



NATIONAL CIVIC
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Americans' Preferred Architecture for Federal Buildings

A National Civic Art Survey
Conducted by The Harris Poll

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INTRODUCTION

Since the founding of the United States, there has been discussion regarding what architectural style or styles is best for federal government buildings, including courthouses, department headquarters, and office buildings, both in the nation's capital and across the country. As desired by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, the first important government buildings, the White House and Capitol, were classical in design, as was the plan of Washington, D.C. Evolving over time, classicism—a tradition that includes neoclassicism, Greek Revival, Beaux Arts, and WPA style—set the precedent for federal government architecture for 150 years. During this era, other forms of traditional architecture were on occasion used, including regional styles such as Pueblo Revival and Spanish Colonial.

After World War II, the General Services Administration (established 1949), the agency responsible for constructing federal buildings, abandoned classical architecture in favor of Modernism.¹ In 1962, GSA adopted the Guiding Principles of Federal Design, which formally rejected official classicism in favor of Modernism. Government architecture came to be typified by the International Style and Brutalist style. Until the 1990s, there were few to no buildings constructed in a traditional style.

In the 1994, GSA instituted a design program, still existing today, that brought post-modern architecture to the fore.² Under this program,

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1. See GSA Office of the Chief Architect, *Growth, Efficiency, and Modernism: GSA Buildings of the 1950s '60s, and '70s* (GSA, 2003), available at <https://www.gsa.gov/cdnstatic/GEMbook.pdf>.
 2. See Brook, Daniel, "A Blueprint for the Future," *Legal Affairs*, Nov./Dec. 2005, available at https://www.legalaffairs.org/issues/November-December-2005/feature_brook_novdec05.msp. For a visual atlas of federal buildings around the country, see https://tradarchlistserv.blogspot.com/2020/02/classical-vs-modernist-federal_28.html.



called Design Excellence, only 6 of the 78 federal buildings constructed have been classical or traditional—i.e., just 8%—with the remainder (92%) Modernist or post-modernist.³

In February 2020, there were press reports of a leaked draft White House Executive Order that would re-orient federal architecture in a classical and traditional direction, including by requiring that new office buildings in Washington, D.C. be classical in design. These reports brought more public attention to the subject than has been seen in many decades—indeed, if ever before. In response to the leak, a bill—entitled the “Democracy in Design Act”—was proposed in the House of Representatives to overturn the anticipated Executive Order.

Our aim in undertaking this survey, conducted online by the Harris Poll on behalf of the National Civic Art Society among over 2,000 US adults, was to gain insights on Americans’ architectural preferences. We wished to discover what matters most when it comes to U.S. courthouses or federal office buildings. What do Americans really like?

The results show that Americans strongly prefer a more traditional look when it comes to the architecture of U.S. courthouses and federal office buildings. Furthermore, the data suggests that the character and historical influence of the style may have an impact on preferences.

3. For a list of all completed Design Excellence buildings, see <http://www.civcart.org/s/list-of-GSA-Design-Excellence-Buildings.pdf>.

PRIOR STUDIES

The findings of this study comport with the conclusions of the few visual surveys of Americans' architectural preferences. In 2007, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) undertook a survey of 2,200 random Americans, also conducted by The Harris Poll, of Americans' 150 favorite buildings.⁴ Called "Americans' Favorite Architecture," the survey found that Americans strongly preferred buildings designed in a traditional style. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the poll showed that "Americans preferred older buildings that evoke ancient architectural styles such as Gothic, Greek, and Roman traditions. Of the top 50 [buildings], only 12 can be described as 'modern-looking.'"⁵

In 2020, an academic study of courthouse architecture found that the study's participants preferred neoclassical designs for courthouses.⁶ The study's author, Jack L. Nasar, Academy Professor of City & Regional Planning at Ohio State University, concluded, "The findings agree with consistent findings that architects misjudge public likely public impressions of a design, and that most non-architects dislike 'modern' design and have done so for almost a century. Perhaps, through repeated experience, U.S. citizens have learned to see neo-classical designs or designs with those features as good examples of public buildings such as courthouses."

THE SURVEY QUESTION

The survey comprised seven pairs of images of existing U.S. courthouses and federal office buildings. The buildings were not identified in any way. Each pair comprised one building in a traditional style and one building in a modern style. The order in each pair was randomized, as was the order of the questions.

For each pair, the survey question was: "Which of these two buildings would you prefer for a U.S. courthouse or federal office building?"

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4. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/America%27s_Favorite_Architecture.
 5. Frangos, Alex, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Public, Designers at Odds on What's a Beautiful Building," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 7, 2007, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB117081054378900269> and <https://www.civkart.org/s/WSJ-In-the-Eye-of-the-Beholder-Public-Designers-at-Odds-on-Whats-a-Beautiful-Building.pdf>.
 6. Nasar, Jack L., "What Should Courthouses Look Like?" *Architexturez*, 2020, available at <https://patterns.architexturez.net/doc/az-cf-206835>.

IMAGE SELECTION

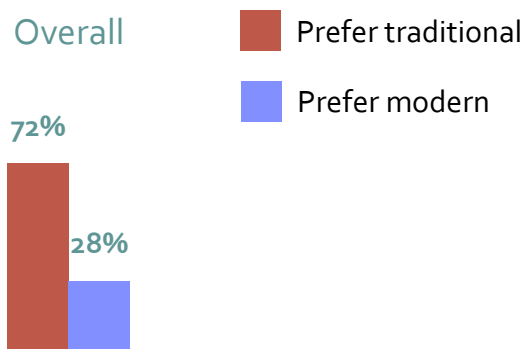
From a long list of many dozens of photos, the seven pairs of images were very carefully selected and edited to ensure fair comparisons. Factors such as sky color, angle of photo, light conditions, distance from building, weather conditions, nature of foreground, nature and quality of street furniture, presence of street trees, parked cars, and passing people were all controlled for either perfectly (e.g., sky color) or as far as possible via careful photo selection and editing. In all cases the aim was to reduce to a minimum factors other than the building itself that might influence people's preferences. In addition, the use of a range of seven pairs of photos rather than just one comparison permits confident conclusions to be drawn.



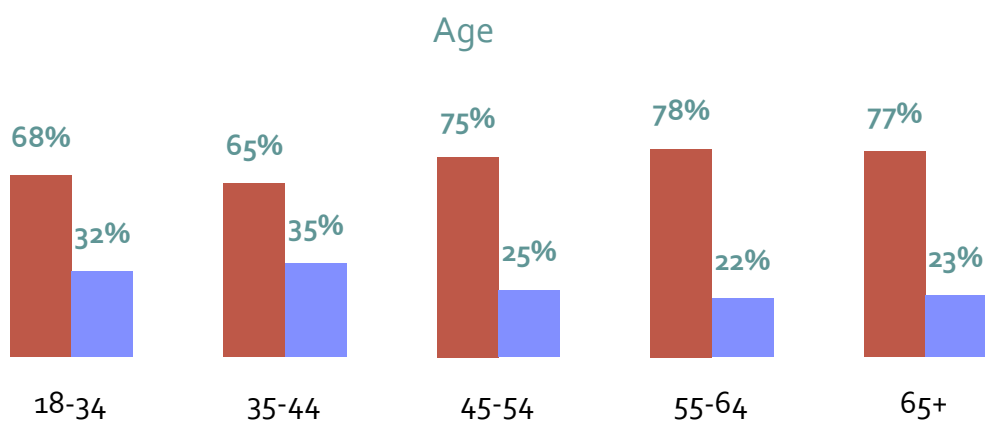
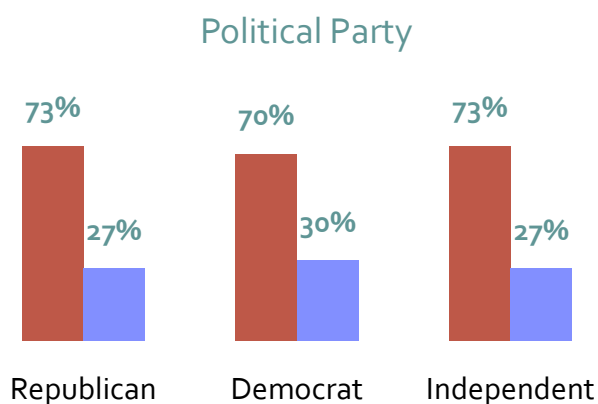
KEY FINDINGS

Traditional Tops Modern for Americans

When it comes to the style of architecture Americans favor for U.S. courthouse or federal buildings, traditional is the clear winner across the board with more than 7 in 10 Americans (72%) preferring a traditional look.



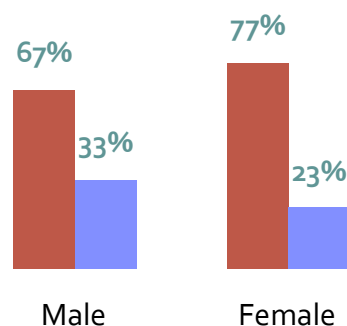
Support for traditional design was bipartisan. It was favored by 73% of Republicans, 70% of Democrats, and 73% of Independents.



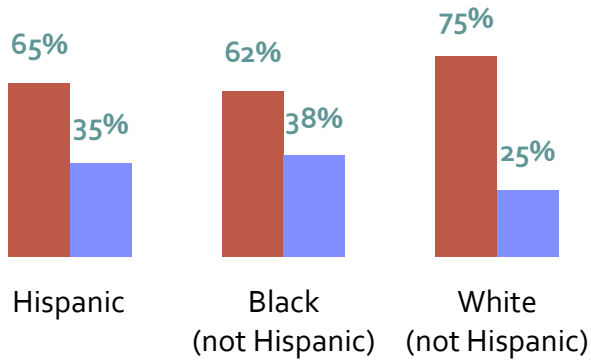
Traditional was the clear winner for all demographic groups, including gender, age, geographic region, household income, education, and race/ethnicity:

- Preference for traditional architecture unites majorities across generations. Traditional styles are the choice of 77% of those aged 65 or older, and 68% of those aged 18-34.
- Women are more likely than men to prefer traditional architecture for a U.S. courthouse or federal office building - 77% vs. 67%, respectively.
- Majorities of black (62%), Hispanic (65%) and white (75%) Americans prefer traditional architecture.
- A preference for traditional architecture bridges regional divides: 73% prefer it in the Northeast, 73% in the South, 74% in the Midwest, and 69% in the West.
- The typical markers of "elite" status - higher earning and education levels - do not diminish a preference for traditional architecture. It is the clear choice of Americans making a household income under \$50,000 (73%) and those making a household income over \$100,000 (70%); those with a high school degree or less (72%); and those with a bachelor's degree or greater (72%).

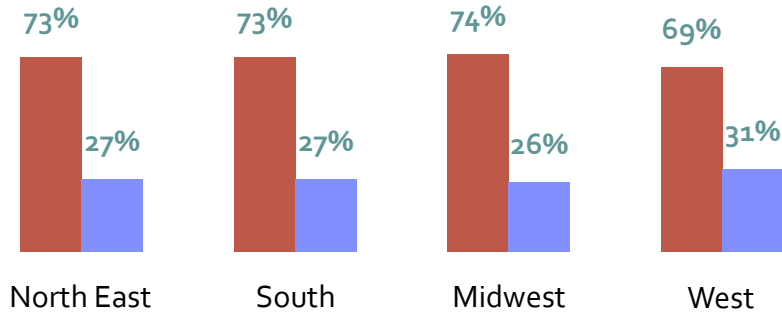
Gender



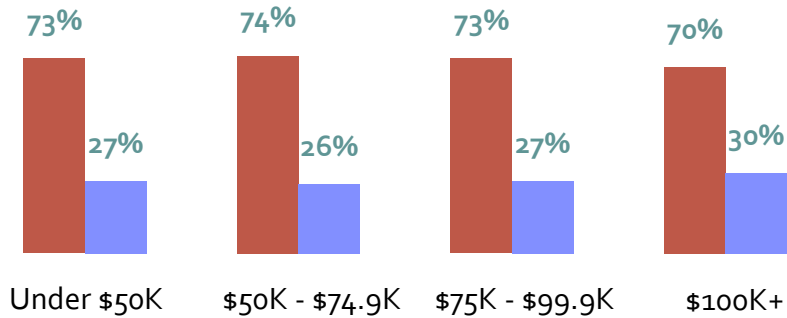
Race/Ethnicity



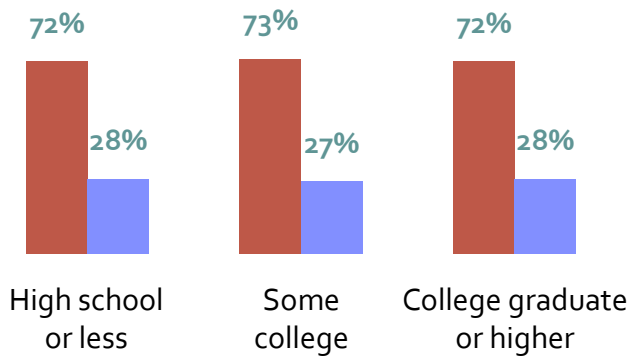
Region



Income



Education Level Attained



The traditional buildings that Americans prefer most among those shown are neoclassical:

- National Archives Building – 83%
- Gene Snyder U.S. Courthouse and Custom House – 81%
- William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building (EPA HQ) – 81%

Conversely, the modern buildings that Americans prefer least among those shown are Brutalist buildings:

- Robert C. Weaver Federal Building (HUD HQ) – 19%
- Hubert H. Humphrey Building (HHS HQ) – 17%

While most Americans do prefer traditional, there are some that prefer modern. Nearly 3 in 10 Americans (28%) prefer a modern look for a U.S. courthouse or federal office building.

The modern buildings that Americans prefer most among those shown are:

- U.S. Courthouse, Newport News – 42%
- Frank M. Scarlett Federal Building – 40%
- Hansen Federal Building – 32%

Style: History and Character Matter

Why does a wide majority of Americans prefer a U.S. courthouse or federal office building with a traditional appearance? Perhaps the neoclassical style of some of these buildings, as well as that of Colonial Revival, is positively associated with the historic architecture of the American founding, iconic government buildings such as the U.S. Supreme Court, and/or the country's democracy. Furthermore, some of the buildings in the study are characterized by classical columns and pediments—features that could signify a courthouse as a recognizable building type—i.e., a temple of justice. When looking at which buildings were among the top three traditional buildings preferred in the study, each of these structures strongly exude these ancient Greek and Roman features.

It is also possible that Americans perceive traditional buildings as being more beautiful or pleasing to the eye than modern ones. They might also perceive such buildings as being more open or accessible. As indicated by the aforementioned AIA poll, Americans might also prefer traditional architecture as such.

In comparison to the traditional buildings in the study, the modern style buildings follow a more minimalistic, austere style with emphasis on glass, concrete, and sharp geometric shapes. The three modern style buildings that were at the bottom of the list of those Americans preferred all feature a grey unornamented concrete façade with uniform repetitive windows, which may project a more cold and sterile feel compared to the warmer stone and variation in structure of the traditional buildings.

- Robert C. Weaver Federal Building (HUD HQ) – 19%
- Hammond Federal Courthouse – 19%
- Hubert H. Humphrey Building (HHS HQ) – 17%

The modern style buildings that Americans liked the most, had one thing that differentiated them from the less preferred modern buildings and that is color. Those modern buildings that rated higher incorporated red brick or blue tinted glass. This suggests that modern buildings that have architecture with more character make a difference when it comes to how much Americans like the look of those buildings.

- U.S. Courthouse, Newport News – 42%
- Frank M. Scarlett Federal Building – 40%

Pair 1

- Top: William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building (EPA HQ) 81%
Washington, DC
- Bottom: Robert C. Weaver Federal Building (HUD HQ) 19%
Washington, DC



Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Pair 2

Top: Hubert H. Humphrey Building (HHS HQ)
Washington, DC



Bottom: National Archives Building
Washington, DC



Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division



Alexandre Fagundes De Fagundes - Dreamstime.com

Pair 3

Top: Sandra Day O'Connor U.S. Courthouse
Phoenix, Arizona



Bottom: Howard M. Metzenbaum U.S. Courthouse
Cleveland, Ohio



Derrick Neill - Dreamstime.com



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Pair 4

Top: Hansen Federal Building
Ogden, Utah 32%

Bottom: U.S. Courthouse
Toledo, Ohio 68%



Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Pair 5

Top: Frank M. Scarlett Federal Building
Brunswick, Georgia

40%

Bottom: U.S. Courthouse
Waco, Texas

60%



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Evan Kalish - livingnewdeal.org

Pair 6

Top: Martin V. B. Bostetter, Jr. U.S. Court House
Alexandria, Virginia 58%

Bottom: U.S. Courthouse
Newport News, Virginia 42%



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Adapted from Smash the Iron Cage licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Pair 7

Top: Hammond Federal Courthouse
Hammond, Indiana 19%

Bottom: Gene Snyder U.S. Courthouse and Custom House
Louisville, Kentucky 81%



Joey Lax-Salinas



David Swinney

FULL METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of National Civic Art Society between August 17-19 among 2,039 adults ages 18+.

Results were weighted for age within gender, region, race/ethnicity, household income, education, and size of household where necessary to align them with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Poll avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in online surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in our panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

About The Harris Poll

The Harris Poll is one of the longest running surveys in the U.S. tracking public opinion, motivations and social sentiment since 1963 that is now part of Harris Insights & Analytics, a global consulting and market research firm that delivers social intelligence for transformational times. We work with clients in three primary areas; building twenty-first-century corporate reputation, crafting brand strategy and performance tracking, and earning organic media through public relations research. Our mission is to provide insights and advisory to help leaders make the best decisions possible.

To learn more, please visit www.theharrispoll.com



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Founded in 2002, the National Civic Art Society is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization headquartered in Washington, D.C. that educates and empowers civic leaders in the promotion of public art and architecture worthy of our great Republic. We do this by advancing the classical tradition in architecture, urbanism, and their allied arts. Through our programs and initiatives we guide government agencies and officials; assist practitioners; and educate students and the general public in the preservation and creation of beautiful, dignified public buildings, monuments, and spaces.