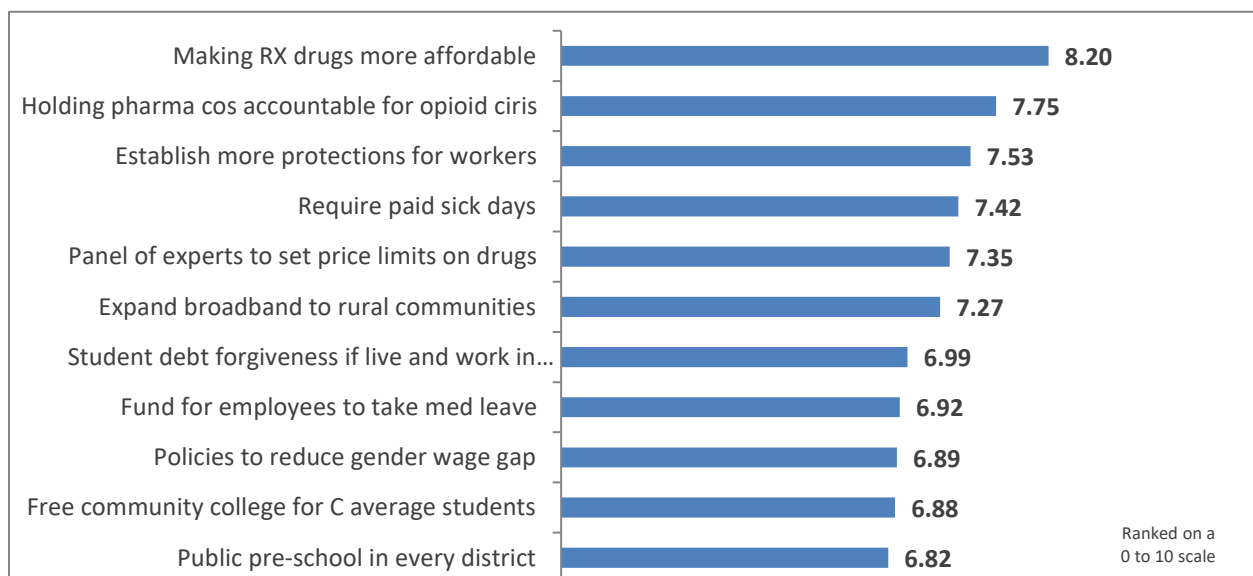


**TO:** Interested Parties  
**FR:** Lincoln Park Strategies  
**RE:** Legislative Priorities in Maine: Focus Group Results  
**DATE:** January 17, 2020

As the 2019 legislative session came to a close, State Innovation Exchange (SiX) commissioned Lincoln Park Strategies to conduct a poll to gauge voters’ feelings on the progress of the legislative session. To build on that knowledge, SiX commissioned focus groups of Mainers prior to the 2020 legislative session to gauge swing voters’ feelings about the state’s future and their views on the legislative leadership’s policy agenda. Two focus groups were conducted among swing voters in December 2019 in Lewiston and Saco, Maine. The Lewiston group was comprised of non-college swing voters and the Saco group was female swing voters age 55 and older. One thing is clear: Mainers are looking for solutions to their everyday problems and largely support the progressive ideas the legislature has passed and considered.

The 2019 post-legislative session polling showed strong support for a majority of the progressive legislative ideas, particularly health care focused legislation, including bills making prescription drugs more affordable and increasing transparency in drug pricing; holding pharmaceutical companies accountable for their role in the opioid crisis; and creating a panel of experts to set price limits on drugs. Each policy received strong support by at least three in five Mainers.



Additionally, legislation establishing more protections for workers—including fairness in overtime pay and scheduling and preventing wage theft—was the third most popular policy behind making prescription drugs more affordable and holding pharmaceutical companies accountable for their role in the opioid crisis. Establishing more protections for workers is particularly popular among non-college educated men, college educated women, and among residents in the western region. Mainers also strongly supported additional worker protections, including requiring paid sick days, establishing a state insurance fund so all employees can take medical or family leave, and policies to reduce the gender wage gap. Expanding broadband internet to rural communities was also popular with everyone except college educated men and residents under 45.

The survey also found that Mainers were on board with helping residents attend college. A majority strongly supported providing student debt forgiveness for any Mainer who lives and works in the state for at least five years after they graduate, and making community college free for all Maine residents who maintain a C average or better while they attend school. However, less than a majority of Mainers support ensuring every school district offers public pre-school. The polling results showed strong support for those policies that have already passed, and equally strong support for a progressive legislative agenda in the coming session.

### **Focus Groups Summary**

The recent focus groups provide a deeper look into the findings of the previous polling but is not generalizable to the overall voting population. There were many interesting findings throughout the focus groups, and this memo focuses specifically on Mainers' reactions to the recent legislation passed or considered by the state legislature.

In our discussions in both locations, the most popular policies that have passed or are being considered in Augusta were ensuring every district has public preschool; forgiving student debt for living and working in the state for five years; and cracking down on surprise medical bills.

In Lewiston, voters also strongly supported expanding broadband internet access to rural communities since it is an issue many of them face every day. However, those in Saco were more hesitant regarding the costs associated with the legislation even though they supported the goal. Similarly, voters in Lewiston were more on board with free community college, while voters in Saco were more hesitant about the costs and thought that it would lead to a lack of motivation among students.

Voters in both groups needed more details about policies focusing on workers' rights, specifically requiring employers to allow employees to take paid sick leave and establishing a state insurance fund so employees can take medical or family leave. Some believed that it

would be beneficial to the economy as a way to keep workers in the state and attract new ones but others were concerned about how it would be implemented, particularly what it means for jobs that do not traditionally get paid time off and how it would affect small businesses. Voters were also concerned about policies such as these making the state less desirable for businesses to come in, which is one of their top priorities. In both locations, participants supported the goals of the progressive legislation that has passed or is being considered in Augusta and are looking to hear more from their representatives about what they have been doing and how these policies will be funded.

Group	Supported policies	Need more details	Hesitant policies
<b>Lewiston (non-college)</b>	Public preschool	Free community college	State insurance fund so employees can take medical/family leave
	Expanding broadband	Making prescription drugs more affordable	Requiring employers to allow employees to take paid sick leave
	Student debt forgiveness	Drug pricing board	
	Cracking down on surprise medical bills		
<b>Saco (women 55+)</b>	Public preschool	Requiring employers to allow employees to take paid sick leave	State insurance fund so employees can take medical/family leave
	Student debt forgiveness	State based medical insurance exchange	Free community college
	Cracking down on surprise medical bills		Expanding broadband
	Making prescription drugs more affordable		
	Holding pharmaceutical companies accountable for opioid crisis		

### Lewiston Specific Findings

Overall, non-college educated voters in the Lewiston area were largely pessimistic and frustrated about the way things are going in the country, mostly blaming the polarization out of Washington, D.C. However, this pessimism extends to the state since it causes them to tune out local issues as well as national ones. Voters are also concerned about the high cost of living and the lack of good-paying jobs, which are the main reasons they do not expect young Mainers and college students to stay in the state. Unfortunately, Lewiston participants were not sure of any

leaders in DC or Augusta who were doing the right thing and fighting for them. While some Augusta lawmakers are viewed as doing the right thing, that sentiment is not universal.

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*“I deal with this almost on a daily basis that we are still the frontier as far as internet goes”*

– Lewiston voter

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When it comes to the policies that have passed or considered in Augusta, Lewiston participants were on board with many of them. Expanding broadband internet to rural communities and ensuring all school districts have public preschool were the most popular policies discussed. These voters have experienced the difficulties of unreliable internet and think it is essential that all communities have

it, particularly for job growth. Similarly, they viewed preschool as essential for children’s development and not something that families should have to pay for.

Lewiston voters also supported making higher education more affordable through student debt forgiveness and free community college since it would help keep young people in the state. However, some participants were concerned about paying for the costs of the programs. Additionally, participants did not trust anyone in the health care sphere, particularly insurance and drug companies. It is not surprising that they were very supportive of legislation that will make it more transparent and affordable. In particular, Lewiston voters supported cracking down on surprise medical bills, making prescription drugs more affordable, and creating an independent drug pricing board.

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*“I think people need to believe in making finances as not a barrier to getting your education. If you want to keep workers here and have good workers in your jobs, that needs to stop being a barrier”*

– Lewiston voter

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While participants supported most of the policies discussed, they were more hesitant when it came to ones that focused on workers’ rights, particularly a state insurance fund so employees can take medical or family leave and requiring employers to allow employees to earn paid sick days. Lewiston voters supported the goals of the legislation and think they should be instituted for larger companies but were concerned about the impact the proposals would have on small businesses and make the state less desirable for businesses as a result.

## Saco Specific Findings

Similar to what happened in Lewiston, older women in Saco were also largely pessimistic about the way things in the country are going, however they overwhelmingly blamed the media for increasing divisiveness. Unlike Lewiston participants, those in Saco were largely satisfied with how things in their area were going but they were concerned about problems that other areas, particularly those in the north, face. Like Lewiston, Saco voters were also unaware of who their state representatives were and what they have been doing in Augusta.

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*"I would love to see that. I think that would have people stay in Maine, buy houses, pay taxes, start families, use the schools."*  
– Saco voter

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*"It's a matter of the two Maines. You've got the southern Maine, and you've got northern Maine. And the politics are different for the most part in both of those areas. And northern Maine is not getting what it needs to have. Money is not really being spent there."*  
– Saco voter

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Saco voters also strongly supported ensuring public preschool in every district knowing the importance of preschool for a child's development and forgiving student debt if they live and work in the state for five years. Additionally, they supported policies that would increase transparency in various aspects of health care, such as cracking down on surprise medical bills and making prescription drugs more affordable and holding pharmaceutical companies accountable for the opioid crisis.

Saco voters were more hesitant when it came to policies that might make the state less desirable for businesses and that they might be abused, such as requiring employers to allow employees to earn paid sick leave. Participants in Saco were also concerned about how these policies would be paid for, even if they supported the policies in theory. Voters were concerned about the state having the money to expand broadband to rural communities, establish a state insurance fund so employees can take medical or family leave, and free community college. Policies that focused on workers' rights

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*"This all sounds great to have free tuition, but who's paying for it? Someone has to."*  
– Saco voter

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*"we can have the best schools and graduate students with wonderful degrees and a good workforce, but until they change the taxes and get an incentive for the businesses to come, you're not going to do any good."* – Saco voter

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needed more explanation than most, particularly explaining how it would apply to different size businesses.

## **Conclusion**

While the findings of the focus groups are not generalizable to the overall public, they are instructive on how some swing voters have internalized LePage-era rhetoric. Through these conversations it is clear that participants are interested in the progressive policy agenda, but are worried about the fiscal impact.

At the same time, we heard from participants that they are over-taxed and that they believe they are the highest, or one of the highest, taxed states in the country. The Republican party has been pushing the anti-tax narrative for over four decades and it clearly has been effective. In our opinion, the best framing to push back on these efforts is not “we need to raise taxes” or even that “the rich should pay more.” While undoubtedly true, arguing about taxes is not putting the progressive agenda on the best footing. Instead we should focus on investment and improving the future of Maine, and how we are going to achieve these goals. If there are people or organizations against these ideas by default they don’t want to invest in Maine’s future. If we are arguing about taxes, we are allowing our opponents to be “anti-tax” which is where many Mainers are.

Legislators and partners need to engage in clear and consistent messaging to help constituents better understand how these investments are solutions to the very problems identified.

It will be important for legislators to reach out to their constituents to make sure they know what they have been doing in Augusta, and to explain some of the more complicated policies they have passed. Voters need to understand that their legislators are fighting for them and that they have a plan to pay for the legislation they pass.