



PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION  
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

# **GOVERNMENT REFORM:**

## **Independent and Third-Party Candidates' Access To Congressional Elections and Presidential Debates**

**A Survey of American Voters  
April 2018**

# Methodology

**Fielded by:** Nielsen Scarborough

**Sample Size:** 2,569 Registered voters (MoE +/-1.9%)

**Field Dates:** September 22 – October 17, 2017

**Method:** Administered online to a probability-based sample selected from a larger panel recruited by telephone and mail.

# **Independent and Third-Party Candidates' Access to Congressional Elections**

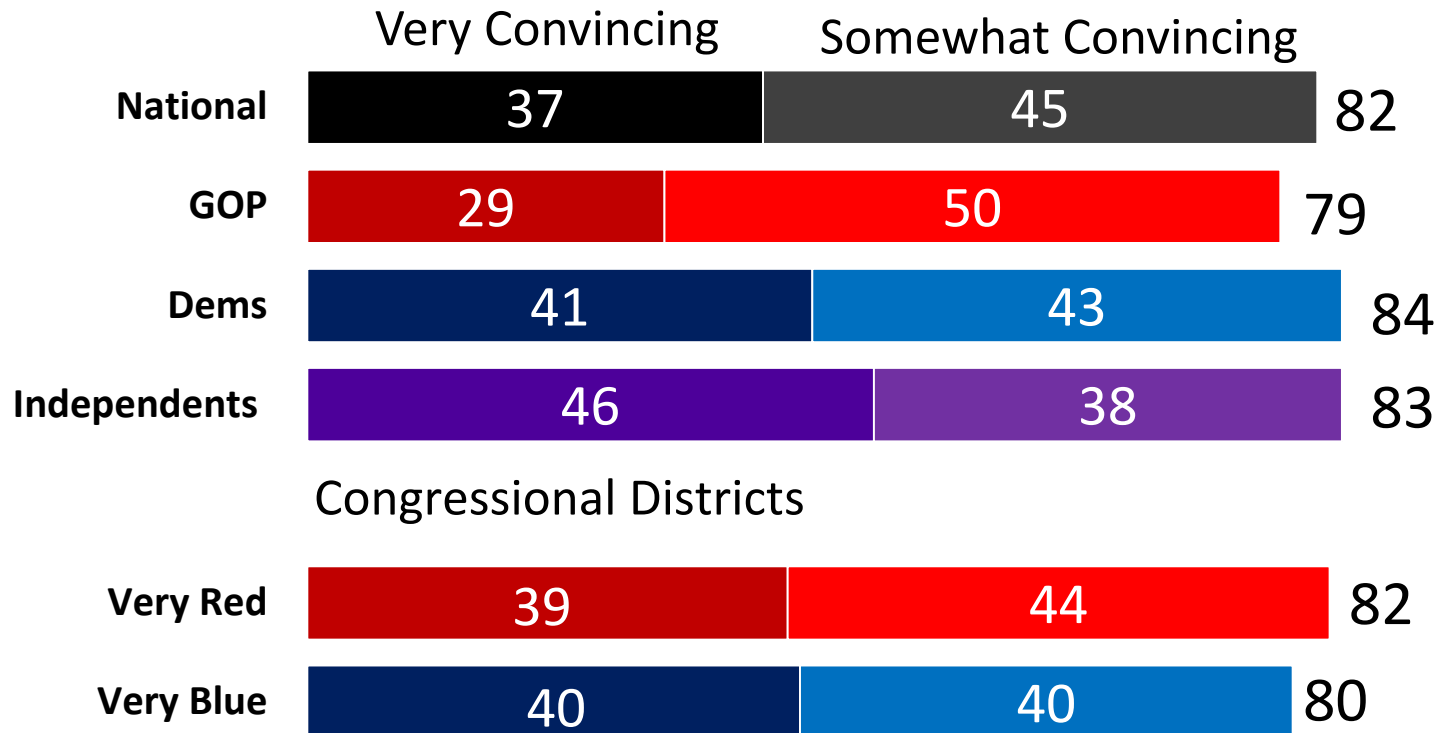
# **Independent and 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Candidates' Access to Congressional Elections**

## ***Pro Argument:***

If there were more independent and third-party members of Congress, the two big parties would not be so powerful. They would be less able to drive Congress into gridlock. The big parties would have to be more flexible and less ideological so as to form coalitions on specific issues with the non-aligned members. Sometimes, the non-aligned members would be a swing vote that could break through an impasse or introduce a new idea. Also, voters who are not enthusiastic about either of the big parties, would finally have a real voice in Congress.

# Independent and 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Candidates' Access to Congressional Elections

## *Pro Argument:*



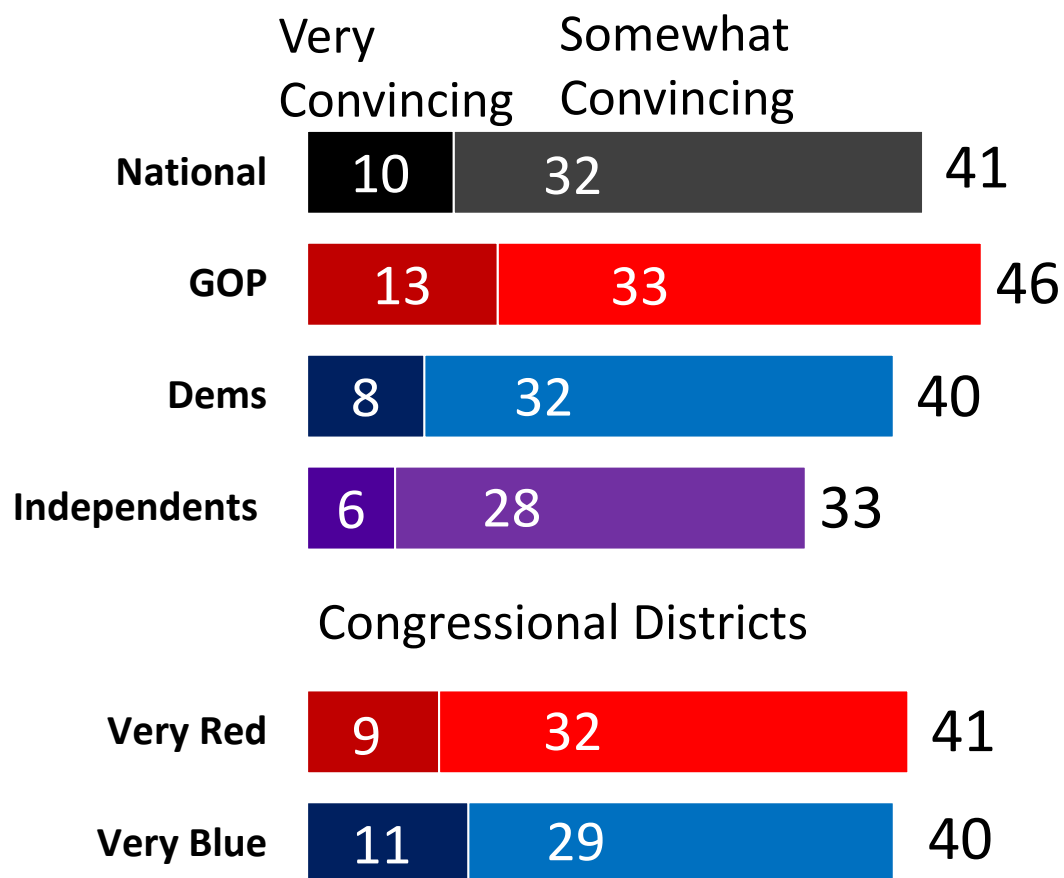
# Independent and 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Candidates' Access to Congressional Elections

## *Con Argument:*

There is no need to make efforts to help out independent and third-party candidates. We already have some independent members of Congress, and we have had more than two parties for a long time. Nothing forces someone to pick one of the two major parties if they don't want to. Third parties should build themselves up by grassroots organizing and fielding good candidates for local offices instead of focusing on tweaking the rules in their favor. It is also not clear that having independent or third-party members of Congress will necessarily lead to consensus. Some of them could be more extreme than the big parties, and with more players in the field, it might be even harder to find common ground.

# Independent and 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Candidates' Access to Congressional Elections

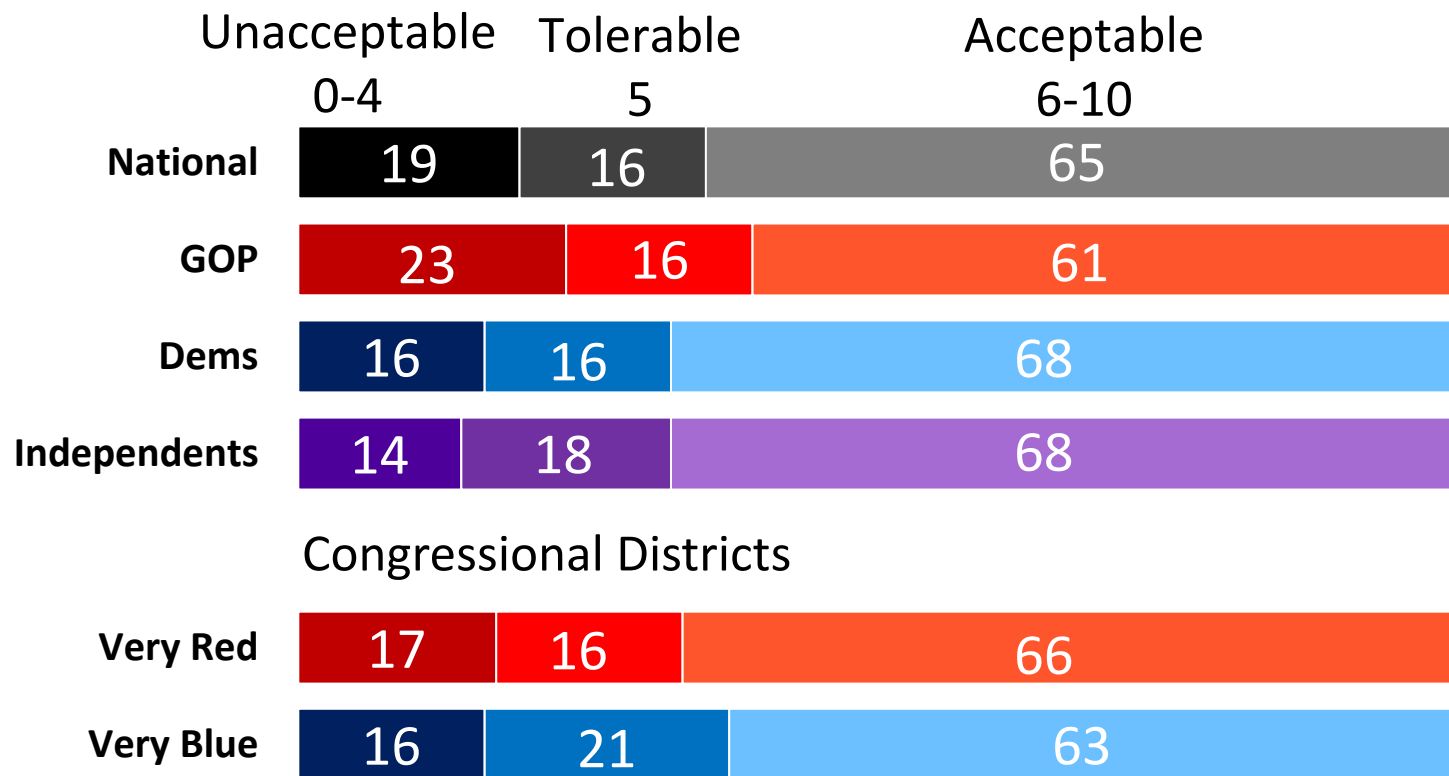
## *Con Argument:*



# Independent and 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Candidates' Access to Congressional Elections

## *Assessment:*

So, how acceptable would it be to you for the government to take steps to make it more possible for independent and third-party candidates to compete in Congressional elections?

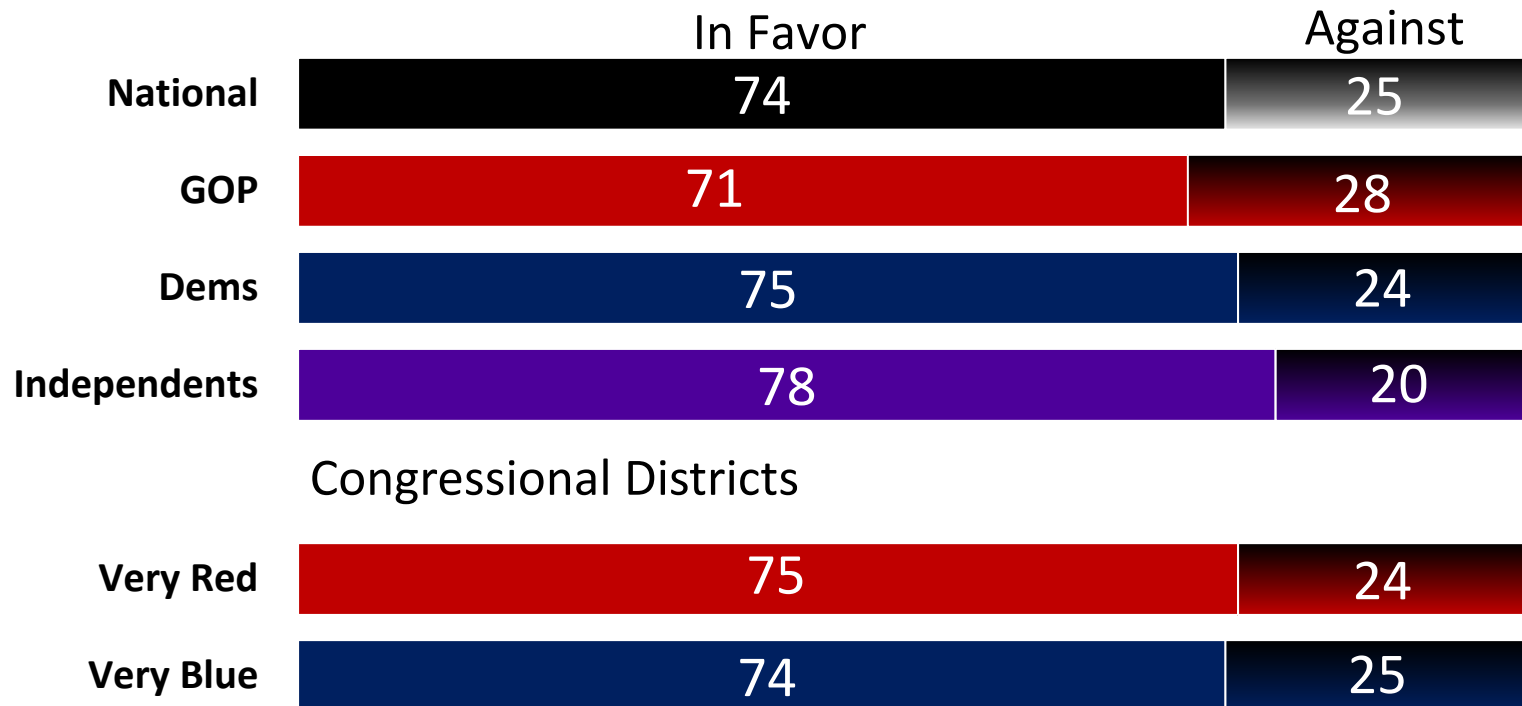




# Independent and 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Candidates' Access to Congressional Elections

## *Final Recommendation:*

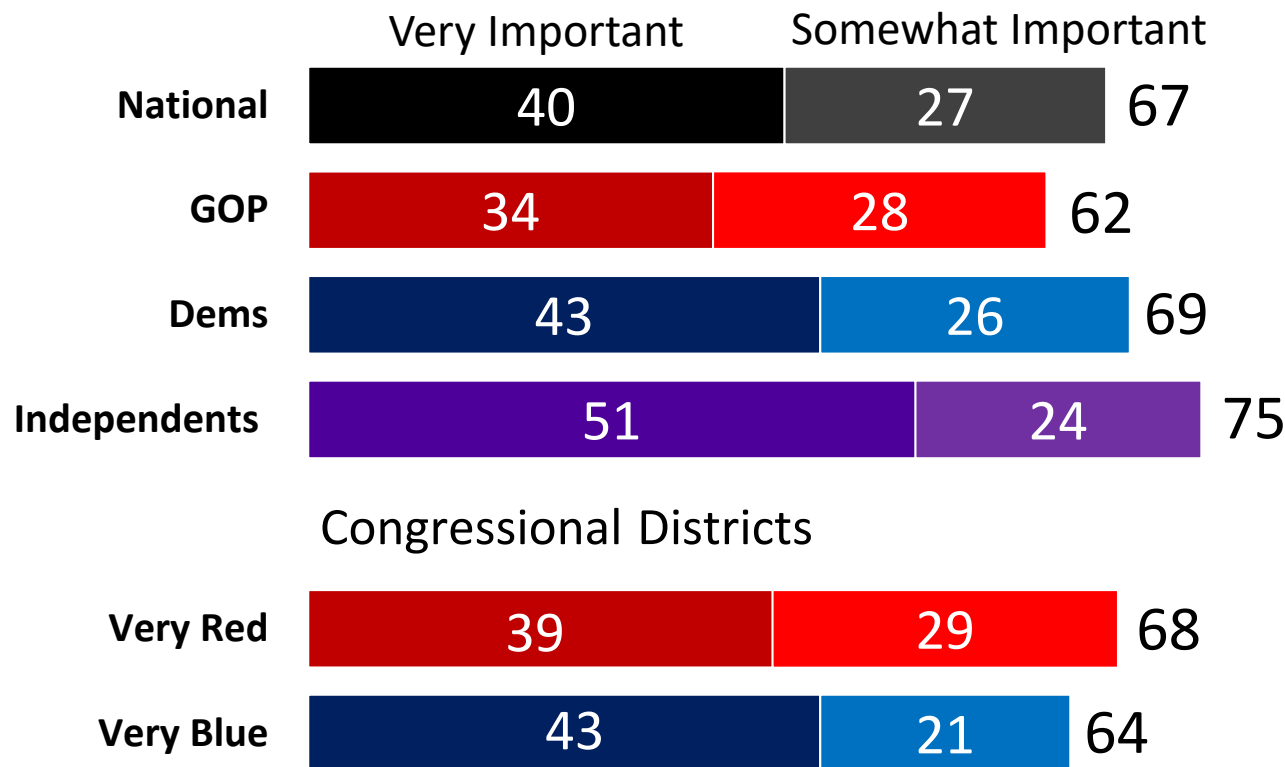
In conclusion, do you favor or oppose for the government to take steps to make it more possible for independent and third-party candidates to compete in Congressional elections?



# Independent and 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Candidates' Access to Congressional Elections

## *Importance:*

(If they chose "Favor") How important do you think it is to make it more possible for independent and third party candidates to compete in Congressional elections?



# **Independent and Third-Party Candidates' Access to Presidential Debates**

# Independent and Third-Party Candidates' Access to Presidential Debates

A related topic is whether the government should make it more possible for independent and third-party candidates to run for US President. One proposal is to make it more possible for independent or third-party candidates to participate in presidential debates.

The Commission on Presidential Debates controls these debates. Currently, the Commission requires that candidates must receive an average of 15% support in five major national polls just prior to the debate. An independent or third-party candidate has only met this requirement once since the Commission was established in 1987.

Here is an alternative requirement that has been proposed to the Commission on Presidential Debates to make it more possible for an independent or third-party candidate to be part of the presidential debates:

A candidate must fulfill the state requirements to be on the ballot (primarily getting signatures) in enough states that the candidate could conceivably win an election. If more than one candidate meets this condition, then the candidate who has gathered the most signatures across states would be the participant in the debates.

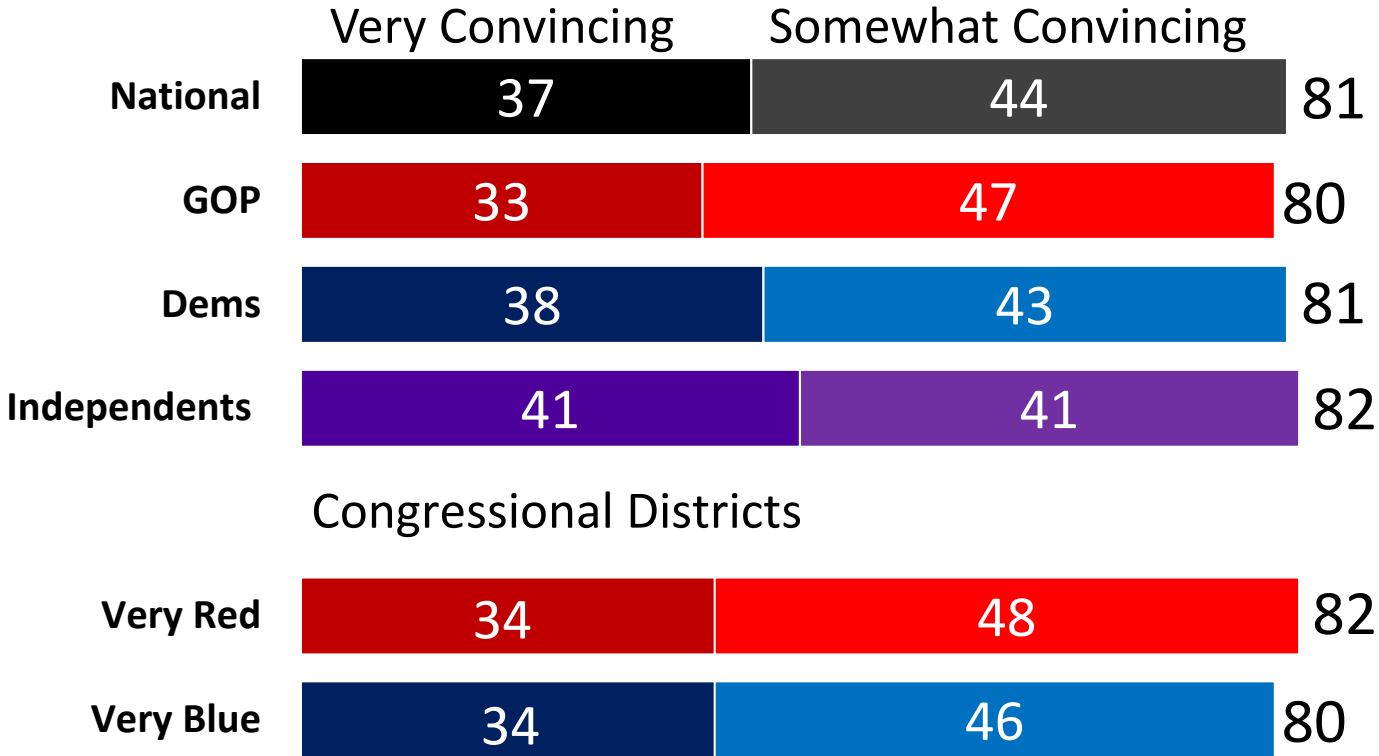
# Independent and Third-Party Candidates Access to Presidential Debates

## *Pro Argument:*

It is important for our Presidential debates to not simply be dominated by the standard parties. Independent and third-party candidates bring important new perspectives. But the current standard--that candidates must have 15% support in polls to be in the debates--is really a catch-22, because the candidate would need name recognition to get support, and the best way to do that would be to participate in the debates. They don't have the institutional support that Republican and Democratic candidates get, they receive far less free media coverage, and it is too costly for them to pay for enough advertising to gain name recognition. Getting the many thousands of signatures needed to get on the ballot in many states is enough of a requirement.

# Independent and Third-Party Candidates' Access to Presidential Debates

## *Pro Argument:*



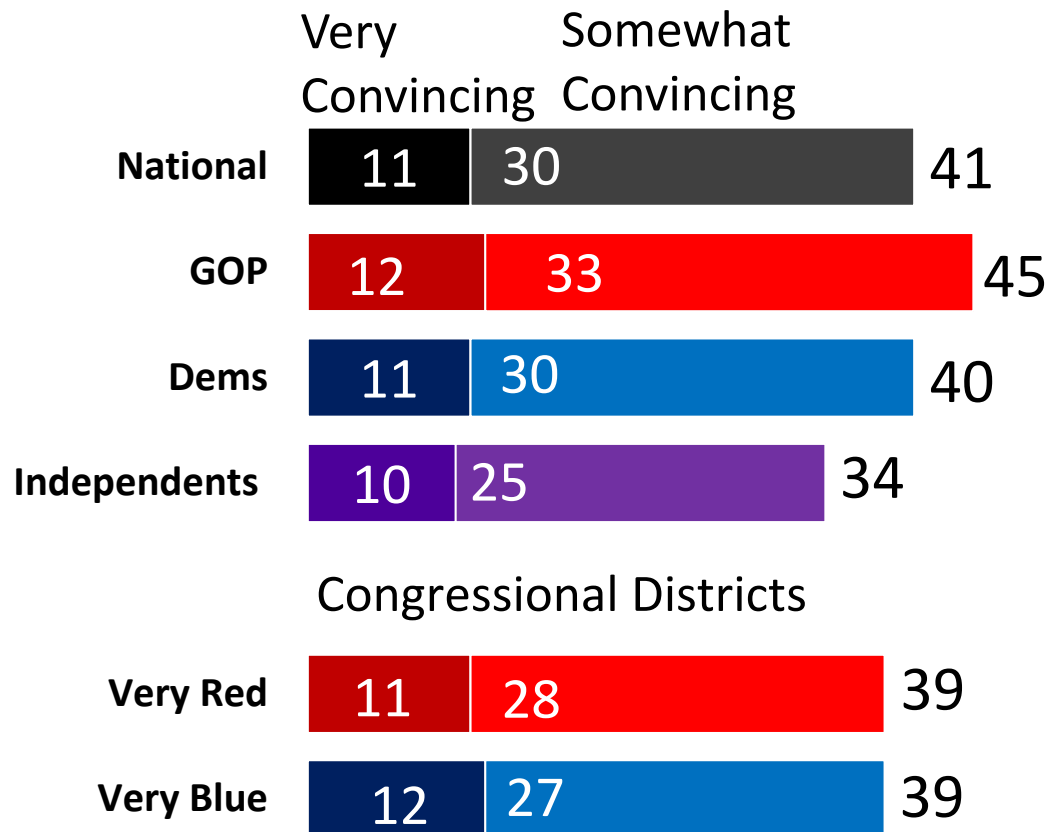
# Independent and Third-Party Candidates' Access to Presidential Debates

## *Pro Argument:*

The debates are a key moment during which voters see and hear the candidates who have a realistic chance of winning the election and becoming President. Having up on the stage another candidate who is not really a serious contender is a big distraction, driven by an excess of inclusiveness. The 15% polling requirement works to make sure only viable candidates participate and no one is prevented from meeting this standard. Just getting a lot of signatures, which can be done if you hire enough canvassers, is too low a bar.

# Independent and Third-Party Candidates' Access to Presidential Debates

## *Pro Argument:*

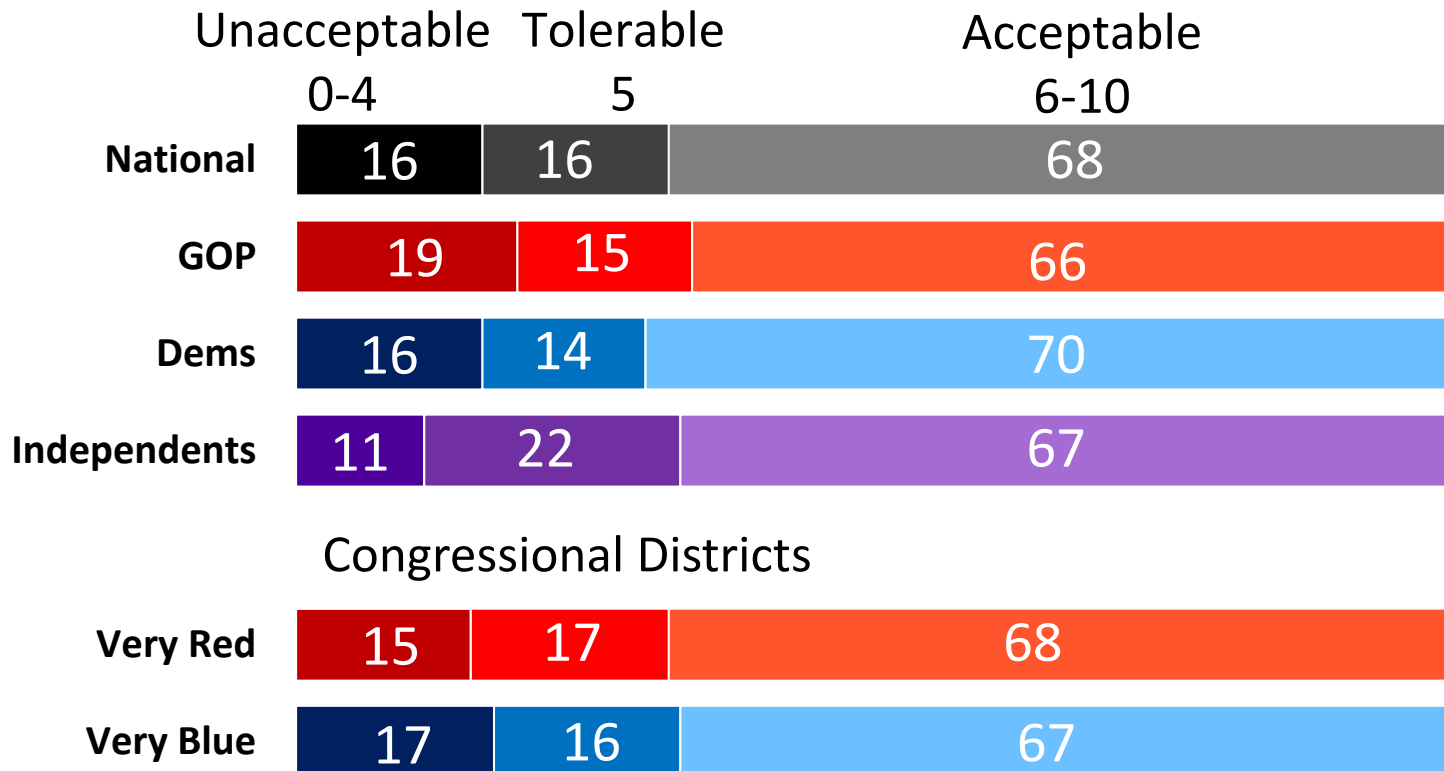




# Independent and Third-Party Candidates' Access to Presidential Debates

## Assessment

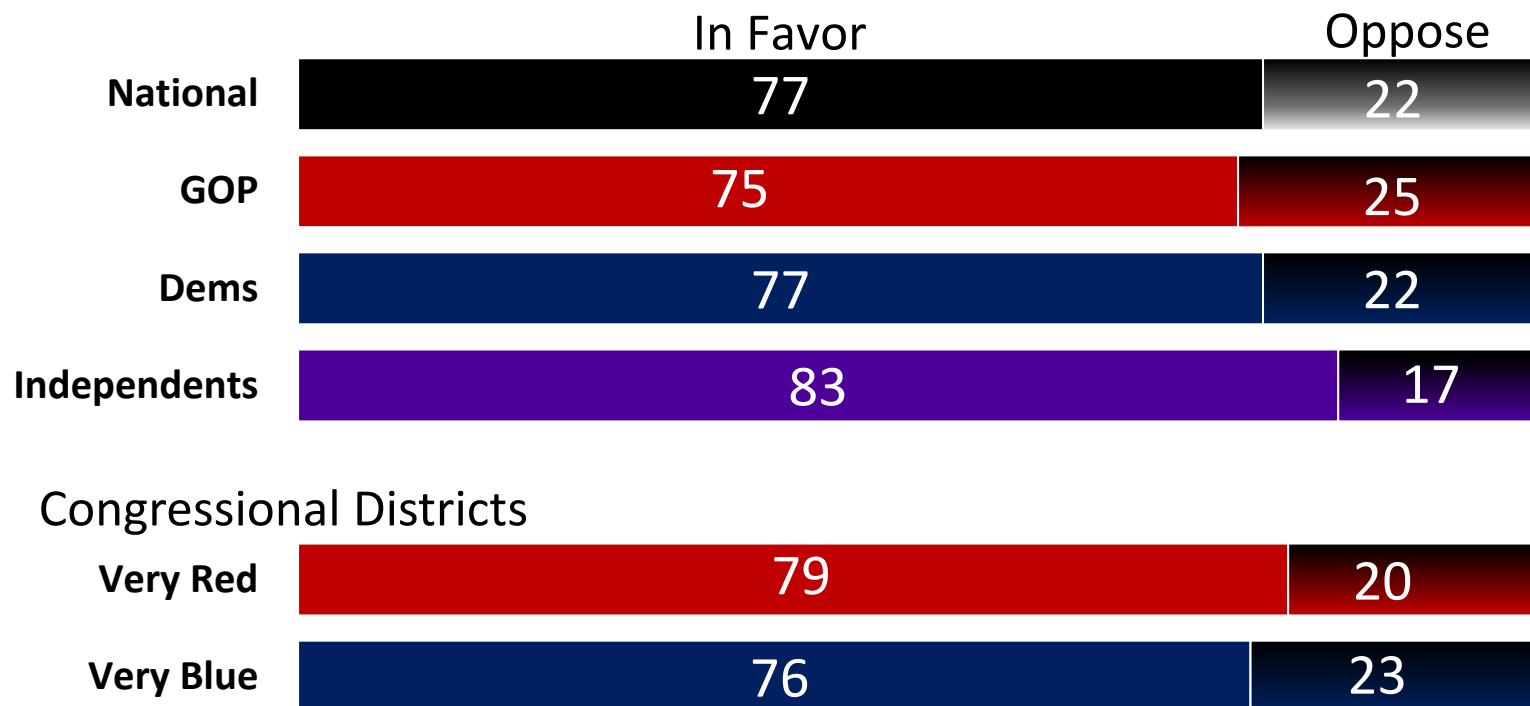
So, again, the proposal is to make it more possible for an independent and third-party candidate to be part of the presidential debates by replacing the current requirement with a requirement to that he or she succeeds in getting on the ballot in enough states to potentially win.



# Independent and Third-Party Candidates' Access to Presidential Debates

## *Final Recommendation*

Would you favor or oppose having the Commission on Presidential Debates adopt this proposal for making it more possible for an independent or third-party candidate to participate in the presidential debates?



# Independent and Third-Party Candidates' Access to Presidential Debates

## *Importance*

(If they chose "Favor") How important do you think it is to make it more possible for an independent or third-party candidate to participate in the presidential debates?

