

# Public Policy Brief

## Should Electronic Slot Machines Fill the Budget Gap?

### An Assessment of Ohio Voter Attitudes

By Samuel R. Staley, Ph.D.

November 20, 2003

#### *Abstract*

*Ohio's budget crisis has prompted elected officials in Ohio to consider various approaches to tax reform. Unfortunately, these discussions have occurred without a gauge of popular support. This report is the first of two by The Buckeye Institute that assesses Ohio citizen concerns about tax reform and fiscal policy in Ohio. This report focuses on attitudes toward video lottery terminals, or VLTs.*

*VLTs are electronic slot machines that would be placed at Ohio race tracks. Proponents argue they will generate hundreds of millions of dollars in new tax revenue for the state government. The results of this poll found:*

- *Ohioans are deeply split on whether VLTs should be allowed;*
- *Most registered voters oppose expanding gambling in Ohio;*
- *At no point do a majority of registered voters support expanding gambling via VLT's, outside the survey's margin of error of 4.1 percent;*
- *Those strongly opposing VLT's consistently outnumber those strongly supporting VLT's even when the revenues are tied to programs such as college scholarships and tax relief.*
- *Opposition to VLT's appeared to increase as respondents became more informed about different proposals.*

*The poll results suggest many Ohioans do not separate the moral and ethical dimensions of gambling from more objective policy issues such as the potential for VLT's to raise revenues for state government programs.*



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**The Buckeye Institute is committed to:**

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We are committed to public policy research and advocacy without regard to politics. We cooperate with elected officials without consideration to political party.

**Solutions**                              *NOT platitudes or empty rhetoric*

We believe in offering tangible policy prescriptions that will improve the lives of all Ohioans.

**Individuals**                              *NOT bureaucracies or organizations*

We believe individuals are best situated to know what is best for themselves. Accordingly, we support public policies that empower individuals not organizations or agencies.

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We do not expect immediate results, but work for a long-term change in the intellectual climate. We will not trade off principles for short-term political gain.

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Data-driven research and analysis is essential to elevate the policy debate beyond partisan interests.

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We support an entrepreneurial economy that is open to all individuals from all classes. We oppose attempts to close economic life to those without the "proper" corporate or government credentials.

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Our most core value is freedom. We support the right of individuals to choose for themselves how to live and work in the Ohio economy.

## Ohio's Budget Crisis

The general assembly passed a budget in June 2003 that increased spending by nine and a half percent over the next two years.<sup>1</sup> This rate of increase is almost twice the rate of inflation.<sup>2</sup> While higher spending was matched by higher taxes and fees, most notably a temporary increase in the sales tax, a recent analysis of the budget by the Cleveland-based Federation for Community Planning estimates that the General Assembly created a “structural” deficit of \$3.8 billion once these temporary taxes and fees expire.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, current tax revenues are running below estimates.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, an effort is underway to repeal the sales tax increase a year earlier than scheduled, raising the prospects of a deficit in 2004.

Not surprisingly, the General Assembly is examining alternative ways of raising revenues. The most important short term solution is adopting an amendment to the Ohio Constitutional allowing video lottery terminals—electronic slot machines—to be installed at Ohio's race tracks. Proponents believe that expanding gambling in this way will generate more than half billion dollars.

## Gambling and the Budget

The revenue raising potential of video lottery terminals, or VLTs, has emerged as their primary benefit in the current public debate. Proponents argue that VLT's could raise more \$550 million in new revenues. This discussion raises an important question: Is expanding gambling a viable option for raising new revenue to fund state programs?

The viability of gambling, and VLTs in particular, rests on two issues. The first is moral and ethical: *should* gambling be allowed or promoted by the State of Ohio? Most of the early debate has centered on whether gambling should in principle be expanded. This analysis does not weigh in on this aspect of the debate.<sup>5</sup>

A second issue concerns the objective viability of gambling and VLT's to raise money to fund the state government. This issue is perhaps even more important in the current political climate given the State of Ohio already runs a statewide lottery and numerous privately owned horse racetracks operate profitably. If video lottery machines fail to adequately address significant long-term revenue shortfalls, VLTs represent another piece-meal approach to addressing a dysfunctional tax structure. In this vein, they have the same ineffective qualities as “boutique” taxes such as cigarette or alcohol taxes.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Ohio's continuing struggle to balance its budget suggests that the state needs to focus its efforts on two important and complimentary strategies: spending restraint and fundamental tax reform. This study does not address spending restraint. Those issues have been addressed elsewhere by The Buckeye Institute.

While The Buckeye Institute has published numerous studies on fundamental tax reform, these proposals have traditionally relied on academic and statistical analysis.<sup>7</sup> They have not given significant attention to the political environment in which tax reforms would be implemented. This analysis is the first of two reports on tax reform that helps fill this gap.

The following analysis focuses primarily on VLT's while more basic questions of fundamental tax reform are reserved for a separate analysis.

## Ohioans Attitudes Toward Gambling

The Buckeye Institute commissioned The Tarrance Group to poll Ohio citizens on their attitudes toward Video Lottery Terminals as a tax reform strategy. The Tarrance Group surveyed 603 registered voters in Ohio on November 9-10, 2003. The complete questions, characteristics of respondents, and responses are included in Appendix A.

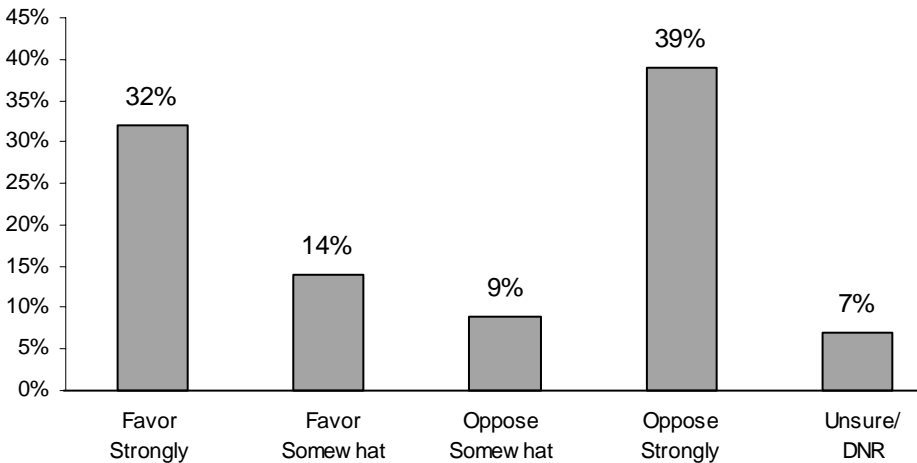
One of the first questions the poll asked was whether Ohioans favored or opposed gambling in the State of Ohio. These results provide an important baseline for assessing the policy environment for implementing VLTs. This is

particularly important for issues like gambling. Gambling, like drinking and smoking, carry strong ethical and moral connotations that make distinguishing between objective policy issues (e.g., will this new tax raise X dollars?) from normative or value driven issues difficult.

Ohioans are evenly split between those favoring and opposing gambling according to this poll. Forty-eight percent favor gambling in Ohio while forty eight percent oppose. Seven percent indicated they were unsure (or did not respond). Given a margin of error of 4.1 percent, opponents or supporters could gather a slim majority if they were able to convince all of the unsure voters to vote their way.<sup>8</sup>

A deeper look at the responses suggests that Ohioans are deeply divided: Thirty-nine percent said they were *strongly* opposed to gambling while thirty two percent said they strongly favored gambling. Thus, gambling appears to be politically polarizing.

**Figure 1: Do You Personally Favor Gambling to Occur in the State of Ohio**



Source: The Tarrance Group

## VLTs Polarize Ohio Voters

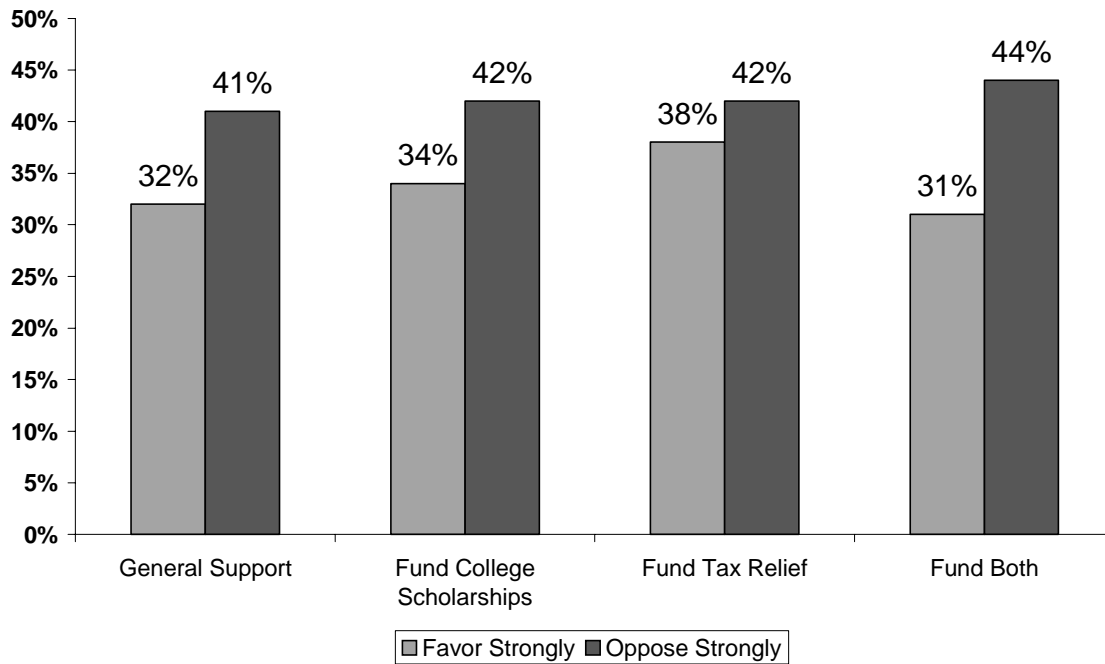
Polarization is clearer as voters responded to more complicated scenarios involving video lottery terminals. While one third of Ohioans indicated that gambling should be kept at current levels, almost one quarter said that gambling should be *reduced*. Combined with those indicating gambling should be kept at current levels, *a majority appears opposed to a significant expansion of gambling in Ohio*. Even convincing those that were “unsure” or “did not respond” would not be sufficient to overcome the popular opposition to expanded gambling.

These attitudes obviously influence Ohioans’ attitudes toward VLTs. Majorities would not support VLT’s even if the revenues were earmarked for college scholarships or tax relief. While 47 percent favored an amendment allowing VLTs as a stand alone proposal, tying revenues to specific programs did not increase popular support:

- Forty-seven percent said they would support an amendment if the revenues were tied to college scholarships for Ohio high school graduates,
- Forty-eight percent said they would support the proposal if revenues were tied to tax relief, and
- Forty-four percent said they would support the proposal if revenues were tied to both.

These general responses may mask the intensity of support and opposition to VLTs. Strong opponents consistently out poll strong supporters (Figure 2). Strong opposition is high regardless of whether VLTs are presented as a stand alone proposal, tied to funding for college scholarships, or tied to tax relief. This intensity may explain why resistance to VLT's appeared to strengthen after they had been exposed to different scenarios and implications: Fifty-four percent indicated they were strongly or somewhat opposed to VLT at the end of this section of the survey. The strength of opposition (and support) suggests that Ohio voters do not distinguish between the ethical and moral dimensions of policy and the more objective, public finance driven elements. Not surprisingly, forty eight percent of registered voters responding to the poll indicated they would be less likely to vote for their legislator if they supported VLTs.

**Figure 2: Intensity of Support and Opposition to VLTs in Ohio**



Source: The Tarrance Group.

## Conclusions

Popular support for VLTs should not necessarily be the only, or even primary, criterion for determining whether expanded gambling is good public policy.<sup>9</sup> Gambling is an issue that carries a strong moral and ethical dimension. This report is not intended to address these concerns nor should this analysis be construed as support or opposition to gambling *per se*.

Rather, these poll results should inform public officials about the political environment in which tax reform decisions are made. Ultimately, tax reforms must have a practical application, and general political support is

important for formulating policy and strategy. This information can be used strategically—to determine where public education may be important—and tactically—to determine which proposals can be promoted at which times.

These poll results suggest that support for expanded gambling through VLTs has some weak popular support. Opposition appears to be intense, suggesting a degree of polarization among registered voters and reluctance among Ohio voters to separate normative concerns about gambling from objective issues of public finance and policy analysis.

Lingering concerns about the Ohio lottery may also be influencing voter views. Since 1974, Ohio lottery funds have been directed toward education funding, but the share of state funding for education from the general revenue fund fell by almost one third until the Ohio Supreme Court intervened and state legislators dramatically increased funding.<sup>10</sup> Economists are well aware of this effect—earmarking tax revenues are often used to replace general revenue funds, not increase them for particular programs.<sup>11</sup> Ohio voters may believe that VLT's will be subject to similar types of earmarking gamesmanship.

Interpreting poll results should include a degree of caution as well. The poll was conducted in the aftermath of the November elections. Ohioans defeated a proposed constitutional amendment to issue bonds to use state funds to promote high technology investment. These results could reflect general popular dissatisfaction with constitutional amendments as a technique for achieving policy reforms, and this dissatisfaction may carry over into VLTs and tax reform. In addition, the sample size is reliable for interpreting statewide responses, but not large enough to draw conclusions about attitudes in specific regions.

## About the Author

Samuel R. Staley, Ph.D. is President of The Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions. Prior to joining The Buckeye Institute full time in 1995, Dr. Staley was an economic development consultant to local governments and a full time economist at Wright State University. His applied research has covered a wide range of issues, including the supervision, design, and analysis of several surveys on issues such as business relocation, community development, low income housing, and public transit. His work has appeared in numerous academic publications, including the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *Economics of Education Review*, *Constitutional Political Economy*, the *FORUM for Applied Research and Policy*, and the *Capital University Law Review*. He earned his Ph.D. in public administration from The Ohio State University, M.S. in applied economics from Wright State University, and B.A. in economics-public policy from Colby College in Waterville, Maine.

## About The Tarrance Group

The Tarrance Group is one of the nation's leading polling firms. Founded in 1977, The Tarrance Group is a full-service internationally recognized polling and strategic research firm based in Alexandria, Virginia. Its clients include political candidates, trade associations, and major corporations. Eleven U.S. Senators, three Governors, and over thirty Members of Congress currently use The Tarrance Group for their research needs, as does Miller Brewing, Papa John's and the American Society of Anesthesiologists. Partner Brian Tringali and Senior Research Analyst Brian Nienaber advised The Buckeye Institute on the design, implementation, and analysis of the poll results.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Total general revenue fund spending from *State of Ohio Budget Highlights: Fiscal Years 2004 and 2004*, Enacted June 2003, Ohio Office of Budget and Management, Figure 1a, p. 2, <http://www.Ohio.gov/obm>.

<sup>2</sup> Inflation is forecast by OBM to increase by 2.1 percent in 2004 and 2.3 percent in 2005. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> John Corlett, David Ellis, and Richard Sheridan, "Ohio Structural Deficit Reaches Record Levels," Federation of Community Planning, Cleveland, release November 5, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> OBM estimates that year to date tax revenues were down \$77.5 million and overall revenues down \$26.5 million through September 2003. See the monthly financial report to the Governor by Thomas Johnson and Sam Nemer, October 10, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Credible arguments could still be made to allow expanded gambling even if VLTs do not raise significant new revenue. These arguments would include libertarian ones favoring the freedom of individuals to gamble, as well as less ideological ones that gambling is a legitimate form of entertainment and the state should not use the revenue raising potential of a business as a criterion for determining whether it should exist or be allowed.

<sup>6</sup> See the discussion by David Owsiany, "Cigarette Taxes Not the Answer," *Perspective on Current Issues* (Columbus: The Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, 2002), <http://www.buckeyeinstitute.org>.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the empirical studies by Russell Sobel and Robert Lawson, *Income Tax Progressivity in Ohio* (Columbus: The Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, 2003) and Richard Vedder, *Grinding to a Halt: Ohio's Tax Policy and Its Impact on Economic Growth* (Columbus: The Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, 2002) at <http://www.buckeyeinstitute.org>.

<sup>8</sup> The "margin of error" is a statistical term used to recognize uncertainty in polling and survey results. The survey, for example, polled 603 registered voters out of a statewide population of about 7 million registered voters according to the Ohio Secretary of State. A margin of error of 4 percent would suggest that, statistically, we can be very confident that between 44 percent and 52 percent of Ohio's registered voters oppose gambling in Ohio.

<sup>9</sup> Other criteria should include the stability of tax revenue, equity in its application, and the efficiency of implementing the tax. Interestingly, some research suggests that gambling tax revenues are not very stable. See the analysis of casinos in Ranuana G. Madhusudhan, "Betting on Casino Revenues: Lessons from State Experiences," *National Tax Journal*, vol 49, no. 3 (September 1996), pp. 401-412. Moreover, the Ohio Lottery Commission notes that transfers from the Ohio Lottery to public education have fallen from a high of \$749 million in 1997 to \$641 million in 2003, a 14.4 percent drop. Transfers were around \$635 million in 2001 and 2002. See <http://www.ohiolottery.com>. The lottery generated revenues of \$2.2 billion in 2003, and \$2.1 billion in 2001 and 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Garrett and Robert Lawson, "Earmarking Tax Revenues for Education: Now You See Them, Now You Don't," *Perspective of Current Issues* (Columbus: The Buckeye Institute, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

# Appendix A

## Questions Relating to Video Lottery Terminals and Gambling in Ohio

NOTE: Questions have been renumbered for clarity.

I would like for you to think about gaming and gambling issues here in the state of Ohio.

1. Are you personally in favor of allowing gambling to occur here in the state of Ohio?

Favor/strongly	32%
Favor/somewhat	14%
UNSURE (DNR)	7%
Oppose/somewhat	9%
Oppose/strongly	39%
  
2. Currently, the only forms of gambling in Ohio are charitable gaming, wagering on horse racing, and the state lottery. Which of the following comes closest to your view of gambling in the state of Ohio?

Gambling should be allowed to expand beyond the current levels	41%
Gambling should be kept at its current levels	33%
Gambling should be reduced from its current levels	23%
UNSURE (DNR)	3%

Now, thinking about the issue of electronic slot machines and Ohio racetracks —

As you may or may not know, electronic slot machines allow gambling on casino style games like poker and blackjack and operate much like regular slot machines. A statewide constitutional amendment has recently been proposed to allow these machines to be placed in horse racetracks in Ohio.

3. Based upon what you have heard, do you favor or oppose an amendment to the state constitution to allow the installation of electronic slot machines in horse racetracks in Ohio?

Favor/strongly	32%
Favor/somewhat	15%
UNSURE/REFUSED (DNR)	4%
Oppose/somewhat	8%
Oppose/strongly	41%

One version of this proposal for a statewide constitutional amendment would allow electronic slot machines to be placed in horse racetracks in Ohio and use the state tax revenues from these machines to fund a college scholarship program for some Ohio high school graduates.

4. Based upon what you have heard, would you favor or oppose an amendment to the state constitution to allow the installation of electronic slot machines in Ohio racetracks and use the state tax revenues to fund a college scholarship program for some Ohio high school graduates?

Favor/strongly	34%
Favor/somewhat	13%
UNSURE/REFUSED (DNR)	4%
Oppose/somewhat	8%
Oppose/strongly	42%

A competing proposal is also being discussed to allow these electronic slot machines to be placed in horse racetracks in Ohio and use the state tax revenues from these machines to provide tax relief, perhaps including lowering the state sales tax.

5. Based upon what you have heard, do you favor or oppose an amendment to the state constitution to allow the installation of electronic slot machines in Ohio racetracks and using the state tax revenues to fund tax relief?

Favor/strongly	38%
Favor/somewhat	10%
UNSURE/REFUSED (DNR)	3%
Oppose/somewhat	8%
Oppose/strongly	42%

Yet another proposal is being discussed to allow electronic slot machines in Ohio horse racetracks and use the state tax revenue from these machines to fund some tax relief efforts and to fund some college scholarships for some Ohio high school graduates.

6. Based on what you have heard, do you favor or oppose an amendment to the state constitution to allow the installation of electronic slot machines in Ohio racetracks and use the state tax revenue to fund some tax relief efforts and to fund some college scholarships for some Ohio high school graduates?

Favor/strongly	31%
Favor/somewhat	13%
UNSURE/REFUSED (DNR)	3%
Oppose/somewhat	9%
Oppose/strongly	44%

And thinking about this issue and your state legislator —

7. And, if your state legislator supported allowing electronic slot machines to be placed in existing horse racetracks, would you be more likely or less likely to support your state legislator in the next election?

More likely/strongly	22%
More likely/somewhat	19%
UNSURE (DNR)	5%
NO DIFFERENCE (DNR)	9%
Less likely/somewhat	12%
Less likely/strongly	34%

Now, I would like to read you some statements that some people may make about the proposal to place electronic slot machines in Ohio horse racetracks. Please, listen as I read the list and tell me for each one whether knowing this statement would make you more likely or less likely to support the proposal. Here's the first one...

	MORE LIKELY STRONG	SMWHT	UNSURE/ REFUSE	NO DIFF	LESS LIKELY SMWHT	STRONG
8. It is estimated that these electronic slot machines would generate \$550 million in tax revenue to fund the college scholarship program or to fund tax relief. Would knowing this make you more likely or less likely to support allowing electronic slot machines in Ohio racetracks?	36%	16%	3%	3%	7%	36%
9. If Ohio voters approve the installation of electronic slot machines in horse racetracks, it may make it legally possible for land-based Indian casinos to open in several locations across the state.	24%	12%	3%	5%	9%	48%
10. Forty percent of the revenue from these electronic slot machines would be given to the owners of horse racetracks.	9%	8%	3%	4%	13%	64%
11. The state tax revenue from these electronic slot machines would not be used to solve the current state budget crisis. Instead, these tax revenues would be funding newly created programs.	13%	10%	3%	3%	13%	58%
12. If voters approve the installation of electronic slot machines in horse racetracks, the state will pay up to 80 million dollars for replacing, operating, and advertising electronic slot machines at privately owned horse racetracks.	10%	7%	4%	3%	14%	64%

Now that you have had a chance to think about it —

13. Based upon what you have heard, do you favor or oppose an amendment to the state constitution to allow the installation of electronic slot machines in horse racetracks in Ohio?

Favor/strongly	30%
Favor/somewhat	12%
UNSURE/REFUSED (DNR)	4%
Oppose/somewhat	6%
Oppose/strongly	48%

Now, just a few final questions for statistical purposes only —

D1. What is your age, please?

18-24	3%
25-29	4%
30-34	7%
35-39	9%
40-44	11%
45-54	20%
55-64	18%
65-69	9%
70-74	8%
75-79	5%
80-84	2%

85-89	1%
90 or over	1%
REFUSED	2%

D2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Some grade school (1-8)	1%
Some high school (9-11)	4%
Graduated high school (12)	30%
Technical/vocational (12)	3%
Some college (13-15)	24%
Graduated college (16)	24%
Graduate/professional school (16 or more)	14%
Unsure/Don't Know	1%

D3. When thinking about politics and government, do you consider yourself to be...

Very conservative	19%
Somewhat conservative	44%
MODERATE (DNR)	2%
Somewhat liberal	22%
Very liberal	8%
UNSURE/DK (DNR)	4%

D4. In which political party do state records show that you are registered to vote

• the Republican,  
• the Democrat — OR  
are you registered as an Independent?

Republican	41%
Democrat	39%
Independent	15%
OTHER	*
UNSURE/REFUSED (DNR)	5%

D5. Which of these statements best describes how you have usually voted in past elections?

Straight Republican	7%
Mostly Republican	24%
A few more Republicans than Democrats	13%
INDEPENDENT/ THE PERSON (DNR)	11%
A few more Democrats than Republicans	12%
Mostly Democrat	19%
Straight Democrat	9%
UNSURE/DK (DNR)	4%

D6. What is the church you or your family attends most often? (READ LIST IF NECESSARY)

Roman Catholic	22%
Baptist	11%
Methodist	10%
Episcopalian	3%
Evangelical	2%
Presbyterian	5%
Lutheran	5%
Other Protestant	14%
Greek Orthodox	1%
Jewish	1%
Mormon	1%
Quaker / Amish	*
Other (SPECIFY)	6%
NONE (DNR)	15%

IF ANY RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN D6, ASK:

D7. And how often do you attend church (or synagogue)?

More than once a week	15%
Once a week	42%
Several times a month	13%
Once a month	7%
Several times a year	15%
Only on holidays	2%
NEVER/DON'T ATTEND	5%
UNSURE/REFUSED	2%

D8. What do you consider to be your race? Are you white, African-American, Hispanic, Asian or some other race?

White	89%
Black/African-American	6%
Hispanic	1%
Asian	
Other	3%
UNSURE/REFUSED (DNR)	2%

D9. Sex/Emp

ASK OF EVERYONE: Are you employed outside the house, are you a homemaker, or are you retired?

Male/employed	29%
Male/homemaker	
Male/retired	14%
Male/not in labor force	3%
Female/employed	26%

Female/homemaker	9%
Female/retired	16%
Female/not in labor force	2%
MALE/REFUSED (DNR)	*
FEMALE/REFUSED (DNR)	1%

D10. What is your current marital status — are you — · single and never married, · married, · separated, · divorced, or ·widowed?

Single	13%
Married	65%
Separated	1%
Divorced	10%
Widowed	10%
UNSURE/REFUSED (DNR)	2%

D11. Do you have children under the age of 18 living at home?

Yes	32%
No	67%
UNSURE/REFUSED (DNR)	2%



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