

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Benenson Strategy Group, Public Opinion Strategies, Center Forward
RE: Political, Economic and Health Care Landscape
DATE: October 20, 2021

Overview: A recent poll commissioned by Center Forward and conducted by Benenson Strategy Group and Public Opinion Strategies finds that voters nationwide and in battleground states¹ hold nuanced positions on the economy, infrastructure and health care, which provides context around the hurdles faced passing legislation in the last several months.

Our findings reveal that the economy, and particularly inflation, has emerged as a uniquely salient concern among voters, who are feeling higher costs in their pocketbooks and supply chain bottlenecks at the store. More than two thirds (68%) of voters believe that inflation won't subside unless the government becomes more fiscally responsible. Simultaneously, a similar share (65%) of voters agree that the economy won't be fixed until we can manage to get the coronavirus pandemic under control, highlighting the nuanced lens that voters view the economy through.

A majority of voters agree that **Congress should pass the infrastructure package**. The only remaining question is not *if* but *when*: a little more than a third of voters (35%) said Congress should pass the infrastructure bill as soon as possible, and a quarter of voters (26%) said Congress should wait until the social spending bill is finalized and then pass both.

Voters believe that working together is the key to fixing America's problems. Nearly two-in-three voters (65%) *strongly* agree that **collaboration between political parties** and the development of commonsense solutions is the best approach for tackling our nation's problems.

On issues related to health care, we see that voters are generally satisfied with their own coverage and doctors, but want to prioritize cost reductions over the quality of care or access to care.

Political Landscape: In terms of the political environment/landscape, our poll finds by a two-to-one ratio, voters think that the country is headed in the wrong direction (63% wrong direction / 29% right direction), with 70% of Independents indicating the country is headed in the wrong direction.

Despite a majority of voters believing that the country is headed in the wrong direction, President Biden is only slightly underwater on both favorability (47% favorable / 51% unfavorable) and job approval (48% approve / 50% disapprove).

Similarly, voters give Democrats in Congress higher favorability ratings than they give Republicans in Congress, largely due to Democrats rating their own party more favorably than Republicans. In a classic case of Fenno's Paradox, voters tend to rate *their own representative in Congress* favorably (53% favorable / 37% unfavorable) while being more critical of Congress overall.

¹ Battleground states, which we will refer to throughout this analysis, include: AZ, FL, GA, IA, ME, MI, MN, NV, NH, NC, OH, PA, TX, & WI.

When asked to select their top three priorities from a list of issues that national leadership should address, voters suggest that immigration/border security (38%), the economy² (37%), COVID-19 pandemic recovery (34%), and health care³ are all top priorities. Lower priorities include housing, prescription drug prices, online privacy and college education, among other issues. Top priorities are split along party lines:

- Democrats want to prioritize pandemic recovery, the environment/climate change, and health care
- Republicans want to prioritize immigration/border security, the economy, and national security
- Independents want to prioritize the economy, health care, and immigration/border security

***“Below you will see a list of issues that some people may think need to be addressed by our national leadership...Please choose up to three issues that you feel are most important.”
(Multiple responses accepted, results will not add up to 100%)***

| | National | Battlegrounds | Party ID | | |
|--|----------|---------------|----------|-----|-----|
| | | | Dem | Ind | Rep |
| Immigration and border security | 38 | 41 | 10 | 37 | 70 |
| The economy / inflation / jobs | 37 | 37 | 23 | 41 | 49 |
| COVID-19 pandemic recovery | 34 | 29 | 44 | 31 | 25 |
| The environment / climate change | 30 | 27 | 50 | 29 | 10 |
| National security and terrorism | 25 | 26 | 9 | 24 | 43 |
| Health insurance / coverage costs | 23 | 21 | 24 | 23 | 21 |
| Supply chain problems for both businesses and consumers | 23 | 22 | 11 | 25 | 33 |
| Raise taxes on the wealthy | 19 | 20 | 34 | 17 | 5 |
| The high cost of housing | 14 | 18 | 17 | 17 | 10 |
| Prescription drug prices | 12 | 16 | 19 | 11 | 7 |
| Race relations | 11 | 12 | 18 | 12 | 4 |
| Expanding health care coverage for lower-income Americans or the uninsured | 10 | 11 | 14 | 14 | 3 |
| Online privacy / protecting children online | 7 | 8 | 7 | 5 | 8 |
| The high cost of college education | 6 | 7 | 9 | 5 | 3 |
| Childcare | 3 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 1 |

² On the economy, the sample was split, with half hearing “The economy and **jobs**” and the other half hearing “The economy and **inflation**.” Of the sample that heard “The economy and **inflation**,” 42% selected it as a top priority, compared to only 33% of those that heard “The economy and **jobs**.” The figure cited above represents a combination of these two samples.

³ We tested multiple health care items in this question. While no individual health care item was rated as a top priority, they are collectively one of the top-testing priorities.

The Infrastructure Impasse: Our research also reveals that three-in-five (61%) voters want the infrastructure package to be passed, but they are just as divided as Capitol Hill over whether it should be passed immediately or delayed until the reconciliation package can be finalized.

After being read a brief introduction on the infrastructure package's contents⁴, more than a third of voters (35%) suggest that the infrastructure package should be passed as soon as possible, regardless of whether the social spending package has been finalized, with 26% saying they should be passed at the same time, and 27% saying neither should be passed at all.

- Democrats are even more divided over whether the infrastructure package should be passed as soon as possible or passed in conjunction with the social spending bill, with 43% saying they want to pass the infrastructure package as soon as possible, regardless of the social spending package's status, and 41% saying they should both be passed together.

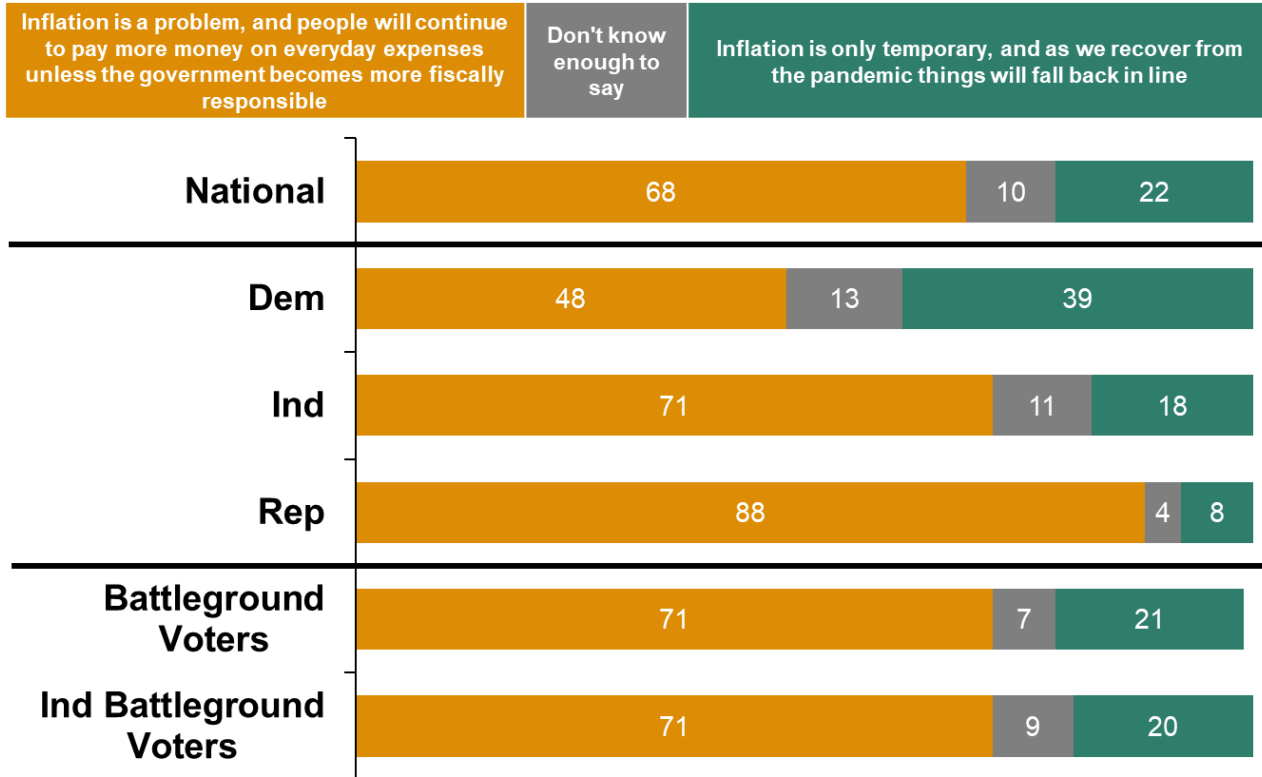
⁴ Respondents were read: *As you may or may not know, in August the U.S. Senate passed a bipartisan infrastructure package totaling \$1.2 trillion that would expand access to clean water and internet broadband across every corner of America, and would repair and modernize our roads, highways, and bridges.*

The U.S. House of Representatives has delayed a vote on that same infrastructure package until it can finalize a separate social spending package, and then plans to hold a vote on each package on the same day. Given what you know, do you think the U.S. House of Representatives should...

- 1) *Pass the infrastructure package as soon as possible, regardless of whether the social spending package has been finalized*
- 2) *Wait until the social spending package is finalized, and then pass both the infrastructure package and the social spending package at the same time*
- 3) *Not pass either the infrastructure package or the spending package*
- 9) *Don't know enough to say*

The Economy: Inflation is a top concern and priority among voters, with 68% – including a near-majority (48%) of Democrats and 71% of Independents in battlegrounds – suggesting that inflation will not subside unless the federal government becomes more fiscally responsible.

“When it comes to inflation in America, which of the following do you agree with most?”



Further, voters across party lines say that higher costs of living due to inflation would be most likely to cause them serious financial difficulties, which ranked higher than losing their jobs or paying for a serious medical issue. And when asked on an open-ended basis what would be most helpful in improving their personal financial situation, a plurality (17%) suggest lowered costs of goods or lower levels of inflation.

**“In a few words, what would most help or improve your financial situation right now?”
(Verbatim responses)**

“Lower inflation rates. Reduce food prices, increase pay.”

- Hispanic Woman, Ind, Age 35-49

“The biggest help financially would be to lower consumer prices on just about everything and control inflation.”

- White Woman, Dem, Age 65+

“As a small business owner, the inflation and rising costs of all things overhead are destroying industries like mine.”

- White Man, Dem, Age 35-49

Voters have also felt the effects of recent supply chain issues when they go to the store, with nearly half (49%) suggesting that they've struggled to find at least one item that they would normally buy over the past month, and an additional 20% indicating that their preferred brands have been unavailable.

- That said, supply chain problems fell on the lower end of issue priorities for voters, indicating that it's not as salient an issue as inflation.

Beyond inflation and supply chains, we also gauged perceptions on the impact federal spending has had on recent labor shortages. Respondents were asked:

“When it comes to recent reports of labor shortages that you may have read about in the news, which of the following do you agree with most?”

- 1) Labor shortages are a result of the federal government spending too much and disincentivizing people from working
- 2) Labor shortages are a result of businesses that aren't paying enough or providing the level of protection from COVID that people need

52% of voters indicated that the labor shortages are a result of federal spending, compared to 40% who think that shortages are a result of businesses not paying enough or not providing adequate COVID protection, though this question exhibited partisan disparities that are more in line with what we'd expect in a polarized political environment:

- Only 21% of Democrats point to federal spending, while 68% point to businesses
- 54% of Independents point to federal spending, and 38% point to businesses

All of this, though, should be considered with the understanding that a strong majority of voters – including a majority of battleground voters and Independents – agree that the economy will not be fixed until we can manage to get the pandemic under control, suggesting that COVID mitigation efforts are embedded in voters' perception of the economy.

Health Care Attitudes and Perceptions: Voters are generally satisfied with their personal health care coverage, both in terms of quality and access. But voters indicate that – in the event of sickness or an accident – they are *most* worried about paying for hospital costs and out-of-pocket costs related to their health insurance more than anything else.

- This finding is corroborated by a [Kaiser Family Foundation study](#) conducted in September of 2020, which finds that inpatient and outpatient care are the primary drivers of high health care costs in America relative to other wealthy countries.

We also find that voters’ interaction with the health care system hasn’t materially worsened since the pandemic, with 63% of voters indicating that their personal interaction with the health care system since the pandemic is either unchanged (41%) or *more* positive (22%), and only 31% indicating that their experience with the health care system has gotten worse.

On prescription drug costs, voters don’t view prescription drugs as their primary health care priority, though it is still a concern. Only 14% of voters indicate that, in the event of sickness or an accident, they are worried about paying for prescription drugs.

When asked whether Congress should focus more on “reducing the overall costs of health care coverage, such as premiums, deductibles, and co-pays,” or focus more specifically on “reducing the costs of prescription drugs,” by a two-to-one margin voters chose the former related to coverage (64%), compared to 27% who chose the latter related to prescription drugs. This trend holds across parties, with Democrats inching slightly higher than Republicans and Independents on reducing the costs that have a more personal financial impact.

| | National | Battlegrounds | Party ID | | |
|--|----------|---------------|----------|-----|-----|
| | | | Dem | Ind | Rep |
| Congress should focus more on reducing the overall costs of health care coverage such as premiums, deductibles, and co-pays. | 64 | 64 | 66 | 64 | 63 |
| Congress should focus more on reducing the costs of prescription drugs. | 27 | 28 | 28 | 26 | 28 |
| Don't know enough to say | 8 | 8 | 6 | 10 | 9 |

Methodology: Benenson Strategy Group conducted n=2,672 interviews with likely 2022 voters in the United States from October 7-18, 2021. Interviews were conducted using a multi-mode methodology that included live dialers, SMS text-to-web services, and online panels. The sample was weighted to ensure it was proportionately representative of likely voters in the United States, and the margin of sampling error is $\pm 1.9\%$ for the full sample at the 95% confidence level.

About Center Forward: Center Forward brings together members of Congress, not-for-profits, academic experts, trade associations, corporations, and unions to find common ground. Our mission: to give centrist allies the information they need to craft common sense solutions, and provide those allies the support they need to turn those ideas into results.

Center Forward is a centrist, bipartisan nonprofit organization that focuses on convening discussion opportunities and education.

Center Forward has its roots with moderate Democrats, who have always played a critical role in maintaining fiscal responsibility, supporting pro-growth business policies and leading meaningful reform. After the extreme polarization in the 2010 elections the organization was founded to give pragmatic Democrats and Republicans an opportunity to come together to tackle our country's biggest problems.