

*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, Wilkes University, and the business community*

## Student Polling Project

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 2022 poll assesses students' opinions about public policy issues and civic engagement. Nearly 880 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 2022.

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
- (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.

The Institute was formed as a unique collaborative of regional higher education institutions and the business community, and founded on the belief that good decisions are driven by good data.

### **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.

Overall, 6.44 percent of students believe that the United States is headed in the right direction, while 55.94 percent believe the country is on the wrong course. Yet another 24.92 percent indicated feelings that the country's direction is ultimately unchanged, while a final 12.71 percent are uncertain about the country's direction. The proportion of 'right track' answers has declined from 9.3 percent in 2021, and the share of 'unchanged' answers has decreased slightly from 26.9 percent in 2021.

Students' perceptions of Pennsylvania's direction are considerably less certain with 30.36 percent of respondents unsure. Another 33.50 percent claim that the Commonwealth's direction is fundamentally unchanged, while 13.53 percent express optimism and 22.61 percent have concerns. A decrease in the level of optimism was noted from 2021 (15.10 percent), along with a decrease in concerns since 2021 (24.5 percent).

"The generations preceding the young people in our universities are challenged to work toward a society that engenders the trust that our young people cannot feel, that seeks solutions to mend the divisions that keep us from moving forward, and that affords them the tools that will allow them to live productive and fulfilling lives. Unless they are able to embrace the values of truth, integrity, and societal justice, they move into the future without the hope of a better world. This is what we owe the next generation."



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

## Public Policy and Civic Engagement 2022

**Student respondents deemed healthcare, the cost of education, government corruption, and jobs and the economy to be the most important public policy issues, while policies related to taxes and 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 of 1 to 5, the most important public policy issues to regional students are: (1) healthcare; (2) cost of college education; (3) corruption of government or public officials; (4) jobs and economy; (5) public health; (6) equality or civil rights issues; (7) issues related to education (other than the cost of college); (8) efficiency of government; (9) criminal justice or police issues; and (10) climate change.

The bottom tier issues include: (1) the national debt; (2) immigration; (3) taxes; (4) social security; (5) terrorism/homeland security; and (6) energy.



"Whether they are concerned or excited about the nation's trajectory, it is heartening to know that our students are engaged. Their awareness and interest are integral to forward momentum in all areas – from education and workforce development to politics and public health. I have full faith in these emerging leaders."

Linda Thomas-Hemak, MD., FACP, FAAP  
President and CEO  
The Wright Center for Graduate Medical Education

Knowledge of Current Events	
Very informed	25.7%
Somewhat informed	61.1%
Not very informed	11.1%
Not at all informed	2.1%

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

Their primary sources are the internet, in particular social media, or online communities, televised national news, websites of newspapers, websites of television networks, and televised local news.

Less utilized forms of media include radio, podcasts, smartphone news apps, and late night television. Similar to 2021, this continuing trend suggests that smartphones are still major contenders in the field of media dissemination, while more traditional forms of online content (such as internet news or even social media) remain the prevailing forms of content circulation for students.

## Public Policy and Civic Engagement 2022

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

A plurality of students, 48.4 percent, indicated that one can't be too careful in dealing with people. Nearly 42.0 percent indicated that it depends on the situation, while only 8.4 percent indicated that most people can be trusted and 1.3 percent were unsure.

Trust in other people or groups	
Most people can't be trusted.	8.4%
You can't be too careful.	48.4%
Depends.	41.9%
Not sure.	1.3%

### **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 82.0 percent of students who responded to the survey have, on at least one occasion, discussed politics or government during class. Nearly 80.0 percent of students have participated in an event to raise money for charity. Furthermore, 72.7 percent have participated in a debate about public issues (in or out of school).

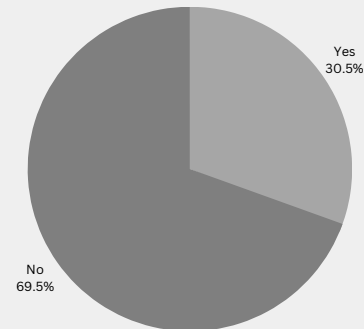
Students were also asked about their participation in political debates or discussions online, and over 49.0 percent had never engaged in such interaction.

### **For the 2022 poll, students also shared their opinions regarding federal and state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

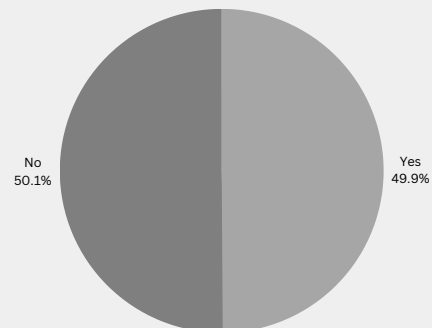
Nearly 70.0 percent of the respondents reportedly did not think the federal government appropriately handled the public health crisis.

With regard to the state government, the disparity between responses was significantly greater. Over 49.9 percent agreed that the state government appropriately handled the public health crisis, and 50.1 percent did not.

Do you think the federal government handled the COVID-19 public health crisis the right way?



Do you think the state government handled the COVID-19 public health crisis the right way?



## Public Policy and Civic Engagement 2022

"We are educating the public servants of tomorrow. It is a formidable responsibility, and I am honored to share it with so many capable and distinguished colleagues. This poll functions as a thermometer of sorts, letting us know the degree to which our students are up to the task as well as how and where to focus our efforts. It is a helpful tool that effectively captures the subtle changes and nuances in student perceptions, experiences, and intentions."

Daniel Myers, Ph.D.  
President  
Misericordia University



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

Close to 82.0 percent of regional students are registered to vote in any location within the United States, with registration rates rising beyond 92.0 percent for students over the age of 19. Over 38.0 percent of all responding students are registered Democrats, followed by Republicans at 26.9 percent, unaffiliated voters at 23.0 percent, and members of other parties (Libertarians, Greens, etc.) at 4.9 percent. Over 77.3 percent of students were at least somewhat likely to vote in the November 2022 election.

"Voting truly is a pinnacle of civic engagement, so it is both telling and promising that more than four-fifths of our students are registered to vote and that nearly as many expressed their intentions to vote. Increased presence of these individuals at community events, such as school board and city council meetings, is another effective means of facilitating change. I am eager to witness it."

Thomas Leary  
President  
Luzerne County Community College



### **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, 79.0 percent of Democrats and 63.9 percent of Republicans self-identified as 'very likely' to vote in the upcoming elections. Over 94.0 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) public health; (3) equality and civil rights issues; (4) health care; (5) cost of college education; and (6) climate change.

# Public Policy and Civic Engagement 2022

## 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 63.0 percent to 48.0 percent), while the perceived importance of environment policy has grown most (from 35.0 percent to 49.0 percent).

Students Describing Public Policy Issues as "Very Important"								
National Public Policy Issue	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Cost of College	66%	59%	63%	66%	61%	60%	62%	61%
Education	45%	44%	42%	45%	45%	45%	43%	46%
Healthcare	55%	52%	55%	58%	61%	63%	61%	60%
Jobs and Economy	63%	55%	55%	54%	52%	51%	50%	48%
Terrorism	50%	50%	50%	45%	46%	41%	45%	39%
Environmental	35%	34%	42%	43%	55%	51%	50%	49%
Energy	32%	28%	32%	33%	40%	35%	37%	35%
Immigration	26%	26%	28%	28%	33%	32%	32%	30%
Social Security	36%	29%	31%	33%	32%	31%	32%	29%
Taxes	34%	25%	28%	26%	30%	24%	27%	26%
Efficiency of Government	50%	45%	44%	42%	44%	46%	43%	44%

## 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	2022
Newspaper (local)	43%	31%	35%	32%	33%	29%	34%
Television (National News)	75%	61%	59%	56%	41%	57%	51%
Radio	36%	31%	32%	31%	26%	27%	25%
Internet (newspapers)	79%	64%	47%	48%	48%	50%	48%
(Internet (social media)	72%	60%	70%	70%	73%	71%	73%
(Internet (other)	28%	24%	44%	39%	43%	43%	42%
Word of Mouth	63%	53%	57%	55%	56%	57%	57%

# Public Policy and Civic Engagement 2022

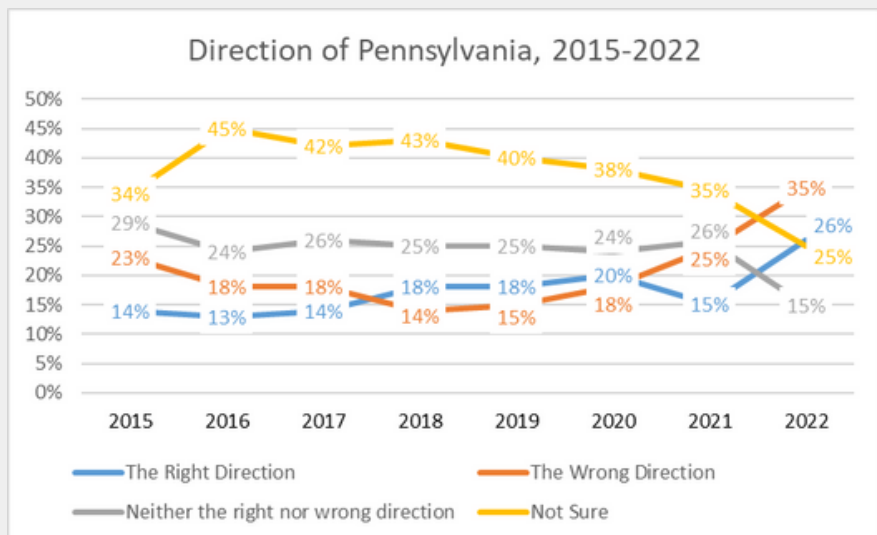
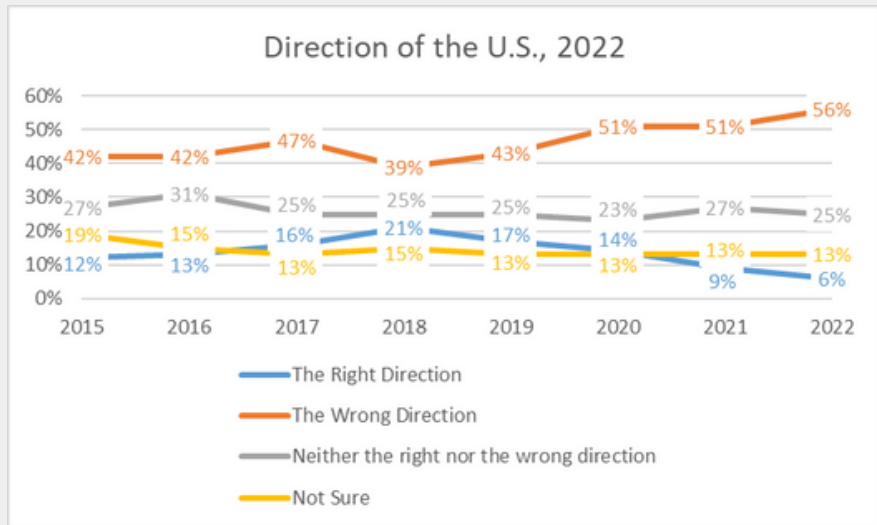
## Direction of the United States and Pennsylvania

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 56 percent in 2022—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 between 2015 and 2021, 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. For the first time, 2022 responses indicating ambivalence and uncertainty have dropped below those indicating more decisiveness.

Other observable trends emerge among students who have more fully formed opinions of current events in Pennsylvania. 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.



## Public Policy and Civic Engagement 2022

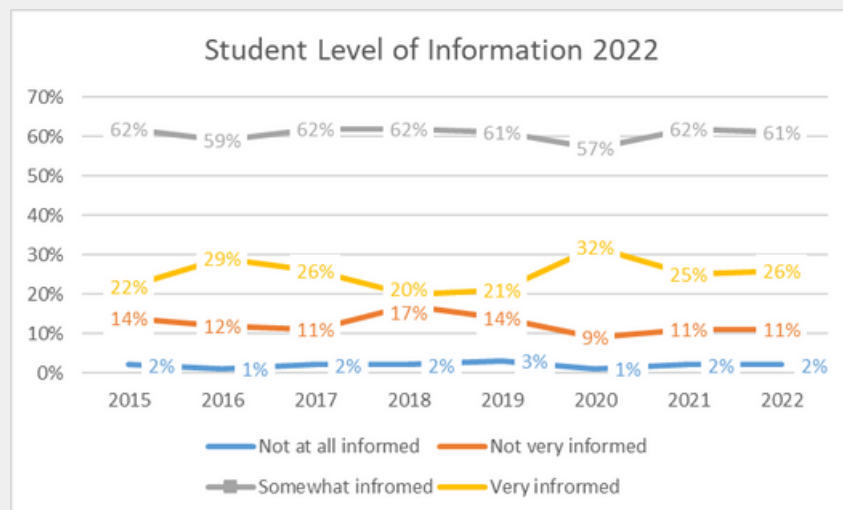
"As the content of this poll suggests, civic activity extends far beyond jury duty or even voting. It requires mindfulness, commitment, critical thinking, and awareness. As leaders of the region's higher education infrastructure, we must ensure that our students develop and maintain these attributes. Their potential is unquestionable and I support, admire, and applaud their abilities to energize communities, develop constructive policies, or otherwise spark positive societal change."

Jill Murray, Ph.D.  
President  
Lackawanna 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 2020. 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.

# The Institute

*Turning Information into Insight*

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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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