

# WORKTRENDS

AMERICANS' ATTITUDES ABOUT WORK, EMPLOYERS, AND GOVERNMENT

## Impact of Hard Work in a Pandemic

**How Americans View Getting Ahead and Looking for Work during COVID-19**

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**RUTGERS**

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# Key Takeaways

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- 1. Americans' opinions are generally split on whether hard work brings about success in the current economy.** One in two (55%) Americans say getting ahead is possible for people willing to work hard; almost one in two (45%) say hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people.
- 2. Americans are also divided on whether hard work can lead to success when asked about racial minorities and women, specifically.** Fifty-one percent say hard work is no guarantee of success for racial minorities, and 50% say the same for women; 49% say racial minorities can get ahead if they are willing to work hard; the same is true for 50% of Americans when asked about women.
- 3. Most Americans think that finding work is possible if the job seeker "wants to work."** Nearly two thirds (64%) of Americans say "it's not hard" to find a job in the United States if someone wants to work, a significant uptick in optimism compared to the months following the Great Recession.
- 4. Opinions about the role of hard work in guaranteeing success contrast sharply among political party lines, even during the pandemic-affected economy.** Democrats are skeptical of the link between hard work and success. Republicans overwhelmingly believe that success is within reach if the individual is willing to work hard.

This brief compares findings from a post-election survey conducted from December 4 to 14, 2020 with a pre-election survey conducted from October 21 to November 1, 2020, and with previous Heldrich Center surveys conducted during and after the Great Recession. See Appendices A, B, and C for methodological and sample information.

# How Americans Think About Hard Work<sup>1</sup>

In the most recent Work Trends survey, evidence suggests that opinions about the impact of hard work on success are divided among Americans. About one in two Americans believe that “most people who want to get ahead can make it if they’re willing to work hard” (55%) and the rest feel that “hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people” is a statement that is closer to their views (45%). Comparing the Heldrich Center’s most recent survey results with results from previous Work Trends studies, opinions appear to have changed little over time, **except for August 2016, when two thirds of Americans (68%) were optimistic that hard work was key to getting ahead** (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Opinions on Hard Work, Trend Data**

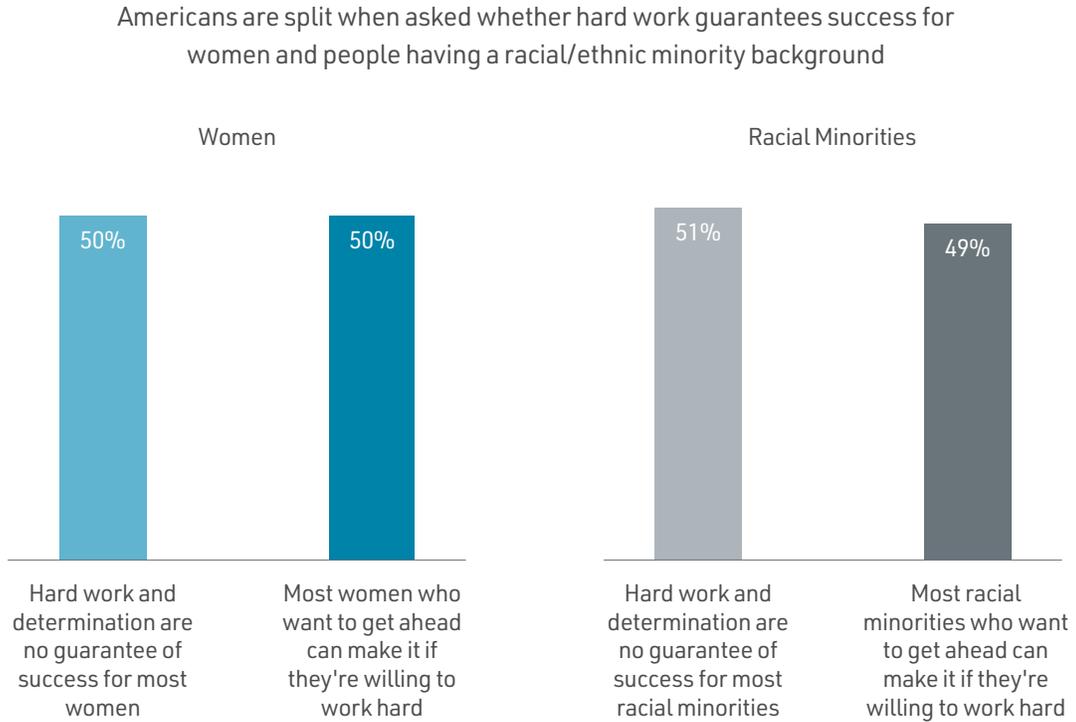
	December 2020	August 2018	August 2016	August 2014
Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they’re willing to work hard	55%	54%	68%	58%
Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people	45%	38%	33%	42%
Don’t know	NA	8%	NA	NA
Total	100%	100%	101%	100%
N	811	827	822	1,153

*Please indicate which of the following two statements comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right...*

<sup>1</sup> The pre-election and post-election surveys differed slightly in the samples asked per question. The pre-election survey asked a random half sample about their opinions of the ability of most people, and a second random half sample was asked about racial minorities, the ability to get ahead if they are willing to work hard, or if they felt hard work and determination were no guarantee of success. The post-election survey asked a random half sample about their opinions on women and racial minorities’ ability to get ahead while a full sample was asked about the ability of most people to get ahead with hard work.

When asked the same question but specifically about subgroups of the population, Americans are also split regarding their views about women and racial minorities (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Opinions on Women, Racial Minorities, and Hard Work, December 2020**

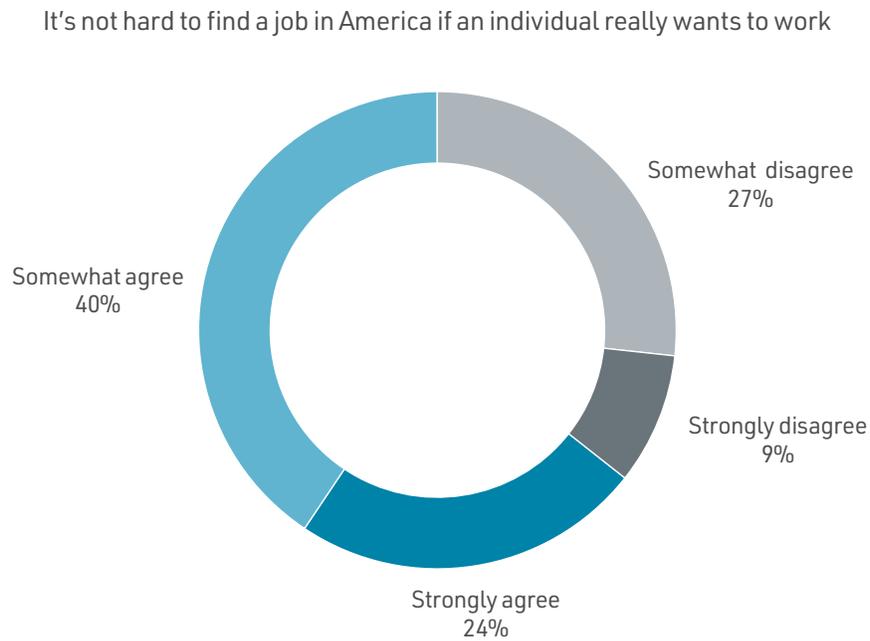


Women: N=406 (half sample A)  
Racial minorities: N=401 (half sample B)

*Please indicate which of the following comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right...*

Despite the challenging economic conditions and uncertainty caused by the pandemic, a majority of Americans are optimistic about the idea that an individual can find a job if they really want to work. Two thirds of Americans agree that it is not hard to find a job in America if the job seeker is determined (64%) (see Figure 2). As the nation emerged from the depths of the Great Recession in 2010, Americans were less likely to be optimistic, with fewer than half (44%) indicating that finding work was easy (see Table 2).

**Figure 2: Finding a Job in America**



N=813

**Table 2: Finding a Job in America, Trend Data**

	December 2020	November 2020	August 2010
Agree	64%	68%	44%
Disagree	36%	32%	56%*
Total	100%	100%	100%
N	813	810	818

\* August 2010 percentage included disagreed or refused responses.

***Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statement: It's not hard to find a job in America if you really want to work.***

# The Political Divide on Opinions of Hard Work

Opinions about hard work’s assurance of success contrast sharply along political party lines. **Overall, Democrats are more likely to say that hard work and determination are not a guarantee for success. Republicans are more likely to say people can get ahead if they are willing to work hard (see Table 3).** This finding holds regardless of the group being asked about in the survey – “most people,” women, and racial minorities.

Prior to the November 2020 presidential election, when asked to choose which statement comes closer to their own views, three in five Democrats (61%) but fewer than one in five Republicans (15%) say hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people.

Democrats’ opinions did not change before and after the presidential election; a slight change was observed for Republicans, who still largely think hard work is the key to getting ahead.

**Table 3: Opinions on Hard Work, by Political Party**

	Democrats December 2020	Republicans December 2020	Democrats November 2020	Republicans November 2020
Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they’re willing to work hard	38%	75%	39%	85%
Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people	62%	25%	61%	15%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	343	379	172*	170*

\* Half sample A

*Please indicate which of the following two statements comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right...*

Similarly, Democrats and Republicans have contrasting views on whether women can get ahead with hard work. As illustrated in Table 4, Democrats were two times more likely to feel that hard work is not a guarantee of success for most women (68%) compared to Republicans (30%). Republicans feel more strongly that most women who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard (70%).

**Table 4: Opinions on Women and Hard Work, by Political Party**

	Democrats December 2020	Republicans December 2020
Most women who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard	32%	70%
Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most women	68%	30%
Total	100%	100%
N	170*	190*

\* Half sample A

*Please indicate which of the following two statements comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right...*

As shown in Table 5, Republicans overwhelmingly say that people of a racial/ethnic minority background who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard (81%) compared to only 21% of Democrats. Eight in 10 Democrats (79%) but only 2 in 10 Republicans (19%) feel that hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most racial minorities. There was no significant change for either party when asked prior to or after the election.

**Table 5: Opinions on Racial Minorities and Hard Work, by Political Party**

	Democrats December 2020	Republicans December 2020	Democrats November 2020	Republicans November 2020
Most racial minorities who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard	21%	81%	22%	85%
Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most racial minorities	79%	19%	78%	15%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	171*	188*	157*	209*

\* Half sample B

*Please indicate which of the following two statements comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right...*

# Finding a Job in America

While Democrats are divided (50% strongly or somewhat agree versus 49% somewhat or strongly disagree) on whether finding work is difficult if the job seeker wants to work, **the large majority of Republicans overwhelmingly agree that it's not hard to find a job if someone really wants to work** (84% strongly or somewhat agree). These opinions did not change significantly for either political party from before the election to the days following the election (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Finding Work in America, by Political Party**

	Democrats December 2020	Republicans December 2020	Democrats November 2020	Republicans November 2020
Strongly Agree	13%	38%	12%	50%
Somewhat Agree	37%	46%	38%	38%
Somewhat Disagree	37%	12%	37%	8%
Strongly Disagree	12%	4%	13%	4%
Total	99%	100%	100%	100%
N	343	379	330	380

*Please indicate to what degree you agree or disagree with the following statement: It's not hard to find a job in America if you really want to work.*

## Conclusion

The pandemic has had a momentous impact on job availability in every state, industry, and major demographic group in the United States. Unemployment rates reached as high as **14.8%** at the height of the pandemic. Democrats have less faith than Republicans in the ability of hard work and determination to lead to success, even after the election of President Joe Biden. The same division also exists in opinions on the ease of people finding work if they really want a job. Americans are divided politically over the relationship between hard work and success along with the ease of finding jobs. As discussed in the Heldrich Center's January 2021 report, *Twin Crises*, there appears to be more optimism for the future in 2021, compared to how people felt after the Great Recession.

# Appendix A: Methodological Statement

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This issue brief is based on the results of two surveys: a national probability survey of 814 American adults age 18 and older fielded online between December 4 and 14, 2020 and a national probability survey of 810 American adults age 18 and older fielded online between October 21 and November 1, 2020 by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC. All surveys are subject to sampling error, which is the expected probable difference between interviewing everyone in a population versus a scientific sampling drawn from that population. See the Heldrich Center's January 2021 report [Twin Crises](#) for complete methodological information.

## Appendix B: Sample and Composition Notes

In this brief, percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding. Refusals are excluded as missing data. Reported sample sizes are unweighted to reflect the sample composition of each survey. Reported percentages are weighted. A sample composition table is presented below for both the pre-election and post-election surveys; because of missing data, sample sizes may vary slightly depending on the question.

**Table B-1: Pre-election Survey, November 2020**

	Unweighted Sample Size	Approximate Margin of Error
<b>Total sample</b>	810	±3.8%
Democrats (including leaners)	330	±5.9%
Republicans (including leaners)	380	±5.6%
<b>Half sample A</b>	401	±5.4%
<b>Half sample B</b>	409	±5.4%
Half sample A Democrats (including leaners)	172	±8.3%
Half sample A Republicans (including leaners)	170	±8.3%
Half sample B Democrats (including leaners)	157	±8.6%
Half sample B Republicans (including leaners)	209	±7.5%

**Table B-2: Post-election Survey, December 2020**

	Unweighted Sample Size	Approximate Margin of Error
<b>Total sample</b>	814	±3.8%
Democrats (including leaners)	343	±5.8%
Republicans (including leaners)	379	±5.5%
<b>Half sample A</b>	407	±5.3%
<b>Half sample B</b>	407	±5.3%
Half sample A Democrats (including leaners)	170	±8.2%
Half sample A Republicans (including leaners)	190	±7.8%
Half sample B Democrats (including leaners)	171	±8.2%
Half sample B Republicans (including leaners)	188	±7.8%

## Appendix C: Work Trends Trend Data Information

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August 2018

***A Glass Half Full or Half Empty? Americans Agree the Economy is Strong, but Worry about the Future***

Conducted online by GfK

August 8 to 20, 2018

Sample: U.S. national adults

N=827

August 2016

***Turning Points: Americans' Growing Confidence in the Job Market, Perspectives on the Presidential Election, and Assessments of Foreign and Immigrant Workers***

Conducted online by GfK

August 3 to 11, 2016

Sample: U.S. national adults, including an oversample of the employed and unemployed and looking for work

N=822

August 2014

***Unhappy, Worried, and Pessimistic: Americans in the Aftermath of the Great Recession***

Conducted online by GfK

July 24 to August 3, 2014

Sample: U.S. national adults, including an oversample of the employed and unemployed and looking for work

N=1,153

August 2010

***American Workers Assess an Economic Disaster***

Conducted online by Knowledge Networks

July 20 to August 5, 2010

Sample: U.S. national adults, including an oversample of the unemployed and looking for work

N=818

# Background

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The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey was founded as a research and policy organization devoted to strengthening New Jersey's and the nation's workforce during a time of global economic change. The Heldrich Center researches and puts to work strategies that increase worker skills and employability, strengthen the ability of companies to compete, create jobs where they are needed, and improve the quality and performance of the workforce development system. Since 1997, the Heldrich Center has experienced rapid growth, working with federal and state government partners, Fortune 100 companies, and major foundations. The center embodies its slogan "Solutions at Work" by teaming with partners and clients to translate cutting-edge research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, unions, schools, community-based organizations, and government officials can leverage to strengthen the nation's workforce.

Since its inception, the Heldrich Center has sought to inform employers, union leaders, policymakers, community members, the media, and academic communities about critical workforce and education issues that relate to the emerging global economy. To better understand the public's attitudes about work, employers, and the government, and improve workplace practices and policy, the Heldrich Center produces the Work Trends surveys on a regular basis. (The complete set of reports is available at [www.heldrich.rutgers.edu](http://www.heldrich.rutgers.edu)). The surveys poll the general public on critical workforce issues facing Americans and American businesses. The survey findings are promoted widely to the media and national constituencies. The series is directed by Carl E. Van Horn, Ph.D., Director of the Heldrich Center and Distinguished Professor of Public Policy at Rutgers University.

*Impact of Hard Work in a Pandemic* continues to advance the goals of the Work Trends series to give American workers a voice in the national economic policy debates, and thereby provides policymakers and employers with reliable insights into how workers across the nation are judging and acting upon the realities of work and the workplace.

The authors of this brief were Kristine Joy Bacani and Brittney Donovan. Sean Simone, Ph.D. was instrumental in developing the survey design and analyzing the survey data. Nathan Satish and Jessica Starace, MPP assisted with the data analysis. InBum Chung was the graphic designer. Robb C. Sewell was the editor.