

New North Political and Consumer Confidence Survey

Survey Information

- New North region: population of all 18 counties: 1,228,982
- Random selection, landline and cell telephone survey
- Number of adult New North respondents: 538 interviewed October-November 2011
- Margin of error: +/- 5% at the 95% confidence level

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Major Findings:

Partisan Polarization

Like much of the rest of the nation, Northeast Wisconsin is highly polarized. Self-identified Republicans and Democrats took opposing positions on every issue in our survey, from the question of which party can better manage state government to which party will do a better job of keeping the state prosperous. Extreme partisan differences also appear on the questions about the performance of the state's governor and legislature, the right direction for Wisconsin and the merits of recall elections for holding public officials accountable. The response of independent, undecided and other respondents was more diverse and moderate.

Uncertainty and Third Party Support

Northeast Wisconsin residents expressed a great deal of uncertainty. More than one-third (36 percent) of respondents indicated no support for either major party. These independent, other and undecided residents also gave mixed responses on the issues. Dissatisfaction with partisan politics in Wisconsin might be best expressed by the surprising support for another party option. Both the Democrats and Independents in our survey gave majority support for having a major Third Party in this country. Only the Republican respondents were generally satisfied with the present two-party competition.

Republican Confidence Advantage

Not surprisingly in this Republican-leaning region, there was a Republican Party advantage in the response to most of the issues with those respondents expressing no support to either major party (36 percent) showing somewhat greater confidence in the capabilities and positions of the Republican Party and its leaders. With these respondents, the GOP has a clear advantage on the eight questions about which party can best: manage state government, handle the economy, bring about needed change, control crime, select better candidates, govern honestly, cope with problems and keep the state prosperous. The Democratic Party's only strength was on the issue of the ability to promote quality education. Neither party had much advantage at all on the three questions about handling health care and transportation needs or concern for the values of people like themselves.

Disapproval of the Governor, Democrats and Legislative Process

Many Northeast Wisconsin residents are dissatisfied with both the governor and members of the state legislature. Governor Walker's approval rating in the Northeast now is only 44 percent, and the legislative Democrats' is even lower at just 32 percent. While a plurality of respondents (43 percent) say that they think that the policies enacted by Republicans in the legislature have moved Wisconsin in the right direction, they also say that they favor "divided government" with half of those surveyed asserting that it is unhealthy for one political party to control both the governorship and both houses of the state legislature.

Negative Reaction to Recall

Governor Walker is clearly a polarizing figure: 82 percent of Democrats either disapprove or strongly disapprove of his performance while 85 percent of Republicans either approve or strongly approve. Nevertheless, nearly half (46 percent) of those surveyed view the use of recall elections negatively as a means to hold elected officials accountable. A recall election seems likely though because three of five (60 percent) of the Democratic respondents view recall elections positively.

Economic Issues Dominant

The economy dominates both national and statewide issue concerns. Our survey shows that four issues -- jobs (39 percent), education (22 percent), welfare (15 percent) and taxes (10 percent) -- dominate the problems that New North residents see facing the state. Issues like gun control, crime, gay marriage, highway and infrastructure and other lesser issues that are currently receiving attention in Madison hold little interest for respondents. Collective bargaining is only a primary concern for a small minority (11 percent) of the Democrats in the sample. If our survey is correct, three issues -- the economy (56 percent), health care (12 percent) and the deficit (12 percent) -- will decide the 2012 election in Northeast Wisconsin. Very few respondents say that social and international issues will be critical to their vote for president.

Modest Consumer Optimism

Concern over the state of Wisconsin's economy can be found in the response to our market questions. Over a third (35 percent) of those surveyed say that they are worse off financially than they were a year ago. However, 62 percent say that they are either better off or no worse off. Looking ahead, three-fourths (77 percent) of our respondents indicate that they expect to be either better off or about the same while less than one in five (18 percent) anticipate harder times. Over half of those surveyed (53 percent) say that it is either a good time to buy major household items or neither a good nor bad time to buy them. There is none of the partisan divisions over issues like financial hardship or consumer confidence that we find in most of the other questions in this survey.

High Quality of Life

On one thing most of our respondents can agree: Northeast Wisconsin is a great place to live. Over nine out of ten (92 percent) of those surveyed say that the quality of life in the New North communities where they live is either good or excellent. Just 5 percent say it is poor and almost no one says that their communities are very poor.