



# RESULTS FOR AMERICA

July 24, 2019

## AMERICANS OVERWHELMINGLY SUPPORT INVESTING IN WHAT WORKS:

NATIONAL POLLING RESULTS  
ON EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING

### I. Overview

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Evidence-based policymaking is gaining traction. Since 2015, Congress has passed landmark bipartisan legislation that is helping to identify and invest in what works in K-12 education (the Every Student Succeeds Act), foster care (the Family First Prevention Services Act), juvenile justice (the Juvenile Justice Reform Act), and opioid prevention, treatment, and care (SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act).

In 2016, Congress also passed bipartisan legislation creating the [Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking](#) to study how government can better use data and evidence in policymaking. Three years later, the [Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act](#) was signed into law—expanding the ability of the federal government to use data and evidence to evaluate various policies by implementing several of the Commission's recommendations.

Evidence-based policy is advancing at the state and local levels, too. For example, in 2018 Results for America [identified](#) 88 leading and promising data-driven and evidence-based practices, policies, programs, and systems in effect in 30 states across the country. And at the city level, over 100 mayors—Democrats and Republicans—have participated in Bloomberg Philanthropies' What Works Cities initiative with 14 cities receiving a [2019 What Works Certification](#) for their data-based decision-making.

While these advancements are promising, Results for America (RFA) wanted to know the extent to which the public supported government efforts to build and use evidence and data in their decision-making. So, in March 2019 RFA commissioned NORC at the University of Chicago to conduct a nationally representative survey of roughly 1,000 Americans to ascertain their views on evidence-based policy in general and RFA-backed initiatives in particular.

The results were both encouraging and enlightening. Roughly nine-in-ten Americans supported the notion that policymakers should seek the best evidence when making decisions, and about the same percentage indicated they would support a candidate who shifted public dollars towards programs that were proven to work. About 85 percent of Americans reported they supported a policy that would set aside 1 percent of funds for program evaluation, and a similar share voiced support for the practice of shifting dollars towards programs that have proven to work. At the same time, many Americans showed concern over lack of evidence in policymaking: just 8 percent indicated that evidence drove policymakers' decisions.

This brief describes the survey results in more depth, including breakdowns along ideological and demographic dimensions. It provides background on methodology, and additional information on the organization that conducted the survey. And it concludes with guidance for those seeking to put in place policies which align with the public's desire for more evidence-based policy.

## II. Background on NORC and the AmeriSpeak Survey

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In March 2019, RFA contracted with NORC to add seven questions to its monthly AmeriSpeak survey, which polls approximately 1,000 nationally representative respondents on a wide variety of questions. NORC—a research institution affiliated with the University of Chicago—describes itself as “an objective, non-partisan research institution that delivers reliable data and rigorous analysis to guide critical programmatic, business, and policy decisions.” NORC conducts several high-profile surveys, including the General Social Survey, the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth, and the Survey of Consumer Finances.

NORC's Amerispeak survey is a household panel survey that allows organizations to survey a scientifically selected sample of adults on questions related to issues such as business, policy, technology, and current events. Respondents can answer via telephone, the internet, or an AmeriSpeak app. One particular strength of the study is that it makes use of NORC's area probability sample to produce a nationally representative survey. Additional information on the AmeriSpeak survey can be found [here](#).

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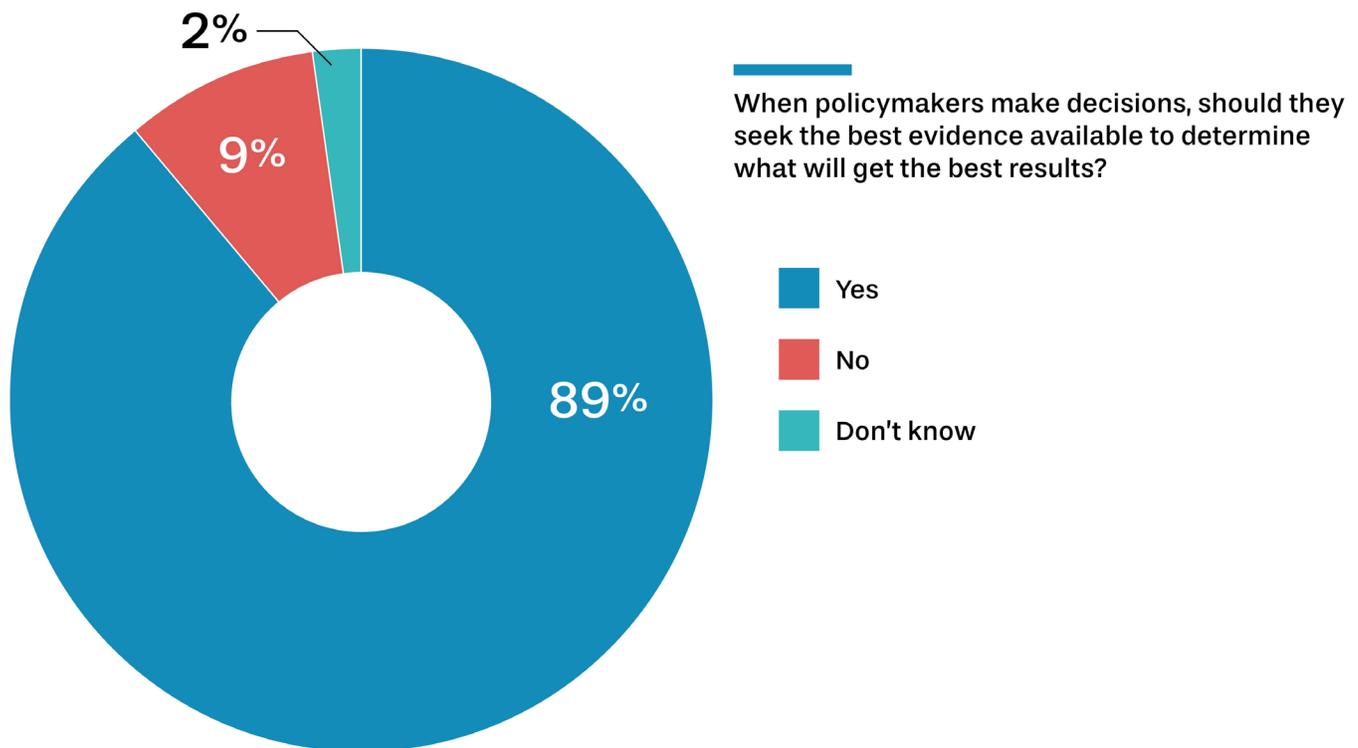
<sup>1</sup> The survey asks respondents about both political party affiliation and political ideology. Throughout this brief, respondents are referred to as belonging to a particular party if they self-identify as a “strong” or “moderate” member of that party or that they “lean” towards a particular party.

# III. Questions and Results

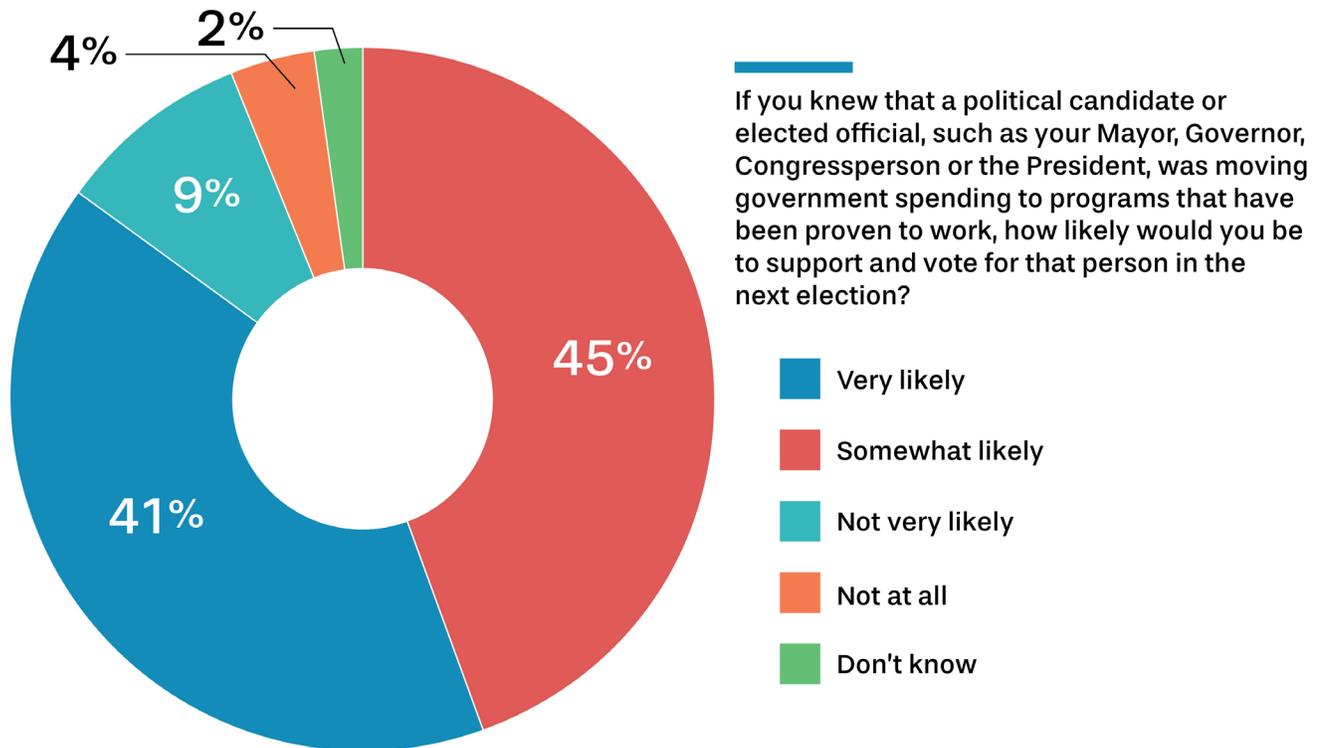
The seven questions that were asked in the survey were designed to elicit respondents' views about evidence-based policy in general, beliefs about the drivers of the policymaking process, and degree of support for evidence-based initiatives that have long been supported by Results for America. The key takeaways are summarized below.

## Takeaway #1: Americans exhibit broad support for evidence-based policy

The survey asked several questions regarding support for evidence based policy. One question asked "When policymakers make decisions, should they seek the best evidence available to determine what will get the best results?" An overwhelming 89 percent answered yes, with only 9 percent answering no. This level of support was roughly consistent across ages, genders, income levels, and political party affiliation. For example, 88 percent of male respondents and 91 percent of female respondents answered in the affirmative, as did at least 83 percent of each income group. Younger respondents were somewhat less supportive relative to older subgroups, with 78 percent of people between ages 18 and 29 supporting policymakers' efforts to incorporate evidence. Respondents were equally supportive across party lines, too. Ninety-two percent of Democrats and 90 percent of Republicans answered yes to this question.



A second question measured support for policymakers who embrace evidence, asking "If you knew that a political candidate or elected official, such as your Mayor, Governor, Congressperson or the President, was moving government spending to programs that have been proven to work, how likely would you be to support and vote for that person in the next election?" A striking 86 percent answered that they were either very likely (41 percent) or somewhat likely (45 percent) to support that person, with just 13 percent noting they were not very likely (9 percent) or not at all likely (4 percent) to support the official. As with the prior question, this support was widespread across a host of demographic characteristics.

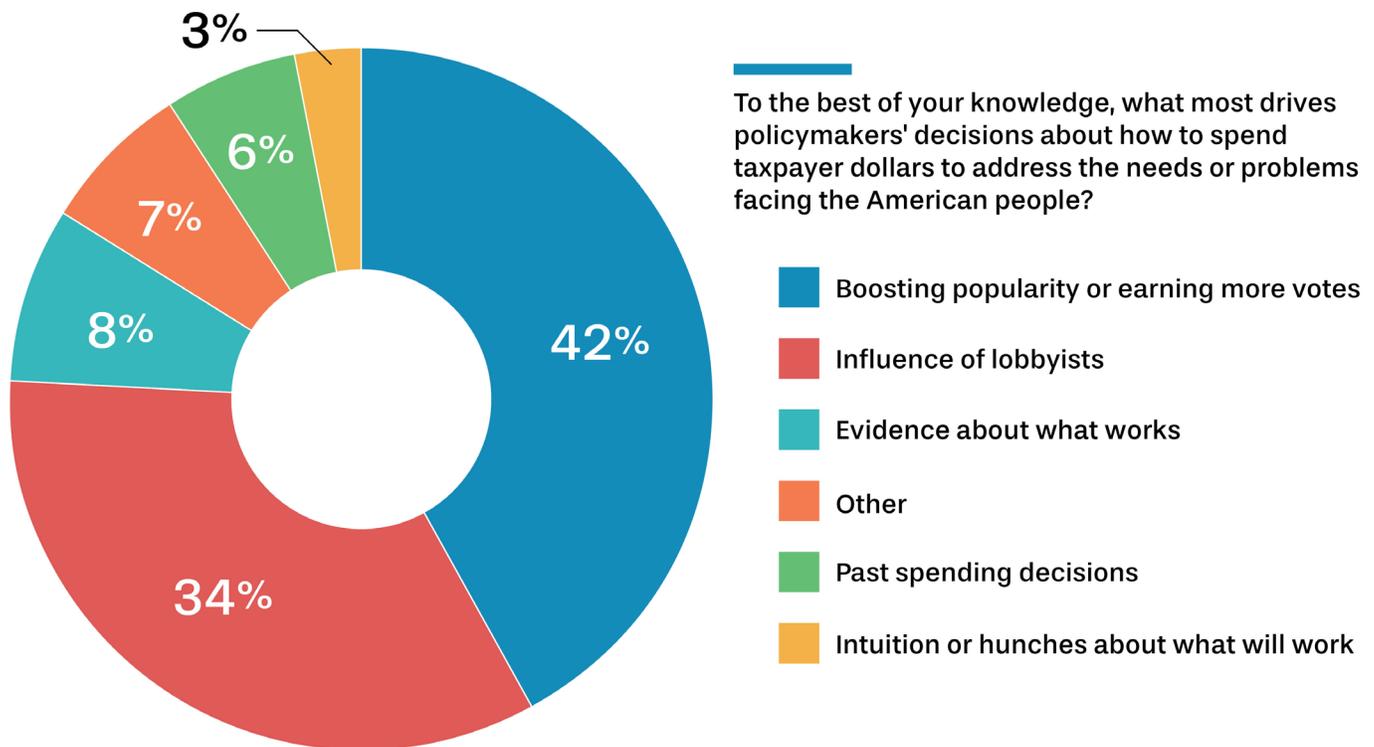


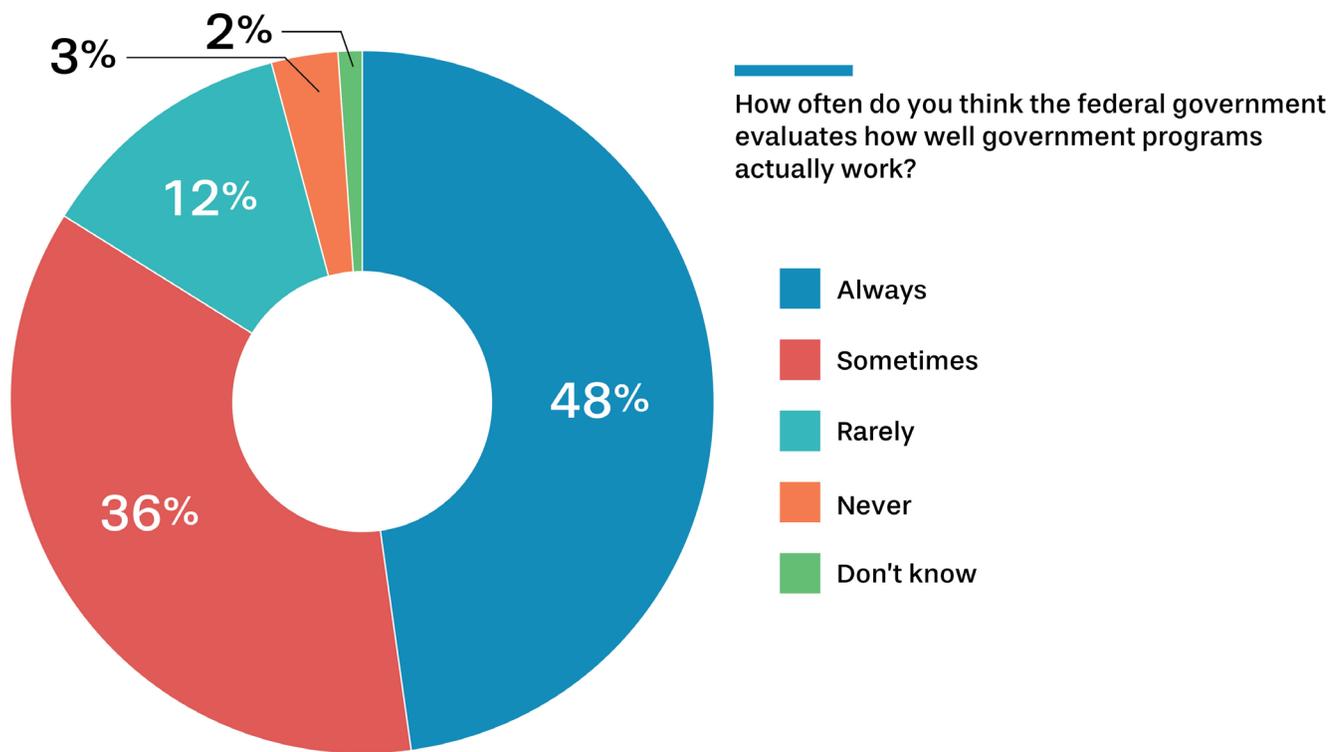
## Takeaway #2: Americans think evidence is largely absent from policymaking

Several questions pertained to Americans' views of policymakers' adoption of evidence. One question asked "To the best of your knowledge, what most drives policymakers' decisions about how to spend taxpayer dollars to address the needs or problems facing the American people?" Unlike the questions about whether evidence should be incorporated in policymaking, the responses varied over whether evidence was currently the main driver of policy decisions. Over four-in-ten respondents answered that "boosting popularity or earning more votes" was the main driver, while 34 percent answered that "influence of lobbyists" was the main driver. Just 8 percent of the respondents thought that "evidence about what works"

was the primary factor in policy decisions. Also, although responses were similar across party lines, Democrats cited influence of lobbyists as the most prominent decision-making factor, while Republicans thought that popularity was the most common driver.

Another question asked about the perceived frequency of evaluation of federal programs. Many respondents answered that federal programs were, at times, subject to evaluation—with just 12 percent of respondents answering that the federal government “never” evaluates how well programs actually work. Still, only 3 percent answered that programs were “always” evaluated. The bulk of respondents—84 percent—thought that programs were evaluated at times, with 36 percent answering that programs are “sometimes” evaluated and 48 percent answering “rarely.”



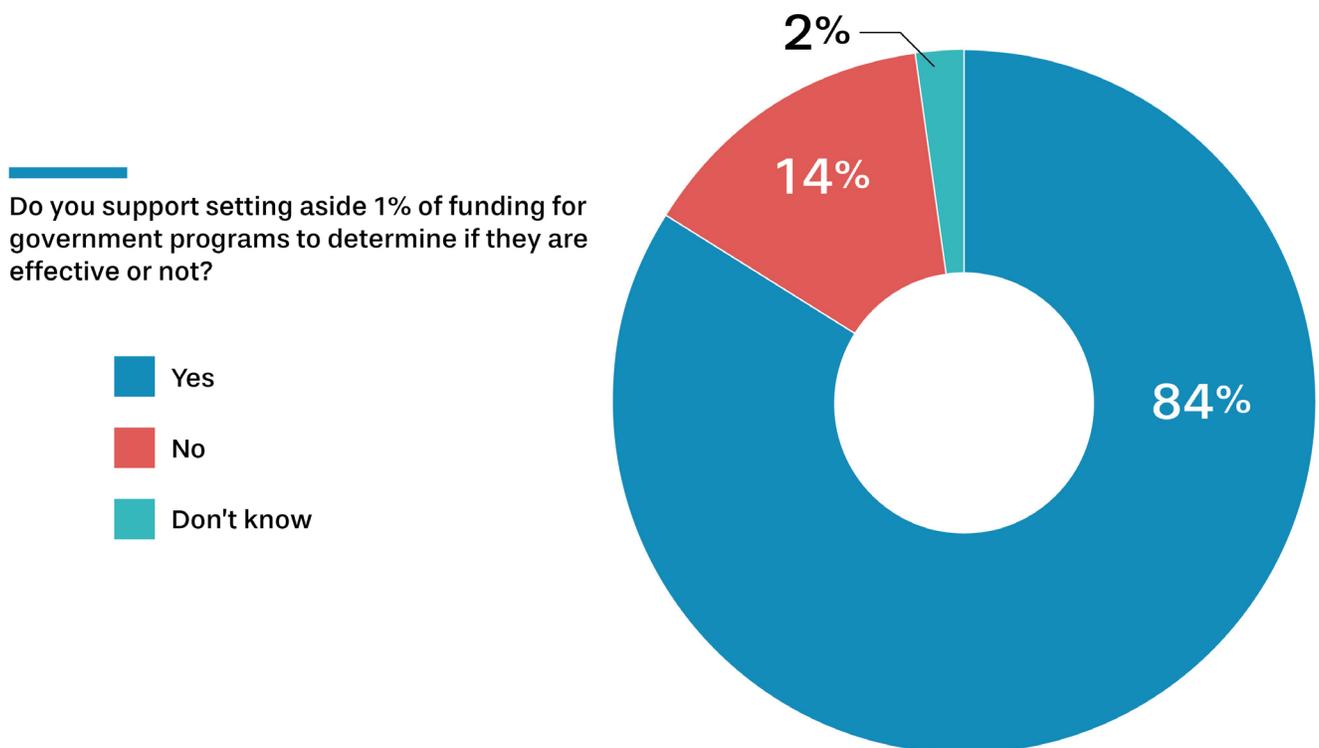
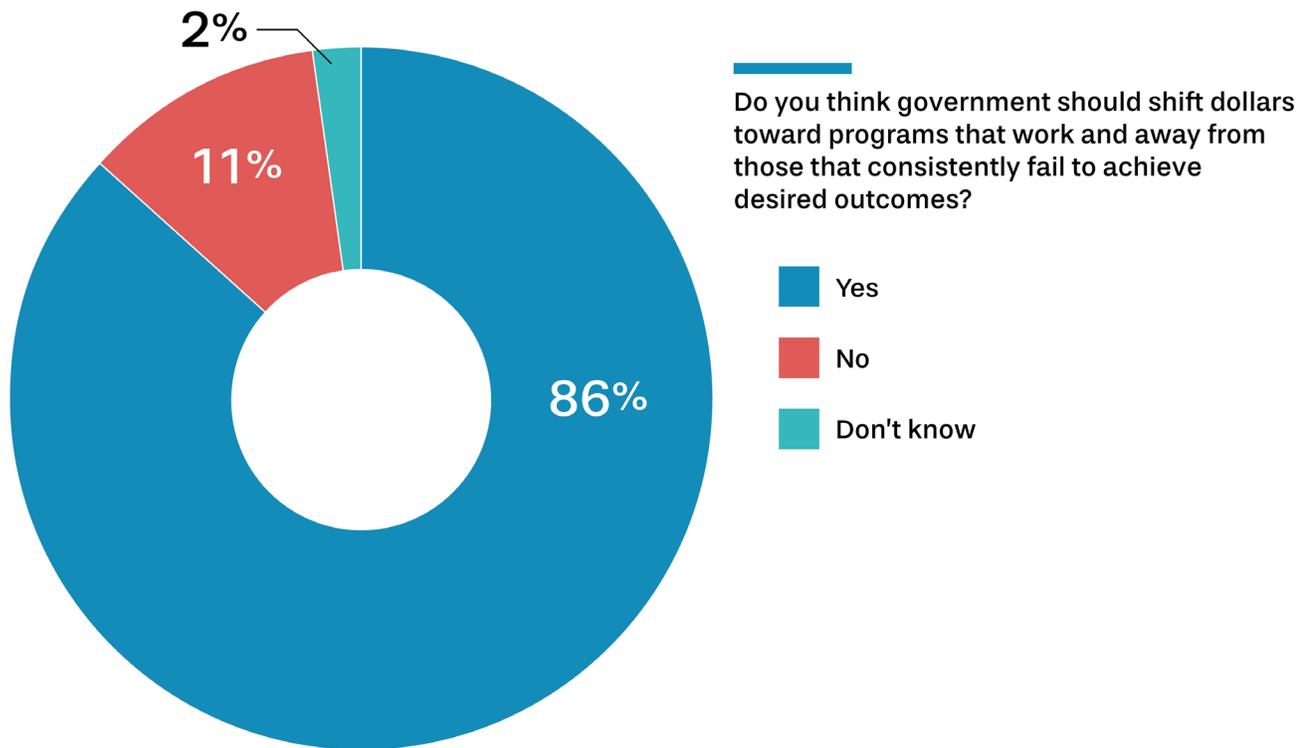


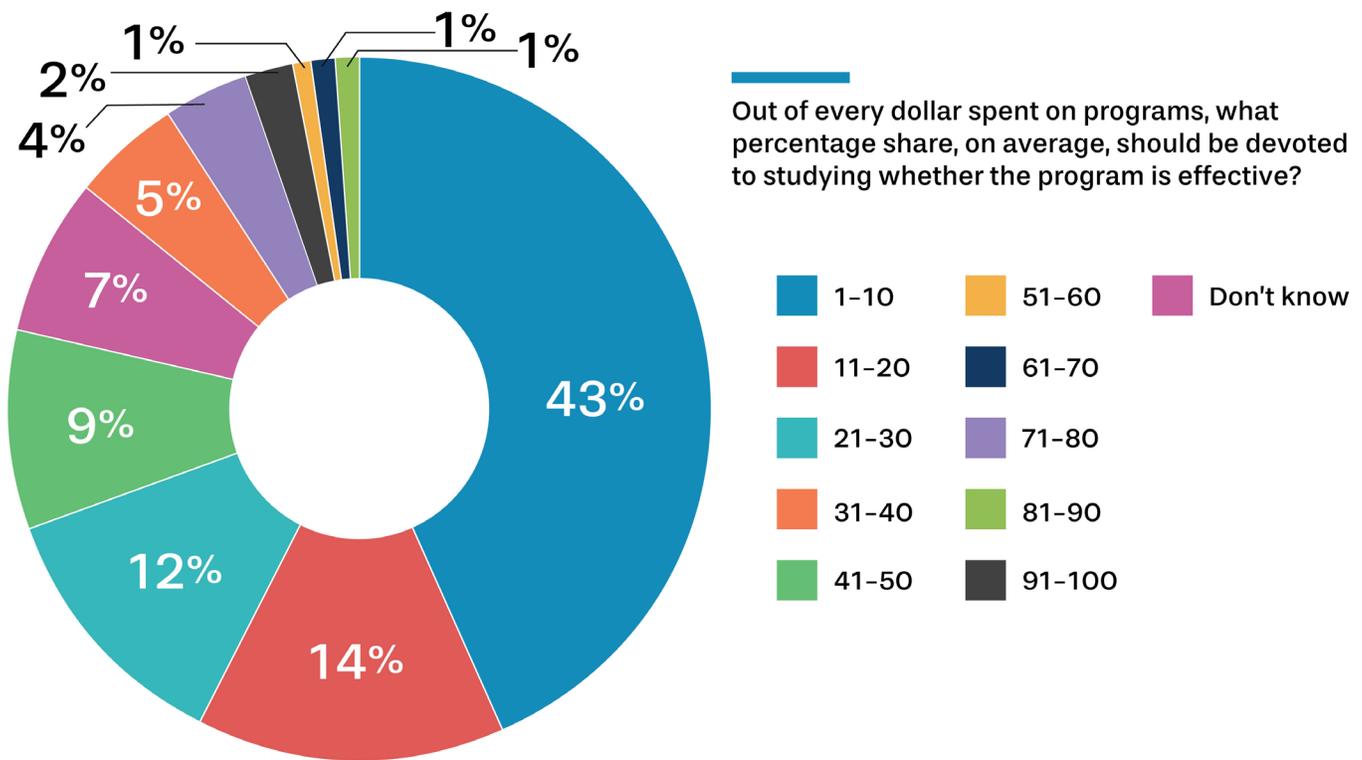
### Takeaway #3: Americans support initiatives to add more evidence to policymaking

Survey respondents were generally supportive of initiatives that would inject evidence and more frequent evaluations into policymaking. One question, for example, asked "Do you think government should shift dollars toward programs that work and away from those that consistently fail to achieve desired outcomes?" Among those responding, an overwhelming 86 percent answered in the affirmative. Here, the demographic breakdown mimicked that of those in the preceding section, with nearly equal support across genders and income groups—but slightly lower support by younger respondents. And again, responses were similar across party lines: 87 percent of Democrats and 89 percent of Republicans agreed with the statement.

Two additional questions related to the share of funding that should be earmarked for evaluation. One asked about a longstanding Results for America proposal that would set aside 1 percent of funds for evaluation. Eighty-four percent of respondents explicitly supported this policy. Another question asked "Out of every dollar spent on programs, what percentage share, on average, should be devoted to studying whether the program is effective?" Here, the modal answer (43 percent) was that between 1 and 10 percent should be spent, with an additional 14 percent answering that the share should be between 11 and 20 percent. About one-fifth of respondents—18 percent—thought that over 40 percent of funds should be devoted to evaluation.

As with earlier questions, the responses for these questions showed remarkable consistency across demographics and party affiliation. For example, for the question asking about the 1 percent set aside for evaluation, 84 percent of both men and women both supported the initiative. And across age groups, support only varied from 83 percent (18 to 29 year olds) to 88 percent (60+ year olds). Political ideology was approximately the same, with 89 percent of Democrats supporting the proposal compared to 85 percent of Republicans.





## IV. Conclusion

In a polarized political landscape, it may seem that few issues receive support across wide swaths of the American public. Yet, this recent nationally representative survey commissioned by Results for America showed that almost all Americans agree that policy should be backed by data and evidence. This broad support is robust across a range of demographic and political metrics.

While most Americans support evidence-based policy, many feel that policymakers do not devote enough resources to measuring what works. In particular, over eight-in-ten respondents thought that policymakers should set aside at least 1 percent of funding for program evaluation and that government should shift dollars based on those evaluations. RFA has advocated for these approaches since its inception.

These results are encouraging. The recognition that Americans are mostly united in support of evidence-based policy helps RFA to advance our mission of injecting data and evidence into the policymaking process. Political leaders of all stripes should recognize that Americans across the board support a system of laws and regulations built on evidence.