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US Virgin Islands Residents Feel Like Second-Class Citizens: Suffolk University Poll

BOSTON — An overwhelming majority of U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) residents feel like they are second-class citizens and an overwhelming supermajority want to vote in U.S. elections, according to a new Suffolk University poll of USVI residents, led by Suffolk University Political Survey Research students for the spring semester.

The people who live on the U.S. Virgin Islands are U.S. citizens, but the islands are U.S. territories and residents do not cast electoral votes for president of the United States.

More than 70% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement, “When it comes to the U.S. I feel like I am a second-class citizen” while just 25% disagreed. More than 90% support voting in U.S. presidential elections while less than 6% disagreed.

Residents opposed the USVI becoming an independent country 59%-19% but supported the USVI becoming a U.S. state 63%-23%.

Suffolk University graduate student Rae’Niqua Kierra Victorine , a native of St. Thomas in the USVI, and her classmates recommended that the Suffolk University Political Research Center poll this group of U.S. citizens, whose opinions are rarely surveyed, if at all.

“Residents in U.S. territories are overlooked in many ways, and having our votes count in the elections that decide who runs our country is something we all want,” Victorine said. “When I voted in my first presidential election in the mainland U.S. I called my family, teary eyed, declaring that my vote was for all of us. Conducting this poll was not only a rewarding experience, but a crucial step towards a future where we have a voice.” Both graduate and upper-level undergraduate students in the class “Political Survey Research” had the unique opportunity to create the questions, design the sample frame, set quotas, make the phone calls, and analyze the results of this groundbreaking study.

More than two-thirds of USVI residents (67%) rated the reliability of power on their island as poor, while 61% rated the quality of roads and bridges as poor, and more than 57% rated the quality of medical care as poor. In addition, a plurality of respondents rated the quality of housing (47%) and the quality of education in public schools (42%) as poor.

In contrast to these dismal ratings of vital services and conditions on their islands, residents gave glowing support to public officials charged with improving those very conditions.

Governor Albert Bryan scored a 63% favorable – 22% unfavorable rating, while Lt. Governor Tregenza Roach had a 56% favorable – 17% unfavorable rating. On the national level, USVI residents gave higher ratings to President Joe Biden (72% favorable – 15% unfavorable) and Vice President Kamala Harris. She received a 58% favorable – 15% unfavorable rating, significantly higher than her approval in mainland United States.

“There is a disconnect between the idyllic version of the U.S. Virgin Islands as seen in tourism ads and the experiences of residents who live there,” said David Paleologos, director of the Suffolk University Political Research Center. “Residents rated all seven conditions and services that we listed as ‘fair’ or ‘poor’ with very few saying ‘good’ or ‘excellent,’ yet they strongly approve of their public officials.”

This survey of 500 USVI residents was conducted March 4-7, using live interviews of cellphone and landline users, and is based on live telephone interviews of adults 18 years of age or older, residing on all islands in the USVI. Quota and demographic information—including region, race, and age—were determined from census and American Community Survey data. The margin of sampling error for results based on the total sample is +/- 4.4 percentage points. Error margins increase for smaller subgroups in the cross-tabulation document. All surveys may be subject to other sources of error, including but not limited to coverage error and measurement error.

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