

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, Maywood 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 2021 poll assesses students' opinions about public policy issues and civic engagement. Nearly 2,200 students participated in this poll— from all class years and a variety of majors. Part-time and graduate students are well represented in the data. The poll is distributed online through our academic partners, and the data was collected during September 2021.

The Institute is an applied research and economic consulting organization that fulfills two related priorities— (1) customized client solutions and strategies to facilitate decision-making, and (2) 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. This empirical, objective information is intended to drive discussion and innovative solutions that enhance regional quality of life and standard of living.

"It is exhilarating to know that students in Northeast Pennsylvania value civic participation—particularly in light of public health crises and other global unrest in recent years. Their engagement inspires hopefulness for the region, and for the future. It brings to mind the wise words of Vonnegut—"Every so often, in the midst of chaos, you come across an amazing, inexplicable instance of civic responsibility."

Greg Cant, Ph.D., President & CEO, Wilkes University

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.

More than nine percent of students believe that the United States is headed in the right direction, while nearly 51 percent believe the country is on the wrong course. Yet another 26.9 percent indicated feelings that the country's direction is ultimately unchanged, while a final 12.9 percent are uncertain about the country's direction. The margin between 'right track' and 'wrong track' answers has grown, from a deficit of 18 percentage points in 2018 to 25 in 2019, 37 in 2020, and now 41.6 percent.

Students' perceptions of Pennsylvania's direction are considerably less certain, with 34.5 percent withholding opinion on the subject. Of those who did share their thoughts, 25.9 percent claim that the Commonwealth's direction is fundamentally unchanged, 15.1 percent express optimism, and 24.5 percent have concerns. In the past year, concerns have increased 6.6 percent and optimism has decreased 5.3 percent.



Student respondents deemed the cost of education, healthcare policy, jobs and economic development, government corruption, and public health to be the most important national public policy issues, while policies related to the national debt were rated least important.

Students were asked to evaluate the importance of various public policy issues 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) the cost of education (4.5); (2) healthcare policy (4.4); (3) jobs and the economy (4.4); (4) corruption of government or public officials (4.4); (5) public health (4.4); (6) equality or civil rights issues (4.3); (7) government efficiency (4.2); and (8) criminal justice or police issues (4.2).

The bottom tier of issues include (1) the national debt (3.6); (2) immigration (3.8); (3) tax policy (3.8); (4) Social Security (3.9); (5) energy policy (4.0); (6) terrorism and homeland security (4.2); (7) climate change (4.2); and (8) issues related to education—other than cost (4.2).



"Let us work together to encourage student participation in community activities such as city council meetings. Doing so will enhance trust and empathy throughout the region, while also fostering a sense of connectedness to the area. As they recognize Northeastern Pennsylvania as home, they will be motivated to support new policies, join the local workforce, and make meaningful investments here."

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

Students overwhelmingly indicated that they are cautious and wary of others and their intentions.

Students were questioned about whether they should trust people in general. Only 7.1 percent believe that most people can be trusted. Fewer than 48.0 percent are less likely to trust others, as they can't be too careful. Additionally, 43.0 percent of the respondents indicated that their trust in people depends on other factors.

Trust in the people or groups	
Most people can be trusted.	7.1%
You can't be too careful.	47.9%
Depends	43.0%
Not sure	2.0%

Students feel reasonably well-informed about current events, crediting the internet and national news sources.

Eighty-seven percent of students reported feeling 'very informed' or 'somewhat informed' on current events. Their primary sources include the internet (social media in particular), television (for national news), and word of mouth.

Less utilized forms of media include podcasts, smartphone apps, radio, and late night television.

These results are largely consistent with those of last year's poll, continuing to suggest that more traditional forms of online content (such as newspaper subscriptions or even social media) remain the prevailing forms of content circulation for students.

Knowledge of current events	
Very informed	25.0%
Somewhat informed	62.0%
Not very informed	11.2%
Not at all informed	1.8%



"It is an encouraging sign that college students in Northeast Pennsylvania took the time to express their opinions and share their deep value of community engagement and civic participation. The Institute's annual student engagement poll is a useful barometer to measure how these young adults feel about the state and direction of our local communities, NEPA region, commonwealth, and nation. All of us as leaders and community members should take note and seek to understand the expressed concerns of our next generation who will shape tomorrow's environmental, health care, and social policies that will significantly impact our collective health and well-being."

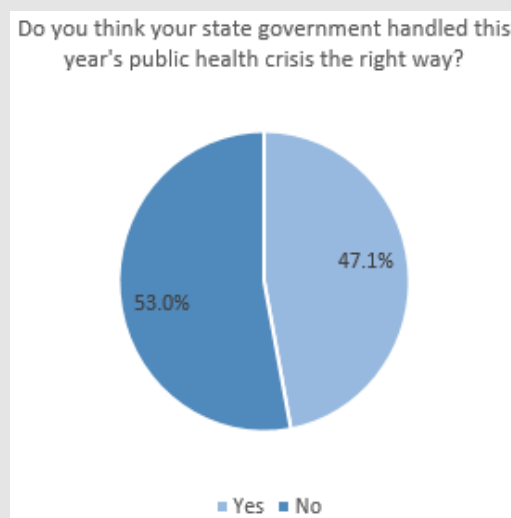
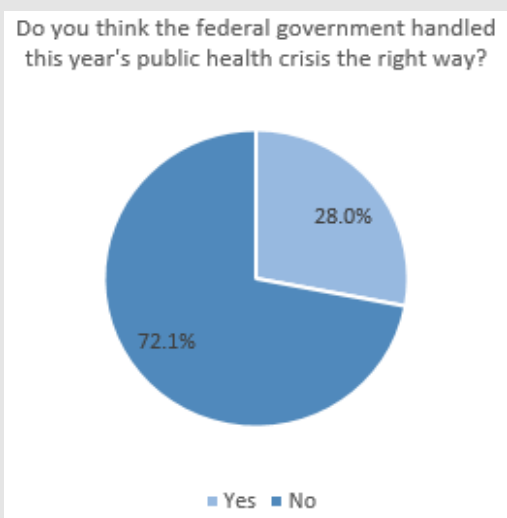
Linda Thomas-Hemak, M.D.

President and CEO, The Wright Center for Graduate Medical Education

For the 2021 poll, students also shared their opinions regarding federal and state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

More than 72.0 percent of the respondents reportedly did not think the federal government appropriately handled the public health crisis.

With regard to the state government, the disparity between responses was significantly greater. Over 47.0 percent agreed that the state government appropriately handled the public health crisis, and 53.0 percent did not.



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 83.0 percent of students who responded to the survey have, on at least one occasion, discussed politics or government during class. More than 81.0 percent of students have participated in an event to raise money for charity. Furthermore, 76.0 percent have participated in a debate about public issues (in or out of school).

Students were also asked about their attendance of local public meetings, such as sessions of city councils, school boards, or county commissions; over 49.0 percent never attended such a meeting.

A large majority of students are registered to vote, and likely to vote in the upcoming election.

Close to 78 percent of regional students are registered to vote in any location within the United States, with registration rates rising beyond 89.6 percent for students over the age of 19. Nearly 36 percent of students are registered Democrats, followed by Republicans at 31.5 percent, unaffiliated voters at 23 percent, and members of other parties (Libertarians, Greens, etc.) at three percent. Over 69 percent of students are at least somewhat likely to vote in the November 2022 election.

"Every educator, business manager, nonprofit director, community organizer, and religious leader in the region has something to gain from this annual civic engagement poll. From political affiliation and voting intention to media preference and awareness of current events, the insights shared by local college students can be leveraged to fuel economic growth and improve overall health and well-being."

Marwan A. Wafa, Chancellor, Penn State Scranton



"The growth in college students' concern with issues of social and political justice is both a commentary on the challenges of our time and an encouraging sign for the future of our nation. The Institute's fall poll reaffirms the growing investment of college students in civic participation and concern about important regional, national, and international issues. The results also reinforce our responsibility as educators, mentors, and community leaders to guide these students into greater engagement and provide opportunities for them to grow in their understanding and participation in all aspects of public life."

**Daniel J. Myers Ph.D. , President & CEO,
Misericordia University**

Members of the regional student population who are likeliest to vote are generally well-informed, and concerned about the direction of the United States.

Among student respondents, 55.8 percent of Democrats and 50.7 percent of Republicans self-identify as 'very likely' to vote in the upcoming elections. Nearly 95 percent of students most likely to vote are at least somewhat informed about current affairs.

They also believe, by more than a 4-1 margin, that the United States is currently on the wrong track, and are most concerned about: (1) corruption of government or public officials; (2) healthcare; (3) the cost of college education; (4) jobs and the economy; (5) public health; and (6) 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.

Students appear to be most concerned about four public policy issues: (1) the cost of a college education; (2) healthcare policy; (3) environmental issues; and (4) jobs and economy. In particular, the costs of college education and healthcare have been top public policy issues for regional students since this poll commenced in 2015.

The importance of jobs and the economy has declined more than any other policy issue (from 63 percent to 50 percent), while the perceived importance of environment policy has grown most (from 35 percent to 50 percent).

Students Describing Public Policy Issues as 'Very Important'							
National Public Policy Issue	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Cost of College	66%	59%	63%	66%	61%	60%	62%
Education	45%	44%	42%	45%	45%	45%	43%
Health Care	55%	52%	55%	58%	61%	63%	61%
Jobs and Economy	63%	55%	55%	54%	52%	51%	50%
Terrorism	50%	50%	50%	45%	46%	41%	45%
Environmental	35%	34%	42%	43%	55%	51%	50%
Energy	32%	28%	32%	33%	40%	35%	37%
Immigration	26%	26%	28%	28%	33%	32%	32%
Social Security	36%	29%	31%	33%	32%	31%	32%
Taxes	34%	25%	28%	26%	30%	24%	27%
Efficiency of Government	50%	45%	44%	42%	44%	46%	43%

Media Dissemination

Reliance on traditional media conduits, whether by print (newspaper), television, or radio, has generally declined since 2016. On the other hand, the use of the internet—including social media—has become an important resource for students.

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. These methods include 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 2017 and 2018.

Source of Information About Current Events						
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Newspaper	43%	31%	35%	32%	33%	32%
Television	75%	61%	59%	56%	41%	41%
Radio	36%	31%	32%	31%	26%	27%
Internet (blog or website)	79%	64%	47%	48%	48%	43%
Internet (social media)	72%	60%	70%	70%	73%	71%
Internet (other)	28%	24%	44%	39%	43%	43%
Word of mouth	63%	53%	57%	55%	56%	57%

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.

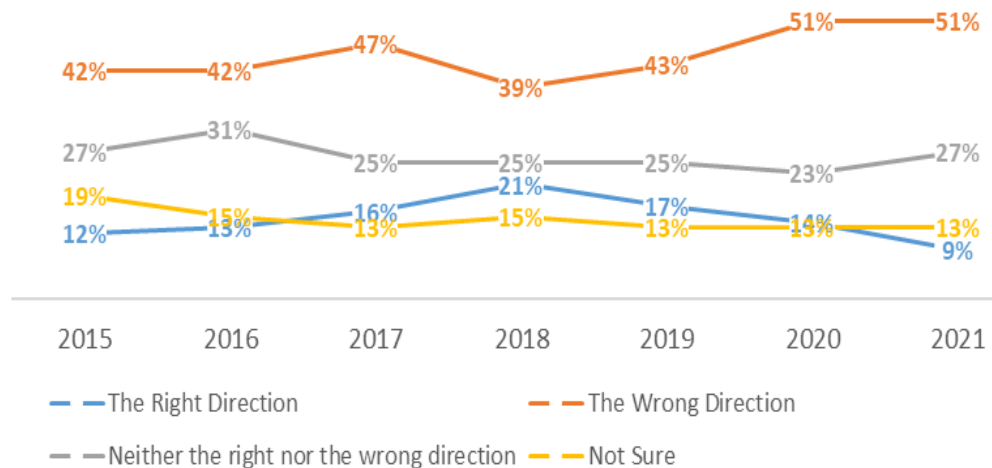
Although the percentages of students selecting any given option have fluctuated over time, some broader patterns still emerge. First, among students polled about the

direction of the United States, a rising percentage of students feel the country is headed in the wrong direction, from 42 percent in 2015 to 51 percent in 2020 and 2021—although that number dipped to a low of 39 percent in 2018. Furthermore, the percentages of students who are unsure or ambivalent have remained relatively steady.

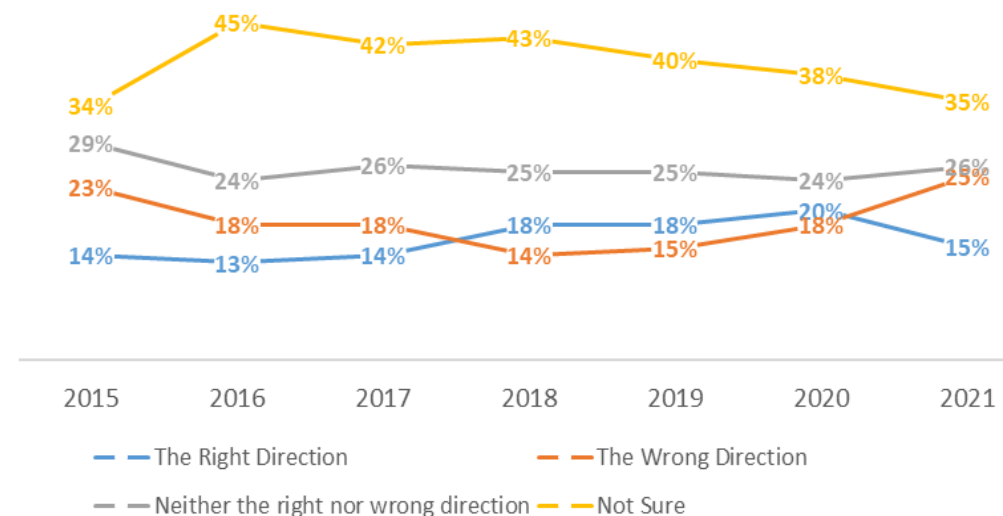
Long-term trends are more easily observable among students polled about the direction of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In every poll conducted since 2015, the plurality of students have been uncertain about the trajectory of Pennsylvania's direction, suggesting a possible disengagement from state-level politics as opposed to national developments.

Among students who have more fully formed opinions of current events in Pennsylvania, however, other observable trends emerge. For example, the proportions of students who think the state is heading in the right and wrong directions fluctuated most notably between 2017 and 2021; the interim years represent a period during which larger shares of students had more confidence in the commonwealth's trajectory.

DIRECTION OF THE U.S., 2021

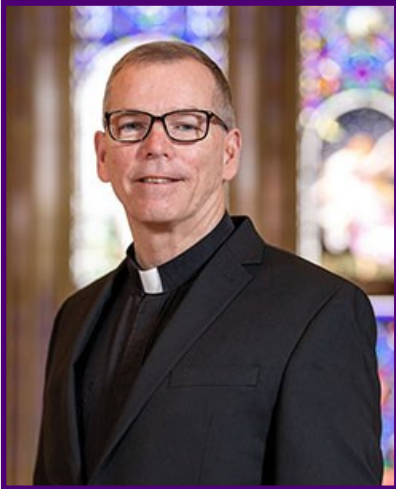


DIRECTION OF PENNSYLVANIA, 2021



"We have so much to learn from our students. Their participation in this poll—not to mention their honesty—is proof that they are here to teach us. Why not aim for collaboration? I envision a mutual exchange of information and support, for the benefit of all."

Katie Leonard, Ed.D., President & CEO, Johnson College



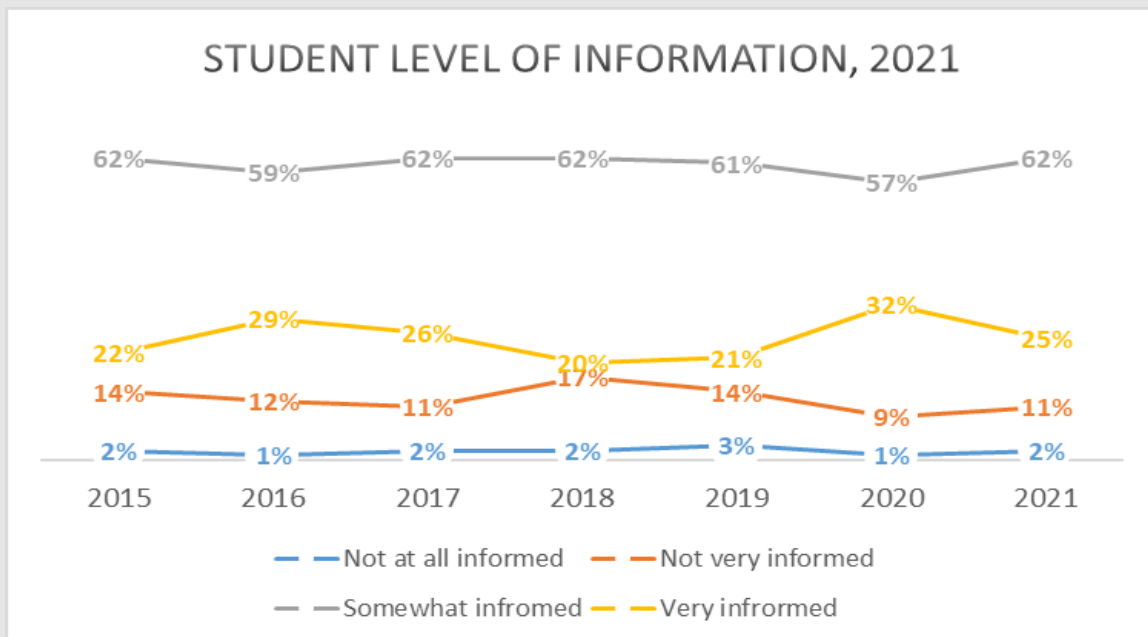
"At the heart of the mission of higher education is a commitment to form engaged citizens willing to grapple with challenging issues on the local, regional, state, national, and international levels. Student participation in this poll suggests that our colleges and universities are fostering practices of good citizenship."

Rev. Thomas P. Looney, C.S.C., Ph.D., President & CEO, King's College

Knowledge of Current Events

Since 2015, respondents' levels of information about current events has remained relatively steady. Most notably, however, the number of students who feel very informed about the news has risen and the number who feel uninformed has declined. These shares of respondents were most balanced in 2018, before diverging again toward the greatest disparity (23 percentage points) in 2020.

Finally, while 2016 is the only other 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 regional 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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