



What Americans think about college: value and free access

Findings from the APM Research Lab's
APM Survey

March 11, 2019

More than 7 in 10 Americans support free tuition for public colleges and universities for those who qualify to attend



Question: "Would you support or oppose making tuition at public colleges and universities free for anyone who is qualified to attend?"

Notes: "Don't know" and "Refused" responses are not shown.

Source: APM Survey (November 27 – December 2, 2018). N=1,003 Americans age 18 or older; overall margin of error=+/-3.7% at the 95% confidence level.

Background

This survey is a result of a collaboration between the APM Research Lab, APM Reports, and the Hechinger Report. It was conducted between November 27 and December 2, 2018 and is a nationally representative survey of 1,003 adults conducted via telephone—60 percent via cell phone and 40 percent landline.² Respondents were asked five questions about the value and cost of college:

1. These days, would you say that getting a four-year college degree is worth the cost, or not?
2. (IF NO) Which of the following comes closest to the reason why you think a four-year college degree is NOT worth the cost?
 - i) People often graduate without specific job skills and with a large amount of debt
 - ii) You can get a good job without a four-year degree
3. Over the last 10 years do you think that government funding for public colleges and universities has generally increased, decreased, or stayed the same?
4. Over the past 10 years do you think that publicly-funded grants and loans for students attending colleges and universities has generally kept up with the price of tuition, fallen behind the price of tuition, or increased faster than the price of tuition?
5. Would you support or oppose making tuition at public colleges and universities free for anyone who qualified to attend?

In questions 2, 3, and 4 the sequence of the answer categories was rotated to address any possible order effects. Question two was only asked if respondents responded “No, not worth it” in question 1. The results of questions 3 and 4 were reported in an earlier brief (see <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/stories/2019/02/25/colleges-funding-university-loans-students-free-tuition-government-aid-research-survey>)

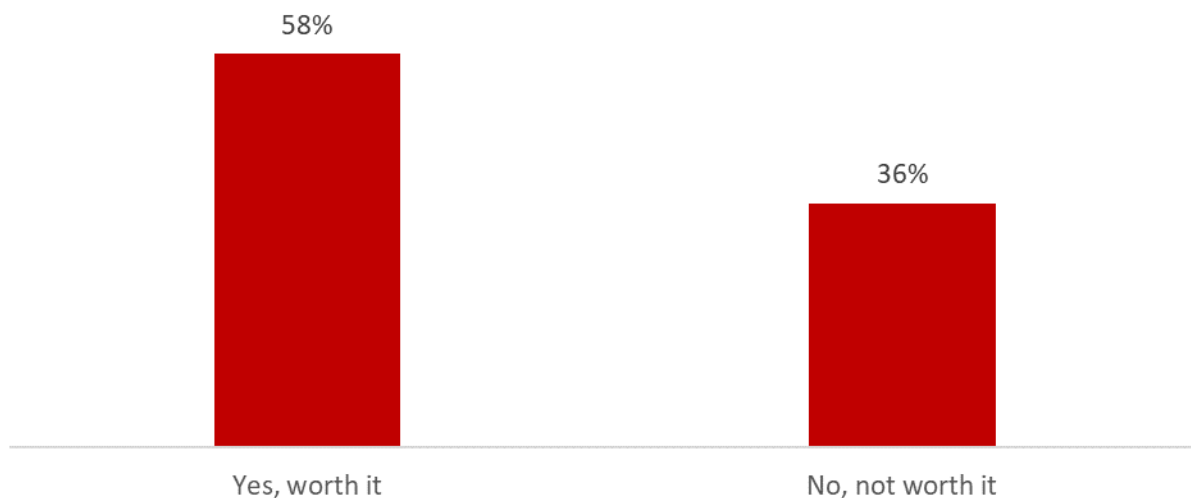
A standard list of demographic and characteristic questions was also asked, including age, sex, educational attainment, race and ethnicity, household income, political affiliation, parental or guardian status, U.S. region residing in, metro status, and employment status. The report only describes differences that are statistically significant and shows these in the graphs.

² For additional details about the survey’s methods, see the appendix.

Value vs. cost of a four-year college degree

Overall, the majority of Americans feel the cost of college is worth the investment, with 58 percent feeling this way, while 36 percent say the cost is not worth it.

The majority of Americans feel a four-year college degree is worth its cost



Question: “These days, would you say that getting a four-year college degree is worth the cost, or not?”

Notes: “Don’t know” and “Refused” responses are not shown.

Source: APM Survey (November 27 – December 2, 2018). N=1,003 Americans age 18 or older; overall margin of error=+/-3.7% at the 95% confidence level.

Who thinks college is worth its cost—and who doesn’t?

There is majority support for the value of a four-year college degree, with at least 50 percent of Americans saying they think the cost of a four-year college degree is worth it regardless of age, income, sex, region, education, race, or metro status. However, there were some groups more likely to feel college is worth the cost than others.

The most notable difference among groups was by respondents’ educational attainment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was much more support for the cost of college education among those who had completed a four-year degree than among those who had not: 7 in 10 Americans with at least a bachelor’s degree say a college degree is worth the cost, compared with about 5 in 10 for those with some college or less education.

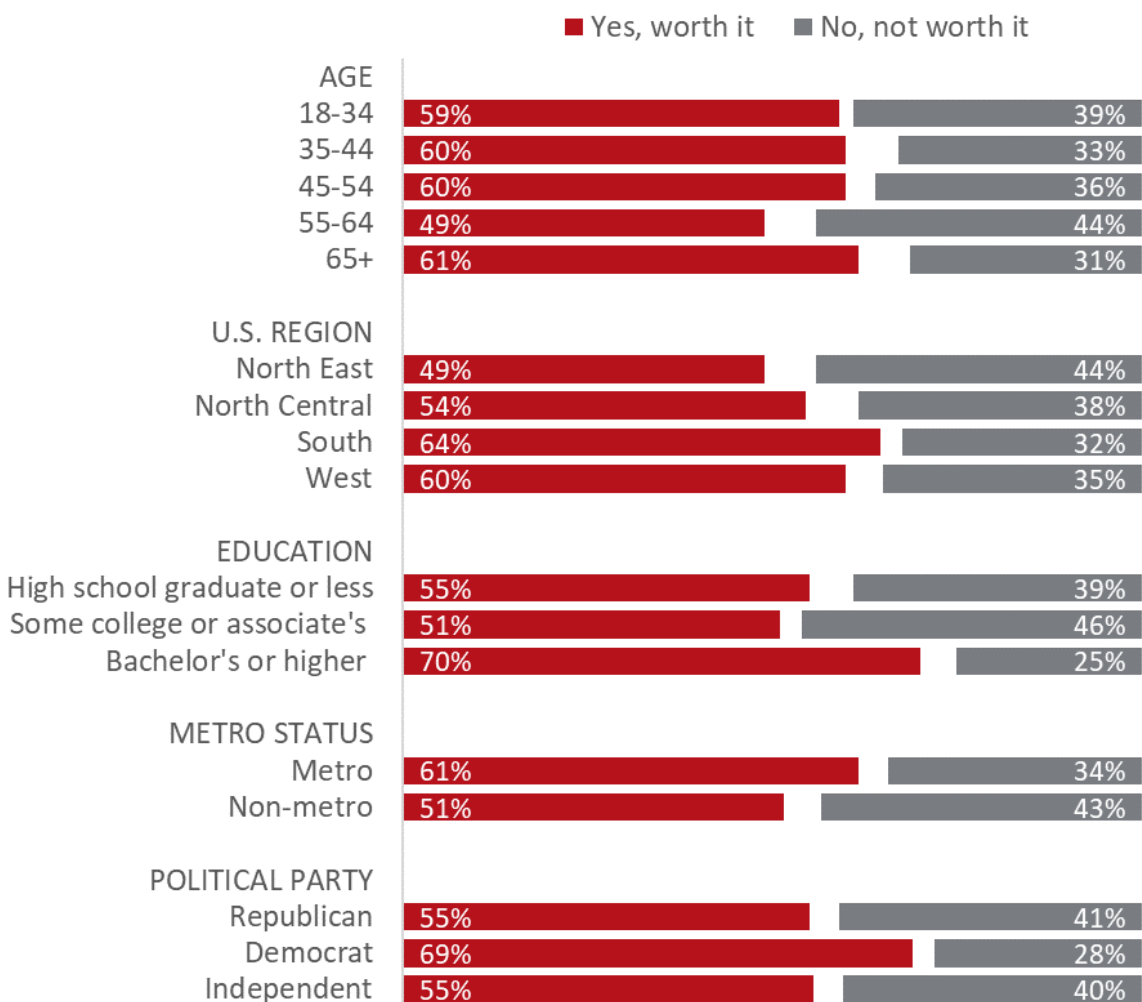
Regionally, residents of the South are more likely to see value in a college degree (64%) than those in the North East or North Central United States (49-54%). Additionally, people living in

metro areas of the country are somewhat more likely to say a college degree is worth the cost compared to those in non-metro areas (61% and 51%, respectively).

Roughly 60 percent of adults in each of the age groupings believe that college is worth the cost, except for those age 55 to 64, where support falls to half. Conversely, 44 percent of Americans age 55 to 64 do *not* think a college degree is worth the cost, compared to just 31 percent of those at least 65 years of age.

Political affiliation reveals that Republicans and Independents align on this topic while Democrats diverge. Fifty-five percent of Republicans and Independents believe a four-year college degree is worth the cost, while that share increases to 69 percent among Democrats.

Proportion who feel a four-year college degree is or is not worth the cost



Question: "These days, would you say that getting a four-year college degree is worth the cost, or not?"

Notes: States included in each region are listed in the appendix. "Don't know" & "Refused" responses are not shown.

Source: APM Survey (November 27 – December 2, 2018). N=1,003 Americans age 18 or older; overall margin of error=+/-3.7% at the 95% confidence level.

Reasons given for why “college is not worth the cost”

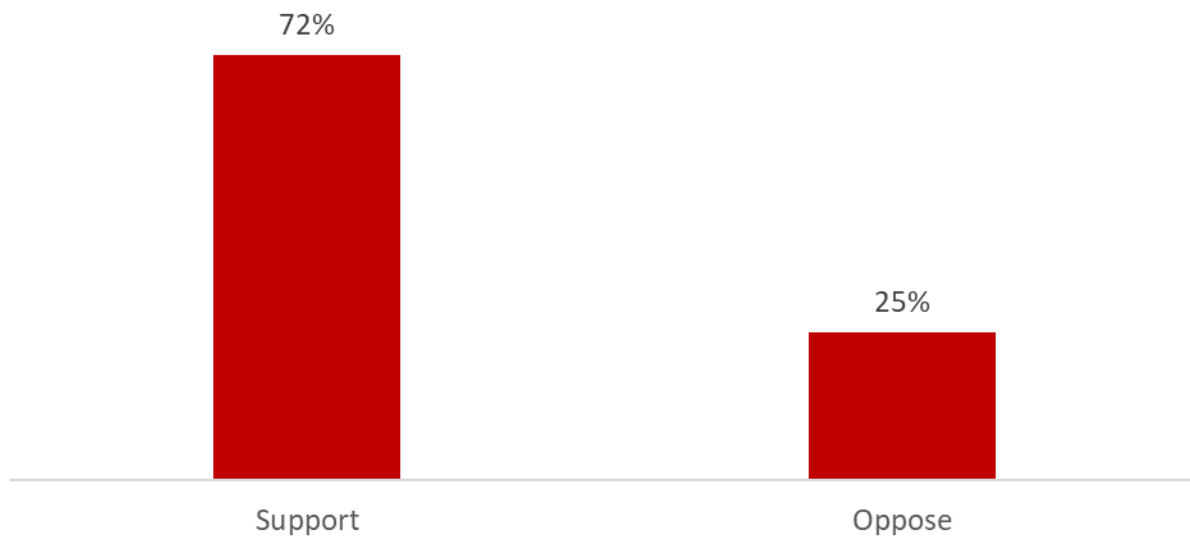
Of the 36 percent of Americans who think a four-year college degree is *not* worth the cost, 60 percent feel the statement “people often graduate without specific job skills and with a large amount of debt” more closely aligns with their reasoning. Thirty-six percent of Americans feel the statement “you can get a good job without a four-year degree” comes closest to the reason why they feel a college degree is not worth the cost.

We did not find any statistically significant differences between the groups we analyzed in terms of patterns of answers to this question, due in part to the fact that this question was only asked of a smaller subset of our sample. In general, it appears that both men and women, younger and older, more and less educated, of various employment statuses, from all major political parties, and from all regions of the United States who do not feel college is worthwhile are similarly split, with roughly 3 in 5 indicating that college leads to high debt and few marketable skills, and 2 in 5 indicating that college is not necessary to secure a good job.

Free tuition for public colleges and universities

Americans are more likely to support than oppose free tuition for public universities and colleges for qualified applicants. Nearly three-quarters support the idea, while only one-quarter are opposed.

A majority of Americans support free tuition for public colleges and universities for anyone qualified to attend



Question: "Would you support or oppose making tuition at public colleges and universities free for anyone who is qualified to attend?"

Notes: "Don't know" responses are not shown.

Source: APM Survey (November 27 – December 2, 2018). N=1,003 Americans age 18 or older; overall margin of error=+/-3.7% at the 95% confidence level.

Who supports and who opposes free tuition for public colleges?

A majority of all the groups we analyzed support free tuition for students qualified to attend public colleges, except for Republicans who are statistically tied (47% support, 50% oppose). Support is particularly strong, reaching 80 percent or higher, among: women, those age 18 to 44, Latinx and non-Hispanic Black respondents, Democrats, and part-time workers. Other meaningful differences in this data exist by sex, age, education, household income, race, political affiliation, and employment status, as detailed below.

The data show approximately 80 percent of Americans adults below age 45 support free tuition for public college and universities, compared with 57 to 66 percent among those age 55 and

older. Additionally, Americans age 45-54 are more likely than those of traditional retirement age to support this idea, with 72 percent of the former group saying this.

Americans with a high school degree or less education are more likely than those with at least some college education to support tuition-free public higher education for those qualified to attend (79% and 67%, respectively). On the other hand, 3 in 10 Americans with at least some college education oppose free college tuition for public institutions compared to 2 in 10 with a high school degree or less.

About 80 percent of those with a household income of less than \$50,000 support free tuition for public higher education institutions compared to two-thirds of U.S. residents with a household income of at least \$75,000. Conversely, 32 percent of Americans with a household income of at least \$75,000 *oppose* free tuition for public colleges and universities compared to about 20 percent of those with a household income of less than \$50,000.

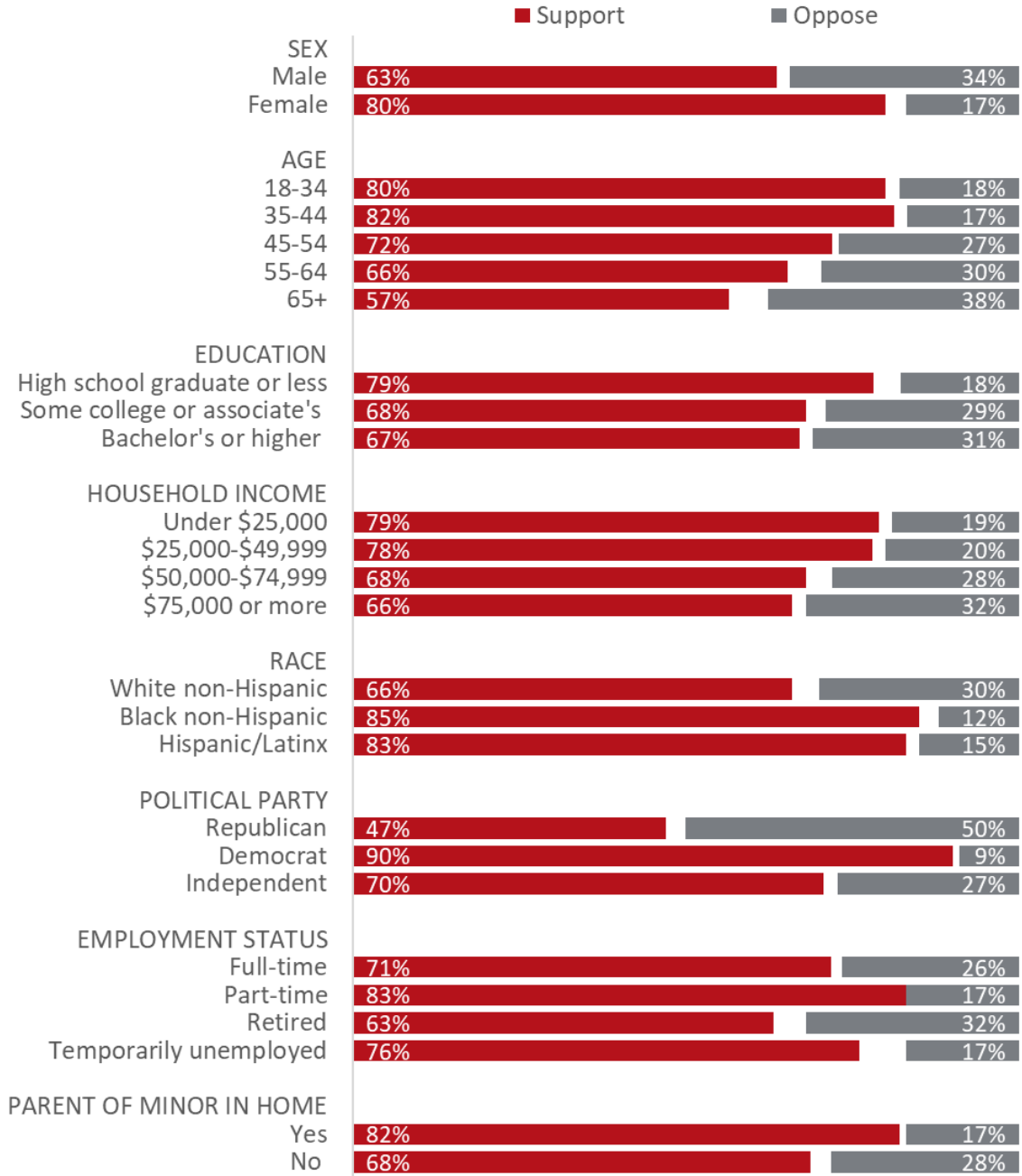
By race, the data reveal that 66 percent of the White non-Hispanic population support free college tuition for public institutions compared to over 80 percent of Black non-Hispanic and Latinx adults. Opposition to the idea is twice as high among non-Hispanic whites (30%) compared to the Black and Latinx populations (12-15%).

The greatest divide on this issue follows political lines: 9 in 10 Democrats support free tuition for public college and universities for qualified applicants, while the share drops to 7 in 10 for Independents, and just under half for Republicans. Conversely, a full half of Republicans oppose free tuition for public higher education institutions, while 27 percent of Independents and nine percent of Democrats feel the same way.

Eighty-three percent of adults in the United States who are employed part-time support free tuition at public college or universities for qualified applicants; the share drops more than 10 points for full-time workers (71%) and 20 points for retirees (63%). Full-time employees are more likely to support free tuition than are retirees. Part-time employees are the least likely to oppose free tuition, at 17 percent, while the share rises to 26 percent for full-time workers and 32 percent for retirees.

Eighty-two percent of adults who are parents or guardians of at least one child in their household support making tuition free at public universities and colleges compared to 68 percent of adults who are not parents or guardians to a child in their home who feel the same way. On the other hand, 28 percent of adults are not parents (or who do not have a child in the home) oppose free tuition; this percentage drops 11 points for parents with resident children.

Percentage of Americans who support and oppose free tuition for public colleges and universities



Question: "Would you support or oppose making tuition at public colleges and universities free for anyone who is qualified to attend?"

Notes: "Don't know" and "Refused" responses are not shown. "Parent of minor in home" refers to adults who are either the guardian or parent of a child under 18 who lives in their household.

Source: APM Survey (November 27 – December 2, 2018). N=1,003 Americans age 18 or older; overall margin of error=+/-3.7% at the 95% confidence level.

Appendix:

Note: For additional details about survey methodology, please see:

https://www.americanpublicmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/SSRS_2018-Nov-27-Dec-2-OmnibusSurvey_Methods.pdf

Characteristics of survey sample

	<i>Number of respondents</i>	All
<i>Weighted N</i>	<i>1,003</i>	<i>100%</i>
SEX		
Male	<i>487</i>	<i>49%</i>
Female	<i>516</i>	<i>51%</i>
AGE GROUP		
18-34	<i>284</i>	<i>28%</i>
35-44 ^b	<i>169</i>	<i>17%</i>
45-54	<i>173</i>	<i>17%</i>
55-64	<i>164</i>	<i>16%</i>
65+	<i>206</i>	<i>21%</i>
RACE & ETHNICITY		
White (non-Hispanic)	<i>622</i>	<i>62%</i>
Black (non-Hispanic)	<i>116</i>	<i>12%</i>
Hispanic/Latinx	<i>163</i>	<i>16%</i>
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT		
High school diploma or less	<i>387</i>	<i>39%</i>
Some college or associate's degree	<i>280</i>	<i>28%</i>
At least a bachelor's	<i>324</i>	<i>32%</i>
ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME		
Under \$25,000	<i>169</i>	<i>17%</i>
\$25,000-\$49,999	<i>253</i>	<i>25%</i>
\$50,000-\$74,999	<i>127</i>	<i>13%</i>
\$75,000 or more	<i>305</i>	<i>30%</i>

Continued on next page.

	Number of respondents	All
<i>Weighted N</i>	1,003	100%
REGION ^a		
North East	178	18%
North Central	209	21%
South	377	38%
West	239	24%
METRO STATUS ^b		
Metro	706	70%
Non-metro	172	17%
PARENT/GUARDIAN STATUS ^c		
Yes, parent or guardian	248	25%
Not, not parent or guardian	754	75%
POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION		
Republican	225	22%
Democrat	311	31%
Independent	393	39%
EMPLOYMENT STATUS		
Full-time	446	44%
Part-time	122	12%
Retired	230	23%
Homemaker	61	6%
Unemployed	58	6%

^a See next page for definitions of regions.

^b Metro status is unknown for 125 respondents.

^c "Parent/Guardian Status" refers to adults who are either the guardian or parent of a child, or someone under the age of 18, in their household.

Source: APM Survey (November 27 – December 2, 2018).

Regions

North Central: Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin.

North East: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont.

South: Alabama, Arkansas, Washington DC, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia.

West: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming.

About the APM Survey

The APM Research Lab periodically conducts brief national surveys on topics of public interest. Those interested in partnering with the APM Research Lab on future iterations of the APM Survey are encouraged to contact us through the channels below. To see other examples of our survey-related research, please see: <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/collections/surveys>

This survey was funded through internal resources. It was not conducted on behalf of or in conjunction with any other entity or initiative beyond the partners acknowledged below.

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This report was jointly authored by Kassira Absar and Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab.

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Contact: info@apmresearchlab.org | apmresearchlab.org | 651-290-1219