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STATE POLITICS AND THE FISCAL SITUATION
by G. Donald Ferree, Jr.

Governor Doyle's job ratings might fairly be called moderate. Overall, those who are willing to rate his performance in office split roughly evenly between those who call it excellent (7%) or good (31%) versus those labeling it as fair (31%) or poor (10%). Compared to last month (shown in a separate table following this summary), this shows an increase in the proportion prepared to rate him, a slight downward trend among those who do overall, and a greater tendency than earlier seen to go to the "extremes" (excellent or poor) as opposed to the middle ratings (good or fair).

Democrats are more upbeat than Republicans. Just under six in ten rate him good or better among the former, compared to just over one in three among the latter, but this is not as much partisan differentiation as one often sees. There is some tendency for views of Doyle to become more positive on balance as one moves up the age ladder, but these differences are scarcely overwhelming.

Clearly, the fiscal situation dominates the state agenda, and Wisconsin residents split pretty evenly on whether "Doyle will be able to solve Wisconsin's budget problems". Roughly evenly sized groups say he will (41%) as say he won't (39%) with a further one in ten (9%) volunteering that he will help reduce them but not solve them. The overall results are little changed since the last poll, conducted just before his budget message. That, in turn showed some increase in optimism from the January reading close upon his entry into office.

Belief that Doyle will solve the problem is nowhere very strong, but older respondents are modestly more hopeful than younger ones, and Democrats are on balance somewhat more positive than Republicans, but Independents are least hopeful. Among the groups examined, the biggest distinction is between men (who feel by four to three that he will) and women (a plurality of whom think he will not). As noted, however, it is striking both how split the overall result is, and how little groups differ among themselves.

Doyle has repeatedly promised not to raise taxes, although his plan does call for a number of fees to be increased to "enhance revenue". The expectation of residents overall, in any event is that their wallets will be tapped one way or the other, to some extent. Specifically, when asked what they expect to happen to what the state "charges for things like licenses, permits, and user fees", one quarter (26%) think what they pay will go up a lot. Adding in the more than six in ten (62%) who expect it to go up some accounts for nearly nine residents in every ten. Only a handful expect what they pay for such things to go down.

This sentiment is quite widespread across groups, and little changed from last month.

Turning explicitly to taxes, despite the Governor's promise, there is clearly a sense among many that taxes will go up. Overall, roughly two thirds think what they pay in state taxes will go up (8% a lot, 56% some), with almost all the remainder (32%) expecting them to stay the same. This is not to say that people WANT tax increases, merely that to some extent they are expecting what they pay to increase. Compared to February (which in turn was almost identical with January) results are generally similar. There is no evidence of an increase in expectation of higher taxes, but Doyle's message and the initial budget debate do not seem to have eradicated the expectation of increased levies either.

There are no sharp distinctions among gender, partisan, or age groups on this sense. "Some increase" seems by far the typical response of persons regardless of where they stand politically or socially.

As noted, expecting taxes to increase is one thing. Desiring this is quite another. Overall, six in ten residents (62%) describe "the level of state taxes in Wisconsin" as too high. Almost all the remainder say it is "about right". While there is evidence of discontent many places, Democrats are less likely to object than Republicans (one half of the former, but three quarters of the latter say taxes are too high). On the one hand, this is a clearer distinction than seen on some of the earlier questions, on the other hand, this is not a major partisan divide either. Older respondents are somewhat more likely to say taxes are too high than younger, do mostly to the fact that those in the very youngest age group are the only ones among whom a majority feels taxes are about right.

The other side of the coin, of course, is spending. Overall, six in ten (61%) call that "too high", with one in four (24%) feeling it is about right. The same party and age patterns, if more muted, are found for this question. Men (who were very similar to women as a group when it came to taxes) are somewhat more likely to feel spending is excessive.

Both of these questions have been tracked over time, going back to the first Badger Poll™ last March. Generally, there has been a slow decline in the proportion calling taxes too high (within a relatively narrow range). Attitudes to spending have moved (also within a narrow range) up and down, but for the past months have been close to one another.

A key question, when hard fiscal decisions are being made, is the degree to which the public feels difficult choices are necessary as opposed to hoping for quick fixes or painless choices like reducing waste and fraud while leaving programs intact. Overall, when respondents are asked if a choice must be made between service cuts and tax increases or whether it is possible "to both maintain essential services and keep taxes down", half (50%) say such a choice must be made. Four in ten (41%) do not believe it is necessary. With the exception of age, which shows a modestly growing tendency to believe in the seriousness of the situation as one moves up, group membership is not centrally related to positions here.

Looking across time, however, it seems that -- while there remain substantial doubts, residents have been coming to view the fiscal situation as more and more real. The present survey shows a modest plurality thinking that the choices are real. This is the first time that this has happened. That means that, while opinion has not yet reached the point where people will more comfortably address

unpleasant choices, convinced that they must be made, there is some evidence of movement in that direction.

One further measure of the fact that many would still hope for a short-term or limited "fix" is that the public does not really seem all that engaged in the debate so far. When asked how much attention they had been paying to "Governor Doyle's tax and spending plan", only one in six (16%) said "a lot". To be sure, almost half (44%) said "some", but this is scarcely a laser-like focus. One reason may be as noted, doubts that the situation really is as critical and long-term as many in government say. Another may be that other events, particularly in the international arena, are crowding out what might otherwise be a greater focus on state fiscal matters.

On balance, and taking into account the relatively low level of attention paid to the matter, the public seems favorably disposed (or, to put it another way, not mobilized against the proposal). Overall, more than six in ten said they favored the plan (16% strongly, 47% somewhat) while three in ten opposed it (23% somewhat, 10% strongly). As noted, this is not a ringing endorsement, and the public debate is just getting underway, but it represents an asset to the Governor, with people starting off with a relatively positive reception.

It is noteworthy, and perhaps a sign of the early stage of the discussion, that Republicans seem as favorably disposed to the plan in general as do Democrats, and indeed, once again except for age with modest increase in general support as one moves up, group differences are small to vanishing.

Three questions looked at major revenue sources (income, sales, and property taxes) and asked for each whether the state should shift its relative dependence on the tax. (This is not, strictly, a question whether any should move up or down in an absolute sense, but where increases would be more or less problematic or decreases more or less sought.

On balance, about half (47%) would leave dependence on the income tax about where it is. Those who would lessen it (27% somewhat, 12% much) outnumber those who would increase it (10% somewhat, 1% much) by about four to one. This tends to increase as one moves from Democrat to Republican on the partisan spectrum.

Ratings of Governor

	MAR03	FEB03	JAN03+	SPT02	JUN02	MAR02
Incumbent Governor Rating						
EXCELLENT	7%	5%	10%	5%	3%	3%
GOOD	36	34	44	29	32	23
FAIR	31	27	31	39	35	40
POOR	10	5	3	17	19	23
TOO SOON TO TELL (VOL)	10	22	n/a	2	4	4
DON'T KNOW	6	7	9	8	7	7
REFUSED	*	*	2	*	*	2

+Rating was of job Doyle was expected to do, previous were McCallum

About the same proportion overall is happy (or fails to express discontent) about the degree of reliance on the sales tax. Here, however, the balance among those desiring a change is different. Those who favor INCREASED reliance (26% somewhat, 5% more) outnumber those who would like to see the relative reliance

Short-Run Fiscal Expectations

	MAR03	FEB03	JAN03
Doyle and fiscal problem			
CAN SOLVE	41%	41%	25%
CAN'T SOLVE	39	40	54
HELP, NOT SOLVE (VOL.)	9	4	5
DON'T KNOW	11	14	15
REFUSED	*	1	1
Expectation for fees			
GO UP A LOT	26%	26%	
GO UP SOME	62	65	
STAY ABOUT THE SAME	10	7	
GO DOWN SOME	*	*	
GO DOWN A LOT	*	--	
DON'T KNOW	1	2	
REFUSED	--	--	
Expectation for own taxes			
GO UP A LOT	8%	12%	11%
GO UP SOME	56	57	57
STAY ABOUT THE SAME	32	28	24
GO DOWN SOME	1	1	3
GO DOWN A LOT	*	*	1
DON'T KNOW	3	2	3
REFUSED	*	--	1

on it reduced (12% somewhat, 5% much) by two to one, smaller in magnitude but in the opposite direction than was the case for the income tax. Partisan differences were relatively small.

Once again the largest single group (here some 43%) would not shift the relative emphasis on property taxes. But the balance, for those who would, is even more clear than was the case for the income tax. Fewer than one in ten would increase reliance on this levy (5% somewhat, 2% much). But half would lessen it (31% somewhat, 17% much). As one moves across the partisan spectrum, the degree of discontent with property taxes increases, but among all groups, the balance is clear.

One specific revenue enhancement in the Governor's plan hinges on compacts with the state's Indian tribes. Public opinion on what has become a contentious issue seems split. To begin with, when the plans are generally described, "deals with Indian tribes allowing them to expand their gambling and essentially making the arrangements permanent instead of expiring every few years, in exchange for a bigger cut of their gambling money for the state", half (52%) of residents favor the notion (note that specific money figures were not included), while almost as many (44%) say they oppose the deals.

This is something of a partisan issue. Democrats are onesidedly in favor (68%-27%) while self-described Republicans (46%-51%) and Independents (42%-53%) are narrowly opposed in principle, but this is certainly a far smaller partisan divide among the public than it is in the Legislature.

General Budget-Related Perceptions Across Time

	MAR03	FEB03	JAN03	SPT02	JUN02	MAR02
Current level of taxes						
TOO HIGH	62%	68%	71%	74%	77%	71%
TOO LOW	1	1	1	2	1	2
JUST ABOUT RIGHT	36	29	26	22	19	24
DEPENDS ON TAX (VOL.)	2	1	*	*	1	1
DON'T KNOW	1	1	1	2	2	2
REFUSED	--	--	1	--	*	*
Current level of spending						
TOO HIGH	61%	66%	63%	63%	58%	61%
TOO LOW	2	2	3	3	5	5
JUST ABOUT RIGHT	24	21	22	23	25	25
DEPENDS ON PROG. (VOL.)	4	2	3	2	3	5
DON'T KNOW	9	9	8	9	9	5
REFUSED	*	*	1	1	1	*
Serious budget choices						
HAVE TO CHOOSE	50%	46%	41%	30%	34%	28%
DOESN'T HAVE TO CHOOSE	41	42	46	56	55	56
SOME OF EACH (VOL.)	3	5	4	3	5	6
DON'T KNOW	4	6	9	10	6	8
REFUSED	1	1	1	1	--	2

When respondents were reminded that in the past, the compacts had been made just between the Governor and the tribes, there seems to be a fair amount of sympathy with the idea of broadening the approval process, "regardless of whether your favor or oppose the arrangement". Specifically, two thirds (68%) said the deals "should require a vote of the Legislature" while three in ten said this was "the sort of thing a Governor should be able to do by himself". This sentiment is modestly higher, but only modestly so, among Republicans than Democrats. So the general idea of Legislative approval gets a favorable response, and one somewhat less tempered than the general reception for the deals themselves.

On a related point, the public is split on whether or not gaming should be limited to Indians ("right now in Wisconsin and several other states, only Indian tribes are allowed to open casinos"). Half (50%) favor "keeping this limitation", while almost as many (46%) say "other people" should "be able to open casinos here". Sentiment is closely split in all groups save the oldest (those over sixty, which keeping the limitation achieves about a two to one advantage).

There seems, however, to be one exception at least. "Allowing things like video poker or slots in taverns and restaurants in Wisconsin if the people operating them paid a special fee to the state" garners backing by about three to two (58%-37%) overall. Men are more in favor than women, Republicans and Democrats as groups agree, while Independents are more closely divided. Approval tends to decline with age.

DOYLE07. And do you think your own state taxes next year will go up a lot, go up some, stay about the same, go down some, or go down a lot?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
GO UP A LOT	8%	9%	8%	9%	9%	6%	4%	12%	6%	10%
GO UP SOME	56	54	58	54	57	57	63	51	55	55
STAY ABOUT THE SAME	32	34	30	33	30	33	29	33	36	29
GO DOWN SOME	1	2	*	1	1	2	3	1	*	2
GO DOWN A LOT	*	--	*	1	--	--	--	--	1	--
DON'T KNOW	3	1	4	3	4	2	2	3	1	4
REFUSED	*	--	*	--	--	1	--	--	1	--

TAX01. Right now do you think the level of state taxes in Wisconsin is too high, too low, or just about right?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
TOO HIGH	62%	63%	60%	53%	64%	74%	31%	61%	70%	66%
TOO LOW	1	--	1	--	1	1	2	1	1	--
JUST ABOUT RIGHT	36	36	36	43	33	26	62	37	29	31
DEPENDS WHICH TAX(VOL)	2	1	2	3	2	--	2	1	1	3
DON'T KNOW	1	1	*	1	1	--	3	--	--	1
REFUSED	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

TAX02. How about the level of state spending, is that too high, too low, or just about right?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
TOO HIGH	61%	67%	56%	51%	67%	70%	49%	63%	61%	64%
TOO LOW	2	*	3	2	2	2	3	2	3	1
JUST ABOUT RIGHT	24	26	23	33	17	21	33	23	25	23
DEPENDS ON PROG.	4	2	5	6	5	1	1	4	4	6
DON'T KNOW	9	4	13	8	10	6	12	9	8	6
REFUSED	*	1	--	--	--	--	2	--	--	--

BUDG02. In order to balance the state budget, do you think a choice will have to be made between serious service cuts and big increases in taxes, or is it possible to both maintain essential services and keep taxes down?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
HAVE TO CHOOSE	50%	52%	49%	51%	50%	52%	41%	43%	55%	60%
DOESN'T HAVE TO CHOOSE	41	40	42	42	39	42	49	50	36	32
SOME OF EACH (VOL.)	3	4	2	2	5	3	2	3	5	2
DON'T KNOW	4	4	5	6	7	1	6	3	4	5
REFUSED	1	1	1	--	--	2	2	1	1	1

BUDG06. How much attention have you been paying to Governor Doyle's tax and spending plan? A lot, some, only a little, or not much at all?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
A LOT	16%	21%	11%	12%	24%	18%	3%	15%	18%	22%
SOME	44	43	46	51	39	45	40	36	54	47
ONLY A LITTLE	23	21	24	21	21	23	26	25	20	20
NOT MUCH AT ALL	16	14	18	16	13	14	26	23	9	10
DON'T KNOW	1	1	1	--	3	--	4	1	--	1
REFUSED	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

BUDG07. To make up the deficit, the Governor proposes holding taxes where they are, but sharply cutting a number of programs, eliminating more than 1000 state jobs, and counting on extra money from Indian gambling casinos and the Federal government. In general, do you strongly favor the plan, somewhat favor it, somewhat oppose it, or strongly oppose it?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
FAVOR STRONGLY	16%	17%	15%	12%	17%	21%	9%	16%	19%	16%
FAVOR SOMEWHAT	47	49	44	55	42	44	43	37	52	54
OPPOSE SOMEWHAT	23	20	27	22	27	18	31	27	19	19
OPPOSE STRONGLY	10	10	10	8	10	13	13	14	8	6
DON'T KNOW	4	4	4	3	4	4	1	6	2	5
REFUSED	1	1	*	--	--	1	2	1	--	--

TAXTYP01. Government in Wisconsin gets its money primarily from the state income tax, the sales tax, and the property tax. Compared to other taxes, would you like to see Wisconsin depend much more on the income tax than it now does, somewhat more, somewhat less, much less, or about the same?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MUCH MORE	1%	1%	1%	3%	--%	1%	--%	1%	--%	4%
SOMEWHAT MORE	10	13	7	11	11	8	9	12	7	13
SOMEWHAT LESS	27	26	29	27	26	29	29	29	25	21
MUCH LESS	12	12	12	7	14	17	8	14	15	9
ABOUT THE SAME	47	47	46	49	47	42	50	41	50	51
DEPENDS ON AREA (VOL.)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
DON'T KNOW	3	2	5	2	3	2	4	3	3	3
REFUSED	*	--	*	--	--	1	--	1	--	--

TAXTYP02. How about the sales tax. Should Wisconsin depend much more on that than it now does, somewhat more, somewhat less, much less, or about the same?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MUCH MORE	5%	6%	3%	5%	5%	7%	4%	7%	4%	4%
SOMEWHAT MORE	26	33	19	23	34	25	22	26	30	20
SOMEWHAT LESS	12	10	14	14	12	12	13	12	14	9
MUCH LESS	5	5	5	7	3	5	8	5	5	4
ABOUT THE SAME	50	43	57	50	44	51	48	47	46	60
DEPENDS ON AREA (VOL.)	1	1	1	*	3	--	--	1	1	1
DON'T KNOW	1	1	1	1	1	--	2	1	--	1
REFUSED	1	1	*	--	--	1	2	1	--	--

TAXTYP03. How about the property tax? (PROMPT FOR CATS AS NECESSARY)

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MUCH MORE	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%	3%	5%	2%	1%	--%
SOMEWHAT MORE	5	6	4	4	5	5	8	5	4	4
SOMEWHAT LESS	31	30	31	27	33	39	24	29	31	37
MUCH LESS	17	18	16	15	20	16	9	21	17	14
ABOUT THE SAME	43	40	45	52	38	33	43	40	46	43
DEPENDS ON AREA (VOL.)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
DON'T KNOW	3	2	3	1	3	3	9	2	1	1
REFUSED	1	1	*	--	--	1	2	1	--	--

CASIN06. Recently Governor Doyle has been making deals with Indian tribes allowing them to expand their gambling and essentially making the arrangements permanent instead of expiring every few years, in exchange for a bigger cut of their gambling money for the state. In general, do you favor or oppose these deals?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
FAVOR	52%	53%	51%	68%	42%	46%	67%	52%	54%	43%
OPPOSE	44	43	45	27	53	51	31	41	45	52
DON'T KNOW	4	3	4	4	4	3	2	6	1	5
REFUSED	1	*	1	*	1	1	--	1	1	1

CASIN07. In the past, the deals were made just between the Governor and the tribes. Regardless of whether you favor or oppose the arrangement, do you think they should require a vote of the Legislature, or is this the sort of thing a Governor should be able to do by himself?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
SHOULD HAVE BEEN VOTED	68%	69%	67%	62%	70%	75%	75%	72%	59%	70%
GOVERNOR CAN DO ALONE	29	30	27	33	27	24	22	25	37	27
DON'T KNOW	3	1	5	4	3	1	3	3	3	3
REFUSED	*	--	1	1	*	--	--	--	1	1

CASIN11. Right now in Wisconsin and several other states, only Indian tribes are allowed to open casinos. Do you favor keeping this limitation or should other people also be able to open casinos here?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
FAVOR LIMITATION	50%	50%	49%	54%	51%	48%	43%	42%	50%	63%
ALLOW OTHERS TO OPEN	46	48	44	44	42	46	53	54	45	33
DON'T KNOW	3	2	5	2	6	3	3	3	4	3
REFUSED	1	*	2	--	2	2	--	2	1	1

CASIN12. Would you favor or oppose allowing things like video poker or slots in taverns or restaurants in Wisconsin if the people operating them paid a special fee to the state?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
FAVOR ALLOW VIDEOGAMES	58%	64%	53%	60%	51%	59%	70%	65%	63%	40%
OPPOSE ALLOWING	37	32	42	36	45	36	27	33	34	52
DON'T KNOW	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	2	8
REFUSED	1	*	1	1	*	*	--	--	1	1

QD05. Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or something else?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
DEMOCRAT	34%	26%	41%	100%	--%	--%	39%	31%	32%	34%
REPUBLICAN	26	29	23	--	--	100	29	28	24	25
INDEPENDENT	26	33	20	--	100	--	16	23	29	33
OTHER	8	8	9	--	--	--	7	13	8	4
NONE	4	4	5	--	--	--	4	5	3	4
DON'T KNOW	1	*	1	--	--	--	3	--	1	--
REFUSED	1	1	1	--	--	--	2	*	1	1

QD11. In what year were you born? (ENTER FOUR-DIGIT YEAR) (Calculated and grouped as below)

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
18-29	13%	15%	12%	16%	8%	15%	100%	--%	--%	--%
30-44	30	29	31	28	26	33	--	100	--	--
45-59	31	30	31	30	34	28	--	--	100	--
60 and over	24	26	21	24	29	23	--	--	--	100
DK/REFUSED	3	1	5	3	3	2	--	--	--	--

* denotes less than .5%

-- denotes 0%

HOW THE POLL WAS DONE

This BADGER POLL™ was conducted by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center as part of its ongoing program of research designed to benefit the research community and the people of Wisconsin, under the direction of G. Donald Ferree, Jr., Associate Director for Public Opinion Research of the Center. The media sponsors of the survey are the (Madison) Capital Times, and the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel. The BADGER POLL™ is intended to be a "poll of record" for the state, investigating matters of concern to Wisconsinites including politics, culture, and their daily lives, adhering to the highest standards of polling methodology and rigorous independence.

A total of 507 randomly chosen state residents were interviewed for this survey by telephone between March 4 and 12, inclusive. Telephone numbers were generated by computer in proportion to the number of adults living in each area of the state. Theoretically, results from this survey have a "margin of error" of a little over +/- 4%. This means that, had we asked every eligible resident in Wisconsin, exactly these questions at the time the survey was conducted,

there is only a one in twenty chance that the answers would differ by more than that in either direction from what we report here. There could be differences because of changes in question wording, events occurring in the meantime, or any of the practical difficulties involved in taking a scientific survey. Results based on subgroups are subject to a larger "margin of error".