

## So what do folks think?

Periodically we survey to see how Montana voters view our issues, and we compare their responses over time.

At the end of October 2005, we polled state-wide 602 likely voters. Harstad Strategic Research, Denver, CO, conducted our poll.

We do not construct our agenda and advocate for our members based on polls. And poll results, especially regarding political figures, can change dramatically.

With that in mind, the findings of this poll were generally positive for our members and issues, but respondents were at times inconsistent and sometimes they sent sobering messages.

So what were some of the key results of our latest poll? (Remember: no one is authorized to kill the messenger!)

Respondents were evenly split on issues we asked them to prioritize: maintaining quality public schools (25%), creating jobs (25%), improving access to affordable health care (23%), and holding down taxes (22%).

72% of respondents rated our public colleges and universities excellent or good.

60% of respondents rated the performance of state government employees excellent or good. This is a significant increase over our 2003 poll. We believe our Work That Matters campaign has made a difference.

After that, excellent and good ratings declined precipitously. 40% rated the state legislature's funding of state employee salaries and benefits excellent or good; 44% rated the legislature only fair or poor in this regard.

**School funding.** Voters have real concerns about how the governor and legislature are handling school funding.

39% rated Governor Brian Schweitzer's efforts to provide adequate funding for k-12 public schools excellent or good; 38% rated the governor's efforts only fair or poor.

Just 35% of respondents rated the legislature's work in providing k-12 public school funding excellent or good; 56% said only fair or poor.

It will be interesting to see how or if these last two opinions change as a result of the school funding special session.

When it comes to who respondents trust most when hearing about public school funding, public school teachers led the pack, as they have for years. We know from other polling that people overwhelmingly respect teachers and trust their opinions on a wide variety of issues.

Here's how the ranking went in terms of trust on school funding: public school teachers (63%), Montana PTA (55%), Governor Brian Schweitzer (49%), and state legislature (31%).

40% indicated they were suspicious of the legislature on the issue of school funding—by far the worst score respondents gave any of the above.

A huge majority, 82%, said it's important for the legislature to consider the views of teachers, school board members, and superintendents when making school funding decisions.

**School funding vs. no-new-taxes.** We asked: "Suppose there were two candidates running for state legislature. One pledged to no-new-taxes and the other pledged to invest more state funds in public schools. Which one of these candidates would you be more likely to vote for?"

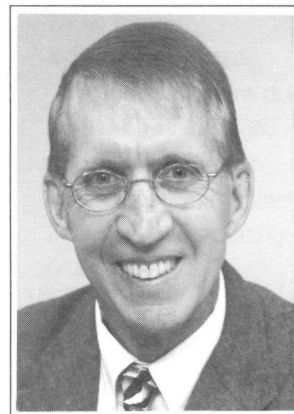
A decisive 56% of all voters chose the candidate who would invest more state funds in public schools.

We asked: "Should state spending for k-12 public schools be increased, kept the same, or decreased?" 55% would increase state funding, 34% keep it the same, 5% would decrease it.

And whereas a whopping 66% of poll respondents favored raising taxes to better fund k-12 public schools, when asked about revenue sources—something other than a specifically selective sales or user tax—respondents were less than enthusiastic. Respondents gave precious little support for a general sales tax, state income tax increase, or increases in local property taxes.

Enough said. Clearly the governor and legislature have plenty of work ahead of them to restore at least in part the millions of dollars in revenue recent Republican-dominated legislatures cut in business equipment and capital gains taxes.

The revenue won't be restored in this special session. But it must happen sooner than later if this state really intends to adequately fund public schools and public services. ■



BY ERIC FEAVER  
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**'56% of all voters chose the candidate who would invest more state funds in public schools over the one who pledged to no-new-taxes.'**