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Alabama Public Opinion Survey

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Spring 2017

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INTRODUCTION

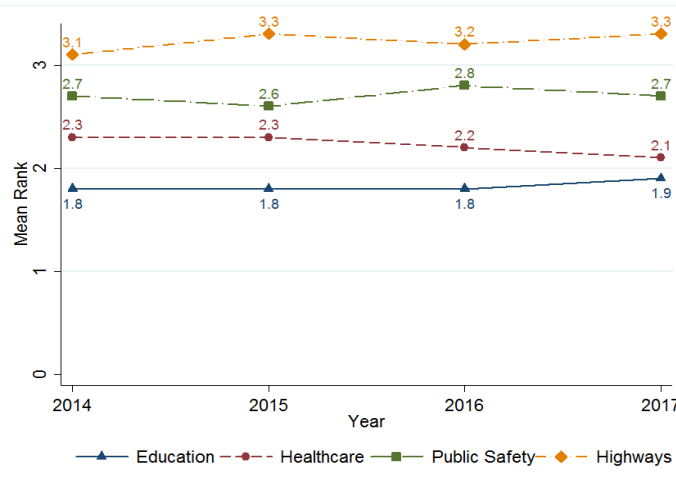
The Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama collaborated with Samford University to conduct a telephone survey of Alabama citizens between January 3, 2017 and January 28, 2017. The survey director was Dr. Randolph Horn and was under the field direction of Grace Okoro. The statewide random-digit dial survey of both cell phone and landlines produce 361 completed interviews yielding a margin of error of +/- 5.2%. Responses were weighted by race and gender to match state demographics. The survey addressed topics including state budget priorities, the quality of representation in state government, and in partnership with the Alabama Association of School Boards, questions about public education in Alabama.

Major Areas of State Investment

MAJOR AREAS OF STATE INVESTMENT

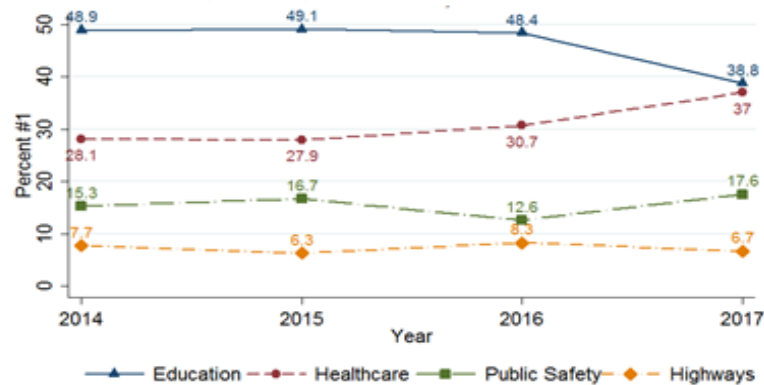
Respondents were asked to rank the four major areas of the state spending, assigning a number one to their top priority, two to their second priority, and so forth until all four areas are ranked. The four areas (mean rank in parentheses) include education (1.9), healthcare for the poor and elderly (2.1), public safety, including prisons and law enforcement, (2.7) and highways (3.3). Results for the current year and three previous years are reported in Figure 1. The ranking of these budget priorities has been fairly stable for the last four years. Education is the top priority, followed by healthcare, public safety, and highways.

Figure 1. Rank of Major Budget Areas



While the average ranking of these areas appears stable, there is some evidence of shifting priorities for some residents. Figure 2 reports the percentage identifying each area as their number one priority. The figure shows that there has been a decline in the number of respondents identifying education as their top choice, from about 48% in 2016 to just over 38% in 2017.

Figure 2. Budget Priorities



MAJOR AREAS OF STATE INVESTMENT

Similarly, there has been an increase in the proportion of respondents identifying healthcare as the top priority, rising from about 31% in 2016 to about 37% in 2017. One possible explanation is that discussion of healthcare in the presidential campaigns of 2016 and in the dawning of a new administration have heightened concerns for some residents. For example, those with lower incomes and lower levels of education are more likely to list healthcare as a top priority, so those who are more vulnerable to changes in the healthcare system may be more likely to list it as a top priority.

Respondents were asked if they would be willing to pay more in taxes to avoid cuts in each of these major areas of state activity. The responses track respondents' priorities fairly closely. As can be seen in Figure 3, majorities say they would be willing to pay more in taxes to avoid cuts in healthcare and education, a plurality are willing to pay more for public safety, and a majority of respondents are unwilling to pay more for highways.

Figure 3. Willing To Pay More To Avoid Cuts

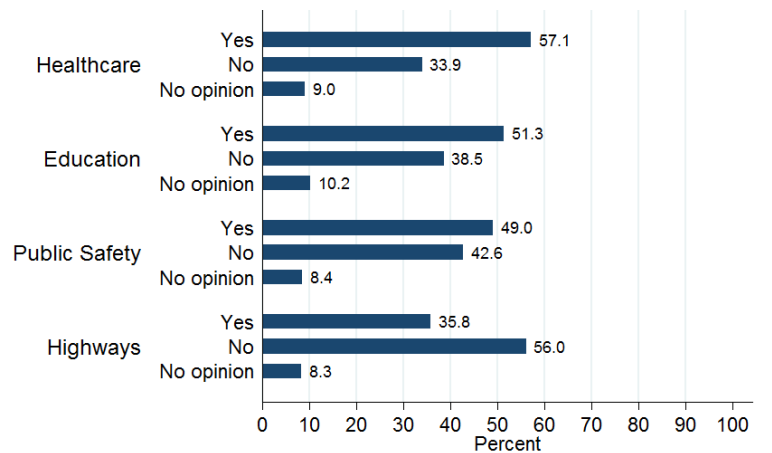
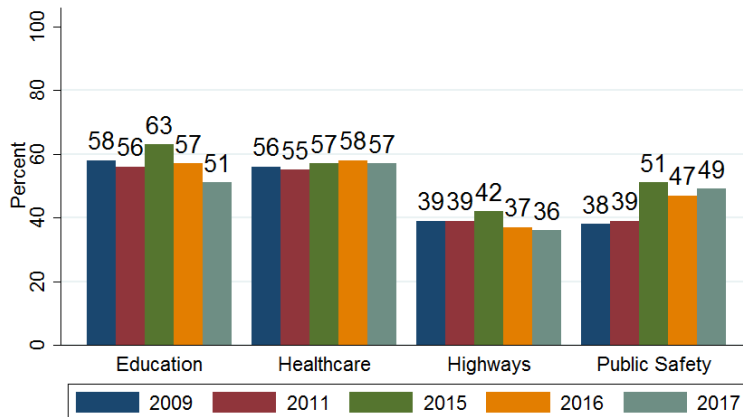


Figure 4 displays the current year's results with several previous years. Substantial support is evident for education and healthcare, as majorities across all years say they would be willing to pay more in taxes to avoid cuts in these programs. It appears support for public safety may be growing in the last three years. As has been the case for many years, support for education is broad based varying little across political, demographic, or regional lines. While majorities of almost every group say they would be willing to pay more in taxes to avoid cuts in healthcare, there is some variation in the level of support.

Figure 4. Willing To Pay More to Avoid Cuts -- 2009-2017



While majorities of almost every group say they would be willing to pay more in taxes to avoid cuts in healthcare, there is some variation in the level of support.

MAJOR AREAS OF STATE INVESTMENT

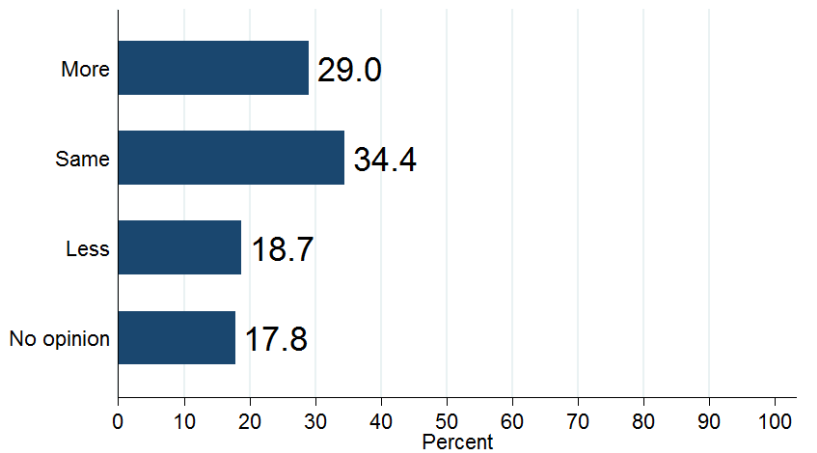
Higher percentages of Democrats and Independents say they would be willing to pay more in taxes to avoid cuts in healthcare. Similarly lower-income respondents are more willing to pay more in taxes for healthcare than higher-income respondents. Finally, older respondents are more willing to pay more for public safety than younger respondents.

Revenue

REVENUE

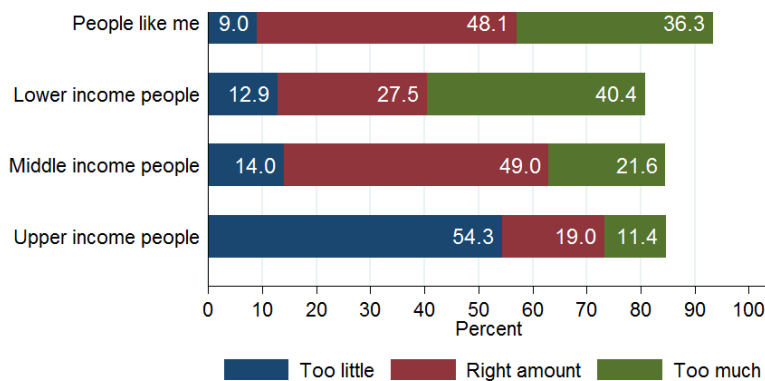
Previous PARCA research (see the December 2015 *PARCA Perspective*) has indicated that Alabamians pay less in per capita state and local taxes than residents of most other states. We asked respondents, “Thinking about how much you pay in state and local taxes here in Alabama, do you think people like you in neighboring states pay more, less, or about the same in state and local taxes?” Only 19% said they pay less than residents in other states (see Figure 5). About a third say they pay about the same, and just under a third say they pay more. There were no significant differences in this pattern across and political, demographic, or regional subpopulations.

Figure 5. People Like Me in Other States Pay More or Less in State and Local Taxes



Despite some reforms in recent decades, the tax system retains several regressive elements, meaning that lower-income residents pay a larger proportion of their income in taxes than those who are better off. For a discussion of state and local tax fairness, see the Institute on Tax

Figure 6131. State and Local Taxes -- Too Little, Right Amount, Too Much



and Economic Policy, which in recent years has included Alabama in its “Terrible 10” list of states with the most regressive state and local tax systems. If residents are shaky on the details of comparative state revenue systems, the results presented in Figure 6 indicate they are aware of the regressive nature of the Alabama taxes. When asked if people in different income

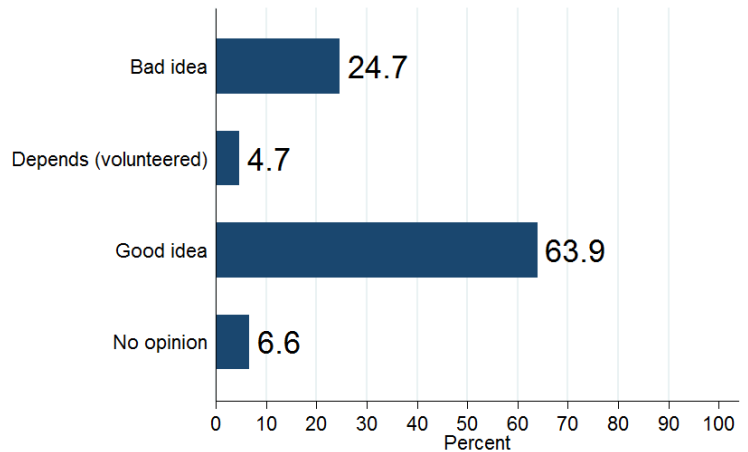
groups paid too much, too little, or the right amount in state and local taxes, pluralities indicated that lower-income people paid too much, middle-income people paid about the right amount, and a majority indicated that upper-income people paid too little. Those with lower levels of education were more likely to think that they and people like them paid too much in state and local taxes than others. Majorities of Independents and Democrats say that lower-

REVENUE

income people pay too much in taxes, while a plurality of Republicans say lower-income people pay the right amount. People who actually are low-income were more likely to say the poor paid too much while pluralities in higher-income groups said the poor paid the right amount. There was little systematic variation across subpopulation concerning the amount that upper-income people pay in taxes except for party identification. A plurality of Republicans, about two thirds of Independents, and about three quarters of Democrats say upper-income people pay too little in state and local taxes.

Alabama dedicates revenue streams to particular uses, typically referred to as earmarking. We asked respondents if this practice is a good idea with this question, “Alabama’s education programs are funded mostly through income and sales tax dollars collected by the state. Highways are maintained with gasoline and automobile tax dollars. These revenues are earmarked and can’t be used for anything else. Do you think it is a good idea or a bad idea to earmark taxes to fund a particular kind of public service?” More than three fifths indicate that earmarking is a good idea (see Figure 7). White respondents were more supportive of earmarking than non-white respondents.

Figure 7. Earmarking Revenue -- A Good Idea?

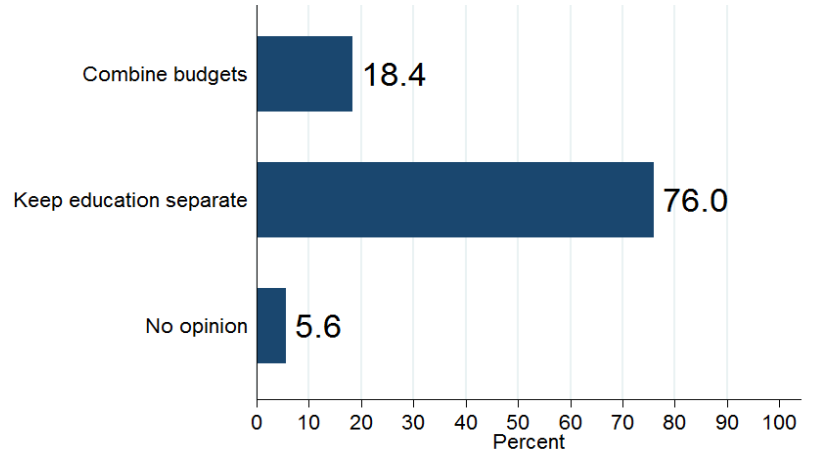


Public Education

PUBLIC EDUCATION

Alabama dedicates revenue streams to particular uses, typically referred to as earmarking. Earmarking prevents revenue dedicated to one priority from being redirected to another. The state uses a similar device to regulate expenditure by isolating education expenses in one budget and other state expenses in the general fund budget. When asked if the education budget should be kept separate or combined, three-quarters of respondents opt for keeping education in a separate budget. (See Figure 8.) There is no significant variation in opinion on this question across any demographic, political, or regional grouping.

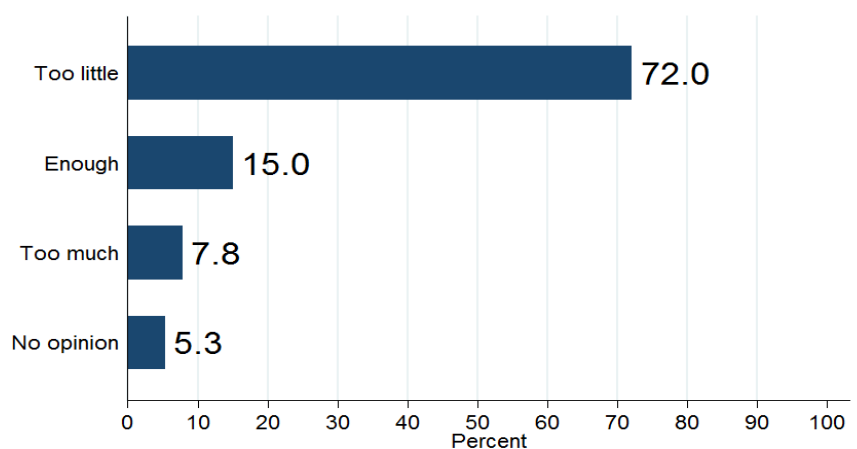
Figure 8. Should Education Budgets Be Separate?



When asked “Do you think there is too little, too much, or enough money now being spent on education in Alabama?” over two-thirds of respondents say too little is spent on education. (See Figure 9.) Majorities of every identifiable subgroup said that too little is being spent on education in Alabama. There are a few differences in the size of the majority across subgroups.

For example, about two-thirds of Republicans say too little is being spent on education, about three-quarters of Independents, and nearly 90% of Democrats say the same thing. Slightly larger majorities of women say too little is being spent on education than men. Similarly,

Figure 9. Too Little/Too Much Spent on Education?

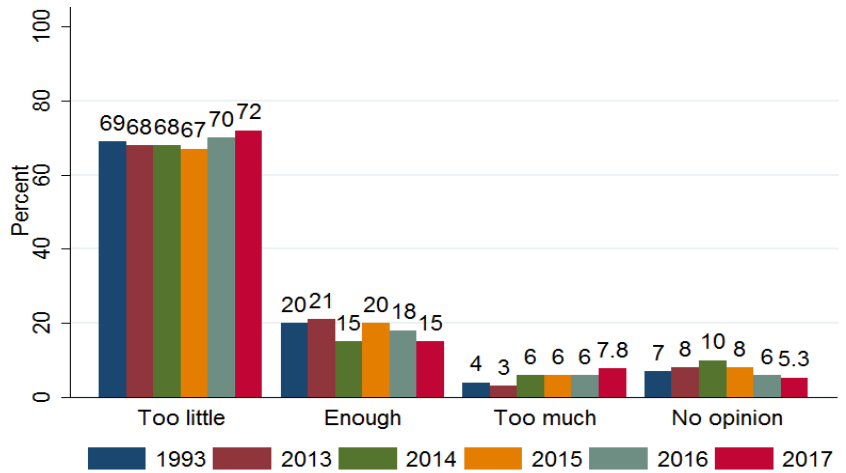


residents from the state’s southern counties are more likely to say too little is being spent on education than residents in other parts of the state.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

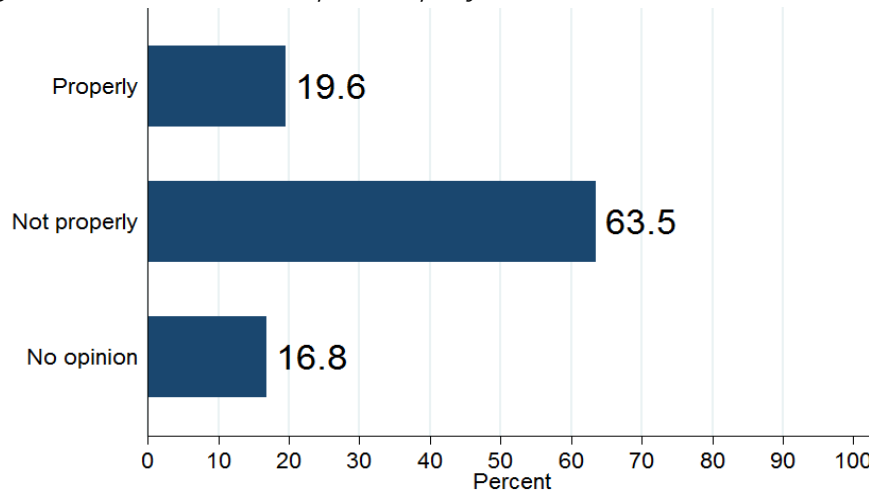
The sentiment is nothing new in Alabama. Surveys dating back over 20 years yield similar results. Figure 10 presents the results for this question from the last five PARCA surveys and a 1993 survey conducted by the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama. In every year we have asked the question, at least two-thirds of respondents say too little is being spent on education.

Figure 10. Too Little/Too Much Spent on Education in Alabama? 1993-2017



That residents say the state invests too little in education does not mean they are sanguine about how the money is spent. When asked if the money spent on education is spent properly or not properly, about three-fifths of respondents say not properly. (See Figure 11.)

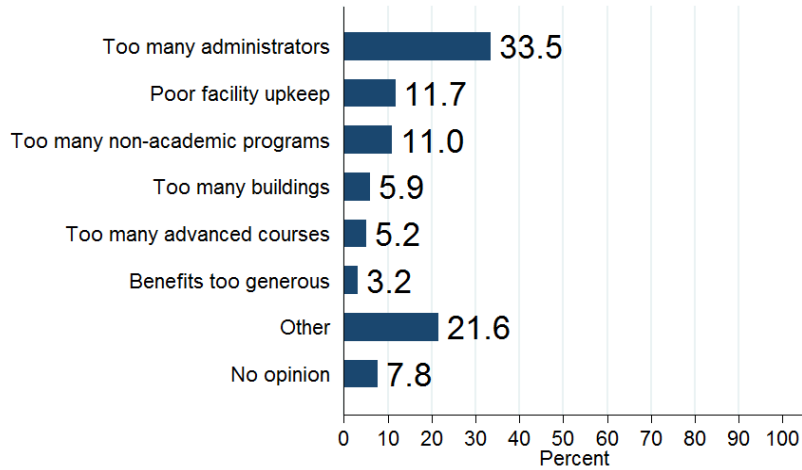
Figure 11. Education Dollars Spent Properly?



For those who said education dollars were not properly spent, we asked a follow-up question asking them to identify the main reason they said spending is not proper. The results are presented in Figure 12.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

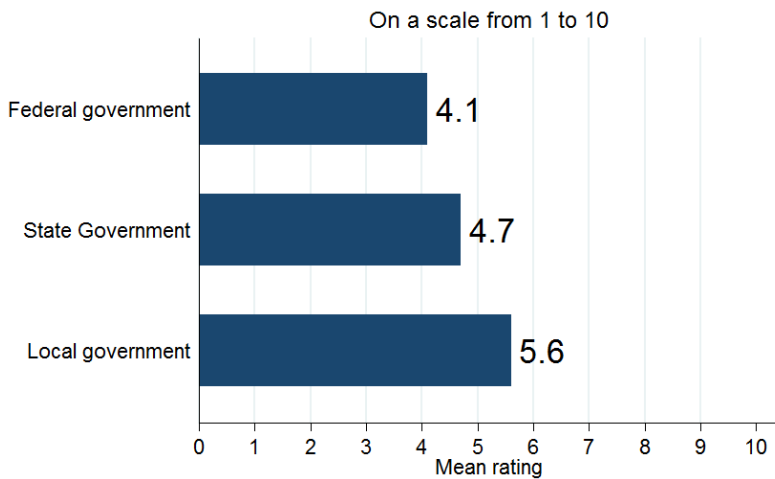
Figure 12. Reason Education Dollars Not Spent Properly?



About a third see the schools as spending too much on administration, with the number identifying other reasons dropping off considerably. Most of the examples of improper spending refer to expenses other than instruction, so one might infer that residents want greater investment in education and for that investment to be efficiently administered, i.e. concentrated on instruction.

Multiple levels of government have a role in funding and regulating education. We asked respondents to rate the federal, state, and their local governments in terms of how much they trusted each level of government to handle school funds properly, using a scale where 10 represents the highest level of trust and 1

Figure 13. Trust To Handle School Funds Properly?

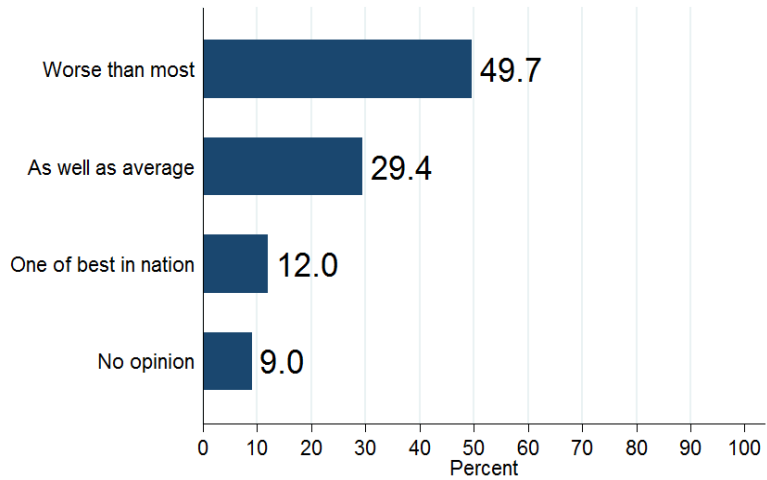


represents the lowest level. The results are presented in Figure 13. In general, Alabamians trust lower levels of government more than higher levels of government. Republicans tend to be less trusting of the federal government than Democrats. People from South Alabama are less trusting of the state government than residents from the rest of the state. African-American respondents tend to be slightly less trusting of local government than others.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

We asked respondents about the quality of public education in Alabama compared to other states with this question, “How well do you think Alabama public schools do compared to schools in other states? On average, would you say public schools in our state perform worse than schools in most states, perform as well as schools in the average state,

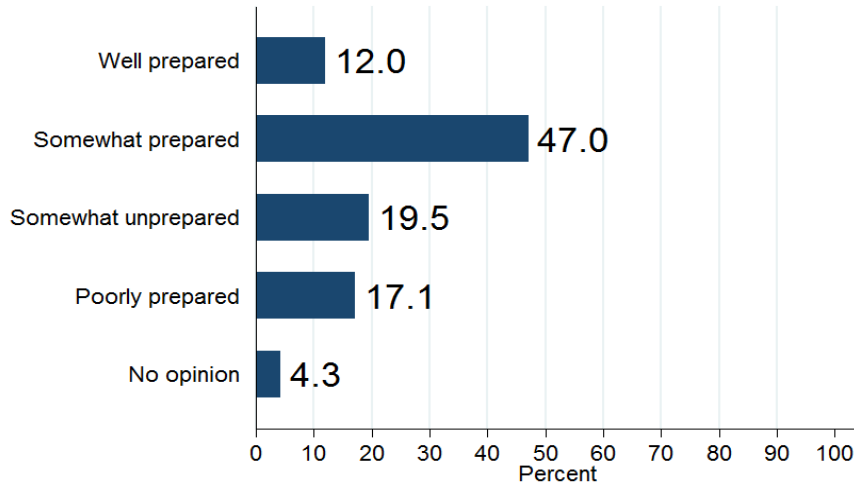
Figure 14. Alabama Schools Compared to Other States?



or do we have one of the better-performing school systems in the nation?” (See Figure 14.) About half say that Alabama schools are worse than those in most other states. While majorities or pluralities of nearly every subpopulation say Alabama schools perform worse than most, parents of public school students tended to rate the schools slightly more favorably than those who do not have children in public schools.

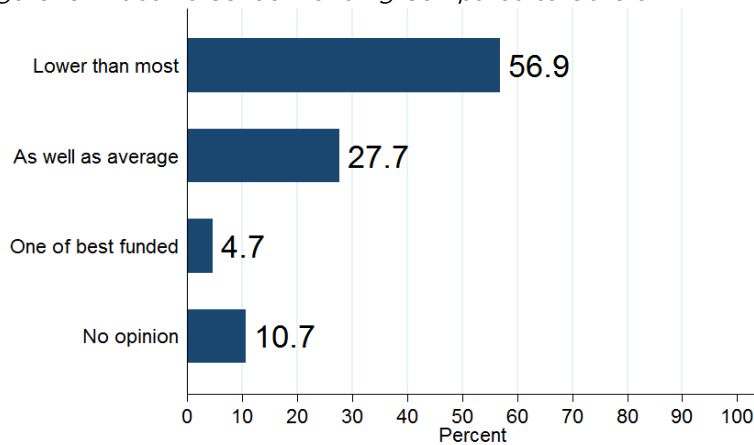
We queried evaluations of public school performance in another way, asking, “How well prepared would you say Alabama’s public school graduates are to enter the workforce or start college?” (See Figure 15.) Nearly half of all respondents say that graduates are somewhat prepared, and about 59% say graduates are somewhat or well prepared. While not dramatically different than the overall pattern, respondents from Black Belt counties tended to characterize graduates as less prepared compared to residents from the rest of the state.

Figure 15. How Well Prepared Are Graduates?



PUBLIC EDUCATION

Figure 16. Alabama School Funding Compared to Others?

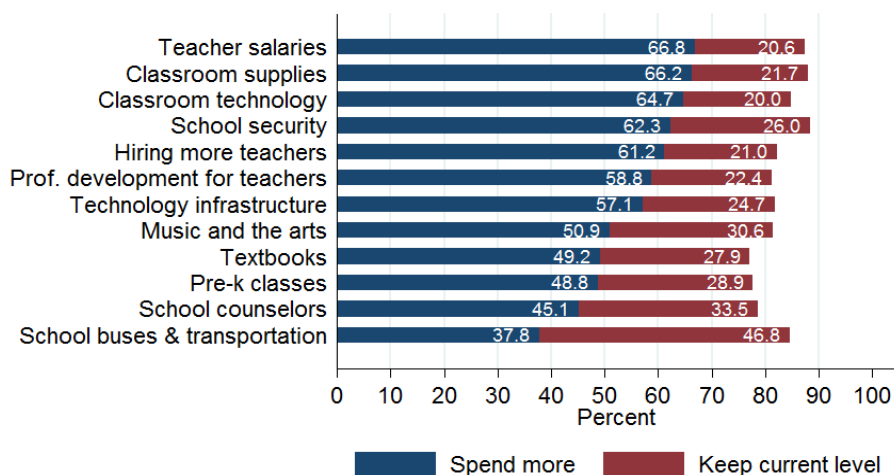


To understand respondents' evaluation of the level of school funding we asked, "How well funded do you think Alabama public schools are compared to schools in other states? On average, would you say public schools in our state are funded at lower levels than schools in most states, funded as well as schools in the average state, or do we have one of the better-

funded school systems in the nation?" A majority of respondents say Alabama schools are funded at lower levels than schools in most other states. While majorities of virtually every subpopulation say state schools have lower levels of funding than those in most other states, respondents with college or advanced degree were even more likely to hold that view than those with less education.

We asked about spending on 12 different school resources or programs. (See Figure 17.) Respondents were asked if the state should spend more, less, or leave funding at the current level for each of the items. In general, respondents found all of these areas worthwhile investments. In every case, at least 75% of respondents said funding should be kept at the same level or increased. For eight of the 12 items, majorities of respondents indicated that more should be spent. There are very few differences in support for funding these across any of the subpopulations we measured. When there is a difference, it tends to be only matter of degree. Rarely do we see polarization, where a majority of one group opposes a majority of another. In no case do we find even a plurality of a subpopulation saying the state should spend less in any of the areas we asked about.

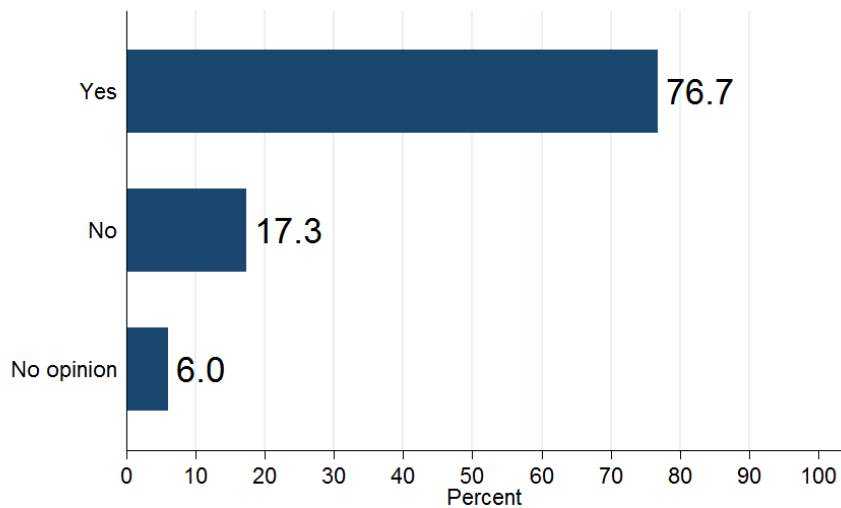
Figure 17. Alabama Should Spend More/Less/Same?



PUBLIC EDUCATION

One might infer from this pattern of response that state residents think funding of education priorities is important. We asked for a more global assessment of the connection between funding and quality with this question, “Do you think the level of school funding makes a difference in the quality of education?” As the results presented in Figure 18 indicate, more than three-quarters of respondents answered affirmatively. A substantial majority of state residents say funding makes a difference in educational quality. Large majorities of every political, demographic, and regional subpopulation share this view.

Figure 18. Funding Makes a Difference in Educational Quality?



Public Connection to State Officials

PUBLIC CONNECTION TO STATE OFFICIALS

For each of the last 11 years, we have asked some questions that give us a sense of respondents' connection to their elected officials. We ask them to agree or disagree with two statements: A) Government officials in Montgomery do not especially care what people like me think (see Figure 19); and, B) People like me have no say in what the government in Montgomery does (see Figure 20). Over the years there have been some ups and downs in the percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree with the statements. Both trends appear to have been rising since 2014. There are no significant differences across any subpopulation in the level of agreement with the first statement. Majorities of every group agree that officials in Montgomery do not especially care what people like me think. There is significant variation in the second statement by income, but only among those reporting incomes of over \$100,000 do we see less than a majority agreeing that people like me have no say in what the government in Montgomery does.

Figure 19: Officials in Montgomery Don't Care What People Like Me Think

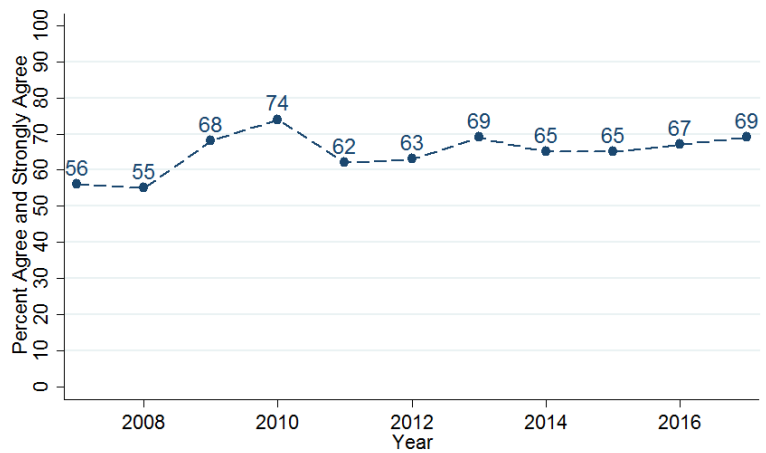
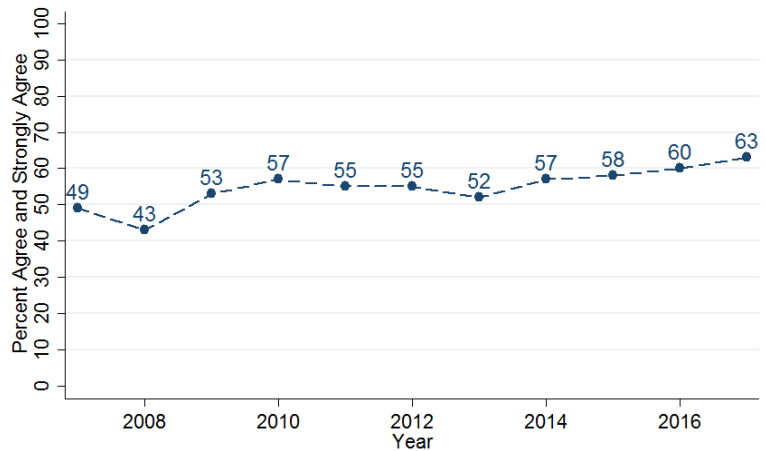


Figure 20: People Have No Say in What Government in Montgomery Does



Conclusion

CONCLUSION

Results from this year's survey are consistent with previous years' results in some important ways. Residents value state investments in education and healthcare. They believe education is inadequately funded. There is substantial evidence that respondents have limited faith in public officials. Support for earmarking revenues and keeping the education budget separate from the general fund may indicate concern that officials would mispend those resources if they could. Majorities think the state government does not care what they think or that they have no say in what the government does.

Public officials are in a difficult position. As Edmund Burke and others have noted, there is often a tension between the preferences of constituents in a district and the collective interest of a state or nation. Officials, seeing their colleagues defeated in primaries from the more extreme wing of their parties, may underestimate the scope they have when working to solve important public policy challenges. Similarly, officials may underestimate their capacity to educate their constituents on what it may take to address the problems confronting the state. Results of PARCA polls indicate many opportunities for officials to demonstrate responsiveness to public concerns and leadership in crafting public policy solutions.



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