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UMass Amherst/WCVB Poll Finds Massachusetts Residents Support ‘Right to Shelter’ Law, State Policies Addressing Immigration

The new poll also finds tepid support for pro-Palestinian protests that have taken place on college campuses and the causes for which the protestors have lobbied

Topline results and crosstabs for the poll can be found at www.umass.edu/poll

AMHERST, Mass. – In spite of the cost, a new University of Massachusetts Amherst/WCVB Poll has found that more than six in 10 Massachusetts residents continue to support the “right to shelter” law, though respondents support limiting the capacity of the state shelter system and the maximum time during which individuals can reside in them.

The survey on various issues facing the Bay State, which included questions regarding the pro-Palestinian protests that have taken place on college campuses since the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks and the subsequent war in Gaza, was conducted May 17-30.

“With the state poised to spend $1 billion this year on its one-of-a-kind shelter system in support of more than 23,000 people – including homeless families with children, pregnant woman, and migrant families – and little relief offered by the federal government to address what many have deemed the state’s migrant crisis, many would have assumed that the tides of public opinion would have significantly shifted since last year with a marked number of residents of the Bay State expressing opposition to the ‘right to shelter,’” says Tatishe Nteta, provost professor of political science at UMass Amherst and director of the poll. “Yet, we find little evidence that this is the case, with support only dipping from 63% to 61% since last October.”

Nteta explains that, “While expensive, the right to shelter remains a popular policy in the commonwealth with majorities of demographic and political groups – with the exception of conservatives, Republicans and Trump voters – expressing majoritarian or near majoritarian support for the policy. It remains to be seen whether this public support wanes in the coming months as immigration becomes the centerpiece of the 2024 presidential election and the state continues to grapple with a growth in the number of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, but for now the policy remains a popular solution to the growth in migrant families in the commonwealth.”
The survey also found support among respondents for measures that could safeguard the continuation of the shelter policy, especially in light of increased immigration to the Bay State.

“As the number of migrants coming to the state continues to grow and the cost of ensuring a ‘right to shelter’ skyrockets, Gov. Maura Healey and the Massachusetts State Legislature have recently responded by passing legislation that addresses the growing concerns about the state’s commitment to providing food and shelter to these vulnerable communities,” Nteta says. “Our results suggest that these policies are popular among the public, with a plurality (39%) supporting limiting the shelter system to 7,500 families, half of residents (50%) supporting a limit on the time in the shelter system, and close to six in ten (57%) in favor of the provision of assistance in finding migrants, asylum seekers and refugees work permits. It is unclear whether these policies will achieve the goals of slowing down the number of migrants coming to the state and lowering costs of the shelter system, but with these policies the state’s political leaders have responded to the public’s call to address the problem of immigration to the Bay State.”

In assigning responsibility for the migration crisis affecting Massachusetts, Nteta says that the poll clearly shows respondents point their fingers south to the nation’s capital.

“The current session of the U.S. Congress, rife with partisan and ideological conflict, is poised to be the least productive in modern history,” Nteta says. “So, it comes as no surprise that efforts to address the influx of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees coming to the United States and the increasing strain that these newcomers have placed on localities and states have repeatedly failed in the Congress. Residents of the commonwealth are paying attention and are holding Congressional Republicans, the party in control of the U.S. House and the party most reticent to compromise on immigration reform, responsible for the migrant crisis in the state.”

Those saying Congressional Republicans are responsible for the deadlock on immigration have increased from 24% to 29% since the UMass Amherst/WCVP Poll surveyed the issue last October, while those blaming President Joe Biden have decreased from 29% to 27%.

“Since the beginning of the so-called migrant crisis, leaders on Beacon Hill from Senate President Karen Spilka to House Speaker Ronald Mariano to Gov. Healey have made the case that the growing number of migrant families in the commonwealth and the increasing cost of the shelter system is a reflection of a failure by federal officials – most notably the U.S. Congress and the Biden administration – to pass comprehensive immigration reform that addresses the record number of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees seeking admission to the U.S. at the Southern border,” Nteta says. “Residents in the Bay State have heard these messages loud and clear and identify Congressional Republicans and President Joe Biden as the two most responsible for the current situation in the Bay State. With little indication that Congress will take up the issue of immigration before the 2024 election and President Biden poised to announce his executive action on
immigration, in the coming months Congressional Republicans may emerge as the central culprit in the continuation of the migrant crisis.”

**College Protests and Views on Higher Education**

The new UMass Amherst/WCVB Poll also surveyed Massachusetts residents about an issue that has captured headlines since last fall – the protests on college campuses against Israel’s retaliation in Gaza for Hamas’ Oct. 7 attacks.

“It is no surprise for a state with so many universities and colleges that Massachusetts residents have been paying attention to campus protests related to the Israeli-Hamas war – 4 in 5 voters say they have read, seen or heard about the protests,” says Raymond La Raja, professor of political science at UMass Amherst and co-director of the poll.

“Roughly one-third of the poll’s respondents, 32%, support the protests on campus, while 35% oppose them and 32% did not take any position. The biggest supporters are self-identified liberals – 54% of them support the protests compared to just 21% of moderates and 15% of conservatives.”

The poll found less support for the protestors’ demands, including divestment from companies doing business with Israel and ending study abroad programs with Israeli universities.

“Commonwealth residents are divided on whether Israel should face sanctions,” La Raja says. “One-quarter of them want universities to end student study abroad programs in Israel and 29% support cutting financial ties with companies doing business versus a plurality of voters, 37%, who are opposed to both potential sanctions. The sentiments for imposing sanctions are held most strongly by self-identified liberal voters.”

“While these protests garnered widespread media attention, pluralities of Americans express opposition to these protests, oppose divestment from companies doing business with Israel and support the forcible dismantling of protest encampments located on university property (43%),” Nteta says. “The consistent opposition to this social movement is by no means a shock and is in line with the opposition that Americans have historically expressed to previous social movements such as the Civil Rights, Anti-Vietnam War, Women’s Rights, Anti-Apartheid and Black Lives Matter Movements. Over time, these historical movements were able to mobilize support from the public for the movement, their tactics and strategies, and their goals. Whether the movement against the Israeli-Hamas war will join this list of successful social movements is still left to be seen, but our results suggest that the road to majoritarian support for this movement appears long and difficult to achieve.”

The poll also asked respondents about their views of higher education in general, and the results were decidedly split.

“Massachusetts residents’ perceptions of higher education in the U.S. are quite mixed, which is interesting for a state whose economy and identity rely so much on colleges and
universities,” La Raja says. “When asked how much confidence they have in colleges and universities performing certain positive functions in society, such as helping students with careers or preparing them as citizens, a plurality – roughly 2 in 5 – will lukewarmly agree that they have ‘some’ confidence in them, but other respondents are split deeply on their confidence in U.S. higher education institutions. Regarding confidence in how they prepare students for successful careers, 37% say they have ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence, while 24% say ‘not much’ or ‘very little.’ Universities get even worse marks for confidence in how they prepare citizens for citizenship, with just 27% saying they have ‘significant’ confidence in them and 33% reporting weak confidence.”

There were two higher education-related policies that held clear majority support in the poll, however: 70% of the survey’s respondents support proposals for both tuition-free community college for Bay State residents and imposing a 2.5% annual tax on the endowments of private universities and colleges whose assets are valued over $1 billion.

**Border Tolls, Native Imagery and Physician-Assisted Death**

The UMass Amherst/WCVB poll surveyed the commonwealth’s residents about various other issues, as well.

“This past spring, Transportation Secretary Monica Tibbits-Nutt floated the idea of tolls along the Massachusetts border to increase revenue for the state’s transportation and infrastructure projects,” Nteta explains. “This idea initially went down like a lead balloon, with Gov. Healey declaring that her administration has no plans to place tolls on the state’s borders in a stunning rebuke of Tibbits-Nutt’s proposal. However, some Beacon Hill leaders, such as Senate President Karen Spilka, have publicly expressed an interest in considering this change. Unsurprisingly, in a state whose residents are concerned about rising costs, there is little support for these new tolls, with less than a quarter of residents expressing support for them. Given the lack of political support from the governor and the opposition expressed by the public, it is likely that residents and visitors to the Bay State will continue to be allowed to enter and exit the state without paying any fees.”

**Jesse Rhodes,** professor of political science at UMass Amherst and co-director of the poll, reports that the poll found tepid support for a number of policy proposals related to Native American issues.

“Massachusetts residents remain divided over the reckoning with the state’s history of mistreatment of Native Americans,” Rhodes says. “Of the policy proposals we polled – ending the use of Native American names for sports teams, changing the state’s flag and seal to remove an image that is threatening to Native Americans, and renaming Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples’ Day – none currently receives majority support. A consistent one-third of respondents oppose all these policies, and between 20-30% are in the mushy middle. Even in the most progressive state in the nation, old habits – including those that many consider racially insensitive – die hard.”

Rhodes sees a number of splits among demographic groups on these issues, though.
“Younger Massachusetts residents are much more likely than their older counterparts to support these policies that aim to address injustices against Native Americans,” he says. “This reflects a broader pattern in which Millennials and Gen-Zers are especially sensitive to matters relating to racial inequality and discrimination in American society. Because younger Americans typically represent the leading edge of cultural change, we can expect that public opinion on these issues may come to more closely resemble that of younger Massachusetts residents in the coming years.”

Rhodes adds, “There is a huge education divide in support for these policies, as well. While only one-fifth to one-third of Massachusetts residents with a high school degree or less support these initiatives, more than half of those with post-graduate degrees do. This tracks a broader education-based divide in our national politics in which those with higher levels of education tend to have much more progressive views on social issues than those with lower levels of education. In Massachusetts, like the United States as a whole, education has become associated with very different worldviews and cultural priorities.”

Rhodes says that the one policy that stands a greater likelihood of coming to pass is the renaming of the October holiday.

“Renaming Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples’ Day is a policy that may gain majority support in the not-too-distant future,” he says. “About 44% of Massachusetts residents currently support the idea, and another 22% are unsure. Given the speed of recent attitude changes on many social and cultural issues, it wouldn’t surprise me if a majority of the public came to support this idea in the coming years.”

Nteta sees opinions evolving on one other issue the poll surveyed, as well – physician-assisted death.

“In 2012, a question that would have legalized physician assisted death narrowly lost at the ballot box,” he says. “Now 12 years later, close to 7 in 10 residents are in favor of providing terminally ill patients with only a few months to live to make the decision to terminate their life. With the State Legislature currently contemplating legislation that would provide this right to residents of the Bay State, it may only be a matter of time before Massachusetts becomes the 11th state to legalize physician-assisted death.”

Methodology

This University of Massachusetts Amherst/WCVB Poll of 700 Massachusetts respondents was conducted by YouGov May 17-30. YouGov interviewed 741 total respondents who were then matched down to a sample of 700 to produce the final dataset. The sampling frame is a politically representative “modeled frame” of Massachusetts adults, based upon the American Community Survey (ACS) public use microdata file, public voter file records, the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and
Registration supplements, the 2020 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll, and the 2020 CES surveys, including demographics and 2020 presidential vote.

The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined, and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education and own or rent. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles. The weights were then post-stratified on 2020 presidential vote choice as well as stratifications of gender, age (4-categories), race (4-categories) and education (4-categories) to produce the final weight.

The margin of error of this poll is 4.4%.

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