

WHAT TECH EXECUTIVES SHOULD KNOW IN TODAY'S POLARIZED SOCIETY

An Ipsos Point of View

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GAME CHANGERS



Technology has transformed our world in ways that would have seemed unimaginable even just a few years ago. Innovations in this space have lit up our world, opening up instantaneous communication and erasing the erstwhile, now seemingly quaint, challenges of time and space. Those of us who exist online are closely interlinked in a growing digital community with an unfathomable amount of information to be summoned with the click of a button.

People are well-aware of these benefits. Yet, despite the undeniable advantages of technology, there is a dark side. Our hyperpolarized society with its split realities is amplified in the digital space—to the detriment of our offline reality.

Many tech companies exist at “ground zero” of our hyperpolarized world. They are part of its feedback loop—reflecting and amplifying social divisions. Over the past few years, social media companies in particular found themselves at the center of this dynamic, in part due to certain unique and unpredictable circumstances, such as the coronavirus pandemic, and widespread (false) claims that the 2020 election results were fraudulent.

There is support to address some of the central issues facing tech and social media companies, and even some rare moments of bipartisan consensus around what the chief problems are and possible solutions. Yet, on other issues, partisan opinion breaks down completely. Tribal warfare undermines the attempts of industry and governmental leaders to find commonly agreed upon solutions.

In short, the positives people feel toward technology do not shield brands from negative public backlash during instances of scandal or crisis. In this briefing, we will explore public perceptions of the tech sector and what companies can do to navigate our polarized realities.

What decision makers in tech should know

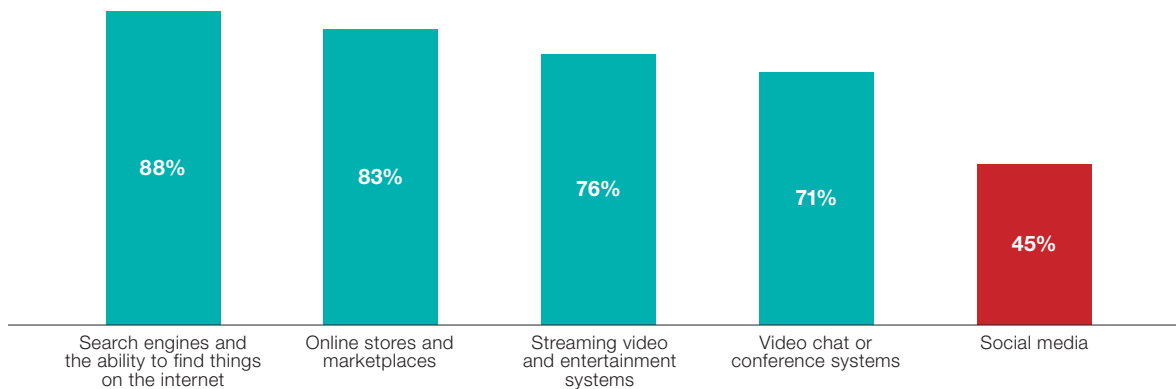
- The central problem in American society today is hyper-polarization.
- The more proximate the tech business model is to polarization, the greater the reputational and regulatory risks.
- Politics is corrosive, so brands should avoid it if possible. When not, they should tread lightly by avoiding partisan cues and clues.
- This all said, Americans recognize tech’s positive impact on society. This is a critical asset.
- To further minimize the public’s discomfort with tech, sound hygiene on privacy and data security is critical.
- Finally, Americans want tech companies to establish and enforce rules of conduct. Tech has a license from the public to curate and enforce.

Perceptions of the tech sector

First, the good news. A large majority of Americans, across the partisan divide, agree that technology is an important part of contemporary society. In particular, people feel that online stores and marketplaces, search engines, streaming video and entertainment systems, and video chats positively impact their lives, with most Democrats and Republicans in agreement.

Most Americans agree that digital advancements improve their lives—except social media

Percent believe that the following technologies have had a good impact on their lives



Source: Ipsos Technology and Society Poll; Conducted on Ipsos' KnowledgePanel® between October 8–11, 2021, among 1,016 U.S. adults

But the public is less certain about social media: 45% of people feel it has had a good impact on their lives, while 42% feel it has had a bad impact. Indeed, social media companies are viewed particularly unfavorably relative to the rest of the tech sector. Just 32% of the public say they hold a favorable view of social media companies, compared to the 53% who say they are favorable towards tech companies.

What's driving this divide? This discrepancy is explored in greater length later in this piece, but the public's core complaints about social media stem from a perception that it is a conduit for misinformation and negativity. As prior Ipsos research conducted with NPR underlines, many Americans are concerned that the information they are exposed to on social media is [not accurate](#). Further polling, conducted with Hidden Common Ground and USA Today, finds that many believe social media companies foment destructive public discourse.

Despite the broader reservations the public may hold about the tech sector or social media platforms, technology is deeply embedded in everyday life. Americans spend hours every day on their devices. For example, almost half of Americans (44%) spend more than four hours per day on their computer or tablet, while a similar share (42%) spends more than four hours per day on their smartphones.

In fact, the more time Americans spend plugged in, the more likely they are to be favorably disposed towards social media. For instance, among Americans who say they spend no time at all, or very little time, posting or reading on social media, just 18% say they have a favorable view of social media companies. Conversely, 46% of those who spend two or more hours a day posting or reading on these platforms say they have a favorable view of social media companies.

Yet taking a broader view, most feel the tech sector has a positive impact on the lives of average Americans. Three in four people feel this way, which puts the tech sector on par with other industries, like the automotive industry. Importantly, far fewer Americans feel that entities attempting to regulate tech, like the national news media and elected officials, have a good impact on the lives of average Americans.

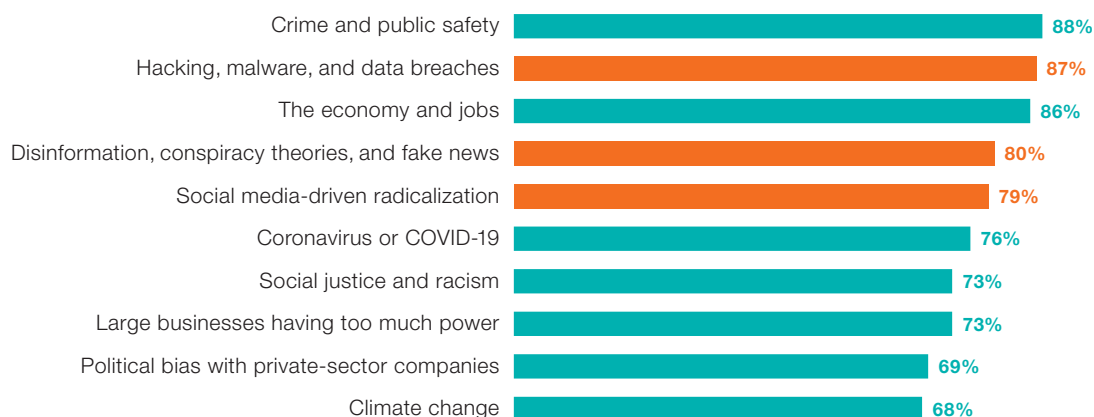
Tech sector worries on par with other major concerns

Even as people see the value tech holds in their day-to-day lives, issues surrounding the tech world are worrying for many Americans.

When asked what issues concern the public the most, certain tech-sector related issues rise to the fore, even when set in context against more bread-and-butter issues like the economy or crime and public safety. To test this, Ipsos surveyed the public on a range of common concerns, such as the economy and COVID, mixed with a variety of tech-sector specific issues, like data breaches or social media-driven radicalization.

Tech sector issues are concerning to many

Percent concerned with the following topics



Source: Ipsos survey of 1,022 American adults September 15–22, 2021

Ipsos polling underlines that tech issues rank relatively high within the hierarchy of national concerns. Overall, Americans are most likely to point to crime and public safety; hacking, malware and data breaches; and the economy and jobs as top areas of concern. Hacking, malware and data breaches presence toward the top of this list is even more notable considering that the economy is generally a perennial front-runner in the list of main issues facing the country.

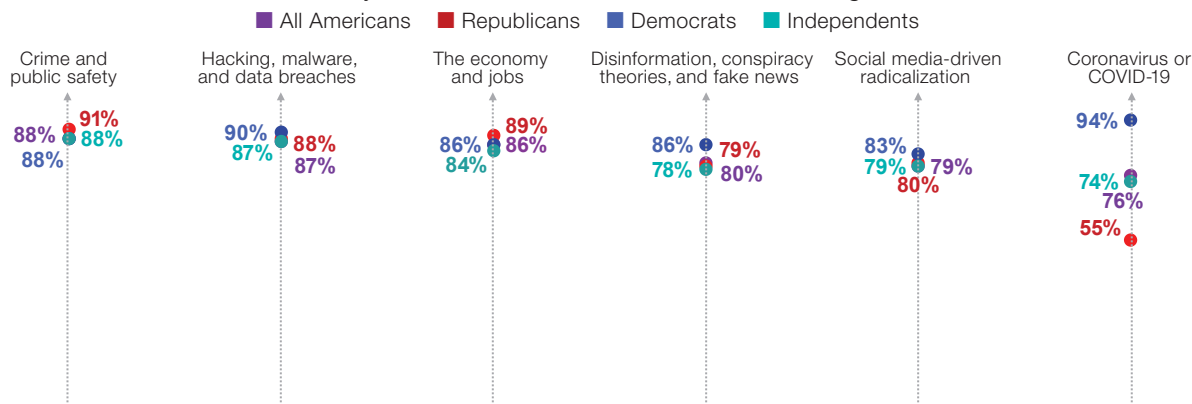
Other issues directly pertinent to the tech and social media sectors—namely, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news, as well as social media-driven radicalization—are seen as more secondary issues, albeit on par with the coronavirus pandemic.



Strikingly, partisans are aligned in their tech-sector related worries: Nine in 10 across party lines say they are concerned about hacking, malware and data breaches. Close to nine in 10 Democrats and eight in 10 Republicans say they are concerned about disinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news. Approximately eight in 10 across parties say they are concerned about social media-driven radicalization.

Little partisan differences on tech-related issues

Percent very or somewhat concerned with the following issues



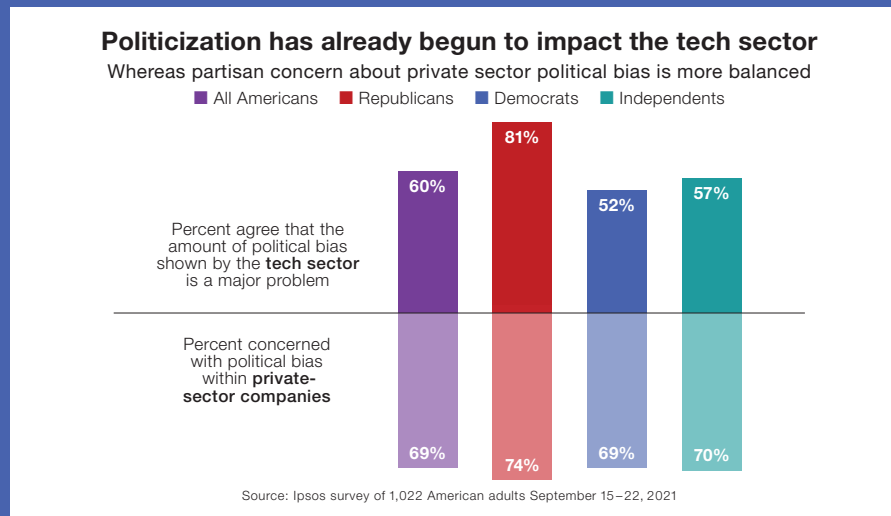
Source: Ipsos survey of 1,022 American adults September 15–22, 2021

However, as we will explore below, partisans are not necessarily evaluating these items with the same, shared understanding. Disinformation to one American may very well mean something completely different to another, as per the rules of partisan or ideological reasoning. Nevertheless, taken together, these data points underscore the relevance of tech-sector related issues to Americans today and the unanimity of concern across partisan lines.



Historical Snapshot: Understanding Political Polarization

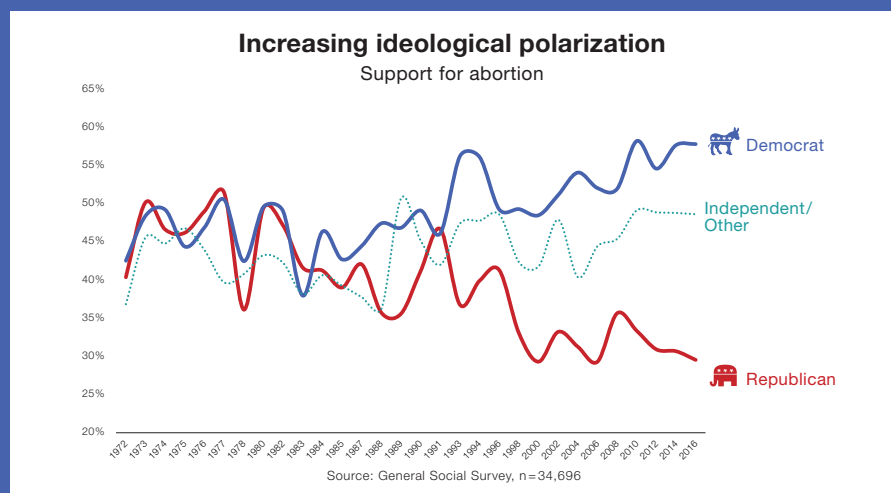
Americans believe that both private-sector and social media companies demonstrate concerning levels of political bias. Overall, six in 10 Americans believe that political bias in the tech sector is a major problem, a sentiment most strongly felt by Republicans but shared by 52% of Democrats and 57% of independents. Even more feel that political bias is a major issue in private sector companies more generally.



Underlying these perceptions is the fact that partisans do not see eye to eye on many common social issues of the day, making it challenging for companies to deliver a social message that will be acceptable to both parties.

While the idea that Democrats and Republicans hold opposing opinions on social issues seems commonplace today, this was not always the case. Abortion is one example of this. As an issue, it currently sorts Americans in a politically homogenous way; Democrats widely support abortion, while Republicans widely do not. But fifty years ago, things were different.

As trend data from the General Social Survey shows, Democrats and Republicans held similar levels of support for abortion throughout the 1970s and into the middle of the 1980s. But, from the latter part of the 1980s onward, the parties have moved farther apart on their support for abortion as party politics have become more tribal. Views on abortion are one microcosm of a growing gulf between the parties on a range of issues.



Disinformation splits realities

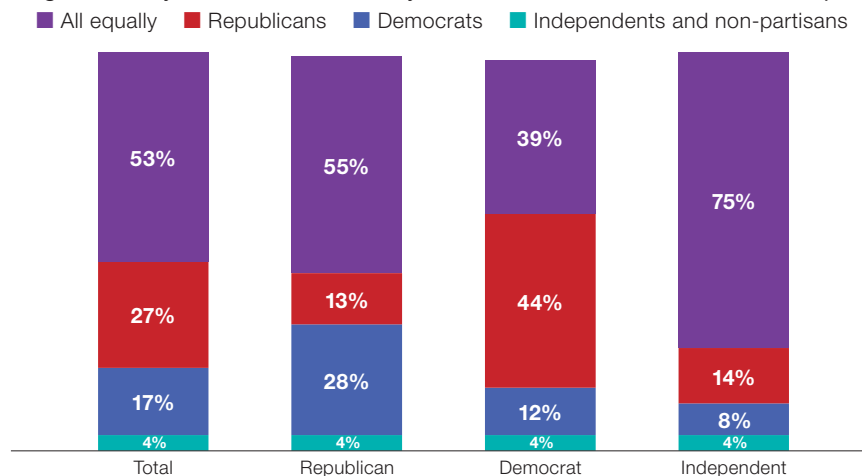
The intensity of concern about disinformation strikes at the heart of some of the more disruptive recent events of the past few years, including false assertions that the 2020 election was fraudulent and the inherent risk of the coronavirus. It also has direct implications for social media companies, as many Americans say they [are concerned](#) that the information they receive on social media is inaccurate. Yet combating misinformation (or put differently, establishing a commonly-agreed upon reality), is all the more challenging considering that what counts as fact and what is fiction varies substantially by identity group.

As Ipsos polling has repeatedly found, Republicans and Democrats hold markedly different views about certain core facts. A majority across parties believe that they themselves have never shared false or misleading content online, according to an Ipsos Consumer Tracker survey conducted in October 2021.

Moreover, when asked in a 2020 NPR/Ipsos survey which political party was most susceptible to false information or conspiracy theories, partisans were more likely to point to the other side than to their own party. A plurality (44%) of Democrats said that Republicans were more likely to believe conspiracy theories. For their part, Republicans were most apt to believe that “all equally” are subject to believing conspiracy theories, but one in four said Democrats were.

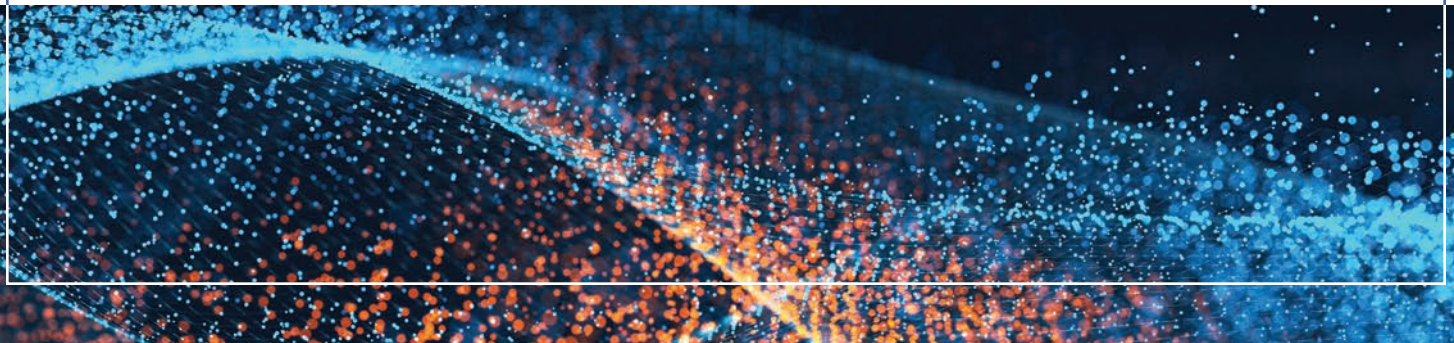
Partisans are unlikely to believe their party is susceptible to false information

Of the following, who do you think is most likely to believe false information or conspiracy theories?



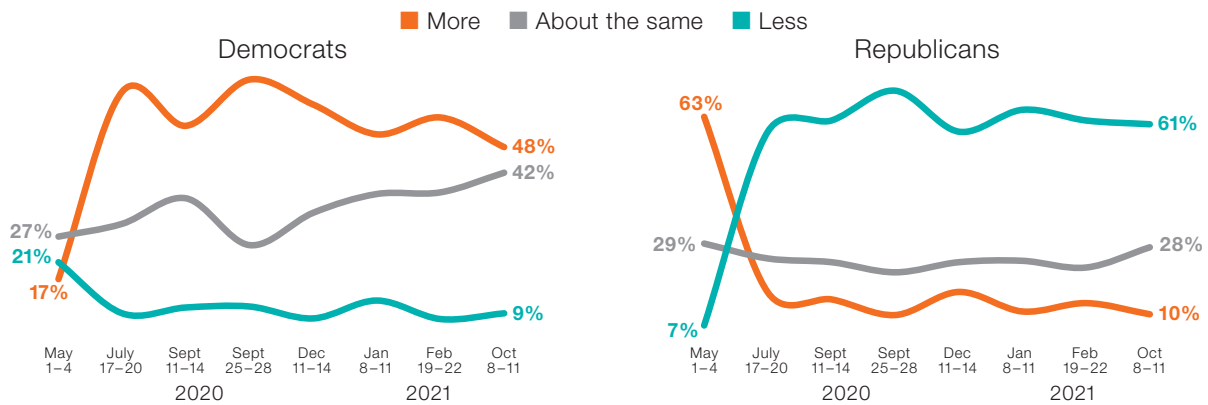
Source: NPR/Ipsos survey of 1,115 American adults age 18+ conducted December 21–22, 2020

That lack of common understanding extends to a range of issues, including the official statistics around the number of people who have died from COVID in the U.S. Over the course of the pandemic, our polling with Axios found that Democrats were much more likely to believe that there are more deaths than what appears in the official statistics. A plurality still believes this is the case, but a growing number believe that the death toll is “about the same” as the reported numbers, perhaps a reflection of greater trust in national institutions now that the Democratic Party has won the White House. Republicans, on the other hand, are—and remain—much more likely to think that there are fewer COVID-19 deaths when compared to the official numbers.



Split realities in a partisan world

Do you believe the actual number of Americans dying from the coronavirus is more, less, or about the same as the number of deaths that have been reported?



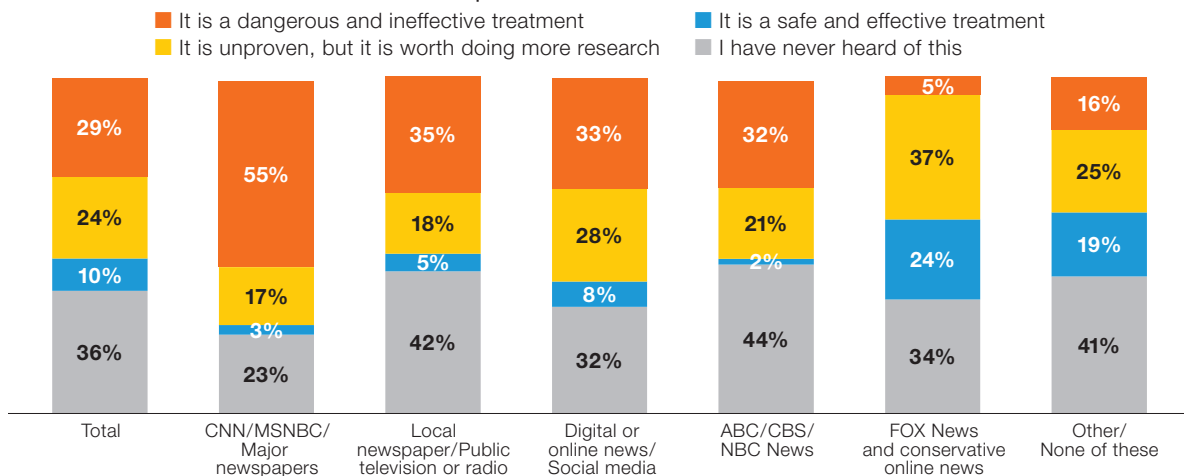
Source: Axios-Ipsos Coronavirus Index

News consumption is another prism that channels opinion in different directions, strongly correlated with party affiliation. Some Americans who are distrustful of vaccines have sought alternative remedies for COVID, turning to Ivermectin as a possible cure. As an analysis of Axios-Ipsos polling data shows, where Americans primarily source their news is a strong driver of how efficacious they believe Ivermectin to be.

Of course, news consumption overlaps strongly with partisan identification, with Republicans trending towards FOX and other conservative sites, while Democrats tilt towards MSNBC and the like. The breakdown in opinion on Ivermectin by news source—not to mention a host of other issues—also underlines the split in the information environment across news channels and the inflection or tone of the content that different groups are being exposed to on a regular basis.

With news source also framing reality

Which of the following best describes your view on the use of Ivermectin to prevent or treat COVID-19 in humans?



Source: Axios-Ipsos Coronavirus Index survey of 1,105 Americans conducted September 24–27, 2021

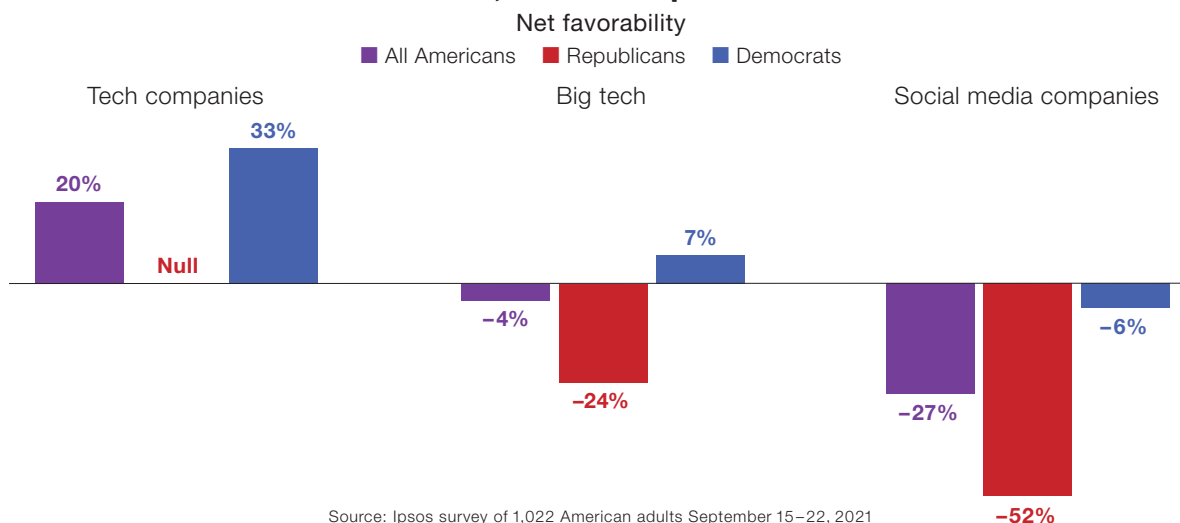


Partisanship goes digital

Although Americans feel that tech innovations have had a positive impact on their lives, the sector as a whole is seen less positively. The framing matters: while many say they hold favorable views about specific tech companies, like Google or Microsoft, just 53% say they have a favorable opinion of technology companies overall, and just 39% hold favorable views of “big tech.” Net favorability for tech companies is 20% overall, while net favorability for big tech and social media companies is underwater.

While Democratic and Republican reactions to different tech terms fall and rise in tandem, with both favoring the term “technology companies” over “social media companies,” there are notable partisan spreads on the matter.

Semantics matter, even with partisan differences

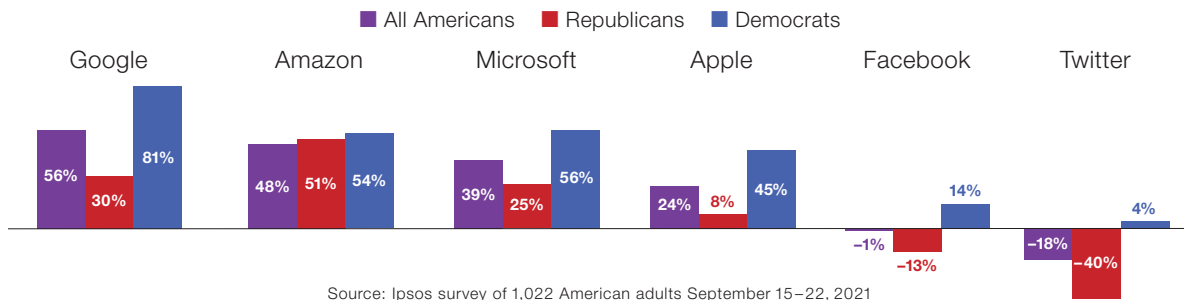


A similar pattern plays out across favorability towards specific companies, like Google, Apple and Facebook. Democrats, on the whole, hold a more favorable opinion of tech labels Ipsos tested, while Republican favorability across all tech terms tested does not surpass 50%. More pointedly, though, brands, whose business model is closest to the problems of misinformation and content moderation, have more polarizing favorability among partisans. Take social media companies, like Facebook or Twitter, for example, whose net favorability is underwater. On the other hand, Amazon, whose business model touches these problems less, has a consistent favorability rating among partisans.



Social media companies weakest reputation

Net favorability for the following companies, cut by partisanship



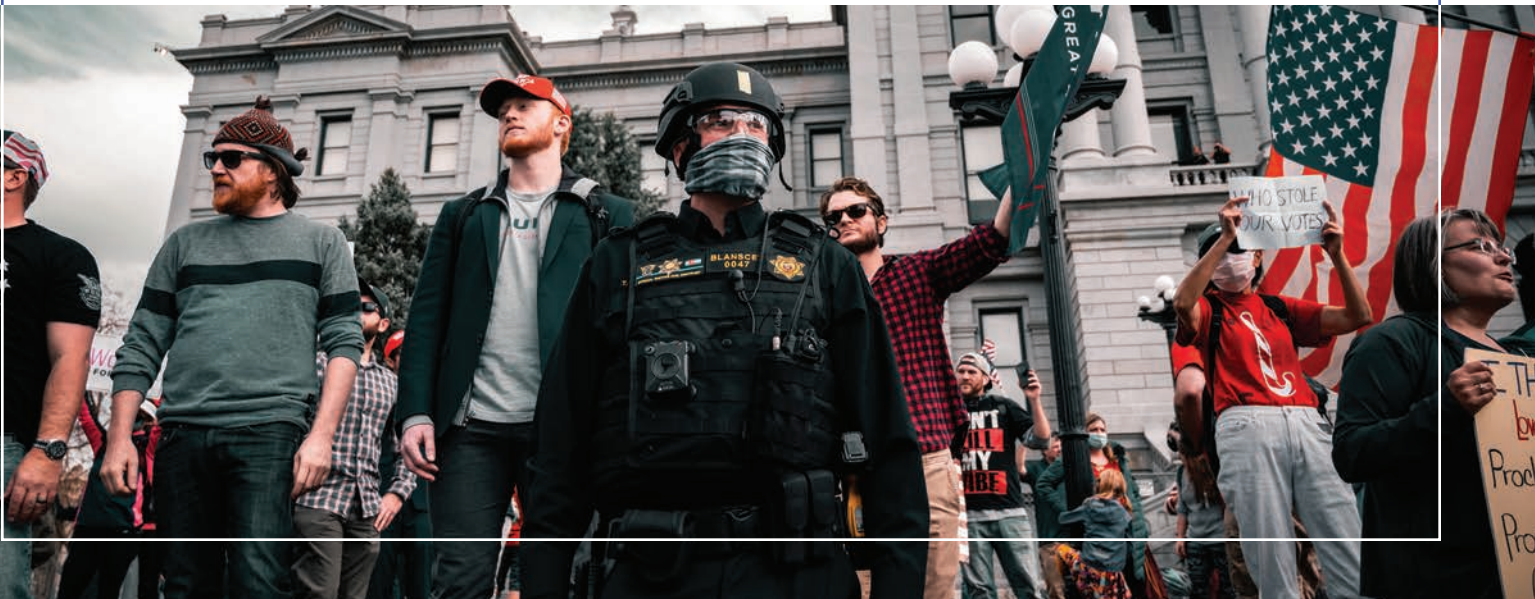
Zooming in, Republican distrust of social media is a recurring theme in Ipsos polling. As Ipsos/Hidden Common Ground polling found in the spring of 2021, Republicans are primarily responsible for driving the majority view that social media companies are mostly promoting destructive public discourse and debate (78% of Republicans vs. 48% of Democrats agree).

Ipsos' work on the first anniversary of the attack at the Capitol more explicitly draws out this point. [NPR/Ipsos polling](#) finds that three in four Republicans (76%) feel that conservatives are unfairly censored on social media, while just 11% of Democrats and 36% of independents agreed.

The partisan response to events of the past year help contextualize this breakdown in opinion. Following the riot at the Capitol and subsequent suspension of former President Trump from various social media platforms, Ipsos found that few Republicans and Democrats could agree on the basic facts that led to the riot: did then-president-elect Joe Biden fairly win the election? Ninety-three percent of Democrats correctly believed that Joe Biden legitimately won the 2020 presidential election. Only 27% of Republicans felt the same.

Since partisans do not see eye-to-eye on the events that led to the January 6th attack, the actions social media companies took following the events of that day did not sit well with either side. Many Republicans (55%) felt that social media companies should not have suspended the former president from their platforms, while two-thirds of Democrats felt social media companies should have taken action sooner. Perhaps as a result, that same poll found that only 14% of Republicans trust social media company leaders, while 37% of Democrats do.

Taken together, these split realities make it so that any action social media companies take is interpreted and judged through their own partisan realities. It also demonstrates how the closer a tech company business model is to the most contentious issues facing the country, the more polarizing these brands become.

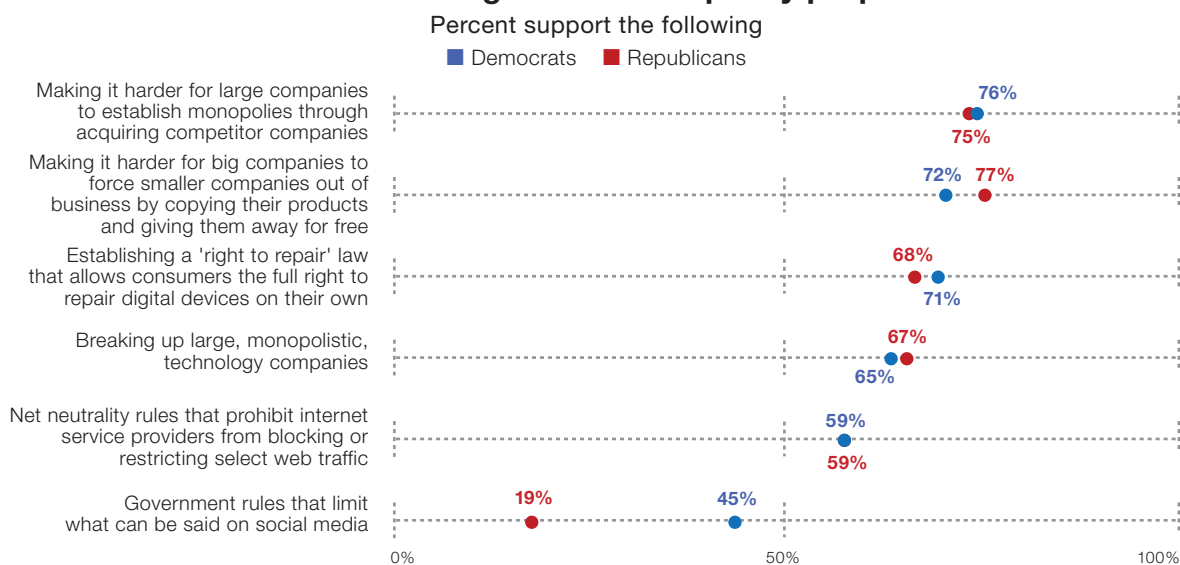


Public agrees on widespread tech reform, but becomes divided over social media

At least in theory, the public supports new economic controls being introduced to the tech sector, particularly to limit the scale and reach of the current giants in the space.

Yet with regard to social media, views are more muddled. Partisan opinion breaks down sharply, as some groups reveal a preference for and against government intervention on speech on social media. Instead, a majority overall believe that it is the responsibility of individual social media companies to moderate problematic content on their channels—not the government's. In fact, most forms of speech on social media are protected from government intervention by the First Amendment, including hate speech.

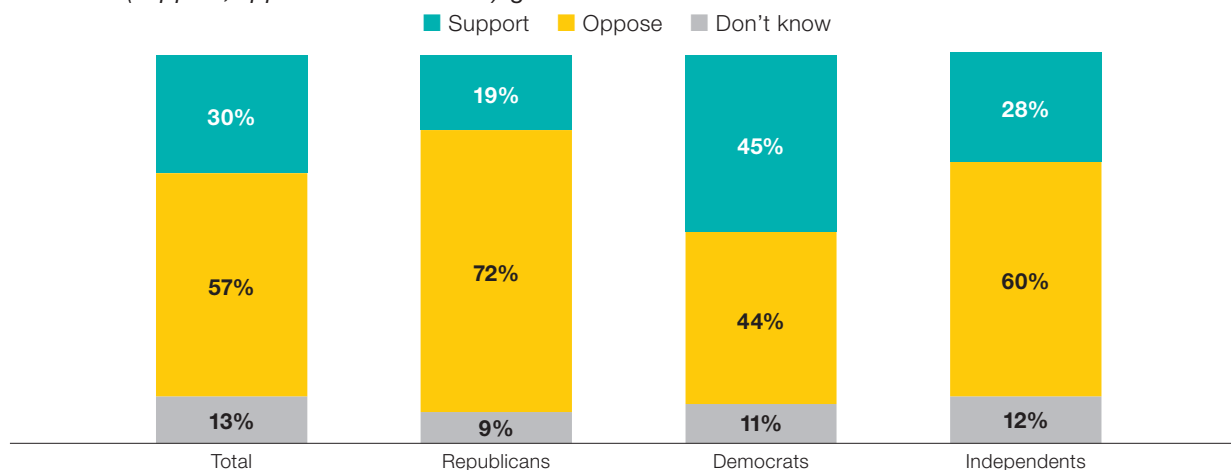
Partisans are aligned on most policy proposals



Democrats are most split on this issue (with 45% for government intervention, 44% against, and the remaining 10% say they don't know). A majority of Republicans and independents alike oppose government interference.

A majority oppose government intervention on social media

Percent (support, oppose or don't know) government rules that limit what can be said on social media

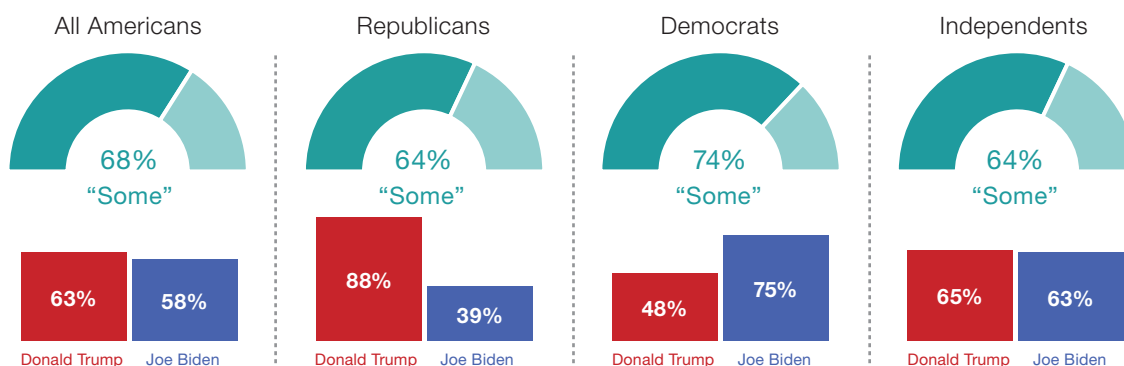


Another one of the central problems to regulating tech through government intervention is the public's reactivity to messenger cuing. While support for regulating the sector is relatively even across parties, when certain political figures are introduced as proponents of regulation and new controls, support shifts dramatically, demonstrating how quickly these issues can become politicized.

Our research investigates this, testing how support rises and falls for rules when they are linked to former President Donald Trump and President Joe Biden. Republican support for new rules and laws rises 24 points if Trump were to say they should be put in place, but falls 25 points if Biden were to say this. Among Democrats, support is essentially the same if Biden were to introduce the concept of new rules and laws, but falls 26 points if the messaging were to come from Trump.

Support for rules on tech sector shifts depending on messenger

Percent support new rules and laws limiting what technology companies can do if _____ said there need to be new rules and laws put in place to limit technology companies



Source: Ipsos survey of 1,022 American adults September 15–22, 2021

Unpacking partisan views on social media further underscores that parties disagree on what people should be allowed to do and say online. Just over half of all Republicans (53%) say that people should be able to post “whatever they want” on social media and the web, compared to 32% of Democrats and independents.

This has direct implications for whether they believe that companies should intervene on their own platforms. Democrats are much more likely to say they want social media companies to take proactive steps to remove content that is misleading or false (72%), while just 46% of Republicans say the same. Independents follow Republicans on this question, at 51%.

However, the type of speech in question matters. Americans are generally less supportive of allowing incitements to violence to spread unchecked online than they are of misinformation and bullying. For both types of speech, there is majority support among all parties for social media companies taking some type of action and policing content on their platforms.

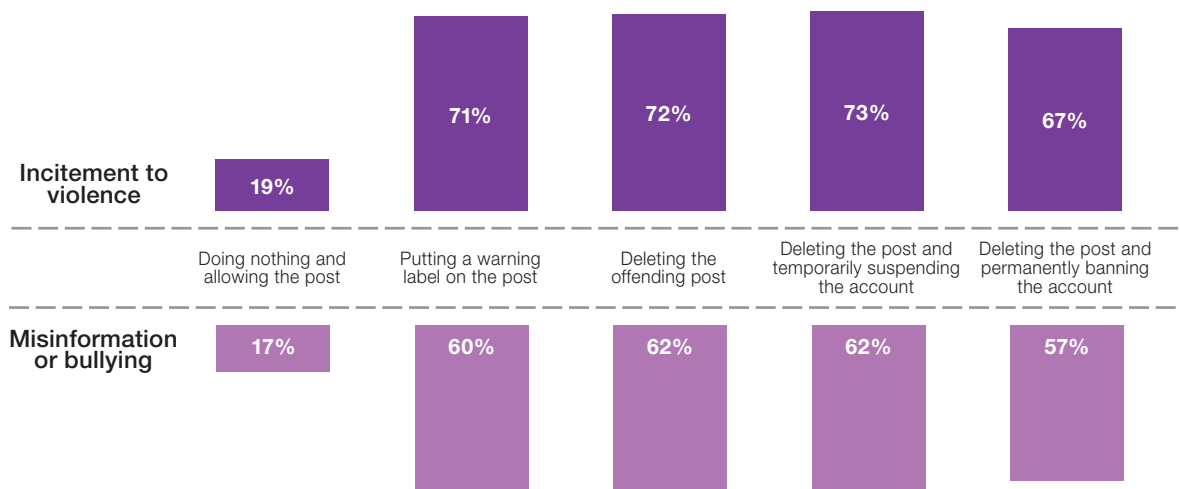


When it comes to a social media post that involves misinformation or bullying, majorities of people from all parties support social media companies putting a warning label on the post, deleting the offending post, or deleting the post and temporarily suspending the account that posted it. Majority support among Republicans softens somewhat when it comes to permanently banning the account holder, though majorities of Democrats and independents continue to support that move. For posts that incite violence, majorities in all parties back social media companies taking any type of action, including permanently banning the offending account.

A small minority—less than one in five—back social media companies doing nothing at all when met with content on their platform that incites violence or includes misinformation or bullying.

Americans support stronger action when dealing with incitement to violence than misinformation

Percent support social media companies taking the following action if someone were to post something like _____ on social media



Source: Ipsos survey of 2,000 Americans, conducted March 17–19, 2021

While there is support for controls in the abstract, opinion splits around how those interventions should be implemented. There are several ways platforms can monitor misinformation on their platforms—for instance, letting algorithms do the work, or assigning the task to individuals. Among the possible content moderation options, the public leans toward employing human fact-checkers, not algorithm-based controls, according to an October 2021 wave of the [Ipsos Coronavirus Consumer Tracker](#).



Conclusion

The public appreciates that technology has transformed our world, erasing the antiquated problems of time and space, making many things that were once unthinkable now thinkable. But concerns about the tech sector also animate the public, something that unites red and blue America in a way few other issues do. This is one of the few points of commonality across partisan lines, underlining its pertinence.

The problems surrounding tech are structural and not necessarily unique to the industry. The public's concerns about the industry reflect the problems with political polarization in American society writ large. They are not issues specific to the tech industry alone, even if they take shape in that space in unique ways. Recent events, like the pandemic and widespread false claims that the 2020 election was stolen, have brought the distinctive position of tech in this hyperpolarized world to the fore.

Although tech companies are taking steps to ameliorate the political context, these obstacles are part of the issue landscape tech companies exist in, creating continued headwinds as the industry evolves.

We can't and don't expect this political context to change anytime soon. Hyperpolarization is here

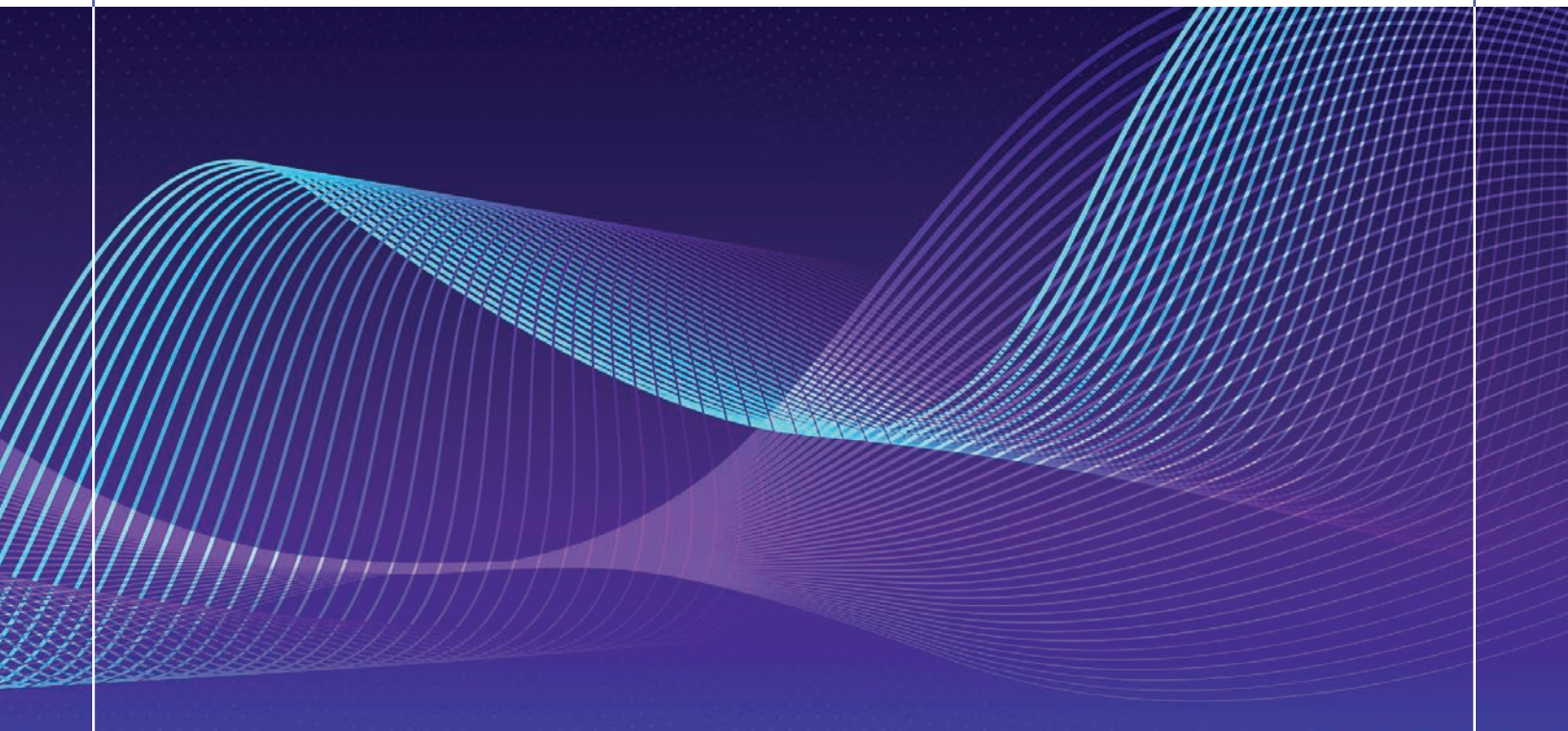
to stay for the foreseeable future. While we can expect further evolutions in the tech landscape—think the metaverse and beyond—this same core problem political tribalism poses will not shift.

So, what can companies do?

While companies must be aware of the risks they face, in many cases the extent to which companies and brands are affected by these broader social ills is dictated by where they are situated in our hyperpolarized world.

In other words, the closer companies are to the source of the division, the bigger problem a company is likely to have. Yet mitigation measures are possible, even for companies closest to these issues. As our polling shows, the public grants companies license to crack down on harmful content. Some strategies include emphasizing the tech sector's positive impacts and stamping out hyper-partisanship or inflammatory speech.

Taken together, the public wants companies to proactively act on these issues. To act smart, companies must take note of the specific risks they face and plan accordingly because the staying power of political polarization will persist well into the future.



Sources

[Ipsos Tech and Society Poll](#), Feb 2022

[Axios-Ipsos Coronavirus Index](#), March 2020–Present

[Ipsos Consumer Tracker](#), April 2020–Present

[Ipsos Tech Polling](#), March 2021, Americans report high levels of concern about data privacy and security

[Ipsos Polling](#), January 2021, Majority support social media platforms suspending or deleting President Trump's accounts

[Ipsos Global Advisor Polling](#), December 2020–January 2021, U.S. stands out among 28 countries in perceptions of social tension

[NPR/Ipsos Polling](#), December 2020, More than 1 in 3 Americans believe a 'deep state' is working to undermine Trump

[World Economic Forum/Ipsos](#), October–November 2018, Ignorance and distrust prevail about what companies and governments do with personal data

Contact

In today's shifting threat environment, it is critical for corporations to monitor issues and influencers in real-time. Take a look at [Ipsos RISE](#)—a solution to navigate reputational uncertainty.

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