

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 9, 2012

Contact: Charles Leonard
618-303-9099

Southern Illinois Voters Oppose Facilities Closures, Support Some Pension Reforms

Voters in southern Illinois believe their state's multibillion-dollar budget deficit can be solved by cutting waste and inefficiency, but oppose cuts such as closing outdated or underutilized state facilities, according to the latest Southern Illinois Poll, conducted by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

More than six in ten (63 percent) believe the state takes in enough to pay for public services, but that eliminating waste and inefficiencies can close the budget gap. Just one in twelve (8 percent) believe that a tax increase is necessary to fix the budget. One in five (19%) say the problem is so large it will require both budget cuts and tax increases to solve it.

They also are against having local school districts pay their own teachers' pension contributions rather than having the state do it, which would result in huge savings for the Teachers Retirement System, but would place a financial burden on downstate districts.

On the other hand, they narrowly favor consolidating sparsely populated local school districts and support some measures that would cut down on pension costs for the state.

The survey of 400 registered voters in Illinois' 18 southernmost counties was conducted February 23 – 28. It has a margin for error of +/- 4.9 percentage points.

Facilities Closures

By almost 50 percentage points, voters oppose closing state facilities, even ones described as "under-used or too expensive to maintain" (70 percent opposed to 21 percent in favor). The margin was somewhat higher against closing the Illinois Youth Center in Murphysboro (70 percent opposed to 15 percent in favor, and greater still against closing the super-maximum-security facility in Tamms (79 percent opposed to 9 percent in favor).

“As the old saying goes, nothing unites the opposition like the details,” said Charles Leonard, a visiting professor at the Paul Simon Institute who supervised the Southern Illinois Poll. “Waste and inefficiency are always out there somewhere else, not in your backyard.”

School District Consolidation

On the other hand, opinion is more even—perhaps even slightly in favor—on the issue of consolidating school districts in sparsely populated areas, such as southern Illinois. Half (49 percent) either favored or strongly favored consolidation, while just over four in ten (43 percent) were opposed.

When the question shifted to “consolidating the school district in which you live with a neighboring district,” the numbers did not change much, with 48 percent in favor and 45 percent opposed.

“Perhaps voters are less likely to oppose school consolidation than facilities closures because the prospect of job loss is not as obvious,” Leonard said. “And unless you are in Union County, school consolidation is not as high-profile an issue across most of the area as are the closings of the Murphysboro and Tamms facilities.”

State Pension Savings

Opinion was more mixed on specific issues that could relieve the burden on the state’s severely underfunded pension obligations. For example, southern Illinois voters opposed by a wide margin (54 percent to 31 percent) a proposal to have local school districts make their teachers’ pension contributions. However, by a wider margin, they favored having defined-benefit, 401(k)-style plans for future state workers (58 percent in favor to 25 percent opposed).

Opinion was more closely split on a proposal to increase the pension contributions required of current state employees (45 percent in favor to 42 percent opposed). Respondents were also split evenly on the issue of raising current retirees’ contributions to their health insurance plans (48 percent in favor to 47 percent opposed).

“This poll illustrates the difficulty political leaders have in cleaning up Illinois finances,” said David Yepsen, the Simon Institute’s director. “Voters tell pollsters they want to cut the budget, but whenever the knife gets close to home they object.

“The fact is, the state's finances are in such bad shape that dramatic cuts have to be made and some tax increases will be needed to put this in balance. It's not pleasant, but the state has been living beyond its means, and we've been enjoying services without paying for them. That can't last forever.”

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. We also included a special sample of cell phone users to ensure greater accuracy.

The poll was conducted by Issues and Answers of Virginia Beach, VA. It reports no Illinois political figures as clients. The poll was paid for with non-state dollars with proceeds 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 of publication of these polls is encouraged- but only with credit to the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at SIUC.

Table 1 • Best Way to Fix Illinois' Budget Deficit

The state of Illinois has a budget deficit of over 3 billion dollars. I'm going to read three statements that people have made about how to fix the deficit, and ask you which one comes closest to your views.

Illinois' public programs and services have already been reduced significantly. We can only fix the problem by taking in more revenue, such as a tax increase.	7.8%
The state takes in plenty of money to pay for public services, but wastes it on unnecessary programs. We can fix the problem by cutting waste and inefficiency in government.	62.8%
Illinois' budget problem is so large it can only be solved by a combination of budget cuts and revenue increases.	19.0%
Haven't thought much about it.	10.5%

Table 2 • Support for Facilities Closures

	Favor	Oppose	Don't Know
Another proposal to save money for the state is to close state facilities such as mental health centers, state prisons, and juvenile facilities that are under-used or too expensive to maintain. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?	21.3%	70.3%	8.5%
One facility that has been proposed for closure is the Illinois Youth Center in Murphysboro. Would you favor or oppose closing the Murphysboro facility?	15.0%	70.0%	15.0%
Another facility that been proposed for closure is the super-maximum security prison in Tamms. Would you favor or oppose closing the Tamms facility?	9.3%	79.0%	11.8%

Table 3 • Support for School Consolidation

Some people in Springfield have suggested that the state could save money on administrative costs by consolidating school districts in lightly populated areas. Would you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose this proposal?

Strongly favor	15.8%
Favor	33.0%
Oppose	28.3%
Strongly oppose	14.8%
Don't know	8.3%

If there were a proposal to save administrative costs by consolidating the school district you live in with a neighboring district, would you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose that proposal?

Strongly favor	15.5%
Favor	32.3%
Oppose	26.8%
Strongly oppose	18.3%
Don't know	7.3%

Table 4 • Support for Pension Reforms

	Favor	Oppose	Don't Know
Relieve the state's obligation to the teachers' pension fund by having local school districts make their teachers' pension contributions	30.8%	53.8%	15.5%
Replace future state workers' defined-benefit plan with a 401(k)-style, defined-contribution plan, similar to what many private businesses have for their employees	58.0%	24.8%	17.3%
Increase the required pension contribution for current state employees	44.8%	42.0%	13.3%
Ask current retirees to contribute to the cost of their state health insurance plan	47.5%	46.5%	6.0%