

# The Institute

*Turning Information into Insight*

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 for Graduate Medical Education, 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 2019 poll assesses students' opinions about public policy issues and civic engagement. A total of 1,896 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 2019.

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.

**Overall, students do not think the United States is moving in the right direction. Their perceptions of Pennsylvania's trajectory, however, are not as clear.**

Approximately 18 percent of students believe that the United States is headed in the right direction, while 43 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 14 percent are uncertain about the country's direction. However, the margin between "right track" and "wrong track" answers has grown since last year's survey, from a deficit of 18 percentage points in 2018 to 25 as of 2019. The deficit in the 2017 poll was 31. Students' perceptions of Pennsylvania's direction are considerably less certain, as nearly 41 percent did not register an opinion on the subject. Additionally, nearly 26 percent claim that the Commonwealth's direction is fundamentally unchanged, 18 percent express optimism, and nearly 16 percent have concerns.



*"The information gleaned from these student polls is critical in so many ways for so many stakeholders. Our students have strong voices and opinions. It is up to our entire community to cultivate these students and encourage them to be active. They need to understand they can make a difference and their perspective is valued."*

Paul Adams, Ph.D., Interim President, Wilkes University

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**Healthcare policy, the cost of education, and jobs and economic development are deemed the three most national public policy issues by student respondents, while policies related to the national debt 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, the most important public policy issues to regional students are: (1) healthcare policy (4.5); (2) the cost of college education (4.4); (3) jobs and the economy (4.4); (4) equality or civil rights issues (4.3); (5) corruption of government or public officials (4.2); (6) government efficiency (4.2); and (7) other issues related to education (4.2). The bottom tier of issues include (1) the national debt (3.7); (2) immigration (3.8); (3) Social Security (3.9); (4) tax policy (3.9); (5) criminal justice or police issues (4.0); (6) energy policy (4.1); (7) terrorism and homeland security (4.1); and (8) climate change (4.2).

**Very few students trusted any group of people a lot.**

Very few of the students trusted any group of people "a lot." Over half of the students indicated that they at least "somewhat" trust the groups of people, except in the case of strangers.

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

Nearly 83 percent of students reported feeling 'very informed' or 'somewhat informed' on current events. Their primary sources include the internet, in particular social media, television, comprising of both national and local news, and word of mouth. Less utilized forms of media include podcasts, smartphone apps, newspapers, and radio. These results are consistent with those of last year's poll, continuing to suggest that smartphones are still new contenders to the field of media dissemination, while more traditional forms of online content (such as newspaper subscriptions or even social media) remain the prevailing forms of content circulation for students.



*"The Institute's Public Policy and Civic Engagement Poll results are valuable for leaders to know. Through the poll, our region's college students have let us know what they think about a variety of public policy issues. I appreciate knowing what's on the minds of today's students who will be tomorrow's leaders."*  
**Dale Jones, Ph.D., Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer, Penn State Wilkes-Barre**

Trust in the people or groups				
Group of people	A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
People in general	5.3%	55.2%	29.6%	9.9%
Your neighbors	20.3%	46.5%	24.6%	8.7%
Your peers and fellow students	22.3%	58%	16.6%	3%
Strangers	1.2%	15.9%	40.6%	42.4%
People who do not share your political beliefs	4%	50.3%	35.6%	10.1%

**While most students have engaged in some type of political activity least once, the majority of respondents have never participated in a boycott or in-person protest.**

Over 83 percent of students who responded to the survey have, on at least one occasion, discussed politics or government during class. Over 73 percent have participated in a debate about public issues (in or out of school). Furthermore, approximately 60 percent of students have signed written petitions. Students were also asked about their attendance of local public meetings, such as sessions of city councils, school boards, or county commissions; nearly 48 percent never attended such a meeting.



*"This poll shows how engaged and involved our students are about the issues that face them both locally in their communities as well as on a larger scale across the country. I'm pleased, but not surprised, to see the high number of our students who are well informed and active in matters of governance."*

*Another important finding of the poll shows that the cost of college remains one of the major concerns that students have and that is why we strive to keep our tuition as affordable as possible. Jobs and the economy are another top concern of students which reinforces the need for higher education to focus on educating students regarding career pathways and to provide meaningful career exploration experiences while they are in college."*

*Thomas P. Leary, President, Luzerne County Community College*





**An overwhelming majority of students are registered to vote, and are very likely to vote in the upcoming general election. This voter enthusiasm also pertains to participation in the November 2020 election for offices including the President of the United States.**

Nearly 78 percent of regional students are registered to vote in any location within the United States, with registration rates rising beyond 85 percent for students over the age of 19. Almost 41 percent of students are registered Democrats, followed by Republicans at 27 percent, unaffiliated voters at 21 percent, and members of other parties (Libertarians, Greens, etc.) at two percent. Over 75 percent of students are at least somewhat likely to vote in the 2019 general election, and more than 88 percent intend to vote in the November 2020 election.



*"The overall responses of the students of Northeast Pennsylvania are encouraging in their authenticity and enlightening in their honesty. The findings around media usage are not particularly surprising nor are the topics that capture their interest. A lesson to be learned from this poll lies in the section on social trust. As leaders in the community, we need to be authentic ourselves and true to the values we espouse as educators and members of the greater NEPA community. In so doing we offer our young people a reason to re-establish trust in those who mentor, guide, and support them. They become what we model to them."*

*Sister Mary Persico, IHM, Ed.D., President, Marywood University*



*"This year's report clearly shows that college and university students in Northeastern Pennsylvania, just as so many around the country, remain concerned with the cost of college education, health care, as well as jobs and the economy. As leaders in the private higher education sector, our university listens to these concerns and strives to graduate students on time so that they might begin rewarding careers sooner and be well prepared to excel in their chosen field."*

*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, 64 percent of Democrats self-identify as "very likely" to vote in the upcoming midterm elections, compared to 43 percent of Republicans and 32 percent of unaffiliated voters. On average, roughly 93 percent of students most likely to vote are at least somewhat informed about current affairs. They also believe, by more than a 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) corruption of government or public officials.

### 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) environmental issues. In particular, the costs of college education and healthcare have been top public policy issues for regional students since this poll commenced in 2015. Public policy issues whose importance appears to be on the decline for regional students include (1) cost of

Students Describing Public Policy Issues as "Very Important"					
National Public Policy Issue	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Cost of College	66%	59%	63%	66%	61%
Education	45%	44%	42%	45%	45%
Healthcare	55%	52%	55%	58%	61%
Jobs and Economy	63%	55%	55%	54%	52%
Terrorism	50%	50%	50%	45%	46%
Environmental	35%	34%	42%	43%	55%
Energy	32%	28%	32%	33%	40%
Immigration	26%	26%	28%	28%	33%
Social Security	36%	29%	31%	33%	32%
Taxes	34%	25%	28%	26%	30%
Efficiency of Government	50%	45%	44%	42%	44%

college (66 to 61 percent); (2) jobs and the economy (from 54 to 52 percent); and (3) social security (33 to 32 percent).

### Media Dissemination

Reliance on traditional media conduits, whether by print (newspaper), television, or radio, has generally declined since 2016. The use 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.

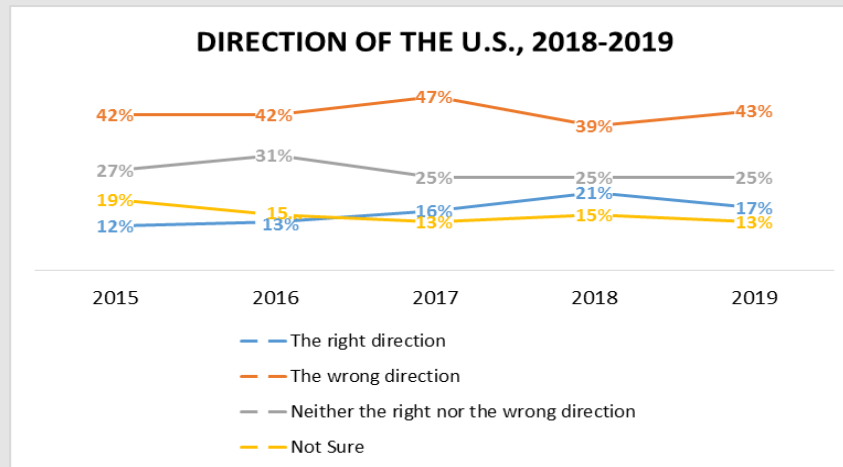
In 2019, for the first time in the Public Policy and Civic Engagement Poll, the wider range of resource options were provided to respondents, in an attempt to more fully capture the diverse methods by which today's students acquire news and information, including smartphone applications and podcasts. When comparing these results to

Source of Information About Current Events				
	2016	2017	2018	2019
Newspaper	43%	31%	35%	32%
Television	75%	61%	59%	56%
Radio	36%	31%	32%	31%
Internet (blog or website)	79%	64%	47%	48%
Internet (social media)	72%	60%	70%	70%
Internet (other)	28%	24%	44%	39%
Word of mouth	63%	53%	57%	55%

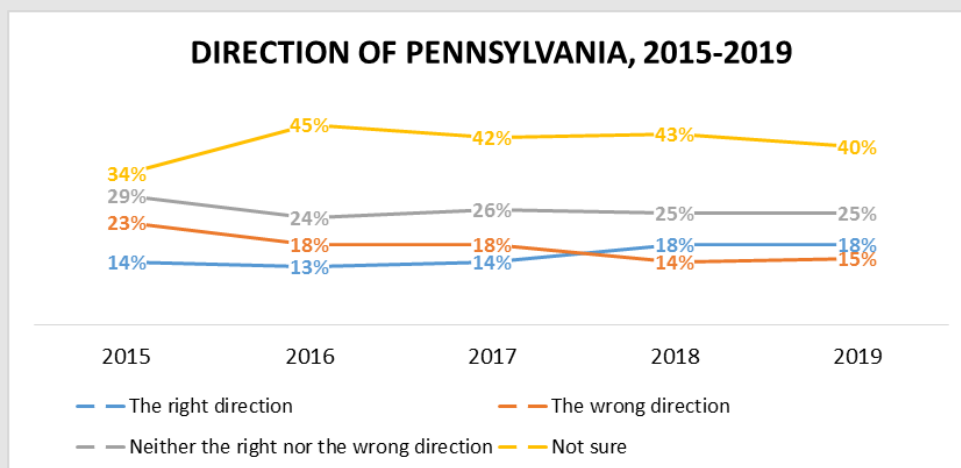
those of previous years, however, these new categories must be reintegrated back into larger categories, which explains the pronounced jump in the number of students who receive news from "Internet – Other" between 2016-2017 and 2017-2018.

## 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 17 percent in 2019—although that number dropped from 21% in 2018. Conversely, the percentage of students who feel the country is headed in the wrong direction has remained relatively steady since 2015, but for a rise to 47% in 2017 and a dip to 39% in 2018.

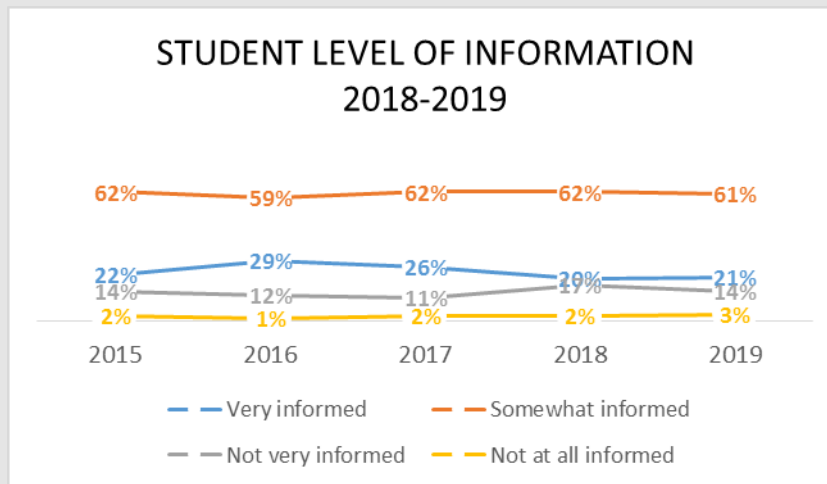


Among students polled about the direction of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, long-term trends are more easily observable. In every poll conducted since 2015, the plurality of students are uncertain about the trajectory of Pennsylvania's direction, suggesting a possible disengagement from state-level politics as opposed to national developments. Even more students are feeling uncertain about Pennsylvania's direction, with numbers rising from 34 percent in 2015 to 40 percent in 2019. 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 declined from 23 percent in 2015 to 15 percent in 2019, 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.



## Knowledge of Current Events

Since 2015, respondents' levels of information about current events has remained, on balance, relatively unmoved. From 2015 to 2018, the number of students who feel very informed about the news has decreased by one percentage point, as has the number of students who feel somewhat informed. The proportion of students who claim to feel 'not very informed' decreased three percentage points from 2018 and has returned to 2015 levels, while the percentage of students feeling completely uninformed has remained relatively static throughout the same period. Finally, while 2016 is the only presidential election year in which the Institute has conducted this poll, overall levels of student current events awareness did noticeably increase during this year. Thus, one interesting trend that might emerge in future iterations of this poll may indicate higher levels of student awareness about current events in presidential election years.





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### 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.

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