



Americans Want the Federal Government To Help People in Need

New Polling Illustrates Voters' Opinions on Economic Policies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction and summary

The United States recently reached a grim milestone: 500,000 Americans dead from COVID-19.¹ The country continues to claw its way out of the public health and economic crisis, which has hit low-income and other vulnerable populations particularly hard. As Congress and the Biden administration debate additional legislation to address the immediate economic downturn, as well as longer-term policies for national recovery, they should consider how best to assist those most in need. To that end, what do American voters think about various solutions for improving the U.S. economy, fighting poverty, and shoring up the position of the nation's families? How are workers and their families doing financially during the pandemic? Do voters favor substantial government interventions to address unemployment, low wages, and high household costs? Or are they skeptical of these actions? And what are voters' main priorities for action?

To answer these and other questions, the Center for American Progress and GBAO Strategies developed a large national poll of 2,000 registered voters, conducted online from February 2 to February 7, 2021. The overall sample was weighted to reflect nationally representative demographic and geographic targets based on census and other voting data. The full results of the poll, along with a slide presentation of the data, are available on the CAP website.²

The current research marks the continuation of CAP and GBAO's ongoing examination of public attitudes on poverty dating back to 2013. The new survey confirms many of the major findings of this earlier work, highlighting broad-based support across partisan lines for government actions that ensure that all people have access to good jobs and are able to meet basic needs such as housing, education, and health care. Although worries about dependency, fraud, and abuse of such assistance are prevalent among a small sector of voters, these concerns do not outweigh the overall desire for ongoing government assistance for those in need.

Major findings on U.S. economic policies and conditions facing American voters

The results of this latest survey show that American voters want the government to play a strong role in securing basic living standards for all people. Specifically, the majority of voters back a range of proposals to increase the economic security of and opportunities for low-income families. This section presents some of the specific findings.

On the responsibility of government to meet basic human rights and provide support

Strong majorities of voters across party lines view access to clean water, a quality public education, adequate food, and housing as basic human rights that should be secured by the federal government. The survey presented respondents with a series of items and asked them to rate them on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 means that item represents a basic human right that should be guaranteed to everyone and 0 means that government should not be involved and that the provision of the item should be left completely to the free market.

At the top of the list, 85 percent of voters overall rated “access to clean water” in the 6 to 10 range, believing it to be a basic right that government should ensure in some capacity. Seventy-nine percent of voters overall similarly rated “a quality public education through high school” as a basic right, and more than 6 in 10 voters overall also included “access to adequate, nutritional food” and “access to safe, affordable housing” on the list of basic rights. Majorities across party lines view providing for these essential needs as a core function of government.

“Affordable, quality child care” falls further down the list, although with majority support overall for government taking a role in providing it (60 percent). Meanwhile, “broadband internet access” is seen as a basic human right by a majority of Democrats only (65 percent).

More than 7 in 10 voters across party lines support major infrastructure investments, guaranteed sick days for employees, paid family and medical leave, and increases to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for low-income families. The study presented a list of proposed ideas for improving the economy and asked participants whether they supported or opposed each item. (see Table 1) The top tier of proposals, supported by more than 7 in 10 voters overall, includes the following items presented to respondents in the study:

- Create good jobs and make American businesses more competitive by investing \$1 trillion in the nation’s infrastructure, including roads, bridges, railroads, broadband, and expanded production of clean energy. (Supported by 79 percent of voters in total, including 88 percent of Democrats, 77 percent of independents, and 72 percent of Republicans)
- Require all employers to provide workers with guaranteed paid time off if they are sick. (Supported by 74 percent of voters in total, including 84 percent of Democrats, 74 percent of independents, and 63 percent of Republicans)
- Increase the level of food assistance provided via SNAP—formerly known as food stamps—to ensure that those who need help keeping food on the table do not run out of benefits and adequate food before the month is over. (Supported by 72 percent of voters in total, including 86 percent of Democrats, 71 percent of independents, and 57 percent of Republicans)
- Create a national paid family and medical leave plan that would provide workers part of their wages when they need time off for the birth of a child or to care for a sick or elderly family member. (Supported by 71 percent of voters in total, including 86 percent of Democrats, 68 percent of independents, and 58 percent of Republicans)

TABLE 1

Voters across party lines strongly support government assistance programs for low-income people

Percentage of respondents supporting policy, by category

Q. Please indicate whether you support or oppose this particular policy idea.

	Total support	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
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.	79	88	77	72
Require all employers to provide workers with guaranteed paid time off if they are sick.	74	84	74	63
Increase the level of food assistance provided via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps) to ensure that those who need help keeping food on the table don't run out of benefits and adequate food before the month is over.	72	86	71	57
Create a national paid family and medical leave plan that would provide workers part of their wages when they need time off for the birth of a child or to care for a sick or elderly family member.	71	86	68	58
Increase direct rental and mortgage payment relief for families during crises such as the current coronavirus pandemic.	69	80	69	57
Put a moratorium on all housing evictions for the duration of crises such as the current coronavirus pandemic.	69	80	66	60
During crises such as the current coronavirus pandemic, provide direct housing payments to landlords or banks to prevent evictions or penalties for low-income families.	68	83	65	56
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	76	64	53
During crises such as the current coronavirus pandemic, automatically increase weekly unemployment payments to help meet basic living costs and extend unemployment insurance for the duration of the crisis rather than to a specific date not tied to improved conditions.	65	82	62	48
Expand the earned income tax credit, the governmental income support program for working people, to include up to \$1,500 per year for low-income people without children.	62	76	62	47
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.	59	84	56	35
Provide direct monthly payments to middle-class families up to \$3,000 per year for single people earning \$50,000 per year or less, and up to \$6,000 annually for married people earning \$100,000 per year or less.	54	70	52	39

Source: Center for American Progress/GBAO Strategies nationally representative online poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted February 2–7, 2021. See John Halpin, Karl Agne, and Nisha Jain, "Americans Want the Federal Government To Help People in Need" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2021), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=496744>.

More than 6 in 10 voters across party lines also support increased housing assistance, a moratorium on evictions during the pandemic, and an expansion of the child tax credit (CTC). Exploring other issues to help working people and families facing economic hardships, majorities across party lines also back the following proposals presented in the survey, several of which focus on stronger protections during economic crises:

- Increase direct rental and mortgage payment relief for families during crises such as the current coronavirus pandemic. (Supported by 69 percent of voters in total, including 80 percent of Democrats, 69 percent of independents, and 57 percent of Republicans)
- Put a moratorium on all housing evictions for the duration of crises such as the current coronavirus pandemic. (Supported by 69 percent of voters in total, including 80 percent of Democrats, 66 percent of independents, and 60 percent of Republicans)
- During crises such as the current coronavirus pandemic, provide direct housing payments to landlords or banks to prevent evictions or penalties for low-income families. (Supported by 68 percent of voters in total, including 83 percent of Democrats, 65 percent of independents, and 56 percent of Republicans)
- Increase the CTC 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. (Supported by 65 percent of voters in total, including 76 percent of Democrats, 64 percent of independents, and 53 percent of Republicans)

Majorities of American voters back an expansion of the earned income tax credit (EITC), automatic enhancements of unemployment insurance, an increase in the minimum wage, and new monthly payments to working families. Rounding out the exploration of assistance measures, the study finds majorities of voters overall—including majorities of both Democrats and independents but less than half of Republicans—backing a range of additional measures, presented in the survey, to improve the financial situation of Americans, including:

- During crises such as the current coronavirus pandemic, automatically increase weekly unemployment payments to help meet basic living costs and extend unemployment insurance for the duration of the crisis rather than to a specific date not tied to improved conditions. (Supported by 65 percent of voters in total, including 82 percent of Democrats, 62 percent of independents, and 48 percent of Republicans)
- Expand the EITC, the governmental income support program for working people, to include up to \$1,500 per year for low-income people without children. (Supported by 62 percent of voters in total, including 76 percent of Democrats, 62 percent of independents, and 47 percent of Republicans)

- 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. (Supported by 59 percent of voters in total, including 84 percent of Democrats, 56 percent of independents, and 35 percent of Republicans)
- Provide direct monthly payments to middle-class families—up to \$3,000 annually for single people earning \$50,000 or less per year and up to \$6,000 annually for married people earning \$100,000 or less per year. (Supported by 54 percent of voters in total, including 70 percent of Democrats, 52 percent of independents, and 39 percent of Republicans)

On individual economic situations in the wake of COVID-19

Roughly one-quarter of American voters say that their personal economic situation is worse than it was before the pandemic, with more than one-third reporting that their family's income is failing to keep up with the cost of living. Given ongoing employment and income issues throughout the past year of lockdowns and restrictions due to COVID-19, the study finds many Americans—particularly women and younger people—facing acute economic problems.

Asked to compare their current personal economic situation to their situation before the pandemic, 54 percent of voters overall rate their current situation as about the same as before, while one-fifth say it is better than before and 26 percent say it is worse now.

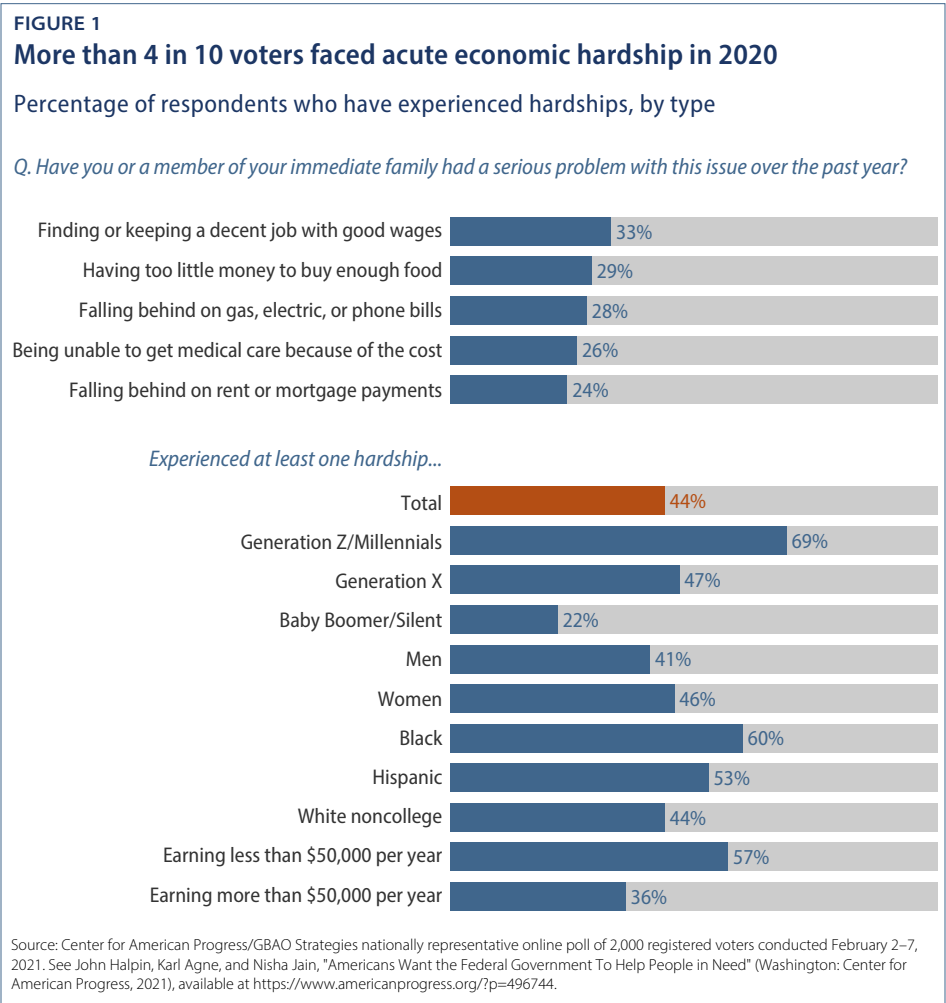
Women are more likely than men to say that their personal economic situation is worse than it was before the pandemic—28 percent versus 23 percent, respectively. More than 3 in 10 voters earning less than \$50,000 annually also say that their economic situation is worse today, compared with 23 percent of those earning more than \$50,000. One-quarter of both Black and Hispanic voters report a worse situation, as do 28 percent of white non-college-educated voters.

The largest differences emerge when looking at age. One-third of Generation Z/Millennial voters say that their economic situation is worse now than it was before the pandemic, compared with about one-quarter of Generation X voters and one-fifth of Baby Boomer/Silent Generation voters.³

Consistent with these overall assessments, 35 percent of voters in total say that their income is falling behind the cost of living, while only 11 percent say that their income is growing faster than the cost of living. Meanwhile, 55 percent overall say that their income is staying even with rising costs. Worries about incomes not keeping up with costs are higher than average among women (38 percent) and white non-college-educated voters (40 percent).

More than 4 in 10 American voters experienced some acute economic hardship in the past year. The study presented participants with a list of five economic challenges and asked them whether they or a member of their immediate family had experienced each one in the past year.

Overall, 44 percent of voters report experiencing at least one of the five items, with 28 percent experiencing three or more challenges and 13 percent of voters experiencing all five.



At the top of the list—experienced by one-third of voters—was difficulty finding a decent job with good wages. Slightly less than 3 in 10 voters also say that, in the past year, they experienced challenges affording food or paying their gas, electric, or phone bills. Around one-quarter of voters say that they were unable to get medical care because of the costs or fell behind on rent or mortgage payments. (see Figure 1)

Looking at demographic patterns, experiences with at least one of these hardships were higher than average among women (46 percent), those earning less than \$50,000 annually (57 percent), and Black and Hispanic voters (60 percent and 53 percent, respectively).

Again, challenges were most pronounced among younger voters: Nearly 7 in 10 Generation Z/Millennial voters reported experiencing at least one of these challenges in the past year, compared with 47 percent of Generation X voters and only 22 percent of Baby Boomer/Silent Generation voters.

In a follow-up question, 51 percent of voters said that the pandemic was the primary cause of their personal economic pressures, while 43 percent said they faced similar pressures prior to the pandemic. Nearly 6 in 10 respondents said that the pandemic was the primary cause of economic troubles for their family members.

Notably, given these findings, nearly 4 in 10 voters—and more than half of Generation Z/Millennial voters—report that they or a member of their extended family are currently receiving “government assistance for housing, health care, food, disability, or unemployment.”

On which groups are struggling the most during the COVID-19 pandemic

A majority of American voters believe that those living in poverty have been more affected by the coronavirus pandemic than others—due primarily to the increased exposure working front-line jobs, the lack of health care, and fewer resources to handle economic precarity. Fifty-five percent of voters overall say that those living in poverty have been more affected by the pandemic than others; 29 percent say that the impact has been the same across communities; and only 5 percent say that poor people have been less affected.

More than two-thirds of Democrats believe that those in poverty have been more affected by the pandemic than others, as do 54 percent of independents and 45 percent of Republicans.

Presented with data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showing that those in poverty have contracted the coronavirus and died at higher rates than the rest of the U.S. population, the study then asked respondents to choose from a list of potential options of the two factors that best explain this scenario. At the top of the list, across partisan lines, 41 percent of voters overall selected the factor that those living in poverty “often work frontline jobs and jobs without work-from-home options increasing risk of exposure to the virus” as the best explanation for the disproportionate impact.

About 3 in 10 voters also selected “they have less access to quality health care” or “they often struggle to make ends meet and the loss of income has a bigger impact on those who do not have savings.” Voters are much less likely to attribute the coronavirus’s disproportionate impact on those in poverty to personal situations such as not taking the warnings seriously or the overrepresentation of poor people in prison populations.

A poverty framing of the pandemic’s impact drives a greater desire among voters for major changes, compared with a racial and ethnic framing. The study employed a split-sample experiment to assess this same presentation of CDC data about disproportionate impacts through the lens of race and ethnicity. While half the sample described above received a question about the disproportionate impacts of the coronavirus on “those living in poverty,” the other half received a question about the disproportionate impacts on “Black Americans and Hispanics.”

In the racial framing sample, less than half of all voters—46 percent—say that Black Americans and Hispanics have been more affected than white Americans by the coronavirus, while 39 percent say that the impact has been the same across communities. When using the poverty framing of the pandemic, however, the margin is 55 percent to 29 percent.

Roughly the same percentage of Democrats report seeing disproportionate impacts for both those living in poverty and Black Americans and Hispanics, but independent and Republican ratings drop off significantly in the race and ethnicity framing sample. Forty-four percent of independents say that Black Americans and Hispanics have been more affected than whites by the pandemic, but only 28 percent of Republicans think similarly—far below their ratings using the poverty framing.

In turn, the choice of framing clearly affects voters' desire for big changes versus a return to the status quo. Forty-six percent of voters overall in the poverty framing sample say that “we should make big changes that address historical economic inequities in health care, education, and the economy” after the pandemic passes, while 43 percent say that the federal government should “take steps to restore our health care, education, and economic systems to the way they were” before the pandemic. In contrast, among those voters who received the racial framing, the margin is 39 percent to 49 percent in favor of restoring things to pre-pandemic norms rather than making bigger changes.

Again, Democrats react essentially the same to either formulation, but independent voters in particular express far more willingness to make big changes when impacts are given a poverty lens rather than a racial one. Republicans are more in favor of the status quo in either formulation, but twice as many Republicans favor big changes when given a poverty lens.

On other priorities for the federal government

Two-thirds of American voters believe it is more important to ensure basic living standards for all than it is to reduce government spending to address budget deficits. The study presented respondents with a series of statement pairs and asked them to rate which statement comes closer to their own view, even if neither is exactly right. (see Figure 2)

Sixty-five percent of voters overall say, “It is more important to me that the government provide basic living standards like housing, nutrition, and health care for those struggling to make ends meet.” Meanwhile, only 29 percent of voters overall believe, “It is more important to me that the government address large budget deficits by reducing overall spending on government assistance programs for low-income people.”

Support for government programs to help low-income people is widespread. Eighty-three percent of Democrats and 63 percent of independents, as well as a plurality of Republicans (48 percent), favor basic living standards over deficit reduction. Nearly two-thirds of both white non-college-educated voters and Hispanics, as well as more than three-quarters of Black voters, favor government assistance over deficit reduction.

Support for basic living standards crosses generations as well, including 70 percent of Generation Z/Millennial voters and more than 6 in 10 Generation X and Baby Boomer/Silent Generation voters.

FIGURE 2

Voters more concerned about basic living standards than budget deficits; want states to get federal help

Percentage of respondents who selected each response

Q. Which statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right?

It is more important to me that the government provide basic living standards like housing, nutrition, and health care for those struggling to make ends meet.



It is more important to me that the government address large budget deficits by reducing overall spending on government assistance programs for low-income people.



With state budgets crushed by the pandemic, the federal government should step in and directly provide aid to help struggling families keep their homes, put food on the table, and otherwise make ends meet.



State governments must tighten their spending in the face of this pandemic, even if it temporarily reduces benefits for the unemployed and those who rely on government programs. The federal government should not bail states out during this pandemic.



Source: Center for American Progress/GBAO Strategies nationally representative online poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted February 2–7, 2021. See John Halpin, Karl Agne, and Nisha Jain, "Americans Want the Federal Government To Help People in Need" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2021), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=496744>.

Nearly 7 in 10 voters want the federal government to step in to help state governments hit hard by the pandemic provide assistance to those in need. In another statement pair test, 68 percent of voters overall agree more with the idea that “with state budgets crushed by the pandemic, the federal government should step in and directly provide aid to help struggling families keep their homes, put food on the table, and otherwise make ends meet” than with the idea that “state governments must tighten their spending in the face of this pandemic, even if it temporarily reduces benefits for the unemployed and those who rely on government programs. The federal government should not bail states out during this pandemic.” Only 26 percent of voters rate the latter statement above the former.

Given current debates about the inclusion of state supports in new legislative packages, it is notable that support for state assistance crosses party lines: 84 percent of Democrats, 64 percent of independents, and 53 percent of Republicans favor state assistance over no state bailouts. Support for states crosses demographic lines as well, with 65 percent of Hispanics, 67 percent of white non-college-educated voters, and 78 percent of Black voters agreeing that more should be done to help states and their citizens.

Conclusion

This study provides overwhelming evidence that many Americans faced acute economic difficulties prior to the pandemic—and that these difficulties have only worsened for many families as the pandemic has dragged on. Consequently, strong majorities of voters want the federal government to take more aggressive actions to bolster jobs, wages, and other economic protections for low-income people.

Members of Congress and the Biden administration should listen to the needs and desires of the majority of Americans and pass legislation to advance the economic well-being of all people.

About the authors

John Halpin is a senior fellow and co-director of the Politics and Elections program at the Center for American Progress.

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Endnotes

- 1 See Josh Katz, Denise Lu, and Margot Sanger-Katz, "527,000 More U.S. Deaths Than Normal Since Covid-19 Struck," *The New York Times*, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/01/14/us/covid-19-death-toll.html> (last accessed March 2021).
- 2 John Halpin, Karl Agne, and Nisha Jain, "Voters Strongly Back Federal Assistance for Those in Need," Center for American Progress, February 25, 2021, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/general/news/2021/02/25/496403/voters-strongly-back-federal-assistance-need/>.
- 3 To define the generations, this study used categories developed by the Pew Research Center. See Michael Dimock, "Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins," Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, available here: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

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