

2023





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



IN THE RELATIVELY SHORT HISTORY of this country, countless Americans are raised on the idea that if they work hard with enough passion and fervor, the world will offer itself to them. In more recent years, our hope of achieving the American Dream faces tougher opponents: economic uncertainty and misinformation, to name a few.

Measuring our collective hopes of attaining the American Dream can serve as barometer on our country's mood. That mood can impact public attitudes, behaviors, and habits.

This 2023 Gulf South Index report reveals that the economy is the top issue across all demographics. Moreover, a declining number of citizens believe they can achieve the American Dream. A growing number of those surveyed as part of the annual index added that they are worse off financially this year than they were two years ago.

This statistical pessimism along with other data extracted from our intensive survey sheds light on what Americans are thinking about the future, while also

revealing where they get their information and who they trust most to provide that information.

This valuable data helps paint a picture of what our post pandemic, politically divided American economic landscape might look like in the immediate future.

The Index is the product of a cooperative research agreement between The Ehrhardt Group and Causeway Solutions. The project defines the Gulf South as Louisiana, Mississippi, coastal Alabama and the Florida Panhandle. The data derived from the survey provides insights on trust issues, media usage and lifestyle trends in these southern states and compares them to national figures.

The resulting report helps identify how people make monetary decisions, both locally and nationally. It better prepares us for the next bend on what has become a rocky road to the American Dream.



MEDIA: CONSUMPTION AND TRUST



*"Local news still wins in usage and trust. Gulf South citizens, though, are using Facebook, TikTok and Twitter more than our neighbors across the U.S."
– Marc Ehrhardt*

TRUST IN THE FAMILIAR.

Past surveys have detected a growing skepticism in the trustworthiness of the news media. This has been particularly true of national news sources. The 2023 version is no different.

This survey has brought into greater focus the public's news consumption habits and who people trust to provide fair and accurate information.

When asked which source they trusted for news, 43% of Gulf South respondents and 47% in national stats said they had a "great deal" of trust in information from local news networks.

Comparatively, cable news networks and social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter hovered in the 30% range.

Perhaps a reflection of the trust issue, a greater percentage of both Gulf South and national respondents – roughly one quarter of them – said they most often rely on local news networks for information on current events and politics. In an ominous sign for the once powerful print media, only 3% of respondents both nationally and in the Gulf South said they rely on newspapers and periodicals for this information.

Facebook emerged as the most popular online community in this year's survey, with 77% in the Gulf South and 72% around the country saying they were participants. Both nationally and regionally, YouTube had roughly 65% participation and Instagram about 50%.

The controversial TikTok registered 44% Gulf South participation and 41% nationally, according to the survey.

"Local news still wins in usage and trust. Gulf South citizens, though, are using Facebook, TikTok and Twitter more than our neighbors across the U.S. While each of these platforms face increasing concerns and regulatory pressure over privacy and data usage, many Gulf South residents are jumping in with both feet. That trend says a great deal about what we are willing to give up for access to these social media outlets," said Marc Ehrhardt, co-founder of the Gulf South Index and president of The Ehrhardt Group.

HALF OF THE POPULATION USES A CELLPHONE 4+ HOURS PER DAY.

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

USE A SMART OR CELL PHONE
4+ HOURS - G.S. 2023

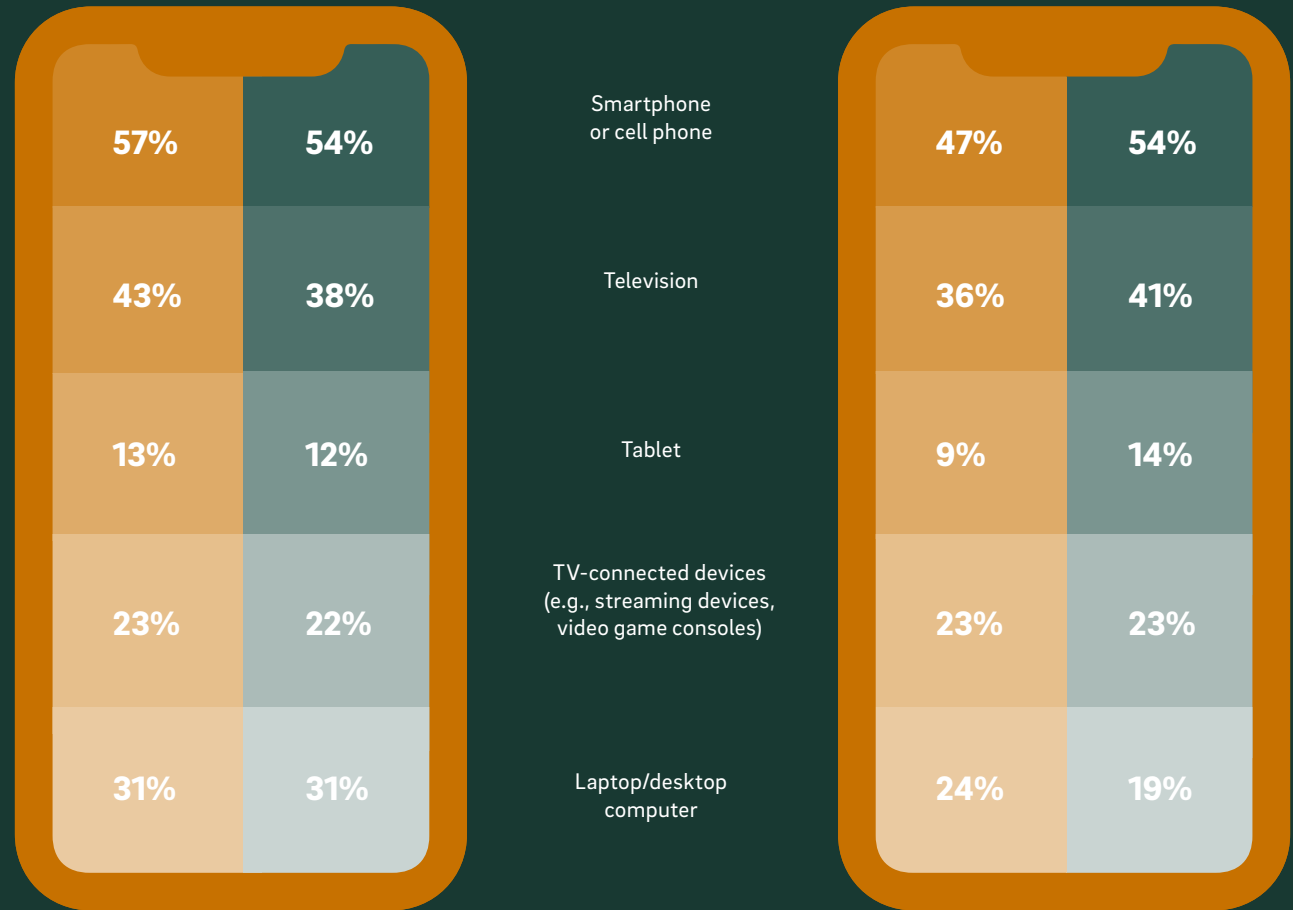
47%

54%

USE A SMART OR CELL PHONE
4+ HOURS - U.S. 2023

2022

2023

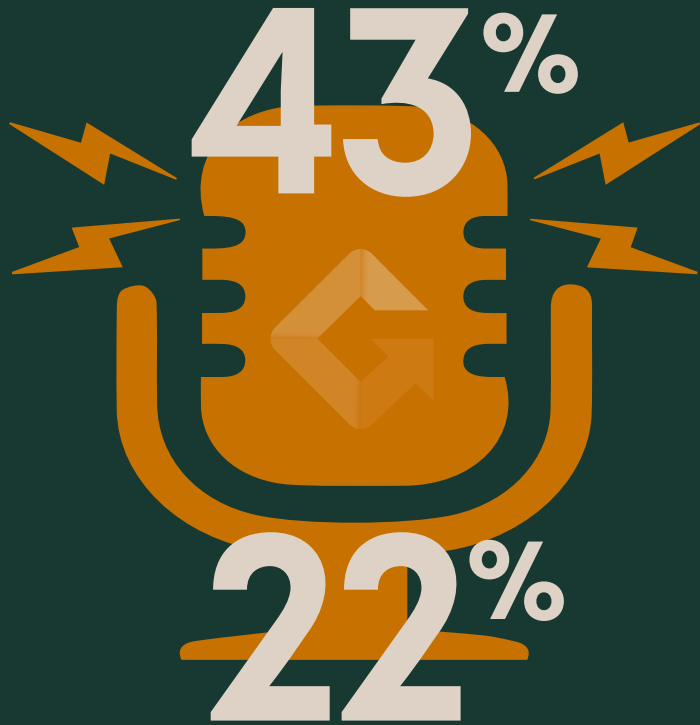


Do you spend 4+ hours using the following devices during a typical day? 18-24 year-olds are more likely to spend 4+ hours a day on their phones (61% for U.S., 63% for GS). While individuals older than 55 are more likely to spend 4+ hours a day watching television (53% for U.S., 42% for GS).

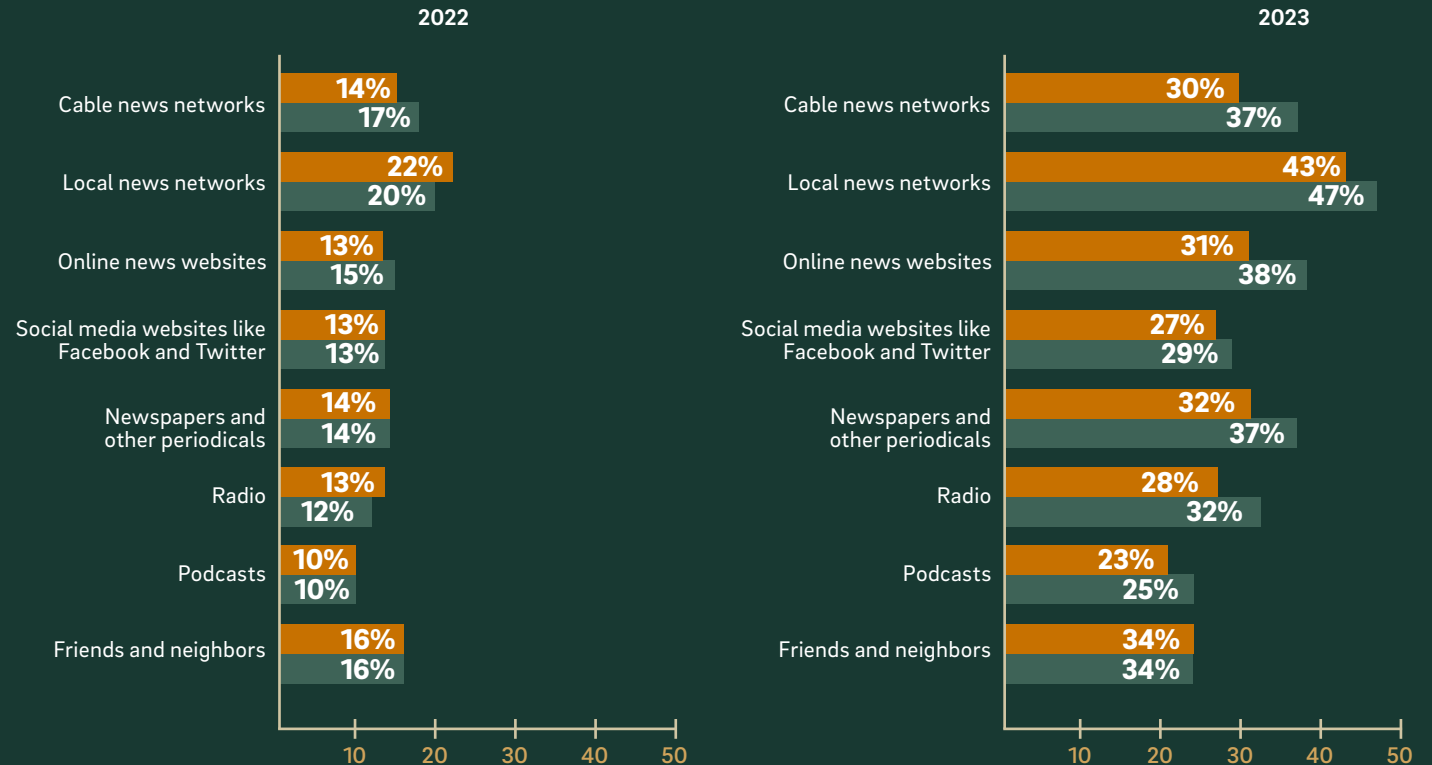
PEOPLE IN THE GULF SOUTH TRUST LOCAL NEWS MORE THAN FAMILY AND FRIENDS.



LOCAL NEWS NETWORKS - G.S. 2023



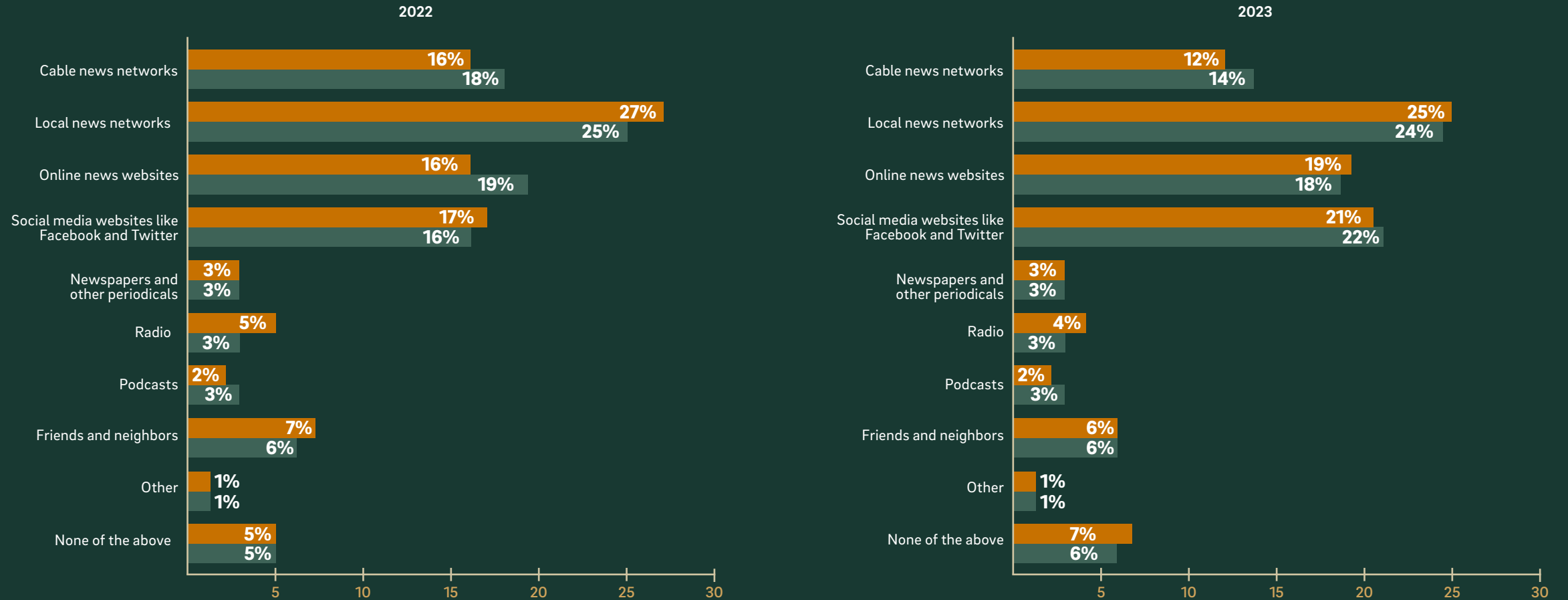
LOCAL NEWS NETWORKS - G.S. 2022



Which information do you trust? Is what we see and read on social media credible? 18-24 year-olds think so. This age group trusts in social media "a great deal" more than the other age ranges (51% for U.S., 40% for GS).

THERE IS A GENERATIONAL DIVIDE IN WHERE PEOPLE GET INFORMATION ABOUT CURRENT EVENTS AND POLITICS.

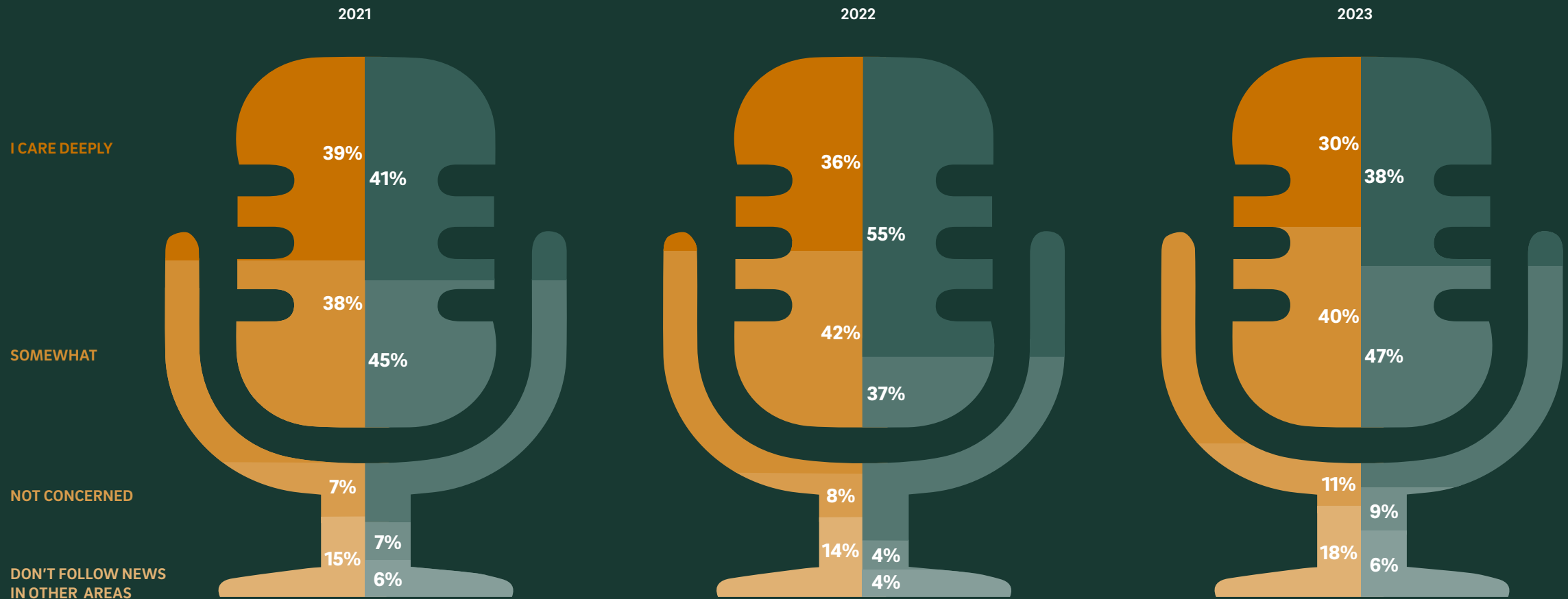
GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL



Which of the following sources would you say you rely on most often for your information about current events and politics? Younger individuals are more likely to rely on social media for information on current events and politics. (18-24 year-olds: 40% for U.S. 37% for GS | 25-34 year-olds: 29% for U.S. / 36% for GS). Older individuals are more likely to use traditional local news networks (45-54 year-olds: 33% for U.S. / 24% for GS; 55+ years old: 33% for U.S. / 37% for GS).

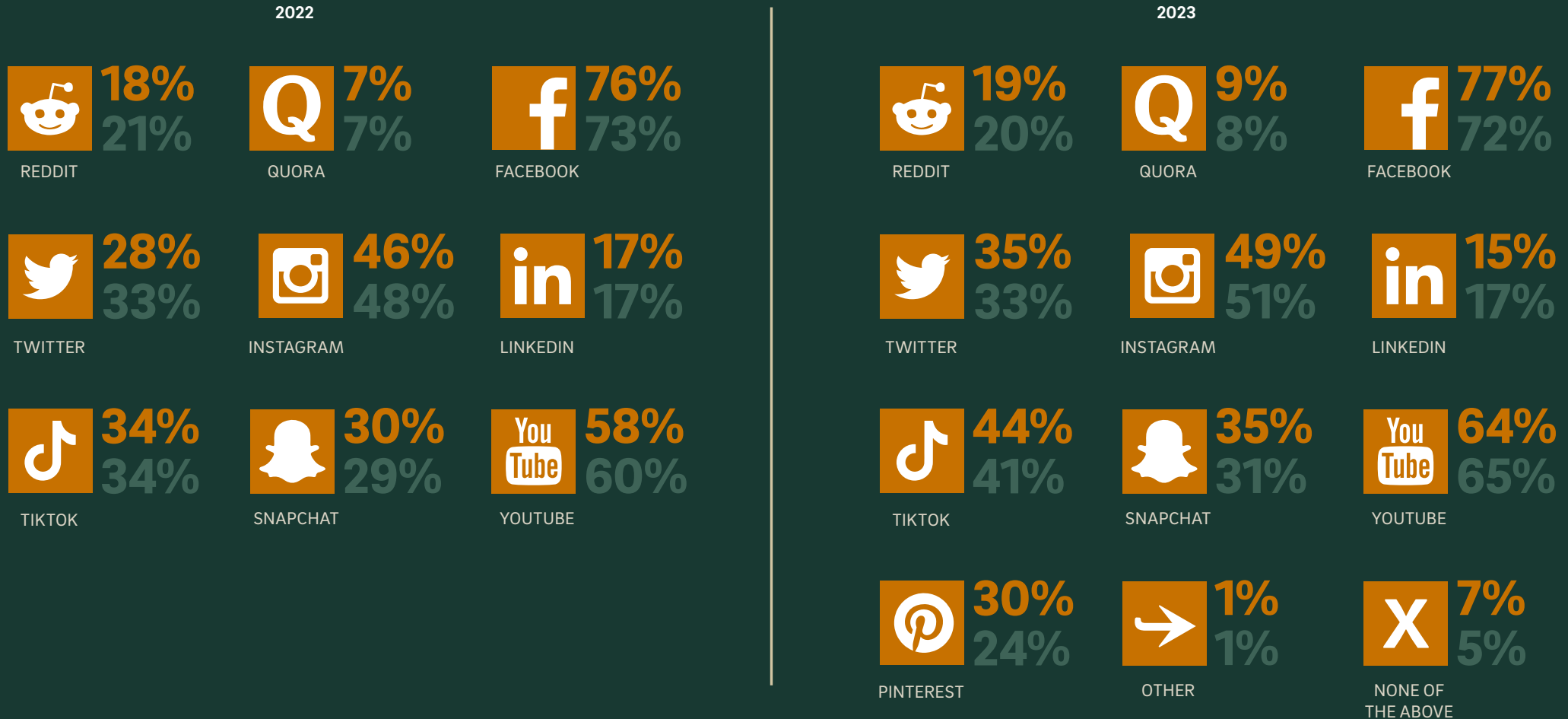
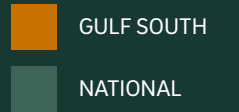
GULF SOUTH RESIDENTS CARE LESS ABOUT NEWS OUTSIDE OF THEIR AREA THAN THEY DID IN 2021.

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL



How do you feel about news happening in areas outside of the Gulf South/your immediate area? Gulf South residents were more likely than the national sample to not follow news in other areas. This group is more focused on what is happening right around them.

ARE YOU AN ACTIVE PARTICIPANT IN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING ONLINE COMMUNITIES?



18-24 years olds are less likely use Facebook (50% for U.S., 61% for GS), but are more likely to use TikTok (62% for U.S., 74% for GS), Instagram (70% for U.S., 70% for GS) and Snapchat (56% for U.S., 67% for GS).

45% OF THE GULF SOUTH SPEND 3+ HOURS ON SOCIAL MEDIA PER DAY.

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

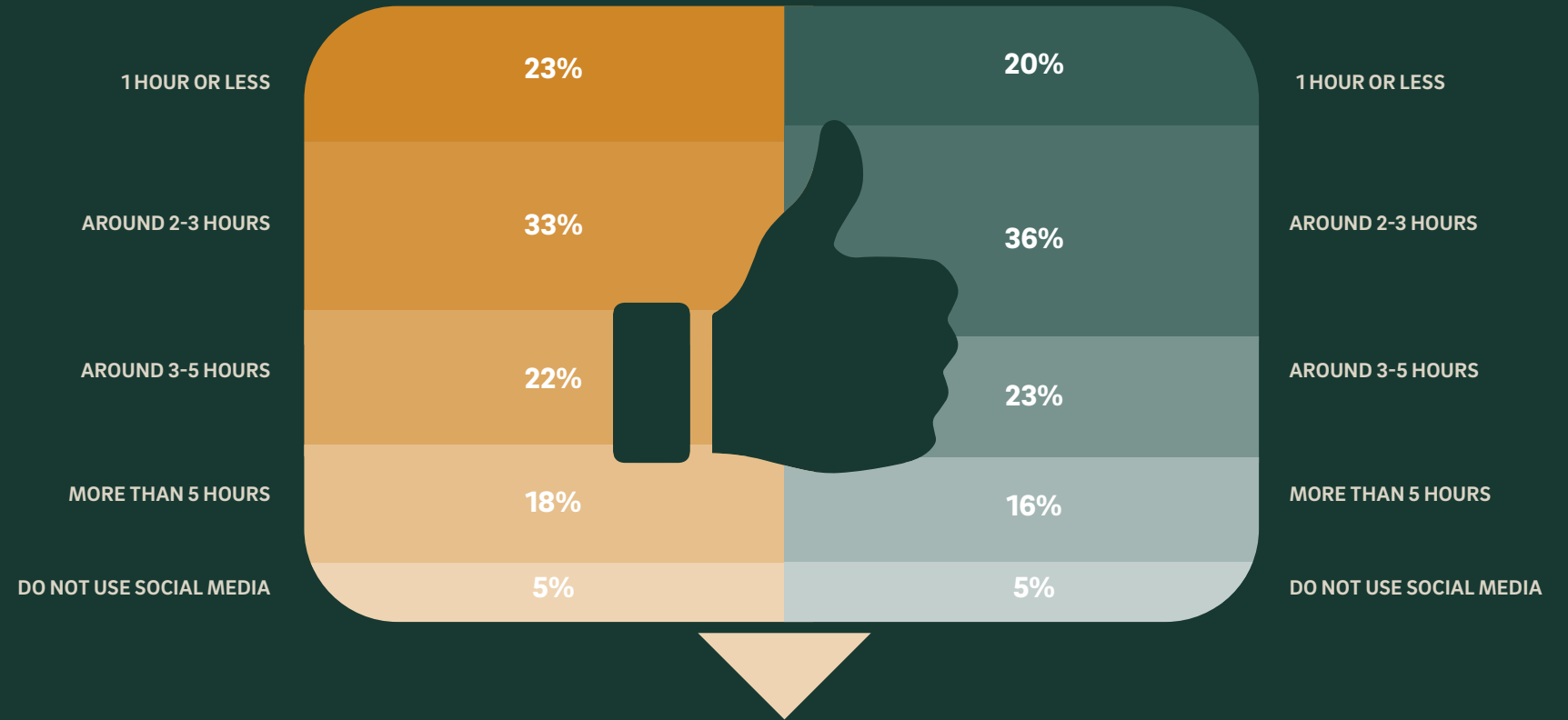
2-3 HOURS - G.S.

33%



36%

2-3 HOURS - U.S.

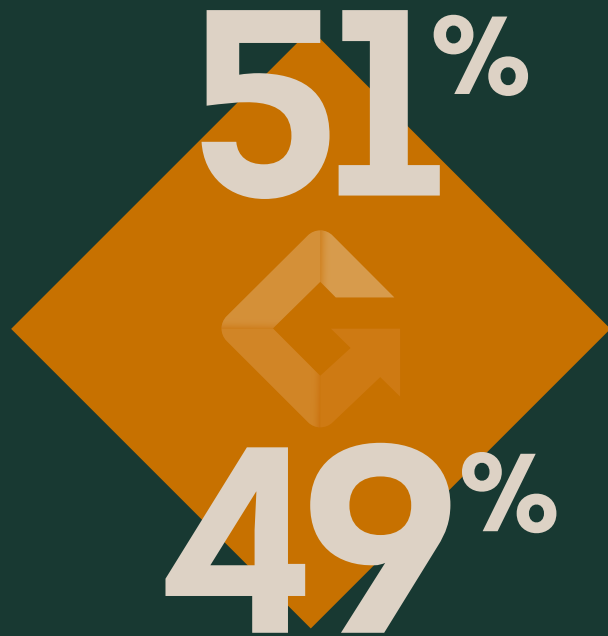


How much time do you spend on social media on a typical day? 18–24-year-olds are more likely to spend more than 5 hours a day on social media (26% for U.S., 28% for GS). A small amount of them spend an hour or less in a day (9% for U.S., 8% for GS).

WHAT CONCERNS YOU MORE, THE SPREAD OF FALSE OR MISLEADING INFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA – OR GIVING THE GOVERNMENT THE POWER TO RESTRICT WHAT PEOPLE ARE ALLOWED TO SAY OR SHARE ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

SPREAD OF FALSE INFORMATION - G.S.



GIVING THE GOVERNMENT MORE POWER TO RESTRICT SPEECH - G.S.

THE SPREAD OF FALSE OR MISLEADING INFORMATION



GIVING THE GOVERNMENT MORE POWER TO RESTRICT SPEECH



Gulf South middle-income individuals were the most concerned with giving the government more power to restrict speech (52%).
35–44-year-olds from the Gulf South were the only age group most concerned about this option as well (53%).



ECONOMY: EARNINGS AND SPENDINGS



*"We see two stories among Gulf South residents in 2023. First, we are uncertain about what's ahead of us, but we say we do OK in taking care of our needs. Second, the perceptions of the 'haves' and the 'have nots' are as distinct and divided as we've seen in the four years of the Gulf South Index."
– Marc Ehrhardt*

OPTIMISM IS DOWN, BUT MAYBE NOT OUT.

Using the Gulf South Index as a microscope, let's look at what consumers are thinking. In 2022, 54% of respondents in the Gulf South and 62% of the people in the U.S. answered YES to the question "Can you achieve the American Dream?" In 2023, only 44% in the Gulf South and 52% in the U.S. answered in the affirmative.

Survey takers were also asked "Are you better or worse off financially than you were two years ago?" Roughly one-third responded that they were about the same. In the 2022 survey, 29% of those in the Gulf South and 36% nationally said they were better off. In 2023, the numbers dropped to 24% and 26% respectively.

"We see two stories among Gulf South residents in 2023. First, optimism is down, but maybe not out. We are uncertain about what's ahead of us, but we say we do ok in taking care of our needs. Second, the perceptions of the 'haves' and the 'have nots' are as distinct and divided as we've seen in the four years of the Gulf South Index," said Marc Ehrhardt, president of The Ehrhardt Group and co-founder of the Gulf South Index.

Consistent with previous surveys, high-income respondents are generally more optimistic about the future, are more likely to make large purchases, are more aware of the news in their area and the U.S. as a whole and are more likely to seek out greener lifestyles.

High-income national survey respondents also were the most likely group to have left a job for a higher paying job in the last 2 years, the survey shows.

When it comes to major purchases and other spending habits, the survey found that 15% of respondents in both the Gulf South and across the U.S. purchased a house in

2022. As for vehicle purchases, 34% in the U.S. and 28% in the Gulf South acquired new wheels last year.

Breaking down the employment picture, a dwindling number of respondents – 23% in the Gulf South and 25% in the U.S - indicated they were employed in a job that they enjoyed in their desired field. In the 2022 survey, that number was 31% in the Gulf South and 30% in the U.S.

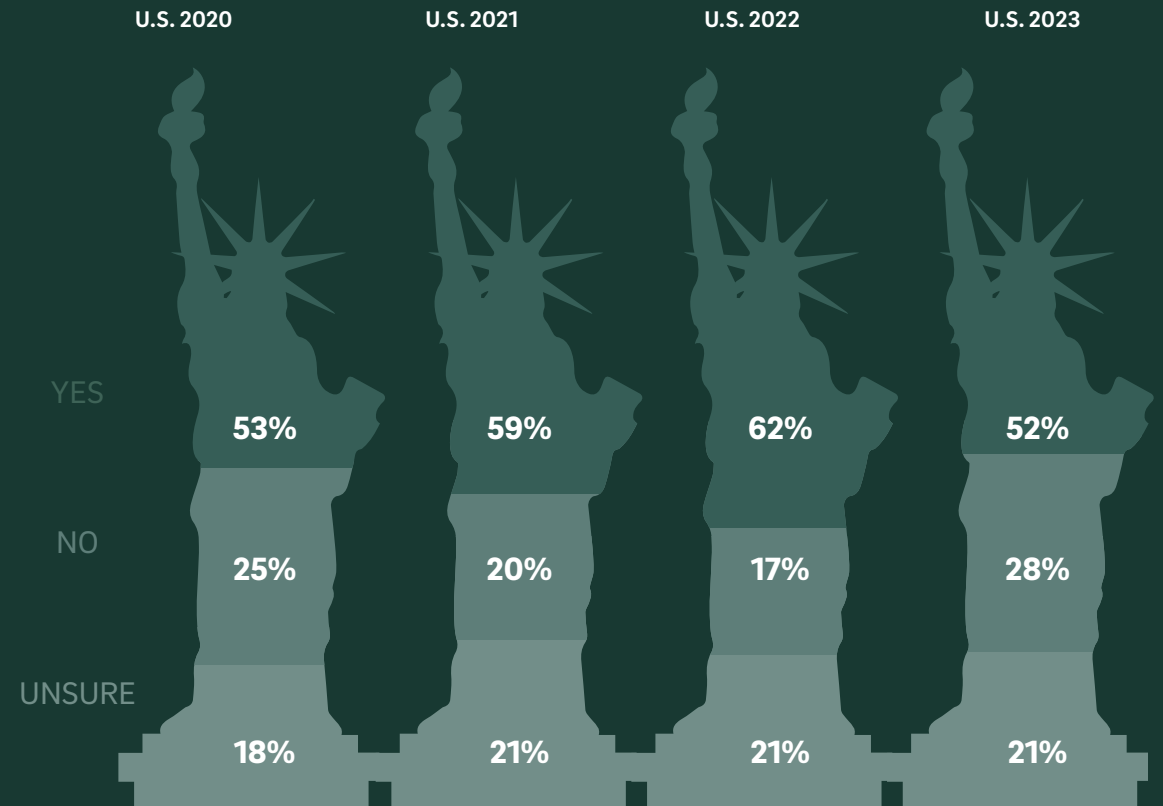
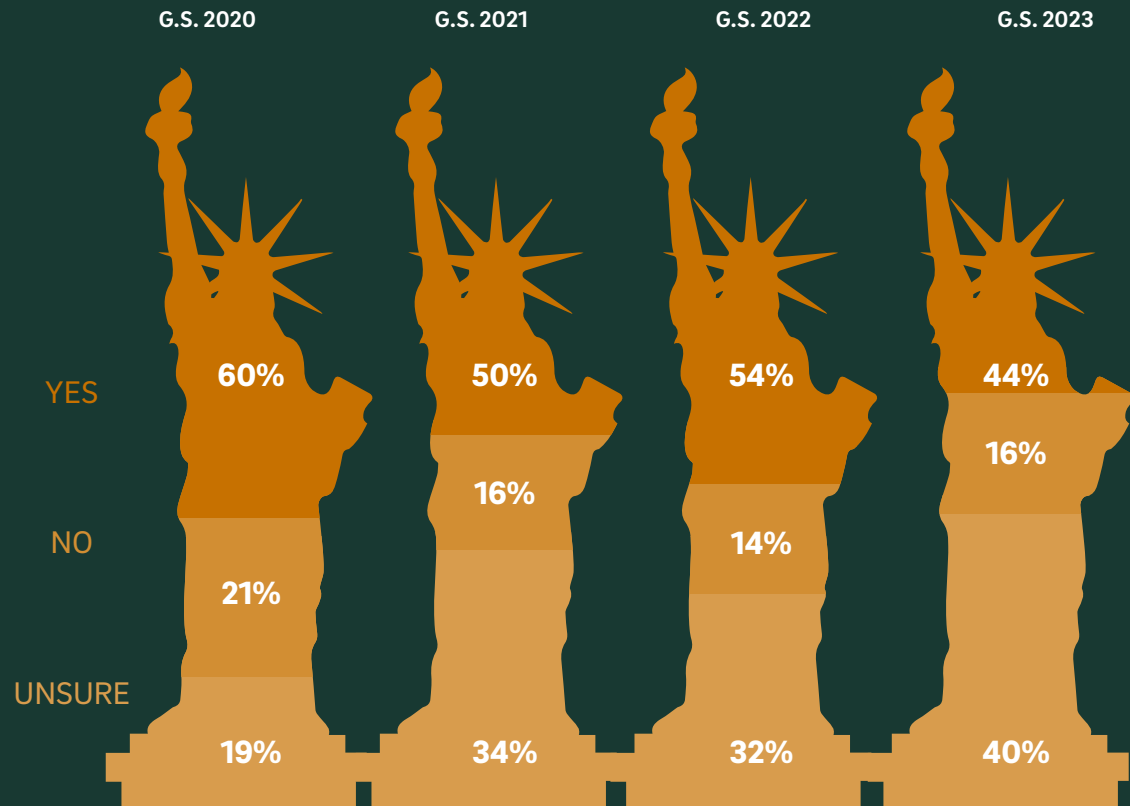
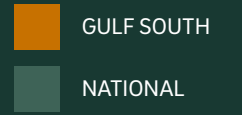
A significant change was also detected in the perception of employment opportunities in the Gulf South. This year, only 37% of those in the Gulf South and 51% of those nationwide answered YES to the question "Do you think your area or the Gulf South offers attractive career opportunities in your desired field?" Those numbers amounted to a 14-percentage point drop from 2022 in both categories.

By a longshot, the economy ranked as the most important issue facing the country today for both Gulf South and national respondents - 43% and 39% respectively. Crime and public safety came in a distant second, with 11% of Gulf South study participants and 8% nationally ranking it as their number one concern. The politically charged abortion issue came in at 6% for the U.S. and 3% for the Gulf South.

When asked to rate the economy from one to five stars, only 8% of people in the U.S. and 6% in the Gulf South gave the top five-star rating. Meanwhile, 17% of those nationwide and 19% of those in the Gulf South gave the economy one star. Most respondents gave the economy two or three stars.

In another measurement of the public's mood, roughly 10% of respondents both nationwide and in the Gulf South said they were "very satisfied" with the "way things are going" in the United States and their individual states at this time.

GULF SOUTH OPTIMISM FOR ACHIEVING THE AMERICAN DREAM IS FADING.

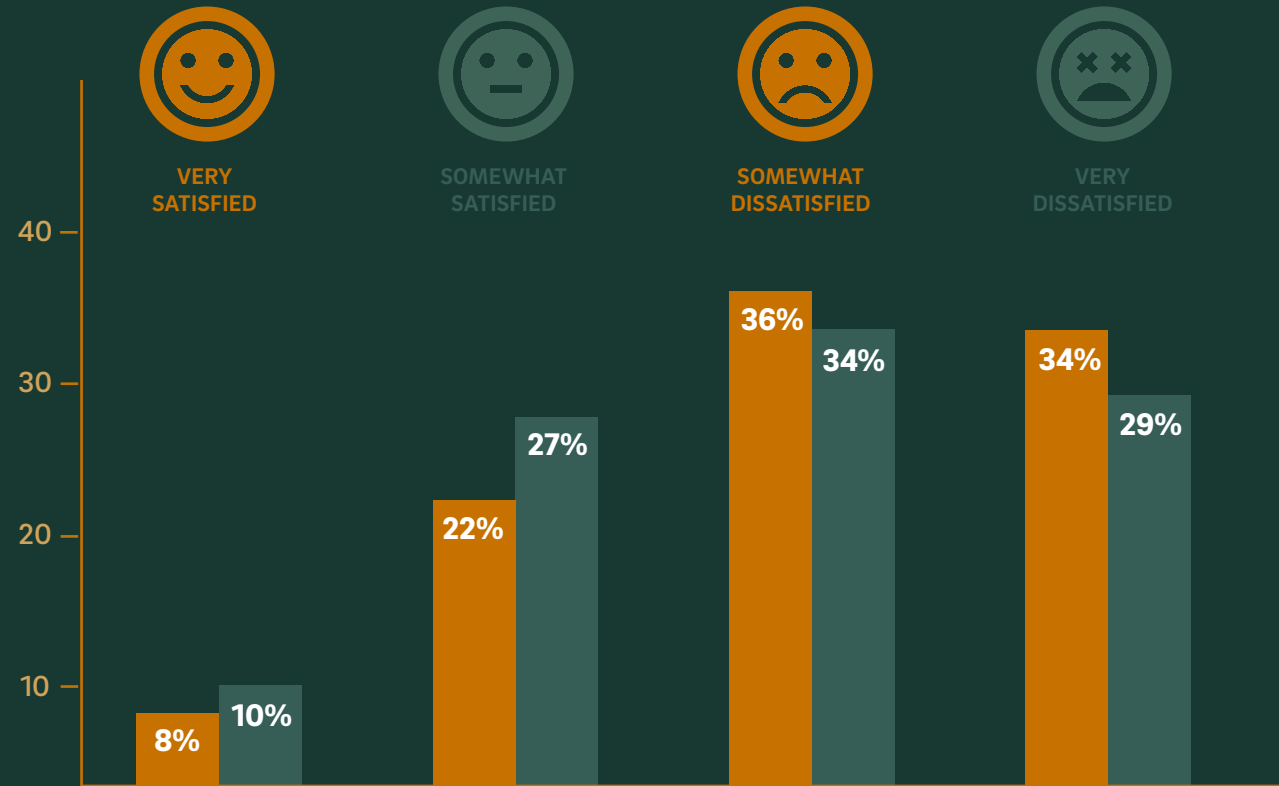
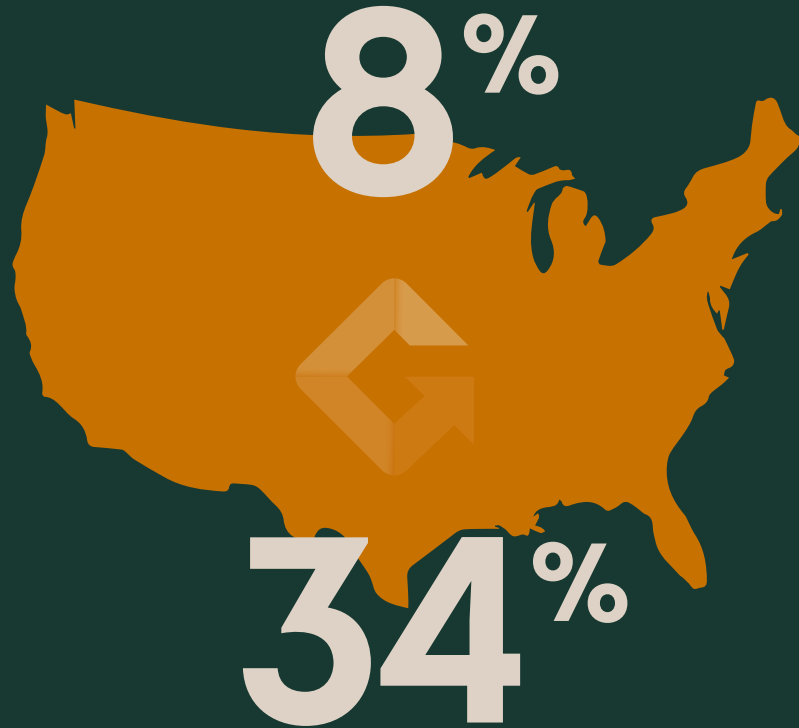


Do you think you can achieve the American Dream in your area of the U.S.? in the Gulf South? Over the last four studies, there has been a noticeable decline in how optimistic people are feeling towards achieving the "Dream" or goals. High-income respondents were most likely to still believe in the American Dream (74% for U.S., 67% for GS).

THE GULF SOUTH IS LESS SATISFIED WITH THE WAY THINGS ARE GOING IN THE U.S. THAN THE AVERAGE AMERICAN.

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

VERY SATISFIED - G.S. 2023



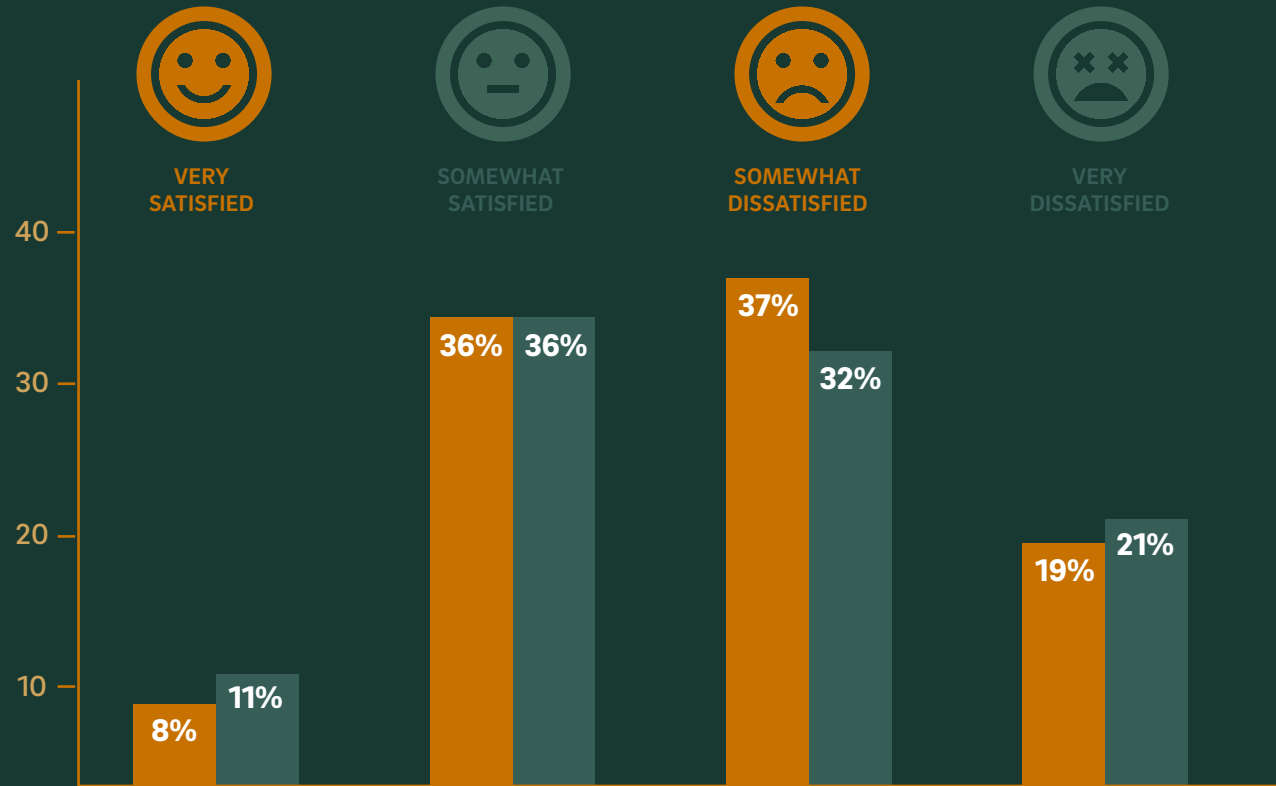
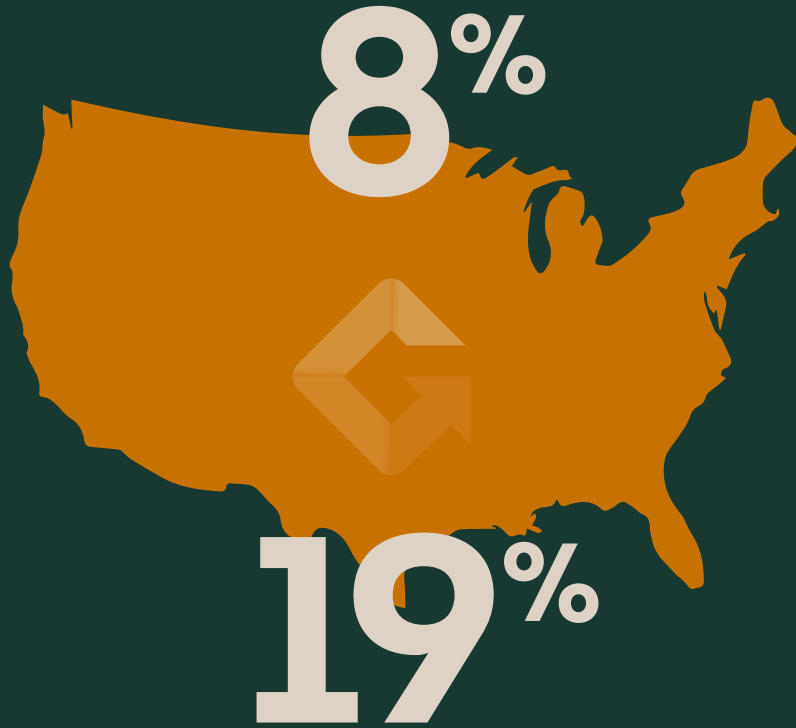
VERY DISSATISFIED - G.S. 2023

In general, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States at this time? High-income respondents were most likely to be very satisfied with the way things are going the U.S. (20% for U.S., 17% for GS), whereas low-income respondents were most likely to be very dissatisfied with the way things are going (31% for U.S., 36% for GS). Similar to the state question above, 45-54-year-olds were most likely to be very dissatisfied (38%) while 35-44-year-olds were the most likely to be very satisfied (15%).

TWICE AS MANY GULF SOUTH RESIDENTS ARE *VERY DISSATISFIED* IN THE WAY THINGS ARE GOING IN THEIR STATE THAN THEY ARE *VERY SATISFIED*.

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

VERY SATISFIED - G.S. 2023



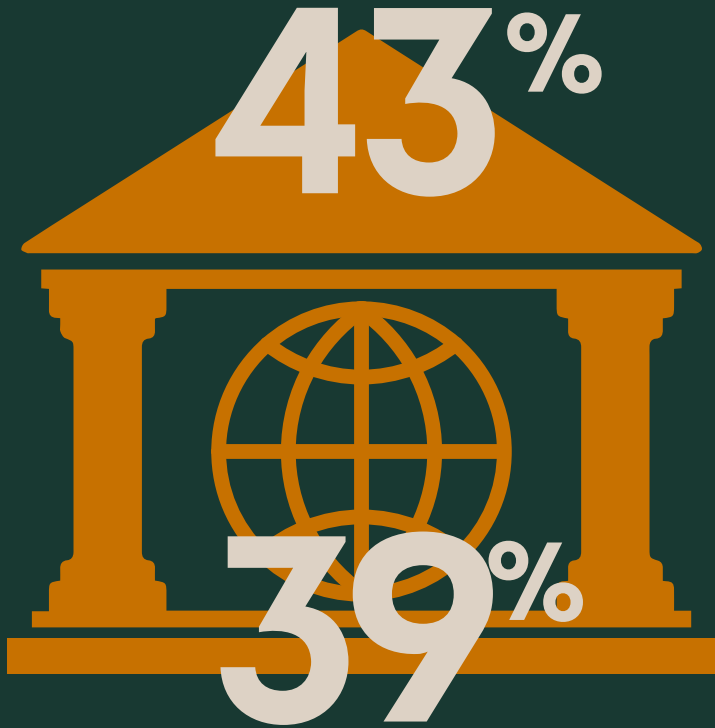
VERY DISSATISFIED - G.S. 2023

In general, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in your state at this time? High-income respondents were most likely to be very satisfied with the way things are going their state (22% for U.S., 17% for GS), whereas low-income respondents were most likely to be very dissatisfied with the way things are going (23% for U.S., 22% for GS). 45–54-year-olds nationally were the most likely age group to be very dissatisfied at the way things are going in their state (31%), while 35–44-year-olds nationally were the most likely to be very satisfied (16%).

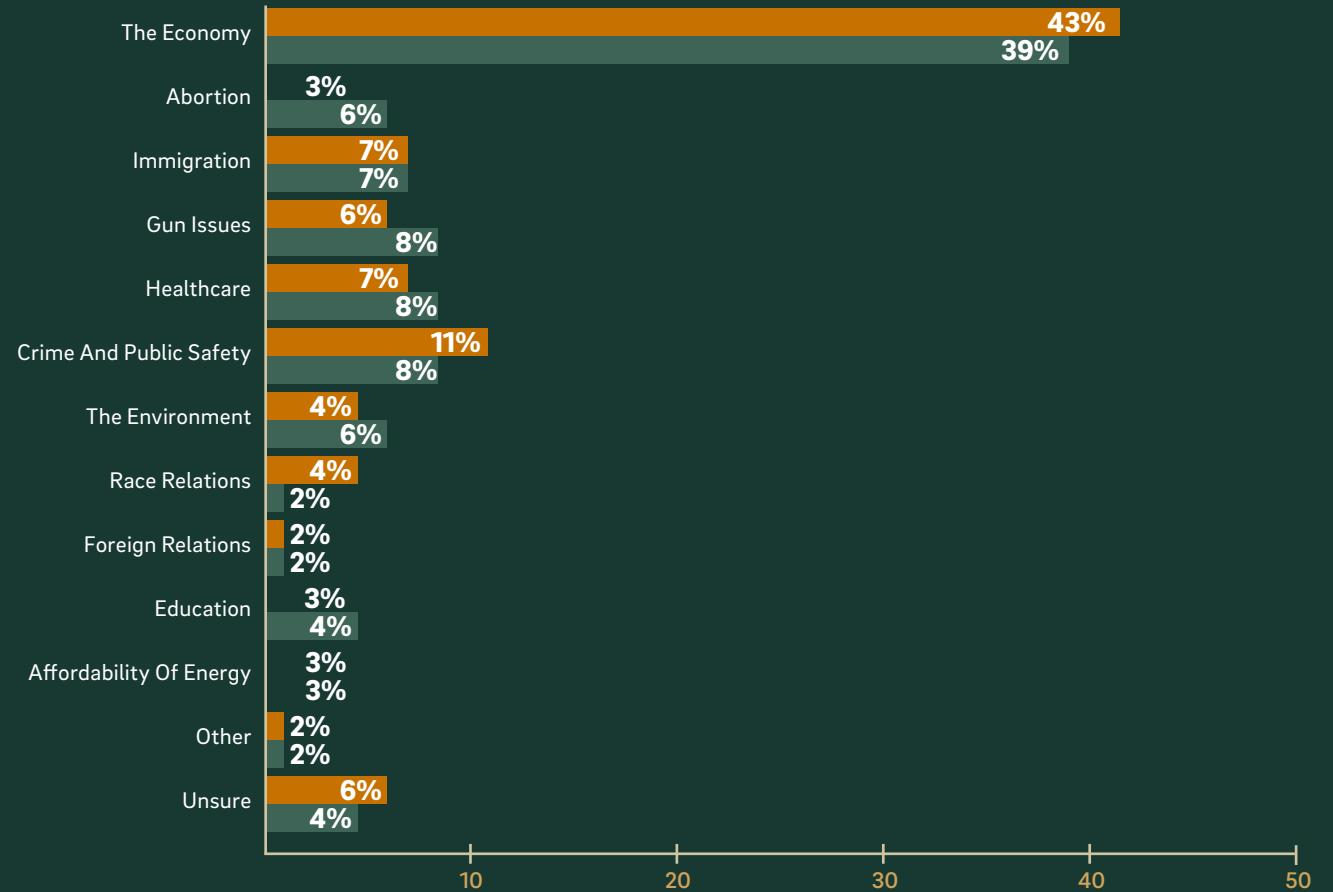
IT'S THE ECONOMY! BY FAR THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE FOR THE U.S. AND GULF SOUTH.

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

THE ECONOMY - G.S. 2023



THE ECONOMY - U.S. 2023



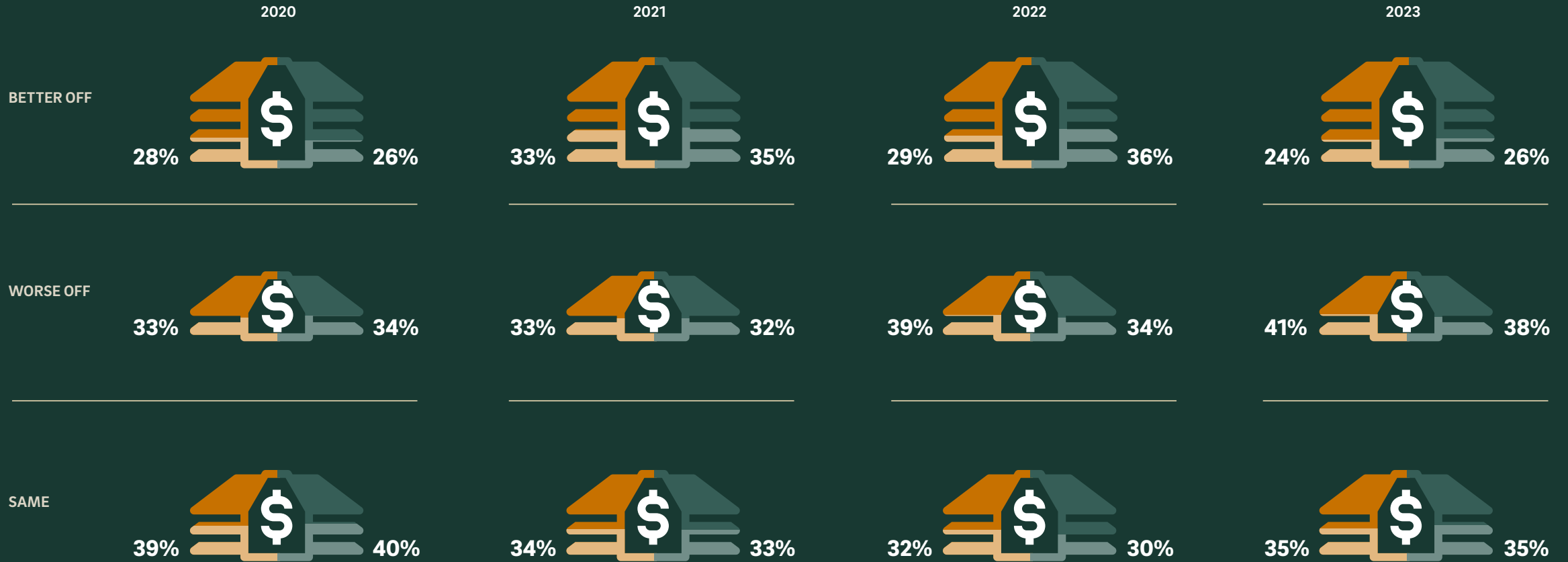
What do you think is the most important issue facing the country today? The economy is the most important issue for all economic groups from both surveys but was highest for middle-income respondents from the Gulf South (GS) (52%). While it is still rated as the most important issue, 18–24-year-olds from both survey are less likely to prioritize the economy as the most important issue facing the country (21% for U.S., 23% for GS). This youngest age group also places a higher priority on gun issues (14% for U.S., 11% for GS) and crime and public safety (16% for U.S., 14% for GS) than the other age groups.

THE ECONOMIC SITUATION'S RATING CONTINUES TO DECLINE.



How would you rate the economic situation in our country today? 5 stars is the best and 1 star is the worst. Higher-income (>\$100k) Gulf South and national respondents were most likely to rate the economy as 5 stars (12% and 16%). Lower-income (<\$50k) Gulf South and national respondents most commonly rated the economy as 3 stars (both at 36%).

GULF SOUTH RESIDENTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO SAY THEY ARE WORSE OFF IN 2023 THAN PREVIOUS YEARS.

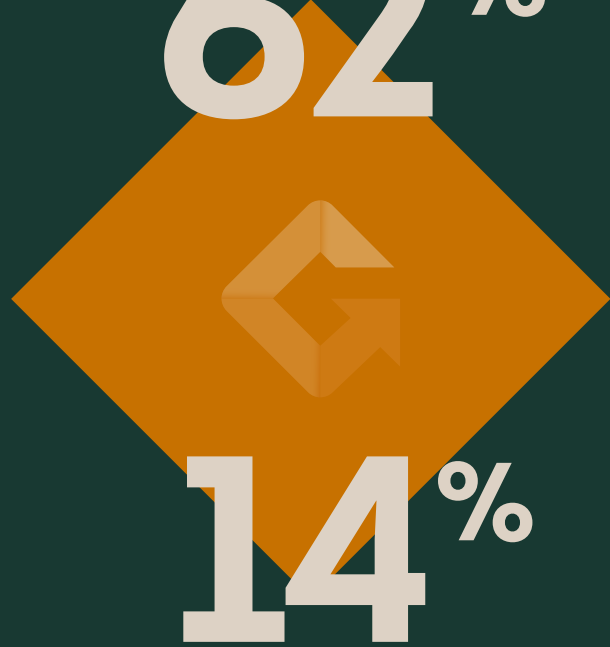


Are you better or worse off financially than you were 2 years ago? Lower-income (<\$50k) Gulf South and national respondents most commonly answered that they were worse off (both at 43%). Not surprisingly, higher-income respondents answered that they were better off than two years ago (36% for GS, 50% for U.S.).

OPTIMISM REIGNS: 62% OF GULF SOUTH RESIDENTS FEEL THIS YEAR WILL BE BETTER THAN THE LAST.

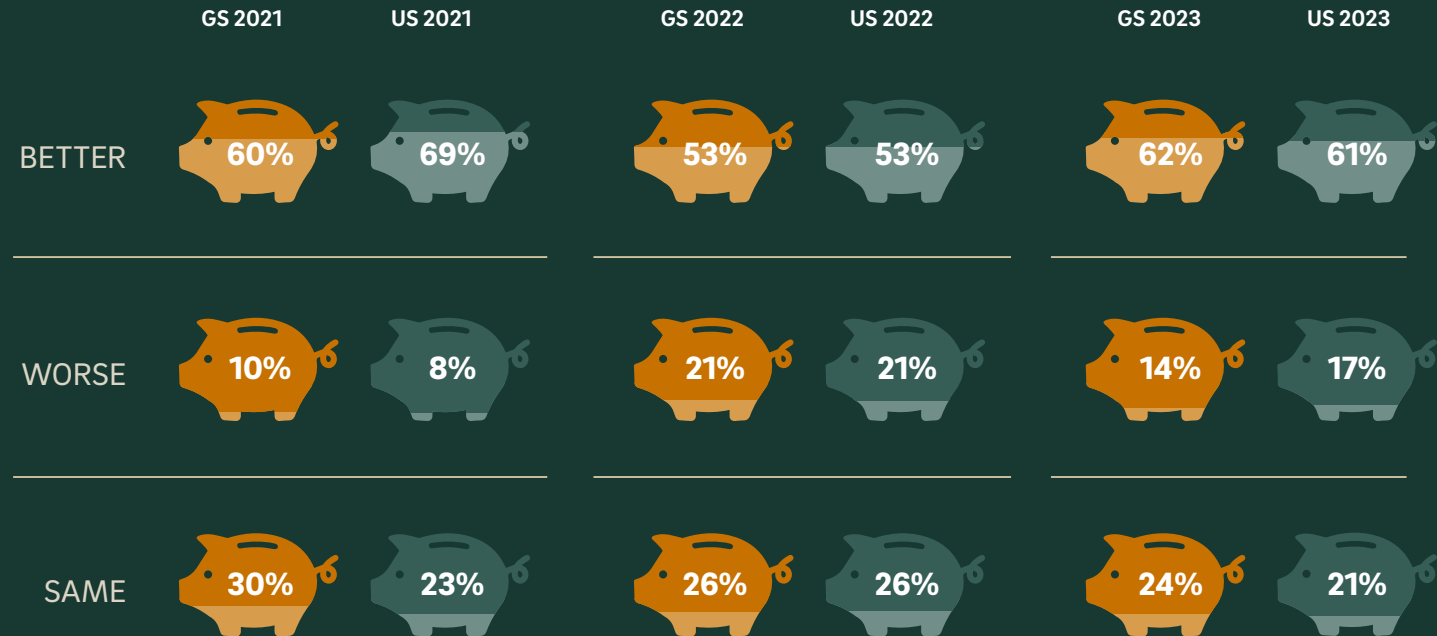
BETTER - G.S. 2023

62%



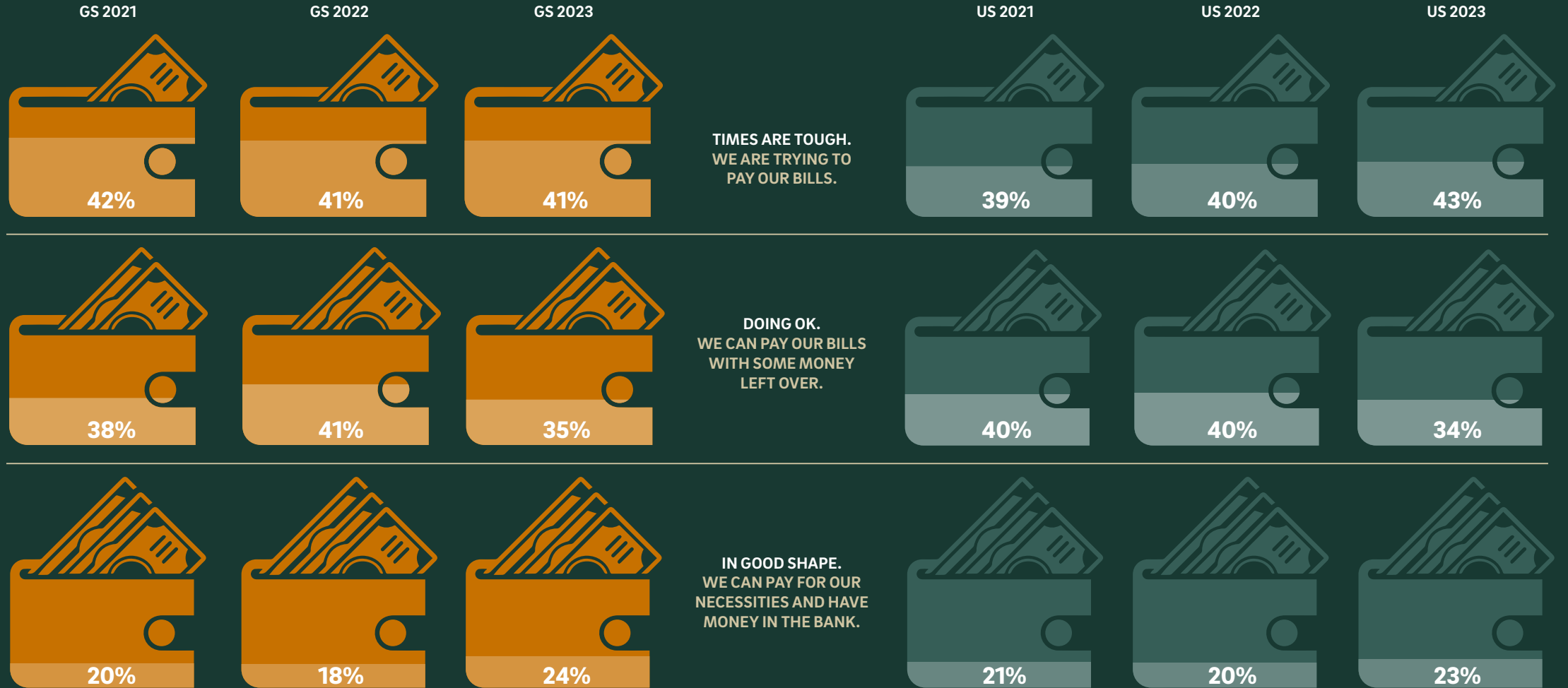
14%

WORSE - G.S. 2023



Do you believe that this year will be a better year for you personally than last year? High-income national survey respondents were the most optimistic about 2023 being a better year than 2022 (72%). In the Gulf South, low-income respondents were most optimistic (64%).

59% OF GULF SOUTH RESIDENTS AND 55% OF THE U.S. SAY THEY ARE IN GOOD SHAPE OR DOING OK FINANCIALLY.

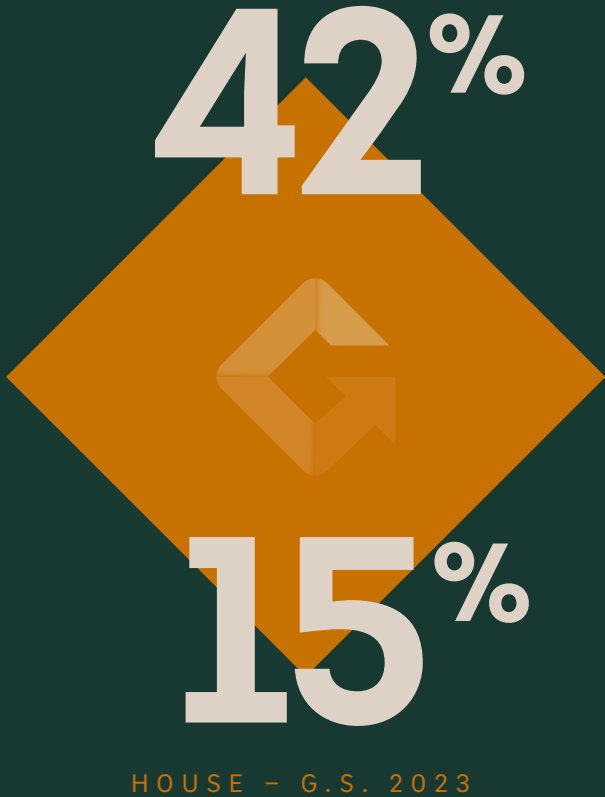


Which statement best describes your current personal financial situation? Despite very similar aggregate numbers, there are differences between income levels. Not surprisingly, higher-income (>\$100k) Gulf South and national respondents more often selected that they were in good shape (47%) than lower-income (<\$50k) Gulf South and national respondents (17%).

34% OF AMERICANS SAID THEY BOUGHT A CAR WITHIN THE LAST YEAR.

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

MAJOR APPLIANCE - G.S. 2023



	CAR	HOUSE	MAJOR APPLIANCE	VACATION
2023	28%	15%	42%	23%
	34%	15%	44%	23%
2022	40%	15%	49%	OTHER 16%
	42%	17%	53%	OTHER 15%

Which of the following did you purchase last year? High-income individuals from across the country and the Gulf South were more likely to have made a major purchase in 2022. Since then, consumers aren't making large purchases as much.

ARE YOU EXTREMELY LIKELY, OR VERY LIKELY TO MAKE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING PURCHASES OVER THE NEXT 6 MONTHS?



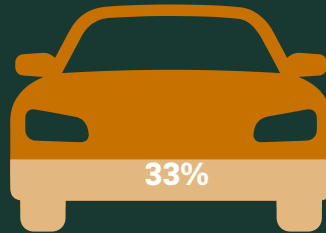
CAR - G.S. 2023

33%



HOUSE - G.S. 2023

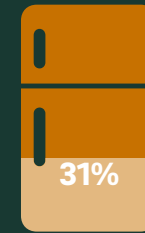
CAR



HOUSE



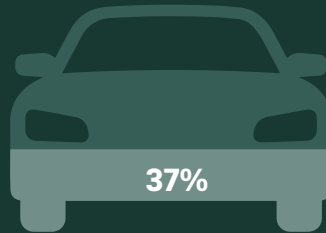
MAJOR APPLIANCE



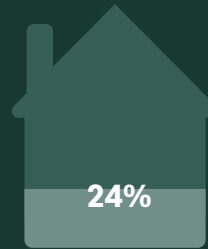
VACATION



37%



24%



33%



29%

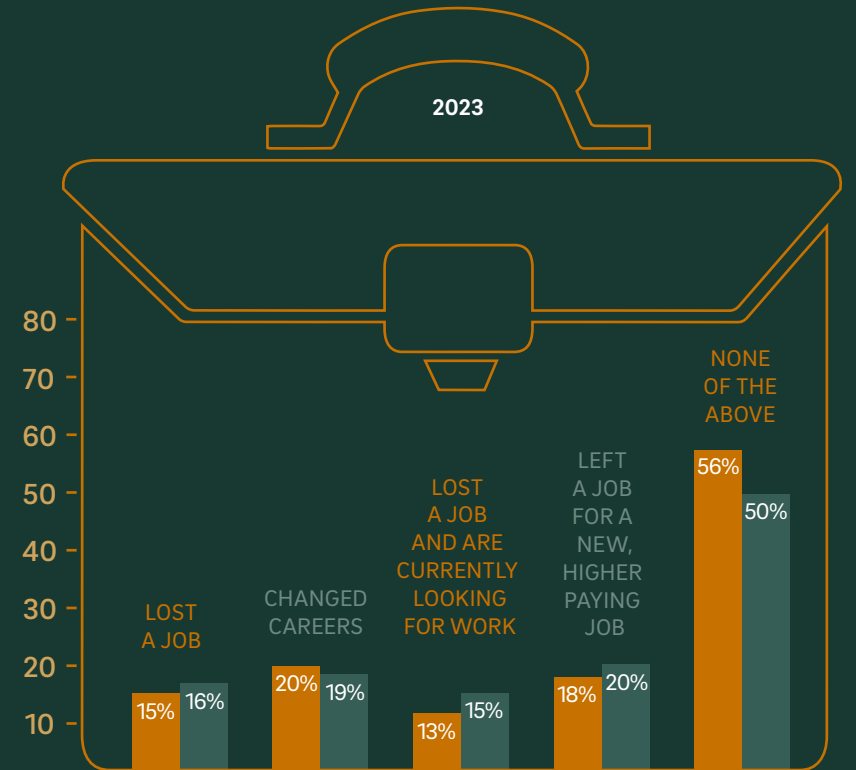
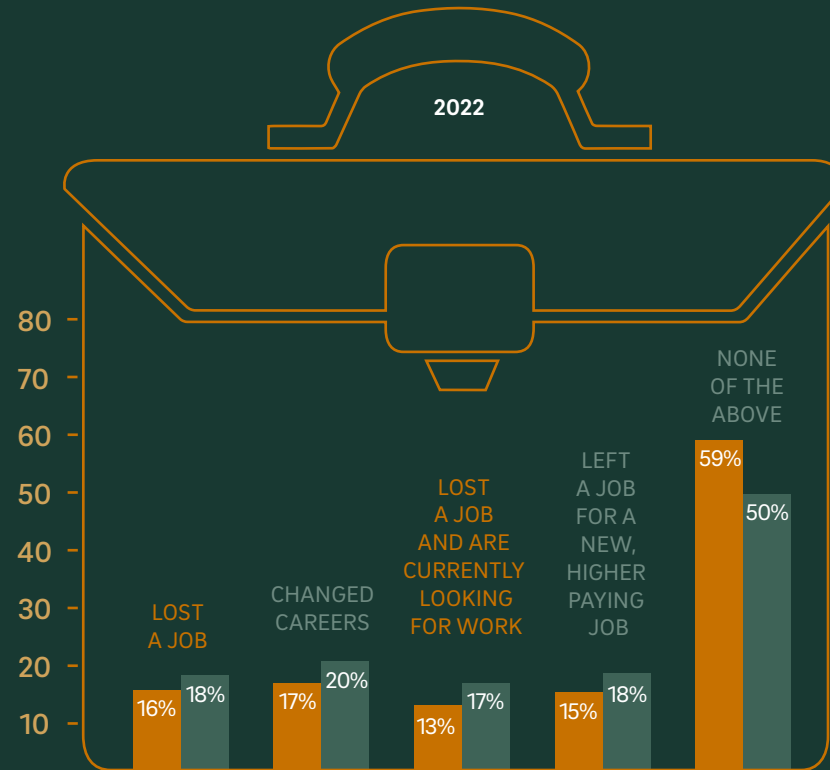
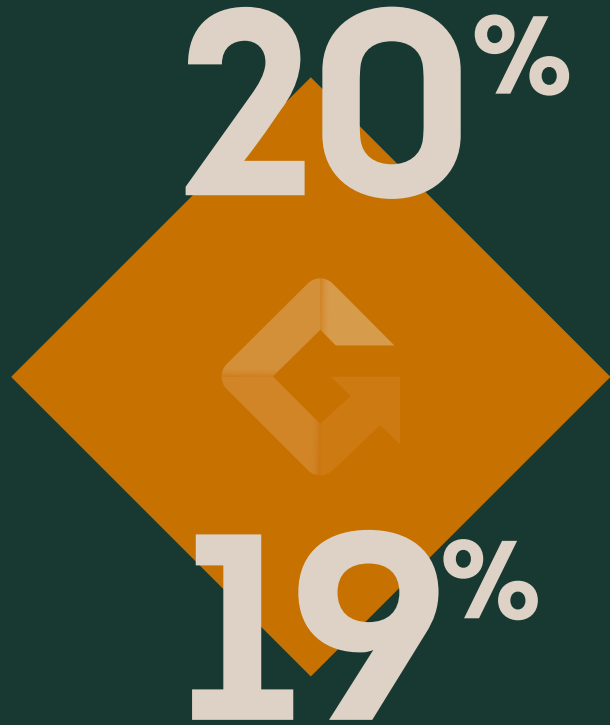


High-income individuals from both surveys were more likely to make a major purchase in the next 6 months.

IN THE PAST TWO YEARS, HAVE YOU...

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

CHANGED CAREERS - G.S. 2023



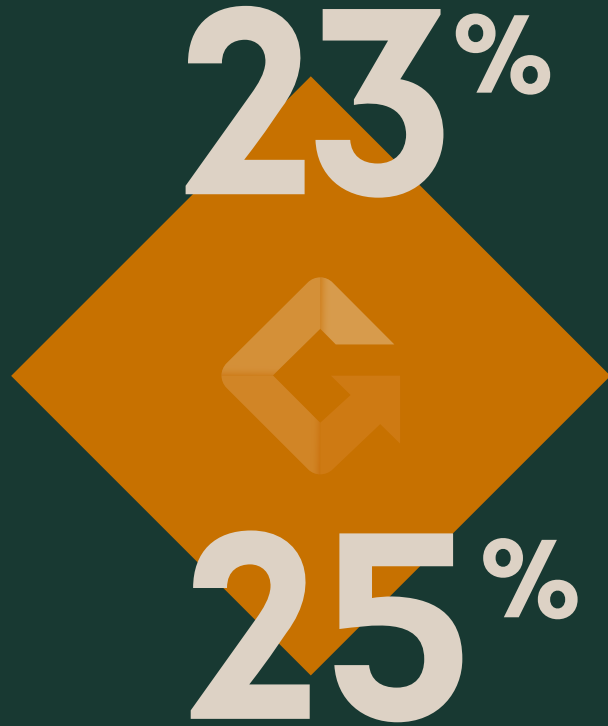
CHANGED CAREERS - U.S. 2023

High-income national survey respondents were the most likely group to have left a job for a higher paying job in the last 2 years (27%).

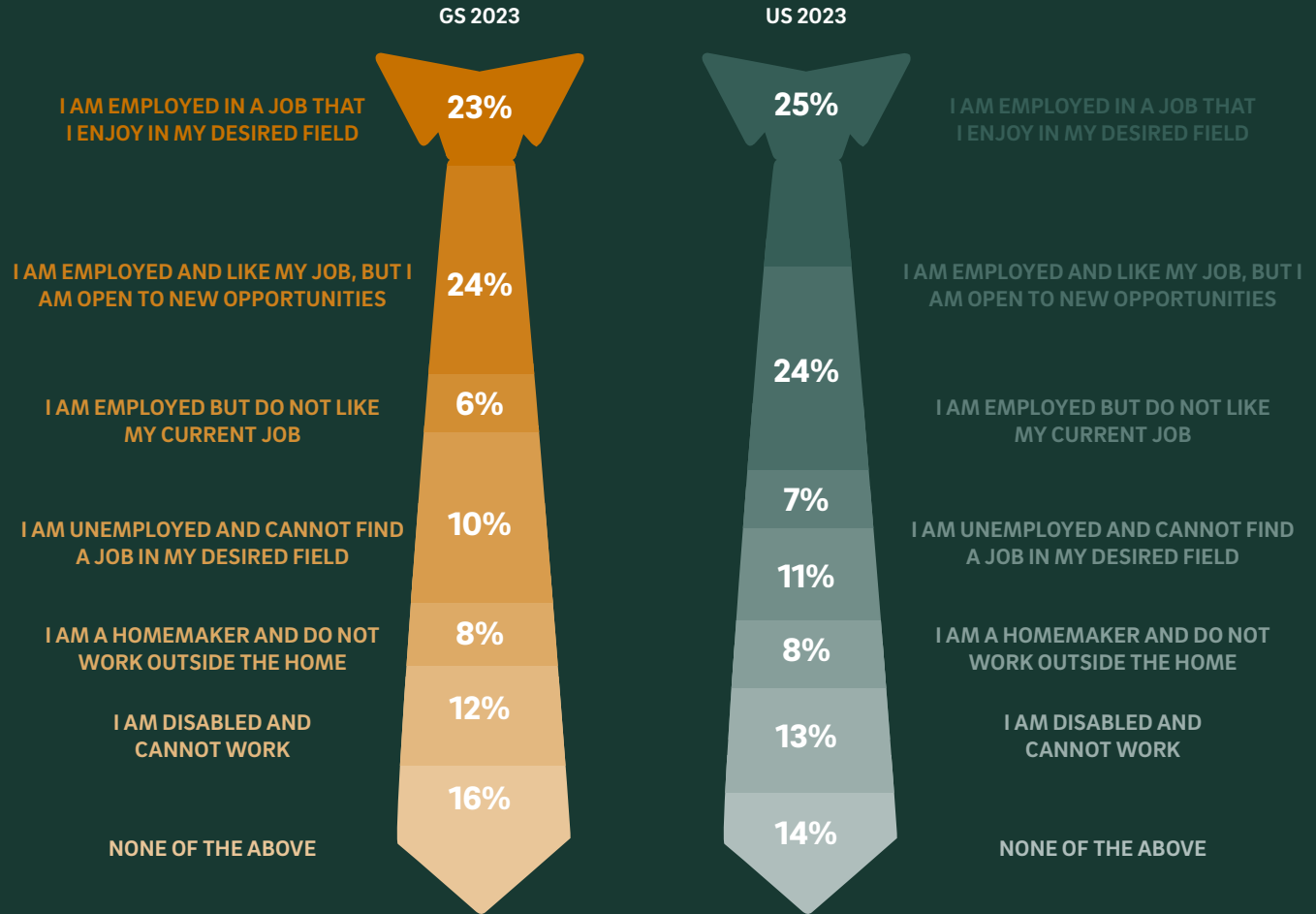
GULF SOUTH AND U.S. RESIDENTS SHARE SIMILAR OPINIONS ABOUT THEIR CURRENT JOBS.

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

EMPLOYED IN MY DESIRED FIELD - G.S. 2023



EMPLOYED IN MY DESIRED FIELD - U.S. 2023



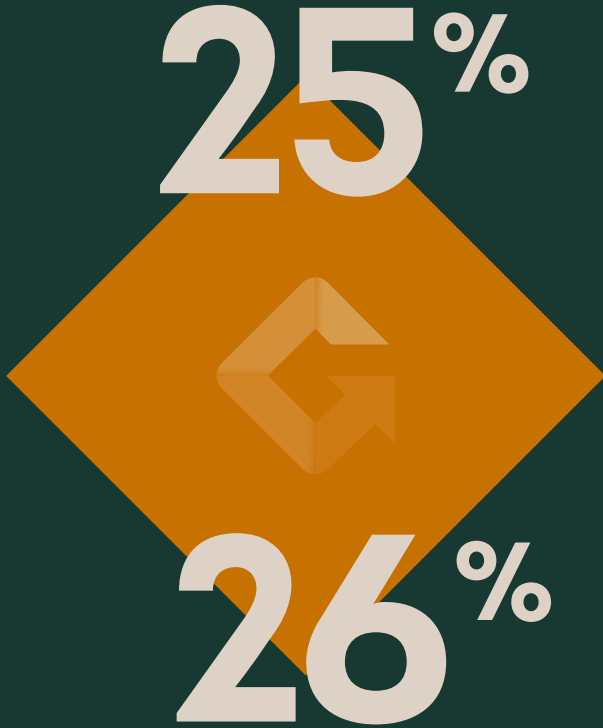
Which best describes your current job situation?

IN THEIR CAREERS, EMPLOYEES VALUE COMPETITIVE PAY AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE MOST.



COMPETITIVE PAY - G.S. 2023

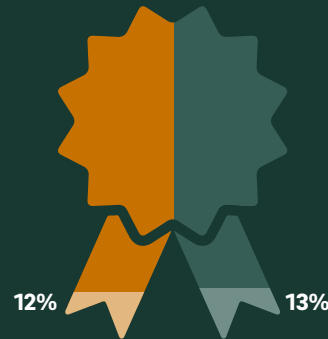
25%



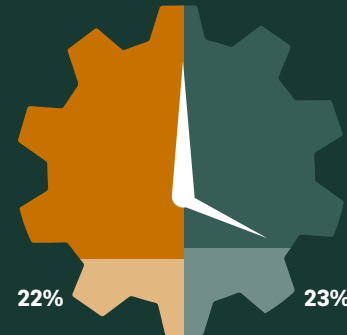
26%

WORK BALANCE - U.S. 2023

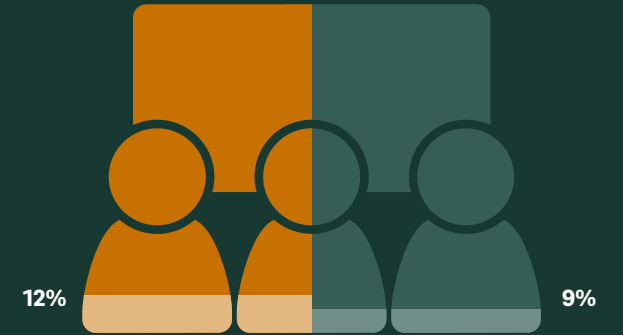
RECOGNITION AND APPRECIATION



FLEXIBILITY (E.G., HYBRID/REMOTE WORK OPTIONS, FLEXIBLE SCHEDULE)



TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT



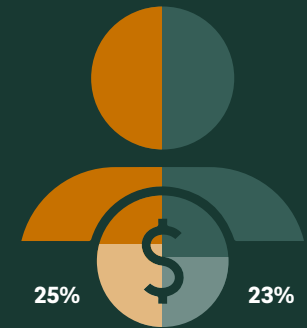
WORK BALANCE



ORGANIZATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL ALIGNMENT



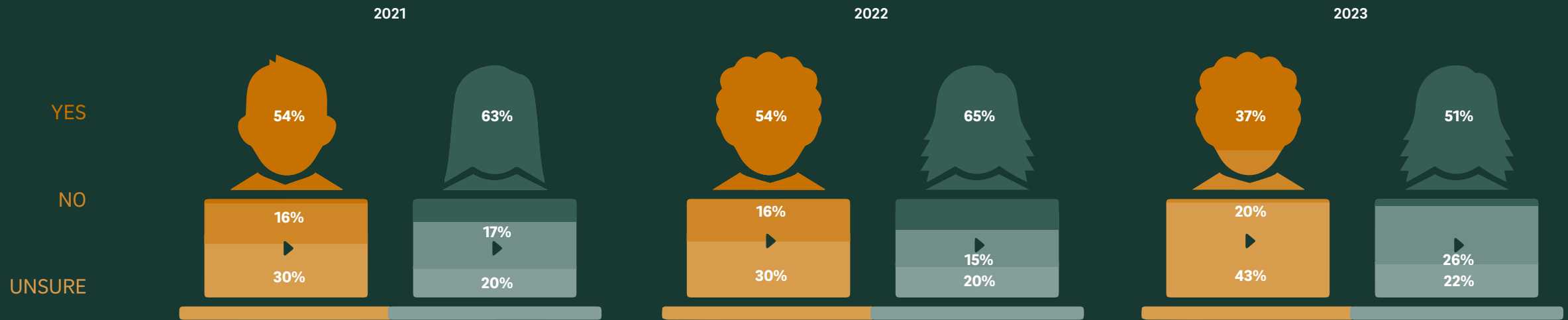
COMPETITIVE PAY PLANS



As an employee, which of these do you consider to be the most important? While competitive pay plans are most important or rated very highly among all the varying economic groups and geographic areas, it is most important for high-income Gulf South respondents (31%).

THE GULF SOUTH IS MORE UNSURE ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT THEIR AREA OFFERS CAREER OPPORTUNITIES IN THEIR DESIRED FIELD.

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

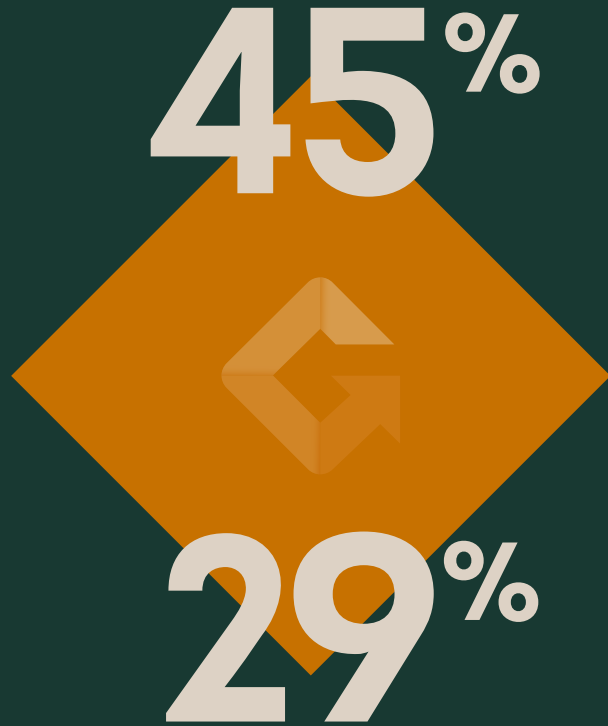


Do you think your area or the Gulf South offers attractive career opportunities in your desired field?

ARE YOU AWARE OF ANY SHORTAGES IN THE LABOR MARKET, EITHER LOCALLY OR NATIONALLY?

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

YES, LOCALLY AND NATIONALLY
G.S. 2023



YES, LOCALLY,
BUT NOT NATIONALLY



YES, NATIONALLY,
BUT NOT LOCALLY



YES, BOTH NATIONALLY
AND LOCALLY



NO, NOT AWARE
OF ANY SHORTAGES



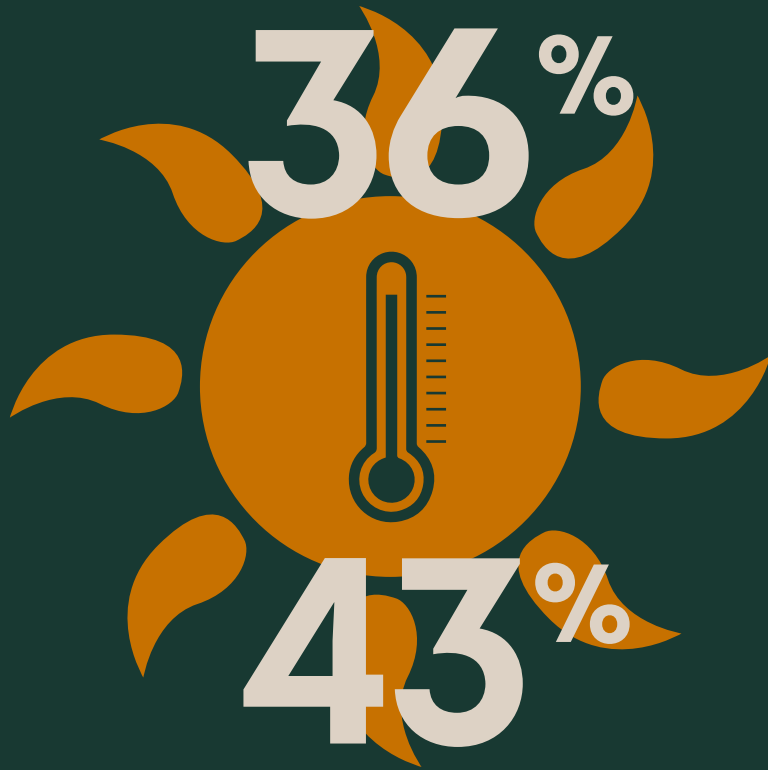
NO, NOT AWARE OF ANY
G.S. 2023

Low-income individuals in both surveys were most likely to not be aware of shortages in the labor market (both national and Gulf South at 36%). High-income individuals in the Gulf South were more likely to be aware of labor shortages on any scale (89%).

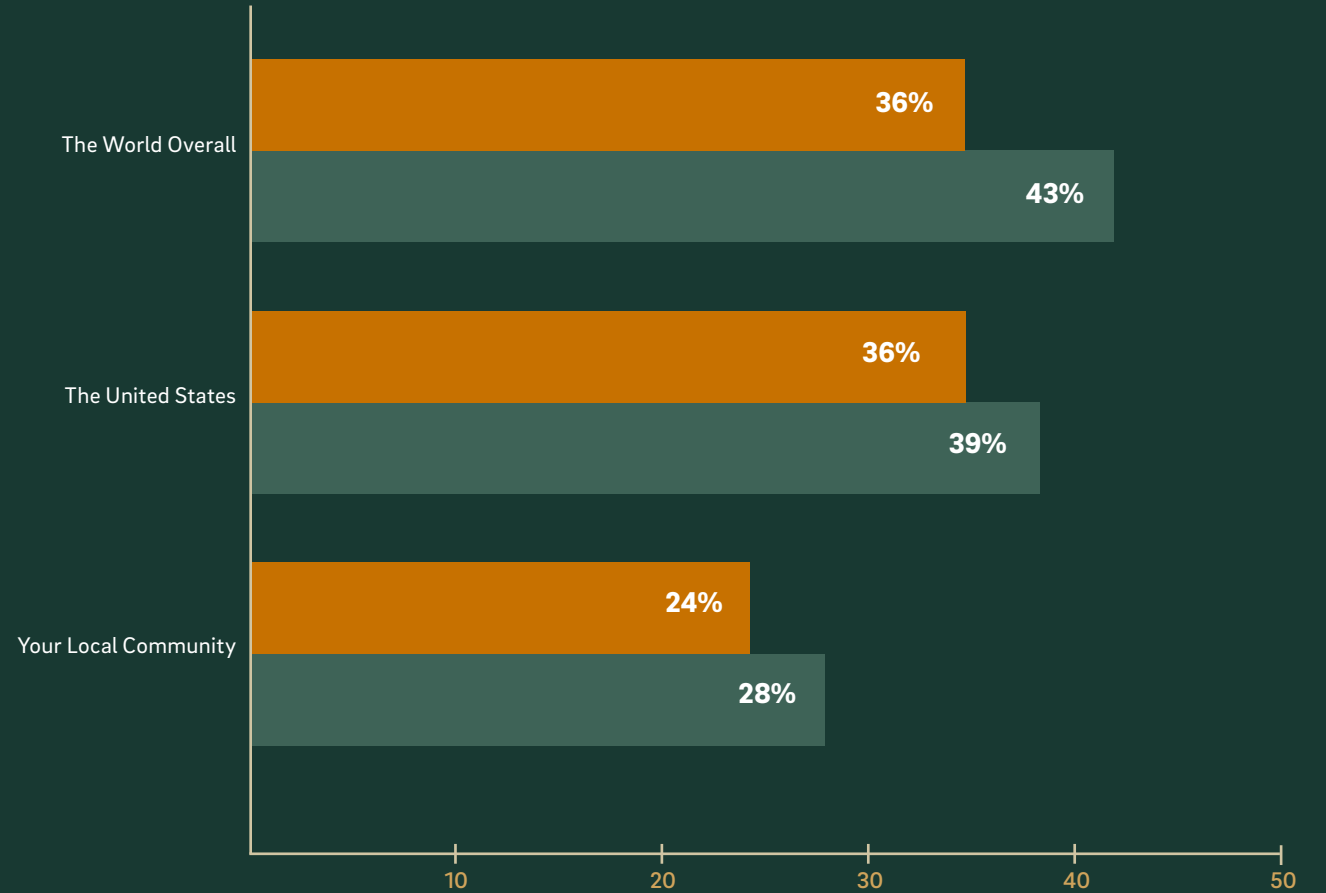
GULF SOUTH RESIDENTS FEEL THEY ARE LESS IMPACTED BY CLIMATE CHANGE THAN THE AVERAGE AMERICAN.

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

THE WORLD OVERALL - G.S. 2023



THE WORLD OVERALL - U.S. 2023



How much, if at all, do you think climate change is currently affecting the following a great deal?

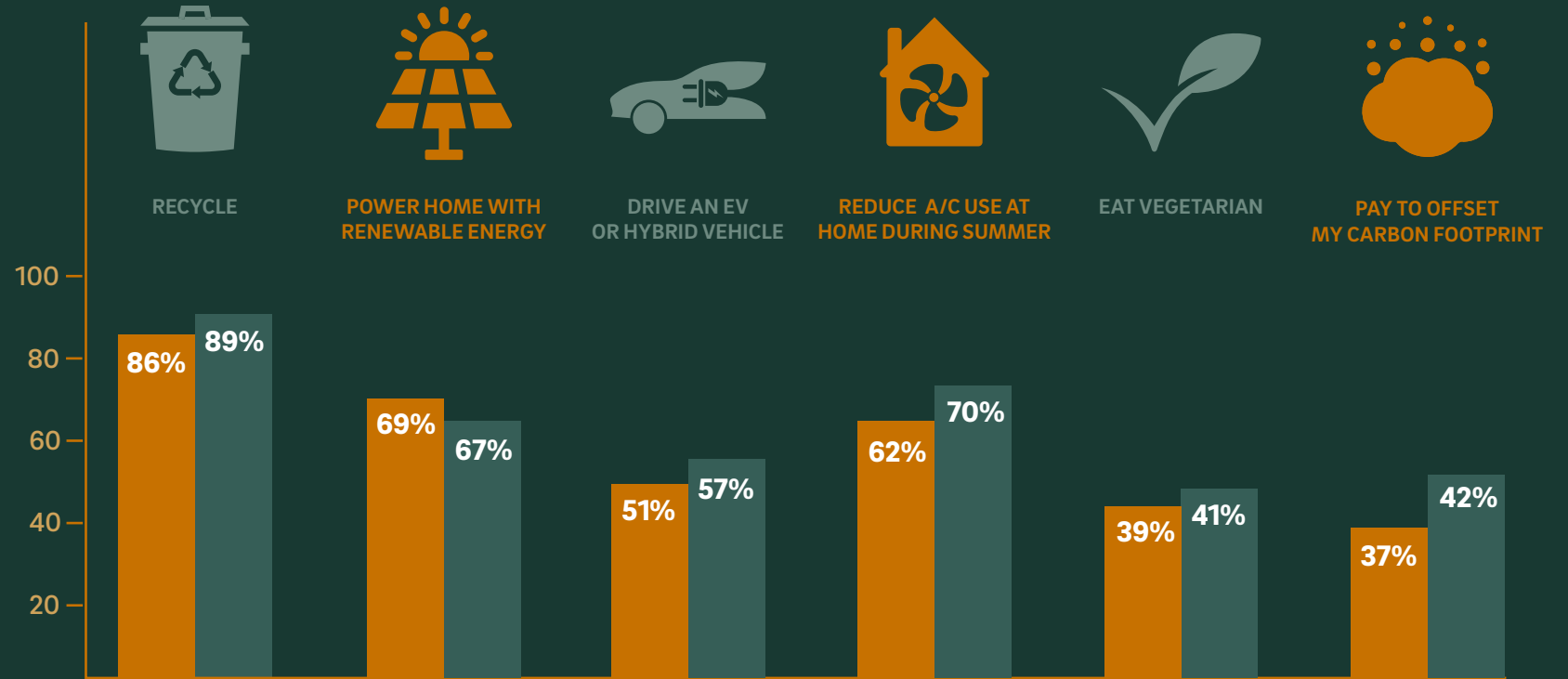
DO YOU CURRENTLY DO ANY OF THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS OR WOULD CONSIDER DOING TO LESSEN YOUR IMPACT ON THE CLIMATE?

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

RECYCLE - G.S. 2023



RECYCLE - U.S. 2023

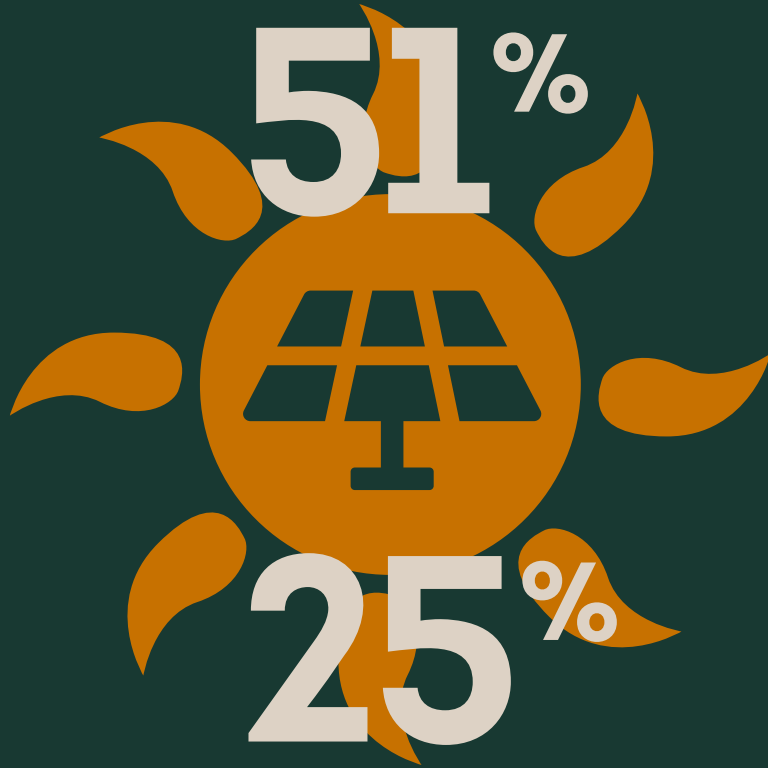


High-income individuals from both surveys are more likely to power their home with renewable energy (79% for U.S., 75% for GS), and more likely to drive an electric/hybrid vehicle (73% for U.S., 64% for GS). High-income individuals from the national survey are the most likely economic group to eat vegetarian (51%). An overwhelming majority of all groups from both surveys are already recycling or are willing to recycle. **Answers are a combined percentage of those who already do this action or would be willing to do this action.*

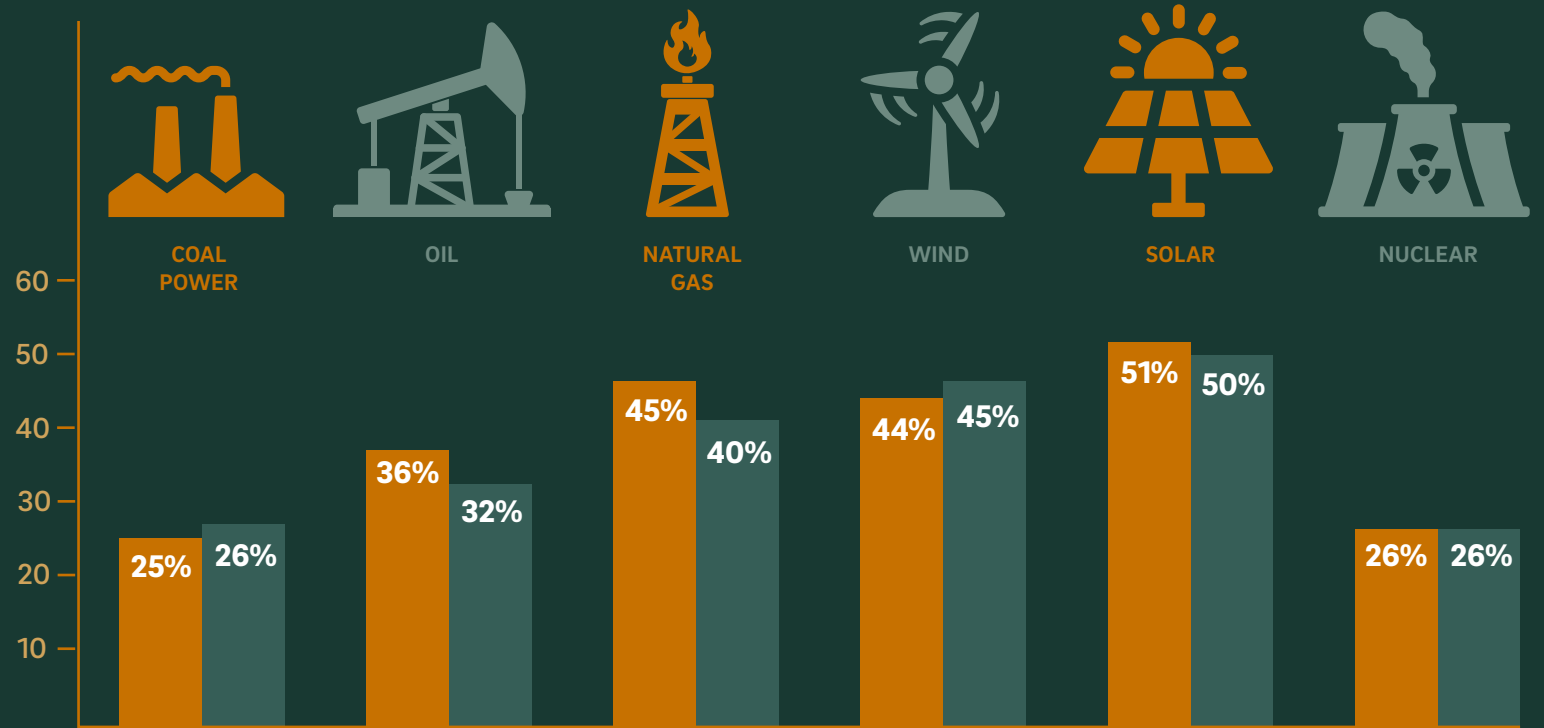
DO YOU THINK THE U.S. SHOULD PUT MORE EMPHASIS ON PRODUCING ENERGY FROM EACH OF THE FOLLOWING SOURCES?

GULF SOUTH
NATIONAL

SOLAR POWER - G.S. 2023



COAL POWER - G.S. 2023



Individuals 55 and older are more likely to believe the U.S. should be putting more emphasis on producing energy from coal (34% for U.S., 30% for GS).



"IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT, BUT I FEEL FINE." -R.E.M.

Q&A with Marc Ehrhardt

The economy seems to be the top issue on the minds of many people these days. The survey indicates only 24 % of respondents in the Gulf South and 26 % nationwide say they are better off now than they were two years ago. Is this surprising?

As we look at four years of data from the Gulf South Index, we see citizens of this region that don't believe they can achieve the American Dream. Citizens that say they are better off financially than two years ago is at its lowest point in four years. Those saying they are worse off total the highest percentage in four years.

However, 53% of people in the Gulf South rank the economy at 3 or more stars, a 10-point increase over 2022. There's also a 9-point increase in the number of Gulf South residents that believe 2023 will be better for them personally than 2022, slightly ahead of the 8-point increase among citizens nationally.

So which way is it?

A pattern emerged in 2022 among Gulf South residents. When we think about the world overall? Things are a disaster. When we think about our state? "Things are rough out there but could be worse." When we think about ourselves? "I'm doing ok."

2023 just cements this pattern. When we ask Gulf South citizens about their current personal financial situation, 59% of people said they can pay their bills with some money left over OR they can pay their necessities and have money in the bank. That tracks what citizens think nationally and what the Gulf South and the nation have said consistently since 2021.

The survey reveals that a majority of both Gulf South and national respondents (62% and 61% respectively) believe 2023 will be better for them personally than 2022. To what do you attribute this optimism?

The closer someone gets to their own front door, the better they perceive their lot in life. We are seeing it with someone's financial outlook, as well as their outlook about the climate and other events on the news each day.

We perceive a greater level of control in our lives when we think about our own specific circumstances. A greater number of us have jobs with steady paychecks. We look around our neighborhoods and towns and think "things aren't so bad." We have a greater understanding of our circumstances for the most part.

It even extends to our own news and information habits. We trust local news the most. That has not changed.



**"THE FUTURE
STARTS TODAY,
NOT TOMORROW."**

-POPE JOHN PAUL II



OUR WORLD IS FILLED WITH COMPLEX ISSUES, mind-boggling challenges and agonizing choices. Uncertainty abounds.

The war in Ukraine, political turmoil, inflation, failing banks and the remnants of the pandemic have fed the ambiguity. Many of the questions that weigh heavily on the future of communities, businesses and public attitudes are difficult to answer.

To be successful, we must arm ourselves with as much information and insight as possible. That's where this Gulf South Index comes into play.

This research appears to suggest that in both the Gulf South and the country as a whole people haven't quite snapped out of the funk brought on by events of the past few years. The state of the economy and what some experts say is a looming recession appear to be weighing heavily on most of us.

At the same time, people are buying things and going places in an undaunted, carpe diem approach to life.

Understanding how our malaise is influencing attitudes and behaviors could provide a key to unlocking the uncertainties that bedevil businesses and institutions trying to see what's around the next curve. This survey provides real time scientific data to help straighten out that bend in the road for a better view of what's ahead.





HOW DO WE KNOW ALL OF THIS?

THE GULF SOUTH INDEX DELVES INTO hundreds of thousands of data points to shed light on what millions of people in both the Gulf South region of the U.S. and around the country are thinking and how they are living their lives. What emerges is a picture showing how and why we make purchasing decisions, what we are buying, how we get our news and where we are spending our money.

The Index is a cooperative project between The Ehrhardt Group, a public relations, content, issues and crisis firm, and Causeway Solutions, a nationally recognized research and data analysis company. Both companies are based in the Gulf South and have years of experience conducting major research projects like this one. Causeway Solutions and The Ehrhardt Group conducted a series of online surveys, garnering 1,500 responses from adults throughout the Gulf South and country with a margin of error of 2.5%. Some surveys questions allowed for respondents to select more than one response. Surveys were conducted between January 18 – 28, 2023.

For more information please contact us.

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