

Inside the Cynicism that Shaped the American Election

Press contacts:

Eric Young, young-eric@norc.org or (703) 217-6814 (cell)

Aariel R. Charbonnet, acharbonnet1@lsu.edu, or (225)-578-8480

A comprehensive typology of Americans identifies five key cohorts based on their views of the country, its institutions, their political engagement and their attitudes toward the future.

Washington, Nov. 15 – Ahead of the transformative election that swept Donald J. Trump back into the White House, Americans across the political spectrum were feeling deep cynicism about the United States and pessimism about its future.

In the months before the election, only about a quarter believed the country's best days are ahead according to an in-depth new report about deep-seated American attitudes by the Louisiana State University Manship School of Communication and NORC at the University of Chicago. Just about a quarter, thought the United States is the greatest country in the world. Americans from all quarters were just as likely to think other countries are better – and that pessimism crossed party lines.

And the cynicism was shared by people on the left and the right as well as those in the middle, by those who are highly engaged politically and those who are not, by people who have positive views of America's history of diversity and those who do not.

The study also correlated these behaviors and attitudes to people's use and feelings about the news media. Most people register at least some faith in the media they personally consume themselves. Despite that, the public has a negative view of the news media in general, including on the left. Overall, more than 7 in 10 Americans say they have little or no confidence in the media. Few think the news media in general is even handed, willing to admit mistakes, or more interested in truth-telling than making a profit.

The findings not only reveal the strong headwinds that Kamala Harris faced as a de facto incumbent. They explain why her attempt to differentiate how she would reshape the country was not enough to defeat the Trump's pessimism and anger that so deeply resonated with Americans across the political spectrum.

'We are looking to understand how news-reading behavior or news avoidance relates to Americans' views and actions on individual civic participation, the strength of their democratic participation, values and polarization,' said Leonard Apar, Professional-in-Residence and Wendell Gray Switzer Jr. Endowed Chair at the Manship School of Communication at LSU. "Was there a connection between those who do and do not engage in civic life and political polarization?"

The study then identified five key groups or cohorts -- which do not divide neatly along party or ideological lines -- based on a range of demographic characteristics and measures including trust in democratic processes and political institutions, connections to community, faith in their fellow Americans, and outlook on the economy, politics, and the American Dream.

"This long look into Americans' views of one other, their institutions and the future makes it clear that people across the ideological spectrum are deeply unhappy, not just about current events but about long-standing systemic matters," said Tom Rosenstiel, a Senior Fellow at NORC and Professor of the Practice and the Eleanor Merrill Scholar on the Future of Journalism at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland. "These problems identified by the survey will not be easily addressed by one party nor soon."

Americans are deeply divided over whether they can improve their standard of living. The public is divided on what institutions and what people they trust. Some people are very dissatisfied with the state of politics in the country and others are less concerned.

"There is no doubt that the country is deeply polarized, but this study demonstrates that people's partisan affiliations are not enough to understand Americans' deeper feelings about their country. The five groups of Americans identified by this research hold distinctly different perspectives about the state of the country" said Jennifer Benz, Vice President of Public Affairs and Media Research at NORC. "These perspectives correlate with the ways they engage with government, news, and their participation in civic life. Understanding these groups helps us understand why so many Americans feel misunderstood or unseen in the left/right conversation that dominates our usual national narrative."

Some key characteristics of each typology include:

- **The Ambivalent (29%):** neither overly optimistic nor pessimistic about the country, less concerned about the current state of politics, slightly younger, more racially and ethnically diverse, and more moderate politically than the general population.
- **Classically Liberal (22%):** pessimistic and cynical about the country's future and the government, very supportive of the country's diversity and its democratic system of government, slightly better educated, more affluent, and Democratic than the public overall.

- **Mostly MAGA (21%):** high rates of racial resentment and distrust of immigrants, negative outlook on national economy and the state of politics, older, more likely to be white, Christian and Republican than the population in general.
- **The Disillusioned (15%):** the most cynical and pessimistic, least engaged, more diverse, less educated, less affluent and younger than the general population.
- **The Believers (13%):** the most optimistic, highly engaged, very trusting of American leadership, politicians, institutions, and the media, lean Democratic, more racially and religiously diverse than the public in general.

About the Study

The nationwide survey, funded by the Wendell Gray Switzer Jr. Endowed Chair in Media Literacy at Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication, was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago. Staff from NORC at the University of Chicago and Louisiana State University collaborated on all aspects of the study.

Data were collected using both probability and non-probability sample sources. Interviews for this survey were conducted between June 26 and July 17, 2024, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The probability sample source of 1,514 interviews is AmeriSpeak®, NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. Proedge provided 1,517 non-probability interviews.

In order to incorporate the nonprobability sample, NORC used TrueNorth calibration, an innovative hybrid calibration approach developed at NORC based on small area estimation methods in order to explicitly account for potential bias associated with the nonprobability sample. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 2.3 percentage points.

A full description of the study methodology for the survey can be found at the end of the report on <https://www.norc.org/research/projects/civic-cynicism-united-states.html> or www.norcroundtable.squarespace.com.

About NORC at the University of Chicago

NORC at the University of Chicago is an independent research organization that collaborates with government agencies, foundations, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, and businesses to provide data and analysis that support informed decision-making in key areas, including health, education, economics, crime, justice, and energy. NORC's 70 years of leadership and experience in data collection, analysis, and dissemination—coupled with deep subject matter expertise—provides the foundation for effective solutions. www.norc.org

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advertising and pre-law, along with four graduate degree programs: Master of Mass Communication, Ph.D. in Media and Public Affairs, Certificate of Strategic Communication and a dual MMC/Law degree. www.lsu.edu/manship

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