



Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics

Erie County and the Trump Administration

*A Survey of 412 Registered
Voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania*

Prepared by: The Mercyhurst Center
for Applied Politics at Mercyhurst
University

Joseph M. Morris, Director
Maggie Hackney, Sophia Jensen,
Logan Ford, Katie Johnston, Project
Managers

Context of the Poll

The Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics' Spring 2019 poll is the third of five polls of voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania. The polls will be conducted annually and include a standard battery of questions addressing a wide range of issues related to the public's perception of Donald Trump and his performance as president. The goal of the project is to provide an accurate account of the evolution of public opinion in Erie County for the duration of the Trump administration in service of the democratic process. All poll results will be made available to the public via the Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics webpage.

Summary of Findings

A Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics poll of 412 registered voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania, (MOE +/-5, March 11 – March 20, 2019, live interviewers) finds bad news and good news for Donald Trump.

The Bad News: Nearly two and a half years after helping Donald Trump win a narrow victory over Hillary Clinton in the race for President of the United States, registered voters in Erie County give the president poor marks for his job performance. Only 35% of voters approve of the job he is doing as president, while a majority (55%) say they disapprove. Likewise, today only 43% of voters have a favorable opinion of the President and 61% say they believe the nation is off on the wrong track (right direction = 33%). These numbers contrast with those obtained in polls of Erie County voters conducted in February and October 2017, which were more positive for the president. When asked whether they approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling 14 specific issues, either a majority or plurality of voters say they disapprove the way he is handling most of them. Perceptions of Donald Trump's job performance, his favorability, feelings about the direction of the nation, and his handling of issues are heavily influenced by voters' party affiliations.

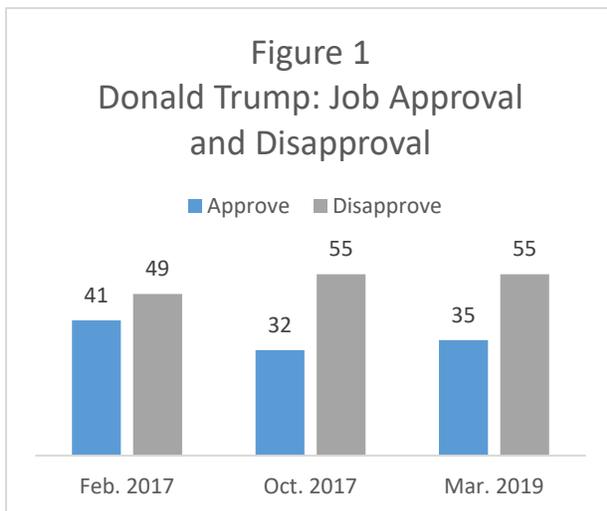
The Good News: If Donald Trump's job performance, favorability, and handling of multiple domestic issues may be cause for concern as we approach the 2020 election, voters' perception of the economy may be cause for confidence. For the first time since Donald Trump's election, a solid majority (59%) of Erie County

voters describe the state of the nation’s economy as either “excellent” (7%) or “good” (51%) as opposed to “not so good” (31%) or “poor” (9%). Voters’ perceptions of Erie County’s economy are also positive. Today, voters’ perceptions of their families’ financial situations, the availability of jobs, and the overall state of the Erie County economy are more positive than they were in February and October of 2017. In addition, half of all voters approve of the way Donald Trump is handling national defense (approve =50%) and terrorism (approve =50%).

Challenges Facing Donald Trump in Erie County: Job Performance, Favorability, and Many Domestic Issues

History suggests that voters’ perceptions of a president’s job performance are important for predicting the outcome of presidential elections. Although no single variable can be used to accurately predict the outcome of all presidential elections, in nearly every election since the middle of the 20th century, incumbent candidates for President of the United States who had a national approval rating of 49% or higher at the time of the election won reelection.

Nearly two and a half years after helping Donald Trump win a narrow victory over Hillary Clinton in the race for President of the United States, registered voters in Erie County give the president poor marks for his job performance. Only 35% of



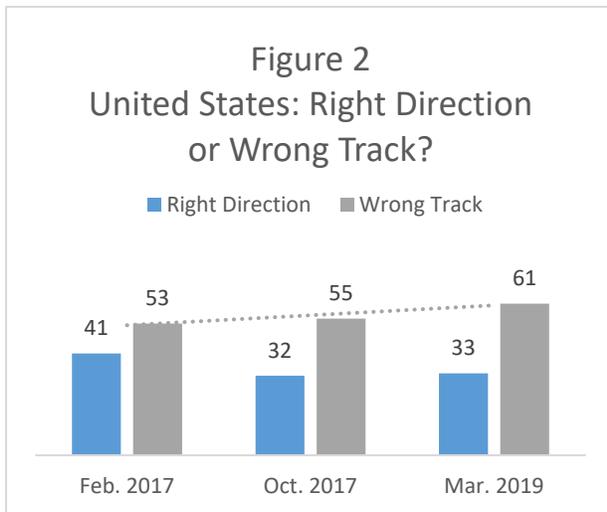
voters approve of the job he is doing as president, while a majority (55%) say they disapprove. These numbers contrast sharply with those obtained in a MCAP poll conducted February 2017, which found 41% approving and 49% disapproving of his job performance (see Figure 1); but the numbers are relatively unchanged from October 2017 when an MCAP poll found 32% approving and 55% disapproving.

Likewise, today 43% of voters have a favorable opinion of the president (18% = strongly favorable, 25% = somewhat favorable) compared to 47% (strongly favorable = 20%, somewhat favorable = 27%) in February 2017 and 40% (strongly

favorable = 14%, somewhat favorable = 26%) in October 2017.

Donald Trump's 35% approval rating in Erie County – a county where the number of registered Democrats is substantially greater than the number of registered Republicans – suggests that the president has work to do in the coming months if he hopes to carry it again in 2020. Perceptions of Donald Trump's job performance are heavily influenced by voters' party affiliations. Of the registered voters interviewed for this poll, 65% percent of self-identified Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say they approve of the job he is doing as president (disapprove = 23%) compared to only 13% of self-identified Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (disapprove = 83%). Similarly, 67% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents have a favorable opinion of the president (unfavorable = 24%) compared to only 18% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (unfavorable = 81%).

Erie County voters' dissatisfaction with the president's job performance and unfavorable opinion of him may be at least partly due to their perception of the trajectory of the nation. When asked whether they believe the nation is headed in



the right direction or off on the wrong track, 61% say they believe it is off on the wrong track and only 33% say it is headed in the right direction. These numbers, again, contrast sharply with those obtained in February 2017 when 53% said the nation was off on the wrong track and 40% said it was headed in the right direction. It is worth noting that the percentage of voters who today say that things in the United States are

“headed in the right direction” is nearly identical to October 2017 (32%); but the percentage of voters saying they’re “off on the wrong track” has steadily increased each iteration of this poll since February 2017 (see Figure 2).

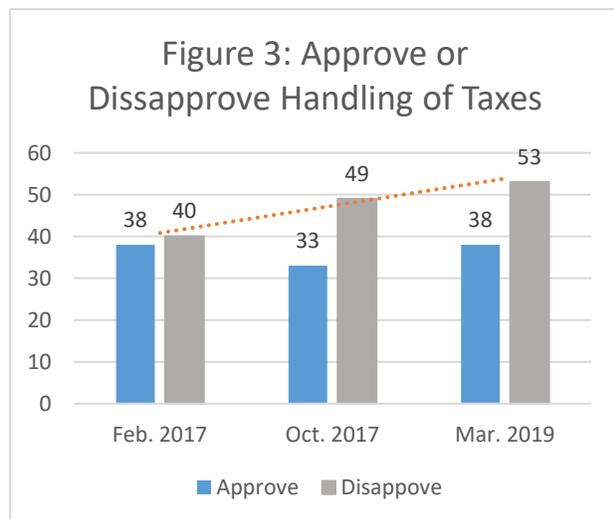
Why do Erie County voters express such dissatisfaction with the trajectory of the nation? Table 1 may provide some answers. When asked whether they approve or

disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling 14 issues, either a majority or plurality of voters say they disapprove the way his is handling most of them (see Table 1). A majority of voters disapprove of the way he is handling taxes (53%), trade with other nations (54%), America’s infrastructure (53%), healthcare (58%), gun violence (55%), the environment (65%), and our relations with other nations (60%). A plurality of voters disapprove of the way he is handling gun control (47%) and Social Security (44%).

Table 1. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...

	February 2017		October 2017		March 2019	
	Approve	Disapprove	Approve	Disapprove	Approve	Disapprove
The economy	49	36	47	45	52	45
Taxes	38	40	33	49	38	53
Relations w/other nations	32	60	26	68	34	60
Trade w/other nations	42	48	36	47	36	54
America’s infrastructure	45	35	32	48	30	53
Immigration	37	58	32	61	37	57
Healthcare	36	51	30	62	30	58
Social Security	28	37	25	42	31	44
Terrorism	49	44	46	44	50	39
National defense	49	41	48	43	50	40
Illegal drugs	39	31	35	43	46	37
Gun control	43	39	38	48	43	47
Gun violence	42	39	26	58	32	55
The environment	29	55	29	58	25	65

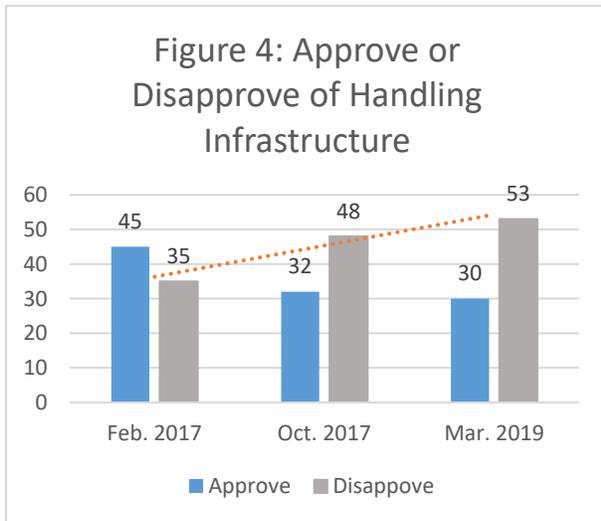
The president’s handling of two potentially important issues has been met with steadily increasing disapproval from Erie County voters since 2017: taxes and



America’s infrastructure. Prior to any clear articulation of the president’s plan for reforming the tax code in February 2017, Erie County voters were evenly divided in their approval and disapproval of his handling of the issue (see Table 1). During the period when the details of his tax reform bill were becoming known, voters’ disapproval of his handling of the issue increased from

40% in February 2017 to 49% in October 2017. Today – a little more than a year after the President’s Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 was signed into law – a majority of voters (53%) disapprove of the president’s handling of the issue. The steady increase in voters’ disapproval of his handling of taxes should be cause for concern to the president as the 2020 campaign approaches as he will undoubtedly present tax reform as a major accomplishment of his first term in office. Given Erie County voters’ increasing disapproval of his handling of taxes, presenting this issue as a success may not be advantageous in the Erie region.

Erie County voters’ disapproval of Donald Trump’s handling of America’s infrastructure should also be of concern as 2020 approaches. Communities like



those found in Erie County, which have been hit particularly hard by the decline of the manufacturing sector, are suffering from aging, declining and, in some cases, failing infrastructure. The fact that voters in these communities were a key component of the electoral coalition that swept Donald Trump into office in 2016 means that infrastructure may become a critical issue for him in 2020. Erie County voters who approve

of Donald Trump’s handling of America’s infrastructure have steadily declined from 45% in February 2017 to 30% in March 2019; while voters who disapprove have increased from 35% in February 2017 to 53% in March 2019.

Donald Trump’s Strengths in Erie County: Economy, National Defense, and Terrorism.

If Donald Trump’s job performance, favorability, and handling of multiple domestic issues may be cause for concern as we approach the 2020 election, voters’ perception of the economy may be cause for confidence. The state of the nation’s economy, for example, is widely considered to be another important predictor of the outcome of presidential elections. Simply stated, econometric models used to forecast the outcome of presidential elections are among the most

accurate models available. The results of the present poll suggest that Erie County voters’ perceptions of the national and local economies are increasingly positive (see Table 2).

For the first time since Donald Trump’s election, a solid majority (58%) of Erie County voters describe the state of the nation’s economy as either “excellent” (7%) or “good” (51%) as opposed to “not so good” (31%) or “poor” (9%). This is a sizeable improvement from February 2017 (see Table 2). Similarly, voters’ perceptions of Erie County’s economy have also improved. In February 2017 only 11% of voters described Erie County’s economy as “excellent” (1%) or “good” (10%), while today 28% describe it as “excellent” (2%) or “good” (26%). In addition, today voters are more likely to say that there are “plenty of jobs” in their community (26%) than in February 2017 (9%); and voters are much less likely to say that jobs are “difficult to find” (16%) than in 2017 (33%). Given these numbers, it is not surprising that more Erie County voters say they are “getting ahead” financially (30%) than did in February 2017.

Table 2
Erie Voters’ Perception of the National and Local Economy

	February 2017	October 2017	March 2019
State of Nation’s economy			
Excellent	2	5	7
Good	40	45	51
Not so good	42	38	31
Poor	16	11	9
State of Erie’s economy			
Excellent	1	2	2
Good	10	16	26
Not so good	52	47	50
Poor	34	30	20
Jobs where you live			
Plenty	9	15	26
Somewhat difficult to find	56	52	52
Very difficult to find	33	29	16
Family’s financial situation			
Getting ahead	21	23	30
Just keeping up	62	56	55
Falling behind	15	19	12

Aside from the national and local economy, jobs in Erie County’s communities, and families’ financial situation, voters give Donald Trump relatively high marks on the issue of national security. Half of Erie County voters say they approve of Donald Trump’s handling of national defense (50%) and terrorism (50%) – a fact that has remained unchanged since February 2017.

Congress and News Media

Just as Erie County voters’ perception of the state of the national and local economy has changed substantially in recent years, so, too, has their perception of Congress. Although a majority of voters (57%) still say they have an unfavorable opinion of Congress (somewhat unfavorable = 38%, strongly unfavorable = 19%), the percentage of voters reporting a favorable opinion of Congress (38%) is higher than in February and October 2017 when only 34% and 27% reported such an opinion, respectively.

Table 3. News Media

	February 2017		October 2017			March 2019			
	Great deal/fair amount	Not much/none at all	Great deal/fair amount	Not much/none at all	Great deal/fair amount	Not much/none at all			
Trust and confidence that news will be reported fully, accurately, and fairly	47	53	43	56	45	53			
	February 2017			October 2017			March 2019		
	Too Hard	Not Hard Enough	About Right	Too Hard	Not Hard Enough	About Right	Too Hard	Not Hard Enough	About Right
News media reporting on Trump	37	23	37	38	21	36	36	24	37
	February 2017		October 2017		March 2019				
	Fair and Justified	Unfair and Unjustified	Fair and Justified	Unfair and Unjustified	Fair and Justified	Unfair and Unjustified			
Donald Trump’s criticism of news media	41	53	41	51	41	54			

When it comes to news media, today a majority (53%) of voters say they have “not much” trust or “none at all” in the veracity of news reporting, which remains relatively unchanged from October 2017 (see Table 3). In terms of whether reporting on Donald Trump has been too hard (36%), not hard enough (24%), or about right (37%), there has been virtually no change since February 2017. When asked whether the president’s criticism of news media has been fair and justified or unfair and unjustified, a majority (54%) say it has been unfair and unjustified. This number, too, remains virtually unchanged since February 2017. Today’s poll results suggest that while a majority of Erie County voters remain skeptical of the ability of news media to present the news fully, accurately and fairly, a majority also see the president’s criticism of news media as unfair and unjustified.

Frequencies

Interviews were completed with 412 registered voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania. For a sample size of 412, there is a 95 percent probability that our survey results are within plus or minus 5 points (the margin of error) of the actual population distribution for any given question. For subsamples the margin of error is larger (depending on the size of the subsample). The data were weighted on gender, age and race to correct for minor discrepancies between the sample and population. Question order was randomized whenever possible. Due to rounding, column totals may not equal 100 percent.

1. To begin, do you approve or disapprove of the job Donald Trump is doing as president?

approve	35%
disapprove	55%
neither	3%
depends	5%
DK	2%
RF	0%

2. Generally speaking, how do you rate the way that Congress is doing its job? Would you say Congress is doing an excellent job, a good job, a fair job, or a poor job?

excellent job	1%
good job	8%
fair job	45%
poor job	41%
DK	2%
RF	0%

3. I'm going to read you a short list of issues and I would like you to tell me whether you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling each one.

Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling the economy?

approve	52%
disapprove	45%
neither (volunteered)	1%
depends (volunteered)	2%
DK	1%
RF	0%

4. How about taxes?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	38%
disapprove	53%

neither (volunteered)	2%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	4%
RF	0%

5. How about America's relationship with other nations?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	34%
disapprove	60%
neither (volunteered)	2%
depends (volunteered)	4%
DK	1%
RF	0%

6. How about trade with other nations?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	36%
disapprove	54%
neither (volunteered)	3%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	5%
RF	0%

7. How about America's infrastructure?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	30%
disapprove	53%
neither (volunteered)	5%
depends (volunteered)	4%
DK	8%
RF	1%

8. How about immigration?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	37%
disapprove	57%
neither (volunteered)	1%
depends (volunteered)	4%

DK	1%
RF	0%

9. How about health care?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	30%
disapprove	58%
neither (volunteered)	5%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	4%
RF	1%

10. How about Social Security?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	31%
disapprove	44%
neither (volunteered)	6%
depends (volunteered)	5%
DK	13%
RF	2%

11. How about terrorism?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	50%
disapprove	39%
neither (volunteered)	5%
depends (volunteered)	2%
DK	4%
RF	1%

12. How about national defense?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	50%
disapprove	40%
neither (volunteered)	3%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	4%
RF	0%

13. How about illegal drugs?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	46%
disapprove	37%
neither (volunteered)	5%
depends (volunteered)	2%
DK	10%
RF	0%

14. How about gun control?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	43%
disapprove	47%
neither (volunteered)	4%
depends (volunteered)	2%
DK	4%
RF	1%

15. How about gun violence?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	32%
disapprove	55%
neither (volunteered)	6%
depends (volunteered)	2%
DK	5%
RF	0%

16. How about the environment?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	25%
disapprove	65%
neither (volunteered)	3%
depends (volunteered)	2%
DK	5%
RF	1%

17. Generally speaking, do you believe things in the United States are headed in the right

direction, or that they're off on the wrong track?

right direction	33%
wrong track	61%
DK	5%
RF	1%

18. Would you describe the state of the nation's economy these days as excellent, good, not so good, or poor?

excellent	7%
good	51%
not so good	31%
poor	9%
DK	2%
RF	0%

19. Would you describe the state of Erie County's economy these days as excellent, good, not so good, or poor?

excellent	2%
good	26%
not so good	50%
poor	20%
DK	3%
RF	0%

20. Thinking about job opportunities where you live, would you say there are plenty of jobs available in your community, jobs are somewhat difficult to find in your community, or that jobs are very difficult to find in your community?

plenty of jobs	26%
somewhat difficult to find	52%
very difficult to find	16%
DK	6%
RF	0%

21. Which best describes your family's financial situation? Do you feel as if you are getting ahead financially, have just enough money to maintain your standard of living, or are you falling behind financially?

getting ahead	30%
just enough money	55%
falling behind	12%
DK	2%
RF	2%

22. In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the news media - such as newspapers, television and radio - when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly - a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or none at all?

great deal	9%
fair amount	36%
not very much	34%
none at all	19%
DK	2%
RF	0%

23. Do you feel that news media's reporting has been too hard on Donald Trump, not hard enough, or about right?

too hard	36%
not hard enough	24%
about right	37%
DK	3%
RF	1%

24. Generally speaking, do you feel Donald Trump's criticism of the news media has been fair and justified or unfair and unjustified.

fair and justified	41%
unfair and unjustified	54%
DK	4%
RF	1%

25. Is your opinion of the US Congress strongly favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or strongly unfavorable?

strongly favorable	2%
somewhat favorable	36%
somewhat unfavorable	38%
strongly unfavorable	19%
DK	3%
RF	1%

26. Is your opinion of Donald Trump strongly favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or strongly unfavorable?

strongly favorable	18%
somewhat favorable	25%
somewhat unfavorable	14%
strongly unfavorable	43%

DK	1%
RF	0%

27. Now I have just a few questions that we'll be using for statistical purposes. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or an independent?

Republican	42%
Democrat	51%
Independent	6%
other (volunteered)	0%
DK	0%
RF	0%

28. Generally speaking, do you consider yourself to be a liberal, conservative, or have you not thought much about this?

liberal	27%
conservative	35%
not though about	27%
neither/other (volunteered)	10%
DK	1%
RF	0%

29. Age

18-29 years	15%
30-39 years	14%
40-49 years	12%
50-69 years	42%
70 or more years	17%

30. What is your marital status?

single/divorced/widowed/separated	46%
married	53%
other (volunteered)	1%
DK	0%
RF	0%

31. If you add together the yearly incomes, before taxes, of all members of your household for the past year, would the total be...[read categories]

\$0-30,000	18%
\$30,001-60,000	22%
\$60,001-100,000	28%

\$100,010-150,000	11%
over \$150,000	5%
DK	7%
RF	9%

32. What is your race?

white/Caucasian	88%
non-white/Caucasian	12%
DK	0%
RF	0%

33. What is the highest level of education you completed?

grade school	2%
some high school	2%
high school	26%
some trade/vocational school	2%
trade/vocational certification	3%
some college/2-year degree	24%
college/4-year degree	24%
some graduate school	5%
master's degree	10%
doctorate	3%
DK	0%
RF	0%

34. Gender

male	52%
female	47%

Methodology

This report summarizes the results of a survey of registered voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania, which was conducted between March 11 and March 20, 2019.

During the nine-day field period, interviewers called weekday evenings between the hours of 6 and 9 p.m. and between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. on weekends. For each working phone number, interviewers made no fewer than six attempts to contact individuals selected to participate in the study. Calls were initiated by CATI software or manually dialed and relied on a list of randomly selected registered voters Pennsylvania obtained from L2.

A total of 412 individuals were interviewed. For a sample size of 412, there is a 95 percent probability that the results are within plus or minus 5 points (the margin of error) of the actual population distribution for any given question. For subsamples, the margin of error is higher (depending on the size of the subsample). Aside from sampling error, there are several factors that prevent the results obtained through a probability sample from being a perfect representation of the results that would be obtained if the entire population were interviewed. This non-sampling error may be caused by a variety of factors including, but not limited to, response rate and question order. In this survey, a variety of techniques were employed to reduce common sources of non-sampling error.

Response Rate

Calculating a response rate for a particular study involves considering a number of variables (see http://www.aapor.org/Response_Rates_An_Overview.htm); but, simply stated, it refers to the percentage of individuals in a sample that, when contacted, elect to participate in a study by responding to an interviewer's questions. In recent years, researchers have documented a sharp decline in response rates. Today, a typical study that relies on telephone interviews can expect a response rate of between 20 and 30%. Although it is unclear if, or to what extent, response rate is a source of non-sampling error, most polls strive to maximize response rate by making multiple attempts to contact individuals and taking steps to secure their cooperation once they have been reached. In this way, our study of registered voters in Pennsylvania is no different than most polls: No fewer than six attempts were made to contact hard-to-reach individuals. These attempts occurred during weekday evenings and on Saturday afternoons. To ensure a high rate of cooperation, interviewers received training on conversion techniques that are consistent with research ethics as identified by the Mercyhurst University Institutional Review Board.

Questions

This report contains the questions as worded on the questionnaire and in the order in which they were asked. Some of the questions include bracketed information, which is, in every case, an instruction to the programmer or interviewer. Whenever possible, question order was randomized to ensure that respondents did not receive a set order of response options, which allowed response set bias to be minimized. For structured (close-ended) questions, interviewers were trained to probe for clarity when respondents' answers were not identical to the predefined response options. For unstructured (open-ended) questions, interviewers were trained to record verbatim responses whenever possible. In cases where a respondent asked that a question or response option be repeated, interviewers were careful to re-read the entire question or all response options.

Data

Data collected during this study was prepared for analysis by director and associate director of Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics. Data preparation included, but was not limited to, removing partial interviews (respondent-terminated interviews) from the dataset. To maximize the accuracy of our results and correct for discrepancies between our sample and the population, the data were weighted on age and gender. Simply stated, weighting is when data collected from survey respondents are adjusted to represent the population from which the sample was drawn.

Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics

The Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics (MCAP) began operations in July 2010. Inspired by the mission of Mercyhurst University and guided by the university's core values, the center promotes reasoned discourse about problems facing communities, states and nations. It accomplishes this objective by providing elected officials, government agencies, news organizations, and nonprofits with accurate and unbiased assessments of public opinion; and offering a nonpartisan forum for public debates and roundtable discussions that address pressing public problems.

The centerpiece of MCAP is the state of the art computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) facility. The facility, which is located in the Center for Academic Engagement, comprises 31 interviewer stations and is staffed by well-trained research associates. The specialized computer software used to conduct telephone interviews generates random telephone numbers in a predefined geographic area or dials from a list, and allows research associates to accurately complete even the most complex interviews.

The center also has the ability to design and administer online surveys. This method of interviewing is ideal for organizations that have relatively up-to-date email addresses for their members. The software used by MCAP allows a researcher to administer a survey - whether short and simple or long and complex – to an unlimited number of email addresses. In addition, a researcher has the ability to monitor response rates and send out reminders, thereby ensuring that the study produces high quality results.

As northwestern Pennsylvania's only CATI facility whose primary purpose is to regularly and accurately gauge public opinion, the MCAP is an invaluable resource for community leaders. Each year the center conducts polls on issues of local, state and national interest. The results of these studies are made available to the public via the university's webpage (mercyhurst.edu/mcap-polls). In addition to its annual polls, the center offers its services to private parties, nonprofits, news organizations, and government agencies for minimal cost.

Please direct questions about the center to Dr. Joseph M. Morris, Director, Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics, Mercyhurst University, 501 E. 38th Street, Erie, PA, 16546, (814) 824-2154, jmorris@mercyhurst.edu.

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