

Public Divides on Filibuster; Focus on the Issue is Low

Americans divide about evenly on the question of changing the Senate’s filibuster rule on judicial nominations, with a sharp partisan divide– and fairly low attention to the issue.

Just 47 percent are following the filibuster debate closely, and only 16 percent are following it “very closely,” an ABC News/Washington Post poll finds. That’s lower than the level of attention paid to a variety of other issues in recent years.

Forty-three percent in this survey favor eliminating the filibuster rule, as Senate Republicans propose; about as many, 40 percent, want it kept in place, the Democrats’ position. As befits low attention, a substantial 17 percent have no opinion on it.

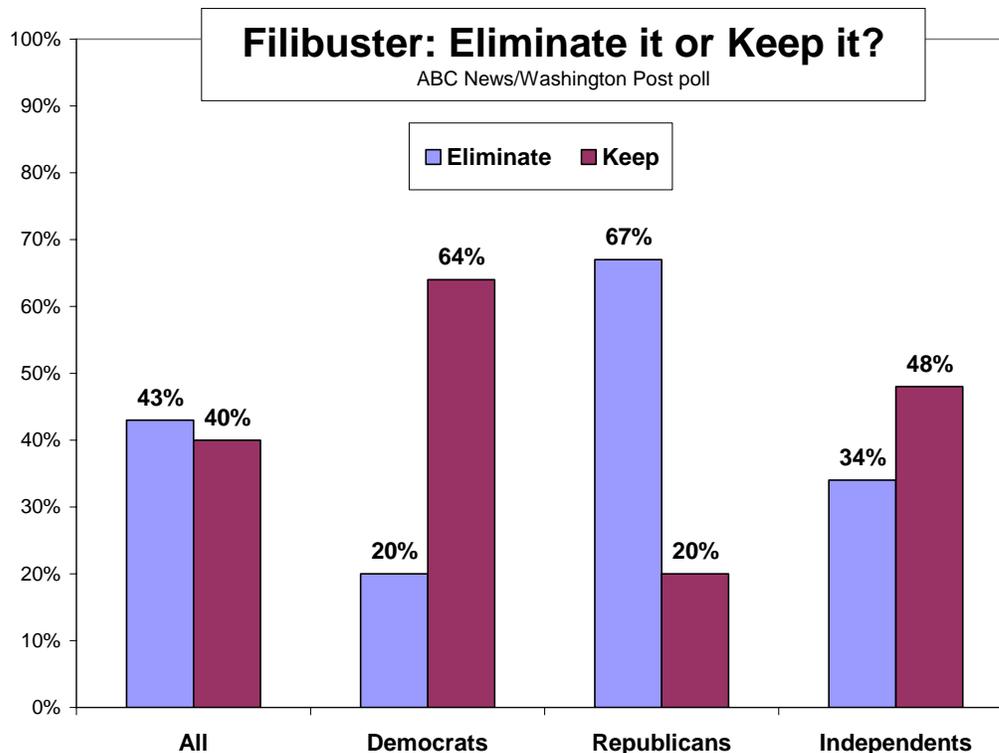
Other polls, asking about the issue in different ways, have found more support for the Democratic position, albeit in widely varying levels. This poll has considerably more Republicans than usual; adjusting for usual party divisions would make for a 40-44 percent pro-con split on the rules change, rather than 43-40 percent – still closely divided.

As noted, the issue is highly partisan: Two-thirds of Republicans want the filibuster rule eliminated, while nearly two-thirds of Democrats support keeping it. Neither side appears to have much advantage in intensity of sentiment: Twenty-two percent feel strongly that the rule should be eliminated, and 27 percent feel strongly that it should stay intact.

There’s also a wide partisan gap in attention, with nearly six in 10 Republicans following the issue closely, compared with about four in 10 Democrats and independents. Attention has risen particularly among Republicans since the Senate debate started last week.

| | %Closely following filibuster news | |
|--------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Before Senate debate started* | After Senate debate started |
| All | 34% | 47 |
| Republicans | 34 | 58 |
| Democrats | 39 | 38 |
| Independents | 30 | 40 |

*Pew Research Center poll



Interest is somewhat higher than it's been for inside-the-beltway topics such as the ethics complaints against House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (36 percent closely following) and campaign finance reform at the beginning of 2002 (37 percent). But it's been far higher on a range of other issues, including, for example, the Enron collapse (64 percent), the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal (75 percent) or the SARS virus (74 percent).

PARTY IDENTIFICATION – Political allegiance can vary from poll to poll. In this survey an unusual number of Americans identify themselves as Republicans – 38 percent, which is seven points higher than the average in the last three ABC/Post polls, and the most on record in ABC/Post polls. Fewer than usual identify themselves as Democrats (28 percent, or seven points fewer than the recent average).

As noted, adjusting the results to recent party ID levels would have 44 percent in favor of keeping the current rule, 40 percent in favor of changing it.

There are other, greater sources of differences in polls, including their timing and their question wording – particularly in a fairly complex, comparatively low-attention issue like this one.

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone May 18-22, 2005, among a random national sample of 1,003 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Jon Cohen.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com at <http://abcnews.com/pollvault.html>.

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Full results follow (*= less than 0.5 percent).

1. How closely have you been following news about the debate in the U.S. Senate over filibuster rules involving the confirmation of federal judges - very closely, somewhat closely, not too closely or not closely at all?

| | -----Closely----- | | | -----Not closely----- | | | No |
|---------|-------------------|------|----------|-----------------------|---------|--------|-----|
| | NET | Very | Somewhat | NET | Not too | At all | op. |
| 5/22/05 | 47 | 16 | 31 | 53 | 15 | 37 | 1 |

2. As you may know, the president nominates federal judges and the Senate votes whether to confirm them. A Senate rule called a filibuster allows a minority of senators to block a final vote on a judicial appointment even if a majority of senators supports the nominee. (Republicans want to eliminate the filibuster rule for judges, saying it's unfair that a minority can block a vote by the full Senate.) (Democrats want to keep the filibuster rule for judges, saying the minority needs a way to block nominees that they strongly oppose.) What about you: Do you prefer to (eliminate) the filibuster rule, or to (keep) the filibuster rule for judicial nominees?

| | -----Eliminate----- | | | -----Keep----- | | | No |
|---------|---------------------|----------|----------|----------------|----------|----------|-------|
| | NET | Strongly | Somewhat | NET | Somewhat | Strongly | opin. |
| 5/22/05 | 43 | 22 | 21 | 40 | 13 | 27 | 17 |

END