	1,628	684
Aug. 8 to Oct. 31, 2018	ABS/web	9,396	8,778	6,407
Aug. 19 to Nov. 30, 2019	ABS/web	5,900	4,720	4,682
Total		**35,014**	**23,440**	**15,415**

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.

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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.

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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[2] AAPOR Task Force on Address-based Sampling. 2016. "AAPOR Report: Address-based Sampling."

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

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

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.

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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:

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

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

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Topline questionnaire

2020 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL
WAVE 69 JUNE 2020
FINAL TOPLINE
JUNE 16-22, 2020
N=4,708

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.

	Sample size	**Margin of error at 95% confidence level**
U.S. adults	4,708	+/- 1.8 percentage points

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,
 <u>2020</u>
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,
 <u>2020</u>
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,
<u>2020</u>
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, <u>2020</u>		May 29-June 11, <u>2018</u>
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, <u>2020</u>		May 29-June 11, <u>2018</u>
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…[3]

<u>Republican</u>	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>Independent</u>	Something <u>else</u>	No <u>answer</u>	Lean <u>Rep</u>	Lean <u>Dem</u>
28	29	29	12	1	16	23

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[3] Party and Partyln asked in a prior survey.