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Ongoing Research on Democratic Reforms

Welcome to NAVIGATOR — a project designed to better understand the American public's views on issues of the day and help advocates, elected officials, and other interested parties understand the language, imagery and messaging needed to make and win key policy arguments.

This memo includes analysis from two national surveys conducted by GBAO, fielded July 9-14 and August 24-27, 2020 respectively. Both surveys were national online surveys of 1000 interviews, each with oversamples of 150 interviews among Black, Latinx,

and AAPI voters (450 total oversample per survey). This memo also includes September 2019 focus groups in four markets (Newark, Minnesota, Houston, and Jackson) with a variety of audiences. More information about Navigator and past waves of its research can be found [here](#).

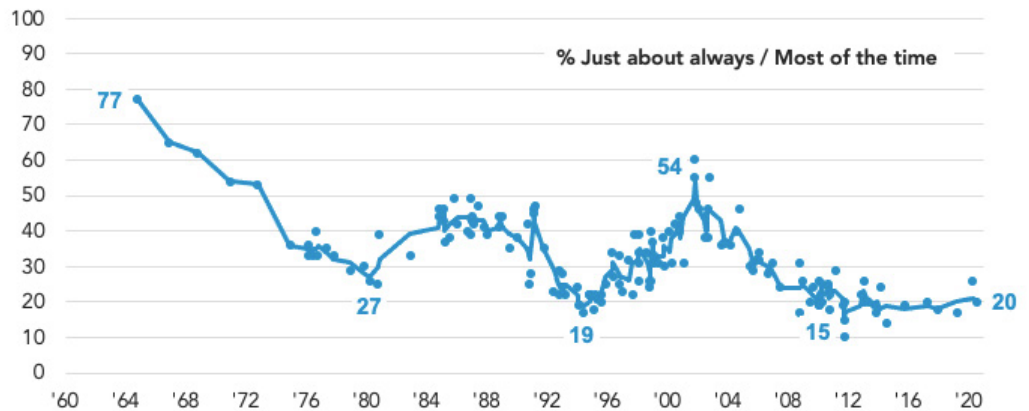
With long declining trust in the federal government, there is wide agreement on the structural problems our country currently faces. Yet at the same time, many continue to be optimistic, and show widespread interest in a variety of big solutions.

Key Findings

There is widespread, increasing awareness that the country is on the wrong track and major change to the way government works is needed. No matter the measure, the assessment is the same. Two-thirds say we need to make “major” changes in the way our government works. Pew finds trust in government has been low for a decade—lower than at almost any time since they began asking the question in 1958. Current polling averages show about two-thirds feel America is on the wrong track. And a plurality feel America is in decline, rather than feeling its best days are ahead of us.

Trust in Government Has Settled At Well Below The Historical Average

How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, never)



Compiled by Pew Research. References polling from Pew Research, NES, Gallup, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and CNN polls.

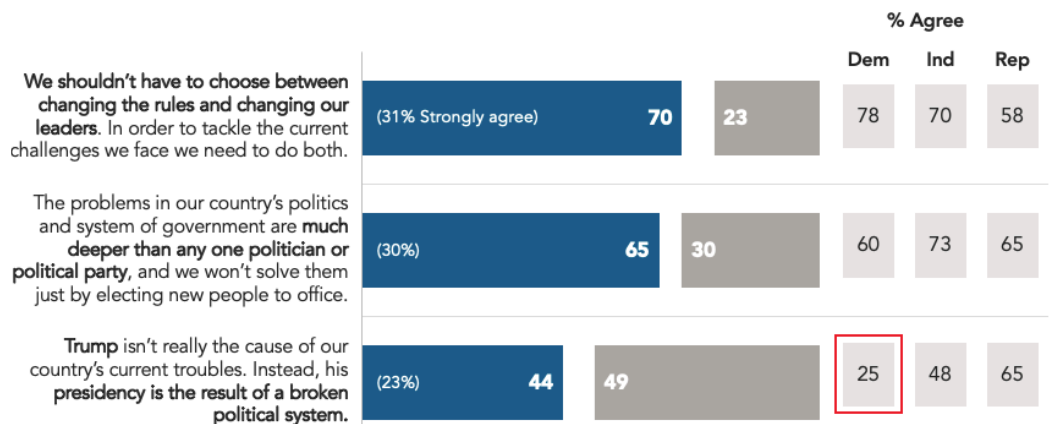
Most see this year’s election as critical, but confidence in leaders is deeply partisan and broadly lacking. With this backdrop, there is a clear sign of partisan agreement: most feel this election will have a big impact on their family. On this front, Democrats (78% agree) are no different than Republicans (80% agree). And while Democrats and Republicans only trust their own party’s leaders to “address the major challenges facing our country today” majorities of independents have little trust in either presidential candidate or party.

The specific problems are vast and numerous. From a series of national problems (such as “partisanship and political divisions,” “structural racism and discrimination” or “public K-12 education”), every single one is seen as “getting worse” rather than “getting better.” We also tested a series of more fully articulated problems with our democracy, and majorities find each of these to be either “a crisis” or “major problem.”

When presented with a choice between reforming our leaders versus the system overall, voters reject this as a false choice. Many don’t initially see “the system” as the problem, as much as “bad apples.” In our 2019 focus groups, participants around the country spoke of corruption in government, “back scratching” and deal-making. Yet when presented with a choice, most agree we should improve both our system and our leaders (70%).

Voters Reject A False Choice Between Changing Our Leaders And Changing Our Broader System

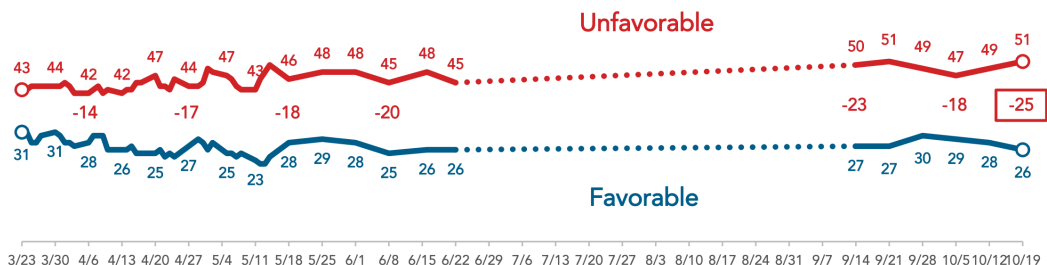
Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?



Mitch McConnell could be a proofpoint of both bad actor and structural obstacle. In our 2019 groups, some volunteered unprompted that McConnell was behind partisan Washington gridlock. Our longtime Navigator tracking shows he's been steadily unpopular, with only tepid support among Republicans (48% favorable, 25% unfavorable).

McConnell Has Remained Unpopular, With Weak Base Support

How favorable or unfavorable are you to Mitch McConnell?



Yet despite all this, many prefer to feel optimistic about America's future. American optimism is of course not a new observation. But it is confirmed once again in our survey. Majorities across party lines believe COVID, the economy, and protests are a "period of difficulty, but ultimately our system of democracy and government is resilient, and we will recover." Just over a quarter say recent events suggest "our government is ultimately failing and will never recover." Black voters are unsurprisingly more divided (51% recover, 43% may never recover).

Voters see a wide variety of big structural solutions as having a positive effect. With voters diagnosing the country's challenges as both varied and serious, nearly everything in our list of solutions is seen as likely to have a positive effect. Top-tier proposals include both campaign finance reforms and broader structural reforms of the Supreme Court and Congress. Every proposal is viewed to have more positive impact than negative. Only increasing the number of justices has truly mixed results, yet is still more positive than negative (31% positive, 22% negative—note this survey was conducted prior to Justice Ginsberg's passing).

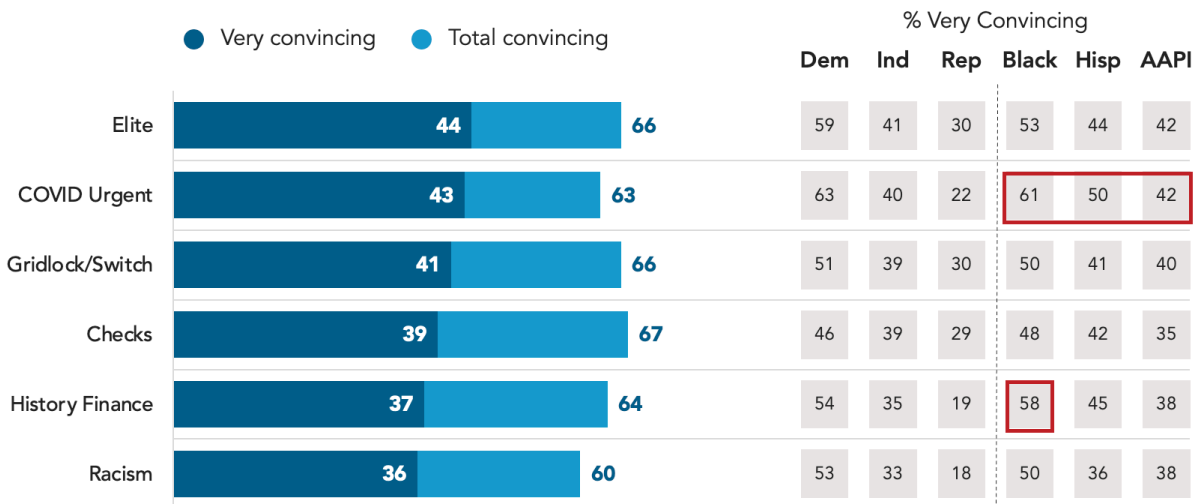
Voters (Even Republicans) Find Filibuster, Campaign Finance, Voting, Redistricting, And SCOTUS Reforms Largely Beneficial

Please indicate what kind of impact you think each of the changes described below would have in making government work better for the people it represents.

	Positive	None/Don't Know	Negative	% Positive Impact		
				Dem	Ind	Rep
Get rid of the loophole that allows a small minority of U.S. senators to block legislation that a majority of senators support.	67	23	10	75	66	58
End corporate spending on political campaigns.	66	26	8	77	67	52
Allow only small-dollar donations to political campaigns, and ban all contributions from corporations and special interests.	66	24	10	69	69	60
Make vote by mail or in-person early voting - which is already used in some states, and for absentee and overseas military voters - available across the country.	65	19	16	84	61	45
Require that boundaries for all congressional districts be drawn by an independent non-partisan	63	29	8	68	60	61
Require term limits for Supreme Court justices.	57	28	15	63	55	51

Reform messages can be grounded in the power of elites, but also a historical context. Many voters—particularly across party lines—respond to messaging around elitism, specifically “a tiny wealthy elite, who in turn pour billions of dollars into elections and lobbying to make sure that politicians work for them, instead of for us.” At the same time Democratic constituencies, particularly Black voters, respond to reform’s historical context.

Overall, Inequality, COVID, and Gridlock frames work well though with some GOP Pushback On COVID; Historical Context Works Well With Black Voters. For each statement, please indicate whether it is a very convincing, somewhat convincing, a little convincing, or not at all convincing...



Some reforms face low information or generate confusion. In 2019, majorities had heard little about a variety of reform proposals. Even in an open-ended discussion, many are unfamiliar with the technical details of filibusters, voting rules, campaign finance, redistricting, and the like. We recommend finding accessible definitions and not assuming extensive prior knowledge. For example, we found calling the filibuster “a loophole” boosts that proposal’s support.

Appendix: Reform Arguments In Full

Elite	Over the last 40 years, wealth has transferred from the poor and the middle class to a tiny wealthy elite, who in turn pour billions of dollars into elections and lobbying to make sure that politicians work for them, instead of for us. We need real change that puts power back in the hands of ordinary people.
Gridlock/Switch	Partisan gridlock in Washington is preventing our government from doing its job and passing things most voters want like background checks for every gun purchase or access to health care for everyone. Voters care about change, not parties and politicians, and no matter which party is in charge, the gridlock remains the same. We need leaders willing to make the changes needed to deliver results rather than playing partisan games.
Checks	It’s not just a few bad apples – the checks and balances in our political system have failed, with special interests and career politicians using the system to enrich themselves at our expense. We need to use the democratic processes in our Constitution to create new, stronger checks to restore balance to our government. We don’t need to just elect better leaders; we need to improve our political system overall.
Racism	A small handful of senators used obscure rules to block the 1964 Civil Rights Act for months, hoping to stop its passage. In the decades since, politicians have exploited that same loophole to stop progress – not just on issues like racial inequality and police brutality, but also on health care, voting rights, and background checks for gun purchases. We need to get rid of this loophole immediately so we can overcome the major challenges facing our country today.
History Finance	When African-Americans and women were denied the right to vote, we changed our Constitution. After the Great Depression, we transformed our banking laws. After Watergate, we updated our campaign finance laws. Our history demands we make major changes when our government no longer responds to our needs.
COVID Urgent	The pandemic has shown us how flawed our government is today. Because our government failed to act quickly, almost 200,000 Americans have died from COVID, more than the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan all combined. And now Congress can’t even agree to extend unemployment insurance for people who just lost their jobs. A government is only as good as its response in an emergency, and this failure shows we need to make major changes to how our political system works.

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About Navigator

In a world where the news cycle is the length of a tweet, our leaders often lack the real-time public-sentiment analysis to shape the best approaches to talking about the issues that matter the most. Navigator is designed to act as a consistent, flexible, responsive tool to inform policy debates by conducting research and reliable guidance to inform allies, elected leaders, and the press. Navigator is a project led by pollsters from Global Strategy Group and GBAO along with an advisory committee, including: Andrea Purse, progressive strategist; Arkadi Gerney, The Hub Project; Christina Reynolds, EMILY's List; Delvone Michael, Working Families; Felicia Wong, Roosevelt Institute; Mike Podhorzer, AFL-CIO; Jesse Ferguson, progressive strategist; Joel Payne, The Hub Project; Navin Nayak, Center for American Progress Action Fund; Stephanie Valencia, EquisLabs; and Melanie Newman, Planned Parenthood Action Fund.

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To learn more about Navigator: <http://navigatorresearch.org/>