

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

*A partnership among Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine, Johnson College, 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 2018 poll assesses students' opinions about public policy issues and civic engagement. A total of 2,649 students participated in this poll. Students from all class years, a variety of majors, and part-time and graduate students are well-represented in the data. The poll is distributed online through our academic partners. The data was collected during September 2018.

The Institute is an applied research and economic consulting organization that fulfills two related priorities.

The Institute provides customized client solutions and strategies to facilitate decision-making and planning that enhances growth, impact, and sustainability for organizations. The Institute also serves a public mission to provide data, analytics, and research to the community at large to improve regional quality of life and standard of living.

The Institute was formed as a unique collaborative of regional higher education institutions and the business community.

The Institute was founded on the belief that good decisions are driven by good data. Our mission is to provide empirical, objective information that drives discussion, informs decisions and develops innovative solutions.

**On balance, the United States is not moving in the right direction. Student perceptions of Pennsylvania's trajectory, however, are not as clear.**

Overall, approximately 21 percent of students believe that the United States is headed in the right direction, while 39 percent believe the country is on the wrong course. Yet another 25 percent indicated feelings that the country's direction is ultimately unchanged, while a final 15 percent are uncertain about the country's direction. However, the margin between "right track" and "wrong track" answers has narrowed since last year's survey, from a deficit of 31 percentage points to 18, as of 2018. Students' perceptions of Pennsylvania's direction, however, are considerably less certain, as nearly 43 percent did not register an opinion on the subject. Of those who did, 25 percent claim that the Commonwealth's direction is fundamentally unchanged, 17 percent express optimism, and another 14 percent have concerns.



*"The findings in this brief indicate that our region's college students are very well informed and expect to be active voters. This information is a very positive indication that our next generation of leaders are ready to take their place in our communities, our businesses and organizations, and in our government."*

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

**The cost of education, healthcare policy, and jobs and economic development are deemed the three most national public policy issue by student respondents, while policies related to taxation were rated least important.**

Students were asked to evaluate the personal importance of public policy issues to them by assigning a number between 1 ("Not at All important") to 5 ("Very Important"). Based on this scale of 1 to 5, the most important public policy issues to regional students are: (1) the cost of college education (4.5); (2) healthcare policy (4.4); (3) jobs and the economy (4.4); (4) racism or civil rights issues (4.2); (5) other issues related to education (4.2); (6) government efficiency (4.2); and (7) terrorism and homeland security (4.2). The bottom tier of issues include: (1) immigration (3.7); (2) the national debt (3.8); (3) tax policy (3.9); (4) Social Security (4.0); (5) energy policy (4.0); (6) criminal justice or police issues (4.0); and (7) environmental issues (4.1).

**Students feel reasonably well-informed about current events, crediting the internet, television, and their friends over newspapers, radio, or smartphone apps.**

Just over 80 percent of students reported feeling "very informed" or "somewhat informed" on current events. Their primary sources included the internet, in particular social media, television, comprising of both national and local news, and word of mouth. Less utilized forms of media included newspapers, radio, smartphone apps, and podcasts. This may suggest that smartphones are still a new contender to the field of media dissemination, while more traditional forms of online content (such as newspaper subscriptions or even social media) remain the prevailing form of content circulation for students.



*"Our region's university students understand the value of receiving a college-level education. However, according to the Institute's poll results, the cost of a college education and other issues related to education are important public policy issues for university students in our area. We must continue to find ways to make college education more affordable for more students."*

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

**While most students have volunteered at least once, the majority of respondents have never volunteered for a political cause or attended a public meeting.**

Over 75 percent of students who responded to the survey have, on at least one occasion, volunteered their time to an off-campus, non-profit organization. On the other hand, almost 81 percent of students have never volunteered for a political cause or candidate. Students were also asked about their attendance of local public meetings, such as sessions of city councils, school boards, or county commissions – of them, 54 percent never attended such a meeting, while 45 percent have.



*"Higher education institutions need to focus more on promoting student engagement through volunteer work and build into the curriculum political awareness which emphasizes the importance of informed voting that influences the direction of our country regionally, nationally, and internationally. It is important that we take such steps since we have been focused on the academic side, possibly at the expense of preparing influential "Citizens". It is time, more so than any other recent times, to take corrective steps in producing actively engaged citizenry."*

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





**An overwhelming majority of students are registered to vote, and are very likely to vote in the 2018 midterm elections. This voter enthusiasm did not translate to primary election participation.**

Approximately 75 percent of regional students are registered to vote in any location within the United States, with registration rates rising to 90 percent for students over the age of 19. Approximately 36 percent of students are registered Democrats, followed by Republicans at 28 percent, unaffiliated voters at 25 percent, and members of other parties (Libertarians, Greens, etc.) at 3 percent. While approximately 72 percent of students are at least somewhat likely to vote in the upcoming November 2018 midterm elections, only 25 percent voted in a primary election during the 2018 election cycle.



*"The Institute's Public Policy and Civic Engagement poll is a helpful tool in measuring our students' civic participation, their awareness of societal issues, and how likely they are to be politically engaged. I was heartened that a majority of college and university students in Northeastern Pennsylvania are registered to vote and likely to vote in the 2018 midterm elections. Voting is a responsibility and a privilege. I am especially proud of our University of Scranton student government which has coordinated a "UofS Votes" non-partisan effort to increase voter registration and foster a more civically aware and engaged student body. It is a mark of good citizenship that students in our region are informed about current events and prepared to vote in the coming elections. "*

*Scott R. Pilarz, S.J., President of The University of Scranton*



*"The 2018 Public and Civic Engagement Poll provides important information about our region's college students and how we, as college leaders and educators, can help our students engage in Government. With 75 percent of those polled registered to vote, and 90 percent of those over 19 years of age registered to vote, our area's college students have the potential to contribute significantly to elections now and into the future."*

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

**Likely voters among the regional student population are Democratic-leaning, well-informed, and concerned about the direction of the United States.**

Among student respondents, 61 percent of Democrats self-identify as "very likely" to vote in the upcoming midterm elections, compared to 49 percent of Republicans and 36 percent of unaffiliated voters. On average, roughly 94 percent of students most likely to vote are at least somewhat informed about current affairs. They also believe, by a nearly 2-1 margin, that the United States is currently on the wrong track, and are most concerned about: (1) the cost of college education; (2) jobs and the economy; and (3) equality and civil rights issues.

### Public Policy Issues over Time

While the full range of public policy issues presented in this course of this survey has expanded from year to year, the overwhelming majority of issues evaluated by students have been featured regularly enough to analyze over a longer-term period. These issues include: (1) the cost of a college education; (2) issues related to education other than the cost of college; (3) healthcare; (4) jobs and the economy; (5) terrorism and homeland security; (6) environmental issues; (7) energy policy; (8) immigration policy; (9) Social Security; (10) taxes, and (11) government efficiency.

On balance, students appear to be disproportionately concerned about three public policy issues: (1) the cost of a college education; (2) healthcare policy; and (3) jobs and the economy. These policies have, in some form, constituted the top three public policy issues for regional students since this poll commenced in 2015. Since 2015, no other public policy issue experienced a change greater than two percent (in either direction). Public policy issues whose importance appears to be on the decline for regional students include: (1) jobs and the economy (from 63 to 54 percent); (2) terrorism (50 to 45 percent); (3) tax policy (34 to 26 percent); and (4) government efficiency (50 to 42 percent).

### Students Describing Public Policy Issues as "Very Important"

National Public Policy Issue	2015	2016	2017	2018
Cost of College	66%	59%	63%	66%
Education	45%	44%	42%	45%
Healthcare	55%	52%	55%	58%
Jobs and Economy	63%	55%	55%	54%
Terrorism	50%	50%	50%	45%
Environmental	35%	34%	42%	43%
Energy	32%	28%	32%	33%
Immigration	26%	26%	28%	28%
Social Security	36%	29%	31%	33%
Taxes	34%	25%	28%	26%
Efficiency of Government	50%	45%	44%	42%

### Media Dissemination

Reliance on traditional media conduits, whether by print (newspaper), television, or radio, has generally declined since 2015. The utilization of social media, on the other hand, has become an important resource for students. Additionally, in closely-knit student communities, word of mouth remains a potent method by which students receive updated news and information. Finally, the number of students relying on resources inadequately classified by the continuum of options to the right continues to rise from 8 percent in 2015 to 30 percent as of 2018.

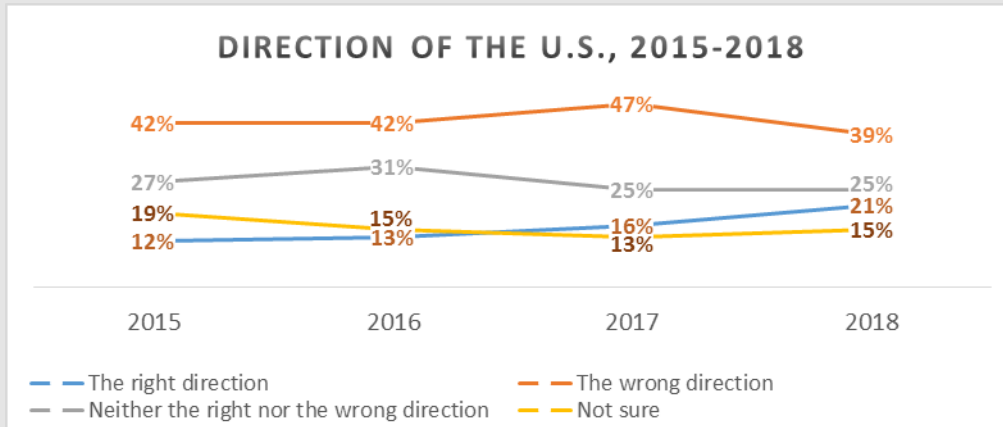
In 2018, for the first time in the Public Policy and Civic Engagement Poll, the wider range of resource options were provided to respondents, in an attempt to more fully capture the diverse methods by which today's students acquire news and information, including smartphone applications and podcasts. When comparing these results to those of previous years, however, these new categories must be reintegrated back into larger categories, which explains the pronounced jump in the number of students who receive news from "Internet – Other" between 2016-2017 and 2017-2018.

### Source of Current Events

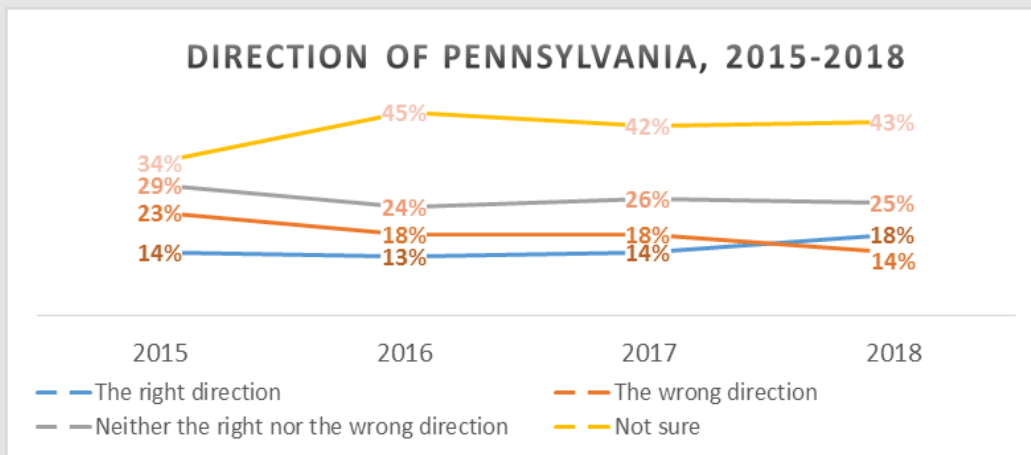
	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Newspaper	43%	31%	35%
Television	75%	61%	59%
Radio	36%	31%	32%
Internet (blog or website)	79%	64%	47%
Internet (social media)	72%	60%	70%
Internet (other)	28%	24%	44%
Word of mouth	63%	53%	57%
Other	8%	7%	30%

### Direction of the United States and Pennsylvania

Every Public Policy and Civic Engagement poll conducted thus far has asked respondents to indicate in what direction (if any) both the United States and Pennsylvania were heading. While the percentages of students selecting any given option have fluctuated over time, some broader patterns still emerge. First, among students polled about the direction of the United States, a rising percentage of students feel the country is headed on the right track, from 12 percent in 2015 to 21 percent in 2018. Conversely, the percentage of students who feel the country is headed in the wrong direction have dropped by eight percentage points (47 percent to 39 percent).



Among students polled about the direction of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, long-term trends are more easily observable. In every poll conducted since 2015, the plurality of students are uncertain about the trajectory of Pennsylvania's direction, suggesting a possible disengagement from state-level politics as opposed to national developments. Moreover, students feeling uncertain about Pennsylvania's direction are growing, from 34 percent in 2015 to 43 percent in 2018. Among students who have a more fully formed opinion of current events in Pennsylvania, however, other observable trends emerge. For example, the number of students claiming Pennsylvania is heading in the wrong direction has steadily declined from 23 percent in 2015 to 14 percent in 2018, while the percentage of students more optimistic about Pennsylvania's direction has increased from 14 percent to 18 percent in the same period. Students who feel that Pennsylvania's direction remains unchanged are the second largest in number throughout the course of this poll, and have remained relatively static since 2016.





## Volunteerism

Since 2015, every installment of the Public Policy and Civic Engagement poll has detected a robust commitment to volunteerism among the regional student population. Every year, strong majorities of student (59 percent, as of 2018) volunteer for non-profit causes at least occasionally. However, a trend analysis shows a slight but noticeable decline in the extent of such volunteerism. The percentage of students who volunteer for a non-profit at least occasionally has modestly dropped from 64 percent in 2015 to 59 percent in 2018, while students who report never having volunteered inched up from 13 to 18 percent during the same period.

On the other hand, the same expansive commitment to volunteerism cannot be detected among political causes. The rate of student volunteerism for a political cause or candidate has remained virtually unchanged since 2015, as over 80 percent of students have never once committed their time or talents toward political activism. Conversely, just 7 percent of students since 2015 have engaged in such activism more than once.

Volunteerism	Non-Profit Volunteerism			Political Volunteerism		
Frequency	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-20
Yes, I do this regularly	18%	18%	17%	2%	2%	2%
Yes, I do this occasionally	46%	43%	42%	5%	5%	5%
Yes, I have done this once	19%	20%	18%	8%	11%	9%
No, I have never done this	13%	16%	18%	82%	80%	81%
Not sure	3%	3%	5%	3%	4%	3%





A collaboration among Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine, Johnson College, 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.

### 2018 Institute Underwriters

#### Signature Underwriters

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

#### Contributing Underwriters

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

#### Supporting Underwriters

Berkshire Asset Management  
BlackOut Design  
CAN DO  
Classic Properties  
Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield  
OneSource Staffing  
NET Credit Union  
PNC Foundation  
Sanofi Pasteur  
Wells Fargo Foundation

#### Academic Partners

Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine  
Johnson College  
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

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*