



By: TA | AP Insight

# Fewer Americans say democracy is central to country's identity



As the U.S. prepares for an extravagant celebration of its founding principles, fewer Americans see their country as exceptional, a new poll finds.

The survey from The [Associated Press-NORC](#) Center for Public Affairs Research highlights many Americans' feeling of unease over the future of its representative government — particularly among young people.

It presents a jarring contrast as communities around the country commemorate the nation's 250th anniversary.

Only about one-quarter of Americans say the U.S. stands above all other countries in the world, the new poll found, while 44% say it's one of the greatest countries in the world, along with some others.

About 3 in 10 say there are better countries than the U.S., an increase from 19% in an [AP-NORC poll](#) conducted in June 2016.

Americans remain divided about whether diversity is an essential feature of the U.S.'s identity, and agreement about other aspects of the country's underlying character appears to be eroding, the survey found.

Americans are less likely to see a democratically elected government as “extremely” or “very” important to the United States' identity as a nation than they were just a few years ago.

About two-thirds of U.S. adults now say a democratically elected government is highly important to the U.S.'s identity as a nation, down from 80% in 2021.

“It's not that the democracy part is not working,” said Derricka Wall, 24, of Chickasaw, Alabama. “It's the people that are actually being put in office that is the problem.”

Wall believes politicians have damaged America's governing system, which was designed to ensure representation and guard against government misuse.

America, she said, “is not what it used to be. I feel like our founding fathers would be kind of disappointed with how it is now.”

## Rising belief that democracy is not essential to American identity

Young adults are much less likely than older Americans to believe the U.S. is special, compared with other nations, the poll found.

About 4 in 10, 44%, of U.S. adults under 30 say there are other countries better than the U.S., compared with 22% of U.S. adults ages 60 and older.

Fewer, too, see democracy as a key element of the U.S.'s identity. Only about half of Americans under 30 believe this, compared with 81% of those 60 and older.

Wall said the people who established the government with co-equal branches thought they were erecting safeguards to keep any one person or group from attaining too much power.

But she believes they didn't foresee how easily those guardrails would crumble if the people in the system stopped enforcing them.

“I feel like they would actually roll out of their graves,” she said. “I feel they would be very disappointed in us.”

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Kent Stage, 62 and a retired senior enlisted man in the Army, is a registered Republican in Indiana.

He does not think the current political system addresses the country's problems. He'd like to see term limits on politicians and more working-class people serving.

"I'll trust the ambulance-chasing lawyer and a shady used car salesman before I trust the politician," he said.

Stage, who is also a former Marine, believes public servants make self-serving choices for their families "while mine and yours still got to hit the old grindstone."

## Many feel it's harder to get ahead in the US

The survey also finds widespread cynicism about America as the land of opportunity.

About half of U.S. adults, 51%, say the American Dream — the idea that if you work hard, you'll get ahead — once held true but does not anymore.

About one-third say it "still holds true" while 15% say it never held true.

Jack Hermanson, a 27-year-old software developer in Denver, said his belief in the American Dream changed when he saw his engineer husband struggle to find a job. "That really shattered my impression that if you work hard, you get what you deserve," Hermanson said.

Only 22% of Americans under 30 say the American Dream still holds true, compared with 46% of Americans ages 60 and older.

Angela Toombs, 31, works at a senior living facility in Atlanta where her clients talk about how easy it was to buy a house while working their first regular jobs in their 20s and are incredulous about the obstacles facing Toombs' generation.

Toombs recently gave up her own apartment to rent a room in order to save money.

## Most Republicans say the American Dream still holds true, compared with about one-quarter of independents and 17% of Democrats

Skepticism about the American Dream is more widespread among Democrats and independents, compared with Republicans.

Most Republicans, 57%, say the American Dream still holds true, compared with about one-quarter of independents and 17% of Democrats.

Republicans are also much likelier than Democrats to see the U.S. as exceptional. About half of Republicans say the U.S. stands above all other countries in the world, compared with only 7% of Democrats.

Quintin Sharpe, 28, lives in a resort town on Lake Geneva in Wisconsin. A financial planner who is Republican, he said the American Dream remains accessible and he is proud of the country. "It's been a great experiment."

"The opportunity is there for those who want to work for it," he said. Sharpe believes the country is "a meritocracy, and the best ideas, the best work ethic, those with the best succeed regardless of race, skin color, any of those factors."

He and his wife will celebrate the country's 250th anniversary watching the fireworks over the lake.

## Divides on whether diversity is essential to US

Just over half of U.S. adults — 56% — say a shared American culture and set of values are "extremely" or "very" important to the country's identity, down from 65% in 2017.

Younger Americans are less likely than older ones to say a singular set of values is important to U.S. identity.



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But Americans remain sharply divided on the centrality of welcoming diverse perspectives: About half of adults, 51%, say the ability of people to come from other places in the world to escape violence or find economic opportunities is “extremely” or “very” important to American identity, while 55% say this about the mixing of cultures and values from around the world.

Only about 4 in 10 Republicans see the mixing of cultures and values from around the world as central to the country's identity, compared with 76% of Democrats.

Rose Nunez, 70, of San Antonio, was a small business owner but now is a caregiver for family members. Nunez, who tends to vote for Democrats, said there is an unease and tension that are just beneath the surface, especially focused on Hispanics. She said some people have started carrying their papers showing their immigration status in case they are challenged.

“It is hard to celebrate when the feelings towards immigrants and communities of color are so strong,” she said of the upcoming America 250 celebrations.

She said even citizens are questioned now. If it gets to a point where being naturalized is challenged, “guess what, my mom would be leaving. She’s been living in this country since she was maybe four years old. She’s 93.”