



The Associated Press-NORC
Center for Public Affairs Research

THE LINK BETWEEN GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE AND ATTITUDES TOWARD THE U.S. DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM

Support for changes to the U.S. system of government are related to people's assessment of the government's performance in solving problems rather than to how well they feel it represents people like them, according to a new UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll.

This study explores Americans' views about how well the government is handling various issues and how well it is representing people like them. It then examines how such concerns about both government performance and representation connect to overall attitudes toward American democracy.

The poll shows most adults believe the government should be responsible for issues such as ensuring access to health care for all Americans and reducing crime, but a majority believe the government is handling those issues poorly.

Americans who are most critical of government performance are most likely to believe major changes are needed to the government system. They are also more likely to lack trust in government. For example, those most critical of government performance are more likely than those least critical to say they rarely or never trust the government (53% vs. 24%) and to support major changes to the system (82% vs. 56%).

In contrast, those who are most dissatisfied with how much influence people like them have in government are not significantly more likely to support a major overhaul of the government. However, 70% feel that people like them have too little power, and beliefs about representation are connected to trust in government.



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Three Things You Should Know

About the UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll
Among American Adults:

- 1) Those most critical of the government's performance in solving problems are more likely than those who are least critical to support major changes to the U.S. government system (82% vs. 56%).
- 2) When asked how often they can trust the federal government to do what is right, 50% can do so only some of the time and 36% can rarely or never trust it.
- 3) More than 70% of Americans say the government should have a lot of responsibility for issues such as terrorism, economic growth, and crime, but few believe it handles such issues very well.

Forty-seven percent of people least satisfied with their representation rarely or never trust the federal government to do what is right, compared to 24% of those who feel people like them are well represented.

Only 13% of Americans say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right always or most of the time. Likewise, 28% believe the government can't work well, no matter who is elected.

Democrats are more likely than Republicans to believe major changes are needed to the government system, have critical views of government performance, and think people like them have too little power and influence. Yet, Republicans are more likely to believe that government can't work well no matter who is elected.

The views of both Democrats and Republicans toward the government's handling of policy issues is a significant predictor of their trust in government and support for changes to the system. For example, Democrats most critical of the performance of government are more likely than those least critical of performance to believe the government needs major changes or should be completely replaced (85% vs. 57%), and the same is true among Republicans (71% vs. 54%).

The nationwide poll was conducted by the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research from March 14 to 18, 2019, using AmeriSpeak®, the probability-based panel of NORC at the University of Chicago. Online and telephone interviews using landlines and cell phones were conducted with 1,003 adults. The margin of sampling error is +/- 4.2 percentage points.

Among the key findings from the report:

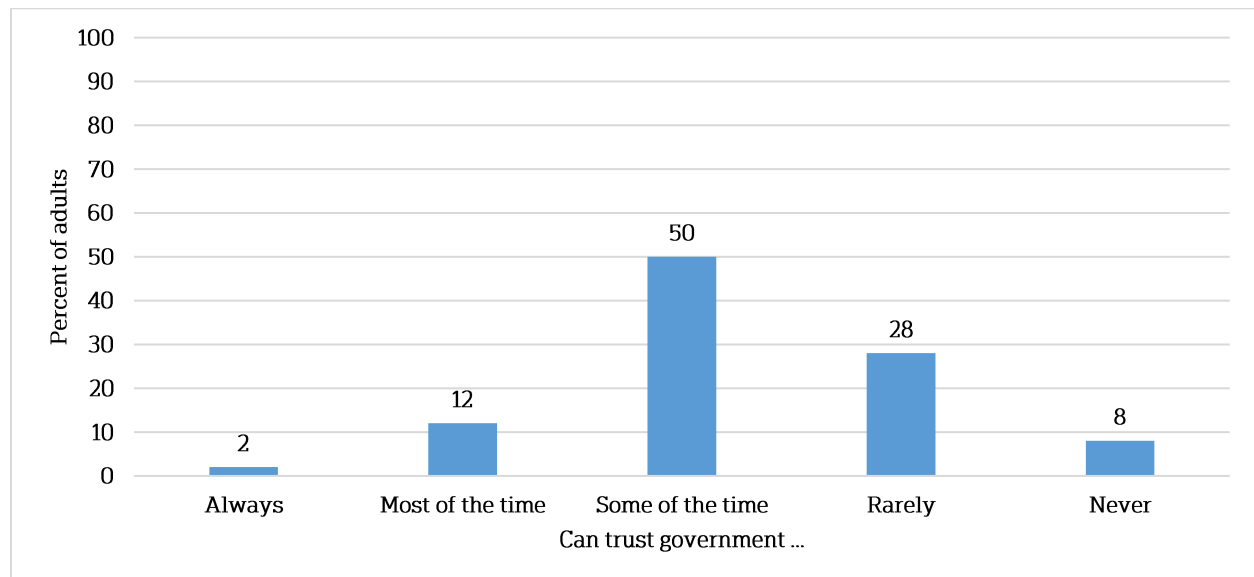
- Fifty-four percent of the public thinks that major changes are needed to the U.S. government system, 12% say the whole system needs to be replaced, and 32% say either no or minor changes are needed.
- Political independents are more likely than Democrats and Republicans to say the whole U.S. system of government needs to be replaced (22% vs. 11% and 8%, respectively).
- A majority of Americans say the government is not doing well with issues like reducing income inequality (73%), addressing climate change (62%), ensuring access to health care (61%), and reducing crime (54%).
- Those most critical of the government's policy performance are more likely than those who are least critical to support major changes to the U.S. government system (65% vs. 48%).
- Seventy percent say people like them have too little power and influence in Washington.
- When it comes to representation, 60% of Democrats say whites have too much power and influence compared with only 12% of Republicans.
- Americans most critical of how well people like them are represented are more likely than those least critical to rarely or never trust the government to do what is right (47% vs. 24%). But those most critical of how they are represented are no more likely than those least critical to think the government needs major structural changes.

MOST AMERICANS HAVE SOME DISTRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND BELIEVE MAJOR CHANGES ARE NEEDED TO THE SYSTEM.

Americans tend to have little trust in the federal government, and most support major changes to the government.

When asked how often they can trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right, only 13% of respondents say they can do so always or most of the time, while 50% say they can do so only some of the time, and 36% say they can rarely or never trust the government.

While many Americans feel they can trust the government some of the time, few say they can always or most of the time.



Question: How often can you trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right?

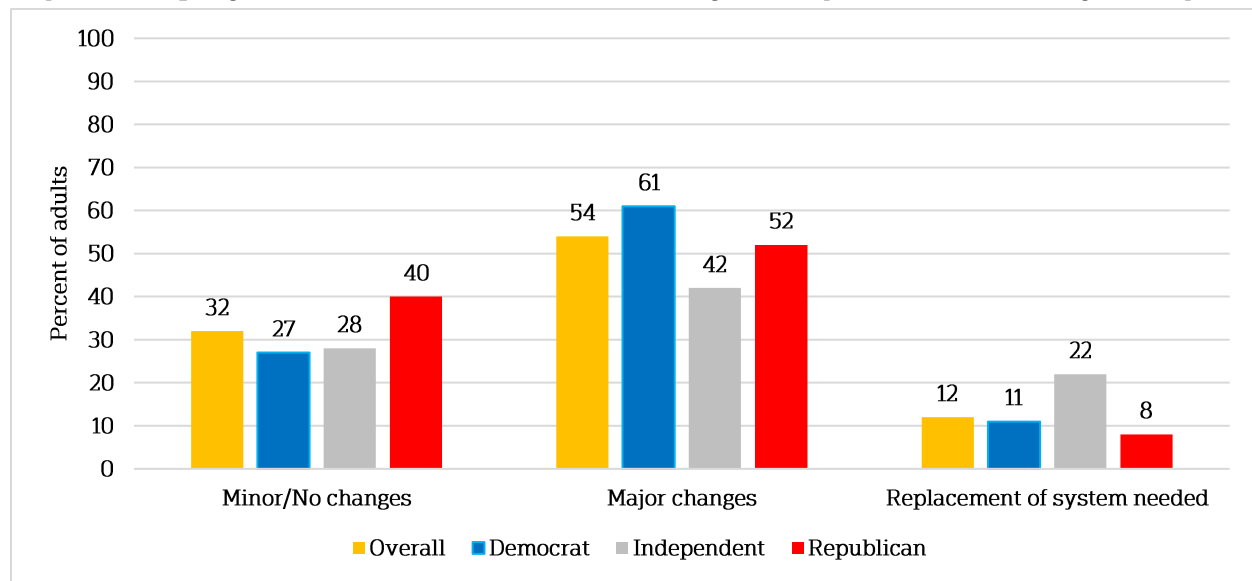
Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

Further, while 70% of respondents agree that with the right people elected, the government in Washington can work well, 28% say that no matter who is elected, the government can't work well.

Democrats are more likely than Republicans and independents to hold the view that government can work well with the right people elected (83% vs. 61% and 56%, respectively).

A majority support significant changes to the U.S. system of government. Fifty-four percent of people say that major changes are needed, 12% say the whole system needs to be replaced, and 32% say either no or minor changes are needed.

Democrats are more likely than independents and Republicans to say that major changes are needed, while independents are most likely to say that a replacement of the system is needed.

Regardless of party affiliation, most Americans think the system of government needs major changes.

Question: Thinking about the structure of the U.S. system of government, which of the following comes closest to your view?

Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

Attitudes about the government and whether changes are needed also vary depending on people's race and ethnicity and education.

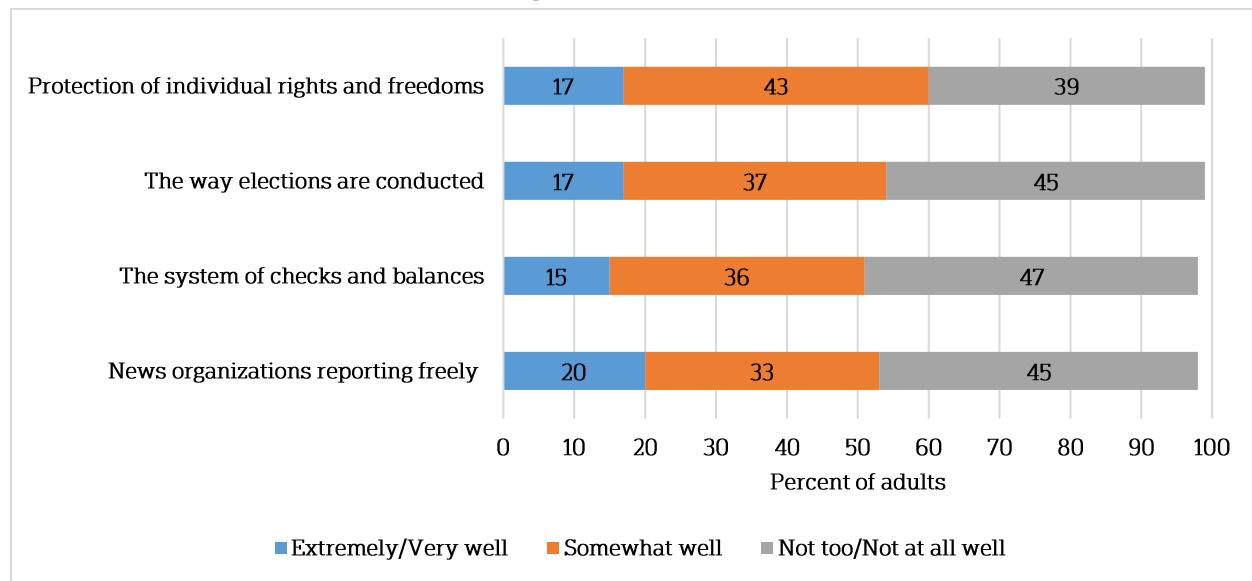
Hispanics are more likely than whites to believe that the government can work well with the right people elected (83% vs. 68%). Blacks are more likely than whites to say that a replacement of the system is needed (25% vs. 10%), while whites are more likely than black and Hispanics to say that minor or no changes are needed (36% vs. 20% and 23%, respectively).

Americans without a college degree are more likely to say that a replacement of the system is needed than those with a college degree (20% vs. 7%). Moreover, whites with no college experience are more than three times as likely as other Americans to believe a replacement of the system is needed (17% vs. 5%). Likewise, white Americans with no college experience are more likely to believe that the government can't work well no matter who is elected (39% vs. 25%).

AMERICANS BELIEVE GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR AN ARRAY OF POLICY ISSUES, BUT ARE GENERALLY DISSATISFIED WITH ITS PERFORMANCE.

The public believes that the government should tackle a variety of different issues, but there are partisan differences in views toward what the government is responsible for and how well it is addressing such issues.

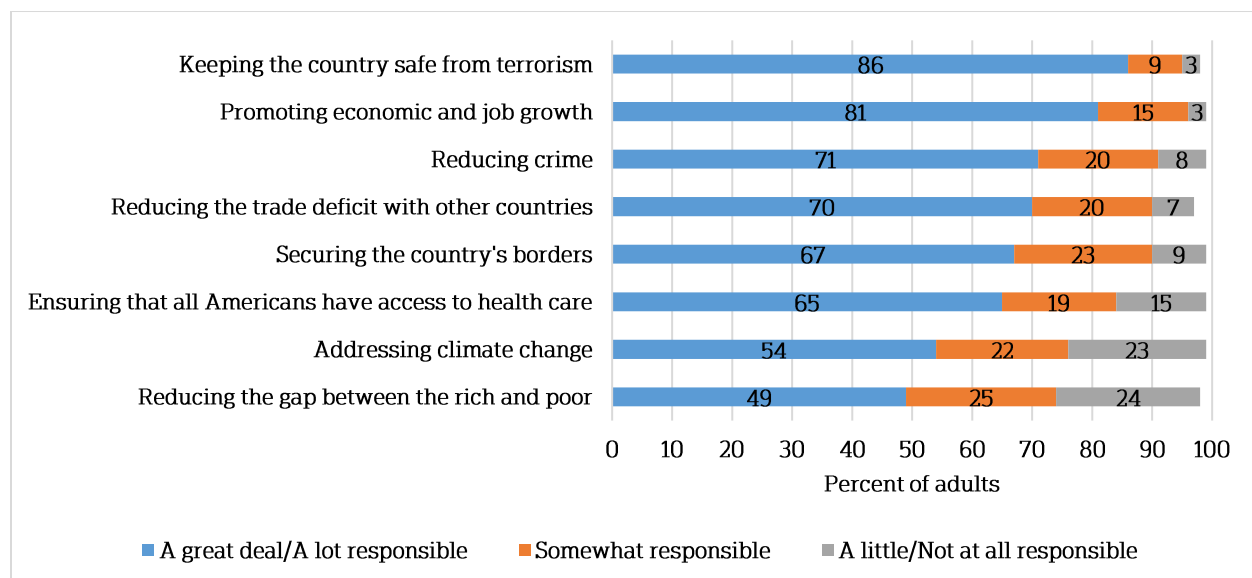
When asked about how well core elements of democracies such as conducting elections and freedom of the press are working in the United States today, few respondents say they are satisfied.

Americans are dissatisfied with the workings of several core values of democracies.

Question: How well do you think each of the following is working in the United States today?

Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

A majority of Americans say the government has a lot of responsibility to handle policy issues like keeping the country safe from terrorism, promoting economic and job growth, and reducing crime. Even with more polarizing issues such as ensuring access to health care and addressing climate change, most Americans feel the government should have at least some responsibility.

Americans believe that government should have at least some responsibility to handle a wide range of issues.

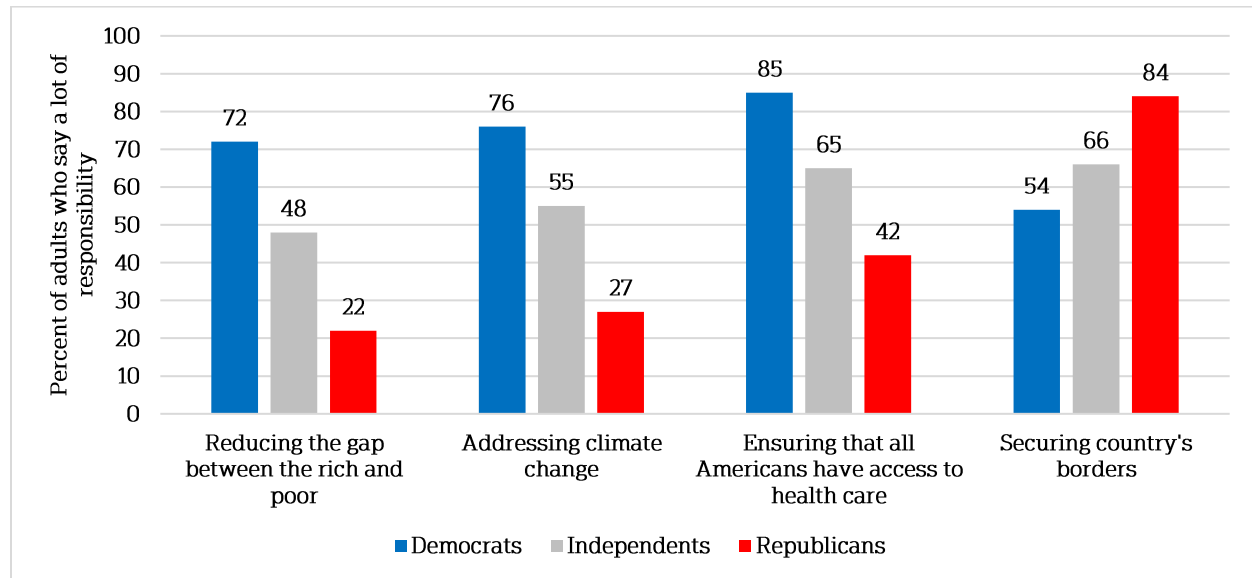
Question: How much responsibility do you think the government should have for handling each of the following?

Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

Democrats are more likely than Republicans to believe the government should have a lot of responsibility to handle certain issues. For example, more Democrats than Republicans believe that the government has a large responsibility to handle reducing income inequality, addressing climate

change, and ensuring access to health care. On the other hand, more than 8 in 10 Republicans believe that securing the country's borders is a large responsibility for the government, while only about half of Democrats agree.

Republicans overwhelmingly believe that securing the country's borders is a key responsibility for the government.



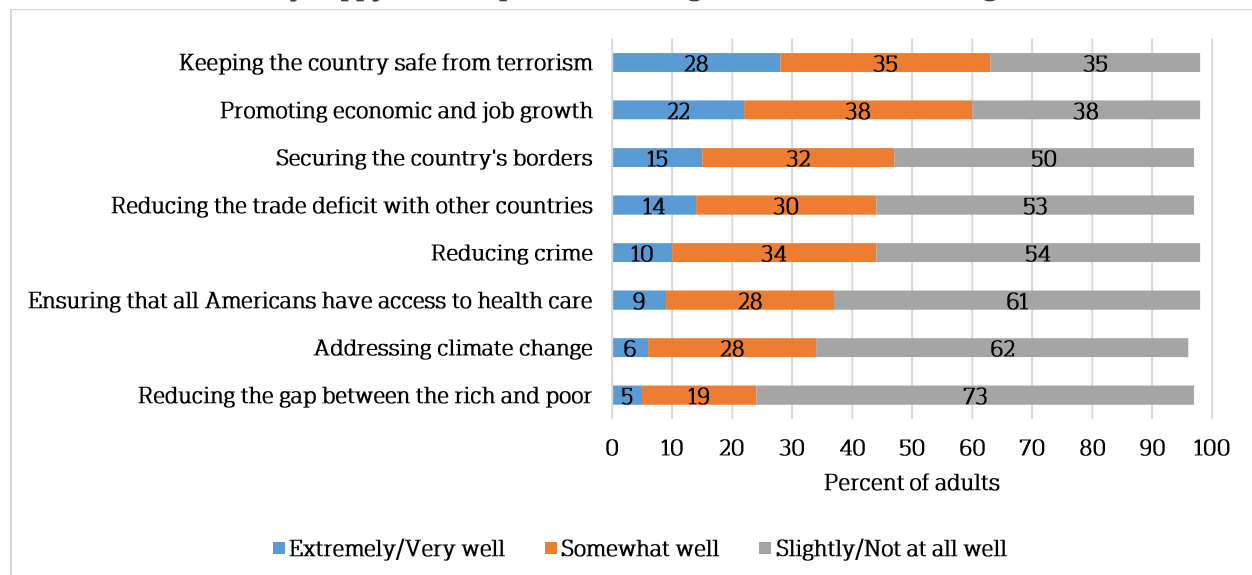
Question: How much responsibility do you think the government should have for handling each of the following?

Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

However, few Americans are satisfied with how well the government handles many of these policy issues.

A majority of Americans say the government is not doing well with issues like reducing inequality, addressing climate change, securing the country's borders, reducing the trade deficit, and reducing crime.

Few Americans are very happy with the performance of government across a range of issues.

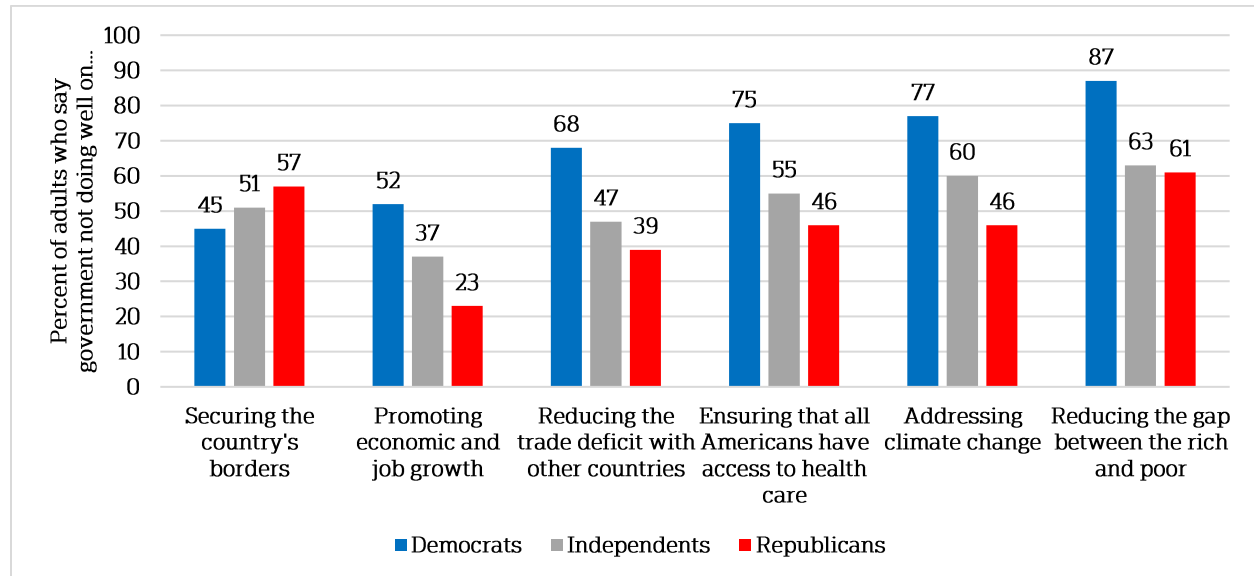


Question: How well is the government handling each of the following?

Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

Democrats are more critical of government performance than Republicans and independents. For example, Democrats are twice as likely as Republicans to say that the government is not doing well promoting economic and job growth. On the other hand, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say that the government is not handling securing the country's borders well.

Democrats are more dissatisfied with government performance on issues like climate change and income inequality.



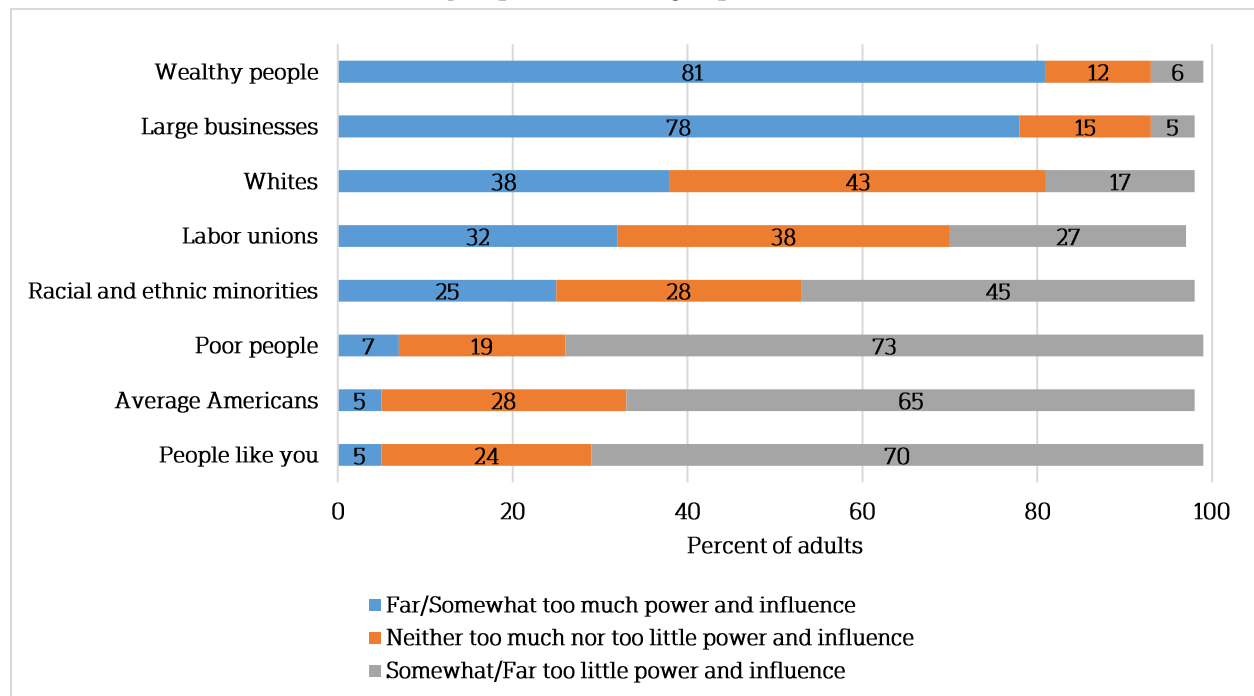
Question: How well is the government handling each of the following?

Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

MOST AMERICANS BELIEVE PEOPLE LIKE THEM HAVE TOO LITTLE INFLUENCE IN WASHINGTON, BUT ATTITUDES ABOUT RACIAL REPRESENTATION VARY BY PARTY.

When asked about how much power and influence various types of people and groups have in Washington, few Americans believe the government represents most groups well.

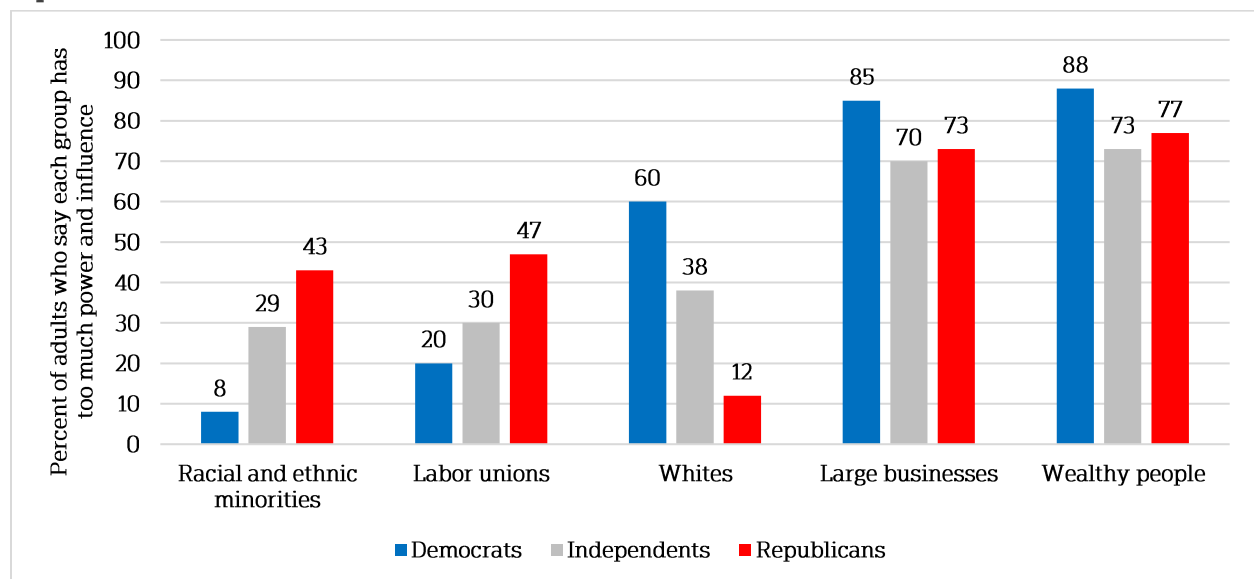
Around 8 in 10 Americans believe that wealthy people and large businesses have too much influence. On the other hand, more than half of respondents feel that poor people, average Americans, and people like them have too little power and influence.

Few Americans believe that certain groups are correctly represented in America.

Question: Do you think each of the following has too much, too little, or neither too much nor too little power and influence in Washington?

Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

While Democrats, independents, and Republicans all agree that large businesses and wealthy people have too much power and influence, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say that racial and ethnic minorities and labor unions have too much power and influence. On the other hand, more than half of Democrats agree that whites have too much power and influence compared with only 12% of Republicans.

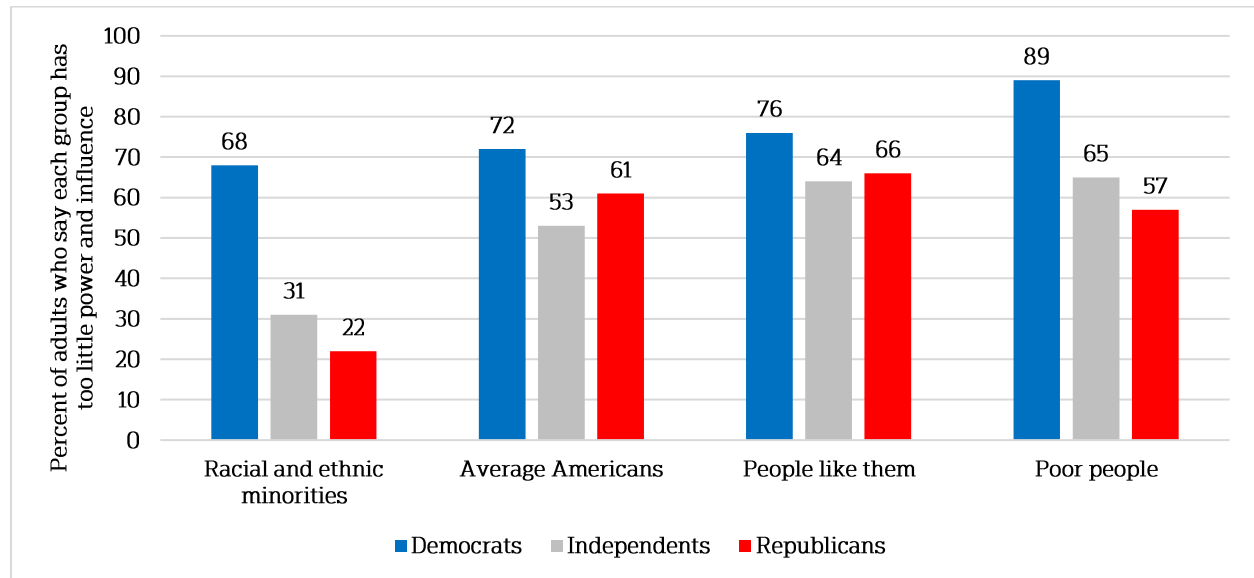
Republicans and Democrats disagree on whether whites and minorities have the right amount of representation in America.

Question: Do you think each of the following has too much, too little, or neither too much nor too little power and influence in Washington?

Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

Most Americans, regardless of political affiliation, believe that people like them and average Americans have too little power and influence. However, Democrats are more likely than Republicans and independents to say that racial and ethnic minorities and poor people are underrepresented.

Democrats are less satisfied with representation of racial and ethnic minorities than independents and Republicans.



Question: Do you think each of the following has too much, too little, or neither too much nor too little power and influence in Washington?

Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

When it comes to views toward the representation of whites and ethnic and racial minorities, there are several differences related to race and education. For example, white Americans are less likely to say they have too much power and influence than are black Americans and Hispanics (27% vs. 69% and 54%, respectively).

Moreover, white Americans who have not attended college are more likely than whites who have attended college to say whites have too little power and influence (34% vs. 11%).

VIEWS TOWARD GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE ARE STRONGLY TIED TO TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND DESIRE FOR CHANGING THE U.S. SYSTEM.

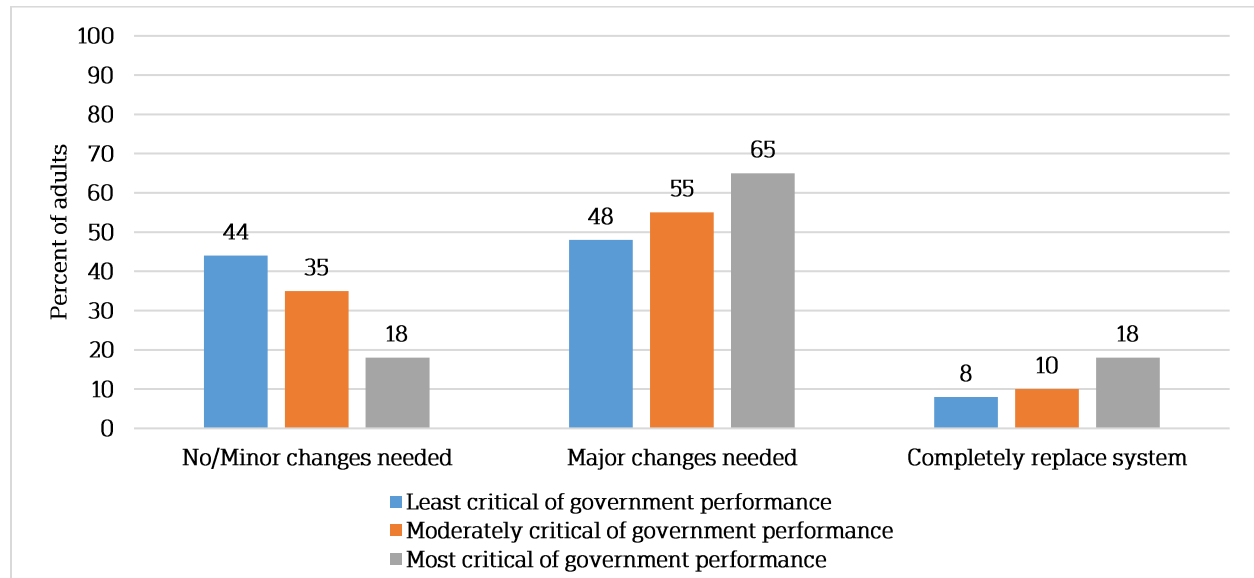
Americans most critical of government performance are also most likely to support major changes to the system and to distrust the government.

Views toward government performance are measured with an index that combines each individual's assessment of how well the government is handling the eight policy issues discussed previously. Each individual receives an index score for government performance, and then all Americans are divided based on their score into three roughly equal groups: most critical, moderately critical, and least critical.¹

¹ The index is based on each respondents' answer to those issues that they said the government should have a lot or a great deal of responsibility handling. However, we created a similar index that looked at respondents' answers to performance of all eight items, regardless of how much responsibility they think the government should have handling it, and it did not change the key results or relationships.

Criticism of how the government is performing relates to beliefs in how much change is needed. Those least critical of the performance of government are more likely to believe that the government needs minor or no changes compared to those most critical (44% vs. 18%).

Americans most critical of how government performs are most likely to say major changes are needed or the system should be completely replaced.

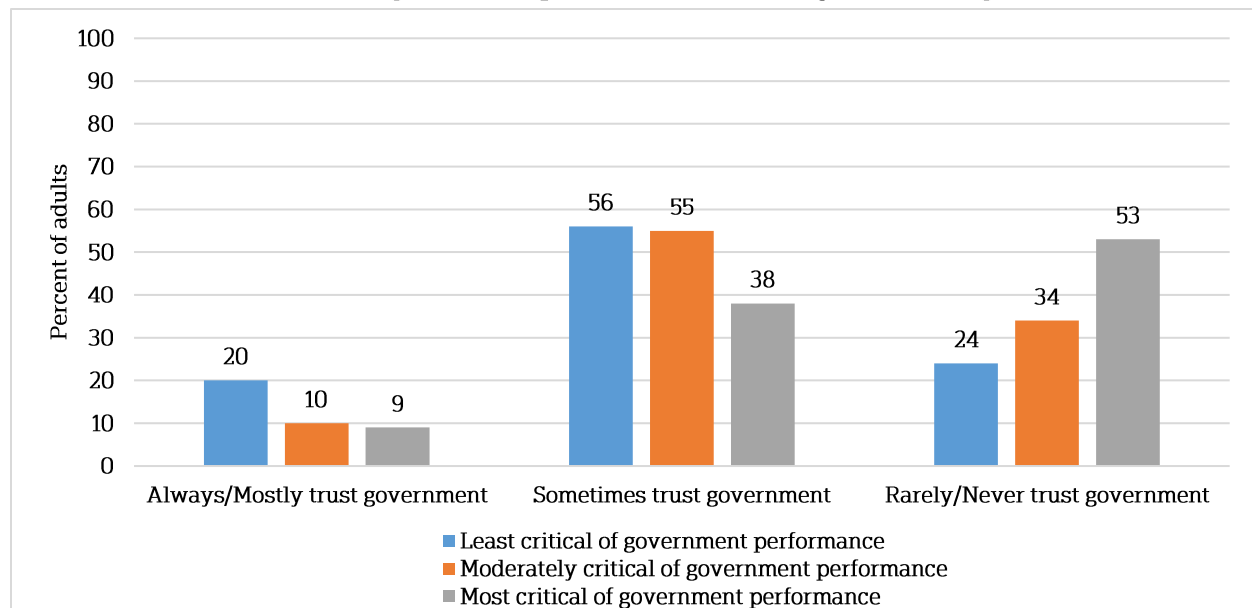


Question: Thinking about the structure of the U.S. system of government, which of the following comes closest to your view?

Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

The connection between views of performance and support for change holds true for all ages, races, education levels, and partisan affiliations. Democrats least critical of the performance of government are more likely than those most critical of performance to believe the government needs minor or no changes (43% vs. 15%), as are Republicans (46% vs. 29%).

Americans trust in government is also related to beliefs on how well the government is performing. Those Americans most critical of government performance are twice as likely as those least critical of government to say that they rarely or never trust the government to do what is right (53% vs. 24%).

Americans most critical of how government performs are most likely to not trust government.

Question: How often can you trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right?

Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

This trend is consistent for Americans of all ages, races, education levels, and partisan affiliations. For example, Democrats most critical of the performance of government are more likely than those least critical to say they rarely or never trust the government (51% vs. 23%), as are Republicans (52% vs. 27%).

BELIEFS ABOUT REPRESENTATION ARE TIED TO TRUST IN GOVERNMENT BUT ARE NOT SIGNIFICANT PREDICTORS OF WANTING MAJOR CHANGES IN THE SYSTEM.

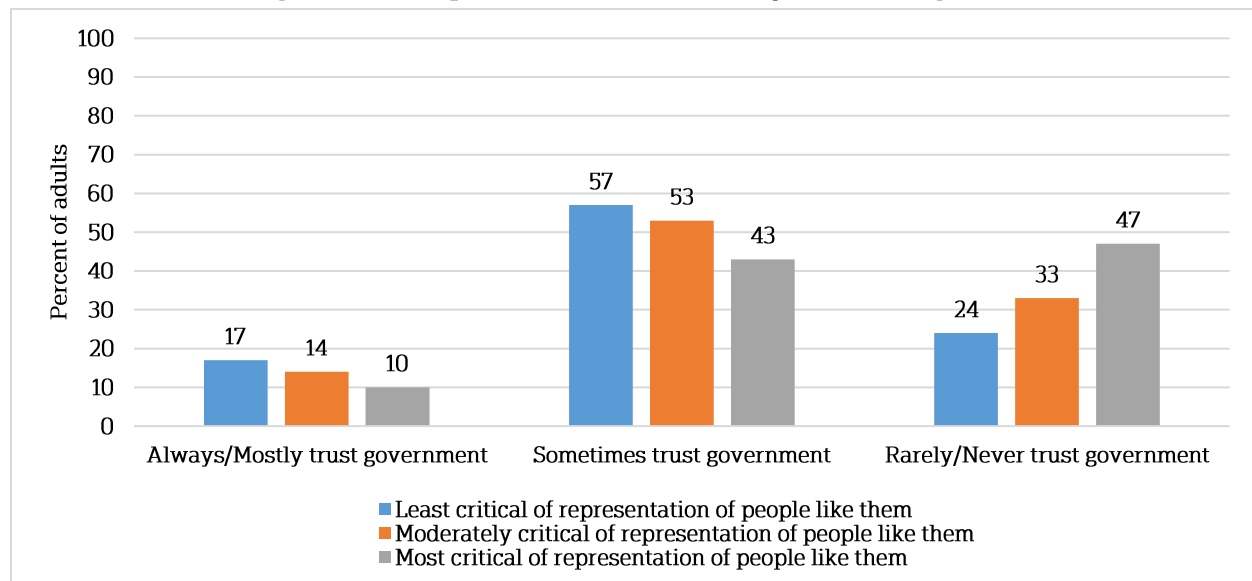
Americans who are least satisfied with the amount of influence people like them have in Washington are also most likely to distrust government. However, those least satisfied with representation are not more likely to support changes to the government system.

Representation is measured based on how much power and influence each individual believes people like them have in Washington, and how much that deviates from the ideal amount.² With representation, people were divided into three groups: 1) those most critical of representation who believe people like them have either far too little or far too much power, 2) those moderately critical who believe people like them have either somewhat too little or somewhat too much power, and 3) those least critical who believe people like them have neither too much nor too little power.³

Americans most critical of how well people like them are represented are more likely than those least critical to say that they rarely or never trust the government to do what is right (47% vs. 24%).

² We explored using a representation index that combined respondents' answers for all eight questions asking about representation of various groups, and it did not significantly change the key findings or relationships.

³ In the most critical group, 379 people said far too little power, while 13 said far too much power. Similarly, in the moderately critical group, 331 said somewhat too little, while 24 said somewhat too much.

Those most critical of government representation are most likely to not trust government.

Question: How often can you trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right?

Source: UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll conducted March 14-18, 2019, with 1,003 adults age 18 and older nationwide

The relationship between representation and trust in government is consistent across political affiliations. Democrats most critical of representation of people like them are more likely to say they rarely or never trust the government (46% vs. 24%), as are Republicans (46% vs. 23%).

While views on representation are related to trust in government, representation is not significantly associated with support for change in government when controlling for other demographic variables and beliefs about government performance.

Americans most critical of how people like them are represented are no more likely than others to believe that government needs major changes, and this is true among both Democrats and Republicans.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted by the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research with funding from NORC at the University of Chicago. Staff from Harris Public Policy and The AP-NORC Center collaborated on all aspects of the study.

Data were collected using the 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). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings.

Interviews for this survey were conducted between March 14 and 18, 2019, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from

AmeriSpeak, and 1,003 completed the survey—888 via the web and 115 via telephone. Interviews were conducted in English. The final stage completion rate is 22.5%, the weighted household panel response rate is 34.2%, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 85.1%, for a cumulative response rate of 6.5%. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.18 percentage points at the 95% 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 noncoverage or under- and oversampling resulting from the study specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, gender, census division, race/ethnicity, and education. Weighting variables were obtained from the 2018 Current Population Survey. The weighted data reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over.

A topline with full question wordings is available at www.apnorc.org. For more information, email info@apnorc.org.

About the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy

One of the largest graduate professional schools at the University of Chicago, Harris Public Policy has been driven by the belief that evidence-based research, not ideology or intuition, is the best guide for public policy. For more than three decades, our exceptional community of scholars, students, and alumni have applied this exacting perspective to the world's most pressing problems using the latest tools of social science. Through our undergraduate and graduate programs, we empower a new generation of data-driven leaders to create a positive social impact throughout our global society.

<https://harris.uchicago.edu/>

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.

The founding principles of The AP-NORC Center include a mandate to carefully preserve and protect the scientific integrity and objectivity of NORC and the journalistic independence of AP. All work conducted by the Center conforms to the highest levels of scientific integrity to prevent any real or perceived bias in the research. All of the work of the Center is subject to review by its advisory committee to help ensure it meets these standards. The Center will publicize the results of all studies and make all datasets and study documentation available to scholars and the public.