



Electoral
Psychology
Observatory

www.epob.org
epob@lse.ac.uk
[@EPO_lse](https://twitter.com/EPO_lse)



What people think,
feel and do

www.opinium.com
hello@opinium.com
[@opiniumresearch](https://twitter.com/opiniumresearch)

Opinium & Electoral Psychology Observatory

US Hostility Barometer



Key findings

12 May 2020



Foreword

The Electoral Psychology Observatory (EPO) specialises in developing unprecedented approaches and measures to understand how citizens experience elections and how those elections affect our lives. The unique challenges raised by the coronavirus crisis and a background of immense polarization make the November Presidential elections a terrifying test for democracy in the US and the world. We have thus partnered with Opinium, with whom we jointly won an MRS award for “Best International Research” to launch the new Hostility Barometer USA, which delves into the minds of US voters 6 months before the presidential election, using some of the crucial questions presented in Sarah Harrison’s and Michael Bruter’s new book *Inside the Mind of a Voter* and one of EPO’s new programme of research on how citizens want their governments to respond to major health, environmental, and terrorist threats in those unprecedented times.

Opinium has conducted research in the United States for over 10 years and we’ve had the privilege of working with the EPO team for most of that time so we’re delighted to be able to help bring Michael and Sarah’s expertise to bear on American politics at such a critical time. There are 6 months to go before the United States chooses its president for the next four years and Opinium will be covering the race at both a national and state level. Using our suite of innovative tools and techniques, we will be digging deep to understand what voters think about the issues, how they feel about the candidates and what they’re going to do in November.

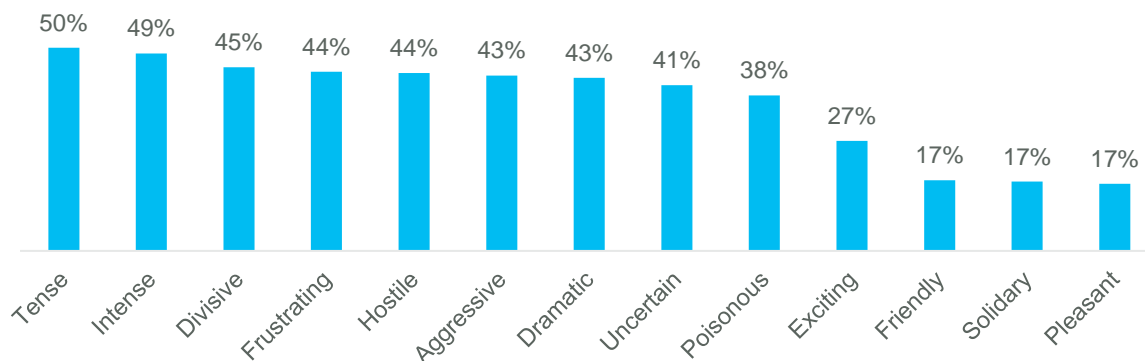


The upcoming Presidential election

Over two in five feel the atmosphere of the upcoming Presidential election is aggressive, hostile, and frustrating

The atmosphere of the upcoming Presidential election is perceived to be largely negative. Half of US adults describe the election as tense (50%) or intense (49%) while 45% have described it as divisive. Similar numbers feel the atmosphere is hostile and frustrating (44%) or aggressive (43%). 38% even describe it as poisonous. On the other hand, less than one in five would describe the atmosphere as friendly or pleasant (both 17%).

% who selected that the following characterised the atmosphere of the upcoming Presidential election



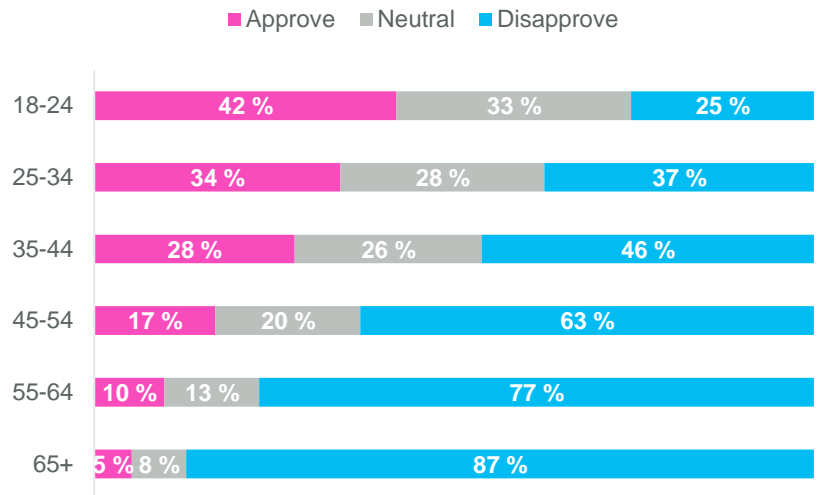
The public are not happy with postponing the election but are split on changing its format

The Coronavirus pandemic has raised many questions on mass events being held, and on elections taking part in the first place while the situation is ongoing. The vast majority of US adults (73%), however, want to see the election go ahead exactly as planned in terms of date and organisation. Over half (57%) would not be happy with postponing the election until 2021, and similar numbers (52%) are opposed to the idea of delaying elections in severely affected states while the rest of the country votes as planned.

The public is split on whether, in these extraordinary times, the election format may need to be amended in some way; half (49%) of US adults would back the idea of all polling stations being closed, and an all-absentee (postal) election nationwide instead. On balance, Americans remain attached to the national character of the election, and only 42% would approve such an all-absentee ballot to replace regular polling stations in affected states only.

However, those results hide some important splits across generations and partisan groups. For instance, whilst most Americans would oppose postponing the election, the younger generations are far more supportive of such a decision, with 42% of young people aged 18-24 saying they would approve whilst only 25% would oppose it. Similarly, nearly 2/3 of Democrat voters (64%) would support an all-absentee ballot nationwide, but more Republican voters would oppose it (44%) than support it (36%).

Do you approve or disapprove of postponing the election until 2021?

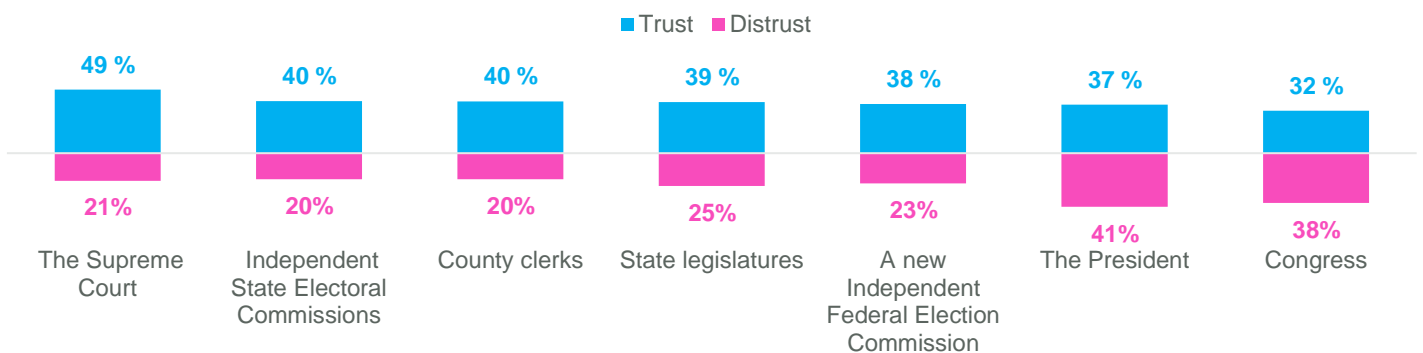


The public is also split on when to finalise a decision, with roughly equal groups wanting a decision right now (26%), by early July (33%), and early September (28%). Few wish to wait till October (13%).

As for who should decide how to run the election, the Supreme Court is by far most trusted (+27%) to make decisions based on what is best for the country rather than what is best for themselves followed by State electoral commissions and County clerks (both +20%). If a new independent Federal Electoral Commission was created, it would also have a net trust of +15%. By contrast, elected politicians are seen as likely to do what is best for themselves, with the President and Congress have a net negative trust score (-4% and -5% respectively).

- Whilst trust in the President diverges radically for Republican and Democrat voters, both are split in roughly similar ways on most other institutions including Congress, County Clerks, and State or a hypothetical new Federal Electoral Commission.

Trust in the following entities to decide whether to adapt the organization of the 2020 Election in response to the coronavirus crisis on the basis of what is best for the country rather than what is best for themselves





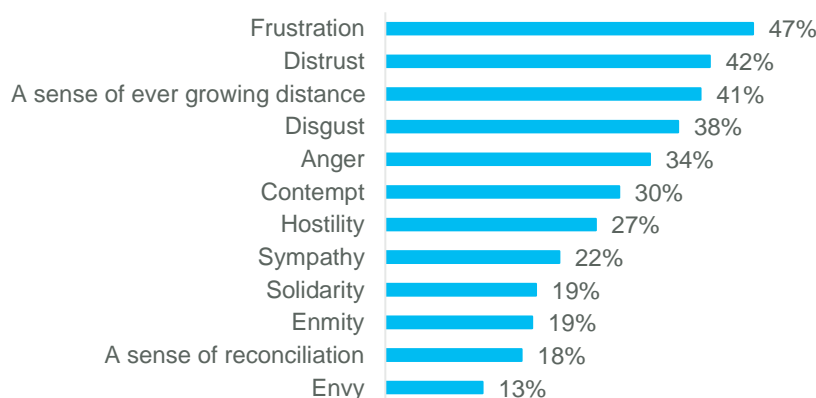
Frustration and insults: the spiral of electoral hostility

Half of US adults regularly face angry reactions from those who vote differently to them

For a long time, citizens have harboured negative feelings towards their politicians, but in recent years, it is often voters themselves who have become the target of others' anger.

Citizens hold largely negative feelings towards opposite voters. Just under half (47%) feel a sense of frustration, 42% express distrust, and over a third (38%) even refer to disgust. Many even feel that things are going from bad to worse in terms of hostility between voters, with 41% perceiving a sense of ever-growing distance. Meanwhile, only 19% say they feel a sense of solidarity with opposite voters and 18% a sense of reconciliation.

% who selected they feel this way about people who vote differently to them

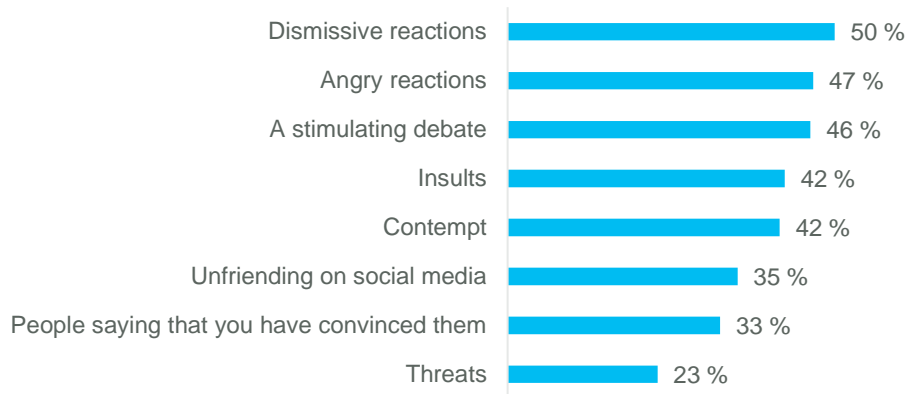


Critically, others' electoral hostility is something that many Americans have experienced themselves. Half (47%) of US adults occasionally or frequently experience angry reactions from people who vote differently from them. Almost as many (42%) have occasionally or frequently experienced insults (a proportion that increases to 70% if we include those who have experienced being insulted albeit rarely) and quarter (23%) have even occasionally or frequently received threats (46% including those who have experienced this rarely).



At the same time, almost half (46%) of US adults say that they regularly or occasionally have stimulating debates with people who vote differently from them. And overall, political debate is perceived to be constructive (41%).

% who often or occasionally experience the following from people who vote differently from them



Finally, a significant minority of Americans now prefer to simply avoid those with whom they disagree electorally. A third (32%) say that they would be likely never to want to speak again to an acquaintance with whom they have a radical disagreement on which party to vote for, a proportion which increases to 44% among those aged 18-24.

- Crucially, even those who do not support either party and vote for another type of candidate are almost as likely to never want to speak again to others on those grounds (29%).

On the whole, as America prepares to vote on whether to re-elect Donald Trump or put her faith in Joe Biden instead, it seems that experiencing electoral hostility from others has thus become part and parcel of the side effects Americans experience from electoral democracy.



Introduction of restrictions for health, terrorism and environmental threats

Americans favor more restrictions to civil liberties to fight terrorism than the Coronavirus

As the coronavirus crisis shook much of the US and the world, a majority of the country has become used to severe restrictions to their usual ways of life.

By and large, a majority of Americans feel that many of those sacrifices are always or often worth making in the context of major health threats such as the current Coronavirus pandemic. This is the case for compulsory stay-at-home orders even if they restrict freedom of movement (74%), closing schools (73%), restricting non-essential economic activity even if it leads to mass unemployment (65%) and also investing massively in public health facilities even if it results in a major tax increase (67%).

- However, by contrast, less than half of Americans support allowing the state to track citizens' movement using contact tracing technology (43%) or giving the police additional preventive detention powers (40%).

It is worth noting that whilst ideological differences exist, those preferences are largely shared by Republican voters – for instance, two thirds (67%) of them feel that compulsory stay at home orders for the whole population are always or often worth it in contexts like the current one, 57% support restricting non-essential economic activities, and 58% believe that a massive investment in public health facilities would always or often be worth it even if it results in a major tax increase.

However, partisan divides become more relevant where it comes to deciding whether to extend the same exceptional restrictions in the context of major environmental or terrorist threats. Thus, whilst a majority of Americans from all sides of the political spectrum also support compulsory stay-at-home orders in the case of major environmental threats (68% overall), only 56% of Republican voters believe that the sacrifice is worth it in such a case (11 percentage points below how many say it is worth it for major health threats) whilst 81% of Democrat voters believe the same (only 2 percentage points below major health threats).

- The same is true to an extent of curtailing all non-essential economic activities, which is a sacrifice seen as worth it in the context of a major environmental threat by 53% of Republican voters (4 percentage points below major health threats) and 76% of Democrat voters (only 2 percentage points above those finding the sacrifice worth it for a major pandemic).

In the context of major terror threats, 69% would see compulsory stay at home orders for the whole population as a sacrifice worth making and two thirds (64%) would say the same about restricting all non-essential economic activities even if it leads to mass unemployment, both of which are below the support for the same measures in the context of health threats. Furthermore, this time, a majority of



54% would also support giving the police greater rights to detain suspects before trial and 48% would accept giving authorities the right to use contact tracing data as a sacrifice worth making.

About Opinium and the Electoral Psychology Observatory

OPINIUM is an award-winning strategic insight agency built on the belief that in a world of uncertainty and complexity, success depends on the ability to stay on pulse of what people **think, feel** and **do**. Creative and inquisitive, we are passionate about empowering our clients to make the decisions that matter. We work with organisations to define and overcome strategic challenges – helping them to get to grips with the world in which their brands operate. We use the right approach and methodology to deliver robust insights, strategic counsel and targeted recommendations that generate change and positive outcomes.

www.opinium.com | hello@opinium.com | 212 754 5425

THE ELECTORAL PSYCHOLOGY OBSERVATORY (EPO) is a research unit at the London School of Economics dedicated to the understanding of the psychology of voters and optimising the electoral experience led by Michael Bruter and Sarah Harrison. EPO is currently conducting “the Age of Hostility”, the world’s most ambitious comparative project on electoral hostility in 27 countries including the US and is financed by the European Research Council and First and Foremost, a project on first time voters financed by the Economic and Social Research Council. Bruter and Harrison’s latest book, *Inside the Mind of a Voter* has been published by Princeton University Press in May 2020.

www.epob.org | epob@lse.ac.uk | +44 (0) 20 7405 7686