Chapman Survey of American Fears 2024

Key Findings

Chapman University recently completed its 10th annual Chapman Survey of American Fears (2024). Each wave of the survey focuses on what Americans fear, the potential causes of those fears and the consequences of fear. In addition, the comprehensive survey includes extensive background information about respondents, allowing for examinations of how fears vary by different groups.

The survey asked respondents about 85 fears across a broad range of categories including fears about the government, the election, crime, the environment, the economy, personal finances, AI technology, sickness and health, natural and man-made disasters, terrorism, war, ghosts, and a host of others.

Top 10 Fears and Trends

The top ten American fears of 2024, reflect a combination of fears about government, world events and personal life.

"Recent world events appeared to have stirred fears about war and terror attacks. Six of the top ten fears have to do with fears about Russia or North Korea employing nuclear weapons and different forms of terrorism," said Christopher Bader, Professor of Sociology and Chair of Sociology & Anthropology. *Six* of our top 10 fears are related to war and warfare including: fears about Russia using nuclear weapons (#5), the US becoming involved in another world war (#7), North Korea using nuclear weapons (#8), terrorist attacks (#9), cyberterrorism (#3) and biological warfare (#10). Two of those fears, the fear of North Korea using nuclear weapons and fears of a terrorist attack were not in the top 10 last year.

People are also very afraid for the health of their loved ones. "People I love becoming seriously ill" was at #2 on our list, and "people I love dying" was at #4.

Economic fears have also risen amongst Americans in the past year, with the fear of running out of money moving up four places on our list, from #10 in 2023 to #6 in 2024.

Top 10 Fears of 2024

Fear	% of Very Afraid or Afraid	Rank in 2023	
1. Corrupt Government Officials	65.2%	1	
2. People I Love Becoming Seriously Ill	58.4%	5	⬆
3. Cyberterrorism	58.3%	9	⬆
4. People I Love Dying	57.8%	6	⬆
5. Russia Using Nuclear Weapons	55.8%	3	⬇

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6. Not Having Enough Money for the Future	55.7%	10	⬆
7. US Becoming Involved in Another World War	55.0% (tie)	4	⬇
8. North Korea Using Nuclear Weapons	55.0% (tie)	12	⬆
9. Terrorist Attack	52.7%	16	⬆
10. Biological Warfare	52.5%	8	⬇

Sitting at #1 on our list of top fears, as it has for the last 9 years, is the fear of corrupt government officials. Nearly 2/3 of Americans fear that our government is run by corrupt officials.

"More interesting, really, than what is in the top 10 list, is how the overall level of fear changes. For example, in the 2015 survey, only the top one, Corrupt Government Officials, had more than 50% reported afraid or very afraid. By the time you get to 2018, all 10 are over 50%. Americans are more afraid of everything," said Ed Day, Associate Professor of Sociology.

Corruption

Since the inception of the Chapman Survey of American Fears, Fear of Corrupt Government Officials (hereafter, FOC) has been the leading fear Americans reported. That is a striking fact because the surveys have spanned a decade and three presidential administrations. In the tenth wave of the survey conducted in 2024, 65.2% of Americans said that they were afraid or very afraid of corrupt government officials up more than 5% since 2023. FOC peaked at 79.6% in 2020/2021 and then declined to current levels.

Fear of Corrupt Government Officials (%) by Year
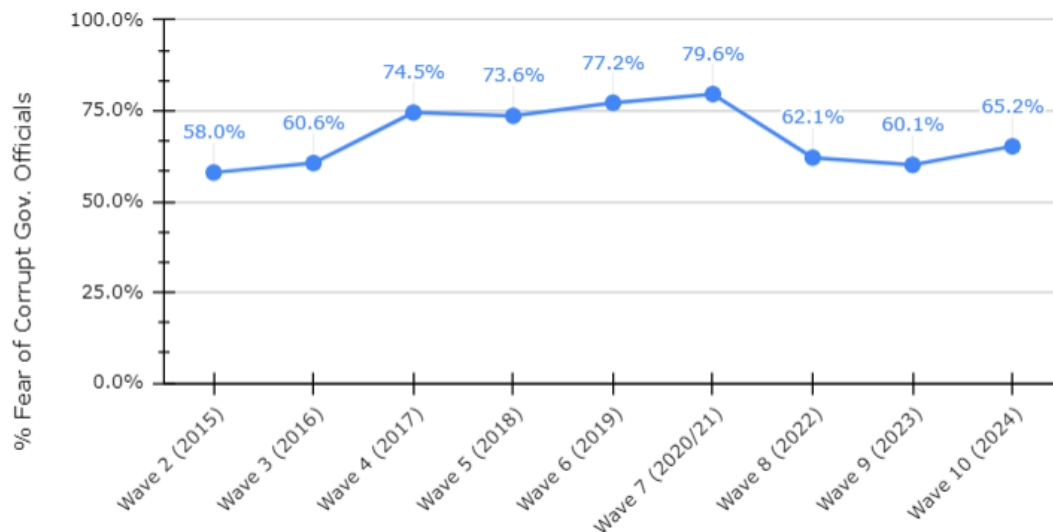
Source: Chapman Survey of American Fears 2015-2024 by Tyler Coker ('25)

To better understand this, in the Chapman survey's most recent wave, we asked Americans additional questions to probe why fear of corruption is so widespread and severe. We found that the usual social explanations fall short. Although there is some variation between different categories of Americans in the degree to which they report FOC, in all categories we considered – including those related to race, ethnicity, gender, education, income, ideology, and partisanship – a majority reports being either afraid or very afraid of corrupt government officials. Our analysis of the data also shows that Americans perceive corruption at all levels of government – local, state and Federal. Whereas some might suggest that perceptions of corruption are driven by mistrust of national politicians and the executive branch of government, our findings show that, although Americans perceive somewhat less corruption at the local level, all levels of government are generally perceived as compromised.

And despite the intense partisanship that surrounds public discussion of corruption, we found that Americans are fearful of corruption across lines of party and ideological identification. Nevertheless, partisanship did matter when we asked Americans about major interest organizations and influential groups. Partisanship affects whether Americans think that particular interest organizations and influential groups are effective in pursuing their agendas and whether those agendas are in the interest of the American people. They tended to regard the interest groups they favored as being public-spirited but ineffective and the groups they disliked as being influential and self-interested. Some influential groups – especially major business corporations – were widely believed to exert improper influence across partisan lines, but even labor unions, the interest organizations most widely favored, did not enjoy the confidence of most of our respondents.

The implications of our study of corruption are profound. FOC appears to be a substantial factor that contributes to distrust of the political process and American institutions. Worse yet, we found that the most left-leaning and right-leaning Americans were the most fearful of corruption. Although experts and international organizations generally rate the United States as enjoying relatively uncorrupted government, ordinary Americans see things differently. Particularly when corruption is defined narrowly and in legal technical fashion, i.e., as payments or favors in exchange for political advantages or government services, it fails to comport with what residents perceive as the undue influence of the powerful and resourceful over American government. That citizens may be attracted to populist rhetoric decrying career politicians and the political establishment could have its roots in distrust driven by fear of corruption.

## Elections Fears, Political Violence and Unrest

As we approach the election in November, more than half of all Americans (51.6%) fear the outcome of the presidential election. Looking at the partisan breakdown, we see that Democrats and Independents are slightly more likely that Republicans to have this worry. Some 50.4% of Republicans, 56% of Democrats, and 54% of Independents said they were afraid for the outcome. Just under half (48.6%) of Americans fear civil unrest.

Americans' fear of the presidential election outcome can be traced back to three underlying issues. First, Americans of both parties are very concerned about government corruption. This was the top

fear of 2024, mentioned by nearly two-thirds (65.2%) of respondents. Naturally, Americans who identify with a political party believe that corruption is primarily a problem for the *other* party. From this perspective, it seems clear that a victory by the other party will only exacerbate the corruption problem.

Second, anxieties about the presidential election may stem from a deeper fear of civil unrest. The events of January 6, 2021, made clear that the peaceful transition of power in the wake of a presidential election can no longer be taken for granted. Currently, nearly half of Americans (48.6%) are afraid of civil unrest. "Our finding that roughly 15 percent of Americans are supportive of using violence to achieve political aims in at least some circumstances suggests that these fears are not entirely unfounded," said John Compton, Professor and Chair of Political Science.

Third, many people are worried about foreign policy and international stability. Over half of Americans (55.8%) are worried about the possibility that Russia could use nuclear weapons in its war against Ukraine, for example. Most Americans have strong convictions about which presidential candidate is better suited to manage this and other foreign policy challenges, and they fear that a victory by the other side will further exacerbate international instability.
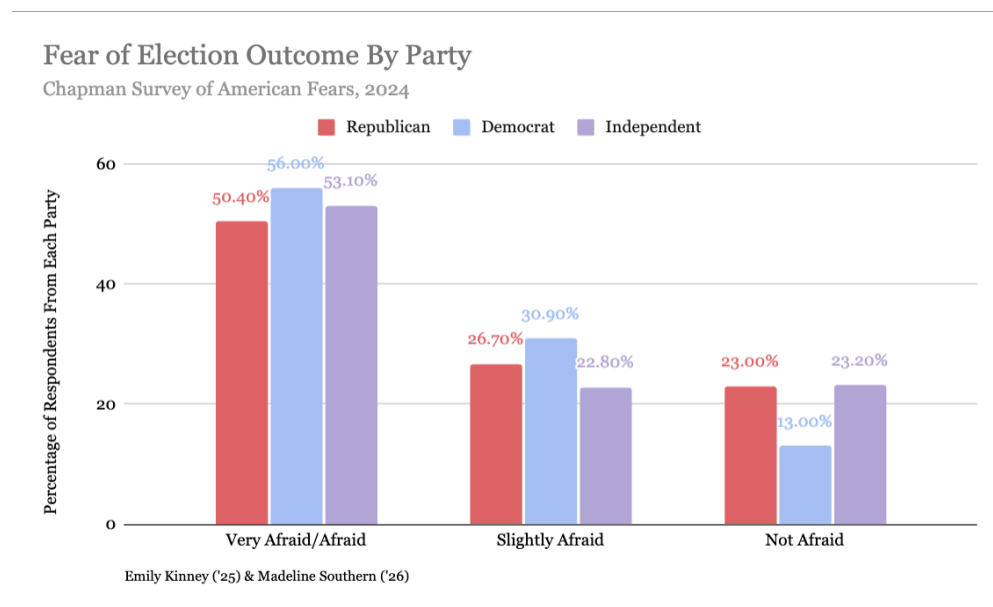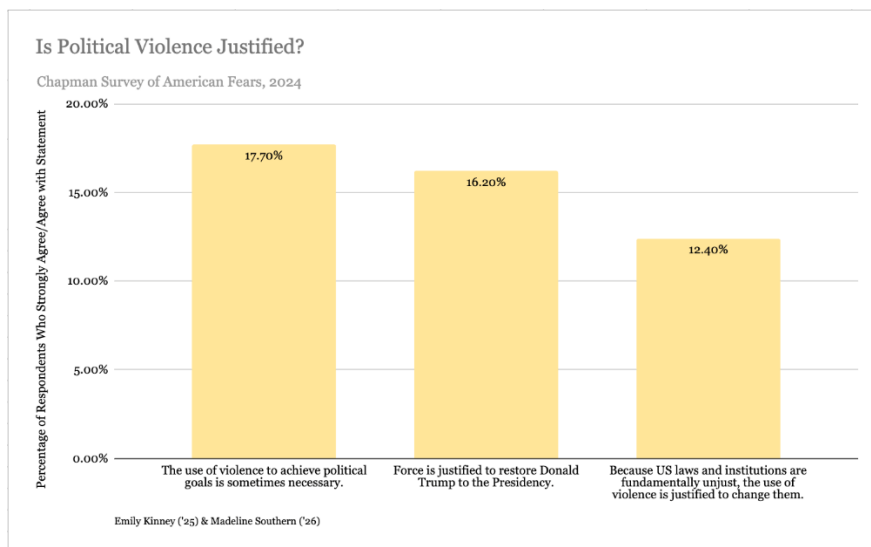

Alarmingly, a significant number of Americans consider political violence to be justified under certain circumstances. Some 12.4% agreed or strongly agreed that force is justified to restore Donald Trump to the presidency, 16.2% said it is sometimes necessary to use violence to achieve political goals, and 17.7% said because U.S. laws and institutions are fundamentally unjust, the use of force is justified to change them.

"From the shootings of Rep. Giffords and Rep. Scalise, to the violence on Jan 6th, to the assassination attempt on former President Donald Trump, and the growing threats to public

officials, political violence is on the rise. Not only is it a threat to individuals who are targeted, but it's a threat to democracy itself," said Dr. Ann Gordon, Associate Professor of Political Science.

Support for political violence appears to be driven primarily by younger and less educated respondents. Older respondents and those with college degrees were far less likely to say that the use of violence is justified to achieve political goals. In addition, Republicans were slightly more supportive of political violence than Democrats, though the partisan gap is not huge. For example, 14.7 percent of Democrats and 20.4 percent of Republicans agreed with the statement that the use of violence is justified to overturn "unjust laws."

"In sum, while large majorities of both parties are opposed to political violence, the fact that even a small number of Americans feel differently is cause for concern," Compton explained.

Is Political Violence Justified?
Chapman Survey of American Fears, 2024

- The use of violence to achieve political goals is sometimes necessary. — 17.70%
- Force is justified to restore Donald Trump to the Presidency. — 16.20%
- Because US laws and institutions are fundamentally unjust, the use of violence is justified to change them. — 12.40%

Percentage of Respondents Who Strongly Agree/Agree with Statement

Emily Kinney ('25) & Madeline Southern ('26)

Fear of a Warming Planet

The American public is narrowly divided on climate fears. Nearly half of respondents (48 percent) said they were afraid or very afraid of the effects of climate change. Climate fear has also been consistent in recent years, deviating very little since 2021, when 49 percent of Americans responded they were afraid or very afraid. The current stability of these sentiments comes after a trend in which fear of climate change increased sharply over several years. The ten-year time series of public opinion data collected by the Chapman Survey of American Fears shows that climate change emerged as one of the most feared public problems, breaking into the top ten and then becoming established as one of the most salient fears.

David Shafie, Associate Professor of Political science cites multiple reasons for this trend, "With the growing urgency of the climate crisis, emotional reactions have become more common. A growing body of scholarship on 'climate anxiety,' has documented widespread distress over global warming, particularly among young people. Another factor is the Trump effect: In 2016, only 32 percent of Americans said they were afraid or very afraid of climate change. That figure rocketed to

new heights after Trump rolled back pollution regulations and withdrew the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement." In 2019, 57 percent of Americans were afraid or very afraid of climate change.

Fear of Climate Change/Global Warming
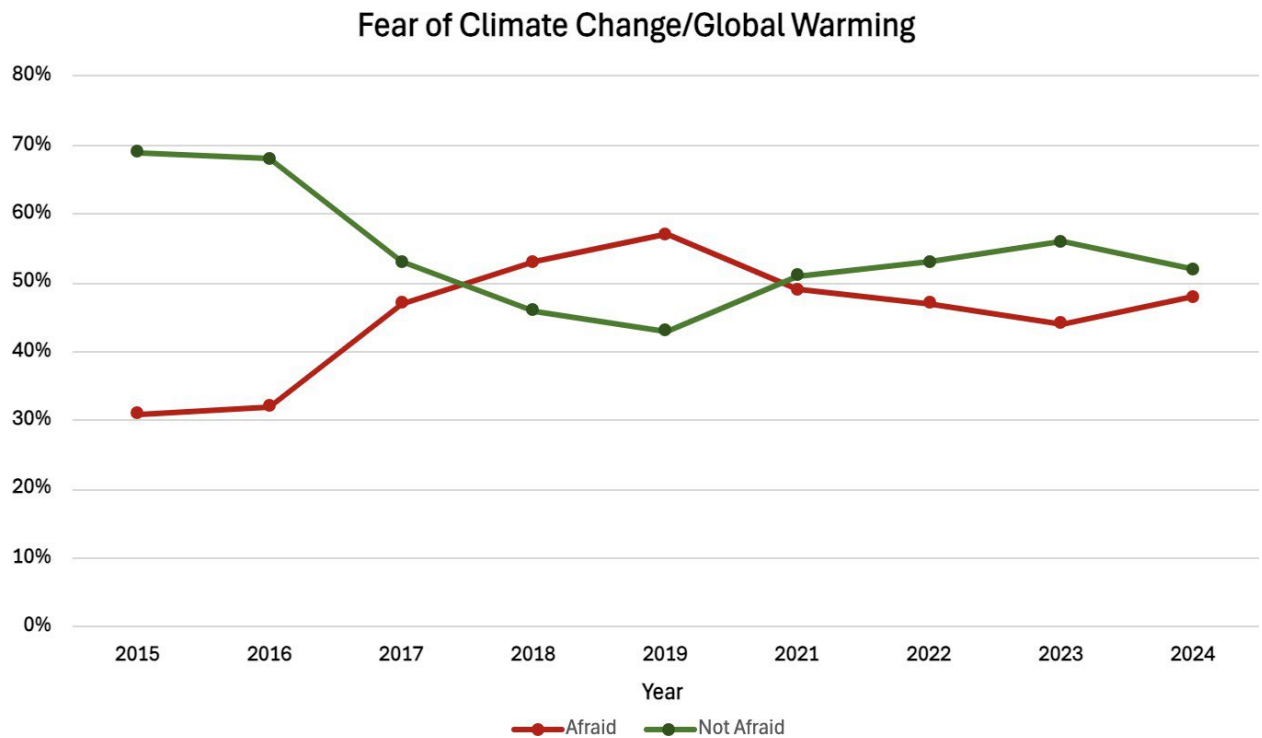
Fear of Climate Change/Global Warming									
Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024
Afraid	31%	32%	47%	53%	57%	49%	47%	44%	48%
Not Afraid	69%	68%	53%	47%	43%	51%	53%	56%	52%

Graph by Mariana Juarez ('24)

Methodology

Conducted for Chapman by SSRS, this nationally representative survey utilizes a probability-based method. The survey was fielded in the spring of 2024 using a multi-mode design so that households with internet could complete the survey over the web, and those without can participate by phone. There were 1,008 respondents, with a margin of error of +/- 4%.

[insert link to full methodology document]