SPACE CITY PANEL

Introducing the SPACE City Panel: Voices from Across Greater Houston

Center for Public Policy
Hobby School of Public Affairs

Research Team

Principal Investigators

Gail J. Buttorff, Associate Director, Center for Public Policy and Research Associate Professor, Hobby School of Public Affairs
Jim Granato, Professor and Dean, Hobby School of Public Affairs
Maria P. Perez Argüelles, Research Associate, Hobby School of Public Affairs
Pablo M. Pinto, Distinguished Professor and Director, Center for Public Policy, Hobby School of Public Affairs
Savannah L. Sipole, Research Associate, Hobby School of Public Affairs
Agustín Vallejo, Research Assistant Professor, Hobby School of Public Affairs
M.C. Sunny Wong, Professor and Associate Dean for Graduate Studies, Hobby School of Public Affairs

Researchers

Catherine M. Miers, Research Assistant, Hobby School of Public Affairs
Garrett P. Upchurch, Research Assistant, Hobby School of Public Affairs

How to cite

Buttorff, Gail J.; Granato, Jim; Miers, Catherine M.; Perez Argüelles, Maria P.; Pinto, Pablo M.; Sipole, Savannah L.; Upchurch, Garrett P.; Vallejo, Agustín; & Wong, M.C. Sunny. *Introducing the SPACE City Panel: Voices from Across Greater Houston*. Hobby School of Public Affairs, University of Houston. Available at: https://uh.edu/hobby/research/space-city-panel/intro/.

The SPACE City Panel

The **S**urvey on **P**ublic **A**ttitudes and **C**ommunity **E**ngagement, or **SPACE City Panel**, is a research initiative developed by the University of Houston's Hobby School of Public Affairs in collaboration with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. It is designed as a quarterly longitudinal survey of residents from across the Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) to capture changing attitudes around today's biggest challenges.

The recruitment survey to build the panel was launched on March 7, 2025, and remained open through May 7, 2025. During this period, a total of 5,015 individuals from across the Houston MSA joined the panel. Panelists represent neighborhoods throughout the region and reflect the diverse demographics of the broader Houston population, helping to ensure that the panel captures a wide range of perspectives and lived experiences.

The goal of the **SPACE City Panel** is to provide policymakers, journalists, academics, nonprofits, businesses, and civic leaders with timely, high-quality data on residents' priorities, challenges, and perspectives. A longitudinal survey allows stakeholders to monitor trends, test the impact of interventions, and adjust strategies in response to emergent concerns. Because the data reflect the lived experiences of a broad cross-section of Houston area residents, it enables more equitable, informed, and effective decision making.

The **SPACE City Panel** survey is administered quarterly, during the months of March, June, September, and December. It centers on four key themes: politics, community development and resiliency, sustainability and environmental issues, and household economics. By centering local voices and providing actionable insights, the panel helps the city and surrounding counties become more resilient, responsive, and inclusive.

Methodology

The panel was designed to include households located within the nine counties of the Houston MSA. Households within the Houston the area were selected to receive mailed invitations asking one adult, aged 18 or older, to fill out the *Houston Metro Community Survey*. This survey aimed to achieve two objectives: firstly, to collect data regarding the region's economic status, civic resilience, and political views; and secondly, to extend an invitation to respondents to become members of the **SPACE City Panel**. Participants were allowed to finish the entire survey whether or not they decided to join the panel.[1]

We used a multi-stage, stratified address-based sampling (ABS) design to recruit panelists for the **SPACE City Panel**. The goal was to establish a panel large enough to yield 1,500 completed responses per quarterly survey, which required recruiting at least 4,200 panelists. Eligibility was limited to adults aged 18 or older residing within the Houston MSA, confirmed via screening at the beginning of the survey. Figure 2.1 illustrates the multi-stage ABS recruitment process.

The first-stage sample of 507,000 addresses was drawn from the USPS Delivery Sequence File and stratified by geographic regions based on Census Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs). These addresses were then sent to a data vendor to append demographic and consumer data, which NORC used—along with Census and voter registration records—to apply its **Big Data Classifier**. This predictive model identified households likely to fall into key underrepresented groups, including young adults (18–29), Black/African American, Asian, and Spanish-speaking households. Addresses were then classified into six sampling strata: Age 18–29, Asian, Black or African American, Spanish-speaking, Residual (i.e., not in a low-response group), and No Match (i.e., insufficient data).

[1] See the Houston Metro Community Survey report here: https://uh.edu/hobby/research/space-city-panel/intro/houston-metro.pdf

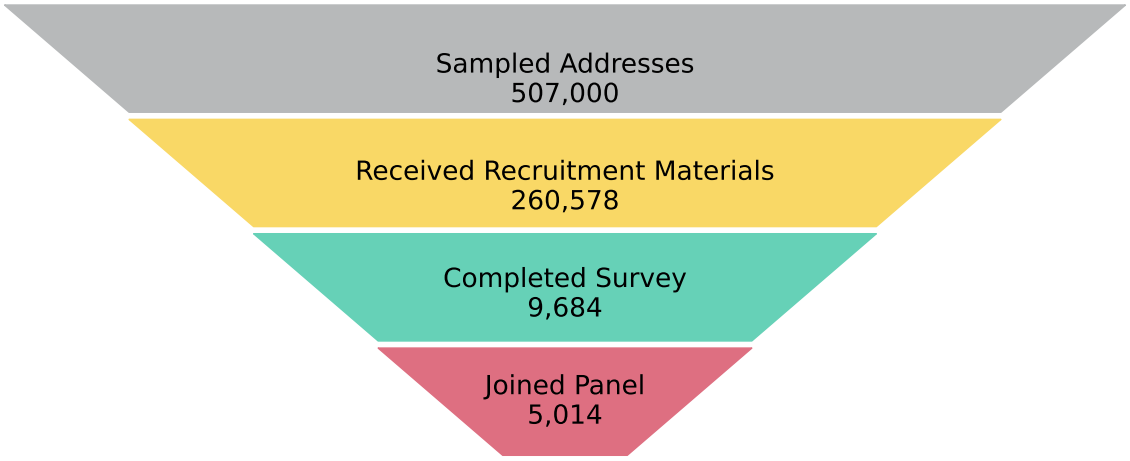


Figure 2.1: Recruitment funnel for the **SPACE City Panel**, showing the number of addresses sampled, materials mailed, surveys completed, and panel enrollments during the March–May 2025 recruitment period.

A stratified random sample was then drawn for the second stage, resulting in two mailing batches: Batch 1 (104,236 addresses) and Batch 2 (156,342 addresses). Batch 1 was mailed on March 7, 2025, and Batch 2 followed on April 17, 2025, with adjustments based on early response rates. Specifically, Batch 2 increased the share of residual households (who showed higher response rates) and decreased the share of no-match households (who had the lowest panel enrollment rates). The final batch composition is summarized in Table 2.1, with Black/African American, Age 18–29, and Spanish-speaking households heavily oversampled to support representativeness.

Table 2.1: Strata for recruitment

Strata	Batch 1	Batch 2
Age 18-29	21,355	32,029
Asian	6,368	9,552
Black/African American	22,308	33,462
No match	20,224	11,118
Residual	19,590	48,600
Speaks Spanish	14,391	21,581
Total	**104,236**	**156,342**

For each batch, reminder postcards were mailed to all sampled households one week after the initial mailing on March 14 and April 23 for Batch 1 and Batch 2, respectively.

All materials were available in English and Spanish, and respondents could complete the survey in the language of their choice. The survey was offered in two formats: online through a self-administered web survey or by phone with a live interviewer. Of those contacted, 9,684 individuals completed the Houston Metro Community Survey with 9,539 completing the survey online and 145 by telephone. Of the 9,684 surveys completed, 5,015 joined the panel (4,941 online and 74 by phone). These totals do not include surveys or interviews removed for data quality purposes.[2]

[2]In total, 32 cases were removed: 30 for speeding–those who completed the survey in less than one-third the median duration– and 3 for high refusal rates–those that skip or refused more than 50% of the eligible questions. One case was marked with both the speeder and high refusal rate flags, bringing the total of removed cases to 32.

Panel Demographics

The panel respondents are not only demographically varied, but also bring a wide range of perspectives shaped by different life experiences. Their participation is the core of the **SPACE City Panel**'s mission: *to elevate community voices and provide policymakers, researchers, and leaders with a grounded understanding of who lives in the Houston area and their experiences*.

3.1 Population Benchmarks for Sampling

The **SPACE City Panel**'s sampling goal was to reflect the diversity of the Houston MSA, and the demographic profile of respondents confirms representativeness of the region's population. With 5,015 participants, the panel captures variation across age, race and ethnicity, gender, educational attainment, and household income, among others. The panel's sampling design was based on Census data for five key demographic variables for the Houston MSA: Geographic Region, Race, Age, Education, and Gender. Subsequently, we demonstrate the extent to which the **SPACE City Panel** accurately reflects the population across these dimensions.[3]

First, our panel does not limit its scope to the City of Houston but **extends to the entire Houston MSA**, which includes Harris County, Fort Bend County, Montgomery County, and the other smaller, surrounding counties. Figure 3.1 shows the geographic distribution of respondents in the SPACE City Panel compared to Census benchmarks. The panel closely reflects the population distribution across major regions of the MSA. For instance, the proportion of respondents from Houston City is nearly identical in the panel (38.2%) compared to the benchmark (38.0%). Similarly, Harris County outside of Houston City accounts for 26.4% of the panel and 26.0% of the benchmark,

[3]Note: The findings in this report have been weighted, with percentages rounded to the nearest tenth.

while Fort Bend County comprises 12.2% and 12.0%, respectively. Small deviations are observed in Montgomery County (9.5% in the panel vs. 10.0% in the population) and the "Other" category (13.7% vs. 14.0%). Overall, however, the geographic composition of the panel remains well-balanced and representative of the broader Greater Houston Area.

Figure 3.1: Comparison of geographic region in the SPACE City Panel and Census benchmarks for the Houston MSA

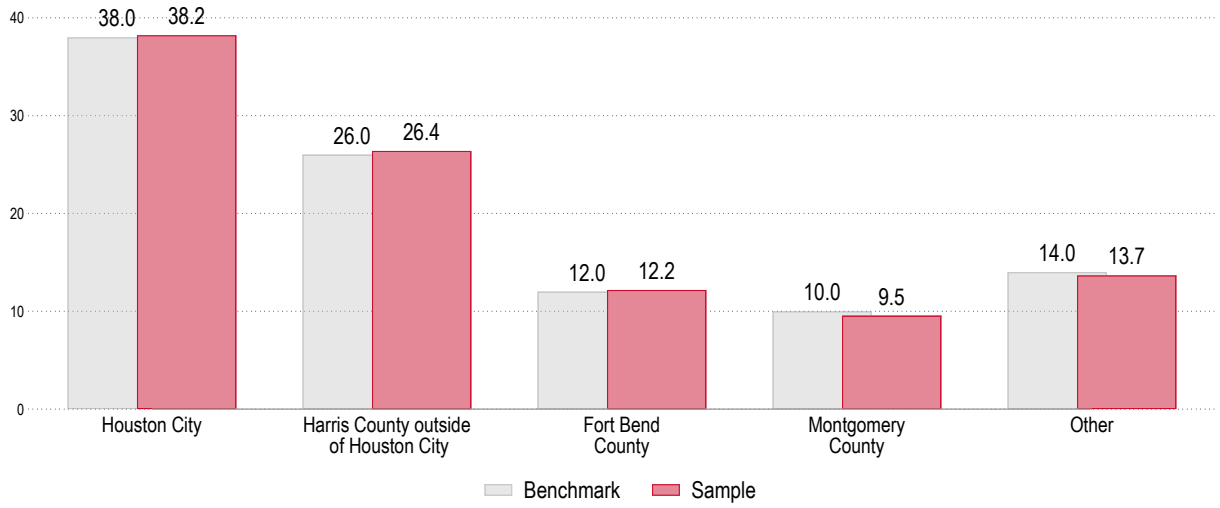
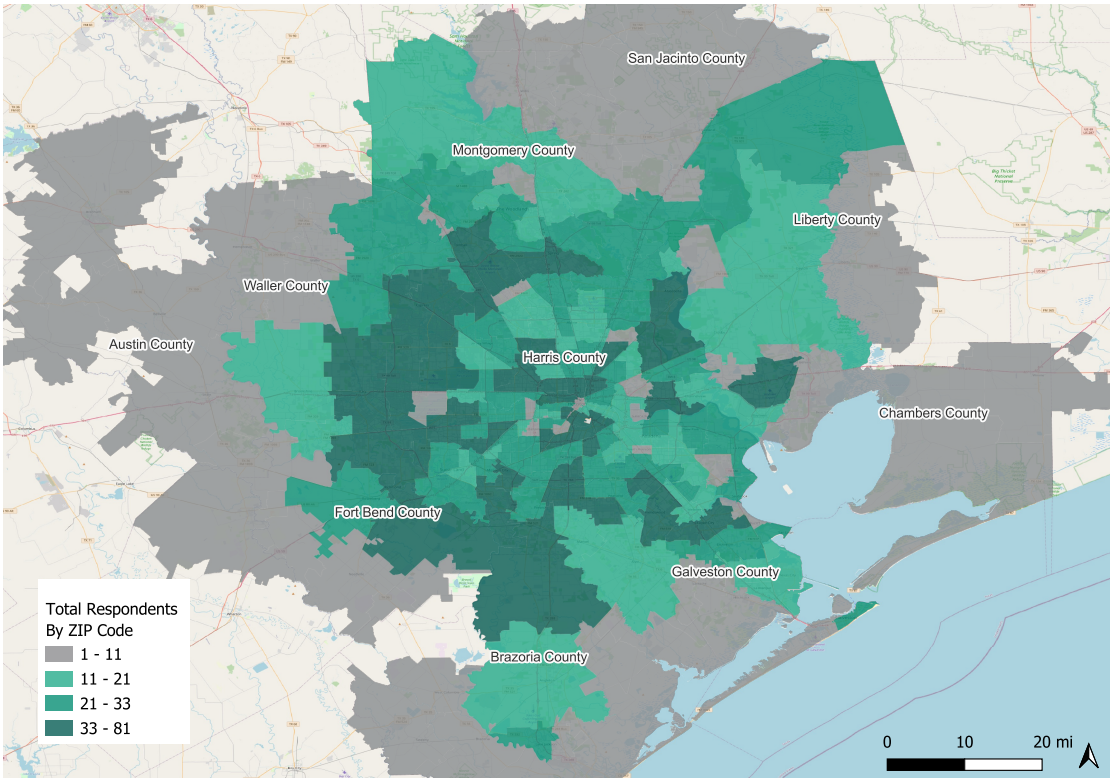


Figure 3.2 provides a more granular view of where panel respondents are located within the Houston MSA. In addition to the county-level overlay, the map shows the distribution of respondents by ZIP code. The panel includes respondents from a wide range of ZIP codes, demonstrating comprehensive geographic coverage across the metropolitan area. Areas within and immediately surrounding Harris County, including portions of Fort Bend, Montgomery, Brazoria, and Galveston counties, exhibit especially high response frequencies, with several ZIP codes sometimes reaching 81 respondents. A greater density of respondents in these areas, however, is consistent with the population distribution of residents.

Figure 3.2: Geographic distribution of panelists across the Houston MSA



We also wanted to ensure that the panel reflects the **racial and ethnic diversity** that defines the Houston MSA as one of the most diverse in the country. Figure 3.3 compares the population benchmarks (in grey) to the weighted composition of the **SPACE City Panel** (in red) across four target groups: Non-Hispanic All Other (which includes non-Hispanic whites), Non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, and Non-Hispanic Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI). The panel closely matches the benchmark for each group. For example, the Hispanic population constitutes 36.0% of the benchmark and 35.9% of the panel. Similarly, Non-Hispanic All Other represents 38.0% in both the benchmark and the panel. The shares for non-Hispanic blacks are 17.0% (benchmark) and 17.3% (panel), while the AAPI group is slightly underrepresented, with 9.0% in the benchmark and 8.8% in the panel. Overall, the panel is well aligned with the racial and ethnic composition of the Houston MSA.

Figure 3.3: Comparison of racial and ethnic composition in the SPACE City Panel and Census benchmarks for the Houston MSA

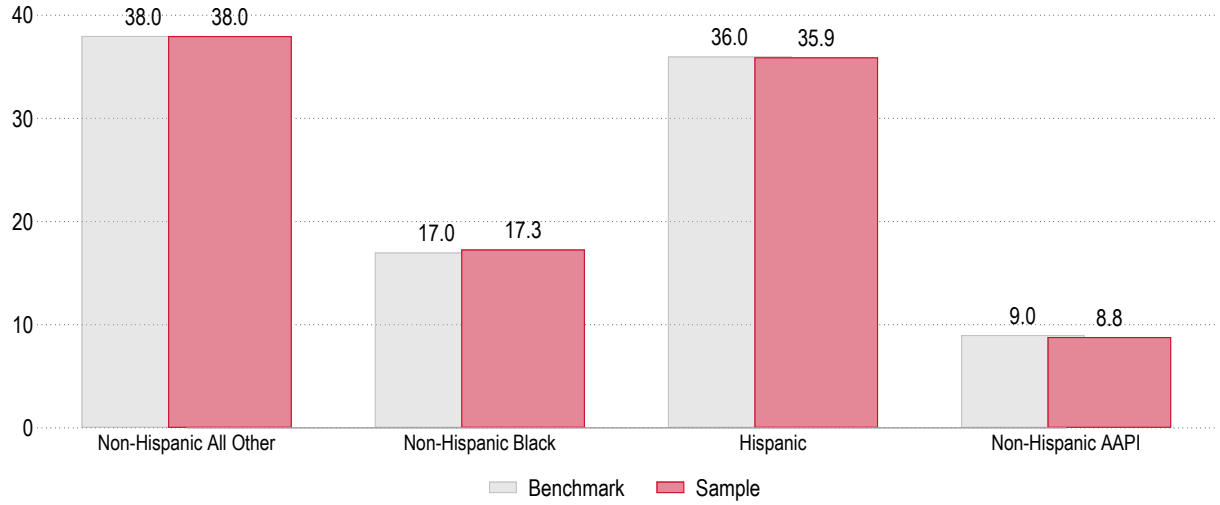
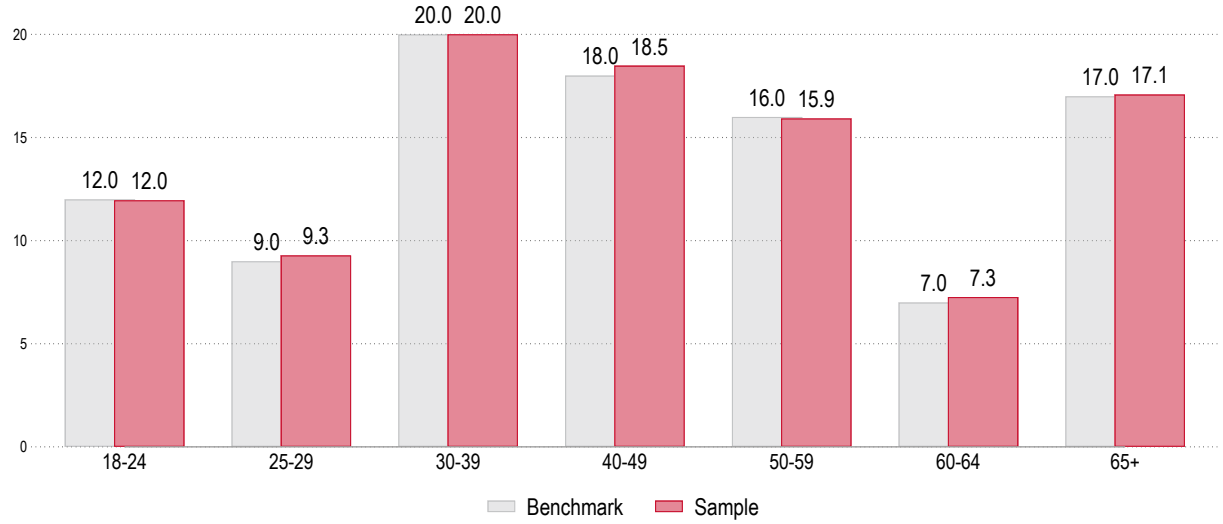


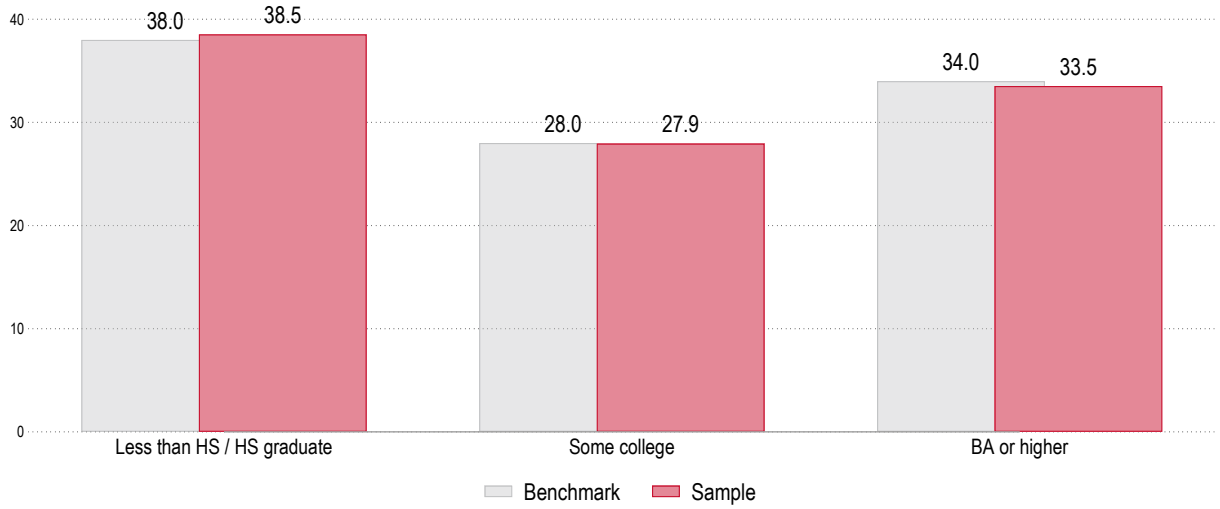
Figure 3.4 compares the **age** distribution of respondents in the SPACE City Panel to the Census population estimates for the Houston MSA. Overall, the panel closely aligns with the benchmark across all age groups, with only minor deviations. The 30–39 age group is perfectly matched between the sample and the benchmark (20.0% each), and represents the largest cohort. Similarly, the shares for individuals aged 40–49 (18.5% in the sample vs. 18.0% benchmark) and 25–29 (9.3% vs. 9.0%) are nearly identical as are those for the remaining age groups. Taken together, these results indicate that the panel maintains a strong balance across age cohorts.

Figure 3.4: Comparison of age distribution in the SPACE City Panel with Census estimates for the Houston MSA



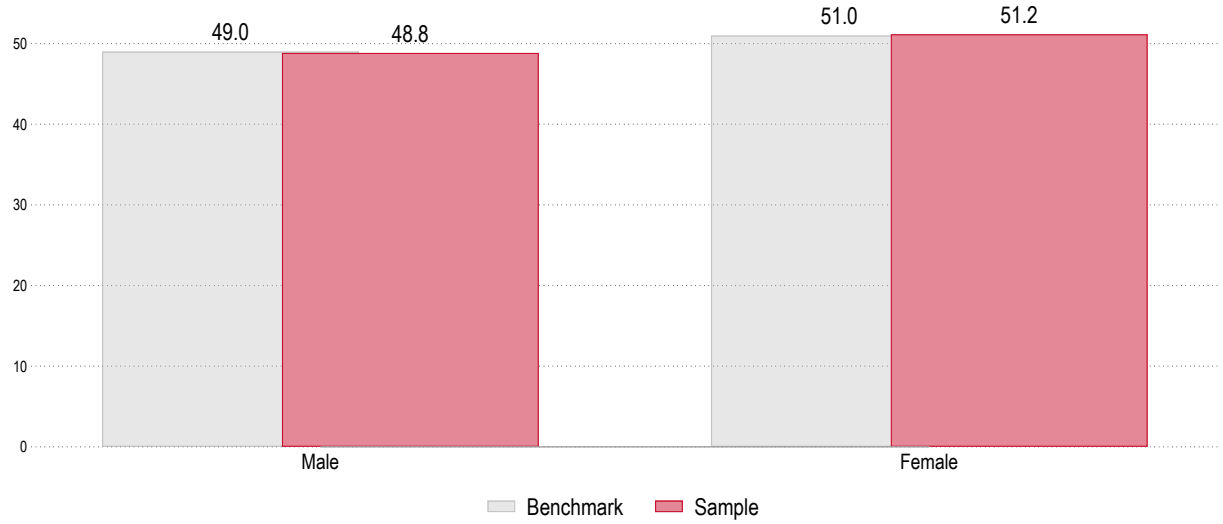
Next, Figure 3.5 compares the **educational attainment** of respondents in the **SPACE City Panel** to the Census benchmarks. The weighted panel estimates demonstrate strong alignment with Census estimates across all educational categories. The proportion of respondents with a high school diploma or less is identical between the sample and benchmark (12.0% each). Similarly, the share of respondents with some college education or an associate's degree (20.0%) matches the benchmark precisely (20.0%). Among those with a bachelor's degree, the panel includes 18.5% of respondents, closely reflecting the benchmark estimate of 18.0%. For individuals with a postgraduate or professional degree, the sample captures 17.1% compared to 17.0% in the population.

Figure 3.5: Comparison of educational attainment in the SPACE City Panel and Census estimates for the Houston MSA



Finally, the last demographic characteristic we used to assess the representativeness of our panel is **gender**. Figure 3.6 shows strong alignment with the regional benchmark, with nearly identical proportions across categories. Male respondents constitute 48.8% of the panel compared to 49.0% in the population, while female respondents represent 51.2% in the panel compared to the benchmark of 51.0%.

Figure 3.6: Comparison of gender distribution in the SPACE City Panel and Census benchmark for the Houston MSA



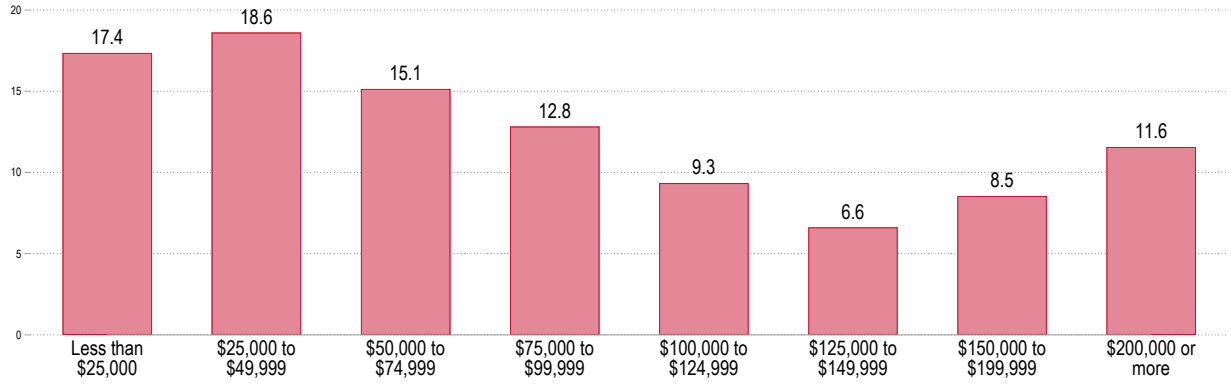
Taken together, the comparisons presented across **geography**, **race and ethnicity**, **age**, **education**, and **gender** show that the SPACE City Panel closely mirrors the demographic composition of the Greater Houston area. Across all key categories, the panel achieves near-parity with Census benchmarks. Beyond the core demographic metrics used to assess the representativeness of SPACE City Panel respondents, the panel collects an extensive array of socioeconomic and political characteristics from panelists, a selection of which are examined in the sections that follow.

3.2 Household Economic Characteristics of Panel Members

In this section, we analyze key economic attributes of respondents and their households. In Figure 3.7, panelists reported a wide range of household incomes, capturing economic diversity across the Greater Houston area. Just under one-third of respondents fall into lower-income brackets, with 17.4% reporting annual household incomes under $25,000—often associated with or below the poverty line—and 18.6% earning between $25,000 and $49,999. Middle-income households are also well represented, with 15.1% earning between $50,000 and $74,999, 12.8% between $75,000 and $99,999, and 9.3% between $100,000 and $124,999. Higher-income respondents include 6.6% earning $125,000 to $149,999, 8.5% earning $150,000 to $199,999, and

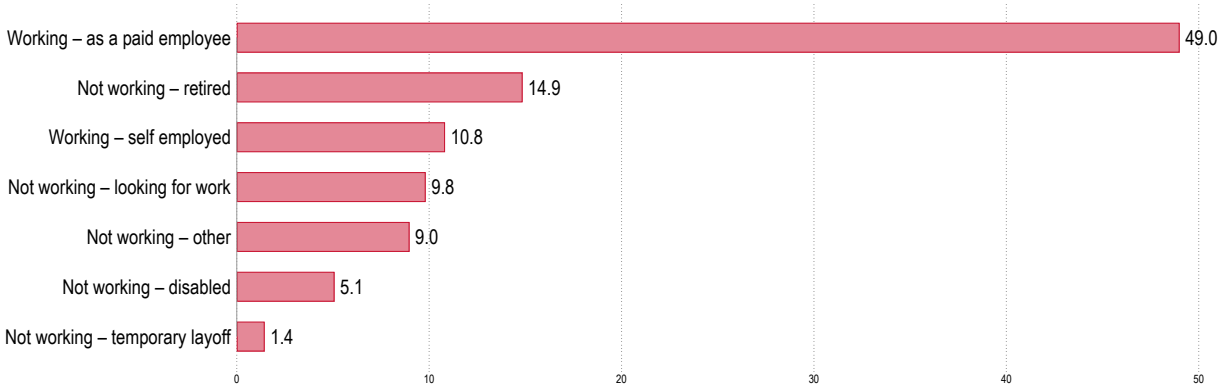
11.6% reporting household incomes of $200,000 or more. A sizable portion, around two-fifths, indicated they did not know their household income. The broad income distribution of panelists allows for the analysis of public attitudes from households facing financial hardship to those with economic security and beyond.

Figure 3.7: Household income, 2024



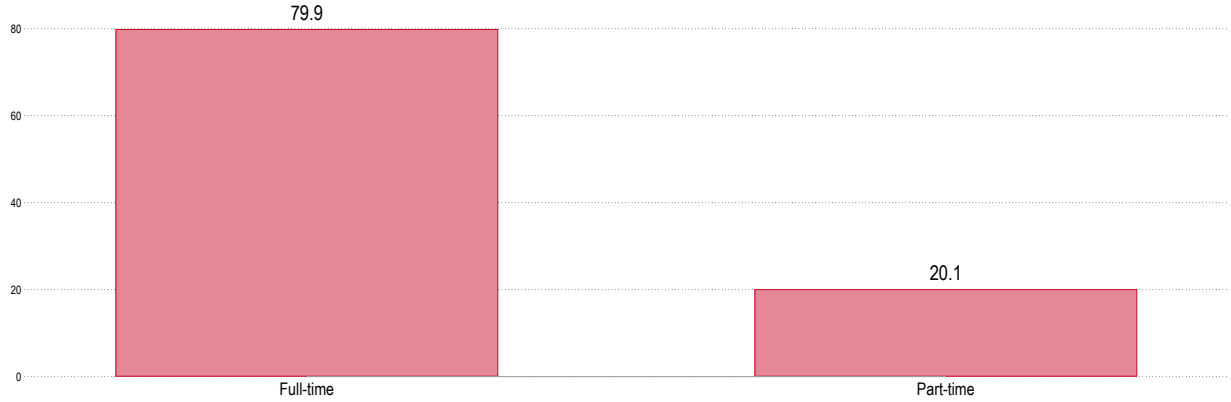
Panelists report a diverse range of employment status and labor market participation (Figure 3.8). Nearly half (49.0%) are employed for wages, and an additional 10.8% are self-employed, together representing the majority of respondents. Others remain attached to the labor market in different ways: 1.4% are on temporary layoff, while 9.8% are unemployed but actively seeking work. Those no longer in the labor force include 14.9% who are retired and 5.1% who report being unable to work due to a disability. Another 9.0% selected "other," which may include full-time caregivers, students, or individuals engaged in informal or nontraditional forms of work.

Figure 3.8: Which of the following best describes your current employment status?



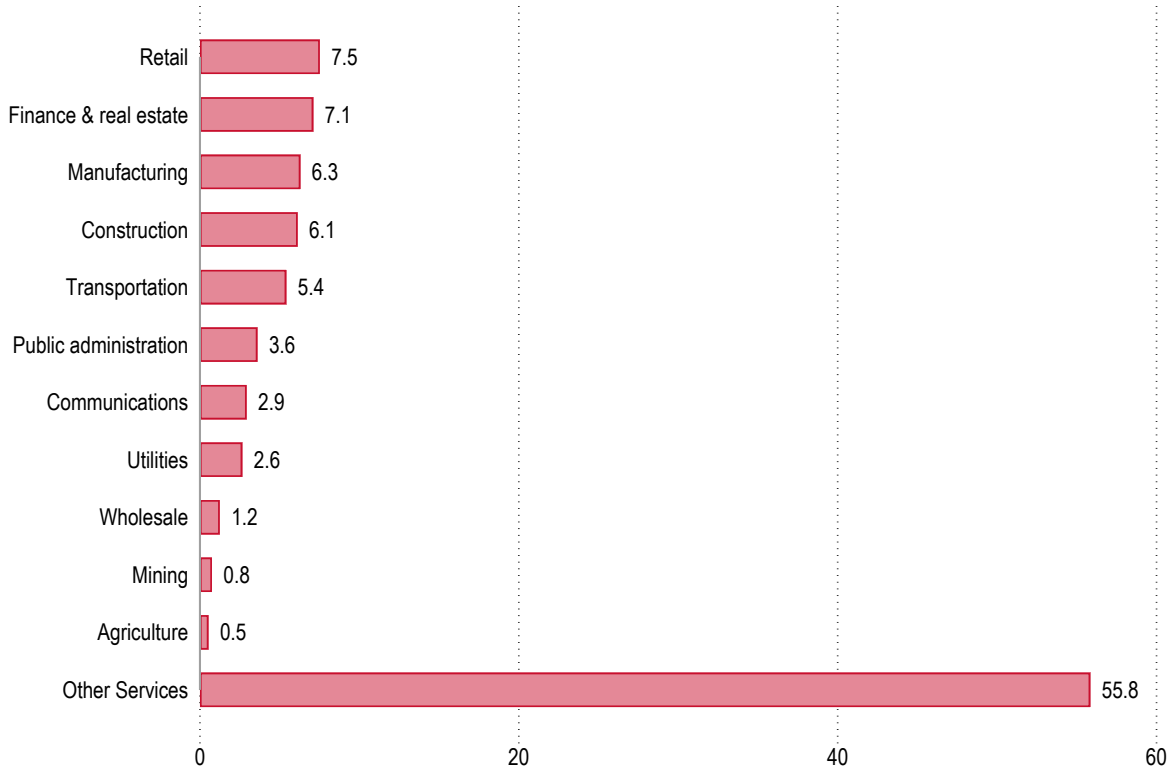
Panelists who said they were working, either as a paid employee or self-employed, were then asked if they worked full- or part-time (see Figure 3.9). The majority, 79.9%, of the panelists are working are working full-time and 20.1% are working part-time.

Figure 3.9: Do you currently work full or part time?



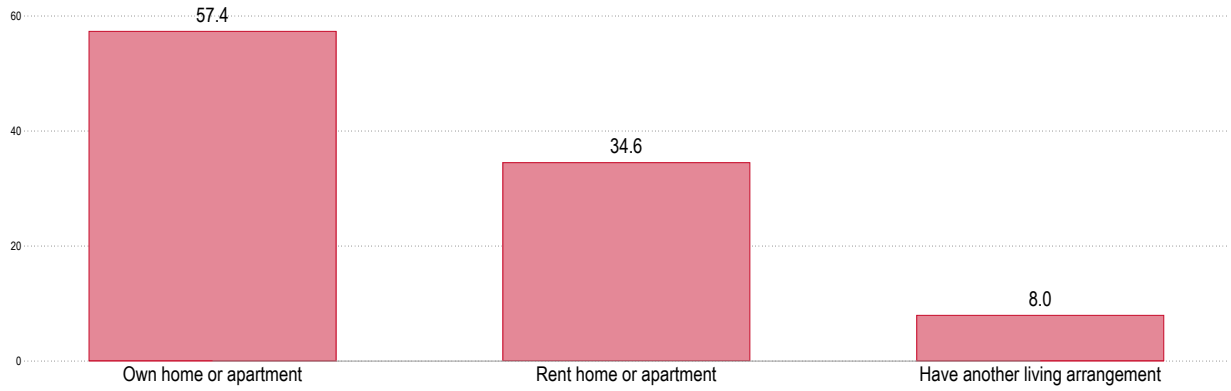
The employment sector data (Figure 3.10) reveal that a majority of working panelists are concentrated in a broad category labeled "Other services," which accounts for 55.8% of respondents. This category includes a wide range of occupations across education, healthcare, hospitality, personal services, and more. The next most commonly reported sectors are retail trade (7.5%), finance, insurance, and real estate (7.1%), manufacturing (6.3%), and construction (6.1%). Smaller proportions of respondents report working in transportation (5.4%), public administration (3.6%), communications (2.9%), electric/gas/sanitary services (2.6%), and wholesale trade (1.2%). Very few respondents are employed in mining (0.8%) or agriculture, forestry, and fishing (0.5%). These results highlight the diversity of the region's workforce while also reflecting the region's economic reliance on service-oriented sectors.

Figure 3.10: Which of the following best describes the sector of your current employment?



Housing tenure among panelists reflects a range of living arrangements across the Houston MSA. Figure 3.11 shows a majority (57.4%) report owning their home or apartment, while 34.6% rent their residence. An additional 8.0% indicate they have another type of living arrangement, which may include living with family or friends without paying rent, or residing in non-traditional or transitional housing. With rising home prices and rental costs across the Houston area, understanding housing stability and access is increasingly important for identifying disparities in economic opportunity and long-term community well-being.

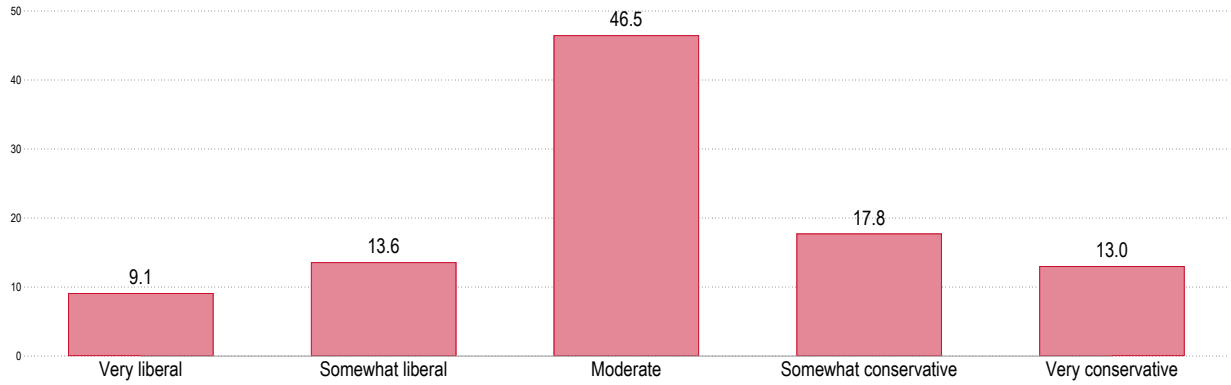
Figure 3.11: Do you own or rent your home or apartment?



3.3 Political Ideology and Party Identification

The ideological composition of the SPACE City Panel reflects a broad spectrum of political perspectives, with a large share identifying as politically moderate. As shown in Figure 3.12, 46.5% of respondents describe themselves as "moderate" on a 5-point ideological scale. Smaller shares identify at either end of the spectrum, with 9.1% selecting "very liberal" and 13.0% choosing "very conservative." An additional 13.6% consider themselves "somewhat liberal," while 17.8% identify as "somewhat conservative."

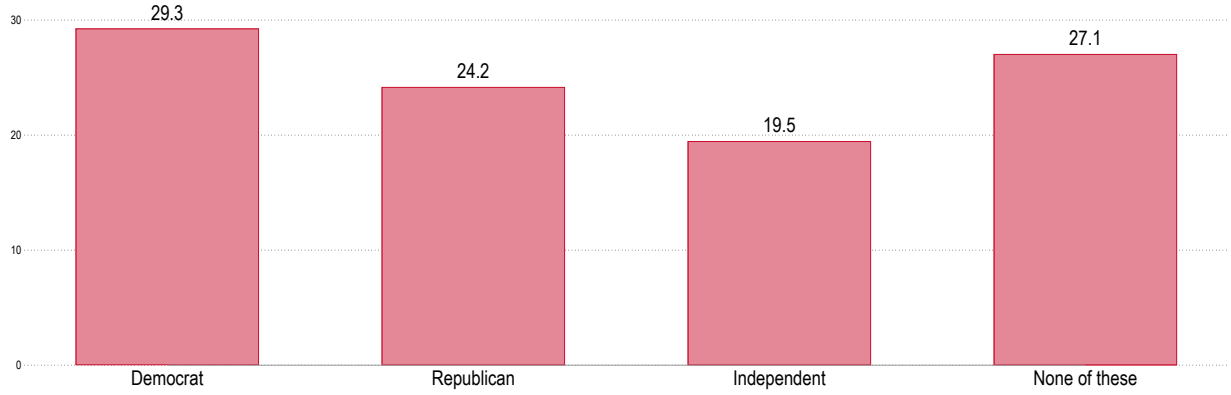
Figure 3.12: Ideology 5-point scale



Party identification, as shown in Figure 3.13, shows a similar diverse patter. Nearly 30% of respondents identify with the Democratic party, 24.2% identify with the

Republican party, and 19.5% identify as independents. A substantial proportion (27.1%) of respondents said they do not identify with any of the standard party ID labels. When taken together, these measures of ideology and partisanship reveal a panel that is ideologically mixed and not rigidly aligned along party lines.

Figure 3.13: Party Identification



Panel Topics and Timeline

For the longitudinal dimension of the SPACE City Panel, at least 1,500 panel respondents will be surveyed quarterly giving researchers and decision-makers a consistent way to track evolving public opinion and experiences over time. Each wave of the quarterly surveys will include two of four rotating thematic modules: economics, resiliency, politics, and sustainability. This ensures that each module will be administered twice per year. Figure 4.1 shows quarterly schedule of the modules.

Figure 4.1: Timeline for the longitudinal survey waves and modules

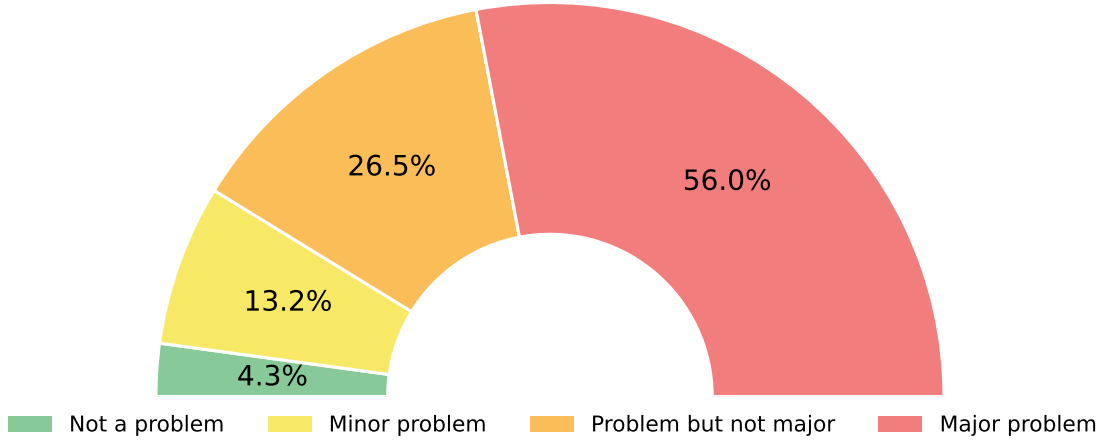
Through the voices of over 5,000 residents who joined the SPACE City Panel, we begin to understand not only the challenges faced across households and neighborhoods, but also the hopes, anxieties, and expectations shaping daily life. The next sections provide more details about the four rotating modules, sample questions, and results from the recruitment survey for relevant questions.

4.1 Politics

The politics module aims to capture residents political attitudes and engagement. It will ask residents what they think are the most pressing issues, their approval ratings of local, state, and national political figures and institutions, and their voting behavior and civic engagement. Results of the first survey reveal that respondents are politically engaged—but divided in their evaluations. Many feel their city is heading in the right

direction, yet others remain skeptical. Confidence in local government is generally higher than in state or federal institutions, but opinions vary sharply depending on political identity. Still, across the spectrum, there is clear concern about issues such as political corruption. Figure 4.2 shows that over 50% of respondents answered that political corruption was a major problem for the Houston Area today. Fewer than 5% of residents said that corruption was not a problem at all and only 13.2% said political corruption was a minor problem.

Figure 4.2: How big of a problem are political corruption and ethics in the Houston area today?



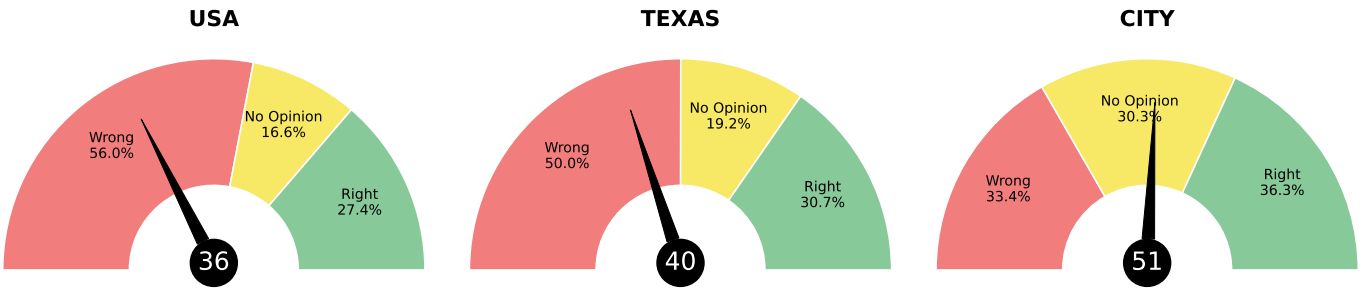
Political Thermometer

A key part of the politics module will be a political thermometer tracking whether area residents think their city, state, and country are heading in the right or wrong direction. To build the thermometer, we ask respondents whether they think things are going in the right direction, the wrong direction, or if they have no opinion. 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. This 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. We show the score using a needle on a half-circle chart, like a thermometer, to make it easy to compare across

groups, places, and time.[4]

Figure 4.3 displays the results of the political thermometer for the United States, Texas, and their city. Each gauge illustrates the proportion of respondents who believe things are going in the *right direction* (green), the *wrong direction* (red), or have *no opinion* (yellow). The needle shows the average score converted to a 0–100 scale: a score of 0 indicates that all respondents believe things are going in the wrong direction, 50 indicates an even split, and 100 means everyone thinks things are going in the right direction. The **national** average is 36, indicating a predominantly negative outlook, while **Texas** scores 40. In contrast, the **cities** register a more balanced perspective with a score of 51, reflecting reflecting a marginally greater share of residents who believe things are going in the right direction.

Figure 4.3: Political Thermometer: For each of the following, please indicate whether you think things are going in the **right** or **wrong** direction



As of the summer of 2025, residents in the Houston MSA are more optimistic about the direction of their city compared to their views on the state of Texas and the country as a whole. While national and state-level sentiments lean more negative, the balanced score at the city level suggests a higher level of local confidence and satisfaction with the trajectory of their respective municipalities. Each time the politics module is administered, we will update the thermometer to see how sentiment evolves over time.

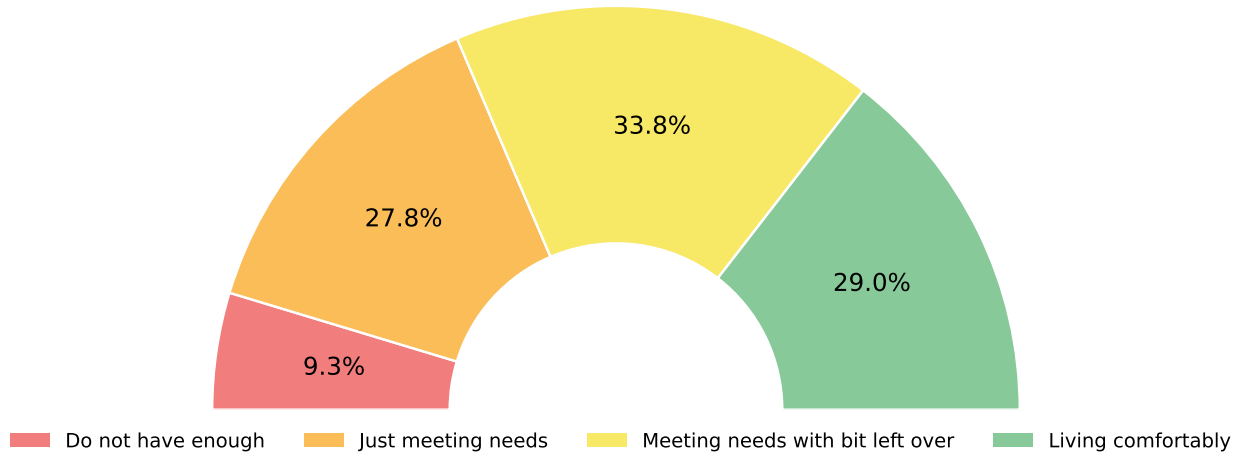
[4]The formula used is Thermometer Score $= \left(\frac{R-W}{R+N+W} + 1\right) \cdot 50$, where R, N, and W are the number of respondents who answered "Right direction", "No opinion", and "Wrong direction", respectively.

4.2 Economics

The Economics Module covers topics related to household dynamics, employment and dimensions of workforce development, and economic well-being. This module will track various economic pressures that residents and their communities are facing and their expectations about the future. One such question asks respondents: How would you describe your household's current financial situation? Economic stress is a top concern for many Houston residents. While some households report living comfortably, large portions are just getting by or falling behind. Cost of living, inflation, and personal debt emerged as major areas of concern. Yet, a significant number remain optimistic about their financial future—suggesting both strain and resilience coexisting within the city.

As seen in Figure 4.4, 29.0% of respondents report living comfortably and 33.8% have a little money left over after meeting their basic expenses. It is encouraging that three-fifths of households in the Houston MSA have at least a little money left over after meeting basic needs. However, the proportion of households who can only meet their basic expenses (27.8%) and do not have enough to meet their expenses (9.3%) should concern local policy makers. When people are living paycheck to paycheck any unexpected bills, such as unforeseen medical costs, can lead to financial disaster.

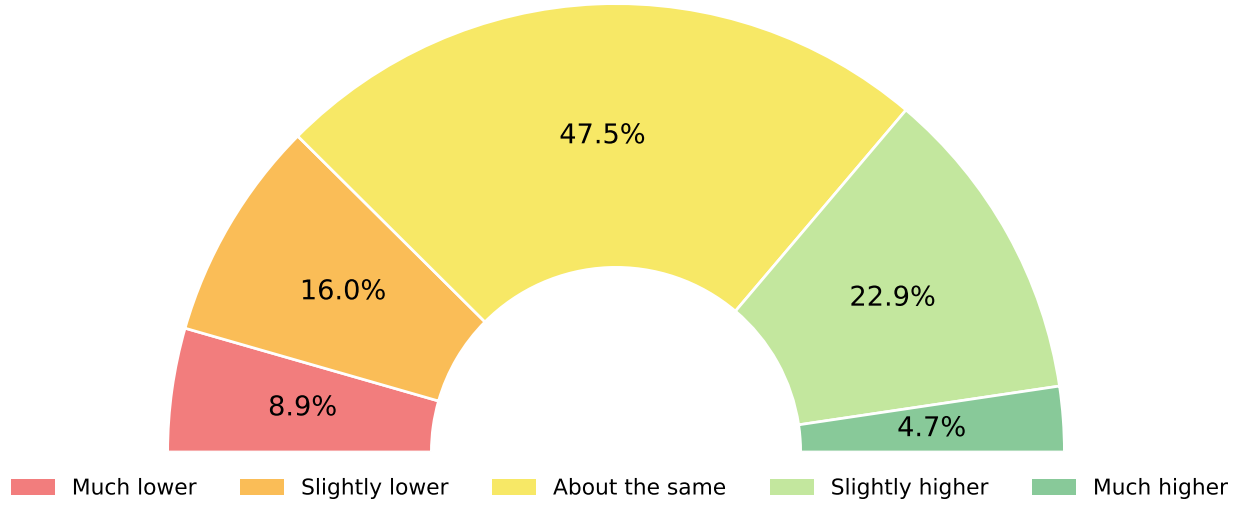
Figure 4.4: Household's current financial situation



Another question in the economics module asks respondents how their income this year compares to the previous year. As shown in Figure 4.5, nearly half of respondents (47.5%) report that their household income is about the same as it was at the same time

last year. While 22.9% report a slight increase and 4.7% report a much higher income. A combined 24.9% indicate that their income has declined—either slightly (16.0%) or significantly (8.9%). While household income for almost half of respondents remained stable, the distribution of gains and losses suggests an uneven economic scenario—one that warrants further exploration to understand who is benefiting and who is being left behind.

Figure 4.5: How does your household income this year compare to the same time last year?



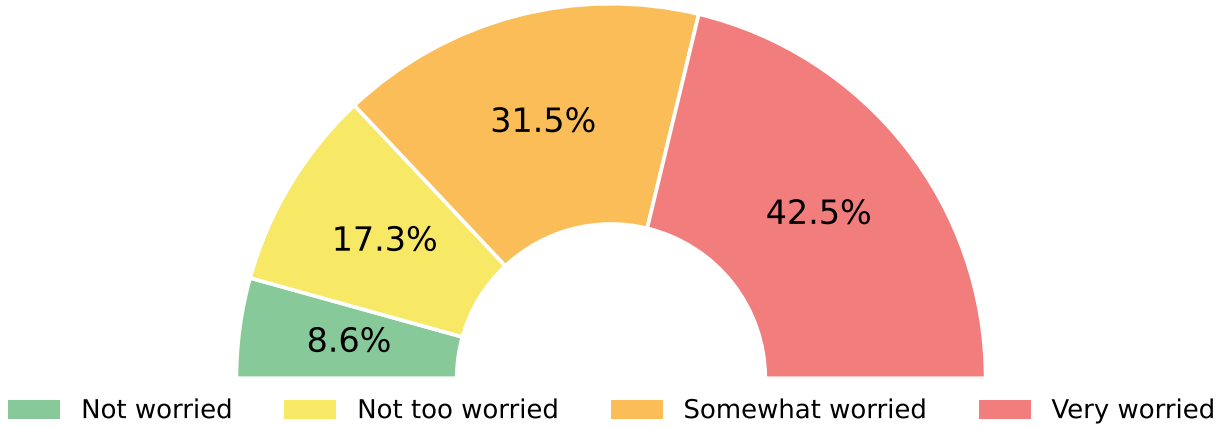
4.3 Resiliency

The Community Development and Resiliency Module includes a range of questions about the ability to withstand shocks like natural disasters, household vulnerabilities, and neighborhood and larger community concerns. While most panelists indicate they feel secure during the day, comfort decreases sharply after dark. The threat of natural disasters also looms large, with many unsure if they have the resources to weather another extreme weather event. Recent hurricanes, heavy flooding, and winter storms have impacted the Houston MSA, and responses highlight the need for both improved infrastructure and trust in emergency systems.

One set of questions in the Resiliency Module asks respondents if a natural disaster hits, how worried would they be about a range of issues, including having enough

savings, loss of home or shelter, and being able to access community resources, among others. Figure 4.6 shows the level of worry about having enough savings. Over two-fifths of respondents (42.5%) said they were very worried about having enough savings to withstand the impacts of a natural disaster and 31.5% said they were somewhat worried. Fewer than a third of respondents said they were not too worried (17.3%) or not worried at all (8.6%).

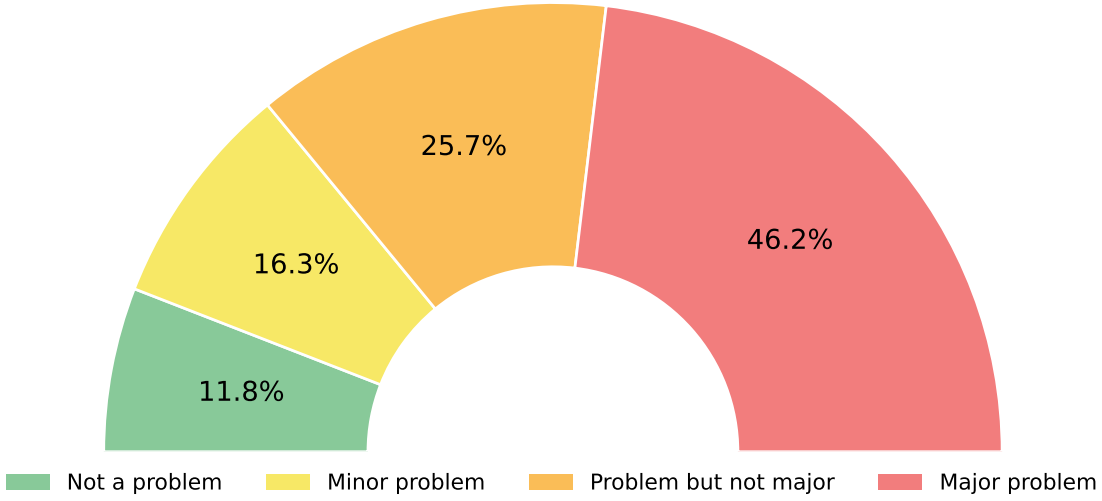
Figure 4.6: If a natural disaster hits your area, would you be very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried, or not worried at all about each of the following? **Having enough savings to withstand the impacts of the natural disaster**



4.4 Sustainability

Finally the Sustainability Module asks respondents about their experiences with natural disasters, attitudes about climate change and extreme weather events, energy sources, and expectations about future impacts. One such question asks respondents how big of a problem-from not a problem at all to a major problem-do they think climate change and environmental concerns are for the Houston area. Figure 4.7 shows the distribution of responses. The plurality of respondents (46.2%) view climate change and environmental concerns as a major problem, while one-quarter (25.7%) view them as a problem but not a major one. Only 11.8% of respondents don't climate change and other environmental concerns as a problem at all.

Figure 4.7: How big of a problem are climate change and environmental concerns?



Further Resources and Insights

The **SPACE City Panel** is an exciting opportunity to learn more about the concerns of the citizens of the nine-county Houston metropolitan area. Like the Houston area, the SPACE City Panel contains a diverse group of respondents, ensuring a wide range of perspectives are reflected in the panel. The initial survey offers a small glimpse of what is to come. Area residents express mixed feelings about their current economic well-being with some reporting a level of comfort, but many expressing serious doubts about the future. Panelists also worry about natural disasters and their ability to recover from one as well as about the direction the US and Texas are heading. Future surveys will be conducted quarterly and will dive deeper into the topics of politics, resiliency, sustainability, and economics-offering a unique opportunity to track attitudes on important topics over time.

Beyond the quarterly surveys, the **SPACE City Panel** also offers custom opportunities for researchers, government agencies, businesses, and community organizations to add questions or explore specific issues and trends over time. Policymakers, businesses, community leaders, and residents can rely on the SPACE City Panel's to understand, serve, and shape Houston's vibrant future. Stay aware for further releases!

For further information or questions about the **SPACE City Panel** please go to the SPACE City Panel's web page and/or spacecitypanel.org.

SPACE CITY PANEL

Center for Public Policy
Hobby School of Public Affairs