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American Values Study: America at a Crossroads

Americans, Deeply Divided, Yet Share Core Values of Equality, Liberty & Progress
Large National Study Finds U.S. Split on Biden vs. Trump, Fake News; Nearly 1/3 Say Election was Stolen from Trump While 63% Support Ban on Assault Weapons

Americans of Every Stripe, Guided by the Same Core Principles, Worry Partisanship, Race Relations, Greed, Social Media & Politicians May Destroy the American Experiment

Loudonville, NY – Questions about vote choice in 2020, whether the election was stolen from Donald Trump or if much of the mainstream media is fake display profound differences among Americans. But 34 questions asking Americans whether many central tenets of our union are words that they live by show that Americans say that they share the same values according to a new national online study of 6,077 Americans released today by the Siena College Research Institute (SCRI). This study invites Americans to simultaneously consider both our divisions, and our shared values, and to decide how to contribute to the preservation of this “great experiment” personally, collectively and politically.

“Are we divided? Yes. Do we share core values? Absolutely. Are we proud to be Americans? For the most part. Do we think our great experiment will weather this storm? We’re somewhat hopeful, but concerned,” said SCRI’s Director, Don Levy.

We are Divided

Within this study of those that voted in 2020, 51 percent voted for Joe Biden and 47 percent for Donald Trump. Thirty-one percent say that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump while 56 percent think it was not. Half of the sample say that much of the mainstream media is fake news while 36 percent do not. Twenty-six percent, a full quarter of Americans, say both that the election was stolen from Donald Trump and that much of the mainstream media is fake news.

Asked about four current issues – voting rights, a path to citizenship, assault weapons and abortion – Americans express their divisions. By 61-39 percent they support a federal ban on assault weapons. By 63-37 percent they support providing a path to citizenship, called amnesty by some, for those some call illegal aliens and others call undocumented immigrants. Both of those initiatives are opposed by between 69-73 percent of Americans that think both that the election was stolen and that much of the mainstream media is fake.

While 84 percent of all Americans support passing federal legislation that would both protect voting rights and make it easier to vote, 68 percent of those that think the election was stolen and that the media is fake news support voting rights legislation. Overall, 43 percent think abortion should be legal in most cases while 36 percent believe in most cases abortion should be illegal. Among those that think the election was stolen and the media is fake, 63 percent think abortion should be illegal in most cases.

“We look at the divisions across Americans in two ways. First, we label the 26 percent that think the election was stolen and that much of the media is fake news as ‘anti-establishment’ in our analyses,” Levy notes. “Secondly, using a technique known as cluster analysis we simultaneously group respondents based on their answers to all six issues, media and election integrity questions and find that 35 percent are left-of-center in that they support voting rights, abortion, a ban on assault weapons, a path to citizenship, do not think the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump and tend not to think the mainstream media is fake news. Thirty-four percent, we identify as right-of-center in that they hold the opposite view on virtually all those issues with the notable exception that they do not all oppose an expansion of voting rights. The remaining 31 percent, we identify as centrists as they tend to hold positions as a whole between the other two groups although with the exception of their appraisal of the media, they lean more to the left on these issues than to the right.”

Members of the left and right-of-center groups vote at a rate of 83 to 84 percent while centrists vote at a lower rate, 68 percent. Members of the right-of-center group voted for Trump over Biden by 94-5 percent and 60 percent describe themselves as Republicans, 35 percent as independents and only 5 percent as Democrats. Members of the left-of-center group voted for Biden over Trump by 89-10 percent and 60 percent describe themselves as Democrats, 30 percent as independents and 10 percent as Republicans. The centrist group voted at a lower rate but did vote for Biden over Trump by 62-35 percent and 40 percent describe themselves as Democrats, 40 percent as independents and 20 percent as Republicans.

“These numbers appear to tell the same now familiar story of a divided nation that disagrees on issues and can be readily assigned to one ‘team’ or another with a less politically engaged group of citizens voters left in the middle,” Levy said.

But We Share the Same Values

Respondents considered 34 statements and were asked, “are these words that you live by? All the time? Some of the time? Would others say that you embody these statements, that your actions, or that the things you say, are a reflection of these words?” We asked respondents to evaluate themselves on a scale of “0” (you disagree with the statement, are not guided by it...), to “5” (the statement may be one that you endorse but you don’t always live your life with it in mind. Sometimes yes, sometimes no...) to “10” (you believe the statement, and not only aspire to live that way but you do live that way...).

Statements include:

- All people are equal, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, physical appearance, or any other personal characteristics.
- Not everyone starts off with the same set of tools or skills, sometimes we need to level the playing field by giving some people a head start.
- No one, not even the government, should be able to restrict another’s pursuit of happiness.
- Everyone can speak their mind in public regardless of the viewpoint without fear of punishment.
- Advances in areas like health, technology, business or personal development, rely on the careful application of science.
- It is important to achieve something specific and measurable each and every day.

“As we tested the study, we recognized that many people tended to answer the questions aspirationally, that is, how they would like to think of themselves, or how they would like others to think of them. We intentionally raised the bar for evaluating yourself as a ‘10’ and invited honest self-assessments where people recognized that they don’t always live consistently with their values or with core American values,” Levy explains.

Using factor analysis to consider all answers by 6,077 Americans to all 34 statements, we identified three major value areas: Equality, Liberty and Progress. We arrived at scores for each of the three areas by summing the scores for each statement in that group and normalizing the scores on a 0 – 100 scale.

	All	Trump Voter	Biden Voter	Left of Center	Centrist	Right of Center	Anti-Establish
Equality	82	80	85	85	82	79	79
Liberty	79	82	77	76	79	82	82
Progress	81	82	81	80	81	82	83

The scores are universally high and consistent across groups. A score of 100 would mean that all people are always guided by all statements. While it is noteworthy that Biden voters or members of the left-of-center cluster, acknowledging the overlap, tend to score slightly higher than others on Equality and Trump voters, right-of-center cluster members and those identified as ‘anti-establishment’ tend to score slightly higher on Liberty, the differences are small, and of degree rather than substance.

Americans, across regions, political outlooks, the current partisan divide as well as by gender, race, ethnicity and age, all report believing in and embodying core American values.

“One might argue that these values, whether we are talking about perceiving others as equal, being of service to others, saying that Americans should be self-reliant, endorsing free and varied speech, believing that no one is above the law, etc. mean different things to different people. However, we choose to highlight that beneath the current partisan divides, as real as they are, we find an underlying base of not just support for traditional American values,

but more importantly, an assertion that those values guide us in our thoughts and actions on a daily basis,” Levy said.

While the overall scores, by category – Equality, Liberty and Progress – are both impressively high and similar, we see individual indicators that have noteworthy differences.

- Biden voters, 9.4 out of 10, receive almost a ‘perfect’ score on protecting voting rights. Trump voters, lower at 9.18, are not far behind.
- Trump voters, 9.23, score highest on ‘no one is above the law.’
- Biden voters/left-of-center are dramatically higher than Trump voters/right-of-center/anti-establishment on ‘protecting our environment is a priority.’
- The largest difference of any indicator refers to affirmative action. Trump voters/right-of-center/anti-establishment are tepid at best, while Biden voters/left-of-center are in support.
- Anti-establishment citizens score especially high on indicators aimed at self-reliance and entrepreneurship.
- ‘The careful application of science’ is far more strongly endorsed by those on the left than those on the right.

“These variations on the extent to which groups that are fiercely divided on issues and vote choice are more of degree than those that would fundamentally separate us as a nation,” according to Levy.

Can We Save our Union?

In extensive open-ended interviews with additional respondents, respondents told us that by and large they are proud to be an American. They echoed core values as they described our country as the land of opportunity that had afforded, in some cases, recent immigrants the fertile soil that allowed their families’ tenuous seeds to blossom into rich American stories.

America, they told us, while not perfect, is the country, the idea that everyone wants to be part of. Some described Americans as kind, compassionate and generous. But others focused on what they see as a lack of understanding among us driven by siloed hate speech and a litany of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination. One interviewee said, “Antisemitism is on the rise, anti-Asian. Anti-black, anti-white, it's anti, anti, anti.”

Some questioned aspects of the current American character when they described other Americans as arrogant, greedy, entitled and selfish. They worry that too much liberty has morphed into individualistic selfishness and wish that more Americans would dedicate themselves to working and sacrificing for the common good.

“I think what divides us is the overemphasis on the importance of the individual, which has caused – the pendulum's gone too far and that too many people have decided someone else should take care of all these collective things I'm talking about, like being part of your community beyond just your own self-interest and contributing to the greater good for its own sake.”

Many said that we are held together by our Constitution, Bill of Rights, Declaration of Independence – our values. One interviewee said, “I could sit here for hours and talk to you about the American way of life. It's...believing in

the Constitution, the rule of law, the rights of all people to live their life as they choose, and that's the American way of life.”

But at the same time they cited partisanship and the continuing debate over the outcome of the 2020 election as pulling us apart. One 49 year old man from California said, “You've got a former president that wants to claim that he still won the election. The election has been over for months now and he's still lying about winning the election and people still believe him and the big lie.”

Again and again, race and systemic racism came up as current issues that are breaking us apart. While one interviewee commented, “I believe that we do hold certain values that we want to protect our country from foreign terrorists and all that, but the thing is that.. I guess, systemic racism, that's what we need to look at and address. I think that is the biggest thing we need to address right now.” But another interviewee notes, “Well, I think its critical race theory, is an absolute horror. And I think the 1619 project, is an absolute horror.”

More than any other divisive factor, politics and politicians were brought up by respondent after respondent. Past political decisions they said have contributed to enduring problems including wealth inequality, educational opportunity variance and greed supplanting shared purpose. But ringing loud and clear is a dissatisfaction with a political landscape in which they say politicians stoke divisions, divide and conquer, won't work together to address the needs of the people and remarkably can't be held accountable for misdeeds that are apparent to everyday citizens.

Rounding out the list of factors that divide us, interviewees talked about the media and social media – ripping us to shreds, class and the myopic quest for personal enrichment, disagreements on social policies including immigration, healthcare, gun control and abortion and to some, most importantly, what they describe as ignorance among many Americans. What they seem to mean by ignorance, is a failure to entertain multiple perspectives and to curate edited information prior to adopting a position that all too often becomes inflexibly held.

Many said that they are, at least somewhat, hopeful about the future of our country if we can overcome destructive partisanship and learn to treat each other with respect. Several spoke of being afraid to express an opinion that deviates from the orthodoxy of either the left or the right. “There's no middle. It's basically if you believe in conservative ideas and if you're conservative and you believe some progressive ideas, your own party or your own people will bash you because you express those feelings. The same from the left side, if you express some conservative ideologies, you want to be in the middle, we bash you. So, it's just that people have to choose to be all the way to the right or all the way to the left. That's the issue.”

One put it simply, “We could all do a lot better.”

But others worry that if we don't change, if we don't live consistently with our values, we could be headed for a civil war. And some are losing hope, "I hate to say it, but I don't see it getting any better anytime soon. And that is sad to say. I see it getting worse before it gets better. What it's going to take, I'm not quite sure, but it's going to take a miracle. That is my opinion."

Still, our interviewees are proud Americans. One summed up saying, "Because we have already survived so much. I think we have a resilience, I hope we have. I am very hopeful. I don't know how realistic that hope is but you ask how hopeful I was. I am very hopeful."

Where do we go from here?

It is our hope that this study will provoke comment from our leaders, our thought leaders, and individual Americans that point to how "we could all do a lot better."

Our study confirms that we are a nation divided. We are divided by political affiliation, by our stance on issues and by enduring racial and class divisions. But we are all Americans and we proudly say that we share the core values that are enshrined in our founding documents, those that we teach in elementary school and those that we reinforce in our culture.

We ask, "How can we use our shared values to overcome our partisan divisions in order to both build a more perfect union and to insure equality and liberty for all?"

"The American Values Study is a starting point for a robust national conversation that must end with action," said Dr. Chris Gibson, Former U.S. Congressman, President of Siena College, and co-Principal Investigator. "We need reform now to restore faith in our institutions and democracy itself. Legislators need to stop opposing any collaboration with the party-opposite and empower Congress to restore the balance of the separation of powers. We need to do the hard legislative work to restore Americans' faith in the relationship between the people and our government, and as envisioned by the Founders, to encourage all citizens to do their patriotic duty to engage in the process of self-governance."

This study seeks suggestions aimed at saving our union from readers, commentators, elected officials and thought leaders. Some suggestions offered by our investigators include:

- Repair the separation of powers. Legislators must reassert Congress and do their job as legislators.
- Pass legislation that protects every American's right to vote, a value that is nearly universally shared.
- Enact campaign finance reform.
- Consider term limits for Members of Congress.
- Construct a system of truly independent redistricting.
- Institute national service initiatives.