



# Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics

## *Erie County and the Trump Administration*

*A Survey of 454 Registered  
Voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania*

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

Joseph M. Morris, Director

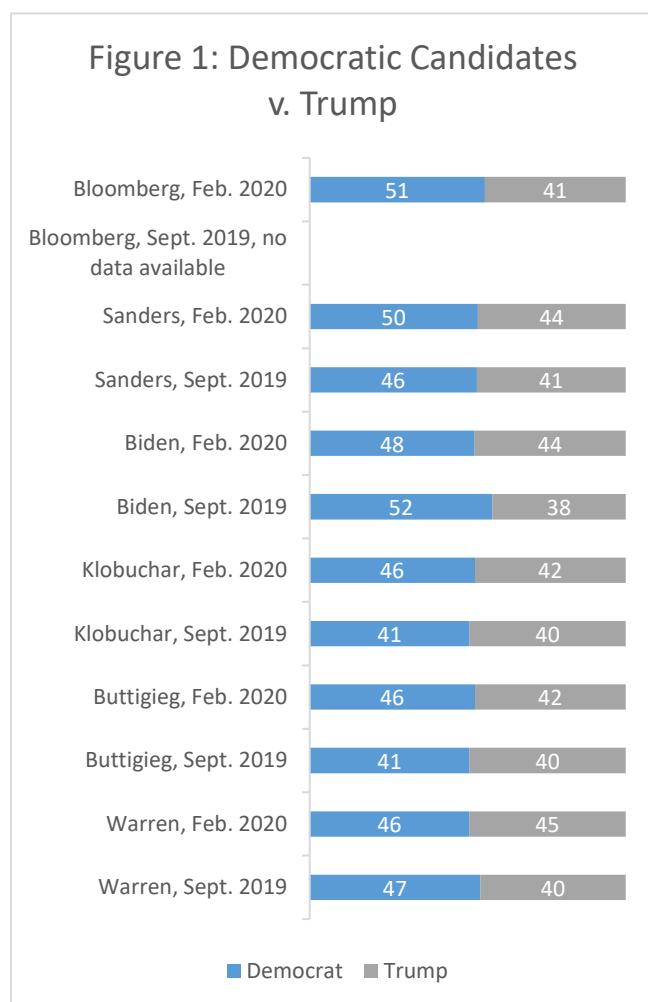
Katie Johnston and Luke Sveda, Project Managers

## **Context of the Poll**

The Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics Spring 2020 poll is the last in a series of five polls designed to assess the perception of Donald Trump and his performance as president among registered voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania. The polls, conducted periodically since February 2017, 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.

## Results

**2020 Match-ups.** A Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics poll of 454 registered voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania, (MOE +/-4.6; Feb. 10-18, 2020; live interviewers) finds encouraging news for some of the



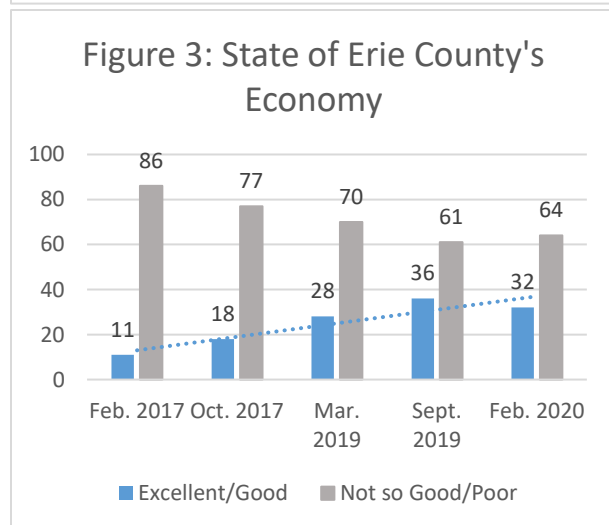
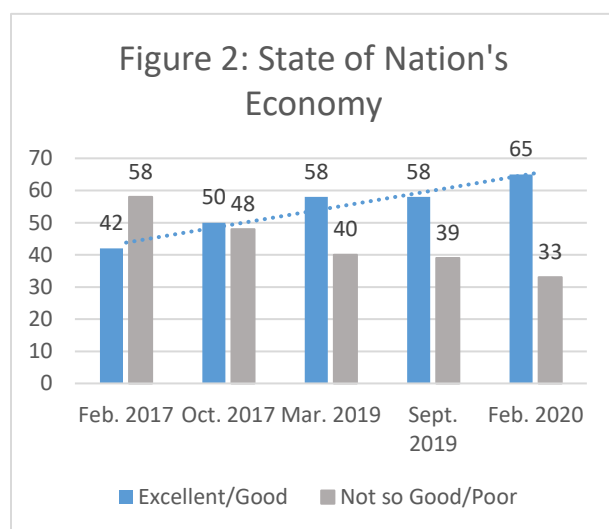
leading Democratic candidates hoping to unseat Donald Trump in 2020, and troublesome news for others (see Figure 1). A majority of voters in this historically blue county that swung red in 2016 say that if the election were held today, they would choose Michael Bloomberg (51%-41%). Bloomberg's 10-point advantage over Trump is the largest advantage enjoyed by any Democratic candidate. Bernie Sanders' six-point lead over Trump (50% - 44%) is, like Bloomberg's lead, outside of the margin of error for this poll. Other leading Democratic candidates – Joe Biden, Amy Klobuchar, Elizabeth Warren, and Pete Buttigieg – all best the incumbent President in hypothetical match-ups, but their leads are within the poll's margin of error. In other words, Biden, Klobuchar, Warren, and Buttigieg are statistically tied with Trump.

As Figure 1 indicates, this poll of registered voters in Erie County brings troubling news for some Democratic candidates. Biden's hefty 14- point lead over Trump in September 2019 (52%-38%) had all but evaporated by February 2020 (48%-44%). Likewise, Warren's 7-point lead (47% - 40%) among voters in this critical county had dissipated by February 2020 (46% - 45%). This decline in support for Biden and Warren mirrors national trends. Whether Biden and Warren can regain their status as Democratic frontrunners will likely be determined on March 3, when Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota,

North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, and Virginia will all hold their presidential primaries.

Interestingly, with more than eight months before the presidential election, relatively few voters remain undecided. In contests between Biden or Buttigieg and Trump, only 1% of voters say they are undecided; while only 6% remain undecided in a hypothetical contest between Klobuchar and the incumbent president. Undecided voters in hypothetical contests between Trump and the other leading Democratic candidates range between 1% and 6%.

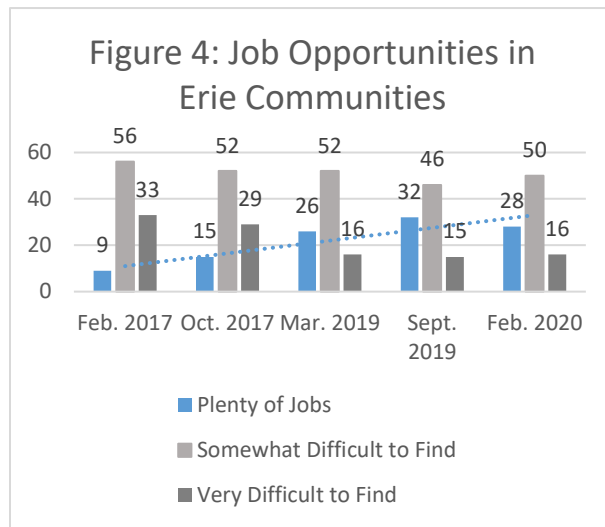
**State of the Economy.** Trump's inability to best any of the potential Democratic challengers is somewhat surprising given voters' perceptions of the state of the national and local economies. Historically, voters'



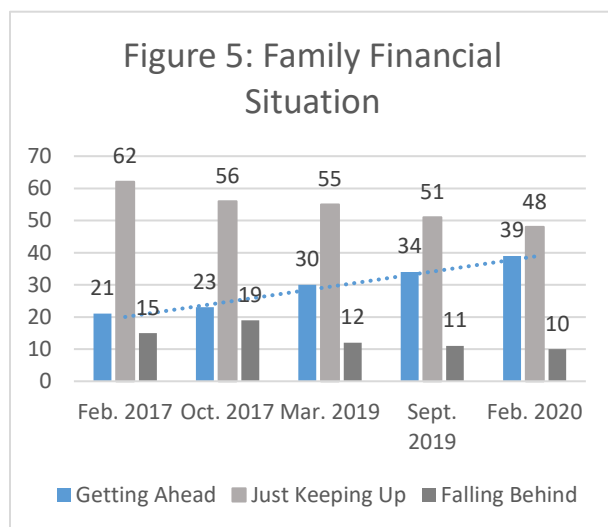
perception of the state of the economy has been among the strongest predictors of the outcome of presidential elections; and Erie County voters' perception of the economy is significantly more positive than when Trump took office. Exactly how positive is illustrated in four figures (see Figures 2-5).

Today a solid majority of voters (65%) describe the state of the nation's economy as "excellent" or "good," which is up from 58% in September 2019. Only 33% 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 perception. Although most voters (64%) 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 increased from 11% in February 2017 to 32% today.

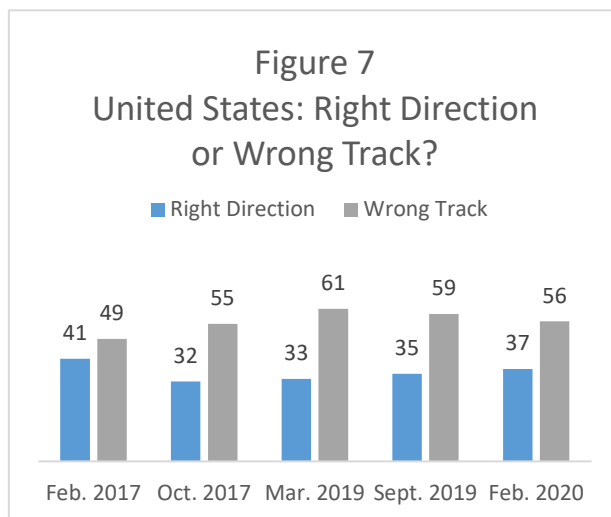
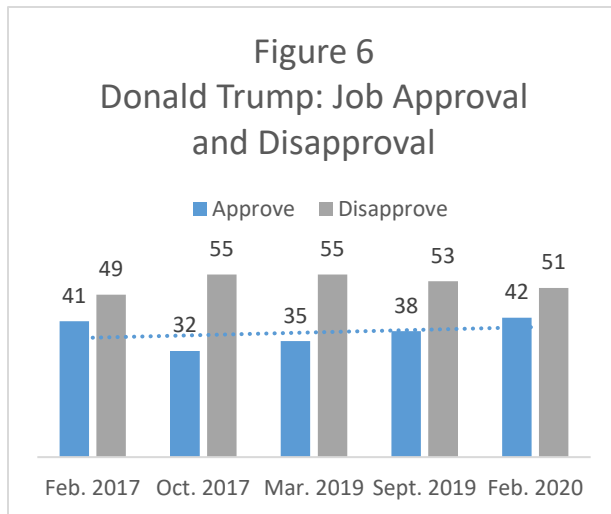


The same pattern is apparent in voters’ perceptions of the availability of jobs in their communities and their families’ financial situations. The percentage of voters who say there are “plenty of jobs” in their community increased from 9% to 28% since Trump took office in early 2017. Voters saying that jobs are “very difficult to find” decreased by 17 points during the same period. As further evidence of increasingly positive perceptions of the economy, voters are also more likely to say they are “getting ahead financially” than at any time since February 2017.



Today 39% 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. These findings cannot be construed as anything other than positive for the incumbent President, as presidents’ electoral fortunes track closely with the state of the nation’s economy.

**Job Performance, Favorability, and the Direction of the Nation.** As is true with the state of the nation’s economy, history suggests that voters’ perception of a president’s job performance is 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 42% of voters in Erie County approve of the job Trump is doing as president, while a majority (51%) say they disapprove (see Figure 6). Although evaluations of his job performance have steadily 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 may be at least partly due to their perception of the trajectory of the nation and their favorability ratings of the President. When asked whether they believe the nation is headed in the right direction or off on the wrong track, a solid majority of voters (56%) say they believe the nation is off on the wrong track. Only 37% say that things in this nation are headed in the right direction.

Although these numbers have improved since the first half of Trump's term, they are less than ideal for a president seeking reelection in less than a year. In terms of favorability, only 44% 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 results of the poll conducted in February 2017, which were more positive for the president.

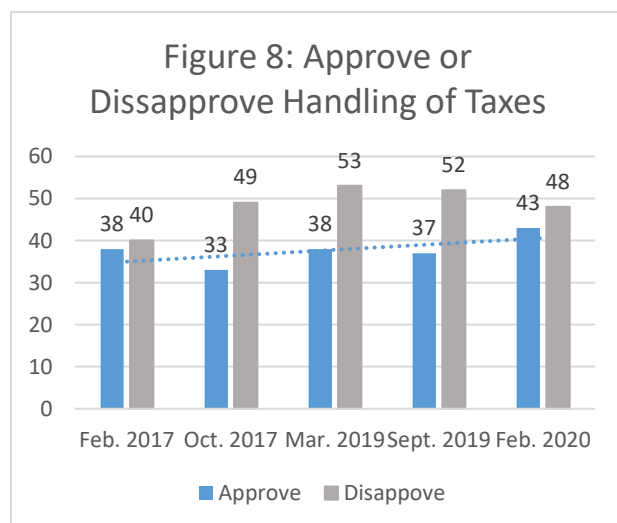
**Issues.** Why do Erie County voters express such dissatisfaction with the trajectory of the nation? Table 1 may provide some answers. When asked whether they approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling 14 issues, a majority or plurality of voters approve of his handling of only four: the economy (58%), terrorism (56%), national defense (56%), and illegal drugs (44%). However, voters largely disapprove of his handling of the 10 remaining issues. A majority voters disapprove of the way he is handling America's infrastructure (56%), immigration (56%), healthcare (56%), gun violence (55%), the environment (59%), and our relations with other nations (58%). A plurality of voters disapprove of the way he handling taxes

(48%), Social Security (46%), trade with other nations (47%), and gun control (48%).

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

	Feb. 2017		Oct. 2017		Mar. 2019		Sept. 2019		Feb. 2020	
	App.	Dis.	App.	Dis.	App.	Dis.	App.	Dis.	App.	Dis.
The economy	49	36	47	45	52	45	52	41	58	37
Taxes	38	40	33	49	38	53	37	52	43	48
Int. Relations	32	60	26	68	34	60	31	62	36	58
Trade	42	48	36	47	36	54	35	55	44	47
Infrastructure	45	35	32	48	30	53	29	52	31	56
Immigration	37	58	32	61	37	57	35	57	39	56
Healthcare	36	51	30	62	30	58	32	57	33	56
Soc. Security	28	37	25	42	31	44	32	47	35	46
Terrorism	49	44	46	44	50	39	48	43	56	38
Nat. defense	49	41	48	43	50	40	49	43	56	38
Illegal drugs	39	31	35	43	46	37	38	39	44	36
Gun control	43	39	38	48	43	47	34	56	45	48
Gun violence	42	39	26	58	32	55	24	63	31	55
Environment	29	55	29	58	25	65	28	59	29	59

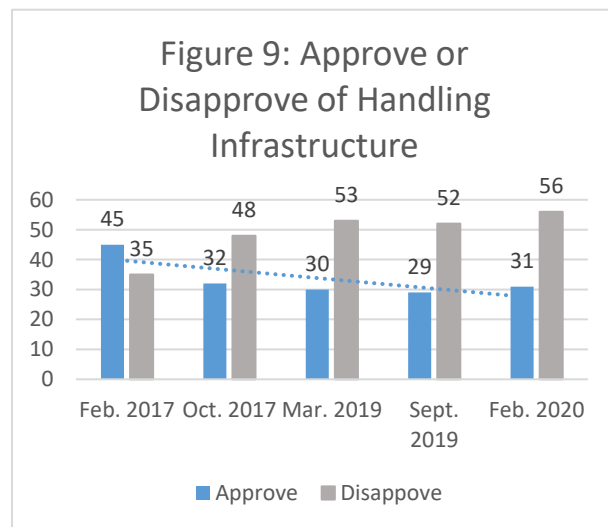
The president's handling of two potentially important issues has been met with consistent disapproval from Erie County voters since 2017: taxes and America's infrastructure. Prior to any clear articulation of the president's plan for reforming the tax code in February 2017, Erie County voters were evenly 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. In September 2019 and nearly two years after the President's Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 was signed into law, a majority of voters (52%) disapproved of the president's handling of the issue. Today, 48% say they disapprove of the issue, while only 43% say they approve. The consistency of voters' perception

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' consistent 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 declined from 45% in February 2017 to 31% today.



## Frequencies

*Interviews were completed with 454 registered voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania. For a sample size of 454, there is a 95 percent probability that our survey results are within plus or minus 4.6 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.*

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

approve	42%
disapprove	51%
neither (volunteered)	2%
depends (volunteered)	4%
DK	1%
RF	0%

Q.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	2%
good job	7%
fair job	36%
poor job	53%
DK	3%
RF	0%

Q.3 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.

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

approve	58%
disapprove	37%
neither (volunteered)	2%
depends (volunteered)	1%
DK	2%
RF	0%

#### Q.4 How about taxes?

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

approve	43%
disapprove	48%
neither (volunteered)	3%
depends (volunteered)	0%
DK	5%
RF	0%

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

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

approve	36%
disapprove	58%
neither (volunteered)	1%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	1%
RF	1%

#### Q.6 How about trade with other nations?

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

approve	44%
disapprove	47%
neither (volunteered)	3%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	3%
RF	0%

#### Q.7 How about America's infrastructure?

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

approve	31%
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disapprove	56%
neither (volunteered)	4%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	5%
RF	1%

Q.8 How about immigration?

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

approve	39%
disapprove	56%
neither (volunteered)	3%
depends (volunteered)	1%
DK	1%
RF	1%

Q.9 How about health care?

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

approve	33%
disapprove	56%
neither (volunteered)	6%
depends (volunteered)	2%
DK	3%
RF	0%

Q.10 How about Social Security?

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

approve	35%
disapprove	46%
neither (volunteered)	8%
depends (volunteered)	2%
DK	8%
RF	1%

Q.11 How about terrorism?

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

approve	56%
disapprove	38%
neither (volunteered)	3%
depends (volunteered)	0%
DK	3%
RF	0%

Q.12 How about national defense?

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

approve	56%
disapprove	38%
neither (volunteered)	2%
depends (volunteered)	0%
DK	1%
RF	2%

Q.13 How about illegal drugs?

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

approve	44%
disapprove	36%
neither (volunteered)	5%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	11%
RF	1%

Q.14 How about gun control?

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

approve	45%
disapprove	48%
neither (volunteered)	2%
depends (volunteered)	1%
DK	3%
RF	1%

Q.15 How about gun violence?

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

approve	31%
disapprove	55%
neither (volunteered)	5%
depends (volunteered)	2%
DK	6%
RF	1%

Q.16 How about the environment?

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

approve	29%
disapprove	59%
neither (volunteered)	5%
depends (volunteered)	3%
DK	4%
RF	0%

Q.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	37%
wrong track	56%
neither (volunteered)	3%
DK	3%
RF	1%

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

excellent	16%
good	49%
not so good	22%
poor	11%
DK	1%
RF	0%

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

excellent	1%
good	31%
not so good	43%
poor	21%
DK	4%
RF	0%

Q.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	28%
somewhat difficult to find	50%
very difficult to find	16%
DK	6%
RF	1%

Q.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	39%
just enough money	48%
falling behind	10%
DK	1%
RF	2%

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

unfavorable?

strongly favorable	24%
somewhat favorable	20%
somewhat unfavorable	13%
strongly unfavorable	43%
DK	0%
RF	0%

Q.23 Now I have just a few questions about the 2020 presidential election.

[RANDOMIZED]

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	44%
Biden	48%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	3%
someone else (volunteered)	4%
DK	1%
RF	0%

Q.24 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	42%
Buttigieg	46%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	5%
someone else (volunteered)	3%
DK	1%
RF	0%

Q.25 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	42%
Klobuchar	46%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	3%
someone else (volunteered)	2%
DK	6%
RF	1%

Q.26 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	45%
Warren	46%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	4%
someone else (volunteered)	2%
DK	3%
RF	0%

Q.27 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	44%
Sanders	50%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	3%
someone else (volunteered)	1%
DK	2%
RF	0%

Q.28 What if the Republican candidate was Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate was Mike Bloomberg?

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



Trump	41%
Bloomberg	51%
wouldn't vote (volunteered)	2%
someone else (volunteered)	1%
DK	4%
RF	1%

Q.29 You may be aware that Donald Trump was impeached by the House of Representatives, but that the Senate voted against removing him from office. If you were a Senator, would you have voted for or against removing him from office?

for removal	48%
against removal	49%
not sure	3%
RF	0%

Q.30 Does the fact the Senate voted against removing Donald Trump from office make you more likely to vote for him in 2020, less likely to vote for him in 2020, or have no impact on whether you will vote for him in 2020?

more likely	12%
less likely	21%
no impact	65%
DK	1%
RF	0%

Q.31 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	38%
independent	30%
other (volunteered)	1%
DK	0%
RF	0%

Q.32 Generally speaking, do you consider yourself to be a liberal, conservative, or have you not thought much about this?

liberal	24%
conservative	39%
not thought about	28%
neither/other (volunteered)	9%
DK	0%
RF	0%

### Q.33 Age

18-29 years	16%
30-39 years	10%
40-49 years	15%
50-69 years	35%
70 or older	25%

### Q.34 What is your marital status?

single/divorced/widowed/separated	47%
married	52%
other (volunteered)	1%
DK	0%
RF	1%

### Q.35 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	16%
\$30,000-60,000	24%
\$60,000-100,000	25%
\$100,000-150,000	14%
over \$150,000	8%
DK	5%
RF	9%

### Q.36 What is your race?

white/Caucasian	87%
non-white/non-Caucasian	11%

DK	0%
RF	2%

Q.37 What is the highest level of education you completed?

Grade School	2%
Some High School	1%
High School	28%
Some Trade/Vocational School	1%
Trade/Vocational certification	4%
Some College/2 Year Degree	27%
College 4 Year Degree	26%
Graduate Degree	11%

Q.38 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 Feb. 10 and 18, 2020. During the eight-day field period, interviewers called weekday evenings between the hours of 6 and 9 p.m. and on weekends between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. 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 Pennsylvania voters obtained from L2.

A total of 454 individuals were interviewed. For a sample size of 454, there is a 95 percent probability that the results are within plus or minus 4.6 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 10 and 30 percent. 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](http://mercyhurst.edu/mcap)). 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).

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