

Battleground Civility Poll **Voters Remain Frustrated, but Solutions Are Available**

Republican Analysis
By: Ed Goeas and Brian Nienaber

Introduction and Overview

This latest edition of the Georgetown University Institute of Politics and Public Service national poll on political civility, which fielded September 10-14, 2023, continues to find an electorate frustrated by the status quo, but willing to embrace politicians committed to finding solutions.

While there will always be challenges for elected leaders who work for solutions instead of agitating for paid media attention, this data makes clear that voters are ready embrace these efforts to find common ground and solutions.

Much of this analysis will highlight the views of voters we have labelled as centrists. These are voters who do not identify as very conservative Republicans and do not identify as very liberal Democrats. These voters in the wide ideological and political middle compromise sixty-five percent (65%) of the electorate. These voters who are not rigidly committed to one end or the other of the ideological spectrum make a broad and useful target for political leaders looking to find voters who will support their efforts to find common ground solutions.

Voters remain frustrated and pessimistic

Voters continue to be frustrated and pessimistic about the current political environment. A majority of voters (68%) think the country is off on the wrong track, including a majority (55%) of voters who strongly believe this. There are political and ideological divides on this view. Those centrists discussed in the introduction are decidedly negative (63% wrong track), but majorities of Republicans (91%), Independents (68%), and conservatives (87%) think the country is on the wrong track. In contrast, a plurality of Democrats (48%) and a majority of liberals (51%) think the country is headed in the right direction. The power of holding the White House provides comfort to liberal Democrats.

Fully 72% of voters believe their personal values are under attack in our current culture, including a majority (59%) of voters who strongly believe this. A strong majority of centrists (68%) think their personal values are under attack as does an overwhelming majority of Republicans (90%). In addition, majorities of Independents (60%) and even Democrats (58%) share this view. When you believe that your values are under attack, previously unthinkable responses become reasonable. A key goal for our political discourse should be to emphasize the importance of solutions in which all voters can see victory and not emphasize seeking the defeat of those holding opposing views.

Asked to rate the level of political division in the country on a 0-100 scale where 100 means edge of a civil war, the mean response is 72.9 and six-in-ten (60%) voters give a rating of 75 or above. Asked to rate where they think the level of political division in the country will be in one year, the mean response is 73.6 and fifty-eight percent (58%) of voters give a rating of 75 or above. Having majorities of voters thinking the country is now and will be closer to civil war than peaceful tranquility has a corrosive impact on the political climate. If you think your opponents might be ready to secede, it becomes that much harder to meet them in middle ground for solutions.

A majority of voters (56%) agree that woke culture and its impact are a serious problem. While a majority of voters do hold this view, this concern is very much driven by conservatives. Among voters in the centrist segmentation, a majority of centrists (54%) do agree that this is an issue. However, on the ideological poles, fully 91% of very conservative Republicans think this is serious problem while fully 81% of very liberal Democrats do not think this a problem.

More than eight-in-ten voters (88%) agree that politicians trying to control what is being taught in school is a serious problem. This is clearly an issue where voters on both sides of the political spectrum think the other side is trying to influence educational policy. Groups ranging from Republicans (89%), Independents (88%), Democrats (86%), conservatives (88%), moderates (89%), liberals (87%), and even parents (92%) and non-parents (87%) think this is a serious problem. No one wants politicians in the classroom, but almost all voters think this is occurring.

Fully 81% of voters agree that the political division in our country today is worse than it has ever been. This pessimistic assertion has the agreement of strong majorities of Republicans (89%), Independents (80%), and Democrats (73%). This is a bold assertion considering all the strife and struggles our country has endured, but clearly more needs to be done to assure voters that while things can be heated now, we have endured through some pretty fractious times.

Voter anxiety is fueling voter discontent

The issues of concern to voters are also fueling this discontent. Voters are offered three choices for their top area of issue concern – economic issues like jobs and inflation, cultural issues like critical race theory or gender issues, or abortion. A majority of voters (52%) select economic issues while another 26% of voters select abortion and 18% of voters select cultural issues.

It is very challenging to enact policies that alleviate economic anxiety. Voters who are fearful of being unemployed or being hurt by inflation are not likely to have their concerns assuaged by a law designed to encourage more hiring or by the efforts of the Federal Reserve to control inflation through monetary policy. A voter's perception of their economic situation is a deeply personal attitude driven by their unique situation. It is hard to shift this perception through either policy or persuasion.

In a similar way, the Dobbs decision and the state laws which have followed have led a significant number of voters to believe that access to abortion will or may soon be severely restricted. Absent a federal law that has been affirmed to be constitutional by the Supreme Court, it is hard to conceive of what could be done to dampen this concern.

Looking at some key political demographics, a majority of centrist voters (55%) select economic issues followed by abortion (24%) and social issues (17%). The real challenge will be for Democratic politicians. While majorities of Republicans (66%) and Independents (60%) select economic issues, Democrats divide evenly between economic issues (37%) and abortion (37%). Many Democratic partisans will expect action on abortion, but Democrats will be challenged to find Republicans willing to work with them on this issue, particularly at the expense of focusing on economic issues.

Frustration but at least others share your concerns

Voters were asked if all, most, some, or none of their close friends and family share this item. As seen in the chart below, majorities of voters indicate that all or most of their close friends and family share quite a few qualities.

Close friends/family share this item?	All	Most	All + Most
Has the same views on racial issues as you	26%	41%	67%
Are in the same ethnic group as you	29%	35%	64%
Has the same views on economic issues as you	22%	36%	58%
Has the same views on social issues as you	16%	41%	57%
Share the same political beliefs as you	16%	38%	54%
Are in the same economic class as you	14%	36%	50%
Share same religious views as you	16%	31%	47%
Gets their news from the same sources as you	8%	18%	26%
Have the same type of job as you	4%	8%	12%

Indeed, among the qualities that do not have a majority score for all plus most, there are two institutions – religion and employment – at which Americans have formed lasting bonds for many years.

One can easily see how this level of insularity can fuel negative voter sentiment. When most of your close friends and family share your views on race, economic issues, social issues, political issues as well as are of the same race and economic status as you, the likelihood of hearing dissenting arguments about your frustrations with the national economy or political seem quite dim. On all the issues or perspectives on which one might benefit from hearing other points of view, most voters are not getting different perspectives.

No heroes on the horizon to solve this problem

From Frank Capra to Aaron Sorkin, the Hollywood view of DC sells the illusion that brave, articulate, and persistent political leaders are waiting in the wings to unite the country with their heroic and selfless leadership.

This data finds that voters do not see a Mr. Smith or Jeb Bartlett waiting to inspire us. Voters were asked to rate a variety of leaders and institutions by level of respect. As seen below, just one institution, the U.S. military, had a majority score for a lot of respect.

Level of respect	A lot	Some	A little	None	UND
The U.S. military	67%	25%	5%	3%	1%
Law enforcement	49%	35%	10%	5%	0%
President Joe Biden	28%	22%	14%	36%	1%
The Supreme Court	27%	31%	25%	16%	1%
Donald Trump	25%	18%	8%	48%	1%
Your local school board	24%	44%	13%	11%	9%
Members of the Democratic Party	22%	36%	16%	25%	1%
Your state legislature	20%	41%	19%	17%	3%
The U.S. justice system	18%	46%	21%	14%	1%
Large religious institutions	17%	43%	19%	18%	3%
Members of the Republican Party	13%	38%	21%	28%	1%
Large corporations	6%	42%	27%	25%	1%
Congress	6%	42%	32%	18%	2%
Large social media platforms	3%	25%	34%	35%	3%

On these questions of respect, voter enthusiasm was quite limited. Both President Biden and Donald Trump have a lot scores under thirty percent as do storied institutions like the Supreme Court, members of both the Democratic and Republican parties, the U.S. justice system, and Congress.

Indeed, the ratings among subgroups for some of these figures are striking. Just 13% of Republicans indicate they have a lot (4%) or some (9%) respect for President Biden though he is at 57% combined a lot (31%) or some (26%) respect among centrists. For Donald Trump, just 5% of Democrats indicate they have a lot (1%) or some (4%) respect for him though he is at 36% combined a lot (17%) or some (19%) respect among centrists.

In addition, large social media platforms, a key source of news and entertainment for millions of voters, have a strong majority of voters (69%) who say they have a little (34%) or no respect (35%) for these platforms.

Salvation by Action

Voter attitudes about the political environment seem unlikely to improve via legislative action on issues or by hearing differing perspectives in their familial or social circle or by inspirational political leadership. What this survey does find is that there is broad support for a restoration of political civility. There is no doubt this course of action is challenging, but voters are ready to reward politicians who seek compromise, solutions, and civility.

Statement	Agree	<i>Agree strongly</i>
Respect for each other is the first step in having a government that works.	94%	72%
Civility is the language of respect.	89%	59%
Compromise and common ground should be the goal for political leaders.	83%	54%
I'm tired of leaders compromising my values and ideals. I want leaders who will stand up to the other side.	82%	54%
On the issues most important to me, I think my side has already compromised enough. The other side now needs to give a little.	76%	48%
I think it is ok for my side to compromise a little more if it means getting something done. Getting something done is better than getting nothing done.	71%	31%

As seen above, there is broad and intense agreement on the need for respect and civility. Also of note, is the challenging course for any politician attempting to uphold these ideals as eight-two percent (82%) of voters agree they are tired of leaders compromising their values and seventy-six percent (76%) of voters think their side has already compromised enough while seventy-one percent (71%) of voters are ok with additional compromise in service of getting something done.

This is a challenging situation for even the most skilled politician. What are the values on which their constituents do not want to compromise and where they have already conceded enough and what the values on which a little compromise to get to a solution is acceptable.

These split views indicate that politicians need to have signature issues for which they are known and for which they hold fast to their views. If the electorate sees this commitment to these signature issues, they will be willing to give their elected representatives latitude to find common ground solutions on the remaining issues.

Conclusion

The hit musical Hamilton features a poignant moment when President George Washington urges Alexander Hamilton to work with his political opponents to find a solution on a significant policy issue. Washington offers the maxim that “winning was easy...governing is harder”. What follows is Hamilton negotiating the real life compromise that among other things brought Washington, DC into existence. Hamilton gets much of what he wants and indeed much of the strength of our modern economy is due to his foresight.

Political leaders in this city created by this compromise and leaders across the country would do well to follow Hamilton’s example. It can be frustrating and challenging to be civil and respectful and to seek compromise with one’s adversaries, but the good policy outcomes and the electoral goodwill created by these actions will be more than worth the initial struggle.