

# UMass Lowell Center for Public Opinion Report on Citizen Opinions about Voting & Elections

**Results of 2 surveys**  
**Conducted by YouGov**  
4/3/15-4/21/15  
&  
10/1/14-11/3/14

Sample size for each survey is N=1,000 American Adults  
Credibility Interval: +/-3.7% (+/- 3% adjusted for weights)  
National Internet Panel Surveys matched to 2010 ACS

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## HIGHLIGHTS

In April of 2015 and October of 2014, the UMass Lowell Center for Public Opinion completed two separate surveys, each of 1,000 American Adults on their attitudes towards voting, elections, felon enfranchisement and campaign finance reform. The surveys were designed to evaluate the current state of elections in the United States, with the backdrop of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Students of a course entitled *Survey Research* worked in conjunction with Center for Public Opinion faculty members to revise and complete part of the survey and analysis. The survey was then administered by YouGov and fielded in April, 2014.

Examination of the data reveals three important themes. The first is that while the Voting Rights Act promised to right historical inequities in the availability and exercise of the franchise, people of color in America perceive higher barriers to voting and a greater acceptance of the idea of the universal franchise. Secondly, voting has become highly politicized. Whether or not the two parties stand to gain anything from laws that make it harder or easier to vote, Republicans generally favor laws that make voting more difficult, while Democrats favor laws that make voting easier. Lastly, Americans hold a variety of sometimes incongruent attitudes towards campaign finance that include

a strong belief that money creates a great deal of inequity in the process, but also a large resistance to allowing the government to solve this problem through many legal sanctions or publicly funded campaigns. Voting in the United States is as near of a universal right as we hold; however, the varied perspectives represented among Americans in this survey highlight the enormity of the challenge of implementing universal democratic values when so much is perceived to be at stake in elections.

## ACCESS TO VOTING, PARTICIPATION AND FRAUD

- Respondents were asked, “which is a bigger problem:” *people who want to vote are not able to* OR *people who should not be allowed to vote are able to vote*. A narrow majority of respondents (51%) agree that the bigger problem is access to the franchise, rather than voter fraud. Given numerous studies over the past several years suggesting that voter fraud is a nearly non-existent problem in American elections, it is somewhat striking that 49% of Americans believe that fraud is a bigger problem than access. The story told by the cross-tabulations suggests that the major differences emerge because of party identification, race/ethnicity and age.
  - While 78% of Democrats view *access* to the franchise as a bigger problem, 76% of Republicans view fraud as a bigger problem. Independents also view fraud as a bigger problem than access, 57-43 percent.
  - Whites were more likely to view fraud as a problem (57%) than access (43%). This is a 45 point difference from African-Americans, who viewed access as a bigger problem (88%) than fraud (12%). Latinos (57%) and those of other races (non-white, non-Black), who do not identify as Hispanic/Latino (60%) were also more likely to view access as a problem.
  - There is also a sizeable age difference. Sixty-five percent of those 18-29 view access as a bigger issue, while the same number (65%) of those over 65 view fraud as a bigger issue.
- Additionally, a gap emerges in attitudes by race on trust in the electorate. A majority of Americans (43%) think people can be trusted to make intelligent/informed decisions when voting in US elections as opposed to 39% who say “people cannot be trusted;” 18% answered “don’t know.” Among those, more than half (60%) of the African American respondents felt this to be true. In comparison, less than half of white respondents (39%)

agreed. With an eight-point increase over white respondents, 47 percent of Latinos feel people can be trusted at the voting booths. Interestingly, while the differences by race appear to persist in this question, the responses are not nearly as partisan or ideological, with similar numbers of Democrats/Republicans and Conservatives/Liberals expressing trust/distrust.

## **FELON ENFRANCHISEMENT**

- During a given year there are roughly 1.3 million US citizens incarcerated in state prisons. In 2008, it was estimated that approximately 5.3 million American adults (about 1 in 40) are unable to vote because they are currently incarcerated or their state prevents former felons or those on parole from voting. Felons who complete their sentences become eligible to vote as soon as they are released in 38 states and the District of Columbia. Other states have varying rules that require a waiting period after release, while other states require ex-felons to apply to have their voting rights restored. Our survey posed a series of questions about felon enfranchisement, specifically asking respondents whether (1) currently incarcerated felons should be allowed to vote and (2) former felons should be allowed to vote.
  - While 39% of respondents opposed felon enfranchisement while they are in prison outright, only 18% opposed felon enfranchisement after ex-felons are released.
  - A few interesting trends appear. African-Americans are the most supportive of voting rights and the restoration of voting rights for felons/ex-felons. Additionally, those with a college degree are much more likely than those with less education to support restoration of voting rights. We also see large differences by ideology: 50% of liberals support voting rights restoration in every circumstance, while only 21% of conservatives support those rights in every circumstance.

## **CAMPAIGN FINANCE**

During the course of the Fall 2014 campaign, we fielded a survey that asked a robust battery of questions about attitudes regarding campaign finance. These data were collected as part of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study project (<http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces/home>).

In general, Americans are concerned about donors and money and elections, but also are receptive to messaging that portrays campaign donations as free speech. However, posed in terms of trade-offs, clear majorities are in favor of imposing donation limits to reduce corruption; they are not, to

be sure, in favor of publically financed campaigns. These results highlight the difficulty that Americans have in reconciling individualism and free speech beliefs central to the American democratic creed with the fact that majorities are clearly and overwhelmingly bothered by the role of money in US elections.

- Asked how closely they have followed the debate over campaign finance, only 13% report following this debate very closely, 31% somewhat closely, 35% not too closely and 22% not at all closely. Women report paying much less attention (37% follow closely compared to 50% of men). Younger voters, those with lower incomes, those with less education and those not registered to vote also report paying significantly less attention.
- Asked whether donors to political campaigns have too much power, 87% of Americans surveyed agreed with this statement (52% strongly agree, 35% somewhat agree). Furthermore, 91% of Americans surveyed agreed that wealthy Americans have more of a chance to influence elections than other citizens (62% strongly agree; 29% somewhat agree). The biggest differences we observe in this question are between Democrats and Republicans in the ‘strongly agree’ category.
- While the asymmetry of power granted to wealthy donors is seen as a problem across all categories, there is also a strong belief in individual liberty and freedom of speech expressed in the data. A 53% majority (25% strongly agree; 29% somewhat agree) also agrees that no one should be able to tell us how much money we can give to a political candidate and a large 71% majority (26% strongly agree; 45% somewhat agree) agrees that donating money is a protected right. Not surprisingly, there are large differences in answers to these questions by both party and ideology: 85% of Republicans, for instance view donating money as protected right compared to 67% of Independents and 63% of Democrats. There are also interesting differences by age 18-29 year olds (72%) and 40-49 year olds (75%) are the most likely to report viewing donating money as a protected right, as well as the most ardent defenders of the statement, “no one should be able to tell us how much money we can give to a political candidate.” While millennials are liberal on social issues, these findings also suggest a strong individualist streak in the youngest American adults.

- What these data all suggest is that multiple frames have power in influencing how Americans think about campaign finance. Perhaps the most telling question in our survey asked respondents to evaluate as a trade-off, “which of these statements comes closer to your point of view...”: (1) contributing money to political candidates is a form of free speech that must be protected, or (2) contributing money to political candidates can be a form of corruption that should be limited in order to maintain fair elections. Posed as a trade-off, Americans are more than twice as likely to agree with the point of view (67% to 33%) that campaign contributions can be a form of corruption as opposed to a form of free speech. Republicans are split evenly on this question while 69% of Independents and 78% of Democrats view money more as a form of corruption than speech.
- In addition, a large majority (69%) believes that the amount of money individuals donate to campaigns should be limited, with only 31% preferring the perspective that individuals should be allowed to contribute as much money to political campaigns as they would like. There are differences here by party and ideology, but majorities of conservatives (56%) and Republicans (57%) still believe in limits. Moreover, a majority (52%) believe that campaign donation limitations work to prevent corruption.
- There is less agreement, however, on how to proceed with reforms. A Majority (55%) believes that the current individual limit donations (\$2,600 per candidate in 2012) are appropriate; 19% think it should be more and 26% think it should be less. Asked if they would favor a publically funded federal campaign finance system, 44% reported being in favor, with 56% opposed. Republicans, not surprisingly are hugely opposed to publically funded campaigns (73% opposed), but a surprising number of Democrats (43%) also oppose such a system.