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Simon Poll: Southern Illinois Voters are Ready for Reform

Southern Illinois voters overwhelmingly support a wide variety of reform measures they think may improve Illinois government and politics, according to a new poll by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University.

From term limits and open primaries to campaign contribution limits and redistricting, the poll showed there is broad support for changes to Illinois' political processes.

"It is remarkable how consistently the voters of southern Illinois favor significant changes," said John S. Jackson, one of the co-directors of the poll. "The dominant position, usually favored by sixty to seventy five percent of the voters, is in favor of change - of trying something new to see if it works.

The poll of registered voters in 18 counties south of Interstate 64 was taken September 20 – Oct. 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. 30 percent of the sample were cell phone users.

According to the poll, voters support:

Term Limits for State Legislators. Voters approve of limiting state representatives to five terms and state senators to three terms. A total of 74.7 percent favored or strongly favored this measure while 21.1 percent opposed it.

In a more philosophical vein, voters were also asked whether term limits made legislators more responsive to their constituents. A total of 73.2 percent agreed or strongly agreed that term limits had this effect while 19.9 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with this proposition.

Critics claim that term limits don't give elected officials enough time to develop the expertise necessary to handle the state's challenging problems. Only 32 percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this criticism while a total of 62.8 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed.

In addition, the respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement, “Term limits ensure that we’ll get new people with fresh ideas coming into office.” Only 12.2 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with this proposition while a total of 86.2 percent agreed or strongly agreed.

Another common criticism is that, “Term limits force legislators out of office, even if their constituents want to keep them, thereby giving more power to lobbyists and unelected staff.” There were 54.8 percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed while 34.2 percent agreed or strongly agreed with it.

Term Limits for Legislative Leaders: A closely related question asked about term limits for those who hold leadership positions in the General Assembly. Here the approval levels were even higher with 83.1 percent supporting term limits for legislative leaders and 13.4 percent opposed.

Limiting Legislative Leaders’ Contributions to Members: Campaign finance is a controversial area in Illinois politics and the poll asked for the voters’ opinions of a proposal to limit the amount of money legislative leaders can raise and then transfer to other candidates. The current practice is a key component of the power leaders of the General Assembly have.

There were 59.1 percent of the respondents favoring limits on the amounts of money leaders can transfer to members while 32.7 percent opposed.

Open Primaries: Current Illinois law requires voters to publicly ask for a specific party’s ballot if they want to vote in that party’s primary. Southern Illinoisans said they supported a change to a completely open primary where the voter does not have to declare which party’s ballot they requested. Three fourths (75.7 percent) favored or strongly favored the open primary while only 17.4 percent opposed or strongly opposed it.

Redistricting Reform: Drawing legislative district lines is another area where there is much discussion about how Illinois creates districts and how that system might be improved. The current system provides that the two political parties form a redistricting commission which draws a map every ten years. However, if the two parties cannot agree on a plan, which usually happens, they end the stalemate by drawing one party’s name out of a hat. The winning party gets to draw the new legislative district map.

This plan was explained to the respondents and they were asked if they approved or disapproved of it. Only 16.7 percent approved or strongly approved while 75 percent disapproved or strongly disapproved.

If Illinois were to change the current system, two options have been advanced by reformers:

- One plan would have the Illinois Supreme Court add a neutral person to the redistricting commission if there is a partisan tie. This would effectively break the tie.

A total of 74 percent of southern Illinois voters favored or strongly favored this change while only 18 percent opposed it.

- Another more drastic change would involve a constitutional amendment requiring legislative maps be drawn by a commission that is independent of the elected representatives. This is essentially the plan used by our neighboring state of Iowa.

When offered this option, 64.8 percent of the voters favored or strongly favored this new plan while a total of 22.6 percent opposed or strongly opposed it.

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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Southern Illinois Poll Fall 2013 – Reform Questions

Table 1 – Favor Open Primaries?

Currently in Illinois, when voting in a PRIMARY election, the voter has to ask for a specific party's ballot. Would you favor or oppose a proposal to change the primary-election process in Illinois so that voters do not have to publicly declare which party's ballot they have chosen?

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Strongly favor	62.3%
Somewhat favor	13.4%
Somewhat oppose	7.2%
Strongly oppose	10.2%
OTHER/DON'T KNOW	7.0%

Table 2 – Term Limits for State Legislators?

A proposal to limit how long state legislators could serve. It would limit state representatives to five consecutive terms and state senators to three consecutive terms. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Strongly favor	50.1%
Somewhat favor	24.6%
Somewhat oppose	10.7%
Strongly oppose	10.4%
OTHER/DON'T KNOW	4.2%

Table 3 – Term Limits Make Officials More Responsive?

Please tell me if you agree or disagree with this statement: Term limits help make elected officials more responsive to constituents.

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Strongly agree	39.2%
Agree	34.0%
Disagree	12.2%
Strongly disagree	7.7%
OTHER/DON'T KNOW	7.0%

Table 4 – Term Limits Hamper Development of Expertise?

Please tell me if you agree or disagree with this statement: Term limits don't give elected officials enough time to develop expertise to handle Illinois' challenging problems.

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Strongly agree	11.4%
Agree	20.6%
Disagree	28.8%
Strongly disagree	34.0%
OTHER/DON'T KNOW	5.2%

Table 5 – Term Limits Ensure New Ideas?

Please tell me if you agree or disagree with this statement: Term limits ensure that we'll get new people with fresh ideas coming into office.

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Strongly agree	46.7%
Agree	39.5%
Disagree	8.2%
Strongly disagree	4.0%
OTHER/DON'T KNOW	1.7%

Table 6 – Term Limits Increase Power of Lobbyists/Staff?

Please tell me if you agree or disagree with this statement: Term limits force legislators out of office, even if their constituents want to keep them, thereby giving more power to lobbyists and unelected staff.

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Strongly agree	12.9%
Agree	21.3%
Disagree	28.5%
Strongly disagree	26.3%
OTHER/DON'T KNOW	10.9%

Table 7 – Term Limits for Legislative Leaders?

A proposal to limit how long legislators could serve in leadership positions – such as Speaker of the House or President of the Senate – before they stepped down to let other legislators lead. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?

Response	Percent Responding
Strongly favor	52.1%
Somewhat favor	31.0%
Somewhat oppose	8.2%
Strongly oppose	5.2%
OTHER/DON'T KNOW	3.5%

Table 8 – Limits on Transfer of Campaign Funds by Party Leaders?

A proposal to limit the amount of campaign money that party leaders can transfer to other candidates in the general election. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?

Response	Percent Responding
Strongly favor	40.7%
Somewhat favor	18.4%
Somewhat oppose	11.4%
Strongly oppose	21.3%
OTHER/DON'T KNOW	8.2%

Table 9 – Approve Current Redistricting Plan?

Currently, when the political parties can't agree on a legislative redistricting plan, they end the stalemate by pulling a party's name out of a hat. The winning political party gets to draw the new legislative district map. Do you approve or disapprove of this tie-breaking process?

Response	Percent Responding
Strongly approve	5.5%
Somewhat approve	11.2%
Somewhat disapprove	18.4%
Strongly disapprove	56.6%
OTHER/DON'T KNOW	8.4%

Table 10 – Favor a Neutral Tie-Breaker?

One proposal for improving the state legislative redistricting process would have the Illinois Supreme Court add a neutral person to the redistricting panel in case of a partisan tie. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?

Response	Percent Responding
Strongly favor	39.2%
Somewhat favor	34.7%
Somewhat oppose	8.9%
Strongly oppose	9.2%
OTHER/DON'T KNOW	7.9%

Table 11 – Favor a Neutral Commission?

Other people have proposed a constitutional amendment that would have legislative district maps created and recommended by a commission that is independent of the elected representatives. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?

Response	Percent Responding
Strongly favor	32.5%
Somewhat favor	32.3%
Somewhat oppose	11.9%
Strongly oppose	10.7%
OTHER/DON'T KNOW	12.7%