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**RED,  
GRAY  
AND BLUE** The Issues  
that Unite  
and Divide  
Utah Voters

# RED, GRAY AND BLUE

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Utah Foundation's mission is to produce objective, thorough and well-reasoned research and analysis that promotes the effective use of public resources, a thriving economy, a well-prepared workforce and a high quality of life for Utahns. Utah Foundation seeks to help decision-makers and citizens understand and address complex issues. Utah Foundation also offers constructive guidance to improve governmental policies, programs and structures.

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## Research Report 780

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## INTRODUCTION

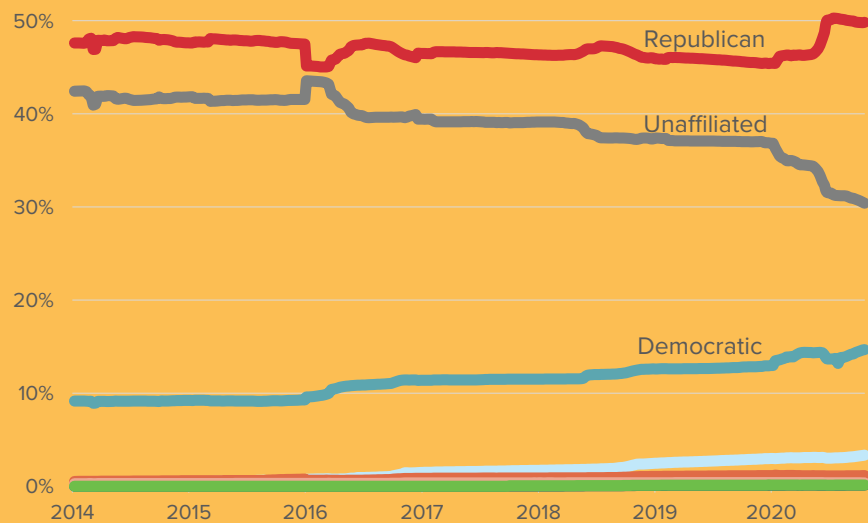
During every gubernatorial election year, Utah Foundation surveys Utah voters to understand their priorities and releases a series of reports as the Utah Priorities Project. The summer 2020 priority list for Utahns overall can be found in the first report of the 2020 series. This report looks at how priorities are different across party and ideological lines. The report highlights both similarities and dissimilarities between the groups.

## UTAH'S PARTISAN LANDSCAPE

As of July 2020, 50% of Utah voters were registered as Republicans. This was up from 46% in May. There was an increase in registered Republicans in May and June 2020 due in some degree to a competitive primary among Republican candidates for governor. Since Utah's Republican party holds closed primaries, the only way to participate in the primary was to register as a Republican voter. By contrast, only 30% of voters are unaffiliated, a low point. Since 2014, unaffiliated voters have been in the range of 37% to 41% of Utah voters. Voters registered as Democrats represent 15% of voters in 2020.

### Registered Republicans have hit a seven-year high.

Figure 1: Utah Party Registration



Note: Independent American, Libertarian, United Utah, Constitution and Green parties are make up the remaining 5% of voters (2020).

Source: Utah Lt. Governor's Office.



### KEY FINDINGS OF THIS REPORT

- The proportion of registered voters who are Republicans or Democrats have both increased, with Democrats increasing by roughly 50% since 2016. However, Republicans now make up half of registered voters, while only 15% are Democrats. (Unaffiliated voters make up most of the remainder.)
- There is close agreement among Republicans, unaffiliated voters and Democrats as to the relative importance of both K-12 education and housing affordability issues.
- Utah Foundation's survey found that partisanship and division was a top-10 issue only for unaffiliated voters.
- Republicans have a higher level of concern about taxes, jobs and the economy, and growth management. They are also more worried about crime.
- Democrats have a higher level of concern about racial inequality or racism, public health and homelessness. They also have a higher level of concern about climate change.
- The median voter in Utah has become more liberal. This is due in large part to shifting views among unaffiliated voters and Democrats.
- Republicans and Democrats in Utah have become more polarized, mainly due to a shift further left among Democrats.



The top five priorities for Utahns as a whole fall into each party's top 10 list, with one exception: *State taxes and government spending* is not a top-10 issue for Democrats.

## PARTISAN PRIORITIES

The top five priorities for Utahns as a whole fall into each party's top 10 list, with one exception: *State taxes and government spending* is not a top-10 issue for Democrats. (See Figure 2.) However, Democrats uniquely prioritized *racial inequality or racism*, *climate change*, and *homelessness* among their top 10 issues. While *air quality* was not among Utah's overall top 10, it was among the top issues for Democratic and unaffiliated voters.

Unaffiliated voters were unique for including *partisanship and division* among their top 10 issues. Unaffiliated voters and Republicans both included *managing growth* and *state taxes and government spending* while Democrats did not. Issues unique to the Republican top-10 list include *crime* and *police (support or reform)*.

When analyzing issues, not just by order, but by the likelihood of being the top issue, a different set of trends emerge. Important topics where political parties largely agreed were *K-12 education*, *politicians listening to voters*, and *housing affordability*. Republican, Democratic and unaffiliated voters also largely agreed that *immigration*, *politicians listening to voters*, and *water supply or quality* were

### Utahns' priorities mostly cross party lines.

Figure 2: Top 10 Priorities of Utahns, by Political Party Identification

Republicans		Democrats		Unaffiliated	
<b>State taxes and gov't spending</b>	1	Public health / pandemic	1	Public health / pandemic	
Jobs and the economy	2	<b>Racial inequality or racism</b>	2	Health care	
K-12 education	3	Health care	3	K-12 education	
<b>Managing growth</b>	4	K-12 education	4	Politicians listening to voters	
Health care	5	<b>Climate change</b>	5	Jobs and the economy	
Politicians listening to voters	6	Housing affordability	6	<b>State taxes and gov't spending</b>	
<b>Crime</b>	7	<b>Air quality</b>	7	Housing affordability	
Public health / pandemic	8	Politicians listening to voters	8	<b>Air quality</b>	
<b>Police (support or reform)</b>	9	<b>Homelessness</b>	9	<b>Managing growth</b>	
Housing affordability	10	Jobs and the economy	10	<b>Partisanship and division</b>	

Key: Items that are unique to one demographic are both highlighted and **bolded**. Items that are shared by only two demographic groups are **bolded**.

less-important issues. The issues with the largest difference between Republican and Democratic voters but prioritized by Democrats were *racial inequality or racism* and *climate change*, while *crime* and *state taxes and government spending* were issues prioritized by Republicans. Unaffiliated Utahns were less likely than their partisan counterparts to consider *immigration* as a top issue. They were also more likely to consider *partisanship and division* and *politicians listening to voters* as their top issue.

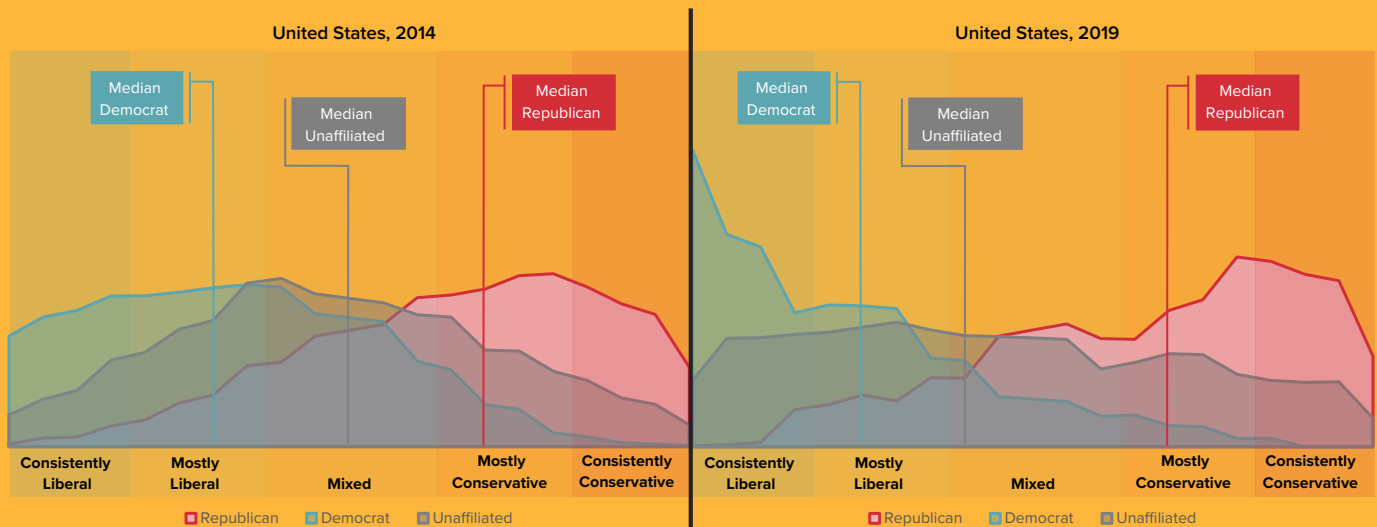
**Utahns' rankings of K-12 education and housing affordability are quite similar, but there is significant divergence on other issues.**

**Figure 3: Average Likelihood of Ranking an Issue the Top Priority, by Party Affiliation and Voters Overall**



## U.S. parties have become more polarized, especially Democrats.

Figure 4: Ideological Consistency, U.S., 2014 and 2019



Note: Each party sums to 100%. Actual sizes of political parties and unaffiliated portion of voters vary.

Source: Pew Research Foundation. Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here.

### IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDES

Since the 2016 Utah Priorities Project, Utah Foundation has included survey questions to measure Utahns' ideological consistency. To allow for comparisons between Utah and the nation at large, the questions mirrored those developed and used by the Pew Research Center since 1994.<sup>1</sup> See the appendix for an extensive discussion of Pew's approach.

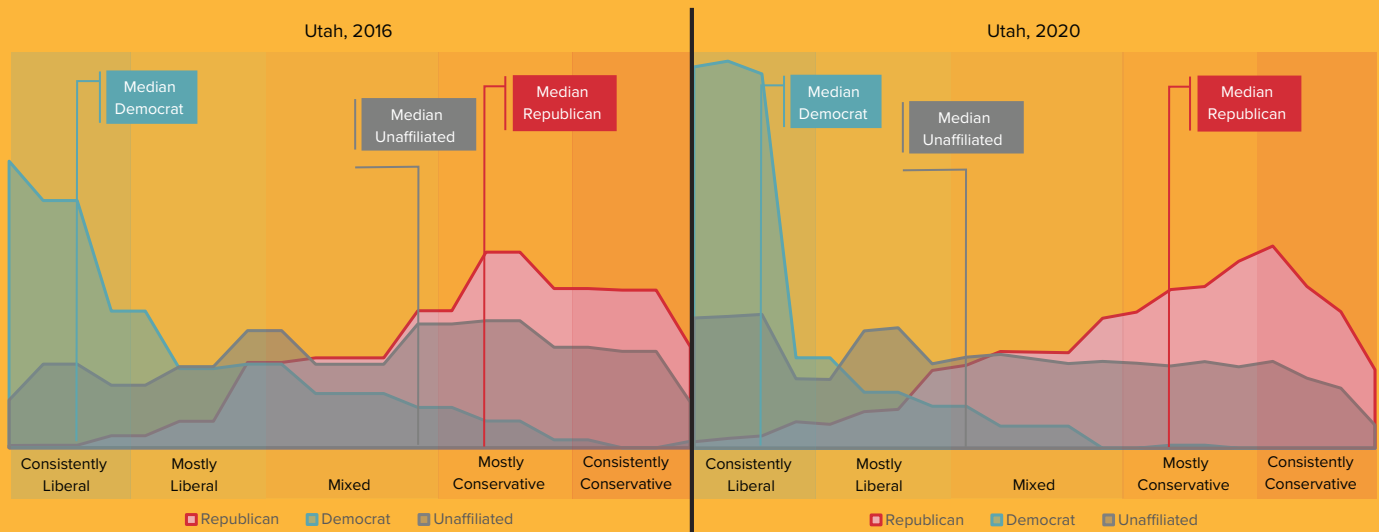
Survey respondents are asked whether seemingly conservative or liberal statements come closer to their own views. Responses are used to create a scale from negative 10 to positive 10, or consistently liberal to consistently conservative. (See the appendix for more detail.)

Nationally, Democratic and unaffiliated voters took more liberal positions in 2019 than in 2014. (See Figure 4.) The number of Democratic voters who scored consistently liberal increased by 23% while consistently liberal independents increased by 9%. The median Democrat was consistently liberal, while the median unaffiliated voter swung to the liberal side of a mixed ideology. Republicans who were consistently conservative increased by a much smaller amount – just 4%. Still, Republicans and Democrats became more polarized over the five-year period from 2014 to 2019, continuing a trend since the turn of the millennium.

Trends among Utah voters from 2016 to 2020 to a large extent reflect those of their national counterparts. Unaffiliated and Democratic voters have become more consistently liberal. Consistently liberal Utah Democrats increased by 23% while consistently liberal unaffiliated voters increased by 14%. In 2016, 55% of Democrats scored an 8 or higher – meaning they were as liberal as or more liberal than

**Utah Democrats and unaffiliated voters moved to the left while Republicans stayed about the same.**

**Figure 5: Ideological Consistency, Utah, 2016 and 2020**



Note: Each party sums to 100%. Actual sizes of political parties and unaffiliated portion of voters vary.

Source: Utah Foundation.

the median Democrat. By 2020, 78% of Democrats scored an 8 or higher. Utah Republican voters remained largely the same. (See Figure 5.)

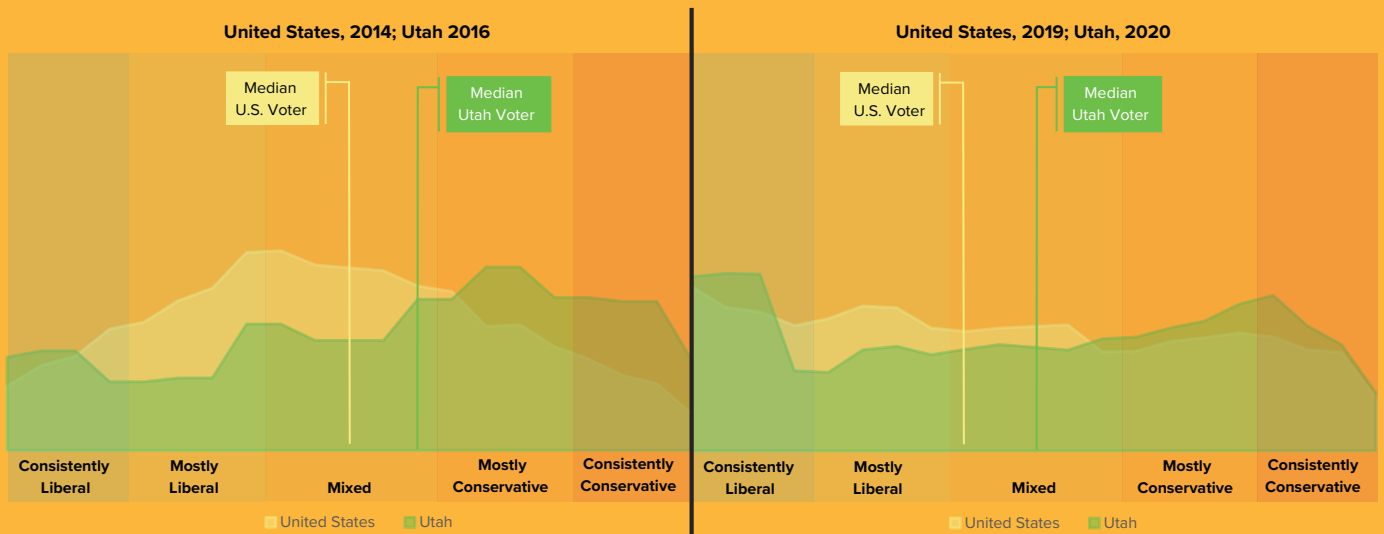
When comparing Utah and U.S. voters overall, the consistently or mostly liberal voters increased by 10% while consistently or mostly conservative voters increased by 3%. Consistently or mostly liberal voters in Utah increased by an even greater percentage – 15%. Consistently or mostly conservative voters, contrary to national trends, decreased by 9%. The median voter among national and state voters continued to have a mixed ideology, but on average chose one additional liberal position instead of a conservative position when compared to 2014 (U.S.) and 2016 (Utah). (See Figure 6 on the next page.)

Comparing Utah in early 2020 to the United States in late 2019, Utah Democrats are more consistently liberal than their national counterparts. Just over half of U.S. Democrats are consistently liberal, but more than three-quarters of Utah Democrats

**The median voter among national and state voters continued to have a mixed ideology, but on average chose one additional liberal position instead of a conservative position when compared to 2014 (U.S.) and 2016 (Utah).**

**U.S. and Utah voters, on average, changed one conservative position to a liberal one.**

**Figure 6: Ideological Consistency, U.S. and Utah, 2014/2016 and 2019/2020**



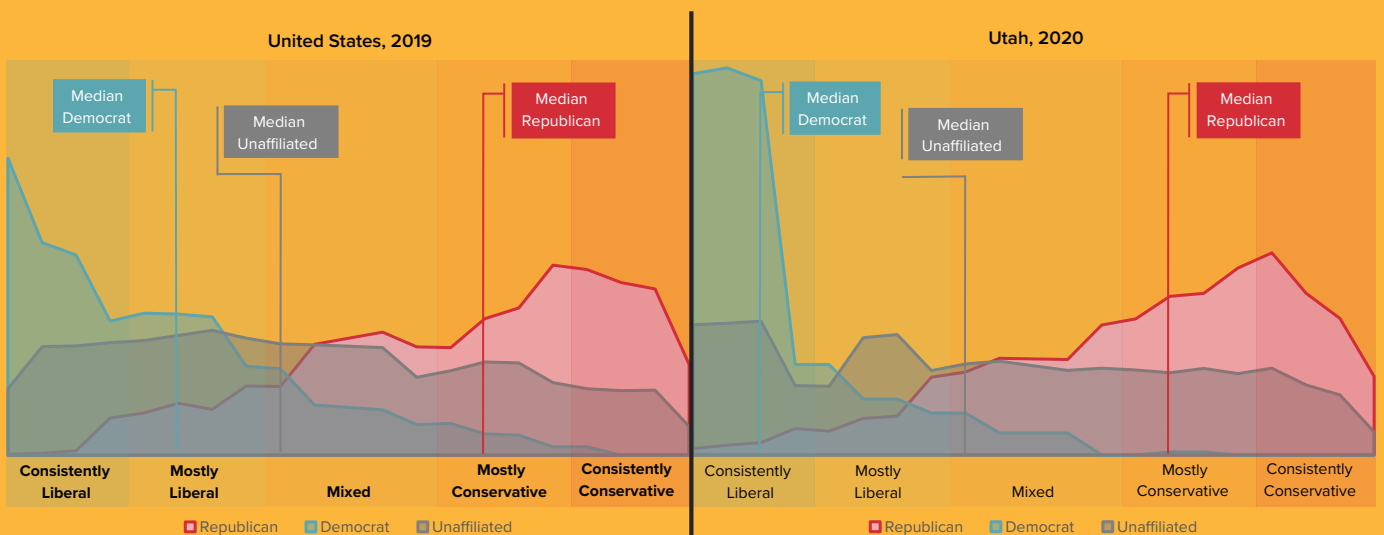
Note: Each party sums to 100%. Actual sizes of political parties and unaffiliated voters vary.

Sources: State data from Utah Foundation. National data from Pew Research Foundation. Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here.

are consistently liberal. One-quarter of unaffiliated voters are mostly or consistently conservative in both the U.S. and Utah. However, Utah unaffiliated voters that do not identify as mostly or consistently conservative are more likely to be consistently liberal over mostly liberal or mixed ideology. Utah Republicans’ ideological consistency was not significantly different from their national counterparts. (See Figure 7.)

**Utah’s Democrats and liberal unaffiliated voters are more liberal than their national counterparts.**

**Figure 7: Ideological Consistency, U.S. and Utah, by Party**



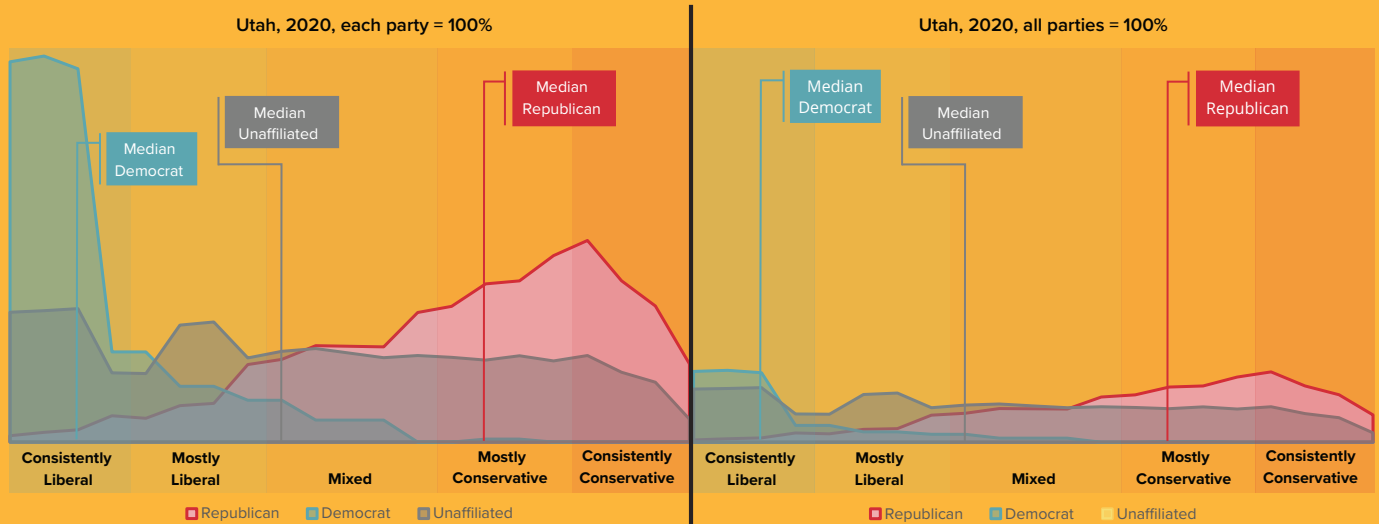
Note: Each party sums to 100%. Actual sizes of political parties and unaffiliated voters vary.

Sources: State data from Utah Foundation. National data from Pew Research Foundation. Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here.



**While 78% of Democrats are consistently liberal, Democrats only represent 15% of Utah voters.**

**Figure 8: Ideological Consistency, Among and Across Parties.**



Note: Each party sums to 100% on the left graphic; actual sizes of political parties and unaffiliated voters vary. All parties sum to 100% on the right graphic.

Sources: State data from Utah Foundation. National data from Pew Research Foundation. Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here.

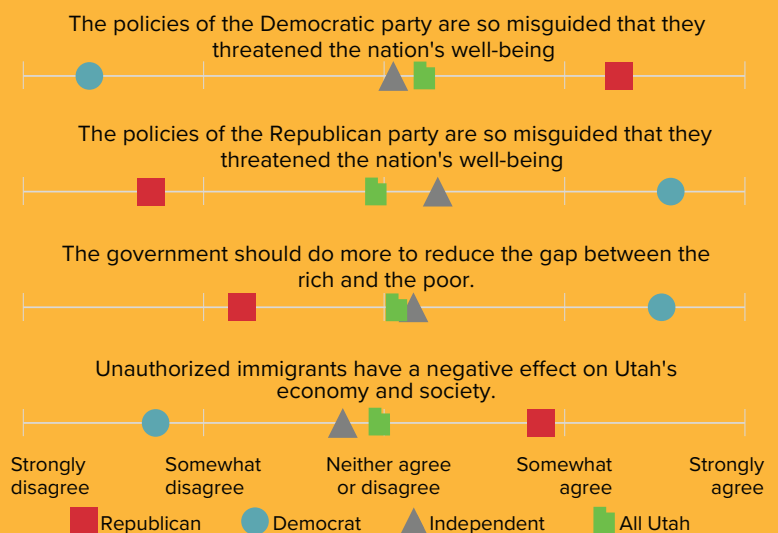
The above analyses have compared polarization within political parties. Consequently, each political party was the same size – 100%. However, Utah’s ideological consistency among political parties looks substantially different once one accounts for the fact that Democrats make up 15% of Utah’s registered voters while Republicans make up 50%. That means although 78% of Democrats are consistently liberal, they are numerically equivalent to the 25% of Republicans that are consistently conservative. (See Figure 8.)

**PARTISANSHIP ON THE ISSUES**

In addition to the prioritization of issues, Utah Foundation included 18 questions in its 2020 Utah Priorities Project survey to better understand how Utahns feel about the issues they prioritized. While several of these issues showed big divides across partisan lines, there were other issues where Utahns across parties felt similarly.

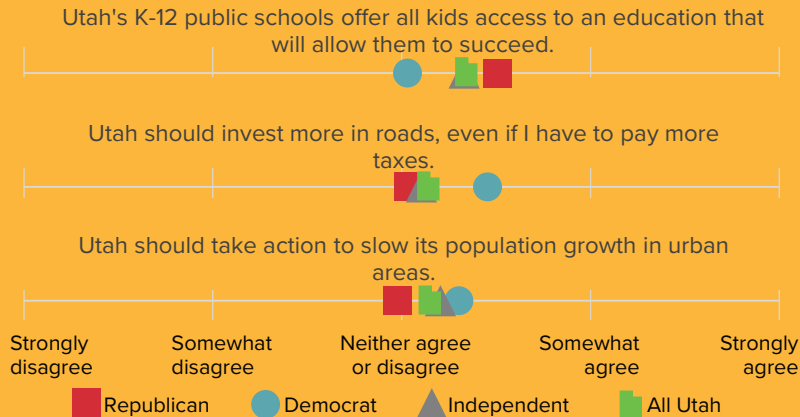
The issues that saw the largest divergence between Republicans and Democrats regarded whether the policies of the Democratic or Republican parties were threatening to the nation’s well-being, whether the government should do more to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor, and the impact of unauthorized immigrants on Utah’s economy and society. (See Figure 9.)

**There are large partisan divides on political policies, income inequality and unauthorized immigration.**  
**Figure 9: The Largest Partisan Divides on Utah Priority Project Positional Questions**



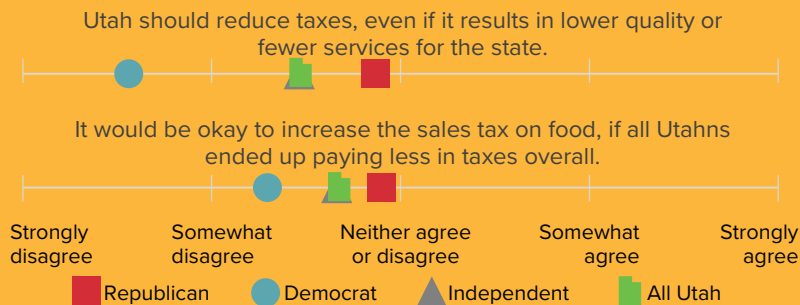
### There is common ground on schools, roads and growth.

Figure 10: The Smallest Partisan Divides on Utah Priority Project Positional Questions



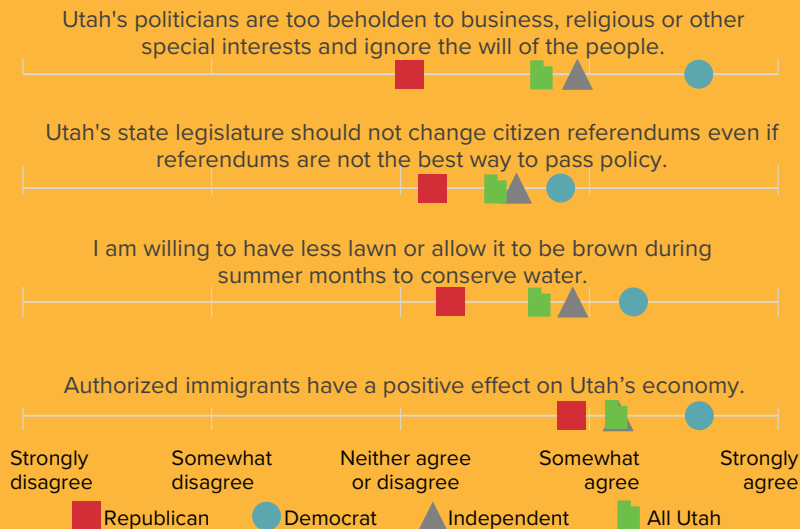
### Views on tax policy vary by party, but all disagree.

Figure 11: Partisan Divides with Agreement on Positional Questions



### There is generally inter-party agreement on authorized immigrants, water and state responsiveness.

Figure 12: Partisan Divides with Agreement on Positional Questions



On the other hand, there are issues where the difference between parties is relatively small. On these issues, voters agreed with each other, but had neutral feelings regarding the positions themselves. This issues included whether they agreed that “Utah’s K-12 public schools offer all kids access to an education that will allow them to succeed,” “Utah should invest more in roads, even if I have to pay more taxes,” and “Utah should take action to slow its population growth in urban areas.” (See Figure 10.)

Interestingly, there were also a few issues where there was a large partisan divide, but all the parties came down on the same side of the issue. For example, Utahns across parties disagreed that Utah should reduce taxes, even if it results in lower quality or fewer services for the state and “It would be okay to increase the sales tax on food, if all Utahns ended up paying less in taxes overall.” But the degree to which they disagreed with the statements varied by party. (See Figure 11.)

Similarly, there were issues where Utahns across parties agreed at least somewhat. These issues included “Authorized immigrants have a positive effect on Utah’s economy,” “I am willing to have less lawn or allow it to be brown during summer months to conserve water,” “Utah’s state legislature should not change citizen referendums even if referendums are not the best way to pass policy,” and “Utah’s politicians are too beholden to business, religious or other special interests and ignore the will of the people.” On all of these topics, voters agreed across party lines. (See Figure 12.)

## CONCLUSION

The proportion of registered voters who are Republicans or Democrats have both increased, with Democrats increasing by roughly 50% since 2016. However, Republicans now make up half of registered voters, while only 15% are Democrats. (Unaffiliated voters make up most of the remainder.)

Republicans and Democrats in Utah have become more polarized, and there are significant differences on certain issues. Republicans have a higher level of concern about taxes, jobs and the economy, and

growth management. They are also more worried about crime. Democrats have a higher level of concern about racial inequality or racism, public health and homelessness. They also have a higher level of concern about climate change. Interestingly, partisan division was a top-10 issue only for unaffiliated voters.

While partisan divides clearly exist, there are issues upon which Utahns agree across party lines. For instance, there is close agreement among Republicans, unaffiliated voters and Democrats as to the relative importance of both K-12 education and housing affordability issues. Such issues represent fertile ground that can be used to nurture consensus-driven public policy.

## APPENDIX: IDEOLOGICAL SCALE METHODOLOGY

Utah Foundation posed a series of 10 questions to respondents. These questions asked respondents whether they would take a traditionally conservative position or a traditionally liberal position on a number of issues. If a respondent selected the liberal position they would receive -1 point (to make them appear on the left of the graph) if a respondent selected the conservative position, they would receive +1 point (to make them appear on the right of the graph). Respondents were categorized into five groups.

Category	Score	Description
Consistently liberal	-10 to -7	Responded with at least 7 more liberal positions than conservative positions.
Mostly liberal	-6 to -3	Responded with 3 to 6 more liberal positions than conservative positions.
Mixed	-2 to 2	Responded with less than 3 more liberal positions than conservative positions, or less than 3 more conservative positions than liberal positions.
Mostly conservative	3 to 6	Responded with 3 to 6 more conservative positions than liberal positions.
Consistently conservative	7 to 10	Responded with at least 7 more conservative positions than liberal positions.

Looking at the box above, it should be noted that it was possible to rate an odd number on the scale only if respondents skipped or refused to answer a question.

Adopting Pew’s methodology, Utah Foundation smoothed the figures in this report by showing the average of two consecutive points on the scale.

This methodology is built to measure a conservative-liberal axis. It is the most commonly used form of identifying how voters will act beyond party identification, which can be problematic with unaffiliated voters. At the same time, it misses some nuances. It should be noted that, while borrowing Pew’s methodology allows us to compare Utah to the nation at large, it also places our survey at the mercy of Pew’s questions. If left to our own choices, we might add or subtract certain questions. For instance, the fact that Pew does not ask about abortion would seem to leave a significant gap in determining left-right views. Furthermore, there are certain answers that Pew classifies as liberal or conservative that could arguably be attributed to the opposite viewpoint as politics evolve. For instance, an answer considered “conservative” under Pew’s approach is to state that “Military strength is the best way to ensure peace,” although in recent years non-interventionism has regained currency in conservative circles. Likewise, anti-corporation populism has become increasingly associated with the right, and therefore the answer “Most corporations make a fair and reasonable amount of profit” might not be as reliably a “conservative” answer as in the past.

Pew's survey asks the which of the following most closely agrees with the respondent's viewpoint:

- “Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient” or “Government often does a better job than people give it credit for.”
- “Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good” or “Government regulation of business is necessary to protect the public interest.”
- “Poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return” or “Poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently.”
- “The government today can't afford to do much more to help the needy” or “The government should do more to help needy Americans, even if it means going deeper into debt.”
- “Black people who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition” or “Racial discrimination is the main reason why many black people can't get ahead these days.”
- “Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and healthcare” or “Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents.”
- “Military strength is the best way to ensure peace” or “Good diplomacy is the best way to ensure peace.”
- “Most corporations make a fair and reasonable amount of profit” or “Most corporations make too much profit.”
- “Stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs and hurt the economy” or “Stricter environmental laws and regulations are worth the cost.”
- “Homosexuality should be discouraged by society” or “Homosexuality should be accepted by society.”

## ENDNOTES

1 Pew Research Center, “American Trends Panel wave 53,” September 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/dataset/american-trends-panel-wave-53/>; Pew Research Center, “2014 Political Polarization Survey,” 2014, [www.pewresearch.org/politics/dataset/2014-political-polarization-survey/](http://www.pewresearch.org/politics/dataset/2014-political-polarization-survey/).



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