Florida Southern College
Center for Polling and Policy Research

Reforming American Political Parties Poll

Executive Summary

There is widespread support for reforming the system of political parties in America, but little agreement on the specific changes needed. Using Survey Monkey's Audience product, the Florida Southern College Center for Polling and Policy Research commissioned a poll of 1,124 residents of the United States on November 20, 2017. Seventy-seven percent of respondents agree that some type of reform is needed within the Democratic Party and 82 percent believe the same regarding the Republican Party. Examining only those who identify as members of each party, 75 percent of Republicans believe their own party needs to be reformed and 72 percent of Democrats believe the same.

When asked about specific institutions and processes within their party's organization, few are identified as needing change. Respondents were asked the degree they supported changing how their party chose its presidential candidate, how the party makes internal decisions, who leads the party, the party's positions on the issues, and the amount of contact the party has with voters. Despite less than 20 percent saying no changes are necessary, none of these reforms garnered the support of half of the party members surveyed. This same trend is found when examining the party's positions on the issues. In almost every case, most party members desire their party's position on major issues to remain the same.
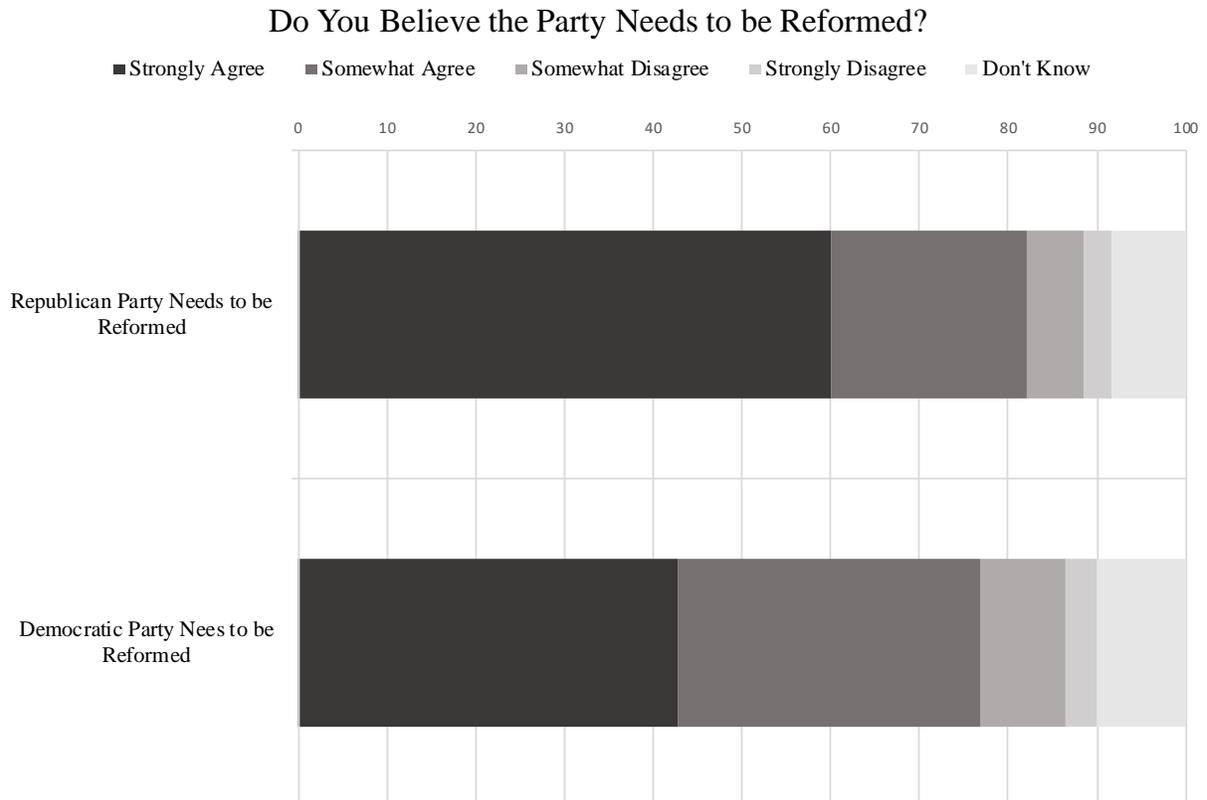
Looking more broadly at the electoral system, respondents support changing the U.S. Constitution to allow for more than two parties to regularly win elections but identify only a few circumstances under which they would support third-party candidates. Only when third-party candidates are closer to them on the issues will Republicans, Democrats, and independents support them electorally.

Our results reveal a high degree of interest in reforming the American party system, but a general unwillingness to change how parties currently conduct business, the positions they take on the issues, and how the electoral system is organized. Much of the dissatisfaction felt toward parties appears to be frustration felt by voters of one party toward the other.

Results

 Americans want to see changes in the two major parties. When asked, 76.9 percent of respondents thought the Democratic Party needed to be reformed and 82 thought the same of the Republican Party. The figure below shows that almost 60 percent of respondents *strongly* agreed with the sentiment the Republican Party needs to be reformed and about 43 percent took that same position with regard to the Democratic Party. There appears to be a stronger desire to see reform within the Republican Party, but the lack of intensity found toward the Democratic Party should not be interpreted to mean that reform is not desired in both.

Do You Believe the Party Needs to be Reformed?

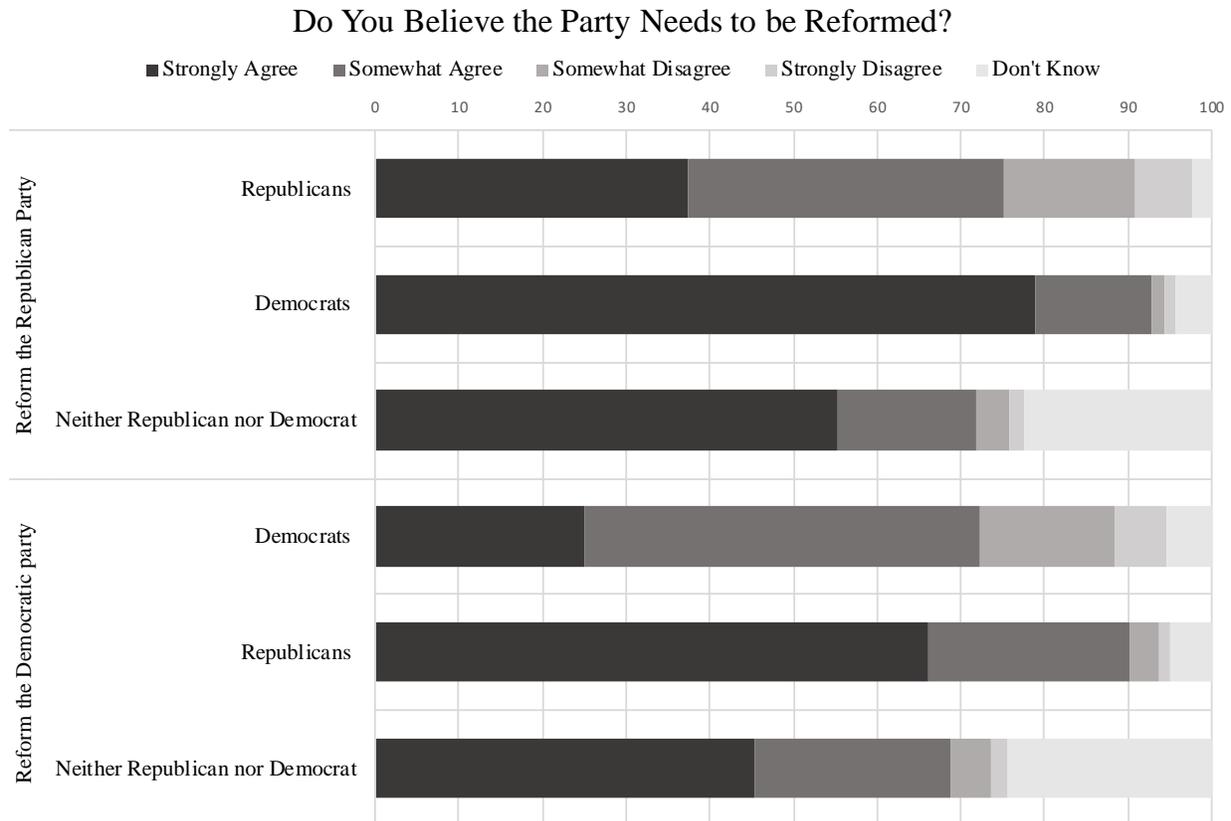■ Strongly Agree   ■ Somewhat Agree   ■ Somewhat Disagree   ■ Strongly Disagree   ■ Don't Know

Source: Florida Southern College Center for Polling and Policy Research
Reforming American Political Parties Poll, November 2017

 Examining these attitudes based on the partisanship of the respondent reveals strong support for party reform. Party members want to see changes within their own organizations; 72.3 percent of Democrats agreed (strongly or somewhat) that the party needs to be reformed and 75.2 percent of Republicans felt their party also needs reform. Somewhat predictably, members of the opposite party are most likely to *strongly* agree that the party needs to be reformed; 78.9 percent of Democrats strongly support reform in the Republican Party and 66.1 percent of Republicans want the same in the Democratic Party. While the latter finding is hardly surprising in an era of partisan polarization, the former finding lends credibility to statements made in the popular press that Americans are growing increasingly frustrated with parties.

Looking specifically at those respondents who do not identify themselves with either the Republican or Democratic parties, we see the same trend. Sixty-nine percent either strongly or somewhat agree with the sentiment that the Democratic Party needs to be reformed and 71.8 percent believe the same about the Republican Party. Interestingly, there is a relatively high percent of non-party identifiers that *don't know* if they would like to see reforms made (24.5 percent with regard to the Democratic Party and 22.4 percent with regard to the Republican). This could indicate a general lack of interest in politics – or parties – among respondents or the lack of ideas about how (or if) these organizations could be reformed.
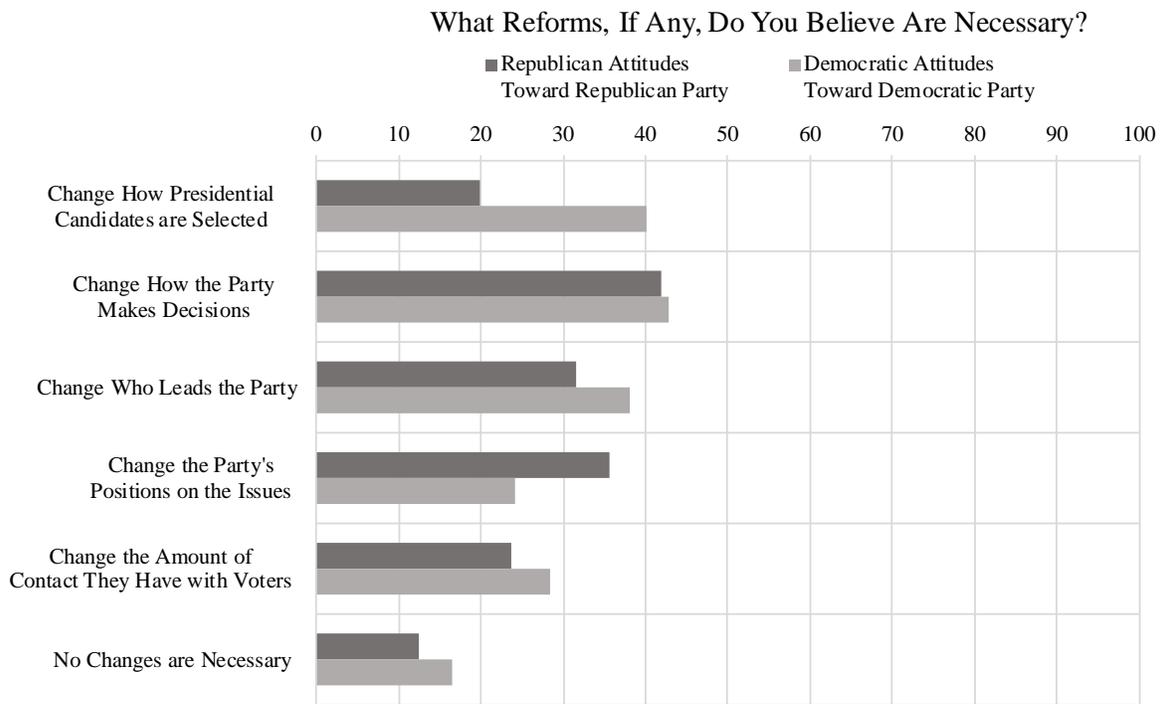
Do You Believe the Party Needs to be Reformed?

Source: Florida Southern College Center for Polling and Policy Research
Reforming American Political Parties Poll, November 2017

What Reforms are Needed?

We next asked respondents what changes they would like to see in each party. For Republicans, changing how the party makes decisions received the most support (41.90 percent) followed by the party's positions on the issues (35.5 percent), who leads the party (31.5 percent), how much contact the party has with the voters (23.7 percent), and how its presidential candidates are selected (19.9 percent). For Democrats, changing how their party makes decisions is also at the top of the list (42.8 percent), but how presidential candidates are selected is a close second (40 percent). This is followed by changing who leads the party (38 percent), the amount of contact the party has with voters (28.5 percent), and the party's positions on the issues (24.10 percent).

There are three notable trends in these data. Fist, no suggestion garners majority support among party members. Members of both agree that changes need to be made (only 12.4 percent of Republicans and 16.5 percent of Democrats believe no changes are necessary), but no one item wins the support of a majority of respondents. Second, while changing the way their parties make decisions garners the most support among both parties, the second highest choice is notable. For Republicans, it is changing their party's positions on the issues and for Democrats, it's changing how their party chooses its presidential candidates. Both of these appear to conform to popular media stories about Democrats search for answers to their latest presidential loss and Republicans restructuring in the face of broadening definitions of conservatism. Finally, the gap between Republican and Democratic attitudes may give us insight into the comparative priorities of each organization. We might expect Democrats to be more concerned about modifying their nomination process over the coming years if they wish to be responsive to their members. Likewise, we may see Republicans debating what it means to be conservative even more openly than what currently exists.

What Reforms, If Any, Do You Believe Are Necessary?

■ Republican Attitudes Toward Republican Party ■ Democratic Attitudes Toward Democratic Party
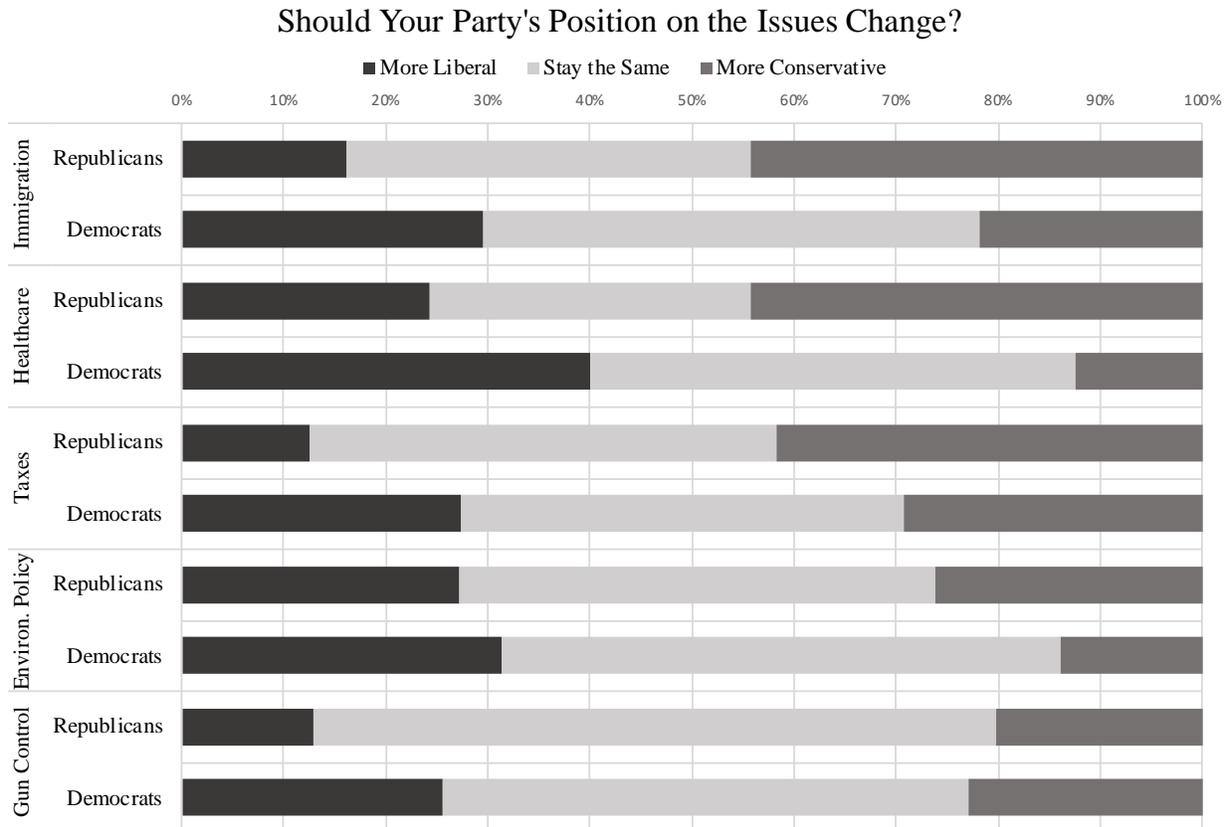

Source: Florida Southern College Center for Polling and Policy Research
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Thinking about the positions the parties have taken on the issues, we asked our respondents if they would like to see their party become more conservative, more liberal, or stay the same on a range of policy issues. Specifically, we asked them to provide their feelings toward their party's view on gun control, environmental policy, taxes, healthcare, and immigration. The table below shows responses by Democrats to the policy positions of the Democratic Party and the responses of Republicans to the Republican Party.

Examining the preferences of Republicans first, we find that individuals want their party's positions on gun control, environmental policy, and taxes to stay the same and on healthcare and immigration, to become more conservative. It should be noted the difference between staying the same and becoming more conservative is very narrow on the issue of taxes.
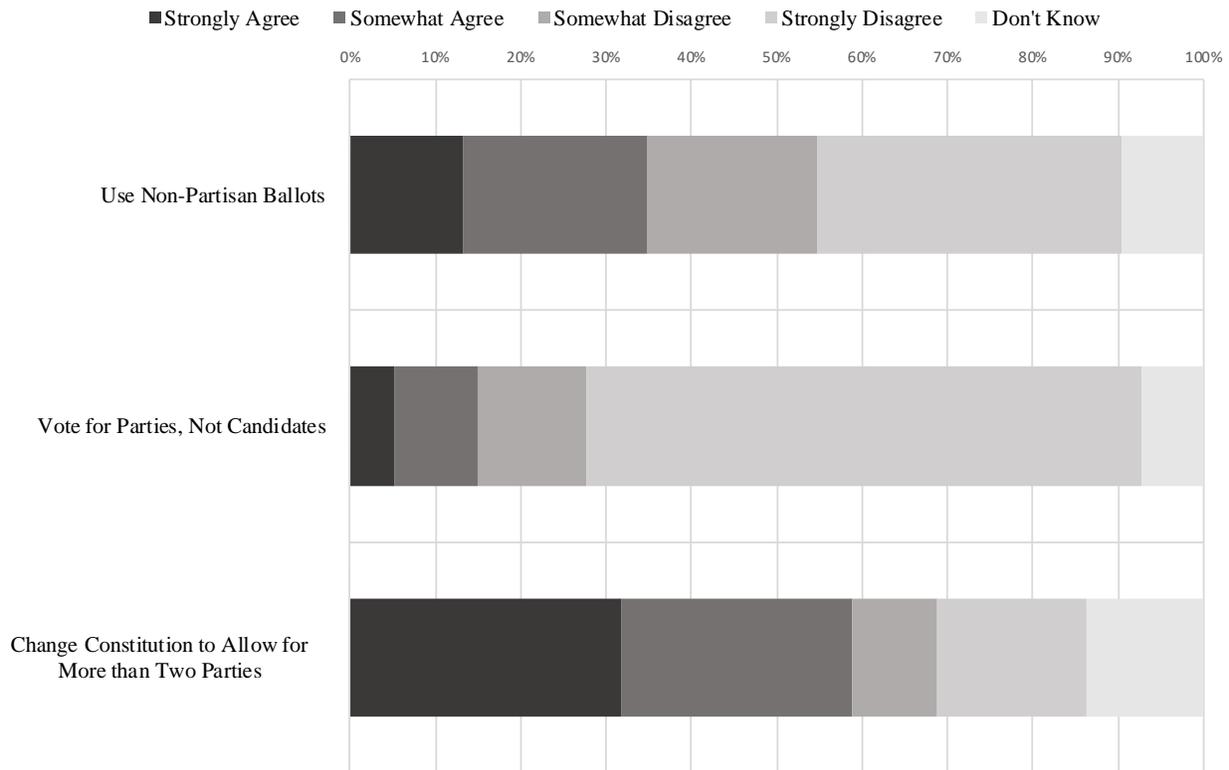
Democrats desired their party's positions to stay the same on all issues. In only the case of healthcare was this margin close. Interestingly, looking at Democrat's position on taxes we find that more would favor a more conservative policy (compared to liberal) if the policy position would change.

Should Your Party's Position on the Issues Change?

■ More Liberal ■ Stay the Same ■ More Conservative

We also asked about possible changes to the electoral system more broadly. Specifically, we asked respondents to indicate their level of support for the following propositions: changing the Constitution to allow for more than two parties to regularly win elections, voting for parties, but not candidates (parties would choose who serves), and using non-partisan ballots. The figure below illustrates that both proposed changes to the ballot were met with disapproval; a majority did not support moving to non-partisan or party-centered elections. However, a majority did support altering the Constitution to allow for more than two parties to regularly win elections. This position was supported more among Democrats (66.5 percent) compared to Republicans (47.8 percent) and was also favored by a majority of individuals identifying as neither Republican nor Democrat (58.8 percent).

Do You Support the Following Changes to the Electoral System?

■ Strongly Agree   ■ Somewhat Agree   ■ Somewhat Disagree   ■ Strongly Disagree   ■ Don't Know

Use Non-Partisan Ballots

Vote for Parties, Not Candidates

Change Constitution to Allow for More than Two Parties

Source: Florida Southern College Center for Polling and Policy Research
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To assess if the source of the reform message mattered, we also included a brief survey experiment. Using the open primary as our example, we asked half of our respondents if they would approve of using this system of nominating presidential candidates if the party supported the change or if a non-partisan government group was advocating for the change. Specifically, our respondents were asked the degree to which the support the following statement: "Members of your party (or "Americans for Reform, a non-partisan citizen group seeking to clean-up government,) have been advocating for the use of open primaries nation-wide. Open primaries allow all registered voters, not just registered party members, to have a voice in selecting a party's presidential nominee. How much do you support these efforts?"
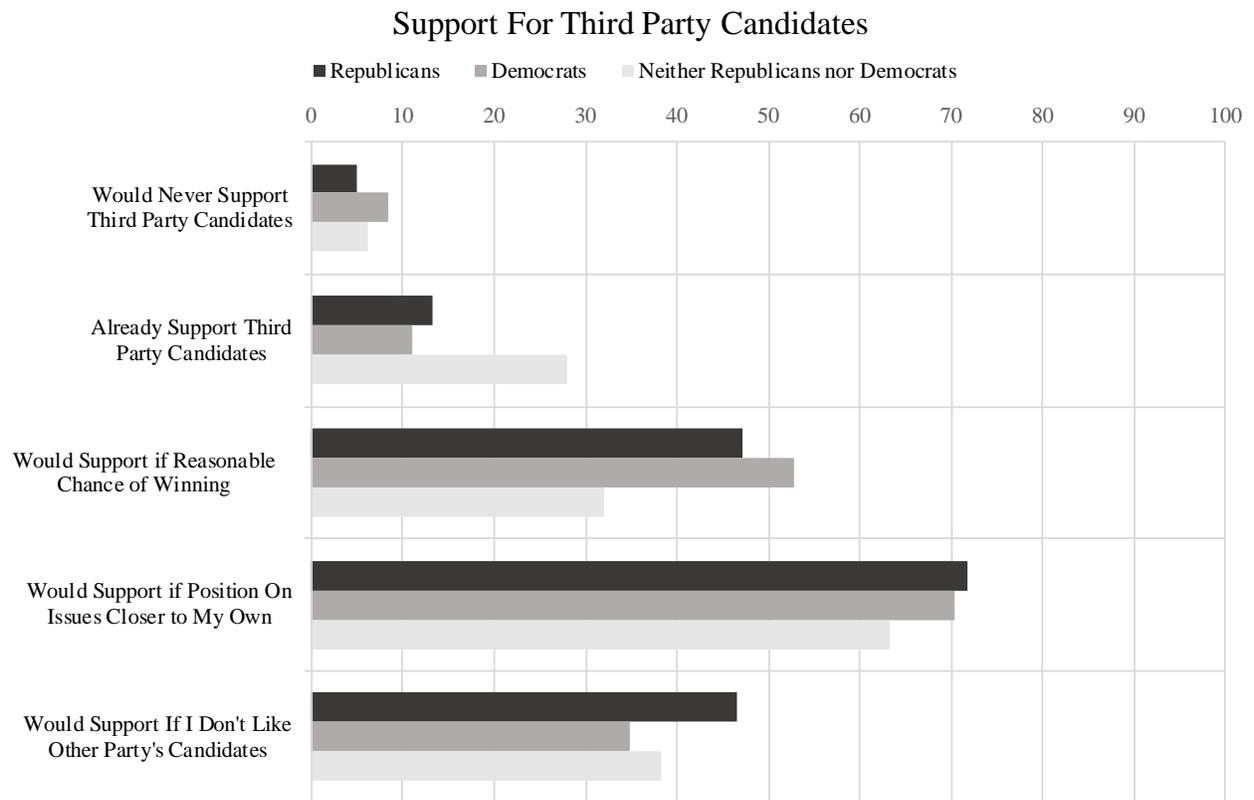
There is no substantive difference in attitudes toward open primaries based on the source of the proposal. While those who believe the idea comes from their party are more likely to take a position on the issue, there are no statistically significant differences between the groups. The use of open primaries is supported by both groups (68 percent report strongly or moderately supporting the idea), but the source of the message does not appear to matter.

Finally, we asked a series of questions assessing how much support there would be for third party candidates. On the whole, 6.8 percent of respondents indicated they would never support third-party candidates and 15.9 percent say they have voted for third party candidates in the past. People who identify themselves with an existing party, however, may be less likely to support third parties because of their pre-existing attachments. In the data, this is not supported:

4.9 percent of Republicans say they would never support third-party candidates and 8.4 of Democrats indicate the same.

Finally, we asked about the conditions under which existing party members would support third-party candidates. Looking at Republicans first, we find that less than half would support them even if they stood a reasonable chance of winning and less than half would support them even if they did not like the candidate being run by the two major parties. Among Democrats we see the same trend; slightly more than half would support a third-party candidate if they stood a reasonable chance of winning and less than half would support them even if they didn't like the other major-party candidates running. Among both Republicans and Democrats, we find only one condition that garners support for third-party candidates: if voters perceive this candidate's positions on the issues as closer to their own. There are two chief explanations for this trend: it reflects social desirability bias as citizens want to appear fair and open-minded or it could reflect the genuine desire of voters to select candidates who best represent their interests.

Perhaps most surprisingly here are the attitudes of those who identify as neither close to the Republican nor Democratic parties. We notice no big differences between partisan and non-partisan identifiers. Non-partisans tend to already support third-party candidates at a slightly higher rate than partisan identifiers, but in every other category, they are less likely to support third-party candidates. If this survey is repeated, it would be helpful to dig into the questions raised here in more detail.

Support For Third Party Candidates

■Republicans ■Democrats ▢ Neither Republicans nor Democrats

Source: Florida Southern College Center for Polling and Policy Research
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Methodology

Students from Florida Southern College, under the supervision of their instructor, designed this poll and fielded results on November 20, 2017. Using Survey Monkey's Audience product, we drew a sample of 1,380 respondents from their online panel, 1,124 of whom completed the questionnaire. Our respondents represented to Survey Monkey they are at least 18 years old, live in the United States, and they all have access to the internet. All survey instruments and protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Florida Southern College before implementation.

Due to our use of an online panel, there are some inherent questions about the characteristics of our respondents. Here, I compare the characteristics of those individuals who completed our questionnaire to information from the 2016 Census Bureau estimate of the U.S. population. Starting with gender, our sample is slightly more female than the population as a whole (53.3 percent in the sample compared to 50.8 percent in the population as a whole). Turning to age, our sample contains no respondents below the age of 18, 19.16 percent are between 18 and 29 years old, 27.72 percent are between 30 and 44, 25.76 are between 45 and 60, and 27.36 percent are over the age of 60. Finally, examining the income distribution of our respondents we find that those toward the bottom of the income distribution are represented at slightly lower rates than those at the top. Specifically, 14.8 percent report incomes below $25,000 (compared to 20.8 percent nationally in 2016), 20.05 percent between $25,000 and $49,999 (compared to 22.3 percent), 15.15 percent between $50,000 and $74,999 (compared to 17 percent), 13.10 percent between $75,000 and $99,999 (compared to 12.3 percent), and 24.95 percent with incomes above $100,000 (compared to 27.7 percent). Overall, our sample appears to broadly reflect the characteristics of the U.S. population on these dimensions.

Top-Line Results

All cells are percent values

Question 1: In politics today, do you think of yourself as:

A Strong Republican	11.83
More Republican than Democrat	18.95
More Democrat than Republican	21.80
A Strong Democrat	22.51
Not Close to either Democrats or Republicans	24.91

Question 2: To what degree to you agree or disagree with the following statements

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
The Democratic Party needs to be reformed	42.70	34.11	9.49	3.58	10.03
The Republican Party needs to be reformed	59.96	22.04	6.52	3.12	8.36

Question 3: Thinking specifically about the REPUBLICAN PARTY, what reforms – if any – do you believe are necessary? (Choose all that apply)

Change how presidential candidates are selected	38.35
Change how the party makes decisions	48.04
Change who leads the party	48.58
Change the party's positions on the issues	52.94
Change the amount of contact they have with voters	24.64
No changes are necessary	7.30
Other (please specify)	16.37

Question 4: Thinking specifically about the DEMOCRATIC PARTY, what reforms – if any – do you believe are necessary? (Choose all that apply)

Change how presidential candidates are selected	38.41
Change how the party makes decisions	47.24
Change who leads the party	44.93
Change the party's positions on the issues	42.08
Change the amount of contact they have with voters	26.51
No changes are necessary	11.83
Other (please specify)	12.72

Question 5: Thinking about each party's positions on the issues, do you think they need to become more liberal, more conservative, or stay the same?

Republican Party

	Stay the Same	More Conservative	More Liberal	Total
Gun Control	30.78	26.43	42.91	100
Environmental Policy	21.96	22.50	55.54	100
Taxes	24.39	29.36	46.25	100
Healthcare	15.90	24.75	59.35	100
Immigration	21.33	27.78	50.90	100

Democratic Party

	Stay the Same	More Conservative	More Liberal	Total
Gun Control	34.88	42.19	22.93	100
Environmental Policy	44.03	32.52	23.45	100
Taxes	28.98	48.96	22.05	100
Healthcare	34.41	35.86	29.73	100
Immigration	32.28	46.31	21.40	100

Question 6: Under what circumstances could you see yourself voting for a third party candidate? (Choose all that apply)

If they stood a reasonable chance of winning the election	45.91
If their positions on their issues were closer to my own	68.95
If I don't like the other party's candidates	39.32
I would never vote for a third party candidate	6.76
I already vote for third party candidates	15.93
Other (please specify)	5.34

Question 7: How much would you support the following changes to American political processes?

	Strongly Approve	Somewhat Approve	Somewhat Disapprove	Strongly Disapprove	I Don't Know
Changing the Constitution to allow for more than two parties to regularly win elections	31.90	26.90	10.01	17.61	13.58
Voting for parties, but not candidates. Parties would then choose who serves	5.18	9.65	12.78	65.06	7.33
Listing only the names of candidates on the ballot, but not their party affiliations	13.21	21.52	19.91	35.71	9.64

The next question is a survey experiment. Half of respondents were told "members of their party" were advocating change and the other half were told "Americans for Reform, a non-partisan citizen group seeking to clean-up government" has been advocating for the change.

Question 8: [Members of your party] OR [Americans for Reform, a non-partisan citizen group seeking to clean-up government] have been advocating for the use of open primaries nation-wide. Open primaries allow all registered voters, not just registered party members, to have a voice in selecting a party's presidential nominee. How much do you support these efforts?

	Members of Your Party	Americans for Reform
Strongly Support	41.35	38.34
Moderately Support	27.07	29.22
Moderately Oppose	8.27	7.09
Strongly Oppose	11.47	9.29
I don't know	11.87	16.05
Total	100	100