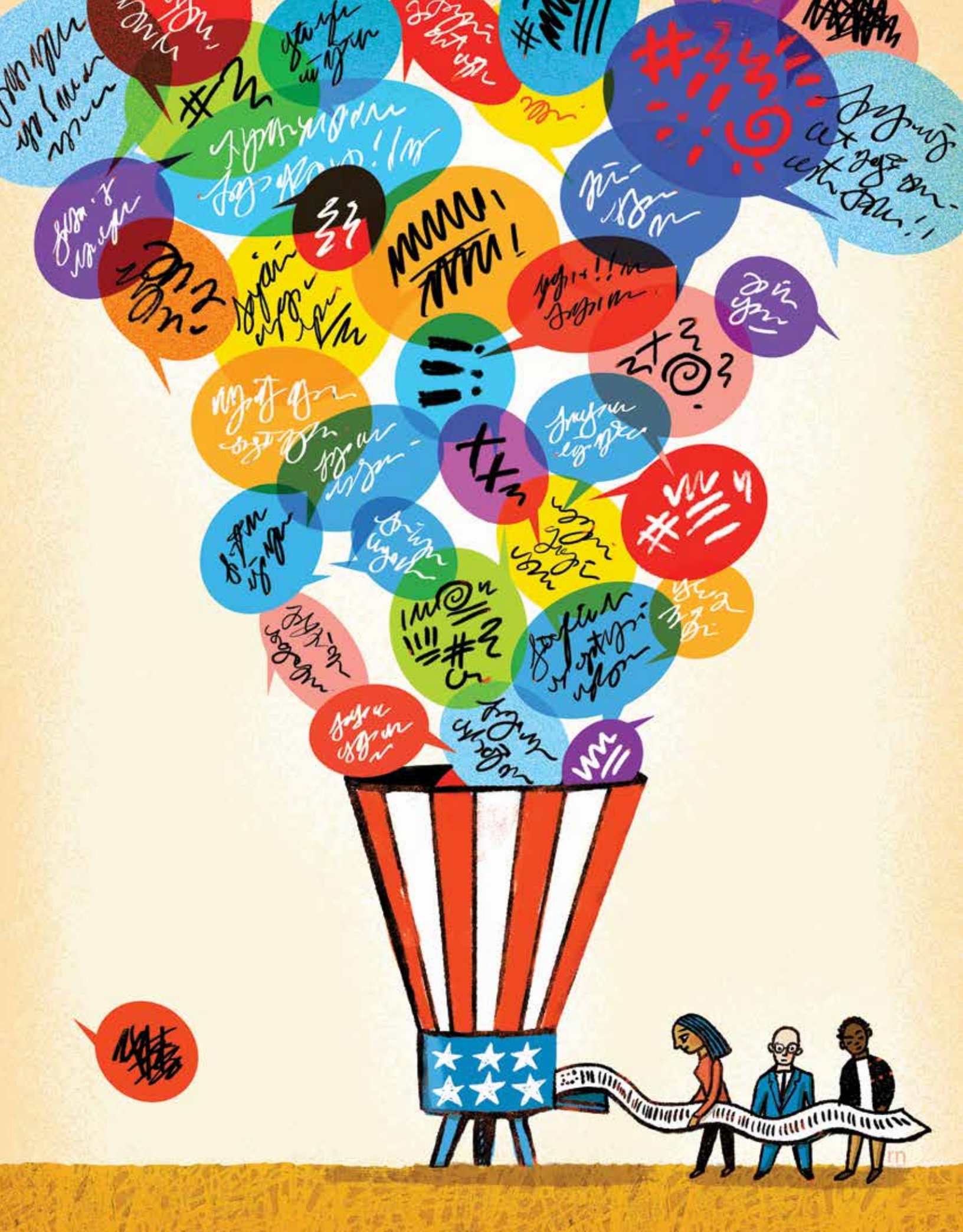


The State of the People of the Union

Special Marquette Law School Poll national survey sheds light on Americans' lives, 250 years after "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" were proclaimed as "unalienable Rights."

BY ALAN J. BORSUK

In God we trust. It says so right there on the money in your wallet. But how much does the national motto accurately describe Americans in 2026? That's just one of the questions that ring out as the nation marks the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

There are many others: On the earthly level, do we trust other people? Which institutions are worthy of trust, and which not? What are our families like? How connected are people to their communities? How do we express our religious lives?

Shedding light on questions such as these was the goal of a special national survey by the Marquette Law School Poll this past summer. There were no "horse race" political matchups. Instead, the poll took an in-depth look at how Americans live and what matters to them. The survey was conducted June 9–15, 2026, interviewing 1,514 adults across the country, with a margin of error of +/-2.7 percentage points. The results were the subject of four releases in late June and early July.

Trust in other people

Society rests on connections between people, and trust is one vital element in social bonds of cooperation, business, friendship, and family. In 2026 America, whom do Americans trust, and how much trust do we have in each other?

One striking finding in the poll is that trust in other people is dramatically lower among those born since 1990 than those born in the 1960s or before. "Among those born before 1960, for example, 77% say most people can be trusted, while for those born in the 2000s, just 35% say most can be trusted," said Charles Franklin, professor of law and public policy and director of the Marquette Law School Poll. "That's a huge difference, and trust declines with each successive cohort born in the 1960s, 1970s, and through to the 2000s."

It is tempting to reach for a handy explanation for the decline in trust, but the fact that trust has declined with each new cohort makes recent changes, such as the growth of social media, not generally persuasive. It is true that heavy users of social media are less trusting, and they are also younger and thus a larger proportion of recent birth cohorts than of earlier ones, but the gap in trust between heavy users and light users is some 13 percentage points, considerably less than the gap between young and old cohorts.

More telling is that within birth cohorts, those who use social media the most hardly differ in trust from those who make the least use of social media. For example, consider the 1970s cohort. Among those who use one or no social media app, 62% say most people can be trusted, while among those who use five or more social media platforms, 63% say most can be trusted. For the cohort born in the 2000s, 34% of the lightest users say most can be trusted, while among the heaviest users 35% trust others.

The interpersonal trust gap between the old and the young carries over to more specific questions about trust in people. Among adults in June 2026, 59% said that most people would "try to take advantage of you if they got a chance," while 41% thought most would "try to be fair." A majority of each cohort except those born before 1960 think most people would try to take advantage, and that majority grows with each younger cohort.

Illustration by Robert Neubecker

Sixty-four percent say that people just look out for themselves, while 36% say that people try to help others. A small majority of the pre-1960 cohort think people try to help others. The majority saying that people look out for themselves grows to 76% in the youngest cohort.

One area in which the old and the young see trust the same way is that all agree that Americans' level of trust in one another has been shrinking. Among all adults, 82% say trust is declining, just 5% say it has been growing, and 13% say it is staying about the same. Although the older cohorts have longer experience to inform their answers, there is hardly any difference across cohorts in views of this aspect of trust.

Trust in institutions

The Marquette Law School Poll asked about confidence in 18 different institutions. Doctors have the highest net-confidence rating (percentage of people with a great deal/quite a lot of confidence, minus percentage with very little/no confidence), followed by the U.S. military, the police, and local schools. Other positive net ratings go to colleges and universities and the people who administer state elections.

The other 12 institutions have net negative confidence ratings. Only slightly negative are local news media, the U.S. Supreme Court, and the Food and Drug Administration, each less than 10 percentage points net negative. State legislatures are viewed negatively at -16 net, but far better than Congress at -43. Other federal institutions with negative net ratings are the U.S. Department of Justice (-21) and the executive branch (-30).

Business fares rather poorly: business leaders are at -24, companies developing artificial intelligence are at -47, and Facebook has the lowest rating of all at -66. National news media get a very negative -31 rating, much worse than local news media's -2.

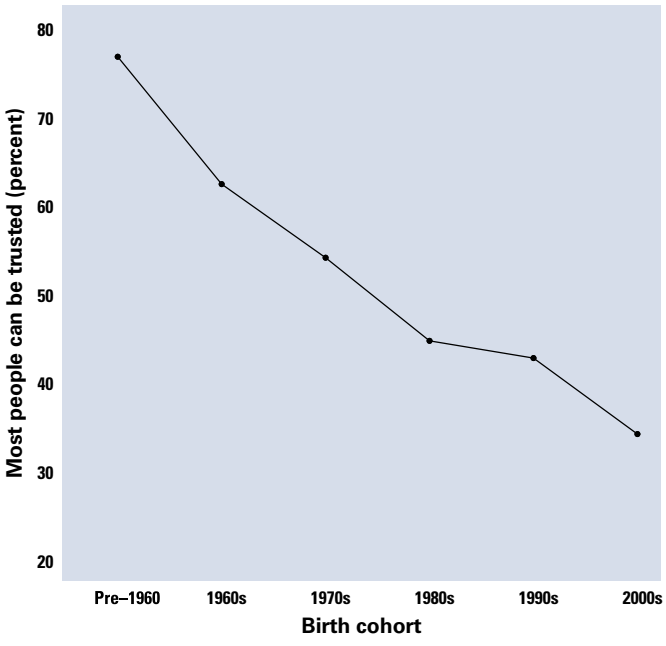
Partisans differ in trust of some institutions but not of others. Both Republicans and Democrats have positive net ratings of doctors, the military, and the police, and they also agree in holding negative views of Congress, artificial intelligence companies, and Facebook. Partisans differ on the U.S. Supreme Court and the executive branch (with Republicans positive and Democrats negative) and on colleges/universities and local news media (with Democrats positive and Republicans negative).

After the kids leave home

Many government statistics focus on fertility and child-rearing, but pay little attention to family life after children reach age 18. This Marquette

Trust in people, by birth cohort

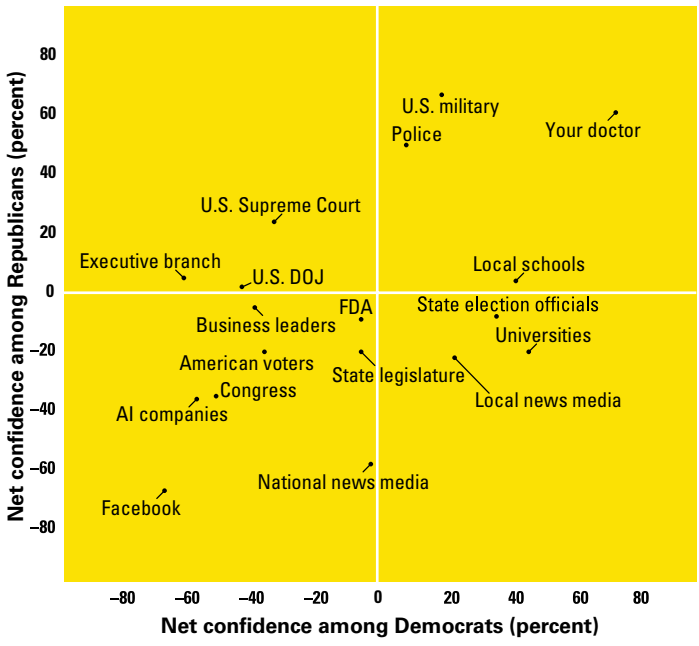
Among adults in polls conducted in 2026



Marquette Law School Poll, national surveys, latest June 9–15, 2026

Net confidence in institutions, by party ID

Among adults; net is percent confident minus percent not confident



Marquette Law School Poll, national survey, June 9–15, 2026

survey examined aspects of family life among parents of adult offspring, including the role of grandparents. This provided glimpses of family relationships across the later part of life.

The survey found that large numbers of families have active multigenerational lives, including grandparents who frequently care for grandchildren and families in which all the grandparents, parents, and grandchildren live within 50 miles of each other. Relatively few of those in later life, including after 70, are isolated from their children.

Among Americans age 18 and older, 38% don't have any children. Making up the 62% of adults with children, 20% have only children younger than 18, 8% have children both younger than 18 and 18 or older, and 34% have children only 18 or older.

Where and how often adults interact with other people

Where	How Often	
	Monthly or more	Few per year or never
Text messages	84	16
Telephone call	72	28
Social media	63	37
At work	58	42
Visiting someone's house	47	53
Child's school	41	59
Coffee shop/restaurant	40	60
Religious services	33	67
Parties or meals organized by others	33	67
Neighborhood events/parks	28	72
Social organization/club	26	74
Parties or meals organized by yourself	23	77
Bar or tavern	22	78
Class or group/knitting/book club	18	82
Sporting event	17	83

Marquette Law School Poll, national survey, June 9–15, 2026

Question: In each of the following settings, how often do you interact with other people outside of your immediate family?

For people in their 40s and beyond, more than half have two or more children. Barring untimely death, these adult children will define and extend family for their parents through the end of the parents' lives. Adult children extend their parents' family by creating grandchildren. In this survey, 43% of parents have at least one grandchild, but the adult children include those too young to have their own children yet.

Grandchildren are a prominent part of family life for older Americans, many having four or more.

Grandparents engage with their grandchildren in many ways, but a prominent one is through providing childcare of one sort or another. Among grandparents, 50% said they take care of a grandchild at least once a month, with 31% doing so a few times a year and 20% who never take care of a grandchild.

Among those with adult children, 45% of these parents have all of their adult children living within 50 miles of them. Another 37% have some children near and others far, while 18% have all of their children living more than 50 miles away.

This picture of families with adult children and grandchildren shows there is considerable interaction throughout life, with most families remaining, at least in part, in geographic proximity and connections with grandchildren playing a prominent role in the lives of older Americans. (It should be noted that this particular analysis focused exclusively on those with children.)

Not all families are happy families. Looking at trust of immediate family, 62% say they can trust their immediate family a great deal, 30% trust their family a fair amount, 6% say they trust family not very much, and 2% trust them not at all.

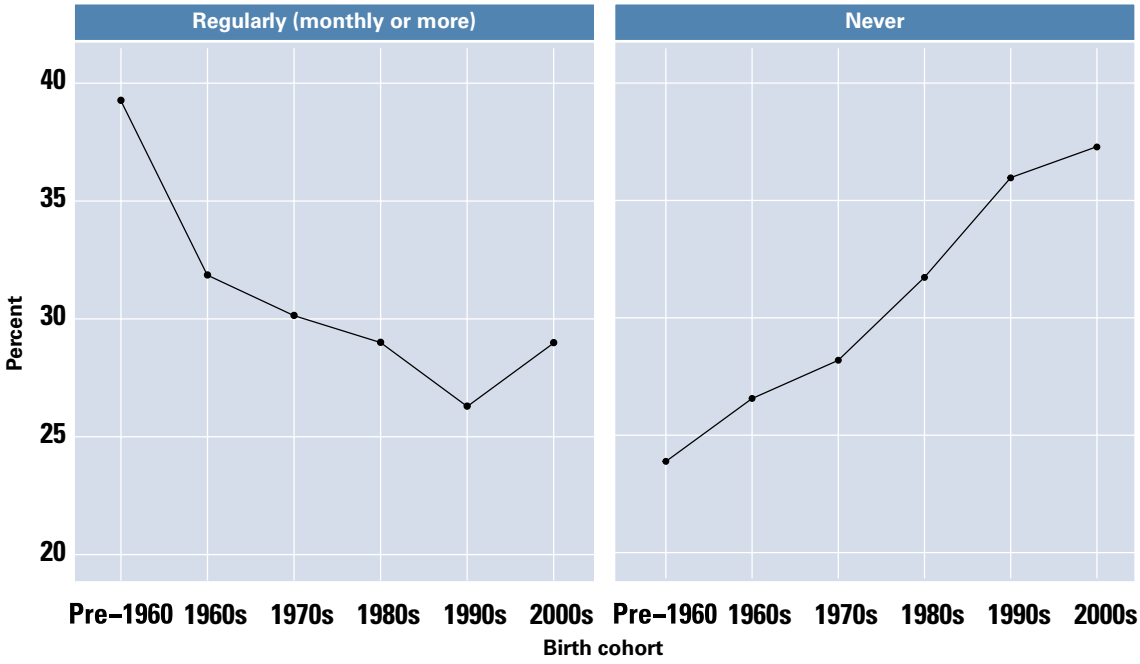
Financial stress plays a substantial role in reducing trust in family. Among those who say they are struggling financially, 42% say they trust their family a great deal, compared to 61% among those who are "just getting by" and 70% among those who say they are living comfortably. Similarly, trust in family is related to income levels.

Compared to the standard of living they experienced growing up, about half of adult Americans say they are now better off. That includes 21% who say they are much better off and 31% who are somewhat better off, while 20% are somewhat worse off and 9% are much worse off. The remaining 20% say their standard of living is about the same as when they were young.

Faith and family

Most Americans identify themselves as adherents to a religious group, though in recent years the

Religious service attendance, by birth cohort
Among adults



Marquette Law School Poll, national survey, June 9–15, 2026

percentage not affiliated has grown. In this survey, 28% say they are not adherents, while more than 70% identify themselves with a religious tradition. While fewer than a third of Americans say they are not affiliated with a religion, more than half, 56%, say they seldom or never attend worship services.

Attendance at religious services has declined across birth cohorts, with older people attending most frequently and younger people attending the least. In the Marquette Law School Poll, there is some hint that attendance may be on the rise for those born in the 2000s, though this group also has the highest rate of never attending. (Those attending occasionally or seldom are omitted in the charts on this page.)

Beyond affiliation and attendance, religious practice includes prayer. Given relatively low attendance rates of respondents, a surprisingly large number of people (55%) say they pray at least a few times a week. This contrasts with just 21% who attend religious services weekly. Furthermore, prayer is frequent even among those who attend services only rarely. For example, 24% of those who say they never attend religious services say they pray at least a few times a week.

Forty-four percent say it is important for children to learn moral values through religion, and 71% say it is important for children to learn moral values apart from religion. (People could answer "yes" to more than one of those questions.)

How people interact

A powerful image of modern social isolation is a group of people sitting together while all of them are mesmerized by their cell phones, not speaking to anyone around them. In this survey, 41% say they turn to their phone all or most of the time, rather than talk to people around them. Another 40% say they do this sometimes, while 20% say they seldom or never do so.

A few other glimpses into how people interact with others:

Nearly 60% of adults say that they start a conversation with strangers at least once a month. Eighty percent of adults report that they say "hello" to strangers in passing at least monthly.

Over half of adults spend a social evening with friends at least monthly. Thirty-three percent say they go to parties or meals organized by other people at least monthly, while 23% say they host parties or dinners at least monthly.

Text messages are the most frequent electronic interaction, followed by telephone calls and social media.

The most common face-to-face interaction comes at work, though this is naturally much less

common for retired people and others not in the labor force. While it is obvious that work involves interaction with others, it is important as a source of contact with other people who may become friends and who provide different perspectives from those within the immediate family.

For parents of school-age children, schools offer a frequent point of contact with others. Likewise, coffee shops and restaurants are frequent locations for personal interactions. About one in five say they meet other people at bars or taverns regularly. Less common locations come from participating in groups with special interests, such as knitting circles and book clubs, or attending sporting events.

Regardless of how singles meet people, they go on dates more often than they use dating apps. Among singles, 27% say they go on a date at least once a month, 24% go out a few times a year, and 49% are not dating at all.

Dating is most frequent for singles in their 30s, with those in their 20s dating the next most frequently. The 20-somethings, however, also have a relatively high level of never dating. Beyond the 30s, dating among singles is fairly stable in the 40s through the 60s, dropping for those 70 and over. It is worth noting, however, that about half or more of singles over 40 say they never go on dates.

Declining trust in federal government

The poll found that trust in the federal government to do what is right all or most of the time has declined over the long term. While overall levels of trust in the government have not changed much in recent years, partisanship has increasingly shaped levels of confidence. More generally, satisfaction with many institutions, both governmental and nongovernmental, varies widely.

Eighteen percent of American adults say that they trust the federal government to do what is right all or most of the time, while 19% say they can never trust the government. The remainder, 63%, say they trust the government only some of the time.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, trust in the federal government was much higher, and partisan differences in opinion were much smaller. In 1958, almost three-quarters (73%) said they trusted the federal government all or most of the time, according to polling by the American National Election Study. That percentage fell to 25% by 1980. Except for brief and limited increases during the mid-1980s and the late 1990s and early 2000s, trust has remained much lower than it once was.

Unlike in the period before 2000, trust in the government has become substantially dependent on partisanship and which party controls the White House at the time. For example, in Marquette Law School Poll surveys during the Biden administration, beginning in 2021, 31% of Democrats trusted the government all or most of the time, compared to 12% of Republicans. In the second Trump administration, beginning in 2025, 31% of Republicans say they trust the government that much, compared to 11% of Democrats.

These partisan discrepancies in trust were much smaller in the past. For example, in 1968, under Democratic President Lyndon Johnson, 65% of Democrats trusted the government, as did 59% of Republicans. And during Republican President Ronald Reagan's second term in 1988, 48% of Republicans and 35% of Democrats mostly trusted the government. Partisan gaps grew in the 2000s.

Views of the country

The poll found that a majority of adults have positive views of the country, but more are moderately positive rather than strongly so. Thirty-five percent of those polled strongly agree that America is a better country than most other countries, while 40% somewhat agree. Only 7% strongly disagree, with 19% somewhat disagreeing.

The gap is sharper when it comes to opinions on how much the United States has succeeded in achieving the ideals of the nation's Founding, with 18% saying a great deal but 53% saying a fair amount. Almost a quarter (24%) say the United States has "not very much" achieved its ideals, while 5% say that those ideals have been not at all achieved.

How proud of America are Americans? Twenty-eight percent say they are very proud, 38% say they are somewhat proud, 24% are not very proud, and 10% are not at all proud.

Americans are about evenly divided on the country's future as a democracy, with 11% who are optimistic, 41% somewhat optimistic, 36% not very optimistic, and 12% not at all optimistic.

Interest in the 250th

Interest in the "semiquincentennial," to use the formal term, was limited among those polled. As July 4 approached, only 26% of Americans had read or heard a lot about the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Another 57% said they had heard some about it, while 17% had heard nothing at all.

Favorability toward figures from the Founding Era
Among adults, ordered by percent favorable

Who	Favorability		
	Favorable	Unfavorable	Not Heard Enough
Benjamin Franklin	84	9	7
George Washington	81	13	6
Thomas Jefferson	76	16	9
John Adams	66	13	21
Alexander Hamilton	64	14	22
James Madison	59	13	28
Aaron Burr	22	29	49
Benedict Arnold	15	53	32

Marquette Law School Poll, national survey, June 9–15, 2026

Question: Do you have a favorable or an unfavorable opinion of the following people, or haven't you heard enough yet to have an opinion?

One might think this a particularly low level of attention, but this pattern was found 50 years ago also, on the 200th anniversary. In a Roper Organization poll conducted June 12–19, 1976, 28% said they were following news about the Bicentennial closely, 50% were following casually, and 22% were paying no attention. Raw data from the 1976 survey were provided by the Roper Center data archive at Cornell University, with analysis conducted by Marquette poll director Franklin.

One substantial difference from 50 years ago was found in the partisan patterns of interest and attention to the Declaration's anniversary. Opinions of President Donald Trump, who took a substantial interest in marking the anniversary, were reflected in interest in the 250th. Seventy-six percent of Republicans were very interested, as opposed to only 46% of Democrats. For the Bicentennial in 1976, during Republican Gerald Ford's presidency, there was much less correlation between interest levels and partisanship, with 66% of Republicans and 63% of Democrats very interested.

Opinions of the nation's Founders

This Marquette Law School Poll applied a modern survey question to opinion of members of the Founding generation, asking respondents if they have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of eight historical figures. Benjamin Franklin is someone Americans still like: he is seen favorably by 84%, a figure modern politicians can only envy. George Washington comes in second with 81% favorable, and Thomas Jefferson third at 76%, among eight figures from the American Revolution. Six of the eight have favorable ratings overall.

You might think Alexander Hamilton would be particularly popular since his life was the subject of a popular Broadway musical in recent years, but, at 64% favorable, he comes in fifth, behind John Adams (66% favorable). From the same musical, you might expect considerable unfavorable opinion of Aaron Burr, but almost half, 49%, say they haven't heard enough about him. Twenty-two percent are favorable and 29% unfavorable.

And the least favorable of the eight? An unsurprising choice: Benedict Arnold, who switched sides, joining the British in the middle of the Revolutionary War, and whose name became synonymous with treason. The poll didn't ask for reasoning, but 15% have a favorable view of him, as against 53% unfavorable. Perhaps there are a few British loyalists still in America.

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Broadly speaking, the poll found that the fabric of American life continues to have strength and has frayed less than might sometimes seem to be the case in a world of polarized politics. There are a wide range of colors in the fabric, and some shine brighter than others.

Is it "one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all," as the Pledge of Allegiance says? Do Americans feel themselves successful in "the pursuit of happiness" endorsed by the Declaration of Independence? The picture of the United States is complex, but the Marquette Law School Poll shows that there is still strength in the many ways we live. ■