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# Public Attitudes Toward Technology Companies

*A majority of Republicans say technology firms support the views of liberals over conservatives and that social media platforms censor political viewpoints. Still, Americans tend to feel that these firms benefit them and – to a lesser degree – society*

**BY** Aaron Smith

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## Public Attitudes Toward Technology Companies

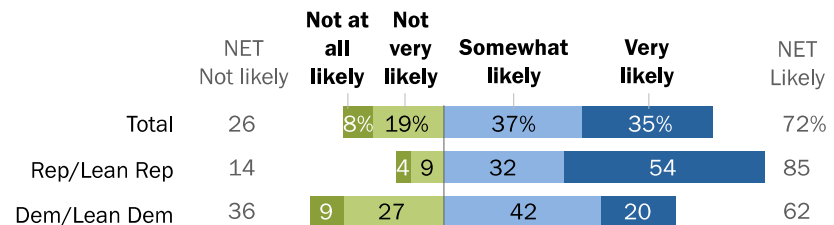
*A majority of Republicans say technology firms support the views of liberals over conservatives and that social media platforms censor political viewpoints. Still, Americans overall say the firms benefit them and – to a lesser degree – society*

In the midst of an ongoing debate over the power of digital technology companies and the way they do business, sizable shares of Americans believe these companies privilege the views of certain groups over others. Some 43% of Americans think major technology firms support the views of liberals over conservatives, while 33% believe these companies support the views of men over women, a new Pew Research Center survey finds. In addition, 72% of the public thinks it likely that social media platforms actively censor political views that those companies find objectionable.

The belief that technology companies are politically biased and/or engaged in suppression of political speech is especially widespread among Republicans. Fully 85% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents think it likely that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints, with 54% saying this is *very* likely. And a majority of Republicans (64%) think major technology companies as a whole support the views of liberals over conservatives.

### Roughly seven-in-ten Americans think it likely that social media platforms censor political viewpoints

*% of U.S. adults who think it is \_\_\_ that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints they find objectionable*



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.

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On a personal level, 74% of Americans say major technology companies and their products and services have had more of a positive than a negative impact *on their own lives*. And a slightly smaller majority of Americans (63%) think the impact of these companies *on society as a whole* has been more good than bad. At the same time, their responses highlight an undercurrent of public unease about the technology industry and its broader role in society. When presented with

several statements that might describe these firms, a 65% majority of Americans feel the statement “they often fail to anticipate how their products and services will impact society” describes them well – while just 24% think these firms “do enough to protect the personal data of their users.” Meanwhile, a minority of Americans think these companies can be trusted to do the right thing just about always (3%) or most of the time (25%), and roughly half the public (51%) thinks they should be regulated more than they are now.

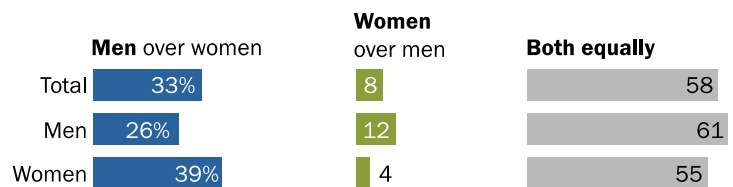
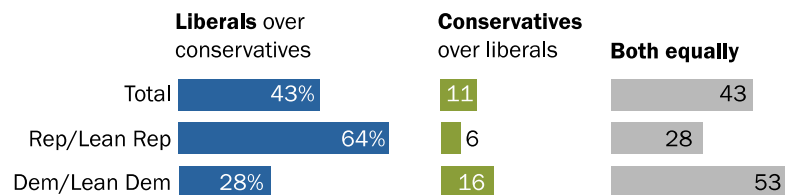
These are among the key findings of this Pew Research Center survey, conducted May 29–June 11 among 4,594 U.S. adults.

## Majorities of Republicans say major technology companies favor the views of liberals over conservatives and that social media platforms censor political viewpoints they find objectionable

As technology companies have taken on an increasingly central role in the media landscape and broader economy, they have been drawn into a number of controversies relating to the perception that they actively support or promote certain viewpoints over others. For instance, social media sites and other online platforms have faced charges from conservative [commentators](#) and [lawmakers](#) that their platforms suppress or limit the reach of right-leaning viewpoints. And this survey finds that a substantial share of Americans – especially those with conservative political leanings – agree with these arguments.

### Majority of Republicans say major technology companies support the views of liberals over conservatives

*% of U.S. adults who say major technology companies support the views of ...*



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 29–June 11, 2018.

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When asked about the political views that major technology companies support, fewer than half of Americans (43%) say these companies support the views of liberals and conservatives equally.

Instead, a slight majority feels these companies support the views of one side of the partisan spectrum over the other: 43% of Americans say the companies support the views of liberals over conservatives, while 11% say they support the views of conservatives over liberals.

The view that major technology companies are more supportive of certain political views is particularly widespread among Republicans. Some 64% of Republicans (including Republican-leaning independents) say major technology companies support the views of liberals over conservatives, and just 28% say these companies support the views of liberals and conservatives equally. By contrast, 28% of Democrats and Democratic leaners say these companies support liberal views over conservative ones, and 53% say both groups' views are supported equally. Just 16% of Democrats say the companies support the views of conservatives over liberals.

Along with companies' perceived support of certain political viewpoints, roughly seven-in-ten Americans (72%) think it likely that social media companies intentionally censor political viewpoints that those companies find objectionable – with 35% saying they find this very likely. The vast majority of Republicans and Republican leaners (85%) think it likely that social media companies engage in this behavior, with 54% indicating they find it very likely. A smaller share of Democrats – though still a majority, at 62% – also think it likely that social media companies engage in this behavior.

In interpreting these findings, it is important to note that the public does not find it inherently objectionable for online platforms to regulate certain types of speech. For example, a [2017 survey](#) by the Center found that the vast majority of Americans think these platforms have a responsibility to step in when their users are engaging in harassing behavior. That same survey found that 53% of Americans think it is more important for people to feel welcome and safe online than it is for people to be able to speak their minds freely in digital spaces (although, notably, 45% say the opposite). Nonetheless, the view that social media platforms take steps to censor certain political viewpoints is one that is widespread among the public as a whole.

When asked a separate question about whether major technology companies support the views of men or women, a majority of Americans (58%) say these companies support the views of men and women equally. One-third (33%) say the companies support the views of men over women, while 8% feel they support the views of women over men.

Men and women differ somewhat in their perceptions of which gender's values, if either, technology companies favor. Some 39% of women say these companies support the views of men more than women, while just 4% say they support women's views more than those of men. Men, on the other hand, are less likely to say these companies support the views of men over women

(26% express this view). In addition, men are three times as likely as women to say these companies support the views of women over those of men (12% of men express this opinion). However, majorities of both men (61%) and women (55%) say these companies support the views of men and women equally.

## 74% of Americans say major technology companies' products and services have been more good than bad for them personally, but a somewhat smaller share (63%) thinks they have had a net positive impact on society as a whole

Previous [Pew Research Center surveys](#) have found that Americans tend to be more broadly upbeat about the impact of technology on their own personal lives than they are about the impact of technology on society as a whole. And this survey finds continuing evidence of this trend in the specific context of public attitudes toward major technology companies.

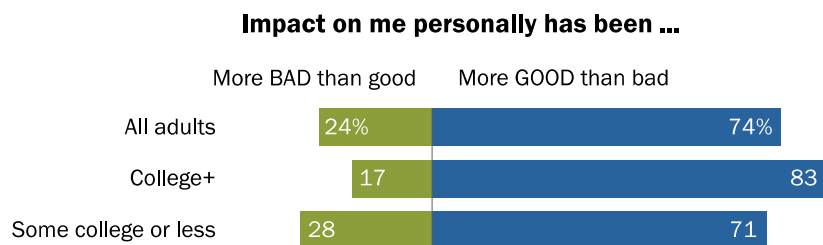
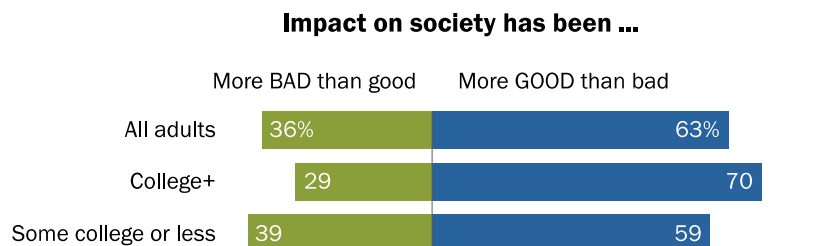
Roughly three-quarters of Americans (74%) think the impact of major technology companies on their own lives has been more good than bad, while 24% say the opposite. When asked about the broader societal impact, a majority of Americans continue to feel

positively, but the share saying the good outweighs the bad falls to 63%. And 36% of Americans say the impact of these companies on society as a whole has on balance been more bad than good.

In general there is relatively modest variation on these questions across demographic categories, but certain groups stand out somewhat in their views. Notably, Americans who have not graduated

### College graduates have somewhat more positive views of the personal, social impact of major tech companies

*% of U.S. adults who say the following about the impact of major technology companies and their products and services*



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.

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from college express somewhat more negative views about the impact these companies have had on their own lives, as well as on society as a whole. Some 17% of those with a college degree say the bad outweighs the good, compared with 28% among those who have not graduated from college. Similarly, 29% of college graduates describe the societal impact as more bad than good, as do 39% among Americans who have not graduated from college.

Along with these differences by educational attainment, Republicans are somewhat more pessimistic than Democrats about the impact of these companies – especially their impact on society as a whole. Some 41% of Republicans and Republican leaners think these companies have had an impact on society that is more bad than good, compared with 32% of Democrats.

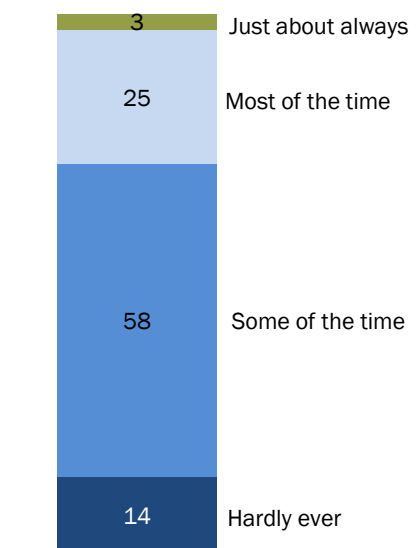
### **Relatively few Americans trust major technology companies to consistently do what is right, and 51% think they should be regulated more than they are currently**

Overall, the public expresses modest levels of trust in major technology companies to do what is right. Only 3% of Americans think these companies can be trusted to do what is right just about all of the time, notably smaller than the share (14%) that thinks they can hardly ever be trusted. In total, some 28% of Americans think these companies can be trusted to do the right thing most of the time or always, while a total of 72% think they can be trusted to do the right thing some of the time or hardly ever.

Even so, a majority of Americans (69%) say these companies are no more or less ethical than companies in other industries. Around one-in-five (22%) think they are generally *less* ethical than companies in other industries, while 8% feel they are more ethical than others. Republicans and Republican leaners are around twice as likely as Democrats to say these companies are less ethical than others (30% vs. 16%). But a majority of Americans belonging to or leaning toward each party say major technology companies are about as ethical as companies in other industries.

### **Moderate levels of public trust in major technology companies**

*% of U.S. adults who say they can trust major technology companies to do what is right ...*



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.  
Source: Survey conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.  
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When asked about the appropriate role of government in regulating major technology companies, around half of U.S. adults (51%) believe these companies should be regulated more than they are now. Around one-in-ten (9%) feel they should be regulated less than they are now, while 38% say their current level of regulation is appropriate.

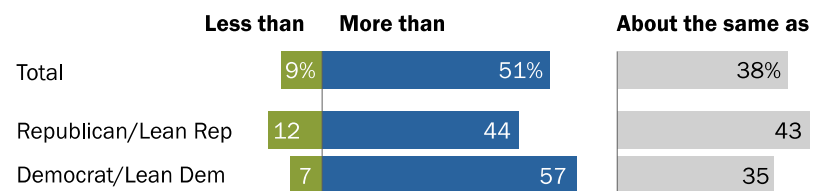
Although Republicans are more likely than Democrats to see an anti-conservative bias among major technology companies, this attitude does not translate into a broader desire by Republicans for increased regulation of these companies. Just over half (57%) of Democrats and Democratic leaners think major technology companies should be regulated more heavily than they are now, but that share falls to 44%

among Republicans and Republican leaners. Indeed, 12% of Republicans say these companies should be regulated *less* than they are currently. That view is shared by 7% of Democrats.

More broadly, the public places technology companies somewhere in the middle of the pack in terms of their overall power in the economy relative to other industries and commercial entities. Asked about the relative clout of eight different groups or entities, just over half the public (55%) says technology companies have too much power and influence, similar to the share (57%) that thinks the energy industry has an outsized influence on the economy today. Larger shares of the public feel that pharmaceutical companies, advertisers, or banks and other financial institutions have too much power and influence today, while smaller shares think this is true of labor unions, small businesses or the farming and agriculture industry.

### Roughly half the public thinks major tech companies should be regulated more than they are now

*% of U.S. adults who say that major technology companies should be regulated \_\_\_ they are currently*



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.

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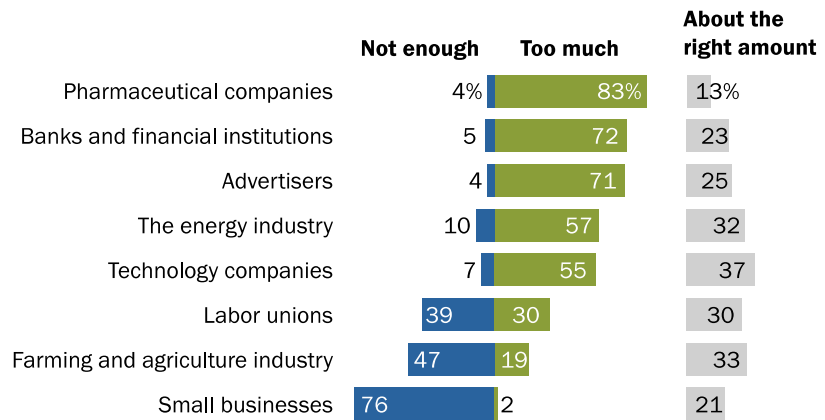
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Americans also are generally downbeat about the role and impact of tech firms when presented with statements about those firms. Majorities of Americans feel these companies create products and services that mostly benefit people who already have advantages in life (64% think this describes these companies well) and that they often fail to anticipate how their products and services will impact society (65%). At the same time, just 24% think these firms “do enough to protect users’ personal data” – and 75% feel this is *not* an accurate description of major technology companies.

## Americans view technology companies and energy companies similarly when it comes to having too much power and influence in today’s economy

*% of U.S. adults who say the following entities have \_\_\_ power and influence in today’s economy*



Note: These questions were asked as a form split. Form 1 respondents received “technology companies,” “the energy industry,” “labor unions” and “banks and financial institutions.” Form 2 respondents received “advertisers,” “pharmaceutical companies,” “the farming and agriculture industry” and “small businesses.” Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.  
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## Generational differences exist around some – but not all – of these questions about the role of technology companies in society

Although differing shares of older and younger adults adopt and use various technologies in their own lives, their views of the technology industry itself diverge in certain ways but align in others.

On some of these issues, younger and older Americans express similar attitudes. For instance, they have comparable levels of trust in major technology firms to consistently do what is right; are equally likely to think that these companies support the views of a particular gender or political affiliation over others; and are equally likely to say the impact of these companies on society as a whole has been more good than bad.

On other questions, there are more pronounced differences between the attitudes of older and younger Americans – with older adults typically taking a more broadly pessimistic view of these firms and their overall impact. For instance, larger shares of older adults think major technology companies often fail to anticipate how their products and services will impact society, that these companies have too much power and influence in today’s society, and that they should be regulated more than they are currently. And while sizable shares of both age groups think it likely that social media companies censor political speech that those companies find objectionable, that view is shared by a larger majority of older (81%) than younger (67%) adults.

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### Older and younger adults express differing opinions about major technology companies

*% of U.S. adults in each age group who say the following*

	<b>18-29</b>	<b>65+</b>
Personal impact of major tech companies more good than bad	81	73
Think it likely that social media platforms censor political viewpoints	67	81
Major tech companies often fail to anticipate how products will impact society	57	73
Major tech companies have too much power and influence	47	61
Major tech companies should be regulated more than they are now	45	57
Major tech companies do enough to protect personal data of their users	31	19

Source: Survey conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.

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## Acknowledgements

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals. Find related reports online at [pewresearch.org/internet](https://www.pewresearch.org/internet).

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## The American Trends Panel Survey Methodology

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults recruited from landline and cellphone random-digit-dial (RDD) surveys. Panelists participate via monthly self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by GfK.

Data in this report are drawn from the panel wave conducted May 29-June 11, 2018, among 4,594 respondents. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 4,594 respondents is plus or minus 2.4 percentage points.

Members of the American Trends Panel were recruited from several large, national landline and cellphone RDD surveys conducted in English and Spanish. At the end of each survey, respondents were invited to join the panel. The first group of panelists was recruited from the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey, conducted Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014. Of the 10,013 adults interviewed, 9,809 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 5,338 agreed to participate.<sup>1</sup> The second group of panelists was recruited from the 2015 Pew Research Center Survey on Government, conducted Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015. Of the 6,004 adults interviewed, all were invited to join the panel, and 2,976 agreed to participate.<sup>2</sup> The third group of panelists was recruited from a survey conducted April 25 to June 4, 2017. Of the 5,012 adults interviewed in the survey or pretest, 3,905 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 1,628 agreed to participate.<sup>3</sup>

The ATP data were weighted in a multistep process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original survey selection probability and the fact that in 2014 some panelists were subsampled for invitation to the panel. Next, an adjustment was made for the fact that the propensity to join the panel and remain an active panelist varied across different groups in the sample. The final step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that aligns the sample to population benchmarks on a number of dimensions. Gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and region parameters come from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2016 American Community Survey. The county-level population density parameter (deciles) comes from the 2010 U.S. decennial census. The telephone service benchmark comes from the July-December 2016 National Health

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<sup>1</sup> When data collection for the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey began, non-internet users were subsampled at a rate of 25%, but a decision was made shortly thereafter to invite all non-internet users to join. In total, 83% of non-internet users were invited to join the panel.

<sup>2</sup> Respondents to the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey who indicated that they are internet users but refused to provide an email address were initially permitted to participate in the American Trends Panel by mail, but were no longer permitted to join the panel after Feb. 6, 2014. Internet users from the 2015 Pew Research Center Survey on Government who refused to provide an email address were not permitted to join the panel.

<sup>3</sup> White, non-Hispanic college graduates were subsampled at a rate of 50%.

Interview Survey and is projected to 2017. The volunteerism benchmark comes from the 2015 Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement. The party affiliation benchmark is the average of the three most recent Pew Research Center general public telephone surveys. The internet access benchmark comes from the 2017 ATP Panel Refresh Survey. Respondents who did not previously have internet access are treated as not having internet access for weighting purposes. Sampling errors and statistical tests of significance take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish, but the Hispanic sample in the ATP is predominantly native born and English speaking.

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:

<b>Group</b>	<b>Unweighted sample size</b>	<b>Plus or minus ...</b>
Total sample	4,594	2.4 percentage points
Men	2,290	3.4 percentage points
Women	2,304	3.4 percentage points
College grad	2,500	3.2 percentage points
Some college or less	2,082	3.6 percentage points
Democrat/Lean Dem	2,533	3.2 percentage points
Republican/Lean Rep	1,961	3.7 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.

The May 2018 wave had a response rate of 84 % (4,594 responses among 5,486 individuals in the panel). Taking account of the combined, weighted response rate for the recruitment surveys (10.0%) and attrition from panel members who were removed at their request or for inactivity, the cumulative response rate for the wave is 2.4%<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves are removed from the panel. These cases are counted in the denominator of cumulative response rates.

## Topline questionnaire

### 2018 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL

WAVE 35 MAY 2018

FINAL TOPLINE

MAY 29 – JUNE 11, 2018

TOTAL N=4,594

#### ASK ALL:

ECIMP

How much power and influence do you think each of the following have in today's ECONOMY? **[RANDOMIZE ITEMS; RANDOMIZE RESPONSES 1 AND 2, 3 ALWAYS LAST]**

	<u>Too much power and influence</u>	<u>Not enough power and influence</u>	<u>About the right amount</u>	<u>No Answer</u>
<b>ASK FORM 1 [N=2,303]</b>				
a. Technology companies May 29-Jun 11, 2018	55	7	37	*
b. The energy industry May 29-Jun 11, 2018	57	10	32	*
c. Labor unions May 29-Jun 11, 2018	30	39	30	1
d. Banks and other financial institutions May 29-Jun 11, 2018	72	5	23	*
<b>ASK FORM 2 [N=2,291]</b>				
e. Advertisers May 29-Jun 11, 2018	71	4	25	1
f. Pharmaceutical companies May 29-Jun 11, 2018	83	4	13	*
g. The farming and agriculture industry May 29-Jun 11, 2018	19	47	33	1
h. Small businesses May 29-Jun 11, 2018	2	76	21	1

**[TCF1 AND TCF2 NOT SHOWN]**

**ASK ALL:**

TC2a How much of the time do you think you can trust major technology companies to do what is right?

May 29-  
Jun 11  
2018

3	Just about always
25	Most of the time
58	Some of the time
14	Hardly ever
*	No Answer

**ASK ALL:****[RANDOMIZE ORDER OF TC2b AND TC2c]**

TC2b Thinking about the impact major technology companies and their products and services have had on SOCIETY, do you think that impact has been... **[RANDOMIZE 1 AND 2; USE SAME ORDER IN TC2b AND TC2c]**

May 29-  
Jun 11  
2018

63	More good than bad
36	More bad than good
1	No Answer

**ASK ALL:****[RANDOMIZE ORDER OF TC2b AND TC2c]**

TC2c Thinking about the impact major technology companies and their products and services have had on YOU PERSONALLY, do you think that impact has been... **[RANDOMIZE 1 AND 2; USE SAME ORDER IN TC2b AND TC2c]**

May 29-  
Jun 11  
2018

74	More good than bad
24	More bad than good
1	No Answer

**ASK ALL:**

TC3 Do you think the following statements describe major technology companies well?  
**[RANDOMIZE ITEMS]**

	<u>Describes them well</u>	<u>Does not describe them well</u>	<u>No Answer</u>
a. Their products and services mostly benefit people who already have advantages in life May 29-Jun 11, 2018	64	35	1
b. They do enough to protect the personal data of their users May 29-Jun 11, 2018	24	75	1
c. They often fail to anticipate how their products and services will impact society May 29-Jun 11, 2018	65	34	1

**ASK ALL:**

TC4 Compared to other companies, do you think major technology companies are...  
**[RANDOMIZE 1 AND 2, 3 ALWAYS LAST]**

May 29- Jun 11 <u>2018</u>	8	More ethical
	22	Less ethical
	69	About as ethical as other companies
	1	No Answer

**ASK ALL:**

TC5 Thinking about the role of the government in regulating major technology companies, do you think these companies should be regulated... **[RANDOMIZE 1 AND 2, 3 ALWAYS LAST]**

May 29- Jun 11 <u>2018</u>	51	More than they are now
	9	Less than they are now
	38	About the same as they are now
	1	No Answer



**ASK ALL:****[RANDOMIZE ORDER OF TC6a AND TC6b]**

TC6a Do you think major technology companies tend to... **[RANDOMIZE 1 AND 2, 3 ALWAYS LAST]**

May 29-  
Jun 11  
2018

33	Support the views of men over women
8	Support the views of women over men
58	Support the views of both equally
2	No Answer

**ASK ALL:****[RANDOMIZE ORDER OF TC6a AND TC6b]**

TC6b Do you think major technology companies tend to... **[RANDOMIZE 1 AND 2, 3 ALWAYS LAST]**

May 29-  
Jun 11  
2018

43	Support the views of liberals over conservatives
11	Support the views of conservatives over liberals
43	Support the views of both equally
3	No Answer

**ASK ALL:**

SM7 How likely, if at all, do you think it is that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints that they find objectionable?

May 29-  
Jun 11  
2018

35	Very likely
37	Somewhat likely
19	Not very likely
8	Not at all likely
1	No Answer