



The Associated Press-NORC  
Center for Public Affairs Research

# AMIDST THE PANDEMIC, CONFIDENCE IN THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY BECOMES INCREASINGLY POLARIZED

Political divisions on confidence in the scientific and medical communities have widened, according to an analysis of the 2021 General Social Survey (GSS) by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The survey, conducted a year into the pandemic, finds confidence in the scientific community has increased among Democrats between 2018 and 2021, but fell among Republicans.

Forty-eight percent of Americans overall have a great deal of confidence in the scientific community. But there is now a 30-point gap in confidence between Democrats and Republicans, up from a 9-point gap in 2018. In 2021, 64% of Democrats have a great deal of confidence in the scientific community, whereas only 34% of Republicans say the same.

A similar pattern, though less severe, is observed for confidence in medicine. Thirty-eight percent of Americans overall report a great deal of confidence in medicine in 2021, though confidence is higher among Democrats (45%) than Republicans (34%).

While Democrats historically tend to have greater trust in the scientific community and both parties exhibited similar levels of trust in medicine in the last two decades, this political polarization increased between 2018 and 2021 as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and health and vaccine information became increasingly politicized.



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## Three Things You Should Know

From the 2021 General Social Survey  
Among American adults:

- 1) There is growing polarization in confidence in science with Democrats (64%) more confident than Republicans (34%). This 30-point gap is up from 9 points in 2018.
- 2) In 2021, 45% of Democrats and 34% of Republicans had a great deal of confidence in medicine. There was no partisan gap in 2018 when 37% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans had a great deal of confidence.
- 3) Overall confidence in education decreased from 26% in 2018 to 18% in 2021.

The shifts in confidence in science and medicine also come at a time when public support for the U.S. government covering medical costs is at its highest in the last decade at 37%. Similarly, in 2021, 45% of Americans overall felt federal spending on scientific research was too low.

Confidence dropped in other institutions impacted by the pandemic, such as education. With the pandemic uprooting classroom instruction across the country, overall confidence in education decreased between 2018 (26%) and 2021 (18%) after remaining relatively stable since 2000. Both Democrats and Republicans express lower confidence in education in 2021.

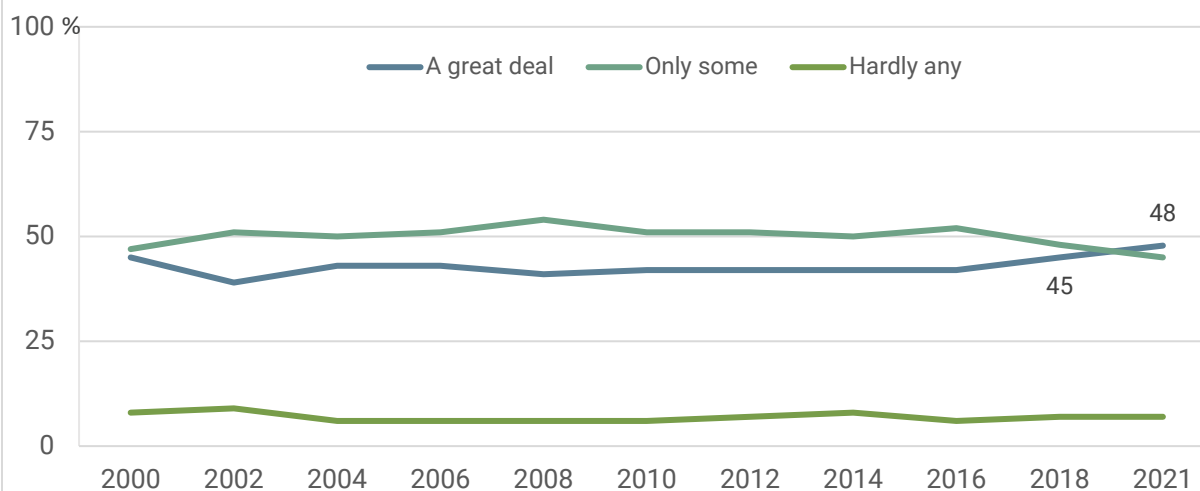
Regarding sources of information, confidence in the press remains low. However, confidence among Democrats ticked up in 2018 (19%) and remains steady in 2021 (18%). Democrats are more likely than Republicans to express a great deal of confidence in the press (18% vs. 3%).

There is also a decrease in confidence in organized religion between 2018 (21%) and 2021 (15%). While Republicans' confidence in organized religion has held steady, both Democrats (17% in 2018 to 12% in 2021) and, particularly, independents (26% in 2018 to 12% in 2021), have seen a dip in those who had a great deal of confidence in the institution.

The 2021 GSS was conducted December 1, 2020 through May 3, 2021 and includes interviews from 4,032 American adults. Results for the full sample have a margin of error of plus or minus 2.0 at the 95 percent confidence level. The sampling error may be higher for subgroups and due to other non-sampling errors. Changes in opinions, attitudes, and behaviors observed in 2021 relative to historical trends may be due to actual change in concept over time and/or may have resulted from methodological changes made to the survey methodology during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

### Overall confidence in the scientific community remains steady.

Percent of adults



**Question:** [Scientific community] I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

**Source:** General Social Survey, the latest conducted December 1, 2020-May 3, 2021

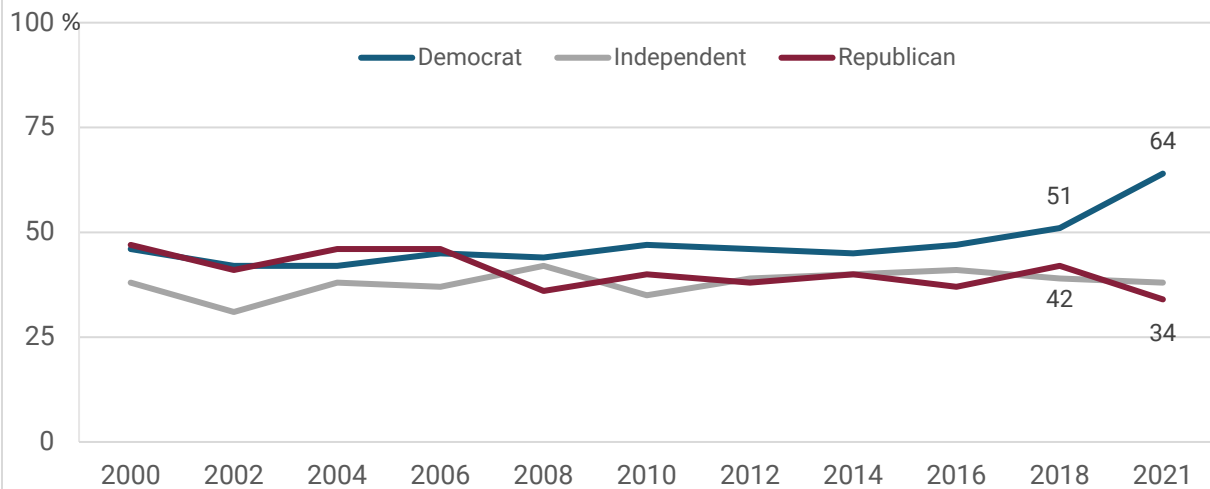
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In 2018, 51% of Democrats and 42% of Republicans had a great deal of confidence in the scientific community. By 2021, that gap widened significantly to 30, with nearly two-thirds of Democrats expressing confidence compared to one-third of Republicans.

**Large partisan gap on confidence in the scientific community.**

Percent of adults who have a great deal of confidence



**Question:** [Scientific community] I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

**Source:** General Social Survey, the latest conducted December 1, 2020-May 3, 2021

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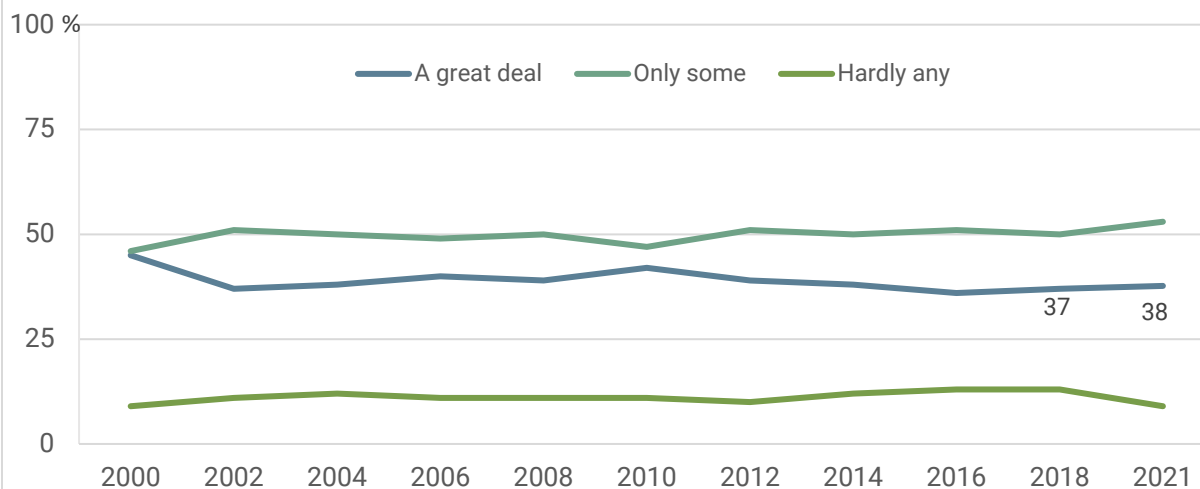
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## THE PARTISAN GAP IN CONFIDENCE IN MEDICINE ALSO WIDENED BETWEEN 2018 AND 2021.

A similar pattern, though less striking, is seen with the public's confidence in medicine: while the overall trend in confidence held steady, the partisan gap widened since 2018. In 2021, 38% of Americans overall reported a great deal of confidence in medicine.

**Overall confidence in medicine remains steady.**

Percent of adults



**Question:** [Medicine] I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

**Source:** General Social Survey, the latest conducted December 1, 2020-May 3, 2021

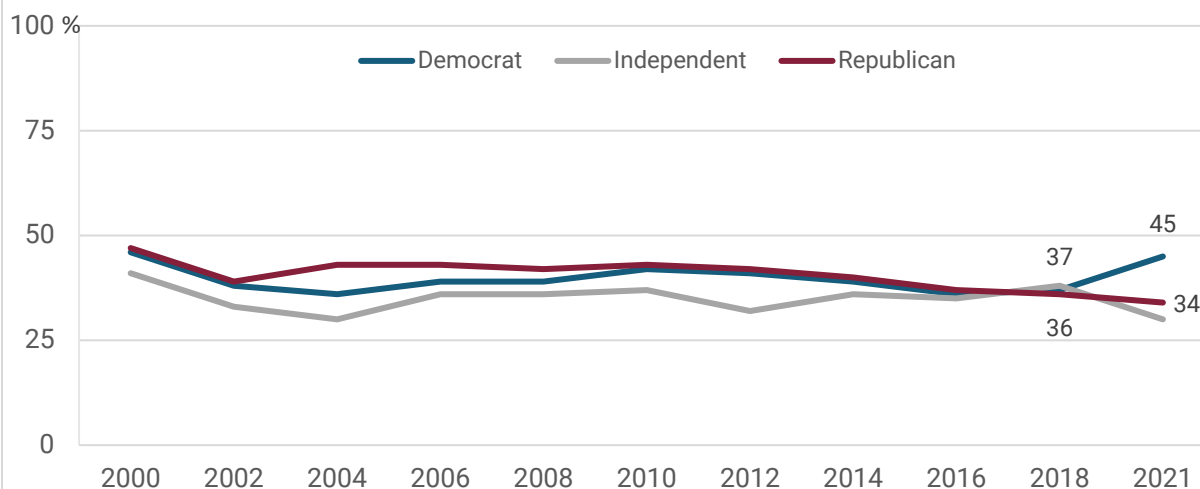
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In 2018, 37% of Democrats, 36% of Republicans, and 38% of independents had a great deal of confidence in medicine. By 2021, an 11-point gap emerged with 45% of Democrats having a great deal of confidence compared to 34% of Republicans and 30% of independents.

**Partisan gap emerges on confidence in medicine.**

Percent of adults who have a great deal of confidence



**Question:** [Medicine] I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

**Source:** General Social Survey, the latest conducted December 1, 2020-May 3, 2021

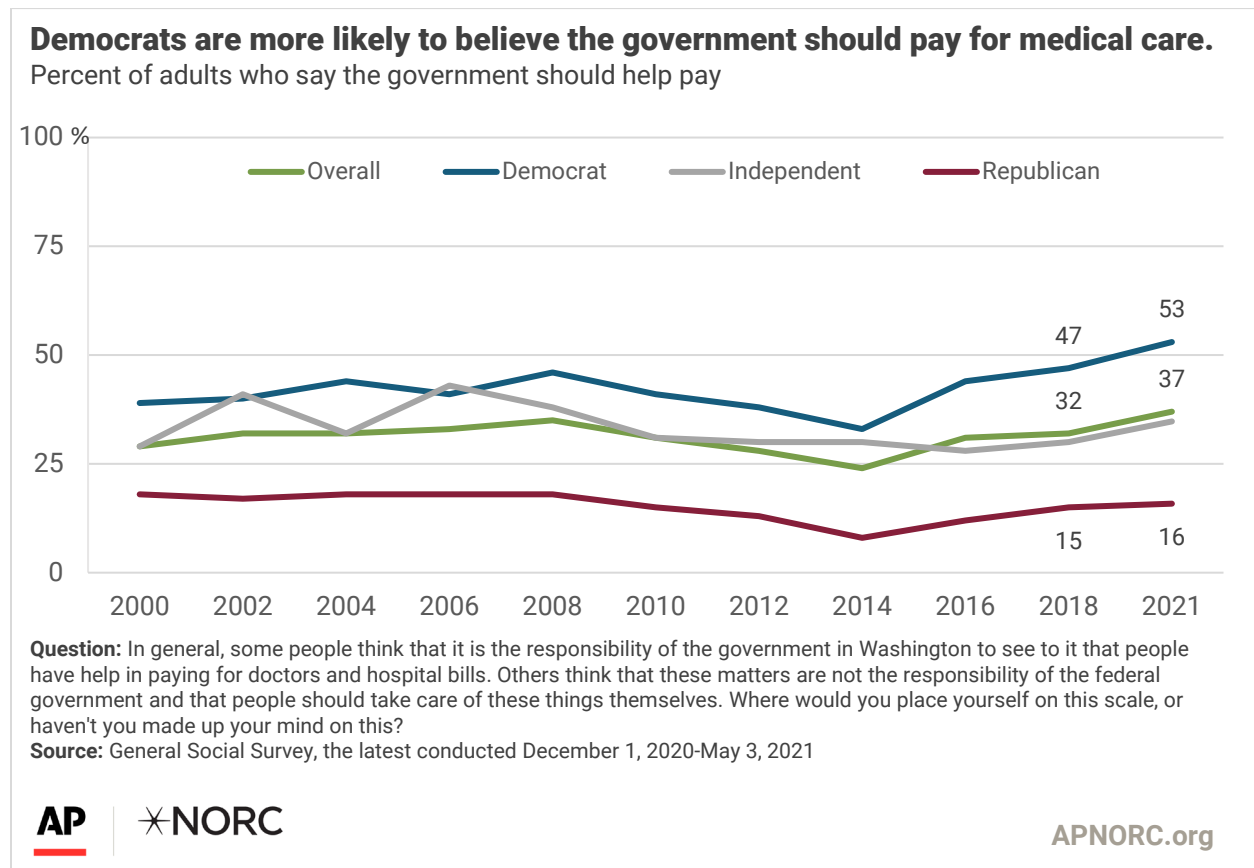
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## SUPPORT INCREASES FOR GOVERNMENT SPENDING TO PAY FOR MEDICAL CARE, BUT NOT FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH.

Shifts in confidence in science and medicine come at a time when public support for the U.S. government covering medical costs is at its highest in the last decade, with 37% of Americans<sup>1</sup> feeling the government should help.

This has remained a partisan issue, though support among both Democrats and Republicans increased. Thirty-three percent of Democrats felt the government should help pay for medical care in 2014 and that increased to 53% in 2021. In 2021, just 16% of Republicans felt the government should help pay for medical care compared to 8% in 2014.

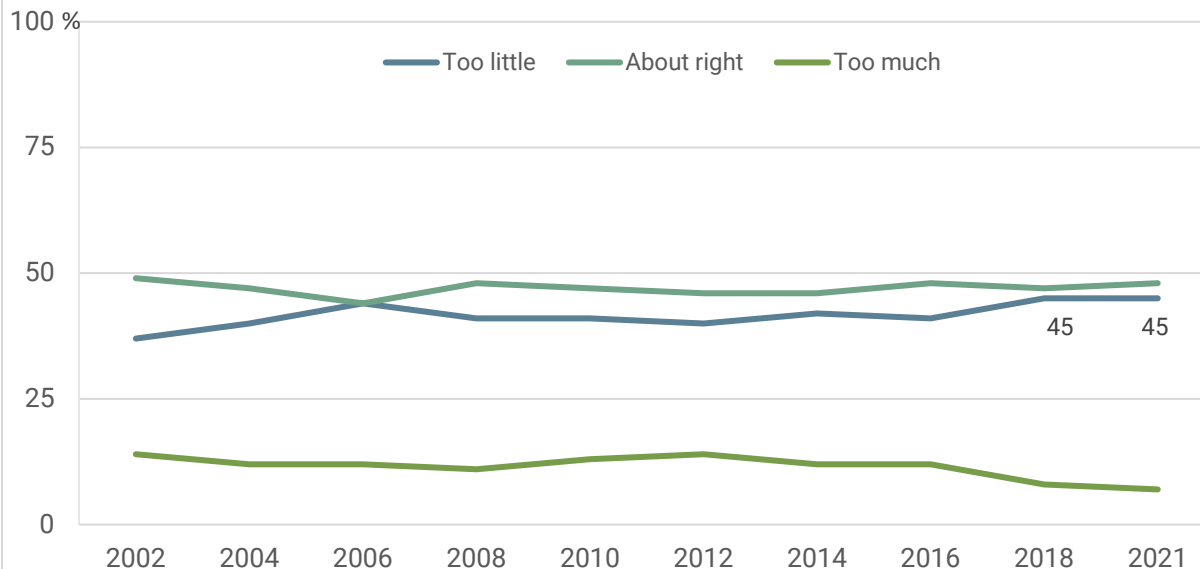


In 2021, 45% of Americans felt government is spending too little on scientific research, the same as 2018.

<sup>1</sup> Response options are a 5-point scale where 1 indicates the respondent believes the government should help, 3 indicates agreement with both, and 5 indicates that the respondent believes people should care for themselves. 2 and 4 indicate mid-range response options between agreement and each side. Data reported are respondents who answered 1) The government should help.

## Preferences on spending for scientific research remained steady between 2018 and 2021.

Percent of adults



**Question:** [Supporting scientific research] Let's begin with some things people think about today. We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount.

**Source:** General Social Survey, the latest conducted December 1, 2020-May 3, 2021

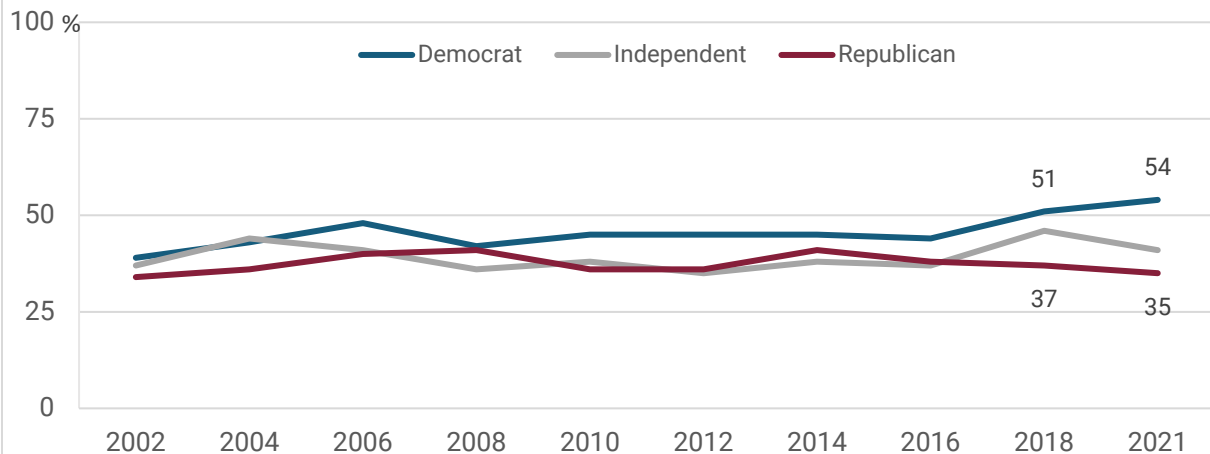
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Democrats and Republicans felt similarly about national spending for scientific research at the beginning of the millennium. However, in the last five years, more Democrats than Republicans have felt the scientific community receives insufficient funding from the national government, a gap that widened since 2016. Democrats were more likely than Republicans to believe too little national funding is dedicated to scientific research in 2016 (44% vs. 38%), 2018 (51% vs. 37%), and 2021 (54% vs. 35%).

### Most Democrats believe scientific research receives insufficient government funding.



**Question:** [Supporting scientific research] Let's begin with some things people think about today. We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount.

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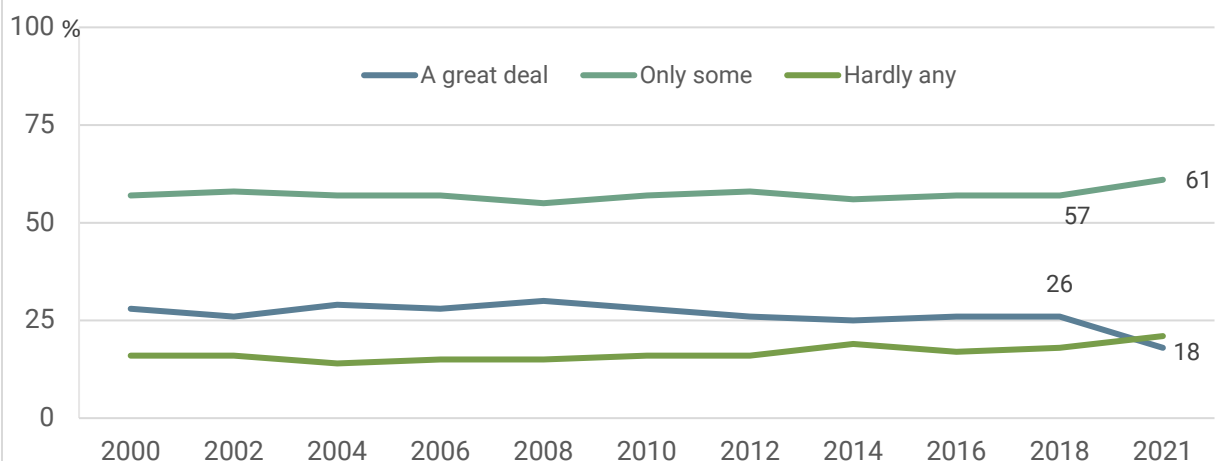
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### AMIDST THE PANDEMIC, CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION DECREASES.

With the COVID-19 pandemic uprooting classroom instruction across the country, overall confidence in education decreased between 2018 and 2021 after remaining relatively stable since 2000. In 2018, 26% of Americans reported a great deal of confidence in education, while just 18% felt the same amount of confidence in 2021.

### Overall confidence in education has dropped.

Percent of adults



**Question:** [Education] I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

**Source:** General Social Survey, the latest conducted December 1, 2020-May 3, 2021

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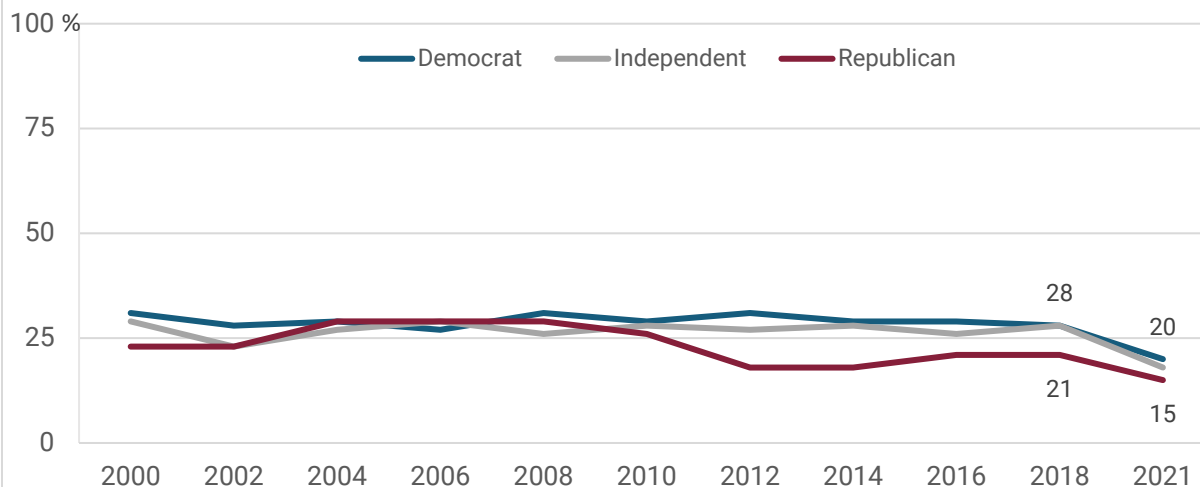
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Democrats were more confident than Republicans in education throughout the early 2010s, but this gap closed in the last few years, with both parties demonstrating decreases in confidence with the education system between 2018 and 2021. In 2021, just 20% Democrats and 15% of Republicans possessed a great deal of confidence in education.

### Confidence in education has decreased across all political affiliations.

Percent of adults who have a great deal of confidence



**Question:** [Education] I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

**Source:** General Social Survey, the latest conducted December 1, 2020-May 3, 2021

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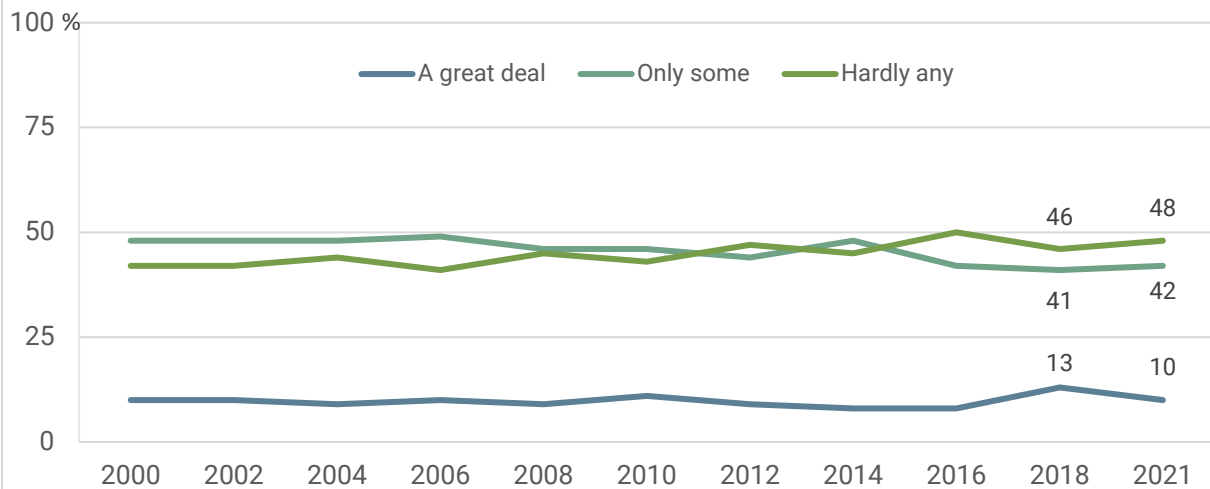
## THE PUBLIC MAINTAINS A LOW LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE IN THE PRESS AND TELEVISION.

When it comes to sources of information, confidence in the press has remained low since 2000, with less than 15% expressing a great deal of confidence.



**Confidence in the press remains low.**

Percent of adults



**Question:** [Press] I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

**Source:** General Social Survey, the latest conducted December 1, 2020-May 3, 2021

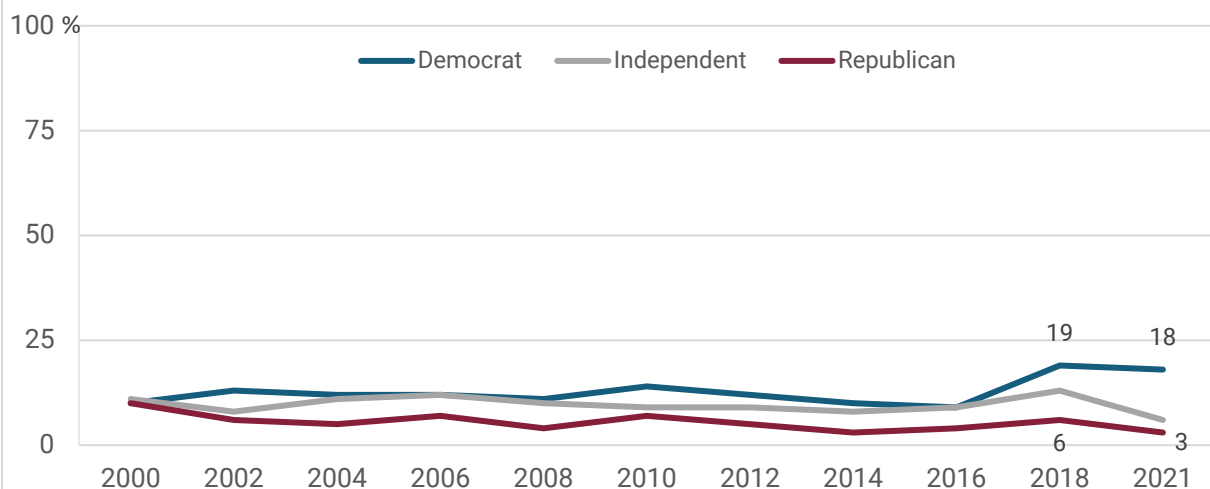
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This increase in confidence is particularly driven by Democrats, who were more likely than Republicans to express a great deal of confidence in the press in 2018 (19% vs. 6%) and 2021 (18% vs. 3%).

**Democrats increased their confidence in the press in the last five years.**

Percent of adults who have a great deal of confidence



**Question:** [Press] I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

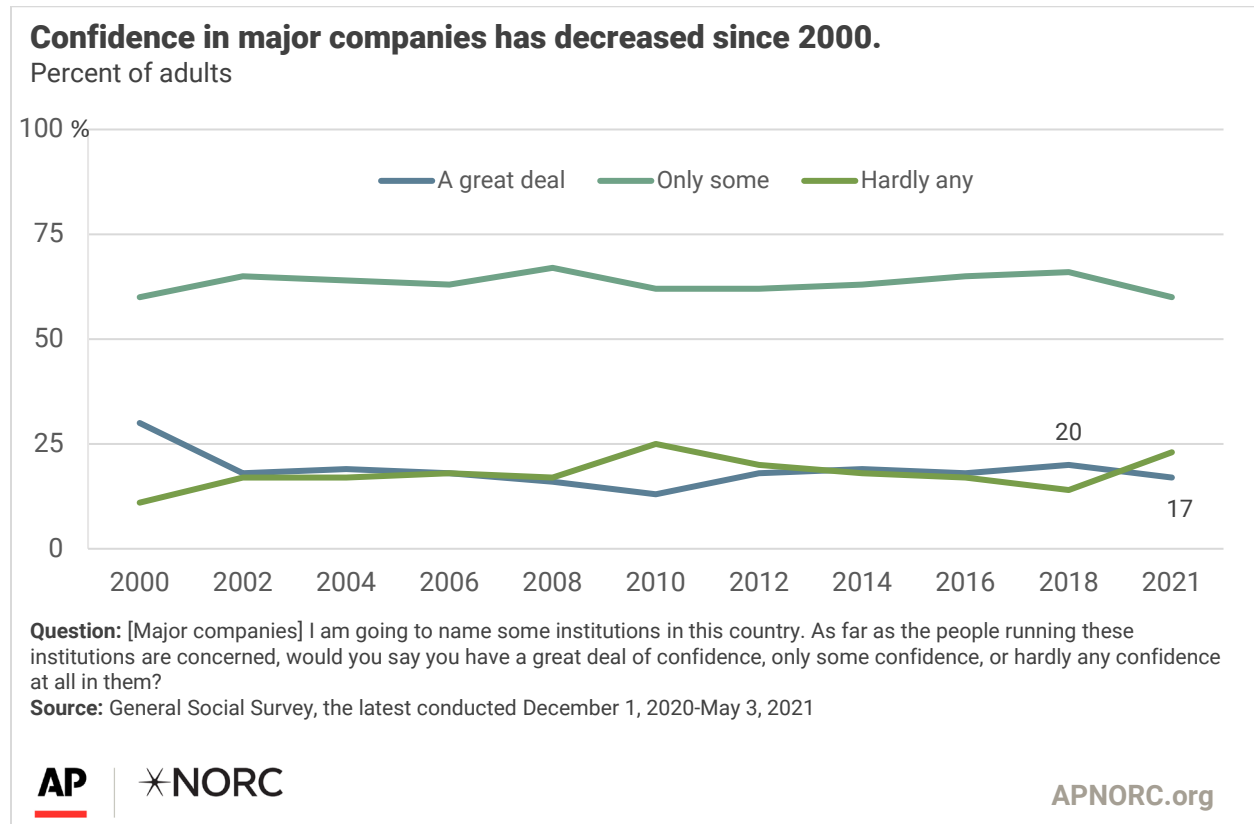
**Source:** General Social Survey, the latest conducted December 1, 2020-May 3, 2021

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## CONFIDENCE IN ORGANIZED RELIGION AND MAJOR COMPANIES HAS DECREASED SINCE THE START OF THE MILLENIUM, BUT REPUBLICANS REMAIN MORE LIKELY TO HOLD GREATER CONFIDENCE IN BOTH.

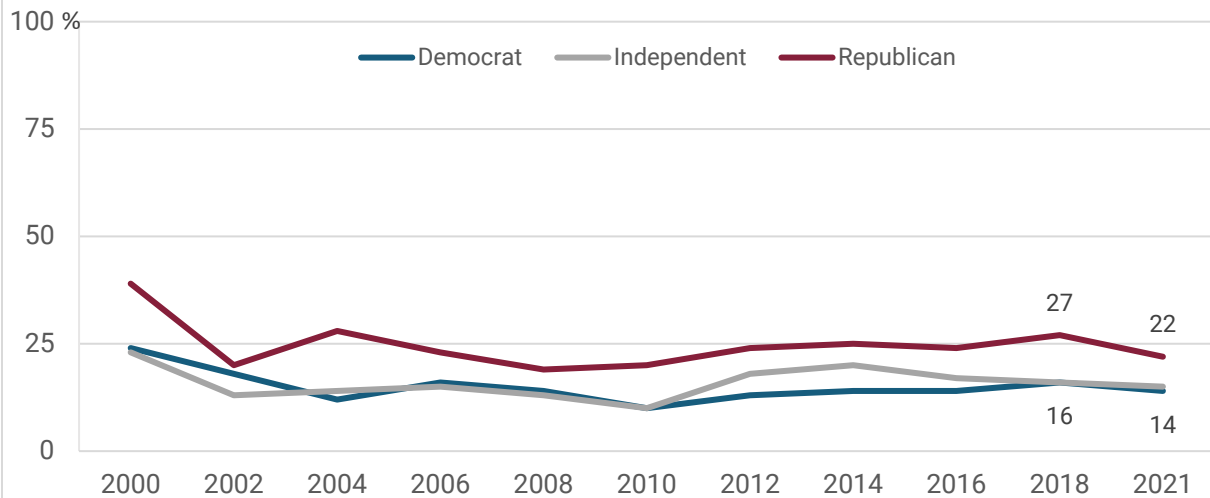
The public's confidence in major companies decreased since the start of the millennium, though no major shifts were observed between 2018 and 2021.



Republicans have historically expressed more confidence in major companies than Democrats or independents. In 2018, 27% of Republicans expressed a great deal of confidence in major companies, compared to 16% of Democrats. In 2021, 22% of Republicans felt the same compared to 14% of Democrats.

## Republicans historically expressed more confidence in major companies.

Percent of adults who have a great deal of confidence



**Question:** [Major companies] I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

**Source:** General Social Survey, the latest conducted December 1, 2020-May 3, 2021

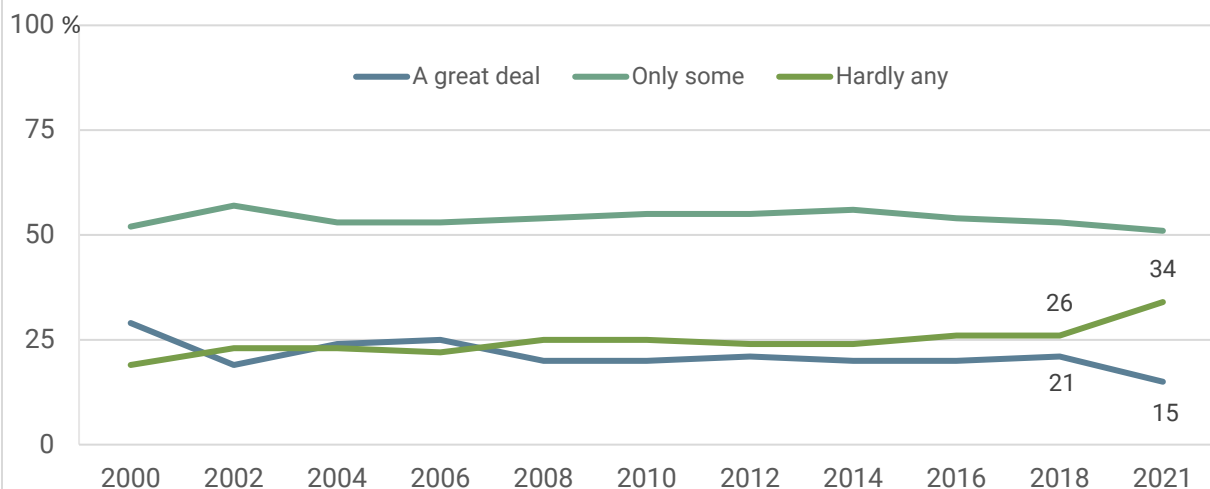
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Similarly, fewer Americans have a great deal of confidence in organized religion. Thirty-four percent have hardly any confidence, up from 26% in 2018.

## Confidence in organized religion decreased between 2018 and 2021.

Percent of adults



**Question:** [Organized religion] I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

**Source:** General Social Survey, the latest conducted December 1, 2020-May 3, 2021

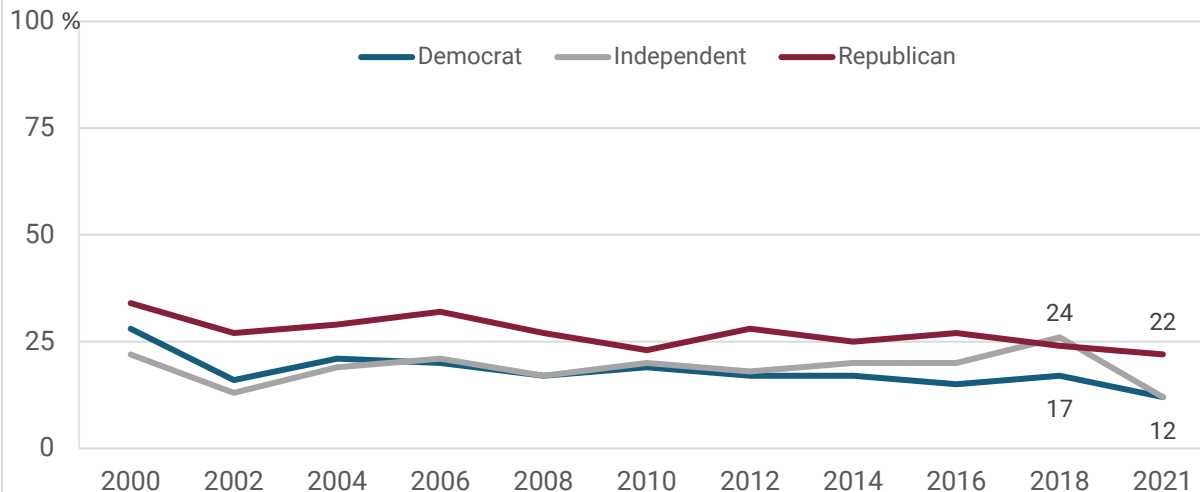
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Republicans are historically more likely to express a great deal of confidence in organized religion, which has held steady between 2018 and 2021. Both Democrats (17% to 12%) and, particularly, independents (26% to 12%) saw a dip in confidence between 2018 and 2021.

### Fewer Democrats and independents confident in organized religion.

Percent of adults who have a great deal of confidence



**Question:** [Organized religion] I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

**Source:** General Social Survey, the latest conducted December 1, 2020-May 3, 2021



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## STUDY METHODOLOGY

The General Social Survey (GSS) is administered by NORC at the University of Chicago, primarily using in-person interviewing. The GSS started in 1972 and completed its 33rd round from December 2020 to May 2021. For the last 40 years, the GSS has been monitoring societal change and the growing complexity of American society. The GSS is the largest project funded by the Sociology Program of the National Science Foundation. The typical sample size was 1,500 prior to 1994 but increased to 2,700-3,000 until 2008 and decreased to 2,000-2,500 for the most recent surveys. Resulting margins of error are between +/- 3.1 for the smaller sample sizes and +/- 2.2 percentage points for the larger sample sizes at the 95% confidence level.

The 2021 GSS was conducted December 1, 2020 through May 3, 2021 and includes interviews from 4,032 American adults. Results for the full sample have a margin of error of plus or minus 2.0 at the 95 percent confidence level. The sampling error may be higher for subgroups and due to other non-sampling errors. Changes in opinions, attitudes, and behaviors observed in 2021 relative to historical trends may be due to actual change in concept over time and/or may have resulted from methodological changes made to the survey methodology during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

To safeguard the health of staff and respondents during the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 GSS data collection used a mail-to-web methodology instead of its traditional in-person interviews. Research and interpretation done using the data should take extra care to ensure the analysis reflects actual changes in public opinion and is not unduly influenced by the change in data collection methods. For more information on the 2021 GSS methodology and its implications, please visit

<https://gss.norc.org/Get-The-Data>

## CONTRIBUTING RESEARCHERS

### From NORC at the University of Chicago

Marjorie Connelly  
Betsy Broaddus  
Semilla Stripp  
Mariana Hernandez  
Ridgely Knapp  
Jennifer Benz  
Trevor Tompson

### From The Associated Press

Hannah Fingerhut  
Emily Swanson

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