

The Star-Ledger/**Eagleton-Rutgers Poll**

REGIONALIZATION: LITTLE AWARENESS, LITTLE CONSENSUS

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A story based on the survey findings presented in this release and background memo will appear in the May 3 Star-Ledger. We ask users to properly attribute this copyrighted information to "The Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll."

Despite the clear pressure of increasing property taxes which might drive citizens to consider consolidating municipal services, "regionalization"--where municipalities share services in order to reduce costs--remains an inside-Trenton issue. The vast majority of the New Jersey residents have heard little or nothing about the idea.

Moreover, regionalization has all the earmarkings of being a controversial and divisive issue in New Jersey. The public is badly split about the value and payoffs of regionalization; the idea of combining services brings into focus many dearly held values, such as home rule, local community identification and control.

The most recent *Star-Ledger*/Eagleton Poll finds New Jerseyans' views about regionalization to be complex, with public support for the idea depending on the particular service asked about, views of the other community a municipality might partner with, the degree to which real savings would occur, and control of the delivery of municipal services. The survey was conducted with a random sample of 802 state residents, interviewed by telephone between February 12 and 17. The poll has a sampling error margin of ± 3 percent.

One of the survey's key findings is the tremendous difference in familiarity with this issue between political leaders and state residents. Despite being prominent on the radar screen of high state officials--including remarks by former Governor James J. Florio upon leaving office in 1993 and current Governor Christine Todd Whitman--discussion of regionalization has had little penetration of the general public. Well over half of the public say they have heard "nothing" about regionalization, while another 13 percent say they have heard "a little." Just one-third of New Jerseyans say they have heard either "a lot" or "some" about regionalization. Despite intense discussion of this issue among the state's attentive political community over the last few years, these figures are unchanged from a Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll conducted in June of 1994.

Regionalization remains an issue on which there is no clear consensus. When presented with a main argument of proponents of regionalization--that it would be an effective way to hold down costs and taxes down--and by one of opponents--that people would have to give up local control of municipal services--the public's initial reaction is basically split: 48 percent favor the idea while 38 percent oppose it and the remainder offer no opinion. This is also unchanged from the last time the poll explored the topic of regionalization in 1994.

While the survey documents the pressure of increased property taxes on New Jerseyans, it also reveals a cavernous public schism among state residents about how expansive the role of government should be, including the tradeoff between the level of taxation on one hand and amount of services provided on the other. A majority of New Jerseyans--54 percent--say their property taxes have gone up in the last year, including 25 percent who say they have gone up "a lot." Just two percent say their taxes have gone down, while 28 percent say they have remained about the same and the remainder offer no opinion.

However, Garden State citizens are evenly divided about what they would like to see happen in the face of this financial pressure. Faced with a choice of cutting taxes or cutting services, 41 percent say they would prefer an increase in taxes to maintain the current level of services. In contrast, 40 percent say they would rather see the tax level remain the same, even if it means a decrease in services provided. The remaining 20 percent say it depends on what services would be reduced or offer no opinion.

State residents are also unsure as to whether regionalization would save a significant amount of money. While a majority of 54 percent feel that combining services with a neighboring town would save money, only 19 percent feel it would save enough to make a significant difference in their taxes. The other 35 percent either feel not much would be saved or cannot estimate whether the amount would be significant. About 30 percent do not think that combining services would result in lower property taxes, with the remaining 17 percent offering no opinion.

Similarly, New Jerseyans are unsure as to what would happen to the quality of municipal services if they were regionalized: 19 percent feel they would get better, 25 percent feel they would get worse, 47 percent feel they would remain about the same and the remaining nine percent express no opinion.

Cliff Zukin, director of the poll, commented: "There clearly has been insufficient public debate for any widespread move towards regionalization at this time. We have seen little change in public knowledge or opinions over the last four years. Given that this is an issue that touches core public values and that public sentiment is evenly divided, it is an issue on which state policy makers would want to move quite cautiously and deliberatively. Clearly, there is no public consensus on whether regionalization is a wise policy at this time."

The survey asked the public for its reaction to the regionalization of a variety of specific services. One question that shows the deep division in the public asked about "combining

schools in your town with a neighboring one if it meant that you shared common athletic programs like a single football team and bus lines." Statewide, 52 percent said they would favor this proposal while a strong 43 percent said they would oppose it. The remainder offered no opinion. Interestingly, there was little difference among the responses given by Democrats, Republicans and independents, and very little variation by income grouping. Residents of South Jersey were somewhat more likely to favor this idea (56 to 38 percent) with residents of the Central part of the state evenly divided (47 to 48 percent) and residents of Northern New Jersey modestly in favor (51 to 42 percent). Younger New Jerseyans--those under 30 years of age--expressed the most opposition to the idea (44 in favor to 53 percent opposed).

An experiment was conducted in the survey to see how much opposition exists to regionalization as a general idea and how much might be related specifically to giving up local control. Half of the sample was asked whether they favored or opposed combining services if those services were under their municipality's control, while the other half was asked if they favored or opposed regionalization if the services were under the control of the other municipality. The results show that even if the idea of regionalization might come to be accepted, it would face a second level of difficulty when municipalities tried to put it into practice for some services. For example:

- A majority of those asked about combining the public schools in their town with those in a more affluent town favored the idea, by a margin of 50 to 41 percent, with the remainder offering no opinion. However, a majority of those asked about combining their schools with schools in a less affluent town rejected the idea by a slightly stronger margin of 55 to 39 percent.
- By a fairly significant majority of 59 to 34 percent, there was strong support for the idea of "combining departments for road, street maintenance and snow removal if it was under the control of the mayor of your town." However, support for this same idea dropped to a much narrower and more controversial margin of 50 to 44 percent if it was under "the control of the mayor in the other town."

Regionalization failed to get majority support in two other specific situations:

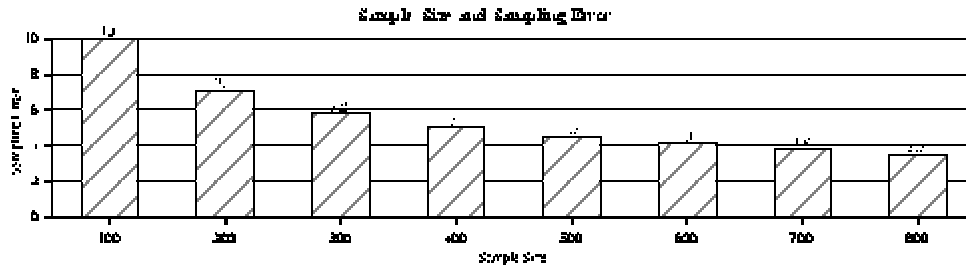
- By a margin of 40 percent in favor to 53 percent opposed, residents rejected combining police forces with a neighboring town if it means firing the police chief in either town.
- Slightly fewer favor (44 percent) than oppose (49 percent) combining the public library in their town with one in the neighboring town if it means their town's library will be smaller.

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BACKGROUND MEMO -- RELEASE SL/EP67-6 (EP117-6), SUNDAY, MAY 3RD, 1998

The latest *Star-Ledger/Eagle* Poll was conducted between February 12 and 17, 1998, when a scientifically selected random sample of 800 New Jersey adult residents was interviewed by telephone.

All surveys are subject to sampling error, which is the expected probable difference between interviewing everyone in a population versus a scientific sampling drawn from that population. The sampling error for the total sample size of 800 is just over ± 3 percent, at a 95 percent confidence interval. Thus if 50 percent of New Jerseyans were found to have a favorable opinion of the Governor, one would be 95 percent sure that the true figure would be between 47 and 53 percent (50 ± 3) had all New Jerseyans been interviewed, rather than just a sample. Sampling error increases as the sample size decreases, so statements based on various population subgroups, such as separate figures reported for men and women, are subject to more error than are statements based on the total sample. The following chart shows the relationship between sample size and sampling error.



Sampling error does not take into account other sources of variation inherent in public opinion studies, such as non-response, question wording or context effects. The verbatim wording of all questions asked are reproduced in this background memo. The sample has been stratified based on county and the data have been weighted on age and education to insure an accurate proportional representation of the state. Two versions of the questionnaire were used in this study. Not all questions were on both versions.

"In the past year, have your local property taxes gone up, gone down, or stayed the same?" Probe if up or down: "Have they (gone up/gone down) a lot or just a little?" (R1)

	Gone Up <u>A Lot</u>	Gone Up <u>A Little</u>	Down	Down	<u>Don't Know</u>		
		<u>A Little</u>	<u>A Lot</u>	<u>Same</u>		<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
February 1998	25%	29%	2%	--	28%	17%	101% (802)

June 1994 27 34 3 -- 22 14 100 (801)

"Currently many towns in New Jersey are facing budget problems. In order to provide the same level of taxes the might have to raise taxes. If you had to choose between raising taxes or cutting services, which would you choose?" (R2)

	<u>Increase Taxes, Maintain Services</u>	<u>Maintain Taxes, Decrease Services</u>	<u>Depends</u>	<u>Don't know No opinion</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
February 1998	41%	40%	10%	9%	100%	(802)
Party ID						
Democrat	52	33	8	7	100	(242)
Independent	39	42	11	8	100	(335)
Republican	32	47	10	10	99	(186)
Gender						
Men	40	43	9	8	100	(391)
Women	42	38	10	10	100	(411)
Income						
Less than \$30,000	44	34	8	14	100	(143)
\$30,001 - \$50,000	42	42	11	6	101	(162)
\$50,001 - \$70,000	37	48	11	5	101	(138)
More than \$70,000	46	39	12	3	100	(228)

By Age

-- 18 - 29	48	42	4	7	101 (120)
-- 30 - 49	43	40	12	6	101 (351)
-- 50 - 64	36	43	13	8	100 (188)
-- 65 or older	37	36	5	22	100 (128)

By Region

North	43	39	11	7	100 (388)
Central	39	42	9	10	100 (202)
South	40	41	8	11	100 (212)

"As you probably know, property taxes provide a variety of local services, such as education and police. There has been some talk lately of regionalization, where different towns combine these services and share costs in order to hold taxes down. Have you heard of this or read anything about this? (IF YES: How much have you read or heard -- a lot, some, or a little?)" (R3)

	<u>Heard</u> <u>A Lot</u>	<u>Heard</u> <u>Some</u>	<u>Heard</u> <u>A Little</u>	<u>Have</u> <u>Not Heard</u>	<u>Don't</u> <u>Know</u>	Total	(n)
February 1998	12%	20%	13%	56%	--	101%	(802)
Registered Voters	13	23	14	50	--	100	(625)
Education							
High school or Less	7	14	13	65	--	99	(286)
Some college	12	23	10	54	--	99	(216)
College graduate	20	27	14	38	--	99	(300)
By Region							
North	12	20	14	55	--	101	(388)
Central	16	19	12	53	--	100	(202)
South	8	20	12	61	--	101	(212)

June 1994 10 16 15 58 2 101 (801)

"Those who favor regionalization feel it would hold costs and taxes down. Those who oppose it are worried about giving up their own town's control of services. Overall, do you favor or oppose regionalization of services where you live?" (If favor or oppose probe: "Do you strongly or mildly favor/oppose it?") (R4)

	Strongly <u>Favor</u>	Mildly <u>Favor</u>	Mildly <u>Oppose</u>	Strongly <u>Oppose</u>	<u>Depends</u>	Don't <u>Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	(n)
February 1998	24%	24%	16%	22%	2%	13%	101%	(802)
Education								
High school or Less	19	22	18	24	1	15	99	(286)
Some College	27	26	14	19	2	12	100	(216)
College Graduate	30	26	13	21	2	9	101	(300)
Gender								
Men	30	26	16	20	2	6	100	(391)
Women	18	22	15	24	2	19	100	(411)
By Region								
North	24	21	15	23	2	16	101	(388)
Central	25	24	19	18	2	12	100	(202)
South	23	29	14	24	1	9	100	(212)
June 1994	20	24	17	20	2	15	98	(801)

"Do you think regionalizing your local services with a neighboring town would or would NOT result in saving money and lower property taxes?" (If would save money probe: "Would it save enough money to make a significant difference in what you pay in taxes, or don't you think it would make that much of a difference?") (R5)

	Would Save <u>Significant</u>	Would Save <u>Not Much</u>	Would Save <u>Don't Know</u>	Would <u>Not</u>	Don't <u>Know</u>	Total	<u>(n)</u>
February 1998	19%	18%	17%	29%	17%	100%	(802)

	54%	Would <u>Not</u>	Don't <u>Know</u>	Total	<u>(n)</u>
June 1994	Would Save 51	30	19	100	(801)

"If your local services are regionalized, do you think the quality of those services will get better, get worse, or stay about the same?" (R6)

	Get <u>Better</u>	Get <u>Worse</u>	Same	Don't <u>Know</u>	Total	<u>(n)</u>
February 1998	19%	25%	47%	9%	100%	(802)
June 1994	24	27	40	10	101	(801)

"Thinking about the specific neighboring town closest to where you live, would you favor or oppose sharing services with them?" (R7)

Favor	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>Depends</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
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February 1998	58%	33%	5%	5%	101%	(802)
Party ID						
Democrat	54	35	5	6	100	(242)
Independent	57	35	3	5	100	(335)
Republican	64	27	5	5	101	(186)
Race						
White	56	34	5	5	100	(609)
Non-white	62	29	2	7	100	(164)
Gender						
Men	63	29	4	4	100	(391)
Women	52	36	5	7	100	(411)

"Here are some proposals people have made for combining government services. These changes could reduce your property taxes, but your town might have less control over the services you receive. Please tell me whether you favor or oppose each one. First, how about combining schools in your town with a neighboring one if it meant that you shared common athletic programs like a single football team and bus lines. Would you favor or oppose this?" (R8)

	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>Depends</u> <u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
February 1998	52%	43%	4%	99%	(802)
Party ID					
Democrat	49	43	8	100	(242)
Independent	53	43	4	100	(335)
Republican	54	40	6	100	(188)
Income					
Less than \$30,000	56	39	5	100	(143)
\$30,001 - \$50,000	54	44	2	100	(162)

More than \$50,000	51	43	5	99	(366)
Age					
18-29	44	53	3	100	(120)
30-49	52	44	4	100	(351)
50 and older	55	36	9	100	(316)
Children in Household					
Yes	48	48	4	100	(260)
No	53	40	7	100	(535)
By Region					
North	51	42	7	100	(388)
Central	47	48	5	100	(202)
South	56	38	6	100	(212)

Split half questions: The A questions were asked to one half of the sample, the B question to the other half.

"Combining the public schools in your town with those in a neighboring school if it was in a"

A: "Less affluent town?" (R9A2)

B: "More affluent town?" (R9B2)

	<u>Favor</u>	Oppose	Depends	<u>Don't Know</u>	Total	(n)
February 1998						
Less Affluent	39%	55%	1%	5%	100%	(403)
More Affluent	50	41	2	7	100	(399)

"Combining the police force of your town with a neighboring one if it meant firing the police chief in "

A: "Your town?" (R9A3)

B: "Their town?" (R9B3)

	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>Depends</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
February 1998						
Your Town	39%	53%	1%	8%	101%	(403)
Their Town	40	53	2	6	100	(399)

"Combining departments for road, street maintenance and snow removal with another town if it was under the oversight of the mayor of "

A: "Your town?" (R9A4)

B: "Their town?" (R9B4)

	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>Depends</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
February 1998						
Your Town	59%	34%	--	7%	100%	(403)
Their Town	50	44	3	5	102	(399)

"Combining the public library in your town with a library in a neighboring town if meant your town's library would be smaller? Favor or oppose?" (R9A1)

	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>Depends</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
February 1998	44%	49%	1%	6%	100%	(403)

"Combining the fire department of your town with a neighboring one if it meant that it might take fire-fighters a little longer to get to a fire?" (R9B1)

	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>Depends</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
February 1998	28%	69%	1%	2%	100%	(399)