

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

What Do Americans Think?



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THE 2019 YANKELOVICH
DEMOCRACY MONITOR
REPORT

 PUBLIC AGENDA

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY:
What Do Americans Think?

The 2019 Yankelovich Democracy Monitor Report
from Public Agenda
by David Schleifer and Antonio Diep

The Kettering Foundation served as a collaborator
in this research.

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STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY: What Do Americans Think?

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly every day, Americans are confronted with evidence that our politics are broken and our democracy is not working as it should. So what do Americans think we should do to improve our politics and renew our democracy? This is the question that Public Agenda, in partnership with the Kettering Foundation, is exploring in the Yankelovich Democracy Monitor.

This multiyear study tracks Americans' evolving views on democracy and how to strengthen it. The study is named for and informed by the insights of Daniel Yankelovich (1924–2017), a co-founder of Public Agenda and master public opinion researcher. The Democracy Monitor aims to make several distinct contributions to understanding the public's views and values regarding the democratic renewal so sorely needed today:

- The Democracy Monitor is solutions oriented, focused primarily on what should be done to make progress rather than on who is to blame for our problems.
- This research emphasizes the roles that ordinary people and communities can play in democratic problem solving, rather than focusing solely on institutional policy and electoral politics.
- Building on Yankelovich's distinction between knee-jerk opinion and sounder "public judgment," the Democracy Monitor will track the evolution of public views over time and assess whether stable judgments are forming on solutions to the problems undermining our democracy.¹

This report summarizes findings from the first Yankelovich Democracy Monitor, a nationally representative survey of 1,000 American adults 18 and older. The survey was fielded from September 14 through October 15, 2018, by telephone, including cell phones, and online. Respondents completed the survey in English. Before developing the survey instrument, Public Agenda conducted three demographically diverse focus groups with adults 18 and older in July 2018 in Hicksville, New York; Fort Lauderdale, Florida; and Earth City, Missouri. In total, 31 adults participated in these focus groups.

For a complete methodology providing more detail, including sample characteristics and the survey's topline with full question wording, please go to www.publicagenda.org/pages/strengthening-democracy-what-do-americans-think or email research@publicagenda.org.

¹ Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*, Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991.



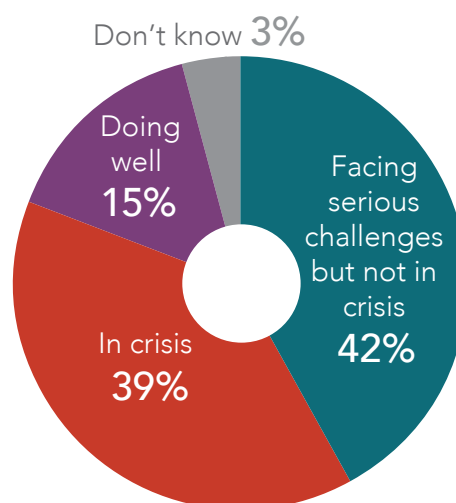
MAIN FINDINGS

1 The vast majority of Americans believe that our democracy is in serious trouble.

The Democracy Monitor survey proposed to respondents that “the United States is meant to be a democracy, where citizens have a voice, rights are protected, and laws are fairly enforced” and asked whether our country’s democracy is in crisis, facing serious challenges but not in crisis or doing well. Only 15 percent of Americans say that our country’s democracy is doing well. The rest believe it is either facing serious challenges or in crisis; see figure 1.

Few Americans think our democracy is in good shape

Figure 1. Percent who say—when told that the United States is meant to be a democracy, where citizens have a voice, rights are protected, and laws are fairly enforced—that they think our country’s democracy is:



Base: All respondents, N=1,000.
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to the 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

Does this mean that faith in democracy itself is eroding? Findings from other surveys paint a mixed picture. Two notable surveys from 2018—one conducted by the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group and another conducted collaboratively by Freedom House, the George W. Bush Institute and the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement—found that an overwhelming majority of Americans support democracy and that many people are concerned about the state of our democracy.² Yet the former survey found that support for authoritarianism is highest among those who are disengaged from politics, distrustful of experts, culturally conservative and those who have negative attitudes toward racial minorities.³ The latter survey found that 54 percent of nonwhite Americans agree that living in a democracy is “absolutely important,” compared with 64 percent of white Americans.⁴ Meanwhile, disillusionment with government and political institutions has been growing for generations.⁵ These findings, together with those from the Democracy Monitor, suggest that public support for democracy is strong and that people are concerned about how our democracy is working, but that support for democracy could wane and should not be taken for granted.

The Democracy Monitor found that while four in ten Americans overall say our democracy is in crisis, some of those who may experience discrimination feel that sense of crisis more acutely. Thus, more women (47 percent) than men (31 percent) and more blacks (58 percent) than Hispanics (39 percent) or whites (36 percent) say our democracy is in crisis.

Concern about the state of our democracy is shared across partisan affiliations. The Republican Party held the presidency and both houses of Congress when this survey was fielded. Yet only 27 percent of Republicans and those who lean Republican say our democracy is doing well, suggesting that people’s opinions about the state of our democracy do not necessarily depend on whether their party holds political power; see figure 2.

2 Lee Drutman, Larry Diamond and Joe Goldman, “Follow the Leader: Exploring American Support for Democracy and Authoritarianism,” Washington, D.C.: Democracy Fund Voter Study Group, March 2018. <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publications/2017-voter-survey/follow-the-leader>. The Democracy Project, “Reversing a Crisis of Confidence,” Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, the George W. Bush Institute and the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, 2018. <https://www.democracyprojectreport.org>.

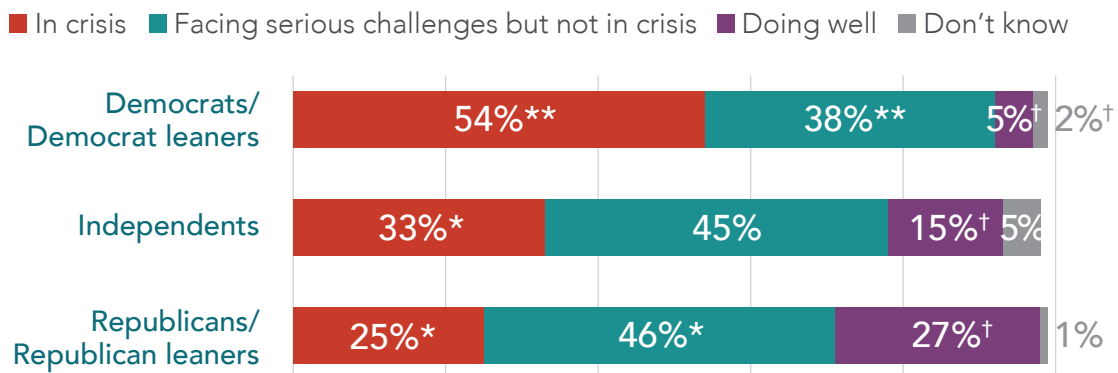
3 Drutman, Diamond and Goldman, “Follow the Leader.” <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publications/2017-voter-survey/follow-the-leader>.

4 Democracy Project, 2018. “Reversing a Crisis of Confidence.” <https://www.democracyprojectreport.org/report>.

5 Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2017,” Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2017. <http://www.people-press.org/2017/12/14/public-trust-in-government-1958-2017>. Gallup, “Confidence in Institutions,” 2018. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/Confidence-Institutions.aspx>.

Across political affiliations, few Americans think our democracy is doing well.

Figure 2. Percent who say the following about the state of American democracy, by political affiliation:



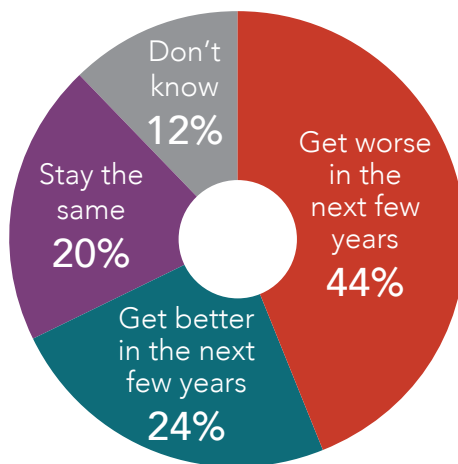
Base: Democrat n=413; Independent n=140; Republican n=344.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to the less than 3 percent or less of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure. Estimates indicated by * are not statistically different from one another. Estimates indicated by * are statistically different from groups indicated by **. Estimates for groups with no * are not statistically different from groups indicated by * or **. Estimates indicated by † are all statistically different from each other. Estimates are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Not only do few Americans think our democracy is doing well, but only about a quarter think that it will get better in the next few years. More than four in ten actually say it will get worse in the next few years; see figure 3.

Few Americans think our country's democracy will get better in the next few years

Figure 3. Percent who say they think our country's democracy is likely to do each of the following:



Base: Those who say our country's democracy is doing well, facing serious challenges but not in crisis, or in crisis, N=959.

The public mood and prospects for democratic reform may hinge on whether more Americans begin to feel that our democracy is moving in the right direction, a sentiment that the Democracy Monitor will track in the coming years.

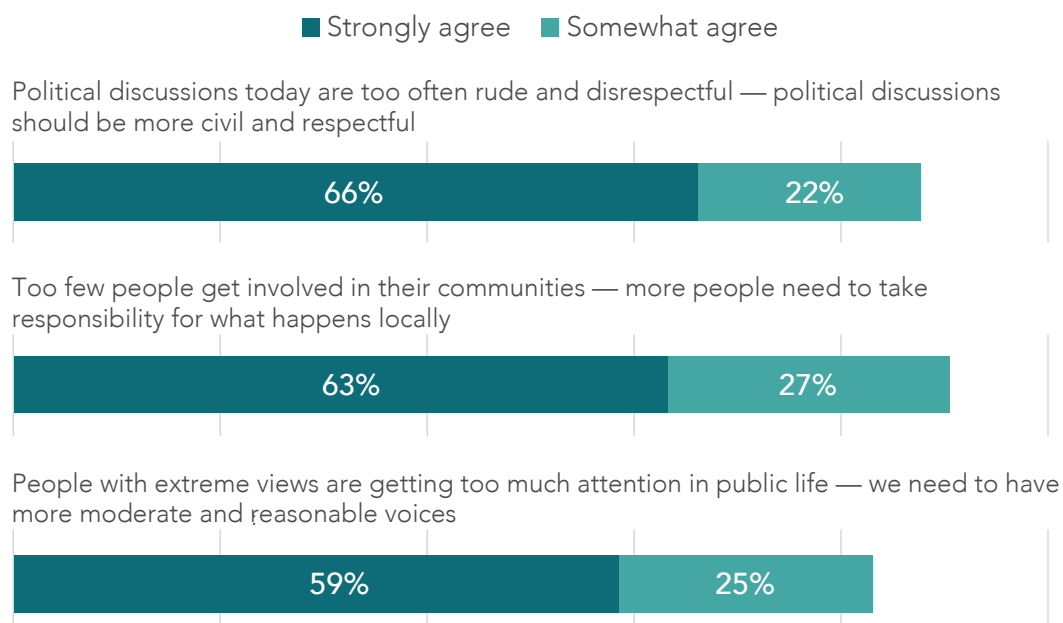
2 Across political affiliations, Americans agree that politics should be more civil and respectful, more people should take responsibility for their communities and extreme voices are too dominant.

What do Americans think is needed to address the underlying challenges facing our democracy? The Democracy Monitor found robust agreement across political affiliations on several points: political discourse should be more civil and respectful; more people should take responsibility for their communities; and we need less extreme and more moderate, reasonable voices in public life; and see figure 4.

Widespread agreement across political affiliations on the need for civility and moderation suggests that, for the public, creating these conditions for better problem solving may be a precursor to or catalyst for instituting substantive democratic reforms.

Americans across partisan lines share some priorities for strengthening our democracy.

Figure 4. Percent who say they strongly agree or somewhat agree with each of the following:

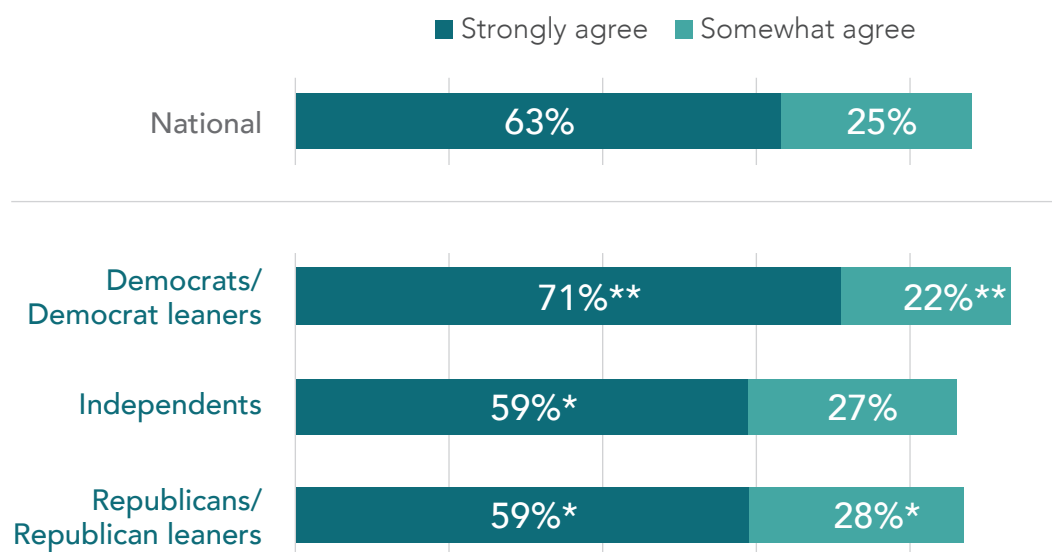


Base: All respondents, N=1,000.

On a second set of approaches to addressing underlying challenges facing our democracy—more people getting involved in public affairs, politicians compromising and reducing the influence of money on government—the Democracy Monitor found that the strength of people’s agreement varies modestly by political affiliation. Despite these modest variations, Americans across all political affiliations agree at least somewhat that more people need to get involved in elections and public affairs, that political leaders need to be more willing to compromise and that we need to reduce the influence of money on our government; see figure 5, figure 6 and figure 7. Again, addressing these underlying challenges may be a precursor to or a catalyst for addressing more divisive problems in our democracy.

Most Americans agree that more people need to get involved in elections and public affairs, but differ modestly by political affiliation in the strength of their agreement.

Figure 5. Percent who say they strongly agree or somewhat agree, by political affiliation:

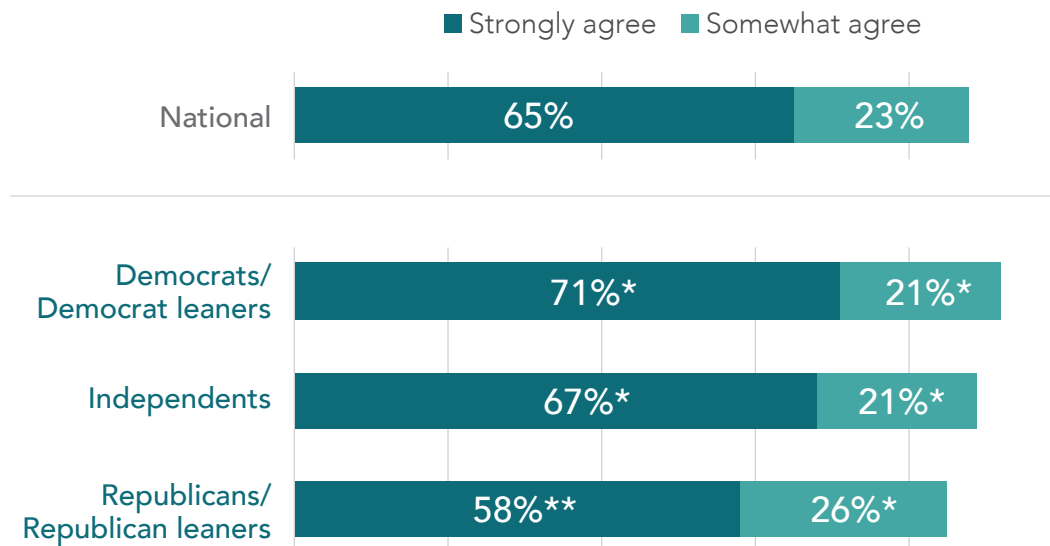


Base: All respondents, N=1,000; Democrat n=422; Independent n=146; Republican n=360.

Estimates indicated by * are not statistically different from one another. Estimates indicated by * are statistically different from groups indicated by **. Estimates for groups with no * are not statistically different from groups indicated by * or **. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<.05 level.

Most Americans agree that our political leaders need to be more willing to compromise, but differ modestly by political affiliation in the strength of their agreement.

Figure 6. Percent who say they strongly agree or somewhat agree, by political affiliation:

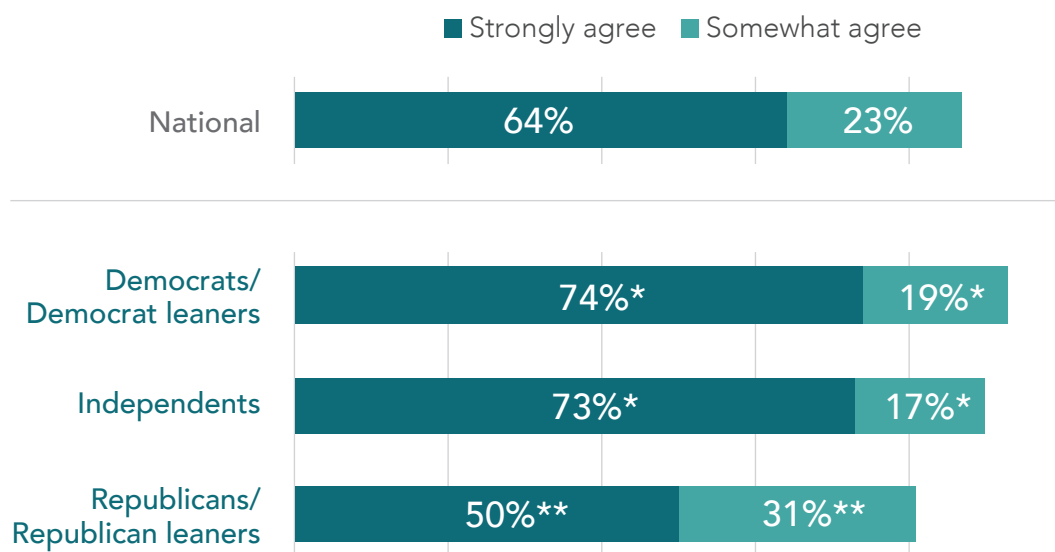


Base: All respondents, N=1,000; Democrat n=422; Independent n=146; Republican n=360.

Estimates for groups indicated by * are not statistically different from one another; groups indicated by *, however, are statistically different from groups indicated by ** at the p<.05 level.

Most Americans agree that we need to reduce the influence of money on our government, but differ modestly by political affiliation in the strength of their agreement.

Figure 7. Percent who say they strongly agree or somewhat agree, by political affiliation:



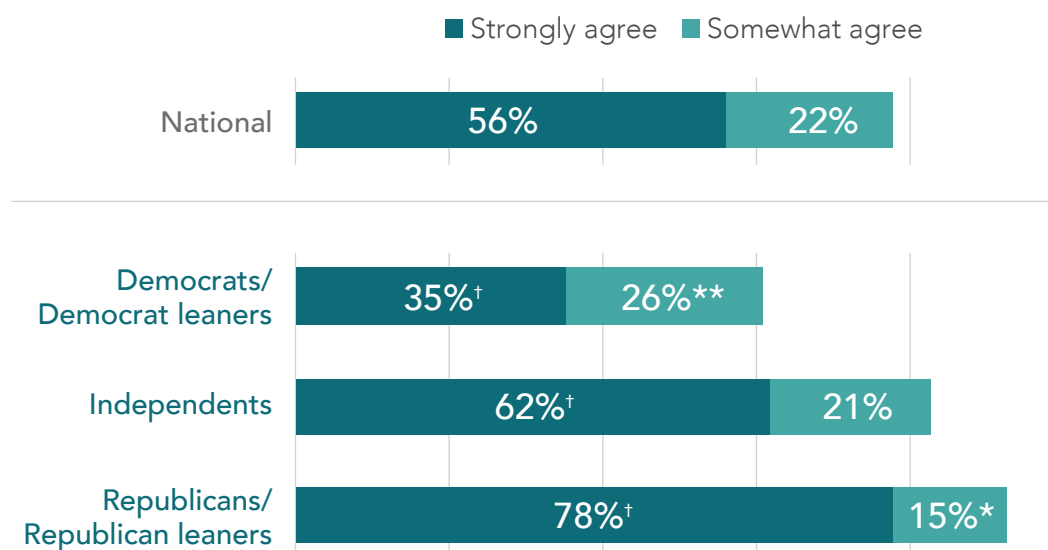
Base: All respondents, N=1,000; Democrat n=422; Independent n=146; Republican n=360.

Estimates indicated by * are not statistically different from one another. Estimates indicated by * are statistically different from groups indicated by **. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<.05 level.

The Democracy Monitor found somewhat greater variation by political affiliation in how strongly people agree that we need more honest information from reliable sources, that we need to protect the integrity of our election system and that we need to rely more on local groups and involved citizens. Nonetheless, most people across political affiliations agree at least somewhat with all of those statements; see figure 8, figure 9 and figure 10.

Most Americans agree that we need more honest information from reliable sources, but differ by political affiliation in the strength of their agreement.

Figure 8. Percent of Americans who strongly agree or somewhat agree, by political affiliation:

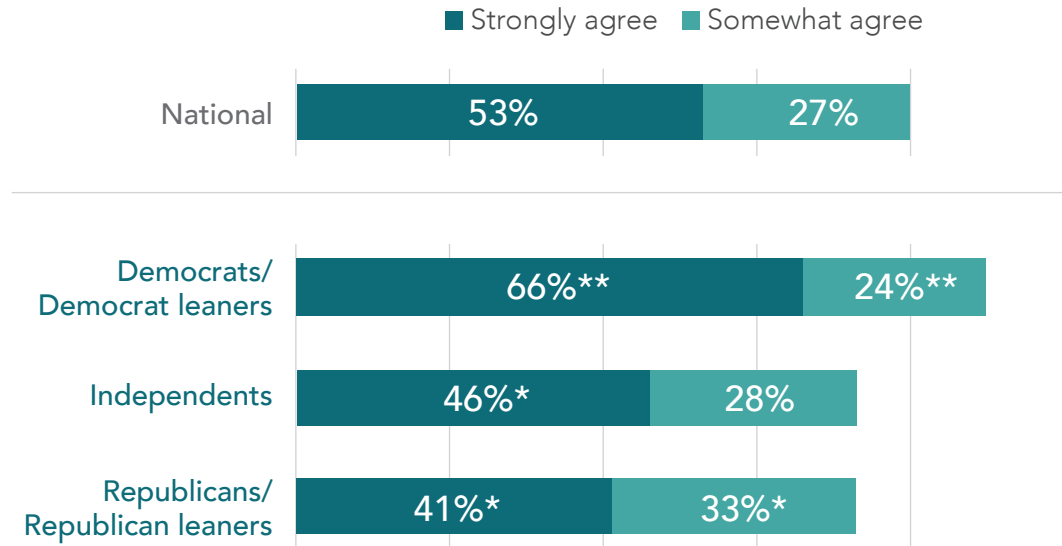


Base: All respondents, N=1,000; Democrat n=422; Independent n=146; Republican n=360.

Estimates indicated by * are not statistically different from one another. Estimates indicated by † are statistically different from groups indicated by **. Estimates for groups with no * are not statistically different from groups indicated by * or **. Estimates indicated by † are all statistically different from each other. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<.05 level.

Most Americans agree that we need to protect the integrity of our election system, but differ by political affiliation in the strength of their agreement.

Figure 9. Percent of Americans who strongly agree or somewhat agree, by political affiliation:

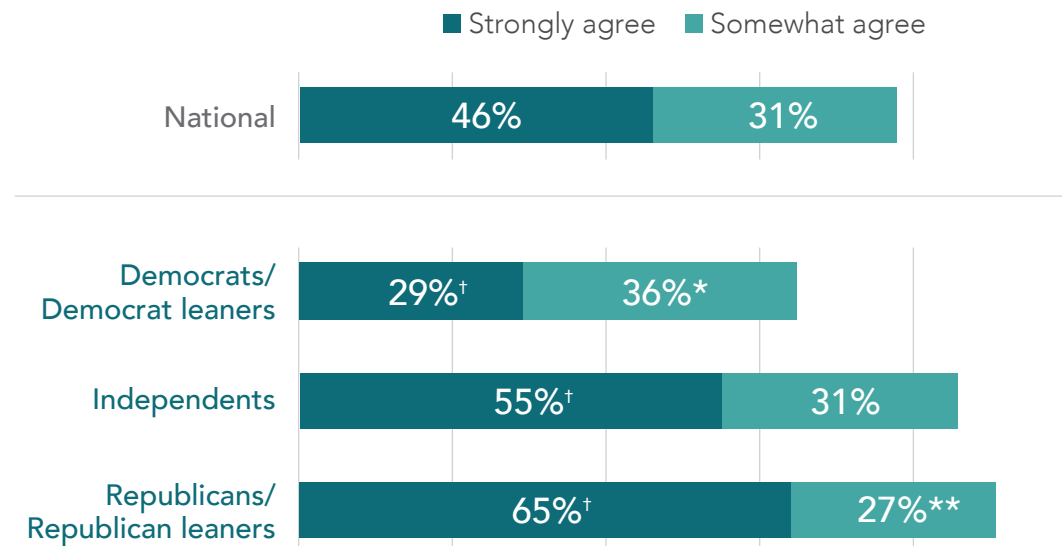


Base: All respondents, N=1,000; Democrat n=427; Independent n=150; Republican n=351.

Estimates indicated by * are not statistically different from one another. Estimates indicated by * are statistically different from groups indicated by **. Estimates for groups with no * are not statistically different from groups indicated by * or **. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<.05 level.

Most Americans agree that we need to rely more on local groups and involved citizens, but differ by political affiliation in the strength of their agreement.

Figure 10. Percent of Americans who strongly agree or somewhat agree, by political affiliation:



Base: All respondents, N=1,000; Democrat n=427; Independent n=150; Republican n=351.

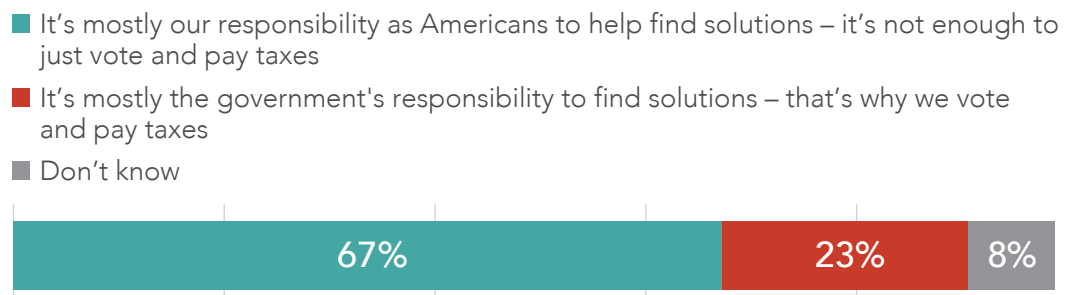
Estimates indicated by * are not statistically different from one another. Estimates indicated by * are statistically different from groups indicated by **. Estimates for groups with no * are not statistically different from groups indicated by * or **. Estimates indicated by † are all statistically different from each other. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<.05 level.

3 Despite their dismay about the state of our democracy, most Americans think they can make a difference and feel a responsibility to do so.

While Americans express dismay and pessimism about our country's democracy, findings from the Yankelovich Democracy Monitor indicate that most people have not given up hope for democratic problem solving and progress. About two-thirds of Americans believe that people have a responsibility to help find solutions to the problems facing their communities and the nation—just voting and paying taxes are not enough; see figure 11.

Most Americans think it is their responsibility to help find solutions.

Figure 11. Percent who say each of the following when it comes to problems facing communities or the nation:



Base: All respondents, N=1,000.

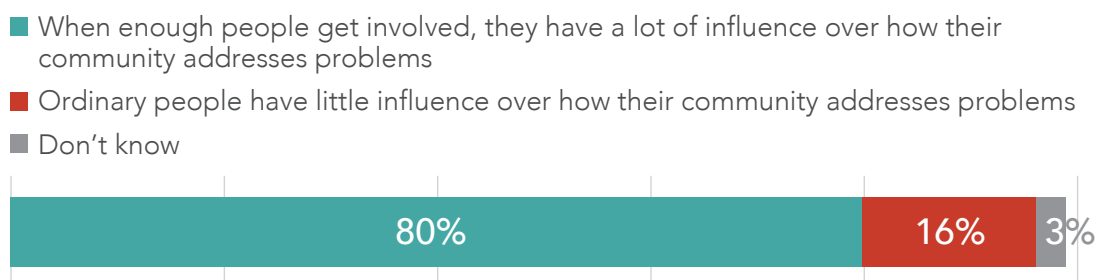
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to the less than 2 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

Along with their sense of responsibility for finding solutions, a surprising share of Americans express confidence about ordinary people's ability to influence how their communities and even the nation address problems—despite the widespread view that democracy is in trouble and, according to other studies, the widespread view that members of Congress are corrupt, beholden to special interests and out of touch.⁶ The Democracy Monitor found that a powerful majority of Americans (80 percent) believe that when enough people get involved, they have a lot of influence over how their communities address problems; see figure 12. And just over half (53 percent) say the same when it comes to how the nation addresses problems; see figure 13.

Across political affiliations, there are no statistically significant differences in how many people believe that when enough people get involved, they have a lot of influence over how their communities address problems or how the nation addresses problems. Furthermore, about two-thirds of Americans (63 percent) think it's easier to get things done at the local level. Only 11 percent think it's easier to get things done at the national level, while 21 percent say it depends on the problem.

Most Americans think people have a lot of influence in their communities when enough get involved.

Figure 12. Percent who say each of the following when it comes to how problems are addressed in communities:

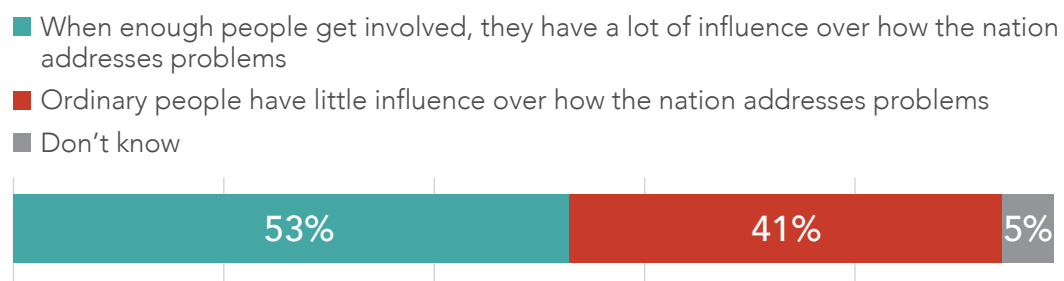


Base: All respondents, N=1,000.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

Half of Americans think people have a lot of influence nationally when enough get involved.

Figure 13. Percent who say each of the following when it comes to how problems are addressed at the national level:



Base: All respondents, N=1,000.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

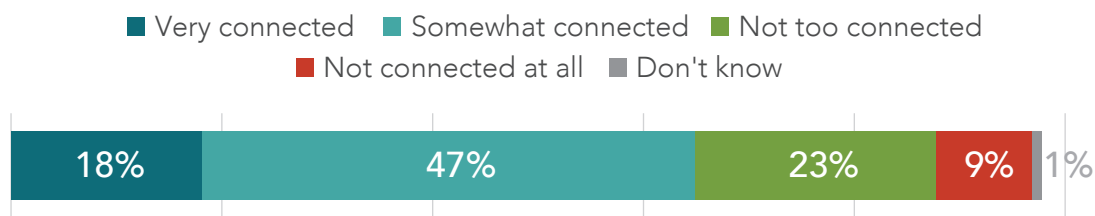
6 Gallup, "Congress and the Public," 2019. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1600/Congress-Public.aspx>.

4 Most Americans are involved in their communities and open to innovative approaches to community problem solving.

Observers of civic life have long lamented the loss of social connections and declining participation in America's communities. The Democracy Monitor's findings suggest that our country may have more civic muscle than meets the eye. Most Americans say they are at least somewhat connected to their community and at least somewhat involved in their community through volunteering, joining civic groups or watching out for their neighbors; see figure 14 and figure 15.

Most Americans say they are connected to their community.

Figure 14. Percent who say they feel very connected, somewhat connected, not too connected or not connected at all to the people in their community:

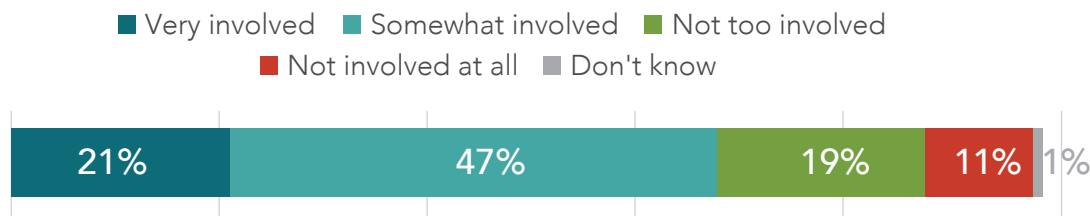


Base: All respondents, N=1,000.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to the less than 2 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

Most Americans say they are involved in their community.

Figure 15. Percent who say they are very involved, somewhat involved, not too involved or not involved at all in the life of their community through such things as volunteering, joining civic groups or watching out for their neighbors:



Base: All respondents, N=1,000.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

In the focus group conversations conducted before fielding this survey, participants initially said that they did not get particularly involved in their communities. But as we dug deeper in those conversations, participants shared many examples of how they actually did get involved—despite not seeing themselves as particularly involved.

“I spent six years on the school board. When moms start showing up at night saying, “Listen, I need to get home and get my kids a bath,” you start listening. Because you know it’s hard for them to get there. When they show up, it’s a big deal. —Earth City, Missouri”

“I get involved when there’s a new housing development if it’s going to affect me directly, my roads. I go to every [hearing] to see what the progress is, what the vision is and how it’s going to affect the neighborhood. Because you want to keep it as much of a neighborhood and as welcoming as you can. —Fort Lauderdale, Florida”

“My community flooded a couple of times. Everyone comes together in a situation like that. It’s very easy to throw your hands up and say, “This isn’t going to make a difference.” They came out anyway. —Earth City, Missouri”

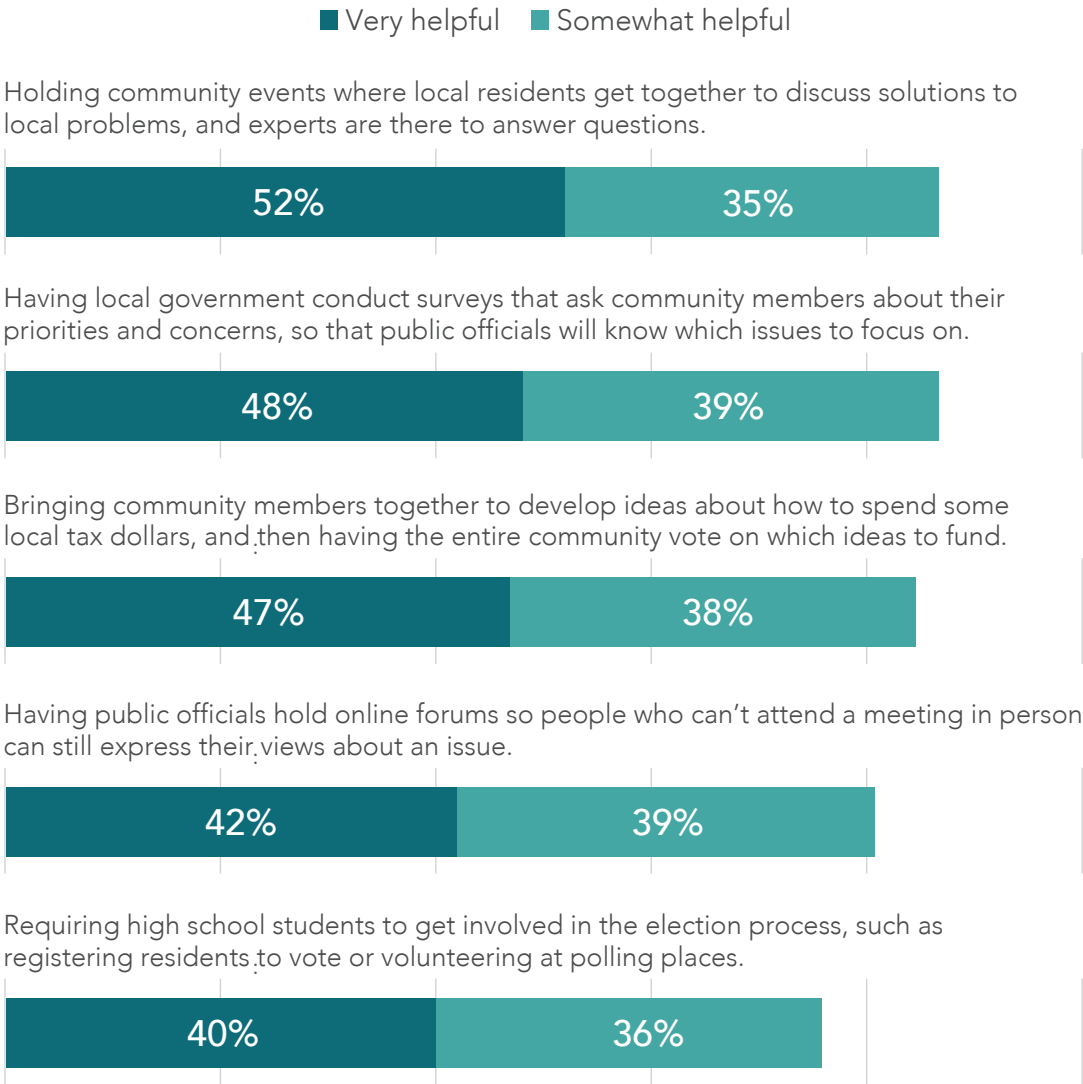
“I don’t have a lot of time to get hands-on with volunteering because I have three young kids. So I try to make up for that with charitable giving when I can. Try to keep it local when I can, too. —Fort Lauderdale, Florida”

“I ended up getting on the board [of my apartment complex] so I can try and help. I had a lot of issues and they weren’t doing anything. —Hicksville, New York”

This willingness to get involved and spirit of problem solving emerged in the Democracy Monitor when we asked about various forms of problem solving, all of which struck most Americans as potentially helpful in their communities; see figure 16.

Americans think innovative approaches to problem-solving would help their communities.

Figure 16. Percent who say they think it would be very helpful or somewhat helpful if their community did each of the following:



Base: All respondents, N=1,000.

To probe Americans' interest in public deliberation as a feature of local democracy and problem solving, we asked about people's likelihood to participate in a hypothetical event in their community where residents would get together to discuss solutions to local problems and experts would be there to answer questions.⁷ Thirty-nine percent of Americans say they would be very likely and 40 percent say they would be somewhat likely to participate. Only 18 percent say they would be not too likely or not likely at all to participate.

What would make people more likely to participate in community problem solving of that type? Most say they would be more likely to participate if they could contribute their skills and experiences, highlighting people's desire to be useful, and if someone they respect invited them, a testament to the importance of personal ties and networks. Most also see a role for public officials, saying they would be more likely to participate if elected officials were there to listen to people's recommendations; see figure 17. However, the Democracy Monitor asked specifically about local problem solving and Americans are more trusting of local than of state or federal government. It therefore remains to be seen how the presence of public officials might affect people's likelihood to participate in state- or national-level problem solving.⁸

Two factors fell lower on the list of what people say would make them more likely to get together with others in their community to discuss solutions to local problems. The first relates to some social dimensions of community problem solving—namely, refreshments, seeing friends and meeting new people. The second relates to participating online rather than in person. Both creating opportunities to socialize and online engagement are surely valuable when used thoughtfully. After all, community organizers have long known that food and socializing bring people together and many aspects of American civic life increasingly take place online. But people seem attracted, first and foremost, to factors that indicate that their participation can have impacts and that it is genuine—because people can apply their skills, because someone they respect invited them and because public officials are listening.

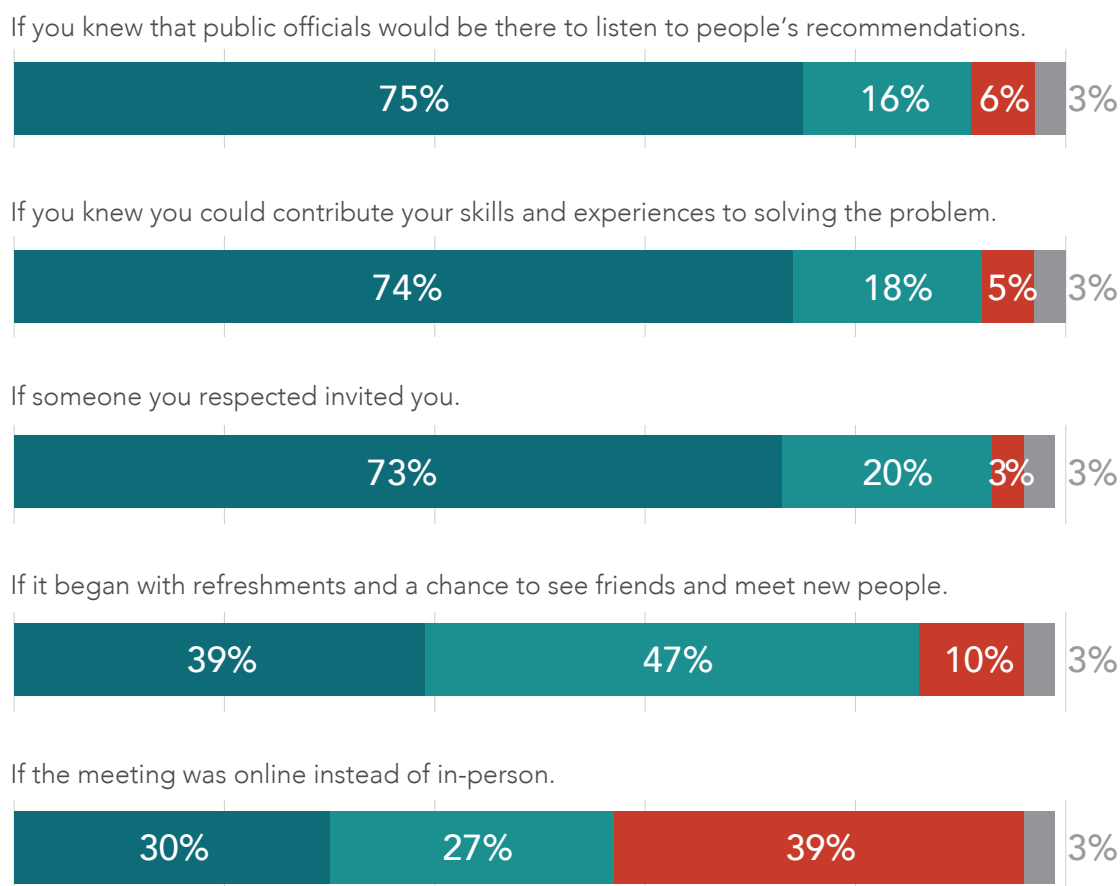
7 While we used the term “event” in the first Yankelovich Democracy Monitor survey, we do not mean to imply that democratic problem solving can necessarily be achieved in one-off events.

8 Justin McCarthy, “Americans Still More Trusting of Local Than State Government,” Washington, D.C.: Gallup, October 8, 2018. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/243563/americans-trusting-local-state-government.aspx>.

People would be more attracted to community problem solving if they could apply their skills, someone they respect invited them and public officials were listening.

Figure 17. Percent who say each of the following would make them more likely to participate, less likely to participate or would make no difference if their community held an event where local residents got together to discuss solutions to local problems and experts were there to answer questions:

■ More likely to participate ■ Would make no difference ■ Less likely to participate ■ Don't know



Base: All respondents, N=1,000.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.



FINDINGS IN SUMMARY

Americans are under no illusions about the state of our democracy, the Democracy Monitor found. Most think it is either facing serious challenges or in crisis, including most Republicans. Only about a quarter of Americans think that our democracy will get better in the next few years.

Yet just as there is agreement across political affiliations about the troubled state of our democracy, the Democracy Monitor found agreement across political affiliations about the need to address some of the underlying challenges we face. These include making our political life more civil and respectful and our politics less dominated by extreme voices. Along with more people taking responsibility for what happens in their communities, creating these conditions for healthier public life may be necessary precursors to or catalysts for addressing our country's more divisive problems.

Can it be done? The American people appear to believe change is possible. Despite their dismay about the state of our democracy, most Americans think people make a difference locally and half think they make a difference nationally—if enough get involved. Most Americans also feel a sense of responsibility to help find solutions to the problems facing communities and the nation. Finally, most are open to a variety of approaches to community problem solving, especially if they can contribute their skills and experiences, someone they respect invites them and public officials are there to listen.

In the coming years, the Democracy Monitor will track whether Americans' views shift on several of the key questions posed here and will explore new ideas for democratic renewal in communities and the nation.

METHODOLOGY IN BRIEF

The findings in “Strengthening Democracy: What Do Americans Think?” are based on a nationally representative survey of 1,000 American adults 18 and older. All interviews were conducted from September 14 through October 15, 2018. All 1,000 interviews were included in the analysis. Data were collected via telephone interviews, including cell phone interviews, and online. A total of 750 interviews were conducted by phone and 250 were completed online. Respondents completed the surveys in English.

The phone survey response rate was 3.3 percent overall, using the American Association for Public Opinion Research Response Rate 4 formula. The response rate was 3.6 percent for the combined landline samples and 3.2 percent for the combined cell samples.

Once the phone survey phase was completed, invitations to complete the web survey were sent directly to potential respondents by Research Now/SSI. Of the 10,000 people on the panel who were invited to participate in the survey, 389 completes were attained along with 58 terminates, which meant 3.8 percent of people who were invited actually responded. However, only 250 of those completes were obtained before the cutoff date and were in states, age/gender categories and race/ethnicity groups still needed to meet targeted quotas for the study when combined with the 750 phone interviews.

The final data were weighted to balance the sample to known national population parameters based on U.S. Census Bureau data for each of the four census regions and to correct for systematic under- or overrepresentation of key demographics. Quotas were met for each region and state, and therefore no additional weighting by geography was required to achieve a nationally representative sample of the United States.

The maximum standard error range (margin of error) for the total weighted sample is +/-3.1 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level. It is higher, however, for questions that were not asked of all respondents and for subgroup results.

The Kettering Foundation served as a collaborator in this research. The survey was fielded by Wiese Research Associates, Inc. WRA was responsible for data collection only. Public Agenda designed the survey instrument and analyzed the data.

Before developing the survey instrument, Public Agenda conducted three demographically diverse focus groups with adults in July 2018 in Hicksville, New York; Fort Lauderdale, Florida; and Earth City, Missouri. In total, 31 adults participated in these focus groups.

For a complete methodology providing more detail, including sample characteristics and the survey’s topline with full question wording, please go to www.publicagenda.org/pages/strengthening-democracy-what-do-americans-think or email research@publicagenda.org.

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And Will Friedman, president of Public Agenda, for his vision, insight and guidance throughout this project.



About Public Agenda

Public Agenda helps build a democracy that works for everyone. By elevating a diversity of voices, forging common ground and improving dialogue and collaboration among leaders and communities, Public Agenda fuels progress on critical issues, including education, health care and community engagement. Founded in 1975, Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in New York City.

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