

Governors' 2020 Priorities in Their Own Words

Introduction

Governors deliver State of the State addresses each year to kick off legislative sessions and set their agendas. Pew researchers reviewed transcripts or prepared text of all speeches, with a focus on fiscal and economic impacts. The analysis provides an approximation of the issues governors most emphasized across 15 policy categories. Governors of three states whose legislatures were not in session this year—Montana, Nevada, and Texas—did not deliver an address; nor did the governors of North Carolina, Ohio, and Oregon.

Methodology

Pew relied on printed records of 2020 State of the State addresses, as reported by the National Association of State Budget Officers. In most cases, the record was prepared text or a transcript published on governors' websites, but in some cases, it was published by a media outlet.

Researchers read governors' addresses and categorized each complete sentence using a typology of 15 policy categories.

Each sentence was assigned to at least one category. Some sentences related to multiple categories and, therefore, were classified under more than one. For example, discussions about frequent flooding compounded by climate change were assigned to both the emergency management and energy and environment categories. If governors referenced flood-control projects or constructing levees, the text was also included in the infrastructure category.

Segments of text that introduced or highlighted policy issues were assigned to corresponding policy categories, regardless of whether the topic was explicitly mentioned. For example, many governors told stories about citizens in attendance as a way to frame substantive policy proposals and commentary, and those introductions were assigned to the relevant category.

Introductions, conclusions, recognition of individuals, and other sentences not related in substance to any of the 15 policy categories were not categorized. Merely using a keyword also didn't necessarily result in categorization. Governors may have mentioned their "budget" or "schools" in discussions focused on other policy topics, for example. An average of only 16% of speech text was not assigned to at least one of the 15 policy categories.

In this way, Pew's approach differs from methodologies based on word frequencies. Considering only words could potentially yield misleading findings. Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, for instance, mentioned the "road ahead" in his speech, which a word-frequency analysis might interpret to refer to infrastructure or transportation.

Results were used to approximate how much of governors' speeches was devoted to each broad policy category. For each governor's address, researchers aggregated all sentences classified in a category and calculated total category word counts using NVivo, a qualitative analysis program. These category totals were compared with total speech word counts to compute each category's share of the speech. Note that policy category percentages for each speech will not add up to 100% as some text was either unclassified or assigned to multiple categories.

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National average shares were computed for each category. Governors not mentioning select policy categories at all were still considered in calculating averages for those categories. Most governors, though, had text assigned to all but one or two policy categories.

Data Limitations

Comparing governors' speeches is subject to limitations. Some governors touched on many more policy issues than others simply because they gave longer speeches. A few governors also delivered a separate budget address, so they may have provided relatively few details on budget proposals in their State of the State speech.

Finally, speeches do not provide a complete accounting of governors' priorities. Pew focused on the content of their speeches, but governors also pursue policy objectives not specifically referenced in their addresses.

Policy Category Definitions

Budget and taxes

The budget and taxes category includes a broad set of topics related to state finances. Examples include taxes, revenue, funding sources, debt, reserves, credit ratings, auditing, financial transparency, and financial accountability issues. Similar references to improving efficiency, cutting costs, or other efforts to save money were also counted. Pew further incorporated governors' explanations of how revenues were raised or how programs were paid for, such as funding formulas. More general references to the "budget" in discussions of other policy categories were typically not included, however. (Example: "My budget provides \$100 million for new infrastructure projects.")

Economy

The economy category encompasses a range of issues related to jobs, economic conditions, wages, and similar topics. It reflects discussions of business climates, regulations affecting the economy, occupational licensing, domestic migration, and other demographic issues with economic implications. The category also includes mentions of private sector labor issues such as paid family leave and retirement benefits. (Similar discussions referring to public employees were categorized separately.) Economic development programs were counted, with the exception of those focusing solely on job training or workforce development, which were instead assigned to the higher education and training category.

Education (pre-K to 12)

The pre-K to 12 education category reflects discussions related to preschool through high school. Frequent subjects discussed included gun violence in schools and teacher pay or benefits. Any technical or job training occurring before high school graduation was further incorporated. Education discussions specific to higher education were categorized separately, while general references to education were assigned to both the pre-K to 12 and higher education categories.

Emergency management

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The emergency management category captures government responses to a range of emergencies and natural disasters such as the coronavirus pandemic, floods, fires, hurricanes, and terrorism. It includes preparation for these events, such as flood mitigation, as well as response efforts. Mass shootings and prison staffing shortages were categorized separately as public safety and justice.

Energy and environment

The energy and environment category covers renewable energy sources such as solar and wind along with oil, coal, and other forms of nonrenewable energy. This category also includes discussions of climate change, energy costs, public utilities, natural resources, state parks, and the outdoors. In addition, it encompasses water quality, lead poisoning, and other environmental health issues.

Health

The health category includes a variety of public health issues. Common subjects discussed were the opioid crisis, prescription drug costs, care for seniors, environmental health, and mental health. It also includes discussions of private health insurance, Medicare, and Medicaid. Additional topics covered include the coronavirus, medical marijuana (but not marijuana for recreational use), vaping, medical leave, and other employee health benefits.

Higher education and training

The higher education and training category includes discussions of public and private colleges, universities, technical schools, and other postsecondary education. It includes issues specific to students, such as debt and financial aid, along with employees of these institutions. Job training and workforce development programs were included as well, regardless of whether they occur in institutional settings. Education discussions specific to primary and secondary schooling were categorized separately, but general references to education were assigned to both the pre-K to 12 and higher education categories.

Housing

The housing category covers public housing, homelessness, and other related issues such as zoning. It further includes discussions of the private real estate market, with housing shortages and affordability being frequently cited topics.

Infrastructure

The infrastructure category includes all discussions related to public infrastructure such as roads, bridges, utilities, levees, schools, and other public buildings. It also includes broader discussions of a state's transportation system and public transportation. Broadband infrastructure was counted in both the infrastructure and technology categories. Housing issues were categorized separately.

Other social services

The other social services category includes discussions of poverty, foster care, child welfare, unemployment, public assistance programs, and similar types of services. Other examples include discussions of human service agencies, veterans services, and libraries. This category does not include discussions of health programs such as Medicaid and drug addiction treatment programs, housing, and homelessness, which were assigned to other categories.

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Public employees and benefits

The public employees and benefits category covers all discussions relating to the public sector workforce, with the exception of education employees. Some of the more frequent topics governors discussed included pay raises, pensions, hiring, staffing levels, and recruitment. The category also includes remarks highlighting the work of rank-and-file state workers or thanking them for their service. Local government employees and National Guard personnel were included.

Public safety and justice

The public safety and justice category primarily includes issues related to law enforcement, sentencing, and corrections. Gun violence, marijuana legalization, and texting while driving were often mentioned. Discussions of firefighters, first responders, judges, and transportation safety were also included.

Social issues

The social issues category encompasses a variety of social, cultural, and civil rights issues. Frequently discussed topics included abortion, LGBT equality, voting rights, condemnation of hate crimes, and various forms of discrimination. Governors' comments on immigration, refugees, and sanctuary cities were also included. The category further covers mentions of diversity, inclusion, broad demographic trends, and related topics. References to gun violence, gambling, and marijuana were categorized elsewhere, as were any mentions of disparities among specific demographic groups in discussions of nonsocial issues.

Technology

The technology category represents a range of public and private sector technology issues. This includes cybersecurity, government information technology systems, computer science education, and the use of technology to help solve public policy problems. For the private sector, this category includes broadband access, autonomous vehicles, and cellphones. General, future-oriented discussions of technology were also counted.

Voting and ethics

The voting and ethics category first reflects issues related to elections such as voting rights, redistricting, and election security. It also comprises the 2020 census and open meetings and public records laws. Another component includes issues concerning government ethics such as corruption, abuse, and financial disclosure for public officials. Strictly political comments and mentions of ballot measures were excluded.

Policy Proposals

Separately, Pew also tracked specific proposals by governors in their addresses on broad tax increases, broad tax decreases, infrastructure projects, and teacher pay raises. Only broad tax proposals that would either affect a majority of taxpayers or likely result in considerably less or more state revenue were counted. To distinguish proposals from more general statements, only references that alluded to at least one of the following were considered: legislation, executive orders, administrative actions, budget requests, formal proposals, specific dollar figures and other numbers, or other language suggesting that a

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governor had plans or proposals that he or she intended to be enacted. Merely stating that a legislature should address an issue or expressing a desire to do so did not qualify as a policy proposal. Only proposals mentioned in speeches were tallied.