



The Associated Press-NORC  
Center for Public Affairs Research

# THE IMPORTANCE OF ECONOMIC ISSUES

With mixed views of the national economy and their own financial situation, Americans want priority given to several different economic problems. In the latest poll conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, the public sees protecting Social Security and reducing unemployment, poverty, and the federal budget deficit as most important to them personally.

A majority of both Democrats and Republicans favor raising the federal minimum wage, but there are partisan divisions on whether it is the government's responsibility to deal with income inequality. Legal immigration is considered good for the economy, while the arrival of undocumented immigrants is seen as harmful to the economy.

Public opinion surveys regularly ask the public to name the most important problem facing the country. The top response is typically the "economy." But what aspect of the economy are Americans referring to when they say the most important problem is the economy?

The poll examines the public's view of several economic issues by asking how important each issue is to them personally. This detailed assessment of different economic topics provides policymakers with information about the public's economic priorities, rather than simply looking at opinions on the economy overall.

More than 80 percent describe protecting Social Security and reducing unemployment as extremely or very important to them. Reducing poverty, cutting the federal budget deficit, and increasing wages to keep up with the cost of living are each important to about 7 in 10 Americans.



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## Three Things You Should Know

About The AP-NORC Poll on Economic Issues

- 1) Large majorities see several different economic problems as important for them personally, with Social Security, unemployment, and poverty at the top of the list.
- 2) Americans' views of immigrants' economic impact are determined by whether or not the immigrants are documented. Fifty-three percent think legal immigration benefits the economy, while 57 percent say illegal immigration is detrimental to the economy.
- 3) Most Americans favor increasing the federal minimum wage: 52 percent support an increase to \$12 an hour, and 34 percent favor raising it to \$15 an hour.

Not unexpectedly, affluent Americans attach different levels of importance to some issues than do those with lower incomes. For example, 63 percent of people with incomes under \$50,000 regard income inequality as important; 44 percent who make more than \$100,000 agree. However, there is no disparity by income on the significance of some other issues. About three-quarters of the public, high- and low-income earners alike, say reducing the federal budget deficit is important.

The nationwide poll was conducted January 14-17, 2016, 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 1,008 adults.

Some other key findings from the poll include:

- Americans have mixed opinions about the state of the economy: 53 percent describe it as poor, and 46 percent consider it to be in good condition. Half say the economy has remained steady in the last month, and they are evenly divided on whether it is in good or poor shape.
- Most Americans (52 percent) say legal immigration helps the economy. The opposite is true for illegal immigration: 57 percent say it hurts the economy.
- Half of the public says their personal finances have remained static in the past year, and nearly as many (46 percent) expect their finances to be unchanged over the coming year as well. Of the 27 percent who say their finances declined in the past year, 38 percent expect things to improve in the next year, while 34 percent think their finances will stay the same and 28 percent anticipate further deterioration.
- Fifty percent describe increasing the minimum wage as important to them personally. Additionally, 7 in 10 favor raising the minimum wage. When asked how high it should be raised, 52 percent of Americans would like to see it grow from the current \$7.75 an hour to \$12. Fewer Americans (34 percent) favor raising it even higher to \$15 an hour.
- Nearly 6 in 10 consider income inequality an important concern. Reducing the gap between rich and poor is the responsibility of the government according to 56 percent of Americans; 42 percent say it is not a government concern.
- More than half of Americans place importance on regulating financial institutions and markets. Forty-two percent say the regulations put in place after the 2008 financial crisis have not gone far enough, while 31 percent regard them as about right and 25 percent say the regulations have gone too far.

## **SOCIAL SECURITY, UNEMPLOYMENT, AND POVERTY TOP THE LIST OF ECONOMIC PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT PRESIDENT.**

Questions on the importance of different economic subjects show that the public gives more precedence to some issues than others. For example, reducing poverty is deemed more important than reforming welfare. Decreasing the federal budget deficit has a higher priority than cutting taxes.

More than 8 in 10 Americans say it is extremely or very important to protect the future of Social Security and reduce unemployment. Seven in 10 say it is important to reduce poverty or reduce the federal deficit. Six in 10 say it is important to reform welfare.

Nearly 6 in 10 say it is important to them personally to reduce the gap between the rich and poor. Fifty-six percent say it should be the government's responsibility to reduce income differences between the rich and poor; 42 percent disagree.

Those earning less than \$50,000 a year are more likely than those earning more to say reducing the gap between rich and poor is important (63 percent vs. 50 percent). Lower earners are also more likely than higher earners to say it should be the government's job to reduce these income differences (64 percent vs. 48 percent).

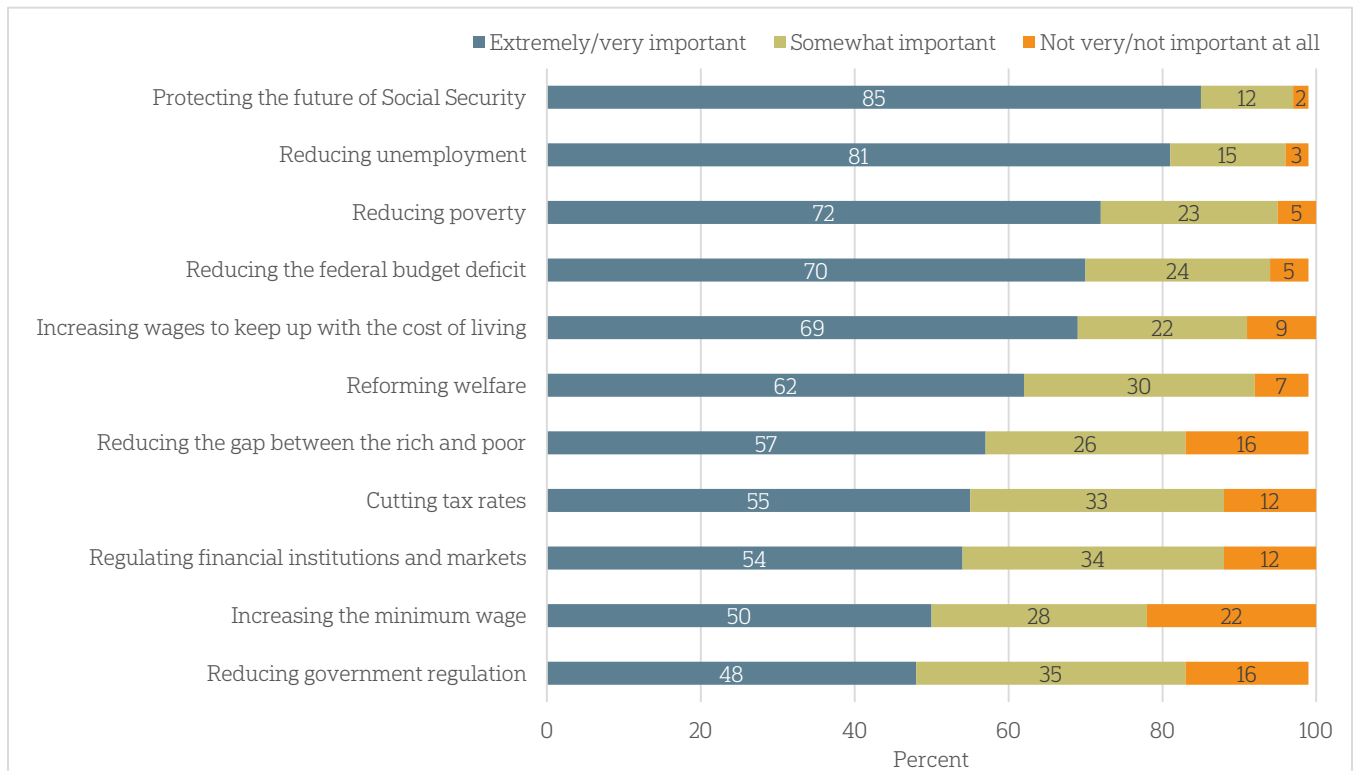
Most Americans also prioritize increasing wages. Nearly 7 in 10 say it is important to them to increase wages to keep up with the cost of living. Fifty percent say it is important to them personally to increase the minimum wage.

Overall, 7 in 10 Americans favor increasing the federal minimum wage from the current \$7.25 an hour. When asked about how high it should be raised, 52 percent of Americans would support an increase to \$12 an hour. Fewer Americans (34 percent) would support an increase to \$15 an hour.

Those earning less than \$50,000 a year view the importance of wage growth differently than those earning more. They are more likely to say it is important to increase wages to keep up with the cost of living (74 percent) and increase the minimum wage (57 percent) compared to those earning \$50,000 or more (64 percent and 41 percent, respectively). They are also more likely to favor raising the minimum wage (76 percent vs. 65 percent).

More than half of Americans place importance on regulating financial institutions and markets. Forty-two percent say the regulations put in place after the 2008 financial crisis have not gone far enough, while 31 percent regard them as about right and 25 percent say the regulations have gone too far.

**Americans assign the most importance to protecting social security, reducing unemployment, and reducing poverty.**



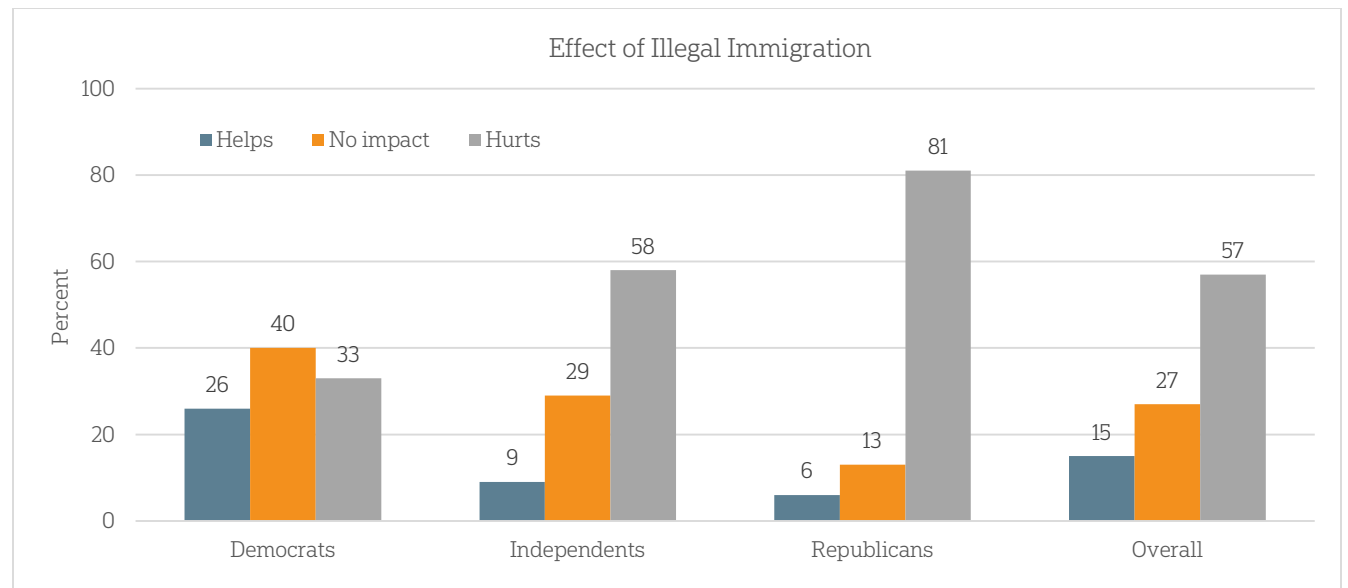
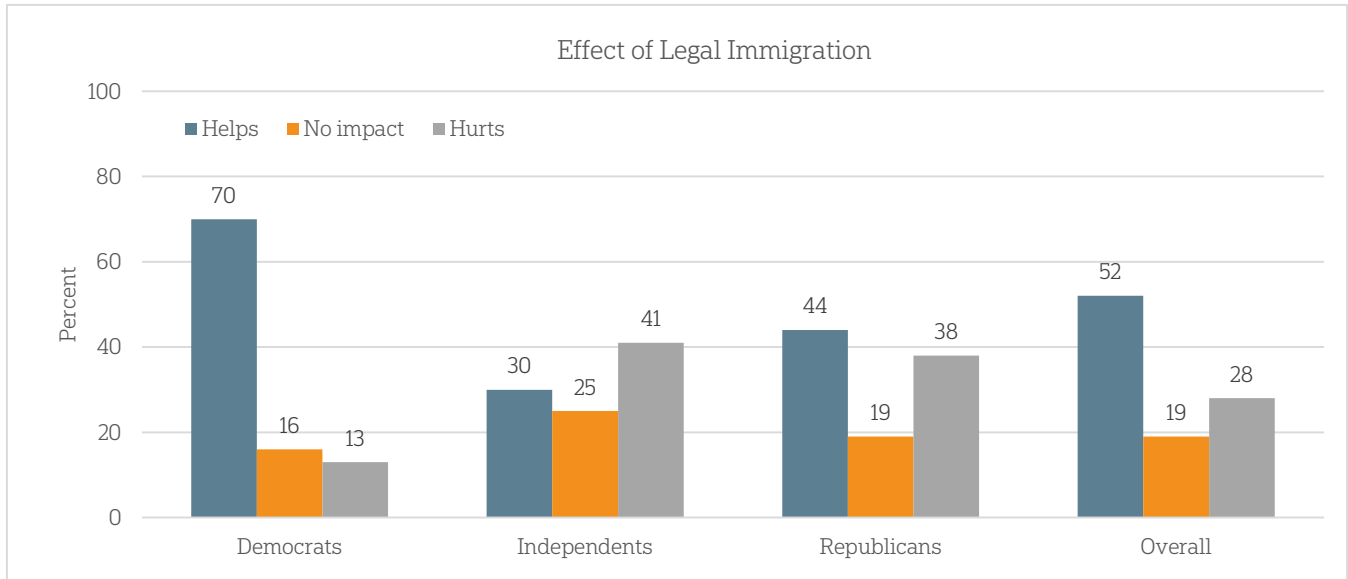
Question: Here is a list of economic issues that some people have mentioned as ones that will be important for the next president of the United States. How important to you are each of the following?

**AMERICANS PERCEIVE LEGAL IMMIGRATION HELPING THE ECONOMY, WHILE ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION HURTS.**

Half of the poll respondents were asked about the effect of legal immigration on the economy, and half were asked about illegal immigration. Of those asked about legal immigration, 52 percent say it helps grow the U.S. economy, while 28 percent say it hurts the economy and 19 percent say it does not make much of an impact. Of those asked about illegal immigration, however, attitudes skew more toward negative effects. Just 15 percent say it helps grow the economy, while 57 percent say it hurts the economy. Twenty-seven percent say it does not have much impact.

Democrats are much more likely than Republicans or independents to say that legal immigration helps grow the economy. Republicans are the most likely to say illegal immigration hurts the economy compared to independents and Democrats.

**Stark partisan differences emerge when asking about the effect of legal and illegal immigration on the economy.**



Questions: In your view, does legal immigration help grow the U.S. economy, hurt the U.S. economy, or not make much impact on the U.S. economy? In your view, does illegal immigration help grow the U.S. economy, hurt the U.S. economy, or not make much impact on the U.S. economy?

**AMERICANS HAVE MIXED FEELINGS ABOUT THE ECONOMY AND THEIR OWN FINANCIAL SITUATION.**

Americans as a whole are slightly negative about the current state of the nation’s economy. A third (34 percent) describe the economy as somewhat poor, and another 19 percent say it is very poor. Only 3 percent describe it as very good, while 43 percent describe it as somewhat good. Those earning \$50,000 a year or more are more likely than those earning less to say the economy is doing well (51 percent vs. 42 percent).

Half say the condition of the economy has stayed about the same over the past month. Thirty-one percent say it has gotten worse, and just 18 percent say it has gotten better. But, Americans are slightly more positive about the economy's prospects for the next year. While they most frequently say they expect the economy to stay the same (44 percent), 31 percent say they expect it to get better, and just 24 percent expect it to deteriorate.

When asked about their personal financial situation, 50 percent say it has stayed the same over the past year, while 28 percent say it has gotten worse and 22 percent say it has gotten better. When asked about future prospects, they are again most likely to expect it to stay the same (46 percent), but 41 percent expect it to improve, and just 13 percent expect it to worsen.

When it comes to which party they trust to handle the economy, 33 percent of Americans trust neither party compared to 29 percent who trust Republicans and 27 percent who trust the Democrats. Eleven percent say they trust both parties equally.

The Republican Party is trusted more by those who place more importance on reducing the deficit, cutting taxes, reforming welfare, and reducing government regulations. Those who assign more importance to reducing poverty and income inequality, raising the minimum wage, regulating financial markets, and boosting wages are more likely to trust the Democrats to handle the economy.

## **THE PUBLIC CONSIDERS A NUMBER OF MEASURES WHEN EVALUATING THE ECONOMY.**

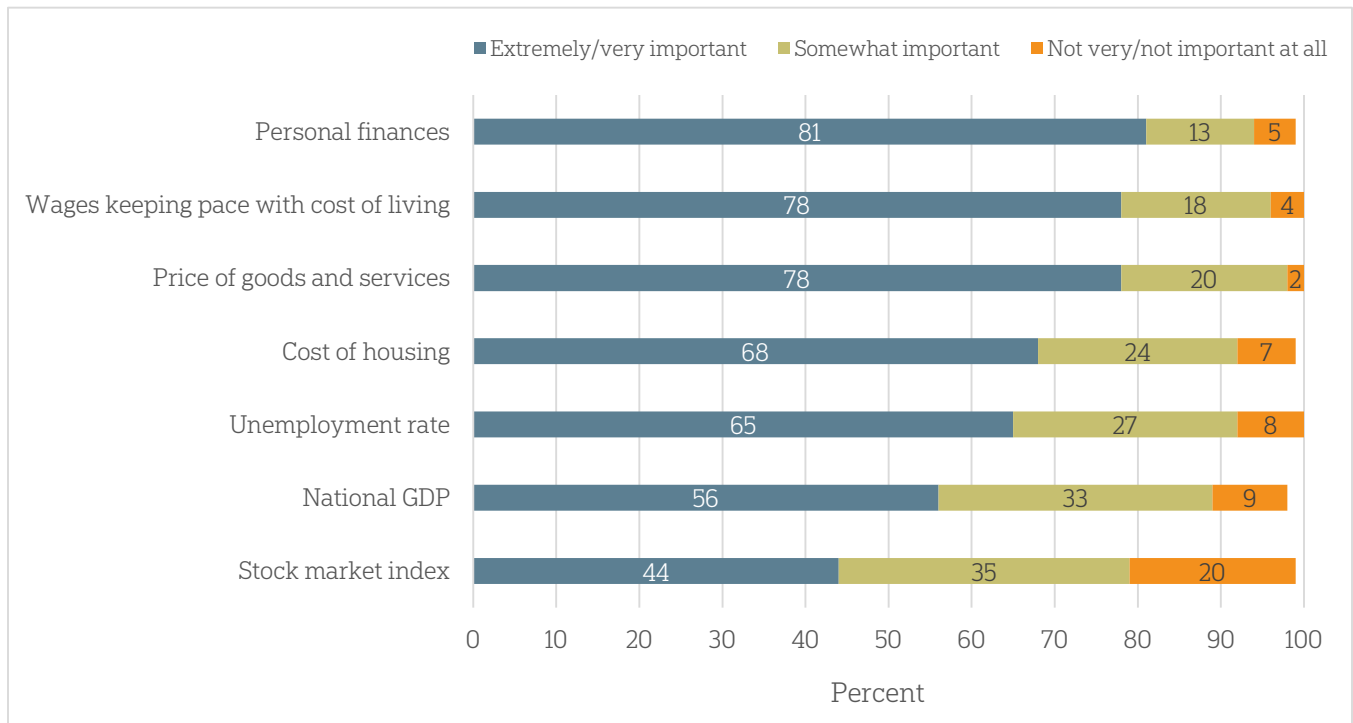
While seeing value in official statistics like the unemployment rate and gross national product, Americans say they find their own pocketbooks somewhat more important when they make assessments about the economy.

More than 8 in 10 say their personal finances are extremely or very important when measuring how the national economy is doing. Nearly 8 in 10 look to the prices of goods and services they buy and whether wages and salaries are keeping up with the cost of living. A majority also say they find cost of housing and the unemployment rate important in their assessment of the economy. Nearly 6 in 10 assign importance to the rise and fall of the country's gross domestic product, but only about 4 in 10 say the stock market is an important measure of the economy.

Blacks are more likely than whites to cite the cost of housing (88 percent vs. 63 percent) and whether wages and salaries are keeping up with the cost of living (91 percent vs. 74 percent) as important measures of the state of the economy. Those earning \$50,000 or more are more likely than those earning less than \$50,000 to cite the stock market index as an important indicator (49 percent vs. 39 percent).

Recent studies have found that people consider both their own economic situation and official government assessments in evaluating the condition of the national economy and in their voting behavior.

**Personal finances, wages, and the prices of goods and services are the most important economic indicators to Americans.**



Question: For you personally, how important are each of the following as measures of how the national economy is doing?

**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 January 14-17, 2016, 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 1,008 completed the survey—773 via the web and 235 via telephone. The final stage completion rate is 29.4 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 36.9 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 97.7 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 10.6 percent. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 3.6 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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The Associated Press (AP) is the world's essential news organization, bringing fast, unbiased news to all media platforms and formats.

NORC at the University of Chicago is one of the oldest and most respected, independent research institutions in the world.

The two organizations have established The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research to conduct, analyze, and distribute social science research in the public interest on newsworthy topics, and to use the power of journalism to tell the stories that research reveals.