



# **2021 Survey of America's College Students**

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Conducted on Behalf of:  
**The Panetta Institute for  
Public Policy**

*By Hart Research Associates*

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## Table of Contents

	Methodology .....	2
	Key Findings .....	3
<b>II.</b>	<b>State of the Nation .....</b>	<b>7</b>
	Domestic Issues.....	10
	Issues about Race.....	11
	Tolerance/Free Speech on Campus .....	12
	Confidence in Democratic Institutions .....	15
	The 2020 Election and Democracy.....	17
<b>III.</b>	<b>International Issues.....</b>	<b>17</b>
	Climate Change .....	18
	Immigration.....	19
<b>IV.</b>	<b>The Political Landscape .....</b>	<b>18</b>
	The 2020 Election .....	20
	President Biden.....	22
<b>V.</b>	<b>Impact of the Coronavirus.....</b>	<b>28</b>
	Personal Impact of the Coronavirus .....	28
	Impact of the Coronavirus on University Campuses .....	31
<b>VI.</b>	<b>Economic Outlook.....</b>	<b>35</b>
	Job Prospects.....	36
	Personal Finances and Impact of Student Loan Debt.....	37
<b>VII.</b>	<b>Public Service.....</b>	<b>38</b>
	Civic Knowledge.....	40
	National and Community Service.....	39
<b>VIII.</b>	<b>Media Consumption .....</b>	<b>39</b>

## **I. Introduction**

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Every spring, the Panetta Institute for Public Policy commissions a nationwide survey of college students to help guide its curriculum and programs. Conducted by Hart Research Associates, the study explores the attitudes and opinions of college students on many topics, including current national and international issues, social, political, and economic trends, level of political involvement, and personal career expectations.

For twenty-one years, the Panetta Institute's nationwide poll of college students has become a highly respected source of information for academics, researchers, political scientists, policymakers, and journalists interested in analyzing two decades of collected data. Given the survey's continuity and depth, scholars and political campaigns find the Panetta Institute's poll to be one of best barometers for measuring college students' opinions.

This year's survey measures attitudes of college students at a key moment in time. The country is showing signs of a slow recovery from the devastation that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused, and expectations are higher as a result of a change in presidential administrations. This report is based upon online interviews with a representative sampling of 801 students at four-year colleges across the country, from April 21 to May 3, 2021.

### **Methodology**

Hart Research contracted with an online survey vendor to administer the survey to students who are enrolled in a four-year higher-learning institution. The screening sample was drawn from the vendor's multi-million-member respondent panel. A total of 801 interviews were completed online. All interviews were conducted from April 21 to May 3, 2021. Some demographics were weighted to achieve representative samples of four-year college students nationwide.

## Key Findings

Key findings from this year's survey show:

- **For the first time since 2015, a majority of university students believe that the country is headed in the right direction, and students are more confident in the future of the country than they have been. However, students are still more likely to be uncertain and concerned about the country's future.** Even while the country attempts to recover from COVID-19, college students express resiliency and hope:
  - 55% of surveyed students say that the nation is generally headed in the right direction, up from 44% last year.
  - While a majority (58%) of students are uncertain and concerned about the future of the country, the proportion of students who are confident and secure in the country's future has increased by 10-points from last year (42% up from 32%).
  
- **Students' positive views of the future have been bolstered by their feelings about the outcome of the 2020 presidential election and their personal involvement in it.** The election of Joe Biden as president has clearly had a positive impact on attitudes among most college students, many of whom voted and also actively participated in the 2020 presidential campaign:
  - 54% of college students feel satisfied with the country's political leadership, an 11-point increase over last year, and the highest level of satisfaction we have measured since 2011.
  - 67% say that politics are very or fairly relevant in their life, up from 61% last year.
  - One in four (24%) college students report that they volunteered for a political campaign or organization during the 2020 election.
  - Among those who volunteered, 87% describe the experience as rewarding, including 41% who say the experience was very rewarding.
  - 71% approve of the job that Joe Biden is doing as president.

- Across the board, in a series of thirteen areas, college students believe that President Biden will make things better rather than worse. Students are most likely to believe that Biden will make things better on some of the most important issues for them personally, including COVID-19 (+51 net positive), dealing with climate change (+39 net positive), dealing with student loan debt, and tolerance and respect for all Americans (+35 net positive respectively).
- **Most students feel that democracy in the United States is working well, yet they also believe that the country is divided, and students have lost confidence in many institutions.** College students also believe that a number of reforms could make a positive difference in improving democracy:
  - 57% of college students believe that democracy in the United States today is working well, but just 8% say it is working very well, with 49% saying somewhat well.
  - 77% say that the United States is divided today.
  - Students have lost confidence in many institutions over time, and while confidence in the presidency is up, trust in the military, Supreme Court, the public health system, the federal government, the news media, and most markedly, police and law enforcement, have all declined since the last time they were measured.
  - Students believe that a number of potential changes within our democracy would improve it. These include making Election Day a national holiday (81%), requiring greater accountability from social media companies to monitor misinformation (75%), public financing of campaigns (71%), and automatically registering every adult citizen to vote (70%).
- **College students have been humbled by COVID-19, which has transformed their aura of invincibility into one of fragility. Yet COVID has improved their relationships with family, and they have retained their positive outlook for their future career.** COVID has had an impact on college students in many ways, both on and off campus:
  - College students say COVID is the most important issue for them personally (54%).

- 73% report that COVID has had a very or fairly major impact on their day-to-day life.
  - Broadly, 88% describe COVID and the pandemic as a significant event in their life, including 50% who say it is a major defining event.
  - 33% have lost a close friend or family member due to COVID.
  - 43% report that their family has lost a significant amount of income due to COVID.
  - 18% have tested positive for COVID, and among those who have not, 40% needed to quarantine due to a close contact with a person who tested positive.
  - On most measures, students believe that COVID is much more likely to have a negative than positive impact on them, including most profoundly their college experience (66% negative experience) and mental health (69%); but by 42% to 29%, students believe that COVID's impact on their relationships with family has been more positive than negative.
  - Looking ahead, students are as confident as they have ever been about finding a job that is acceptable to them after graduation, with 76% saying they are very or fairly confident.
- **College students remain very focused on the impact of student loans, both while they are on campus and after they graduate:**
- Among a list of issues facing the country, 30% of college students mention the cost of college education as important to them personally, on par with concerns about their employment prospects (32%) and the national debt (29%), and slightly above immigration (27%).
  - 52% of college students have taken out student loans, and among them, 87% expect to have student loan debt after they graduate.
  - On average, students expect to have \$35,520 in student loan debt after they graduate from college.
  - 62% expect their student loan debt to remain with them for at least six years after they graduate.
  - 55% worry very or somewhat often about having too much student loan debt.

- 63% believe the debt will have a high impact on the job they pursue upon graduation.
- **Many students report interest in working for government, as well as public health, and they also express an interest in running for elected office themselves.** Three in 10 students have been involved in public service directly related to the COVID pandemic:
  - 39% of college students report high interest in working for government broadly, with 43% saying they are interested in working in public health, and 37% who say they are interested working in a job that is considered essential in dealing with COVID.
  - 40% are interested in running for local or state elected office, while 32% are interested in running for federal elected office.
  - 30% say they have been involved in activities directly related to COVID.
  - 55% say that they are interested in a program that provides financial assistance for college in exchange for two years of national service.
- **On international issues:**
  - The vast majority (87%) of college students want the United States to be engaged in the world, with 39% wanting to see the United States be very engaged and assuming a leadership role, while 48% prefer that the United States be engaged in the world, but not in a leadership role.
  - 40% of college students say that terrorism is the greatest threat to the United States internationally, followed by China (26%), North Korea (16%), Russia (13%), and Iran (5%).
  - 51% of students are worried about the United States experiencing another major attack like September 11, 2001, coming from outside the country. Yet, underscoring students' concerns about domestic issues, fully 69% are worried that the United States will experience another domestic terrorist attack, like the one that occurred at the U.S. Capitol.
- **Students express major concerns about issues of race and recent attacks based upon race and ethnicity:**

- 46% of college students say that race relations is one of the most important issues for them personally, tied for the second most important issue, with the healthcare system.
- 83% are concerned about the recent attacks based upon race and ethnicity, including 55% who are very concerned about this.
- 49% of students overall are worried about themselves being attacked because of their race or ethnicity, and this feeling is much higher among Asian American students (85%), Black students (83%), and Latinx students (66%).

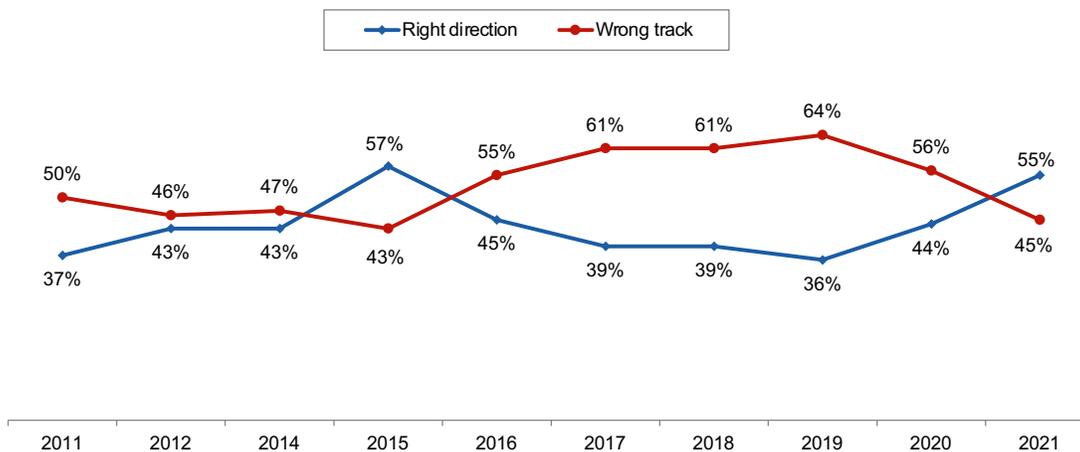
## **II. State of the Nation**

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Optimism among college students appears to be returning, as 55% say the country is heading in the right direction, the highest it has been since 2015. A big driver of this change in attitudes is partisan in nature, a trend we see throughout the survey. In 2020, just 28% of Democrats believed the country was headed in the right direction, now 64% take this more positive outlook. On the other hand, only 36% of Republicans now say the country is headed in the right direction, down from 66% last year. Independents continue to hold an outlook very similar to last year's, with 56% believing the country is headed in the right direction, comparable to 54% in 2020.

**For the first time since 2015, college students believe that the country is headed in the right direction.**

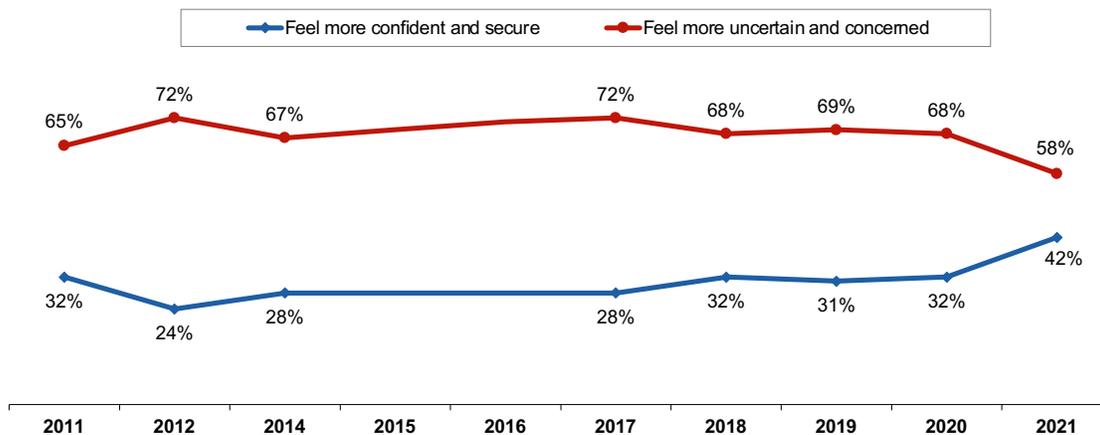
*Assessment of the Nation's Direction*



College students have also improved their outlook about the future of the country, though they still are on the negative side. Last year only three in ten (32%) college students felt confident and secure about the country's future, and this year that increases to 42%, returning to a relative high-water mark not reached for the past ten years.

**College students are still uncertain and concerned about the future of the country, but the gap has narrowed since last year.**

*Expectations for the Future of the Country*



With the end of President Trump’s term and the beginning of the Biden-Harris administration, college students felt more uncertain and concerned during the Trump presidency and are now more hopeful. However, while there have been improvements, the partisan undercurrents that tell the story of this improved outlook on campus are pervasive. In fact, 77% of college students say the country is divided, compared with 23% who say it is united. And this view is shared regardless of party, with 80% of Democrats and Republicans viewing the country as divided.

College students provide a wide range of viewpoints on leading public figures and movements that helps paint a portrait of public opinion on campus in 2021. Students view the Blacks Lives Matter movement most positively, at 66%. In fact, two movements, Black Lives Matter and MeToo, receive higher ratings than either of the two political parties or public figures while Democrats are generally viewed positively on campus, Republicans, most notably Donald Trump, are viewed negatively.

### Feelings toward Selected Public Figures and Institutions

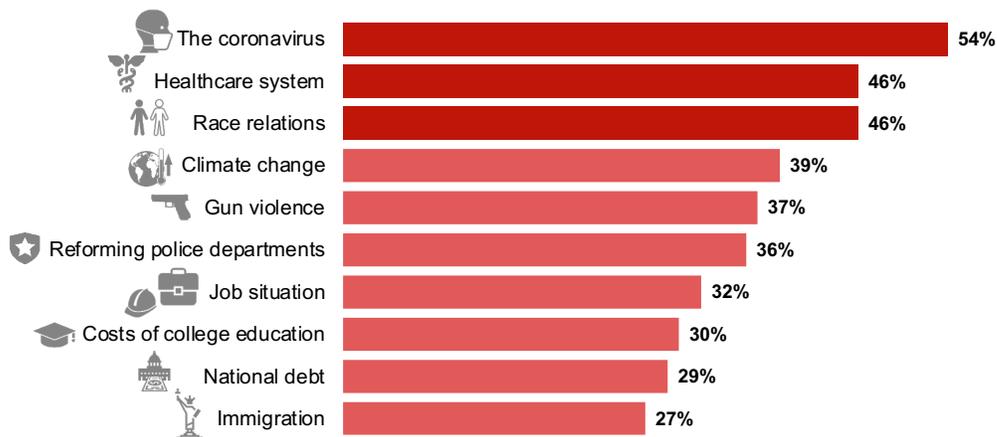
	<u>Positive</u> %	<u>Negative</u> %	<u>Differential</u> ±
The Black Lives Matter Movement	66	20	+46
The MeToo Movement	50	15	+35
Joe Biden	51	30	+21
Anthony Fauci	38	18	+20
Kamala Harris	47	32	+15
The Democratic Party	45	27	+15
Chuck Schumer	13	20	-7
Nancy Pelosi	21	39	-18
The Republican Party	22	52	-30
Mitch McConnell	12	45	-33
Donald Trump	20	69	-49

## Domestic Issues

A year after *the Coronavirus* pandemic took hold of the world, it continues to have a firm grasp and defines our lives. College students are no exception to this experience. COVID continues to be the top issue personally for college students.

### COVID-19 is the top issue for college students, with healthcare and race relations also important for many students.

*FOUR Most Important Issues to Me Personally*



In thinking about the role of government, 74% of college students believe that government should do more to solve problems and help meet people’s needs. This is the highest proportion of college students who desire government to do more, reaching far above the prior high of 56% in 2014. Moreover, 44% of college students believe that the Biden-Harris administration is spending about the right amount in responding to the pandemic, with an economic stimulus and large infrastructure plan that increased federal government spending, with 29% taking the view that they are spending too much and 27% who take the other side—that they are not spending enough.

With such heavy and pressing issues facing the country domestically, nearly six in ten (59%) college students say that most of the problems their generation will face are national in scope, a five-point jump from last year. Meanwhile, four in ten (41%) students say the problems they will face will mostly be international in scope.

The greater focus domestically was highlighted by the terrorist attack at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, with students being more concerned about future attacks on our institutions coming from within the country. Nearly seven in ten college students (69%) are worried that the country will experience another attack from Americans within the United States, compared with half (51%) who are worried that the country will experience another major attack like September 11, 2001, from outside the country. Six in ten (62%) students are also worried that the country will experience a major cyber-terrorist attack that would paralyze the country or cause major disruptions to the operations in credit, finance, and the Internet. This level of concern was expressed prior to hackers taking control of the Colonial Pipeline's files.

### Issues about Race

As indicated by their prioritization of race relations as a top issue for them personally, college students are very cognizant about racial issues. A majority (72%) feel that people in the country are not seeing racial discrimination where it does exist. Progressives, Democrats, Biden voters, and Liberals are most likely to say this is the case, along with Asian American, Black, and Latinx students. Conversely, nearly three in ten (28%) students feel that people are seeing racial discrimination where it really does not exist, with a majority of Conservatives, Republicans, and Trump voters agreeing with this.

<b>Racial Discrimination Issues</b>		
	<b>People seeing racial discrimination where it really does NOT exist</b>	<b>People NOT seeing racial discrimination where it really DOES exist</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>All College Students</b>	28	72
Democrats	12	88
Republicans	60	40
Biden voters	13	87
Trump voters	61	39
Progressives	11	89
Liberals	13	87
Conservatives	63	37

White students	33	67
Latinx students	23	77
Black students	23	77
Asian American students	20	80

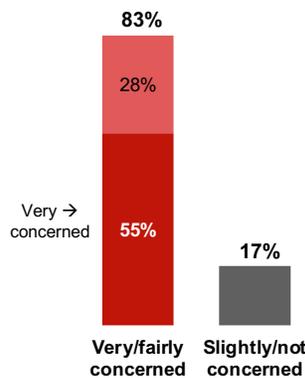
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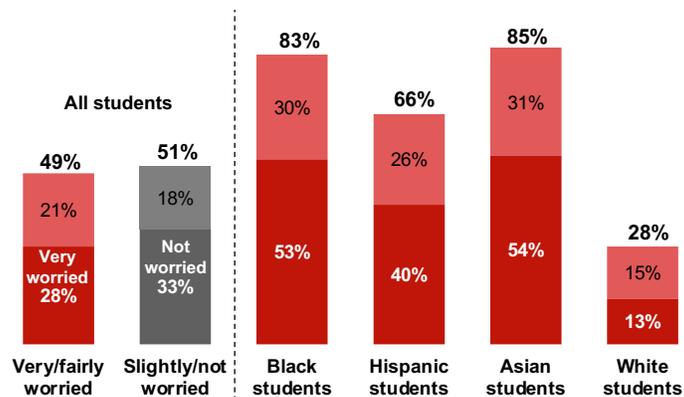
all students (95%) are concerned about the recent attacks based upon race or ethnicity, with 55% being very concerned. Sadly, about half (49%) are worried about being a victim of a racial attack, led by Asian American (85%), Black (83%), and Latinx students (66%). This is much less of a concern for White students (28%).

**College students are concerned about recent attacks based upon race and ethnicity. Many students are worried about being a victim of an attack, particularly students of color.**

*Concern about Recent Attacks Based on Race/Ethnicity*



*Worry about Being Attacked Based on Your Race/Ethnicity*



**Tolerance/Free Speech on Campus**

Students take different points of view on how tolerant and accepting their campus is when it comes to expressing controversial opinions, and also how frequently they themselves do not express opinions for fear of being attacked for their views.

A majority (59%) of college students say their campus is tolerant and willing to listen when someone expresses opinions that are different from their own. Similarly, when students hear someone on campus expressing support for a

political figure they strongly disagree with, 55% say they are generally tolerant and willing to listen.

Looking closer at tolerance for differing opinions and controversial issues, patterns differ across the political spectrum and by ethnicity. Democratic and Liberal groups and students of color are more likely to say students are tolerant and willing to listen. Meanwhile, more conservative groups, Trump voters, and White students say students are intolerant.

<b>How students on campus respond to someone who expresses opinions that differ from their own on controversial issues</b>		
	<b>Tolerant and Willing to Listen</b>	<b>Intolerant and Unwilling to Listen</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Overall</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>41</b>
Democrats	<b>63</b>	37
Republicans	50	<b>50</b>
Biden Voters	<b>65</b>	35
Trump Voters	52	<b>48</b>
Liberals	<b>67</b>	33
Conservatives	52	<b>48</b>
White students	<b>54</b>	46
All students of color	<b>65</b>	35

When it comes to tolerance toward someone who supports a political figure they strongly disagree with, Republicans (53%) and Conservatives (52%) are more likely to say that students are intolerant and unwilling to listen, while Black (65%) and Latinx (64%) students are more likely to say those on campus are tolerant.

While there is a tolerance for speech and expression of differing opinion, nearly half (48%) say they have not expressed their opinion all of the time or frequently because they believe other students or faculty would attack their views.

Six in ten Trump voters, Conservatives, and Republicans say they did not express their opinions because their views would be attacked. These same groups are also more likely to say they have felt threatened by how other students or faculty reacted to an opinion that they expressed. Around four in ten students across these groups share this view.



### How students on campus respond to someone who expresses opinions on controversial issues that are different from their own

	Not expressed your opinion because you believed other students or faculty would attack your views	Felt threatened by how other students or faculty reacted to an opinion that you expressed
	%	%
<b>Overall</b>	48	31
Trump Voters	<b>63</b>	<b>46</b>
Conservatives	<b>62</b>	<b>44</b>
Republicans	<b>60</b>	<b>45</b>

Three in ten (30%) students say they have felt threatened by another student or faculty based upon an opinion they express. This is fairly consistent across all political, ideological, and race groups. However, Black students are more likely to feel threatened by someone else expressing their opinion than other students (38%).

### Confidence in Democratic Institutions

A majority of college students continue to believe that democracy in the United States is working well (57%), which tracks closely with 58% in 2020, and 56% in 2019. However, just 8% of students say democracy is working very well, while 49% say it is working somewhat well, which demonstrates that there is real work to do.

There are large differences by party identification on this measure, most notably among Republicans. In the 2020 survey, conducted prior to the 2020 election, 71% of Republicans said that democracy in the United States was working well, but that has dropped to 46% today. Democrats have shifted the other way, moving from 52% who said democracy was working well in 2020 to 62% now, while Independents have essentially held steady (57% in 2020, 58% in 2021). Views on the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election are a key driver of attitudes toward our democracy. Among the 76% of students who believe that Joe Biden won the presidency legitimately, 61% believe that democracy in the United

States is working well, but among the 15% who do not believe Biden won legitimately, 36% say democracy is working well.

While students are generally more positive about the outlook of the country compared to last year, confidence in many institutions has declined. This may on its face seem counterintuitive, but it is fair to say that our institutions faced significant challenges in their response to the COVID pandemic which could explain some of the drops in confidence. The one institution where overall confidence has increased is the presidency (+13 points from 2020). Again, here we see partisan divisions driving this movement, with confidence in the presidency among Republicans dropping from 51% who had a great deal or quite a bit of confidence in 2020 to 19% today, while confidence among Democrats has increased from 11% to 46%.

Institutions that have experienced drops in confidence since last year include the public health system (-9 points from 2020), the military (-8 points), and the national news media (-5 points). The institution that has seen the biggest drop in confidence since its last measurement is police and law enforcement agencies. In 2017, 44% of college students had a great deal or quite a bit of confidence in police, but that has dropped to 24% now. Black students have actually slightly increased their level of confidence with police and law enforcement agencies over this time, but students of other ethnicities have lost confidence.

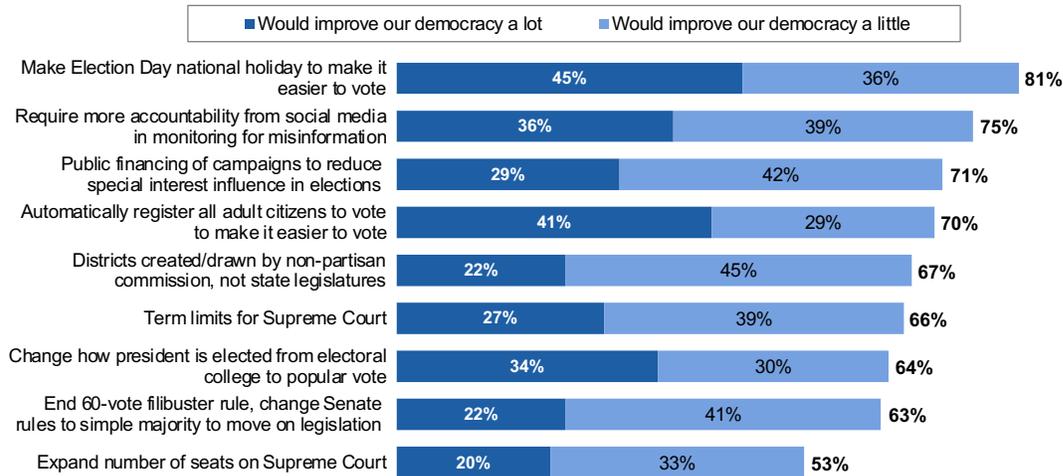
<b>Confidence in Police and Law Enforcement Agencies</b> <i>Proportion of College Students with a Great Deal/ Quite a Bit of Confidence</i>					
	<b>All College Students</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Latinx</b>	<b>Asian American</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
2021	24	28	26	21	16
2017	44	50	23	46	30

## **The 2020 Election and Democracy**

Overall, 76% of college students believe that Joe Biden won the presidency legitimately. This view is shared by nearly all Democrats (96%) and most Independents (71%). A plurality of Republicans (46%) believe that Joe Biden did not win the presidency legitimately, while 38% believe that he did, and another 16% are not sure. On the question of voting and possible reforms to the system, Democrats (78%) and Independents (58%) say that having more eligible people vote is more important, while 74% of Republicans say preventing voter fraud matters most.

Students were also presented with a series of changes that could take place to improve our democracy. Majorities believe that each of these reforms would improve our democracy overall, and several receive majority support across party lines: making Election Day a national holiday (Democrats: 88%, Independents: 72%, and Republicans: 71%), requiring greater accountability from social media companies in monitoring their platforms for misinformation (83%, 71%, 61% respectively), public financing of campaigns to reduce the influence of special interests in elections (79%, 65%, 61% respectively), having districts created by non-partisan commissions (71%, 60%, 63% respectively), instituting term limits for the United States Supreme Court (76%, 60%, 51% respectively), and changing the U.S. Senate rules to a simple majority of 51 votes to move forward on legislation (71%, 54%, 55% respectively).

**College students believe many reforms to our democracy will improve things, including making Election Day a holiday and automatically registering every citizen eligible to vote.**



### III. International Issues

Students want the United States to be engaged internationally, but the preference is for America not to assume a leadership role. As with the country overall, college students are deeply divided along partisan lines on international issues and the role of the United States in the world today.

Overall, 39% of college students want America to assume a leadership role in the world and be very engaged, while the plurality (48%) of students instead prefer that the United States be engaged, but not in a leadership role. Just 13% of students do not want the United States to be engaged in the world. Majorities of Democrats and Independents take the view that the United States should be engaged, but not in a leadership role (51% and 53% respectively). Republicans are most likely to want the United States to be very engaged and assume a leadership role (44%), but also are more likely than others to see America assume an isolationist position and not engage at all (19%). While most demographic groups lean toward the side of the United States being engaged, but not in a leadership role, those who are majoring in business are more likely to want America to be very engaged and assume a leadership role (52%).

<b>Role of the United States in the World</b>				
	<b>All College Students</b>	<b>Democrats</b>	<b>Independents</b>	<b>Republicans</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
The United States be very engaged and assume a leadership role	39	38	35	44
The United States be engaged but not in a leadership role	48	51	53	37
The United States not be engaged	13	11	12	19

While nearly a third of college students surveyed were born after the 9/11 attacks, students still rank terrorism (40%) as the greatest threat to the United States internationally, surpassing the threats from China (26%), North Korea (16%), Russia (13%), and Iran (5%). Again, students are divided along party lines, with Democrats (43%) and Independents (44%) overwhelmingly selecting terrorism as the top threat, while Republicans say China is the greatest threat to the United States (42%) over terrorism (31%). There is also a significant gender gap, with men ranking China (39%) over terrorism (26%), but women ranking terrorism (52%) over China (16%) as the greatest threat to the United States.

## **Climate Change**

Climate change continues to be a looming threat in the minds of college students. Not only is climate change cited as one of the top issues facing the country for college students, but a staggering 88% of students say that climate change is a serious problem, 59% of whom consider it a very serious problem. Among Democrats, almost all (96%) say that climate change is a serious problem, 79% of whom rank it as a very serious problem. While the Republican Party platform does not consider climate change to be a serious problem, there is a sharp deviation from the party line among Republican college students, a trend we also see with younger Republicans nationally. Three-quarters of Republican students and three-quarters of Trump voters (76% respectively) consider climate change to be a serious problem. It appears that for this younger generation, who will experience

the effects of climate change more acutely in their lifetime, the partisan divide shrinks.

### **Immigration**

On another issue that has been debated throughout their lives, 71% of college students say that immigration helps the United States more than it hurts it. Even greater majorities of Democrats (83%) and Biden voters (81%) say that immigration helps the United States more than it hurts it. By contrast, half of Republican students (51%) and Trump voters (54%) say that immigration hurts more than it helps the United States. There is little differentiation on this measure by ethnicity, with Asian-American students most likely to say that immigration helps more than it hurts the United States (79%), but there is widespread agreement across ethnicities on this measure among Black (71%), White, and Latinx (70% for both) students.

## **IV. The Political Landscape**

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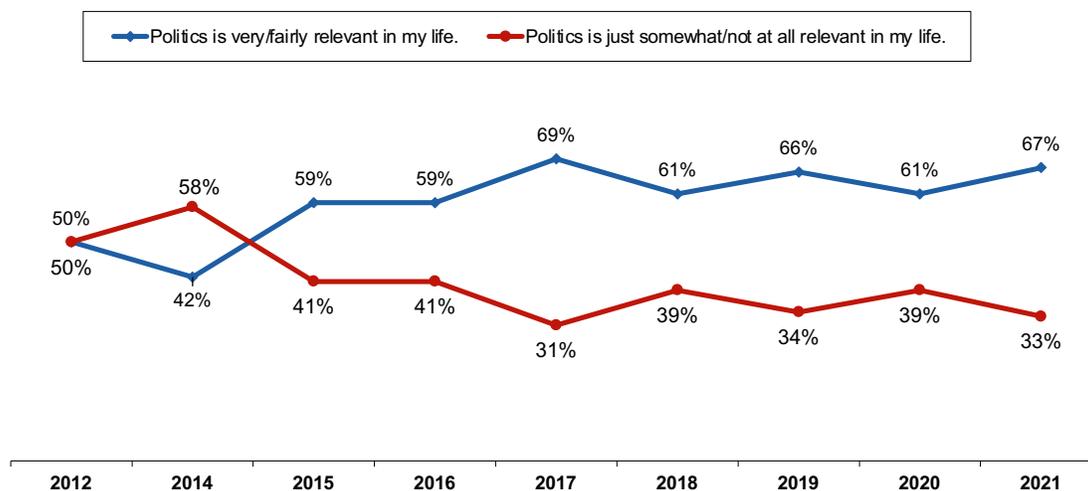
The 2020 election was a major defining moment for the country, and one that was also felt on campus and in the lives of college students. Not only did many college students vote in the election, but they volunteered at all-time high levels and found the experience to be rewarding, with most students believing that politics is relevant to them.

For the first time since 2011, a majority (54%) of college students are satisfied with the country's political leadership, up from 43% in last year's survey. Here again there are vast differences by political identification on this measure. While majorities of Democrats (68%) and Independents (52%) say they are satisfied with the country's political leadership, just 28% of Republicans share this view. A year ago, prior to the 2020 presidential election, 73% of Republicans were satisfied with the country's political leadership, while only 25% of Democrats felt similarly (46% for Independents).

College students are also more likely than last year to believe that politics are relevant in their life, with 67% expressing this view, up from 61% last year. Unlike other measures, relevance is one instance where Democratic (74%) and Republican (68%) views more closely align, with a majority (51%) of Independents

also expressing the belief that politics are relevant to them. One sign for concern is that first-year students are by far the least likely to view politics as relevant to them (59%), while sophomores (64%), juniors (69%), and seniors (76%) are all more likely to feel this way. While most college students report that they are registered to vote, those who are not registered are also much less likely to view politics as relevant to their life (46%) compared with those who are registered (71%).

### Two in three college students believe that politics is relevant in their lives.



### The 2020 Election

More than eight in ten (83%) college students say they are registered to vote, and among those who are registered, 87% say they voted in the November 2020 election. Among those who voted, 70% report voting for Joe Biden, while 24% said they voted for Donald Trump. Fully 80% of first-year students report having voted for Joe Biden, as well as majorities of Democrats (95%) and Independents (58%), while 70% of Republicans say they voted for Donald Trump.

Not only did many college students vote in the 2020 presidential election, but they were more likely to have volunteered for a political campaign or organization in the 2020 election compared with prior years. One in four (24%) college students say they volunteered during the 2020 election, up from 10% after the 2008

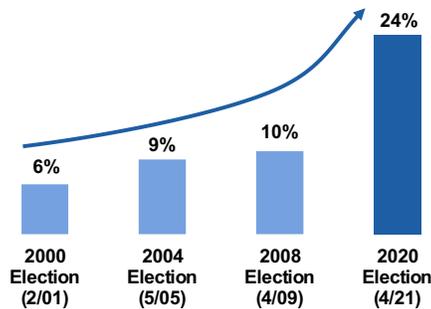
election. Among those who are more likely to have volunteered are those very interested in working for government after graduation (43%), those studying in the social sciences (32%), those who read newspapers to follow news and information (31%), juniors (30%) and seniors (29%). Latinx (37%), Black (34%), and Asian American (23%) students are all more likely to have volunteered than White students (16%). Independents (26%) and Democrats (25%) are more likely to have volunteered in 2020 than Republicans (19%). Progressives (32%) are more likely to have volunteered than Liberals (23%), Conservatives (23%), and moderates (21%).

Among students who volunteered during the 2020 election, 60% reported that it was for a presidential campaign—45% for the Biden campaign and 15% for the Trump campaign—while 23% volunteered for a state or local race, and 22% for a candidate for the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives.

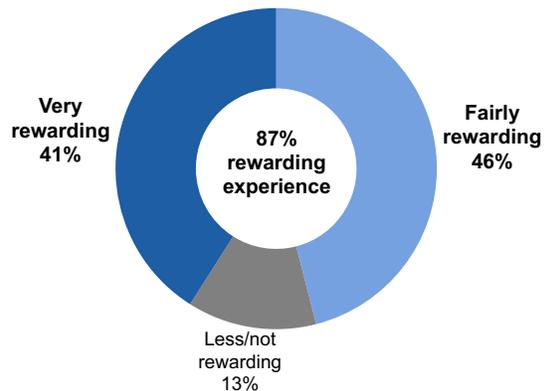
Significantly, the vast majority found the experience to be rewarding (87%).

**Nearly one in four college students report that they volunteered during the 2020 election; most found the experience rewarding.**

*I Volunteered for a Political Campaign during the Recent Elections:*



*Assessment of the Time I Spent Volunteering for a Political Campaign in 2020*



**President Biden**

Seven in ten (71%) college students approve President Biden’s job performance. He receives widespread support across gender and ethnic groups, as well as those from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Majorities of Democrats (90%) and

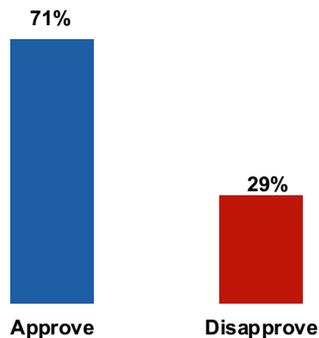
Independents (63%) approve of Biden's performance as president, along with 36% of Republicans.

<b>Joe Biden Presidential Job Rating</b>		
	<b>Approve</b>	<b>Disapprove</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
All students	71	29
Men	62	38
Women	77	23
White students	63	37
Black students	80	20
Latinx students	73	27
Asian American students	83	17
Social class: upper-middle/upper	70	30
Social class: middle	69	31
Social class: lower/lower-middle	73	27
Democrats	90	10
Independents	63	37
Republicans	36	64
Economy: Excellent/good	80	20
Economy: Not so good/poor	61	39
State school	73	27
Private school	61	39

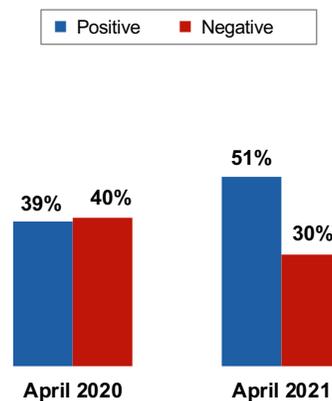
In addition to approving of the job Joe Biden is doing as president, college students also have positive feelings toward him personally, which marks significant improvement on this measure compared to last year. On the heels of a competitive Democratic nomination process, 39% of college students held positive feelings toward Joe Biden and 40% viewed him negatively. A year later, his personal ratings are 51% positive, 30% negative. The most notable improvement for President Biden from the 2020 survey is among Democrats, among whom President Biden stood at 50% positive, 29% negative last year whereas he has improved to 71% positive, 11% negative this year. President Biden's ratings with two other groups are particularly noteworthy in measuring improvement: progressives have shifted from 36% positive / 44% negative to 62% positive / 20% negative today, along with Whites, from 33% positive / 48% negative last year to 44% positive / 36% negative in the 2021 survey.

**Seven in ten college students approve of President Biden’s performance, and his personal ratings have improved since last year.**

*Joe Biden’s Job Performance as President*



*Feelings toward Joe Biden*



A majority (54%) of college students feel optimistic and confident (17%) or satisfied and hopeful (37%) about Joe Biden as president, while 46% are either uncertain and wondering (32%) or pessimistic and worried (14%). Seven in ten (73%) Democrats are optimistic or satisfied with Joe Biden as president while a nearly equal 76% of Republicans are uncertain or pessimistic. Independents find themselves in the middle, most likely to either be uncertain and wondering about Biden (46%) or satisfied and hopeful (35%).

When students are provided the opportunity to send a message to President Joe Biden, they focus on being appreciative of the work that he is doing and that he is thinking of the people when he makes his decisions. Underneath this is an acknowledgement that the country is facing major problems both domestically and internationally, specifically with climate change, and there is a desire for President Biden to do what he can to regain our standing on these pressing issues even if they cannot be solved in the short term.

**“Please help bring the country together.”**

**“You are doing a really nice job as a president and thank you because you care about our nation.”**

**“Please, please help unify our country again. Don't feed into the fear. If you stay strong and confident, others will follow in your footsteps. As someone from Gen-Z, we are afraid, even though we may not always show it.”**

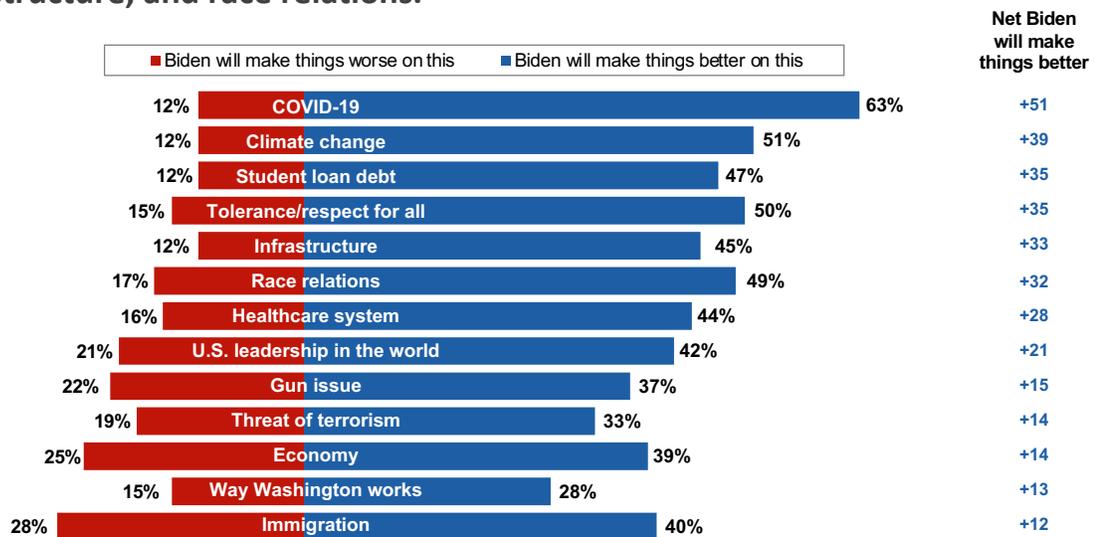
**“Please do the best you can for our environment, Joe. Our earth is very sick and facing its own pandemic, please do your best and slow down what's happening.”**

**“I would tell President Biden thank you for leading our country through this pandemic with the vaccination plan.”**

**“Please help COVID-19 from spreading further. I am happy he took the initiative and got vaccines everywhere! I'm hoping that his efforts to fight this continue to get toward back to normal life again.”**

There is a great deal of hope and optimism that college students express about the positive impact that President Biden can make for the country. In fact, on a series of thirteen issues facing the country, the expectation is that on each one, Joe Biden is more likely to make things better than make things worse. On several of the most important issues identified by college students as priorities to address, students believe that Joe Biden will make things better. This includes THE top issue facing the country in the eyes of college students, COVID, which also happens to be the issue where students believe Biden is most likely to improve (63%), and extends to other top issues, including climate change (51%), tolerance and respect for all (50%), race relations (49%), and student loan debt (47%).

**College students believe that President Biden will make things better, particularly with COVID-19, climate, student loan debt, tolerance, infrastructure, and race relations.**



As the Biden-Harris administration agenda is debated in Congress, college students are clear in their desire for Republicans in Congress to change and make compromises with President Biden to gain consensus on legislation (74%) rather than a rigid adherence to a position or platform (26%). However, Republicans are more divided on this measure, though still taking the side of wanting Republicans in Congress to compromise by 54% to 46%.

While college students prefer Republicans to compromise they are more divided about Democrats in Congress taking liberal or progressive positions instead of working to pass President Biden's agenda. Overall, 51% of college students want Democrats in Congress to stick to liberal and progressive positions even if it means not passing all of what President Biden wants to do (51%) rather than working to pass President Biden's agenda (49%). Democrats (53%), moderates (55%), and Liberals (51%) all land more on the side of working to pass the Biden agenda, while Progressives (62%) prefer sticking to positions even if this means not being able to pass all of what President Biden wants.

## V. Impact of the Coronavirus

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COVID has had a deep and lasting impact on the psyche of college students, both in their own personal experiences as well as their college experience. Not only will COVID have a profound impact on their college years, but many students also see COVID's impact on their lives long after they leave campus.

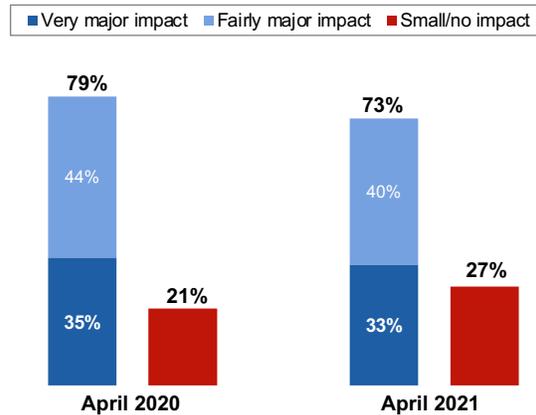
### Personal Impact of the Coronavirus

More than seven in ten (73%) college students say that their day-to-day life has changed in a very or fairly major way due to *the Coronavirus*. While this is down a bit from last year (79%), when many students were at home or in lockdown, the fact that so many students report this degree of impact highlights just how life-changing the pandemic has been. Students that are more likely to have been impacted include Democrats (80%), as well as those in the Northeast (79%) and West (78%).

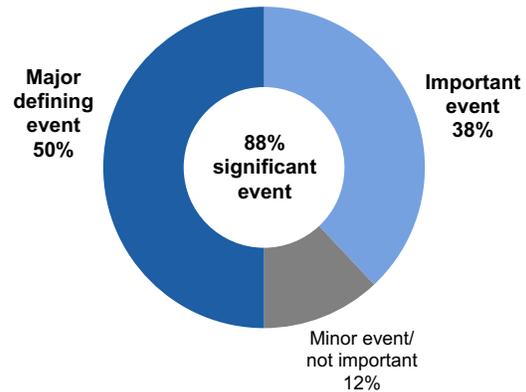
It is not just how the pandemic has changed day-to-day life; it is how the pandemic has defined students' lives. Half (50%) of all surveyed students believe that *the Coronavirus* is a major defining event in their life, while 38% say it is an important event. Those who are more likely to say the pandemic is a major defining event in their life are Asian American students (62%), Democrats (61%), seniors (59%), those from a lower socioeconomic background (57%), those in the Northeast (57%), and women (56%).

## College students continue to report that COVID-19 has changed their life in a major way, and half say that it is a major defining moment in their life.

*Impact of the Coronavirus on my Day-to-Day Life*



*Overall View of the Coronavirus on my Life*



In their own words, college students who say that COVID-19 is either a major defining event or an important event explain what impact it has had on them. The feelings expressed run the gamut from the deeply personal, individual experience of what it means to have lived through COVID as a college student to changes in their worldview and expectations for life, with a new sense of humility and fragility that may not have been felt before.

**“This will go down in history as one of the most difficult time periods for America.”**

**“The pandemic is a major defining event for me because it has taken away a lot of rites of passage from me and has completely changed the way I will look at life in the coming years.”**

**“I think it's changed how I see my time and how I spend my life. It's showed me that anything could really happen, and maybe I should be spending more time with the people that matter and worrying about the next day rather than the next five years.”**

**“It is a major defining event in my life. It has affected my school years in the supposedly best times of my youth. My senior year, is spent at home online learning, rather than with friends.”**

**“Everything has gone on pause. So many people have suffered, and I really believe it will change the ways in which we interact with people and view health from now on.”**

**“The coronavirus has stopped my life as I knew it; I went from attending college and having lots of freedom to having to be isolated from all social life.”**

**“It put everything on hold. I feel like I lost a year socially where I could’ve been making friends and building relationships but instead, I stayed home.”**

**“I lost a significant career opportunity due to it and began experiencing mental health issues I did not have before the pandemic and lockdowns.”**

**“It humbled me. It changed how I view the world entirely.”**

College students have been impacted by COVID in many ways, both directly and indirectly. Nearly one in five (18%) college students report that they have tested positive for COVID, and to drive home the point that the virus does not differentiate, there is little variation between students who attend smaller schools (22%) and larger schools (18%), White students (19%) and students of color (17%), or Republicans (22%) and Democrats (17%). And among those who have not tested positive for COVID, two in five (40%) have had to quarantine due to close contact with a person testing positive. COVID’s impact on this measure is also widespread and uniform including students at smaller schools (40%) and larger schools (36%); White students (44%) and students of color (35%); Republicans (40%) and Democrats (43%).

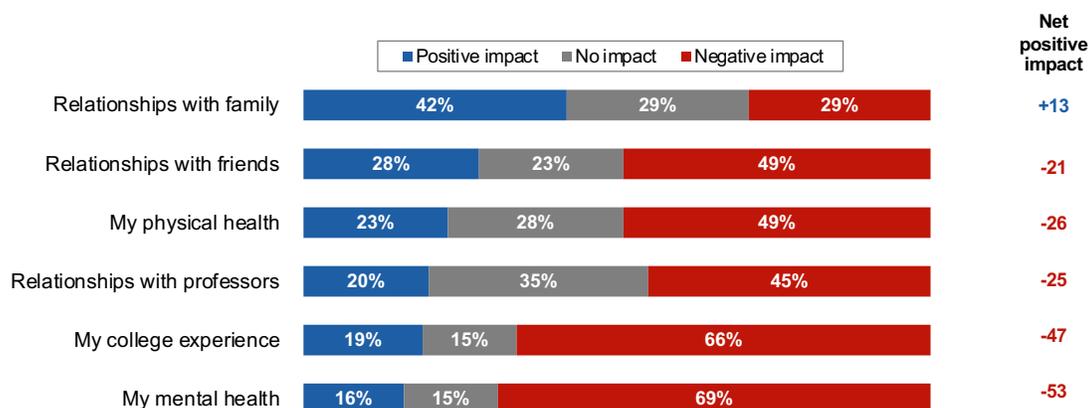
COVID has also had a profound psychological and financial toll on college students, with one in three (33%) students saying they have lost a close friend or family member due to COVID and two in five (43%) reporting that their family has lost a significant amount of income due to the pandemic. While many college students have been hurt by COVID, the cost has been greater for Latinx students in particular, among whom 50% have lost a close friend or family member and 49% indicate their family has lost significant income. Black students (41%) are also more likely to have lost a close friend or family member, and those from a lower socioeconomic background are much more likely to say their family has lost significant income due to COVID (57%).

<b>Impact of COVID</b>		
	<b>Close friend/family member died from COVID</b>	<b>Family lost income due to COVID</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
All students	33	43
Men	35	41
Women	32	45
White students	27	41
Black students	42	41
Latinx students	50	49
Asian American students	18	41
Social class: upper-middle/upper	32	32
Social class: middle	32	41
Social class: lower/lower-middle	36	57

Taking a broader look at COVID's impact, college students evaluated how COVID has impacted them in six areas, and for most, COVID's impact was more negative than positive. Of particular concern is that 69% of college students say COVID has had a negative impact on their mental health and 66% feel similarly about their college experience. Students who are more likely to say COVID has had a negative impact on their college experience include those who attend schools with 20,000 students or more (73%) and students in the Northeast (72%). Those more likely to feel COVID has had a negative impact on their mental health are those from a lower socioeconomic background (80%), those majoring in the Humanities (79%), those who attend schools with more than 20,000 students (77%), Democrats (76%), those in the West (76%), those majoring in the Social Sciences (75%), and women (74%). The only relative bright spot here is that college students are more likely to say that COVID has had a positive rather than negative impact on relationships with family (42% to 29%).

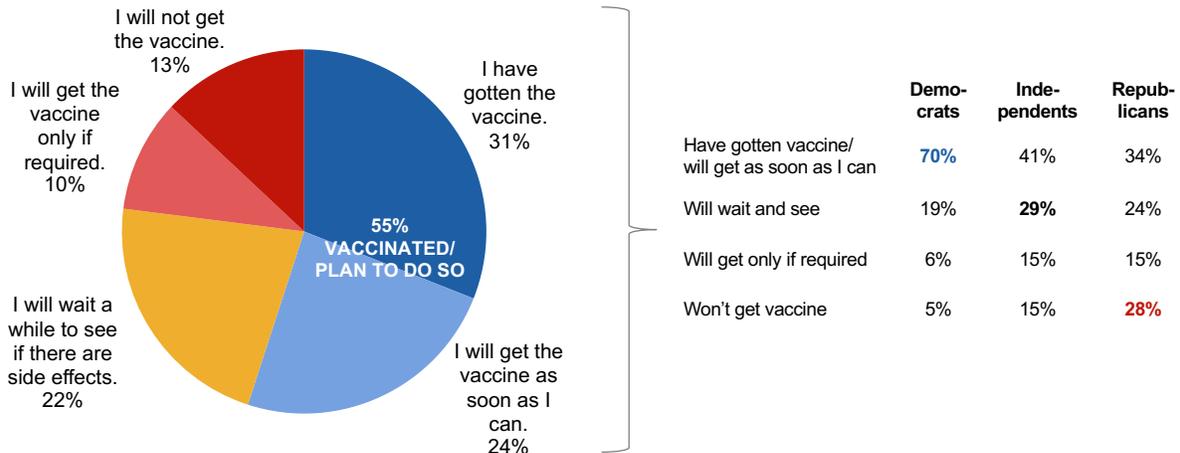
**College students report negative impacts on many aspects of their life due to COVID-19, including their college experience and mental health. Relationships with family are a bright spot.**

*Impact of the Coronavirus on Aspects of My Life*



A majority (55%) of college students report that they have either already received the COVID vaccine (31%) or will be vaccinated as soon as they can (24%). Another 22% say they will wait to see if there are major problems as a result of the vaccine, while 23% can be considered vaccine hesitant or skeptic, including 10% who will only be vaccinated if required, and 13% saying they will not get the vaccine at all. There are significant divisions on willingness to take the vaccine (or those who have already received it) by partisan identification, with Democrats and to a less degree, Independents, being more willing to get the vaccine than Republicans. In addition, Black students (33%) are much less likely to either have gotten the vaccine already or plan get it as soon as they can, compared with Asian American (69%), White (59%), and Latinx (50%) students who have been vaccinated or will get vaccinated as soon as they can. Personal experience does not appear to be a motivator to be vaccinated, as those who have tested positive for COVID (40%) or lost a close friend or family member (43%) are less likely than students overall to either be vaccinated or say they will be vaccinated.

**Most college students report that they have either gotten the vaccine or are planning to do so.**



**Impact of the Coronavirus on University Campuses**

In a school year like no other, students had very different experiences in their COVID year on campus. While it has been a very challenging year, with students experiencing learning in different ways, and having a different perspective on whether online learning should remain a major aspect of instruction, students continue to be mostly satisfied with how their institution dealt with COVID.

In fact, more than half (54%) of students left campus at some point to live with their family, 30% took time off until classes returned in person, and 18% transferred to another school that was more affordable. Latinx students were more likely to have moved back with their family (64%) and taken time off until classes returned to be in person (37%).

Despite the many challenges facing administrators in navigating COVID, college students remain satisfied with how their college or university is dealing with the pandemic. Overall, 78% of students say they are satisfied with how their school has dealt with COVID, down slightly from 83% last year, as the gravity of COVID’s impact was beginning to be understood across the country and on campus. First-year students (84%), who would not have been on campus last March when COVID’s impact began to be felt, and those who attend smaller schools of 5,000 or fewer students (84%) are among those more satisfied with how their institution has responded to COVID. While 82% of Democrats and Independents respectively are

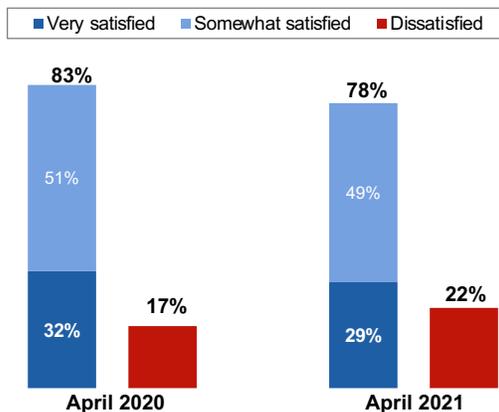
satisfied with their school’s response, that drops to 67% for Republicans. Students who tested positive for COVID (75%) or had to quarantine due to a close contact (78%) are nearly as satisfied as students who had neither of these experiences (79%).

Underscoring what a different year this has been on campus, just 7% of students say that during the school year all of their classes have been in-person, 55% report there has been a mix of in-person and online, and 38% say all classes have been online. Students attending schools with 5,000 students or less (58%) or 5,000 to 20,000 students (61%) are more likely to say their school offers a mix of in-person and online classes, while students at schools with 20,000 or more students are less likely to say this is the case (51%), with students at larger schools being more likely to have all online classes (46%).

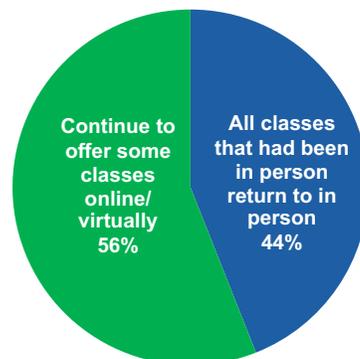
Once the pandemic is over, a majority (56%) of students want to continue having some classes offered online, while 44% want all classes that had been in-person to return to in-person instruction. While students regardless of year prefer to continue with some online courses, seniors are most likely to want to continue with online instruction (65%). Republicans prefer all classes to be held in-person by 51% to 49%, while Democrats would like to continue offering some classes online by a 60% to 40% margin.

**The vast majority of students continue to be satisfied with how their institution has handled COVID-19. Most students want to see some classes offered online post-COVID-19.**

*How satisfied are you with the way your college or university has dealt with the coronavirus?*



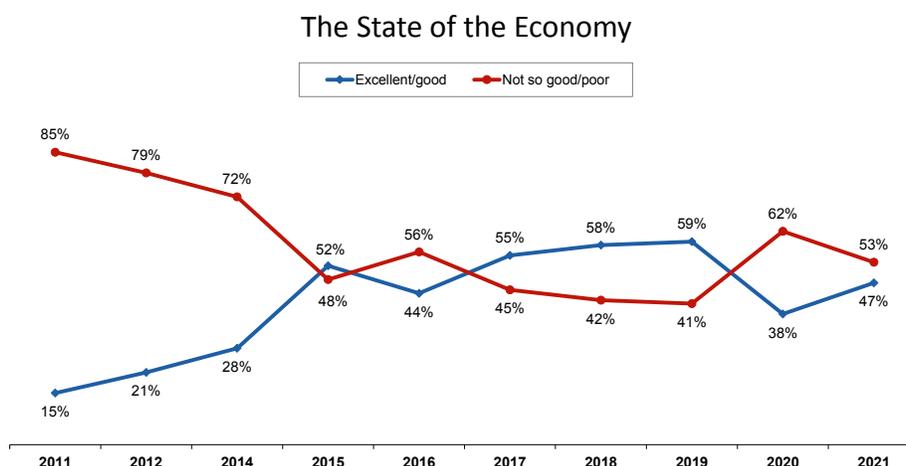
*Once the pandemic is over and there aren't safety concerns, what would you prefer for classes?*



## VI. Economic Outlook

In the light of a pandemic that triggered an economic slowdown and soaring unemployment rates, college students last year expressed a deep pessimism about the economy. This year, college students are feeling more optimistic about the country, and have record high levels of confidence in their own employment situation after graduation.

Nearly half (47%) of college students say that the nation's economy is excellent or good, a nine-percentage-point increase from 2020 (38%). While students overall are more optimistic than in the previous year, 53% still rate the economy as not so good or poor.



A majority (56%) of students studying business, and the sciences, math, or computer science (51%) say the economy is excellent or good, as well as students from an upper- or upper-middle-class socioeconomic background (57%).

Looking ahead, when asked whether they believe the nation's economy will get better, worse, or stay the same in the next twelve months, a plurality (43%) of students say the economy will get better, the highest recorded proportion in five years. There is a significant gap between Democratic and Republican students. Among Democrats, 55% think the economy will get better, while just 27% of Republicans agree. Biden voters (56%) also are twice as likely as Trump voters (25%) to think the economy will get better in the next year.

## Job Prospects

While college students are cautiously optimistic about the state of the economy, they are more confident than they ever have been in the history of this poll that they will find a job that is acceptable to them after graduation. Fully 76% of students say they are confident they will find a job that is acceptable to them.

However, despite the high level of confidence in their ability to find an acceptable job, there are still significant concerns about a job that is good paying. Seven in ten (71%) students worry about finding a good-paying quality job, and since 2018, more than seven in ten students have expressed concern about this, a level we had not measured previously. Clearly students are differentiating between the two – confidence in an acceptable job and concern about a job that pays well. Even among those who are confident in their ability to find an acceptable job, 66% are worried that they will find a job that is good paying. Notably, students of the social sciences (86%) and humanities (78%) are more likely than their peers studying other fields to be worried about finding a good-paying quality job.

More students continue to be interested in working in the private sector (49% very or fairly interested) than in any other jobs or careers, though students also report high levels of interest in working in high tech (47%) or a job that addresses climate change (47%). In the wake of the pandemic, students also remain interested in jobs in public health (43%) and a job that is considered essential in dealing with *the Coronavirus* (37%).

Interest in working for government has declined from 44% last year to 39% this year. Half (50%) of seniors are interested in working for government, but this drops for all other college students, with juniors (37%), sophomores (38%), and first-year students (32%) expressing less interest. There are little differences by party, as 40% of both Democrats and Independents are interested in working for government, as are 38% of Republicans. Latinx (49%) and Black (44%) students are more interested in government service than are other students.

## **Personal Finances and Impact of Student Loan Debt**

Many college students are facing significant financial challenges and will continue to do so after graduation. The types of jobs students are interested in likely will be impacted by the burden of student loan debt they expect to have upon graduation.

One in four (24%) college students report that they have needed to take time off because they could not afford tuition. Black students (36%), students whose family lost significant income due to COVID (36%), those from a lower socioeconomic background (35%), and students who attend smaller schools of 5,000 students or less (32%) are more likely to have had to take time off from college. Many college students are also working to pay their tuition, with 35% indicating they are working at least 20 hours a week to do so. Those who are more likely to work to pay their tuition include juniors (45%), those whose family lost income due to COVID (44%), Black students (43%), those who attend smaller schools of 5,000 students or less (41%), as well as students from a lower socioeconomic background (41%). Underscoring the interconnectedness of these financial challenges and their impact, among those who have been forced to take time off, 55% work at least 20 hours a week to pay their tuition.

Among students who expect to have student loan debt upon graduation, 63% say their debt will have a great deal or quite a bit of impact on the type of job they are likely to pursue after graduation. A quarter of students say it has a great deal of impact on their job interests. Overall, 87% of students expect to have student loan debt upon graduation, and this includes students across demographic groups, including those whose families are from an upper- or upper-middle-class socioeconomic background (86%), lower or lower middle class (92%), and students who attend state (88%) or private schools (86%). On average, students expect to graduate with \$35,520 in student loan debt, and a quarter of them expect to graduate with more than \$50,000 of debt. Students who attend private colleges expect to graduate with an average of \$43,354 in debt, more than their peers in state schools who expect an average of \$32,999.

Half (52%) of surveyed students have taken out student loans to pay for their tuition, including 69% of students from lower- to lower-middle-class families and 59% of students whose families have lost income during the pandemic. Among

students in upper- to upper-middle-class families, 81% say their parents or other family members are paying some or all their tuition, while just 51% of lower- to lower-middle-class students were receiving similar financial support from their families. A large portion of students receive scholarships to help pay for their education. Seven in ten (71%) students report receiving scholarships to pay for some or all their tuition. A majority (55%) worry about taking on too much student loan debt. Students from lower- and lower-middle-class families (68% worried), Latinx students (63%), and women (60%) are more likely to report concern about student loan debt. The debt burden looms large in the minds of students with 62% expecting that it will take six years or longer to pay off their loans.

## **VII. Public Service**

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Not only did college students volunteer at a record-high level during the 2020 presidential election, but students also continue to show impressive dedication to serving their communities every day. As the pandemic has continued to grip the country, many students have volunteered their time to help their fellow students on campus, first responders and healthcare workers, and those most at risk in their community. Students also continue to study democracy, government, and how to be a good citizen, though there has been a slight drop here from last year. Additionally, students of color express notably strong interest in running for federal or state and local office in their lifetimes.

Students are very engaged in volunteer work and other avenues of public service. In fact, three in five (64%) students have been involved in activities to help their local communities during their time in college. Three in ten (30%) students have been involved in activities directly related to COVID, either serving as an essential worker or volunteering their time. Among Black students, 40% have been involved in work or volunteer activities directly relating to COVID. Students report providing a variety of volunteer services during the pandemic, including donating and distributing food (11%), handing out masks (9%), and volunteering at a hospital or vaccine distribution site (9%).

In their own words, students detailed a variety of services for their communities and highlight the real and critical work that students are doing to make a difference.

**"Ran a food drive for people affected by COVID. Volunteered to write notes for healthcare workers."**

**"Bringing food to those in quarantine, helping educate people on COVID vaccine options."**

**"I helped give out food near my school for any kids of families that needed something to eat."**

**"Helping hand out masks and hand sanitizer on campus."**

**"Helped administer on-campus COVID testing. I am not medically trained so I did not administer testing myself, but I helped people sign up and contacted students with their results."**

**"I am a biology and nursing major, and just recently I worked to pass out coronavirus vaccines."**

**"I worked with COVID-19-positive residents in an assisted living facility."**

Nearly a third (32%) of students are interested in running for a federal elected office in their lifetime. Republican students are far more likely (45%) to be interested in running for federal office than Democratic (30%) or Independent (24%) students. Despite the landmark election of Vice President Kamala Harris, there is still a substantial gender gap when it comes to students interested in running for office. Nearly two in five (39%) men are interested in running for federal office, compared with just 27% of women. However, the election of Vice President Harris and of other representatives and senators of color over the past four years may have succeeded in inspiring and opening up doors for students of color. While just 25% of White students are interested, 43% of students of color are interested in running for federal office, an 18-point difference.

Students are overall more interested in running for local or state elected office than for federal office, with 40% indicating they would be interested in running for a state legislative or city council position. There is again a partisan divide, with 48% of Republicans expressing interest, compared with just 34% of Democrats. Men are still more likely to express an interest in running for state or

local office than women (50% and 32% respectively). While a smaller gap than seen when asked whether they would consider running for federal office, students of color are still more interested than are White students in running for state and local office; 44% of students of color and 37% of White students are interested in running.

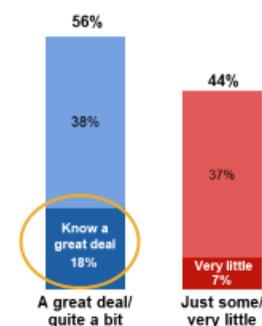
Nearly half (48%) of students report being spoken to about getting involved in politics or public service. More than half (52%) of women report being spoken to about getting involved in politics or public service, despite being consistently less interested than their male peers in running for office. Half (51%) of all students of color have also had similar conversations, just a five-percentage-point difference from White students (46% report being spoken to about getting involved). Interestingly, though Republican students are more interested in running for public office, just 42% of them report being spoken to about getting involved in politics or public service. Instead, larger proportions of Democratic and Independent students report having these conversations (52% of Democrats, 47% of Independents).

## Civic Knowledge

Students report being slightly less confident this year about their knowledge of democracy, government, and how to be a good citizen. A majority (56%) say they know a great deal or quite a bit about democracy, government, and how to be a good citizen; a five-percentage-point dip from 2020. Students of the Social Sciences are more confident in their knowledge (68% high knowledge) as well as those who are very interested in a career in government (90% high knowledge).

Nearly eight in ten (79%) students say they have taken a course in high school or college on our democracy and how to be a good citizen. Among those who have taken a course, they are more likely to be confident in how to be a good citizen (63% compared to just 29% for those who have not taken a course).

*How much do you know about our democracy, government, and how to be a good citizen?*



## **National and Community Service**

This year, students report somewhat lower interest in service-oriented programs after completing their degree. Just 24% of students have considered pursuing a service-oriented experience like Teach for America, VISTA, or AmeriCorps, down from 34% last year, but on par with the 2019 survey (25%). Notably, students are more likely to consider these programs if they are very interested in working in government (48%) or if they volunteered in the 2020 election (51%). Students also express less interest this year in a program that provides them with grant or financial assistance in exchange for two years of national service after graduation. Though a majority of students (55%) would still be interested in such a program, this is the lowest recorded percentage in the past six years. Again, students who are interested in working in government or who volunteered in the 2020 election are more likely to express interest in these programs (81% and 71% respectively).

## **VIII. Media Consumption**

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In tracking attitudes on campus over the past twenty years, one of the most striking changes is how college students seek information about politics and civic affairs. A major driver in these changing behaviors has been the rise of social media and its impact on college students.

In the 2001 Panetta Institute survey, 51% of students reported that they got most of their information about politics and civic affairs from television. In 2021, 27% of students say this is the case, which is a nine-point drop from last year (36%). Now the top source for information about politics and civic affairs for college students is social media (51%), followed by family or friends (34%), and Internet news websites (33%).

Not only has social media taken over as a purveyor of news for college students, but in many ways, it has also taken over how students interact. Ninety percent of college students use social media once a day or more often, which is up slightly from last year (88%). Three in five (60%) students who use social media daily use their accounts four or more times a day, with first-year students being even more likely to be heavy users (68%).

Regarding social media networks, Instagram continues to be the most used at 85%, followed by Snapchat at 81%, but the landscape is rapidly changing. TikTok, the popular video sharing app known for its short-form videos, gained a significant 16-point increase in users since just last year, and now 69% of college students use it, which overtakes Twitter (66%) and matches Facebook (69%). Another sign of this rapidly changing landscape is that there are differences in social network use among college students—with seniors more likely to use Facebook than TikTok (80% to 57%), and first-year students more reliant on TikTok than Facebook (76% to 62%).

With the prominent role social media has in relaying news and information, the survey explored what responsibilities social media companies have for the content posted on their platforms. Should social media companies not get involved in limiting speech or should these companies step in to reduce disinformation? Overall, there is no definitive consensus, as students were divided nearly evenly: 51% of college students said these companies have a responsibility to reduce disinformation and 49% said they should not get involved in limiting speech. However, Democrats are more likely to take the view that social media companies have a responsibility to reduce disinformation (61% to 39%), while Independents (59% to 41%) and Republicans (62% to 38%) favor unrestricted expression.