Small Business Index

Q3 2024

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The Voice of Small Business Owners





Contents

Index Summary 04

Index Highlights
08

Quarterly Spotlight 10

Key Findings 16

Index Snapshots 20

Regional Scores
22

Methodology 23

About Us 25

INDEX SUMMARY

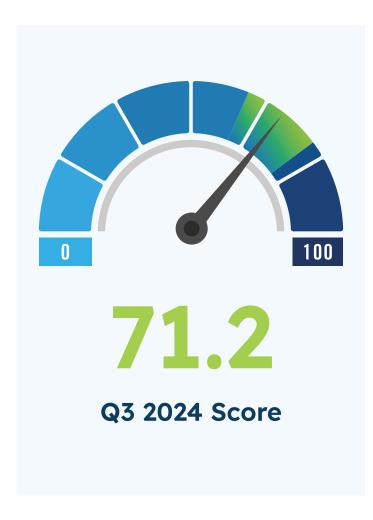
Index Steady as Optimism Over Future Hiring and Revenue Stay High

Small business leaders want elected representatives to focus on economy and inflation

This quarter, the MetLife & U.S. Chamber of Commerce Small Business Index is 71.2, similar to last quarter's score of 69.5, and with sentiments from this time last year (69.2).

Helping drive this continued optimism among small businesses are bullish expectations for future revenue and upbeat plans for next year's headcount. Seventy-three percent of small business owners expect next year's revenue to increase—identical to last quarter and the highest number recorded since the Index began in 2017. Similarly, more than two in five (44%) anticipate increasing staff in the next year, which is near Q2 2023's high water mark (47%).

Most survey measures are consistent with last quarter. Two in three small businesses continue to view their business as being in good health; this measure has hovered around 66% for most quarters dating back to Q2 2022. A similar share (68%) report feeling comfortable with their business's cash flow—a slight, but not significant, shift from 73% last quarter and a return to attitudes from Q4 2023 and Q1 2024. A greater percentage of small businesses (48%) are negative about the national economy than positive (35%). And 38% rate the economy



in their local area as good compared to those who believe their local economy is doing poorly (34%). Neither the cash flow nor local economy changes are statistically significant.

For over two years small businesses' single top concern has been remarkably consistent: inflation. This quarter, 56% of small businesses select inflation as their biggest challenge. Revenue (28%) remains a distant-second challenge, followed by affording employee benefits (16%), and rising interest rates (15%, which has declined since peaking in Q2 2023).

This quarter's survey also explores small businesses' perceptions of the upcoming presidential election. According to the findings, they are more interested than the last presidential election cycle (2020), concerned about the economy/inflation, and hoping that their elected representatives come to Washington ready to compromise. The vast majority also think it's very important not to raise taxes on business.

Seven in ten (71%) small businesses say they are more interested in the 2024 election than the previous presidential election, including 42% who are much more interested in this year's election. They are also voting with their interests as small business owners in mind: Four in five small business owners say that a candidate's policy positions are a factor when determining who they support, including about half that say they are a major factor.

The economy/inflation is the single most important issue that small businesses would like the new U.S. Congress and presidential administration to address in 2025, with a majority (59%) saying the economy/inflation is the most important priority. Following the economy/inflation, small businesses choose taxes (36%), healthcare (19%), or immigration reform and border security (18%) as the first or second most important priorities that the new U.S. Congress and president should focus on.



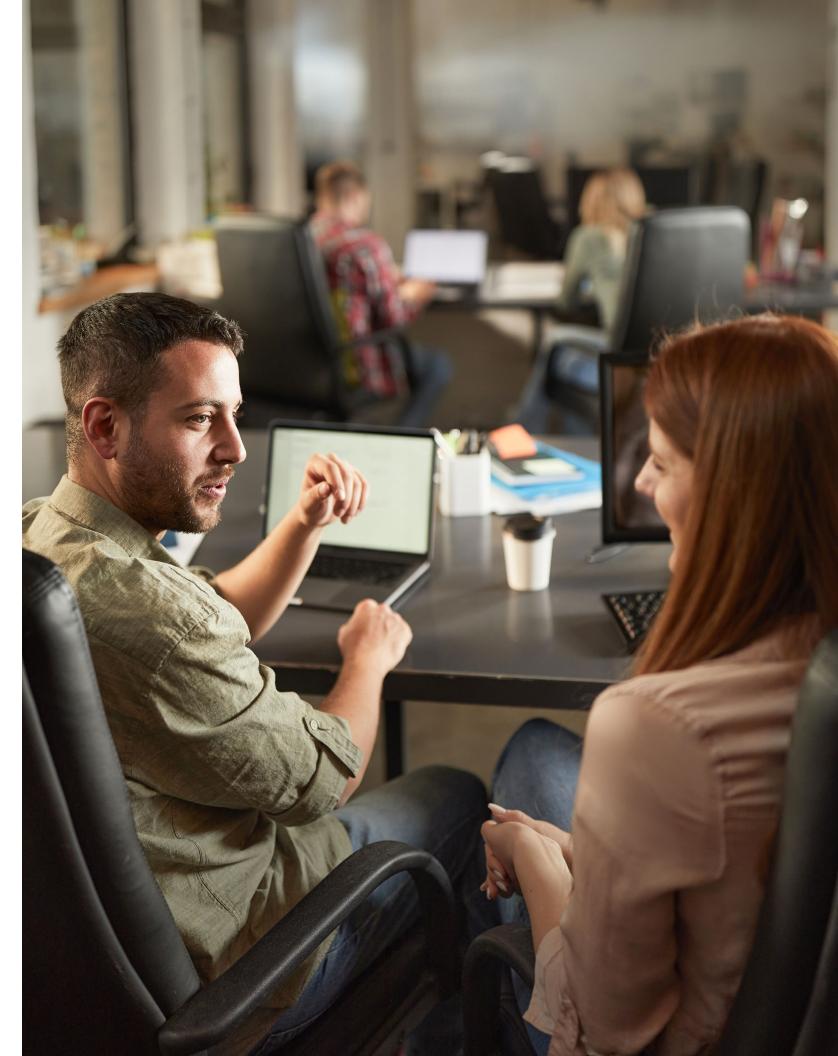


Four in five small business owners (84%) feel that partisan gridlock is a serious problem in the federal government today. This holds true across industries, company size, and the age of ownership of the business. There is also a broad desire among small business owners to see political leaders move beyond this partisan gridlock and reach compromise to get things done. Three in four (75%) say it is important for political leaders to compromise in order to get things done, up from 68% ahead of the 2020 presidential election. Again, this is true for a majority of small business owners across industries, company size, and age of ownership.

When it comes to taxes, most small business owners (88%) say that it is very important to them that the next Congress does not raise taxes on businesses.

84%

of small business owners feel that partisan gridlock is a serious problem in the federal government



INDEX HIGHLIGHTS

Small Business Index Q3 2024 – 71.2

The MetLife and U.S. Chamber of Commerce Small Business Index score for Q3 is 71.2. The Q2 2024 Index score was 69.5.



Index score remains steady.

The Small Business Index is 71.2 this quarter, similar to 69.5 last quarter and sentiments from this time last year (69.2).

Many plan to hire.

More than two in five (44%) small businesses anticipate increasing staff in the next year, which is near Q2 2023's high water mark (47%) for this measure.

Inflation remains top challenge.

56% say inflation is the top challenge facing the small business community. This is the ninth consecutive quarter in which 50% or more have cited inflation as the biggest challenge.

Fewer concerned about rising interest rates.

Just 15% of small businesses say rising interest rates is the top challenge facing small businesses, representing an 8-percentage point drop from Q2 2023 (23%).

Small business owners more interested in this election.

71% say they are more interested in the 2024 election compared to the 2020 election. In comparison, in Q3 2020, 62% said they were more interested in the 2020 election compared to the 2016 election.

Nearly nine in ten say it's very important to not raise business taxes.

88% of small businesses say that it is very important that the next Congress does not raise taxes on businesses.

A majority want their representatives to focus on the economy/inflation.

78% say the economy and inflation should be the top priorities for the next president and Congress, representing a 21-percentage point jump from Q3 2020.

Most say gridlock is a serious problem.

84% of small businesses say partisan gridlock is a serious problem in the federal government today.

Majority of small business owners want political compromise.

75% say it is important for political leaders to compromise in order to get things done, up from 68% ahead of the 2020 presidential election.

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QUARTERLY SPOTLIGHT

Small Businesses Want Elected Officials to Focus on the Economy

Small businesses more interested in this election

Most small business owners are more interested in the upcoming 2024 election than they were in the 2020 election.

Seven in ten (71%) small businesses say they are more interested in the 2024 election than the previous presidential election, including 42% who are much more interested in this year's election. (Back in Q3 2020, 62% of small businesses said they were more interested in the 2020 election compared to the 2016 election). Fewer respondents say they are less interested in the 2024 election compared to 2020 (7%), while one in five (21%) report having about the same level of interest.

Levels of interest in the presidential election are roughly constant across all business sizes and industries—however there are a few differences. Male-owned small businesses (75%) are more likely than female-owned small businesses (66%) to say they are more interested in the 2024 presidential election than the 2020 presidential election. Similarly, small businesses owned by baby boomers and older generations (77%) are more likely to say they are more interested in the presidential election now than those owned by Gen Xers (66%).



Small businesses owned by Gen Zers and millennials fall in the middle (73%). Compared to Q3 2020, baby boomers and older saw an increase in interest compared to 2020 (63% in Q3 2020).

Half of small businesses say that when deciding which political candidate¹ to support, the candidate's policy positions are a major factor in their decision (51%). These findings are similar to small businesses' sentiment in Q3 2020 when 48% said that candidates' policy positions were a major factor in deciding who to support.

Most small businesses (81%) say policy positions play at least some factor in their decision of which candidate to support, whether major or minor, unchanged since Q3 2020 (81%). Small businesses in the South are most likely of any region to say that policy positions are a factor in which political candidates they support (87% vs. 79% in the Midwest, 77% in the Northeast, 75% in the West).

Small businesses want the next president to make the economy top priority

A majority of small businesses want the next president and Congress to prioritize the economy and inflation as the top priority.

Fully 78%² of small businesses say that the economy and inflation should be the first or second most important priority for the next Congress and presidential administration (59% say it is the most important priority). Majorities across business region, size, age of ownership, and gender of ownership all say they want the next president and Congress to prioritize the economy and inflation first. This is particularly true for the group of small businesses who report their business is in average health (72%), rather than good health (54%).

Following the economy and inflation, small businesses want the next president and Congress to prioritize taxes (36%), a slight increase from Q3 2020 (27%). In addition to the economy and taxes, small businesses want the next president and Congress to prioritize healthcare (19%) and immigration reform



"The local economy feels strong, restaurants and shopping centers are busy. I've been surprised by how much construction has continued even with interest rates high."

Bryan Owen, Co-CEO, Between Pixels Marietta, Georgia

and border security (18%). The desire to prioritize immigration reform and border security³ has more than doubled from Q3 2020 (7%).

When it comes to immigration, about two in three (67%) small businesses say the U.S. should issue more skilled worker visas each year so businesses can hire the workers they need (67%), up 13 percentage points from Q4 2023 (54%).

More small businesses owned by Gen Zers and millennials agree with this sentiment than those owned by Gen Xers or baby boomers and older (86% vs. 78% and 71%, respectively). And, when it comes to hiring more broadly, nearly four in five (79%) small businesses say that employers should more often consider hiring from overlooked talent pools, such as formerly incarcerated people, veterans, military spouses, or immigrants. This share has increased from 71% who said the same in Q4 2023.

- 1. In Q3 2020, this question was asked specifically about a "presidential candidate." In Q3 2024, this question was asked more generally about "political candidates."
- 2. While this represents a 21-percentage point jump in those citing the economy as the first or second top priority from Q3 2020 (57%), COVID-19 (25%) and racial issues (12%) were previously asked as policy priorities in Q3 2020. These two responses were not asked in O3 2024.
- 3. In Q3 2020, the "immigration reform and border security" response was asked as just "immigration reform."

QUARTERLY SPOTLIGHT

Small Businesses Want More Compromise, Less Gridlock

Three in four say it is important to compromise

A majority of small businesses say that gridlock is a serious problem and that it's more important that their elected representatives find ways to compromise than stick to their beliefs.

This quarter, four in five small business owners (84%) say that partisan gridlock is a serious problem in the federal government. This holds true across industries, company size, and age of ownership, but it is especially true among small businesses owned by baby boomers and older (92%) compared to Gen X-owned (83%) and Gen Z and millennial-owned (82%) businesses.

While the overall share of small businesses calling partisan gridlock a serious problem is roughly the same compared to Q3 2020 (82%), small businesses are now less likely to say that it is a very serious problem: This year, 44% say partisan gridlock in the federal government is a very serious problem compared to 52% in 2020.

At the same time, there is a broad desire among small businesses to see political leaders move



75%

of small businesses say it is more important for political leaders to compromise in order to get things done



beyond partisan gridlock and reach compromise to get things done. Three in four (75%) say it is more important for political leaders to compromise in order to get things done, up from 68% ahead of the 2020 presidential election.

Again, this is true for a majority of small businesses across industry, company size, and age of ownership. However, compared to Q3 2020, more small businesses now say they strongly agree that political compromise is important in order to get things done (35% Q3 2024 vs. 23% Q3 2020). This strong desire for political compromise is particularly high for small businesses in the retail (43%) and professional services (38%) industries compared to those in services (26%). Thirty-five percent of small businesses in manufacturing say they strongly agree that political compromise is important in order to get things done.

Most say it is "very important" not to raise business taxes

Small businesses have made it clear that they don't think this is the time to raise taxes on them—or other businesses. A majority of small businesses (88%) say that it is very important to them that the next Congress does not raise taxes on businesses.

Small businesses in the manufacturing (95%) and retail (92%) sectors are more likely than those in services (79%) to be averse to tax hikes on businesses. Eighty-seven percent of small businesses in the professional services sector agree it's important that Congress does not raise taxes on businesses.

QUARTERLY SPOTLIGHT

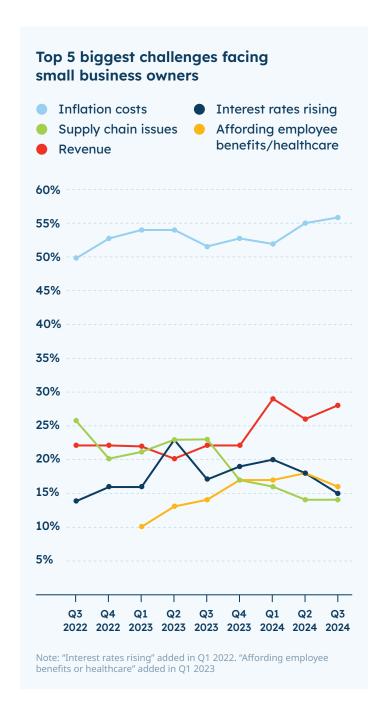
Two Years On, Inflation Is Still the Top Challenge for Small Businesses

Revenue concerns come distant second, others follow

Inflation has been top-of-mind for small businesses for more than two years, and this quarter is no different. Just over half of respondents (56%) report inflation costs as the biggest challenge facing small business owners right now, roughly unchanged since Q3 2022.

Revenue ranks as the second largest concern, with 28% saying it is one of the biggest challenges.
Revenue has held steady as the second biggest challenge since Q4 2023. Concern with revenue is six percentage points higher than it was in Q3 2023. However, it is mostly in line with where it has been throughout 2024.

Third-tier concerns include affording employee benefits or healthcare (16%), rising interest rates (15%), supply chain issues (14%), and employee retention (13%). On the other hand, concern with rising interest rates has declined from a high point of 23% in Q2 2023 to 15% now.





Inflation concerns break down a bit differently depending on the length of operating history and generation of ownership of a small business. Similar to last quarter, inflationary pressure is a larger concern among businesses in operation from 11 to 20 years (67%) and businesses in operation for more than 20 years (64%) compared to those in operation for 10 years or less (50%).

It is also a larger concern among small businesses owned by baby boomers and older generations (66%) compared to businesses owned by younger Americans (56% for Gen Xers; 48% for Gen Zers and millennials).

56%

of small businesses report inflation costs as the biggest challenge facing small business owners right now

 KEY FINDINGS

Small Business Operations, Environment and Expectations

Small Business Operations

Small businesses report stable business health, hiring, and cash flow

Business operations measures remain steady this quarter, small businesses report.

For example, two-thirds of small businesses say their business is in good health this quarter, a reading that has been relatively stable since Q2 2022.

Also, nearly seven in ten (68%) small businesses now say they are comfortable with their cash flow this quarter, compared to 73% last quarter (a slight, but not significant, shift) and similar attitudes in Q4 2023 and Q1 2024 (67% for both). This slight change in cash flow comfort is attributed to a shift in those who say they are very comfortable with their cash flow (21% vs. 26% last quarter, respectively).

Additionally, about one-fifth (22%) of small businesses say they have increased staff over the past year, stable from last quarter and maintaining a six-percentage point increase reported from Q1 to Q2 2024 (16% to 22%, respectively). Similar to last quarter, small businesses that have been in

16

operation for a shorter amount of time, as well as those owned by Gen Z or millennials, are more likely than their older counterparts to say they have increased staff in the past year.

For each measure of small business operations—business health, cash flow comfort, and staffing increases—there are no significant differences in sentiments by gender of ownership. There are also no significant differences in reported business health or staffing increases by sector. Yet small businesses in manufacturing are now more likely than those in retail to say they are comfortable with their cash flow (76% vs. 63%, respectively). Small businesses in services and professional services fall in the middle (66% for each sector).

By business size, small businesses with more employees are more likely to report good business health, comfort with cash flow, or increased staffing than those with fewer employees. These differences are consistent with historical patterns recorded from the start of the study in Q2 2017¹.

Small Business Environment Perceptions of national economy remain unchanged

Nearly two in five small businesses say the U.S. economy (35%) or local economy (38%) is in good health this quarter. While their perceptions of the national economy are consistent from the start of 2024, small businesses' perceptions of their local economic health have slightly, but not significantly, softened from last quarter when 42% said their local economy was in good health. Regardless, small businesses' perceptions of the U.S. economy and their local economy are relatively unchanged from Q3 2023 (33% and 38%, respectively).

A greater percentage of small businesses (48%) are negative about the national economy than positive (35%). And 38% rate the economy in their local area as good compared to those who believe their local economy is doing poorly (34%).

In a trend now observed for a full year, small businesses owned by men are more likely than those owned by women to say the national or local economy is in good health. About two in five small businesses owned by men say the national or local economy is in good health (42% and 43%, respectively). Comparably, just about three in ten small businesses owned by women say the same (27% and 31%, respectively).

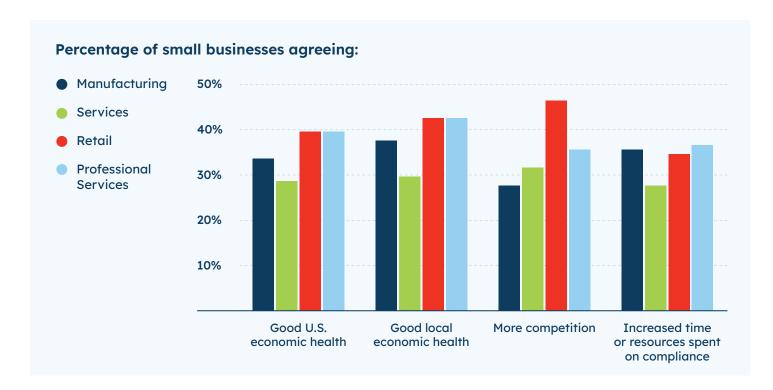
By sector, small businesses in retail or professional services are now more likely than those in services to say the U.S. economy (40% each vs. 29%,



"The overall health of my business is very good. We have two locations and this year completed a building expansion at one location, and have almost completed a whole new building for the second location... The additional space is to accommodate the waiting lists we have for kids to get into our classes!"

Brenda Nolby, President, Jam Hops Ramsey, Minnesota

^{1.} Beginning in Q2 2020, an online approach was used in place of the typical phone methodology. This change in mode may be responsible for some of the shifts in the data after Q1 2020.



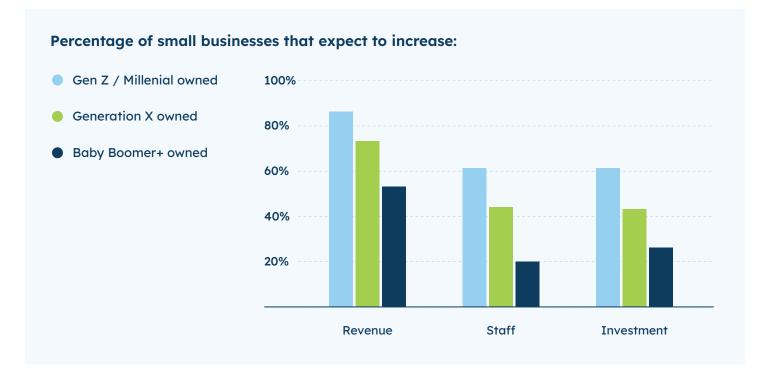
respectively) or their local economy is in good health (43% each vs. 30%, respectively). Those in manufacturing fall in the middle (34% for national; 38% for local). Last quarter, for the first time since Q3 2023, there were no significant differences in local economic perceptions by sector. Notably, this quarter's renewed sector-by-sector differences in perceived local economic health are likely attributed to the 11-percentage-point drop in perceived local economic health among those in the service sector (30% in Q3 vs. 41% in Q2 2024).

Compared to last quarter, slightly, but not significantly, more small businesses now say that the time or resources spent on compliance requirements have decreased or stayed the same in the past six months (66% vs. 62% last quarter, respectively).

Small businesses' perceptions of increased competition from smaller or local companies, however, are stable. About two in five (36%) small businesses say that competition has increased over the past six months, relatively unchanged from last quarter (35%) and similar to this time last year (34%).

18

Notably, each measure of the small business environment varies by length of business operation this quarter. Small businesses that have been in operation for 10 years or less are more likely than those in operation for 11 years or more to say that competition or the time or resources spent on compliance have increased in the past six months. Further, small businesses that have been in operation for 10 years or less are more likely than those in operation for more than 20 years to say that the national or local economy is in good health. These differences in business environment measures by length of business operation are consistent with those observed last quarter; however, these differences are less consistent across the board prior to Q2 2024.



Small Business Expectations Small businesses optimistic about the next year

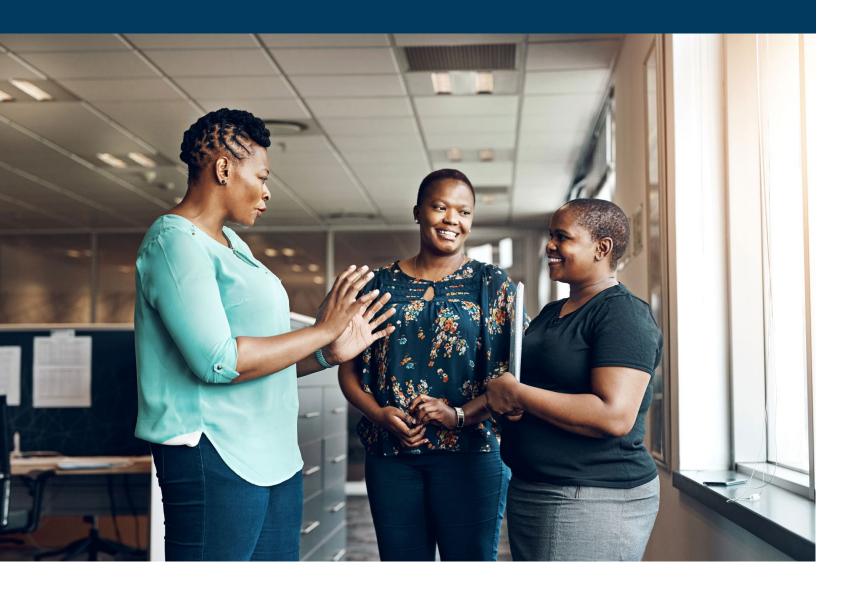
Small businesses remain optimistic about the future. Nearly three-quarters of small businesses (73%) say they expect revenue to increase in the next year, unchanged from last quarter and also like Q2 and Q3 2023 (71% for each). This attitude is consistent across business size, sector, and gender of ownership.

Consistent with last quarter, 44% of small businesses say they expect to increase their staff, and 45% say they plan to increase their investment in the next year. Following an increase in optimism around these measures last quarter, small businesses are now more positive about future hiring and investments than they were at the start of the year.

While plans to increase investment in the next year are consistent by sector, small businesses in the retail (51%) and professional services (48%) sectors are more likely than those in services (35%) to say they plan to increase their staff in the next year. About two in five (41%) small businesses in manufacturing say the same.

Across each measure of business expectations—future increases in revenue, hiring, and investment—small businesses owned by men are more optimistic than those owned by women. Similarly, small businesses in operation for ten years or less, and small businesses owned by Gen Z or millennials are more optimistic about future revenue, hiring, and investment than their older counterparts.

Index Snapshots





Index score remains steady.

The Small Business Index is 71.2 this quarter, similar to 69.5 last quarter and sentiments from this time last year (69.2).



20

Many plan to hire.

More than two in five (44%) small businesses anticipate increasing staff in the next year, which is near Q2 2023's high water mark (47%) for this measure.



Inflation remains top challenge.

56% say inflation is the top challenge facing the small business community. This is the ninth consecutive quarter in which 50% or more have cited inflation as the biggest challenge.



Fewer concerned about rising interest rates.

Just 15% of small businesses say rising interest rates is the top challenge facing small businesses, representing an 8-percentage point drop from Q2 2023 (23%).



Small businesses more interested in this election.

71% say they are more interested in the 2024 election compared to the 2020 election. In comparison, in Q3 2020, 62% said they were more interested in the 2020 election compared to the 2016 election



Nearly nine in ten say it's very important to not raise business taxes.

88% of small businesses say that it is very important that the next Congress does not raise taxes on businesses.



A majority want their representatives to focus on the economy/inflation.

78% say the economy and inflation should be the top priorities for the next president and Congress, representing a 21-percentage point jump from Q3 2020.



Most say gridlock is a serious problem.

84% of small businesses say partisan gridlock is a serious problem in the federal government today.



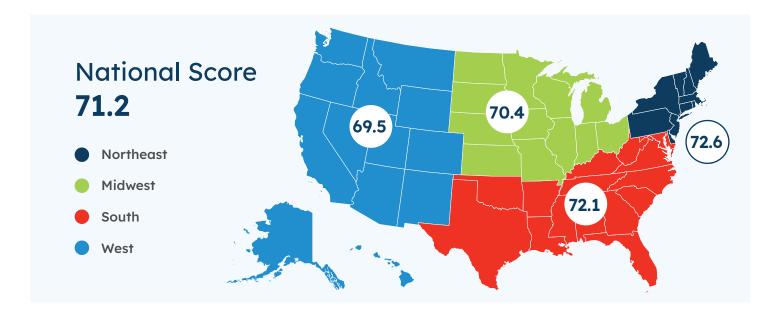
Majority of small business owners want political compromise.

75% say it is important for political leaders to compromise in order to get things done, up from 68% ahead of the 2020 presidential election.

METHODOLOGY

Q3 Small Business Index Scores by Region

Northeast and South are most upbeat this quarter



Northeast (72.6): Those in the Northeast are among the most upbeat regarding their business health. Seventy-four percent say their business is in good health, which is significantly higher than the West (60%). Their outlook towards the U.S. economic environment is also improving; 44% say the U.S. economy is in good health, up 11 percentage points from last quarter, but a return to attitudes seen this time last year (42%, Q3 2023).

Midwest (70.4): Compared to last quarter, small business owners in the Midwest are less comfortable with their current cash flow (65% are comfortable, down from 78%). This is, however, in line with Q3 2023 (67% comfortable). A similar number, 66%, say their business is in good health. Attitudes toward future revenue remain very optimistic, as 75% expect their revenue to increase over the next year.

22

South (72.1): Southern small businesses are more likely than any other region to report they have increased staff, that they plan to increase staff in the next year, and that they are experiencing more local competition this quarter. A majority (54%) say they plan to increase staff in the next year, up nine percentage points from last quarter. They also feel significantly better about their local economy (43% say it's good) than those in the West.

West (69.5): Compared to those in the Northeast and South, small business owners in the West are less confident about the economic environment-both nationally and locally. Roughly a quarter feel the U.S. economy or their local economy is in good health. There is also a slight, but not significant, softening in comfort with cash flow (61% comfortable vs. 70% last quarter). However, their perceptions of their own business health have not changed.

Small Business Index Methodology

These are the findings of an Ipsos poll conducted between July 18–August 2, 2024. For this survey, a sample of 752 small business owners and operators age 18+ from the continental U.S., Alaska, and Hawaii was interviewed online in English.

The sample was randomly drawn from partner online panel sources that specialize in B2B sample and does not rely on a population frame in the traditional sense. Ipsos uses fixed sample targets, unique to the study, in drawing sample. Small businesses are defined in this study as companies with 500 or fewer employees that are not sole proprietorships. This sample calibrates respondent characteristics to be representative of the U.S. small business population using standard procedures such as raking-ratio adjustments. The sample drawn for this study reflects fixed sample targets on firmographics. Post-hoc weights were made to the population characteristics on region, industry sector and size of business. The source of these population targets is U.S. Census 2021 Statistics of U.S. Businesses dataset. Additional post-hoc weights were made to the population characteristics on the gender of the business's owner and whether the business is minority-owned or not. The source of these two weight variables is the Small Business Administration's 2023 Small Business Profiles.

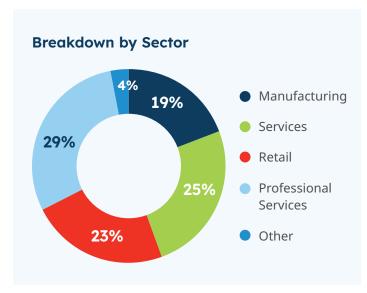
Statistical margins of error are not applicable to online non-probability polls. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to other sources of error, including, but not limited to coverage error and measurement error. Where figures do not sum to 100, this is due to the effects of rounding. The precision of Ipsos online polls is measured using a credibility interval. In this case, the poll has a credibility interval of plus or minus 4.4 percentage points for all respondents. Ipsos calculates a design effect (DEFF) for each study based on the variation of the weights, following the formula of Kish (1965). This study had a credibility interval adjusted for design effect of the following (n=752, DEFF=1.5, adjusted Confidence Interval=+/- 5.9 percentage points).

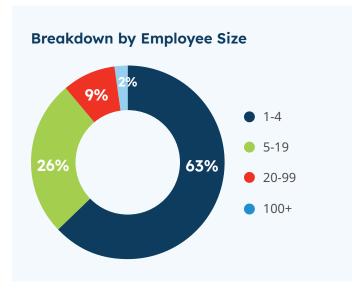
Starting with the March 2020 survey, small business decision makers are reached via an online survey, in place of the typical phone-based approach. This methodological shift was in response to lower anticipated response rates in dialing owners at their businesses as a result of mandated closures related to the COVID-19 outbreak. Switching from a phone to online approach may have also generated a mode effect.

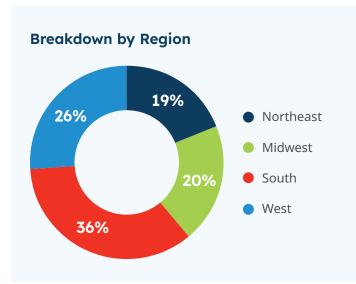
Index Methodology

To construct national, regional, employee size, and broad industry group level estimates of the health of small businesses in the U.S., a sequence of statistical techniques were applied to the survey results, including elastic net for variable selection and multilevel regression with post stratification (MRP) from the survey data.

Since each business may report the state of its health by different standards, Ipsos uses the core survey questions to construct a stable, consistent definition of small business status. Each business is then classified into one of three categories: poor, neutral, or good. Once each business is measured on a consistent scale, the survey results are fed into a multilevel regression model to generalize our results to a broader set of businesses enabling us to measure the health of businesses not just nationally but also at the level of state, industry, and







24

business size. The model uses employee size, industry type, and location as individual level predictors, as well as data from the BLS on job change by industry.

Next, to ensure that our model results are reflective of the small business population in the U.S., we adjust our estimates using the number of businesses in the over 5,000 possible combinations of state, industry, and firm-size categories to ensure that the model of business health represents the U.S. population of small businesses.

The process used is known as post-stratification, something which was not possible with the original sample due to sample-size limitations. The population estimates for employee size, industry, and location were obtained from the U.S. Census 2021 Statistics of U.S. Businesses dataset.

Small businesses are categorized into four industry sectors, using the NAICS sector definitions from the U.S. Census.

- Retail: Wholesale Trade; Retail Trade; or Accommodation and Food Services
- Manufacturing: Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting; Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction; Utilities; Construction; Manufacturing; or Transportation and Warehousing
- Services: Educational Services; Health Care and Social Assistance; Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation; or Other Services
- Professional Services: Information; Finance and Insurance; Real Estate and Rental and Leasing; Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services; Management of Companies and Enterprises; or Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services

About Us





U.S. Chamber of Commerce

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is the world's largest business organization representing companies of all sizes across every sector of the economy. Our members range from the small businesses and local chambers of commerce that line the Main Streets of America to leading industry associations and large corporations. They all share one thing: They count on the U.S. Chamber to be their voice in Washington, across the country, and around the world. For more than 100 years, we have advocated for pro-business policies that help businesses create jobs and grow our economy.

For more information, visit www.uschamber.com.

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MetLife

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