

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

Residents Express Cautious Optimism

Despite the fact that Louisianans gave the state mixed marks across a variety of policy and service areas, a plurality of residents believed the state was headed in the right direction. Forty-eight percent of respondents believed the state was headed in the right direction, 36 percent believed the state is headed in the wrong direction, and 16 percent said they were not sure or did not know. The overall mood of the electorate is best described as "cautiously optimistic" reflecting a combination of negative evaluations of current problems with an optimism that these problems will improve over the next several years.

Concern about the Economy and Jobs Grows

While education topped residents' concerns as the most important problem confronting the state, Louisianans have grown increasingly concerned about the economy and jobs over the past year. A plurality of respondents, 31 percent, identified education as the most important issue confronting the state. This is a nine-point drop from the 2003 survey. The percent selecting the economy and jobs increased from 20 percent in 2003 to 26.5 percent in 2004. The third most important problem - health care - remained flat with roughly 12 percent of respondents citing health care as the most important problem.

Health Care Quality & Access

Ratings of Louisiana compared to other states in the region were comparable to results from the 2003 survey with one notable exception: Respondents were considerably more negative in their evaluations of health care quality and access. The percent of respondents evaluating health care access as better than in other states in the southeast dropped 8 points, while the percent evaluating health care access as better dropped over 10 points from the 2003 survey. Nearly 27 percent of respondents reported that at least one member in the household did not have health insurance, while over 35 percent reported having gone without medical care in the past twelve months. When asked whether maintaining charity hospitals or providing insurance was a better mechanism for caring for the uninsured, 49 percent of respondents opted for charity hospitals compared to 39 percent who opted for providing insurance coverage. Notably, however, households with at least one uninsured member preferred state funded insurance coverage.

Spending Priorities and the Arts Paradox

Education and health care remained at the top of state spending priorities and as the areas of state government respondents least wanted cut. When it comes to cutting state government, respondents targeted arts and cultural institutions and state parks. The preference for cutting the arts creates an interesting paradox: When asked to rate the state relative to other states in the region, arts and cultural institutions topped the charts with the most positive evaluations. Despite the fact that residents recognize this as a point of distinction for the state, it is one of the areas they were most willing to cut.

Perceptions of Waste

When asked what bothered them most about state taxes, respondents overwhelmingly opted for government waste of taxpayer dollars. Sixty-two percent of respondents said that the idea that government was wasting taxpayer money bothered them most about taxes. Twenty-six percent said they were most bothered by the perception that not everyone was paying their fair share, and only 6 percent were actually bothered most by the total amount they paid in taxes. When asked how much of state government spending could be reduced by eliminating wasteful spending, the average response was 22%.

Dealing with the Deficit: Tax Gambling

Faced with budgetary shortfalls, two-thirds of Louisiana residents would opt to increase taxes on gambling. Given a range of options from increasing sales and income taxes, raising fees on selected services, or cutting government spending, this is the only option that garnered majority support. Forty-two percent of residents said they would cut government spending and 30 percent said they would increase user fees on some government services. Only 12 percent and 13 percent respectively would increase state sales or income taxes.

Property Taxes and the Homestead Exemption

Overall, there is little evidence in the survey to suggest Louisianans would support a tax increase, but there is also little evidence of a tax revolt. A majority of respondents say that property taxes, sales taxes, and income taxes are about right. However, nearly 65 percent of respondents would support reducing the homestead exemption if additional revenues went to local public schools. This is comparable to results from the 2003 survey despite changes in question wording and order designed to assure that respondents fully understood the question. Respondents were also open to property tax reassessments. Eighty-three percent of respondents said they would be willing to have their property reassessed, and 70.4% said they would be willing to have their property reassessed even if they personally had to pay more. This finding, however, should be taken with a grain of salt given that 77 percent of respondents believe property assessments in their parish are already fair.