The Star-Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll

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CONTACT: PATRICK MURRAY
OR CLIFF ZUKIN
(732) 932-9384

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REGIONALIZATION: A LONG ROW TO HOE

IDEA LACKS PUBLIC AWARENESS, SUPPORT

In November, Governor James McGreevey stood before a gathering of the state's municipal leaders and – echoing proposals offered by his two elected predecessors – called for regionalization of local services as a way to reduce the tax burden on New Jersey citizens. And while property taxes continue to rise, the latest *Star-Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll* finds that the clarion call for consolidating services in the state's 566 municipalities has barely made a dent in the public's consciousness.

When it comes to the provision of local services about the only thing that New Jerseyans are agreed upon is that their property taxes keep increasing – 37 percent say they have gone up a lot in the past year and 27 percent say they have gone up a little. However, residents are split on whether local services should be cut and whether regionalizing local services, especially education is a good idea.

The one clear message coming out of the latest poll is that very few people have heard much about regionalization. A majority of New Jerseyans have heard nothing at all (58%) about it and another 14 percent have heard just a little.

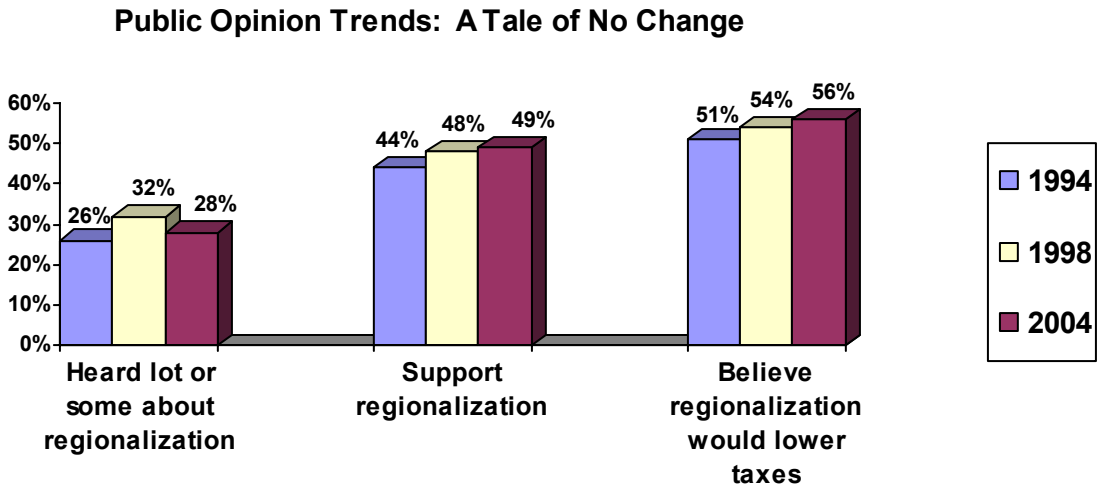
"For proponents of regionalization, the message in the poll results is not a particularly optimistic one," commented Patrick Murray, associate director of the poll. "Despite being raised by successive governors, the idea of regionalization is not one which has taken hold in the hearts and minds of the average New Jerseyan."

The Star-Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll • Eagleton Institute of Politics
185 Ryders Lane, New Brunswick, New Jersey 08901
Director: Cliff Zukin x247 • Associate Director: Patrick Murray x243
Graduate Research Assistants: Robert Suls • Allison Kopicki • Mike Schubert • x289
Phone: 732-932-9384 - Website: http://slerp.rutgers.edu - Fax: 732-932-1551

In the current poll, just over 1-in-4 (28%) say they have heard a lot or some about regionalization. These findings are basically unchanged from awareness registered among New Jerseyans when regionalization was talked about by former Governor Jim Florio ten years ago (26%) and then-Governor Christie Whitman in 1998 (32%).

The main argument for regionalization is that it would hold costs and taxes down, while opponents say that consolidation would mean giving up too much control over local services. When asked to consider these two views, the public basically splits, with 49 percent supporting regionalization of their local services compared to 39 percent who would oppose it. These findings are practically unchanged from previous Star-Ledger/Eagleton surveys conducted in 1998 – when the margin was 48 to 38 percent – and 1994 – when it was 44 to 37 percent.

In a climate of low awareness, just over half of state residents believe that regionalization will save money and lower property taxes, although only 1-in-5 (19%) thinks it will have a significant impact. Just as the idea of regionalization has not become dinner-time conversation in the state, the argument that sharing local services would reduce costs has not made any headway during the past 10 years. In 1994, 51 percent of New Jerseyans believed that regionalization could lead to lower taxes compared to a similar 54 percent who said the same in 1998 and 56 percent today.



However, the poll results give mixed signals on the importance of lowering property taxes if doing so would translate to a substantial decline in local services. In fact, residents are somewhat more likely to think that regionalization will worsen the quality of local services (27%) rather than improve them (19%), although nearly half (47%) of the state feels that

regionalization will have no impact on the quality of local services. And there are many in the state who are wary of any tax saving measures that could lead to a decline in services. The current poll finds the state is evenly divided when asked to choose between raising taxes to maintain the current level of local services (43%) or cutting services to maintain the current tax levels (40%). These numbers are virtually unchanged from past surveys.

Murray remarked, "Proponents have yet to convince the majority of residents that regionalization will result in a considerable savings for New Jersey taxpayers with little or no loss in either the level or control of local services. These poll results indicate that they are still quite a ways from persuading the public of their view."

SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION:

The largest chunk of the typical New Jersey property tax bill is taken up by local school districts. In a state with more school districts than municipalities, one of Governor McGreevey's specific regionalization proposals is the elimination or consolidation of nearly 200 districts that have either one or no actual school buildings. It is not clear that the public is ready to accept even these initial steps toward school consolidation.

New Jersey residents are sharply divided when asked whether they would support combining education related services – such as athletic teams and bus lines – in their town with those in a neighboring town. Overall, 52 percent favor this consolidation of school services compared to 41 who oppose it. This number remains unchanged from 1998, when the margin was 51 to 43 percent.

In a more direct question on combining local education systems, the poll asked half of those surveyed whether they would favor or oppose combining their public schools with those in a more affluent town. The other half were asked about combining their schools with those in a less affluent town. Not surprisingly, support is stronger when the school system is seen to be "trading up" rather than down in terms of wealth – *although not by much*. Half of those surveyed (50%) favor consolidating their schools with ones in wealthier towns, but 42 percent still oppose this potential loss of local control. When asked to consolidate their schools with those in a less affluent town, the numbers are flipped – 44 percent give their support compared to 50 percent who are opposed.

"The governor has pegged consolidation of local services as the cornerstone of his tax relief program in New Jersey," observed Murray. "However, given the prevalent home rule culture in this state, selling the merits of such a policy will be a very difficult task."

The *Star-Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll* was conducted by telephone with a random sample of 904 New Jersey adults between January 7 and 13, 2004. Results from this poll have a +/-3.9 percent margin of error.

Pollsters also noted some regional differences in the poll numbers. On the whole residents of South Jersey tend to be more supportive of regionalization than those who live north of Interstate 195. About 6-in-10 South Jerseyans (59%) favor the idea of regionalization compared to 34 percent who oppose this. This compares to 46 – 41 in Central Jersey and 43 – 41 in North Jersey. South Jersey residents (62%) are also somewhat more likely than their neighbors in the central (52%) and northern (54%) parts of the state to believe that regionalization would lower property taxes.

Also, residents in New Jersey's developing towns (58%) are somewhat more likely than those in stable suburbs (43%) and urban areas (39%) of the state to favor the regionalization of local services to hold down taxes, although this greater level of support does not necessarily extend to the consolidation of schools. Residents of South Jersey and in the state's more rapidly developing towns are the most likely to report that their property taxes have gone up a lot in the past year.

BACKGROUND MEMO – RELEASE (EP145-4) January 25, 2004

The latest *Star-Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll* was conducted by telephone from January 7-13 with scientifically selected random samples of 904 New Jersey adults. 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 904 New Jersey residents surveyed is ± 3.9 percent, at a 95 percent confidence interval. Thus if 50 percent of the public were found to be less likely to agree with a statement, one would be 95 percent sure that the true figure would be between 46.1 and 53.9 percent (50 ± 3.9) had all New Jersey residents 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 residents of North, Central and South Jersey, are subject to more error than are statements based on the total sample.

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 is 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. The questions referred to in this release are as follows:

"How serious do you think New Jersey's budget problems are—very serious, somewhat serious, not very serious, or not at all serious?" [RG1]

	Very serious	Somewhat serious	Not very serious	Not at all serious	Don't Know	Total	(n)
January 2004	**41%**	**41%**	**5%**	**2%**	**11%**	**100%**	**(904)**
PAST SURVEYS							
--February 2003	55	36	2	1	5	99	(401)
--September 2002	41	37	8	3	11	100	(804)
--June 2002	37	48	7	2	7	101	(801)
--March 2002	39	44	8	2	7	100	(803)

"In the past year, have your local property taxes gone up, gone down, or stayed about the same. [IF "GONE UP," PROBE: Have they gone up a lot or just a little]?" [RG2]

	Gone up a lot	Gone up a little	Gone down	Stayed the same	Don't Know	Total	(n)
January 2004	**37%**	**27%**	**1%**	**21%**	**14%**	**100%**	**(904)**
Region							
--North	34	28	1	21	16	100	(401)
--Central	36	26	--	24	13	99	(227)
--South	43	26	--	18	12	99	(202)
Community Type							
--Urban	26	30	1	21	22	100	(129)
--Stable Suburb	36	24	1	24	15	100	(353)
--Growth Area	44	28	--	18	11	101	(405)
PAST SURVEYS							
--February 2003	32	32	--	19	17	100	(401)
--September 2002	34	33	--	18	15	100	(804)
--September 1999	--	55 --	3	23	19	100	(802)
--February 1998	25	29	2	28	17	101	(802)
--February 1997	28	28	4	25	15	100	(800)
--February 1995	28	31	4	26	12	101	(801)
--February 1994	29	30	2	26	12	99	(801)
--September 1991	--	59 --	9	15	17	100	(800)

"Currently, many towns in New Jersey are facing budget problems. In order to provide the same level of services they might have to raise taxes. If you had to choose between raising taxes or cutting services, which would you choose? [RG3]

	Increase taxes, maintain services	Maintain taxes, decrease services	Depends	Don't Know	Total	(n)
January 2004	**43%**	**40%**	**10 %**	**7%**	**100%**	**(904)**
Region						
--North	43	38	11	7	99	(401)
--Central	41	44	7	8	100	(227)
--South	45	41	10	4	100	(202)
Community Type						
--Urban	42	35	12	11	100	(129)
--Stable Suburb	44	40	10	6	100	(353)
--Growth Area	43	42	9	5	99	(405)
Gender						
--Male	41	43	11	6	101	(429)
--Female	45	38	10	7	100	(475)
Income						
--Less than $35,000	36	47	9	7	99	(149)
--$35,000 to $70,000	48	33	11	7	99	(222)
--More than $70,000	49	39	9	4	101	(372)
Age						
--18 to 29	62	31	4	4	101	(111)
--30 to 49	41	43	10	5	99	(326)
--50 and older	36	42	12	9	99	(440)
Party ID						
--Democrat	54	29	11	7	101	(289)
--Independent	37	45	12	6	100	(295)
--Republican	38	50	8	3	99	(214)
PAST SURVEYS						
--February 1998	41	40	10	9	100	(802)

"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?" [RG4]

	Heard a lot	Heard some	Heard a little	Have not heard	Don't Know	Total	(n)
January 2004	**10%**	**18%**	**14%**	**58%**	**1%**	**101%**	**(904)**
Region							
--North	9	17	12	60	1	99	(401)
--Central	9	21	15	55	1	101	(227)
--South	12	17	14	57	1	101	(254)
Community Type							
--Urban	6	13	9	69	3	100	(129)
--Stable Suburb	10	17	15	58	1	101	(353)
--Growth Area	12	21	14	53	1	101	(405)
PAST SURVEYS							
--February 1998	12	20	13	56	--	101	(802)
--June 1994	10	16	15	58	2	101	(801)

"Some who favor regionalization feel it would hold costs and taxes down. Some 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?" [RG5]

	Strongly favor	Mildly favor	Mildly oppose	Strongly oppose	Depends on town	Don't Know	Total	(n)
January 2004	**25%**	**24%**	**17%**	**22%**	**2%**	**10%**	**100%**	**(904)**
Region								
--North	22	21	14	27	4	12	100	(401)
--Central	23	23	24	17	1	12	100	(227)
--South	32	27	15	19	1	6	100	(254)
Community Type								
--Urban	21	18	26	17	4	14	100	(129)
--Stable Suburb	21	22	14	30	3	11	101	(353)
--Growth Area	31	27	15	17	1	8	99	(405)
PAST SURVEYS								
--February 1998	24	24	16	22	2	13	101	(802)
--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, ASK**: 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?]" [RG6]

	WOULD SAVE Significant amount	But not much	Don't know how much	WOULD NOT SAVE	Don't Know	Total	(n)
January 2004	**19%**	**19%**	**18%**	**29%**	**15%**	**100%**	**(904)**

	Would save	Would not	Don't Know	Total	(n)
January 2004	**56%**	**29%**	**15%**	**100%**	**(904)**
Region					
--North	54	29	17	100	(401)
--Central	52	35	13	100	(227)
--South	62	26	13	101	254)
Community Type					
--Urban	51	30	20	101	(129)
--Stable Suburb	58	29	13	100	(353)
--Growth Area	57	29	15	101	(405)
PAST SURVEYS					
--February 1998	54	29	17	100	(802)
--June 1994	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?" [RG7]

	Get better	Get worse	Same	Don't Know	Total	(n)
January 2004	**19%**	**27%**	**47%**	**8%**	**101%**	**(904)**
Region						
--North	17	27	47	9	100	(401)
--Central	15	26	51	8	100	(227)
--South	24	27	45	4	100	(254)
Community Type						
--Urban	19	26	43	12	100	(129)
--Stable Suburb	18	29	47	7	101	(353)
--Growth Area	19	26	49	6	100	(405)
PAST SURVEYS						
--February 1998	19	25	47	9	100	(802)
--June 1994	24	27	40	10	101	(801)

"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?" [RG8]

	Favor	Oppose	Depends	Don't Know	Total	(n)
January 2004	**52%**	**41%**	**2%**	**5%**	**100%**	**(904)**
Region						
--North	47	44	3	6	100	(401)
--Central	54	41	1	4	100	(227)
--South	57	38	1	4	100	(254)
Community Type						
--Urban	47	46	2	4	99	(129)
--Stable Suburb	53	39	3	5	100	(353)
--Growth Area	53	41	1	4	99	(405)
Income						
--Less than $35,000	53	39	2	5	99	(149)
--$35,000 to $70,000	58	37	--	4	99	(222)
--More than $70,000	49	47	3	2	101	(372)
PAST SURVEYS						
--February 1998	51	43	1	6	99	(802)

[**Asked of half the sample:**]
Combining the public schools in your town with those in a neighboring school if it was in a
-- Less affluent town? (RG9A)

	Favor	Oppose	Depends	Don't Know	Total	(n)
January 2004	**44%**	**50%**	**2%**	**5%**	**101%**	**(452)**
PAST SURVEYS						
--February 1998	39	55	1	5	100	(403)

[**Asked of half the sample:**]
Combining the public schools in your town with those in a neighboring school if it was in a
-- More affluent town? (RG9B)

	Favor	Oppose	Depends	Don't Know	Total	(n)
January 2004	**50%**	**42%**	**1%**	**7 %**	**100%**	**(452)**
PAST SURVEYS						
--February 1998	50	41	2	7	100	(399)