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WISCONSIN STATE GOVERNMENT AND EMPLOYEES IN COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

by G. Donald Ferree, Jr.

Historically, Wisconsinites have liked to think of their state as exceptional on a number of dimensions, ranging for the overall quality of life to a government which stands out as an example of "clean" governance. However, true that may have been at some points in the past, present perceptions call this rosy self-image into question. This conclusion is based on results from the most recent Badger Poll™, which interviewed 509 randomly selected state residents by telephone from April 8 to 15, inclusive.

Respondents were asked to compare Wisconsin's state government to others in terms of how well run it was. Overall, just over half (53%) said it was "more or less like other states in this regard. Those who did feel that Wisconsin was atypical split evenly between the 20% who said it was "especially well run" and the 20% who called state government "especially poorly run".

All three partisan groups were similar, differing mainly in the proportion which found the state typical (higher for Democrats and Republicans, lower for Independents). The balance of opinion was pretty even for all three. Younger respondents (below thirty) were most likely to see that state as especially well run, and the only one for whom this group clearly outnumbered those who felt it was poorly run. Those between forty-four and fifty-nine were most critical on balance.

This question was also put twice last year, in March and June, on the first two Badger Polls™. On each occasion, the largest group found the state government to be more or less the same as others. In each case, those thinking it was especially well run were slightly more numerous than their counterparts who felt it was poorly run. The differences are small enough, however, that we can have only quite limited confidence that the poll to poll movement reflects any clear trend in the overall population as opposed to random fluctuation due to which particular residents happened to be interviewed.

A somewhat different picture emerges, though, if the focus shifts to "when it comes to spending tax money efficiently". Again, just over half (53%) feels Wisconsin is more or less like other states. But, among those who think it distinguished one way or the other, more than twice as many (26% to 11%) feel it is "especially wasteful" rather than "especially efficient". Democrats and Republicans are in general agreement in their perception, while Independents were more likely to think Wisconsin stood out in one direction or the other. Among all three, more felt that Wisconsin was relatively wasteful than efficient, but the balance was somewhat clearer for Independents. There was

some tendency for older respondents to be more critical than younger, but the distinctions among age groups are not huge.

This question as well was asked last year. Compared to then, the present results may appear a bit less negative, since while just under half called Wisconsin typical on this dimension in March and June of 2002, the balance among those who felt it differed in either direction was more clearly (three to one or so) in the direction of believing Wisconsin to be more wasteful than most other states.

A third dimension, related perhaps even more clearly to the traditional "good government" image, has to do with relative honesty. Of the three areas examined, this is the most positive (or least negative) although in an absolute sense, it is scarcely encouraging. Two thirds (65%) call Wisconsin more or less like other states. The three in ten who see it as unusual in either direction break (by 18%-12%) toward thinking Wisconsin state government "especially honest" rather than "especially corrupt". Thus, we do better when it comes to honesty than being "well run", and better yet than in terms of "spending tax money efficiently", but the typical resident sees little to be proud of in the comparison.

Once again, basic perceptions do not vary much by self-described partisanship, although Democrats and Independents, who are quite similar as groups, are a bit more optimistic than Republicans. The younger three age groups are quite similar, while the oldest one (sixty and over) is both more likely to see Wisconsin as different but most "balanced" with those who think government here is especially honest evenly matched with those thinking it especially corrupt.

These results have not sharply differed across time. Results last March and June were extremely similar to one another (differing less than one percent from one category to the other). The present result is close, if not identical. Any change has been in the direction of being (only modestly) LESS likely to think of Wisconsin as excelling in honesty. The difference is small enough to limit one's confidence that any real change has occurred, but it is worth noting that belief Wisconsin is especially honest has, if anything lessened, while belief that it is especially wasteful has moved, if at all, in the same direction (one "bad", one "good").

These three dimensions all have to do, in one way or the other, with Wisconsin government. When it comes to the broader quality of life focus, the "traditional" self-understanding of Wisconsinites may be more evident. Overall, when respondents were asked how Wisconsin stacked up compared to other places to live and work, almost two thirds felt it was atypically good (23% said the best, or one of the best, 40% said better than most). Almost all the remainder (32%) called Wisconsin about average, leaving only a handful who said it was worse than most (3%) or the worst or one of the worst (1%).

On balance, Republicans are a bit more likely than Democrats, who in turn are a bit more likely than Independents to rate Wisconsin highly in these terms. But among all three a clear majority feels the state is better than most, and very, very, few rate it lower than average. Expressed satisfaction rises with age. Thus, Half of those under thirty, more than six in ten of the next group, two thirds of the next, and three fourths of those sixty and older rate Wisconsin as "better than most" or higher.

This question, too, was in the March and June surveys last year, when it also was the dimension where Wisconsin most clearly stood out positively. Views are

broadly similar at all three points, although they present reading is closer to March than June overall, which month while still quite positive by any measure produced was slightly less positive. Still, the consistency of stance is much more evident than any relatively minor poll to poll change.

Views of Wisconsin Compared to Other States

	APR03	JUN02	MAR02
State government overall			
ESPECIALLY WELL RUN	20%	22%	23%
ESPECIALLY POORLY RUN	20	18	14
MORE/LESS LIKE OTHERS	53	53	58
DEPENDS ON AREA (VOL.)	1	1	1
Spending of tax money in WI			
ESPECIALLY EFFICIENT	11%	9%	11%
ESPECIALLY WASTEFUL	26	33	33
MORE/LESS LIKE OTHERS	53	49	49
DEPENDS ON AREA (VOL.)	*	1	1
Comparative honesty WI govt.			
ESPECIALLY HONEST	18%	19%	19%
ESPECIALLY CORRUPT	12	8	8
MORE/LESS LIKE OTHERS	65	69	69
DEPENDS ON AREA (VOL.)	*	*	*
WI as place to live/work			
ONE OF VERY BEST	23%	24%	24%
BETTER THAN MOST	40	38	43
ABOUT AVERAGE	32	33	29
WORSE THAN MOST	3	2	2
ONE OF VERY WORST	1	1	*

This survey also asked respondents their views of state employees on a variety of dimensions, and looking both at "high ranking officials" compared to "executives in private industry" and "ordinary state employees" compared to "workers doing similar jobs in private industry".

The first comparison had to do with honesty. Two thirds of residents overall (68%) view state officials as about as honest as private executives. The almost three in ten who see a distinction are about twice as likely (19% to 8%) to think state officials are less honest as to see them as more honest.

All partisan groups seem them as roughly equivalent, though Republicans are, by a slight margin, most likely and Democrats, again by a slight margin, least likely to see state officials as less corrupt than their private counterparts. Those thirty to forty-four were more critical than others, while men and women did not differ much at all as groups.

While most thought state officials honesty was similar to that of private executives, the public did tend to see a difference when it came to compensation. Only one in five (20%) felt high officials got about the same as private executives. The two thirds who saw a clear difference tended on balance (41%-26%) to think state officials were paid less rather than more.

Democrats came (somewhat) closer to thinking on balance that state officials and private executives were equally paid, but similar sized groups among all three partisan persuasions saw a difference one way or the other. On balance, the older group saw most parity, the next younger one the least, followed by the two younger ones. Only among those below thirty, however, did a plurality think state officials were paid more than their counterparts in the private sector.

When it comes to how hard they work, almost half (44%) felt state officials and private executives were similar, putting this proportion between the similar ones for the other two questions so far addressed. But, while fewer (in this case half) saw a discrepancy, there was a good deal more consensus on what direction the discrepancy lay if any there was. Four in ten overall felt state officials work less hard than executives, while fewer than one in ten felt they work harder.

This sentiment is especially marked among Republicans, followed closely by Independents, with Democrats bringing up the rear. The youngest respondents are less likely than any of the older groups to see a discrepancy in how hard state officials work.

Just under three in ten (28%) think executives and state officials have the same job security. But the largest single group (47%) believes state officials have the advantage here. The counterpart group which thinks the private sector offers more security is less than half as large (21%). Age differences here are small, Republicans think state officials do a bit better on this comparison than do Democrats, while Independents are a bit less onesided, but only a bit.

Each of these questions was also asked with respondents requested to compare ordinary state workers with private sector counterparts. Residents were even more likely to say that ordinary state employees were equally honest with their private sector peers than was the case for officials (75% found them to be equivalent). The smaller number who perceived a difference came close to finding no NET difference as well (that is those saying public employees were almost exactly balanced by those saying they were less honest. do individual group examined showed a clear pattern on balance, and between two thirds and eight in ten said explicitly that workers in the two sectors did not differ in this regard.

As was the case in the official/executive comparison, relatively few saw parity when it came to pay. In this case, fewer than three in ten (28%) thought them equivalent. But while those who DID see a compensation difference tended to think executives out-earned officials (or at least were out-paid), the opposite is true for ordinary workers. Almost half (45%) feel state workers get more money than those doing comparable work in the private sector. This is twice as many as the 22% who see the situation as reversed.

The balance moves more in the direction of seeing state workers advantaged as one moves across the partisans spectrum. Those under thirty are relatively most likely to think public sector employees are more richly compensated than private, followed by those forty-five to fifty-nine, and then those thirty to forty-four. The oldest come close to perceiving parity on balance.

Half (52%) think government employees work as hard as their counterparts in the private sector. And, as was the case for executives, if there is a difference, opinion breaks pretty onesidedly in the direction of thinking private sectors work harder. This perception is (modestly) clear among Republicans and Independents than among Democrats. As one moves up the age ladder the comparison becomes clearer and clearer in the mind of respondents

with those forty-five or older most onesidedly feeling the public sector works less hard.

Job security presents an especially clear picture. Almost six in ten (58%) feel government workers have more job security than those in private industry. Only one in eight (12%) think the two are equivalent, while one in four (27%) feel the advantage lies with the private workers.

In one of the more clear gender-related patterns, men as a group are more likely than women as a group to think government workers have a job security edge. Partisan distinctions are in the expected direction (Republicans most likely to see an advantage for government employees) but the size of the differences is relatively small. Younger respondents see an advantage on balance for government workers on this dimension, but are less likely so to do than their older fellow residents.

Comparison of Private/Public Sector

	OFFICIALS	WORKERS
Honesty of Public Sector		
MORE HONEST	8%	9%
LESS HONEST	19	11
ABOUT AS HONEST	68	76
DON'T KNOW	5	4
REFUSED	1	1
Pay of Public Sector		
PAID MORE	26%	45%
PAID LESS	41	22
PAID ABOUT THE SAME	20	28
DON'T KNOW	13	5
REFUSED	*	*
Work effort of public sector		
HARDER	8%	7%
LESS HARD	41	37
ABOUT THE SAME	44	52
DON'T KNOW	7	4
REFUSED	*	*
Job security of public sector		
MORE	47%	58%
LESS	21	12
ABOUT THE SAME	28	27
DON'T KNOW	4	3
REFUSED	*	*

All results from April 2003

These eight questions are depicted together for ease of comparison in the accompanying table. As may be seen, distinctions are least obvious to respondents when it comes to honesty, with government officials doing a bit better in comparison with their private sector counterparts than ordinary workers. (It should be noted that the comparison is NOT between the honesty of officials and workers, so that it would be quite possible that workers in both sectors are seen as more honest than their bosses -- or vice versa -- the

distinction is that workers are seen as more similar across the sectors than are officials.

Both ordinary workers and officials are seen as having to work less hard (or at least as actually working less hard) than is the case for the private sector. Just below half (for officials) and just above it (for workers) of respondents see them as equivalent. But any difference is to the benefit of public sector employees.

When it comes to pay and job security, individual respondents are most likely to see a discrepancy (between one fifth and three tenths see two sectors equivalent). The balance is similar magnitude but opposite in direction for pay between the two sectors, with private sector bosses, but public sector workers seen as advantaged. Job security for officials looks roughly like pay comparison for ordinary workers. But the advantage is clearest of all when it comes to job security for ordinary government workers, compared to those doing similar work in the private sector.

Statewide Marginals and Percentages for Key Groups

What follows is the exact question wording for each of the items referred to in the release. All results shown are for the basic sample of state residents. The first column is the percentage of the entire sample giving each response. The second and third reports the percentages for men and women separately. The fourth, fifth, and sixth columns show self-described Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. Columns seven through ten group respondents by age.

Q01. INTERVIEWER: (DO NOT ASK) Enter respondent's gender

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MALE	49%	100%	--%	36%	58%	58%	46%	56%	51%	42%
FEMALE	51	--	100	64	42	42	54	44	50	58

WICMP01. Overall, compared to other states, would you say Wisconsin's state government is especially well run, especially poorly run, or more or less like other states?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
ESPECIALLY WELL RUN	20%	18%	22%	20%	24%	18%	30%	16%	18%	22%
ESPECIALLY POORLY RUN	20	22	17	15	25	19	13	19	25	21
MORE/LESS LIKE OTHERS	53	55	52	59	44	55	52	56	54	47
DEPENDS ON AREA (VOL.)	1	*	1	1	--	*	--	*	1	1
DON'T KNOW	7	5	8	5	7	8	5	9	3	10
REFUSED	*	--	*	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

WICMP02. How about when it comes to spending tax money efficiently, compared to other states, is Wisconsin especially efficient, especially wasteful, or more or less like other states?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
ESPECIALLY EFFICIENT	11%	11%	10%	10%	15%	10%	11%	10%	12%	10%
ESPECIALLY WASTEFUL	26	29	23	23	34	25	19	20	33	26
MORE/LESS LIKE OTHERS	53	50	55	58	38	56	57	59	50	48
DEPENDS ON AREA (VOL.)	*	1	--	--	--	1	--	1	--	--
DON'T KNOW	10	10	11	7	13	9	13	11	5	15
REFUSED	*	--	1	1	--	--	1	--	*	1

WICMP03. Compared to other states, do you think Wisconsin state government is especially honest, especially corrupt, or more or less like other states?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
ESPECIALLY HONEST	18%	15%	22%	23%	21%	15%	16%	17%	17%	21%
ESPECIALLY CORRUPT	12	10	13	13	11	12	9	10	7	21
MORE/LESS LIKE OTHERS	65	73	58	60	63	68	69	67	72	53
DEPENDS ON AREA (VOL.)	*	--	*	--	--	--	1	--	--	--
DON'T KNOW	5	3	7	4	5	5	5	6	4	5
REFUSED	*	--	*	*	--	--	--	--	--	*

PUBEMP04. Compared to executives in private industry, do you think high ranking officials in the Wisconsin state government are more honest, less honest, or about as honest?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MORE HONEST	8%	10%	6%	10%	9%	7%	4%	6%	11%	9%
LESS HONEST	19	18	19	15	17	19	17	26	16	17
ABOUT AS HONEST	68	66	69	69	67	69	71	62	70	68
DON'T KNOW	5	5	5	6	6	4	7	6	4	4
REFUSED	1	1	*	--	1	*	1	--	--	1

PUBEMP05. Compared to executives doing similar work in private industry, do you think high public officials in Wisconsin are paid more, paid less, or paid about the same as they would get in private industry?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
PAID MORE	26%	18%	34%	29%	19%	21%	44%	24%	19%	28%
PAID LESS	41	55	28	39	47	48	30	41	54	30
PAID ABOUT THE SAME	20	17	22	18	19	19	18	21	15	24
DON'T KNOW	13	11	15	13	13	13	7	14	12	17
REFUSED	*	*	1	*	1	--	1	--	--	1

PUBEMP06. And do you think they work harder, less hard, or about as hard as executives in private industry?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
HARDER	8%	8%	9%	11%	8%	6%	13%	9%	7%	7%
LESS HARD	41	46	37	35	40	47	32	42	43	41
ABOUT THE SAME	44	41	46	47	46	41	48	41	46	44
DON'T KNOW	7	5	8	6	6	6	6	8	4	7
REFUSED	*	*	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	--

PUBEMP07. And do you think they have more job security, less, or about the same job security as they would get for the same kind of job in private industry?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MORE	47%	53%	42%	48%	45%	50%	49%	47%	47%	46%
LESS	21	20	22	23	26	19	14	22	23	21
ABOUT THE SAME	28	24	31	25	26	28	31	28	29	27
DON'T KNOW	4	2	5	4	3	4	5	3	1	4
REFUSED	*	1	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	1

PUBEMP08. Thinking now not of high-ranking state officials, but of ordinary state employees... Compared to workers doing similar jobs in private industry, do you think Wisconsin state workers are more honest, less honest, or about as honest than workers in private industry?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MORE HONEST	9%	8%	9%	7%	13%	7%	10%	10%	10%	5%
LESS HONEST	11	12	10	8	15	11	12	13	10	11
ABOUT AS HONEST	76	76	76	80	66	79	73	74	79	76
DON'T KNOW	4	4	5	5	7	2	5	3	2	7
REFUSED	1	1	*	*	--	--	1	--	--	1

PUBEMP09. Compared to workers doing similar jobs in private industry, do you think Wisconsin state workers are paid more, paid less, or paid about the same as they would get in private industry?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
PAID MORE	45%	47%	43%	33%	41%	47%	52%	43%	51%	34%
PAID LESS	22	23	22	26	28	21	16	26	21	22
PAID ABOUT THE SAME	28	28	28	35	26	28	27	25	25	38
DON'T KNOW	5	3	7	6	5	5	5	6	3	5
REFUSED	*	*	1	*	1	--	1	--	--	1

PUBEMP10. In general, do you think they work harder, less hard, or about as hard as workers doing similar jobs in private industry?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
HARDER	7%	4%	10%	9%	5%	6%	15%	8%	4%	5%
LESS HARD	37	44	30	30	41	42	24	36	43	40
ABOUT THE SAME	52	49	55	58	50	48	55	55	50	50
DON'T KNOW	4	3	4	3	4	4	6	2	3	5
REFUSED	*	*	*	1	--	--	1	--	--	1

PUBEMP11. And do you think they have more job security, less, or about the same job security as they would get for the same kind of job in private industry?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MORE	58%	66%	50%	54%	56%	63%	49%	61%	62%	57%
LESS	12	7	16	15	10	9	21	11	9	10
ABOUT THE SAME	27	23	31	27	32	26	25	23	29	30
DON'T KNOW	3	2	3	4	3	3	4	5	1	2
REFUSED	*	1	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	1

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

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
DEMOCRAT	28%	21%	35%	100%	--%	--%	28%	26%	27%	34%
REPUBLICAN	32	37	26	--	--	100	22	38	32	31
INDEPENDENT	22	26	18	--	100	--	20	19	24	24
OTHER	11	10	13	--	--	--	17	14	10	4
NONE	4	4	5	--	--	--	10	2	2	6
DON'T KNOW	1	1	1	--	--	--	--	1	1	2
REFUSED	2	2	2	--	--	--	2	*	3	*

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

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
18-29	15%	15%	16%	15%	14%	11%	100%	--%	--%	--%
30-44	24	28	21	22	21	30	--	100	--	--
45-59	32	33	31	31	35	32	--	--	100	--
60 and over	25	21	28	30	27	24	--	--	--	100
DK/REFUSED	4	3	4	1	3	3	--	--	--	--

* 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 509 randomly chosen state residents were interviewed for this survey by telephone between April 8 and 15, 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".

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