

Dream on

Does the American Dream mean anything anymore? More young people are saying no.

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December 1, 2015

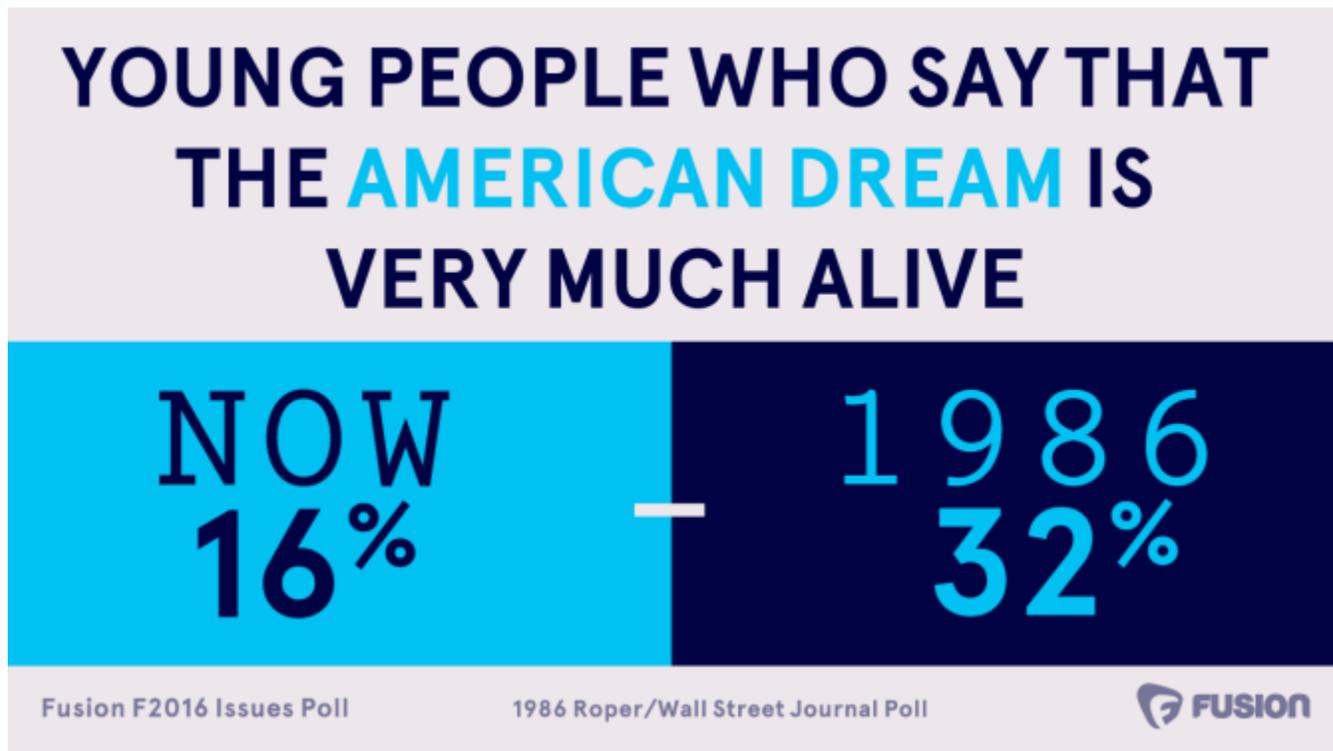
Do you think about your life in terms of the American Dream? A white picket fence? The 2.5 children? The kind of upward mobility that isn't ostentatious—never!—but still pays for nice enough vacations and new iPhones?

For a growing number of young people, the answer is no.

In 1986, 67% of young adults said the concept of the American Dream had “real meaning” to them. Compare that with today, when 56% say the idea holds personal resonance.

Those are the findings of the latest Fusion 2016 Issues Poll, a survey of people between the ages of 18 and 35 on how they define the American Dream and whether it still matters to them. In order to figure that out, the survey repeated some of the questions that were asked in a poll conducted in October 1986 by the Roper Organization for *The Wall Street Journal*. We took the results among 18- to 34-year-olds from that survey and compared them with 18-35s today to see how things stacked up.

Another thing the survey found: a new streak of pessimism about the very idea of the American Dream. **Just 16% of people said it was “very much alive,” compared with 32% almost three decades ago.** And a lot more young people report seeing the American Dream deferred: **29% say the Dream is “not really alive,” compared with just 12% three decades ago.**



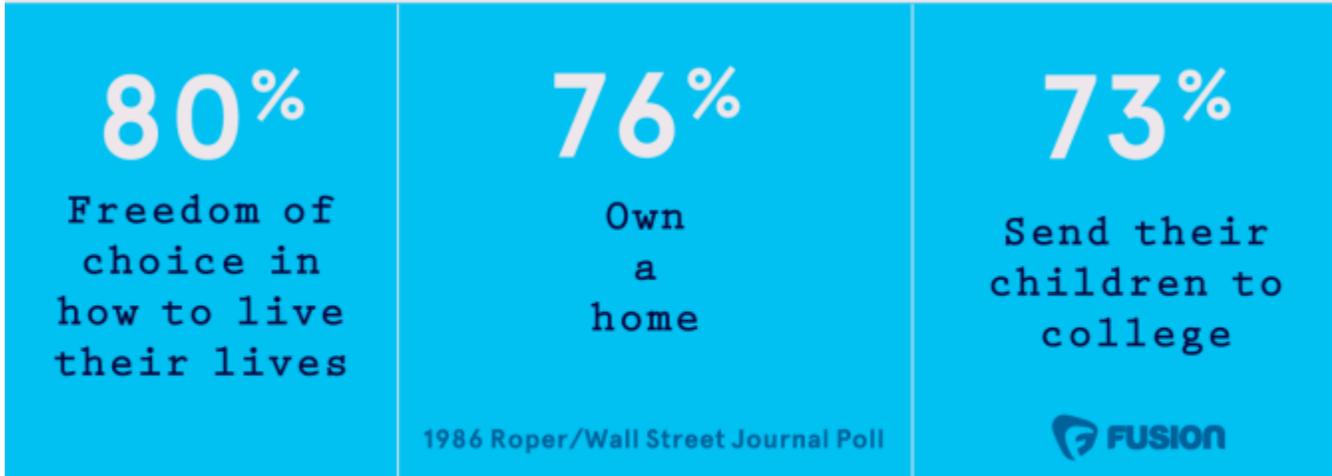
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The definition of that dream, even as it's losing resonance, is shifting, too.

Thirty years ago, “freedom of choice in how to live one’s life” came out on top when young people were given a list of what defines the American Dream. Today, being able to start your own business came out on top, with 68% of respondents reporting that it was very much how they understood the Dream. That’s up 10 percentage points from 1986. That was followed closely by the ability to send your kids to college, which came in at 67%—down by 6 points since 1986.

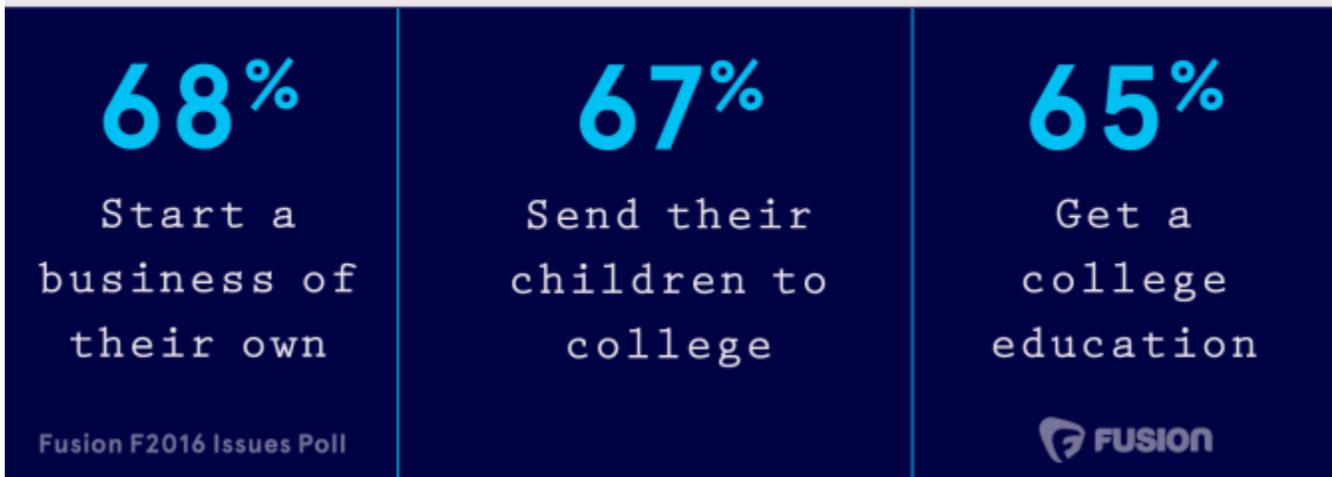
Top items young people listed as “very much” part of the **AMERICAN DREAM** in 1986:



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Top items young people listed as “very much” part of the **AMERICAN DREAM** today:



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So is this the beginning of the end of the American Dream, or just a sea change in how people relate it to their lives?

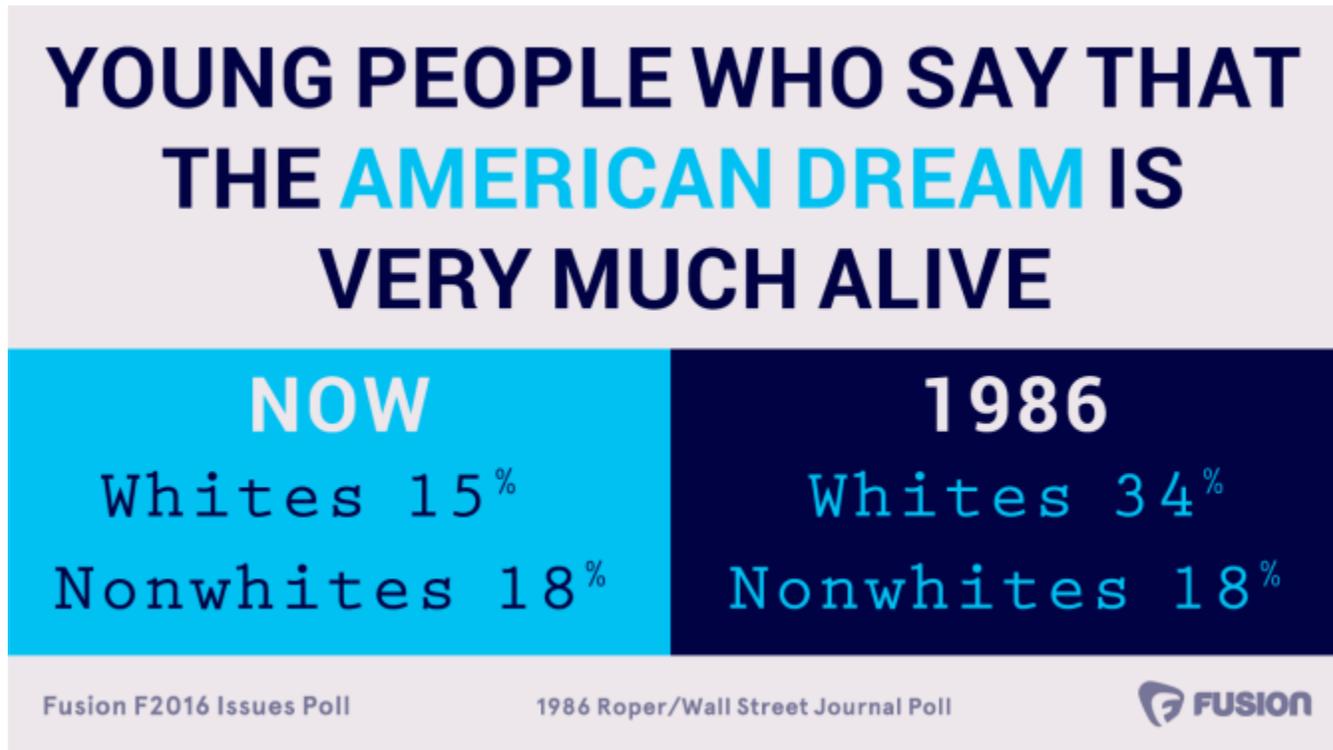
It's impossible to know from these data what, or what messy combination of whats, might be turning young people away from it.

After all, millennials, as we are so often told about ourselves, are wary of institutions. The American Dream might have always been a fiction for many people in the United States, but it has also been a fixture. It's a towering image that reflects the hopes, desires, consumer habits, and institutional forces that have shaped, and continue to shape, what we think of as the Good Life in this country.

And one of the big components of the American dream—the pursuit of wealth—is also losing ground among young people. Becoming wealthy ranked dead last—listed by just 29% of young people as very much part of the American Dream, down from 40% in 1986.

So maybe the American Dream that we've always heard about doesn't fit with the desires of young people right now. Or the realistic prospects. As seven out of 10 recent graduates leave college with debt, and as the average debt burden rises to nearly \$30,000, maybe the image of wealth feels further off for young people today.

One thing we do see reflected in the numbers, whatever is feeding them, is that more young white Americans feel disconnected from the idea of the American Dream while the percentage of young people of color who felt an attachment to—or apathy about—it has remained steady.



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The numbers can't tell us why, exactly. But we can ask ourselves whether, at this moment when young people continue to slog through the reverberations of the Great Recession—mounting debt, uncertain job prospects, stagnating wages—a generation of white Americans might be waking up to how the sausage of prosperity gets made.

Or maybe young people are just skeptical of all-consuming narratives. Or maybe it's this highly individualized moment we're living in. Or maybe it's all of it at once, with new variables pushing us every day. Call it pessimism or a delayed bout of realism, but when it comes to the American Dream, more young people than ever are waking up and leaving it behind.

More on our methodology:

This Fusion 2016 Issues Poll was conducted by landline and cell phone interviews Nov. 4-18 among a random national sample of 935 adults age 18 to 35. Results have a margin of sampling error of 3.5 points for the full sample, including the survey's design effect. The 1986 survey dataset was accessed via the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

This survey was produced for Fusion by Langer Research Associates of New York, with sampling, data collection and tabulation by SSRS/Social Science Research Solutions of Media, Pennsylvania. See methodological details [here](#).