

ALABAMA PRIORITIES



Alabama Priorities

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Executive Summary

In this election year, PARCA surveyed Alabama voters to determine their thoughts about the general direction of the state and the issues that most concern them. We found broad agreement on the critical issues facing the state. Based on voter response, PARCA identified and ranked voters' top 10 critical issues. These issues constitute Alabama's priorities.

The Priorities

Alabama voters are eager to see improvement in **K-12 education**, with 70% indicating they are very concerned about the state's education system. Voters are worried about **healthcare**, particularly access and cost. With the recent resignations of a Governor, a Speaker of the House, and a state Supreme Court Justice, it should come as no surprise that voters are concerned about **corruption and ethics**. For many voters, **mental health and substance abuse** are not just theoretical problems—56% of Alabamians indicate they are very concerned about the issue. The **poor and homeless** have not been forgotten.

These issues, along with **jobs and the economy**, **crime and public safety**, **job training and workforce development**, **the state's image**, and **tax reform** comprise the top 10 list of Alabama's priorities.

Perhaps this list should not come as a surprise. Previous polling by PARCA and other organizations have found similar results.

What is perhaps more surprising, however, is the extent to which these are **shared** priorities. We found few significant differences between Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, blacks and whites, or other groups. While differences exist, **Alabama voters are not polarized**.

ALABAMA PRIORITIES

1. K-12 Education
2. Healthcare
3. Government Corruption and Ethics
4. Mental Health and Substance Abuse
5. Poverty and Homelessness
6. Jobs and the Economy
7. Crime and Public Safety
8. Job Training and Workforce Development
9. Improving the State's Image
10. Tax Reform

Experts and Voters: Differing Priorities

At the same time, while the data suggests broad agreement among voters, there is an area where significant gaps exist. PARCA surveyed business, civic, and nonprofit leaders, journalists, and academics. The differences between the priorities of these experts and voters were noticeable.

Four top 10 issues for voters fell outside the top 10 for experts:

- Mental health and substance abuse
- Poverty and homelessness
- Job training and workforce development
- Improving the state's image

Conversely, experts identified four issues that did not register high on voters' list of concerns:

- Infrastructure and transportation
- Prison and sentencing reform
- Funding state government
- Civil rights

Possible explanations as to why some issues are more important to voters and others more important to experts are offered in the "Differences Between Experts and Voters" section of the report.

Implications

The data suggest four implications.

Voters are not polarized along traditional political, ideological, racial or generational lines.

There is a **significant gap between the priorities of experts and the priorities of voters**.

Policymakers have a two-fold **opportunity to inform and educate voters** on critical and systemic challenges facing the state.

Policymakers have an **opportunity to respond** to immediate, often highly personal issues that concern voters.

This research suggests that elected officials and candidates have an opportunity to show leadership and to build broad coalitions to address Alabama's most pressing challenges.

Background

The mission of PARCA, the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama, is to inform and improve state and local government through independent, objective, nonpartisan research. As part of that mission, every year since 2007, PARCA has partnered with Samford University to survey Alabamians on a range of policy issues, including public education, taxes, and trust in government. This traditional survey was reimagined as *Alabama Priorities* for 2018.

In 2018, Alabamians will elect a governor and five other statewide executive branch officers, 140 legislators, and scores of local officials. Those elected will lead Alabama for the next four years. These leaders should be responsive to the concerns of those they represent but also willing to help citizens understand critical, but perhaps less obvious, public policy issues. Such leadership requires understanding what issues most concern voters and what issues voters may not fully appreciate. *Alabama Priorities* explores this issue. Findings from the *Alabama Priorities Project* were first reported at PARCA’s 2018 Annual Meeting, The 21st Century Governor, on February 2, 2018. *Utah Priorities*, a quadrennial publication of the Utah Foundation, served as the inspiration for the project.

Process

PARCA partnered with Samford University and the University of South Alabama to conduct two rounds of surveys in the fall of 2017. A complete methodology is included in the appendices.

The first survey, an open-ended mail and email survey of experts and policy professionals, generated a list of 17 critical issues facing Alabama, listed alphabetically in Table 1.

Table 1 Alabama Issues

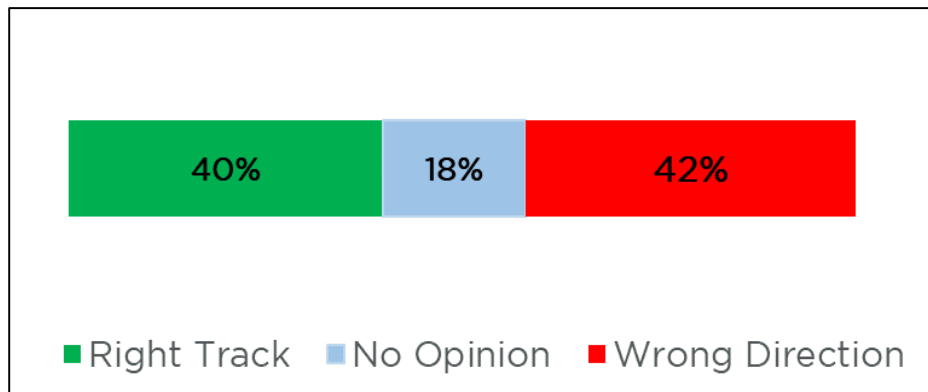
Civil Rights	Infrastructure and Transportation
Constitutional Reform	Jobs and the Economy
Crime and Public Safety	Job Training/Workforce Development
Environmental Protection	K-12 Education
Funding State Government	Poverty and Homelessness
Government Corruption and Ethics	Mental Health and Substance Abuse
Healthcare	Prison and Sentencing Reform
Higher Education	Tax Reform
Improving the State’s Image	

The second survey, a telephone survey of registered voters, collected 468 responses. Respondents were asked to evaluate the issues and to answer other questions about life and politics in Alabama. Respondents were first asked two general questions.

Right Direction, Wrong Track

We asked, “Would you say things in the State of Alabama are headed in the right direction, or have they gotten off on the wrong track?” Overall, about equal percentages say right direction as wrong track. Similar percentages of partisans, respondents who identify as Democrat, Republican, or independent, say “right direction.” While about 60% of every partisan category said something other than “right direction,” about a quarter of Republicans responded “don’t know” compared to half as many for Democrats. About half of men say “right direction,” while only 29% of women express this view. Self-employed and employment categories out of workforce were less likely to say “right direction.”

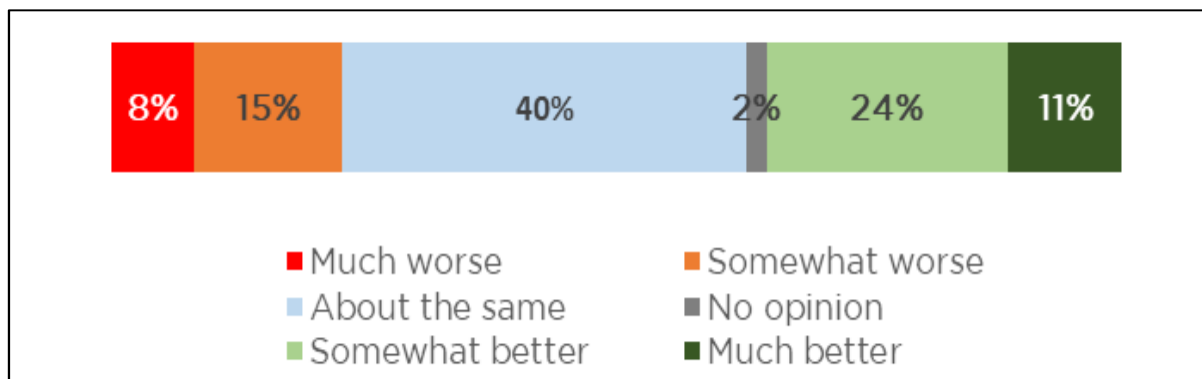
Figure 1 Right Track, Wrong Direction



Quality of Life

We asked, “How would you rate the overall quality of life in Alabama today, compared with five years ago . . . would you say it is much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse?”

Figure 2 Quality of Life



About 40% say things are about the same as five years ago with about a third saying they are better. About 40% of all partisan groups also say about the same, but Republicans appear more positive than either independents or Democrats. Roughly 45% of Republicans have a positive view, while less than a third of independents or Democrats have a positive view. Men are more optimistic in their assessments of quality of life than women. With 63% of respondents having

something other than a positive response (either negative or neutral) on these questions, policymakers have an opportunity to improve voters' opinions of the state's direction by championing public policies that will improve the quality of life in the state.

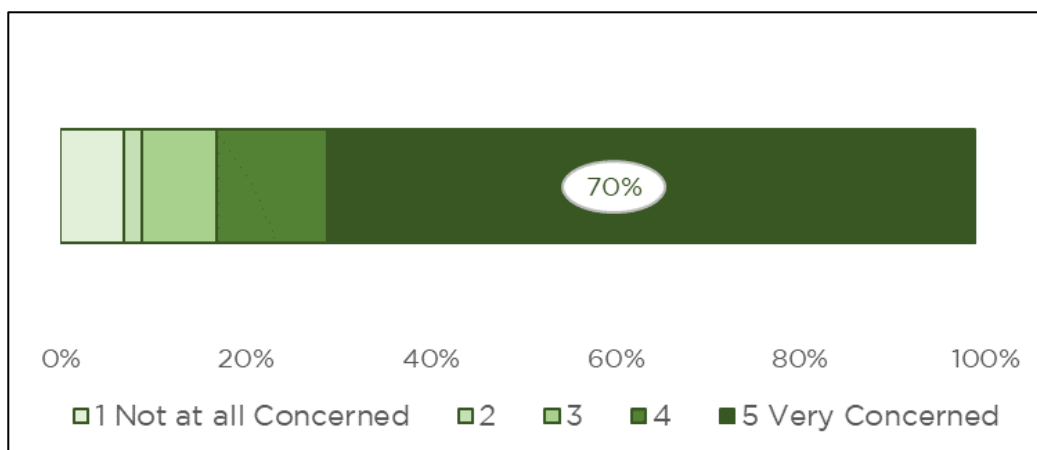
The Rankings

The list of issues developed by experts was used in our survey of Alabama voters. The order of issues was randomized for every respondent. Respondents were asked to, "Rate how concerned you are, using a scale of 1 through 5, where 1 means you are 'not at all concerned' and 5 means you are 'very concerned.'" In general, voters were concerned about all the issues. A majority or a plurality (more than any other category, but not a majority) of respondents indicated they were very concerned about each issue, and all median and mean values were greater than a neutral value.

#1 K-12 Education

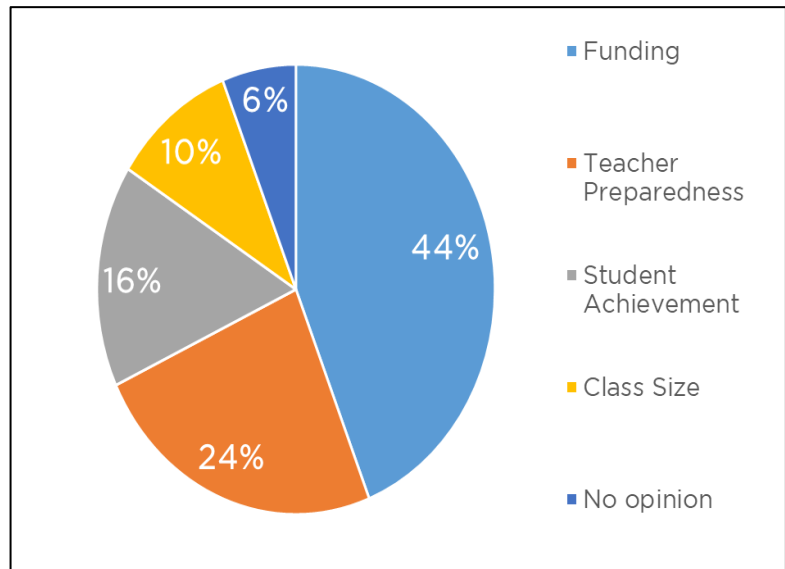
The number one issue for voters is K-12 education. With a mean of 4.378, about 70% of respondents say they are very concerned about K-12 education. **Large majorities of every group say they are very concerned**, including about 60% of Republicans, 66% percent of independents, and over 80% of Democrats.

Figure 3 K-12 Education



Later in the survey, we asked follow-up questions to probe further policy preferences on a handful of issues. When asked to identify their top priority regarding K-12 education, a plurality (44%) selected funding. Nearly a quarter selected teacher preparedness as their top priority with lesser percentages selecting student achievement and class size. **Pluralities of every partisan stripe prioritize funding.**

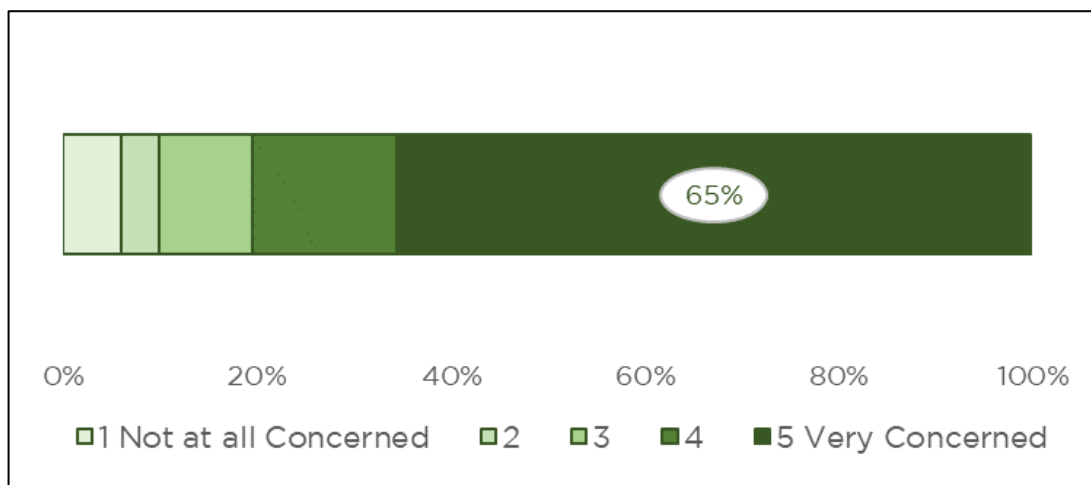
Figure 4 K-12 Policy Options



#2 Healthcare

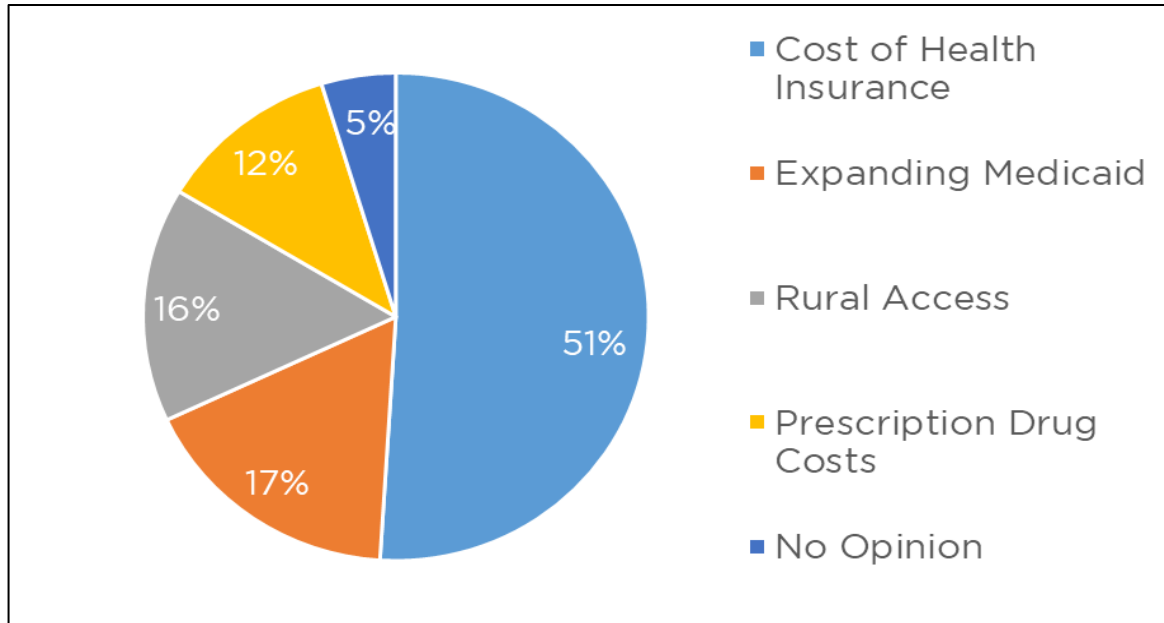
With a mean of 4.302, about two-thirds of respondents say they are very concerned about healthcare. **Majorities of every demographic and political party say they are very concerned about healthcare.** Those with less than full-time employment and the self-employed are even more likely to say they are very concerned.

Figure 5 Healthcare



About half of respondents (51%) identify the cost of insurance as their top priority. Less than 20% identify expanding Medicaid, improving rural access to care, or prescription drug costs as their top priorities. **Pluralities of Democrats and independents prioritize cost of insurance, as do about 60% of Republicans.**

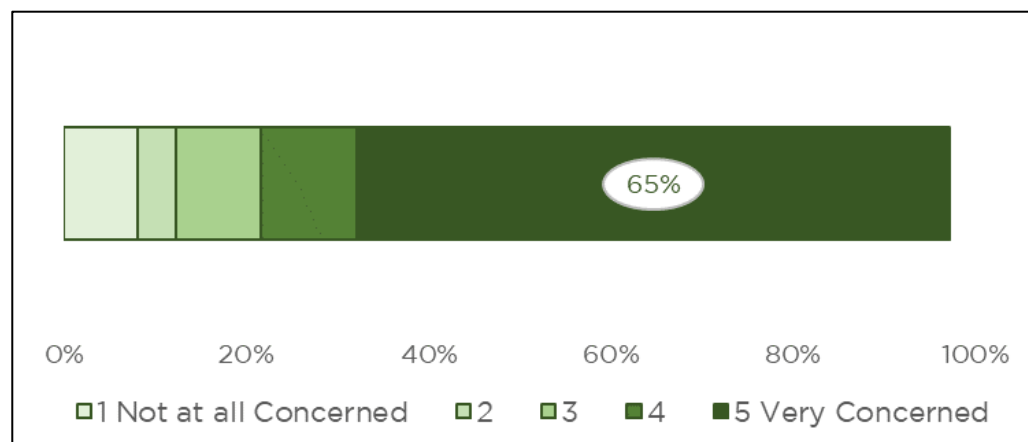
Figure 6 Healthcare Policy Options



#3 Government Corruption and Ethics

With a mean ranking of 4.239 out of 5, nearly **two-thirds of respondents say they are very concerned about government corruption and ethics**. While majorities of nearly every demographic or political group are concerned, there are some differences among partisan identifiers: A majority of Republicans are very concerned, while two-thirds of independents and over 80% of Democrats are very concerned.

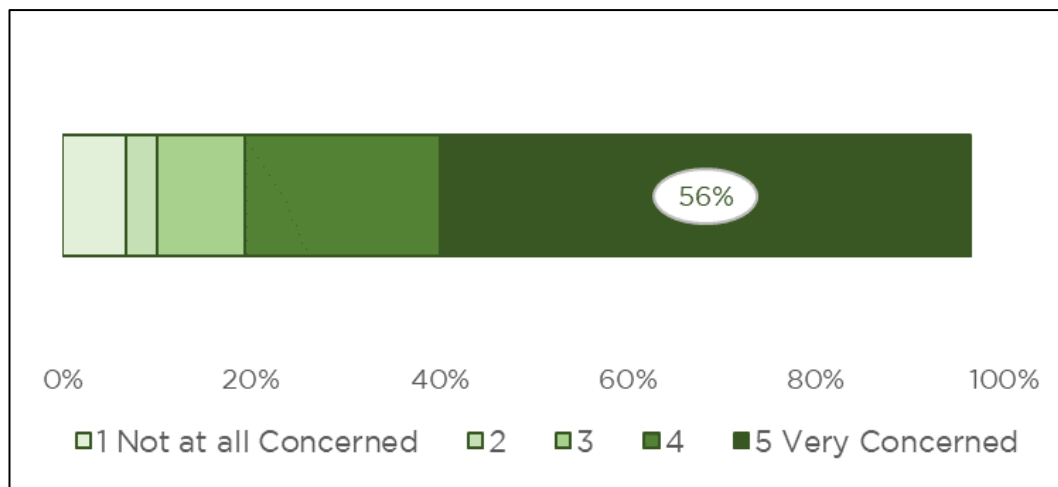
Figure 7 Government Corruption and Ethics



4 Mental Health and Substance Abuse

The number four issue among voters is mental health and substance abuse. With a mean of 4.232, about 56% of respondents say they are very concerned about mental health and substance abuse. **Majorities of most generations say they are very concerned about this**, while a plurality of millennials say they are very concerned.

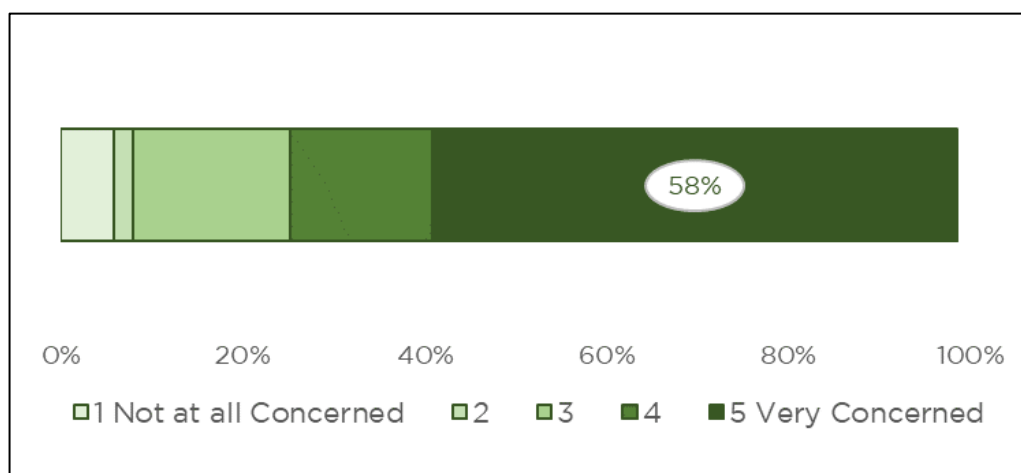
Figure 8 Mental Health and Substance Abuse



#5 Poverty and Homelessness

With a mean of 4.192, about 58% of respondents say they are very concerned about poverty and homelessness. **Majorities of every demographic or political group say they are very concerned**, although there is some variation in the size of majority across different employment statuses.

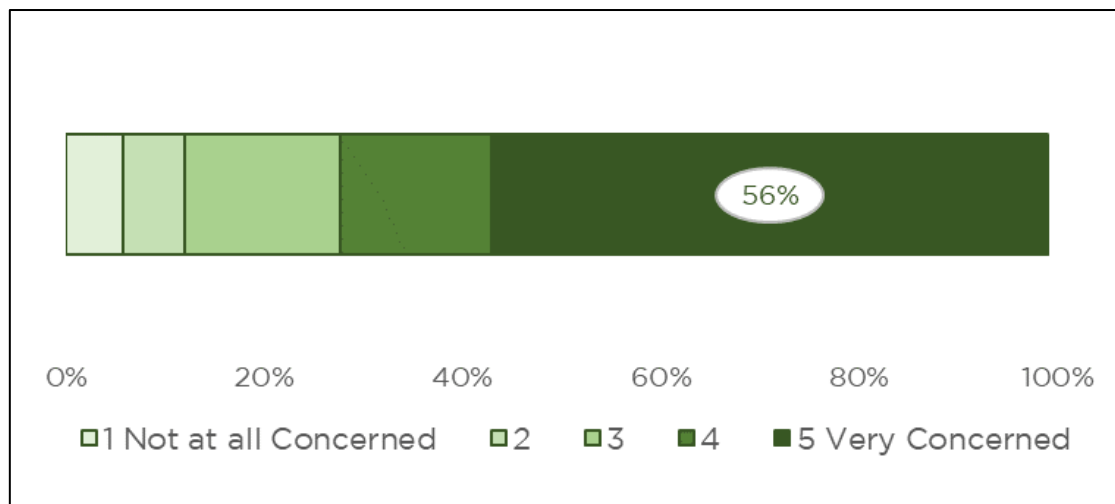
Figure 9 Poverty and Homelessness



#6 Jobs and the Economy

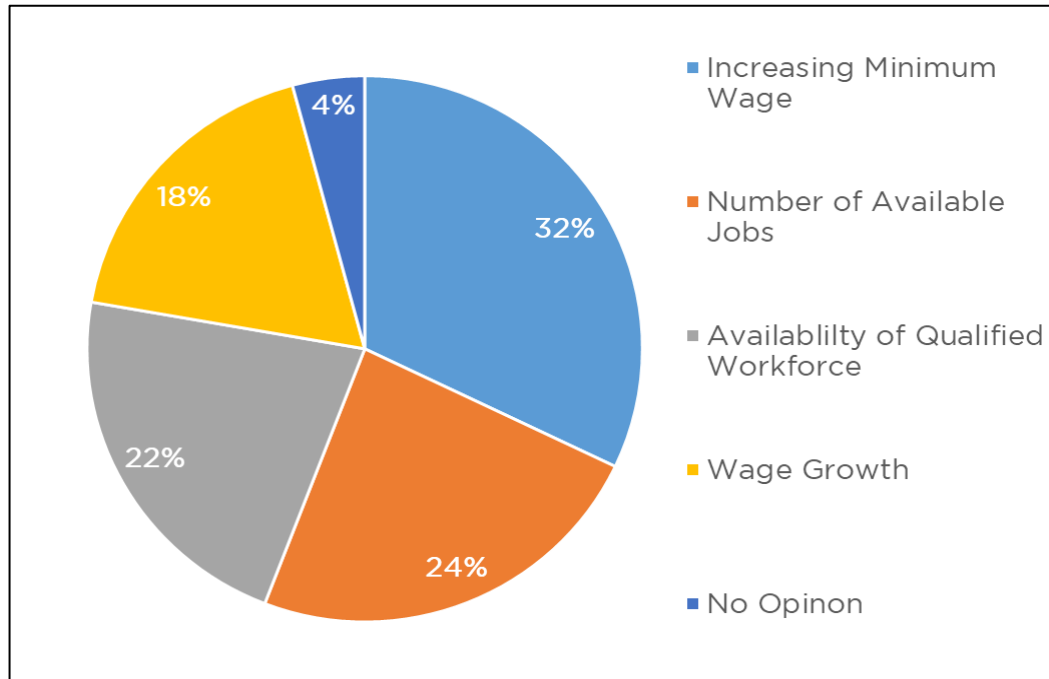
With a mean 4.11, about 56% of respondents say they are very concerned about jobs and the economy. **African-Americans are more likely to say they are very concerned about jobs and the economy than other racial groups**, and unmarried respondents are more likely to say they are very concerned than married respondents.

Figure 10 Jobs and the Economy



Respondents identified what their top priority is regarding jobs and the economy, selecting from the number of available jobs, availability of qualified workers, wage growth, or increasing the minimum wage. Nearly **a third selected increasing the minimum wage, about a quarter selected increasing the number of jobs, with lesser percentages for the other options**. Whites are evenly divided among policy positions, while nearly 60% of African-Americans identify increasing the minimum wage as their top priority. A plurality of unmarried respondents favor a minimum wage hike, while married respondents are evenly divided. Republicans list the number of jobs and qualified workers as priorities 1 and 2, while Democrats favor a minimum wage hike. Independents are evenly split among four priorities.

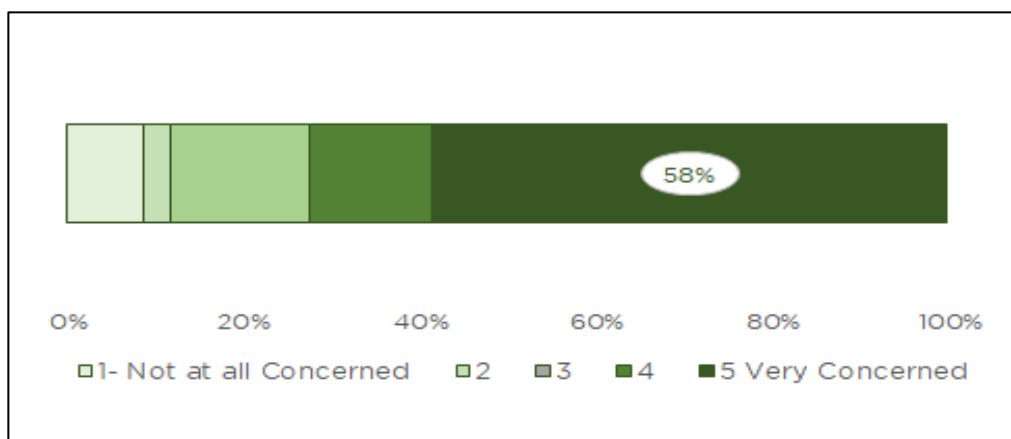
Figure 11 Jobs and the Economy Policy Options



#7 Crime and Public Safety

With a mean of 4.106, about 58% of respondents say they are very concerned about crime and public safety. While **majorities of every racial group are very concerned about this issue, about three-quarters of African-Americans say they are very concerned.** Respondents with lower incomes are more likely to say they are very concerned than respondents with higher incomes. While majorities of conservatives and liberals say they are very concerned, only a plurality of self-described moderates hold this view.

Figure 12 Crime and Public Safety

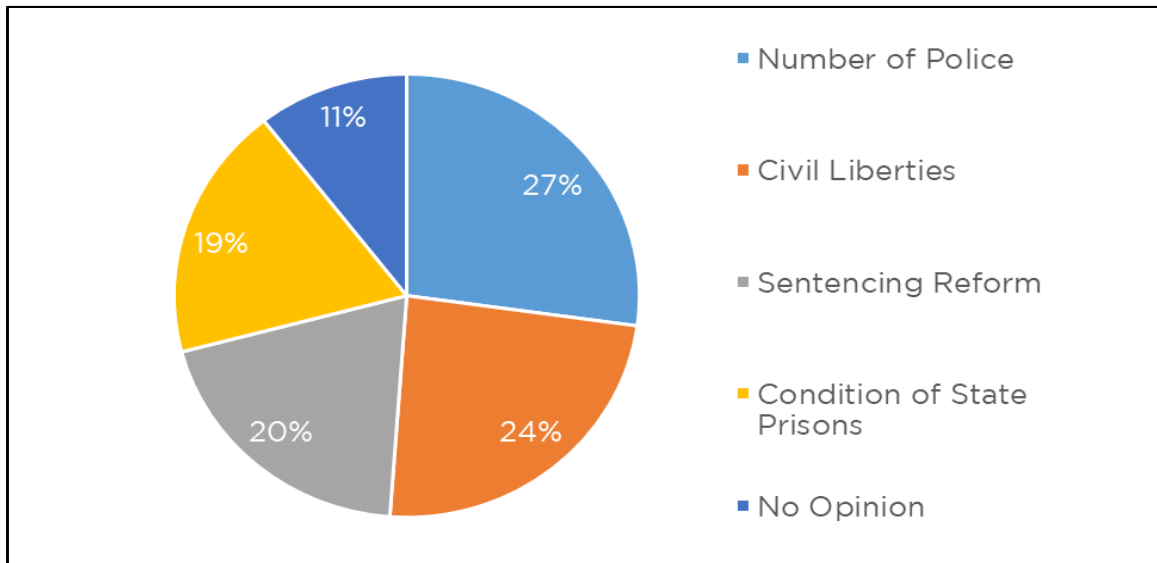


Additionally, we asked, “When thinking about crime and public safety, what is your top priority? The condition of state prisons, number of police, sentencing reform, or civil liberties?”

Alabama Priorities

Similar proportions selected number of police and civil liberties as their top priority, with lesser percentages identifying sentencing reform and conditions of state prisons as their top priority. Pluralities of independents and Democrats have civil liberties as their top priority, while a plurality of Republicans have the number of police as theirs. When broken down by race, **whites and blacks mostly express similar priorities.**

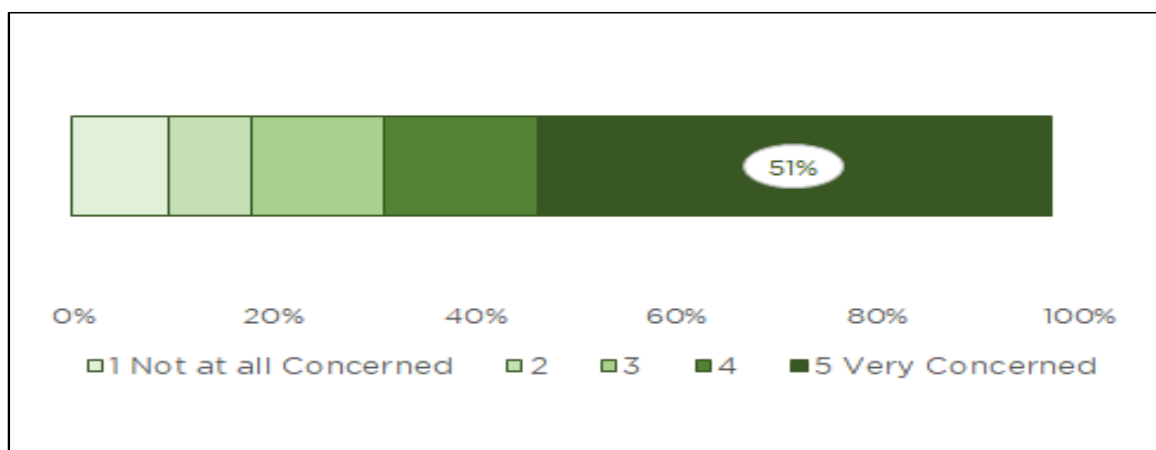
Figure 13 Crime and Public Safety Policy Options



#8 Job Training and Workforce Development

With a mean of 3.925, about 51% of respondents say they are very concerned about job training and workforce development. While **pluralities of whites and others indicated they are very concerned about this issue**, like job training, **a majority of African-Americans say they are very concerned.** There is some difference by marital status: A majority of unmarried respondents are very concerned about the issue, while a plurality of married respondents are very concerned.

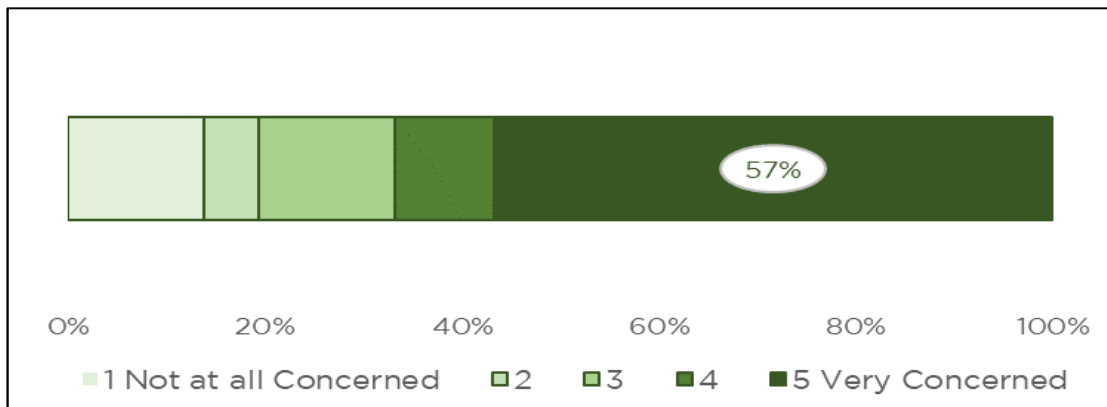
Figure 14 Job Training and Workforce Development



#9 Improving the State's Image

With a mean of 3.905 out of five, about 57% of respondents say that are very concerned about improving the state's image. There are no significant differences in the level of concern by any tested subgroup.

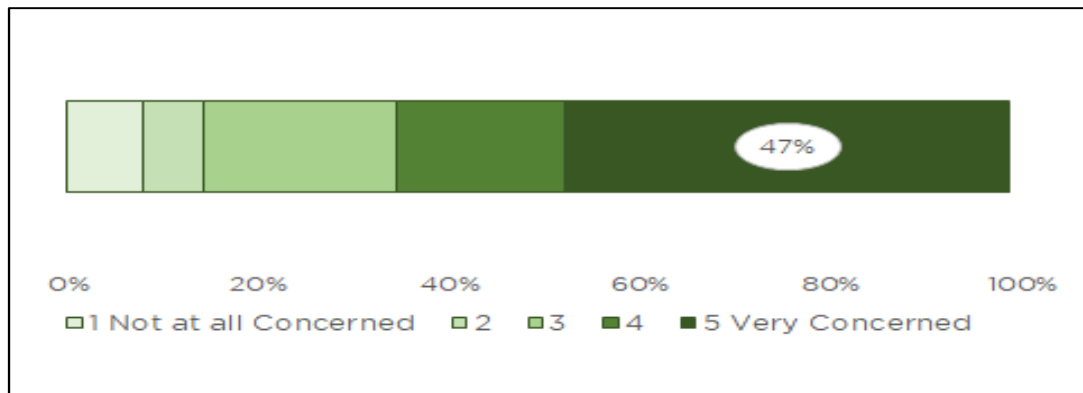
Figure 15 Improving the State's Image



#10 Tax Reform

With an average value of 3.899 on a five-point scale, about 47% of respondents say they are very concerned about tax reform. We tested the results against a wide range of demographic and political traits and found **no significant differences in any subgroup**.

Figure 16 Tax Reform



Alabama Priorities

The complete voter Top 10 list is presented below in Table 2. As noted earlier, there tends to be little variation in the level of concern for individual items by subgroups. Also, only a half point separates issues one and ten.

Table 2 Alabama Priorities Top 10

Issue	Mean	Rank
K-12 Education	4.378	1
Healthcare	4.302	2
Government Corruption and Ethics	4.239	3
Mental Health and Substance Abuse	4.233	4
Poverty and Homelessness	4.192	5
Jobs and the Economy	4.110	6
Crime and Public Safety	4.106	7
Job Training and Workforce	3.925	8
Improving the State's Image	3.905	9
Tax Reform	3.899	10

The Rankings by Subgroup

As noted above, the data suggest that all these issues are important to Alabamians, and if there are few significant differences in responses among subgroups, perhaps the different subgroups would have different Top 10 lists.

Nearly every subgroup's Top 10 list includes six common issues: K-12 Education, Healthcare, Government Corruption and Ethics, Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Poverty and Homelessness, and Jobs and the Economy. Below we present the Top 10 lists broken down by several subgroups. While there are some interesting differences across groups, many of the top issues overall are also represented in the subgroups.

Top 10 by Party

We might expect to see the biggest difference across party groups. When we look at the Top 10 within each group of partisan identifiers, we see a good deal of overlap. All include **five common issues in their top seven**: K-12 Education, Healthcare, Government Corruption and Ethics, Poverty and Homelessness, and Jobs and the Economy. Another six issues are shared by two partisan groups. Only three issues appeared on a single party list: Tax Reform, Prisons and Sentencing Reform, and Environmental Protection.

Table 3 Top 10 by Party

Republican		Independent		Democrat
Mental Health & Substance Abuse	1	K-12 Education	1	K-12 Education
K-12 Education	2	Mental Health & Substance Abuse	2	Healthcare
Healthcare	3	Government Corruption & Ethics	3	Government Corruption & Ethics
Crime & Public Safety	4	Healthcare	4	Poverty & Homelessness
Poverty & Homelessness	5	Poverty & Homelessness	5	Jobs & the Economy
Jobs & the Economy	6	Crime & Public Safety	6	Civil Rights
Government Corruption & Ethics	7	Jobs & the Economy	7	State's Image
Tax Reform	8	Higher Education	8	Prisons & Sentencing Reform
Job Training & Workforce Development	9	Job Training & Workforce Development	9	Environmental Protection
State's Image	10	Civil Rights	10	Higher Education

All Three Groups	Republicans Only	Republicans and Independents	Independents and Democrats	Republicans and Democrats	Democrats Only
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Top 10 by Ideology

When broken down by ideology, we see **five common issues included in the top six** of the various categories: K-12 Education, Healthcare, Government Corruption and Ethics, Mental Health and Substance Abuse, and Poverty and Homelessness. Environmental Protection and Prison and Sentencing Reform only ranked in the top 10 for self-described liberals.

Table 4 Top 10 by Ideology

Conservative		Moderate		Liberal
Crime & Public Safety	1	K-12 Education	1	K-12 Education
K-12 Education	2	Government Corruption &	2	Government Corruption & Ethics
Healthcare	3	Healthcare	3	Healthcare
Mental Health & Substance Abuse	4	Mental Health & Substance	4	Poverty & Homelessness
Government Corruption & Ethics	5	Jobs & the Economy	5	Civil Rights
Poverty & Homelessness	6	Poverty & Homelessness	6	Mental Health & Substance Abuse
Job Training & Workforce	7	Civil Rights	7	Improving the State's Image
Tax Reform	8	Crime & Public Safety	8	Higher Education
Jobs & the Economy	9	Job Training & Workforce	9	Environmental Protection
Higher Education	10	Improving the State's Image	10	Prison & Sentencing Reform

All Three Groups	Conservative Only	Conservatives and Moderates	Moderates and Liberals	Conservatives and Liberals	Liberals Only
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Top 10 by Generation

We also broke down the responses by generational cohort. Those born in 1945 or earlier are considered part of either the Greatest Generation (born before 1928) or the Silent Generation (1928 - 1945). The Baby Boomers are comprised of those born between 1946 and 1964, Generation X between 1965 and 1980, and the Millennial Generation between 1981 and 1997.

These generational cohorts **share eight issues in their Top 10s**: K-12 Education, Healthcare, Government Corruption and Ethics, Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Poverty and Homelessness, Jobs and the Economy, Crime and Public Safety, and Job Training and Workforce Development. Higher Education makes the Top 10 only for Millennials.

Table 5 Top 10 by Generation

Greatest/Silent		Boomer		Gen X		Millennial
Crime & Public Safety	1	Healthcare	1	K-12 Education	1	K-12 Education
Mental Health & Substance Abuse	2	K-12 Education	2	Healthcare	2	Healthcare
Government Corruption & Ethics	3	Government Corruption & Ethics	3	Mental Health & Substance Abuse	3	Poverty & Homelessness
Healthcare	4	Mental Health & Substance Abuse	4	Government Corruption & Ethics	4	Government Corruption & Ethics
K -12 Education	5	Poverty & Homelessness	5	Poverty & Homelessness	5	Jobs & the Economy
Improving the State's Image	6	Crime & Public Safety	6	Crime & Public Safety	6	Higher Education
Job Training & Workforce Development	7	Jobs & the Economy	7	Tax Reform	7	Mental Health & Substance Abuse
Jobs & the Economy	8	Improving the State's Image	8	Jobs & the Economy	8	Improving the State's Image
Poverty & Homelessness	9	Tax Reform	9	Job Training & Workforce Development	9	Job Training & Workforce Development
Tax Reform	10	Job Training & Workforce Development	10	Civil Rights	10	Crime & Public Safety

All Four Groups	Greatest, Boomer, and Millennial	Greatest, Boomer, and Gen X	Millennial Only
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Top 10 by Gender

Men and women have **eight overlapping issues in their Top 10s**: K-12 Education, Healthcare, Government Corruption and Ethics, Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Poverty and Homelessness, Jobs and the Economy, Crime and Public Safety, and Job training and Workforce Development. Men saw Improving the State's Image and Tax Reform as more important. Women showed greater concern for Higher Education and Civil Rights.

Table 6 Top 10 by Gender

Men		Women
K -12 Education	1	Mental Health & Substance Abuse
Healthcare	2	K -12 Education
Government Corruption & Ethics	3	Healthcare
Crime & Public Safety	4	Poverty & Homelessness
Poverty & Homelessness	5	Jobs & the Economy
Mental Health & Substance Abuse	6	Government Corruption & Ethics
Improving the State's Image	7	Crime & Public Safety
Jobs & the Economy	8	Higher Education
Job Training & Workforce Development	9	Job Training & Workforce Development
Tax Reform	10	Civil Rights

Top 10 by Educational Attainment

While the Top 10 varies some across different levels of education, **all groups share seven issues:** K-12 Education, Healthcare, Government Corruption and Ethics, Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Poverty and Homelessness, Jobs and the Economy, and Crime and Public Safety.

Table 7 Top 10 by Education

High School or Less		Some College or Associate's		Bachelor's		Graduate or Professional
Healthcare	1	K-12 Education	1	Mental Health & Substance Abuse	1	Government Corruption & Ethics
Jobs & the Economy	2	Healthcare	2	K-12 Education	2	K-12 Education
K-12 Education	3	Government Corruption & Ethics	3	Government Corruption & Ethics	3	Healthcare
Poverty & Homelessness	4	Poverty & Homelessness	4	Healthcare	4	Mental Health & Substance Abuse
Mental Health & Substance Abuse	5	Mental Health & Substance Abuse	5	Poverty & Homelessness	5	Prison & Sentencing Reform
Crime & Public Safety	6	Crime & Public Safety	6	Crime & Public Safety	6	Poverty & Homelessness
Government Corruption & Ethics	7	Jobs & the Economy	7	Tax Reform	7	Jobs & the Economy
Job Training & Workforce Development	8	Improving the State's Image	8	Jobs & the Economy	8	Civil Rights
Improving the State's Image	9	Higher Education	9	Job Training & Workforce Development	9	Crime & Public Safety
Higher Education	10	Tax Reform	10	Improving the State's Image	10	Job Training & Workforce Development

All Four Groups	High School and Some College / Associate's	High School and Bachelor's	High School, Some College / Associate's and Bachelor's	Some College / Associates and Bachelor's	Graduate / Professional
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Top 10 by Income

The various income groups hold **eight items in common across their Top 10 lists**: K-12 Education, Healthcare, Government Corruption and Ethics, Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Poverty and Homelessness, Jobs and the Economy, Crime and Public Safety, and Job Training and Workforce Development. While the middle-income bracket was the only group to prioritize Higher Education and Civil Rights, they were also the only group to not place Tax Reform in the Top 10.

Table 8 Top 10 by Income

Under \$25,000		\$25,000 - 75,000		\$75,000 and Up
Healthcare	1	Healthcare	1	K -12 Education
K -12 Education	2	K -12 Education	2	Government Corruption & Ethics
Crime & Public Safety	3	Mental Health & Substance Abuse	3	Mental Health & Substance Abuse
Jobs & the Economy	4	Government Corruption & Ethics	4	Healthcare
Mental Health & Substance Abuse	5	Poverty & Homelessness	5	Poverty & Homelessness
Poverty & Homelessness	6	Crime & Public Safety	6	Jobs & the Economy
Government Corruption & Ethics	7	Jobs & the Economy	7	Tax Reform
Improving the State's Image	8	Higher Education	8	Crime & Public Safety
Tax Reform	9	Job Training & Workforce Development	9	Job Training & Workforce Development
Job Training & Workforce Development	10	Civil Rights	10	Improving the State's Image

All Three Groups	Under \$25,000 and Over \$75,000	\$25,000 - \$75,000
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Top 10 by Race

The Top 10 lists of **whites and African-Americans** have fewer differences than any of the other **subgroups reviewed**. These groups **share nine issues in common**: K-12 Education, Healthcare, Government Corruption and Ethics, Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Poverty and Homelessness, Jobs and the Economy, Crime and Public Safety, Job Training and Workforce Development, and Tax Reform.

In sum, while it is possible to detect differences in the issues that most concern Alabamians in different political or demographic categories, the overwhelming pattern is one of shared concern over a core set of issues.

Table 9 Top 10 by Race

Whites		African-Americans
K-12 Education	1	K-12 Education
Government Corruption and Ethics	2	Healthcare
Healthcare	3	Poverty and Homelessness
Mental Health and Substance Abuse	4	Jobs and the Economy
Poverty and Homelessness	5	Higher Education
Crime and Public Safety	6	Job Training and Workforce Development
Jobs and the Economy	7	Government Corruption and Ethics
Tax Reform	8	Mental Health and Substance Abuse
Job Training and Workforce Development	9	Crime and Public Safety
Improving the State's Image	10	Tax Reform

Differences Between Experts and Voters

We can expect gaps between the knowledge and priorities of policy experts and the general voter. However, the gaps identified here are particularly interesting.

Issues Prioritized by Experts

It might be understandable that some issues identified by experts may not rank as highly with the public. For example, while the public may think schools are underfunded, they may not think much about funding state government more generally. On the other hand, many policy experts may be concerned with aspects of the state's approach to revenue and the reliance on a series of one-time windfalls to fund basic government operations. PARCA's regular report *How Alabama Taxes Compare*¹, explores how Alabama's state and local taxes compared to other states and these states' relative tax advantage over Alabama.

Table 10 Experts' Priorities

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Voters' Rank</u>	<u>Experts' Rank</u>	<u>Gap</u>
Mental Health and Substance Abuse	4	13	9
Poverty and Homelessness	5	11	6
Job Training and Workforce	8	12	4
Improving the State's Image	9	16	7

Similarly, policy experts and most public officials know that the Alabama prison system must be reformed or face federal takeover, but this issue is not visible to most people. For most people, prisons are literally out of sight and out of mind.

Issues Prioritized by Voters

Table 11 Voters' Priorities

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Voters' Rank</u>	<u>Experts' Rank</u>	<u>Gap</u>
Mental Health and Substance Abuse	4	13	9
Poverty and Homelessness	5	11	6
Job Training and Workforce	8	12	4
Improving the State's Image	9	16	7

¹*How Alabama Taxes Compare*, 2017 www.parcAlabama.org

We also see some issues on the voters' Top 10 list are not so highly ranked by experts. One of the larger gaps between expert and public rankings in the voters' Top 10 is found in the Mental Health and Substance Abuse issue, the number four for voters and number 13 for experts. Almost everyone, experts and public alike, knows someone who has experienced mental illness or substance abuse. So this finding is a puzzle. If the opioid crisis is rapidly accelerating, it may be that the public is closer to, or more aware of, the issue than policy experts and other political engaged respondents. We might expect voters with higher levels of education or income to be less concerned about this issue compared to others, but they are not. The lower rank of the issue is likely a function of another distinguishing quality of the expert panel, namely their expertise in politics. Perhaps on some of these issues, experts are politically handicapping or discounting the issue based on perceived political prospects. As important as mental health and poverty are, there may not be a natural constituency that can be mobilized around the issues. Experts may see them as harder issues for politicians to adopt and thus less likely to be mentioned as an issue that could be addressed.

Conclusion

When PARCA has conducted past opinion polls addressing questions of public policy, we have tended not to see dramatic divisions across subgroups: By and large, people support public education and want safe streets and ethical leaders. Even when we do see measurable differences across demographic or political groups, we rarely see polarization, where a majority of one group takes a position contrary to a majority of another. These past findings are consistent with the results presented here. For the most part, the overall results hold for most subgroups.

The list of Top 10 priorities is not particularly surprising. What is surprising is the degree to which Alabamians agree even frequently about specific policy options to address issues.

- Alabamians show **a high level of concern for all 10 issues**. There is only a 0.479 spread in the mean level of concern between issues 1 and 10.
- There is **little polarization**, where a majority of one group takes a position contrary to a majority of another group.
- There is **little difference in the issues identified by African-Americans and whites**. The two groups share 9 of the Top 10 issues.
- **60% of respondents believe the overall quality of life in Alabama has not improved** in the last 5 years.

While differences in the priorities of experts and the public can be expected, the nature of the gaps revealed in the data are surprising.

- Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Poverty and Homelessness, Job Training and Workforce Development, and Improving the State's Image are Top 10 issues for voters, but not for experts.

Alabama Priorities

- Infrastructure and Transportation, Prison and Sentencing Reform, Funding State Government, and Civil Rights are important issues for experts, but not for voters.

Where issues of importance are not recognized by the public, leaders have the opportunity to inform and educate. Second, the list gives leaders an opportunity to identify and take up issues that are not currently receiving adequate attention in Montgomery.

This research suggests that elected officials and candidates have an opportunity to show leadership and to build broad coalitions to address Alabama's most pressing challenges.

Appendix

Methodology

In October 2017, PARCA partnered with Samford University to survey policy experts to identify issues experts see as important. A list of more than 400 experts, including political science faculty, journalists, civic and business leaders, activists, nonprofit leaders, and lobbyists, was compiled. These experts were surveyed via an open-ended survey. An email with a link to an online survey was sent to those with identifiable email addresses. Paper surveys were sent to those whose emails could not be identified. The experts were asked, “Think for a moment about issues facing Alabama that a governor could do something about . . . What would you say are the top five issues facing Alabama?” More than 150 responses were collected. Responses were recoded and grouped into policy areas. Seventeen issues (Table 2) garnered substantial support.

In December 2017, PARCA partnered with the University of South Alabama to conduct a scientific public opinion study of registered voters to ask about their levels of concern on each of the 17 issues. The survey was a live-interviewer statewide random-digit-dial poll of registered voters, equally divided between cell phone numbers and landline numbers. The order of issues was randomized for every respondent. Respondents were asked to, “Rate how concerned you are using a scale of 1 through 5, where 1 means you are ‘not at all concerned’ and 5 means you are ‘very concerned.’ ” In general, voters were concerned about all the issues. A plurality or a majority of respondents indicated they were very concerned about each issue, and all median and mean values were greater than a neutral value. We used the mean values to rank the Top 10 issues. Only a small number of respondents, less than 5% in every case, indicated they had no opinion on any of these issues. For ease of presentation, the means and percentages reported below are calculated using only valid responses: The few cases with no opinion are excluded. The survey resulted in 468 completed interviews and a margin of error of +/-4.5%. Responses were weighted by race, gender, age, and education to match population demographics.



Our Mission

Alabamians want similar things: good schools, safe neighborhoods, a strong economy, freedom, equality, and opportunity, but we often disagree about the best way to achieve these goals. We resolve these disagreements through healthy debate and negotiation, which requires accurate and unbiased information. PARCA exists to provide this information.

WHO WE ARE

The Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization working to inform and improve state and local government, schools, and nonprofits through independent, objective, nonpartisan research and analysis.

WHAT WE DO

Data Analysis: Data should be a flashlight, not a hammer. PARCA provides complex data analysis to illuminate opportunities and improve outcomes.

Research and Recommendations: Numbers may tell what, but they don't tell why. PARCA seeks to understand what is working, what is not working, and what changes might be feasible.

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WHERE WE WORK

PARCA focuses on issues impacting Alabama's state and local governments, education and workforce development, and quality of life.

State and Local Government

- Analysis of proposed amendments to Alabama's Constitution.
- Comparative studies of Alabama's budgets and taxes.
- Comparative studies of municipal finances.
- SMART budgeting analysis for cities and counties.

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- Studies of Alabama's Pre-K program.
- Deep dives into school systems' performance.
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- Long-form research in partnership with the Business Education Alliance.

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- Comparative studies of infrastructure and the built environment.
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