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Arkansas Poll Finds Economy Remains Top Concern for Arkansas Voters

Poll also finds that 69% of Arkansans personally know someone who died or was hospitalized due to COVID-19

Social Media Post: New #UARK Arkansas Poll finds economy remains top concern, 69% of Arkansans personally know someone who died or was hospitalized due to COVID-19 @Blair_Center

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. – The 23rd annual Arkansas Poll, released today, found voters continue to be most concerned about the economy, healthcare and politics, which were the top three concerns from 2020. However, only concern about the economy held steady, while concerns about healthcare and politics saw declines.

The 2021 poll also addressed approval ratings for public figures as well as positions on current issues, such as gun control, abortion, climate change and the death penalty. Additional questions addressed political party affiliation and ideology, life in Arkansas during COVID and opinions about female politicians.

While the top three concerns of Arkansas voters were unchanged from the previous year, the acuity of concern, as measured by total number of people expressing concern, declined. A similar percentage of respondents were concerned about the economy in both 2020 and 2021, 23% and 22% respectively, but concern about healthcare fell 11 points from 2020 to 2021, and concerns

about politics also fell 11 points over the same period. The number of respondents whose answers fell into the “other/don’t know/refused” category grew from 4% in 2020 to 45% this year, reflecting the more open-ended questions they were asked.

“Most of the movement in our ‘top issues’ responses is attributable to the alternating way we ask the question,” said Janine Parry, director of the Arkansas Poll and professor of political science at the University of Arkansas. “This year, as in all odd-numbered years, it was truly open-ended. That means that while it’s easy to lump together answers like ‘good jobs’ and ‘wages’ into a broad category like ‘the economy,’ a response like ‘vaccines’ is not as clearly lumped together with ‘prescription costs’ into ‘healthcare.’ The bottom line is that Arkansans — like Americans — nearly always direct our attention to the same 3 or 4 things: economics, healthcare, education and, lately, their frustration with politics.”

Perhaps indicating that frustration, Gov. Asa Hutchinson, U.S. Sen. John Boozman and U.S. Sen. Tom Cotton all saw significant drops in their approval ratings over the last year. Hutchinson’s ratings declined from 69% to 57%, Boozman’s from 50% to 37%, and Cotton’s from 58% to 49%. But that doesn’t mean Democrats are making inroads. Sixty-three percent of Arkansas voters disapproved of President Joe Biden, while just 30 percent approved. Further, twice as many respondents plan to vote for the Republican nominee, as compared with the Democratic nominee, in next year’s race for governor.

“There are two things going on with public figure approval ratings this year,” Parry said. “On the one hand, partisans get excited in election years, so approval of all three state-level figures was higher than normal in 2020. On the other hand, even with this year’s drop, Hutchinson in particular is faring well compared to most governors who are averaging about 10 points lower. Managing the COVID crisis as long as they have — particularly alongside hyperpartisan legislatures of both stripes — has taken a toll.”

Other notable one-year shifts occurred in the “Life in Arkansas” section of the poll:

Do you feel Arkansas is headed in the right or wrong direction?

Right: 61% (down 16 points from 2020)

Wrong: 28% (up 8 points)

Other: 12%

Are you financially better/worse/same compared to last year?

Better: 22% (down 12 points from 2020)

Same: 47%

Worse: 29% (up 9 points)

Other: 4%

A year from now, will you be better/worse/same financially?

Better: 21% (down 13 points from 2020)

Same: 45%

Worse: 27% (up 21 points)

Other: 8%

To make sense of this increased pessimism, Parry said, “It could be a hangover from the pandemic slowdown, but that is hard to fathom in light of Arkansas’ low unemployment rate. I suspect these dips reflect instead our current political climate: negative polarization compounded by hyper nationalization. Nothing seems to matter except that the other team occupies the White House, a phenomenon that likely affected blue-state voters during the Trump years.”

Finally, 69% of voters also indicated that they knew someone who had been hospitalized or died as a result of COVID-19. But when asked whether they were in favor of mask mandates in a range of locations, 61% favored such a requirement on an airplane, the highest percentage, while 42% favored it as a condition of entering a restaurant, the lowest percentage. The majority of respondents were also opposed to having to show proof of vaccination at sporting events or concerts (55% opposed), inside restaurants (60% opposed), and inside stores and businesses (61% opposed).

The poll was conducted through 800 telephone interviews with randomly selected adult Arkansans between Oct. 12 and Oct. 24. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percent.

The full 2021 Arkansas Poll Summary Report, protocols and historic outcomes can be found at the [Arkansas Poll web page](#).

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[The Arkansas Poll] – <https://fulbright.uark.edu/departments/political-science/partners/arkansas-poll.php>

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