

# Public Policy and Civic Engagement 2024

## 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 Hazleton, 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 2024 poll assesses students' opinions about public policy issues and civic engagement. A total of 920 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 2024.

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.**

Five percent of students believe that the United States is headed in the right direction, while 53.07 percent believe the country is on the wrong course. Additionally, another 23.94 percent indicated feelings that the country's direction is ultimately unchanged, while a final 17.95 percent are uncertain about the country's direction. The proportion of 'right track' answers has declined slightly from 6.19 percent in 2023, and the share of 'not sure' answers has increased from 12.87 percent in 2023.

Students' perceptions of Pennsylvania's direction are considerably less certain, with 31.97 percent of respondents indicating that they are not sure. Another 31.18 percent claim that the Commonwealth's direction is unchanged, while 20.31 percent express optimism and 16.54 percent have concerns. An increase in the level of optimism was noted from 2023 (18.67 percent), along with a decrease in concerns (22.36 percent).

"As this generation of students thinks about the future, it appears their concerns about debt relief, access to healthcare, and affordable housing hold as much weight as career fulfillment opportunities and family considerations. These concerns are valid and insightful. It is important for all of us as educators, employers, policymakers, and other leaders to acknowledge these concerns, while we responsively support and implement solutions that will enhance high quality, accessible healthcare services, economic mobility, and overall quality of life in our regional community for many years to come."

Linda Thomas-Hemak, MD., FACP, FAAP  
President and CEO

The Wright Center for Graduate Medical Education



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**Student respondents deemed the cost of education, healthcare, jobs and the economy, and government corruption to be the most important public policy issues, while policies related to immigration and international affairs and/or foreign policy 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) cost of college education; (2) healthcare; (3) jobs and economy; (4) corruption of government or public officials; (5) equality or civil rights issues; (6) public health; (7) efficiency of government (8) issues related to education (other than the cost of college); (9) terrorism/homeland security; and (10) criminal justice or police issues.

The bottom tier issues include: (1) international affairs and/or foreign policy; (2) immigration; (3) energy; (4) the national debt; (5) taxes; (6) social security; and (7) climate change.

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

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

Knowledge of Current Events	
Very informed	26.9%
Somewhat informed	59.8%
Not very informed	12.3%
Not at all informed	1.0%

Less utilized forms of media include radio, smartphone apps of television networks, other smartphone apps, late night television, and smartphone newspaper apps. Similar to 2023, 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.

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

Almost half of the students (47.79 percent) indicated that one can't be too careful in dealing with people. Approximately 40.00 percent indicated that it depends on the situation, while only 9.23 percent indicated that most people can be trusted and 2.58 percent were unsure.

Trust in other people or groups	
Most people can be trusted.	9.2%
You can't be too careful.	47.8%
Depends.	40.4%
Not sure.	2.6%

**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.**

Nearly 80.0 percent of students have participated in an event to raise money for charity. Approximately 76.0 percent of students who responded to the survey have, on at least one occasion, discussed politics or government during class. Furthermore, 65.0 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 nearly 58.0 percent had never engaged in such interaction.

**For the 2024 poll, students were asked to rate their levels of agreement with the following statements:**

*I discuss government/politics nearly every day.*

*I follow those with similar beliefs to mine (e.g., Twitter).*

Overall, they are unlikely to discuss the government or politics on a daily basis.

Although almost one-third of responding students are likely to follow people with similar beliefs on social media, a plurality indecisive about this issue.

Level of Agreement	Daily Discussions	Similar Beliefs
Strongly agree	8.5%	11.4%
Agree	19.6%	28.8%
Neither agree nor disagree	22.6%	42.6%
Disagree	34.9%	11.8%
Strongly disagree	14.5%	5.5%

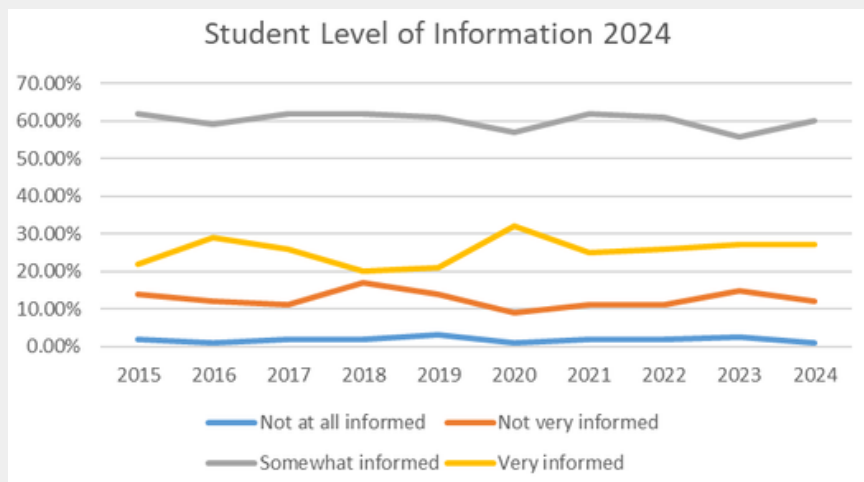
# Public Policy and Civic Engagement 2024

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

Over 80.0 percent of regional students are registered to vote in any location within the United States. Nearly 37.0 percent of all responding students are registered Democrats, followed by Republicans at 30.1 percent, unaffiliated voters at 22.5 percent, and members of other parties (Libertarians, Greens, etc.) at 3.8 percent. Over 83.0 percent of students are at least somewhat likely to vote in the November 2024 election. Consistent with general trends in political science research, the likelihood of voter engagement generally increases for presidential elections.

## Knowledge of Current Events

Since 2015, respondents' levels of information about current events have remained relatively steady. Most notably – and despite some fluctuation – the share of students who feel very informed about the news has risen. The shares of respondents feeling very informed and not very informed were most balanced in 2018, before diverging again toward the greatest disparity (23 percentage points) in 2020. Over the last several years, proportions of students who were very informed and those who were not very informed experienced small increases.



Finally, while 2016 and 2020 are the only other presidential election years in which The Institute has conducted this poll, overall levels of student current events awareness noticeably increased during those years and in 2024. Thus, an emergent trend points to higher levels of student awareness about current events in presidential election years.

## 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, 87.1 percent of Democrats and 80.6 percent of Republicans self-identified as 'very likely' to vote in the upcoming elections. About 93.5 percent of students most likely to vote are at least somewhat informed about current affairs.

They are most concerned about: (1) Health care, (2) Cost of college education, (3) Jobs and the economy, (4) Corruption of government or public officials, (5) Public health, and (6) Efficiency of government.

# Public Policy and Civic Engagement 2024

## 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 three public policy issues: (1) cost of education; (2) healthcare; and (3) 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.

In the past year, the perceived importance of energy policy has declined more than any other policy issue (from 34.0 percent to 29.0 percent), while the perceived importance of government efficiency has grown most (from 42.0 percent to 47.0 percent).

National Public Policy Issue	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Cost of College	66%	59%	63%	66%	61%	60%	62%	61%	66%	66%
Education	45%	44%	42%	45%	45%	45%	43%	46%	44%	47%
Healthcare	55%	52%	55%	58%	61%	63%	61%	60%	65%	65%
Jobs and Economy	63%	55%	55%	54%	52%	51%	50%	48%	56%	54%
Terrorism	50%	50%	50%	45%	46%	41%	45%	39%	44%	41%
Environmental	35%	34%	42%	43%	55%	51%	50%	49%	39%	40%
Energy	32%	28%	32%	33%	40%	35%	37%	35%	34%	29%
Immigration	26%	26%	28%	28%	33%	32%	32%	30%	29%	29%
Social Security	36%	29%	31%	33%	32%	31%	32%	29%	34%	36%
Taxes	34%	25%	28%	26%	30%	24%	27%	26%	30%	33%
Efficiency of Government	50%	45%	44%	42%	44%	46%	43%	44%	42%	47%

## 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.

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Newspaper (local)	43%	31%	35%	32%	33%	29%	34%	34%	26%
Television (National News)	75%	61%	59%	56%	41%	57%	51%	54%	56%
Radio	36%	31%	32%	31%	26%	27%	25%	25%	24%
Internet (newspapers)	79%	64%	47%	48%	48%	50%	48%	40%	37%
Internet (social media)	72%	60%	70%	70%	73%	71%	73%	73%	71%
Internet (other)	28%	24%	44%	39%	43%	43%	42%	40%	34%
Word of Mouth	63%	53%	57%	55%	56%	57%	57%	57%	57%

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.



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## Direction of the United States and Pennsylvania

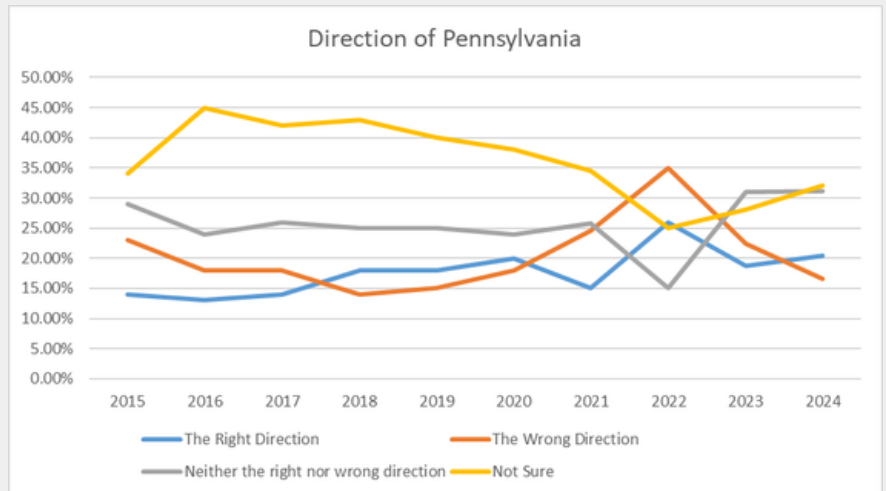
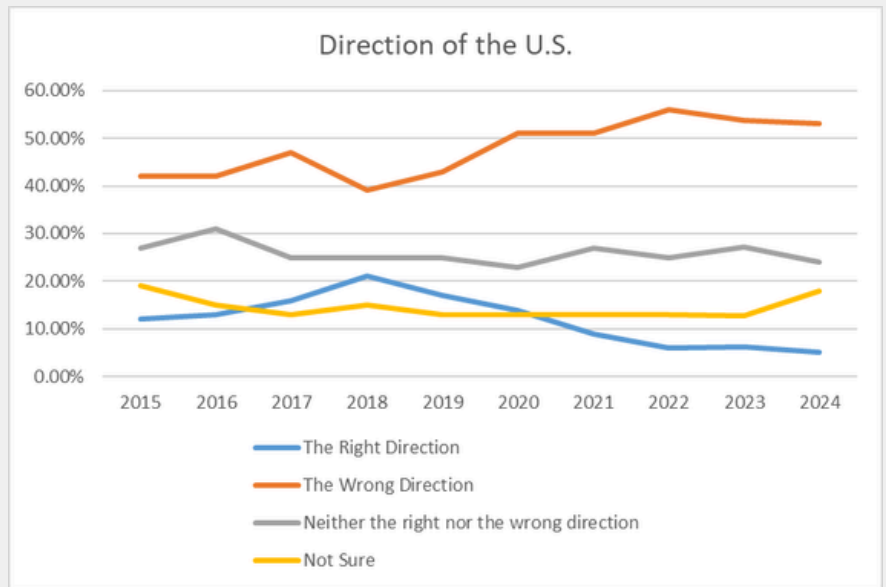
Every Public Policy and Civic Engagement poll conducted thus far has asked respondents to indicate in what direction (if any) both the United States and Pennsylvania were heading.

Although the percentages of students selecting any given option have fluctuated over time, some broader patterns still emerge. Among students polled about the direction of the United States, the share of students who feel the country is headed in the right direction has decreased slightly compared to 2023, and more than half compared to a peak in 2018.

Conversely, the percentage of students who feel the country is headed in the wrong direction has increased more than 10 percent since 2018.

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. This uncertainty again reach majority share status in 2024, after a dip in 2022.

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. As of 2024, a larger share once again is optimistic about the direction of the state.



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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.

## 2024 Institute Underwriters

### Signature Underwriters

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Luzerne County  
PPL Electric Utilities  
Sordoni Family Foundation

### Contributing Underwriters

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The Luzerne Foundation  
Wayne County Community Foundation  
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