

Battleground Civility Poll
Frustration and Division Continue, but Hope Remains

Republican Analysis

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This latest edition of the Georgetown University Institute of Politics and Public Service national poll on political civility, which fielded January 22-27, 2022, one year after President Biden took office with a message of unity, even with the events of January 6th foremost in voters' minds. That message of unity quickly faded when the first major piece of legislation of the Biden Administration was quickly passed without a single Republican vote. Since that first vote the road to bringing the country together has been littered with speed bumps, and not just speed bumps provided by the opposition party or manufactured by Fox News.

Over the last year, not only has there been several surges of COVID keeping the pandemic front and center, but there was also the collapse of Afghanistan, continued flareups of problems at our southern border, and endless reboots of infrastructure legislation that the overwhelming percent of voters supported. Meanwhile, those in Congress fighting over increasing government spending seem to pay little or no attention to voters very real concerns about inflation, cost of living, jobs, and an unstable economy.

It's not surprising that voters continue to be frustrated with the political environment given the challenging economic climate voters find themselves facing. Voters are anxious and frustrated about the present and voter frustrations with the current political environment are evident throughout this data. Fully sixty-two percent (62%) of voters think the country is on the wrong track, including a majority (50%) of voters who strongly believe this. This dissatisfaction crosses many demographics with majorities of men, women, younger voters, middle aged voters, and seniors all thinking the country is off on the wrong track.

However, in a difference in perspective that is seen repeatedly in this data, majorities of African Americans and Democrats think the country is headed in the right direction. Most voters are frustrated with the direction of the country, but these two key constituencies for those running Congress and the White House think the country is headed in the right direction. These split views

make it challenging for Democratic national leaders to address problems not seen as priorities to their base voters.

It is important to note that this tendency to have the incumbent party of the White House feel the country is going in the right direction is not unusual, but when the national right direction/wrong track numbers get upside down with over 60% of the electorate responding wrong track it is a sign that independent voters are siding with the out-party. That and the traditional intensity advantage of the out-party usually spells trouble for the party of the White House in the off-year elections.

The most important issue matrix creates another problem. As seen on the chart below, fully eight (8) issues are selected as a top two concern by at least fifteen percent (15%) of the electorate. There is no singular issue on which politicians can act and expect to build significant voter goodwill. Voters concerns range from economic concerns like rising cost of living and jobs to health issues like COVID-19 and health care to national issues like immigration and climate change.

Issue	Most important issue	Next most important issue	Combined choices
Rising cost of living	13%	10%	23%
Jobs and the economy	11%	11%	22%
Division in the country	12%	9%	21%
COVID-19	10%	8%	18%
Climate change	10%	8%	18%
Government spending	9%	9%	18%
Immigration	8%	8%	16%
Health care	6%	9%	15%
Crime and drugs	4%	5%	9%
Racism	4%	4%	8%
National defense and terrorism	2%	5%	7%
Taxes	2%	3%	5%

As seen on the chart, there are also significant partisan differences in issues of concern. Democrats are significantly more concerned about COVID-19 and climate change. In contrast, Republicans are focused on fiscal issues and immigration while Independents are concerned about division in our nation.

Also included in the chart below are centrists – a vote segmentation of those voters who are not either a very conservative Republican or a very liberal Democrat and who comprise about 65% of the electorate. While their views are diverse, they have a notable level of concern about pocketbook issues like inflation and jobs.

Most Important Issue	GOP	IND	DEM	Centrists
Rising cost of living	17%	11%	9%	14%
Jobs and the economy	14%	10%	8%	13%
Division in the country	10%	16%	12%	12%
COVID-19	2%	7%	19%	10%
Climate change	2%	7%	19%	8%
Government spending	16%	14%	2%	9%
Immigration	16%	2%	1%	5%
Health care	1%	7%	9%	7%
Crime and drugs	6%	5%	2%	4%
Racism	0%	4%	7%	3%
National defense and terrorism	4%	2%	0%	2%
Taxes	2%	1%	2%	3%

The Democrats in control of Congress and the White House will be in the challenging position of showing action on the issues of top concern to their most important stakeholders or of showing action on issues of broader concern but of less interest to their key voters.

In their perceptions of civility, voters are pessimistic and frustrated. More than six-in-ten (68%) voters think politics has been less civil since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, more than six-in-ten Republicans, Independents, and Democrats share this view about the decreasing level of political civility since the beginning of this crisis. It is challenging to find common ground for growth when most voters think that ground has gotten less fertile over the last two years.

A similar trend is seen for President Biden. The President has repeatedly talked about bringing more civil discourse to our politics. However, most voters (60%) think politics has been less civil (43%) or about the same (27%) in terms of civility during President Biden's time in office. Even a majority of liberal Democrats (54%) think politics has gotten less civil (17%) or about the same (37%) during President Biden's time in office. Voters are not seeing actions to match the rhetoric about improving civility, leading 58% of the electorate to believe violent protests like those of January 6th are likely.

This is an ominous trend. A majority (58%) of voters think the events of January 6 make it more likely that there will be more violent political protests in the future. This includes even a majority (50%) of voters in states where Trump won with 55%+ of the vote. It can be hard to try to meet your political opponents in the middle if you think they might embrace violence as a solution.

An aspirational question about the most important value for our leaders to have yielded diverse selections ranging from freedom (33%) to responsibility (23%) to respect (18%) to stability (11%). It is challenging to imagine a politician skillful enough to project the willingness to protect freedom and maintain stability while also being seen as responsible and respectful in seeking policy solutions.

Indeed, respect is a value that voters distribute in limited quantities. As seen on the next page, no political figure or entity has a lot of respect from more than two-in-five voters. In contrast, with the exception of governors every politician and organization has a no respect score with at least one quarter of the electorate.

Amount of respect	A lot	Some	A little	No respect	Unsure/Refused
Dr. Anthony Fauci	40%	13%	11%	33%	5%
Your state's governor	35%	23%	17%	23%	2%
The Black Lives Matter movement	33%	21%	11%	32%	4%
President Joe Biden	31%	23%	12%	34%	1%
Donald Trump	24%	17%	11%	46%	1%
Nancy Pelosi	22%	19%	11%	45%	3%
Members of the Democratic Party	19%	32%	21%	26%	2%
Large newspapers like <i>The Washington Post</i> and <i>The New York Times</i>	19%	25%	15%	30%	11%
Members of the Republican Party	16%	32%	22%	26%	4%
CNN	16%	25%	12%	38%	9%
MSNBC	15%	24%	15%	34%	12%
Fox News	13%	21%	20%	41%	5%
U.S. Senator Mitch McConnell	7%	27%	20%	37%	10%

Among all the politicians and entities tested, just three have “a lot” scores higher than their “no respect” scores. Respect is a fundamental building block for finding common ground. Having it in such limited supply is a notable obstacle for improving political civility.

All of these attitudes and experiences lead voters to be quite concerned about political division in the country. On a 0-100 scale with 0 being no political division and 100 being political division on the edge of a civil war, the mean score for voters on the current level of political division is 70.36. When asked where they think division will be in one year, voters are slightly more optimistic and provide a mean score of 68.32.

This data does have a bright spot and hope for the future. A majority of voters (58%) agree with the assertion that “I am optimistic about the future because young people are committed to making this country a better place to live for everyone.”.

However, even on this rosy statement, there is a partisan divide. Majorities of Democrats (82%) and Independents (51%) agree with this statement. In contrast, among Republicans just thirty-four percent (34%) agree versus a majority of Republicans (61%) who disagree.

The mark of a good political leader is one who knows the right times to sacrifice immediate and fleeting triumphs in service of solutions that serve the long term good. This data marks the challenges this altruistic approach will face. Voters are frustrated now and have limited respect for their leaders now. Platitudes about how things will eventually get better will not work.

Politicians with the policy skill to know what issues are worthy of forward thinking solutions and the rhetorical skill to convince their constituents that this is the correct approach will be seen as remarkable leaders by voters. Having even a handful of politicians succeed at operating at this level will be a cause for celebration. Ambitious politicians are always looking for tactics they can use to advance. Having role models who are improving their political standing by promoting civility will spur other political leaders into doing the same.

Again, there are some signs in the data that even with the negative reaction to the current political environment voters are yet somewhat hopeful for the future regarding political civility. While reviews are still mixed on the control of the Senate changing hands, most feel the chances of the Republicans gaining control of the U.S. House of Representatives at better than fifty-fifty. Maybe, just maybe, that may cut the bindings of the progressive party leaders amongst the Democratic Party and allow President Biden to govern from his more centrist roots.

It is a tribute to the fundamental optimism of the American electorate that voters continue to have hope for the future despite their reasonable frustrations with the present. The real question that cannot be answered with a survey is how we get the political environment to a point that that optimism can truly grow.