

The **INSTITUTE** for  
Public Policy & Economic Development  
at Wilkes University

*A partnership among Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine, Keystone College, King's College, Lackawanna College, Luzerne County Community College, Marywood University, Misericordia University, Penn State Scranton, Penn State Wilkes-Barre, The Wright Center, University of Scranton, and Wilkes University*

**The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development (The Institute)**

launched a polling program in 2014. The Institute regularly polls students at its partnering higher education institutions. These polling and survey research services are part of The Institute's menu of services offered to all types of clients.

This fall 2017 poll assesses students' opinions about the importance of certain public policy issues and their level of civic engagement. A total of 1,995 students participated in this poll. Of all respondents, Students from all class years, a variety of majors, and part-time and graduate students are well-represented in the data.

**Students have diverse political views, but (nearly) all care about public policy.**

The majority of respondents to this poll found each of the public policy issues in question to be of some level of personal importance. Evidenced by only four of the 14 issues in question receiving over 10 percent of respondents rating them "Not very" or "Not at all" important, while none received over 15 percent in these categories. This proves important as all participants are of voting age, and over 75 percent are registered to vote in the United States. The distribution of these voters among political parties was reasonably even across the two major parties, with two percent more democratic affiliated voters than republican (however 8 percent were unsure of their affiliation). Although the majority of respondents indicated they did not vote in a 2017 primary election, over 50 percent endorsed one of the top two levels of likelihood of voting in the coming November election.

**A plurality of students feel the country is headed in the wrong direction, but are unsure of PA.**

More participants, both in percentage and in frequency, felt the country is headed in the wrong direction than any other two options combined. However, this is contrasted with respondent's feelings regarding the direction of the state, a shift is seen to a less certain category, as "Not sure" received more attention than any other. This may mean that the group of respondents are less informed about state events than they are of national, or that national media is more polarizing, permitting easier commitment to a direction.

**Students feel informed. Credit internet, TV, and their friends**

Just under 90 percent of students reported feeling "Very" or "Somewhat" informed on current events. Their primary sources for this information include website and blogs, television, social media, and word of mouth. While over 80 percent of respondents suggested they had some level of experience volunteering for an off-campus non-profit organization, less than 20 percent had volunteered for a political cause or candidate.



*"This study reiterates what we already know: college students are passionate about the direction of the country and highly invested in the future. It is our duty to help this generation connect their views and concerns to politics and government, reiterating that very vote counts."*

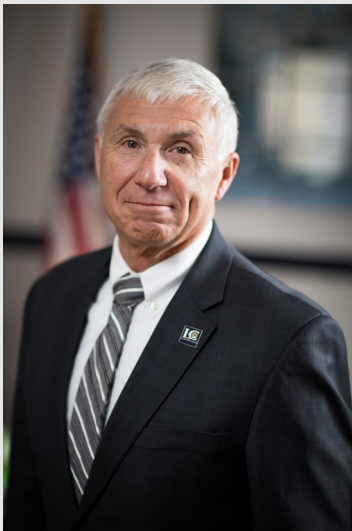
Patrick F. Leahy, E.D., President, Wilkes University

**Students are increasingly concerned about policies pertaining to the environment. Compared to prior years, they feel less strongly about Taxes, Jobs and the Economy, and Efficiency of Government.**

A decline was seen in ratings of "Very Important" in Taxes, Jobs and the Economy, and the Efficiency of Government, of around 20, 13, and 10 percent, respectively, over the past three years of the poll. Environmental policy, however, has experienced nearly a 19 percent increase in "Very Important" ratings over the past three polls.

**Student's sources of news have consolidated around internet outlets over the past three years' polls. Newspapers, Television, and Radio have seen declines in popularity.**

Students have reported using Newspapers and Television less to access news on current events in each year of the poll (aggregated to 11 and 6 percent, respectively). Radio experienced a small increase from 2016 to 2017 after the largest drop of any category from 2015 to 2016. While the three categories of internet have seen no net change, every other category has experienced some level of net decrease.



*"This is another in-depth and enlightening study by The Institute. As educational institutions, it is critical that we expose our students to ideas and concepts that not only address their areas of interest, but that also expand their understanding of other issues in order to make them good citizens, not just good students. Among the opinions and concerns expressed, it is clear that the cost of education is an issue that we all need to keep at the forefront of our thoughts as we address the needs of our students and their families."*

**Mark Volk, E.D., President, Lackawanna College**



*"The civic engagement polls administered by the Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development provide valuable insights to community leaders about college students in our region. With nearly 2,000 respondents to the poll, I have confidence in the quality of the survey."*

*"The 'Cost of college education' as the top public policy issue with 63 percent of students rating it as 'Very Important' is striking. At Penn State Wilkes-Barre, we are highly cognizant of cost pressures on students and families and, therefore, we ensure students receive a quality education for their tuition dollars."*

*"I was quite pleased to learn from the poll that students are well-engaged in volunteer activities. It is beneficial for our community that 61 percent of students volunteered time regularly or occasionally at off-campus non-profit organizations and almost half attended a local public meeting."*

*I am optimistic about their future involvement in community affairs to help advance our region."*

**Dale Jones, Ph.D., Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer, Penn State Wilkes-Barre**

### Importance of public policy issues

Participants were asked to rate the personal importance of each issue on a 5 level Likert scale ranging from (1) "Not at all important," (2) "Not very important," (3) "Somewhat important," (4) "Important," and (5) "Very important." Across all categories "Very Important" was most frequently endorsed (over 40 percent of responses across all issues), at a rate 21 times that of "not at all important", suggesting that the students see these public policy issues as personally important, in general.

The issues receiving the highest percent of "Very Important" included the Cost of college education (63 percent), Healthcare (55), Jobs and economy (55), and Terrorism and homeland security (50).



*"It's extremely important to learn as much as possible about the views and opinions of college students throughout our region. By doing so, we can openly and thoughtfully engage in meaningful discussions as part of the educational process. In short, the more we learn about our students' concerns, the more we can take steps to address them and hopefully convince them to live and pursue careers in Northeastern Pennsylvania."*

**David L. Coppola, Ph.D., President, Keystone Colleges**



*The recent poll of university students in Northeast Pennsylvania conducted by The Institute is a good indicator of the importance and the need to emphasize civic engagement, volunteerism, and active involvement in the political environment that institutions of higher learning must integrate into the overall academic experience. Key issues that impact people in Pennsylvania and the rest of the country include healthcare, education, jobs, and national security."*

**Marwan A. Wafa, Chancellor, Penn State Scranton**

	Importance of each issue				
	Not at all important	Not very important	Somewhat important	Important	Very Important
Cost of college education	1%	2%	10%	24%	63%
Other issues related to education	1%	4%	17%	34%	42%
Healthcare	1%	3%	13%	30%	55%
Jobs and economy	0%	1%	8%	36%	55%
Terrorism and homeland security	1%	3%	14%	32%	50%
Environmental issues	2%	6%	18%	33%	42%
Energy	1%	5%	21%	42%	32%
Immigration	3%	12%	28%	31%	28%
Social Security	2%	6%	23%	39%	31%
Taxes	1%	5%	26%	41%	28%
The national debt	2%	9%	25%	35%	30%
Efficiency of Government	8%	3%	15%	37%	44%
Criminal Justice or police issues	2%	6%	20%	39%	34%

### Public Policy Issues over Time

The table below displays each of the public policy issues listed with the number and percent of respondents endorsing any of the top three levels of importance (somewhat important, important, or very important), as well as the number and percent who felt the issue was "Very important."

While the counts in each year changed dramatically, this was generally due to fluctuations in the number of respondents. The percent of endorsing one of the top three levels of importance in each year has remained relatively constant over the three years of the poll. The largest percent change in the top three levels of importance was seen in Environmental issues, with an increase of just under 1.5 percent. None of the other areas of public policy had a percent change greater than one percent (in either direction).

When "Very Important" is examined alone, larger fluctuations are found. The largest percent change over the three years of the poll was found in Taxes, with just under 20 percent fewer respondents identifying the issue as "Very important" in 2017 than in 2015. The largest increase is found in relation to Environmental policy, as it has experienced nearly a 19 percent increase over three years. The increase in ratings of "Very Important" in environmental policy were constituted by an increase of just under 23 percent from 2016 to 2017, after a small decrease from 2015 to 2016. Perhaps linked to this issue is energy, which returned to its 2015 levels of importance following a negative percent change of over 13 percent from 2015 to 2016.



*"College students in Northeast Pennsylvania are clearly active and engaged in supporting our region and the people who live here in a variety of ways," says Thomas J. Botzman, Ph.D., president of Misericordia University. "As our students evaluate the direction of our country and the direction of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, I encourage them to apply their innovation and creativity to identify shared values and common issues while encouraging civil discourse and positive relationships in local, state and federal government."*

**Thomas J. Botzman, Ph.D., President, Misericordia University**

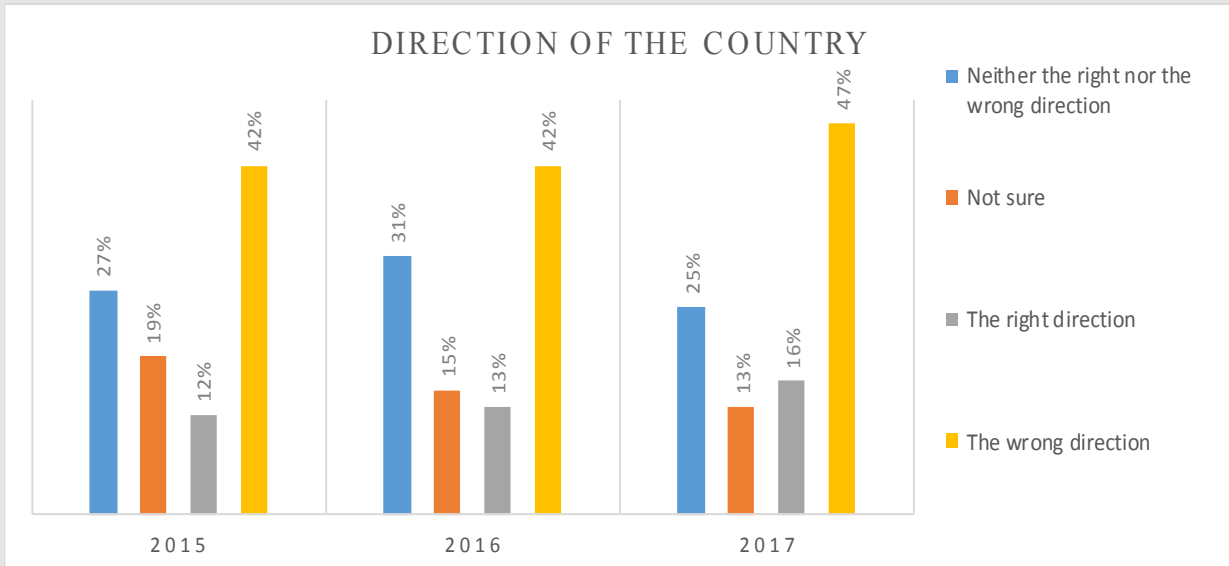
Other notable changes in the percent change of "very important" include Jobs and Economy, Efficiency of government which experienced a negative percent change of over 13 percent, and 10 percent, respectively.

National Public Policy Issue	2015				2016				2017			
	Somewhat to Very Important		Very Important		Somewhat to Very Important		Very Important		Somewhat to Very Important		Very Important	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Cost of college	2677	97%	1817	66%	1177	96%	723	59%	1923	96%	1251	63%
Education	2650	96%	1257	45%	1189	97%	539	44%	1843	92%	834	42%
Healthcare	2677	97%	1525	55%	1189	97%	638	52%	1933	97%	1091	55%
Jobs and Economy	2722	98%	1750	63%	1201	98%	674	55%	1967	99%	1091	55%
Terrorism	2605	94%	1378	50%	1177	96%	613	50%	1913	96%	996	50%
Environmental	2532	91%	978	35%	1116	91%	417	34%	1847	93%	834	42%
Energy	2582	93%	900	32%	1128	92%	343	28%	1873	94%	634	32%
Immigration	2367	85%	725	26%	1054	86%	319	26%	1712	86%	555	28%
Social Security	2582	93%	1008	36%	1128	92%	356	29%	1853	93%	624	31%
Taxes	2622	95%	950	34%	1140	93%	307	25%	1883	94%	549	28%
Efficiency of Government	2662	96%	1375	50%	1189	97%	552	45%	1927	97%	886	44%

### Direction of State and Country

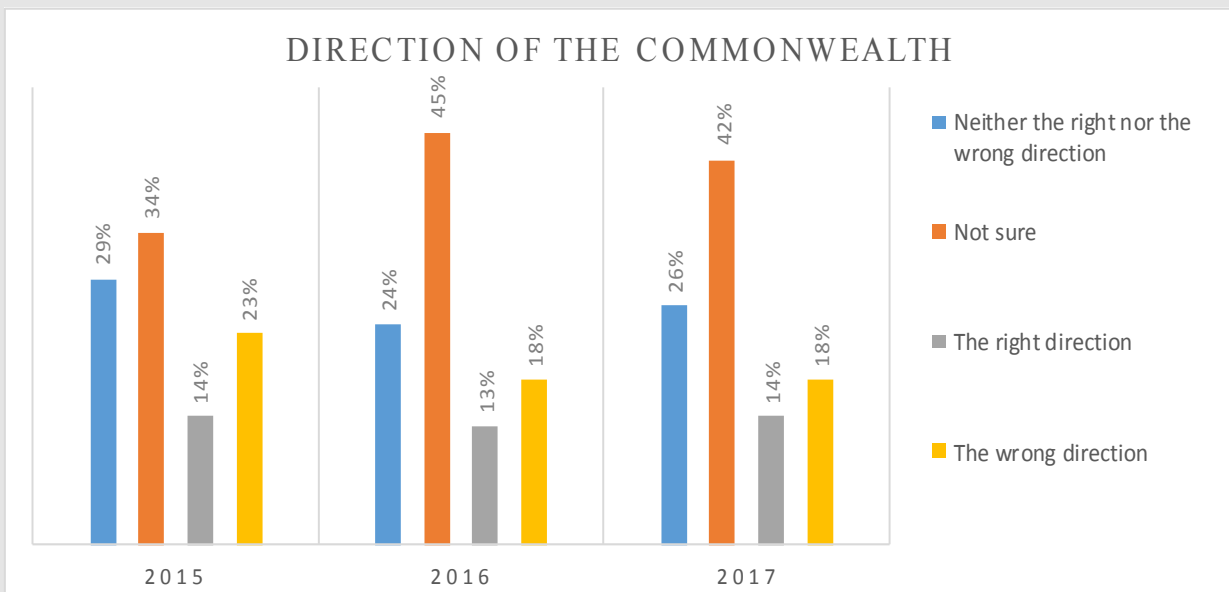
The past three years of civic engagement polls asked respondents to indicate in what direction (if any) the country and the state were moving. Statistical analysis showed differences when the responses to direction of the country were grouped by year. The full distribution when grouped by year is shown below.

This shows the location of this difference in each category over each two-year period (in percent). It shows an six percent reduction in those indicating not sure, as well as a five percent increase for those suggesting the country is headed in the wrong direction.



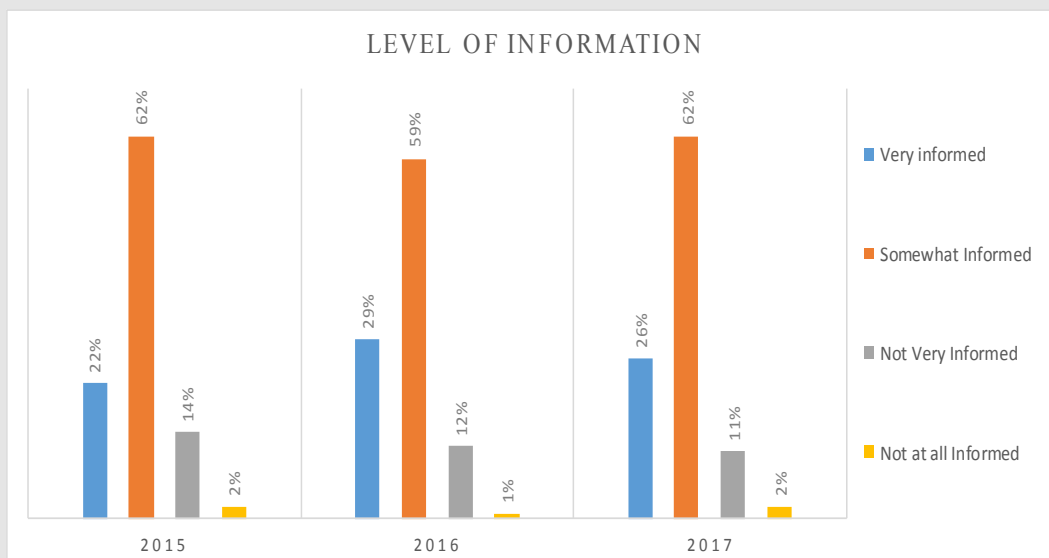
The same method applied to the direction of Pennsylvania showed a difference between years ( $F = 11.6$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The Commonwealth table below shows a shift towards those who are unsure of the direction of the country, with an increase of eight percent over three years.



### Other Trends Over Time

The percentage of students reporting that they are very, somewhat, not very informed, or not at all informed about current events has fluctuated slightly since this question was first asked in 2015. The highest percentage of students who reported being very informed and the smallest percentage who felt not at all informed were in 2016, which likely coincides with the presidential election held shortly after the poll was conducted that year. It appears likely that the presidential election contributed to slightly higher self-reported information levels that year. However, levels of information in 2017 remain generally higher than in 2015, with a larger share of students reporting being very informed about current events.



The table below shows changes in the frequency with which students report volunteering for political causes as well as for non-profit or charitable causes. From 2016 to 2017, there was a shift towards more students having engaged in political volunteering or engagement at least once; the percentage who had never done this dropped by 4 percentage points. From 2016 to 2017, there was an increase in the percentage of student students who had volunteered for a nonprofit cause or organization at least once, while the percent who did so more frequently dropped.

	Political Volunteer		Non-profit Volunteering	
	2015-16	2016-17	2015-16	2015-17
Yes, I do this regularly	0%	0%	0%	-1%
Yes, I do this occasionally	-1%	0%	0%	-3%
Yes, I have done this more than once	1%	2%	-4%	5%
No I have never done this	2%	-4%	2%	0%
Not sure	-1%	2%	1%	-1%



Rev. Herbert B. Keller, S.J. Interim  
President, The University of Scranton

*"This study confirms the important role that civic engagement and community service play in the formation of students into active and committed citizens. I was heartened to see the high level of both volunteerism at non-profit organizations and voter registration among students in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The Institute's study also indicates that students have varied political party affiliations and hold a diversity of views on major policy issues, underscoring the importance of encouraging dialogue across differences on our own campuses and in our own communities. As we head into a new year and another academic semester, I hope students will continue to remain informed about pressing current events and encourage them to seek out fellow students with different perspectives from their own so as to foster better understanding and mutual respect."*

### Volunteer Activities & Local Involvement

Participants were asked to respond to two questions related to their volunteer activities and experience. These questions separated two categories of volunteer experience. The first question was related to volunteer experience for an off-campus non-profit organization, for which most students have some experience with (16 percent of students reported having no experience of it). The second related to volunteer experience for a political cause or candidate, which shows 80 percent of participants have never done.

Participants were also asked to indicate whether they had ever attended a local public meeting. Just over half (54 percent), stated that they had not, 43 percent reported that they had, and 3 percent responded that they were unsure.



*“The majority of our college-educated young adults reported experience volunteering for an off-campus non-profit organization at least once, which is so inspiring. To me, this indicates that our young adults value social responsibility and recognize the tremendous value in the giving of their time and talents to better our community. They are stepping up in ways that resonate with them to make positive impacts at a local level. I believe that as community members and leaders, identifying new ways to harness the power of this enthusiasm and to encourage regionally educated students to strengthen and deepen their connections to our NEPA will result in talent retention and undeniable benefits to our workforce and community.”*

**Dr. Linda Thomas—Hemak, President & CEO, The Wright Center for Graduate Medical Education**

### Characteristics of the Poll Respondents

The median age of respondents was 20 years old, the largest share of respondents (49 percent) came from the age group of 18 to 19, followed by 20 to 21 (25 percent). When asked about the zip code of their home, just over 57 percent reported a zip code from Pennsylvania.

No single field of study represented a majority of the respondents, however those most frequently endorsed included healthcare, science/math, business, and social science.

Major	Frequency	Percent
Healthcare	500	25%
Science/Math	375	19%
Business	310	15%
Social Sciences	217	11%
Education	146	7%
Humanities	146	7%
Engineering	96	5%
Fine arts	57	3%
Technology/Trades	51	3%
Other	168	9%

A majority of respondents indicated that they are registered to vote.

Registered to vote in any location within the United States		
	Frequency	Percent
Yes	1264	76%
No	368	22%
Not Sure	38	2%

If they were registered, they were then asked with what political party, if any, they are affiliated with. The split between the two major political parties was nearly equivalent, splitting 66 percent of respondents. Those with no party affiliation made up the next largest group with 24 percent of responses.

Party affiliation (if registered)	
	Frequency
Republican party	504
Democratic party	536
Another political party	52
Not affiliated/No party	374



A collaboration among Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine, Keystone College, King's College, Lackawanna College, Luzerne County Community College, Marywood University, Misericordia University, Penn State Scranton, Penn State Wilkes-Barre, The Wright Center, University of Scranton and Wilkes University

## The Institute — *Turning Information into Insight*

### What We Believe

At The Institute, we believe that empowering leaders with the research-based strategies and solutions they need to make informed decisions will lead to a stronger economy and a better quality of life for residents. For over a decade, The Institute has worked behind the scenes to support initiatives that advance regional competitiveness and revitalize communities.

### 2017 Institute Underwriters

#### Signature Underwriters

Andrew J. Sordoni Foundation  
Luzerne County  
Moses Taylor Foundation  
PPL Electric Utilities  
Sordoni Family Foundation

#### Contributing Underwriters

BlackOut Design  
Borton-Lawson  
Commonwealth Health Systems  
Geisinger Health System  
Luzerne County Housing Partnership  
Mohegan Sun Pocono  
Rosenn, Jenkins & Greenwald, LLP

#### Supporting Underwriters

Berkshire Asset Management  
CAN DO  
Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield  
OneSource Staffing  
NET Credit Union  
Prudential Retirement Services  
Sanofi Pasteur  
Wells Fargo Foundation

#### Academic Partners

Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine  
Keystone College  
King's College  
Lackawanna College  
Luzerne County Community College  
Marywood University  
Misericordia University  
Penn State Scranton  
Penn State Wilkes-Barre  
The Wright Center  
University of Scranton  
Wilkes University

#### Public Media Partner

WVIA Public Media

Follow us on Facebook and Twitter

<http://www.facebook.com/institutepa>

<https://twitter.com/institutepa>



[www.institutepa.org](http://www.institutepa.org)



*The Institute — Turning Information into Insight*