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TO: Interested Parties

FR: Paul Fallon

RE: Post-election Survey Data and Lessons for Transit and Public Funding Clients

Last week in Hillsborough County, Florida during the general election, a one percent sales tax increase request for public transit systems was defeated, with 42% of the voters supporting it and 58% opposing it. The extensive package of various transit and transportation components that would have been funded through the tax included road improvements, expanded bus services and a light rail system. It was one of the most widely-watched transit ballot issues in the country in 2010. Fallon Research & Communications, Inc. conducted a post-election survey among voters in Hillsborough County who turned out to vote. It provides some interesting, and surprising, insight that may be useful to transit agencies and organizations, as well as other groups that are exploring public funding requests which require voter approval, such as cities, counties, social service agencies and school systems.

Differences in Support

Although there were some profound differences in the levels of support between registered Republicans (25%), Democrats (63%), and unaffiliated or independent voters (34%), perhaps the most intriguing difference was predicated on expectations about the utility of the transit improvements. Interestingly, voters who are commuters working full-time outside the home were 5% less likely to support the tax than voters who are not employed working outside the home. In fact, only 6% of the commuters said that they expected to use the light rail system a lot for their commuting and travel needs. Of greater political significance, only 12% of voters that voted for the tax said that they would use the light rail system a lot. **This indicates that the vast majority of the voters that supported the tax did so, even though they had no intention of using light rail!**

However, that does not mean that self-interest was not a factor in their decisions, because 60% of those who voted for the tax said that they expected traffic flow and commuting would improve a lot because of the proposed transit improvements and light rail system. In addition to the partisan and behavioral differences, diametrically opposite expectations seem to be a critical factor in differentiating support and opposition for the tax. While 48% of voters who supported the tax said that the proposed projects funded by it would have strengthened and improved the local economy a lot, this sentiment was shared by only a paltry 5% of the voters that voted against it.

What Went Right

While it might be tempting to conclude from a 16 percent margin of defeat that there are few valuable lessons that could be gleaned from such a situation, the survey data indicates that there was some noteworthy organizational success that is instructive. A total of 26% of voters, including 47% of those who voted for the transit tax, said they were very or somewhat convinced by the information provided by the committee that championed the transit tax, named **Moving Hillsborough Forward**. This is an impressive achievement for an *ad hoc* organization that was competing with many well-funded candidate campaigns for the attention of voters. By comparison, just 6% of voters, including 7% of those who voted against the transit tax, said they were very or somewhat convinced by the information provided by the primary committee that opposed the transit tax, named **No Tax for Tracks**. In fact,

75% of those who voted against the tax reported that they did not recall hearing any information from it during the campaign. **This suggests that passive opposition was more detrimental than active organized opposition, and that little time and resources should be spent combating such groups.**

What Went Wrong

Even though “Monday morning quarterbacking” can be treacherous and retrospective views can be misleading, the fact that 28% of those who voted against the tax said they would have been more likely to vote for it if the amount had been a smaller one, which just paid for improved roads and expanded bus services, suggests that changing the plan -- or emphasis of the campaign messaging to certain targeted groups -- might have provided enough additional support to achieve victory. Although that could be seen as a repudiation of the light rail system concept, the bigger problem may have been damning 11th hour press coverage leading up to the election that raised questions about discrepancies in the total projected cost for the light rail system. A total of 28% voters, including a whopping 44% of those who voted against the transit tax, said their decision was influenced a lot by possible uncertainty about the total cost of the light rail system! Since a total of 43% of voters said they made their voting decisions within the last four weeks or right before they voted, **this points to the need to, whenever possible, have such questions resolved and, perhaps, vetted by responsible media organizations, well in advance of Election Day!** Once voters made their decisions, they seemed to become entrenched as only 13% of voters said they changed their minds about how they would vote. Although there are a lot of highly sophisticated cognitive psychological studies to explain this phenomenon, your mother probably said it best: “*first impressions are lasting ones.*”

Is It Over?

A total of 70% of those that voted for the tax would like for another issue to be placed on the ballot when more definitive information is available or the economy gets better, which is not surprising given their willingness to support the 2010 ballot issue under conditions that most dispassionate political observers would reasonably describe as less than optimal. The surprise is that, despite their initial opposition, those who voted against the issue still seem interested in transit improvements. When given a choice, a total of 21% would like for another issue to be placed on the ballot when more definitive information is available or the economy gets better, and another 20% would prefer seeking a lower tax so some vital improvements to existing services and roads can be made. In fact, only 31% of the voters that were against the tax say that no additional steps should be taken to improve roads and transit or build a light rail system. Despite the magnitude of the defeat, the issue is still a potentially viable one that may need to be refined and recast, because even opposition voters want something to be done!

Please feel free to call me at 614-341-7005, if you want to discuss this information in greater detail.

This information is based on survey research that was conducted through telephone interviews of 498 randomly-selected registered voters in Hillsborough County, Florida with valid residential and cellular telephone numbers who voted in the 2010 general election. The interviews were performed during the period of November 3, 2010 to November 4, 2010. The overall estimated margin of sampling error is +/- 4.39%, 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 4.39% of those provided herein. In order to account for sampling variability within the confidence interval, adjustments were made to proportionately weight the results toward the actual electoral outcome, as well as demographic and electoral characteristics of the county.

About Paul Fallon...



Paul Fallon is a public opinion researcher, political pollster and advisor for levy committees, local government agencies, school districts, interest groups, political candidates and trade associations. He specializes in land-use policy research, education, transit and public funding ballot issues and referendums.

He has worked on issues and campaigns in 34 different states throughout the country. He has served as the pollster for numerous campaigns to get voter approval for public funding requests for transit services, school districts and government agencies of all sizes, ranging from Florida to California.