Our recent focus groups show women over 50 lamenting the state of the country, particularly its political divisions. While some women are enjoying their careers, hobbies, or grandchildren, quite a few describe medical worries, financial pressures, bias and discrimination, and a sense that “their golden years” are not what they expected. Almost to a person, women feel unheard by politicians today, and many describe themselves as “invisible” at work and in public life.

Focus Group Composition

- White Republican women, ages 50 and older
- White Democratic women, ages 50 and older
- Black women, ages 50 and older
- Latinas, ages 50 and older
- Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) women, ages 50 and older
- Undecided women, ages 50 and older

Focus groups were conducted May 23 to 25, 2022. Each group consisted of 7 to 10 participants. Qualitative research findings are directional and not projectable onto the population at large. Responses were lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

The focus groups were conducted by a bipartisan team of pollsters: GBAO, Echelon Insights, Lake Research Partners, and Bellwether Research.

KEY FINDINGS

- Most women see a country in trouble.
- Inflation dominates, with profound impacts.
- But there are other salient issues—like crime, Ukraine, and (with Democrats) abortion and climate change.
- Many also worry about the future for young people.
- Quite a few see their lives as not what they expected.
- And most feel unheard and invisible, at work and in politics.
- Nearly all imagine a woman-run world as infinitely better in collaboration, empathy, and no-nonsense.
- Women are frustrated by politicians, struggling to balance policy and character.
- Across most groups, “personal responsibility” ranks highest as a value, followed by “morality” and “equality,” yet these words carry different meanings.
- Most see elected officials as not understanding their lives, particularly on caregiving or living paycheck to paycheck.
- Despite these challenges, many still choose to feel optimistic about their own lives.
DETAILED FINDINGS

Most Women See A Country In Trouble

As our recent poll and other public national polling would suggest, most of our focus group participants see the country as adrift. Barely a single participant across the six groups uses a positive word to describe how the country is doing, explaining “all we focus on is the next big bad thing.” The groups—conducted in the immediate wake of the Uvalde school shooting—also mention rampant violence. One AAPI woman laments, “America is supposed to be a first-world country… all this crime is like third-world country crime.”

One White Republican woman explains she mows the lawn to avoid the news. Another from that group puts the current times in context, “It’s a mess like I’ve never seen, and I’m not a young woman, I’ve lived through a lot of things. Cuban missile crisis, recessions, you name it, I lived through it. This is the worst I’ve ever seen it, ever.”

But it’s not just Republicans who feel the country is on the wrong track. One White Democratic woman notes, “I just feel like there just isn’t the same kind of commonality that I thought or set of values that I thought were prevalent with everyone. And it’s just not the case. And that leads to hopelessness. I don’t trust anybody.”

Inflation Dominates

Unsurprisingly, many participants describe inflationary pressures as part of what’s on their mind. In particular, women point to increases in groceries, but others tell of sharp increases in rent or gas prices, or their fixed incomes not going as far as previously. Participants share stories not just of sticker shock, but the impact of high prices—like not spending time with grandchildren or being forced to leave a long-time home.

A few respondents—notably Democrats—put inflation in a historical context. “I hate to say it, but I feel like it was a necessary correction,” explains one. Another recalls previous inflationary times, “I think I remember going through this back in, what was it, the eighties? Where we were excited when our mortgage rate was only 18% or something and we survived it and we came through it.”

However, when asked what policies would best tackle inflation, participants across groups struggle. “I’m not an economist,” explains one.

But There Are Other Salient Issues

Inflation is not the only issue on women’s minds, however. In addition to concerns about inflation and crime, unprompted, several women worried about the conflict in Ukraine. Abortion and the leaked Supreme Court decision came up unaided.
in five of the six groups—notably it did not come up in the group of White Republican women. White Democratic women also volunteered climate change as a top-tier issue.

On several economic issues—school loans, Social Security, and health care/prescription drugs—we probed respondents directly. School loans struck participants as challenging because participants are clearly torn between feeling worried about their children and grandchildren being able to afford college and “knowing what they’re signing up for,” while also explaining that they managed to pay for college and so others should too.

On Student Loans

“My daughter’s student loans are almost as much as my mortgage. It’s depressing to imagine my daughter having to pay that. I’m going to help her as much as I can, but I’m a widow. It’s just sad that she even has to do that to get a college degree.” – Latina

“I transparently want to tell you I worked three jobs in college. I was fanatical about working to pay off the loans with no financial parental help. I had to do it on my own. And things were, at that time, were just not that great, not as bad as they are now. But I worked three jobs to pay off that loan and it took me like 10 years. But yeah, I paid it off. So guys, pay it off.” – White Dem woman

“You know, I’m of an older generation and when we took out a loan, we paid it. And I know it’s a struggle for kids to go to school, but not every kid goes to college. I mean if every kid went to college, who is going to work on your car? And why as American taxpayers are we supposed to forgive student loans?” – White GOP woman

“And I think the world I lived in when I graduated school is much different in the tuition bill of what’s going to face my daughter in like seven years. That I think the end result is it's going to be, the rich is going to, you know, it's going to bifurcate the society. That either really poor people are going to realize that they can't afford to go to college, and they'll have no upward mobility and opportunity. And then the rich people who do have the means will kind of rely on that privilege and it's an expectation.” – AAPI woman

When asked about Social Security, participants are mixed on whether they expect it to be there for their own retirement (and some were, of course, already receiving Social Security). As one current Social Security recipient explains, “I truly don't believe that our country will ever let all the old people starve in the streets.”

Yet some with retirement farther in the future, or those worrying about their own children, are more pessimistic. One AAPI respondent predicts, “I believe anybody who is 50 or under might not even have much of what they promise, or what is promised to them at the time. So I would say that, for the purpose of planning for the retirement, do not rely on the Social Security because I don't know how much you can get or if you can get anything.” One White Democratic woman wonders, “Am I going to have to un-retire and get another job?”

On health care, participants share a variety of worries, such as costs, portability, prescription drug company profits, and racial bias. One Latina summarizes, “It’s not getting better, and it’s only getting more expensive.” The challenge of fixing the health care system seems massive and daunting. A White Democratic woman suggests “a total redo” of our system.
Many Also Worry About The Future For Young People

Sometimes in focus groups participants describe a younger generation that is less polite or less hard-working. However, when asked about the next generation, women in our groups expressed warmth, hope, and concern. Several women—notably in the Latina group—speak about the openness of young people around issues of mental health.

Other respondents, however, express worry about the dangers facing young people. One white woman told of high school students dying of Fentanyl overdoses, and both Black and AAPI women tell stories of racial profiling by police or anti-Asian bias.

Quite A Few See Their Lives As Not What They Expected

Many participants shared personal stories of tough challenges. Some describe their lives as “disappointing,” or say they are “scared” or unsure of what is coming next for them. Another describes being disabled, “My life wasn’t supposed to be like this.” Others recount the loss of a child, husband, or best friend, or worries about medical scares, pending test results, and diagnoses. As one widow in our undecided group movingly tells the others of losing her husband at the beginning of the pandemic, “The world went to hell. Nobody touched me for over a year. I went from $200,000 a year to $12,000 a year. I don’t have a support system anymore, that person I did everything with. I’m trying to figure out how to rebuild.”

Some respondents share they did “everything right” yet still experienced economic pressures. As one Latina participant explains, “I can’t afford to retire. I am of age to retire now and I can’t afford it. So I’m waiting.” A White Republican woman agrees, “I wanted to retire, but I’m unable to because of the way the economy is.”

“When that anti-Asian hate started, I told my kids, my college-aged kids, wear our home team baseball and home team football jerseys, so that people know that you are one of them. That you are one of the people, you're local, and it was important to us.” – AAPI woman

“I worry about his safety because where he was raised, we didn't have problems like they have up there. So, he has been profiled too. And he lives alone up there, and I am very concerned. My other son, I'm less concerned about him because he knows how to take care of himself. He knows where he is and where he lives.” – Black woman

“I just stress because we just enjoyed always going every year to see a different island of some sort on our anniversary and we would just take off for a weekend getaway and he's had a stroke and he's had cancer. So I don't know what happened to the golden years, but I don't see any golden years here and it's hard. I try to stay positive. And I pray every day for those because I always look to see, I try not to dwell on what's going on in my household, but I try to think of others that are in worse shape than I am. So that makes me feel more blessed.” – White GOP woman
And Most Feel Unheard And Invisible, Facing Age Discrimination At Work And In Politics

In nearly every group, at least one woman describes herself as “invisible”—either to elected officials, to marketers and companies, at work, or simply walking down the street. Quite a few tell of their experiences with age discrimination and explain that women their age are not well-received in the workforce. As one Latina recounts, “I feel invisible, but that's why I'm going out on my own, because at my job, there was no further growth there after 21 years and then the younger kids come in to do the job.”

One Black woman tells of having to change the way she dressed at work in order to fit in better with young people who wear “leggings and jeans” instead of more conservative work attire.

Across all audiences, participants feel unheard by elected officials. As one Black respondent notes, “They're not listening at all.” Latinas agree: “[Arizona is a] border state, and there are so many Hispanics here. Yet, we don't really have a say, because our politicians, for the most part, are not Hispanic, and they're playing to their base. I don't know if we're not speaking loud enough. I don't see them listening to us.” Some wonder if it was due to prejudices or because officials are more beholden to campaign donors. “I think money talks,” according to one undecided woman.

White women feel forgotten and unheard, too. One Republican woman laments, “A lot of the people in my area are older people, and they [politicians] don't listen to anybody older, we don't matter to them. It's like, you're fine, go away, you've had your life. We don't make enough noise, like younger people do, to get the attention of politicians. Those people are usually on the coast trying to work and make a living, us middle-aged in the center of the United States, like I said, were forgotten.” An undecided woman concurs, putting it bluntly, “They could not care less what we think.”

“Asians in general are in kind of a weird situation. We're either, we're the model minority or the Other. I don't think that the voices of Asian Americans have gotten to be strong enough, big enough to really make that much of an impact yet. I think because of all this hate crime that's been going on these last two years, I think it's beginning a little bit, to get a little bit stronger, but we have a ways to go.” – AAPI woman

“If you feel as though you still want to work, you should be able to do that and not have that stigma that, ‘Oh, I'm sorry. How old are you? Oh, no. I don't think that you'll be able to do that,’ even though you might have the experience and the education.” – Black woman

“We're too old to be hired, but too young to retire.” – Latina

“Leggings and jeans” instead of more conservative work attire. 
Nearly All Imagine A Woman-Run World As Infinitely Better At Compromise And Collaboration

When asked how they thought things might be different if women like them were in charge, our respondents are very clear: things would be better. Participants conjured a woman-led world with collaboration, empathy, and no-nonsense. One White Republican woman imagines, “I just feel it’d be more gentler. I don’t know, bake cookies.”

Others see women as better able to get things accomplished on the issues important to them. According to one Latina, “We would work together. I think health care is a big thing. I think getting AK-47s, or whatever they are, off the streets, that would just be a no-brainer. Oh my goodness, that list could go on and on and on and on, but I think things would be a lot better if women were running.”

Women Are Frustrated By Politicians, Struggling To Balance Policy And Character

Our respondents—like many voters—feel discouraged by the political climate today. This leads many to struggle to explain how they choose candidates. Few offer they are single-issue voters, and instead try to assess whether candidates are truly fighting for people like them, or to “lower the temperature.” One undecided woman explains she tries to “get a sense of what they’re in it for, whether it’s themselves or for the real country and other people.”

Across Most Groups, “Personal Responsibility” Is Valued Most, Followed By “Morality” And “Equality” Yet These Words Have Many Meanings

Mirroring our survey from February, we asked respondents which value from a short list was most important to their voting decisions. While participants mostly consolidate around “personal responsibility” followed by “morality” and “equality,” it’s important to note these words mean different things to different people. To some, “personal responsibility” connotes owning up to one’s mistakes, but for others it means being clear about campaign promises. Similarly, “morality” doesn’t necessarily connote what some describe as “traditional family values” but, as one undecided woman defines it, “being civil, being empathetic, being a good person.” Even equality—a popular value in the White Democratic group—could mean “fairness, going to look at both sides of the issues. Every once in a while a Republican might have a good idea.”

Most See Elected Officials As Lacking Experience Of Caregiving And Living Paycheck To Paycheck

Caregiving is unsurprisingly a challenge many of our participants have faced, if not currently, then in the past, or likely in the future. As one AAPI woman with an aging husband explains, “I’m the one who is taking care of everything. And with COVID, it’s multiplied more. I’m always afraid I might fall sick. Then who is going to take care? And I’m afraid if I leave him home, he might fall. What do I do?”

“I never would’ve said [a candidate’s] personality until the Trump era and the Ted Cruz era. Now, I have a threshold, like if you can’t be a decent human being, I don’t care what you might be able to do for me later.” – White Dem woman

“It’s a White man’s world. Let’s face it. And we’ve gone through everything. We’re supposed to work, we’re supposed to cook, we’re supposed to raise kids, we’re supposed to do all this stuff. Because we’ve been through all that, we’re much more understanding of other people and their needs.” – Undecided woman

“I think women have a lot of compassion, but I also think they have a lot of strength and they’re not going to take the kind of crap that they’re doling out right now. And I have wonderful children, but they had rules. They followed the rules and I think the government ought to follow the rules, really.” – White GOP woman
So caregiving looms large as an example of how elected officials “don’t get” older women’s lives. The final question of each group asked participants to describe what they would show an elected official to provide a good sense of their own lives. Many women describe showing politicians how hard they work, or how they struggle to pay for groceries. Quite a few, however, detail their caregiving challenges.

What would you show an elected official about your life?

“I would show them my patent. **That a woman, a Black woman can get a patent and the hard work that I put in over these 25 years**…That as a Black woman, we can accomplish things with the little we have.” – Black woman

“They don’t understand with my 92-year-old mother-in-law, there’s no place to put her unless we put her in a nursing home. She doesn’t deserve to be in a nursing home. It would be nice to get help, there is no help available, we are the caretakers. I did that with my mother, I did that with my father, I did it with my father-in-law, and now my mother-in-law, who’s living with us. Take some time and try doing that Nancy Pelosi, Senator Chuck Schumer, Mitch McConnell, come on over, put my mother-in-law in the bathtub.” – White GOP woman

“Well, if I was taking care of my parents, but they’re passed on, I would show them a day. I did this with my boss one time. He goes, ‘You got it made. You’re single.’ I said, ‘Come home, I’ll show you what I do. He couldn’t handle it. He threw up. He goes, ‘Oh my God.’ I said, ‘Really? You think I have it easy, but I don’t.’ So I’d like to see them in our shoes, basically. And see what we go through.” – Undecided woman

Despite These Challenges, Many Still Feel Or Choose Optimism About Their Own Lives

While these groups reveal personal, economic, and political pressures, some still choose positivity to describe their own lives. Quite a few say or use the word “blessed” or “great” to depict lives filled with the joys of retirement, baking cookies, traveling, and spending time with grandchildren. Others—like one undecided woman, explain they intentionally “have to search out the positive, and be grateful every day” since it’s “very easy to stay negative.”

“I feel challenged sometimes when I’m in a group and I feel guilty when my response is, I’m feeling like I’m doing fantastic. And it’s not because I worked hard and other people didn’t. It might be because I came from a privileged background of some sort. But anyway, I just want to say that, yes. So fantastic. Yes. I wasn’t fantastic several years ago. I made just about every change that you can think of in your life to make changes. And I feel proud of the work I personally did since 2018 to get to the point where I feel fantastic.” – White Dem woman

“It’s the nature of my personality. I am seldom without a cheery word, but I know where to find sunshine. On the darkest of days, there’s always something out there that I can find that will definitely bring a smile to my face and it can’t always just be all doom and gloom. **There’s lots of challenges that we fight, but there is the optimistic rainbow at the end that it’s all coming for us. I’m sure of it.**” – White GOP woman

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