

New Jersey

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NJ Leads in Public-Opinion Polls. From Pork Roll to Property Taxes, Here's What We Care About

Thanks to four distinguished public-opinion research centers based here, there are more polls taken in New Jersey than almost anywhere else in the country.

By [Joe Lauro](#) | | January 3, 2023 | Appears in the [January 2023](#) issue

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Illustration by Katy Lemay

New Jerseyans can be an opinionated lot. Ask their views on issues as weighty as mass transit or crime, or as frivolous as [pumping your own gas](#) or the real name of an iconic breakfast sandwich, and you are likely to get very divergent opinions.

However, there are two topics that have united residents for more than a half century: property taxes and the economy.

When the public-opinion researchers at the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University first began polling New Jersey residents on state issues more than 50 years ago, property taxes and the economy were the issues that concerned them the most.

Some things never change.

With 2023 underway, property taxes and the economy continue to be the most pressing issues facing New Jersey. “In the five decades we have been polling New Jersey, taxes perennially have the number one spot when it comes to what residents say is the top problem,” says Ashley Koning, director of the Eagleton Center.

Economic concern is almost universal in polls taken everywhere in the country, pollsters say, but property taxes are a much greater concern in high-tax states like New Jersey.

Despite ongoing worries over property taxes and the economy (and increasing focus on the rising cost of housing), no matter what area of the state they live in, a majority of residents say that, overall, they like the state, and especially their hometowns. A majority of residents also have positive views about our education system, career and business opportunities, and cultural attractions.

On a host of other issues, however, there is much less consensus, with differences of opinion driven by factors such as age, gender, education, income, race, ethnicity, geography and, in recent years, cultural identity.

Whatever opinions residents hold, they can be fairly certain to be asked their views at some point.

There are almost certainly more public-opinion surveys taken here than almost anywhere else in the country. Four universities—Rutgers (the first university-based public-opinion research poll in the country), Fairleigh Dickinson, Monmouth and Stockton—all regularly take the pulse of the Garden State. By comparison, with roughly three times as many residents, New York has only two university-based centers that track state policy issues.

In recent years, geography and political affiliation have increasingly become the factors most strongly correlated with most public-policy issues, pollsters say. People in South Jersey say they are very concerned with drug abuse, especially opioids; crime; and the future of agriculture, with warehouses, solar and wind farms, and housing developments replacing traditional farms.

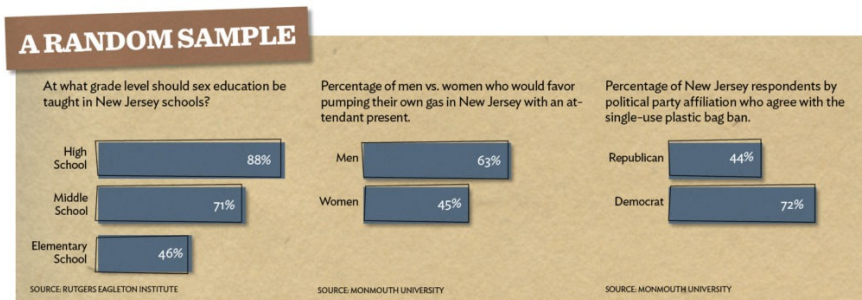
Conversely, people in North Jersey are very concerned with mass transit, congestion pricing in New York City, and the proposed Gateway rail-tunnel project. These topics “fall off the map” in South Jersey, says Dan Cassino, executive director of Fairleigh Dickinson’s FDU Poll.

These regional differences attest to the state’s changing political identification, says Patrick Murray, founding director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute.

South Jersey has grown more conservative and more Republican, and North Jersey has grown more liberal and more Democratic, he says, as part of a national phenomenon where “cultural identity has become even more important than the issues themselves.”

There is a “huge gap” on issues between the south and north, mostly along partisan lines, says Cassino. Koning agrees, saying “partisanship has become a social identity, and it bleeds into everything, even grocery bags.”

The state’s new ban on single-use plastic bags, indeed, has become a political issue. In one 2022 poll from Monmouth University’s Polling Institute, 72 percent of registered Democrats say they support the measure, but only 44 percent of Republicans agree.



Of course, people’s views can and do change. Unlike property taxes and the economy, over time, some negative opinions morph into more positive ones. Issues that once were hot-button concerns—gay marriage, abortion, casino gambling and legal marijuana—now enjoy strong support.

“In a state as densely populated and diverse as ours,” Murray says, “if we got into each other’s values, we’d be at each other’s throats. New Jersey’s unofficial motto is ‘Live and let live.’”

Other issues have become major concerns through external forces, such as the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy and the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, in 2021, a solid majority (as many as 6 in 10 in one poll) supported strong Covid-19 mandates, but by 2022, that number had decreased to about one-third in the latest Monmouth polls.

While fears about Covid-19 have diminished, “concerns about mental-health issues, many of them stemming from the pandemic, remain,” says Alyssa Maurice, research associate at Stockton University’s William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy. One recent survey found that 58 percent of respondents said they or someone close to them has experienced mental health issues coming out of the pandemic, and 68 percent reported that mental health issues had worsened during the pandemic, according to a 2022 Stockton University poll.

It is impossible to predict what events may impact the state in the coming year, but there are several issues likely to be points of contention, including education.

Most residents report they are happy with their local schools, with as much as an 80 percent approval rating in one poll. Yet there are different areas of concern about education, mostly depending upon where you live.

In the more affluent suburbs, a majority of parents say they want more extracurricular activities for their students, and they're willing to pay for them. They also want to see the start of classes moved back to give students more sleep time, says Cassino. In the urban areas and less affluent suburbs, though, more parents say they are concerned with funding for schools than with additional after-school programs or class start times, he adds.

Two issues that may become more hotly debated in 2023 are the state's new health and sex education guidelines and what role parents may play in following these guidelines.

One recent Eagleton Center poll found very strong support for the guidelines, with 88 percent of respondents saying they favor teaching sex education in high schools and 71 percent in middle schools. That number drops precipitously, though, to 46 percent when it comes to elementary schools; 51 percent of respondents say they oppose teaching sex education at all in elementary schools.

There is also strong support for "parental rights" in education, with 60 percent saying parents should have the right to take their children out of health and sex education classes; that number increases to 70 percent among parents with children in school.

While most surveys have shown consistently that residents like New Jersey, several polls have also shown that roughly one-third of respondents (and as high as 59 percent in one poll) would choose to leave one day, if they could. This group mostly includes younger people born in the state, as well as older people in or near retirement.

"The population in the north is more fluid than in the south. North Jersey has a lot of students who go off to college out of state and never return," says Cassino. "But they're being replaced by new residents who chose to live here, and they like it. People in the south leave, but they aren't being replaced."

The reason for older people leaving, or wanting to leave, is almost purely economic: the high cost of living.

"When you're younger, career opportunities, education and a wide range of cultural attractions can be important," says Murray, "but when you retire, you may find you don't need all these benefits, and you aren't willing to pay for them."

Not every issue polled is a major policy concern for the state, although most have policy implications.

One issue driven more by gender than anything else is the state's ban on self-service gasoline stations. New Jersey is the only state in the nation where you can't legally pump your own gas across the entire state. A recent poll found only 45 percent of female respondents would fill up their tanks themselves even if there were an attendant present, while 63 percent of men said they would. The 45 percent support from women falls down to 28 percent when asked if they would use self-service with no attendants.

What's driving this gender split? "It's simple," says Murray about the Monmouth poll. "Jersey girls don't want to pump gas."

Oh, and what about that iconic breakfast sandwich? Is it Taylor ham or pork roll? Statewide, it's a statistical draw: 38 percent say it is pork roll and 35 percent say it is Taylor ham, according to a 2022 Eagleton poll.

If you're hungry and want to make sure you get the right sandwich, when you are in the north, it's advisable to ask for Taylor ham, because that's what it's called there by nearly 60 percent of the people. If you're in the south and craving your favorite breakfast sandwich, however, you had better make it pork roll, because that's what nearly two-thirds of people call it.

Joe Lauro is a longtime contributor to New Jersey Monthly.

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