



**Progressive State Leaders Committee
Southwestern States Project Focus Group and Survey Findings
October 2023**

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1) Project Overview & Goals

The Progressive State Leaders Committee (PSLC) advocates for innovative and inclusive progressive policies that promote justice, fairness, and equity.

Using communications to educate the public, targeted research, and the convening of thought leaders and stakeholders, PSLC works to advance solutions to emerging legal and policy issues on both the federal and state level with a focus on how state attorneys general (AGs) can promote progressive policies grounded in the rule of law.

Since 2016, PSLC has tackled a number of issue areas, including highlighting the role state attorneys general played in advocating for constituents during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing daily healthcare concerns, advancing criminal justice reform, safeguarding the environment, and protecting the integrity of elections and the right to vote.

To further its policy goals, PSLC runs education and advocacy campaigns. In 2020, PSLC ran an education program in three states: North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. This campaign aimed to educate constituents on the role of AGs in healthcare, rural healthcare, consumer protection, and public safety and crime—specifically addressing the rape kit testing backlog.

In 2022, PSLC conducted a research project to dive deeper into constituents' views on their AG in the southwest region of the U.S. PSLC retained the public opinion research firm GBAO to conduct this research. In August 2022, GBAO conducted focus groups with white suburban voters and Hispanic voters in five states in the Southwest: Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada and Texas. The groups excluded strong ideological voters. Following the groups, GBAO surveyed 950 registered voters in each state, including an oversample of 150 Hispanic voters, via phone and text-to-web. These surveys were conducted in September 2022 and have a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percentage points each.

| | AZ | CO | NM | NV | TX |
|---------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Focus groups | | | | | |
| Participants | 6-7 per group | 5-6 per group | 6-7 per group | 6-8 per group | 7 per group |
| Dates | Aug. 23-24, 2022 | Aug. 17-18, 2022 | Aug. 25, 2022 | Aug. 17-18, 2022 | Aug. 23-24, 2022 |
| Surveys | | | | | |
| Sample size | 950 registered voters (150 Hispanic oversample) | 950 registered voters (150 Hispanic oversample) | 950 registered voters (150 Hispanic oversample) | 950 registered voters (150 Hispanic oversample) | 950 registered voters (150 Hispanic oversample) |
| Dates | Sep. 12-18, 2022 | Sep. 6-12, 2022 | Sep. 13-18, 2022 | Sep. 7-14, 2022 | Sep. 11-14, 2022 |
| Margin of error | +/- 3.5% | +/- 3.5% | +/- 3.5% | +/- 3.5% | +/- 3.5% |

In this 2022 Southwestern Research Project, PSLC explored a variety of issue areas relevant to state AGs, focusing primarily on public safety, criminal justice reform, abortion, voting rights and

election integrity. Demographically, PSLC also did a deep dive on the public opinions of Hispanic voters in these five southwest states, contributing to PSLC's high-level aim of better understanding communities of color in the U.S. and how best to educate these communities on the role of their state AGs.

The following sections lay out the Key Findings of the research project across the Southwest region (section 2), state-by-state results in Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and Texas (section 3), as well as remaining questions, aspirations, and next steps for the ongoing research work from PSLC (section 4).

2) Key Findings

- **In September 2022, voters in nearly all surveys felt pessimistic about the direction of their state.** When asked if their state is going in the “right direction” or if it is on the “wrong track,” a majority of voters in Arizona (65% wrong track), Texas (59%), New Mexico (55%), and Nevada (54%) were pessimistic about the direction of their state. Voters in Colorado were divided on the direction of their state (49% right direction, 45% wrong track).
- **The attorney general and the Office of the Attorney General were thinly known in each state outside of Texas.** Fewer than half of voters could identify their attorney general in Arizona (49% ID), New Mexico (49%), Colorado (30%), and Nevada (27%). In focus groups, those who identified their AG mentioned few specifics about them beyond their title. In Texas, even back in September 2022 and prior to recent events, voters were more likely to know AG Ken Paxton (67% ID) and were split on their opinion of him (32% fav/35% unfav) and the office of the Texas Attorney General (40% fav/38% unfav).
- **Human trafficking was voters' top priority for the Office of the Attorney General.** Large majorities across states wanted their attorney general to investigate and take action on human trafficking, an issue that also found wide bipartisan agreement. Other priorities included government waste and fraud, mass shootings, election integrity, enforcing existing laws, and holding opioid manufacturers responsible. In focus groups, “election integrity” denoted a mix of improving accessibility to voting as well as accountability, but few were concerned about large scale voter fraud. Democrats also prioritized abortion access and Republicans prioritized tackling illegal immigration. Hispanic voters were particularly keen on the office addressing housing costs.

Top-Tier AG Priorities

% Important priority for the (STATE) Attorney General to investigate or take action on (showing net 8-10 on 0 to 10 scale)

| | Arizona | Colorado | New Mexico | Nevada | Texas |
|---|---------|----------|------------|--------|-------|
| Human trafficking | 82 ✓ | 70 ✓ | 78 ✓ | 77 ✓ | 83 ✓ |
| *Government waste and fraud | 63 | 66 | 68 | 68 | 70 |
| Mass shootings | 63 | 62 | 64 | 62 | 76 |
| Election integrity | 65 | 60 | 59 | 68 | 64 |
| Enforcing (STATE)'s existing laws | 60 | 57 | 67 | 64 | 60 |
| Opioids manufacturers and distributors | 65 | 58 | 65 | 58 | 61 |
| Scams or identity theft | 57 | 50 | 58 | 62 | 60 |
| Illegal immigration and border security | 59 | 43 | 54 | 52 | 61 |
| Housing costs | 51 | 52 | 48 | 58 | 51 |

*Split sampled

- Voters were deeply concerned about crime in their state and saw it as intertwined with other issues like the economy but experienced it differently by state and locality.** Despite differences in voters' concerns across states, crime was a common worry in all states and viewed as intertwined with other problems such as the economy, cost of living, and immigration. Across states, voters were significantly more likely to see crime as an immediate crisis or major problem in their state or in larger cities than in their local community. Hispanic and urban voters overall were slightly more likely to see crime as a major problem in their local community. The specific types of crimes voters were concerned about and experience varied by state, party, and urbanicity.

With the exception of New Mexico, a plurality of voters across states believed economic factors like inflation, unemployment, and wealth disparity were most responsible for crime. Half of New Mexico voters blamed the lack of accountability in the criminal justice system for crime in their state.

- Voters expressed more concern about the criminal justice system than police when it came to public safety and wanted to see the system changed.** Across states, voters gave positive marks to local police departments for addressing crime and keeping them safe. In focus groups, many participants sympathized with police and believed they are overwhelmed, stretched thin, and underfunded. On the other hand, each state's criminal justice system received net negative ratings. Focus group participants said courts are not doing a good job holding criminals accountable for their actions.

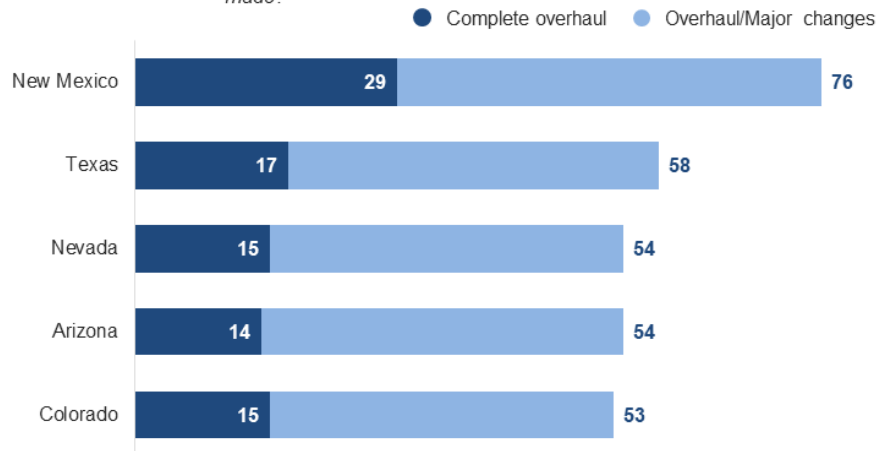
For each one, please tell me if that group is doing an excellent, good, not so good, or poor job of addressing crime and keeping you safe.

| Job Ratings | Your local police department | | The (STATE) criminal justice system | |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | Positive <i>Excellent/Good</i> | Negative <i>Not so good/Poor</i> | Positive <i>Excellent/Good</i> | Negative <i>Not so good/Poor</i> |
| Arizona | 69% | 26% | 39% | 52% |
| Colorado | 68% | 27% | 39% | 52% |
| New Mexico | 58% | 39% | 21% | 73% |
| Nevada | 68% | 28% | 40% | 49% |
| Texas | 77% | 20% | 42% | 53% |

A majority of voters in each of these states also believed the criminal justice system needs a complete overhaul or major changes. The desire for change was particularly strong in New Mexico where more than three-quarters of voters (76%) said the New Mexico criminal justice system needs an overhaul or major change.

Changing The System

Thinking about the criminal justice system in (STATE), would you say it needs a complete overhaul, major changes, minor changes, or do changes not need to be made?



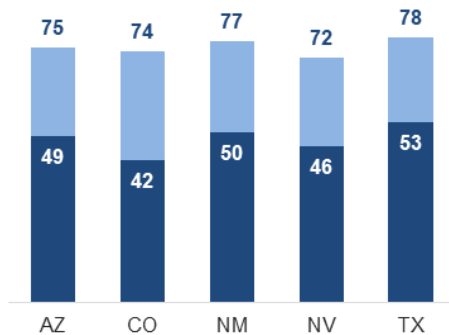
- Voters across parties agreed the criminal justice system works in favor of the rich and politically connected.** Over two-thirds of voters in each state described the criminal justice system treating those with money or powerful connections differently rather than treating all citizens equally. However, there was a lack of consensus on whether there is racial discrimination within the system, with Democrats and Hispanic women more likely to see the criminal justice system discriminating against people of color.
- Wide agreement existed on an approach to crime and public safety that involves both fully funding police as well as addressing the societal causes of crime.** Nearly three-quarters across states said “making sure our police are fully funded” would make their state safer. Eight-in-ten across states also said “addressing societal causes of crime like mental health challenges, drug addiction, and lack of after school or jobs programs” would make their state safer.

Crime Proposals

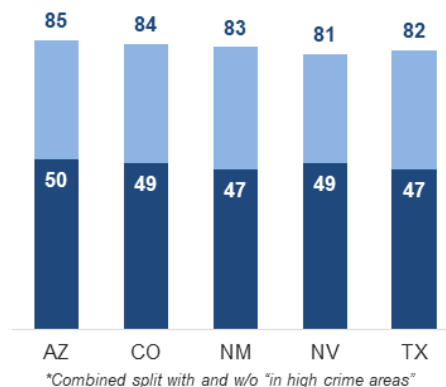
% saying it would make (STATE) more safe

Darker shade = Stronger intensity

Making sure our police are fully funded



Addressing societal causes of crime -- like mental health challenges, drug addiction, and lack of after school or jobs programs*



3) State Results

Arizona

- **More voters were pessimistic about the direction of Arizona in September 2022.** Nearly two-thirds of registered voters (65%) believed that things were heading in the wrong direction in Arizona. Pessimism was higher among white (67%) and rural voters (72%).
- **Concerns about the economy, immigration, and political division shaped how Arizonans view public safety.** According to registered voters in Arizona, economic pressures contributed to crime, illegal immigration strains government resources and was connected to human trafficking, and political division hindered progress. In focus groups, white suburban voters expressed a more positive outlook on their community compared to Hispanic voters, but they lamented political division and illegal immigration. Hispanic voters expressed concerns about economic pressures, including rising homelessness, rent increases, high-speed car chases, pandemic-related learning setbacks, taxes, and the dangerous conditions faced by immigrants crossing the border.
- **Voters perceived crime as a more significant issue for the state than their local communities and were particularly worried about drugs and homelessness.** Large majorities across various groups considered crime to be a crisis or major problem for the state (71%) and its major cities (76%), while only a third (35%) viewed crime as a major problem or crisis in their local communities. Hispanic voters were more likely than white voters to see crime as a crisis or major problem in their communities (42% compared to 30%). Drugs and homelessness were top crime concerns. Drugs or drug trafficking was particularly worrisome to rural voters. Democrats were also concerned about gun violence.

When asking for the top two factors most responsible for crime over the past year, economic factors (41%), substance abuse (32%), lack of mental health counseling (27%), and the lack of accountability in the criminal justice system (26%) topped the list. Only 6% of voters blamed crime on the police not doing their job. Economic factors and substance abuse were cited as top causes of crime across party lines, while accountability in the criminal justice system was a more significant factor for Republicans. Democrats and independents were more likely to say the lack of mental health services is a top contributor to crime.

- **Arizonans held a positive view of their local police departments and county sheriffs in terms of handling crime, but expressed concern about the Arizona criminal justice system when it comes to public safety.** Arizonans' positive sentiment toward law enforcement was universal across demographic groups. A solid majority gave positive job ratings to their local police departments (69% positive/26% negative) and county sheriffs (55% positive/31% negative). During focus groups, white suburban participants described having a more positive experience with the police compared to Hispanic participants. White suburban voters praised the police for their timely response when called upon. In contrast, Hispanic voters mentioned a lack of sufficient police officers to respond to their demands, and some brought up the history of unfair treatment by the police towards people of color.

While voters tended to believe law enforcement was doing their part on crime, they did not believe the Arizona criminal justice system was doing its part. A majority (52%) gave the justice system negative ratings on addressing crime, while only 39% gave them positive ratings. The criminal justice system received net negative ratings across political and demographic groupings, but liberal voters were most critical (25% positive/68% negative).

- **When it comes to making their state safer, Arizona voters want to both fully fund the police and address the societal causes of crime.** Three-quarters of voters agreed that the police should be fully funded and 85% supported addressing the societal causes of crime like mental health challenges, drug addiction and lack of after school or jobs programs. Support for both measures was strong across party lines.
- **When Mark Brnovich was Attorney General, knowledge of him was thin, particularly among Hispanic voters.** Among those who held an opinion of Mark Brnovich (49%), slightly more held an unfavorable view of him (21% fav/27% unfav). Only 30% of Hispanic voters can ID him. One white suburban focus group respondent said: *"I don't really know much about him. I knew who he was and what his job was."* Similarly, among the 61% of voters who held an opinion of the Office of the Arizona Attorney General, opinions were divided but leaned slightly unfavorable (29% fav/32% unfav). In focus groups, participants described their ideal attorney general as someone who follows the law and is independent, unbiased, impartial, objective, and fair.
- **Human trafficking found wide agreement as a top issue that fell within the wheelhouse of the AG's office.** Regardless of voters' partisanship, race, and gender, human trafficking was seen as the most important priority for Arizona's attorney general. As one white suburban voter noted: *"It's so scary, and it's something that's really on the rise. I think we need to pay attention to especially where we're located next to the border."*
- **Election integrity, opioids, and government waste and fraud were also top tier priorities that the attorney general should investigate or focus on.** Democrats, Hispanic voters, and women also highly prioritized mass shootings, while Republicans wanted the attorney general to enforce existing laws and tackle illegal immigration. Election integrity was particularly important to Republicans and men, although its meaning varied among voters. While most focus group participants trusted the outcomes of elections, they were concerned that voting accessibility in Arizona was being reduced. Some participants expressed support for voter ID laws and others were frustrated with the prolonged debate surrounding the 2020 election results, such as a white suburban voter who stated, *"Counting ballots is hard, but that's ridiculous. I think it's a joke; we have technology to help us count ballots, we have technology to track ballots and ballot boxes. For people to say that there's intentional crime happening, I think that is really trying to destroy the American election system."* Ultimately, there was a desire for both accessibility and accountability in election management and voting rights.

- **Although focus group participants expressed concerns about the threat to abortion rights in Arizona, only Democrats prioritized abortion access as an issue that the AG's office should address.** Participants in focus groups were deeply alarmed by the perceived regression on abortion rights, with some describing the situation as "going backwards" and making them feel "fearful" about what lies ahead. Others argued that the decision is unfair to women and asserted that it is not a topic in which the government should be involved.

About the Arizona Electorate

| Party ID | |
|-------------|-----|
| Democrat | 26% |
| Independent | 42% |
| Republican | 31% |

| Ideology | |
|--------------|-----|
| Liberal | 21% |
| Moderate | 37% |
| Conservative | 39% |

| Race/Ethnicity | |
|----------------|-----|
| White | 63% |
| Hispanic | 23% |
| Black | 5% |
| AAPI | 3% |

Colorado

- **Views regarding the direction of Colorado were mixed in September 2022.** Half (49%) said Colorado was headed in the right direction and 45% believed things have gotten off on the wrong track. A majority of Democrats (78%), Hispanic voters (54%), suburban voters (53%), and urban voters (50%) expressed higher optimism about the state.
- **In focus groups, top-tier issues like housing costs, homelessness, and crime were rooted in population growth and development.** This growth also had a negative impact on what participants love about living in Colorado, particularly the outdoor spaces and mountains. Participants felt that cities like Denver and Colorado Springs are growing too rapidly and soaring real estate prices are making housing feel unaffordable.

Concerns about affordable housing and wages not keeping pace with the cost of living were particularly pronounced among Hispanic voters. Many Hispanic participants worried about the growing wage disparity in the state, with one participant stating, "*the middle class is fading away.*" Others felt that they can no longer afford to live in their communities: "*It breaks my heart because I'm a native and I don't see myself purchasing a home here. Probably after a couple of years I'll have to leave the state.*"

- **Environmental concerns were also top of mind for the Colorado focus group participants.** While some applauded the state and cities taking small steps to make Colorado more environmentally friendly, others felt more could be done to conserve water and prevent wildfires. Concerns about the environment and climate change did not necessarily overlap for everyone. For instance, one white suburban participant expressed a strong passion for preserving public lands and wildlife but placed less emphasis on climate change: "*Focus on environmental issues, and I'm not talking about climate change, I'm talking about not destroying our wildlife to build more things, more strip malls and more tea lodges and things that people don't need.*"

- **Voters perceived crime to be more of a problem at the state and city levels than in their own communities, with homelessness a top concern outside rural communities.** A significant majority of voters across different groups considered crime to be a crisis or a major problem for the state (67%) and larger cities (73%). However, when it came to their local communities, the level of concern about crime was milder, with 40% viewing it as a crisis or major problem. Republicans (47%), Hispanics (46%), and urban voters (52%) were more likely than the overall voter population to say crime in their local communities is a significant issue. Homelessness, drugs, and property crime were top crime concerns, with Democrats also concerned about gun violence. Concern about drug crime was particularly pronounced among rural voters. Focus group participants specifically mentioned experiencing package thefts, stolen bikes, car break-ins, and catalytic converter thefts.
- **Economic circumstances and crime were seen as intertwined for many voters, but failings of the criminal justice system also play a role when it comes to crime, particularly for Republicans.** Economic factors (39%), accountability in the criminal justice system (30%), substance abuse (30%), and lack of mental health counseling (27%) were seen as contributing most to crime. Democrats and independents were more likely to see economic factors as the issue most responsible for crime while Republicans were more likely to blame the lack of accountability in the criminal justice system.

Voters also gave the Colorado criminal justice system net negative ratings on addressing crime and keeping them safe (39% positive/52% negative). This dissatisfaction was driven by Republicans (-67 positive-negative) and independents (-15). Democrats viewed the system in a positive light (+29). Law enforcement, on the other hand, received positive ratings from voters across the state, except for in Denver. Focus group participants excused lapses in police performance by saying they are stretched thin and deserve more support and respect.

- **For voters, a public safety agenda included fully funding police and addressing homelessness, substance abuse, and the mental health crisis which voters link to crime.** Nearly three-quarters (74%) of voters in Colorado believed fully funding police will make Colorado safer. Majority support for funding the police cuts across party lines including 92% of Republicans, 75% of independents, and 58% of Democrats. Solid majorities across party also believed addressing the societal causes of crime will make the state safer.
- **The Attorney General Phil Weiser and the Office of the Colorado Attorney General were unknown entities to many.** Among those able to provide a rating of the Office of the Attorney General (54%), a plurality held a favorable opinion (31% fav/23% unfav). Phil Weiser was known to less than a third of voters (30%), but among those familiar with him, he had a net favorable rating (19% fav/11% unfav). Only 22% of Hispanic voters could ID AG Weiser. In focus groups, participants wanted the Attorney General to embody a wide range of traits, such as, having integrity and being non-biased, non-partisan, honest and trustworthy, balanced, for equal justice under the law, and for accountability for all regardless of economic status.

- Human trafficking, government waste and fraud, reducing gun violence, election integrity, opioids, and enforcing laws were top-tier priorities for the AG’s office.** While not necessarily a top crime concern, human trafficking was widely recognized as a priority for the AG's office across various groups. Furthermore, there were specific issues that different groups prioritize. Hispanic voters expressed a strong desire for the AG's office to address housing costs, Republicans emphasized the importance of tackling illegal immigration, and Democrats prioritized ensuring access to abortion. Focus group participants expressed disappointment in the Supreme Court ruling on *Roe v. Wade*, but did not feel abortion is under threat in Colorado.
- In focus groups, Colorado was viewed as a leader on voting accessibility, although some voters expressed concerns about extreme views on elections.** Participants generally trusted election outcomes and believed Colorado sets a good example for accessibility because of how Colorado has implemented mail-in voting, ballot drop boxes, and the ability to track your ballot. However, some participants were still proponents of ID requirements for voting.

Focus group participants overwhelmingly found questioning the results of the 2020 election or participating in the January 6th riot to be disqualifying for an elected official. Concerns about division, fueled by the pandemic and extreme views from politicians, were more pronounced with white suburban voters. As one white suburban voter said, *“We, as a country have become very divided, very extremist and our views, whether left or right...When I hear people like Boebert it just gives me pause about you know, is this the direction our nation is moving in.”*

About the Colorado Electorate

| Party ID | | Ideology | | Race/Ethnicity | |
|-------------|-----|--------------|-----|----------------|-----|
| Democrat | 28% | Liberal | 29% | White | 76% |
| Independent | 50% | Moderate | 39% | Hispanic | 13% |
| Republican | 21% | Conservative | 28% | Black | 3% |
| | | | | AAPI | 3% |

Nevada

- A majority of Nevada voters were pessimistic about the direction of the state.** While most independent (60%) and Republican (82%) voters saw the state as going in the wrong direction, a majority of Democrats felt optimistic (67%). Hispanic voters were split (47% right direction, 45% wrong track) about the direction of Nevada and white voters were mostly pessimistic (36% right direction, 59% wrong track).
- Costs and crime—which were seen as intertwined, were at the forefront of voters’ minds.** In focus groups, participants expressed optimism about the economy rebounding from the coronavirus pandemic. However, many participants were dissatisfied with the direction of economic development, crime, and the availability of well-paying jobs. Hispanic participants acknowledged the availability of jobs but noted these are low wage jobs that make it hard to afford the cost of living. While homeowners benefit from rising property values, many participants saw buying a home as out of reach and noted large increases in rental rates.

Economic factors were considered most responsible for crime across the political spectrum. Republicans and independents also blamed the failure of the Nevada criminal justice system to hold people accountable as contributing to crime. The lack of mental health counseling and substance abuse were also leading contributors to crime.

- **Water shortages were also top of mind among focus group participants.** With Lake Mead drying up, voters questioned what the future will bring in terms of water supply, and a few participants wondered if this is a sign it is time to get out of Nevada.
- **Voters considered crime more of a problem in the state and cities at large than in their own communities.** A significant majority of voters across different groups considered crime to be a crisis or a major problem for the state (68%) and larger cities (75%). Only four-in-ten (39%) voters said the same of crime in their local communities. Republicans (45%) and Hispanic voters (46%) were more likely to see crime in their local communities as a crisis or major problem than voters overall. Homelessness, human trafficking, and property crimes were top crime concerns. While gun violence was a lower tier crime concern, the 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas was personal to some of our focus group participants.
- **Across party lines, a public safety agenda included fully funding the police and addressing homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health challenges, which voters linked to crime.** Nearly three-quarters of Nevada voters (72%) thought fully funding police and 81% said addressing societal causes of crime will make Nevada safer. While majorities across parties supported both, Republican expressed more intense support for funding police, while Democrats more intensely supported addressing societal causes of crime.
- **The AG and the Office of the Nevada Attorney General was an unknown entity to many.** Less than a third (27%) of Nevada voters could ID Attorney General Aaron Ford, and those who had an opinion about the Office of the Attorney General (50%) were split in their views (25% fav/24% unfav). Democrats and Hispanic voters were somewhat more favorable toward AG Aaron Ford and the Office of the Attorney General. In focus groups, participants wanted an attorney general to embody a wide range of traits—such as having integrity, being impartial, working across party lines, being an enforcer, following through on their word, being fair and honest, having a law degree, and “*talking to real people – rich and poor.*”
- **Human trafficking, election oversight, government waste and fraud as well as enforcing Nevada’s existing laws were top priorities voters wanted the Attorney General to investigate or take action on.** Democrats, Hispanic voters and women also wanted to prioritize gun violence, while addressing illegal immigration was a top priority for Republicans. Furthermore, housing costs were especially important to Hispanic voters and women, and abortion access was a priority for Democrats.

Election integrity meant different things to different voters and there was an interest in both accessibility and accountability when it comes to election management and voting rights. In focus groups, participants generally trusted election outcomes and believed voting should be made accessible to those that are qualified to vote. Most participants

were proponents of ID requirements for voting; however, questioning the results of the 2020 election goes too far.

About the Nevada Electorate

| Party ID | | Ideology | | Race/Ethnicity | |
|-------------|-----|--------------|-----|----------------|-----|
| Democrat | 32% | Liberal | 24% | White | 59% |
| Independent | 43% | Moderate | 36% | Hispanic | 18% |
| Republican | 25% | Conservative | 35% | Black | 9% |
| | | | | AAPI | 10% |

New Mexico

- A majority of voters were pessimistic about the direction of New Mexico in September 2022.** Nearly every group, except for Democrats, believed New Mexico was headed in the wrong direction. Republicans were overwhelmingly pessimistic.
- Economic factors and crime (which were seen as intertwined) were at the forefront of voters' minds.** In focus groups, voters felt strained by economic pressures and were frustrated with the state's low ranking on economic, education and health measures. As one white suburban voter explained: *"I'm discouraged about New Mexico because just a couple of weeks ago there was a news article that said New Mexico dropped to fiftieth in the nation as far as child well-being that's based on education and poverty and other things."* Participants shared vivid, varied concerns about crime. Crime was not just a perception of a threat, but a personal experience of home or car break-ins, and seeing homelessness, drug abuse, DUIs, and gangs in their own communities. One Hispanic participant explained she hires a babysitter to watch her children because she is wary of taking them to the grocery store. Another Hispanic voter explained: *"when people don't have the things they need, even at the most basic level, they are going to commit crimes to get it."*
- The New Mexico criminal justice system is damaged in the eyes of voters and culpable for the rise in crime.** Nearly three-quarters of voters (73%) felt that the state's criminal justice system was doing a not so good or poor job at addressing crime and a similar number (76%) believe the system is in need of a complete overhaul or a major change. The lack of accountability in the criminal justice system (50%) was also seen as the issue contributing most to crime, followed by substance abuse (35%) and economic factors such as unemployment, inflation and wealth disparities (29%).
- Crimes were viewed as both over-prosecuted and under-prosecuted.** Participants in focus groups saw the criminal justice system as having the wrong priorities. Small crimes were over prosecuted, while domestic abusers or people with multiple infractions did not receive proper justice. Some participants said the root causes of crimes are overlooked in the criminal justice system and more needs to be done in terms of mental health counseling and getting people struggling with addiction into rehab programs.

- **Law enforcement was viewed most positively, but voters identified challenges.** Overall, a majority felt positively about the job their local police department (58%) and the county sheriff (55%) are doing on crime and safety. However, voters in Albuquerque gave the police in their area more mixed ratings (49% positive/47% negative). In focus groups, participants saw the police as overwhelmed and not responsive, though they had mixed opinions on what is to blame for this situation. Some blamed the wrong priorities, lack of resources, or staff shortages.
- **For voters, a public safety agenda included funding the police and addressing societal causes of crime.** Voters said making New Mexico safer included both fully funding the police (77%) and addressing societal causes of crime (83%). Majorities across parties supported these proposals, with Republicans more strongly supporting police funding and Democrats showing stronger support for addressing the societal causes of crime.
- **When Hector Balderas was Attorney General, he was moderately well known, but knowledge about him and his role was limited.** Attorney General Hector Balderas was moderately known. Among the 49% of voters who knew him, opinions were net favorable (28% fav/22% unfav). More voters had an opinion about the Office of the Attorney General (61%) with a net favorable rating of +5 (33% fav/28% unfav). Overall, Democrats and Hispanic voters had a more favorable opinion of both Balderas and the Office of the Attorney General. One white suburban focus group participant said, *“I’m familiar with who he is. I could give you a couple of facts, but other than that I don’t have much of an opinion, because I don’t really follow his decisions or policy as much.”*
- **Human trafficking, a topic with which focus group participants were very familiar, was one that clearly fell in the wheelhouse of the AG’s office.** More than three-quarters of voters saw human trafficking as a very important issue for the Attorney General should investigate or take action on. In focus groups, participants explained New Mexico’s border location makes the state a target for human and drug trafficking. Several participants had personal experiences with loved ones being victims of trafficking or volunteering to help victims. *“There’s so much money in trafficking,”* one participant explained. *“It’s a little close to home because I’ve lost family members, and we don’t know what happened to them,”* said another.
- **Government waste and fraud, enforcement of New Mexico’s existing laws, opioids, and reducing gun violence were also top tier priorities.** Aside from these issues, Democrats also prioritize abortion access, but most in the focus groups expressed relief that abortion does not feel threatened in New Mexico. Republicans wanted illegal immigration tackled and more scrutiny of elections. Focus group participants largely did not question the validity of election results but did desire greater accountability and felt that having an ID to vote is reasonable, rather than a burden.

| Party ID | |
|-------------|-----|
| Democrat | 35% |
| Independent | 36% |
| Republican | 28% |

| Ideology | |
|--------------|-----|
| Liberal | 26% |
| Moderate | 32% |
| Conservative | 36% |

| Race/Ethnicity | |
|----------------|-----|
| White | 51% |
| Hispanic | 36% |
| Black | 3% |
| Native Amer. | 7% |

Texas

- **A majority were pessimistic about the direction of Texas in September 2022.** Nearly every group, except for Republicans, believed Texas was headed in the wrong direction. Democrats and voters of color were most pessimistic.
- **Texans were frustrated with the hyper-partisan political environment distracting the state’s leaders from working toward solutions on the issues they care about.** Voters were highly aware of changes to state laws on abortion and said the Governor and Texas legislature have gone too far. Voters said the focus on abortion is misguided and elected leaders were “*reverting us back to the old days.*” White suburban focus group participants specifically disagreed with attempts to ban books and would rather see their leaders do more to address school safety. Participants believed the Governor and Attorney General were too focused on culture wars and making huge issues out of small or non-existent problems, while other problems go by the wayside.

Focus group participants would much rather see their leaders focus on inflation, immigration, infrastructure, affordable housing, and gun violence. Texans were concerned about the cost of living going up and illegal immigration being out of control and straining state and local government resources. The pace of development was also a concern for some as more people move to Texas from other states and strain the local infrastructure. Several participants said they have personal experiences with mass shootings and were fearful for their children’s safety in school.

- **Voters viewed AG Paxton and the Office of the Texas Attorney General as partisan and would prefer the office to be less political.** At the time of this survey, Texan voters were split on their opinions of Ken Paxton (32% fav/35% unfav) and the Office of the Attorney General (40% fav/38% unfav). Republicans and white voters were more likely to have a favorable opinion of Paxton and the Office of the Attorney General, while Democrats, independents and voters of color had a negative opinion of both. Participants in focus groups who knew of Paxton recalled negative information about ongoing investigations and desired an attorney general who is honest, fair, unbiased, not partisan, and has integrity. Some participants wanted more of a focus on issues central to Texas and less national grandstanding or suing the federal government or other states.

- **Voters agreed human trafficking, mass shootings, and government waste and fraud were priority areas for the attorney general.** Democrats also prioritized abortion access and discrimination, and Republicans prioritized election integrity, illegal immigration, and enforcing Texas' existing laws. Although corporate price gouging was not a top concern for voters in the state, some participants in focus groups specifically mentioned wanting the Attorney General to hold electric companies accountable. And even though election integrity was a priority, few participants in focus groups believed claims of widespread voter fraud or report difficulty voting in Texas. As one white suburban voter explained: *"In Chicago or in Detroit or in Baltimore are there instances where you know tens of thousands of ballots are being gathered up and pushed through the machines? Certainly possible. But personally, I'm not concerned about that happening in Texas."*
- **Voters considered crime more of a problem in the state or cities at large than in their communities.** Seven-in-ten voters considered crime to be an immediate crisis or major problem in Texas (70%) and the state's larger cities (72%), while only a third (35%) saw crime as a major problem or crisis in their local communities. Hispanic and urban voters were somewhat more likely to see crime as a problem in their communities. For Texans, gun violence, human trafficking, and drugs were the most prevalent crime concerns.
- **Economic factors and a lack of accountability in the criminal justice system were seen as the two issues most contributing to crime in Texas.** Economic factors as a cause of crime bridged partisanship, but there were differences on other leading factors by party. Democrats also blamed loose gun laws, and independents cited the lack of mental health counseling and accountability in the criminal justice system. Republicans shared the concern about the criminal justice system with independents and also identified substance abuse as a leading cause of crime.
- **Voters expressed more concern about the criminal justice system than the police when it comes to public safety.** Texans gave police highly positive ratings on keeping them safe (77% positive/20% negative). Focus group participants described mostly positive interactions with police, but admitted they are overwhelmed and underfunded. On the other hand, the Texas criminal justice system received negative ratings (42% positive, 53% negative) and was seen as not holding criminals accountable for their crimes.
- **Voters wanted a public safety agenda that includes funding the police and addressing the societal causes of crime.** Both initiatives had a high level of agreement across partisanship that they will make Texas safer. Eight-in-ten voters wanted police fully funded (78%), including majorities of Democrats (67%), independents (73%), and Republicans (93%). At the same time, 82% wanted societal causes of crime such as mental health challenges, drug addiction, and lack of after school or jobs programs addressed, again including majorities of Democrats (90%), independents (82%), and Republicans (78%).

About the Texas Electorate

| Party ID | |
|-------------|-----|
| Democrat | 25% |
| Independent | 40% |
| Republican | 33% |

| Ideology | |
|--------------|-----|
| Liberal | 19% |
| Moderate | 34% |
| Conservative | 42% |

| Race/Ethnicity | |
|----------------|-----|
| White | 54% |
| Hispanic | 26% |
| Black | 12% |
| AAPI | 3% |

4) Next Steps

The 2022 Southwestern Research Project showed that voters across the Southwest felt pessimistic about their states, and crime—broadly defined—seemingly drove those views. However, concerns about crime contained multitudes, like worries about the criminal justice system holding people accountable, untreated addiction and mental illness, and a surprisingly prevalent concern about human trafficking. Voters in both focus groups and surveys did not yearn exclusively for a blunt “get tough” approach to crime, but also wanted a focus on social investments and support.

Clearly, the offices of the attorney general in each state play a large role in tackling these issues. Voters may not know much about the office, but they know they prioritized having an official not distracted by election denialism or political grandstanding. (Only Ken Paxton was well-defined, and even in Fall 2022 this was not in a positive way.) Despite eschewing politics, voters generally did want to see abortion rights protected in their state.

The Southwestern Research Project shows several opportunities for further research that would build upon the 2022 learnings:

1. First, the 2022 Southwestern Research Project showed that while there are obvious regional trends when it comes to voter perceptions of state attorneys general and certain issue areas, there were also clear differences across states. For example, voters across all 5 southwest states prioritized human trafficking as the most important issue for their state attorney general to address, but environmental issues were top of mind for Colorado voters in a manner not seen in Arizona, New Mexico or Texas, while voters in Nevada showed concern about water shortages but not other aspects of protecting the environment. **Given these state-level differences in voter opinions, state-level research in other regions of the U.S. should be prioritized – potentially the Rust Belt region, the Mountain states in the upper Northwest, or states in the South.** It is not enough to simply rely on national-level data to guide issue education and advocacy, as voter perceptions of important AG issues such as policing and crime definitely vary from state-to-state.
2. Second, the 2022 Southwestern Research Project clearly showed the differences in opinion between white voters and communities of color (with a specific area of focus on Hispanic voters in our Southwest project) when it comes to issue areas addressed by state attorneys general. As one example from our 2022 project, our focus groups and poll oversamples of Hispanic voters allowed us to observe that Hispanic voters typically have more personal experiences of economic distress and are more economically sensitive to housing issues than white voters. The issue areas that Hispanic voters wanted their state attorney general to prioritize also differed from those picked by white voters. For example, in Arizona, while the top priority for both white and Hispanic voters was human trafficking, the second top priority for white voters was cracking down on opioid manufacturers and distributors, while the second top priority for Hispanic voters was addressing mass shootings. **Future research should continue deep diving into communities of color, with the exact communities dependent on the voter composition of each state—for example, focus on the Native population in Montana, versus a focus on Black and Asian-American voters in Georgia.**
3. Finally, there are important research questions left to answer when it comes to voter perceptions of criminal justice reform. **A majority of voters in each of the Southwest**

states believed that their state’s criminal justice system needs major changes or a complete overhaul, but the research did not dig deeper into what reforms voters find imperative. As demonstrated by PSLC’s policy work, a variety of initiatives can fall under the umbrella of criminal justice reform, and more research is needed to understand which reform issues are most important to the voters of each state. **If possible, the Southwestern Research Project should launch a second project focused on topics of criminal justice reform.**

The 2022 Southwestern Research Project made important strides in understanding voter perceptions of state attorney general work. However, as with any research project, one set of answers leads to another set of questions. Expanding this research model to other states, other communities of color, and other issue areas under the state attorney general umbrella of work in the future will provide greater clarity about the priorities of voters and their understanding of the role of the state attorney general.