



## Republicans no longer trust the FBI

Mood of the Nation Poll examines Americans' trust in the FBI after the agency's leaders have come under attack from the President and congressional Republicans

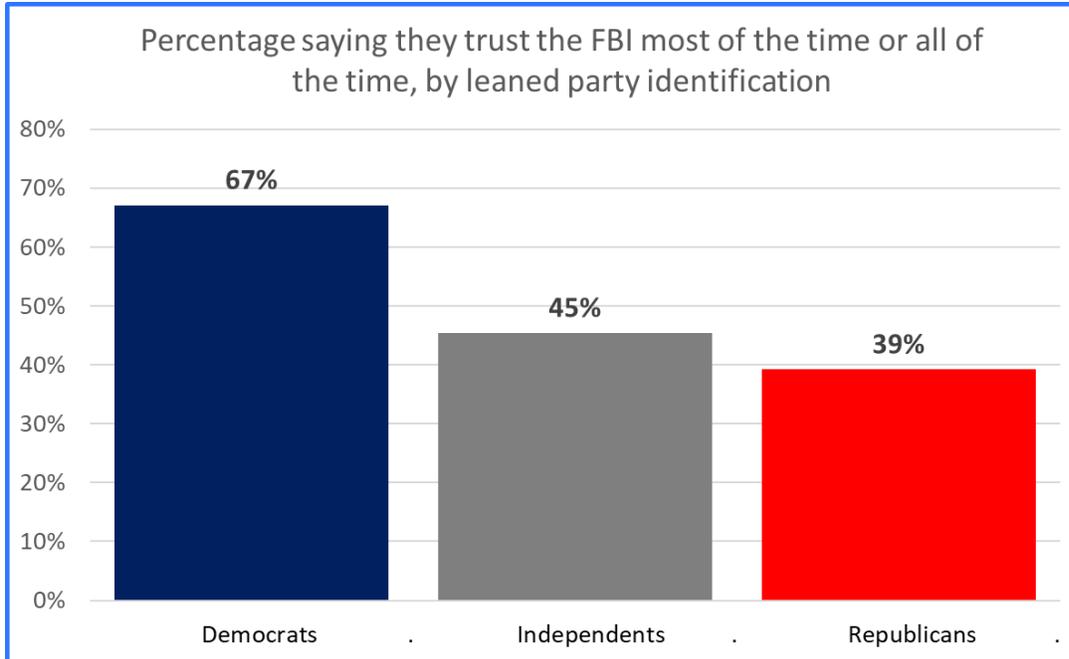
Michael Berkman and Eric Plutzer

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American's trust in the FBI is sharply divided along partisan lines, finds a recent Mood of the Nation Poll from the McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State. The falling trust in the FBI is not confined to the FBI's leadership but extends to the agents as well. A large majority of Republicans believe that the agents are biased against President Trump.

Between February 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, The Mood of the Nation Poll asked a random sample of 1,000 Americans "How much of the time do you think you can trust the FBI to do what is right?"

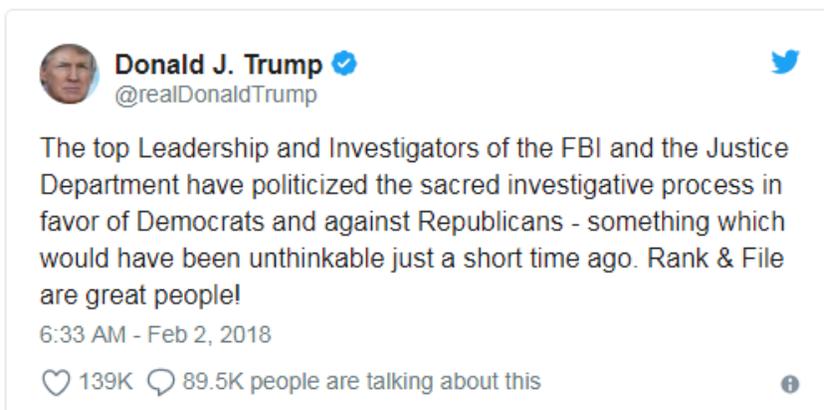
Among Democrats, 67% trust the FBI to do what is right "most of the time" or "just about always." This contrasts with only 39% of Republicans.



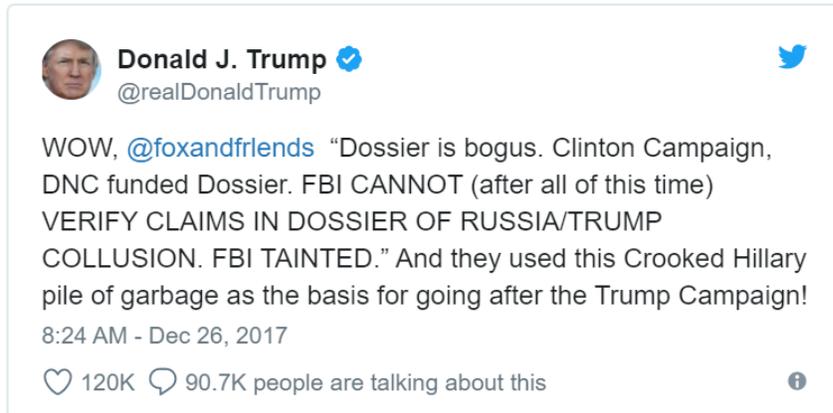
Source: *McCourtney Institute Mood of the Nation Poll, February 5-8, 2018*

### Does Republican distrust extend to the agents?

This low level of support is clearly a result of President Trump’s firing of James Comey and his questioning of the FBI leadership’s impartiality. With respect to the FBI’s 16,000 agents and intelligence analysts, the Trump administration has offered more mixed messages. On the one hand, he recently tweeted that FBI rank and file “are great people!”



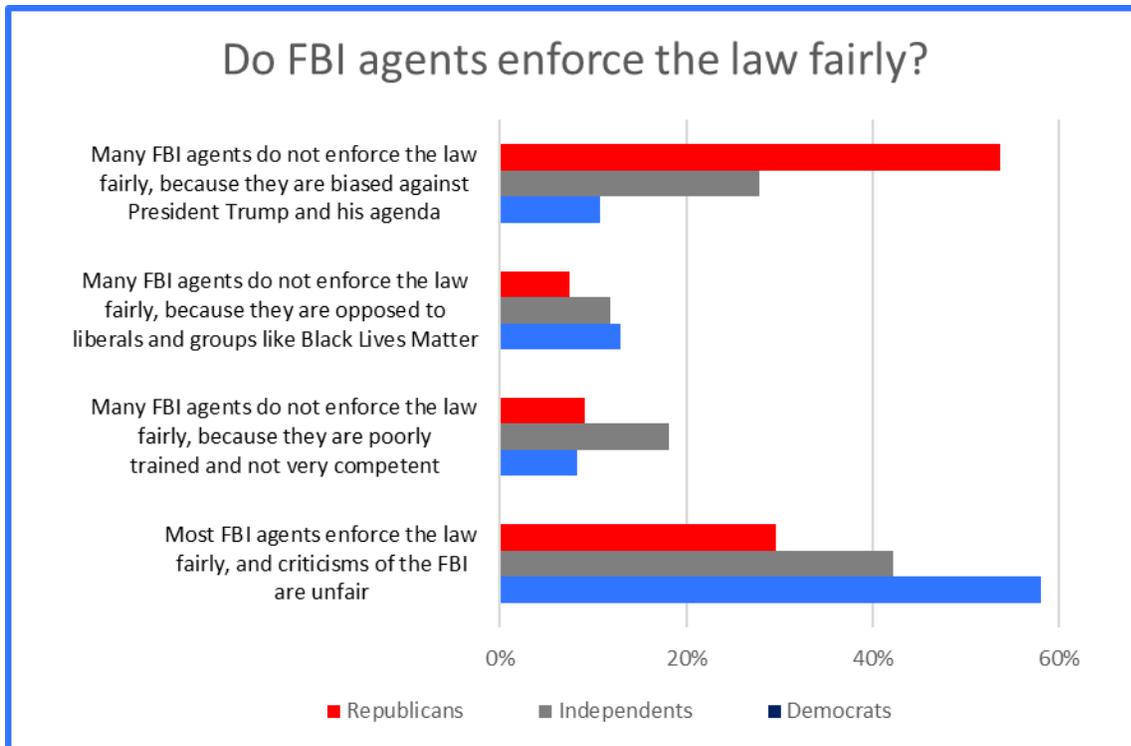
On the other hand, this tweet follows other tweets and comments that lump the leadership and agents together, as when he tweeted, “FBI TAINTED” on December 26<sup>th</sup>.



Our poll shows that the President’s followers are not picking up on his more recent support. We offered poll participants three different critical perspectives on the FBI that might account for low levels of trust – that agents are poorly trained and incompetent, that agents are biased against liberal groups like Black Lives Matter, or that agents are biased against the President and his agenda. We also offered the option that “Most FBI agents enforce the law fairly, and criticisms of the FBI are unfair.”

Overall, only 49% of Americans felt that “most FBI agents enforce the law fairly,” including 68% of Democrats.

But what stands out most is that a majority of Republicans, 54%, felt that FBI agents were “biased against President Trump and his agenda.”



*Source: McCourtney Institute Mood of the Nation Poll, February 5-8, 2018*

These results are consistent with other recent polls and show a marked contrast with [polls](#) taken as recently as 3 years ago, which high levels of Democratic support and even higher levels by Republicans.

It is especially remarkable that negative views of FBI agents are especially intense among older Republicans. Among Republicans 45 or older, 60% believe the agents are biased against the President. This generation of American conservatives, all born before 1973, were socialized to see the FBI as the epitome of American law enforcement, and especially tough against perceived threats from the left, not the right.

Every Mood of the Nation poll also uses open-ended polling to ask Americans about what it is in the news and politics that makes them angry, and to tell us what worries them about the future. Here, too, we see remarkable polarization and change over a very short period. When we asked 1,000 Americans what made them angry or worried in November of 2017, not a single person mentioned the FBI. But asked again in February 2018, 17 out of 369 Republicans (about 5%)

mentioned the FBI without in any way being prompted for it and before we asked any questions about the Bureau.

A Republican, 57 year old white woman from Idaho, for example told us she was angry about the

*FBI and Democrats working to corrupt the 'Justice' department to fix an election, and no one is yet in jail.*

And a 35 year old Republican white man from Louisiana was angry

*...that some people in the FBI violated Federal law by using the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court for political purposes.*

Not surprisingly, voters angry with the FBI see the FBI deficiencies as part of a broad pattern and mentions of the FBI were frequently intertwined with criticism of the Democrats, the “*deep state*” or *the media*. Another Republican, a 62 year old Californian was angry that

*The news agencies are just a bunch of liars. The FBI is full of people who are more concerned with agenda than protecting the American people.*

#### Implications for American democracy

These findings on American’s growing polarization over the FBI offer some reason for concern. Previous McCourtney Mood of the Nation polls have found that Americans of both political parties have maintained high levels of support for the courts, suggesting that this important institution in the system of checks and balances was holding.

In the past, the Justice Department and FBI have generally been recognized as the most independent of the cabinet agencies, especially when it came to criminal matters such as political corruption. The individuals we today regard as heroes of the Watergate crisis were precisely those individuals who resigned or put their careers in jeopardy in order to safeguard the independence of agencies investigating the president.

Yet we see now relentless and unprecedented attacks by the president have taken a toll as Americans now see the FBI in strongly partisan terms, and few members of the president’s own party have spoken up to protect the FBI’s independence.

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## How the Poll was Conducted

This poll was conducted between February 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018 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.<sup>1</sup>

Core questions asked in every Mood of the Nation Poll can be viewed [here](#).

Supplemental questions reported in this report are as follows:

**Please select the answer that comes closest to your opinion, even if none of the choices are perfect.**

How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in in Washington to do what is right?

1. Just about always
2. Most of the time
3. Only some of the time
4. Hardly ever

**Next we turn to a particular part of the government, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (the FBI).**

How much of the time do you think you can trust the FBI to do what is right?

1. Just about always
2. Most of the time
3. Only some of the time
4. Hardly ever

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<sup>1</sup> Ansolabehere, Stephen, and Douglas Rivers. (2013) "Cooperative survey research." *Annual Review of Political Science* 16: 307-329.

**Still thinking about the FBI, which of the following comes closest to your opinion (even if none are exactly right)?**

1. Many FBI agents do not enforce the law fairly, because they are biased against President Trump and his agenda
2. Many FBI agents do not enforce the law fairly, because they are opposed to liberals and groups like Black Lives Matter
3. Many FBI agents do not enforce the law fairly, because they are poorly trained and not very competent
4. Most FBI agents enforce the law fairly, and criticisms of the FBI are unfair