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Closer to Home: Views on Local Political Conditions Outpace State and Nation

Greater Houston residents express broad political pessimism, with national conditions viewed most negatively. Local institutions receive stronger ratings than state and national leaders, especially the county sheriff and mayor or city manager. Even so, confidence in government remains low at all three levels: federal, state, and local. Cost of living and inflation dominate local concerns, while corruption and immigration become more prominent at the state and national levels. Panel trends show declining optimism since April 2025, with partisan divisions sharpest on national and state politics and more mixed locally.



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Key Takeaways

- Pessimism about nation and state:** Greater Houston residents remain pessimistic about national and state politics. In the current-wave snapshot, 21% say the United States is headed in the right direction and 28% say the same about Texas. Houston is viewed more positively, but only 42% say the area is headed in the right direction.
- Low ratings for political leaders:** Local institutions are rated better than national and state political leaders. President Donald Trump and Governor Greg Abbott receive approval from 26% and 29%, respectively. Approval is higher for the mayor or city manager (52%), depending on the city, and county sheriffs (64%), while the county judge is at 40%.
- Not so confident about government:** Overall, confidence in government remains low. Only 18% report a fair amount or a great deal of confidence in the federal government, 24% in state government, and 28% in local or city government.
- State of the economy dominate is a top concern:** Cost of living and inflation are the top local concern. Eight in ten respondents list cost of living or inflation as one of the top three problems facing the city. Health care access and affordability is second at 53%.
- Partisan divide on national and state politics:** in the latest wave, 53% of Republicans and Republican-leaning respondents say the United States is headed in the right direction, compared with 16% of independents and 3% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning respondents. For Texas, the shares are 62%, 23%, and 8%, respectively. Perceptions about Houston are less divided by party.
- Bearish attitudes on the direction of nation, state and city:** the panel trends show declining optimism over time: from April 2025 to April 2026, the share of respondents saying that the United States is headed in the right direction fell from 33% to 21%; for Texas this reading fell from 37% to 28%, and for Houston the fall was from 51% to 44%. Donald Trump’s approval fell from 37% to 25%, Greg Abbott’s approval fell from 36% to 28%, and mayor or city manager approval fell from 65% to 51%.

Introduction

This report examines political attitudes among residents of the Greater Houston area using the latest wave of the SPACE City Panel. The analysis focuses on how respondents evaluate the direction of the United States, Texas, and Houston; how they rate major national, state, and local political institutions and leaders; and which problems they see as most pressing for the region. The report further analyzes how these views differ across among Democrats, independents, and Republicans. It begins with the most recent political snapshot, then turns to trends over time and differences by party identification.

The main finding is clear: Residents are most pessimistic about the country, somewhat less pessimistic about Texas, and more positive about Houston. Still, the local picture is not strongly positive. Fewer than half of respondents say the Houston area is headed in the right direction, and confidence in local government remains limited. Local institutions perform better than state and national institutions, but residents still view politics in a mostly negative way.

The over-time section should be read as a panel trend analysis, not as a repeat of the current-wave snapshot. The SPACE City Panel follows respondents across survey waves, but not every respondent appears in every wave or answers every item. As a result, the sample for the panel figures is smaller and varies by question. The direction of the trends is in-

formative, but each estimate is based only on respondents with valid answers for that question and wave.

The May 2026 Political Snapshot

Greater Houston residents are much more pessimistic about the country and the state than about their local area. As shown in Figure 1, only 21% say the United States is headed in the right direction, and 28% say Texas is headed in the right direction. Houston fares better, with 42% saying the area is headed in the right direction, but that remains below a majority.

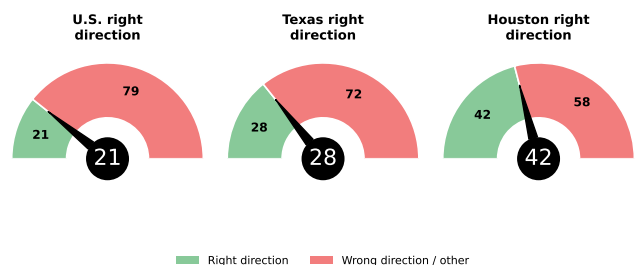


Figure 1 Share of respondents saying the United States, Texas, and Houston are headed in the right direction.

Approval of political leaders and institutions follows a similar pattern, as shown in Figure 2. National and state leaders

receive low approval: 26% approve of Donald Trump, and 29% approve of Greg Abbott. Local offices fare better. Approval is 52% for the mayor or city manager and 64% for the county sheriff. The county judge receives lower approval, at 40%, and ICE is at 26%. Overall, residents rate local leadership more favorably than state and national leadership, although confidence remains limited.

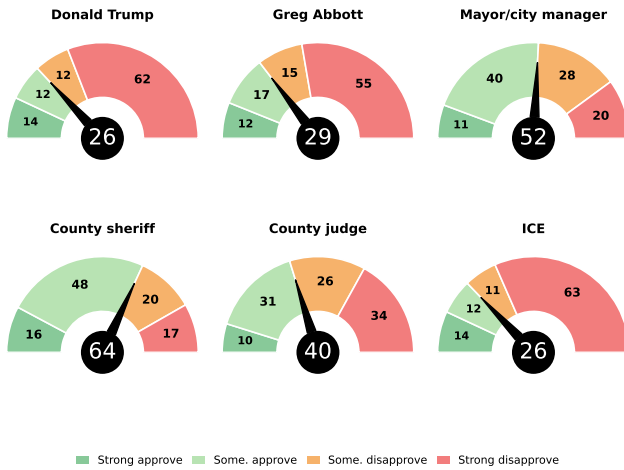


Figure 2 Approval of selected national, state, local, and immigration-related institutions.

Confidence in government is low at every level. Only 18% of respondents report a fair amount or a great deal of confidence in the federal government. The share is 24% for state government and 28% for local government. Local government is viewed somewhat more favorably than state or federal government, but confidence remains weak overall.

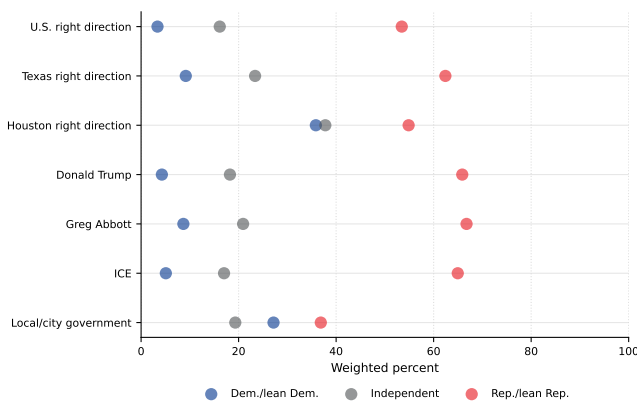


Figure 3 Core political attitudes by three-category party identification.

Party identification is one of the strongest predictors of political views. Figure 3 shows large differences among Democrats and Democratic-leaning respondents, independents, and Republicans and Republican-leaning respon-

dents. The gaps are largest for national and state politics, including views of the United States, Texas, Donald Trump, and Greg Abbott. Views of local government are less divided by party.

Figure 4 shows that the cost of living and inflation dominate the city agenda. Eighty percent of respondents name it as one of the top three problems facing the city. Health care access and affordability rank second at 53%. Political corruption and ethics follow at 34%, while public safety and economic inequality each stand at 30%. These results show that affordability, health care, and governance concerns shape how residents think about local conditions.

The issue rankings at the state and national levels follow the same broad pattern. Cost of living and inflation remains the top concern for both Texas and the United States. Political corruption and ethics becomes more important at broader levels of government. Immigration and border control also ranks higher for Texas and the country than for the city. Together, these results show that residents are judging politics through economic stress and dissatisfaction with government.

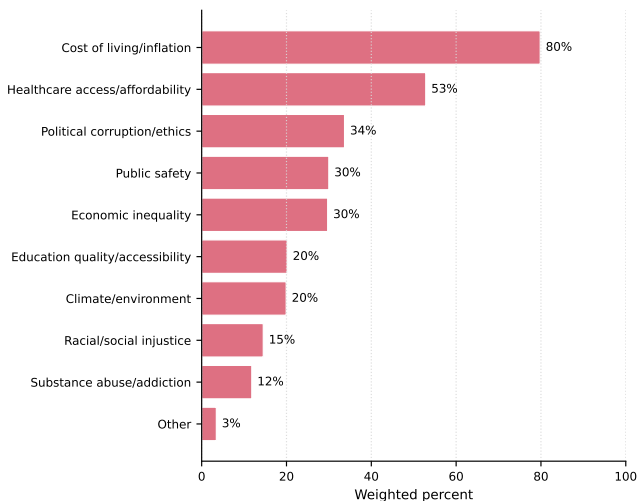


Figure 4 Issues selected as top three city problems.

Panel Trends Over Time

The SPACE City Panel is built from a randomly selected group of Greater Houston residents, recruited by mail to be representative of the area. As shown in Figure 5, the panel began in April 2025 with 5,015 respondents. In later waves, panelists are invited back from this same group: 1,549 responded again in December 2025, and 1,525 in March/April 2026. Across the three waves, 3,117 respondents appear in only the first wave, 722 in exactly two waves, and 1,176 in all three.

This design supports two kinds of analysis. The snapshot for each wave is weighted to match the Houston-area population, so it reflects the views of residents at that point in

time. The over-time trends, by contrast, focus on respondents who participated in more than one wave, allowing us to track how the same people change their views rather than comparing different groups at different moments.

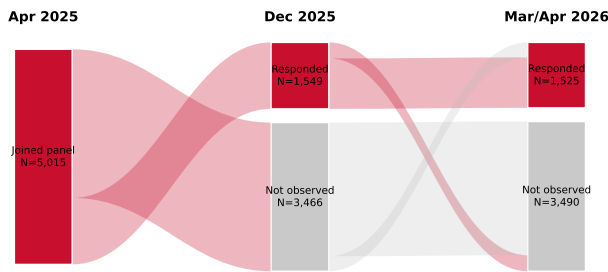


Figure 5 Respondent participation across the politics survey waves used for the panel trend figures.

Because not every panelist answers every question in every wave, the trend figures are based on the respondents who gave a valid answer to each specific item. In the latest wave, the six overall trend figures use samples ranging from 1,160–1,515 respondents. The trends should therefore be read as patterns over time, not as comparisons across an identical set of respondents for every question.

With this sample structure in mind, the next figures show how political evaluations have changed since April 2025. They begin with right-direction assessments for the United States, Texas, and Houston, then turn to approval of national, state, and local leaders. Figure 6 shows a steady decline in views of the country’s direction. The share saying the United States is headed in the right direction fell from 33% in April 2025 to 26% in December 2025 and 21% in the latest wave. National pessimism has grown across the panel period.

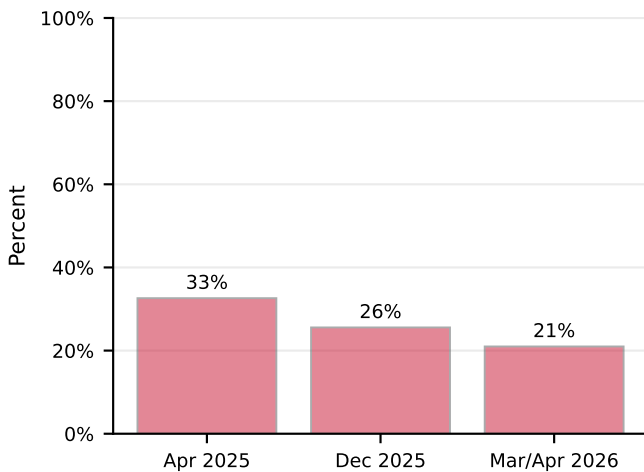


Figure 6 Share of respondents saying the United States is headed in the right direction across survey waves.

Figure 7 shows that views of Texas also became more negative. The share saying Texas is headed in the right direction declined from 37% in April 2025 to 31% in December 2025 and 28% in the latest wave. The decline is smaller than the national decline, but the direction is the same.

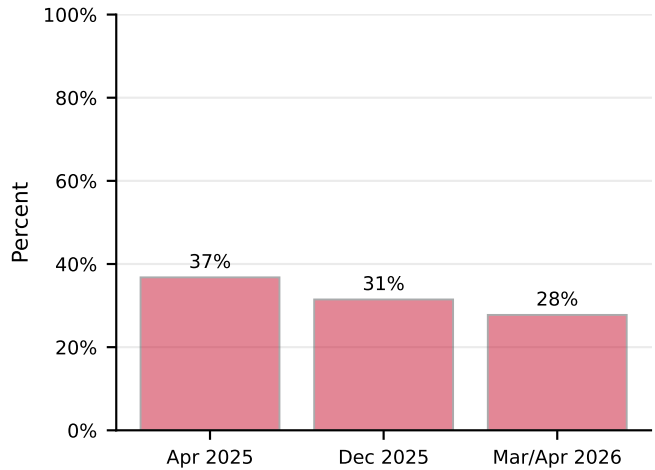


Figure 7 Share of respondents saying Texas is headed in the right direction across survey waves.

Figure 8 shows that Houston remains the most positively viewed place, but the local trend is also moving downward. The share saying the Houston area is headed in the right direction fell from 51% in April 2025 to 49% in December 2025 and 44% in the latest wave. Houston still does better than the United States or Texas, but local optimism is weaker than it was at the start of the panel period.

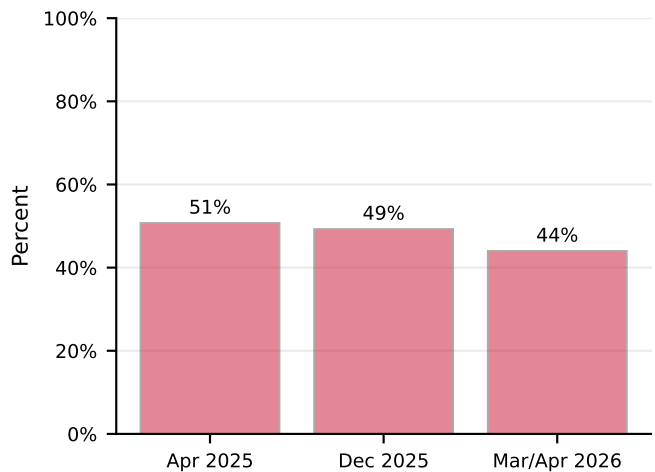


Figure 8 Share of respondents saying the Houston area is headed in the right direction across survey waves.

Figure 9 shows a similar decline in approval of Donald Trump. Approval fell from 37% in April 2025 to 28% in December 2025 and 25% in the latest wave. Current approval is well below the level at the start of the panel series.

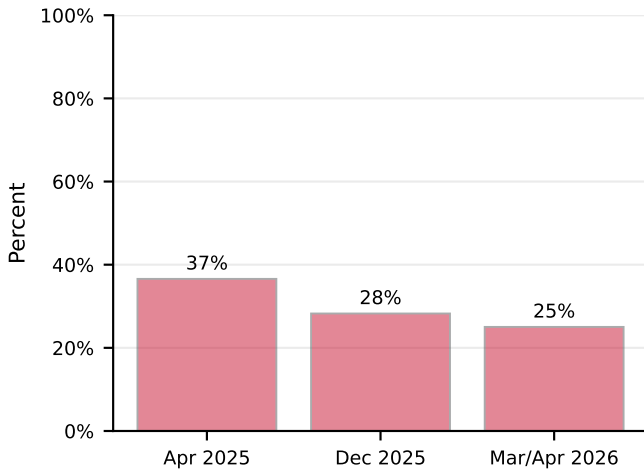


Figure 9 Approval of Donald Trump across survey waves.

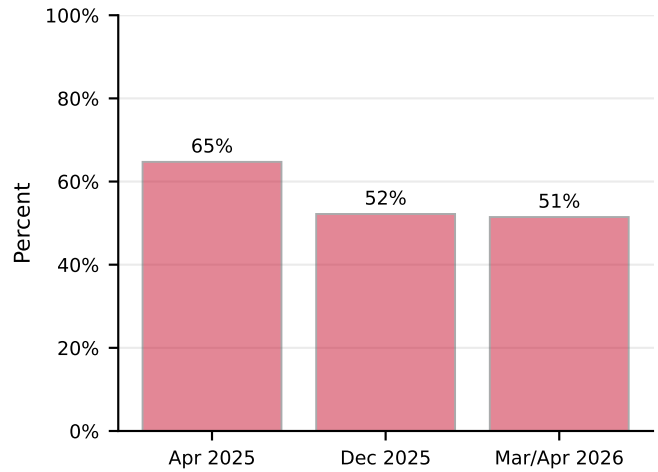


Figure 11 Approval of the mayor or city manager across survey waves.

Figure 10 shows that approval of Greg Abbott also declined. Approval fell from 36% in April 2025 to 29% in December 2025 and 28% in the latest wave. This suggests that the sharp drop happened earlier in the panel period and then continued slightly lower.

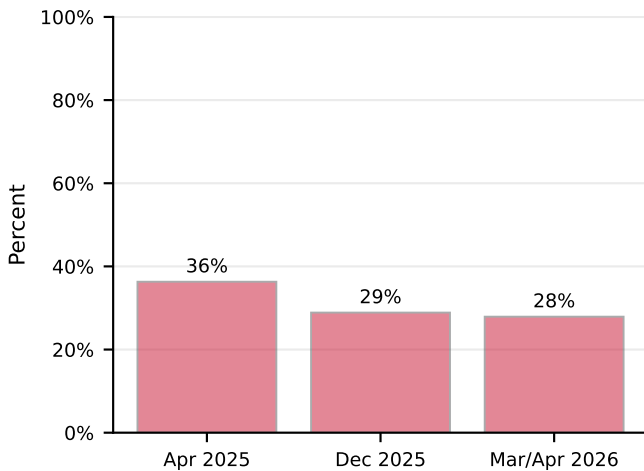


Figure 10 Approval of Greg Abbott across survey waves.

Figure 11 shows that local leadership performs better, but approval has still declined over time. Approval of the mayor or city manager fell from 65% in April 2025 to 52% in December 2025 and 51% in the latest wave. Local approval remains higher than approval for state and national leaders, but it is still far below the first measurement.

Overall, the panel evidence supports the current-wave findings. Respondents are most negative about national conditions, less negative but still pessimistic about Texas, and more positive about Houston. Still, right-direction views are declining at all three levels. Local government remains a relative bright spot, but it is not immune to broader dissatisfaction.

Panel Trends by Party Identification

The overall panel trends show declining political optimism including within party-specific sub-samples. Party differences remain large, especially for national and state politics. Republicans and Republican-leaning respondents are much more likely than Democrats and Democratic-leaning respondents to say the United States and Texas are headed in the right direction. Independents fall between the two groups, but on national and state politics they are usually closer to Democrats than to Republicans.

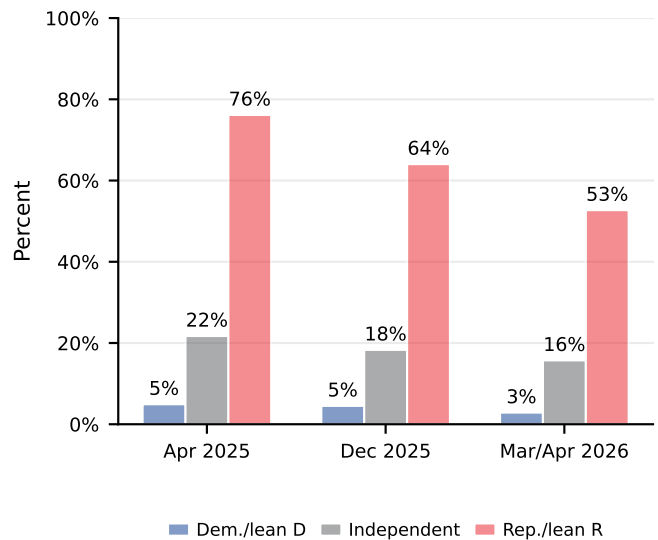


Figure 12 Party differences in the share saying the United States is headed in the right direction across survey waves.

Figure 12 shows that views of the country’s direction are the most divided by party. In April 2025, 76% of Republican and Republican-leaning respondents said the United States was headed in the right direction. That share fell to 64% in De-

ember 2025 and to 53% in the latest wave. Among independents, the share fell from 22% to 18% and then 16%. Among Democrats and Democratic-leaning respondents, it moved from 5% to 5% and then 3%. Republicans remain far more positive about the country than other respondents, but Republican optimism has also dropped sharply.

The results suggest that the decline in optimism is not limited to single party in national and state evaluations. Republicans, independents, and Democrats all became less positive about the country’s direction. Views of Texas also fell among Republicans and independents, while Democrats remained very low. Houston is different: Democrats and independents became less positive, while Republicans ended the period about where they started.

Figure 13 shows a similar pattern for Texas. Republican and Republican-leaning respondents remain the most positive about the state, but the share saying Texas is headed in the right direction fell from 78% in April 2025 to 72% in December 2025 and 62% in the latest wave. Independents also became more negative, falling from 30% to 26% and then to 23%. Democrats and Democratic-leaning respondents were already very pessimistic about Texas and changed little, moving from 8% to 9% and then back to 8%. The Texas trend shows large party differences and clear declines among Republicans and independents.

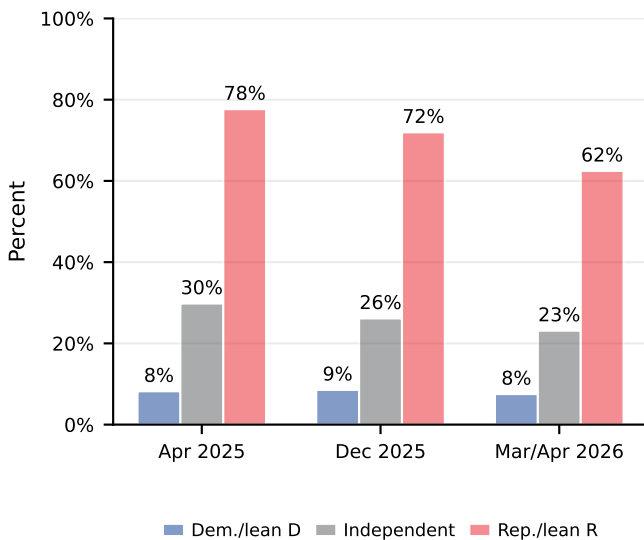


Figure 13 Party differences in the share saying Texas is headed in the right direction across survey waves.

Figure 14 shows that Houston is less divided by party than the United States or Texas. Among Democrats and Democratic-leaning respondents, the share saying Houston is headed in the right direction fell from 48% in April 2025 to 45% in December 2025 and 37% in the latest wave. Among independents, it fell from 44% to 39% and then to 37%. Among Republicans and Republican-leaning respondents, it was 59% in April 2025, rose to 62% in December 2025, and

then returned to 59% in the latest wave. Houston still has a local advantage, but that advantage has weakened among Democrats and independents.

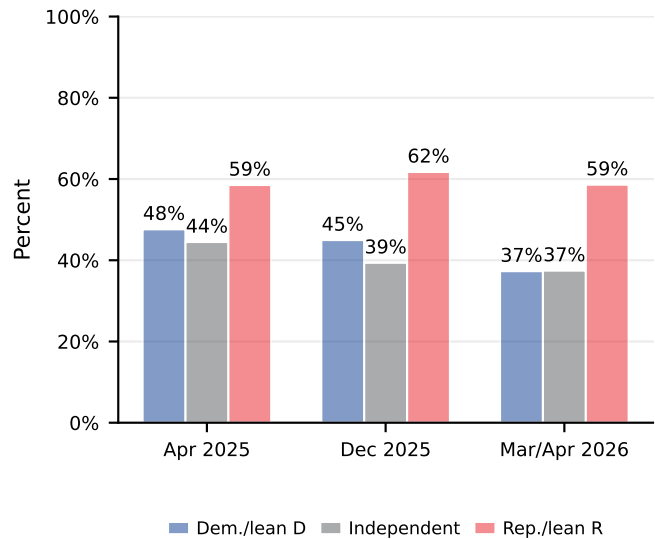


Figure 14 Party differences in the share saying the Houston area is headed in the right direction across survey waves.

The approval trends point in the same direction in the overall panel figures. Donald Trump approval fell from 37% in April 2025 to 28% in December 2025 and 25% in the latest wave. Greg Abbott approval fell from 36% to 29% and then to 28%. The current-wave party figure shows that both leaders remain much more popular among Republicans than among Democrats, with independents in between.

Local leadership is less divided by party, but approval still fell in the overall trend. Approval of the mayor or city manager fell from 65% in April 2025 to 52% in December 2025 and 51% in the latest wave. Local government remains the relative bright spot, but the trend shows that local approval has also declined over the panel period.

Taken together, the party trends support the report’s central finding. Houston-area politics is highly divided by party, especially when residents evaluate the country, Texas, Donald Trump, and Greg Abbott. But the decline over time is broader than partisan differences alone. Republicans remain the most positive group on national and state politics, but they are less positive than they were in April 2025. Independents also moved downward across most measures. Democrats remain deeply pessimistic about national and state politics, while also becoming less positive about Houston. The result is a broad erosion of political confidence, with the strongest party divides on national and state politics and a more mixed local pattern.

Conclusion

The evidence from the May 2026 SPACE City Panel points to a Greater Houston public that views politics through a lens of distance and proximity. Residents are most negative about the country, less negative about Texas, and most positive about Houston, but even local optimism falls short of a majority. Local institutions, particularly the county sheriff and the mayor or city manager, receive stronger ratings than state and national leaders, yet confidence in government remains limited at every level. Cost of living and inflation anchor the public agenda across all three levels of government, with corruption and immigration gaining weight as the focus shifts from city to state to nation.

The panel trends place these findings in a longer arc. Since April 2025, right-direction views and leader approval have declined at the national, state, and local levels. The drop is steepest for evaluations of the United States and for approval of Donald Trump, but Texas, Greg Abbott, and even the mayor or city manager have all lost ground. Local government remains the relative bright spot, but it is not insulated from the broader erosion of political confidence.

Party identification continues to structure how residents see national and state politics, with Republicans far more positive than independents and Democrats. But the decline over time cuts across party lines. Republicans remain the most optimistic group on national and state matters, yet they are markedly less positive than they were a year ago. Independents moved downward on nearly every measure, and Democrats, already pessimistic about the country and the state, became less positive about Houston as well. The local picture is the least divided by party, but it is also where the erosion among Democrats and independents is most visible.

Taken together, the results suggest that Houston-area residents are judging politics through a combination of economic strain, dissatisfaction with government, and partisan alignments, and that the dissatisfaction is greater for higher levels of government. Local leaders enter this environment with a relative advantage, but that advantage is narrower than it was a year ago. Sustaining public confidence in local government will likely depend on how leaders respond

to the affordability, health care, and governance concerns that residents identify as most pressing, concerns that, for now, weigh more heavily than any single political figure or party.

Methodology

Sample & data collection. *SPACE City Panel, Wave 4, March/April 2026; N = 1,525; mode: online. MOE: ±3.53%.*

Current-wave snapshot. Current-wave cross-sectional figures use the latest wave cross-section and are weighted to match the Houston-area population. Because *Don't knows*, *Skipped* responses, *No opinion*, and item non-response are excluded from most figures, the analytic *N* varies across outcomes and is often smaller than the full *N* = 1,525.

Panel/trend estimates. Over-time figures use comparable items from the SPACE City Panel waves reported in the figures: April 2025, December 2025, and the latest political wave. These trend figures are unweighted estimates. Not every respondent appears in every wave or gives a valid response to every item, so analytic *N*s can vary by outcome, wave, and party group. These figures should therefore be interpreted as unweighted panel trend estimates with item-specific denominators, not as representative comparisons across all figures.

Weights. Current-wave cross-sectional figures are *post-stratified to age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, and county*; missing demographics are imputed. Panel/trend figures are not weighted.

Exclusions. Unless explicit in figure, *Don't knows*, *Skipped* responses, *No opinion*, and item nonresponse are excluded from figures or analyses.

Percentages. Unless explicit in text or figure, percentages are calculated over valid responses. Percentages shown in figures are rounded to the nearest whole percentage point unless decimals are displayed; because categories are rounded independently, totals may not sum exactly to 100%.



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