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CRITICAL ISSUES 2007: OUR REGION SPEAKS ITS MIND

by Craig Wollner, Associate Dean of the College of Urban & Public Affairs, Portland State University
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Introduction

The great historian Richard Hofstadter remarked that the United States was the only country born in perfection and aspiring to progress. Locally, what issues facing the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan region (Clackamas, Clark, Washington, Columbia, Multnomah, Washington, and Yamhill counties) must we deal with immediately to preserve the vaunted quality of life in one of the most livable regions in the nation?

The Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies (IMS) at Portland State University (PSU) in partnership with the PSU Survey Research Laboratory regularly conducts a biennial Critical Issues survey. Consisting of a telephone canvass of regional residents as well as a mail-back questionnaire from the region's elected and appointed officials, academics, journalists, and citizen-activists, the 2007 Critical Issues Survey attempted to identify what Hofstadter would understand as our traditional need to make better of best.

The problems identified by respondents to both surveys are compelling. They tell a story of leaders and ordinary residents battling with issues which, if neglected, could significantly impair our future. And the clearest news to come from the surveys is that both groups—the public and the opinion leaders—pinpoint the same topics as the ones requiring immediate attention:

- The general public and the opinion leaders agreed on the top three issues.
- The general public is most concerned about health care, followed by education and the economy a distant third. Opinion leaders ranked education by far the most important, followed by the economy and health care.

■ Health care has moved up in importance for the general public since 2004, when the economy was the most important issue to the general public. For the opinion leaders, education has moved from 2nd (2004) to most important today.

Citizens and Leaders on the Critical Issues

On a scale featuring “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “agree,” and “strongly agree,” respondents reacted to statements on the regional economy, their family's financial well being, taxation, and population growth. Among the general public, the great majority believes that the regional economy is healthy (60.4% agree; 3.2% strongly agree). However, as Table 1 shows, a significant minority (29.9% disagree; 3.4% strongly disagree) are concerned about the economy. Opinion leaders reflect stronger overall satisfaction with the economy (67.8% agree; 5.1% strongly agree) and a similar level of dissatisfaction (25.5% disagree; 1.6% strongly disagree) compared to the public. The county-by-county breakdown reveals that Clackamas County rated the economy most highly (65.1% agree; 2.3% strongly agree) with Washington disagreeing most strenuously (34.3% disagree; 3.6% strongly disagree).

Do respondents believe that they and their families are doing better financially than two years ago? Among the general public, just over half (57.7%) agree that they are better off (46.3% agree; 11.4% strongly agree). Opinion leaders share a much stronger sense of financial well being (54.9% agree; 10.6% strongly agree). But a large group among the opinion leaders also feel that they are not as well off (30.3% disagree; 4.2% strongly disagree). Interestingly, Washington County, home of the state's presumably lucrative high tech industry, ranked second in dissatisfaction with personal financial condition (30.7% disagree; 12.4% strongly disagree) after Columbia County (35.5% disagree; 8.8% strongly disagree).

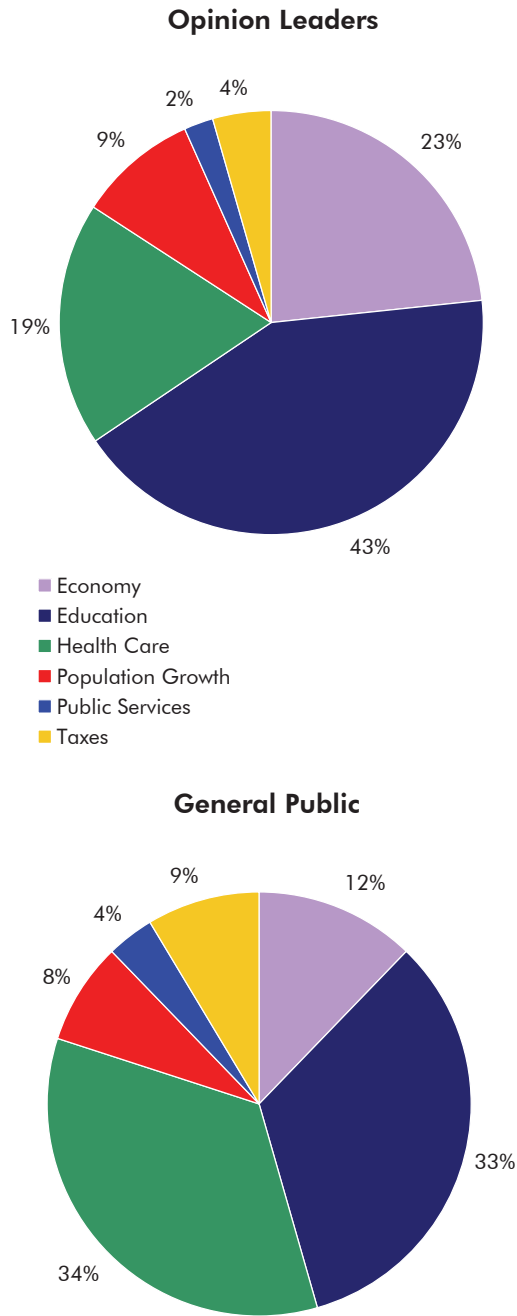


Figure 1: Top Ranked Issues Among the General Public and the Opinion Leaders

Table 1: Top Ranked Issues Among the General Public by County

Clackamas	Education (32.6%)
Clark	Health Care (40.5%)
Columbia	Health Care (38.2%)
Multnomah	Education (38.3%)
Washington	Education (38.7%)
Yamhill	Health Care (32.5%)
Overall sample	Health Care (33.9%)

Is taxation reasonable in light of the benefits it provides? A slim majority (53.0%) among the public thinks so (46.0% agree; 7.0% strongly agree). As might be expected, the opinion leaders, the members of the community with the greatest interest and often largest stake in government and the taxes that subsidize it, were more convinced that the tax system is fair (57.7% agree; 19.2% strongly agree, for a total of 76.9%). In light of the November 7 election results, the attitude of the public to taxes, as revealed here, may be telling. The defeat of state ballot measures 41 and 48, which would have returned significantly more money to taxpayers while (according to opponents) starving government of necessary funds, may be rooted in the attitude, rarely in evidence in Oregon elections since 1990, that taxes are generally fair but only adequately pay for or entirely under-fund public services and thus are not satisfactory. The passage of many funding measures regionally may be founded in the same view. This division was captured in a comment from a public respondent: "I think taxes are too low and that's why many services are inadequate or poor." Another commented, "I don't think it's the fault of the Parks & Recreation people that I'm not completely satisfied.

They don't get enough money." A slightly different perspective captured the ambivalence of citizens on this subject: "I'm dissatisfied with my water and sewer services because they are raising our rates. I don't think enough services are provided for people with mental health issues. With the schools, I think there is always room for improvement, but with a 97% rating you can't keep hounding people to improve."

Public respondents to the statement, "Population growth has become a serious issue in this region," expressed serious concerns (44.8% agree; 32.5% strongly agree). By county, the greatest anxiety was expressed in Clackamas where 83.7% identified this as a compelling problem (50.4% agree; 33.3% strongly agree) and the least in Columbia (39.0% agree; 32.4% strongly agree). Although a similar percentage (75.2) of opinion leaders was apprehensive about population growth, they provided no commentary to "unpack" their views on this issue. On the other hand, members of the public often intensely explicated their views on the severity and importance of the problem to them. Respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that population growth was a serious issue were specifically asked why they agreed. In addition, some comments focusing on immigration surfaced as responses to other questions. Many comments centering on immigration were surprisingly volatile in light of the fact that it played only a minor role in the unfolding election campaign despite some attempts to make it a major issue. "The Mexicans are taking over. I live near a county health clinic and they are everywhere. They are using up all the services," one respondent noted. Another said, "Immigrants and the

baby boom [are the problem]. They should restrict who comes into the country.” “I think that American citizens should be the ones who get the services and benefits before foreigners or immigrants,” another said. After Mexicans and other foreign immigrants, the culprits in the adverse effects of population growth were identified as Californians, traditionally the largest cohort of internal migrants to the state. As one respondent observed, “We’ve been inundated with Californians who are idiots when it comes to money. They pay ridiculous prices for homes and then everyone else’s assessed values go up and our taxes go up.” Other comments focused on connections between immigration and the increased competition for jobs, the increase in traffic congestion, the price of homes, the overcrowding of schools, and pressure on the urban growth boundary.

The second question on the survey probed further into views on the regional economy. It asked how important or unimportant respondents felt a list of policy goals were to improving the economy. The most important policy among a list including creating new jobs, improving worker wages, reducing costs for business, and reducing the cost of housing, public respondents felt, was creating new jobs at 72.5% (43.6% very important; 28.9% extremely important). The least important policy was thought to be reducing costs for businesses at 58.6% (44.2% moderately important; 14.4% not important). “I do think creating jobs is important for improving the economy,” a public respondent observed, “but it matters who is creating the jobs. It should be individual businesses and not government organizations.” Another who thought that creating jobs is necessary added, “It is also essential that it [be] possible to support a family on that wage,” linking the lack of family wage work that compels people to take second and third jobs to the perception that “families are falling apart.”

The third question asked respondents to rate the importance of four goals for improving the quality of K-12 education: improving teacher quality; raising

student achievement in the lower grades; improving public school financial accountability; improving the high school graduation rate; and reducing the gap between white and minority public school students. According to the general public, the most important goal is stabilizing funding for public schools. No other goal approached the 47.2% who thought this issue was extremely important. Another 34.9% thought this was a very important goal for a total of 82.1% who

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The total sample of the general public expressed near unanimity (90.4%) in believing that the overall goal of controlling health care costs was very important (33.1%) or extremely important (57.3%).

embraced it. Survey results reflected the chronic struggles of school systems in Multnomah and Columbia counties, where respondents ranked this goal as “extremely important” (54.3% and 51.1%, respectively). The least important goal to the public sample was improving public school financial accountability. In the total sample, only 38.8% found this goal extremely important and 32.1% found it very important. Among the opinion leaders, the leading goal was also by far stabilizing funding for public schools (69.4% extremely important). Among the other goals, only improving the high school graduation rate broke out of the thirties in percentage of extreme importance. However, when combining very important responses with extremely important, improving high school graduation rates (83.9%) approached the significance of the combined percentages of the funding stability goal (92.1%). This finding perhaps indicates opinion leaders’ improved awareness of Oregon’s dropout rate, which the

Oregon Progress Board reported in 2005 as 5.3% (in 2001). For the US in 2001, the rate was 5.0%. Oregon ranked 35th among 45 states reporting (Oregon Progress Board, 2006; Oregon Department of Education, 2006).

The fourth question was framed to elicit attitudes toward health care policy. Respondents were asked to rate policy goals for improving health care, from not important to extremely important. The goals were controlling the cost of health care; improving health services and health education programs, such as vaccinations and prenatal care; providing health care coverage for everyone; controlling the cost of prescription drugs; and accelerating medical and health

research. The total sample of the general public expressed near unanimity (90.4%) in believing that the overall goal of controlling health care costs was very important (33.1%) or extremely important (57.3%). A mere 9.4% regarded controlling health care costs as moderately important or not important. Among the questions relating to policy goals, this issue revealed the least disagreement about importance, reflecting the chronic simmering debate about health care in the state and the nation. Among the sub-goals, controlling the cost of prescription drugs ranked as the most important to respondents in the public (85.6%; 55.3% extremely important; 30.3% very important), perhaps reflecting the high average age for all respondents in the survey—54.32 years—a time in life when many individuals begin taking multiple medications for chronic conditions.

Many of the general public respondents expressed unease over inequities and gaps in the health care system, often in very personal terms: “Health care is a big issue because my father has lung cancer and has worked all his life with no health care.” Another commenter explained, “The medical coverage for people like me, who are by themselves, is nonexistent. I have medical issues; I’m going blind, I’m 58 years old, and I can get no medical help through work or the state.” Yet another said, “My husband takes seventeen prescriptions and sometimes we can’t eat because it gets so expensive.” Still another laid blame for the rapacity of the system not at the doorstep of the usual suspects—the insurance companies—but at that of providers: “I think doctors and pharmacies overcharge us and bleed insurance companies for as much as they can get. I have a problem with that.” In all, the comments suggested a pervasive anxiety about a system in which inequities are readily identifiable, but consensus on remedies is less so.

The confluence of public opinion and the perspective of the opinion leaders was most evident on health care. A solid 91% of the opinion leaders thought controlling health care costs was extremely important (60.4%) or very important (30.6%). A similar percentage of the general public (85.2% versus 85.6%) believed that the leading policy choice was controlling the cost of prescription drugs.

The opinion leaders echoed the public’s scorn for the quality of mental health services.

Question 5 concerned the level of satisfaction with public services provided by local government. The specific services spotlighted were police, fire, and other public safety services; parks and recreation; roads and traffic; and public transportation. The greatest satisfaction was recorded for two items. The public expressed confidence in police, fire, and other public safety services; 47.8% were somewhat satisfied and 36.7% were completely satisfied with these services, for a total of 84.5%.

Despite news reports of metropolitan area police organizations mishandling arrests, incidents of sexual harassment over the summer and into the fall, and gubernatorial campaign rhetoric regarding the serious understaffing of the State

Police, the number of respondents who were completely or somewhat dissatisfied with public safety services was relatively low (13.9%). Still, some commented on the conduct of the police: “The Portland police need additional training. It should start at the academy to avoid a lot of tragedies.” Another asserted, “Portland police need a lot of work; they need to be reconstructed.” In any case, the positive rating of 86.7% almost exactly matched parks and recreation’s total (48.9% somewhat satisfied; 37.8% completely satisfied).

The lowest rated item was services for people with mental illness, which, overall, was rated somewhat or completely unsatisfactory by 55.1% of those surveyed (24.7% somewhat dissatisfied; 30.4% completely dissatisfied). Views of one of the best liked services, the police, and the least, the approach to the mentally ill, came together in one respondent’s view of the interface between the two: “When [the police are called] to deal with mentally ill people, they just shoot them. They don’t know how to deal with them and they don’t have anywhere to take them that they can get help.”

For the opinion leaders, parks and recreation constituted the most satisfactory service (57.0% somewhat satisfied; 30.9% completely satisfied). Like the public, the opinion leaders thought highly of public safety services (54.7% somewhat satisfied; 29.1% completely satisfied), although there was a slight gap (87.9%

total versus 83.9% total). The opinion leaders echoed the public's scorn for the quality of mental health services (40.7% somewhat dissatisfied; 40.9% completely dissatisfied) but in harsher terms (81.4% versus 55.1%).

Question 6 returned to the topic of education: "How satisfied are you with the quality of public education students receive in kindergarten through 12th grade in your community today?" The split between those who were somewhat satisfied (47.5%) or completely satisfied (12.2%) with public education (totaling 59.7%) and those who were somewhat dissatisfied (28.6%) or completely dissatisfied (28.6%; totaling 57.2%) was not wide (22.9%) compared to other issues. The highest level of satisfaction occurred in Washington County, where 53.3% of respondents were somewhat satisfied, 10.9% were completely satisfied, and only 12.1% were either somewhat dissatisfied (5.1%) or completely dissatisfied (7.0%). Columbia County recorded the highest level of dissatisfaction at 47.6% of those surveyed (36.8% somewhat dissatisfied; 10.3% completely dissatisfied). Registering 30.8% somewhat dissatisfied and 11.1% completely dissatisfied (totaling 41.9%) Yamhill County was not far behind, perhaps indicating the difficulty that largely rural districts experience in finding adequate school funding.

The softened attitudes to and generally improved levels of satisfaction with taxes and public services, indeed, with government itself, as uncovered in these surveys, contrast clearly with attitudes of just a few years ago.

Public commentary on this issue was among the most copious, no doubt because schools have been a subject of intense debate in Oregon and Washington for more than a decade. Frustration with schools was evident and remarkable considering the otherwise strong level of satisfaction revealed in the survey. Many respondents had difficulty making a coherent statement about the quality of schools and the type and level of funding they deserved. Some made unwarranted leaps of logic or based their views on misinformation, but they were willing to articulate their thoughts emphatically, sometimes encapsulating contradictions in their remarks about the system, its teachers and their methods, the curriculum, funding, parents, and the children themselves. For example, one individual stated, "I think the schools get way too much of our tax dollars for what they produce. I think that the public schools need help and I choose to send my

children to private school." Another said, "Public schools are too closely tied to property tax and the money is not going to education." Another observed, "We waste a lot of money in our education system in grades K-12, but we still need more funding for them." Behind some comments on education was a sense that lack of professionalism of teachers is responsible for the problems of schools. "There's not the same quality of teachers that there used to be," one person said, adding, "Teachers today work just to be paid. Teachers need to make sure that they focus on each student and not just push them through school. If they do that, they should be fired." Another respondent pointed to parental neglect: "I don't think parents care anymore whether kids go to school. If parents don't value school, neither will their children." Another remarked, "I really think education needs to concentrate on basics like reading, writing, and math."

A moderate consensus of opinion leaders (60.8%) portrayed K-12 education as doing well (52.3% somewhat satisfied; 7.9% completely satisfied).

Summing Up

The prospect of change was in the air at the time these surveys were administered, but little empirical evidence existed to confirm that a transformation in public attitudes toward government and key institutions, and thus the policymaking environment, was imminent in Oregon and Southwestern Washington. In fact, absent the November 7, 2006 elections, the results of these surveys might well have seemed aberrative. But election results seem to confirm that a sea change was occurring in the national and regional outlook on government and public institutions. The softened attitudes to and generally improved levels of satisfaction with taxes and public services, indeed, with government itself, as uncovered in these surveys, contrast clearly with attitudes of just a few years ago. But the surveys also distinctly indicated that knotty problems remain in the very policies and institutions on which many now look more favorably. In this regard, education springs readily to mind. The inconsistencies in public respondents' comments indicate a deep level of

discomfort with the system and its formula for subsidy residing side by side with a sturdier optimism about learning outcomes. Also, the public's comments on population growth indicate a complex mix of doubt and optimism about growth that stem from the region's fiercely held values concerning quality of life. Traffic, sprawl, immigration—topics that appear over and over in public respondents' comments—are at the root of such concerns. In all, the surveys show that citizens and their leaders are more inclined than before to embrace an active and more costly government, but wary of too intense a romance.

APPENDIX 1

Background and Methodology

The surveys were conducted between October 12 and November 2, 2006. The mail-back survey was sent to 3616 elected and appointed officials, academics, journalists, and citizen activists in the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan region currently on the IMS mailing list. Of these, 435 were returned.

The telephone survey was conducted as a random sample of respondents over 18 years of age in the six-county region. It was stratified by county to ensure representation. The final sample size was 833. By gender, the respondents were 61.8% female and 38.2% male. Overall age was 54.32 years in a range from 18 to 106. A full description of the methodology, as well as demographic data for this project and detailed survey results, can be found at www.pdx.edu/ims.

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