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THE STATE OF THE NATION:
A 50-STATE COVID-19 SURVEY
REPORT #21: MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEMS FACING THE NATION TODAY

USA, October 2020

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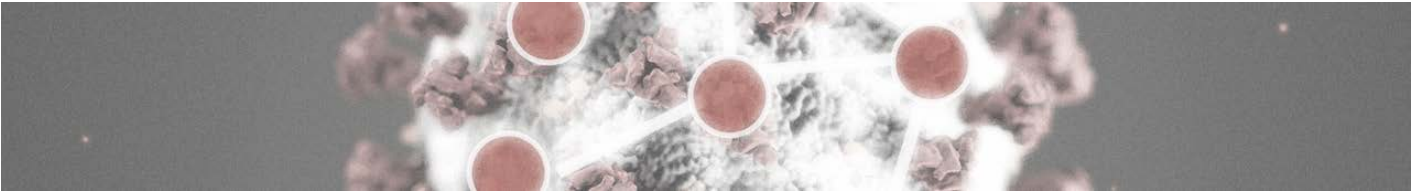Matthew Simonson, Northeastern University

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Northwestern University

Report of October 31, 2020, v.1

From: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States

A joint project of:
Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

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COVER MEMO

Summary Memo — October 31, 2020

The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States
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From April through October, we conducted multiple waves of a large, 50-state survey, some results of which are presented here. You can find previous reports online at covidstates.org.

Note on methods:

In September 2020, we surveyed 20,315 individuals across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. We combined that data with 3,676 responses collected in October from battleground states. The data was collected by PureSpectrum via an online, nonprobability sample, with state-level representative quotas for race/ethnicity, age, and gender (for methodological details on other waves, see covidstates.org). In addition to balancing on these dimensions, we reweighted our data using demographic characteristics to match the U.S. population with respect to race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and living in urban, suburban, or rural areas.

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Assessing the most important problems facing the nation in September and October, 2020

Which issues are, or will be, on voters' minds as they enter the voting booth on or before November 3rd? Candidates Trump and Biden have stressed quite distinct issues throughout the campaign. The Democrat, Joe Biden, has sought to maintain a focus on the President's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, claiming that Donald Trump is undermining Americans' healthcare with his COVID-19 response. He also has accentuated Trump's efforts to revoke the Affordable Care Act, and the issue of systemic racism. President Trump, the Republican, has emphasized starkly different issues, particularly law and order and the economy, while seeking to avoid focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. But to what extent are the campaigns succeeding in framing the election according to their preferred emphases? In this report, we present results from our September and October survey waves in which we asked respondents to name the most important problems (MIPs) facing the nation. We investigate overall responses, as well as differences across individual states and demographic subgroups.

Overall Patterns

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most highly cited issue is COVID-19, mentioned as the top problem facing the nation by nearly one third (32%) of all respondents nationally. While the percentages vary widely, from a low of 13% in Wyoming and Alaska, to highs of 44% and 42% in the District of Columbia and Hawaii, respectively, **COVID-19 was the number one problem mentioned by respondents in *every state except Alaska, where climate change comes out on top***. (In Alaska, 16% named climate change as the number one problem facing the nation.) Figure 1 presents the percentages of respondents naming COVID as the number one problem facing the nation in each state.

Other problems mentioned by at least 5% of respondents include racism (10%), the economy (8%), healthcare (7%), and crime and violence (6%). These topline figures suggest that the issues both candidates have sought to emphasize are indeed among the most frequently cited problems. **Yet, they also suggest that the campaign, in the aggregate, is being fought out more squarely on turf preferred by Biden. Biden's preferred issues rank 1st (COVID-19), 2nd (racism), and 4th (health care) among the public; in contrast, Trump's preferred issues rank 3rd (the economy) and 5th (crime and violence).**

Figure 1. Percent of Americans saying that COVID-19 is the most important problem facing the country today

What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?
[Percent respondents who selected COVID-19]
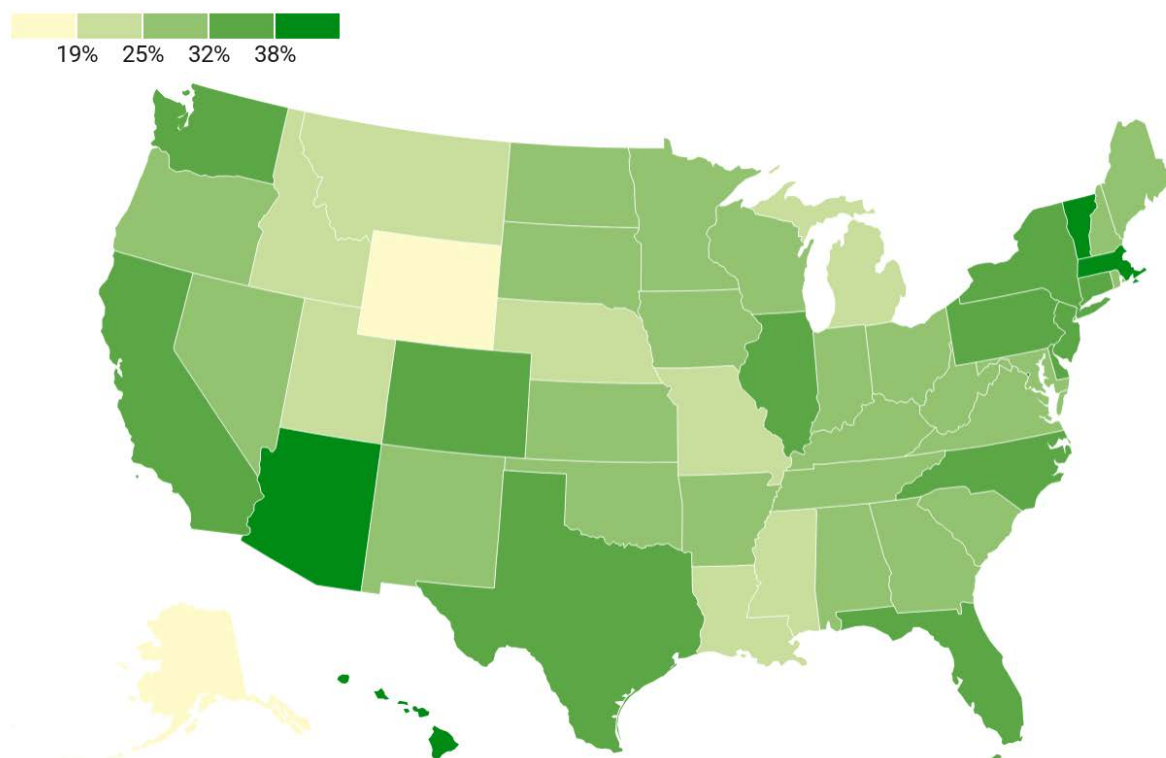
19%   25%   32%   38%

National sample, N = 20,315, Time period: 9/4/2020-9/27/2020

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org
 • Created with Datawrapper

Of course, the election is really a series of state elections, rather than a single national campaign. The picture is somewhat different when we focus on state-level responses regarding the most important problem *other than COVID-19* (Figure 2). In our September wave, we polled respondents in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia on their top 3 most important problems. The results show that majorities of respondents in **43 of the 50 states selected one of three issues: racism (17 states), crime and violence (18 states), and healthcare (8 states).**

Figure 2. Second most important problem facing the country

What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?
[Second problem following "climate change" in Alaska and "COVID-19" in all other states]

■ Climate Change ■ Crime and Violence ■ Economy ■ Healthcare ■ Racism

National sample, N = 20,315, Time period: 9/4/2020-9/27/2020

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org
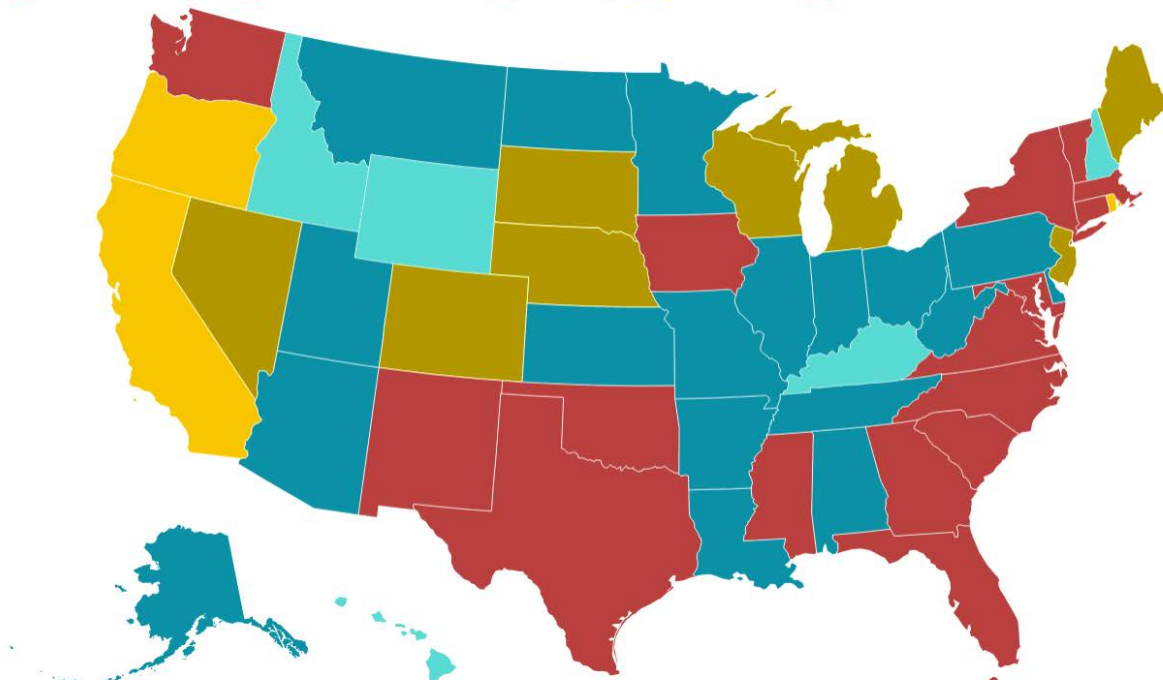 • Created with Datawrapper

Bringing in the Battlegrounds

For the remainder of this report, we broaden our focus to include both national results and results from 10 states that have been listed by RealClearPolitics (RCP) as battlegrounds[1]: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. While there is no obvious pattern to the states falling into any of the three groupings of the most frequently mentioned issues apparent in Figure 2 (again, from the September wave), it is interesting to note that all of the battleground states fall into one of these three clusters.

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[1] This list changes as polling averages evolve. So ours represents a snapshot from a particular moment, based on RCP polling averages at the time we downloaded the list.

Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Iowa all rate racism as the second-most-important problem, while Arizona, Ohio and Pennsylvania rate crime and violence as such. Finally, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Maine choose healthcare as the #2 problem.

Comparing the September and October waves (Figure 3), we see shifts in the #2 problem in three of the 10 states: Florida (from racism to the economy), Ohio (from racism to healthcare), and Wisconsin (from racism to the economy). **Two of the three shifts (Wisconsin and Florida, but not Ohio) appear to move in directions preferred more by the Trump campaign than the Biden campaign, suggesting that the President's preferred issue framing gained a bit more purchase in October.**

Figure 3. Most important problem facing the nation, excluding COVID-19
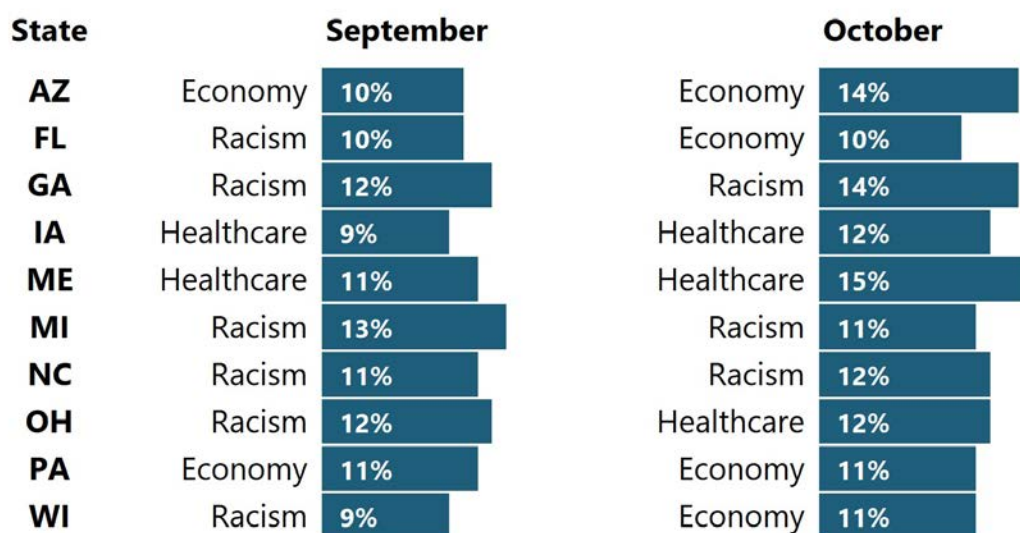
State	September		October	
AZ	Economy	10%	Economy	14%
FL	Racism	10%	Economy	10%
GA	Racism	12%	Racism	14%
IA	Healthcare	9%	Healthcare	12%
ME	Healthcare	11%	Healthcare	15%
MI	Racism	13%	Racism	11%
NC	Racism	11%	Racism	12%
OH	Racism	12%	Healthcare	12%
PA	Economy	11%	Economy	11%
WI	Racism	9%	Economy	11%

National sample, N1 = 3,676 (9/4/20-9/27/20), N2 = 3,984 (10/2/20-10/25/20)
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As an aside, though we do not find a clear partisan pattern at the state level, the individual level numbers in October suggest a strong relationship between partisanship and the most important problems mentioned by respondents. **For instance, among those who mention racism as the #2 problem, more than four in five (81%) indicate that they intend to vote for Biden in 2020. Conversely, among those who mention crime and violence as the #2 problem, two out of three indicate that they intend to vote for Trump in 2020.**

Comparing September and October, respondents in all 10 states ranked COVID-19 as the #1 most important problem in both waves. The percentage of respondents mentioning COVID-19 as their top problem varies, as does subsequent mentions of other national problems. Figure 4 compares the percentage of respondents in these 10 battlegrounds mentioning COVID-19 as the #1 problem in September and October. In September, the percentages mentioning COVID-19 as the top problem facing the nation varied from 25% in Michigan to 40% in Arizona. By October, the corresponding percentages ranged from 20% in Iowa to 37% in Florida. We see only minor shifts in eight of the 10 states, with variations less than 3 percentage points. The two exceptions are Arizona and Iowa, where the percentages fall by 8 and 7 points, respectively.

Figure 4: Percentages of respondents naming COVID-19 as the most important problem (September vs. October)

State	September	October	Change (from Sep to Oct)
AZ	40%	32%	-8%
FL	35%	37%	2%
GA	31%	28%	-3%
IA	27%	20%	-7%
ME	31%	31%	0%
MI	25%	27%	2%
NC	34%	31%	-3%
OH	29%	29%	0%
PA	33%	33%	0%
WI	30%	32%	2%

National sample, N1 = 3,676 (9/4/20-9/27/20), N2 = 3,984 (10/2/20-10/25/20)
The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States
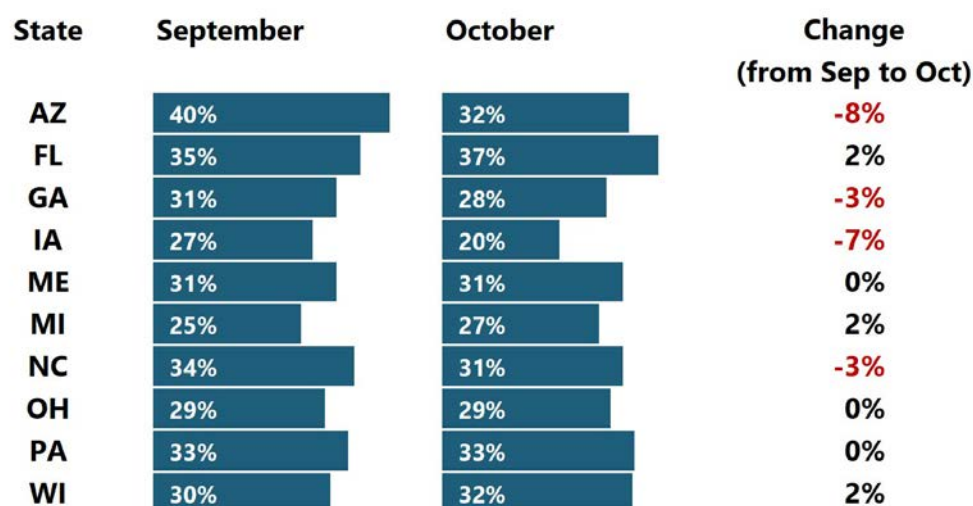 (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and
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Partisan Differences

As shown in Figure 5, breaking out responses by party reflects the overall patterns described above, and reveals both partisan overlap and difference. **Among Democrats, the top 5 issues mentioned as the nation's #1 most important problem are COVID-19 (mentioned by 40%), racism (14%), healthcare (9%), climate change (7%) and the economy (5%). Among Republicans, three of the top 5 issues are the same, albeit in a different sequence, while the remaining two are completely different.**

In descending order, the top 5 issues among Republicans are: COVID-19 (mentioned by 25%), the economy (13%), crime and violence (9%), healthcare (6%), and abortion (6%). Finally, Independents mirror Democrats for four of the five issues, albeit with a different order of prioritization: COVID-19 (mentioned by 31%), racism (10%), the economy (8%), healthcare (8%),and -- the one issue not in the top 5 among Democrats -- crime and violence (5%).

Figure 5. Top 5 Mentions of #1 most important problem facing the nation, national average by party (September)

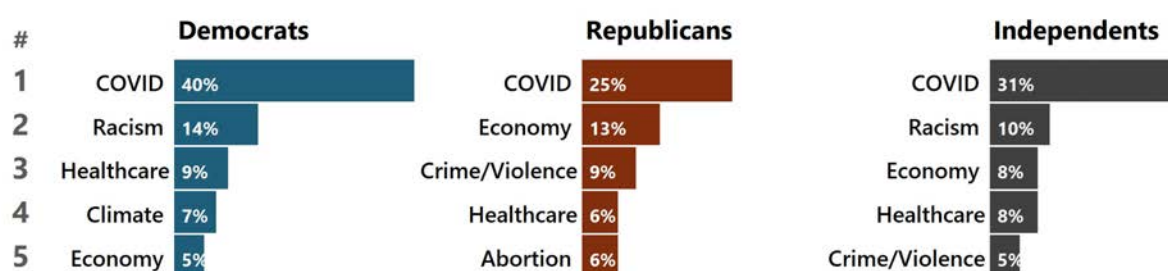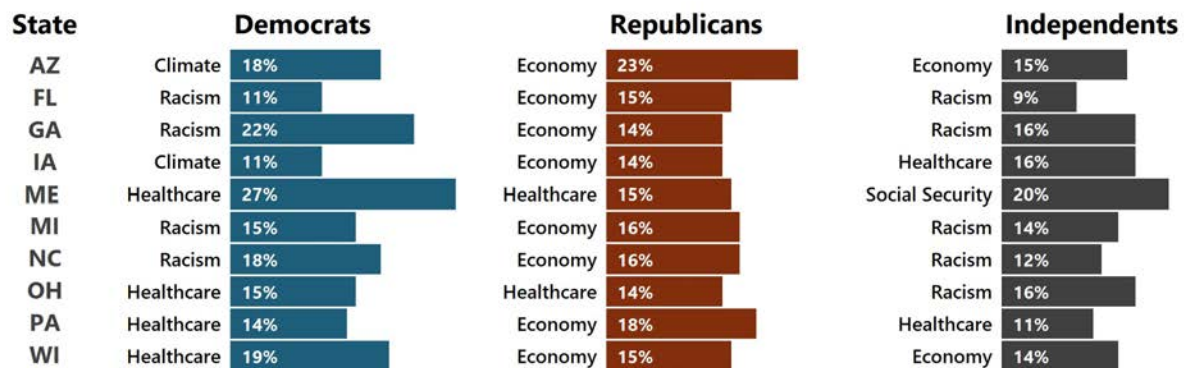National sample, N = 20,315, Time period: 9/4/2020-9/27/2020
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Notably, while COVID-19 is the most frequently mentioned problem across all three partisan subgroups, **Democrats are 13 points more likely than independents, and 18 points more likely than Republicans, to cite the virus as the nation's most important problem.** None of the other differences are as large, though Republicans do differ from Democrats and Independents in their top 5 list of the most import problems facing the nation when it comes to their emphasis on crime and violence, as well as abortion, instead of racism and climate change.

When we turn to individual states and exclude COVID-19 from being the most important problem cited (Figure 6), we see stark differences between partisans. **Among Democrats, the three most frequently cited issues are racism (Florida, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina), healthcare (Maine, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) and climate change (Arozona, Iowa). Republicans, in contrast, cite the economy as the #2 issue in every state except Maine and Ohio, where healthcare is the second most important problem, after COVID-19. Independents, in turn, cite the economy in two of the battlegrounds (Arizona and Wisconsin), racism in five (Florida, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, and Ohio), and healthcare in two (Iowa and Pennsylvania).**

Figure 6. Top 5 Mentions of #1 most important problem facing the nation, national average by party (October)

State	Democrats		Republicans		Independents	
AZ	Climate	18%	Economy	23%	Economy	15%
FL	Racism	11%	Economy	15%	Racism	9%
GA	Racism	22%	Economy	14%	Racism	16%
IA	Climate	11%	Economy	14%	Healthcare	16%
ME	Healthcare	27%	Healthcare	15%	Social Security	20%
MI	Racism	15%	Economy	16%	Racism	14%
NC	Racism	18%	Economy	16%	Racism	12%
OH	Healthcare	15%	Healthcare	14%	Racism	16%
PA	Healthcare	14%	Economy	18%	Healthcare	11%
WI	Healthcare	19%	Economy	15%	Economy	14%

National sample, N = 20,315, Time period: 9/4/2020-9/27/2020
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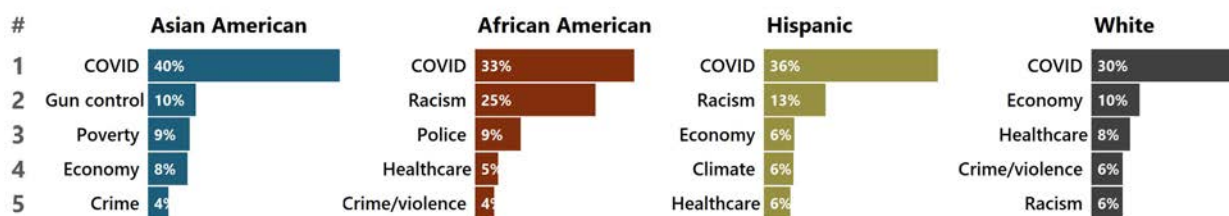
Differences by Race/Ethnicity

We again look at the percentages of respondents mentioning a given problem as the top problem facing the nation, but grouped by race/ethnicity (see Figure 7). Among white respondents, the 5 most frequently mentioned problems are COVID-19 (30%), the economy (10%), healthcare (8%), crime and violence (6%), and race (6%). The patterns differ starkly for other groups. Among Black respondents, the top 5 issues are COVID-19 (33%), racism (25%), police brutality (9%), healthcare (5%), and crime (4%). The corresponding issues and percentages among Hispanics are COVID-19 (36%), racism (13%), the economy (6%), climate change (6%), and healthcare (6%). Finally, among Asian Americans, the top five issues are COVID-19 (40%), gun control (10%), poverty (9%), the economy (8%), and crime (4%)

Looking across these topics, we see a mix of similarities and differences across racial and ethnic groups. COVID-19 tops all four lists, while the economy appears, with variant rankings, on the top 5 lists of three of the four groups, with the exception being Black respondents. That said, Asian Americans were more likely than the other three groups to mention COVID-19. Three of the four groups also mention the economy, healthcare and racism, with the exceptions in the latter two instances being Asian American respondents and the exception in the first instance being Black respondents.

Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans each have one or more problems in their top 5 list that does not appear in any of the other groups' lists. For Black respondents, this item is police brutality; for Asian American respondents, it is national debt, poverty, and gun control. Finally, for Hispanic respondents, it is climate change.

It is noteworthy here that so few respondents mention racism as the top national problem, notwithstanding the Black Lives Matter-led protest movement during the summer of 2020. The figure is relatively high among Black respondents (25%), but far lower for the other groups, with the second-highest figure being 13% among Hispanics.

Figure 7. Top 5 Mentions of #1 most important problem facing the nation, national average by race (September)

#	Asian American		African American		Hispanic		White	
1	COVID	40%	COVID	33%	COVID	36%	COVID	30%
2	Gun control	10%	Racism	25%	Racism	13%	Economy	10%
3	Poverty	9%	Police	9%	Economy	6%	Healthcare	8%
4	Economy	8%	Healthcare	5%	Climate	6%	Crime/violence	6%
5	Crime	4%	Crime/violence	4%	Healthcare	6%	Racism	6%

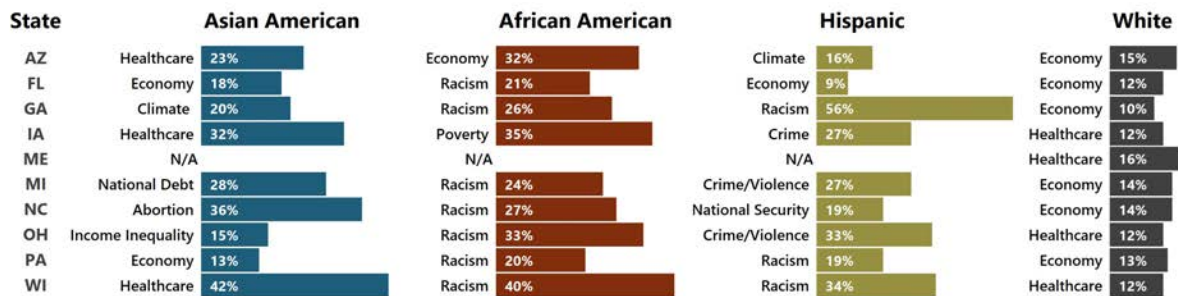National sample, N = 20,315, Time period: 9/4/2020-9/27/2020
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When we look at the most important problems other than COVID-19 that are mentioned across the individual battleground states by different racial and ethnic groups, we find a diverse range of responses. **White respondents mention the economy as the #2 problem in six states (Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania)**, while citing healthcare in the other four battlegrounds (Iowa, Maine, Ohio, and Wisconsin). In sharp contrast, **Black respondents identify racism as the #2 problem in seven of the 10 battleground states, with the exceptions being Arizona, Iowa, and Maine**, where respondents cite the economy, poverty, and education, respectively.

Among Hispanics and Asian Americans, we find much wider ranges of #2 problems across the battlegrounds. In the former case, three battleground states mention racism (Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin), two mention crime and violence (Iowa and Michigan), and one each mention climate change (Arizona), the economy (Florida) and national security (North Carolina). Finally, among Asian Amerians, two battlegrounds mention the economy as the #2 problem (Florida and Pennsylvania), and three others mention healthcare (Arizona, Iowa and Wisconsin). Asian Amerians in the other battlegrounds all mention different issues as the nation's most important problem other than COVID-19, including climate change in Georgia, the national debt in Michigan, abortion in North Carolina, and income inequality in Ohio.

Figure 8. Top 5 Mentions of #1 most important problem facing the nation, by race/ethnicity (October)

State	Asian American		African American		Hispanic		White	
AZ	Healthcare	23%	Economy	32%	Climate	16%	Economy	15%
FL	Economy	18%	Racism	21%	Economy	9%	Economy	12%
GA	Climate	20%	Racism	26%	Racism	56%	Economy	10%
IA	Healthcare	32%	Poverty	35%	Crime	27%	Healthcare	12%
ME	N/A		N/A		N/A		Healthcare	16%
MI	National Debt	28%	Racism	24%	Crime/Violence	27%	Economy	14%
NC	Abortion	36%	Racism	27%	National Security	19%	Economy	14%
OH	Income Inequality	15%	Racism	33%	Crime/Violence	33%	Healthcare	12%
PA	Economy	13%	Racism	20%	Racism	19%	Economy	13%
WI	Healthcare	42%	Racism	40%	Racism	34%	Healthcare	12%

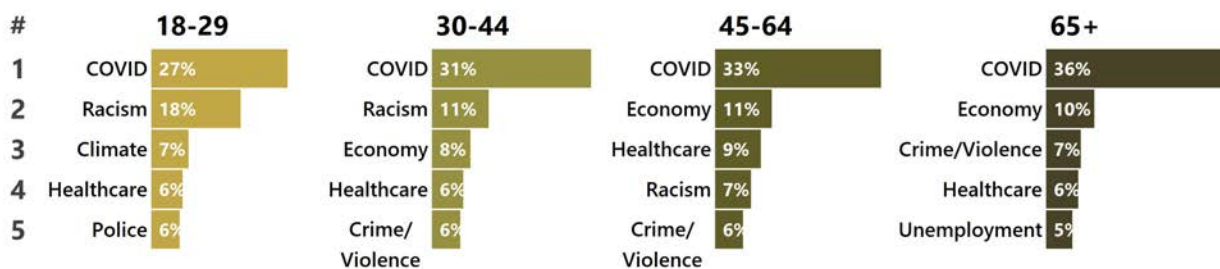National sample, N = 3,676 (9/4/20-9/27/20)
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Differences by Age Cohort

COVID-19 also ranks as the top problem mentioned across all four age groups we tracked (Figure 9). That said, as one might expect, the salience of COVID steadily increases with age, with respondents over age 65 about 9 percentage points more likely to mention COVID-19 as the nation's top problem than their younger counterparts between ages 18 and 29.

Figure 9. Most important problem facing the nation, excluding COVID-19 national average by age (October)

#	18-29		30-44		45-64		65+	
1	COVID	27%	COVID	31%	COVID	33%	COVID	36%
2	Racism	18%	Racism	11%	Economy	11%	Economy	10%
3	Climate	7%	Economy	8%	Healthcare	9%	Crime/Violence	7%
4	Healthcare	6%	Healthcare	6%	Racism	7%	Healthcare	6%
5	Police	6%	Crime/Violence	6%	Crime/Violence	6%	Unemployment	5%

National sample, N = 20,315, Time period: 9/4/2020-9/27/2020
The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States
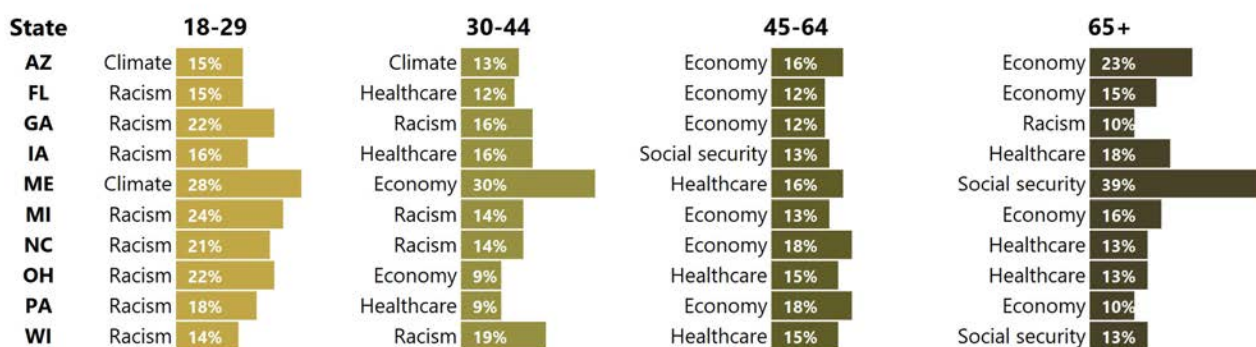(A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org

Once we look beyond COVID-19, however, we do see noteworthy differences across age groups. **Respondents under 30 are far more likely as their counterparts over age 65 to mention racism.** This topic did not even make the top-5 list for the oldest age group. **Climate change is among the top five most-frequently mentioned problems only among respondents under 30** (mentioned by 7% of this age group).

Conversely, the economy is more salient to older respondents, with 8% of respondents in the 30-44 group, 11% in the 45-64 group, and 10% in the 65+ group mentioning the issue. Interestingly, the variation in percent mentioning healthcare is considerably smaller, ranging from 6% among the youngest group to 9% among respondents in the 45-64 age group.

Turning to the individual battleground states, we once again find a great deal of variety across states and age cohorts (see Figure 10). **The youngest group of respondents, age 18-29, named racism as the most important problem other than COVID-19 in 8 of the 10 battleground states (Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin). In the other two states (Arizona and Maine), the #2 problem for this cohort was Climate Change. Among respondents in the 30-44 age group, racism is the top problem, other than COVID-19, in four states (Georgia, Michigan, and North Carolina, and Wisconsin).** Healthcare was also cited by respondents in this age group in three states (Florida, Iowa, and Pennsylvania). The other three issues named as the most important problem, excluding COVID-19, were climate change (Arizona) and the economy (Maine and Ohio). **Turning to respondents in the 45-64 cohort, here the economy emerges as the most frequently mentioned problem, other than COVID-19, in six of the 10 battlegrounds (Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania).** Three additional states cited healthcare (Maine, Ohio, and Wisconsin), while respondents in Iowa mentioned social security as the top problem, excluding COVID-19. Finally, **among respondents ages 65+, four state cited the economy (Arizona, Florida, Michigan, and Pennsylvania), three mentioned healthcare (Iowa, North Carolina, Ohio), two cited social security (Maine and Wisconsin), and one (Georgia) named racism as the most important problem, again, other than COVID-19.**

Figure 10. Most important problem facing the nation, excluding COVID-19 by age (October)

State	18-29		30-44		45-64		65+	
AZ	Climate	15%	Climate	13%	Economy	16%	Economy	23%
FL	Racism	15%	Healthcare	12%	Economy	12%	Economy	15%
GA	Racism	22%	Racism	16%	Economy	12%	Racism	10%
IA	Racism	16%	Healthcare	16%	Social security	13%	Healthcare	18%
ME	Climate	28%	Economy	30%	Healthcare	16%	Social security	39%
MI	Racism	24%	Racism	14%	Economy	13%	Economy	16%
NC	Racism	21%	Racism	14%	Economy	18%	Healthcare	13%
OH	Racism	22%	Economy	9%	Healthcare	15%	Healthcare	13%
PA	Racism	18%	Healthcare	9%	Economy	18%	Economy	10%
WI	Racism	14%	Racism	19%	Healthcare	15%	Social security	13%

A Brief Comment on Differences by Individual COVID-19 Status

As with all other comparisons in this report, COVID-19 is the most frequently mentioned problem among respondents, whether or not they report a COVID-19 diagnosis in their households (that is, they say that they or a family member have been diagnosed with COVID-19). However, when just considering the September wave, we find that the issue is modestly more salient among those who have experienced COVID-19 in their households. In September, among respondents who reported a COVID-19 diagnosis in their household, 35% rated COVID-19 as the top national problem. The corresponding percentage among respondents who had not directly experienced a COVID-19 diagnosis was four points lower (31%).

Appendix 1: Most important problem question

What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today? (Please select up to 3 answers)

- Abortion
- Climate change
- Crime and violence
- Coronavirus (COVID-19)
- Education
- Elections
- Environment
- Foreign policy
- Gay/lesbian rights
- Gun control
- Healthcare
- Immigration
- Income inequality
- Military strength

- Morality and religion
- National debt
- National security
- Police brutality
- Poverty
- Racism
- Social security
- Taxes
- The economy
- The media
- Terrorism
- Unemployment
- Unifying the country
- Women's rights

Please rank the importance of the issues you selected (drag the most important one to the first position, the next most important to second, and so on).

Appendix 2: Respondents per state

The individual state data presented above comes from two large-scale surveys conducted in September (9/4/20-9/27/20) and October (10/2/20-10/25/20). The number of respondents per state for the states discussed in the report is included below.

Table 1. Respondents per state

State	N September	N October
AZ	395	270
FL	622	518
GA	437	320
IA	275	276
ME	225	58
MI	312	342
NC	418	435
OH	442	481
PA	495	634
WI	363	342