

FOR RELEASE APRIL 16, 2015

Less Support for Death Penalty, Especially Among Democrats

Supporters, Opponents See Risk of Executing the Innocent

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
ON THIS REPORT:**

Carroll Doherty, Director of Political Research

Robert Suls, Research Associate

Rachel Weisel, Communications Associate

202.419.4372

www.pewresearch.org

Less Support for Death Penalty, Especially Among Democrats

Supporters, Opponents See Risk of Executing the Innocent

A majority of Americans favor the death penalty for those convicted of murder, but support for the death penalty is as low as it has been in the past 40 years. A new Pew Research Center survey finds 56% favor the death penalty for people convicted of murder, while 38% are opposed.

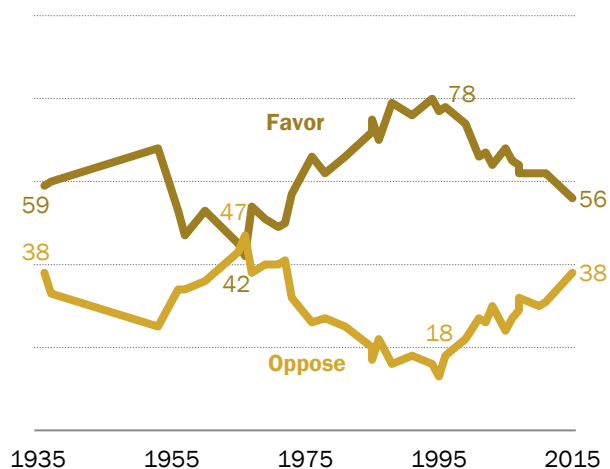
The share supporting the death penalty has declined six percentage points, from 62%, since 2011. Throughout much of the 1980s and 90s, support for the death penalty often surpassed 70%. [In a 1996 survey](#), 78% favored the death penalty, while just 18% were opposed.

Much of the decline in support over the past two decades has come among Democrats. Currently, just 40% of Democrats favor the death penalty, while 56% are opposed. In 1996, Democrats favored capital punishment by a wide margin (71% to 25%).

There has been much less change in opinions among Republicans: 77% favor the death penalty, down from 87% in 1996. The share of independents who favor the death penalty has fallen 22 points over this period, from 79% to 57%.

Smaller Majority Supports the Death Penalty

% who favor/oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder

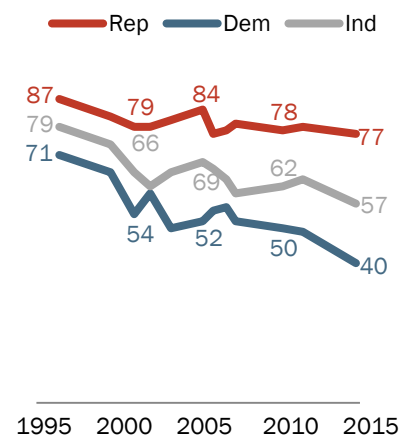


Survey conducted March 25-29, 2015. 1936-1995 data from Gallup.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Wider Partisan Gap on Death Penalty

% who favor death penalty among...



Survey conducted March 25-29, 2015.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The latest national survey by the Pew Research Center, conducted Mar. 25-29 among 1,500 adults, finds widespread doubts about how the death penalty is applied and whether it deters serious crime. Yet a majority (63%) says that when someone commits a crime like murder, the death penalty is morally justified; just 31% say it is morally wrong, even in cases of murder.

At the same time, 71% of Americans say there is some risk that an innocent person will be put to death. Only about a quarter (26%) say there are adequate safeguards in place to make sure that does not happen.

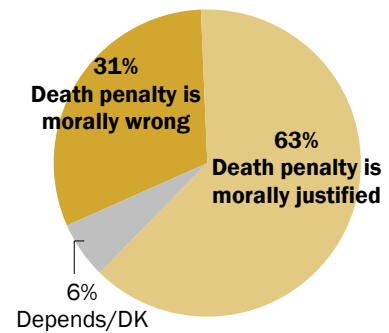
About six-in-ten (61%) say the death penalty does not deter people from committing serious crimes; 35% say it does deter serious crime.

And about half (52%) say that minorities are more likely than whites to be sentenced to death for similar crimes; fewer (41%) think that whites and minorities are equally likely to be sentenced for similar crimes.

The survey also finds that Americans are relatively unaware about whether the number of death penalty executions taking place in the U.S. has changed in recent years. According to [U.S. Justice Department records](#) the number of prisoners executed in the last 10 years has declined.

Death Penalty Viewed as Morally Justified

When someone commits a crime like murder ...

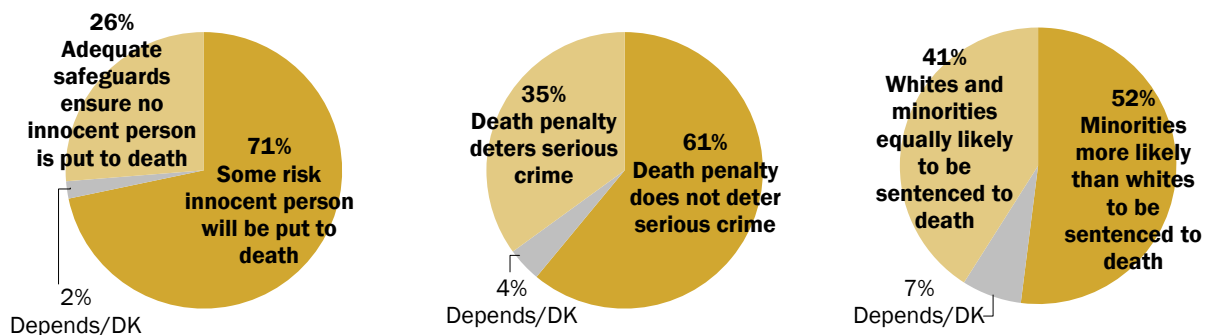


Survey conducted March 25-29, 2015.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Most Americans See ‘Some Risk’ an Innocent Person Will Be Executed

Opinions about the death penalty ...



Survey conducted March 25-29, 2015.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Overall, about three-in-ten Americans (31%) think the number of prisoners put to death in the U.S. has been decreasing. And a quarter (25%) say that the number of people put to death has stayed about the same in the past ten years. Fewer say that it has increased (21%) and about a quarter do not offer an answer (23%).

Opinions of the Death Penalty

The share of women who favor the death penalty has fallen 10 points since 2011, while men's views have shown virtually no change. Men are now 15 points more likely than women to favor the death penalty (64% vs. 49%). Four years ago, the gender difference was much more modest (65% of men favored the death penalty, as did 59% of women).

The balance of opinion on the death penalty among Democrats has shifted since 2011: 56% now oppose the death penalty, while 40% favor it. Four years ago, more Democrats favored (49%) than opposed (43%) the death penalty. By contrast, opinion of the death penalty is virtually unchanged among Republicans (77% favor now, 79% in 2011).

Democrats continue to be ideologically divided over the death penalty. Nearly half of conservative and moderate Democrats (48%) favor it, compared with 29% of liberals. Among Republicans, conservative Republicans are as likely as moderate and liberal Republicans to favor the death penalty (77% each).

Support for the death penalty has edged down among whites, blacks and Hispanics since 2011, but wide racial differences persist. About six-in-ten whites (63%) favor the death penalty, compared with 34% of blacks and 45% of Hispanics.

Age differences in views of the death penalty continue to be modest. About half (51%) of those under 30 favor the death penalty, as do

Growing Gender, Partisan Gaps in Views of the Death Penalty

	Nov 2011		Mar 2015		Change in favor
	Favor %	Oppose %	Favor %	Oppose %	
Total	62	31	56	38	-6
Men	65	30	64	30	-1
Women	59	33	49	45	-10
White	68	26	63	33	-5
Black	40	49	34	57	-6
Hispanic	52	42	45	47	-7
18-29	59	36	51	43	-8
30-49	64	31	57	38	-7
50-64	65	27	61	33	-4
65+	56	33	54	41	-2
College grad+	53	42	53	43	0
Some college	67	28	59	35	-8
HS or less	65	27	57	36	-8
Republican	79	15	77	17	-2
Cons Rep	84	11	77	17	-7
Mod/lib Rep	73	22	76	17	+3
Independent	64	31	57	37	-7
Democrat	49	43	40	56	-9
Cons/Mod Dem	55	37	48	49	-7
Liberal Dem	40	54	29	68	-11
Protestant	67	26	63	32	-4
White evang	77	16	71	25	-6
White mainline	73	21	66	27	-7
Black	40	47	37	58	-3
Catholic	59	36	53	42	-6
White Catholic	61	33	63	34	-2
Unaffiliated	57	36	48	45	-9

Survey conducted March 25-29, 2015. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. Don't know responses not shown.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

57% of those 30 to 49, 61% of those 50 to 64 and 54% of those 65 and older.

Among religious groups, sizable majorities of white evangelical Protestants (71%), white mainline Protestants (66%) and white Catholics (63%) favor the death penalty. But those who are religiously unaffiliated are divided (48% favor, 45% oppose). In 2011, the religiously unaffiliated supported the death penalty by a wide margin (57% to 36%).

Death Penalty Opponents, Supporters See Risk of Executing the Innocent

Death penalty supporters overwhelmingly view it as morally justified: 90% say that when someone commits a crime like murder, the death penalty is morally justified. Just 26% of death penalty opponents view it as morally justified.

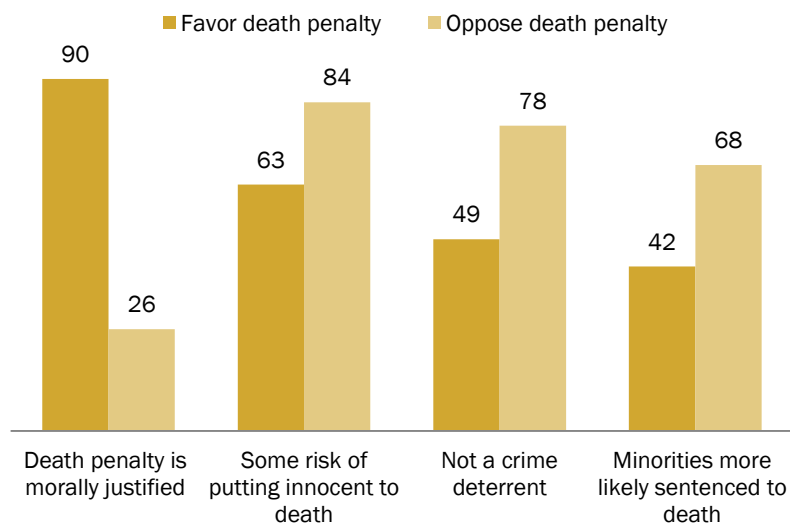
Yet the differences between death penalty supporters and opponents are not as stark when it comes to other opinions about capital punishment. A large majority (84%) of those who oppose the death penalty say there is a risk that an innocent person will be put to death; so too do 63% of death penalty supporters.

Nearly eight-in-ten (78%) opponents of the death penalty say it does not deter people from committing serious crimes. People who favor the death penalty are divided: 49% say it does not deter serious crimes, while 47% think it does.

A majority of opponents (68%) say minorities are more likely than whites to be sentenced to the death penalty for committing similar crimes. That compares with 42% of death penalty

How Death Penalty Supporters and Opponents View Its Morality, Fairness and Effectiveness

Among those who favor/oppose the death penalty, % who say...



Survey conducted March 25-29, 2015.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

supporters; 52% of supporters say whites and minorities are equally likely to be sentenced to the death penalty for similar crimes.

Racial Gap in Views of Death Penalty and Minorities

As with overall views of the death penalty, there are demographic and partisan differences in attitudes about capital punishment.

The sharpest disagreements are in views of whether minorities are more likely than whites to face the death penalty.

Fully 77% of blacks say minorities are more likely than whites to receive the death penalty for similar crimes. Whites are evenly divided: 46% say minorities are disproportionately sentenced to death, while an identical percentage sees no racial disparities.

More than twice as many Democrats (70%) as Republicans (31%) say minorities are more likely than whites to receive the death penalty for similar crimes.

Large Majority of Blacks Say Minorities Are More Likely to Receive the Death Penalty

Opinions about the death penalty ...

	Morally justified	Some risk of putting innocent person to death	Not a crime deterrent	Minorities more likely to face death penalty
	%	%	%	%
Total	63	71	61	52
Men	68	68	55	49
Women	58	74	66	54
White	69	70	60	46
Black	46	74	75	77
Hispanic	51	70	54	55
College grad+	59	76	64	60
Some college	67	70	62	55
High school or less	63	69	58	44
Republican	80	61	48	31
Democrat	50	79	71	70
Independent	64	71	60	52

Survey conducted March 25-29, 2015. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

There also are educational differences in these opinions: 60% of college graduates say minorities are more apt to receive the death penalty than are whites, as do 55% of those with some college experience. But among those with no more than a high school education, 44% say minorities are disproportionately sentenced to death; 48% say whites and minorities are equally likely to receive the death penalty for similar crimes.

In contrast, there are much more modest differences in opinions about whether the death penalty presents a risk that an innocent person will be put to death, or whether there are adequate safeguards in place. Majorities across every demographic and partisan group see some risk that an innocent person will be put to death, including 74% of blacks, and 70% each of whites and Hispanics. Still, larger shares of Democrats (79%) and independents (71%) than Republicans (61%) say there is a risk of executing an innocent person.

About the Survey

The analysis in this report is based on telephone interviews conducted March 25-29 among a national sample of 1,500 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia (525 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone, and 975 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 567 who had no landline telephone). The survey was conducted by interviewers at Princeton Data Source under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International. A combination of landline and cell phone random digit dial samples were used; both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Respondents in the landline sample were selected by randomly asking for the youngest adult male or female who is now at home. Interviews in the cell sample were conducted with the person who answered the phone, if that person was an adult 18 years of age or older. For detailed information about our survey methodology, see

<http://www.pewresearch.org/methodology/u-s-survey-research/>

The combined landline and cell phone sample are weighted using an iterative technique that matches gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and nativity and region to parameters from the 2013 Census Bureau's American Community Survey and population density to parameters from the Decennial Census. The sample also is weighted to match current patterns of telephone status (landline only, cell phone only, or both landline and cell phone), based on extrapolations from the 2014 National Health Interview Survey. The weighting procedure also accounts for the fact that respondents with both landline and cell phones have a greater probability of being included in the combined sample and adjusts for household size among respondents with a landline phone. The margins of error reported and statistical tests of significance are adjusted to account for the survey's design effect, a measure of how much efficiency is lost from the weighting procedures.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Total sample	1,500	2.9 percentage points
Republican	400	5.6 percentage points
Democrat	442	5.3 percentage points
Independent	574	4.7 percentage points
White non-Hispanic	1032	3.5 percentage points
Black non-Hispanic	158	8.9 percentage points
Hispanic	183	8.3 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Pew Research Center is a nonprofit, tax-exempt 501(c)3 organization and a subsidiary of The Pew Charitable Trusts, its primary funder.

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER
MARCH 2015 POLITICAL SURVEY
FINAL TOPLINE
MARCH 25-29, 2015
N=1,500**

QUESTIONS 1-2, 14a, 16, 25-27, 30, 32-33, 40-41, 43-45, 47-50, 57 PREVIOUSLY RELEASED

NO QUESTIONS 3-13, 17-19, 23-24, 28-29, 31, 34-39, 42, 46, 51-56, 58-59

QUESTIONS 14b-d, 15, 20-22 HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE

ASK ALL:

Next,

Q.60 Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose or strongly oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?¹

	-----FAVOR-----			-----OPPOSE-----			(VOL.) DK/Ref
	Total	<i>Strongly favor</i>	<i>Favor</i>	Total	<i>Strongly oppose</i>	<i>Oppose</i>	
Mar 25-29, 2015	56	23	34	38	13	24	6
Nov 9-14, 2011	62	28	34	31	11	20	7
Sep 22-Oct 4, 2011 ²	58	--	--	36	--	--	6
Jul 21-Aug 5, 2010	62	30	32	30	10	20	8
August, 2007	62	29	33	32	11	21	6
Early January, 2007	64	30	34	29	11	18	7
March, 2006	65	27	38	27	8	19	8
December, 2005	62	--	--	30	--	--	8
Late November, 2005	61	--	--	27	--	--	12
July, 2005	68	32	36	24	8	16	8
Mid-July, 2003	64	28	36	30	10	20	6
March, 2002	67	33	34	26	9	17	7
March, 2001	66	30	36	27	10	17	7
September, 1999	74	41	33	22	7	15	4
June, 1996	78	43	35	18	7	11	4

ASK ALL:

Q.61 Do you happen to know if the number of prisoners put to death in the U.S. over the past ten years has been increasing, decreasing or staying about the same?

Mar 25-29

2015

21	Increasing
31	Decreasing
25	Staying about the same
23	Don't know/Refused (VOL.)

¹ Question was also asked in a survey conducted by the Pew Religion and Public Life project in April 2013 on views about [radical life extension](#) and [end-of-life medical treatments](#). Due to contextual differences, results for that survey not shown here.

² In all surveys October 2011 and before, the question was asked as part of a list, except in November-December 2005.

ASK ALL:

Q.62 I'm going to read you a few pairs of statements about the death penalty in the U.S., please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views — even if neither is exactly right. First **[READ AND RANDOMIZE PAIRS AND RANDOMIZE STATEMENT WITHIN EACH PAIR]**. Next, **[NEXT PAIR] [IF NECESSARY: "Which statement comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right?"]**

a.	Mar 25-29, 2015	The death penalty deters people from committing <u>serious crimes</u> 35	The death penalty does NOT deter people from committing <u>serious crimes</u> 61	(VOL.) <u>Depends</u> 1	(VOL.) <u>DK/Ref</u> 3
b.	Mar 25-29, 2015	When someone commits a crime like murder, the death penalty is <u>morally justified</u> 63	The death penalty is morally wrong, even when someone commits <u>a crime like murder</u> 31	(VOL.) <u>Depends</u> 3	(VOL.) <u>DK/Ref</u> 3
c.	Mar 25-29, 2015	Minorities are more likely than whites to be sentenced to the death penalty for committing <u>similar crimes</u> 52	Whites and minorities are equally likely to be sentenced to the death penalty for committing <u>similar crimes</u> 41	(VOL.) <u>Depends</u> 1	(VOL.) <u>DK/Ref</u> 6
d.	Mar 25-29, 2015	There is some risk that an innocent person will <u>be put to death</u> 71	There are adequate safeguards to ensure that no innocent person will <u>be put to death</u> 26	(VOL.) <u>Depends</u> *	(VOL.) <u>DK/Ref</u> 2

NO QUESTIONS 63-69, 72-73, 76-79

QUESTIONS 70-71, 74-75, 80-81 PREVIOUSLY RELEASED

ASK ALL:

PARTY In politics TODAY, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or independent?

ASK IF INDEP/NO PREF/OTHER/DK/REF (PARTY=3,4,5,9):

PARTYLN As of today do you lean more to the Republican Party or more to the Democratic Party?

	<u>Republican</u>	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>Independent</u>	(VOL.) No preference	(VOL.) Other party	(VOL.) DK/Ref	Lean Rep	Lean Dem
Mar 25-29, 2015	25	30	39	4	*	2	15	17
Feb 18-22, 2015	24	31	38	4	1	1	18	17
Jan 7-11, 2015	21	30	44	3	1	1	19	18
Dec 3-7, 2014	24	31	39	3	1	2	17	17
Nov 6-9, 2014	27	32	36	2	*	1	15	16
Oct 15-20, 2014	24	33	38	4	*	1	13	17
Sep 2-9, 2014	24	33	38	3	1	2	15	15
Aug 20-24, 2014	24	31	37	4	1	4	15	16
Jul 8-14, 2014	25	34	37	2	1	1	16	15
Apr 23-27, 2014	24	30	41	2	1	2	18	17
Jan 23-Mar 16, 2014	22	31	41	3	1	2	17	17
Yearly Totals								
2014	23.2	31.5	39.5	3.1	.7	2.0	16.2	16.5
2013	23.9	32.1	38.3	2.9	.5	2.2	16.0	16.0
2012	24.7	32.6	36.4	3.1	.5	2.7	14.4	16.1
2011	24.3	32.3	37.4	3.1	.4	2.5	15.7	15.6
2010	25.2	32.7	35.2	3.6	.4	2.8	14.5	14.1
2009	23.9	34.4	35.1	3.4	.4	2.8	13.1	15.7
2008	25.7	36.0	31.5	3.6	.3	3.0	10.6	15.2
2007	25.3	32.9	34.1	4.3	.4	2.9	10.9	17.0
2006	27.8	33.1	30.9	4.4	.3	3.4	10.5	15.1
2005	29.3	32.8	30.2	4.5	.3	2.8	10.3	14.9
2004	30.0	33.5	29.5	3.8	.4	3.0	11.7	13.4
2003	30.3	31.5	30.5	4.8	.5	2.5	12.0	12.6
2002	30.4	31.4	29.8	5.0	.7	2.7	12.4	11.6
2001	29.0	33.2	29.5	5.2	.6	2.6	11.9	11.6
2001 Post-Sept 11	30.9	31.8	27.9	5.2	.6	3.6	11.7	9.4
2001 Pre-Sept 11	27.3	34.4	30.9	5.1	.6	1.7	12.1	13.5
2000	28.0	33.4	29.1	5.5	.5	3.6	11.6	11.7
1999	26.6	33.5	33.7	3.9	.5	1.9	13.0	14.5
1998	27.9	33.7	31.1	4.6	.4	2.3	11.6	13.1
1997	28.0	33.4	32.0	4.0	.4	2.3	12.2	14.1
1996	28.9	33.9	31.8	3.0	.4	2.0	12.1	14.9
1995	31.6	30.0	33.7	2.4	.6	1.3	15.1	13.5
1994	30.1	31.5	33.5	1.3	--	3.6	13.7	12.2
1993	27.4	33.6	34.2	4.4	1.5	2.9	11.5	14.9
1992	27.6	33.7	34.7	1.5	0	2.5	12.6	16.5
1991	30.9	31.4	33.2	0	1.4	3.0	14.7	10.8
1990	30.9	33.2	29.3	1.2	1.9	3.4	12.4	11.3
1989	33	33	34	--	--	--	--	--
1987	26	35	39	--	--	--	--	--

ASK REPUBLICANS AND REPUBLICAN LEANERS ONLY (PARTY=1 OR PARTYLN=1):

TEAPARTY3 From what you know, do you agree or disagree with the Tea Party movement, or don't you have an opinion either way?

BASED ON REPUBLICANS AND REPUBLICAN LEANERS [N=627]:

	Agree	Disagree	No opinion either way	(VOL.) Haven't heard of	(VOL.) Refused	Not heard of/ DK
Mar 25-29, 2015	35	11	52	1	1	--
Feb 18-22, 2015	36	9	54	*	*	--
Jan 7-11, 2015	34	9	54	1	2	--
Dec 3-7, 2014	34	9	55	2	1	--
Nov 6-9, 2014	31	10	57	1	1	--
Oct 15-20, 2014	32	8	56	2	2	--
Sep 2-9, 2014	38	10	50	1	1	--
Aug 20-24, 2014	34	10	53	*	2	--
Jul 8-14, 2014	35	12	50	2	1	--
Apr 23-27, 2014	33	11	54	1	1	--
Jan 23-Mar 16, 2014	37	11	50	1	1	--
Feb 14-23, 2014	36	9	54	1	1	--
Jan 15-19, 2014	35	12	52	1	*	--
Dec 3-8, 2013	32	9	57	1	1	--
Oct 30-Nov 6, 2013	40	9	48	2	1	--
Oct 9-13, 2013	41	11	45	2	1	--
Sep 4-8, 2013	35	9	54	1	1	--
Jul 17-21, 2013	37	10	50	2	1	--
Jun 12-16, 2013	44	9	46	1	2	--
May 23-26, 2013	41	7	48	1	3	--
May 1-5, 2013	28	8	61	2	1	--
Mar 13-17, 2013	43	7	47	1	1	--
Feb 13-18, 2013	36	9	52	1	3	--
Feb 14-17, 2013	43	9	45	1	2	--
Jan 9-13, 2013	35	10	51	2	2	--
Dec 5-9, 2012	37	11	51	1	*	--
Oct 31-Nov 3, 2012 (RVs)	40	8	49	1	2	--
Oct 4-7, 2012	38	9	50	1	3	--
Sep 12-16, 2013	39	7	52	1	1	--
Jun 28-Jul 9, 2012	40	9	47	2	1	--
Jun 7-17, 2012	42	8	48	1	1	--
May 9-Jun 3, 2012	36	9	53	1	2	--
Apr 4-15, 2012	42	8	48	1	1	--
Mar 7-11, 2012	38	10	49	2	1	--
Feb 8-12, 2012	40	7	51	1	1	--
Jan 11-16, 2012	42	8	47	1	1	--
Jan 4-8, 2012	37	8	52	1	1	--
Dec 7-11, 2011	40	9	48	2	1	--
Nov 9-14, 2011	41	9	49	*	1	--
Sep 22-Oct 4, 2011	37	11	51	1	1	--
Aug 17-21, 2011	43	7	49	*	1	--
Jul 20-24, 2011	40	7	51	*	1	--
Jun 15-19, 2011	42	9	47	1	1	--
May 25-30, 2011	37	7	52	1	3	--
Mar 30-Apr 3, 2011	45	9	46	*	1	--
Mar 8-14, 2011	37	7	54	1	*	--
Feb 22-Mar 1, 2011	41	9	48	1	1	--
Feb 2-7, 2011 ³	43	8	47	1	1	--

³ In the February 2-7, 2011, survey and before, question read "...do you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the Tea Party movement..." In October 2010 and earlier, question was asked only of those who had heard or read a lot or a little about the Tea Party. In May 2010 through October 2010, it was described as: "the Tea Party movement that has been involved in campaigns and protests in the U.S. over the past year." In March 2010 it was described as "the Tea Party protests that have taken place in the U.S. over the past year."

TEAPARTY3 CONTINUED...

	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>No opinion either way</u>	(VOL.) <u>Haven't heard of</u>	(VOL.) <u>Refused</u>	Not heard of/ <u>DK</u>
Jan 5-9, 2011	45	6	47	1	1	--
Dec 1-5, 2010	48	5	45	1	1	--
Nov 4-7, 2010	51	5	42	1	1	--
Oct 27-30, 2010 (RVs)	58	5	27	--	1	9
Oct 13-18, 2010 (RVs)	54	5	30	--	1	10
Aug 25-Sep 6, 2010 (RVs)	56	6	29	--	*	9
Jul 21-Aug 5, 2010	46	5	36	--	1	13
Jun 16-20, 2010	46	5	30	--	*	19
May 20-23, 2010	53	4	25	--	1	16
Mar 11-21, 2010	48	4	26	--	1	21