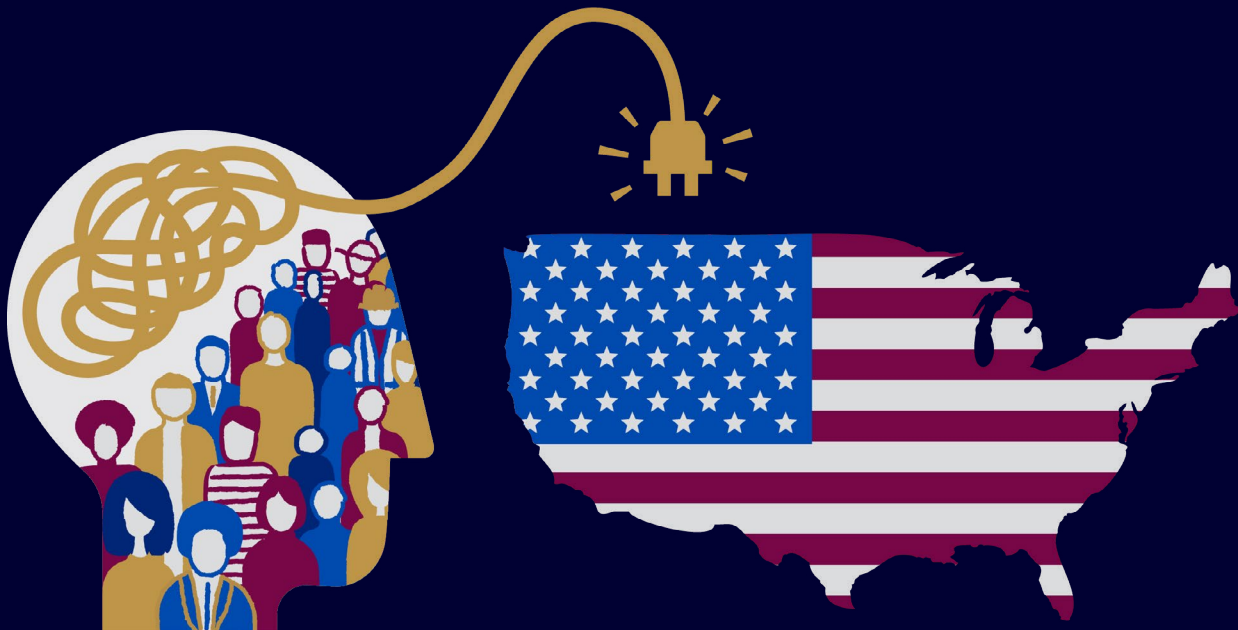


# Delivering on the Promises of “We the People”

Political Psychology Foundations  
for American Democracy Policy

Berkeley Public Policy  
DEMOCRACY POLICY LAB



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# Acknowledgments



## About the Democracy Policy Lab at the Goldman School of Public Policy, UC Berkeley

**The Democracy Policy Lab conducts research on the intersections of politics, policy, and democracy. Our work uncovers the influence of campaign finance, election administration, civil rights, and labor policies on state-level democratic performance; and behavioral insights to inform and improve policy interventions that protect, promote, and deliver on the promise of democracy.**

UC Berkeley is one of the top public universities in the world, home to the Free Speech Movement, dozens of Nobel laureates, and a model of public higher education for more than 150 years. Its faculty, students, staff, and alumni are at the forefront of innovation as well as active engagement in the important problems and issues of the day. Since its founding, UC Berkeley has been committed to the idea that a thriving democracy depends upon an educated populace dedicated to a common purpose: striving to benefit society and the greatest public good. UC Berkeley has played and continues to play an outsized role in determining the quality and understanding of our democracy. We are more than just a research institution of international significance; we are a place of discovery, influence, and impact, and we seek to do more to protect and sustain a democracy that works for everyone.

Founded in 1969, The Goldman School of Public Policy (GSPP) at UC Berkeley embodies the intellectual rigor, entrepreneurial spirit, public mission, and commitment to the betterment of society that are the hallmarks of UC Berkeley.

Learn more at <https://democracypolicylab.berkeley.edu> and follow the [Goldman School](#) on social media.

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# The Political Psychology of American Democracy

**Despite the simplicity of American democracy as a concept, the practice is complex. Democracy in general is about shared public responsibility for governing; then the emphasis is on service, sacrifice, and commitment to collective engagement in public life.** Many in America today see democracy as failing, broken, inadequate, antiquated, and abstract, and beyond partisan political analysis, yet there is a dearth of empirical research to understand why. If “we the people” are to govern our democracies at the local, state, and federal levels of society, we need policies that can strengthen the collective public. To start, we therefore need to understand how people think about democracy, government, and one another to design the right policies to intervene.

The Political Psychology of American Democracy (PPAD) survey project is designed to guide democracy policy. Prior public opinion research on democracy finds that people lack a common understanding of democracy and disagree on the values or actions that make for an effective, fair, and trustworthy self-governing system. In addition, elected officials and well-funded political organizations exploit long-standing and contemporary ideological, racial-ethnic, and economic divisions that give the appearance that democracy as a political system is akin to a competitive marketplace of hierarchical winners and losers. The result is an American public that sees democracy through an abstract and distant political lens, with increased distortion about what government does and how it functions, heightened partisan division, and an erosion of the sense of belonging in America, ultimately fracturing “We, the People.” Without data to understand the psychological threats to democracy, policy solutions to address these problems wither.

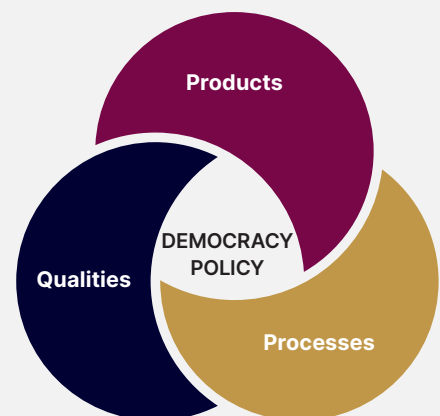
## What is Political Psychology?

Political psychology is an interdisciplinary framework for understanding political motivations, thoughts, and behaviors within a defined political system—in our case, American democracy.

## What is Democracy Policy?

Democracy policies focus explicitly on strengthening, sustaining, or weakening “we” [the people] through policies and programs (products), systems and practices (processes), and values (qualities).

They can focus on aspects of representation, identity, fair treatment, social and civil status, information ethics and quality, voice (inclusion), and government relations.



*“Public policy is anything local, regional, state, and federal governments do (or do not do) to solve societal problems. They include authoritative statements, legislation, court decisions, distributional designs, and cross-industry partnerships.*

*If American democracy—and by extension trust, perceived legitimacy, and faith in government—is under question, then governments need “democracy policy.”*

—David C. Wilson, Dean Goldman School of Public Policy, UC Berkeley

The 2024-25 PPAD survey project is led by the Goldman School of Public Policy’s (GSPP) Democracy Policy Lab (DPL) at UC Berkeley. DPL investigators partnered with the company Ipsos to collect three waves of survey data—in English and Spanish—from their KnowledgePanel®, the largest online panel in the United States, with a target population of non-institutionalized adults (age 18+) residing in the United States. The survey resulted in 2,451 respondents who completed all three waves of data collection, 785 who completed two waves, and 332 who completed only one wave. Specific details for each wave are as follows:

Survey Design and Methodology

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Field dates	October 23–November 1, 2024	December 4–16, 2024	February 6–19, 2025
Sample size	N=3,141	N=3,126	N= 2,988
Details	The baseline wave of the study was designed to obtain 3,000 completed interviews among a sample of U.S. adults (age 18 and older).	Reinterviewed those from the baseline sample (N=2,699) and interviewed a new sample of U.S. adults (N=427) to replace attrition.	Reinterviewed all respondents who completed either Wave #1 or Wave #2 of the study.
Median interview time	21 minutes	24 minutes	21 minutes
Completion rate	61%	82%	86%
Margin of error	±1.88	±1.92	±1.97

The survey largely steered clear of content about the “horse races” of the 2024 elections, candidate mentions, partisanship, and actual voting behavior, and instead focused on understanding the content and correlations of democracy identities, evaluations of democracy beliefs and practices, and democracy policies. The project tracked psychological indicators like human flourishing (or “complete well-being”), hope for democracy, political efficacy, institutional trust and respect for public servants across local, state, and federal government, and a host of predispositions (e.g., attitudes, beliefs, value orientations, justice motives, and other system and status beliefs) that are consequential for civic sentiment and behaviors in a liberal democracy. It also collected data on different elements for engagement that could support effective democracy policy.

## The Big Picture

**The PPAD revealed that the public suffers from a lack of a “democracy” identity which erodes a sense of belongingness to a collective “We” in American society. People easily connect with social and political groups, but struggle to connect with broader abstract systems like “democracy.”** Three core features of identity are categorization, identification, and comparison. With limited clarity on what democracy is, how it is practiced in America—across local, state, and federal levels of government, and how it helps give meaning directly to our lives, it is difficult for people to understand and ultimately embrace. As a result, people use shortcuts in thinking, like winning and losing elections, economic transactions, beliefs that facilitate “othering” and other blame attributions to evaluate the quality of democracy, especially at the national level. Some describe this as “polarization,” however, it can also be described as a lack of shared identity and belonging.

The PPAD results suggest there is a pathway to strengthening democracy that can bring together people around a common desire for human flourishing. One element involves building agency and efficacy among those who need help understanding the engagement the most. A second element involves investments in innovation at the local and state level where connections and belonging are more natural and sustainable. A third element involves focusing on well-being as a metric for assessing the quality of “we” [the people] at all levels of American life. Finally, all of these elements require continuing monitoring and data collection, sharing of results from these activities, and collaborative democracy policies designed by, for, and of the people.

We encourage researchers, journalists, and other interested parties to continue to explore the PPAD results and use the data for further study of the political psychology of American democracy and the advancement of effective democracy policy.



# Executive Summary

**The PPAD's findings reveal a complex interplay of concerns and aspirations. While negativity surrounds perceptions of American democracy, several promising trends offer hope:**



**Trust in government, though low overall, is significantly higher at the local and state levels, suggesting potential avenues for democratic revitalization.** This local focus aligns with the public's perception that their votes matter more at the local level. However, limited knowledge about local candidates and issues presents a challenge to informed participation.



**The concept of "Human Flourishing" (HF), encompassing internal drive and economic well-being, is positively correlated with hope for democracy.** Analysis of HF reveals four distinct public segments: Flourishing, Searching, Resilient, and Suffering. These groups offer insights into the complex relationship between personal well-being and democratic values.



**Finally, an individual's sense of belonging significantly influences their views on democracy. Satisfaction with the system tends to be higher when "their team" is in power.** This fluidity of democratic values, tied to social identity and perceived social order, highlights the importance of fostering a shared understanding of democracy and promoting inclusivity.

The study results suggest that the political psychology of American democracy consists of a blend of uncertainty about personal efficacy in the public sphere and the promise of civic reciprocity; informational and intellectual needs about the workings of government and public policy; the formation and identification of common goals and values; over reliance on diffusion of responsibility and attribution to explain America's shortcomings; and balancing motivational needs for justice and belonging for a common good. Effective democracy policies are needed to sustain America's promise.



**While there is limited knowledge about candidates and issues, there is a strong public appetite for greater civic knowledge, particularly about voting, elections, and citizen rights.** This desire for information extends to policy matters, with strong support for initiatives like "citizen assemblies," which would empower citizens to invest in civic learning, policy education, trust-building, and dialogue across differences.



**Americans attribute the success of democracy to different things.** A majority of Americans believe that the freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution are key to America's success, while others feel that the ability to constrain some freedoms for the greater good has been more crucial. Similarly, slightly more than half attribute it to the country's adaptability and capacity for change, while nearly half believe it stems from adherence to long-standing principles.



# How is Democracy Doing?

## Hope, Well-being, and Belonging Shaped by Political Change

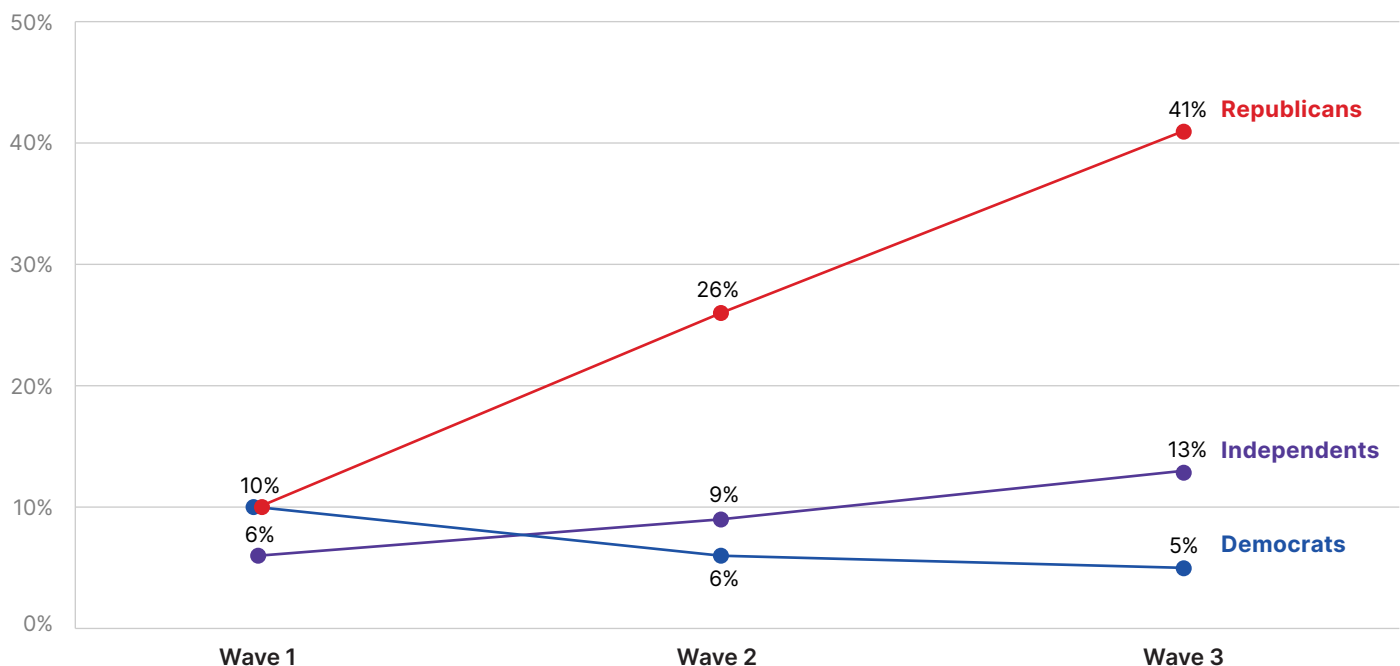
Do Americans feel hopeful about the shape and direction of American democracy? Few feel happy outright, though that changes based on partisanship.

Americans who self-identify as Republicans, and even some independents, saw their hope for democracy increase immediately after President Donald Trump won a second term. However, hope among Democrat-identifying Americans stagnated during and after the 2024 election. This also translates into wellbeing. As of February 2025, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to report lower flourishing scores, suggesting lower levels of wellbeing.

Winning helps foster a sense of belonging, while losing hurts those out of power, eroding a sense of certainty and empowerment in the system they live in. How people make sense of fitting in—that is, their sense of belonging—shapes their views on democracy. If their team is in power, they feel better and have more hope for the system overall; if their team is out of power, the inverse is true. What this suggests is that people hold different meanings of democracy which are related to their own sense of belonging and their view on social order, which can shift depending on the context.

## Hope for Democracy by Party ID

Generally speaking, on a scale from 1 to 10 where 10 is 'extremely hopeful' and 1 is 'extremely worried' how do you feel about the future of American democracy? (% responding with 8–10)



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 1; Fielded: October 23 – November 1, 2024; N=3,141 Americans 18+. Wave 2; Fielded: December 4 – 16, 2024; N=3,126 Americans 18+. Wave 3; Fielded: February 6-19, 2025; N=2,988 Americans 18+.

# What is American Democracy?

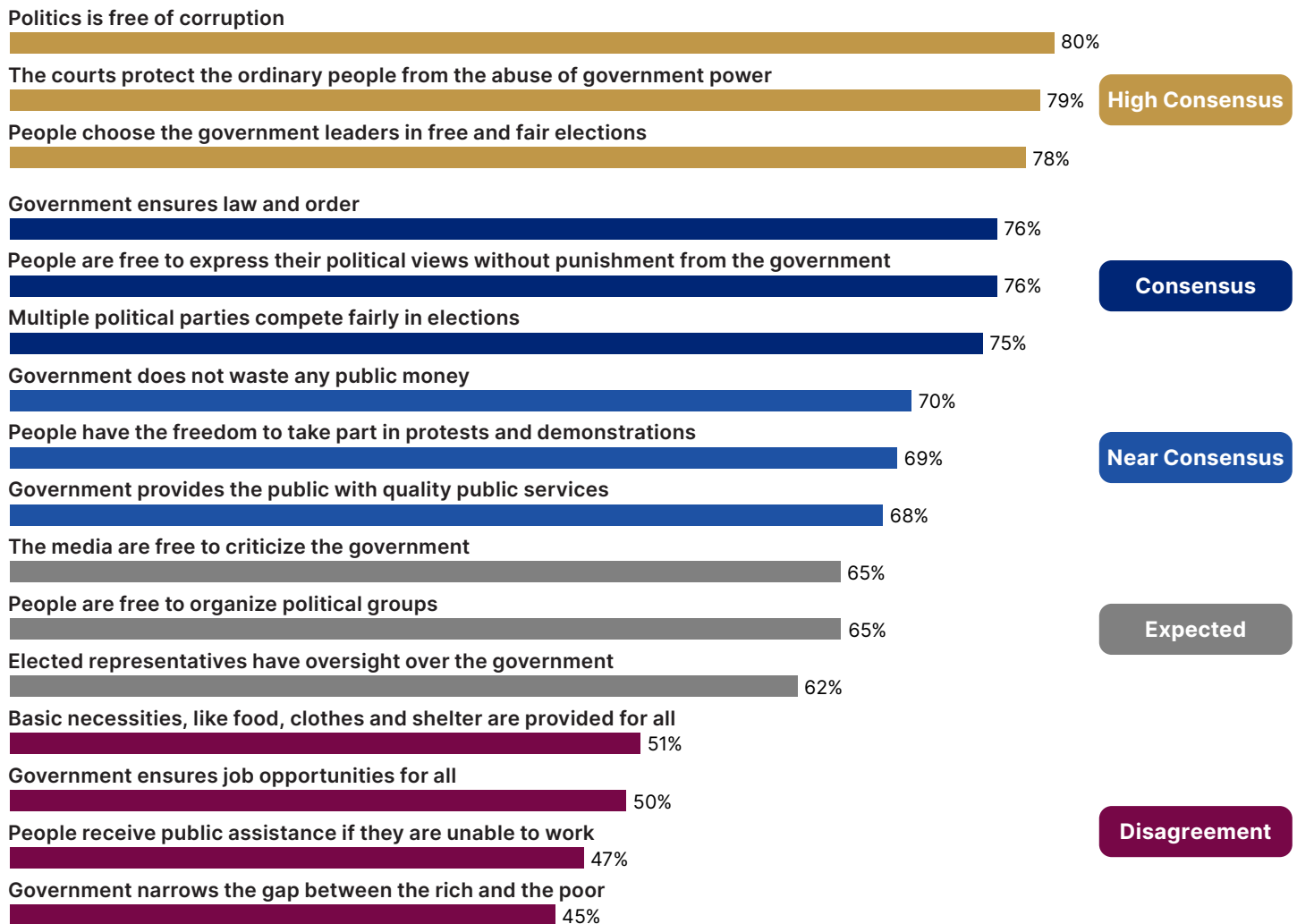
## Multiple Meanings in a Complex Society

Even as some Americans are hopeful about American democracy, what does “democracy” mean to them? The translation of democracy from an abstract concept to an applied, lived reality is the location of much of the disagreement about the political direction of this country.

Democracy is a conceptual, muddled, and fluid idea for most people. Since there is no shared meaning, there is no shared identification with it among the public. In place of that, people approach democracy through different associations with the many component parts of democracy, like governance, voters, history, and politics.

## Important Attributes for Democracy

*Below is a list of different attributes for American democracy. Please indicate how important each one is for your own thoughts about democracy: (% responding very or extremely important for democracy)*



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 3; Fielded: February 6-19, 2025; N=2,988 Americans 18+.

Delivering on the Promises of “We the People:” Political Psychology Foundations for American Democracy Policy

## What is Democracy as an Idea? Freedom and Anti-corruption.

Overall, Americans primarily have a positive association with democracy but do not always agree on what democracy is, making democracy itself a fluid concept.

Largely, Americans have the broadest consensus that democracy is associated with anti-corruption and fairness. Most Americans feel that politics free of corruption, courts protecting ordinary people from government abuse, and free and fair elections are important attributes of American democracy.

Freedom to express, protest, and vote are also intertwined with how most Americans see democracy, though there is somewhat less consensus here. Physical safety falls into this tier of agreement, too. For most Americans, the media's ability to criticize the government and the right to organize political groups are important attributes of democracy, but these aspects of democracy are not universally agreed upon. There is more disagreement about whether economic security, like meeting basic needs, is a critical attribute of democracy.

These themes of freedom and anti-corruption are integral to the ways Americans wrestle with what democracy is. For example, in open-ended responses, Americans largely say “freedom” describes democracy.

Yet, freedom to maneuver the web of democracy is tied to how well someone is doing, that is whether they are flourishing, and have the emotional or financial resources to fully participate.

## What One Word or Phrase Would You Use to Define American Democracy?



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Pooled responses with 5+ mentions across all 3 waves. See methodology for sample size and field dates per wave.

# How are Americans Doing?

## How Do We Measure Human Flourishing?

Are Americans living the good life? How well people feel they are doing, and their sense of belonging and connection—that is, whether they are flourishing—is associated with certain feelings, ideas, and predispositions about democracy and governance.

Someone's ability to feel a part of or belong to the broader collective is much more difficult when someone is struggling financially or metaphysically. If someone is worried about making ends meet or has no sense of purpose, they are less likely to worry about more abstract questions of democracy, government, and elections—or even others who may need help.

The Human Flourishing Index is a combined measure of seven items, capturing people's sense of happiness and life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and financial and material stability. All three waves of the survey measured these seven component parts of Human Flourishing.

How people respond to the Human Flourishing Index provides a rich dataset to analyze the similarities and differences of different groups of people on these seven measures. Natural clusters emerge from this analysis, grouping those who are “suffering,” “searching,” “resilient,” and “flourishing.” Understanding the human flourishing landscape in the United States—who is suffering, who is flourishing—provides insights into where there are opportunities for democracy policy to foster stronger connections and a sense of belonging.

### Human Flourishing Index Seven Measures:

1. In general, how positive (happy) or negative (unhappy) do you usually feel these days? [0 = Extremely negative (Unhappy) 10 = Extremely positive (Happy)]
2. Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile? [0 = Not at all worthwhile, 10 = Completely worthwhile]
- 3-5. Please read the statements below. For each one, please tell us whether the statement is completely true of you or not true of you at all. [0 = Not true of me, 10 = Completely true of me]
  3. I understand my purpose in life
  4. Even in difficult and challenging situations I always act to promote good in all circumstances
  5. I am always able to give up some happiness now for greater happiness later
- 6-7. Please read the statements below. Please tell us how often you worry about...[0 = Worry All of the Time, 10 = Do Not Ever Worry]
  6. Being able to meet normal monthly living expenses
  7. Safety, food, or housing

#### SUFFERING

Lower on all seven measures

#### SEARCHING

Lower on happiness, meaning and purpose, character and virtue

Higher on financial and material stability

#### RESILIENT

Higher on happiness, meaning and purpose, character and virtue

Lower on financial and material stability

#### FLOURISHING

Higher on all seven measures



## Natural Groupings of Human Flourishing

A two-step cluster analysis technique identified four patterns of response to the Human Flourishing Index. These patterns were based on how far an individual's responses were to the average responses to each of the items for given clusters. No cluster solution provided a better fit for the data without making the cluster too small for analysis. The clusters were as follows:

		CLUSTER: Suffering	CLUSTER: Searching	CLUSTER: Resilient	CLUSTER: Flourishing
ELEMENTS	Happiness and Life Satisfaction	Lowest	Lower	Higher	Highest
	Meaning and Purpose	Lowest	Lower	Higher	Highest
	Character and Virtue	Lowest	Lower	Higher	Highest
	Financial and Material Stability	Lowest	Higher	Lower	Highest

Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos.

## Who is Flourishing?

After analyzing responses to the Human Flourishing Index, four distinct groups of Americans emerge: flourishing, resilient, searching, and suffering.

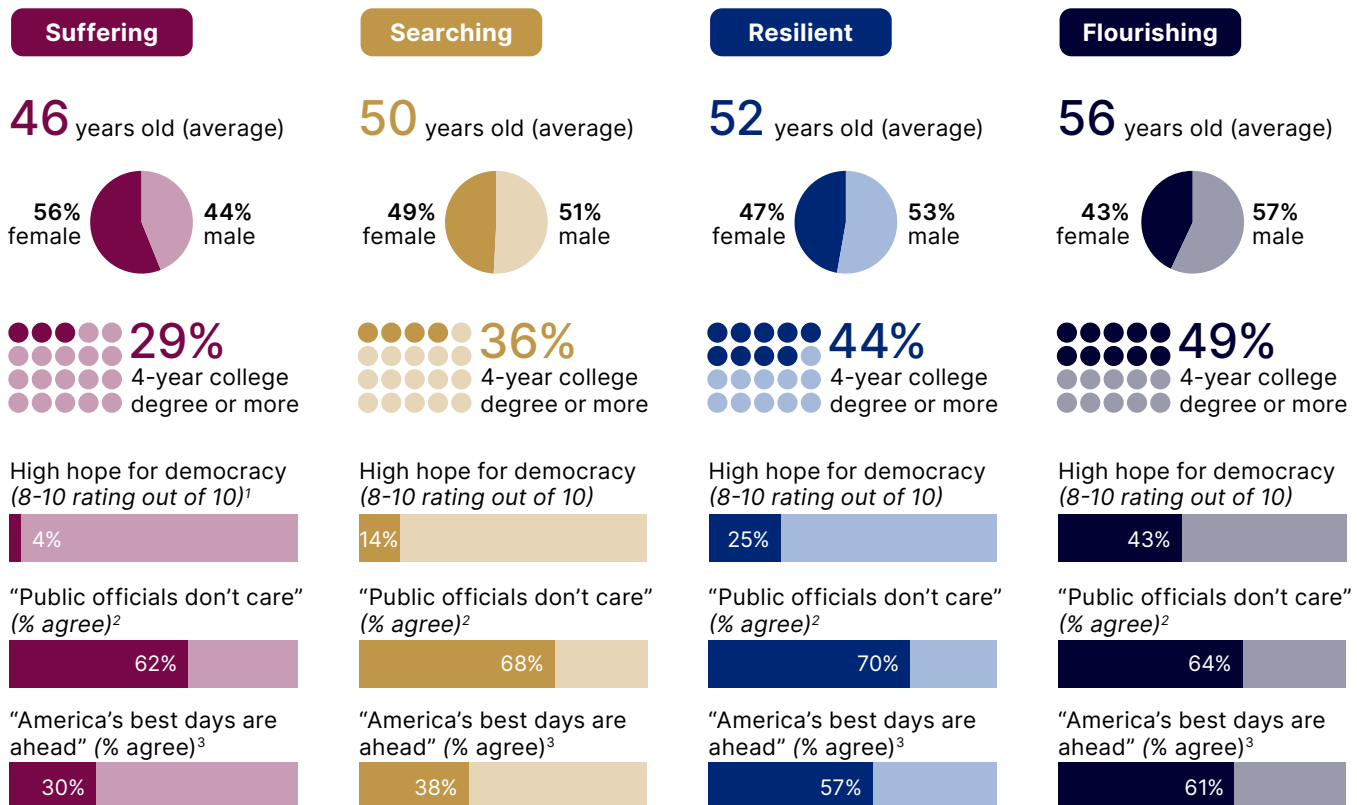
Flourishing Americans are among the happiest and most satisfied, have meaning and purpose, a sense of character, and are financially stable. Resilient Americans are more likely to be happier, satisfied, have a sense of meaning and purpose, and a sense of character, however, these people are less likely to feel like their financial and material needs are being met. Those who are searching are more likely to feel secure financially, but they are less likely to have a sense of happiness and meaning. Finally, suffering Americans are less likely to feel happy, find meaning, or have financial and material stability.

## Who is Flourishing? (continued)

Looking at the human flourishing index in its totality, some Americans are more likely to be struggling than others. Women and Americans who are younger are much more likely to be suffering or searching. Flourishing Americans tend to have a four-year college degree, are older on average, and lean male.

Flourishing frames how people feel about government and the wider world. Those who score higher on the flourishing scale are more likely to have hope for democracy. Higher flourishing scores are also generally correlated with less agreement that public officials don't care about them. Those who are suffering are much more likely to feel a sense of alienation and that "things are out of control in the U.S."

### Cluster Profiles



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 3; Fielded: February 6-19, 2025; N=2,988 Americans 18+.

<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, on a scale from 1 to 10 where 10 is 'extremely hopeful' and 1 is 'extremely worried' how do you feel about the future of American democracy?

<sup>2</sup> Public officials don't care about what people like me think. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below.

<sup>3</sup> In general, do you think America's best days are ahead of us or behind us?"

# Democracy and Governance: A Nation Divided on its Past and its Present

## Division on Core Questions

Democracy is a web of association, encompassing questions of history, who belongs, and who or what to trust. What is clear from the data is that there are deep divisions and moments of consensus on core questions of American democracy, like what has made American democracy successful, who belongs, and whether to trust the government or other voters. Underlying all of these core questions is who belongs and who gets to decide that.

## Freedom vs. The Greater Good: What Makes Democracy Successful?

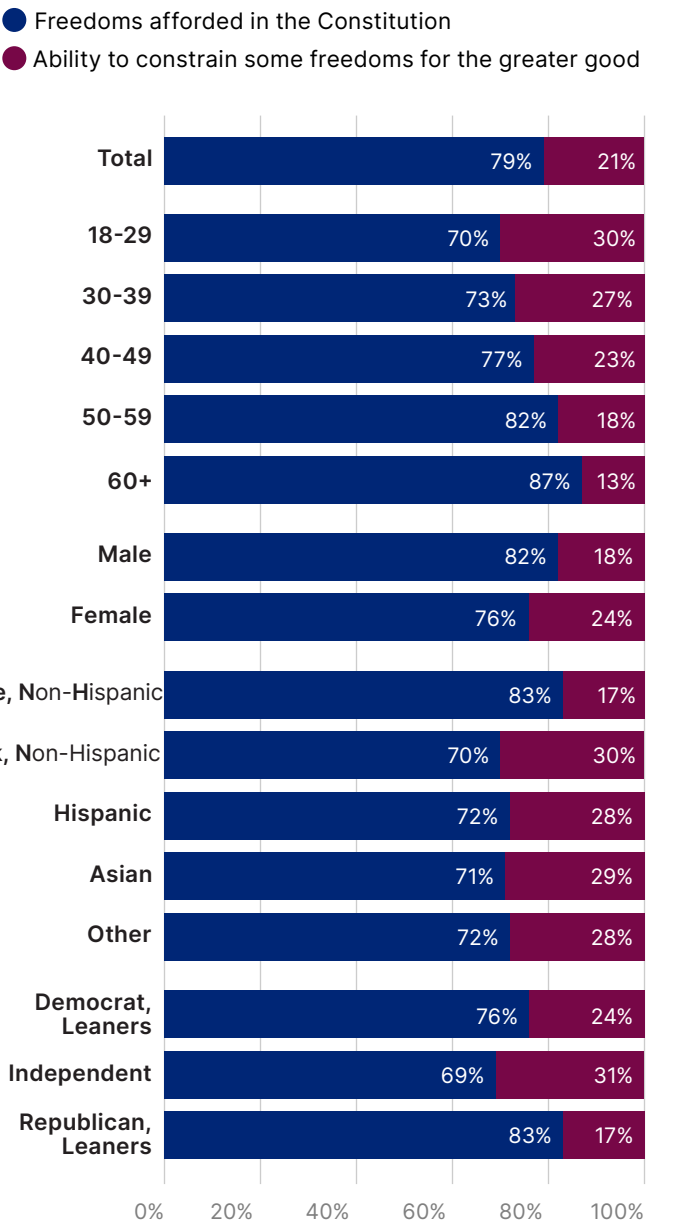
Groups foster a sense of belonging, shaping connections to the past, present, and future. Those who are more likely to be suffering or searching—that is, younger people or women—are more likely to be willing to constrain freedoms for the greater good. These groups are also more likely to feel that the country’s success comes from its ability to change.

This constrained or restrictive approach to democracy is sometimes at odds in the public’s mind with what most Americans feel has made America successful: freedom. Four in five Americans say “freedoms afforded in the Constitution” are what has made America successful, more than the ability to constrain some freedoms for the greater good, which only one in five respondents feel has made the U.S. successful.

While a majority feel freedom afforded in the Constitution is what made America more successful, there are some marginal but significant differences by demographics. Younger Americans, women, Black, Hispanic, Asian respondents and those who do not identify with a single race or ethnicity are more likely to say American success is rooted in the ability to constrain some freedoms for the greater good.

## Majority of Americans say Constitutional Freedoms has Made Democracy Successful

*In your view, has America been successful more because of its freedoms afforded in the Constitution or more because of its ability to constrain some freedoms for the greater good?*



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 2; Fielded: December 4 – 16, 2024; N=3,126 Americans 18+.

## The Past vs. The Future: What Makes Democracy Successful?

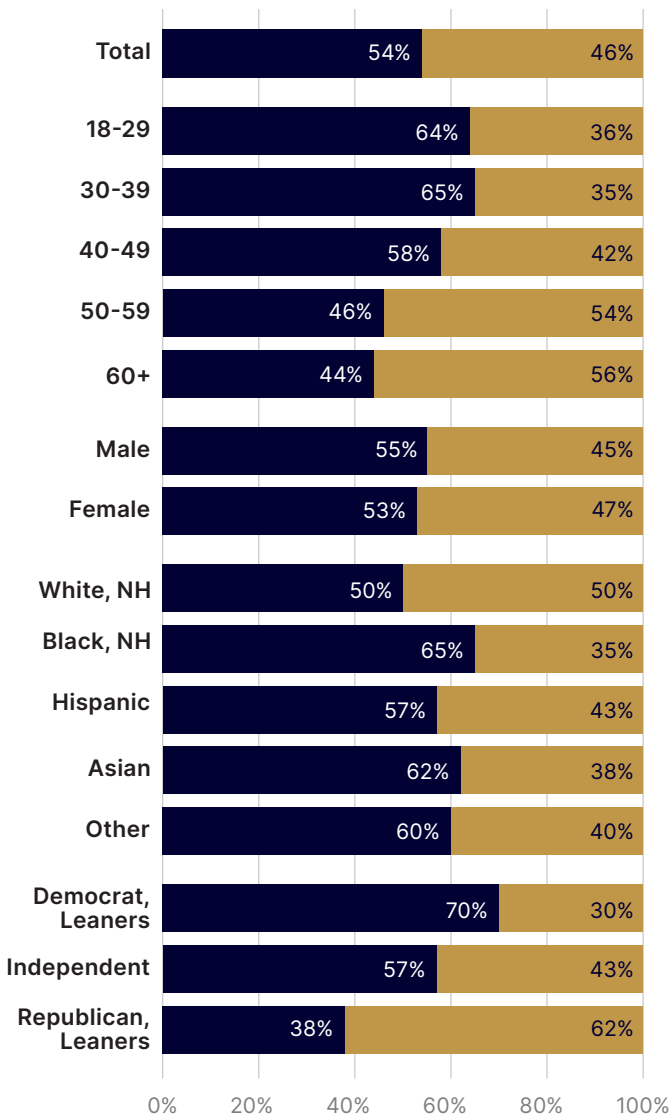
Questions of belonging and connection are mediated by an understanding of the past too. Americans are mixed on whether America has been successful because of the country’s ability to change or its reliance on long-standing principles. Half (53%) feel America’s success comes from its ability to change while 47% feel it is successful because of reliance on long-standing principles.

Majorities of Democrats, independents, Americans under 50, Black, Hispanic, Asian respondents, and Americans who do not identify as a single race or ethnicity are more likely to feel success is from change. A majority of Republicans and Americans over 50 believe the country’s success comes from leaning on long-standing principles. White Americans are more split between change and long-standing principles, with no single response gaining a majority.

## Americans Split on Whether Change or Long-standing Principles has Made American Democracy Successful

*In your view, has America been successful more because of its ability to change or more because of its reliance on long-standing principles?*

- Ability to change
- Reliance on long-standing principles



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 2; Fielded: December 4 – 16, 2024; N=3,126 Americans 18+. Where figures do not sum to 100, this is due to the effects of rounding percentage points to the nearest whole number.





## How, then, do Americans View the Country Today?

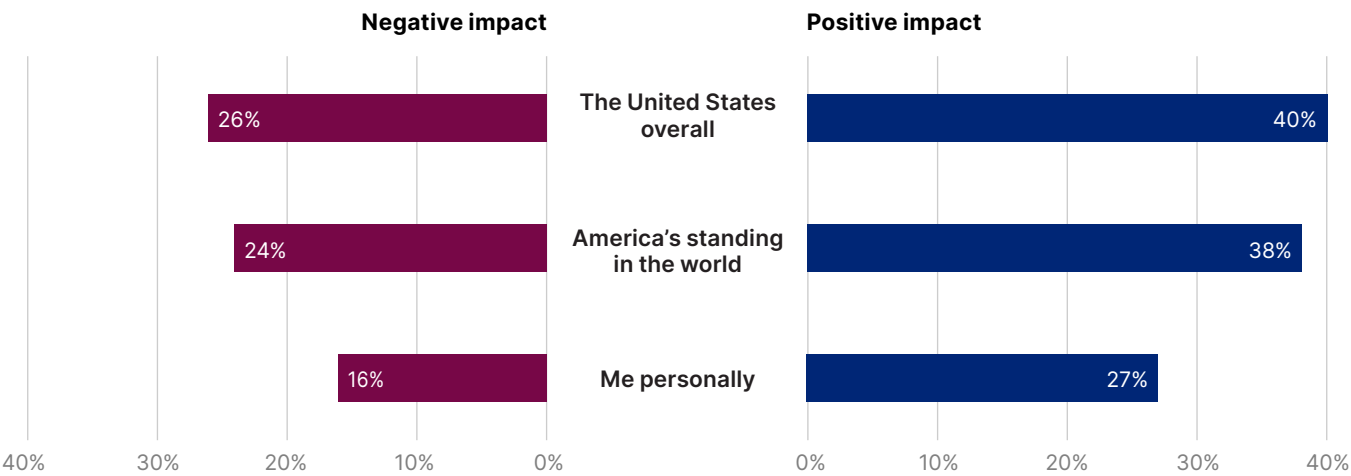
The questions about the past and future shape conversations about the present. Who is the “We” in “We the People”? Questions of diversity go to the heart of belonging in America today.

The public holds mixed views about the changing diversity of the U.S. today. While few (16%) think it will hurt them personally, more feel that it will have a negative impact on the U.S.’ standing in the world (24%) or believe that it will hurt the United States (26%), suggesting that questions of connection go beyond the individual and encompass the larger definitions of power and belonging.

However, even with that, more feel that diversity will have a positive impact on them specifically (27%), the U.S.’ standing in the world (38%) and the U.S. overall (40%).

## Impact of Changing Diversity in the U.S.

% of Americans who agree that the changing diversity of the United States will have a positive/negative impact on the following:



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 2; Fielded: December 4 – 16, 2024; N=3,126 Americans 18+. Half of the sample (N=1530) saw “negative” framing and half of the sample (N=1596) saw the “positive” framing.

# The Eroding and Complicated Sense of Belonging in American Democracy

## Belonging & Democracy

Belonging involves being part of something that makes us feel seen and whole. Humans are social creatures, orienting ourselves around groups—our families, communities, and neighborhoods.

It is a fundamental human motive to belong. What groups make up someone's sense of belonging are fluid, and the boundaries are not always clear. Yet this sense of belonging is vital for people to feel safe and secure. Exclusion or alienation threatens this sense of belonging in painful ways, which requires people to be on guard, constantly evaluating and assessing whether they belong.

While this is true in a micro sense—how people connect interpersonally—this is also true in a macro sense. Belonging and connection are critical for how people form their conception of a democracy or a nation they exist in, and whether they feel like they belong to these more expansive groups.

People's attachment to democracy is fluid and interpreted through the lens of their own experiences, understanding, and ability to maneuver and connect the many different elements of democracy that they encounter, from abstract ideas to practical governance to their fellow voters.



**Belonging and connection are critical for how people form their conception of a democracy or a nation they exist in...**



Questions of belonging and fairness mold attitudes and associations about democracy as an idea. The sense of belonging—or lack thereof—permeates the mistrust Americans feel toward the government and their fellow voters. “We the People” is filled with suspicion.

## What One Word or Phrase Would You Use to Describe American Voters?



Delivering on the Promises of “We the People:” Political Psychology Foundations for American Democracy Policy

## Trust Deficit Across Different Levels of Government

Americans' trust and understanding of government is nuanced and fluid, changing based on who is in charge and whether they feel like they belong to that ingroup.

Governing structures closer to people's lives, and therefore closer to people's sense of belonging, are more trusted than national ones. For example, in February 2025, only 29% of Americans had a fair amount or great deal of trust in the federal government. However, trust in state and local government (44% and 45%, respectively) was substantially higher.

Much like with hope in democracy, trust in government and respect for civil servants shift overtime as a response to the larger political environment too. From 2024 to 2025, trust in state government grew (36% in pre-election and post-election 2024 vs. 44% trust in February 2025), even as trust in the federal government and local governments stayed the same. This improvement largely comes from more Hispanic Americans, Republicans and independents expressing more trust in state government in February 2025 than in 2024. Winning heightens belonging, while losing elections hurts it.

Respect for federal workers softened throughout 2024 to 2025, falling from 57% before the election to 50% in February 2025, driven primarily by Democrats and independents losing respect as their party came out of power. That's true even as respect for state and local workers remained largely high and stable.

### Government Trust

(Fair amount to a great deal of trust)

29%

of Americans trust in the **federal government**<sup>1</sup>



44%

of Americans trust in the **state government**<sup>2</sup>



45%

of Americans trust in the **local government**<sup>3</sup>



### Government Worker Respect

(Fair amount to a great deal of respect)

50%

of Americans respect **federal workers**<sup>4</sup>



53%

of Americans respect **state workers**<sup>5</sup>



60%

of Americans respect **local workers**<sup>6</sup>



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 3; Fielded: February 6-19, 2025; N=2,988 Americans 18+.

<sup>1</sup>How much do you trust the FEDERAL government to do what is right? (Shown to 1/3 of respondents each wave)

<sup>2</sup>How much do you trust your STATE government to do what is right? (Shown to 1/3 of respondents each wave)

<sup>3</sup>How much do you trust your LOCAL government to do what is right? (Shown to 1/3 of respondents each wave)

<sup>4</sup>How much do you respect those who serve in your FEDERAL government? (Shown to 1/3 of respondents each wave)

<sup>5</sup>How much do you respect those who serve in your STATE government? (Shown to 1/3 of respondents each wave)

<sup>6</sup>How much do you respect those who serve in your LOCAL government? (Shown to 1/3 of respondents each wave)



Civic Empowerment vs. Effectiveness

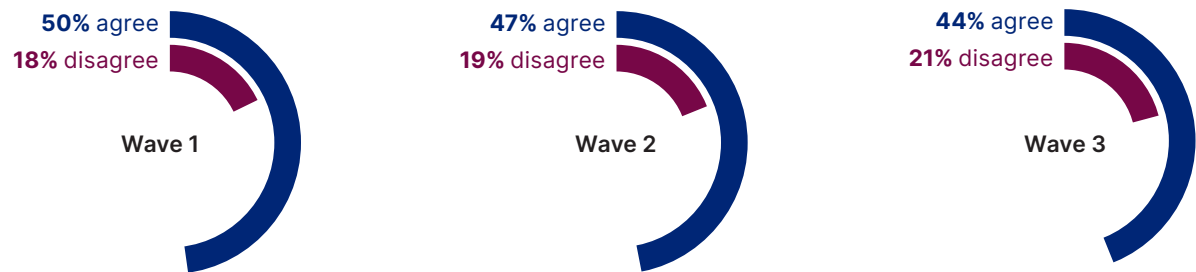
Empowerment and effectiveness are critical concepts for belonging and identity connections with democracy. When people feel they have less access to all of the information needed to confidently participate in the democratic process *and* believe public officials do not care about what they think, they may feel disempowered and that they do not belong in the democratic process.

Across the three waves of the survey, slightly more than two-thirds of Americans agree that public officials don't care what people like them think, and similar levels of agreement that people feel they have access to all the information they need to participate in American democracy with confidence. It is noteworthy that the levels of agreement were statistically unchanged for both items over the course of the study, and that the public has higher internal efficacy (i.e., believe they have information) and lower external efficacy (i.e., public officials don't care) suggesting conflict between the inputs and outputs necessary for a well-functioning democracy.

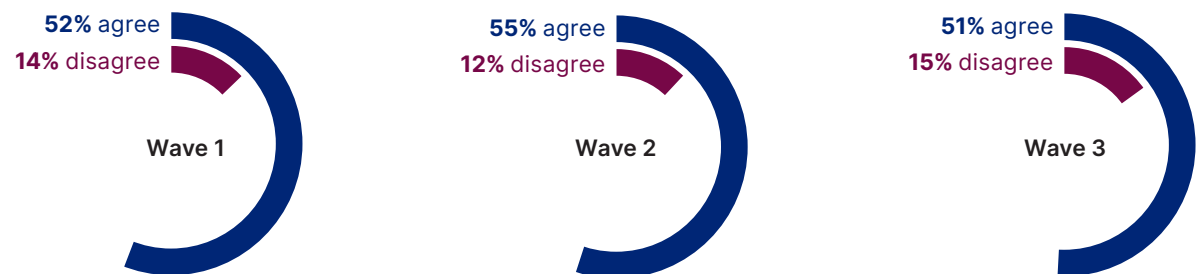
Half of Americans Do not Feel Empowered to Participate in the Democratic Process

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below.

I have access to all the information I need to participate in our democracy with confidence.



Public officials don't care about what people like me think.



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 1; Fielded: October 23 – November 1, 2024, N=3,141 Americans 18+. Wave 2; Fielded: December 4 – 16, 2024; N=3,126 Americans 18+. Wave 3; Fielded: February 6-19, 2025; N=2,988 Americans 18+.

# Who “Belongs” Shapes Who Deserves Help

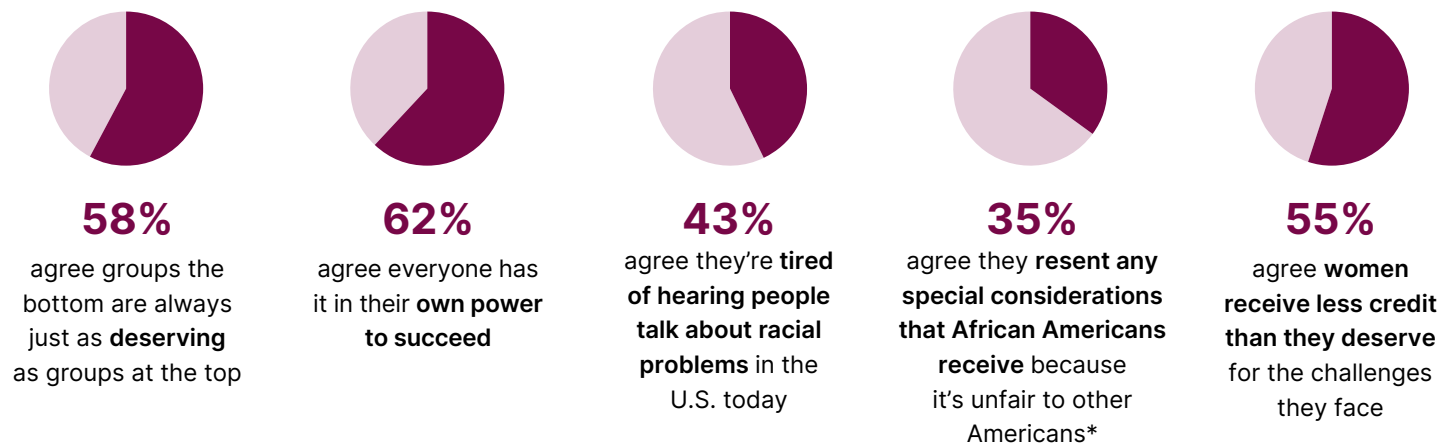
## How the Public Views Merit and Deservingness

Questions of bias, resentment, hierarchy, and inferiority all shape how Americans approach the question of who is “American” and who merits support—that is, who belongs. What the distance is between “us” and “them” establishes who someone is willing to help.

These in-group and out-group attitudes drive who or what Americans blame for the problems they see in democracy, governance, and their lives. Who to trust and who to blame breaks down into beliefs about other people, and beliefs about the government, creating unique opportunities for policies and solutions that build up people’s sense of belonging and connection with democracy.

**Connecting and belonging are eroded when people feel uncertain about whether members of their group or others are not perceived as doing their part in society.**

## Belief About Self and Others



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 2; Fielded: December 4 – 16, 2024; N=3,126 Americans 18+.

Q1. There are many kinds of groups in the world: men and women, ethnic and religious groups, nationalities, political factions. How much do you agree or disagree with each idea about groups in general?... Groups at the bottom are always just as deserving as groups at the top.

Q2. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below... Everyone has it in their own power to succeed

Q3. Please indicate the extent you agree or disagree with the following statements...I'm tired of hearing people talk about racial problems in the U.S. today.

Q4. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below...I resent any special considerations that African Americans receive because it's unfair to other Americans.\*

Q5. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with this statement... Women receive less credit than they deserve for the challenges they face.

\*Question was not asked of African American respondents.

## Who Gets Help: The Role of Resentment, Social Control, and Isolation

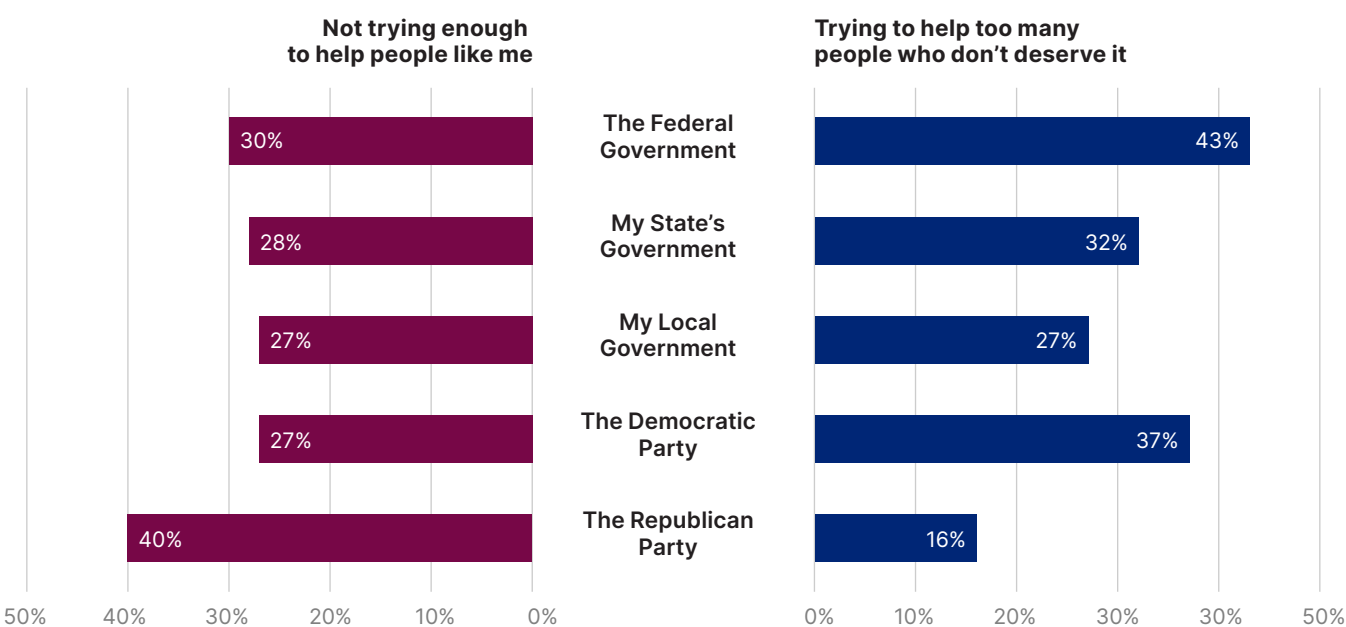
Who is imagined as part of American democracy translates into who people feel deserves help. Investing in “us” helps the individual and the group but investing in an outside group—”them”—can threaten the individual and the group, ultimately feeling unfair.

At the root of this, there is a suspicion that some people do not deserve help. There is more suspicion that the federal government is trying to help too many people who don’t deserve it. For state and local governments, the governments Americans are closer to, far fewer people feel these more local forms of government are trying to help too many people who do not deserve it.

Feelings about the federal government helping too much match how people feel about the Democratic party. Inversely, the Republican party is much more likely to be seen as not doing enough to help people over helping too many people.

### The Politics of Helping

Which of the following, if either, do you think is a bigger problem with [INSERT]?



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 3; Fielded: February 6-19, 2025; Split Sampled, N=~600 respondents Americans 18+ per item.

Feelings of Disconnection Associated with Role of Government

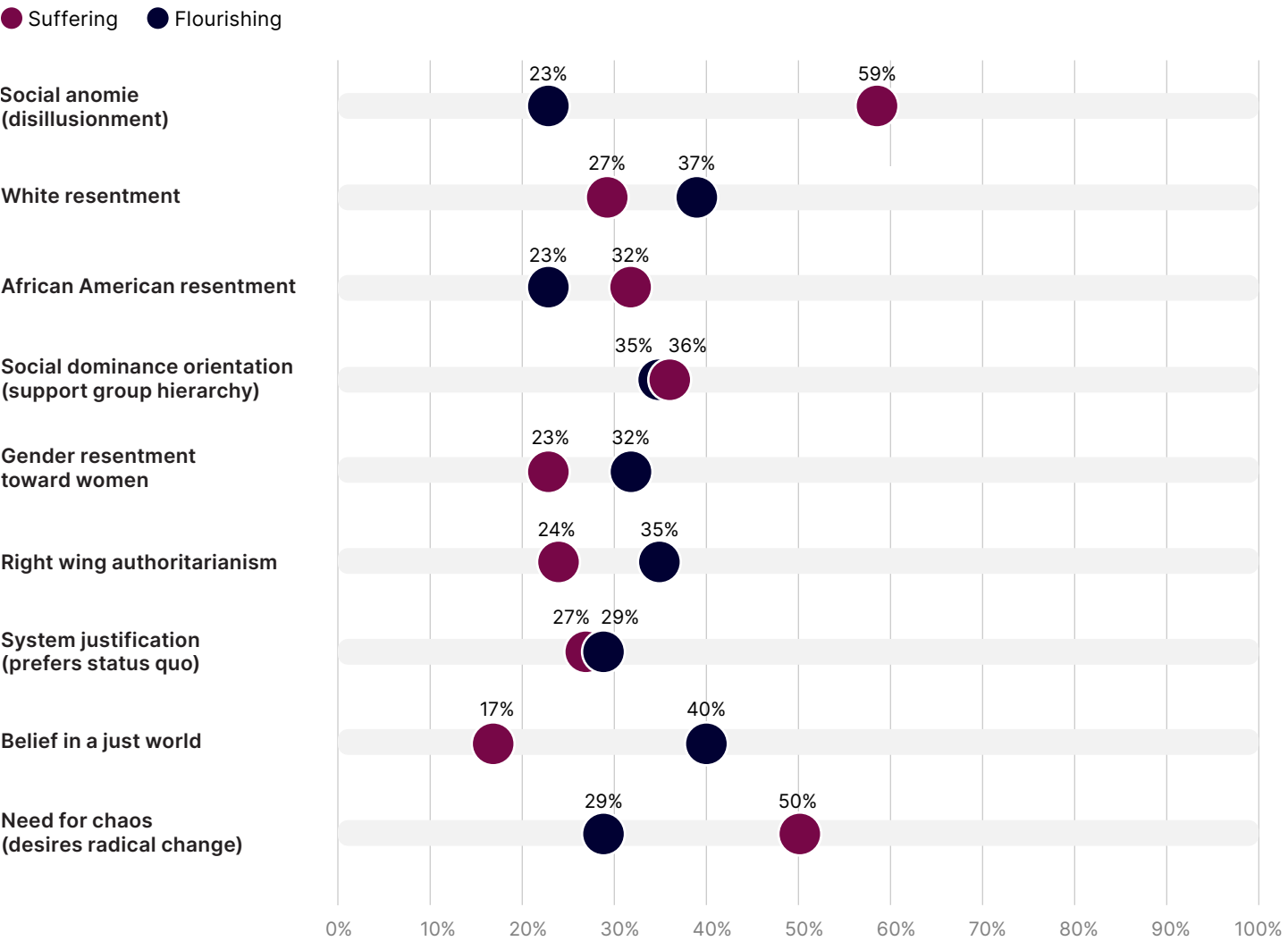
White resentment toward African Americans, right wing authoritarianism, and anomie—that is, feelings of alienation and disconnection from society—are all powerful and predictive tools of understanding whether people feel that government and major political institutions help people too much, or not enough. These indices capture ideas about social order, belonging, and how that corresponds with policymaking.

For instance, higher right wing authoritarianism predisposition is associated with the belief that government and major political institutions are doing too much to help others. A high white resentment score also correlates with stronger beliefs that society is doing too much to help people who do not deserve it.

On the other hand, a higher ranking on the index measuring anomie is correlated with a stronger sense that these institutions are not helping people enough. Suffering Americans are more likely to feel that sense of dislocation and alienation, suggesting that they feel like they do not belong and perhaps are left behind by these institutions.

Feelings of Disconnection Associated with Role of Government

% of those with the highest levels of the sentiments within the Human Flourishing Index Clusters.



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos.  
Wave 2; Fielded: December 4 – 16, 2024; N=3,126 Americans 18+. Wave 3; Fielded: February 6-19, 2025; N=2,988 Americans 18+.  
White Resentment Indices Not Shown to African American Respondents, African American Resentment Not Shown to White Respondents.  
Please see Methodology Report for Index Information.



# Who Deserves Help

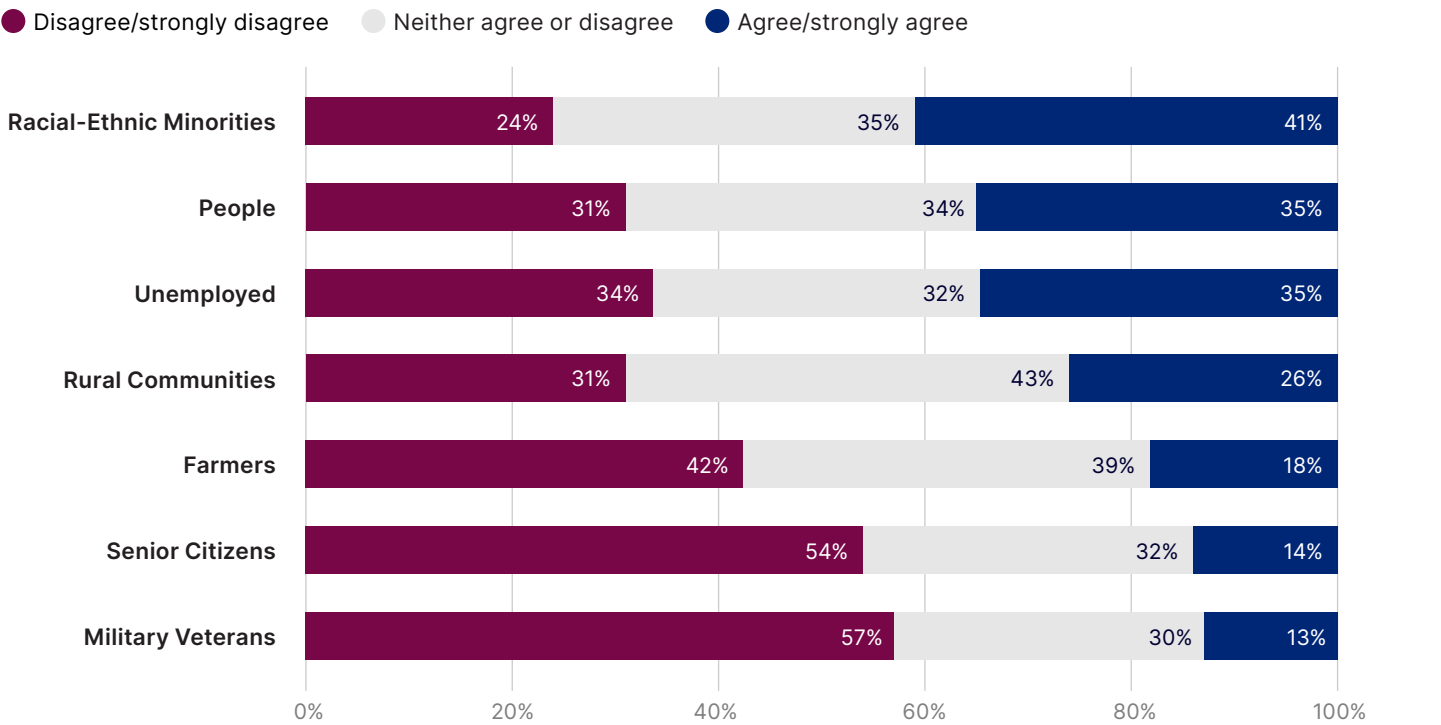
Who deserves assistance and who does not is the basic policy question underpinning whether people consider certain policies fair. Notably, Americans’ support for providing economic assistance changes based on the group that is receiving the assistance.

For example, when it comes to public policies like providing economic assistance, most in the survey sample disagree that economic assistance makes military veterans or senior citizens too dependent on public support. Many also disagree that farmers receiving economic help become too dependent on it. There is little disagreement by partisanship, race, age, or gender on these questions.

However, more Americans do believe that providing economic assistance to racial-ethnic minorities or unemployed people makes these groups too dependent on public support. Providing economic assistance to racial-ethnic minorities is more divisive with Republicans, Americans in their fifties, and white and Hispanic Americans. These groups are more likely to feel economic assistance makes racial-ethnic minorities or unemployed people too dependent on public support than Democrats, Black Americans, or Americans younger than 50 and those older than 60.

## Does Economic Assistance Help or Harm?

Public policies that provide economic assistance to [GROUP] make them too dependent on public support.



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 1; Fielded: October 23 – November 1, 2024; Randomized, Split-Sampled, N=~440 respondents  
Americans 18+ per item

Baseline: Public policies that provide economic assistance to people make them too dependent on public support.

Experiment: Public policies that provide economic assistance to [experimental language: farmers/military veterans/rural communities/people who are unemployed/senior citizens/racial-ethnic minorities] make them too dependent on public support.

# Solutions: Democracy in Action

What solutions are possible to inspire Americans to feel a sense of belonging and engage in democracy?

There are opportunities for empowering Americans with more information about their democracy, something the public wants. Americans are curious about how to strengthen democracy and want more information on this. This is particularly true at the state and local level where there are opportunities to build on Americans' trust and foster a sense of belonging.

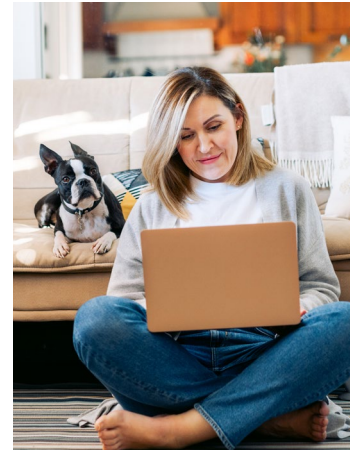
## Empowering Americans with More Information

Results show that the American public seems less interested in participating more in democracy though they are curious about learning about democracy, government, policy.

Only about one in four say they are interested in participating more in government and politics. Yet, a majority of Americans are interested in learning more about a wide range of issues, like citizenship rights and freedoms (59%), how to improve U.S. democracy (56%), economics and labor (55%), voting and elections for U.S. democracy (54%), finance and investment (54%), government and public policy (52%), U.S. democracy generally (52%), energy and climate (50%), artificial intelligence and technology (44%), and housing and real estate (44%). However, more than anything else tested, most Americans (72%) are interested in learning more about personal health and well-being, reinforcing that to engage with larger questions of democracy and governance, Americans need to secure their own basic needs first.

Interestingly, Americans who are suffering want to learn about how to improve democracy (49%) significantly more than they want to learn about energy and climate (42%), finance and investment (37%), AI and technology (34%), and housing and real estate (33%), even though these topics have a material impact on their lives.

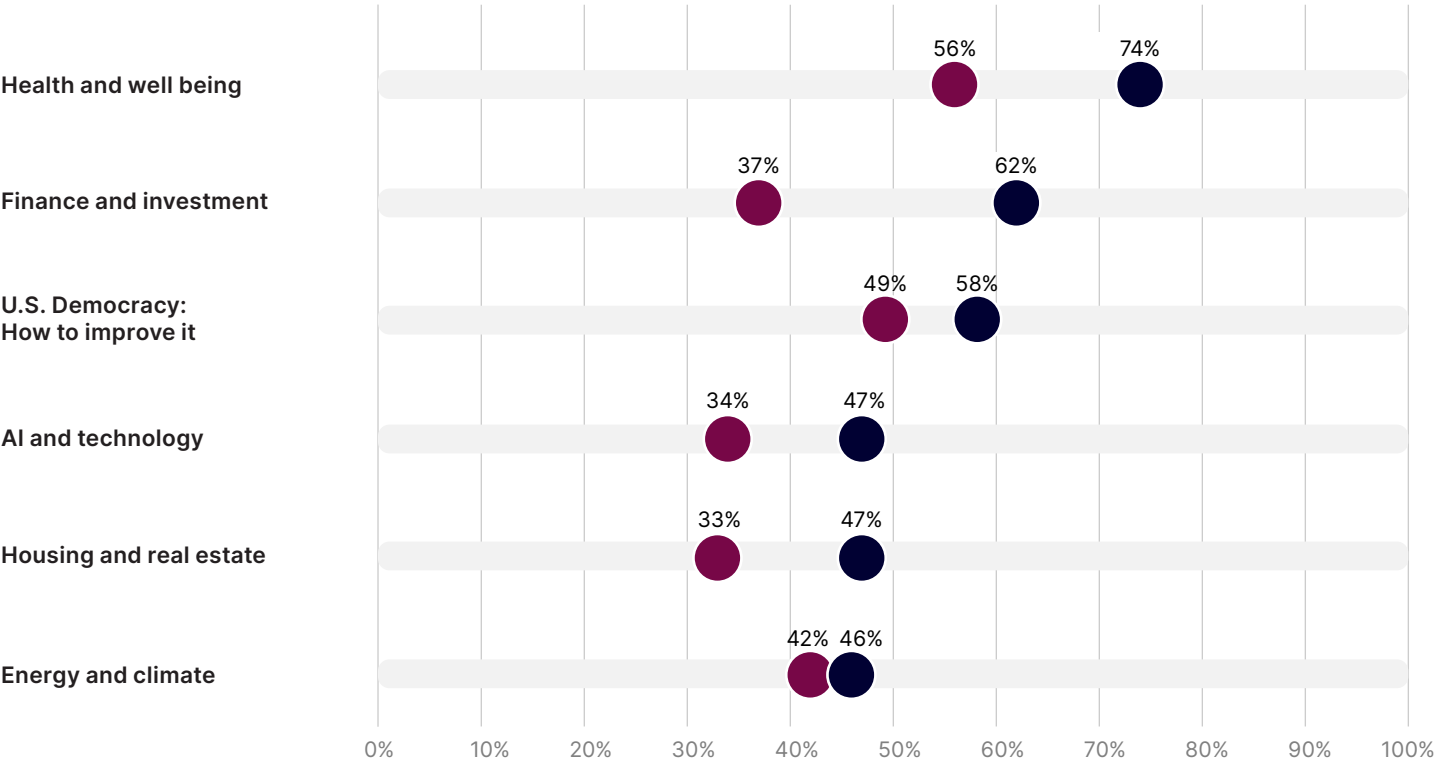
Not all Americans are equally as interested in learning more about these topics. Less than half of Americans under 40 report being interested in learning about democracy generally, voting and elections, citizenship rights and freedoms, and how to improve U.S. democracy. A bare majority of Americans under 40 are interested in learning more about personal health and well-being. Younger Americans are more likely to be in the struggling Human Flourishing group, suggesting that concerns about democracy may take a backseat to other more pressing needs, like dealing with their health and financial security.



### Interest in Democracy is Among Top Interests

There are many subjects being discussed these days, please indicate how much interest you have in gaining a deeper understanding of each of the following: (% responding a fair amount or a lot)

● Suffering    ● Flourishing



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 2; Fielded: December 4 – 16, 2024; N=3,126 Americans 18+.

## What Types of Information Would Help People Understand Political Issues?

Not all information sources appeal to the public. The majority of Americans are looking for factual information from reports and books, though social networks and community spaces are also important sources. These social spaces hold both the opportunity and risk of jeopardizing or reinforcing belonging, which is a key to engaging with democracy.

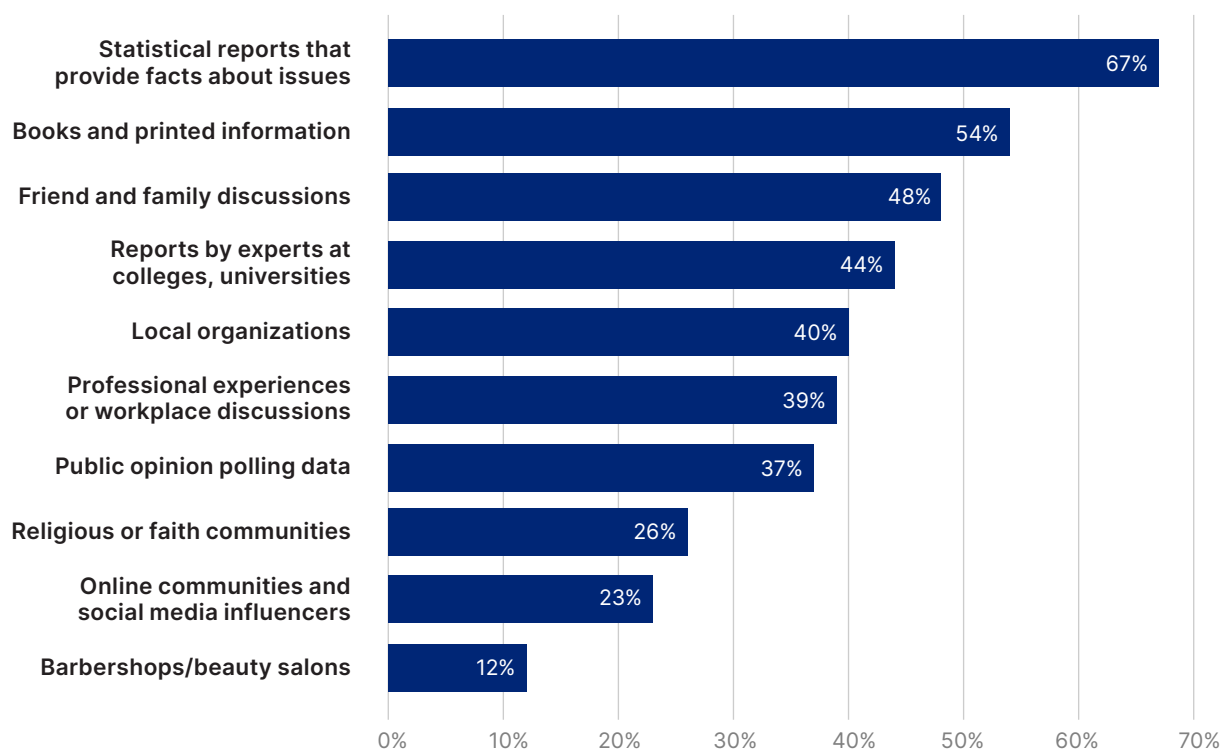
Most Americans feel that factual information, like statistical reports that provide facts about issues (67%) and books and printed information would be helpful for understanding political issues. From there, opinion becomes mixed, with Americans not coming to consensus on any other single source for political information. Many would find reports by experts at colleges and universities or information from local organizations helpful.

Belonging to a community and being able to tap into a community for political information is important but also comes with some social risk that may threaten that very sense of inclusion. Half say discussions with family and friends would be a helpful way to learn about political information. However, less than half also feel it is easy to keep friendships with people despite political disagreements. Americans would like to tap their social networks for political information, but many believe there is some risk in doing so.

Additionally, barber shops or beauty salons are important places to seek political information for some Americans. While about one in 10 Americans overall feel that beauty salons or barbershops are helpful in helping them better understand political issues, twice as many Black Americans feel the same.

## Helpful Information Sources for Politics

*In your opinion, how helpful are each of the following in helping you to better understand political issues?*



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 3; Fielded: February 6 - 19, 2025; N=2,988 Americans 18+. Half of the sample (N=1,456) saw "A" issues and half of the sample (N=1,532) saw the "B" issues.

## More Civic Education

Solutions most Americans feel would strengthen democracy correspond with the attributes people believe are most important to democracy: fairness and anti-corruption. Embedded in this is a strong sense from most Americans that being empowered with more information and engagement would strengthen democracy.

For example, most feel that schools requiring civic education about how government works (76%), local experts holding ‘office hours’ to help people understand government decisions (56%), or more policy proposals coming directly from ordinary citizens (56%) would strengthen democracy.

From there, anti-corruption and minimizing partisanship are priorities for strengthening democracy too. To that end, most feel that policies that address these two overarching themes would fortify democracy, like instituting mandatory term limits for members of Congress (72%), banning corporations from making campaign donations (61%), making a non-partisan process for drawing election district maps (56%), ensuring it is easier for third-party and independent candidates to run for office (55%), and preventing Justices on the U.S. Supreme Court from having lifetime appointments (54%).

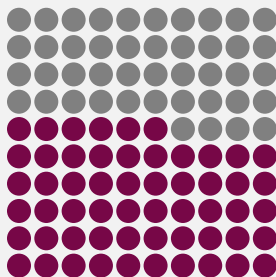
### Percent Who See Reform with Potential to Strengthen Democracy

*In your opinion, how much STRONGER or WEAKER would American democracy become if:*



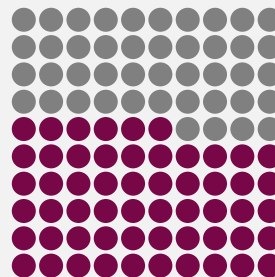
**79%**

would like to see **schools requiring civic education** about how government works



**56%**

would like to see **local experts holding ‘office hours’** to help people understand government decisions



**56%**

would like to see more **policy proposals coming directly from ordinary citizens**

Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 3; Fielded: February 6–19, 2025; N=2,988 Americans 18+.



## More Opportunities at the State and Local Level

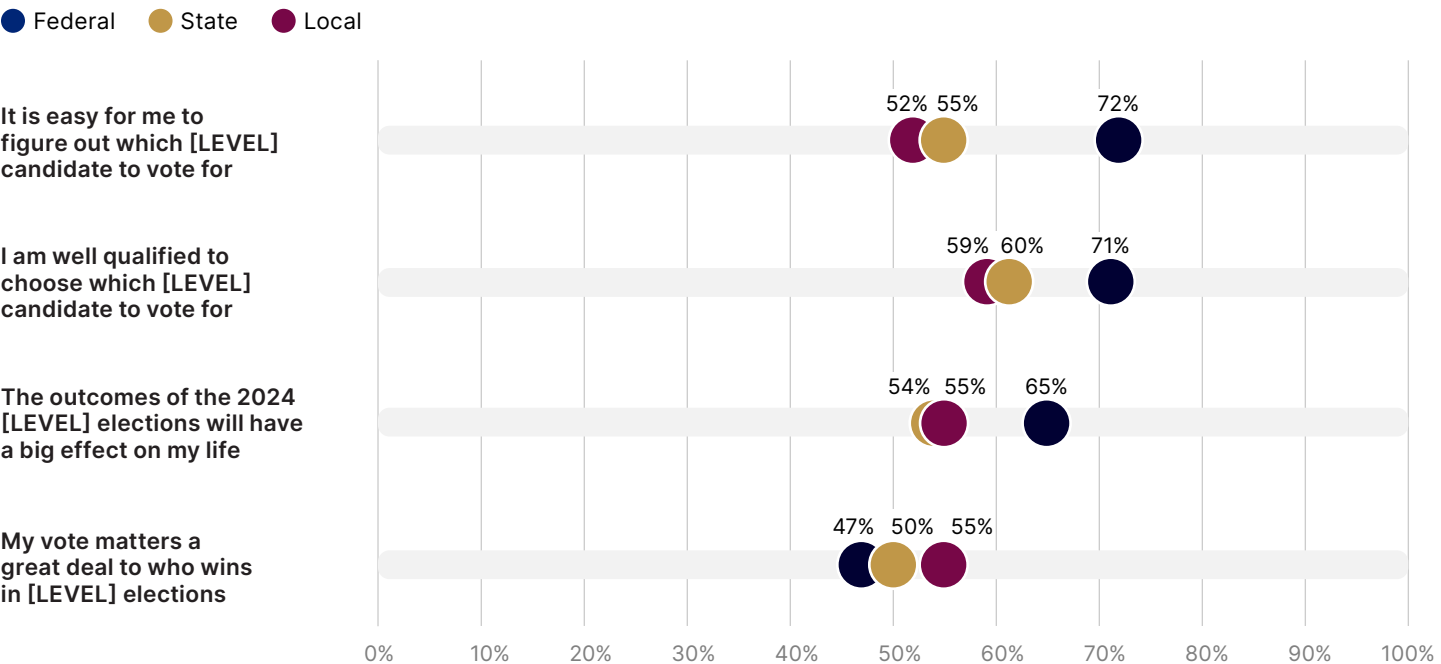
State and local governments provide an opportunity for democratic engagement and to foster a sense of belonging and participation through reform.

The public trusts state and local governments more, creating distinct built-in advantages when engaging government and policymaking at these levels. Specifically, compared to the federal government, Americans trust and respect those who serve in state and local government more. Notably, most also feel their vote matters more in local elections than federal ones.

There are opportunities to build off this trust surplus and empower people with information to participate at the state and local levels. Even as the public has more trust and feels their vote is more impactful at the state and local level than the federal one, fewer feel qualified to choose which state and local candidates to vote for or feel it is easy to figure that out.

## More Americans Feel Their Vote Matters at the Local Level, but Feel Less Qualified to Choose Candidates to Vote for at that Level

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below.



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 1; Fielded: October 23 – November 1, 2024; N=3,141 Americans 18+. Split Sampled: Federal N=1,041; State N=1,038; Local N=1,037

# Democracy Dollars: Allowing Americans to Choose

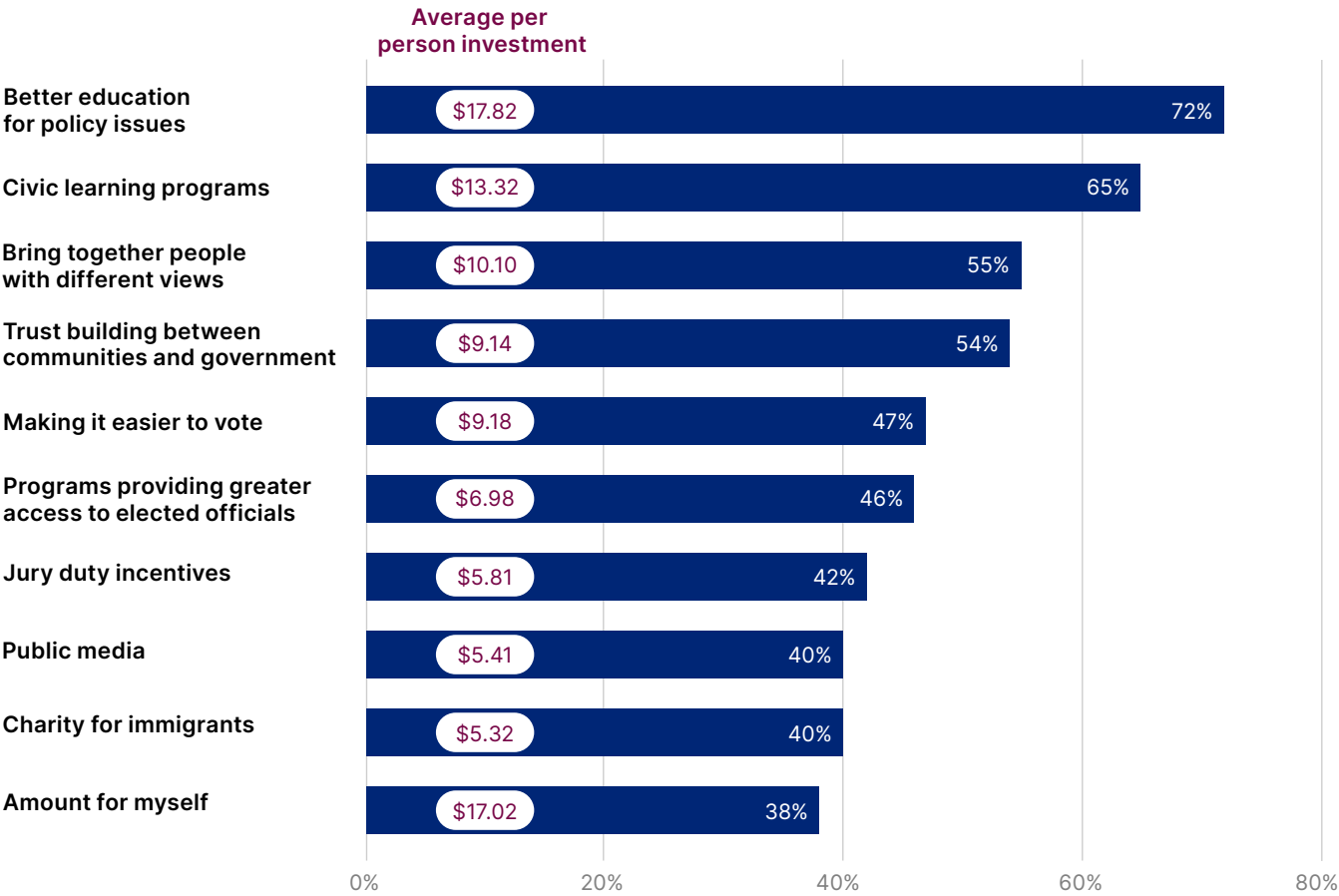
If every eligible voter in the U.S. was provided \$100 ‘democracy dollars’ to invest in policy solutions to strengthen democracy in the United States, what would they invest in?

Bolstering civic learning and education—an area most Americans want more information on—are also the programs people invest their democracy dollars in. The policy areas that win the highest investment per person and are most popular are general policy education, civic learning, trust building, and creating dialogue that bridges differences, underscoring the public’s hunger for better information about policy and civic life to dispel the confusion many feel around democracy.

Americans are also interested in investing in themselves, which wins roughly the same per person investment as educating people generally on policy, the top policy area people invest toward. Younger Americans, who are also more likely to be in the suffering or searching Human Flourishing groups, are most likely to invest in themselves, suggesting that financial security is critical to address before engaging in these broader conversations about policymaking and good governance.

## Popularity of Areas and Per Person Investments

Assume that every eligible voter in the [U.S. / your state / in your local community] was provided \$100 “democracy policy dollars” to invest in strengthening democracy by: (% respondents who invested in the category)



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Percentages and per person investment are averages from Wave 1 and Wave 2. Wave 1; Fielded: October 23 – November 1, 2024, N=3,141 Americans 18+. Wave 2; Fielded: December 4 – 16, 2024; N=3,126 Americans 18+. Randomized Split Sample: “the United States” / “the federal government” N=~1,000; “your state / your state government” N=~1,000; “your local community / your local government” N=~1,000. Assume that every eligible voter in the U.S. was provided \$100 “democracy policy dollars” to invest in strengthening democracy in [experimental language: the United States / your state / in your local community]. How would you allocate your \$100 to the different items that support democracy for [experimental language: the federal government / your state government / your local government]? (the total amount must sum to \$100)

## Citizen's Assembly: How to Encourage Participation and Engagement

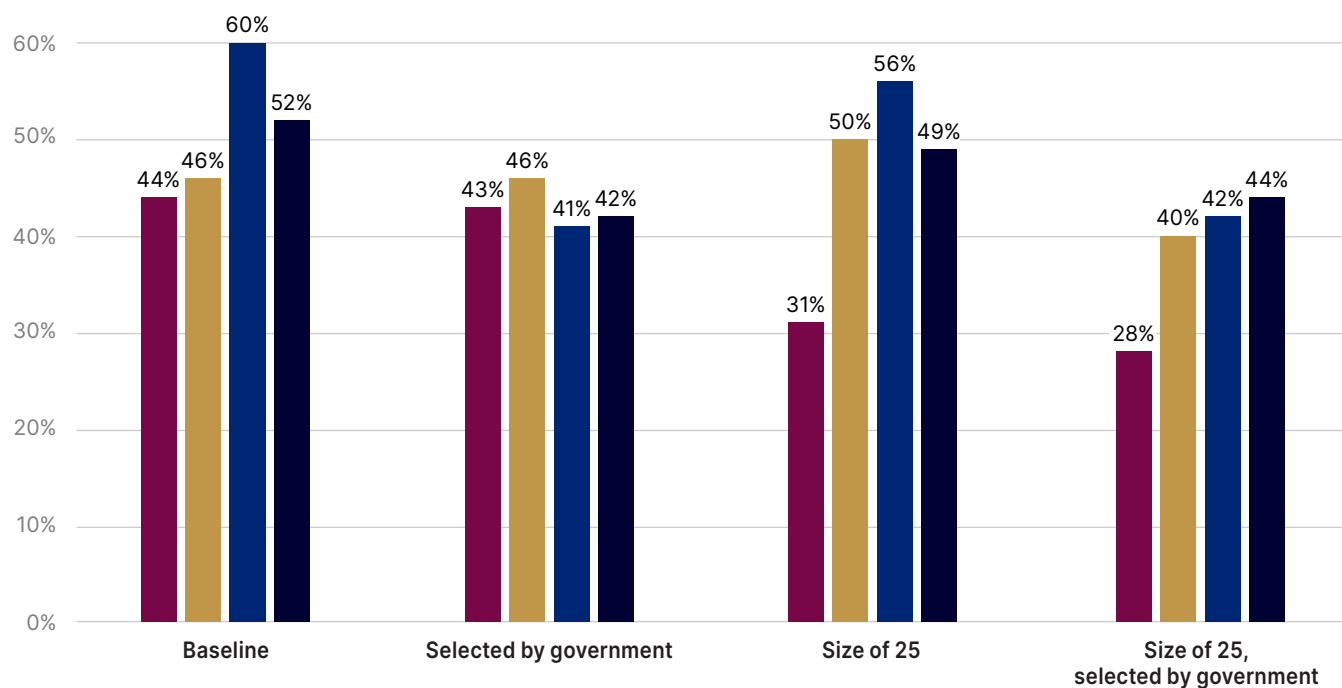
A Citizen's Assembly is another opportunity to engage the public in policymaking. Americans are mixed on whether they feel a Citizen's Assembly is a good idea, though the public is much more likely to engage with this idea if they have some financial incentive, a tax credit or some significant compensation for their time.

A Citizen's Assembly is a group of people—either randomly selected or picked by the government—who come together to participate in guided discussions and make policy recommendations on a set of topics. Overall, people are more interested in a Citizen's Assembly, but those lower on the Human Flourishing Index are less likely to believe a Citizen's Assembly group of 25 randomly selected persons is a good idea relative to not mentioning a size at all, and relative to those at the highest levels of the Human Flourishing Index. Importantly, those at the highest and lowest levels on the Human Flourishing Index agree on the value of Citizen's Assemblies as a general idea (i.e., the baseline condition) and when “government” is selecting the participants. Knowing the government is selecting participants lowers favorability for event among those who are flourishing but it does so to a level equal of those who are suffering. Interest across all groups diminishes if a Citizen's Assembly is composed of 25 people and those people are selected by the government.

### Civic Voices: Citizen's Assemblies

...Do you think this is a good idea? (% responding a good idea or very good idea)

● Suffering ● Searching ● Resilience ● Flourishing



Source: University of California Berkeley/Ipsos.

Wave 3; Fielded: February 6 - 19, 2025; N=2,988 Americans 18+. Split Sampled, N=~600 respondents Americans 18+ per item.

Baseline: A Citizens' Assembly consists of a group of randomly selected members of the public who come together to participate in guided discussions and make policy recommendations. Do you think this is...[a good idea or a bad idea]?

Size of 25: A Citizens' Assembly consists of a group of 25 randomly selected members of the public who come together to participate in guided discussions and make policy recommendations. Do you think this is...[a good idea or a bad idea]?

Selected by the Government: A Citizens' Assembly consists of a group of randomly selected members of the public – selected by the government – who come together to participate in guided discussions and make policy recommendations. Do you think this is...[a good idea or a bad idea]?

Size of 25, Selected by Government: A Citizens' Assembly consists of a group of 25 randomly selected members of the public – selected by the government – who come together to participate in guided discussions and make policy recommendations. Do you think this is...[a good idea or a bad idea]?

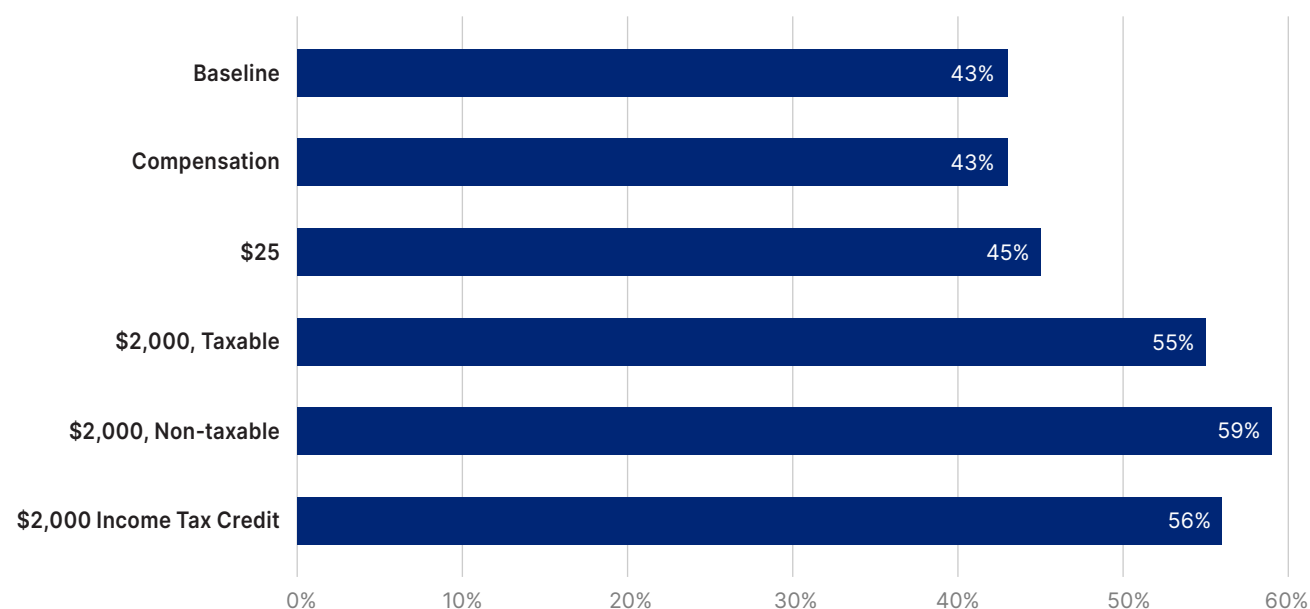
## Citizen's Assembly: How to Encourage Participation and Engagement (continued)

Americans are more likely to be interested in participating in a Citizen's Assembly if there is significant compensation. With no information about receiving an incentive for participating, a plurality of Americans say they would likely participate in the process. Generally being informed that they would be compensated or learning that they would be provided \$25 in cash does not move respondents significantly.

However, a majority of Americans say they are willing to participate in a Citizen's Assembly when respondents are informed that they would be provided with \$2,000 cash or an income tax credit of the same amount, suggesting that significant compensation for people's time is critical for enticing Americans to participate in these programs.

### Higher Incentives, Higher Reported Participation

*If you were asked to take part in [a citizen's] assembly, how likely it is that you would participate? (% likely or extremely likely)*



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos.

Wave 3; Fielded: February 6 - 19, 2025; N=2,988 Americans 18+. Split Sampled, N=~500 respondents Americans 18+ per item.

Respondents were randomly assigned to see either the baseline or one of the experimental language inserts.

Baseline: Again, a Citizens' Assembly is made up of randomly selected people who discuss a particular topic of relevance to society and politics. If you were asked to take part in such an assembly, how likely is it that you would participate?

Experiment: Again, a Citizens' Assembly is made up of randomly selected people who discuss a particular topic of relevance to society and politics.

Participants are provided with [experimental language: compensation / \$25 / \$2,000 taxable / \$2,000 non-taxable / \$2,000 income tax credit] for their time and expenses. If you were asked to take part in such an assembly, how likely is it that you would participate?

## Citizen's Assembly: How to Encourage Participation and Engagement (continued)

Whether someone is flourishing impacts their willingness to participate in a Citizen's Assembly and influences what incentives move them, suggesting that an openness to engage is rooted in whether someone has the capacity to. Interestingly, the \$2,000 non-taxable incentive is the only incentive where most respondents across all clusters—suffering, searching, resilient, and flourishing—report being likely to participate in a Citizen's Assembly.

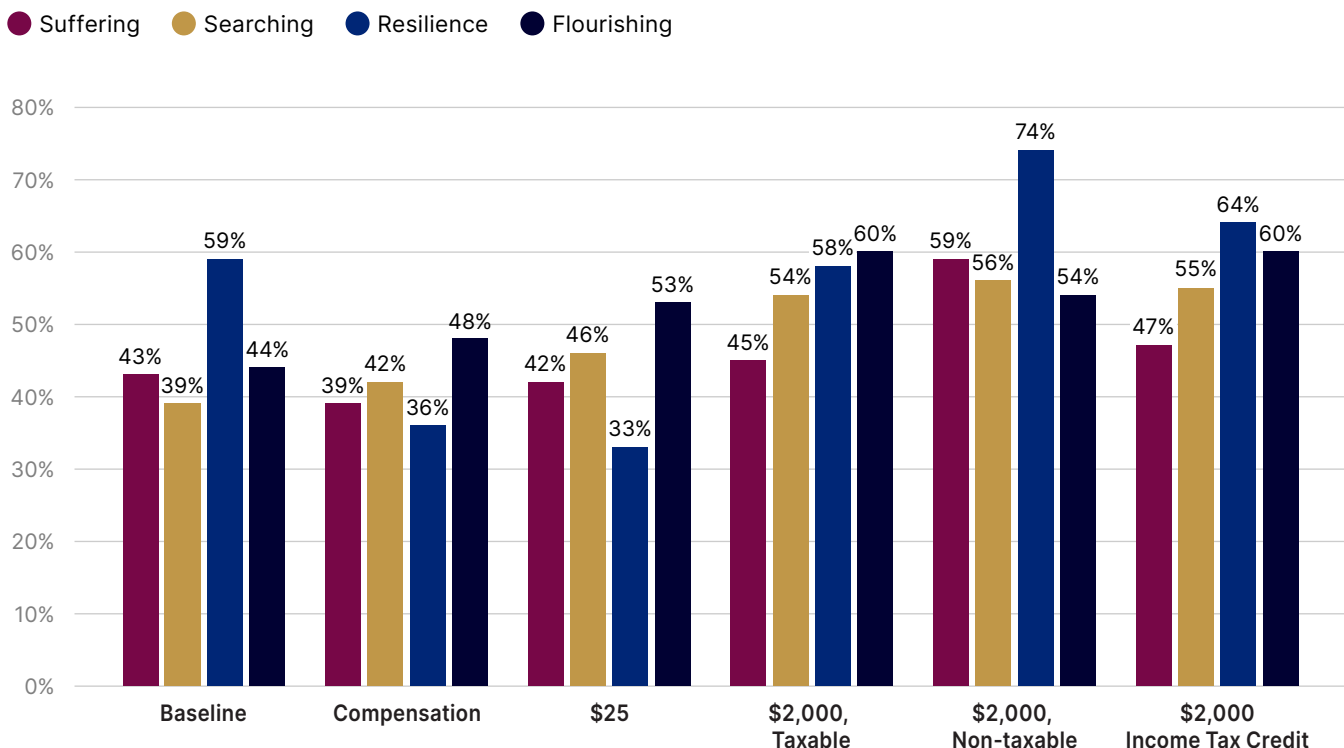
Though, other clusters respond to each incentive differently. The \$2,000 incentives—taxed, non-taxable, and the income tax credit—are popular with most respondents who fit into the searching category, that is they are financially secure but not happy.

Resilient and flourishing Americans seem more open to participating in a Citizen's Assembly generally. A majority of resilient Americans, those who are happy and fulfilled but not financially secure, would participate in a Citizen's Assembly for any incentive structure, outside of being told that they would be “compensated” or receive \$25.

Likewise, for flourishing adults, a majority would be willing to participate in a Citizen's Assembly for at least \$25, though the \$2,000 taxable or \$2,000 income tax credit win the most support with this group. Not receiving an incentive or just being told they would be “compensated” are the only two items where less than half of flourishing adults report being likely to participate in a Citizen's Assembly.

### Civic Voices: Citizen's Assemblies

...Do you think this is a good idea? (% responding a good idea or very good idea)



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos.

Wave 3; Fielded: February 6 - 19, 2025; N=2,988 Americans 18+. Split Sampled, N=500 respondents Americans 18+ per item.

Respondents were randomly assigned to see either the baseline or one of the experimental language inserts.

Baseline: Again, a Citizens' Assembly is made up of randomly selected people who discuss a particular topic of relevance to society and politics. If you were asked to take part in such an assembly, how likely is it that you would participate?

Experiment: Again, a Citizens' Assembly is made up of randomly selected people who discuss a particular topic of relevance to society and politics.

Participants are provided with [experimental language: compensation / \$25 / \$2,000 taxable / \$2,000 non-taxable / \$2,000 income tax credit] for their time and expenses. If you were asked to take part in such an assembly, how likely is it that you would participate?



## Topics to Deliberate

Most Americans, whether they would like to participate in a Citizen's Assembly or not, believe that keeping people and communities safe, making sure elections are fair and transparent, educating children and young adults, economics and labor, government and public policy, and American democracy and civic engagement are all high priority or essential topics to cover in a Citizen's Assembly.

In open-ended responses, Americans reported that discussing government, education, corruption, and rights would be priority topics for a Citizen's Assembly, all areas that align with what Americans feel are most important in a democracy and where they would like to be empowered with more information.

### Are There Any Other Topics You Think a Citizen's Assembly Should Prioritize?



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Pooled responses with 2+ mentions across all 3 waves. See methodology for sample size and field dates per wave.

## Divided on Expertise

Outside of the randomly selected people, most feel that local and state business owners, community leaders, judges, and legal experts would be helpful to have in attendance at a Citizen's Assembly. Americans are split on whether academic experts from colleges and universities and local and state elected officials would be helpful additions to a discussion at this type of meeting.

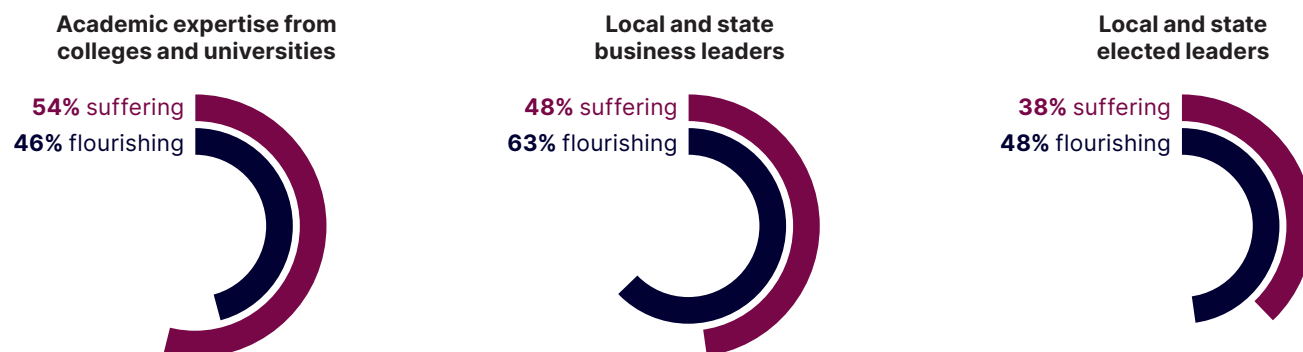
For many of these figures, like local and state business owners or judges and legal experts, older rather than younger people feel that these experts would be helpful to have at a Citizen's Assembly.

However, there are significant differences between those who are suffering and flourishing regarding which additional voices may make a Citizen's Assembly better. Those who are suffering are much more likely to feel that academic experts from colleges and universities would help a Citizen's Assembly meeting, while those who are flourishing are more likely to believe that local and state business owners are more likely to help the conversation.

To structure a Citizen's Assembly and encourage the most participation, it is important to consider who might be left out of the process and what will be maximally impactful. Examining how the public feels about the setup, incentives to participate, discussion topics, and additional experts to include are all important angles to examine the implementation of this policy solution.

### Those Who are Suffering More Likely to Feel that Academic Expertise from Colleges and Universities Would Help Citizen's Assembly

*% of those who are suffering or flourishing who feel that the following make a Citizen's Assembly meeting better:*



Source: Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab/Ipsos. Wave 3; Fielded: February 6 - 19, 2025; N=2,988 Americans 18+.

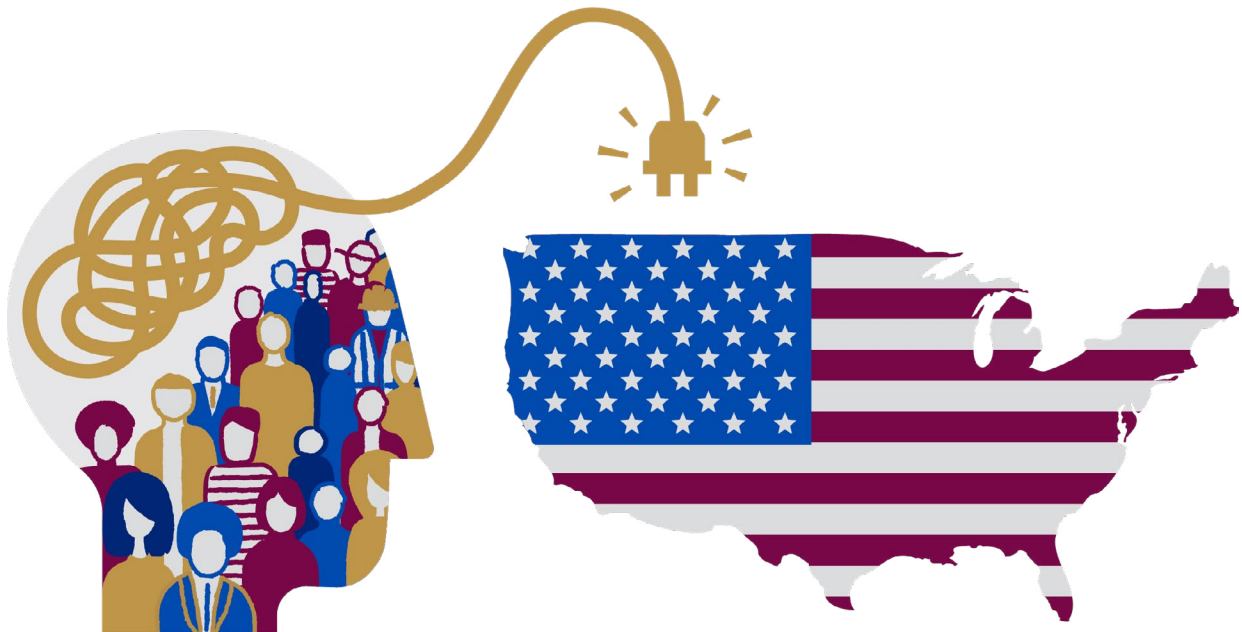
In addition to randomly selected participants, how much better or worse would the Citizens' Assembly meeting become if it included... local and state elected officials, local and state business owners, academic experts from colleges and universities.

## Conclusion

**It is well known that there are deep divisions in the United States. This research project highlights the complexity of democracy's meaning—which can change over time for people—and also highlights the psychological challenges and potential solutions for stronger connections to democracy among those who are suffering as well as those who are flourishing.**

To build a stronger sustainable democracy, addressing holistic well-being and fostering flourishing is essential. Starting with the question of belonging—the “We” in “We the People”—and taking that sense of connection seriously could produce more trust, respect, and confidence in government. Focusing on local and state democracy and the trust surplus the public has with this level of government can also give people an entry point for learning and engaging in democracy in a meaningful way.

To that end, developing democracy policy that can empower people with information, engage with state and local democratic reforms, and cultivate a sense of belonging with each intervention can give Americans the tools to build a sense of belonging and identity with democracy.



# Methodology

**Ipsos conducted the Political Psychology of American Democracy study on behalf the Berkeley Democracy Policy Lab.** All three survey waves of the study were conducted online in English and Spanish using KnowledgePanel®, the largest online panel in the United States that relies on probability-based sampling methods for recruitment to provide a representative sampling frame for adults in the U.S. The target population was comprised of non-institutionalized adults (age 18 and older) residing in the United States.

The data were weighted to adjust for gender by age, race and ethnicity, census region, metropolitan status, education, household income, and political party identification. Political party identification benchmarks are from the 2024 NPORS annual survey. The demographic benchmarks came from the 2024 March supplement of the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS).

## Berkeley Public Policy DEMOCRACY POLICY LAB

### About the Researcher

The Democracy Policy Lab (DPL) at the Goldman School of Public Policy seeks to understand the intersections of politics, policy, and democracy. DPL's work uncovers the influence of campaign finance, election administration, civil rights, labor policies on state-level democratic performance, and the political psychology of democracy.

### Additional Information

More information about **DPL** and **other research DPL has conducted** are available here:

<https://democracypolicylab.berkeley.edu/>

The **full questionnaire text** for the "Delivering on the Promises of "We the People:" Political Psychology Foundations for American Democracy Policy" report are located here:

<https://democracypolicylab.berkeley.edu/research/political-psychology-of-american-democracy>