

**For Immediate Release
October 21, 2013**

Contact: John S. Jackson 618-453-3106 or
Charles Leonard 618-303-9099

Poll: Southern Illinois Voters Are in a Bad Mood

Southern Illinois voters are in a pretty bad mood, according to a new poll by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University.

- They have a negative view of the directions the state and nation are currently going. They are somewhat happier about their local cities and the southern Illinois region.
- They are guarded in their views about their own finances and the financial future for themselves and others. Most say they just doing the same as they were a year ago.
- When it comes to making the state's pension systems sound, they generally oppose having local school districts pay pension costs, having public employees pay more or having current retirees pay for their health insurance.

The poll of registered voters in 18 counties south of Interstate 64 was taken September 20-October 2. The survey was based on a random sample of 403 registered voters who responded to telephone interviews. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.9 percentage points. Thirty percent of the sample was cell phone users.

Right Direction: Wrong Direction

Voters were asked the following: 'Generally speaking, do you think things in our country are going in the right direction, or are they off track and heading in the wrong direction?'. The question was repeated for the State of Illinois and for "in your city or area of the state." The following were the results for each level of government:

- 14.9 percent said the nation was going in the right direction while 73.5 percent chose the wrong direction option.
- 10 percent said the state was going in the right direction while 82.9 percent chose the wrong direction option.
- However, 51.9 percent said their city or area was going in the right direction while 38 percent chose the wrong direction.

There were dramatic party differences on this item for the direction of the nation. Ninety-four percent of the Republicans said the country was going in the wrong direction while only 4 percent said the right direction. In contrast, 52.4 percent of the Democrats said wrong direction and 30.9 percent said right direction. The Independents scored in between the two partisan groups. Those partisan differences also carried over into ratings of state and local directions.

“The overall results of this study, coupled with our earlier polls, make it evident that those who are dissatisfied and disgruntled about the general direction of the state and nation constitute a solid majority of southern Illinois voters. It is notable that for the majority this negativism doesn’t carry over to their local city or the southern Illinois area in general,” said John Jackson, one of the Co-Directors of the poll.

Financial Outlook

Most voters said they were doing “about the same” financially as a year ago. More people said they were “doing worse” than said they were “doing better.”

Respondents were asked the following questions: (1) “Overall and generally speaking, would you say your family’s economic situation is better than it was a year ago, worse than it was a year ago, or about the same?” (2) “Overall and generally speaking, would you expect your family’s economic situation next year will be better than it has been this year, worse than it has been this year, or about the same as this year?”

The following were the results for each of these three economic outlook questions:

- 11.2 percent said they were doing better than a year ago; 30 percent said they were doing worse; while 58.6 percent said they were about the same
- 15.4 percent said they expected their family’s economic situation to be better in the coming year; 23.8 percent said they would be doing worse; while 58.1 percent said they would be doing about the same

Budget Deficit and Pension Reform

Illinois has some widely recognized budgetary problems and has been facing a long running discussion of what to do about its underfunded pension system. Pension reform is the most immediate problem and the following questions addressed that issue.

Questioners asked:

“One part of Illinois’ budget problem is its huge obligation to state employee pension funds. I’m going to read some proposals people have made to fix the pension obligation problem. For each one that I read, please tell me if you favor or oppose that proposal.” The results were:

- Relieve the state’s obligation to the teachers’ pension fund by having local school districts make their teachers’ pension contributions.”
29.3 percent favored; 55.1 percent opposed; 15.6 percent don’t know
- Increase the required pension contribution for current state employees 48.4 percent favored; 38.2 percent opposed; 13.4 percent don’t know
- Ask current retirees to contribute to the cost of their state health insurance plan 39 percent favored; 52.1 percent opposed; 8.9 percent don’t know.

“Fixing the public pension system in Illinois will require some strong medicine,” said David Yepsen, director of the Institute. “It’s pretty clear people in southern Illinois don’t want local schools, current state employees or retirees to pay more. I’m afraid all that leaves is cutting other state programs to increase pension payments – or higher taxes. We know from earlier polls that neither of those options is very popular either.”

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The poll of 403 registered voters covered the 18 southernmost counties in Illinois: Alexander, Franklin, Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Massac, Perry, Pope, Pulaski, Randolph, Saline, Union, Washington, White, and Williamson. Live phone interviews were conducted September 20 through October 2. The sample has a margin for error of 4.9 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. This means that if we conducted the survey 100 times, in 95 of those instances, the result would be within plus or minus 4.9 percentage points from the results obtained here. The sample included 30 percent cell phone interviews.

Telephone interviews were conducted by Customer Research International of San Marcos, Texas. It reports no Illinois political figures as clients. The poll was paid for with non-state dollars using proceeds from the Institute’s endowment fund.

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Table 1 – Right Direction: Wrong Direction for U.S.

First, we’d like to know what you think about the direction of the United States of America. Generally speaking, do you think things in our country are going in the right direction, or are they off track and heading in the wrong direction?

Right Direction	14.9%
Wrong Direction	73.5%
Don’t Know	11.7%

Table 2 – Right Direction: Wrong Direction for Illinois

And what about the direction of the State of Illinois? Generally speaking, are things in Illinois going in the right direction, are they off track and heading in the wrong direction?

Right Direction	9.9%
Wrong Direction	82.9%
Don't Know	7.2%

Table 3 – Right Direction: Wrong Direction for local area

And how are things going in your city or area of the state? In general, are things in your city or area going in the right direction, or in the wrong direction?

Right Direction	51.9%
Wrong Direction	38.0%
Don't Know	10.2%

Table 4 – Family's Present Economic Situation

Next, we are interested in how people are doing financially in Illinois. Overall, and speaking generally, would you say your family's economic situation is better than it was a year ago, worse than it was a year ago, or about the same?

Better	11.2%
Worse	29.5%
About the same	58.6%
Other/Don't know	0.7%

Table 5 – Family's Economic Situation Next Year

And what about in the coming year? Overall, and speaking generally, do you expect your family's economic situation next year will be better than it has been this year, worse than it has been this year, or about the same as this year?

Better	15.4%
Worse	23.8%
About the same	58.1%
Other/Don't know	2.7%

Table 6 – Local School Districts Cover Pensions?

Relieve the state’s obligation to the teachers’ pension fund by having local school districts make their teachers’ pension contributions. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?

Favor	29.3%
Oppose	55.1%
Don’t know	15.7%

Table 7 – State Employees Increase Contributions?

Increase the required pension contribution for current state employees. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?

Favor	48.4%
Oppose	38.2%
Don’t know	13.4%

Table 8 – Retirees Cover Health Insurance Costs?

Ask current retirees to contribute to the cost of their state health insurance plan. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?

Favor	39.0%
Oppose	52.1%
Don’t know	8.9%