



The Associated Press-NORC
Center for Public Affairs Research

2021: THE PUBLIC'S PRIORITIES AND EXPECTATIONS

Headed into 2021, COVID-19 tops the list of Americans' priorities for government to address. Health care in general and economic issues continue to be high on the public's agenda as well. Compared to prior years, Americans have more confidence in the government's ability to make progress on many of the public's top priorities.

With the election of Joe Biden, Democrats are now more positive about the state of the country and where it's heading than Republicans.

In order to explore the public's agenda for 2021, a December 2020 poll conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research accepted from each respondent up to five volunteered issues they want to see the government address.

In reaction to the economic hardship caused by the coronavirus pandemic, economic problems, particularly unemployment, have risen in importance. And mentions of racial and policing issues have increased in the wake of protests against police brutality and racism earlier this year.

There are substantial partisan differences on several high-profile problems, including the importance of immigration, education, and the environment. In addition to differences on what problems should be addressed in the coming year, Republicans and Democrats have conflicting opinions about how things are going in the United States, the condition of the national economy, and where the country is headed.



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Three Things You Should Know

About The AP-NORC Poll on the Public's Priorities and Expectations Among Americans Age 18 and Older:

- 1) Fifty-three percent want to see the government address the problem of COVID-19 this year, and 66% are at least moderately confident that Washington will make progress on the pandemic in 2021.
- 2) Twenty-four percent say racism is one of their top concerns, up from 10% in 2018 and 2019.
- 3) Looking ahead, 55% expect 2021 to be an improvement over 2020 for them personally while 13% say it will be worse, and 31% don't anticipate much difference.

The nationwide poll was conducted December 3-7, 2020, 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 1,117 adults. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points.

Findings from the poll include:

- Along with COVID-19 taking the top spot on the list of Americans' priorities, health care reform continues to be a major issue.
- In 2018 and 2019, 10% of Americans mentioned racism or racial issues as one of their top five priorities, and 2% cited the police and policing issues. This year, 24% say racism is one of their top concerns, and 11% mention police and law enforcement.
- In 2018, immigration was the number one priority for Americans, cited by 49%. In 2020, only 18% mention immigration as one of their top five problems. Twenty-five percent of Republicans cite it as one of their concerns, down from 51% in 2019. Among Democrats, the number mentioning immigration dropped to 15% compared with 29% in 2019.
- Most Americans are at least moderately confident that Washington will make progress on the country's top problems.
- Sixty-six percent of Democrats say things in the country will improve in the next year, and 59% think the national economy will get better. In contrast, only 26% of Republicans think the country will get better over the next year, and just 25% expect the economy to improve.
- In another turnaround, 55% of Americans think they will personally have a better 2021 than 2020, and 13% think it will be a worse year. Thirty-one percent do not expect much difference between 2020 and 2021. In a change from the past two years, Democrats are more optimistic about the coming year than Republicans: 75% of Democrats expect 2021 to be an improvement over 2020, while only 37% of Republicans agree.

DOMESTIC ISSUES DOMINATE THE PUBLIC'S AGENDA FOR 2021

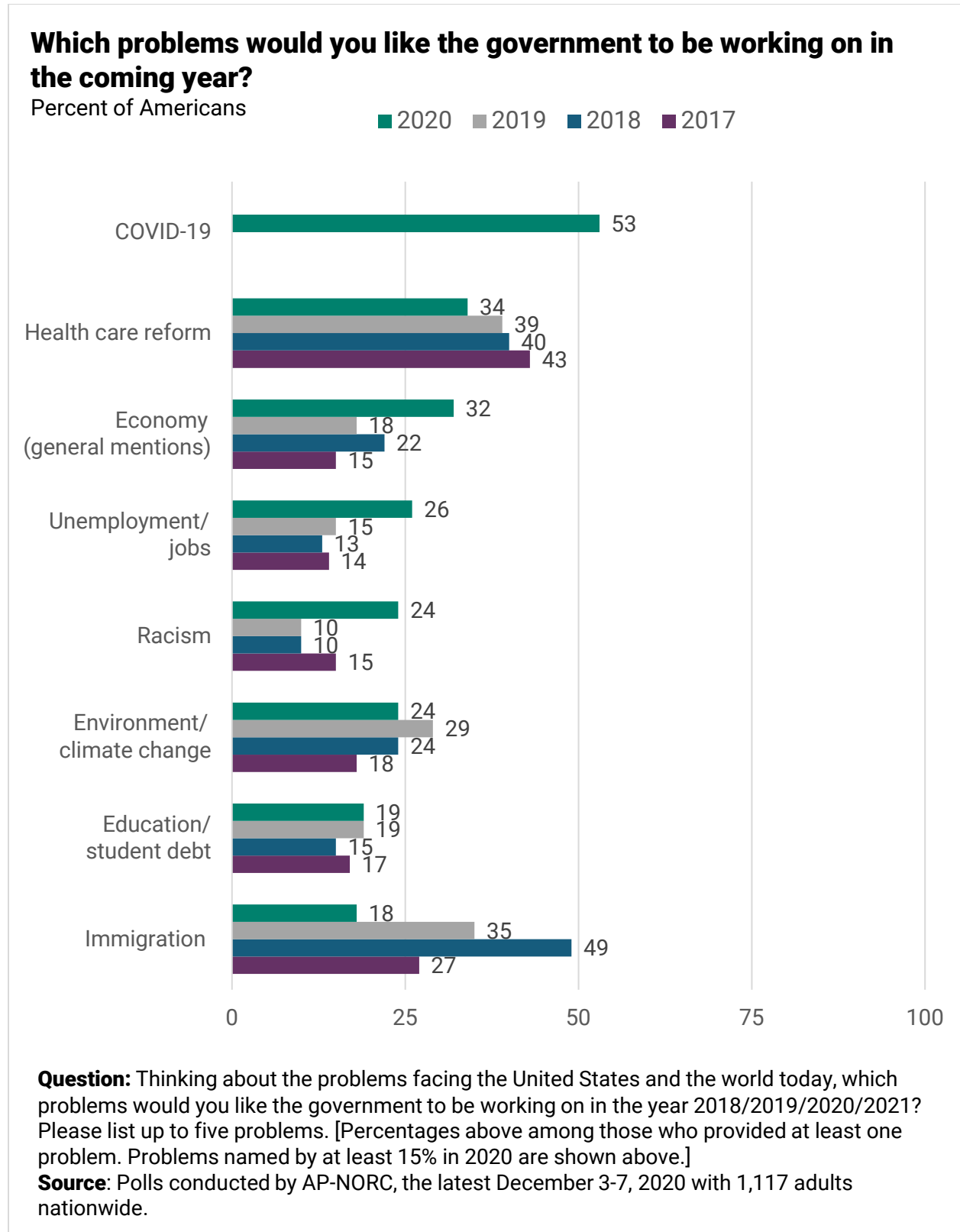
The public was asked about which problems facing the United States and the world today they would like the government to work on in 2021. Among all policy areas, domestic issues continue to be cited as Americans' most pressing policy concerns.

COVID-19 is the most frequently mentioned issue. Fifty-three percent cite COVID-19 as one of their top policy concerns. The second most cited issue, health care reform, is mentioned by 34%. The economy in general (32%), unemployment (26%), and racism and the environment (both with 24%) round out the top issues.

During the years of the Trump Administration, foreign policy issues have receded as priorities for the public. There is less urgency given to terrorism and immigration, while domestic concerns have grown. Thirty-four percent of Americans wanted the government to deal with terrorism in 2016, more than health care in general (31%) or immigration (29%). A year later, as Donald Trump was about to be inaugurated, the top issue was health care, in general (43%). Terrorism (18%) had dropped down the list.

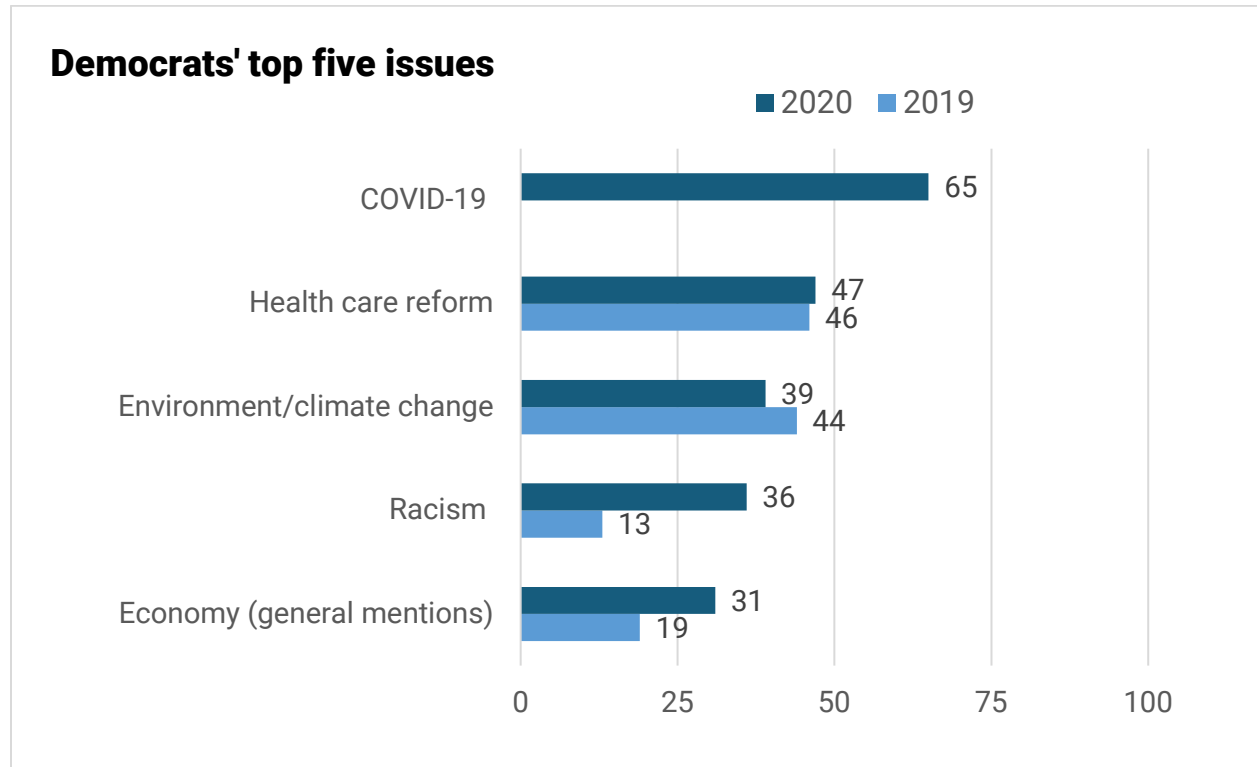
Asked about their priorities for 2018, health care reform was a high priority, mentioned by 43%. After a year of headlines about the border wall, the separation of children, and efforts to overhaul immigration, immigration was a top priority for 2019, at 49% up from 27%.

Last year, when the public was asked about their priorities for 2020, 50% mentioned health care in general, and 39% said health care reform specifically. Only 15% cited unemployment and 10% said racism. The economy, unemployment, and racism have all risen as priorities in the wake of a challenging year which included a global pandemic and subsequent economic damage, along with protests throughout the country against police violence.

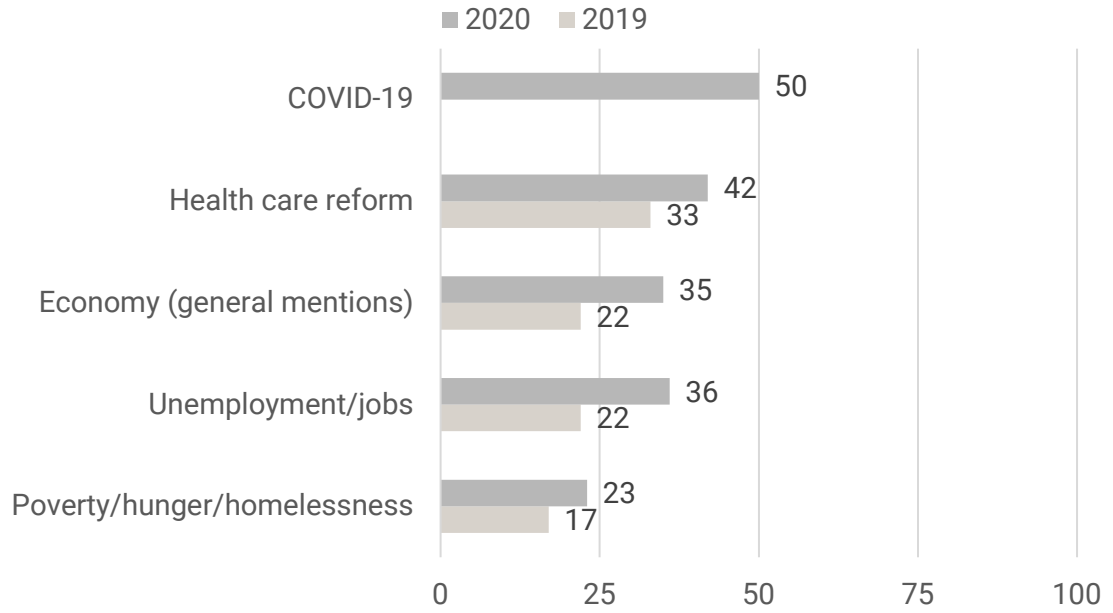


COVID-19 is the top priority for all Americans, regardless of party identification. Health care reform, which was the top issue for both Democrats and independents in 2019, and second for Republicans, remains as a high priority for all.

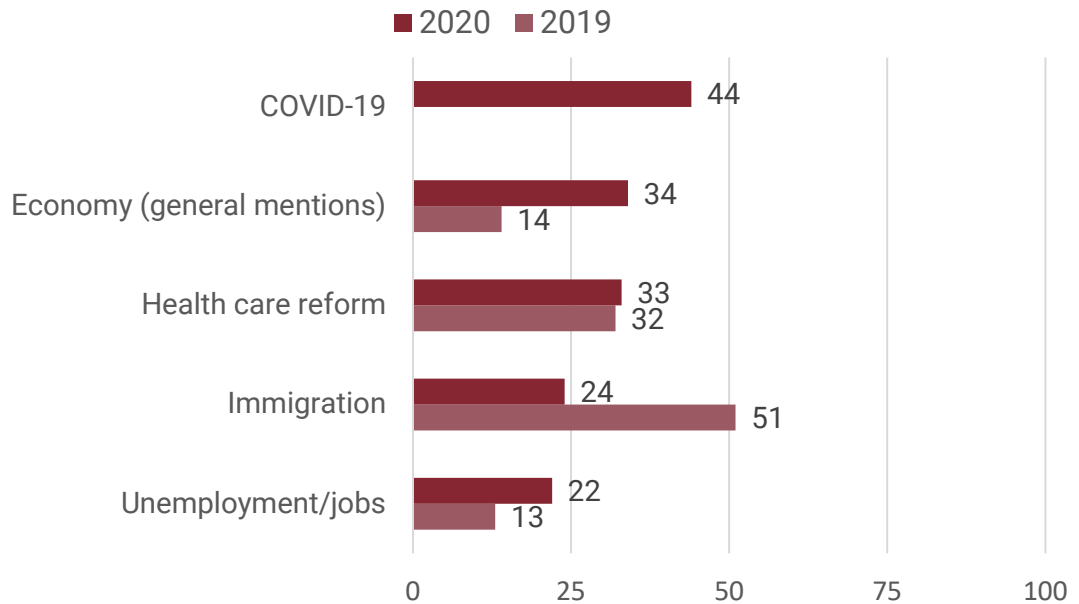
In addition to COVID-19, racism is a new addition to the list of Democrats' top five concerns, replacing immigration and education. Mentions of poverty, hunger, and homelessness are cited by independents more frequently this year than in recent years, while the environment and education are no longer among their top five concerns. Immigration is still a top issue for Republicans, but they cite it significantly less often than they did last year. Unemployment and the economy have moved into their list of top five concerns, while government spending, trade, and taxes have moved down as priorities for Republicans.



Independents' top five issues



Republicans' top five issues



Question: Thinking about the problems facing the United States and the world today, which problems would you like the government to be working on in the year 2020/2021? Please list up to five problems. [Percentages above among those who provided at least one problem.]

Source: AP-NORC polls, the latest conducted December 3-7, 2020, with 1,117 adults nationwide.

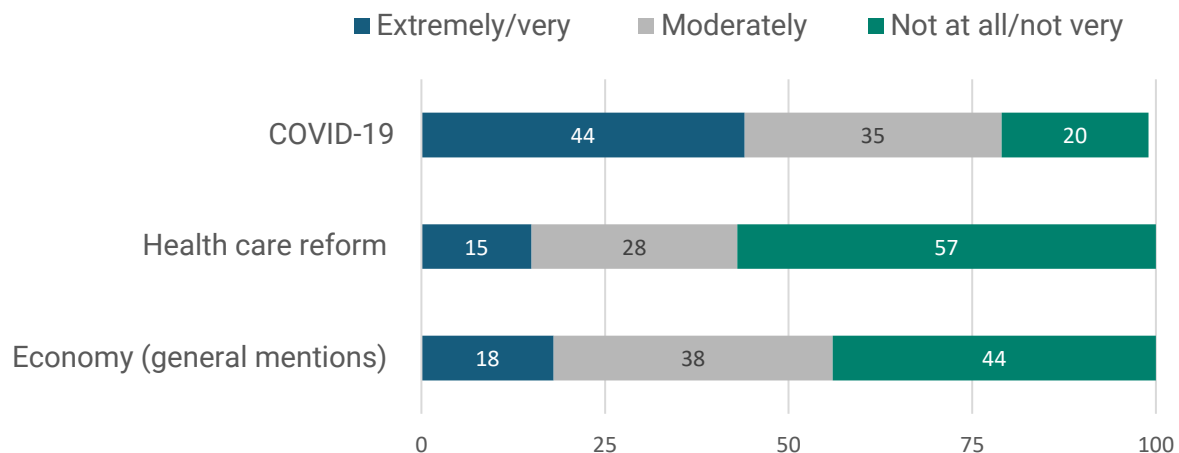
INCREASED CONFIDENCE THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL MAKE PROGRESS ON TOP ISSUES IN 2021

In 2019, only 23% of those mentioning health care reform as a top issue were even moderately confident in the government's ability to make headway on it; now 43% have at least some confidence. Forty-four percent said they were at least moderately confident in the government's ability to deal with the economy in 2020; now 56% are at least somewhat confident.

Among the public's other pressing concerns, 79% of those citing COVID-19 as a priority are confident in that the government will be able to address the pandemic in 2021. However, confidence in the government's ability to address race issues is significantly lower with 41% expressing at least moderate confidence.

How confident are you in the ability of the federal government to make progress on each problem in 2021?

Percent of Americans mentioning issue as a top priority



Question: How confident are you in the ability of the federal government to make progress on this problem in 2021?

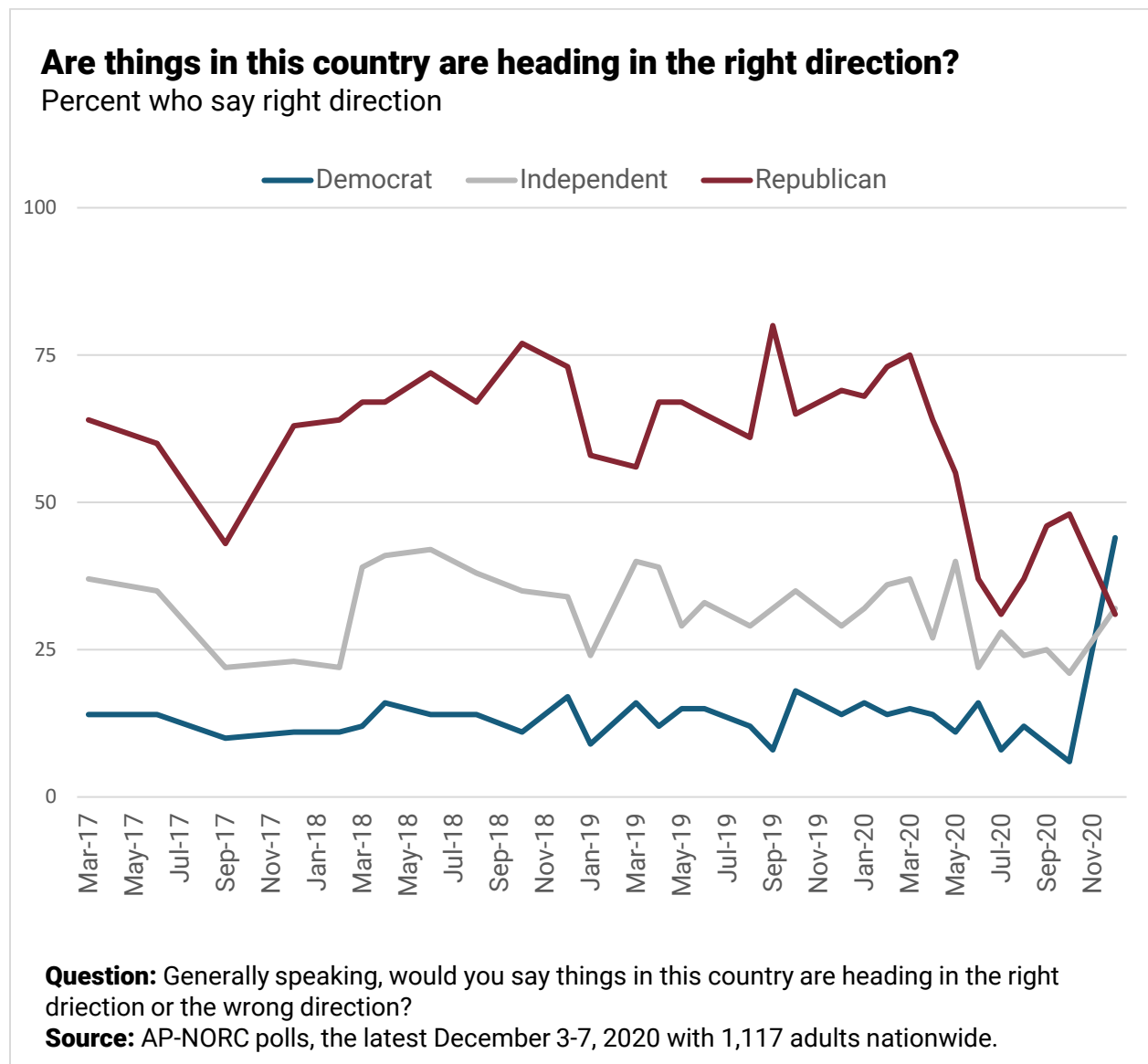
Source: AP-NORC poll conducted December 3-7, 2020, with 1,117 adults nationwide.

PARTISAN DIFFERENCES IN APPRAISALS OF DIRECTION OF COUNTRY

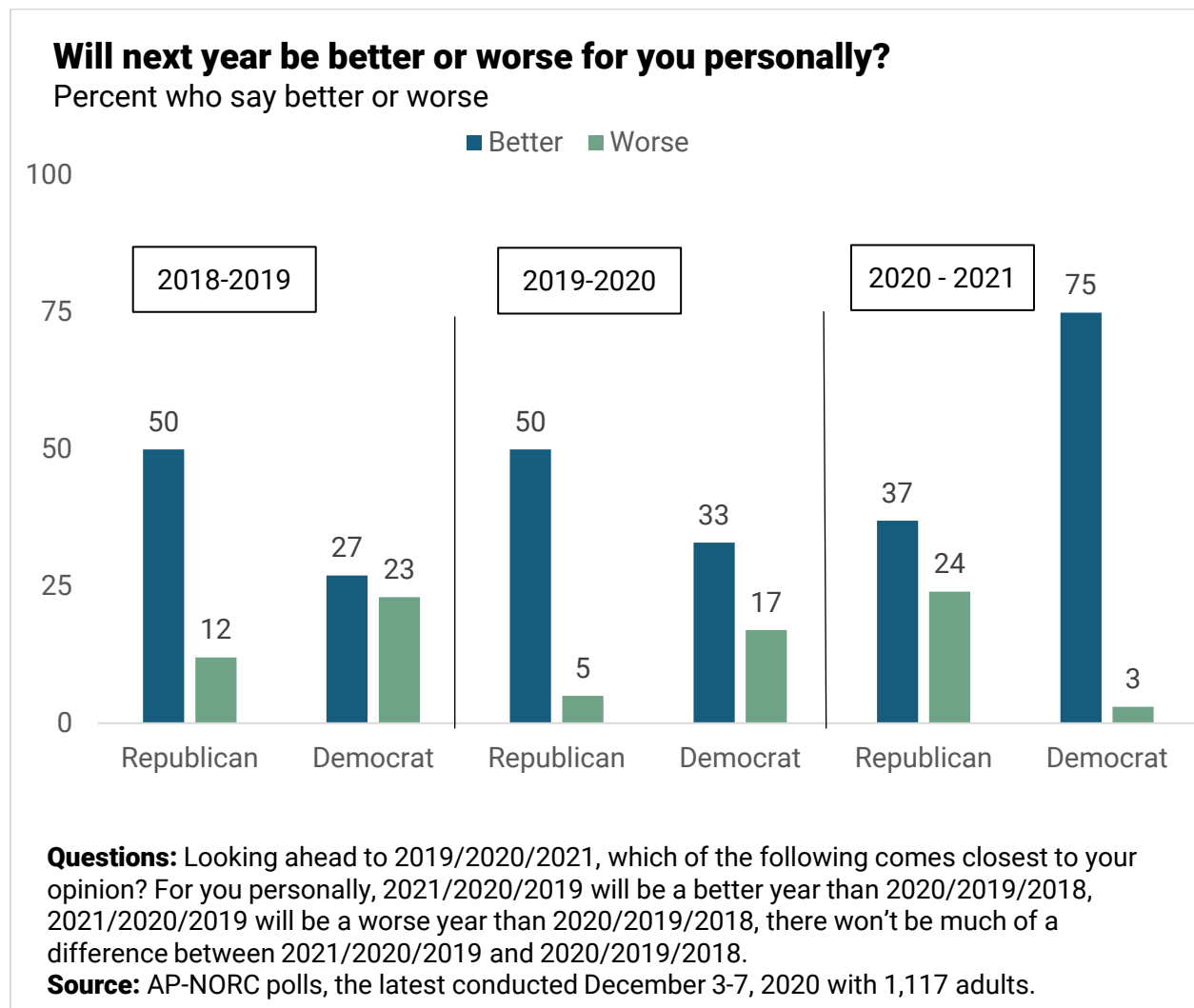
Americans continue to regard the country as headed in the wrong direction: 37% say it is heading in the right direction and 62% think it is heading in the wrong direction; nearly the same as December 2019.

But there have been considerable changes in outlook by party. As 2020 drew to a close, the prospect of a Biden Administration appears to be brightening the outlook of Democrats. Throughout the Trump Administration, large numbers of Democrats have described the country as headed in the wrong direction. As recently as October 2020, only 6% said the country was on the right track. Now, 44 percent of Democrats, the highest it has been since the 2016 election, say the country is moving in the right direction.

A majority of Republicans have had a positive view of the direction of the country for most of the Trump Administration, dropping into the 30's during the summer as the pandemic surged and among protests for civil rights and racial justice. In the wake of Biden's election, only 31% of Republicans say the country is heading in the right direction, while 68% think it's heading in wrong direction.



Overall, 54% of Americans think 2021 will be an improvement for the country over 2020, a year marked by a pandemic, economic crisis, racial unrest, and political turmoil. Similarly, 55% say 2021 will be better for them personally. Again, Democrats have become more much confident about their prospects in the coming year, while Republicans are feeling less secure about 2021 than they were about the previous two years.



COMPARED TO LAST YEAR, AMERICANS ARE MORE POSITIVE ABOUT THE STATE OF COUNTRY AND THE ECONOMY

A year ago, only 28% of the public expected the way things were going in the country to improve over the year. Now, 45% think things will get better.

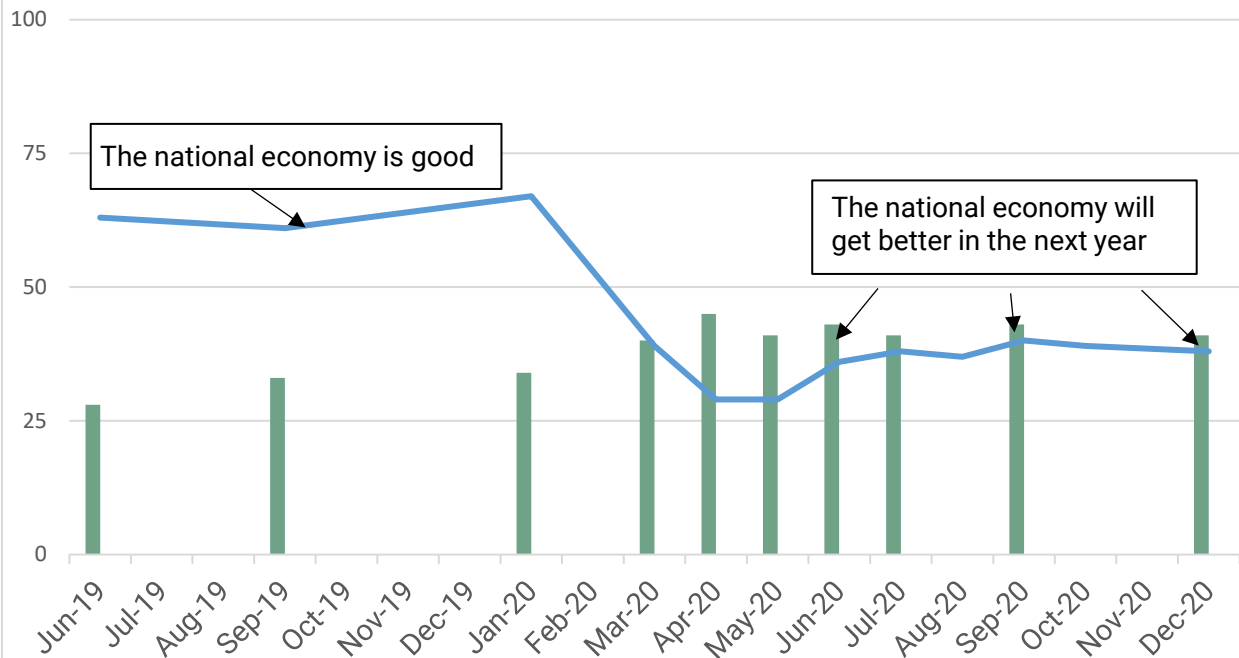
In December 2019, 31% of Americans said the national economy would improve, while in the latest survey 41% think the economy will get better over the next year.

Pre-pandemic the public had a very positive view of the economy, while now most Americans consider the national economy to be in poor shape. In January 2020, 67% said the national economy was very or somewhat good. After the outbreak of the coronavirus in March, Americans' view of the economy dropped precipitously, and now only 38% describe the country's economy as good.

When the public thinks the economy is in good shape, they tend to hedge their expectations for the next year. But when the economy is doing poorly, people are more hopeful that it can only get better.

Hope for the future of the economy increase when current conditions are poor.

Percent of Americans



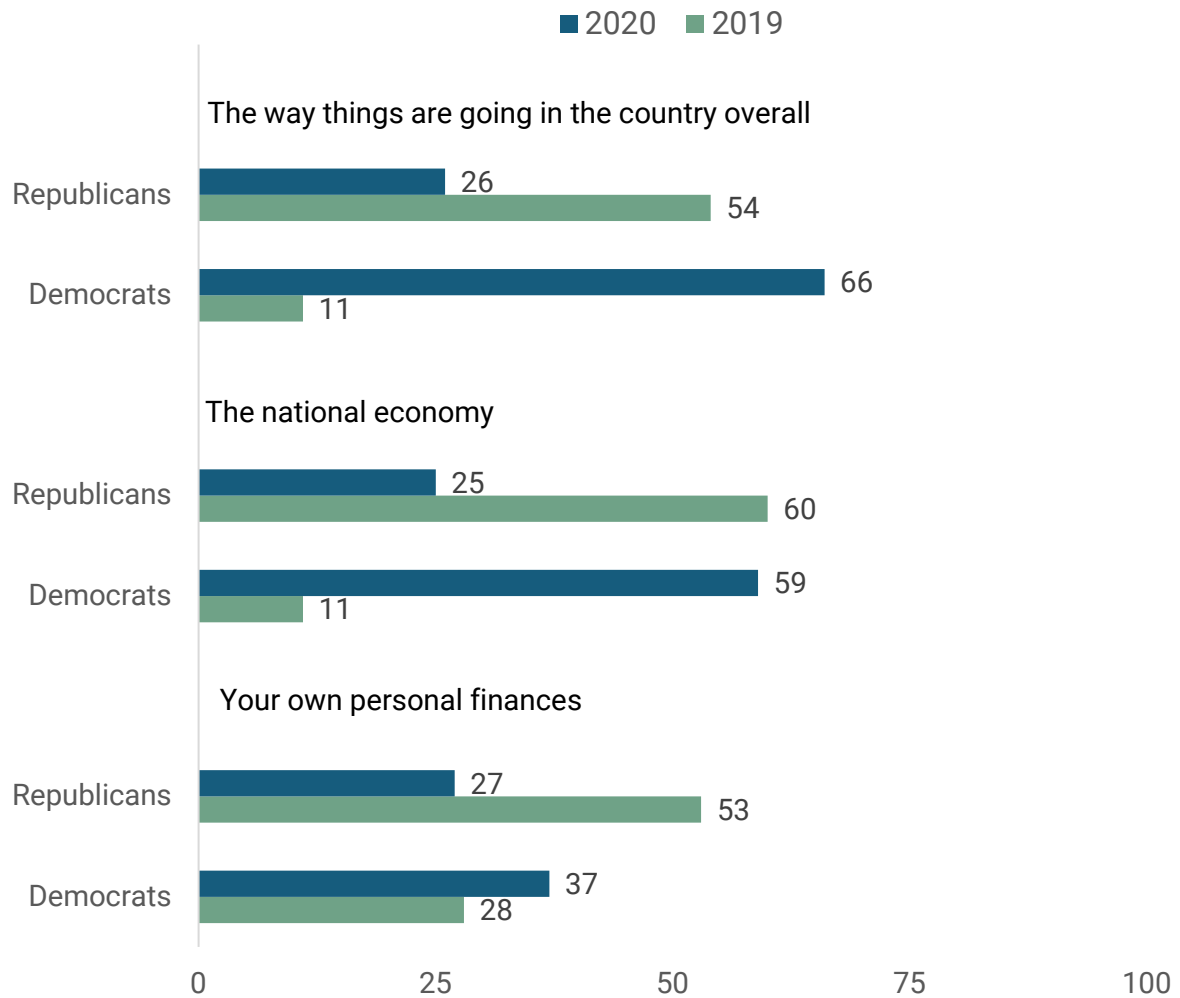
Questions: How would you describe the nation's economy these days? In the next year, do you think each of the following will get better, get worse, or stay about the same?

Source: AP-NORC polls, the latest conducted December 3-7, 2020 with 1,117 adults nationwide.

Last year, most Republicans were optimistic that conditions in the country overall, the economy, and their own personal finances would get better in the next year. Now, it's Democrats who express optimism. While more positive than Republicans, Democrats are not as confident about their own finances as Republicans were during the Trump administration.

Will each get better in the next year?

Percent of who say each will get better



Question: In the next year, do you think each of the following will get better, get worse, or stay about the same?

Source: AP-NORC polls conducted December 5-9, 2019 with 1,053 adults, and December 3-7, 2020 with 1,117 adults.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and with funding from The Associated Press and 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). 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 December 3 and 7, 2020, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 1,117 completed the survey—1,028 via the web and 89 via telephone. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference. The final stage completion rate is 20.3%, the weighted household panel response rate is 21.0%, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 80.4%, for a cumulative response rate of 3.4%. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 3.9 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 non-coverage 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 2020 Current Population Survey. The weighted data reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over. The sample is also weighted to match the average of self-identified party identification in the previous two waves of the AmeriSpeak Omnibus survey and this current survey.

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

For the open-ended question, which asked respondents to name the top problems the government should address in the country in 2021, responses were classified using a supervised machine learning model. Nearly 20,000 responses to the same question from previous AmeriSpeak Omnibus surveys were used to train a support vector machine to classify responses into nearly 70 codes. These codes were validated by a human coder and were then collapsed into more general categories based on topic for reporting.

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. For more information, email info@apnorc.org.

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