



Badger Poll™ #1, Release 3
University of Wisconsin Survey Center
University of Wisconsin Madison
March 26, 2002

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VIEWS OF WISCONSIN, ITS GOVERNMENT, AND THE TAX STRUCTURE
by G. Donald Ferree, Jr.

Wisconsin residents like their state and view it as a good place to work and live. They are less positive when it comes to assessing their state government relative to those of other states, especially when it comes to the efficiency with which taxes are spent. Against a backdrop of a sense that taxes are already as high as they should be, there seems to be a special reluctance to depend on the property tax as a source of revenue for government at various levels in the state. These are among the findings of the inaugural Badger Poll™, which interviewed 597 persons from throughout the state in telephone interviews conducted between March 5 and 17, sponsored by Wisconsin Public Broadcasting and the Capital Times.

People like living in Wisconsin. Two thirds of respondents felt that as a place to live and work in this country, Wisconsin was above average. One resident in four (24%) said it was either one of the best or the very best, and they were joined by more than four in ten (43%) who regard the state as better than most. Virtually all the remainder (29%) thought it was just about average, with only a handful (some 2%) saying it was worse than average.

Enthusiasm is higher among those who are forty-five and older. Almost three in four of that group rated Wisconsin as above average, which was followed by two thirds of those sixty and older, and just over half of those in the younger age groups. Women were about ten points more likely than men to call the state above average, as were Republicans compared to other partisans. But the key finding is that people who live here tend to feel good about the state overall.

This tends to be a stable state in terms of residence. Almost nine in ten told our interviewers they had lived here either fifteen years or more or simply said they had lived here "all my life". Those in the older age groups were (not surprisingly) especially likely to be long-term residents: more than nineteen out of twenty of those sixty and older have been here at least fifteen years, as have nine in ten of those between forty-five and sixty. But even among those thirty and less, eight in ten have been here at least fifteen years, which amounts to all their adult years.

As would be expected, we are a bit more mobile (but not much) when it comes to the amount of time one has lived in the same community (leaving that definition to the respondent). Just under two thirds have lived there either fifteen years or "all my life". Those under forty-five are as likely to have spent less than fifteen as that amount of time or more. The proportion who have stayed put for at least fifteen years rises to seven in ten for the forty-five to fifty-nine group, and to nine in ten for those sixty and older.

Shifting the focus somewhat, to state government overall, Wisconsin is seen as less exceptional. Respondents were asked about three dimensions: how "well run" the state government is; "how efficient" it is in spending tax money; and "how honest" it is. Overall, the typical opinion is that Wisconsin's state government does not distinguish itself in either direction vis a vis others', but there are distinctions in the dominance of this view and the balance of views among those who see the state as other than typical.

Taking them in the order presented to respondents, just shy of six in ten residents think that Wisconsin's state government is "more or less like other states" in terms of being "well run". Those who do perceive a difference give a slight (23%-14%) edge to the view that is "especially well run" compared to "especially poorly run". There are only small gender differences, which may not be surprising. What is perhaps less expected, is that the relative view of state government overall is perhaps most positive among the youngest group -- which is also most likely to see it as being typical, but those who have an especially positive view outnumber those who take an especially critical stance by a factor larger than is the case for older residents. Those in all three partisan groups are similar in the proportion who see the state as typical, but the balance is closest to an even split among Independents, followed by Democrats, followed (closely) by Republicans.

Zeroing in on taxing and spending results in a clouding of the picture. Specifically, while the largest single proportion, just under half at 49%, feels that Wisconsin is more or less typical when it comes to spending tax money, this means that four in ten do see a distinction, and they break three to one in terms of seeing the Badger State as being "especially wasteful", rather than "especially efficient".

Neither age, gender, nor (perhaps surprisingly) partisan identification divide opinion very clearly. In each group, the most common perception is that the state is typical on this dimension, and this hovers around the fifty percent mark. In each, those who think the state is wasteful outnumber those who see it as efficient. The balance does bounce around somewhat. Independents are (very modestly) more critical than either partisan group, but this difference is small and one cannot be very confident that it reflects a real distinction in the population. The middle age groups likewise are relatively somewhat more critical.

The third dimension, honesty, shows Wisconsin once again in a somewhat better light. Overall, seven in ten (69%), view the state government as essentially typical in terms of honesty. About twice as many see it as especially honest than view it as essentially corrupt. Compared to other states, then, perhaps this particular glass is a bit more than "half full". Against the "traditional" Wisconsin sense of squeaky clean government, however, these results, while scarcely an indictment (in any sense) may be disappointing. Once again, one fails to find bright lines defined by gender, age, or partisanship. Older respondents are least critical, Republicans less so than either Democrats or Independents, but the basic view is held with remarkable consistency.

There is a general sense that the level of taxes is already quite high enough in Wisconsin. Specifically, seven in ten (71%) say the "level of state taxes in Wisconsin" is now "too high". This sentiment dwarfs that held by about one resident in four (24%) that they are "just about right". Only a handful (2%) find taxes now too low in the abstract. There is what must be described as remarkable consistency of this view regardless of respondents' self-described partisanship, and their gender. Only the very youngest group, which splits pretty evenly between those who believe taxes are too high and those who

believer they are about right, stands out. The common pattern applies to all other groups.

Views on spending are almost as clear overall. Six in ten (61%) say that is too high, one in four (25%) find it about right. A few more (5%) say it is too low, and another group this size volunteered that it depended on the particular program. As above, the youngest group, which splits evenly, stands out. There does seem to be a bit more distinction, particularly among partisan groups than was the case for taxes, and for every group, the proportion saying spending is too high is lower than the corresponding proportion saying that TAXES are too high, suggesting that the latter is the particular "sore point". (And when one speaks of distinctions among groups, or between these questions, one must not lose sight of the fact that the clearly most common view is that both are higher than they should be.

Taxes exist not just in the abstract "overall" but in terms of who pays what. For residents as a whole, the balance of opinion is that business in Wisconsin pays its fair share, but this masks some dissent. Just under half (48%) feel business pays what it should, relative to others. Those who feel there is a mismatch between what it pays and what it should split pretty evenly between those who say it now pays more than it should (20%) and those who feel it pays less (21%). This masks, however, some differences. Men and women differ primarily in the number who feel things should change, but not in the balance of what should happen if there were a change. Democrats, if they would like to see a change, think business pays too little, Republicans who would change things tend to think business pays too much. Independents split. Anti-business sentiment is more evident among younger respondents (who are also more likely NOT to want to see a shift) relatively than older respondents. There is, in any event, not much of clear "soak business sentiment" among the public.

If the focus is "upper income people", opinion is a bit more clearly defined. Overall, and in many groups, the most common sentiment is that such people pay about their fair share. But in many groups (and overall) more are critical in one direction or the other than are content. The overall balance runs about four to one (if there should be a change) in the direction of taxing upper income people more.

This question, at least as much as business, shows a partisan pattern. Sentiment is clearly strongest among Democrats that the upper income group is undertaxed relatively. Half of all self-described Democrats take this stance. The proportion who see things as now appropriate rises as one moves across the partisan spectrum, as does the balance if one does want a change, to the point that among Republicans, the group feeling upper income people should pay more outnumbers those who think they should pay less by only about six percentage points. By contrast, men as a group and women as a group are quite similar, while the youngest respondents are most content with the existing situation as they see it, and least likely to want to see upper income people pay more.

When the focus is personalized to "people like you" (again leaving to the respondent just what that might mean), just over half (56%) see the tax burden of that group as being appropriate. If there is discontent, the balance is quite clearly in the direction of feeling overtaxed (36%) rather than undertaxed (3%). This pattern tends to hold with great consistency across the groups examined. But those in the middle age categories are more likely to manifest discontent than those older (sixty and over) or (especially) younger.

To finish up this topic, respondents were also asked about the relative reliance the state (at both state and local level) places on its three main

sources of tax revenue. Respondents were reminded that "government in Wisconsin gets its money primarily from the state income tax, the sales tax, and the property tax", and then were asked "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?". Overall, the largest group (44%) was content with the present degree of reliance. But more would like to see less reliance (28% somewhat, 9% much) than to see more (11% somewhat, 3% much).

Sentiment for a reduced relative reliance on the income tax tended to increase as one moved across the partisan spectrum from Democrat to Republican, but in all groups the largest single body of opinion was for the present balance, though combining the two groups which wanted a lessening came close. It should also be noted that neither "extreme" category garnered anywhere near the support that those closer to the middle did (that is "much more" and "much less" were a good deal less common than "somewhat more" and "somewhat less" respectively). The pattern of younger respondents differentiating themselves somewhat from their older fellows continued, within the overall pattern of there being substantial feeling that things are OK now, and more of willingness to see reduced reliance than increased.

Just over half (52%) would be content to see the relative reliance on the sales tax stay where it was, so there was a bit less sentiment for a change than was the case for the income tax. Moreover, overall, the direction of any preferred change is less clear. Overall, again, one in four would favor increase reliance (22% somewhat, 4% much), which was a bit larger group than the one in five who would prefer reduced reliance on this levee (15% somewhat, 5% much). But this is a pretty close balance.

Against the backdrop of the most common view being that the present emphasis is OK, Democrats were almost evenly balanced between those who might increase reliance on the sales tax and those who would cut it. Independents were most likely to be open to an increase (about twice as many as would prefer a decrease), Republicans fell in the middle.

One tax, however, stands out, which may have significance for the ongoing debate over the revenue the state "returns" to municipalities. One third (35%) overall would leave emphasis on the property tax "about the same". But more than half (55%) would cut it, placing either somewhat less (37%) or much less (18%) reliance on it. These groups dwarf the relative handful who would like to see an increase (6%, divided between 1% who would like to see much more emphasis and 5% who would see somewhat more). Except for the somewhat anomalous youngest group, those who would see at least some lessening of emphasis on the property level outnumbered those who would keep it where it now is, often by half again as many or more. There is, moreover, a clear similarity across partisan groups, which look very much like one another. This does not directly translate to a policy preference, to be sure, but it does suggest that the widespread sentiment that reliance on the property tax should be reduced might be a factor in the developing debate, particularly if residents should come to perceive the evolving choices to be increasing the relative reliance on this apparently sensitive levy.

Statewide Marginals and Percentages for Key Groups

What follows is the exact question wording for each of the items referred to in the release. 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 their age group (calculated from year of birth: 18-29; 30-44; 45-59; sixty and older.)

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

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MALE	49%	100%	--%	43%	52%	53%	51%	51%	50%	43%
FEMALE	51	--	100	57	48	47	49	49	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?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
ESPECIALLY WELL RUN	23%	20%	25%	23%	21%	26%	26%	24%	21%	24%
ESPECIALLY POORLY RUN	14	14	13	13	19	9	6	13	17	16
MORE/LESS LIKE OTHERS	58	62	54	58	57	60	63	58	57	53
DEPENDS ON AREA (VOL.)	1	1	1	1	1	1	--	--	3	--
DON'T KNOW	5	3	7	4	3	3	6	5	3	7
REFUSED	*	*	*	--	--	1	--	1	--	1

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?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
ESPECIALLY EFFICIENT	11%	11%	11%	12%	12%	11%	14%	11%	10%	12%
ESPECIALLY WASTEFUL	33	34	31	33	38	30	27	37	35	27
MORE/LESS LIKE OTHERS	49	51	46	48	44	51	50	45	50	50
DEPENDS ON AREA (VOL.)	1	--	1	1	*	1	--	--	1	2
DON'T KNOW	7	4	9	6	6	6	8	6	5	9
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?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
ESPECIALLY HONEST	19%	20%	19%	19%	19%	26%	20%	18%	17%	24%
ESPECIALLY CORRUPT	8	10	6	8	11	4	11	9	8	3
MORE/LESS LIKE OTHERS	69	68	70	70	68	68	65	68	73	67
DEPENDS ON AREA (VOL.)	*	--	*	*	*	--	--	--	--	1
DON'T KNOW	3	3	4	3	2	2	3	5	1	4
REFUSED	1	--	1	1	*	1	1	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	71%	72%	71%	69%	75%	73%	49%	71%	77%	78%
TOO LOW	2	2	2	4	--	1	1	2	2	1
JUST ABOUT RIGHT	24	24	24	24	25	23	46	24	19	17
DEPENDS WHICH TAX (VOL)	1	1	1	2	--	--	--	--	1	1
DON'T KNOW	2	1	3	1	1	2	4	2	*	4
REFUSED	*	--	1	--	--	1	--	1	--	--

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%	62%	59%	55%	63%	69%	41%	65%	66%	58%
TOO LOW	5	5	5	10	*	3	8	4	6	3
JUST ABOUT RIGHT	25	27	22	25	27	20	39	23	19	26
DEPENDS PROGRAM (VOL)	5	3	6	6	5	2	2	2	7	7
DON'T KNOW	5	4	7	4	5	5	9	5	2	6
REFUSED	*	--	1	--	--	1	--	1	--	--

TAX05: Overall, do you think business in Wisconsin pays more than its fair share of state taxes, less than its fair share, or about its fair share?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MORE THAN FAIR SHARE	20%	23%	16%	11%	20%	29%	10%	21%	20%	24%
LESS THAN FAIR SHARE	21	24	18	28	25	14	21	20	26	15
ABOUT FAIR SHARE	48	45	51	51	44	47	61	48	47	44
DON'T KNOW	11	8	14	10	11	9	9	11	7	18
REFUSED	*	--	*	--	--	1	--	1	--	--

TAX06: How about upper income people in Wisconsin, do they pay more than their fair share of state taxes, less than their fair share, or about their fair share?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MORE THAN FAIR SHARE	10%	12%	8%	6%	12%	17%	8%	10%	12%	9%
LESS THAN FAIR SHARE	39	39	40	53	41	23	25	40	45	42
ABOUT FAIR SHARE	41	40	42	33	43	48	52	38	38	39
DON'T KNOW	9	9	9	8	5	11	15	10	5	10
REFUSED	1	*	1	1	--	1	1	1	--	*

TAX07: How about people like you? (PROBE FOR CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY)

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MORE THAN FAIR SHARE	39%	40%	38%	34%	39%	41%	29%	42%	44%	32%
LESS THAN FAIR SHARE	3	3	3	5	1	2	2	3	3	4
ABOUT FAIR SHARE	56	55	57	58	59	55	67	54	51	57
DON'T KNOW	2	1	3	3	*	2	2	1	1	6
REFUSED	1	1	1	1	--	1	1	1	1	*

QR02: How many years have you lived in Wisconsin? (ROUND UP)

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
One year or less	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	4%	2%	--%	1%
Two to four yrs	3	3	2	2	3	4	2	4	3	--
Five to nine	5	6	5	8	3	4	11	8	2	1
10-14	4	4	4	5	3	6	2	7	5	1
15 or more	78	78	78	72	82	80	81	77	86	67
All my life	9	8	10	11	8	6	--	2	5	30
DON'T KNOW	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
REFUSED	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

QR03: How many years have you lived in your community? (ROUND UP)

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
One year or less	5%	3%	7%	5%	5%	5%	15%	5%	4%	1%
Two to four yrs	11	12	11	9	12	15	17	16	10	3
Five to nine	9	10	8	11	3	8	15	15	4	4
10-14	10	9	12	12	10	12	6	15	12	6
15 or more	60	62	59	57	66	57	47	49	69	73
All my life	4	4	3	6	4	3	--	1	2	14
DON'T KNOW	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
REFUSED	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

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	32%	28%	35%	100%	--%	--%	26%	28%	36%	36%
Republican	28	31	26	--	--	100	32	33	23	31
Independent	22	23	21	--	100	--	22	18	27	20
Other	11	14	8	--	--	--	8	16	10	5
None	4	2	6	--	--	--	10	4	3	3
DON'T KNOW	1	*	2	--	--	--	2	1	1	*
REFUSED	2	1	3	--	--	--	1	2	2	3

QD11: In what year were you born? (ENTER FOUR-DIGIT YEAR)

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
18-29	15%	16%	15%	12%	15%	17%	100%	--%	--%	--%
30-44	31	32	29	27	25	35	--	100	--	--
45-59	32	33	32	37	39	26	--	--	100	--
60 and over	20	17	22	23	18	22	--	--	--	100
DON'T KNOW	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
REFUSED	2	1	2	2	4	--	--	--	--	--

* denotes less than .5%

-- denotes 0%

HOW THE POLL WAS DONE

This inaugural 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 poll was sponsored in part by Wisconsin Public Broadcasting and the Capital Times newspaper of Madison. 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 597 randomly selected adult residents of Wisconsin were interviewed over the telephone from March 5-17, 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 about +/- 4%. This means that, had we asked every eligible adult 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".