



# Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics

## *Erie County and the Trump Administration*

*A Survey of 407 Registered  
Voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania*

Prepared by: The Mercyhurst Center  
for Applied Politics at Mercyhurst  
University

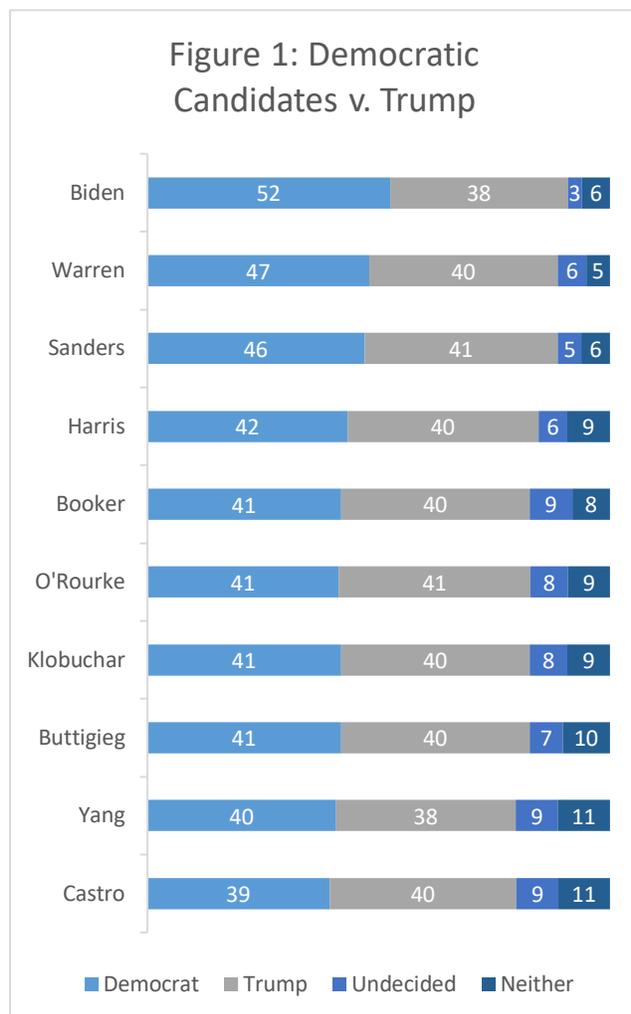
Joseph M. Morris, Director  
Project Managers: Logan Ford, Katie  
Johnston, Sophia Jensen, Luke Sveda

## Context of the Poll

The Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics' fall 2019 poll is the fourth in a series of five polls of voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania, which began in February 2017. All polls have included a standard battery of questions addressing a wide range of issues related to the public's perception of Donald Trump and his performance as president. The goal of the project is to provide an accurate account of the evolution of public opinion in Erie County for the duration of the Trump administration in service of the democratic process. All poll results will be made available to the public via the Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics webpage.

## Summary of Findings

**2020 Match-ups.** A Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics poll of 407 registered voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania, (MOE +/-5, Sept.16-25, 2019, live

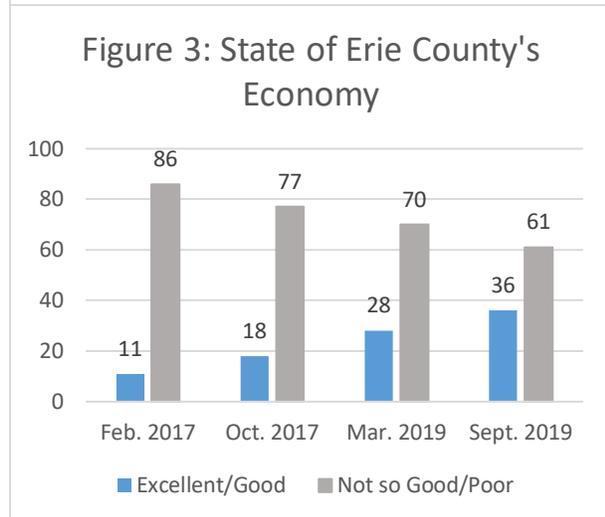
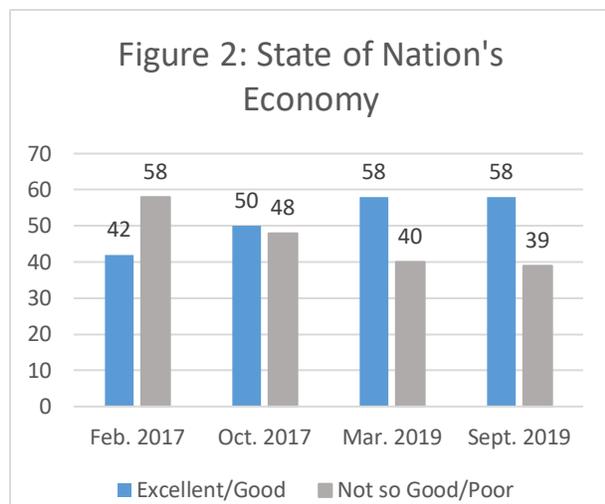


interviewers) finds encouraging news for the leading Democratic candidates hoping to unseat Donald Trump in 2020. A majority of voters in this historically blue county that swung red in 2016 say that if the election were held today, they would choose Joe Biden over Donald Trump (52%-38%). Elizabeth Warren (47%-40%) and Bernie Sanders (46%-41%) also best Trump by noteworthy margins, though their leads are within the margin of error of this poll. Other Democratic candidates including Harris, Booker, O'Rourke, Yang, Buttigieg, Castro, and Klobuchar are running neck and neck with the incumbent president (see Figure 1).

Interestingly, with more than one year before the presidential election, relatively few voters remain undecided. In a contest between Biden and Trump, only 3% of voters say they are undecided; only 5% remain undecided in hypothetical contests between Warren and Sanders and the incumbent president. While the number of undecided voters increases in match-ups between Trump and other leading Democratic candidates, the fact that it never exceeds 10% means undecideds are relatively few in number.

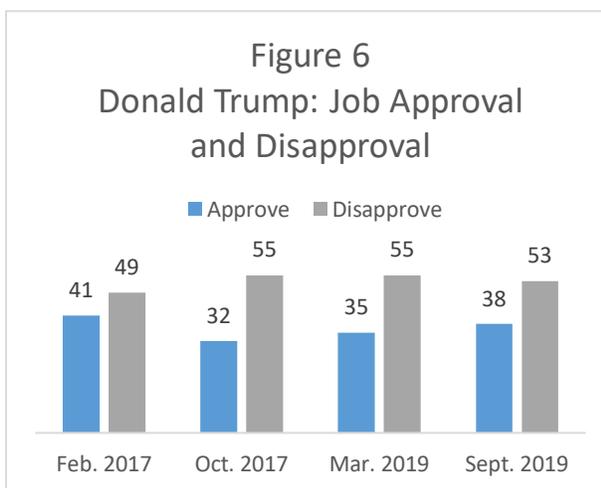
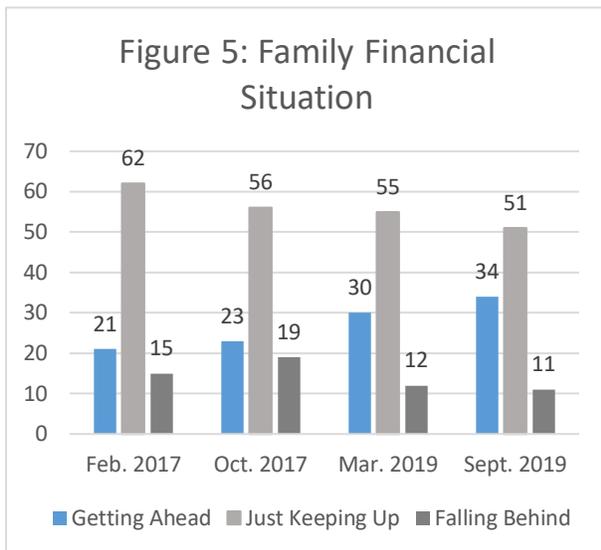
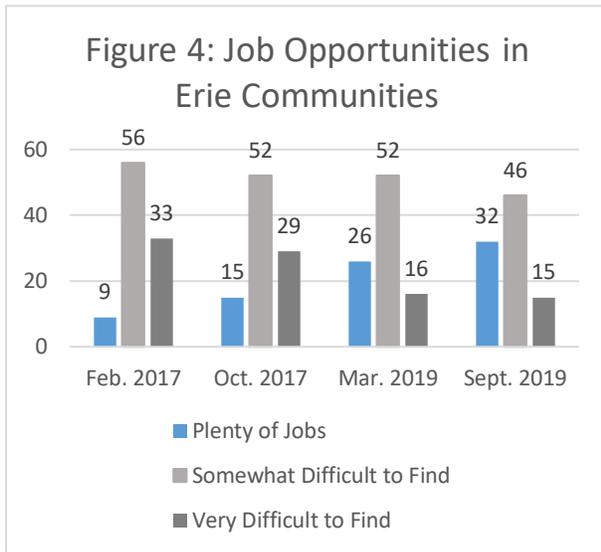
**State of the Economy.** Biden, Warren, and Sanders’ strong showings in Erie County are in some ways surprising given voters’ perceptions of the state of the national and local economies. Historically, voters’ perception of the state of the economy has been among the strongest predictors of the outcome of presidential elections; and Erie County voters’ perception of the economy is as positive as it has been since Trump took office. Exactly how positive is illustrated in four

figures (see Figures 2-5).



A solid majority of voters (58%) describe the state of the nation’s economy as “excellent” or “good,” which is up from 42% in February 2017. Only 39% of voters say the state of the nation’s economy is “not so good” or “poor.” Even when it comes to the economy in Erie County, which has for decades struggled to find its way in the post-industrial era, voters have increasingly positive perceptions.

Although most voters (61%) describe the state of Erie County’s economy as “not so good” or “poor,” the percentage of voters describing their local economy as “excellent” or “good” has steadily increased from 11% in February 2017 to 36% today.

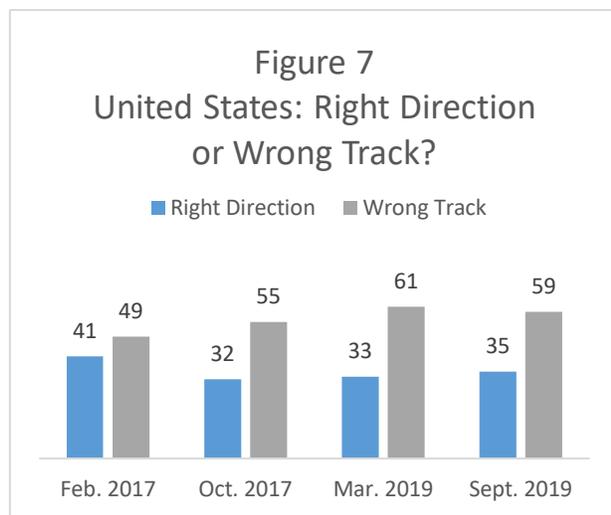


The same pattern is apparent in voters' perceptions of the availability of jobs in their communities and their families' financial situations. The percentage of voters who say there are "plenty of jobs" in their community increased from 9% to 32% since Trump took office in early 2017. Voters saying that jobs are "very difficult to find" decreased by 18 points during the same period. Voters are also more likely to say they are "getting ahead financially" than at any time in the past three years. Today 34% of voters say they are getting ahead financially, compared to only 21% in February 2017, and fewer say they are just keeping up or falling behind. In other words, voters perceive the state of the national and local economies is translating into an increase in the availability of jobs and improvements in their families' financial situations.

**Job Performance, Favorability, and the Direction of the Nation.** History suggests that voters' perceptions of a president's job performance are important for predicting the outcome of presidential elections. Although no single variable can be used to accurately predict the outcome of all presidential elections, in nearly every election since the middle of the 20th century, incumbent candidates for President of

the United States who had a national approval rating of 49% or higher at the time of the election won reelection. Today only 38% of voters in Erie County approve of the job Donald Trump is doing as president, while a majority (53%) say they disapprove (see Figure 6). Although evaluations of his job performance have improved since October 2017, the results of this poll suggest that he has work to do if he hopes to repeat his performance in 2016.

Erie County voters' dissatisfaction with the president's job performance and unfavorable opinion of him may be at least partly due to their perception of the trajectory of the nation. When asked whether they believe the nation is headed in



the right direction or off on the wrong track, a solid majority of voters (59%) say they believe the nation is off on the wrong track. Only 35% say that things in this nation are headed in the right direction. In terms of favorability, only 42% of voters have a “somewhat” or “strongly” favorable opinion of the President, while 56% have a “somewhat” or “strongly” unfavorable opinion of him. When it comes to

favorability and the direction of the nation, the results of this poll contrast with the poll conducted in February 2017, which were more positive for the president.

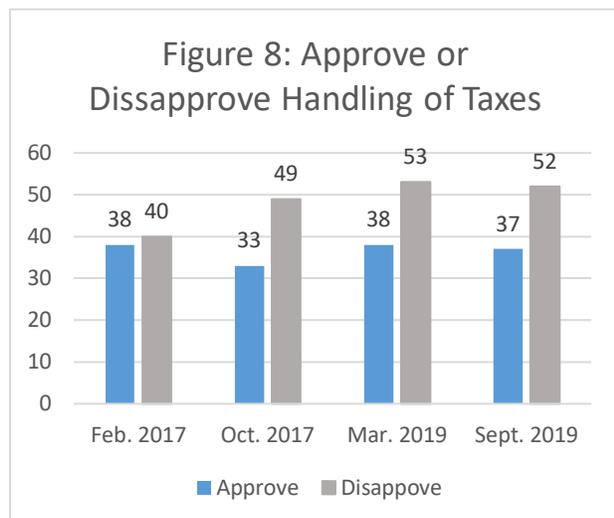
**Issues.** Why do Erie County voters express such dissatisfaction with the trajectory of the nation? Table 1 may provide some answers. When asked whether they approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling 14 issues, a majority or plurality of voters approve of his handling of only three: the economy (52%), terrorism (48%), and national defense (49%). However, voters largely disapprove of his handling of the 11 remaining issues. A majority of voters disapprove of the way he is handling taxes (52%), trade with other nations (55%), America's infrastructure (52%), immigration (57%), healthcare (57%), gun violence (63%), the environment (59%), gun control (56%), and our relations with other nations (62%). A plurality of voters disapprove of the way he handles Social Security (47%), and voters are evenly divided on his handling of illegal drugs (38%

approve, 39% disapprove).

Table 1. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling ...

	Feb. 2017		Oct. 2017		Mar. 2019		Sept. 2019	
	Approve	Disappr.	Approve	Disappr.	Approve	Disappr.	Approve	Disappr.
The economy	49	36	47	45	52	45	52	41
Taxes	38	40	33	49	38	53	37	52
Int. Relations	32	60	26	68	34	60	31	62
Trade	42	48	36	47	36	54	35	55
Infrastructure	45	35	32	48	30	53	29	52
Immigration	37	58	32	61	37	57	35	57
Healthcare	36	51	30	62	30	58	32	57
Soc. Security	28	37	25	42	31	44	32	47
Terrorism	49	44	46	44	50	39	48	43
Nat. defense	49	41	48	43	50	40	49	43
Illegal drugs	39	31	35	43	46	37	38	39
Gun control	43	39	38	48	43	47	34	56
Gun violence	42	39	26	58	32	55	24	63
Environment	29	55	29	58	25	65	28	59

The president’s handling of two potentially important issues has been met with steadily increasing disapproval from Erie County voters since 2017: taxes and America’s infrastructure. Prior to any clear articulation of the president’s plan for reforming the tax code in February 2017, Erie County voters were evenly divided in their approval and disapproval of his handling of the issue (see Table 1). During

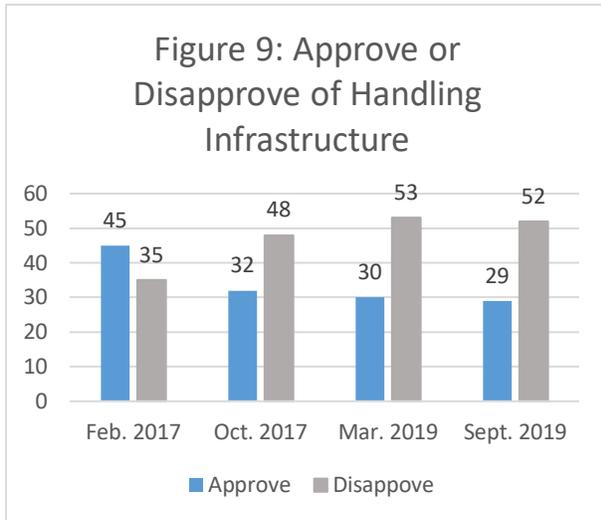


the period when the details of his tax reform bill were becoming known, voters’ disapproval of his handling of the issue increased from 40% in February 2017 to 49% in October 2017. Today – nearly two years after the President’s Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 was signed into law – a majority of voters (52%) disapprove of the president’s handling of the issue. The steady increase in voters’ disapproval of

his handling of taxes should be cause for concern to the president as the 2020 campaign approaches, as he will undoubtedly present tax reform as a major

accomplishment of his first term in office. Given Erie County voters' increasing disapproval of his handling of taxes, presenting this issue as a success may not be advantageous in the Erie region.

Erie County voters' disapproval of Donald Trump's handling of America's infrastructure should also be of concern as 2020 approaches. Communities like those found in Erie County, which have been hit particularly hard by the decline of



the manufacturing sector, are suffering from aging, declining and, in some cases, failing infrastructure. The fact that voters in these communities were a key component of the electoral coalition that swept Donald Trump into office in 2016 means that infrastructure may become a critical issue for him in 2020. Erie County voters who approve of Donald Trump's handling of America's infrastructure steadily declined from 45% in February 2017 to 29% today.

## Frequencies

*Interviews were completed with 407 registered voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania. For a sample size of 407, there is a 95 percent probability that our survey results are within plus or minus 5 points (the margin of error) of the actual population distribution for any given question. For subsamples the margin of error is larger (depending on the size of the subsample). The data were weighted on gender, age, and race to correct for minor discrepancies between the sample and population. Question order was randomized whenever possible. Due to rounding, column totals may not equal 100 percent.*

1. To begin, do you approve or disapprove of the job Donald Trump is doing as president?

approve	38%
disapprove	53%
neither (volunteered)	3%
depends (volunteered)	5%
DK	1%
RF	1%

2. Generally speaking, how do you rate the way that Congress is doing its job? Would you say Congress is doing an excellent job, a good job, a fair job, or a poor job?

excellent job	1%
good job	7%
fair job	39%
poor job	48%
DK	4%
RF	1%

I'm going to read you a short list of issues and I would like you to tell me whether you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling each one.

[RANDOMIZE]

3. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling the economy?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	52%
disapprove	41%
neither (volunteered)	2%
depends (volunteered)	1%
DK	3%

RF 1%

4. How about taxes?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	37%
disapprove	52%
neither (volunteered)	3%
depends (volunteered)	2%
DK	5%
RF	1%

5. How about America's relationship with other nations?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	31%
disapprove	62%
neither (volunteered)	1%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	4%
RF	1%

6. How about trade with other nations?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	35%
disapprove	55%
neither (volunteered)	2%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	5%
RF	0%

7. How about America's infrastructure?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	29%
disapprove	52%
neither (volunteered)	5%
depends (volunteered)	2%
DK	9%
RF	2%

8. How about immigration?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	35%
disapprove	57%
neither (volunteered)	2%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	3%
RF	1%

9. How about health care?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	32%
disapprove	57%
neither (volunteered)	3%
depends (volunteered)	1%
DK	6%
RF	2%

10. How about Social Security?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	32%
disapprove	47%
neither (volunteered)	7%
depends (volunteered)	1%
DK	12%
RF	2%

11. How about terrorism?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	48%
disapprove	43%
neither (volunteered)	3%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	4%
RF	1%

12. How about national defense?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	49%
disapprove	43%
neither (volunteered)	2%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	4%
RF	1%

13. How about illegal drugs?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	38%
disapprove	39%
neither (volunteered)	7%
depends (volunteered)	4%
DK	11%
RF	2%

14. How about gun control?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	34%
disapprove	56%
neither (volunteered)	3%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	4%
RF	1%

15. How about gun violence?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	24%
disapprove	63%
neither (volunteered)	4%
depends (volunteered)	2%
DK	5%
RF	2%

16. How about the environment?

(Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...?)

approve	28%
disapprove	59%
neither (volunteered)	4%
depends (volunteered)	1%
DK	7%
RF	1%

17. Generally speaking, do you believe things in the United States are headed in the right direction, or that they're off on the wrong track?

right direction	35%
wrong track	59%
neither (volunteered)	3%
DK	3%
RF	1%

18. Would you describe the state of the nation's economy these days as excellent, good, not so good, or poor?

excellent	13%
good	45%
not so good	28%
poor	11%
DK	2%
RF	0%

19. Would you describe the state of Erie County's economy these days as excellent, good, not so good, or poor?

excellent	2%
good	34%
not so good	43%
poor	18%
DK	4%
RF	0%

20. Thinking about job opportunities where you live, would you say there are plenty of jobs available in your community, jobs are somewhat difficult to find in your community, or that jobs are very difficult to find in your community?

plenty of jobs	32%
somewhat difficult to find	46%
very difficult to find	15%
DK	7%
RF	1%

21. Which best describes your family's financial situation? Do you feel as if you are getting ahead financially, have just enough money to maintain your standard of living, or are you falling behind financially?

getting ahead	34%
just enough money	51%
falling behind	11%
DK	1%
RF	3%

22. Is your opinion of Donald Trump strongly favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or strongly unfavorable?

strongly favorable	20%
somewhat favorable	22%
somewhat unfavorable	13%
strongly unfavorable	43%
DK	1%
RF	2%

Now I have just a few Questions about the 2020 presidential election.

[RANDOMIZE]

23. If the 2020 presidential election was held today and the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Joe Biden, who would you vote for?

Trump	38%
Biden	52%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	2%
someone else (volunteered)	4%
DK	3%
RF	2%

24. What if the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Julian Castro?

(If the 2020 presidential election was held today and the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Julian Castro, who would you vote for?)

Trump	40%
Castro	39%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	5%
someone else (volunteered)	6%
DK	9%
RF	2%

25. What if the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Pete Buttigieg?

(If the 2020 presidential election was held today and the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Pete Buttigieg, who would you vote for?)

Trump	40%
Buttigieg	41%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	5%
someone else (volunteered)	5%
DK	7%
RF	2%

26. What if the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Amy Klobuchar?

(If the 2020 presidential election was held today and the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Amy Klobuchar, who would you vote for?)

Trump	40%
Klobuchar	41%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	5%
someone else (volunteered)	4%
DK	8%
RF	2%

27. What if the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Andrew Yang?

(If the 2020 presidential election was held today and the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Andrew Yang, who would you vote for?)

Trump	38%
Yang	40%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	5%
someone else (volunteered)	6%
DK	9%
RF	2%

28. What if the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Elizabeth Warren?

(If the 2020 presidential election was held today and the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Elizabeth Warren, who would you vote for?)

Trump	40%
Warren	47%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	3%
someone else (volunteered)	2%
DK	6%
RF	2%

29. What if the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Bernie Sanders?

(If the 2020 presidential election was held today and the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Bernie Sanders, who would you vote for?)

Trump	41%
Sanders	46%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	3%
someone else (volunteered)	3%
DK	5%
RF	1%

30. What if the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Beto O'Rourke?

(If the 2020 presidential election was held today and the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Beto O'Rourke, who would you vote for?)

Trump	41%
O'Rourke	41%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	5%
someone else (volunteered)	4%
DK	8%
RF	2%

31. What if the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Cory Booker?

(If the 2020 presidential election was held today and the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Cory Booker, who would you vote for?)

Trump	40%
Booker	41%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	4%
someone else (volunteered)	4%
DK	9%
RF	2%

32. What if the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Kamala Harris?

(If the 2020 presidential election was held today and the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Kamala Harris, who would you vote for?)

Trump	40%
Harris	42%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	4%
someone else (volunteered)	5%
DK	6%
RF	2%

33. Now I have just a few questions that we'll be using for statistical purposes. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or an independent?

Republican	31%
Democrat	41%
independent	25%
other (volunteered)	1%
DK	1%
RF	1%

34. Generally speaking, do you consider yourself to be a liberal, conservative, or have you not thought much about this?

liberal	25%
conservative	35%
not thought about	30%
neither/other (volunteered)	8%
DK	2%
RF	1%

35. What is your age?

18-29	15%
30-39	9%
40-49	14%
50-69	35%
70 or older	25%

36. What is your marital status?

single/divorced/widowed/separated	45%
married	52%

other (volunteered)	1%
DK	0%
RF	1%

37. If you add together the yearly incomes, before taxes, of all members of your household for the past year, would the total be...[read categories]

\$0-\$30,000	15%
\$30,001-60,000	22%
\$60,001-100,000	25%
\$100,001-150,000	12%
over \$150,000	7%
DK	6%
RF	13%

38. What is your race?

white/Caucasian	82%
non-white/non-Caucasian	15%
DK	1%
RF	4%

39. What is the highest level of education you completed?

High School or less	28%
Some College/2-Year Degree	30%
College/4-Year Degree	27%
Graduate degree	15%

40. Gender [just record, do not ask]

male	49%
female	51%

## **Methodology**

This report summarizes the results of a survey of registered voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania, which was conducted between September 16 and September 26, 2019. During the nine-day field period, interviewers called weekday evenings between the hours of 6 and 9 p.m. and between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. on weekends. For each working phone number, interviewers made no fewer than six attempts to contact individuals selected to participate in the study. Calls were initiated by CATI software or manually dialed and relied on a list of randomly selected registered voters Pennsylvania obtained from L2.

A total of 407 individuals were interviewed. For a sample size of 407, there is a 95 percent probability that the results are within plus or minus 5 points (the margin of error) of the actual population distribution for any given question. For subsamples, the margin of error is higher (depending on the size of the subsample). Aside from sampling error, there are several factors that prevent the results obtained through a probability sample from being a perfect representation of the results that would be obtained if the entire population were interviewed. This non-sampling error may be caused by a variety of factors including, but not limited to, response rate and question order. In this survey, a variety of techniques were employed to reduce common sources of non-sampling error.

## **Response Rate**

Calculating a response rate for a particular study involves considering a number of variables (see [http://www.aapor.org/Response\\_Rates\\_An\\_Overview.htm](http://www.aapor.org/Response_Rates_An_Overview.htm)); but, simply stated, it refers to the percentage of individuals in a sample that, when contacted, elect to participate in a study by responding to an interviewer's questions. In recent years, researchers have documented a sharp decline in response rates. Today, a typical study that relies on telephone interviews can expect a response rate of between 20 and 30%. Although it is unclear if, or to what extent, response rate is a source of non-sampling error, most polls strive to maximize response rate by making multiple attempts to contact individuals and taking steps to secure their cooperation once they have been reached. In this way, our study of registered voters in Pennsylvania is no different than most polls: No fewer than six attempts were made to contact hard-to-reach individuals. These attempts occurred during weekday evenings and on Saturday afternoons. To ensure a high rate of cooperation, interviewers received training on conversion techniques that are consistent with research ethics as identified by the Mercyhurst University Institutional Review Board.

## **Questions**

This report contains the questions as worded on the questionnaire and in the order in which they were asked. Some of the questions include bracketed information, which is, in every case, an instruction to the programmer or interviewer. Whenever possible, question order was randomized to ensure that respondents did not receive a set order of response options, which allowed response set bias to be minimized. For structured (close-ended) questions, interviewers were trained to probe for clarity when respondents' answers were not identical to the predefined response options. For unstructured (open-ended) questions, interviewers were trained to record verbatim responses whenever possible. In cases where a respondent asked that a question or response option be repeated, interviewers were careful to re-read the entire question or all response options.

## **Data**

Data collected during this study was prepared for analysis by director of Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics. Data preparation included, but was not limited to, removing partial interviews (respondent-terminated interviews) from the dataset. To maximize the accuracy of our results and correct for discrepancies between our sample and the population, the data were weighted on age and gender. Simply stated, weighting is when data collected from survey respondents are adjusted to represent the population from which the sample was drawn.

## **Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics**

The Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics (MCAP) began operations in July 2010. Inspired by the mission of Mercyhurst University and guided by the university's core values, the center promotes reasoned discourse about problems facing communities, states and nations. It accomplishes this objective by providing elected officials, government agencies, news organizations, and nonprofits with accurate and unbiased assessments of public opinion; and offering a nonpartisan forum for public debates and roundtable discussions that address pressing public problems.

The centerpiece of MCAP is the state-of-the-art computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) facility. The facility, which is located in the Center for Academic Engagement, comprises 31 interviewer stations and is staffed by well-trained research associates. The specialized computer software used to conduct telephone interviews generates random telephone numbers in a predefined geographic area or dials from a list, and allows research associates to accurately complete even the most complex interviews.

The center also has the ability to design and administer online surveys. This method of interviewing is ideal for organizations that have relatively up-to-date email addresses for their members. The software used by MCAP allows a researcher to administer a survey – whether short and simple or long and complex – to an unlimited number of email addresses. In addition, a researcher has the ability to monitor response rates and send out reminders, thereby ensuring that the study produces high-quality results.

As northwestern Pennsylvania's only CATI facility whose primary purpose is to regularly and accurately gauge public opinion, the MCAP is an invaluable resource for community leaders. Each year the center conducts polls on issues of local, state and national interest. The results of these studies are made available to the public via the university's webpage ([mercyhurst.edu/mcap-polls](http://mercyhurst.edu/mcap-polls)). In addition to its annual polls, the center offers its services to private parties, nonprofits, news organizations, and government agencies for minimal cost.

Please direct questions about the center to Dr. Joseph M. Morris, Director, Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics, Mercyhurst University, 501 E. 38th Street, Erie, PA, 16546, (814) 824-2154, [jmorris@mercyhurst.edu](mailto:jmorris@mercyhurst.edu).

*The Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics was established with a generous gift from Erie Insurance.*