Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics

Pennsylvania Supreme Court Primary Elections

A Survey of 405 Registered Voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania

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Summary of Findings

On May 19, 2015, Pennsylvania voters will hold primary elections to determine which candidates will compete for three open seats on the state's highest court. One open seat on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court is a result of the retirement of Chief Justice Ronald D. Castille in December 2014, while the other two seats were made vacant by resignations. The general election, which will be held in November 2015, has the potential to drastically change the political composition of the Court. Presently, the Court is controlled by a Republican majority (three Republican Justices, Two Democratic Justices).

As important as this election is, a Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics (MCAP) poll of 405 (MOE +/-4.75) registered voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania, finds very few voters recognize the names of potential candidates for seats on the state's high court. While a majority (56%) say that the election of three justices is about as important as electing a governor and one in five (20%) say that it is more important, the vast majority of voters do not recognize the names of potential candidates. Large percentages of voters say they do not recognize the following candidates' names: Cheryl Lynn Allen (80%), John Bender (74%), Sallie Updike Mundie (81%), Anne Covey (83%), Dwayne Woodruff (80%), Christine Donahue (78%), David Wecht (84%), Anne Lazarus (85%), Kevin Dougherty (79%), and John Foradora (83%). Nor do they recognize the names of sitting Justices Thomas Saylor (82%), Michael Eakin (79%), Correale Stevens (82%), Deborah Todd (80%), or Max Baer (72%). A plurality of voters (43%) do not know whether they approve or disapprove of the way the Supreme Court is handling its job. When asked how much they have heard, seen or read about the upcoming primary election, a handful of voters say "a lot" (2%), "some" (8%) or "a little" (30%), while a solid majority (60%) say "nothing."

Turning to an issue that has received far more media attention – healthcare reform – Erie County voters have mixed opinions about the Affordable Care Act, or "Obamacare." A majority (63%) of voters say that the law has not had a direct impact on their family. In spite of this, a plurality of voters say that they have a generally unfavorable (49%) opinion of the law compared to 35% who say they have a favorable opinion of it (14% are unsure, 2% do not know). However, a strong plurality (46%) say that they want their representative in Congress to work to improve the law rather than repeal it and replace it with something else (21%), repeal it and replace it with nothing (9%), or do something else (17%). Healthcare in general is described by voters as a very important (70%) or a somewhat important (25%) political issue.

Frequency Report

Interviews were completed with 405 registered voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania. For a sample size of 405, there is a 95 percent probability that our survey results are within plus or minus 4.87 points (the margin of error) of the actual population distribution for any given question. For subsamples the margin of error is larger (depending on the size of the subsample). The data were weighted on age, race and gender to correct for minor discrepancies between the sample and population. Question order was randomized whenever possible. Due to rounding, column totals may not equal 100 percent. Bracketed or italicized text are instructions to interviewers.

Q.1 To begin, when you think about political issues that are important to you, how would you rank healthcare? Would you say it's very important, somewhat important, somewhat unimportant, or not important at all?

Very important	70%
Somewhat important	25%
Somewhat unimportant	2%
Not important at all	5%
DK	1%
RF	0%

Q.2 As you may know, the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, was signed into law in 2010. Given what you know about the health reform law, do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable opinion of it?

Generally favorable	35%
Generally unfavorable	49%
Unsure (volunteered)	14%
DK	2%
RF	0%

Q.3 So far, would you say that the Affordable Care Act has directly helped you or your family, directly hurt you or your family, or has not had a direct impact?"

Directly helped	14%
Directly hurt	18%
Not had a direct impact	63%
DK	5%
RF	0%

Q.4 Which would you rather see your representative in Congress do when it comes to the Affordable Care Act? Would you say they should work to improve the law, they should work to repeal the law and replace it with something else, they should repeal the law and not replace it with anything, or they should do something else.

Work to improve law	46%
Work to repeal and replace	21%
Work to repeal	9%
Something else	17%
DK	6%
RF	1%

Now I'm going to read you a short list of people that may run for an elected office in Pennsylvania. For each name I read, please tell me whether you have a generally favorable opinion of the person, generally unfavorable opinion of the person, or if you are unsure about your opinion. If you don't recognize the name, just tell me that you don't recognize it and I'll quickly move on.

Q.5 Is your opinion of Thomas Saylor generally favorable, generally unfavorable, are you unsure about your opinion, or do you not recognize the name?

Generally favorable	2%
Generally unfavorable	0%
Unsure	13%
Do not recognize	82%
DK	1%
RF	1%

Q.6 Is your opinion of Michael Eakin generally favorable, generally unfavorable, are you unsure about your opinion, or do you not recognize the name?

Generally favorable	2%
Generally unfavorable	1%
Unsure	16%
Do not recognize	79%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.7 How about Correale Stevens?

Generally favorable	4%
Generally unfavorable	1%
Unsure	11%
Do not recognize	82%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.8 How about Debra Todd?

Generally favorable	4%
Generally unfavorable	1%
Unsure	13%
Do not recognize	80%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.9 How about Max Baer?

Generally favorable	6%
Generally unfavorable	0%
Unsure	19%
Do not recognize	72%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.10 How about Cheryl Lynn Allen?

Generally favorable	4%
Generally unfavorable	1%
Unsure	13%
Do not recognize	80%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.11 How about John Bender?

Generally favorable	6%
Generally unfavorable	2%
Unsure	15%
Do not recognize	74%
DK	1%
RF	1%

Q.12 How about Sallie Updyke Mundie

Generally favorable	3%
Generally unfavorable	1%
Unsure	12%
Do not recognize	81%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.13 How about Anne Covey?

Generally favorable	3%
Generally unfavorable	0%
Unsure	13%
Do not recognize	82%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.14 How about Dwayne Woodruff?

Generally favorable	4%
Generally unfavorable	1%
Unsure	12%
Do not recognize	80%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.15 How about Christine Donahue?

Generally favorable	6%
Generally unfavorable	0%
Unsure	14%
Do not recognize	78%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.16 How about David Wecht?

Generally favorable	2%
Generally unfavorable	2%
Unsure	10%
Do not recognize	84%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.17 How about Anne Lazarus?

Generally favorable	2%
Generally unfavorable	1%
Unsure	10%
Do not recognize	85%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.18 How about Kevin Dougherty?

Generally favorable	6%
Generally unfavorable	0%
Unsure	13%
Do not recognize	79%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.19 How about John Foradora?

Generally favorable	1%
Generally unfavorable	0%
Unsure	13%
Do not recognize	83%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.20 You may be aware that this May Pennsylvania will be holding a primary election for justices of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. Some people will vote in this election while others won't because they don't have the time. How about you? Would you say you are very likely, somewhat likely, somewhat unlikely, or very unlikely to vote in this election?

Very likely	51%
Somewhat likely	25%
Somewhat unlikely	10%
Very unlikely	13%
DK	1%
RF	0%

Q.21 Would you say that the election of three Pennsylvania Supreme Court justices is more important, about the same importance, or less important than the election of a governor for the state?

More important	20%
Same importance	56%
Less important	19%
DK	5%
RF	0%

Q.22 So far, how much have you heard, seen or read about the upcoming primary election for Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justices? Would you that you've heard, seen or read a lot, some, a little, or nothing about the primary election for Supreme Court Justices?

A lot	2%
Some	8%
A little	30%
Nothing	60%
DK	1%
RF	0%

Q.23 Do you approve or disapprove of the way the Pennsylvania Supreme Court is handling its job?

Approve	40%
Disapprove	15%
DK	43%
RF	2%

Q.24 Finally, I have a few questions that we'll be using for statistical purposes. Generally speaking, would you consider yourself to be a liberal, a conservative, a moderate, or have you not thought much about this?

Liberal	17%
Conservative	27%
Moderate	29%
Not thought much	26%
DK	1%
RF	0%

Q.25 Do you consider yourself to be a Democrat, Republican, independent, or something else?

Democrat	44%
Republican	33%
Independent	16%
Something else	5%
DK	2%
RF	1%

Q.26 In what year were you born?

18-28 years old	15%
29-38 years old	13%
39-48 years old	14%
49-58 years old	18%
59-68 years old	24%
68 years or older	15%

Q.27 What is your race or ethnicity?

Caucasian/White	87%
African American/Black	6%
Latino/Hispanic	1%
Other	3%
DK	0%
RF	2%

Q.28 Gender [Do not read]

Male	51%
Female	49%

Methodology

This report summarizes the results of a survey of registered voters in Erie County, Pennsylvania, which was conducted between Monday, Feb. 16, and Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2015. During the 10-day field period interviewers called weekday evenings between the hours of 6:00 and 9:00 PM. For each working phone number, interviewers made no fewer than six attempts to contact individuals selected to participate in the study. Calls were generated by CATI software or manually dialed and relied on a list of randomly selected registered voters Pennsylvania obtained from Votermapping.com.

A total of 405 individuals were interviewed. For a sample size of 405, there is a 95 percent probability that the results are within plus or minus 4.87 points (the margin of error) of the actual population distribution for any given question. For subsamples, the margin of error is higher (depending on the size of the subsample). Aside from sampling error, there are several factors that prevent the results obtained through a probability sample from being a perfect representation of the results that would be obtained if the entire population was interviewed. This non-sampling error may be caused by of a variety of factors including, but not limited to, response rate and question order. In this survey, a variety of techniques were employed to reduce common sources of non-sampling error.

Response Rate

Calculating a response rate for a particular study involves considering a number of variables (see http://www.aapor.org/Response_Rates_An_Overview.htm); but, simply stated, it refers to the percentage of individuals in a sample that, when contacted, elect to participate in a study by responding an interviewer's questions. In recent years, researchers have documented a sharp decline in response rates. Today, a typical study that relies on telephone interviews can expect a response rate of between 20 and 30%. Although it is unclear if, or to what extent, response rate is a source of non-sampling error, most polls strive to maximize response rate by making multiple attempts to contact individuals and taking steps to secure their cooperation once they have been reached. In this way, our study of registered voters in Pennsylvania is no different than most polls: No fewer than six attempts were made to contact hard-to-reach individuals. These attempts occurred during weekday evenings, mornings and on Saturday afternoons. To ensure a high rate of cooperation, interviewers received training on conversion techniques that are consistent with research ethics as identified by the Mercyhurst University Institutional Review Board.

Questions

This report contains the questions as worded on the questionnaire and in the order in which they were asked. Some of the questions include bracketed information, which is, in every case, an instruction to the programmer or interviewer. Whenever possible, question order was randomized to ensure that respondents did not receive a set order of response options, which allowed response set bias to be minimized. For structured (close-ended) questions, interviewers were trained to probe for clarity when respondents' answers were not identical to the predefined response options. For unstructured (open-ended) questions, interviewers were trained to record verbatim responses whenever possible. In cases where a respondent asked that a question or response option be repeated, interviewers were careful to re-read the entire question or all response options.

Data

Data collected during this study was prepared for analysis by director and associate director of Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics. Data preparation included, but was not limited to, removing

partial interviews (respondent-terminated interviews) from the dataset. To maximize the accuracy of our results and correct for discrepancies between our sample and the population, the data were weighted on race and age. Simply stated, weighting is when data collected from survey respondents are adjusted to represent the population from which the sample was drawn.

Mercyhurst Center
for Applied Politics

The Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics (MCAP) began operations in July 2010. Inspired by the mission of Mercyhurst University and guided by the university's core values, the center promotes reasoned discourse about problems facing communities, states and nations. It accomplishes this objective by providing elected officials, government agencies, news organizations, and nonprofits with accurate and unbiased assessments of public opinion; and offering a nonpartisan forum for public debates and roundtable discussions that address pressing public problems.

The centerpiece of MCAP is the state of the art computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) facility. The facility, which is located in the Center for Academic Engagement, is comprised of thirty-one interviewer stations and staffed by well-trained research associates. The specialized computer software used to conduct telephone interviews generates random telephone numbers in a predefined geographic area or dials from a list, and allows research associates to accurately complete even the most complex interviews.

The center also has the ability to design and administer online surveys. This method of interviewing is ideal for organizations that have relatively up-to-date email addresses for their members. The software used by MCAP allows a researcher to administer a survey - whether short and simple or long and complex – to an unlimited number of email addresses. In addition, a researcher has the ability to monitor response rates and send out reminders, thereby ensuring that the study produces high quality results.

As the Northwestern Pennsylvania's only CATI facility whose primary purpose is to regularly and accurately gauge public opinion, the MCAP is an invaluable resource for community leaders. Each year the center conducts polls on issues of local, state and national interest. The results of these studies are made available to the public via the university's webpage (polisci.mercyhurst.edu/mcap). In addition to its annual polls, the center offers its services to private parties, nonprofits, news organizations, and government agencies for minimal cost.

Please direct questions about the center to Dr. Joseph M. Morris, Director, Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics, Mercyhurst University, 501 E. 38th Street, Erie, PA, 16546, (814) 824-2154, jmorris@mercyhurst.edu.

The Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics was established with a generous gift from Erie Insurance.