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AUTHORS

Gail J. Buttorff
Samuel T. Danilola
Jim Granato
Catherine M. Miers
Soran Mohtadi
Maria P. Perez Argüelles
Pablo M. Pinto
Savannah L. Sipole
Garrett P. Upchurch
Agustín Vallejo
M.C. Sunny Wong

On the Right Track? Public Perceptions in Houston and Chicago

This report compares public perceptions in Chicago and Houston using survey data from the most recent University of Houston Hobby School's SPACE City Panel and the ChicagoSpeaks poll from NORC at the University of Chicago to assess national and local sentiments and economic concerns. The data show that national pessimism is high in both cities, but state and local perceptions are more positive than national views, especially among Chicagoans. Across both cities, affordability emerges as the dominant economic concern.



Center for Public Policy
Hobby School of Public Affairs

Key Takeaways

1. **National pessimism is widespread in the nation's third- and fourth-largest cities, Chicago and Houston:** A majority of respondents in both cities say the country is headed in the wrong direction, including 80% in Houston and 86% in Chicago.
2. **Houstonians express significantly more negative views of their state than do Chicagoans:** Only 24% of Houstonians say Texas is headed in the right direction compared to 45% of Chicagoans' assessment of Illinois.
3. **Partisan gaps in perceptions are pronounced in both cities:** In Chicago, 91% of Republicans and 52% of Democrats say their city is headed in the wrong direction compared to 62% of Democrats and 34% of Republicans in Houston.
4. **Affordability dominates economic concerns in both cities, but in different ways:** In Houston, 78% of respondents list wages not keeping up with the cost of living as a top three challenge, while in Chicago 79% list high cost of living among their top three concerns.
5. **Cost of living is a widely shared concern across demographic groups:** In Houston, 33% cite the high cost of living as their top challenge, with this concern especially pronounced among Hispanic residents and those aged 60 and older. In Chicago, 43% cite the high cost of living as their primary concern, with concern particularly elevated among older residents and racial minorities.

Introduction

Chicago and Houston are the third and fourth largest cities in the U.S., respectively. They present distinct demographic, economic, and urban characteristics. In this report, we analyze how structural differences shape attitudes and inform policy priorities across these two major U.S. cities. This comparison is based on public opinion surveys collected in December 2025 and January 2026 by the University of Houston Hobby School's **SPACE City Panel** and the most recent **ChicagoSpeaks** panel from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago.

Together, the contrasts in growth, demographics, urban structure, economic and political conditions, make **Houston** and **Chicago** informative cases for comparing residents' perceptions about local, state and national conditions. We compare two main questions among respondents from Chicago and Houston: first, whether city, state and country conditions are heading in the right or wrong direction, and second, what respondents perceive to be the top 3 economic challenges facing their communities today.

Overall patterns across the two city surveys reveal both similarities and important differences in public sentiment. In both cities, majorities believe the U.S. is heading in the wrong direction. These results align with the January 2026 release of the Consumer Confidence Index, which fell to its lowest level since May 2014 - below even the COVID-19 pandemic levels.¹ The decline in the index appears to be driven by inflation concerns, rising living costs, and a weakening labor market.

Perceptions about conditions at the local are more optimistic: those who believe the city is headed in the right direction is twenty-two points higher than nationally (41% vs. 19%) among Houston respondents and twenty four points higher than nationally (37% vs. 13%) among Chicago re-

spondents. Partisan divides are significant in both cities but in different ways. Republicans living in Chicago are much more pessimistic about the direction of the city than Democrats or independent respondents, whereas the opposite is true in Houston.

In both cities, the main economic concerns relate to affordability: high cost of living and wages not keeping up are the most frequently cited problems. These shared affordability pressures—amid local differences in costs and wage levels—suggest that eroding purchasing power lies at the core of what respondents identify as most pressing.

Background

Although Chicago has historically been larger, Houston's rapid growth suggests it may soon surpass Chicago as the nation's third-largest city. Houston's **population** is estimated at 2.39 million, reflecting a 3.9% increase from 2020 to 2024, while Chicago's population, at approximately 2.72 million, has declined by 1.0% during the same period.²

Demographically, Houston has a younger population, with 23.6% of residents **under age 18**, compared to 19.8% in Chicago. Both cities are highly **ethnically and racially diverse** with non-minorities (white non-Hispanic) representing 23.6% of the population in Houston and 32.2% in Chicago, in sharp contrast with a national average of 57.5%. However Houston exhibits greater linguistic diversity, with 47.2% of residents speaking a language other than English at home, compared to 35.5% in Chicago.

Educational attainment in both cities differs noticeably, with Chicago having a higher share of residents with a high school diploma or higher, exceeding Houston by more than six percentage points. This may affect labor market outcomes, such as labor force participation, wages, and unemployment rates, income levels—median household income is

higher in Chicago (\$75,134) than in Houston (\$62,894)—and even community and political attitudes.

Chicago and Houston also differ markedly in their urban structure: Chicago is characterized by a dense, transit-oriented urban core, whereas Houston is known for its expansive sprawl, featuring decentralized neighborhoods, strip-commercial corridors, and master-planned developments. Additionally, Houston’s **cost of living** is approximately 6% below the national average, while Chicago’s is

about 5% above, a difference reflected in the survey results, where Chicagoans were more likely to cite high cost of living as their top economic concern.

Are the city, state and country heading in the right or wrong direction?

Houstonians and Chicagoans were asked to assess the direction of their city, state, and the country; responses are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2, respectively.³

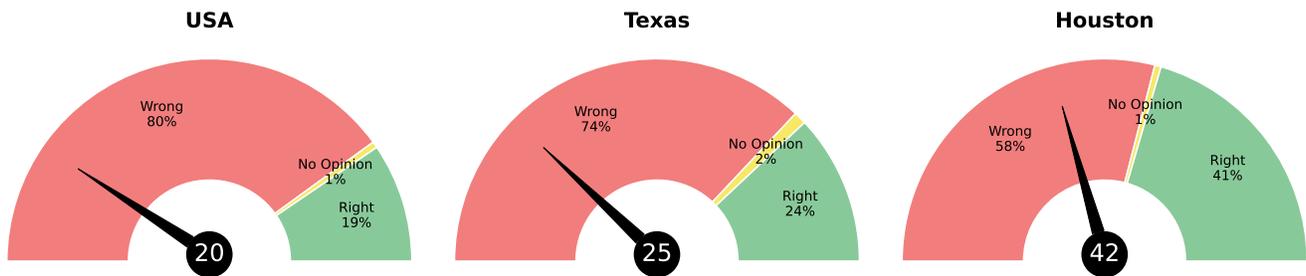


Figure 1 Direction of city, state and country in Houston

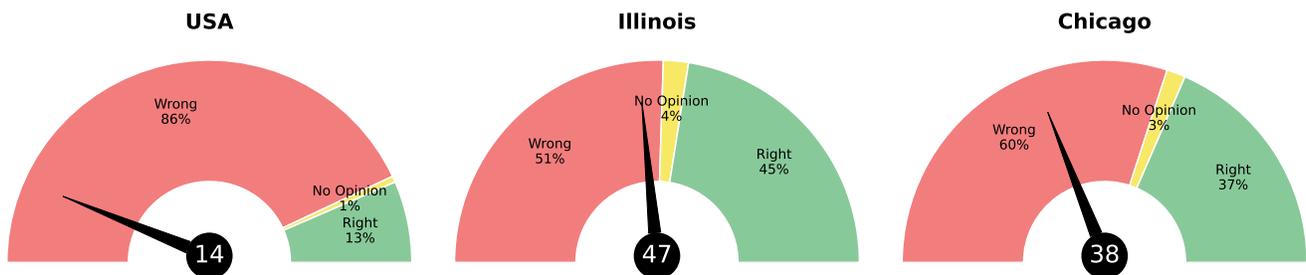


Figure 2 Direction of city, state and country in Chicago

Figure 1 shows that 80% of residents in the greater Houston area think that the United States is headed in the wrong direction compared to 74% for Texas and 58% for Houston. Only 19% say that the country is moving in the right direction, while 24% say this for Texas and 41% for Houston.

Among residents of Chicago, 86% say that the United States is headed in the wrong direction compared to 51% for Illinois and 60% for Chicago, as shown in Figure 2. Only 13% say that the country is moving in the right direction, in sharp contrast with their perception of the state of affairs in Illinois

(45%) and Chicago (37%).

Differences by party identification

Breaking down responses by party identification (Figure 3) we observe small differences in the assessment of the state of current conditions among Houston residents: 93% of Democrats and 84% of independents say that the United States is heading in the wrong direction, compared to 37% of Republicans. The share reporting that the state of Texas is headed in the wrong direction reveals a similar pattern:

86% among Democrats, 74% among independents, and 31% among Republicans. When thinking about the city of Houston, these differences are narrow, though a large partisan gap remains with 62% of Democrats, 61% of independents, and 34% of Republicans saying the city is heading in the wrong direction.

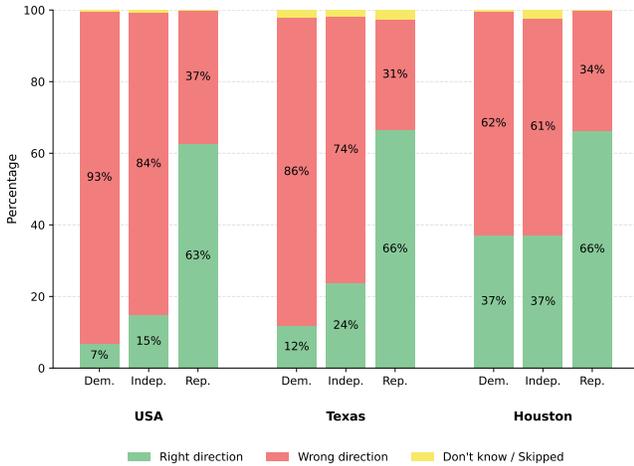


Figure 3 Direction of city, state and country in Houston by party identification

Regarding partisan differences in perceptions about the direction of national, state and local conditions among Chicago residents (Figure 4), 92% of Democrats, 81% of independents, and 56% of Republicans say that the U.S. is heading in the wrong direction. The share reporting Illinois is moving in the wrong direction is 41% among Democrats, 64% among independents and 83% for Republicans. Lastly, 52% of Democrats, 72% of independents, and 91% of Republicans say that the city is heading in the wrong direction.

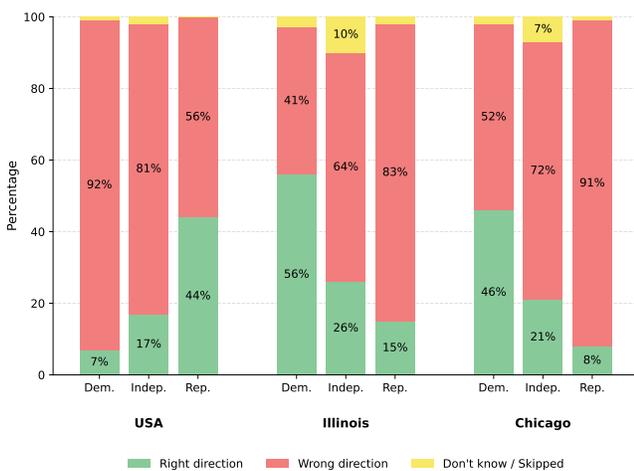


Figure 4 Direction of city, state and country in Chicago by party identification

Top 3 economic challenges facing city residents today

Houston

As shown in Figure 5, 78% of Houston respondents selected wages not keeping up with the cost of living as one of their top three economic challenges, followed by high cost of living (73%) and inequality and wealth disparity (49%). Nearly half of respondents (47%) selected job availability and 39% selected education and skill gaps.

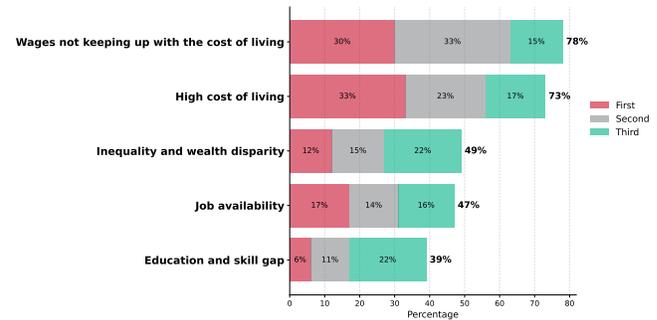


Figure 5 Top 3 economic challenges in Houston

Overall, 33% of Houstonians identify high cost of living as their single top economic challenge, as reflected in Figure 6. By gender, 35% of women and 31% of men report this concern. The share is 27% among those aged 18–29, 39% for those 30–44, 29% among those aged 45–59, and 40% among respondents older than 60. By race and ethnicity, 22% of whites, 31% of Blacks, and 40% of Hispanics report the cost of living as their top concern. Thirty-percent of those who identify as other or more than two races ranked high cost of living as the top economic challenge in Houston.

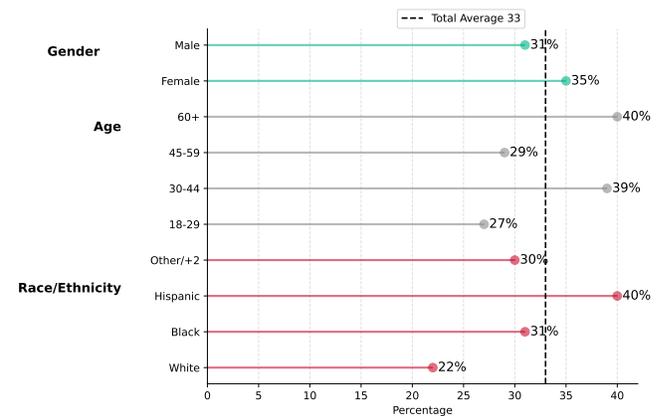


Figure 6 Top economic challenge in Houston: wages not keeping up with the cost of living

Chicago

In Chicago, the high cost of living dominates economic concerns, with 79% of the respondents selecting it as one of their top three economic challenges (Figure 7). Wages not keeping up with the cost of living follows at 77%, inequality and wealth disparity at 53%, job availability at 46%, and education and skill gaps at 31%.

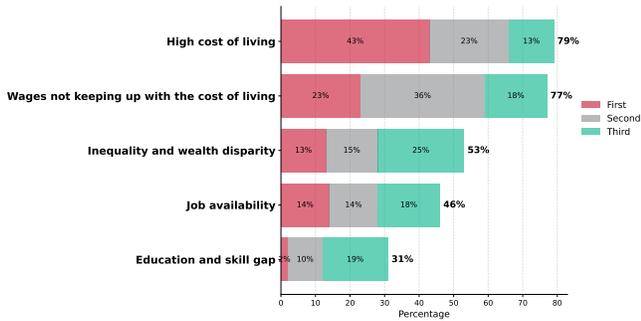


Figure 7 Top 3 economic challenges in Chicago

Figure 8 shows that, overall, 43% of Chicagoans select the high cost of living as their main economic challenge. By gender, 42% of women and 43% of men report this concern. By age, the share is 41% among those aged 18–29, 35% among those aged 30–44, 45% among those aged 45–59, and 51% among those aged 60 and older. By race and ethnicity, 39% of whites, 43% of Blacks, and 47% of Hispanics report this as their main concern.

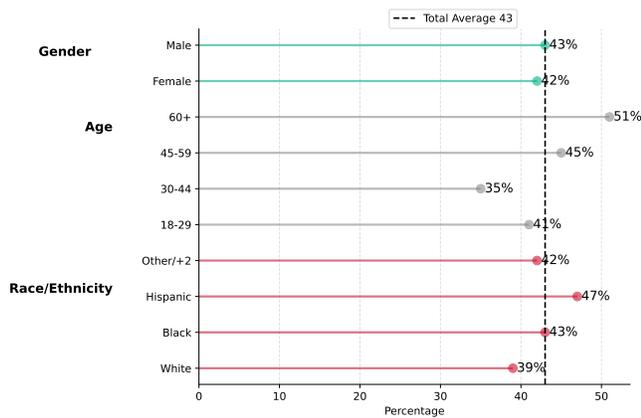


Figure 8 Top economic challenge in Chicago: high cost of living

Conclusion

This report offers a comparative snapshot of public sentiment and economic perceptions in Houston and Chicago, drawing on recent waves of the SPACE City Panel and the ChicagoSpeaks surveys. The comparison is instructive not only because both cities rank among the nation’s largest, but because they reflect distinct regional models of urban development.

Chicago and Houston differ markedly in their demographic, economic, and spatial characteristics. Chicago combines higher median household income and educational attainment with a declining population and a higher cost of living, while Houston features a younger and more linguistically diverse population, faster population growth, lower median income, and greater overall affordability. These structural contrasts provide important context for how residents evaluate the direction of their city, state, and the country, as well as the economic challenges they identify as most pressing.

Across both cities, respondents express widespread pessimism about national conditions, though assessments become more favorable at the local level. However, Houstonians are much more negative about the direction of the state of Texas compared to how Chicagoans see the direction Illinois is heading. Despite these differences, a common theme emerges: affordability dominates economic evaluations in both cities. In Houston, residents most frequently point to wages failing to keep pace with the cost of living, while in Chicago, high living costs stand out as the leading concern—highlighting how shared pressures around purchasing power manifest differently across distinct urban contexts.

Future waves of the SPACE City Panel and the ChicagoSpeaks survey will allow us to further examine both shared patterns and important differences between the nation’s third- and fourth-largest cities.

Notes

1. The Conference Board (2026) US Consumer Confidence Fell Sharply in January. The Conference Board, 27 January. Available at: <https://www.conference-board.org/topics/consumer-confidence/> (Accessed: 27 January 2026).
2. As a reference the national population growth rate is 2.6%. Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). Quick-Facts: Houston, Texas; Chicago, Illinois; United States. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/houstoncitytexas,chicagocityillinois>
3. To calculate the overall score, we give each answer a score: +1 for *right direction*, 0 for *no opinion*, and -1 for *wrong direction*. Then, we calculate the average score based on how many people chose each option. The average is converted to a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 means everyone thinks things are going in the wrong direction, 50 means opinions are evenly split, and 100 means everyone thinks things are going in the right direction.

Methodology

HOUSTON - SPACE City Panel:

Sample & data collection. *SPACE City Panel, Wave 4, Dec./Jan. 2025/6; $N = 1,549$; $N_{CityofHouston} = 742$; mode: online. MOE: $\pm 3.47\%$.*

Weights. *Post-stratified to age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, county. Missing demographics imputed.*

Exclusions. *Unless explicit in figure Don't knows and Skipped responses excluded from figures or analyses.*

Percentages: Percentages calculated over the total of respondents in the City of Houston.

CHICAGO - ChicagoSpeaks:

Sample & data collection. *ChicagoSpeaks Poll, Nov./Dec. 2025; $N = 1,230$; mode: online. MOE: \pm .*

Weights. *Post-stratified to age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region. Missing demographics imputed.*

Exclusions. *Unless explicit in figure Don't knows and Skipped responses excluded from figures or analyses.*

Percentages: Percentages calculated over the total of respondents in Chicago.



Contact Information:

For information about learning or using the **Space Panel**, please contact us:
Visit: Space City Panel
Email: hobbycpp@central.uh.edu
Phone: (713) 743-3970

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Corresponding Author:

María Paula Pérez Argüelles
E-mail: mppereza@central.uh.edu

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Agustín Vallejo, avallejo7@uh.edu