

Center for American Progress



How Americans Envision a More Perfect Union

A Common Path Forward for the Country

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Introduction and summary

The American people have taken their fair share of knocks over the past two years, from the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent economic downturn to the nation's increasingly fractured politics and rising polarization across much of society. Talk of national unity is seen as an illusory goal as various factions press their ideological agendas on government. Americans themselves are right to wonder: "Is there anything we can do together in our politics? Can we find even a temporary conception of the common good and move forward with a set of policies that help all people and reduce inequalities between people and places?"

A major new public opinion study conducted by the Center for American Progress and GBAO Strategies, examining a range of policy issues that could shape the post-COVID-19 recovery and rebuilding effort, suggests that there is a unified path forward if our leaders choose to focus on the core aspects of national renewal: making major investments in the sources and sectors of good-paying jobs; linking U.S. domestic and foreign policy more tightly to better protect workers and U.S. interests; upgrading national infrastructure; and supporting American families as they try to get back on their feet.

These new findings show that Americans desperately want less fighting in politics and more cooperation carried out with a sense of shared purpose that is focused on the building blocks of national economic improvement and the well-being of all people. It will not be easy to do this given the forces of fragmentation in U.S. government and in political and media debates, as well as real differences between voters on a number of key issues and priorities—most notably, immigration and climate change. But Americans themselves express a basic willingness to turn the page on division and embrace new models of governance focused on cooperative actions to tackle some of our nation's biggest challenges.

The current study complements previous CAP research examining public views on international policy featured in the report "America Adrift," as well as ongoing examinations of domestic and economic attitudes, as highlighted in "America Decides," and the overall framework for national economic development outlined in "A More Perfect Union."¹

These reports collectively try to clarify for voters and policymakers alike what exactly the government’s goals and priorities should be in the near term, while also focusing attention on the issues that are likely to produce the biggest gains for Americans in terms of jobs, family economic stability, and national security over the next decade.

This report will look at the wider economic context shaping American public opinion, providing detailed explorations of voter attitudes on major domestic and foreign policy priorities; beliefs about America’s role in the world and the proper role of government; and voter reactions to a series of 20 concrete ideas that could potentially drive more unified national action.

Importantly, as put forth in the “A More Perfect Union” report and confirmed in the opinion research projects, American voters recognize the need for the country’s domestic and international policies to work together to produce gains and protect the interests of American workers and businesses. The Biden administration has spoken of advancing a foreign policy for the middle class, and the current research finds an appetite among voters for policy efforts that integrate domestic and foreign policy to help protect American jobs and the country’s interests. For example, a strong majority of voters agree that what happens in the rest of the world affects America’s economy directly, especially as China emerges as America’s biggest economic competitor and a nation that must be taken seriously in U.S. policymaking. Moreover, cybersecurity has become a pressing concern among Americans, and there is strong support for measures to protect America’s industries and infrastructure from foreign hackers.

Voters also see the need for the federal government to help drive both public and private sector investments into the sources of good jobs in fields such as technology, health care, infrastructure, higher education, and domestic manufacturing of vital goods. What do voters consider to be good jobs? In this study, good jobs were viewed primarily as those with stability in terms of employment, wages that are capable of supporting family needs, and benefits that make work and family life more manageable and enjoyable.

In addition, some of the most interesting findings in this research involve voter attitudes about U.S. political culture overall. For example, Americans are overwhelmingly united in their desire for government to pay more attention to the needs of voters and less attention to campaign donors, corporations, and the wealthiest few. They also strongly believe that Americans themselves need to stop fighting one another on social media and in politics. Moreover, at a time of increasing racial and social tensions, it is critical to see that American voters almost uniformly believe that if America is to succeed going forward, everyone—regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or religious background—

must enjoy full legal equality and a fair shot at economic success. And although the priority of climate change as an issue produces stark partisan divides, this study finds a potential way forward on climate action that focuses on how steps to reduce global warming improve the national economy in terms of new jobs and business opportunities from clean energy production and deployment.

This study is based on a comprehensive national poll of 2000 registered voters conducted online from March 24 to March 29, 2021. Fielded just after Congress passed the American Rescue Plan Act and President Joe Biden signed it into law, the poll offers an important snapshot of Americans' views just as the country was taking key steps to tackle the pandemic and the economic challenges facing the country. The large sample size of this poll makes it possible to examine continuity and divergences in opinions across generational, partisan, and demographic lines.

At a time of seemingly endless political divisions in America, it is encouraging to find voters seeing many areas for common action from government, the private sector, and individual citizens to help rebuild the economy into something more productive and competitive in the world, with widely shared prosperity and increased opportunities available for all people.

National economic context and domestic and foreign policy priorities

To better understand the attitudes and policy positions presented later in the study, it is useful to first get a read on the overall context for opinion formation early in the new Biden administration. The study examined a number of key questions, including: “Are things looking up for the country economically, or down?”, “What do voters think about President Biden’s job performance in office so far?”, “How are Americans themselves feeling about their own financial situation?”, and “What are their major domestic and foreign policy priorities?”

Although a majority of American voters feel the national economy has gotten worse not better in the past year, President Biden receives positive job approval ratings from a majority of voters

Perhaps not surprisingly given the pandemic, the study finds that 55 percent of voters overall feel that the U.S. economy has gotten worse over the past year, with approximately one-fifth of voters saying the economy either has either gotten better (19 percent) or stayed the same (22 percent) over this period. There are no real generational divides on this measure, as a majority of people across all age groups feel that the economy has gotten worse in the past year.

Partisan differences on evaluations of the national economy are, however, apparent, with nearly 7 in 10 Republicans saying the national economy has gotten worse, compared with slightly more than 4 in 10 Democrats.

Partisan divides about the direction of the country and President Biden’s job approval ratings are also quite pronounced. For example, 74 percent of Democrats believe the country is generally headed in the right direction, while 82 percent of Republicans believe the country has gotten seriously off on the wrong track.

Likewise, although 54 percent of voters overall approve of the job Biden is doing as president—including 92 percent of Democrats and 50 percent of independents—82 percent of Republicans disapprove of Biden’s job as President, reflecting the sharply polarized partisan evaluations that have grown over the past decade.

FIGURE 1

Most voters agree that the economy has worsened in past year, but Democrats and Republicans disagree on President Joe Biden’s job approval

Percentage of respondents who feel the economy has gotten better, worse, or stayed the same, by party affiliation

Q. Over the last year, do you feel the economy in our country has gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same?

	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Better	19%	28%	17%	12%
Worse	55%	43%	55%	69%
Stayed the same	22%	24%	24%	17%
Don't know	4%	5%	4%	2%

Percentage who approved or disapproved of President Joe Biden’s job performance, by party affiliation

Q. Do you approve or disapprove of the job Joe Biden is doing as president?

	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Approve	54%	92%	50%	16%
Disapprove	43%	7%	44%	82%
Don't know	3%	2%	6%	2%

Source: Center for American Progress/GBAO Strategies online survey of 2000 registered voters conducted March 24–29, 2021.

Most American voters personally feel stable and economically secure but believe other people are unstable and economically insecure

The study asked voters how they would describe their own or their family’s current economic situation. Overall, more than 6 in 10 voters report that they are “stable and economically secure,” compared with 3 in 10 voters who say they are “unstable and economically insecure.”

Generational differences are notable on this measure, with more than one-third of Generation Z/Millennial voters and nearly two-fifths of Generation X voters saying their current economic situation is unstable and insecure, compared with only one-fifth of Baby Boomer/Silent Generation voters.

FIGURE 2

Most voters feel personally stable and economically secure but feel other Americans are not

Percentage of respondents describing their economic situation as secure or unstable

■ Stable and economically secure ■ Unstable and economically insecure ■ Don't know

Q. Which of the following better describes your own and your family's current economic situation?



Percentage of respondents describing other Americans' views of their economic situation as secure or unstable

Q. How do you think most Americans would describe their own and their family's current economic situation?



Source: Center for American Progress/GBAO Strategies online survey of 2000 registered voters conducted March 24–29, 2021.

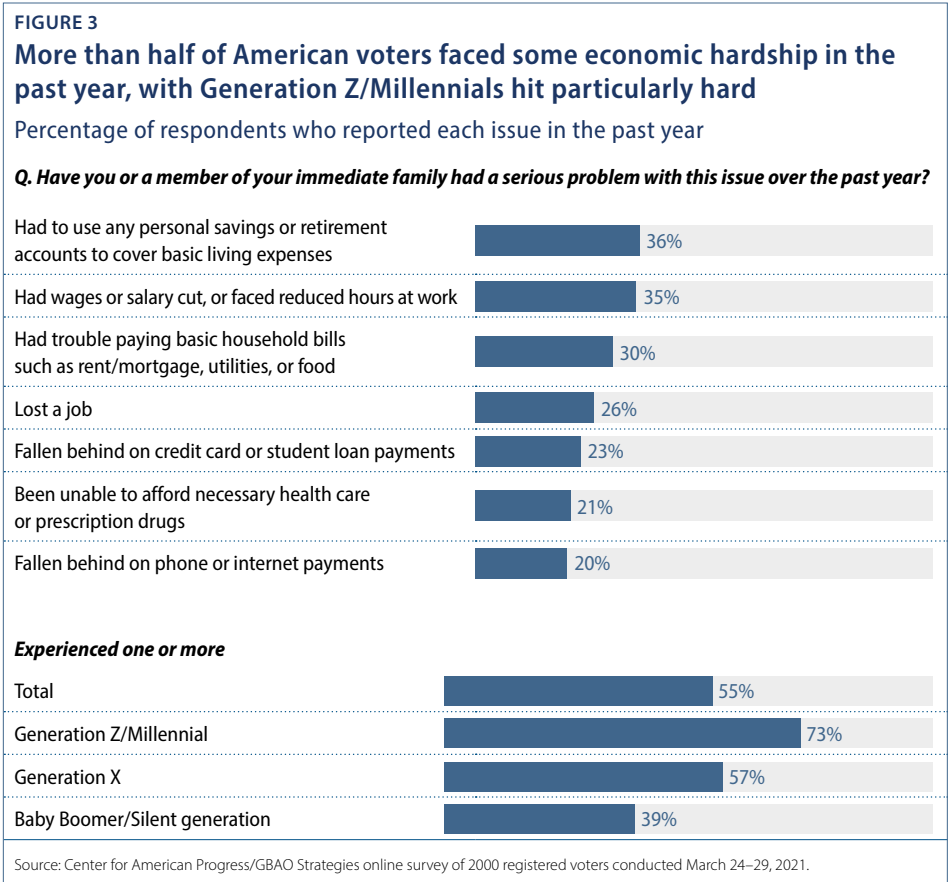
Notably, when asked to assess how other Americans might evaluate their economic situations, voters provide a much more negative evaluation: Nearly 7 in 10 voters say that other people would describe their situation as unstable and economically insecure, and only 15 percent say they would describe it as stable and economically secure. Few demographic differences emerge on this question, as large majorities of people across age and party lines feel that other Americans are economically unstable and insecure.

Perceptions of economic hardship among Americans match many voters' experiences, with more than half of all voters reporting facing some economic hardship or difficulty in the past year

Respondents were presented with a list of economic challenges facing many Americans today, and they were asked if they or a member of their immediate family had a serious problem with these issues in the past year.

As seen in Figure 3, at the top of the list of financial challenges, 36 percent of voters overall report having to use “personal savings or retirement accounts to cover basic living expenses” in the past year of the pandemic. More than one-third of voters overall—and more than half of Generation Z/Millennial voters—say they had their “wages or salary cut, or faced reduced hours at work” last year; and 3 in 10 voters overall report they had “trouble paying basic household bills such as rent and mortgage, utilities, or food.”

More than one-quarter of American voters overall, including 40 percent of Generation Z/Millennial voters, say that they or someone in their immediate family “lost a job” during the past year. Roughly one-quarter of voters also report having “fallen behind on credit card or student loan payments,” and about one-fifth say they have “fallen behind on phone or internet payments” or have “been unable to afford necessary health care or prescription drugs.”

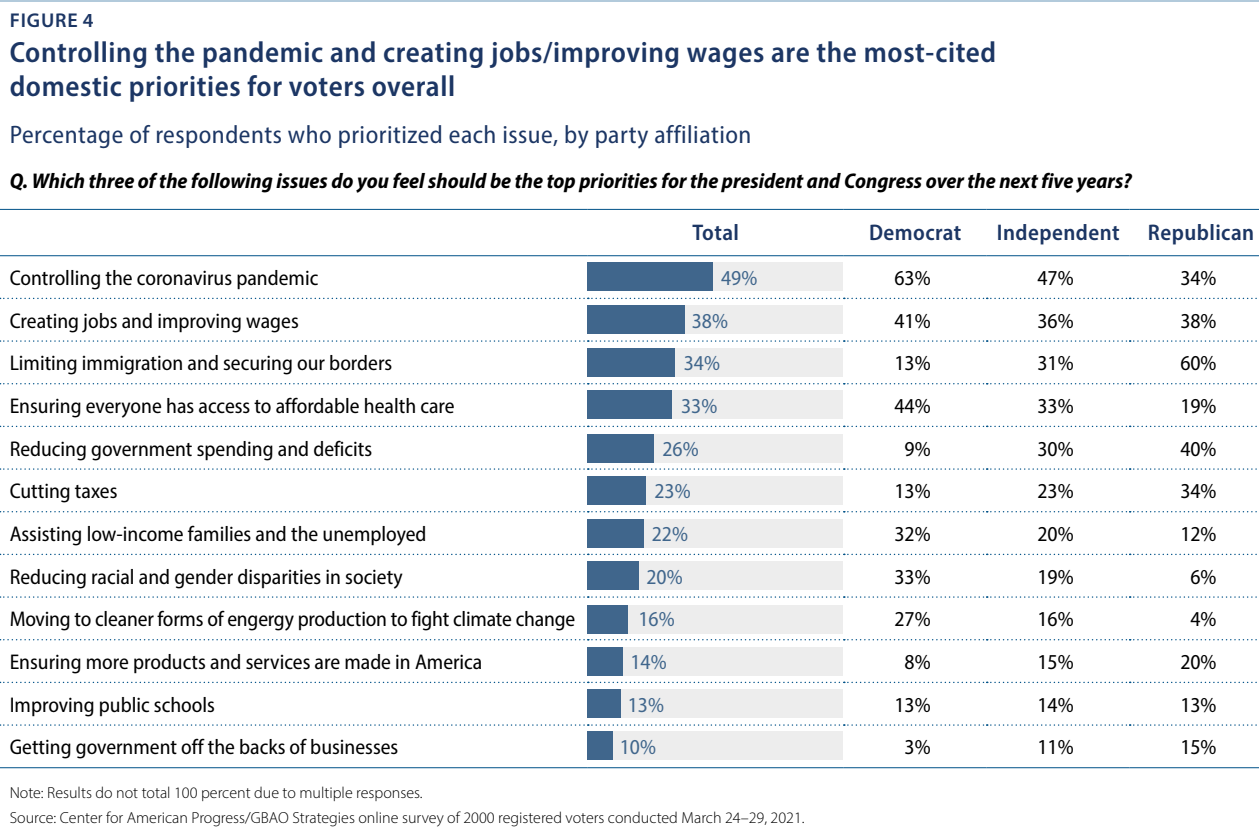


Looking across all of these challenges, the study finds that 55 percent of American voters overall faced at least one of these economic hardships or difficulties in the past year, with nearly one-third facing three or more and approximately one-fifth facing five or more of these challenges.

The generational differences on this measure are stark: Nearly three-quarters of Generation Z/Millennial voters faced at least one of these economic challenges in the past year, and nearly half faced three or more. In contrast, only about 4 in 10 Baby Boomer/Silent Generation voters faced at least one challenge. Groups reporting higher-than-average experiences with at least one of these seven economic challenges include women, non-college-educated voters of all races, African Americans, Hispanics, and those with less than \$50,000 in annual household income.

American voters’ top domestic priorities are controlling the coronavirus pandemic and creating jobs and improving wages, with big partisan divides on issues of immigration and climate change

The study asked respondents to pick the issues that they feel should be the top domestic priorities for the president and Congress over the next five years. Among voters overall, “controlling the coronavirus pandemic” emerges as the clear top priority for government leaders, chosen by 49 percent of American voters, while “creating jobs and improving wages” emerges second on the list, chosen by 38 percent of voters.



But as seen in Figure 4, there are big partisan differences on the top domestic priorities for the country. For example, among Democrats, the top three issue priorities are controlling the pandemic (63 percent), increasing access to health care (44 percent), and creating jobs and improving wages (41 percent). Likewise, independents report these same three issues as their top priorities. Among Republicans, however, limiting immigration and securing the borders is by far the most important priority (60 percent), followed by reducing government spending and deficits (40 percent) and creating jobs and improving wages (38 percent).

Examining the patterns in more detail, the sharp partisan differences in issue saliency become more apparent. Although Republicans overwhelmingly place limits on immigration and border security at the top of their list, only 13 percent of Democrats agree. Conversely, more than twice as many Democrats as Republicans put a premium on access to affordable health care: 44 percent versus 19 percent, respectively.

In addition, more than twice as many Republicans as Democrats view cutting taxes as a top priority, while five times as many Democrats as Republicans see reducing racial and gender disparities as a top priority.

Looking at generational trends, younger Generation Z/Millennial voters align with those in Generation X in rating the pandemic and jobs and wages as the most important priorities for government, while older Boomer/Silent Generation voters see the pandemic as their top priority but also rank immigration and border security quite high.

Protecting American jobs is the most important U.S. foreign policy priority for voters, while concerns about foreign terrorism have dropped noticeably since 2019

Notably, the study finds Americans aligned on the key foreign policy priority of “protecting jobs for American workers” (47 percent overall); nearly 4 in 10 Democrats, about half of independents, and nearly 6 in 10 Republicans rank this as a top priority.

Beyond the issue of protecting jobs for American workers, partisan differences are pronounced on foreign policy priorities. For example, Republicans overwhelmingly view immigration (65 percent) and the protection of jobs (57 percent) as top foreign policy priorities for government, with independents expressing similar preferences at slightly lower levels. Democrats, in contrast, put climate change at the top of their list of foreign policy priorities (44 percent), while only 1 in 10 Republicans cite this as a top priority.

FIGURE 5

Protecting American jobs is the top foreign policy priority for voters

Percentage of respondents who prioritized each foreign policy issue, by party affiliation

Q. Which three of the following issues should be the top priorities for U.S. foreign policy in the next 5 years?

	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Protecting jobs for American workers	47%	38%	48%	57%
Reducing illegal immigration	42%	22%	40%	65%
Combatting global climate change	28%	44%	28%	10%
Improving relationships with allies	28%	32%	30%	21%
Ending U.S. involvement in wars in the Middle East	25%	24%	27%	24%
Protecting against terrorist threats from groups like ISIS or al-Qaeda	24%	20%	23%	30%
Taking on China's economic and military aggression	23%	14%	26%	31%
Dealing with nuclear threats in Iran and North Korea	22%	20%	21%	25%
Stopping Russian interference in U.S. government and politics	21%	31%	19%	11%
Fighting global poverty and promoting human rights	17%	26%	16%	9%
Promoting international trade	14%	17%	14%	9%
Promoting democratic rights and freedoms abroad	9%	11%	7%	7%

Note: Results do not total 100 percent due to multiple responses.

Source: Center for American Progress/GBAO Strategies online survey of 2000 registered voters conducted March 24–29, 2021.

The most striking finding on this measure is the decline of terrorism as a top foreign policy concern since CAP last polled voters on this list of issues in 2019. Two years ago, 40 percent of voters overall said “protecting against terrorist threats from groups like ISIS or al-Qaeda” should be a top priority for government—the single most important priority on the list. Yet in the current research, protection against terrorist threats has fallen to sixth on the list, selected as a top priority by less than a quarter of American voters.

Two-thirds of voters back President Biden’s American Rescue Plan Act


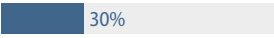
Rounding out the examination of the larger context for policy debates, the study finds overwhelming support for the recently passed federal stimulus and relief package. The survey presented respondents with a description of the \$1.9 trillion legislation, noting the inclusion of stimulus checks to individuals, extended unemployment and nutritional assistance, small business loans, school reopening funds, and vaccine development and distribution spending.

FIGURE 6

The \$1.9 trillion federal stimulus plan is a big hit with voters

Percentage of respondents who approve of the economic relief package, by party affiliation

Q. Based on what you have heard or read, do you approve or disapprove of this economic relief package?

	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Approve	 66%	92%	61%	41%
Disapprove	 30%	6%	34%	54%

Source: Center for American Progress/GBAO Strategies online survey of 2000 registered voters conducted March 24–29, 2021.

Based on this description, more than 9 in 10 Democrats back the American Rescue Plan Act, as do more than 6 in 10 independents and 4 in 10 Republicans. Support also crosses generational lines, with more than 7 in 10 Generation Z/Millennial voters and more than 8 in 10 voters in older generations backing the third coronavirus relief package.

Voters express a strong desire for national investments and an integrated policy approach to help America compete in the world

The survey presented respondents with a series of statement pairs involving America's approach to the world and the proper role of government in the economy, asking them to indicate which of the two statements comes closer to their own view, even if neither one is exactly right. This exercise makes it possible to assess the larger values and perspectives shaping voters' decisions on more concrete policy issues and agenda items.

Americans are receptive to arguments that connect America's economic renewal at home to its ability to compete in the world, especially against China

Americans want the United States to be more active in fighting for the nation's interests in the world and to support measures that help the country compete against the likes of China, especially in the economic realm. For example, in one paired-statement test, nearly two-thirds of voters overall—including majorities across party lines—say they agree more with the proposition, “Things that happen in other parts of the world have a big impact on America's economy, and we should do more to make sure our domestic and foreign policies work together to create more U.S. jobs and protect our interests,” while only about 3 in 10 voters prefer the alternative: “Things that happen in other parts of the world don't really affect America's economy, and we should do more to focus on our own situation in terms of jobs and growth, and less on other countries.”

Uniting U.S. domestic and foreign policies to better protect American workers and interests—a core idea in CAP's “A More Perfect Union” report—is favored over the alternative idea by more than 7 in 10 Democrats and approximately 6 in 10 independents and Republicans. Majorities across generational lines also back this idea of making U.S. domestic and foreign policies work together to advance American interests.

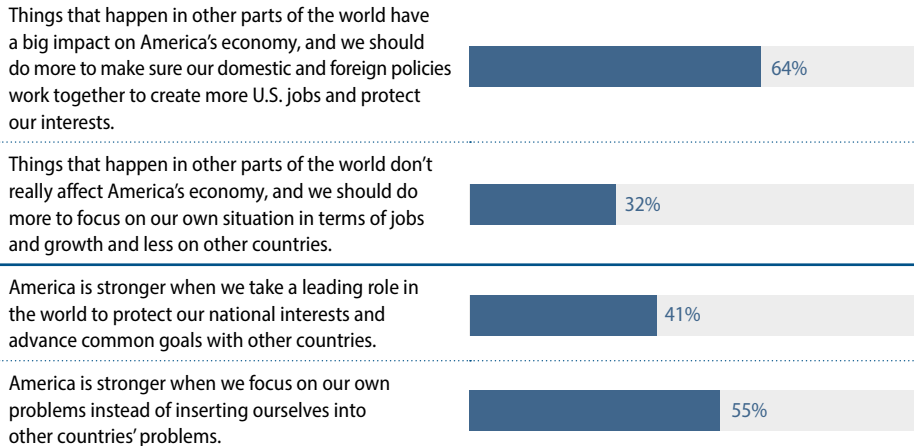
These results suggest that a policy approach connecting America's domestic renewal to its ability to compete in the world—along with public investments and a tighter coordination between domestic and foreign policy—has wide public appeal.

FIGURE 7

Americans understand the need to unite U.S. domestic and foreign policies but don't want the United States meddling with other countries

Percentage of respondents who selected each response

Q. Please indicate which statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right.



Source: Center for American Progress/GBAO Strategies online survey of 2000 registered voters conducted March 24–29, 2021.

Voters still do not want America getting too involved in other countries' problems

Consistent with the foreign policy priorities outlined in the previous section, the study finds that a majority of American voters favor the United States focusing on the home front rather than involving itself with other nations too much. In another paired-statement test, 55 percent of voters overall agree more with the idea, “America is stronger when we focus on our own problems instead of inserting ourselves into other countries’ problems,” while 41 percent of voters feel, “America is stronger when we take a leading role in the world to protect our national interests and advance common goals with other countries.”

Nearly 6 in 10 independents and 2 in 3 Republicans agree more with focusing on the country’s own problems, while a slight majority of Democrats agree more with America taking a leading role in the world. Likewise, Generation Z/Millennial and Generation X voters are more in favor of focusing on the country’s own problems than are Boomer/Silent Generation voters; but majorities of each generation favor a domestic focus above the United States taking a leading role in the world.

Clearly, the idea of getting involved in other countries' problems does not excite American voters. But this does not translate into full retrenchment in foreign policy views. On the contrary, the results of these two statement pairs suggest that Americans want the United States to be more active in fighting for the nation's interests—with sensible limits and a strong connection to people at home.

Majorities of Democrats and independents believe the government should help drive job creation and economic development rather than leave it up to businesses and markets alone

Another statement pair presented respondents with two competing ideas about the proper role of government in creating jobs and driving investments. Fifty-eight percent of voters overall—including 80 percent of Democrats and 52 percent of independents—say they agree more with the idea, “The government should help drive public and private investments into the sources of good jobs such as technology, infrastructure, health care, higher education, and domestic manufacturing.” Meanwhile, slightly more than one-third of voters overall, and a majority of Republicans, agree more with the alternative free market notion: “The government should stay out of the economy and allow the private sector and open markets to determine what to invest in and where to allocate resources.”

Majorities of voters across generational lines back a role for government in helping to drive public and private investments in the sources and sectors of good jobs.

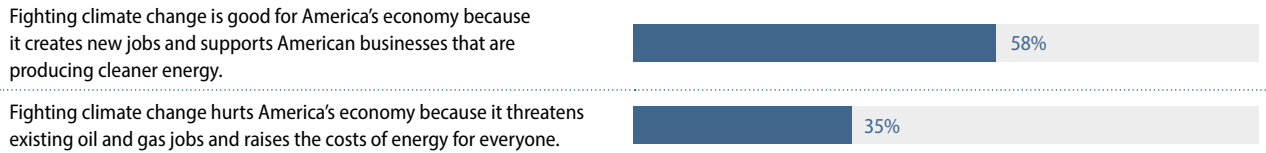
The study finds almost identical patterns of agreement on the issue of whether fighting climate change is good or bad for the economy. Fifty-eight percent of voters overall, and more than 8 in 10 Democrats and half of independents, say they agree more with the idea, “Fighting climate change is good for America's economy because it creates new jobs and supports American businesses that are producing cleaner energy.” Conversely, 35 percent of voters overall, and nearly 6 in 10 Republicans, agree more with the alternative idea: “Fighting climate change hurts America's economy because it threatens existing oil and gas jobs and raises the costs of energy for everyone.”

As in the previous statement pair, majorities of voters across generational lines see action on fighting climate change as good for America's economy in terms of jobs and business opportunities, rather than as a net drain on the economy.

FIGURE 8

A majority of American voters see the fight against climate change as good for the U.S. economy when presented as creating jobs and supporting businesses that produce cleaner energy

Percentage of respondents who selected each response



Source: Center for American Progress/GBAO Strategies online survey of 2000 registered voters conducted March 24–29, 2021.

Voters believe a “good job” includes pay and benefits necessary to live a secure and enjoyable life, along with job security

What exactly is meant by a “good job” as described in some of these statements? The study probed this concept in two different manners, first asking voters to write in their own words what a “good job” means to them. Voters overwhelmingly and most consistently refer to pay, wages, and benefits—including decent or living wages. Ideas about work-family balance, fairness, and overall job environment are also mentioned by voters as important components of a good job.

In a follow-up exercise, the study presented respondents with a list of concrete items and asked them to rate the importance of each one on a scale from 0 to 10. As seen in Figure 9, the top three most important qualities of a “good job,” according to voters across generational lines, are 1) “wages or salary high enough to fully cover you living expenses” (8.6 average); 2) “steady, reliable employment without fear of losing your job” (8.5 average); and 3) “good health care, retirement, paid leave, and vacation benefits” (8.5 average).

A second tier of important job quality characteristics includes “a respectful work environment with courteous colleagues” (8.3 average); “having a boss you like and managers who treat people well” (8.1 average); and “real chances to be promoted and given greater responsibilities” (8.0 average).

FIGURE 9

According to voters, good pay, reliability, and solid benefits are the most important components of a good job

Mean score among respondents rating the importance of each component to a good job

Q. On a scale from 0 to 10, please indicate how important is each to what you consider a good job, where 0 means not at all important and 10 means extremely important.



Source: Center for American Progress/GBAO Strategies online survey of 2000 registered voters conducted March 24–29, 2021.

Beyond these top-tier items, other important job qualities involve “having predictable hours and not having to be accessible during your time off” (7.6 average) and “flexibility with child care or other family needs” (7.4 average). Less important items to voters overall include “having the ability to work from home if necessary” (6.5 average) and “having the ability to join a union if desired” (5.7 average), with this last result being driven by particularly low ratings from Republicans (4.8 average).

20 attitudes about national economic development and a new, post-COVID-19 political model

The heart of this survey includes a battery of 20 separate ideas crossing four main categories described in CAP's "A More Perfect Union" report: 1) national economic development; 2) a strengthened social safety net; 3) new forms of international engagement on America's core interests; and 4) new models for cooperative politics at home.

The study asked respondents to indicate whether they agree or disagree with each idea using a 0 to 10 scale, with 0 indicating strong disagreement with the idea and 10 indicating strong agreement. As seen in the accompanying table, the 20 statements are ranked based on the average score for each.

Voters want a less contentious form of politics, equal opportunity for all people, and a core strategic focus on protecting American interests and dealing with emerging international threats

Interestingly, these results show wide and strong agreement—with an average rating of 8 or higher for all voters, including 7 to 8 averages across party and demographic lines—on a few core ideas centered on a new model of politics, a basic liberal vision of equality and fairness, and a focus on emerging threats from cyberattacks and China.

The five ideas with the greatest consensus among all voters include:

- "We need to clean up all levels of government to make sure politicians are paying attention to the needs of American voters and not just corporations, campaign donors, and the wealthiest few." (8.4 average)
- "Americans need to spend less time fighting one another on social media and in politics." (8.3 average)
- "If America is to succeed going forward, we need to ensure that everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or religious background enjoys full legal equality and has a fair shot at economic success." (7.9 average)
- "Cybersecurity should be a bigger U.S. priority, and we need stronger actions to stop foreign hackers from attacking our critical infrastructure and key industries." (7.8 average)
- "China is America's biggest economic competitor, and in order to compete effectively, we need policies that invest in our own businesses and protect American workers from unfair trade practices." (7.8 average)

FIGURE 10

Mean score among respondents rating how much they agreed with 20 ideas for building a more perfect union, by party affiliation

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
We need to clean up all levels of government to make sure politicians are paying attention to the needs of American voters and not just corporations, campaign donors, and the wealthiest few.	8.4	8.6	8.2	8.3
Americans need to spend less time fighting one another on social media and in politics.	8.3	8.4	8.3	8.3
If America is to succeed going forward, we need to ensure that everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or religious background enjoys full legal equality and has a fair shot at economic success.	7.9	8.7	7.7	7.2
Cybersecurity should be a bigger U.S. priority, and we need stronger actions to stop foreign hackers from attacking our critical infrastructure and key industries.	7.8	8.1	7.7	7.7
China is America's biggest economic competitor, and in order to compete effectively, we need policies that invest in our own businesses and protect American workers from unfair trade practices.	7.8	7.8	7.6	8.1
America's economy will not fully recover and grow unless our workers and families first have good-paying jobs, affordable housing, and adequate health care.	7.4	8.2	7.1	6.7
With interest rates low, it is time for the government to make substantial investments to improve America's infrastructure—roads, bridges, and airports; public transportation and utilities systems; schools and health care facilities; and internet networks.	7.4	8.0	6.9	7.0
Government and the two political parties should focus less on social issues that divide Americans and more on creating the economic policies necessary for all people to prosper.	7.3	7.0	7.2	7.7
Controlling the coronavirus pandemic and creating new jobs are the two most important priorities for America right now, and the federal government should focus mostly on these goals and less on others.	7.3	7.9	7.0	6.8
Too many people in both rural and urban areas have been left behind in the global economy, and we should ensure that residents in these areas have the same economic and educational opportunities as those in wealthier parts of the country.	7.2	8.0	6.8	6.6
Social safety net programs like unemployment, food and housing assistance, and wage supports should be easy for families to access during economic crises like the current pandemic and cover basic living costs.	7.1	8.2	6.8	6.2
Government policies should encourage and help people to build wealth through homeownership, tax-free education and retirement programs, and private investments.	7.1	7.8	6.8	6.5
Policies like paid family and medical leave, or child care support, are important for families and help the overall economy by supporting the national workforce.	7.1	8.1	6.6	6.3
Federal spending on research and development was vital in creating the technology boom in America and helps us stay ahead of countries like China in developing new products and ideas.	7.0	7.6	6.7	6.7
America needs a national industrial policy to help coordinate government and private sector action to build up domestic manufacturing and invest in the sources of good jobs.	6.8	7.5	6.4	6.5
The government should make it easier for low-income people to sign up for necessary support programs and eliminate bureaucratic barriers that block people from getting assistance.	6.7	8.1	6.4	5.5
Democracy is under attack in many countries around the world, and America has clear security and economic interests in building alliances with other democracies to protect individual rights and fight corruption.	6.6	7.4	6.4	6.0
America cannot deal with challenges like the coronavirus pandemic on its own; we need to work with other countries and institutions like the World Health Organization to fight the spread of global diseases.	6.3	7.8	6.2	4.8
A transition to a clean energy economy—with net-zero carbon emissions by 2050—is an important national goal that will help create new jobs and industries at home and protect people from extreme weather.	6.2	8.0	5.7	4.5
Climate change is affecting people around the world, and America has no choice but to work more closely with both allies and competitors like China and Russia to reduce global temperatures that are threatening everyone.	6.1	7.7	6.0	4.4

Source: Center for American Progress/GBAO Strategies online survey of 2000 registered voters conducted March 24–29, 2021.

Notably, these items with the most consensus suggest that American politics as currently practiced is failing to represent the desires and focus of the bulk of Americans themselves. Voters tell us they want a cleaner, fairer government with full equality and opportunity for all, as well as a focus on foreign threats and challenges that undermine American workers and businesses. Yet with the exception of some bipartisan focus on China, U.S. political leaders do not really talk or organize themselves in this manner. There are few concrete efforts offered in Congress to take on special-interest influence and to bridge divides and focus on core economic challenges globally as well as opportunities for all people, in all regions of the country.

Voters back a range of steps to build up America's economy, focus on the twin challenges of the coronavirus and jobs, and reduce regional inequalities

Going beyond this top tier of items, voters also show basic agreement—albeit with less intensity at about a 7 average overall—on a range of ideas that would advance U.S. national economy, reduce regional inequalities, and improve the economic standing of workers and their families.

These ideas include:

- “America’s economy will not fully recover and grow unless our workers and families first have good paying jobs, affordable housing, and adequate health care.” (7.4 average)
- “With interest rates low, it is time for the government to make substantial investments to improve America’s infrastructure—roads, bridges, and airports; public transportation and utilities systems; schools and health care facilities; and Internet networks.” (7.4 average)
- “Government and the two political parties should focus less on social issues that divide Americans, and more on creating the economic policies necessary for all people to prosper.” (7.3 average)
- “Controlling the coronavirus pandemic and creating new jobs are the two most important priorities for America right now, and the federal government should focus mostly on these goals and less on others.” (7.3 average)
- “Too many people in both rural and urban areas have been left behind in the global economy, and we should ensure that residents in these areas have the same economic and educational opportunities as those in wealthier parts of the country.” (7.2 average)

Voters are more divided by partisanship on issues involving international cooperation and climate change

The bottom tier of attitudes—with average ratings of about 6—reflect greater division between Democrats and Republicans over issues such as global democracy and, particularly, on international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and global steps to combat climate change.

For example, Democrats give the following statement on public health a 7.8 average rating, while Republicans give it only a 4.8 average rating: “America cannot deal with challenges like the coronavirus pandemic on its own; we need to work with other countries and institutions like the World Health Organization to fight the spread of global diseases.” Likewise, while Democrats clearly see international climate cooperation as vital (7.7 average rating), Republicans disagree (4.4 average rating): “Climate change is affecting people around the world, and America has no choice but to work more closely with both allies and competitors like China and Russia to reduce global temperatures that are threatening everyone.”

Protecting democracy around the world—a priority expressed by the Biden administration in its early months through its plan to convene a global summit of democracies—also produces partisan divisions, though not as sharp as those seen on the WHO and climate change. Democrats give the following statement on global democracy a 7.4 average rating, while Republicans give it a 6.0 average rating: “Democracy is under attack in many countries around the world, and America has clear security and economic interests in building alliances with other democracies to protect individual rights and fight corruption.”

Combined with earlier data on jobs and the economy, this finding suggests that a public argument based on constructive competition in the world—grounded in economic self-interest rather than ideological ideas about democracy—would garner support across a wider spectrum of Americans.

Voters say America will be back on the right track after the pandemic once people have jobs and wages are rising

Finally, the study presented voters with a list of economic and social outcomes and asked them to look ahead several years to pick which two outcomes would be the most important indicators to them that America has recovered from the pandemic and is once again moving in the right direction.

FIGURE 11

Job creation and wage increases would be seen as top signs that America is on the rebound post-coronavirus

Percentage of respondents who selected each response, by party affiliation

Q. Which two of the following economic and social outcomes would be the most important to you as a sign that the United States has recovered from the pandemic and is once again moving in the right direction?

	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican
The job market returns to and exceeds pre-pandemic levels	40%	34%	43%	44%
Workers have higher wages, and wages are rising faster than household costs	29%	32%	28%	26%
More Americans have access to affordable health care through the government or private sector	25%	33%	24%	16%
The crisis at the border has subsided and illegal immigration has been reduced	22%	8%	21%	39%
The number of children and families living in poverty is significantly lower	22%	27%	22%	15%
America is still the world's leading economy, beating out China and other countries in terms of economic growth, incomes, and wealth	20%	12%	22%	28%
The United States is more respected around the world and is seen as a global leader again	16%	15%	14%	19%
Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, or religion is lower than at any point in our history	16%	25%	16%	6%
U.S. carbon emissions have significantly declined while new clean energy production has increased	9%	13%	10%	6%

Source: Center for American Progress/GBAO Strategies online survey of 2000 registered voters conducted March 24–29, 2021.

Perhaps not surprisingly given other findings in this study, voters overwhelmingly see “the job market returns to and exceeds pre-pandemic levels” as the top sign of national improvement (40 percent), followed by the possibility that “workers have higher wages, and wages are rising faster than household costs” (29 percent).

A second tier of outcomes includes “more Americans have access to affordable health care through the government or private sector” (25 percent); “the crisis at the border has subsided and illegal immigration has been reduced” (22 percent); and “the number of children and families living in poverty is significantly lower” (22 percent).

As seen in the earlier issue priorities sections, partisan divides emerge on key potential goals in national life. Although job creation is the top sign of national improvement for voters across party lines, Republicans’ second sign of improvement is immigration (39 percent), while Democrats are looking for increased access to affordable health care (33 percent).

While Americans do not agree on every aspect of the core ideas of national renewal outlined in the “A More Perfect Union” report, there is consensus on the need for a sensible and pragmatic path forward that reduces partisan discord and gamesmanship in favor of concentrated focus on policies that will benefit all people and regions of the country through public investments in jobs, infrastructure, and family security measures—as well as foreign policies that fight for American interests on the global stage.

Conclusion

As America climbs its way out of the pandemic and related economic challenges, voters want to know: “Where are we headed? How do we get there? And can we work together again to achieve common goals?”

Although politics remains highly polarized on certain key issues such as immigration and climate change, the evidence in this study shows that there is a viable path forward for national renewal that has the backing of the vast majority of American voters.

Above all, this path first requires a political reset whereby the U.S. government agrees to focus on the needs of citizens above special interests and ensure full equality and economic opportunity for everyone, while Americans themselves agree to stop fighting one another online and in daily life. Along with this political recalibration, voters overwhelmingly want their leaders to advance American interests and protect the United States against cyberattacks and competitors such as China. Add in national investments in infrastructure—along with measures to reduce regional inequalities and bolster families’ economic security—and consensus is possible on a policy path that meets voters’ desires and advances America’s economic and security interests.

Politics does not have to remain a contentious battlefield with little compromise and no common agenda. Voters see a path toward a more perfect union based on national economic renewal and a more cooperative politics. America’s political leaders now need to embrace this path and help guide us in the right direction.

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Endnotes

- 1 See John Halpin and others, "America Adrift: How the U.S. Foreign Policy Debate Misses What Voters Really Want" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/05/05/469218/america-adrift/>; John Halpin, Karl Agne, and Nisha Jain, "America Decides: How Voters Think About the Economy, Government, and Poverty Ahead of the 2020 Election" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/politics-and-elections/reports/2019/12/05/478144/america-decides/>; Center for American Progress, "A More Perfect Union: A Policy Blueprint for Economic, Social, and International Rebuilding in the Post-COVID-19 Era" (Washington: 2021), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2021/01/13/494444/a-more-perfect-union/>.

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