



# Utah Priority No. 6: Politicians Listening to Voters

Utah Foundation’s Utah Priorities Project survey revealed a new voter priority for 2020: *politicians listening to voters*. Utah voters complain that elected officials are paying too little attention to voters in favor of corporations, religious organizations, the well-connected or special interest groups. The fact that *politicians listening to voters* is top-of-mind for voters also encapsulates sentiments regarding legislative changes to ballot initiatives – given that all three ballot measures passed in 2018 were altered by the Utah Legislature.

When prioritized among other issues in early March 2020, *politicians listening to voters* ranked as the top choice by a substantial margin. However, in the summer Utah Priorities Project survey after the start of the coronavirus pandemic, *politicians listening to voters* dropped to 6th. Utah Foundation categorized it as “high importance” because, while distinct from the top five issues, it stood substantially above the remaining 12 issues presented to voters in the summer survey. Interestingly, independent voters were more likely to rate the issue as a top priority than were Democrats or Republicans. (See Figure 1.)

## Voters or Special Interests

In the Utah Priorities Project’s open-ended responses surveys, many voters said that they believe that policymakers listened to business, religious or special interest groups more than they listened to voters. Utah Foundation included a question in its prioritization survey regarding whether Utah voters thought this was the case. Approximately two-thirds of voters agreed. Nearly as many conservative voters agreed as disagreed

that policymakers listened to business, religious or special interest groups more than they listened to voters. However, liberal and moderate voters were much more likely to agree with the statement. (See Figure 2.) Younger voters were also more likely to agree than were their counterparts, as were those who do not identify as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

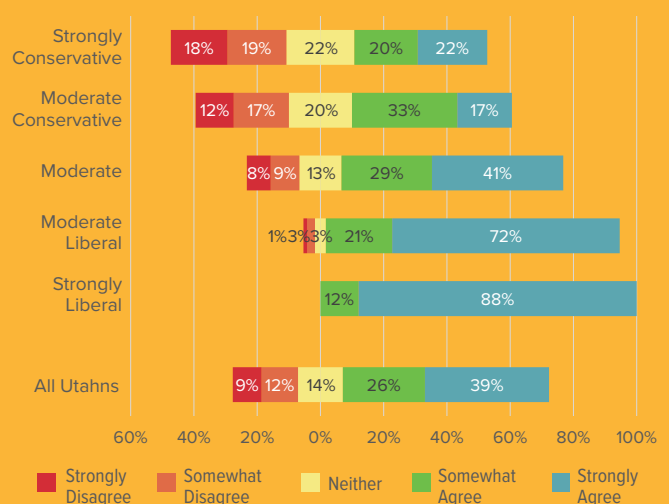
**Politicians listening to voters was one of only four priorities where unaffiliated voters felt more strongly about the issue than either Republicans or Democrats.**

Figure 1: Likelihood of Voters to Chose *Politicians Listening to Voters* as the No. 1 Issue, Summer Survey



**Most liberal and moderate voters agree that Utah politicians favor business-, religious- and special-interests over voters, while conservatives are split on the matter.**

Figure 2: Share of Utah Voters that Agree or Disagree with the Statement “Utah’s politicians are too beholden to business, religious or other special interests and ignore the will of the people.”



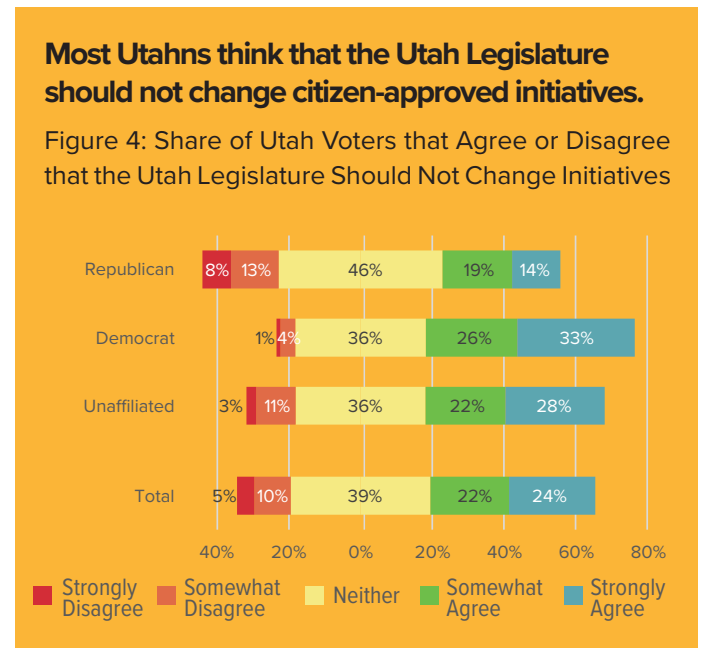
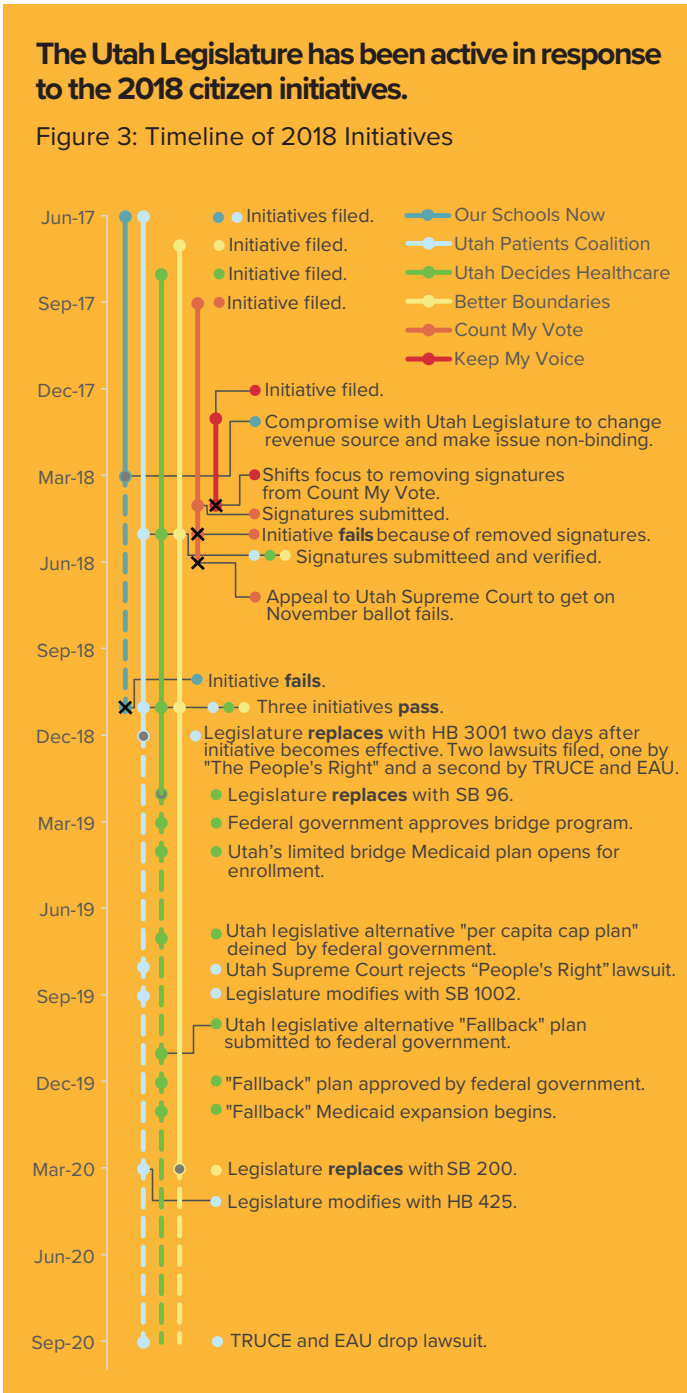
Utah is a unique state. No other state has such a large concentration of members of a single religious denomination. Based on Utah Foundation survey data, 57% of Utah voters identify as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One analysis estimated that nearly 90% of Utah legislators were members of the Church.<sup>1</sup> This may not be unexpected since members of the Church are a majority of voters in most of Utah's districts, though such voters are not necessarily voting based upon

their religious affiliation. In some of the open-ended survey responses, Utah voters expressed discomfort over their perception of the Church's influence, but many also expressed concern regarding the influence of businesses and special interests.

### Initiatives: Voice of the People

Utah is one of 24 states that allow voter initiatives and referendums. In Utah, voter initiatives can be used to directly pass legislation or indirectly propose legislation to the Utah Legislature. Referendums are used to veto current law. While Utah was the first state to allow voter initiatives and referendums, it employs them relatively infrequently.<sup>2</sup> During the past two decades, there have been 23 proposed voter initiatives. Only six made it to the ballot, and voters approved only three – all of which passed in 2018. All three of these were later modified in varying degrees by the Utah Legislature.<sup>3</sup> (See Figure 3.)

Because so many of the open-ended responses to Utah Foundation's survey focused on 2018 voter initiatives and subsequent legislative changes, Utah Foundation asked voters whether they believed that the Utah Legislature *should not* change citizen initiatives even if the initiatives are "not the best way to pass policy." While 40% of Utah voters were ambivalent on the topic, those with an opinion who agreed with the statement outnumbered those who disagreed by three to one. (See Figure 4.) Democrats were more likely than Republicans to indicate that the Utah Legislature should not change citizen initiatives.



## Endnotes

1. Lee Davidson, "Who has a bigger supermajority than even Republicans in Utah's Legislature? Latter-day Saints," The Salt Lake Tribune, January 21, 2019, [www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2019/01/21/who-has-bigger/](http://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2019/01/21/who-has-bigger/).
2. Utah was the first state to allow initiatives, however, supporting legislation wasn't passed for another 17 years. See National Conference of State Legislatures, 2012, "Initiative states ranked in order by use," [www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/initiative-states-ranked-in-order-of-use.aspx](http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/initiative-states-ranked-in-order-of-use.aspx).
3. Ballotpedia's list of ballot measures, 2002-2020. For example, see [https://ballotpedia.org/Utah\\_2002\\_ballot\\_measures](https://ballotpedia.org/Utah_2002_ballot_measures). Two more voter initiatives were not placed on the ballot, but may merit mention: a 2018 initiative to raise

income and sales taxes for schools and a 2020 initiative to revert a tax package including an increase on the sales tax on food and a reduction on income tax. The 2018 initiative ended with intervention from the Utah Legislature that drove a compromise to replace an increase in school taxes with a non-binding question regarding whether Utah should increase motor fuel taxes that would be used for roads but free up funds otherwise dedicated for roads for education. This non-binding question on the ballot subsequently failed. The 2020 initiative, however, gathered so much popular support so quickly, that legislators preempted the issue from going to the ballot by adopting the changes in a subsequent special session.

Thanks to the following for providing project-based support:

GEORGE S. AND DOLORES DORÉ ECCLES  
F O U N D A T I O N



Utah Foundation's mission is to produce objective, thorough and well-reasoned research and analysis that promotes the effective use of public resources, a thriving economy, a well-prepared workforce and a high quality of life for Utahns. Utah Foundation seeks to help decision-makers and citizens understand and address complex issues. Utah Foundation also offers constructive guidance to improve governmental policies, programs and structures.

Utah Foundation is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization.

This research brief was written by Research Analyst Christopher Collard and Research Assistant Abaigael Peterson.