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Never Solved, Only Outgrown: The Most Important Problem(s) Facing Utah

Thomas C. Terry

“The greatest and most important problems of life are all fundamentally insoluble. They can never be solved but only outgrown.” – Carl Jung

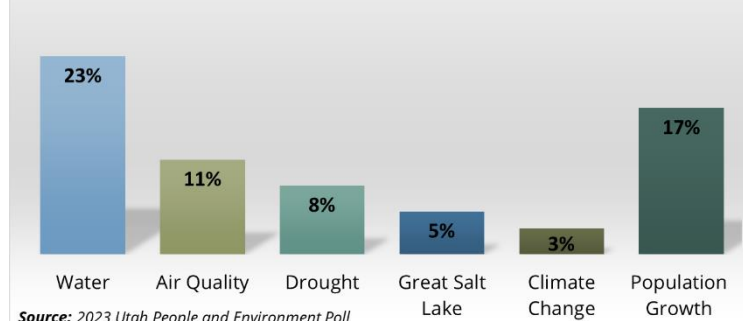
Nearly 90 percent of Utahans surveyed identified the most important problem (MIP) facing the state as either the environment (50%) or population growth and development (40%) in the inaugural Utah People and Environment Poll (UPEP) conducted in March-May 2023 (see Figure 1). Eleven percent of Utahns identified air quality issues – including pollution and its negative impacts – as the single largest component within the MIP environment and climate change category. According to the results of the poll, water and air pollution, affordable housing, pressure on the environment and threats to habitat boil down to “too many . . . damn people” as one respondent quipped and “uncontrolled growth,” according to another. More than half of respondents who identified water as the state’s MIP used terms such as water resources, use of water, the drying up of the Great Salt Lake, declining snowpack, and “water in the wrong place.”

Population growth and overpopulation worried 17% of Utahns polled, with 7% identifying affordable housing as an MIP. Too many already available houses combined with overbuilding

KEY FINDINGS

- In a 2023 statewide survey, 50% of Utah respondents consider issues related to the environment and climate change as the most important problem (MIP) facing the state. Eleven percent single out air pollution and air quality specifically as the largest component of this category.
- 40% believe issues involving population growth and development is the MIP, and relatedly, seven percent identified affordable housing as their top concern.
- Eight percent of Utahns cite government, politics, or high taxes as the state’s MIP.

Figure 1 Utahns' Perceived Most Important Problem





developments were the MIP for four percent of those polled. Conversely, three percent of respondents believed housing was limited, without identifying a particular cause.

Eight percent of Utahns pointed to government, politics, and high taxes as the MIP facing the state. This was divided into two categories: right wing politics, polarization, cronyism, corruption, and one-party rule (4.5%) and too much government and high taxes (3.5%). Intolerance, unkindness, woke attitudes, and social media effects bothered three percent of Utahns and bigotry and protection or violation of LGBTQ+ and transgender rights two percent.¹

Polling People on the Environment

The MIP question was the opening question and asked: “Broadly speaking, what do you think is the most important problem facing Utah today?” A clarification was added: “While this survey is about environmental issues, please feel free to note any type of issue.” Just under a fifth of respondents (18%) gave more than one response, which were also coded, yielding 443 distinct answers. Two coders independently examined all the survey data and an average intercoder reliability measurement of over 95% was achieved.

Gallup Polling originated the “most important question” nationally in the mid-1930s, and it is, arguably, the most valuable longitudinal public opinion research tool available to scholars. For over nine decades, between 1,000 and 1,600 Americans older than 18 nationwide have been asked essentially the same question almost every year (and usually multiple times annually as at present): “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?”² Gallup conducted seven national MIP polls in 2023, including from April 3-25, while the USU survey was in the field. The Top Ten national-level survey responses were: government/poor leadership (18%), the economy in general (14%), high cost of living/inflation (9%), immigration (8%), guns/gun control (7%), crime/violence (6%), race relations/racism (4%), poverty/hunger/homelessness (3%), and ethics/moral/religious/family decline (3%).³ There was overlap only in the government category and even then the gap was wide: roughly 8% in Utah versus 18% nationally.

When presented with a series of issues, even if their personal choice is not listed and/or if none of the options represent their own preference, those polled still dutifully pick an option anyway. The open-ended MIP question requires respondents to independently provide and identify their personal evaluation of what the most important issue is facing the nation at any given time without suggestions, probes, prompts, or a pre-selected list of possible answers. The answer is entirely up to the respondent.



Conclusion

Between 2010 and 2023, according to U. S. Census data, Utah's population increased by 642,321 or 23%. That works out to 45,880 annually, a 1.7% annual rate. In 2010, the state's population was 2,775,413, while it was 3,417,734 in 2023.⁴ From 2010 to 2020, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures, Utah was the fastest growing state in the country at 18% overall. This was over a full percentage point above second place Idaho and nearly 2.5 percentage points above Texas.⁵ The state is the second driest in the U.S. with about 13 inches of precipitation annually and home to a large saline lake with a water level that has dropped worrisomely in recent years.⁶ The rapid population growth and pressing environmental factors may partially explain Utahns' opinions discussed in this brief. Policymakers may consider these findings – notably the importance of natural landscapes that have been shown by the [Utah Wellbeing Project](#) to have a positive association with wellbeing for residents across the state¹⁰ - when considering what topics they might devote time and resources to.

Data and Methods

In spring 2023, Utah State University (USU) faculty and students started the Utah People and Environment Poll, or UPEP, to track Utahns' perceptions on environmental issues of importance to the state to help inform policy to address environmental issues. A random sample of 3,750 households were contacted using postal mail to respond to the survey online or on paper. 441 individuals responded to the survey for a final total response rate of 12%. Weights for survey design and to adjust for age, education, and gender representation are applied. To achieve a 95% degree of confidence (i.e. validity) for the state of Utah (2.4 million adults over 18)⁷ – given widely accepted polling norms – required 402 respondents,⁸ which the poll exceeded.⁹ The poll carries a margin of error of +/- 3.5%. To access other briefs and learn more about the UPEP, please visit: <https://chass.usu.edu/sociology/canri/upep>

About CANRI

The Community and Natural Resources Institute, or [CANRI](#), produces and promotes interdisciplinary and applied social science and humanities research focused on challenges at the intersection of people and the environment in the Intermountain West.

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About the Author

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References & Endnotes

1. Few respondents selected women's reproductive rights at the state's MIP. The poll was conducted before the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson overturning Roe v. Wade*, though almost the entire decision had been leaked on May 2.
2. Gallup, Gallup News, "Methodology: How Does the Gallup Poll Social Series Work? Long-Term U.S. Trends on Social, Economic, and Political Topics," accessed online at www.gallup.com. Gallup's MIP question is part of the Gallup Public Service Survey and now involves a mix of 70% cellphone and 30% landline respondents across U.S. regions and time zones. Interviews are conducted in Spanish as necessary.
3. Gallup, Gallup News "Most Important Problem (June 2023)," accessed online.
4. "U.S. Population Trends Return to Pre-Pandemic Norms as More States Gain Population," December 19, 2023, U.S. Census Bureau, accessed online.
5. Matt Canham and Tony Semerad, "New Census Numbers are Staggering," *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 12, 2021, accessed online.
6. "Great Salt Lake," Utah Division of Water Resources (UDWR), accessed online at <https://water.utah.gov/great-salt-lake/>. UDWR also maintains a site at <https://drought.utah.gov/> that tracks drought across Utah.
7. United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts Utah," July 2023, accessed online at www.census.gov.
8. See: Michael A. Rosenblum and Mark J. van der Laan, "Confidence Intervals for the Population Mean Tailored to Small Sample Sizes, with Applications to Survey Sampling," *The International Journal of Biostatistics* 5, no. 1 (2009); and Hamed Taherdoost, "Determining Sample Size; How to Calculate Survey Sample Size," *International Journal of Economics and Management Systems* 2 (2017).
9. In a survey of the literature, scholar Duncan D. Nulty found that paper-based response rates ranged from 32.6 percent to 75 percent with most settling into the 45-56 percent range. Online response rates were in the 20 percent to 47 percent range, but mainly clustered between 39 percent and 43 percent. Duncan D. Nulty, "The Adequacy of Response Rates to Online and Paper Surveys: What Can be Done?" *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(3): June 2008), 301-314.
10. See: "Key Project Findings," accessed online at <https://www.usu.edu/utah-wellbeing-project/key-findings/>