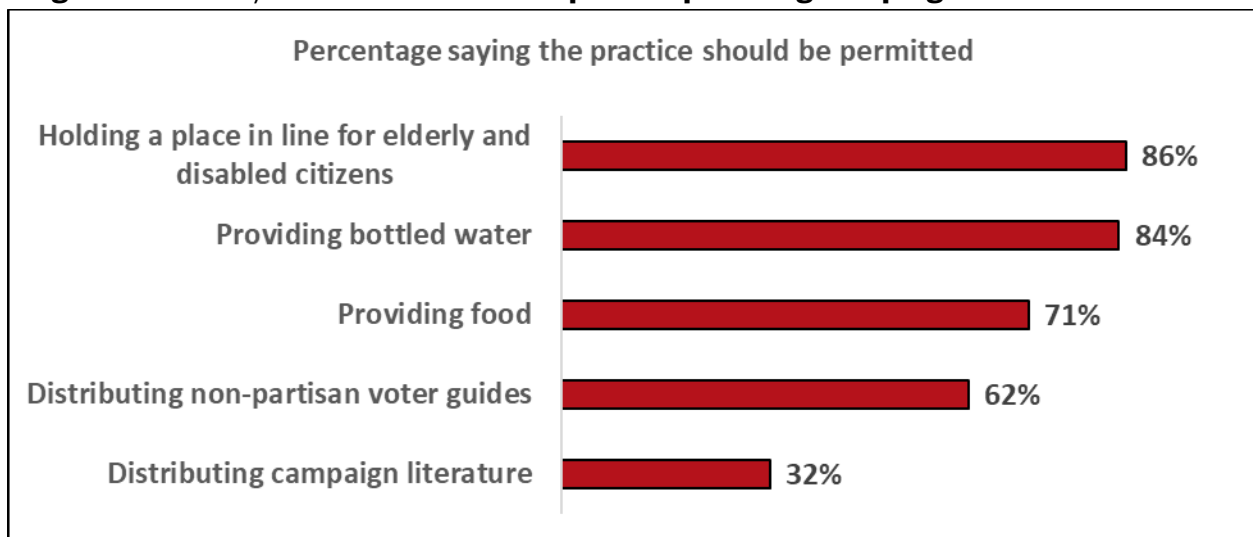


# Waiting in line to vote

## How long is too long? And what types of assistance should be permitted for those waiting?

June 16, 2021

**Strong majorities of Americans support allowing assistance to be provided to those with long waits to vote, with the notable exception of providing campaign literature**



Question: "At polling sites with wait times longer than one hour, some community groups have organized to do some of the following activities. For each one, please tell me if you think the activity should be permitted or prohibited."

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, April 13-20, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is  $\pm 3.4$  percentage points.

# Key findings

- Nearly half of Americans say that waiting to vote more than 30 minutes is unacceptable.
  - 24% of Republicans and Independents indicate that “any wait time, even more than three hours, is acceptable,” compared with only 8% of Democrats.
- Half of American adults say they definitely would vote even if wait times reach 90 minutes or more.
  - Long wait times would likely discourage 30% of American adults from voting, including even higher proportions of women, Black and Latino voters, those with less education, those with lower incomes, and political independents.
- Strong majorities of Americans support allowing community groups to provide assistance to those waiting over an hour to vote, including:
  - Holding a place in line for elderly and disabled citizens until they reach the polling place (86%),
  - Providing bottled water to citizens waiting to vote (84%),
  - Providing food to citizens waiting to vote (71%), and
  - Distributing non-partisan voter guides (62%).
  - These provisions are supported by majorities within a wide variety of demographic groups: men and women, younger to older adults, various racial and ethnic groups, those with higher and lower education and income, and all regions of the nation.
  - Across all these forms of assistance, a higher proportion are supported by Democrats than Republicans.
  - Some of the reasons given for allowing the distribution of food or water to those waiting in line to vote include:
    - “If the wait is so long, it should be allowed. Voting should not be discouraged at any time. Otherwise, we have failed as a democratic nation.”
    - “Diabetics, elderly or pregnant persons may feel ill without food or water. Better yet, voting by mail should be allowed for everyone.”
    - “It’s just humane.”

- Those who oppose allowing the distribution of food or water to those waiting in line to vote stated reasons including:
  - “Because some people will take it the wrong way as if someone [is] getting paid to vote.”
  - “Bottled water is plentiful. Citizens can easily bring their own bottled water. Voting citizens should not be treated like incapable children.”
  - “It is not a party and you should not have to be fed while doing it.”
- A strong majority of Americans thinks the distribution of campaign literature to those waiting to vote should be prohibited (68%).

# Introduction

On March 25, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp signed the Election Integrity Act of 2021 into law. The most controversial provision, and the one that arguably has received the most attention in the media, is the provision criminalizing the act of distributing food or water from outside groups to voters waiting in line to cast their ballot.

Such a prohibition has been decried by some as a blatant voter suppression tactic—noting that longer wait times tend to arise in urban areas, which traditionally lean Democrat—while others have raised the concern of outside influence swaying peoples’ votes. These are the narratives that have unfolded in the media, but what do Americans really think?

Penn State’s nonpartisan McCourtney Institute for Democracy regularly conducts the nationally representative Mood of the Nation Poll to gauge how Americans are feeling about various aspects of American politics and society.<sup>1</sup> The April 2021 poll included several questions on voting, including some that are specifically related to Georgia’s new laws on voting:

1. When citizens vote in person, many can vote almost immediately while other voters must stand in line for a very long time. What is your opinion about waiting times?
  - Wait times under 30 minutes are acceptable, anything more is unacceptable.
  - Wait times under 60 minutes are acceptable, anything more is unacceptable.
  - Wait times under 90 minutes are acceptable, anything more is unacceptable.
  - Wait times under 2 hours are acceptable, anything more is unacceptable.
  - Wait times under 3 hours are acceptable, anything more is unacceptable.
  - Any wait time, even more than three hours, is acceptable.
  
2. Imagine that it is Election Day in 2022 when voters elect representatives to Congress and the Senate. If you planned on voting in the election, but learned that the waiting time to vote was **90 minutes or longer**, what do you think you would do?
  - I would definitely vote that day.
  - I would probably vote that day.
  - I would probably not vote that day.
  - I would definitely not vote that day.
  
3. At polling sites with wait times longer than one hour, some community groups have organized to do some of the following activities. For each one, please tell me if you think the activity should be **permitted** or **prohibited**.
  - a. Distributing non-partisan voter guides.
  - b. Distributing campaign literature.
  - c. Providing bottled water to citizens waiting to vote.

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<sup>1</sup> For additional information about the Mood of the Nation Poll see the appendix to this brief. For additional details about this survey’s methodology, please see <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>

- d. Providing food to citizens waiting to vote.
- e. Holding a place in line for elderly and disabled citizens until they reach the polling place.

Importantly, respondents were also asked to provide reasons for their responses to questions 3a, 3b, and 3c in their own words.

To see whether Americans' opinions on these topics vary according to demographic, social and economic characteristics, we analyzed the results of each question by gender (women, men), age (four groups), race and ethnicity (only four groups are available in this survey: White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic or Latino; and Other), educational attainment (high school or less, some college or Associates degree, Bachelors or graduate degree), family income (four groups), region of the country, and political affiliation (Republican, Independent, or Democrat as derived from self-placement on a seven-category scale ranging from "Strong Democrat" to "Strong Republican"). The number of respondents in each group are detailed in the methodology report that accompanies this brief.

# Waiting in line to vote: How long is too long?

A majority of Americans believe that no voter should have to wait longer than 60 minutes to cast their ballot. Nearly half indicate that wait times exceeding 30 minutes are unacceptable. These views are remarkably similar across a variety of demographic characteristics that we examined—but there are some partisan differences to what might otherwise appear to be a non-partisan aspect of a civic duty.

Sixty percent of Democrats indicate that it is only acceptable to allow voters to wait up to 30 minutes to cast their ballots, compared with only 36% of both Independents and Republicans. Perhaps even more revealingly, three times as many Independents and Republicans as Democrats say that “any wait time, even more than three hours, is acceptable.”

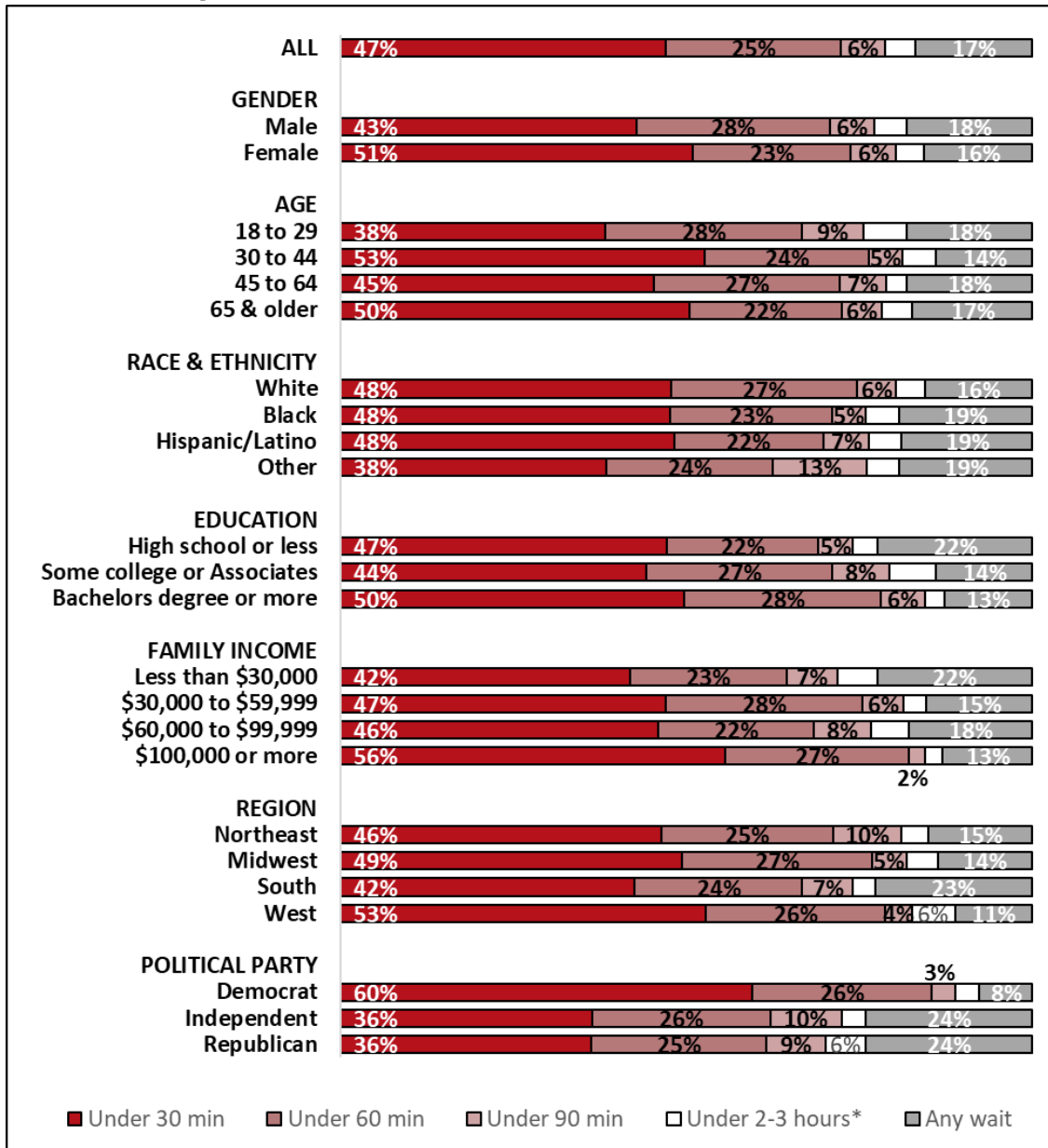
The April Mood of the Nation Poll also asked respondents to imagine that they plan to vote in the 2022 midterm election, but on election day, they discover that wait times are 90 minutes or more. Half indicated that they would “definitely” wait to cast their ballot, and another 21% indicated they “probably” would wait. Thirty percent indicated that such long wait times would dissuade them from voting, including 19% who indicated they would “probably not” vote as well as the 11% who “definitely” would not.

Personal response to longer wait times is much less partisan than the more theoretical question of what allowable wait times should be. A strong showing of both Republicans and Democrats—roughly 3 in 4 of both party—affirmed that they would likely still vote if wait times exceeded 90 minutes. Only 36% of Independents, by contrast, responded that they definitely would vote when faced with waiting times that exceeded 90 minutes.

Responses to this question reveal which demographic groups might be underrepresented at the voting booth in 2022 in places that have long wait times to vote:

- Women would be somewhat underrepresented: 33% likely would not wait 90 minutes or longer to vote, compared with 25% of men.
- Younger voters would be underrepresented: Only 35% of voters aged 18 to 29 said they would definitely wait over 90 minutes to vote, compared with 60% of those age 65 and older.
- Black and especially Latino voters would be underrepresented: Nearly 40% of each group likely would not vote if wait times reached 90 minutes, compared with 26% of White adults.
- Those with less education and income would be underrepresented: 64% in the lowest education and income groups that we analyzed indicated they would likely vote, compared with 80% of those in the highest income and education groups.

**About half of most demographic groups believe waiting to vote longer than 30 minutes is unacceptable; higher proportions of Republicans and Independents indicate longer wait times are acceptable**

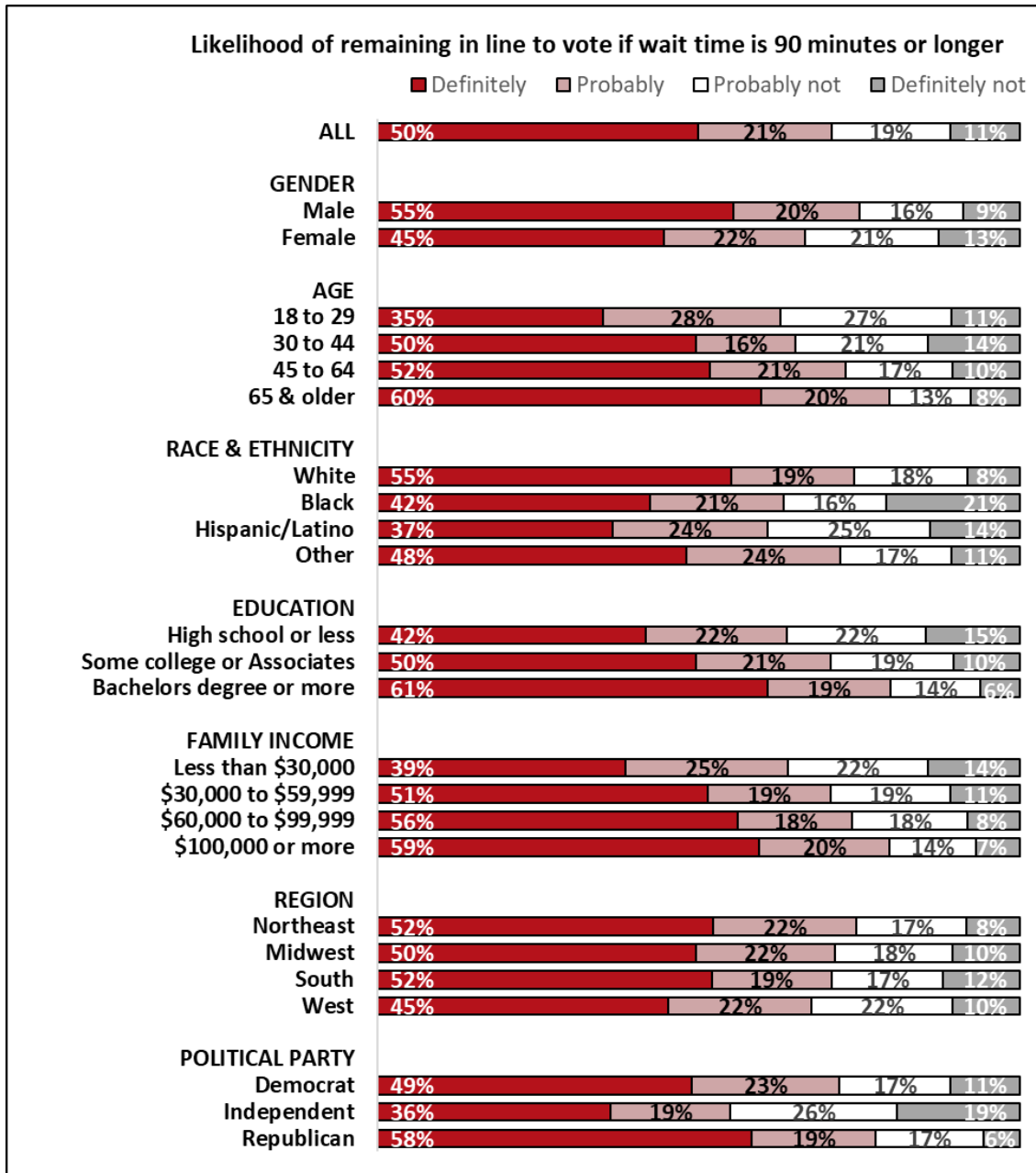


Question: "When citizens vote in person, many can vote almost immediately while other voters must stand in line for a very long time. What is your opinion about waiting times? Wait times under 30 minutes are acceptable, anything more is unacceptable; Wait times under 60 minutes... Any wait time, even more than three hours, is acceptable."

\* Percentages for those indicating that either 2 or 3 hours of waiting time is acceptable have been added together (3.2% and 1.2%, respectively). The percentage is labeled only in cases where it exceeds 5%.

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, April 13-20, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.4 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

**Women, younger voters, Black and Latino voters, those with less education and income, and Independents all somewhat less likely to vote with wait times of 90 or more minutes**



Question: "Imagine that it is Election Day in 2022 when voters elect representatives to Congress and the Senate. If you planned on voting in the election, but learned that the waiting time to vote was 90 minutes or longer, what do you think you would do? I would definitely vote that day...I would definitely not vote that day"

\* Percentages for those indicating that either 2 or 3 hours of waiting time is acceptable have been added together (3.2% and 1.2%, respectively). The percentage is labeled only in cases where it exceeds 5%.

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, April 13-20, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.4 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.



# Providing assistance to those waiting to vote: When is it acceptable?

During elections various community groups, both partisan and nonpartisan, organize to help enable voters to cast their ballots. One form of such organizing is that of providing various forms of assistance to ease the burden of those waiting in line in to vote.

In some places such assistance has been called into question. Perhaps most notably, Georgia's recently passed Election Integrity Act of 2021 criminalizes the act of distributing food or water from outside groups to voters waiting in line to cast their ballot.

The April Mood of the Nation Poll tested Americans' support for four seemingly nonpartisan forms of assistance for voters facing long wait times, (1) holding a place in line for older and disabled voters, (2) providing water, (3) providing food, (4) providing nonpartisan voter guides, and one-partisan activity, distributing campaign literature.

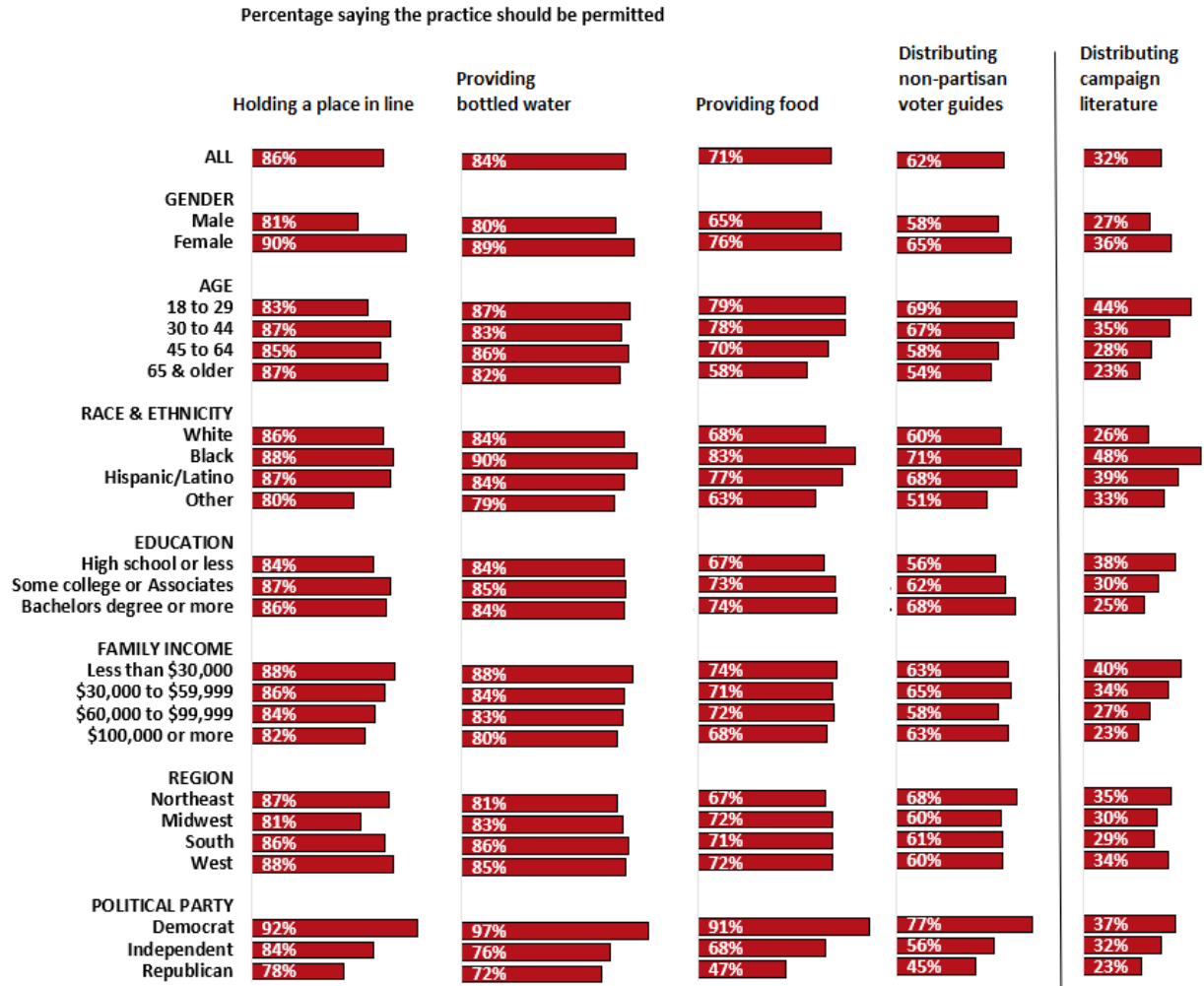
Overall, the vast majority of Americans believe community groups should be allowed to assist would-be voters facing long wait times: 86% would allow people to hold a place in line for elderly and disabled voters, 84% would allow the distribution of water, 71% would allow food distribution, and 62% would allow the distribution of non-partisan voting guides. Only 32% would allow the partisan activity of distributing campaign literature to those waiting in line to vote.

Support for assisting voters through holding a place in line, providing water, providing food, and distributing non-partisan voter guides is remarkably consistent across the variety of demographic groups that we examined: similarly high levels of support exist whether respondents are male or female, highly educated or not, and regardless of race. Some variation does exist, however, along party lines.

While a strong majority of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans favor allowing assistance to voters facing long wait times in the form of both holding a place in line for elderly and disabled voters and providing water, the support is nearly unanimous among Democrats. Ninety-two percent of Democrats support holding a place in line for elderly and disabled voters, compared with 84% of Republicans; and, more notably, 97% percent of Democrats support the distribution of water, compared with 72% of Republicans.

Even greater partisan variation exists when it comes to allowing distribution of food. Ninety-one percent of Democrats approve of food distribution, compared to 68% of Independents and 47% of Republicans. There is also a partisan difference in views related to the distribution of non-partisan voter guides: 77% of Democrats would allow it, compared with 56% of Independents and 45% of Republicans.

**There is widespread consensus among most groups of Americans that helping those waiting a long time to vote should be permitted; notably higher proportions of Democrats than Republicans support assisting waiting voters**



Question: “At polling sites with wait times longer than one hour, some community groups have organized to do some of the following activities. For each one, please tell me if you think the activity should be permitted or prohibited.” Graph shows percentages of those indicating “permitted”.

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, April 13-20, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.4 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

## ***In their own words: Why Americans approve or disapprove of distributing food and water to those waiting in line to vote***

To better understand why respondents approved or disapproved of the distribution of food and water to voters facing long wait times, respondents were asked to answer a simple question in their own words, “Can you explain why?” In looking at the answers several common themes emerge.<sup>2</sup>

Across Democrats, Republicans and Independents, the most commonly given answer indicated that excessive wait times necessitate handing out water and food. For example, a 41-year-old Republican from Georgia answered that “waiting is tedious, food and water make it more tenable.”

Other respondents emphasized that long wait times were a form of voter suppression. One 80-year-old Independent from California, for example, argued that “long lines are intentional, and meant to discourage voting,” indicating that the distribution of water and food in such an instance counteracts an impediment to voting. Similarly, a 41-year-old Democrat from Minnesota wrote: “Having to wait for hours to vote is a serious flaw (and likely brought forth due to closing too many polling places), and it’s not the voter’s fault.”

Many respondents also explicitly connected long wait times to negative health impacts, particularly for those with pre-existing medical conditions. Respondents across all political parties were roughly equivalent in the frequency of this type of answer. However, among Republicans, concerns over health impacts were among the most common reasons given for supporting the distribution of food and water, whereas health concerns were one of many reasons given by Independents and Democrats.

Independents and Democrats were more likely than Republicans to provide answers indicating that, (a) supplying food and water is a humane and decent thing to do, or (b) what appears to be a variation on the sentiment, simply questioning, for example, “why wouldn’t it be okay to distribute food and water.” Republicans also provided answers along these lines, although not quite as commonly as answers pertaining to health impacts.

Religion was sometimes used by respondents as a moral basis for supplying food and water, as in the case of a 67-year-old Democrat from West Virginia who wrote that, “My religion teaches me to feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty,” clarifying, “that applies to those in line to vote just as much as to the homeless or the unemployed.”

Others, still, turned to concepts like empathy and kindness as reasons to allow the distribution of food or water to waiting voters. A 42-year-old Republican from New York answered

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<sup>2</sup> While the themes and examples presented here are representative of the survey’s findings note that the McCourtney Institute is planning to perform a more systematic analysis of the open-ended responses as a part of their academic research agenda related to the Mood of the Nation Poll.

succinctly, “for empathy, for helping others.” And a 55-year-old Independent from Indiana answered, “It’s simply a humane thing to do,” before adding, “my God, what kind of country do we live in if someone can’t provide food or water to someone who is hungry or thirsty.”

The primary reason why someone thought distributing water and food should *not* be allowed was that it could be construed as influencing someone’s vote. Some respondents indicated allowing distribution of food or water might open the door to an expectation that those receiving the assistance would vote a certain way.

In fact, a smaller portion of those who responded affirmatively to allowing water and food to be distributed added the caveat that it should be done in a non-partisan fashion and with no electioneering of any kind. Republicans were about twice as likely as Democrats to add such a caveat, with Independents falling somewhere in between the two parties.

Some respondents opposed to the distribution of food or water answered that it was the responsibility of the voter to bring such supplies with them if they were concerned about the possibility of a long wait time. Still, other respondents raised concerns over cost, hygiene and safety, and littering.

## Examples of comments from those in favor of allowing the distribution of food and water to voters waiting in line

Comment	Age	Sex	Race	State	Political affiliation
If the wait is so long, it should be allowed. Voting should not be discouraged at any time. Otherwise, we have failed as a democratic nation.	61	Male	White	CT	Democrat
Hunger and thirst is a barrier to voting. Voting must be easy and accessible. Long wait times are inexcusable, and if they occur, food and water should be provided.	33	Female	White	ID	Democrat
No, it is your responsibility to explain why not.	32	Male	White	TX	Democrat
Long lines are physically challenging, and people may leave if they are hungry or thirsty. This could impact certain communities more, including young voter, people with children in tow, and people with certain medical conditions.	31	Female	White	CO	Democrat
The media reported long lines in very warm areas where elderly and disabled voters suffered in the heat. In my opinion the passing out water or food is a humane thing to do.	78	Female	Black	ME	Democrat
Because it encourages people to stay in line and to vote, and it does absolutely no harm to the election's integrity.	58	Male	Two or more races	AZ	Democrat
Diabetics, elderly or pregnant persons may feel ill without food or water. Better yet, voting by mail should be allowed for everyone.	75	Female	Black	TX	Democrat
It's just humane.	29	Male	Asian	VA	Democrat
Food and water are essential to human life, and the act of giving people essential items while they wait to participate in an essential act of democracy just makes sense.	34	Male	Two or more races	MI	Democrat
Making the wait uncomfortable is voter suppression.	44	Female	White	KY	Democrat

<b>Because those are physical bodily needs that can be done in a completely non-partisan way that will not in any real way influence the vote.</b>	21	Female	Native American	NY	Democrat
<b>I highly doubt handing a water bottle or hotdog to someone will change someone's vote to your party in this political climate.</b>	29	Female	White	WA	independent
<b>It would depend on what group is providing the food and if they use this as a method to influence votes.</b>	65	Male	White	AL	independent
<b>It's silly to think that free food and water would sway someone's vote, and if it did, then perhaps we have a bigger problem in our country of constituents feeling removed from their representatives.</b>	25	Female	White	TX	independent
<b>It's simply a humane thing to do. My God, what kind of country do we live in if someone can't provide food or water to someone who is hungry or thirsty.</b>	55	Male	White	IN	independent
<b>Because I have empathy.</b>	42	Male	Hispanic	DE	independent
<b>It only improves the voting process and camaraderie between Americans. Prohibiting this is just to make it more difficult for Americans to vote, and I believe it disproportionately affects marginalized groups.</b>	22	Female	White	WA	independent
<b>They showed up to do their duty. Like how even jurors selected for a trial get a lunch break.</b>	33	Male	Hispanic	GA	independent
<b>As long as the groups are non-partisan and the wait is longer than an hour giving aid and comfort is compassionate and should be allowed. Even having someone's place in line held for a quick 5-to-10-minute bathroom break should be allowed.</b>	69	Male	White	VA	Republican
<b>There is nothing wrong with this so long as NO electioneering or campaign materials is given, including campaign or candidate is connected with the food or water.</b>	57	Male	White	CA	Republican
<b>It's just kindness.</b>	31	Female	Hispanic	CA	Republican

<b>Because I don't think it would sway someone.</b>	27	Female	White	VA	Republican
<b>If a group wants to use their funds to purchase snacks for voters, that's their business if it encourages people to come out and vote it's not bad.</b>	24	Male	White	PA	Republican
<b>I don't see that there's a problem with this and it doesn't skew the voting result or anything like that.</b>	37	Female	Black	CA	Republican
<b>Seriously? Water is good, and most people don't get enough. Keep hydrated and keep the brain happy.</b>	57	Male	White	AL	Republican

## Examples of comments from those against distributing water or food to voters waiting in line

Comment	Age	Sex	Race	State	Political affiliation
<b>Government waste in this country is out of control. If a person is not smart enough to eat beforehand, then they probably are not smart enough to vote. There are people so into handouts, they would show up just for the food.</b>	60	Male	White	MI	other
<b>If the wait time is more than 6 hours, I could see providing food. But the wait time should NOT be that long.</b>	62	Female	White	CT	Democrat
<b>Is an extra risk for health concerns, an extra expense. There is an option for the people voting to bring their own snacks knowing there will be waiting times.</b>	76	Female	White	WA	Republican
<b>It could be more work for the workers if people make a mess &amp; it might encourage people that aren't going to vote come there just for the food.</b>	24	Male	White	CA	independent
<b>Water is a good idea but I don't think food is necessary. Wait time should not be so long that you would need nourishment.</b>	85	Female	White	CA	Democrat
<b>Health code concerns mainly.</b>	56	Male	White	VA	independent
<b>If better foods are given to voters who vote for the community's interests, while poorer food is given to voters who vote against the communities interests, the voters being given poorer food may change their vote in order to get better food.</b>	38	Male	White	NM	Democrat
<b>It is not a party and you should not have to be fed while doing it.</b>	80	Female	other	TX	independent
<b>They are messy with no respect for others or the places that are gracious enough to allow voting in their buildings. It is hard enough to find poll workers, they should not be made to cook for strangers on top of it.</b>	61	Female	White	OH	Republican



<b>A voter is an alleged adult and should know to come prepared.</b>	42	Female	Hispanic	MN	independent
<b>Anyone can bring their own water - distributing water is just a ruse to engage the voters in conversation and attempt to influence their votes. No politics allowed within 500 feet of a polling place, including placing signs!</b>	82	Male	White	FL	other
<b>Because some people will take it the wrong way as if someone getting paid to vote.</b>	48	Female	White	AL	Democrat
<b>Bottled water is plentiful. Citizens can easily bring their own bottled water. Voting citizens should not be treated like incapable children.</b>	47	Male	Asian	CA	independent
<b>Bring your own. Come prepared. This isn't a picnic.</b>	69	Male	White	IL	Republican
<b>I am okay with poll workers providing bottled water, I am not okay with any organization for profit or nonprofit doing it. I am also not okay with political groups of any kind even non-partisan doing it.</b>	43	Male	White	SD	independent
<b>It's used as a tool to politik at the polls. The nonsense argument that folks are dying of thirst waiting to vote is just propaganda. Bring a bottle of water with you.</b>	60	Male	White	WI	Republican
<b>Possibly too many hands would be touching the bottles and spreading germs. Who ends up paying for the water? The tax payers?</b>	59	Female	White	IA	independent
<b>Someone may put something in the water on purpose.</b>	57	Female	Black	NC	independent
<b>They should bring their own water bottles. Plastic is a waste of environment resources.</b>	19	Female	Black	CA	Democrat
<b>A) People will show up for the free food. B) Free food opens up a tit for tat or, quid pro quo situation.</b>	62	Male	White	OH	independent
<b>Did they come to eat or vote? People don't need to eat with in a time period of 90</b>	50	Female	Asian	CA	Republican

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**minutes to keep them alive. People can survive 7 days without food. People should plan accordingly and bring their own food if they are hungry or eat before going.**

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<b>Dietary regulations, sanitary and hygiene issues.</b>	28	Female	White	IL	not sure
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<b>It is too much like a bribe. who provides the food? If it were someone like United Way or the league of women voters, different. however, Tammany Hall classic is buy you a steak for a vote.</b>	59	Male	White	NY	Republican
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## About the APM Research Lab

The APM Research Lab is a division of American Public Media that informs the public about challenges and opportunities facing families, communities, and organizations throughout the nation. Our mission is to foster an engaged democracy by inspiring curiosity, inquiry and discussion through fact-driven, credible research and analysis. Our Values: Independent, Useful, Informative, Non-partisan.

The Lab is a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative and abides by its standards. See <https://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/Transparency-Initiative/>.

Contact: [info@apmresearchlab.org](mailto:info@apmresearchlab.org) | [apmresearchlab.org](http://apmresearchlab.org)

## About the McCourtney Institute for Democracy

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State promotes scholarship and practical innovations that defend and advance democracy in the United States and abroad. Through teaching, research, and public outreach, the Institute leverages the resources of Penn State and partners around the world to foster a model of deliberation, policymaking, and responsiveness that is passionate, informed, and civil.

The Mood of the Nation Poll offers a unique approach to public opinion polling. It allows Americans to speak in their own words through open-ended questions that focus on emotions like anger and hope, as well as commitment to constitutional principles.

Contact: [democracyinst@psu.edu](mailto:democracyinst@psu.edu) | [democracy.psu.edu](http://democracy.psu.edu)

## About the survey

Data collection for this Mood of the Nation Poll was conducted online by YouGov (<https://today.yougov.com/>), April 13-20, 2021. The YouGov panel includes over 1.8 million individuals who agree to complete occasional surveys. The 1,200 individuals who completed the April Mood of the Nation Poll were matched to the joint distribution from the Census's American Community Survey in terms of age, sex, race and ethnicity, and years of education. The frame was augmented by matching to the November 2010 Current Population Survey and the Pew Religious Life Survey in order to include voter registration, political interest and party identification in the selection model.

For additional details about the sample and survey methodology, as well as transparency disclosures relevant to the American Association of Public Opinion, the Roper Center and CNN, please see:

<https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>.

# Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Benjamin Clary and Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab, with input from Eric Plutzer of the McCourtney Institute for Democracy. The survey questions were designed by the McCourtney Institute.

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