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PUBLIC OPINION ON THE MAJOR ISSUES IN ALABAMA POLITICS

By Randolph Horn

In an election year during which all state legislators and a new governor will be selected, PARCA conducted an opinion poll to gauge public sentiments regarding important public policy challenges confronting the state and issues which have already or are likely to figure in the campaigns. PARCA identified ten issues including, the most important issue for policy makers, budget priorities, state revenue, roads and highways, gambling, constitutional reform, charter schools, Prepaid Affordable College Tuition Program (PACT), ethics in government, and government responsiveness.

The statewide survey was conducted January 4-17, 2010. Random digit dialing was used to collect a scientific sample of 529 respondents, yielding a margin of error of +/- 4.26 percent.

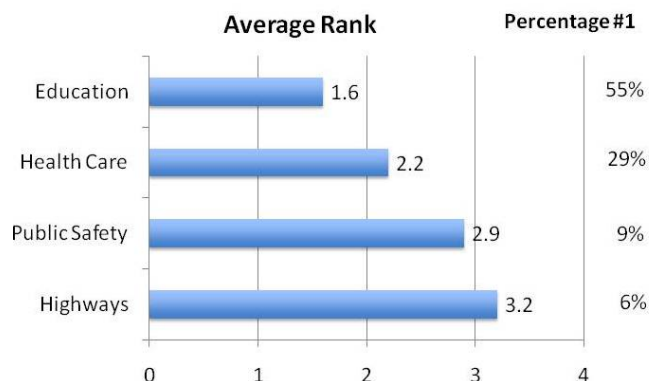
I. Most important issue for state leaders

Respondents were first asked about general policy areas that they thought should be addressed by the legislature in 2010 and by the new governor in 2011. Given the poor economic times, it should come as no surprise that jobs and the economy topped both lists as concerns of state residents. Just under one-third of residents thought the legislature should address the issue this year and two-fifths of respondents have put it on their agenda for the next governor. About one-fifth of respondents selected education as the most important issue for both legislature and governor; those with higher levels of education themselves were more likely to identify education as the most important issue than others. About 12 percent of respondents saw healthcare as something important for the state legislature to address, with women being more likely to identify this issue as most important than men. Budget issues round out respondents' agenda for the new governor; nearly eight percent see the budget shortfall or the prospect of proration

as the most important issue for the new governor to tackle. Older respondents were more likely to identify budget issues as most important than younger ones.

CHART 1

Funding Priorities for State Government



II. Budget priorities

The four largest areas of state government activity were presented to the respondents in a random order. Respondents were then asked to rank which area was most important, second most important, and so on until all four areas were ranked. Education was rated most important by nearly a three-fifths majority of respondents. No matter how the sample was sliced, education was the top priority for nearly every demographic group, region, gender, political affiliation, etc. Those with higher levels of education tended to be even more likely to identify education as a top priority than others.

Health Care earned the second highest rating. Nearly 30 percent of respondents chose health care as the most important service provided by the state. In this case there are some differences across respondent traits. Older respondents and women are more likely to rate healthcare as a higher priority than younger or male respondent. Given

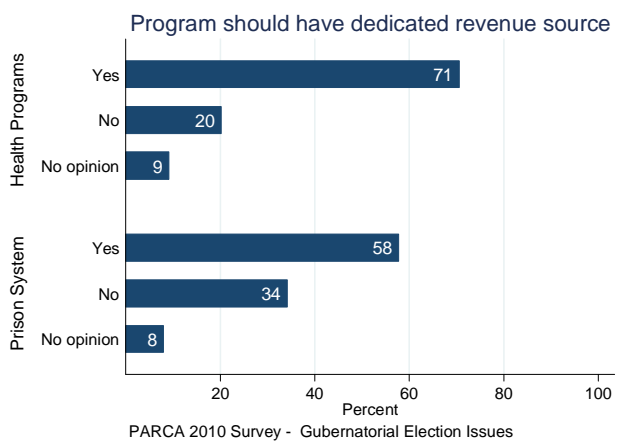
the prominence of the issue on the national agenda and the partisan nature of the national debate, it will come as no surprise that Democratic respondents tended to rate health care as a higher priority than Republicans.

Rounding out the four major areas of state government activity are public safety and highways. Nearly 10 percent of respondents identified public safety as the top priority for state government: Republicans are more likely to place a priority on public safety than others. The issue of highways fell below the other issues, with only six percent of respondents counting this as most important. Although still not a top priority, whites and men tended to rate highways more highly than others.

III. Revenue

With the state in an apparently precarious pecuniary position, respondents were asked about several issues related to revenue. For example, the survey asked if the state should dedicate sources of revenue for some state functions. More than two thirds of respondents thought the state should have a dedicated revenue stream for health care, although those with higher levels of income and education tended to be less supportive of earmarking than others. Similarly a majority supported having a dedicated revenue source for prisons. Again those with higher levels of education were marginally less supportive of earmarking revenue.

CHART 2

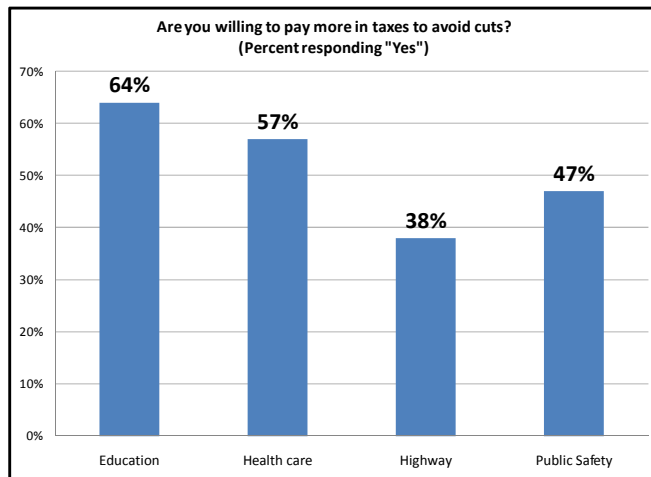


Respondents were asked if they would be willing to pay more in taxes to avoid substantial cuts in each of the four major areas of state government service. More than three-fifths said they were willing to pay more in taxes to avoid substantial cuts in education. Support was nearly uniform across all respondent traits, although support diminished with increasing attachment to the Republican Party.

A majority said they were willing to pay more in taxes to avoid substantial health care cuts. Those with higher incomes or stronger Republican attachments tended to be less willing to pay more in taxes to avoid cuts in health care services. Respondents were fairly evenly divided on their

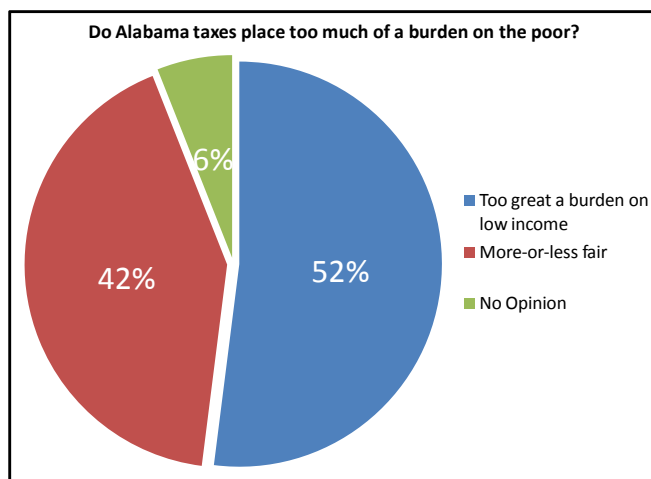
willingness to pay more in taxes to avoid substantial cuts in public safety, with no subgroup shaking off the ambivalence characteristic of the total sample on this issue. A majority of respondents and majorities in nearly every subgroup said they were not willing to pay more taxes to avoid cuts in highway building and maintenance.

CHART 3



Issues of tax fairness have been on the political agenda for several years. Respondents were asked if they thought the tax system in Alabama was more-or-less fair or if it placed too great a burden on low-income people. More respondents thought the tax system placed too great a burden on low-income people than thought it is fair (52 percent to 42 percent). A majority of those making less than \$75,000 a year thought the system placed too great a burden on the poor. Similarly, a majority of Democratic and Independent respondents held this view while Republicans are more likely to see the system as fair.

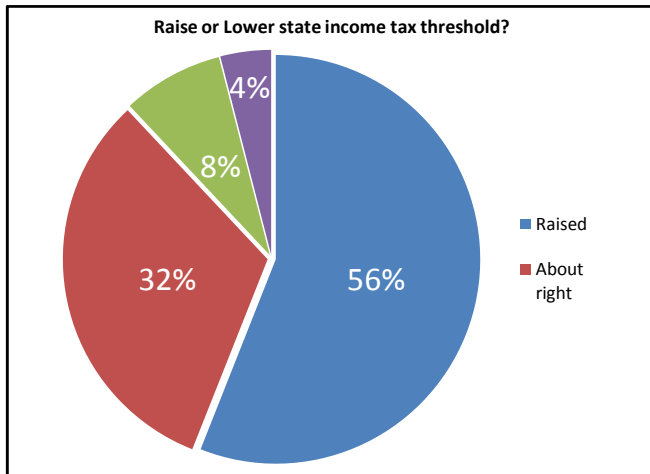
CHART 4



The governor and legislature acting together to raise the income tax threshold to \$12,600 to make the income tax less regressive in 2006. Respondents were asked if they thought

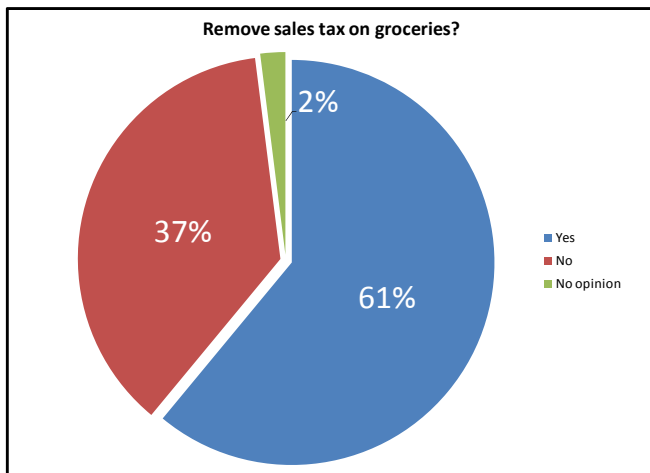
that threshold should be raised, lowered or if it is about right. A majority responded that the threshold should be raised. This held for almost every imaginable subgroup, although those with more education were more likely to have said the threshold needed to be raised than others.

CHART 5



Another revenue issue perennially on the state agenda is whether the state sales tax on groceries should be removed. About three-fifths of respondents thought the sales tax should not be collected on groceries. Support for this position was consistent across most subgroups. Those with higher levels of education were only slightly less supportive of removing the tax from groceries than others, while older respondents tended to be more supportive of the proposition.

CHART 6

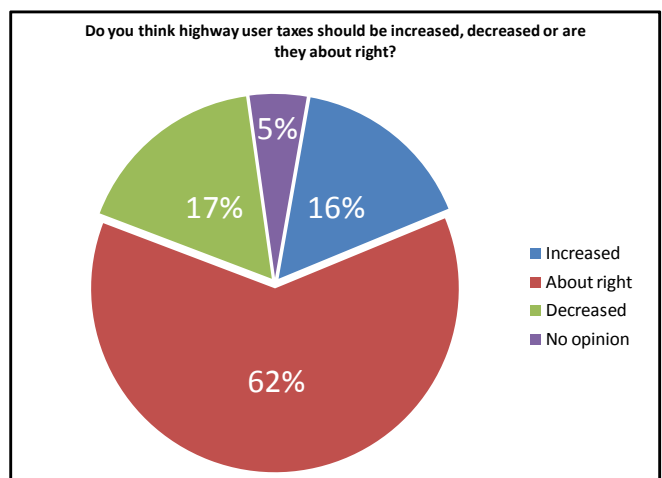


Respondents were asked how the state should pay for any of these changes in tax structure, either by cutting spending or finding new sources of revenue. The difference between the two options is not statistically significant.

IV. Roads and Highways

Some voices in the state have raised concerns about the condition of state roads and highways. Questions were asked to gauge public opinion on this subject. Respondents were told “officials in the highway department said that there is not sufficient revenue to maintain state roads and highways.” They were then asked how important road maintenance was compared to other state funding priorities. The additional information seems to have had an effect on respondents’ thinking on the issue; about three-quarters said road maintenance was important or very important. African-American and Hispanic respondents were more likely to see road maintenance as important than others, while those with higher levels of education tended to see it as less important.

CHART 7



Respondents were asked about funding for roads and highways and whether they thought highway user taxes, such as fuel taxes and license plate fees, should be increased, decreased, or if they were about right. Just over 60 percent of respondents thought highway user taxes were about right. There was some variation across subgroups of the population. Older respondents tended to be more supportive of raising user taxes than younger ones. African-Americans and Republicans shared a tendency to be more supportive of reducing these fees than others.

V. Gambling

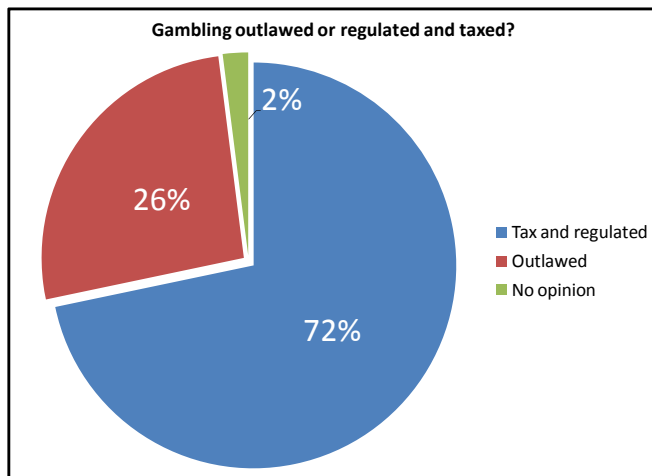
Issues related to gambling have been in the news and talked about on the campaign trail. Respondents were asked about their policy preferences regarding a number of issues related to gambling or gaming. Because gambling facilities already exist in the state, respondents were asked if gambling should be outlawed altogether or regulated and taxed. More than two-thirds (71 percent) said that gambling should be regulated and taxed, while only a quarter of respondents said it should be outlawed altogether. Majorities of every subgroup said that gambling should be regulated and taxed. Support for this position varied by strength of partisan attachment. While Republicans were less supportive than

Democrats, a majority still supported regulating and taxing gambling.

Respondents were asked if they would support a lottery to fund education. A similar proportion of respondents, about 70 percent, supported this idea. Here the parties were more polarized, with 92 percent of strong Democrats supporting the idea and only 47 percent strong Republicans casting their lot with the lottery. The same pattern plays out when respondents were asked about allowing electronic bingo games in the counties that want them. Nearly two-thirds (66 percent) supported allowing bingo in some counties, with support greater among Democrats than Republicans.

Respondents were asked to react to the argument offered in neighboring states that allowing casino gambling promotes economic development and is a source of tax revenue. About three-fifths thought allowing casinos was a good idea for Alabama. There were significant differences of opinion across subgroups. Whites tended to be less supportive, as were Republicans and female respondents.

CHART 8



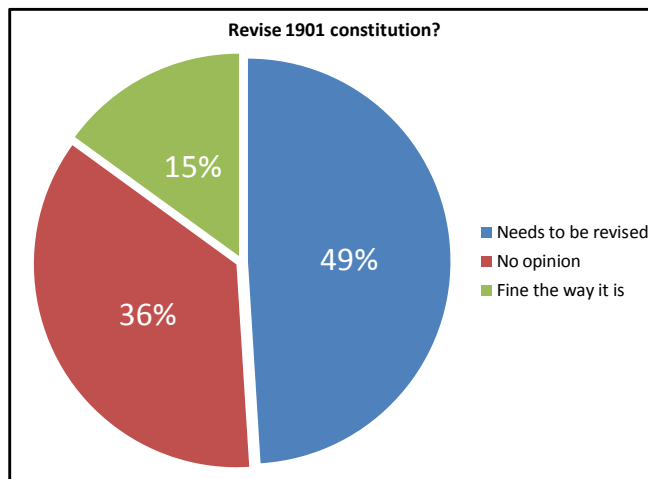
Survey questions related to gaming were designed to gauge public opinion on positions articulated by gubernatorial candidates. While the survey was in the field, some forms of gambling were ostensibly legal in the state. Recent judicial decisions and executive actions may have subsequently changed the context. For example, the question regarding whether gambling should be regulated and taxed or outlawed altogether has as its premise that legal gambling already exists in the state. Responses, then, indicate preferences for handling pre-existing gaming operations and not a recommendation for introducing new gambling into the state. Similarly, respondents were asked if electronic bingo games should be allowed in the counties that want them. While a majority of respondents say that they should be allowed in those counties that want it, this does not mean that respondents want such games in their own counties or that they think it is a good idea. Finally these questions represent gaming in the abstract. Public responses to

specific policy proposals may vary considerably. The survey went into the field before the start of the current legislative session. The survey should not be construed as a measure of support for proposals currently before the legislature.

VI. Constitutional Reform

Another perennial issue in the state is whether the state's 1901 constitution needs to be revised. While this issue topped the list for many reformers, there are indications that the public is less engaged. When asked if the state constitution needed to be revised or was fine the way it is, more than a third of respondents had no opinion on the matter. Among those with an opinion, reformers outnumbered others 3 to 1. The issue seems to be devoid of partisan or any other division among subgroups but one. Those with higher levels of education were both more likely to have an opinion and more likely to support reform. Among those who indicated support for revision, there was more support for revision via amendment than for calling a convention. Nearly three-fifths (58 percent) supported amending the constitution, while only about a third (35 percent) supported a complete rewrite by a convention.

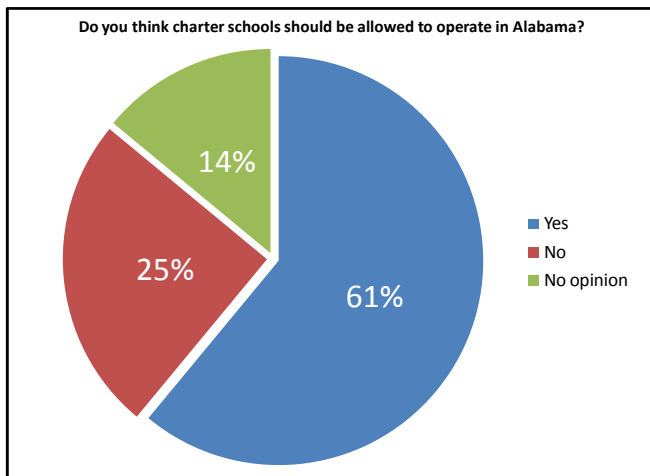
CHART 9



VII. Charter Schools

Desire for education reform and the prospect of Federal funds have helped charter school proposals appear on the state political agenda. Currently, the state has no provision for such schools. When asked if charter schools should be allowed to operate in Alabama, about three-fifths (61 percent) of respondents said they supported the ideas. Support for allowing charter schools was widespread. Younger respondents tended to be more supportive than older ones, while women were slightly less supportive than men.

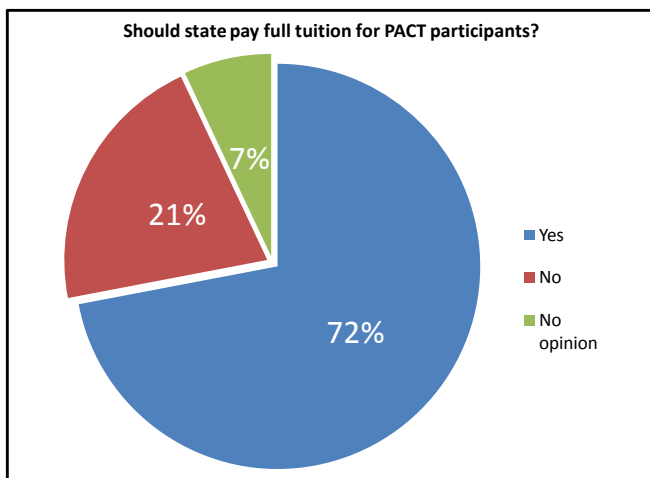
CHART 10



VIII. Alabama Prepaid Affordable College Tuition (PACT) program

The Alabama Prepaid Affordable College Tuition Program or PACT program saw the value of its investments decline in recent years. As a result, the program’s board has issued public statements said that additional revenues would have to be appropriated if the program is to pay full tuition benefits for current participants. Several proposals have been made to change the structure of the program, including making smaller payouts to participants. Respondents were asked if the program should pay full tuition benefits “even if it means diverting funds from other programs?” Even with this severe condition, about 72 percent of respondents said the program should pay full tuition benefits, with almost no variation across any subgroup.

CHART 11

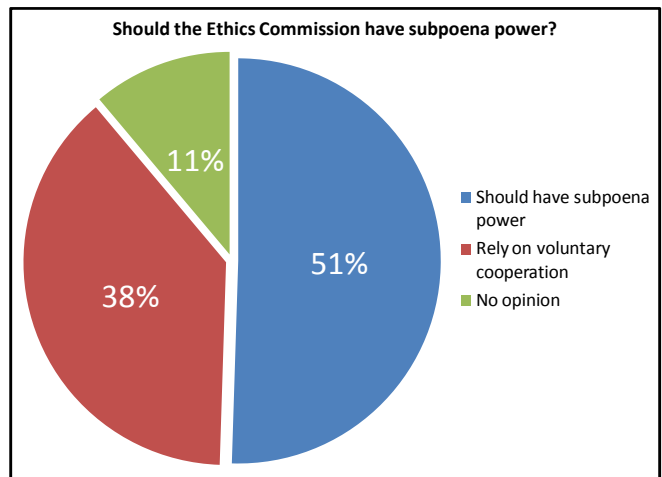


IX. Ethics in Government

Consumers of state new media have been treated to a smorgasbord of ethics issues in recent years. In the state legislature, many bills to reform various aspects of state

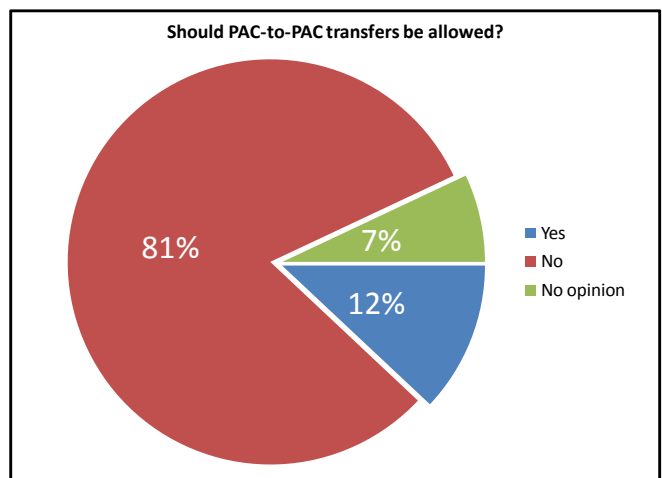
government have been introduced and many bills have died. Respondents were asked about several proposals and issues regarding ethics. For example, respondents were asked if the state Ethics Commission should have subpoena power or if it should rely on voluntary cooperation. More respondents said the commission should have subpoena power than said it should rely on voluntary cooperation by a margin of 50 percent to 38 percent.

CHART 12



Respondents were asked about PAC-to-PAC transfers and the difficulty they pose for transparency in state elections. An overwhelming majority (81 percent) said that they should be banned. Opposition to PAC-to-PAC transfers was uniform across every subgroup, with one exception. Older respondents tended to like them even less than younger respondents.

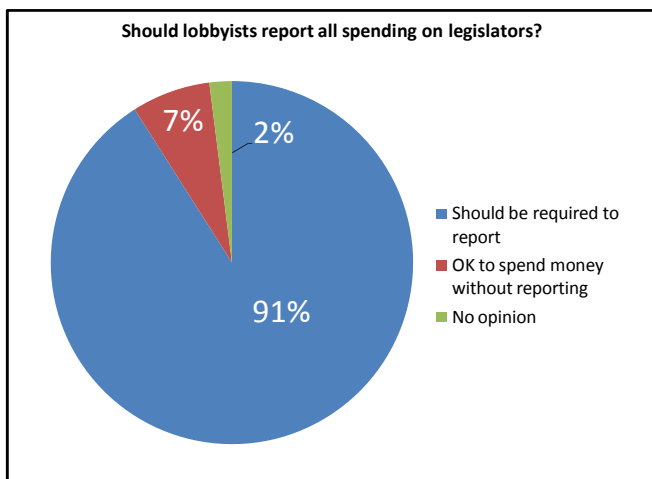
CHART 13



Respondents were asked about lobbying practices in the state. Currently lobbyists can spend up to \$250 a day entertaining legislators without having to file a report to the State Ethics Commission. More than 90 percent said that

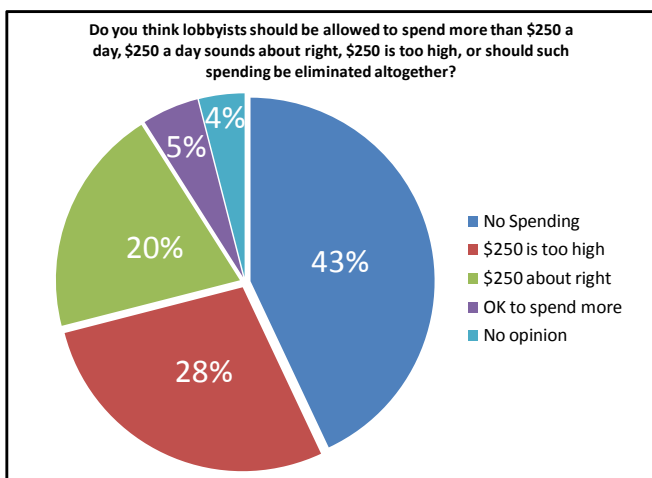
lobbyist should be required to report all money spent entertaining legislators.

CHART 14



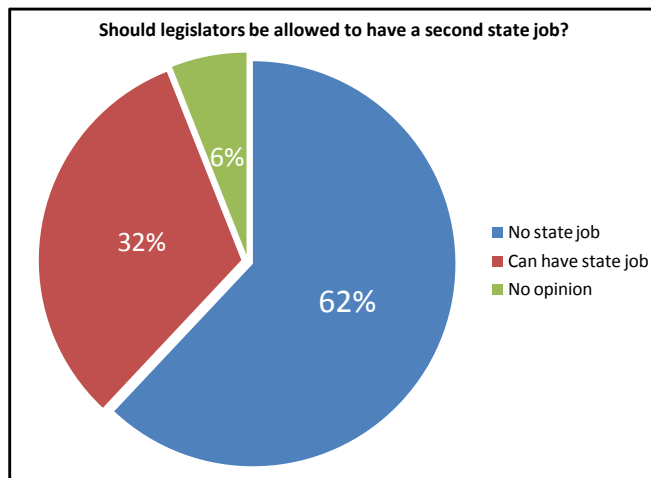
This position is supported equally by every subgroup of the population. Similarly, about 70 percent said the current \$250 limit is either too high or that spending such should be eliminated altogether. While majorities of every subgroup supported a more restrictive environment than the one that currently reigns in Montgomery, those with higher incomes were slightly more permissive than others. Conversely, older respondents tended to be more restrictive than younger ones.

CHART 15



In recent years, there has been much debate about “double dipping,” state employees also holding seats in the legislature. About three-fifths of respondents thought that the practice should be banned. Older respondents were more likely to oppose double dipping than younger ones. Women were slightly more open to letting legislators hold state jobs while serving. Similarly, recent migrants to the state were more permissive than others.

Chart 16

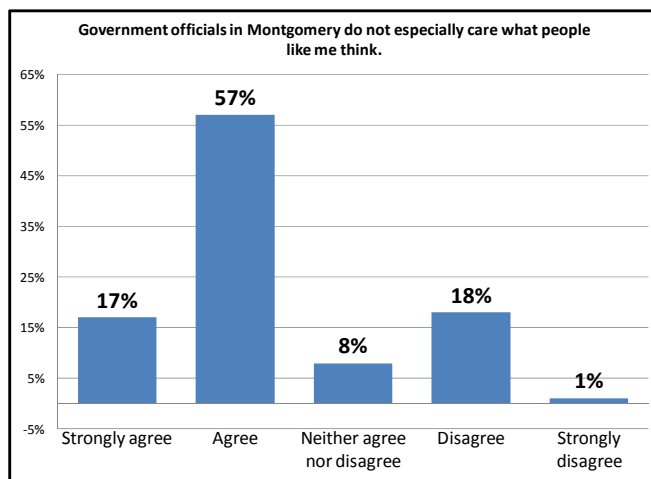


The results from this year’s survey on ethics issues are nearly identical to the results from 2007 (See PARCA Quarterly, Spring 2007). Alabamians overwhelmingly and consistently favored ethics reform in government. Despite near universal public support, few measures have made it through the legislature.

X. Government Responsiveness

In addition to asking questions about policy preferences respondents were asked questions how responsive officials in Montgomery are to public opinion and citizen concerns. Regardless of question wording, majorities characterized public officials as nonresponsive. For example, when asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Government officials in Montgomery do not especially care what people like me think,” more than 70 percent indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed.

CHART 17



The position was consistent across all subgroups of the population, although respondents with higher incomes tended to find government more responsive than others.

About the Contributor

Randolph Horn is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Samford University and Director of the Samford University Survey Research Center.