

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: EXPLORING PUBLIC OPINION OF PROFESSIONAL LICENSING

INTRODUCTION

Occupational licensing reform has emerged as a hot topic in statehouses across the country. Conversations around licensing have been shaped largely by groups like Americans for Prosperity (AFP), American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), the Institute for Justice, and the Goldwater Institute, which claim that occupational licensing laws create harmful, unnecessary barriers to workforce participation and should be reduced or eliminated. The Alliance for Responsible Professional Licensing (ARPL) contends that calls to eliminate or weaken licensing make no distinction for highly complex professions that have a direct impact on public health, safety, and welfare. ARPL is concerned that broad-brush legislation would deregulate licensing wholesale and cause potentially dangerous and unintended consequences.

Benenson Strategy Group (BSG) conducted a recent national study to understand public opinion toward professional licensing standards. BSG conducted interviews with 952 “likely voters”—individuals who are registered to vote and have voted in the 2016 or 2018 elections or indicated that they are likely to vote in the 2020 election. This was a national opinion study with a diverse respondent pool—mix of gender, age, race, and political ideology. Research was conducted from October 25 through November 6, 2019.

KEY FINDINGS

The public overwhelmingly supports licensing regulations for complex, highly technical professions that have a direct impact on public health, safety, and welfare. Research found that 75% of voters believe it is important to ensure qualifications for professionals in certain industries. And a majority of voters believe current professional licensing requirements protect the public and should not be reformed.

However, the public is not entirely opposed to deregulating licensing standards for trades and occupations. Members of the public acknowledge that such reform initiatives may be warranted in some instances, but they are largely opposed to legislation that is not narrowly tailored to those ends. They are deeply concerned by overbroad licensing reform that would jeopardize licensing standards for highly complex, technical professions. The public expects that professions tasked with

safeguarding their physical and financial wellbeing are regulated. More than 70% of voters believe that regulating professionals in accounting, engineering, architecture, and related fields with high impact on public safety and welfare is important.

Moreover, licensing standards are the public’s preferred default position. 71% of voters believe professional licensing should be required unless it can be proven that eliminating licensing *will not* have a negative impact on public health and safety. The public is wary of the alternative approach: requiring licensing only when it is proven necessary for health and safety.

Professional licensing boards are also viewed favorably and are seen as critical regulatory entities. 67% of voters believe that consumers are best protected by a system that regulates education, examination, and experience standards—all of which are overseen by a professional licensing board. And the public intuitively understands what roles the boards play and why those roles are important. A majority of the public believes that it is “very important” that the boards oversee qualifications to enter a profession and regulate continuing education and certification standards.

For more information about the research, email info@responsiblelicensing.org.