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Cloudy skies shroud the Capitol in Washington, Thursday morning, Nov. 21, 2013.

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INTRODUCTION

A society as large and complex as the United States faces many problems, and the country's official institutions must prioritize some problems over others. Public opinion pollsters have long tried to inform policymakers and the media about which problems the public sees as most important, and political analysts have also tried to capture this information in order to understand the impact of important issues on political behavior. Capturing the public's priorities for public policy can be among the most important and informative data that pollsters are able to collect, and news organizations can use this information to help report on whether the actions of official institutions are in step with the wishes of the citizens they serve.

However, most polling that tries to measure issue importance tends to ask members of the public to choose just one "most important problem" among many. This is often an unnecessarily difficult task, as government is generally able and even required to tackle many problems at once, all with a high level of effort. Citizens expect government to protect public safety at the same time as it seeks to improve economic conditions, and most citizens probably expect government to pursue both goals with equal enthusiasm. So asking people to pick just one problem as "most important" asks a difficult question that even policymakers are never required to answer.

As a result of this oversimplification, poll results on the "most important problem" tend to mimic the issues that are most often at the top of the newscasts while other issues that are less often in the public spotlight are lost, even though many citizens may believe them to be of similar urgency. A more expansive approach to measuring the public's full range of priorities would allow citizens to set forth a fuller, more realistic list of problems that the public sees as concerns requiring government attention.

With the goal of providing a more complete picture of what Americans expect from their government in 2014, the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research conducted a nationally representative online survey of 1,141 American adults. The data reveal a public that views a number of policy issues as priorities for the government to address in the coming year, although the public's confidence in the government to make progress on these issues is lacking. The key findings from the study, summarized below, provide policymakers with rigorous data to understand the public's outlook on where the country is now and what the public's preferred agenda would look like in 2014.

- The public's preferred agenda for the government in 2014 includes a diverse set of policy issues that range from economic problems to social policies to foreign affairs. Health care reform is at the top of the public's list of priorities.
- Americans want the government to put significant effort into addressing their priority problems. On the most commonly mentioned issues, large majorities of Americans, two-thirds or more, would like the federal government to devote a lot or a great deal of effort toward solving those problems. And although the public is split on how active a role government ought to take generally, nearly six in 10 see government as a necessary intermediary in dealing with the complex modern economy.
- When asked how confident they are that the federal government can make real progress in solving each of the problems they identified, Americans report very low levels of confidence, with large majorities saying they are only slightly or not at all confident that the government can make real progress on the most commonly mentioned issues.
- Americans express relatively little faith in the current political system, giving the government low marks on its performance upholding this country's fundamental principles. For example, more people believe the government is doing a poor job than a good job of promoting the well-being of all Americans—not just special interests (55 percent vs. 9 percent)—and of representing the views of most Americans (55 percent vs. 9 percent).
- Americans have important personal goals for 2014—such as issues with personal finances and health—but also report facing significant challenges in meeting those goals.
- Looking back, Americans most often cite technology as the biggest change to American life, and they tend to think the quality of life in America has declined in the last four decades and will continue to do so over the next 40 years.
- On a number of different fronts, many Americans, especially whites and Republicans, continue to feel pessimistic about their own lives and the condition of the country.

AMERICANS PERCEIVE A NUMBER OF DIVERSE AND COMPLEX POLICY ISSUES FACING THE COUNTRY AND THE WORLD THAT THEY THINK THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE WORKING ON IN 2014.

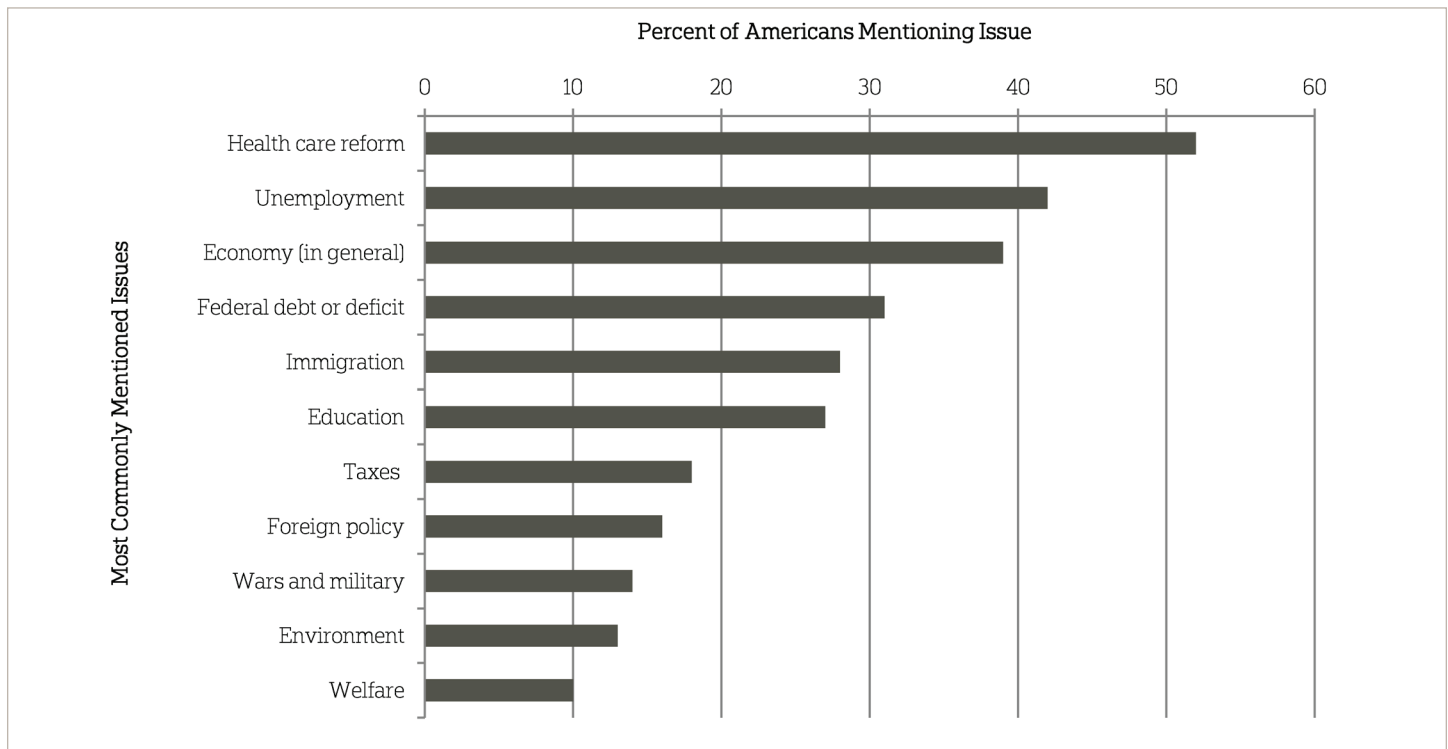
Often times, surveys ask people to pick or name just one issue that they perceive as the most important one facing the nation. By limiting people to only one policy issue, this approach may not accurately capture the range of issues facing the nation. To avoid this problem, we gave survey respondents the opportunity to list an unlimited number of problems facing the United States and the world that they believe the government should work on in 2014. While we coded all of the problems mentioned by each respondent, we focused our analysis on the first 10 problems mentioned by each respondent.

Using this approach, we find that the public's agenda for the government in 2014 includes a diverse set of policy issues that covers economic problems, social policies, and foreign affairs, among others. At the top of the agenda is health care reform, mentioned by 52 percent of individuals as one of the 10 top

problems facing the country and the world that they think the government should work on in 2014. Coming in just behind health care reform are a series of economic issues. Forty-two percent of Americans listed unemployment, 39 percent the economy in general, and 31 percent the federal deficit or debt.

Other issues that percolate to the top of the agenda when people are given the opportunity to provide multiple issues of concern are immigration (28 percent), education (27 percent), taxes (18 percent), foreign policy and U.S. involvement overseas (16 percent), the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (14 percent), the environment and climate change (13 percent), and welfare or entitlement reform (10 percent).

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 2014? Please list up to 10 issues.



Perceptions of the importance of issues related to health care and politics vary by political and ideological characteristics, with those less engaged in the political system less apt to call them top concerns. Republicans are more likely to mention issues with politics (43 percent) than Democrats (23 percent) or independents (27 percent). Within this broad topic, Republicans tended to mention issues related to President Obama more often than Democrats or independents. Partisans, both Democrats (54 percent) and Republicans (62 percent) are more likely to mention issues related to health care than independents (48 percent). Liberals are more likely to mention domestic policy issues (55 percent) than moderates (43 percent) or conservatives (46 percent). People who identify with the tea party movement are more likely to mention issues related to health care (67 percent vs. 52 percent) or politics (50 percent vs. 25 percent) than others. Registered voters, no matter their partisan identification, are more likely than individuals who are not registered to vote to mention issues related to domestic policy (47 percent vs. 34 percent), health care (58 percent vs. 40 percent), and politics (35 percent vs. 15 percent).

Americans' sense of the most important issues for the government to handle in 2014 vary slightly by demographic factors, as noted below, but overall, different groups within America tend to perceive similar priorities for the government in 2014.

- Domestic issues such as education or the environment are mentioned more frequently by young adults 18-29 (47

percent) and older adults (48 percent of those 50-64 and 54 percent of those 65 and over) relative to middle-aged Americans (39 percent of those 30-39 and 38 percent of those 40-49). Americans 65 and over are nearly three times as likely as 18- to 29-year-olds to mention issues related to politics (49 percent vs. 17 percent), and they mention issues related to health care more often than younger Americans (62 percent vs. 51 percent).

- Whites are more likely than racial and ethnic minorities to mention issues related to politics (37 percent vs. 18 percent) and health care (59 percent vs. 48 percent), but non-whites are more likely than whites to mention issues related to personal health (13 percent vs. 4 percent) and personal finances (16 percent vs. 10 percent).
- Individuals in lower- and middle-income households, those making less than \$100,000 per year, are more likely to mention personal finance issues (15 percent and 13 percent) compared with individuals in upper-income households earning more than \$100,000 per year (6 percent).
- Men are more likely than women to mention issues related to politics (35 percent vs. 26 percent). Women are more likely than men to mention issues related to health care (59 percent vs. 52 percent). Parents are more likely than non-parents to mention issues related to health care (59 percent vs. 48 percent) and politics (34 percent vs. 23 percent).

AMERICANS WANT THE GOVERNMENT TO WORK HARD ACROSS A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT PRIORITY PROBLEMS IN 2014.

After listing their ideas about the top problems that the federal government should be working on in 2014, Americans were asked how much they wanted government to do to solve these problems. Despite broadly negative views on how the government performs, the public expresses a desire for these problems to be addressed with vigor. Averaging across the entire range of problems mentioned as issues that Americans want the government to address in 2014, 80 percent of Americans would like the federal government to spend a lot or a great deal of effort in finding solutions to those problems. Race and racial inequality issues were mentioned by 3 percent of Americans as one of the 10 problems for the government to address in 2014. It is the only policy area where a majority of those mentioning them say they do not want the government to spend a great deal of effort solving the issue in 2014. Fifty-six percent of those mentioning race issues think the government should devote no effort or only a little effort to solving the problem, 12 percent want a moderate amount of effort, and 26 percent want a lot or a great deal of effort.

When given a specific list of issues that often appear on more traditional lists of important problems facing the nation, Americans tend to prefer a lower overall level of government

effort than for their own priority issues. Still, regardless of where the issue falls on their own priority list, a majority of Americans want the federal government to expend a lot or a great deal of effort on many of the same problems, including improving the health care system (68 percent), reducing unemployment (67 percent), reducing the federal budget deficit (71 percent), improving the quality of education (62 percent), and reforming the tax system (59 percent).

While more than a quarter of Americans feel that immigration is a problem the federal government should work on in 2014, and 79 percent of those indicate it should receive a lot or a great deal of effort toward a solution, just short of a majority (48 percent) feel that a lot or a great deal of effort should be made toward "reforming the immigration system." In terms of environmental concerns, 13 percent of Americans mentioned the environment or climate change as a priority, with 75 percent of them feeling that the federal government should devote a lot or a great deal of effort towards this problem. On the more specific item asking about the level of effort that should be devoted to "addressing climate change," only 28 percent would like a lot or a great deal of effort expended.

Here is a list of issues that some people have mentioned as ones that the federal government should focus on in the coming year. For each one, please say how much effort you would like the federal government to expend on this issue in 2014.

	A lot/ A great deal of effort (%)	A moderate amount of effort (%)	None/ Only a little effort (%)
Reducing the federal budget deficit	71	16	11
Improving the way the government functions	70	18	10
Improving the health care system	68	16	14
Protecting the future of Social Security	68	23	6
Reducing unemployment	67	20	10
Improving the quality of education	62	22	14
Reforming the tax system	59	27	11
Reforming the immigration system	48	28	21
Protecting the right to vote	47	23	28
Improving infrastructure like bridges, highways, and dams	45	38	14
Reducing the gap between the wealthy and poor	44	24	30
Promoting traditional family values	39	24	36
Reforming gun laws	37	16	45
Protecting a woman's right to choose	37	27	32
Preparing for natural disasters	36	41	22
Reducing racism and racial disparities	33	29	36
Addressing climate change	28	28	41
Reducing gender disparities in the workplace	27	32	39
Overturning Roe v. Wade	24	21	52
Advancing gay rights	20	24	55

Other specific issues that a majority of Americans want the government to address in 2014 include “improving the way the government functions,” with 70 percent requesting a lot or a great deal of effort, and “protecting the future of Social Security,” with 68 percent. Issues with moderate numbers of Americans interested in high levels of effort include protecting the right to vote (47 percent); improving infrastructure like bridges, highways, and dams (45 percent); and reducing the gap between the wealthy and the poor (44 percent). Many of the remaining issues with fewer Americans interested in high levels of effort are related to more narrowly focused objectives, such as promoting traditional family values (39 percent), protecting a woman's right to choose (37 percent), reforming gun laws (37 percent), reducing racism and racial disparities (33 percent), reducing gender disparities in the workplace (27 percent), overturning *Roe v. Wade* (24 percent), and advancing gay rights (20 percent). Another issue with moderate support is preparing for natural disasters, with 36 percent of Americans feeling that the federal government should expend a lot or a great deal of effort on this issue.

There are class divisions on a number of issues, with more Americans in households earning \$50,000 per year or less in favor of strong government effort toward solving certain problems than those whose household incomes top \$100,000 or more. These issues include protecting the future of Social Security (75 percent vs. 56 percent), reducing unemployment (73 percent vs. 60 percent), reducing the gap between the

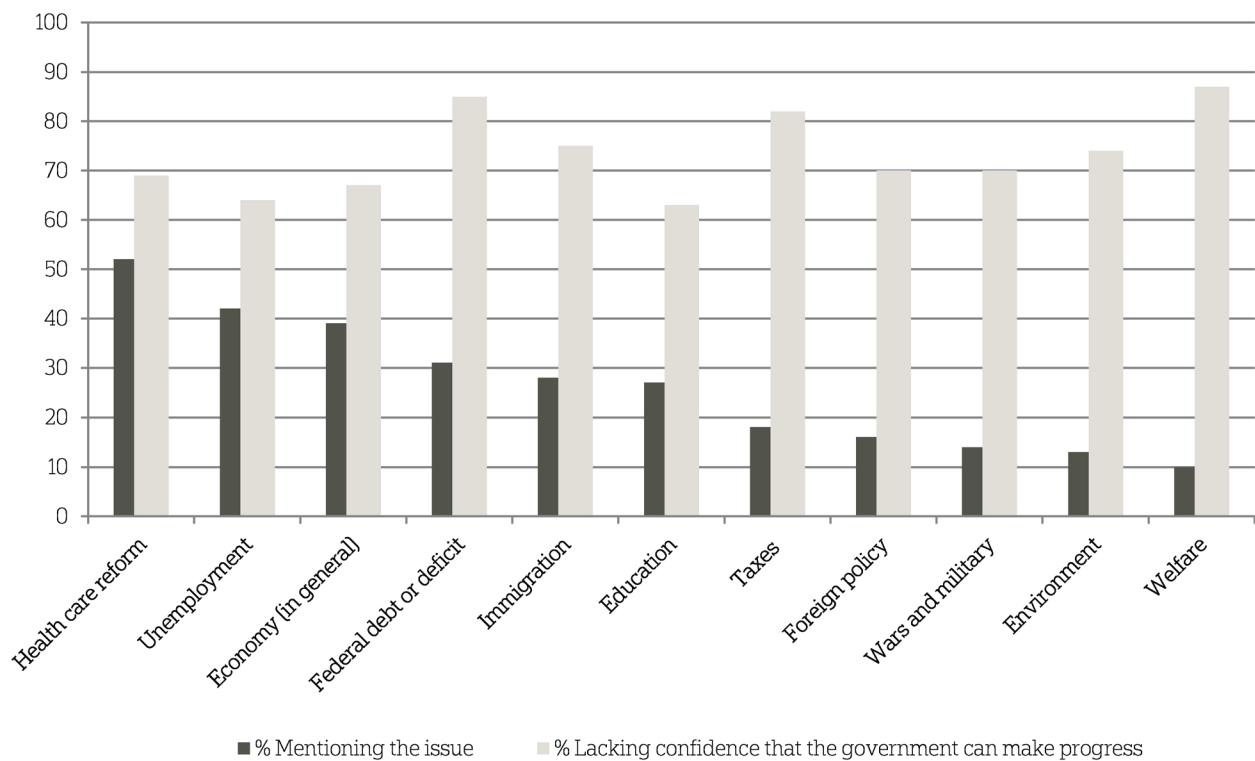
wealthy and poor (53 percent vs. 37 percent), protecting the right to vote (52 percent vs. 37 percent), reforming the immigration system (51 percent vs. 35 percent), promoting traditional family values (48 percent vs. 35 percent), preparing for natural disasters (40 percent vs. 25 percent), reducing racism and racial disparities (40 percent vs. 23 percent), reducing gender disparities in the workplace (33 percent vs. 19 percent), and overturning *Roe v. Wade* (28 percent vs. 17 percent).

Gender divisions also exist, with women wanting the government to make more effort toward solving certain problems than men. These include improving the quality of education (74 percent vs. 49 percent); improving the health care system (73 percent vs. 61 percent); reducing the gap between the wealthy and poor (53 percent vs. 34 percent); protecting the right to vote (52 percent vs. 41 percent); improving infrastructure like bridges, highways, and dams (50 percent vs. 39 percent); protecting a woman's right to choose (46 percent vs. 28 percent); promoting traditional family values (45 percent vs. 32 percent); reforming gun laws (44 percent vs. 28 percent); reducing racism and racial disparities (42 percent vs. 24 percent); preparing for natural disasters (41 percent vs. 31 percent); reducing gender disparities in the workplace (34 percent vs. 21 percent); and advancing gay rights (25 percent vs. 15 percent).

AMERICANS LACK CONFIDENCE IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S ABILITY TO MAKE PROGRESS ON THEIR PRIORITY ISSUES IN 2014.

When asked how confident they are that the federal government can make real progress in solving each of the problems they identified as important for the government to address in 2014, Americans report very low levels of confidence. Large majorities are only slightly confident or not at all confident that the government can make real progress on the most commonly mentioned issues, including 69 percent for health care reform, 64 percent for unemployment and jobs, 67 percent for the economy, 85 percent for the budget and

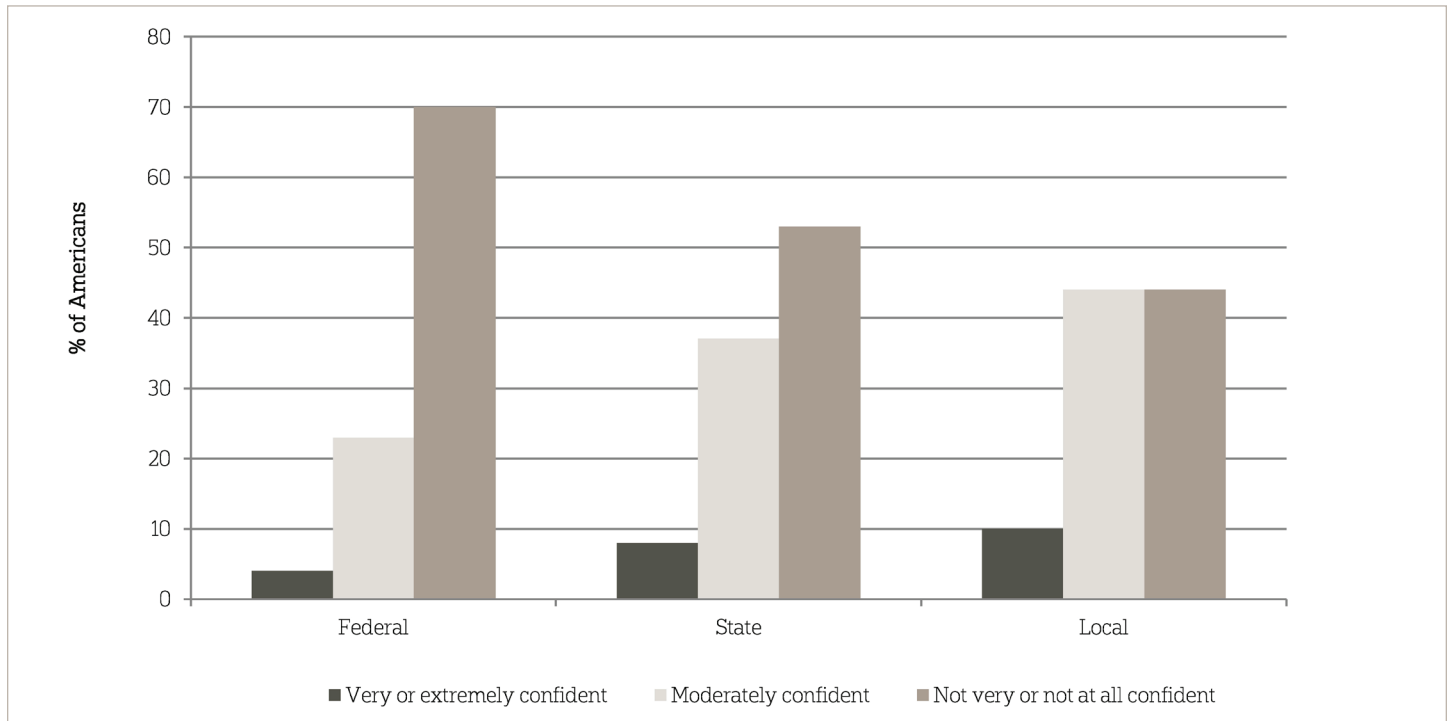
national debt, 75 percent for immigration, 63 percent for education, 82 percent for taxes, 70 percent for foreign policy, 70 percent on war-related issues, and 74 percent for the environment and climate change. Averaging across the entire range of problems mentioned, 76 percent of Americans report low levels of confidence that the government will make real progress toward solutions to those problems.

Americans' priorities for 2014 and their lack of confidence in the government's ability to address them.**AMERICANS' LACK OF FAITH IN THE GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS THEIR PRIORITY PROBLEMS EXTENDS TO A LACK OF CONFIDENCE GENERALLY AND ACROSS ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT.**

Although Americans want the government to expend a great deal of effort across a number of policy areas in 2014, they express relatively little confidence in government generally or in its ability to address their priority problems in 2014. Across all levels of government, Americans lack confidence in its ability to make progress on the important problems and issues facing them in 2014. Americans express the least amount of confidence in the federal government. Seventy percent say that they are not very confident or not confident at all that the federal government will make progress on the important problems and issues facing the country in 2014, while 23 percent say they are moderately confident and just 4 percent are very or extremely confident.

Confidence increases somewhat when Americans focus on their state government, but still, a majority, 53 percent, say they are not very confident or not confident at all that their state government will make progress on their state's important problems and issues. Thirty-seven percent express moderate confidence in state government, and just 8 percent say they are very or extremely confident in their state government. Americans are most optimistic about their local government's ability to address the critical issues it faces, though levels of confidence remain fairly low. Just 10 percent say they are very or extremely confident in their local government's ability to make progress on important problems and issues. Forty-four percent are moderately confident. Forty-four percent are not very confident or not confident at all.

How confident are you in the ability of the federal/state/local government to make progress on the important problems and issues it faces in 2014?



Republicans (87 percent) and independents (71 percent) are more likely than Democrats (56 percent) to say they lack confidence in the federal government. However, Democrats (45 percent) and independents (52 percent) are significantly more likely than Republicans (37 percent) to report low levels of confidence in their local government.

Whites (76 percent) are significantly more likely than blacks (54 percent) and Hispanics (58 percent) to say they are not very confident or not at all confident in the federal government, but this difference between races disappears when asking about confidence in their state or local governments. Looking at annual income, people making \$50,000 a year or less (60 percent) are significantly less likely than those making between \$50,000 and \$100,000 (76 percent) and those making \$100,000 or more (78 percent) to say they are not very confident or not confident at all in the federal government. Again, this difference disappears when asking about state or local government.

Americans with less than a high school education (11 percent) are more likely than those with a high school degree (4 percent) or college degree (1 percent) to say they are very or extremely confident in the federal government's ability to tackle the important problems it faces. A similar pattern emerges when asking about state government, where 17 percent of those with less than a high school degree report being very or extremely confident compared to just 6 percent of those with a high school degree or some college. When asking about local government, however, those with less than a high school degree (62 percent) are significantly more likely than those with a high school degree (43 percent) or a college degree (39 percent) to report being not very confident or not confident at all.

Those from suburban (74 percent) and rural (75 percent) areas are more likely than those in urban areas (62 percent) to report low levels of confidence in the federal government's ability to solve its important problems. No consistent patterns emerge for confidence in state and local governments based on urbanicity.

AMERICANS ALSO EXPRESS RELATIVELY LITTLE FAITH IN THE SYSTEM, GIVING THE GOVERNMENT LOW MARKS ON ITS PERFORMANCE IN UPHOLDING THIS COUNTRY'S FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES.

Only one in 20 Americans (5 percent) believe the U.S. system of government works well and needs no changes. Just over half see a need for big changes, with 51 percent reporting that the U.S. system of government needs a lot of changes or needs

to be completely changed. Forty-two percent say it works well but needs some changes. Republicans (12 percent) and independents (14 percent) are more likely than Democrats (6 percent) to say that the system needs to be completely

changed. Also, blacks (12 percent) are more likely than whites (4 percent) to say that the system works well and needs no changes.

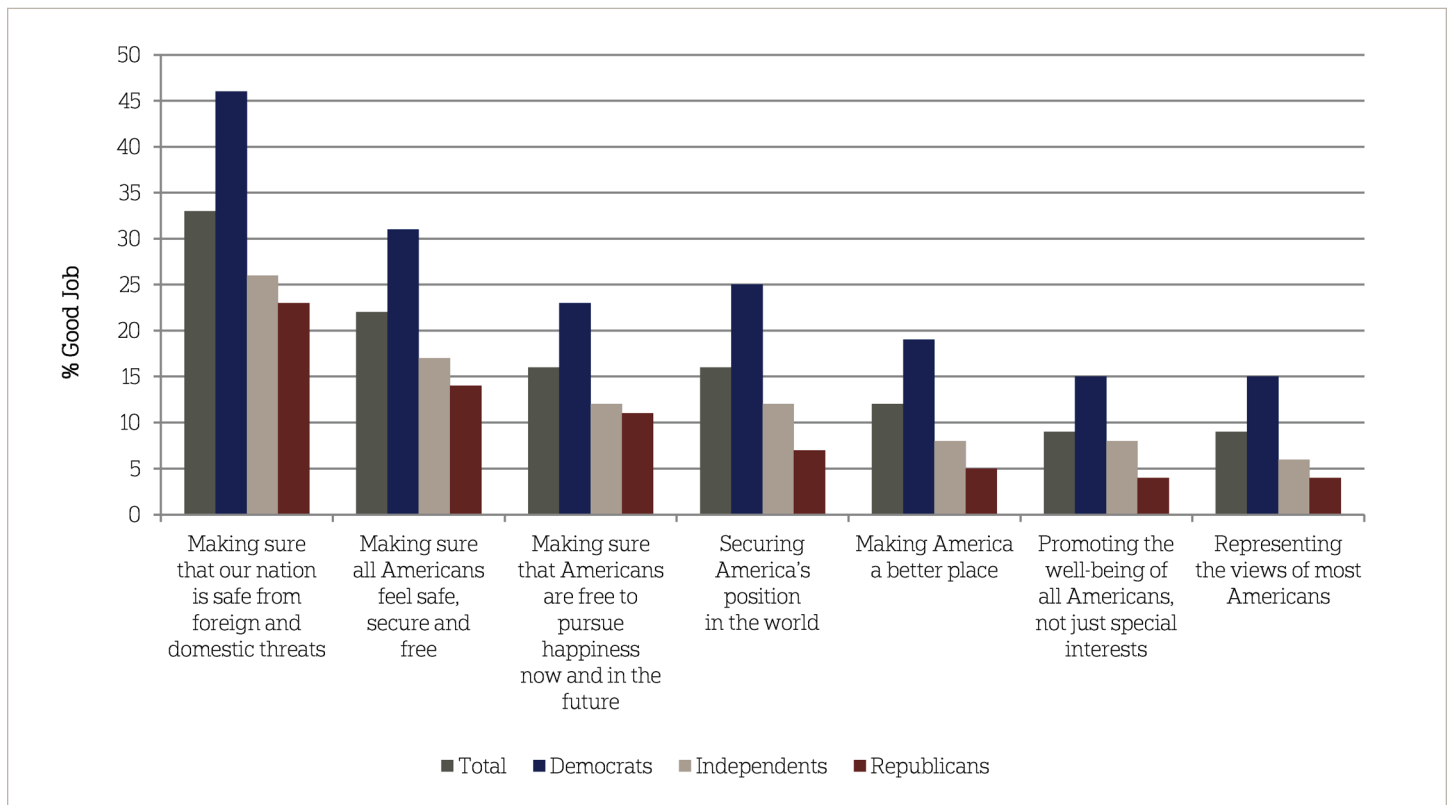
On a democratic government's most basic function—representing the views of most Americans—the public gives the government poor marks by a factor of 6 to 1, with 55 percent saying it is doing a poor job while just 9 percent say it is doing a good job.

Additionally, Americans give the government poor marks on a variety of critical tasks for which it is responsible. Just 12 percent say the federal government is doing a good job of making America a better place compared to 44 percent who say it is doing a poor job. Fourteen percent think it is doing a good job making sure that all people are treated equally, while 42 percent think it is doing a poor job. More Americans also think that the federal government is doing a poor job than a good job at making sure all Americans feel safe, secure, and free (30 percent vs. 22 percent), making sure that Americans are free to pursue happiness now and in the future (35 percent vs. 16 percent), and securing America's position in the world (41 percent vs. 16 percent). Even larger percentages think that their government is doing a poor job promoting the well-being of all Americans, not just special interests (55 percent vs. 9 percent).

Protecting the nation from foreign and domestic threats is the one area where more Americans feel the federal government is doing a good job than a poor job. Thirty-three percent say the government is doing a good job at keeping the nation safe from foreign and domestic threats compared to 23 percent who say it is doing a poor job.

For almost all tasks, Democrats were more likely than independents or Republicans to say the federal government is doing a good job, a pattern frequently seen in survey research where the government receives more favorable ratings from members of the president's party. This held true on making America a better place (19 percent vs. 8 percent and 5 percent), making sure that our nation is safe from foreign and domestic threats (46 percent vs. 26 percent and 23 percent), making sure all Americans feel safe, secure and free (31 percent vs. 17 percent and 14 percent), promoting the well-being of all Americans (15 percent vs. 8 percent and 4 percent), making sure that Americans are free to pursue happiness now and in the future (23 percent vs. 12 percent and 11 percent), securing America's position in the world (25 percent vs. 12 percent and 7 percent), and representing the views of most Americans (15 percent vs. 6 percent and 4 percent).

For each of the following tasks, do you think the federal government is doing a good job, a poor job, or neither a good nor poor job at that particular task?

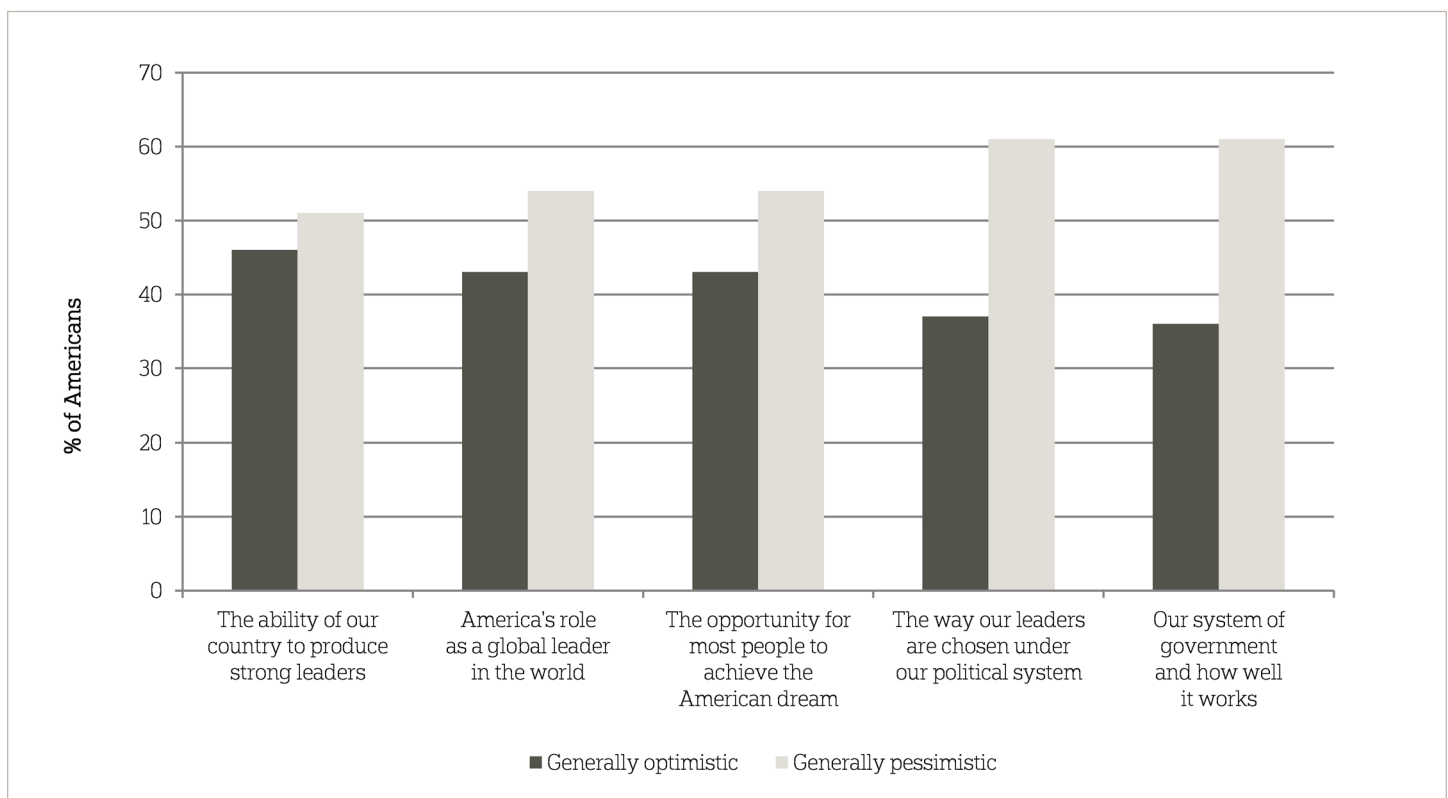


In keeping with their doubts about the government's ability to make progress on key priorities or maintain the basic functions of democratic government, when thinking about the future of the United States, a majority of Americans feel generally pessimistic. Most say they have doubts about the electoral system, the standing of the United States in the global community, and the government in general.

Forty-six percent of Americans say they feel generally optimistic about the ability of our country to produce strong leaders, and 51 percent say they feel generally pessimistic about it. Forty-three percent of Americans say they feel generally optimistic about America's role as a global leader in

the world, and 54 percent say they feel generally pessimistic about it. Forty-three percent of Americans say they feel generally optimistic about the opportunity for most people to achieve the American dream, and 54 percent say they feel generally pessimistic about it. Thirty-seven percent of Americans say they feel generally optimistic about the way our leaders are chosen under our political system, and 61 percent say they feel generally pessimistic about it. Thirty-six percent of Americans say they feel generally optimistic about our system of government and how well it works, and 61 percent say they feel generally pessimistic about it. These levels of pessimism are consistent across both members of both parties and independents.

Thinking about the future of our country, please tell me whether you feel generally optimistic or generally pessimistic about each of the following.



AMERICANS HAVE IMPORTANT PERSONAL GOALS FOR 2014 BUT ALSO REPORT FACING SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES.

Looking at their own goals for 2014, Americans report a wide range of objectives. When asked what they most wanted to accomplish in 2014, Americans most frequently cite key personal priorities focused on personal finance or health. During 2014, 10 percent of Americans want to improve their current financial situation, 10 percent want to maintain or improve their health, 10 percent want to get a new or better job, 7 percent want to reduce their personal debt, and 6 percent want to further their education.

Americans also report that they are likely to face serious personal challenges in 2014. When asked to think about the most serious problem facing them in the coming year, Americans report that personal finance and health are the most significant challenges. Twenty-four percent of Americans report that maintaining their current financial situation and making ends meet would likely be the most serious problem they face in 2014, and 14 percent report that their health would be the most significant problem they face. Other challenges include getting a job (8 percent) and obtaining health care or

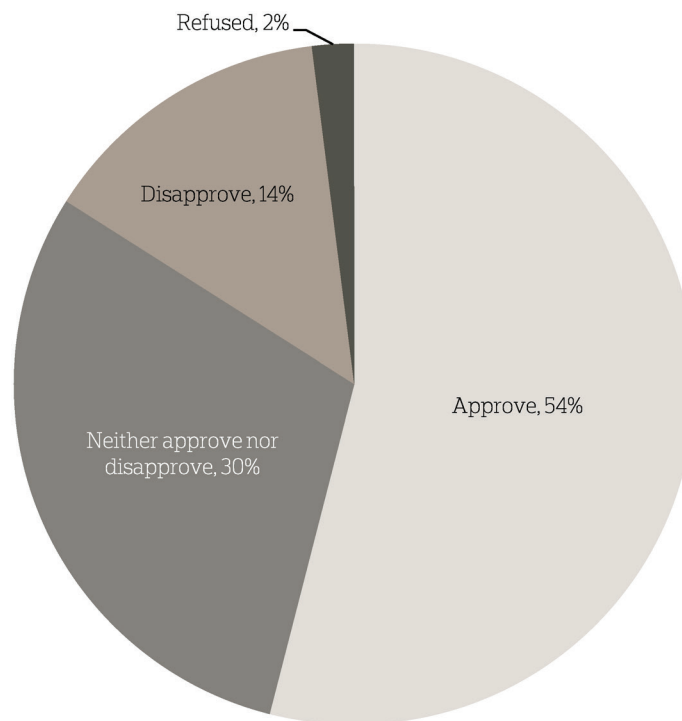
getting health insurance (6 percent). Notably, 6 percent of Americans report that they do not expect to face any challenges or problems in 2014.

Although most Americans indicate that they likely would face significant personal challenges in 2014, when asked how confident they are in their own ability to make progress on the important issues and problems they are likely to face, seven in 10 Americans have moderate or greater confidence that they can make progress on problems and challenges they may face

during the coming year. Twenty-four percent indicate they are extremely or very confident in their ability to make progress on personal issues and problems during 2014, and 47 percent indicate that they are “moderately confident” in their ability to make progress on important issues and problems they may face in 2014.

Looking back on 2013, a majority of Americans (54 percent) approve of the way that they handled their own lives during 2013.

Overall, would you say you approve, disapprove, or neither approve nor disapprove of the way you handled the year 2013?



Americans with incomes above \$50,000 per year are more likely than those with lower incomes to report that they approve of their own performance in 2013. Similarly, Americans who report completing college or graduate/

professional education are more likely than those who did not complete high school or college to approve of their own performance in 2013.

MANY AMERICANS CONTINUE TO FEEL PESSIMISTIC ABOUT THEIR OWN LIVES AND THE CONDITION OF THE COUNTRY.

While half of Americans think their standard of living is better than their parents' standard of living when they were their age, fewer than half think people like them have a good chance of improving their standard of living. Forty-nine percent of Americans say their own standard of living is somewhat or much better compared to their parents standard of living when they were their age, 24 percent say it is somewhat or much worse, and 25 percent say it is about the

same. Just 35 percent of Americans say they strongly or somewhat agree with the statement, “the way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living.” 37 percent say they strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement, and 26 percent say they neither agree nor disagree with the statement.

The general feeling of pessimism among Americans is not limited to views about their own lives. Sixty-three percent say things in this country are heading in the wrong direction while just 35 percent of Americans say things in this country are heading in the right direction. However, trend data indicates an increase in optimism and a decline in pessimism over the past two years. Just 26 percent of Americans in December

2011 said things in this country are heading in the right direction while 70 percent said things in this country are heading in the wrong direction. Optimism peaked in December 2012 when 42 percent of Americans said things in this country are heading in the right direction and 50 percent said things in this country are heading in the wrong direction.¹

LOOKING BACK, AMERICANS MOST OFTEN CITE TECHNOLOGY AS THE BIGGEST CHANGE TO AMERICAN LIFE, AND THEY TEND TO THINK THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN AMERICA WILL CONTINUE TO DECLINE OVER THE NEXT 40 YEARS.

As Americans are asked to reflect on the biggest changes in American life compared with the early 1970s, one in five volunteer that technology overall is the biggest change. Beyond general mentions of technological advancements, Americans specify that the biggest changes include, specifically, the internet (2 percent), computers (2 percent), communications advancements (1 percent), consumption of technology (1 percent), and too much dependence on technology (1 percent).

In general, beyond the more neutral perceptions about changes in technology, most other volunteered responses about America's biggest changes since the 1970s reflect negative perceptions about today compared to the 1970s. Fifteen percent say the biggest change in American life since the early 1970s has to do with the economy. In particular, Americans indicate that prices and the cost of living are higher (3 percent); the economy is worse, with higher unemployment and fewer jobs (3 percent); and there is more economic inequality, a shrinking middle class, and increased poverty (2 percent). One percent volunteer that the economy has gotten better.

Fewer Americans volunteer that the biggest change in American life since the 1970s relates to politics, partisanship, or political leadership (9 percent); among those that do mention such issues, 3 percent say there is too much government. Seven percent of Americans gave responses relating to domestic issue changes, including 3 percent who say the biggest change relates to civil rights and equality. Five percent say there have been moral, religious, and social changes such as a decline in morals and religiosity, and 4 percent think the biggest changes relate to children and family issues.

Asked about how life in America compares to life in the early 1970s, a majority (54 percent) thinks that life in America over that time has gotten worse; three in 10 think things have gotten better, and 15 percent say life in America has stayed about the same. There are clear generational differences in respondents' views about America now compared to the early 1970s. Among Americans ages 50 and older—those who were

coming of age or older in the 1970s—63 percent say life in America has gotten worse since that time, while just 23 percent say life has gotten better. In contrast, fewer than half of Americans ages 18 to 49 (46 percent) say life in America has gotten worse, and 34 percent say it has gotten better.

The survey shows that these negative perceptions about life in America today compared to the early 1970s are at least partially shaped by individual circumstance. Among those who agree that people like them or their family have a good chance of improving their standard of living, half say life has gotten better since the 1970s, while those who do not see such an opportunity (77 percent) overwhelmingly say life has gotten worse. Similarly, among those who think their own standard of living is better than that of their parents, a plurality (47 percent) say life has gotten better in America; among those who indicate that their own standard of living is worse than their parents, 85 percent say life has gotten worse since the 1970s.

As Americans look forward to 2014, the survey also assessed Americans' outlook further into the future—explicitly, what they think the biggest change in everyday American life will be from now until about 2050. Similar to their retrospective opinions, a plurality (15 percent) volunteer that the biggest change will be technology, including general changes in technology (7 percent) and advancements in technology (3 percent). Another 11 percent think the biggest change in everyday life will relate to politics and government, such as an increase in the size of government (3 percent) or that America's system of government will change or there will be civil unrest (2 percent). Ten percent mention the economy will change over the next 40 years, with 5 percent saying there will be a bigger gap between the rich and poor, a shrinking middle class, and increased poverty.

Eight percent volunteer that there will be changes relating to domestic issues, including loss of civil liberties and freedoms (4 percent), and changes in issues relating to crime, drugs, violence, guns, and safety (2 percent). Others mention global changes (5 percent), including environmental decline, climate change, and global warming (2 percent). Fewer say moral,

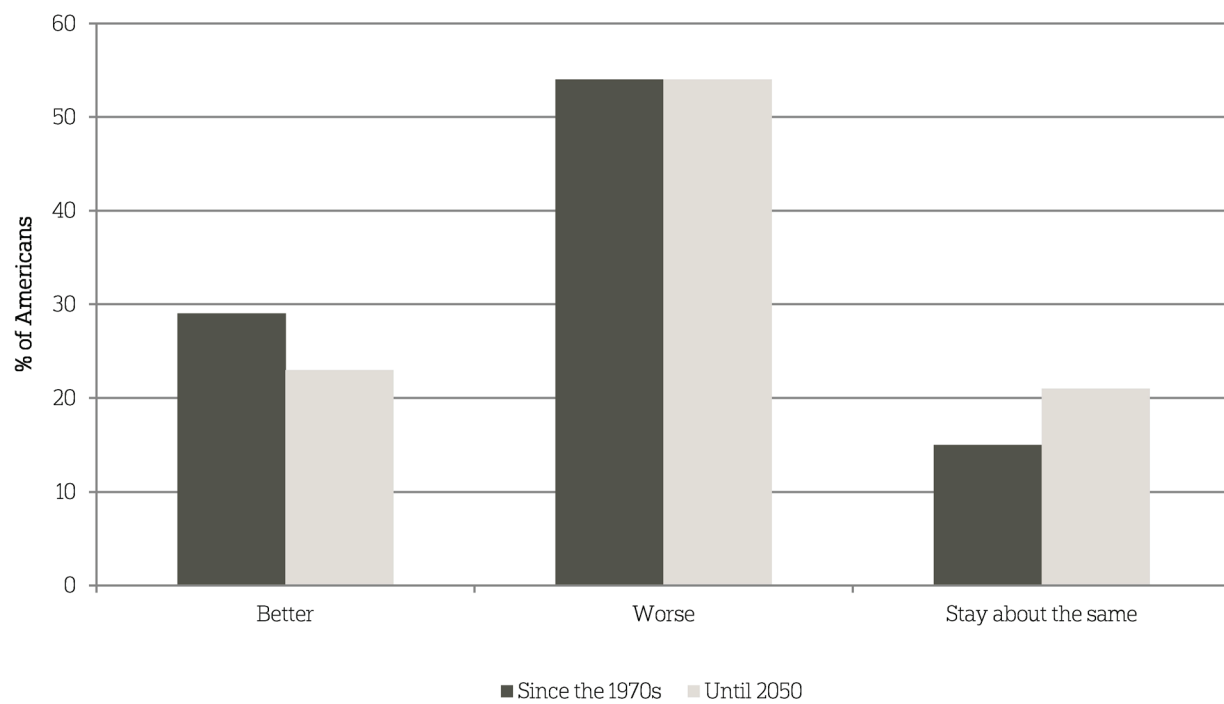
1 From the December 2013 AP-GfK Poll. http://surveys.ap.org/data/GfK/AP-GfK%20December%202013%20Poll%20Topline%20FINAL_POLITICS.pdf

religious, or social issues (3 percent), health issues (3 percent), quality of life generally (2 percent), or foreign and international issues (2 percent) will be the biggest changes.

Americans' views about the next 40 years mirror their views about the last 40 years: asked directly whether life from now until about 2050 will get better, worse, or stay about the same, a majority (54 percent) again say worse, 23 percent say better, and 21 percent say it will stay the same. Interestingly, the

differences in outlook across age groups are not as stark looking forward as looking backward. Still, older Americans remain somewhat more negative; 59 percent of those 50 and older say things will get worse in America over the next 40 years, with just 20 percent saying things will get better. Comparatively, half of adults ages 18 to 49 hold negative views about the future of America, while 26 percent believe things will get better.

Do you think life in America over that time has gotten/will get...?



Further, perceptions are again tied to views about one's own, as well as one's family, circumstances. Among those who disagree that people like them or their family have a good chance of improving their standard of living, an overwhelmingly majority—73 percent—say life in America over the next 40 years will get worse; just 11 percent say life will get better. In contrast, 39 percent who think they and their family have a chance to improve their standard of living say life in America will get worse, and 38 percent say it will get better.

The general pessimism that Americans express about specific aspects of the future of our country also relates to the general pessimism about America's future. For example, two-thirds of those who are generally pessimistic about America's role as a

global leader in the world say American life will get worse, compared to 39 percent who are generally optimistic about America's future standing in the world. And among those who indicate they are generally pessimistic about our system of government and how well it works, a solid majority (64 percent) say that things will get worse over the next 40 years, compared to far fewer (39 percent) who say they are generally optimistic about the way our system of government works. In addition, of those who are generally pessimistic about the opportunity for most Americans to achieve the American dream, 63 percent think life in America will get worse in the future, whereas 44 percent who are optimistic about the achievement of the American dream say things will get worse.

RACE AND POLITICAL AFFILIATION CONTINUE TO BE CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH ASSESSMENTS OF THE COUNTRY AND ITS DIRECTION.

Consistent with prior AP-NORC Center research, race and partisanship are closely associated with people's levels of optimism and pessimism. White Americans and Republicans have become increasingly pessimistic about the future of the country, but the same cannot be said about black and Hispanic Americans.² The same pattern emerges across a number of different topics covered in this study.

White Americans are mostly negative about the change over time—58 percent say things have gotten worse while just a quarter (23 percent) say things have gotten better. Reflecting back, blacks are somewhat more positive, with a slim majority (52 percent) saying life in America has gotten worse and 36 percent saying things have gotten better. Latinos are the most positive about America now compared to the 1970s, but are still divided in their views (45 percent gotten worse, 42 percent gotten better).

Some of the starkest differences in perceptions about how life in America has changed since the 1970s relate to political affiliation. For example, self-identified conservatives (65 percent) are the most likely to say life has gotten worse, followed by moderates (51 percent) and liberals (44 percent). Further, while majorities of Republicans (64 percent) and independents (55 percent) think life has gotten worse, Democrats are more divided (46 percent worse, 39 percent better).

Blacks and Hispanics are more likely than Whites to say that their standard of living is much better than their parents' standard of living was at the same age (26 percent and 30 percent vs. 15 percent). While whites are more likely than blacks and Hispanics to say that their standard of living is worse than their parents' was (27 percent vs. 20 percent and 19 percent). Whites are also more likely than blacks to disagree with the statement that "the way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living" (41 percent vs. 21 percent). Democrats (56 percent) are significantly more likely than independents (42 percent) and Republicans (46 percent) to say their standard of living is somewhat or much better than their parents' was. Democrats (40 percent) are significantly more likely than independents (27 percent) to say they somewhat or strongly agree with the statement, "the way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living," and Republicans (41 percent) and independents (42 percent) are significantly more likely than Democrats (32 percent) to say they somewhat or strongly disagree.

This division extends to support for the tea party movement. Tea party supporters (32 percent) are significantly more likely than non-tea party supporters (22 percent) to say their

standard of living is somewhat or much worse than their parents' standard of living at the same age. Tea party supporters (30 percent) are significantly less likely than non-tea party supporters (38 percent) to say they somewhat or strongly agree with the statement, "the way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living," and tea party supporters (49 percent) are significantly more likely than non-tea party supporters (35 percent) to say they somewhat or strongly disagree.

Across demographic groups, the largest difference in opinions about the future outlook of America over the next 40 years lies with distinctions along racial and ethnic lines. Sixty-two percent of white Americans say life will get worse, 19 percent say it will stay the same, and only 16 percent say it will get better. Meanwhile, views among blacks and Latinos are divided. Thirty-nine percent of blacks think life in America will get better, 36 percent say it will get worse, and 25 percent say it will stay the same. Similarly, 38 percent of Latinos think the next 40 years will get better, 36 percent say it will get worse, and 25 percent say it will stay the same.

Again, opinions are distinct across partisan and ideological groups. Looking ahead 40 years, seven in 10 Republicans think life in America will get worse, compared to 53 percent of independents and 42 percent of Democrats. Further, conservatives again hold the most negative views, with 64 percent saying life in America will get worse compared to 51 percent of moderates and 46 percent of liberals. Among those who say they support the tea party movement, the outlook is even more negative: 75 percent say American life will get worse; 49 percent of adults who are not supporters of the tea party movement say the same.

Whites are more likely than blacks and Hispanics to say that the federal government is doing a poor job on a variety of tasks, including making America a better place (51 percent vs. 28 percent and 27 percent), making sure the nation is safe from foreign and domestic threats (28 percent vs. 9 percent and 21 percent), promoting the well-being of all Americans (61 percent vs. 36 percent and 41 percent), making sure that Americans are free to pursue happiness now and in the future (39 percent vs. 24 percent and 26 percent), and representing the views of most Americans (64 percent vs. 32 percent and 35 percent).

In addition to race, ethnicity, and partisanship, whether people live in urban, suburban, or rural areas is associated with their outlook for the country. For example, while over half of Americans living in urban, suburban, and rural areas say life in America has gotten worse since the 1970s, those in urban areas are somewhat more positive than others, with 36 percent saying it has gotten better, compared to 29 percent of

2. Tompson, T. and Benz, J. 2013. *The public mood: white malaise but optimism among blacks, Hispanics*. Chicago: AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. <http://www.apnorc.org/projects/Pages/the-public-mood-white-malaise-but-optimism-among-blacks-hispanics.aspx>.

those living in the suburbs and 25 percent living in rural areas. Americans living in rural (62 percent worse) or suburban (56 percent worse) areas are more negative in their future outlooks than those living in urban areas (46 percent worse).

Rural Americans (32 percent) are significantly more likely than urban Americans (21 percent) and suburban Americans (21 percent) to say their standard of living is somewhat or

much worse than their parents' standard of living at the same age. Rural Americans (44 percent) are significantly more likely than urban Americans (33 percent) to say they somewhat or strongly disagree with the statement, "the way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living."

ALTHOUGH MOST AMERICANS WANT THE GOVERNMENT TO INVEST MORE EFFORT IN FIXING THE PROBLEMS THEY CARE ABOUT, NEARLY HALF BELIEVE LESS GOVERNMENT IS BETTER.

Half of Americans say the statement "the less government the better" is closer to their views than the statement "there are more things that government should be doing," while 48 percent are closer to feeling that "there are more things the government should be doing." Fifty-seven percent of Americans say the statement "we need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems" is closer to their views than the statement "the free market can handle these [complex economic] problems without government being involved," while 41 percent of Americans are more apt to prefer the free market.

As expected, these views differ by partisanship and expressed ideology. Republicans (80 percent) are significantly more likely than independents (48 percent) and Democrats (27 percent) to say less government is better, and Democrats (71 percent) are significantly more likely than independents (45 percent) and Republicans (20 percent) to say there are more things the government should be doing. Democrats (80 percent) are significantly more likely than independents (59 percent) and Republicans (27 percent) to say we need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems, and Republicans (73 percent) are significantly more likely than independents (33 percent) and Democrats (20 percent) to say the free market can handle these problems without government being involved.

Conservatives (75 percent) are significantly more likely than moderates (42 percent) and liberals (26 percent) to say less government is better, and liberals (71 percent) are significantly

more likely than moderates (58 percent) and conservatives (24 percent) to say there are more things the government should be doing. Liberals (78 percent) and moderates (68 percent) are significantly more likely than conservatives (33 percent) to say we need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems, and conservatives (66 percent) are significantly more likely than liberals (22 percent) and moderates (31 percent) to say the free market can handle these problems.

Tea party supporters are significantly more likely than non-tea party supporters to say less government is better (82 percent vs. 42 percent). Tea party supporters are significantly less likely than non-tea party supporters to say we need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems (21 percent vs. 68 percent), and are significantly more likely to say the free market can handle these problems without government being involved (79 percent vs. 31 percent).

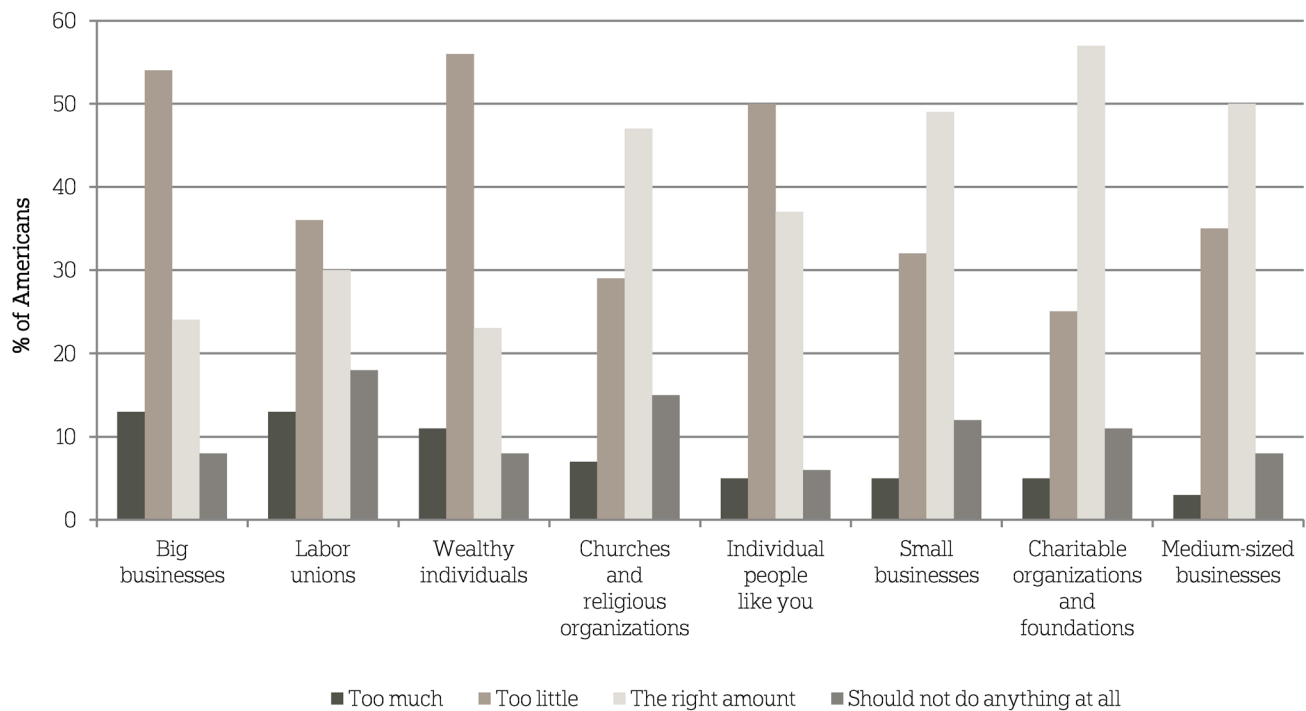
Registered voters are significantly more likely than non-registered voters to say less government is better (56 percent vs. 34 percent), and are significantly less likely to say there are more things the government should be doing (44 percent vs. 62 percent). Registered voters are significantly more likely than non-registered voters to say the free market can handle today's complex economic problems without government being involved (44 percent vs. 33 percent), but are not significantly less likely to say we need a strong government to handle these problems.

WHEN THE GOVERNMENT IS NOT ABLE TO SOLVE AN IMPORTANT PROBLEM FACING THE COUNTRY, AMERICANS OFTEN LOOK TO OTHER PEOPLE AND INSTITUTIONS TO HELP PROVIDE SOLUTIONS.

These days, Americans are content with the level of additional help provided by many groups, with large portions of the public saying that charitable organizations and foundations (57 percent), medium-sized businesses (50 percent), small businesses (49 percent), and churches and religious organizations (47 percent) are doing the right amount to solve the country's problems. They are less satisfied with the contributions of other groups. Fifty-six percent of Americans think wealthy individuals are doing too little to solve the

country's problems. Fifty-four percent feel the same way about big businesses. Fifty percent say individual people like them could be doing more to help. Labor unions (18 percent) were most frequently cited as a group that should not do anything at all to solve the country's problems, followed closely by churches and religious organizations (15 percent). The poll did not seek to assess how these groups ought to step in to assist the government.

In general, when the government isn't able to solve an important problem facing the country, other people and institutions may step up to help provide solutions. Do you think each of the following people and institutions is doing too much, too little, or the right amount to solve the country's problems, or should they not do anything at all?



Some interesting trends emerge when looking at people's views regarding government intervention. For one, of those who think there are more things that the government should be doing, 62 percent say that big business is doing too little to help solve the country's problems, compared to just 47 percent of those who think the less government the better. Similar trends emerge when asking about medium-sized businesses, where 40 percent of those who think that there

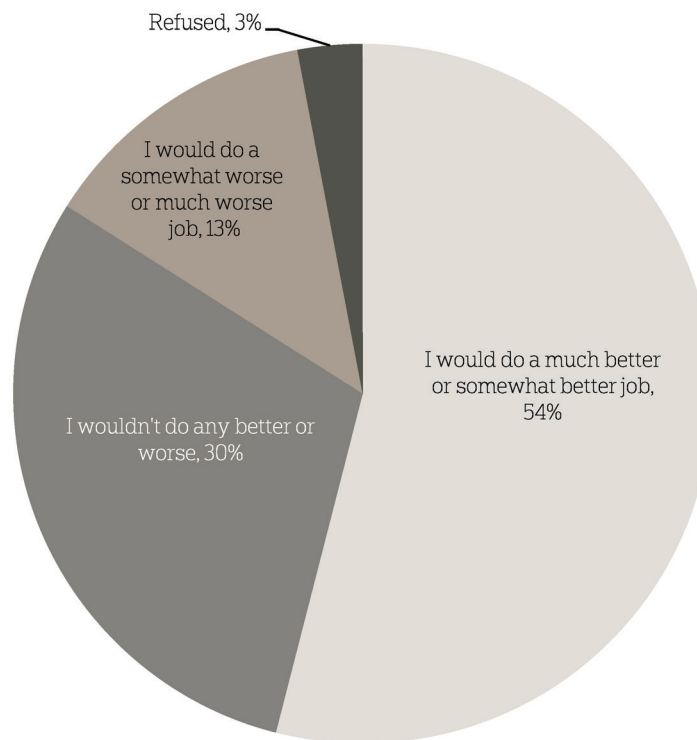
are more things the government should be doing say they are doing too little compared to just 31 percent of those who say the less government the better. The "more government" group also is more likely to think wealthy people (67 percent vs. 48 percent) and labor unions (44 percent vs. 29 percent) are doing too little to help.

A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS FEEL THEY WOULD DO A BETTER JOB THAN THEIR ELECTED OFFICIALS IN RUNNING THE COUNTRY.

Fifty-four percent of Americans indicate that they would do either a much better job or a somewhat better job than today's leaders in Washington, DC, in running the country. However, 30 percent of Americans report that they would do no better

or worse than today's leaders in Washington, DC, and 13 percent report that they would do a somewhat worse or much worse job than today's leaders in Washington, DC.

Compared to today's leaders in Washington, DC, do you think you personally would do a better or worse job in running the country?



Republicans (66 percent) are more likely than Democrats (46 percent) and independents (53 percent) to report that they would do a much better or somewhat better job in running the country. Americans who indicate that they are conservative (65 percent) also are more likely than liberals (51 percent) and moderates (50 percent) to report that they would do a much

better or somewhat better job running the country. Notably, Americans who self-identify as supporters of the tea party movement are significantly more likely than other Americans (76 percent vs. 50 percent) to feel that they would do a much better or somewhat better job of running the country.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study was designed by the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Funding for the study was provided by NORC at the University of Chicago. The authors thank Rebecca Reimer, Nicole Willcoxon, Matthew Courser, Daniel Malato, and Emily Alvarez of NORC and Dennis Junius of The Associated Press for their assistance in the data processing and analysis.

This survey was conducted by GfK using the web-enabled KnowledgePanel®, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Initially, participants are chosen scientifically by a random selection of telephone numbers and residential addresses. Persons in selected households are then invited by telephone or by mail to participate in the web-enabled KnowledgePanel®. For those who agree to participate but do not already have internet access, GfK provides, at no cost, a laptop and ISP connection. People who already have computers and internet service are

permitted to participate using their own equipment. Panelists then receive unique login information for accessing surveys online, and they are sent emails throughout each month inviting them to participate in the research.

Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish between December 12 and 16, 2013, with 1,141 adults 18 and over from the 50 states and the District of Columbia. A total of 2,439 panel members were randomly drawn from GfK's KnowledgePanel®, 1,141 (excluding breakoffs) responded to the invitation, yielding a final stage completion rate of 46.8 percent. The recruitment rate for this study, reported by GfK, was 14.1 percent, and the profile rate was 63.7 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 4.2 percent. The overall margin of error is +/- 3.7 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

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 noncoverage or under- and oversampling resulting from the study-specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, sex, education, race, and metropolitan status using the August 2013 Current Population Survey. The weighted data, which reflect the U.S. population of adults 18 and over, were used for all analyses.

All analyses were conducted using STATA (version 13), which allows for adjustment of standard errors for complex sample designs. 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. A comprehensive listing of all study questions, complete with tabulations of top-level results for each question, is available on the AP-NORC Center website: www.apnorc.org.

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