

# [***Americans are united in their negative perception of national politics, new Pew report finds***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:696P-5GV1-DY7V-G03S-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Americans' outlook on national ***politics*** is best summarized as "dismal," according to a wide-ranging [*new Pew Research Center report*](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-dismal-views-of-the-nations-politics/) released Tuesday.

"Americans have long been critical of politicians and skeptical of the federal government," the report's authors write. "But today, Americans' views of ***politics*** and elected officials are unrelentingly negative, with little hope of improvement on the horizon. Majorities say the political process is dominated by special interests, flooded with campaign cash and mired in partisan warfare."

Just 14% of US adults, the survey finds, believe that most elected officials care about the thoughts of people like them. Only 15% believe all or most currently serving elected officials ran for office even in part out of a desire to serve the public, while a majority say they think most were motivated by the desire to "make a lot of money." And just 26% see the quality of candidates for political office over the past several years as good, down 21 points from just five years ago.

Just 27% of Americans describe the country's political system as working even somewhat well today, with only 37% expressing even some confidence in this system's future. An open-ended question asking Americans to describe ***politics*** these days in one word or phrase yielded overwhelmingly negative responses, ranging from "divisive" and "corrupt" to the kind of invective rarely found in analysis written by think tanks. Asked to describe a strong point of the American political system, more than half of respondents either denied that the system had any or skipped the question altogether.

Americans' low regard for political institution persists across a somewhat dizzying range of findings. Among them: Just 26% rate Congress favorably, and fewer than half (44%) say that voting in elections is a highly effective way to change the country for the better. On a personal level, 65% of Americans say they frequently feel exhausted when thinking about ***politics*** and 55% that they feel angry, with a tenth or fewer feeling hopeful about or excited by the topic.

As the Pew report highlights, this disaffection is particularly notable in that it "comes at a time of historically high levels of voter turnout in national elections." It also comes even as Americans continue to draw increasingly sharp distinctions between the parties: 54% say they see a great deal of difference between the Democratic and Republican parties, a number that's considerably higher than it was several decades ago.

How new is the political malaise?

There's [*more than six decades of data*](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022/) from various pollsters to suggest that one measure - public trust in the federal government - is at one of its lowest ebbs since pollsters began asking the question in the late 1950s, with only 16% of Americans now saying they trust the government in Washington to do the right thing just about always or most of the time.

In 1958, when the National Election Study first began polling the topic, roughly three-quarters of Americans said they trusted the federal government to do the right thing almost always or at least most of that time. That widespread trust gradually eroded over the course of the next few decades, dropping to just about 27% in the Carter era, before segueing into a pattern of smaller declines and upswings. The last time a majority of the public expressed confidence in the government was just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001; since 2007, the share saying they can usually trust the government has remained lower than 30%.

Public opinion of the legislative branch has followed a similar trajectory. From the mid-1980s through the early 2000s, the Pew report notes, views of Congress were largely positive. But opinions of Congress have now remained underwater for more than a decade, with unfavorable ratings of the institution reaching a near-record high in the latest round of polling.

What role does partisanship play?

Increasingly, pollsters have found Americans' views divided along partisan lines, [*even on seemingly apolitical topics*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/25/politics/partisanship-polls-americans-economy/index.html) like ratings of the economy. According to the Pew Research report, Republican-aligned adults are 40 percentage points likelier than their Democratic-aligned counterparts to say that the federal government - currently headed by a Democratic president - is doing too much on issues best left to the states, and 26 points likelier to express anger toward the federal government.

But in many cases, public unhappiness with the political system spans both parties, suggesting something deeper at play than a statement of discontent with the current crop of incumbents. Nearly identical majorities of Democratic- and Republican-aligned adults, 85% and 87% respectively, consider it a good description of the US political system to say that "Republicans and Democrats are more focused on fighting each other than on solving problems," and both sides give identically poor favorability ratings to the currently divided Congress.

At the same time, Americans are also weary of conversations focused on partisanship: 57%, including similar majorities in both parties, say there's too much attention paid to disagreements between Republicans and Democrats these days.

Do people think a third political party would fix things?

While most Americans still hold a positive view of at least one of the two parties, an increasing share of the public dislikes both political parties. A record-high 28% of Americans view both Republicans and Democrats unfavorably, little changed from a year ago, but up from just 6% when Pew first asked the question in 1994. This disaffection is particularly widespread among adults younger than 50, with 35% of them saying they dislike both parties.

A substantial minority of all adults, 37%, say they're sympathetic to the wish that there were more political parties to choose from. But the latest poll also finds "considerable skepticism that having more parties would make it easier for the country to solve its problems." Only 26% of US adults think that new parties would make problem-solving easier, with similar shares saying either that it would make things harder (24%) or have little impact (25%). And only one-third think it's even somewhat likely that an independent candidate will win the White House any time in the next 25 years.

Are there any limits to Americans' negativity?

As broad as Americans' discontent with government is, it does have some limits. More than half of Americans say their local elected officials (56%) and their state's governor (51%) are doing good jobs, for instance. A 56% majority say they usually feel that there's at least one candidate for political office who shares most of their views, and 57% believe that voting by people like them has at least some effect on the country's future direction.

Other Pew studies have found that most Americans continue to [*count the US as among the world's greatest countries*](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/29/majority-of-americans-say-us-is-one-of-the-greatest-countries-in-the-world/) and to [*express broad satisfaction*](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/americans-views-of-government-decades-of-distrust-enduring-support-for-its-role/pp_2022-06-06_views-of-government_7-02/) with the state of their own community. Other polling has found that Americans [*remaining largely satisfied*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/470888/americans-largely-satisfied-personal-life.aspx) with most aspects of their own day-to-day-existence.

There are also limits on the extent to which most Americans perceive ***politics*** as impinging on their lives. Per Pew's classification, only 35% of Americans are highly engaged with ***politics*** - meaning that they frequently follow news about government and current affairs, express high level of interest in ***politics*** and frequently talk about ***politics*** with others. This group experiences political life in a way that's notably different from other Americans. Those who are highly politically engaged, for instance, are 20 points likelier than those with low engagement to say there are clear solutions to most big issues facing the country today, and 25 points likelier to see a great deal of difference between the two main political parties.

Among all US adults, while about two-thirds say that who is president makes a big difference to the nation's standing in the world (67%) and to the mood of the country (65%), only about half (52%) see the presidency as similarly central to the health of the economy - and just 24% say that it makes a big difference to their own personal life.

The Pew Research Center report is based primarily on a July 10-16 survey among 8,480 adults, with a margin of sampling error of +/- 1.5 percentage points. The survey was conducted online, using the nationally representative American Trends Panel.

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