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Americans' Views of Economic Inequality, Its Causes and Who Should Fix It

Since 2019, a growing share among those who say there's too much inequality think the economic system needs to be completely rebuilt to address it

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About this research

This Pew Research Center report looks at Americans' views of economic inequality, including what factors they think contribute to it and who they believe should be responsible for reducing inequality. It also explores trends in income and wealth inequality.

Why did we do this?

Pew Research Center does research to help the public, the media and decision-makers understand important topics. This analysis builds on our previous work on economic issues.

Learn more about Pew Research Center.

How did we do this?

The analysis of Americans' views of economic inequality is based primarily on a Pew Research Center survey of 5,166 U.S. adults conducted Aug. 24-30, 2026. Everyone who took part is a member of the Center's American Trends Panel. The survey is designed to represent the views of all U.S. adults.

Here are the survey questions used for this report, the detailed responses and the survey methodology.

In addition to survey data, the report also examines the trends in the typical income and wealth of lower-, middle- and upper-income households using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and other standard government sources.

Americans' Views of Economic Inequality, Its Causes and Who Should Fix It

Since 2019, a growing share among those who say there's too much inequality think the economic system needs to be completely rebuilt to address it

About six-in-ten Americans (61%) say there is too much economic inequality in the United States, a view that is far more common among Democrats and Democratic leaners than Republicans and GOP leaners (78% vs. 42%).

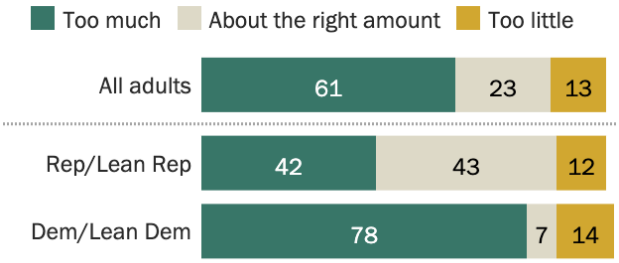
These figures are unchanged from 2019. But some views about inequality and how to address it have shifted in that time.

Among those who say there is too much economic inequality in the U.S.:

- 35% now say **no amount of economic inequality is acceptable,** up from 29%.
- 24% now say **the economic system needs to be completely rebuilt** in order to address this inequality, up from 14%.

Democrats are nearly twice as likely as Republicans to say there is too much inequality

% saying there is ____ economic inequality in the U.S. these days



Note: Shares of respondents who didn't offer an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 24-30, 2026. "Americans' Views of Economic Inequality, Its Causes and Who Should Fix it"

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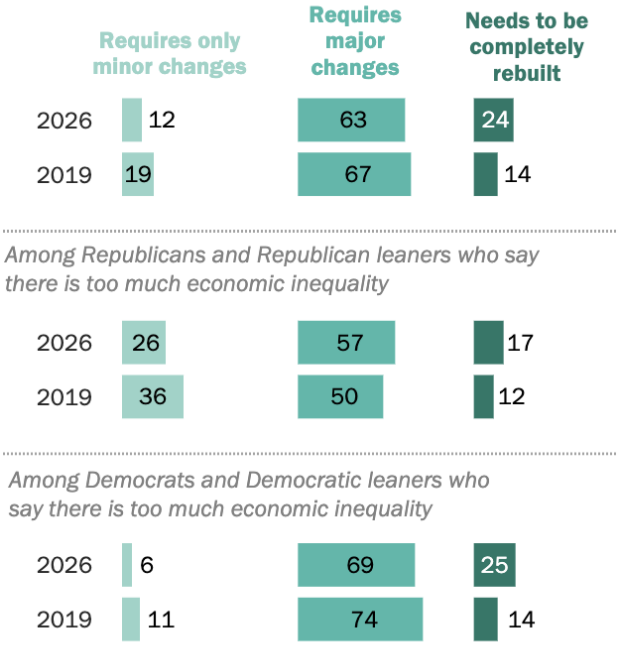
Both Democrats and Republicans who see too much inequality are now more likely to say the country's economic system requires major changes or needs to be completely rebuilt in order to address it. Democrats' views have also shifted on whether any amount of economic inequality is acceptable.

Four-in-ten Democrats who say there is too much economic inequality now say no amount of inequality is acceptable, up from 32% in 2019. A quarter say the economic system needs to be completely rebuilt, up from 14%.

Views on how to address economic inequality have also shifted among Republicans who say there is too much of it. In 2019, 50% of Republicans in this group said the economic system needed major changes to address it, while another 12% said it needed to be completely rebuilt. Those shares stand at 57% and 17% today, respectively.

24% of Americans who say there is too much inequality now say the economic system needs to be rebuilt to fix it

Among those who say there is too much economic inequality in the U.S., % saying our economic system ____ in order to address it



Note: Shares of respondents who didn't offer an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 24-30, 2026. "Americans' Views of Economic Inequality, Its Causes and Who Should Fix it"

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Confidence that the economic system *can* be effectively changed to address inequality is low. Among those who say there's too much inequality and that at least major changes are needed to address it, only about one-in-ten Republicans (11%) and Democrats (8%) are extremely or very confident the economic system can be effectively changed. By contrast, 70% of Democrats and 55% of Republicans are not too or not at all confident.

These findings come as economic issues play a prominent role in both Republicans' and Democrats' midterm election campaigns. They are based on a survey of 5,166 U.S. adults conducted Aug. 24-30, 2026, that also explores Americans' views on:

- Factors that contribute to economic inequality

- Who is responsible for reducing inequality

Read about trends in wealth and income inequality.

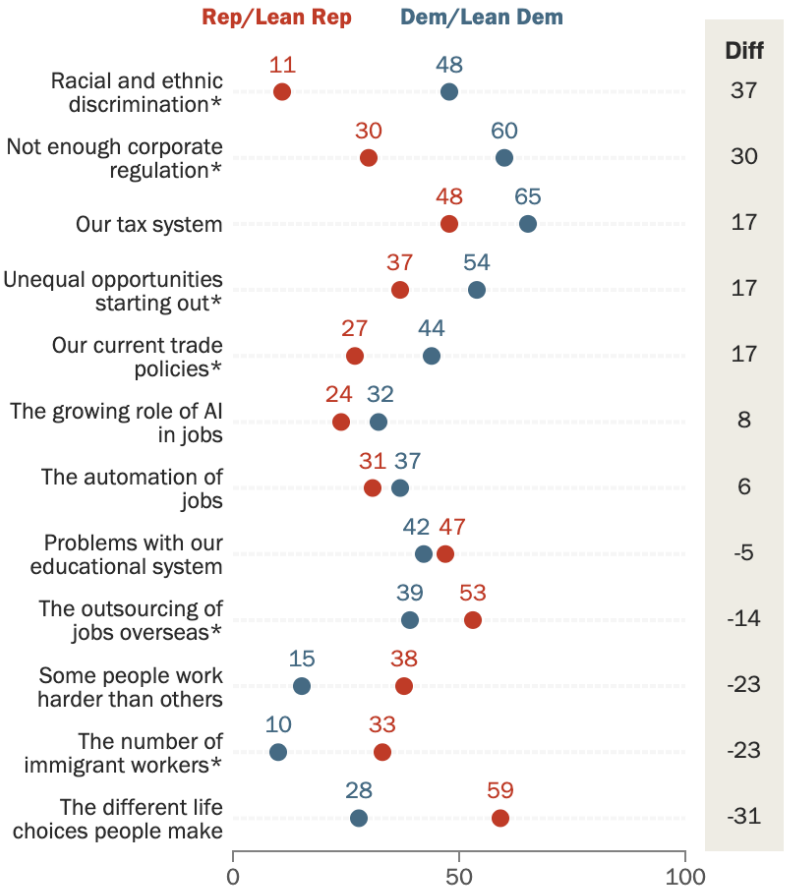
What contributes to economic inequality?

Republicans and Democrats who say there is too much economic inequality disagree on what factors contribute to it. For example, 59% of Republicans in this group (versus 28% of Democrats) say the different life choices people make contribute to economic inequality a great deal. Of the possible factors included in the survey, this is among the ones Republicans cite most often.

Among Democrats who say there is too much economic inequality, the U.S. tax system (65%) and insufficient regulation of major corporations (60%) top the list of factors they say contribute a great deal. And more than half (54%) say people starting out with more opportunities than others is a major driver of economic inequality.

Views on what factors contribute to economic inequality differ widely by party

Among those who say there is too much economic inequality in the U.S., % saying each of the following ***contributes a great deal*** *to it*



* Refer to topline for full item wording.
Note: Other response options included "Contributes a fair amount," "Contributes not too much" and "Contributes not at all."
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 24-30, 2026.
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Who is responsible for reducing inequality?

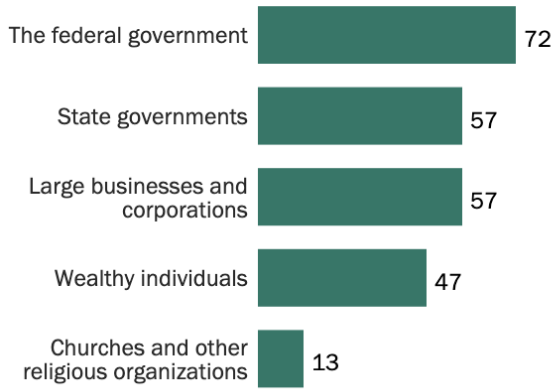
More than half of Americans who say there is too much economic inequality in the U.S. think each of the following actors should have a lot of responsibility in reducing it:

- The federal government (72%, up from 66% in 2019)
- State governments (57%, up from 52%)
- Large businesses and corporations (57%, *down* from 62%)

Nearly half of those who say there's too much economic inequality (47%) say wealthy individuals should have a lot of responsibility in reducing it. A much smaller share (13%) say the same of churches and other religious organizations. These shares are virtually unchanged from 2019.

Most Americans think the federal government should play a large role in reducing economic inequality

Among those who say there is too much economic inequality in the U.S., % saying each of the following should have ***a lot of responsibility*** *in reducing it*



Note: Other response options included "Some," "Only a little" and "None."
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 24-30, 2026. "Americans' Views of Economic Inequality, Its Causes and Who Should Fix it"

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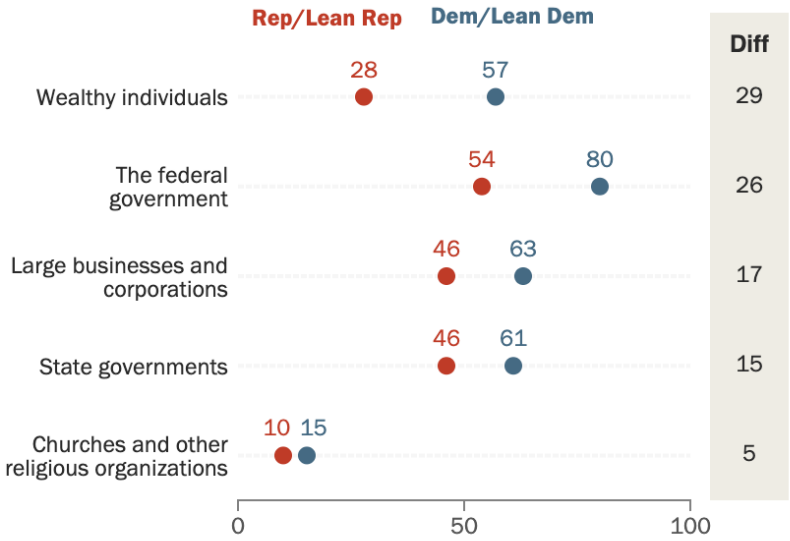
Views by party

Among those who say there is too much economic inequality, Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to say the federal government, state governments, large businesses and corporations, and wealthy individuals should play a major role in reducing it.

Still, more than half of Republicans in this group (54%) say the federal government should have a lot of responsibility, up from 44% in 2019.

Republicans and Democrats differ in who they think should be responsible for reducing economic inequality

Among those who say there is too much economic inequality in the U.S., % saying each of the following should have ***a lot of responsibility*** *in reducing it*



Note: Other response options included "Some," "Only a little" and "None."
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 24-30, 2026.
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Trends in Income and Wealth Inequality

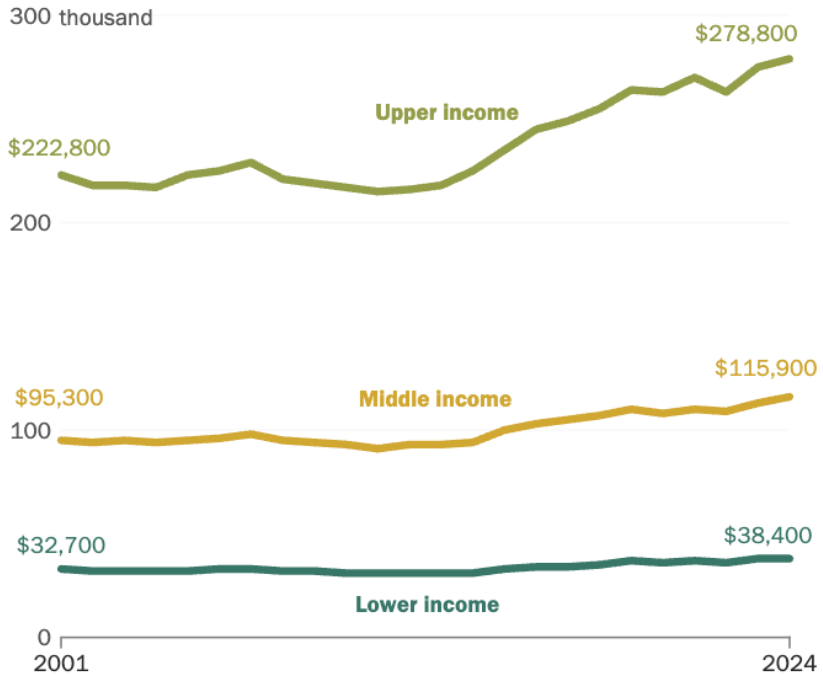
Most Americans say there's too much economic inequality in the United States these days. To understand how people's financial circumstances have changed in recent decades, we looked at trends in income and wealth for lower-, middle- and upper-income households since 2000.

Income and wealth have grown for each group. But the gains have been greatest for upper-income households, leading to increased economic inequality.

The median income for upper-income households increased 25% between 2001 and 2024 (from $222,800 to $278,800). Incomes for middle- and lower-income households grew less over that period – 22% and 17%, respectively. (All income figures have been adjusted for inflation.)

The typical income of lower-, middle- and upper-income households has increased since 2001

*Median U.S. household **income**, by income tier (2024 dollars)*



Note: Households are assigned to income tiers based on their size-adjusted income, scaled to reflect a three-person household. Revisions to the Current Population Survey affect the comparability of data from 2014 onward. Refer to the methodology for details.
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements (IPUMS).
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One way to measure income inequality is to look at the gap between upper- and lower-income households. In 2024, upper-income households had 7.3 times the typical income of lower-income households. The ratio was 6.8 in 2001.

Read about Americans' views of economic inequality, including the factors they think contribute to it and who should be responsible for reducing it.

How we define income tiers

"Middle-income" households have an annual household income that is two-thirds to double the national median, after incomes have been adjusted for household size. Lower-income households have incomes less than two-thirds of the median, and upper-income households have incomes that are more than double the median. In 2024, a family of three would be "middle income" with an income between $66,700 and $200,000.

Income inequality varies across metropolitan areas

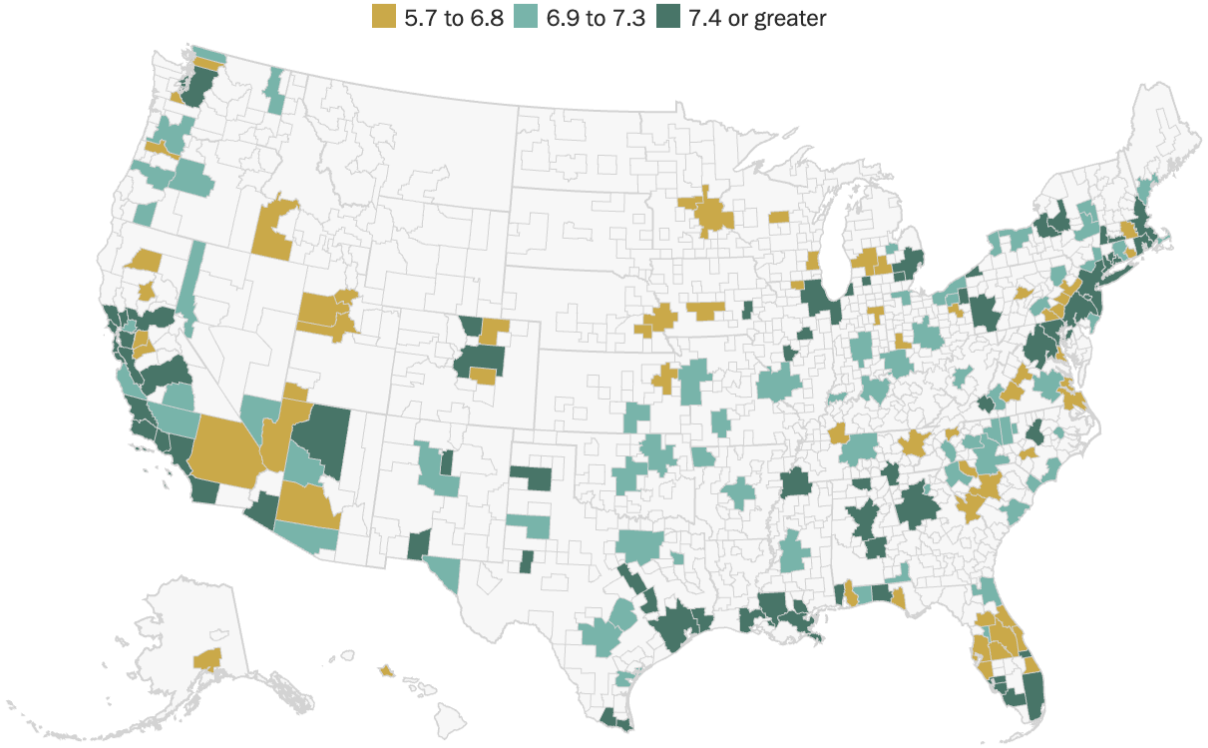
The income gap between upper- and lower-income households varies across the U.S. We analyzed 204 metropolitan areas and found the upper-to-lower income ratio ranged from 5.7 to 9.7, as of 2024.

The metro areas with the most income inequality are concentrated on the East and West coasts. However, the area with the highest upper-to-lower income ratio is in the middle of the country: In Iowa City, Iowa, upper-income households had 9.7 times the median income of lower-income households in 2024 ($239,300 vs. $24,600).

The metro area with the lowest level of income inequality was Canton-Massillon, Ohio. The median income of upper-income households there was 5.7 times higher than that of lower-income households ($235,000 vs. $41,200).

Household income inequality varies across metro areas

Ratio of the 2024 median income of upper-income households to the median income of lower-income households



Note: Households are assigned to income tiers based on their size-adjusted income and local cost of living.
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the 2024 American Community Survey (IPUMS).
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Wealth inequality is up sharply from 2001

Wealth is spread much less evenly across U.S. households than income, and the gap in wealth between upper- and lower-income households has grown wider between 2001 and 2022.

Over that period, median wealth increased for middle- and upper-income households and remained mostly flat for lower-income households.

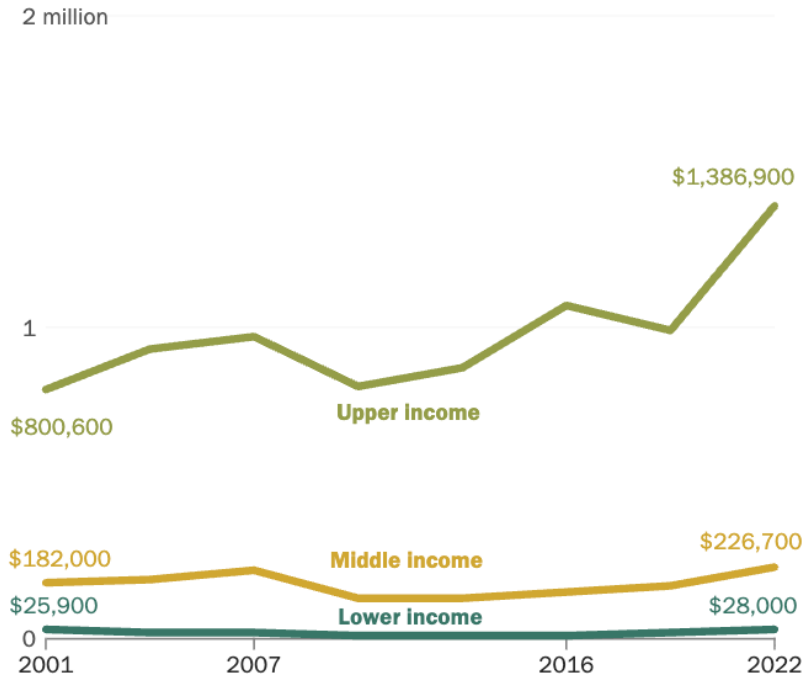
Upper-income households saw the largest gains, with wealth increasing 73% (from $800,600 to $1,386,900).

Wealth increased 25% for middle-income households and only 8% for lower-income households.

All told, upper-income households owned about 49 times the median wealth of lower-income households in 2022. That gap has increased from 31 times in 2001.

In 2022, the median wealth of upper-income households was 49 times higher than that of lower-income households

*Median U.S. household **wealth**, by income tier (2024 dollars)*



Note: Wealth values are shown for years 2001 and 2022. Wealth is a household's total assets minus its total debts. Households are assigned to income tiers based on their size-adjusted income.
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the Survey of Consumer Finances.
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As the Federal Reserve and others have reported, while the wealth gap has widened significantly across households since 2001, it was even higher in 2016 than it was in 2022.

Acknowledgments

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals. Find related reports online at pewresearch.org/topic/economy-work/.

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Methodology

The American Trends Panel survey methodology

Overview

Data in this report comes from Wave 198 of the American Trends Panel (ATP), Pew Research Center's nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. The survey was conducted Aug. 24-30, 2026. A total of 5,166 panelists responded out of 5,602 who were sampled, for a survey-level response rate of 92%.

The cumulative response rate accounting for nonresponse to the recruitment surveys and attrition is 3%. The break-off rate among panelists who logged on to the survey and completed at least one item is 1%. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 5,166 respondents is plus or minus 1.6 percentage points.

The survey includes an oversample of non-Hispanic Asian adults in order to provide more precise estimates of the opinions and experiences of this smaller demographic subgroup. This oversampled group is weighted back to reflect its correct proportions in the population.

SSRS conducted the survey for Pew Research Center via online (n=4,997) and live telephone (n=169) interviewing. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish.

To learn more about the ATP, read "About the American Trends Panel."

Panel recruitment

Since 2018, the ATP has used address-based sampling (ABS) for recruitment. A study cover letter and a pre-incentive are mailed to a stratified, random sample of households selected from the U.S. Postal Service's Computerized Delivery Sequence File. This Postal Service file has been estimated to cover 90% to 98% of the population.[1] Within each sampled household, the adult with the next birthday is selected to participate. Other details of the ABS recruitment protocol have changed over time but are available upon request.[2] Prior to 2018, the ATP was recruited using landline and cellphone random-digit-dial surveys administered in English and Spanish.

A national sample of U.S. adults has been recruited to the ATP approximately once per year since 2014. In some years, the recruitment has included additional efforts (known as an "oversample")

[1] AAPOR Task Force on Address-based Sampling. 2016. "AAPOR Report: Address-based Sampling."
[2] Email pewsurveys@pewresearch.org.

to improve the accuracy of data for underrepresented groups. For example, Hispanic adults, Black adults and Asian adults were oversampled in 2019, 2022 and 2023, respectively.

Sample design

The overall target population for this survey was noninstitutionalized persons ages 18 and older living in the United States. It featured a stratified random sample from the ATP in which non-Hispanic Asian adults were selected with certainty. The remaining panelists were sampled at rates designed to ensure that the share of respondents in each stratum is proportional to its share of the U.S. adult population to the greatest extent possible. Respondent weights are adjusted to account for differential probabilities of selection as described in the Weighting section below.

Questionnaire development and testing

The questionnaire was developed by Pew Research Center in consultation with SSRS. The web program used for online respondents was rigorously tested on both PC and mobile devices by the SSRS project team and Pew Research Center researchers. The SSRS project team also populated test data that was analyzed in SPSS to ensure the logic and randomizations were working as intended before launching the survey.

Incentives

All respondents were offered a post-paid incentive for their participation. Respondents could choose to receive the post-paid incentive in the form of a check or gift code to Amazon.com, Target.com or Walmart.com. Incentive amounts ranged from $5 to $20 depending on whether the respondent belongs to a part of the population that is harder or easier to reach. Differential incentive amounts were designed to increase panel survey participation among groups that traditionally have low survey response propensities.

Data collection protocol

The data collection field period for this survey was Aug. 24-30, 2026. Surveys were conducted via self-administered web survey or by live telephone interviewing.

For panelists who take surveys online:[3] Postcard notifications were mailed to a subset on Aug. 24.[4] Survey invitations were sent out in two separate launches: soft launch and full launch. Sixty panelists were included in the soft launch, which began with an initial invitation sent on Aug.

[3] The ATP does not use routers or chains in any part of its online data collection protocol, nor are they used to direct respondents to additional surveys.
[4] Postcard notifications for web panelists are sent to 1) panelists who were recruited within the last two years and 2) panelists recruited prior to the last two years who opt to continue receiving postcard notifications.

24. All remaining English- and Spanish-speaking sampled online panelists were included in the full launch and were sent an invitation on Aug. 25.

Invitation and reminder dates for web respondents, ATP Wave 198

	Soft launch	Full launch
Initial invitation	Aug. 24, 2026	Aug. 25, 2026
First reminder	Aug. 27, 2026	Aug. 27, 2026
Final reminder	Aug. 29, 2026	Aug. 29, 2026

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Panelists participating online were sent an email invitation and up to two email reminders if they did not respond to the survey. ATP panelists who consented to SMS messages were sent an SMS invitation with a link to the survey and up to two SMS reminders.

For panelists who take surveys over the phone with a live interviewer: Prenotification postcards were mailed on Aug. 21. Soft launch took place on Aug. 24 and involved dialing until a total of nine interviews had been completed. All remaining English- and Spanish-speaking sampled phone panelists' numbers were dialed throughout the remaining field period. Panelists who take surveys via phone can receive up to six calls from trained SSRS interviewers.

Data quality checks

To ensure high-quality data, Center researchers performed data quality checks to identify any respondents showing patterns of satisficing. This includes checking for whether respondents left questions blank at very high rates or always selected the first or last answer presented. As a result of this checking, three ATP respondents were removed from the survey dataset prior to weighting and analysis.

Weighting

The ATP data is weighted in a process that accounts for multiple stages of sampling and nonresponse that occur at different points in the panel survey process. First, each panelist begins with a base weight that reflects their probability of recruitment into the panel. These weights are then calibrated to align with the population benchmarks in the accompanying table to correct for nonresponse to recruitment surveys and panel attrition. If only a subsample of panelists was invited to participate in the wave, this weight is adjusted to account for any differential probabilities of selection.

Among the panelists who completed the survey, this weight is then calibrated again to align with the population benchmarks identified in the accompanying table and trimmed at the 1st and 99th percentiles to reduce the loss in precision stemming from variance in the weights. Sampling errors and tests of statistical significance take into account the effect of weighting.

American Trends Panel weighting dimensions

Variable	Benchmark source
Age (detailed) Age x Gender Education x Gender Education x Age Race/Ethnicity x Education Race/Ethnicity x Gender Race/Ethnicity x Age Born inside vs. outside the U.S. among Hispanics and Asian Americans Years lived in the U.S. Census region x Metropolitan status	2024 American Community Survey (ACS)
Volunteerism	2023 CPS Volunteering & Civic Life Supplement
Frequency of internet use Religious affiliation	2025 National Public Opinion Reference Survey (NPORS)
Party affiliation x Race/Ethnicity Party affiliation x Age	2026 National Public Opinion Reference Survey (NPORS)
Validated 2024 presidential election turnout and vote choice	Candidate vote share is based on official results from the Federal Election Commission. Turnout is based on estimates from the Election Lab at the University of Florida. The size of the voting-eligible population is based on the 2023 ACS.

Note: Estimates from the ACS are based on noninstitutionalized adults. For weighting to the 2024 presidential election results, panelists are considered validated voters if their self-report of having voted was confirmed after matching to a national voter registry.

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The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey.

Sample sizes and margins of error, ATP Wave 198

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Total sample	5,166	1.6 percentage points
Lower income	1,311	3.3 percentage points
Middle income	2,443	2.3 percentage points
Upper income	1,169	3.2 percentage points

Note: This survey includes an oversample of non-Hispanic Asian respondents. Unweighted sample sizes do not account for the sample design or weighting and do not describe a group's contribution to weighted estimates. Refer to the Sample design and Weighting sections above for details.

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Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request. In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Dispositions and response rates

Final dispositions, ATP Wave 198

	AAPOR code	Total
Completed interview	1.1	5,166
Logged in (web) / Contacted (CATI), but did not complete any items	2.11	98
Started survey; broke off before completion	2.12	30
Never logged on (web) / Never reached on phone (CATI)	2.20	305
Survey completed after close of the field period	2.27	0
Other non-interview	2.30	0
Completed interview but was removed for data quality	2.90	3
Total panelists sampled for the survey		**5,602**
Completed interviews	I	5,166
Partial interviews	P	0
Refusals	R	128
Non-contact	NC	305
Other	O	3
Unknown household	UH	0
Unknown other	UO	0
Not eligible	NE	0
Total		**5,602**
AAPOR RR1 = I / (I+P+R+NC+O+UH+UO)		92%

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Cumulative response rate, ATP Wave 198

	Total
Weighted response rate to recruitment surveys	12%
% of recruitment survey respondents who agreed to join the panel, among those invited	74%
% of those agreeing to join who were active panelists at start of Wave 198	40%
Response rate to Wave 198 survey	92%
Cumulative response rate	**3%**

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How family income tiers are calculated

Family income data reported in this study is adjusted for household size and cost-of-living differences by geography. Panelists then are assigned to income tiers that are based on the median adjusted family income of all American Trends Panel members. The process uses the following steps:

1. First, panelists are assigned to the midpoint of the income range they selected in a family income question that was measured on either the most recent annual profile survey or, for newly recruited panelists, their recruitment survey. This provides an approximate income value that can be used in calculations for the adjustment.

2. Next, these income values are adjusted for the cost of living in the geographic area where the panelist lives. This is calculated using price indexes published by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. These indexes, known as Regional Price Parities (RPP), compare the prices of goods and services across all U.S. metropolitan statistical areas as well as non-metro areas with the national average prices for the same goods and services. The most recent available data at the time of the annual profile survey is from 2024. Those who fall outside of metropolitan statistical areas are assigned the overall RPP for their state's non-metropolitan area.

3. Family incomes are further adjusted for the number of people in a household using the methodology from Pew Research Center's previous work on the American middle class. This is done because a four-person household with an income of say, $50,000, faces a tighter budget constraint than a two-person household with the same income.

4. Panelists are then assigned an income tier. "Middle-income" adults are in families with adjusted family incomes that are between two-thirds and double the median adjusted family income for the full ATP at the time of the most recent annual profile survey. The median adjusted family income for the panel is roughly $76,000. Using this median income, the middle-income range is about $50,700 to $152,000. Lower-income families have adjusted incomes less than $50,700 and upper-income families have adjusted incomes greater than $152,000 (all figures expressed in 2025 dollars and scaled to a household size of three). A panelist is assigned "no answer" in the income tier variable if they did not provide all three pieces of information needed to calculate their tier (family income, household size and residential address).

Two examples of how a given area's cost-of-living adjustment was calculated are as follows: the Monroe metropolitan area in Louisiana is a relatively inexpensive area, with a price level that is

16.4% less than the national average. The San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont metropolitan area in California is one of the most expensive areas, with a price level that is 15.6% higher than the national average. Income in the sample is adjusted to make up for this difference. As a result, a family with an income of $41,800 in the Monroe area is as well off financially as a family of the same size with an income of $57,800 in San Francisco.

Secondary data analysis

The data for the analysis of national median household incomes is derived from the Annual Social and Economic Supplements (ASEC) of the Current Population Survey (CPS), which are conducted in March of every year. The specific files used are from March 2002 to March 2025 and contain data on the annual income of households from 2001 to 2024. Conducted jointly by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the CPS is a monthly survey of about 60,000 households and is the source of the nation's official statistics on unemployment. The ASEC survey in March typically features a larger sample size (about 75,000 in recent years) and is the source of the annual income and poverty estimates reported by the Census Bureau.

Methodological and other revisions to the CPS may have an impact on estimated trends. For example, the 2015 ASEC introduced a redesigned set of income questions.

The classification of households into lower-, middle- and upper-income tiers is based on the same principles used in the survey analysis. However, the income ranges that define the boundaries of each income tier are based on incomes as reported in the ASEC. For the national estimates, incomes are not adjusted for the local cost of living.

"Middle-income" households are defined as those with an annual household income that is two-thirds to double the national median, after incomes have been adjusted for household size. In the 2025 ASEC, a middle income household with three people has an income between $66,700 and $200,000 (in 2024 dollars).

The metropolitan analysis of income gaps used the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is the largest household survey in the United States, with a sample of more than 3 million addresses. Collected by the U.S. Census Bureau since 2001, it covers the topics previously included in the long form of the decennial census. The ACS estimates the size and characteristics of the nation's resident population.

The ACS analysis applies the same definition of lower-, middle- and upper-income households as the national ASEC analysis. However, household incomes are adjusted for the local cost of living

using the metropolitan Regional Price Parities (RPP) published by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. The upshot of adjusting for the local cost of living is that the household income needed to be “middle income" is lower in low-cost metro areas compared with high-cost metros.

The 2024 ACS data has household income information on 263 metropolitan areas. Our analysis used the 204 metro areas having at least 100 unweighted upper-income households.

The ASEC and ACS microdata used for this analysis were provided by the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) from the University of Minnesota. IPUMS standardizes variable names and coding across years as much as possible, making it easier to analyze the data over time.

The wealth analysis is based on the Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) that is sponsored by the Federal Reserve Board of Governors and the Department of Treasury. It has been conducted every three years since 1983 and is designed to provide detailed information on the finances of U.S. households. The SCF sample typically consists of approximately 4,500 households.

The SCF data has information on household income as well as household wealth. The SCF household income data is used to define the income tiers in analyzing household wealth. So, for example, in the 2022 SCF a household with three persons needs an income between $61,300 and $184,000 (in 2024 dollars) to be “middle income.”

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