

Public Opinion in Aiken County: Fall 2007

**A Public Service Report
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**All conclusions in this report are solely those of the authors
and do not represent any position or opinion of the University of South
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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. These surveys have been performed since the 1980s.

The survey consisted of 37 questions covering a wide range of opinions and identifications as well as demographic information. The survey focused on the reaction of Aiken County citizens to important national issues, such as President George W. Bush's approval rating, the conflict in Iraq, the upcoming presidential primaries, and immigration. It included state issues such as status of the Confederate Battle Flag. It also included basic political orientations such as partisan identification. Students will be doing detailed research reports in the weeks to come seeking to explain interrelationships among these questions. This report highlights some of the areas that might be of interest to local citizens.

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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 25 and November 11, 2007. 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 53%, which is acceptable for telephone surveys. What this means is that for every 10 individuals contacted, a little more than half

of those individuals completed the interview. This is typical of the response rates for telephone surveys done today.

Because the procedures used to produce the sample approximates a random sample of all residents, we can estimate the maximum sampling error that should result in any given question. The sampling error on any question that includes all 424 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. Christy Randall, who has managed several studies in the lab. She was assisted by Ms. Lauren K. Eidson, a former USCA student who has also directed several studies at the lab. The students who were involved in the survey were Domonique Brown, Andrew Carson, Xavier de Jesus, Andrew Doran, Amber Driggers, Chauncey Gary, Christie Hightower, Holly Hutchins, Warren Knightner, Ronnie Kolev, Patrick Long, Keith Simms, Chris Skeen, Lyle Todd, and Erica Wilson.

Findings

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 President Bush is faring in Aiken County. Also shown are the ratings in a USA Today/Gallup question asked in the same time period

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

	<u>Aiken Co.</u>	<u>USA Today/Gallup</u>
Approve	40%	31%
Mix Feelings/Not Sure	13%	5%
Disapprove	<u>47%</u>	<u>64%</u>
	100%	100%

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

	<u>2001</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2007</u>
Approve	83%	59%	47%	40%
Mixed Feelings/Don't Know	10%	16%	14%	13%
Disapprove	6%	25%	39%	47%
	99%	100%	100%	100%

Comments:

President George W. Bush has somewhat less negative job approval ratings in Aiken County than he does in the nation as a whole. However, even in Aiken County, President Bush's job approval ratings have slipped dramatically over the last several years. As the war in Iraq has dragged on, job approval ratings have been dragged down. President Bush has dropped 43 percentage points from his 2001 approval rating, which came only about a month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Since then citizens in Aiken County have had growing concerns regarding how the president has handled the Iraq conflict (see below).

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, 66% approve of Bush's performance, but approval ratings are only at 34% among independents and 11% 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 with a standard question used in many national surveys.

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

	<u>Aiken Co.</u>	<u>Nation (ABC/Wash Post Poll – 9/07)</u>
Not Worth	55%	59%
Worth	38%	38%
Not Sure	<u>8%</u>	<u>3%</u>
	101%	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.” Now a majority of Aiken County residents do not support the war, though it is not a very strong majority. Views on the war are strikingly similar to a national survey using a nearly identical question that was performed about a month before the Aiken County survey.

Views on the war are strongly related to views on President Bush’s job performance. A little over seven out of ten who support the war also approve of the president’s performance, and nine out of ten of those who feel going to war was not justified disapprove of the president’s performance.

Democrat and Republican Presidential Primaries

Because both the Democrats and Republicans are holding their primaries in January 2008, we asked Aiken County residents whether they would vote in the primary, which primary they thought they would vote in, and finally their voting choice in each of the primaries.

Question: As you may have heard, both the Democrats and Republicans are holding presidential primaries in South Carolina in early 2008. Do you plan to vote in one of the primaries, and if so, which one will you vote in?

<i>Democrat</i>	32%
<i>Republican</i>	35%
<i>Not Sure</i>	18%
<i>Not Vote</i>	<u>15%</u>
	100%

Comments:

In a heavily Republican County where Democratic identifiers are outnumbered by Republican 36% to 44%, the Democratic primary attracts nearly as much interest as the Republican primary (32% versus 35% saying they will vote in these respective primaries). Nearly one in five (18%) said they were not sure which primary they would vote in.

We cannot assume that people will actually vote even though they say they will. Turnout in primaries are generally well under 30% of the potentially eligible population, so the actual percentage who will not vote will be far more than the reported 15%. Survey questions are often skewed by a "good intentions" factor. Republicans generally turn out to vote more than Democrats, so we would expect that the actual difference in the two primaries will be larger in January than we saw in our survey. But at this point, for such a Republican county, residents seem unusually interested in the Democratic primary.

Question: [If Democrat] Which one of these candidates would you vote for?

Hillary Clinton	35%
John Edwards	16%
Barack Obama	23%
Bill Richardson	2%
Other Candidate	3%
Undecided	<u>24%</u>
	103%

Comments:

These numbers include only those who said they would vote in the Democratic primary. We did allow those who said they were “not sure” to make a choice in both primaries, but we did not include them in this analysis because that would in effect give them two votes. Furthermore, they are unlikely to vote.

Senator Clinton appears to have a comfortable lead in Aiken County. A major question for Clinton’s campaign is whether her support is broadly based or narrowly based. Can she appeal to independents and weaker Democrats as well as to strong Democrats, to both men and women, and to both whites and blacks? In fact, her support is broadly based. Her support is nearly the same among men and women, whites and blacks, strong Democrats, weaker Democrats and independents. Of course, this does not mean that Clinton will win the most votes in the primary in January. The key in the primary, as in all contests with relatively low turnout, is who gets more of their supporters to the polls. Candidates who are not showing up in the polls can do quite well if they mobilize almost all of their supporters on primary day.

Question: [If Republican] Which one of these candidates would you vote for?

Rudi Giuliani	16%
Mike Huckabee	8%
John McCain	11%
Mitt Romney	8%
Fred Thompson	15%
Other Candidate	4%
Undecided	<u>37%</u>
	99%

Comments:

If the election were held today and all adult residents voted, the Republican primary would be a statistical dead heat (remembering that the sampling error is plus or minus five percentage points). Undecided voters will determine the outcome. The Republican presidential primary in Aiken County is up for grabs

two months before the primary. As was the case with the Democratic primary, the final result will rest on turnout.

Of particular interest in the Republican primary are Christian fundamentalist voters. They comprise 56% of those who say they will vote in the Republican primary. They are split over whom they think they will support, dividing rather evenly among Giuliani, McCain, and Thompson at about 13% each. Baptist minister Mike Huckabee is at 8%. Mitt Romney is at 5% among fundamentalists. One would suspect that Romney's Mormon faith is hurting him among these voters. Fundamentalists are even more uncertain than Republicans as a whole, with 40% saying they are undecided.

Party Identification

We asked each respondent about their party identification, just as we have been asking since the early 1980s. Here is the breakdown in late 2007.

<i>Democrats</i>	36%
<i>independents</i>	19%
<i>Republicans</i>	43%
<i>other</i>	<u>2%</u>
	100%

Comments.

We know from previous surveys that Republicans became the plurality party in Aiken County in the late 1980s, during the latter part of the Reagan years. The success or failure of presidents has a slow but certain effect on partisan identification. Most of any shift takes place among younger adults who are molding their partisan identifications as they become more politically aware in their late teens up until their mid twenties. As people move into their late twenties, the identifications they form usually stay with them for the rest of their lives. So it is critical for the long term success of any party to have presidents perceived as successful

Such is not the case with President George W. Bush. We have already examined the dramatic fall in his approval ratings and in support for the war in Iraq, which is clearly linked to presidential performance. That has been a damper on young people identifying with the Republican Party in Aiken County. We began seeing a hint of this a few years ago in earlier surveys, but now the trend is clear. If we look at those under 30 years of age, Democratic identifiers actually outnumber Republican identifiers 52% to 38%. Over the age of 30, Republicans have a 10 percentage point advantage.

If the Democrats win the 2008 election and if that president is perceived to have two successful terms in office, by 2016 Democrats might once again become competitive in elections in Aiken County. Those are two big “ifs.” Nevertheless, what happens to the identifications of young people as they enter the electorate in the next decade and replace heavily Republican older voters will be critical for the fortunes of both political parties.

Immigration

Immigration is a hot topic in the presidential primaries and also affects all levels of government. We replicated a series of eleven questions tapping attitudes toward immigration that had been asked in a 2006 state-wide Georgia survey. The questions formed a compound measure that includes many dimensions of attitudes about immigration, such as perceptions about whether immigration has been good or bad in the past and today, the impact of immigration on crime, the impact on jobs, the impact on demand for public assistance, and feelings about hearing Spanish spoken or written in signs and advertisements. Below are the results for one key question in the measure and the overall results of the compound measure for both Aiken County and Georgia.

Question: In your view should immigration be kept at its present level, increased, or decreased?

	<u>Aiken County</u>	<u>Georgia (2006)</u>
Decreased	60%	48%
Kept at present level	30%	32%
Increased	<u>11%</u>	<u>11%</u>
	101%	91%*

*Note: * the remaining 9% were not sure*

Compound measure: the scale runs from -18 to +18 with the minus side representing negative attitudes toward immigration and the positive side being positive attitudes toward immigration.

	<u>Aiken County</u>	<u>Georgia (2006)</u>
Negative attitudes	54%	47%
Neutral attitudes	4%	5%
Positive attitudes	<u>42%</u>	<u>47%</u>
	100%	100%

Comments:

Attitudes toward immigration in Aiken County in late 2007 are similar to those found in Georgia in 2006, but somewhat more negative. While attitudes are clearly divided, the majority in Aiken County are more negative than positive on immigration.

Both political parties are split on attitudes toward immigration, with Republicans being slightly more negative than Democrats, though members of both parties are overall on the negative side. Independents are also negative in their attitudes, fitting in between Democrats and Republicans.

We found a more important difference between whites and blacks, with blacks having a slightly positive attitude toward immigrants and whites having negative attitudes. Among whites, those considering themselves “native southerners” were far more negative in attitudes than those who were either “converted southerners” or “non-southern” in their regional self-identification. Anti-immigrant nativist attitudes are far more likely to be found among whites who consider themselves native to the region. They seem most likely to feel their culture is under threat from newcomers.

The Confederate Flag

We asked a question about whether the Confederate battle flag should be removed from the state house grounds, where it now flies after having been removed from the top of the capitol dome. This issue continues to be a topic of discussion in the state.

Question: There has been more talk in recent months about the flying of the Confederate Battle Flag on the statehouse grounds in Columbia. Do you think it should be kept there or should it be removed?

<i>Kept there</i>	52%
<i>Mixed feelings</i>	9%
<i>Removed</i>	32%
<i>Don't know</i>	<u>7%</u>
	100%

Comments:

Most residents of Aiken County seem satisfied with the compromise in 2000 that removed the flag from the dome and moved it to the Confederate soldier's memorial in front of the statehouse. However about a third of residents feel it should be completely removed. Not surprisingly, this division is along racial lines.

Two thirds of the African-Americans in the survey want the flag removed, while only one in five whites supported removal.

Among whites, a clear division exists along lines of regional self-identification. Self-identified Southerners are most likely to want to keep the flag where it is (71%). Those identifying themselves as “converted southerners” are the next most likely (63%). But only a minority of non-southerners and those with some other regional identification want to keep the flag flying (32%).