

America's Resilient Center and the Road to 2020 – Results from a New National Survey

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and Will Marshall

For the past two years, many people have fretted that American democracy was in its twilight. In 2016, voters elected as president Donald Trump, a volatile demagogue with a predilection for peddling conspiracy theories and a soft spot for dictators and white nationalism. Our politics seemed hopelessly polarized, with gridlock the new normal, seemingly into perpetuity.

The 2018 election, however, provided tangible proof that 2016 could be an aberration – a glitch but not a feature of the politics to come. Turnout broke modern records for midterm elections, including among first-time and youthful voters. But the real revolt came not from the activist base but from the suburbs, from a once quiescent but a newly resurgent center. Led by suburban women disgusted by Trump's misogyny and blatant race baiting, suburban voters gave Democrats the lion's share of their gains in the House – including among many districts that had voted for Trump in 2016. These districts handed Democrats their new majority, and their defection from a Trump-dominated Republican party creates an opportunity for Democrats to broaden their coalition and build a truly national party.

The question now for Democrats is how to wield the power they now hold.

To help meet this challenge, PPI and Expedition Strategies surveyed 1,090 likely voters on the eve of this crucial election. Our goals were to gather data to put the current results into context and to gather clues about the kind of agenda progressives should craft as we barrel headlong into the 2020 presidential sweepstakes.

The good news for Democrats is that they have the potential to build a durable majority. In our poll, 48 percent of respondents identified as Democrats or as independents who lean Democratic, while 39 percent said they were Republicans or Republican leaners, and 13 percent were true independents, with no allegiance to either party.

But for Democrats to maintain and expand this near-majority advantage, they must craft a broadly appealing agenda that brings or keeps independents and less committed partisans – the majority of whom call themselves “moderate” - under the tent. Also vital will be winning over for the long term the suburban women who led the revolt against Trump. According to one poll by CNN immediately pre-election, 62 percent of women wanted Democrats to take control of Congress, and 63 percent disapproved of Donald Trump – sentiments these voters acted on with a vengeance, not only through their energetic turnout but by sending a record number of women to Congress. While our survey shows that women – and white college-educated women in particular – are more liberal and more Democratic than men or the electorate at large, the plurality of women are still “moderate,” and their views do not conform in many ways to those of the liberal activist Democratic base.

The agenda that could help Democrats sustain a governing majority, our poll suggests, is one that is progressive yet pragmatic – one that’s optimistic, aspirational and respects Americans’ beliefs in individual initiative and self-determination; one that broadens Americans’ opportunities for success in the private sector and strengthens the nation’s global economic role; one that demands more from business but doesn’t cross the line into stifling growth; and one that adopts a practical approach to big challenges such as immigration reform and climate change.

The next two years present a do-or-die chance for progressive leaders to build upon and solidify their governing majority in Congress and, potentially, to recapture the White House from an unpopular president whose destructive policies have already badly undermined the country’s democratic institutions. The progressive left, impatient for change, has embraced the notion that “bold” ideas must also always imagine the most expansive possible role for government. Our survey suggests that voters would disagree with this approach. Rather, “radical pragmatism” might be the better bet for delivering the results that Americans crave in a way that rings true to their values.

THE KEY TO A DURABLE MAJORITY: A BIG TENT

As noted above, Democrats enjoy a natural advantage heading into the next election cycle – but it’s also one that’s predicated on holding together a heterogeneous coalition of liberals, moderates and independents.

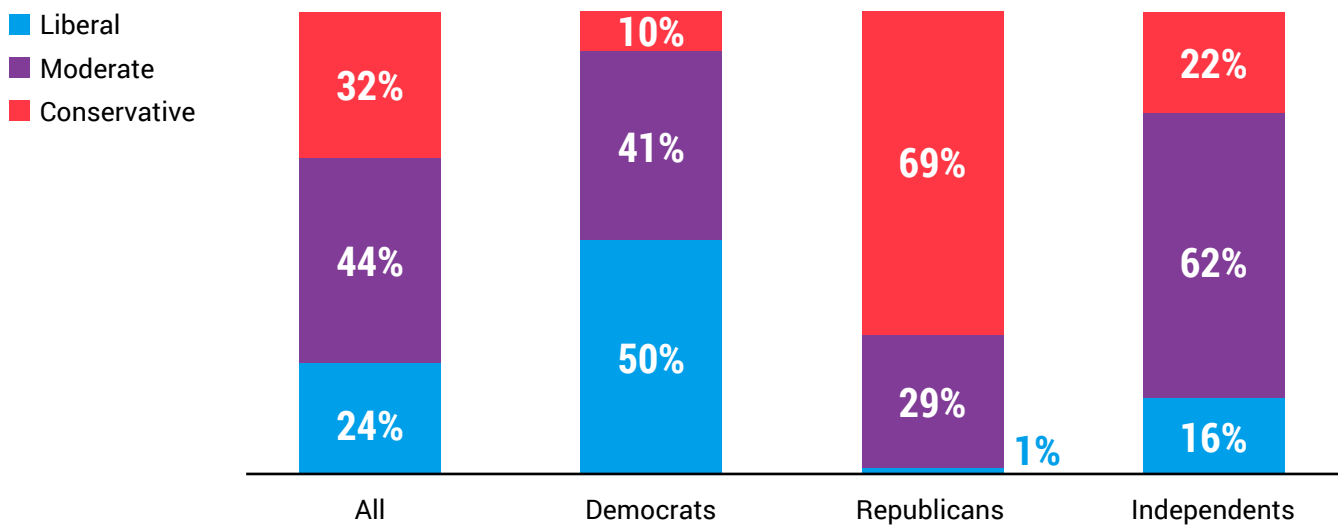
Strong partisans of either stripe were a minority among our respondents – potential evidence that the nation may have hit “peak polarization” and is now on its way to a more rational equilibrium. Among the voters surveyed in our poll, only 27 percent identified themselves as “strong Democrats” and 22 percent said they were “strong Republicans,” while the remainder – 51 percent – identified as weak partisans (20 percent) or independents (31 percent).

A strong plurality of our respondents – 44 percent – also called themselves “moderate,” versus 24 percent who said they are liberal and 32 percent who said they are conservative. Independents in particular are overwhelmingly moderate – 62 percent – which potentially makes this group of “moderate independents” an exceptionally valuable swing vote.

On the one hand, Democrats are far better positioned than Republicans to attract independents and leaners. Unlike the GOP, Democrats are not relying on an inherently narrowing strategy of racial and

cultural polarization that runs counter to America’s emerging diverse demography. On the other hand, a larger share of partisan Democrats – 50 percent – now identify themselves as “liberal,” which explains the party’s increasingly leftward tilt. Democrats need to be wary of heading into a cul-de-sac of their own on the left, where independents – and many Democrats – are loath to follow.

FIGURE 1: Do you generally consider yourself liberal, moderate or conservative?



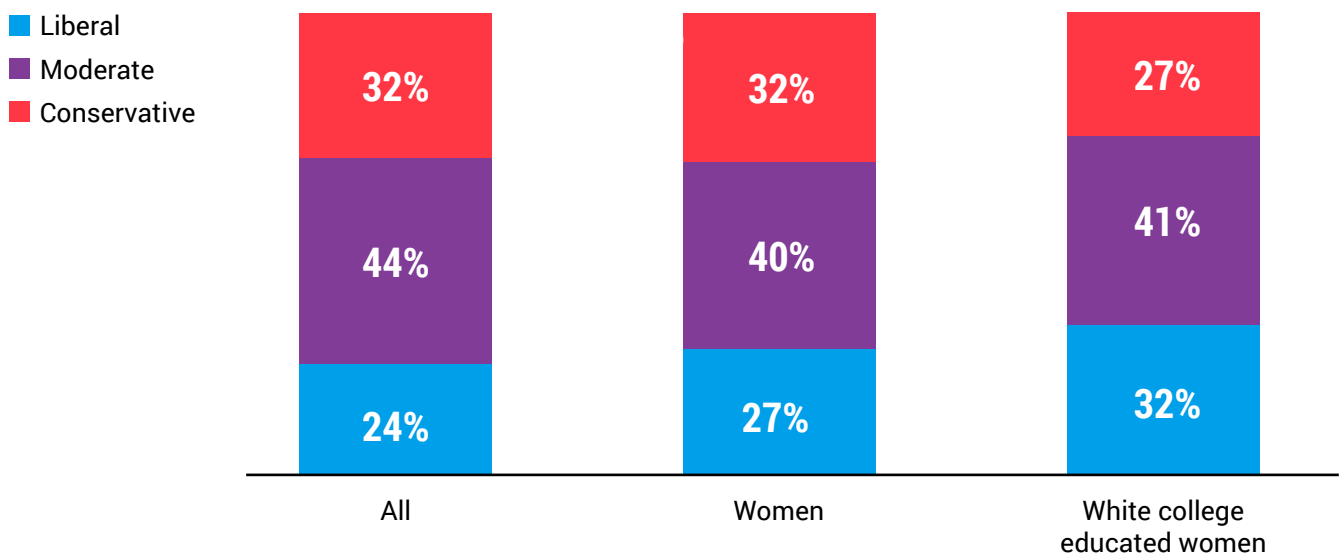
Democrats smartly pursued a largely centrist strategy in 2018, which helped account for their victories election night. These wins included Virginia’s 7th and 10th districts, where Democrats Abigail Spanberger and Jennifer Wexton defeated incumbents David Brat and Barbara Comstock in the Richmond and northern Virginia suburbs; and in Minnesota, where challengers Angie Craig and Dean Phillips bounced out Republicans in the suburbs of Minneapolis.

An especially formidable influence in races like these were suburban women, and college-educated white women in particular. And with the entry of many more women into Congress next session, as well as a plethora of female candidates for president, college-educated women promise to be a potent force in the country’s politics.

In some ways, these women appear to be the new tip of the spear for progressive activism, pushing aside 2016’s “Bernie Bros.” Our survey, for instance, found white women to be more concerned than other voters about health care, the environment and Social Security and Medicare. Unlike college-educated men, white college-educated women support “taking on big banks and monopolies” (51 percent) and favor reducing the income gap over making the economy more successful (52 percent). White college-educated women were also significantly more likely to consider themselves liberal than women generally or the electorate at large (32 percent versus 27 percent for all women and 24 percent for all voters).

Democrats should not assume, however, that white college-educated women will fall into lockstep with Berniecrats and democratic socialists. A plurality of these voters (41 percent) consider themselves “moderate,” and white college-educated women are actually more likely than women generally to call themselves “independent” (31 percent versus 25 percent). Moreover, when it comes to policy preferences, as we shall see, these women rank the federal deficit high on their priorities and prefer policies that help Americans adapt to economic change rather than simply cushion them from the impact.

FIGURE 2: Women Voters by ideology



What all this means is that the right agenda for attracting suburban women is the same agenda that can broadly appeal to the newly emboldened center – pragmatic, progressive and driven toward results.

THE KEY TO A BIG TENT: A RADICALLY PRAGMATIC AGENDA

After two years of Sturm und Drang, crisis-driven politics, Americans are ready to end the current era of hyper-partisan gridlock and get something done. As a groundbreaking report by the international More in Common initiative discovered, most Americans are now members of “an exhausted majority” – tired of the divisiveness in our politics and who “believe that compromise is necessary in politics, as in other parts of life.” Our survey found a similar willingness to embrace a pragmatic approach to the many crucial issues our nation currently faces.

For all the scare talk about immigration, for instance, an overwhelming majority of Americans – including almost two-thirds of Republicans – favor a “comprehensive” approach to immigration reform versus one that’s focused only on border security – i.e., building the wall. Likewise on energy and climate, most voters prefer an all-fuel approach or a gradual move away from fossil fuels over an immediate phase-out of carbon-intensive energy. Americans also broadly reject the narrow nationalism espoused by President Donald Trump and would prefer to see America play a leadership role in the world rather than retreat into insularity and isolation.

As for the role of government, our survey found that most voters reject the top-down expansion of federal government advocated by the progressive left in such proposals as “free college” or “universal basic income.” Rather, we found a strong belief in personal agency, self-determination and the virtues of a market-driven economy. Voters strongly prefer a system of “free enterprise” where government’s role is to support the private sector and enable greater opportunities for workers to acquire the skills they need to earn a good living. (Socialism, in contrast, did not fare well.)

A whopping 81 percent of respondents, for example, said government policies “should help Americans succeed in a time of change” by creating more opportunities for success, versus just 19 percent who said government should “try to cushion the impact of economic change” with more generous safety net programs. Progressive proposals for guaranteed income and guaranteed jobs found relatively minimal support, even among Democrats. While our survey also suggests that many Americans are anxious despite the current strong economy and sense today’s good times won’t last, it’s still a circumstance they want to cope with on their own terms, without the overweening hand of government.

There are, however, two issues where Americans do lean toward greater public activism: worker wages and health care. Despite a broadly favorable view of the private sector, voters want businesses to step it up when it comes to wages, and they are willing to support strong government intervention – including mandates – to ensure more Americans earn a living wage. As for health care, which was unquestionably the central issue in this year’s midterms, Americans’ anxieties over the cost and access of coverage are severe enough to drive better-than-expected support for a nationalized system of health care. This is especially true for women. For instance, 54 percent of voters in our survey said they favor a system in which everyone gets health care from Medicare, with even 47 percent of Republicans favoring a universal program. At the same time, however, 85 percent of voters said they are worried about the national deficit and debt, and 72 percent say their taxes are “too high” – which means that assuaging Americans’ health care anxieties won’t be as simple as promising “Medicare for all.”

The following key findings from our survey provide some guideposts for policymakers constructing a radically pragmatic agenda for the next two years.

1. Americans want help, not handouts.

Despite the strong economy, many Americans are anxious about their economic futures. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Americans do not see government’s job as rescuing them from these anxieties.

Our survey found that Americans feel relatively confident about their current circumstances. Just 18 percent of voters, for instance, ranked “jobs and economic growth” as one of their top three priorities for Congress, and personal worries about meeting monthly bills or losing a job also ranked relatively low. Only 10 percent of voters also said they were “very worried” about losing their jobs to robots or automation, and just 12 percent feared having their job shipped overseas.

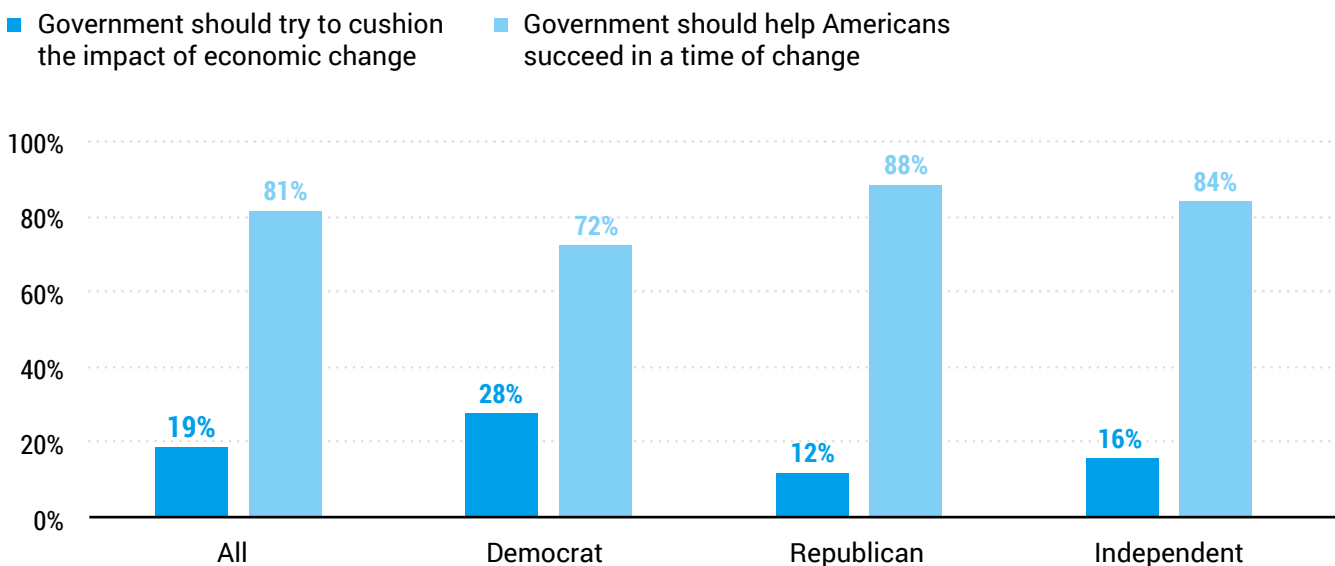
Voters were less sanguine, however, about their children’s prospects, and our poll revealed nagging concerns about Americans’ future economic security. More than three in four Americans – 77 percent – worry that today’s children will be worse off than their parents, and there also seem to be concerns about keeping up with future expenses. Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of voters are worried about

saving for retirement, 72 percent say their taxes are “too high,” and large majorities worry about health care costs and drug prices (more on that below).

Nevertheless, our survey showed that voters would prefer government to build them taller, stronger ladders rather than a plusher safety net.

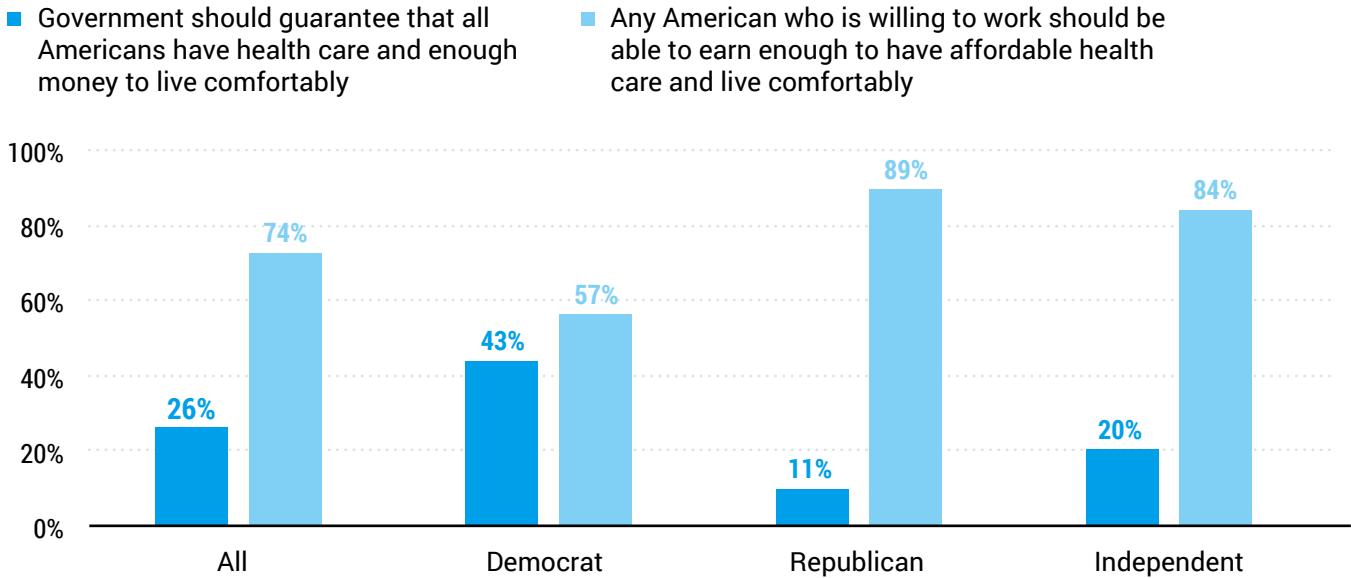
We asked our respondents whether government’s role should be to shield Americans from the impacts of economic change or to help them adapt and succeed. Voters showed a strong preference for the latter. Eighty-one percent – including 72% of Democrats – said government policies “should help Americans succeed in times of change by making job training affordable and creating more opportunities to save for education and retirement.” In contrast, just 19 percent preferred government policies to “try to cushion the impact of economic change by supplementing peoples’ incomes and guaranteeing a government job for people who can’t find work.” Two groups expressed a slightly stronger preference for policies that cushion against change – African-Americans and non-college-educated white women – but this support was hardly overwhelming (25 percent and 23 percent, respectively).

FIGURE 3: Which is closer to your view?



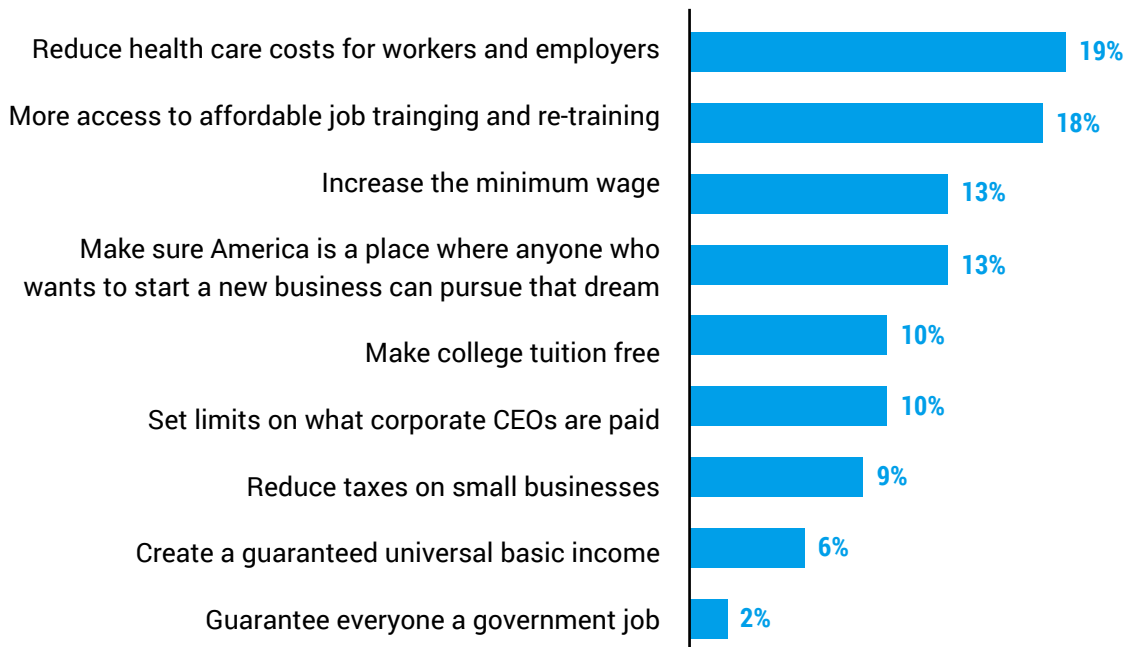
We also found strong support for providing opportunities over guaranteeing outcomes. Seventy-four percent of voters, for instance, say that “any American who is willing to work should be able to earn enough to have affordable health care and live comfortably,” while just 26 percent say that “the government should guarantee that all Americans have health care and enough money to live comfortably.” Voters also prefer economic growth over redistribution – 55 percent say they would rather Congress focus on “making the economy more successful, especially in areas that have been left out of today’s prosperity” versus “reducing the income gap between the wealthy and the poor.”

FIGURE 4: Which is closer to your view?



One consequence of Americans' preference for self-help is strong support for better access to training and education and less interest in ideas favored by the left, such as guaranteed jobs and income. When we asked respondents to rank a variety of options for reducing inequality in the United States, better access to affordable job training and re-training ranked second (after lower health care costs), while universal basic income and guaranteed jobs ranked dead last (including among Democrats).

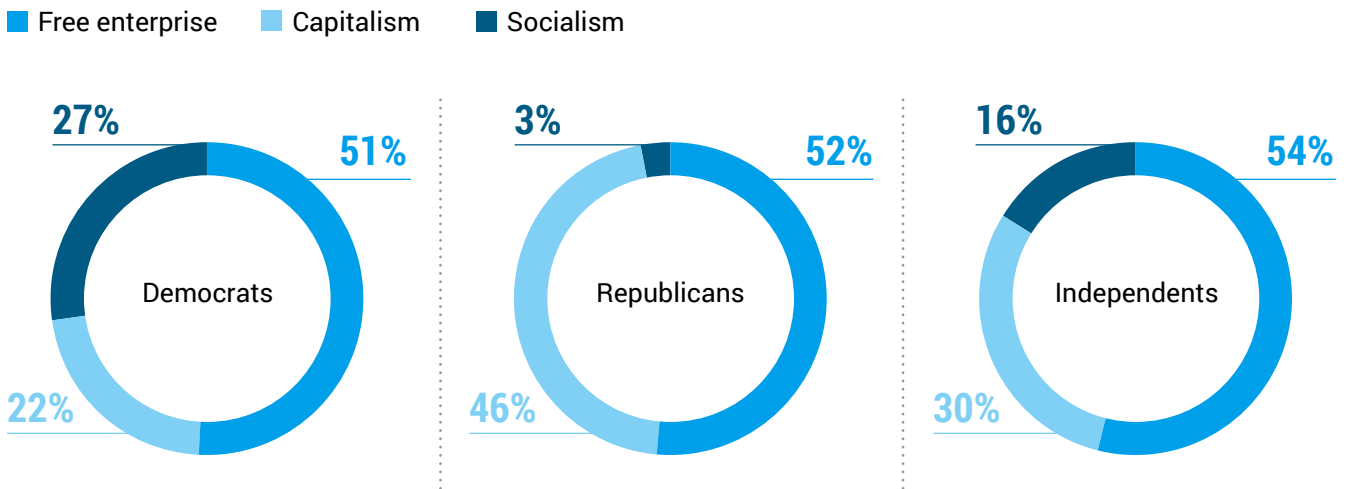
FIGURE 5: Which of the following is the best way to reduce the gap between the wealthy and the poor in the United States?



Voters also preferred better opportunities for acquiring skills over conservative policies as well. For instance, when we asked what the economy needs more of – “making sure that everyone who wants training or education can get it” or “low taxes and low regulations” – a majority of respondents said they preferred training and education. This includes 58 percent of independents and 59 percent of non-college-educated white men. Voters prefer lower regulation, however, over other Democratic policy ideas such as raising the minimum wage (51 percent to 49 percent) and “taking on big banks and monopolies” (56 percent to 44 percent).

Many Democratic candidates who’ve thrown their hats into the ring for 2020 might be hoping that the left’s interest in a more centralized, Scandinavian style economy will find broad appeal among voters. Our poll, however, found that Americans have little interest in becoming Swedish. Rather, we found strong support for a “free enterprise” economy, including among a majority of Democrats. Moreover, when we asked those who supported socialism why they did so, the most common response was “don’t know/refused,” followed by the rather amorphous rationale “it’s less selfish/ all of us working together.”

FIGURE 6: Which do you prefer?



What all this means is that the blue wave of 2018 does not also presage a rising tide for democratic Socialism. Americans want government to act as the handmaiden to greater opportunities for success rather than as the dispenser of public largesse. In particular, our poll shows strong potential for cross-partisan support of expanding opportunities for acquiring job skills and credentials along the lines that PPI has long endorsed.

2. Voters are open to a bigger federal role in health care and are especially worried about drug prices – but the messages are mixed.

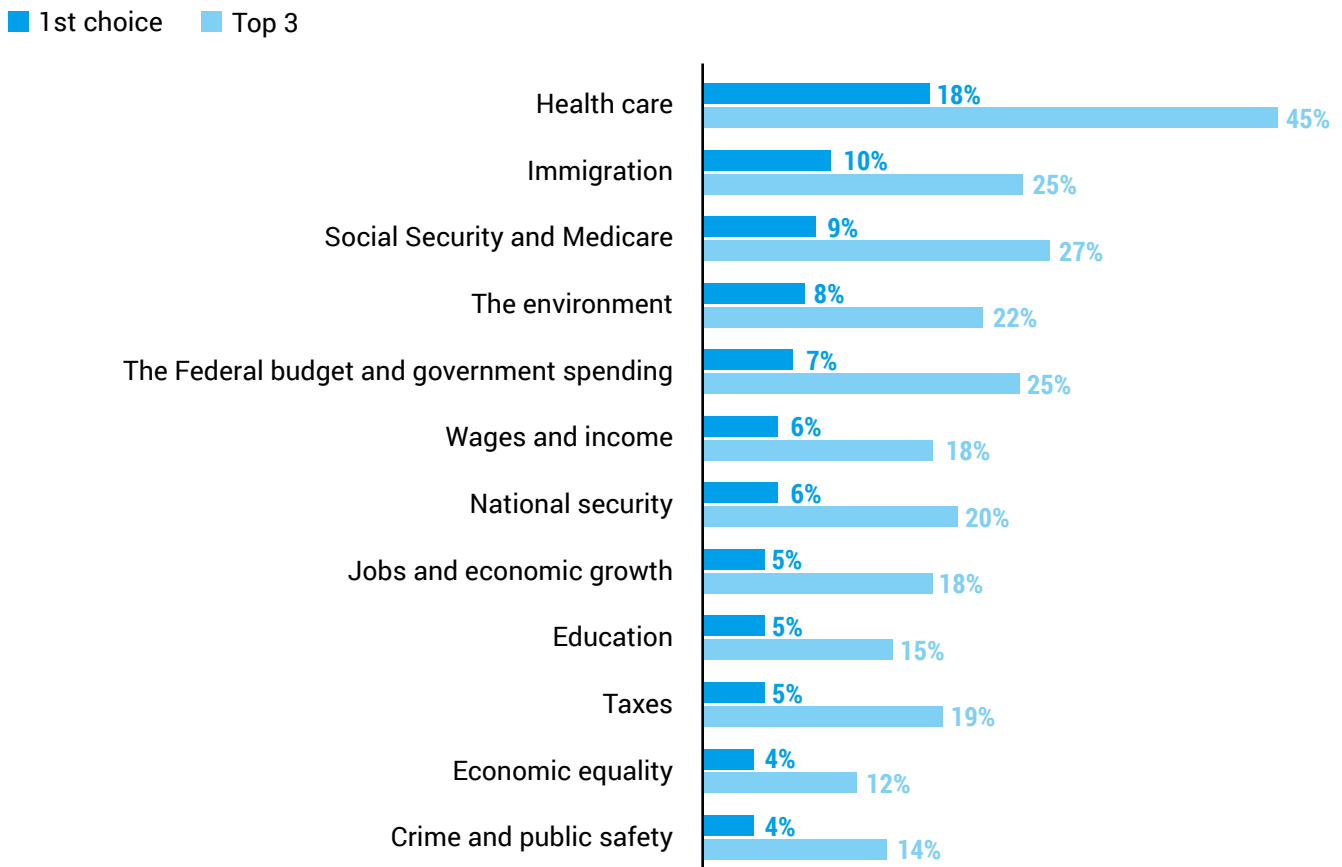
One issue where voters may welcome more public intervention, however, is health care.

Against the backdrop of a strong U.S. economic rebound, health care coverage – its high cost and the fear of losing it – was the central economic security issue of the 2018 midterm elections and will no doubt continue to be the single biggest concern heading into 2020.

Among our respondents, 45 percent ranked health care as one of their top three concerns, including 55 percent of Democrats, 42 percent of Independents and 38 percent of Republicans. Health care handily outweighed other issues overall and was the one issue where there was agreement across party lines in its importance.

Health care was also the top priority across educational and racial groups, and a particular worry among women and non-college-educated white women. Fifty-two percent of women – including 53 percent of non-college-educated white women – ranked health care among their top three policy concerns, compared to 39 percent of men.

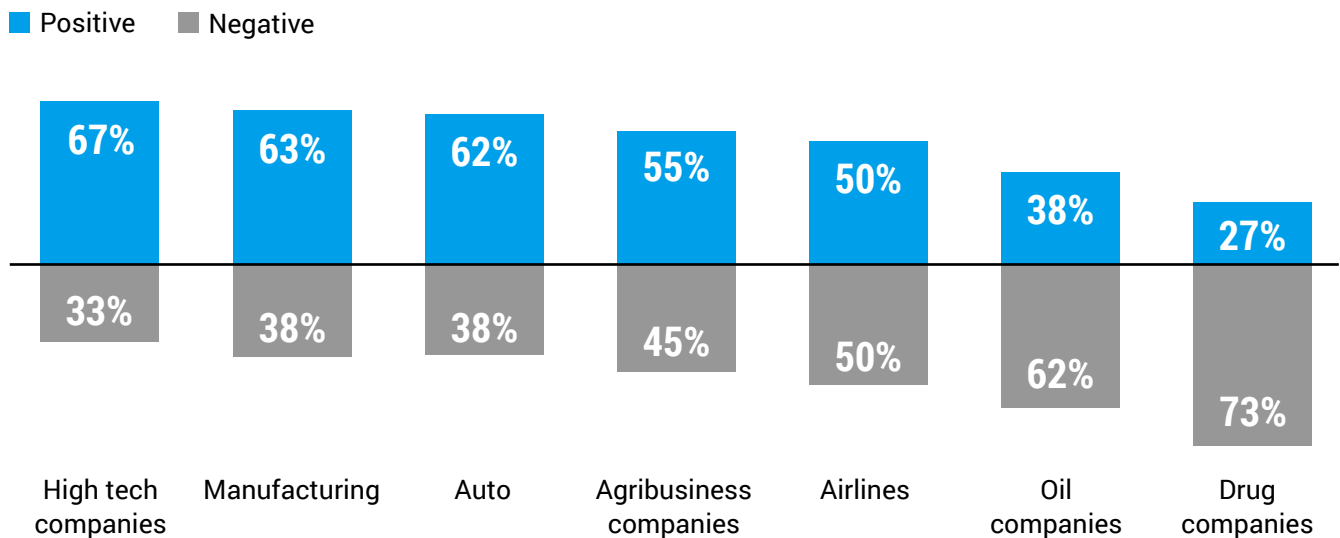
FIGURE 7: Top Issue for Congress to Address



High costs – especially prescription drug prices – and the fear of losing coverage were voters’ biggest worries. Among our respondents, 83 percent said they were worried that “drug companies are charging too much,” including 54 percent who were “very worried” about this problem. Sixty-six percent of voters say they are worried about keeping their health care coverage and 64 percent are worried about their ability to pay their health care bills. These concerns outweighed other worries such as crime, “your ability to pay monthly bills” and the lack of jobs.

The pharmaceutical industry is a particular target of ire for voters, who ranked drug companies even lower than oil companies and airlines among the industries whose favorability we tested. Voters also cited pharmaceuticals as the industry that concerns them most – ahead of Big Tech, cable, mobile and airlines – when it comes to the size of companies, the lack of competition and price.

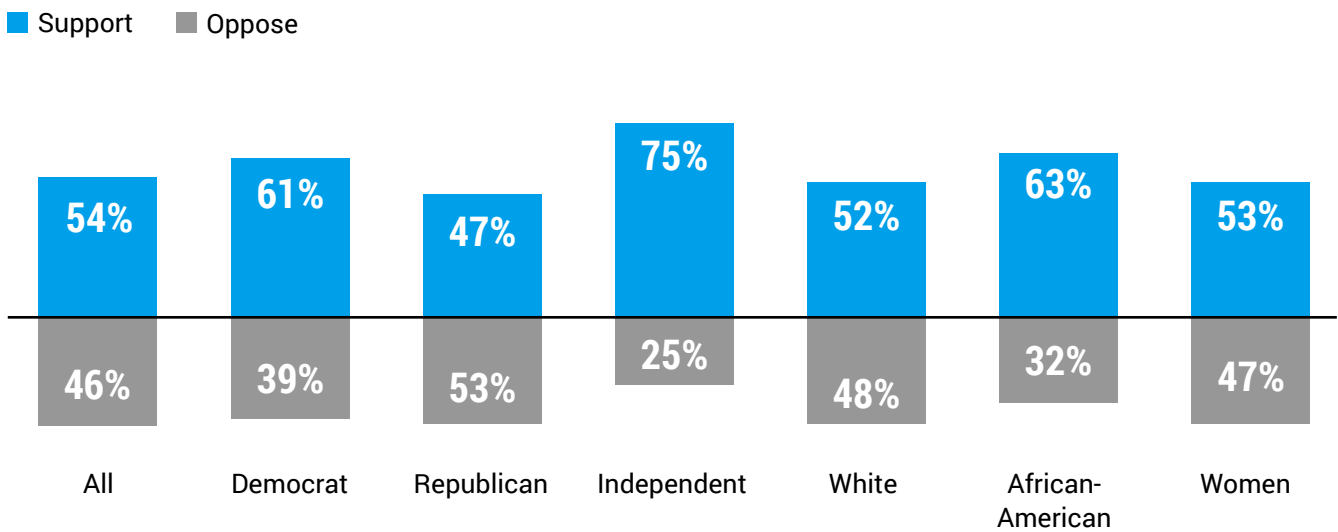
FIGURE 8: Please rate how you feel about the following industries:



In the 2018 cycle, the prevalence of voters’ anxieties around health care played to Democrats’ advantage. Republicans struggled to explain their support for the Trump administration’s efforts to either kill or eviscerate the Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare), which included undoing the ACA’s popular protections against high premiums for people with “pre-existing” medical conditions. Republicans, echoing Trump, tried to change the subject by decrying Democratic calls for “Medicare for all,” which they claimed would destroy Medicare as we know it and lead to government rationing of health care.

Despite Trump’s scare tactics, our poll showed significant public interest in nationalized health care and Medicare-for-all. By a margin of 54 percent to 46 percent, voters said they favor a system in which “everyone gets health care through Medicare instead of through people’s place of work or instead of buying it directly,” with even 47 percent of Republicans favoring such a universal program. Thirty-eight percent of respondents said Congress should “create a national health care system like Britain or Canada,” while 36 percent said Congress should “build on and improve Obamacare.”

FIGURE 9: Support or Oppose: Change the current health care system so everyone gets health care through Medicare instead of through people's place of work or instead of buying it directly



Voters also are under the impression that a national health care program would be cheaper than the current system – 55 percent say a national health care program “will save voters money.” It’s important to note, however, that our poll did not present voters with information about the likely costs and massive disruptions entailed by a shift of 155 million Americans from private, job-based coverage to a government-run health care system. Our survey suggests that this information, once presented, is likely to become a major roadblock. Eighty-five percent of respondents, for instance, say they are worried about the size of the national debt and the deficit, while 72 percent of voters said their taxes are “too high.”

Nonetheless, these findings suggest that the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010 was clearly just the first chapter in our nation’s drive toward universal, affordable coverage and that many Democrats may not be content to simply defend or expand the ACA. It’s also clear that Republicans’ efforts to gut the ACA have backfired, creating instead a greater public appetite for a stronger federal role, though this appetite may diminish once the potential tradeoffs come into sharper relief.

3. Companies need to step it up on wages, but treating Big Business as the enemy is a mistake.

Despite the unpopularity of some sectors, voters are not generally anti-business. Few voters, for instance, are worried about corporate monopolies, which both Sens. Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren have latched on to as the new bogeyman. Only 4 percent of voters ranked monopolies as a top-tier concern, and even among Democrats, only 5 percent named monopolies as one of the three top issues Congress should address.

There was also little interest in breaking up Big Tech, as some on the left have proposed. Fifty-five percent of voters oppose breaking up big tech companies such as Amazon or Google, and 67 percent said they would prefer a candidate who says “we need to be careful about breaking up large American companies like Amazon and Google that are innovative and successful” over a candidate who would “take on” these companies. And while 60 percent of voters say they are concerned about tech companies’ handling of privacy and data protection, large majorities see these companies as “mainly a positive force in society,” “a sign that the American economy is working” and “a key advantage in our competition with China.” In contrast, just a third see Big Tech as “too powerful.”

These favorable public attitudes toward the tech sector come as something of a surprise, given the intense scrutiny and criticism Facebook, Google, and other companies have recently faced. While voters may disapprove of certain aspects of corporate behavior, they do not necessarily automatically assign malign motives to all business and seem to admire industries that bring empowering technologies and tangible benefits to people’s lives. In fact, most Americans have a favorable view of tech, manufacturing, the auto industry, and agribusiness. And despite their support for “taking on big banks and monopolies,” as noted above, three in four white college educated women still say that big American technology companies reflect America’s strengths in innovation and entrepreneurship, versus acting as a force that is “too powerful, suppressing innovation and making inequality worse.”

Businesses are no longer getting a free pass when it comes to wages and worker treatment, however, perhaps precisely because of their success. Our survey found surprisingly strong support for government intervention to raise wages. Seventy-five percent of voters, for instance – including 63 percent of Republicans and 76 percent of independents – favor requiring big companies “to pay their full-time workers enough that they do not qualify for federal assistance such as food stamps.” Nearly the same share of voters (71 percent) supported raising taxes on these low-paying companies, and 64 percent liked the idea of denying them federal contracts. Americans support carrots, as well as sticks, to improve corporate behavior. Two-thirds support a PPI idea: reducing taxes on companies that pay their workers enough to avoid dependence on federal benefits.

TABLE 1: Support for Proposals

| | ALL | DEMOCRAT | REPUBLICAN | INDEPENDENT |
|--|-----|----------|------------|-------------|
| Mandate that large American companies pay workers enough that they do not qualify for federal assistance such as food stamps | 75% | 83% | 63% | 76% |
| Raise taxes on companies that underpay workers | 71% | 83% | 56% | 73% |
| Require U.S. companies to pay more | 69% | 84% | 52% | 67% |
| Reduce taxes on companies that raise pay | 67% | 61% | 68% | 72% |
| Cut off federal contracts for companies that don't raise pay | 64% | 80% | 39% | 68% |

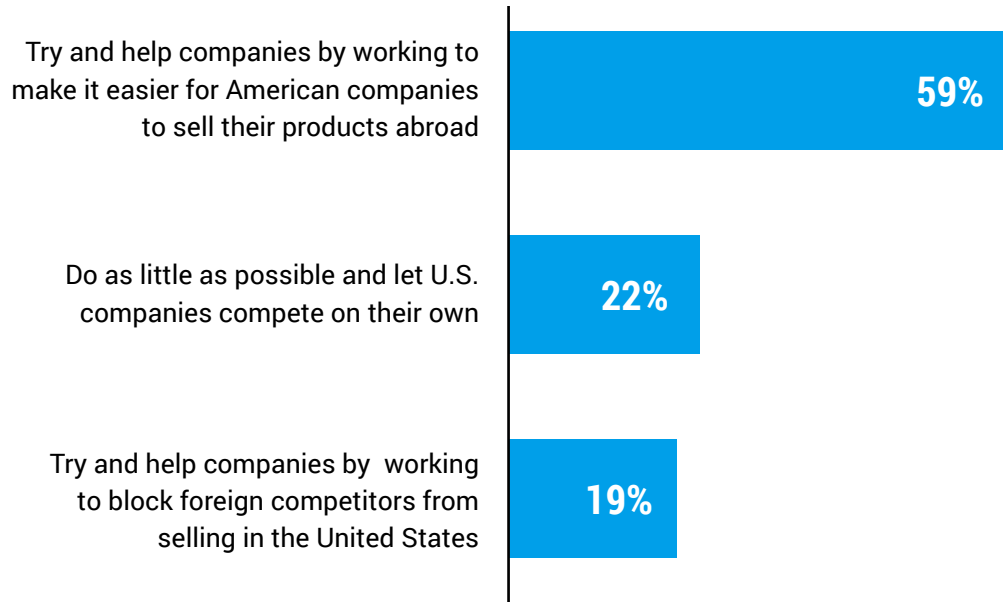
For progressives, these results point to a potential opening for demanding that companies reinvest in their workers and raise wages, though they should also be wary of crossing the line into reflexive business-bashing. For businesses, these results should be a flashing red warning sign of the changes they need to make to ensure that more of the economy's current prosperity is broadly shared. If business does not reform itself, it runs the very real risk of having reform imposed upon it.

4. Nationalism is a failing strategy – perhaps even among Trump's core supporters.

President Trump often describes himself as an unabashed nationalist. But U.S. voters aren't in love with his chauvinistic, "we-win, you lose" view of America's place in the world.

For instance, voters would like to see American companies succeed globally and don't support closing our economy to foreign trade. A strong majority of voters – 59 percent – want government to "try and help companies by working to make it easier for American companies to sell their products abroad." Only 22 percent said government should "do as little as possible and let U.S. companies compete on their own," and even fewer voters – 19 percent – said the right response was to "try and help companies by working to block foreign competitors from selling in the United States."

FIGURE 10: When it comes to competition from foreign companies, what should the position of the U.S. government be?



Most voters – 53 percent – also see Trump’s aggressive use of tariffs as a “bad idea,” although this issue is highly tinged by partisanship. Among Republicans, 78 percent support Trump’s tariffs, and it is the equally strong opposition of Democrats as well as opposition from independents that tip the balance against this policy.

More broadly, however, voters would like to see the United States involved with the world rather than retreating inward. Fifty-seven percent of voters say they’d like to see America “play a leadership role helping democracies around the world that are dealing with threats from authoritarian countries like Russia and China.” At the same time, Americans are nervous about Trump’s bellicose stance toward foreign policy. A majority of voters (61 percent) fear that he will take the United States into a new war – a concern that ranks this fear just under concerns about the deficit and drug company prices.

These results imply that Trump’s rather frightening and pessimistic vision of Fortress America – under siege and alone – isn’t what most Americans want. Rather, they’d like to see America engaged and leading.

5. The federal deficit could be the sleeper issue of 2020.

An unexpected finding in our poll is how worried U.S. voters are about government spending and debt. It ranked as their second biggest worry, behind drug prices, and fifth on the list of big problems they want Washington to tackle. In fact, the deficit ranked ahead of many of the issues that have been central in prior campaigns, such as education, taxes, and crime, as well as cultural issues such as abortion rights and religious liberty.

This was somewhat surprising since, despite a lot of mutual finger-pointing, neither party has shown much appetite for reining in government deficits and debt. Nor has there been a groundswell of public pressure on Congress to take fiscal discipline more seriously. And our poll's findings gave little indication that voters are prepared to support the tough actions necessary to restore fiscal responsibility in Washington.

Democrats were more worried than Republicans, probably because they (accurately) see swelling deficits as resulting mainly from Trump's tax cuts. In general, however, the poll showed that men are more concerned about public spending and debt than women. In particular, older, college-educated white men and Republicans (substantially overlapping groups) worry most about the nation's deteriorating fiscal health.

TABLE 2: Which are the top three problems you would like to see the President and Congress address? (Top 3 choices combined)

| | ALL | DEMOCRAT | REPUBLICAN | INDEPENDENT |
|--|-----|----------|------------|-------------|
| Health Care | 45 | 55 | 38 | 42 |
| Immigration | 25 | 15 | 40 | 21 |
| Social Security and Medicare | 27 | 24 | 31 | 27 |
| The Environment | 22 | 34 | 6 | 25 |
| The Federal budget and government spending | 25 | 14 | 34 | 28 |
| Wages and income | 18 | 25 | 11 | 17 |

The irony, of course, is that Republican Congressional leaders have been Trump's willing accomplices in opening the floodgates to a torrent of red ink. One mystery is why younger voters – on whom the burden of today's unpaid bills eventually must fall – aren't more engaged in the issue. Voters under 50 in our survey are more worried about their ability to save for retirement and the possibility of war than they are about the deficit.

Our poll furnished further evidence that the Trump-Republican tax cuts of 2017 were a bust with voters. By more than 2-1 (68 percent to 32 percent), voters favored repealing the Trump/GOP tax cuts and instead cutting the payroll tax to give ordinary workers a break. However, that likely reflects the public's view that the Trump cuts are unfair more than their impact on the federal budget.

Voters also did not connect the growth of entitlement spending to their worries about fiscal profligacy in Washington. On the contrary, the poll found strong support across the political spectrum for expanding Social Security and Medicare, with women leading the charge. Notwithstanding Democratic claims that Republicans are scheming to cut the giant social insurance programs (to pay for their tax cuts), GOP voters in our poll backed expanding Social Security by a whopping 61 percent to 39 percent. The least enthusiastic about spending more on the entitlements were independents; only 27 percent wanted to increase Social Security benefits.

Respondents strongly opposed (68 percent to 32 percent) slowing the growth of entitlement spending to make room for public investment. Republicans and Independents were even more opposed than Democrats. These findings suggest that advocates of greater fiscal restraint in Washington face a huge education challenge. Voters don't seem aware of what's driving federal spending growth or the demographic and longevity changes that have put the entitlements on the road to insolvency.

This suggests that the Congressional budget ax will continue to fall – if it falls at all – on discretionary domestic spending, the shrinking portion of the federal budget from which public investments are funded. This is bad news for today's young working families and their children. Nonetheless, public concern about unconstrained federal spending and borrowing is rising, creating opportunities to hold Republicans accountable for the fiscal mess they've created, but also putting pressure on progressives to come up with a credible plan for stabilizing and gradually reducing the nation's debts.

6. Don't forget immigration.

Almost as important a concern as the deficit for many voters is immigration. While this priority ranked relatively low for Democrats, it registered as the top-tier concern for Republicans (even ahead of health care) and a major concern for independents, ahead of such priorities as national security, education and taxes. Immigration also looms large for non-college-educated whites, both men and women.

TABLE 3: Top concerns of non-college-educated whites (top 3 combined)

| | MEN | WOMEN |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | Health care 40% | Health care 53% |
| 2 | Social Security and Medicare 36% | Social Security and Medicare 37% |
| 3 | Immigration 27% Federal budget and government spending 27% (tie) | Immigration 25% |

The good news is that voters are far more nuanced in their views on immigration than President Trump, and there is room for solutions beyond such divisive and destructive policies as building walls or the cruel separation of children from their parents.

For instance, overwhelming majorities of voters in our survey – including Republicans and non-college whites – support a comprehensive approach to immigration reform over one that deals only with border security. Comprehensive reform was favored by a margin of 75 percent to 25 percent overall, as well as by 62 percent of Republicans, 82 percent of Independents, 81 percent of Democrats and even 72 percent of non-college white men.

Voters do, however, want to see a shift in immigration policy from family unification to skills. This change was supported by 63 percent of voters overall, including 63 percent of Democrats, 66 percent of Independents and 64 percent of Republicans.

What should progressives take away from these findings? It's necessary but insufficient to deplore Trump's nativism and fear-mongering about caravans and "criminal aliens." Progressives also need to offer voters a credible blueprint for bringing our outdated immigration laws into the 21st Century. Such a blueprint would combine unequivocal progressive support for tough enforce of immigration laws – in workplaces as well as at borders – and a realigning of immigration policy with the labor needs of a high-skill knowledge economy.

7. Voters are pragmatists on energy and climate change.

In our poll, the environment ranked fourth in the hierarchy of problems voters would like to see U.S. leaders tackle. Republicans were outliers; only 6 percent listed the environment as a top priority. Independents (25 percent) were much closer to Democrats (34 percent) in favoring action on the environment.

For most voters, however, concern about the environment did not translate into support for demands by green activists that fossil fuels be banned as rapidly as possible. In fact, a solid majority (58 percent) view America's shale oil and gas boom in a positive light because it creates jobs and reduces U.S. reliance on imported oil. On the other side, 42 percent say shale resources should be "left in the ground" because they threaten to make global warming worse.

A significant majority of Democrats (61 percent to 39 percent), however, opted for leaving shale in the ground. That puts them at odds with independents (56 percent to 44 percent for shale) and suggests difficulties for Democratic candidates running in shale-rich states like Pennsylvania, Ohio and North Dakota, as well as traditional oil patch states like Texas and Oklahoma. It's important for Democrats to recognize that, across much of middle America, green hostility to fossil fuel is an anti-jobs stance that also threatens to deprive our country of the strategic benefits of once again being an energy superpower.

Another question, however, suggests that Democratic views on shale energy may be more nuanced. It gave voters a three-way choice between eliminating fossil fuels as soon as possible, gradually reducing their use and promoting both oil and gas and cleaner sources of energy. Most (42 percent) picked

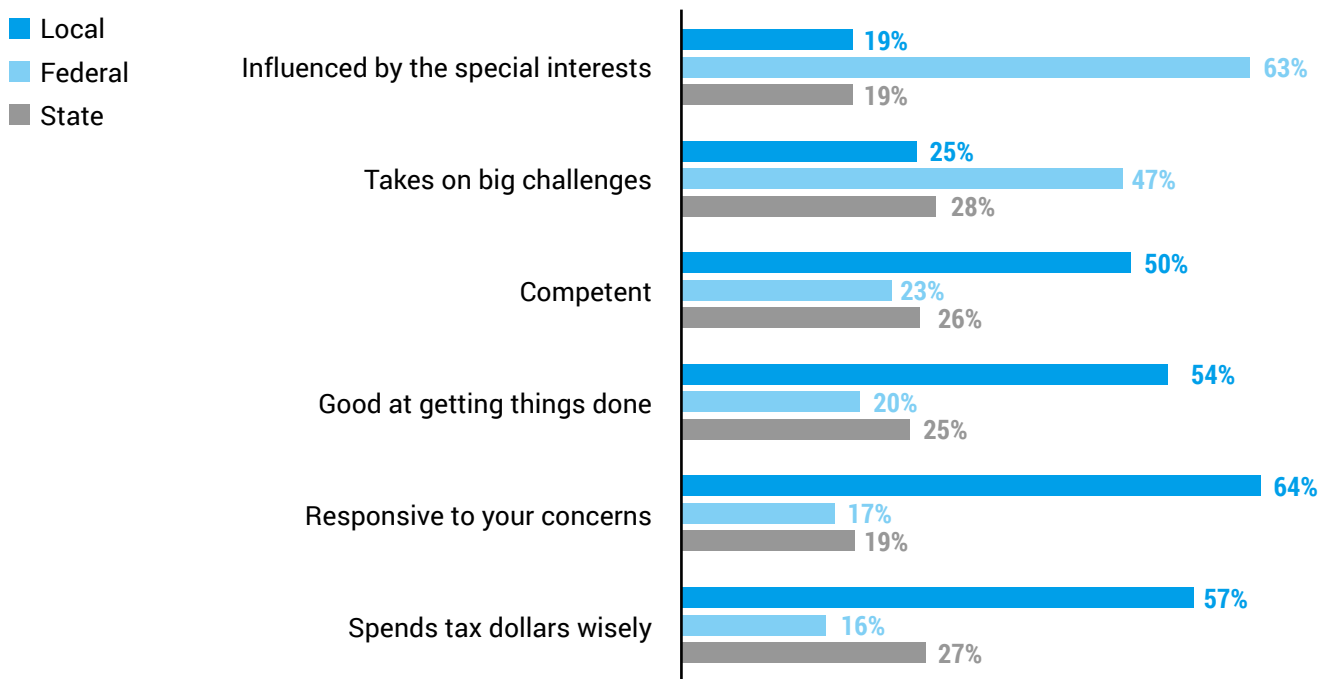
an all-fuel approach, 37 percent opted for a gradual move away from fossil fuels and just 21 percent favored an immediate phase-out of fossil fuels. Only 29 percent of Democrats took that view, which was tilted heavily toward young voters, while 43 percent favored a more gradual approach.

As we look ahead to the 2020 presidential campaign, it's clear that despite their midterm gains, Democrats need to enhance their competitiveness across broad swaths of the middle of the country. They can win on energy and climate issues – but only if they stop outsourcing their energy policy to green activists and avoid a false choice between fossil fuels and renewable energy. For the foreseeable future, our country – and the wider world – will need both. During the Obama years, shale oil and gas production surged, as did deployment of wind and solar power, yet greenhouse gas emissions also fell by 12 percent. On energy and climate, Democrats should embrace innovation rather than shale prohibitionism.

8. Americans prefer a responsive local government over a centralized federal government that they deeply distrust.

Our survey revealed deep distrust across the political spectrum of the federal government, both in its capacity and competence to get things done and on the question of whether it serves the interests of the public versus those of moneyed concerns. In comparison to state and local government, just 17 percent of our respondents said the federal government is “responsive to your concerns,” just 20 percent said it is “good at getting things done,” and only 16 percent said it “spends tax dollars wisely.” A big majority (63 percent) said they thought the federal government is “influenced by special interests.”

FIGURE 11: Tell us if each of the following applies more to your local government, state government or federal government



While voters see state governments as much less captive to special interests than Washington, they otherwise tended to give the states similar grades. However, they express a strikingly high level of satisfaction in local government. Sixty-four percent consider it responsive to citizens' concerns, 54 percent say it is good at getting things done and 57 percent say it spends tax dollars wisely. These marks were uniformly high across all demographic and ideological groups, while white college-educated men showed the greatest degree of skepticism about the integrity and effectiveness of the federal government.

These findings highlight daunting obstacles to the ambitions of the Berniecrats and “democratic socialists” peddling a “bold” vision for free college, guaranteed jobs or incomes, or other top-down redistribution. Simply put, voters don't trust the vehicle by which the left proposes to deliver these new benefits. Rather than rallying behind a statist vision, progressives should look for ways to empower innovative mayors and metro leaders who are rebuilding our economy and social fabric from the ground up.

CONCLUSION

Like many surveys, ours found sharp partisan differences in priorities and outlook.

But we also discovered a common foundation of values and aspiration that cuts across party and demographic lines. Most significantly, we found an electorate hungering for progress on crucial issues but far more pragmatic about what the solutions should be than either the extreme left or right is currently calling for.

Democrats in the new majority now have a chance to satisfy that hunger, by offering practical, actionable ideas that will help solve the enormous challenges our nation faces and bring greater opportunities for economic success to more Americans in all places. But to achieve this, Democrats will also have to offer an agenda that is broadly appealing and that respects the newfound trust that voters have given them to serve as a check on President Trump and bring progress where there has been none.

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The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton’s “idea mill.” Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

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