

Democracy for All Project

Frustration Rises, Commitment Endures

SEPTEMBER 2026



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Survey Methodology

Introduction

The Democracy for All Project, a collaboration between the Charles F. Kettering Foundation and Gallup, is the most extensive annual study of how Americans experience democracy. The November 2025 report of the [Kettering/Gallup Democracy for All Project](#) demonstrated that Americans have mixed views of democracy in that they generally support the system of government but are critical of how it is performing in this country.

This year's survey finds Americans' commitment to democracy holding steady but assessments of U.S. democratic performance worsening. New survey questions reveal that Americans view democracy more positively at the local level, in terms of how it is performing, how sensitive elected leaders are to their needs, and the ability of ordinary people to create positive change. When Americans trust local leaders and their neighbors, they view democracy more positively at both the local and national levels.

This new report features insights from a survey of more than 23,000 Americans conducted April 24 through June 10, 2026.



KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

- 1 Fifty-six percent of U.S. adults say U.S. democracy is doing “very” or “moderately” poorly, while 19% say it is doing “very” or “moderately” well. Both figures offer a more negative assessment than in 2025, with the changes largely seen among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents.
- 2 Sixty percent of Americans think that democracy in the U.S. was “much” or “somewhat” stronger 50 years ago than it is today. Looking ahead, more Americans expect U.S. democracy to become “much” or “somewhat” weaker (45%) rather than stronger (31%) over the next 50 years.
- 3 Just 28% of U.S. adults trust that political leaders will be held accountable to the nation’s laws and Constitution. Americans also express concern that the executive branch of the federal government is too powerful — 59% say it has “too much power,” far more than say this about the judicial (38%) and legislative (34%) branches.
- 4 When asked about how democracy is performing in their city or town, Americans are more positive than negative, with 34% saying it is doing “very” or “moderately” well, 21% saying “very” or “moderately” poorly, and the largest percentage, 44%, saying it is doing “okay.” Evaluations of local democracy are more positive among those who are satisfied with the quality of local services, express greater trust in their neighbors and trust the information provided by local leaders.
- 5 Americans are most likely to say getting new people into office is the single best way to improve U.S. democracy. Other solutions they offer include reforming the electoral process to both expand voting opportunities and increase election security, strengthening checks and balances in the system, ensuring leaders are accountable to their constituents and the law, and giving the public greater input into governance.



SECTION 1

Changes in Americans' Views of U.S. Democracy

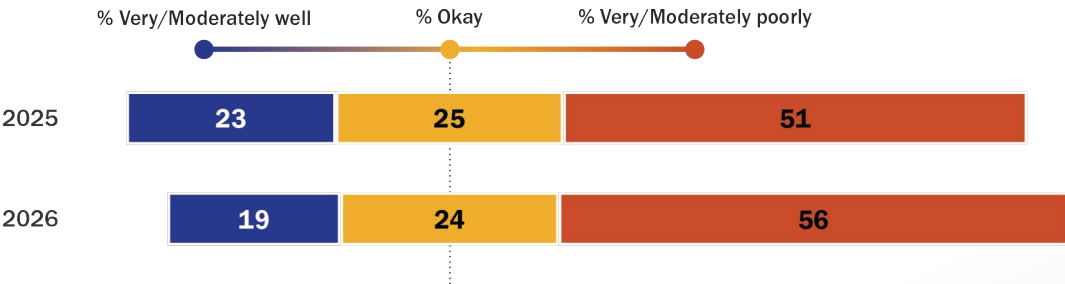
Key Findings:

- Commitment to democracy remains strong, but compared with 2025, a larger share of Americans now say democracy is doing poorly in the U.S.
- Increases in negative views of democracy are chiefly seen among Republicans and Republican leaners.
- More than four in 10 Republicans now believe it is reasonable to assume election officials acted improperly when election outcomes are surprising.

The second year of the Democracy for All Project finds that most Americans remain committed to democracy. Two-thirds of Americans, 66%, strongly agree or agree that democracy is the best form of government, while 23% neither agree nor disagree and 10% strongly disagree or disagree. Those figures are essentially unchanged from last year. At the same time, Americans’ assessment of democracy’s performance in the U.S., which was negative last year, has gotten worse. Fifty-six percent of U.S. adults, up from 51% in 2025, say democracy is doing “very” or “moderately” poorly in the U.S. The percentage evaluating democratic performance positively has fallen by about the same amount, to 19% from 23%.

FIGURE 1
Changes in Americans’ Views of How U.S. Democracy Is Doing

Whether or not you agree with current political leadership, how do you think U.S. democracy is doing?



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of “don’t know” responses and/or missing data.

Two-thirds

OF AMERICANS STRONGLY AGREE OR AGREE

democracy is the best form of government,
essentially unchanged from last year.

Most of the shifts in opinion have occurred among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. Since last year, there has been a 10-point decline in the percentage of Republicans who say democracy is performing well (from 47% to 37%) and an 8-point drop among Republican leaners (from 34% to 26%).

More Republican-leaning independents now say democracy is doing poorly (37%) rather than well (26%), where the opposite was true in 2025. Republicans are the only group with net positive views, but the gap has shrunk from +26 points (47% well, 21% poorly) to +8 points (37% well, 29% poorly).

The assessments of Democrats, Democratic leaners and non-leaning independents have remained more stable. Solid majorities of these political party groups continue to believe democracy is performing poorly, compared with the roughly one-third of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents who now agree.

FIGURE 2
Changes in Assessments of How U.S. Democracy Is Performing, by Political Party Group

	% Very/Moderately well		% Very/Moderately poorly	
	2025	2026	2025	2026
Republican	47	37	21	29
Republican-leaning independent	34	26	28	37
Non-leaning independent	10	10	58	62
Democratic-leaning independent	4	6	81	80
Democrat	9	9	74	74

Note: Percentages of “Okay” and “No answer” responses are not shown.

Americans have become increasingly critical of the way several U.S. democratic institutions and processes “are generally working,” with increases in poor ratings for Congress and the legislative branch (8 points, from 53% to 61%), the presidency and executive branch (7 points, from 46% to 53%), the division of power among the branches of the federal government (4 points, from 47% to 51%), and the equal treatment of all people under the law (5 points, from 55% to 60%).

Public opinion also has shifted in a more pessimistic direction on the following items related to democratic practice and fulfillment:

- Nearly half, 49%, of U.S. adults now disagree that U.S. leaders are committed to having a strong democracy, up from 44% last year. Meanwhile, 24%, down from 27% last year, agree leaders show this commitment.
- A majority of 53% now disagrees that U.S. political leaders will be held accountable to the nation's laws and Constitution. The percentage disagreeing is up from 48% in 2025.
- The percentage of U.S. adults who agree they would feel comfortable openly expressing their opinions about the government and laws has fallen below the majority level, to 47% from 52%.
- Increasing distrust in election officials is seen with 33%, up from 29%, now agreeing it is reasonable to assume that people who oversee elections acted improperly when election outcomes are surprising.
- Most Americans still see different races, cultures and religions as a national strength rather than a weakness, but this year's 78% is slightly diminished from 84% a year ago.
- Sixty-two percent now think that young people today are less likely to have a better life and standard of living than their parents, up from 57% last year.

Again, these changes in attitudes are primarily seen among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, including fewer feeling comfortable expressing their views; fewer believing that various races, cultures and religions are a national strength; and fewer expressing trust in election officials.

Subgroups of Republicans have mostly shown similar changes on these matters. One exception is that older Republicans are significantly less trusting in election officials than last year — 42% now agree that it is reasonable to assume officials acted improperly when election outcomes are surprising, up from 30%. Meanwhile, younger Republicans, who were less trusting than older Republicans in 2025, haven't shown meaningful change. Now, all age groups of Republicans fall between 42% and 45% agreement on this item.

Older Republicans also show a larger decrease than other subgroups in viewing different races, cultures and religions as a U.S. strength, with 62%, down from 80% last year, holding that view. Older Republicans are now slightly less likely than younger Republicans (68% of those aged 18 to 34 years and 69% of those aged 35 to 54 years) to believe this. By comparison, no fewer than 80% of independents or Democrats of all age groups think the U.S. is stronger because of the mix of cultural groups it has.



SECTION 2

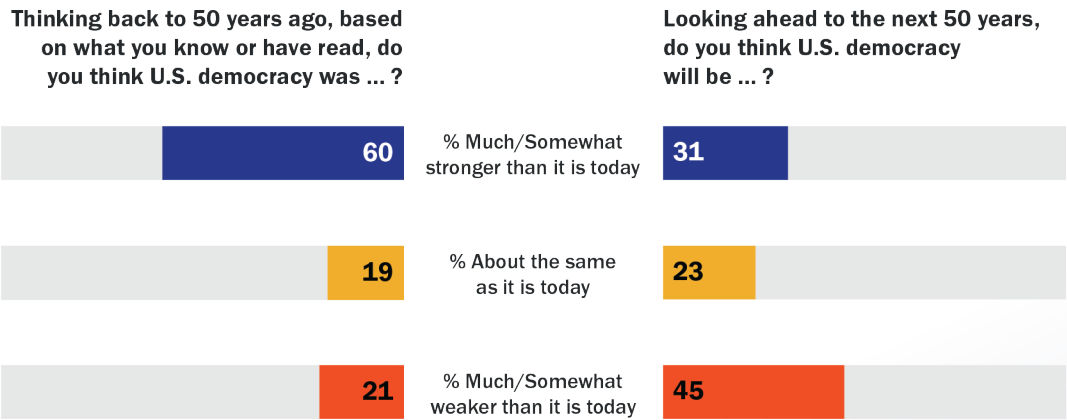
Looking to the Past and Future of U.S. Democracy

Key Findings:

- Most Americans believe U.S. democracy was stronger 50 years ago than it is today. Older Americans and those with higher educational attainment are especially likely to believe this.
- More U.S. adults expect democracy will get weaker rather than stronger in the U.S. over the next 50 years.

The year 2026 marks the 250th anniversary of the United States’ founding, and Americans are reflecting on how the nation has evolved and where it is headed in the future. The Democracy for All Project survey asked Americans to compare U.S. democracy today to what it was 50 years ago, at the nation’s bicentennial, and how they think it will be 50 years from now, at the tricentennial. The majority of U.S. adults, 60%, believe U.S. democracy was stronger 50 years ago than it is today, while 21% believe it was weaker, and 19% say it was about the same as it is today. Looking ahead, more Americans expect democracy to weaken (45%) rather than strengthen (31%) over the next 50 years, while 23% don’t foresee it changing.

FIGURE 3
Americans’ Assessments of the Strength of U.S. Democracy Versus the Past and in the Future



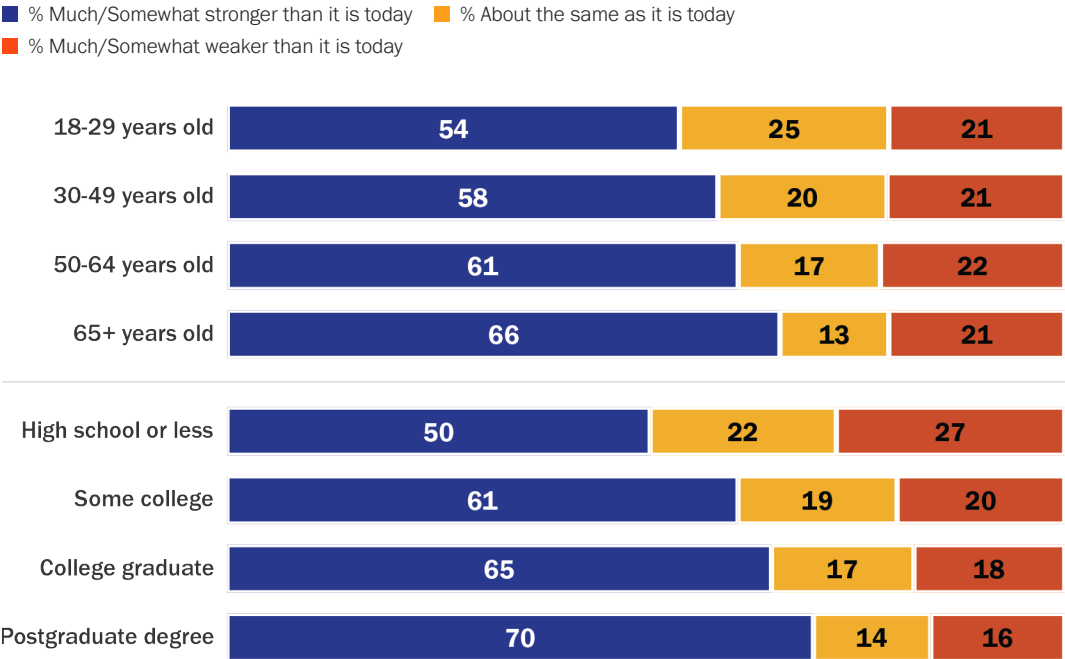
Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of “don’t know” responses and/or missing data.

Majorities of nearly all major demographic and attitudinal subgroups believe democracy was stronger 50 years ago than it is today, with older adults and those with college or graduate degrees more likely to hold that view than their counterparts.

60%
OF U.S. ADULTS
believe U.S. democracy
was stronger 50 years
ago than it is today.

FIGURE 4
Americans’ Assessment of Democracy 50 Years Ago Versus Today

Thinking back to 50 years ago, based on what you know or have read, do you think U.S. democracy was ... ?



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of “don’t know” responses and/or missing data.

Political party groups are generally in alignment that U.S. democracy was stronger 50 years ago than today, with 56% of Republicans, 61% of independents and 62% of Democrats expressing that opinion.

Most U.S. demographic groups share similar views on whether democracy will be stronger or weaker in the future. However, some subgroups exceed the national average in believing that democracy will strengthen, including those with a postgraduate degree (38%), strong partisans from either party (37%) and Black Americans (36%).

Additionally, several behavioral or attitudinal characteristics are associated with more optimism about the future of U.S. democracy:

- People with greater political engagement tend to express above-average optimism about the future, with 37% of those who say they pay “a great deal” of attention to political matters and 39% who report that they participated in a protest or rally in the past year predicting U.S. democracy will get stronger over the next 50 years.
- Community involvement is also associated with greater optimism about the future of democracy, as 40% of those who frequently attend community events and 38% of those who express trust in local leaders anticipate democracy will strengthen in the coming decades.
- Finally, expectations for the future are influenced by assessments of how things are going today, as people who think democracy is doing well in the U.S. (43%) or in their local community (40%) believe U.S. democracy will be stronger 50 years from now.



SECTION 3

Accountability, Rule of Law and Executive Power

Key Findings:

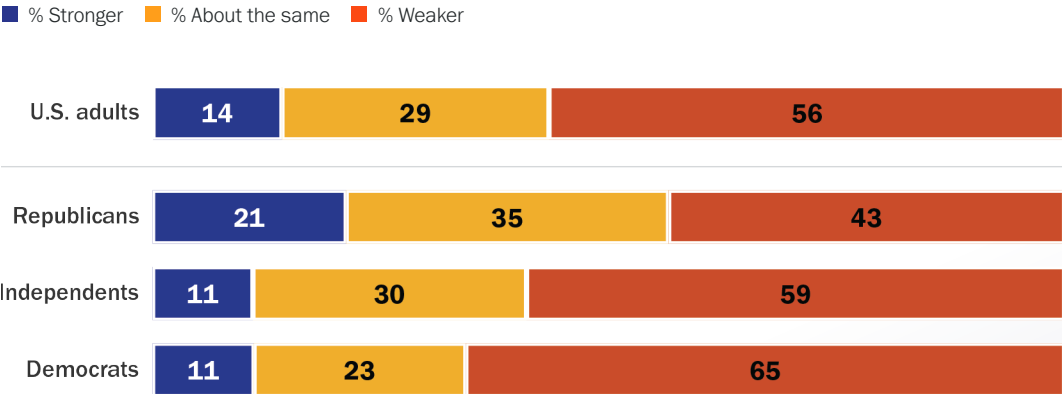
- Americans are four times as likely to say the rule of law is weaker than it was 10 years ago as to say it is stronger.
- More than three-quarters of Americans, 78%, say government officials must always follow the law, but only about one-quarter, 28%, trust that political leaders will be held accountable to the nation's laws and Constitution.
- Negative assessments outweigh positive ones for how well equal treatment under the law, the Supreme Court, the criminal justice system and the division of power among the branches of government are working.
- The majority of Americans, 59%, believe the executive branch of the federal government has too much power, while just over one-third believe judicial and legislative branches do.

Declining assessments of democracy’s performance extend to perceptions of the rule of law. Americans express broad concern about the rule of law, with a majority (56%) saying it is weaker than it was a decade ago — four times the percentage (14%) who say it is stronger.

This perception of greater weakness than strength for the rule of law is seen across party lines, though it is more pronounced among Democrats (65%) and independents (59%) than Republicans (43%). Even among Republicans, however, twice as many believe the rule of law has weakened rather than strengthened (21%).

FIGURE 5
Assessments of the Strength of the Rule of Law Compared With 10 Years Ago, by Political Party

Do you think the rule of law is weaker now than it was 10 years ago, about the same, or stronger than it was 10 years ago?



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of “don’t know” responses and/or missing data.

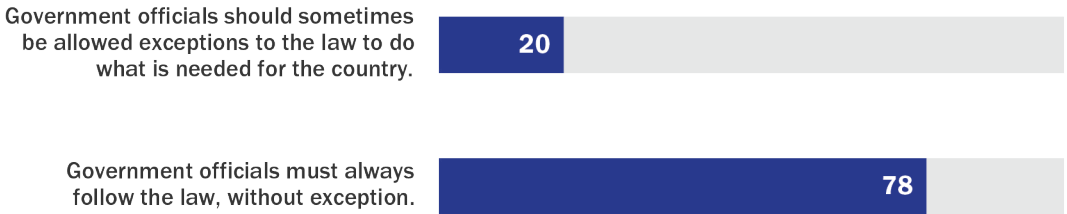


Americans generally agree that leaders should be accountable to the law, with 78% saying government officials must always follow the law, without exception, while 20% believe they should sometimes be allowed exceptions to do what is needed for the country. This consensus cuts across political identity.

FIGURE 6
Americans’ Belief in the Rule of Law and Exceptions to It

For each of the following pairs of statements, please indicate which comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right.

% Selected



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of “don’t know” responses and/or missing data.

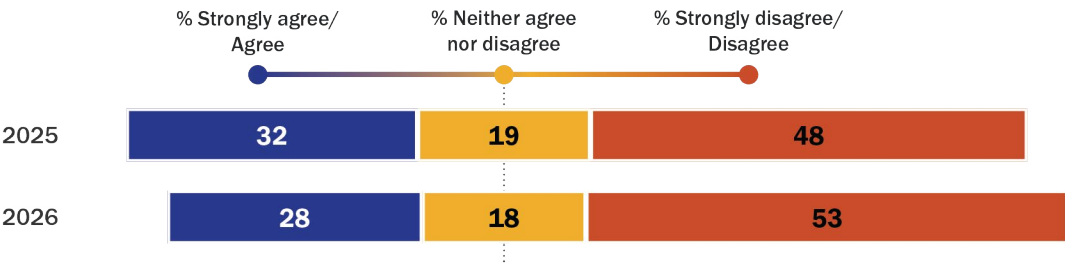
Although there is a broad consensus in favor of strict adherence to the law, support for allowing leaders occasional exceptions to the rules is somewhat higher among younger adults (27% of those aged 18 to 29) than among older adults (17% of those aged 65 and older) and among Republicans (26%) than among Democrats (17%) and independents (19%). Support for allowing leaders occasional exceptions to the rules is also higher among those who attend religious services regularly (25%) than among those who seldom or never attend (17%).

A Growing Trust Gap in Accountability

Americans are skeptical about whether leaders are being held accountable to the law. Twenty-eight percent of Americans agree they can trust that U.S. political leaders will be held accountable to the nation’s laws and Constitution, while a majority, 53%, disagrees. In 2025, 32% agreed and 48% disagreed.

FIGURE 7
Americans’ Perceptions of Political Leader Accountability

I trust that U.S. political leaders will be held accountable to our nation’s laws and Constitution.

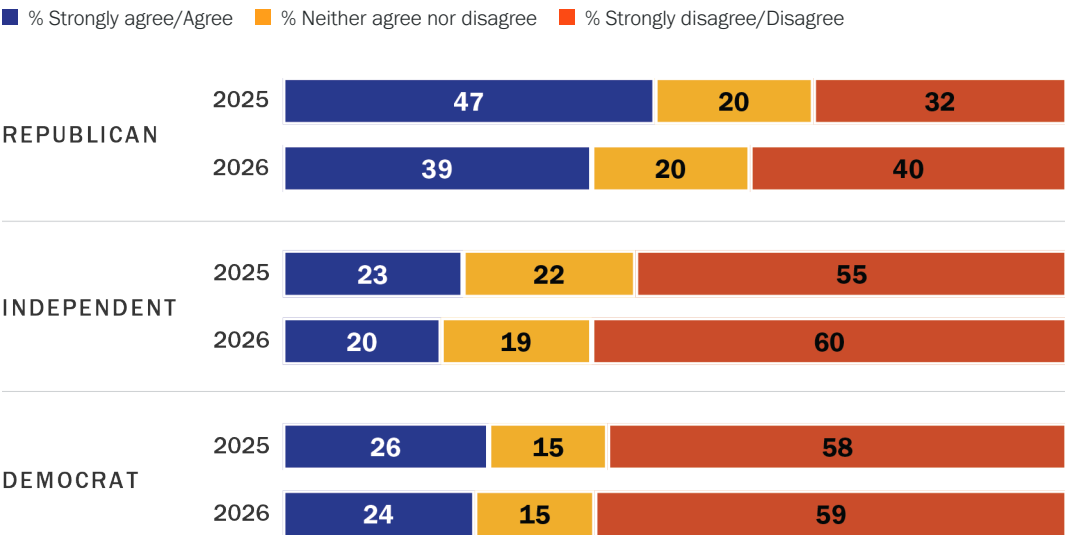


Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of “don’t know” responses and/or missing data.

As previously noted, trust in accountability has declined since 2025, driven largely by shifts among Republicans. Among Republicans, agreement that leaders will be held accountable fell from 47% to 39%. At the same time, the percentage of Republicans who disagree that leaders will be held accountable rose to 40% from 32%, while the percentage who neither agree nor disagree remained consistent at 20%, a pattern that indicates a shift toward skepticism rather than uncertainty.

FIGURE 8
Americans’ Perceptions of Political Leader Accountability, by Political Party

I trust that U.S. political leaders will be held accountable to our nation’s laws and Constitution.



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of “don’t know” responses and/or missing data.

Institutions of Accountability Are Seen as Underperforming

Americans’ skepticism extends to the institutions and systems designed to uphold the rule of law. Across a range of core pillars of U.S. democracy, including the Supreme Court, the criminal justice system, and constitutional checks and balances among the branches of government, more Americans say these systems are working poorly than well. Although Republicans’ perceptions are more negative in 2026 than in 2025, Democrats remain generally more likely than independents and, especially, Republicans to view these systems negatively.

FIGURE 9
Changes in Negative Ratings of Democratic Institutions and Processes, by Political Party

Regardless of who is in power, how well do you think each of these institutions or processes are generally working in our democracy?

		The Supreme Court and judicial branch % Very/ Moderately poorly	The criminal justice system % Very/ Moderately poorly	That all people are treated equally under the law % Very/ Moderately poorly	Division of power between the federal judicial, legislative, and executive branches % Very/ Moderately poorly
U.S. ADULTS	2025	42	55	55	47
	2026	44	57	60	51
REPUBLICANS	2025	19	43	35	27
	2026	21	47	40	32
INDEPENDENTS	2025	45	60	61	51
	2026	48	61	65	56
DEMOCRATS	2025	63	63	70	62
	2026	60	61	72	63

A Majority of Americans Say the Executive Branch Holds Too Much Power

Negative evaluations of how power is divided among branches of government — only one in five Americans say this is going “very” or “moderately” well — point to broader concerns about how power is distributed in the U.S. system.

When asked whether each branch of the government has too much power, the right amount of power or too little power, 54% of U.S. adults say the judicial branch has the right amount of power, and 46% say the same of the legislative branch. Significantly fewer, 34%, say the executive branch has the right amount of power.

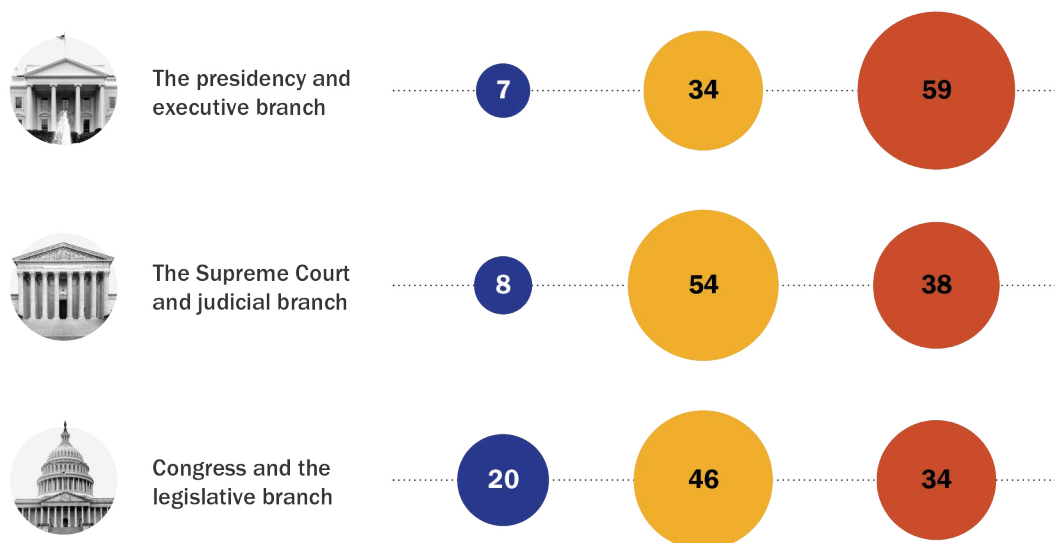
Among those who see an imbalance, Americans are more likely to say institutions have too much rather than too little power. This is especially the case for the executive branch, with 59% saying it holds too much power and just 7% saying it holds too little.

FIGURE 10

Americans’ Views of the Power Held by the Three Branches of the Federal Government

Do you think each of the following branches of the U.S. government currently has too much power, the right amount, or too little power?

● % Too little power ● % The right amount of power ● % Too much power



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of “don’t know” responses and/or missing data.

Partisan differences in these views are stark, particularly regarding the presidency and executive branch. Large majorities of Democrats (82%) and independents (64%) say the executive branch has too much power, compared with 25% of Republicans, yet even among Republicans, relatively few (12%) believe the presidency has too little power.

Republicans (38%) are somewhat more likely than Democrats (30%) and independents (33%) to say the legislative branch has too much power. Thirty percent of Democrats, compared with 21% of independents and 7% of Republicans, believe the legislative branch has too little power.

FIGURE 11

Perceived Balance of Power Across Government Branches, by Political Party

		Too much power %	The right amount of power %	Too little power %
 THE PRESIDENCY AND EXECUTIVE BRANCH	Republican	25	63	12
	Independent	64	30	5
	Democrat	82	14	3
 THE SUPREME COURT AND JUDICIAL BRANCH	Republican	26	68	5
	Independent	37	54	9
	Democrat	48	42	10
 CONGRESS AND THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH	Republican	38	54	7
	Independent	33	45	21
	Democrat	30	39	30

Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of “don’t know” responses and/or missing data.

Divides Rooted in Community Experiences and Financial Situation

While political identity is the strongest predictor of views on accountability and rule of law, other factors, including feelings of trust, agency and belonging, also shape perceptions of systems related to accountability and rule of law. Trust in these systems is higher among Americans who:

- agree that the experiences and beliefs of people like them are valued and respected by others in the nation
- believe that ordinary people have power to create change in the nation
- trust the information provided by religious or faith leaders; business leaders; elected officials; education officials; and family, friends, and/or neighbors in their community

These groups rate the performance of the criminal justice system, equal treatment under the law and federal division of power better than those who do not have the same feelings of belonging, power to create change or trust in local information sources, though none of these groups rates these systems highly.

FIGURE 12
Positive Perceptions of Systems, by Sense of Belonging, Power to Create Change and Trust in Information Sources

		The criminal justice system % System working “very” or “moderately” well	That all people are treated equally under the law % System working “very” or “moderately” well	Division of power between the federal judicial, legislative, and executive branches % System working “very” or “moderately” well
AGREEMENT THAT EXPERIENCES AND BELIEFS ARE VALUED AND RESPECTED	Strongly agree/ Agree	31	32	35
	Neither agree nor disagree	12	12	12
	Strongly disagree/ Disagree	6	8	9
SENSE OF HOW MUCH POWER ORDINARY PEOPLE HAVE TO CREATE CHANGE IN THE NATION	A great deal/ A moderate amount	28	30	31
	Some	15	15	17
	Almost none/ Very little	8	9	9
TRUST IN LOCAL INFORMATION SOURCES	A great deal/ A fair amount	28	29	31
	Not at all/ Only a little	8	9	10

Note: Trust in local information is calculated as the mean level of trust across five sources of information in their community: religious or faith leaders; business leaders; elected officials; education officials; and family, friends, and/or neighbors.

People who have a sense of belonging, a belief that ordinary people have power to create change in the nation, and a great deal or fair amount of trust in local information sources are also more likely to trust that the nation's political leaders will be held accountable to the nation's laws and Constitution.

Financial resources also are associated with attitudes about the rule of law and accountability as they pertain to the criminal justice system, equal treatment and division of federal power. Individuals with higher incomes and greater financial security — those who say they are living comfortably on their present income — tend to express more confidence, while those who feel economically strained are less likely to believe the systems are performing well.

Americans who say they are living comfortably on their present income are three times as likely as those who say they are finding it very difficult to get by on their present income to rate the criminal justice system as performing “very” or “moderately” well (24% vs. 8%). Similar gaps are evident in assessments of whether all people are treated equally under the law and whether power is appropriately divided among the federal branches of government. Similar patterns are also apparent by household income.

FIGURE 13**Positive Perceptions of Systems, by Financial Stability and Income**

		The criminal justice system % System working “very” or “moderately” well	That all people are treated equally under the law % System working “very” or “moderately” well	Division of power between the federal judicial, legislative, and executive branches % System working “very” or “moderately” well
SUBJECTIVE INCOME	Living comfortably on present income	24	25	26
	Getting by on present income	15	17	18
	Finding it difficult on present income	11	11	12
	Finding it very difficult on present income	8	9	10
HOUSEHOLD INCOME	\$180,000 or more	22	24	25
	\$120,000-\$179,999	20	21	22
	\$60,000-\$119,999	17	18	19
	\$36,000-\$59,999	15	15	17
	Less than \$36,000	15	15	16



SECTION 4

Two Democracies: Local vs. National Perceptions

Key Findings:

- Americans rate the performance of local democracy better than that of national democracy — 34% say local democracy is performing “very” or “moderately” well, while 19% say national democracy is.
- People who are more positive about the functioning of local democracy are also more positive about how democracy is performing nationally.
- Belief that local democracy is doing well is closely tied to direct experiences such as being satisfied with local services and trusting information from local leaders and social networks.

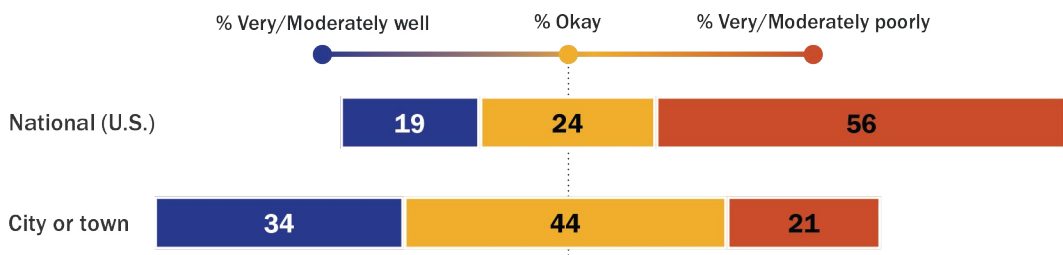
Perceptions of democracy are shaped not only by national trends and political beliefs, but also by everyday experiences with how institutions function in people’s communities, where policy is felt most directly and where institutions like the justice system and equal treatment under the law are encountered firsthand.

Local Democracy Viewed More Favorably Than National Democracy

About one-third of U.S. adults (34%) say democracy in their own city or town is doing “very” or “moderately” well, nearly double the share who say the same about democracy nationally (19%). Meanwhile, 21% say democracy is performing “very” or “moderately” poorly locally, which is less than half of the 56% who say the same about democracy nationally. Instead, far more rate local democracy (44%) than national democracy (24%) as doing “okay.”

FIGURE 14
Perceptions of National and Local Democratic Performance

Whether [or not you agree/you agree or disagree] with current political leadership, how do you think [U.S. democracy is doing/democracy is doing in your city or town]?



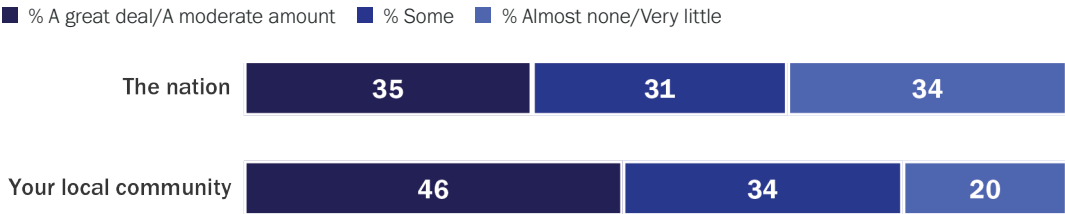
Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of “don’t know” responses and/or missing data.

Perceptions of the government’s sensitivity to people’s needs also vary significantly when assessed at the local versus national level. Americans are nearly twice as likely to strongly agree or agree that officials in their own city or town are sensitive to the needs of people like them (39%) as to say the same about national leaders (23%). Views of local officials’ sensitivity are generally similar among Democrats (44%) and Republicans (40%) but are slightly lower among independents (33%). The least positive perceptions of sensitivity to needs are seen among independents who don’t lean toward either party (25%); this group is also the least likely party group to say democracy is performing well in their community (22%).

Americans also perceive greater personal influence closer to home. Nearly half (46%) say ordinary people have “a great deal” or “a moderate amount” of power to create change in their local community, compared with 35% who say the same about the nation. Meanwhile, Americans are more likely to say ordinary people have “very little” or almost no power to make change in the nation (34%) versus their community (20%).

FIGURE 15
Perceptions of Americans’ Power to Create Change, Nationally and Locally

How much power do ordinary people have to create change [in our nation/in your local community]?



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of “don’t know” responses and/or missing data.

Local and National Governments Seen as Equally Influential

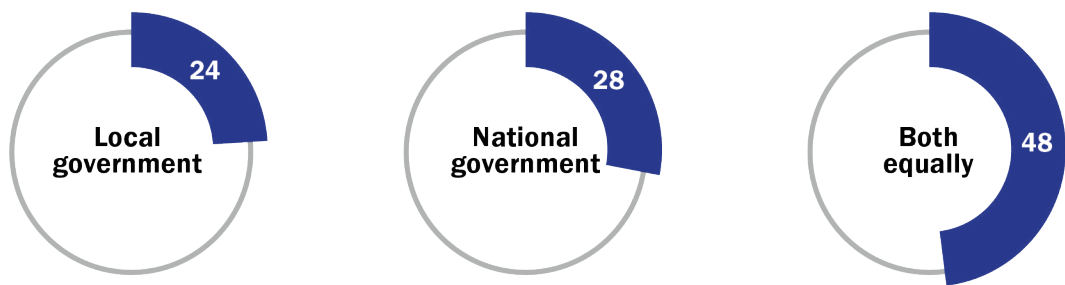
Americans’ more positive evaluations of local versus national democracy cannot be explained by them believing local government has a greater impact than national government on their daily life, as only 24% perceive that local government decisions have the bigger impact. By contrast, nearly half (48%) say decisions made by local and national government leaders affect their daily lives equally, while 28% say national government decisions have a greater impact.

Perceptions of governmental influence are fairly consistent across demographic and political groups, indicating that many Americans see both levels of government as consequential.

FIGURE 16
Perceived Impact of Local and National Government Decisions on Daily Life

Which has a greater impact on your daily life, decisions made by local government leaders or decisions made by national government leaders?

% Selected



Local Experiences Shape Views of National Democracy

Americans who believe democracy is working well in their communities are far more likely to express strong support for democracy in principle and have greater confidence in its performance nationally.

Among those who say democracy is working well in their own community, a large majority (81%) strongly agrees or agrees that democracy is the best form of government. Sixty-two percent of Americans who say their local democracy is doing “okay” and 53% who say it is performing “very” or “moderately” poorly also see democracy as the best form.

Perceptions of national democracy are also more positive among those who evaluate democracy in their community as doing well rather than okay or poorly.

FIGURE 17
Perceptions of National Democracy, by Ratings of How Local Democracy Is Doing

		Democracy is the best form of government. % Strongly agree/Agree	Whether or not you agree with current political leadership, how do you think U.S. democracy is doing? % Very/Moderately well
RATINGS OF HOW LOCAL DEMOCRACY IS DOING	Very/Moderately well	81	31
	Okay	62	13
	Very/Moderately poorly	53	11

PERCEPTIONS OF NATIONAL DEMOCRACY

are more positive

among those who evaluate democracy in their community as doing well rather than okay or poorly.

Americans’ experiences with how democracy functions in their communities are also linked to how they view other people’s commitment to democracy in the nation.



Views that U.S. political leaders are committed to having a strong democracy are also more positive among those who view democracy in their community as doing well, compared with those who view it as doing poorly.

FIGURE 18
Perceptions of Democratic Commitment, by Ratings of How Local Democracy Is Doing

		Most people in the U.S. are committed to having a strong democracy, regardless of their positions on political issues facing the country. % Strongly agree/Agree	U.S. political leaders are committed to having a strong democracy, regardless of their positions on political issues facing the country. % Strongly agree/Agree
RATINGS OF HOW LOCAL DEMOCRACY IS DOING	Very/Moderately well	63	36
	Okay	43	19
	Very/Moderately poorly	34	16

Evaluations of Local Democracy Linked to Community Resources and Social Trust

Assessments of local democracy are closely tied to Americans’ perceptions of the quality of local services that meet residents’ needs. Among those who are satisfied with local services, including healthcare, housing, schools, childcare and access to food, 39% say democracy in their city or town is performing “very” or “moderately” well, compared with 19% of those who are dissatisfied saying the same.

FIGURE 19
Perceptions of Local Democracy, by Satisfaction With Local Services

		Whether you agree or disagree with current political leadership, how do you think democracy is doing in your city or town? % Very/Moderately well
SATISFACTION WITH LOCAL SERVICES	Very satisfied/ Satisfied	39
	Very dissatisfied/ Dissatisfied	19

Note: Satisfaction with services is calculated as the mean satisfaction rating across five local services: housing, healthcare, food, schools and childcare.

ASSESSMENTS OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY
are closely tied to

Americans’ perceptions of the quality of local services that meet residents’ needs.

In addition to services and resources, the social environment plays an important role in shaping views of local democracy. Those who strongly agree or agree that people in their neighborhood can be trusted are more than twice as likely as those who strongly disagree or disagree with the same to say democracy is performing “very” or “moderately” well in their city or town (40% vs. 15%). Similar gaps are seen between those who agree and disagree that people in their neighborhood are willing to help their neighbors (39% vs. 17%).

Although majorities across all demographic groups report positive views of their neighbors, these perceptions are somewhat more common among higher-income adults than lower-income adults and among White and Asian Americans than Hispanic and Black Americans. Despite these differences, the relationship between positive perceptions of neighbors and evaluations of local democracy is apparent regardless of income or race/ethnicity.

FIGURE 20
Perceptions of Local Democracy, by Perceptions of Neighbor Trust and Helpfulness

		Whether you agree or disagree with current political leadership, how do you think democracy is doing in your city or town? % Very/Moderately well
NEIGHBORS ARE TRUSTWORTHY	Strongly agree/ Agree	40
	Strongly disagree/ Disagree	15
NEIGHBORS ARE WILLING TO HELP	Strongly agree/ Agree	39
	Strongly disagree/ Disagree	17

These patterns extend beyond social trust to trust in local information sources. Differences in how well people think democracy is doing in their town are most pronounced based on trust in information provided by local elected officials versus other groups. A majority, 54%, of those who trust local elected officials say local democracy is performing “very” or “moderately” well, compared with 25% of those who have little trust in local elected officials. The relationships between trust in information sources and perceptions of local democracy are still apparent but slightly weaker for those who trust versus don’t trust information provided by local faith leaders; business leaders; education officials; and family, friends, and/or neighbors.

FIGURE 21
Perceptions of Local Democracy, by Trust in Local Information Sources

		Whether you agree or disagree with current political leadership, how do you think democracy is doing in your city or town? % Very/Moderately well
TRUST INFORMATION FROM LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS	A great deal/A fair amount	54
	Not at all/Only a little	25
TRUST INFORMATION FROM LOCAL BUSINESS LEADERS	A great deal/A fair amount	48
	Not at all/Only a little	26
TRUST INFORMATION FROM LOCAL EDUCATION OFFICIALS	A great deal/A fair amount	46
	Not at all/Only a little	22
TRUST INFORMATION FROM LOCAL RELIGIOUS OR FAITH LEADERS	A great deal/A fair amount	41
	Not at all/Only a little	28
TRUST INFORMATION FROM LOCAL FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND/OR NEIGHBORS	A great deal/A fair amount	38
	Not at all/Only a little	22

Feeling able to influence outcomes locally is closely tied to more positive evaluations of how democracy is functioning at the community level. Among those who believe ordinary people have “a great deal” or “a moderate amount” of power to create change in their local community, half (50%) say democracy in their city or town is doing “very” or “moderately” well. Just over one-quarter, 27%, of those who feel they have only “some” power and 13% of those who say people have “very little” or almost no power to make change locally say their democracy is performing well.

Perceptions of local government officials’ sensitivity to people’s needs show a similar relationship: 65% of those who strongly agree or agree that local officials are sensitive to the needs of people like them say democracy is performing well, compared with 8% of those who strongly disagree or disagree.

FIGURE 22
Perceptions of Local Democracy, by Sense of Local Power and Government Responsiveness to Local Interests

		Whether you agree or disagree with current political leadership, how do you think democracy is doing in your city or town? % Very/Moderately well
SENSE OF HOW MUCH POWER ORDINARY PEOPLE HAVE TO CREATE CHANGE IN LOCAL COMMUNITY	A great deal/A moderate amount	50
	Some	27
	Almost none/Very little	13
AGREEMENT THAT LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS ARE SENSITIVE TO INTERESTS OF PEOPLE LIKE ME	Strongly agree/Agree	65
	Neither agree nor disagree	20
	Strongly disagree/Disagree	8

Stronger community resources, more positive resident experiences and higher levels of personal wellbeing among residents often go hand in hand, and these relationships may also be shaped by mutually reinforcing dynamics in which civic engagement, community attachment, confidence in local institutions and individual wellbeing strengthen one another over time.

The political context of a community may also shape residents’ perceptions of local democracy and government officials’ sensitivity to their people’s needs. Residents are more likely to believe local government officials are sensitive to their needs when the political makeup of their community aligns with their own partisan identity. A majority of Republicans living in strongly Republican communities, 54%, and Democrats living in strongly Democratic communities, 56%, strongly agree or agree that local officials are sensitive to their interests, compared with 14% of Republicans living in strongly Democratic communities and 23% of Democrats living in strongly Republican communities.

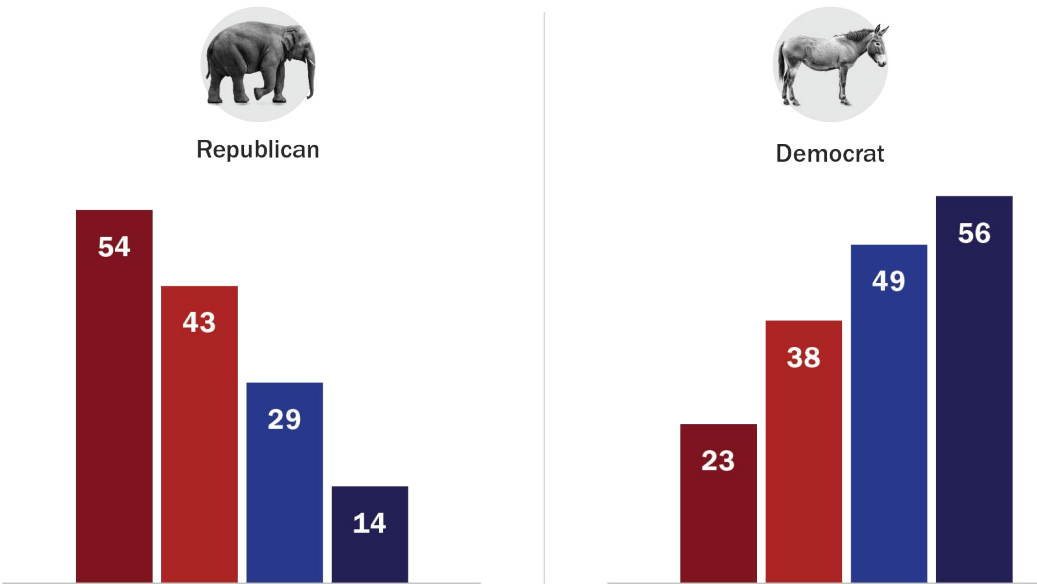
This pattern may partly reflect the fact that local elected officials are often more likely to advance policies and priorities that resonate with residents who share the dominant political identification of the community. It also may indicate that people are more likely to view government as sensitive to their needs when public decisions reflect the priorities of the broader community.

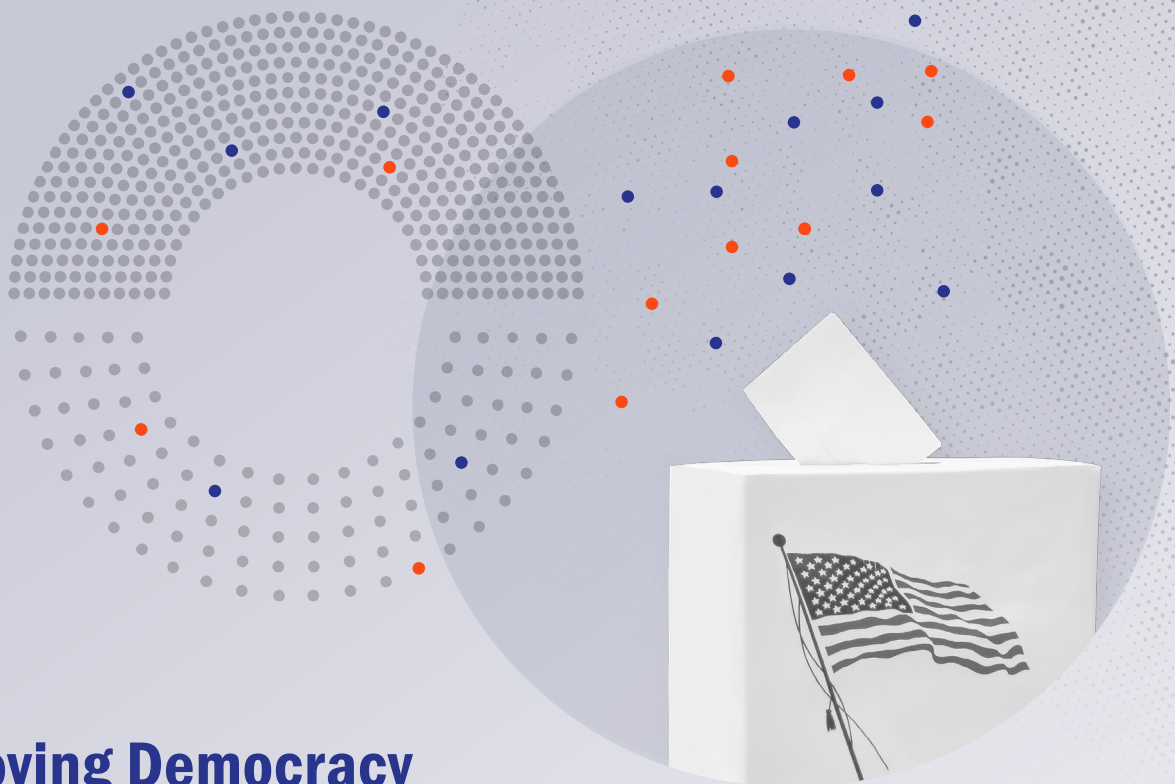
FIGURE 23
Perceptions of Government Responsiveness to Local Interests, by Political Party and Perceived Community Political Party

Government officials in my city/town are sensitive to the interests of people like me when making decisions.

% Strongly agree/Agree

- Believe community is strongly Republican
- Believe community is Republican leaning
- Believe community is Democratic leaning
- Believe community is strongly Democratic





SECTION 5

Improving Democracy

Key Findings:

- Americans' most common recommendations for improving democracy are replacing the people in government and enacting various electoral reforms.
- The most common specific electoral reforms proposed are ensuring fair elections, expanding voting access, requiring voters to show identification and abolishing the Electoral College.
- Feeling an important right or freedom is being threatened and believing that their involvement can make a difference are the two factors that people say would most likely make them get involved in public affairs.

The previous section suggests that one way to improve democratic performance and commitment is to capitalize on the foundations built by local governance. This year's survey gave Americans the opportunity to offer their own ideas for how to best improve U.S. democracy. It also sought to understand what most motivates Americans to get involved in public affairs.

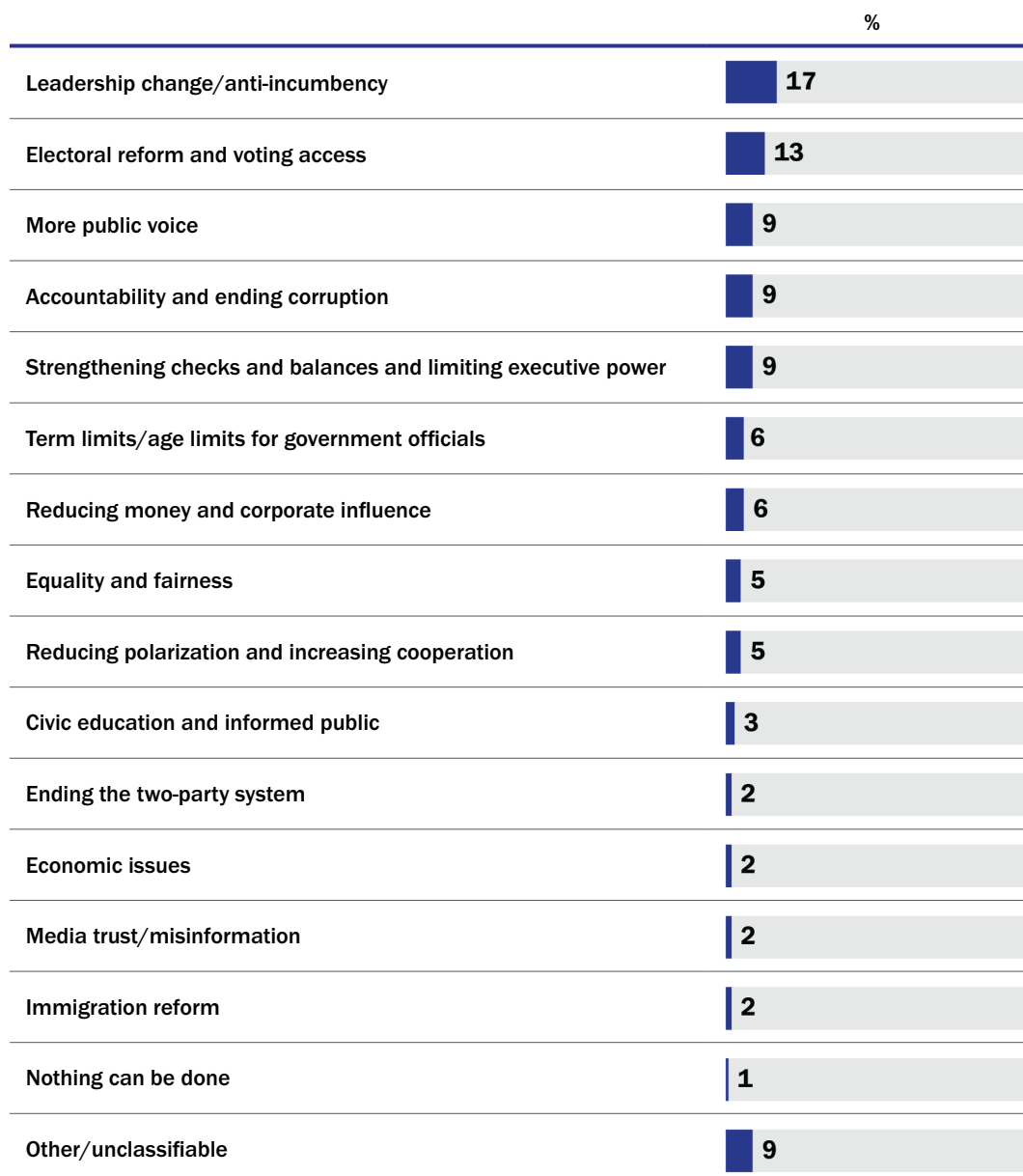
How to Improve U.S. Democracy

The survey asked Americans, in an open-ended question, what is the one thing that can be done to most improve U.S. democracy in the future. Responses to this question were classified using a natural language model, arranging the more than 20,000 answers into broad themes. The most common themes are focused on changing the people who serve in government, changing election laws and access, giving the public more voice in public affairs, and making leaders more accountable.

FIGURE 24

Themes for Improving U.S. Democracy

What is the one thing that could be done that you think would most improve U.S. democracy in the future?



Overall, 17% of respondents identify leadership change or voting incumbent politicians out of office as the best solution. A more in-depth look at these responses finds these respondents want to change specific politicians currently in office (primarily President Donald Trump), are calling for the election of new leaders, generally, or say voters should elect better people (for example, those with higher moral character) to office.

The next largest group of responses, mentioned by 13%, involves a variety of election law reforms. This theme includes specific suggestions, including requiring all voters to show identification when voting (3% mentioned this specifically), abolishing the Electoral College (2%), eliminating gerrymandering of legislative districts (1%) and instituting ranked-choice voting (1%). Most of the rest of the responses in this group expressed more general suggestions to ensure fair elections (3%) or to expand access to voting or make it easier to vote (3%).

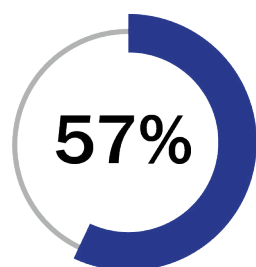
Nine percent mentioned giving the public more say in matters, which includes general suggestions like listening more to the people, attempting to reduce the influence of money and wealth in politics, and encouraging people to exercise their freedom of speech by speaking up to leaders.

Two other broad themes — increasing accountability to voters/ending corruption and strengthening checks and balances to limit executive branch power — were also mentioned by 9% of respondents.

The broad themes for improving democracy were generally shared about equally across subgroups including political affiliation, age and education. One of the larger differences is that Democrats (25%) are more likely than Republicans (9%) and independents (14%) to talk about changing U.S. leadership. The majority of Democrats, independents and Republicans who talk about changing leadership mention removing Trump from the presidency.

Republicans (16%) are modestly more likely than Democrats (10%) and independents (12%) to mention electoral reforms. Republicans who see electoral reform as the best way to improve democracy primarily focus on requiring voter identification for voting (6%) and ensuring fair elections (4%).

Most differences among age groups are modest, but older Americans (those aged 50 and older) are somewhat more likely than younger Americans to want to replace incumbent officials, while younger adults are more likely to want to increase the people's voice in the process.



The desire for leadership change is also apparent in another survey question, which finds that **given a choice, 57% of U.S. adults say they prefer election candidates who challenge powerful groups and established interests**, compared with 42% who prefer candidates who know how to work within established systems and institutions. Younger adults show a stronger preference for candidates who challenge powerful interests than older adults do (60% vs. 53%).

Getting Involved

Citizen involvement in public affairs is one of the hallmarks of democracy. The first year’s survey examined Americans’ involvement in community and national affairs and the major barriers keeping people from participating. The second year’s study takes a different approach by asking Americans what would motivate them to get involved in public affairs.

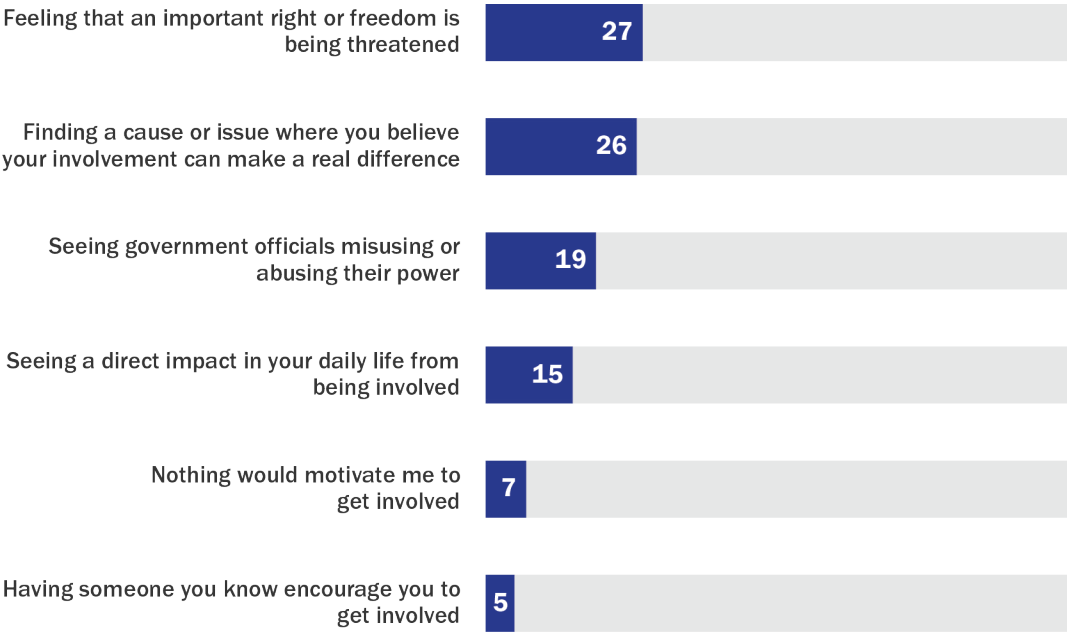
Americans are most likely to get involved in supporting political issues when they feel that an important right or freedom is being threatened (27%) or believe their involvement can make a real difference (26%). Another 19% say that seeing government officials misusing or abusing their power would make them want to get involved, and 15% say seeing a direct impact from their actions would motivate them.

Five percent say that having someone encourage them to participate would be the factor most likely to motivate them to get involved. Because respondents were asked to choose only one motivator, this result likely understates the broader role that invitations and encouragement can play. While few identify it as their primary motivation, being invited may nonetheless be an important complementary factor that helps people act on other motivations to participate.

FIGURE 25
Top Motivations for Getting Involved in Public Affairs

People differ in what motivates them to engage in social or political causes. Regardless of whether or not you are currently involved, which of the following would be most likely to make you get involved in a social or political cause or issue? Choose only one answer.

% Selected



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of “don’t know” responses and/or missing data.

Young Americans are particularly likely to be motivated by making a difference: 29% of Americans aged 18 to 34 say they would be motivated by finding a cause or issue where their involvement can make a real difference, and another 19% say they would be motivated by seeing a direct impact in their daily life from being involved. This contrasts with Americans aged 55 and older, who are most likely to be motivated by an important right or freedom being threatened (30%).

FIGURE 26**Motivations for Getting Involved in Social or Political Causes or Issues, by Age**

	18-34 years old %	35-54 years old %	55+ years old %
Feeling that an important right or freedom is being threatened	25	26	30
Finding a cause or issue where you believe your involvement can make a real difference	29	27	23
Seeing government officials misusing or abusing their power	17	17	22
Seeing a direct impact in your daily life from being involved	19	18	11
Having someone you know encourage you to get involved	6	5	4
Nothing would motivate me to get involved	4	7	10

Note: Ranked by percentage of U.S. adults overall, with “nothing” last.

Seeing a direct impact is also an important motivator for involvement among those who pay less attention to political matters. Twenty-eight percent of U.S. adults who pay less attention to politics indicate that their involvement making a real difference would be motivating, and 18% say seeing a direct impact in their daily life would be motivating. Those who pay more attention to political matters list perceived threats to important rights or freedoms (32%) as the most motivating factor for them to get involved.

FIGURE 27**Motivations for Getting Involved in Social or Political Causes or Issues, by How Much Attention Paid to Government and Political Matters**

	A great deal/A moderate amount %	Almost none/ Very little/Some %
Feeling that an important right or freedom is being threatened	32	19
Finding a cause or issue where you believe your involvement can make a real difference	25	28
Seeing government officials misusing or abusing their power	21	16
Seeing a direct impact in your daily life from being involved	14	18
Having someone you know encourage you to get involved	4	6
Nothing would motivate me to get involved	4	13

Note: Ranked by percentage of U.S. adults overall, with “nothing” last.

Conclusion

The Democracy for All Project continues to highlight a central tension in how Americans experience democracy. While most still believe democracy is the best form of government, an increased majority is critical of how it is functioning in the U.S. Additionally, Americans believe democracy was stronger in the past than it is today, underscoring concerns about the nation's democratic trajectory. These concerns extend to the structure of government itself, with many Americans expressing dissatisfaction with the division of power across institutions and a majority saying the executive branch holds too much power.

Ensuring U.S. democracy fulfills its promise will require stronger institutional performance, including greater accountability for political leaders and a demonstrated ability to respond effectively to the needs of communities. As confidence in the functioning of key democratic institutions declines, Americans' own recommendations for improving democracy reinforce these priorities, with many calling for new elected leaders, reforms to the electoral system and greater opportunities for citizen input.

Americans' more positive evaluations of local democracy also point to conditions that may foster stronger perceptions of democratic performance overall. When people trust their neighbors and local leaders, see tangible examples of democratic functioning through their own actions and the actions of others, and are satisfied with local services, they are more likely to view democracy favorably.

Notably, Americans who view local democracy positively also tend to be more positive about how democracy is doing in the nation as a whole. At a time of growing skepticism about the health of U.S. democracy, preserving the integrity and effectiveness of local democratic institutions could be essential to sustaining Americans' broader commitment to democracy.

Survey Methodology

These results are based on a survey study completed by 23,683 U.S. adults, aged 18 and older. The survey was conducted in English. The Gallup Panel™ recruited 10,800 respondents for the study and supplemented them with 12,883 respondents from a third-party sample provider. In total, 21,652 respondents completed the survey as a web survey between April 24, 2026, and May 21, 2026, and 2,031 respondents completed the survey as a mail survey between April 24, 2026, and June 10, 2026.

The Gallup Panel is a probability-based panel of U.S. adults whom Gallup selects using address-based sampling methods and random-digit-dial phone interviews that cover landlines and cellphones. Demographic targets were specified for the third-party sample provider to improve representativeness of the sample. Gallup uses a multistage weighting process to ensure samples are demographically representative of the U.S. adult population, using the most recent Current Population Survey figures; this process includes weighting data separately for each sample source before combining the sample.

For results based on this sample, the maximum margin of sampling error, which takes into account the design effect from weighting, is ± 1 percentage point at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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The Charles F. Kettering Foundation is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, operating foundation dedicated to advancing inclusive democracies. Through partnerships, research and strategic communications, the foundation fosters citizen engagement, promotes government accountability and counters authoritarianism.

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