

THE CLIMATE OF OPINION IN ILLINOIS 2008–2019: GRIDLOCK BROKEN?

BY JOHN S. JACKSON, CHARLES W. LEONARD, AND SHILOH L. DEITZ
PAUL SIMON PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE,
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY CARBONDALE

This article summarizes select results of the statewide polls of Illinois' citizens conducted by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute over the course of 12 years. The results offer insights into public sentiment about some of the most prominent issues facing the state, including potential tax and revenue sources, spending issues, and programs to support and potentially cut, many of which voters will face in upcoming elections. Analysis also shows that the relationship between ideology and attitudes is growing, which points to a deepening divide among the electorate.

The Paul Simon Public Policy Institute periodically polls residents on important questions related to public policy, government, and politics in Illinois. The Simon Poll asks questions based on issues that constitute the state and national agenda, as well as items that are perennial matters of public discourse. This allows the institute to provide a snapshot of current public opinion and longitudinal data on continuity and changes in mass opinion over time.

The empirical data presented in this article are drawn from a larger paper by the same title (Paper #56 in the *Simon Review*, July 2019). By seeking to concisely summarize 12 years of polling statewide (15 polls in all), this paper is ambitious in orientation. The larger paper and our entire polling archive are available electronically on our website: paulsimoninstitute.org. Most polls had 1,000 respondents and a $\pm 3.1\%$ margin of error. It is important to note that our recent polls use a random digit dialing sample, including 60% cell phones and 40% landlines. All respondents are interviewed via personal phone calls. Spanish language interviews are available, if requested. The interviewing period is one week in duration. In the years with only one survey, it was typically administered in February and March just ahead of the primary, if there was one that year. If there were two surveys, the second one was done in late September and the first half of October and was to be finished and reported before the upcoming general election. Interviews are designed to last no more than 20 minutes. To our knowledge, the Simon Poll is the largest collection of public

opinion data from the State of Illinois. Certainly, it is the largest collection of polls covering recent years in Illinois.

We discuss reporting on the polls in a historical and conceptual context. The historical context includes which governor was in office at the time of the poll and what the relationship was like between the governor and the General Assembly. Understanding whether the government was unified or divided provides important information about policy successes and the governor's overall ability to govern.

THE GRADUATED (OR PROGRESSIVE) INCOME TAX

The election of Governor JB Pritzker, a Democrat, in 2018 shifted the direction of state policy. There is no question that Governor Pritzker is a progressive. During his campaign, he advocated for a range of issues that Democrats have discussed for years and added some new plans of his own to the platform. His most notable proposal and advocacy is to dramatically change the basic revenue system by adoption of a constitutional amendment to switch Illinois from a flat rate income tax system to a graduated or progressive tax system. If adopted, this would be the most fundamental change since Republican Governor Richard Ogilvie led the adoption of the personal income tax system in 1969.

Pritzker also supports a significant expansion of gambling, legalizing recreational marijuana, raising the minimum wage, implementing state protections for abortion rights, and instituting a new capital improvements plan. The various Simon Polls since 2008 have included multiple questions directly or indirectly addressing many of these issues, some of which are reported in this paper. That agenda will continue to dominate our state's political dialogue during the 2020 elections because the graduated income tax proposal will be on the ballot.

There will also be tens of millions of dollars spent on both sides to convince the Illinois voters that this measure will either lead the state to economic ruin, as some Republicans say, or will be one key to continued prosperity and success for the state's future, as many Democrats and Governor Pritzker claim. This debate will be a great natural experiment on the powers of a campaign, big money, and big media to convince the Illinois public to support one side or the other in this referendum.

Fortunately, the Simon Poll has baseline data, plus trend line data through spring 2019, which can be used to mark the beginning of that campaign. In later polls, we will show the impact of the campaign on public opinion.

TABLE 1

PERCENT FAVORING GRADUATED INCOME TAX BY POLITICAL PARTY

| | | 2008 | 2015 | 2016 ^a | 2017 | 2018 ^a | 2018 ^b | 2019 |
|--------------------|--------------|------|------|-------------------|------|-------------------|-------------------|------|
| Favor | Total | 65% | 66% | 66% | 72% | 72% | 67% | 67% |
| | Democrats | 79% | 80% | 83% | 87% | 86% | 87% | 88% |
| | Republicans | 49% | 50% | 44% | 55% | 51% | 42% | 43% |
| | Independents | 60% | 65% | 68% | 71% | 69% | 57% | 65% |
| Oppose | Total | 29% | 28% | 28% | 24% | 24% | 26% | 31% |
| | Democrats | 16% | 16% | 12% | 10% | 11% | 9% | 10% |
| | Republicans | 46% | 45% | 51% | 42% | 44% | 51% | 55% |
| | Independents | 31% | 28% | 27% | 26% | 27% | 34% | 31% |
| Do not know | Total | 5% | 6% | 6% | 4% | 4% | 7% | 2% |
| | Democrats | 4% | 4% | 4% | 3% | 3% | 5% | 1% |
| | Republicans | 5% | 5% | 5% | 3% | 4% | 7% | 2% |
| | Independents | 8% | 7% | 5% | 3% | 4% | 10% | 4% |

The idea of a graduated income tax has been widely popular; that is, it had a 65%–72% overall statewide approval between 2008 and 2019 (Table 1). The idea has been especially popular among the Democrats, polling in the 79%–88% range. It was even initially popular among Republicans, where support ranged from 42% to 55%. Note that the proposal was at 55%, the highest ever among Republicans, in 2017. After this, Republican support declined in 2018 and 2019, when it became “Pritzker’s Plan.” This shift among Republicans likely traces, at least in part to, the power of partisan politicizing.

Independents are between the two partisan groups, but they are closer to the Democrats than to the Republicans on this issue.

If the vote were taken today, the progressive income tax proposal would probably pass handily. The vote, however, will not take place until November 3, 2020, and a lot can happen politically before then.

MILLIONAIRE TAX

A closely related idea to the progressive income tax—putting a surtax on taxpayers who have an annual taxable income of \$1,000,000 or more—has been around for a while. A proposal for this form of taxation was placed on the ballot as an advisory referendum in the 2014 general election. This proposal is, in effect, a slice off the top bracket of the progressive income tax idea. The referendum passed with 60% support.

TABLE 2

PERCENT SUPPORT FOR MILLIONAIRE TAX BY POLITICAL PARTY

| | | 2014b | 2015 | 2016a | 2017 | 2018a | 2018b | 2019 |
|-------------|--------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Favor | Total | 68% | 76% | 75% | 78% | 76% | 74% | 71% |
| | Democrats | 84% | 86% | 88% | 90% | 88% | 88% | 90% |
| | Republicans | 41% | 63% | 56% | 63% | 60% | 53% | 51% |
| | Independents | 66% | 72% | 77% | 83% | 72% | 74% | 69% |
| Oppose | Total | 28% | 21% | 23% | 19% | 21% | 21% | 27% |
| | Democrats | 13% | 11% | 10% | 8% | 11% | 9% | 9% |
| | Republicans | 55% | 34% | 42% | 33% | 36% | 41% | 47% |
| | Independents | 27% | 25% | 22% | 15% | 27% | 21% | 27% |
| Do not know | Total | 5% | 3% | 2% | 3% | 3% | 5% | 2% |
| | Democrats | 3% | 2% | 2% | 2% | 1% | 3% | 1% |
| | Republicans | 5% | 3% | 1% | 3% | 4% | 6% | 2% |
| | Independents | 7% | 3% | 1% | 2% | 1% | 5% | 4% |

Approval of this form of taxation has also been quite high in the Simon Poll results. The overall support level ranged from 68% to 78% (Table 2). Unsurprisingly, the support levels were different by party. It has consistently been above 80% for Democrats and even reached 90% in 2019, when we conducted our most recent poll.

Support for a millionaire tax ranged from 66% to 83% for Independents. It was the lowest among the Republicans, with a range from 41% to 63% support. Even for Republicans, however, support far exceeded a simple majority and was above 60% in most polls.

EXPANDING GAMBLING

Proposals to expand legal gambling to increase tax revenues have been debated since at least the turn of the 21st century. Many cities and jurisdictions have wanted to cash in on some form of gambling. Most notably, many of Chicago’s public officials have long wanted a casino. Critics reasonably asked the following: Why has Metropolis, a community of 6,537 people in deep southern Illinois, had a casino for well over two decades while Chicago still has none? Chicago has suffered significant budget deficits and the city’s officials have been looking for new revenue for at least two decades. In addition, the state has needed the money, as did many other cities and counties that would also get a cut of the revenue from expanded gambling.

TABLE 3

PERCENT SUPPORT FOR EXPANDING GAMBLING BY POLITICAL PARTY

| | | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2013 | 2014 ^a | 2015 | 2016 ^a | 2017 | 2018 ^a | 2018 ^b | 2019 |
|-------------|--------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------------------|------|-------------------|------|-------------------|-------------------|------|
| Favor | Total | 42% | 47% | 50% | 57% | 50% | 53% | 53% | 50% | 55% | 49% | 51% | 57% |
| | Democrats | 45% | 48% | 53% | 60% | 55% | 58% | 54% | 51% | 54% | 52% | 52% | 59% |
| | Republicans | 41% | 36% | 48% | 53% | 45% | 47% | 50% | 50% | 54% | 47% | 51% | 57% |
| | Independents | 44% | 51% | 51% | 59% | 42% | 56% | 54% | 47% | 55% | 48% | 48% | 54% |
| Oppose | Total | 52% | 53% | 46% | 39% | 44% | 44% | 43% | 46% | 41% | 46% | 42% | 40% |
| | Democrats | 51% | 51% | 43% | 36% | 40% | 40% | 42% | 44% | 42% | 44% | 39% | 38% |
| | Republicans | 52% | 64% | 50% | 43% | 50% | 50% | 46% | 47% | 43% | 49% | 46% | 41% |
| | Independents | 50% | 48% | 43% | 37% | 53% | 38% | 41% | 52% | 38% | 44% | 46% | 43% |
| Do not know | Total | 6% | 0% | 4% | 4% | 6% | 4% | 5% | 4% | 4% | 6% | 7% | 3% |
| | Democrats | 4% | 1% | 4% | 4% | 6% | 2% | 4% | 5% | 4% | 4% | 8% | 3% |
| | Republicans | 6% | 0% | 2% | 4% | 5% | 3% | 3% | 4% | 2% | 4% | 3% | 2% |
| | Independents | 6% | 0% | 6% | 4% | 5% | 6% | 4% | 1% | 8% | 8% | 6% | 3% |

Support for expanding gambling in Illinois started at 42% and 47%, respectively, in our first two polls, taken in 2008 and 2009. It then increased to 50% and 57% during the following two years. In the nine years since 2010, support has been above the majority with the lone exception of the 49% observed in 2018. In fact, the 57% recorded in 2019 was the highest level this item has garnered since 2011.

On average, Democrats have been more likely to support expanding gambling. Since 2015, support from both partisan groups has been at or above 50%, with Democrats at 59% and Republicans at 57% in the 2019 polls. This was near the highest level ever for both partisan groups. Independents lagged behind slightly at 54%.

At the start of 2019, expanding gambling seemed to be an idea whose time had come; the new Pritzker administration supported the bill, and it passed late in the spring legislative session. Of course, gambling can lead to addiction, and there are definitely social costs involved. The bill that passed in the spring legislative session required that some money be set aside to study and remedy some of those social costs. In addition, a number of other legal and logistical questions have to be settled, especially for the casino in Chicago.

THE UNPOPULAR LIST

Over the years, we have also tracked a number of potential revenue sources garnering less public support. These include taxes on retirement income, services, and gasoline.

TAXING RETIREMENT INCOME

Taxing retirement income has been a perennial topic of debate on the public agenda since before we started the Simon Poll. Illinois is one of only three states that does not levy the state income tax on income from public retirement systems. This is a great benefit to retirees, many of whom retire on relatively low incomes and who forego some of their current pay benefits to receive this retirement income exemption. Not surprisingly, the exemption for retirement income has long been contentious. Repealing it is not a very popular idea.

Statewide support for eliminating the exemption has consistently been in the 21%–24% range over the years of our polling, while opposition has been in the 70%–74% range. In our most recent 2019 poll, support was 23% and

opposition was 73%. The unpopularity of taxing retirement income extends across all partisan categories. Not surprisingly, this proposal is not on Governor Pritzker's list of possible revenue sources.

TAXING A BROADER RANGE OF SERVICES

Illinois taxes only 17 services. The average is 56 in other states. Certain states tax 168 service categories. Many good government and civic think tanks in Illinois have advocated changes to service taxation as one way to solve the structural deficit problem (Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, 2015; Civic Federation, 2019). Their analyses suggest that our tax system has not kept pace with the fundamental changes to a service economy.

The idea is largely unpopular among the general public, however; in our 2019 poll, only 36% favored and 61% opposed. This proposal was less favored and more opposed by Republicans and Independents than by Democrats.

RAISING THE MOTOR FUEL TAX

During the time we were polling, the proposal to raise the state's Motor Fuel Tax was generally not very popular. Support for this proposal ranged from 26% to 42%.

In our March 2019 poll, a far higher proportion of Republicans were opposed to a gas tax increase than Democrats, although Democratic support only reached a majority in 2018 and 2019. Nevertheless, the General Assembly passed a new capital bill on June 2, 2019, with a 19-cents-per-gallon increase in the state's Motor Fuel Tax. Supporters said it was the only way to get a capital bill, which the state had not had in 10 years. It passed with remarkable bipartisan support and was one of Pritzker's largest victories. Many regarded this as an example of political leaders rising to the challenge of doing something they think is right for the long-term interests of the state, despite it being unpopular.

TABLE 4

PERCENT SUPPORT FOR RAISING GAS TAX BY POLITICAL PARTY

| | | 2015 | 2016 ^a | 2017 | 2018 ^a | 2018 ^b | 2019 |
|-------------|--------------|------|-------------------|------|-------------------|-------------------|------|
| Favor | Total | 26% | 41% | 42% | 42% | 35% | 37% |
| | Democrats | 34% | 47% | 49% | 50% | 46% | 50% |
| | Republicans | 18% | 32% | 35% | 36% | 25% | 26% |
| | Independents | 25% | 44% | 41% | 34% | 29% | 32% |
| Oppose | Total | 72% | 56% | 56% | 57% | 60% | 61% |
| | Democrats | 64% | 49% | 48% | 49% | 49% | 48% |
| | Republicans | 81% | 66% | 63% | 63% | 74% | 72% |
| | Independents | 74% | 53% | 56% | 64% | 63% | 66% |
| Do not know | Total | 2% | 3% | 2% | 1% | 5% | 2% |
| | Democrats | 2% | 3% | 3% | 1% | 4% | 2% |
| | Republicans | 1% | 1% | 2% | 1% | 1% | 2% |
| | Independents | 1% | 3% | 3% | 1% | 8% | 2% |

In 2015, the question asked, “Would you favor or oppose raising the state gasoline tax by 10 cents per gallon?” However, in 2016, the question asked about a general gas tax increase.

IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL PARTY IDENTITY

Political science research going back 60 years shows that party and ideological identification are the two most important independent variables affecting how people see the political world and how voters behave (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002). Of course, we the people—the voters—are deeply divided or polarized, both ideologically and in our partisanship (Bishop, 2008; Gelman, 2008).

Perhaps more importantly, the political leaders—those in public office and influential party activists who constitute the core of both the Democratic and Republican parties—are especially polarized (Heatherton, 2001). Our data, which offers a longitudinal view of Illinois voters from 2008 through spring 2019, show that there is both continuity and some change in their attitudes and beliefs.

The most notable constant is how geography and region divide Illinois. The most profound differences are between rural and urban voters and between Chicago and downstate voters. The collar counties around Chicago hold the balance of power in Illinois and will hold it again in the 2020 election. Although the data are not shown here (refer to our online data for details), these regional differences appear markedly on both ideology and partisanship.

IDEOLOGY

In the 2010 survey, 27% of respondents identified themselves as being very or somewhat liberal, compared to 40%, who were very or somewhat conservative (Table 5). However, by 2018, liberals had caught up and surpassed conservatives in number.

TABLE 5
PERCENT OF RESIDENTS BY IDEOLOGY/POLITICAL LEANING

| | VERY LIBERAL | SOMEWHAT LIBERAL | MODERATE | SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE | VERY CONSERVATIVE | OTHER/DO NOT KNOW |
|-------|---------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2010 | 7% | 20% | 27% | 25% | 15% | 6% |
| 2011 | 8% | 17% | 34% | 24% | 11% | 5% |
| 2012 | 9% | 23% | 26% | 25% | 13% | 4% |
| 2013 | 11% | 24% | 26% | 23% | 10% | 7% |
| 2014a | 10% | 20% | 29% | 24% | 14% | 4% |
| 2014b | 13% | 23% | 27% | 22% | 10% | 5% |
| 2015 | 11% | 21% | 26% | 24% | 12% | 6% |
| 2016a | 12% | 21% | 28% | 22% | 11% | 6% |
| 2016b | 13% | 22% | 29% | 22% | 12% | 4% |
| 2017 | 13% | 22% | 28% | 24% | 10% | 4% |
| 2018a | 14% | 23% | 26% | 21% | 12% | 4% |
| 2018b | 15% | 20% | 28% | 20% | 12% | 4% |
| 2019 | 12% | 20% | 26% | 21% | 16% | 5% |

The question asked was, “Generally speaking, in politics today, do you consider yourself very liberal?”

Our first poll in 2018 found that 37% identified as liberal compared to 33% who identified as conservative. Our second poll that year, however, showed 35% liberal and 32% conservative. This represented a marked change since 2010 when, as previously noted, 27% of voters identified as liberal and 40% identified as conservative. Liberals increased by 10% over this period while conservatives declined by 7%. Our 2019 poll shows a strong swing in the conservative direction, but it may be an outlier. The swing showed 32% liberal and 37% conservative.

We do not think the change in residents' attitudes in a liberal direction is an irreversible trend, but it is certainly more closely in line with the country as a whole. For many years, the country's populace self-identified as being more conservative than liberal by about 2:1 (usually around 40%–20%). More recently, national polls have shown liberals catching up, although they have not closed the gap entirely. A Gallup poll taken the same month as our Illinois poll found 35% were conservative and 26% were liberal (Gallup Poll, 2019).

In the March 2019 Gallup poll, 35% identified as moderate. That is one data point on the side of those who argue that the Democrats seeking to unseat Donald Trump must nominate a candidate who appeals to moderates in the 2020 presidential election.

PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Democrats clearly have the initial advantage in Illinois. These results show that Democrats significantly outnumber Republicans in Illinois, whether we are examining strong or weak partisans and Independents who lean toward one party or another. This is, of course, expected in a traditionally blue state with a major city similar to Chicago, where the Democratic Party tradition is quite strong. As Table 6 shows, starting with our first poll taken in 2008, 45% of respondents said that they were either “Strong Democrats” (24%), “Weak Democrats” (10%), or “Democrat-leaning Independents” (11%).

Looking at the Republican side, 11% claimed to be “Strong Republicans,” and an identical 11% claimed “Weak Republican” identification, leaving another 10% who were “Republican-leaning Independents,” for a total of 32% in all Republican categories. This shows a 13% disadvantage for Republicans compared to Democrats.

TABLE 6

PARTY IDENTIFICATION OF RESPONDENTS

| | STRONG DEMOCRAT | MILD DEMOCRAT | DEMOCRAT-LEANING INDEPENDENT | PURE INDEPENDENT | REPUBLICAN-LEANING INDEPENDENT | MILE REPUBLICAN | STRONG REPUBLICAN | OTHER/ DO NOT KNOW |
|-------|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| 2008 | 24% | 10% | 11% | 9% | 10% | 11% | 11% | 15% |
| 2009 | 22% | 11% | 11% | 4% | 11% | 10% | 12% | 19% |
| 2010 | 18% | 9% | 13% | 18% | 11% | 8% | 14% | 8% |
| 2011 | 22% | 8% | 14% | 19% | 11% | 9% | 11% | 5% |
| 2012 | 26% | 13% | 13% | 8% | 12% | 10% | 14% | 8% |
| 2013 | 26% | 13% | 13% | 10% | 9% | 10% | 13% | 8% |
| 2014a | 23% | 13% | 12% | 6% | 14% | 8% | 14% | 10% |
| 2014b | 27% | 9% | 12% | 17% | 8% | 8% | 11% | 9% |
| 2015 | 22% | 10% | 15% | 15% | 12% | 7% | 10% | 10% |
| 2016a | 23% | 9% | 15% | 12% | 13% | 7% | 12% | 9% |
| 2016b | 27% | 10% | 11% | 13% | 11% | 8% | 12% | 8% |
| 2017 | 21% | 10% | 15% | 12% | 14% | 8% | 11% | 10% |
| 2018a | 22% | 8% | 20% | 14% | 12% | 6% | 12% | 7% |
| 2018b | 27% | 8% | 14% | 15% | 11% | 4% | 12% | 8% |
| 2019 | 22% | 8% | 14% | 15% | 12% | 7% | 14% | 8% |

The question asked was, “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?”

The 2008 poll also found that only 9% of Illinois voters were “Pure Independents”; that is, they did not lean either way, consistently split their tickets in voting, and exhibited no real attachment to either party. This group grew to 15% “Pure Independents” in 2018 and 2019.

PARTY IDENTIFICATION AT THE STATE VS. NATIONAL LEVEL

In general, the Democrats are in a better position in Illinois than they are nationally. This fits the classification of Illinois as a blue state, especially in

presidential elections. National polls for comparable data indicate that 26% of the American public identifies as Republican if only the strong and weak categories of party identification are included, compared to 30% for the Democrats and 42% Independents (Gallup Poll, March 2019).

This is the reason many election experts argue that the Democrats (or the Republicans) nationally have to nominate a candidate who can appeal to the middle, or the more moderate and Independent voters, to win in November. Appealing just to the base will not work for either party, no matter their turnout level.

LONGITUDINAL COMPARISONS FOR ILLINOIS

On a longitudinal basis, by 2012, 52% of respondents identified as being Democrats while 36% identified as being Republican—giving the former a 16% advantage. This advantage held steadily through 2019 with 44% in the three Democratic categories and 33% in the Republican categories. Essentially, the share of Democrats and Republicans has returned to levels roughly the same as those 2008 (Democrats polled at 44% in 2019 compared to 45% in 2008, and Republicans polled at 33% in 2019 compared to 32% in 2008).

THE ROOTS OF GRIDLOCK: THE 2016 PAPER

When we wrote *The Climate of Opinion in Illinois 2008–2016*, our state was in the depths of legislative gridlock between Governor Rauner and the General Assembly. That paper's subtitle, *The Roots of Gridlock*, summarized the conundrum that motivated us to write the paper based on the evaluation of our extensive polling data. In the end, Illinois went two years without adopting a formal budget, which is the most fundamental function a government must perform. There were multiple disruptions in governmental services and reductions in programs. The *Roots of Gridlock* paper explores the genesis of the state's structural budgeting problem and the gridlock that resulted from the inability of Governor Rauner and the Democrats in the General Assembly to reach an agreement on how to handle their differences.

A synoptic account of the argument of the earlier paper was that people in general do not like paying taxes and that they are usually vehemently opposed to raising taxes. Nevertheless, they do not want their services cut. When you give the voters a list of specific services to cut, those which constitute the biggest part of the budget, they oppose cutting most programs by wide margins.

The Simon Poll has posed the same question regarding how to deal with the state’s chronic budgetary problems each year. Respondents are asked if they favor making spending cuts only, raising new revenue, or doing both (Table 7).

TABLE 7

PERCENT SUPPORT FOR BUDGET DEFICIT STRATEGIES BY POLITICAL PARTY

| | | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2013 | 2014a | 2014b | 2015 | 2016a | 2016b | 2017 | 2018a | 2018b | 2019 |
|--|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Cuts | Total | 57% | 57% | 58% | 55% | 52% | 43% | 42% | 47% | 44% | 45% | 51% | 45% | 52% |
| | Democrats | 49% | 49% | 42% | 44% | 43% | 35% | 35% | 36% | 32% | 34% | 39% | 36% | 36% |
| | Republicans | 69% | 68% | 75% | 70% | 63% | 55% | 51% | 60% | 61% | 60% | 70% | 62% | 70% |
| | Independents | 56% | 53% | 68% | 58% | 57% | 46% | 47% | 50% | 44% | 45% | 53% | 42% | 54% |
| Both Accepting Cuts and Raising Revenues | Total | 27% | 27% | 29% | 29% | 29% | 32% | 34% | 33% | 33% | 35% | 28% | 26% | 28% |
| | Democrats | 30% | 30% | 37% | 36% | 33% | 35% | 37% | 36% | 38% | 38% | 31% | 29% | 35% |
| | Republicans | 24% | 23% | 19% | 22% | 25% | 28% | 35% | 32% | 27% | 29% | 22% | 20% | 22% |
| | Independents | 28% | 32% | 24% | 26% | 25% | 36% | 27% | 34% | 41% | 39% | 34% | 35% | 25% |
| Raising Revenues | Total | 10% | 9% | 7% | 8% | 10% | 16% | 14% | 10% | 12% | 11% | 10% | 12% | 10% |
| | Democrats | 14% | 14% | 12% | 11% | 14% | 18% | 18% | 16% | 17% | 18% | 17% | 18% | 17% |
| | Republicans | 4% | 4% | 2% | 2% | 7% | 14% | 9% | 4% | 6% | 4% | 2% | 4% | 2% |
| | Independents | 10% | 9% | 3% | 7% | 6% | 12% | 14% | 9% | 4% | 7% | 5% | 5% | 10% |
| Have Not Thought About It | Total | 3% | 3% | 3% | 5% | 5% | 5% | 3% | 4% | 5% | 4% | 6% | 6% | 4% |
| | Democrats | 4% | 4% | 4% | 5% | 7% | 6% | 4% | 5% | 6% | 4% | 8% | 6% | 5% |
| | Republicans | 2% | 2% | 2% | 3% | 3% | 1% | 3% | 3% | 2% | 4% | 3% | 6% | 3% |
| | Independents | 3% | 2% | 2% | 2% | 5% | 4% | 3% | 4% | 4% | 2% | 3% | 6% | 3% |
| Other/Don't Know | Total | 2% | 4% | 4% | 5% | 4% | 4% | 6% | 6% | 6% | 6% | 5% | 11% | 6% |
| | Democrats | 2% | 3% | 5% | 1% | 3% | 6% | 6% | 7% | 6% | 6% | 5% | 11% | 6% |
| | Republicans | 1% | 3% | 2% | 3% | 4% | 1% | 3% | 2% | 4% | 4% | 3% | 8% | 3% |
| | Independents | 2% | 4% | 3% | 7% | 6% | 4% | 10% | 3% | 8% | 7% | 5% | 12% | 7% |

The option of selecting cuts only as the strategy for mitigating the perennial structural deficit was favored by 57% of respondents in both 2009 and 2010, then increased to 58% in 2011. Support steadily declined and dropped to 55%

in 2013 and 52% in the first poll of 2014 and stayed in the low- to mid-forties from the second poll in 2014 through 2017. Additionally, 2014 brought forth vigorous policy debate as part of the gubernatorial race. Pat Quinn’s and Bruce Rauner’s campaigns stimulated frequent discussion of the deficit and whether the 2011 income tax increase had been justified. Later, 2016 and 2017 were years of legislative gridlock and divisive battles—and a lengthy stalemate—regarding the budget. These political battles may have influenced the overall level of consciousness regarding what options were available and most practical. This debate’s effects probably carried over into the two 2018 polls and the most recent one in 2019. In general, close to a majority or somewhat over a majority (but less than 60% of the respondents) favor making cuts (including cutting waste and fraud) throughout the duration of the polls.

The option of raising new revenues, meanwhile, has attracted just 7%–16% of the respondents across all the years surveyed. In the 2019 poll, support was a mere 10%. The percent supporting both strategies has ranged from 27% to 35%. Democrats are slightly more, but not much, amenable to considering new tax revenue than Republicans. The narrowness of the gap can be seen in the categories of the “raise new revenue” and “consider both raising new revenue and making some programmatic cuts” options. The difference between Democrats and Republicans never exceeds 15%.

At the same time, Democrats are generally somewhat less likely than Republicans to believe that cuts alone would solve the problem. In the most recent survey, 36% of Democrats took that option, compared to 70% of Republicans and 54% of Independents.

FAVORING PROPOSED CUTS?

If you give voters a list of the major programs in the state budget, they generally oppose cuts in those by wide margins. Table 8 provides a synoptic overview of the poll questions about specific programs where the respondents considered cuts that could be made.

TABLE 8

PERCENT FAVORING CUTS IN VARIOUS SPENDING CATEGORIES

| | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2014 ^a | 2015 | 2016 ^a | 2017 | 2019 |
|--|------|------|------|------|-------------------|------|-------------------|------|------|
| Cuts to state spending on pension benefits for state workers' retirement | 22% | 42% | 46% | 46% | 41% | 44% | 49% | 45% | 44% |
| Cuts to state spending on natural resources, such as state parks or environmental regulation | 19% | 33% | 40% | 37% | 31% | 35% | 38% | 33% | 29% |
| Cuts to state spending on state universities | 21% | 34% | 34% | 38% | 37% | 36% | 35% | 30% | 38% |
| Cuts to public safety, such as state police and prison operations | 13% | 17% | 21% | 21% | 24% | 27% | 26% | 25% | 26% |
| Cuts to state spending on programs for poor people | 21% | 21% | 25% | 25% | 26% | 23% | 25% | 21% | 25% |
| Cuts to state spending on K–12 education | 12% | 13% | 14% | 17% | 18% | 16% | 17% | 15% | 18% |
| Cuts to state spending on programs for people with mental or physical disabilities | N/A | 12% | 12% | 12% | 15% | 13% | 15% | 11% | 13% |

It is clear that cutting the programs on this list was not a particularly popular option across all the surveys that included these questions between 2008 and 2019. The only options even in the 30%–40% approval range for potential cuts were (a) pensions for state workers, (b) spending on natural resources and parks, and (c) spending on state universities. For cutting state pensions, the approval of cuts ranged from 22% the first year to 49% in 2016 and 45% and 44% in 2017 and 2019, respectively. For the other two options, the range of those supporting cuts was from 19% and 21% to 40%, with most of the support for such cuts falling in the 30% range.

For all the rest, there is simply not much of a constituency for making program cuts. Of those listed, support for state spending on public safety, programs for poverty alleviation (programs for the poor), K–12 education, and people with mental or physical disabilities is truly impressive. These are programs with rather overwhelming support from the voters of Illinois.

SOURCES OF NEW REVENUE?

If Illinois is ever going to address its structural deficit and pay the backlog of bills already accumulated, it appears evident that some new revenue sources must be found. Table 9 offers a synoptic summary of the individual tables we reviewed earlier regarding where new revenue could be found.

TABLE 9
PERCENT FAVORING NEW REVENUE SOURCES

| | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2013 | 2014 ^a | 2014 ^b | 2015 | 2016 ^a | 2017 | 2018 ^a | 2018 ^b | 2019 |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------------------|-------------------|------|-------------------|------|-------------------|-------------------|------|
| Millionaire tax | - | - | - | - | - | - | 68% | 76% | 75% | 78% | 76% | 74% | 71% |
| Graduated income tax | 65% | - | - | - | - | - | - | 66% | 66% | 72% | 72% | 67% | 67% |
| Tax retirement income over \$50,000 | - | - | - | 43% | - | 53% | - | 56% | 54% | 55% | 52% | 43% | 59% |
| Expand gambling | 42% | 47% | 50% | 57% | 50% | 53% | - | 53% | 50% | 55% | 49% | 51% | 57% |
| Tax services | 28% | 45% | 42% | 50% | 37% | 44% | - | 49% | 45% | 36% | 39% | 36% | 36% |
| Raise gas tax | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 26% | 41% | 42% | 42% | 35% | 37% |
| Tax retirement income | - | - | - | 21% | - | 22% | - | 24% | 22% | 23% | 22% | 21% | 23% |
| Raise sales tax | 22% | 22% | 25% | 22% | - | 18% | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |

The polls did not offer all of these options in each year the surveys were conducted; however, the available results include the most important and widely discussed revenue sources being considered at the time the polls were taken. While not exhaustive, Table 9 offers a view of the potential sources of revenue on the political agenda and in the public discourse since 2015.

The top four most favored sources of new revenue have been: i) the millionaire tax, ii) the graduated income tax, iii) taxing retirement income over \$50,000 or \$100,000, and iv) expanding gambling. The top two of these options received far above majority support in each year the question was asked. The three least popular options have been: i) raising the gas tax, ii) taxing retirement income, and iii) raising the sales tax. Support for taxing retirement income and raising the sales tax has mostly been between 20% and 25%.

In the face of all of this, Governor Pritzker and the leaders of the Illinois legislature passed an ambitious package of bills through the 101st General Assembly in the spring term of 2019. It included submitting the graduated income tax to a referendum vote in 2020, specification of the brackets for the progressive tax, a large capital plan with tax increases to fund it, expanded gambling, legalization of adult-use cannabis sales, and several other important initiatives.

Thus, the name of the 2019 paper—*Gridlock Broken?*—is appropriate. For fiscal years 2020 and 2021, we can answer that yes, it has been broken. We will see what the 2020 legislative races and elections bring in public opinion before we know the prospects for Governor Pritzker and the Democrats in 2022, when Pritzker will have to run for re-election.

Illinois has had the same budget problem under governors of both parties for decades. We have not had a truly balanced budget since Republican Governor Jim Edgar left office in 1997. The state had a “structural deficit” that political leaders temporized under all other governors. This paper has explored some possibilities that have been advanced by various authorities and think tanks for addressing the very real budgetary problems Illinois has faced since the turn of the 21st century. It also shows how much the voters’ views on these matters are influenced by party and ideology.

CONCLUSION

The Simon Poll shows great continuity in public opinion in most key areas but considerable change on some issues. In a nutshell, public opinion generally moves only incrementally—and only rarely in abrupt fashion. Even modest changes in public opinion, however, can result in large changes in governmental policymaking. The Simon Poll helps show why the Illinois political landscape has been so volatile and why it will likely remain so for years to come.

John S. Jackson is professor emeritus of political science and visiting professor at the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute. Charles W. Leonard is executive director of the Grawemeyer Awards and the Grawemeyer Scholars Program at the University of Louisville. Shiloh L. Deitz is a PhD student in Geography at the University of Oregon and a visiting scholar at the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute.

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