

ISSUES OF INFLUENCE: THE ECONOMY IS HOT; RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND ENVIRONMENT ARE NOT

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With midterm voting already in progress in some states and the Nov. 8 election just three weeks away, a new report from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University provides new insights into the influence of numerous issues on the voting choices of the public. The survey results provide encouraging news for Republican candidates.

Not surprisingly, the most influential issues relate to the economy. Topping the list are inflation and the rising cost of living, listed as having “a lot of influence” on their votes by 61%. Food prices and shortages were identified by 60%, and oil and gasoline policies and prices were named by roughly six out of 10 adults, at 58%. Yet another economic issue—jobs and unemployment—was rated as the eighth most-influential issue (45%).

That trio of highly rated economic issues—inflation, food prices, and gas prices—are the only three issues out of more than 20 evaluated to which a majority of the adult population assigns “a lot” of influence on their voting decisions.

Shades of “It’s the economy, stupid!”—the famous rejoinder from the 1992 Clinton election season to recognize the importance of “pocketbook issues” to the American people.

According to the America’s Values Study, the other three issues in the top six were crime, policing, and personal safety, chosen as a highly influential issue by half of all adults (50%). Also mentioned were the cost, quality, and availability of health insurance and health care, named by 47% of voting-eligible adults, and protection against terrorism (also at 47%).

The five issues among the 21 tested that emerged as the least likely to have “a lot” of influence were policies related to foreign relations, military and defense (barely one-third—34%—named this as having a lot of influence on their voting decisions); religious freedom (36%); environmental policies (also 36%); government size, authority, and performance (36%); and income inequality and redistribution (37%).

The lowest rankings change slightly when the issues are rated on the basis of a “net influence” score, derived by subtracting the proportion of respondents who said the issue would have “not much” or “no influence” from the percentage who attributed “a lot” of influence to the issue. Specifically, religious

freedom drops to the least-influential issue, and environmental policy is barely ahead of it in influence. The net ratings also indicate that the issue of income inequality and redistribution loses some of its already-low standing, as well.

Comparative Influence of Issues on November Vote (U.S. adults, N=2,275)			
Question: There are many important issues facing America today. For each of the issues listed below, please indicate how much influence each of those issues will have on whom you vote for in the upcoming election: a lot, some, not much, or none. (Note: Issues listed in descending order of net influence.)			
Issue	How much influence this issue has:		
	A lot	Not much/None	Net Influence ²
Inflation, rising cost of living	61%	13%	48 points
Food prices and shortages	50	15	45
Oil and gasoline policies, prices	58	16	42
Crime, policing, personal safety	50	17	33
Health insurance, health care	47	18	29
Protection against terrorism	47	20	27
Jobs, unemployment	45	18	27
Abortion, right to life	46	23	23
Government spending	44	21	23
Quality of public-school education	42	20	22
Racism, discrimination, intolerance	44	22	22
Addressing poverty, homelessness	41	21	20
Immigration, border security	43	25	18
Unifying America	41	23	18
Mental health issues	39	23	16
National morality, changing values	38	26	12
Government size, authority, performance	36	25	11
Income inequality, distribution	37	27	10
Foreign policies, military/defense	34	24	10
Environmental policies	36	28	8
Religious freedom	36	32	4

Source: America's Values Study, commissioned by America'sOne, conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=2,275 adults; July 2022. Additional details and data available at www.CulturalResearchCenter.com and at www.AmericasOne.com.

²Note: Net influence calculated by subtracting combined percentage of "not much" and "none" from "a lot." "Some" responses are not included in the calculation.

Top Issues Vary by Segment

The survey revealed that different segments of the population are moved by divergent issues. Those distinctions point out how complex American society has become, making the ability to achieve consensus in governance a significant challenge.

Issues and Religion

Among the religious segments of the population, the three top-ranked issues—inflation, food prices, and gas prices—were nearly universal. The only exceptions were adults who have a biblical worldview, who ranked food prices and shortages as the fifth most-impactful issue, and people who claim to be theologically liberal ranking gas prices and policies fifth.

Examining the five most-influential issues among people of various faith perspectives, there were other unique choices:

- Religious freedom is a top-five issue only among people with a biblical worldview and those who identify the Bible as their primary source of moral guidance. The latter group was also the only one to include protection against terrorism in their top five.
- Racism is a top-five issue only among those who say they are theologically liberal and among adults who do not associate with Christianity. The latter segment was also the only one to include the cost of health insurance and health care in their list.
- Theological conservatives were the sole segment to list immigration in their five most influential issues.

Surprisingly, religious segments such as born-again Christians and people who regularly attend evangelical churches did not include issues such as abortion, national morals and values, and religious freedom in their top-five lists.

Issues and Politics

The survey explored the impact of issues among more than a dozen subgroups based on political beliefs and behavior. Inflation and food prices/shortages were in the top-five issues for each political segment, regardless of their political ideology or party affiliation.

There was a sharp difference in the views of people on the left and those on the right regarding several issues. Although both sides of the political continuum ranked inflation and food issues in their top five, the other three issues listed by each group differed.

Democrats and liberals placed racism at the top of their list. Both of those segments also included abortion and health insurance/costs in their top five.

It is noteworthy that a large majority of residents of “blue” states identified inflation as their most influential issue.

In contrast, Republicans, conservatives, residents of “red” states, and SAGE Cons (i.e., Spiritually Active Governance Engaged Conservative Christians) all placed inflation at the top of their issue lists, with food issues and oil prices and policies also on each of their lists. The remaining pair of influential issues varied slightly:

- Residents of “red” states rounded out their list with protection against terrorism and crime/policing/personal safety.
- SAGE Cons placed religious freedom and immigration in their top five.

- Conservatives included government spending and immigration among their most influential issues.
- Republicans incorporated crime/policing/safety, government spending, and immigration. (Their list contains an extra issue due to a statistical tie.)

The survey results describe the views of three political segments often characterized as a “swing vote.” Each had some distinctives compared to the more predictable political segments.

People living in so-called “purple” states chose the three consensus issues (inflation, food prices/shortages, gas prices/policies). They filled out their top five with crime/policing/safety, government spending, and protection against terrorism. (They had two extra issues on the list due to a three-way tie for fifth place.)

Beyond the trio of consensus issues, ideological moderates added crime/policing/safety and the cost of health insurance and health care to their major influences.

Independent voters—those who are not affiliated with a political party—included crime/policing/safety and government spending to the three consensus issues to round out their list.

Issues and Demographics:

Although there is the same trio of consensus issues across age groups and ethnic groups in concerns about inflation, food problems, and gas prices, there are significant differences in issues of influence across several demographic categories. Two additional issues have substantial influence among the various age and ethnic segments:

- Adults under age 35 were the only ones to list abortion as a major voting influence. Their other highly ranked issues were racism, and health insurance/costs.
- Besides the two consensus issues, adults 35 to 49 embraced crime/policing/safety and jobs among their most influential issues.
- People 50- to 64-years-old and those 65 or older added crime, health costs, and protection against terrorism to the consensus issues.
- Other than the consensus issues, white adults named crime/policing/safety and protection against terrorism as their vote-affecting issues.
- In contrast black adults identified racism, poverty/homelessness, and crime/policing/safety as their other top-ranked considerations.
- Both Asians and Hispanics incorporated health insurance/costs and crime/policing/safety in their top five.

Black adults stood out for not just including racism as a top-tier issue, but for ranking it as their single, most influential issue of all.

Ranking of Issues by How Many Adults in Religious Segments Attribute "A Lot" of Influence to the Issue (limited to the five highest-rated issues)								
Issue	Religious Self-Identification			Born-Again		Church Affiliation		
	Christian	Other Faith	No Faith	Yes	No	Evang	Prot.	Cath.
Abortion, right to life			4					
Addressing poverty, homelessness								
Crime, policing, personal safety	4			5	4	4	4	4
Environmental policies								
Food prices and shortages	2	2	2	1	2	3	2	1
Foreign policies, military/defense								
Government size, authority, performance								
Government spending								
Health insurance, health care		4	5					
Immigration, border security								
Inflation, rising cost of living	1	3	1	1	1	2	1	2
Income inequality, distribution								
Jobs, unemployment								
Mental health issues								
National morality, changing values								
Oil and gasoline policies, prices	3	1	3	1	3	1	3	3
Protection against terrorism	5	5		4		5	5	5
Quality of public school education								
Racism, discrimination, intolerance		5	5		5			
Religious freedom								
Unifying America								

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Ranking of Issues by How Many Adults in Religious Segments Attribute "A Lot" of Influence to the Issue (limited to the five highest-rated issues)							
Issue	Have a Biblical Worldview		Theologically		Primary Moral Guide		
	Yes	No	Liberal	Conservative	Bible	Self	Society
Abortion, right to life	3						
Addressing poverty, homelessness							
Crime, policing, personal safety		4		5		4	4
Environmental policies							
Food prices and shortages	5	2	3	1	1	2	1
Foreign policies, military/defense							
Government size, authority, performance							
Government spending							
Health insurance, health care		5	3			5	
Immigration, border security				4			
Inflation, rising cost of living	1	1	1	1	1	1	2
Income inequality, distribution							
Jobs, unemployment							5
Mental health issues							
National morality, changing values							
Oil and gasoline policies, prices	2	3	5	3	3	3	3
Protection against terrorism					5		
Quality of public school education							
Racism, discrimination, intolerance			2				
Religious freedom	4				4		
Unifying America							

Source: America's Values Study, commissioned by America'sOne, conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; N=2,275 adults; July 2022. Additional details and data available at www.CulturalResearchCenter.com and at www.AmericasOne.com

Ranking of Issues by How Many Adults in Political Segments Attribute "A Lot" of Influence to the Issue (limited to the five highest-rated issues)						
Issue	Self-Identified Ideology			Party Identification		
	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Repub.	Dem.	Independent
Abortion, right to life			3		4	
Addressing poverty, homelessness						
Crime, policing, personal safety		4		5		4
Environmental policies						
Food prices and shortages	2	1	5	3	3	3
Foreign policies, military/defense						
Government size, authority, performance						
Government spending	5			5		5
Health insurance, health care		5	2		4	
Immigration, border security	4			4		
Inflation, rising cost of living	1	1	3	1	2	1
Income inequality, distribution						
Jobs, unemployment						
Mental health issues						
National morality, changing values						
Oil and gasoline policies, prices	3	3		2		2
Protection against terrorism						
Quality of public school education						
Racism, discrimination, intolerance			1		1	
Religious freedom						
Unifying America						

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Ranking of Issues by How Many Adults in Political Segments Attribute "A Lot" of Influence to the Issue (limited to the five highest-rated issues)								
Issue	State Pol. Ideology			SAGE	Political News		Activist?	
	Blue	Purple	Red	Cons	Attentive	Inattentive	Yes	No
Abortion, right to life	5				5		4	
Addressing poverty, homelessness								
Crime, policing, personal safety	4	4	4		4			
Environmental policies							5	
Food prices and shortages	2	2	2	4	2	1	2	1
Foreign policies, military/defense								
Government size, authority, performance								
Government spending		5						
Health insurance, health care						4		5
Immigration, border security				5				
Inflation, rising cost of living	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	1
Income inequality, distribution								
Jobs, unemployment		5						4
Mental health issues								
National morality, changing values								
Oil and gasoline policies, prices	3	2	2	2	3	3	1	3
Protection against terrorism		5	4		5			
Quality of public school education								
Racism, discrimination, intolerance						4		
Religious freedom				2				
Unifying America								

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Ranking of Issues by How Many Adults in Demographic Segments Attribute "A Lot" of Influence to the Issue (limited to the five highest-rated issues)								
Issue	Age Group				Race/Ethnicity			
	18-34	35-49	50-64	65+	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian
Abortion, right to life	5							
Addressing poverty, homelessness							5	
Crime, policing, personal safety		4	4	4	4	4	4	3
Environmental policies								
Food prices and shortages	1	1	2	3	1	2	3	1
Foreign policies, military/defense								
Government size, authority, performance								
Government spending								
Health insurance, health care	5		5			4		5
Immigration, border security	3	1	1	1	1	1	2	2
Inflation, rising cost of living								
Income inequality, distribution		5						
Jobs, unemployment								
Mental health issues								
National morality, changing values								
Oil and gasoline policies, prices	1	3	3	2	3	3	5	4
Protection against terrorism			5	5	5			
Quality of public school education								
Racism, discrimination, intolerance	4						1	
Religious freedom								
Unifying America								

Source: America's Values Study, commissioned by America'sOne, conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, N=2,275 adults, July 2022. Additional details and data available at www.CulturalResearchCenter.com and at www.AmericasOne.com.

Bad News for Democrats?

According to George Barna, director of the research study, the results bode poorly for Democrats in November.

“Many of the most influential issues in this election are those that highlight publicly perceived failures by the Democrats. The highest-impact issues—specifically, inflation, the cost of food and related shortages, and policies and prices related to gas and oil—all highlight turns for the worse over the past two years, when Democrats have held the White House and both chambers of Congress,” Barna said.

“If historical patterns hold true, voters will hold Democrats responsible for those failures. Some four out of five incumbents in the U.S. House and Senate are typically re-elected. However, there may yet be substantial change in the two federal legislative bodies given the confluence of anger with the condition of America, the historical tendency to replace the prevailing party in mid-term elections, the unusually large number of incumbents not seeking re-election, and the fact that the issues of greatest importance to voters underscore public dissatisfaction with Democrat rule,” he said.

Barna also noted that the issues of greatest concern to Americans now address personal rather than common-good interests.

“Issues such as mental health policies, poverty, the quality of public schools, national morals and values, and unifying the nation are more about the common good than self-interest,” the veteran

researcher commented. “Even among the most deeply religious Americans, regardless of their faith of choice, a greater emphasis was placed upon the personal impact of governance choices and public policies. That focus on self, to the exclusion of the community, is a reflection of the syncretistic worldview and the decline of spiritual commitment in America.”

About the Research:

The data referred to in this report are taken from the American Worldview Inventory (AWVI), an annual survey that evaluates the worldview of the U.S. adult population (age 18 and over). Begun as an annual tracking study in 2020, the assessment is based on several dozen worldview-related questions that fall within eight categories of worldview application, measuring both beliefs and behavior.

The American Worldview Inventory 2021 is the first-ever national survey conducted in the United States measuring the incidence of both biblical and competing worldviews. It was undertaken in February 2021 among a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults, providing an estimated maximum sampling error of approximately plus or minus 2 percentage points, based on the 95% confidence interval. Additional levels of indeterminable error may occur in surveys based upon non-sampling activity.

About the Cultural Research Center:

The Cultural Research Center (CRC) at Arizona Christian University is located on the school’s campus in Glendale, Arizona, in the Phoenix metropolitan area. In addition to conducting the annual American Worldview Inventory, CRC also introduced the ACU Student Worldview Inventory (SWVI) in 2020. That survey is administered to every ACU student at the start of each academic year, and a final administration is undertaken among students just prior to their graduation. The ACU SWVI enables the University to track the worldview development of its student body and to make changes to that process as recommended by the research. The Cultural Research Center also conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares that information with organizations dedicated to facilitating the positive transformation of American culture with biblical truth.

CRC is guided by George Barna, Director of Research, and Tracy Munsil, Executive Director. Like ACU, CRC embraces biblical Christianity. The Center works in cooperation with a variety of Bible-centric, theologically conservative Christian ministries and remains politically non-partisan. Access to the results from past surveys conducted by CRC, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, is accessible at www.culturalresearchcenter.com. Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at www.arizonachristian.edu.