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Nineteen Years of Public Opinion: The Boise State University Annual Public Policy Survey



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Nineteen Years of Public Opinion:

The Boise State University Annual Public Policy Survey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY Evidence suggests that public opinion has a significant and measurable impact on legislative, executive, and citizen interaction. The state of Idaho is no exception. In this white paper, we examine a sample of the opinions of Idahoans, as expressed in the Public Policy Survey, over the past nineteen years.

The following is a list of findings:

- Education and the economy have largely rotated as the single most important issues facing the state.
- Idahoans have consistently indicated that they trust their local government more than state or federal government.
- Local government is also consistently voted the most responsive to Idahoans' needs and able to provide the most for their tax dollars.
- More Idahoans consider themselves to be Republicans, rather than Democrats or Independents.
- Most feel the state is headed in the right direction.

In some form or another, Boise State University has been administering the Public Policy Survey to citizens throughout Idaho since 1989. Questions on the survey range from the general (trust in government) to the specific (should Idaho adopt English as its official state language). Responses to the survey



questions have been published in the newspapers, distributed to legislators, and discussed in round tables. Of the many benefits that the survey offers, some of the not inconsequential benefits are an additional outlet through which citizens may express their opinions, and additional information provided for decision makers.

Generally, the information gathered from the survey is used discretely, year by year, to inform policy makers. In this white paper, we have taken a comprehensive look at all 19 iterations of the survey and summarized results from questions that have been asked repeatedly.

INTRODUCTION: THE POLICY SURVEY

Since 1989, the Social Science Research Center (SSRC) at Boise State University has conducted a statewide survey of Idahoans in order to better understand their public policy concerns and opinions. The survey is made up of questions about public policy in Idaho, as well as opinions on federal government policies and service provision. The survey is administered to a minimum of 500 Idaho citizens each year, with the data being weighted according to the proportion of the total state population within each of six geographic regions. These six geographic regions are the same regions into which the state is divided for administrative purposes by the Idaho Association of Counties. The regions are weighted in order to create a more representative sample of the population of Idaho.

While the numbers change slightly, the survey has found that Idaho's population adheres to recognizable trends. This white paper focuses on eight particular questions appearing frequently on the Public Policy Survey:

- » In your opinion, what is the one most important issue facing Idaho today?
- » In general, do you have more trust in the local, state, or federal government?
- » Which level of government do you think best responds to your needs?
- » From which level of government do you get the most for your tax money?
- » Which tax do you think is the least fair?
- » Do you think the state of Idaho is headed in the right direction?
- » Do you consider yourself to be a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?
- » Do you agree that Idaho should breach the lower 4 Snake River dams to restore salmon runs?

POLICIES IN CONTEXT

The literature on public opinion and its effects on government is expansive. An emerging theme among scholars is that public opinion has a noticeable impact on public policy, though the exact force of the impact is difficult to quantify. Burstein (2003) observes that “No one believes that public opinion always determines public policy; few believe it never does” (29). He goes on to explain that citizens who care about specific areas of policy are likely to remember officials' response to those issues on Election Day, which causes elected officials

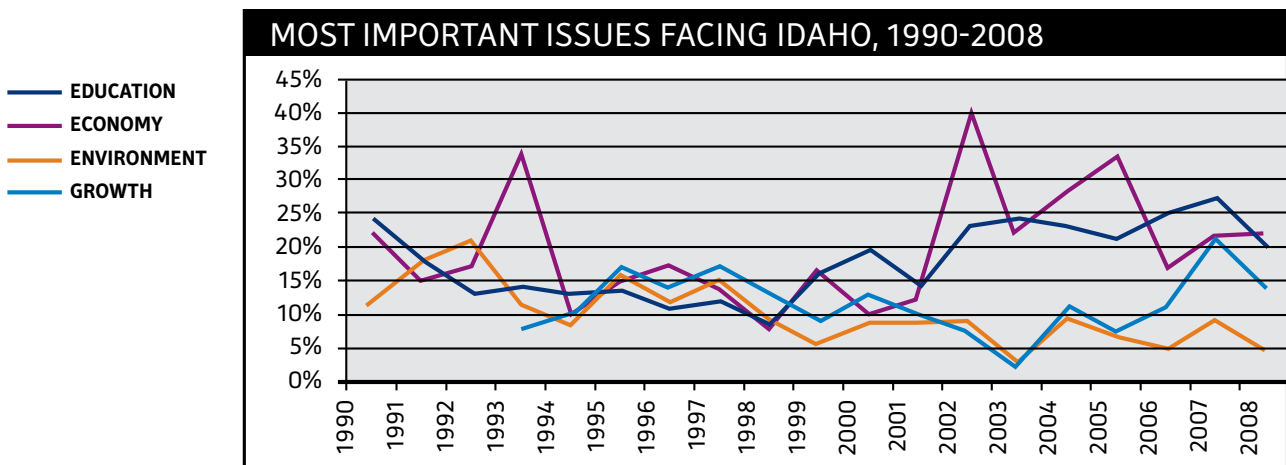
to be especially responsive to salient issues in order to secure reelection (30). The public’s ability to create a tangible amount of responsiveness on certain issues gives them some power to affect public policy.

This power to affect policy is likely to diminish the farther away the general public is from a given branch of government. For example, a study by Miller and Miller (1991) found that citizens are generally most satisfied with local government service provision (512). Results of the Annual Idaho Public Policy Survey affirm this conclusion, showing a similar trend, with satisfaction in responsiveness decreasing as the size of government (state, federal) increases. Kelleher and Wolak (2007) find that “One reason why people dislike government is the sense that it is out of touch from the people, populated by career politicians with little in common with the average citizen” (708). They also cite responsiveness as being directly related to public confidence at the state level, positing that “When processes are more contentious, more complex, and more discordant, citizens lose confidence in government” (708).

Chanley’s (2002) study on trust in government after September 11, 2001 yielded the result that when the public is confident in its government, it is more likely to support government spending (479). Thus, being able to gauge approval of or trust in government makes it possible to predict possible outcomes of proposed public policy. Miller and Miller (1991) assert that “the most useful tool for local government administrators is the survey that elicits citizens’ assessments of city services—the evaluative survey. The evaluative survey casts the citizen as a consumer whose attitudes about service delivery (in the absence of free market competition) represent government’s only bottom line” (503). The data collected over the past nineteen years of the Idaho Public Policy Survey are a valuable tool for predicting responses to public policy.

THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE FACING IDAHO TODAY

The following is a representation of some of the questions that have been asked repeatedly on the survey, with results and analysis.

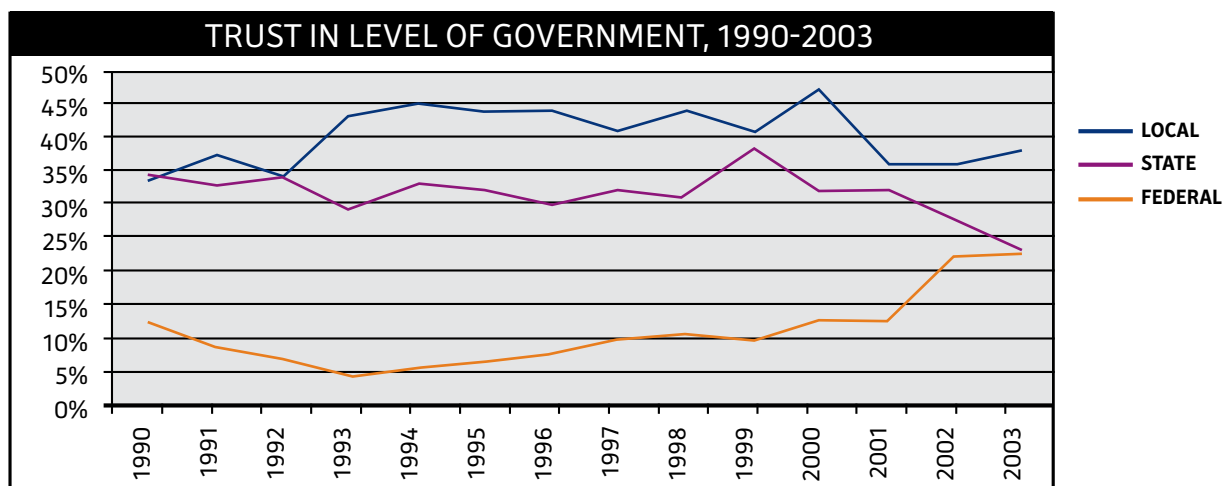


- » The issues most important to Idahoans have fluctuated somewhat over the years of the policy survey. The most prevalent issues have usually been the economy, education, growth, and the environment. These are the responses to the open-ended question “In your opinion, what is the one most important issue facing Idaho today?” which has appeared on all 19 Idaho Public Policy Surveys.
- » Over the period of time that the survey has been administered, concern over these issues has changed according to external influences facing those taking the survey. For example, perception of the economy has changed more dramatically than the others. It was selected as the most important issue by 34% in 1994, 40% in 2002, and 33% in 2005. Concern with the economy also experienced the largest increases year-to-year in 1992-1993 and 2001-2002. These dates coincide with the economic recessions of 1990-1991 and 2001-2002. Similarly, the economy received the least amount of attention during the periods of recovery from those recessions. The percent of people who considered the economy most important dropped substantially from 1993-1994 and from 2002-2003 as the economy recovered.
- » Perception of the rise in importance between growth and the environment seem to share a common thread. Since 1994, the graphs of growth and the environment follow a very similar path. This may imply a connection in impact in the minds of Idaho’s citizens.

TRUST IN FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The question, “In general, do you have more trust in the local, state, or federal government?” has been included in each of the Idaho Public Policy Surveys except for those administered in 2004 and 2008. In addition to federal, state, or local government, respondents were given the option to vote “I don’t know,” “trust all equally,” or “trust none.”

- » From the first administration of the survey in 1990 until 1992, Idahoans responded that they had the most trust in state government. From 1993 until

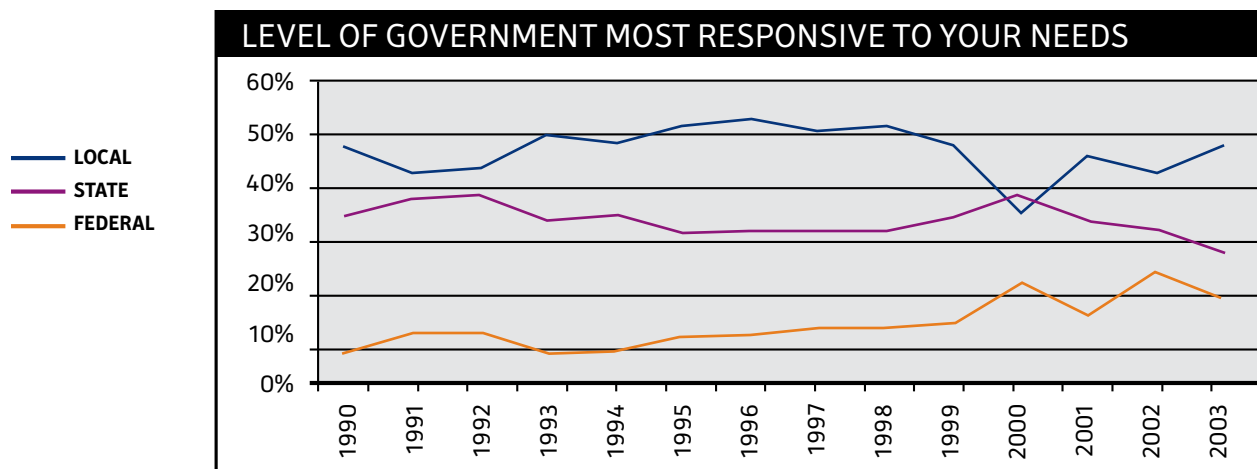


the present, however, Idahoans have agreed that local government is more trustworthy. Since then, trust levels in local government have been over 35%, and it has been over 40% for all but three years from 1993 to 2008. In 2000, the level of trust in local government reached 47%, but it dropped in the following years to 43%.

- » Trust in state government saw a high of 38% in 1999, during which time trust in local government was at 41%. Idahoans' level of trust in state government remained fairly consistent between 30-40%, but it began a decline in 2000 that ended at 18% in 2008.
- » The level of trust in the federal government has never exceeded either state or local government. It has remained below 15% for the entire length of the survey except for a brief peak of 23% in 2002 and 2003, after which it decreased to 10% in 2007. This peak is probably attributed to the federal government's response to the 2001 terrorist attacks. It was at its lowest in 1993, when the public level of trust was at 5%.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Since the beginning of the Idaho Public Policy Survey in 1990, the question, "Which level of government do you think best responds to your needs?" has been included each year except 2004, 2005, and 2008. Respondents were given the option to answer that federal, state, or local government responded best to their needs, that they responded equally well, that none responded, or that they don't know.



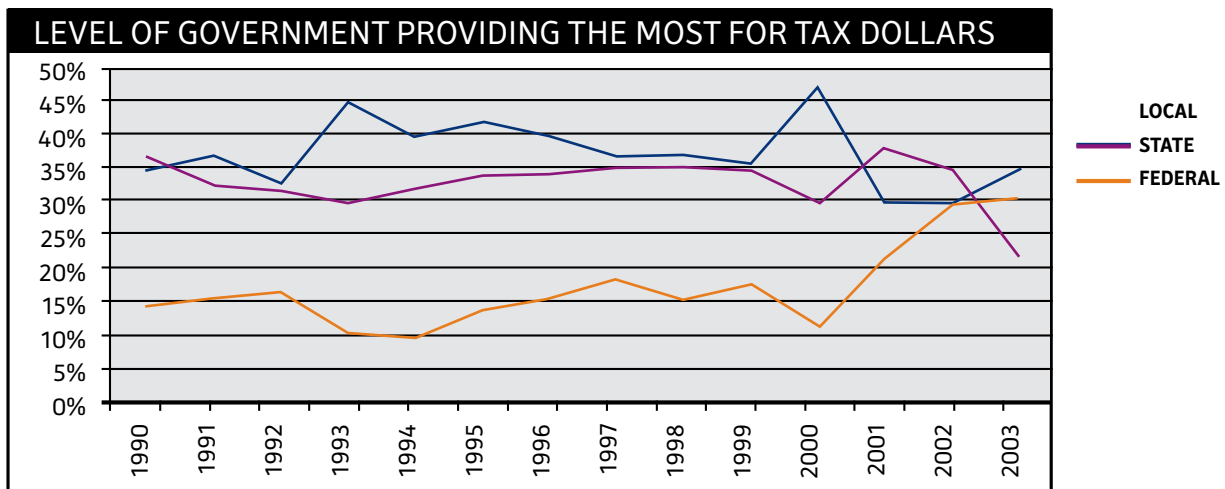
- » The breakdown of data looks very similar to the trust in government level question addressed previously. Local government proved most responsive, state government second, and federal least. Local government was consistently between about 40-50% in terms of level of responsiveness, with a high of 51% in 1996 and a low of 35% in 2000.
- » It is interesting to note that state government was rated as having a slightly higher

level of responsiveness in 2000, with 38% of Idahoans rating state government as most responsive. Satisfaction with State government responsiveness steadily declined to 20% in 2007, during which time local government response satisfaction climbed back to 45% .

- » Idahoans’ satisfaction with federal government responsiveness hovered around 10% from 1990 to 1999. In 2000, it began climb to a peak of 22% in 2002. This peak may reflect a general increase in satisfaction with government response following the 2001 terrorist attacks. The 2001 survey was administered in November after the attacks and was reported in January 2002. Afterwards, the federal government response level dropped steadily to 10% in 2007.

THE MOST FOR YOUR MONEY

The question, “From which level of government do you get the most for your tax money?” has been included in each of the Idaho Public Policy Surveys except for those administered in 2004, 2005, and 2008. In addition to federal, state, or local government, the bank of options to select included “I don’t know,” “trust all equally,” or “trust none.”



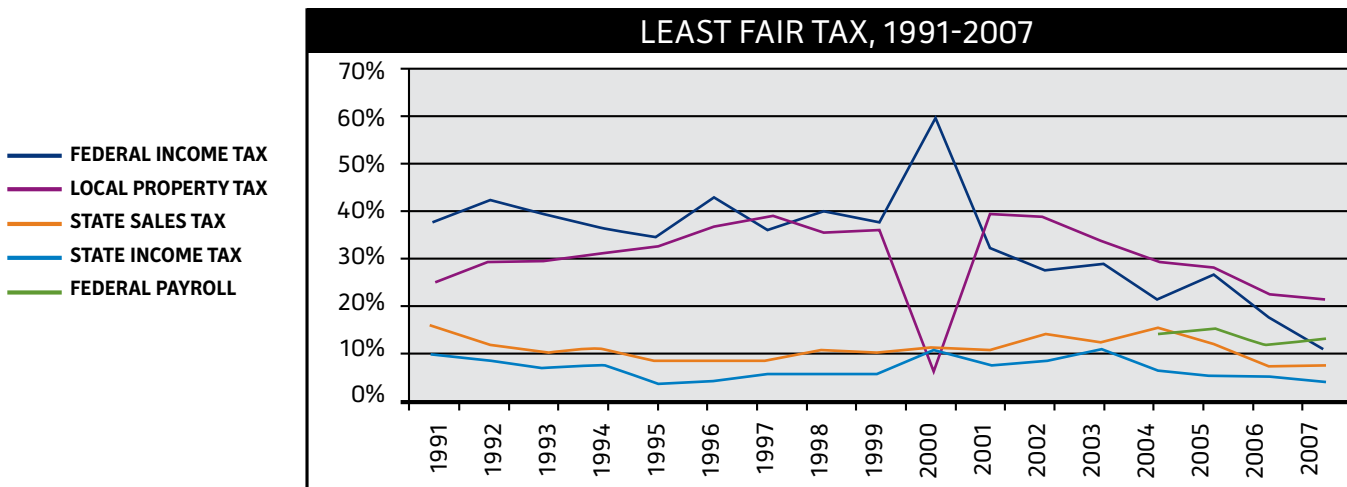
- » Responses to this question over the years have been much less consistent than previous questions about satisfaction in levels of government. Local government, for example, was not always perceived as the providing the most for tax money. During three periods over the course of the survey, more Idahoans felt that the state provided more for their tax dollars than did local government: 1990, 2001, and 2002. The percent of respondents who chose local government as giving the most for their money reached a high of 47% in 2000. It fell to a low of 30% in 2007.
- » The State of Idaho climbed in use of tax dollar satisfaction to 38% in 2001. It fell steadily thereafter, falling to a low of 22% in 2003 and rising slightly to 25% in 2007.
- » The federal government hovered between 10-20% until 2002, when it climbed to 30%—the same percentage as local government at the time. It eventually

reached a peak of 31% in 2003, after which it declined sharply to 14% in 2007. Again, this spike is probably attributed to increases in government attention after 9/11.

» It is interesting to note that this result echoes the findings of a study done by Cole and Kincaid (2000), in which the Bruskin/Goldring Research group conducted a survey of 1,000 adults and found that in 1999, “the public regarded their local governments as providing them with the most for their tax money”(190).

LEAST FAIR TAX

The question “Which tax do you think is the least fair?” has been included in all of the Idaho Public Policy Surveys except for the first one in 1990 and the most recent one, 2008. The options included with the question were the federal income tax, local property tax, state sales tax, state income tax, and federal payroll tax.



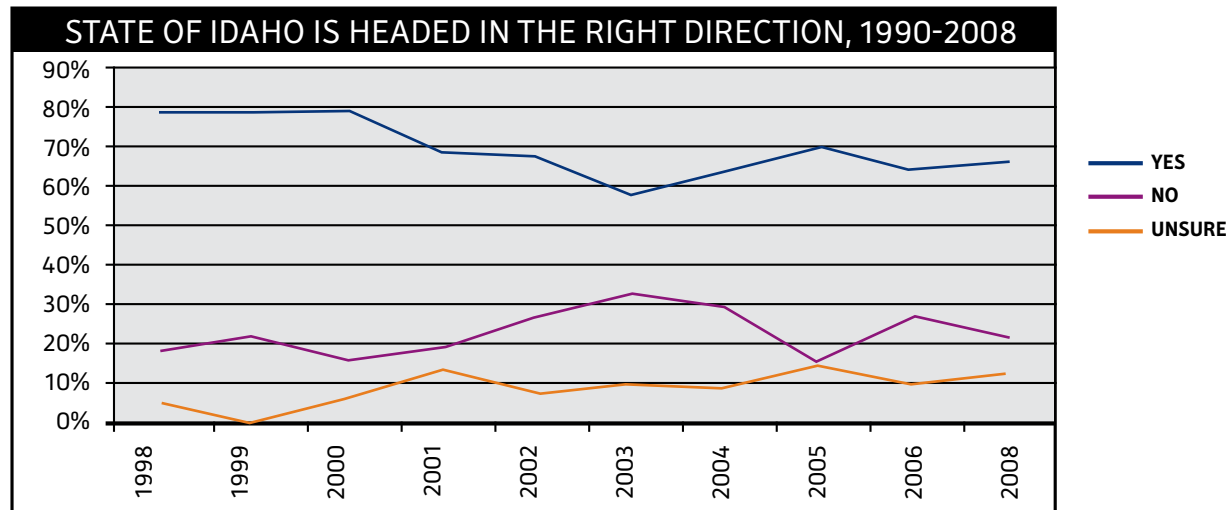
» From the beginning of the survey until 2000, the federal income tax was consistently believed to be the least fair tax. In 2001, the local property tax rose to the top and has remained there ever since. The federal income tax saw a dramatic increase in the number of respondents who perceived it as least fair in 2000, rising from 39% in 1999 to a high of 60% in 2000. At the same time, the number of respondents who felt that the local property tax was the least fair decreased dramatically from 38% in 1999 to 7% in 2000.

» In 2004, federal payroll tax began to appear in significant amounts as a candidate for least fair tax. In 2007 it rose to the second least fair tax, according to Idaho respondents, climbing above state sales tax and income tax. In 2006, 18% of respondents indicated that they believed all taxes to be equally unfair, and 12.4% of the respondents felt that none of the taxes were unfair. In 2007, the number of respondents who believed that all taxes are unfair remained at 18%, but the number of respondents who believe that no taxes were unfair climbed to 20%.

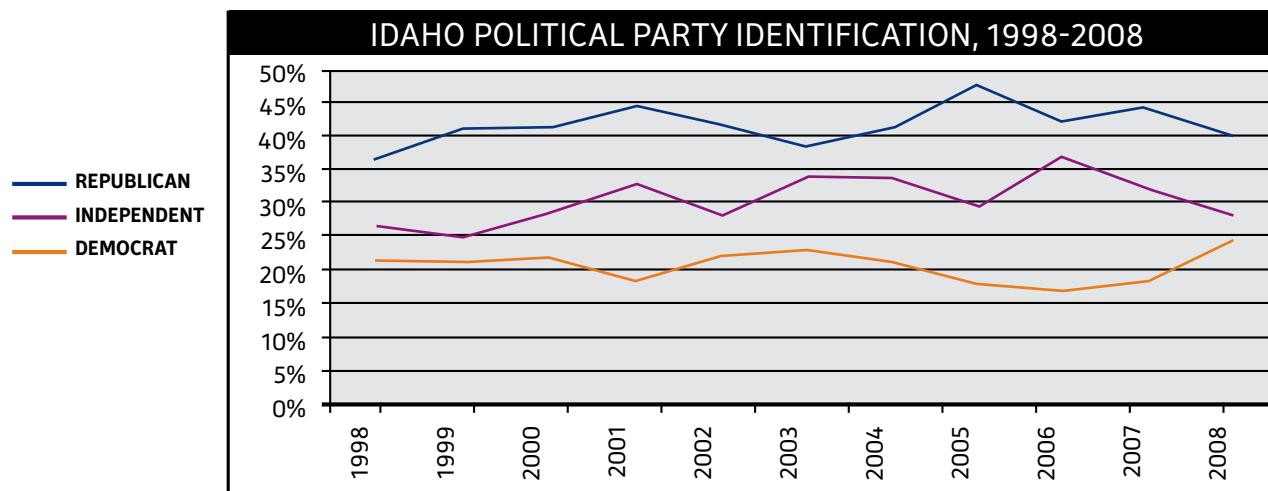
- » This result also reflects the finding of the Cole and Kincaid (2000) survey, which found that in 1999, the federal income tax was found to be the least fair, followed closely by the local property tax (194).

IS IDAHO HEADED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

The question “In your opinion, do you think the state of Idaho is headed in the right direction?” first appeared on the Annual Idaho Public Policy Survey in 1998. Since then, the majority of respondents have indicated that they believe that Idaho is heading in the right direction.



- » In 2000, the percentage of respondents who answered “yes” to the question peaked at 79%. Over the next three years, the number of “yes” responders dropped 21 percentage points to 58% in 2003. Over the next five years, the percent of respondents who indicated that Idaho is headed in the right direction increased 8 points to 66% in 2008, a figure that is 12 points below the 78% indicated in the first survey report in 1998.
- » The percentage of respondents who indicated that they did not believe Idaho is headed in the right direction reached a high of 32% in 2003. Over the next five years, this percentage has decreased to 21%, four points higher than the original vote of 17% in 1998.
- » The percent of respondents who voted that they were unsure whether or not Idaho is headed in the right direction began at 5% in 1998 and peaked at 15% in 2005. “Unsure” respondent percentage was at 13% in 2009.



PARTY AFFILIATION

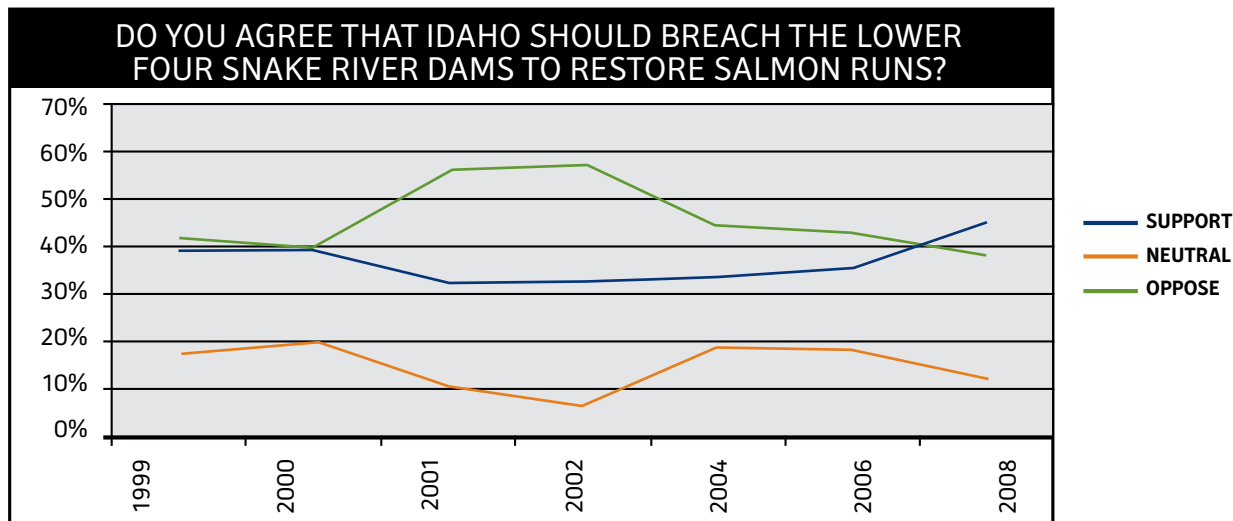
Respondents to the Annual Idaho Public Policy Survey have been asked the question “Do you consider yourself to be a...?” every year since 1998, with possible answers being Republican, Independent, or Democrat.

- » The plurality of respondents has consistently identified itself as Republicans. The percent of respondents identifying themselves as Republicans has always been above 35%, reaching a high of 47% in 2005 and falling to 40% in 2008.
- » The percentage of respondents who identified themselves as Independents has remained between 25-36%, with the high of 36% occurring in 2006. In 2008 the percentage of respondents who identified themselves as Independents decreased to 28%.
- » The percentage of respondents who identified themselves as Democrats fluctuated around 20%, climbing to 25% in 2008.

SLAKE RIVER DAMS

The question “Do you agree that Idaho should breach the lower 4 Snake River dams to restore salmon runs?” first appeared on the Public Policy Survey in 1999. It has appeared on the survey in various forms ever since. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they supported, were neutral, or opposed.

- » In 1999 when the question first appeared on the survey, similar percentages of the respondents indicated that they supported (40%) and opposed (41%) the measure. Support for the measure began to decline thereafter until it reached a low of 32% in 2002. It gradually increased to 45% in 2008.
- » Opposition to the measure peaked in 2002 at 58%, then declined gradually to 39% in 2008, below the percentage of respondents who indicated that they were in support of the measure.
- » Neutral respondents have hovered near 20% from the first iteration until 2008, when they dropped to 12%.



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