



# Local Priorities for Infrastructure

## What Do Local Governments Want?

June 15, 2021



Contributors: Michael Hotard, Nathan Lee

CivicPulse is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization that runs a national survey platform of local government officials. Our mission is to enhance local government through shared data and research. To learn more about our work, please visit [civicpulse.org](https://civicpulse.org). For additional information about this report, please contact Michael Hotard ([michaelhotard@civicpulse.org](mailto:michaelhotard@civicpulse.org)).

## Executive Summary

Local governments are responsible for a large share of infrastructure spending in the United States, but leaders at the local level have been relatively absent from the ongoing discussions in Washington about a possible infrastructure bill. CivicPulse surveyed 413 elected policymakers from counties, cities, and townships across the United States to ask what they thought should be included in any potential infrastructure bill, as well as what issues they considered important when thinking about infrastructure projects. The key takeaways are:

- Support was highest for funding for roads and bridges, as well as water and wastewater (93% and 83% favored the inclusion of these in any infrastructure bill).
- Funding for the electricity grid and broadband also had high levels of support, each with 73% of policymakers favoring their inclusion in an infrastructure bill.
- The majority of local policymakers also favor a bill that would include funding for ports, public buildings, clean energy, affordable housing, and homecare and elderly care.
- Policymakers from larger cities are more likely to support investments in ports (airports, ports, and waterways) and mass transit than their counterparts in smaller jurisdictions.
- Democrats and Republicans are split on their support for including funding for clean energy and electric car infrastructure.
- The top issues that local policymakers consider for infrastructure projects are public safety, business development, and quality of life.
- 40% of policymakers believe that racial equity and economic inequality are very important issues when considering an infrastructure project, but this view is divided along party lines.

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## Background

Local and state governments in the United States spend hundreds of billions of dollars on infrastructure costs each year.<sup>1</sup> This amount includes capital spending for new projects, as well as the operation and maintenance costs for existing infrastructure. Since the 1970s, the share of public spending by the federal government has decreased, while spending by state and local governments has increased.

In the first half of 2021, the federal government has considered passing an infrastructure spending bill that would pass billions or even trillions of dollars into American infrastructure projects.<sup>2</sup> Much of this funding would likely make its way to local governments to plan and implement the projects. As of the beginning of June 2021, the details of any possible legislation are still being debated. The Biden administration has outlined several options for its plan and continues to seek bipartisan support for some version of an infrastructure bill. Congressional Republicans have offered their own plans, usually covering a narrower scope of projects and providing less overall funding.

To understand the priorities of the elected officials who will be making many of the actual decisions around how and where to spend the funds, CivicPulse conducted a national survey in May 2021 of 413 policymakers from counties, cities, and townships with populations of 1,000 or more. Their answers help us better understand the on-the-ground needs of the officials who plan and maintain a large share of America's infrastructure.

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<sup>1</sup> Public Spending on Transportation and Water Infrastructure, 1956 to 2017. Congressional Budget Office. October 2018. <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2018-10/54539-Infrastructure.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Factbox: Republicans vs. Biden: What's in their infrastructure plans? Reuters. May 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/republicans-vs-biden-whats-their-infrastructure-plans-2021-04-22/>

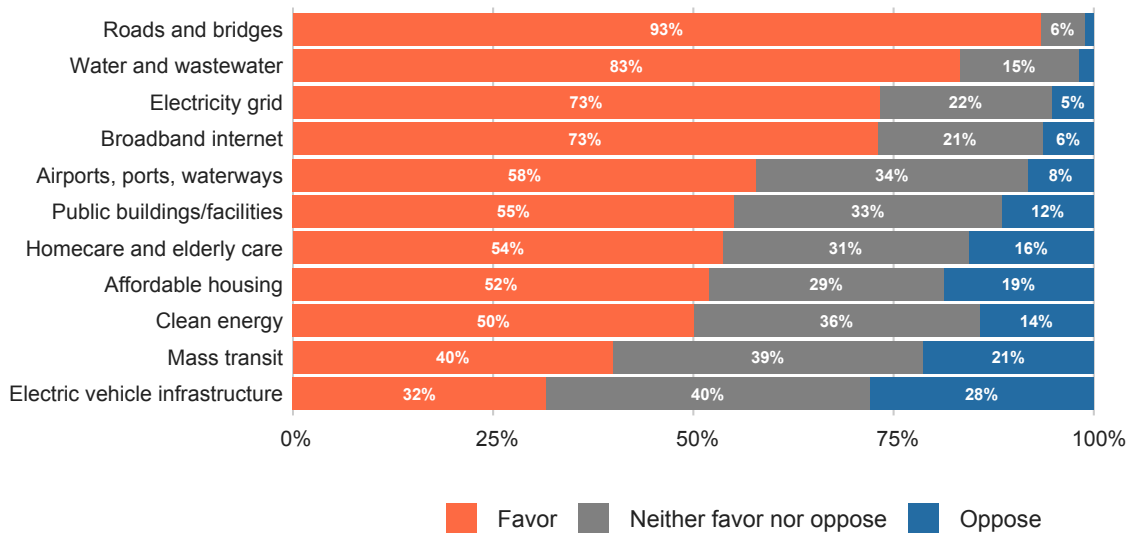
# What Do Local Leaders Want in an Infrastructure Bill?

What should be included in a new infrastructure spending bill? Elected leaders in Washington are discussing the level of funding and the scope of a possible bill. However, much of the funding will be spent by local governments around the country who build and maintain infrastructure projects in their communities. We asked elected local policymakers directly – which items would they favor or oppose having included in a new infrastructure spending bill.

The survey found that most items are supported by local policymakers. Only two areas (mass transit and electric vehicle infrastructure) had less than 50% of policymakers expressing support for their inclusion in a potential bill. Furthermore, no area received stated opposition from more than 30% of respondents. These results show that many local policymakers favor a wide-reaching bill, and few seem actively opposed to it.

## Infrastructure Bill

For each of the following items, would you favor or oppose the inclusion of funding in a new infrastructure bill?



Source: CivicPulse (May 2021)

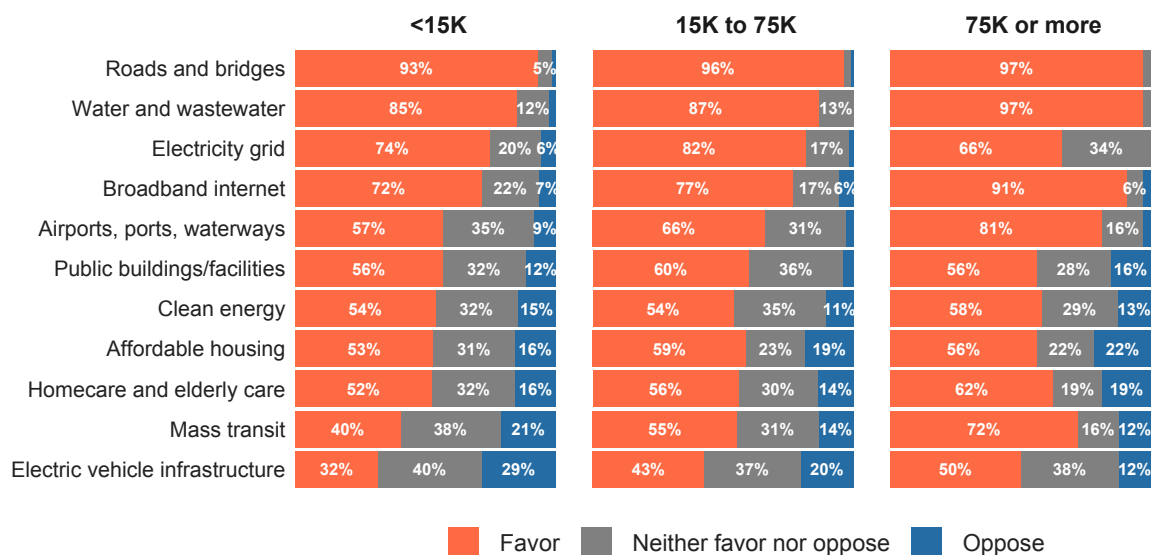
**Figure 1: Infrastructure Bill Provisions.** Bars show the percentage of local policymakers that favor or oppose the inclusion of an item in potential infrastructure bill.

The area with the strongest level of support was roads and bridges (94%) followed closely by water and wastewater (87%). The next two areas with the highest levels of support were the electricity grid (73%) and broadband internet (73%). Historically, the three infrastructure areas where local governments spend the most have been electric power, roads, and water,

so it makes sense for support to be strong for these areas.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the American Rescue Plan, passed in March 2021, will provide billions of dollars to state and local governments and specifically allows governments to “make necessary investments in water, sewer, or broadband infrastructure.”<sup>4</sup> Support for transportation projects seems to be one of the few areas where there is bipartisan agreement for inclusion in a new spending bill. While it may be getting less attention in some discussions around infrastructure, improvements to the electricity grid have been included in various versions of a potential infrastructure bill, and the survey results show that improving the electricity grid has strong support among local elected policymakers.

## Infrastructure Bill by Population Size

For each of the following items, would you favor or oppose the inclusion of funding in a new infrastructure bill?



Source: CivicPulse (May 2021)

**Figure 2: Infrastructure Bill Provisions by Population Size.**  
 Bars show the percentage of local policymakers that favor or oppose the inclusion of an item in potential infrastructure bill.

<sup>3</sup> Chen, Can and Bartle, John R., "Infrastructure Financing: A Guide for Local Government Managers". January 2017. Public Administration Faculty Publications. 77. <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/pubadfacpub/77>

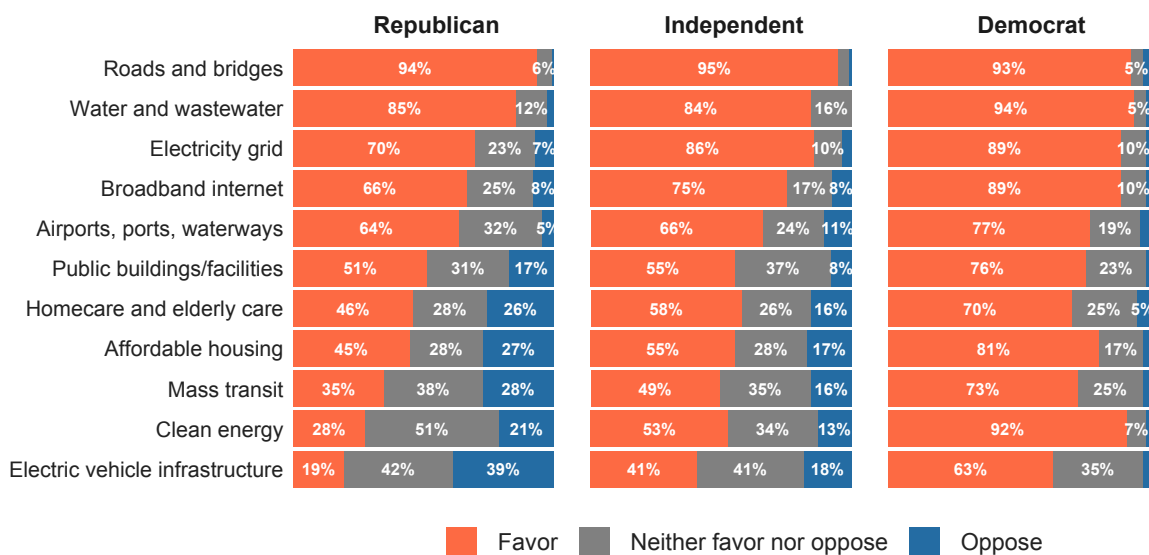
<sup>4</sup> American Rescue Plan Interim Final Rule. May 2021. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/05/17/2021-10283/coronavirus-state-and-local-fiscal-recovery-funds>

The priorities for small, mid-sized, and large jurisdictions looks similar in many ways, but there are some noticeable differences. The top two priority areas remain the same regardless of population size: roads and bridges and water and wastewater.

There were changes in the levels of support for some other areas, especially among policymakers who serve areas with populations above 75,000 people. These policymakers were more likely to favor funding for broadband internet; airports, ports, and waterways; and mass transit. Each of these areas received 20 percentage points more support in larger population areas than smaller population areas. Larger population areas are more likely to have networks of mass transit, airports, and other ports, so these differences may reflect the differences in the needs of the community that a policymaker is serving.

### Infrastructure Bill by Party of Respondent

For each of the following items, would you favor or oppose the inclusion of funding in a new infrastructure bill?



Source: CivicPulse (May 2021)

**Figure 3: Infrastructure Bill Provisions by Party of Respondent.** Bars show the percentage of local policymakers that favor or oppose the inclusion of an item in potential infrastructure bill.

Since the spring, the focus of much of the national discourse on the new infrastructure bill has been on efforts for a bipartisan compromise that would allow the Biden administration to pass a bill with support of Congressional Republicans. When the results of the survey of local policymakers is broken down by partisanship, the findings mirror what is occurring in

## Local Priorities for Infrastructure:

### What Do Local Leaders Want in an Infrastructure Bill?

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the national discourse.<sup>5</sup> While there is consensus among the top items – again roads and bridges and water and wastewater receive the highest levels of support from Republicans, Independents, and Democrats – there is disagreement on other items.

Overall, Democrats are much more likely to express support for all the suggested areas; Republicans are much more likely to oppose specific items, especially some areas that may not meet the more traditional definition of “hard” infrastructure – including homecare and elderly care and affordable housing.

The biggest difference between parties was on clean energy, which is supported by 91% of Democrats but only 27% of Republicans. Independents split the difference with 53% favoring it. Among Republicans, 40% oppose funding for electric vehicle infrastructure, compared to 19% that support it. This is the only item for any subgroup where the opposition is larger than the support. Electric vehicle infrastructure is also the least supported feature for Democrats, although most of them would still favor its inclusion in the bill.

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<sup>5</sup> Respondents were asked whether they thought of themselves as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or Other party in a survey question.

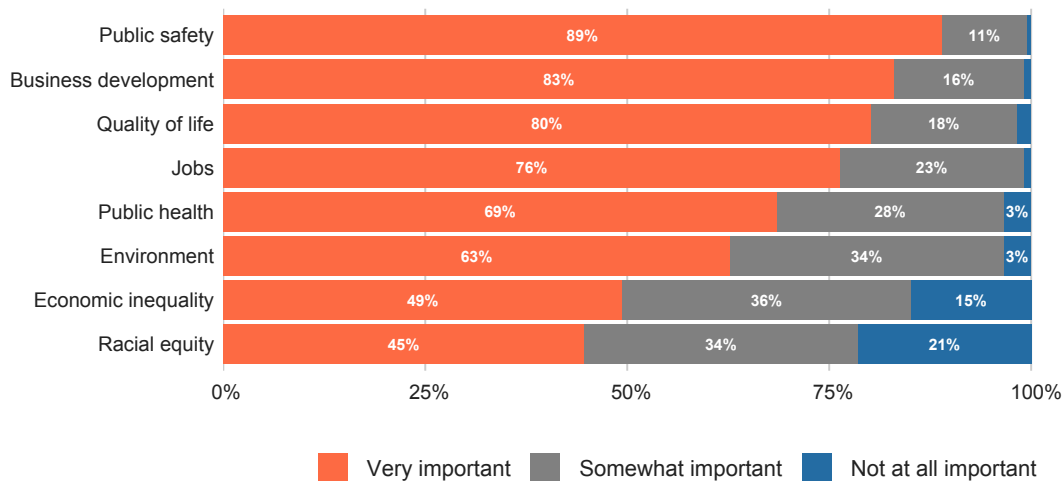


## Which Issues Surrounding Infrastructure Are Most Important?

Even if a new infrastructure bill does not make it to the President’s desk, infrastructure remains a core priority for local governments. Many local governments reported that they were pausing capital investments in 2020 due to projected revenue shortfalls caused by the pandemic and recession.<sup>6</sup> Now that they have clearer trajectories for revenue and expenditures for upcoming fiscal years, they may be more likely to restart projects. Governments also received an influx of funds from the American Rescue Plan, which is sending billions of dollars to state and local governments. In short, the current circumstances create a favorable environment for new infrastructure projects. In order to understand their decision-making process around possible projects, CivicPulse asked policymakers which issues they consider important when thinking about infrastructure projects.

### Infrastructure Policy Priorities

Infrastructure projects can have an impact on a range of issues in a community. When thinking about infrastructure generally, how important do you consider its impact on each of the following areas?



Source: CivicPulse (May 2021)

**Figure 4: Infrastructure Policy Priorities.** Bars show the percentage of local policymakers that believe an issue is very important, somewhat important, or not important at all when thinking about infrastructure.

<sup>6</sup> COVID 19’s Impact on County Finances and Implications for the U.S. Economy. July 2020. National Association of Counties. <https://www.naco.org/sites/default/files/documents/Analysis-of-COVID-19s-Impact-on-County-Finances-and-Implications-for-the-US-Economy.pdf>

## Local Priorities for Infrastructure:

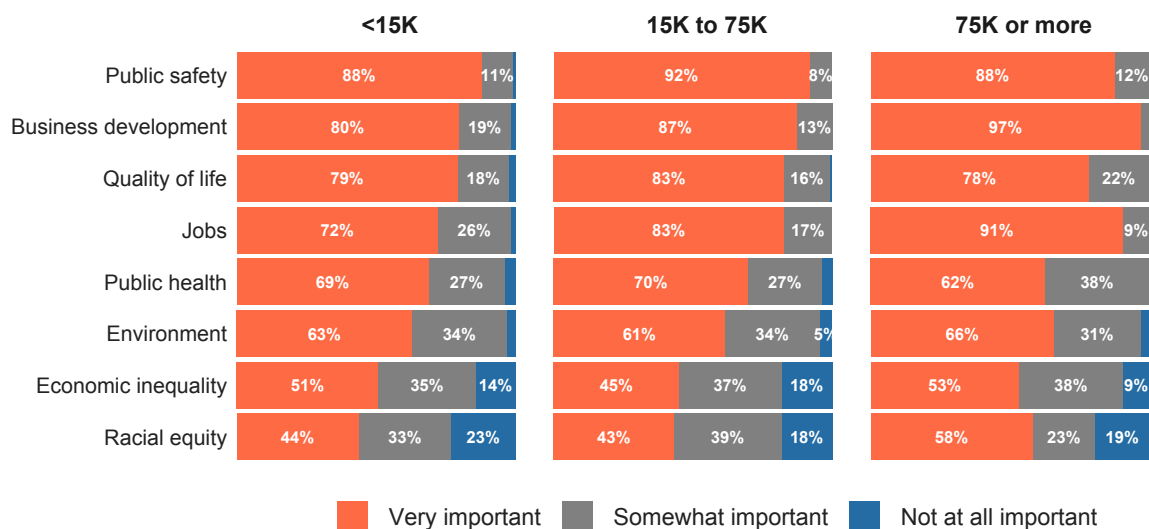
### Which Issues Surrounding Infrastructure Are Most Important?

Policymakers said that most of the issues listed in the survey were either “very important” or “somewhat important.” However, the issue that that was mostly likely to be considered very important was public safety, followed by business development, quality of life, and jobs. The next items were public health and the environment. And the two areas least likely to be considered important were economic inequality and racial equity. Fewer than 50% of respondents said that those social areas were very important and at least 15% or roughly 1 in 7 said they were not important at all.

When we looked at the policy priorities by population size, there were some differences, but the top four priorities remained the same. For larger cities, business development and jobs were seen as the top two priorities, while public safety and quality of life were third and fourth respectively. In all places, business development ranked more highly than jobs, showing that policymakers distinguished between a contribution to the local economy and merely the creation of more employment opportunities.

## Infrastructure Policy Priorities by Population Size

When thinking about infrastructure generally, how important do you consider its impact on each of the following areas in your community?



Source: CivicPulse (May 2021)

### Figure 5: Infrastructure Policy Priorities by Population Size.

Bars show the percentage of local policymakers that believe an issue is very important, somewhat important, or not important at all when thinking about infrastructure.

There were starker contrasts when policy priorities were broken down by the respondent’s self-reported party. Collectively, Democratic policymakers reported that all of the listed areas were important to them, with each area being deemed very important by 70% or more of the respondents. Republican policymakers also said that most of the areas were very important, although the four areas that were considered very important by 70% or more of the

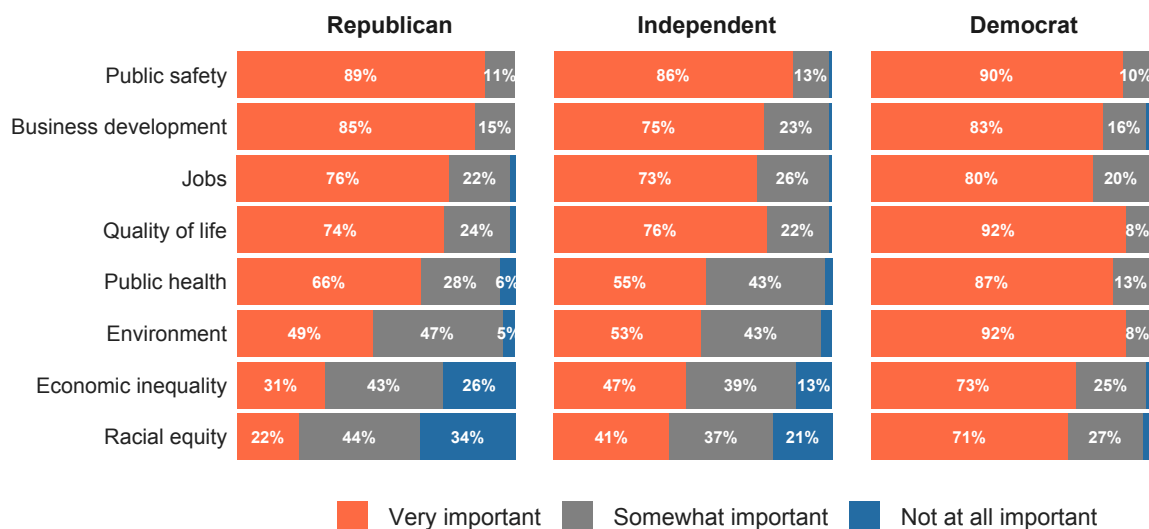
## Local Priorities for Infrastructure:

### Which Issues Surrounding Infrastructure Are Most Important?

respondents were public safety, business development, jobs, and quality of life. 60% considered public health very important, and 50% considered the environment very important. For both Republicans and Democrats, economic inequality and racial equity were considered very important by the fewest number of policymakers.

## Infrastructure Policy Priorities by Party of Respondent

When thinking about infrastructure generally, how important do you consider its impact on each of the following areas in your community?



Source: CivicPulse (May 2021)

**Figure 6: Infrastructure Policy Priorities by Party of Respondent.** Bars show the percentage of local policymakers that believe an issue is very important, somewhat important, or not important at all when thinking about infrastructure.

Nearly all policymakers agree that public safety, business development, and quality of life are very important considerations regarding infrastructure. However, there is a division on whether to consider social factors such as economic inequality and racial equity. These have stronger support among Democratic respondents than Republican respondents. In the past few months, more attention has been given to whether infrastructure spending should be used to remediate economic and racial inequalities, some of which may have been exacerbated by past infrastructure projects.<sup>7</sup> Not all lawmakers agree on whether this should be an important priority for future infrastructure spending.

<sup>7</sup> Biden Seeks to Use Infrastructure Plan to Address Racial Inequities. Jim Tankersley and Zolan Kanno-Youngs. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/01/us/politics/biden-infrastructure-racial-equity.html>

## Conclusion

Local governments have received billions of dollars in federal funding from the recent American Rescue Plan and may be set to receive billions more from a possible infrastructure bill. While Washington debates what is most needed in infrastructure, the two areas with the most support among local policymakers are roads and water projects, with the electricity grid and broadband being close behind them. Local policymakers also support the inclusion of funding for other areas in a new infrastructure bill, but there are some partisan differences—especially around possible clean energy provisions.

When deciding on infrastructure projects, local policymakers must consider a number of factors, but the issues that are considered very important by the highest percentage of local policymakers are public safety, business development, and quality of life. More than half of policymakers also said that social factors such as economic inequality and racial equity were also very important.

## Acknowledgements

CivicPulse would like to thank all of the people and organizations who contributed to the creation of this report. The Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University provided financial support and assisted with the survey's contents. Power Almanac's contact list of local government officials provided the basis of the sample frame for the report. Route Fifty provided feedback on the context of the report. Finally, we thank all of the local government officials who participated in the survey for providing information about infrastructure priorities and for the service they provide to their communities.



## Local Priorities for Infrastructure Supplemental Appendix

This supplementary appendix contains information on the survey methodology, the questionnaire, as well as additional analyses for the CivicPulse report “Local Priorities for Infrastructure.” It includes unweighted figures for each of the main figures in the main report. It also includes subsample analyses for each question discussed in the main report with breakouts for Census region and level of government.

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## Methodology and Sample

CivicPulse uses Power Almanac’s continuously updated contact list of the appointed and elected officials associated with townships, municipalities, and counties in the United States with populations of 1,000 or more.

From this list, CivicPulse invited a random sample of top appointed officials and elected policymakers to complete a survey that included a module on infrastructure. (See Table A.1). CivicPulse sent two to three email invitations to the selected sample of local officials asking them to complete the survey. This report includes data from 413 respondents. The data was collected between May 7, 2021 and May 25, 2021.

**Table A.1:** Survey Respondents by Position.

	Respondents
Top Elected Official	103
Governing Board Member	310
<b>Total</b>	<b>413</b>

**Table A.2:** Survey Respondents by Level of Local Government.

	Respondents
Townships	95
Municipalities	251
Counties	67
<b>Total</b>	<b>413</b>

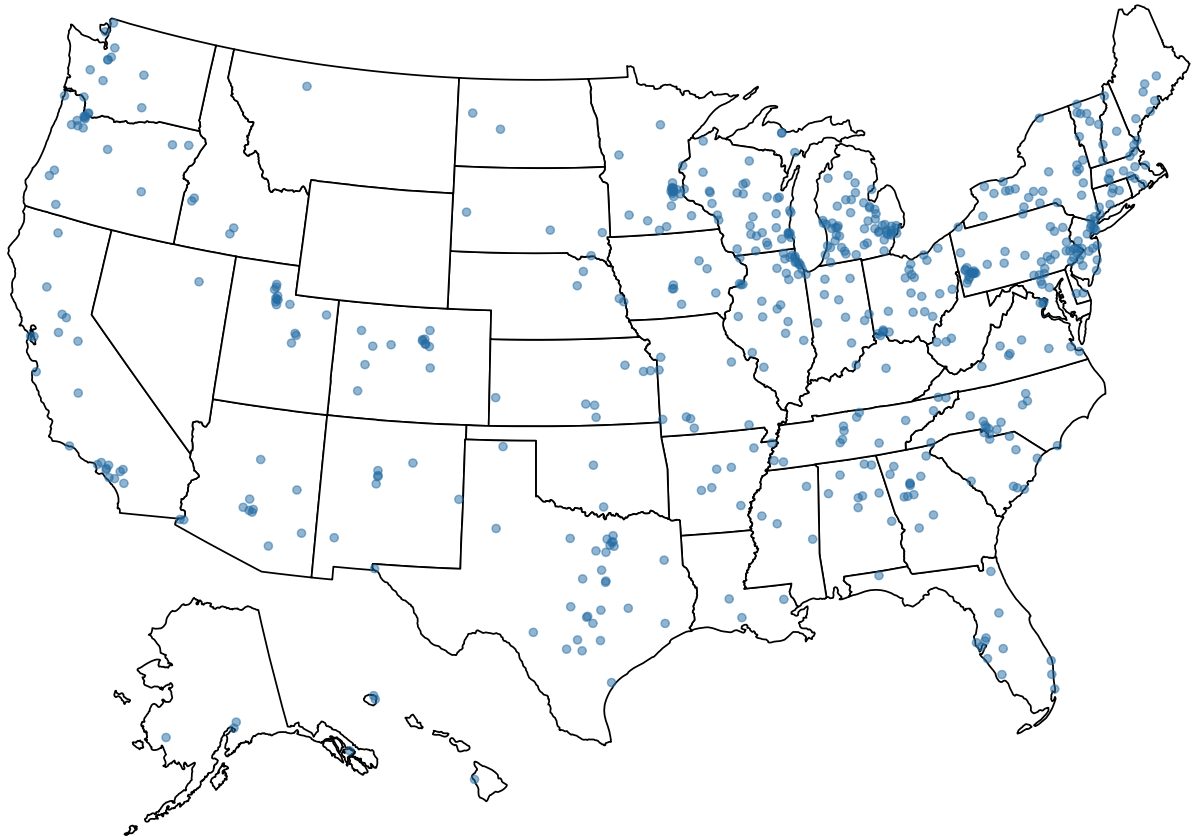
**Table A.3:** Survey Respondents by Census Region.

	Respondents
Midwest	159
Northeast	102
South	94
West	58
Total	413

**Table A.4:** Survey Respondents by Population Size of Area.

	Respondents
Less than 5,000	271
5,000 to 25,000	110
More than 25,000	32
Total	413





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Source: **CivicPulse** (May 2021)

**Figure A.1:** Geographic distribution of respondents.

The geographic distribution of the survey respondents approximates the population distribution of the United States (Figure A.1). To characterize the representativeness of our survey sample, we match these respondents to the U.S. Census data for the areas which their local governments serve. Tables A.5–A.6 compare the sample and population medians for four Census-area spatial characteristics: population size, urbanicity, the proportion of residents with a 4-year college education, and the proportion of residents who voted for Trump in 2016.

**Table A.5:** Sample Representativeness among Sub-County<sup>1</sup> Officials

	Sample Median	Population Median
Proportion Urban	0.96	0.72
Proportion College-educated	0.28	0.22
Population Size	5,289	3,324
Democratic Vote Share in 2020 Presidential Election	0.45	0.39

<sup>1</sup> This group includes officials from townships and municipalities

<sup>2</sup> Vote share estimated at the county level. Each sub-county government is matched to the relevant county in which it is contained.

**Table A.6:** Sample Representativeness among County Officials

	Sample Median	Population Median
Proportion Urban	0.39	0.40
Proportion College-educated	0.20	0.19
Population Size	39,111	25,758
Democratic Vote Share in 2020 Presidential Election	0.33	0.30

Survey weights were also tabulated based on these four county-level characteristics using a post-stratification raking procedure. The Supplementary Appendix contains unweighted versions of each of the figures presented in the report.

The de-identified survey data for this report will be posted on the CivicPulse website. For additional questions about the data, please contact Michael Hotard at [michaelhotard@civicpulse.org](mailto:michaelhotard@civicpulse.org).

## Questionnaire

1) For each of the following items, would you favor or oppose the inclusion of funding in a new infrastructure bill?

The choices provided were: Favor, Neither favor nor oppose, Oppose

- Roads and bridges
- Mass transit
- Water and wastewater
- Broadband internet
- Electric vehicle infrastructure
- Public buildings/facilities
- Airports, ports, and waterways
- Clean energy
- Homecare services and elderly care
- Electricity grid
- Affordable housing

2) Infrastructure projects can have an impact on a range of issues in a community. When thinking about infrastructure generally, how important do you consider its impact on each of the following areas in your community?

The choices provided were: Not at all important, Somewhat important, Very important

- Business development
- Public health
- Jobs
- Racial equity
- Public safety
- Environment
- Quality of life
- Economic inequality

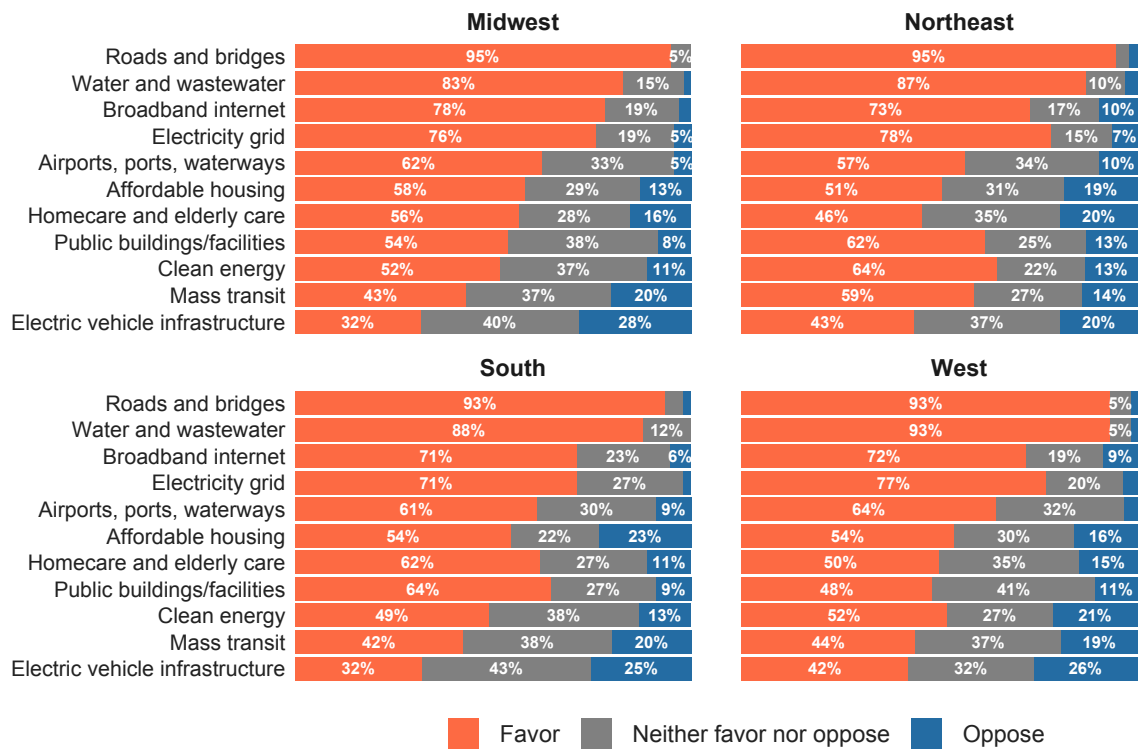
# Subsample Results by Census Region and Level of Government

## Infrastructure Bill

### Census Region

#### Infrastructure Bill by Census Region

For each of the following items, would you favor or oppose the inclusion of funding in a new infrastructure bill?

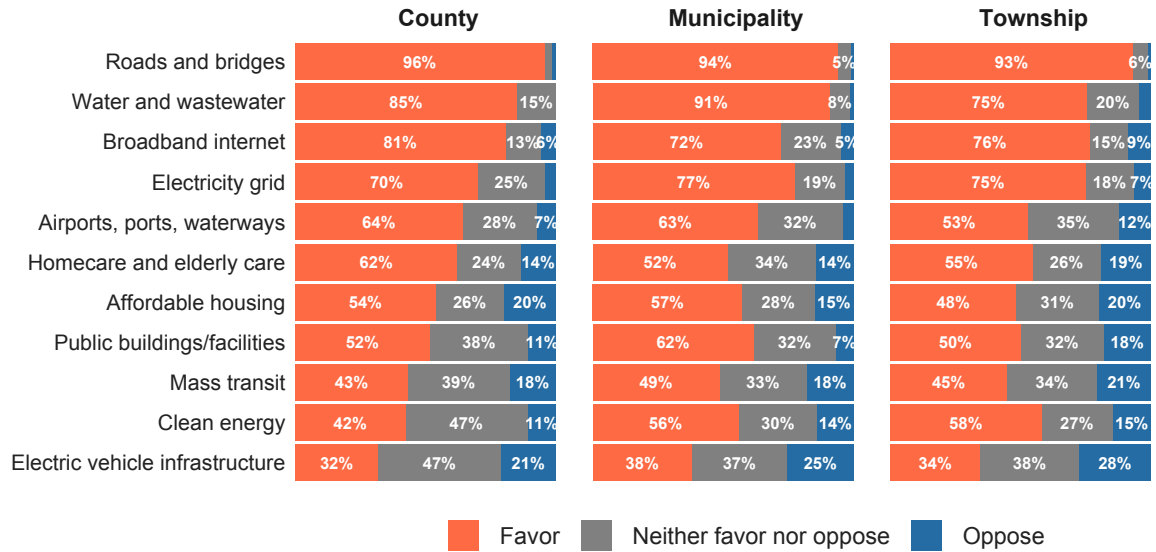


Source: CivicPulse (May 2021)

## Level of Government

### Infrastructure Bill by Level of Government

For each of the following items, would you favor or oppose the inclusion of funding in a new infrastructure bill?



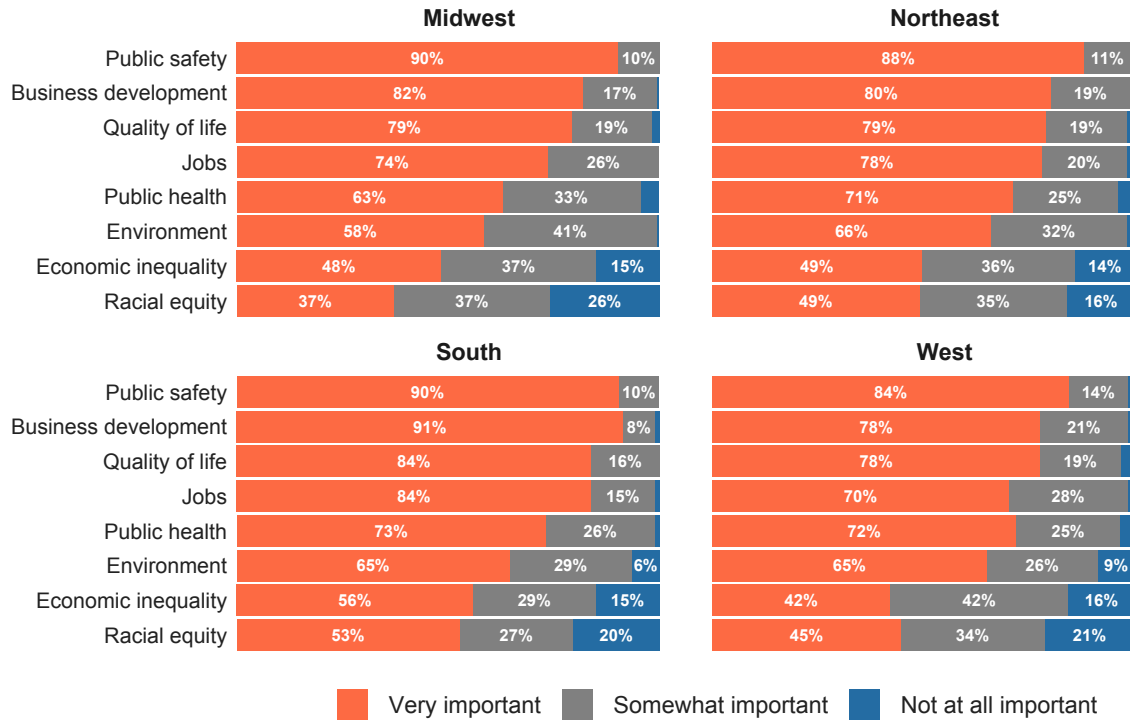
Source: CivicPulse (May 2021)

## Infrastructure Policy Priorities

### Census Region

#### Infrastructure Policy Priorities by Census Region

When thinking about infrastructure generally, how important do you consider its impact on each of the following areas in your community?

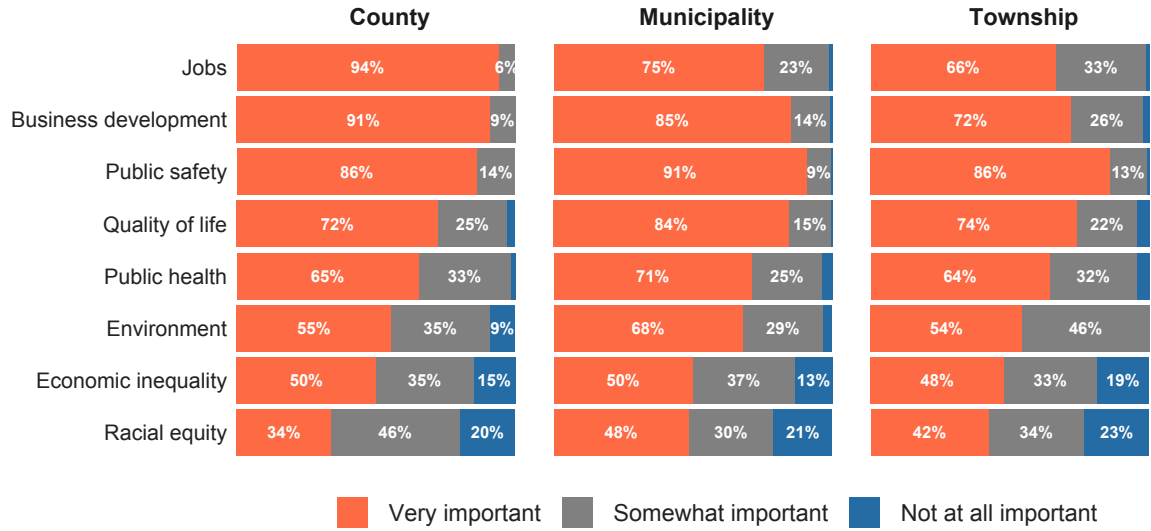


Source: CivicPulse (May 2021)

## Level of Government

### Infrastructure Policy Priorities by Level of Government

When thinking about infrastructure generally, how important do you consider its impact on each of the following areas in your community?



Source: CivicPulse (May 2021)