

CHICAGO IN CONVERSATION POLL

July 2026

Divided America, Hopeful Chicago:

How Residents View Political Polarization and Common Ground

Presented by:

NORC at the University of
Chicago

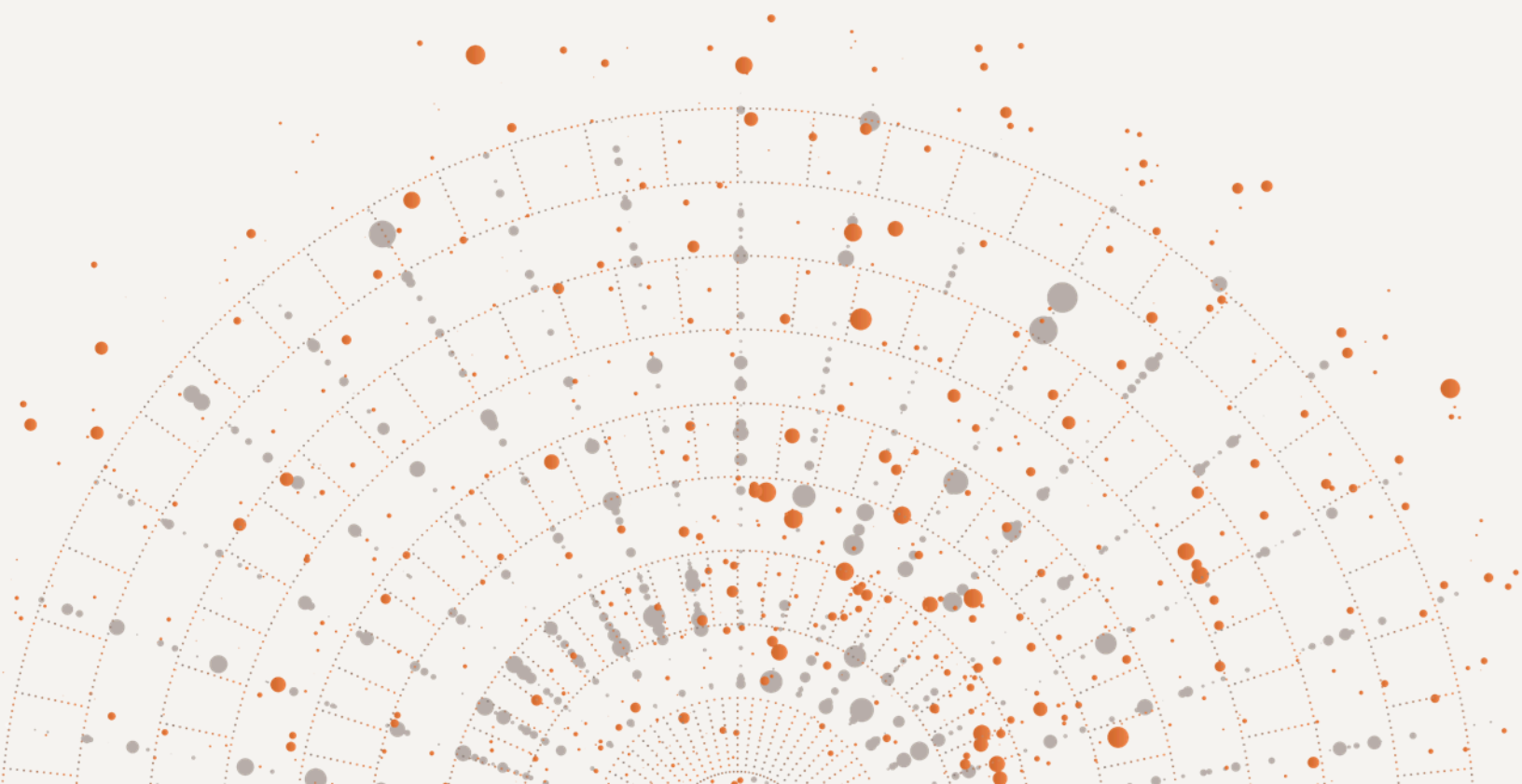


Table of Contents

Chicagoans see greater political division nationally than locally and expect it to worsen. 1

Chicagoans most often attribute political division to the nation’s political leaders, though views on the causes of division differ across groups. 4

City spending priorities emerge as Chicago’s most divisive political issue. 6

Despite concerns about political division, many Chicagoans remain optimistic about finding common ground locally and express a willingness to engage in efforts that bring people together across differences. 8

Study Methodology 13

About NORC at the University of Chicago 14

About the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy..... 14

About Chicago Public Media 14

For Chicagoans, political division has become a defining feature of public life in the United States, but many draw important distinctions between what they see nationally and what they see closer to home. Findings from a new 2026 ChicagoSpeaks survey conducted by the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, Chicago Public Media, and NORC at the University of Chicago suggest that residents see polarization as a much greater challenge nationally rather than locally. While many Chicagoans describe the United States as deeply divided and expect those divisions to persist, they are considerably less likely to view Chicago itself through the same lens.

When considering the sources of political division, Chicagoans are more likely to point to factors such as political leadership, misinformation, or economic inequality than to reasonable disagreements over policy. At the same time, perceptions of what drives division vary across partisan and demographic groups, highlighting the different ways residents interpret the causes of polarization. Chicagoans also do not see all issues as equally divisive. Perceived divisions are strongest around questions of local governance and public resources, including city spending priorities, policing, housing policy, or negotiations involving Chicago Public Schools and teachers and weakest on issues such as artificial intelligence or climate policy.

Despite concerns about political division, this study reveals evidence of civic optimism. Many residents remain confident that people with different political views can find common ground, particularly within Chicago. Political discussions are often experienced as places where new information is shared, even when they do not result in changed opinions. Some residents also express a willingness to engage in activities aimed at reducing division, from participating in community discussions to supporting leaders who emphasize cooperation across political lines.

These survey findings paint a nuanced picture of political division in Chicago. Residents acknowledge that polarization is a significant challenge, especially at the national level, but they also identify opportunities for dialogue, learning, and civic participation closer to home.

The Chicago poll was conducted June 15-23, 2026, using the ChicagoSpeaks® Panel, the NORC at the University of Chicago probability panel of Chicago residents. Online interviews were conducted with 1,194 adults. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.1 percentage points.

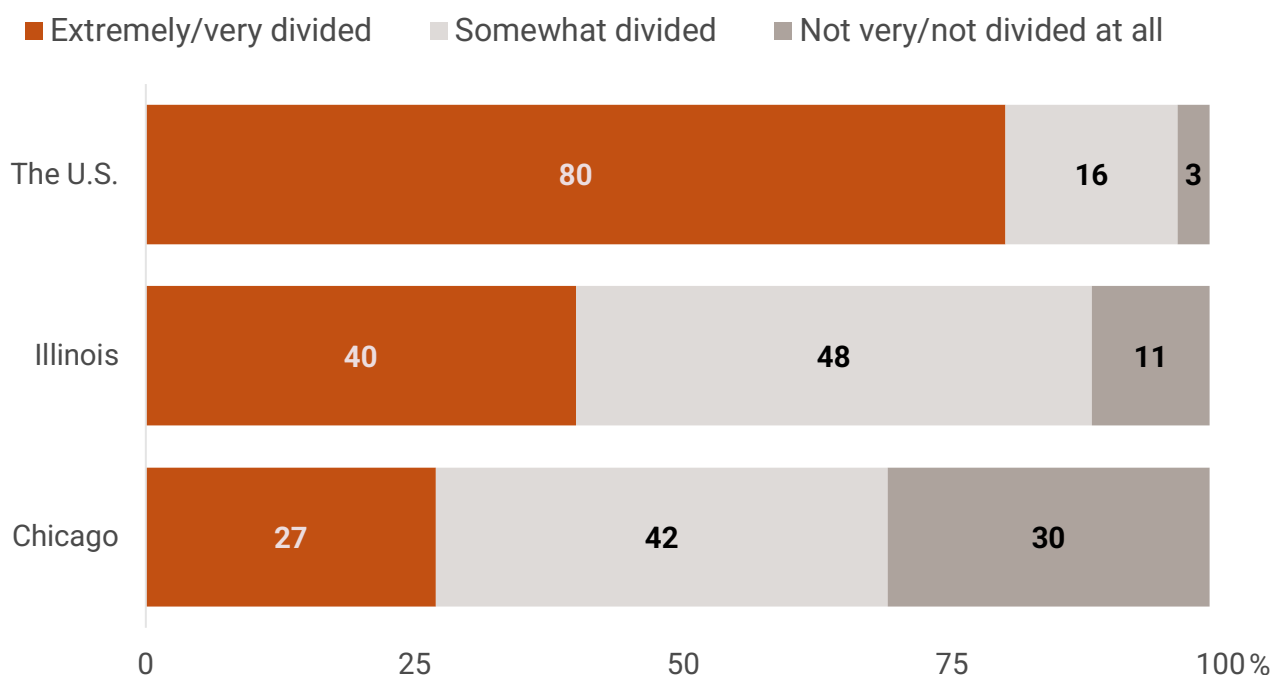
Chicagoans see greater political division nationally than locally and expect it to worsen.

While Chicagoans see political division across all levels of government, they view the United States as most divided, followed by Illinois, with Chicago perceived as comparatively less divided. A vast majority of Chicagoans feel that the U.S. is extremely or very divided compared with four in 10 who feel the same about Illinois and only about a quarter who feel the same about Chicago.

While most groups within Chicago are similarly likely to view America as divided, there is more variance in perception of division in Illinois and Chicago. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to view both Illinois (53% vs. 37%) and Chicago (47% vs. 20%) as politically divided. Adults aged 45 and older are also more likely than younger adults to view Illinois (47% vs. 35%) and Chicago (35% vs. 20%) as politically divided.

Chicagoans view the U.S. as more politically divided than Illinois or Chicago.

Percent of Chicagoans



Question: In your view, how politically divided, if at all, is each of the following today?

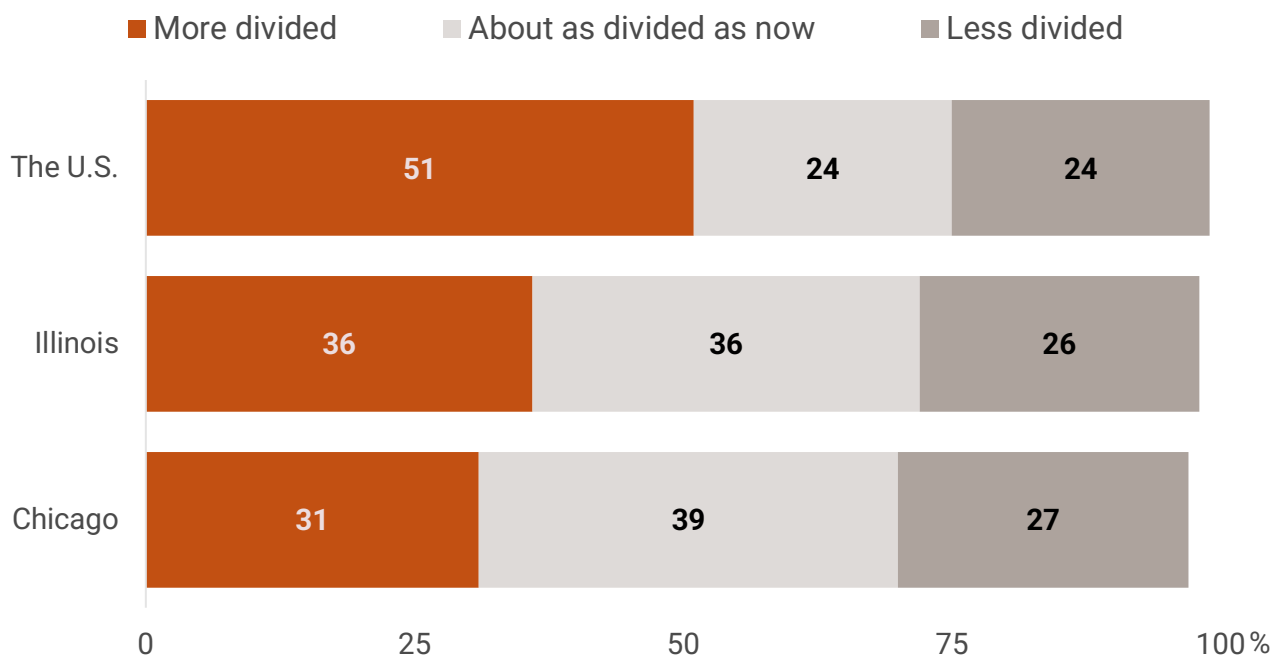
Source: Harris/ChicagoSpeaks Poll conducted June 15-23, 2026 with 1,194 adult Chicago residents.



Similarly, Chicagoans are more pessimistic about the future of political division in America compared with Illinois or Chicago. Half feel that the U.S. will become more divided on important values in the next five years compared with about a third who say the same about Illinois or Chicago. Few express hope for depolarization in any of the three, with only about a quarter predicting either the U.S., Illinois, or Chicago will become less divided in the next 5 years.

Half of Chicagoans feel that the nation will become more politically divided over the next five years.

Percent of Chicagoans



Question: Thinking about five years from now, do you think the following will become more divided on the most important values, less divided on the most important values, or be about as divided as it is now?

Source: Harris/ChicagoSpeaks Poll conducted June 15-23, 2026 with 1,194 adult Chicago residents.



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
HARRIS SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC POLICY



ChicagoPublicMedia

Republicans are more likely than Democrats to think both Illinois (53% vs. 32%) and Chicago (55% vs. 25%) will become more divided in the next five years. Chicagoans of all ages feel similarly about the likelihood of Illinois and Chicago becoming more or less divided, but older and younger adults differ at the national level. Younger Chicagoans are more pessimistic than older Chicagoans, with 55% of those aged 18 to 44 believing the U.S. will become more divided in the next 5 years compared with 46% of those aged 45 and older.

Chicagoans most often attribute political division to the nation's political leaders, though views on the causes of division differ across groups.

When asked about the drivers of political division in Chicago, Chicagoans most often point to the nation's political leaders. About 6 in 10 blame misinformation and economic inequality. Relatively few Chicagoans feel that policy disagreements are substantially driving political division.

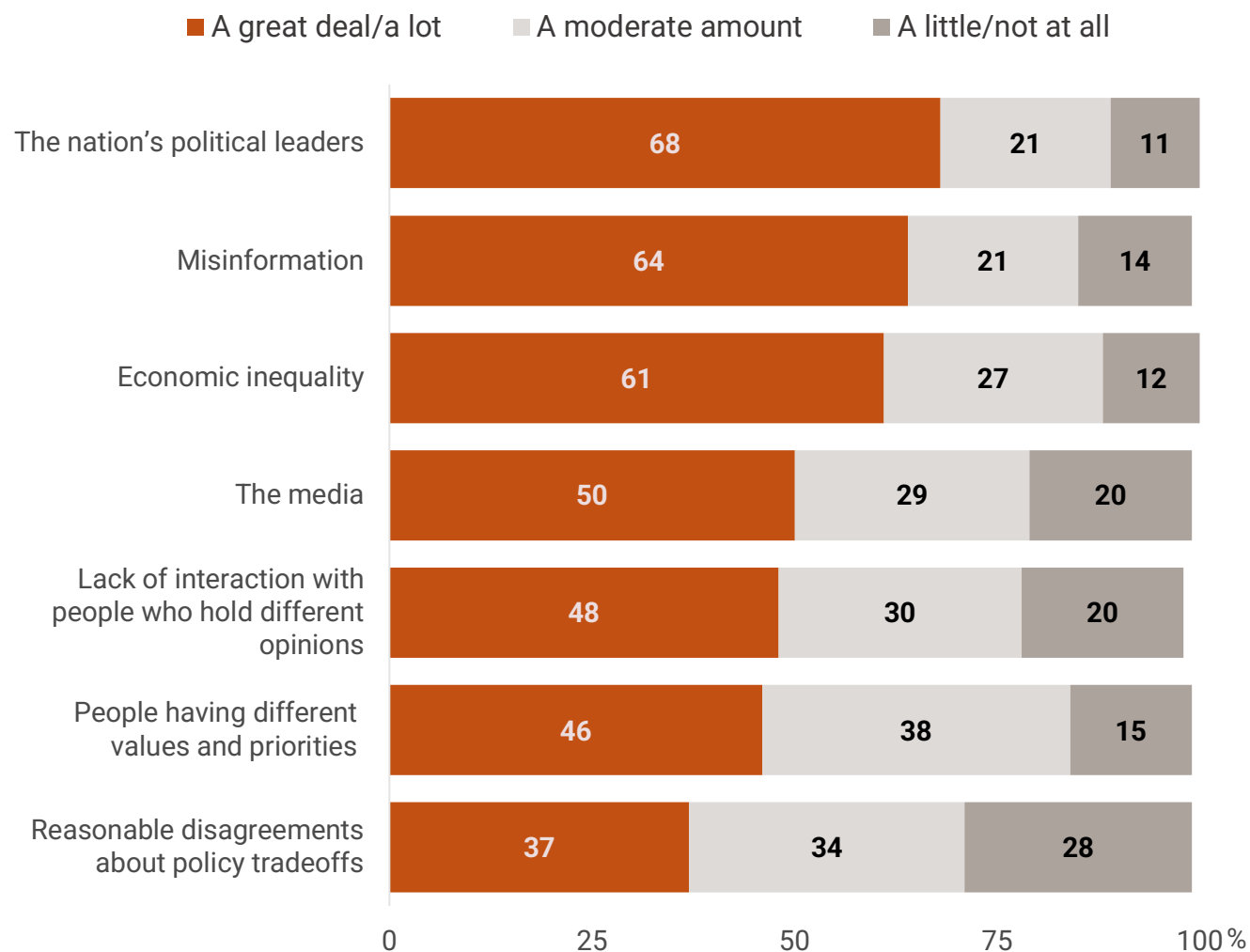
Chicagoans are not equally likely to agree on explanations for the division. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to feel that economic inequality (67% vs. 46%) or the nation's political leadership (74% vs. 55%) are causing a great deal or a lot of division. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to blame the media (68% vs. 47%) or differences in values (67% vs. 40%) as the source of division.

Older Chicagoans are more likely to blame several sources for dividing Chicagoans compared with young Chicagoans. Chicagoans aged 45 or older are more likely than younger Chicagoans to feel that the nation's political leaders (77% vs. 60%), people having different values (52% vs. 41%), or reasonable disagreements over policy choices (46% vs. 29%) are causing division in Chicago.

Chicagoans with a college degree are more likely than less educated residents to identify several causes for the division. Those with a college degree are more likely than those without to say the nation's political leaders (77% vs. 60%), misinformation (71% vs. 58%), or economic inequality (66% vs. 56%) are significant sources of division in Chicago.

The nation's political leaders receive the most blame for political division in Chicago.

Percent of Chicagoans



Question: How much, if at all, do you think each of the following is responsible for causing division in Chicago?

Source: Harris/ChicagoSpeaks Poll conducted June 15-23, 2026 with 1,194 adult Chicago residents.

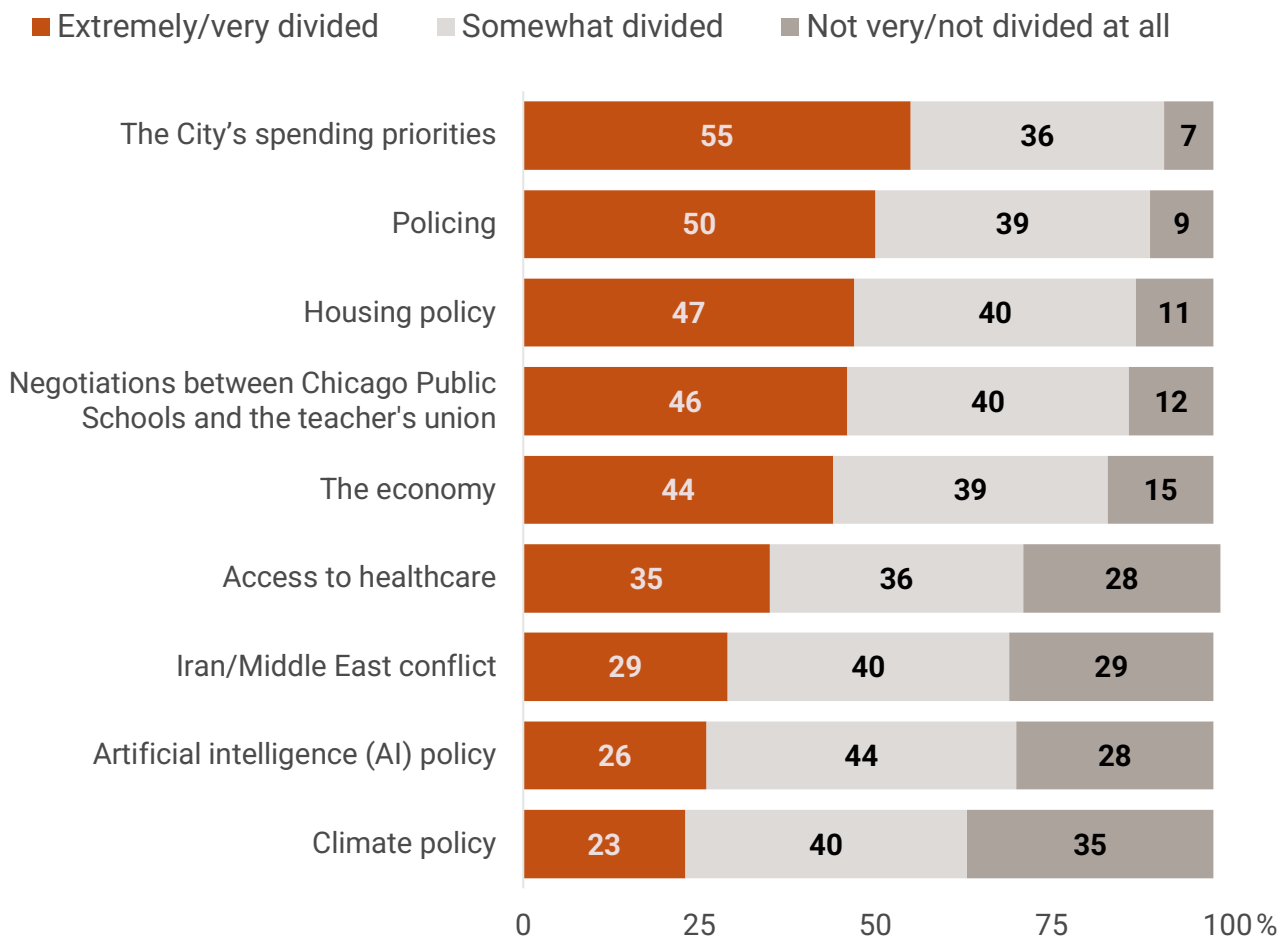
City spending priorities emerge as Chicago's most divisive political issue.

When it comes to the *issues* that divide Chicagoans, the city's spending priorities are most often cited as divisive, while policing, housing policy, and negotiations between Chicago Public Schools and the teacher's union are also seen as contentious. Chicagoans perceive the least division on matters like climate change or artificial intelligence policy, with only about a quarter viewing the public as divided on those issues.

Perceptions of the divisiveness of many of these issues vary across political and age groups. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to view the city's spending priorities (68% vs. 51%) and policing (64% vs. 47%) as issues that deeply divide Chicagoans. Age differences are also evident. Chicagoans ages 45 and older are more likely than those ages 18 to 44 to see the city's spending priorities (62% vs. 49%) and negotiations between Chicago Public Schools and the teachers' union (51% vs. 42%) as major sources of division.

More than half of Chicagoans believe the city is divided over spending priorities.

Percent of Chicagoans



Question: How divided, if at all, do you think Chicago is on the following issues?

Source: Harris/ChicagoSpeaks Poll conducted June 15-23, 2026 with 1,194 adult Chicago residents.

Despite concerns about political division, many Chicagoans remain optimistic about finding common ground locally and express a willingness to engage in efforts that bring people together across differences.

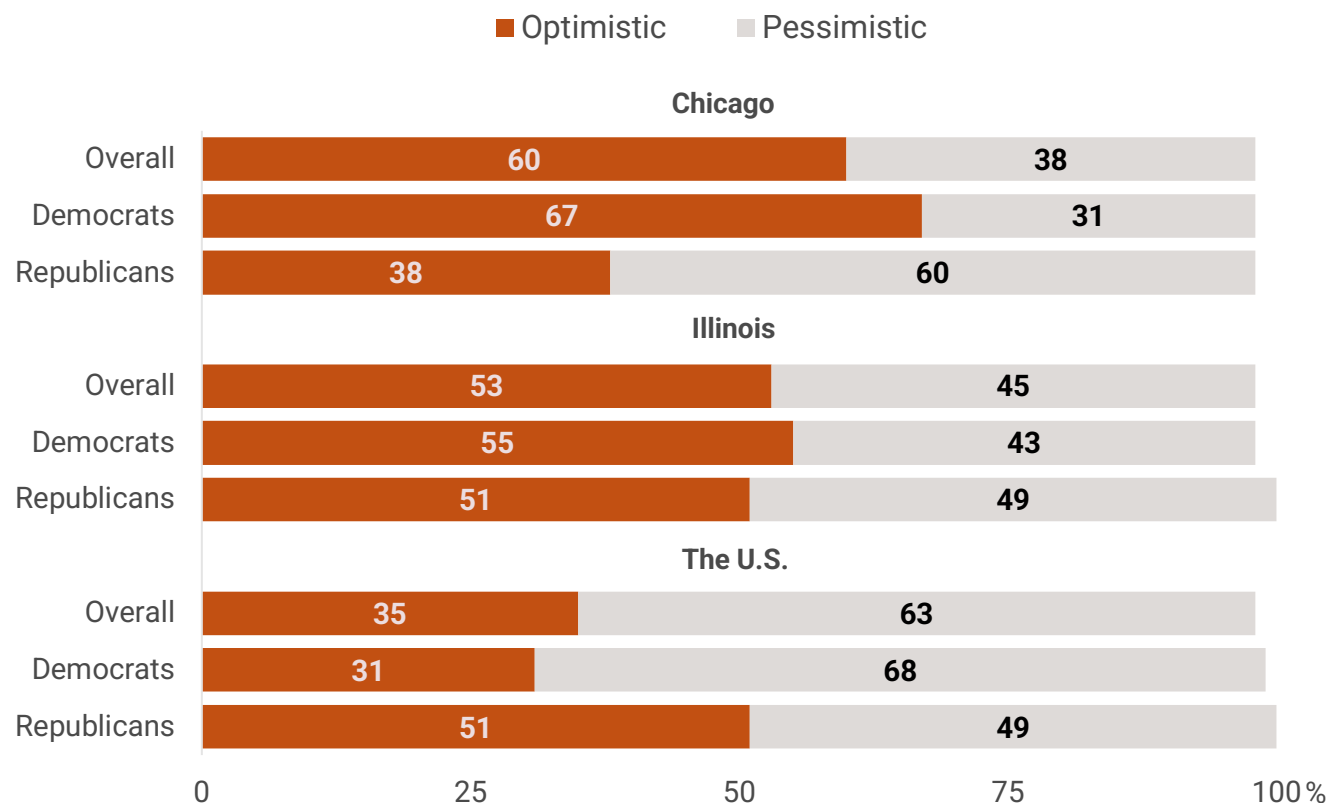
Chicagoans see more potential for unity in Chicago and Illinois than nationally. Six in 10 Chicagoans are optimistic that people of different political opinions can come together and work out their differences in Chicago, and another half feel the same about adults living in Illinois. Only a third of Chicagoans are optimistic that Americans can come together despite their differences.

Republicans are more confident than Democrats about building unity on the national level, with 51% of Republicans feeling optimistic compared with 31% of Democrats. But Democrats are more confident that Chicagoans can come together despite their differences than Republicans (67% vs. 38%).

Chicagoans without a college degree are more likely than college educated Chicagoans to feel optimistic that people in the United States can come together despite political division (43% vs. 27%).

Democrats feel more optimistic for depolarization in Chicago while Republicans have more hope for the national level.

Percent of Chicagoans



Question: These days, do you feel optimistic that people of different political views living in each of the following areas can still come together and work out their differences, or are you pessimistic that they can do that now?

Source: Harris/ChicagoSpeaks Poll conducted June 15-23, 2026 with 1,194 adult Chicago residents.

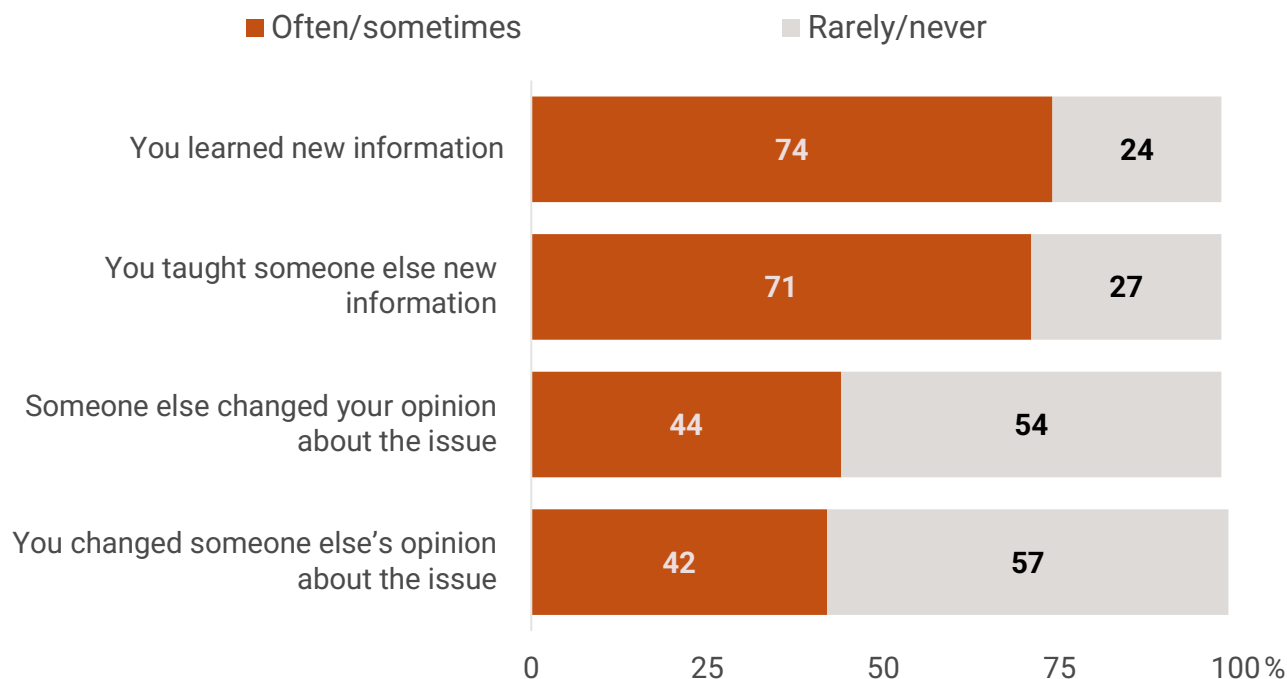


While political conversations often introduce new information, they are less likely to sway opinions. About 7 in 10 Chicagoans say they often or sometimes either learn or teach new information during a conversation about politics. But when asked about changing someone else's or their own mind about a topic, only around four in 10 say this often or sometimes happens.

Republicans and Democrats share or learn new information at similar rates, but Republicans are more likely than Democrats to report changing someone else's mind about a topic often or sometimes (51% vs. 39%).

Conversations about politics introduce new information, but are less likely to change opinions.

Percent of Chicagoans



Question: How often, if ever, have each of the following happened to you because of a conversation you had about politics?

Source: Harris/ChicagoSpeaks Poll conducted June 15-23, 2026 with 1,194 adult Chicago residents.

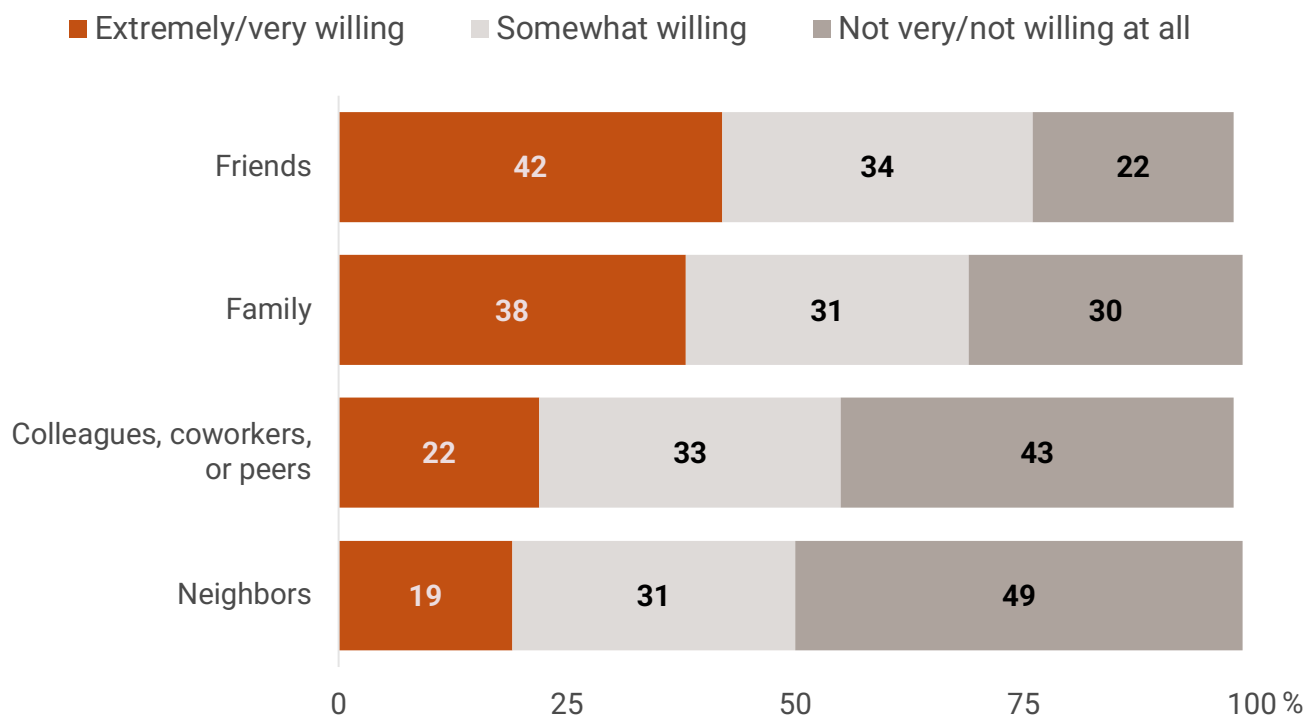


Chicagoans are more willing to engage in political conversations with some groups than others. They are most willing to speak with friends or family of differing beliefs about politics, with 4 in 10 being extremely or very willing. About half as many, 2 in 10, are willing to speak with coworkers or neighbors about political topics.

Chicagoans ages 18 to 44 express more willingness to have political conversations with their friends who have opposing views compared with older Chicagoans (49% vs. 33%). Similarly, Chicagoans with a college degree are more likely than those less educated (51% vs. 34%) and men are more likely than women (48% vs. 36%) to report a willingness to have these types of conversations with their friends. Men are also more likely than women to say they would be willing to have these types of conversations with their neighbors (23% vs. 15%).

Chicagoans are most willing to have political conversations with their friends or family.

Percent of Chicagoans



Question: How willing are you to engage in political discussions with people in the following groups who hold different views than your own?

Source: Harris/ChicagoSpeaks Poll conducted June 15-23, 2026 with 1,194 adult Chicago residents.



Chicagoans express varying likelihoods to take certain actions to help reduce division in the city. Around 4 in 10 express a willingness to vote for candidates who campaign on working across party lines, have conversations with people with opposing political views, attend a local event to learn about an issue affecting Chicago, participate in discussions with local people who have different views, or attend a local event focused on bringing people together. A third are willing to share information online or volunteer with certain organizations with the goal of reducing division in Chicago. Only 14% say they are not willing to do any of these things.

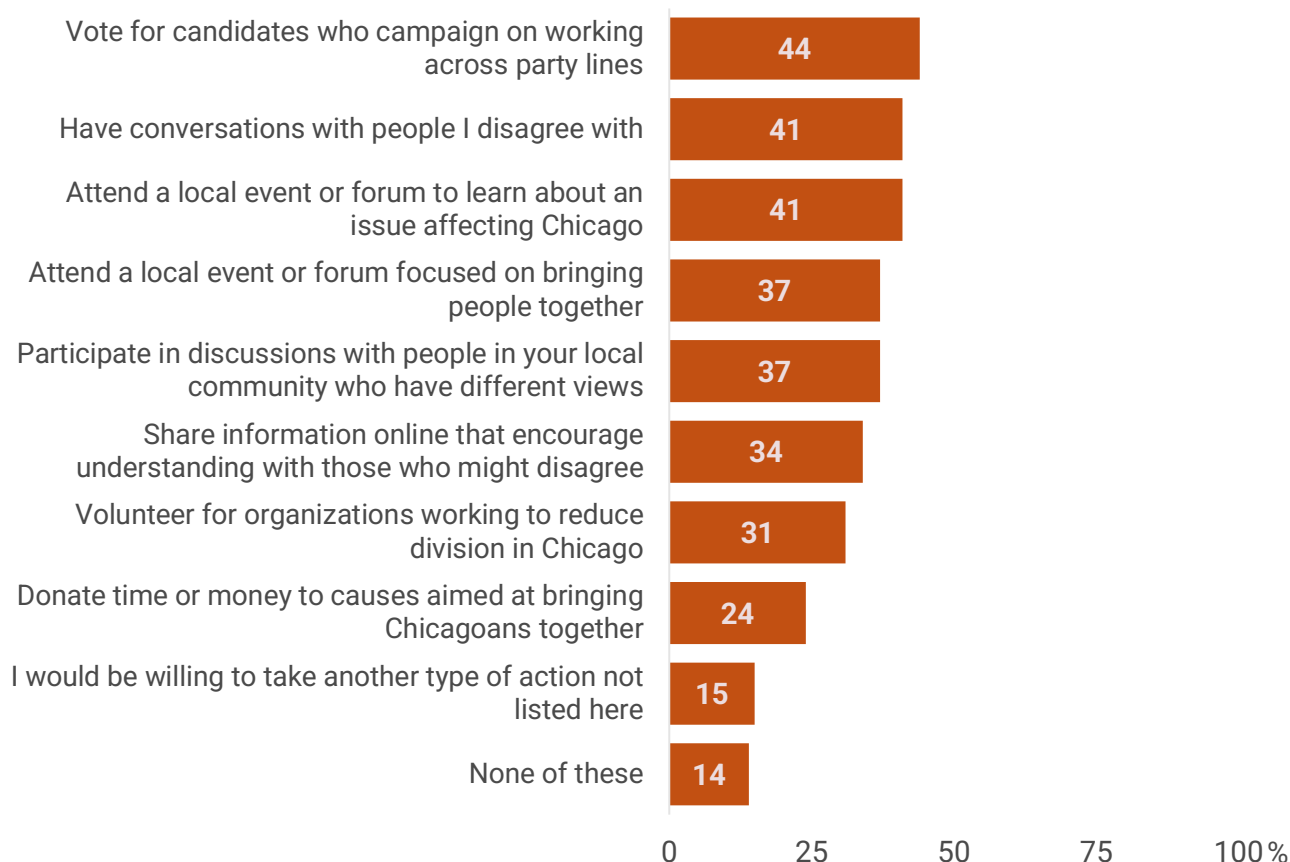
Democrats are more likely than Republicans to be willing to attend a local event or forum focused on unity (42% vs. 22%) or to learn about an issue affecting Chicago (46% vs. 24%).

Older Chicagoans are more likely than younger Chicagoans to say they would vote for a candidate promising to work across party lines (55% vs. 35%) while younger Chicagoans are more willing to converse with people with whom they disagree (45% vs. 36%).

College educated Chicagoans are more likely than less educated ones to be willing to attend an event aimed at bringing people together (44% vs. 31%), have conversations with people they disagree with (52% vs. 32%), or donate time or money to a cause focused on unifying diverse Chicagoans (31% vs. 19%).

Most Chicagoans would be willing to take at least one of the following actions to help reduce division in Chicago.

Percent of Chicagoans



Question: Which of the following actions would you be willing to take to help reduce division in Chicago?
Please select all that apply.

Source: Harris/ChicagoSpeaks Poll conducted June 15-23, 2026 with 1,194 adult Chicago residents.

Study Methodology

This survey was conducted by the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, Chicago Public Media, and NORC at the University of Chicago with funding from the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy. Staff from Harris Public Policy, Chicago Public Media, and NORC collaborated on all aspects of the study.

Funded and operated by NORC at the University of Chicago, ChicagoSpeaks® is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the Chicago household population. NORC conducted the ChicagoSpeaks summer 2026 survey using two sample sources: (1) NORC's AmeriSpeak® Panelists who reside in Chicago and (2) NORC's ChicagoSpeaks Panelists.

AmeriSpeak and ChicagoSpeaks are probability-based panels. The final survey estimates were calibrated to account for these different sample sources. This research was done to support a scientifically rigorous, community-driven research resource for informing policymakers and the public with accurate information about the experiences and opinions of all Chicago residents.

Interviews for this survey were conducted between June 15-23, 2026 with Chicago residents aged 18 and older, the overall study target population. Overall, 1,194 Chicago residents completed the survey. AmeriSpeak panelists were invited through the password-protected AmeriSpeak Mobile App and received email reminders and SMS reminders. ChicagoSpeaks panelists received a combination of email and SMS communications. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference, using an online survey. Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive for completing the survey. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.1 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect.

Sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error and there may be other unmeasured error in this or any other survey.

Quality assurance checks were conducted to ensure data quality. In total, 30 interviews were removed for nonresponse to at least 50% of the questions asked of them or for completing the survey in less than one-third the median interview time for the full sample. These interviews were excluded from the data file prior to weighting.

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data have been collected and made final, a poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any noncoverage or under and oversampling resulting from the study specific sample design. Poststratification variables included Chicago region, age, sex, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment. The sociodemographic characteristics are weighted to benchmarks from the American Community Survey 2024 1-year estimates.

For more information, email ChicagoSpeaks-BD@norc.org or visit go.norc.org/ChicagoSpeaks.

<https://www.norc.org/research/projects/chicagospeaks.html>

About NORC at the University of Chicago

NORC at the University of Chicago conducts research and analysis that decision-makers trust. As a nonpartisan research organization and a pioneer in measuring and understanding the world, we have studied almost every aspect of the human experience and every major news event for more than eight decades. Today, we partner with government, corporate, and nonprofit clients around the world to provide the objectivity and expertise necessary to inform the critical decisions facing society.

About the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy

The mission of the Harris School of Public Policy is to serve society by advancing analysis- and evidence-informed public policy through rigorous research, educating serious-minded and effective policy leaders, and engaging on pressing societal issues. The second-largest professional school at the University of Chicago and home to one of its largest undergraduate majors, Harris Public Policy offers a full range of degree and executive education programs that empower aspiring leaders from more than 40 countries each year. Harris is the academic home to 20 research centers and labs that study and engage with the public on areas such as democracy and effective government, economic and political development, education, climate and energy, health, municipal finance, public safety, social policy, and urban policy.

For more information visit <https://harris.uchicago.edu/>

About Chicago Public Media

Chicago Public Media is a nonprofit organization committed to providing our community with accessible and trusted news, information and programming. Brought to life by the work of our independent local newsrooms – WBEZ and the Chicago Sun-Times – we envision a Chicago that is equitable, inclusive and vibrant.