

CITIES OF THE 21ST CENTURY | JANUARY 2015

A SURVEY OF PUBLIC OPINION

Key Findings

- Nearly half of all respondents (47%) agree that their city is on the right track and 32% say wrong track. This positive sentiment is expressed by residents of cities and suburbs of all sizes, as well as all age groups polled. Only 29% feel the US is on the right track with 55% saying wrong track.
- A majority (53%) feel that their city (or the city nearest to them) “embraces the 21st century more than it is stuck in the 20th century”. This is a consensus point among all subgroups. Importantly, it is a point of agreement among Democrats (59% to 21%), Republicans (50% to 26%) and independents (47% to 19%), also self-identified members of the Creative Class (59% to 25%), union households (57% to 25%), Hispanics (48% to 30%), African Americans (52% to 21%), and whites (55% to 21%). Only one in five (22%) feel their city is stuck in the past.
- Where can the public go for solutions? -- So who do respondents sense have the best answers to problems? Who do they turn to provide new ideas, innovation and opportunities for economic growth? Americans like small business and small business leaders. By far and away they are trusted most for the kinds of ideas and innovations that produce economic growth – 58% of respondents gave them scores of 4-5 and only 10% rated them a 1 or 2.
- The next group most trusted was “a young person fresh out of graduate school” with 38% high trust and 17% low trust. Trust levels were even higher in bigger cities (42% in cities with more than 250,000 people and 46% in cities with 100,000 to 250,000 people.)
- City mayors came in third at 37% high trust and 25% low trust. Mayors are bolstered by stronger feelings among city voters (of all sized cities). Governors were next with 33% high trust, but 33% gave scores of low trust. Rounding out the list were “a community college president” (31% high, 20% low), “a college president” (30% high, 21% low), “a CEO of a large high tech company” (31% high, 29% low), “a CEO of a large manufacturer” (29% high, 31% low), “your congressman” (26% high, 38% low), “the White House Council of Economic Advisors” (22% high, 43% low), and “a Wall Street advisor” (17% high, 44% low).
- As for the economy, voters gave a 41% positive to 21% negative to their city’s capacity to “build relationships with businesses and citizens to create jobs”. The numbers were more favorable among voters in cities (generally half positive) than in rural areas (36% positive, 29% negative) and highest among both college graduates (48%-16%) and the Creative Class (48%-19%). But the view was less enthusiastic among Millennials (30% positive, 31% negative), the group that promises to be about 30% of the workforce in the next few years. Millennials will need some convincing that the cities that they like for social and cultural reasons will be job- (or gig-) machines that will help them succeed.
- Cities and mayors receive higher marks for “providing public safety to all” – 54% grant scores of 4-5, while only 19% give 1-2. Even higher ratings are given to cities’ police “in protecting the safety and rights of minorities” – 62% high and 32% low. This is something – to varying degrees – that all races and ideologies agree upon by majorities. For example, whites offer a 67% high to 29% low performance for the police, as do Hispanics (60% to 34%) and African Americans (50%-43%). Liberals offer 54% to 39%, conservatives 73% to 24%, and moderates 60% to 35%.

- Fifty seven percent give high scores to cities for “keeping the community clean” and 60% like the way that cities “provide parks and recreation”. While overall 50% of voters give high grades to cities for “removing snow and handling weather crises”, two in three (67%) of voters in urban counties were favorable. By two to one – 42% to 23% -- voters agreed that cities “offer a broad spectrum of culture and entertainment”, 54% of voters in urban counties. The percentages were almost identical – 43% to 21% -- for “ensuring the best possible public education for children”.
- Cities do well in the public mind with both basic services like “providing safe and well maintained roads” (46% to 22% overall) and “providing adequate public transportation” (44% to 26% overall) and in developing pathways to the future: “utilizing the latest technologies to improve public services” (39% to 20% overall) and “offering broadband to enable internet and mobile communications” (42% to 23% overall).
- The Decline in Public Trust – we asked respondents to tell us their level of trust for the federal, state, and local governments on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being no trust and 5 being the highest trust. A majority (54%) gave the federal government scores of 1 or 2 (low trust), while only 19% said a combined 4-5 (high trust). They rated their own state government better – 37% 1 or 2, 28% 4 or 5. Local governments did best with a 25% low score and 38% high score.
- Respondents are not shy about defining the priorities they want mayors to tackle: On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest priority and 5 being the highest, they want mayors to improve public safety (65% scored a combined 4 and 5), followed by fixing local infrastructure like streets, bridges, water and sewer lines (64%). Education, like public safety, is always a high priority and – consistent with Zogby Polls in communities and school districts throughout the US – they want mayors to “work closely with school administrators to prepare for the world of work in the 21st century (58% high priority, only 13% low priority). Encouraging entrepreneurs (47% high priority); implementing plans for 21st Century transportation methods such as cars on call and bicycles (41% high); and emphasizing green jobs (40%) were the next three highest priorities.
- Congress is not highly regarded but, while voters place more trust in city and local governments, they still have some expectations that Congress should help in some matters. The most notable are immigration and infrastructure. We posed the following statements and asked respondents to rate how high a priority each is for the new Congress on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being lowest and 5 highest:

“The new Congress pass a new transportation investment bill that targets renewal, repair and modernization of the nation’s infrastructure, which will go directly to your city or metropolitan area.”

“The new Congress pass comprehensive immigration reform which further strengthens border security, creates an effective employer verification system, reforms the legal immigration system, and allows the 11 million people residing in the country illegally to earn a pathway to citizenship.”

Majorities see both measures as high priorities for the new Congress. Fifty-five percent say that passing the transportation infrastructure bill is a priority (11% low priority), while 53% see Congress passing the immigration bill as a high priority (18% low priority).

The Survey was conducted by Zogby Analytics on 2,425 respondents from December 19 through December 22, 2014. It has a margin of error of +/- error of 2.0%