



GREATER VOICE, GREATER IMPACT:

Americans' Views on Making Democracy Work for Everyone

THE 2020
YANKOLOVICH DEMOCRACY
MONITOR REPORT





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Americans' Views on Making Democracy Work for Everyone

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FOREWORD

BY WILL FRIEDMAN

We release our second Yankelovich Democracy Monitor report amid profound challenges to America's democratic experiment. Some of these challenges, such as plummeting trust in our governing institutions and mounting polarization in our national politics, have been building for years. And now, despite such depleted reserves of democratic capital, we must overcome a devastating public health emergency, attempt to resolve deep and historical racial wounds, and salvage a cratered economy, all while pulling off a legitimate national election this coming fall.

It's a dire picture, but "Greater Voice, Greater Impact: Americans' Views on Making Democracy Work for Everyone" offers reason to hope that we can meet these challenges. The research shows an American public ready for change and willing to play its part in the democratic renewal so sorely needed today. Across partisan lines, for example, most believe that voting is not enough to turn things around; rather, people need to take responsibility and play an active role in making the country a better place and making our democracy work as it should.

Moreover, the study shows that a substantial share of Americans are ready for serious change, not just nibbling around the edges. Only half of Americans think the current design and structure of our government work well, while 40 percent believe that no matter who is in office, significant changes are needed. And this survey was fielded before the coronavirus pandemic and the renewed attention being paid to racial equity, which is likely intensifying these sentiments.

What kind of change to our democratic institutions and process are people looking for? The research makes clear that people want to have a greater voice in the decisions that affect their lives and are enthusiastic about democratic innovations that promise it, such as participatory budgeting and citizen juries.

While the research offers rays of hope for democracy, it provides no guarantees. Much will depend on the kind of leadership that emerges at all levels of society in the coming months and years and whether the public's values and sentiments detected here evolve into a powerful shared vision of a more just and effective democracy, along with the engaged citizenship that can help bring that vision to life. It is our hope that this research helps illuminate some of the contours of that vision and the kinds of steps the American public is ready and willing to take to accomplish it.

INTRODUCTION



From impeachment and divisive rhetoric to an aging infrastructure and runaway health care costs, Americans have long faced evidence that neither our politics nor our government function as they should. The 2020 coronavirus pandemic has made those challenges more stark while the growing Black Lives Matter movement is highlighting the consequences of racial inequality.

What do Americans think should be done to strengthen our democracy, and what roles do they want to play in civic and political life? This report explores those and other questions based on data from the second Yankelovich Democracy Monitor survey. This survey was fielded before the 2020 novel coronavirus outbreak began and before nationwide protests over the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minnesota. Subsequent surveys will track how Americans' attitudes on these questions evolve as the nation recovers from the pandemic.

The Democracy Monitor is a multiyear study designed to track Americans' views on democracy and how to strengthen it, conducted in partnership with the Kettering Foundation. The study is named for and informed by the insights of Daniel Yankelovich (1924–2017), a co-founder of Public Agenda and master public opinion researcher.

The Democracy Monitor aims to make several contributions to understanding the public's views and values regarding democratic renewal:

- The Democracy Monitor is oriented toward solutions and what should be done to make progress, rather than on who is to blame for our problems.
- This research emphasizes the roles that ordinary people and communities play in democratic problem solving, rather than focusing solely on institutions and elections.
- The Democracy Monitor is designed to track the evolution over time of public opinion on the problems facing our democracy.

METHODOLOGY IN BRIEF

The second annual Yankelovich Democracy Monitor, a nationally representative survey of 1,000 American adults 18 and older, was fielded from November 6 to December 28, 2019, by telephone, including cell phones, and online. A total of 750 interviews were conducted by phone and 250 were completed online. Respondents completed the survey in English. This report also includes data from the first Yankelovich Democracy Monitor survey fielded in 2018.¹

The final data were weighted to balance the sample to known national population parameters based on U.S. Census Bureau data for each of the four census regions and to correct for systematic under- or overrepresentation of key demographics. The maximum standard error range (margin of error) for the total weighted sample is +/- 3.1 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level. It is higher for questions that were not asked of all respondents and for subgroup results.

Before developing the survey, Public Agenda conducted three demographically diverse focus groups with adults 18 and older in June and July 2019 in New Rochelle, New York; Jackson, Mississippi; and Cincinnati, Ohio.

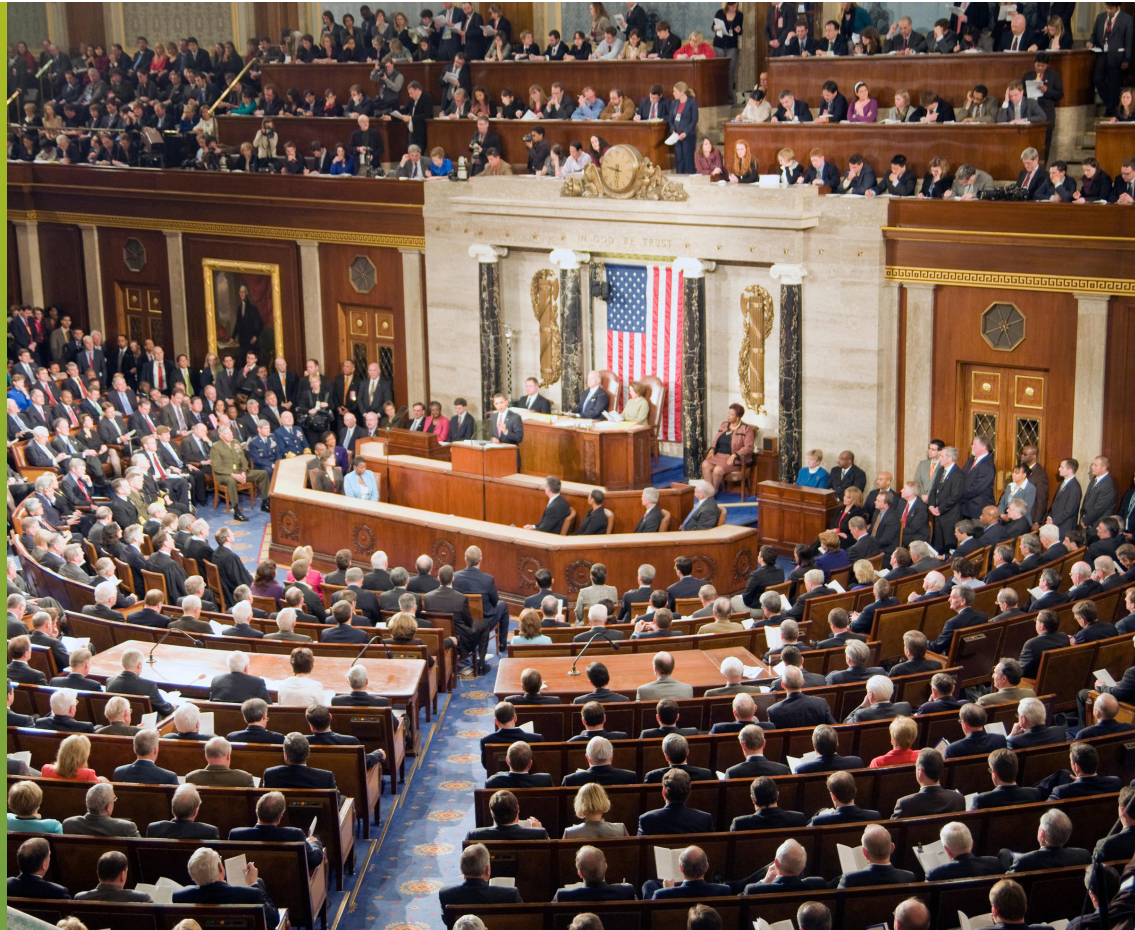
The Kettering Foundation served as a collaborator in this research. The survey was fielded by Wiese Research Group. Public Agenda designed the survey instrument and analyzed the data.

For a more detailed methodology, including sample characteristics and the survey's topline with full question wording, please go to <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/greater-voice-greater-impact/> or email research@publicagenda.org.

¹ David Schleifer and Antonio Diep, "Strengthening Democracy: What Do Americans Think?," Public Agenda, 2019. <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/strengthening-democracy-what-do-americans-think/>.

FINDING

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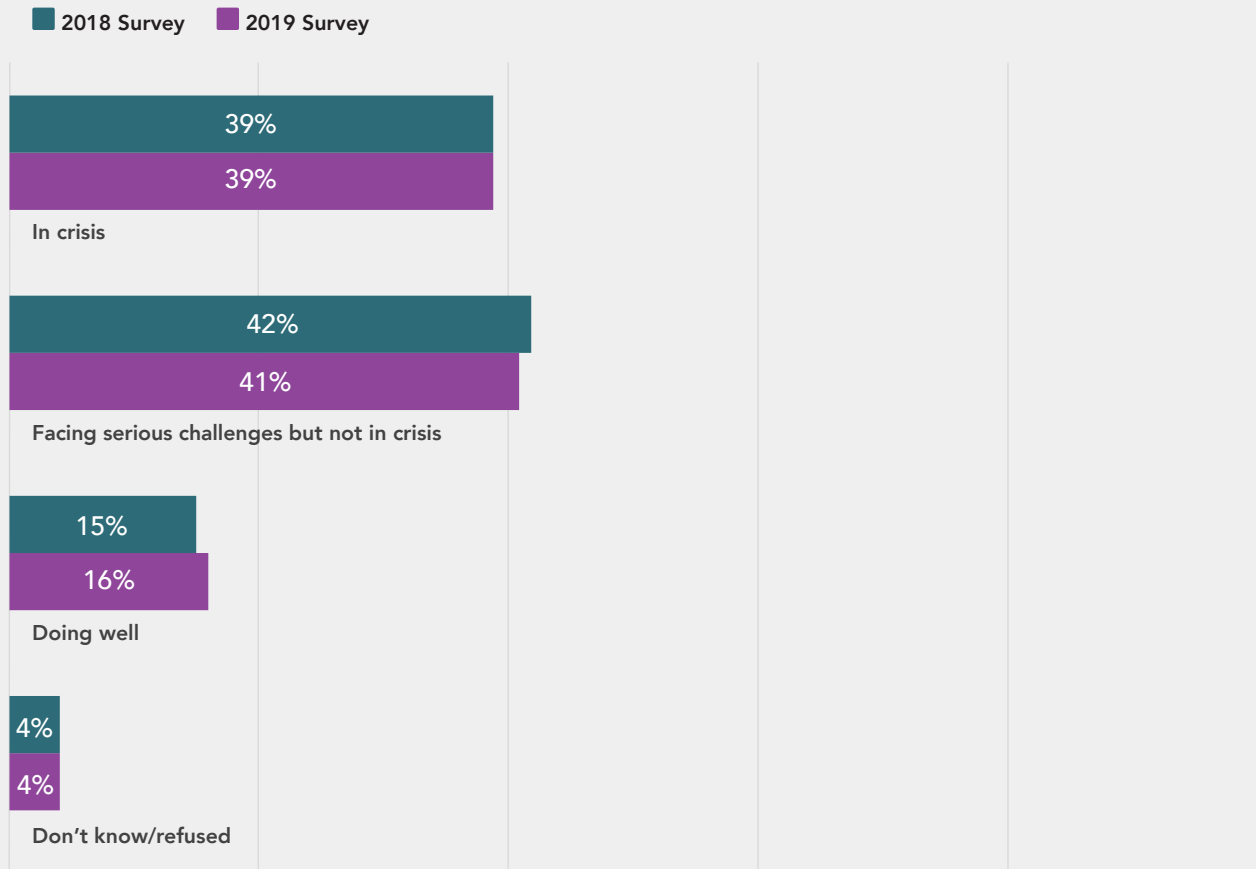
Few Americans think our democracy is functioning well, and Independents are particularly pessimistic about whether it will improve. Half of Americans acknowledge that racism can make civic participation difficult.

Both the first and second annual Democracy Monitor surveys began by proposing to respondents that “the United States is meant to be a democracy, where citizens have a voice, rights are protected, and laws are fairly enforced” and asking them whether they think our country’s democracy is in crisis, facing serious challenges but not in crisis, or doing well.

Only 16 percent of Americans say that our country’s democracy is doing well. The rest believe it is either facing serious challenges or in crisis. These responses are nearly identical to findings from the 2018 Democracy Monitor survey; see figure 1.

Few Americans think our democracy is functioning well.

Figure 1. When told that the United States is meant to be a democracy, where citizens have a voice, rights are protected, and laws are fairly enforced, percent who say they think our country’s democracy is each of the following, 2018 and 2019 surveys:

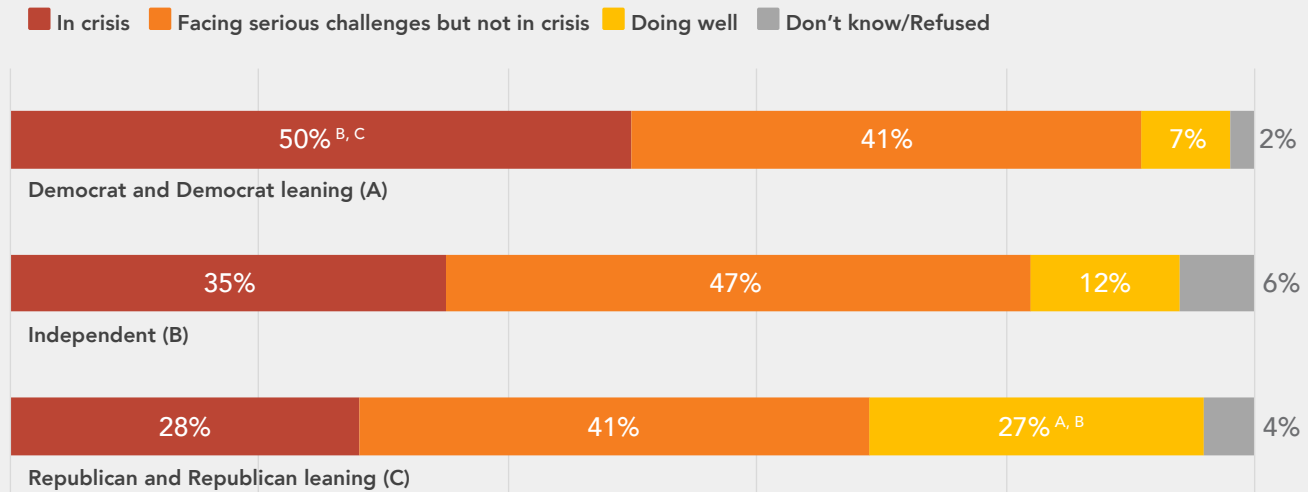


Base: All respondents 2018 survey, N=1,000. All respondents 2019 survey, N=1,000.

As in the previous Democracy Monitor survey, this research found that concern about the state of our democracy is shared across partisan affiliations. However, almost twice as many Democrats and those who lean Democratic say our democracy is in crisis compared with Republicans and Republican leaners. Similar proportions of people across all partisan affiliations say our democracy is facing serious challenges but not in crisis; see **figure 2**.

Across political affiliations, few Americans think our democracy is doing well.

Figure 2. When told that the United States is meant to be a democracy, where citizens have a voice, rights are protected, and laws are fairly enforced, percent who say they think our country’s democracy is each of the following, 2019 survey, by political affiliation:



Base: Democrat and Democrat leaning, n=424; Independent, n=136; Republican and Republican leaning, n=372. Letters next to percentages denote statistically significant difference at the p<.05 level.

While this research finds pervasive dismay about the state of our democracy, some Americans clearly have an appetite for new forms of democratic decision-making. As Finding 2 of this report explains, four in ten Americans think significant changes are needed to the design and structure of our government—largely so that ordinary people have more of a voice and so government can solve problems more effectively. Meanwhile, as explained in Finding 4, about half of Americans want their local government to give people more direct power through systems such as participatory budgeting, citizen juries and ballot initiatives.

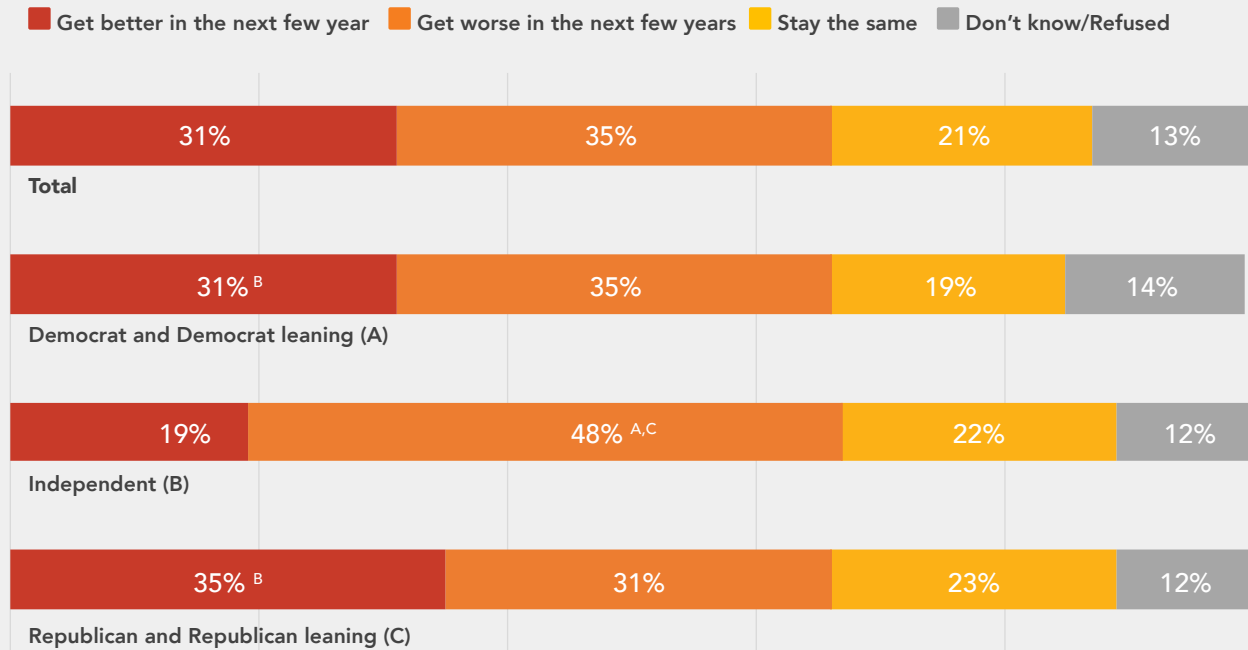
Independents are particularly pessimistic about whether our democracy will improve.

While few people think our country’s democracy is doing well, Americans are split on its prospects for the future. About one-third say our country’s democracy will get better and about one-third think it will get worse, with the remainder saying it will either stay the same or that they do not know. Americans who identify with or lean toward one of the two major political parties are more optimistic about the future of our democracy than Independents, nearly half of whom say our country’s democracy will get worse; see figure 3. It is possible that Independents’ decisions not to affiliate with either party as well as their pessimism about the future of our democracy both indicate a lack of faith in politics as usual.

These findings are largely consistent with findings from the 2018 Democracy Monitor survey. But this 2019 survey was fielded before the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. Americans’ opinions about the state of our democracy may shift by the time Public Agenda conducts this survey again in 2020.

Independents are particularly pessimistic about whether our democracy will improve.

Figure 3. Percent who say our country's democracy is likely to do each of the following, 2019 survey:



Base: Those who say our country's democracy is doing well, facing serious challenges but not in crisis or in crisis, n=952; Democrat and Democrat leaning, n=415; Independent, n=129; Republican and Republican leaning, n=355.

Letters next to percentages denote statistically significant difference at the p<.05 level.

Numbers do not add up to 100 percent owing to the 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

Half of Americans acknowledge that racism can make civic participation difficult.

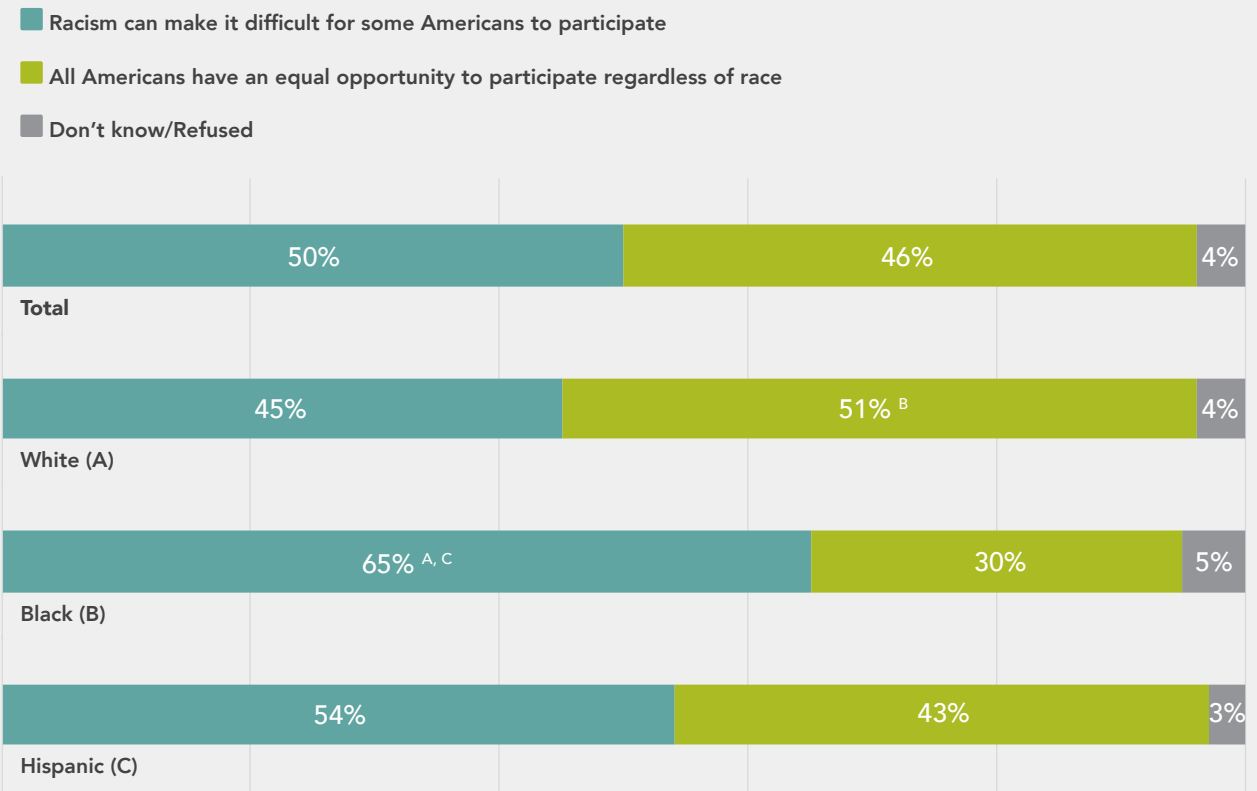
Civic participation is a bedrock of American democracy. But racism has also been a consistent feature of our democracy. People of color have been systematically denied rights to vote, assemble, speak and otherwise participate. How widely do Americans recognize that racism today creates systemic challenges to participation in civic and political life?

The Democracy Monitor survey, fielded before nationwide protests over the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minnesota, found that Americans are nearly evenly split, with about half recognizing that racism can make it difficult for some Americans to participate in civic and political life and about half believing that all Americans have an equal opportunity to participate regardless of race; see figure 4.

Not surprisingly, more Black than white Americans say racism can make it difficult for some people to participate. However, the proportion of Hispanic-Americans who say racism can make it difficult for some people to participate is statistically identical to the percentage of whites who say so. In other words, Hispanic people are no more likely than whites to believe that racism can make participation difficult for some Americans; see figure 4.

Half of Americans acknowledge that racism can make civic participation difficult.

Figure 4. Percent of Americans who say each of the following statements comes closer to their view about civic and political life in the United States today, 2019 survey by race:



Base: Total, N=1,000; white, n=612; Black, n=173; Hispanic, n=146.
 Letters next to percentages denote statistically significant difference at the p<.05 level.

Since party affiliation also varies by race and Republicans are predominantly white, it follows that more Democrats and those who lean Democratic (71 percent) than Republicans and those who lean Republican (25 percent) say racism can make it difficult for some people to participate, with Independents falling in the middle.

However, it is noteworthy that the differences by race on the question of whether racism can make civic participation difficult are considerably less stark than the differences by partisan affiliation. The difference between Democrats and Republicans on this question is a yawning 46 percentage points. But the difference between Black and white Americans on this question is a narrower 20 points, with Hispanic responses statistically identical to those of whites. This narrower gap suggests that constructive cross-racial engagement could help Black, white and Hispanic-Americans see eye-to-eye on the impacts of racism on civic and political life.

The Democracy Monitor survey intends to measure these attitudes again, tracking how widely racism is perceived to be an obstacle and whether the differences in those perceptions by race and political affiliation change over time, particularly after the 2020 protests.

FINDING

2



Only half of Americans think the current design and structure of our government work. No matter who is in office, four in ten Americans think significant changes are needed to our government so that ordinary people have more of a voice and so government can solve problems more effectively.

Given their serious concerns about our country's democracy, what do Americans think should be done to strengthen it? A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that 61 percent of Americans believe significant changes are needed in the "fundamental design and structure" of American government.² The Democracy Monitor explored whether those viewpoints are a matter of discontent with elected officials or represent a genuine desire to alter how our nation's government is structured.

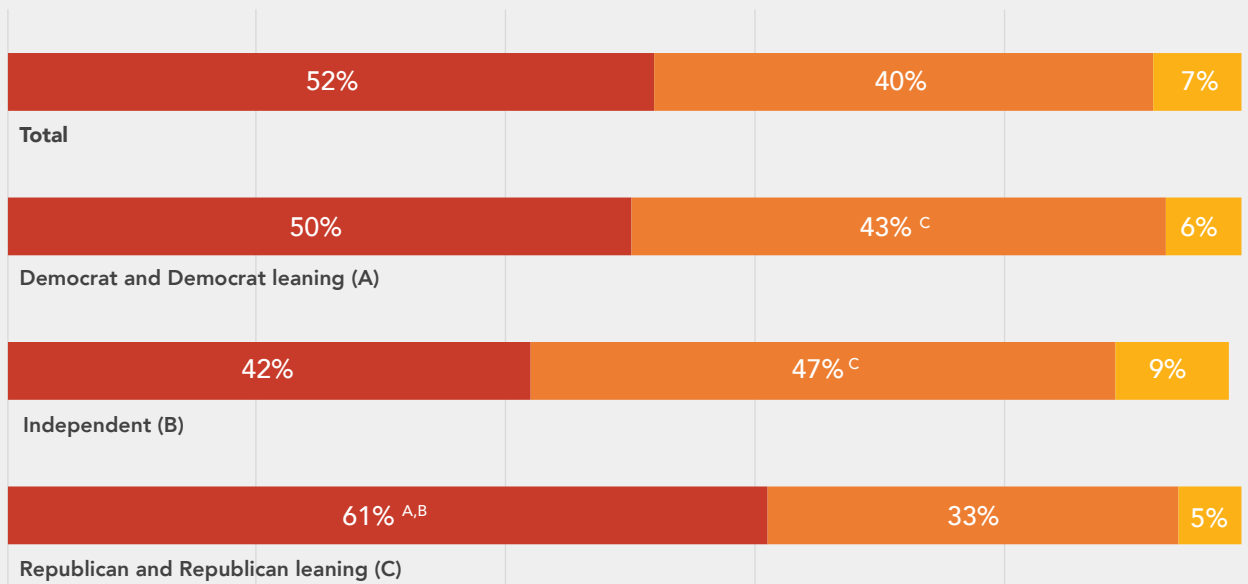
² Pew Research Center, "The Public, the Political System and American Democracy," April 2018. <https://www.people-press.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/04/4-26-2018-Democracy-release-1.pdf>.

This research found that 52 percent of Americans say that the design and structure of our nation’s government are fine as long as we elect the right people to represent us. However, 40 percent say the design and structure of our nation’s government need significant change no matter whom we elect to represent us—with notable differences in these beliefs by political affiliation, race and age. In particular, more Democrats/Democrat leaners and Independents say the design and structure of our nation’s government need significant change when compared with Republicans/Republican leaners; see figure 5.

Only half of Americans think the current design and structure of our government work. Four in ten think significant changes are needed no matter whom we elect to represent us.

Figure 5. Percent of Americans who say each of the following about the design and structure of our nation’s government, 2019 survey:

- Is fine as long as we elect the right people to represent us
- Needs significant change no matter who we elect to represent us
- Don’t know/Depends



Base: Base: Total, N=1,000; Democrat and Democrat leaning, n=424; Independent, n=136; Republican and Republican leaning, n=372.

Letters next to percentages denote statistically significant difference at the p<.05 level.

Numbers do not add up to 100 percent owing to the 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

By race, the Democracy Monitor found that substantially more Black (51 percent) and Hispanic (53 percent) than white (35 percent) Americans say that the design and structure of government need significant change no matter whom we elect to represent us.

Differences by age also stand out. Somewhat more people in middle age and younger express a desire for change: 46 percent of Americans under 45 believe that the design and structure of our government need significant change, compared with only 34 percent of those 45 and older.

However, 45 percent of people 45 and older also say that our country’s democracy is in crisis, compared with 32 percent of people under 45. And as Finding 4 explains, more older than younger Americans also express a responsibility to help find solutions to problems in their communities and the nation. Together, these findings suggest that somewhat more older Americans are worried about our democracy than their younger peers, while somewhat more younger people want systematic changes beyond what can be achieved in elections. Future iterations of the Democracy Monitor will examine whether this desire for change grows or diminishes over time, including whether more older people begin to express a desire for more thoroughgoing changes to our democracy.

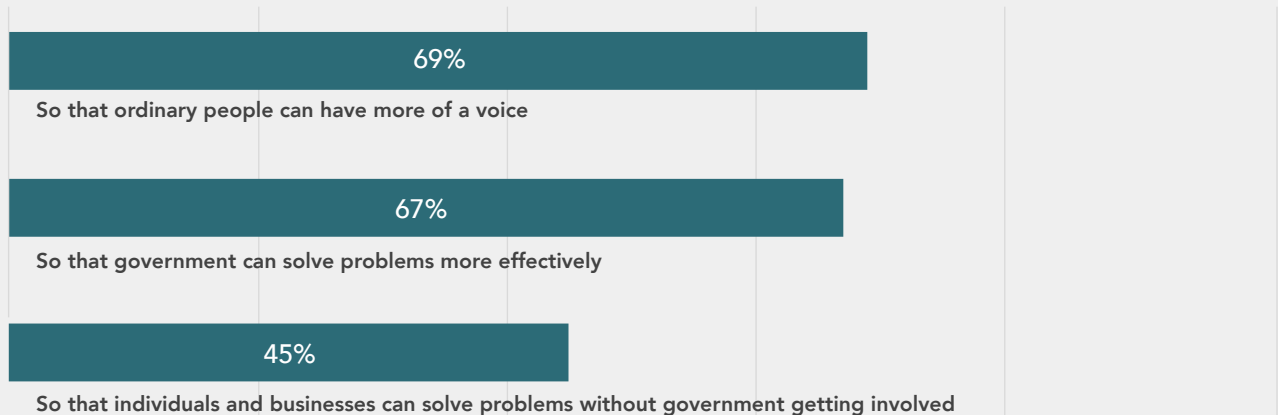
Giving people more of a voice and making government more effective are major reasons why some people think the design and structure of government need to change.

Why do some Americans think that the design and structure of our nation’s government need significant change? Giving ordinary people more of a voice and allowing our government to solve problems more effectively were major reasons for about two-thirds of those who want to see significant change. Less than half say a major reason is so that individuals and businesses can solve problems without the government getting involved; see figure 6.

These responses suggest more Americans want to have a say in government and want a better-functioning government than want to see government retreat to the sidelines. However, many more Republicans/Republican leaners (71 percent) than Democrats/Democratic leaners (27 percent) say that letting individuals and businesses solve problems without government involvement is a major reason why the design and structure of government need to change.

Giving people more of a voice and making government more effective are major reasons why some people think the design and structure of government need to change.

Figure 6. Percent of those believing the design and structure of government need significant change who say each of the following is a major reason they think so, 2019 survey:



Base: Those who think the design and structure of our government need significant change no matter whom we elect to represent us, n=386.

FINDING

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Americans see elected officials and special interests as obstacles to ordinary people having a voice. Nonetheless, many people feel they can have influence in their communities if enough people work together. Fewer feel they can have much influence nationally.

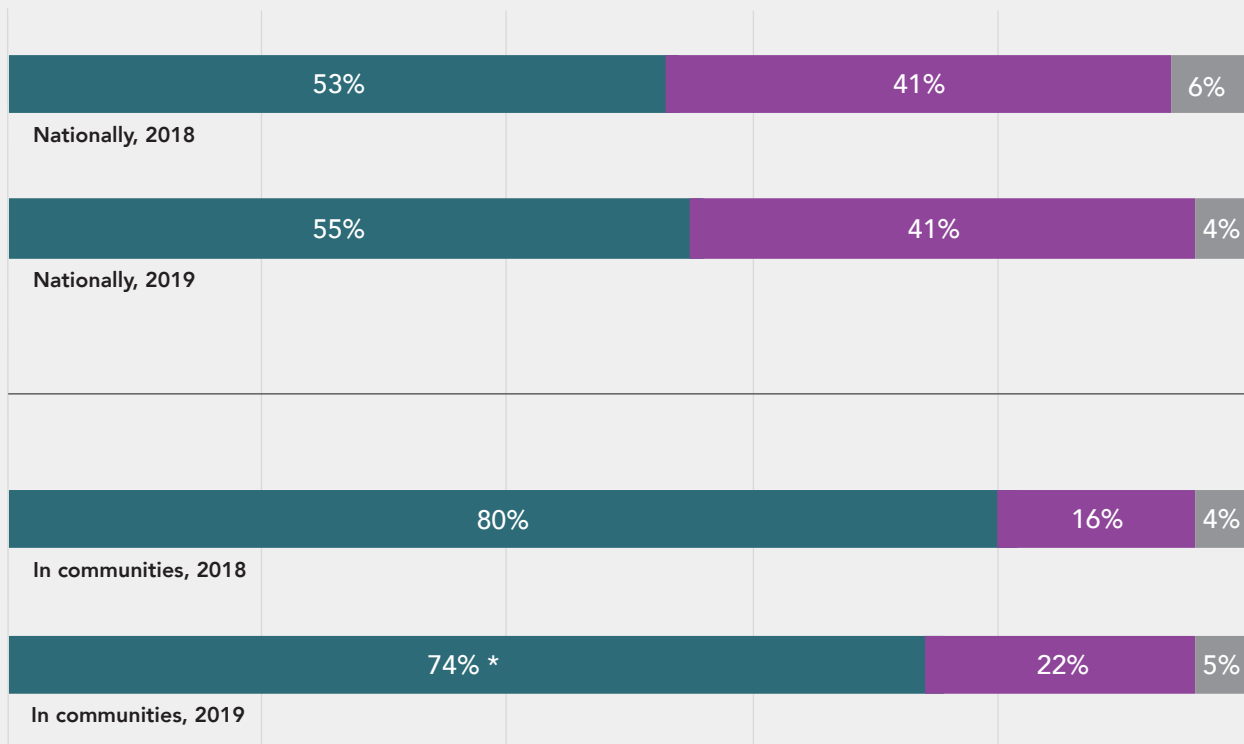
Despite widespread worry about the state of our democracy, the Democracy Monitor found that Americans feel they can nonetheless influence problem solving locally and to a lesser extent nationally when people work together. A strong majority of Americans (74 percent) believe that “when enough people get involved,” they have a lot of influence over how their communities address problems. This sense of local efficacy has diminished somewhat since the 2018 survey, when 80 percent of Americans believed that to be the case.

When it comes to how the nation addresses problems, just over half (55 percent) of Americans feel they can influence how problems are addressed, a sentiment that remains largely unchanged since the 2018 survey; see figure 7.

Most Americans feel that ordinary people can have influence in their communities, and half of Americans feel that ordinary people can have an influence nationally when enough people get involved.

Figure 7. Percent who say each of the following when it comes to how problems are addressed in their communities and nationally, 2018 and 2019 surveys:

- When enough people get involved, they have a lot of influence
- Ordinary people have little influence
- Don't Know/Refused



Base: All respondents 2018 survey, N=1,000. All respondents 2019 survey, N=1,000.

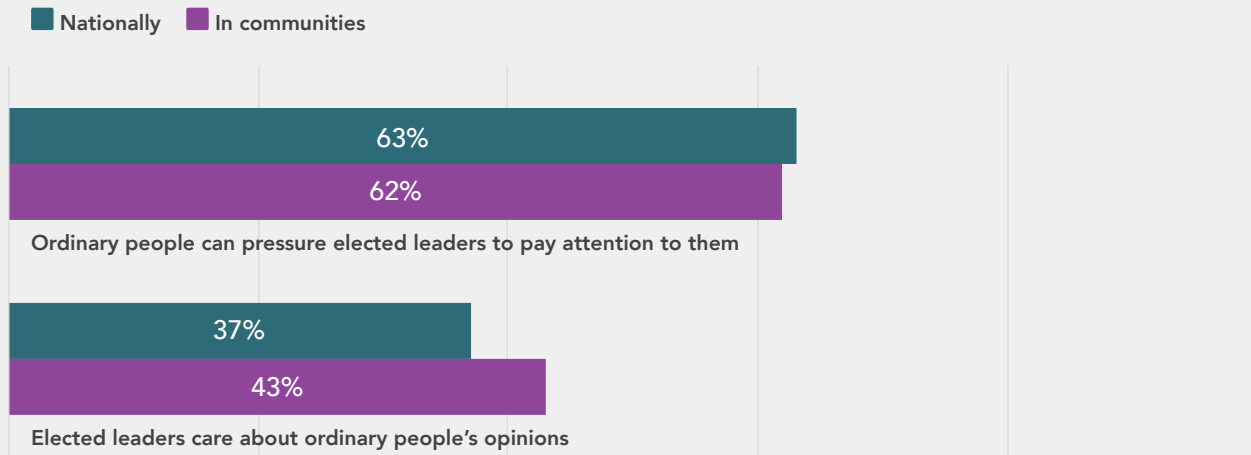
*Denotes statistically significant difference versus 2018 survey at the p<.05 level.

Americans see elected officials and special interests as standing in the way of ordinary people having an influence on how their communities and the nation solve problems.

Those Americans who feel that ordinary people can in fact have an influence unfortunately see elected officials more as impediments than as facilitators. Thirty-seven percent of those who think that ordinary people can have an influence nationally and 43 percent of those who think so locally say a major reason why is that elected leaders care about ordinary people’s opinions. Two-thirds say it is because ordinary people can pressure elected leaders to pay attention to them; see figure 8.

More Americans see elected officials as needing to be pressured than as actually caring about what ordinary people think.

Figure 8. Percent of those believing that when enough people get involved they have a lot of influence over how their community or the nation addresses problems who say each of the following is a major reason why they think so, 2019 survey:

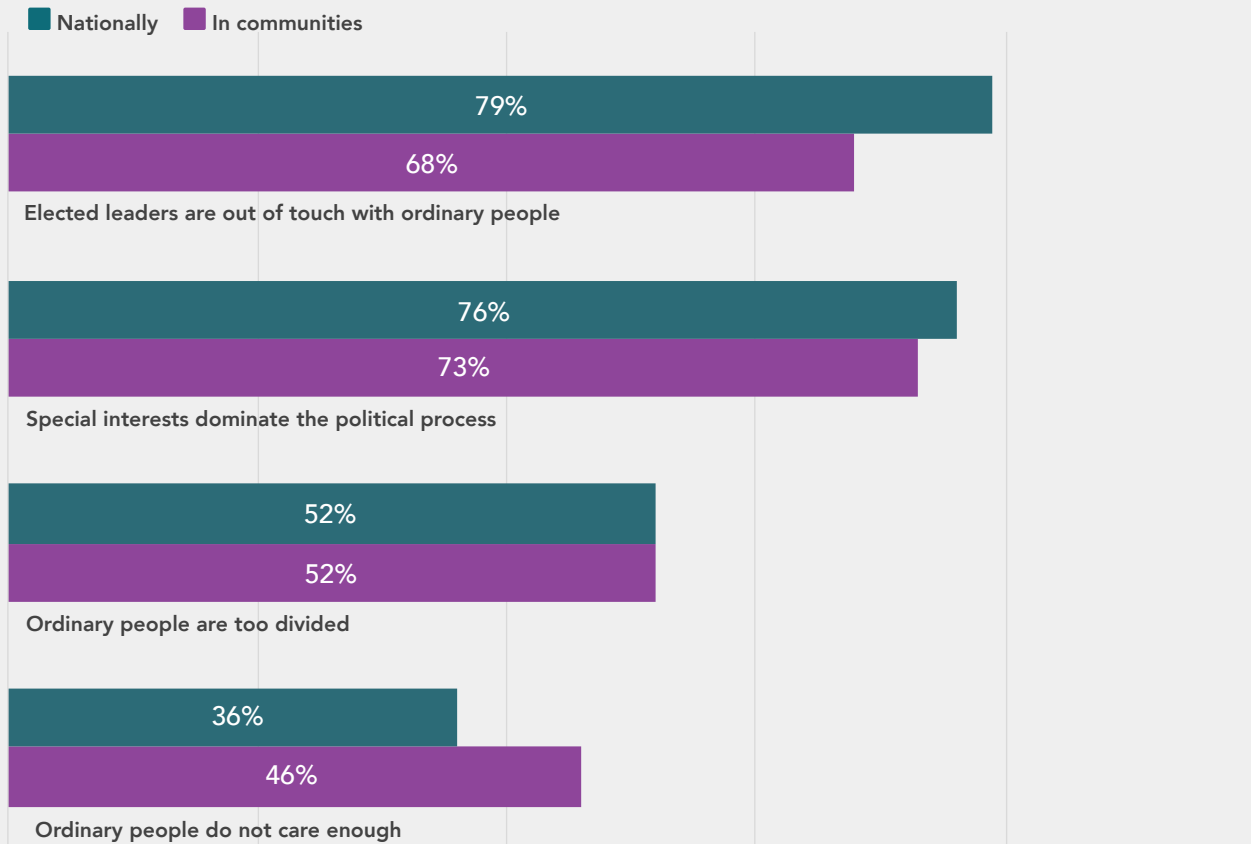


Base: Those who think when enough people get involved, they have a lot of influence over how the nation addresses problems, n=322. Those who think when enough people get involved, they have a lot of influence over how their community addresses problems, n=505.

Meanwhile, those Americans who feel that ordinary people have little influence appear to blame elected officials and special interests. Large majorities of those who think that ordinary people have little influence—locally and nationally—say major reasons are that elected officials are out of touch with ordinary people and that special interests dominate the political process. In other words, people see the same forces standing in the way of their having an influence in politics both nationally and in their local communities; see figure 9.

Of those who think ordinary people have little influence, most see out-of-touch elected officials and special interests as impediments. Fewer blame the divisions or apathy of ordinary people.

Figure 9. Percent of those believing that ordinary people have little influence over how their community or the nation addresses problems who say each of the following is a major reason they think so, 2019 survey:



Base: Those who think ordinary people have little influence over how the nation addresses problems, n=313. Those who think ordinary people have little influence over how the community addresses problems, n=157.

Half of those who feel that ordinary people have little influence, locally and nationally, also say a major reason is that ordinary people are too divided. However, people do not necessarily see this as an insurmountable obstacle, as suggested by previous Public Agenda research that found three in four Americans overall say there is more common ground among the public than the news media and political leaders typically portray.³ However, the notion that ordinary people have little influence because they do not care enough is somewhat more common at the local level than at the national level; see figure 9.

³ Will Friedman and David Schleifer, "Divisiveness and Collaboration in American Public Life: A Hidden Common Ground Report," Public Agenda, 2019. <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/divisiveness-and-collaboration-in-american-public-life-a-hidden-common-ground-report/>.

FINDING

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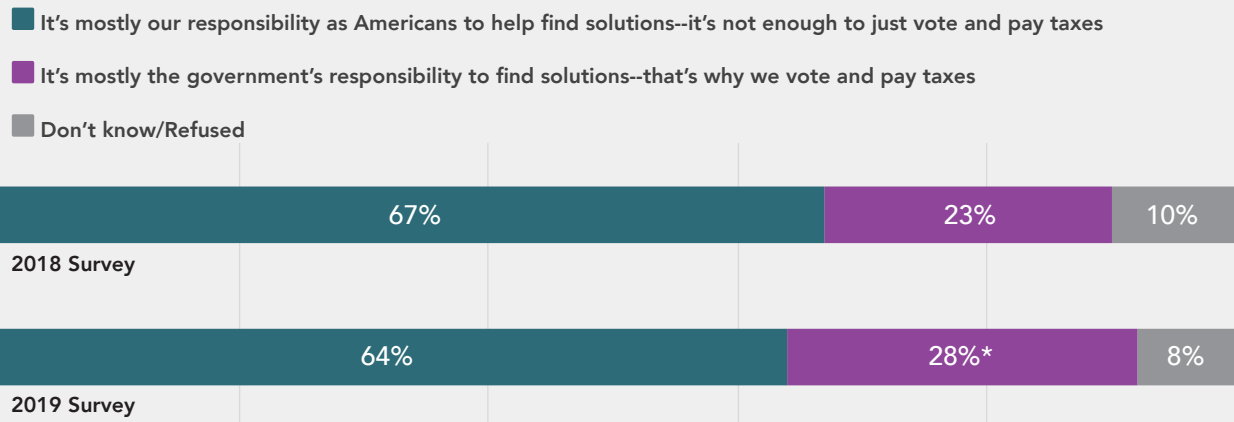


People say they would be more likely to get involved in local issues if they could make a real impact. About half of Americans want their local government to implement systems that give people more direct power, such as participatory budgeting, ballot initiatives and citizen juries.

About two-thirds of Americans believe that “it’s mostly our responsibility as Americans to help find solutions—it’s not enough to just vote and pay taxes”; see figure 10. A similar share of Americans expressed this sense of responsibility in the previous Democracy Monitor survey.

Most Americans continue to feel a responsibility to help find solutions to problems in their communities and the nation.

Figure 10. Percent who say each of the following when it comes to problems facing communities or the nation, 2018 and 2019 surveys:



Base: All respondents 2018 survey, N=1,000. All respondents 2019 survey, N=1,000.

*Denotes statistically significant difference versus 2018 survey at the $p < .05$ level.

This sense of responsibility is more common among older people: 73 percent of people 45 and older say it is mostly our responsibility to help find solutions—it's not enough to just vote and pay taxes—while 55 percent of people younger than 45 say so. This could mean that fewer people in the younger cohort are willing to get involved in problem solving, or it could mean that more of them see a role for government in solving the type and scale of problems faced by communities and the nation.

To learn more about how people want to get involved, the Democracy Monitor presented Americans with four different systems for democratic decision-making and asked if they thought their local government should implement each one:

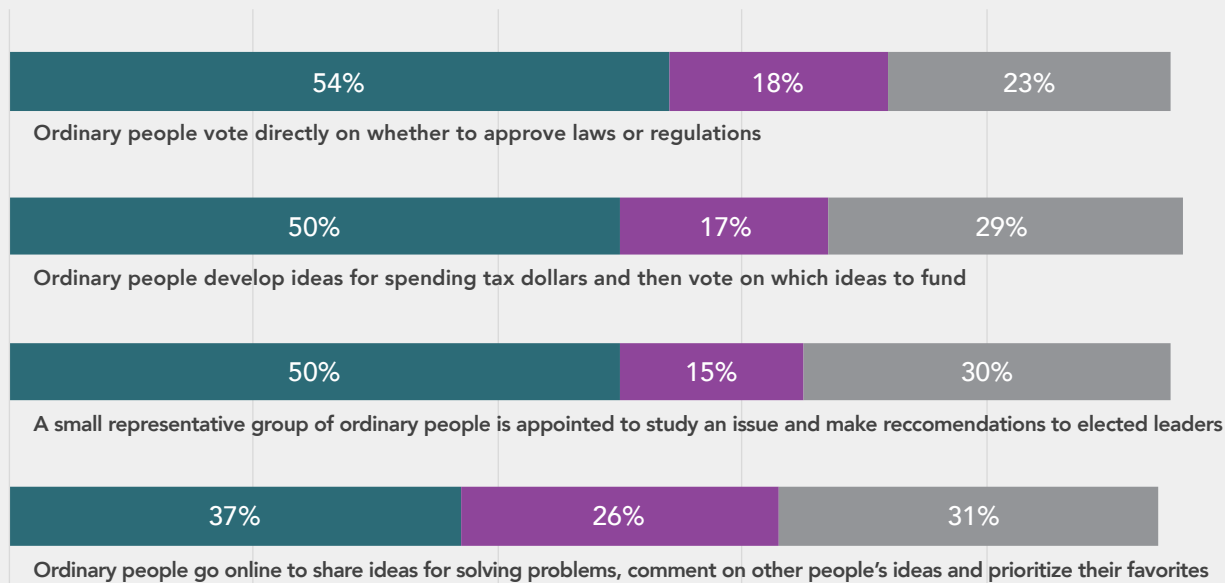
- **Ballot initiatives**, described in the survey as a system in which “ordinary people vote directly on whether to approve laws or regulations.”
- **Participatory budgeting**, described in the survey as a system in which “ordinary people develop ideas for spending tax dollars and then vote on which ideas to fund.”
- **Citizen juries**, described in the survey as a system in which “a small representative group of ordinary people is appointed to study an issue and make recommendations to elected leaders.”
- **Sharing ideas online**, described in the survey as a system in which “ordinary people go online to share ideas for solving problems, comment on other people's ideas and prioritize their favorites.”

About half of Americans think their local government should implement the three systems that give people direct power over decisions: participatory budgeting, ballot initiatives and citizen juries. The system for sharing ideas online is less popular, perhaps because it gives people input without real power; see figure 11.

About half of Americans say their local government should implement systems to give people more decision-making power.

Figure 11. Percent of Americans who say their local government should or should not implement each of the following systems or that they are not sure, 2019 survey:

■ Local government should implement ■ Local government should not implement ■ Not sure



Base: All respondents, N=1,000.

Numbers do not add up to 100 percent owing to the 5 percent of respondents who either refused the question or responded “Depends” or “My local government already does this” and are not represented in the figure.

Among those Americans who support implementing at least one of these new systems, 38 percent say the main reason is to give people more control over local government decisions. A slightly smaller proportion says the main reason is to better solve local problems (30 percent) or to get more people involved in the community (28 percent).

Almost a quarter to almost a third of Americans are not sure how they feel about each of the four systems that this survey asked about. This suggests that people’s interest in these approaches to strengthening democracy could evolve over time, especially if they have opportunities to learn about and experience them.

Among those who say their local government should implement each system, only about two-thirds say that the system should also be implemented nationally. That could be because people see these systems as more appropriate for addressing local problems or because they are more comfortable trying new systems locally before expanding them nationally.

People would be more likely to get involved in local issues if they could make a real impact.

Similar to the Democracy Monitor survey fielded in 2018, this survey found that most Americans say they are either very involved (28 percent) or somewhat involved (42 percent) in their community through volunteering, joining civic

groups or watching out for their neighbors. Fewer of the youngest American adults—only 14 percent of those 18 to 24—say they are very involved in their communities compared with older age groups. The middle-aged cohort is the most involved of all age groups—35 percent of people 45 to 64 say they are very involved in their communities.

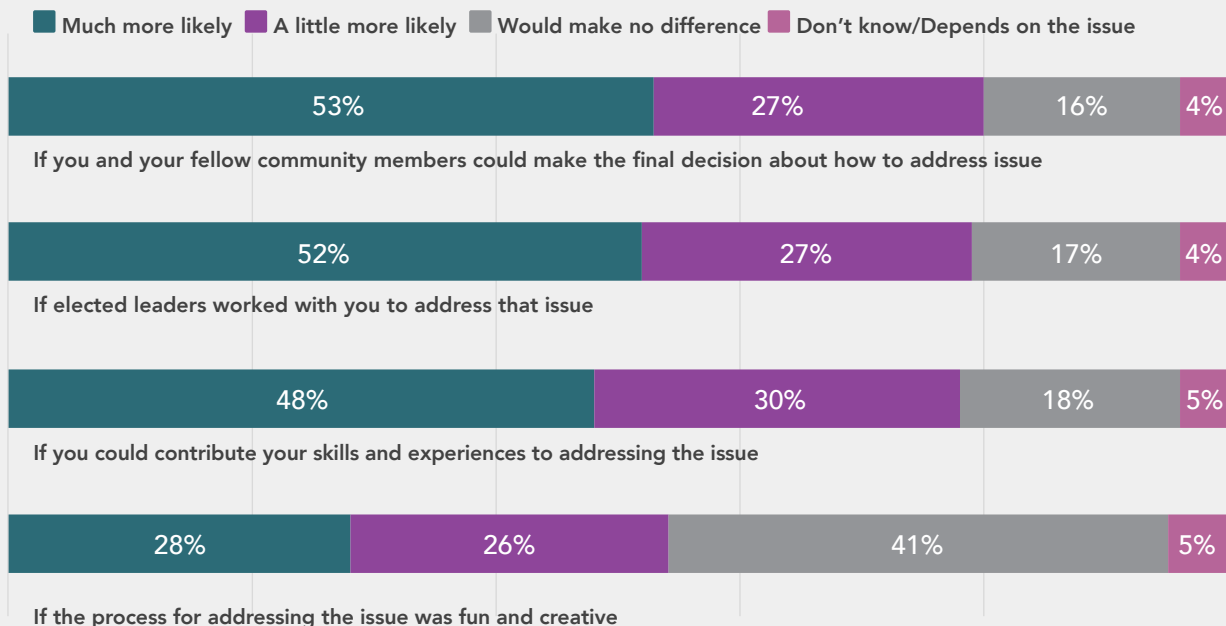
How much do people’s busy lives prevent them from getting involved in their communities? Half of Americans (51 percent) say that if people care, they will find ways to get involved in their communities no matter how busy they are. But 44 percent of Americans say that generally, people are too busy and overwhelmed to get involved in their communities. More of the oldest Americans—71 percent of those 75 and older—say that if people care, they will find ways to get involved in their communities no matter how busy they are, compared with only 58 percent of those 65 to 74 and even fewer middle-aged or younger Americans.

The Democracy Monitor asked people what would make them more likely to get involved in an issue in their local community that they felt needed to be addressed. Their responses exemplify Americans’ desire to make a real impact. About half of Americans say they would be much more likely to get involved if they and their fellow community members could make the final decision about how to address the issue, if elected leaders worked with them to address the issue and if they could contribute their skills and experiences to addressing the issue; see figure 12.

Fewer say they would be more likely to get involved in an issue in their local community if the process was fun and creative. However, more of the youngest American adults appear to be motivated by fun and creativity: 42 percent of those 18 to 24 say they would be much more likely to get involved if the process was fun and creative, compared with only 24 percent of those 45 and older.

People would be more likely to get involved in local issues if they had decision-making power.

Figure 12. When there is an issue in their local community that they feel needs to be addressed, percent who say how each of the following would impact their likelihood to get involved, 2019 survey:



Base: All respondents, N=1,000.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author of “Greater Voice, Greater Impact: Americans’ Views on Making Democracy Work for Everyone” thanks the following for their support and contributions to this research:

The focus group participants and survey respondents who took the time to share their views and experiences with us;

The Kettering Foundation, which served as a collaborator in this research, especially Nick Felts and John Dedrick;

The members of the Yankelovich Democracy Monitor Advisory Group: Xavier de Souza Briggs, Ford Foundation; Martín Carcasson, Colorado State University; Nick Felts, Kettering Foundation; Keesha Gaskins-Nathan, Rockefeller Brothers Fund; Myung Lee, Cities of Service; Brian Lehrer, New York Public Radio; Tad McGalliard, International City/County Management Association; Beth Noveck, New York University; Marc Ott, International City/County Management Association; Pete Peterson, Pepperdine University; Robert Shapiro, Columbia University; Trish Tchume, Center for Community Change; and Mark Warren, University of British Columbia;

Wiese Research Group, which brought invaluable expertise to collecting the survey data, especially Cathy Morrissey;

Matt Leighninger from Public Agenda’s public engagement team, for his input into this report, and Jennifer Orellana from Public Agenda’s public engagement team, for helping to facilitate the Yankelovich Democracy Monitor Advisory Group;

Rebecca Silliman from Public Agenda’s research team;

Nick Obourn and Ashley Morse from Public Agenda’s communications team, for bringing these findings to the attention of a broad audience;

And Will Friedman, president of Public Agenda, for his vision, insight and guidance.



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