

targetsmart



DATE: July 24, 2019
TO: Nikkilia Lu, State Innovation Exchange
FROM: Ben Lazarus and Gabby Weisberg, TargetSmart
RE: SiX Pennsylvania 2019 Statewide Issues Poll – Environmental Priorities

Political Environment

Pennsylvania currently presents an advantageous environment for Democrats and progressive policy priorities. President Trump is largely disliked by voters, receiving a chilly 40-degree mean rating, as measured on a 0 to 100 scale. The president is rated unfavorably (0 to 49 degrees) by over half of the electorate (54 percent), while he receives warm, favorable ratings (52 to 100 degrees) from just 2-in-5 voters (38 percent).

In comparison, Governor Wolf's personal standing is much stronger than Trump's, receiving a warm 55-degree mean rating on the same 0-100 scale. The governor is rated favorably by almost half of the electorate (47 percent), while fewer than 1-in-3 voters rate him unfavorably (30 percent).

A generic Democratic candidate for state house also leads a generic Republican candidate by 8-points in this poll (48 percent to 40 percent), representing a net gain of 4-points since 2018, when the generic ballot was essentially tied (47 percent to 43 percent).¹

In an open ended exercise that probes voters on the issues on which they'd like to see the General Assembly focus, we find that voters gravitate towards taxes (16 percent), education (15 percent), and health care affordability (11 percent) as their top priorities. Democrats are more likely to prioritize education and schools (20 percent), while independents (20 percent) and Republicans (23 percent) place the highest priority on taxes. Issues that rank relatively lower in voters' priorities list, though still salient, include jobs and the economy (9 percent), infrastructure improvements (7 percent), immigration (6 percent), and climate change (5 percent).

Messaging Related to Environmental Priorities and Concerns

This poll spent significant time investigating voters' environmental concerns and priorities. In the top tier of concerns² we find protecting and conserving Pennsylvania's forests, rivers, parks, and public lands (mean rating of 4.2 on 0-5 scale), strengthening the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to hold polluters accountable (4.1 mean rating), and reducing carbon emissions to maintain clean air and water (4.0 mean rating). Just below in the second tier are the priorities of investing in clean, renewable energy sources³ (3.8 mean), and passing a severance tax to hold gas companies financially accountable

¹ The 2018 SiX Pennsylvania Statewide Issues and Messaging poll was conducted from June 13-17, 2019.

² See appendix B for full text of statements tested in the environment and climate change section of the survey.

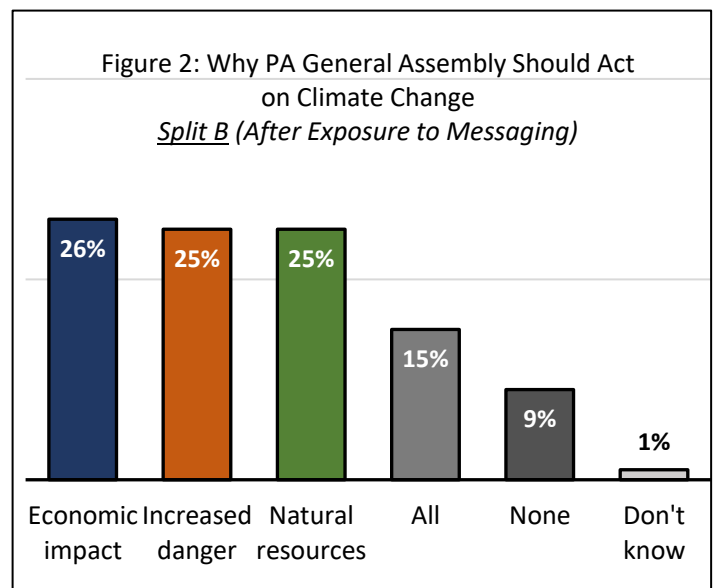
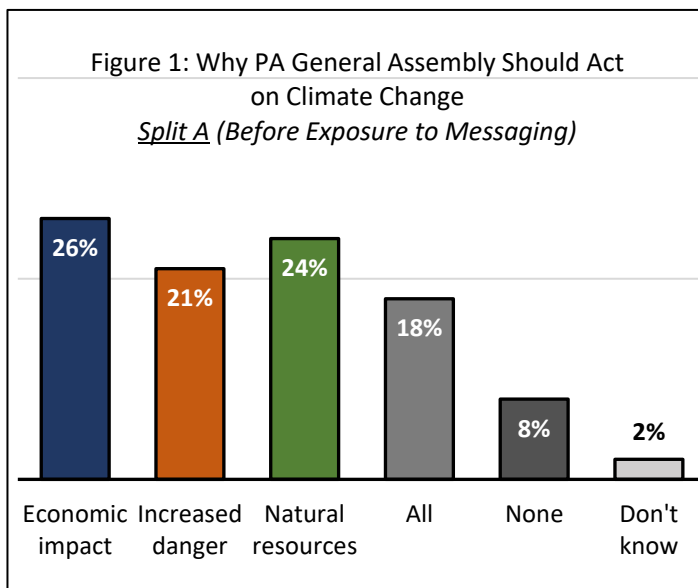
³ Investing in clean, renewable energy sources tested equally well with or without the mention of nuclear energy.

(3.8 mean). A bit lower on voters' priority list are steering the state away from harmful and exhaustible energy sources (3.6 mean), passing a severance tax to provide more resources for environmental protection (3.6 mean), and strengthening the DEP to increase the number of enforcement officers (3.4 mean).

Following the presentation and ranking of each priority, we asked respondents to name their single top priority in this space. In this exercise, we find that 28 percent of voters cite investing in renewable and clean energy as their top priority, surpassing the other actions tested. Protecting and conserving Pennsylvania's nature and beauty (17 percent), reducing pollution to ensure access to clean air and water (15 percent), and passing a severance tax (13 percent) form a second tier, while strengthening the DEP (7 percent) and sparking economic growth (6 percent) fall towards the bottom. While Democrats and independents place the highest priority on investing in renewable energy, Republicans prioritize protecting and conserving Pennsylvania's nature.

Pennsylvania voters express acute concerns over the public health risks facing the state if environmental action is not taken. We specifically find messaging on groundwater contamination from toxic chemicals (53 percent very concerning), fracking and petrochemical plants (48 percent very concerning), DEP's lack of funding and staff (47 percent very concerning), and dangerous weather and climate conditions (44 percent very concerning) to be quite resonant with the Pennsylvania electorate. Voters also see the risks bad actors pose to the environment as over half of the electorate is also very concerned about greedy oil and gas companies dodging regulations (54 percent very concerning). **Connecting public health risks, like groundwater contamination, pollution, and cancer, to bad environmental actors, like greedy oil and gas companies, creates a particularly effective messaging frame.**

Community-centric messaging on the environment also has its place in the mix. In fact, an argument that asserts that poor, underserved, rural/minority communities are frequently targeted by companies as the perfect places to dump toxic chemicals, release asthma-causing pollutants into the air, and never be held accountable for their actions, resonates for voters in both rural and urban communities. Importantly, we tested the messages using those local paradigms, and practitioners should be careful to use community-specific language when putting this research to use.



Voters are split on the reason why the General Assembly should act on climate change. About three-in-four voters cite either the economic impact, increased danger and harsh weather, and preservation of natural resources arguments, and the introduction of information and messaging makes little change on voters' opinions (see Figures 1 and 2). That said, certain audiences strongly back each of the arguments – Republicans tend to over cite the natural resources argument (37 percent), men under 50 over cite the economic argument (37 percent), and women under 50 over cite the increased danger argument (31 percent). Other audiences in this electorate are much more diffuse.

Appendix A – Survey Methodology

TargetSmart designed this multi-modal survey. Eight-hundred and fifty interviews were conducted via professional telephone agents (453 wireless respondents, 397 landline respondents), and 406 interviews were conducted online among panelists who were matched to the TargetSmart voter file from six opt-in panel providers. The survey was conducted from June 15-20, 2019. All respondents indicated they were 18 years or older and registered to vote in Pennsylvania. Quotas were designed to reflect the demographic and geographic distribution of registered voters in Pennsylvania. The data were weighted by age, race, party registration, TargetSmart High School Only Score, and region by county to ensure an accurate reflection of the population.

A representative statewide base sample of 1,106 respondents was augmented by oversamples of 50 respondents residing in the state’s Northwest⁴ region, Southwest⁵ region, and East Central⁶ region. The oversamples were weighted into the base such that the overall effective sample size is 1,100. No margin of sampling error is calculated for this survey as online data collection relies on non-representative opt-in panels. However, a fully randomized study with a sample size of 1,100 interviews carries with it a margin of error of +/- 2.95% at a 95% confidence level. Percentage totals may not add up precisely due to rounding.

⁴ The Northwest region is defined by Erie, Crawford, Mercer, Lawrence, Venango, and Warren counties.

⁵ The Southwest region is defined by Armstrong, Indiana, Westmoreland, Fayette, Washington, Greene, Beaver, and Butler counties.

⁶ The East Central region is defined by Dauphin, Lebanon, Lancaster, York, Adams, Cumberland, and Perry counties.

Appendix B – Full Text of Tested Environmental and Climate Change Messages

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| <p>Q.20 (ROTATE Q.20/Q.21 AND Q.22) OK, I'm going to read a list of several actions that the Pennsylvania General Assembly could take to protect our environment and combat climate change. Please rate each action using a scale from one to five, where one means the action should not be a priority at this time, and five means the action should be a top priority at this time. Of course, you can use any number between one and five, the higher the number the higher the priority you place on that action.</p> |
| <p>A. (SPLIT A) Invest in clean, renewable energy sources like wind and solar power to spark economic growth and create a wide range of high-paying jobs throughout Pennsylvania.</p> |
| <p>B. (SPLIT B) Invest in clean, carbon-free energy sources like wind, solar, and nuclear power to spark economic growth and create a wide range of high-paying jobs throughout Pennsylvania.</p> |
| <p>C. Reduce carbon emissions and pollution so Pennsylvanians have clean air and drinking water safe from harmful chemicals and toxins.</p> |
| <p>D. Steer Pennsylvania away from harmful and exhaustible energy sources like coal, oil, and gas, and introduce safe, accessible, and renewable sources like wind, solar, and hydroelectric power.</p> |
| <p>E. Protect and conserve Pennsylvania's forests, rivers, public lands, parks, and other open spaces.</p> |
| <p>F. (SPLIT A) Strengthen Pennsylvania's Department of Environmental Protection to increase to the number of officers enforcing our environmental laws</p> |
| <p>G. (SPLIT B) Strengthen Pennsylvania's Department of Environmental Protection so polluters are held accountable for their actions.</p> |
| <p>H. (SPLIT A) Pass a severance tax on oil and gas companies to hold them financially accountable for the impact extracting fossil fuels has on the Commonwealth and its citizens.</p> |
| <p>I. (SPLIT B) Pass a severance tax on oil and gas companies to provide more resources for environmental protection and the enforcement of environmental regulations.</p> |

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| <p>Q.22 (ROTATE Q.20/Q.21 AND Q.22) Now I am going to read you a series of statements about climate change and the environment. Please tell me whether you are very concerned, somewhat concerned, a little concerned, or not at all concerned about each.</p> |
| <p>A. In Pennsylvania, greedy oil companies, gas companies, and chemical companies routinely cut corners and avoid regulation to maximize their profits. They frack and drill in our communities, build pipelines through our backyards and near our kids' schools, poison wells, expose us to cancer causing chemicals, create sinkholes, pollute our clean air and water, and generally put public health and the safety of our families at risk.</p> |
| <p>B. Climate change is an immediate crisis facing Pennsylvania. Temperature increases will make our climate feel more like Virginia's as longer and harsher droughts and heat waves hurt farmers and make summers unbearable. Rainfall is predicted to increase by fourteen percent, resulting in more runoff, soil erosion, and flooding. More and more frequent extreme hurricanes, snowstorms, tornadoes, and flooding will impact communities across the Commonwealth.</p> |
| <p>C. Fracking in Pennsylvania brings petrochemical plants that make plastics from natural gas, and in the process create dangerous, toxic environments for the communities and citizens who live nearby. Petrochemical plants emit massive quantities of climate-changing carbon dioxide, trigger the construction of additional pipelines, and will turn the tristate area of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio into the country's next cancer alley.</p> |
| <p>D. Pennsylvania's Department of Environmental Protection is drastically under-funded and has laid off one third of its staff since 2002. Without proper funding and a dedicated staff, environmental laws and protections will be ignored, and it's not a matter of if, but when the Commonwealth faces another environmental disaster like a gas leak, explosion, or dangerous chemical spill.</p> |
| <p>E. (ASK ONLY IF URBANICITY = U5 OR U6) Poor, underserved, minority communities are frequently targeted by companies as the perfect places to dump toxic chemicals, release asthma-causing pollutants into the air, and never be held accountable for their actions.</p> |
| <p>F. (ASK ONLY IF URBANICITY = R1 OR R2) Poor, underserved, rural communities are frequently targeted by companies as the perfect places to dump toxic chemicals, release asthma-causing pollutants into the air, and never be held accountable for their actions.</p> |
| <p>G. Many towns in Pennsylvania face groundwater contamination due to the toxic chemicals in fire retardant foams seeping into the ground. Without financial support from the state, local communities won't be able to protect their drinking water from these cancer-causing chemicals.</p> |