



## Government Overreach

September 17, 2024

Government overreach is a new priority in 2024 for the Utah Priorities Project. Overreach can be defined as governmental interference in ways perceived as counterproductive or in matters outside governments' defined limits at either local, state, or national levels. Government overreach may also be linked to a fundamental distrust of government and disagreement regarding what it should protect. **Three in five voters consider government to be wasteful and inefficient. On top of that, nearly three in five Utahns think it is not the government's job to protect people from themselves.**

### A Broad Category

The importance of government overreach on the Utah Priorities Project list may reflect the fact that it is an umbrella topic. It covers a diverse range of debates, such as the role of government in the administration of public lands, what is taught in schools, and the requirements for dentists to be licensed. Sometimes, the claim of government overreach merely reflects the government making a broadly disliked policy position. If the opposite policy position had been implemented, a different set of voters may have had a similar problem with the government's role in that policy – and asserted overreach.

### General Survey Responses

Most demographic groups did not vary substantially in their concern over government overreach. However, those who prioritized government overreach lower were conservative voters rather than liberal respondents and white voters rather than non-Hispanic, non-white respondents.

Open-ended survey responses were sometimes very specific. For example, some were critical of professional licensing and OSHA requirements. Others showed a broad distaste for bureaucracy, with a recommendation that businesses should be allowed to grow without government interference. More than a third of these responses were focused on the federal government.

Voters often criticized the federal government's role in public lands and education. Regarding land

management, this concern could be based on the controversy over federal control of 70% of Utah's land by federal land management agencies.<sup>1</sup> In August, the State of Utah filed a lawsuit against the federal government attempting to gain control of roughly half of the lands currently managed by a federal agency.<sup>2</sup>

One respondent noted the potential benefit of "Getting out...[from] under the control of the federal education system... It's nonsense."

Another comment seemed to focus on local issues, noting that "State government is overbearing... [forcing] its poorly conceived legislation onto local communities." This could be related to state intervention in the housing sector, which may be seen as forcing cities to build apartments. It could also relate to opposition to measures taken by the Utah State Legislature regarding ballot initiatives going back to 2018.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, in many cases, when a specific policy was mentioned in a survey response, it was an argument in favor of more regulation. An example of this was an expressed desire for more professional licensing power to restrict access to the dentistry profession by "foreign-trained" practitioners.

### Specific Survey Responses

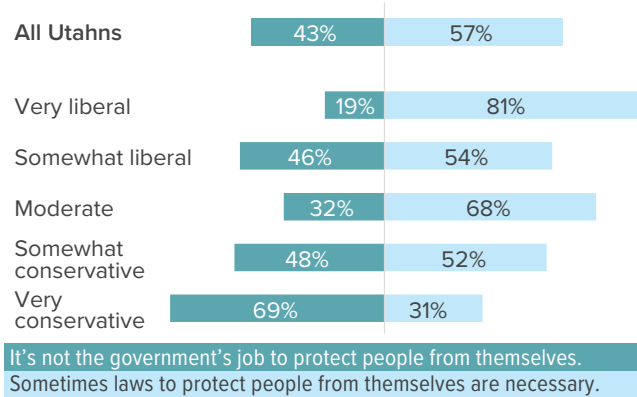
In the closed-ended responses to the survey, respondents were asked to agree with one of two sets of statements. The first was, "It's not the government's job to protect people from themselves," while the other was, "Sometimes laws to protect people from themselves are necessary." About three in five

Utahns do not think it is the government’s job to protect people from themselves. Conservatives were more likely than liberals to think it is not the government’s job. (See Figure 1.)

Also, those with postgraduate degrees were more likely to embrace the idea that sometimes laws are

### Liberals are more likely to accept that laws may be needed to protect citizens.

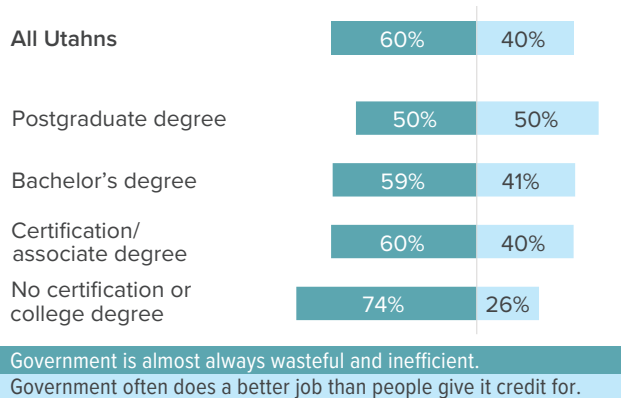
Figure 1: Political affiliation influences the perception of government intervention



Source: Utah Foundation survey.

### Postgraduate education reduces the likelihood of perceived government wastefulness.

Figure 2: Less education correlates with a perception that government is wasteful



Source: Utah Foundation survey.

necessary to protect people from themselves as compared to those with lower levels of education.

Those who are actively religious are also more likely to agree that sometimes the government needs to protect people from themselves, as compared to the inactively religious, the spiritual but not religious, and those to whom religion and spirituality are not important.

The second set of survey responses was centered around another pair of statements with which respondents could either agree or disagree. The first was, “Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient,” while the second was, “Government often does a better job than people give it credit for.” Three in five Utah voters considered the option that “government is almost always wasteful” to be closer to their own views. Conservatives and moderates were much more likely to agree that it is almost always wasteful, while liberals were more likely to agree that it often does a better job.

That tendency was mirrored among Republicans and Democrats. Educational attainment also exhibited a strong influence on responses. Postgraduate voters were more likely than any other group to embrace the idea that government does a better job than is often perceived. Successively lower levels of educational attainment increased the likelihood of respondents believing that government is almost always wasteful. (See Figure 2.)

While Utahns are broadly concerned with government overreach, sometimes the claim of government overreach seems to be a protest emanating from a disliked policy decision. For example, conservatives might claim government overreach if the federal government set a school curriculum that applied to all the states. Conversely, liberals might claim overreach if local officials ban specific books from school libraries. This is not to say that these are not valid discussions of where and how government power should be used, but rather to highlight that government overreach may mean different things to different voters and cover an array of smaller issues under discussion.

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

## Endnotes

1. Utah State Senate, 2024, "Utah Files Landmark Lawsuit Challenging Federal Control Over Most BLM Land," senate.utah.gov.
2. Utah Office of the Attorney General, 2024, "Utah Files Landmark Lawsuit Challenging Federal Control Over Most BLM Land," <https://attorneygeneral.utah.gov/19181-2/>.
3. The Utah Foundation, 2024, "An Appetite for Housing Affordability: Insights from Utah's Municipal Officials," <https://www.utahfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/rr822.pdf>.
4. Salt Lake Tribune, 2024, "Will Amendment D Stay on the Ballot? Judge Set to Decide Today," <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2024/09/11/amendment-d-utah-voters-not-courts/>.

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