

Research Paper: Study on Ten Participants in Clifton, NJ

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POLS 303: State and Local Politics

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In a time when national headlines dominate conversations about politics, the strength of a state often gets lost in the confusion. Yet, the decisions made at the state level directly shape the daily lives of residents, from the safety of neighborhood streets to the quality of public schools. In February 2025, I conducted a series of interviews with ten New Jersey residents in Clifton, New Jersey to better understand how average people view their state government. The results, though drawn from a small sample, revealed sharp perspectives on pressing political concerns such as undocumented immigration, the performance of Governor Phil Murphy, and the role of the state in delivering essential services. Even in this brief window, I saw patterns that echoed national debates, while also reflecting uniquely local attitudes shaped by the state's policies and leadership.

New Jersey's diversity, density, and proximity to major cities make it a fascinating case study for evaluating the cross between political issues and civic concerns. In asking participants to evaluate the governor on a scale of 1 to 100, share their level of concern about undocumented immigration, and rate their trust in the state's ability to uphold education and public safety, I was not just collecting numbers, I was capturing sentiment. Beneath the data were stories of cautious hope, visible frustration, and a desire for responsive leadership. This project offered a chance to hear unfiltered opinions from people who live the consequences of policy every day, and to piece together a clearer image of where New Jersey residents stand as we approach the next pivotal election cycle.

Methods

On February 16th, 2025, a field survey was conducted outside the Target store located on Kingsland Road in Clifton, New Jersey. The location was selected because it draws steady foot traffic from both Clifton and surrounding towns such as Bloomfield, Garfield, and Paterson. Weather conditions were unfavorable, with a mix of light rain and leftover snow, but despite this, ten participants were successfully surveyed between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 11:45 a.m. All participants were approached individually, and each was informed that participation was

voluntary and anonymous. The final group included six men and four women, with a variety of ages, racial backgrounds, and education levels represented. Among the ten participants were three sets of couples, each consisting of one man and one woman. These pairs reflected a mix of generations, with one couple being in their early twenties, one in their thirties, and one in their sixties. In contrast to individuals who were often hesitant or declined to participate, couples demonstrated greater willingness to engage. Many seemed more relaxed discussing politics together, which led to more in-depth conversations and contributed to the diversity of perspectives in the sample.

The survey consisted of fifteen questions designed to measure public attitudes toward state government and key political issues. Specific questions included: “On a scale from 1 to 100, how would you rate Governor Murphy’s job performance?”, “How concerned are you about undocumented or illegal immigration in your state?” and “To what extent do you trust your state government to address public safety?” Other questions asked participants to identify what they saw as the two most important issues in New Jersey politics and to select which one they felt mattered most and why. General themes explored through the survey included trust in government institutions, confidence in state services like education and infrastructure, and voter identification and registration. The survey also gathered basic demographic information such as age, gender, race, and education level. The overall structure of the survey combined rating scales, multiple-choice formats, and open-ended questions, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative data. This blend reflects common practices in political science field research. As Clipperton (2022) notes, surveys are among the most valuable tools for empirically examining theories, as they allow for the direct measurement of public opinion and individual level variables. Several challenges arose during the data collection process. Some individuals declined to participate, often citing time constraints or expressing discomfort with discussing political topics in a public setting. In three cases, participants began the survey but chose to withdraw after hearing the questions, requesting that their answers not be used. These

instances speak to the hesitancy some people feel around political conversations, even in informal settings. As Squire (1992) observes, trust in local institutions can significantly impact whether individuals are willing to disclose political opinions.

Results

The survey findings reveal how ten New Jersey residents, ranging in age, race, gender, and political affiliation, view state and local political issues. When asked to identify the most important issue at the state level (Q3), responses centered on economic and service related concerns. Taxes and property tax were mentioned by 3 out of 10 participants (30%), followed by education (2 participants, 20%), and one response each for jobs, retirement, childcare, healthcare, and cost of living (10% each). These results reflect a broad yet familiar set of concerns common in state politics. Rosenthal (1996) argues that constituents often expect legislators to address a growing list of social and economic problems, placing pressure on state governments to do more with limited capacity, and these expectations, reflected in the diversity of top concerns, suggest that the public sees the state as a central problem-solver in their daily lives. In contrast, when asked about the most important issue in their local community (Q4), responses shifted toward more place specific concerns. Eminent domain and corporate expansion and infrastructure or road maintenance were each named by 2 participants (20%). The remaining 6 participants (60%) gave unique responses, including property taxes, immigration services, lack of services for seniors, education reform, healthcare access, and general infrastructure. These responses suggest that while the state is viewed as responsible for broader systemic issues, local governments are expected to deliver immediate, practical improvements. Concerns like road maintenance or healthcare access reflect lived realities that demand attention at the municipal level.

Trust in government varied depending on the issue. In Table 1, which measured trust in the state government's ability to handle public safety, 4 out of 10 respondents (40%) expressed somewhat trust, while 6 (60%) were neutral. No one selected distrust. In Table 2, regarding

education, only 3 participants (30%) expressed some level of trust, while 2 (20%) were neutral, and 5 (50%) selected some level of distrust. This gap indicates that while public safety receives more consistent confidence, education remains a source of skepticism. Female respondents were more likely to express trust in education, while male participants leaned toward neutrality or distrust. As Crowley (2004) explains, political perceptions are often shaped by social identity, and individuals from underrepresented backgrounds may assess government effectiveness through personal and community experience, particularly in areas like education, where systemic inequality persists. Attitudes on immigration were polarized. As shown in Figure 1, exactly 5 out of 10 participants (50%) reported being very concerned about undocumented immigration, while the other 5 (50%) were not concerned at all. The complete absence of middle range responses suggests strongly held views on both sides, likely shaped by broader political discourse and personal experiences. One participant specifically mentioned “immigration services (no SS card)” as their most important local issue, highlighting the intersection of policy and identity in how people perceive community needs.

Participants gave Governor Phil Murphy mixed but moderate evaluations. Based on a 1–100 rating scale, scores ranged from 40 to 75, with a mean of 59.2 (see Figure 2). Most ratings fell between 50 and 65, indicating general approval without strong enthusiasm. The lowest score (40) came from a respondent focused on healthcare access, while the highest (75) came from one focused on local economic and community issues. Freeman (1995) notes that state leaders often face challenges in being both visible and effective, as the public expects them to lead symbolically while also delivering concrete policy outcomes. The middle-range scores seen here reflect that tension as approval exists, but voters still see room for improvement. On the other hand, Political engagement was relatively strong. According to Q8, 9 out of 10 participants (90%) were registered to vote, though only 5 (50%) were registered with a political party. Among those affiliated, 1 was Republican, 2 were Democrats, and 2 identified as Independents. The other half either did not affiliate with a party or were unsure. This suggests a

trend toward issue-based engagement, rather than strong partisan identity.

Demographic patterns help further explain the variation in political attitudes. The sample included 6 males and 4 females, with ages ranging from 20 to mid-60s. Three participants (30%) identified as Hispanic/Latino, and 5 identified as White, with the rest identifying as Black, Mixed, or declining to state. In terms of education, 6 participants (60%) held a bachelor's degree or higher, while 3 (30%) had some college, and 1 had only a high school diploma. These levels of education likely shaped both the language and depth of responses, particularly regarding policy preferences in education and healthcare. Higher education levels often correlate with greater political awareness and more complex views, especially on institutional trust and party alignment.

Governors

The governor's office in New Jersey holds a prominent position in the public eye. In the Clifton survey, participants readily shared their opinions on Governor Phil Murphy's performance, but many of their comments reflected confusion about the actual powers and responsibilities of the role. Several respondents connected him to property taxes, healthcare access, and even local road maintenance. While these are important concerns, not all of them fall under direct gubernatorial control. This suggests that people often judge governors as representatives of the entire state government, even when legislative bodies or local officials hold the authority. This tendency reflects a broader pattern of confusion within the general population. Bernick (2016) explains that governors receive heightened attention in the media, and because they are more visible than legislators, the public tends to attribute successes or failures of state government directly to them. In the data collected, participants often mentioned that the governor should "do more" to solve affordability or education issues. These expectations reveal how executive figures are often held responsible for broad public frustrations, even when those issues are tied to legislative action or federal policy.

In terms of approval, participants gave Governor Murphy moderately positive ratings.

The average job performance score was 59.1% out of 100. The lowest rating was 40%, and the highest was 75%. Those who rated him more favorably tended to describe him as caring or making an effort, while those with lower scores focused on economic stress and perceived inaction. Crew and Lewis (2011) emphasize that public evaluations of governors are shaped not only by policy but also by how leaders communicate, as a governor's language, energy, and style all play a role in building or eroding public confidence. This showed, as several participants appeared to factor in tone and presence, even when they lacked specific knowledge of policy details

Altogether, the responses collected in this survey show that the public views the governor as both a policymaker and a symbol of state direction. Even when people do not fully understand how power is distributed across state governments, they tend to look to the governor to solve problems and lead by example.

Legislatures

Survey responses suggest that most participants are not highly engaged with or informed about the state legislature. While respondents spoke confidently about the governor, few mentioned legislators or legislative processes when asked about political issues. This aligns with research that finds public knowledge of state legislatures is often limited. Legislative bodies tend to be less visible than governors, yet they hold significant power over taxation, education funding, and infrastructure budgets. The disconnect between what residents want and how policy is made highlights a gap in civic understanding. Strengthening public knowledge of how laws are made at the state level may help create more focused political expectations and participation.

Important Issues and Public Policy

Education and taxation were the most frequently named concerns in the survey. Several participants emphasized that education "affects them most," while others expressed distrust in the state's ability to manage it. Property taxes and the general cost of living were also key

concerns, with many respondents associating these issues with stress and financial pressure. Despite these concerns, responses reflected limited awareness of how policies are developed or implemented. This suggests a need for more accessible public information about how educational and fiscal policy is handled at the state level.

Conclusion

The data collected from ten New Jersey residents highlights both strong opinions and limited understanding of state politics. Participants voiced concern about education, taxation, public safety, and the cost of living. However, their responses often revealed confusion about which branch of government controls what, particularly when assigning responsibility to the governor for issues managed by legislatures or local agencies. Trust in government varied by issue, with higher trust in public safety and lower trust in education. Immigration and affordability also surfaced as deeply divisive topics, showing how personal values shape political priorities. Most participants were registered to vote, though many were not affiliated with a political party. Their evaluations of Governor Murphy reflected moderate approval, suggesting that visibility and symbolic leadership play major roles in how state officials are perceived. While the survey group was small, the findings reflect broader patterns in public opinion: people expect state leaders to deliver results, but they often lack a clear understanding of how those results are achieved. This creates both a challenge and an opportunity for improving civic education and democratic responsiveness in New Jersey politics.

Table 1: Trust in Government to Address Public Safety

Trust Rating	Male (Count)	Female (Count)	Total
Trust	30% 3/10	10% 1/10	40% 4/10
Neutral	30% 3/10	30% 3/10	60% 6/10
Distrust	--	--	--

Source: Survey data collected by author, February 2025

Table 2: Trust in Government to Address Education

Trust Rating	Male (Count)	Female (Count)	Total
Trust	10% 1/10	20% 2/10	30% 3/10
Neutral	20% 2/10	--	20% 2/10
Distrust	30% 2/10	20% 2/10	50% 5/10

Source: Survey data collected by author, February 2025

Figure 1:

Source: Survey on Participants Concern with Immigration, 2025

Figure 2:

Source: Survey on Governor Murphy's Job Performance, 2025