

# **The 2014 Election in Aiken County: The Sales Tax Proposal for Public Schools**

A Public Service Report  
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All conclusions in this report are solely those of the author and do not represent any position or opinion of the University of South Carolina Aiken.

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Thanks to the *Aiken Standard* for co-sponsoring this project and to Adora Hawkins and Carol Botsch for their suggestions that significantly improved the report.

Perhaps the most significant and hotly contested ballot question facing voters across Aiken County in the November 2014 election was the proposed sales tax increase for the purpose of improving public school facilities in Aiken County. In contrast, most elections for political office were uncontested and virtually none of the contested ones were expected to be very competitive.

While two ballot questions pertained to local public schools, we asked only about the sales tax increase. In our judgment, the second ballot question, on whether the district could borrow on the basis of anticipated revenue rather than pay for new facilities as sales tax money came in, was only relevant if the sales tax increase passed. We anticipated that if the sales tax increase passed, the second measure would pass as well, as it did. 59% of Aiken County voters supported the passage of the one percent or one cent sales tax.

Winning by nearly three to two was a very significant victory only four years after the defeat of a school bond referendum in a special election. That referendum was defeated

by more than a two to one margin. Its passage would have increased property taxes to finance the bonds. Winning any tax increase on anything is difficult in Aiken's fiscally conservative political culture. This exit poll allowed us to examine factors that were associated with "yes" and "no" votes in 2014. (See the table at the end of this report for a detailed statistical breakdown on support and opposition.)

Some demographic factors made no difference, while others made quite a bit of difference. Ethnicity was a nonfactor with whites and blacks voting virtually the same as the county as a whole. However, gender made a significant difference. Men were eight percentage points less likely to support the measure than women. This is consistent with long standing traditional gender roles in which women playing their nurturing role support education spending, and men playing their breadwinner role oppose tax increases. Nevertheless, despite these differences, a majority of both genders supported the sales tax increase.

Education and income were relatively more important factors. Those with no more than a high school degree were almost evenly split on the proposal, with only a slight majority favoring it. On the other hand, those with more than a four year college degree were overwhelmingly supportive. Family income followed a similar pattern. Those from families with low incomes were relatively less supportive while those in the highest income groups were comparatively more supportive.

Age was the most important demographic factor in the sense that one age group, those over 65, evenly split and did not give the proposal a majority. Among those over 70, a majority (53%) opposed the increase. As age went down, support generally went up. This may be a matter of simple self-interest in that younger people are more likely to have children or friends with children in the public schools.

Political identifications proved to be more important than any of the demographic factors. Liberals and moderates were very strongly supportive of the tax increase. Conservatives who did not self-identify themselves as "strong" conservatives were also

supportive. However, a clear majority of those who identified themselves as “strong” conservatives opposed the measure.

Party identification, which has more and more reflected ideology in recent years, followed a pattern similar to that of ideology. The greatest support came from Democrats. Independents, along with Republicans who did not self-identify as “strong” in their partisanship, also gave the measure majority support. Only among strong Republicans did we find a majority who opposed the tax increase.

We also asked voters if they “supported” the Tea Party. Though members of this group sometimes portray themselves as nonpartisan, they are in fact mostly Republican. Among 2014 Aiken County voters, more than four in five who said they supported the Tea Party also claimed a Republican identification. While the county as a whole approved the sales tax by three to two, Tea Party supporters opposed the measure by the same ratio of three to two.

Religious identification also made a large difference. We asked voters if they identified themselves as “religious fundamentalists.” Given that many fundamentalists see public schools as promoting secular humanism and teaching science in ways that are not consistent with their literal interpretation of the Bible, they might be inclined to oppose paying more taxes to aid public schools. Indeed, a significant number of parents who want their children to have a more religious based education opt out of public schools for home schooling. Not surprisingly, a majority of self-identified religious fundamentalists were against the sales tax proposal, while a strong majority of those who did not consider themselves to be fundamentalists supported the proposal.

Confidence in government was a powerful predictor in voting on this issue. We measured confidence in government by asking voters about their confidence in government performance on a specific issue—how confident they felt about how government could handle an Ebola outbreak. Support for the sales tax varied dramatically with the level of confidence people had in government. Support more than

doubled from those who were “not at all” confident to those who were “very confident.” Of all the factors examined, this one had the most impact on the vote. Almost two-thirds of those who were “not at all” confident were against the tax. At the other end, almost three-fourths of those who were “very confident” favored the tax. Many social science studies have found that confidence in government is closely related to political trust. Lack of confidence would tend to make people distrust claims by government officials that money is needed, to distrust the ability of government to spend new money wisely, and to feel that reducing government waste could and should fund any needed improvements—all reasons to vote against the sales tax proposal.

How voters viewed the work ethic of their fellow citizens played a significant role in voting on the sales tax. We asked voters which had more effect on the economy, lazy people who would rather live off government handouts or lack of jobs for people who truly want to work. Those who thought laziness was more important were less likely to support the sales tax measure than those who thought lack of jobs was more important. The probable link is seeing government—in the form of public schools—as enabling the laziness of undeserving people who should be forced to make it on their own.

Preferences about experiencing diversity in daily life also played a significant role in explaining the vote on the sales tax. Those who preferred living environments with ethnic and religious diversity were significantly more likely to support the sales tax measure than those who did not think it important to seek out such diversity in making living choices. The link between these feelings is probably the fact that public schools are environments with a great deal of diversity. Thus those who prefer diversity might tend to support public schools.

The table at the end of this report lays out all of these factors and the percentages against and for the sales tax measure for each value of each factor. A final column compares the percentage favoring the proposal to the 59% who favored it countywide. For example, if 65% of a group favored the tax, then that group was +6 percentage

points different than the county as a whole. If 49% of some group favored the tax, then this group was -10 percentage points different than the county as a whole.

Examining this last column gives a quick view of which groups were relatively more in favor of and which were more against the tax. Liberals were the single most supportive group at +20 percentage points over the “yes” vote for the county as a whole. Interestingly, liberals were more supportive than “strong” liberals. A possible explanation is that strong liberals might have disliked the regressive nature of the sales tax and would have preferred that money be raised by a tax that was more progressive. Democrats, who are also very likely to be liberal in ideology, were next at +14. They tied with those who were “very confident” in government, also at +14 percentage points over the 59% who supported the tax countywide.

The group most against the sales tax measure was those who had no confidence at all in government to handle a crisis like Ebola. They had the greatest negative difference at -24 percentage points behind the 59% countywide vote approving the measure. The two groups following them have a great deal of overlap, Tea Party supporters at -19 and strong conservatives at -18. Those who prefer leaders who stick to party principles and refuse to compromise, more than half of whom are Tea Party supporters, were at -16. The other groups who fell double digits below the countywide level of support were self-identified religious fundamentalists at -13 and strong Republicans at -12. These were all the groups that produced a majority against the measure. (See the figure at the end of this report listing all the groups we have discussed in descending levels of support for the sales tax showing how far they were above or below 50%).

While some groups stand out as very supportive or very opposed to the sales tax measure, they were not the key to building a clear majority. The most important groups were the less than strong conservatives, and the less than strong Republicans. This is due to their size and because their partisan and ideological inclinations would tend to make them skeptical about any tax proposal.

Less than strong conservatives comprised nearly a third of all voters. They are a larger group than all the liberals and moderate voters combined. And they voted for the sales tax by a ratio of three to two.

Of course many of these less than strong conservative voters were also less than strong Republicans, so we would expect them to have a similar pattern. Republicans whose partisanship was less than strong comprised a little over a fourth of all voters, and they supported the sales tax by a little more than three to two.

Other important swing groups were pure moderates (14% of all voters) and pure independents (16% of all voters). A little less than half of these voters self-identified as both ideological moderates and partisan independents. Together with those who shared at least one of these labels, this group comprised one in five of all voters. They also voted for the sales tax by about three to two.

Winning support from all these key groups was critical to the success of the proposal. The school board worked harder than they had in the previous failed effort in 2010. They carefully explained their plan in all parts of the county and rallied teachers to help in the effort. But efforts from the school community probably would not have been enough.

Since the last effort to find new money for school facilities, the business environment had changed. A well-publicized 2014 USC Aiken study showed that population growth in the area had been flat. Slow or no population growth would certainly be a drag on business growth and profits. The housing market had also been flat. This alarmed local realtors, many of whom had opposed the 2010 bond referendum because it would have raised property taxes. Anecdotal stories floated around the community that young professionals moving to the area for high paying positions were choosing to live and raise families in neighboring counties rather than in Aiken because of the physical appearance of the local schools.

The changed business environment flipped the political environment. Realtors and the Aiken Chamber of Commerce called for new money to modernize schools and saw a sales tax increase as the answer. This time pro tax interests dominated the political debate. This time the opposition was not as visible or organized. Moreover, this was a sales tax, which is less unpopular than property taxes. Sales taxes hit people in small amounts rather than all at once. In addition, visitors pay sales taxes as well as residents, so some of the burden is shifted away from the local population. And proponents sweetened the pot by building some property tax relief into the proposal. The *Aiken Standard* strongly supported the measure and ran a story debunking a number of claims made by opponents. The newspaper showed, for example, that the local schools spend comparatively little on administration. Groups that usually reject new taxes—conservatives and Republicans who were less than “strong,” along with ideological moderates and partisan independents—shifted to support this new tax.

Combining the support of these key groups with liberals and Democrats, who would be expected to support measures that increase public school funding, overwhelmed the most conservative of the conservatives and the strongest anti-government Republicans, who by themselves would have voted the measure down.

Finally, turnout almost certainly played a major role in passage of the sales tax proposal. Turnout can have a dramatic impact on the composition of the electorate, which in turn can determine the outcome. The 2010 bond referendum vote was a special election held in May that produced less than 20,000 votes. The 2014 vote was a referendum held during a general election in November. It attracted more than 46,000 voters, well over twice as many as in 2010. Increased turnout decreases the share of the total vote held by strong partisans and those with a strong ideology, and increases the share of the total vote held by less strong partisans and those with more moderate ideology. Higher turnout also increases the Democratic and independent share of the total vote. As we have seen in this report, the groups with a larger share of the

electorate in higher turnout elections are groups that tended to favor the sales tax increase.

**Table. Demography, Identifications, Attitudes and the 2014 Vote on the Sales Tax Proposal to Improve Aiken County School Facilities**

<b>Groups, Identifications, and Attitudes</b>	<b>Against Sales Tax (All: 41%)</b>	<b>For Sales Tax (All: 59%)</b>	<b>Diff in Support [(% For) – 59%]</b>
<b>Ethnicity:</b> Whites	41%	59%	0
Blacks	40%	60%	+1
<b>Gender:</b> Men	45%	55%	-4
Women	37%	63%	+4
<b>Education:</b> HS or less	48%	52%	-7
> College Degree	30%	70%	+11
<b>Income:</b> < \$35,000	47%	53%	-6
> \$75,000	34%	66%	+7
<b>Age:</b> 18-35	32%	68%	+8
36-50	39%	61%	+2
51-65	39%	61%	+2
66 and up	50%	50%	-9
<b>Ideology:</b> Strong Liberals	31%	69%	+10
Liberals	21%	79%	+20
Moderates	31%	69%	+10
Conservatives	39%	61%	+2
Strong Conservatives	59%	41%	-18
<b>Party:</b> Strong Democrats	34%	67%	+8
Democrats	27%	73%	+14
Independents	41%	59%	0
Republicans	37%	63%	+4
Strong Republicans	53%	47%	-12
<b>Tea Party:</b> Supporters	60%	40%	-19
Not Supporters	33%	68%	+8
<b>Religion:</b> Fundamentalist	54%	46%	-13
Not Fundamentalist	35%	65%	+6
<b>Pol compromise w/other party:</b>			
Support Compromise	37%	63%	+4
Oppose Compromise	57%	43%	-16
<b>Government can handle Ebola:</b>			
Very Confident	27%	73%	+14
Somewhat Confident	30%	71%	+12
Not Too Confident	47%	53%	-6
Not At All Confident	65%	35%	-24
<b>View of human nature:</b>			
People are lazy	46%	54%	-5
People want to work	35%	65%	+6
<b>Prefer living with people of:</b>			
Diverse Religious Beliefs	37%	63%	+4
Same Religious Beliefs	46%	54%	-5
Diverse Ethnic Backgrounds	35%	64%	+5
Same Ethnic Backgrounds	44%	56%	-3

**Figure. Groups in Descending Levels of Support Above and Below 50%**

