

New poll shows what Americans think of America, and it's not great

di Erin Doherty

America's brand is fading from within.

In a bitterly divided country, pessimism and cynicism reign supreme: Two-thirds of Americans say it is at least probably true that the government often deliberately lies to the people. That distrust cuts across partisan lines: Strong majorities of Donald Trump voters (64 percent) and Kamala Harris voters (70 percent) agree.

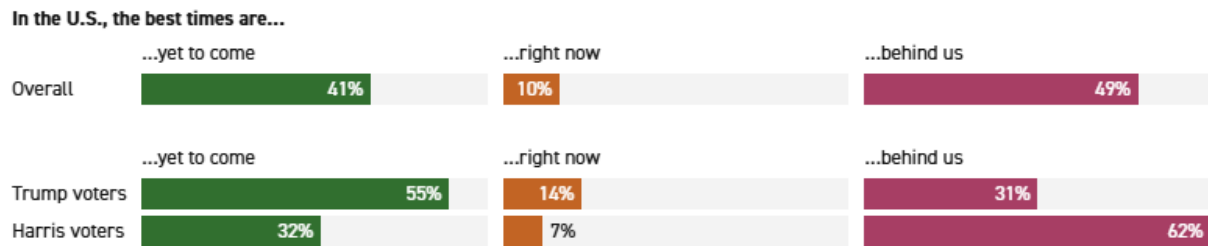
Nearly half of Americans, 49 percent, say that the best times of the country are behind them, [according to The POLITICO Poll by Public First](#). That's greater than the 41 percent who said the best times lie ahead, underscoring a pervasive sense of unease about both individuals' own futures and the national direction.

The exclusive new poll, conducted nearly one year after Trump's reelection, reveals a deep strain of pessimism across the electorate — but especially for Democrats.

People who voted for Harris last year are twice as likely as Trump voters to say the United States' best times are in the past.

America, as a country, is like “someone who is feeling lost, confused, or beat up ... or uncertain of what to do, and looking around and saying this isn't right, this isn't the way,” said Maury Giles, the CEO of Braver Angels, a nonprofit that works to bridge partisan divides.

Democrats are more pessimistic than Republicans



Note: The poll surveyed 2,051 U.S. adults from Oct. 18 to 21 and has an overall margin of error of ± 2.2 percentage points. Subgroups have larger margins of error.

Source: The Politico Poll with Public First
Jonathan Lai/POLITICO

Asked about “the best times” in the United States, only a small number of people cited the present moment.

Instead, nearly two-thirds of Harris voters said the best times in the U.S. were in the past, double the share of Trump voters who believe that. A 55 percent majority of Trump voters said the best times still lie ahead.

That’s likely at least partly a reflection of a partisan pattern of expressing optimism when one’s party is in the White House, and pessimism when it is not.

“Americans will divide on how they view the country’s doing depending on who is in office and which party they identify with,” said Jennifer McCoy, a political scientist at Georgia State University who focuses on political partisanship.

Americans’ views may flip in the future, when control of the White House and government next change — but for now, Democrats’ negative views are pervasive.

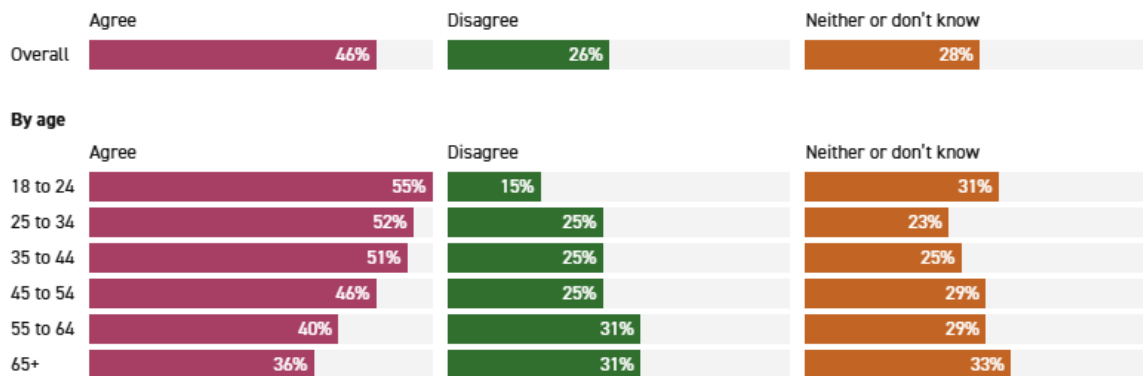
More than half of Harris voters, 51 percent, say that America is not a functioning democracy, while 52 percent of Trump voters take the opposite view and say the U.S. is a model.

The view from Democrats is so gloomy that a solid majority of Harris voters — 70 percent — say the quality of life in the U.S. is at least somewhat worse than it was five years ago, a period that was marked by the turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread racial justice protests and a contentious presidential election. Meanwhile, a 42 percent plurality of Trump voters say the quality of life in the U.S. is at least somewhat better than it was five years ago.

That dynamic even extends to views of the world at large: More than three-quarters — 76 percent — of Harris voters say the state of the world is at least somewhat worse than it was five years ago, compared to 44 percent of Trump voters who agree.

Many people don't believe the American Dream exists

Percentage of Americans who agree or disagree with the statement "The American dream no longer exists."



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On a personal level, faith in the American Dream has also fallen. The idea — once considered a national ethos about the ability to better one's life through hard work and discipline — was not specifically defined in the poll, which asked more generally about the statement that "the American Dream no longer exists."

Overall, almost half — 46 percent — of Americans said that the American Dream no longer exists. That was by far the most common answer, far greater than the 26 percent who disagreed.

A slight majority of Harris voters, 51 percent, agreed that the American Dream no longer exists, while last year's Trump voters were even split, with 38 percent agreeing and 38 percent disagreeing.

The declining belief in the American Dream, which has been mirrored in other [national surveys](#), reflects a pessimism about today's economy, said McCoy.

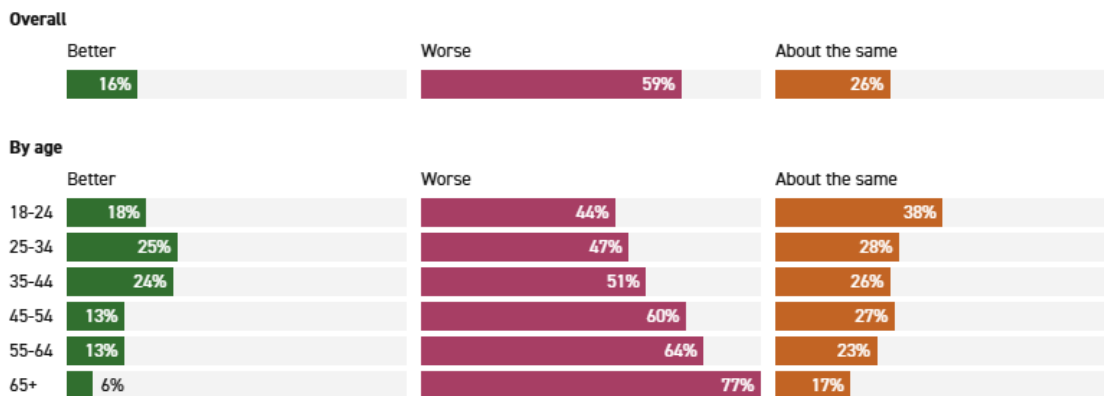
There's also a stark age divide, with younger Americans more likely to say the American Dream no longer exists. More than half of Americans 18-24 — 55 percent — agree, compared to 36 percent of Americans over 65.

“In economic terms, social mobility has been getting worse and worse, and that social mobility is basically the indicator of the American Dream,” she said. “And young people especially ... are feeling that, feeling that they can't buy a house, they can't afford to have children, they still have student debt, all of these things,” she continued.

The sense of pessimism about the future comes amid a widening perception of political polarization.

Americans know they're polarized, and say it's getting worse

Percentage of Americans who say political polarization in the U.S. is better or worse than five years ago.



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More than half of U.S. adults, 59 percent, said that political polarization is “much” or “somewhat” worse than it was five years ago, with Americans over 65 much more likely to hold that view, according to the survey.

Americans' divisions are also reflected in their personal lives, with 61 percent of Americans saying that most of their friends share their political views. That cuts across party — 65 percent of Trump voters, 67 percent of Harris voters — and age and gender divides, according to the survey.

Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) warned in an interview last week that American politics had been degraded by the internet and a culture of anonymous vitriol.

“Anonymity makes anger worse and gets people really ginned up,” Paul told POLITICO’s Dasha Burns for [“The Conversation.”](#) He faulted people whose “expertise and ... excellence is in anger and emitting anger.”

Forty-one percent of Americans say they do not have a close friend at all who votes for a different party than them, with younger Americans and those who supported Harris more likely to say that is the case.

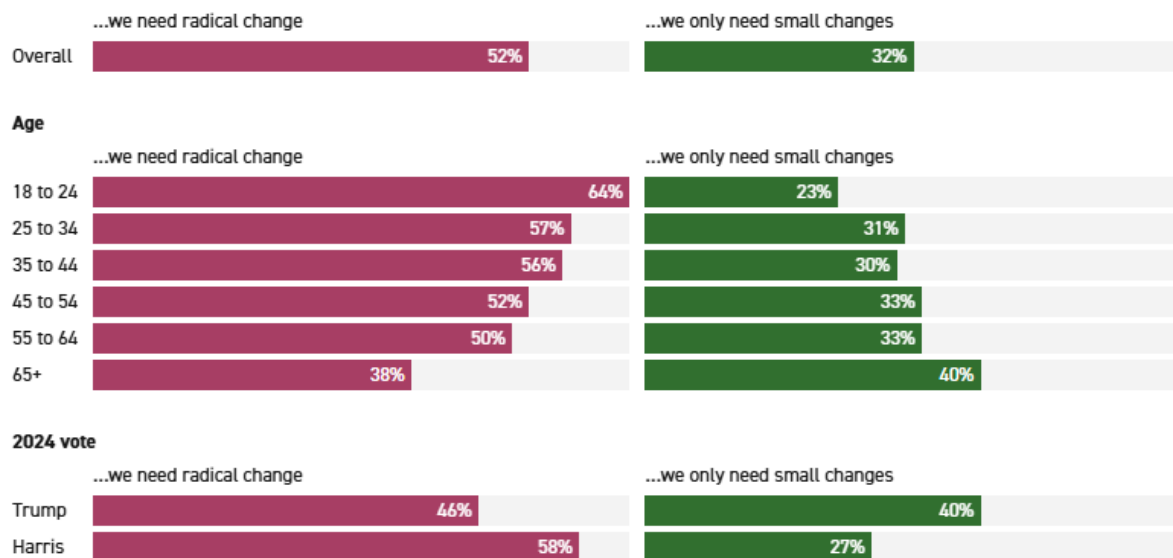
The increasingly segmented society has exacerbated Americans’ pessimism, Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), a frequent critic of the Trump White House, told POLITICO.

“We have a crisis of connection and meaning in this country, and Trump is a symptom, not the cause, of that crisis,” he said.

“We are built to want to feel a sense of common purpose, but we live in a world today in which we spend less time with our family and our friends and our peers than ever before,” he added.

Americans say 'radical change' is needed

Which of the following comes closest to your view? To make life better in America...



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Americans' general malaise has fueled an appetite for overhaul in the country, with a slight majority (52 percent) believing that "radical change" is necessary to make life better in America.

Younger Americans are particularly likely to hold that view, and more Harris voters agree with the need for radical change than Trump voters.

Roughly one-third of Americans go even further: Thirty-five percent say the U.S. needs a revolution — a view that, broadly, cuts across party lines, with 39 percent of Harris voters and 32 percent of Trump voters holding that view.

But even as pessimism about the future persists for many Americans, pride endures. Almost two-thirds of Americans — 64 percent — say they are proud to be an American, according to the poll.

"Americans need hope and they need confidence," Giles said. "The vast majority of this country understands that what is happening right now is not healthy, it is not sustainable."