

America Pulls Back From Values That Once Defined It, WSJ-NORC Poll Finds

Patriotism, religion and hard work hold less importance

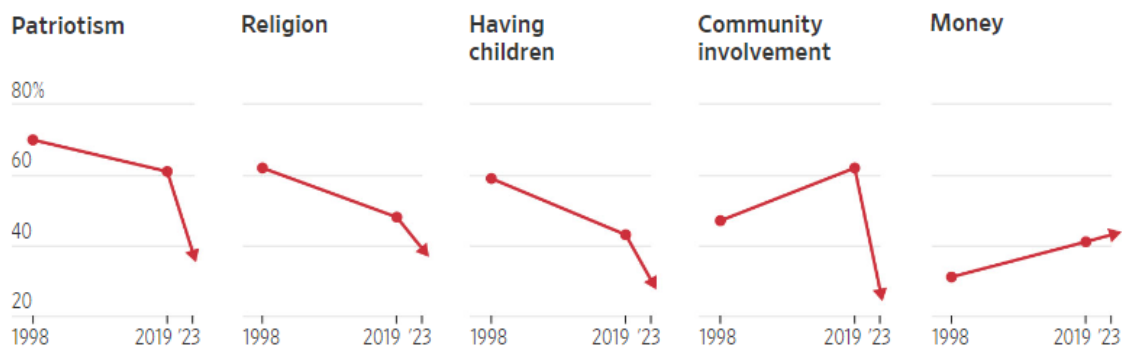
By [Aaron Zitner](#) - March 27, 2023 – Wall Street Journal

Patriotism, religious faith, having children and other priorities that helped define the national character for generations [are receding in importance to Americans](#), a new Wall Street Journal-NORC poll finds.

The survey, conducted with NORC at the University of Chicago, a nonpartisan research organization, also finds the country sharply divided by political party over social trends such as the push for [racial diversity in businesses](#) and the use of [gender-neutral pronouns](#).

Some 38% of respondents said patriotism was very important to them, and 39% said religion was very important. That was down sharply from when the Journal first asked the question in 1998, when 70% deemed patriotism to be very important, and 62% said so of religion.

Percentage who say these values are ‘very important’ to them



Source: WSJ/NORC poll of 1,019 adults conducted March 1-13, 2023; margin of error +/-4.1 pct. pts. Prior data from WSJ/NBC News telephone polls, most recently of 1,000 adults conducted Aug. 10-14, 2019; margin of error +/-3.1 pct. pts.

The share of Americans who say that having children, involvement in their community and hard work are very important values has also fallen. Tolerance for others, deemed very important by 80% of Americans as recently as four years ago, has fallen to 58% since then.

Bill McInturff, a pollster who worked on a previous Journal survey that measured these attitudes along with NBC News, said that “these differences are so dramatic, it paints a new and surprising portrait of a changing America.” He surmised that “perhaps the toll of our political division, Covid and the lowest economic confidence in decades is having a startling effect on our core values.”

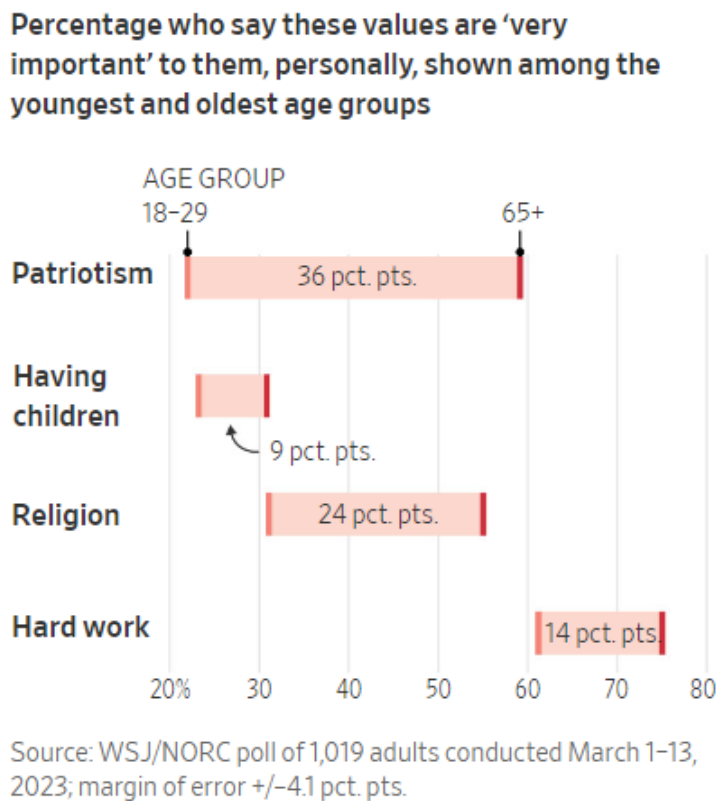
A number of events have shaken and in some ways fractured the nation since the Journal first asked about unifying values, among them the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the

financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent economic downturn and the rise of former President [Donald Trump](#).

The only priority the Journal tested that has grown in importance in the past quarter-century is money, which was cited as very important by 43% in the new survey, up from 31% in 1998.

Aside from money, all age groups, including seniors, attached far less importance to these priorities and values than when pollsters asked about them in 1998 and 2019. But younger Americans in particular place low importance on these values, many of which were central to the lives of their parents.

Percentage who say these values are ‘very important’ to them, personally, shown among the youngest and oldest age groups



Some 23% of adults under age 30 said in the new survey that patriotism was very important to them personally, compared with 59% of seniors ages 65 or older. Some 31% of younger respondents said that religion was very important to them, compared with 55% among seniors.

Only 23% of adults under age 30 said that having children was very important.

To Kevin Williams, a commercial and residential painter in Bend, Ore., many of these values are linked. Mr. Williams, 33 years old, said he thought that patriotism is declining as a civic

value in tandem with rising individualism, a sense of entitlement among many people and a decline in community involvement, possibly because of people focusing on their own racial or cultural backgrounds rather than what Americans have in common.

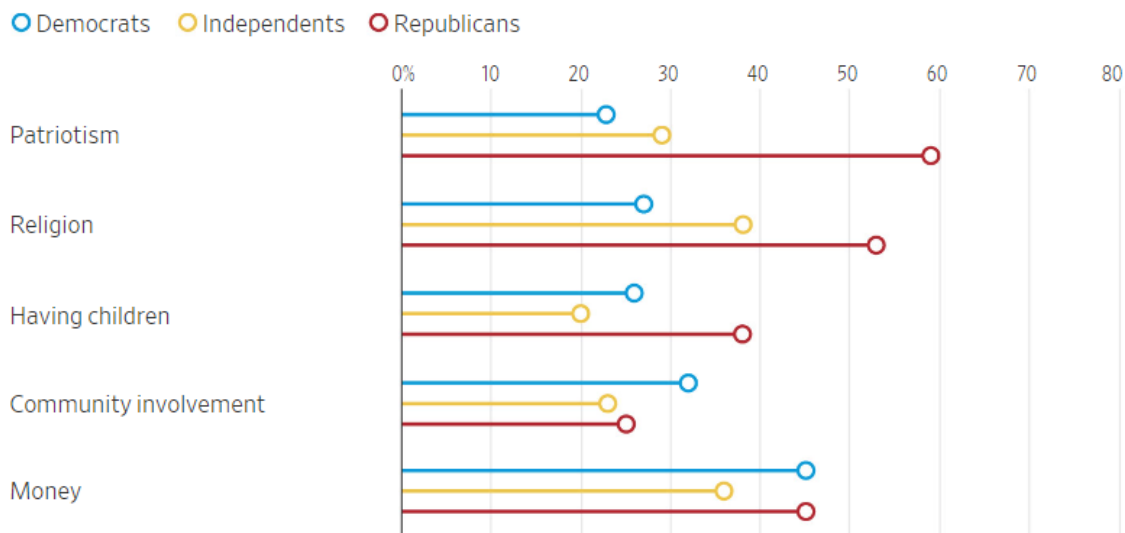
“I think patriotism encompasses being part of your community and helping other Americans,” said Mr. Williams, who said he coaches youth sports and volunteers with a group that provides security at protests and rallies.

Mr. Williams said that, as a middle-school student at the time of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, he knew then that he would join the military. “I just felt that I wanted to do my part to protect my country,” said Mr. Williams, who supported former President Donald Trump’s two White House campaigns. He eventually served four years in the Marines.

To Janet Boyer, a former Pentecostal minister who lives in Cumberland Township in Southwestern Pennsylvania’s coal country, patriotism has taken on a political sheen and is no longer important to her. “For me, patriotism has turned into right-wing nationalism,” said Ms. Boyer, who backed President Biden in 2020.

Political divisiveness also weighs on her. “Back in the day, Republicans and Democrats had a sense of deference to one another,” said Ms. Boyer, 52, a self-help author and jewelry designer. “They didn’t act like they were in a schoolyard trying to be vengeful and reactive.”

Percentage who say these values are ‘very important’ to them



Source: WSJ/NORC poll of 1,019 adults conducted March 1-13, 2023; margin of error +/-4.1 pct. pts.

Asked what values unite the nation, Elana Reiser, 43, of Brookhaven, N.Y., pointed to economic opportunity. “No matter your starting point, you can always become successful,” she said.

Some 21% in the survey said that America stands above all other countries in the world, a view that some call American exceptionalism. Half said that America is one of the greatest

countries, along with some others. The share who said other countries are better than the U.S. rose to 27%, up from 19% when the same question was asked in 2016.

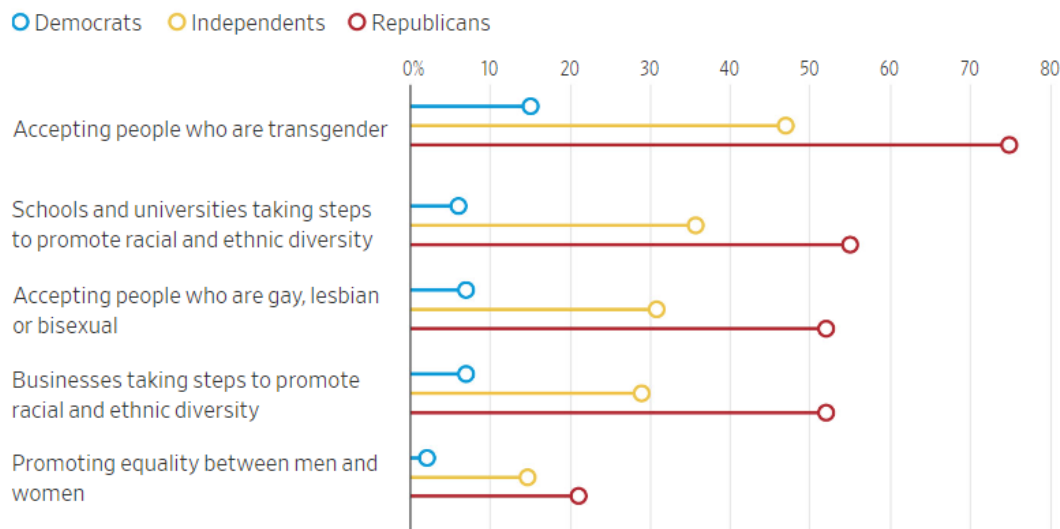
Ms. Reiser said that, as a university math teacher, she knows that other countries rank higher on tests of math performance. She said longer vacations and maternal leaves in some European countries mean they have a better quality of life. “In America, you basically have to work your whole life, and you don’t get breaks,” she said.

Jennifer Benz, vice president of public affairs and media research at NORC, said that views in the survey might have been colored by [the downbeat economic outlook](#) that the poll also found. “People are just sort of down on everything about the country,” she said.

The survey found sharp differences by political party on social issues that have gained prominence.

It asked whether society had gone far enough—or had gone too far—when it comes to businesses taking steps to promote racial and ethnic diversity. Just over half of Republicans said society had gone too far, compared with 7% of Democrats. Some 61% of Democrats said diversity efforts hadn’t gone far enough, compared with 14% of Republicans.

For each of the following, has our society gone too far, not gone far enough, or is it about right? Shown by percentage who say ‘too far’



Source: WSJ/NORC poll of 1,019 adults conducted March 1-13, 2023; margin of error +/-4.1 pct. pts.

Three quarters of Republicans said society had gone too far in accepting people who are transgender, while 56% of Democrats said society hadn’t gone far enough.

Overall, 63% of people in the survey said that companies shouldn’t take public stands on social and political issues, while 36% of people said companies should take such stands. Among Republicans, 80% opposed companies doing so, while 56% of Democrats favored the idea.

Half of people in the survey said they didn't like the practice of being asked to use gender-neutral pronouns, such as "they" or "them," when addressing another person, compared with 18% who viewed it favorably. Some 30% of respondents under age 35 viewed the practice favorably, compared with 9% of seniors.

The Journal-NORC survey polled 1,019 people from March 1-13, mostly online. The margin of error was plus or minus 4.1 percentage points.

Differences in how the new poll and prior surveys were conducted might account for a small portion of the reported decline in importance of the American values tested. Prior surveys, conducted for the Journal and NBC News, used live interviewers to reach people by phone.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/americans-pull-back-from-values-that-once-defined-u-s-wsj-norc-poll-finds-df8534cd>