

Quarterly Profile

OF NEW MEXICO CITIZENS

A UNM INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER REPORT

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FOCUS: MEDIA AND THE NEW MEXICO LEGISLATURE

Is There A Media Bias?

by Professor David Soherr-Hadwiger

Where do New Mexicans turn for information on the state legislature? The August *Quarterly Profile of New Mexico Citizens* survey asked respondents several questions about their preferred sources of information on the Roundhouse and perceived bias in the news coverage of the legislature by different media sources.

Nationwide research has shown that most citizens get their news about national current events from television but depend more on newspapers for local news. Table 1 shows that New Mexicans follow the national pattern, preferring newspapers to television as a source for news on the state legislature by a slim margin.

Next, we asked respondents if their preferred source of news “presents a biased or ideologically slanted view” of the New Mexico state legislature. Table 2 shows that many respondents indicated that media coverage is biased. Overall, newspapers were the most likely to be considered biased by survey respondents, followed by television and radio.

The next two questions in the survey explored the nature of perceived media bias. First, respondents were asked to identify the ideological direction of media bias. In Table 3, we see that most respondents answered that media coverage of the legislature is ideologically moderate. Moreover, the remaining respondents split almost evenly on the perceived direction of ideological bias.

Our second question on the nature of media bias focused on whether news coverage is biased either for or against the legislature. Nationally, the nature of journalistic coverage of state legislatures has changed dramatically since the early 1970s. Prior to that time, legislators and journalists enjoyed congenial relationships in most states. Journalists tended to socialize with legislators extensively and were sometimes reluctant to expose the gaffes or corruption of legislators. In the wake of Watergate, the profession of journalism changed dramatically—from an emphasis on reporting the facts to an emphasis on investigative reporting. In this era of Woodward and Bernstein emulators, it is not surprising that legislators feel under siege by the media.

This change is evident in New Mexico. Recent legislative sessions have been punctuated by legislators’ accusations of unfair coverage by the media. Despite occasional bad blood between legislators and the media, Table 4 shows that survey respondents tended to believe that news coverage of the legislature is either neutral or biased *in favor* of the legislature.

In 1993, there were accusations in the legislature that media attacks on legislative leaders reflected ethnic bias. A recent New Mexico First town meeting report reiterated this point in its conclusions. We found that Hispanic survey respondents were much more

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TABLE 1

| | |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Newspapers | 44.3% |
| Television | 40.7% |
| Radio | 9.5% |
| Other Sources or No Answer | 5.5% |

TABLE 2

| | Biased | Not Biased | Don't Know |
|--------------------|--------|------------|------------|
| Newspaper readers | 46.2% | 38.6% | 15.2% |
| Television viewers | 35.7% | 51.1% | 13.1% |
| Radio listeners | 30.9% | 65.5% | 3.6% |
| From other sources | 28.6% | 42.9% | 28.6% |

TABLE 3

| | Liberal | Moderate | Conservative |
|--------------------|---------|----------|--------------|
| Newspaper readers | 8.7% | 86.3% | 5.0% |
| Television viewers | 8.7% | 80.3% | 11.0% |
| Radio listeners | 15.1% | 77.4% | 7.5% |
| From other sources | 0.0% | 93.8% | 6.3% |

TABLE 4

| | Favorable | Neutral | Unfavorable |
|--------------------|-----------|---------|-------------|
| Newspaper readers | 23.5% | 51.9% | 15.9% |
| Television viewers | 34.9% | 54.9% | 4.7% |
| Radio listeners | 21.8% | 61.8% | 10.9% |
| From other sources | 14.3% | 42.9% | 19.0% |

* Rows do not add to 100% due to non-respondents.

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FOCUS: MEDIA AND THE NEW MEXICO LEGISLATURE

Is There A Media Bias?

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likely than non-Hispanic respondents to believe that newspaper and television coverage of the legislature is biased in some way. (See Table 5.)

Despite this ethnic difference on the general question of media bias, Table 6 shows that Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites tended to agree that television and newspaper coverage of the legislature is not unfavorable.

Among newspaper readers, however, Hispanics were more likely to believe that newspaper coverage is biased against the legislature (24.5%) than were non-Hispanic whites (14.6%) and other groups (4.8%). Hispanic television viewers, on the other hand, were more likely to believe that TV coverage favors the legislature (48.2%) than were non-Hispanic whites (22.4%).

Finally, most survey respondents believed that the media was providing the right amount of coverage of the legislature; however, Table 7 shows that a large proportion of the survey respondents indicated a desire for more legislative coverage.

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TABLE 5

| Ethnicity and Bias in Newspaper/TV Coverage (%) | | | |
|--|---------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | <i>Biased</i> | <i>Not Biased</i> | <i>Don't Know</i> |
| Hispanic | 53.5% | 32.4% | 14.1% |
| Non-Hispanic white | 36.0% | 50.6% | 13.4% |
| Other** | 41.0% | 38.5% | 20.5% |

TABLE 6

| Ethnicity and Newspaper/TV Bias For or Against (%) | | | |
|---|------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| | <i>Favorable</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Unfavorable</i> |
| Hispanic | 39.3% | 49.6% | 11.1% |
| Non-Hispanic white | 25.8% | 61.3% | 12.9% |
| Other** | 42.1% | 55.3% | 2.6% |

TABLE 7

| Sufficient Media Coverage of the NM Legislature (%)* | | | |
|---|-------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| | <i>Not Enough</i> | <i>Enough</i> | <i>Too Much</i> |
| Newspaper readers | 39.0% | 50.0% | 4.9% |
| Television viewers | 34.5% | 55.7% | 4.3% |
| Radio listeners | 54.5% | 40.0% | 1.8% |
| From other sources | 28.6% | 47.6% | 4.8% |

* Rows do not add to 100% due to non-respondents.

** The number of Native-American, Black and Asian-American respondents is too small to generalize about these groups.

TRENDS

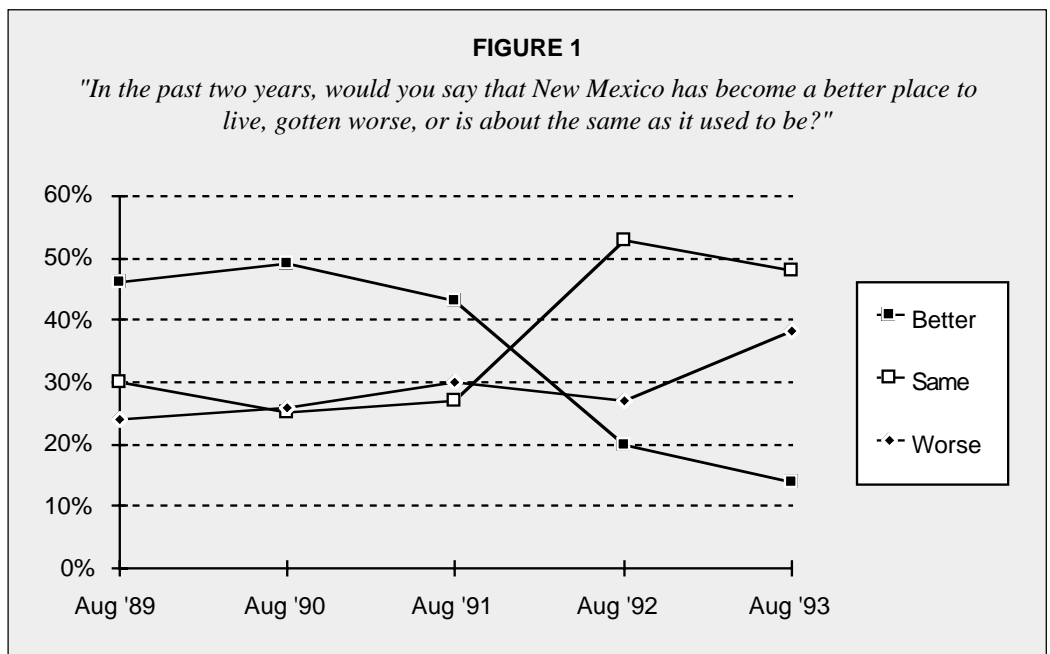
Quality of Life

This *Quarterly Profile* examines the changing perceptions of New Mexico's quality of life. This inquiry was prompted by a trend which has developed in the responses to the question, "In the past two years, would you say that New Mexico has become a better place to live, gotten worse, or is about the same as it used to be?" We ask this question every quarter, and as Figure 1 illustrates, a trend appears to have developed over the past three years indicating that our respondents are increasingly less positive about current conditions in the state. Although there have been slight variations up and down from one quarter to the next, the less optimistic trend has been obvious.

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FIGURE 1

"In the past two years, would you say that New Mexico has become a better place to live, gotten worse, or is about the same as it used to be?"



TRENDS

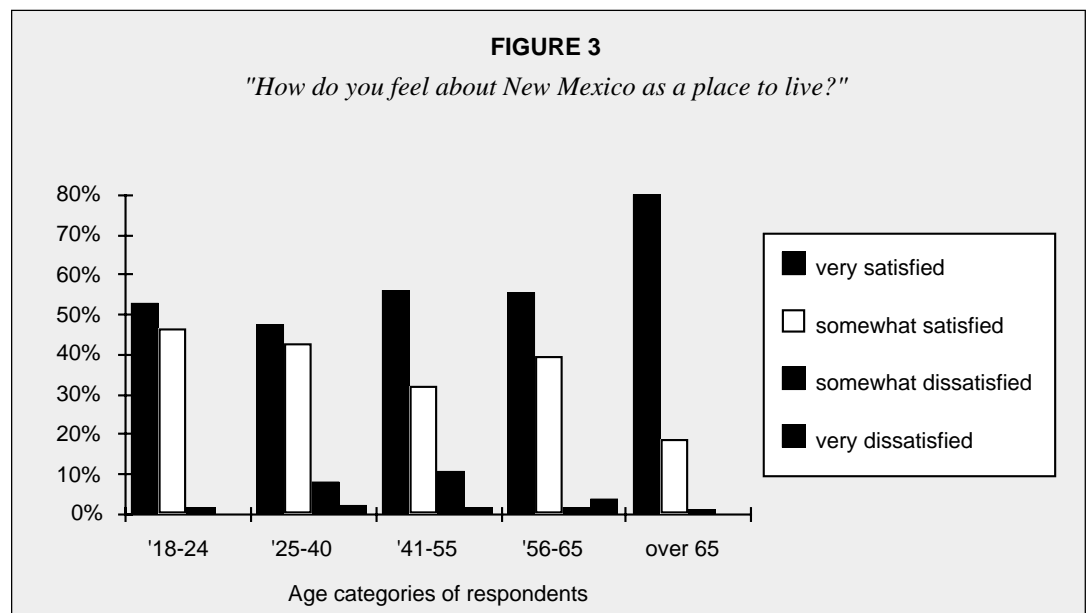
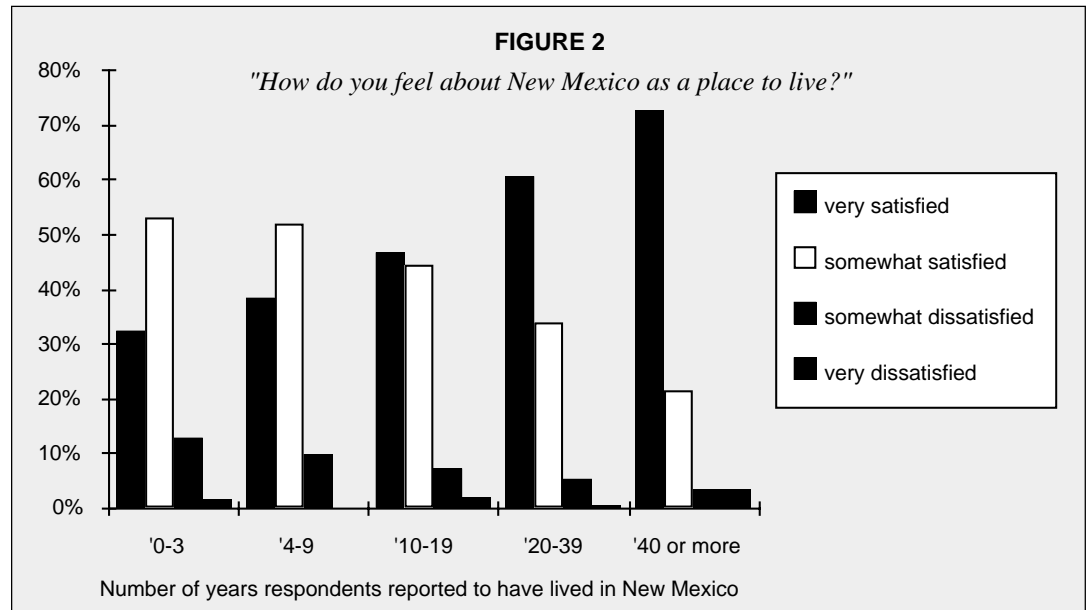
Quality of Life

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We thought that this might be associated with economic variables such as changes in income or employment status and demographic variables such as ethnic background, educational status, or family size. Such variables have long been regarded as strongly influencing political attitudes, and changes in those variables have been shown to be associated with changes in individuals' attitudes toward volatile, less deeply ingrained political attitudes such as attitudes toward political candidates, or specific events. For example, continuing news that New Mexico's per capita income is among the lowest in the nation; ongoing concern about joblessness, particularly in the state's non-metropolitan areas; and antagonism toward the influx of new residents from other places all seemed to be likely sources of explanation for this trend. What we found was that there are no clear explanations for this trend. The offsetting increase in "same" responses would suggest that the trend is not pessimistic. The lack of any significant relationships between the quality of life question and the demographic variables would also tend to support an argument that the climate is simply less "upbeat" rather than "gloomy" about the comparative state of affairs.

While exploring this change over time we also took a careful look at the current responses to our other regularly asked quality of life questions. We asked our respondents to indicate their level of satisfaction in response to the question: "How do you feel about New Mexico as a place to live?" The predominant answers were that our respondents were either "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied." These results are the same across virtually all demographic variables with the exception of the length of time one has lived in New Mexico.

As can be clearly seen in Figure 2, the longer one lives in New Mexico the greater one's degree of satisfaction with the place. Intuitively this conclusion seems almost trivial, and yet the popular press, and various pundits, frequently proclaim the Southwest as the refuge of elderly "Snowbirds," and displaced industrial wage earn-



ers. It is easy to see both categories as ripe for discontented feelings associated with cultural change as one experiences the adjustment from life in the Rustbelt to life in the Sunbelt, distance from family and old friends, and the constraints of limited incomes. We pushed the analysis a bit further to explore the relationship between age, length of residence and quality of life. As indicated above, there was no statistically significant relationship between the quality of life assessment and income, employment status, ethnicity, ideology, or age. Across the categories for each of those variables, no significant differences in the distribution of opinions about New Mexico's quality of life could be discovered. Figure 3 for example, portrays the distribution of opinions regarding New Mexico's quality of life by age distribution. Individuals who were "very" or "somewhat satisfied" dominate in all categories.

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TRENDS

Quality of Life

(continued from page 3)

A similar slight trend may be observed in Figure 2, i.e. "somewhat satisfied" decreases with each progressive tenure, and the value, "very satisfied," rises most markedly in the longest tenure category. It would seem that the conjecture regarding discontent arising from relocation or economic dislocation is ill-founded. So we decided to take one more step to determine the relationship between age and length of residence in New Mexico. The following table presents the distribution of respondents by age category and length of residence in New Mexico. The percentage figures indicate the proportion of each age category which has lived in New Mexico for less than 4 years; 4 to 9 years, 10 to 19 years, 20 to 39 years, and 40 or more years. One should also keep in mind that 361 of our respondents (62.5%) were not born in New Mexico, and 217 (37.5%) were.

Only 20% of the entire sample has resided in New Mexico less than 10 years. While 175 of our respondents (31%) report

having lived in New Mexico all their lives. This fits well with the observation that 37.5% of the sample reports having been born in New Mexico. Yet the number of short term residents is proportionately much smaller than the number of non-native New Mexicans in the survey. The conclusions that may be drawn are numerous, but it appears that the relocated retiree and displaced worker migration rationales are unsupportable. Our representative sample would indicate that New Mexico has a predominance of non-native immigrants, but they are not "Johnny-come-latelys." The quality of life in New Mexico apparently holds powerful appeal. The fact that a substantial portion of the population is no longer perceiving noticeable improvement over the preceding two year time period need not be politically alarming. The overall satisfaction with the state's current quality of life coupled with the long tenure of the bulk of the state's population seems to suggest an absence of discontent likely to upset the present political environment.

TABLE 8

Length of Residence by Age Cohort

| | 0-3 Years | 4-9 Years | 10-19 Years | 20-39 Years | 40 or More | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------|-------------|------------|-------|
| Age 18-24 | 13% | 11% | 33% | 43% | 0% | N= 76 |
| Age 25-40 | 16% | 11% | 13% | 57% | 3% | N=211 |
| Age 41-55 | 8% | 10% | 18% | 29% | 35% | N=141 |
| Age 56-65 | 9% | 6% | 11% | 32% | 43% | N= 54 |
| Over 65 | 2% | 5% | 14% | 21% | 58% | N= 85 |

TRENDS

Citizen Approval Ratings

Governor King's approval ratings show a sharp decline since the May quarterly profile of New Mexico households. After a modest, and statistically non-significant, drop of 2 percentage points in May to 36%, the Governor's approval fell nearly 7 percentage points to 29%. Our findings reveal that fewer respondents who are non-Hispanic White, have some college education, and are Republican or "no party affiliation" identifiers gave the Governor "excellent" or "good" ratings than in the past. The largest decline came among respondents making \$30,000 annually or less. The Governor has experienced slight (statistically non-significant) ups and downs with Hispanic respondents, respondents who have had education beyond the Bachelor's degree, and Democrats.

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TABLE 9

Percentages of Respondents Rating Governor King Excellent or Good

| | May '93 (N=531) | August '93 (N=578) |
|---------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Hispanic | 37% | 38% |
| Non-Hispanic White | 40% | 26% |
| Education | | |
| H.S. Diploma | 36% | 31% |
| Some College | 42% | 29% |
| Bachelor's Degree | 34% | 21% |
| Post-Baccalaureate | 33% | 31%* |
| Political Party | | |
| No Affiliation | 40% | 27% |
| Democrat | 40% | 37% |
| Republican | 35% | 20% |
| Income | | |
| \$20,000 or less | 44% | 33% |
| \$20,001-\$30,000 | 47% | 36% |
| \$30,001-\$60,000 | 33% | 26% |
| \$60,001 or more | 24% | 17% |

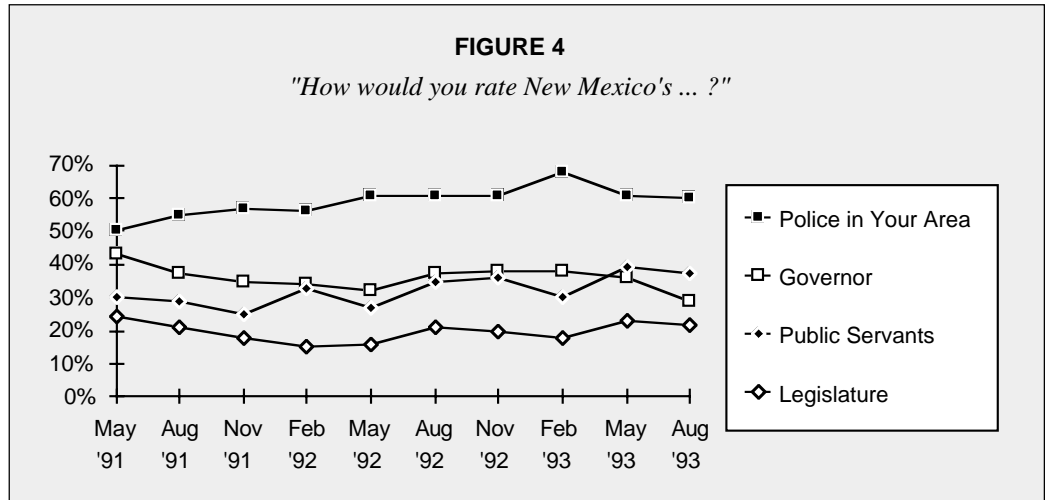
* No respondents indicated "excellent" as a response.

TRENDS

Citizen Approval Ratings

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With regard to other public officials, we found that public employees continue to retain most of the gain in favorable assessment reported in the Spring newsletter. A slight drop to 37% in the approval rating for New Mexico's public employees was not statistically significant. Ratings by the respondents of the performance of the police in their area remained strong at 60% and continued the stable path we've reported since May of 1992. At 22%, approval of the legislature's performance is virtually unchanged from the May numbers.



TRENDS

Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP)

The Waste Isolation Pilot Project (WIPP) has been the focus of heightened attention in recent months as the Clinton Administration works out its policies on radio-active waste management. We asked our respondents, in the most recent quarterly survey of New Mexico households, what they thought about the prospects for opening WIPP as a permanent storage facility for radioactive wastes, and the degree of perceived risk associated with transporting waste to WIPP. The following tables illustrate those responses.

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TABLE 10

"Which of the following best represents your view? WIPP is ..."

| | August '93 |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| Unsafe; Never Open | 25% |
| Unsafe; Open with Major Changes | 28% |
| Unsafe; Open with Minor Changes | 22% |
| Safe to Open Now | 17% |
| Don't Know/No Answer | 8% |

TABLE 11

"Using the scale ... how risky do you consider the transportation of low and medium level radioactive material to the WIPP facility to be?"

| Scale of 1-5 | August '93 |
|----------------------|------------|
| 1 (No Risk) | 8% |
| 2 | 21% |
| 3 | 26% |
| 4 | 18% |
| 5 (Extreme Risk) | 22% |
| Don't Know/No Answer | 4% |

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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 New Mexico citizens. The *Quarterly 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

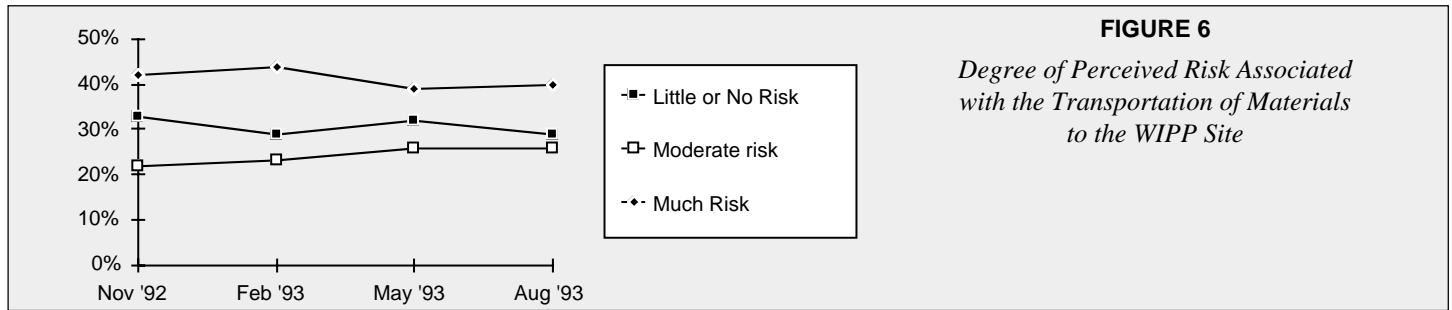
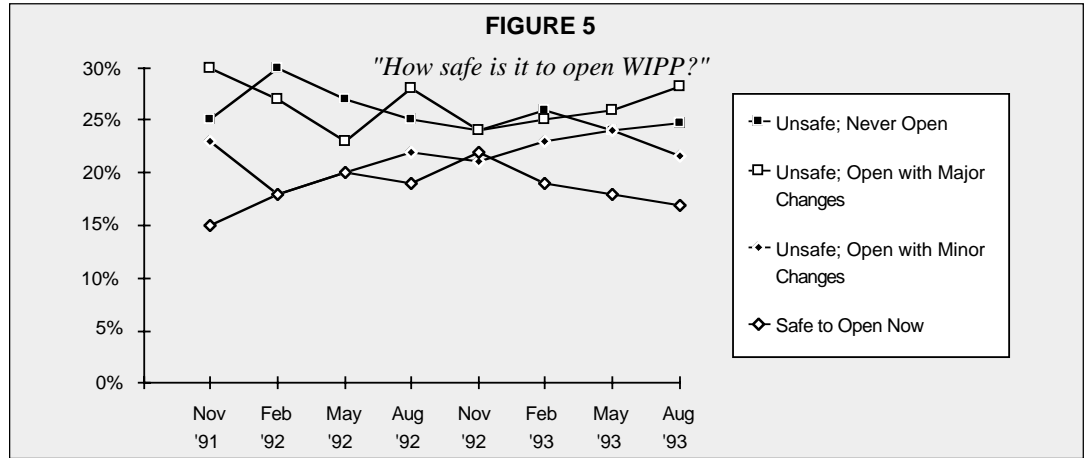
The UNM Institute for Public Policy conducted its survey of New Mexico citizens through telephone interviews with 578 adult New Mexicans in August and September of 1993. The telephone numbers were selected randomly by computer. The results of the poll have a five percentage point margin of error at a 95 percent level of confidence, which means that 19 out of 20 times the findings should be within 5 points of the results that would be obtained if all New Mexico households were surveyed. The margin of error is larger for subgroups of the sample because of the smaller number of observations. As with any survey a potential source of error is the possibility that variation in the wording of questions or the order in which questions are asked could produce different results.

TRENDS

Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP)

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A majority of the full survey (53%) believe WIPP should never open, or open only after major changes. Nearly two-thirds (66%) of our respondents believe that there is a moderate to extreme risk of radiation release associated with the transport of materials to the WIPP site. It appears that the New Mexico public in general remains skeptical concerning WIPP.



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