THE "BATTLE AGAINST THE COUCH": WHO ARE THE NON-VOTERS IN DETROIT, WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO ENGAGE THEM, AND IS THE COUCH REALLY THE ISSUE?

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DETROIT METRO AREA
COMMUNITIES STUDY

This report draws on data collected by the [Detroit Metro Area Communities Study](#) (DMACS) in partnership with [Outlier Media](#). This Detroit survey was administered from April 1 to April 12, 2024, and captures the views of a representative sample of 1,100 Detroit residents. This report focuses on Detroiters' views of the top priorities for U.S. government officials. Information about Detroiters' priorities was collected via open-ended questions, allowing Detroiters to report their priorities in their own words without the limitations imposed by a limited set of response options. Results have been weighted to reflect the population of Detroit. See [full results from DMACS surveys here](#).

INTRODUCTION

Colloquially described as a "battle against the couch," political organizers and commentators have highlighted a concern that many voters are planning to sit this election out.[1] Voter turnout is especially consequential in a state like Michigan, where the outcome of elections for federal office are often determined by tiny slices of the electorate. In 2016, the allocation of the state's electoral college votes was determined by less than 11,000 votes, while in 2020, it was determined by less than 155,000. Both of these numbers are a fraction of the more than 248,000 eligible Detroit voters who did not cast a ballot in the 2020 presidential elections.[2]

In this brief, we dig deeper into understanding non-voters in the state's most populous city – Detroit. Who are non-voters in Detroit, and why are they not voting? What are the issues about which they care most? Have these Detroiters disengaged from their communities broadly, or simply from voting? And is there anything Vice-President Harris, former President Trump, or anyone else can do to bring them back to the polls?
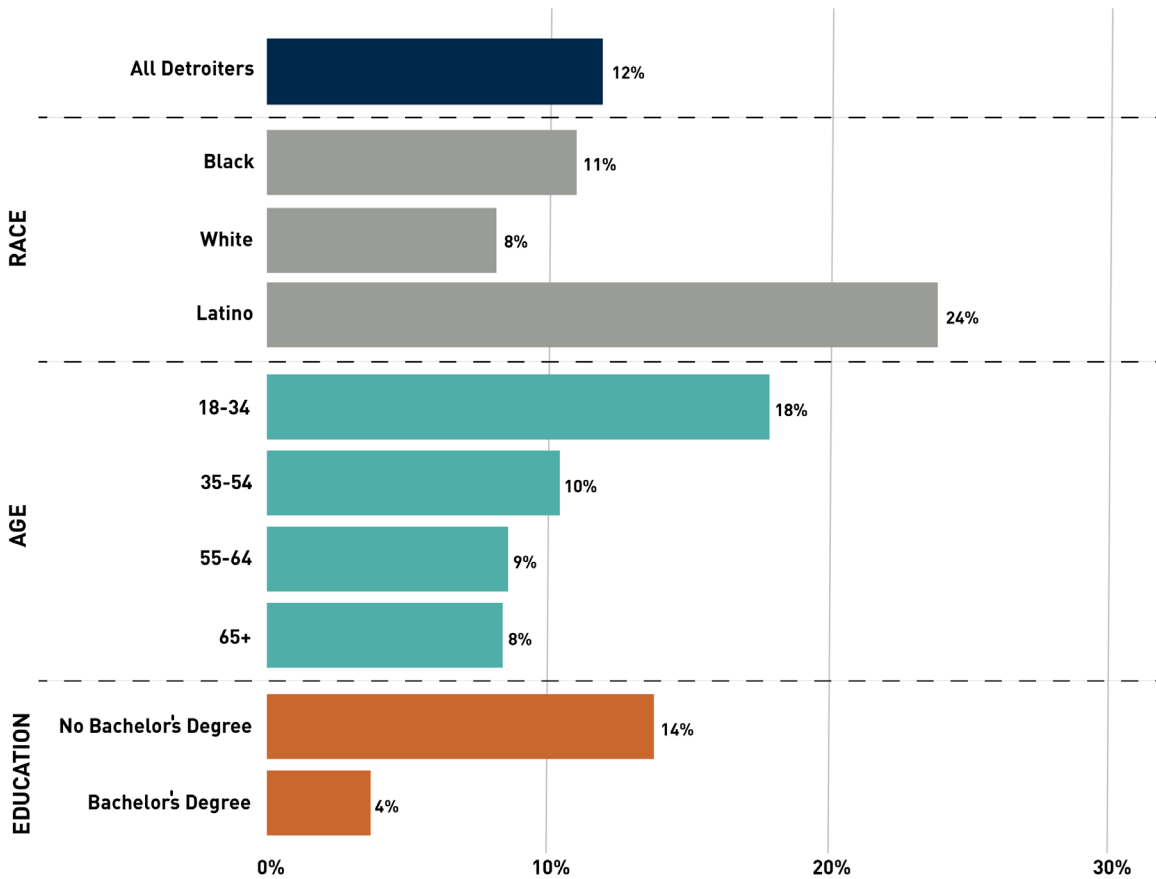
LATINO DETROITERS, YOUNG DETROITERS, AND DETROITERS WITHOUT A BACHELOR'S DEGREE ESPECIALLY UNLIKELY TO VOTE IN NOVEMBER.

- About 12% of Detroit residents who are eligible to vote reported that they were unlikely to vote in the November election. While the actual number of non-voters in November will likely far exceed this number (the percent of registered voters who do not cast a ballot in a presidential election typically ranges from 40-50% nationally), these Detroiters defy social pressures to overestimate their voting intentions[3] and offer important insights into the reasons that many Detroiters are opting out of the election.

- Eligible[4] Latino voters in Detroit were significantly more likely than other ethnoracial groups to report being unlikely to vote in November. Nearly 1 in 4 voting-eligible Latino Detroiters (24%) indicated that they were unlikely to vote in November, compared to only 8% of White Detroiters and 11% of Black Detroiters.

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- Spanish-dominant Latino voters[5] were particularly unlikely to report that they planned on voting. One-third of eligible Latino voters who took the survey in Spanish reported that they are unlikely to vote, relative to only 21% of eligible Latino voters who took the survey in English.

• Voters under 35 were about twice as likely as voters 35 and over to suggest they are unlikely to vote in the general elections in November.

- Eighteen percent of eligible Detroit voters under 35 reported that they are unlikely to vote in the November elections, compared to 10% of those between 35 and 54, 9% of those between 55 and 64, and 8% of those 65 and over.

• Higher levels of formal education were associated with a higher likelihood of voting. Eligible Detroit voters without a bachelor's degree (14%) were more likely to report that it was unlikely they would vote in the general election in November, relative to eligible Detroit voters with a bachelor's degree (4%).
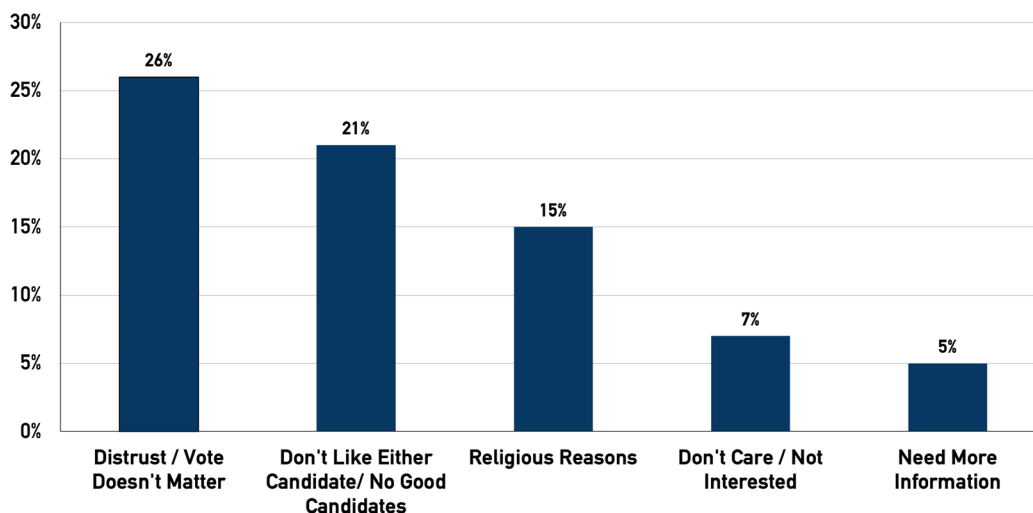
Figure 1: Percent of Detroit Population Who Are Unlikely Voters[6]

THE MOST COMMONLY CITED REASONS FOR NOT VOTING AMONG ELIGIBLE DETROIT VOTERS WERE GENERAL DISTRUST IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND NOT LIKING THE CANDIDATES.[7]

- More than one-quarter of eligible Detroit voters who reported that they were unlikely to vote in the general election this November (26%) stated that the main reason was that they didn't trust the U.S. political system. Information about Detroiters' reasons for not being likely to vote was collected via open-ended questions, allowing Detroiters to report their reasons in their own words without the limitations imposed by a limited set of response options.

  - Specific comments that Detroiters gave for not voting that related to political distrust included: "I believe politics is a sham," "Disappointed in the system," and "Too many LIES."

  - Other Detroiters placed more emphasis on the lack of impact they felt their vote has when discussing their distrust in the electoral system. Some of these reasons included: "seems like nothing changes," "It's pointless," and "I don't think my vote matters."

- Twenty-one percent of eligible Detroit voters reported that they were unlikely to vote because they didn't like the candidates, which still included President Joe Biden as the presumed Democratic presidential nominee at the time of the survey and may change when the new Democratic Party nominee is formally selected.

  - Specific reasons that Detroiters provided included: "Because I don't see any president on the ballot worth voting for," "Very disappointed and dissatisfied about the two choices we have to choose from," and "I don't want to vote for either candidate. I feel like I'm in a lose-lose situation."

- Reasons relating to religious beliefs were the main reason that about 15% of eligible Detroit voters reported that they were unlikely to vote in the general election this November. Many of these Detroiters said they were not voting because they are Jehovah's Witnesses, while others simply said it was against their religious beliefs.

- About 7% of eligible Detroit voters reported that they were unlikely to vote because they are not interested.

  - These Detroiters offered responses that included: "I don't care about politics," "It's hard for me to do things that aren't a requirement or not a priority for me," and "Not interested."

- Only 1 in 20 (5%) of eligible Detroit voters reported that information was a barrier to voting in the general election in November.

  - Detroiters who said they were unlikely to vote due to a lack of information reported things like: "Need info [o]n candidates and locations," and "I don't feel I have the time to fully research the candidates."
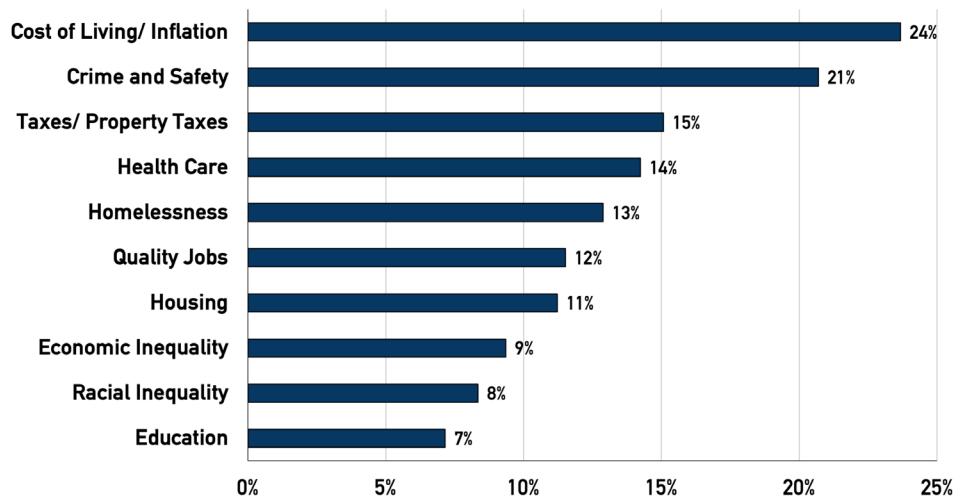
Figure 2: Reasons for Not Voting,[8] among Unlikely Detroit Voters

COST OF LIVING/ INFLATION TOPPED THE LIST OF ISSUES THAT UNLIKELY VOTERS WANTED THE U.S. GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS.

- The cost of living - including inflation - was the most frequently mentioned issue that unlikely voters wanted the U.S. government to address, mentioned by 24% of unlikely voters. Cost of living/ inflation was also a top federal policy priority among the general Detroit population, as reported in a separate Detroit Metro Area Communities Study brief.

- Over 1 in 5 unlikely voters (21%) in Detroit mentioned crime and safety as a top issue that they wanted the U.S. government to address, making it the second most commonly mentioned federal priority among unlikely voters in Detroit.

- Taxes (15%), health care (14%), and homelessness (13%) were also top issues that unlikely voters in Detroit wanted the U.S. government to address.
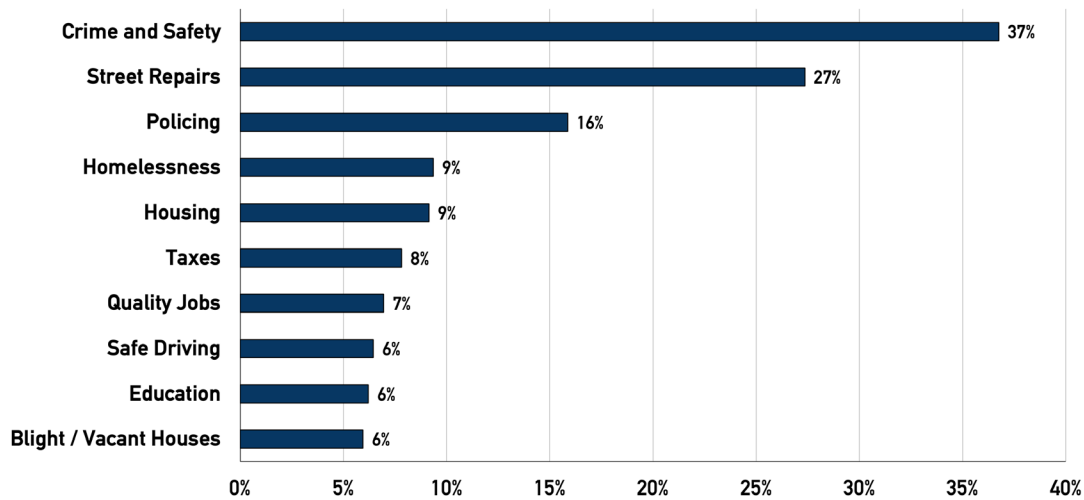
Figure 3: Top 10 Priorities for U.S. Government Officials,[9] Among Unlikely Voters in Detroit

Priority	Percentage
Cost of Living/ Inflation	24%
Crime and Safety	21%
Taxes/ Property Taxes	15%
Health Care	14%
Homelessness	13%
Quality Jobs	12%
Housing	11%
Economic Inequality	9%
Racial Inequality	8%
Education	7%

CRIME AND SAFETY WAS THE MOST FREQUENTLY CITED ISSUE THAT UNLIKELY VOTERS WANTED THE CITY GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS, FOLLOWED BY STREET REPAIRS.

- Over one-third of unlikely voters (37%) listed crime and safety as a top issue that they wanted the city government to address.

- Street repairs was the second most frequently mentioned issue that unlikely voters wanted the city government to address, with 27% of unlikely voters in Detroit noting it as a top priority for city government.

- Sixteen percent of unlikely voters listed concerns about policing – including both racially discriminatory policing and underpolicing - as a key issue that they wanted the city government to address.

- Concerns about housing access were highlighted by the unlikely voters who listed housing (9%) and homelessness (9%) as a top priority that they wanted the city to address.

Figure 4: Top 10 Priorities for City Government Officials,[10] Among Unlikely Voters in Detroit

THE MAJORITY OF UNLIKELY VOTERS IN DETROIT ARE NOT SITTING ON THE COUCH. THESE DETROITERS ARE ACTIVELY ENGAGED IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

- More than two-thirds (67%) of Detroiters who said they were unlikely to vote this November have contributed to their community through at least one other form of civic engagement in the past year.

  - The most common forms of community engagement among unlikely voters were talking with others in their community or neighborhood about dealing with a community issue or problem (37%), contributing money to a charitable organization or cause (37%), and contributing time or money to a religious organization, such as a church, mosque, or temple (36%).

  - More than 1 in 5 (22%) unlikely voters in Detroit have volunteered for a political campaign or community organization, church, or school.

  - Roughly 1 in 10 (11%) unlikely voters in Detroit have volunteered for a political campaign or community organization, church, or school.

  - A smaller share of unlikely voters in Detroit have contacted a government official to express their opinion on a political issue (7%) or taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration about a social or political issue (5%).

- Many unlikely voters in Detroit are informed about and interested in local news. Just under half of unlikely voters in Detroit (46%) watch, listen to, or read news about Detroit multiple times a week.

- Many Detroiters who said they were unlikely to vote in the upcoming November election have voted in previous elections. About 1 in 3 Detroiters (30%) who are unlikely to vote in the upcoming November election say they have typically voted in past presidential elections.

Figure 5: Percent Engaging in Non-Electoral Civic Activities, among Unlikely Voters in Detroit
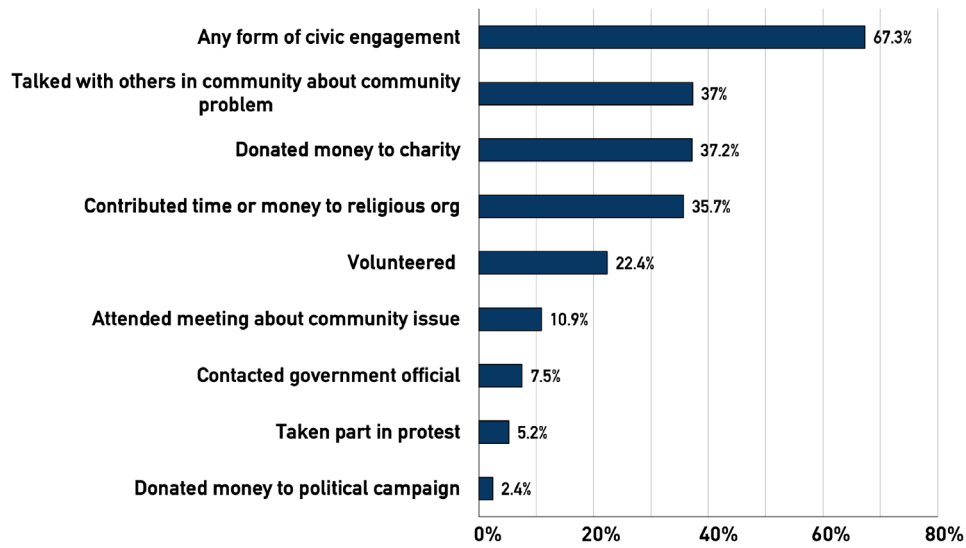
Activity	Percent
Any form of civic engagement	67.3%
Talked with others in community about community problem	37%
Donated money to charity	37.2%
Contributed time or money to religious org	35.7%
Volunteered	22.4%
Attended meeting about community issue	10.9%
Contacted government official	7.5%
Taken part in protest	5.2%
Donated money to political campaign	2.4%

Figure 6: Percent Getting News about Detroit, among Unlikely Voters

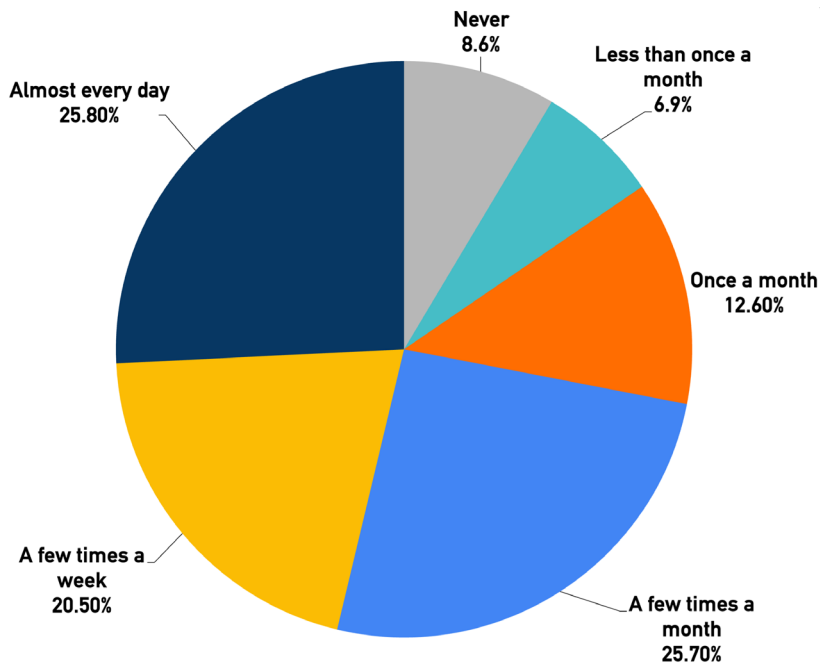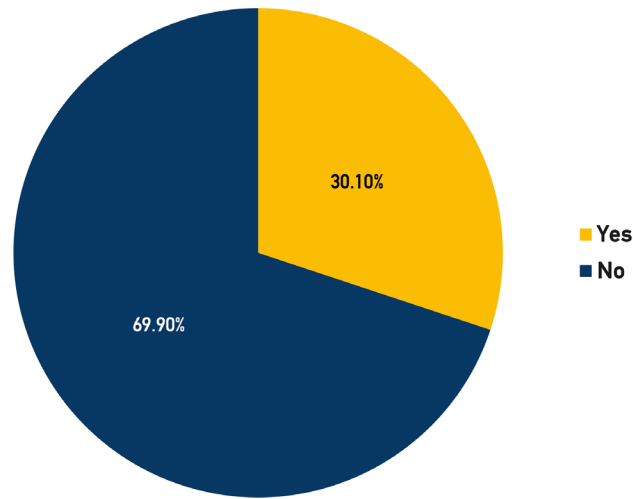| Category	Percent
Never	8.6%
Less than once a month	6.9%
Once a month	12.60%
A few times a month	25.70%
A few times a week	20.50%
Almost every day	25.80%

Figure 7: Percent Who Typically Vote in Presidential Elections, among Unlikely Voters in Detroit

AUTHORS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

ENDNOTES

1   King, M and Glueck, K. (2024, May 18). Biden courts Philadelphia's Black voters. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/18/us/politics/biden-philadelphia-black-voters.html

        Perlman, J. (2024, July 23). Kamala Harris vs. Donald Trump vs. the couch: Can they energize Boston's youth voters? *The Boston Globe*. https://www.bostonglobe.com/2024/07/23/metro/kamala-harris-vs-donald-trump-vs-couch-can-they-energize-bostons-youth-voters/

        Martin, M. (2024, January 9). Biden's 2024 campaign message comes into sharper focus after South Carolina speech. *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2024/01/09/1223626410/biden-s-2024-campaign-message-comes-into-sharper-focus-after-south-carolina-spee

2   Election Summary Report: November 3, 2020 - General Election. City of Detroit. https://detroitmi.gov/sites/detroitmi.localhost/files/2020-11/November%202020%20Election%20Summary%20Report%20Signed%20Copy.pdf

3   Holbrook, Allyson L., and Jon A. Krosnick. "Social desirability bias in voter turnout reports: Tests using the item count technique." *Public opinion quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2010): 37-67.

4   We define "eligible voters" as Detroiters aged 18 and over who did not indicate that they are ineligible to vote at this time in a question about voter registration status.

5   We define Spanish-dominant Latinos as respondents who identified as Latino or Hispanic, and opted to take the survey in Spanish.

6   We define "unlikely voters" as respondents who indicated that: 1) they either "definitely will not vote" or "probably will not vote" in the general election this November, and 2) did not indicate that they are ineligible to vote at this time.

7   We assessed reasons for not voting by having three analysts independently code open-ended responses to the question of "What are the main reasons that you are unlikely to vote in the general election this November?"

8   Reasons for not voting were determined through responses to an open-ended question: "What are the main reasons that you are unlikely to vote in the general election this November?"Bars do not add up to 100% because this figure only plots the five most commonly listed response categories based on qualitative coding, and are not exhaustive of all responses to the question.

9   Priorities for the U.S. government were determined through responses to an open-ended question: "On the whole, what are the two most important issues that you want the **U.S. government** to address?" Bars do not add up to 100% because this figure only plots the ten most commonly listed response categories, and are not exhaustive of all responses to the question.

10   Priorities for Detroit city government were determined through responses to an open-ended question: "On the whole, what are the two most important issues that you want the **City of Detroit** to address?" Bars do not add up to 100% because this figure only plots the ten most commonly listed response categories, and are not exhaustive of all responses to the question.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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