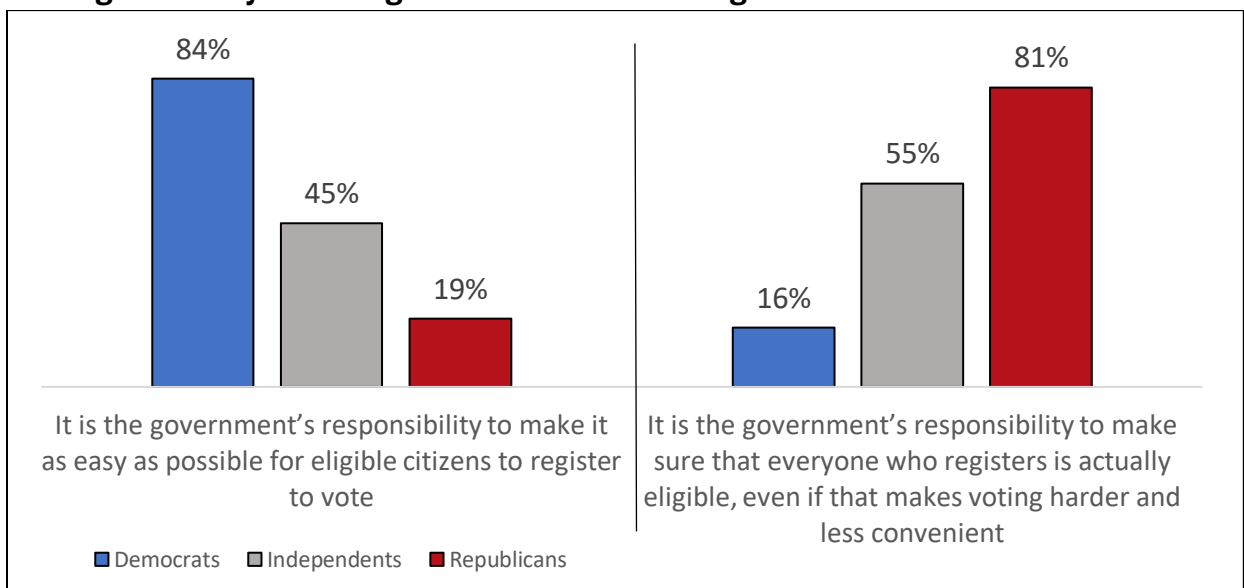


# Views on election policies

## How do Americans feel about who should be allowed to vote? And why?

June 16, 2021

**Democrats and Republicans are divided in what they believe the government's main role should be in the election process—making it as easy as possible for eligible citizens or making sure everyone is eligible even if makes voting harder**



Question: "Overall, which of the following comes closest to your views about voter registration."

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, April 13-20, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; for this survey the maximum margins of error are  $\pm 4.6$  percentage points for Democrats,  $\pm 8.0$  percentage points for Independents, and  $\pm 5.8$  percentage points for Republicans.

# Key findings

- Nearly three-quarters of Americans favor allowing people convicted of felonies to vote after serving their sentences; support is particularly strong among Black Americans and Democrats.
  - While a majority of Republican either strongly or somewhat support this policy (54%), unlike any other group in our analysis a higher proportion of Republicans *strongly oppose* than *strongly support* the enfranchisement of former felons.
- Americans are split on whether people should be removed from registration lists if they have not recently voted or confirmed their registration.
  - The policy is partisan, with four in five Democrats opposing this type of voter roll purging, whereas the same proportion of Republicans favor the policy.
- 83% of American adults favor ensuring the eligibility of those listed on voter rolls through allowing states to cooperate on a national database that checks whether potential voters have moved or have duplicate registrations
- 90% of American adults favor using information from the Social Security Administration and death certificates to remove those who are no longer living from registered voter lists.
- Two-thirds of Americans support requiring all voters to show government-issued identification to vote.
  - Voter ID requirements are favored by a majority of group that we assessed, except for Democrats, who are split on the issue.
- A slight majority prioritizes the government’s role in making it as easy as possible for citizens to register to vote over ensuring voter eligibility.
  - Black Americans stand out as a demographic group that favor ensuring the ease of voting over voter eligibility, by a margin of 74% to 26%.
  - More than 83% of Democrats prioritize emphasizing the ease of voting, while more than 81% of Republicans favor ensuring voter eligibility.
  - When those who prioritize ease of voting are asked to explain their reasoning, far and away the most common type of response given has to do with guaranteeing the *right* to vote. Responses include the following:
    - “Voting is the foundation of our country. Anything less risks privilege and bigotry”
    - “It is our constitutional right to vote.”

- “I think voter suppression is a greater issue than voter fraud or inaccuracies. I also think this could help increase the amount of voters for elections.”
- When those who prioritize ensuring voter eligibility are asked to explain their reasoning, the most common key words are *fraud* and *legal or illegal*. Examples of the responses include:
  - “To prevent voter fraud; to prevent people from voting twice in different jurisdictions; to prevent fake ballots from contaminating and diluting the votes of actual qualified citizen voters.”
  - “Voting is a privilege, not a right. It would be in the government's best interest to make sure voters are eligible.”
  - “Because illegal aliens should NOT be able to vote.”

# Introduction

Penn State’s nonpartisan McCourtney Institute for Democracy regularly conducts the nationally representative Mood of the Nation Poll to gage how Americans are feeling about various aspects of American politics and society.<sup>1</sup> The April 2021 poll included several questions on ideas of election policy and voter requirements:

1. Please indicate whether you would strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose: Removing people from registration lists if they have not recently voted or confirmed their registration.
2. Please indicate whether you would strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose: Requiring all voters to show government-issued photo identification to vote.
3. Please indicate whether you would strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose: Allowing people convicted of felonies to vote after serving their sentences.
4. Every state has different rules for removing citizens from their registered voters lists. In order to identify ineligible voters, do you think that states should cooperate on a nationwide database that provides information on whether voters have moved or have duplicate registrations?
5. Do you think that states should use information from the Social Security Administration and state death certificates to remove voters who are no longer living?
6. Overall, which of the following comes closest to your views about voter registration?
  - It is the government’s responsibility to make it as easy as possible for eligible citizens to register to vote.
  - It is the government’s responsibility to make sure that everyone who registers is actually eligible, even if that makes voting harder and less convenient.

Importantly, respondents were asked to provide reasons for their responses to question 6.

Note that while this is the ordering of the question as presented in the survey, we discuss results of the question in a somewhat different order in the body of this report.

To see whether Americans’ opinions on these topics vary according to demographic, social and economic characteristics, we analyzed the results of each question by gender (women, men), age (four groups), race and ethnicity (only three groups are available in this survey: White, non-

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<sup>1</sup> For additional information about the Mood of the Nation Poll see the appendix to this brief. For additional details about this survey’s methodology, please see <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>

Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; and Hispanic), region of the country, and political affiliation (Republican, Independent, Democrat as derived from self-placement on derived from self-placement on a seven-category scale ranging from “Strong Democrat” to “Strong Republican”). The number of respondents in each group are detailed in the methodology report that accompanies this brief.

# Voting rights for people convicted of felonies

Nearly three-quarters of Americans either strongly or somewhat favor allowing people convicted of felonies to vote after serving their sentences. This substantive majority is reflective of the general trend of states restoring the right to vote at some point for people convicted of felons. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 37 states and the District of Columbia automatically restore voting rights upon completion of sentence, which includes parole or probation.<sup>2</sup>

There is strong consensus on this topic across racial groups: more than 70% of White, Black, and Hispanic Americans strongly or somewhat favor allowing people convicted of felonies to vote after serving their sentences. Support is particularly strong, however, among Black Americans, 66% of whom *strongly* support the political enfranchisement of former felons.

There is virtually no regional variation in support for allowing those convicted of felonies to vote after serving their time. While a high proportion indicate support for the enfranchisement of former felons across all of the demographic groups we analyzed, slightly higher proportions of younger versus older and more highly educated versus less highly educated adults strongly support this policy.

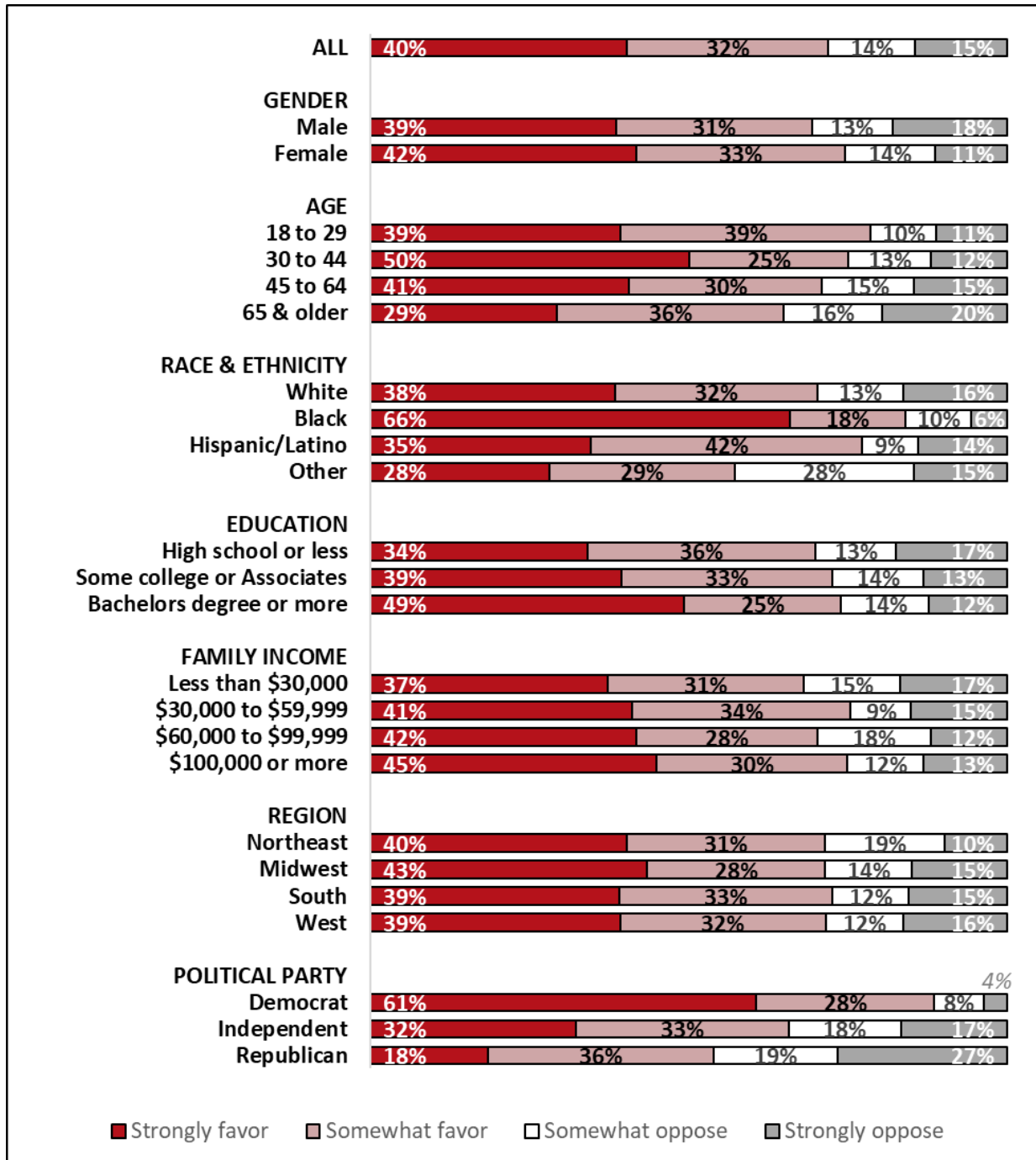
Support for allowing those convicted of felons to vote after serving their time crosses political lines: 89% of Democrats favoring the policy, followed by 66% of Independents, and 54% of Republicans. However, among all demographic groups we assessed, Republicans had the lowest percentage of respondents who favored restoring voting rights to those with felony records. In fact, unlike any other group in our analysis, a higher proportion of Republicans strongly *oppose* than strongly *support* the enfranchisement of former felons.

In light of these findings, it is perhaps not surprising that eight of the 11 states that currently do not automatically restore voting rights to those convicted of felons upon completion of their sentences favored Republican former President Trump in the 2020 presidential election.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights.aspx>, accessed June 9, 2021.

## Nearly three-quarters of Americans favor allowing people convicted of felonies to vote after serving their sentences; support is particularly strong among Black Americans and Democrats



Question: "Please indicate whether you would strongly favor...or strongly oppose: Allowing people convicted of felonies to vote after serving their sentences."

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, April 13-20, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.4 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

# Purging lists due to recent nonvoting or failure to confirm registration

Americans are split on whether people should be removed from registration lists if they have not recently voted or confirmed their registration: 48.4% support the idea while 51.6% are opposed, a difference that is within this survey's margin of error. It is notable, however, that a somewhat larger proportion of Americans *strongly* opposes purging voter rolls for these reasons than *strongly* supports this policy (31% versus 24%).

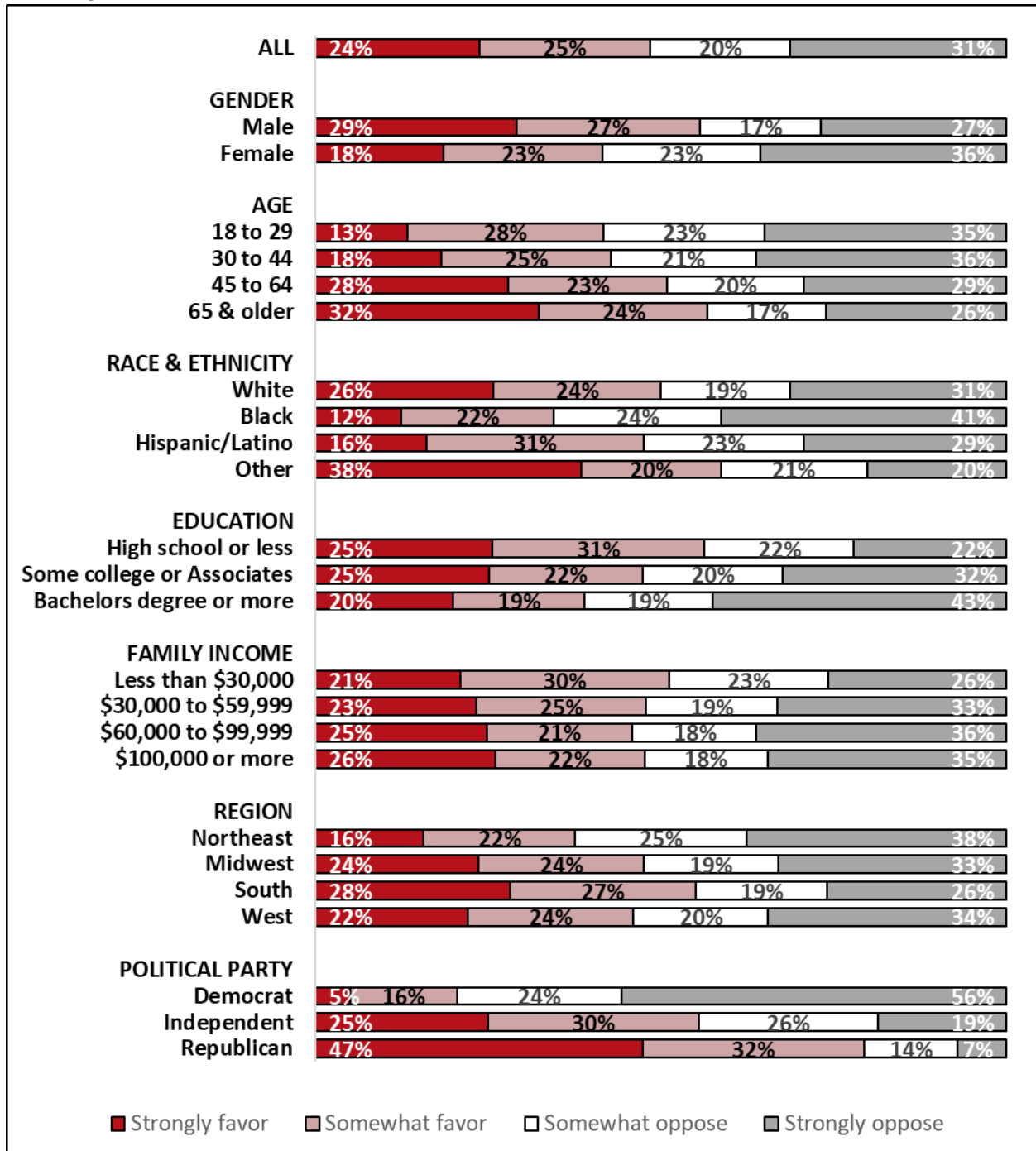
Unlike the case for restoring voting rights for the formerly incarcerated, or requiring all voters to show government identification, support for purging recent non-voters and those who have not confirmed their registration varies across many of the demographic groups we assessed.

Somewhat higher proportions of men than women, older than younger adults, White and Latino than Black Americans, and less educated than highly educated Americans support purging voter rolls of those who have not recently voted or confirmed their interest in voting.

The starkest contrast exists between Democrats and Republicans: Four in every five Democrats oppose this policy of purging voter rolls, whereas the same proportion of Republicans favor the policy. Independents are roughly split on the policy, with 55% responding that they either strongly or somewhat favor removing people from registration lists if they have not recently voted or confirmed their registration.



## Americans are split on removing people from registration lists if they have not recently voted or confirmed their registration; the starkest contrast exists between Democrats and Republicans



Question: "Please indicate whether you would strongly favor...or strongly oppose: Removing people from registration lists if they have not recently voted or confirmed their registration."

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, April 13-20, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.4 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

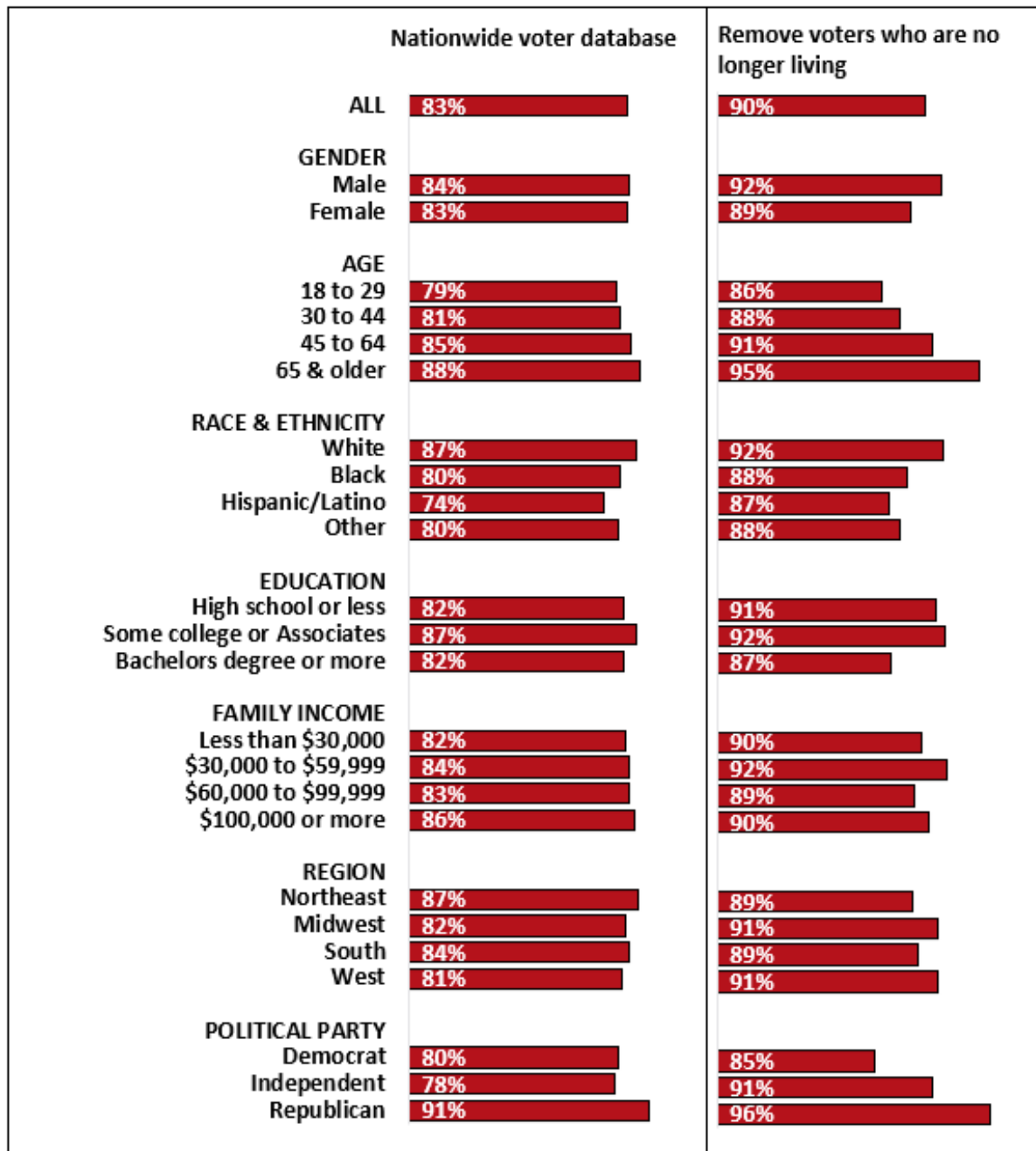
# Ensuring voter eligibility: a national database and cross referencing with death records

Besides asking people whether they favor or oppose removing people from registration lists if they have not recently voted or confirmed their registration, the April Mood of the Nation Survey also asked people whether they would support a national database that could help identify ineligible voters or relying on administrative records to help rid voting lists of voters who are no longer living.

In response to the question of whether states should cooperate on a nation-wide database that provides information on whether voters have moved or have duplicate registrations, a strong majority of 83% said yes. This majority holds across political affiliation: 91% for Republicans, 80% for Democrats, and 78% for Independents. Among breakdowns by race, region, age, and gender, there are no clear trends or standouts.

The second question on potential policy measures for removing people from registration lists was whether states should use information from the Social Security Administration and state death certificates to remove voters who are no longer living. Consensus around this idea is even stronger than that around the nation-wide database, with nine in ten respondents indicating support. At least 85% of respondents answered “yes” to this question across all of the demographic and political groups that we assessed.

**Strong majorities approve of ensuring the eligibility of those on voter lists through a nation-wide database and through cross-referencing with death records**



Questions: “In order to identify ineligible voters, do you think that states should cooperate on a nation-wide database...” and “Do you think that states should use information from the Social Security Administration...”

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, April 13-20, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.4 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

# Requiring government-issued photo identification to vote

Voter ID laws have been considered by many state legislatures in recent years, and the resulting national geography related to this policy is highly partisan: 14 of the 18 states that require a government-issued photo ID to vote, favored Republican former President Donald Trump in the 2020 election, whereas 13 of the 15 states that do not require an ID to vote favored President Biden.<sup>3</sup>

The April Mood of the Nation Poll shows that there is strong support for requiring voters to provide government-issued photo ID in order to vote; half of American adults *strongly* support the requirement and another 18% somewhat support it.

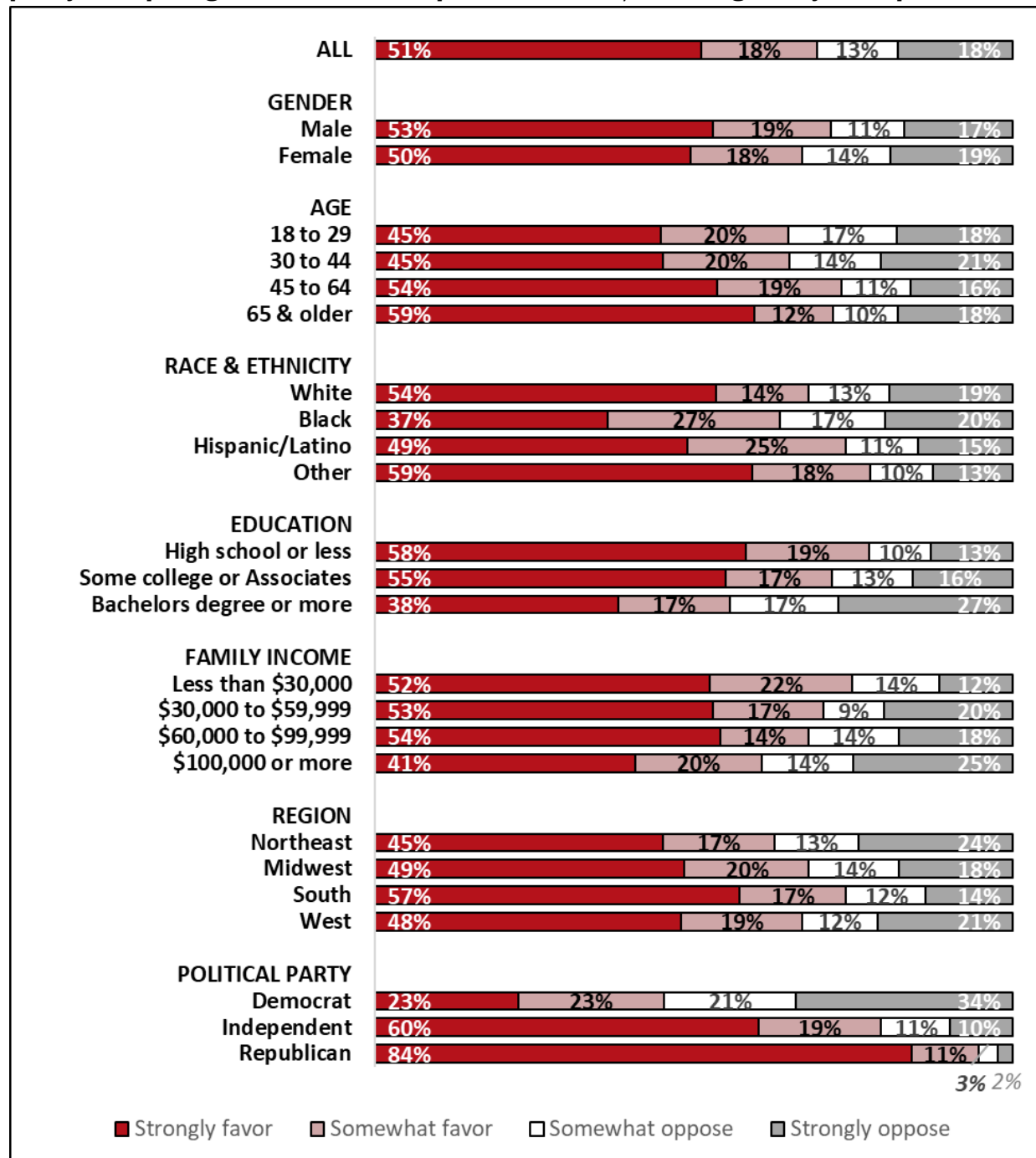
A majority of respondents from all political leanings, racial groups, regions, age groups, and genders analyzed in this survey strongly or somewhat favor this policy, except for Democrats. Democrats are nearly divided in supporting and opposing a voter ID requirement, but a higher proportion *strongly opposed* than *strongly support* the policy (34% to 23%).

Among all the groups that we assessed, Republicans the strongest support for a voter ID requirement with 95% in favor, including the 85% who *strongly* favor the measure.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id.aspx>, accessed 6/9/2021.

**More than two-thirds responded that they would either strongly or somewhat favor the policy to require government-issued photo ID to vote, including nearly all Republicans**



Question: "Requiring all voters to show government-issued photo identification to vote."

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, April 13-20, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.4 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

# Government's responsibility in election process

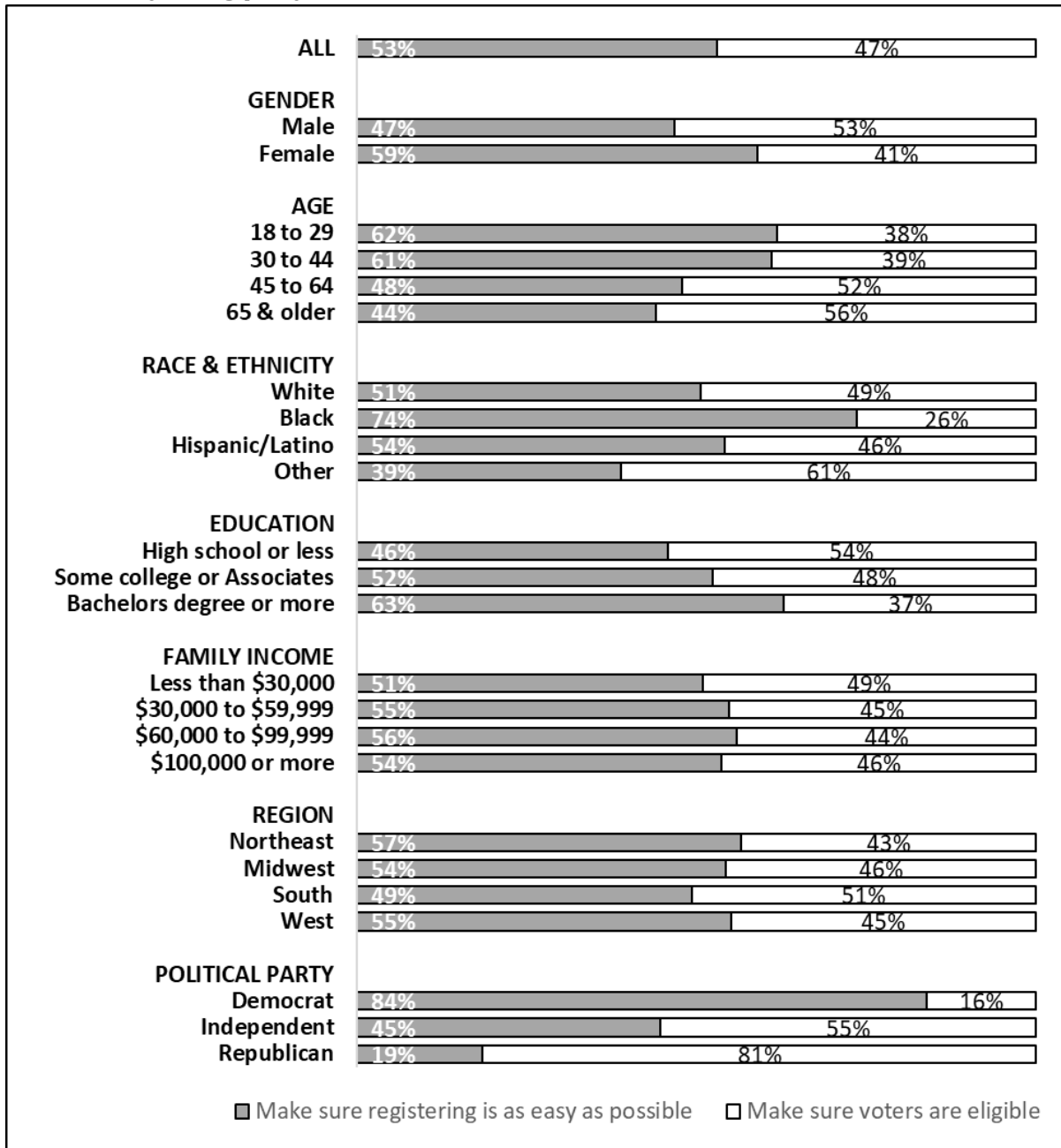
In a question that attempts to sum up how people feel toward voter registration, the April Mood of the Nation Poll asked respondents which of the following statements comes closest to their views: (a) It is the government's responsibility to make it as easy as possible for eligible citizens to register to vote, or (b) It is the government's responsibility to make sure that everyone who registers is actually eligible, even if that makes voting harder and less convenient.

A slight majority chose the first statement, that the government is responsible for making it as easy as possible for eligible citizens to register to vote. However, when broken down by political party, the results show that Democrats and Republicans differ. More than 83% of Democrats prioritize emphasizing the ease of voting, while more than 81% of Republicans favor ensuring voter eligibility. Independents are split, with a slight majority (55%) favoring ensuring eligibility.

Black Americans stand out as a demographic group that favor ensuring the ease of voting over voter eligibility, by a margin of 74% to 26%.

A higher proportion of men than women favor ensuring eligibility over ease, as do a higher proportion of older than younger adults, and those with less education as opposed to those with a Bachelor's degree or more education.

**A slight majority prioritizes the government’s role in making it as easy as possible for citizens to register to vote over ensuring voter eligibility, with responses differing dramatically along party lines**



Question: “Overall, which of the following comes closest to your views about voter registration: (a) It is the government’s responsibility to make it as easy as possible for eligible citizens to register to vote, or (b) It is the government’s responsibility to make sure that everyone who registers is actually eligible, even if that makes voting harder and less convenient.”

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, April 13-20, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.4 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

## ***In their own words:* Reasons people give for their views on government’s primary responsibility in the election process**

As a follow-up to the previous question on the government’s primary responsibility in the election process, respondents were asked to explain the reasoning for their preference.

Among the people who chose the first answer—that the government’s responsibility is to make it as easy as possible for eligible citizens to register to vote—the most common explanation was that voting is a “right,” not a privilege, and therefore should not be made difficult. The word “right” came up 261 times in these responses, and was often paired with “basic,” “fundamental,” “constitutional,” or “sacred.”

*It is the government’s responsibility to make it as easy as possible for eligible citizens to register to vote.*

- right: 261
- democracy: 73
- barrier, obstacle, restriction: 47
- basic, fundamental: 35
- fraud: 32
- suppress, disenfranchise: 31

Other explanations associated with this first answer choice cited the defining characteristics and values of a “democracy” for why the government should make it as easy as possible for citizens to register to vote. The discussion of barriers, obstacles, or restrictions and how they may suppress or disenfranchise certain populations was another common theme. Some respondents decided to go directly for the rebuttal, countering a leading argument from the opposing side by asserting that there has been no evidence of significant voter fraud in previous elections, and that voter suppression is the bigger issue.

On the other side of the argument, respondents who chose the second option—that the government’s responsibility is to make sure that everyone who registers is actually eligible, even if that makes voting harder and less convenient—most often mentioned “fraud” in their explanations. They reasoned that restrictions need to be in place in order for the government to prevent either existing or potential voter fraud in the election process. Along the same lines, the words “legal” or “illegal” were brought up 70 times, commonly in the context of making sure “illegals” cannot vote.



*It is the government's responsibility to make sure that everyone who registers is actually eligible, even if that makes voting harder and less convenient.*

- fraud: 98
- legal, illegal: 70
- ID, identity: 59
- right: 43
- cheat: 24
- privilege: 24

Other responses associated with this a favoring of ensuring voter eligibility over ease of voting argued that official IDs should be a basic requirement to vote. They explained that requiring valid identification does not make voting harder and is not discriminatory, as it is a requirement in many other situations, such as when driving, buying alcohol, entering a hospital, or boarding a flight. Some responses emphasized the importance of IDs to prevent people from casting multiple ballots or voting on behalf of people who are dead.

In contrast to the responses from those who emphasized ease of voting over, several of those who prioritized ensuring voter eligibility described voting as a “privilege” rather than a “right.” In fact, the word “right” only appeared 43 times in these responses, compared to 261 times in responses associated with those favoring ease of voting.

Verbatim examples of responses are provided below.

**Examples of comments from those who believe it is the government’s responsibility to make it as easy as possible for eligible citizens to register to vote.**

<b>Comment</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Political affiliation</b>
<b>Voting is the foundation of our country. Anything less risks privilege and bigotry</b>	61	Male	White	CT	Democrat
<b>It is our constitutional right to vote</b>	30	Male	Asian	WA	Independent
<b>If it becomes a complicated process I would be less likely to do it.</b>	44	Female	Black	SD	Independent
<b>I think voter suppression is a greater issue than voter fraud or inaccuracies. I also think this could help increase the amount of voters for elections.</b>	37	Male	White	WA	Other
<b>"Eligible" is the key word. If someone is eligible, it shouldn't be hard to register to vote if someone has the right identifying documents.</b>	62	Female	White	FL	Democrat
<b>There are a lot of eligible citizens who for various reasons such as the elderly, people without transportation etc. who cannot get to voting locations.</b>	38	Male	Hispanic	MI	Independent
<b>It will lower barriers for previously marginalized peoples and help encourage greater voter turnout</b>	29	Female	Hispanic	CO	Other
<b>The government has no issue verifying people register for the draft and pay taxes. This should not be a big issue.</b>	53	Male	White	IL	Democrat
<b>I believe that you can do both make it easier to register to vote and confirm that voters are still able to vote</b>	54	Male	Black	MO	Republican
<b>Most people do not understand the voting process.</b>	41	Female	White	VA	Independent
<b>It's already a pain to have to register in person in Texas, having to leave/miss work/school to begin with.</b>	36	Female	White	TX	Independent
<b>Voting is a right and a responsibility. Is should be treated as such and not a political football</b>	62	Male	White	NC	Democrat

**Examples of comments from those who believe it is the government’s responsibility to make sure that everyone who registers is actually eligible, even if that makes voting harder and less convenient.**

<b>Comment</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Political affiliation</b>
<b>Voting is a privilege, not a right. It would be in the government's best interest to make sure voters are eligible.</b>	64	Female	White	MI	Republican
<b>To prevent voter fraud; to prevent people from voting twice in different jurisdictions; to prevent fake ballots from contaminating and diluting the votes of actual qualified citizen voters.</b>	47	Male	Asian	CA	Independent
<b>What is wrong with showing proof, unless you have a different agenda.</b>	70	Male	White	IL	Republican
<b>There is a lot of corruption if I'm going to go out and vote I want my vote to count and not be cancelled out by someone who is using a dead person's ballot.</b>	24	Male	White	PA	Republican
<b>It's [the] only way to make my vote count</b>	30	Male	Other	RI	Democrat
<b>Voting is a privilege that is far too easily abused. We require verification on a variety of things. This is no different.</b>	48	Female	Black	TX	Republican
<b>Voting is already easy. It shouldn't be easier to vote than it is to buy alcohol.</b>	26	Male	Hispanic	GA	Independent
<b>Privilege to vote...should be willing to prove one deserves it</b>	57	Female	Hispanic	VA	Republican
<b>Because illegal aliens should NOT be able to vote</b>	65	Female	White	OH	Republican
<b>It's self-explanatory; voting is only fair if everyone gets one vote.</b>	30	Female	White	NY	Republican
<b>We want the real voice of the people who are voting. I don't believe there is widespread voter fraud but we need to keep elections fair. It doesn't have to be harder to vote just update the process</b>	53	Female	White	HI	Democrat
<b>If we want to stay a democracy elections have to be legitimate</b>	58	Male	White	CA	Other

## About the APM Research Lab

The APM Research Lab is a division of American Public Media that informs the public about challenges and opportunities facing families, communities, and organizations throughout the nation. Our mission is to foster an engaged democracy by inspiring curiosity, inquiry and discussion through fact-driven, credible research and analysis. Our Values: Independent, Useful, Informative, Non-partisan.

The Lab is a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative and abides by its standards. See <https://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/Transparency-Initiative/>.

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## About the McCourtney Institute for Democracy

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State promotes scholarship and practical innovations that defend and advance democracy in the United States and abroad. Through teaching, research, and public outreach, the Institute leverages the resources of Penn State and partners around the world to foster a model of deliberation, policymaking, and responsiveness that is passionate, informed, and civil.

The Mood of the Nation Poll offers a unique approach to public opinion polling. It allows Americans to speak in their own words through open-ended questions that focus on emotions like anger and hope, as well as commitment to constitutional principles.

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## About the survey

Data collection for this Mood of the Nation Poll was conducted online by YouGov (<https://today.yougov.com/>), April 13-20, 2021. The YouGov panel includes over 1.8 million individuals who agree to complete occasional surveys. The 1,200 individuals who completed the April Mood of the Nation Poll were matched to the joint distribution from the Census's American Community Survey in terms of age, sex, race and ethnicity, and years of education. The frame was augmented by matching to the November 2010 Current Population Survey and the Pew Religious Life Survey in order to include voter registration, political interest and party identification in the selection model.

For additional details about the sample and survey methodology, as well as transparency disclosures relevant to the American Association of Public Opinion, the Roper Center and CNN, please see:

<https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>.

# Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Kristine Liao and Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab, with input from Eric Plutzer of the McCourtney Institute for Democracy. The survey questions were designed by the McCourtney Institute.

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