



THE CHANGING FACE OF HOUSTON: How Quality-of-Life Issues Became Part of the City's Pro-Business Agenda

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Bayou Preservation Association Symposium: Natural Assets
5 October 2010



HOUSTON, FROM 1900 TO 1982

- This city was basically a “one-horse” industrial town, focused on refining hydrocarbons into gasoline and petrochemicals and servicing the oil and gas industry (Thomas & Murray 1991).
- Houston was the energy capital of the world, the “Golden Buckle of the Sun Belt,” the booming exemplar of laissez-faire capitalism. Houstonians were showing the world what Americans can achieve when left unfettered by zoning, excessive taxation, or government regulations (Kaplan 1983).
- “The ideological thrust in Houston in the twentieth century has been anti-government, anti-regulation, anti-planning, anti-taxes, anti-anything that seemed to represent, in fact or fantasy, an expansion of the public sector or a limitation on the economic prerogatives and activities of the city’s business community” (Fisher 1990).

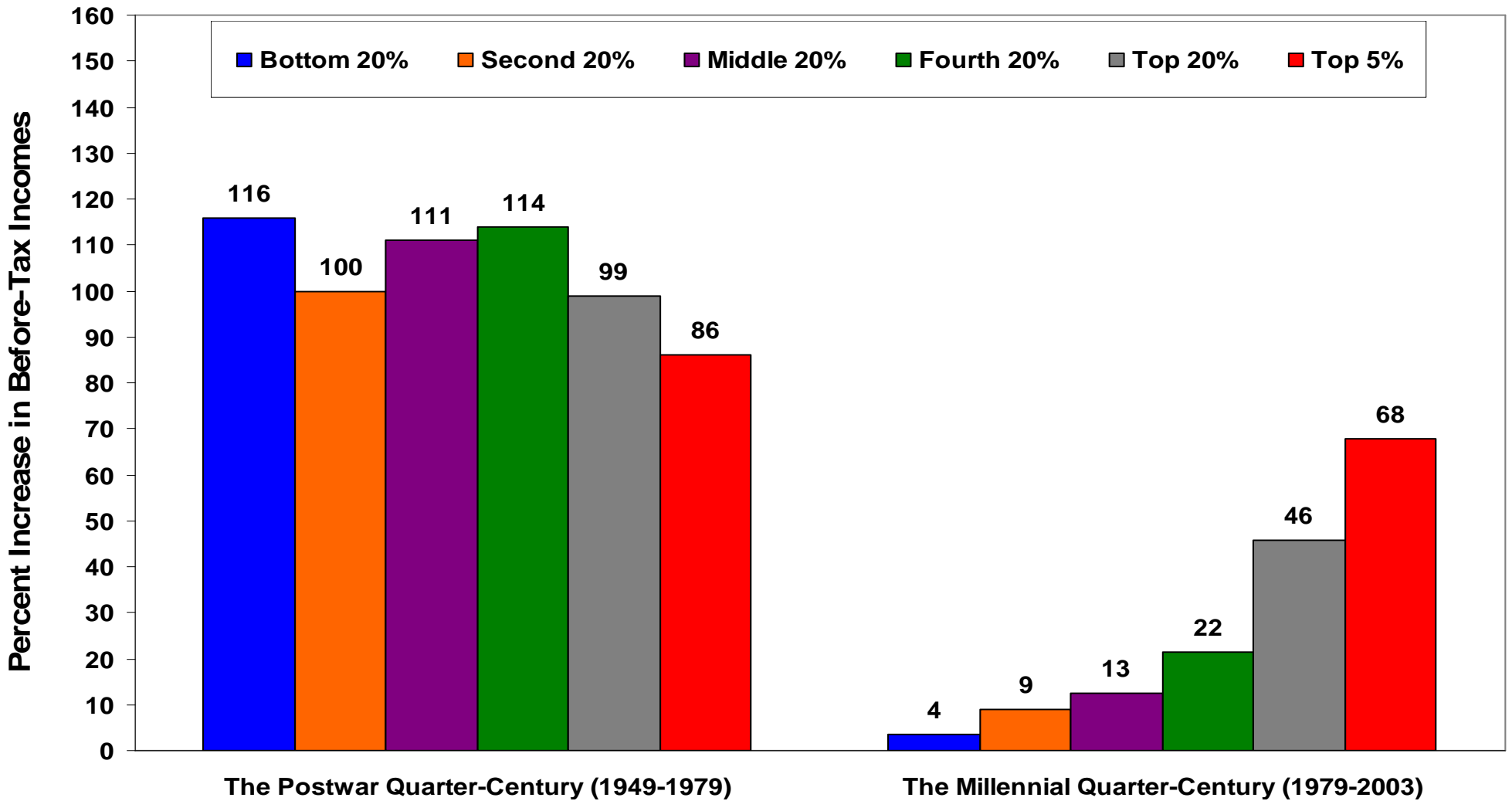
THE HOUSTON AREA SURVEY (1982-2010)

- Supported by local foundations, corporations, and individuals, and now with a permanent home in Rice University's Institute for Urban Research, the annual surveys have interviewed 29 successive representative samples of Harris County residents.
- In May 1982, just two months after the first Houston Area Survey was completed, the 80-year oil boom suddenly collapsed.
- The region recovered from the deep and prolonged recession of the mid 1980s to find itself squarely in the midst of . . .
 - a restructured economy and
 - a demographic revolution.
- These are the same transformations that are refashioning all of American society. The Houston surveys have tracked area residents' changing perspectives on these remarkable trends.

THE RESTRUCTURED ECONOMY

- The “resource economy” of the industrial era, for which this city was so favorably positioned, has been replaced by a new high-tech, knowledge-based, fully worldwide marketplace.
- The traditional “blue collar path” to financial security has now largely disappeared. Almost all the good-paying jobs today require high levels of technical skills and educational credentials.
- In 2010, 67% of the survey respondents *agreed* that “There are very few good jobs in today’s economy for people without a college education.” In the 2008 survey, 74% *disagreed* that “A high school education is enough to get a good job.”
- In this increasingly unequal, hourglass economy, “What you earn,” as the saying goes, “depends on what you’ve learned.”

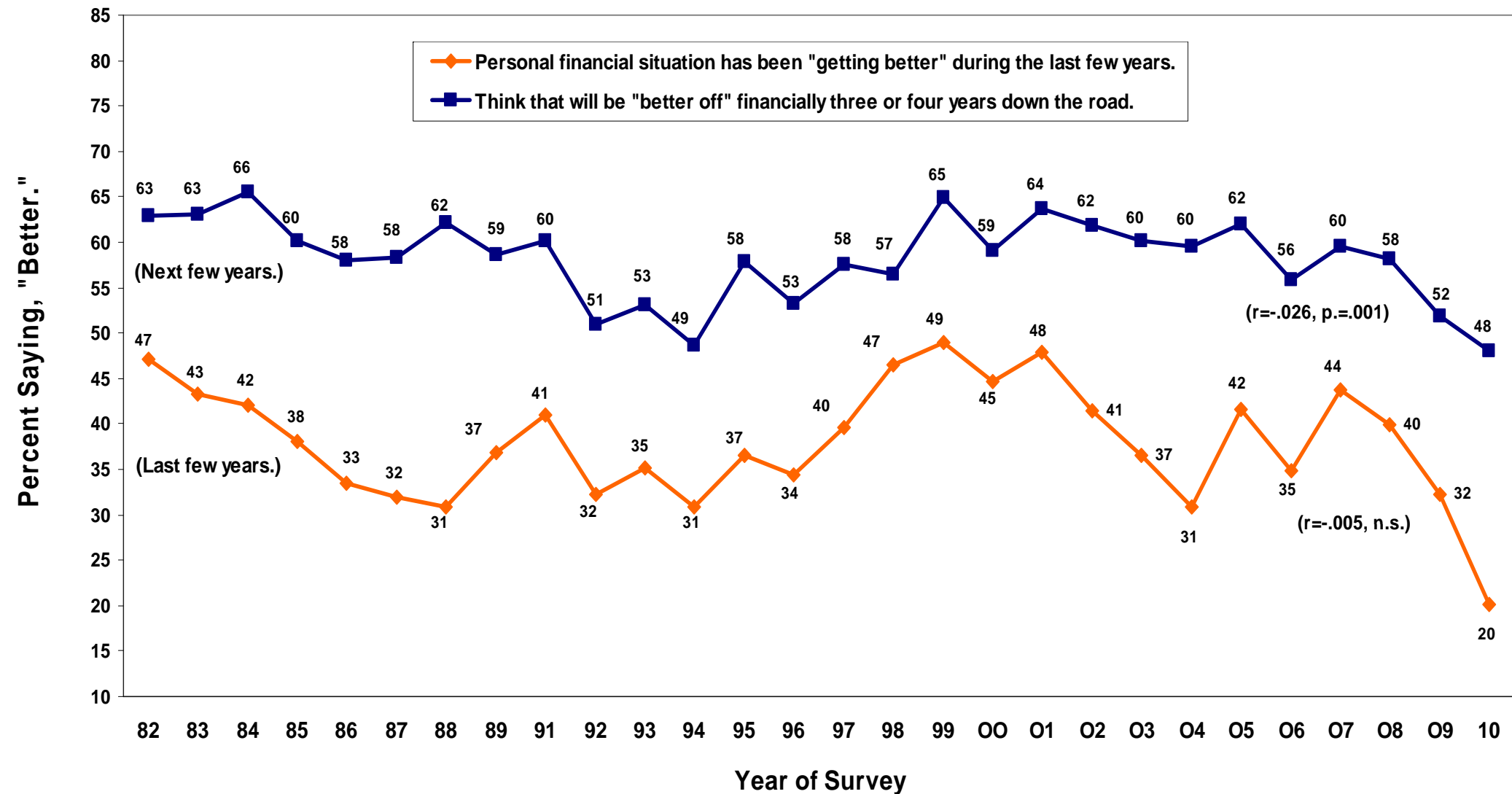
FIGURE 1: TWO CONTRASTING QUARTER-CENTURIES SINCE WORLD WAR II



Percent Increases in Before-Tax Household Incomes

Source: U.S. Census; Robert H. Frank. 2007. *Falling Behind*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 10-11.

**FIGURE 2: PERCENT DOING BETTER FINAN-
 CIALLY IN LAST FEW YEARS AND EXPECTING
 TO DO BETTER IN NEXT FEW YEARS (1982-2010)**



THE NEW IMPORTANCE OF “QUALITY-OF-PLACE” CONSIDERATIONS

- Houston's prospects will now increasingly depend on the city's ability to attract and retain the nation's most skilled and creative “knowledge workers” and high tech companies.
- This will require continued significant improvements in
 - the region's mobility and transportation systems
 - the revitalization and preservation of its urban centers
 - the excellence of its venues for sports, arts, and culture
 - the enhancement of its green spaces, trees, and bayous
 - the richness of its hiking, boating, and birding areas
 - the healthfulness of the region's air and water quality
 - Its overall physical attractiveness and aesthetic appeal
- The public's support for new initiatives along these lines has remained firm or grown stronger across the years of surveys.

FIGURE 3: THE INTEREST AMONG ANGLOS IN MOVING FROM SUBURBS TO CITY AND FROM CITY TO SUBURBS (1999-2010)

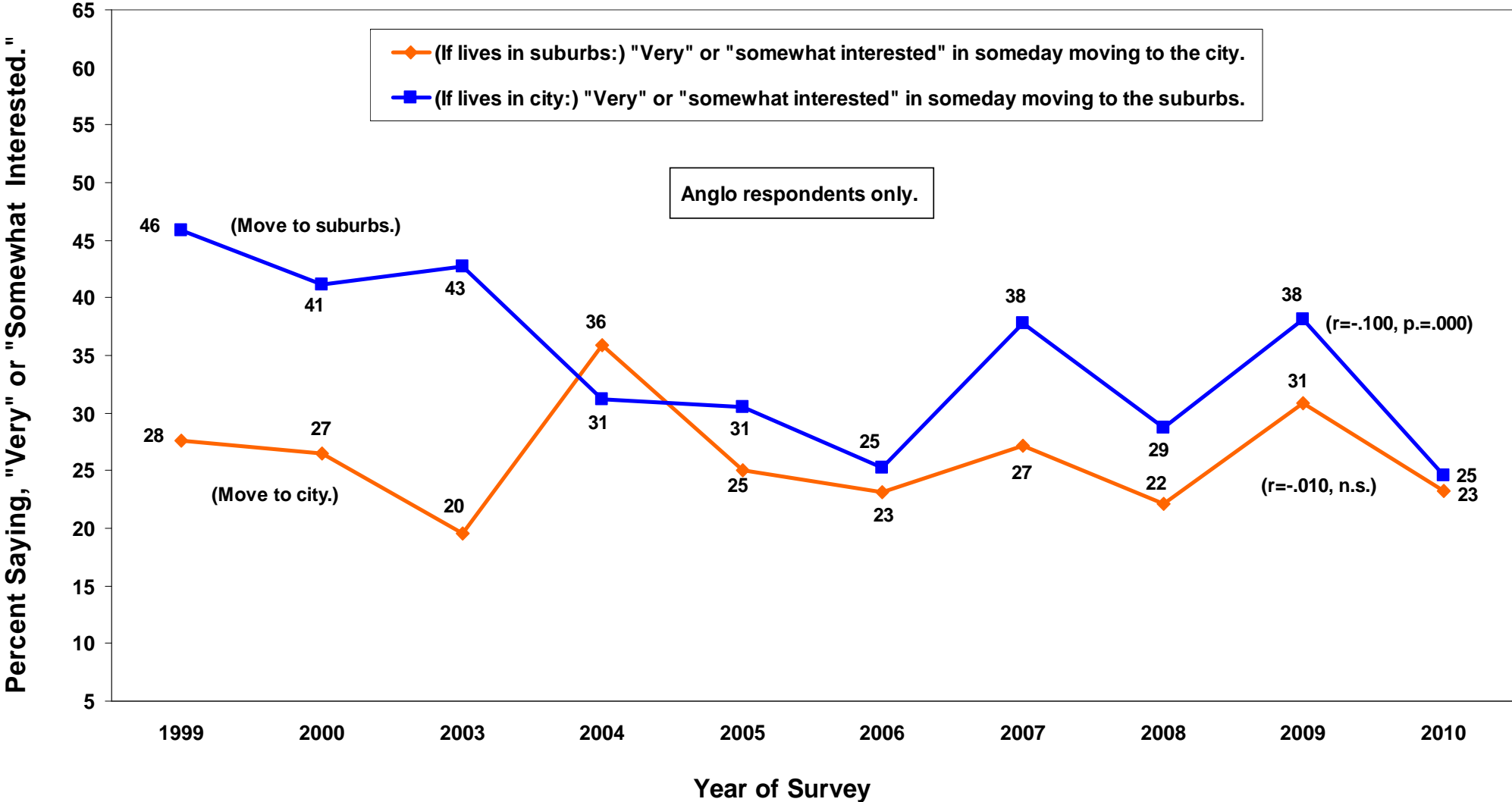


FIGURE 4: THE IMPORTANCE OF A MUCH IMPROVED MASS TRANSIT SYSTEM AND OF INCLUDING A RAIL COMPONENT (1991-2010)

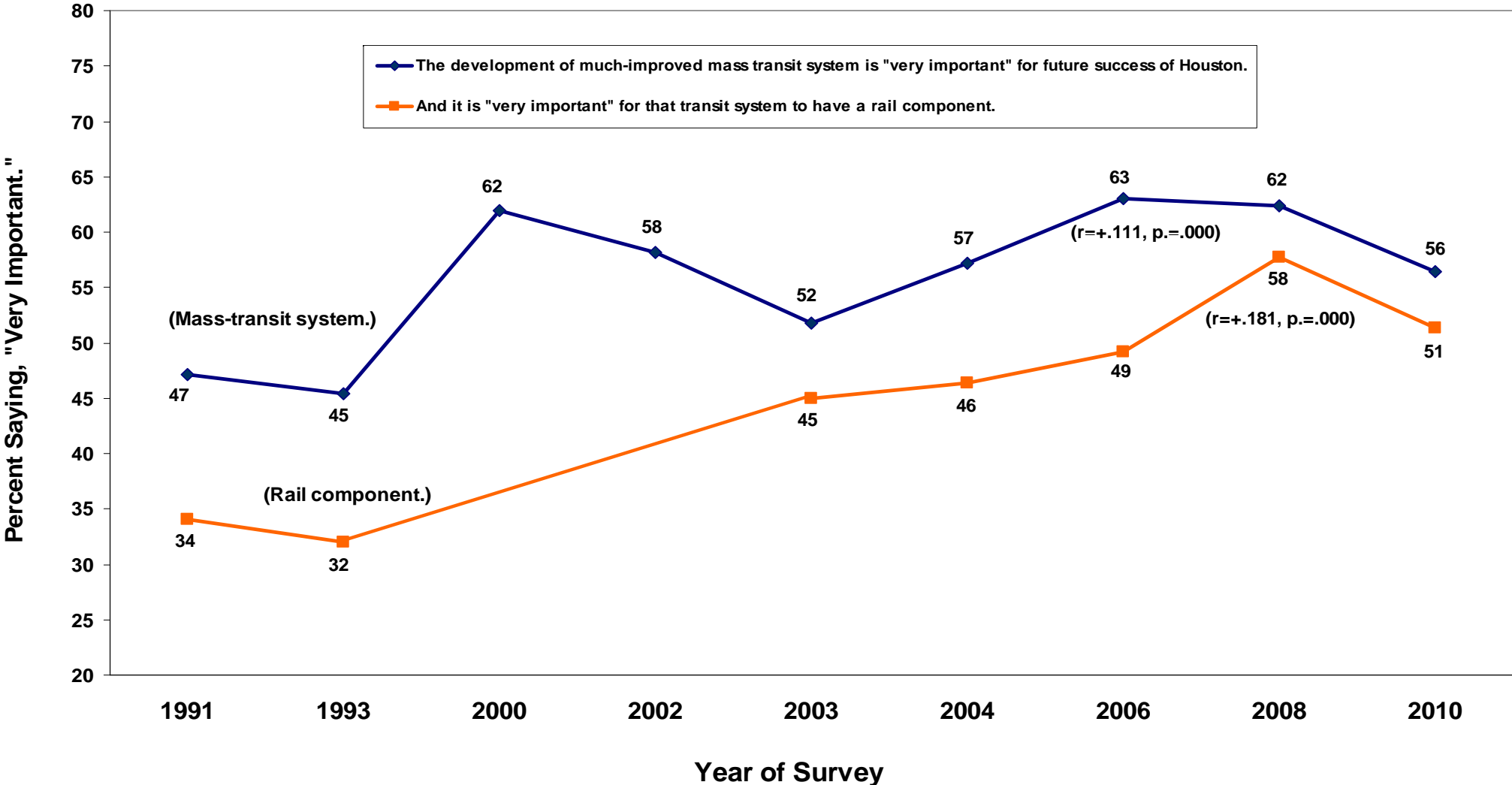


FIGURE 5: ATTITUDES TOWARD LAND-USE PLANNING AND URBAN LIFESTYLES (2009-2010)

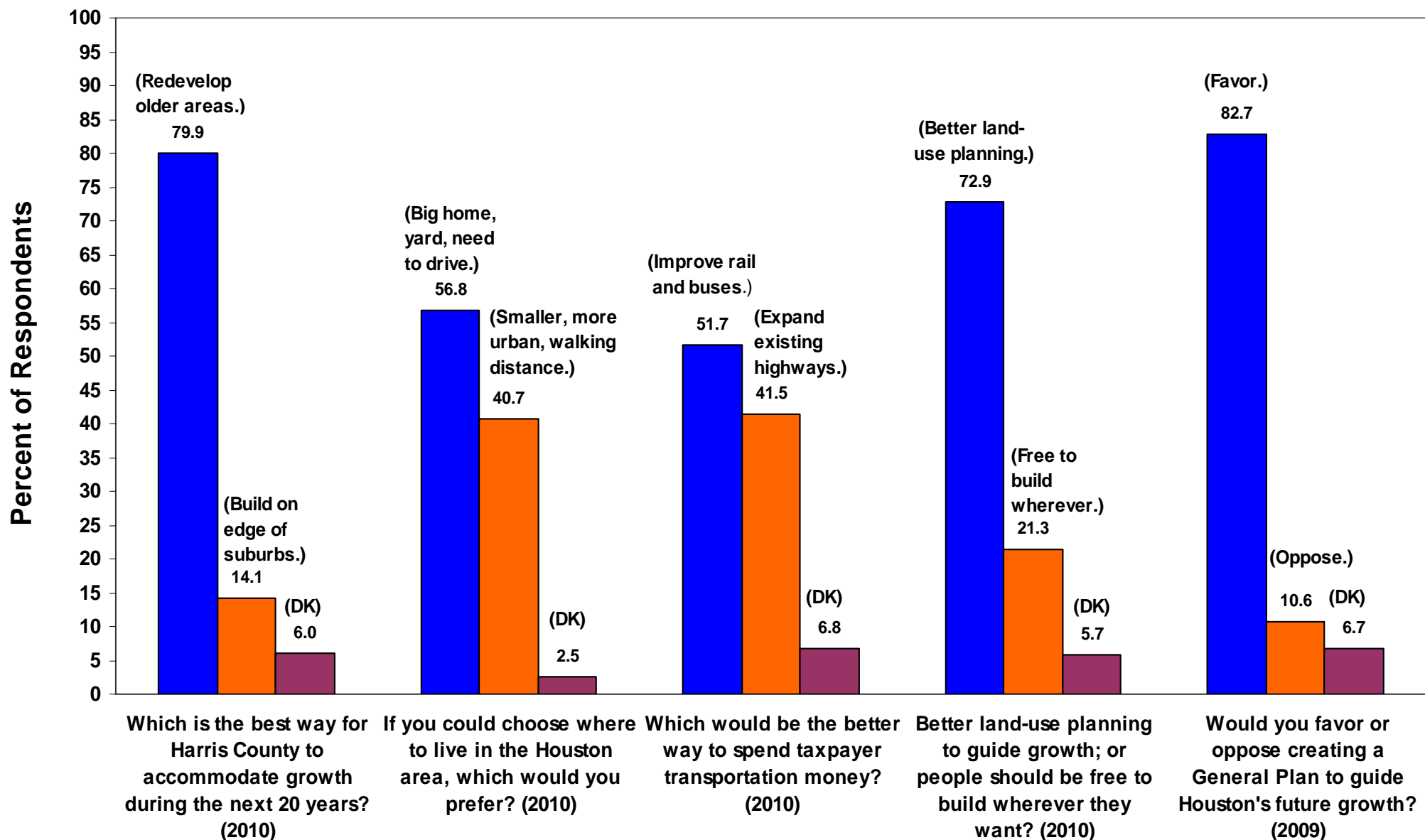


FIGURE 6: ON PENSION FUNDS, TERM LIMITS, DRUG POLICIES, AND LOCAL FOOD (HAS-2010)

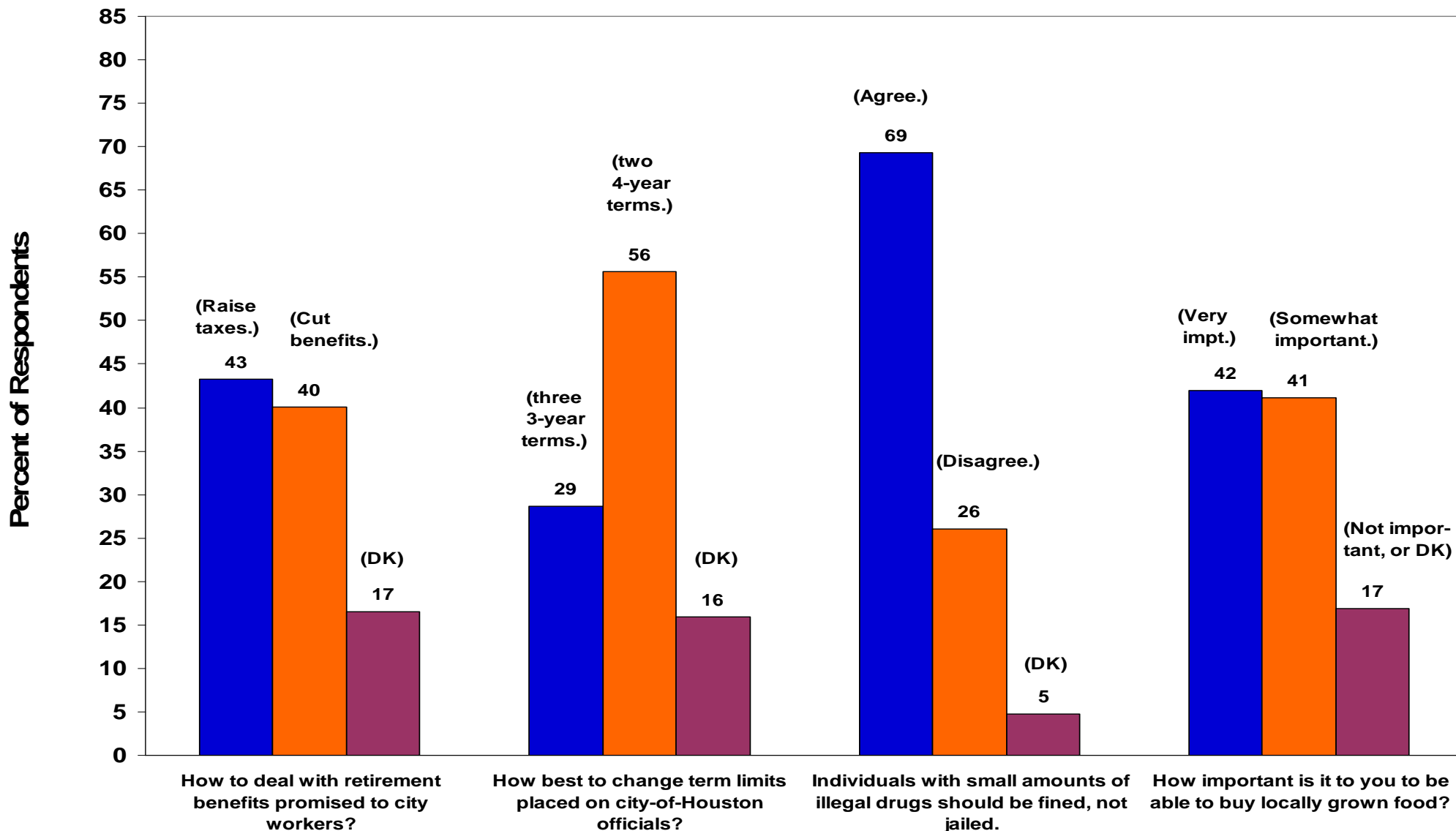
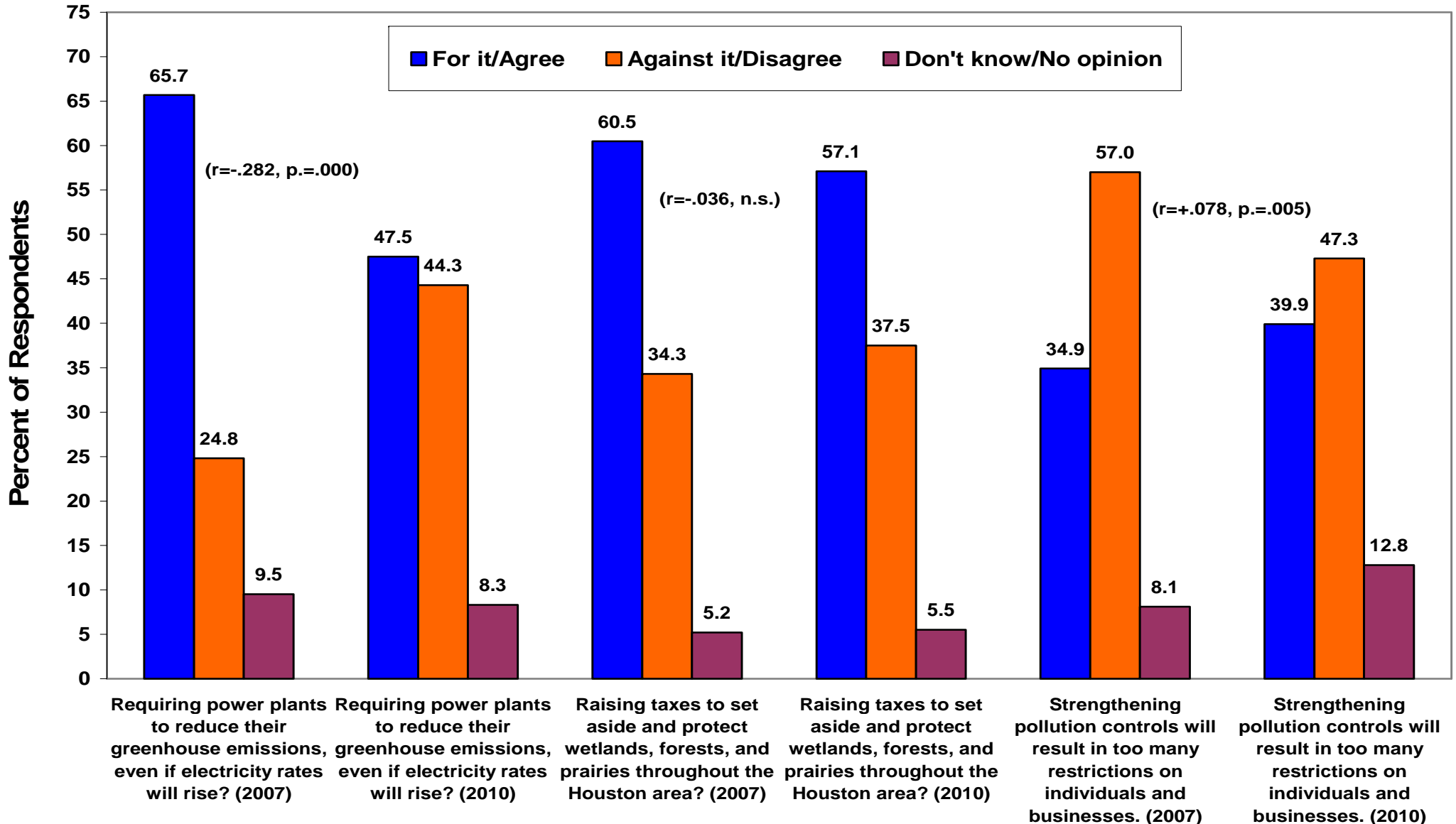


FIGURE 7: ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS AND TRADEOFFS (FROM 2007 TO 2010)



CONCLUSIONS: HOUSTON AND AMERICA FACE SOME FORMIDABLE CHALLENGES

- This city and nation will need to nurture a far more educated workforce, and fashion policies that can reduce the growing inequalities and prevent the rise of a new urban underclass.
- To attract the most innovative companies and talented individuals, Houston will need to grow into a more environmentally appealing urban destination, and develop the research centers that will fuel the critical drivers of the new economy.
- If the region is to flourish in the 21st century, it will need to develop into a much more unified and inclusive multiethnic society, one in which equality of opportunity is truly made available to all citizens and all of its communities are invited to participate as full partners in shaping the Houston future.

CONTACT INFORMATION



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Contact the Institute (at: iur@rice.edu; or 713-348-4132)
for copies of the following publications:

- * the report on the first 24 years of Houston surveys
(*Public Perceptions in Remarkable Times*, 2005)
- * the report on survey findings in major sectors of the
greater Houston area (*Regional Perspectives*, 2007)

For further information, to support the IUR, or to download
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