



# 2022 Public Affairs Pulse Survey Report

What Americans Think about Business and Government

## Executive Summary

The 2022 Public Affairs Pulse Survey, conducted Sept. 1-2 by Morning Consult, provides a thorough look at U.S. public opinion on issues intersecting business, government and American society. These topics include growing pressure on companies to weigh in on social issues, shifting political alliances, why so many Americans hate Washington, and whom the public trusts most for political information.

Corporate involvement in major social issues such as racial justice, voting access and climate change is on the rise, but so is demand for corporate leadership on these issues. This is especially true as divided government and partisanship make it difficult for political leaders to reach consensus. **Will major companies be able to live up to these expectations without making political enemies or damaging their brands along the way?**

We noted the growing divergence between the views of many Republicans and the interests of major companies last year, and this trend has continued in 2022. While the business community and the Democratic Party still have sharp differences on regulatory and tax issues, **they are finding common ground on issues such as race relations, immigration, COVID-19 mitigation and sustainability.**

In our examination of why so many people hate Washington, we found the most troublesome practices to be politicians focusing

too much on getting re-elected (71% considered this a major problem), politicians benefitting financially from their positions of power (66%), intense partisanship (66%), and politicians spending too much time raising money (58%). **Our research notes that most major problems identified by the public involved the behaviors of politicians, not the behaviors of companies and nonprofits.**

As in past years, the 2022 Pulse Survey analyzed the relative trust of major industry sectors. The least trustworthy sector was still pharmaceuticals, though it should be noted that pharma's score has continued to improve. Health insurance companies remained in second-to-last place.

Perhaps the biggest surprise this year was not that the most-trusted source of political news continued to be "friends and family" (with a trust level of 71%), but that **business, with a trust level of 44%, was in second place.** The news media earned a trust score of 40%.

## Companies Face Great Expectations — And Greater Controversy

It's not news that many large companies strive to be good corporate citizens. They donate money, run employee volunteerism programs, and engage in other public service ventures at the local, state, national or international levels.

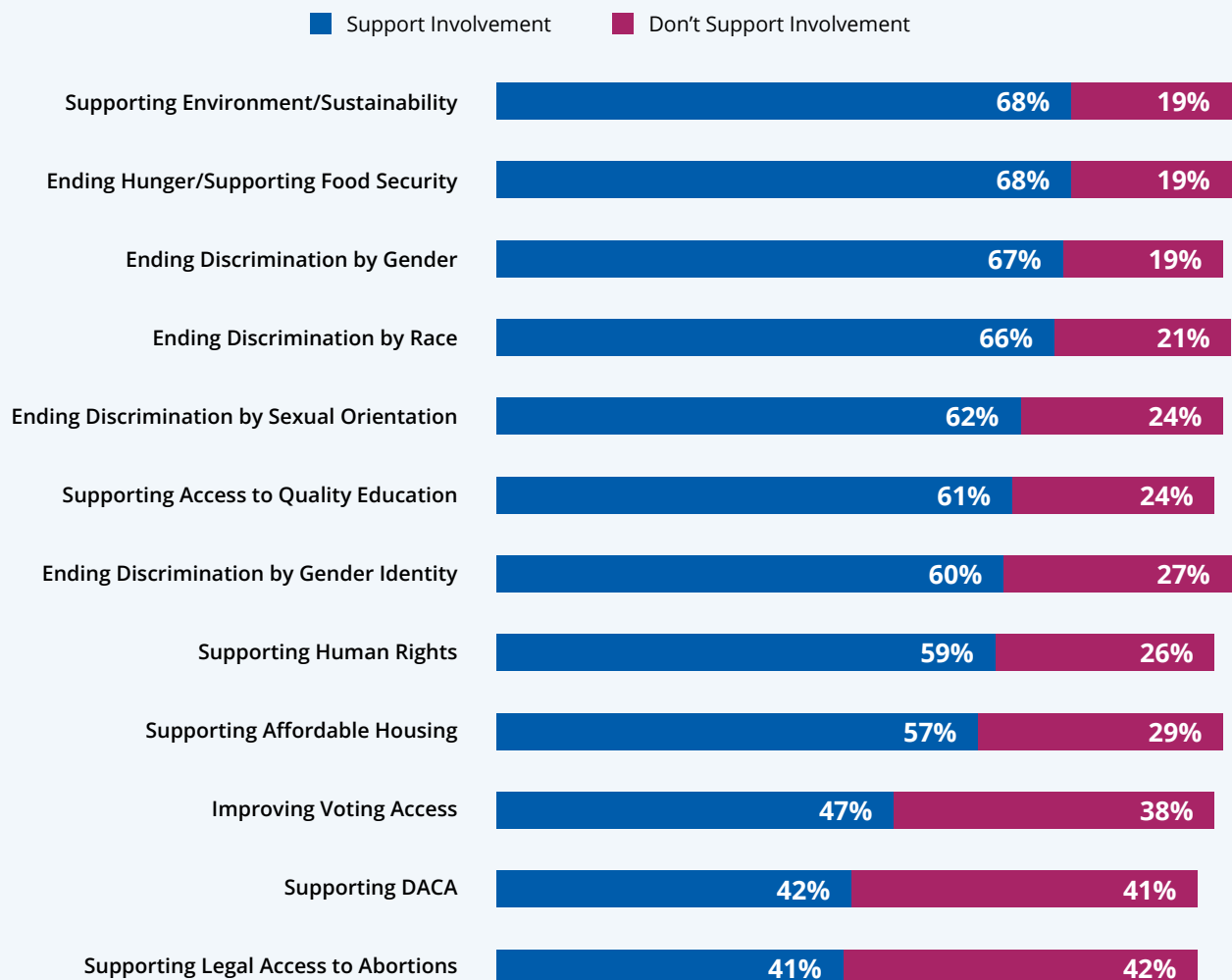
Two major, newsworthy developments in the past seven years changed the relationship between business and society, however. The first is the willingness of many corporations to advocate on behalf of sometimes controversial social issues. This trend accelerated with passage in 2016 of the North Carolina "bathroom bill," when hundreds of companies signed on to a campaign calling for repeal of the law. Since then, more and more firms have weighed in publicly on issues related to racial justice, gender equality, gun violence, police brutality, voting access, reproductive rights and other matters.

The second major development has been growing public expectations for more corporate action on these issues.

The 2022 Public Affairs Pulse Survey reveals that more than 60% of Americans would like major companies to advocate protecting the environment; providing food security; ending discrimination based on gender, race, sexual orientation and gender identity; and providing access to quality education. And more than 50% would like to see firms lobby for human rights and affordable housing.

The racial discrimination issue provides a perfect illustration of the challenges of living up to high public expectations. Seventy percent (70%) of Americans consider racism a problem in the U.S., and 35% consider it a serious problem. Yet, when asked to assess the performance of the business community on this issue, only 21% said companies were playing a positive role, 17% said they were playing a negative role and 45%

### Public Expectations for Business Involvement in Social Issues



believed corporate efforts to reduce racism weren't making any difference. Despite all the recent business pledges to support racial justice, this score worsened since last year when 42% felt the business community wasn't having an impact.



Are big companies not doing enough to end racism or is the public just not aware of their efforts? Or is it possible that people just don't believe the promises they hear from corporate boardrooms? The fact is that when companies pledge to reduce racism, only 8% of Americans find them "very sincere," 34% find them "somewhat sincere," 26% believe they are "somewhat insincere" and 14% say they are "very insincere." To borrow a phrase from the 1970s, big corporations face a "credibility gap."

Some social issues are contentious, which can create controversy (and political enemies) when companies weigh in. While 68% of Americans support corporate efforts to help the environment and alleviate hunger, only 42% want companies involved in the debate over DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. A near equal percentage (41%) would like to see companies "not too involved" or "not involved at all."

Controversy also exists with the abortion issue, which heated up significantly when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* earlier this year. Once again the country was split, with 41% wanting businesses involved in advocating for legal abortions and 42% preferring that companies stay on the sidelines. These splits are often along party lines. While 58% of Democrats supported DACA and 59% favored legal access to abortions, Republican percentages in favor of these two issues were 25% and 23%, respectively.

Divergent views among Republicans and Democrats about involvement in social issues is closing the trust gap for businesses when they talk about political topics. Democrats (47%) and Republicans (46%) are now virtually tied in their trust of political information they receive from large corporations. As recently as 2019 trust levels were 34% for Democrats and 47% for Republicans.

## Political Alliances Are Shifting

Last year we noted the growing divergence between the views of many Republicans and the interests of major companies. The GOP used to be considered a reliable supporter of business at all levels of government. In many regions of the country, this is still the case. But, while the business community and the Democratic Party still have sharp differences on regulatory and tax issues, they are finding common ground on issues such as race relations, immigration, COVID-19 mitigation and environmental sustainability.

Support for corporate involvement in social issues is much stronger among Democrats than among Republicans. While the differences of opinion on immigration and reproductive rights have already been noted, they aren't the only examples of this trend. Democrats are also supportive on expanding voting rights and ending racial, gender and sexual orientation discrimination.

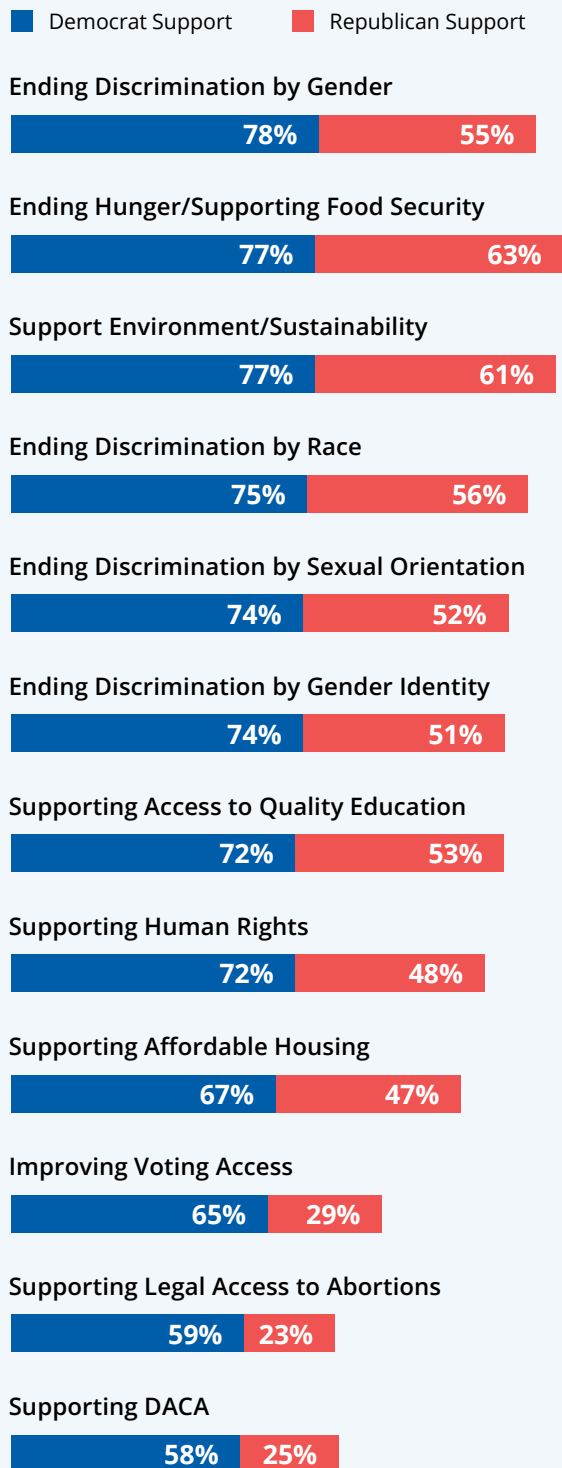
On expanding voting rights, 65% of Democrats wanted companies involved and only 29% of Republicans agreed. On fighting race discrimination, 75% of Democrats were in favor of corporate engagement while only 56% of Republicans were in favor. On ending gender discrimination, 78% of Democrats welcomed the help of businesses while 55% of Republicans agreed. On opposing discrimination by sexual orientation, 74% of Democrats were supportive and only 52% of Republicans wanted companies involved.

Even on support for the environment, 77% of Democrats supported business engagement and only 61% of Republicans agreed.

This year's Pulse Survey also showed "green shoots" of Democratic support for business public affairs practices. For example, while 59% of Republicans considered extensive lobbying in Washington, D.C., to be a major problem of our political system, only half of Democrats (49%) and Independents (51%) agreed. And while 45% of Republicans believed political action committees (PACs) were a major problem, only 36% of Democrats and 35% of Independents concurred.

This change in Republican attitudes seems to be limited so far to the types of issues mentioned above. When it comes to basic trust in major companies to behave ethically, 57% of

## Democrats Are More Supportive of Corporate Involvement in Social Issues



Republicans trust major companies and only 52% of Democrats have some or a lot of trust.

Different age groups were more supportive of different social issues. A majority (51%) of adults under 35 would like companies to be involved in the abortion issue, while only 41% of those ages 35-44, 34% of those ages 45-64 and 37% of those 65 and older agreed. Age-group support for corporate engagement in DACA followed a similar pattern.

On the other hand, 76% of adults 65 and older would like companies to be involved in ending gender discrimination. They were followed by 69% of those ages 35-44, 67% of those ages 45-64 and, finally, 60% of those ages 18-34. Support for ending race discrimination was more consistent, with age group support ranging from 64% to 70%. (Americans 65 and older were once again most in favor of corporate engagement.)

## What's Wrong With Washington?

When we last asked questions about controversial political practices in 2019, we found the major problems identified by the public were associated with the behaviors of politicians, not with those of companies and nonprofits. That is still the case in 2022.

The most troublesome behaviors in the nation's capital, said poll respondents, were politicians focusing too much on getting re-elected (71%), politicians benefiting financially from their positions of power (66%), intense partisanship (66%), and politicians spending too much time raising money (58%). Fewer than 9% of the public considered each of these behaviors "not a problem" in our political system. Americans felt particularly frustrated with the amount of time politicians spend trying to get re-elected. Only 4% said this issue was not a problem.

Of the 10 political concerns tested, the least problematic ones were "good people not going into politics" (51%) and the use of PACs (39%). PACs were also the least controversial of the practices tested when these questions were asked in 2019.

**Age was the major predictor of outrage about political practices.** Across each behavior, the older the respondent the greater the probability they would consider a behavior to be a major problem. For example, concern about PACs as a major problem was only 29% among GenZers, but it rose to 34% among millennials, to 41% among GenXers, and to 45% among baby boomers.

For the most egregious behavior — the amount of time politicians spend trying to get re-elected — negative scores ranged from 53% for GenZers to 85% for baby boomers. For benefiting financially, the same comparison was 44% compared to 80%. The divide on intense partisanship was 43% compared

## The Roots of Public Disdain for Politics

Percentage of public calling an issue a “major problem”

71%

Politicians too Concerned about Getting Re-elected

66%

Politicians Use Their Power to Make Money

66%

Politicians Are too Partisan

58%

Politicians Spend too Much Time Raising Money

52%

Politicians Use Connections to Get High-Paying Jobs

52%

News Media Focuses on Wrong Issues

52%

Super PACs

52%

Too Much Lobbying

51%

Good People Won't Work in Politics

39%

PACs

to 82%, and for raising money for elections it was 37% compared to 73%.

For each of the behaviors, men were more likely than women to say an answer option was a major problem. The difference was greatest when asked about PACs (42% of men called them a major problem but only 35% of women did so) and the amount of time politicians spend raising money (62% of men said this was a major problem compared with 55% of women).

### Pharma, Health Insurance Firms Still Least Trusted Sectors

Overall, the public's trust and confidence that major companies will behave ethically rose to 50% in 2022, up three percentage points from 2021.

Industry rankings were unchanged from last year, when the most trusted sector was food/beverage companies, and the least trusted sector was pharmaceutical companies.

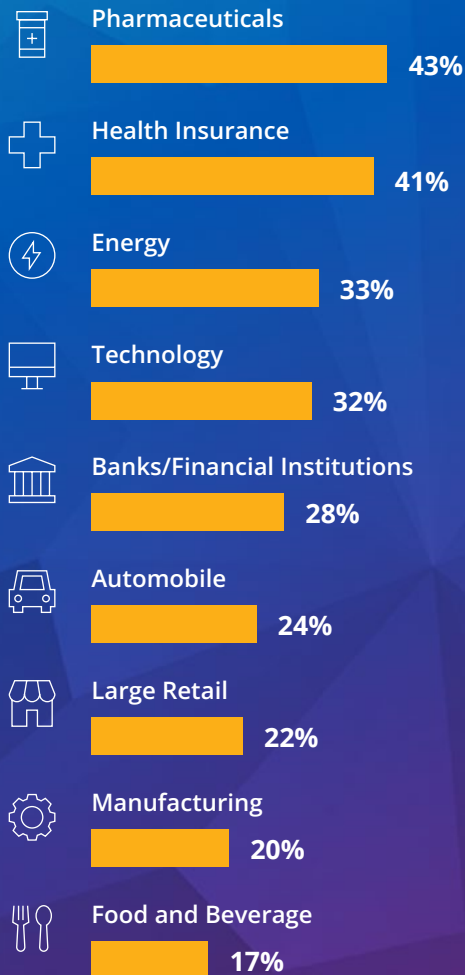
Scores improved noticeably for two sectors. This year pharmaceutical firms were considered less trustworthy than other sectors by 43% of the public, compared with 2021 when their distrustfulness score was 46%, and 2020 when it was 49%. Meanwhile, banks and financial institutions have seen their distrust percentage fall from 33% in 2020 to 32% in 2021 to 28% this year.

As we've noted in past Public Affairs Pulse reports, there is a close correlation between a sector's level of distrust and the public's appetite to further regulate that sector. For example, pharmaceutical companies were most likely to be considered under-regulated (42% of the public agreed). Other firms viewed as under-regulated were health insurance (39%), technology (34%) and energy (34%). While no sector was thought to be over-regulated, those considered to have a sufficient level of regulation included automobiles, food/beverage, manufacturing and retail — the same four sectors that were the most trusted.



## Which Industries Are Least Trustworthy?

Percentage of public saying an industry is less trustworthy than average



Public attitudes about the value of regulation in general were unchanged. While 32% believed government regulation of business was necessary to protect the public interest, 28% believed government regulation of business usually did more harm than good.

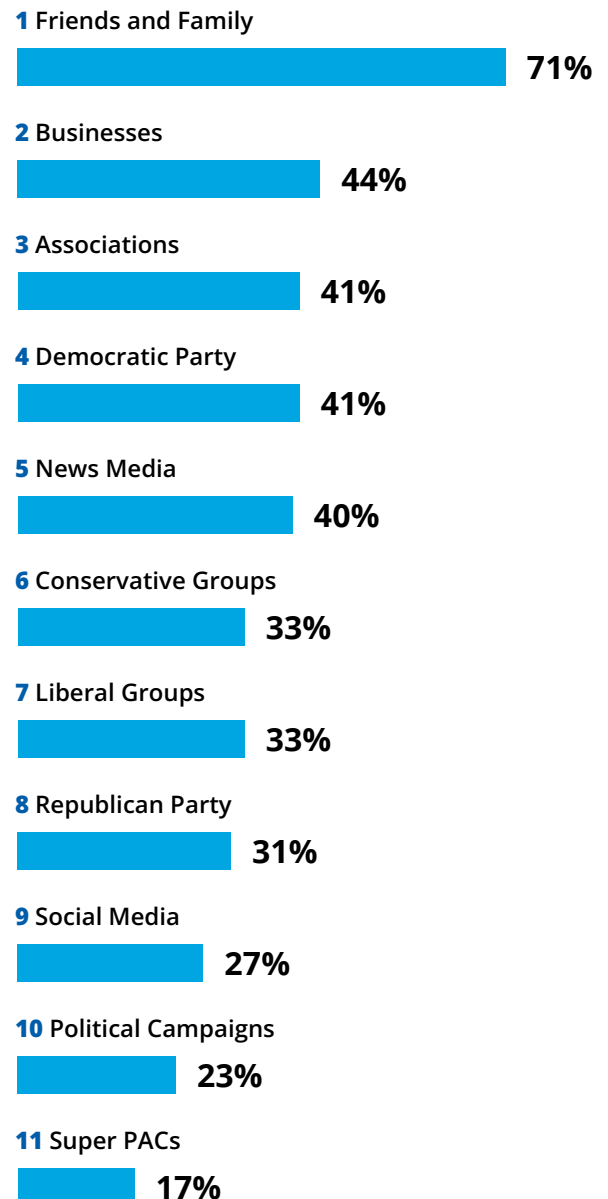
## More Americans Trust Businesses For Political Information

Survey participants were asked to rate 11 sources of political news and information. As usual, the highest-rated source was friends and family, with a trust level of 71%. In second place this year was business, with a trust level of 44%, followed by associations and the Democratic Party — both with trust scores of 41%. Behind these sources was the news media, which earned a trust score of 40%.

In 2022, trust in information from associations slipped three percentage points from 44% to 41%, and trust in information from conservative groups dropped three points from 36% to 33%. While liberal and conservative groups held identical levels of public trust (33%), it's worth noting that the Democratic Party scored considerably better than the GOP (41% to 31%) for trust. This indicated that the GOP is more closely associated with conservatism than the Democratic Party is with liberalism.

The bottom three most-trusted sources of political news and information were social media (27%), political campaigns (23%), and super PACs (17%). The trust score for super PACs declined from 19% last year.

## Trusted Sources of Political Information



Differences were evident based on age for each source of information. Older Americans, for example, were likely to place more trust in news from trade/professional associations and the news media than were younger Americans.

Yet younger Americans were more likely to trust social media than were people their parents' age — though only 37% of GenZers said they, in fact, trusted social media.

The amount of trust individuals had in business political information wasn't as directly correlated with age. It's true that baby boomers had more trust than GenZers (51% to 36%), but the pattern fell apart in the middle generations where 41% of millennials showed trust and 37% of GenXers showed trust.

## Which Large Institutions Will Have More Influence In Future

The influence of large private and public institutions can rise and fall with changes in government, the economy and cultural norms. Since these institutions have a large impact on society, we asked Americans to predict which ones will have greater influence three years from now.

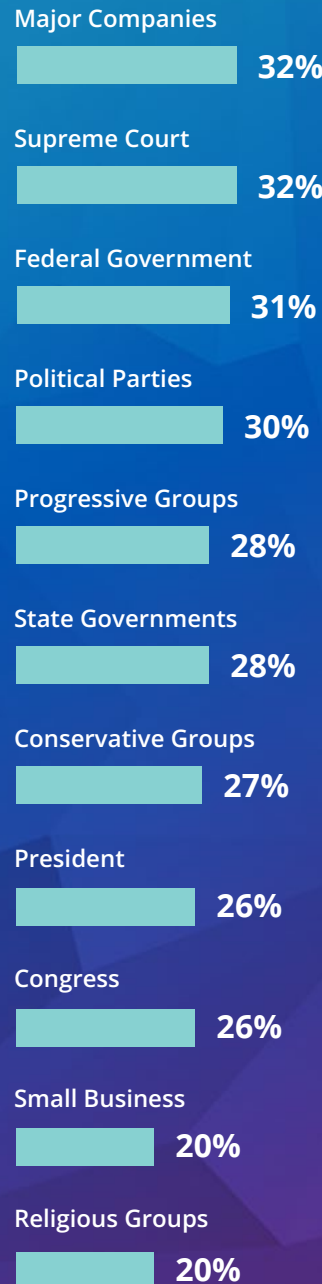
Tied in first place were major companies and the U.S. Supreme Court — both with 32% of the public expecting them to become more influential. Fifteen percent (15%) of adults said major companies would be less influential and 18% said the Supreme Court would lose influence. Two other institutions expected to have greater influence were the federal government (31% said they would gain influence) and political parties (30%).

At the end of the list were small business and religious groups, both of which were considered less likely to be more influential three years from now. In fact, only 20% of the public thought either group would have greater influence. It's interesting to note that many Christians, and even evangelical Christians, said religious groups would have less influence in the future.

But greater influence of institutions doesn't necessarily benefit everyone. Many people who believed political parties will be more influential weren't happy about it. Only 19% considered this a positive development and 55% considered it a negative development. Similarly, but not as dramatically, only 28% of those who predicted that major companies would be more influential considered this a positive development, while 43% said it would be negative.

In contrast, most people who believed small business will be more influential would be delighted if that occurred. Seventy-four percent (74%) said it would be a positive development, and only 6% said it would be negative.

## Who Will Have More Influence?



# 2022 Public Affairs Pulse Survey Report

What Americans Think About Business  
and Government

## About the Public Affairs Council

Both nonpartisan and nonpolitical, the Public Affairs Council is the leading association for public affairs professionals worldwide. The Council's mission is to advance the field of public affairs and to provide its more than 700 member companies and associations with the executive education and expertise they need to succeed while maintaining the highest ethical standards. Learn more about the Council at [pac.org](https://pac.org).

---

**Methodology:** This poll was conducted between September 1-2, 2022, among a sample of 2,210 adults. The interviews were conducted online and the data were weighted to approximate a target sample of adults based on gender, educational attainment, age, race, and region. Results from the full survey have a margin of error of plus or minus two percentage points.