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EDITOR'S NOTE: The results below reflect respondents in Harris County only, except the sections near the end that refer specifically to Fort Bend and Montgomery counties.

David Ruth
713-348-6327
david@rice.edu

Amy McCaig
713-348-6777
amym@rice.edu

Houston residents remain optimistic; Democratic edge grows

Kinder Houston Area Survey: Houston is rated more favorably than ever by its residents, whose spirits don't appear dampened by the oil slump.

HOUSTON – (April 25, 2016) – Even after a year of continuing low oil prices and growing layoffs in the energy industry, Houston area residents are remarkably optimistic about jobs and the future, according to Rice University's 35th annual Kinder Houston Area Survey, conducted by Rice sociologist and Kinder Institute Founding Director Stephen Klineberg. Residents also rate Houston more favorably than ever, while continuing a long-term trend toward becoming more secular and more aligned with the Democratic Party.

Quality of life and economic outlooks

Although traffic continues to be the dominant concern -- 29 percent of the respondents cited traffic congestion as the region's biggest problem -- residents are feeling better about life in the Houston area. Eighty-one percent of the respondents this year said the region is an excellent or good place to live, up from 70 percent in 2006. And 38 percent said that living conditions have been getting better over the past three or four years, compared with 37 percent in 2014 and 28 percent in 2012.

The majority of individuals surveyed -- 61 percent -- were also optimistic about their personal futures, confident that they will be better off financially in three or four years, compared with 54 percent in 2015, and 62 percent gave positive ratings to local job opportunities, down only slightly from 69 percent in 2015.

When asked how often they visit the city's expanding parks and play areas, 57 percent reported making use of these amenities at least once a month during the previous year, compared with only 44 percent in 2012. And 50 percent said they had visited a hike or bike trail at least once a month in the previous year, up from 30 percent in 2012.

Social and political issues

This year's survey found that – continuing a long-term trend – Houstonians are becoming more secular and more aligned with the Democratic Party. Residents who declare or lean Democratic now constitute 52 percent of the Harris County respondents, compared with 30 percent for Republicans. Two years ago the Democratic edge was 42 percent over the Republicans' 35 percent, but as recently as 2005 the Republicans led 37 percent compared with the Democrats' 35 percent..

On the subject of religion, 18 percent of Harris County residents stated no religious preference – the highest number since the survey began in 1982. Some 46 percent said they are Protestants and 31 percent are Catholics. As recently as 2010, 52 percent of Harris County respondents identified as Protestants and only 10 percent said they had no religion. In the 1980s, when the survey began, approximately 60 percent of Harris County residents were Protestants and only 6 percent had no religion.

Queried only three months after the November election, 60 percent of city of Houston respondents said it is very important to pass a local equal rights ordinance -- even though city voters defeated the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) by 61 to 39 percent in November 2015. Another 19 percent of survey respondents said it is "somewhat important" to pass the ordinance. Only 20 percent said it is "not very" or "not at all" important.

"HERO may have been defeated, but our survey shows strong and increasing support for gay rights," Klineberg said. More than half of the 2016 respondents -- 56 percent -- said they are in favor of homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children. Just 17 percent took that position when the question was first asked in 1991.

On the topic of abortion, 57 percent agreed that it should be legal for a woman to obtain an abortion if she wants to have one for any reason, but those who disagreed with this position were much more likely to vote their convictions. Whereas 49 percent of pro-choice respondents said they would be willing to vote for a candidate with whom they disagreed on abortion rights, this was true for only 22 percent of pro-life respondents.

According to Klineberg, the data suggest that area residents' positive evaluations of the local economy and of life in the Houston area are tempered by growing concerns about the mounting inequalities in Houston and America. The survey participants increasingly support government efforts to strengthen programs to foster economic opportunity. Two-thirds (66 percent) of the 2016 respondents said that the government should take action to reduce income differences between the rich and poor in America, up from 45 percent in 2010. The proportion calling on government to make sure that everyone who wants to work can find a job reached 76 percent in this year's survey, up from 69 percent in 2009. Forty-three percent asserted that most people who receive welfare payments are really in need of help, compared with 31 percent in 2010. And 59 percent believed that too little is being spent on improving the conditions of the poor, up from 51 percent in 2014.

Klineberg noted that even as politicians reconsider the nation's current criminal justice policies, public attitudes have been moving in the same direction. Just 27 percent of the respondents in this year's survey thought the death penalty, rather than life imprisonment, is the most appropriate punishment for first-degree murder, a drop from 39 percent in 2008. And the proportion who approve of moving away from mandatory prison sentences for nonviolent drug offenders was 64 percent in 2016, up from 43

percent in 2011.

"The survey illustrates the difference between public opinion in Harris County and statewide policy," Klineberg said. "Even as residents of Ted Cruz's hometown are becoming more secular and more Democratic, the Texas Legislature has generally taken a different approach to immigration, gay rights and abortion. It will be interesting to see how all this plays out in the years ahead."

Refugees and immigration

By 51 to 46 percent, the survey participants favored permitting 10,000 Syrian refugees to enter the U.S. as long as they pass background checks. By an even wider margin -- 64 to 32 percent -- area residents agreed that refugees who are in danger in their home countries because of their beliefs or ethnicity should be welcome in Houston. And 51 percent expressed positive feelings toward Muslims, up from 41 percent in 2010.

Seventy-nine percent of the survey participants this year said that the number of undocumented immigrants living in the Houston area is not a very serious problem, up from 50 percent who felt that way in 2010. The proportion expressing positive feelings about undocumented immigrants reached 49 percent in this year's survey, up from 31 percent in 2010. More than three-fourths agreed that illegal immigrants should be granted a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record, and 63 percent asserted that immigrants -- either with or without papers -- generally contribute more to the American economy than they take, up from 59 percent in 2014 and 45 percent in 2010.

"The surveys make it clear that, despite the negative rhetoric, the antagonism toward undocumented immigrants has actually been fading across the board," Klineberg said. "The public may well be more prepared today than in earlier years to support comprehensive immigration reform that would include a path to legalization."

Contrasting Fort Bend, Harris and Montgomery counties

A comparison of results from Fort Bend, Harris and Montgomery counties -- the three most populous counties in the Houston region -- confirmed that Fort Bend County is both the most ethnically diverse and the most highly educated of the three counties. Fort Bend County residents are almost evenly divided in their political affiliations, with 40 percent identifying as Republicans and 37 percent as Democrats. Residents of Montgomery County are far more likely to affiliate with the Republican Party, at 50 percent, while 27 percent identify as Democrats.

When asked how they would like to live in the Houston region, Harris County residents were evenly split in their preference for a smaller home in a more urbanized area within walking distance of shops and workplaces, rather than a single-family home with a big yard where they would need to drive almost everywhere. In Fort Bend County, 43 percent expressed the same preference for walkable urbanism, as did 32 percent of the Montgomery County respondents.

About the Kinder Houston Area Survey

Now in its 35th year, the Kinder Houston Area Survey is the nation's longest-running study of any metropolitan area's economy, population, life experiences, beliefs and attitudes. The 2016 survey included 808 respondents from Harris County and 401 each from Fort Bend and Montgomery counties. Social Science Research Solutions conducted the interviews by telephone -- both landline and

cellphone -- between Jan. 25 and March 3.

For more information on the survey, visit <http://kinder.rice.edu/>.

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For more information, contact Amy McCaig, senior media relations specialist at Rice, at 713-348-6777 (desk), 217-417-2901 (cell) or amym@rice.edu.

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Stephen Klineberg bio: <http://sociology.rice.edu/Content.aspx?id=122>

The 2016 Kinder Houston Area Survey report is available at <http://kinder.rice.edu/>.

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