

Regional Issue Saliency in Texas

An overview for 2023–2024

Dr. Francisco A. Castellanos-Sosa ^A

Texas Census Institute, Senior Research Associate

August 2023 | RB23–001

Keywords:

Texas, Regions, Salient Issues, Policy Advocacy, Voters Perception

Our Contribution

There is no consensus on the essential topics governments, businesses, advocacy groups, and nonprofits should focus on to improve people's well-being. To address this gap, and to learn more about what this looks like at a regional level for Texas, we examined three relevant sources of salient issues for Texans and explored the regional connections of one of them.

Main Findings

- Infrastructure, Health, and Public Safety are the most salient issues in Texas.
- Infrastructure-Health, Infrastructure-Public Safety, and Health-Public Safety are the combinations of salient issues most common within Texas regions.
- Infrastructure and Public Safety could impact more than 90% of Texas' GDP, Employment, and Population.
- Health, Education, and Housing plausibly impact 60% of the state economy, labor force, and society.

Introduction

Identifying salient issues is critical for policymakers, political parties, advocacy groups, and business

leaders.^{1–4} As an example, people often vote for the party that emphasizes campaign support on issues the voter perceives as most salient.

To inform this issue, this work's contribution is twofold. First, it explores the connectedness of Texas' salient issues within twelve regions to identify common pairs (connections) and potential systemic issues. The regions—Alamo, Capital, Central Texas, Gulf Coast, High Plains, Metroplex, Northwest, South Texas, Southeast, Upper East, Upper Rio Grande, and West Texas—are created by the Texas Comptroller (see more details at comptroller.texas.gov). Second, it summarizes different sources of the most important topics for Texans in 2022–2023.

Data and Methodology

The data for this brief has been gathered from three sources: Allyn Media, Texas 2036, and The Texas Politics Project.^{5–7}

The data from Allyn Media is an internet-based report created in collaboration with the Texas Census Institute. It contains the latest and most relevant socioeconomic trends in the 12 state regions, classified into 7 salient issues (Economic Development, Education, Environment, Health, Housing, Infrastructure, and Public Safety). Given the regional differences across Texas, these seven topics are not salient in all the regions. Some topics appear in some regions but not in others.

In addition to identifying the most salient issues across the state and regions, a regional perspective allows us to observe the pairs of topics connected the most within sub-state geographies. These regional connections permit us to measure their likely impact on relevant socioeconomic outcomes, such as Population, Employment, and Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The data from Texas 2036 was obtained from their Strategic Framework for Texas, published in November 2022. The data classifications Texas 2036 provides are the outcome of reviewing more than 150 indicators to measure the progress of Texas, of those contained in their Texas 2036 Data Lab. For the purposes of this report, the data from Texas 2036 is presented and contrasted with the salient issues from the other sources.

On the other hand, the Texas Politics Project is part of the College of Liberal Arts of The University of Texas at Austin. In collaboration with the Texas Tribune, they conduct three to four statewide public opinion polls to assess the views of registered voters on upcoming elections, public policy, and attitudes toward politics, politicians, and government.

This brief presents the results of two questions from two different polls of the Texas Politics Project. The first question comes from their October 2022 poll, asking 883 likely voters, with a margin of error of +/-3.30%: *Which of the following issues is most important to your vote in the 2022 election?* The second question of interest is from their June 2023 poll, asking 1,547 Texas registered voters (and matched down to 1,200 to obtain a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education) with a margin of error of +/-3.32%: *What would you say is the most important problem facing the State of Texas today?*

Results

Regional approach

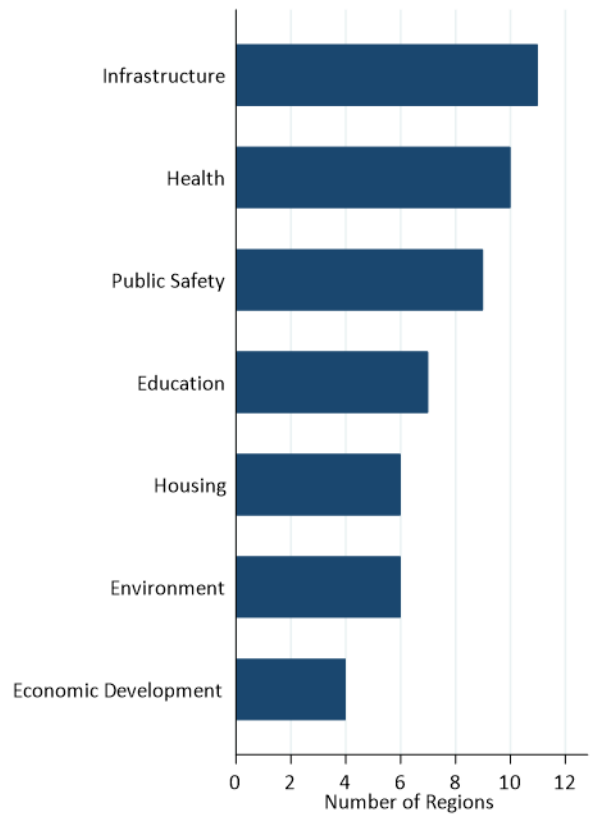
Infrastructure, Health, Public Safety, and Education are the most salient issues across Texas regions, with 11, 10, 9, and 7 appearances (see Figure 1). On the other hand, Housing, Environment, and Economic Development appear in 6, 6, and 4 regions, respectively.

These issues might impact Texas greatly regarding Population, Employment, and Gross Domestic Product (see Table 1). For instance, Infrastructure appears in eleven of twelve regions, impacting 91.7% of the state population, 93.2% of state employment, and 94.7% of the state GDP. Regarding Health, the regions in which it appears impact 64.1% of state population, 60.5% of state employment, and 59.2% of state GDP. Similarly, Public Safety might impact 92.2% of the population, 92.4% of employment, and 91.0% of GDP in Texas. Although being a salient issue in seven of the twelve regions, Education presents the lowest impact on population (34.7%), employment (37.7%), and GDP (38.3%) at the state level.

To analyze the connectedness of salient issues within and across regions, we first identify every pair of salient issues within regions and study how often these pairs appear in other regions. The seven issues from Allyn Media data allow for a maximum of 21 unique pairs

(connections) of issues. These pairs can independently appear in the 12 regions. Then, the case for when all topics are salient in all regions contains 252 total connections. The data from Allyn Media find all possible 21 unique pairs with 94 connections, suggesting an average of 8 connections per region.

Figure 1
Salient Issues Appearances across Texas Regions.



Note: The maximum number of appearances is twelve.

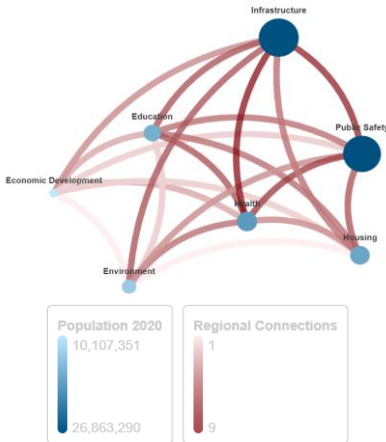
Figure 2 shows the 21 pairs of salient issues and their intensity across regions. The pairs are observed through the edges and salient issues through nodes (or circles). The color of the nodes indicates the maximum potential impact on the population that each issue might impose in the regions in which the issue appeared as salient. The size of the nodes indicates the potential impact in terms of the share of the state GDP contained in the regions in which the issue is salient. On the other hand, the color of the edges (curves) indicates the number of regions in which each connection appeared.

Table 1
Potential Impact of Texas Salient Issues on main variables.

Variable	Population	Employment	GDP (USD Billions)
Economic Dev.	10,107,351 34.7%	4,848,179 37.7%	687.2 38.3%
Education	16,432,349 56.4%	7,277,525 56.6%	960.2 53.8%
Environment	13,263,127 45.5%	5,763,327 44.8%	862.8 48.6%
Health	18,693,833 64.1%	7,771,183 60.5%	1,050.1 59.2%
Housing	17,423,287 59.8%	7,849,751 61.1%	1,033.7 57.9%
Infrastructure	26,736,813 91.7%	11,971,182 93.2%	1,687.9 94.7%
Public Safety	26,863,290 92.2%	11,870,256 92.4%	1,622.0 91.0%

Note: Data is used as presented by the Texas Comptroller's 2022 Regional Reports.⁸ Main sources are the 2020 Census, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Figure 2
Regional Connectedness of Salient Issues in Texas.



Note: A darker edge indicates a higher number of regional connections. A darker node indicates a higher potential impacted population. A bigger node indicates a higher GDP share contained in the regions in which the issue is salient.

As expected from the previous figures and tables, the pairs of salient issues that appear in more regions are those formed by Infrastructure, Health, and Public Safety. In particular, Infrastructure-Health is the pair of salient issues appearing the most; in nine of the twelve

regions. Followed by Infrastructure-Public Safety in eight regions and Health-Public Safety in seven regions.

Infrastructure, Security, and Economic Development are the salient issues more paired with others, with 6, 6, and 5 pairs, respectively. This triplet of salient issues contains 68 of the 94 connections (72.3%).

Classical approach

Texas 2036 considers six policy advocacy areas: Education and Workforce, Health Care, Infrastructure, Natural Resources, Justice and Safety, and Government Performance. Furthermore, four are considered Top Policy Opportunities for the 2023 Legislative Agenda: Education and Workforce, Health Care, Infrastructure, and Government Performance. Three of these four policy advocacy areas coincide with the information provided by Allyn Media. Suggesting that Education, Health, and Infrastructure are among Texas's most important salient issues.

Using an opinion-based approach, the Texas Politics Project, in its October 2022 poll, identified the following issues as the most important for those likely voters for the 2022 election.

- Border Security and Immigration (32%)
- The State Economy (14%)
- Abortion (13%)
- Gun Violence (9%)
- Environment / Climate Change (6%)
- Health Care (5%)
- Voting and Elections (5%)
- Electric Grid (4%)
- Public Safety (4%)
- Property Taxes (3%)
- Public Education (2%)

Similarly, its statewide survey from June 2023 identified the following problems as the most important for Texans.

- Border Security and Immigration (33%)
- Inflation / Rising Prices and Economy (13%)
- Gun Control / Gun Violence (10%)
- Political Corruption / Leadership (10%)
- Abortion (4%)
- Education (4%)

As noted by their latest polling exercises, the Texas Politics Project suggests that about a third of the Texas voting-age population is concerned about Border Security and Immigration. Similarly, Texans said in both polls that Economy-related and Gun-related issues are some of the most relevant problems in the state. Both Border Security and Immigration and Gun Violence problems coincide with Public Safety as the main salient issue, as found by Allyn Media.

Concluding Remarks

Understanding salient issues across different sources clearly signals what is critical for Texans: Infrastructure, Health, Public Safety, and Education.

Investing in and promoting Infrastructure and Public Safety policies could potentially impact more than 90% of Texas' GDP, Employment, and Population. Similarly, policies on Health and Housing have a plausible impact on approximately 60% of the state economy, labor force, and society.

It is well known that higher government investment in one sector would reduce investment in another. However, a higher investment could sometimes arise without significant backlashes. For instance, via industrial spillovers. When governments strategically invest in a roaring industry, private investment could make a fine duplet in the same and related industries.

Second, the state could obtain more resources from federal programs by counting people in Texas accurately instead of allowing an undercount of 1.92% of its population. Approximately half-million people are not being counted, and "...Texas will lose over \$19 billion in federal funding and 1 U.S. House Seat due to census undercount [between 2022 and 2031]"^{9,10} This second alternative is a viable way to increase public investment for Texas people's welfare without having a direct pullback in another local sector.

^A Castellanos-Sosa (Corresponding Author): Texas Census Institute, francisco@texascensus.org.

Acknowledgments: The authors appreciate the insightful support provided by Lloyd Potter, Mandi Kimball, Andrew Reamer, Misty Rueda, Wynn Rosser, Emily Bhandari, and Chris Wallace.

References

1. Costello, R., Toshkov, D., Bos, B. & Krouwel, A. Congruence between voters and parties: The role of party-level issue salience. *Eur. J. Polit. Res.* **60**, 92–113 (2021).
2. Bélanger, É. & Meguid, B. M. Issue salience, issue ownership, and issue-based vote choice. *Elect. Stud.* **27**, 477–491 (2008).
3. Greene, Z. & Jensen, C. B. Ruling divided: Disagreement, issue salience, and portfolio allocation. *Party Polit.* **24**, 640–651 (2018).
4. Franko, W. W. & Witko, C. Class, Policy Attitudes, and U.S. Presidential Voting in the Post-Industrial Era: The Importance of Issue Salience. *Polit. Res. Q.* **0**, 1–17 (2022).
5. Allyn Media. Regional Issue Saliency. (2023).
6. Texas 2036. *A Strategic Framework for Texas*. <https://texas2036.org/> (2022).
7. The Texas Politics Project at The University of Texas at Austin. Polling Data Archive. <https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/polling-data-archive> (2023).
8. Texas Comptroller. Regional Reports. <https://comptroller.texas.gov/economy/economic-data/regions/2022/> (2022).
9. Castellanos-Sosa, F. A. *Undercounting and Overcounting Population in Texas Counties: A Determinants-Side Approach and its Application to Texas*. (2022).
10. Henton, L. Texas Will Lose Over \$19 Billion In Federal Funding And 1 US House Seat Due To Census Undercount. *Texas A&M Today: Culture & Society* <https://today.tamu.edu/2022/05/31/texas-will-lose-over-19-billion-in-federal-funding-and-1-us-house-seat-due-to-census-undercount/> (2022).