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NORC<sup>75</sup>  
at the UNIVERSITY of CHICAGO

The Associated Press-NORC  
Center for Public Affairs Research

# AMERICANS WANT AN ISSUES-BASED CAMPAIGN, BUT DON'T ALWAYS AGREE ON WHICH ISSUES MATTER MOST

As the 2016 presidential campaign heads into the final stretch, Americans remain just as frustrated and angry about the election as in May when the primaries were drawing to a close. In the latest national poll conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, the public says their issues and concerns are not being addressed by the campaigns, and there is too much focus on personal aspects of the candidates and not enough on their qualifications.

The issues that matter most to the public overall are health care, Social Security, education, and terrorism, although Republicans care more about terrorism while Democrats are more concerned with health care.

Regardless of party affiliation, Americans consider the economy and education to be of great importance to them personally. But partisan divisions are found in the level of importance assigned to many other issues asked about in the survey.

For example, three-quarters of Democrats say the environment and climate change are extremely or very important to them personally. Only about 4 in 10 Republicans agree. And on the other side of the aisle, more than 8 in 10 Republicans consider the national debt to be extremely or very important, along with just 6 in 10 Democrats.

While disappointed in the focus of the 2016 election, this campaign is drawing the public's attention. Two-thirds of Americans say the election interests them in general, and 6 in 10 have paid a good deal of attention to the campaign so far.



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## Three Things You Should Know About the AP-NORC Poll

Among all American adults:

- 1) Most Americans say the presidential campaign is focusing too much on the candidates' personal characteristics and not enough on their qualifications or the issues that matter most.
- 2) The issues that matter most to the public overall are health care, Social Security, education, and terrorism, although partisan differences exist in the levels of importance.
- 3) While most Americans are disappointed in the focus of the campaign, they are interested and paying attention to news about the 2016 presidential election.

In comparison, four years ago, less than half of voters surveyed by The New York Times and CBS News said they were paying a lot of attention to the presidential campaign between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. But interest was at similar levels in September during Obama's first presidential campaign against John McCain. At the time, a New York Times/CBS News poll found 63 percent said they were paying a lot of attention to the campaign.

The nationwide poll of 1,022 adults was part of the AmeriSpeak® Omnibus, a monthly multi-client survey using NORC at the University of Chicago's probability-based panel. Interviews were conducted between September 15 and 18, 2016, online and using landlines and cell phones.

Some of the poll's key findings are:

- The public is more inclined to have negative emotions regarding the 2016 presidential election than positive ones. Three-quarters are frustrated, and more than half say the campaign is making them feel angry or helpless. In comparison, only 4 in 10 are hopeful, a quarter are excited, and less than 2 in 10 say they are proud.
- Thirty-five percent of Americans do not have a positive view of either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. These people are particularly likely to express feelings of frustration, anger, and helplessness about the campaign.
- Two-thirds of Americans do not think the presidential campaign is adequately addressing the concerns and the issues that matter most to them. While more than half of the public says coverage of the candidates' experience and qualifications is getting short shrift, about the same number say there is too much focus on the candidates' personal qualities.
- While Americans may be unhappy with how the campaign is developing this year, they are not uninterested. Just 3 in 10 say they are bored by the campaign. Fully 6 in 10 are paying a considerable amount of attention to the campaign so far.
- Top issues among Republicans include terrorism and national security, economic growth, and taxes, with at least 8 in 10 saying each of these is important to them.
- For Democrats, their top priorities include health care, education, and Social Security, also with at least 8 in 10 saying each is important to them.
- The presidential election may be monopolizing the focus of the media and drawing it away from other campaigns. Nearly half of Americans say there is not enough media attention being given to down-ticket races in their state, while only a quarter of the public think the media are giving too much attention to those non-presidential campaigns.

## DESPITE HIGH LEVELS OF FRUSTRATION, MOST AMERICANS ARE INTERESTED IN THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION.

The public expresses more negative sentiment about the 2016 presidential election than positive sentiment. Three-quarters are frustrated and nearly as many feel helpless or angry. On the other hand, only 4 in 10 are hopeful, a quarter are excited, and less than 2 in 10 are proud. These feelings have not changed much since May.<sup>1</sup>

While Americans may be unhappy about the tone and content of the upcoming presidential election, they are generally engaged. Nearly 7 in 10 say they are interested in the election, and 6 in 10 say they have paid a great deal or quite a bit of attention to the campaign. Just 3 percent say they have paid no attention to the campaign at all.

Attention levels this year are more similar to those leading up to the 2008 presidential election than the 2012 election. In September 2008, during Obama's first presidential campaign, 63 percent of voters surveyed by *The New York Times* and CBS News said they were paying a lot of attention to the presidential campaign. Four years later, in the weeks leading up to the 2012 presidential election, less than half (47 percent) said they were paying a lot of attention.<sup>2</sup>

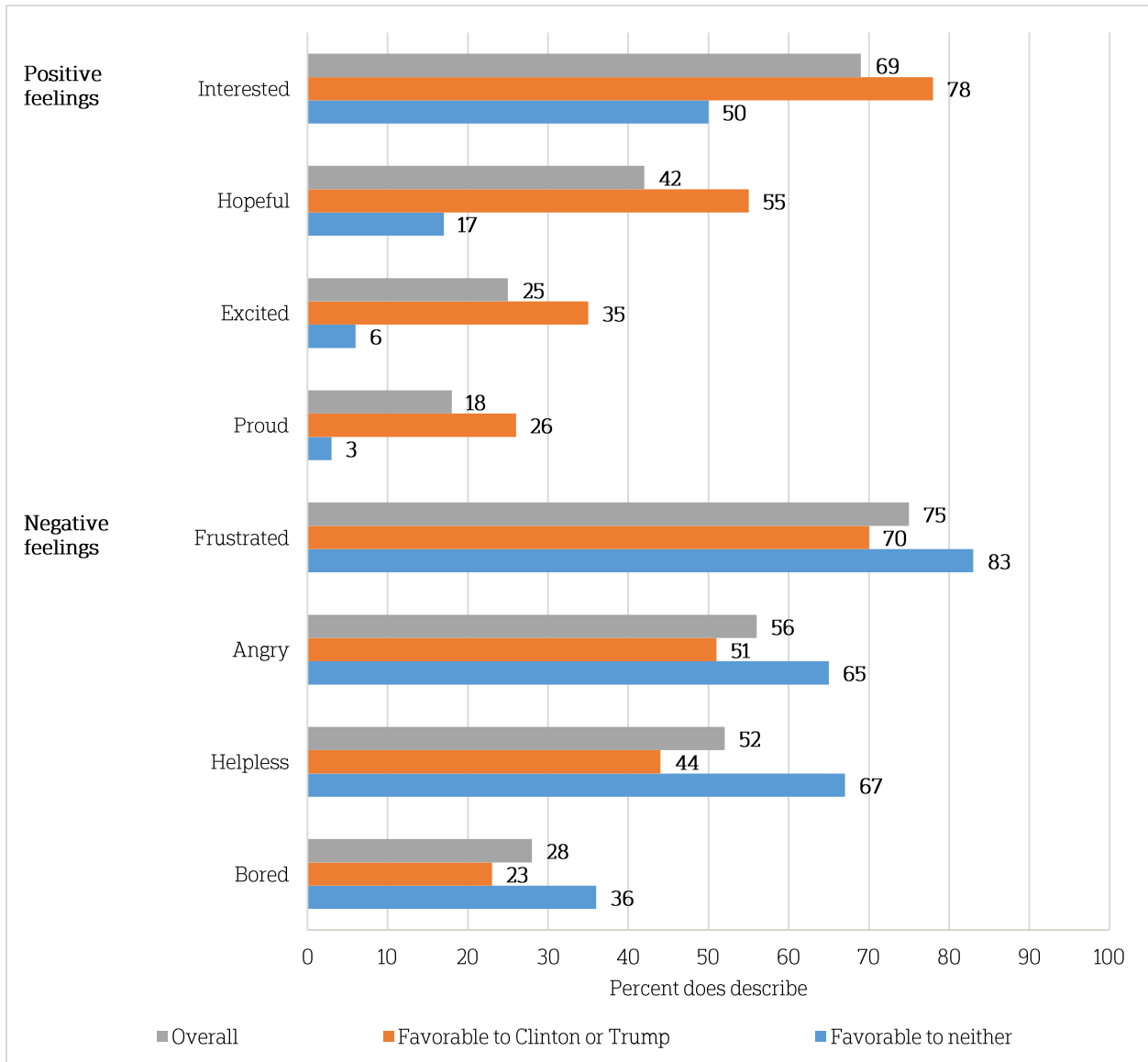
Americans with a favorable opinion of at least one of the major party candidates this year are less inclined to have negative reactions to the campaign. But a substantial minority, 35 percent, do not regard either candidate favorably, and they are disengaged and much more negative about the election this year.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://apnorc.org/projects/Pages/the-frustrated-public-americans-views-of-the-election.aspx?PagePreview=true>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/09/15/us/politics/New-York-Times-CBS-Poll-Results.html?action=click&contentCollection=Politics&module=RelatedCoverage&region=EndOfArticle&pgtype=article>

**Americans are feeling more negative than positive about the 2016 election.**

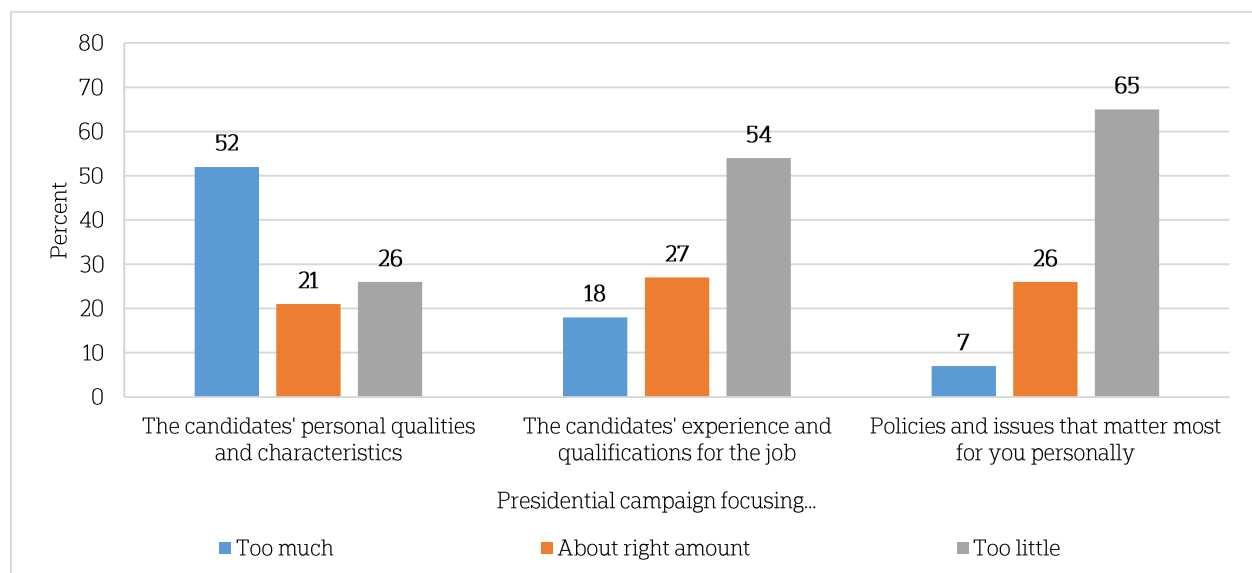


**Question: For each of the following, please say if each of the following words describes or does not describe how you feel about the 2016 presidential election.**

## HEALTH CARE, SOCIAL SECURITY, AND TERRORISM ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES.

Even though much of the public is interested in the presidential campaign and has been paying attention to it, most say the campaign has not struck the right balance between focusing on personal qualities, qualifications, and policy. More than half of Americans say there has not been enough focus on the candidates' experience and qualifications for the job, and two-thirds say there has not been enough attention paid to the policies and issues that matter most to them. At the same time, more than half say the candidates' personal qualities and characteristics have received too much of the focus.

**Americans think the campaign is too focused on the candidates' personal qualities and not enough on their qualifications and policies.**



**Question: In general, do you think the presidential campaign this year is focusing too much, about the right amount, or too little on [ITEM]?**

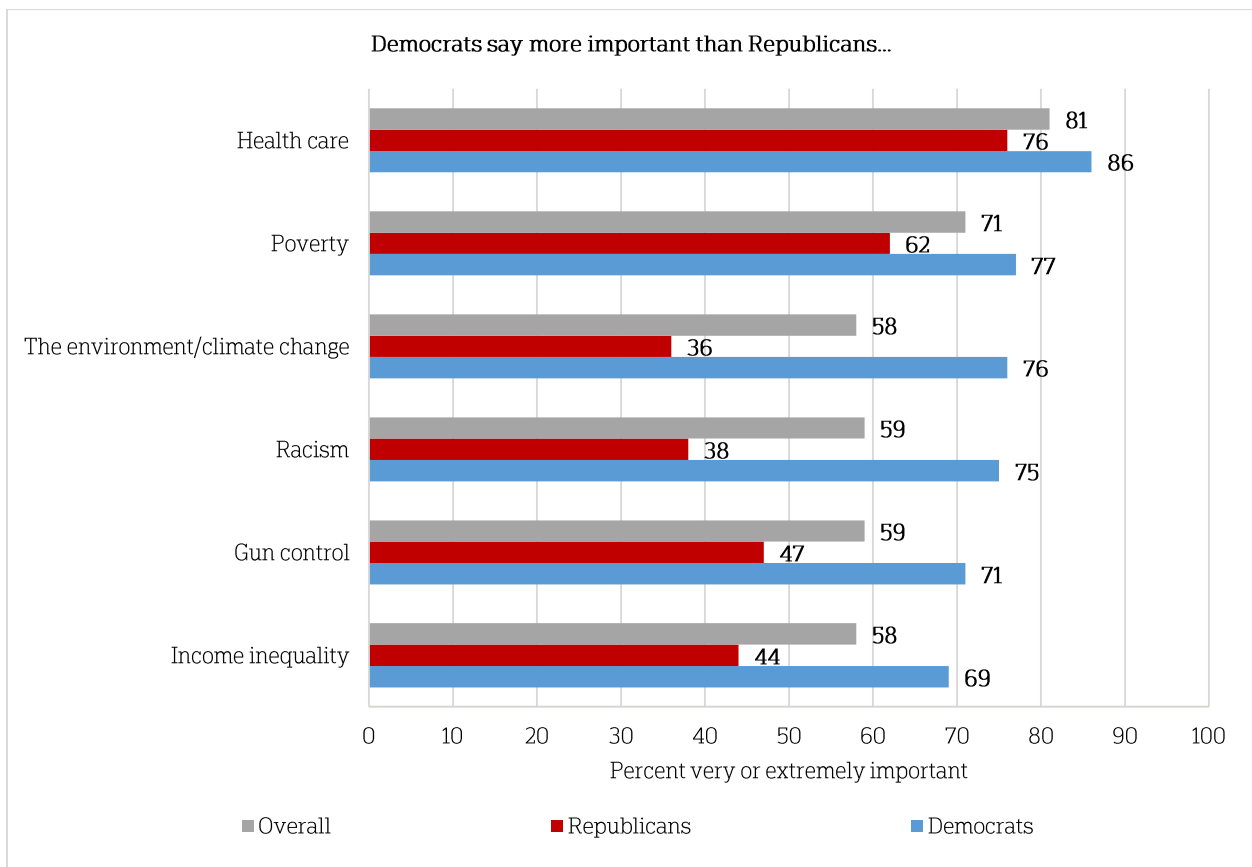
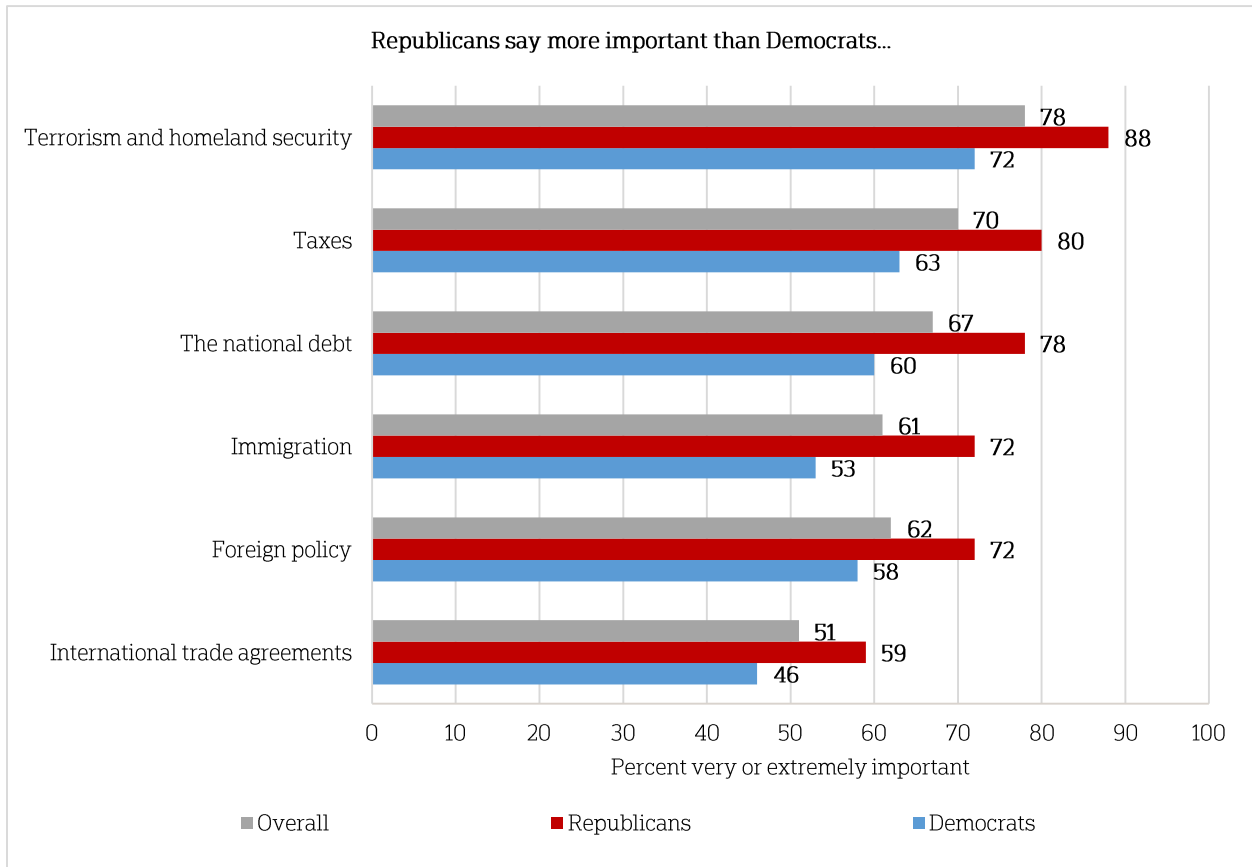
Of course, criticism about the lack of attention paid to issues is hardly unique to the 2016 election. Four years ago, 51 percent of the voters surveyed by the Pew Research Center said there was less discussion of issues in the 2012 campaign compared with past presidential elections.<sup>3</sup>

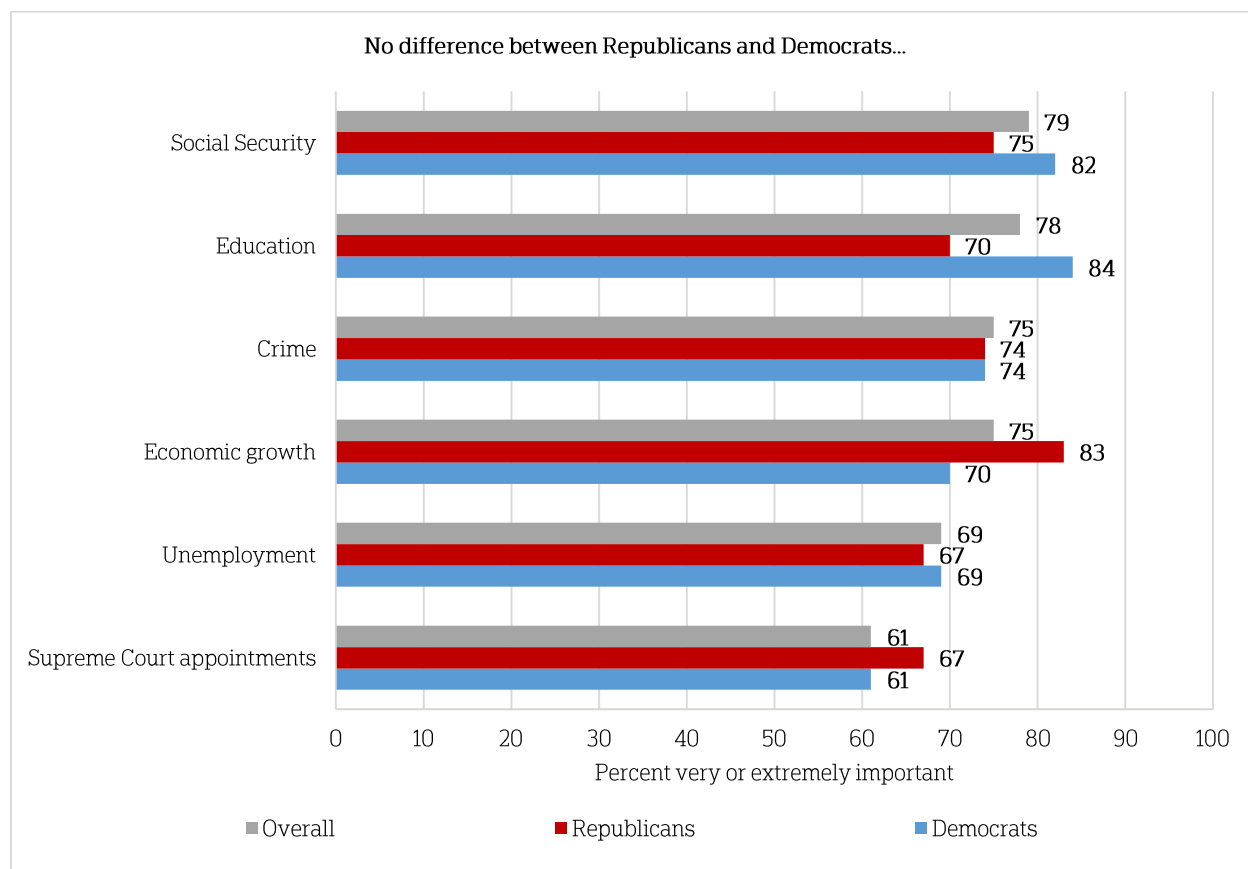
Nearly half of Americans (46 percent) say there is not enough media attention being given to down-ticket races in their state, while only 30 percent say the media are giving these races the right amount of attention and 23 percent say they are giving them too much attention.

Democrats and Republicans agree on the importance of some of the top issues facing the country, such as Social Security, education, crime, and economic growth. But when it comes to some other high-profile problems like health care, terrorism and national security, immigration, racism, and several others, the two groups diverge in how much importance they assign. Republicans place more importance than Democrats on terrorism and homeland security, taxes, the national debt, foreign policy, immigration, and international trade agreements, while Democrats place greater importance on health care, poverty, gun control, income inequality, racism, and the environment and climate change.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.people-press.org/2012/11/15/low-marks-for-the-2012-election/>

**Differences in priorities between Republicans and Democrats emerge on many issues.**





**Question:** How important are each of the following issues to you personally?

## 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 AmeriSpeak Omnibus®, a monthly multi-client survey using NORC’s probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. The survey was part of a larger study 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 September 15 and 18, 2016, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 1,022 completed the survey—821 via the web and 201 via telephone. The final stage completion rate is 29.6 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 26.2 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 95.0 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 7.4 percent. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 3.7 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 have 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.

A comprehensive listing of the questions, complete with tabulations of top-level results for each question, is available on The AP-NORC Center website: [www.apnorc.org](http://www.apnorc.org).

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

The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research taps into the power of social science research and the highest-quality journalism to bring key information to people across the nation and throughout the world.

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.