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# **Thirty-five years of the Kinder Houston Area Survey:**

Tracking Responses to a Changing America





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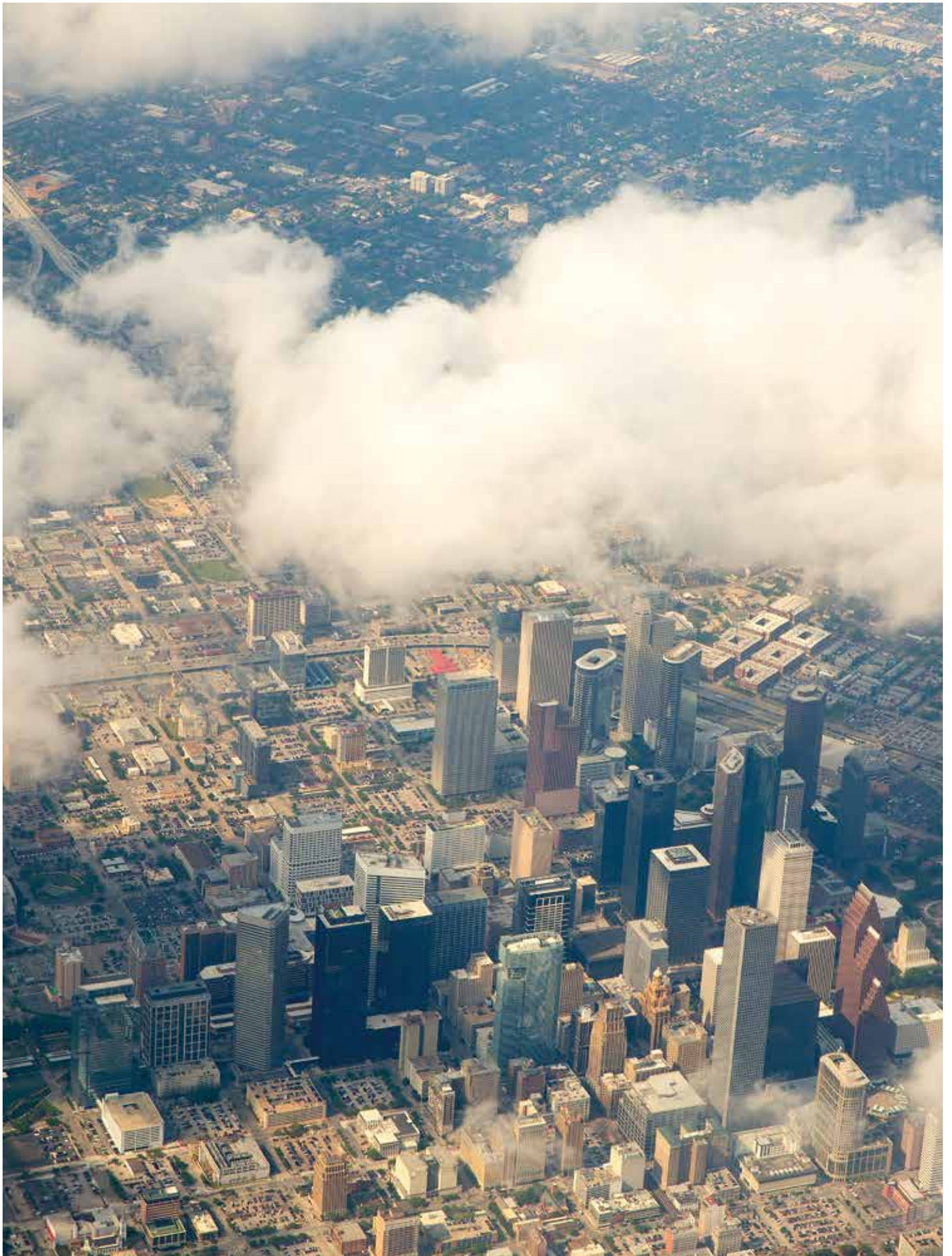
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# Founding Director's Note

**W**e are celebrating this spring the 35th year of the annual Kinder Houston Area Survey (KHAS, 1982-2016), the nation's longest-running study of the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of the residents in any metropolitan region. After the collapse of the oil boom in 1982 and the subsequent major recession, Houston recovered in the 1990s to find itself in the midst of a restructured global, knowledge-based economy and an ongoing demographic revolution. These are the transformations that are occurring across all of America, nowhere more clearly seen or more sharply articulated than in the Houston region.

The traditional low-skilled, blue-collar path to financial stability has now all but disappeared: In today's high-tech worldwide economy, the inequalities in income and wealth are growing rapidly, predicated above all else on access to high-quality education and technical skills. At the same time, Houston is at the forefront of an epic transformation in the U.S. population: An earlier generation, predominantly Anglo and now aging, is being replaced by a new generation of Americans, composed importantly of immigrants and their children, who are a mix of all the world's ethnicities and religions. It is also clear that the Houston area's quality of life (its aesthetic and environmental appeal), which was never of much importance during the oil-boom years of the 1970s and 1980s, has now become central to the region's ability to attract and retain the most innovative companies and talented individuals, the "knowledge workers" who will fuel the engines of the new economy.

In this report, we look back over the 35 years of systematic survey research to explore the way area residents have been responding to remarkable trends. We measure their assessments of life in the Houston area in light of the recent drop in oil prices. We document their increasing support for government initiatives to reduce the widening disparities in economic opportunities and their growing comfort with the region's burgeoning ethnic and cultural diversity. We ask about the bases for the disjuncture so often found between "public opinion"—measured by asking people in the privacy of their homes how they see the world—and "politically effective opinion"—the views that actually get translated into public policy. We conclude with an assessment of the similarities and differences in attitudes and beliefs of the residents in Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery counties.

We are deeply grateful to the Kinder Foundation, to Houston Endowment Inc., and to the many friends and colleagues across the Houston area who have supported this continuing research. That support has enabled us to develop a reliable and ever-changing picture of the way the Houston area is evolving, and to make the research findings readily available to the general public, to civic and business leaders, and to scholars everywhere, in the shared pursuit of solutions to our most pressing urban challenges.

**Stephen L. Klineberg**

Founding Director  
The Kinder Institute for Urban Research

# Highlights from This Year's Survey

## Economic Outlooks

- Despite the continuing low price of oil and the loss of upstream production jobs, the region's unemployment rate remains lower than in the nation as a whole.
- Area residents are upbeat in their assessments of job opportunities in the Houston area, in their personal financial outlooks, and in their overall evaluations of living conditions in the Houston area, despite continuing concerns about traffic.
- At the same time, the optimism is tempered by growing awareness of the deepening inequalities both in Houston and in the nation as a whole: The surveys document area residents' increasing support for government efforts to strengthen the safety net and to foster greater access to economic opportunity.

## Assessing Diversity

- In the course of the past 35 years, this traditionally biracial, Southern metropolis has quite suddenly become one of the most ethnically diverse urban regions in the country.
- Consistently and unmistakably, on identical questions asked across the years, area residents express increasingly favorable views toward the new immigration.
- The survey respondents decisively reject the calls in the current electoral campaign to restrict immigration from Muslim countries and to turn away refugees seeking asylum.

## SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS) completed the interviews for this year's survey between January 25 and March 3, 2016. They reached (68 percent by landline, 32 percent by cell phone) a scientifically selected representative sample of 808 residents from Harris County. As in the past two years, the firm conducted additional interviews with representative samples of residents in Fort Bend County (N=401) and in Montgomery County (N=401), for a total of 1,610 systematic interviews.

The responses from all 35 years are "weighted" to correct for variations in the likelihood of selection and to align the sample more closely with known population characteristics. This procedure helps to ensure that the data will reflect as

accurately as possible the actual distributions along such dimensions as race and ethnicity, age, gender and education levels. The findings presented in the first three sections of this report, unless otherwise indicated, record the views of respondents from Harris County only, enabling us to determine how the weighted responses in 2016 differ from those that were given to identical questions by previous representative samples of Harris County residents.

The margin of error for samples of this size is plus or minus 3 percent, so a change from one year to the next of six points or less could be due to chance variations in the samples. A change of seven or more points, however, is unlikely to have been produced by chance, thereby justifying the conclusion that the surveys are capturing real changes in the attitudes and beliefs of area residents.



## Public Attitudes and Policies

- Why is public opinion so often at odds with public policy?
- Registered voters who are less affluent, younger, and non-Anglo are less likely to vote in most elections than are older, more affluent Anglos.
- The respondents who are “pro-life” are much more likely to vote on that issue alone than are “pro-choice” respondents.
- The rejection of the “Human Equal Rights Ordinance” in the November 2015 election did not signal a retreat from area residents’ increasing opposition to discrimination against gays and lesbians.
- On issues of criminal justice reform, public policies and public attitudes are converging.
- The surveys have also found that Harris County residents over the years are becoming both more secular and more aligned with the Democratic Party.

## County Differences

- Despite important differences among the region’s three largest counties in population characteristics and party affiliations, the surveys point to important areas of agreement.
- The residents from the three counties generally differ only slightly in their beliefs about the benefits of diversity, in their evaluations of the importance of more parks, bayou trails and other quality-of-place improvements, and in their call for more opportunities for “walkable urbanism” in this car-dependent region.







# Economic Outlooks

**D**espite the continuing loss of jobs in upstream oil and gas production, area residents continue to be upbeat in their assessments of the local economy and in their evaluations of life in the Houston area.

The long season of unexpectedly low oil prices has clearly tempered the exuberance so many Houstonians were feeling in the wake of \$100 oil in 2013 and 2014. Last year's survey found that the job losses in upstream energy production had not affected the generally optimistic outlooks of most area residents. We thought that picture might have changed in the 2016 survey. Through all of last year, however, the jobs lost in the oil patch were offset by continuing growth in the education, construction, retail trade, applied science, health care, and hospitality sectors, which were still riding the momentum of growth sparked by the oil and gas boom of 2013 and 2014. As that momentum winds down in the months ahead, the problems in the oil-production sector, in the view of several local economists, are likely to spread across the region as a whole.

**Objective indicators.** Figure 1 provides a vivid reminder of the economic upheavals that the Houston area has undergone over the course of the past 35 years. The economic boom brought about by the ten-fold increase in the price of oil during the 1970s and into the early 1980s was reflected in the low unemployment (at 4.7 percent) recorded in February 1982, at the time of the first KHAS survey. In May 1982, the oil boom collapsed. The price of a barrel of Texas crude dropped from about \$32 in early 1982 to less than \$28 by the end of 1983, but Houston had been building and borrowing in the expectation of \$50 oil. Within 18 months, a region that for more than a century had known only growing prosperity recorded a net loss of nearly 100,000 jobs.

**FIGURE 1:**  
The official unemployment rates in Harris County (February Figures, 1982–2016)



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unemployment rates are not seasonally adjusted.



to reach a total of 6.5 million, up from 6.0 million in 2010. By the time of next year's survey (in February 2017), we will have a clearer picture of how well and for how long the Houston economy has been able to weather the continuing low price of Texas crude.

**Subjective evaluations.** It is interesting to note that the public's subjective impressions faithfully mirror these official figures. In every year, as indicated in Figure 2, the survey participants have been asked to evaluate job opportunities in the Houston area ("excellent, good, fair, or poor?"). The lowest ratings in the past 35 years were given in the depths of great oil-bust recession: One in every seven jobs that had been in Houston in 1982 had disappeared by 1987; the falling price of oil hit bottom in late 1986 at less than \$10 per barrel. By the time of the 1987 survey, only 11 percent gave positive ratings to job opportunities, 71 percent cited the economy as the biggest problem facing the region (see Figure 4), and half of all area residents said living conditions in the Houston area were getting worse.

By 1990 the region had emerged from the recession, only to enter into a nationwide downturn and then the economic expansion of the "stock market bubble" and the "dot.com boom." The positive ratings of job opportunities increased steadily from 25 percent in 1993 to 68 percent in 2000. The recession of 2001-2003 brought another bust, to be followed by yet another recovery later in the decade; then a drop again, from 58 percent in 2007 to 35 percent in both 2010 and 2011, during the years of the recent "Great Recession." As the economy improved once again, the 2012 survey recorded a significant turnaround in area residents' subjective evaluations of local job opportunities, increasing to 48 percent positive ratings that year, and then to 58 percent in 2013 and to 69 percent in 2015. The evaluations dropped to 62 percent in this year's survey.

There was improvement in 1984, prompting the oft-repeated words of encouragement, "Stay alive 'til '85!" Then came the second major blow, when the falling price of oil hit bottom in late 1986 at less than \$10 per barrel and the recession spread from the energy sector to the entire economy. During the ensuing years, there would be three more boom-and-bust episodes, followed by robust recoveries. In the years since 2010, the region recorded a steady drop in unemployment rates, as Houston continued to lead the nation in jobs and population growth; but note the slight uptick in unemployment as the year 2016 began.

The official unemployment rates in Harris County dropped from 8.6 percent in February 2010 to 6.8 percent in 2013, to 5.7 percent in 2014, to 4.3 percent in 2015, and then increased to 4.7 percent in February 2016. The unemployment rate for the nation as a whole in that same month was 5.0 percent. Houston is still among the fastest growing urban areas in the country: Between July 2014 and July 2015, the metro region added more than 150,000 residents,

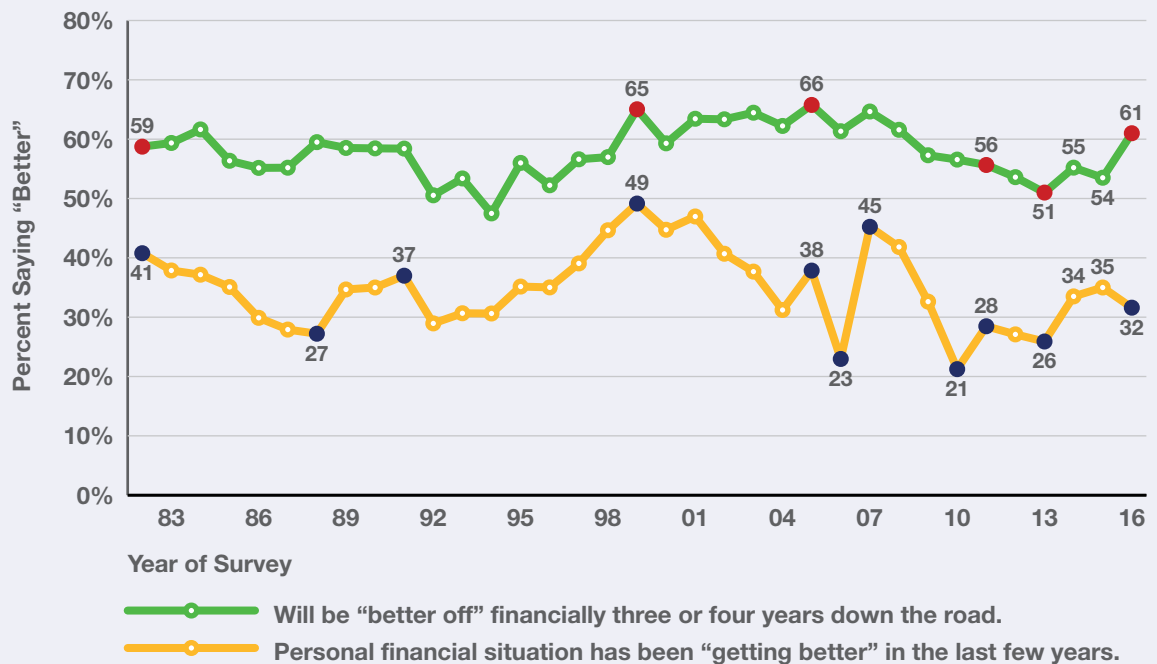
**FIGURE 2:**  
Positive ratings of job opportunities in the Houston area (1982-2016)





**FIGURE 3:**

Respondents' assessments of their personal financial situations (1982-2016)



**Personal financial assessments.** In the years between 2011 and 2013, even as the overall economy improved, there was no meaningful change in the proportion of area residents who said they personally were doing better financially over the past few years. As indicated in Figure 3, the proportion who reported doing better was 28 percent in 2011, 27 percent in 2012, and 26 percent in 2013. In 2014 the survey recorded a significant increase, to 34 percent, in the numbers of respondents who indicated that their personal situations had been getting better in the past few years. The positive numbers were unchanged at 35 percent in 2015 and then recorded a slight decline, to 32 percent, in this year's survey.

There was a similar, and more sustained, improvement in the respondents' outlooks on their personal economic futures. In the 2011 survey, 56 percent thought they would be better off three or four years down the road. Despite the improving economy in those years, that expression of optimism dropped consistently to just 51 percent in 2013, but then increased to 55 and 54 percent in 2014 and 2015. By the time of this year's survey, confidence in the future had grown significantly to 61 percent. Area residents, with their traditional optimism, continue to be upbeat about their economic prospects, even as fewer report doing better in the past few years, and more are giving negative ratings to job opportunities in the Houston area.

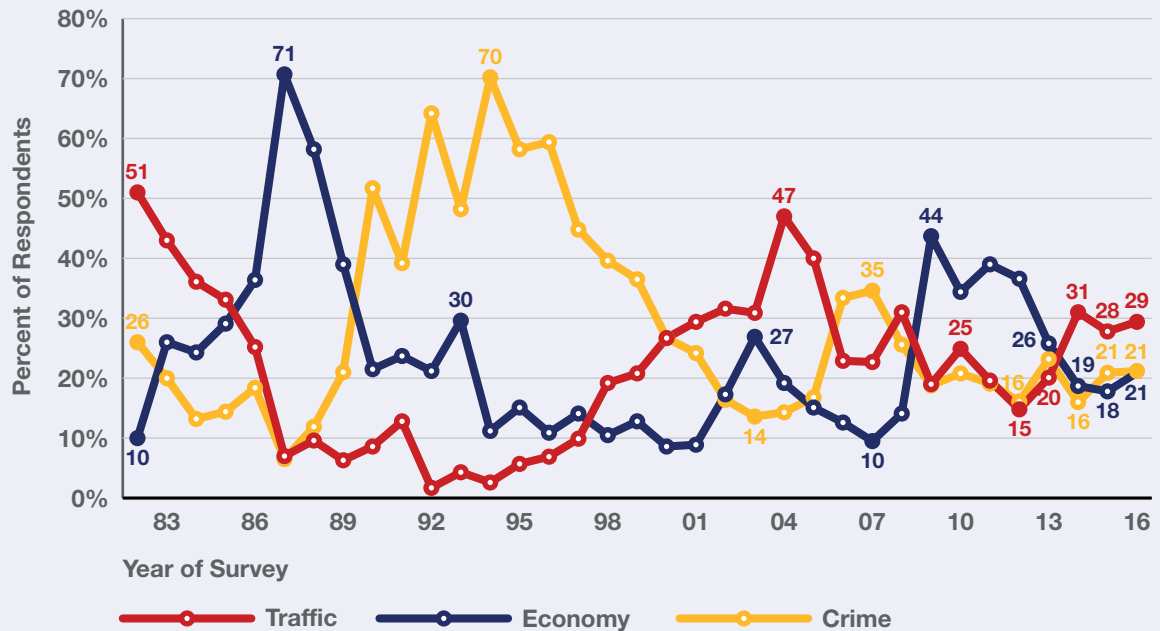


**The biggest problem.** Meanwhile, as economic concerns have lessened and population growth continues apace, traffic is now the dominant pre-occupation. The open-ended question that begins each survey asks: "What would you say is the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today?" Figure 4 depicts the percentages among successive samples of Harris County residents who spontaneously named traffic congestion, the economy, or crime as the biggest problem in Houston. The data provide another graphic reminder of the upheavals that have marked this region's history during the past 35 years.

In the booming years of the early 1980s, traffic congestion was the

**FIGURE 4:**

The biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today (1982-2016)



dominant concern, but during the recession of the mid-1980s area residents were preoccupied with economic issues. The percentages naming the economy as the most serious problem peaked at 71 percent in early 1987. In the 1990s, worries about crime were predominant, mentioned by 70 percent of area residents in 1995. In the years since then, the numbers citing crime or personal safety as the biggest problem decreased steadily, to just 16 percent in 2014 and then up slightly to 21 percent in this year's survey.

Meanwhile, the proportion of area residents who named traffic as the pre-eminent concern grew from single digits in the early 1990s to 47 percent in 2004; traffic woes faded during the years from 2009 to 2012, when economic anxieties once again predominated. In the last few years, with the

region's population still surging, traffic has once again taken over as the dominant concern among area residents. In this year's survey, traffic congestion was cited as the biggest problem by 29 percent of Harris County residents, as it was by 28 percent in 2015 and by 31 percent in 2014—up from 20 percent in 2013 and 15 percent in 2012. Just 21 percent this year named the economy as the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area. In this rapidly growing, automobile-dependent metropolitan region, concerns about traffic are likely to be the “new normal” for many years to come.

**Other quality-of-life indicators.** Despite the concerns about traffic, crime and the economy, Figure 5 indicates that fully 38 percent of area residents in both 2015 and 2016, more than at any time in the past decade, asserted that living conditions in the Houston area have generally been “getting better” over the past 3 to 4 years: The comparable figures were 37 percent in 2014 and 28 percent in 2012. In addition, the proportion of area residents who said they were “very worried” about crime has remained below 30 percent in the past several surveys, and concerns about air pollution in the Houston area have improved considerably: Almost half of all the participants in the 2008 survey rated the control of air pollution in the Houston area as “poor,” but the proportion giving that lowest rating has fallen to just 26 percent in recent years.

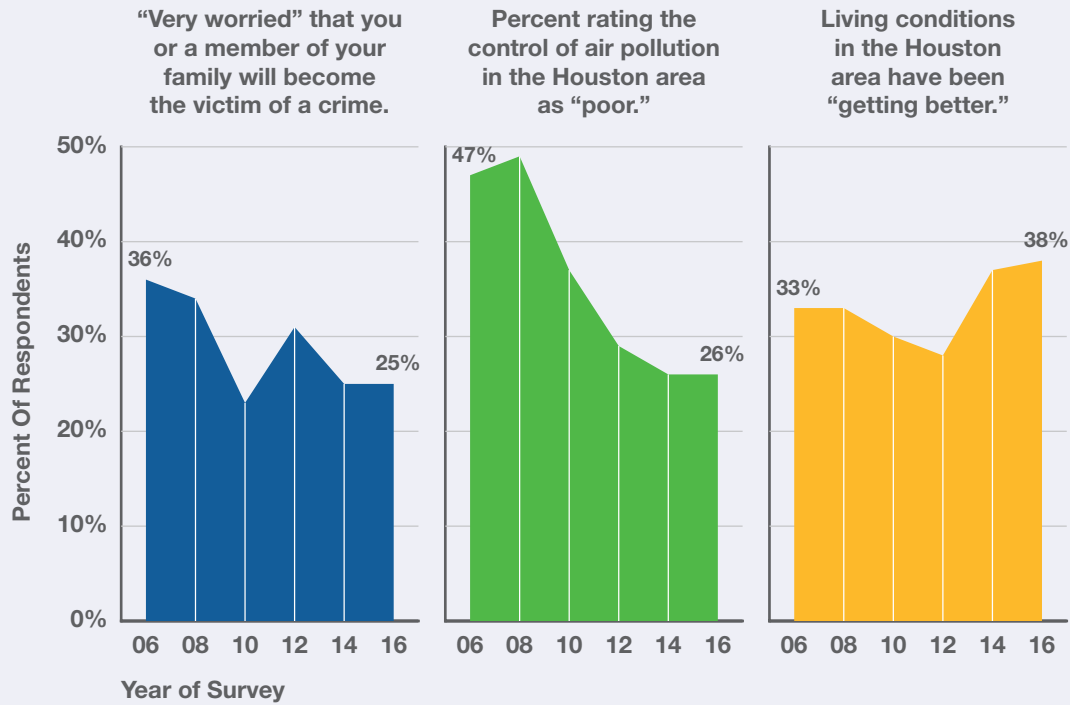
In sum, the survey participants generally express distinctly positive feelings about living in the Houston area, even as they complain about traffic, pollution, and crime—not to mention the summer heat, the flying cockroaches, and the no mountains! The survey participants' favorable evaluations of life in the Houston area, already high to begin with, have continued to grow across the years. When asked, for example, to evaluate “the Houston area in general as a place





**FIGURE 5:**

Assessments of crime, air pollution, and overall living conditions in the Houston area today (2006-2016)



to live,” the percent saying “excellent” or “good” increased steadily from 70 percent in 2006 to 77 percent in 2010 and to 81 percent in this year’s survey.

**Concerns about the national economy.** Area residents’ positive evaluations of the local economy and of life in the Houston area are tempered by growing concerns about the broader inequalities in America, the loss of the

well-paying low-skilled jobs that built a thriving middle class across the country in the years after World War II, and the long slide in real earnings experienced by the bottom 60 percent of American workers. Figure 6 depicts the striking transformation that has taken place across the U.S. economy, as the broad-based economic prosperity of the postwar years has given way to blocked opportunities for those without high levels of education and technical skills.

**FIGURE 6:**

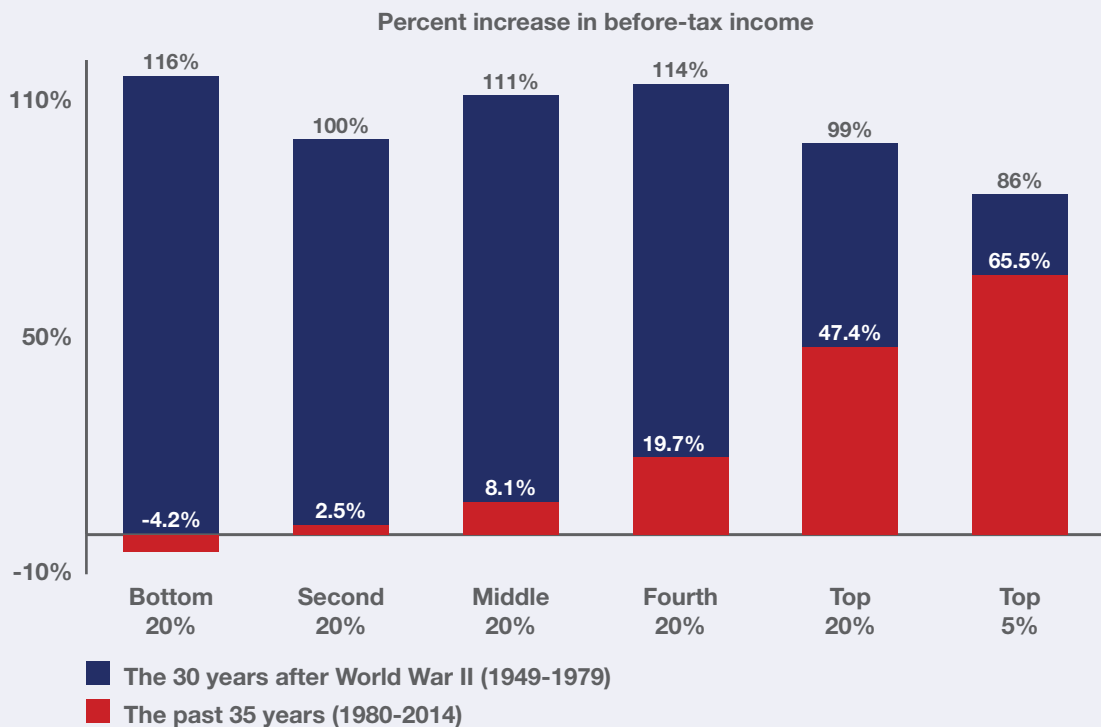
Two contrasting economic eras (1949 to 1979 and 1980 to 2014)

The 30 years after World War II were a period of broad-based prosperity.

The past 35 years have been marked by growing income inequalities.

U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social And Economic Supplements.

Mean Household Income Received By Each Fifth and the Top 5 Percent, Inflation Adjusted to 2014 dollar.

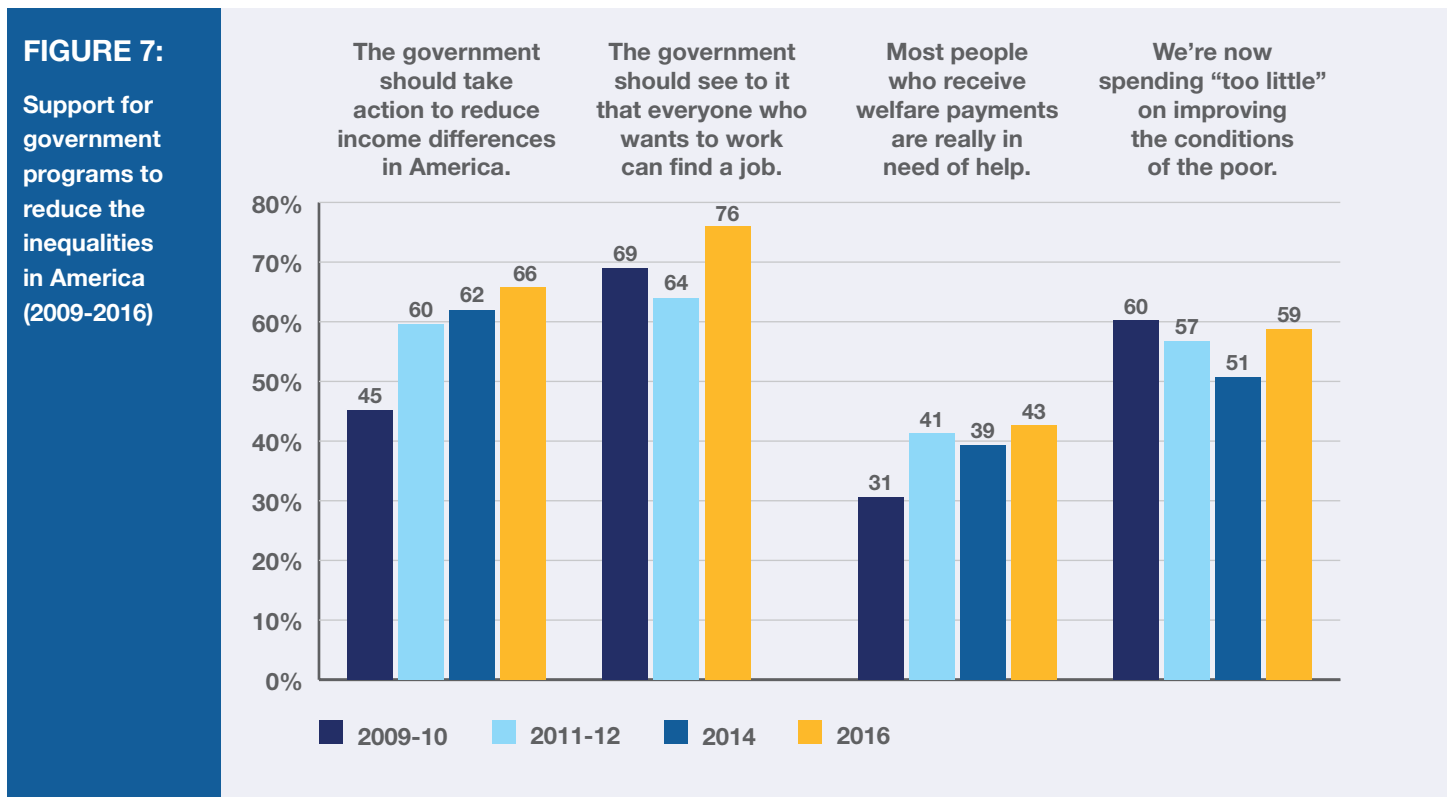




Many area residents are coming to recognize that, in today's global, high-technology economy, workers can lose their jobs and fall into poverty through no fault of their own, and that the government needs to play a role in strengthening the safety net and in fostering greater access to economic opportunity. The 2016 survey included several questions about the role of government in this regard. As indicated in Figure 7, support among the survey respondents for government initiatives to push back against the disparities has grown significantly in recent years.

The proportion of survey participants who agreed that "the government should take action to reduce income differences between rich and poor in America," grew from 45 percent in 2010 to 60 percent in 2012 and to 66 percent today. The proportions calling on government to "see to it that everyone who wants to work can find a job" increased from 69 percent in 2009 and 64 percent when last asked in 2011, to 76 percent in this year's survey.

The survey participants were also asked if they thought "most people who receive welfare payments are really in need of help, or are they taking advantage of the system?" The number who believe that welfare recipients are legitimately in need of help grew from 31 percent in 2010 to 43 percent today. And the proportion who believe that "we're now spending too little on improving the conditions of the poor" dropped from 60 percent in 2010 to 51 percent in 2014, and then grew again to 59 percent in this year's survey.













# Assessing Diversity

**A**s one of the nation's primary magnets for the new immigration, Houston has been a "city of immigrants" for over 30 years. The surveys show clearly that area residents are increasingly embracing the region's burgeoning diversity.

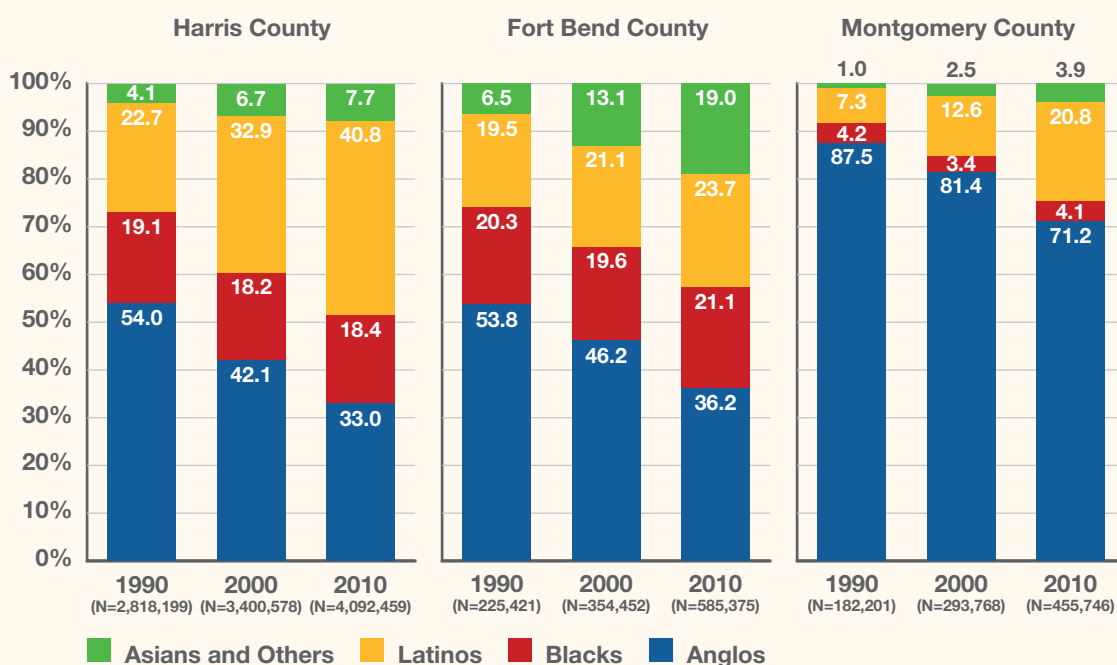
**Houston's demographic revolution.** During the oil-boom years of the 1960s and 1970s, the Houston area's surging population growth was brought about primarily by the in-migration of non-Hispanic whites—Anglos who were streaming into this energy capital from all other parts of the country. After the collapse of the oil boom in 1982, the net increase in Houston's Anglo population slowed dramatically and then declined. The region's rapid population growth during the past three decades is attributable almost exclusively to the influx of Asians, Latinos, and African Americans. As indicated in Figure 8, between 1990 and 2010, the Anglo share of the Harris County population declined from 54 to 33 percent, while the Hispanic num-

bers grew from 23 to 41 percent, and the Asians and others from 4 to 8 percent.

The changes in Fort Bend County have been equally dramatic: In the three decades from 1990 to 2010, the percentage of Anglos in the county dropped from 54 to 36 percent, while the proportions of Latinos grew from 20 to 24 percent and of Asians and others from 7 to 19 percent. Today, Fort Bend County has one of the most even distributions among the four major ethnic communities that can be found anywhere in the country, at 20 percent Asian and others, 24 percent Hispanic, 21 percent African-American, and 35 percent Anglo. Meanwhile, north of Highway 6, Montgomery County is 71 percent Anglo; it was 88 percent Anglo in 1990.

**FIGURE 8:**

**The demographic transformations of Harris, Fort Bend and Montgomery counties (1990-2010)**



Source: U.S. Census, 1990-2010. Classifications based on Texas State Data Center Conventions.

This traditionally black-and-white Southern metropolitan area has quite suddenly and unexpectedly become, by most measures, the single most ethnically and culturally diverse urban region in the entire country. No transition of this magnitude can occur without generating conflict and anxiety, particularly in a time of growing economic and personal insecurity.

The surveys document deep divisions among the various ethnic communities in their beliefs about the continuing realities of discrimination and the extent of equality of opportunity in American society. In the 2016 survey, for example, 61 percent of the Anglo respondents agreed with the statement that “Blacks and other minorities have the same opportunities as whites in the U.S. today,” but 64 percent of the African-American respondents *disagreed* with that assertion.

**Attitudes toward the new immigration.** It is all the more interesting (and reassuring), therefore, to discover that, on virtually every relevant measure of attitudes and beliefs, Harris County residents have been expressing increasingly positive views about the influx of the immigrants, both “legal” and “undocumented,” who have transformed the ethnic composition of the Houston region. Depicting several of the past questions that were replicated in this year’s survey,

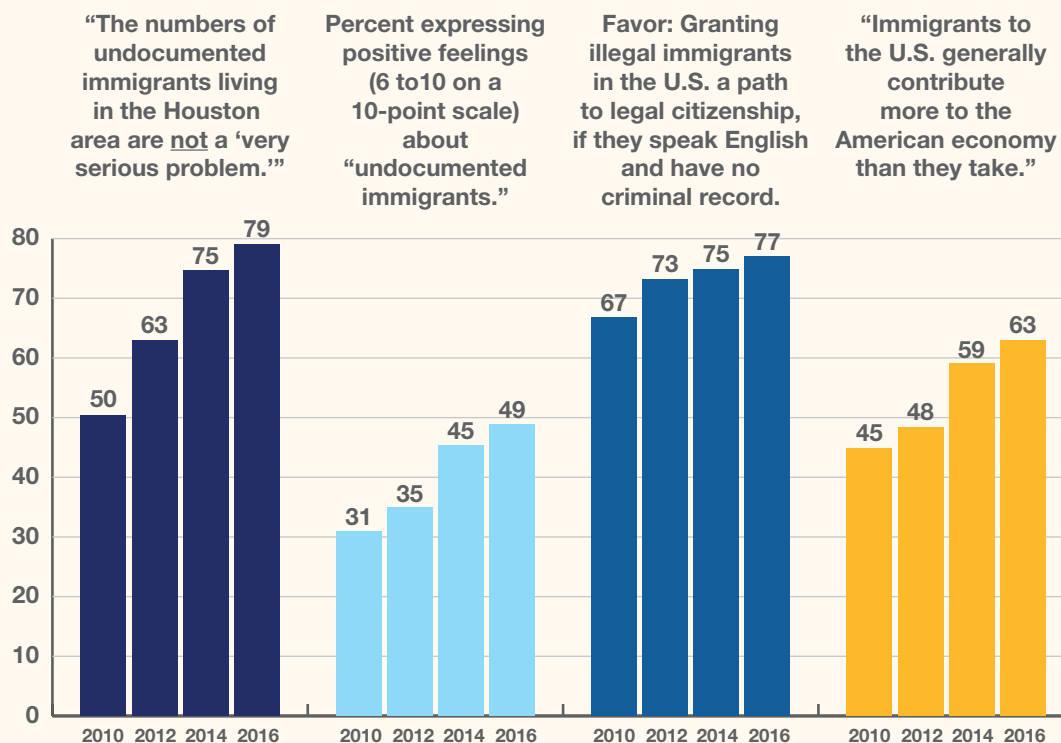


Figure 9 documents the consistently improving assessments of the new immigration.

Fully 79 percent in this year’s survey, up from 75 percent in 2014, thought that “the number of undocumented immigrants who are living in the Houston area” did not constitute a “very serious problem.” A comparable question asked in previous years found 63 percent in 2012 and just 50 percent in 2010 asserting that the “large number of undocumented immigrants who have been coming to Houston in recent years” did not amount to a “very serious problem”

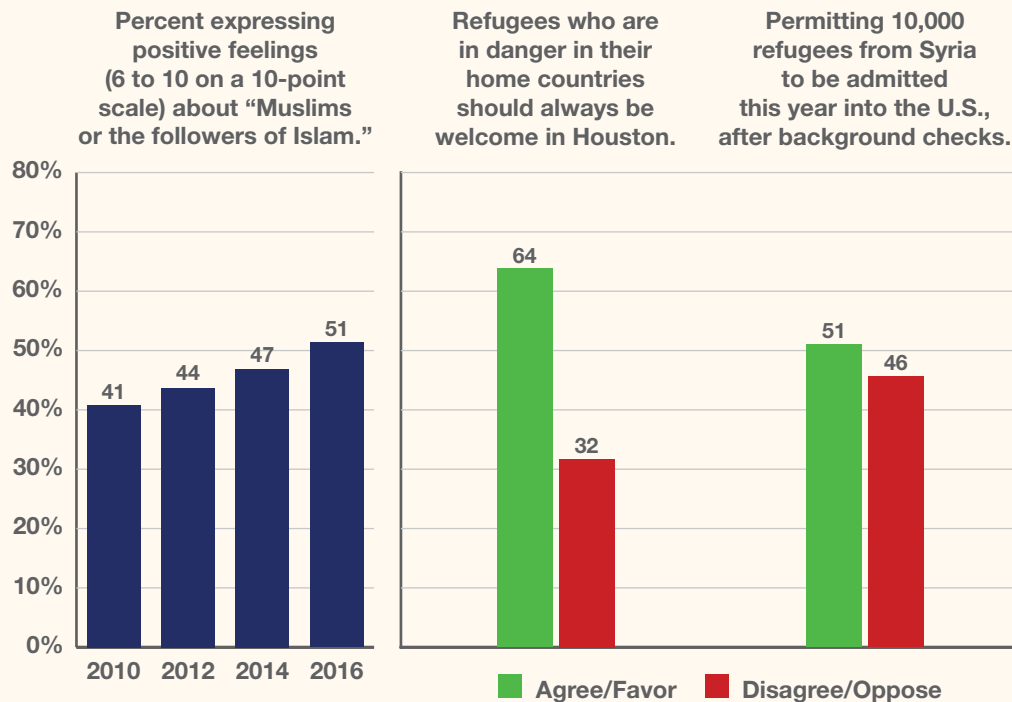
**FIGURE 9:**

**Attitudes toward immigrants in Harris County (2010-2016)**



**FIGURE 10:**

**Perspectives  
on Muslims  
and refugees  
(2010-2016)**



for the city. The survey participants were also asked to express their feelings about undocumented immigrants on a 10-point scale (where "1" means "very unfavorable feelings" and "10" means "very favorable feelings"). The proportion expressing positive feelings (a score of 6 to 10) grew from 31 percent in 2010 to 45 percent in 2014 and to 49 percent in this year's survey.

In addition, as indicated in Figure 9, the proportion of area residents who said they were in favor of "granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record" has continued to grow, up from 67 percent in 2010 to 73 percent in 2012, to 75 percent in 2014 and to 77 percent in this year's survey. In 2016, 63 percent of area residents believed that immigrants to the U.S. (either with or without papers) generally "contribute more to the American economy than they take," up from 59 percent in 2014, 48 percent in 2012, and 45 percent in 2010.

The figures indicate clear and significant positive shifts in area residents' assessments of the impact of immigration on life in the Houston area. The fear of a continuing "invasion" of undocumented immigrants has dissipated as the actual net number of new immigrants coming to America has declined almost to zero in the past few years. The growth in the numbers of Asians and Hispanics in Houston is no longer due to the influx of new immigrants, but to the U.S.-born children of immigrants who came here 20 and 30 years ago.

In addition, area residents have had several decades of experience living in a city that has become a major immigrant destination, and they have had many opportunities to experience the benefits that immigrants bring to the communities

into which they move and to the enrichment of life in the Houston region more generally. The surveys make it clear that concerns about the impact of undocumented immigrants in the region are fading across the board. The general public may well be more prepared today than at any time in the past 30 years to support the initiatives that can finally lead to meaningful comprehensive immigration reform.

Area residents are also rejecting the calls to restrict immigration from Muslim countries and to turn away refugees seeking asylum in America. When representative samples of area residents are asked in the privacy of their homes about these issues, a very different picture emerges from the impression sometimes given in electoral campaigns. As indicated in Figure 10, the percent of area residents expressing positive feelings toward "Muslims or the followers of Islam" has actually increased significantly in recent years, up from 41 percent giving ratings of 6 to 10 on the 10-point scale in 2010 to 47 percent in 2014 and to 51 percent in this year's survey.

Two new questions were added to the survey this year to explore further the public's attitudes toward the acceptance of refugees. Fully 64 percent agreed with the statement that "Refugees who are in danger in their home countries because of their beliefs or their ethnicity should always be welcome in Houston." Area residents were almost evenly divided, but more in favor than opposed (by 51 to 46 percent), to the idea of "permitting 10,000 refugees from Syria to be admitted this year into the U.S., as long as they have passed the background checks." The surveys offer a valuable corrective to the common assumption that, in a democracy like ours, political rhetoric and public policy are faithful reflections of the actual policy preferences of the general public.







# Public Attitudes and Policies

**O**n a variety of issues, area residents' attitudes and beliefs are at odds with public policies, but there are also signs of political convergence and clear indications of a population that is becoming more secular and more Democratic.

As we have seen, the surveys document growing support among area residents for providing a path to legal citizenship for undocumented immigrants (aka, “amnesty”), and they indicate that area residents are increasingly calling on the federal government to reduce the inequalities in America. There seems to be a clear disconnect between the views expressed in these surveys and the way public policy is generally shaped in this state and country.

**Why is public opinion so often at odds with public policy?** Social scientists point to a variety of explanations. For one, the dominating influence of money in politics today gives the “donor class” powerful influence over the policies that are considered to be politically feasible and over their likelihood of being enacted, re-

gardless of the views of the general public. In addition, the gerrymandering of voting districts often makes winning in the primaries virtually tantamount to getting elected, and primary voters are usually more extreme in their views than the electorate as a whole.

Another explanation is voter turnout. The people who actually vote in most elections are hardly a representative sample of all those who are eligible to vote. Registered voters who are less affluent, younger, and non-Anglo are much less likely to vote than older, more affluent Anglos. As the Houston-area population becomes more Latino and less Anglo, the changing mix will be reflected first in the schoolroom, next in the workplace, and only later (but inevitably) in the ballot box.

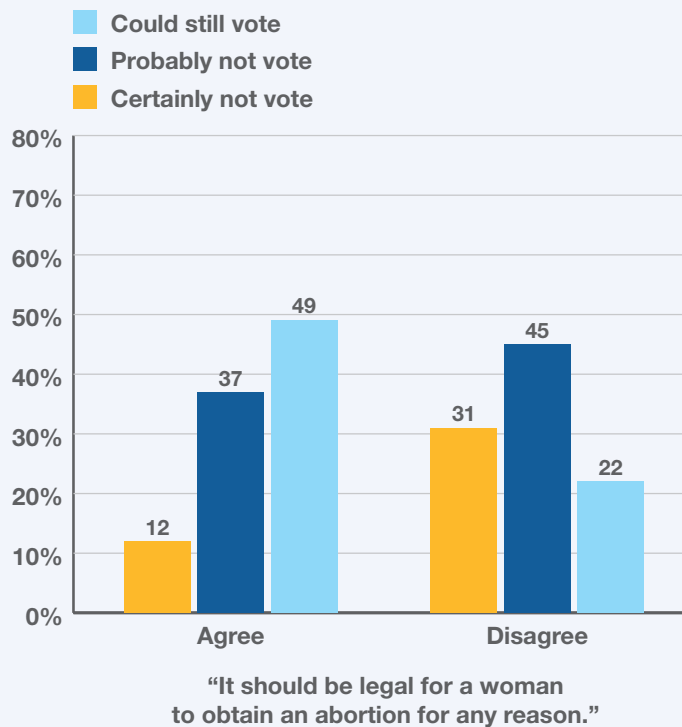


Still another factor has to do with single-issue voting: Citizens who are intensely pro-gun, pro-life, or anti-gay may be more likely to vote on those issues alone than are the voters who support gun control or gay rights, but who also hold a variety of other views with equal conviction. In 2013, for example, as the U.S. Congress defeated every effort to strengthen controls over access to handguns, fully 81 percent of the respondents in the Houston survey that year said they were “strongly in favor” of “requiring universal criminal background checks for all gun sales.” That public preference was never translated into effective legislation, since those who were opposed to any such restrictions were more likely to advocate for that position and to vote

**FIGURE 11:**

Single-issue voting among pro-choice and pro-life respondents (2016)

Could you still vote for a candidate “whose views you mostly agreed with, but who took a position on abortion rights that you disagreed with completely?”



on this one issue alone than those who were in support of “common-sense” regulations.

**Single-issue voting on abortion rights.** An example of the differential propensity to vote one’s convictions can be seen in the findings from this year’s survey on the differences between “pro-choice” and “pro-life” adherents in their voting commitments. Even as the state of Texas has increasingly sought to enact legislation that limits a woman’s access to abortions, fully 63 percent of the respondents in 2015 said they were *opposed* to “a law that would make it more difficult for a woman to obtain an abortion.” Fifty-eight percent in the 2015 survey also said they personally believed that abortion was “morally wrong,” reflecting their tendency over the years to be both anti-abortion and pro-choice. In 2016, 57 percent agreed with the strong pro-choice statement: “It should be legal for a woman to obtain an abortion if she wants to have one for any reason.”

The survey respondents in 2016 were also asked about the following hypothetical situation: “Suppose that there was a candidate running for the Legislature whose views you mostly agreed with, but who took a position on abortion rights that you disagreed with completely. Would you certainly not vote for that candidate, probably not, or could you still vote for that candidate?” As indicated in Figure 11, the respondents who *disagreed* with the suggestion that it should be legal for a woman to obtain an abortion for any reason were more than twice as likely (at 31 percent) as those who agreed with that position (12 percent) to say that they would

“certainly not” vote for such a candidate. Half of the pro-choice respondents (49 percent) said they could still vote for a candidate who disagreed with them on abortion rights, but this was the case for fewer than a fourth (22 percent) of those who took the “pro-life” position.

### The Human Rights Ordinance.

Another example of the disconnect between public opinion and “politically effective opinion” can be seen in the recent vote by city-of-Houston residents in November 2015 that defeated the “Houston Equal Rights Ordinance.” Proposition 1, as it was known, would have banned discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, characteristics that are not now covered by federal laws. By 61 to 39 percent, Houston voters decisively rejected the ordinance. Did that vote signal a reversal among area residents in their growing opposition to discrimination against

gays and transgendered persons? Or was the election skewed by the higher voter turnout among those who were motivated to go to the polls on this issue, and above all by the framing of the Proposition as a “bathroom ordinance” that would have allowed “gender-confused” men to enter women’s restrooms?

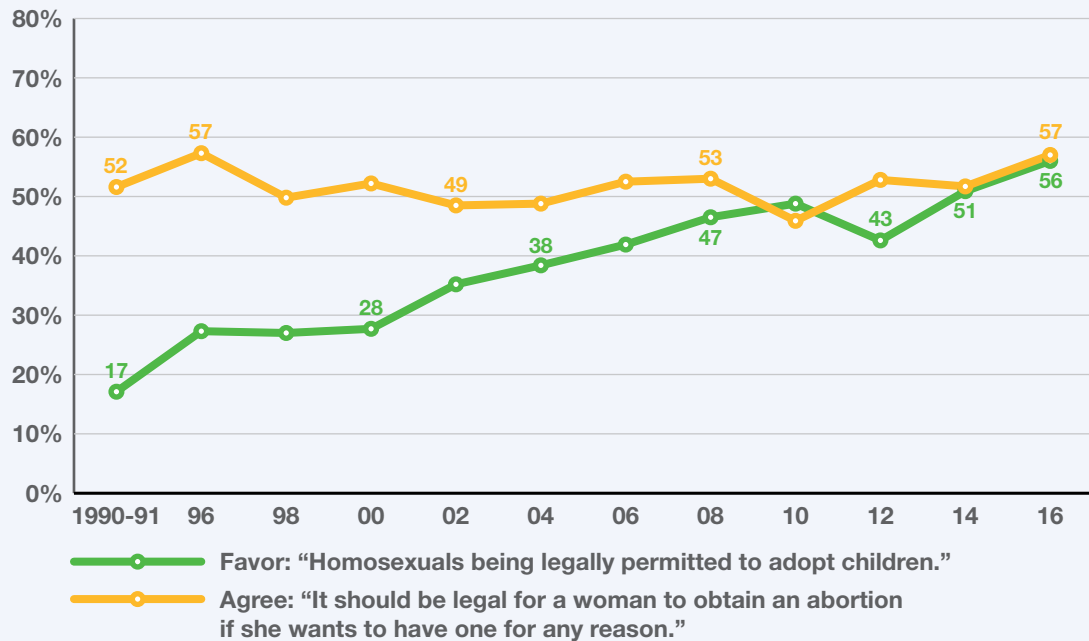
Three months after the decisive defeat of the proposition, the 2016 survey asked city residents how important they thought it was “for the City of Houston to pass a local Equal





**FIGURE 12:**

Support for gay rights and for access to abortion (1990-2016)



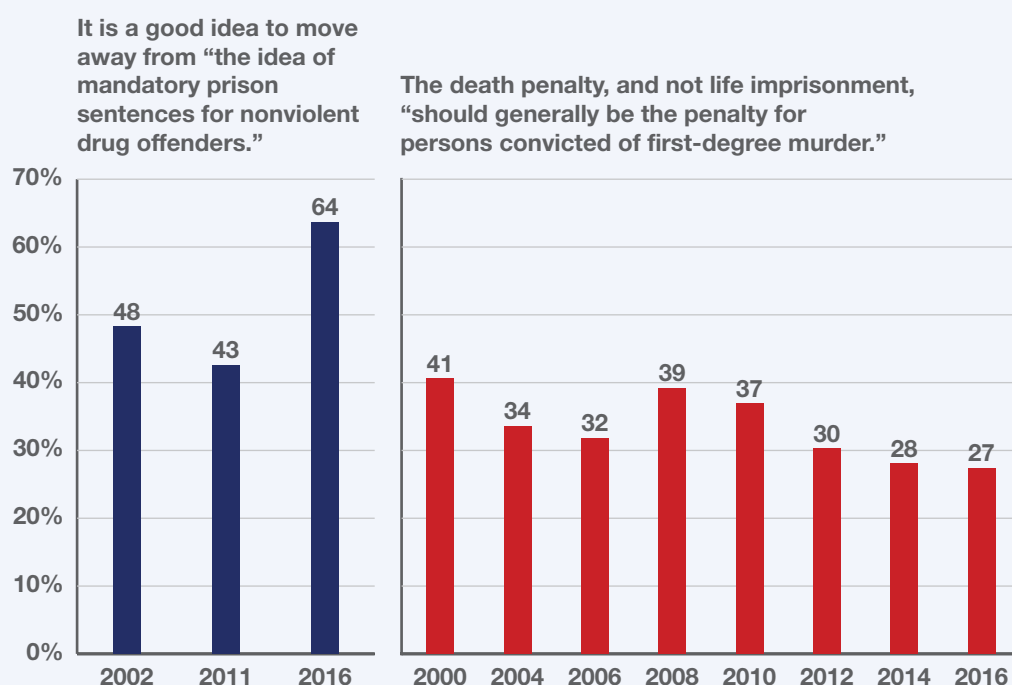
Rights Ordinance that would protect people from discrimination." Fully 60 percent of Harris County residents said that enacting such an ordinance was "very important," another 19 percent said "somewhat important," and just 20 percent said it was "not very" or "not at all important." The defeat of Proposition 1 clearly did not indicate a retreat from the increasing support for gay rights the surveys have documented over the years. Figure 12 depicts the trends on two key questions, showing both the unchanging support for a woman's right to choose across the years since 1990 and the consistent significant increase, year after year, in the propor-

tion of survey participants who said they were in favor of "homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children," rising to 51 percent in 2014 and to 56 percent today, up from just 17 percent when the question was first asked in 1991.

**Convergence on criminal justice reform.** In a democracy, even one as flawed and slow to respond as is the current American version, public opinion will eventually be heard in the shaping of public policy. A growing consensus is taking place today among political leaders of both parties, for example, on the need to reconsider the policies of mass

**FIGURE 13:**

Attitudes toward the criminal justice system (2000-2016)



incarceration and mandatory prison sentences that have filled American prisons with 25 percent of all the inmates imprisoned in the world, and with costs that have risen from \$12 billion per year in 1988 to an estimated \$80 billion today. Increasingly, politicians from almost all political persuasions are coming to believe that reform of the mandatory minimum sentencing laws can save taxpayers money and also make the public safer.

The attitudes and beliefs of area residents as a whole have moved in precisely that same direction. The 2016 survey replicated a question last asked in 2011: “Some states are moving away from the idea of mandatory prison sentences for nonviolent drug offenders. Do you think this is a good idea or a bad idea?” As indicated in Figure 13, the proportion of area residents who now approve of moving away from the idea of mandatory prison sentences has grown to 64 percent, up decisively from 43 percent in 2011 and 48 percent in 2002.

A similar reconsideration seems to be taking place with regard to the death penalty. As Figure 13 also indicates, the survey participants have been asked over the years to choose among three alternative forms of punishment for persons convicted of first-degree murder—“the death penalty, life imprisonment with no chance for parole, or life imprisonment with a chance for parole after 25 years.” The percentages of area residents who chose the death penalty as the most appropriate punishment dropped steadily from 39 percent in 2008 to 27 percent in 2016.

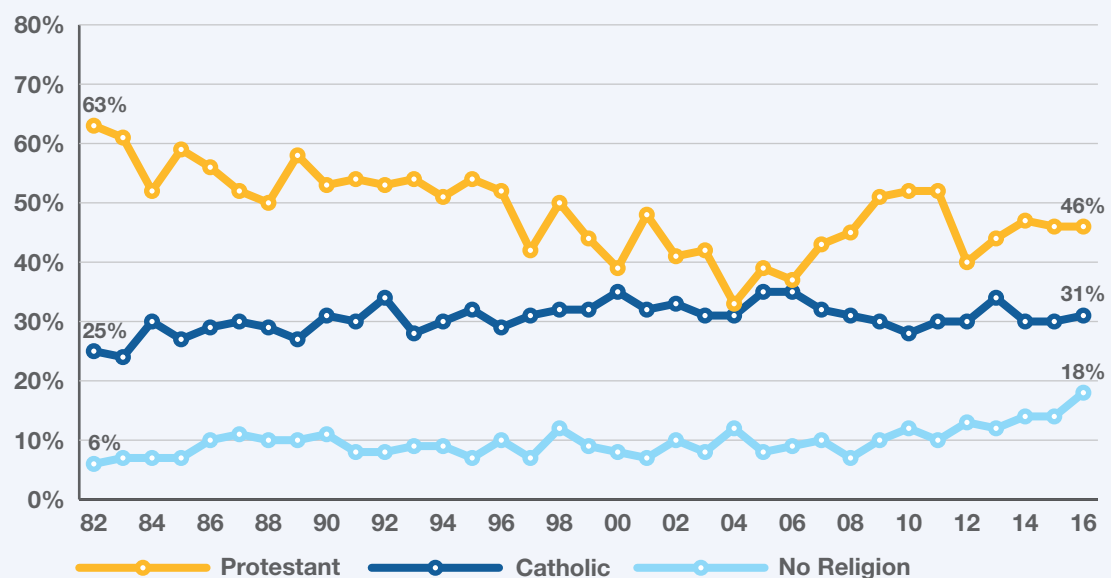


Harris County earned its reputation as the “death penalty capital of America,” having executed more people since 1976 (when the Supreme Court reinstated the practice) than any other county in the nation. However, the recent revelations of discriminatory sentencing, innocent persons being freed from Death Row just before their scheduled executions, and botched lethal injections have been eroding support for capital punishment, and the costs of seeking the death penalty rather than life imprisonment have risen dramatically. Texas executed just 10 prisoners in the year 2014, down from 40 in 2000. During all of 2015, just two inmates were sentenced to death in Texas, and none at all in Harris County.

### Shifts in Religious and Political Orientations.

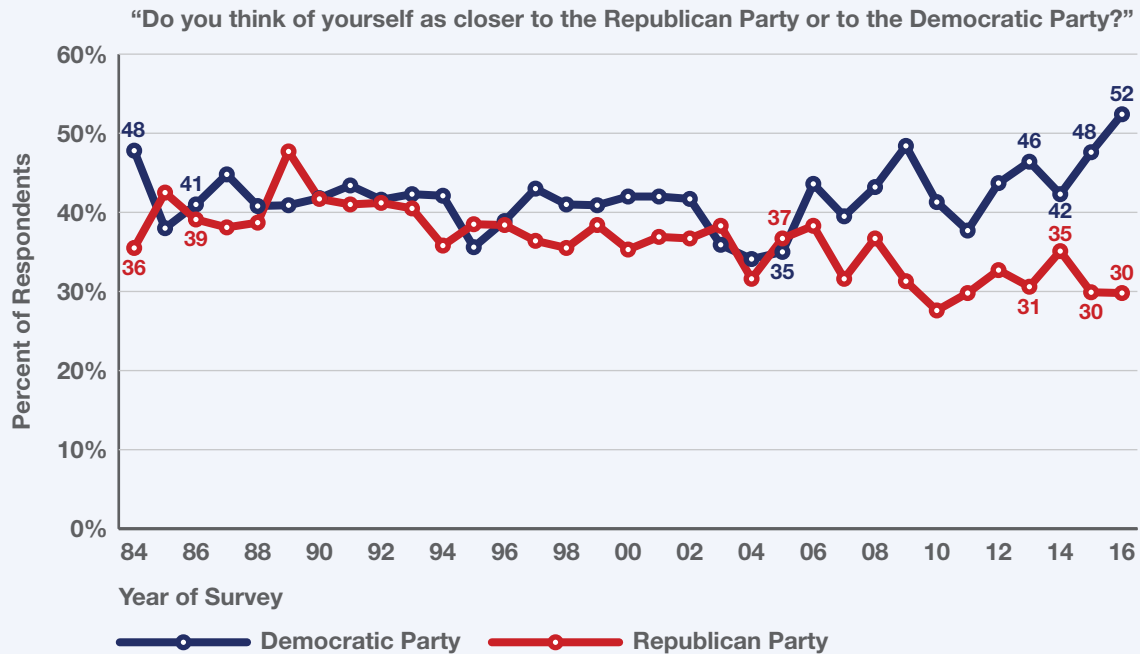
In light of the continuing changes in public opinion and in the region’s demographic characteristics, it is perhaps

**FIGURE 14:**  
The changing  
distributions  
of Protestants,  
Catholics,  
and “nones”  
(1982-2016)



**FIGURE 15:**

Trends in political party affiliation among Harris County residents (1984-2016)



unsurprising that the surveys have also found that Harris County residents are gradually becoming both more secular and more aligned with the Democratic Party. In all of the 35 consecutive surveys, area residents have been asked to indicate their religious preference: "Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?"

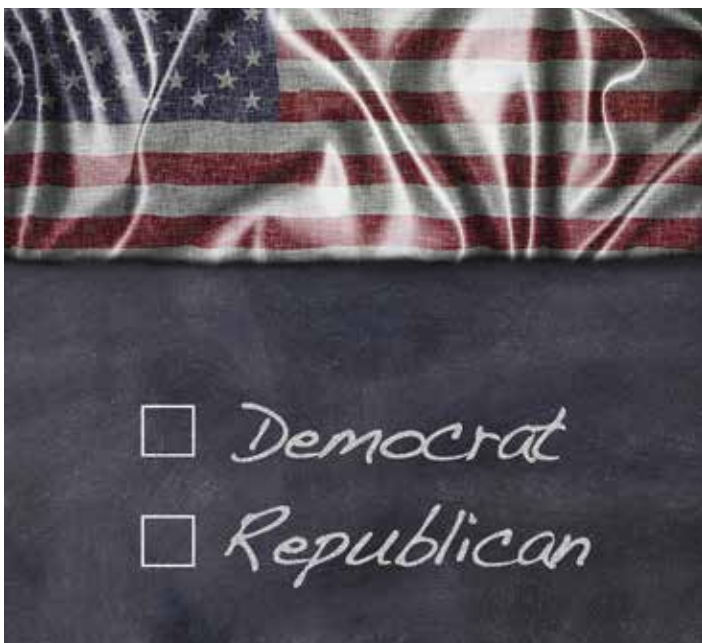
As indicated in Figure 14, the percentage of Protestants in the Harris County population has dropped from almost two-thirds (63 percent) in 1982 to less than half (46 percent) in the most recent years. The share of Catholics—fueled by the influx of Hispanics, Filipinos, and Vietnamese—has grown slightly from 25 percent in the early 1980s to 31 percent

more recently. The numbers of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus have also grown over the years.

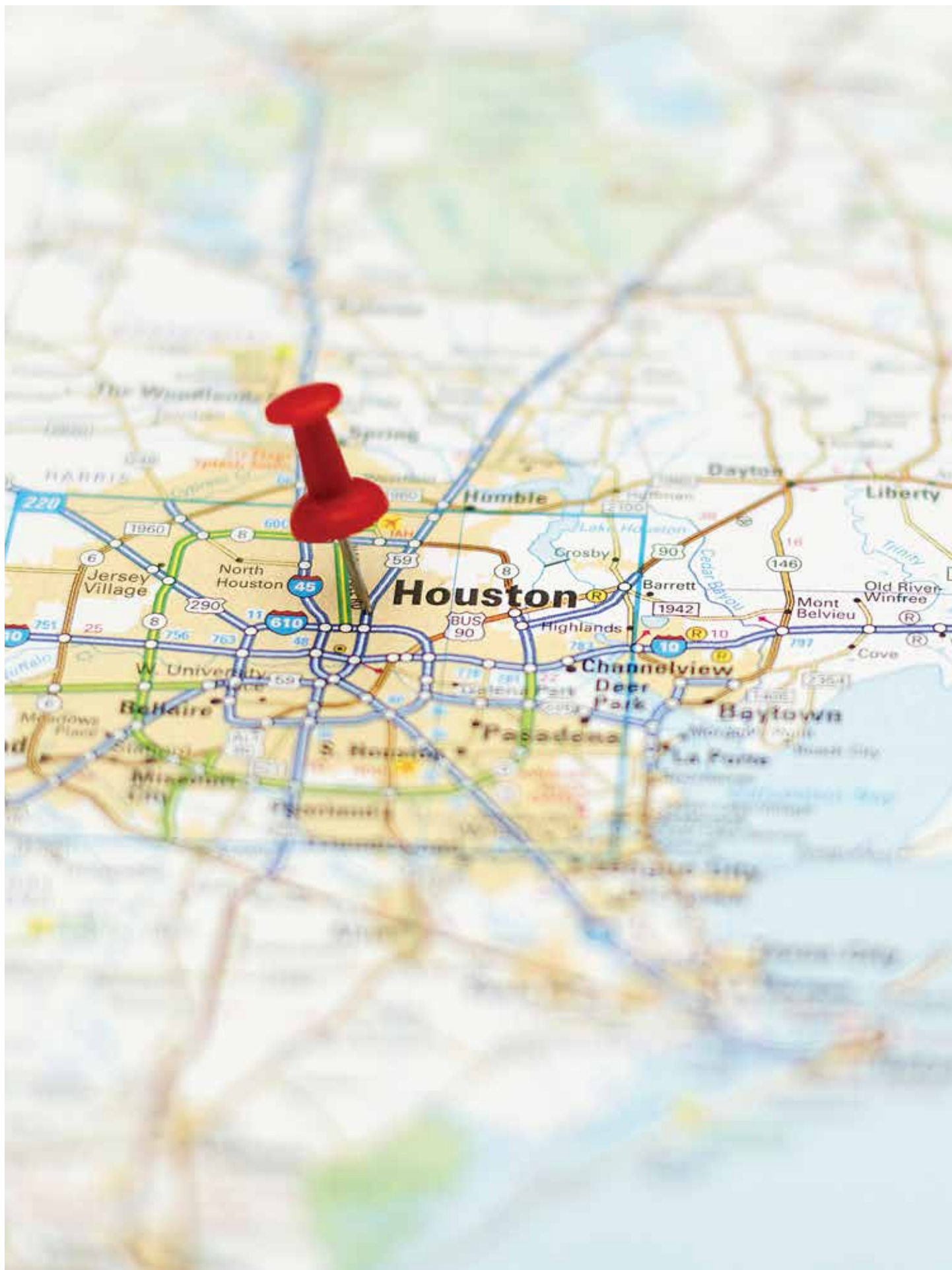
At the same time, the proportion of area residents who answered, "none" or "no religion" when asked for their religious preference has also increased among area residents, as it has in national surveys, growing in the Houston surveys from just 6 or 7 percent in the early years, to 16 and 18 percent more recently. The rise of the "nones" does not mean that religious or spiritual sensitivities are disappearing from the Houston scene. Six out of ten (59 percent) of all area residents in 2016 said that "religion is 'very important' in my life," a number that has remained unchanged across the 35 years of this research.

With regard to political affiliations, Harris County was evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans through most of the early years of the surveys. Beginning in 1984, the survey participants were asked if they would call themselves "a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else." Those who did not indicate an affiliation were asked if they thought of themselves as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party. Figure 15 shows the percentages of area residents over the years who choose "Republican" or "Democrat" in answer to either of these two questions.

In 2005, 35 percent of the survey participants said they were either affiliated with or leaning to the Democratic Party and 37 percent were Republicans. In the years since then, the proportion of Democrats has grown significantly, reaching 52 percent in the 2016 survey, while the numbers associated with the Republican Party declined slightly, to 30 percent. The gap of more than 20 points in political party affiliation is far larger today than ever before in all the years of this research.







# County Differences

## Three Contrasting Communities in One Multi-Centered Metropolitan Region.

In each of the past two years, identical questions were asked of representative samples of approximately 400 residents each from Fort Bend and Montgomery counties, so that direct comparisons can be drawn with the attitudes and beliefs of the respondents from Harris County. Despite the striking differences across the three counties in their population characteristics and party affiliations, the surveys point to widespread agreement in area residents' perspectives on the benefits of diversity, the importance of quality-of-life improvements, and the need for more "walkable urbanism" alternatives in this thoroughly automobile-dependent region.

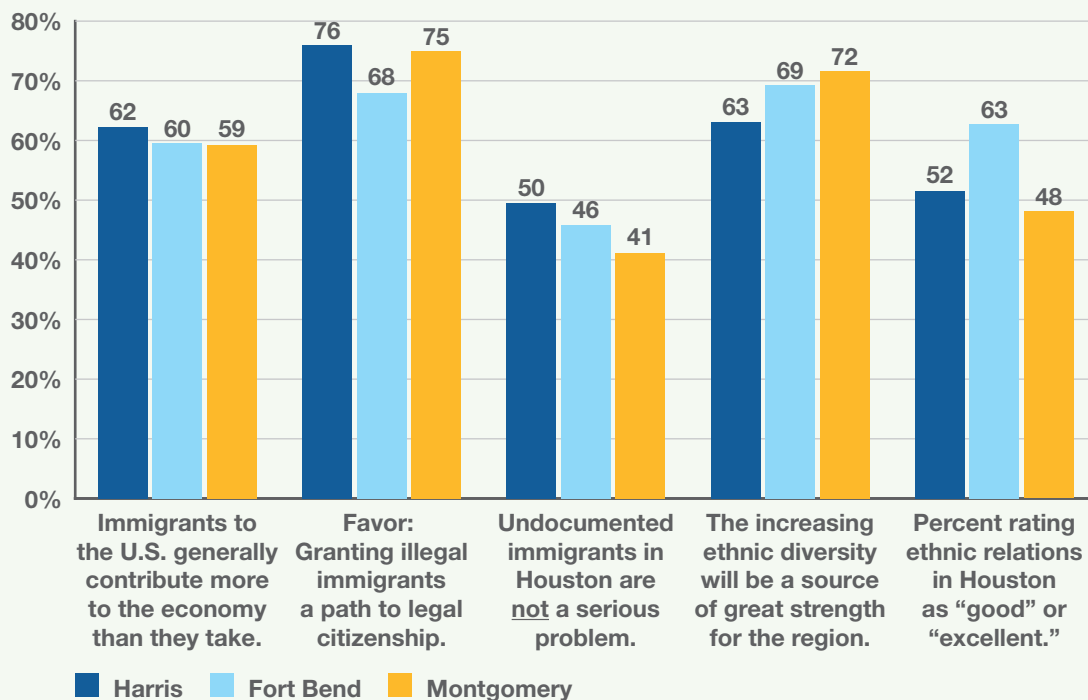
**Demographic comparisons.** As we have seen, Fort Bend County is even more ethnically diverse than Harris County, whereas Montgomery County is now 70 percent Anglo and 22 percent Hispanic. Fort Bend County also has

the most highly educated population, with 43 percent of all those aged 25 or older having college degrees, compared to 32 percent in Montgomery County and 29 percent in Harris County. At the other end of the spectrum, 44 percent in Harris County have no more than a high school diploma, compared to 39 percent in Montgomery County and 30 percent in Fort Bend County. With regard to political affiliations, Fort Bend County is evenly divided, by 40 to 37 percent, between Republicans and Democrats, but the residents of Montgomery County are far more likely to affiliate with the Republican Party (at 50 percent) than the Democratic Party (27 percent).

**Perspectives on the new diversity.** Houston's burgeoning ethnic diversity is experienced most directly in Fort Bend and Harris counties, and not nearly so much in

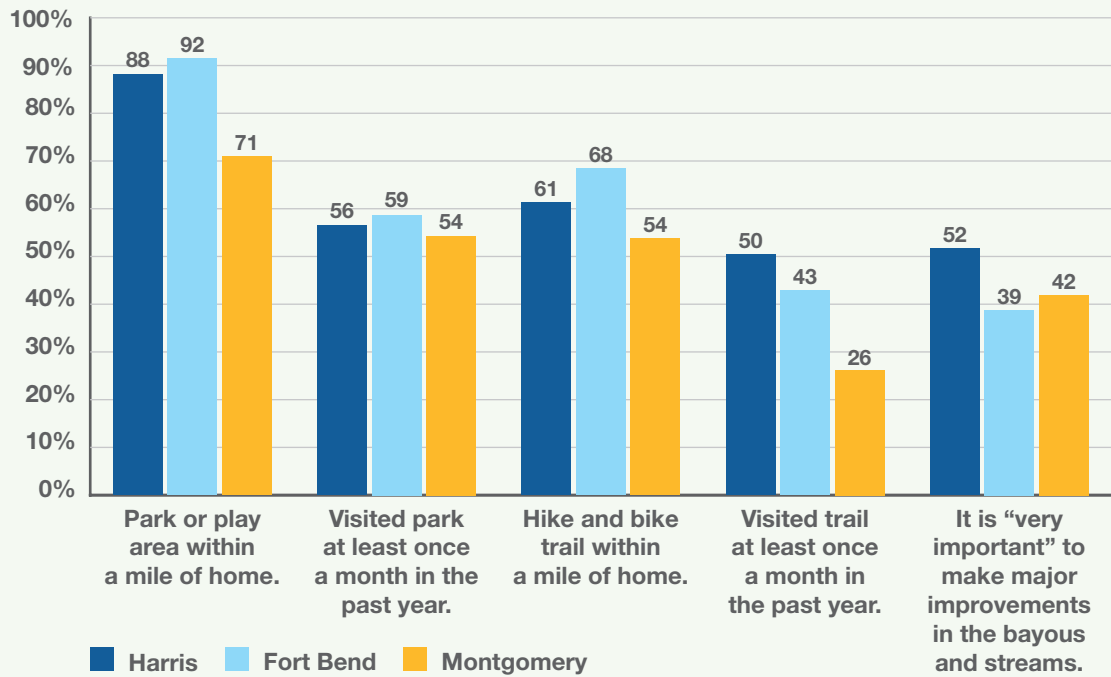
**FIGURE 16:**

County differences in beliefs about immigration and ethnic diversity (2016)



**FIGURE 17:**

County differences in access to and use of parks and bayou trails (2016)



Montgomery County. Are these demographic differences reflected in the views of the residents of the three counties? As indicated in Figure 16, the Montgomery County respondents were slightly less likely to assert that undocumented immigrants are not a serious problem in Houston or to give positive ratings to the relations among racial or ethnic groups in the Houston area. On the other hand, they are slightly more likely than those in the other two counties to affirm that "the increasing ethnic diversity in the Houston area" will eventually become "a source of great strength," rather than "a growing problem," for the region.

The data indicate that the generally positive evaluations of the region's burgeoning diversity are almost equally prevalent throughout the Houston area. At the same time, the enthusiasm is far from unanimous anywhere—an important reminder that societal changes of this magnitude are inevitably experienced with some anxiety and mixed feelings, especially among older Anglos, who came of age in the very different world of the 1960s and 1970s.

### Quality-of-life improvements.

Meanwhile, as the "Bayou Greenways 2020 Project" gets fully underway, with the goal of building 150 miles of hike and bike trails along the city's nine major waterways, increasing numbers of Houston-area residents will find

themselves living within walking distance of parks and bayou trails. The 2016 survey asked area residents about their experience with these new urban amenities. Figure 17 shows the differences among the three counties in residents' encounters with and use of the nearby parks, play areas, and hike and bike trails. The respondents from Montgomery County were consistently less likely to report making use of the green spaces, but there were few differences between Harris and Fort Bend counties in this regard.

The same four questions were asked during the summer of 2012 in a special survey focused on health issues, reaching





a representative sample of Harris County residents (“The Houston Area Health Survey”). A comparison with the 2016 Kinder Houston Area Survey shows clearly the progress that has been made in the 3.5 years separating the two surveys: 88 percent of the Harris County respondents in this year’s KHAS said that there was a “park or play area within a mile or so” of their home, up from 83 percent in the 2012 health survey; the proportion saying there was a “hike and bike trail” within the same distance grew from 58 to 61 percent.

When asked about their use of these amenities, the changes over the past 3.5 years were striking: 57 percent in the 2016 survey, up from 44 percent in June 2012, said they had visited a park or play area at least once a month during the past year; and 50 percent (up from just 30 percent in 2012) said they had visited a hike or bike trail at least once a month. The surveys clearly suggest that area residents are increasingly aware of the new recreational amenities developing around them and are much more likely to be making use of them.

In a final question about the greenways initiative, area residents were asked how important they thought it was for the future of Houston “to make major improvements in the city’s bayous and streams.” More than half (52 percent) of all Harris County residents said it was “very important,” and, by 39 and 42 percent, the residents of the two surrounding counties agreed.

The county differences loom slightly larger when the survey participants are asked what kinds of homes and neighborhoods they would like to have and how they would like to see the region develop in the years ahead. Figure 18 shows

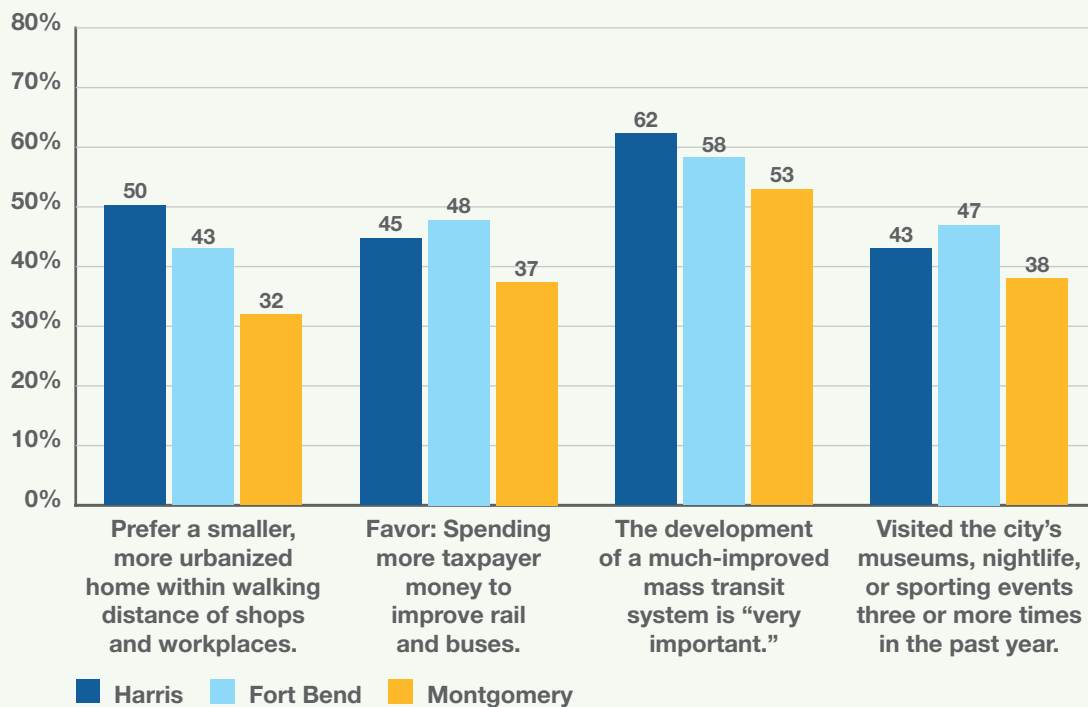
that Harris County residents are generally more likely than those in the surrounding counties to call for more urban opportunities, but the findings also indicate strong support for walkable alternatives even in the two far more sprawling, car-oriented counties.

When asked what sort of home they would like to live in, the residents of Harris County (consistent with the responses in previous surveys) divided evenly, with 50 percent opting for “a smaller home in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces,” rather than “a single-family home with a big yard, where you would need to drive almost everywhere you want to go.” In Fort Bend County, 43 percent expressed a preference for the alternative of walkable urbanism, as did one-third (32 percent) of the residents in Montgomery County.

In further confirmation of the extent of agreement across the three counties in their support for alternatives to the automobile, the proportions ranged from 48 percent (in Fort Bend County) to 37 percent (in Montgomery County) who were calling for “spending more taxpayer money to improve rail and buses,” rather than spending more “to expand existing highways.” Between 53 and 62 percent said that the development of a much-improved mass transit system was “very important.” Finally, when asked how often they make use of Houston’s urban amenities—its “museums, nightlife, or sporting events”—the proportion who said that they had visited such venues three or more times during the past 12 months ranged from 47 percent in Fort Bend County and 43 percent in Harris County to 38 percent in Montgomery County.

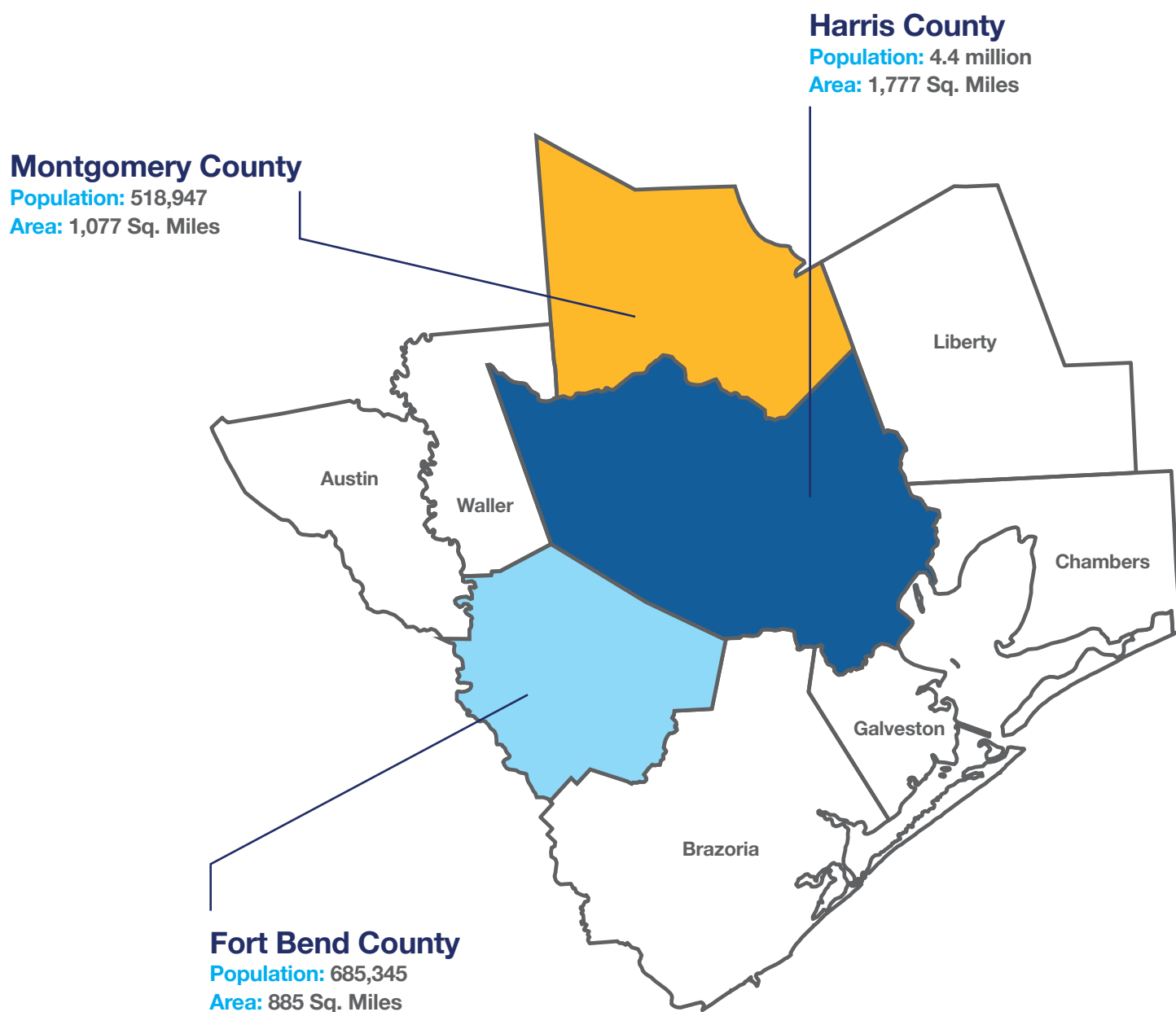
**FIGURE 18:**

County differences in support for “walkable urbanism” and public transit (2016)



# The Greater Houston Metropolitan Region

Population: 6.5 Million    Area: 10,071.73 Sq. Miles



Source: ACS 2014 One-Year Estimates. U.S. Census Bureau  
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## Mission

The mission of the Kinder Institute is to:

- Advance understanding of the most important issues facing Houston and other leading urban centers through rigorous research, policy analysis, and public outreach; and
- Collaborate with civic and political leaders to implement promising solutions to these critical urban issues.