

PRIORITIES FOR PENNSYLVANIA

What issues do the citizens of Pennsylvania view as of greatest priority to the state in the years ahead? How have these changed across time? These questions were addressed using data from the Citizens' Viewpoint, 2001 survey and previous citizen surveys carried out in 1980 and 1990.

The initial question on the survey asked: Compared to what is being done now, what priority do you want the following to have in the future? (Table 1)

- Respondents were requested to indicate whether they believed that each of a series of items should have “higher priority,” “the same priority” or “lower priority” in the future. A “don’t know” response was also provided but seldom used.
- Evaluations did not necessarily reflect the *absolute* importance given to each item, but whether the current emphasis given to a particular issue should be increased, stay about the same, or decreased
- Opinions expressed did not necessarily mean that increased spending or government involvement was called for. Many of the issues that they reported as in need of “higher priority” might properly be the responsibility of volunteers, private agencies and foundations, businesses, individuals, and citizen groups.
- Respondents saw almost all of the issues as deserving of at least “the same” priority in the future.
- Ten of the items were endorsed by more than six out of every ten of the Pennsylvanians surveyed as needing “higher priority” and, for an additional eight items, half or more of those responding indicated that “higher priority” was needed.
- Only four issues received “lower priority” ratings from 20% or more of the respondents (access to telecommunications, computer literacy for everyone, poverty/welfare assistance, and construction of new state highways).

Topping the list in terms of the percentage of respondents indicating that “higher priority” was needed were the issues of:

- crime and violence (77%),
- health care (76%),
- education for children/youth (69%),

- care of the elderly (69%),
- attention by government to citizen concerns (67%),
- safe drinking water (67%),
- availability of jobs (66%),
- safe disposal of industrial wastes (66%),
- drug and alcohol abuse (63%), and
- preservation of farmland in the state (63%).

Other issues judged to be in need of “higher priority” by more than half of the Pennsylvanians surveyed included:

- communication of government decisions to citizens (58%),
- reform of local tax laws (58%),
- air quality (57%),
- safe food supply (56%),
- protection and conservation of the natural environment (55%),
- safe and efficient sewage disposal (53%), and
- cleaning up of polluted sites (53%).

Although the list of issues included on the 1980, 1990, and 2001 questionnaires varied somewhat, some comparisons across time were possible.

- The incidence of “higher priority” responses declined and the proportion of “same priority” answers increased across time, suggesting that over the twenty-year period Pennsylvania citizens became somewhat more satisfied with the emphasis given to these concerns.
- There were a number of important reversals to this overall pattern of apparently increasing satisfaction, including the four issues that received the highest percentage of “higher priority” ratings. In regard to crime and violence, health care, education for children/youth, and care of the elderly, there were clear increases in the level of concern by Pennsylvanians concerning the priority to be given to these issues.

The issue receiving the largest percentage of “higher priority” responses in 2001 was crime and violence.

- 77% of the respondents indicated the “higher priority” should be given to this item; 20% said “the same priority”; 2% indicated “lower [priority;” and 1% did not know how they felt.
- While this might have been expected in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the Citizens’ Viewpoint study was carried out prior to those happenings and in a period in which violent crime rates in the state and the nation was declining.

- In the 1980 and 1990 Citizens' Viewpoint surveys, crime prevention and police services were not even among the top ten issues in terms of the proportion of respondents indicating that "higher priority" should be given to this issue.
- The percentage of "higher priority" responses to the issue of crime prevention and police services had declined from 72% in 1980 to 64% in 1990.
- Most respondents in 2001 rated the quality of their present community as "high" (31%) or "medium" (54%) in regard to freedom from crime, but almost a third (32%) believed that the current situation would change for the worse in the next ten years.

Health care has been an area of increasing debate in American society in recent years, and this was reflected in the answers of Pennsylvanians who responded to the 2001 Citizens' Viewpoint survey.

- 76% of the respondents to the 2001 survey indicated that "higher priority" should be given to health care in the years ahead; 21% felt that the priority should remain "the same;" 2% felt that the priority should be "lower;" and the remainder were undecided.
- Separate items in 1990 asking about the relative priority that should be given to family and emergency medical services and hospitals each received between 39% and 45% "higher priority ratings. In 1980, similar items received slightly higher ratings, but still failed to rank among the top ten issues.
- Nearly one in five (19%) gave their present community a "low" quality rating in health care, and 18% saw the situation as becoming worse in the next 10 years.

The third ranking item in terms of the proportion of "higher priority" responses received from respondents to the 2001 Citizens' Viewpoint survey was concerned with educating children and youth.

- 69% indicated that this issue was deserving of "higher priority" in the years ahead; 27% answered "the same;" 2% answered "lower priority;" and the remainder did not know.
- The year 2001 responses differed markedly from those given to questions concerning education of children and youth in the previous two Citizens' Viewpoint studies. In 1980 and 1990, fewer than 40% of the respondents felt that elementary and secondary schools should be given greater priority than they already received.
- While Pennsylvanians were likely to feel that greater priority should be given to the education of children and youth in 2001, they also often saw their own community schools positively. Nearly 37% rated the quality of the schools in their communities as "high" and an additional 51% gave them a "medium" rating; 12% felt that their quality was "low."

More than 15% of Pennsylvania's residents are over 65 years of age – a total of nearly 2 million persons. Care of the elderly was deemed to be an area deserving of “higher priority” in the years ahead by nearly seven out of every ten Pennsylvanians.

- 69% gave the issue of care of the elderly a “higher priority” rating; 28% felt that “the same” priority was appropriate; only 2% gave this item a “lower priority” rating, and 1% indicated that they did not know.
- Concern for the well-being of these citizens was expressed in varying ways in the 1980, the 1990, and the 2001 Citizens' Viewpoint surveys, with a majority of all respondents indicating that issues such as support for senior housing, nursing homes, and services should be given high priority.

Two thirds of those responding to the 2001 survey felt that greater emphasis should be given to attention by government to citizen concerns.

- 67% gave this item “higher priority;” 28% considered that the priority should be “the same;” and the remainder indicated “lower priority” (3%) or “don't know” (2%).
- This item was also one of the top ten in both the 1980 and 1990 surveys in regard to the proportion of persons giving “higher priority” ratings. It ranked first in 1980, with 87% of the respondents indicating it should have “higher priority;” and fourth in 1990 (with a 77% “higher priority” rate).
- Although the question did not specify the *level* of government (state, county, or local municipality), it seems likely that the subject generalized across all of these levels. In response to an question asking respondents to rate their city/borough/township government on this issue, only 3% reported that it was excellent, with an additional 35% indicating that it was “good.” The remainder (62%) rated it as “fair”(48%) or “poor” (14%).

Safe drinking water was rated as an issue that should be given “higher priority” by two-thirds of Pennsylvanians in 2001.

- 67% gave safe drinking water a “higher priority” rating, 31% felt that “the same” priority was appropriate; while 1% gave it “lower priority” and the remainder did not know.
- The question of safe drinking water asked in 1980 and 1990, received 70% and 85% “higher priority” ratings in those years, ranking third in 1990 in the percentage of subjects answering in this way.
- When asked about their local water, a third rated its quality as “high” and 44% ranked it “high” in regard to the adequacy of the water supply. Just 11% felt that the quality was “low” and only 5% report that the supply rating was “low.”

The priority given to job availability would be expected to vary depending upon the economic conditions in the local area, the state, and the nation. At the time of the 2001 survey, unemployment rates were low. Nevertheless, this issue still ranked among the top ten.

- 66% of the respondents indicated that “higher priority” should be given to job availability; 30% felt that “the same” priority was needed; 2% answered “lower priority;” and 2% did not know.
- For both the 1980 and 1990 surveys, about 80% of the survey responses indicated that “higher priority” was needed for job availability for adults and youth.

Safe disposal of industrial wastes was judged to be an area in need of “higher priority” by two-thirds of those responding to the 2001 survey.

- 66% indicated that a “higher priority” was called for; 30% felt that it should be “the same” priority; 2% answered “lower priority;” and 2% did not know.
- In 1990, 85% of the subjects had indicated that “higher priority” was needed in the area. The question was not asked in 1980. It was uncertain whether the decline in the proportion of persons expressing a need for greater emphasis on this issue resulted from progress made in industrial clean-up, or a declining focus on environmental concerns on the part of Pennsylvanians.

Drug and alcohol abuse, especially by young people, continues to be a social concern to many of the state’s residents.

- In the 2001 survey, 63% of those who responded indicates that “higher priority” should be given to the issue of drug and alcohol abuse than is currently the case.
- The 1990 survey distinguished between teenage and adult drug and alcohol abuse with 65% giving “higher priority” to programs to deal with adult drug and alcohol abuse, and 79% indicating such a rating for teenage drug and alcohol programs.

Pennsylvanians were outspoken in their support of farmland preservation. Across the three surveys, this item ranked among the top ten in terms of the proportion of respondents expressing the view that “higher priority” should be given to saving the state’s farms.

- 63% of Pennsylvania’s citizens rated this issue as one that should be given “higher priority” in the future; 30% believed that the priority should remain “the same;” 3% selected “lower priority” and 4% reported “don’t know.”
- Although the percentages of persons indicating that farmland preservation is deserving of “higher priority” have dropped somewhat across time from 73% in 1980 and 70% in 1990, support for this item remains high.

Nearly six out of ten Pennsylvanians expressed dissatisfaction with citizen-government relationships.

- 58% of those who responded to the 2001 survey reported that “higher priority” should be given to communication of government decisions to citizens; 36% felt that this issue should have “the same” priority, while 3% gave it lower priority and 3% indicated “don’t know.”
- Communication of government decisions to citizens had also been among the top ten items in both 1980 (when 81% responded that “higher priority” was needed) and 1990 (69% “higher priority” responses).
- As with the issue of government attention to citizen concerns discussed above, it was not clear what *level* of government was taken as the referent by those answering the question. However, when respondents were asked about their local (city/borough/township) government in regard to this issue, only 2% reported that it was “excellent,” 24% rated it as “good,” and the remainder felt that it was “fair”(48%) or “poor”(26%).

Reform of Pennsylvania’s local tax was seen as an issue deserving “higher priority” in the years ahead by nearly 60% of Pennsylvania’s citizens.

- 58% reported that local tax reform should receive a “higher priority” in the future; 29% felt the priority should remain “the same;” while 6% felt this issue should be given “lower priority;” and 7% reported that they did not know.
- The question of local tax reform was not asked in the earlier studies.
- The nature of any possible local tax reform was explored elsewhere in the survey with a question on whether the primary basis for school taxes should be shifted from a property tax to a tax on wages and salaries. Forty-eight of the respondents who answered this question “agreed,” 26% were undecided; and 26% disagreed. A second question asked whether the primary basis for school taxes should be shifted from a property tax to a tax on wages, salaries, and investments received only 30% agreement, 27% undecided, and 43% disagreement.

Food safety has come increasingly under public scrutiny in recent years, and a sizeable proportion of Pennsylvanians saw it as an issue that is in need of greater concern in the future.

- 56% reported that a safe food supply was an issue that needed “higher priority;” 40% felt that the priority should remain “the same;” while 3% felt that “lower priority” was appropriate and the remainder did not know.
- When asked about whether farmers do a good job in producing food that is safe to eat, 82% agreed; only 3% disagreed and the remainders were undecided. Fifty percent agreed that the government does good job in assuring food safety; 23% disagreed.

Support for “higher priority” in regard to three issues related to environmental protection was voiced by more than half of the respondents to the 2001 survey. These were:

- Air quality (57%), protection and conservation of the natural environment (55%), safe and efficient sewage disposal (53%) and cleaning up polluted areas (53%) all received a majority of “higher priority” responses.
- The percentages of “higher priority” ratings in 2001 were considerable less than the approximately 70% “higher priority” ratings given by the survey participants to most environmental issues in 1990 and 1980. Whether this reflected perceived progress in combating environmental threats, or a decline in environmental concern on the part of residents was uncertain.

Just half of Pennsylvania’s citizens indicated that repair of state roads and highways was an issue deserving of “higher priority” than is now the case.

- 50% reported that repair of state highways should be given “higher priority; 46% felt that “the same” priority was appropriate, and 3% gave it lower priority than is currently the case; with 1% undecided.
- Support for greater emphasis on highway repair in 2001 represented a substantial decline from 86% in 1980 and 70% in 1990.

For none of the other ten issues presented did a majority of the respondents to the 2001 Citizens’ Viewpoint survey see the need for “higher priority.

- College education opportunities received a sizeable minority of “higher priority” designations (43%); as did preservation of wildlife habitats (41%); citizen participation in government (40%); childcare (39%); and affordable housing (37%).
- Support for “higher priority” was much less for construction of new state highways (25%); preservation of historical and cultural resources (23%); computer literacy for everyone (23%); poverty/welfare assistance (19%) and access to telecommunications/Internet (16%).
- For four of these issues, more than one of every five respondents felt that “lower priority” should be given than is currently the case: poverty/welfare assistance (27%); access to telecommunication/Internet (25%); computer literacy for everyone (24%); and construction of new state highways (22%).
- Overall, however, for all of these last ten items, people were most likely to report that the “same” priority was appropriate; most respondents did not believe that any less emphasis should be given to these issues than is currently the case.

There were some differences in how Pennsylvanians responded to these issues depending upon their gender, age, educational level, and household income. While later reports will deal with these differences in somewhat greater detail, certain general patterns can be noted here:

- For most issues, women were more likely than men to indicate that “higher priority” was needed in the years ahead. In only three instances were men more likely than women to report that “higher priority” was needed. These were: reform Pennsylvania’s local tax structure, construction of new state highways, and repair of state highways.
- Age was inconsistently related to the incidence of “higher priority” responses, with older citizens more likely than their younger counterparts to express the need for greater emphasis on crime and violence, health care, care of the elderly, safe drinking water, safe disposal of industrial waste, drug and alcohol abuse, reform of local tax structure, air quality, food safety, affordable housing, and poverty/welfare assistance. Increasing age was associated with decreases in the percentage of “higher priority” responses to issues such as education of children/youth, preservation of wildlife habitats, child care, computer literacy for all, and access to telecommunication/Internet.
- For most issues, as educational level and household income increased, the proportion of “higher priority” responses declined. Whether this reflected greater knowledge among the more highly educated and wealthier subjects concerning what is already being done to address these problems, resistance to what they perceived, as endorsement of “bigger government,” or some other reason could not be determined from these data.

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Table 1. Compared to what is being done now, what priority do you want the following to have in the future?

Issue	Number Responding	Higher Priority	Same Priority	Lower Priority	Don't Know
		-----Percent-----			
Crime and violence	4106	76.9	20.5	1.6	1.0
Health care	4123	76.3	21.3	1.8	.5
Education for youth/children	4126	69.4	27.1	2.1	1.4
Care of the elderly	4124	68.8	28.1	2.0	1.1
Attention by government to citizen concerns	4122	66.8	27.8	3.0	2.4
Safe drinking water	4112	66.7	31.0	1.4	.8
Availability of jobs	4044	65.7	30.4	1.5	2.4
Safe disposal of industrial wastes	4083	65.5	30.5	1.7	2.4
Drug and alcohol abuse	4079	63.1	30.9	4.9	1.1
Preservation of farmland	4082	63.0	29.9	3.3	3.8
Communication of government decisions to citizens	4124	58.4	35.6	3.2	2.8
Reform of PA's local tax structure	4115	58.1	29.2	5.5	7.2
Air quality	4086	56.9	36.5	3.6	3.0
Safe food supply	4108	56.0	40.3	2.4	1.3
Protection/conservation of natural environment	4060	54.7	38.1	5.0	2.1
Safe and efficient sewage disposal	4108	53.3	42.0	2.0	2.7
Clean up polluted sites	4071	53.3	40.4	4.2	2.2
Repair state highways	4113	49.8	46.3	2.8	1.1
College education opportunities	4107	42.9	48.0	6.8	2.3
Preserve wildlife habitats	4110	41.2	46.8	8.9	3.1

Issue	Number Responding	Higher Priority	Same Priority	Lower Priority	Don't Know
		-----Percent-----			
Citizen participation in government	4090	40.4	48.6	6.5	4.6
Child care	4104	39.2	47.8	9.6	3.4
Affordable housing	4108	36.9	51.9	9.0	2.3
Construction of new state highways	4054	24.9	49.9	21.9	3.2
Computer literacy for everyone	4091	23.2	47.4	24.2	5.2
Preservation of historical and cultural resources	4102	23.2	56.5	16.4	3.8
Poverty/welfare assistance	4083	19.4	50.4	26.8	3.5
Access to telecommunication/ Internet	4115	15.9	51.4	25.0	7.7