Public Policy in Texas

Public Policy Challenges

Texas is home to a large and diverse population. Some families have lived in the state since Texas was its own Republic— or earlier. Others are very recent transplants from all over the country and even the world. What does it mean to be a Texan? The answer to this question has changed over time, but the state’s political culture remains a mixture of traditionalism, individualism, and moralism. Most Texans have a strong faith in the free market economy, tend to be social conservatives, and tend to be populists. They prefer low taxes, a small government whose operations and lawmaking abilities are limited, and pro-business policies. While this comprises the basis of Texas political culture, the diversity of the state’s population does lead to disagreement over public policy issues. Not only do people disagree about the problems that need to be addressed, disagreement also exists over the best way in which to deal with them.

Examining the problems a state chooses to address and how policymakers attempt to solve them provides insight into the state’s political culture, values, and how close its public policy represents its population. Do policymakers attempt to deal with a wide variety of issues facing all citizens...or only address issues placed on the policy agenda by political elites? Does a state try to help the “have-nots” of its society by providing services to meet their needs...or write budgets that benefit the “haves” through low taxes and low services?

When compared to other states, Texas tends to rank toward the bottom in many service areas. The state has shown stinginess in trying to mitigate poverty and ambivalence when it comes to education. It has not always recognized the importance of maintaining its transportation infrastructure and has proven slow in adopting public transportation solutions. Texans enjoy their environment, open spaces, and natural resources, but have been reluctant to protect them at the expense of other public and private interests. In each of these issues, the solutions to the state’s problems showcase the intergovernmental and intragovernmental nature of public policy. This demonstrates how public policy involves different branches and levels of government. Public policy is complex. Solving the state’s problems is not easy and involves trade-offs between multiple groups, interests, and perspectives.
Public Policy, Political Culture, and Political Ideology

This activity examines how Texas' political culture, combined with its conservative political ideology, influences its public policies.

Interactive Activity: Public Policy, Political Culture, and Political Ideology

Describes Texas' political culture as a mixture of individualistic, traditionalistic, and Old South cultures. Explains that Texas' political culture, combined with its conservative political ideology, influences its public policies in education, health and human services, transportation and environment. Highlights how Texas' political culture is reflected its citizens' reluctance to raise taxes to fund education, provide social services, improve highways or build more roads, and protect the environment. Also points out that Texans' love affair with the automobile makes it difficult to promote public transportation.

Public Policy Jeopardy

Education, health and human services, and transportation constitute four-fifths of the total cost of Texas' state government. These services have a significant effect on the way Texans live and even on the way they think.

Test your knowledge about these three services by playing “Public Policy Jeopardy.”

Interactive Activity: Public Policy Jeopardy

Uses a Jeopardy-like game to review mission and services provided by education, health and human services, and transportation agencies. Major concepts covered include: (1) legislation regarding funding, class size, and diversity in education, (2) types of assistance provided by Health and Human Services including medical care, food stamps, employment assistance, etc., and (3) challenges of meeting transportation needs in Texas—Trans-Texas Corridor, state highway fund, gasoline taxes, public transportation, etc.
Additional Resources

Websites

Texas On the Brink
http://texaslsg.org/texasonthebrink

The Texas Legislative Study Group, a caucus of 50 Democratic representatives from the Texas House, publishes this annual report detailing how Texas ranks in the areas of public health, the environment, and overall quality of life. You can download and read the latest report here.

The Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute
http://www.txccri.org/

Founded in 1996 by a group of conservative leaders, this organization’s mission is to shape public policy through four core principles of limited government, individual liberty, free enterprise, and traditional values.

Public Citizen – Texas State Office
http://www.citizen.org/texas/

Since 1984, this progressive consumer advocacy organization has concerned itself with environmental enforcement policies, global warming, promoting renewable/clean energy, product safety, nuclear safety, medical safety, auto safety/quality, pesticide safety, insurance reforms, campaign finance/ethics issues, improving state government agency operations, and fair trade policies.