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Economy and COVID-19 Top the Public's Policy Agenda for 2021

Sharp partisan gaps on addressing race, global climate change

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How we did this

Pew Research Center conducted this study to understand which issues the public views as most important for Congress and the president to prioritize in the coming year. For this analysis, we surveyed 5,360 U.S. adults in January 2021. Everyone who took part in this survey is a member of Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel (ATP), an online survey panel that is recruited through national, random sampling of residential addresses. This way nearly all U.S. adults have a chance of selection. The survey is weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population by gender, race, ethnicity, partisan affiliation, education and other categories. Read more about the [ATP's methodology](#).

Here are the [questions used for the report](#), along with responses, and [its methodology](#).

Economy and COVID-19 Top the Public's Policy Agenda for 2021

Sharp partisan gaps on addressing race, global climate change

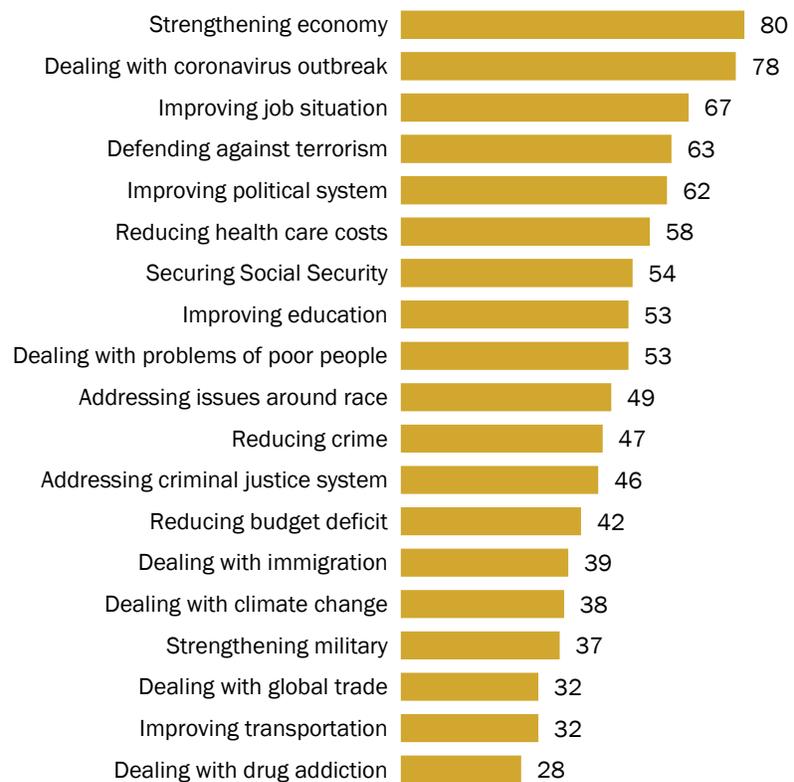
As the United States faces twin crises of high unemployment and a global pandemic, large majorities of Americans want Joe Biden and Congress to prioritize strengthening the economy and addressing the [coronavirus outbreak](#) in the coming year.

Yet there are wide partisan gaps over most of the 19 items asked about in a new Pew Research Center survey – particularly addressing racial issues and dealing with global climate change, but also dealing with COVID-19 and reducing the budget deficit.

The survey, conducted Jan. 8-12 among 5,360 U.S. adults who are members of the nationally representative American Trends Panel, finds that economic concerns once again top the public's agenda after declining in relative importance [in recent years](#).¹

Strengthening the economy and dealing with coronavirus stand out as the public's top priorities

% who say ___ should be a top priority for the president and Congress to address this year



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-12, 2021.

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¹ Previous Pew Research Center policy priority surveys were conducted by telephone; this is the first year the survey has been conducted on the online American Trends Panel. As a result, the year-to-year data is not directly comparable.

Currently, about eight-in-ten Americans say strengthening the nation's economy (80%) and dealing with the coronavirus outbreak (78%) should be top priorities for the president and Congress to address this year. Two-thirds (67%) rate improving the job situation as a top priority.

Majorities also prioritize a number of other policy goals, including defending the country from future terrorist attacks (63%), improving the way the political system works (62%) and reducing health care costs (58%).

About half of the public says the president and Congress should make it a top priority this year to take steps to make Social Security financially sound (54%), improve education (53%), deal with the problems poor people face in their lives (53%), address issues around race in this country (49%) and reduce crime (47%).

Among the priorities that rank lower on the 19-item priorities list are dealing with global trade (32%), improving the country's roads, bridges and public transportation systems (32%) and dealing with drug addiction (28%). Notably, majorities rate all of these policy goals either as a "top priority" for the president and Congress or as "an important but lower priority"; for each, relatively small shares say they are "not too important" or "should not be done."

Partisan differences over many policy goals, but not on ‘improving the political system’

As in past surveys of the public’s priorities, Democrats and Republicans differ on the importance of many policy goals.

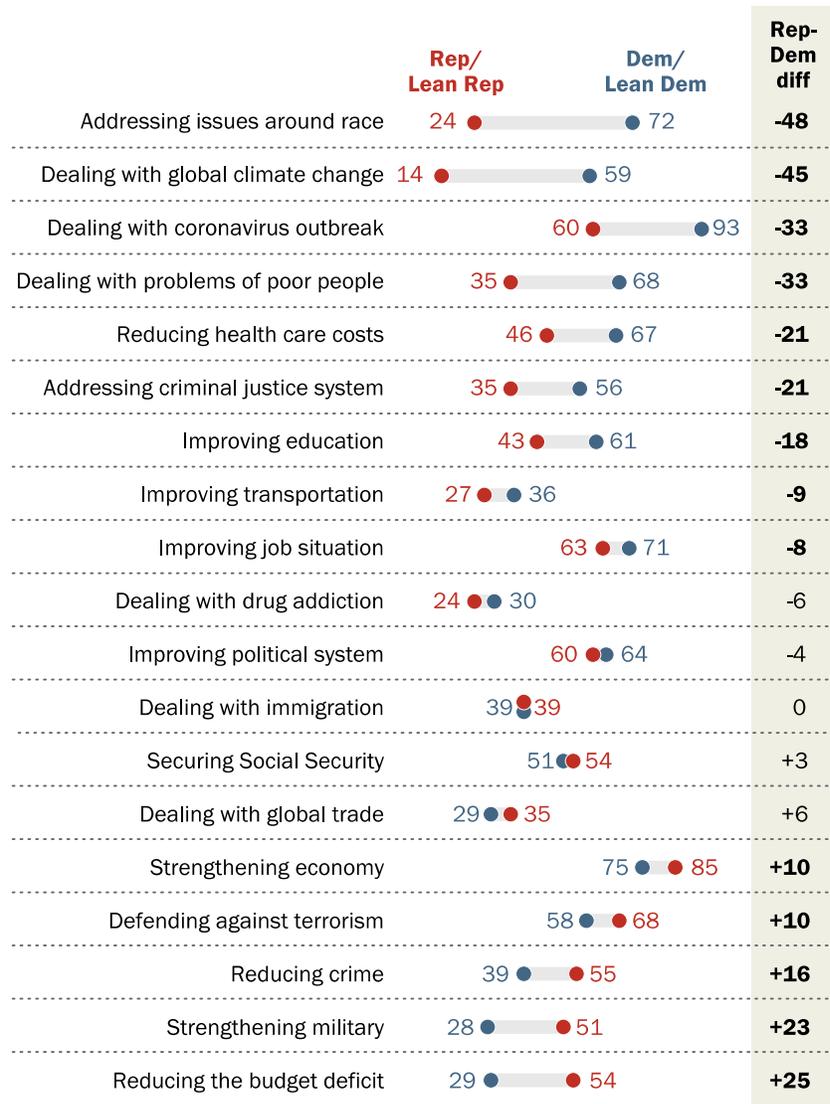
Still, while Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents are more likely than Republicans and Republican leaners to rate improving the job situation as a top policy priority, majorities in both parties (71% of Democrats, 63% of Republicans) say this is a top goal.

Similarly, large shares in both parties rate strengthening the economy as a top goal, though more Republicans (85%) than Democrats (75%) say this. The economy and jobs rank among the top five policy goals for both Republicans and Democrats.

Yet there are stark differences over the importance of other policy objectives – especially those relating to race and climate change.

Wide partisan gaps on importance of addressing race, climate change, coronavirus as well as budget deficit

% who say ___ should be a top priority for the president and Congress to address this year



Note: Significant differences in **bold**.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-12, 2021.

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About seven-in-ten Democrats (72%) say addressing issues around race in this country should be a top policy priority, placing it among the top five goals for Democrats among 19 policy areas. The issue is among the bottom five priorities for Republicans; just 24% cite this as a top priority.

Similarly, 59% of Democrats compared with 14% of Republicans say dealing with global climate change should be a top priority. There also is a 33 percentage point gap between the shares of Democrats (68%) and Republicans (35%) who say addressing the problems of poor people should be a top priority.

The partisan gap over addressing the coronavirus is as large – 93% of Democrats rate this as a top policy priority, compared with 60% of Republicans – though it ranks among the leading goals for members of both parties.

Democrats are also more likely than Republicans to say reducing health care costs (by 21 percentage points), addressing issues within the criminal justice system (also by 21 points) and improving education (by 18 points) should be top priorities this year.

By contrast, larger shares of Republicans than Democrats rate reducing the budget deficit, strengthening the military, reducing crime and defending against terrorism as top policy priorities. More than half of Republicans (54%) say reducing the deficit should be a top policy objective, compared with 29% of Democrats. Reducing the budget deficit ranks as a middle-tier priority for Republicans and is among Democrats' lowest priorities.

Republicans also rated deficit reduction more highly than Democrats last year, at the start of Donald Trump's final year in office. Among members of both parties, the shares rating the deficit as a top priority declined sharply between [2013 \(at the start of Barack Obama's second term\)](#) and 2020. The [nation's debt and its yearly budget deficit](#) have been rising in recent years.

After a [contentious presidential election](#) and a deadly riot inside the U.S. Capitol, comparable shares in both parties identify "improving the political system" as a top priority for the president and Congress (64% of Democrats, 60% of Republicans). Yet in the past, partisans have differed sharply over [proposals related to voting and elections](#).

Policy priorities of White, Hispanic and Black Americans

Economic concerns rank near the top of the policy agenda for Black, White and Hispanic adults. However, there are major differences in their views on the importance of other issues, especially race, poverty, education and criminal justice.

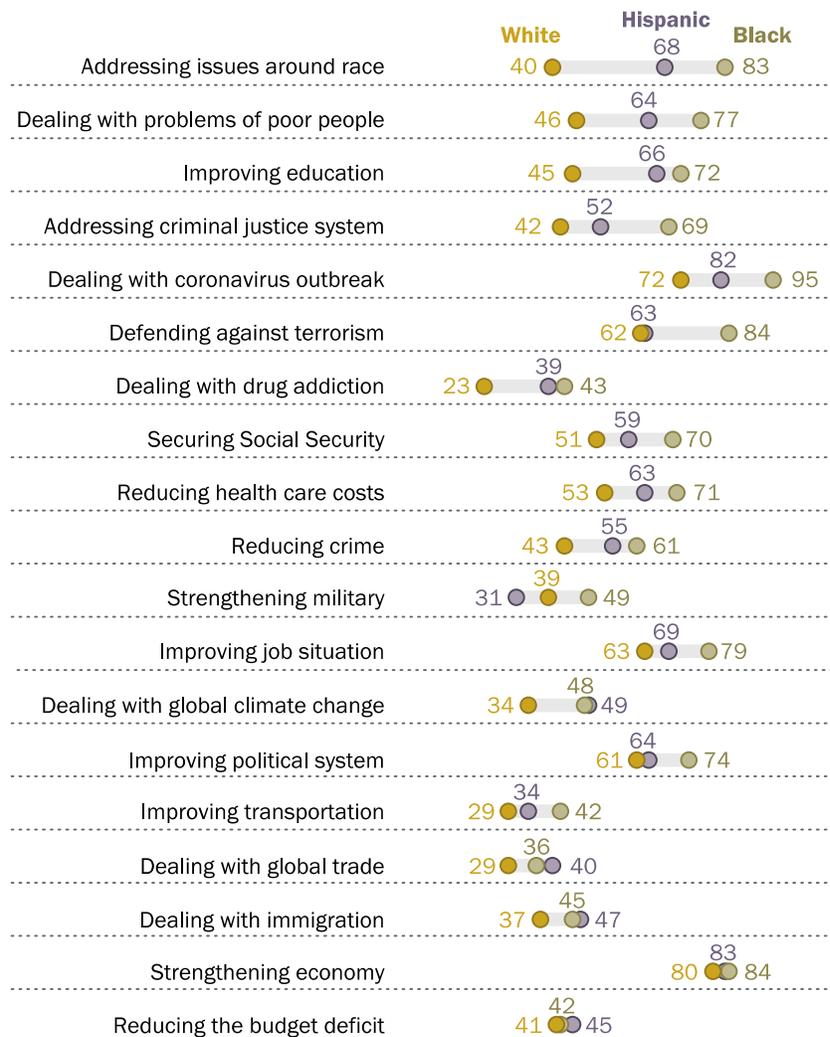
Black adults (83%) are about twice as likely as White adults (40%) to say addressing issues around race should be a top priority; 68% of Hispanic adults view this as a top priority.

Black Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (85%) are more likely than White Democrats and Democratic leaners (68%) to say that addressing issues around race should be a top priority. Still, far more White Democrats than White Republicans (21%) rate this as a top priority. ([see detailed tables for more](#)).

While 77% of Black adults say dealing with the problems of poor people should be a top goal, smaller shares of Hispanic (64%) and White adults (46%) say the same.

Black, Hispanic and White adults differ on importance of addressing racial issues

% who say ___ should be a top priority for the president and Congress to address this year



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-12, 2021.

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There are also wide divisions between White and Black adults – with Hispanics generally falling in between – over how much the government should prioritize improving education, addressing issues within the criminal justice system, dealing with the coronavirus outbreak and a number of other issues.

Across all 19 items, there is none that significantly more White adults than Black or Hispanic adults view as a top policy priority. However, there are no meaningful differences in the shares across racial and ethnic groups who want to prioritize dealing with immigration, dealing with global trade, strengthening the economy or reducing the budget deficit.

Gender and policy priorities

Women prioritize a number of policy goals more highly than men do, especially addressing issues around race, the criminal justice system, health care and education.

A majority of women (56%) say addressing issues around race in this country should be a top priority, compared with fewer than half of men (41%).

More women than men also say addressing issues within the criminal justice system (52% vs. 40%), reducing health care costs (63% vs. 52%) and improving education (59% vs. 48%) should be top priorities.

Overall, a greater share of women than men say improving the job situation, dealing with poverty, dealing with immigration and several other issues also should be top priorities in the year ahead.

Women place higher priority than men on addressing issues around race, criminal justice and health care

% who say ____ should be a top priority for the president and Congress to address this year

	Men	Women	Men-Women diff
Addressing issues around race	41	56	-15
Addressing criminal justice system	40	52	-12
Reducing health care costs	52	63	-11
Improving education	48	59	-11
Defending against terrorism	59	68	-9
Improving job situation	63	71	-8
Dealing with problems of poor	49	57	-8
Dealing with immigration	35	43	-8
Strengthening military	34	41	-7
Securing Social Security	51	57	-6
Dealing with climate change	35	41	-6
Dealing with drug addiction	25	31	-6
Dealing with coronavirus outbreak	75	80	-5
Reducing crime	45	50	-5
Strengthening economy	78	82	-4
Improving political system	61	64	-3
Reducing budget deficit	42	43	+1
Dealing with global trade	31	34	+3
Improving transportation	29	34	+5

Note: Significant differences in **bold**.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-12, 2021.

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Age and policy priorities

Older adults are more likely to view several goals as top priorities compared with younger adults.

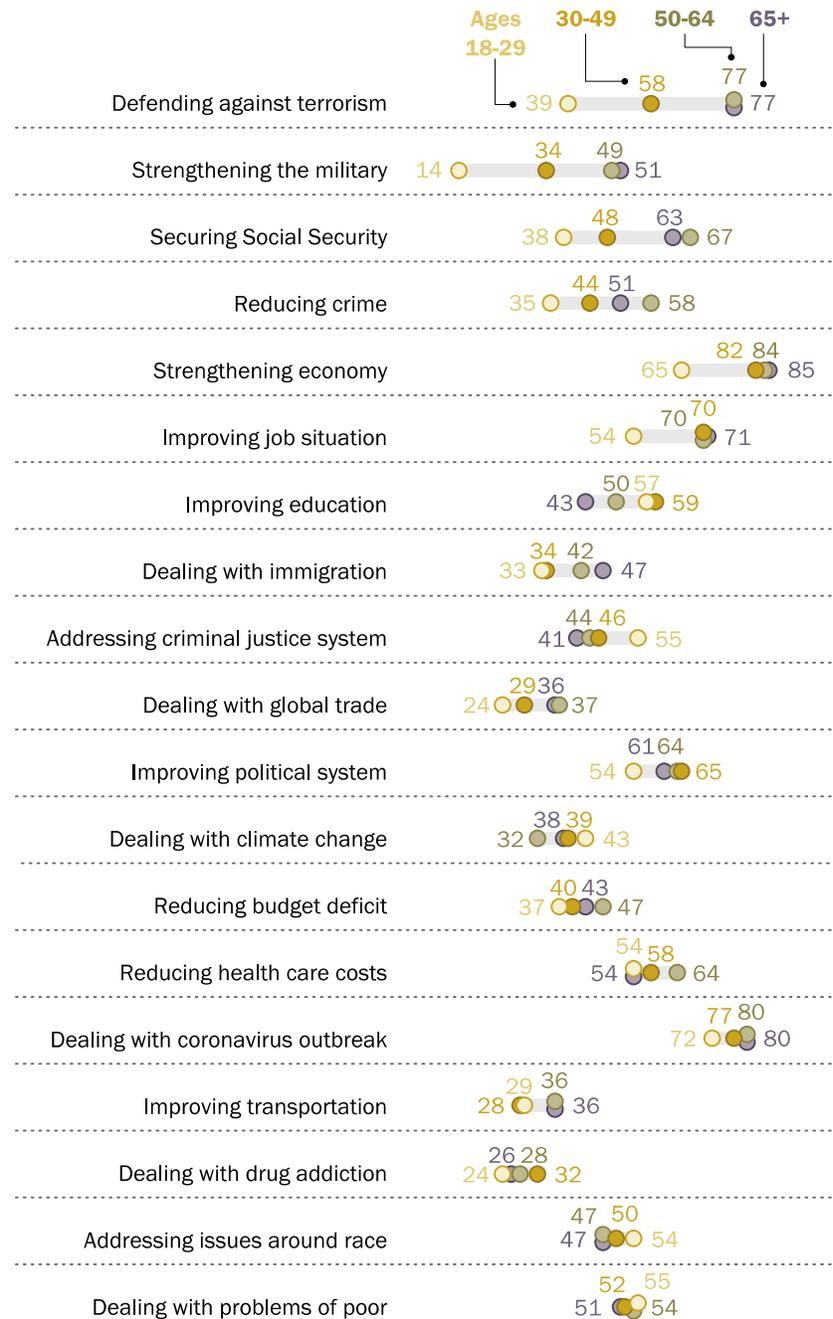
By contrast, there are only three items – improving education, addressing the criminal justice system and dealing with climate change – that larger shares of younger than older adults rate as top priorities.

The biggest gaps between older and younger adults occur on national defense policy priorities. About three-quarters of those 50 and older (77%), compared with only about four-in-ten of those ages 18 to 29 (39%), say defending against terrorism should be a top priority. Within both parties, older Americans are more likely to want the policy agenda to focus more on defense issues ([see detailed tables for more](#)).

Similarly, more than three times as many adults 50 and older (51%) say strengthening the military should be a top issue on the nation’s agenda

Young adults far less likely than older people to prioritize a stronger military, anti-terrorism defenses

% who say ___ should be a top priority for the president and Congress to address this year



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-12, 2021.

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compared with those under 30 (14%). Older adults are also more likely than younger adults to prioritize Social Security, the economy, the job situation and reducing crime.

Education and policy priorities

There are notable differences in views of policy priorities by education. Those with less formal education rate more goals as important priorities than do those with more education.

Nearly seven-in-ten adults with a high school diploma or less (68%) say taking steps to make the Social Security system financially sound should be a top priority, compared with 54% of those with some college, 36% of college graduates and 40% of those with a postgraduate degree.

Views are similar regarding the priority Biden and Congress should give to reducing crime: 57% of those with no more than a high school diploma say it should be a top priority, but this share falls across the other educational groups, reaching a low of 31% among those with a postgraduate degree.

Americans without college experience say a number of additional issues should be top

Wide educational gaps on importance of Social Security, crime, stronger military and climate change

% who say ____ should be a top priority for the president and Congress to address this year

	Postgrad %	College grad %	Some college %	HS or less %	Postgrad- HS or less diff.
Securing Social Security	40	36	54	68	-28
Reducing crime	31	38	48	57	-26
Strengthening military	25	27	36	48	-23
Defending against terrorism	51	56	63	71	-20
Reducing budget deficit	28	37	45	47	-19
Reducing health care costs	46	54	62	61	-15
Dealing with drug addiction	21	18	27	36	-15
Dealing with global trade	28	28	30	37	-9
Strengthening economy	74	75	82	82	-8
Improving political system	57	56	65	65	-8
Dealing with problems of poor people	52	45	52	58	-6
Addressing criminal justice system	43	44	45	49	-6
Improving job situation	64	68	66	69	-5
Improving education	51	47	56	54	-3
Dealing with immigration	39	33	38	42	-3
Improving transportation	32	28	29	35	-3
Dealing with coronavirus outbreak	84	79	75	77	+7
Addressing issues around race	57	48	48	49	+8
Dealing with climate change	49	37	37	35	+14

Note: Significant differences in **bold**.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-12, 2021.

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priorities as well, including such policy areas as strengthening the military, defending against terrorism, reducing the budget deficit, reducing health care costs and dealing with drug addiction.

Those with more education beyond a college degree, on the other hand, are more likely to say that the president and Congress should give top priority to dealing with global climate change: About half of Americans with a postgraduate degree (49%) say it should be a top priority, compared with 37% of those with a college degree or some college experience and 35% of those with a high school degree or less. And adults with a postgraduate degree are modestly more likely than others to say addressing issues around race in this country and dealing with the coronavirus should be top priorities this year.

Acknowledgments

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Methodology

The American Trends Panel survey methodology

Overview

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. Panelists participate via self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access at home are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish. The panel is being managed by Ipsos.

Data in this report is drawn from the panel wave conducted Jan. 8 to Jan 12, 2021. A total of 5,360 panelists responded out of 6,107 who were sampled, for a response rate of 88%. This does not include two panelists who were removed from the data due to extremely high rates of refusal or straightlining. The cumulative response rate accounting for nonresponse to the recruitment surveys and attrition is 4%. The break-off rate among panelists who logged on to the survey and completed at least one item is 1%. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 5,360 respondents is plus or minus 1.9 percentage points.

Panel recruitment

The ATP was created in 2014, with the first cohort of panelists invited to join the panel at the end of a large, national, landline and cellphone random-digit-dial survey that was conducted in both English and Spanish. Two additional recruitments were conducted using the same method in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Across these three surveys, a total of 19,718 adults were invited to join the ATP, of whom 9,942 (50%) agreed to participate.

In August 2018, the ATP switched from telephone to address-based recruitment. Invitations were sent to a random, address-based sample of households selected

American Trends Panel recruitment surveys

Recruitment dates	Mode	Invited	Joined	Active panelists remaining
Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014	Landline/ cell RDD	9,809	5,338	2,186
Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015	Landline/ cell RDD	6,004	2,976	1,244
April 25 to June 4, 2017	Landline/ cell RDD	3,905	1,628	622
Aug. 8 to Oct. 31, 2018	ABS/web	9,396	8,778	5,904
Aug. 19 to Nov. 30, 2019	ABS/web	5,900	4,720	2,333
June 1 to July 19, 2020	ABS/web	1,865	1,636	1,272
	Total	36,879	25,076	13,561

Note: Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves or who did not complete an annual profiling survey are removed from the panel. Panelists also become inactive if they ask to be removed from the panel.

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from the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File. Two additional recruitments were conducted using the same method in 2019 and 2020, respectively. Across these three address-based recruitments, a total of 17,161 adults were invited to join the ATP, of whom 15,134 (88%) agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey. In each household, the adult with the next birthday was asked to go online to complete a survey, at the end of which they were invited to join the panel. Of the 25,076 individuals who have ever joined the ATP, 13,561 remained active panelists and continued to receive survey invitations at the time this survey was conducted.

The U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File has been estimated to cover as much as 98% of the population, although some studies suggest that the coverage could be in the low 90% range.² The American Trends Panel never uses breakout routers or chains that direct respondents to additional surveys.

Sample design

This study featured a stratified random sample from the ATP. The sample was allocated according to the following strata, in order: tablet households, U.S.-born Hispanics, foreign-born Hispanics, high school education or less, foreign-born Asians, not registered to vote, people ages 18 to 34, uses internet weekly or less, non-Hispanic Black adults, nonvolunteers and all other categories not already falling into any of the above.

Questionnaire development and testing

The questionnaire was developed by Pew Research Center in consultation with Ipsos. The web program was rigorously tested on both PC and mobile devices by the Ipsos project management team and Pew Research Center researchers. The Ipsos project management team also populated test data which was analyzed in SPSS to ensure the logic and randomizations were working as intended before launching the survey.

Incentives

All respondents were offered a post-paid incentive for their participation. Respondents could choose to receive the post-paid incentive in the form of a check or a gift code to Amazon.com or could choose to decline the incentive. Incentive amounts ranged from \$5 to \$15 depending on whether the respondent belongs to a part of the population that is harder or easier to reach. Differential incentive amounts were designed to increase panel survey participation among groups that traditionally have low survey response propensities.

² AAPOR Task Force on Address-based Sampling. 2016. "[AAPOR Report: Address-based Sampling](#)."

Data collection protocol

The data collection field period for this survey was Jan. 8 to Jan. 12, 2021. Postcard notifications were mailed to all ATP panelists with a known residential address on Jan. 6, 2021.

An initial soft launch was conducted on Jan. 6, 2021. Those cases are excluded from the final dataset and analysis due to significant questionnaire changes after the soft launch. All remaining English- and Spanish-speaking panelists were included in the survey launch and were sent an invitation on Jan. 8, 2021. All panelists with an email address received an email invitation and up to two email reminders if they did not respond to the survey. All ATP panelists that consented to SMS messages received an SMS invitation and up to one SMS reminders. Interactive voice recording (IVR) reminder calls were made to 58 tablet households that previously provided consent to receive these reminders on Jan. 11, 2021.

Initial invitation	Jan. 8, 2021
First reminder	Jan. 10, 2021
IVR reminder	Jan. 11, 2021
Final reminder	Jan. 11, 2021

Data quality checks

To ensure high-quality data, the Center's researchers performed data quality checks to identify any respondents showing clear patterns of satisficing. This includes checking for very high rates of leaving questions blank, as well as always selecting the first or last answer presented. As a result of this checking, two ATP respondents were removed from the survey dataset prior to weighting and analysis.

Weighting

The ATP data was weighted in a multistep process that accounts for multiple stages of sampling and nonresponse that occur at different points in the survey process. First, each panelist begins with a base weight that reflects their probability of selection for their initial recruitment survey (and the probability of being invited to participate in the panel in cases where only a subsample of respondents were invited). The base weights for panelists recruited in different years are scaled to be proportionate to the effective sample size for all active panelists in their cohort. To correct for nonresponse to the initial recruitment surveys and gradual panel attrition, the base weights for all active panelists are calibrated to align with the population benchmarks identified in the accompanying table to create a full-panel weight.

For ATP waves in which only a subsample of panelists are invited to participate, a wave-specific base weight is created by adjusting the full-panel weights for subsampled panelists to account for any differential probabilities of selection for the particular panel wave. For waves in which all active panelists are invited to participate, the wave-specific base weight is identical to the full-panel weight.

In the final weighting step, the wave-specific base weights for panelists who completed the survey are again calibrated to match the population

benchmarks specified above. These weights are trimmed (typically at about the 1st and 99th percentiles) to reduce the loss in precision stemming from variance in the weights. Sampling errors and test of statistical significance take into account the effect of weighting.

Weighting dimensions

Variable	Benchmark source
Age x Gender	2019 American Community Survey
Education x Gender	
Education x Age	
Race/Ethnicity x Education	
Born inside vs. outside the U.S. among Hispanics and Asian Americans	
Years lived in the U.S.	
Census region x Metro/Non-metro	2019 CPS March Supplement
Volunteerism	2017 CPS Volunteering & Civic Life Supplement
Voter registration	2016 CPS Voting and Registration Supplement
Party affiliation	2020 National Public Opinion Reference Survey
Frequency of internet use	
Religious affiliation	

Note: Estimates from the ACS are based on non-institutionalized adults. The 2016 CPS was used for voter registration targets for this wave in order to obtain voter registration numbers from a presidential election year. Voter registration is calculated using procedures from Hur, Achen (2013) and rescaled to include the total U.S. adult population. The 2020 National Public Opinion Reference Survey featured 1,862 online completions and 2,247 mail survey completions.

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The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey.

<i>Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-12, 2021</i>			
Group	Unweighted sample size	Weighted %	Plus or minus ...
Total sample	5,360		1.9 percentage points
Half sample	At least 2,676		2.7 percentage points
Rep/Lean Rep	2,273	44	2.7 percentage points
Half sample	At least 1,119		3.9 percentage points
Dem/Lean Dem	2,919	49	2.7 percentage points
Half sample	At least 1,443		3.7 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request. In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Dispositions and response rates

Final dispositions	AAPOR code	Total
Completed interview	1.1	5,360
Logged onto survey; broke off	2.12	58
Logged onto survey; did not complete any items	2.1121	36
Never logged on (implicit refusal)	2.11	651
Survey completed after close of the field period	2.27	0
Completed interview but was removed for data quality		2
Screened out		0
Total panelists in the survey		6,107
Completed interviews	I	5,360
Partial interviews	P	0
Refusals	R	745
Non-contact	NC	2
Other	O	0
Unknown household	UH	0
Unknown other	UO	0
Not eligible	NE	0
Total		6,107
AAPOR RR1 = I / (I+P+R+NC+O+UH+UO)		

Cumulative response rate	Total
Weighted response rate to recruitment surveys	12%
% of recruitment survey respondents who agreed to join the panel, among those invited	73%
% of those agreeing to join who were active panelists at start of Wave 80	57%
Response rate to Wave 80 survey	88%
Cumulative response rate	4%

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**2021 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL
WAVE 80 JANUARY 2021
FINAL TOPLINE
JANUARY 8-12, 2021
N=5,360**

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS PREVIOUSLY RELEASED

ASK ALL:

PRIPRES How much of a priority should each of the following be for the president and Congress to address this year?

RANDOMIZE ORDER OF SCREENS 1 and 2 FOR EACH FORM

		<u>Top priority</u>	<u>Important but lower priority</u>	<u>Not too important</u>	<u>Should not be done</u>	<u>No answer</u>
ASK FORM 1 ONLY [SCREEN 1, RANDOMIZE ITEMS ON SCREEN] [N=2,684]						
JOB	Improving the job situation Jan 8-12, 2021	67	29	2	1	1
BD	Reducing the budget deficit Jan 8-12, 2021	42	44	11	2	1
CRI	Reducing crime Jan 8-12, 2021	47	42	9	1	1
CVD	Dealing with the coronavirus outbreak Jan 8-12, 2021	78	14	6	2	*
HC	Reducing health care costs Jan 8-12, 2021	58	36	4	2	*
ASK FORM 1 ONLY [SCREEN 2, RANDOMIZE ITEMS ON SCREEN] [N=2,684]						
TER	Defending the country from future terrorist attacks Jan 8-12, 2021	63	30	6	1	*
GT	Dealing with global trade issues Jan 8-12, 2021	32	56	10	2	1
EDU	Improving the educational system Jan 8-12, 2021	53	39	5	2	1
INF	Improving the country's roads, bridges and public transportation systems Jan 8-12, 2021	32	54	13	1	1
SC	Taking steps to make the Social Security system financially sound Jan 8-12, 2021	54	39	5	2	1

PRIPRES CONTINUED...

		Top <u>priority</u>	Important but lower <u>priority</u>	Not too <u>important</u>	Should not be <u>done</u>	No <u>answer</u>
ASK FORM 2 ONLY [SCREEN 1, RANDOMIZE ITEMS ON SCREEN] [N=2,676]						
IMM	Dealing with the issue of immigration Jan 8-12, 2021	39	44	13	4	1
EC	Strengthening the nation's economy Jan 8-12, 2021	80	16	2	1	*
GCC	Dealing with global climate change Jan 8-12, 2021	38	33	18	10	1
JUS	Addressing issues within the criminal justice system Jan 8-12, 2021	46	42	9	2	1
ASK FORM 2 ONLY [SCREEN 2, RANDOMIZE ITEMS ON SCREEN] [N=2,676]						
POOR	Dealing with the problems of poor people Jan 8-12, 2021	53	39	6	2	*
MIL	Strengthening the U.S. military Jan 8-12, 2021	37	35	20	7	*
POL	Improving the way the political system works in the U.S. January 8-12, 2021	62	29	6	2	1
RA	Addressing issues around race in this county Jan 8-12, 2021	49	32	13	5	1
DA	Dealing with drug addiction Jan 8-12, 2021	28	54	15	2	*

For past phone trends on national priorities, [see the 2020 survey](#).

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS PREVIOUSLY RELEASED

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE

ASK ALL:

PARTY In politics today, do you consider yourself a:

ASK IF INDEP/SOMETHING ELSE (PARTY=3 or 4) OR MISSING [N=1,963]:

PARTYLN As of today do you lean more to...³

<u>Republican</u>	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>Independent</u>	Something <u>else</u>	No <u>answer</u>	Lean <u>Rep</u>	Lean <u>Dem</u>
27	32	26	14	1	17	17

³ Party and PartyIn asked in a prior survey.