

Distrust in Leaders, Faith in Rules: How Political Pessimism Divides Americans—and Brings Them Together

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between December 10 and 18, 2025, Florida State University's Institute for Governance and Civics (IGC) conducted a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults to examine how political pessimism—defined as skepticism toward political elites— influences Americans evaluation of governance. The results show that political pessimism pushes liberals and conservatives further apart in how they view the economic system but brings them together in support of institutional rules that constrain partisan power. Key findings include:

- **Political pessimism is widespread and cuts across partisan and ideological lines**

Pessimism toward political leaders is common across the public—and is not limited to any one party or ideology.

- **Pessimism pushes liberals and conservatives in different economic directions**

As liberals grow more pessimistic about political leaders, they become more critical of capitalism and more open to socialism. Among conservatives, rising pessimism is linked to stronger concerns about government overreach and colder views of socialism, while support for capitalism remains strong or increases.

- **Political pessimism strengthens support for institutional safeguards.**

Americans who are more pessimistic about political leaders are more likely to support rules that limit partisan power regardless of which party holds office.

INTRODUCTION

Public trust in American political institutions and leaders has reached historic lows, with only 17% of Americans saying they trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time”.¹

To better understand the feelings and

impacts of contemporary political pessimism, the Institute for Governance and Civics at Florida State University included a set of targeted questions in its December 2025 nationally representative survey of U.S. adults. These items capture skepticism toward political actors across multiple dimensions. We also included

questions regarding respondents' judgments about who rises to positions of power and beliefs about the corrupting effects of political authority. We then examine how those views influence their beliefs about the economy and political institutions.

AMERICANS HOLD DEEPLY PESSIMISTIC VIEWS OF POLITICAL LEADERS

Americans express strikingly pessimistic views of political leadership.

Across five questions that examine perceptions of politicians' motives, competence, understanding of long-term consequences, susceptibility to corruption and decisions on who runs for office, the most common response given reflects a negative assessment of politicians' incentives and behavior (Table 1).

Only 5% of Americans say politicians are motivated mostly by what is best for the public, while nearly 69% say

Table 1. Correct Answer Rates Across Basic Civic Knowledge Questions

Item	Response Type			
	Positive	Mixed	Negative	Not Sure
Are politicians motivated more by what is best for the public or by what is best for themselves?	Mostly what's best for the public 5%	About equally 22%	Mostly what's best for themselves 69%	4%
How well do politicians understand the intended and unintended consequences of the policies they support?	Very/Somewhat well 34%	---	Not very/Not at all well 60%	6%
Politicians tend to focus too much on short-term effects rather than long-term effects of policies	Disagree 5%	Neither 19%	Agree 75%	---
Are people who rise to political office usually the best or worst suited to lead?	Usually the best 3%	Even mix 61%	Usually the worst 28%	8%
To what extent does holding political power tend to corrupt people?	Not much/Not at all 4%	Somewhat 28%	A great deal/A lot 64%	3%

Note: Data (N=1,533) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S adult population. Full question wording and response scales appear in the report's crosstabs document.

politicians are motivated mostly by what is best for themselves. The remaining 22% say politicians are motivated equally by public and personal considerations.

Pessimism extends to perceptions of competence. A majority of Americans (60%) say politicians have a poor understanding of the intended and unintended consequences of the policies they enact. By contrast, only 34% believe politicians understand policy consequences “very” or “somewhat” well. Three-quarters (75%) agree that politicians tend to focus too much on the short-term effects of social policies rather than their long-term consequences, while just 5% disagree.

Views of political leadership are somewhat more mixed. Twenty-eight percent say those who rise to power are usually the worst suited to lead. Most Americans (61%) describe the pool as an “even mix” of best and worst. Only 3% say those who rise to political office are usually the best suited to lead. Also, Americans broadly endorse the idea that political power is corrupting. Two-thirds (64%) say holding political power tends to corrupt people “a great deal” or “a lot.” Just 4% say power corrupts “not much” or “not at all.”

Nearly identical shares of Democrats and Republicans say that most politicians are motivated more by self-interest

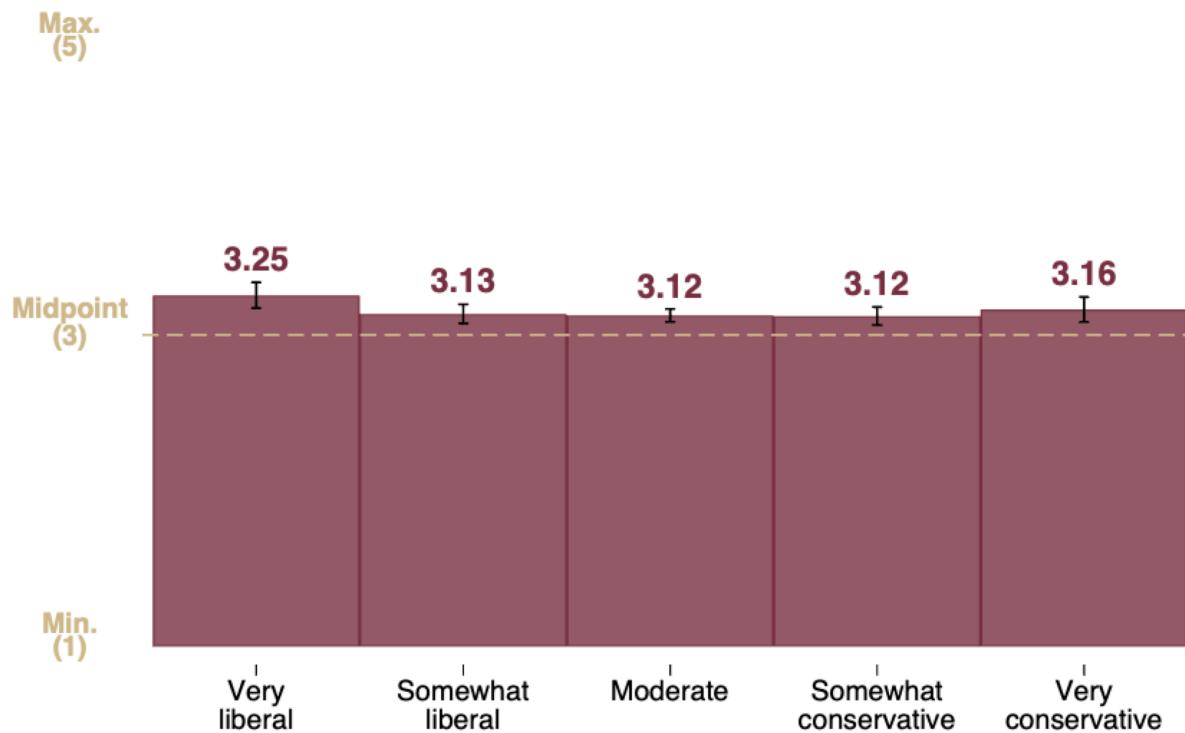
POLITICAL PESSIMISM CUTS ACROSS POLITICAL LINES

These pessimistic views track across political and demographic groups. No major group stands out as consistently positive toward political leaders. For example, nearly identical shares of Democrats (68%) and Republicans (67%) say that most politicians are motivated more by self-interest rather than by what is best for the public. Views that politicians focus too much on the short-term effects of social policies show a similar pattern, ranging from 74% among Democrats to 81% among Republicans.

To summarize these patterns and make the modest size of ideological differences easier to see, we combine responses across the five items into a single “political pessimism” index.² Figure 1 shows average pessimism index values across a five-point scale. The results show that pessimism toward political leaders remains high across the ideological spectrum. While very liberal respondents score slightly higher on average, these differences are modest and disappear once demographic and other background characteristics are taken into account.

Where differences in political pessimism do emerge—most often by race/ethnicity and education—they appear mainly in neutral responses, not in favorable views of political leaders, which remain rare across all groups.³

Figure 1. Average Political Pessimism Index Scores, by Ideology



Note: Data (N = 1,500) are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. Bars show average scores on a political pessimism index constructed by averaging responses across five items (see Table 1). Higher scores indicate greater pessimism. Respondents (n = 33) who answered two or fewer of the five items or did not report an ideological affiliation are excluded. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

POLITICAL PESSIMISM HEIGHTENS CONCERN ABOUT GOVERNMENT OVERREACH—ESPECIALLY ON THE RIGHT

While political pessimism is broadly similar across population groups, how people react to it is not. One place this difference becomes clear is in perceptions of government overreach. As pessimism rises, conservatives become much more likely than liberals to say the federal government has “too much influence” in key sectors of the economy.

Figure 2 illustrates this pattern by showing how increases in political

pessimism are associated with increases in the perception that the government has too much influence across five sectors. Changes in perception are shown separately for liberals, moderates, and conservatives. Across all domains, higher pessimism corresponds to greater concern about government overreach, but the size of this effect varies sharply by ideology and sector.

The clearest difference appears in views of government influence in the banking and finance sector. Among conservatives, a one-standard deviation increase in political pessimism is

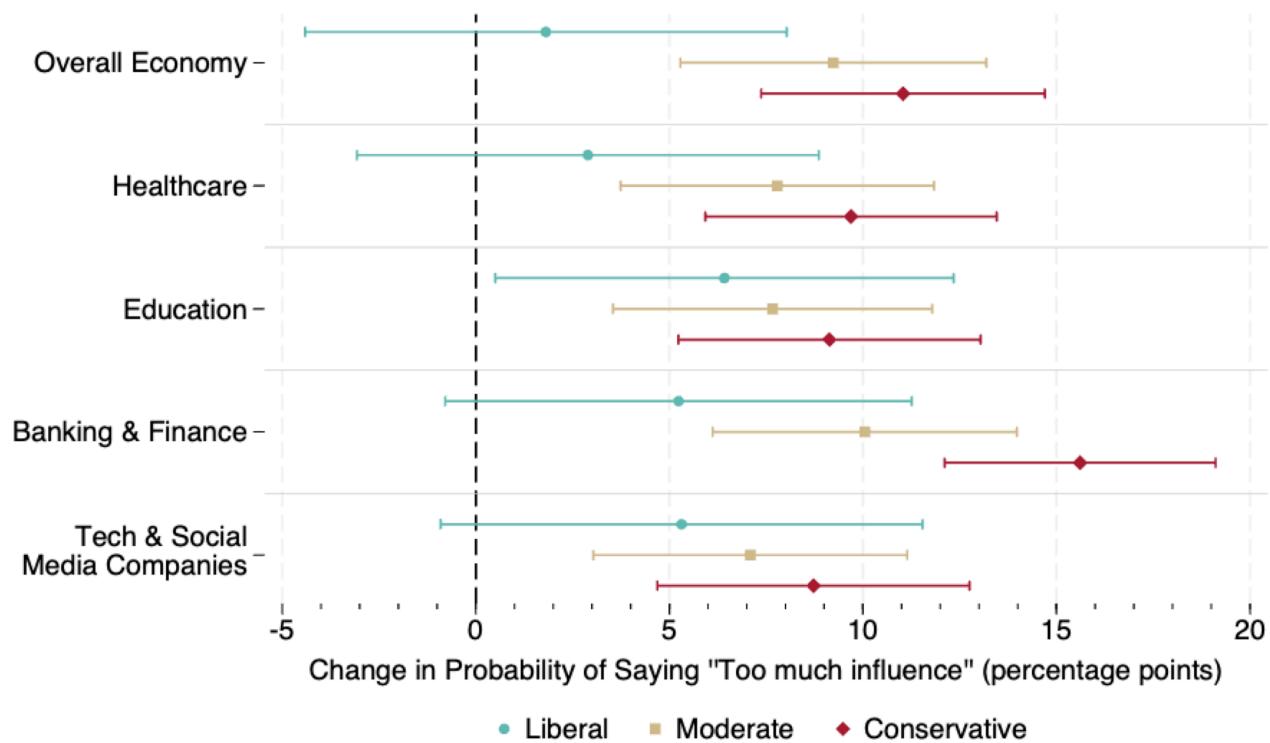
associated with about a 15-point increase in the likelihood of saying the federal government has too much influence. Comparing conservatives at low versus high levels of pessimism, this translates into a rise from roughly 41% to 75—an increase of more than 30 points.

Moderates also show a substantial increase, from about 43% to 63%. By contrast, liberals' views shift more

modestly, rising from roughly 45% for low pessimism respondents to 55% for high pessimism, a difference that does not reach statistical significance.

A similar pattern emerges in most other sectors. Rising pessimism is associated with large and statistically meaningful increases in perceived government overreach among moderates and conservatives, but

Figure 2. Change in Perceptions of Excessive Government Influence as Pessimism Increases, by Ideology



Note: Data (N = 1,469) are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. The full question asked: "In your opinion, do you think the federal government has too much, too little, or about the right amount of influence over each of the following sectors?" Markers represent the average percentage-point change in the probability of saying the government has "a bit too much" or "way too much" influence (versus all other response options) associated with a one-standard deviation increase in political pessimism. Estimates adjust for sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, household income, marital status, number of adults and children in the household, census region, employment status, homeownership, and party identification. Respondents (n=64) with missing data on control variables or ideology, or who answered fewer than three of the pessimism items are excluded. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Full question wording and response scales appear in the report's crosstabs document.

smaller—and often statistically indistinguishable—changes among liberals.

Education stands out as an exception. Across all ideological groups, rising pessimism is associated with significant increases in the likelihood of saying the federal government has too much influence in education. Moving from low to high pessimism predicts a 13-point increase among liberals (from 50% to 63%), increases of 16 points among moderates (46% to 62%) and 19 points among conservatives (51% to 70%). While the increases are somewhat larger for moderates and conservatives, the differences across ideological groups are not statistically significant.

POLITICAL PESSIMISM POLARIZES ATTITUDES TOWARD CAPITALISM AND SOCIALISM

People's views of government control reflect how they think the political and economic system currently operates. But political pessimism may also shape something more basic: how people feel about the system itself. We thus examine if rising pessimism is associated with warmer or colder feelings toward capitalism and socialism.

Overall, respondents express warmer feelings toward capitalism than socialism. On a 0–100 scale, capitalism receives an average rating of about 58, compared with about 34 for socialism. These differences are strongly ideological: conservatives rate capitalism very

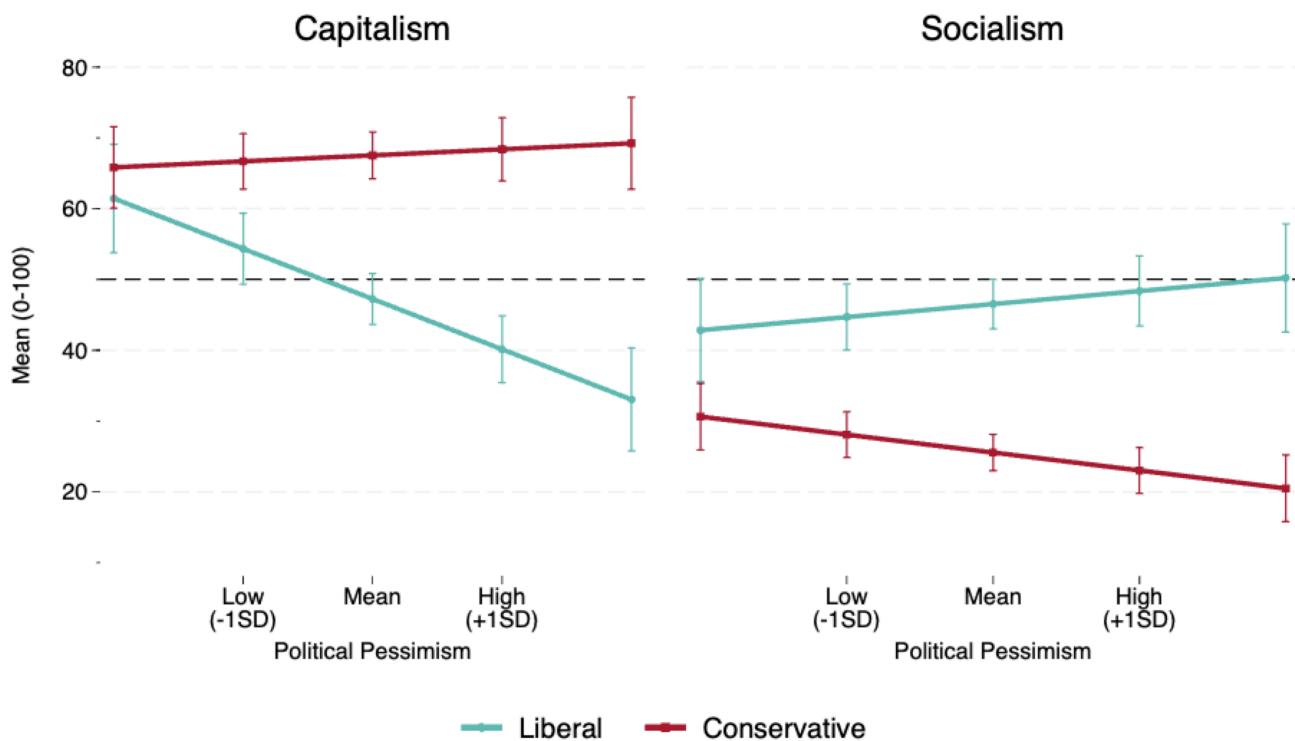
positively (around 74) and socialism very negatively (around 16), while liberals show the opposite pattern, with relatively cooler views of capitalism (around 42) and warmer views of socialism (around 56). Moderates fall between these two groups on both measures.

As their pessimism increases, liberals sour on capitalism. On the other hand, conservatives' already low opinion of socialism drops even further

Given these sharp ideological differences, does political pessimism narrow these divides—or push liberals and conservatives even further apart? Figure 3 shows respondents' feelings towards capitalism and socialism across levels of political pessimism, separately for liberals, moderates, and conservatives.

Attitudes toward capitalism and socialism diverge sharply by ideology. As pessimism toward political leaders rises from relatively low to high, liberals become much less favorable toward capitalism, with average feelings towards capitalism falling from 54 for low pessimism liberals to 40 for liberals with higher pessimism. Conservatives, by contrast, show little change in their support for capitalism. Conservatives' evaluations of capitalism remain strongly positive and even increase slightly, rising from 67 to 69 as their pessimism grows.

Figure 3. Predicted Warmth (0-100) Toward Capitalism and Socialism Across Levels of Political Pessimism, by Ideology



Note: Data (N = 1,348) are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. Lines represent estimated average feeling thermometer ratings (0-100) toward capitalism (left panel) and socialism (right panel) at varying levels of political pessimism. On these 0-100 outcome scales, scores of 0 denote negative feelings, scores of 50 represent neutral feelings, and scores of 100 represent positive feelings. Estimates adjust for sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, household income, marital status, number of adults and children in the household, census region, employment status, homeownership, and party identification. Although estimates at more extreme levels of pessimism (± 2 standard deviations) are shown in the figure, they are not labeled on the x-axis due to the small number of respondents at these extremes. Substantive interpretations focus primarily on differences between -1 and $+1$ standard deviation above the average pessimism level, where the vast majority of respondents fall. Respondents (n = 185) who answered "Don't know" or "Haven't heard enough" to both thermometer items, who are missing data on control variables or ideology, or who answered fewer than three of the pessimism items are excluded.⁴

Views of socialism behave in the opposite manner. As political pessimism increases among liberals, they take a more favorable view toward socialism, with average ratings increasing from 45 to 48. Conservatives, by contrast, become even more strongly opposed to socialism as their political pessimism increase, with

feelings toward socialism falling from 28 to 20.

Increases in pessimism towards political leaders push conservatives and liberals in different directions. As their pessimism increases, liberals sour on capitalism. On the other hand, conservatives' already low opinion of

socialism drops even further as their pessimism in political leaders increases. This suggests that similarly high levels of pessimism in political leaders results in conservative and liberal Americans moving further apart in economic theory, rather than the similar distrust of political leaders bringing people together.

PESSIMISM STRENGTHENS SUPPORT FOR INSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS

If political pessimism reflects doubts about politicians' motives and competence, it may also increase support for rules that limit power and protect citizens.

Even before accounting for political pessimism, Americans express broad support for such safeguards. In our survey, 71% of respondents agree that political rules should be designed so people feel protected even when the other party is in power. Democrats (79%) are more supportive than Republicans (64%)—a gap that likely reflects, at least in part, which party currently holds power—but majorities in both groups favor these protections. A similar pattern appears when Americans are asked about more concrete limits on partisan influence. A majority of respondents (56%)—including 59% of Democrats and 55% of Republicans—oppose allowing political parties to spend unlimited amounts of money to help elect their candidates.

While the enactment of institutional safeguards is broadly popular among the

public, pessimism further strengthens support for them. Figure 4 shows that as pessimism toward political leaders increases, respondents become much more likely to strongly agree that political rules should protect people when their opponents hold office. The predicted probability of strong agreement rises from about 34% among those low in pessimism (one standard deviation below the mean) to just over 50% among those high in pessimism (one standard deviation above). At the same time, weaker and neutral responses decline. The share who somewhat agree falls from 36% to 26%, and the share who feel unsure drops from 23% to 16%. Disagreement remains uncommon at all levels of pessimism (between 4% and 13%).

Political pessimism does not weaken institutional commitments. Instead, it strengthens support for rules and safeguards designed to constrain power and protect citizens, regardless of who governs.

Support for institutional limits also appears in views about campaign finance restrictions. Figure 5 shows that as political pessimism increases, opposition to unlimited party spending rises sharply. Among respondents relatively low in pessimism, just over half (52%) oppose unrestricted party spending. Among

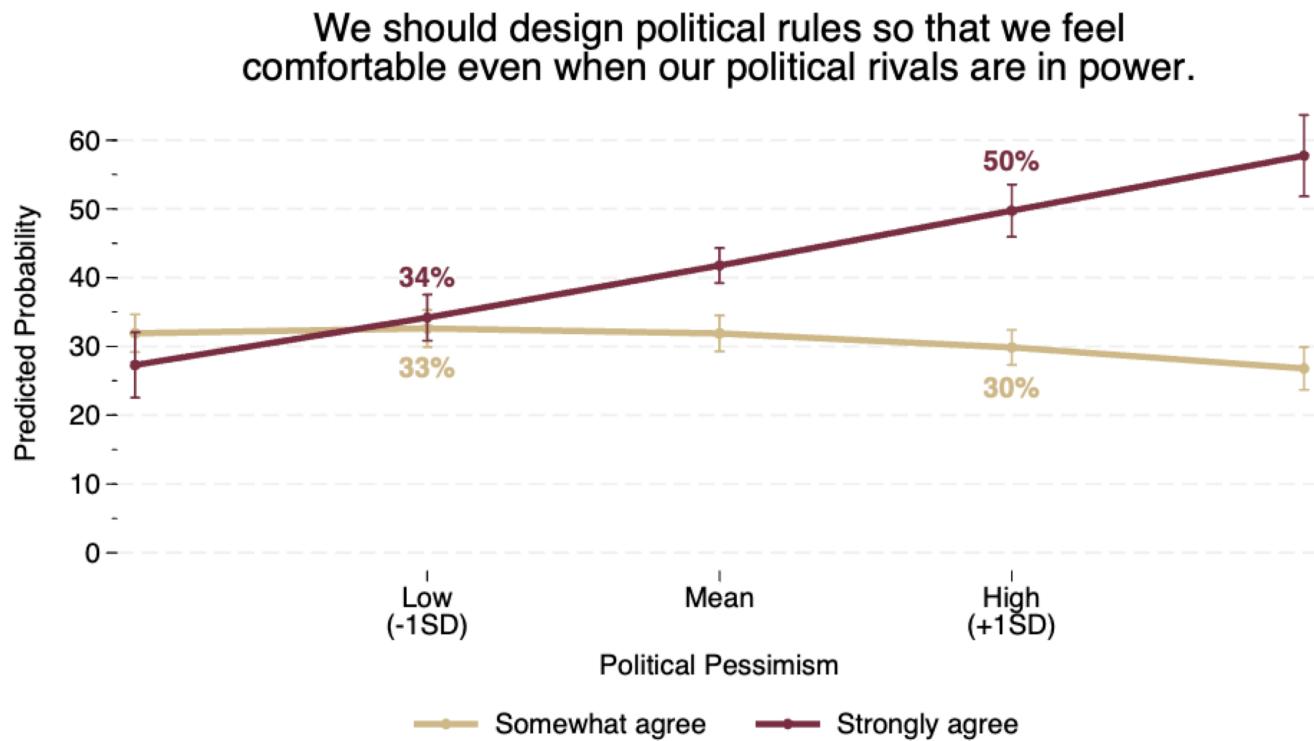
those high in pessimism, 64% do. Over the same range, support for unlimited spending declines from 31% to 21%, indicating a clear shift toward favoring constraints on partisan power.

Importantly, the size of these shifts in support for institutional safeguards does not differ meaningfully by ideology or party. In this domain, political pessimism appears to unite Americans across

partisan lines around limits on partisan power.

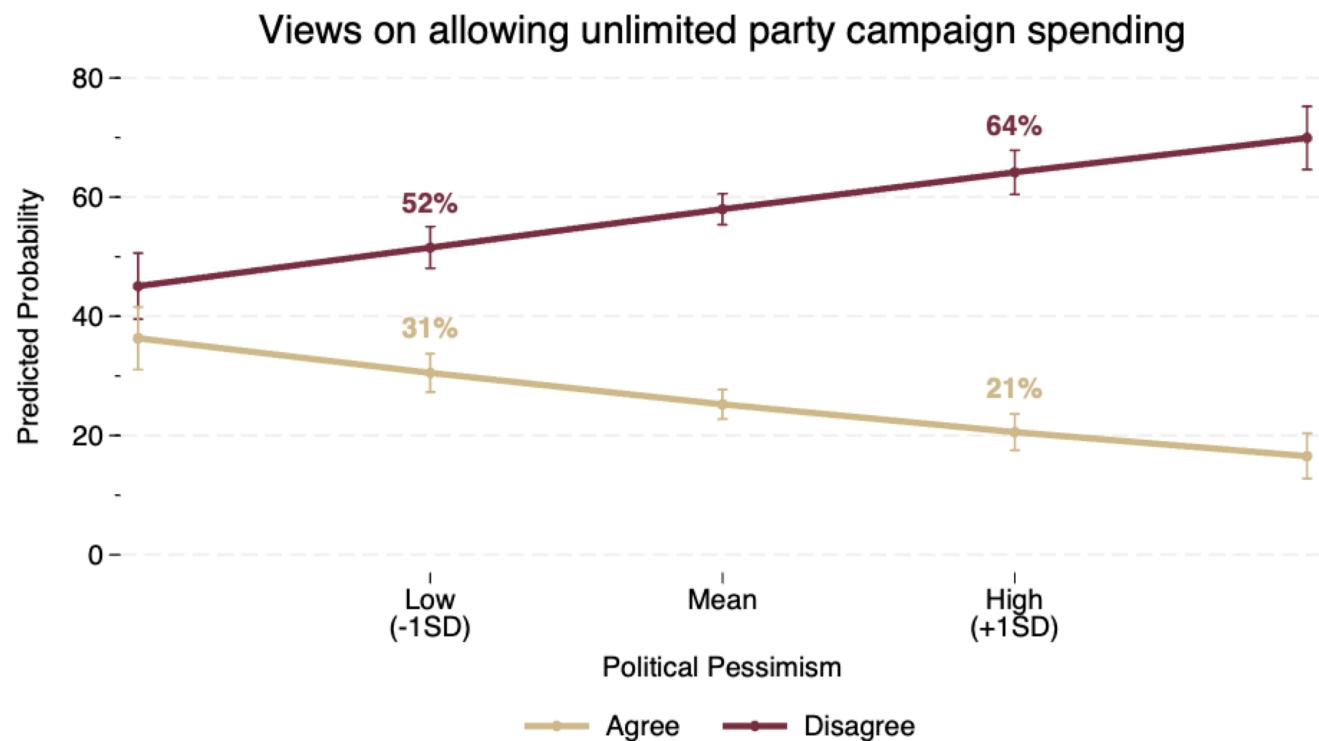
All told, these findings suggest that political pessimism does not weaken institutional commitments. Instead, it strengthens support for rules and safeguards designed to constrain power and protect citizens, regardless of who governs.

Figure 4. Support for Institutional Safeguards, by Level of Political Pessimism



Note: Data (N = 1,469) are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. Lines represent the predicted probability of each response category shown in the legend across levels of political pessimism. Estimates adjust for sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, household income, marital status, number of adults and children in the household, census region, employment status, homeownership, and party identification. Although estimates at more extreme levels of pessimism (± 2 standard deviations) are shown in the figure, they are not labeled on the x-axis due to the small number of respondents at these extremes; substantive interpretation therefore focuses on differences between -1 and $+1$ standard deviation, where the vast majority of respondents fall. Respondents (n = 64) with missing data on control variables or ideology, or who answered fewer than three of the pessimism items, are excluded. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 5. Attitudes Toward Limits on Party Campaign Spending, by Level of Political Pessimism



Note: Data (N = 1,469) are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. Full question prompt reads: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Political parties should not be limited in how much money they can spend to help elect candidates from their party". Lines represent the predicted probability of each response category shown in the legend across levels of political pessimism. Estimates adjust for sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, household income, marital status, number of adults and children in the household, census region, employment status, homeownership, and party identification. Although estimates at more extreme levels of pessimism (± 2 standard deviations) are shown in the figure, they are not labeled on the x-axis due to the small number of respondents at these extremes; substantive interpretation therefore focuses on differences between -1 and $+1$ standard deviation, where the vast majority of respondents fall. Respondents (n = 64) with missing data on control variables or ideology, or who answered fewer than three of the pessimism items, are excluded. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

CONCLUSION

Political pessimism is widespread in contemporary American politics. Skepticism toward the motivations, competence, and judgment of political elites cuts across political lines, with substantial shares of liberals, moderates, and conservatives alike expressing

doubts about whether politicians act in good faith, exercise sound judgment, or are well suited to positions of power. In this sense, political pessimism is not the province of any single faction, but a shared orientation toward the political system itself.

But how people respond to political

pessimism is sometimes tied to their ideology. Among liberals, rising pessimism is strongly associated with more negative feelings toward capitalism. Among conservatives, rising pessimism is associated with increased skepticism toward government power and socialism and support for capitalism.

Yet the same orientation that undermines faith in political actors appears to strengthen support for institutional safeguards designed to constrain power and protect citizens. As political pessimism rises, Americans become increasingly likely to endorse rules and arrangements that limit discretion and partisan advantage. This pattern shows people on opposite sides of the political aisle can agree at least on the need to restrict the overreach of their opponents.

Of course, people with higher distrust in political representatives often support checks and rules on government power, but maybe only when the other party is the one in power. As James Madison famously observed, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” In this spirit, today’s political pessimism may not mean people are turning against democracy. Instead, it may show the public supports a core insight of the American founding: trusting leaders less and demanding more checks on their power (at least when “the other team” holds power).

Poll Information

This study was conducted online between December 8–18, 2025 by Social Science Research Services (SSRS) using a Probability-Based Opinion Panel. The sample consisted of 1,533 respondents age 18 or older, including an oversample of 263 Florida residents. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-2.7% at the 95% confidence level. Weighted demographic characteristics of the survey group are presented in Table 2 on the next page.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics by Survey Sample

Category	General Population	Florida Sample
Sex		
Male	49%	49%
Female	51%	51%
Age		
18 to 29	20%	18%
30 to 49	34%	30%
50 to 64	23%	23%
65 or older	23%	28%
Race/Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic White	60%	53%
Black	12%	15%
Hispanic	17%	25%
Asian	7%	3%
Other	4%	3%
Household Income		
Less than \$50,000	43%	40%
\$50,000-\$74,999	16%	19%
\$75,000-\$99,999	13%	16%
\$100,000 and over	29%	24%
Education		
Less than HS	9%	8%
HS Graduate	28%	29%
Some college	26%	27%
BA Degree	21%	23%
Postgrad / Prof.	15%	12%
Degree		
Parent Status		
Parent	26%	23%
Not a Parent	74%	77%
Stated Party		
Democrat	29%	26%
Republican	29%	32%
Independent/	42%	42%
Something Else		
Political Ideology		
Liberal	23%	18%
Moderate	44%	46%
Conservative	33%	36%

¹ Pew Research Center. (2025, December 4). Public trust in government: 1958-2025. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/12/04/public-trust-in-government-1958-2025/>

² Exploratory factor analysis supports treating these items as a single underlying dimension. All five items load most strongly on the same factor (loadings range from 0.35 to 0.58), and the first factor explains substantially more variance

than any additional factor. The resulting index demonstrates acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.60$).

³ Adjusting for all other covariates, Black ($p=0.009$) and Hispanic ($p=0.037$) respondents score 0.31 and 0.20 standard deviations (SD) lower in pessimism, respectively, than White respondents; and respondents with less than a high school education score 0.25SD lower ($p=0.077$) than high school graduates and 0.39SD lower ($p=0.007$) than respondents with at least some college experience. For distributions of responses to individual pessimism items, see report's crosstabs document.

⁴ Across both feeling thermometers, rates of "Don't know" or "Haven't heard enough" responses do not differ meaningfully by ideology. Differences in the shares (5-6%) of liberals and conservatives selecting these responses are not distinguishable from zero.