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On the Country's 250th Anniversary, the American People Are in a Sour Mood

But there are some signs of optimism about the future

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About this research

This Pew Research Center report uses survey data to explore how U.S. adults think things are going for the country on the eve of its 250th anniversary – and what they see in the nation’s future.

Why did we do this?

Pew Research Center conducts high-quality research to inform the public, journalists and leaders. Studying Americans’ views about how things are functioning in the U.S. and their expectations for the future is a key part of the Center’s long-standing research agenda.

[Learn more about Pew Research Center.](#)

How did we do this?

This analysis includes new findings from a survey of 3,592 U.S. adults who are part of the Center’s [American Trends Panel \(ATP\)](#). The survey was conducted April 6-12, 2026, and has an overall margin of error of plus or minus 1.9 percentage points.

Here are the [questions from that survey used for this analysis](#), along with [responses](#) and the [survey methodology](#).

Additionally, this analysis draws on previously released survey findings we published in recent years. Links to those earlier surveys are included throughout this report.

On the Country's 250th Anniversary, the American People Are in a Sour Mood

But there are some signs of optimism about the future

As the nation approaches its 250th birthday, the American public's mood is sour – but with some signs of enduring optimism.

In Pew Research Center surveys over the past year, most people have told us they are dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States and that they think the country's [best days](#) are behind us.

In recent decades, Americans also have grown less trustful of [each other](#) and of [institutions](#) including the federal government, both major political parties, the mainstream media, and colleges and universities.

Most Americans think the country's best days are behind us

Among U.S. adults ...

All in all, they are ___ with the way things are going in this country today (Jan 2026)



Thinking about the future of the U.S., they think the country's best years are ... (Dec 2025)



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

Source: Question about satisfaction comes from a survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 20-26, 2026. Question about country's best years comes from a survey of U.S. adults conducted Dec. 8-14, 2025.

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Compared with people in other countries, more Americans express [gloomy views](#) about [how their democracy is working](#) and doubts about whether fellow citizens have [good morals](#).

And when asked to look ahead to 2050, upward of half of U.S. adults say they think the economy will be weaker, the U.S. will be less important in the world, the country will be more politically divided, and the American system of government will work worse than it does today.

Still, many Americans express some optimism when they are asked to think about the future in general terms.

Most people say they feel "hopeful" when they think about the future, and 54% say they feel "happy" when they ponder days to come.

About as many Americans say they are optimistic (48%) as say they are pessimistic (51%) about the future of the country as a whole.

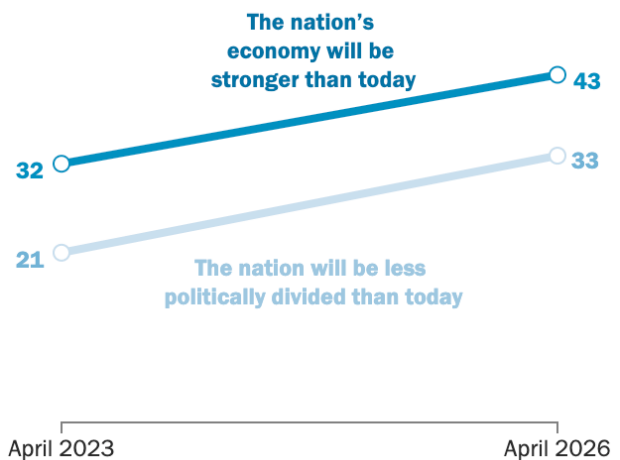
And even on some questions where the balance of opinion leans negative, there are signs of recent improvement in the public's mood.

Compared with our polling in 2023, more U.S. adults now think that in the coming decades, the country's economy will grow stronger and its political divisions will become less sharp.

And satisfaction with the country's direction was lower during much of the period from 2020 to 2024 than it was during 2025 and at the start of this year.

Signs of recent improvement in expectations for 2050

% of U.S. adults who say that by 2050 ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 6-12, 2026.

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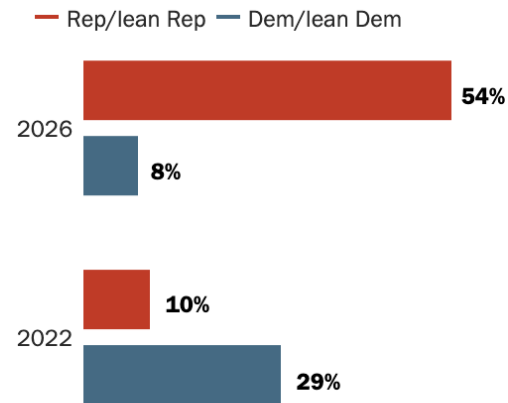
Feelings about the country's direction are closely linked with people's political leanings. During President Donald Trump's second term, Republicans have been much happier than Democrats with how things are going. A few short years ago, when Joe Biden was president, Democrats tended to be more positive than Republicans.

And views about the country's future are also connected with age. When asked to look ahead to what things might be like in the year 2050, the youngest U.S. adults express more pessimistic views than the country's older adults do.

This report focuses on questions we've asked in recent years that shed light on how the country is feeling about itself on the eve of a milestone anniversary. We also look at some questions we asked in a new survey, conducted in April 2026, asking Americans about their expectations for what the country will be like in 2050, roughly 25 years from now.

For Republicans and Democrats, satisfaction with how things are going tracks with who is president

*% of U.S. adults who are **satisfied** with the way things are going in the country*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 20-26, 2026.

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Trends in the public's mood

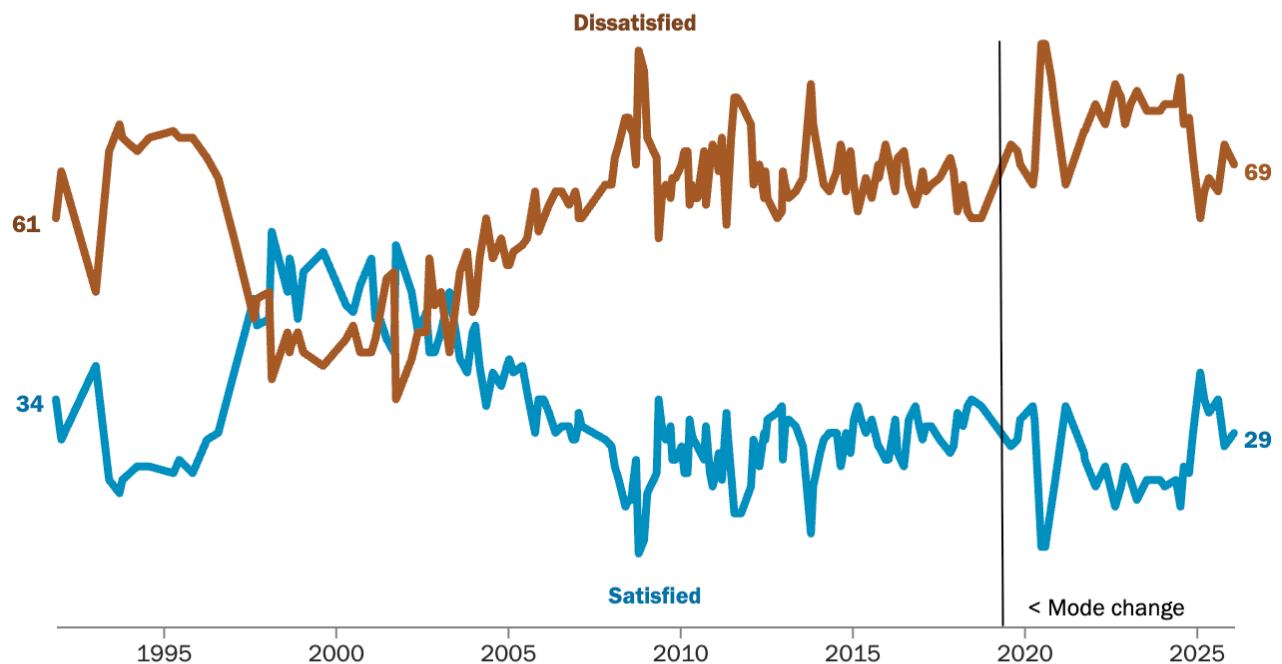
As 2026 dawned, 29% of U.S. adults said they were satisfied with how things were going in the country, while 69% were dissatisfied.

The number of people saying they are satisfied with how things are going has rebounded somewhat since a recent low point in the COVID-19 pandemic. But more Americans have expressed dissatisfaction than satisfaction with the country's direction for more than two decades.

Similarly, over the past decade we've continually found that [more Americans think their side has been losing](#), rather than winning, on the political issues that matter to them.

For decades, more Americans have expressed dissatisfaction than satisfaction with how things are going in the country

% of U.S. adults who say they are satisfied/dissatisfied with the way things are going in this country today



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

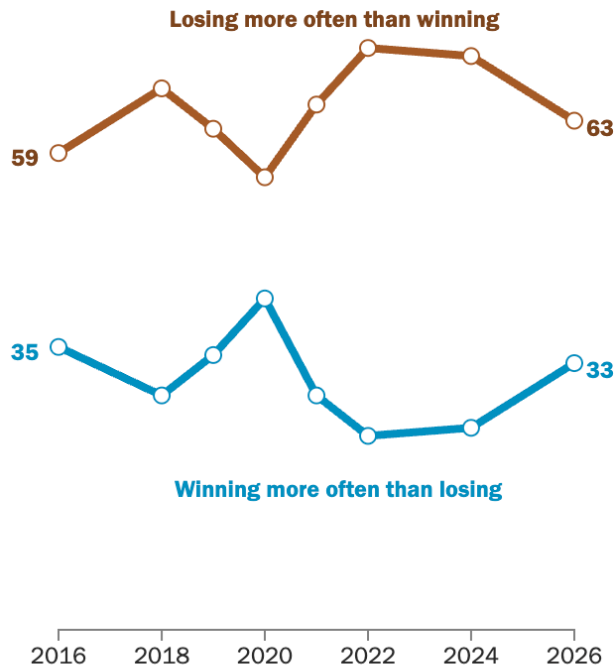
Source: Pew Research Center surveys, November 1991-January 2026. Surveys from 1991-2018 were conducted by telephone; surveys from 2019 and later were conducted mainly online among respondents in the Center's American Trends Panel.

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And in January 2026, the share of Americans saying they think the year ahead will be better than the previous year was lower than in any of our surveys dating back to 2020.

Most Americans think their side is losing on the issues that matter to them

Thinking about the way things have been going in politics over the last few years on the issues that matter to you, would you say your side has been ... (%)

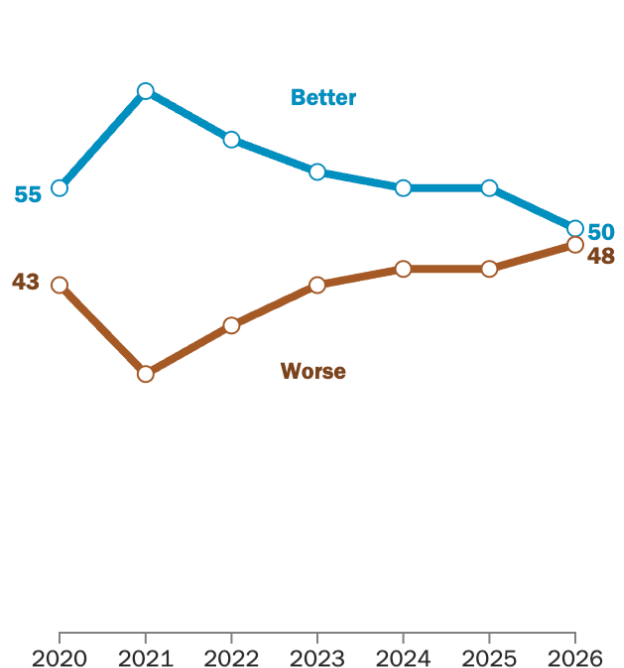


Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 20-26, 2026.

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In 2026, share of U.S. adults saying the year ahead will be better than previous year dips to 50%

Do you think the year ahead will be ___ than the year that just ended? (%)



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 20-26, 2026.

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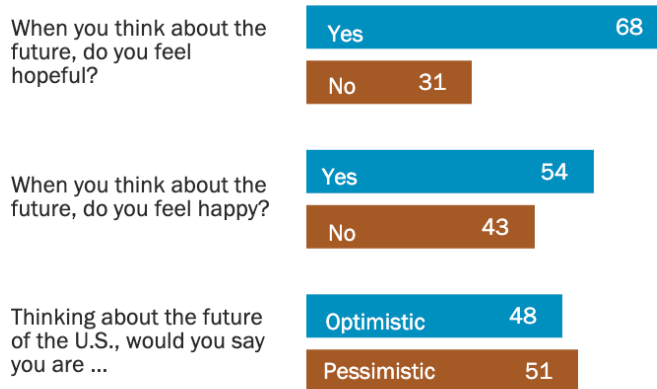
Signs of optimism

At the same time, about as many people say they are optimistic as say they are pessimistic when they think about the future of the United States.

And while many Americans say they feel scared or sad when they think about the future, substantial shares also say they feel hopeful and happy.

Many Americans say they feel hopeful, happy when they think about the future

Among U.S. adults (%)



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

Source: Question about optimism/pessimism comes from a survey of U.S. adults conducted April 6-12, 2026. Questions about hopefulness/happiness come from a survey of U.S. adults conducted July 8-Aug. 3, 2025.

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Looking ahead to 2050

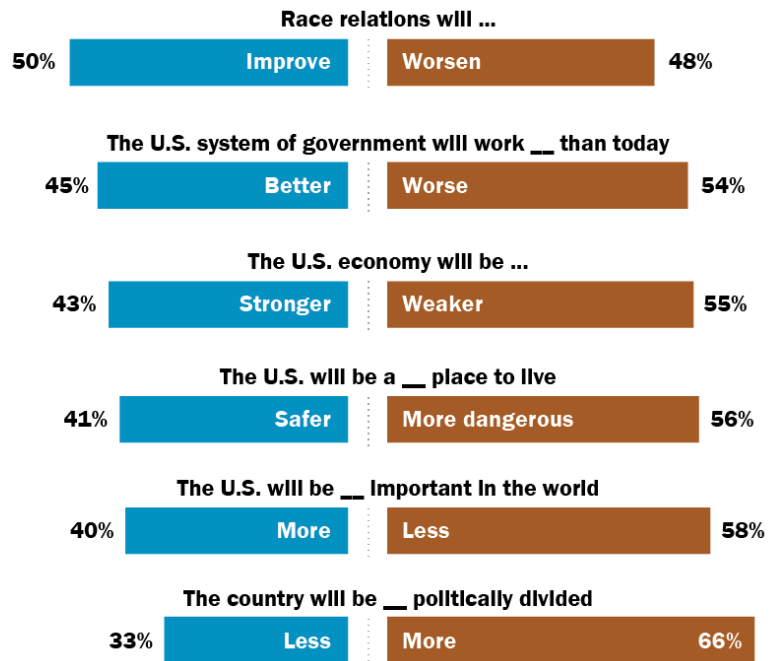
In April 2026, we asked Americans to look ahead to the year 2050 and share their expectations about the country's economic outlook, its place in the world and several other topics.

The public is divided over whether race relations will improve. Half of Americans say race relations will get better in the next 25 years, and roughly the same share say they will get worse.

On the other questions, we find more pessimists than optimists. Two-thirds of U.S. adults think that by 2050 the country will have become more politically divided. More than half say they think the U.S. will play a less important role in the world, be less prosperous, become a more dangerous place to live and have a worse system of government.

Most U.S. adults see no end in sight for country's political divisions

Looking ahead 25 years, % of U.S. adults who say that by the year 2050 ...



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

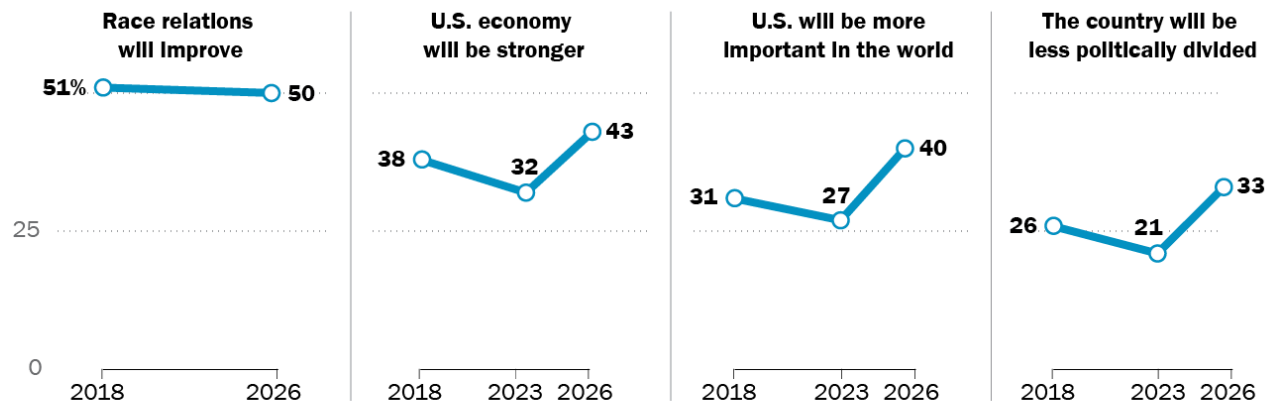
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 6-12, 2026.

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But the questions we can track over time indicate that the nation's expectations for the future have improved in recent years. Since 2023, there has been a 13 percentage point rise in the share of Americans who say the U.S. will be more important in the world by 2050. There also has been a 12-point increase in the share saying the country will be less politically divided and an 11-point rise in the share who expect the economy to grow stronger.

Compared with 2023, more Americans now say they think U.S. economy and America's place in the world will be stronger by 2050

% of U.S. adults who say that by the year 2050 ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 6-12, 2026.

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(We did not ask the question about race relations in the 2023 survey, and we have never previously asked the questions about how government works or whether the U.S. will be a safer place to live in 2050.)

National mood linked with partisanship

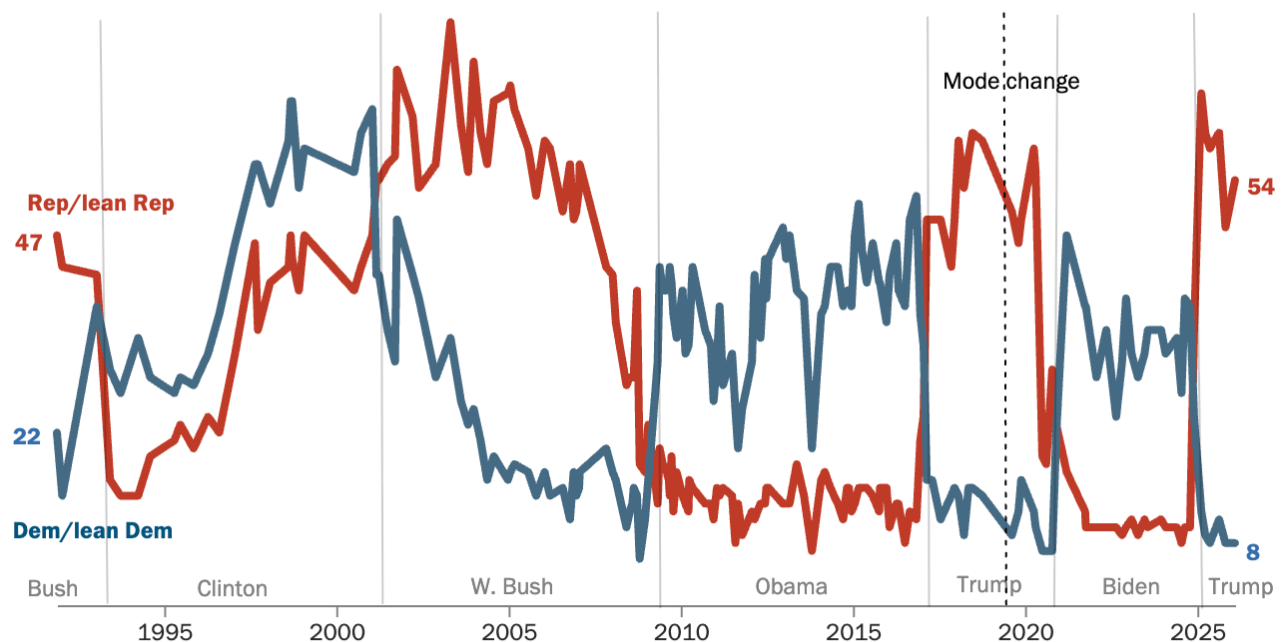
The way people view the state of the nation is often linked with their political allegiances. Republicans and independents who lean toward the Republican Party tend to express very different views from Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, and this aligns with who is in the White House.

For instance, during both the first and second Trump administrations, more Republicans than Democrats have expressed satisfaction with the way things are going in the country. By contrast, during both the Obama and Biden administrations, more Democrats than Republicans were content with the country's direction.

Looking back further, Republicans also expressed higher levels of satisfaction than Democrats during the George W. Bush administration, while Democrats were consistently more satisfied than Republicans during the Clinton administration.

Republicans more satisfied with direction of country when GOP controls the White House, Democrats more satisfied during Democratic administrations

*% of U.S. adults who say they are **satisfied** with the way things are going in this country today*

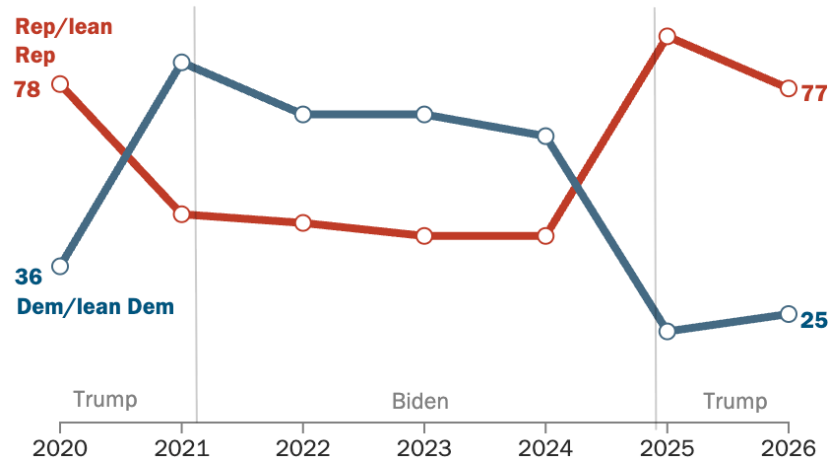


Source: Pew Research Center surveys, November 1991-January 2026. Surveys from 1991-2018 were conducted by telephone; surveys from 2019 and later were conducted mainly online among respondents in the Center's American Trends Panel.

People in both partisan coalitions also tend to express more optimism about the year ahead when their favored party controls the White House.

Republicans and Democrats are more optimistic about the year ahead when their party controls the White House

% of U.S. adults who say they think the year ahead will be better than the year just ended



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 20-26, 2026.

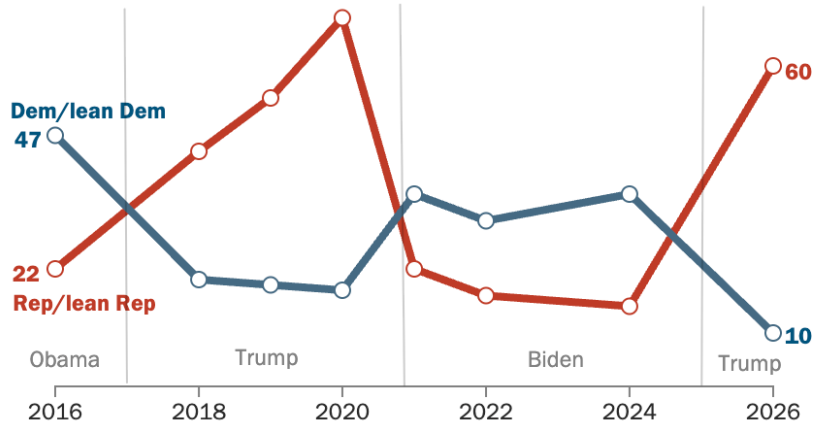
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And Americans generally have been more inclined to say their side is “winning” on the political issues that matter to them when their party has the presidency than when the opposing party controls the White House.

The swings on this question are especially pronounced among Republicans. Just 15% of Republicans thought their side was winning more often than losing during the last year of the Biden administration, but this jumped to 60% following the first year of Trump’s second term. By comparison, fewer than half of Democrats have felt like their side is winning even during Democratic administrations.

Whether people think their side has been winning in politics linked with who’s in the White House

% of U.S. adults who say they think their side has been winning more often than losing on the political issues that matter to them



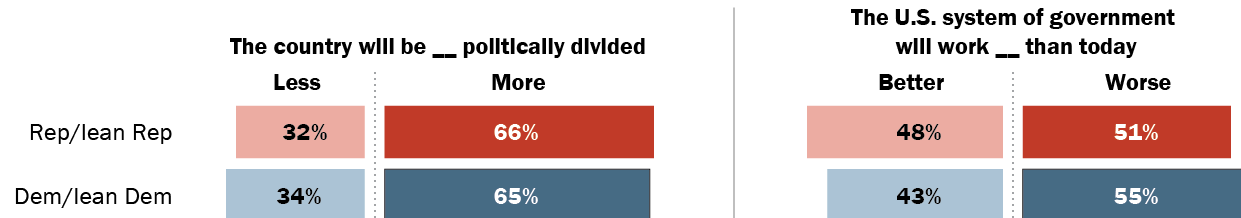
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 20-26, 2026.

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But Republicans and Democrats express similar views on some questions. When asked to look ahead to 2050, most people in both parties think the country will be more politically divided than it is today. And roughly similar shares in both parties say they think the U.S. system of government will work worse than it does today.

Most people in *both* parties expect the U.S. to be more politically divided by 2050

Looking ahead 25 years, % of U.S. adults who say that by the year 2050 ...



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 6-12, 2026.

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Age gaps in the nation's mood

When asked to look ahead to what things will be like in the U.S. in 2050, the nation's youngest adults tend to express more pessimistic views than the country's older adults.

For example, compared with people ages 65 and older, fewer adults under age 30 say race relations will improve, the government will work better or the economy will be stronger. Young adults are also less inclined than older people to say that overall, they are optimistic when they think ahead to 2050.

Looking ahead to 2050, the youngest adults tend to be less optimistic than the oldest adults

Looking ahead 25 years, % of U.S. adults who say that by 2050 ...

	Ages 18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
Race relations will improve	43%	47%	50%	58%
They are very/somewhat optimistic	42	46	51	55
The U.S. system of government will work better	37	42	46	53
The U.S. economy will be stronger	36	41	45	50
The U.S. will be a safer place to live	37	39	42	48
The U.S. will be more important in the world	41	35	42	42
The country will be less politically divided	24	31	35	41

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 6-12, 2026.

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On a variety of other questions, though, the differences between age groups are muted. Young people are not substantially different from older adults in overall levels of satisfaction with how things are going in the country, for example. And people ages 18 to 29 express higher levels of happiness about the future than those 65 and older.

Adults under age 30 and those 65 and older express similar levels of satisfaction with how things are going in the country

% of U.S. adults who say ...

	Ages 18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
They are satisfied with the way things are going in the country	28%	27%	33%	31%
The country's best years are ahead of us	41	34	46	42
They are hopeful about the future	66	66	68	71
They are happy about the future	59	56	54	48
Their side is winning more than losing in politics	33	31	35	36
The year ahead will be better than last year	52	47	54	49

Source: Surveys of U.S. adults. Questions about satisfaction with the way things are going in the country, whether one's side is winning in politics and outlook for the year ahead come from a survey conducted Jan. 20-26, 2026. Question about whether the country's best years are behind us comes from a survey conducted Dec. 8-14, 2025. Questions about hope and happiness for the future come from a survey conducted July 8-Aug. 3, 2025.

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Methodology

This report includes new survey data from Wave 191 of the American Trends Panel (ATP), Pew Research Center’s nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. Information about the methodology for Wave 191 is provided below.

Additionally, this report includes data from several previously published surveys. Information about how those surveys were conducted is available at the links below.

- [Wave 185](#)
- [Wave 184](#)
- [Wave 175](#)

The American Trends Panel survey methodology (Wave 191)

Overview

Wave 191 was conducted April 6-12, 2026. A total of 3,592 panelists responded out of 3,775 who were sampled, for a survey-level response rate of 95%.

The cumulative response rate accounting for nonresponse to the recruitment surveys and attrition is 3%. The break-off rate among panelists who logged on to the survey and completed at least one item is less than 1%. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 3,592 respondents is plus or minus 1.9 percentage points.

The survey includes [oversamples](#) of non-Hispanic Asian adults, White evangelical Protestants who attend church monthly, White nonevangelical Protestants who attend church monthly, Black Protestants who attend church monthly and Catholics who attend church monthly in order to provide more precise estimates of the opinions and experiences of these smaller demographic subgroups. These oversampled groups are weighted back to reflect their correct proportions in the population.

SSRS conducted the survey for Pew Research Center via online (n=3,491) and live telephone (n=101) interviewing. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish.

To learn more about the ATP, read “[About the American Trends Panel](#).”

Panel recruitment

Since 2018, the ATP has used address-based sampling (ABS) for recruitment. A study cover letter and a pre-incentive are mailed to a stratified, random sample of households selected from the U.S. Postal Service’s Computerized Delivery Sequence File. This Postal Service file has been estimated to cover 90% to 98% of the population.¹ Within each sampled household, the adult with the next birthday is selected to participate. Other details of the ABS recruitment protocol have changed over time but are available upon request.² Prior to 2018, the ATP was recruited using landline and cellphone random-digit-dial surveys administered in English and Spanish.

A national sample of U.S. adults has been recruited to the ATP approximately once per year since 2014. In some years, the recruitment has included additional efforts (known as an “oversample”) to improve the accuracy of data for underrepresented groups. For example, Hispanic adults, Black adults and Asian adults were oversampled in 2019, 2022 and 2023, respectively.

Sample design

The overall target population for this survey was noninstitutionalized persons ages 18 and older living in the United States. It featured a stratified random sample from the ATP from which the following groups were oversampled: non-Hispanic Asian adults, White evangelical Protestants who attend church monthly, White nonevangelical Protestants who attend church monthly, Black Protestants who attend church monthly and Catholics who attend church monthly.

The remaining panelists were sampled at rates designed to ensure that the share of respondents in each stratum is proportional to its share of the U.S. adult population to the greatest extent possible. Respondent weights are adjusted to account for differential probabilities of selection as described in the Weighting section below.

Questionnaire development and testing

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

¹ AAPOR Task Force on Address-based Sampling. 2016. “AAPOR Report: Address-based Sampling.”

² Email pewsurveys@pewresearch.org.

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 gift code to Amazon.com, Target.com or Walmart.com. 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.

Data collection protocol

The data collection field period for this survey was April 6-12, 2026. Surveys were conducted via self-administered web survey or by live telephone interviewing.

For panelists who take surveys online:³ Postcard notifications were mailed to a subset on April 6.⁴ Survey invitations were sent out in two separate launches: soft launch and full launch. Sixty panelists were included in the soft launch, which began with an initial invitation sent on April 6. All remaining English- and Spanish-speaking sampled online panelists were included in the full launch and were sent an invitation on April 7.

Invitation and reminder dates for web respondents, ATP Wave 191

	Soft launch	Full launch
Initial invitation	April 6, 2026	April 7, 2026
First reminder	April 9, 2026	April 9, 2026
Final reminder	April 11, 2026	April 11, 2026

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Panelists participating online were sent an email invitation and up to two email reminders if they did not respond to the survey. ATP panelists who consented to SMS messages were sent an SMS invitation with a link to the survey and up to two SMS reminders.

For panelists who take surveys over the phone with a live interviewer: Prenotification postcards were mailed on April 3. Soft launch took place on April 6 and involved dialing until a

³ The ATP does not use routers or chains in any part of its online data collection protocol, nor are they used to direct respondents to additional surveys.

⁴ Postcard notifications for web panelists are sent to 1) panelists who were recruited within the last two years and 2) panelists recruited prior to the last two years who opt to continue receiving postcard notifications.

total of five interviews had been completed. All remaining English- and Spanish-speaking sampled phone panelists' numbers were dialed throughout the remaining field period. Panelists who take surveys via phone can receive up to six calls from trained SSRS interviewers.

Data quality checks

To ensure high-quality data, Center researchers performed data quality checks to identify any respondents showing patterns of satisficing. This includes checking for whether respondents left questions blank at very high rates or always selected the first or last answer presented. As a result of this checking, three ATP respondents were removed from the survey dataset prior to weighting and analysis.

Weighting

The ATP data is weighted in a process that accounts for multiple stages of sampling and nonresponse that occur at different points in the panel survey process. First, each panelist begins with a base weight that reflects their probability of recruitment into the panel. These weights are then calibrated to align with the population benchmarks in the accompanying table to correct for nonresponse to recruitment surveys and panel attrition. If only a subsample of panelists was invited to participate in the wave, this weight is adjusted to account for any differential probabilities of selection.

Among the panelists who completed the survey, this weight is then calibrated again to align with the population benchmarks identified in the accompanying table and trimmed at the 1st and 99th

American Trends Panel weighting dimensions

Variable	Benchmark source
Age (detailed)	2024 American Community Survey (ACS)
Age x Gender	
Education x Gender	
Education x Age	
Race/Ethnicity x Education	
Race/Ethnicity x Gender	
Race/Ethnicity x Age	
Born inside vs. outside the U.S. among Hispanics and Asian Americans	
Years lived in the U.S.	
Census region x Metropolitan status	
Volunteerism	2023 CPS Volunteering & Civic Life Supplement
Frequency of internet use	2025 National Public Opinion Reference Survey (NPORS)
Religious affiliation	
Party affiliation x Race/Ethnicity	
Party affiliation x Age	
Validated 2024 presidential election turnout and vote choice	Candidate vote share is based on official results from the Federal Election Commission. Turnout is based on estimates from the Election Lab at the University of Florida. The size of the voting-eligible population is based on the 2023 ACS.

Note: Estimates from the ACS are based on noninstitutionalized adults. For weighting to the 2024 presidential election results, panelists are considered validated voters if their self-report of having voted was confirmed after matching to a national voter registry.

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percentiles to reduce the loss in precision stemming from variance in the weights. Sampling errors and tests of statistical significance take into account the effect of weighting.

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.

Sample sizes and margins of error, ATP Wave 191

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Total sample	3,592	1.9 percentage points
Rep/lean Rep	1,572	2.9 percentage points
Dem/lean Dem	1,874	2.7 percentage points
Ages 18-29	485	5.3 percentage points
30-49	1,207	3.2 percentage points
50-64	934	3.7 percentage points
65+	961	3.8 percentage points

Note: This survey includes oversamples of non-Hispanic Asian adults, White evangelical Protestants who attend church monthly, White nonevangelical Protestants who attend church monthly, Black Protestants who attend church monthly and Catholics who attend church monthly. Unweighted sample sizes do not account for the sample design or weighting and do not describe a group's contribution to weighted estimates. Refer to the Sample design and Weighting sections above for details.

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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, ATP Wave 191

	AAPOR code	Total
Completed interview	1.1	3,592
Logged in (web) / Contacted (CATI), but did not complete any items	2.11	36
Started survey; broke off before completion	2.12	14
Never logged on (web) / Never reached on phone (CATI)	2.20	130
Survey completed after close of the field period	2.27	0
Other noninterview	2.30	0
Completed interview but was removed for data quality	2.90	3
Total panelists sampled for the survey		3,775
Completed interviews	I	3,592
Partial interviews	P	0
Refusals	R	50
Noncontact	NC	130
Other	O	3
Unknown household	UH	0
Unknown other	UO	0
Not eligible	NE	0
Total		3,775
AAPOR RR1 = $I / (I+P+R+NC+O+UH+UO)$		95%

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Cumulative response rate, ATP Wave 191

	Total
Weighted response rate to recruitment surveys	12%
% of recruitment survey respondents who agreed to join the panel, among those invited	74%
% of those agreeing to join who were active panelists at start of Wave 191	40%
Response rate to Wave 191 survey	95%
Cumulative response rate	3%

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