

# Are veterans more prone to political violence than civilians?

Dana Beth Weinberg, Amelia Ingram, Jeffrey S. Kopstein, David Frey, April Edwards, Javier Fernandez

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# Background

A disproportionate share of those charged in relation to the violence on January 6, 2021 at the nation's Capitol are U.S. veterans. The high visibility of veterans in the insurrection has fostered concerns about the potential for violent extremism among veterans. In this report, we examine how a representative sample of veterans differ, if at all, from civilians in their attitudes about American values, institutions, and political violence.

This report by the [New War Research Consortium](#) was prepared in partnership with Over Zero. Over Zero, Protect Democracy, and New America conducted a survey in January 2022, via YouGov on a nationally representative sample of 1274 Americans. Building on a large body of work examining public attitudes toward January 6, the survey queried Americans' worldviews, values, and assignments of responsibility for the Capitol attack. This report is part of a [series](#) of publications summarizing the findings.

The survey included 1,136 Americans who have never served in the military and 124 veterans. (ROTC, active-duty servicemembers, and reservists were also surveyed but are not included in this report due to the small number.) When weighted to better reflect the American population, the sample size is 138 veterans and 1,119 civilians.

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# This report compares the values and attitudes of veterans and civilians

- What they value most about living in America and what behaviors and attitudes they think should define a “true American”
- How much they trust American institutions
- How much they value democracy and peaceful transition of power
- When they think violence is appropriate, in relation to: January 6th, opposing political parties, 2022 midterm elections, and the 2024 presidential election
- Differences that reach the 95% level of statistical significance are discussed in the text and with an asterisk in the charts.



# There were significant demographic differences between veterans and civilians.

Veterans were significantly more likely than civilians to be:

- White (72% vs. 63%)
- Older:
  - Baby Boomers (22% vs. 5%)
  - Gen X (49% vs. 34%)
- Male (90% vs. 45%)
- Married (58% vs. 44%)
- Middle Class (52% vs. 41%)
- Republican (34% vs. 25%)
- Conservative or Very Conservative (54% vs. 30%)
- Christian (63% vs. 47%)
- To have guns in household (44% vs. 30%)

Veterans were significantly less likely than civilians to be:

- Hispanic (2% vs. 16%)
- Gen Z (9% vs. 34%)
- Female (8% vs. 53%)
- Never Married (13% vs. 34%)
- Have College to Post Graduate Education (23% vs. 31%)
- Democrat (26% vs. 34%)
- Very Liberal (5% vs. 14%)
- Not to have guns in household (41% vs. 63%)



# Part 1: American Values and “Real” Americans

- Survey respondents were asked two sets of questions that reflect on American values. The first asked what they most valued about living in America. The second asked which characteristics define the characteristics of a “true American.”
- Like civilians, veterans most valued individual rights as part of living in America, but they were also significantly more likely than civilians to value respect for the Constitution and law and order.
- In terms of defining who is a “true American,” the majority of veterans agreed with one another, and this majority view prized law-abiding citizenship and political participation as well as supporting and defending oneself and one’s family.
- For about a third of veterans, attributes of a “true American” also related to national pride and identity, and veterans were significantly more likely to strongly agree that these were defining traits of “true Americans” than were civilians.
- In summary, what veterans valued about living in America and how they define “true Americans” pointed to a strong value for rule of law at odds with the violence that occurred on January 6<sup>th</sup>.



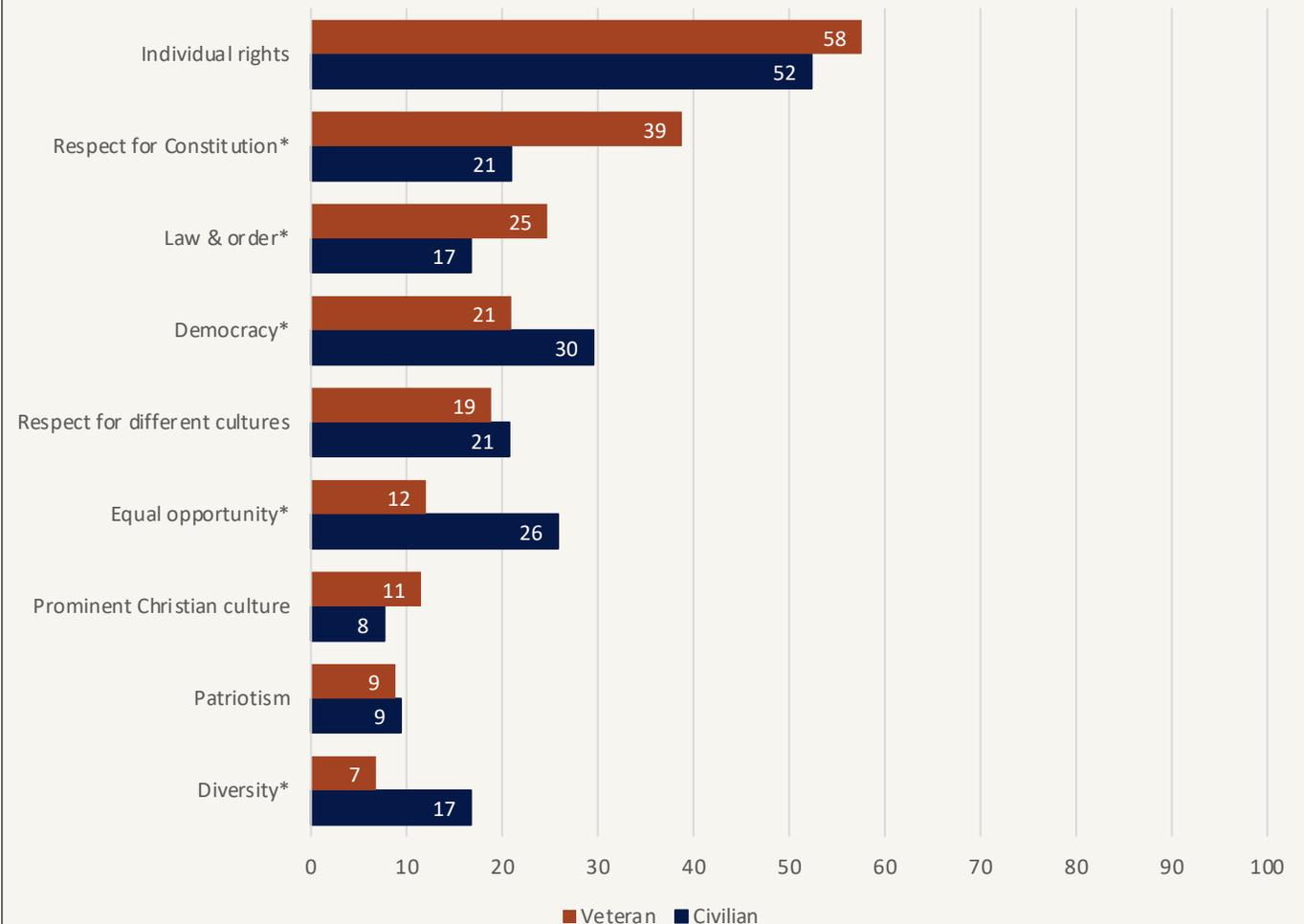
# Veterans valued respect for the Constitution and for law and order more than civilians did.

Given a choice of two values to value most, veterans and civilians similarly reported individual rights as what they valued most about living in America.

Veterans also highly valued respect for the Constitution followed by law and order, tending to identify these values more frequently than civilians.

Veterans placed less importance on democracy, equal opportunity, and diversity than did civilians.

What Veterans and Civilians Value Most About Living in America



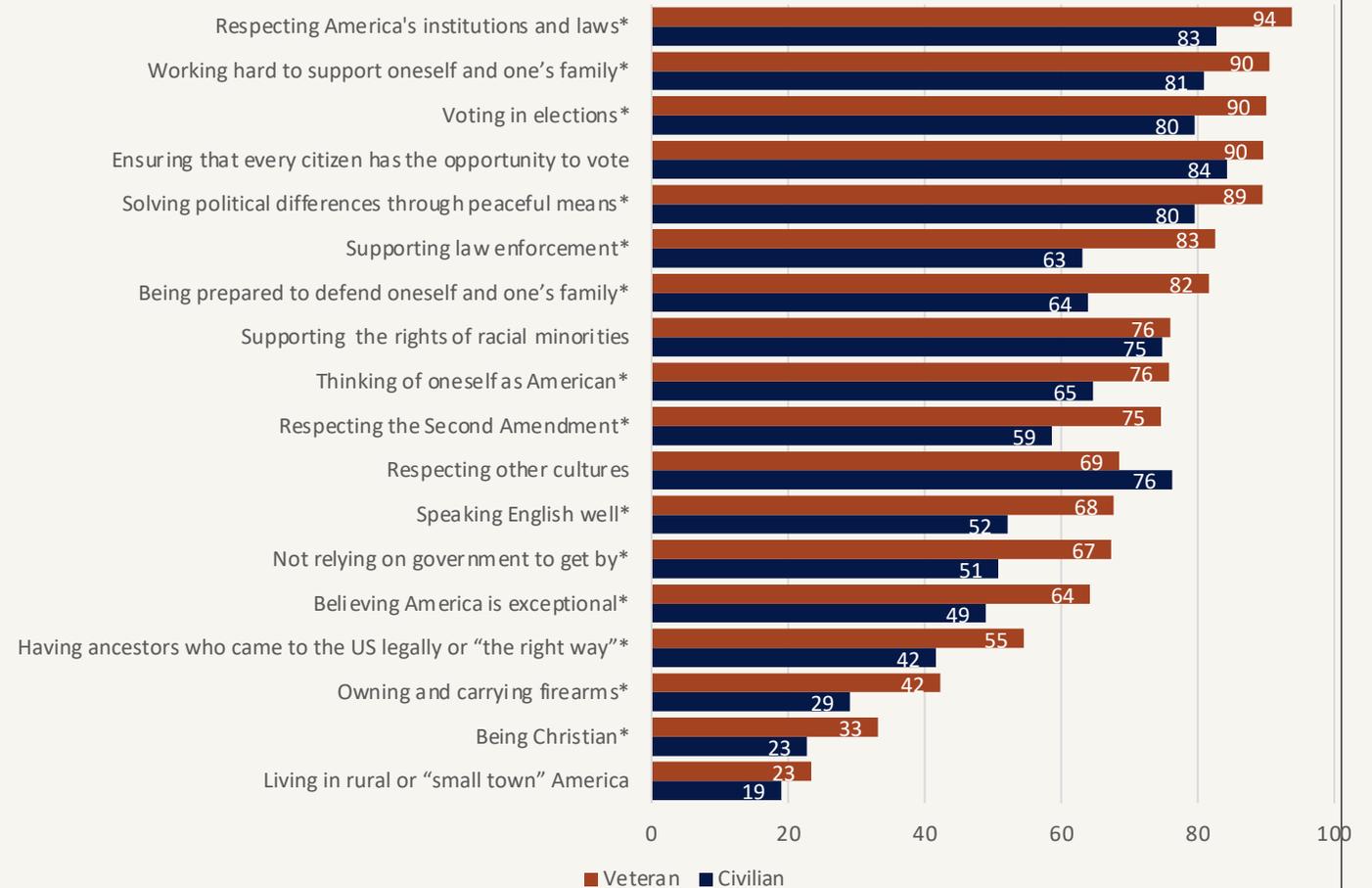
Below we list some values often associated with life in America. Of these, which 2 do you value MOST about living in America?



Veterans and civilians differed on the extent to which particular attributes should determine whether or not someone is a “true American,” but veterans were more likely to agree with one another than were civilians.

Veterans showed stronger cohesiveness of their views on what makes a “true American” than did civilians, with more than two thirds identifying as “very important” or “important” 13 of the 18 items presented compared to only 6 for civilians.

Values That Are Important or Very Important in Determining Who Is a True American



To what extent SHOULD this value or behavior be important in determining whether or not someone is a true American?

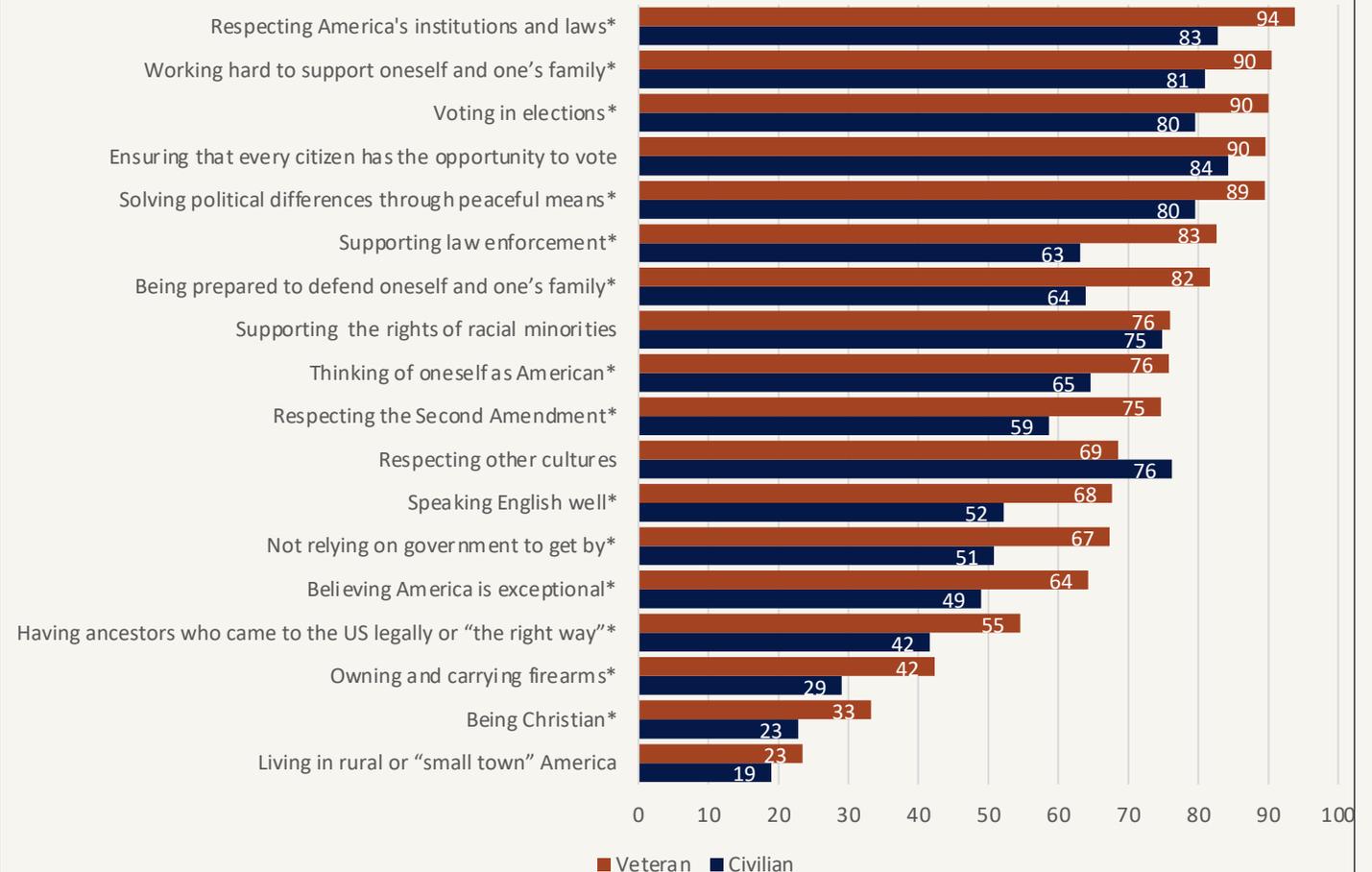
Very Unimportant   Unimportant   Neutral   Important   Very Important



Veterans were more likely to emphasize respect for America’s laws and institutions as “important” or “very important” in determining whether or not someone is a “true American.”

Compared to civilians, veterans placed significantly greater emphasis on respecting America’s laws and institutions, voting in elections, and working hard to support oneself and one’s family. More than 90% of veterans identify these values as “important or “very important.”

Values That Are Important or Very Important in Determining Who Is a True American



To what extent SHOULD this value or behavior be important in determining whether or not someone is a true American?

Very Unimportant   Unimportant   Neutral   Important   Very Important



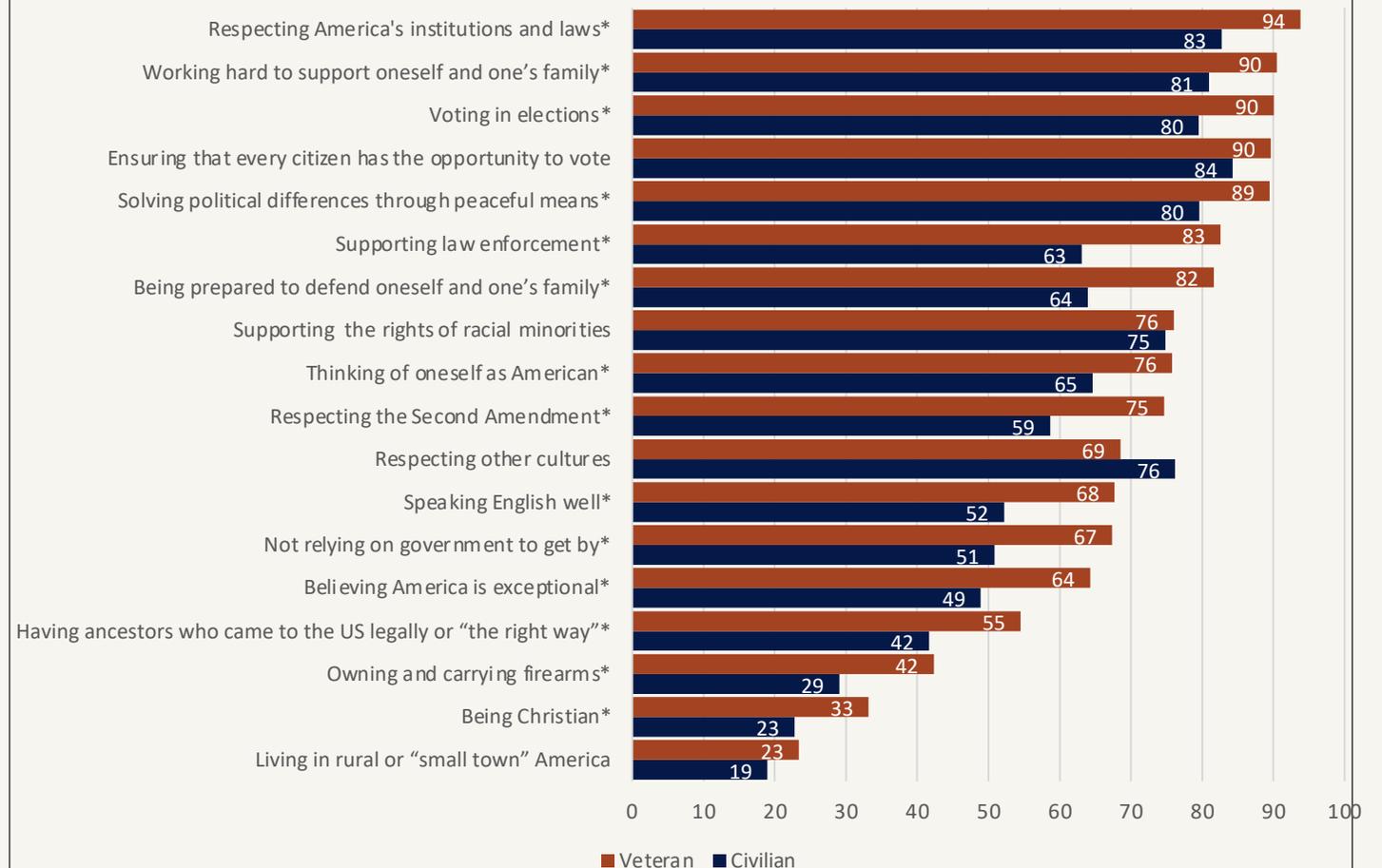
# Veterans were significantly more likely than civilians to view solving political differences through peaceful means as a quality of a “true American.”

About 89% of veterans identified solving differences through peaceful means as “important” or “very important” compared to about 80% of civilians—high percentages of respondents in both cases, but the difference between the two groups was significant.

At the same time, veterans were significantly more likely than civilians to see respecting the Second Amendment and being prepared to defend oneself and one’s family as “important” or “very important.” A substantial minority of veterans identified owning and carrying firearms as “important” or “very important,” a significantly greater percentage than among civilians.

Together these results suggest that veterans’ views of “true Americans” related to rule of law, peaceful resolution of differences, and (armed) readiness for defense.

Values That Are Important or Very Important in Determining Who Is a True American



To what extent SHOULD this value or behavior be important in determining whether or not someone is a true American?

Very Unimportant   Unimportant   Neutral   Important   Very Important

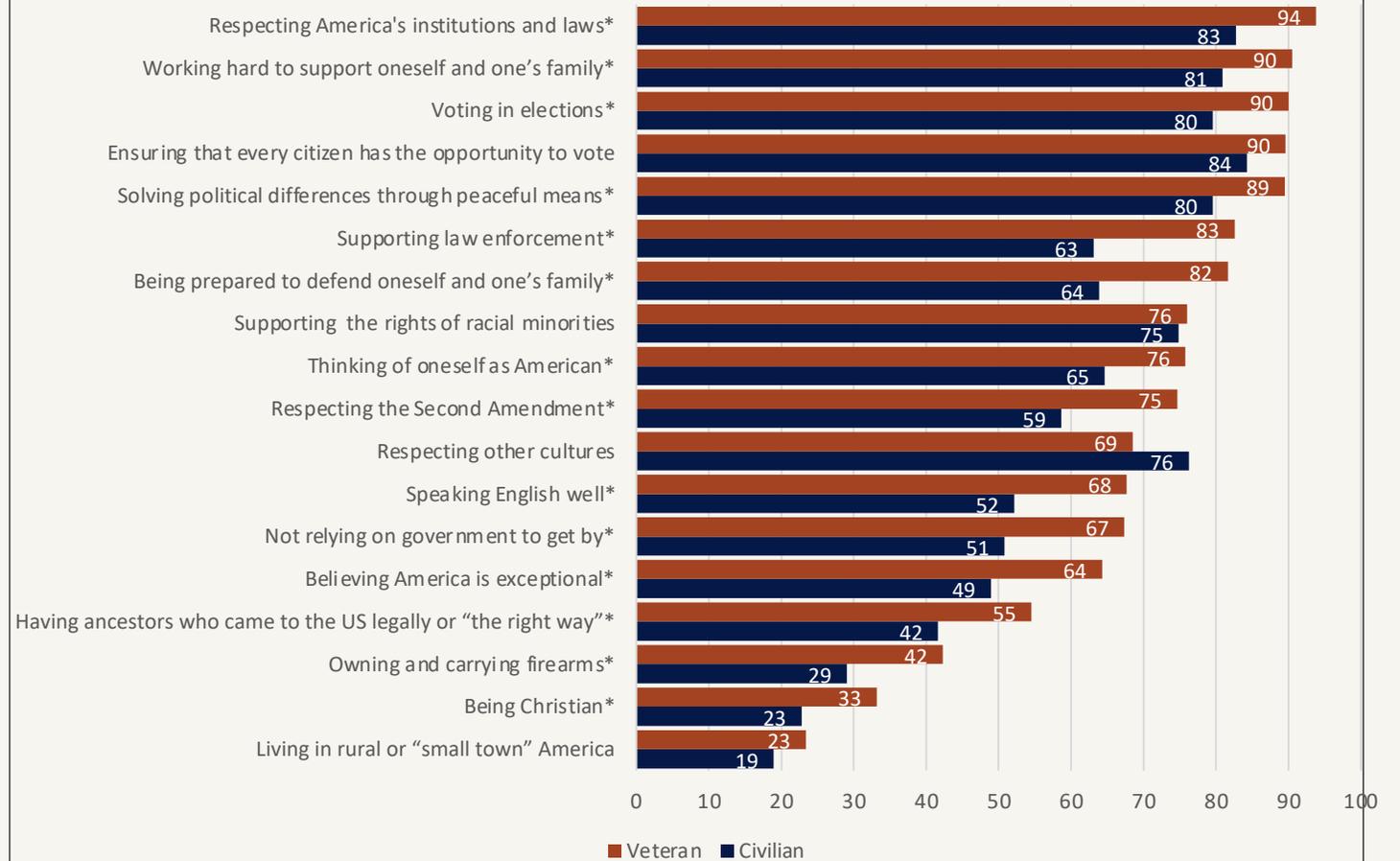


# Veterans were significantly more likely than civilians to emphasize American identity as a quality of a “true American.”

More than three quarters of veterans identified thinking of oneself as American regardless of citizenship or national origin as “important” or “very important” to determining who is a “true American.” Almost two thirds similarly identified believing America is exceptional, and just over half also identified having ancestors who came to the US legally or “the right way” as important attributes of “true Americans.” Each of these differences in attitude between veterans and civilians were statistically significant.

While not significantly different from civilians in the emphasis on respecting other cultures and supporting the rights of minorities—behaviors deemed “important” or “very important” for the majority of respondents in both groups for determining whether or not someone is a “true American”—veterans were significantly more likely to see speaking English well and, for a substantial minority, being Christian, as “important” or “very important.”

Values That Are Important or Very Important in Determining Who Is a True American



To what extent SHOULD this value or behavior be important in determining whether or not someone is a true American?

Very Unimportant   Unimportant   Neutral   Important   Very Important



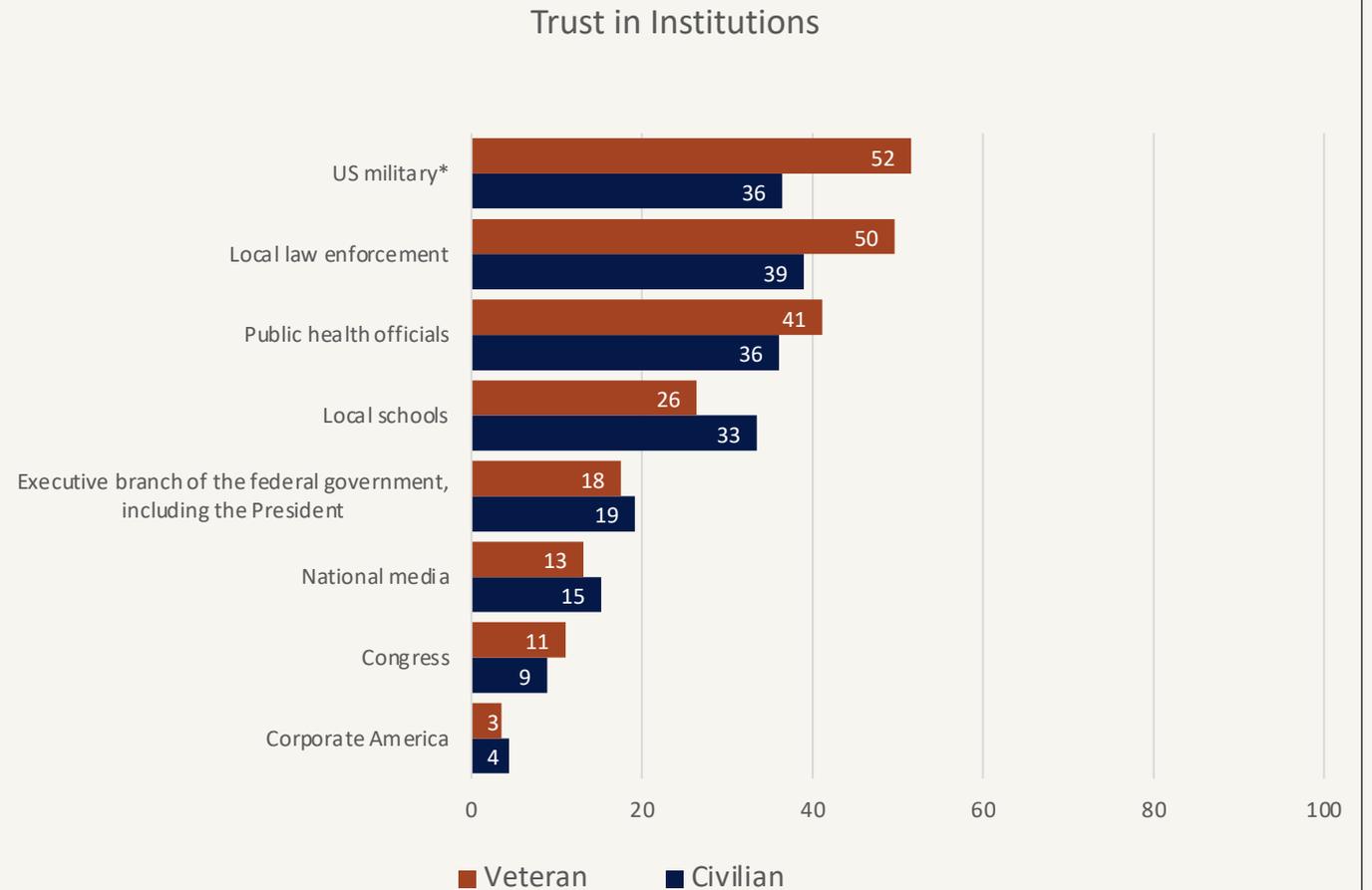
## Part 2. Trust in American Institutions

- While veterans' values reflected the importance of the Constitution and the rule of law, veterans nonetheless shared a widespread distrust of government. More than half distrusted Congress and at a significantly higher rate than civilians (61% vs. 48%). Similar to civilians, a large minority of veterans (43%) distrusted the Executive Branch of government including the President.
- Veterans did tend to trust some American institutions. The majority of veterans trusted the military and at a significantly higher percentage than did civilians (52% vs. 36%). About half also trusted local law enforcement, a higher percentage than for civilians although not statistically significant (50% vs. 39%).



Among a variety of institutions, veterans tended most to trust the military and law enforcement.

Veterans' trust in institutions mostly mirrored that of civilians, with the notable exception that veterans were significantly more likely to trust the military than were civilians. They were similar to civilians in their trust of law enforcement.



Below is a list of some institutions in this country. How much of the time do you think you can trust the people running each of these institutions to do what is in the best interests of people similar to you?

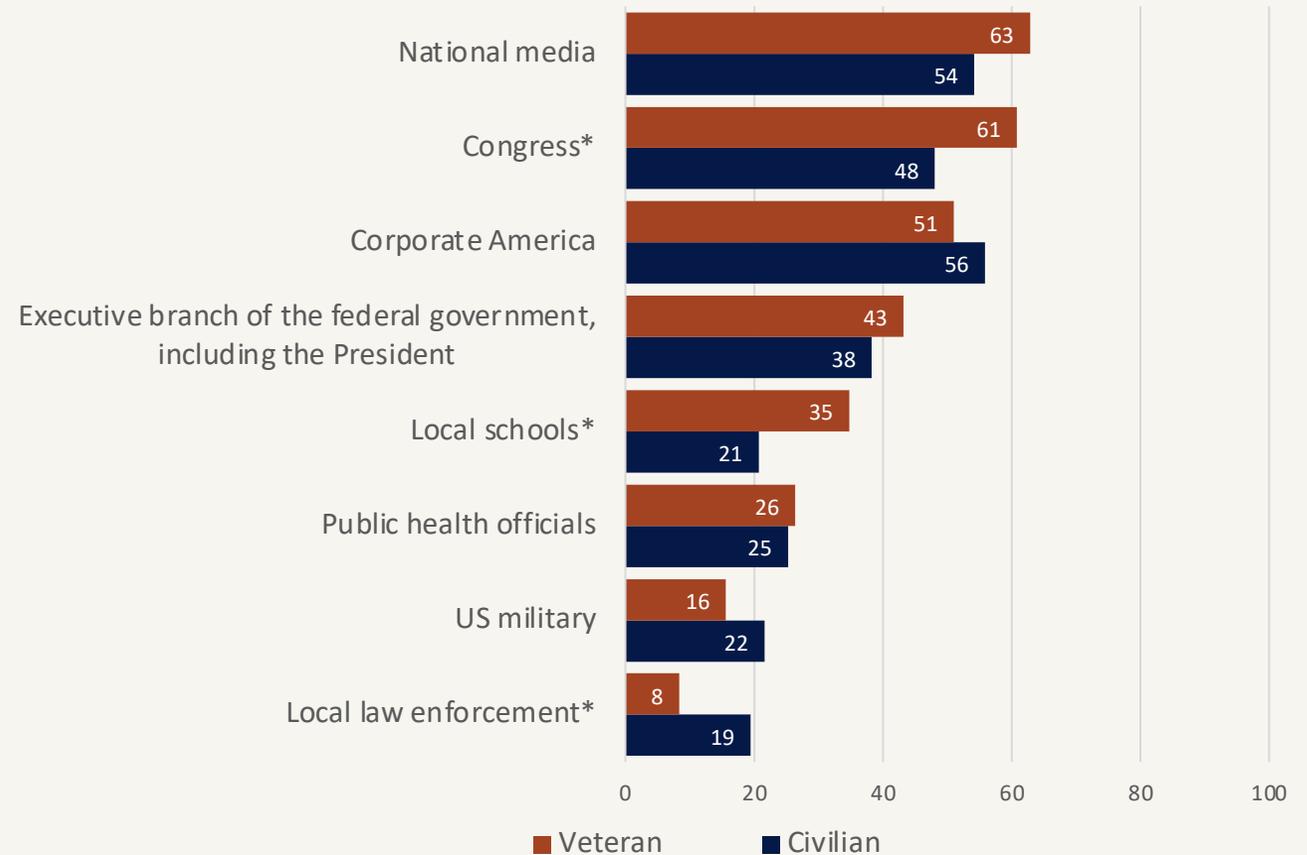


# Veterans distrusted the government, especially Congress.

More than half of veterans surveyed distrust the national media, Congress, and corporate America while a large minority distrusted the executive branch of government, local schools, and public health officials.

Veterans were significantly more likely than civilians to distrust Congress and local schools. They were significantly less likely than civilians to distrust law enforcement.

Distrust in Institutions



Below is a list of some institutions in this country. How much of the time do you think you can trust the people running each of these institutions to do what is in the best interests of people similar to you?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always



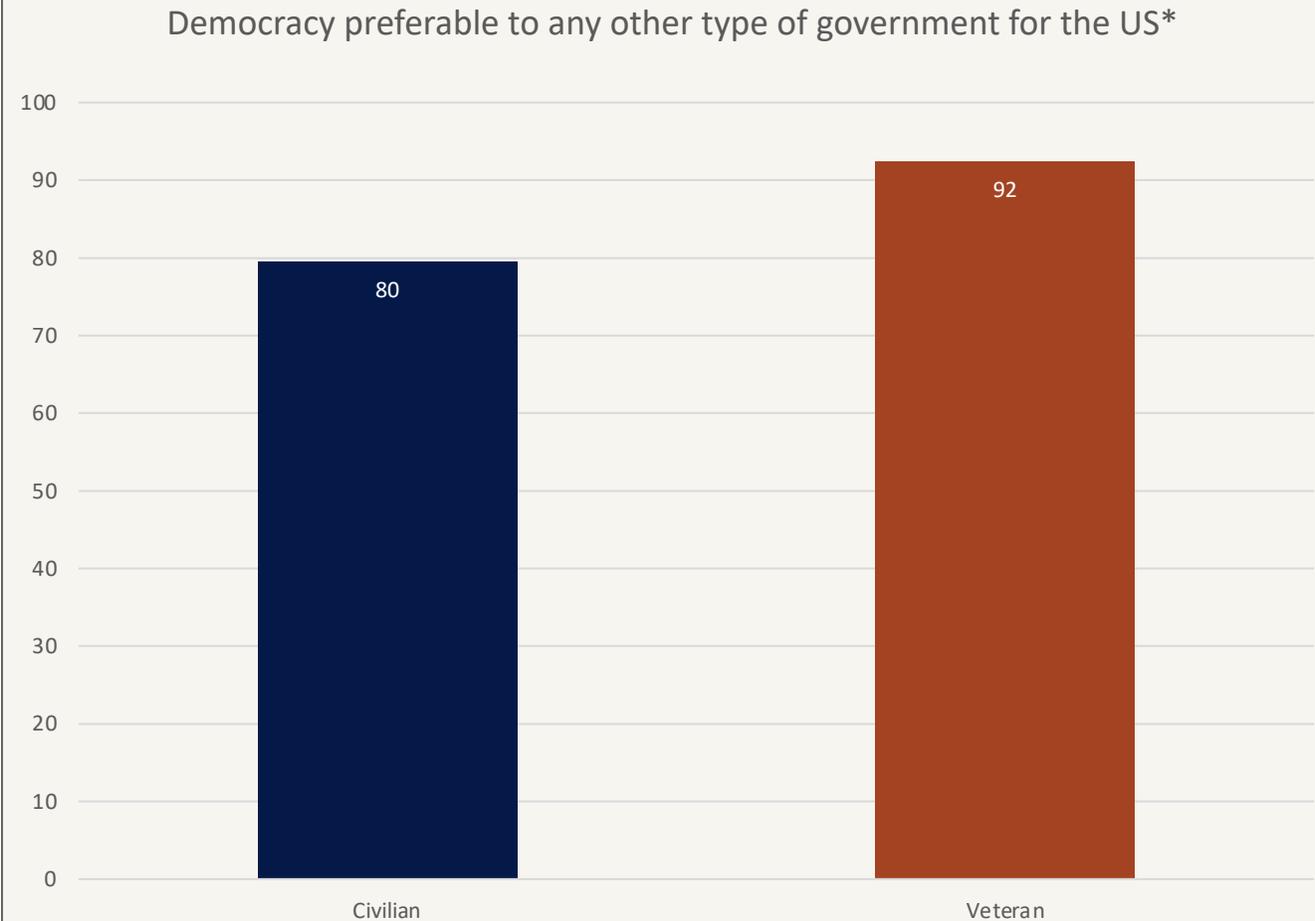
# Part 3. Attitudes toward democracy and toward political violence in general

- Compared to civilians, veterans showed significantly greater preference for democracy over any other type of government.
- In line with this preference, veterans were also significantly more likely than civilians to reject justifications for violence related to election outcomes. In addition, they were significantly more likely to oppose threats of violence against politicians from the opposing party.
- Finally, reporting on veterans' potential for political violence has pointed to emotional risk factors, for example PTSD, anger, or social isolation. While the survey only asked about social isolation, the results suggest veterans were significantly less likely to report various feelings of social isolation compared to civilians.



# Veterans preferred democracy.

While civilians were more likely than veterans to identify democracy as something they valued about living in America, veterans were significantly more likely to prefer democracy over any other types of government for the US.



Which of these statements is closest to your view?

- a. For the United States, democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
- b. For the United States, in some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable (e.g., authoritarian government, military rule, etc.).
- c. For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have in the United States.



# Veterans did not support political violence against opposing party leaders, public health officials or school board members.

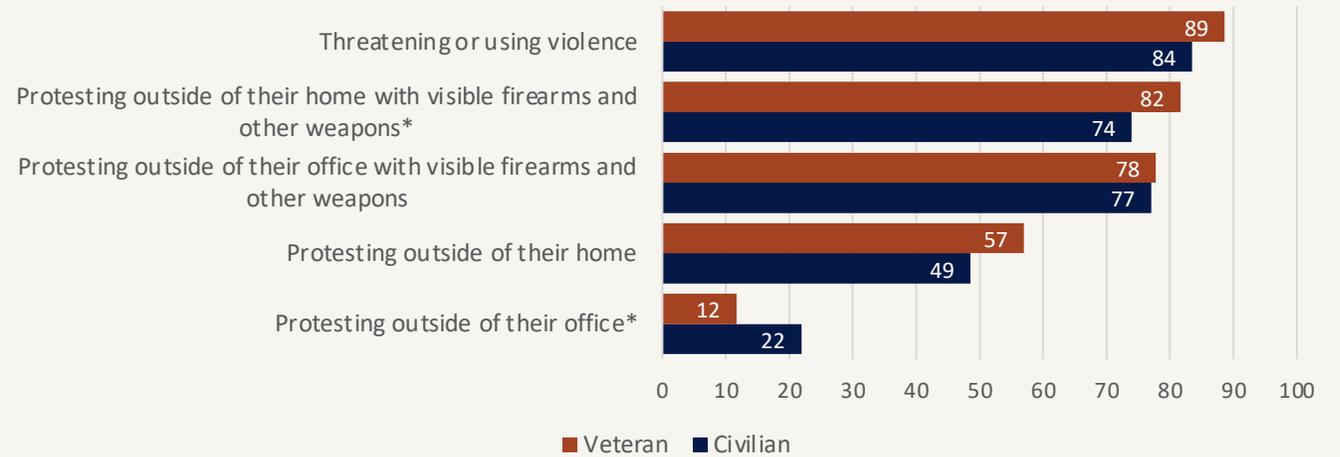
Overall, veterans were similar to civilians in their perspective on what protest-type behaviors are unacceptable, whether toward opposing party leaders or toward public health officials or school board members. Threats of violence and protests outside of homes or offices with visible weapons or firearms were deemed “never OK” by the strong majority, about three quarters or more in each case. Notably, veterans were significantly more likely than civilians to say that protesting with visible weapons outside of the home of an opposing party was “never OK.” They were also significantly less likely to oppose protests outside of the offices of opposing party members and other public officials.

-When, if ever, is the following behavior OK for members of your own political party to do to **opposing party leaders** to advance political goals?

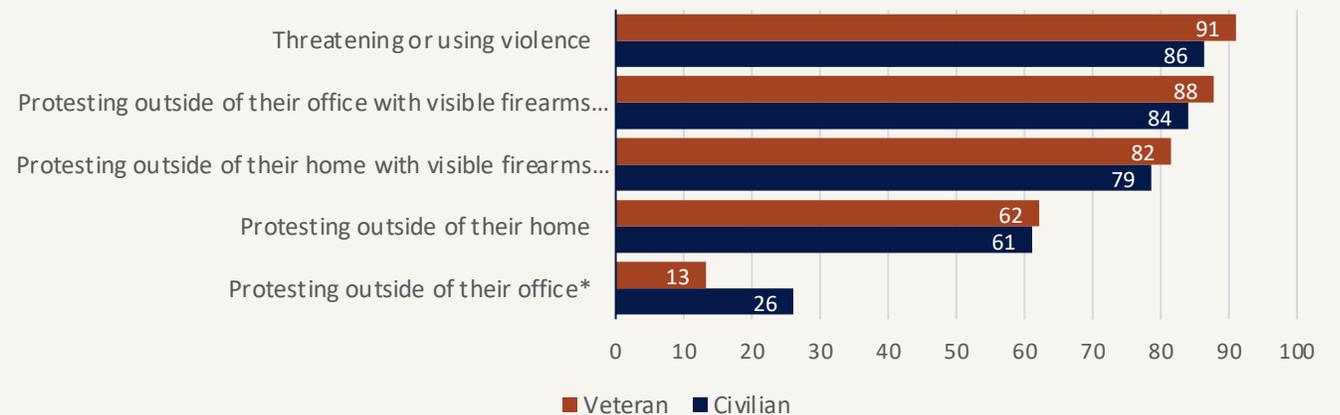
-When, if ever, is the following behavior OK when disagreeing with local **public health officials or school board members**?

Never
  Rarely
  Sometimes
  Often
  Always

Never OK for members of your own political party to do to opposing party leaders to advance political goals



Never OK when disagreeing with local public health officials or school board members

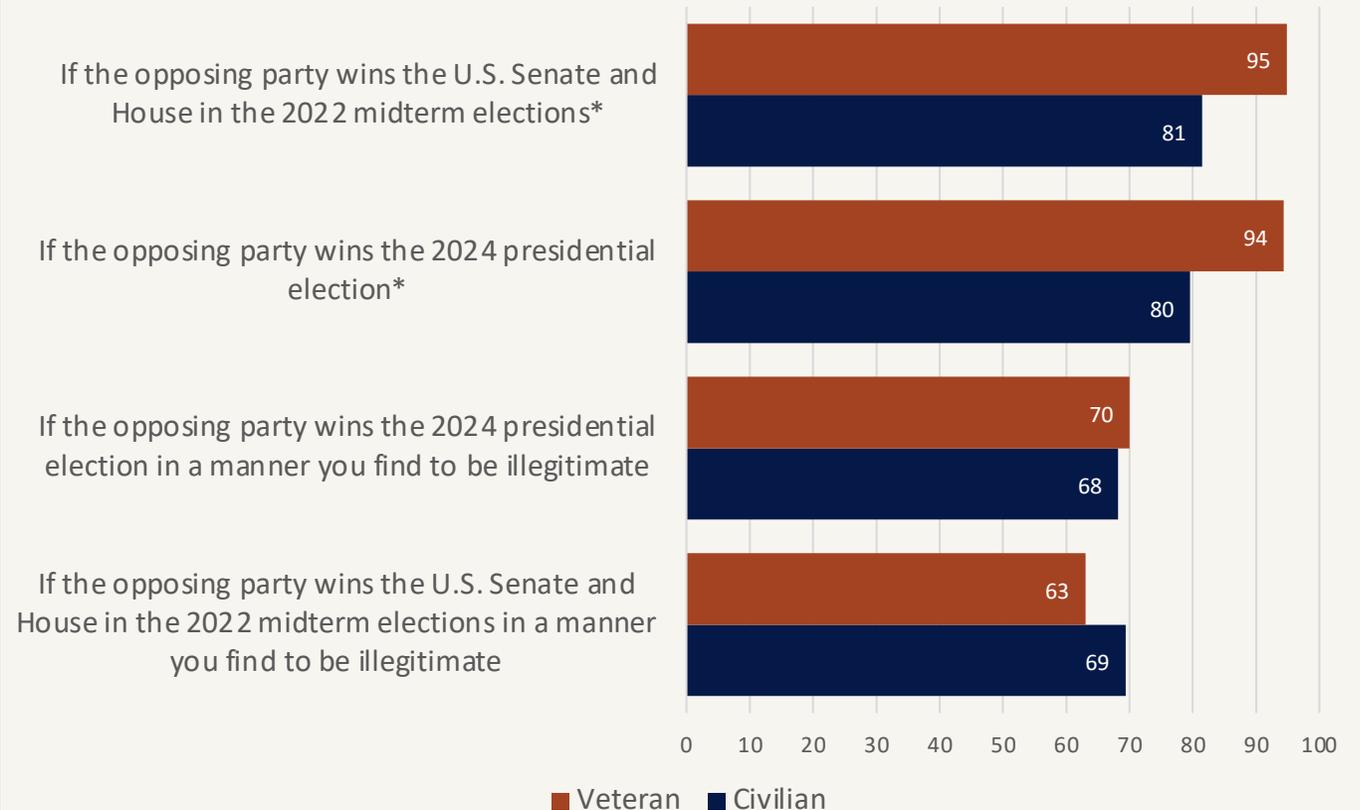


# Veterans were more likely than civilians to support peaceful transition of power.

The vast majority of veterans saw no justification for violence in the course of legal elections, even if the opposing party wins, and they were significantly more likely to hold this view.

In comparison, they were less likely to eschew violence in the case of the opposing party winning elections through illegitimate means. Under such conditions, veterans' attitudes toward violence reflected those of civilians; while the majority rejected this justification for violence, the percentage who saw no justification for violence was smaller than in the case of legitimate elections.

To What Extent Violence NOT Justified



To what extent do you feel violence would be justified ...

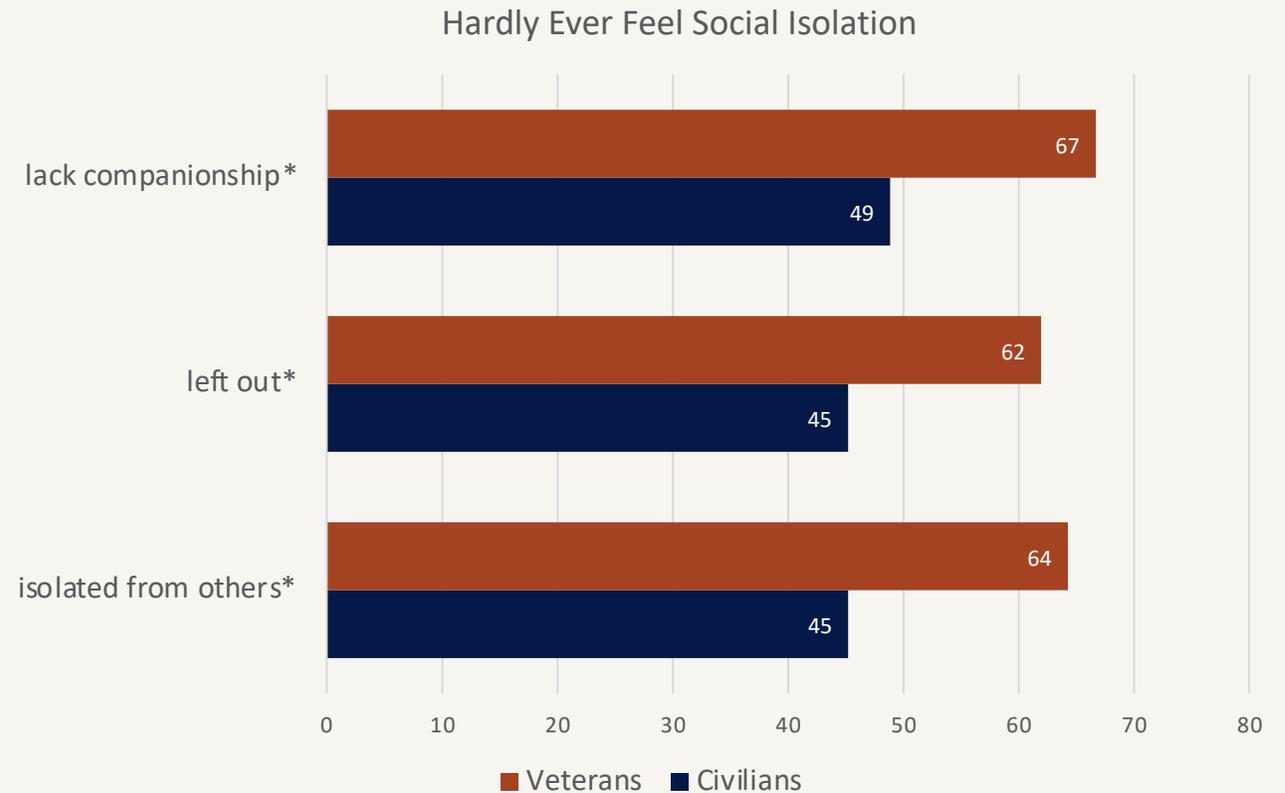
- if the opposing party wins the U.S. Senate and House in the 2022 midterm elections?
- if the opposing party wins the U.S. Senate and House in the 2022 midterm elections *in a manner you find to be illegitimate*?
- if the opposing party wins the 2024 presidential election?
- if the opposing party wins the 2024 presidential election *in a manner you find to be illegitimate*?

None at all   A little   A moderate amount   A lot   A great deal



# Veterans were less likely than civilians to report feeling social isolation.

The survey asked about different experiences of social isolation. For each, veterans were significantly more likely than civilians to say that they hardly ever had experienced any of these feelings: lack of companionship, feeling left out, or feeling isolated from others.



The following questions address how you feel about different aspects of your life. For each question please tell us how often you feel that way.

- How often do you feel you lack companionship?
- How often do you feel left out?
- How often do you feel isolated from others?

Hardly ever

Some of the time

Often



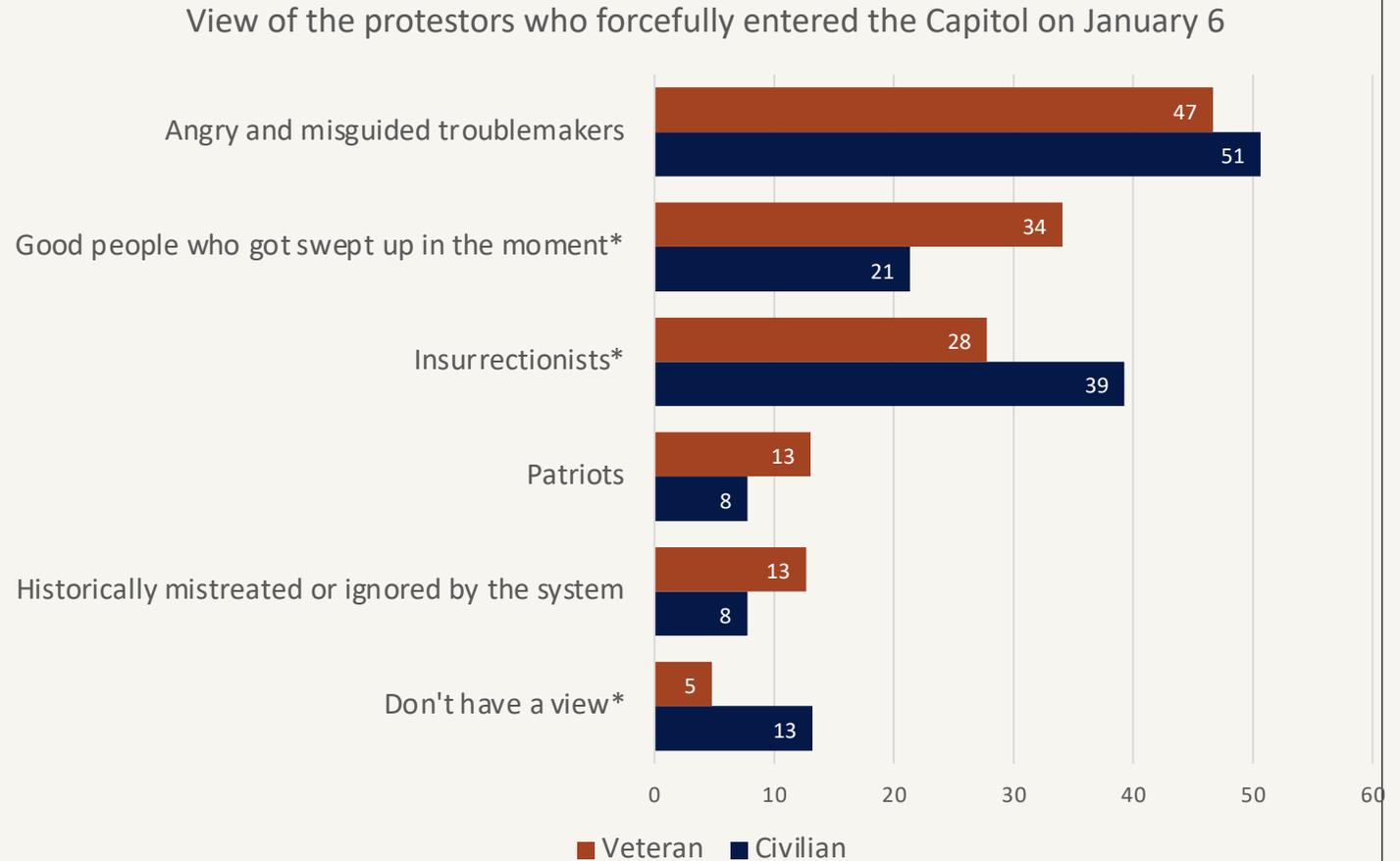
## Part 4. Accountability for and attitudes toward political violence in relation to January 6<sup>th</sup>

- In seeming contradiction to their strong views against political violence, veterans were significantly more sympathetic in their characterization of the protestors who forcefully entered the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>. While, like civilians, veterans most commonly viewed the protestors as “angry and misguided troublemakers,” they showed both a significantly greater tendency than civilians to view them as “good people who got swept up in the moment” and a significantly lower tendency to view them as “insurrectionists.”
- A large minority of veterans, nearly a third, viewed the charges against those arrested as “illegitimate,” and veterans were significantly more likely than civilians to hold this view.



# Veterans were more sympathetic than civilians in their views of the January 6<sup>th</sup> protestors.

While the prevailing view of both veterans and civilians was that the protestors who forcefully entered the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup> were “angry and misguided troublemakers,” veterans were significantly more likely than civilians to view them as “good people who got swept up in the moment” and significantly less likely to view them as “insurrectionists.” They were also significantly less likely than civilians to have no view on the protestors.



How do you view the protestors who forcefully entered the Capitol on January 6? (Select all that apply.) “They are mostly...”

- a. ...patriots
- b. ...good people who got swept up in the moment
- c. ...historically mistreated or ignored by the system
- d. ...angry and misguided troublemakers
- e. ...insurrectionists
- f. I don't have a view on this

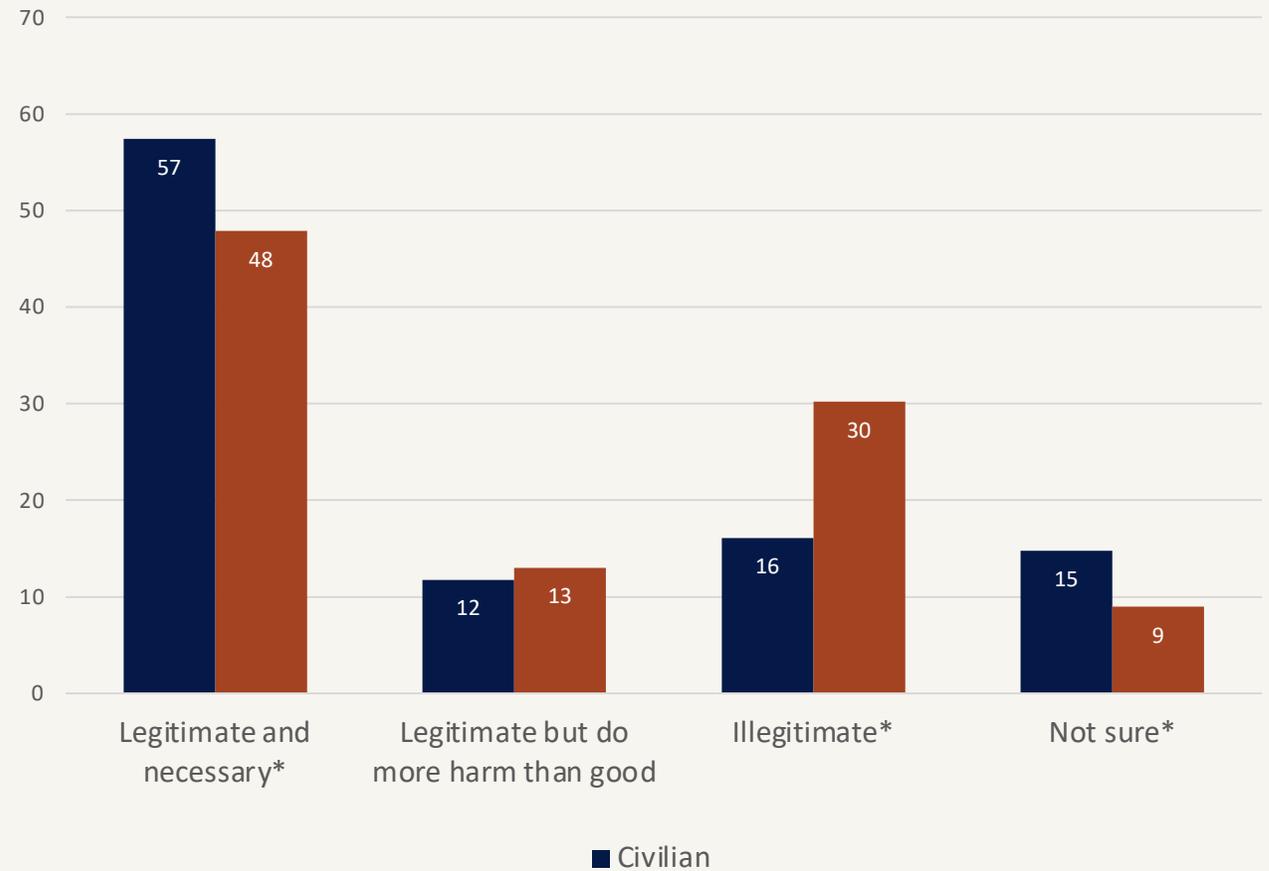


Veterans were more likely than civilians to see the charges against January 6<sup>th</sup> protestors as “illegitimate.”

While the majority of civilians viewed the charges against the people arrested for their involvement in the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> as “legitimate and necessary,” veterans were significantly less likely to share this view. While the most prevalent view for veterans, it was shared by fewer than half of the veterans surveyed.

Nearly a third of veterans viewed the charges as “illegitimate” and were significantly more likely than civilians to hold this view.

View of Charges Against People Arrested and Charged for Involvement in January 6<sup>th</sup> Events



Since January 6, over 700 individuals have been arrested and charged for their involvement in the events that day. How do you view these charges?

- a. The charges are legitimate and necessary for accountability
- b. The charges are legitimate but do more harm than good
- c. The charges are illegitimate
- d. Not sure



# Conclusions

- Although not homogenous in either their demographics or values, veterans displayed a strong sense of shared values, and this cohesion tended to be stronger than for civilians.
- As a group, veterans placed great value on the Constitution, democracy, and law and order. They valued American identity. They supported peaceful transitions of power. They trusted the military and local law enforcement, and yet they were more distrustful of Congress and, to a lesser extent, the Executive Branch of the government.
- While valuing 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment gun rights and readiness to defend oneself and one's family, veterans were more reluctant than civilians to engage in violence related to political protest and did not condone it.
- At the same time, veterans seemed more sympathetic to the January 6<sup>th</sup> protestors than were civilians, and a large minority viewed the charges against the protestors as "illegitimate."
- The seeming contradiction between the value veterans place on democracy, peaceful transition of power and the rule of law and their sympathy for the violent protestors on January 6<sup>th</sup> may be explained by the simultaneous love that veterans have for America and their suspicion of its political leaders.



# Ideas for Further Exploration

- As part of their recruitment and radicalization efforts, Far Right extremist groups and foreign influence operations have weaponized traditional American values and commitment to the Constitution, alongside emphasis on the need to protect oneself, one's families, and one's rights, particularly gun rights—the values many veterans share. Groups like the Oath Keepers describe how one can love one's country while also hating and arming up against a “corrupt” government.
- Given veterans' greater distrust of government and sympathy for the January 6<sup>th</sup> protestors, malign influence operations might seek to prey on veterans' traditional American values while radicalizing them against the government. It may also be that these values have been cultivated through the efforts of such operations, which have increasingly brought their messages to the mainstream.
- While veterans seem less prone to political violence than civilians, their military backgrounds would make them highly appealing targets for recruitment. Given the prize veterans represent in terms of potential insider knowledge as well as in legitimacy that may attract others to the cause, the efforts to recruit them may be greater and more concerted.
- To the extent that there is an extremism problem among veterans, if there is, an important risk factor is the keen interest of anti-government groups to recruit them and to radicalize them from non-violent and Constitutionally protected activities to political violence.



# Appendix: Statistical Note

- This report should be considered a pilot study for a much larger survey with increased statistical power.
- The margin of error in this study is about +/-8 percentage points for veterans and +/-3 percentage points for civilians. As a result, in most cases, differences in views are not statistically significant, meaning that most of the observed differences may reflect statistical chance rather than true differences in perspectives.
- Finally, this report examines group differences. While the majority of veterans or civilians may hold a certain view, that does not mean that an individual veteran or civilian holds either that particular view or the pattern of views we describe.

