



Paul Simon Public Policy Institute



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**SOUTHERN ILLINOIS VOTERS SKEPTICAL AND CYNICAL
TOWARD THEIR GOVERNMENTS AND LEADERS**

Southern Illinoisans have grown increasingly unhappy with public officials and government services in recent decades, according to a new poll conducted by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Area residents have also moved away from the Democratic Party, according to the survey, which replicates similar research done more than 30 years ago by political science professors at the university.

“It is fascinating to watch the movement of public opinion in our home region,” said David Yepsen, director of the Institute. “People are much more unhappy about government and politics than they were a generation ago.”

Dr. John Jackson, a visiting professor at the Institute who worked on both the 2011 poll and the earlier surveys in the mid-1970s, said “the climate of opinion for politicians and office holders has grown much more critical and negative today, and many voters have a very jaundiced view of their leaders now.”

“Indeed, with the 24-hour news cycle and the corrosive presence of cable television talking heads and much of talk radio, it is not surprising that few office holders remain unscathed for very long in today’s toxic atmosphere,” he said.

The survey of 400 registered voters in the 18 southernmost counties in Illinois was taken February 14-22, 2011. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.8 percentage points. It found:

Gov. Pat Quinn is more unpopular than Gov. Jim Thompson was 30 years ago.

Many voters weren't sure about Thompson, who was just a newly elected governor then. They are certain they don't like Quinn today.

In the most recent survey, respondents were asked to give their job approval ratings for Quinn. A total of 29 percent of the residents of this region either approved or strongly approved of the job the governor was doing. This compared to 54 percent who either disapproved or strongly disapproved, leaving 15 percent who were uncertain or did not know enough to rate him.

A Southern Illinois poll taken a year ago found a similar level of disgruntlement toward Quinn. Even though he just won his election in November of 2010, his job numbers in southern Illinois, where he won only Jackson and Alexander Counties, have not moved much since this time last year.

It is interesting to compare these results with those of the June 1977 poll, when the governor was Thompson, Jackson said. Thompson had been in office some six months at that point, having been elected in November of 1976. His job approval ratings were more favorable than unfavorable in that poll; however, the predominant category was "uncertain" or "don't know," which drew over half (52 percent) of the respondents. Of those who had decided about Thompson, a total of 39 percent were favorable and 10 percent were either unfavorable or very unfavorable.

The Legislature has grown unpopular.

The decline in favorability ratings was not limited to the governor's office. It extended to the Illinois House and Senate as well. In 1977 the respondents were asked if they were favorable or unfavorable toward the job the Illinois House and Senate were doing at that time. In 1977, fully 40 percent gave the House either a favorable or a very favorable rating while 42 percent said they were uncertain. There was a total of only 7 percent in either of the unfavorable categories.

The Illinois Senate fared just as well in the earlier poll with a 40 percent favorable rating and only 7 percent unfavorable.

Today the results are almost the opposite. Now just 22 percent are favorable toward the job the House is doing and 24 percent are favorable toward the Senate. On the negative side, 42 percent are either unfavorable or very unfavorable toward the House and 44 percent are unfavorable toward the Senate.

"It is well known these days that we the people consistently rate the U.S. Congress and our state legislative institutions very low on the job approval scale, while at the same time we overwhelmingly re-elect the incumbents almost every election," Jackson observed. "We think 'our guy' is fine; it is those other people in the other districts who elect the people we love to hate. The individuals are fine; the institutions are terrible in our current frame of mind."

Federal and state governments are seen as harmful while local governments are seen as beneficial.

The negativity continued when the respondents were asked to rate how much effect the federal, state and local governments had on their daily lives and whether the effects the federal government and local governments were having on their daily lives were mostly beneficial or mostly harmful.

In our most recent survey 50 percent said that the federal government had “a great deal” of effect on their daily lives and 33 percent said “some.” Only 13 percent said “little” and 3 percent “none.” A similar 46 percent said state government had a great deal of effect and 37 percent said some effect on their daily lives. Local government trailed slightly with 24 percent saying a great deal and 45 percent saying some. This left 26 percent saying that local government had only a little effect and 6 percent none. So the federal government was ranked as having the most effect, followed by state government and then local government with the least effect.

When asked if these effects were “mostly beneficial” or “mostly harmful,” 33 percent in the most recent poll said mostly beneficial for the federal government’s effect, with 54 percent saying mostly harmful.

“This is an extraordinary level of alienation directed toward the national government and state governments from the residents of an area which is heavily dependent on a wide range of programs and services provided by both levels of government,” Jackson said. Only local government was given a “mostly beneficial” rating by more than a majority of the respondents to the poll. “Those who would teach us that the government and public servants are the enemy and are the problem are clearly winning the argument in southern Illinois, and those who think that public service is an honorable and important calling in life are losing,” he continued.

These extraordinarily negative evaluations are also significantly different from the results of the earlier poll taken in 1976. In that poll, 42 percent of the residents of southern Illinois said the federal government’s effects on their daily lives were mostly beneficial and only 24 percent said they were mostly harmful leaving 34 percent undecided. Local governments were seen in an even more positive light, with fully 70 percent of the area’s residents saying that their effects were mostly beneficial while only 11 percent said local governments were mostly harmful. The 1976 poll was taken only two years after the Watergate scandal had forced the resignation of President Richard Nixon, and the Vietnam War’s end had marked the close of an era of much conflict and great cynicism directed toward American government. Today’s results indicate that distrust and cynicism toward government have grown markedly over the past 35 years in the southern Illinois region.

Voters may have moved away from the Democratic Party.

An area that once was dependably Democratic in terms of its partisanship and voting has moved away from the Democratic Party. In the survey taken in 1976, 38 percent of the respondents identified themselves as Democrats and 28 percent said they were Republicans, a Democratic advantage of 10 percent. This left 24 percent in the Independent category. The 2011 poll

showed 29 percent identification with the Democrats, 27 percent identification with the Republicans and 31 percent as Independents. So, the Democrats had lost 9 percent compared to the much earlier poll, while the Republicans were 1 percent below where they had been in 1976, and the Independent category had grown. However, the people of this region may be voting even more frequently for the Republicans than the partisan identification numbers indicate, as recent election returns from this region have shown.

Voters have favorable attitudes toward local institutions and occupations, feelings similar to those they held 35 years ago.

The polls asked residents whether they were favorable, very favorable, unfavorable, or very unfavorable toward the coal industry, coal miners, farmers, physicians, college students and SIU. In the most recent poll coal miners led the favorable categories at 88 percent, followed closely by farmers at 87 percent, college students at 85 percent, physicians at 78 percent, and SIU as an institution at 75 percent favorable. The unfavorable ratings were all below 10 percent except for physicians at 11 percent and SIU at 18 percent unfavorable.

“We think these very positive findings for these major occupations and groups reflect the crucial role each plays in the economy and social life of southern Illinois,” said Jackson.

Two comparable earlier polls, one conducted in 1976 and the other in 1977 on a similar sample of southern Illinois residents also found highly positive evaluations for each of these groups. “The fact that the people of southern Illinois rated these same groups so positively almost 35 years ago is really quite remarkable, given all the time that has passed and how much circumstances have changed,” he said.

“For example, coal mining had declined precipitously across the region and there are far fewer coal miners now compared to when we did the poll more than three decades ago, yet coal mining is still held in very high esteem.”

The most recent poll was of 400 registered voters in the 18 southernmost counties in Illinois taken February 14-22, 2011. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.8 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. Customer Research International of San Marcos, Texas, conducted the telephone interviews for the Southern Illinois Poll using the random-digit dialing method and screening for registered voters. The poll’s sample included both landline and cellular phones. CRI reports no Illinois political figures as clients and was paid with non-tax dollars from the Institute’s endowment fund.

Counties included in the Southern Illinois Poll are: Alexander, Franklin, Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Massac, Perry, Pope, Pulaski, Randolph, Saline, Union, Washington, White, and Williamson.

The 1976 and 1977 studies were conducted by the Social Science Research Bureau (SSRB) which was located at SIUC then. The first poll was conducted in August of 1976 and the second was conducted in June of 1977 by John Jackson and his colleagues in the SSRB. Those polls depended on face-to-face interviews with respondents drawn by taking a stratified random sample of housing units where the specific respondents in the households were also selected by a

random method. In the 1976 study 400 households were randomly chosen and 230 interviews were successfully completed. In the 1977 study 400 households were randomly chosen and 288 interviews were successfully completed. This completion rate produced an accuracy level of plus or minus 6 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. The geographic area covered included what was then the 24th Congressional District of Illinois. It included all 18 counties in the 2011 Southern Illinois Poll plus Bond, Clinton and Monroe Counties.

Note: The “Simon Poll” and the “Southern Illinois Poll” are the copyrighted trademarks of the Board of Trustees of Southern Illinois University. Use or publication of these polls is encouraged- but only with credit to the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute.

List of Tables (Attached):

Table 1—Favorable/Unfavorable Ratings Toward Various Groups: 2011 vs. 1976 and 1977

Table 2—Job Approval for Governor Pat Quinn in 2010

Compared to Job Approval for Governor James R. Thompson: 1977

Table 3—Job Approval for Illinois House: 1977 vs. 2011

Compared to Job Approval for Illinois Senate: 1977 vs. 2011

Table 4—Rating of Government Effect on Daily Life: 1976 vs. 2011

Table 5—Evaluation of Government Effect on Daily Life: 1976 vs. 2011

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**Paul Simon Public Policy Institute - Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Poll Results of Voters in Illinois Conducted February 14 through February 22, 2011
Released March 25, 2011**

Question: “Now I’d like for you to tell me how well some elected officials are performing their jobs... Illinois Governor Pat Quinn. Do you strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove, or strongly disapprove of the job Governor Quinn is doing?”

Table 1
Attitudes Toward Governor

	1977 Attitude Toward Jim Thompson		2010 Attitude Toward Pat Quinn	2011 Attitude Toward Pat Quinn
Very Favorable	11%	Strongly Approve	4%	5%
Favorable	28	Somewhat Approve	27	24
Unfavorable	6	Somewhat Disapprove	25	22
Very Unfavorable	4	Strongly Disapprove	29	39
Uncertain or D/K	52	Uncertain or D/K	15	9

Note: The 1977 poll asked whether respondents were very favorable, favorable, unfavorable or very unfavorable toward Governor James R. Thompson.

Question: “Next we’d like to know people’s attitudes about the Illinois State Legislature. I am going to ask you about both the State Senate and the State House of Representatives... The Illinois State Senate: Is your attitude toward the State Senate very favorable, favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable?” (Repeat for House)

Table 2
Attitudes Toward Illinois House and Senate

	1977		2011	
	House		Senate	
Very Favorable	7%	1%	8%	2%
Favorable	33	21	32	22
Uncertain	42	33	41	30
Unfavorable	5	25	5	25
Very Unfavorable	2	17	2	19
D/K	11	4	12	3*
N=	288		401	

Note: There were minor wording changes in the 2011 survey, i.e. "Uncertain" was changed to "Haven't Heard Enough to Rate" and "Unfavorable" and "Favorable" were changed to "Somewhat Unfavorable" and "Somewhat Favorable".

Question: Now we are interested in your thoughts about the effects of various levels of government in your life. First, how much impact do you think the activities of the federal government have on your day-to-day life? Would you say a great deal of effect, some effect, little effect, or none? (Repeat for state and local government.)

Table 3
Rating of Governmental Effect on Daily Life

	1976		2011		
	Federal	Local	Federal	State	Local
A Great Deal	47%	19%	50%	46%	24%
Some	40	54	33	37	45
Little	9	21	13	12	26
None	4	7	3	3	6
N=	217	216	400		

Question: And do you think this effect is mostly beneficial or mostly harmful?

Table 4
Evaluation of Governmental Effect on Daily Life

	1976		2011		
	Federal	Local	Federal	State	Local
Mostly Beneficial	42%	70%	33%	27%	54%
Mostly Harmful	24	11	54	59	31
Undecided	34	19	13	15	15
N=	201	197	400		

Question: Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or Other?

Table 5
The Distribution of Party Identification

	1976	2010	2011
	Survey	Survey	Survey
	%	%	%
Republican	28	33	27
Democrat	38	29	29
Independent	24	28	31
Other	10	11	12
N=	220	401	400

Note: For this analysis the Independants who said they "leaned" toward one party or another were included in the Independent category – They were not included with the partisans.

Question: We would like to know your views of various industries and occupational groups in our area...the coal industry. Very favorable, favorable, unfavorable, or very unfavorable? If you don't have an opinion either way, please tell me. (Repeat for the other groups)

Table 6
Attitudes Toward Groups

	Very Favorable			Favorable			Uncertain			Unfavorable			Very Unfavorable		
	1976	1977	2011	1976	1977	2011	1976	1977	2011	1976	1977	2011	1976	1977	2011
The Coal Industry	34%	*	23%	40%	*	60%	20%	*	10%	5%	*	6%	0	*	1%
Coal Miners	35	35	23	47	44	65	14	17	8	3	2	4	0	1	1
SIU	26	31	16	48	48	57	17	13	10	6	4	13	1	1	5
College Students	24	33	16	54	50	69	17	11	9	3	2	6	1	3	1
Farmers	67	56	29	30	38	63	1	5	4	1	1	4	0	0	1
Physicians	40	38	15	43	44	63	11	11	12	4	5	9	2	2	2
N=	230	288				400									

**Coal Industry question was not included in 1977.*

**Some columns do not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding.*

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