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Contact: John S. Jackson
618-453-3106

Southern Illinois Voters Critical of Share of State Spending, Income Distribution in the US

In the latest Southern Illinois Poll, sponsored by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University, voters expressed some surprising views about hot button-social issues and income distribution in the United States. The poll asked the voters' views on a variety of current social and regional political issues, as well as about the distribution of wealth in the U.S.

“Some of these results were predictable, given what we have seen in past surveys, and some were quite surprising,” said the Institute’s John Jackson, one of the authors of the poll.

The survey of 400 registered voters from Illinois’ southernmost 18 counties, conducted February 23 – 28, has a margin for error of ± 4.9 percent.

In what might be a predictable result, a plurality of voters favored “a proposal to have Cook County separated from the rest of Illinois and to form its own state.” Nearly half (49 percent) either favored or strongly favored the proposal, while about four in ten (39 percent) either opposed or strongly opposed the idea.

Simon Institute visiting professor Charles Leonard, who supervised the poll, said, “This notion that downstate Illinois somehow does not belong with Cook County is consistent with the results of our 2010 Southern Illinois Poll, in which large numbers of respondents also expressed antipathy toward Chicago.”

Probably closely related was the overwhelmingly negative response to the distribution of state spending in Illinois. Almost eight in ten southern Illinois voters (79 percent) responded that

their area of the state “gets less than its fair share of state spending.” Only three percent said we get “more than our fair share,” and one in eight (13 percent) said their area gets “about the right amount.”

“Given that many political leaders constantly complain about Chicago, and about how badly southern Illinois is treated by the state, the belief in a downtrodden southern Illinois has become a staple of the political culture in this region,” Jackson said. “The belief has become a part of the conventional wisdom, and it undoubtedly is related to the dominant attitude toward Cook County reflected in this question.”

The poll received surprising results from a series of questions about the growing gap between the wealthy and the rest in the U.S., an issue that has received much attention recently. About a third (31 percent) of Southern Illinois voters agreed with the statement “Most rich people today are wealthy mainly because of their own hard work, ambition or education,” while more than half (52 percent) chose “Most rich people today are wealthy mainly because they know the right people or were born into wealthy families.”

Respondents were only about half as likely to say the distribution of wealth in the country was “fair now” (31 percent) as they were to say “should be more even” (59 percent).

Finally, and most surprising, said Jackson, a slight majority (51 percent) said that the federal government should pursue policies that would reduce the income gap, while about four in ten (38 percent) said the government should not pursue such policies.

“For an area like southern Illinois, which is often described with a shorthand ‘conservative’ label, these results are quite surprising. They certainly do not reflect a dominantly conservative view. This is a classic case of many people being symbolically conservative, i.e. calling themselves conservative, while at the same time holding incompatible views that can only be described as ‘liberal’ on these two issues,” said Jackson.

The 2012 Southern Illinois Poll repeated questions on abortion and same-sex marriage from the 2010 poll. Almost one in five (18 percent) said “abortion should be legal in all circumstances; about a quarter chose “abortion should be illegal in all circumstances”; and a little over half (54 percent) chose “abortion should be legal in certain circumstances.” Though access

to abortion is often presented as a polar social issues, most southern Illinois voters reject the two extremes, Jackson said.

Another potentially divisive issue, same-sex marriage, also was repeated from the 2010 poll. A little over one in five (22 percent) chose the option “gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to legally marry.” A third (32 percent) chose “gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to form civil unions, but not to legally marry”; and four in ten (40 percent) chose “there should be no legal recognition of relationships between gay and lesbian couples.”

Interestingly, said Jackson, Southern Illinoisans’ opinions may be more progressive on these issues than they were just two years ago. For example, in 2010, just 9 percent said abortion should be legal under any circumstances, compared with 18 percent in the 2010 poll. In 2010 the combined “legally marry” and “civil unions” responses were 45 percent. In 2012 the combined support for some legal recognition of same-sex unions was 54 percent.

The poll of 400 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 February 23-28. The sample of 400 has a margin of 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.

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The interviews were conducted by Issues + Answers of Virginia Beach, VA. It reports no Illinois political figures as clients. The poll was paid for with non-state dollars from the Institute’s endowment fund.

Note: The “Simon Poll and “Southern Illinois Poll” are 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 at SIUC.

For more information, contact:

Charles Leonard, Visiting Professor and Polling Director,
Paul Simon Public Policy Institute
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Cell phone 618-303-9099

John Jackson, Visiting Professor, Paul Simon Public Policy Institute
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Office phone 618-453-3106

J. Tobin Grant, Associate Professor of Political Science
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Cell phone 618-559-2215

David Yepsen, Director, Paul Simon Public Policy Institute
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Cell phone 618-559-5854

Table 1 • Vote to Separate Cook County

There has been a proposal to have Cook County separated from the rest of Illinois and to form its own state. Would you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose this proposal?

| | |
|-----------------|-------|
| Strongly favor | 33.3% |
| Favor | 15.5% |
| Oppose | 21.0% |
| Strongly oppose | 18.0% |
| Don't know | 12.3% |

Table 2 • Fair Share of Income Distribution

And what do you think about government spending in your area of the state? In terms of its share of state spending, do you think your part of the state gets more than its fair share, about the right amount, or less than its fair share of state spending?

| | |
|--------------------------|-------|
| More than its fair share | 3.3% |
| About the right amount | 13.3% |
| Less than its fair share | 79.3% |
| Don't know | 4.3% |

Table 3 • How the Wealthy Attain Their Status

Which of these statements comes closer to your own views – even if neither is exactly right?

| | |
|--|-------|
| Most rich people today are wealthy mainly because of their own hard work, ambition, or education. | 31.3% |
| Most rich people today are wealthy mainly because they know the right people or were born into a wealthy family. | 51.5% |
| Neither | 1.5% |
| Both equally | 12.8% |
| Don't know | 3.0% |

Table 4 • Fairness of Wealth Distribution

Do you feel that the distribution of money and wealth in this country today is fair, or do you feel that the money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed among a larger percentage of the people?

| | |
|---------------------|-------|
| Fair now | 30.5% |
| Should be more even | 59.0% |
| Don't know | 10.5% |

Table 5 • Pursue Policies to Ensure Fairer Wealth Distribution

Do you think the federal government should or should not pursue policies that try to reduce the gap between wealthy and less well-off Americans?

| | |
|-------------------|-------|
| Should pursue | 51.0% |
| Should not pursue | 38.3% |
| Don't know | 10.8% |

Table 6 • Position on Abortion 2010 and 2012

Do you think abortion should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances?

| | 2010 | 2012 |
|--------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Legal under any circumstances | 9.0% | 18.3% |
| Legal in certain circumstances | 58.9% | 53.5% |
| Illegal in all circumstances | 28.9% | 24.0% |
| Don't know/Refused | 3.2% | 4.3% |

Table 7 • Position on Gay Marriage 2010 and 2012

Which of the following three statements comes closest to your position on the legal rights of gay and lesbian couples in Illinois?

| | 2010 | 2012 |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to legally marry. | 20.0% | 22.0% |
| Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to form civil unions, but not to legally marry. | 25.2% | 31.8% |
| There should be no legal recognition of relationships between gay and lesbian couples. | 48.6% | 39.8% |
| Don't know/Refused | 6.2% | 6.5% |