



## **Public Perceptions of Technology Companies and Possible Government Actions**

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Bipartisan initiatives to regulate Big Tech continue to gain traction in Congress amidst allegations that these firms have stifled competition and mismanaged private data. This paper analyzes survey data from 2,048 American adults to examine whether public sentiments about US tech companies align with the dominant narratives in the media and on the Hill. Survey respondents provided their political affiliation and answered questions about their preferences for regulation and views about major tech and non-tech companies. The results demonstrate that a majority of Democrats and pluralities of Republicans and Independents favor increasing regulatory resources and action against the tech industry. The main problems are trust in companies' use of personal data and their market dominance. Among the tech companies included in the survey, Facebook and Twitter are clearly perceived as the leading candidates for a governmental redress of problems.

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# Public Perceptions of Technology Companies and Possible Government Actions

By David Brady and Douglas Rivers

Anyone following the news in the last year would be aware that tech companies have been carefully scrutinized by the press and the US Government. Indeed, they have been so prominent that a polarized Congress is set to act in a bipartisan fashion to reign in some of the tech companies' alleged abuses. In July 2022, the Hoover Institution commissioned YouGov to conduct a poll on technology use, news sources, and attitudes toward six tech companies—Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and Twitter—and a comparison set of other non-tech companies. The survey asked about brand ratings, trust, quality of product, market power, and the need for government regulation. There were 2,048 interviews in the sample, which is representative of US adults.

In this essay the first question we report on is the preference for regulation, and Table 1 shows the results and the specific question asked.

**Table 1. Government Regulation**

“Should the government regulate the following industries more or less than it does now?”

Industry	More	Same	Less
Pharma	50%	39%	11%
Tech	40%	49%	11%
Finance	37%	52%	12%
Airlines	28%	60%	12%
Automotive	21%	63%	17%

The results show that tech garners the second highest preference for regulation by industry with 40 percent of respondents saying that there should be more regulation while only 11 percent say there should be less regulation. The finance industry is not far behind tech with 37 percent of respondents favoring more regulation and 12 percent saying less regulation is needed.

In addition to more regulation, there has been increasing media attention to and government concern over possible antitrust issues; thus, we asked respondents to say whether they favored giving the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Department of Justice (DoJ) more resources to ensure competition and prosecute antitrust cases against technology companies. Table 2 shows the specific question and the responses broken down by respondents' partisan affiliation. A majority of Democrats and pluralities of Republicans and Independents favor giving the government more resources to use against the tech companies. In addition to these results, the ratios of partisans favoring more resources to fewer resources range from 3.1 for Republicans to 4.6 for Independents.

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Combining the results from the government regulation and government resources questions leads to the conclusion that, overall, the public sees a need for more supervision of the technology industry.

**Table 2. Government Resources**

“Would you favor giving the FTC and DoJ more resources to encourage competition and prosecute antitrust cases against technology companies?”

Answer	Democrats	Independents	Republicans	All Respondents
Favor	57%	46%	47%	50%
Oppose	14%	10%	15%	12%
Not sure	29%	44%	38%	38%

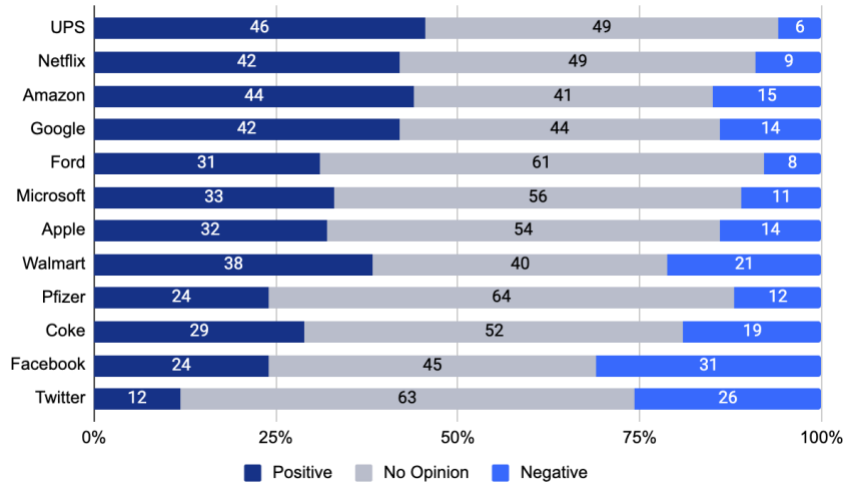
Public perception, in addition to other factors, may also play a role in how much specific companies would need more regulation and supervision. In order to determine how companies were viewed, we asked respondents to rate each company’s brand, the quality of their products, whether they were a monopoly, and, finally, if the respondent trusted the company to protect their personal data. Figures 1–4 show the results of this analysis across twelve companies, some of which are not tech companies. The non-tech companies are included in order to distinguish between general anti-business attitudes and problems specific to tech companies.

Figure 1 shows that ten of the twelve companies have positive ratios of positive to negative impressions. UPS, Netflix, Amazon, and Google all elicited a positive impression from over 40 percent of respondents with only 15 percent or less describing negative impressions. Ford, Microsoft, Apple, and Walmart received over 30 percent positive impressions versus only 8 to 21 percent negative impressions. Pfizer and Coke also had net positive to negative ratios leaving only Twitter and Facebook with negative ratings. Facebook had 24 percent positive and 31 percent negative impressions, while Twitter had only 12 percent positive and 26 percent negative impressions.

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Figure 1. Brand Name

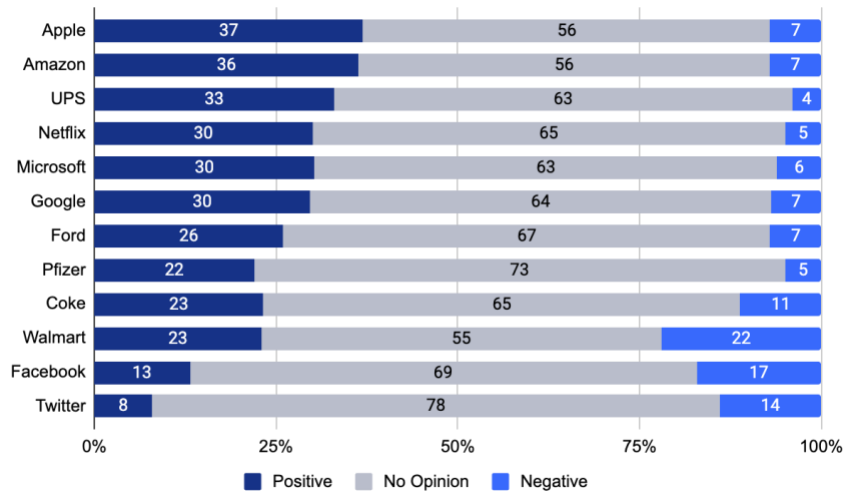
“Overall, do you have a positive or a negative impression of these companies?”



Turning to the perceived quality of products and services, Apple, Amazon, UPS, Netflix, Microsoft, and Google all did very well with over 30 percent of respondents saying that their products and services were high quality compared to 7 percent or less saying that their products were low quality. Interestingly, four non-tech companies—Ford, Pfizer, Coke, and Walmart—all had more positives than negatives but did not rate as highly as Apple, Amazon, Google, and Microsoft. Again, Facebook and Twitter were the only two companies with negative results, i.e., more people rated their products as low quality than high.

Figure 2. Product Quality

“Which of the following companies offer high [or low] quality products and services?”

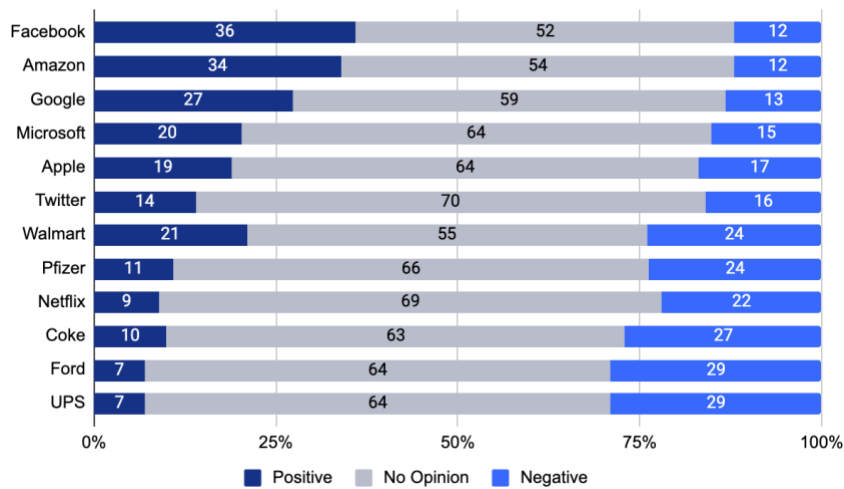


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Turning to the question of which companies were monopolies, higher proportions of survey respondents perceived Facebook, Amazon, Google, Microsoft, and Apple to be monopolies. Facebook, Amazon, and Google had the highest monopoly to non-monopoly ratios while Microsoft and Apple followed with narrower margins. All of the other companies had negative ratios of monopoly to non-monopoly responses; Twitter was the only tech company to fall into this category. It is of some importance to note that most respondents—always over 50 percent—have no opinion on the monopoly question, which gives the tech companies some room to change public opinion regarding their monopoly status.

**Figure 3. Monopoly Status**

“Which, if any, of the following companies is [or is not] a monopoly?”

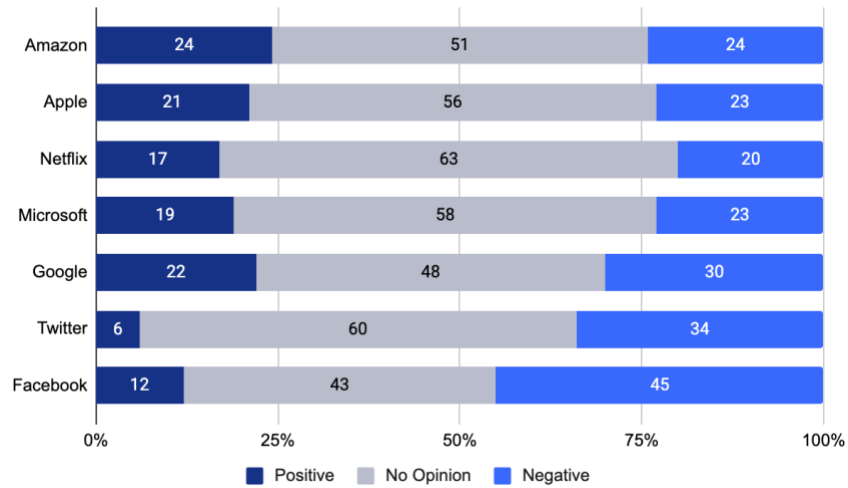


Perhaps the most important question in the survey for tech companies is which companies do respondents trust to protect the personal data of their users. Here, Figure 4 only shows companies that collect personal data. Twitter and Facebook anchor the low end of the scale again with only 6 and 12 percent responding that they trust Twitter and Facebook to protect personal data while 34 and 45 percent respectively do not trust these companies to protect their data. However, the two companies at the bottom of the scale are not alone as the objects of public mistrust. Only Amazon has equal numbers of respondents that trust and do not trust their handling of personal data; every other tech company is underwater on the trust–not trust dimension. Thus, of all the issues in our survey, from product quality through monopoly status, the public perceives technology companies in the worst light when it comes to trust.

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**Figure 4. Trust**

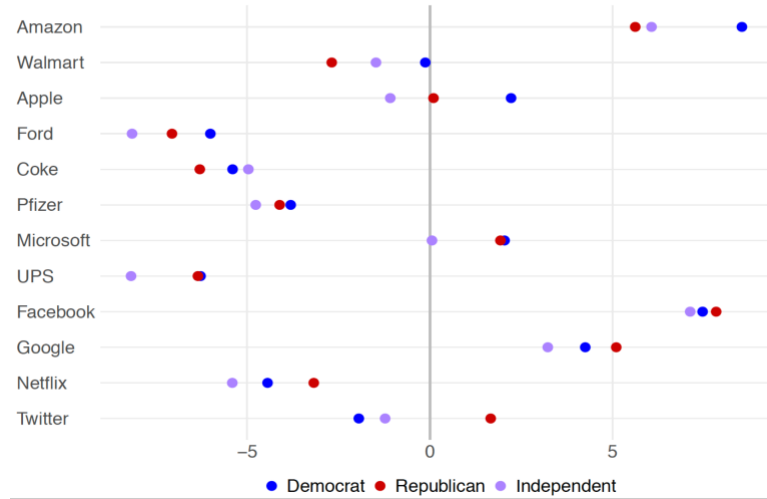
“Which of these companies do you trust [or not trust] to keep protect the personal data of their users?”



Anyone even mildly interested in the tech industry and the effects of possible government actions knows that, as in all things, American partisans have different views on what ills the industry is responsible for and the various potential resolutions by government action. Therefore, we broke down the answers to the monopoly status and trust questions by whether respondents were Democrats, Republicans, or Independents. Figures 5 and 6 show these results.

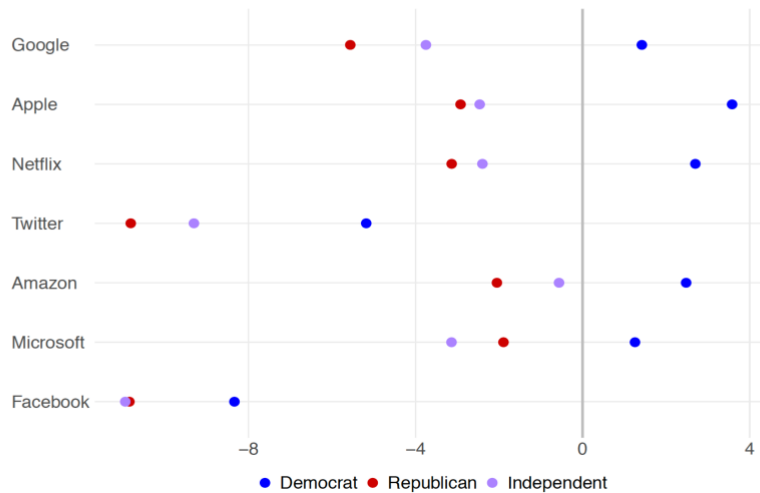
In regard to market power, we show the net difference between those saying a company has a monopoly minus those saying it does not have a monopoly. Amazon, Facebook, and Google received positive (monopoly) scores from Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. Microsoft almost achieved this result but Independents put it at the 50/50, or 0 point, on the chart. Facebook had the least variance in answers as all three partisan groups perceived it as a monopoly.

**Figure 5. Monopoly Status by Partisanship. Net percent saying company “has a monopoly” minus “does not have a monopoly.”**



On the question of partisan differences in trust, Facebook and Twitter were again perceived by partisans of every nature as the least trustworthy companies. On average, Republicans and Independents perceived tech giants Google, Apple, Amazon, and Microsoft as not trustworthy regarding personal data; however, Democratic respondents ranked these companies on the positive side of the trust issue. Overall, trust is the one issue where Americans have the least confidence in tech companies with Facebook and Twitter at the extreme end of the spectrum—both received negative scores across the political divide from Democrats, Republicans, and Independents.

**Figure 6. Trust by Partisanship. Net “trust” minus “not trust” for each company.**



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The final area covered herein is the oft-mentioned public policy solution of breaking up the large technology companies. Table 3 shows the results.

**Table 3. Positions on Company Breakups**

“Do you favor breaking up the following companies into two or smaller companies?”

Company	Should break up	Should not break up	Not sure
Facebook	41%	29%	30%
Amazon	33%	38%	29%
Google	32%	39%	29%
Microsoft	26%	41%	33%
Apple	25%	42%	33%

Respondents were given three choices per company: break them up into two or more smaller companies, do not break them up, and not sure. The company Americans most want to break up is Facebook, where 41 percent favored a breakup with only 29 and 30 percent against a breakup or not sure, respectively. Every other company in the Big Tech category had more respondents saying do not break up than break up. Here, Apple and Microsoft led the way with about a quarter of the sample favoring breaking them up, and over 40 percent of respondents specifically said that they should not be broken up. These results are consistent with our overall results that show public concern for how the government should deal with tech companies.

The main problems leading the tech industry to face increase government pressure are trust in the companies’ use of personal data and their market dominance. Microsoft and Apple appear to be doing better on these issues than the other companies included in this survey while Facebook and Twitter are clearly perceived as the leading candidates for a governmental redress of problems.