



The Associated Press-NORC  
Center for Public Affairs Research

# 2026: THE PUBLIC'S PRIORITIES AND EXPECTATIONS

The American public's priorities for the government in 2026 span a wide variety of issues from economic and personal finance issues to policy areas like health care and immigration to concerns about how well Washington is functioning.

To explore the public's agenda for the coming year, The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research conducted a poll in December 2025, in which respondents provided, in their own words, up to five issues that they believe should be priorities for the government in 2026.

In terms of broad policy areas, economic concerns dominate. About 7 in 10 Americans mention at least one economic issue for the government to prioritize in 2026. And 43% mention at least one issue related to personal finances, up from 31% last year.

Immigration issues (44%) and health care issues (41%) also dominate the public's agenda. Immigration remains a top issue. Mentions of health care issues are up from last year (41% vs 33%).

In terms of specific issues, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to cite the environment (22% vs 5%) as a top problem, while Republicans are more likely than Democrats to mention crime (22% vs 5%) and taxes (19% vs 10%).



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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) 71% mention at least one economic issue. 43% cite a personal finance issue, including 51% of independents, 44% of Democrats, and 37% of Republicans.
- 2) Immigration issues are mentioned by 44%, including 60% of Republicans, 37% of Democrats, 32% of independents.
- 3) 41% mention at least one health care related issue as a priority, including 50% of Democrats, 41% of independents, and 32% of Republicans.

The public's focus on other issues has declined. There was a decrease in the number of people who mentioned a foreign policy issue other than immigration, down to 25% from 35% last year. And only 4% mention women's rights or abortion as specific issues this year, down from 16% last year.

The public is highly pessimistic about the ability of government to address their priorities, with only 11% expressing confidence, down from 15% last year. Republicans are more confident than independents or Democrats (25% vs 5% vs 2%) though Republicans' confidence has slipped compared with last year (25% vs 35%).

Republicans are more optimistic than their Democratic counterparts that next year will be better for the United States and for themselves personally. Half of Republicans think 2026 will be better than 2025 for the country overall compared with 1 in 10 Democrats.

The nationwide poll was conducted December 4-8, 2025 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 1,146 adults. The margin of sampling error is +/- 4.0 percentage points.

## **THE PUBLIC WANTS THE GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS A RANGE OF POLICY ISSUES.**

When asked to name the five most important problems the government should be working on in the upcoming year, economic issues, immigration, personal finance, and health care issues are top of the list.

The public is concerned with a variety of economic and personal finance issues including personal financial health, cost of living, inflation, housing costs, poverty, and unemployment.

Overall, looking across all the specific economic issues mentioned, 71% of the public mention an economic policy issue for the government to address this year. That is similar to 75% in [2024](#) and 76% in [2023](#). A sizable share of the public continues to prioritize inflation and the cost of living, with one-third considering these issues the most important problems for the government to address.

Personal financial issues saw an uptick this year with 43% mentioning at least one issue in the policy area compared with 31% in 2024 and 30% in 2023. Among specific personal financial issues, 18% are concerned about the cost of living, 17% about housing costs, 12% about food costs, 8% about wages, and 6% about gas prices.

Forty-four percent of Americans mention immigration including terms like ICE and border security. This focus area is holding steady. In both [2024](#) and 2025, more than 4 in 10 considered it to be one of their top issues.

In the wake of the [longest government shutdown in U.S. history](#), which was largely centered around the debate over health care subsidies, 41% mention a health care issue, up from 33% last year. Health care reform is mentioned by 21% and 12% cite health care costs or medical bills.

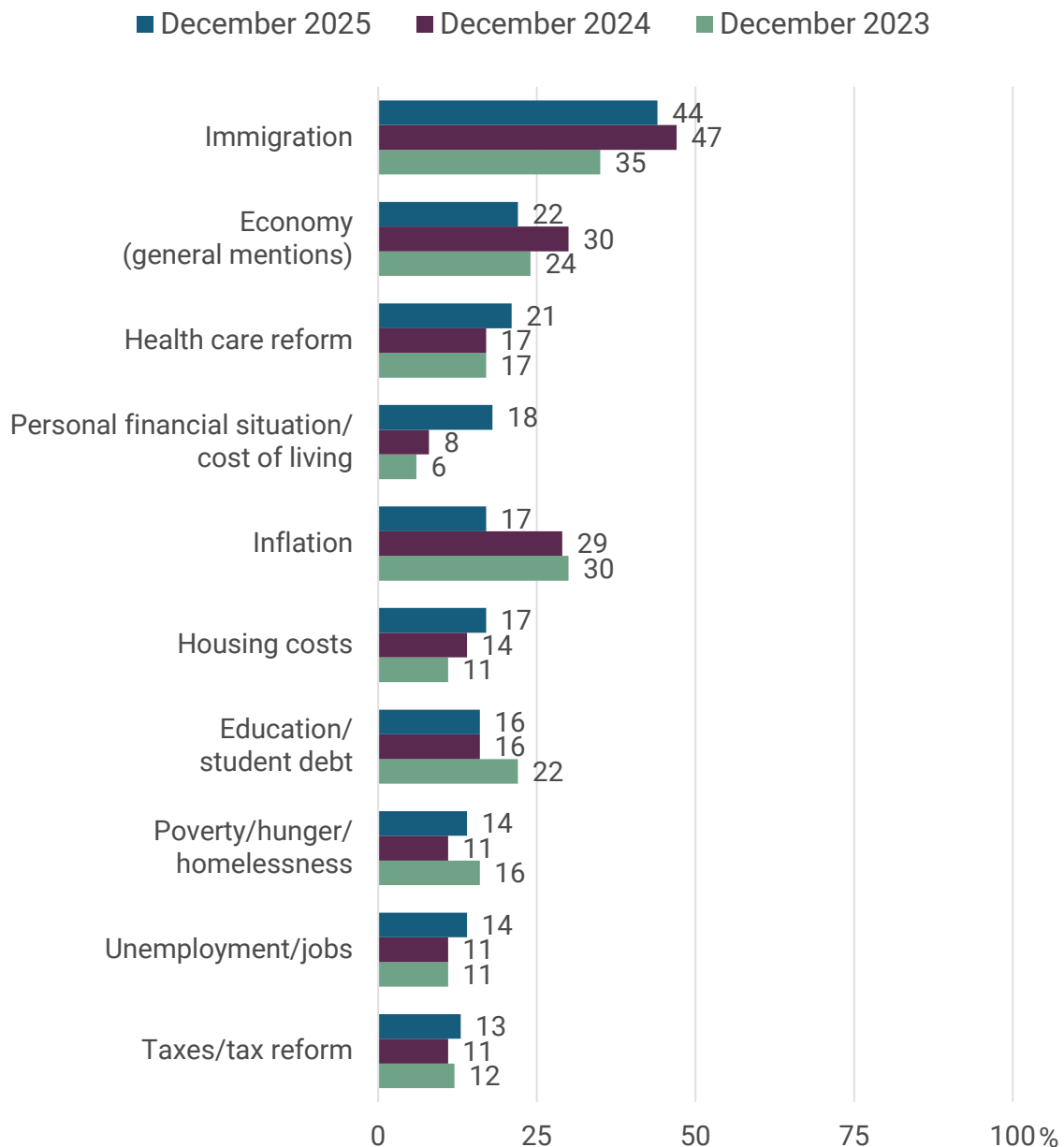
Thirty-seven percent cite at least one specific issue related to politics, including bipartisanship, gridlock, or the shutdown (3%) as top issues, though no single issue related to politics cracked the top ten.

And 25% of the public mention at least one specific foreign policy issue. Common issues included U.S. foreign policy, wars, and the Middle East.

Three-quarters of the public mention a specific domestic policy issue. Education and student debt (16%), crime and violence (12%) and the environment and climate (12%) are most frequently mentioned.

## The top 10 specific issues on the public's agenda for 2026.

Percent of adults



**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 2026? Please list up to five problems. (Percentages above among those who provided at least one problem.).

**Source:** AP-NORC polls, the latest conducted December 4–8, 2025, with 1,146 adults nationwide.

Prioritization of certain issues for the coming year decreased compared to prior years. There was a notable drop in citations of abortion or women's rights as a top issue, dropping from 16% last year to 4% this year. This returns to a similar level to 2020, prior to [the Supreme Court Dobbs v Jackson decision](#), when 2% considered abortion one of the most important problems for the government to address.

Mentions of the environment also decreased compared with last year (12% vs 21%).

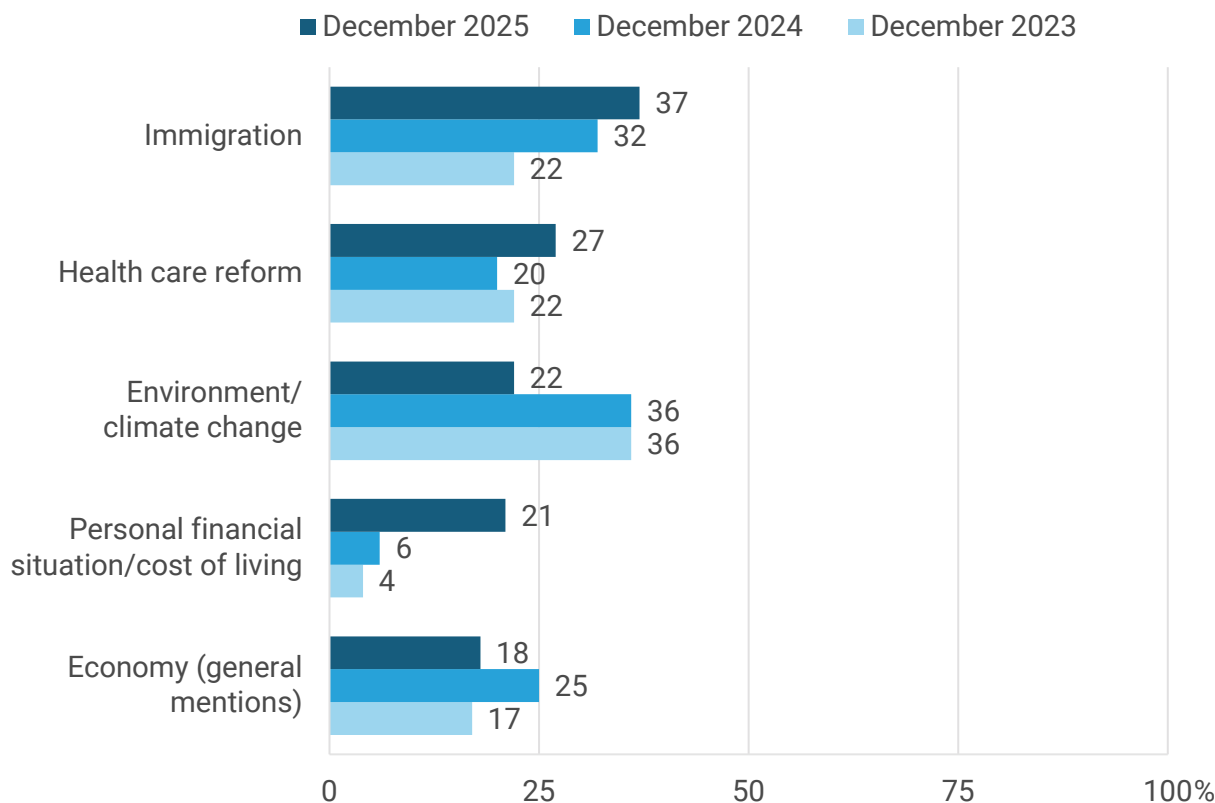
A smaller share of the public reference inflation as one of their specific top issues (17% vs 29%), though there is an increase in mentions of cost of living compared with last year (18% vs 8%).

## IMMIGRATION, HEALTH CARE REFORM, AND THE ENVIRONMENT ARE DEMOCRATS' TOP ISSUES FOR 2026.

Though environmental concerns slipped in rankings of Democrats' top issues, it remains within the top five and Democrats are four times as likely to mention the environment as a top problem compared with Republicans (22% vs 5%).

### Democrats' top issues.

Percent of Democrats



**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 2026?

**Source:** AP-NORC polls, the latest conducted December 4–8, 2025 with 1,146 adults nationwide.



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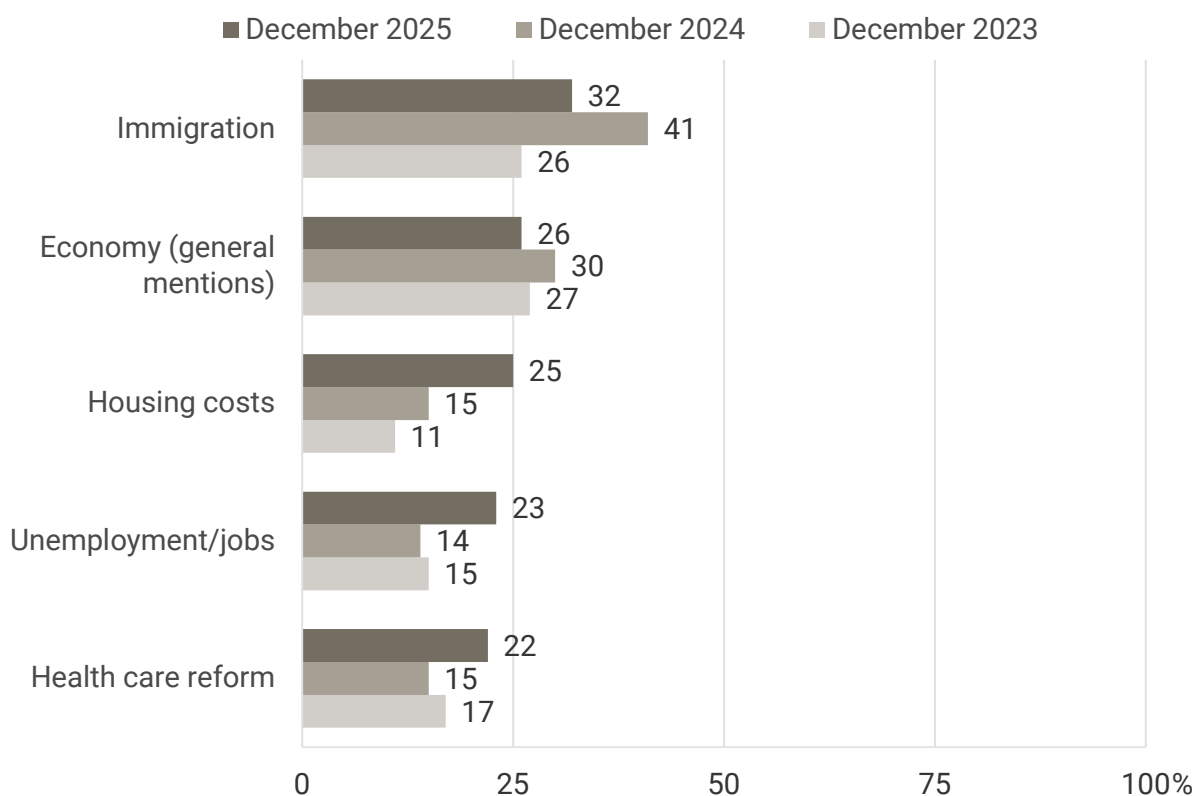
Democrats are also more likely than Republicans to cite upholding the Constitution (4% vs 1%) and the Trump administration (8% vs 2%) as top issues.

## INDEPENDENTS CITE IMMIGRATION AND ECONOMY AS TOP ISSUES.

Similarly to Democrats and Republicans, immigration tops the list of most important problems for the government to address in 2026. Immigration is followed by general mentions of the economy, housing costs, unemployment, and healthcare reform.

### Independents' top issues.

Percent of independents



**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 2026?

**Source:** AP-NORC polls, the latest conducted December 4–8, 2025 with 1,146 adults nationwide.



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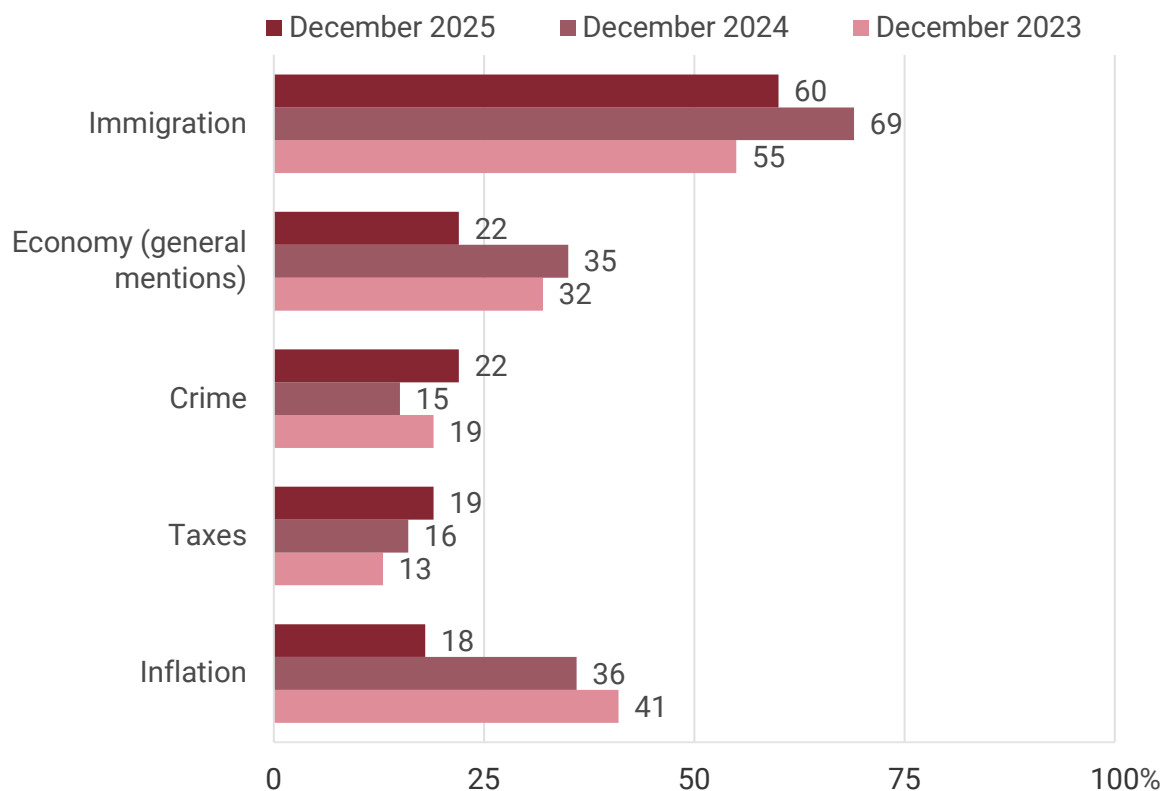
## IMMIGRATION IS THE OVERWHELMING ISSUE FOR REPUBLICANS.

Though immigration tops the list of most important issues across the board for the public, Republicans place even more emphasis on the issue. Six in 10 Republicans cite immigration as a top issue for the government to address in 2026, compared with 37% for Democrats and 32% for independents.

Despite its pervasiveness, mentions of immigration are down slightly among Republicans compared with last year.

### Republicans' top issues.

Percent of Republicans



**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 2026?

**Source:** AP-NORC polls, the latest conducted December 4–8, 2025 with 1,146 adults nationwide.

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Crime and taxes are two issues that are significantly more prevalent among Republicans than Democrats. Republicans are four times as likely to mention crime or violence as one of their top five most important problems for the government to address than Democrats (22% vs 5%). Republicans also mention taxes about twice as often as Democrats (19% vs 10%).

Other issues that are more pressing among Republicans than Democrats include drugs (12% vs 2%), the deficit (14% vs 5%), energy (6% vs 2%), and gas prices (10% vs 3%).

## CONFIDENCE IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS DOWN AMONG REPUBLICANS AND INDEPENDENTS.

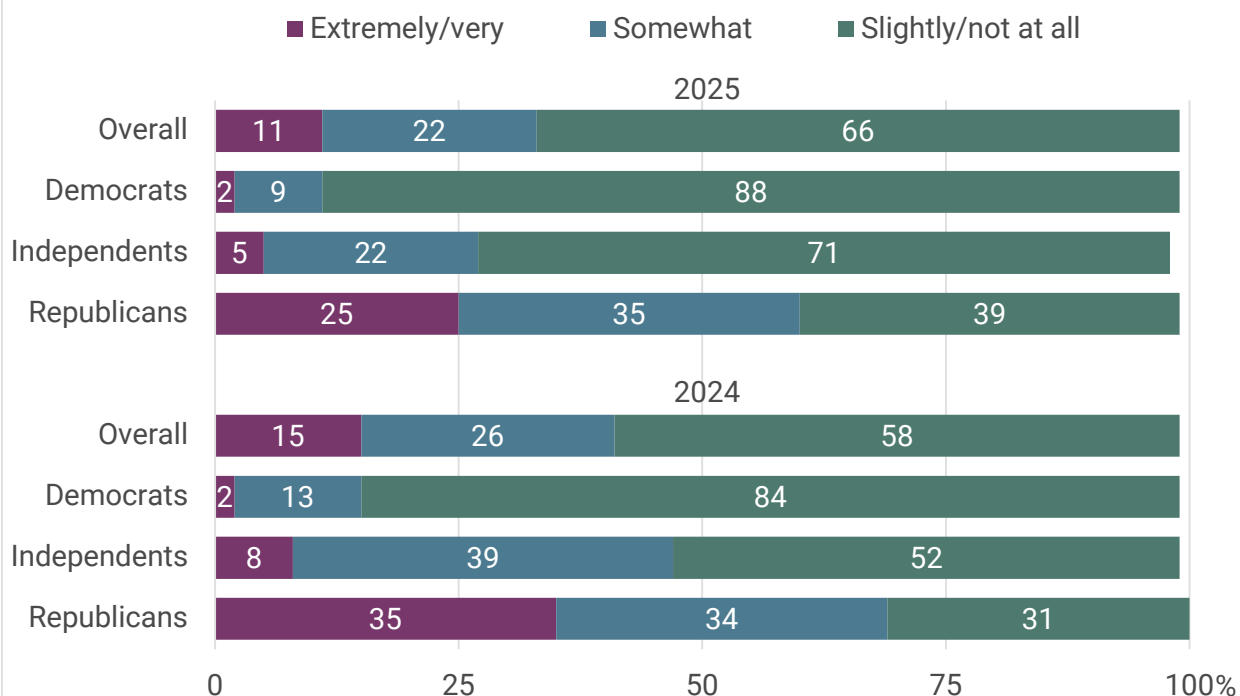
Just 11% of the public is extremely or very confident in the ability of the federal government to make progress on the top issues facing the country. Twenty-two percent are moderately confident and 66% are slightly or not at all confident.

Last year with the second Trump administration set to begin the following month, 35% of Republicans were extremely or very confident in the federal government's capabilities, up from just 1% the previous year when the Biden administration was headed into its final year. Now, while Republicans are more optimistic about progress in the year ahead than Democrats or independents, they have lost some of last year's faith in Washington. Four in 10 Republicans are slightly or not at all confident that the government will address important issues this year.

Independents lost the most confidence. About half were at least somewhat confident in 2024 and that's down to about 3 in 10 this year.

### In the past year, the public has lost some confidence in the government's ability to make progress on the issues facing the country.

Percent of adults



**Question:** How confident are you in the ability of the federal government to make progress on the important problems and issues facing the country in 2025/2026?

**Source:** AP-NORC polls conducted December 5–9, 2024, with 1,251 adults and December 4–8, 2025 with 1,146 adults nationwide.



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## OPTIMISM FOR THE YEAR AHEAD IS DOWN.

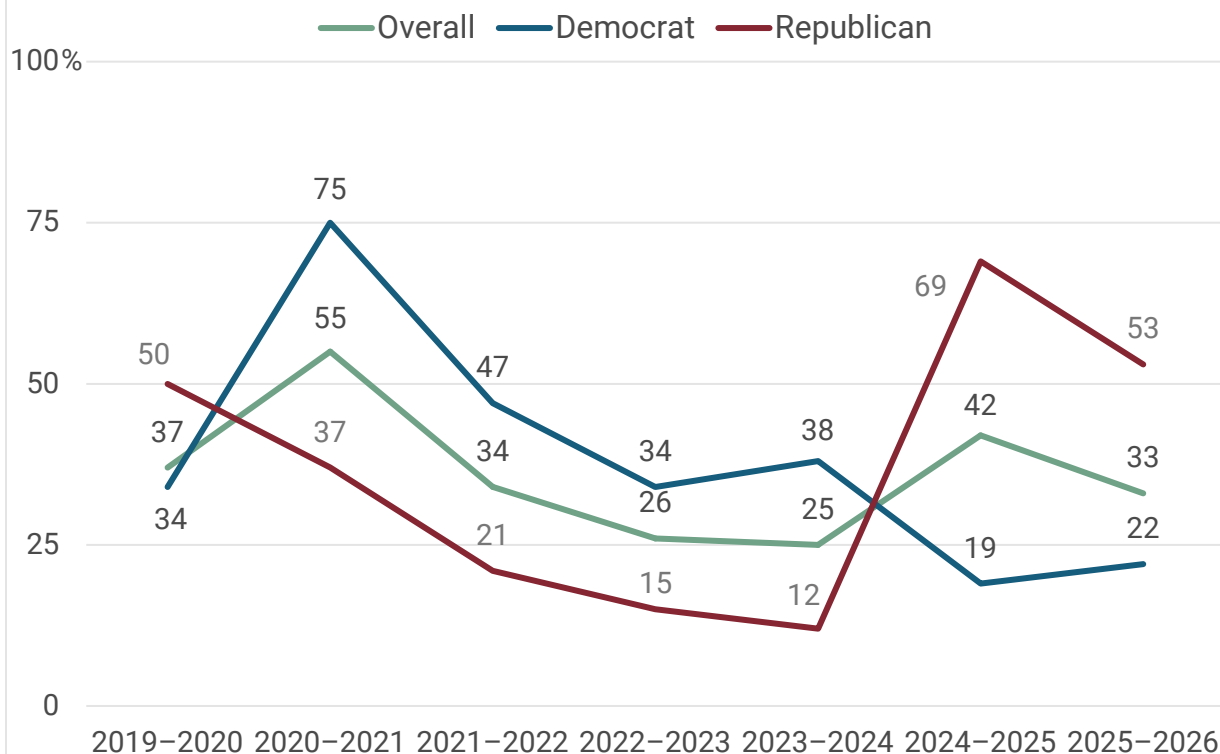
A third of adults are anticipating a better 2026 than 2025 for themselves, and about a quarter think there will be an improvement for the country as a whole. This is down from last year, when 42% were optimistic about 2025 for themselves and 35% thought things would improve for the country.

There are stark partisan differences. During a Democratic administration, Democrats are more positive about the coming year than Republicans, and Republicans are more hopeful than Democrats when a Republican is in the White House.

But while last year about 7 in 10 Republicans were optimistic about the next year for both themselves and the country ahead of Trump's inauguration, a year later about half of Republicans expect that 2026 will be better than 2025.

### Republicans are less optimistic their lives will improve in 2026 than last year.

Percent of adults who say the next year will be better for them personally



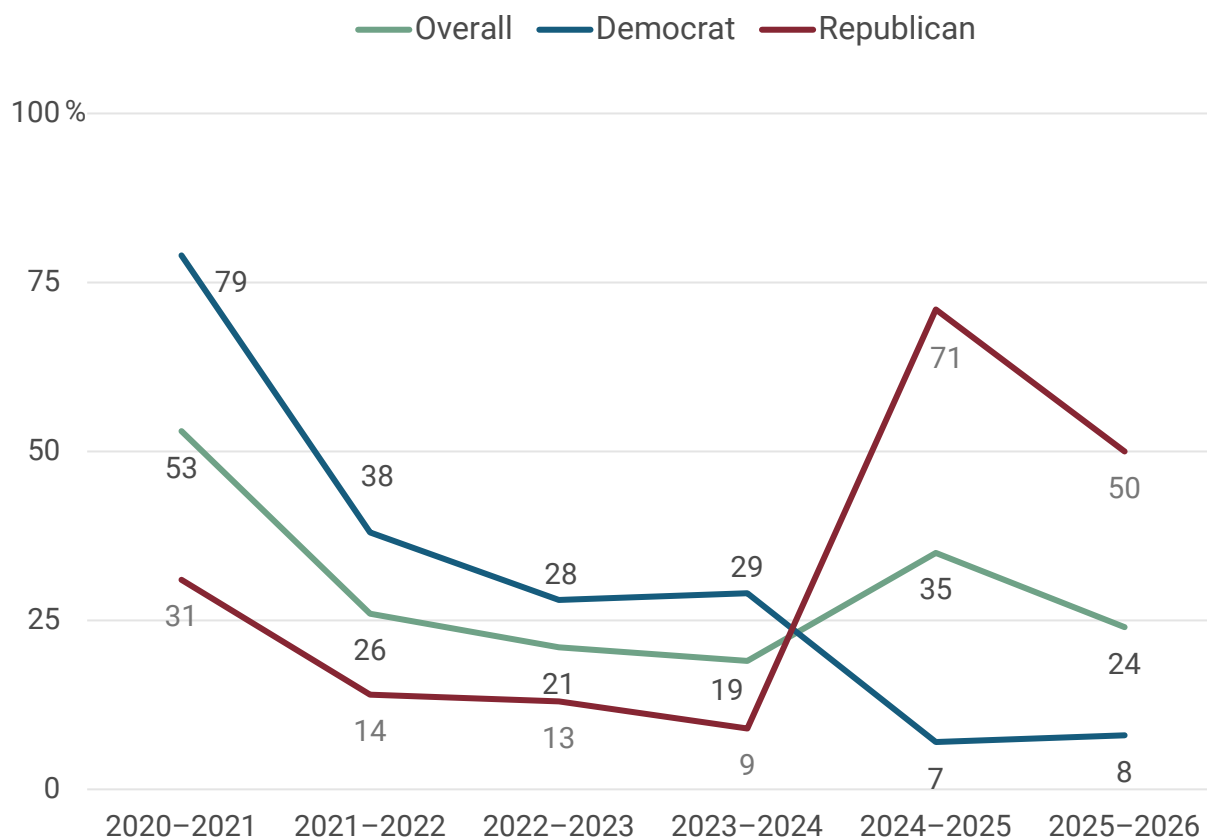
**Question:** [You personally] Looking ahead to 2026, which of the following comes closest to your opinion about how the year will be for each of the following?

**Source:** AP-NORC polls, the latest conducted December 4-8, 2025 with 1,146 adults nationwide.



## Half of Republicans expect things in 2026 to improve for the country.

Percent of adults who say the next year will be better for the United States



**Question:** [The United States] Looking ahead to 2026, which of the following comes closest to your opinion about how the year will be for each of the following?

**Source:** AP-NORC polls, the latest conducted December 4-8, 2025 with 1,146 adults nationwide.

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The public is not optimistic about economic improvement in 2026. Only 23% say 2026 will be a better year for the economy, down from 38% last year. A third think there won't be much change from current conditions and 43% feel it will get worse in 2025.

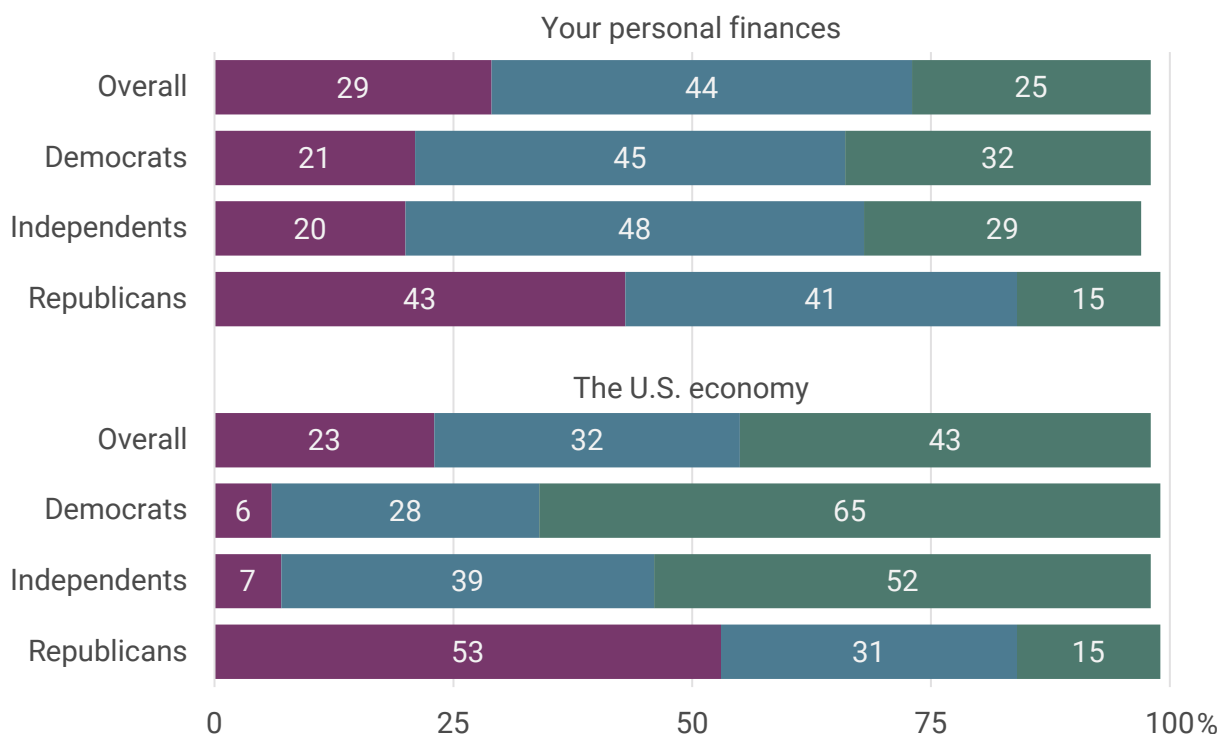
The public is also not hopeful about the personal implications of the economy with only 29% expecting 2026 to be a better year for their personal finances.

Opinion on the economy's improvement in the next year is highly partisan. It is typical to see partisans that are more optimistic when their party controls the White House. About half of Republicans say the economy will be better in 2026 than it was in 2025 compared with only 6% of Democrats.

## Economic outlook for 2026 is highly partisan.

Percent of adults

■ 2026 will be better than 2025 ■ There won't be much difference ■ 2026 will be worse than 2025



**Question:** Looking ahead to 2026, which of the following comes closest to your opinion about how the year will be for each of the following?

**Source:** AP-NORC poll conducted December 4–8, 2025, with 1,146 adults nationwide.



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## 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 the AmeriSpeak Omnibus®, a bi-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 percent 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 4 through December 8, 2025, with adults aged 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 1,146 completed the survey—1,084 via the web and 62 by telephone. Panel members were invited by email or by phone from an NORC telephone interviewer. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference. Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive for completing the survey. The final stage completion rate is 13.5 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 24.9 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 78.0 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 2.6 percent.

The overall margin of sampling error is +/-4.0 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups. For example, the margin of sampling error is 6.0 percentage points for Democrats, 6.2 percentage points for Republicans and 9.1 percentage points for independents.

Sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error and there may be other unmeasured error in this or any other survey.

Quality assurance checks were conducted to ensure data quality. In total, 94 interviews were removed for nonresponse to at least 50% of the questions asked of them, for completing the survey in less than one-third the median interview time for the full sample, or for straight-lining all grid questions asked of them. These interviews were excluded from the data file prior to weighting.

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, education, and 2024 presidential vote. Weighting variables were obtained from the 2025 Current Population Survey and the final results for 2024 presidential vote turnout and vote choice. The weighted data reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over.

For the open-ended question PROB1, responses were classified using Canvs AI, an online platform that codes open-ended data. These codes were validated by a human coder and were then collapsed into more general categories based on topic for reporting.

Complete questions and results are available at: [apnorc.org](https://apnorc.org)

Additional information on the AmeriSpeak Panel® methodology is available at:  
<https://amerispeak.norc.org/about-amerispeak/Pages/Panel-Design.aspx>.

For more information, email [info@apnorc.org](mailto:info@apnorc.org).

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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. Learn more at [www.apnorc.org](http://www.apnorc.org).