



The Associated Press-NORC  
Center for Public Affairs Research

# AMERICANS' PRIORITIES FOR 2016

Terrorism, health care, immigration, education, and unemployment top the list of the public's priorities for 2016. While eager for Washington to expend a significant amount of effort dealing with their concerns for the United States, the public has little confidence that the federal government will be able to make much headway on the problems facing the country.

A recent poll conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research reveals a diverse collection of issues that Americans want the government to address in 2016. Allowed to cite up to five different issues, the public's agenda for the next year also includes problems that range from guns to race relations to national security.

Republicans and Democrats agree on a number of top priority issues, such as unemployment and health care. But there are substantial partisan differences on several high-profile problems, including the importance of poverty, the federal deficit, taxes, and the environment.

The nationwide poll was conducted December 10-13, 2015, using the AmeriSpeak Panel, the probability-based panel of NORC at the University of Chicago. Online and telephone interviews using landlines and cell phones were conducted with 1,042 adults.

Some other key findings from the poll include:

- Eight in 10 Americans named a domestic social issue as one of their top priorities. The top domestic issue for both Democrats (34 percent) and Republicans (27 percent) is health care.
- More than 6 in 10 mentioned an economy-related problem. Unemployment was named by Republicans and Democrats just about equally, but they sharply diverge on other economic issues. Twenty percent of



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## Three Things You Should Know

About The AP-NORC Poll on Americans' Priorities for 2016. Among all American adults:

- 1) The public has a variety of concerns. Unemployment is the top economic issue, health care is the most frequently cited domestic issue, and terrorism is the number one foreign policy problem.
- 2) Republicans are more likely than Democrats or independents to name a foreign policy issue as one of the most important problems. Democrats are more concerned with domestic issues.
- 3) More than 6 in 10 lack confidence in the government's ability to resolve any of the country's important problems.

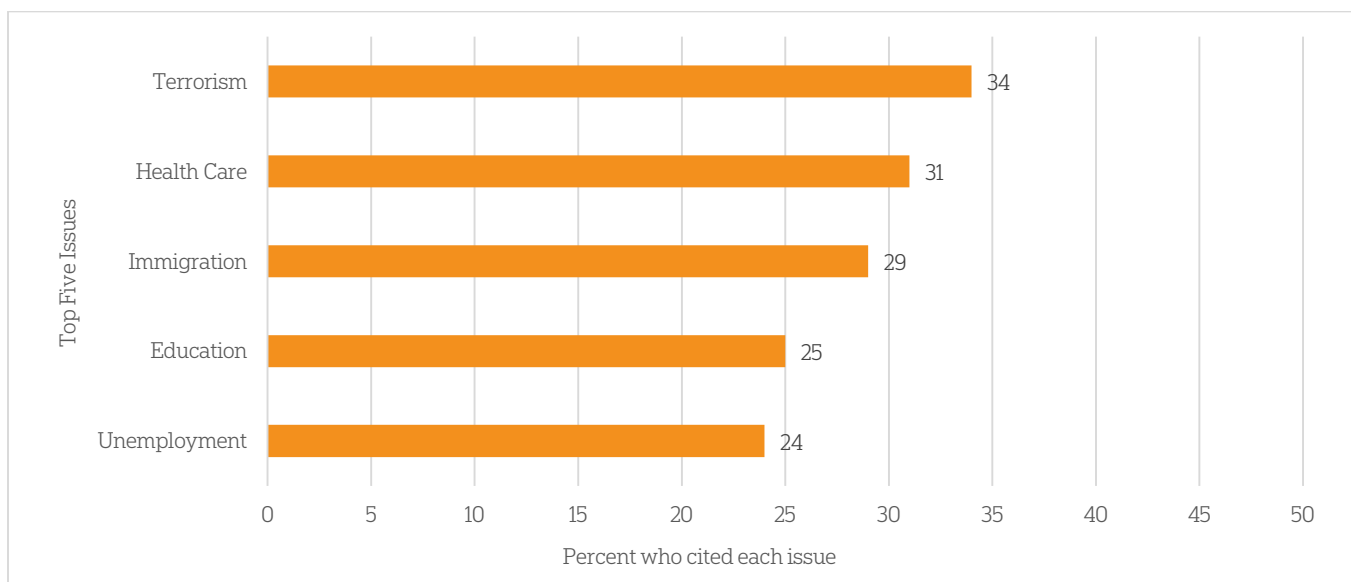
Republicans cited the budget deficit, and the same number are concerned about taxes. Less than 10 percent of Democrats mentioned either of those subjects, but 16 percent cited poverty.

- Republicans are more likely than Democrats or independents to name a foreign policy issue as one of the most important problems. Terrorism is a top issue for 42 percent of Republicans compared with 30 percent of Democrats and 31 percent of independents. And many more Republicans (43 percent) as Democrats (21 percent) or independents (26 percent) mention immigration.
- There is no partisan divide in the public's lack of confidence in the ability of the federal government to make progress in solving any of these issues.

## AMERICANS' PRIORITIES FOR 2016 ARE MORE DOMESTIC THAN FOREIGN

The U.S. government is tasked with addressing a multitude of complex problems. In this survey, respondents were asked which problems they would like the government to work on in the year 2016, and they could give up to five responses.

**Terrorism tops the overall list, followed closely by several domestic problems and immigration.**



**Question: Thinking about the problems facing the United States and the world today, which problems would you like the government to be working on in the year 2016?**

## Economic Issues

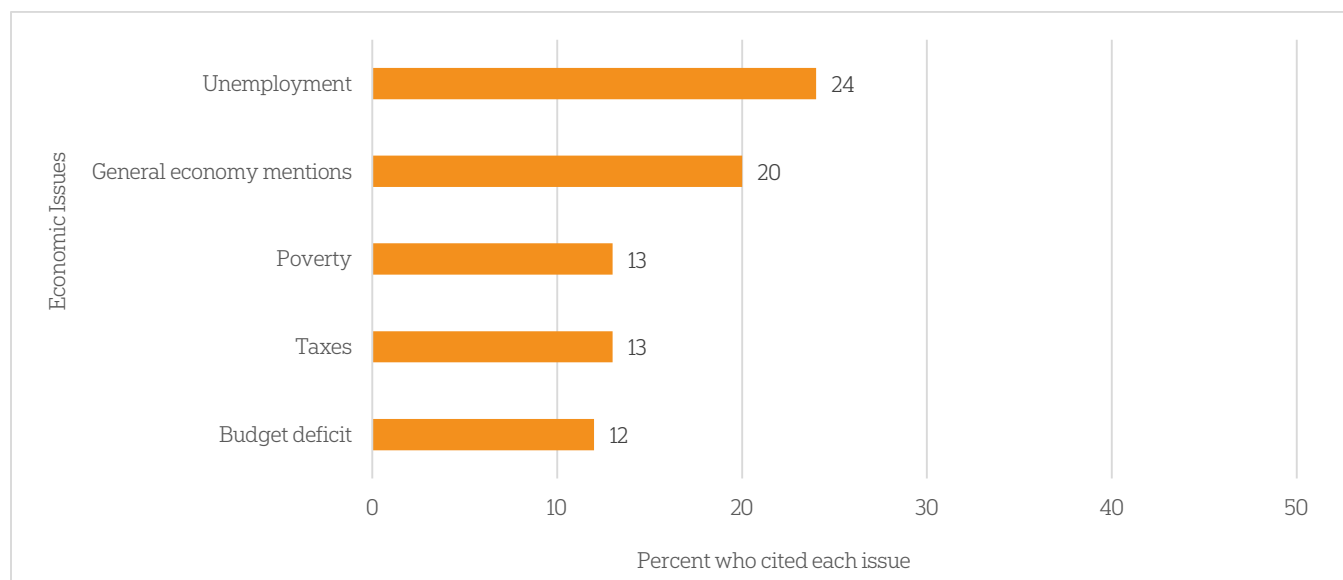
Two-thirds of adults (67 percent)<sup>1</sup> offered at least one type of economic issue as a problem the government should address in the coming year. The unemployment rate in the United States held steady at 5 percent in the months of October, November, and December of 2015, down considerably from 10 percent in October of 2009.<sup>2</sup> Still, 24 percent of Americans mentioned unemployment as one of the top problems the government should work on in 2016, with no significant partisan differences.

<sup>1</sup> Reported proportions are among the 95 percent of Americans who provided at least one valid response to the questions. Respondents who did not answer are not included.

<sup>2</sup> Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>

However, blacks are considerably more inclined to cite unemployment as a top concern than whites (47 percent vs. 19 percent).

### Unemployment tops the list of important economic issues mentioned by Americans.<sup>3</sup>



**Question: Thinking about the problems facing the United States and the world today, which problems would you like the government to be working on in the year 2016?**

There is variance by party with regard to those who mentioned the budget deficit as a top problem for the government to work on in the coming year. Overall, 12 percent cite the deficit as an important problem. But only 8 percent of Democrats specify the deficit as a concern, compared with 20 percent of Republicans. Ten percent of independents say the deficit is a top important problem. Republicans are also about twice as likely as Democrats and independents to identify taxes as one of the top problems (20 percent vs. 9 percent and 10 percent, respectively). Poverty, one of the top issues for Democrats (16 percent) and independents (16 percent), is a lower priority for Republicans (7 percent).

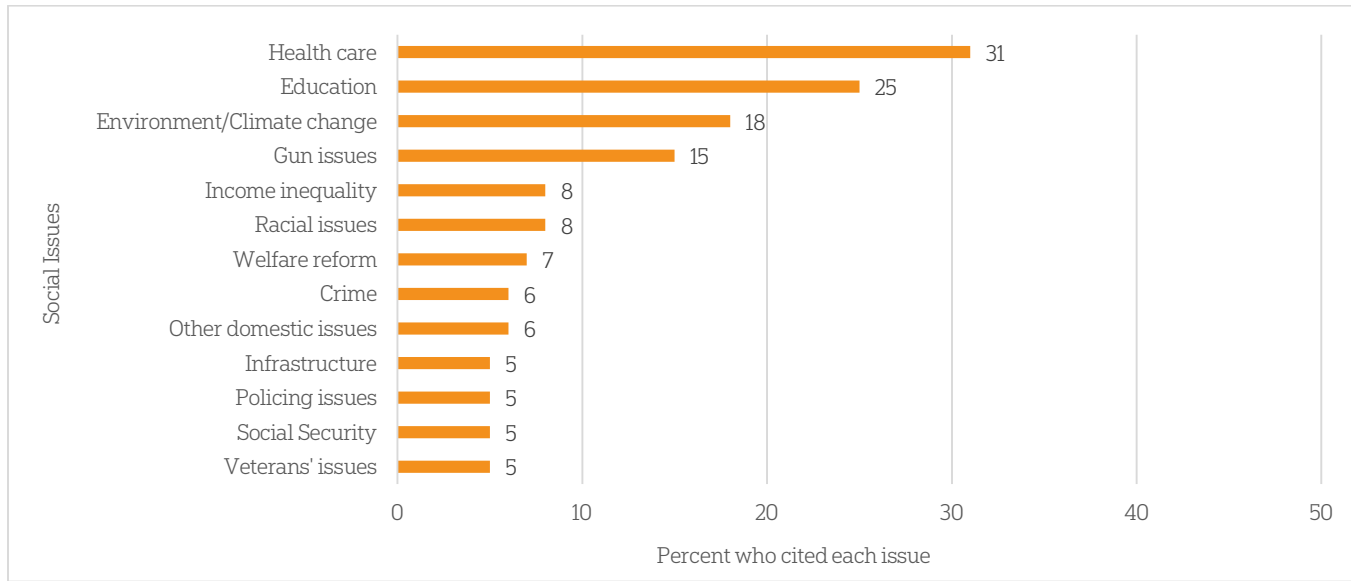
Poverty is also more likely to be mentioned by less educated Americans: 22 percent of those without a high school diploma cited poverty compared with 8 percent of college graduates.

### Other Domestic Issues

Overall, about 8 in 10 Americans (83 percent) mention at least one domestic issue other than the economy as a top problem the government should work on in the year 2016. The social issues cited in the survey run the gamut from health care (31 percent mentioned) to guns (15 percent mentioned) to welfare reform (7 percent mentioned).

<sup>3</sup> Chart only includes categories mentioned by at least 5 percent.

**Health care and education are the most frequently mentioned domestic concerns Americans want the government to handle in the coming year.<sup>4</sup>**



**Question: Thinking about the problems facing the United States and the world today, which problems would you like the government to be working on in the year 2016?**

There is little variance by party identification on some of the concerns cited, but other issues reveal large differences. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to characterize guns as one of the top problems (18 percent vs. 11 percent), while few Democrats (2 percent) mention welfare or other entitlement programs, named by 13 percent of Republicans. Democrats were also more likely than Republicans to mention education, crime, racial problems, and environmental issues, including climate change. There are no party differences among those who mention health care, veterans' issues, and Social Security, among other issues.

## Foreign Policy and Terrorism

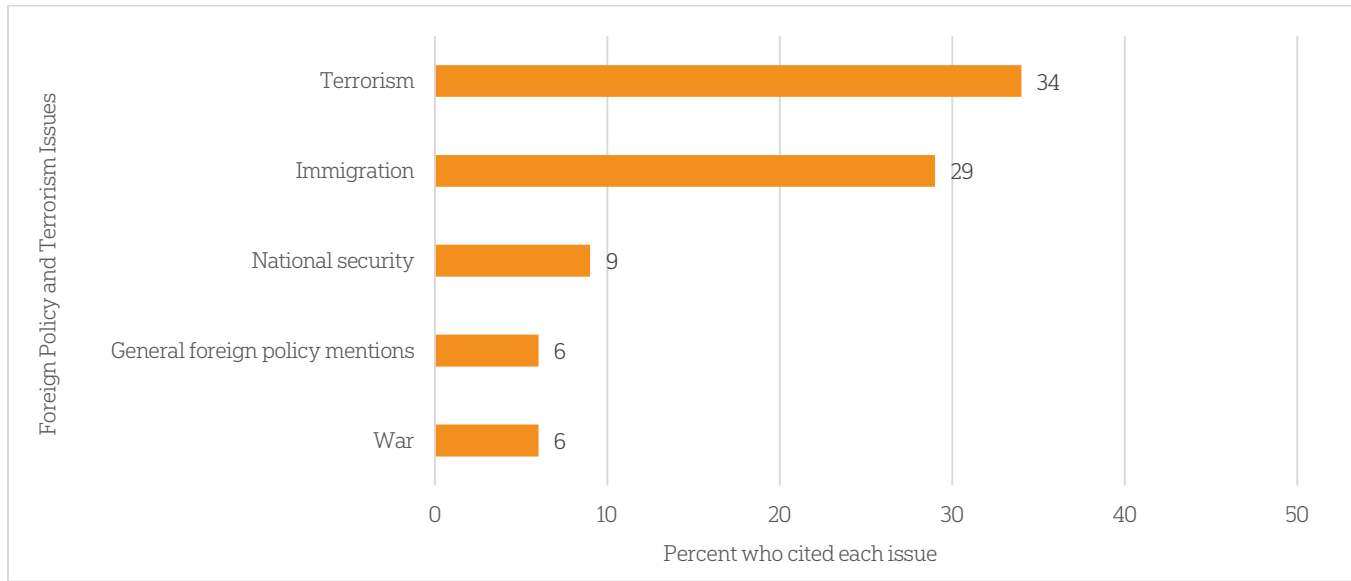
The survey was conducted shortly after several high-profile attacks on Western targets in Paris and California by Islamic extremists. A third of Americans cite terrorism as one of the problems they would like the government to address in the coming year, and nearly half (49 percent) name another foreign policy issue. Three in 10 of foreign policy mentions relate to immigration reform.

Republicans (42 percent) are more likely than Democrats (30 percent) and independents (31 percent) to say terrorism is a top issue. Republicans (61 percent) are also more likely to refer to other foreign policy issues than Democrats (41 percent) or independents (47 percent). For example, many more Republicans (43 percent) as Democrats (21 percent) or independents (26 percent) mention immigration as one of the problems the government should address in 2016.

Older Americans are more likely to cite immigration as one of their top issues. Seventeen percent of adults under age 30 mentioned immigration compared with 32 percent of those age 30 and older.

<sup>4</sup> Chart only includes categories mentioned by at least 5 percent.

**Terrorism and immigration top the foreign policy issues that Americans want the government to be dealing with in 2016.<sup>5</sup>**



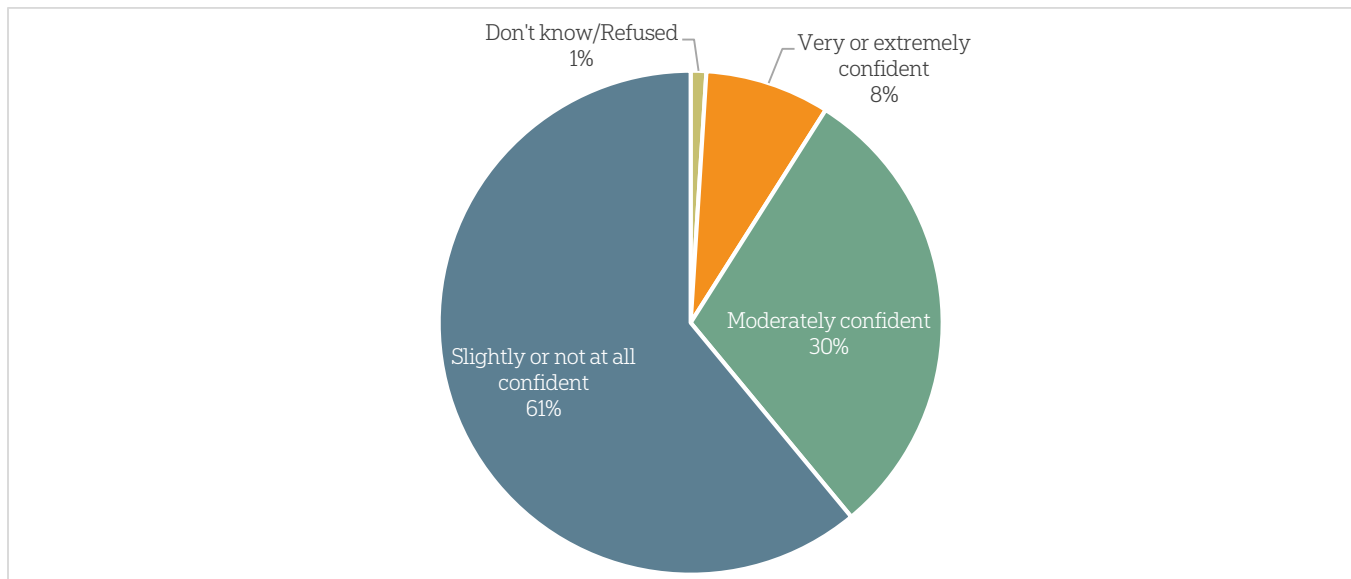
**Question: Thinking about the problems facing the United States and the world today, which problems would you like the government to be working on in the year 2016?**

## THE PUBLIC WANTS GOVERNMENT EFFORT TO FIX IMPORTANT PROBLEMS, BUT HAS LITTLE CONFIDENCE IN ANY SUCCESS

Most Americans would like to see Washington spend a considerable amount of time working on the problems they believe to be the most important. More than 80 percent of the adults who mentioned economic, domestic, foreign policy, and terrorism issues as being the most important issues facing the country in 2016 say the federal government should devote a great deal or a lot of effort to solving these problems.

However, most Americans have little or no confidence in the federal government's ability to actually make progress on the important problems of the day. Just 8 percent say they are extremely or very confident in the ability of the federal government to make progress on important issues facing the country, 30 percent are moderately confident, and 61 percent are slightly or not at all confident.

<sup>5</sup> Chart only includes categories mentioned by at least 5 percent.

**Few Americans expect the government to actually make progress on the important issues of the day.**

**Question: How confident are you in the ability of the federal government to make progress on the important problems and issues facing the country in 2016?**

Republicans and Democrats express similar levels of skepticism about Washington's capacity for making headway on the issues that trouble them.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

### Survey Methodology

This survey was conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and with funding from NORC at the University of Chicago. Data were collected using the AmeriSpeak Panel, which is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. The survey was part of a larger omnibus survey that included questions about other topics not included in this report. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face).

Interviews for this survey were conducted between December 10-13, 2015, with adults age 18 and over from the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from the AmeriSpeak Panel, and 1,042 completed the survey—728 via the web and 314 via telephone. The final stage completion rate is 30.5 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 36.8 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 99 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 11.1 percent. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 3.9 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data has been collected and made final, a poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any non-coverage or under- and oversampling resulting from the study-specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, gender, Census division, race/ethnicity, and household phone status. The weighted data, which reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over, were used for all analyses.

All differences reported between subgroups of the U.S. population are at the 95 percent level of statistical significance, meaning that there is only a 5 percent (or lower) probability that the observed differences could be attributed to chance variation in sampling.

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## ABOUT THE ASSOCIATED PRESS-NORC CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH

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