



TREND REPORT: Like everything else in politics, the mood of the nation is highly polarized

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As Donald Trump approaches the five-month mark in his presidency the American citizens remain highly divided. Not only do they have different perceptions of the President and differ widely on issues ranging from abortion to health care, they also *feel* differently about politics and civic life.

Almost a year ago, Penn State's McCourtney Institute for Democracy embarked on a mission to use the power of public opinion polls and new information technologies to let ordinary citizens tell us how American political life made them feel. Since then, in four major polls, we have asked a representative of 4,000 Americans to tell us – in their own words – what makes them proud, what makes them angry, what makes them hopeful, and what makes them worried.

When we conducted our first Mood of the Nation poll in June 2016, we asked 500 Americans,

“What is there about **American politics today** that makes you feel **proud**?”

Remarkably, 49% of those polled could not name anything that made them proud. Indeed, answers like “not much,” “nothing,” and “very little,” comprised the largest category of answers in every poll we fielded.

Of those who did offer an answer, the largest group referred to broad symbols of American democracy such as free elections, voting rights, or the American flag.

The other 500 respondents in our sample were asked a similar question,

“What has recently **been in the news** that makes you feel **proud**?”

The prompt to think about the news led 13% of those polled to mention the various reactions to the mass shooting at Orlando's Pulse Nightclub. Democrats, in particular, said they were moved by the coming together of diverse Americans in the wake of a hate crime that targeted young people at a nightclub that catered to gay Hispanics living in central Florida. Many Republicans also mentioned the Pulse shooting, but tended to express their pride in first responders and others who volunteered to help victims. Yet even after an event that seemed to galvanize the country, 40% told us that they could think of nothing in the news that made them proud. Our more complete report on reaction to the Pulse Nightclub shooting can be found [here](#).

Not surprisingly, when we asked what news made them angry, roughly four in ten Americans mentioned the Orlando shooting, and a remarkable 95% identified something in the news that made them angry. And when we asked about politics, the negative mood of the nation became crystal clear. Sixteen percent of Americans told us about their anger at the endemic "corruption," "the lies," that they see in US politics. Another 10% mentioned partisan bickering or gridlock, and 8% described the political system as "rigged" to help the establishment. Nearly half of those polled mentioned something about the American *system*, when asked what makes them angry.

Another 15% either mentioned specific individuals – President Obama, candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton – or politicians in general.

How angry were Americans in June 2016? Very! After each person finished typing their answer, we immediately asked them to rate their anger on a scale running from zero ("Nothing made me angry") to four ("Extremely angry"). Indeed, we asked about intensity after every question.

In June 2016, Democrats and Republicans were equally angry, both registering a mean score of 3.2 on our zero-to-four scale. But Democrats were significantly more positive – with a pride intensity of 2.1 (a little more than "somewhat proud") – than Republicans who had an average score of only 1.8 (this difference is statistically significant at the 0.01 level).

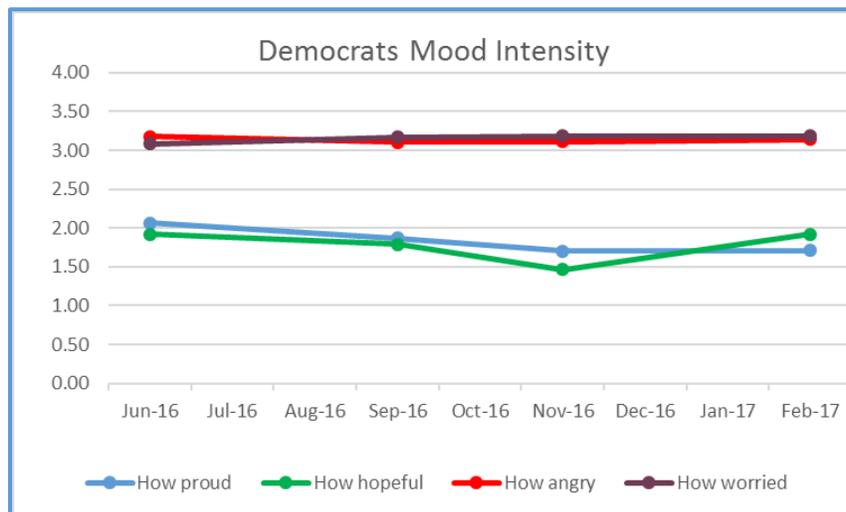
The changing mood of the nation, June 2016 to February 2017

Since our very first poll, the nation endured two national party conventions in which each party tried – with only partial success – to heal the wounds that emerged from the long and conflictual nominating campaign. After the

conventions, a long and negative presidential campaign was punctuated by a series of external shocks such as the uncovering of an open-mike recording of Donald Trump boasting about what many characterized as sexual assault, and continuing news about Hillary Clinton’s private email server. The hacking and publishing of internal Democratic Party emails resulted in the resignation of that party’s chairwoman and exposed establishment animosity for Bernie Sanders.

Our poll taken in September shows virtually no change in the mood of the nation or the mood within each of the parties. But the general election in November resulted in several notable changes. The graphs below show how identifiers with each party and how Independents rated the intensity of their emotions at each poll.

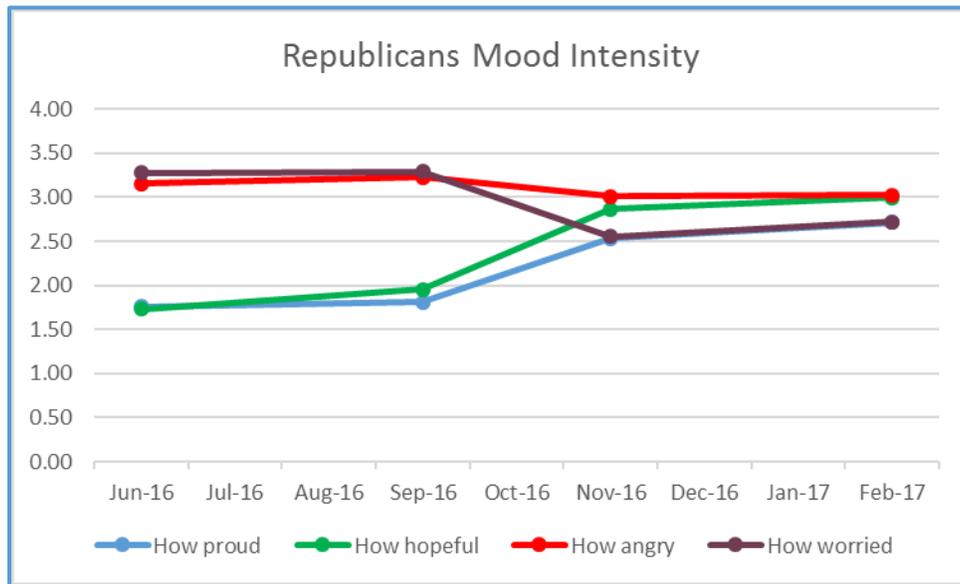
Democrats’ anger and anxiety was remarkably stable through the nine months of polling, but their early optimism and pride slipped during the summer of 2016 and dropped notably when we polled immediately after the November election.



Interestingly, Democrats’ hopefulness rebounded substantially by mid-February, buoyed by early waves of protest and resistance that culminated in the January 21 Women’s March in Washington and other major cities.

The story for Republicans is, of course, quite different. Our data show that hopefulness was on the rise between June and September 2016 as they began to coalesce behind a nominee who had been given little chance on the eve of the Iowa Caucuses. After the November election, Republicans were far more hopeful (scoring 2.9, very nearly “very hopeful”), more proud (mean score of 2.5) and less worried than they had been before.

Yet they remained very angry (mean of 3.0). A close look at the answers to open-ended questions shows that over 40% told us that they were very angry because of the series of post-election protests. As we described in more detailed report in [The Conversation](#), Republicans were both angry that liberal Democrats did not accept the election as legitimate, did not accord Donald Trump the respect they would have wanted to be shown to Hillary Clinton had she won. In addition, a significant number felt the protests were not even genuine, but that protesters were paid (often, they specifically mentioned George Soros as the behind the scenes source of payoffs to “professional” protesters.

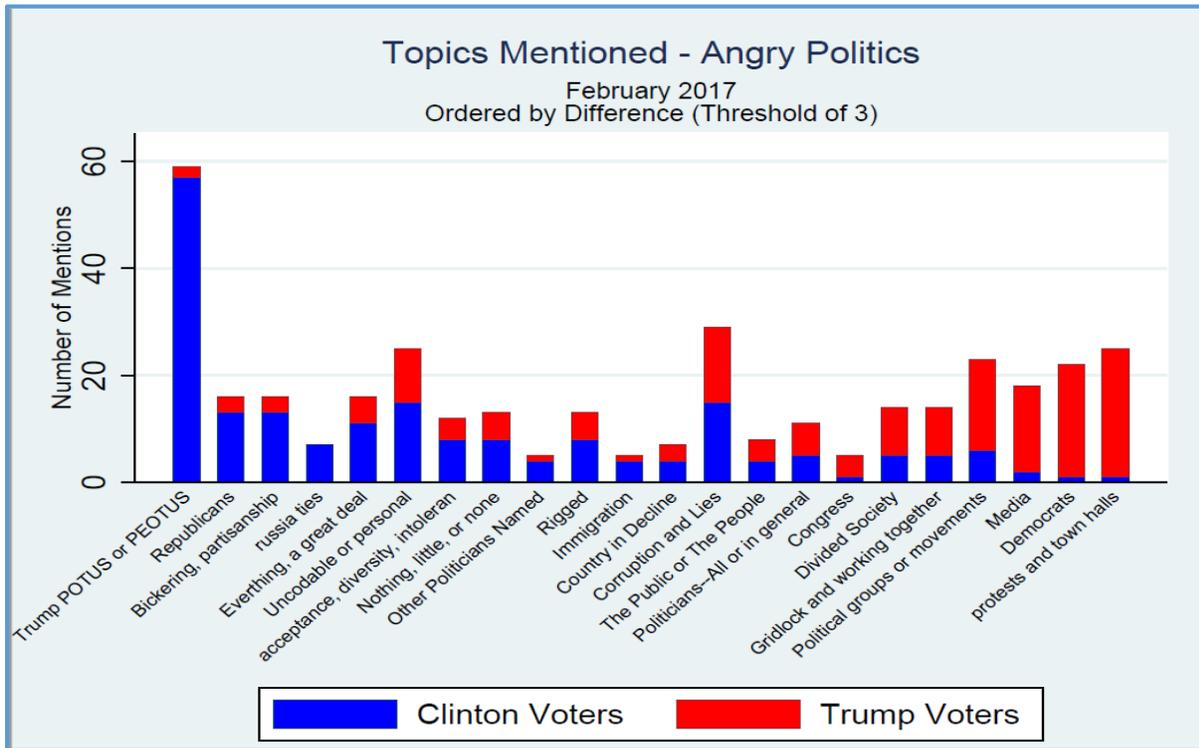


What makes Americans proud and angry in 2017?

While the statistical trends in mood intensity show clear differences between Democrats and Republicans, the differences are even starker when we turn to the answers given to our open ended questions. We deliberately focused our poll around these in order to allow a representative sample of Americans tell us – in their own words – what was on their mind.

The graph below summarizes answers to the question of what in politics makes them angry (topics mentioned by fewer than three individuals are omitted). The blue bars show that Democrats are angriest over President Trump and his actions, tweets, and appointments. In contrast, Republicans were most angry at protests, Democrats, the mass media and various political groups such as Black Lives Matter, women’s groups, the “liberals” more generally. The only “bipartisan”

sources of anger reflect the widespread sense the political system is broken – a modest number from each party felt politics was rigged, expressed anger at unnamed “politicians,” or were angered by corruption and lies that they believe characterize modern politics.



There is no single “Mood of the Nation,” but shared norms of democracy endure

The first year of the Mood of the Nation Poll has shown in a particularly compelling way that the nation is deeply divided. Polarization is not simply a phenomenon of Washington, DC, but now reflects the political beliefs of ordinary citizens. When given the chance to tell us whatever was on their mind, Democrats and Republicans point to different events, different groups, and different people that make them angry.

And, yet, our poll also finds some important evidence that there are some common beliefs that are shared across the political spectrum. In the wake of courts overturning the President’s ban on travel from Muslim nations, we asked participants in our February sample a supplemental question about checks and

balances. Each person was asked to consider each of the following statements (or a close variant) and tell us which came closest to their view:

In addressing the threat of international terrorism, it is important that the president can act independently, and without interference by the US Supreme Court.¹

Even when addressing the threat of international terrorism, it is important that the US Supreme Court act in accord with our system of checks and balances to ensure that a president does not violate the law or the Constitution.

We found that 78% of the public (with a margin of error of $\pm 5.3\%$) – including six in ten Trump voters – said that they felt the Court should act as a check on the president *even for terrorism*: the very sort of national security issue where deference to the executive’s authority should be at its peak.

We asked everyone to explain why they chose a particular answer and we were impressed by how well many citizens articulated the fundamental principles of US government. (The full report on how Americans think about checks and balances can be found [here](#)). One 69 year old Trump voter from Georgia put it this way:

“Regardless of attacks from outside the country, the most serious attacks and those most likely to destroy the country will come from within. Our system of checks and balances is what is our best hope of survival.”

By allowing citizens to explain their answers, the Mood of the Nation Poll thereby highlights both deep divides on specific issues and shared values concerning democracy and the dangers of concentrated power.

Undoubtedly, there will be times when citizens’ commitments to democracy will be tested by conflicts with their desired policy or political outcomes, and the Mood of the Nation Poll will continue to pursue these themes and report on them to the American people.

¹ Half of the survey respondents were asked about “The US Supreme Court” and half about “the justices of the US Supreme Court,” but this made no differences in their answers.

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How the Poll was Conducted

This poll was conducted between February 23rd and February 27th, 2017 by YouGov in partnership with the Penn State McCourtney Institute of Democracy.

All *Mood of the Nation* questionnaires are designed by the McCourtney Institute polling team, with the fieldwork conducted by YouGov, an online polling organization. The YouGov panel includes over 1.8 million individuals who agree to complete occasional surveys. The 1,000 individuals who completed the McCourtney *Mood of the Nation Poll* were matched to the joint distribution from the Census's American Community Survey in terms of age, sex, race/ethnicity, and years of education. The frame was augmented by matching to the November 2010 Current Population Survey and the Pew Religious Life Survey in order to include voter registration, political interest and party identification in the selection model. The unweighted data are broadly representative of the US population in terms of age, education, and region.

The data have been weighted to adjust for variation in the sample from the adult United States population with respect to demographic variables such as geographic region, gender, race/ethnicity, age, and education, and political variables such as voter registration status and political interest. Weighting details are described in a paper by Ansolabehere and Rivers.²

² Ansolabehere, Stephen, and Douglas Rivers. (2013) "Cooperative survey research." *Annual Review of Political Science* 16: 307-329.