



The Panetta Institute for Public Policy

PRESS RELEASE

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**Panetta Institute Survey Shows Record Number of College Students
Concerned About the Health of our Democracy --
76% Say They Will Not be able to Achieve the American Dream
82% Believe the President Should Defend and Follow the Constitution**

In the Panetta Institute's 2025 nationwide survey of college students, results show students are deeply concerned about the future of the United States and their own personal prospects for economic security. A record 55% felt that American democracy was not working well, an increase of 9 points from 2024 and a record low in the survey's twenty-four-year history. Sixty-five percent of college students say that things in the country are off on the wrong track.

"A record number of students are concerned about the health of our democracy and are uncertain and concerned about the future of our country," said Institute Chairman Leon E. Panetta. "At the same time, we saw a spike in the amount of students who believe politics is relevant to their lives. Young people are dissatisfied with the current leadership and worried about their future, but they are expressing an interest in participating in our democracy to make things better. We believe these results suggest we are at a pivotal time in how we approach this next generation of voters and inspire them to apply themselves to protecting our democracy."

DEEP CONCERNS ABOUT AMERICAN DEMOCRACY PAIRED WITH STRONG SUPPORT FOR THE RULE OF LAW

The results of this year's survey show a young population deeply dissatisfied with the current political leadership and extremely concerned about the future both for the country as a whole and for themselves as individuals. A majority of respondents believe democracy in the United States is not working well; believe that the country is off on the wrong; and have concerns about the future of America. Just 45% say that democracy in the United States is working well, down from 54% last year, and a record low in the Panetta Institute Poll's history. Asked to elaborate on their concerns about American democracy, students expressed their impression that the "government isn't acting in the best interest of the country" and was "not listening to the people." They were also worried about the loss of freedoms and President Trump's lack of respect for the Constitution and the rule of law. Some of this frustration may also be linked to a growing shift in students' opinions on the role of government and a desire for government to be actively engaged. A full 79% responded that government "should do more to solve problems and help meet the needs of people." This is a shift from responses in earlier years that found a more equal split between students that supported action by the government versus a more traditional conservative argument for a laissez-faire or free market approach to governance.

Sixty-five percent of college students say that things in the country are off on the wrong track, including 87% of Democrats and 61% of independents, while 68% of Republicans say things are headed in the right direction. This is a sea change from 2024, when just 26% of Republicans felt this way. Sixty-eight percent of students are uncertain and concerned about the future of the country. The criticism seems to extend to both parties to include the system overall with 62% percent expressing dissatisfaction with the country's current political leadership. However, President Trump clearly has a part to play in these feelings, with 65% of students registering their disapproval of the job he is doing as president. Although, interestingly, students were more critical of Trump in the same period in his first term when 72% disapproved. When asked about their views of specific actions related to President Trump, they reported their greatest opposition to actions that threatened the Constitution, with 81% expressing opposition to his efforts to end birthright citizenship and 84% registering opposition to his potential interest in running for a third term. A majority of students believe that the president and executive branch have too much power (52%), and fully 82% believe the president should defend and follow the Constitution. As a note, the survey was conducted before President Trump's decision to deploy the National Guard and the Marines in response to protests in California.

HIGH LEVELS OF CONCERN MATCHED BY HIGH LEVEL OF INTEREST

Encouragingly, 87% of students said they were registered to vote, tying the highest level recorded in the history of the survey in 2023. A full 84% reported that during their time as a high school or college student, they had taken classes on our democracy, government, and their role as a citizen. Additionally, 65% say politics is relevant to their life, an uptick from 54% last year. It will be interesting to see how this level of engagement impacts the midterm elections.

FINANCIAL WORRIES LOOM LARGE

Financial concerns remain front and center for college students, and many have doubts about being able to achieve the American Dream, with the view that it is harder to achieve than it was for their parents' generation. Concerns about finding an acceptable job have reached a record high. Inflation and the cost of living is THE dominant issue for college students – 32% say this is their top issue, with healthcare coming in a distant second (11%). Just 29% say the nation's economy is excellent or good, down from 36% last year. Fifty percent believe the economy will get worse over the next 12 months. This may be a direct reflection on students' awareness and impressions about the administration's tariff policy, with 64% responding they believe Trump will make things worse for trade.

In personal terms, just 16% say their family's income is going up faster than inflation, while 41% say it is falling behind. By 45% to 32%, students believe that they will be worse off rather than better off than their parents. Seventy-six percent say that compared to their parents' generation it is harder to achieve the American Dream – the highest proportion we have recorded on this measure. Fifty-nine percent of college students report that they are confident that they will be able to find a job after graduation that is acceptable to them – this marks a 10-point drop from last year and the lowest level of confidence we have measured in the history of the Institute's survey. Eighty-nine percent of students with student loan debt currently expect to have that debt upon graduation.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

While the survey was conducted before the escalation of the conflict between Israel and Iran, students did not seem overly concerned about global unrest or the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. Sixty-one percent of students believe the problems their generation will face will be national in scope rather than international, and they seem content with the United States' current level of involvement. Fifty-seven percent believe the country should “be engaged, but not in a leadership role.”

ON CAMPUS:

Specific to Trump's actions that impact college students, more than three in five oppose many of these – including freezing funding for institutions that he believes have not done enough to address antisemitism (69% oppose), freezing funding among institutions that are not complying with ending DEI initiatives (69%), deporting students involved in protests (69%), and unfreezing collection of student loans (67%). The one area where there is a difference of opinion and support for Trump's actions is on bringing in someone from outside the educational institution to ensure that diverse viewpoints are represented. In theoretical terms this is favored by 57% of college students. Broadly, 69% of students believe that colleges and universities should not change their policies in response to efforts by the Trump Administration to change them.

USE OF AI ON THE RISE:

Reliance and acceptable of AI continues to grow year over year. Eighty-seven percent of college students report using a chatbot, up from 74% last year, and 60% in 2023. Seventy-three percent now say they use chatbots in completing school assignments, up from 65% last year, and 51% in 2023 and 64% believe that AI should be allowed in completing school assignments, up from 54% in 2023, though holding steady compared to last year (63%). Despite their frequent use of the technology, AI still gets relatively low marks for reliability. Confidence in chatbots has increased, but is still low – 43%, up from 37% in 2024.

The Panetta Institute commissions this poll in the spring of each year to help guide its curriculum and advance its mission, which is to encourage young people to consider careers in public service and prepare them for the challenges they'll face as future leaders. Conducted by Hart Research, the study explores student attitudes and opinions on many topics, including social trends, level of political involvement, personal career expectations, and a variety of national and international issues.

With more than two decades of collected data, the Panetta survey has become a highly respected source of information for scholars and journalists interested in tracking the views of the country's next generation of voters and decision makers.

For this year's poll, Hart Research conducted online interviews with a representative sampling of 809 students at four-year colleges and universities across the country from May 19-29. A more extensive summary of the study's findings can be found in the attached survey charts.