

# Pennsylvania 2016 Pre-Election Poll on Policy and Governance



School of Public Affairs

Public Administration

November 1, 2016

## Pennsylvanians have positive perceptions of the performance of the federal and state governments

**Summary:** Most Pennsylvanians feel that their state and federal governments are doing a good job in delivering public services, but some groups of citizens are less positive. These groups require attention by policymakers and agency administrators.

### Introduction

Pennsylvania leaned Republican for most of the 20th Century but has voted for Democratic candidates for president since 1992. Currently, with a Democratic governor in power, Pennsylvania is considered a battleground state for the 2016 presidential election. The Democratic presidential vote of Pennsylvania in the last six national elections has been driven by the more urban and densely populated cities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Will the 2016 elections be an exception? Or, will the trend continue?

One way we can understand citizen voting behavior is by assessing their perceptions of government performance—whether citizens think government is doing a good job or not in delivering services. These perceptions are often interpreted as a reflection of trust in government and have been found to make a difference for the incumbent in electoral outcomes, with voters often castigating poor performance. From a management perspective, gauging citizen satisfaction is

not only an accountability tool but also a feedback mechanism that could potentially help to improve programs and policies.

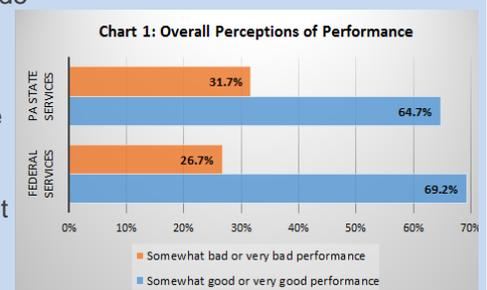
In this research brief we report on Pennsylvanians' perceptions of the performance of the federal government and their state government. The purpose is to get a sense of the mood of Pennsylvanians prior to the elections and to provide a feedback loop for policy-makers.

The data consist of responses from 660 randomly selected adult Pennsylvania residents who were asked two versions of the same question, one about the federal government and one about the state government: "Please think about the job the [federal/state] government is doing in delivering services. Examples of services include transportation, parks and recreation, responding to natural disasters, and keeping people safe. Is the [federal/state] government doing a very good, somewhat good, somewhat bad, or very bad job?"

### Results

#### Overall Positive Perceptions

As was the case with participants in a national telephone survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015, most Pennsylvania residents in this survey had positive views about the overall performance of the federal and the state governments. As shown below in Chart 1, overall, 69.2% of Pennsylvanians rated somewhat good or very good the performance of the federal government in delivering public services. A slightly lower percentage of Pennsylvanians (64.7%) had the same perception for the services provided by the Commonwealth.



(over)

## Results (cont.)

### Subgroup Analysis

Some groups of respondents were notable for their less positive assessments, as shown in Chart 2 (only significant differences shown):

- Federal government services: Northwestern Pennsylvanians; minorities; non-Democratic party affiliates; those with some college.
- State government services: The 35-64 year olds; men; minorities; non-Democratic party affiliates; those with graduate studies.

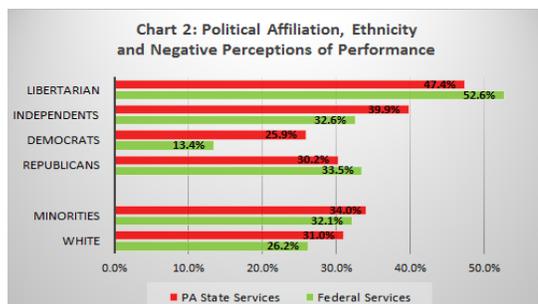
With regard to the services provided by the federal government, minorities and those living in the Northwest region of the state (e.g., Erie, Meadville, and Clarion) had a slightly less positive perception than whites and residents of other regions, (about 8 and 6 percentage points difference, respectively). Those with some college work had also a less positive perception than those more educated (about 5 percentage points difference). Regarding the services provided by the state government, men had more negative perceptions than women (about 5 percentage points difference) and those between 35 and 64 years old also had more negative views than the 18-34 year old residents (12 percentage points differences).

Finally, Pennsylvania residents who self-identified as GOP affiliates had more negative perceptions about the delivery of public services by both the federal and state governments compared to Democratic Party affiliates,

respectively 33.5% and 13.4%. Libertarians also had the least positive perceptions: 52.6% of them rated somewhat bad or very bad the performance of the federal government and 47.4% the performance of the state government. Independents also had less positive perceptions of the federal and the state governments: 32.6% and 39.9%, respectively, rating the performance of the federal and the state governments somewhat bad or very bad.

## Conclusions

This brief analysis provides policy-makers a glimpse of the mood of Pennsylvanians prior to the presidential elections. Although the mood is overall



positive toward the incumbent party with regard to their performance in delivering services (at the state and federal levels), the analysis also shows that there are segments of the population who are less satisfied with this performance. If, as suggested by prior research, positive perceptions of performance is a proxy for support for incumbents, then the Democratic Party could do well in Pennsylvania in the upcoming elections. On the other hand, prior research also suggests that those with more negative perceptions might cast their vote for opposition parties even though there may be no assurances that they will improve performance.

## Methodology

Data consists of responses from 660 randomly selected adult Pennsylvania residents, who participated in the School of Public Affairs' Pennsylvania Pre-election Poll on Policy and Governance. This was an omnibus survey administered by telephone through the Center for Survey Research at Penn State Harrisburg between August 18 and October 15, 2016. The Center employed a dual-frame design consisting of both landline and cell phone samples, with 60.8% of respondents interviewed via cell phone and 39.2% interviewed via landline. The survey cooperation rates for the landline portion and cell portion of the sample were 73.4% and 60.1%, respectively. Responses were weighted by demographic criteria to enhance representativeness. Margin of error is +/- 4.0 percentage points with 95% degree of confidence.

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