



Politicians Not Listening to Voters

September 11, 2024

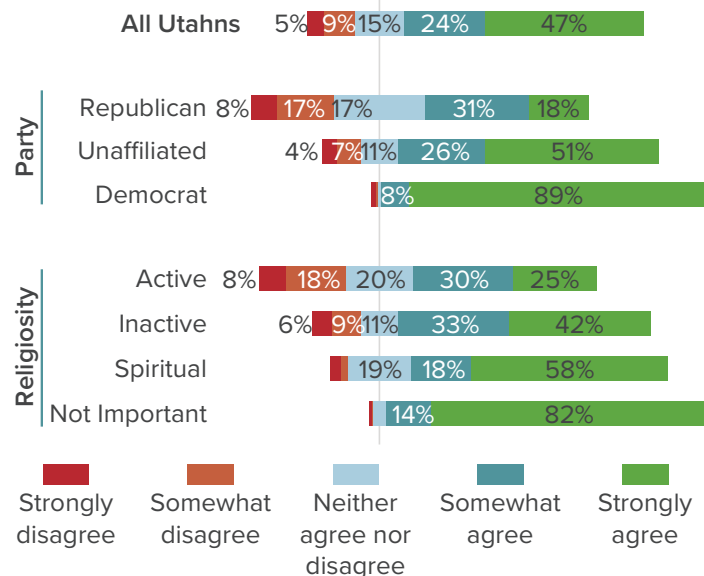
Politicians not listening to voters is a top concern for Utahns in the 2024 Utah Priorities Project.¹ In fact, four in five people nationwide do not believe that elected officials care what they think.² Even if politicians “listen” to all voters, the voters might not feel heard if those elected officials vote in ways that do not represent an individual’s views. As a result, people might believe that politicians are not listening – even if they really are.

Politicians Ignoring the Will of the People?

Responses to the open-ended survey questions focused on how elected officials favor corporations, religious organizations, the well-connected, or special interest groups. Over 70% of Utah voters agree that “Utah’s politicians are too beholden to business, religious, or other special interests and ignore the will of the people.” Democrats and politically unaffiliated populations were more likely to agree, while Republicans were less likely to accept that politicians are beholden to outside interests. Those for whom religion is unimportant were most likely to agree, while those who are actively religious were less likely to agree. (See Figure 1.)

Voters – particularly Democrats, the politically unaffiliated, and those who are less religious – think politicians ignore them.

Figure 1: “Utah’s politicians are too beholden to business, religious, or other special interests and ignore the will of the people.” by Party and Religiosity



View from a Legislator

Some people think that their elected officials “aren’t listening” if they happen to disagree – with almost anything. Because “if they just listened, surely they would see things my way!” It’s a real problem.

I listened when more than one constituent told me three years ago that we should drain the Great Salt Lake and build affordable housing there. I really did listen to the words they said!

Part of my job is to listen. For sure. But part of it is to think as well.

– Utah State Senator Todd Weiler

State Legislature Overriding Ballot Initiatives

In early 2020, before the pandemic, Utah voters clearly selected *politicians not listening to voters* as the most important issue. Several respondents to the 2020 survey expressed frustration regarding legislative changes to ballot initiatives that had passed in 2018.³ One voter described the biggest problem as “A legislature that second guesses and changes the explicit wishes of the public (medical cannabis and Medicare).”

In 2018, voters approved initiatives legalizing medical marijuana, expanding Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, and creating an independent redistricting commission at address gerrymandering.⁴ Following this, the Utah Legislature significantly altered the terms of each initiative. The Utah Legislature may have felt justified in these alterations as none of these initiatives passed by a margin of more than 54%.⁵ In addition, other legislative actions make it more difficult to get voter initiatives on the ballot and delay the implementation of successful initiatives.⁶ These changes possibly heightened voter disillusionment.

Legislative modifications to the redistricting initiative were ultimately challenged in 2024, with the Utah Su-

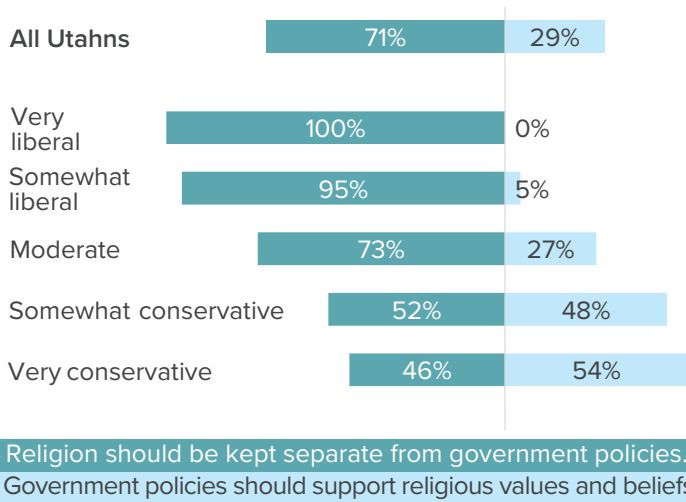
preme Court ruling that the Utah Legislature had overstepped its authority. As a response, the 2024 Utah Legislature brought itself into a special session to fashion a – perhaps controversial – constitutional amendment allowing them to modify future ballot measures.⁷ This amendment will be on the ballot for ratification by voters in November 2024.⁸ This context likely provides some explanation for the rise of *politicians not listening to voters* as a top issue facing Utah Priorities Project survey respondents.

The Role of Religion in Politics

When exploring voters’ preferred relationship between religion and politics, over 70% agreed with the statement, “Religion should be kept separate from government policies.” Less than 30% agreed with the statement, “Government policies should support religious values and beliefs.” More specifically, liberal voters tend to desire church and state separation, while about half of conservative voters see value in the state supporting religious and moral values and beliefs. (See Figure 2.)

Most voters (especially liberals) think religion should be separate from government.

Figure 2. Whether Politics should be Separate from or Support Religion, by Ideology



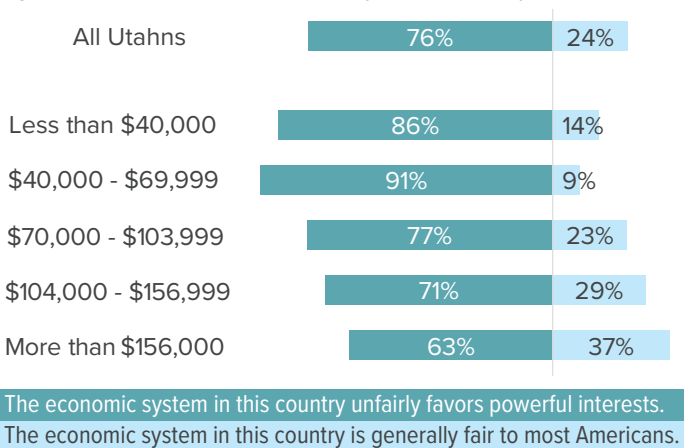
Fairness in the “System”

Fairness on a broader level may be a fundamental part of this issue. People likely want to feel that the economic system, although never equal, is at least fundamentally fair and that their voices are not diminished by corporate interests or the opinions and interests of the wealthy.

Survey results show that voters across demographic categories do not hold a great deal of faith in the fairness of our economic system. More than three-quarters agreed with the statement, “The economic system in this country unfairly favors powerful interests” rather than the statement, “The economic system in this country is generally fair to most Americans.” Similar to the response results for the question in Figure 2, more than 98% of liberal voters think the system is unfair while only 43% of conservatives do.

Voters do not think the economic system is fair; particularly lower income voters.

Figure 3. Whether the economic system is fair, by Income Quintile



Those earning more than \$156,000 have more faith in the fairness of our political system, but even they overwhelmingly believe the system is not fair. Those earning less than \$70,000 are less likely to consider the system fair. (See Figure 3.)

Widespread concern about the general issue of politicians not listening to voters may say a great deal about the nature of politicians and/or the political and economic systems in which Utahns reside. It may also reflect the perceived political dysfunction that has come to embody the relationship between political parties in America. These are realities that the Utah Foundation further discusses in a 2024 Utah Priorities Project brief focusing on political partisanship.

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This research brief was written by Research Analyst John Salevurakis with assistance by other Utah Foundation staff.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Utah Foundation, Priced Out and Fed Up: Cost of Living and Government Dysfunction are Voters' Top Issues, April 30, 2024, <https://www.utahfoundation.org/reports/priced-out-and-fed-up/>.
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