

Summary and key findings

The December 2021 Mood of the Nation Poll seeks to gain insight on Americans' approval and disapproval of President Joe Biden. The poll includes open-ended questions that allow respondents to express the reasons for their assessment of the President's job performance.

Overall, this poll finds that 45% of American adults approve of the job that Joe Biden is doing as president, while 55% disapprove.

- A majority of several groups of Americans disapprove of President Biden's job performance. Most notable are the groups where a majority "strongly disapprove" including:
 - Those age 45 or older (52%),
 - White Americans (53%), and
 - Republicans (85%).
- When taking into consideration the survey's margin of error, the only groups we assessed with a majority approving of President Biden's performance are Democrats and Black and Latino Americans.

A majority of those who approve of President Biden mentioned his character, with frequent use of the phrase "he cares," and words such as "integrity," "honest," "competent" and "compassion." In addition, many contrasted his character with that of former President Trump.

Those who disapprove of Biden were more varied in their reasons:

- About 1 in 3 Republicans who disapproved pointed to the overall state of the economy or specific features such as inflation.
- About 1 in 4 Republicans and Independents mentioned one or more instances where they believe Biden fell short in his handling of the nation's challenges. These include the U.S. exit from Afghanistan (mentioned by 6% of Republicans and 4% of independents), the pandemic and Biden's support for vaccine mandates.
- In addition, many disapprovers showed their dislike of President Biden by describing personal traits. Roughly 4 in 10 Republicans and Independents used terms like incompetent, weak, corrupt, or direct allusions to President Biden's mental competence, referring to Biden's alleged dementia or senility, or characterizing him as a "puppet" of other powerful actors.

Introduction

Penn State’s nonpartisan McCourtney Institute for Democracy regularly conducts the nationally representative Mood of the Nation Poll to gauge how Americans are feeling about various aspects of American politics and society.¹

Following a contentious first year in office, the December poll included a standard presidential approval question and an open-ended follow-up to help us better understand the public’s assessment of President Joe Biden’s job performance:

1. Do you Strongly approve or disapprove of the job Joe Biden is doing as president?
 - Strongly approve
 - Approve somewhat
 - Disapprove somewhat
 - Strongly disapprove

- 2a. (If approve) Polls find that millions of Americans, like you, say they approve of President Biden. If you had to guess one or two reasons, why do you think they say that?

[Open-ended question: Verbatim answers recorded]

- 2b. (If disapprove) Polls find that millions of Americans, like you, say they disapprove of President Biden. If you had to guess one or two reasons, why do you think they say that?

[Open-ended question: Verbatim answers recorded]

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 (four groups are available in this survey: White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; Other), educational attainment and political affiliation (Republican, Independent, Democrat as derived from self-placement or 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.

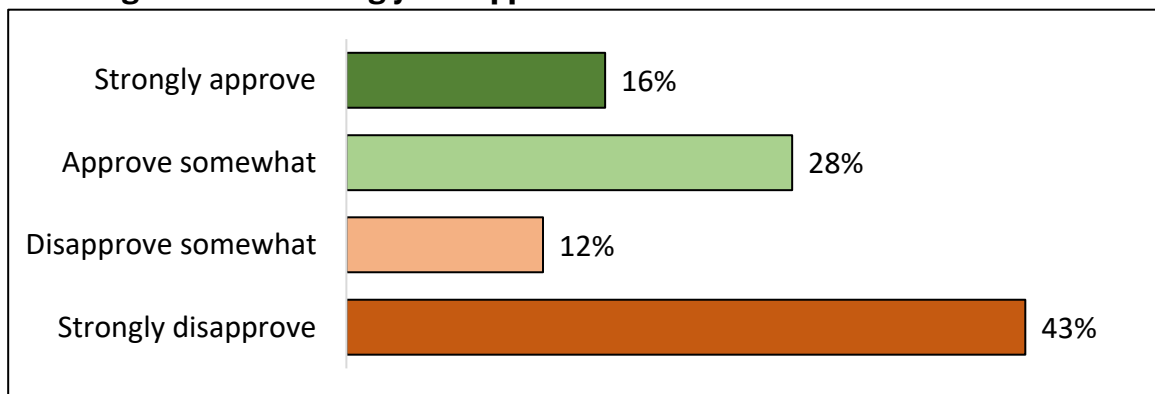
¹ For additional information about the Mood of the Nation Poll see the appendix to this brief. For additional details about this survey’s methodology, please see <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>

President Biden's job approval ratings

Overall, this poll finds that 45% of American adults approve of the job that Joe Biden is doing as president, while 55% disapprove. These findings are in line with other national polls conducted in Nov. and Dec. 2021; for example, FiveThirtyEight's aggregation of national polls shows that on the midpoint of this survey, Dec. 3, 43% approve of President Biden, while 52% disapprove.²

This poll's net approval rating of -10.8 percentage points (44.6% minus 55.4%) is somewhat better than that of Donald Trump at the same time in his presidency (-18), but worse than that enjoyed by Barack Obama—or any president dating back to Harry Truman.³

Over half of Americans disapprove of the job that Joe Biden is doing as president, including 43% who “strongly” disapprove



Question: "Do you strongly approve or disapprove of the job Joe Biden is doing as president?"

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

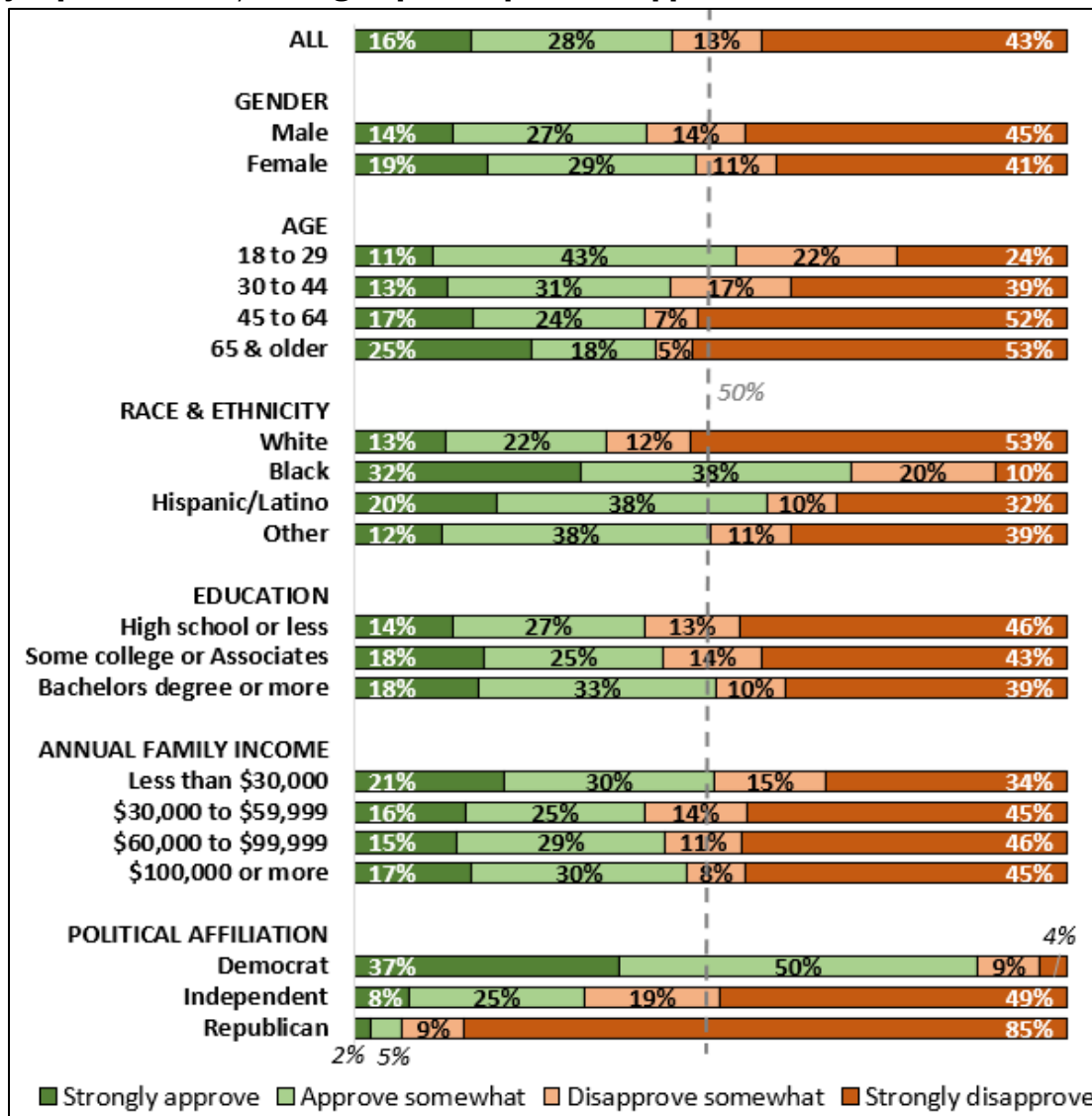
² See <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/biden-approval-rating/> (accessed 12/14/2021).

³ Ibid.

As shown in the graph, a majority of several groups of Americans disapprove of President Biden’s job performance. Most notable are the groups where a majority “strongly disapprove” including:

- Those age 45 or older (52%),
- White Americans (53%), and
- Republicans (85%).

Majorities of Democrats, Latinos and Black Americans approve of President Biden’s job performance; other groups are split or disapprove



Question: "Do you strongly approve or disapprove of the job Joe Biden is doing as president?"
 Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

When taking into consideration the survey’s margin of error, the only groups we assessed with a majority approving of President Biden’s performance are Democrats and Black and Latino Americans. Several groups are statistically split between approving and disapproving of Biden’s presidency, including women, those ages 18 to 44, and those who have some college or more education.

No group that we looked at include a majority that “strongly approve” of President Biden’s job performance, including Democrats. This is even the case when we compare approval ratings across a more detailed 7-point political spectrum. Fifty percent of “strong Democrats” indicate strong approval, whereas 93% of “strong Republicans” strongly disapprove of President Biden’s job performance.

Self-identified “strong Democrats” far outnumber “strong Republicans,” but are far less united in strongly approving President Biden; a majority of independents disapprove

	<i>N (weighted)</i>	Strongly approve	Approve somewhat	Disapprove somewhat	Strongly disapprove
Strong Democrat	291	50%	43%	4%	3%
Not very strong Democrat	133	8%	65%	20%	6%
Independent, leaning Democrat	100	17%	57%	14%	12%
Independent	235	7%	18%	22%	53%
Independent, leaning Republican	111	0%	4%	14%	82%
Not very strong Republican	116	2%	9%	18%	71%
Strong Republican	197	3%	2%	3%	93%

Question: " Do you Strongly approve or disapprove of the job Joe Biden is doing as president?"

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the margin of error is ±4.0 percentage points for strong Republicans, , ±7.0 for strong Democrats, ±8.0 for Independents.

Americans' explanations for approving or disapproving of President Biden's performance

To better understand the reasons that Americans approve or disapprove of the job Joe Biden is doing as president, respondents were asked a simple open-ended question:

“Polls find that millions of Americans, like you, say they [approve/disapprove] of President Biden. If you had to guess one or two reasons, why do you think they say that?” Respondents entered their own narrative responses, which we then analyzed for themes. Several examples of verbatim responses are provided at the end of this report.

Approvers

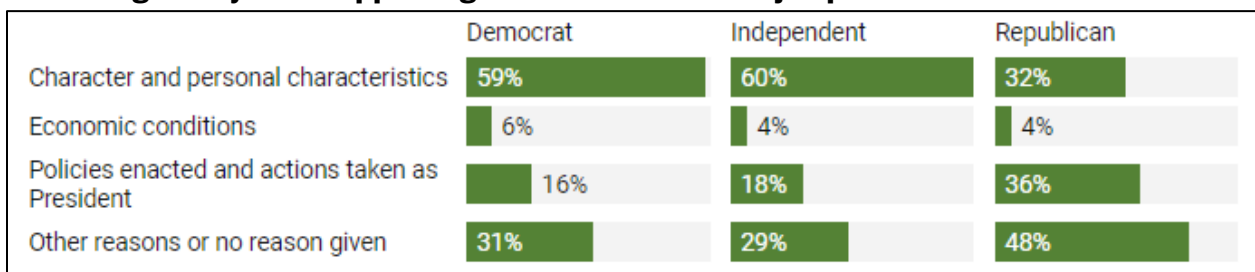
A majority of those who approve of President Biden pointed to his character, with frequent use of the phrase “he cares,” and words such as “integrity,” “honest,” “competent” and “compassion.” In addition, many explained their high regard for Biden by contrasting his character with that of former President Donald Trump. Reasons like these were offered by 6 in 10 Democrats and Independents who approve of Biden’s performance. For example:

“Because he is an honest genuine president who wants to serve the American people” – 43-year-old White woman from Michigan, Democrat.

“He is honest and upright. His presentation is meaningful and reassuring.” – 82-year-old Black man from Arizona, Democrat.

“He isn’t like Trump. He seems like a decent person.” – 43-year-old White man from Kansas, Independent.

Reasons given by those approving of President Biden’s job performance



Question: “Polls find that millions of Americans, like you, say they approve of President Biden. If you had to guess one or two reasons, why do you think they say that?” Graph shows main themes coded from open-ended comments. Note: Respondents answers can be coded in more than one of the top 3 categories. N for Democrats=359 (maximum Margin of Error ±5.8 percentage points); Independents=143 (±11.4); Republicans=23 (±28.0).

Source: McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec.7, 2021.

About 1 in 6 approvers pointed to public policies championed by Biden, including his general handling of the pandemic. For example:

“How he handled the COVID virus.” – 64-year-old White woman from Ohio, Republican.

“Infrastructure improvements and economic conditions.” – 74-year-old White man from New Hampshire, Democrat.

Notably only 4% of approvers mentioned President Biden’s current signature policies, the recently passed infrastructure bill or the currently stalled domestic policy bill. Only 5 respondents specifically referred to the “Build Back Better” plan using those terms, 3 who approve of President Biden’s job performance and 2 who disapprove.

Disapprovers

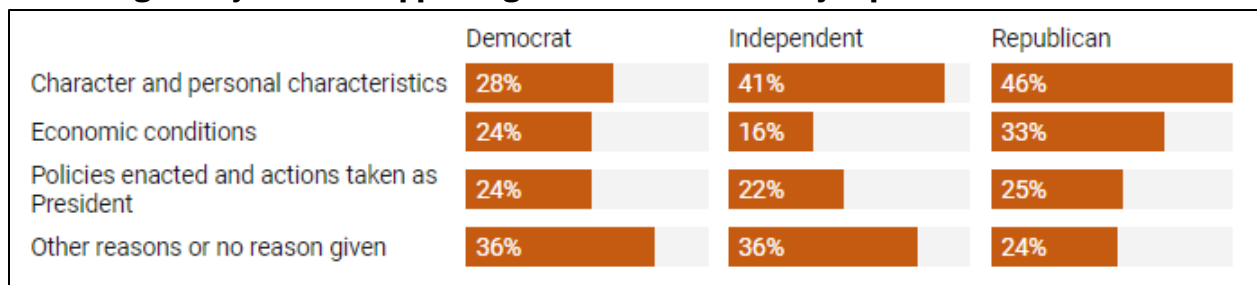
Those who disapprove of Biden were more varied in their reasons. One in three Republicans who disapproved pointed to the overall state of the economy or specific features such as inflation. Some examples include:

“Inflation and liberal policies.” – 59-year-old White man from New York, Republican.

“He is promoting the ‘gimme’ syndrome. People are feeling entitled. The economy is headed in a bad way.” – 56-year-old White woman from Georgia, Republican.

“Economy is heading south.” – 40-year-old White woman from Illinois, Republican.

Reasons given by those disapproving of President Biden’s job performance



Question: “Polls find that millions of Americans, like you, say they disapprove of President Biden. If you had to guess one or two reasons, why do you think they say that?” Graph shows main themes coded from open-ended comments. Note: Respondents answers can be coded in more than one of the top 3 categories. N for Democrats=51 (maximum Margin of Error ±13.4 percentage points); Independents=257 (±8.0); Republicans=290 (±7.0).

Source: McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec.7, 2021.

About 1 in 4 Republicans and Independents mentioned one or more instances where they believe Biden fell short in his handling of the nation’s challenges. These include the U.S. exit from Afghanistan (mentioned by 6% of Republicans and 4% of independents), the pandemic and Biden’s support for vaccine mandates. For example:

“Economy, inflation, COVID restrictions and vaccine mandates.” – 36-year-old Asian woman from California, Independent.

“How he handled Afghanistan. The rising cost of living. Crime being out of control.” – 73-year-old White woman from New Jersey, Republican

In addition, many disapprovers showed their dislike of President Biden by describing personal traits. Roughly 4 in 10 Republicans and Independents used terms like “incompetent,” “weak,” “corrupt” or made direct allusions to President Biden’s mental competence, referring to Biden’s alleged dementia or senility, or characterizing him as a “puppet” of other powerful actors:

“He lies and he’s weak.” – 57-year-old White man from West Virginia, Independent.

“That he is becoming senile and sadly is doing what the Democrats want. He is simply a puppet.” – 81-year-old White woman from California, Republican.

Special focus: Disapproval among Independents who voted for Biden

This poll includes 43 poll respondents who (a) identify as political Independents, (b) indicate that they voted for Biden in the November 2020 election but (c) now disapprove of Biden’s performance. This group is too small to analyze statistically, but their answers may illustrate the political challenges that Biden will face in 2022.

Among these disenchanting former Biden voters are several in swing states who are not only reacting to the economy, but also to Biden’s efforts to fight the pandemic. For example, a 46-year-old White woman from Ohio explained why people disapprove of Biden this way: “Vaccine mandates and he has shown himself to be just as greedy and useless as the Republicans.”

Also among the Independents who have soured on Biden: those from Blue states who explain that Biden has not been sufficiently progressive. One such 35-year-old Latino from New Hampshire stated, “Not progressive enough. Won’t forgive student loans. Cowers to Manchin and Sinema.”

Overall, the most common thread among the disaffected Independents is that Biden is disengaged: “not doing enough,” “not taking enough action,” “can’t seem to make decisions,” “hasn’t done anything,” “done nothing” and similar phrases can be found in most of the answers given by this potentially critical bloc.

Appendix

Examples of reasons given by those who approve of President Biden's job performance

Comment	Age	Sex	Race	State	Political affiliation
Because he is a good man that's just trying to pull us out of this pandemic and all it has caused for our country.	62	Female	White	OR	Democrat
He knows how to run this country.	78	Female	Hispanic	TX	Democrat
Because he's actually competent.	26	Male	Other	MA	Democrat
He is for all of us not just rich people. He is here to improve our country for everyone not just himself.	56	Female	White	MI	Democrat
He is not narcissistic and loud and rude like our previous President.	58	Male	White	GA	Democrat
He is trying to get everyone jobs and get everyone the vaccine to stop COVID19.	69	Female	White	IL	Democrat
He's good leader.	26	Male	Asian	HI	Democrat
Because he cares about people.	67	Female	White	MI	Democrat
He is looking out for people not just himself He is not a danger to us.	50	Female	White	NC	Democrat
He's involved with the American people.	25	Female	Black	NY	Democrat
His handling of COVID the COVID relief bill and the infrastructure bill.	36	Female	Hispanic	CA	Democrat
Because he's trying to fix the dumpster fire Trump created Because he's actually trying to address COVID responsibly and meet regular people's needs while doing it.	41	Female	White	MI	Independent
He listens to people and cares about people.	76	Female	Hispanic	CA	Democrat
Biden actually cares about the welfare of people who aren't rich He's more progressive than some thought.	73	Female	White	VA	Democrat

Examples of reasons given by those who approve of President Biden’s job performance
(continued)

Comment	Age	Sex	Race	State	Political affiliation
What he has done for the virus and jobs.	78	Female	White	MS	Independent
He is better than Donald Trump He has done well with COVID.	18	Female	White	VT	Other
He is honest and seems to be supporting the right initiatives on both sides of the aisle.	41	Male	White	ME	Independent
His response to COVID 19 and the fact that he isn't Trump.	29	Female	White	TN	Independent
He is millions of times better than Trump.	63	Male	White	CA	Democrat
Unlike Trump President Biden does not lead with hate and racism.	45	Male	Black	OH	Democrat
He is trying to make this country better for ALL Americans not just the ones he likes.	56	Male	White	MI	Democrat
He's not Trump and they're not fully paying attention.	28	Male	White	OK	Democrat
Not Trump.	38	Male	White	NC	Independent
Because Donald Trump isn't in office.	67	Female	White	NY	Democrat
He's not Trump.	19	Female	White	MI	Democrat
Low bar was set by the last guy.	41	Male	Black	NY	Independent
It has been helping all Americans out with stimulus.	33	Male	Hispanic	TX	Democrat
because people don't pay attention to anything not directly affecting themselves.	48	Male	White	NY	Independent
I have no idea And then they are not like me if they approve of government overreach open southern border and bring more division to our country.	52	Male	White	NY	Other
He's trying to help people of all races [and] faiths.	65	Male	White	MO	Democrat

Examples of reasons given by those who approve of President Biden’s job performance
(continued)

Comment	Age	Sex	Race	State	Political affiliation
Precise decisions.	71	Female	White	CA	Independent
For many -- possibly including me -- identification with his political tribe is part of it For others his administration's policy priorities (e.g., strengthening the power of unions) align with their interests/ideologies.	34	Male	White	PA	Democrat
End the filibuster to pass meaningful change for democracy and climate change.	44	Female	Asian	MI	Democrat
Well I think everyone deserve a chance at everything.	60	Female	Hispanic	ME	Democrat
Working for all Americans not just the wealthy.	68	Male	White	FL	Democrat
He's a lot better than Trump he chose a woman of color as vice president and he's trying to pass progressive bills/legislation.	21	Female	White	NC	Democrat
He isn't Trump.	36	Female	White	PA	Independent
He is empathetic and genuine.	55	Male	White	OH	Democrat
Pulled all Americans out of Afghanistan Getting the COVID-19 under control.	56	Male	White	NY	Democrat
Because he is very transparent.	57	Female	White	WI	Democrat
Good response to COVID and American Infrastructure bill.	61	Female	White	VI	Other
Attempting to unify the country.	33	Female	White	OH	Independent
He is trying very hard to provide jobs issue vaccine mandates and expand programs but is being blocked by Republicans.	73	Female	White	OR	Independent
Biden is trying to stay moderate in the middle.	71	Female	White	FL	Independent

Question: “Polls find that millions of Americans, like you, say they approve of President Biden. If you had to guess one or two reasons, why do you think they say that?”

Source: McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec.7, 2021.

Examples of reasons given by those who disapprove of President Biden’s job performance

Comment	Age	Sex	Race	State	Political affiliation
Inflation, immigration, mandates and a lot more.	67	Male	Two or more races	WA	Republican
He has led us to crippling inflation.	43	Male	Hispanic	CA	Republican
Incompetent.	47	Male	White	CO	Other
He is not smart - has no ideas on what to do – period.	84	Female	Other	PA	Independent
No help.	44	Female	Black	FL	Democrat
Vaccine mandates and inflation.	52	Female	White	KY	Independent
That he not taking care of the economy correctly.	30	Male	Hispanic	TX	Independent
His constant confusion.	56	Female	White	KS	Republican
His promises broken He has not handled the situation of the everyday citizens. This creates a higher lower middle class.	31	Male	Hispanic	TX	Republican
He's a bumbling idiot. He is trying to be too Progressive. His VP Harris is not capable of taking over if his health fails.	58	Male	Asian	NJ	Republican
He's incompetent and doesn't see future consequences of his actions.	63	Female	White	FL	Independent
Very old. Enacted a dictatorial amount of executive orders (none of which canceled student loan debt) etc.	18	Male	White	FL	Independent
He is an idiot.	51	Female	White	TX	Republican
Demonization of anything remotely liberal.	23	Female	White	CA	Democrat
He is a typical corrupt life-long Washington politician.	51	Male	White	NJ	Republican

Examples of reasons given by those who disapprove of President Biden’s job performance
(continued)

Comment	Age	Sex	Race	State	Political affiliation
He is an idiot. He makes bad policy about vaccines. He calls Trump names for his policies and now is making the same ones.	46	Female	White	TN	Republican
Price of gas and everything else going up since he took office.	21	Male	White	OH	Democrat
Open borders. Screwed up Afghanistan removal and took them in. He is old and unfit for office. He is a liar. He took a payoff from the Chinese.	36	Female	White	CA	Independent
He wants to stop the consumption of oil & gas and for cars to be electric. What makes him think if people can't buy gas for their cars now how will they be able to afford electric vehicles and be able to afford to keep them charged to drive? He didn't think this through.	68	Female	White	TX	Republican
Inflation. China.	26	Male	White	NY	Other
Some disapprove based on political lines. Others wish he held to his campaign promises more strongly.	44	Female	White	TX	Independent
He doesn't know what he's doing.	20	Female	White	CA	Republican
Economy jobs Inflation illegal immigration the US being viewed as weak by the world.	50	Male	White	GA	Republican
He is causing inflation like never before destroying our way of life. He wants lock downs and mask mandates when he lets millions of illegal aliens cross our border. We were energy independent until he shut down all the pipelines and drilling. He is not playing with a full deck, his brain is dying.	69	Male	White	PA	Independent
He stole the election. He is mentally unfit for the job	62	Male	White	MA	Republican

Examples of reasons given by those who disapprove of President Biden’s job performance
(continued)

Comment	Age	Sex	Race	State	Political affiliation
He has ruined the economy by his policies and has violated the constitution too many ways to not be considered a criminal and traitor to this country. He favors the communist Chinese party over Americans.	61	Male	White	SC	Republican
He just doesn't know what he's doing.	54	Female	Hispanic	MA	Independent
He is doing poorly.	50	Male	Two or more races	NE	Independent
He lies he's got no real plan for America. He's never done anything in his whole time in government and has been wrong on all the major issues.	62	Male	White	WV	Independent
He has no idea who he is let alone what he is supposed to do.	62	Male	White	GA	Republican
Inflation and Afghanistan.	54	Male	Black	CO	Republican
Democrat. Too old.	31	Female	White	NY	Republican
He's useless.	23	Female	Two or more	FL	Independent
The rise in gas prices and food prices. And vaccine mandates.	37	Female	White	NC	Republican
He appears that he is not in charge of the country or his faculties.	35	Female	Hispanic	CA	Independent
Because he is raising prices. He is making bad decisions.	39	Female	White	IA	Republican
He is turning the country in to a socialist society and dividing its people.	60	Male	White	FL	Republican
Because Biden did not win the presidency The Democrats are ruining America.	58	Female	White	AL	Independent

Examples of reasons given by those who disapprove of President Biden’s job performance
(continued)

Comment	Age	Sex	Race	State	Political affiliation
Some policies he has made are really affecting the economy.	26	Female	White	IL	Democrat
His policies on energy immigration climate change etc. do not reflect common sense or reality.	79	Male	White	UT	Republican
Inflation (gas prices) and partisanship bias.	19	Male	White	CT	Democrat
He does not know what he is doing. He is making horrible decisions for the direction of our country. He is taking it down a path that is destroying America.	47	Female	White	PA	Republican

Question: “Polls find that millions of Americans, like you, say they disapprove of President Biden. If you had to guess one or two reasons, why do you think they say that?”

Source: McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec.7, 2021.

About the APM Research Lab

The APM Research Lab is a department within 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/>). 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 Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab and Eric Plutzer of the McCourtney Institute for Democracy, with input from Benjamin Clary of the APM Research Lab. The survey questions were designed by the McCourtney Institute.

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