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Pennsylvanians see innovation, entrepreneurship as key to economic opportunity

Survey Findings

To: Ben Franklin Technology Partners
From: State Science & Technology Institute (SSTi)

A new poll* shows Pennsylvania voters overwhelmingly support—95 percent of likely voters—the Innovative Science & Technology for Economic Prosperity initiative (iSTEP) proposed by SSTi. Support cuts across common policy divides, as voters of different ages, races, parties, and education all approve of implementing iSTEP.

The initiative described to respondents would bring the “benefits of American innovation to the American people.” Policies discussed to implement the idea include increasing investments in research, expanding start-ups’ access to capital, and converting “government-funded research into new companies and jobs.”

The results of the Pennsylvania survey complement a national, contemporaneous poll that also found 95 percent support among the U.S. public.

Public appreciation for the initiative appears rooted both in how iSTEP could benefit Americans in the future, as well as now. When thinking about the initiative’s beneficiaries, 70 percent of voters reported a belief that the initiative would directly benefit them. However, 90 percent believed it would create opportunities for their children or grandchildren, and 93 believed it would change the American economy for the better.

Support continued to be overwhelming when voters were asked to consider specific policies to implement iSTEP. Suggestions with the most support in Pennsylvania include training workers for the jobs of the future and funding programs that help turn promising research into new products and jobs.

Voters want to see their elected officials implement iSTEP: 74 percent said they were more likely to support a candidate who supports the initiative.

* The polls were an online survey of 300 voters registered in Pennsylvania, and a national survey of 800 voters (statistically weighted to reflect the national population), both taken March 17-21, 2020. The survey was conducted by a bipartisan team: GQR and TargetPoint Consulting. No estimates of sample error are calculated for online polls, as the method does not employ a probability sample. For sake of comparison, a probability sample of 300 voters would have a margin of error of +/- 4.0 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence interval.

An Enthusiastic Response to iSTEP

Voters read the following description of the iSTEP initiative and were asked about their degree of initial support.

Figure 1: Description of iSTEP initiative

As a country, we lead the world in scientific and medical research and innovative ideas. America is home to 40 percent of the world's Nobel Prize winners—the highest of any country—and two-thirds of the world's top 30 universities. However, both of these figures have dropped sharply in the past decade and we often fail to convert much of that research into benefits for all Americans—economic benefits like new jobs and new companies and quality of life benefits like medical treatments and cures.

We need a new approach that increases our economic prosperity and quality of life through science, technology, innovation and entrepreneurship. This is where the Innovative Science & Technology for Economic Prosperity (iSTEP) initiative comes in.

This is a comprehensive initiative focused on converting our nation's strength in research into new businesses and jobs and to bring the benefits of American innovation to the American people. Among other things, it calls for:

- *Increased investment in scientific research;*
- *A dedicated effort to convert government-funded research into new companies and jobs;*
- *Streamlining government regulations so innovators can more easily, but still safely, bring new products/technologies/cures to the American people;*
- *Increasing access to financing for innovative start-ups and existing companies that are creating new products and jobs; and,*
- *Making smarter investments in science, technology, engineering and math education in U.S. high schools, universities, and community colleges to ensure we have a workforce trained for the future.*

iSTEP received broad and enthusiastic support among Pennsylvania voters. Specifically, 95 percent supported the initiative and 47 percent voiced strong support. This enthusiasm within the state is on par with the support the initiative sees across the country, with 46 percent of Americans voicing strong support. Few public policies garner this level of approval.

Enthusiasm was consistent across a wide variety of demographics and perspectives. Democrats (96 percent), Independents (92 percent), and Republicans (95 percent) all support iSTEP. College educated (97 percent) and non-college educated (94 percent) support iSTEP. White Americans (97 percent) and American communities of color (89 percent) support iSTEP. The employed (93 percent) and unemployed (95 percent) support iSTEP, as do those who live paycheck-to-paycheck (92 percent).

iSTEP proves popular as an overall concept, but voters also express clear support for specific policy recommendations to enact the initiative.

Figure 2: Support for iSTEP’s specific policy changes

Policy	Strong Support	Total Support
Make it easier for U.S. businesses to use promising research results from universities and federal labs to improve existing products and create new products and services	41	93
Ensure that the U.S. has a workforce that is trained for the jobs of the future	58	92
Fund programs that help turn promising research into new products, companies and jobs	38	91
Provide low-interest financing to American manufacturers to help them modernize their production facilities in the U.S	42	90
Increase the ability of start-up companies to access early stage financing and capital	34	88
Streamline government regulations for innovators, but still ensure the safety of new products, technologies and medicines	43	87
Focus on innovation that will result in cleaner air and water and reduce climate change	50	86
Strengthen federal guidelines and accountability standards to improve energy efficiency, public health and waste reduction	47	86
Increase federal funding for research	44	84
Have the federal government partner with cities, states, and non-profit organizations to help fund locally designed strategies that encourage the creation and growth of innovation-oriented companies	35	80
Provide a loan forgiveness program for students majoring in science, technology, engineering or math	34	68

Dealing with Economic Change

Heading into the depths of the coronavirus pandemic response, the majority (59 percent) of survey respondents believed the economy was getting worse, although 48 percent believed it would get better over the next three years. Most Pennsylvania voters view iSTEP as a means for improving the economy in the future. Ninety-three percent believe the initiative can change the economy for the better. Looking beyond the next three years, 90 percent report that iSTEP would create new opportunities for their children and grandchildren.

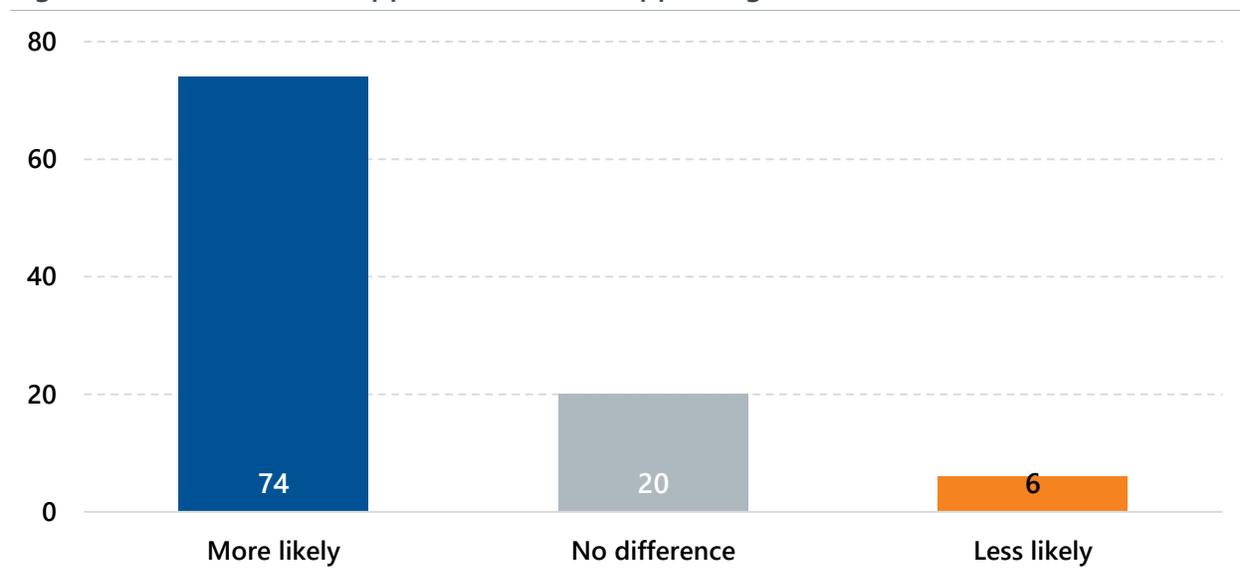
Figure 3: Reasons to support the iSTEP initiative

Statement	Strongly agree	Total agree
If this initiative is fully developed, it can change the American economy for the better.	42	93
If this initiative is fully developed, it can open up opportunities for me or people like me.	23	70
If this initiative is fully developed, it can open up opportunities for my children, grandchildren and the next generation.	46	90

Significant Potential Electoral Impact

Pennsylvania voters report overwhelming interest in supporting a candidate for public office who supports the iSTEP initiative. Seventy-four percent would be more likely to support such a candidate. This enthusiasm holds across party lines, holding true for 72 percent of Republicans, 69 percent of Independents, and 76 percent of Democrats.

Figure 4: Likelihood to support candidate supporting iSTEP initiative



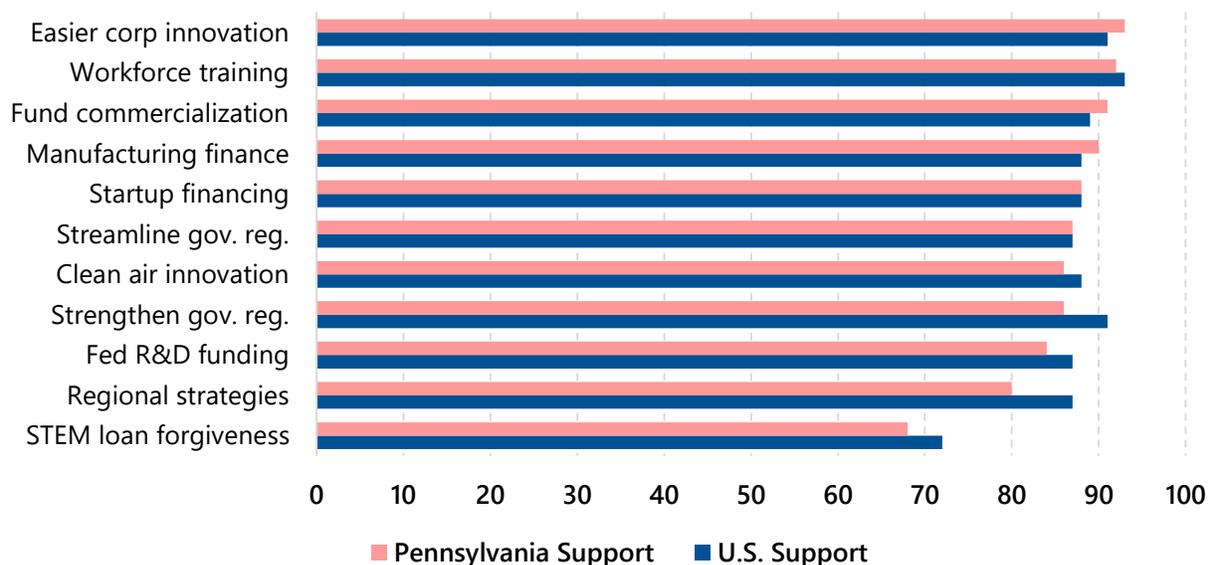
How Voters in Pennsylvania Compare to the Country

Voters in Pennsylvania largely agree on the importance of iSTEP with voters in the rest of the country. When compared to a national survey conducted simultaneously, Pennsylvanians had virtually identical strong support (47 percent to 46 percent) and total support (both 95 percent) for iSTEP.

Pennsylvania and U.S. voters also expressed largely similar levels of support for specific elements of iSTEP, as shown in Figure 4. The main exceptions to this rule were Pennsylvanians’ more limited

endorsement of strengthening regulatory protections (-5 percent) and facilitating regional innovation strategies (-7 percent). However, even in these cases, total support remained above 80 percent.

Figure 4: Support for specific policies by Pennsylvania and U.S. voters



When it comes to reasons to support iSTEP, Pennsylvanians are somewhat more pessimistic than the rest of the country about the initiative’s impact for their economic prospects, but more positive about the value for the next generation. Seventy percent believe it will help people like them (-4 percent), while 90 percent (+2 percent) believe it will help their children or grandchildren, and 93 percent (+1 percent) believe it will make the American economy better.

Support among Pennsylvania voters for a candidate supporting iSTEP is slightly weaker than in the national sample: 74 percent in Pennsylvania versus 78 percent in the U.S. report being more likely to support such a candidate, although just 6 percent versus 7 percent reported being less likely to provide support.

Conclusions

Voters understand the vital role research plays in our economy and our ability to compete internationally. They also understand the need to convert this research into American jobs and prepare the workforce for technological change. This is why the iSTEP initiative generates nearly universal support from the public. At a time when just about everything in this political environment is polarized, the iSTEP proposal crosses partisan boundaries, and bridges racial, regional and socio-economic divides.

About SSTI

SSTI strengthens initiatives to create a better future through science, technology, innovation and entrepreneurship.

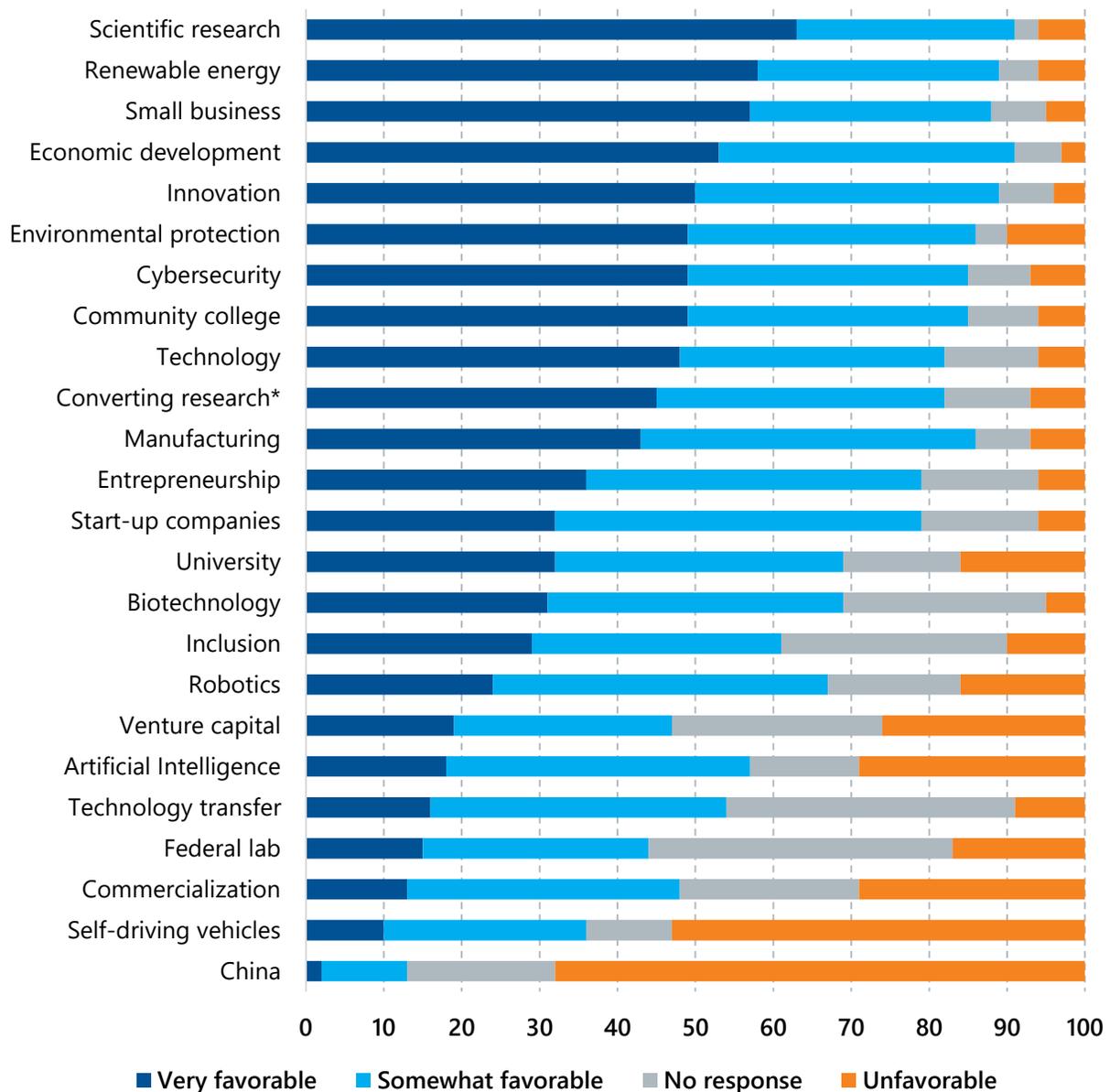
Since its inception in 1996, SSTI has developed a nationwide network of practitioners and policymakers dedicated to improving their regional economies. These professionals represent a wide range of organizations, including state and local governments, federal and national labs, institutions of higher education, other nonprofits, and service providers. SSTI maximizes the capacity of this network to deliver successful outcomes within the context of the complex innovation communities in which they participate by conducting research on common performance standards, identifying best practices, analyzing trends in and policies affecting innovation economies, and fostering greater cooperation among and between all public, private and nonprofit organizations encouraging prosperity.

Learn more about SSTI at ssti.org.

Addendum: Responses to Innovation Terms & Metrics

The survey asked Pennsylvanians for reactions to some terms that are commonly used to describe policies intended to advance science, technology, innovation and entrepreneurship. The responses suggest that stakeholders would be smart to choose their terms carefully and take care to use explanations rather than jargon. See Figure 5 for the full set of reactions.

Figure 5: Pennsylvanians’ responses to science & innovation terms



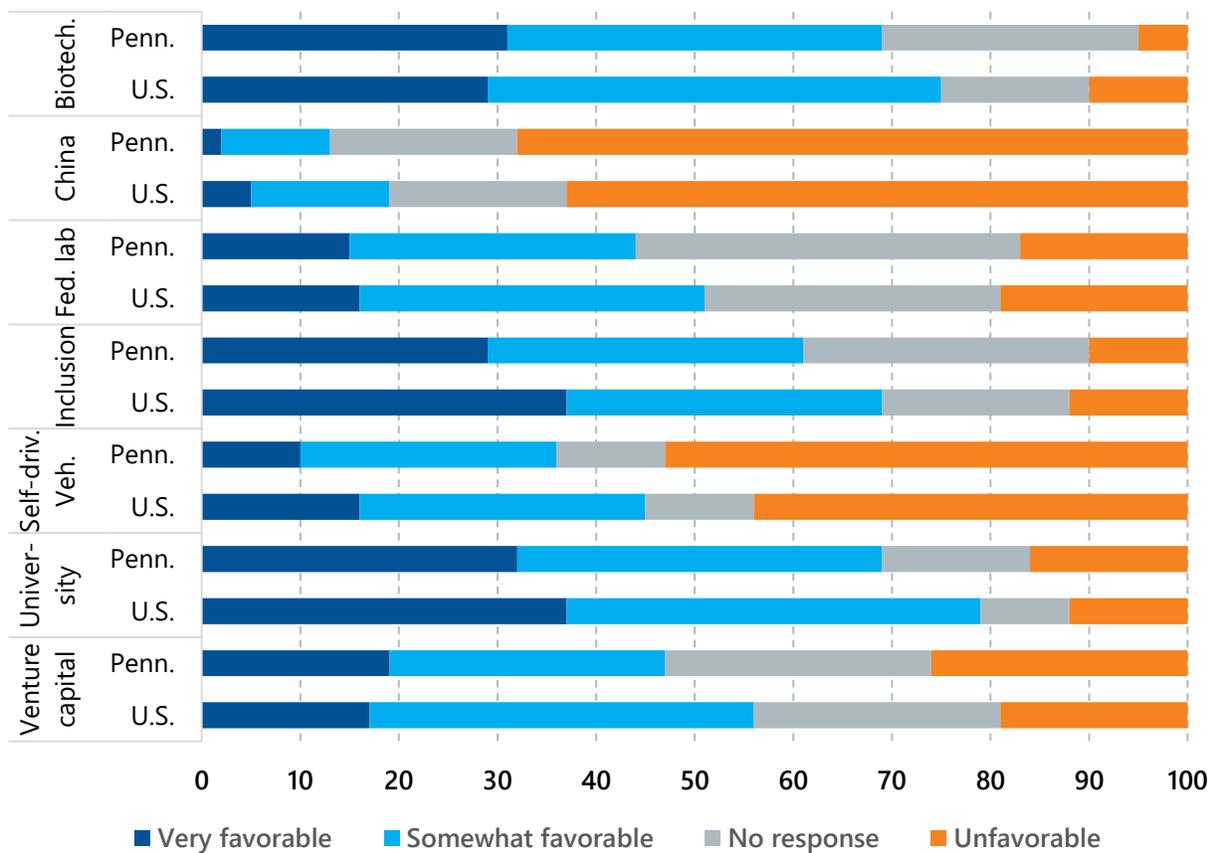
Note: "No response" includes people who did not know the term, were uncertain, or had no reaction. * The full term presented was, "converting research into jobs and businesses."

The clearest example of the importance of word choice is the reaction to “commercialization” (48 percent favorable and 29 percent unfavorable) compared to “converting research into jobs and businesses” (82 percent favorable), which is basically a definition of the former term. Another example is voters’ positive response to facilitating capital access for startups as a policy position (89 percent support) compared to their mixed reaction to “venture capital” (47 favorable).

Looking at concerns related to specific sectors, environmental issues (“renewable energy” 89 percent favorable; “environmental protection” 86 percent favorable) and “manufacturing” (86 percent favorable) perform strongly among Pennsylvanians. Reactions to “biotechnology” were particularly uncertain (26 percent no response).

Voters in Pennsylvania have more sensitive reactions to some terms used commonly around innovation economies than the general U.S. public, including university, inclusion, and venture capital. Figure 6, below, shows the responses of Pennsylvania voters compared to the rest of the country for innovation-related terms where total favorability differs by more than 5 percent.

Figure 6: Pennsylvanians’ and U.S. voters’ differing responses to science & innovation terms



Pennsylvania voters also make a clear distinction between outcome and process measures in expressing how they would prefer to evaluate which initiatives deserve public funds. The metric clearly viewed by the public as most important is number of jobs created (60 percent). Average salary per job created (28 percent) and amount of taxpayer dollars spent (27 percent) also scored as important among voters. On the other hand, the metrics viewed as least important were the number of events held each year (36 percent) and number of scientific papers published (28 percent).