

America's Caste System

Aug 29, 2020

Isabel Wilkerson wants to change how we understand race in America

The award-winning author on living in the shadow of America's caste system.

By Ezra Klein | @ezraklein | Aug 25, 2020, 12:00pm EDT



Civil rights activists around the time of the 1960s Memphis sanitation workers strike are blocked by National Guard members brandishing bayonets while trying to stage a protest on Beala Street in Memphis, Tennessee. | Getty Images

<https://www.vox.com/2020/8/25/21399479/caste-the-warmth-of-other-suns-isabel-wilkerson-the-ezra-klein-show-race>

Identifying Castes

- At a conference about abolishing castes in India
 - She could identify the caste of the people there
 - By their interactions
 - Who feels entitled to interrupt others, explain what they just said, stand over them, etc.

Castes

- There is no such thing as "Caste"
- Only the plural "Castes"
- It's a dance of dominance and submission



It's Unconscious

- At a conference of people opposing the caste system
- It's still obvious who is dominant

American Hierarchy Terms

- In the last ten years, we have given names
- To this autonomic, inherited, unrecognized behavior
 - Microaggressions
 - Mansplaining, whitesplaining

Indian Castes

- Not physical
- Not based on *phenotype*
 - observable characteristics of an individual
- No clue for an outsider

Waking From a Dream



Indian Caste System

- Dates back thousands of years
- Four main castes, from Brahman to Untouchable
- Sacred text sets forth how each caste should be treated
- "Caste" is not an Indian word
 - It comes from Portuguese explorers

Justification

- Religious
- God took the parts of the body and created the castes
- One caste comes from the head, another from the feet

Race

- A social construct
- Formed by European explorers
- Not originally connected to skin color
- That arose with the transatlantic slave trade

Biblical Basis

Gen 9:22

And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without.

Gen 9:24

¶ And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him.

Gen 9:25

And he said, Cursed *be* Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.

Righteousness

- Slaveholders and advocates of slavery felt godly
- They were doing God's work
- By subjugating, oppressing and torturing people
 - On the basis of their lineage
- They felt they were righteous in keeping people subordinate

There are No Black People in Africa

- Africans do not see themselves as black
- Until they come to a place like the USA or the UK
- The bipolar system from the UK was brought to America

"Caucasian"

- A term coined in 1807 by a German anthropologist based on a skull

Blumenbach had a solitary Georgian skull; and that skull was the finest in his collection: that of a Greek being the next. Hence it was taken as the type of the skull of the more organised divisions of our species. More than this, it gave its name to the type, and introduced term *Caucasian*. Never has a single head done more harm to science than was done in the way of posthumous mischief by the head of this well-shaped female from Georgia. [Robert Gordon Latham, M.D., "The Natural History of the Varieties of Man," London, 1850]

Not Based on Color

- A Japanese man petitioned to be declared "white"
 - Because his skin was whiter than other "white" people
- His case was rejected because
 - White does not mean the color of your skin
 - It's about how you would be perceived by a man on the street

Willie James Howard Lynching

On January 2, 1944 15-year-old Willie James Howard was taken to the Suwannee River by the father of a young girl to whom he had sent a Christmas card. Willie James' body was removed from the river the following day.

<https://www.pbs.org/harrymoore/terror/howard.html>

The Lynch Mob did not Feel Evil

- Good fathers
- Good Christians
- Pillars of the community

Hidden Pillars

- You cannot see the pillars and joists in a house
 - But they hold it up
- It is your duty as a member of the dominant caste
 - To enforce the hierarchy you have inherited

Blackface



- Photo from 2008
- Candidate for the Kershaw County Council in 2018
- <https://wach.com/news/local/kershaw-community-outraged-by-photo-of-councilman-candidate-in-black-face>

A Republican candidate for sheriff preemptively released a photo of himself in blackface

By Leah Asmelash, CNN

🕒 Updated 11:33 PM ET, Sat October 12, 2019



Virginia's governor won't resign over blackface, KKK photo. What's next?

Christal Hayes USA TODAY

Published 3:32 p.m. ET Feb. 2, 2019 | Updated 9:07 p.m. ET Feb. 4, 2019

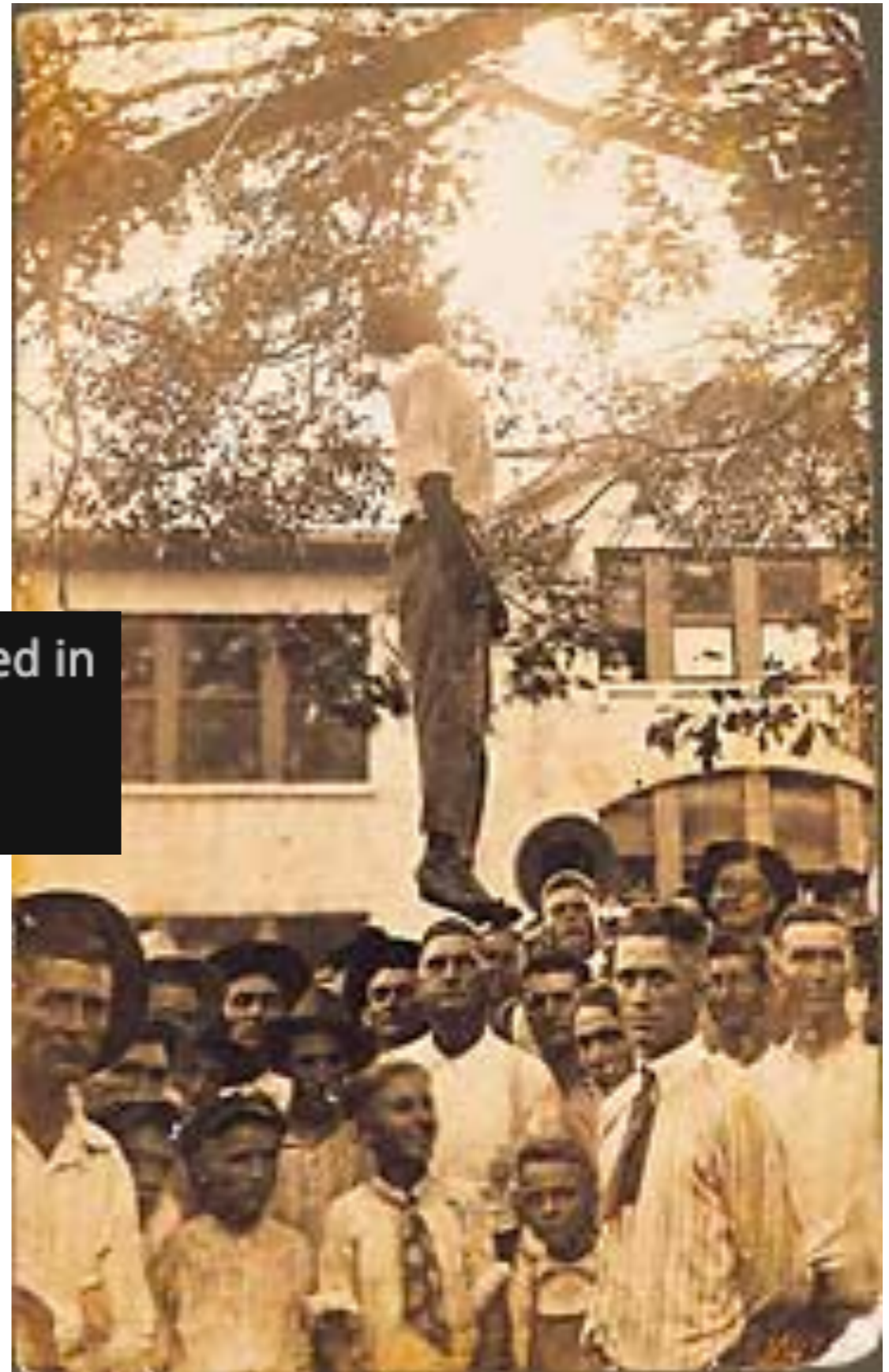
**Racist
photo
from
1984**



Dehumanization

- They see themselves as decent and righteous
- They are good people upholding their inheritance
- They are on the right side of how humans should behave

This postcard captures a man who was lynched in Texas (1920). Notice the young boys with the spellbound look on their faces.



<https://ridwanlaher.blogspot.com/2007/06/fun-and-lynching.html>

Subconscious

- Dehumanization becomes normalized
 - Absorbed into the subconscious
 - In order to survive in the world they are born into
- No one asks to be born into their caste
- Few people are able to break free
- "Breaking rank" or "breaking caste" has consequences

Upstanding People

- Path of least resistance
 - Go along with the flow
 - Accept the caste system you are born into
- Rise in it
 - By becoming an upstanding person
 - Who upholds the caste system better than others

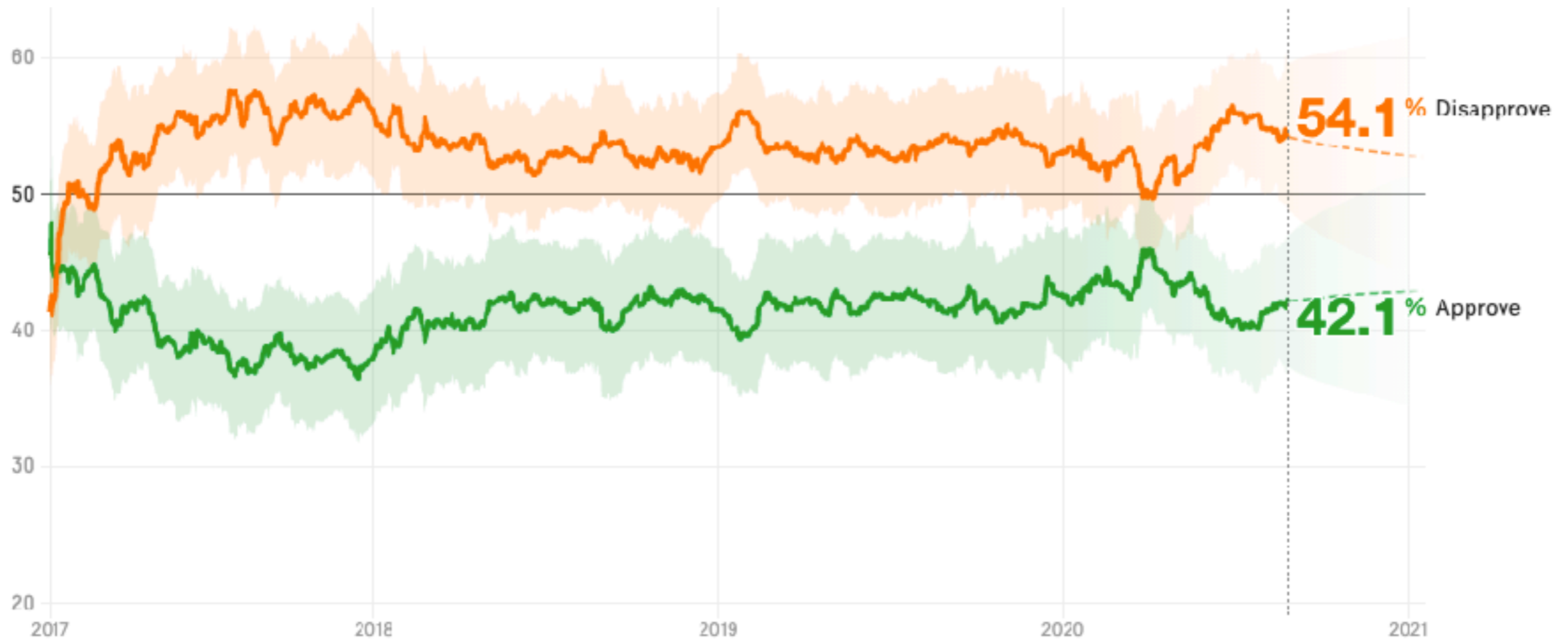
Donald Trump



UPDATED AUG. 28, 2020 AT 6:02 PM

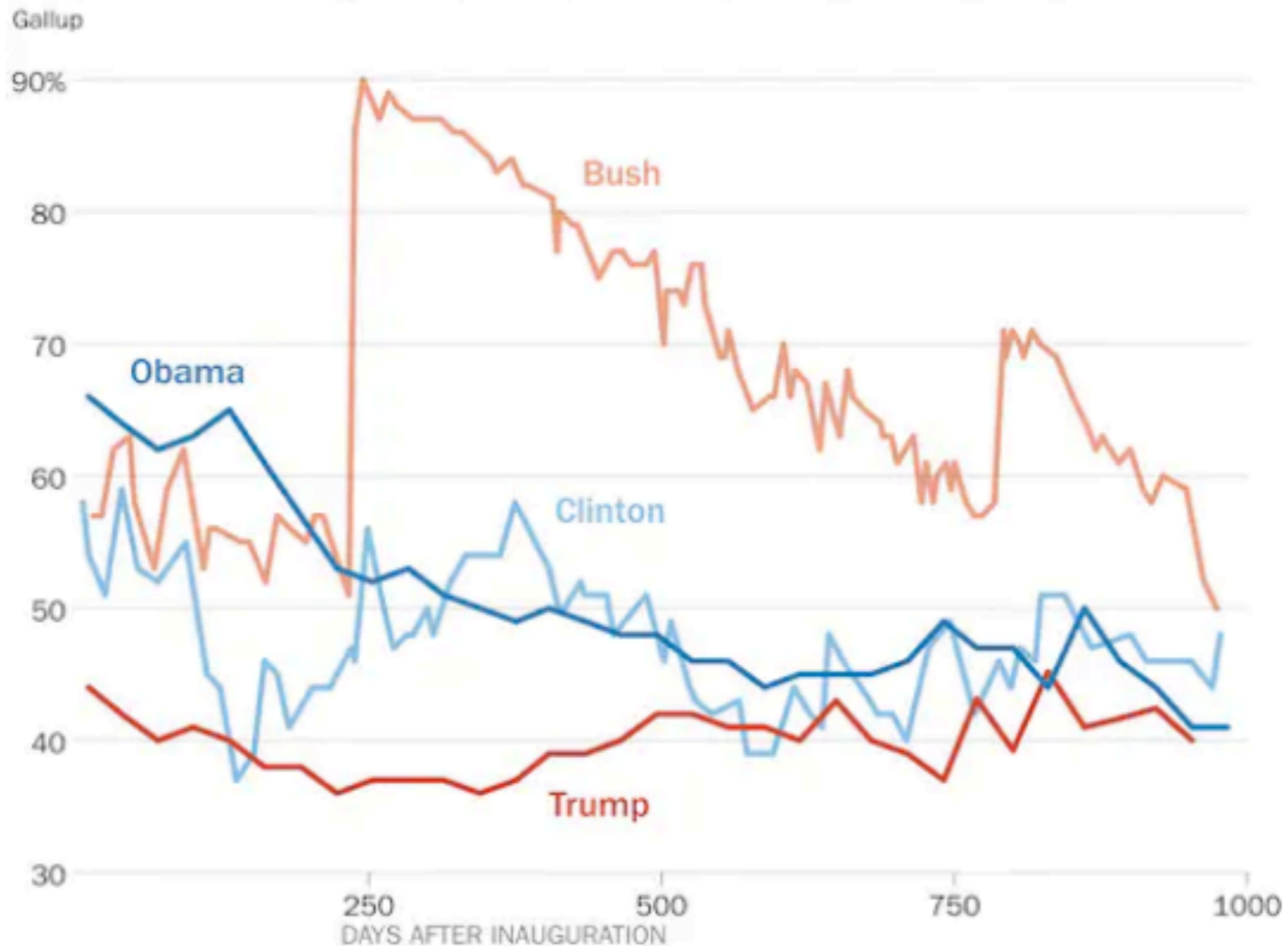
How popular is Donald Trump?

An updating calculation of the president's approval rating, accounting for each poll's quality, recency, sample size and partisan lean. [How this works »](#)



<https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/trump-approval-ratings/>

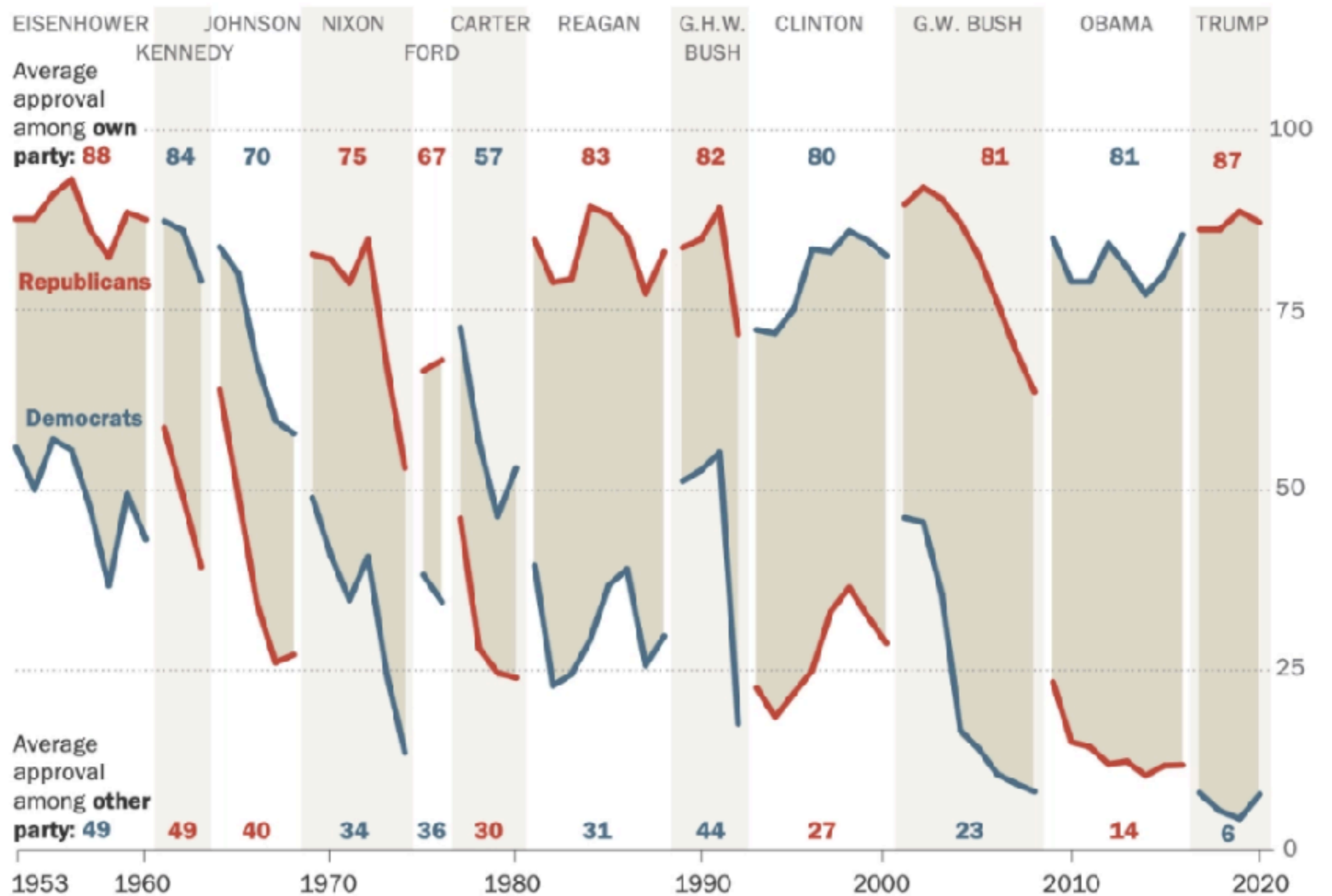
Approval through September of year prior to reelection



<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/09/27/why-comparing-trumps-approval-with-past-presidents-doesnt-tell-us-much-about/>

Trump approval more polarized than for any other president since Eisenhower

% who approve of president's job performance, by party



<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/24/trumps-approval-ratings-so-far-are-unusually-stable-and-deeply-partisan/>

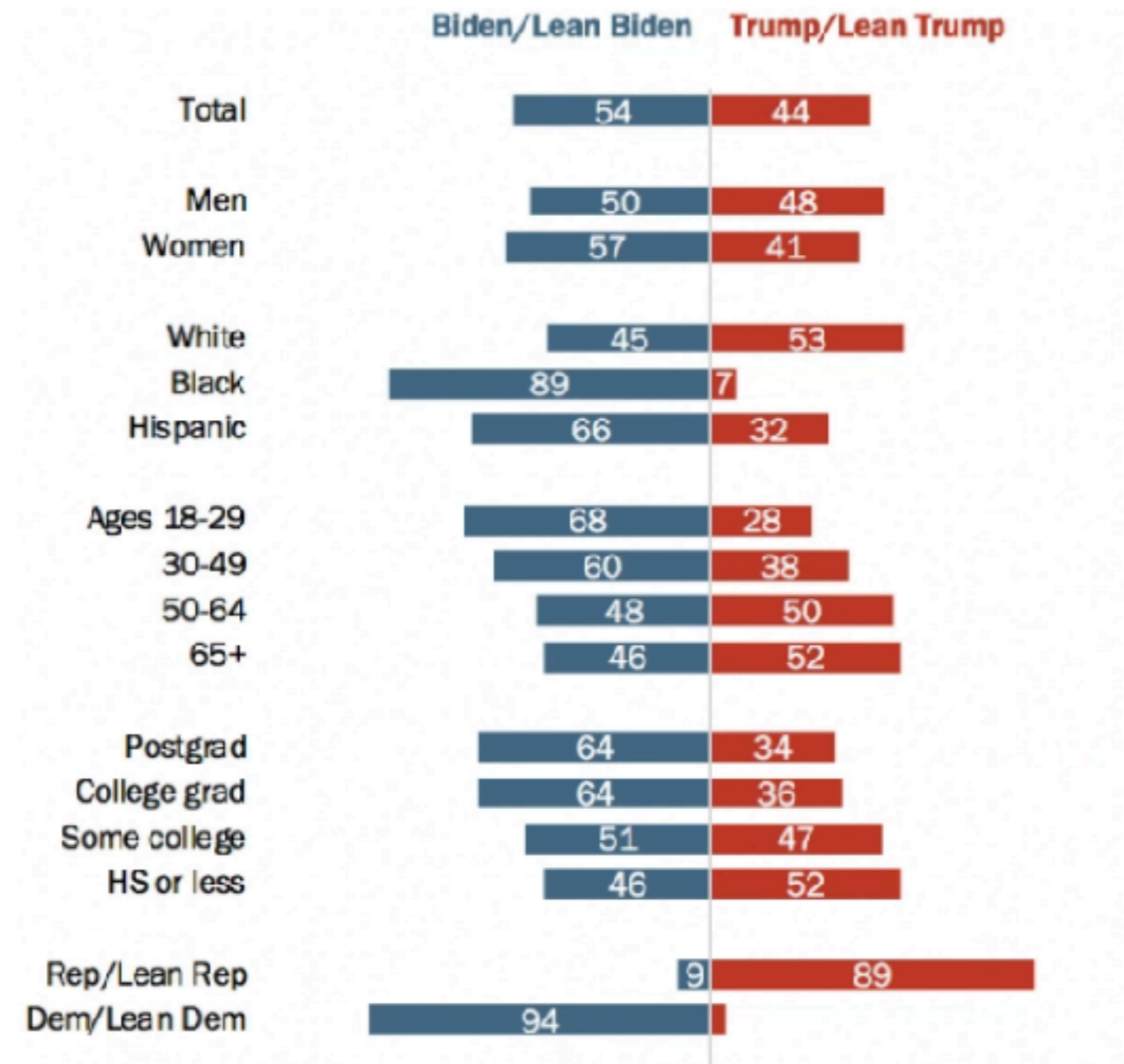
Poll: Most Republicans think Trump lies or exaggerates

A majority of Republicans (68.7%) surveyed in Trump Country (Florida, Wisconsin, Ohio and Pennsylvania) think the president exaggerates or intentionally lies — but they don't care.

<https://www.axios.com/poll-most-republicans-think-trump-lies-or-exaggerates-1513301822-4a6e7fd9-e80a-47ef-892c-d8bfd2a760c6.html>

As in 2016, wide divides by gender, race and ethnicity, age and education in 2020 voter preferences

% of registered voters who would vote for ___ if the 2020 presidential election were held today



<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/06/30/publics-mood-turns-grim-trump-trails-biden-on-most-personal-traits-major-issues/>

Donald Trump: 24 things the next president believes

🕒 9 November 2016

f     Share

- 1. The US should use waterboarding**
- 3. Muslims should not be admitted to the US**
- 4. Arab-Americans cheered the attacks on 9/11**
- 8. Illegal migrants should be deported**
- 9. Syrian refugees could be a "Trojan horse"**
- 14. The Black Lives Matter movement is "trouble"**

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34903577>

Trump's Acceptance Speech in 2020

“I say very modestly that I have done more for the African-American community than any president since Abraham Lincoln, our first Republican president.”

“Everything we’ve achieved is now in danger,” he said. “This election will decide whether we will defend the American way of life or allow a radical movement to completely dismantle and destroy it.”

Mr. Trump’s public remarks, he made little mention of the distress that has swept the country in the wake of the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the more recent shooting of Jacob Blake, focusing instead on what he called the “anarchists, agitators, rioters, looters and flag-burners.”

James Woods defends Trump: He 'loves America more than any president in my lifetime'

“At the Democrat National Convention, Joe Biden and his party repeatedly assailed America as a land of racial, economic and social injustice,” Mr. Trump said to an audience of more than 1,500 as American flags waved behind him. “So tonight, I ask you a simple question: How can the Democratic Party lead our country when it spends so much time tearing down our country?”

Teen Vigilante Killed Unarmed Kenosha Protester Who Threw a Plastic Bag at Him: Court Docs



<https://www.thedailybeast.com/teen-vigilante-kyle-rittenhouse-killed-unarmed-kenosha-protester-who-threw-plastic-bag-at-him-court-docs-say>

‘They just need to disappear’: Kenosha sheriff once called for Black shoplifters to be ‘warehoused’ and kept from having children



<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/28/kenosha-sheriff-aclu-protests-rittenhouse/>

US policing

White supremacists and militias have infiltrated police across US, report says

A former FBI agent has documented links between serving officers and racist militant activities in more than a dozen states

Trump is ignoring right-wing extremists who 'want to start a race war,' former DHS official says

Trump Advisers: He Was 'Triggered' by Talk of White Supremacy

Kenosha Police Chief Defends Officers Who Let Alleged Shooter Walk Right by Them