

THE 2012 UTAH PRIORITIES SURVEY: THE TOP ISSUES AND CONCERNS OF UTAH VOTERS FOR THE 2012 ELECTION

THE TOP 10 ISSUES FOR 2012

1. Jobs and the economy
2. Kindergarten through 12th grade education
3. Energy issues
4. Healthcare
5. Taxes and state government spending
6. Higher education
7. Environmental issues
8. Partisan politics
9. Poverty
10. Immigration

The mission of Utah Foundation is to promote a thriving economy, a well-prepared workforce, and a high quality of life for Utahns by performing thorough, well-supported research that helps policymakers, business and community leaders, and citizens better understand complex issues and providing practical, well-reasoned recommendations for policy change.

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In this election year, Utahns are more confident that the state is heading in the right direction than they were two years ago. However, they are still not as confident as they were in the 2004 and 2008 elections. Their concerns about issues like jobs and the economy, public education, and healthcare remain strong. Some issues that were important in the 2010 election, such as ethics of elected officials, states' rights vs. the federal government, and federal lands in Utah have diminished, and Utahns are now more concerned with energy issues, higher education, partisan politics, and poverty.

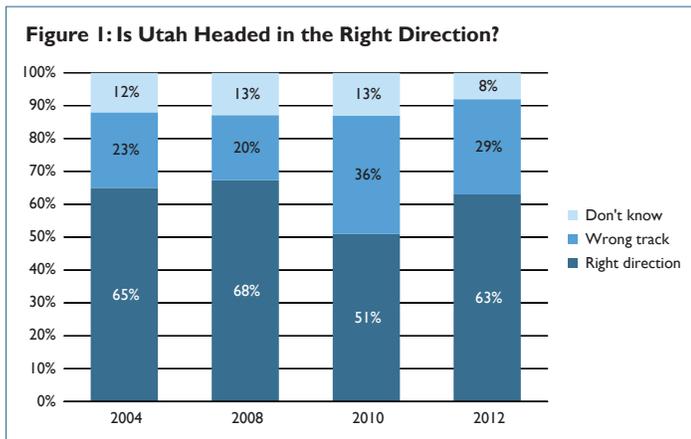
As the introduction to the 2012 Utah Priorities Project, this report provides a summary of the findings of a statewide Dan Jones & Associates survey assessing which issues are most important this year and how voters feel about Utah's economy, society, and politics. The full report is available online at www.utahfoundation.org. The goal of this survey is to determine the most important public policy issues for voters, their level of concern about each issue, and to provide details about why voters care about each issue. The survey was not designed to gather voters' prescriptions for solving these problems, but rather to provide a solid list of priority issues for candidates and voters to focus on through this election cycle. Throughout this election year, Utah Foundation will invite candidates to offer their prescriptions on these issues so that voters can determine who has the best plan for solving these problems.

The 2012 Utah Priorities Project

During this important election year, Utah Foundation is working to focus political dialogue on the issues that matter most to Utah voters. This is a project Utah Foundation undertakes during each gubernatorial election year. It begins with a survey of voters to rank the major issues and set the agenda for Utah Foundation's research and other activities this year.

The Utah Priorities Project website (www.utahpriorities.net) will serve as a library of information on the top issues and will facilitate dialogue about the issues. Through outreach to many media outlets and a partnership with the Hinckley Institute of Politics, this project will also feature issue forums, candidate debates, candidate profiles, and other coverage of these issues.

This report is a summary of a larger survey report by Dan Jones & Associates. The complete report is available on our websites at www.utahfoundation.org and www.utahpriorities.net.



HOW THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED

The 2012 Utah Priorities Survey began by asking a sample of 400 people two open-ended questions: 1) What would you say is the greatest issue facing Utah? And 2) What is the next greatest issue? Those open-ended answers were then analyzed and grouped into 19 major topic areas, from which a larger survey was created and administered to 804 respondents statewide. Surveys were conducted by phone and online during February 15 – 22, 2012. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3.5% and the data are weighted by congressional district. Of the respondents, 38% were from Salt Lake County, 20% from Utah County, 11% from Davis County, 7% from Weber County, and the remaining 23% from a sampling of other counties around Utah.

This methodology is similar to the 2004, 2008, and 2010 Utah Priorities surveys, although this year’s survey is more robust, with the initial, open-ended, survey going to twice the number of respondents, and the structured survey administered to a sample that is 33% larger than in earlier years. Although the earlier surveys were considered accurate, the current survey is even stronger.

HEADED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

The 2012 Utah Priorities Survey began by asking Utah voters if they feel Utah is headed in the right direction or if it is on the wrong track. A majority (63%) responded that the state is “headed in the right direction.” This is a much higher percentage of respondents than in 2010 (51%), when the state and country were still struggling to recover from the economic recession. However, the percentage of respondents who think Utah is on the right track is still not as high as it was in the 2004 and 2008 surveys (65% and 68%, respectively).

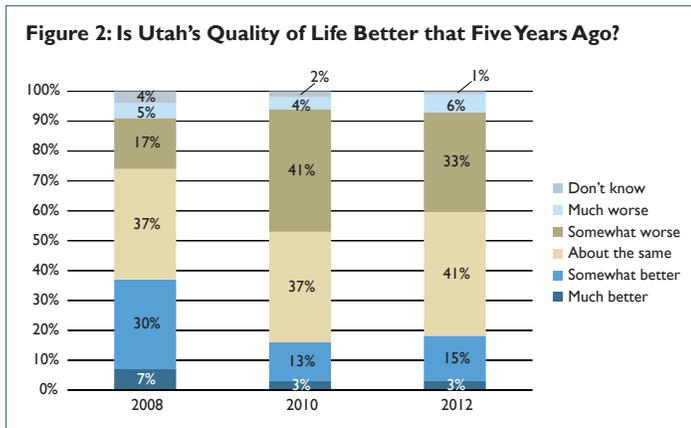


Figure 3: The Top 10 Issues for 2012

Issue	Not at all concerned			Very concerned		Mean Score
	1	2	3	4	5	
1 Jobs and the economy	1%	5%	16%	28%	49%	4.19
2 Kindergarten through 12th grade education	5%	7%	16%	25%	46%	4.02
3 Energy issues	2%	7%	21%	28%	42%	4.01
4 Healthcare	3%	8%	19%	28%	41%	3.98
5 Taxes and state government spending						
Taxes	4%	12%	25%	27%	32%	3.72
Government spending	5%	10%	25%	28%	31%	3.69
6 Higher education	6%	13%	22%	28%	30%	3.64
7 Environmental issues	5%	13%	27%	23%	30%	3.61
8 Partisan politics	9%	12%	24%	18%	34%	3.57
9 Poverty	5%	12%	29%	28%	25%	3.56
10 Immigration	9%	13%	23%	22%	32%	3.55

Similarly, the percentage of respondents who think Utah is on the wrong track (29%), while lower than in 2010 (36%), is still significant higher than in 2008 (20%) and 2004 (23%).

UTAH’S QUALITY OF LIFE

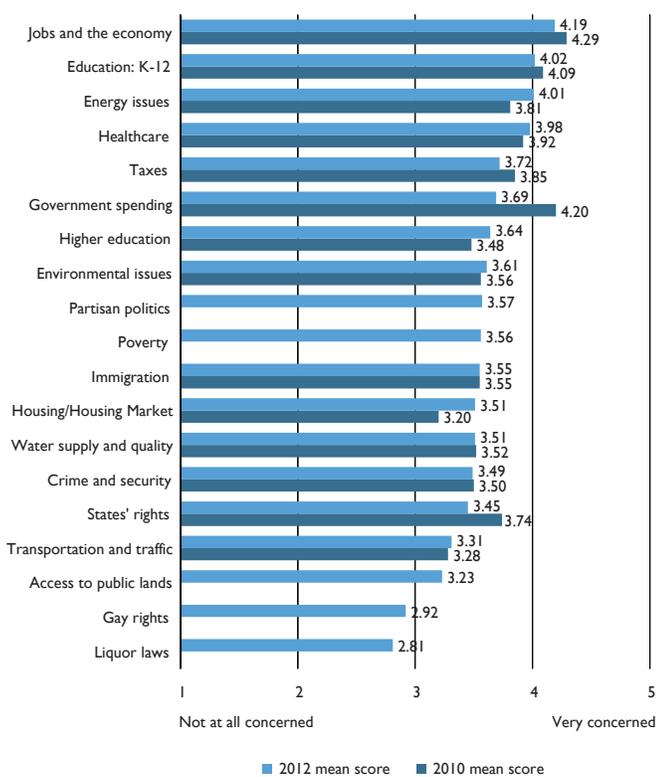
Respondents were asked to rate the overall quality of life in Utah compared to five years ago. Figure 2 shows mixed results for 2012; not surprisingly, the percentage of respondents who feel Utah’s quality of life is “somewhat worse” is noticeably lower today than it was in 2010. A minority of voters (18%) feel the quality of life in Utah is somewhat or much better, and a plurality (41%) feel it is about the same. A similar-sized group of respondents (39%) feel Utah’s quality of life is somewhat or much worse. These sentiments likely reflect the strains placed on individuals and the state by the economic recession. While respondents rated their quality of life as higher than in 2010, it was still much lower than in 2008.

THE TOP 10 ISSUES FACING UTAH

In order to assess the most important public policy issues for Utah voters, survey participants were asked to rate each issue on a scale of one to five, five meaning they are very concerned about the issue and one meaning they are not at all concerned. Three issues in the 2012 survey received a mean score above 4.00 – jobs and the economy (4.19), K-12 education (4.02), and energy issues (4.01). Figure 4 shows the differences between the 2010 and 2012 surveys, including issues that did not make the top 10 list in 2012. This graph shows how voters’ concerns have shifted since 2010. Though they were the two most important issues, concerns actually diminished slightly over jobs and the economy and K-12 education. Concerns significantly diminished about taxes, government spending and states’ rights. Respondents were more concerned about energy issues, healthcare, higher education and environmental issues. Two issues that did not make the top 10 list in 2010, but clearly are high priorities this year, are partisan politics and poverty.

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned about jobs and the economy** include: residents who are 45 years and older; those with lower educational attainment; Catholics and Protestants; and those who are not active in their religion.
- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned about kindergarten through 12th grade education** include: women; residents with a more liberal political ideology; Catholics and those with no religious preferences; those who have children under 18 living at home; and residents of Davis and Weber counties.

Figure 4: Statewide Concerns, 2010 and 2012



- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned about energy issues** include: those who are 65 years old and older; and residents whose political ideology is very conservative.
- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned about healthcare** include: Democrats; women; and residents between the ages of 55 and 64 years.

Figure 5 shows some of the nuances in the public's level of concern for K-12 education today compared with 2004, 2008 and 2010. The number of people "very concerned" about K-12 education fell dramatically between 2004 and 2008, causing the issue to rank second in 2008 rather than first. Even though the percentage of people "very concerned" about K-12 education increased in 2010, the issue ranked third overall. This is because more respondents rated jobs

Figure 5: Concerns About K-12 Education, 2004-2012

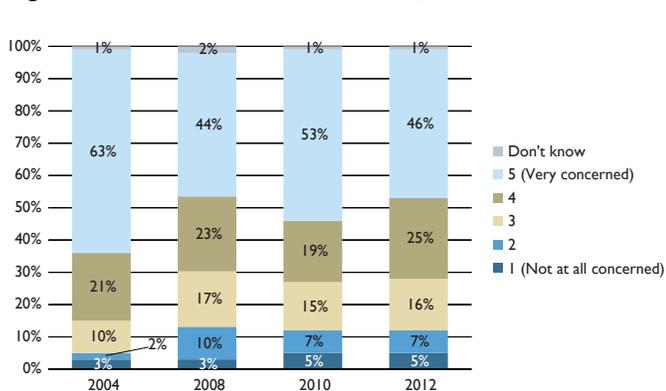
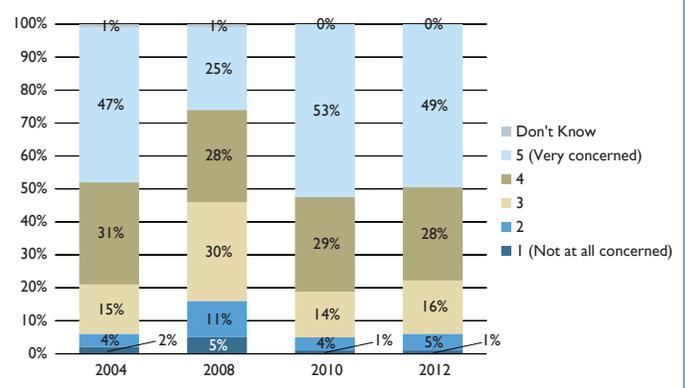


Figure 6: Concerns About Jobs and the Economy, 2004-2012



and the economy and government spending as a four or a five than they did for K-12 education. In 2012, the percentage of respondents who were very concerned about K-12 education decreased somewhat, but it still ranked as the second most important factor overall. This is because the percentage of respondents who thought the economy was very important also decreased slightly.

Figure 6 shows how the concern respondents have over the economy has changed over the last decade. In 2004, 47% of respondents said that jobs and the economy were very important. By February of 2008, this had dropped to 25%. This is due to the strong economic growth the state and nation in the mid-2000s. However, the percentage of respondents who were very concerned with jobs and the economy increased sharply in 2010 (53%) due to the recession which occurred in the late 2000s. In 2012, this percentage decreased slightly (49%), showing Utahns are still concerned about the slow recovery from the recession.

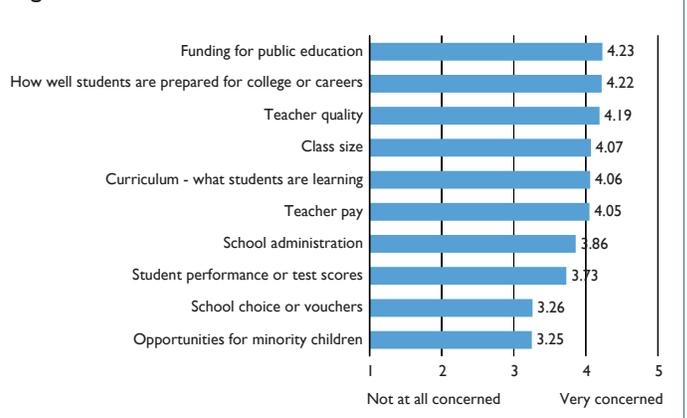
DETAILS ON THE TOP ISSUES

Throughout the remainder of the survey, respondents were asked follow-up questions about K-12 education, working in Utah, Utah's economy, personal finances, taxes, public spending and energy and the environment. These follow-up questions provide insight on why each issue matters to voters. The following sections describe the results of these questions.

K-12 Education

Voters were asked to rate ten additional aspects of Utah's K-12 education system. Of the ten aspects, six had mean scores above

Figure 7: Concerns About K-12 Education Issues



4.00, indicating a very high level of concern. The highest concern is funding for public education (4.23), followed by how well students are prepared for college or careers (4.22), teacher quality (4.19), class size (4.07), curriculum (4.06) and teacher pay (4.05). This list is almost identical to the rankings of K-12 education issues from the 2010 survey. The only difference is that the level of concern for teacher pay rose above 2010 levels.

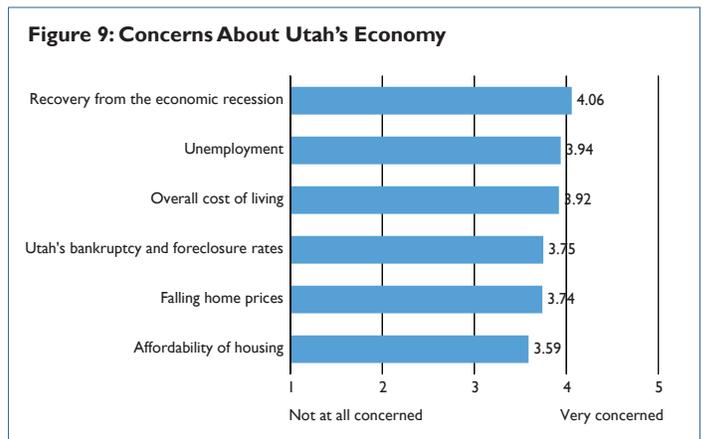
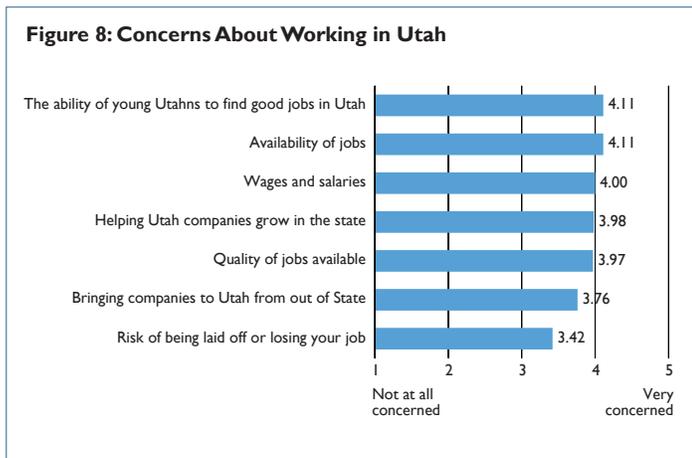
- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned about funding for public education** include: women; those with educational attainment of at least some college or technical school and those with post-college graduate degrees; Democrats; and independent voters.

Working in Utah and Utah's Economy

The 2012 survey revealed that “jobs and the economy” remained the issue of most concern to Utah voters, just as it was in 2010. In the follow-up section, survey respondents were asked two separate sets of questions about this issue—one relating to concerns about working in Utah, and one relating to concerns about Utah's economy. In regards to working in Utah, the availability of jobs (4.11), the ability of young Utahns to find good jobs (4.11) and the levels of wages and salaries (4.00) were the three issues with mean scores at or above 4.00. However, it is interesting to note the close range of scores; most issues received a mean score between 3.75 and 4.11. This indicates Utah voters are quite concerned with all of these issues.

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned about the ability of young Utahns to find good jobs in Utah** include: women; residents who are over 45 years of age; those who have lived in Utah for more than 20 years; those who don't have children under the age of 18 living at home; and those who are employed part-time, retired and unemployed.
- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned about the availability of jobs** include: residents between the ages of 45-64; those who are not active in their preferred religion; and those who don't have children under the age of 18 living at home.

In regards to Utah's economy, the recovery from the economic recession received the highest mean score (4.06). Although this was the issue of highest concern, Utahns were more concerned with the recession in 2010 (4.24). This was the only issue with a mean score



above 4.0. It was followed by unemployment (3.94) and the overall cost of living (3.92). The issues of least concern related to housing; falling home prices and the affordability of housing received the lowest mean scores of the six issues (3.74 and 3.59, respectively). However, all of the issues received mean scores above 3.50 on the five-point scale.

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned about the recovery from the economic recession** include: residents who have lived in Utah for a longer time; those whose political ideology is conservative; and those who do not have children under the age of 18 living at home.

Personal Finances

In order to better understand how the economic recession and recovery impacted Utah voters financially, survey respondents were asked questions about how their personal finances have changed in the last two years. In the 2010 survey, 38% of Utahns reported that their debt levels had decreased somewhat or considerably since 2008. A quarter (24%) of survey respondents stated their debt level had increased, while 37% stated it had remained the same. Similarly, in 2012, 38% of respondents reported that their debt levels had decreased somewhat or considerably, 38% said they had stayed the same, and 23% reported their debt levels had increased.

Figure 11 shows even more results. In 2010, respondents said that over the last two years, personal savings decreased for one-third of Utahns, stayed the same for one-third, and increased for one-third. In 2012, personal savings decreased for 36% of Utahns, stayed about the same for 33%, and increased for 31%.

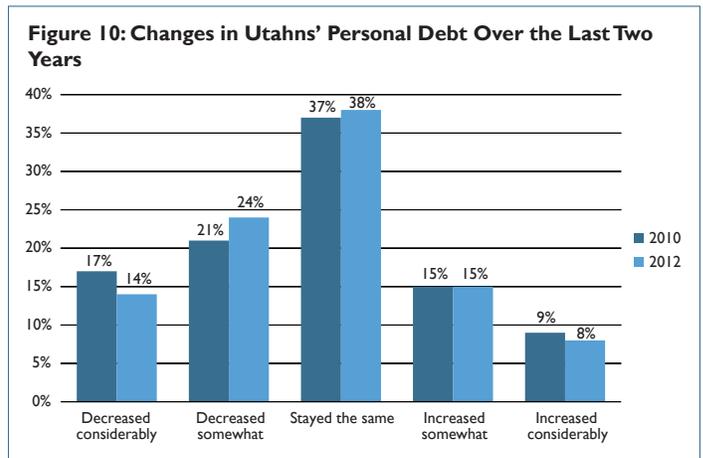
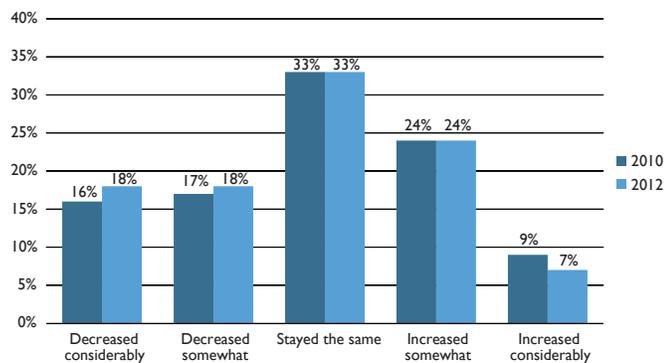


Figure 11: Changes in Utahns' Personal Savings over the Last Two Years



- Demographic groups **more likely to say their level of personal savings has decreased considerably** include: residents who are unemployed; and those whose annual income is under \$15,000.

Taxes

The survey asked respondents about three issues related to taxes. The issue with the highest level of concern is how tax dollars are being spent (4.42). Voters also maintain a high level of concern about spreading the tax burden fairly among Utahns (4.04). Finally, concern over “your overall tax burden” trailed closely with a mean score of 3.95. While the results for the first two questions were very similar to the 2010 results, the 2012 survey indicates that concern over the overall tax burden has increased.

- Demographic groups **more likely to say they are very concerned with the overall tax burden** include: residents between the ages of 45-64; and Republicans.
- Demographic groups **more likely to say they are concerned with spreading the tax burden fairly among Utahns** include: those whose political ideology is liberal or moderate; those who have no children under the age of 18 living at home; and residents of Salt Lake County.

In 2010, a second question related to taxes asked respondents to rate how heavy they perceive the tax burden to be from each of four major taxes. Results showed the income tax is perceived to cause the heaviest burden, with a mean score of 3.55. The property tax ranked second

Figure 12: Concerns About Taxes

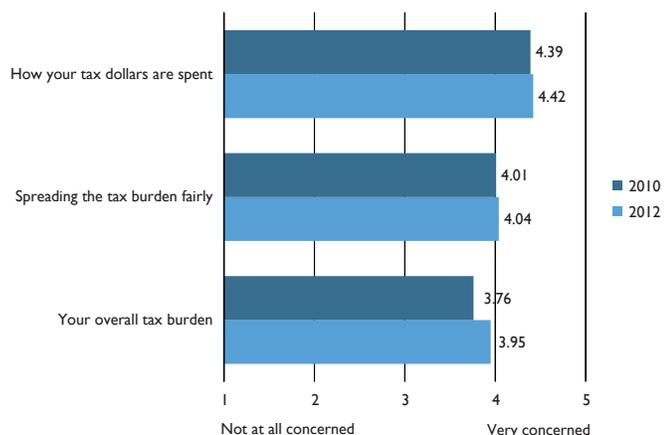
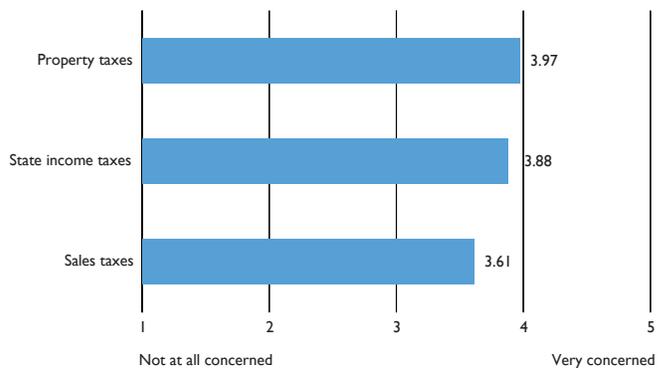


Figure 13: Concern About Types of Taxes



(3.54), followed by the gasoline tax (3.44) and the sales tax (2.98). In the 2012 survey, respondents were asked how concerned they were with state income, sales and property taxes. The results showed they were most concerned with property taxes (3.97), followed by state income taxes (3.88) and sales taxes (3.61).

Curiously, these ratings are opposite to what statistics show about the actual tax burden on Utahns. A 2007 Utah Foundation research brief showed that Utah’s heaviest tax burden comes from sales taxes, with income taxes second and property taxes third.¹ Both the 2010 and the 2012 surveys confirm the notion that more visible taxes are considered more burdensome.

Public Spending

Regarding public spending, respondents were asked to indicate whether they think state and local government spending in six areas should decrease, stay the same, or increase. A one-to-five scale was used, with one meaning definitely decrease, three meaning keep the same, and five meaning definitely increase.

This question shows a clear list of voter preferences for state spending. K-12 education is the only area with a mean score close to 4.00, indicating that most voters feel spending should definitely increase (4.01). Mean scores for the next two areas, higher education (3.42) and healthcare (3.40) are considerably lower. Even so, voters feel that there should be increased spending in these areas.

Overall state spending received a mean score just below the midpoint, indicating that more voters believe overall spending should slightly decrease. This is a slight increase over 2010 (2.72), but a decrease

Figure 14: Preferences for Spending on Major Programs

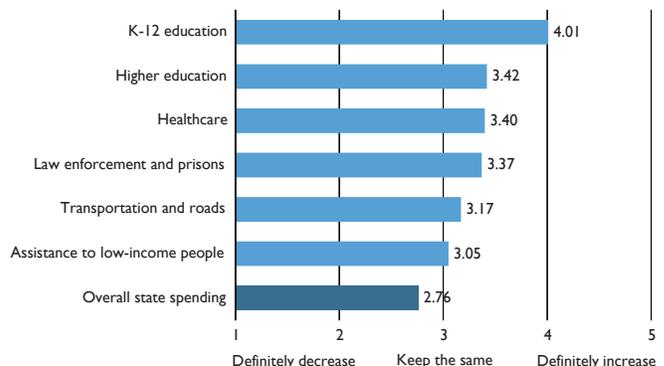
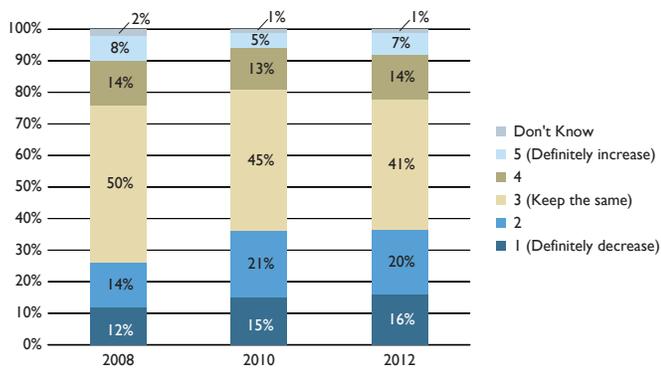


Figure 15: Preferences for Overall State Spending, 2008-2012



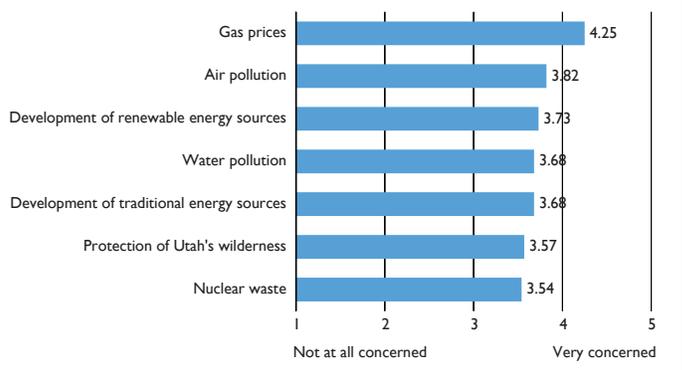
from 2008 (2.94). In 2008, 22% of respondents felt state spending should be increased, this fell to 18% in 2010, but jumped back to 21% in 2012. In 2008, 50% of respondents felt that state spending should be kept the same, this fell to 45% in 2010, and even further to 41% in 2012. In 2008, 26% of respondents felt that overall state spending should be decreased, this jumped to 36% in 2010, and remained at 36% in 2012.

- Demographic groups **more likely to say public spending for K-12 education should definitely increase** include: women; Democrats and independent voters; and those whose political ideology is moderate or liberal.

Energy and the Environment

The 2012 Utah Priorities survey is the first to ask respondents follow-up questions about Utah’s environment and energy use. Because these themes have consistently been shown to be important in previous years, this follow-up section was included in this survey.

Figure 16: Concerns About Utah’s Environment and Energy Use



Respondents were asked their level of concern regarding seven aspects of Utah’s environment and energy use. Of these, respondents were most concerned with gas prices, giving it a mean score of 4.25, followed by air pollution (3.82), and development of renewable energy sources (3.73). While gas prices was the only issue that received a mean score above 4.0, it is notable that all the environment and energy factors were rated above 3.5, showing this is a major area of concern for Utahns.

ENDNOTES

1 Utah Foundation research brief, “Utah’s State and Local Tax and Fee Burdens,” May 24, 2007. http://www.utahfoundation.org/briefs/2007_01_tax_burden.html

The Utah Priorities Project is a special election-year project of Utah Foundation in partnership with the Hinckley Institute of Politics. This research report was written by Research Director Morgan Lyon Cotti, Ph.D., with assistance from President Stephen Kroes. Dr. Lyon Cotti or Mr. Kroes may be reached for comment at (801) 355-1400 or by email at: morgan@utahfoundation.org or steve@utahfoundation.org.

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