

Penta Policy Insiders

Texas Insights Review

Top Issues

December 2023
policyinsiders.pentagroup.co

Executive summary

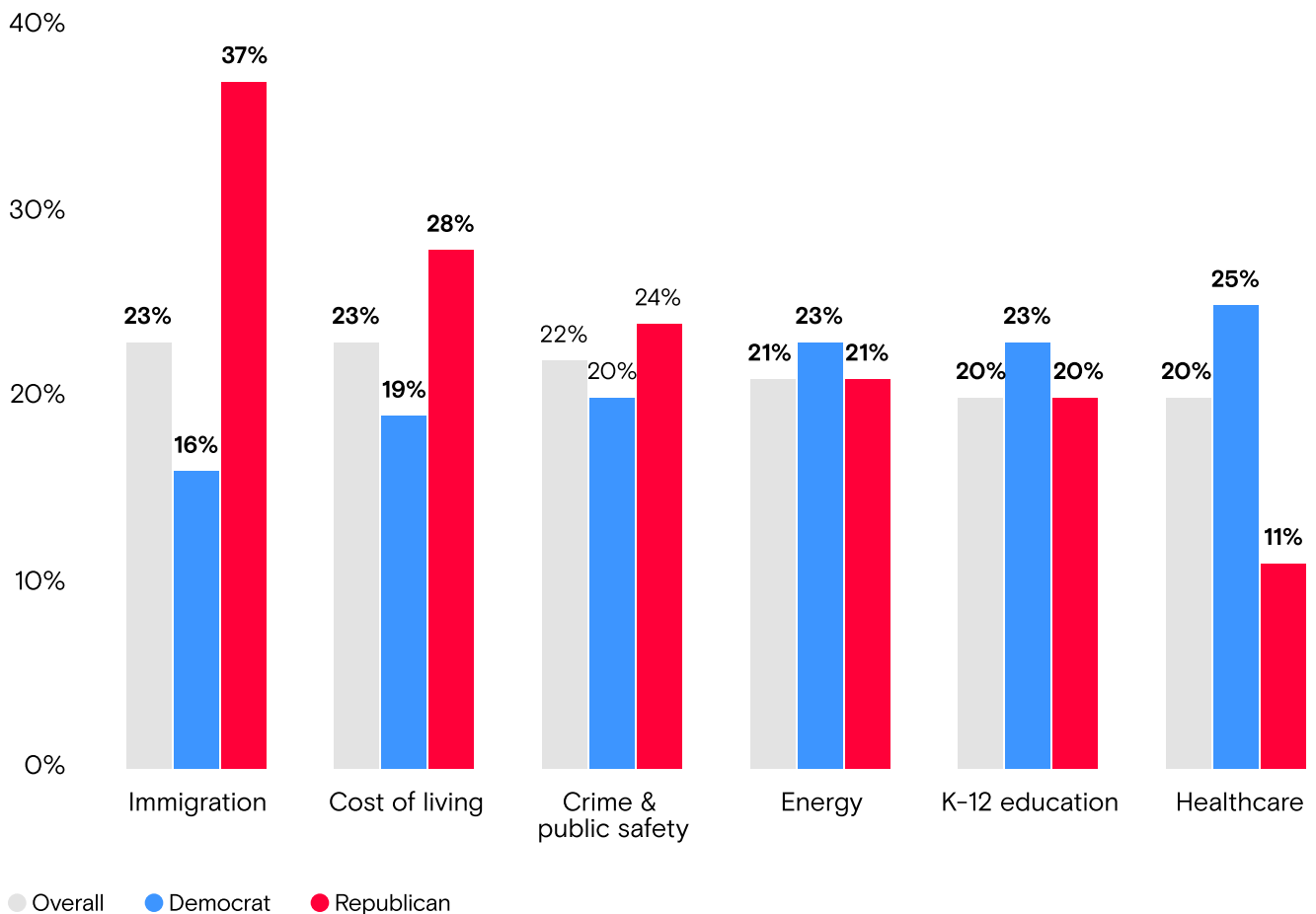
We are pleased to share our findings in this year's Texas Insights Review. From May to July 2023, we spoke to over 220 policymakers in the state to learn about their policy priorities and the top issues facing their communities.

Immigration and the cost of living are the top concerns among Texas policymakers, with almost a quarter of policy staff identifying the issues as individual leading priorities. Both issues are higher priorities for Republicans in the state. Crime and public safety is also a significant issue for the Lone Star state, with policymakers on both sides of the aisle identifying challenges, particularly in relation to immigration concerns. Energy, K-12 education, and healthcare are other top priorities for policymakers across the state of Texas.

This report is the first in a series that examines four of Texas policymakers' top priorities, which include (i) crime and immigration (ii) cost of living (iii) energy and (iv) K-12 education.

Top policy priorities in Texas

Multiple selections permitted



Immigration

Immigration is a top issue for Democrats and Republicans, with almost a quarter of policymakers reporting it to be a concern this year. However, it is a notably more significant priority point for Republicans, with nearly 40 percent of policy staff identifying immigration as a focal point compared to only 16 percent of Democrats. Additionally, the Texas border concerns both sides of the aisle, though Democrat and Republican policymakers are directing efforts in different directions - Republicans are primarily targeting issues around border security and Democrats are prioritizing economic impact.



I would also say the border has been a huge issue and it's being politicized. I think Texas is not getting enough support from the federal government to be able to do a good job at the border. I think that **the way that our immigration system works has negatively impacted Texas** to the point where **businesses are not able to get the workers that they need**, so it's impacting our **economy** here.

Chief of Staff, Texas House of Representatives, D



We have an immigration crisis from our southern border where people are just illegally immigrating to this state and this country. We have to take care of [those] needs.

Representative, Texas House of Representatives, R



Cost of Living

Cost-of-living, particularly when it comes to housing, is another priority for Texas policymakers. Both Democrats and Republicans acknowledge the lack of affordable housing, and also recognize the impact – both positive and negative – that short-term rentals have on local communities.



As interest rates increase, so does the lack of affordability for residential homes. And so you've got to fly the storm here with inflationary pressure, people moving in from other states with inflated values... and then you've got the property taxes and the pressure on that, interest rates, and then just the affordability of the homes simply because of the cost per square foot to construct the home. And so, what's going to **be a continued challenge going forward** is the affordability of homes – and that's market-driven.

Representative, Texas House of Representatives, R



I think **short-term rentals have become a mess. I don't think they're good for the housing crisis** because these are units, homes, dwellings that could be occupied by a single family or whatever. **Somebody could actually live there, but instead, they're used as... just different kinds of transient things.**

Chief of Staff, Texas House of Representatives, D



The reason why people can't afford homes is they can't get a down payment together and they can't really qualify for reasonable financing. They can't afford a home. **They're just not being able to afford it.**

Legislative Director, Texas State Senate, D



Everybody rents houses [as short-term rentals], but they see these big party houses, and they don't like it. But at the same time, it's your property. I believe in private property rights. And **if somebody wants to turn their house into a rental facility, and they can do it the right way, then we need to do that.** So I think we're going to continue to work on finding that balance, but of those I think **they definitely have their place.**

Senator, Texas State Senate, R

Crime and public safety

Policy staff also express concerns related to crime and public safety in the state. Gun reform, criminal justice reform, and immigration reform are among the top priorities for policymakers.



But **I think we should...reduce some of the over-criminalization that's going on, over-incarceration that's happening.** Just the drain it has on our society, those families are getting separated, and the cost to the government to hold everybody, all those people that are detained pre-trial

Chief of Staff, Texas House of Representatives, D



For us, definitely, passing sensible gun legislation, reforming access to assault rifles, which we don't really need here in Texas anyway. **Gun control would be number one.**

Representative, Texas House of Representatives, D



Today, it's up to about **over seven million illegal aliens that come across.** They're starting to permeate the culture. They're causing problems with crime... They can't work because of some of the laws that we have and I mean, they're just **causing a lot of problems with society as far as crime goes.**

Representative, Texas House of Representatives, R

Energy

Grid stability and sustainability, environmental impact of energy production, and the affordability and feasibility of renewable resources, sit atop Texas policymakers' concerns within the energy space.



The power grid has not been sustainable for the number of people and households that we currently have... I do believe that we need to pay more attention to actually fixing it. I think we put in some safeguards that made it possible for us to do some cleanup and making sure that we were stabilizing the system, but **I don't believe we've done everything we can** do to make sure that it has enough power to make [constituents] comfortable throughout the year.

Representative, Texas House of Representatives, D



I think [the number one priority is] **energy** - making sure that we have enough thermal energy to **keep our grid stable**.

Deputy Director, Texas Executive Branch, R



For me, just **the social-environmental factors regarding oil and gas and their almost refusal to really take accountability** for the toxins and the negative effects it's having on our population.

Representative, Texas House of Representatives, D



So **low and no carbon energy in theory sounds great. In reality, it becomes difficult and expensive.** And so in terms of policy, it's not just, hey, what problem are we solving? It's like, okay, well, what are the tradeoffs and what are the costs? And a lot of the low carbon, no carbon energy costs don't make any sense over term.

Mayor, Texas Municipality, R



Not to say that we don't want to look at some of the renewables, but **so far, the only thing that makes renewables profitable is government subsidies. And if you can't run a business profitably without government subsidies, it's not a viable business** in my mind.

Representative, Texas House of Representatives, R

K-12 Education

K-12 education in Texas is also top of mind for policymakers in the state. Policy staff specifically note the lack of adequate funding for public education systems, and acknowledge that the state's unique property tax system creates complications when it comes to financing schools sufficiently.



I just feel like **the public school system in Texas is kind of withering.** And without enough resources from the state... I think it's only going to get worse and worse, which is why we see a big rise in the charter school movement.

Executive Director, Texas House of Representatives, D



There is no funding as of September the 1st. All the virtual education and the funding mechanisms sunset September 1st of 2023. So **there's no safety net for virtual education in the State of Texas as far as funding.**

Representative, Texas House of Representatives, R



We're the eighth largest economy in the world. **We should be able to figure out how to fund the entire education path. Because without education, we aren't anything.** And we have to figure out a way to fund education in this state. We have to figure out a way to rise and be better in education in this state.

Representative, Texas House of Representatives, R



We need to be financially supporting schools more. So much of our school finance system is based on property taxes. It's a very complicated system here in Texas because we have independent school districts. Texas had a \$33 billion surplus a few months ago, and really none of ended up going toward significant school finance funding, and **the burden is still on local communities to be able to financially support their schools... The state has enough money that they could be paying for that, but they don't want to do that.** They want the burden on local communities. And it's really making everybody all across Texas suffer... **We're really doing a disservice to our kids and it has just huge generational implications.**

Chief of Staff, Texas House of Representatives, D

Healthcare

Healthcare in the state of Texas is also a top of mind priority for policymakers in the state. This issue is of particular concern for Democrats, with 25 percent reporting it to be a focal point - while only 11 percent of Republicans feel the same. Despite this disparity, policy leaders on both sides of the aisle agree on the need for affordable access and mental health resources - especially for children.



Healthcare for everybody in the state of Texas because everything is so high. Medicine is so expensive.

Commissioner, Texas Municipality, D



Just **the burden on our healthcare system in Texas.**

Representative, Texas House of Representatives, R



We had a mental health bill - that was the insurance mandate that would **require the insurers to cover more of those mental health services that people that need** the most aggressive treatments seek out. We wanted to increase access to that. We passed that bill in the house to **get more training on mental health trauma and grief to our school resource officers** so that they can better serve the students there.

Chief of Staff, Texas House of Representatives, D



Right now **we have a mental health crisis with children**. And it doesn't help that we normalize [predatory] violence over the Internet on a regular basis with them.

Representative, Texas House of Representatives, R



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