

Public Opinion in Aiken County: Fall 2005

**A Public Service Report
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**All conclusions in this report are solely those of the authors
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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 27 questions covering a wide range of opinions and identifications as well as demographic information. The focus of the survey was on the reaction of Aiken County citizens to important national issues, such as President George W. Bush's approval rating and the conflict in Iraq, as well as state issues concerning Governor Sanford's approval rating and subsequent ratings on South Carolina's economy, the improvement of education, the operation of state government, and tax reform. The report that follows focuses on these national and state questions as well as a few questions on matters of local interest to Aiken County.

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Methodology

The population for this survey was all adults (at least 18 year of age) in Aiken County who have telephones in their homes and who were at home when called. The interviews were conducted over a three-week period between October 18 and November 6, 2005. 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. In order to maximize the chance of contacting people who were rarely at home, 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. 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. 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 56%, which is acceptable for telephone surveys. What this means is that for every 10 individuals who have telephones in their homes and who were at home when called, almost 6 of those individuals completed the interview.

Because the procedures used to produce the sample approximates a simple random sample of all registered voters, we can estimate the maximum sampling error that should result in any given question. The sampling error on any question that includes all 412 people in the sample is no more than 5% 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 the sampling error for any given question.

Note in reading the tables that percentages do not always add to 100% because of rounding to the nearest whole percentage point.

The survey was conducted by USCA students who were trained in survey research techniques by Dr. Robert E. Botsch. They worked under the direction of Ms. Lauren K. Eidson, Director of the USCA SSBRL. The students who were involved in the survey were Shana Barrera, Kenny Burr, Matthew Cromer, Julie Duncan, Brandy Graff, Paul Hampton, Nina Hazen, Bobby Lott, Randy Lucas, Rollie Martinson, Derrick McLane, Darya McMurtrie, Jamal Miller, Jacob Miniard, Michael O’Leary, Justin Ridge, Benjamin Smiley, Afton Walters, and Adam Wise. Ms. Christy Randall, a former USCA student with extensive interviewing experience, rendered additional assistance in completing the survey.

Presidential Job Approval Ratings

Many national surveys have indicated that the Iraq War and the general level of trust in the administration continue to have an impact on President Bush’s job approval ratings. We asked the following question to see how he compared in Aiken County. We compared our data with PEW Research Center’s national poll, conducted November 3-6, 2005.

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

	<u>Aiken Co.</u>	<u>National (PEW Poll)</u>
Approve	47%	36%
Mix Feelings/Not Sure	14%	9%
Disapprove	<u>39%</u>	<u>55%</u>
	100%	100%

Trends in President’s approval rating in Aiken County, 2001-2005:

	<u>2001</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2005</u>
Approve	83%	59%	47%
Mixed Feelings/Don’t Know	10%	16%	14%
Disapprove	<u>6%</u>	<u>25%</u>	<u>39%</u>
	99%	100%	100%

Comments:

President George W. Bush has higher job approval ratings in Aiken County than he does in the nation as a whole. However, as the war in Iraq has dragged on and as national polls show a decline in his approval ratings, we also see a decline in Aiken County, dropping 36 percentage points from his 2001 approval rating, which came only about a month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Citizens in both Aiken and the nation have concerns regarding how the president has handled the Iraq conflict (see below) as well as other recent disasters.

Partisanship makes a major difference in job approval ratings. The president does relatively better in Aiken County than nationally largely because Aiken County has a far higher proportion of Republicans than the nation as a whole. Among Aiken County Republicans, 72% approve of Bush's performance, but approval ratings are only at 33% among independents and 10% among Democrats.

The War in Iraq

Many national surveys show that a majority of Americans no longer approve of the war in Iraq. We asked Aiken county residents their feelings about the war.

Question: All in all, do you think the situation in Iraq was worth going to war over, or not?

Not Worth	42%
Worth	52%
Not Sure	<u>6%</u>
	100%

Comments: Since at least the spring of 2005, a majority of Americans have been telling pollsters that the Iraq war was "not worth going to war." However, in Aiken County a majority of residents still support the war, though it is not a very strong majority. Views on the war are strongly related to views on President Bush's job performance. Nearly eight in ten who support the war also approve of the president's performance, and by the same ratio, those who feel going to war was not justified disapprove of the president's performance.

Governor's Job Approval Rating

Similar to our question regarding President Bush's job performance, we asked Aiken County residents to share their thoughts on how Governor Sanford has handled his job so far. In addition, we thought it only fair to ask residents to grade the governor on areas of the state that he said he wanted to improve, such as the state's economy, education, the operation of state government, and tax reform.

Question: Do you approve or disapprove of the way Mark Sanford is handling his job as Governor?

	<u>Governor Sanford Ratings</u>
<i>Approve</i>	54%
<i>Disapprove</i>	17%
<i>Mixed Feelings/Don't Know</i>	<u>29%</u>
	100%

Following the general job approval ratings, we asked Aiken County residents a series of questions about his performance in four areas in which he had promised to improve the state. Residents were asked to give him a letter grade in each area. We have grouped together the A's and B's and the D's and F's in the table below. The percentages do not add to 100% because of those who said they "did not know."

<u>Area:</u>	<u>A-B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D-F</u>
Improving the state's economy:	32%	44%	13%
Improving education:	30%	35%	22%
Improving operation of government:	33%	34%	13%
Bringing about tax reform:	21%	37%	19%

In addition, we asked residents an open-ended question to identify what is in their mind the single most important issue the state needs to address. Answers were grouped together by subject area.

Question: What would you say is the most important issue facing South Carolina that the state government should do something about?

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
<i>Education</i>	35%
<i>Jobs</i>	18%
<i>Taxes</i>	6%
<i>Health Care</i>	4%
<i>Gas Prices</i>	4%
<i>Roads</i>	4%
<i>Crime</i>	2%
<i>Don't Know</i>	14%
<i>Misc.</i>	<u>14%</u>
	101%

Comments:

The governor's job approval ratings are higher than those for President Bush and are above the 50% mark that candidates would like as a minimum when they run for re-election. However, as was the case for the President, Governor Sanford's ratings are largely a function of having been measured in a strongly Republican county. His ratings were below the 50% mark among independents and Democrats. Moreover, when we look at the specific issue areas that the governor has identified as his own priorities, his grades are not as high as he might like. The governor seems to be passing with mainly a "gentleman's C" in all areas. He never gets more than a third of all residents giving him a grade of A or B in any area. Moreover, improving education is clearly the most important issue identified by residents of the county, and this is the area where the governor has the most D's and F's.

Trial Heat between Governor Sanford and Senator Tommy Moore

Because Aiken County's Senator Tommy Moore is running for the Democratic nomination for next year's gubernatorial race and is considered by many observers to be the front running candidate to win the nomination, we asked how Aiken County residents would vote if he were to be the candidate. We used the standard trial heat question national pollsters use and also included party identifications because party identification will be on the ballot when the election does take place. Because race plays a significant role in candidate choice, we adjusted the sample in this particular analysis to make sure that the proportions of whites and blacks reflected the county's population. This adjustment is called "weighting." Our raw sample had about 15% black, and the county population is 25% black. After weighting, the sample matched the county in terms of ethnic composition. Percentages do not add to 100% because of rounding.

Question: Suppose the election for South Carolina's governor were held today and Republican Mark Sanford was running against Democrat Tommy Moore. For whom do you think you would vote?

Moore	37%
Sanford	36%
Undecided	<u>28%</u>
	101%

Comments: If the election were held today and all adult residents voted, it would be a statistical dead heat (remembering that the sampling error is plus or minus five percentage points) with the undecided voters determining the outcome. In short, the race in Aiken County is up for grabs at this early date.

Supporters for each side can have something positive to take from this. On the Sanford side, to be running even with Moore in his home county (even though only a

portion of the county is in his state senate district) certainly seems like a good omen. On the other side, Moore supporters can feel that to be running even with an incumbent Republican governor in one of the most Republican counties in the state is a positive sign.

As is usually the case in elections, whichever side gets more of their supporters to the polls (because less than a majority of potentially eligible adults will probably vote) and how the undecided voters split will ultimately determine the outcome both in Aiken and in the rest of the state.

Following Events: Reading Newspapers

Over the years, we have tracked newspaper reading among county residents. One possible impact of the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001 and the Iraq War is that people may have begun to follow the news in greater depth. Reading the newspaper provides a deeper 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 the 1999, 2001 and 2003 general population surveys of Aiken County residents. The figures for all surveys are shown below. Totals do not always add to 100% because of rounding error.

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

# of Days	1999	2001	2003	2005
None	18%	11%	12%	12%
One Day	12%	6%	7%	7%
Two Days	11%	7%	8%	9%
Three Days	10%	6%	12%	9%
Four Days	5%	5%	6%	5%
Five Days	4%	8%	6%	5%
Six Days	1%	4%	2%	2%
Seven Days	41%	53%	48%	50%
Totals:	102%	100%	101%	99%

Comments:

The number of Aiken County residents who say they obtain news through the newspaper shifted up between 1999 and 2001. Where we see this shift is in the 12 percentage point increase in those who report reading the paper each day in the previous week. That increase seems to have slightly decreased in subsequent years, but it is still significantly higher than before 9/11/2001.

Local Issues

In addition to the national and state questions, we asked the citizens two local issues questions that could affect Aiken County, the building of a new power generating reactor at SRS and county adoption of a stronger animal control law that emphasizes licensing and spay/neuter incentives. The city of Aiken recently adopted such an ordinance.

Question: Some people want to build a new nuclear reactor at the Savannah River Site to generate electricity. Do you oppose or support that idea?

Support	63%
Oppose	12%
Not Sure	<u>25%</u>
	100%

Question: Each year about 6,000 unwanted dogs and cats are killed in Aiken County. The City of Aiken is trying to reduce this number by an aggressive licensing and spay/neuter program. Would you oppose or favor the county adopting such a program?

Support	75%
Oppose	12%
Mixed Feelings	<u>13%</u>
	100%

Comments:

Residents of Aiken County strongly support both measures. Strong local support is often a factor in locating nuclear projects because of the controversy that often surrounds such projects.

For any animal control ordinance to be effective, it would need to cover the county as well as the city because animals often do not stay on one side of any governmental border. When presented in the context of the numbers of animals that we are destroying at taxpayer expense each year, citizens seem overwhelming supportive of the kind of aggressive program that the city of Aiken has adopted.