



NOVEMBER 2021

REPORT—Fresno Speaks 2021 Pandemic, Spending Priorities and Basic Needs

- COVID-19 remains the top concern for Fresno households
- Fresno city voters reject the gubernatorial recall
- Voters prefer people-centered investments with the city budget and local taxes
- Strong support for preventative solutions to public safety and police reform

Introduction

Fresno is the fifth largest city in California, and the thirty-fifth largest in the United States. It also suffered as other major metropolitan areas from the covid pandemic with over 2,000 deaths, and high infection rates especially among low-income and working-class populations.¹

Between July 24 and August 23, the Fresno County Civic Engagement Table in partnership with UC Merced Community and Labor Center conducted a representative survey of 1,520 registered voters in the city of Fresno (Fresno Speaks 2021).² Voters were queried about a range of questions related to the pandemic, the city budget, and public safety. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3 percent at the city level and +/- 7 percent at the city council district level. The Fresno Speaks 2021 survey also predicted the final certified recall election results within one percentage point

([Fresno Speaks 2021 accurately forecasts voter preferences in Fresno within one percentage point](#)). Hence, the findings in this report and the Fresno Speaks 2021 survey provide a highly representative overview of voter priorities in the city of Fresno.

Year 2 of the Pandemic

Fresno voters were asked about the main issues affecting their households in both open-ended and multiple-choice questions. The coronavirus pandemic continues as the central concern for respondents. Figure 1 presents a word cloud on the question, “What is the most important issue facing your household?” 28 percent of respondents mentioned the coronavirus or health as their number one issue. The next biggest issues involved violence and security (16.5%), homeless or housing (14%), income and finances (13%).³

¹ See, Edward Orozco Flores and Ana Padilla. 2020. [Hidden Threat: California COVID-19 Surges and Worker Distress](#). UC Merced Community and Labor Center (July).

² The response rate was 6 percent, which is close to the national average for telephone surveys. 13 percent of

voters were reached with phone numbers, and 45 percent agreed to do the survey once contacted.

³ In the 2020 Fresno Speaks Survey, 50 percent of respondents mentioned the coronavirus as the most important issue.

These figures show a slight relaxation in pro-public health behaviors from a year ago, before a vaccine was available. In the 2020 Fresno Speaks survey, rates for wearing a facemask, social distancing, and avoiding crowds were about 10 percentage points higher.⁶ As the coronavirus continues to be especially destructive in communities throughout the San Joaquin Valley, protective behaviors and vaccinations offer the best possibility for an end to the public health crisis.⁷

The pandemic has also exacerbated the city’s housing crisis. The 2020 Fresno Speaks Survey found that 76 percent of voters believed the city of Fresno has an affordable housing problem, much higher than the average for California or even the larger Central Valley. Indeed, 60 percent of Fresno County residents are rent burdened, and 69 percent of low-income households use half of their income or more to pay for housing.⁸

Table 3. Pro-Public Health Behaviors for Protection from Coronavirus

Activity	%	Frequency
Wearing a face mask in public	82	1227
Wash hands/frequently use hand sanitizer	82	1224
Social distancing	78	1164
Vaccination	74	1104
Avoid crowds	70	1053
Nothing	4	54

N=1499

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

Table 4 reports the percentage of voters in the Fresno Speaks 2021 survey that were threatened with foreclosure or eviction by city council district. While the city average was 16% of households, five

out of the seven city council districts (1,3,4,5 and 7) were higher than the city average. One out of every four voters were threatened with foreclosure or eviction in city council district 7, and nearly one out of every five households in districts 3 and 5. We also asked respondents if they knew of city or county resources available to those with affordable housing problems, eviction or foreclosure concerns. 45% of respondents said they were unaware. At the district level, those regions more under threat of eviction and foreclosure tended to be relatively less aware of these resources. City officials and community organizations should target these regions with campaigns about tenants’ rights and mortgage and rental assistance.

Table 4. Concerned about Eviction or Foreclosure as a result of the Pandemic and Knowledge of County/City Resources to Assist with housing

District	Threat of Eviction/Foreclosure		Knowledge of County/City Housing Resources	
	% Yes	%No	%Yes	%No
District 1	16	84	55	45
District 2	7	93	57	43
District 3	19	81	54	46
District 4	17	83	57	43
District 5	20	80	51	49
District 6	7	93	60	40
District 7	25	75	48	52
City Total	16	84	55	45

N = 1510

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

⁶ Specifically, 92.5% of respondents reported wearing a facemask in public, 91.4% practiced social distancing, and 85.6% avoided crowds. See [Fresno Speaks 2020](https://www.fresnospeaks.org/2020/11/13/la-me-san-joaquin-valley-covid-surge).

⁷ See, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-11-13/la-me-san-joaquin-valley-covid-surge>

⁸ See, Almeida, Paul, Venise Curry, Edward Flores, and Ana Padilla. 2021. Fresno Speaks 2020: Covid-19, Public Safety, and Civic Engagement in Fresno. Final Report to the Fresno County Civic Engagement Table. Merced, CA: UC Merced Community and Labor Center (75pp.).

City Budget Preferences

Over the past twenty years, a new democratic initiative mushroomed across 1,500 cities demanding participatory budgeting at the local level where residents and taxpayers take an active role in partnership with elected officials over the distribution of municipal resources that have a direct impact on the quality of life in neighborhoods and communities (Miller et al. 2019). The Merced County Board of Board of Supervisors initiated participatory budgeting in District 2 in the 2017-2019 budget cycles.⁹ In 2018-2019, community participatory budgeting was also used to distribute and invest funds from The Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) in Southwest Fresno.¹⁰

We queried Fresno Voters about how they would like to see funds invested in the community from the county transportation sales tax (Measure C) and the Fresno City Cannabis Tax (Measure A). For Measure C, as reported in Table 5, voters chose people-centered investments in road and street improvements in low-income communities followed by transportation projects that do not damage, but rather improve the environment (air pollution and climate change). These priorities were also consistent across all seven city council districts. For the Marijuana Tax (Measure A), residents prefer social services over the funding of law enforcement (see Table 6). Specifically, voters would like to see the Measure A funds invested in Mental Health Services and Youth Programs in the City. Youth programs were also a top priority for Measure A funds in the 2020 Fresno Speaks Survey.¹¹

⁹ See, <https://www.mercedsunstar.com/news/article153479934.html>

¹⁰ See, <https://sgc.ca.gov/programs/tcc/docs/20190201-TCC Awardee Fresno.pdf>

Table 5. How Might Funds from Measure C Improve Your Household? (Choose one)

Best Use	%	Frequency
Improvements to existing streets and roads, especially in low-income areas	49	736
Transportation projects that improve air quality and don't contribute to climate change	22	335
Improved bike lanes, sidewalks and streetlights	11	168
Improved bus, van pool, and rideshare services	11	163
Highway expansion	6	93
Total	100	1495

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

Table 6. How Might Funds from Measure A Improve Your Household? (Choose one)

Use of Marijuana Tax	%	Frequency
Mental health services	37	558
After school and summer youth programs	28	419
Street improvements	16	239
More police	14	215
Improved bus routes	4	67
Total	100	1498

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

Public Safety and City Resources

One section of the Fresno Speaks 2021 survey focused on public safety, policing, and how resources are allocated in these areas. Voters answered a question about their support for the Advance Peace Program. Advance Peace focuses on preventative measures to reduce gun violence in the city. The initiative targets vulnerable populations with employment options and social services. Previously, the program has shown positive results in reducing armed violence in the cities of Sacramento, Richmond, and Stockton.

¹¹ See, https://clc.ucmerced.edu/sites/clc.ucmerced.edu/files/page/documents/fact_sheet-fresno_voters_budget_preferences_oct_2021.pdf

Advance Peace was approved by the Fresno City Council in 2020 with initial funding set at \$125,000 and additional funds from the Economic Opportunities Commission. Table 7 shows voters' strong support for Advance Peace in both the 2020 and 2021 Fresno Speaks Survey.¹² Support has increased since its initial passage. These results are consistent across city council districts, with all districts supporting Advance Peace by 91 percent or more in the 2021 survey.

Table 7. Support for Advance Peace Violence Prevention (%)

Response	2021 (N=1479)	2020 (N=2093)
Yes	93	89
No	7	11
Total	100	100

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

Voters also answered a survey item on the best ways to invest city resources to reduce gang violence. The responses to this issue are detailed in Table 8. Voters overwhelmingly prefer *social and preventative solutions* to gang problems over increased funding for law enforcement, which ranked as a lesser preferred option. Respondents chose job opportunities for persons on parole or the formerly incarcerated as their number one option. Such employment opportunities were also the preferred solution across all seven city council districts. Such preferences are consistent with the social science literature on reducing violence and providing community engagement opportunities for those with past records (Flores 2013; 2018). Consistent with other survey responses, voters

¹² The actual survey question presented was as follows: The Advance Peace program provides resources — such as education, job training, addiction services, and counseling — to those most at risk of being a perpetrator or victim of gun violence. Academic research indicates that such a prevention program may reduce gun violence. Would you like to see the city of Fresno continue this program?

also desired youth opportunities, mental health services, and violence prevention programs over funding law enforcement.¹³ These results remain stable from the 2020 Fresno Speaks survey whereby police funding was a less desirable option and providing opportunities with those with records was the most frequent response.¹⁴

Table 8 What do you think would be the best solution to reduce gang violence (Choose one)

Solution	%	Frequency
Mental health services	29	424
After school and summer youth programs	21	314
Street improvements	19	283
More police	17	251
Improved bus routes	14	215
Total	100	1487

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

Three additional questions specifically asked voters about police reform and city funding for law enforcement. One question queried respondents about if they believed over-policing was a problem in the city. Nearly thirty percent (29.2%) of voters stated that over-policing was a problem. Over policing as a negative issue for voters increased 5 percentage points from the 2020 Fresno Speaks survey, whereby 24.4 percent of respondents stated it a concern. There was substantial variation among city council district levels with nearly 40 percent of voters (39.5%) in District 1 and over one in three voters (35%) in District 3 stating over-policing as a problem. Voters also answered a question about their support for elected politicians that advocate for police reform.

¹³ In statistical terms, violence prevention programs are technically tied with funding for law enforcement as the two funding priorities fall within the +/- 3-point margin of error at the 95% level of confidence.

¹⁴ Mental health services were not an option provided in the 2020 Fresno Speaks survey.

73 percent of voters stated they would support politicians that lobby for police reforms. There was some variation among city council districts, with 65 percent of voters in district 6 supporting police reform (the lowest) and 82 percent of voters in District 1 supporting reforms (the highest). There is also a 5 percent reduction in support for police reform between the 2020 and 2021 Fresno Speaks surveys (see Table 9). This is likely partially due to the absence of massive police reform protests in 2021 that sustained the issue in public opinion in 2020. Nonetheless, in both 2020 and 2021, the local electorate demonstrated strong backing for officials to push policy initiatives that improve existing police practices. The voting public also gave its input on how much of the current city budget should be allocated for law enforcement. The mean percentage was 35.8. Currently, about 52 percent of the city budget is spent on law enforcement. Strikingly, this was similar to the mean percentage from voters in the 2020 Fresno Speaks survey (at 36.4%). These results demonstrate stability of voter preferences over time on the issue of the allocation of city funds to law enforcement, as well as consistent support for a smaller percentage of the city budget towards law enforcement than is currently allocated.

Civic Engagement Recall

Another section of the survey centered on the civic engagement of Fresno voters. The survey was conducted in the context of the gubernatorial recall election. The survey began 7 weeks before the special election and ended three weeks ahead of election day.¹⁵ A majority of Fresno voters rejected recalling Governor Gavin Newsom. 57% of voters planning to vote in the recall election stated they would vote “no” while 43% stated they would vote “yes.” The 13 percent margin between the yes and no vote was close to other state-wide polling at around the same time. The biggest issue dividing Fresno likely recall voters was climate change, with 47% against the recall willing to attend a meeting about global warming, and 29% for the recall willing to attend.¹⁶ Latino, Black and Asian voters were more likely against the recall, while white voters were evenly split. 77 percent of Latino voters planned to vote in the recall election and 62 percent of likely Latino voters stood against the recall. Overall, the Fresno Speaks 2021 survey precisely forecasted the final certified results by the County Clerk and Voter Registrar’s office – just .55 percent from the final vote tally (see Figure 2).

Table 9 Would you support elected officials that advocate for police reform? (In Percent)

Answer	2020 (N=2266)	2021 (N=1460)
Yes	78	73
No	22	27
Total	100	100

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

¹⁵ The survey was conducted between July 24 and August 24 of 2021. The final day of the recall election was September 14, 2021.

¹⁶ [See, Almeida, Paul, and Edward Orozco Flores. 2021. “Heating Up: Recall Election and Climate Crisis in Fresno.” Fact Sheet \(September\). Merced: UC Merced Community and Labor Center.](#)

Figure 2. Comparison of City of Fresno Certified Recall Results with Fresno Speaks Survey

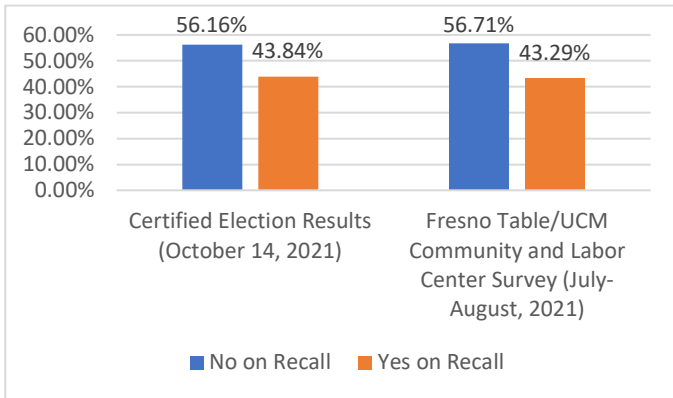
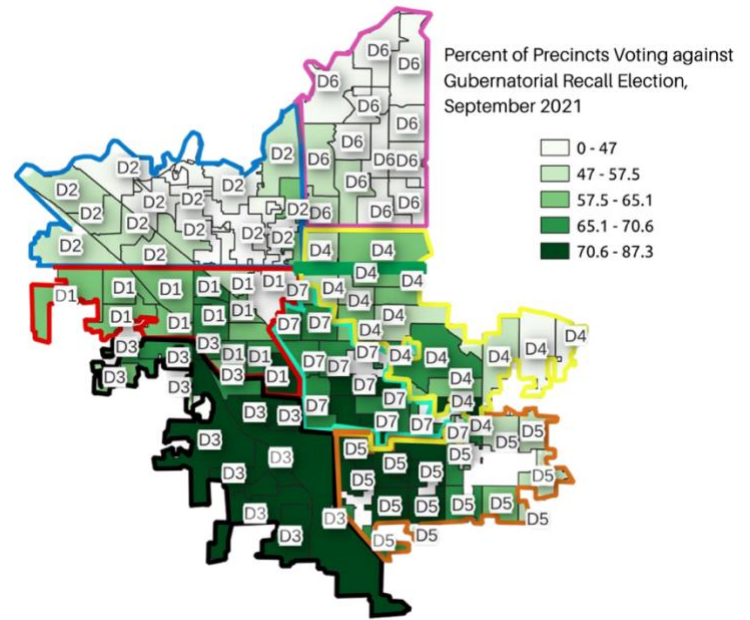


Figure 3 maps the final official 2021 gubernatorial recall vote down to the level of voting precincts across the city. The results follow a similar pattern to voting in the November 2020 US presidential elections. 80 percent of voting precincts (89 out of 111) in the city of Fresno had 50 percent or more of voters rejecting the recall. The efforts by community-based organizations (CBOs) to get out the vote in the city of Fresno paid off for the recall elections. CBOs were able to build off of the turnout in the November 2020 general elections in which 87 percent of precincts in the city registered a majority for the Biden/Harris presidential ticket (see Figure 5 in Appendix).

Figure 3. Map of Precinct Voting in Gubernatorial Recall Election



Registered voters were also queried about putting their beliefs and opinions into action. They were asked if they would be willing to attend a local meeting to strategize on how to improve the situation from a choice of 16 social issues. Respondents could choose as many issues as they desired. The results are presented in Table 10.

Over half of respondents stated they would attend a neighborhood gathering to discuss homelessness, youth involvement in the community, public school quality, and access to health care/medical attention. Nearly half of respondents also prioritized people with disabilities, housing costs, and gang violence. A similar question was asked in the 2020 Fresno Speaks survey with 14 options (voting rights and homelessness were not included in the 2020 survey). Some of the largest increases in interest between 2020 and 2021 include youth community involvement (up 13%); cost of utility bills (up 10%); medical attention (up 9%); and access to affordable internet (up 8%)

Such a wide interest in community participation holds much potential to build larger grassroots advocacy organizations to work cooperatively in finding solutions to the city's most pressing challenges.

References

- Almeida, Paul, Venise Curry, Edward Flores, and Ana Padilla. 2021. *Fresno Speaks 2020: Covid-19, Public Safety, and Civic Engagement in Fresno. Final Report to the Fresno County Civic Engagement Table*. Merced, CA: UC Merced Community and Labor Center (75pp).
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- Miller, S.A., Hildreth, R.W. and Stewart, L.M., 2019. "The modes of participation: A revised frame for identifying and analyzing participatory budget practices." *Administration & Society*, 51(8), pp.1254-1281.

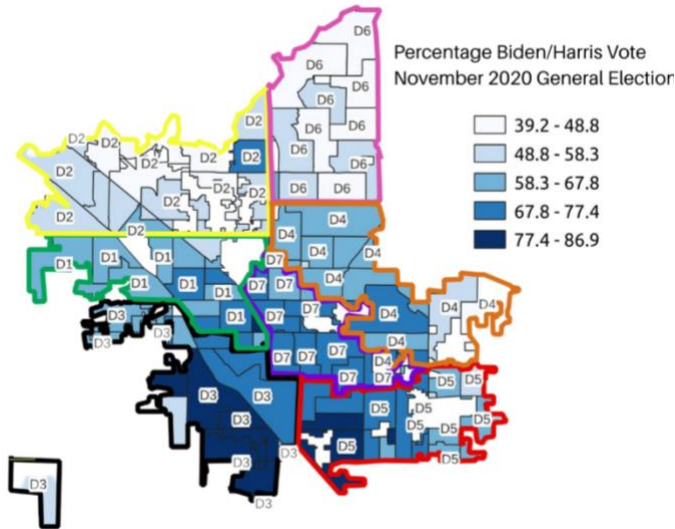
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Mission Statement

The UC Merced Community and Labor Center conducts research and education on issues of community, labor and employment, in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond.

Appendix

Figure 5. Heat Map of Presidential Voting by Precinct in November 2020 Elections



Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table A. Racial/Ethnic Identity (check one)

Racial/Ethnic Identity	Percent
White	44
Hispanic or Latino	32
Black or African American	10
Asian or Asian American/Pacific Islander	8
Two or more	6
American Indian or Alaska Native	1

N=1412

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

Table B. How do you identify in terms of your gender? (Choose one)

Gender	Percent
Female	52
Male	47
Other	2

N=1443

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

Table C. What is your highest level of education completed? (Choose one)

Highest Level Completed	Percent
None/incomplete primary	0
Primary/elementary	0
Junior High/middle school	2
High school	23
AA community college/some college	44
Bachelor's degree	22
Master's degree or more (includes law degree, PhD, MD, etc.)	9

N=1426

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

Table D. Which of the following categories best describes your current annual household income? (Choose one)

Household Income	Percent
\$ 0-24,999	21
\$ 25,000-49,999	37
\$50,000-74,999	20
\$75,000 and above	22

N=1358

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

Table E. What is your age? (Choose one)

Age Group	Percent
18-25	11
26-35	28
36-45	19
46-55	14
56-65	12
Over 65	15

N=1413

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data