

Public Opinion Profile OF NEW MEXICO CITIZENS

A UNM INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER REPORT

WINTER 1999—VOL 11/NO 1

FOCUS: PUBLIC TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND THE CLINTON SCANDAL

Background

Data on voting, voter registration, and opinion poll results reveal a dramatic decline in Americans' trust in government and sense of civic engagement since the early '60s. These phenomena have been examined in the mid-1990s by Robert Putnam ("The strange disappearance of social capital in America") and others (see "Trust in Government" article on page 5).

What has been the role of scandals involving public officials in the process of alienation? Do investigations of the moral failures of incumbents reflect only on them, those who investigate them and those who report about the investigations? Or do they weaken the legitimacy of "the American system of government" in the view of the people? Or do people just not care what is happening in government, finding it irrelevant as long as the economy is working well?

Explanations of and speculation about Americans' increasing alienation from the political process are common topics of media pundits as well as serious researchers. Some treat Americans' increasing cynicism and feelings of powerlessness as a potential cause of a looming threat to the established democratic order. The question is sometimes put this way: Can democratic governance survive rising levels of alienation and declines in participation? Others seek to understand how it came about, as the effect of a variety of social or cultural forces. One "culprit" suggested to be responsible for Americans' "tuning out" is said to be political leaders whose bad behavior engenders disrespect for the institutions of democracy.

The IPP's research

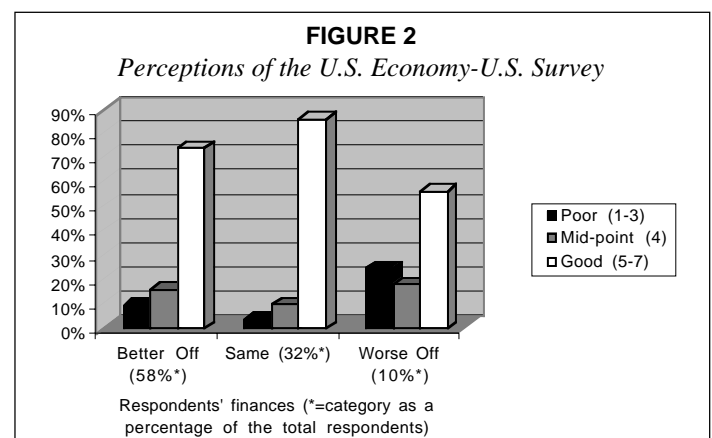
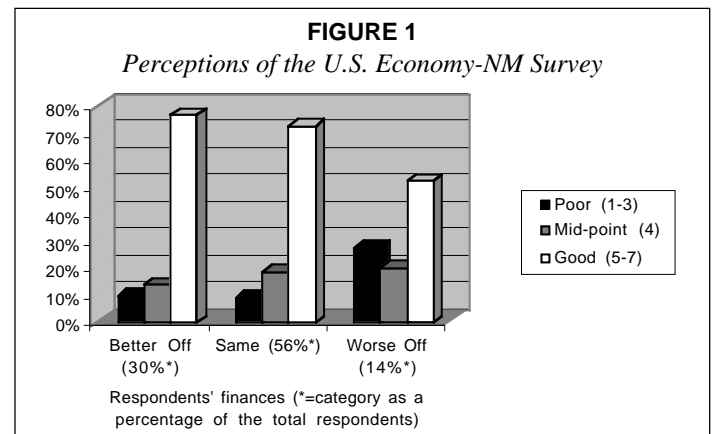
In the fall of 1998 (before the November mid-term elections) the IPP conducted its twice-yearly telephone survey of public opinion. For this survey, we obtained a statewide sample of 805 New Mexicans. In addition, as is done annually each fall, we also surveyed a nationwide sample of 1,084 individuals. In developing the survey instrument for this Winter 1999 *Public Opinion Profile*, the IPP included several questions to test whether the evidence supported some of these propositions about alienation and attitudes toward political leaders.

IPP researchers viewed the recent Clinton scandal as an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the relationships between people's views of the president, their support for or opposition to possible sanctions or "punishments" and a number of factors that might influence these views. Specifically we tested how these views related to people's perceptions of the economy, their level of trust in government, the degree to which they feel their actions have any influence on what government does, and their sense of the extent to which government responds to their concerns.

Is it "the economy, stupid"?

Two questions in our survey enabled us to identify people whose assessment of the economy's performance was less positive than

most others found it to be. We asked respondents to rate their perception of how well the U.S. economy was performing on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 was very poor and 7 was very good, and we asked them whether they and their families were financially better off, worse off, or about the same as a year earlier. There were interesting differences in the response patterns of New Mexicans and those of the nationwide respondents. Considering the New Mexico data first, we discovered (not surprisingly) that those New Mexicans who saw themselves as worse off were nearly three times as likely as those "better off" to view the overall economy as performing poorly. Figure 1 shows the differences.



Data from the national sample (Figure 2) show that people outside New Mexico had a somewhat more optimistic picture of the economy and of their level of wellbeing in it. Almost twice as
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Is it "the economy, stupid"?

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percentage of people in the national survey said they were better off than a year ago (58% of U.S. survey respondents; 30% of NM respondents), while a smaller percentage (10% U.S.; 14% NM) said they were worse off. Moreover, those in the U.S. survey who were doing "about the same" financially were a good deal more likely than their NM counterparts to give the economy a "good" rating (86% versus 72%). This suggests that respondents from the national survey may have been more satisfied with the status quo than respondents from New Mexico. This may be because their average income was higher than that of New Mexico residents, or it may be that they felt less worried about their financial future, or both.

Does the apparently healthy state of the U.S. economy explain the public's willingness to give President Clinton the benefit of the doubt with regard to his actions in the Lewinsky affair? If so, we should expect to see those who themselves were worse off to be more likely, for instance, to favor impeachment. But such a simple relationship was not borne out by the results of our survey of New Mexicans. Figure 3 shows that New Mexicans who felt themselves and their families worse off than a year earlier were *not* much more likely to want to impeach the president than those who rated themselves as being better off.

Analysis of the national data reveals a somewhat different picture, however. It lends some credence to the idea that those who were doing well financially were less inclined than those who see themselves as worse off to want to see the president impeached and removed. Figure 4 shows that those respondents from the U.S. sample who saw their own financial situations remaining "about the same" were significantly more likely than those who saw themselves as "worse off" (76% to 61%) to oppose impeachment. But they were also more likely than those "better off" to oppose it, as well!

These national findings suggest that factors other than economic self-interest were at work affecting people's desire to retain the president or see him removed from office. Else, why would respondents who perceived the economy was healthy and were "better off" financially be more likely to want the president removed from office than those who were doing "about the same"?

In answering our questions on job approval, for both the U.S. and NM surveys, those who said they were doing "about

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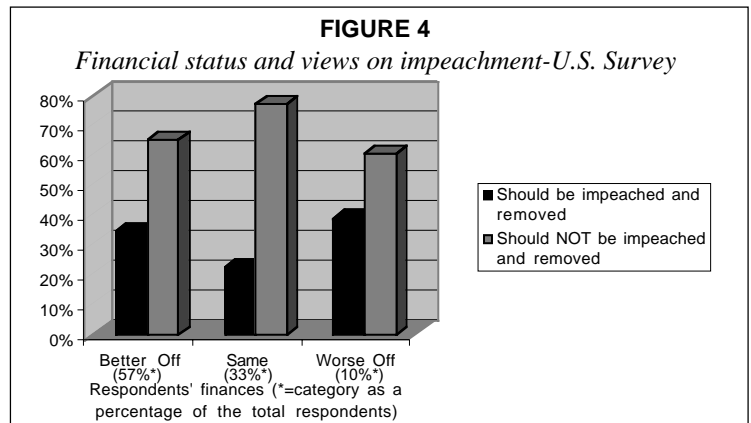
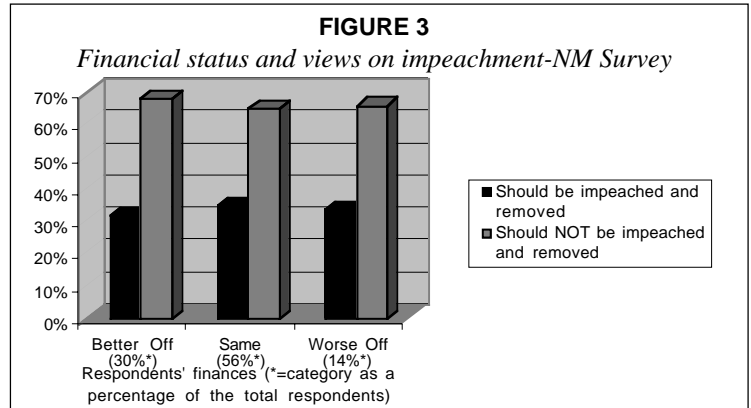


TABLE 1
Positive job performance approval ratings and financial status

Overall rating of "Excellent" or "Good"		Rating by those whose status is:		
	The job Bill Clinton is doing as President	Better off	About the same	Worse off
Nationwide	55%	52%	59%	63%
New Mexico	48%	47%	51%	43%
		The federal government overall in governing in the U.S.		
Nationwide	45%	44%	55%	33%
New Mexico	44%	42%	53%	33%

Public Opinion Profile

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UNM INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

The Institute for Public Policy serves New Mexicans as a non-partisan forum for research, analysis, data collection and training. The Institute's Survey Research Center conducts surveys and research on the policy preferences and political attitudes of U.S. and New Mexico citizens. The Profile is distributed to federal, state, and local New Mexico policy makers, corporate and civic leaders, private organizations, the media and interested citizens.

SURVEY DATA

The UNM Institute for Public Policy conducted its surveys of U.S. and New Mexico citizens through telephone interviews with 1,889 adults in October-November of 1998. The telephone numbers were selected randomly by computer. The results of the polls have a four percentage point margin of error at a 95 percent level of confidence, which means that 19 out of 20 times the findings should be within four percentage points of the results that would be obtained if all U.S. and New Mexico households were surveyed. The margins of error are larger for subgroups of the samples because of the smaller numbers of observations. As with any survey, a potential source of error is the possibility that variation in the wording of questions or order in which questions are asked could produce different results.

Is it the "economy, stupid"?

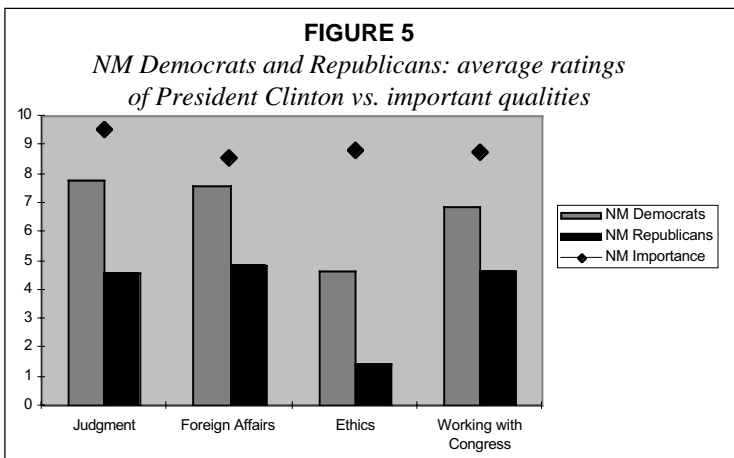
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the same" were also more inclined to say the federal government was, overall, doing an "excellent" or "good" job than either those doing "worse" or "better" financially. And for the U.S. respondents, those who were "worse off" were *most* inclined to rate the president's performance as "excellent" or "good," while in New Mexico they were *least* likely to do so. (See Table 1 on the preceding page.) So the picture is not simple, but "the economy" is far from being a sufficient explanation for the public's opinion on this issue.

The effects of party affiliation and moral judgment

About two-thirds of our New Mexico and U.S. respondents opposed impeaching and removing the president from office. For those who identified themselves with either of the two major parties, however, party affiliation was the one characteristic most significantly associated with a position on impeachment. A majority of self-identified Republicans favored impeachment. Sixty-one percent of New Mexico Republicans were for impeachment, while a smaller majority, 55% of the Republicans in the U.S. survey, also favored impeachment.

The importance of party affiliation is dramatically revealed in assessments of the importance of four "qualities" a president might be expected to possess, and President Clinton's ratings on those qualities, as measured on a zero-to-ten scale. The four qualities measured were sound judgment in a crisis, experience in foreign affairs, high ethical standards, and ability to work well with Congress. The results are shown in Figure 5. The line shows the average importance respondents assigned to each of the four qualities, while the columns show how President Clinton measured up according to New Mexico Democrats and Republicans.



However, positions on impeachment are even more closely associated with respondents' judgments about whether the president's moral behavior was significantly different (worse or better) than the behavior of "other political leaders in Washington."

In both the U.S. and New Mexico surveys, of those who judged the president to have behaved "a lot worse" than other political leaders, more than three-quarters wanted to see him impeached. However, only slightly over a third of those who found his behavior just "slightly worse" than that of others were in favor of impeachment. This did not mean, however, that "the American people" as represented in our

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Measuring Trust

Political scientists have been trying to develop reliable and valid measurements of trust and political efficacy since the 1950s. Craig, Niemi and Silver (1990) conducted a pilot study as part of the National Election Studies (NES) in 1987 to develop a set of questions to measure trust and political efficacy. The authors distinguish between regime-based trust (RBT) and incumbent-based trust (IBT). RBT measures "feelings of attachment or loyalty to the political system." IBT measures what citizens expect to gain from government officials. The authors conclude that it is useful to try to measure separately what people think of incumbents and what they think of the political system.

Using these distinctions, we wanted to test whether it was possible to use survey scores on RBT and IBT to predict respondents' standards for the presidential office and their assessment of Bill Clinton's qualities as president. Using the authors' questions, we created two scales consisting of three questions each for the RBT and IBT. We analyzed scores on these scales against an index created from four questions about qualities associated with excellence in the presidential office and how Clinton rated on those qualities. (For more on presidential qualities see the discussion in the FOCUS article.)

We found that IBT scores correlated with responses on how President Clinton measures up, but did not correlate with the standards respondents set for the office of president. That is, respondents who have higher trust in incumbents tend to give Clinton a higher "quality" rating, and *vice versa*. Thus the IBT scale worked as predicted by the authors. RBT scores correlated with standards of quality for the presidential office, as expected. But they also correlated with respondents' assessments of Clinton's qualities. That is, those who expressed greater trust in "the system" could also be predicted to give Clinton a higher rating on presidential qualities. Our analysis suggests that the questions designed to measure regime-based trust may be too ambiguous, since responses can also be used to predict trust in an incumbent.

Craig, Stephen C., Richard G. Niemi and Glenn E. Silver (1990). "Political efficacy and trust: a report on the NES Pilot Study items." *Political Behavior*, Vol. 12, No. 3: 289-310.

FOCUS: PUBLIC TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND THE CLINTON SCANDAL

The effects of party affiliation and moral judgment

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samples were interested in giving President Clinton a free ride. Not many more wanted him to resign than wanted to impeach him, but about two-thirds (69% of New Mexicans and 65% of the U.S. respondents) favored expressing “disapproval of his actions” through a censure resolution. Figure 6 illustrates the relationship of moral judgment to the interest in impeachment.

We analyzed the data to see whether interest in censuring the president could be associated with the public’s “trust in government.” Had the president’s behavior undermined Americans’ confidence in the basic institutions of our national government? Several questions in our survey had attempted to measure people’s trust of current officeholders (incumbents) and of our system of government (the regime^{*}). We discovered that trust in incumbents was quite low. Most people said that many elected leaders were more inclined to “look out for special interests rather than for all the people.” Only a third thought government leaders “usually tell the truth” to the people. And less than half thought they could generally trust people in government to “do what is right.”

However, this did not keep most Americans from believing that the American form of government is “the best for us,” or from disagreeing strongly with the statement that our form of government gives us “not much to be proud of.” See Figure 7.

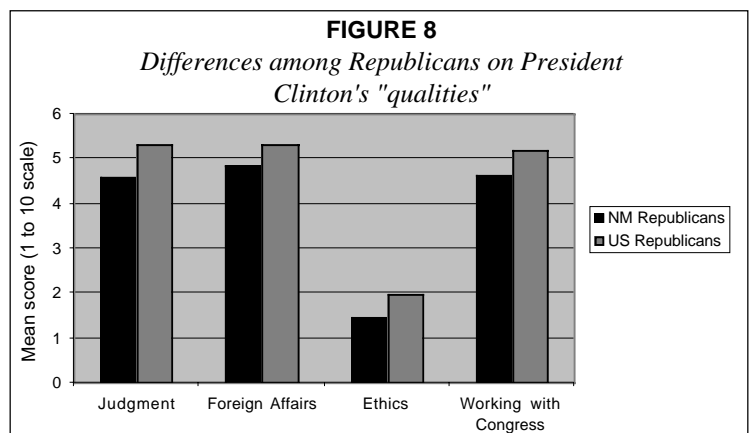
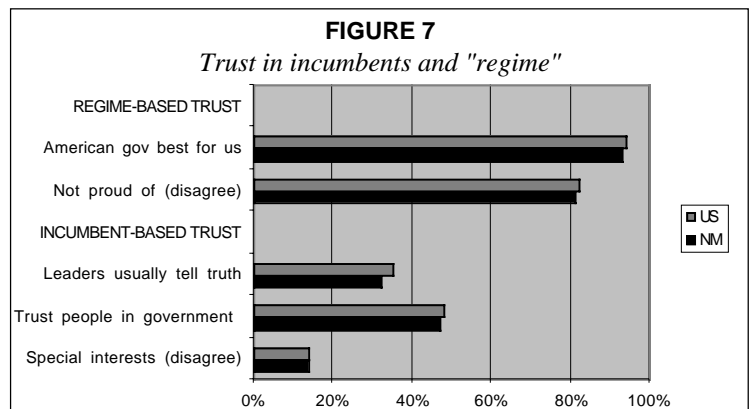
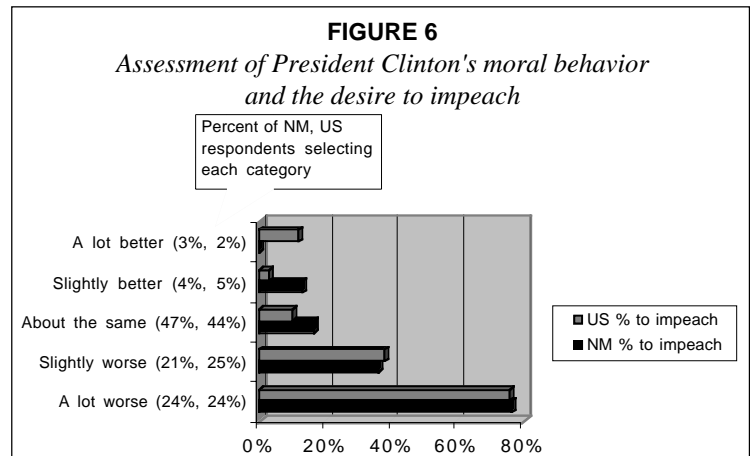
A team of graduate students working for the IPP reviewed recent political science literature on trust and “efficacy” – that is, the public’s sense that the government is “working for us” – and conducted further analysis of the data. Like trust, efficacy can also be thought of as being incumbent- or regime-based. Their findings are summarized in the box entitled “Measuring Trust.” In another sidebar article they review a recent book relevant to this issue, and provide annotated links to pertinent Internet sites.

How different is New Mexico?

New Mexicans and other Americans generally agreed on many basic measurements regarding the qualities they would like to see in a president, basic faith in the American form of government, and views on impeachment. On several indicators, however, it is clear that opinion in New Mexico was somewhat more negative and judgmental than was opinion nationally. That is, higher percentages of New Mexicans compared to the national survey respondents in our study were critical of President Clinton. This becomes more interesting when the findings are “disaggregated” – that is, when portions of the samples are broken out separately, by gender, party, age, financial status, or other factors. (We found that age made little difference.)

Women in New Mexico were more likely (by 2.7%) than women nationally to want the president impeached, for instance. We already noted (see Table 1 above) that people in the U.S. survey who saw themselves to be “worse off” were the most likely to give the president an excellent or good approval rating, while those “worse off” in the New Mexico survey were the least likely to do so. Finally, New Mexico Democrats were

* People often think of “regime” as referring to the government or people in power. Political scientists use the term to mean the form or system of government, and that is how we use it here.



more critical of Clinton than their national counterparts (giving him about an 0.2 lower mean score on judgment, foreign affairs, ethics, and ability to work with the Congress). But it was New Mexico Republicans who diverged most from the U.S. Republicans on these measures, a nearly 0.6 difference in mean scores. The differences are shown in Figure 8.

Conclusion

Our findings overall confirm the “conventional wisdom” that Americans make distinctions between “public” and “private” domains. Though they can be very critical of leaders’ bad behavior in the private realm

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Conclusion

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most are not interested in going so far as to remove an elected president whose official actions they generally approve of. The comparatively few who would do so appear motivated by strong moral sentiments and to a lesser degree by partisan affiliation.

The state of the economy and individuals' assessments of the state of their own finances are inconsistently related to their attitudes about the president or impeachment, though they appear to affect views about how well the federal government is performing.

Trust in Government

Book Review

Joseph S. Nye Jr., Philip D. Zelikow, David C. King, Ed. (1997). *Why People Don't Trust Government*. Harvard University Press. ISBN 0-674-94057-1 (Paper).

Americans' trust in government at all levels began eroding in the 1960s. This may be a cyclical phenomenon, or perhaps the heightened trust in government following WW II was an anomaly. Regardless, many political scientists assert the connection between confidence in institutions and "regime stability." They argue that trust in government is a necessary precondition to citizens' willingly submitting to taxation, going into public service, and voluntarily complying with laws.

This publication from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government examines possible causes for plummeting confidence in government and explores what this loss of trust may mean for the sustainability of democratic institutions. The book is structured in three sections. The first lays out the "existing conditions" around which the debate is to be framed by examining the scope of government operations, government's performance, and how Americans perceive that performance. The second offers explanations, using several methodologies. Richard Neustadt provides a qualitative historical look at how politics and political actors have increased mistrust. David King uses quantitative analysis to argue that voter mistrust is a function of apathy and frustration resulting from the polarization of party elites. As the leaders take positions increasingly further away from the rank-and-file, a growing number of Americans leave the parties and identify themselves as independents. The third section compares

Europe, Japan and the United States. The book's final chapter interweaves the earlier arguments into a qualitative overview of the problem. Though it offers no solutions for the gap in trust between the governors and the governed, it begins to lay the groundwork for solutions by more clearly defining the problem.

Web Resources

<http://www.trustingov.org/>

Partnership for Trust in Government is a project of the Ford Foundation and the Council for Excellence in Government. This site includes several public opinion polls with commentary, essays about public trust and a book review.

<http://www.people-press.org/trustrpt.htm>

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press is an independent opinion research group that studies attitudes toward the press, politics and public policy issues. In late 1997 and early 1998 Pew conducted a series of surveys and focus groups in order to understand trust in the American government. They report information on historical trends.

http://www.gallup.com/POLL_ARCHIVES/1997/970619.htm

This report from The Gallup Organization gives an historical view of trust in government. Gallup uses questions first asked in May of 1972 and most recently updated in June 1997 to study the effect that Watergate has had on shaping faith in government.

<http://www.excelgov.org/op-ed.htm>

Patricia McGinnis, President and CEO of the Council for Excellence in Government, uses an editorial format to explain why, despite the current scandal, Americans should trust government.

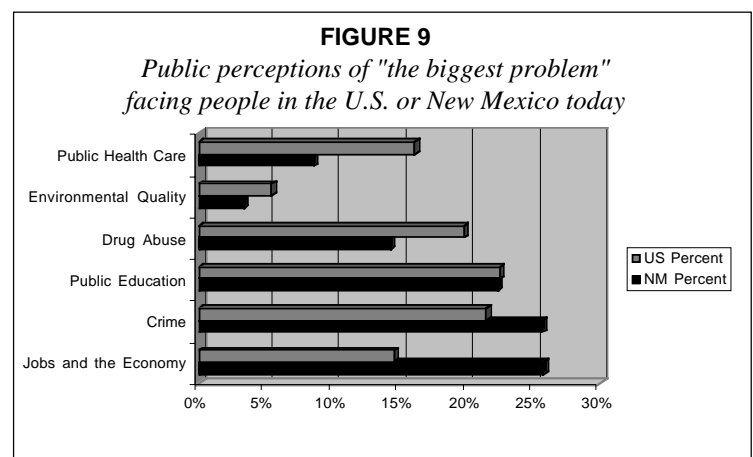
TRENDS

Most Pressing Policy Concerns

As we noted in *POP 36* (Summer 1998) crime is continuing on a downward trend as a pressing policy concern. As of this issue, it is not the "single, biggest problem" facing New Mexicans today, having been squeezed out (by a statistically insignificant 0.2%) by jobs and the economy. Both are now ranked first by about 26% of our respondents.

For this *POP*, we also surveyed a national sample. As is evident by examining Figure 9, New Mexico respondents set different priorities for public policy than did those in the nation at large. New Mexico lags behind most other states in personal income growth and has a higher rate of unemployment. This may account for the fact that the New Mexico respondents rated jobs and the economy as the "biggest problem" at nearly twice the rate as the U.S. survey respondents, who continued to place it in the bottom half of their issues.

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TRENDS

Most Pressing Policy Concerns

(continued from page 5)

Given the high rate of New Mexicans without health insurance, it appears surprising that New Mexico respondents are only about half as likely as U.S. respondents (9% versus 16%) to report public health care as their most pressing concern. (It has remained at between 6 and 9 percent since 1994.) New Mexicans in our survey ranked public

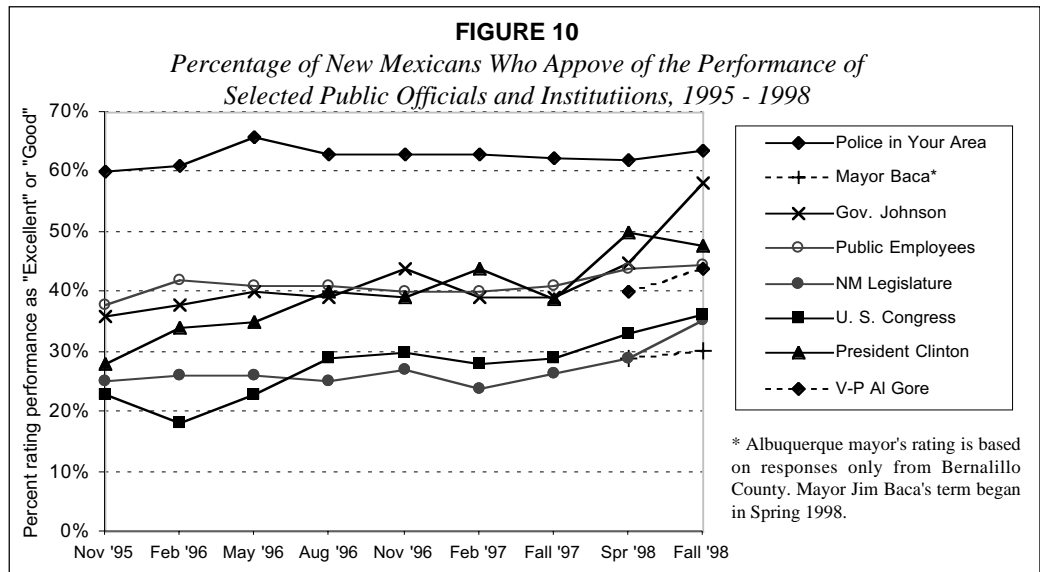
education third among their concerns, while it was first for the U.S. respondents. The percentage of both groups of respondents who ranked it first, however, is about the same (just above 22%). Concern about public education has been trending upwards among our New Mexico respondents since 1996, when it stood at about 18%.

Citizen Approval Ratings

We have begun to see, among New Mexico respondents to our surveys, a gradual upward trend in approval ratings for public officials and institutions since about November 1995. This is reflected in Figure 10. A notable exception is a decline in approval for President Clinton between the spring and fall 1998 surveys. Governor Johnson's rating spiked abruptly from 45% to 58% between the spring and fall surveys, perhaps reflecting his very successful re-election campaign strategy.

Albuquerque's Mayor Jim Baca, elected a year ago with just 27% of the vote, has yet to achieve appreciably more support; his approval rating stood at 30% in this survey. (This reflects Bernalillo County responses only, most of whom are Albuquerque residents.) Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress and

the New Mexico Legislature continued their slow creep upward out of the slough of disrepute in which they have been mired for years.



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