

University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll

with Nielsen Scarborough

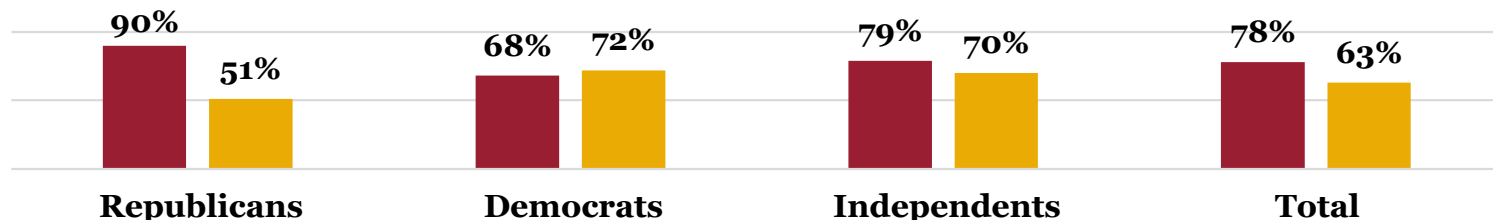
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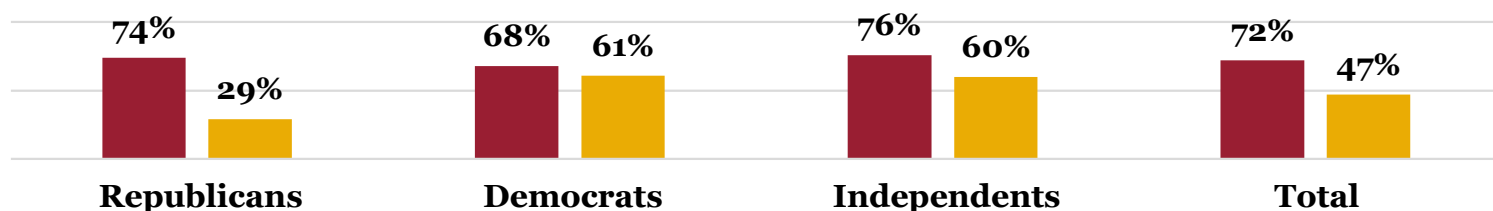
Study of American Attitudes toward the Political and Economic System
Shibley Telhami and Stella Rouse, Principal Investigators

Americans Want Less Political and Economic Change to the American System in 2020 in comparison to 2016

How much do you want significant change to the American political system?
[Among those who answered 'very much']

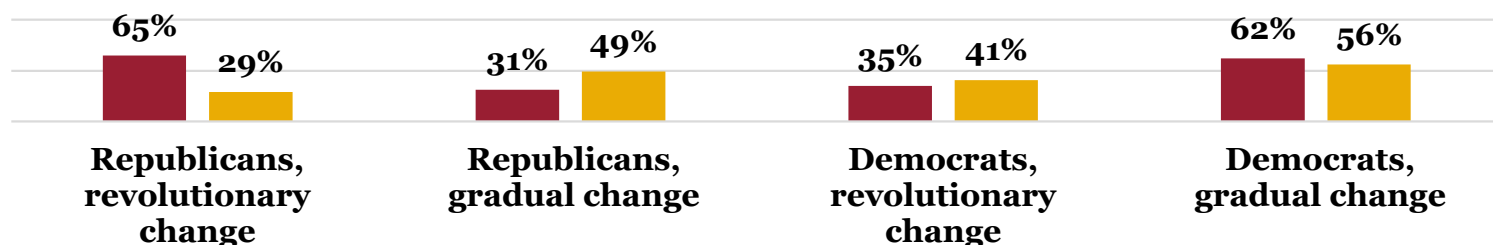


How much do you want significant change to the American economic system?
[Among those who answered 'very much']



Republicans Less Likely to Favor Revolutionary Change Four Years Later

Does our political system need revolutionary or gradual change?



2016



2020

Leadership for the Critical Issues Poll



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Professor Telhami has also been active in the foreign policy arena. He has served as advisor to the US Mission to the UN (1990-91), as advisor to former Congressman Lee Hamilton, more recently as senior advisor to George Mitchell, President Obama's United States Special Envoy for Middle East Peace (2009-2011) and as a member of the U.S. delegation to the Trilateral US-Israeli-Palestinian Anti-Incitement Committee.

Professor Telhami has contributed to *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* and regularly appears on national and international radio and television. His best-selling book, *The Stakes: America and the Middle East* was selected by Foreign Affairs as one of the top five books on the Middle East in 2003. He has been a principal investigator in the annual Arab Public Opinion Survey, conducted since 2002 in six Arab countries.



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Professor Rouse earned her Ph.D. from Louisiana State University in 2008. In 2010, she was a visiting scholar at the Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity and Gender in the Social Sciences (REGSS) at Duke University as a Ford Foundation Post-Doctoral Fellow.

Rouse's book, *Latinos in the Legislative Process: Interests and Influence*, published by Cambridge University Press, was named by Huffington Post as one of the "Best Political Science Books of 2013." Her latest book, *The Politics of Millennials: Political Beliefs and Policy Preferences of America's Most Diverse Generation*, with Ashley D. Ross, was published in August 2018.

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Americans Want Less Political and Economic Change to the American System in 2020

Republicans favor Gradual Change over Revolutionary Change Four Years Later

One week before the 2016 presidential election, we reported in an [article](#) with Reuters that, despite Hillary Clinton's lead at the time, our October 2016 Critical Issues Poll indicated an undercurrent of public opinion that likely worked in Trump's favor. For example, the poll found that:

- A majority of Americans agreed that "our system is rigged against people like me."
- A majority of Americans wanted their vote to send a message to the political establishment "a great deal."
- Strong majorities of Americans expressed a desire for "significant change" to the American political and economic system, 98% and 97%, respectively.
- A majority of Americans believed that, if elected, Trump was more likely than Clinton to bring change to the American political system.

As the article stated, "Still in Trump's favor, however, is that most Americans expressed a desire for "significant" economic and political change. And more people saw Trump as the agent of system change. If the hunch of a majority of Americans across the political spectrum is right, and many voters who may vote for Trump are not saying so publicly, there remains a degree of uncertainty about how some will ultimately vote." As the 2020 election quickly approaches, probing this issue again is significant and may help us to understand this election cycle.

Where do Americans stand today on these indicators?

Rigged System

According the [Critical Issues Poll fielded in March 2020](#), a majority of Americans still agreed that our system is rigged against people like them. But the overall percentage of those who hold this view dropped from 65% to 60% between October 2016 and March 2020.

Moreover, as the graph below shows, attitudes varied by party. The share of Republicans who agreed with this statement dropped from 77% to 48% between 2016 and 2020 – a roughly 30 percentage point decline that left this as the minority position. Meanwhile, the share of Democrats who agreed increased from 53% to 71%, and independents who agreed registered a slight drop from 73% to 68%.

Is the overall decrease in the share of Americans who think the system is "rigged" a reason for optimism? Do Americans have more trust in the political system in 2020 than they did in 2016?

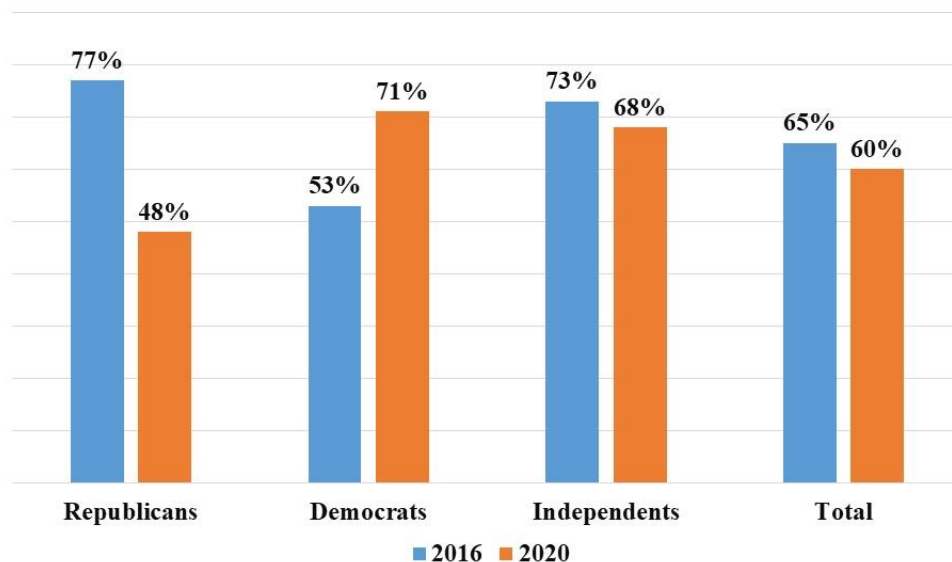
In short, probably not. The overall decline is mostly the result of the 29 percentage point decrease among Republicans, coupled with a smaller shift in the opposite direction by Democrats.

So why did Republicans and Democrats change their views? The most likely answer is that in 2016, the president was a Democrat, and in 2020 the president is a Republican. The system seems less "rigged" when your person is in office. Assuming that this is right so far, and that partisanship provides a straightforward explanation for the switch between Republicans and Democrats, we still need to understand why fewer independents in 2020 thought that the system was rigged against people like them than in 2016.

Since the poll was conducted in March before the economic consequences of COVID-19 may have fully sunk in, it could be that the change among independents was driven by a sense of optimism about an improving economy.

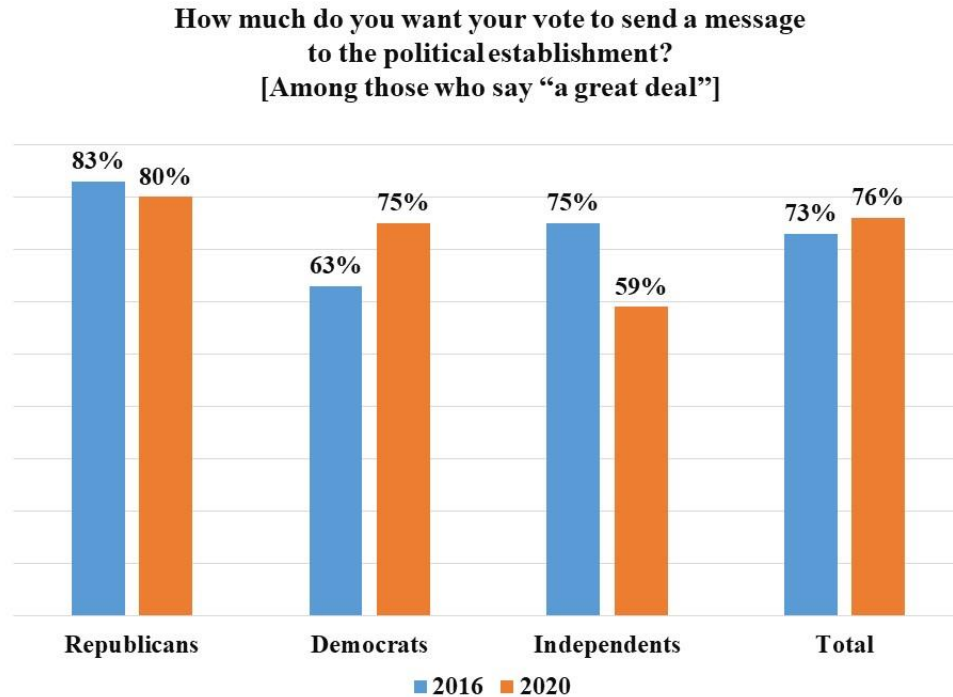
Another interesting question has to do with partisan asymmetry. Why did fewer Democrats think the system was "rigged" in March 2020 than Republicans did in 2016? If responses to this question were only a matter of partisan bias, we might have expected a larger upward swing of "agree" and "somewhat agree" responses among Democrats. But Democrats' more modest swing suggests that they may be less susceptible than Republicans to populist suspicions about diabolical elites working to corrupt our political institutions.

**How much do you agree with this statement:
"Our system is rigged against people like me?"
[Among those who say "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree"]**



Sending a Message to the Establishment

Between 2016 and 2020, the percentage of Americans wanting their vote to send a message to the political establishment ticked upwards by three percentage points (73% to 76%). Despite this modest increase, the share of Republicans and independents responding this way actually declined. Republicans dropped from 83% to 80%, while independents registered a much sharper drop, from 75% to 59%. At the same time, whereas 63% of Democrats in 2016 wanted their vote to send a message to the political establishment, by 2020 that figure rose to 75%.



As was the case above, the shifts by Republicans and Democrats here are likely driven by partisanship. But making sense of independents' shifts is more complicated. Why did the share of independents wanting their vote to send a message to the “establishment” drop so sharply between 2016 and 2020? In fact, fewer independents in 2020 want their vote to send a message to the “establishment” than either Republicans or Democrats. This is puzzling because the decision to identify as an independent presumably arises from an aversion to organized parties, and in the American two-party system, the organized party and “the establishment” tend to be perceived as equivalent entities.

Thirst for Change, Quenched?

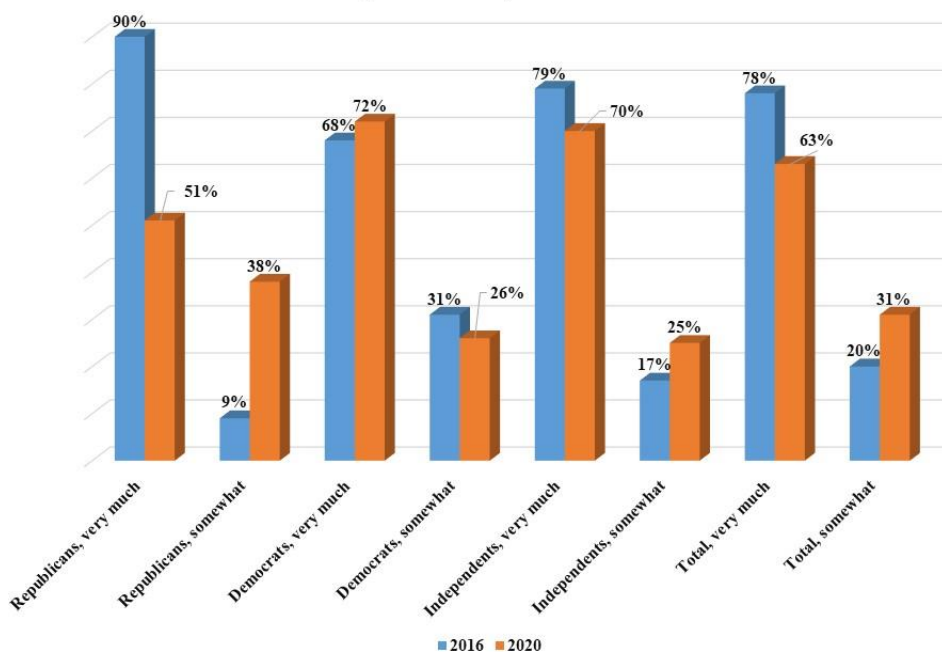
In 2016, most Americans wanted significant change to the American political system “very much” (78%) or “somewhat” (20%). Similarly, most wanted significant change to the American economic system either “very much” (72%) or “somewhat” (25%). The desire for political

change was strongest among Republicans (90% "very much"), and for economic change was strongest among Republicans and independents (74% and 76%, respectively).

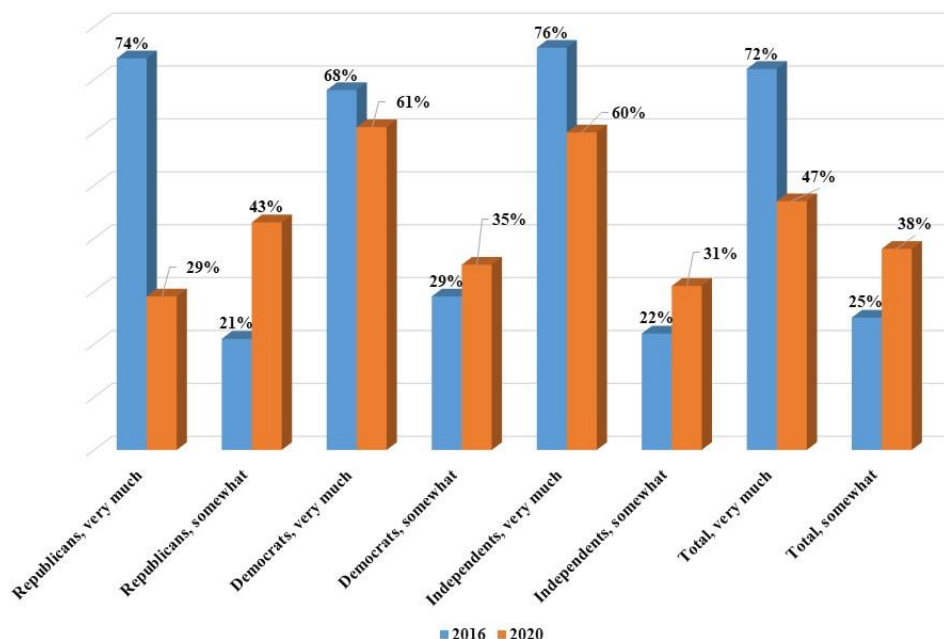
The results of the 2020 survey, though, paint a different picture. In the March 2020 poll, a slim majority of Republicans (51%) wanted significant political change "very much," compared with 72% of Democrats and 70% of independents who said they want political change "very much." Looking beyond the clear-cut partisan changes between 2016 and 2020, it is interesting to observe that independents also relaxed their desire for significant political change over the past four years.

With regard to economic change, independents, Democrats, and Republicans are all less likely in 2020 to say that they want significant economic change. Of the three groups, most conspicuous are Republicans, who registered a 45 percentage point drop in the share wanting significant economic change "very much."

How much do you want significant change to the American political system?



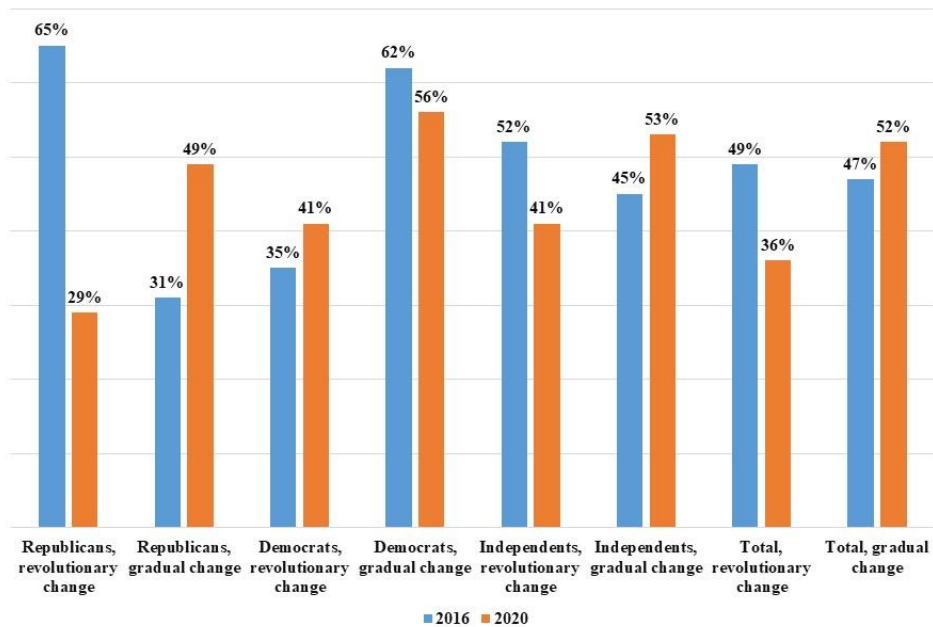
How much do you want significant change to the American economic system?



Overall, Americans in 2020 were less eager for significant political and economic change than they were in 2016. Across all party identifiers, the share of those who want significant political change "very much" declined from 78% to 63%, a 15 percentage point drop. The share of those wanting significant economic change "very much" declined from 72% to 47%, an even steeper 25 percentage point drop.

And yet, sizable majorities of Americans still wanted significant change, whether "very much" or "somewhat." But what kind of change do they want? In 2016, 49% of Americans thought that our political system needed revolutionary change. Republicans and independents preferred revolutionary change to gradual change by 65% to 31% and 52% to 45%, respectively. The majority of Democrats preferred gradual change (62%) over revolutionary change (35%).

Does our Political System Need Revolutionary or Gradual Change?
[Omitting “comfortable with our political system” responses]



Perhaps because a Republican holds the presidential office, Republicans in 2020 were less likely to want revolutionary change and more likely to want gradual change, with the percentage of those wanting gradual change jumping from 31% to 49%. Trump was also selling revolutionary change in 2016 by saying he would “[drain the swamp](#)” and many of his supporters may now view this promise as fulfilled. The sentiments for Trump in this regard may be stronger among Republicans than they might otherwise be if the party standard bearer was a typical Republican politician.

On the other hand, Democrats saw a small six percentage point jump among those wanting revolutionary change over the last four years, from 35% to 41%, and the same percentage point decrease occurred among Democrats wanting gradual change, which decreased from 62% to 56%. Overall, in March 2020, more Americans wanted gradual change than revolutionary change, 52% compared to 36%, respectively, whereas four years ago, Americans slightly preferred revolutionary change (49%) to gradual change (47%).

In addition to their preference for revolutionary over gradual change in 2016, independents and Republicans thought Donald Trump was more likely to affect significant political change than any of the other candidates. By contrast, most Democrats (56%) said that Hillary Clinton was most likely to bring significant political change.

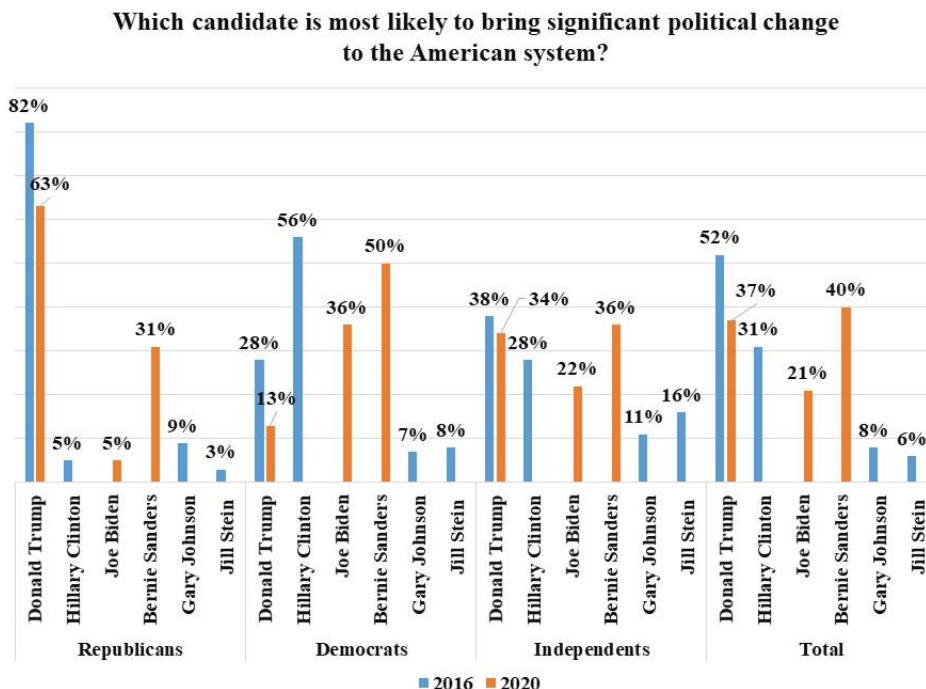
All else equal, we might have expected that the degree to which Democrats associated Clinton with significant political change would have helped her in 2016. And maybe it did. However, she had three things working against her in the last election.

First, whereas 56% of Democrats thought Clinton was more likely to bring significant change, 82% of Republicans thought the same of Trump – a 26 percentage point difference. Second, independents broke in Trump’s direction, viewing him as more likely to bring change than Clinton by 38% to 28%. Third, even if Democrats thought that their candidate, Clinton, was more likely to bring significant political change, only 35% of Democrats wanted revolutionary change, compared with 65% among Republicans. Arguably, then, Democrats were far less motivated by a desire for change than Republicans.

In 2020, something very similar could be said of Republicans. Republicans preferred gradual to revolutionary change by 49% to 29% (for revolutionary change, a drop of 36 percentage points). At the same time, though, 63% of Republicans still thought Trump is more likely to bring significant political change, which is significant compared to Bernie Sanders (31%), who is no longer in the race, or Joe Biden (5%), who is the Democratic candidate in the 2020 election.

Meanwhile, more Democrats want revolutionary change than they did in 2016 (up to 41% in 2020 from 35% in 2016), though the desire for gradual change still outpaces revolutionary change. In a reversal of the 2016 trend, the majority of independents in 2020 preferred gradual to revolutionary change, 53% compared to 41%, compared to 45% and 52% in 2016. They also agreed with Republicans in viewing Biden as least likely to bring about significant political change.

However, this may not hurt Biden in the 2020 general election provided that Americans, unlike in 2016, preferred gradual change over revolutionary change early in 2020. Future polling leading up to the 2020 presidential election may provide better answers with Bernie Sanders no longer an option for respondents.



Demographic Analysis

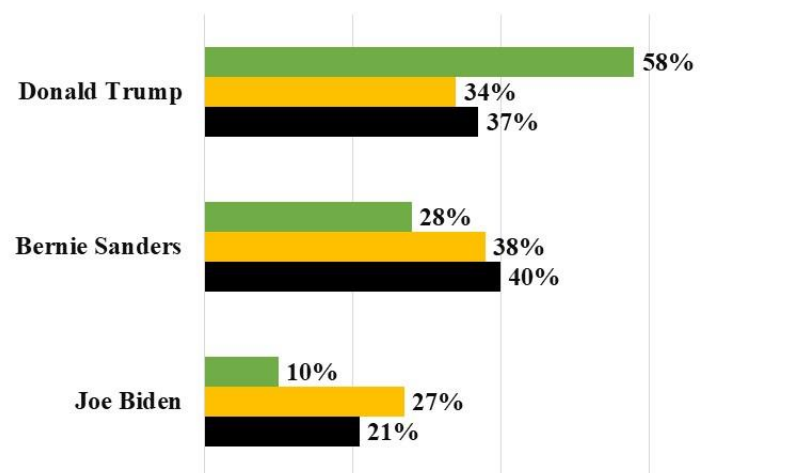
A closer look at the demographics, aside from political party, from this poll may also help to shed some light on the upcoming election.

Evangelicals

We looked at evangelicals in our “[Study of American Attitudes on Immigration and Refugees](#)” from July 2019 and with this group being a large supporter of President Trump, we decided to look into them again, as they are likely to play a large role again in the upcoming election as “roughly seven-in-ten white evangelical Protestants (72%) say they approve of the way Trump is handling his job, according to a [Pew Research Center survey](#) conducted June 16 to 22.”

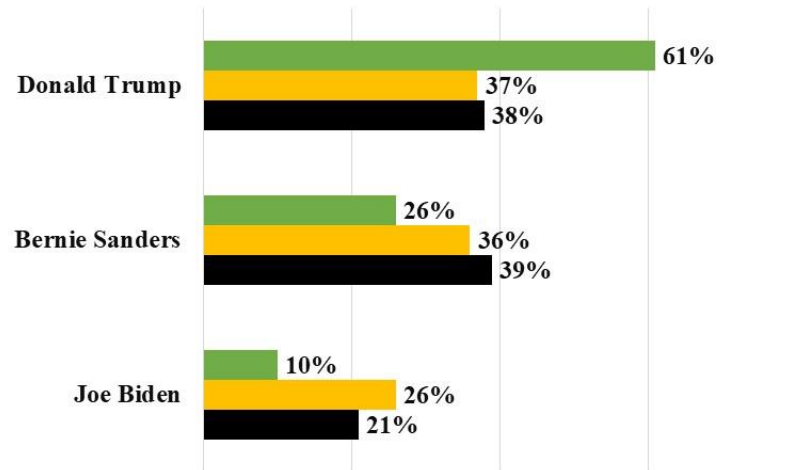
Which candidate is most likely to bring significant political change to the American system?

■ Evangelicals ■ Non-Evangelicals ■ Total



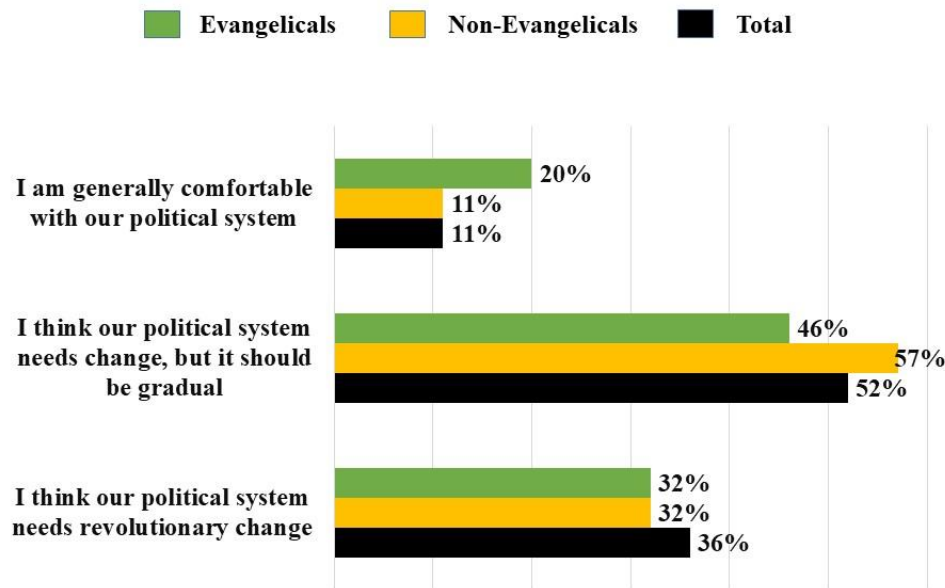
Which candidate is most likely to bring significant economic change to the American system?

■ Evangelicals ■ Non-Evangelicals ■ Total



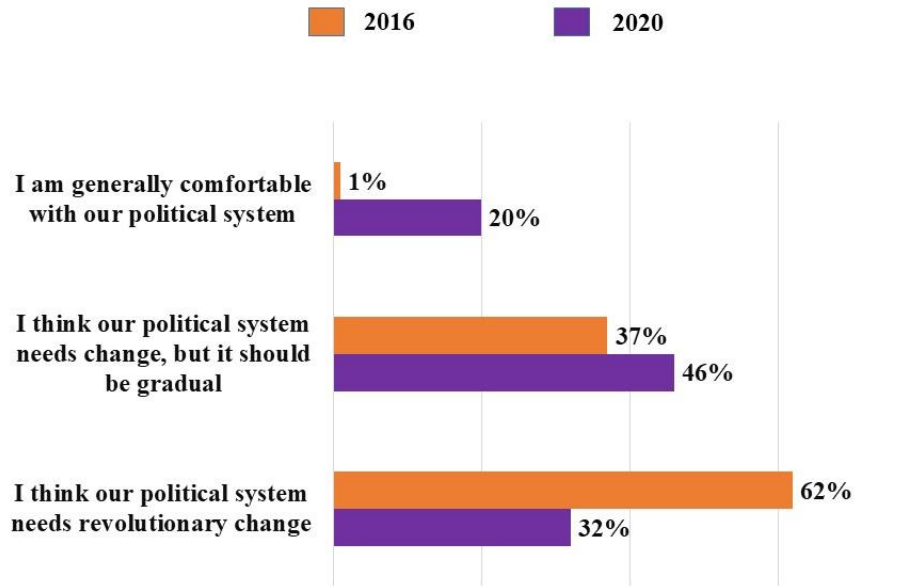
As we see from the two graphs above, evangelicals were more likely to say that Donald Trump is the candidate most likely to bring both significant political and economic change to the American system, when compared to Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden. Evangelicals were 24 percentage points more likely than non-evangelicals to say that Donald Trump was the candidate most likely to bring significant political change as well as economic change. While these numbers may be different now with Bernie Sanders out of the running, it is likely that Donald Trump is still seen as the candidate most likely to bring about change to the American system, both politically and economically, especially when compared to Joe Biden who is not seen as someone who is likely to shake up the system.

Which of the following is closest to your view?

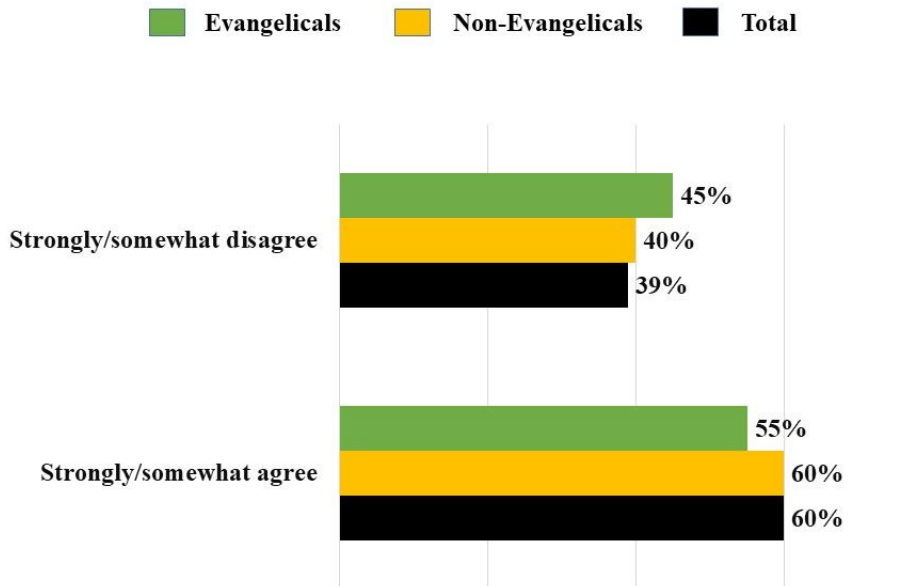


When asked about change to our political system, evangelicals were more likely than non-evangelicals, and Americans as a whole, to say that they are generally comfortable with our political system. Compared to when this question was asked in October 2016 (see graph below), we see that evangelicals have become significantly more comfortable with our political system, jumping from only 1% to 20%. The number of evangelicals who said that we need revolutionary change almost cut in half from 62% to 32% and the number who think the change to our political system should be gradual jumped by 9%, from 37% to 46%.

**Which of the following is closest to your view?
[Among Evangelicals]**



**How much do you agree with this statement:
“Our system is rigged against people like me?”**

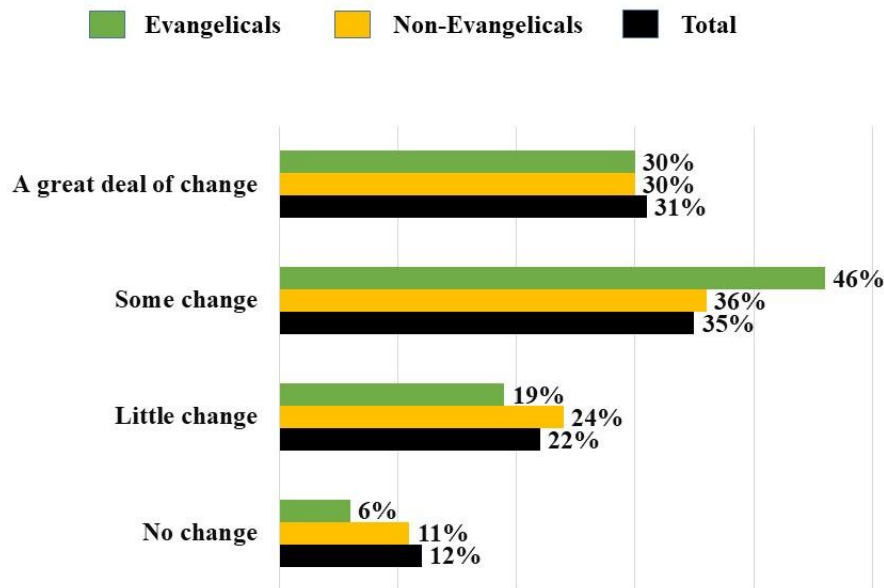


Evangelicals were only five percentage points less likely than non-evangelicals, and all Americans, to agree that the system is rigged against people like them. One might expect this number to be lower in 2020 as President Trump has given the evangelicals a number of things

since coming to office “[from key appointments such as Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos to policies highly favorable toward religious schools.](#)”

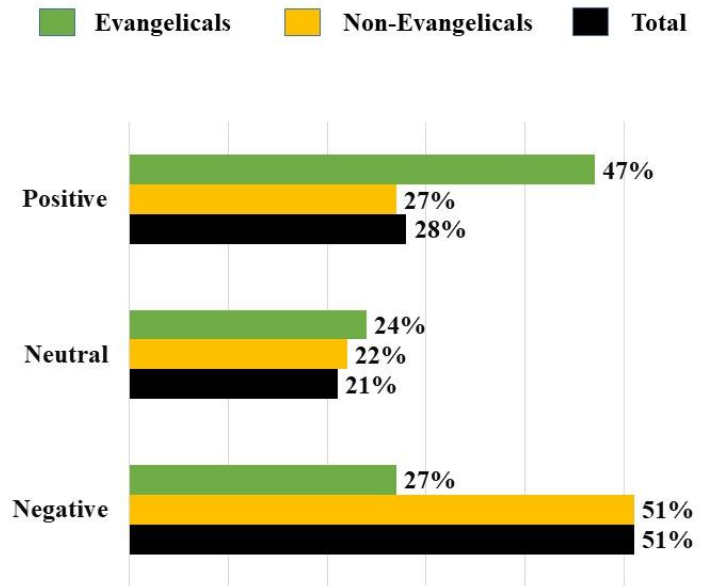
Based on this, one might have expected that evangelicals would have viewed the changes that have occurred in the past three years, since Trump came to office, as being “a great deal of change.” However, that is not the case, as seen in the graph below: evangelicals and non-evangelicals answered that there has been “a great deal of change” in the last three years at the same rate (30%), though non-evangelicals were almost twice as likely as evangelicals to say that there has been no change (6% and 11%, respectively).

How much change to the political system has occurred in the past three years?

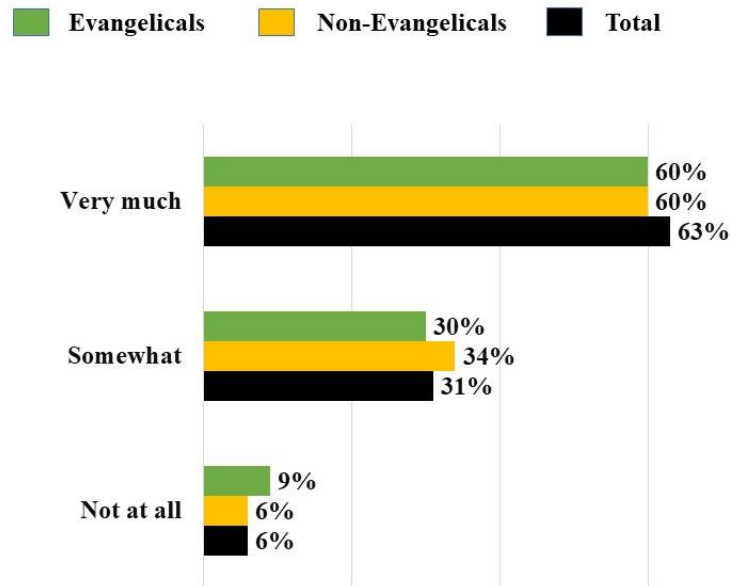


But do evangelicals and non-evangelicals think that change has been positive? A follow-up question included in our poll allowed us to examine the idea of change more closely. As seen in the graph below, among those who thought that there has been at least a ‘little change,’ the assessment of that change among evangelicals was mostly positive, with 47% answering this way compared to a slight majority of both non-evangelicals and all Americans (51% each) who said that the change had been negative. Less than a quarter of evangelicals, non-evangelicals, and all Americans said the change had been neutral.

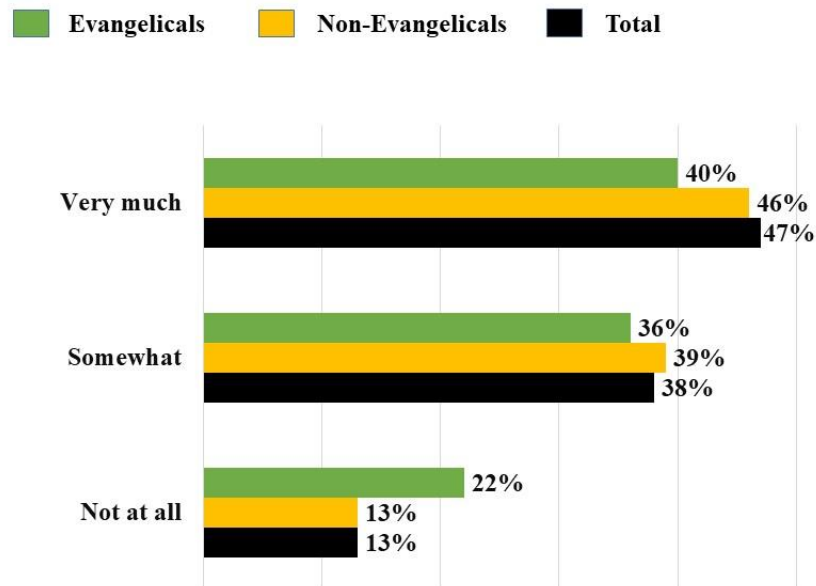
Is it your assessment that most of the change that has occurred has been:



How much do you want significant change to the American political system?



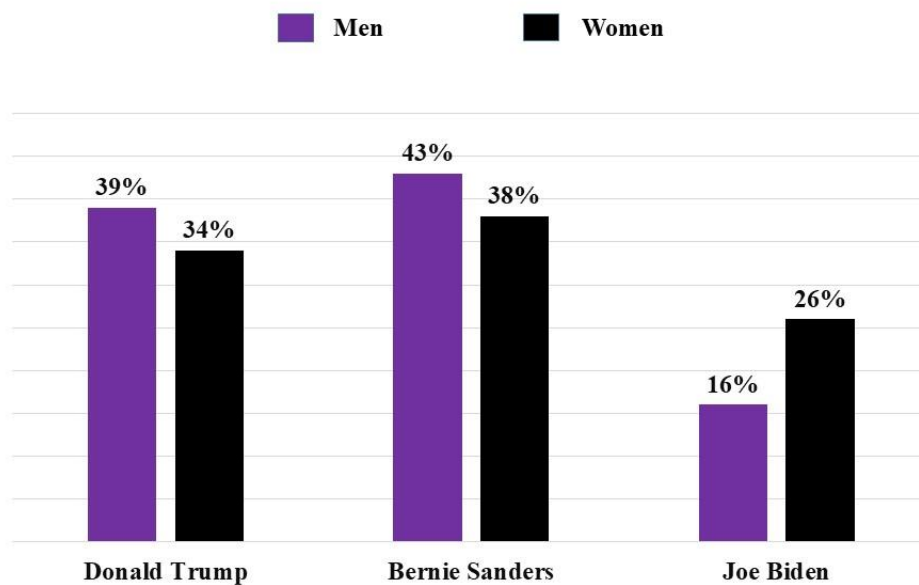
How much do you want significant change to the American economic system?



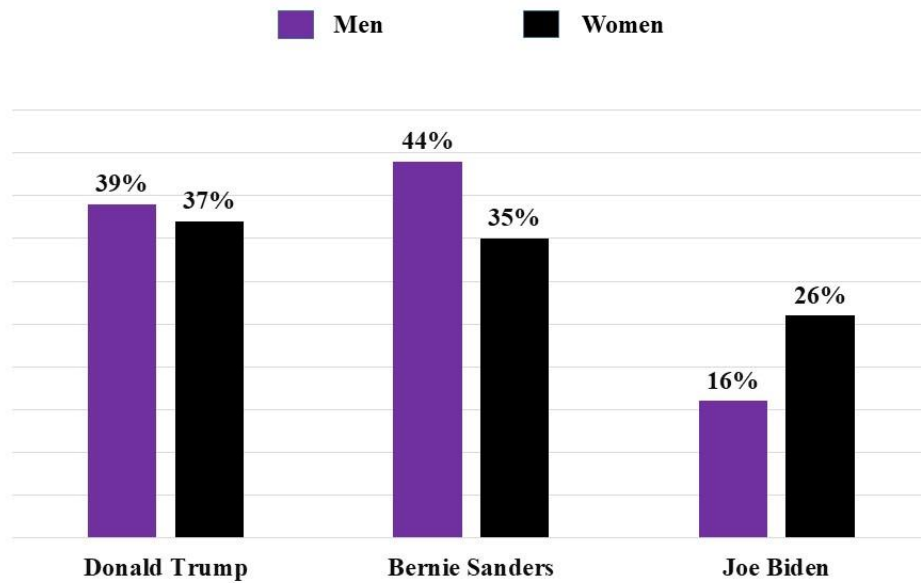
Outlook for the 2020 Election based on Demographics

Attitudes toward the American political and economic systems and what these might mean for the 2020 election can be looked at through a number of demographic lenses. Breaking down the data by gender, we see that both men and women were more likely to say that Bernie Sanders was the candidate to bring about political change (43% and 38%, respectively). Coming in second for both men (39%) and women (34%) was Donald Trump. Once again, Joe Biden was not seen as a top candidate for change. These numbers changed only slightly when asking about economic change.

Which candidate is most likely to bring significant political change to the American system?

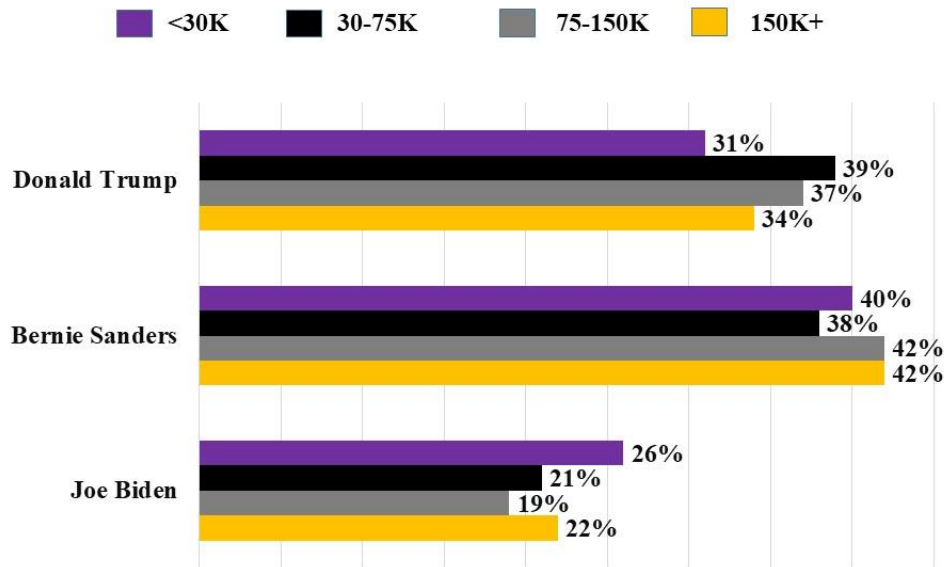


Which candidate is most likely to bring significant economic change to the American system?

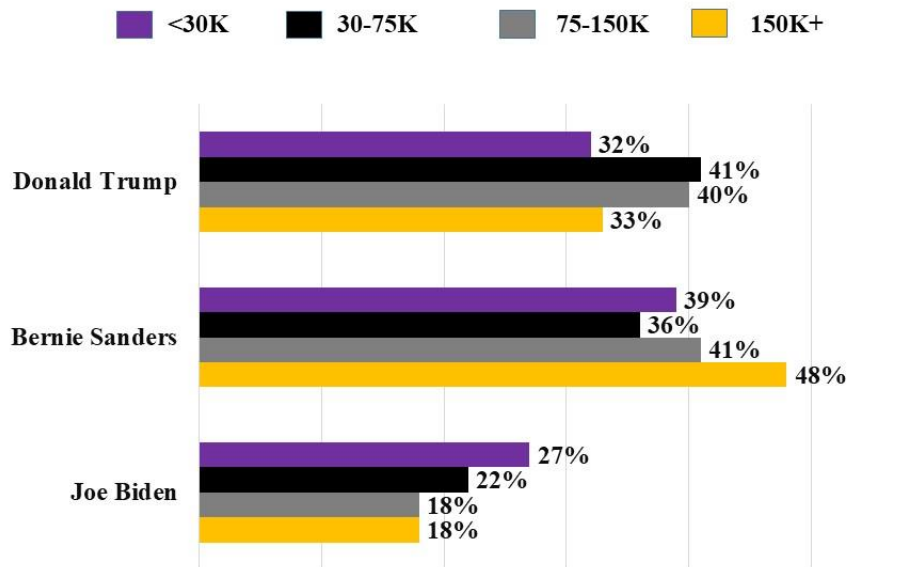


Respondents with an annual household income of over \$150K were more likely to answer that Bernie Sanders was the candidate that would bring significant political change with 42% answering this way. Sanders also earned the highest amount of responses among respondents earning \$75-\$150K a year (also 42%). On economic change, Sanders once again received the most responses among the wealthiest Americans with 48% (15 percentage points higher than Donald Trump). Sanders and Trump, however, were pretty much even among the \$75-\$150K annual salary bracket with 41% and 40%, respectively.

Which candidate is most likely to bring significant political change to the American system?



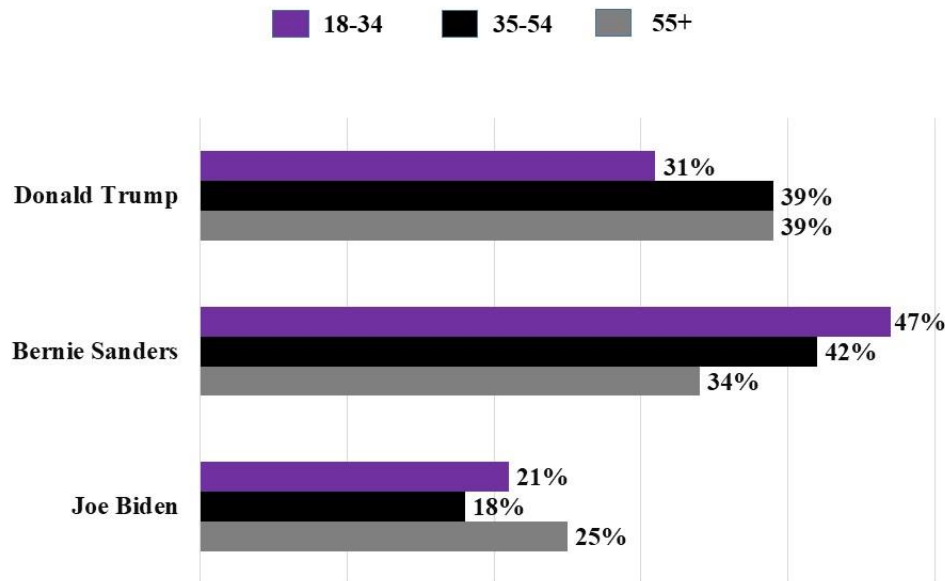
Which candidate is most likely to bring significant economic change to the American system?



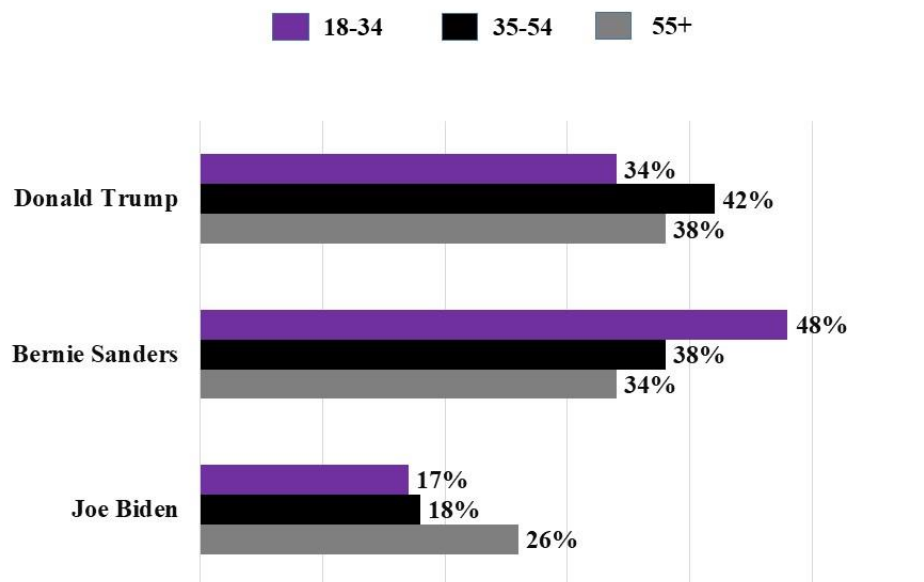
It's no surprise, based on news coverage of the election cycle, that Sanders was popular among millennials (18-34 year olds). Almost half of all respondents in this age group answered that he was the candidate most likely to bring both significant political and economic change (47% and 48%, respectively). Older Americans, those 55 years of age or older, were more likely to say that

Donald Trump would bring about this change than either Bernie Sanders or Joe Biden- 39% said this for political change and 38% said this for economic change.

Which candidate is most likely to bring significant political change to the American system?



Which candidate is most likely to bring significant economic change to the American system?

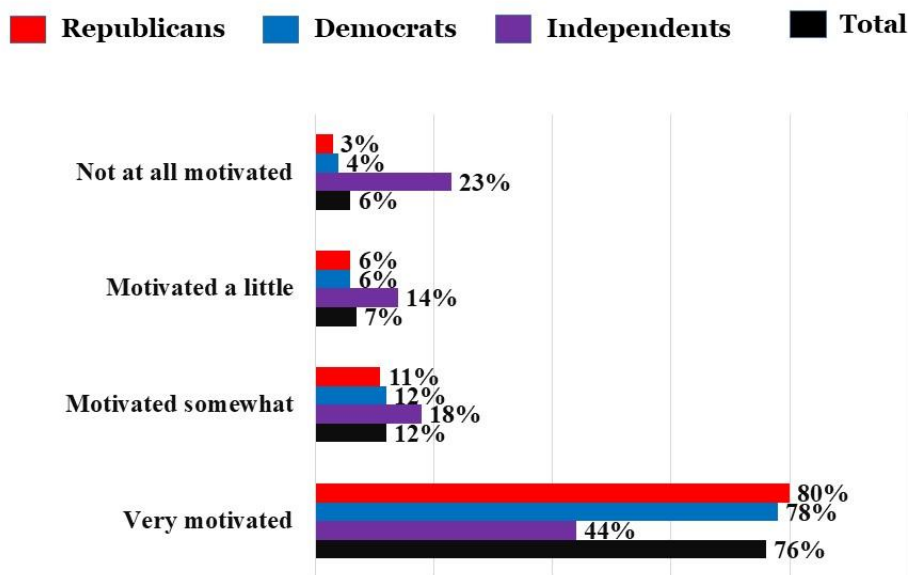


Outlook for 2020

Since our poll included former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, this data may look different now, in light of Joe Biden becoming the democratic candidate, along with the many changes that the country has undergone since March including the COVID-19 pandemic along with heightened racial tensions. In spite of this, our results may still be telling.

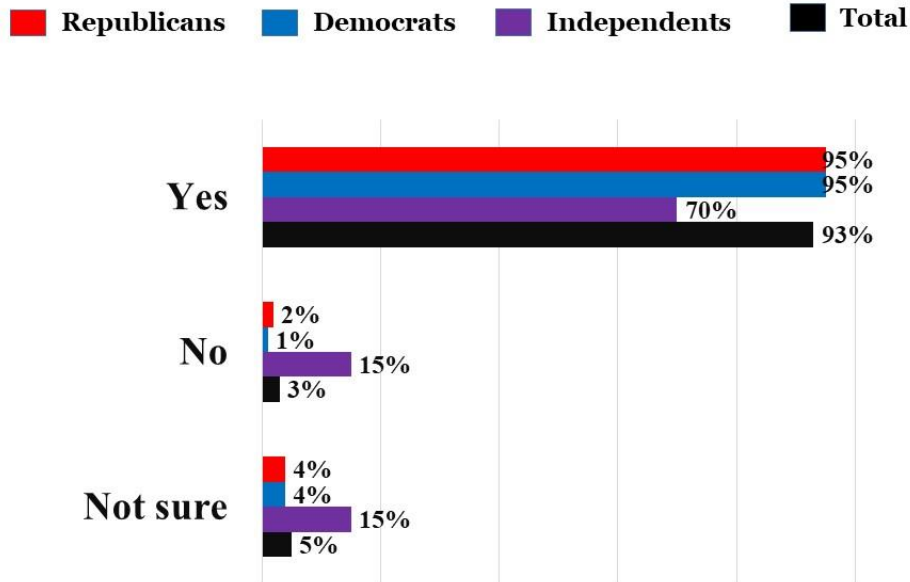
Democrats and Republicans look similar in their motivation to vote in the 2020 presidential election as 80% of Republicans and 78% of Democrats said that they were “very motivated.” Less than half of independents, on the other hand, felt “very motivated” with only 44% selecting this option. Independents were also more likely to say that they were “not at all motivated” with 23% feeling this way compared to only 3% of Republicans and 4% of Democrats who answered this way.

How motivated do you feel about voting in the upcoming presidential election?



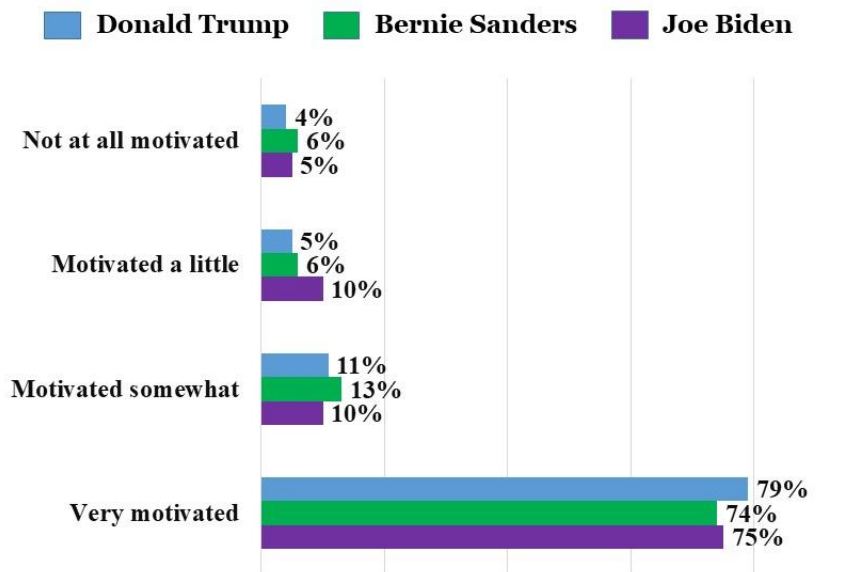
Setting motivation aside, we asked if they plan to vote in the 2020 elections or not. Ninety-five percent of both Republicans and Democrats said that they plan to vote whereas independents were 25 percentage points behind with only 70% answering that they were planning to vote. Very few Republicans and Democrats answered that they were not voting or that they were not sure, however, 15% of independents selected each of these options when asked about their intention to vote in the 2020 elections.

Do you plan to vote this year in the 2020 elections?

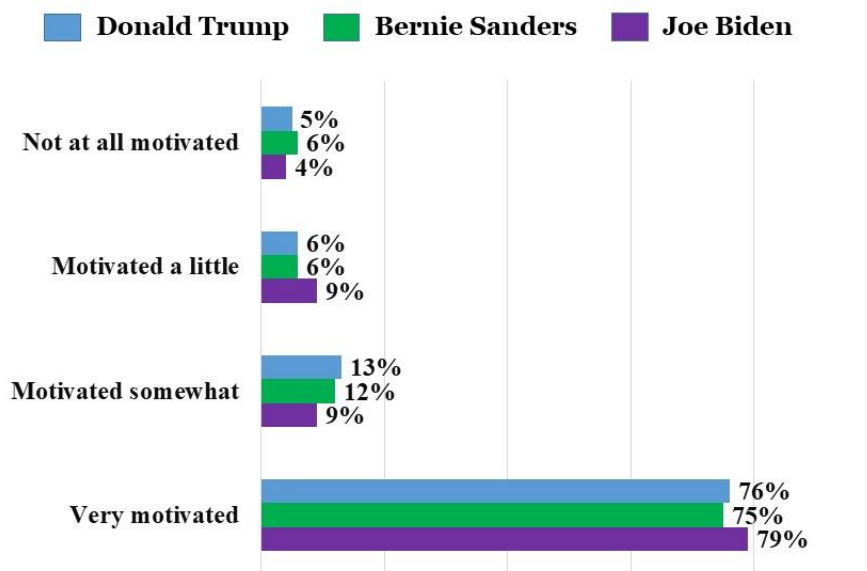


Respondents who believed Donald Trump was the candidate most likely to bring about significant political change were slightly more motivated to vote with 79% of respondents selecting this option compared to 74% who selected Bernie Sanders and 75% who selected Joe Biden. However, when it came to the candidate most likely to bring about economic change, more people who answered that they were “very motivated” selected Joe Biden (79%) compared to 76% for Donald Trump and 75% for Bernie Sanders.

How motivated do you feel about voting in the upcoming presidential election?
[Based on which candidate is most likely to bring significant political change to the American system]



How motivated do you feel about voting in the upcoming presidential election?
[Based on which candidate is most likely to bring significant economic change to the American system]

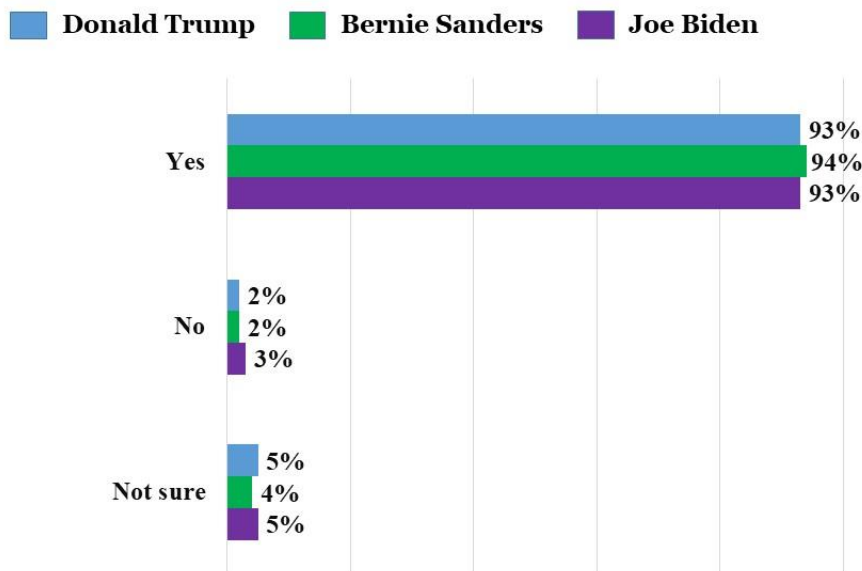


Setting respondents' level of motivation aside, how likely are people to vote who feel that certain candidates are more likely to bring about significant economic and political change to the American system? The numbers did not differ a lot depending on which candidate they saw as

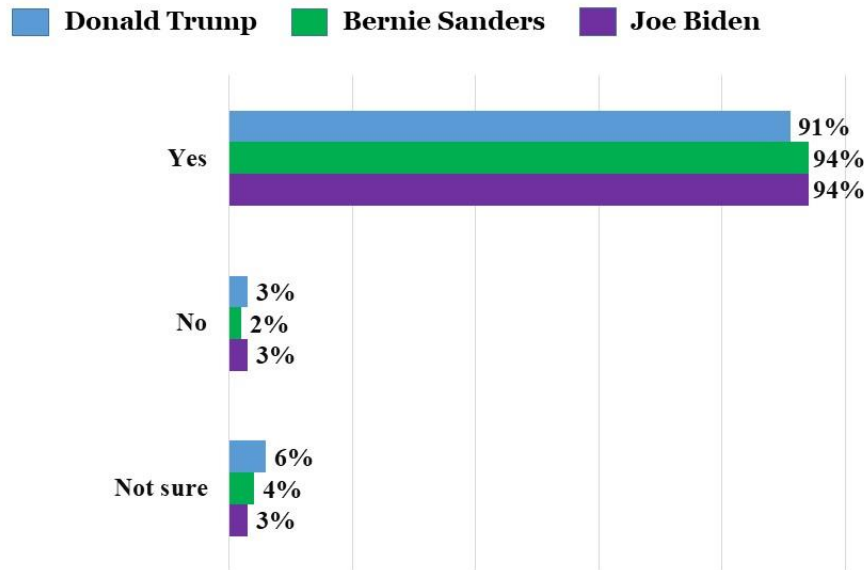
the agent for change as there were strong majorities for all three candidates. Again, it should be noted that these responses included Bernie Sanders, a candidate whom many saw as one who would shake up the system, and the numbers are likely to change with him removed from future Critical Issues Polls that ask these same questions.

In addition, based on a [Monmouth University poll](#) from July 2020, we saw an increase in the number of people who described themselves as “very motivated” to vote in the November election, increasing from 76% in the Critical Issues Poll to 85% (among registered voters) in the Monmouth University poll just four months later. This increase in motivation, too, may change the overall results of future polls leading up to the election. The results of future Critical Issues Polls may also change when looking at registered voters only, as the Monmouth University Poll did.

Do you plan to vote this year in the 2020 elections?
[Based on which candidate is most likely to bring significant political change to the American system]



Do you plan to vote this year in the 2020 elections?
**[Based on which candidate is most likely to bring
significant economic change to the American system]**



How do these results compare to what other polls are showing? Based on a [CNN Poll of Polls](#) from June and July 2020, Biden had a 12 percentage point lead over Donald Trump, with 52% and 40% , respectively, among registered voters. Future Critical Issues Polls plan to explore this issue, which will be telling with the current state of race relations and increasing COVID-19 numbers in the United States.

Survey Methodology (October 2016)

The survey was carried out October 5-14, 2016 online from a nationally representative sample of Nielsen Scarborough's probability-based panel, originally recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of adults. The national poll was conducted among 1,528 respondents, with a margin of error of +/- 2.5%. Overall, the sample was adjusted to reflect population estimates (Scarborough USA+/Gallup) for Americans. The survey variables balanced through weighting were: age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, level of education, census regional division, and political party affiliation.

Survey Methodology (March 2020)

The survey was carried out March 12-20, 2020 online from a nationally representative sample of Nielsen Scarborough's probability-based panel, originally recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of adults. The national poll was conducted among 2,395 respondents, with a margin of error of +/- 2%. Overall, the sample was adjusted to reflect population estimates (Scarborough USA+/Gallup) for Americans. The survey variables balanced through weighting were: age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, level of education, census regional division, and political party affiliation.

Note: These questions were fielded as part of a larger poll on foreign and domestic issues. Participants in this study were provided by Nielsen from Nielsen's sample of respondents.

To view the full questionnaire for this poll, please click [here](#). For more information, please visit: criticalissues.umd.edu