

SNG-Illinois a competitive state-7-7-14-Nowlan

Illinois leans Democratic but still competitive

By Jim Nowlan

“Illinois is still a competitive state that leans Democratic in statewide elections,” declares John Jackson, professor of political science at Southern Illinois University, based on a statewide survey he conducted recently.

Jackson says the national perception that Illinois is a deep blue (strongly Democratic) state is belied by the fact that Republicans hold a U.S. Senate seat and two statewide offices (treasurer and comptroller).

The annual poll by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute found that almost 37 percent of respondents to the poll declared themselves as “strong” or “mild” Democrats whereas only 21.5 said the same about themselves as Republicans.

Yet 32 percent said they were either pure independents or independents who leaned toward one of the two parties, which suggests that a strong, somewhat moderate Republican candidate has a chance to win.

The poll was taken by telephone of 1,000 persons who said they were registered to vote and included 30 percent cell phone respondents.

Offsetting the Democratic advantage is a finding that 37 percent of the respondents consider themselves either “very” or “somewhat” conservative versus 30 percent who saw themselves as liberal to the same extent. We think of conservatives as generally favoring Republican candidates.

The same survey found that 53 percent of respondents favor legalizing marriage for gay and lesbian couples (which has been enacted in Illinois). This represents a 20 percent increase in support for same-sex marriage since the same question was asked just four years ago by the Paul Simon Institute.

Jackson attributes this dramatic increase in support for same-sex marriage to an intensely interested minority in support of such marriage that mobilized to convince political elites (like opinion page readers) of the acceptability of their position. According to Jackson, these elites in turn convinced lawmakers and then the larger public.

“Public opinion tends to follow political elite opinion,” observes Jackson, who has followed Illinois politics and public opinion for four decades.

Thirty-six percent of those polled said abortion should be “always legal,” while 44 percent said legal in “certain circumstances” with 16 percent feeling it should be “always illegal.” These findings were consistent with those across the five years in which the Simon Institute has been asking the question in its annual poll.

The survey, which Jackson conducted with his fellow SIU professor Charles Leonard, also explored respondents’ attitudes about the present budget problems in Illinois, where a temporary tax increase is to expire in steps, beginning Jan. 1.

The professors identified what they term “the dilemma of mass democracy”—strong public support for spending programs and equally strong opposition to taxes to pay for the programs.

For example, large majorities in the poll opposed spending cuts for K-12 education (80 percent opposed), poor people (65 percent) and the disabled (82 percent). This is where most of the spending in the state budget goes, in addition to required pension funding and debt service.

Yet 60 percent opposed making the temporary tax increase permanent versus only 27 percent favoring (the remainder didn't have an opinion).

The budget cobbled together by Democratic legislative majorities in May is expected to add \$2 billion to the state's big backlog of unpaid bills. The budget also borrows about \$630 million that is must pay back to dedicated state funds.

In other words, when the full impact of the ratcheting back of the tax increase takes effect next year, there will clearly have to be major cutbacks in education and social services if the budget is to be balanced.

The Simon poll probed respondents on other sources of revenue, as options to major cuts in spending. Expansion of gambling was favored by a majority (53 percent). All tax revenue increases were opposed by majorities, yet 44 percent did favor broadening the sales tax to include services, and 43 percent favored taxing retirement income above \$50,000.

Gov. Pat Quinn has already expressed support for making permanent the temporary tax increase. If he is re-elected, expect that to happen.

Challenger Bruce Rauner opposes extending the tax permanently.

If Rauner is elected, expect the creation of the mother-of-all blue ribbon task forces to examine both state spending and the revenue system.

And based on what John Jackson says about Illinois being a competitive state politically, appreciate that either candidate can win in November.