

COVID-19 Crisis Shifts Perceptions of the Most Important National Issues

Dr. George Barna, Director of Research, Cultural Research Center

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How will the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already radically altered lifestyles and economic realities in America, affect the upcoming presidential election? One piece of that puzzle relates to the issues that voters consider most important, and which candidate they believe will do a better job addressing those concerns.

A pair of surveys conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University – one completed in early February (pre-pandemic) and the other in mid-April (amidst pandemic responses) – gives insight into how the global health crisis has impacted Americans' views of the nation's critical issues—which may ultimately influence voters as we approach the 2020 election.

The CRC survey findings demonstrate that while the respondents' core concerns have not substantially changed, a few issues—especially concerns about healthcare, jobs and the view of President Trump—have undergone noteworthy levels of change. In addition, in the midst of the pandemic, those surveyed were decreasingly concerned about gun policy, foreign policy and immigration.

Out of more than forty issues tracked in the survey, just seven key issues experienced a significant change in perceived importance for the nation.

Issues of *Greater Perceived Influence*

Only four issues experienced statistically significant increases in perceived importance.

- **Healthcare.** In the February survey, healthcare rated as the top-ranked issue of importance; 37% of adults listed it among the four most significant issues facing America. Unsurprisingly, the coronavirus pandemic raised its perceived importance, with 42% naming healthcare or health insurance as a top issue, up five points from the pre-pandemic survey.
- **Jobs.** Among all of the issues identified as the most important facing America today, jobs/unemployment ranked fourth highest in February, listed by 21%. The mid-April survey, after weeks of pandemic lifestyle changes, financial challenges, and political maneuvering, found that the perceived importance of jobs/unemployment as a national issue jumped by five percentage points, rising to 26%. That increase also elevated jobs/unemployment by one spot, into third place, in the ranking of important issues, behind healthcare and economic growth.
- **President Trump.** Overall, Mr. Trump was listed as one of the most important issues by just 5% of voters in the February survey. By mid-April, Mr. Trump was deemed one of the most important issues facing the nation by 9% of adults. The President ranked as the 15th highest-ranked issue (tied with two other issues). This corresponds to the sense that many Americans deem the President's handling of the crisis – for better or worse – to be a significant issue for people to consider during this election season.

- **Government size, authority, performance.** The importance of the size, authority and performance of government also increased in perceived importance by four percentage points, doubling from 4% in February to 8% in mid-April. That placed the issue as the 18th highest-ranked issue of influence. Although the survey did not delve into why issues became either more or less significant to people, it may be that the government adding more than two trillion dollars of additional debt via stimulus funding, as well as its curtailing of constitutional rights in response to the pandemic, has highlighted the power and motives of both federal and state governments.

Issues of *Lesser* Perceived Importance

There were three issues that declined in perceived importance since early February.

- **Foreign policy.** This issue had been in double figures (10%) in February, but its relative importance dropped precipitously by mid-April (4%). Its importance ranking similarly fell from 16th to 23rd.
- **Gun policies.** Laws regarding gun ownership and use diminished in importance from being named by 18% in February to just 13% seven weeks later. That resulted in the importance ranking of that issue dropping from 8th to 10th place.
- **Immigration.** A four-point decline (from 20% to 16%) left this as the 7th highest ranking issue of importance, compared to a ranking of 5th in February.

No Change in Most Issues

More than two dozen issues reflected no real change since early February. While the pandemic has had an impact on every Americans' life, it seems that most Americans have maintained a consistent perspective regarding which issues matter the most to them overall.

Among the issues that showed no shift in public importance – either up or down – were economic growth and stability (which remained the second highest-ranked influence issue since early February), taxes, environmental care, federal programs for seniors, national security, crime prevention, discrimination policies, and the cost of a college education.

The Big Picture

The survey completed in mid-April indicated that the top-ranked issues of importance to all adults are:

- Most important issue: health insurance/healthcare (listed by 42%)
- 2nd most important: economic growth and stability (28%)
- 3rd most important: jobs/unemployment (26%)
- 4th most important: environmental care (25%)
- 5th most important: abortion/reproductive rights (19%)
- 6th most important: federal programs for seniors (17%)
- 7th most important (tie): immigration (16%)
- 7th most important (tie): national defense/terrorism (16%)

Some issues that generate substantial attention in the media do not rate highly in the minds of voters. Those issues include income inequality (mentioned by just 4%); national moral decline (4%); race relations (3%); and national unity (2%).

Shift in Important Issues Since the Pandemic Struck

Question: There are many important issues facing America today. Which four issues among those listed below are the ones most important to you, personally?		
Issue	February	Mid-April
Health insurance / health care	37%	42%
Economy — growth and stability	29	28
Economy — jobs, unemployment	21	26
Environmental care	27	25
Abortion / reproductive rights	19	19
Federal programs for seniors	17	17
Immigration	20	16
National defense / security / terrorism	19	16
Crime prevention	15	14
Economy — taxes, IRS	16	13
Gun policy	18	13
Education	14	13
Discrimination policies	13	12
College costs	11	10
Federal entitlement programs	12	9
Government — spending, deficit, debt	9	9
President Trump	5	9
Government — size, authority, performance	4	8
Senior citizen support	6	7
Religious freedom in US	3	6
Economy — trade policies	6	5
Poverty reduction	4	5
Foreign policy	10	4
Income inequality, distribution	3	4
Moral decline / changing values	3	4
Infrastructure	4	3
Race relations	4	3
Veterans issues	4	3
Police	3	3
Unity	2	2

Source: Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University. Each survey is based on a sample of 1,000 adults, 18 or older, from across the United States. The surveys were conducted in February 2020 and April 2020.

Pandemic and Priorities

Dr. George Barna, the Director of Research at the Cultural Research Center, suggested that the pandemic was both clarifying and re-establishing the priorities of Americans. “The global crisis is realigning some of our priorities,” Barna explained.

“In relation to the election, the post-pandemic world will require particular skills in our president. Potential voters are indicating that first and foremost they want a leader who will restore the economy to strength and address our healthcare needs.” As the veteran researcher noted, “More than half of adults named some type of economic concern, such as economic growth and stability, taxes, unemployment, entitlement programs, and government spending. Given what has happened to both the national economy and to household finances, prioritizing those matters is not surprising.”

Barna also pointed out that the perceived importance of one set of issues seemed to suffer the most as a result of the pandemic. “Issues related to overseas activity – such as foreign policy, the military, national security, terrorism, and national defense – were among those most hard-hit by the effects of the virus. Peoples’ focus has turned homeward. Domestic policy and performance transcend global concerns at the moment. The research strongly suggests that we should expect the November election to emphasize domestic policy platforms as people wrestle with personal finances, jobs, and the new ways of life that will define the post-pandemic United States.”

About the Research

These surveys were conducted in February and April 2020. Each survey is based on a national sample of 1,000 adults drawn from an online research panel managed by Braun Research Inc. The surveys were designed and analyzed by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University under the direction of George Barna. The survey conducted in April was commissioned by the Presidential Prayer Team (see below).

About the Cultural Research Center

The Cultural Research Center (CRC) at Arizona Christian University is located on the school’s campus in Glendale, Arizona. CRC conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares the information with organizations focused on impacting the spheres of cultural influence in order to transform American culture with biblical truth. Like ACU, CRC embraces the Christian faith but remains non-partisan and inter-denominational. In addition to Dr. George Barna, the Director of Research, Dr. Tracy Munsil serves as the Executive Director of the Center. More information about the Cultural Research Center is available at the Center’s website, located at www.culturalresearchcenter.com.

About the Presidential Prayer Team

The survey undertaken in April was commissioned by The Presidential Prayer Team (PPT), based in Scottsdale, Arizona, to help determine the values and interests of Americans. Since 2001, PPT has been the nation's largest full-time, not-for-profit organization promoting prayers for America and its leaders. Believing that prayer will transform the nation, one heart at a time, PPT seeks to be a catalyst in the development of a robust prayer lifestyle. PPT is a Christian, Bible-believing, non-partisan entity.