



America Decides

How Voters Think About the Economy, Government,
and Poverty Ahead of the 2020 Election

By John Halpin, Karl Agne, and Nisha Jain

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Contents

- 1 Introduction and summary**

- 3 American voters are deeply divided in their evaluations of key national and personal economic indicators**

- 13 A comprehensive examination of voter attitudes about the economy, government, and poverty**

- 22 The narrative arguments that resonate with voters**

- 24 Conclusion**

- 25 About the authors and acknowledgments**

- 26 Endnotes**

Introduction and summary

The 2020 presidential election cycle will be one of the most consequential in U.S. history. Although electoral outcomes often turn on candidate evaluations or social and cultural choices unrelated to public policy, voters in the upcoming year will likely confront a choice between two competing visions of domestic policy that could shape America's economy and society for a generation. Will voters opt to continue President Donald Trump's and congressional Republicans' approach of large tax cuts, deregulation, tariffs, and increased restrictions on health care and other assistance programs? Or will voters choose to go in a different direction, backing the eventual Democratic nominee's and congressional Democrats' plans for increased taxation on the wealthy, greater scrutiny and regulation of corporations, and expanded health care access and income assistance efforts? Alternatively, will a potential split decision by voters lead to ongoing divided government and continued haphazard approaches to domestic and economic policy by leaders built less on clear ideological choices and more on institutional and partisan bargaining?

Answers to these big political questions first require a deeper sense of what voters actually believe about the current state of the nation's economy; their own personal economic situations; and their views on a range of complex issues related to the government and governing, social policy, and anti-poverty efforts. In order to better understand the landscape for policymaking, the Center for American Progress and Health Care for America Now, in partnership with the public opinion firm GBAO, designed a comprehensive national survey to provide analysts, activists, journalists, and practitioners with concrete empirical data about the views of the American electorate ahead of the 2020 election.

Overall, despite low unemployment and other positive macroeconomic indicators, the study finds voters are conflicted in their evaluations of the national economic situation; President Trump's economic stewardship; and in terms of their own personal economic situations and exposure to hardship, with large partisan and demographic divides emerging on many key questions. When it comes to basic attitudes about the economy and public policy—disconnected from the president himself—

the study finds wider consensus around the need for active governmental policies to reduce poverty and expand economic opportunity, address health care access and costs, improve education and infrastructure, curb corporate power, and tax the super wealthy. Voters split more over theoretical debates about fighting inequality, the relative role of the private and public sectors in job creation, regulation, and the effectiveness of government action in addressing social problems. Likewise, Democratic and Republican voters express divergent opinions about the proper level of federal taxation and in terms of their personal willingness to pay more in taxes to expand health care. In addition, the study finds strong support across party lines for economic narratives focused on “taking back our government from wealthy special interests”; making sure government “works for all people”; and finding political leadership committed to “uniting people” around “simple goals we all share.”

To gather the data highlighted in this report, the authors designed and conducted an online survey from October 10–15, 2019, with a national sample of 2,000 registered voters. Survey results are weighted to reflect national Census data on the demographic composition of the electorate. The survey follows a companion qualitative project exploring voters’ attitudes on the economy and poverty-related issues conducted in 2018 with a range of voters in focus groups in Milwaukee and through an online discussion panel of voters conducted over several days.¹ Complete survey results are on file with the authors. The remainder of this report will explore the major findings from the survey across a number of topics related to the national political landscape, views about government and the economy, and specific policy proposals currently in the public debate ahead of the 2020 election.

American voters are deeply divided in their evaluations of key national and personal economic indicators

Asked, “Over the past few years, do you feel the economy in our country has gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same,” 4 in 10 voters say that the economy has gotten better; one-third believe it has gotten worse; and one-quarter of voters feel it has stayed the same. However, these overall figures mask serious partisan and demographic differences in perception about the state of the national economy as well as on personal or family economic well-being.

National economic indicators show a low-unemployment economy, with growth that began under President Obama continuing under President Trump, albeit at a somewhat slower pace. However, these positive macroeconomic trends—under both Obama and Trump—have not produced uniform shifts in public opinion. Voter opinion about the economy is increasingly shaped by partisanship and views of who is in power rather than on particular economic indicators: Republicans largely did not see a positive national economy under Obama while Democrats did; now Democrats largely do not see an improving national economy under Trump while Republicans do.

For example, as seen in Figure 1, 71 percent of self-identified Republicans and 72 percent of Trump voters in 2016 say the economy has gotten better, compared with only 16 percent of self-identified Democrats and 15 percent of people who voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Conversely, more than half of Democrats and Clinton voters say the economy has gotten worse, versus less than 1 in 10 Republicans and Trump voters. Independents break out more evenly, with 29 percent saying the national economy has gotten better; 36 percent saying it has gotten worse; and 30 percent saying it has stayed about the same.

Beyond partisan divisions, the study reveals significant generational, gender, class, and racial and ethnic cleavages on views of the national economy, partially reflecting the differences in the underlying composition of each party. As highlighted in Figure 1, a plurality of Generation Z (born 1997–2012)/Millennial voters (born 1981–1996), 43 percent, believe the country’s economy has gotten worse, while half of Baby Boomer

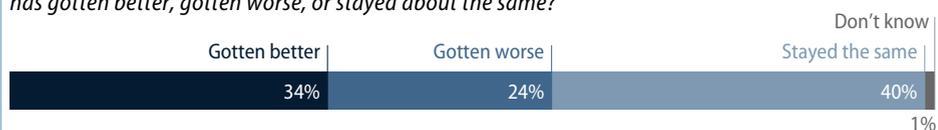
(born 1946–1964)/Silent Generation (born before 1945) voters feel it has gotten better. Generation X (1965–1980) voters split more evenly in their opinions, with 36 percent saying the economy has gotten better and one-third saying it has gotten worse.



FIGURE 2
Bulk of American voters feel that their own economic situation is unchanged

Share of respondents, by category

Q. "Over the past few years, would you say your personal economic situation has gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same?"



Total percentage, by group

	Gotten better	Gotten worse	Stayed the same
Democrat	21	32	45
Independent	30	29	39
Republican	50	13	36
2016 Trump voter	52	13	34
2016 Clinton voter	21	31	47
White	36	22	41
African American	27	33	38
Hispanic	35	28	35
Men	38	21	40
Women	30	28	41
Gen Z/Millennial	36	29	31
Gen X	33	26	40
Baby Boomer/Silent Generation	33	19	47
Household income of less than \$50k	24	33	41
Household income between \$50k and \$100k	37	21	42
Household income of \$100k or more	50	12	37

Source: Center for American Progress and Health Care for America Now national poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted from October 10 to October 15, 2019. The data are on file with authors.

Beyond the generational gaps, the groups with at least a plurality believing the economy has gotten better rather than worse or stayed the same include white voters (46 percent); men overall (45 percent), including half of both white noncollege-educated men and white college-educated men; middle-income voters (42 percent); and those with \$100,000 or more in annual household income (48 percent). Those groups with at least a plurality saying the national economy has gotten worse rather than gotten better or stayed the same include African Americans (54 percent); Hispanics (45 percent); women overall (38 percent); and those earning less than \$50,000 in annual household income (38 percent).

As seen in Figure 2, personal economic evaluations are less divided, with roughly one-third of voters saying their own personal economic situation has gotten better over the past few years; about one-quarter saying their own situation has gotten worse; and 4 in 10 saying their own situation has stayed the same. There are some similar but less muted partisan and demographic divisions on this measure, with Republicans and older voters more likely to say that their own economic situation has gotten better and Democrats and younger voters more likely to report that their own economic situation has gotten worse. Racial/ethnic and educational divisions are less noticeable on this personal economic dimension.

More than half of American voters—especially younger voters and voters of color—report having experienced a serious economic problem in the past year

The survey presented voters with a series of economic hardship measures and asked them whether they or any member of their immediate family “had a serious problem” with this issue in the past year.

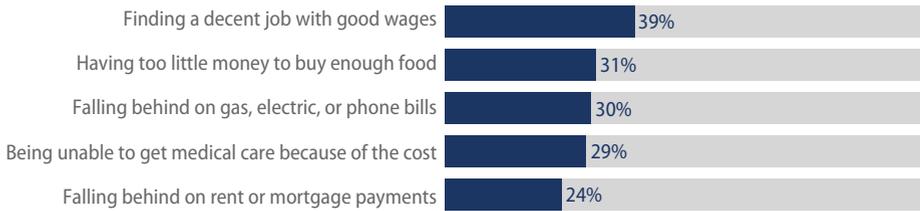
As seen in Figure 3, 39 percent of voters overall report that they or someone in their family has faced a serious problem “finding a decent job with good wages” in the past year—the most critical challenge to emerge. Roughly 3 in 10 voters also report that they or someone in their family has faced serious challenges in the past year with “having too little money to buy enough food”; “falling behind on gas, electric, or phone bills”; or “being unable to get medical care because of the cost.” About one-quarter of voters say they or someone in their immediate family has faced serious problems in the past year with “falling behind on rent or mortgage payments.”

FIGURE 3

More than half of voters faced serious economic problems last year

Share of respondents who reported struggling with the following economic issues

Q. "Have you or a member of your immediate family had a serious problem with this issue over the past year?"



Total percentage of voters experiencing one or more versus none of these problems



Source: Center for American Progress and Health Care for America Now national poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted from October 10 to October 15, 2019. The data are on file with authors.

These new findings are consistent with other research documenting significant economic challenges for many Americans, including the Federal Reserve Board's latest study of U.S. households showing the nearly 4 in 10 Americans report having less than \$400 available to pay for an unexpected expense.² Similarly, the United Way Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed (ALICE) Project finds that 43 percent of American households don't have enough money each month to cover their budgets for housing, food, child care, health care, and transportation.³

Overall, 52 percent of voters report having faced a serious problem in the past year with one or more of the aforementioned scenarios, compared with 48 percent who say that they have experienced none of these challenges. About 30 percent of voters report having had serious problems with three or more of these challenges, and 13 percent report having had serious problems with all five of these economic hardship measures.

Examining partisan and demographic patterns on these questions, the survey finds a majority of Republicans (60 percent) reporting none of these economic challenges in the past year versus 40 percent of Democrats and 44 percent of Independents. Similarly, a majority of white voters (55 percent) reported none of these problems in the past year, compared with large majorities of African American (72 percent)

and Hispanic (67 percent) voters who experienced one or more of these economic problems. One-quarter of African Americans and about one-fifth of Hispanics say that they or someone in their immediate family has experienced all five of these issues in the past year—about twice the rate of white voters.

Generational divides are also stark on these indicators: Three-quarters of Gen Z/Millennial voters and more than half of Gen X voters report serious problems with one or more of these issues, compared with less than one-third of Baby Boomer/Silent Generation voters.

Consistent with these findings, 40 percent of voters overall report that they or a close relative of theirs are currently “receiving government assistance for housing, health care, food, disability, or unemployment”—many of which are programs that the Trump administration has sought to slash after Congress rejected these cuts. One-third of white voters report a personal or family connection to government assistance programs, compared with more than half of African Americans and Hispanics. Among white voters, however, nearly half of noncollege-educated women and one-third of noncollege-educated men report a connection to government programs, compared with less than 3 in 10 of their college-educated cohorts. Likewise, 56 percent of Gen Z/Millennial voters report a personal or family connection to government assistance programs versus 27 percent of Baby Boomer/Silent Generation voters.

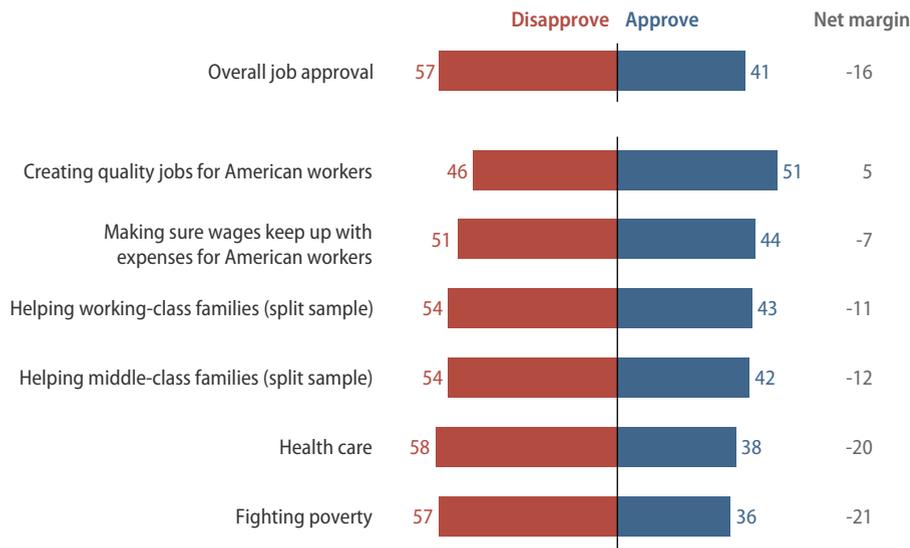
President Trump receives his lowest job approval ratings on issues of health care and poverty

Approximately 4 in 10 voters overall approve of the job Trump is doing as president, with nearly 6 in 10 disapproving of his tenure—a job approval/disapproval net margin of -16 points. As seen in Figure 4, President Trump’s job approval margins range from a low of -21 on “fighting poverty” and -20 on “health care” to -11 on “helping working-class families” and -7 on “making sure wages keep up with expenses for American workers.” Consistent with other data on the economy, President Trump receives slight majority job approval overall from voters on the issue of “creating quality jobs for American workers,” reflecting very high Republican margins (+76) but still net negative approval among Independents (-5) and Democrats (-53).⁴

FIGURE 4

President Donald Trump’s overall job approval and his approval on specific economic measures

Q. "Do you approve or disapprove of the job Donald Trump is doing as President?
Do you approve or disapprove of how Donald Trump is handling [the following issues]?"



Source: Center for American Progress and Health Care for America Now national poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted from October 10 to October 15, 2019. The data are on file with authors.

As expected, huge partisan divides emerge on President Trump’s overall job performance and on specific economic indicators. Republican voters report net positive margins across all of the measures, ranging from +52 points to +76 points. Democrats, in contrast, give the president net negative ratings across all of the measures by a similar but inverted -53-point to -78-point range.

Notably, in the specific areas of health care and fighting poverty, President Trump receives net negative job approval across all generational, educational, income, and racial and ethnic group lines.

A sizeable plurality of voters disapproves of President Trump's 2017 tax cut legislation, and less than one-fifth of voters say their taxes have gone down as a result

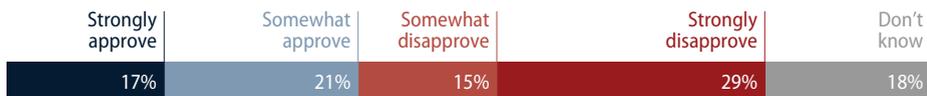
The survey assessed reactions to the president's signature legislative accomplishment on the domestic front, the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017. As highlighted in Figure 5, opinions of the bill are more negative than positive, with 45 percent of voters disapproving of the tax cut bill, 37 percent approving, and nearly one-fifth not offering an opinion. Consistent with other partisan trends, Republicans approve of the 2017 tax law by a 59-point margin, while Democrats disapprove of the law by a 60-point margin. Independents align more with Democrats in their judgment, disapproving of the tax bill by a 20-point margin. Generational differences emerge as well, with Gen Z/Millennial and Gen X voters disapproving of President Trump's tax bill by an 18-point margin and 7-point margin, respectively, and Baby Boomer/Silent Generation voters returning a split verdict.

In terms of the perceived effect of the 2017 tax cut legislation, the plurality of voters, 46 percent, say the taxes they pay have "stayed about the same," while 27 percent report that they've "paid more in taxes." Less than one-fifth of voters report that they've "paid less in taxes" as a result of the bill. Despite the Trump administration's arguments that its signature tax law would produce wide benefits in terms of reduced taxes and higher wages, voters say they have seen no direct benefits.

FIGURE 5
Voters view the 2017 tax bill negatively, with most feeling no impact

Share of respondents, by category

Q. "Do you approve or disapprove of the tax law that was passed by Congress and signed by Donald Trump in 2017?"



Q. "How do you think that tax law has impacted your personal taxes—over the last two years, have you paid more in taxes, paid less in taxes, or have your taxes stayed about the same as a result of the new tax law?"



Source: Center for American Progress and Health Care for America Now national poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted from October 10 to October 15, 2019. The data are on file with authors.

The class dimensions on the perceived effect of the tax cuts are stark. Higher-income voters—those earning more than \$100,000 annually—are more than twice as likely as lower-income voters—those earning less than \$50,000 per year—to say they’ve paid less in taxes due to Trump’s tax plan (27 percent versus 12 percent, respectively).

Health care access and affordability dominate voters’ priorities list for 2020

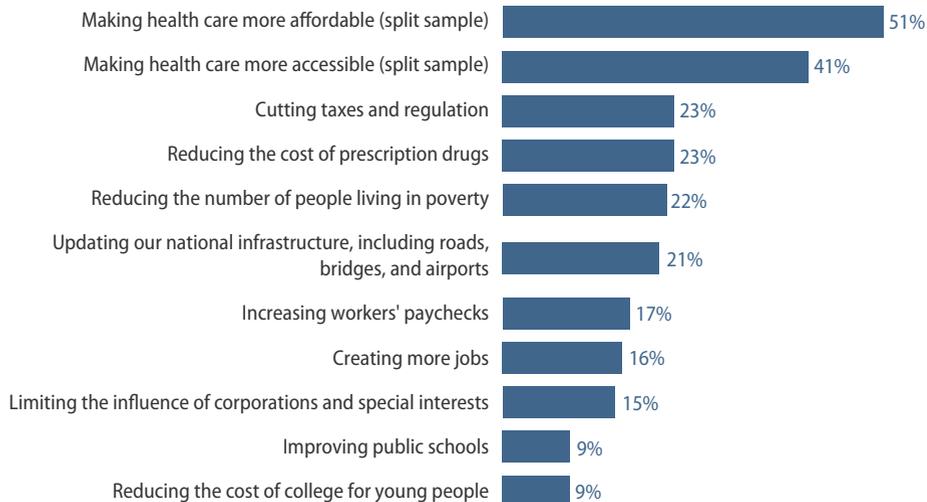
The survey presented voters with a list of specific issue areas and asked them to indicate the two issues that they think are the most important priorities for Congress and the president to work on in the upcoming year. As highlighted in Figure 6, each of the health care items employed in a split sample test are chosen twice as often as other issues in terms of voter priorities: 51 percent of voters choose “making health care more affordable” in one half of the sample, while 41 percent choose “making health care more accessible” as a top priority in the other.

FIGURE 6

Health care is clearly the most important priority for voters

Share of respondents who prioritized the following issues

Q. "Please indicate which two issues you think are most important for the President and Congress to work on in the upcoming year."



Note: Total percentage does not add up to 100 percent given multiple selections.

Source: Center for American Progress and Health Care for America Now national poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted from October 10 to October 15, 2019. The data are on file with authors.

Below health care issues, a mix of different priorities cluster together in terms of voter priorities, with just more than 1 in 5 voters selecting “updating our national infrastructure like roads, bridges, and airports”; “reducing the number of people living in poverty”; “reducing the cost of prescription drugs”; or “cutting taxes and regulation” as one of their two top priorities. “Increasing workers’ paychecks” and “creating more jobs” emerge in the next tier of priorities, with education issues in the final tier.

Health care affordability is the highest-rated priority across party lines, while cutting taxes and regulation emerges slightly above health care access among Republican voters. In addition, creating more jobs and increasing wages are higher priorities for younger voters than older voters, with infrastructure and prescription drug costs rating much higher among older voters than younger ones.

A comprehensive examination of voter attitudes about the economy, government, and poverty

At the center of this study, voters were presented with a series of 20 attitudinal statements focused on a mix of topics related to the economy and government and were asked to rate each on a scale of zero to 10 in terms of how much they disagreed or agreed with each item. Looking across all of the indicators, the survey finds voters expressing broad support for increased government action to deal with a number of concerns, including the need to lower education costs; to increase taxes on the wealthy; to check big corporations; and to ensure all people have basic economic necessities.

Surprisingly, given overall partisan polarization, there were several areas of genuine consensus across party lines. Looking at the results in Table 1, the two statements with majorities of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans expressing agreement are focused on high college costs as well as the need for the wealthy to pay more—and the middle class to pay less—in taxes.

Eighty-eight percent of Democrats, 74 percent of Independents, and 67 percent of Republicans agree with the following statement: “Colleges and universities are too expensive, and state governments should do more to lower costs and help people afford a college education without getting buried in debt.” Even though greater partisan differences likely exist in terms of what federal action on college costs should look like, voters across the spectrum clearly recognize the importance of a college education for young people and want states to do more to alleviate debt burdens on this matter.

The second idea with wide partisan affirmation involves taxation. Nearly 9 in 10 Democrats, three-quarters of Independents, and a majority of Republicans agree with the following idea: “Rich families and corporations should pay a lot more in taxes than they do today, and middle-class families should pay less.” The issue of the relative balance of taxation and concern about what is provided in return for paying taxes is clearly on the minds of many American voters. On top of the desire to tax the wealthy at higher rates, less than 4 in 10 voters across all party lines express agreement with the following statement: “The combined state, local, and federal taxes my household pays seem fair to me for what we get in terms of services and benefits.”

TABLE 1

Voters' attitudes about the economy, government, and poverty

Share of respondents who agreed with statement, by partisanship

Q. "On a scale from 0 to 10, please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement, where 0 means you strongly disagree and 10 means you strongly agree."

	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Colleges and universities are too expensive, and state governments should do more to lower costs and help people afford a college education without getting buried in debt.	78	88	74	67
Rich families and corporations should pay a lot more in taxes than they do today, and middle-class families should pay less.	73	89	74	54
Big corporations have too much power and should be strongly regulated to better serve the public interest.	68	84	72	49
The gap between the rich and the poor has grown too wide, and the government should use its tax and spending powers to reduce this gap and help build a bigger middle class.	67	86	66	45
Ensuring that all people have basic economic security and access to decent living standards is a critical function of government.	66	82	65	48
Too many people in America today face limited work opportunities, and the government should do more to create better jobs and increase wages.	64	81	65	43
Trade wars with nations such as China and Mexico only increase costs for American consumers, which is why we need to reduce tariffs and increase economic cooperation with other nations.	64	80	64	45
Most people who live in poverty are poor mainly due to factors beyond their control, whether it's jobs that don't pay enough to live or the high cost of basic things such as housing, health care, and education.	61	77	59	43
Government programs for things such as nutrition and housing assistance work well and are worth paying for to help those in need.	61	75	57	47
Creating quality jobs and training workers for those jobs are roles that should be left to private businesses and markets without government interference.	53	40	49	69
International trade and globalization have been good for American workers.	53	55	49	51
Federal income taxes are too high and should be cut across the board, regardless of income.	52	44	49	62
Government anti-poverty programs create dependency and discourage people from seeking work.	52	33	52	74
There are enough good jobs with decent pay and benefits available where I live.	48	38	42	63
Schools in my area are doing a good job of preparing young people for the kinds of jobs that are available in our area.	47	47	38	51
Inequality is a natural result of a free market economy, and trying to reduce it through government regulations will only make everyone less well-off.	45	35	43	58
I'm willing to pay more in taxes to help provide more affordable health care.	43	59	42	26
People get stuck in poverty primarily because they make bad decisions or lack the ambition to do better in life.	42	29	36	60
The combined state, local, and federal taxes my household pays seem fair to me for what we get in terms of services and benefits.	37	39	28	37
Our national debt is way too high, and we need to cut government spending on the biggest programs, such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.	36	30	35	43

Note: Respondents who answered 6 or above were considered to have agreed with the statement, based on the 0 to 10 scale.

Source: Center for American Progress and Health Care for America Now national poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted from October 10 to October 15, 2019. The data are on file with authors.

Issues regarding the power of big corporations and the need for government to ensure that all people have basic necessities also generate fairly broad agreement.

For example, 84 percent of Democrats, 72 percent of Independents, and nearly half of Republicans agree that “big corporations have too much power and should be strongly regulated to better serve the public interest.” Further areas related to government regulation receive more divided opinions, however, as Republican voters score lower than others on the issue of regulation and inequality. Nearly 6 in 10 Republicans agree with the idea that “inequality is a natural result of a free market economy, and trying to reduce it through government regulations only will make everyone less well off,” compared with 43 percent of Independents and 35 percent of Democrats. Checking big corporate power clearly unifies American voters more than the idea of reducing inequality.

On the public expenditures front, more than 8 in 10 Democrats, nearly two-thirds of Independents, and almost half of Republicans agree with the basic principle that “ensuring that all people have basic economic security and access to decent living standards is a critical function of government.”

As will be seen later in the report, voters differ on other aspects of social programs—particularly related to perceptions of potential abuse and dependency—but they are fairly aligned on the fundamental idea that government should play a role in ensuring basic living standards for all people.

Majorities of voters across party lines are aligned in opposition to cuts to Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid

Despite rising federal budget deficits under President Trump, American voters are in basic agreement that steps to cut important federal health and retirement programs to reduce deficits should not be taken. Only 30 percent of Democrats, 35 percent of Independents, and 43 percent of Republicans agree with the idea that “our national debt is way too high, and we need to cut government spending on the biggest programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.”

Most voters across demographic lines disagree with cuts to federal health and retirement programs, but the survey highlights some generational divides. Although a majority of Gen Z/Millennial voters disagree with the idea of cutting spending on these programs, support among the youngest voters is noticeably higher than it is among Baby Boomer/Silent Generation voters (46 percent versus 28 percent, respectively).

Nearly two-thirds of voters prefer funding programs to help low-income families get the basics rather than cutting these programs to address large deficits

In a separate test on deficits and program cuts pitting two competing ideas against one another, the survey finds strong support for maintaining public spending on programs that provide low-income families with access to basic living standards. Sixty-four percent of voters overall say the following statement comes closer to their view: “It is more important to me to help provide basic living standards like housing, nutrition, and health care for those struggling to make ends meet.” Conversely, only 29 percent of voters favor the alternative idea: “It is more important to me to address large budget deficits by reducing overall spending on government assistance programs for low-income people.”

As will be shown, the study also finds strong support for not just protecting existing health care programs for Americans but also for expanding public health insurance options to more people who may be uninsured without employer-provided health care.

Voters are split on the perceived effect of global trade on workers but oppose trade wars as a solution

Two of the statements in the list of 20 items deal with issues of trade and tariffs. Regardless of party affiliation, voters are split on the following argument: “International trade and globalization have been good for American workers.” A slight majority of Democrats, 55 percent, agree with this idea, as do 49 percent of Independents and 51 percent of Republicans—basically a draw. Interestingly, no major differences emerge along demographic and class lines; voters genuinely are split on the overall effect of trade and globalization.

However, the current administration’s approach to dealing with trade and globalization is not well supported by most of the voting public. Eighty percent of Democrats and 64 percent of Independents agree with the following statement: “Trade wars with nations such as China and Mexico only increase costs for American consumers, which is why we need to reduce tariffs and increase economic cooperation with other nations.” Although Republicans are clearly more aligned with President Trump’s approach than are Democrats, 45 percent of these Republican voters similarly agree that trade wars have negative consequences that should be avoided.

Big partisan differences exist on issues related to the role of government versus the private sector in job creation and training; personal willingness to pay more for health care; and the causes of poverty

Rounding out the exploration of the attitudinal statements, the study finds some critical areas of economic policy that produce more significant partisan differences.

For example, more than 6 in 10 Republicans agree that “there are enough good jobs with decent pay where I live,” compared with less than 4 in 10 Democrats. Likewise, more than 6 in 10 Republicans—but only 4 in 10 Democrats—agree with the notion that “creating quality jobs and training workers for those jobs are roles that should be left to private businesses and markets without government interference.” In contrast, more than 8 in 10 Democrats, and only around 4 in 10 Republicans, agree with the following statement on increased government role in job creation: “Too many people in America today face limited work opportunities, and the government should do more to create better jobs and increase wages.”

Perhaps reflecting different interpretations of what health care affordability means to voters, or divergent views about redistribution to others, there is wide partisan disagreement in voters’ willingness to personally pay more for health care. Nearly 6 in 10 Democrats agree with the following statement: “I’m willing to pay more in taxes to help provide more affordable health care,” versus roughly one-quarter of Republicans and about 4 in 10 Independents.

Partisan voters also diverge over ideas related to both the causes of poverty and the effects of anti-poverty measures. For example, twice as many Republicans as Democrats (60 percent and 29 percent, respectively) agree with the following statement: “People get stuck in poverty primarily because they make bad decisions or lack the ambition to do better in life.” Conversely, more than three-quarters of Democrats—but only 4 in 10 Republicans—agree that “most people who live in poverty are poor mainly due to factors beyond their control, whether it’s jobs that don’t pay enough to live or the high cost of basic things like housing, health care, and education.”

TABLE 2

Voters strongly support specific measures to ensure economic fairness, opportunity, and security

Share of respondents who supported policy idea, by partisanship

Q. "For each one, please indicate whether you would support or oppose this particular policy idea."

	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Allow people who don't get health coverage through their employer to buy health insurance from a public plan.	81	85	75	77
Penalize pharmaceutical companies if the prices of their prescription drugs increase faster than overall inflation. (split sample)	81	86	76	77
Place a maximum out-of-pocket limit on the cost of prescription drugs for Medicare beneficiaries. (split sample)	79	82	77	77
Create good jobs and make American businesses more competitive by investing \$1 trillion in our nation's infrastructure, including roads, bridges, railroads, broadband, and expanded production of clean energy.	78	83	72	76
Reduce poverty by ensuring that all families have access to basic living standards such as health care, food, and housing if their wages are too low or they can't make ends meet. (split sample)	72	86	72	57
Reduce inequality in our country by creating a 2 percent "wealth tax" on Americans with fortunes of more than \$50 million and a 3 percent "wealth tax" on those with fortunes of more than \$1 billion. (split sample)	70	86	63	55
Increase the child tax credit and provide an extra boost for families with children under the age of 5 to help them make necessary investments during the critical early years of life.	65	71	64	57
Ensure those who rely on food assistance benefits can feed their families for the entire month by increasing benefits to account for how much working families pay for food, and by linking benefits to the cost of living for those in areas with higher costs for rent, utilities, and other basic necessities.	62	77	58	45
Increase the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour, make sure it rises with inflation, and extend the minimum wage to include groups such as tipped workers and workers with disabilities, who are currently allowed to be paid less than the full minimum wage.	61	79	60	42
Increase the earned income tax credit for workers without dependent children and allow workers to access up to \$500 of their tax refund ahead of tax season so they don't have to go into debt just to make ends meet.	60	68	58	52

Source: Center for American Progress and Health Care for America Now national poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted from October 10 to October 15, 2019. The data are on file with authors.

Strong majorities of voters across party lines back specific policy proposals to expand health care, curb prescription drug costs, invest in infrastructure, and implement a wealth tax

Despite some partisan differences in theoretical debates about government and the economy, the study finds broad agreement among all types of voters for a range of concrete steps to make the tax code more progressive and to invest in specific programs to expand economic security and opportunity.

Table 2 highlights the full list of tested policy proposals. As seen, majorities of voters across partisan lines support all but two of these specific ideas for increasing economic fairness, opportunity, and security in American society.

Health care proposals dominate the top tier of the list, with overwhelming majority support for providing a public option for health care for the uninsured and for curbing prescription drug costs. Eighty-five percent of Democrats and roughly three-quarters of both Independents and Republicans support a proposal to “allow people who don’t get health coverage through their employer to buy health insurance from a public plan.” Almost exact proportions of each partisan bloc also support efforts to either “place a maximum out-of-pocket limit on the cost of prescription drugs for Medicare beneficiaries” or to “penalize pharmaceutical companies if the prices of their prescription drugs increase faster than inflation.”

Beyond health-care-related issues, strong consensus also emerges on investing in the foundations of a good economy. Eighty-three percent of Democrats, 72 percent of Independents, and 76 percent of Republicans back a specific plan to “create more jobs and make American businesses more competitive by investing \$1 trillion in our nation’s infrastructure, including roads, bridges, railroads, broadband, and expanded production of clean energy.”

As noted earlier, voters clearly prefer new policies that increase taxation on the very wealthy. Consistent with this broad sentiment, the study finds widespread agreement with a specific proposal to “reduce inequality in our country by creating a 2 percent ‘wealth tax’ on Americans with fortunes over \$50 million and 3 percent ‘wealth tax’ on fortunes worth more than \$1 billion.” Nearly 9 in 10 Democrats, 6 in 10 Independents, and more than half of Republicans support this wealth tax proposal.

Large majorities across partisan lines support federal government action to help reduce poverty and ensure all people have access to basic economic necessities

On the anti-poverty front, strong majorities of voters—including 9 in 10 Democrats, 7 in 10 Independents, and 6 in 10 Republicans—support a specific commitment to “reduce poverty by ensuring that all families have access to basic living standards like health care, food, and housing if their wages are too low or they can’t make ends meet.”

Majorities across party lines also back concrete proposals to “increase the child tax credit and provide an extra boost for families with children under the age of 5 to help them make necessary investments during the critical early years of life” and to “increase the earned income tax credit for workers without dependent children and allow workers to access up to \$500 of their tax refund ahead of tax season so they don’t have to go into debt to make ends meet.”

A strong majority of voters also backs increasing the minimum wage, indexing it to inflation, and expanding it to more people.

More than 6 in 10 voters back steps to “increase the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour, make sure it rises with inflation, and extend the minimum wage to include groups like tipped workers and workers with disabilities, who are currently allowed to be paid less than the full minimum wage.” Nearly 8 in 10 Democrats, 6 in 10 Independents, and more than 4 in 10 Republicans back this proposal for increasing and expanding the minimum wage.

Voters oppose cuts to federal nutrition assistance programs—including to school lunches—and instead want political leaders to focus on creating better jobs with higher wages

The study presented voters with two competing statements about potential cuts and restrictions on federal nutrition programs and asked which one comes closer to their own view.

Sixty-one percent of voters prefer a course of action described as follows: “Taking food away from families struggling to make ends meet, including over half a million hungry children, only makes it harder for them to succeed in school or get back on their feet. Instead, Congress should focus on policies that help create jobs and boost wages so their families can get ahead.” In contrast, only one-third of voters prefer the

alternative notion that “we need to tighten eligibility requirements to access nutrition assistance benefits, including school lunches, in order to promote self-sufficiency, prevent abuse and dependency among low-income people, and to ensure that benefits are going to those truly in need.”

Three-quarters of Democrats, 6 in 10 Independents, and nearly half of Republicans want to preserve federal nutrition programs and focus on jobs and wages rather than restrictions in addressing poverty.

Beyond the issue of opposing cuts, the study finds strong support for a proposal to expand these programs. Sixty-two percent of voters support an effort to “ensure those who rely on food assistance benefits can feed their families for the entire month by increasing benefits to account for how much working families pay for food and by linking benefits to the cost of living for those in areas with higher costs for rent, utilities, and other basic necessities.”

The narrative arguments that resonate with voters

Voters across party lines embrace narrative arguments focused on “taking back our government from wealthy special interests”; making sure that government “works for all of us”; and finding political leadership that seeks to “unite people” around “simple goals we all share.”

Beyond exploration of basic values and attitudes and support for specific policies, the study examined voter reactions to a number of common narrative themes about government and the economy and asked voters to rate each one on a scale of zero to 10 in terms of how convincing the statement is to them personally.

The two highest-rated thematic narratives focus on breaking the link between special interests and government and making sure that government benefits all people—not just the rich and powerful.

Nine in 10 Democrats, 8 in 10 Independents, and 6 in 10 Republicans find the following narrative argument convincing:

We need to take back our government from wealthy special interests and make sure it works for all Americans. Government at its best should ensure everyone has an equal opportunity to get ahead in life and has access to affordable health care, good schools, and a secure retirement. Government should work for everyone, not just the rich and powerful.

Roughly similar proportions of each partisan group find a second related argument convincing, in line with the above sentiments:

The question we really need to answer is not whether government is too big or too small but rather, “Who does the government work for and benefit?” Does it benefit working people, or does it benefit the wealthy? America will be much stronger and more cohesive when we ensure that our government works for all of us and not just the richest few.

Obviously, these narrative frameworks do not include some of the substantive policy arguments assessed in other parts of the study and would need to be fleshed out in practice. But it is instructive to see basic alignment across different types of voters on the importance of breaking special-interest influence over government and ensuring that government is focused on the needs of regular voters and not just the wealthy.

A third narrative also emerges as a convincing framework for capturing voter attention and advancing arguments for a different approach to politics. Eighty-three percent of Democrats and about 7 in 10 Independents and Republicans find the following argument convincing:

The politicians running our country today are purposefully pitting Americans against one another based on race and ethnicity. They want us to fight with each other over cultural differences as they pursue policies that transfer wealth and power to the rich and Wall Street. Instead, we need a government that seeks to unite people—regardless of where they live, what they look like, or how much money they have—around simple goals we all share, like basic economic security for our families and a chance to get ahead in life.

Again, the focus of this narrative framework needs more concrete substance to work in practice, but it is clear that voters across the board are fed up with purposefully created cultural divisions in politics and desire more unity around common economic values and goals.

Conclusion

This study provides interesting and useful empirical evidence about voters' views on a range of complex economic and governmental issues. Although there are some contradictory trends in public opinion and clear partisan divisions on a number of indicators, it is important to recognize the many areas of commonality among voters ahead of the 2020 election.

Voters clearly desire their government to be less focused on the wishes of the wealthy and big corporate interests and more focused on creating the conditions for national prosperity and ensuring greater economic opportunity and security for middle- and working-class families. To that end, voters want political leaders to make health care more affordable and accessible. They want more tax fairness and more checks on corporate power. They want to ensure everyone has access to basic necessities and strongly oppose cuts to programs such as nutrition assistance that help families make ends meet. And they want their government and political leaders to put regular voters' economic needs above the interests of the wealthiest and most powerful.

As the nation prepares for what will certainly be a fiercely contested presidential election, political leaders across the board should understand that the above concerns are the foundations for economic policy that most voters want to see them pursue.

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Endnotes

- 1 Three focus groups were held in Milwaukee with white college-educated women who were Independents or weak partisan identifiers; African Americans of mixed gender; and white noncollege-educated men who were Independents or weak partisan identifiers. The online QualBoard was conducted November 13–15, 2018, with 29 participants, including 22 self-identified moderates; three self-identified liberals; and four self-identified conservatives.
- 2 Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve, “Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households” (Washington: 2019), available at <https://www.federalreserve.gov/consumerscommunities/shed.htm>.
- 3 Tami Luhby, “Almost half of US families can’t afford basics like rent and food,” CNN Business, May 18, 2018, available at <https://money.cnn.com/2018/05/17/news/economy/us-middle-class-basics-study/index.html>.
- 4 See RealClearPolitics, “President Trump Job Approval - Economy,” available at https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president_trump_job_approval_economy-6182.html (last accessed November 2019).

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