

Democrats' Non-College Base: Frustrations, Priorities, and Values

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Democrats have a difficult election cycle ahead of them as they seek to balance appealing to swing voters while holding onto and mobilizing their base. While they will have to pay close attention to the small slice of undecided voters at the center of the electorate, they will also have to appeal to a component of their base that is underrepresented in the national dialogue: Democratic voters without college degrees.

To help with that task, Third Way and Avalanche Insights conducted a national survey of 2,963 registered voters from April 13-17, 2023, focusing on their policy preferences, values, and how they feel about America today. The results indicate that Democrats with and without college degrees are responding differently to the current political climate. Non-college Democratic voters are less likely to see their values reflected in today's Democratic Party and are less positive about the direction of the country. Their attitudes reflected throughout the survey are a warning sign for Democrats that these voters are dissatisfied with both their economic situations and with the state of politics.

Demographics

Non-college voters make up a large share of Democrats' voters; half of the Democratic coalition does not have college degrees. Democratic voters without a college degree are more likely than those with a college degree to be younger, female, non-white, lower income, without children, and living in the suburbs.

Non-college voters are also more likely to be swing voters. Among those who say they have neither voted mostly for Democrats or mostly for Republicans in the last few elections, 70% do not have college degrees.

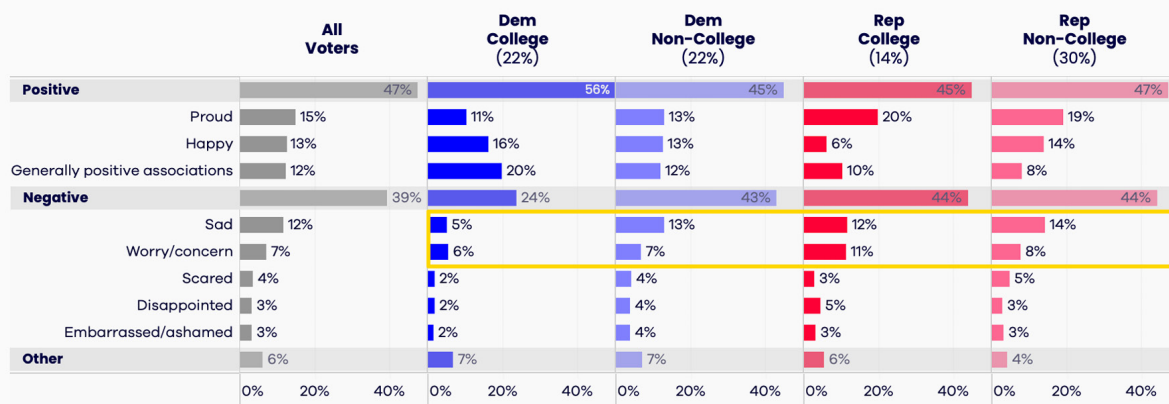
Perceptions of America Today

When asked how they feel about being an American today in an open-ended question, a plurality (47%) of all voters cite positive emotions, while 39% cite negative emotions. Democratic college graduates are largely positive, with 56% citing positive emotions and 24% negative.

The story is different for Democratic non-college voters who are split more evenly: 45% naming positive emotions and 43% negative. Democratic non-college voters are eight points more likely to say they feel "sad" about being American today, compared with college-educated Democratic voters.

Aside from the Dem college audience, voters are equally likely to cite negative emotions as they are to cite positive emotions in describing how they feel about being an American today.

[Emotion American] What emotion best describes how you feel about being an American today? (Open)



Source: Third Way and Avalanche Research conducted a national online survey of 2,963 registered voters from April 13-17, 2023.

Given these responses to the question of how they feel about being an American today, it is not surprising that Democratic non-college voters are more negative about the direction of the country. While a solid majority (61%) of Democratic college graduates feel that the country is moving in the right direction, only 43% of Democratic non-college voters say the same.

Even non-college voters who describe themselves as strong Democrats are 17 points less likely to say the country is going in the right direction compared to college graduates who describe themselves as strong Democrats. And among non-college voters who describe themselves as soft Democrats, only 25% say the country is going in the right direction.

Non-College Voters' Values

To probe voters' political values, we developed five core American values and asked voters to rank them to see which they prioritize. We then asked how confident they are that those values are reflected in America today.

Voters were asked about their perceptions of the following value frames:

Equality/Rights: Everyone, regardless of race, class, or gender, is **treated with respect and has equal rights.**

Freedom: People are **free to make their own decisions and live their lives as they choose.**

Fairness/Hard work: All people get a **fair shot to achieve their goals if they work hard.**

Global Leadership: We serve as a **model of democracy and leadership** to inspire and guide the rest of the world.

Care/Family: If you **take care of your family and contribute to your community**, you will have the **chance to prosper.**

Source: Third Way and Avalanche Research conducted a national online survey of 2,963 registered voters from April 13–17, 2023.

Both Democratic college and non-college voters selected 'equality/rights' and 'freedom' as their most important values. For non-college voters, 'fairness and hard work' were ranked as their third top value, while for college graduates, 'global leadership' took third place.

Yet non-college Democratic voters are less likely to believe that these values they hold dear are true in America today compared to Democrats with a college degree. They are 17 points less likely to feel confident that the 'freedom' value is reflected in the country today and 22 points less confident in the 'equality/rights' value.

Across the board, Democratic college graduates are more likely than their non-college counterparts to say these are values that describe the Democratic Party well.

Non-College Voters' Policy Priorities

In an open-ended question about issues voters want to see their government addressing, economic issues, safety issues, and healthcare lead as voters' top policy priorities.

Unsurprisingly, non-college Democrats cite 'cost of living' and 'inflation' as a higher concern compared to college educated Democrats, with 23% naming it as a top priority, while 16% of Democratic college graduates said the same. 'Safety' also stood out as a top priority for non-college Democrats, with a 11-point gap compared to Democrats with college degrees. "Safety" included a few issues under the surface: immigration and border security, gun safety, crime and violence, and safety and security. (Republicans prioritized immigration and border security at much higher rates; 28% of Republican college graduates named it as a top priority compared to 2% of Democratic college and non-college voters who mentioned 'gun safety/control' specifically at 11% and 16% respectively.)

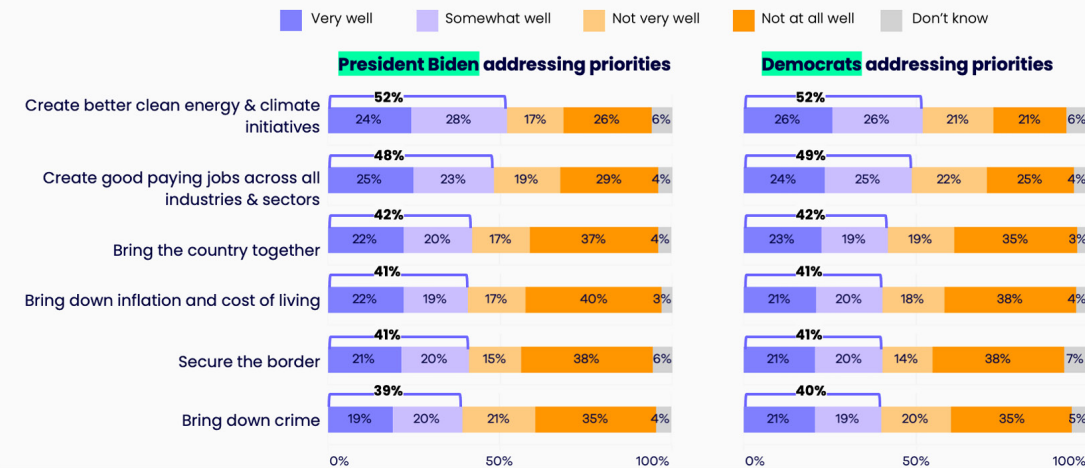
When Democrats were broken out into "strong Democrats" and "soft Democrats," meaning those who said they voted for Democrats but had mixed feelings about them, it became clear that economic issues stand out as higher priority for soft Democrats. A full 69% of soft Democratic college voters named economic issues (with 'inflation and cost of living' rising to the top followed by 'national finances'), and 61% of soft Democratic non-college voters named economic issues (with 'inflation and cost of living' rising to the top as well, but 'good jobs and wages' being the second most-mentioned topic for this segment).

Perceptions of Biden and Democrats

We presented voters with a number of policy priorities and asked them to describe how well or not well Biden and Democrats are addressing them. Climate stood out as an issue that voters feel Biden and Democrats are addressing well (52%), and voters were also relatively satisfied with Biden and Democrats' work creating good paying jobs (48%). However, when it comes to bringing down inflation and the cost of living, securing the border, and bringing down crime, a majority of voters see Biden and Democrats falling short.

Voters say President Biden/Democrats are not addressing a variety of issues well. 'Creating better climate initiatives' and 'creating good paying jobs' lead as priorities addressed well.

[Addressing Issues] How well or not well [is President Biden/are Democrats] addressing the following priorities:

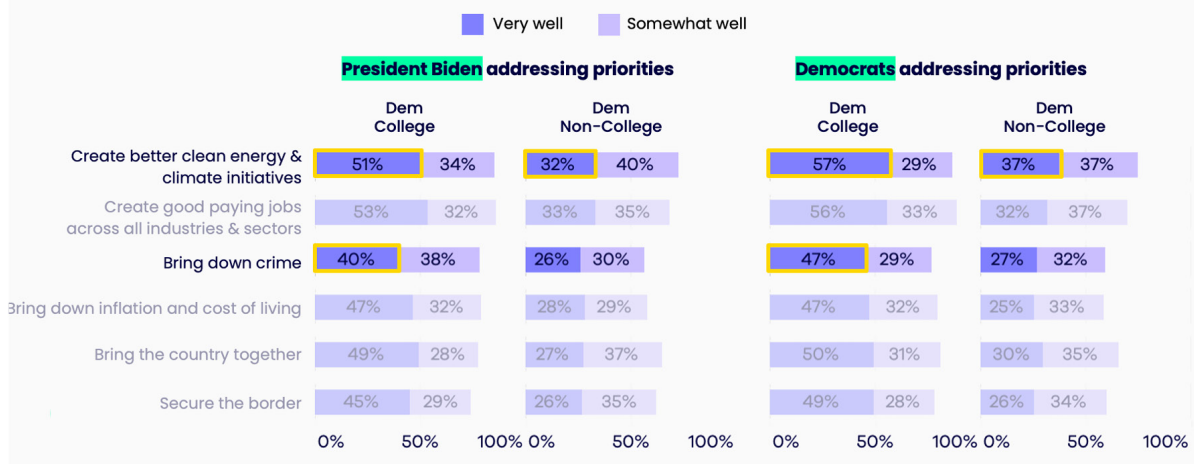


Source: Third Way and Avalanche Research conducted a national online survey of 2,963 registered voters from April 13-17, 2023.

There were large gaps in intensity of response here by education level. Less than three-in-ten Democratic non-college voters say Biden and Democrats are addressing bringing down crime, bringing down inflation, and securing the border very well.

While a majority of Dem voters say Biden/Democrats are doing well to address most issues, Biden evokes less intense confidence than Dems on climate and crime.

[Addressing Issues] How well or not well [is President Biden/are Democrats] addressing the following priorities:



Source: Third Way and Avalanche Research conducted a national online survey of 2,963 registered voters from April 13-17, 2023.

Conclusion

There are a few possible reasons for the divergences among Democratic voters by college education. Democratic college graduates may see their values and priorities more reflected in today's Democratic Party and in the Biden Administration. As a result, they tend to feel optimistic that things are heading in the right direction.

It also may be that lower-income Democratic voters, many of whom do not have college degrees, are experiencing the brunt of rising costs, crime, and the rollback of abortion rights in a way that more affluent Democrats are not (or at least not as viscerally). While Democrats in Washington may worry that progressive, college-educated voters are dissatisfied with the lack of progress being made by the Democratic Party, the reality is that Democrats' most dissatisfied voters are more working class, and are focused on rising costs, health, and gun safety.

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