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'Downhill,' 'divisive': Americans sour on nation's direction in new NBC News poll

Large majorities say that the U.S. is going in the wrong direction, that they are falling behind economically and that political polarization will continue.



— Protesters rally against vaccination mandates Nov. 20 in New York City.

Stephanie Keith / Getty Images file

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By Mark Murray

WASHINGTON – Overwhelming majorities of Americans believe the country is headed in the wrong direction, that their household income is falling behind the [cost of living](#), that [political polarization](#) will only continue and that there's a real threat to democracy and [majority rule](#).

What's more, the nation's top politicians and political parties are more unpopular than popular, and interest in the upcoming November midterms is down – not up.

And when Americans were asked to describe where they believe America is today, the top answers were "downhill," "divisive," "negative," "struggling," "lost" and "bad."

Voters in a 'sour mood' at the Biden presidency one-year mark



Those are the grim findings of a new national [NBC News poll](#) conducted less than 10 months before the midterm elections, when control of the U.S. Senate, U.S. House and governors' mansions across the country will be up for grabs.

"Downhill, divided, doubting democracy, falling behind, and tuning out – this is how Americans are feeling as they're heading into 2022," said Democratic pollster Jeff Horwitt of Hart Research Associates, who conducted this survey with Republican pollster Bill McInturff of Public Opinion Strategies.

That pessimism and gloom isn't helping the party in control of the White House and Congress.

While the poll shows Democrats enjoying a narrow 1 point advantage over Republicans as the party that should control Congress, it also shows President Joe Biden's job approval rating remaining in the [low 40s](#), Republicans holding a double-digit edge in enthusiasm and key Democratic groups losing interest in the upcoming election.

"There is nothing but flashing red lights and warning signs for Democrats," said McInturff, the Republican pollster.

'Bad news for the party in power'

According to the poll, 72 percent of Americans say the country is headed in the wrong direction – essentially unchanged from the 71 percent who held this view in October's NBC News poll.

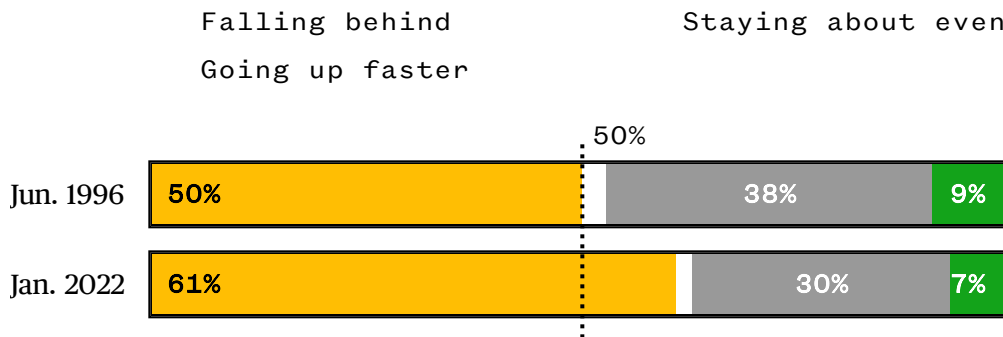
It marks just the sixth time in the poll's history when 70 percent or more have said the nation is on the wrong track in back-to-back surveys.

"In the three instances when this sustained dark outlook coincided with an election year, it foreshadowed bad news for the party in power – 1992, 2008 and 2016," said Horwitt, the Democratic pollster.

On the economy, while job creation is up and the unemployment rate is down, 61 percent of respondents in the poll say their family's income is falling behind the cost of living.

That's compared with 30 percent who say they're staying about even and 7 percent who say their income is going up faster than the cost of living.

Is your family income keeping up with the cost of living?

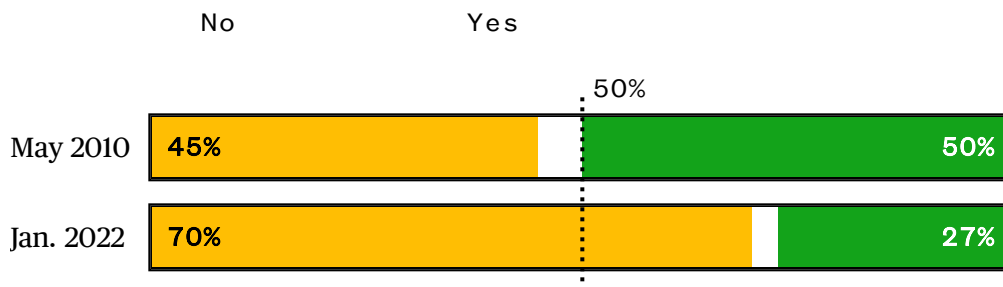


Source: NBC News survey conducted Jan. 14-18, 2022. The margin of error for 1,000 adults is 3.1 percent. Graphic: JoElla Carman / NBC News

On the state of the nation's politics, 70 percent agree with the statement that America has become so polarized that it can no longer solve the major issues facing the country – and that those differences will only continue to grow.

By contrast, 27 percent agree with the statement that, despite the nation's strong partisan differences, the country always comes together to solve the greatest challenges.

Can the nation come together?



Source: NBC News survey conducted Jan. 14-18, 2022. The margin of error for 1,000 adults is 3.1 percent. The May 2010 survey was conducted by Marttilla Strategies for IMS Health. Graphic: JoElla Carman / NBC News

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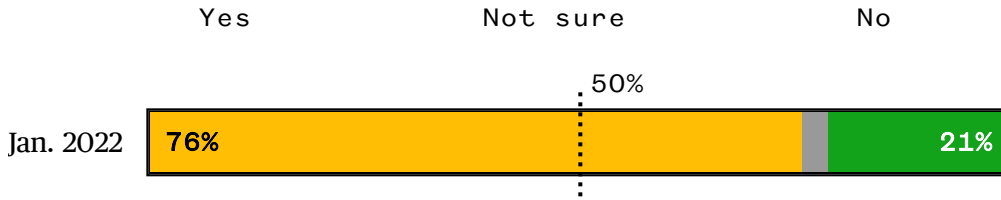
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That's a significant shift from when this question was last asked in 2010 – when 50 percent answered that America always comes together in tough times, versus 45 percent who said that the nation's political differences would only grow.

Do you believe American democracy is threatened?



Source: NBC News survey conducted Jan. 14-18, 2022. The margin of error for 1,000 adults is 3.1 percent. Graphic: JoElla Carman / NBC News

And on the state of democracy, a whopping 76 percent of Americans – including 7 in 10 Democrats, Republicans and independents – believe there is a threat to democracy and majority rule in this country.

A look ahead to the midterms

With fewer than 300 days until the November midterm elections, the NBC News poll finds 47 percent of registered voters saying they prefer a Democratic-controlled Congress, while 46 percent want Republicans in charge.

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That's essentially unchanged from October, when Democrats held a 2 point edge on this question, 47 percent to 45 percent.

But Republicans enjoy a double-digit advance on enthusiasm ahead of November's elections, with 61 percent of Republicans saying they are very interested in the upcoming midterms – registering their interest either as a 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale – compared with 47 percent of Democrats who say the same.

In previous midterm cycles – whether 2006, 2010, 2014 or 2018 – the party that held a double-digit advantage in enthusiasm ended up making substantial gains.

Additionally, overall enthusiasm for the upcoming midterms is down from 59 percent who indicated a high level of interest in October, to 51 percent in this most recent poll.

And some of the biggest drops have come from key segments of the Democratic base, including Black voters, young voters and urban voters.

The top issues facing the country

Asked their two most important issues facing the country, the top responses from Americans were jobs and the economy (a combined 42 percent), the coronavirus (29 percent), voting rights and election integrity (25 percent), the cost of living (23 percent) and border security and immigration (22 percent).

Among Democrats, the top issues were the coronavirus, voting rights and election integrity, social and racial justice, jobs/economy and climate change.

Among Republicans, the top issues were jobs/economy, border security/immigration, taxes and spending and the cost of living.

Unpopular politicians and parties

Finally, the NBC News poll finds every politician and political party it tested to be more unpopular than popular with the American public:

- Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo.: 23 percent positive, 29 percent negative (-6)
- President Joe Biden: 39 percent positive, 48 percent negative (-9)
- The Republican Party: 34 percent positive, 44 percent negative (-10)
- Donald Trump: 37 percent positive, 51 percent negative (-14)
- The Democratic Party: 33 percent positive, 48 percent negative (-15)
- Vice President Kamala Harris: 32 percent positive, 49 percent negative (-17)

The [NBC News poll](#) was conducted Jan. 14-18 of 1,000 adults – including 650 respondents who only have a cellphone – and the overall margin of error is plus-minus 3.1 percentage points.

The margin of error for the poll's 790 registered voters is plus-minus 3.5 percentage points.



Mark Murray



Mark Murray is a senior political editor at NBC News.

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