

# **Public Opinion in Aiken County: Fall 2003**

**A Public Service Report**

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## **Introduction**

Each fall students in Dr. Robert Botsch's Political Science Research Methods class at USC Aiken perform a survey as part of their course experience. This year the survey was a telephone survey of a representative sample of adults in Aiken County.

The survey consisted of 31 questions covering a wide range of opinions and identifications as well as demographic information. In addition, as a public service, the survey asked residents about the relative importance of community goals for Aiken County United Way.

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## **Methodology**

The population for this survey was all adults in Aiken County who have telephones in their homes and who were at home when called. The interviews were conducted between October 29 and November 12, 2003. The sample was stratified by all the telephone exchanges in Aiken County so that all parts of the county would be included in the proper proportions. Numbers were randomly generated using a sampling technique called "systematic sampling plus one." This involves scientifically selecting numbers from the telephone book and then adding one to each number selected. This technique was used so that even those with unlisted phone numbers would be included in the sample. Each number selected was called at least four times at different hours and on different days of the week before it was replaced with a new number in order to maximize the chance of contacting people who were rarely at home. At each residence we reached, we spoke with the individual who had the "most recent birthday" so as to randomly select respondents within the household. This "birthday" technique was also used so that the survey had the right balance of men and women and people of all ages. Interviewing only the person who happens to answer the phone would not provide a fair sample of all adults in Aiken County.

The response rate was 52%, which is acceptable for telephone surveys. What this means is that for every ten individuals who have telephones in their homes and who were at home when called, a little more than five of those individuals completed the interview.

Because the procedures used to produce the sample approximates a simple random sample of all residents over the age of 18, we can estimate the

maximum sampling error that should result in any given question. The sampling error on any question that includes all 455 people in the sample is no more than 4.7% in either direction. As the sample gets smaller, the sampling error increases. For example, on questions that have 150 responses the sampling error is 8%. A one in twenty chance exists that the error can be larger than this for any given question.

The survey was conducted by USCA students who were trained in telephone interviewing techniques by Dr. Robert E. Botsch and Ms. Laura Shick, Director of the USC Aiken Social Sciences and Business Research Laboratory. They worked under the direction of Ms. Shick in performing the interviews. The students who performed the interviews in this survey were Demetrius Abraham, Casey Calhoun, Mark Davis, Billy Deese, Demetrick Drumming, Mary Gordon, Justin Heyward, Tiffany Hill, Allison Hinkle, Latoya Jackson, Tiffany Layne, Kayla Ott, Mona Rosales, Kim Rutland, Mamadou Samba, Arnisha Seaward, Allen Simmons, Carrie Soule, Joe Thompson, Michael Toole, and Mebane Youmans. Ms. Christy Randall, a former USCA student with extensive interviewing experience, rendered valuable additional assistance in completing the survey.

### **Top Issues for 2004 Election**

A series of questions asked residents about issues they felt would be important in the upcoming presidential election next year. Specifically they were asked “how important the candidates’ positions on that issue will be in influencing your vote for president.” This series of questions were identical to questions asked to a national sample a few weeks prior to the survey by the Gallup Organization. The chart below compares opinion in Aiken County to that of the nation, based on the percentage saying each issue was “extremely important.”

| <b>Issue</b>       | <b>Aiken County % Extremely Important</b> | <b>National % Extremely Important</b> |
|--------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Terrorism          | 58%                                       | 49%                                   |
| Education          | 56%                                       | 45%                                   |
| Situation in Iraq  | 54%                                       | 46%                                   |
| Health Care        | 50%                                       | 43%                                   |
| Economy            | 47%                                       | 49%                                   |
| Social Security    | 43%                                       | 36%                                   |
| Budget Deficit     | 26%                                       | 39%                                   |
| Environment        | 25%                                       | 30%                                   |
| Gay/lesbian Policy | 13%                                       | 12%                                   |

The most important issues in both Aiken County and the nation are related to the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism. However, among Aiken county residents, the importance of education issues is relatively higher than it is among national voters. Although this question was about the presidential election, the high importance of education could be of some benefit to State School Superintendent Inez Tannenbaum in the open seat race for U.S. Senate next fall. The issue of policies on gays and lesbians would seem to help the conservative incumbent President Bush and hurt liberal Democrat Howard Dean, if he is the Democratic nominee. However, this issue seems to be low on the radar screen of most Aiken County residents.

### Presidential Job Approval Ratings

President Bush's job approval ratings jumped after the events on September 11, 2001. Our countywide survey a few weeks later reflected these high ratings. However, just as the President's ratings have fallen nationally, they have also fallen in Aiken County over the last two years. Below are the approval ratings for both 2001 and 2003.

Question: Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as President?

|                           | <u>2001 (Freq.)</u> | <u>2003 (Freq.)</u> |
|---------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Approve                   | 83% (193)           | 59% (267)           |
| Mixed Feelings/Don't Know | 10% (26)            | 16% (73)            |
| Disapprove                | 6% (14)             | 25% (115)           |
|                           | <u>99% (233)</u>    | <u>100% (455)</u>   |

While approval ratings have fallen over the last few years, the President remains quite popular in the minds of most Aiken County residents. According to the Gallup Organization website, the President had job approval ratings of 50% in early November nationally, somewhat lower than in Aiken County. Of course, the high ratings in Aiken County are strongly related to the heavy Republican identification across the county. Almost half the county residents identify themselves as Republican and nearly nine in ten of these give the President high job approval ratings.

### The Iraq War

We asked residents about the war in Iraq with the following question. "All in all, do you think the situation in Iraq was worth going to war over, or not?" The chart below compares Aiken County residents' opinions on this question to

the opinions of the nation in a Gallup Survey performed in early November using the identical question.

|               | <u>Aiken County % (freq)</u> | <u>National %</u> |
|---------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Not worth war | 36% (159)                    | 44%               |
| Worth war     | 62% (274)                    | 54%               |
| No opinion    | 2% (7)                       | 2%                |

Opposition to the war was higher among Democrats, women, youth, and especially among minorities in Aiken County. Compared to the nation, county residents are relatively more supportive. As in the case of Presidential job approval, perceptions are colored by partisan identification, which acts as a psychological filter for most citizens.

### **Following Events: Reading Newspapers**

Over the years we have tracked newspaper reading among county residents. Reading the newspaper provides greater depth in understanding than merely following headlines and breaking news through television. We asked the following question to determine how frequently people were reading daily newspapers. The same question was asked in countywide general population surveys in 2001 and in 1999. The figures for all these surveys are shown below.

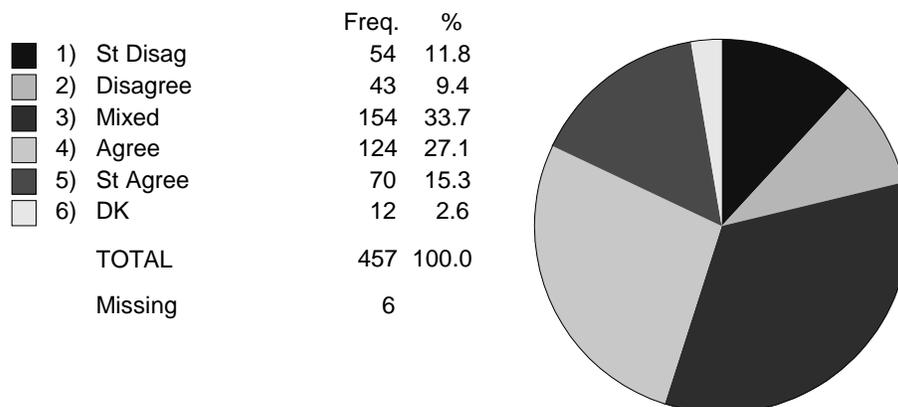
Question: How many days in the past week did you read the news (paper or electronic)?

|            | <u>2003 (Freq)</u> | <u>2001 (Freq.)</u> | <u>1999 (Freq)</u> |
|------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| None       | 12% (54)           | 11% (24)            | 18% (36)           |
| One Day    | 7% (32)            | 6% (14)             | 12% (23)           |
| Two Days   | 8% (34)            | 7% (17)             | 11% (22)           |
| Three Days | 12% (54)           | 6% (13)             | 10% (20)           |
| Four Days  | 6% (27)            | 5% (12)             | 5% (10)            |
| Five Days  | 6% (29)            | 8% (19)             | 4% (7)             |
| Six Days   | 2% (8)             | 4% (9)              | 1% (1)             |
| Seven Days | 48% (218)          | 53% (121)           | 41% (81)           |
|            | 100% (456)         | 100% (229)          | 100% (200)         |

Some researchers noted that newspaper reading jumped temporarily following the events of 11 September 2001. We can certainly see an increase in the 2001 figures, which were taken just a few weeks after the attacks. While the reading rates have declined somewhat since then, they remain somewhat higher than there were in 1999. Of course, the figures should be taken with a grain of salt as a significant percentage of people will give the socially desirable answer to an interviewer. But if overestimates remain constant, then we can see some increase in reading over the last four years.

### The Lottery

We asked residents whether if they agreed with the statement that “the lottery is good for South Carolina.” The graphic below shows how residents responded to this question.



Collapsing all the agrees and disagrees, we see about a two to one ratio of those who feel it has been good to those who feel it has not been good. About 21% feel the lottery has not been good for the state, 42% feel that it has been good, and a little more than a third either have mixed feelings or no opinion on the question. Those most likely to disapprove were white self-identified religious fundamentalists and older residents.

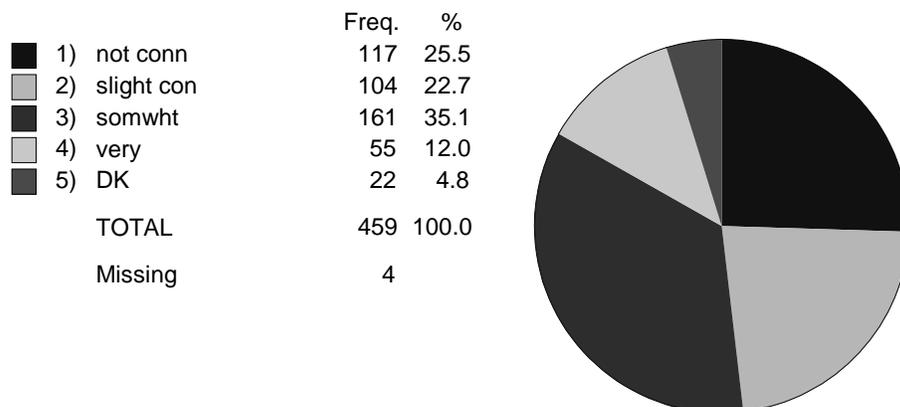
We also asked residents how often they buy tickets. The graphic below shows how residents reported their lottery ticket buying patterns.

|                  |           |
|------------------|-----------|
| Never            | 51% (234) |
| Every few months | 25% (113) |
| Monthly          | 16% (73)  |
| Weekly           | 4% (18)   |
| More than weekly | 5% (21)   |

What is most striking about the pattern in buying tickets is that the overwhelming majority of residents rarely if ever buy tickets. If the pattern in Aiken holds state wide, then the money the state raises from the lottery program is disproportionately from a relatively small proportion of residents. Who are these most frequent buyers? They are more likely to be males and African-Americans. However, we found no statistically significant differences in education or in family incomes in comparing frequent ticket buyers to less frequent buyers.

## Social Capital

An area of significant interest to social scientists in recent years involves the concept of “social capital.” The concept refers to the extent to which people are interconnected with each other in their daily lives. Researchers have found that communities with higher levels of these connections tend to have a host of other indicators with positive ratings. In short, people are healthier and happier in communities with high levels of social capital. This year we asked a self-evaluative question on social capital, “ How well-connected do you feel to others in the Aiken County community through memberships in organizations, groups, and clubs?” In the graphic below is the distribution of answers residents gave to this question. In the years to come we shall track this important social indicator.



While we can make no comparisons or look at trends, we can discuss what this may mean and examine the distribution of social capital among residents. One in four residents do not feel connected to the community in which they live at all. This in and of itself should be a cause of some concern. At the other extreme, only about one in eight feel very well connected to the community. Those who are least likely to feel connected are African-Americans, males, the young, those in lower income families, infrequent newspaper readers, and the less well educated. Several students in the class did more detailed studies on this particular question that hopefully will be published in the months to come.