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Group Perceptions in America: Demographic and Ideological Divides

2023 SPEER Survey Findings

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August 2024

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RECOMMENDED CITATION: Bedle, H., (2024). Group Perceptions in America: Demographic and Ideological Divides. 2023 SPEER Survey Findings.

SPEER

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Abstract

We examine Americans' attitudes towards diverse social and political groups using data from the 2023 SPEER Survey. Employing feeling thermometers, we analyze perceptions of left-sympathetic and right-sympathetic groups across a wide range of demographic, socioeconomic, and ideological factors. Our findings reveal significant patterns in group attitudes, with political ideology emerging as a consistent predictor across both categories. Age, education, gender, race/ethnicity, income, rurality, family structure, and religious beliefs also play varying roles of significance in shaping those perceptions. Left-sympathetic groups generally received warmer ratings from younger, more educated, and less religious respondents, while right-sympathetic groups were viewed more favorably by conservative, rural, and religiously active individuals. These survey results highlight the complex interplay of factors influencing group perceptions in American society, contributing to our understanding of affective polarization and social divisions. These insights begin to document the foundation of feelings toward other groups which has important implications for social cohesion, political behavior, and policy preferences in an increasingly polarized society.

1. Introduction

Understanding how Americans perceive various social and political groups is crucial for comprehending the complex dynamics of contemporary U.S. society. Our perceptions of other groups shape our public discourse, influence policy decisions, and impact social cohesion (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). In this era of increasing polarization, examining attitudes towards different groups can provide insights into the underlying factors that contribute to social tensions and political divisions (Finkel et al., 2020).

Recent research has highlights the growing importance of affective polarization, where individuals hold strong positive feelings towards groups they identify with and negative feelings towards outgroups (Mason, 2018). This phenomenon extends beyond traditional partisan lines, encompassing a wide range of social, religious, and ideological groups (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). Iyengar and Westwood's (2015) seminal work on affective polarization used feeling thermometers to measure attitudes toward political outgroups, finding that party affiliation was a stronger predictor of discrimination than race.

Studies focusing on specific groups have further illuminated the role of demographic factors in shaping attitudes. Lajevardi and Oskooii (2018) used feeling thermometers to study attitudes towards Muslims in the United States, finding that political ideology, age, and education were significant predictors of these

attitudes. Similarly, Drakulich et al. (2020) employed feeling thermometers to examine attitudes towards police, revealing that race, age, and political ideology were key predictors.

The present study aims to contribute to this body of knowledge by examining Americans' attitudes towards a diverse range of groups across the political and social spectrum. By analyzing these perceptions in relation to demographic factors, political affiliations, and religious beliefs, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the current social landscape in the United States. This research is particularly timely given the ongoing debates surrounding issues such as immigration, religious freedom, and social justice (Sides et al., 2018).

It has been noted that understanding these group perceptions is essential for developing strategies to bridge societal divides and foster more constructive dialogue between different segments of the population (Lelkes, 2016). By identifying the factors that influence positive or negative attitudes towards specific groups, policymakers and community leaders can work towards addressing misconceptions and reducing intergroup hostilities.

The SPEER 2023 survey examines attitudes towards a diverse array of groups, categorized broadly as left-sympathetic and right-sympathetic, to provide a comprehensive picture of contemporary American social and political divides. We investigate how a wide range of factors – including age, education, gender, race/ethnicity, income, rurality, family structure, and religious beliefs – intersect to shape these attitudes. By exploring the complex interplay of these variables, we aim to uncover patterns that illuminate the multifaceted nature of group perceptions in the United States.

Utilizing data from the 2023 SPEER Survey, which provides a comprehensive overview of Americans' attitudes towards various groups, we employ statistical analysis to uncover patterns and correlations that shed light on group perceptions in contemporary American society. This approach allows us to build upon and extend the insights gained from previous research in this field.

2. Methods

Data

The 2023 SPEER Survey provides the data for this study. Data collection was conducted via online survey panels administered by Qualtrics, adhering to the guidelines and regulations of the University of Oklahoma Institutional Research Board (IRB approval #15823). All subjects provided informed consent. The sample consists of 2,188 U.S. adults (18+ years), recruited through quota-based sampling to match census benchmarks for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education level, and U.S. region, ensuring a large and diverse representative sample. For additional details, refer to the SPEER 2023 Survey report (Bedle et al., 2024).

Measures

Respondents were asked the following question:

> *We'd like to get your feelings toward some groups of people. We'd like you to rate each group named below using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the group. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the group and that you don't care too much for that group of people. You would rate the group at the 50- degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the group. For each group, touch or click the circle*

and drag it to the degree mark that best represents your feelings about that group. If you come to a group whose name you don't recognize, you don't need to rate that group. Just move on to the next one.

The following groups were analyzed:

Left Sympathetic Groups

- Liberals
- Atheists
- Muslims
- Transgender People
- Feminists
- Illegal Immigrants
- Journalists
- Climate Scientists

Right Sympathetic Groups

- Conservatives
- Cristian Nationalists
- Militia Members
- NRA Members
- Oil & Gas Industry
- Police
- White supremacists

We also incorporated control variables based on standard demographics and other covariates commonly associated with environmental attitudes, as identified in previous research and the literature review. These variables include:

- Political party affiliation
- Mean-centered age (with a squared term when significant)
- Gender
- Race
- Education level
- Income
- Marital and parental status
- Religious service attendance
- Evangelical identity
- Biblical views
- Urbanicity
- U.S. region

Linear OLS regressions were employed to test relationships between these variables and thermometers of groups, including the aforementioned control variables.

3. Insights

After performing the OLS regressions, we noted that a wide range of variables were significant predictors, with overlap between group thermometers. These are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: OLS Regression analysis for Left sympathetic groups.

	Liberals	Atheists	Muslims	Transgender People	Feminists	Illegal Immigrants	Journalists	Climate Scientists
	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b
Moderates	-25.574 ***	-14.437 ***	-9.730 ***	-15.868 ***	-16.367 ***	-13.223 ***	-10.470 ***	-12.068 ***
Conservatives	-39.611 ***	-17.729 ***	-11.248 ***	-26.245 ***	-25.779 ***	-23.206 ***	-20.820 ***	-24.593 ***
Independents	-11.764 ***	-0.961	-5.777 ***	-8.646 ***	-9.773 ***	-6.394 ***	-10.454 ***	-11.653 ***
Republicans	-12.047 ***	-4.374 *	-10.705 ***	-11.392 ***	-12.116 ***	-11.064 ***	-10.773 ***	-13.562 ***
Biblical Literalists	-3.449 *	-13.257 ***	-5.192 **	-8.202 ***	-3.389	-2.349	0.029	-3.876 *
Church Attendance	0.263	-1.909 ***	0.887 **	-1.070 ***	-0.162	0.787 **	0.583 *	0.029
Evangelical Identification	-2.520	-7.207 ***	-5.008 **	-5.950 ***	-2.311	-2.780	-2.475	-4.156 **
College Degree	2.277 *	4.204 **	-0.005	-1.448	2.218	1.783	1.169	2.535 *
Mean-centered age	-0.085 *	-0.205 ***	-0.216 ***	-0.244 ***	-0.156 ***	-0.428 ***	-0.017	-0.137 ***
Mean-centered age squared	0.005 **	0.006 **	0.012 ***	0.009 ***	0.010 ***	0.010 ***	0.003	0.008 ***
Woman	2.004 *	-0.625	0.588	7.382 ***	9.658 ***	2.182	2.922 *	3.753 ***
Black	-1.365	-9.019 ***	0.459	-6.193 **	-5.970 **	3.034	-2.850	-5.439 **
Hispanic	-2.263	-4.540 *	-0.699	-8.279 ***	-6.149 **	10.008 ***	-1.631	-6.194 **
Other Race	-3.143 *	-2.384	1.174	-3.028	-3.998 *	-0.294	-0.189	-2.043
Marital Status	1.524	0.944	-0.321	-0.873	1.066	-0.893	-0.719	0.592
Parental Status	-0.764	0.337	-0.215	-0.999	-0.545	-0.039	-0.706	-0.987
Income	-0.263	0.367	1.188 **	0.454	0.164	-0.983 *	0.668	0.301
Rural	-0.232	-0.841	-1.096	-1.450	-1.655	-1.527	-0.386	-2.619
Urban	-0.103	-0.641	-1.288	-1.398	-1.202	0.934	1.673	0.954
South US Region	0.241	0.046	0.165	1.898	2.440	0.921	0.010	1.054
Constant	72.469	63.029	55.860	71.489 0	62.957	55.023	58.296	76.688
Adj R-squared =	0.447	0.239	0.156	0.313	0.288	0.330	0.186	0.291

* p ≤ .05 ** p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001

Table 2: OLS Regression analysis for Right sympathetic groups.

	Conservatives	Christian Nationalists	Militia Members	NRA Members	Oil & Gas Industry	Police	White Supremacists
	b	b	b	b	b	b	b
Moderates	12.702 ***	9.003 ***	3.372 *	11.138 ***	7.285 ***	6.620 ***	2.652 *
Conservatives	34.806 ***	14.176 ***	6.703 ***	23.650 ***	14.116 ***	13.302 ***	-0.210
Independents	3.265 **	-0.019	2.886 *	4.743 **	-0.504	-0.855	-1.084
Republicans	12.918 ***	6.659 ***	7.645 ***	16.019 ***	5.301 **	4.727 *	4.845 ***
Biblical Literalists	3.961 **	12.587 ***	3.479 *	6.622 ***	9.643 ***	2.530	5.917 ***
Church Attendance	0.740 **	2.090 ***	0.540	0.633 *	0.479	1.112 ***	0.246
Evangelical Identification	4.663 **	12.949 ***	1.512	2.283	3.591 *	1.303	2.144
College Degree	-2.055	-4.263 ***	-1.575	-6.468 ***	-0.933	-1.479	0.351
Mean-centered age	0.084 *	-0.004	-0.185 ***	-0.029	0.161 ***	0.505 ***	-0.082 **
Mean-centered age squared	-0.001	0.001	0.004 *	-0.008 ***	0.004 *	0.001	-0.001
Woman	0.863	0.895	-2.566 *	-3.304 **	-0.047	3.869 ***	-1.246
Black	-3.295	1.094	1.281	-3.454	0.961	-16.230 ***	-2.376
Hispanic	-3.077	-0.678	0.850	-3.603	-1.461	-5.192 *	-1.098
Other Race	-0.303	-1.253	-0.447	-2.849	-1.100	-7.157 ***	-2.540 *
Marital Status	1.135	0.377	-2.131	0.060	3.516 **	3.104 *	2.053 *
Parental Status	3.606 **	6.033 ***	5.084 ***	6.225 ***	3.474 *	1.517	4.108 ***
Income	-0.152	-1.455 ***	-0.817 *	-1.032 *	-0.391	0.497	-1.060 ***
Rural	1.012	1.787	4.434 **	4.439 **	1.985	0.305	3.179 **
Urban	-1.054	1.862	0.238	0.974	0.643	-2.079	2.112 *
South US Region	1.753	1.033	0.134	0.608	0.831	-2.001	1.105
Constant	22.192	17.094	16.856	23.973	25.998	45.595	8.304
Adj R-squared =	0.409	0.283	0.081	0.290	0.154	0.275	0.079

* p ≤ .05 ** p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001

Variables of Individuals

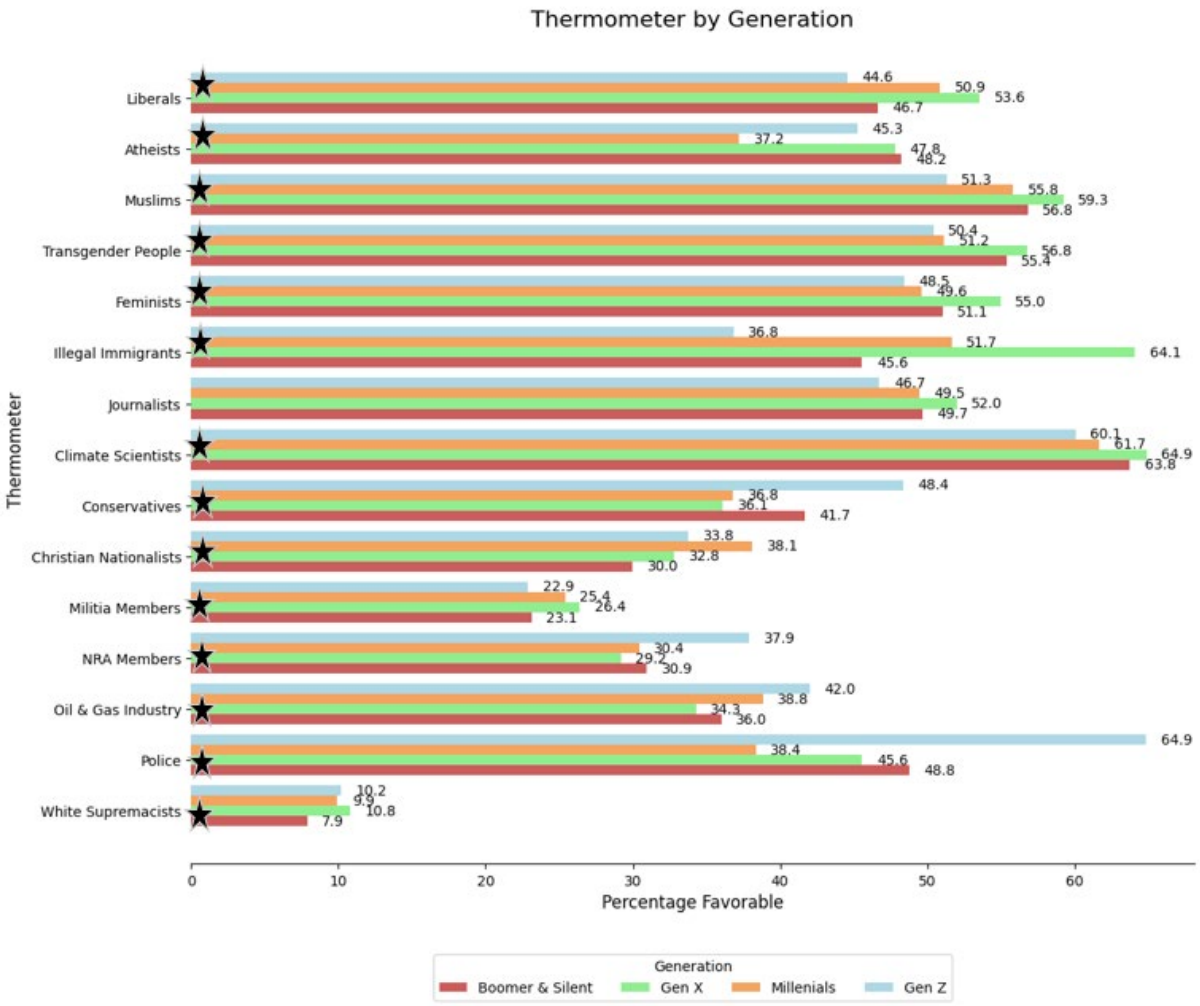


Figure 1: Thermometer by generation. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

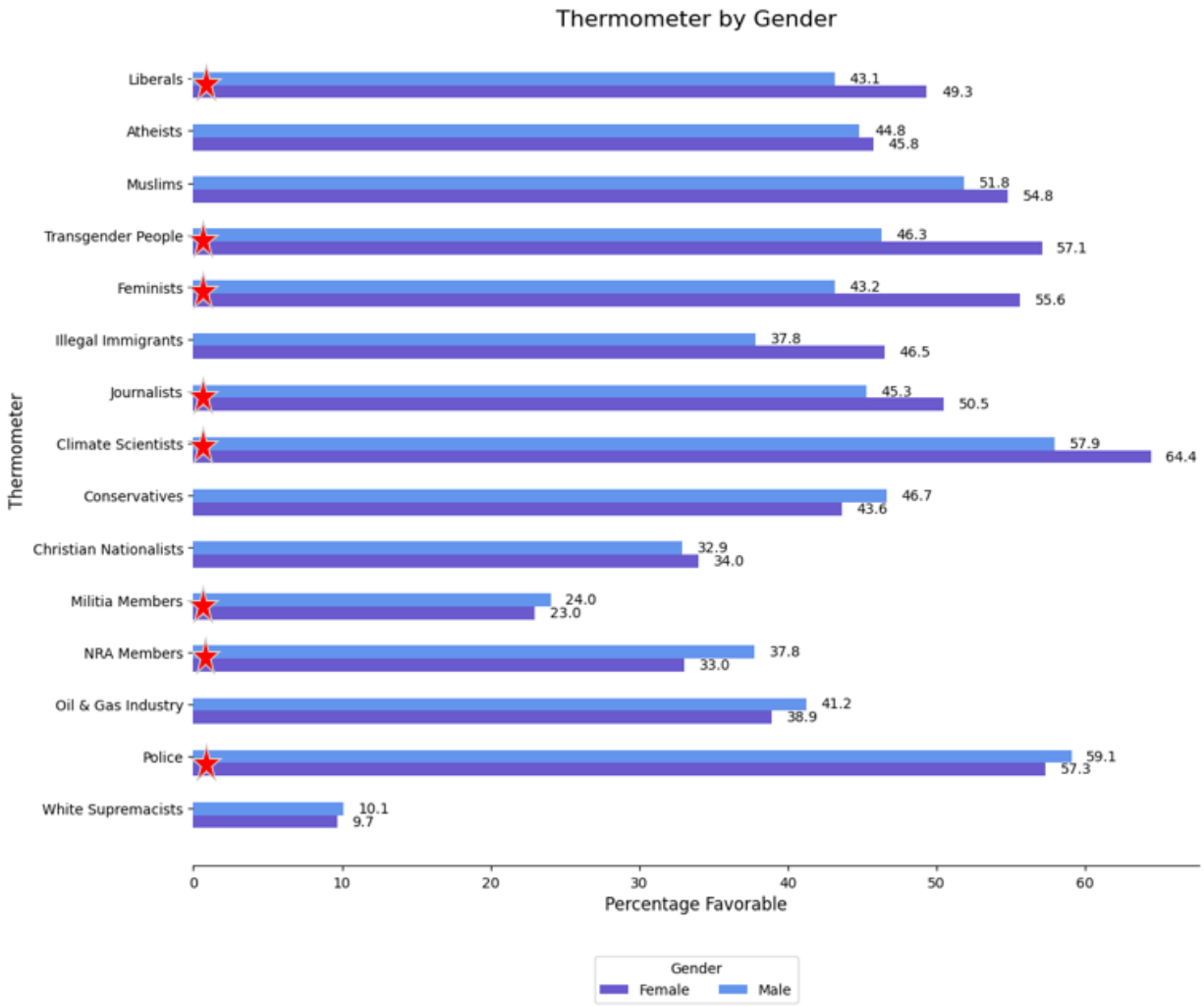


Figure 2: Thermometer by gender. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

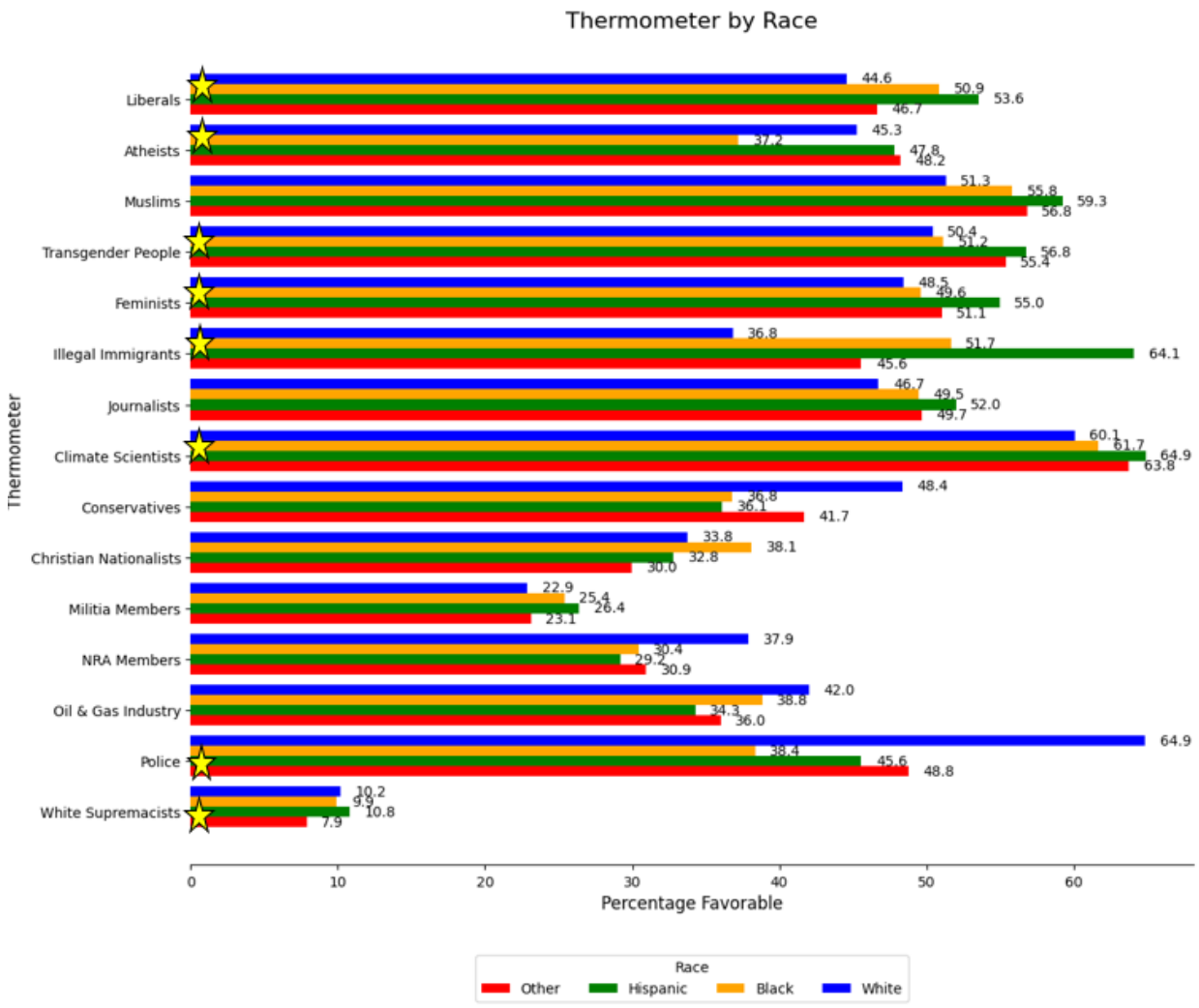


Figure 3: Thermometer by race. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

Socio-economic variables

While education was not significant in any of the energy regressions, income was a factor.

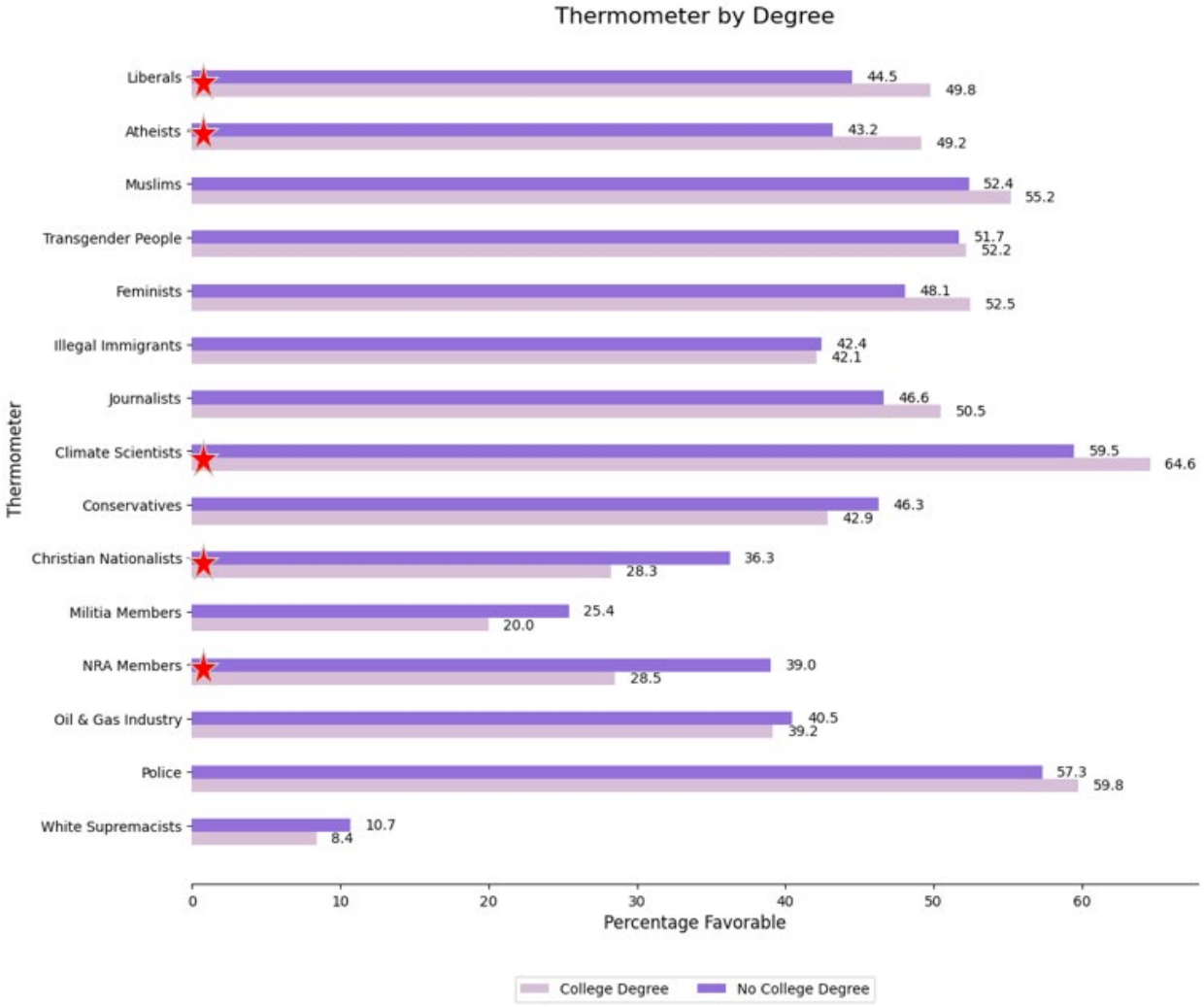


Figure 4: Thermometer by college degree attainment. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

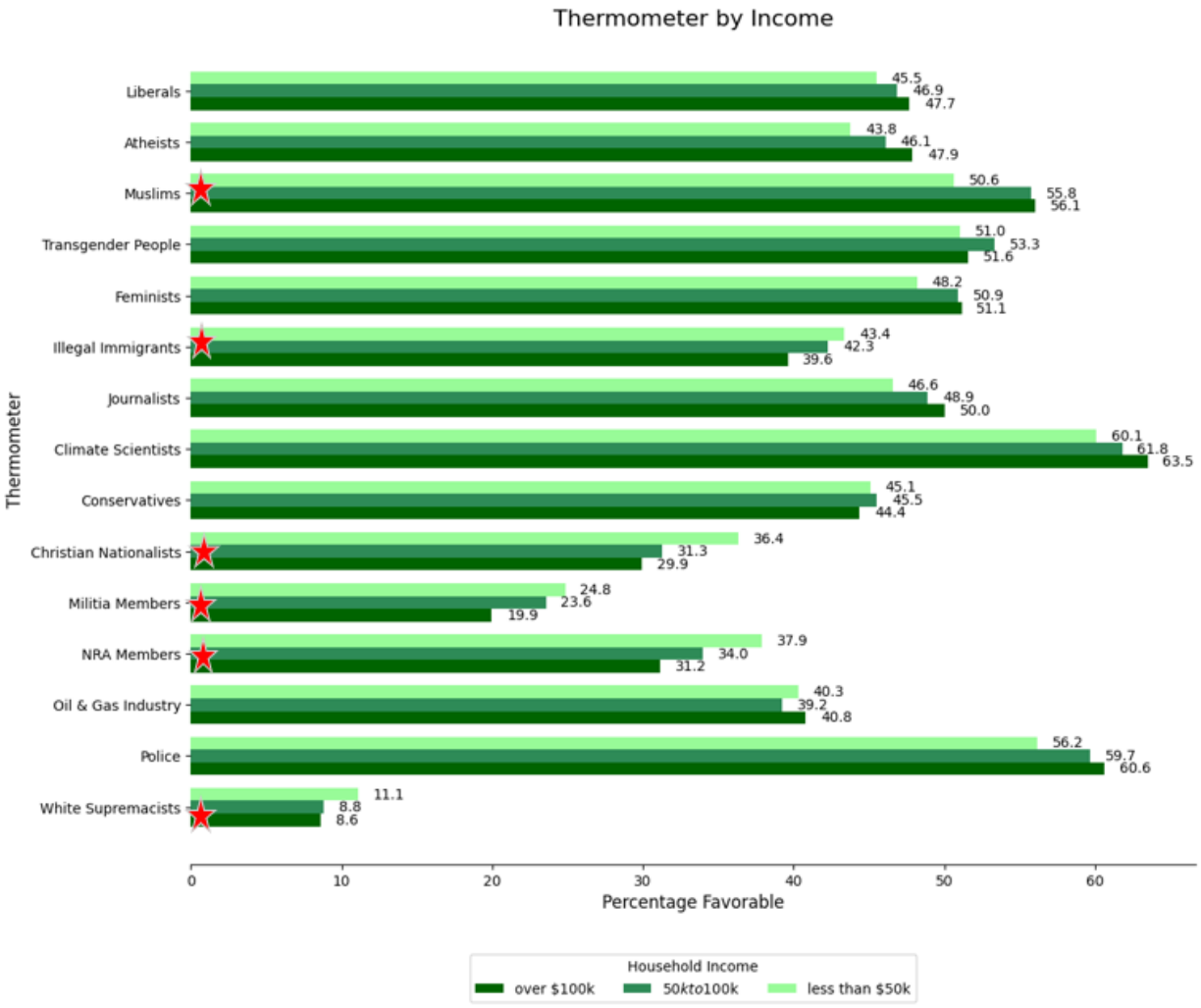


Figure 4: Thermometer by income level. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

Family variables

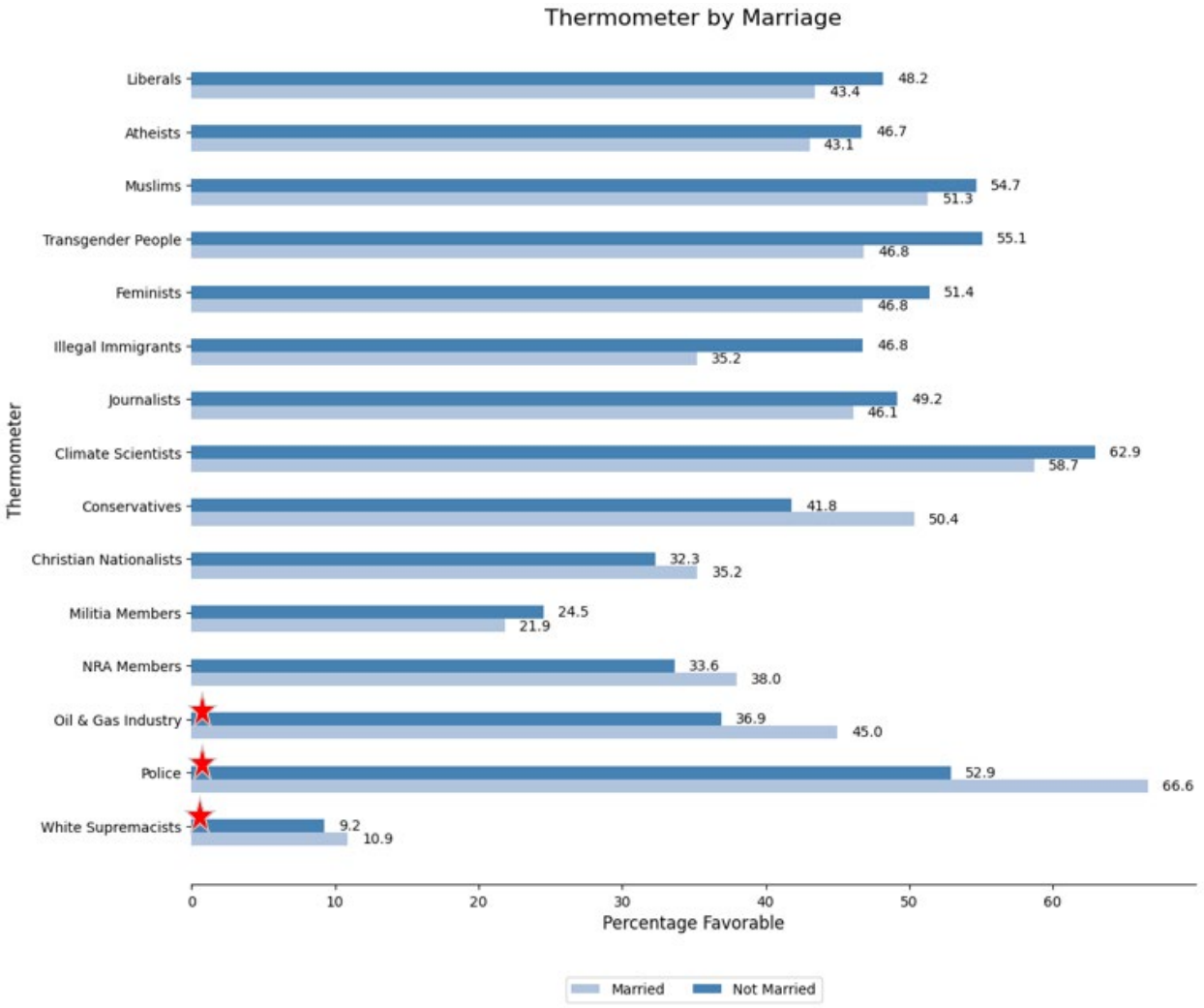


Figure 6: Thermometer by marital status. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

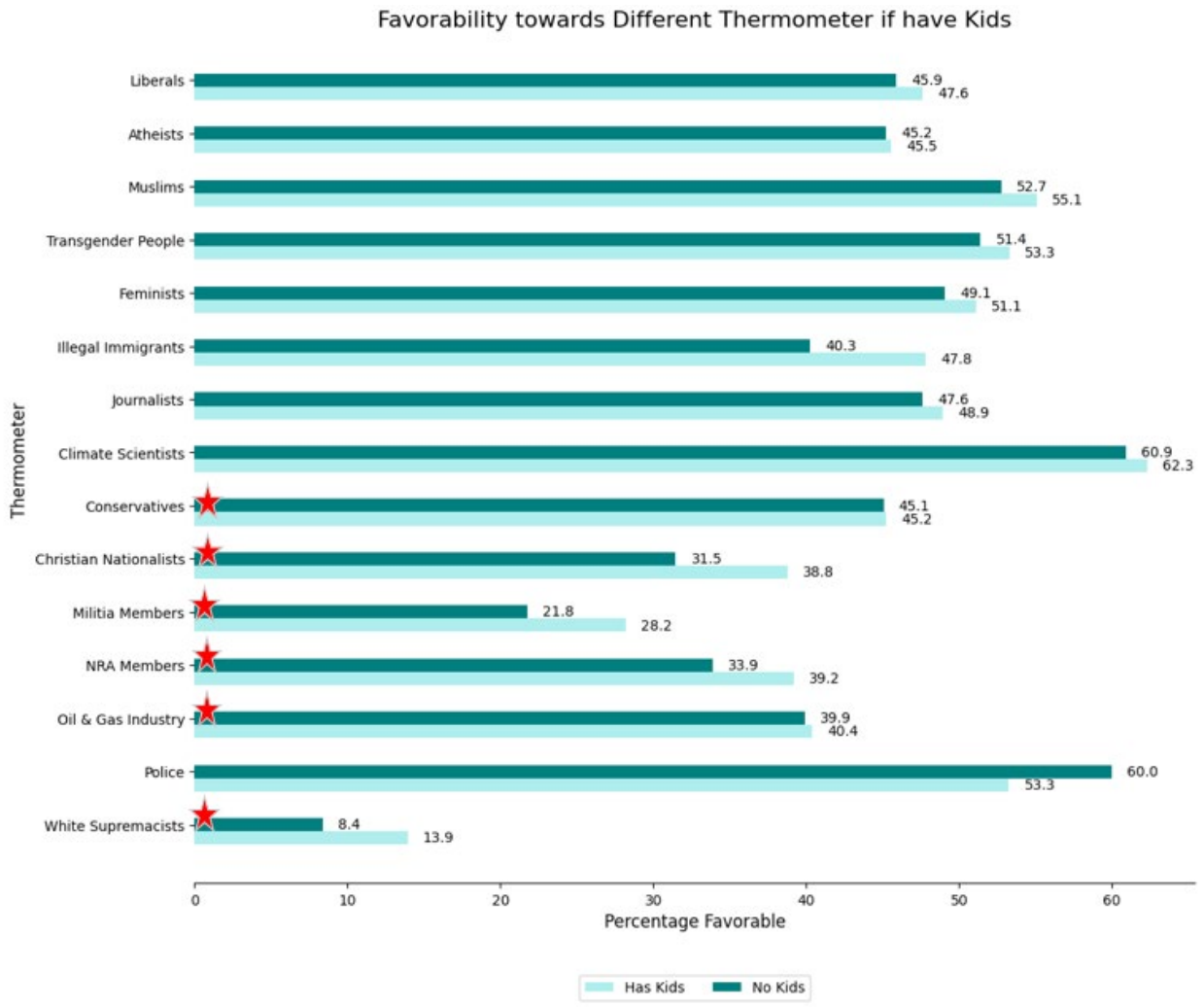


Figure 7: Thermometer by having kids under age 18. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

Variables of place

Region of the US was not significant.

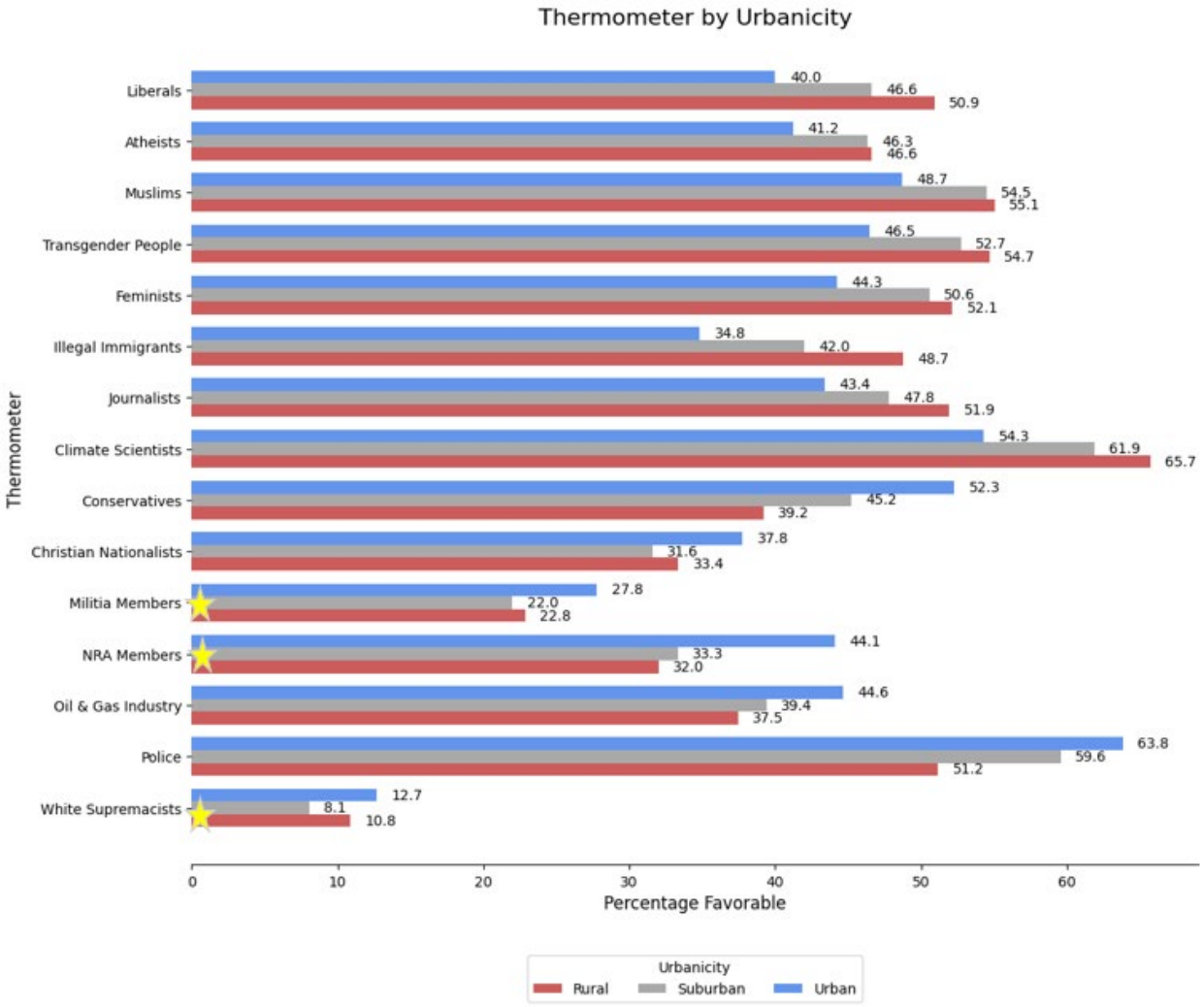


Figure 8: Thermometer by urbanicity. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

Political Variables

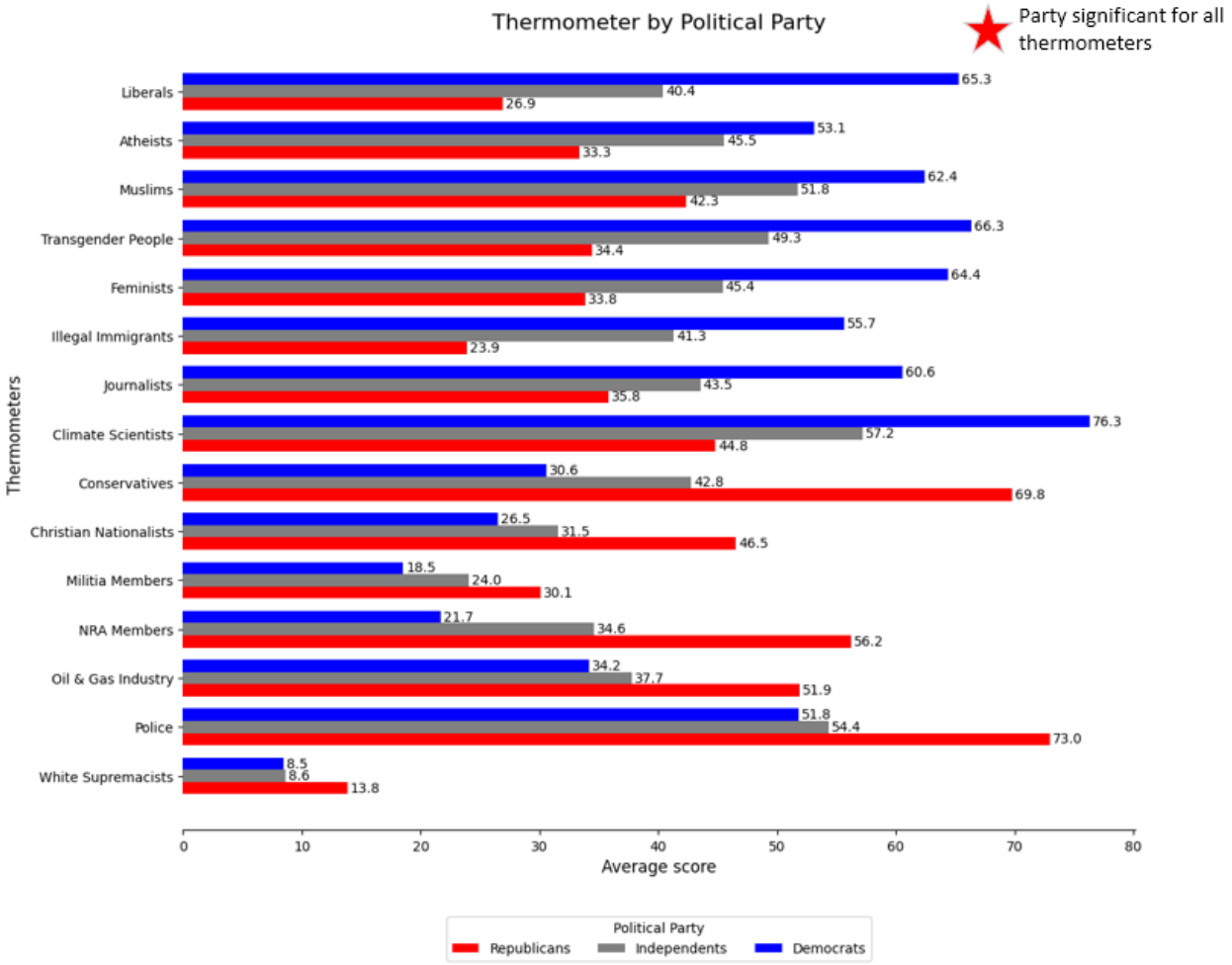


Figure 9: Thermometer by political party. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

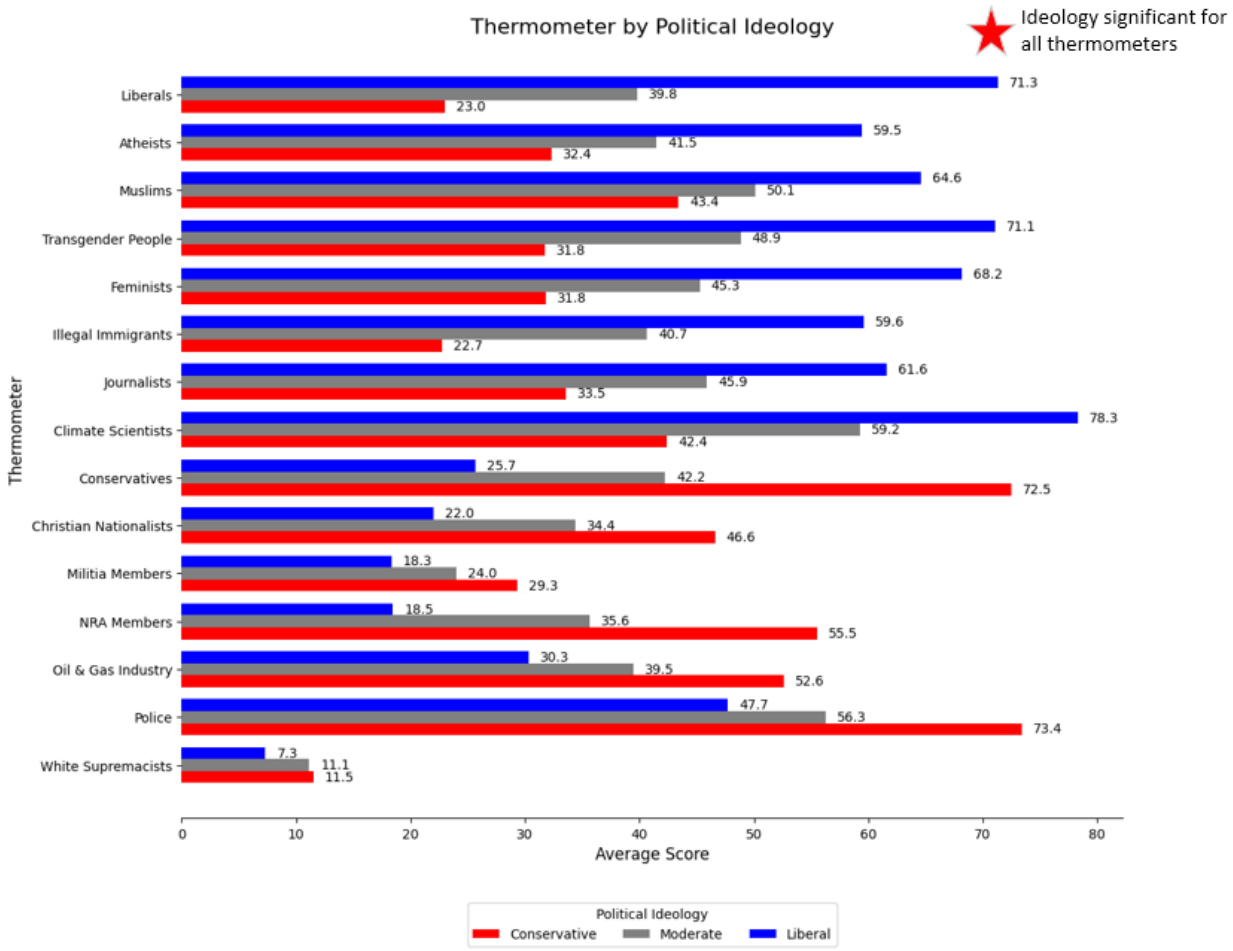


Figure 10: Thermometer by political ideology. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

Religion Variables

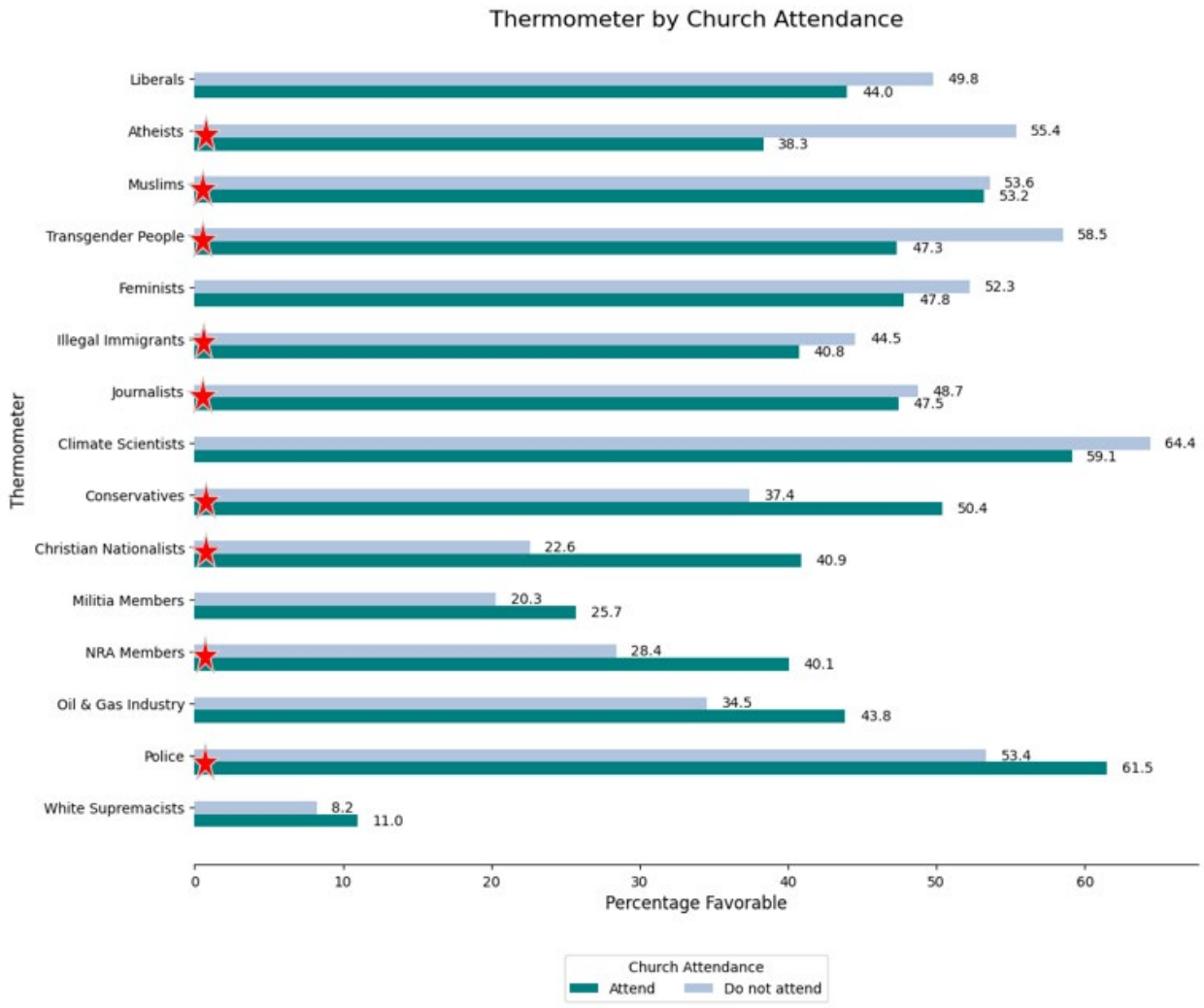


Figure 11: Thermometer by church attendance. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

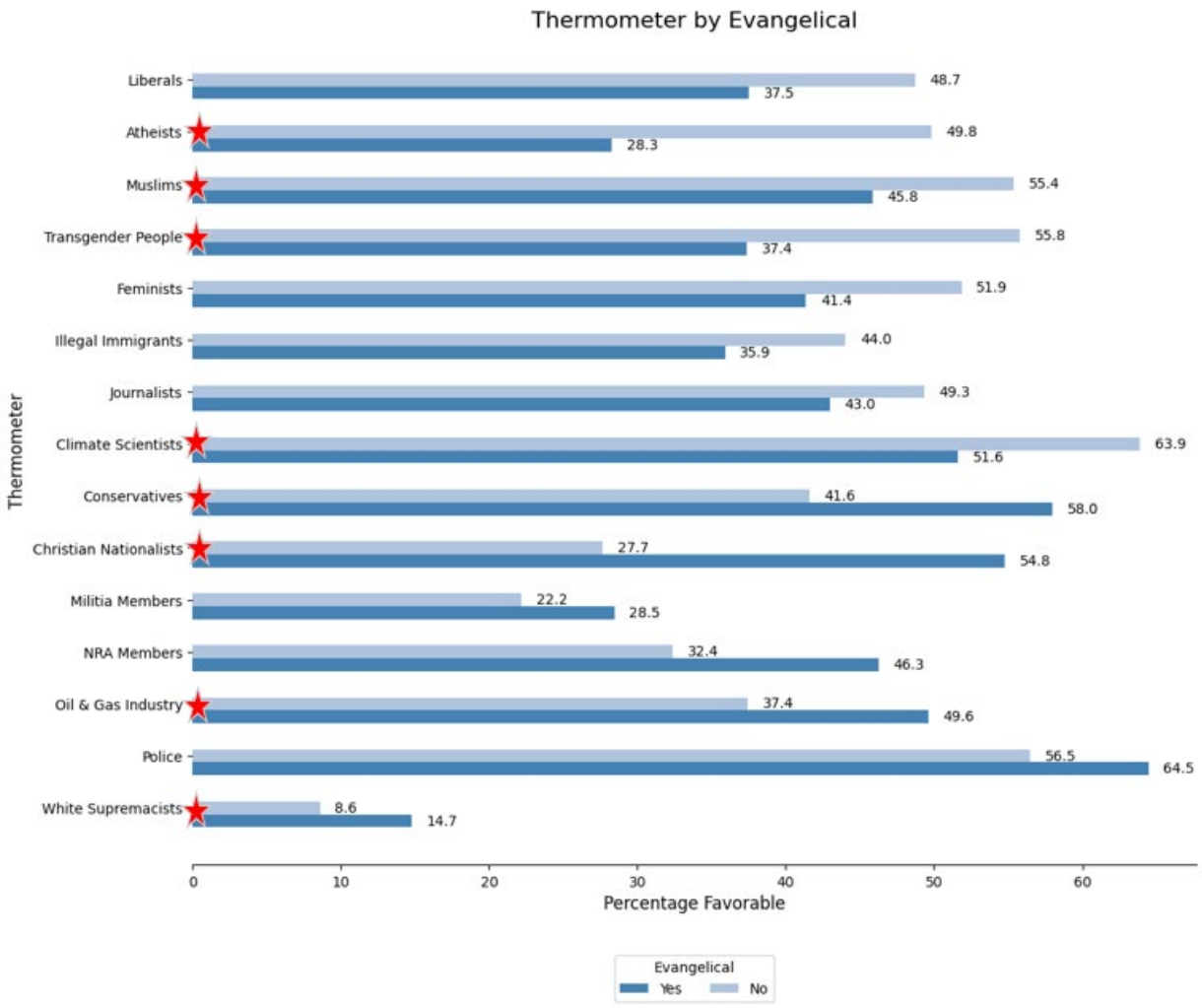


Figure 12: Thermometer by evangelical affiliation. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

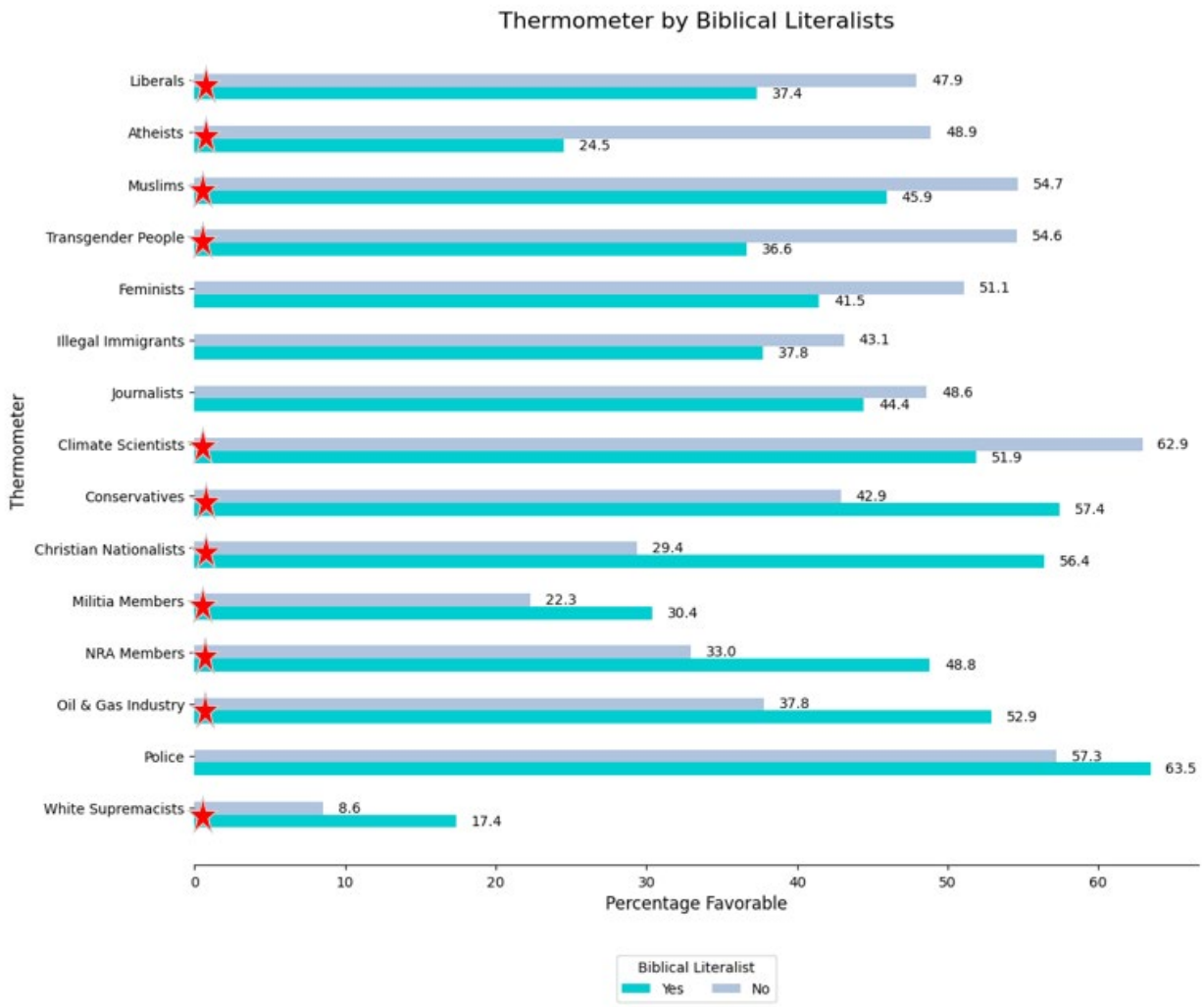


Figure 13: Thermometer by biblical literalism. Those marked by a star were significant for that regression.

4. Concluding Thoughts

Our analysis of the 2023 SPEER Survey data reveals several important patterns in how Americans perceive various social and political groups. By examining these perceptions through the lens of feeling thermometers, we've uncovered significant trends that shed light on the complex landscape of group attitudes in American society.

Left-Sympathetic Groups:

For groups typically associated with left-leaning ideologies (Liberals, Atheists, Muslims, Transgender People, Feminists, Illegal Immigrants, Journalists, and Climate Scientists), we observed several consistent patterns:

- Political Ideology: Conservative and Republican identifications were consistently associated with lower thermometer ratings for these groups, while moderate and independent identifications often predicted more favorable views.
- Age: Younger respondents generally expressed warmer feelings towards these groups, as evidenced by the significance of age variables across most left-sympathetic thermometers.
- Education: Higher education levels were associated with more positive views of some groups, particularly Liberals, Atheists, and Climate Scientists.
- Gender: Women tended to express warmer feelings towards several left-sympathetic groups, notably Transgender People and Feminists.
- Religion: Religious variables such as biblical literalism and evangelical identification were often predictive of cooler attitudes towards these groups.

Right-Sympathetic Groups:

For groups typically associated with right-leaning ideologies (Conservatives, Christian Nationalists, Militia Members, NRA Members, Oil & Gas Industry, Police, and White Supremacists), we noted different patterns:

- Political Ideology: Conservative and Republican identifications strongly predicted warmer feelings towards these groups, while moderate and independent identifications often had the opposite effect.
- Age: The relationship with age was more varied for these groups, suggesting a more complex interplay between age and right-leaning sympathies.
- Rurality: Rural residency was associated with warmer feelings towards some right-sympathetic groups, particularly Militia Members and NRA Members.
- Family Structure: Having children was a significant predictor of warmer attitudes towards several right-sympathetic groups.
- Religion: Religious attendance, biblical literalism, and evangelical identification were positively associated with attitudes towards groups like Christian Nationalists.

Across both categories, we found that race and ethnicity played significant roles in shaping attitudes, though the effects varied depending on the specific group being evaluated. Income levels also emerged as a significant factor for some groups, particularly among right-sympathetic thermometers.

These findings underscore the complex interplay of demographic, ideological, and socioeconomic factors in shaping Americans' perceptions of various groups. The stark contrasts between attitudes towards left-sympathetic and right-sympathetic groups highlight the deep ideological divides in contemporary American society.

Future SPEER surveys will explore how these attitudes evolve over time, as well as investigate the underlying psychological mechanisms driving these perceptions utilizing additional measures such as social capital and moral foundations.

Data and Code Availability

As much as is allowed by the IRB and survey collection agreements, data and code can be made available by contacting speer@ou.edu.

Acknowledgements

We thank the University of Oklahoma, and its College of Earth and Energy for providing start-up funding to the lead author for survey collection. Additionally, we thank Dr. Ann Beutel with the University of Oklahoma's Department of Sociology for immense help in the survey design and collection, and Dr. Christopher R.H. Garneau for insightful feedback.

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