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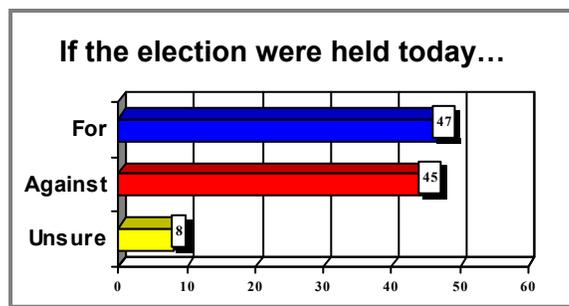
TO: Interested Parties

FR: Paul Fallon

RE: Transit Tax & Tax Swap

This year, some counties in Florida have transit and transportation sales taxes on the ballot, which feature, among other things, “swaps” so that, if they are approved, future property taxes for transit services will no longer be collected. Because of the popularity and interest in the idea of swapping sales taxes for property taxes, I conducted a public opinion survey in Polk County, Florida to explore how enticing the prospect is to voters in the upcoming election.

Polk County proved to be a good location to test the concept, because it has, what appears to be, a very competitive election underway. At the time the survey was taken the electorate was split, with 47% of general election voters saying they would vote for the proposed sales tax for the “My Ride-My Road” public transportation, roadways and bus system, while 45% were against it and 8% unsure. There also were some eye-opening sub-group differences that may prove to be pivotal. Among high propensity voters – that is, those with the most consistent patterns of participating in elections like the one coming up in November – only 45% said they would vote for the sales tax, while a 48% plurality said they would vote against it and 7% were unsure. Remember, too, that variability due to random sampling means that support could be 5.64% higher or lower than the results observed in this survey.



The sub-group data also suggests that the types of voters who participate in the election could prove to be decisive (there was a small inverse correlation between the sales tax ballot vote and voting for Rick Scott). There was much greater support among Democrats, with 62% saying they would vote for the sales tax, compared to just 42% in support among political independents and unaffiliated voters. Opposition from Republican voters was quite high with only 35% saying they intended to vote for the tax and a robust majority of 57% saying that they planned to vote against it. The race may be harrowingly close at this point, but, given that there are still nearly five weeks remaining before Election Day, and enough undecided voters left to build a majority consensus, the proponents could achieve victory! That’s the good news...

The bad news is that the notion of a swap will do little to attract additional support. Using split sample testing to look at the concept from two different perspectives, I explored how the idea of a sales tax swap would affect the views of voters. In one version of a question that was posed to

half of the respondents, the results indicated that 30% of voters would be more likely to vote for the sales tax upon learning that, if it is approved by voters, Polk County will reduce property taxes by between \$1 and \$1.50 for each \$1,000 of taxable property, depending on the area of the county (11% were less likely to vote for it, as a result). For some perspective about what 30% means, I typically do not advise campaigns to tout or spend money publicizing a message unless it makes, at least, 50% of voters more likely to vote for the tax. Obviously, this appeal did not come close to the 50% threshold and appears to be a rather feeble attribute that will do little to affect voting preferences. In fact, it is so benign that only 37% of those voters who intend to vote for the sales tax said that the swap would make them more likely to do so. It is unlikely that this information would even be effective at reinforcing existing support, which is quite telling.

The version of the question that was posed to the other half of the split sample was a factual recitation of how property and sales tax rates would be affected. It fared even worse! Just 22% of the respondents said they would be more likely to vote for the sales tax if they learned that, if it is approved by voters, Polk County will have the **highest sales tax** rate in Florida, because of the increase, and one of the **lowest property tax rates**, because the County will roll back the portion being collected for transit (14% were less likely). Once again, even voters who intend to vote for the sales tax were unfazed, with only 26% saying it would make them more likely to vote for it.

To be sure, the reasons many people support transit tax requests are often pragmatic or philosophical. Voters expect to pay more in order to get something of value, like an improved transit system. This may be why the notion of eliminating one type of tax does not hold much allure or that a swap seems incongruent. The risk of touting such an aspect is that, in addition to talking about something that does not appear to affect voting, tax proponents run the risk of forcing voters to contemplate why a swap is needed when a tax is already being collected, which can be a difficult and complex question to answer.

These survey questions were not funded or commissioned by any organization or committee, nor was Fallon Research & Communications, Inc. retained by any parties of interest in this matter. This information is based on survey research data that was gathered through telephone interviews that specially-trained interviewers conducted with 301 randomly-selected registered voters in Polk County, Florida, who had valid residential or cellular telephone numbers and histories of voting in recent general elections or were new registrants. The interviews were performed during the period of September 22, 2014 through September 24, 2014. The overall estimated margin of sampling error is +/- 5.64%, based on a confidence level of 95%, although it varies for each individual question. This means that if this survey was repeated, 95 times out of 100 the results would be within plus or minus 5.64% of those provided herein. Adjustments were made to weight the results toward demographic and geographic characteristics of the county's electorate, in order to account for under- and over-sampling that normally occurs as a result of the random selection process, and to ensure that all major sub-groups are represented in proportion to their actual percentages. Like all polls, this opinion survey research is subject to other possible sources of error, such as unintentional bias in the wording of questions, data-entry error and nonresponse bias.

About Paul Fallon...



Paul Fallon is a public opinion researcher, political pollster and advisor for tax levy committees, local government agencies, school districts, interest groups and trade associations. He specializes in land-use policy research, education and transit matters, as well as public funding ballot issues and referendums. He has worked on issues and campaigns in 37 different states throughout the country, and has conducted opinion research and citizen satisfaction studies for transit services, school districts and government agencies of all sizes, from Florida to California.