

Quarterly Profile

OF NEW MEXICO CITIZENS

A UNM INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER REPORT

SPRING 1997—VOL 9/NO 2

FOCUS 1: WELFARE REFORM

Recent changes in federal welfare law have spurred states across the nation to propose and enact new legislation. New Mexico is no exception, as the state legislature and Governor Johnson have debated changes to both the form and substance of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and other programs. After discussing these issues with legislators, Johnson administration officials, and welfare advocates, the Institute for Public Policy formulated a series of questions on the subject designed to better understand the public's knowledge of and attitudes toward the most well-known welfare program, AFDC.

Perceptions of AFDC in New Mexico

The random sample of New Mexican adults we surveyed were unable to estimate accurately the "percentage of all New Mexicans [who] receive AFDC payments from the government." Only 3% correctly guessed that less than 5.2% of all New Mexicans receive AFDC (January 1997 figures provided by the New Mexico Human Services Department). Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed (63%) guessed that at least 30% of all New Mexicans received AFDC.

This finding reflected something other than a misunderstanding of the term "AFDC" because interviewers prefaced this question by saying that AFDC was "Aid to Families with Dependent Children" and that AFDC was limited to "cash assistance that the government gives to low-income families who qualify for the program."

Even after hearing this information, only 11% of those surveyed correctly guessed that over 89% of all AFDC households "include a *low income, single mother* and one or more dependent children." (The January 1997 figure is 89.3%, according to the New Mexico Human Services Department.) Fifty-eight percent of those surveyed estimated that no more than half of all AFDC households had a single mother with dependent children.

A similar proportion (12%) correctly guessed that 5% or fewer of AFDC families are headed by a parent under the age of 18. (The most comparable statistic provided by the New Mexico Human Services Department is that 5.5% of all AFDC heads of household are 19 or younger.)

TABLE 1

New Mexicans' Attitudes about AFDC Eligibility

"A low-income, single mother with dependent children SHOULD be allowed to receive AFDC payments, EVEN IF..."	Percent who agree that the family should be eligible for AFDC
...she has been a legal U.S. resident for fewer than five years."	56%
...she OWNS her home."	54%
...she cannot identify the father of her children."	51%
...she is under 18 and has a living parent."	46%
...her children are NOT attending school regularly."	18%

Public Preferences for AFDC Eligibility Requirements

After these questions, interviewers read the following statement to explain the phrasing of the next set of questions: "According to government statistics, the *vast majority* of New Mexico households receiving AFDC payments consist of a low-income, single mother and one or more dependent children. For that reason, the following questions will refer to households with a single mother."

Interviewers then asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements. The statements were presented in random order, and each asked respondents whether they thought a "low-income, single mother with dependent children *should* be allowed to receive AFDC payments" under different circumstances.

Table 1 summarizes the results. A majority of those surveyed thought that a low-income, single mother should still be eligible to receive AFDC even if she had been a legal resident for fewer than five years (56%), owned her own home (54%), or could not identify the father of her children (51%). On the other hand, a majority (54%) said that a low-income, single mother under 18 with a living parent should not be eligible, and 82% said that a mother should be ineligible if her children are not attending school regularly.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents said that AFDC payments should not go up when a recipient has another child. Only 26% of those surveyed agreed with the statement, "A low-income, single mother with dependent children *should* receive an *increase* in her AFDC payments if she has another child." At the same time, only 39% agreed that "the State of New Mexico should pay for abortions for low-income girls and women who request them."

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FOCUS 1: WELFARE REFORM

Work Requirements and Relocation

To preface a question about possible work requirements, interviewers read the following statement: “New welfare laws may *mandate* that low-income, single mothers work at least twenty hours per week if they want to receive AFDC payments. To meet this requirement, some mothers may have to leave a *rural* part of New Mexico that has high unemployment and move to an *urban* area where more jobs are available.” Interviewers then asked, “Do you think that low-income, single mothers *should* remain eligible for AFDC payments if they cannot find a job and *will not* look for work outside of the rural area where they live?” Twenty-nine percent said that such a recipient should remain eligible, and 71% disagreed.

Interviewers then posed another question about possible work requirements: “Some people think that single mothers receiving AFDC payments should be required to work *at least* 20 hours a week and receive free child care. Others think that these mothers receiving AFDC payments should be permitted to *STAY HOME* with their children instead of working part-time. Do you think that the State should require single mothers to work 20 hours a week?” Eighty-seven percent answered that the state policy should include a work requirement.

Other Aspects of Welfare Reform

In addition, interviewers asked three more questions to address current issues in the welfare reform debate. These concerned placing a limit on the number of years a person is eligible for AFDC, replacing cash assistance with goods and services, and attitudes toward the General Assistance program in New Mexico.

Eighty-nine percent of respondents also said that the state should set a maximum on the “number of years that a person can receive AFDC payments in their lifetime.” Twenty-two percent of those favoring a limit suggested that it be for one or two years, 18% suggested three or four years, 32% favored a five-year limit, and 26% of those wanting a limit said it should be beyond five years.

Another policy question was put to respondents in these terms: “Some people believe that the government should help low-income families by providing specific goods and services, such as child care, health care, housing, and food stamps. Other people believe that the government should give low-income families *CASH* assistance that they can spend on their own. If the State of New Mexico offers assistance to low-income families, do you think the State should provide *cash assistance* or *specific goods and services*?” Ninety percent of respondents answered that it was better for the state to give goods and services to low-income families than to offer cash assistance.

Nonetheless, respondents favored continuing the General Assistance program. Interviewers described the program as providing “assistance to roughly thirteen-hundred New Mexicans each

TABLE 2

Democrat and Republican Attitudes about AFDC Eligibility

“A low-income, single mother with dependent children SHOULD be allowed to receive AFDC payments, EVEN IF...	Percent who agree that the family should be eligible for AFDC	
	Democrats	Republicans
...she has been a legal U.S. resident for fewer than five years.”	63%	49%
...she OWNS her home.”	59%	44%
...she cannot identify the father of her children.”	54%	44%
...she is under 18 and has a living parent.”	51%	39%
...her children are NOT attending school regularly.”	19%	15%

year. People receiving General Assistance have mental or physical disabilities that limit their ability to work, but they do *not* qualify for federal disability benefits.” When asked if “the State of New Mexico should *continue* to provide General Assistance to these individuals,” 88% said they wanted the program to continue.

Partisan Differences in Attitudes Toward AFDC

Answers to all of these questions varied little along gender, ethnic, and income lines. The only clear exception was on the question regarding the State of New Mexico paying for abortions requested by low-income women and girls. Overall, men and women agreed on this item, but Anglo and Hispanic respondents disagreed. Forty-five percent of Anglo respondents said that the State should pay for them, compared to only 27% of Hispanic respondents. The results of an earlier *Quarterly Profile* on abortion suggest that this difference was probably more directly the result of differences in religious identities among Anglos and Hispanics.

Democrats and Republicans, however, answered most of the AFDC questions differently. Table 2 shows how they differed on the series of AFDC eligibility questions. The table shows that Republicans were more inclined to limit eligibility than were Democrats.

In addition, 28% of Democrats (compared to 16% of Republicans) believed that an AFDC mother should receive increased aid if she has another child. Thirty-five percent of Democrats and only 20% of Republicans said that a rural AFDC recipient should remain eligible even if unwilling to look for work elsewhere, and 86% of Democrats and 95% of Republicans favored a limit on the number of years a person could be eligible for AFDC in a lifetime. Democrats were also more favorable toward the State's paying for abortions requested by low-income women and girls (46% versus 29%). This partisan difference was as true for Anglo Democrats and Republicans as it was for Hispanic Democrats and Republicans.

The two parties were in statistical agreement, however, on whether a low-income single mother receiving AFDC should be required to work: 87% of Democrats and 89% of Republicans held that view. Those who identified themselves with these parties also agreed that it is better for the State to provide services than cash, and roughly equal percentages of respondents from the two parties supported the General Assistance program.

FOCUS 2: HEALTH COVERAGE

New Mexicans' Knowledge and Policy Preferences about Health Coverage

Previous *Quarterly Profiles* (most recently, Winter 1992/1993) have asked New Mexicans about health care in detail, and this profile included just two questions on the subject. As for AFDC, we asked questions that probed both New Mexicans' knowledge and their policy preferences.

According to the New Mexico Health Policy Commission, between 23 and 27% of New Mexicans are without health insurance. However, only 3% of New Mexicans gave a guess in that range when asked, "To the best of your knowledge, what percentage of New Mexicans currently DO NOT have health insurance?" Only 7% underestimated the percentage of New Mexicans who lack health insurance, and the remaining 90% overestimated the figure. In fact,

the majority of New Mexicans (53%) guessed that at least half of all New Mexicans were without health insurance.

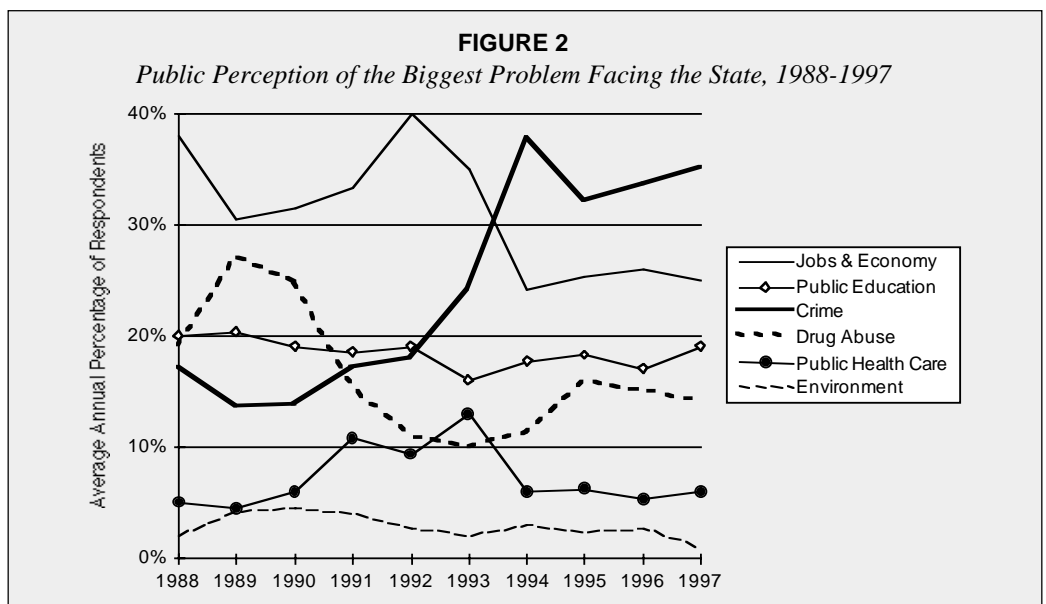
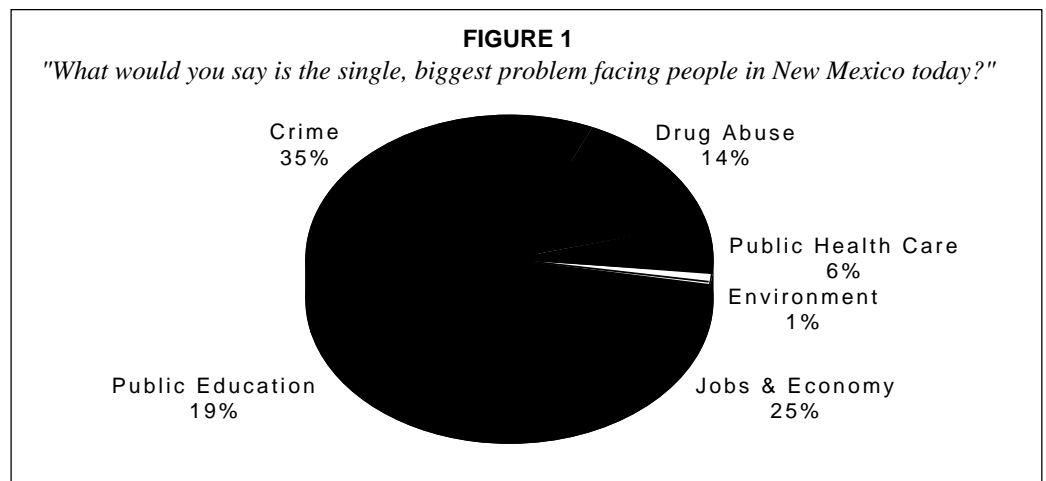
Fifty-nine percent of all New Mexicans surveyed agreed with the statement, "Our tax dollars should be used to provide basic medical care for all citizens, *even if* this means that my taxes will increase." A similar percentage of New Mexicans (63%) agreed with the same statement when it was included in an Institute survey three years ago. Agreement with this statement was slightly associated with respondents' misperceptions of the percentage of New Mexicans without health care: those with the highest overestimations were the most likely to support a tax increase to cover the uninsured.

TRENDS

Most Pressing Policy Concerns

New Mexicans continue to see crime as the "single, biggest problem facing people in New Mexico today." Thirty-five percent identified crime as the most pressing policy concern, 25% said jobs and the economy were most serious, and 19% said the problem was public education. Fourteen percent said drug abuse was the state's worst problem, 6% said it was public health care, and only 1% said that environmental issues were the state's most important problem (see Figure 1).

This same question has been asked since the first *Quarterly Profile* in 1988, and Figure 2 shows that crime was not always the public's most pressing policy concern. Jobs and the economy were originally viewed as the most serious problem, and drug abuse was the second-most often mentioned problem until 1991, when it fell below public education, which has remained the most pressing problem for roughly one-fifth of all New Mexicans. Crime became the second-most frequently cited problem in 1992, and it surpassed jobs and the economy as the top problem between 1993 and 1994.



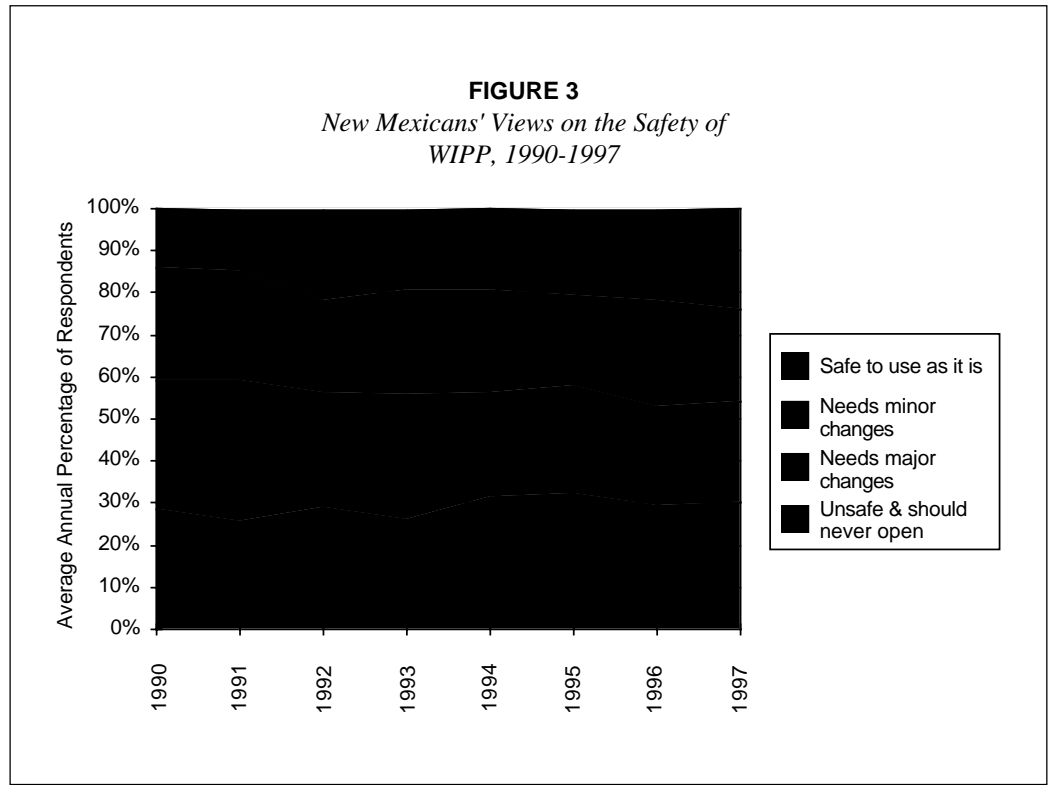
TRENDS

Public Attitudes Toward WIPP

Since 1990, the *Quarterly Profile* has asked New Mexicans about the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), using the following question: "There has been much controversy over WIPP, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico, which is to serve as a permanent storage facility for low and medium level radioactive waste. Which of the following best represents your view? WIPP is (a) unsafe and should never be opened, (b) unsafe but may be made safe with MAJOR changes, (c) only slightly unsafe and can be made safe with MINOR changes; or (d) WIPP is safe to use as it is."

The responses to the question have not changed substantially since 1990, and the responses recorded in this *Quarterly Profile* were typical: 24% of New Mexicans said that WIPP was safe to open as-is, 46% said it needs minor or major changes, and 30% said it should never be opened (see Figure 3).

(continued on page 5)



Commentaries on WIPP

We asked a critic and an advocate of WIPP to comment on the findings reported in Figure 3.

Don Hancock, Administrator, Southwest Research and Information Center:

"The responses generally reflect what our interaction with the public shows—a large majority (more than 75%) of New Mexicans do not favor opening WIPP now because it has not been proven safe. A majority opposes WIPP or believes that it will be difficult for WIPP to meet requirements that adequately protect public health and safety.

"People are concerned about the safety of the site and about transportation. Some people also question whether WIPP is needed since federal government studies show that there would be fewer deaths and injuries over the next several decades if the nuclear wastes remain at the current storage locations, rather than being shipped to WIPP.

"While attitudes have not changed significantly over the past several years, there will likely be some shifts over the next several months, as WIPP's scheduled opening date again approaches. Thousands of New Mexicans will participate in the federal and state government decision making processes regarding whether WIPP is safe to open in 1998. The decisions made and the credibility of the public processes will go a long way toward shaping attitudes about WIPP and about how well the government is doing its job to protect public health and safety."

Dennis Hurtt, Public Affairs Team Leader, Carlsbad Area Office, Department of Energy:

"Despite the fact that the WIPP has been making headlines for more than 25 years, New Mexicans are still taking a 'wait and see' attitude. The majority of residents await concrete evidence that will erase any doubt about the WIPP's safety.

"Views of the WIPP—pro and con—have remained stable over the past eight years. An authoritative, independent decision on whether the WIPP is in compliance with environmental and safety regulations will likely sway public perception in a positive or negative way.

"Recent survey statistics show that fewer than one-third (30%) of the state's residents believe the WIPP is unsafe and should never open. However, the majority (70%) of citizens say that the site can be operated safely, or can be made safe with either major or minor changes.

"The confirmation of scientific data by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the New Mexico Environment Department remains paramount. Their meticulous assessment will determine if the WIPP can meet the stringent environmental standards necessary to operate safely. How this confirmation unfolds and is ultimately reported by the news media will likely influence if the majority of New Mexicans believe the project is safe."

TRENDS

Public Attitudes Toward Wipp

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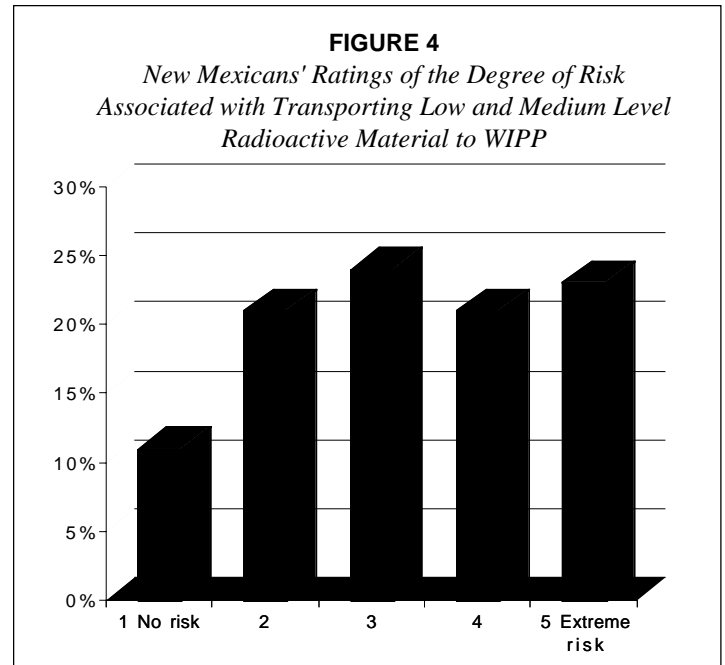
In this *Quarterly Profile*, interviewers asked New Mexicans two additional questions. First, interviewers read the following question:

Thinking specifically about the transportation of wastes to WIPP, some opponents of WIPP have argued that the transportation of materials to WIPP poses a significant risk of releasing radiation into the environment. The Department of Energy has argued that these risks are extremely small. Using the scale where one is no risk, five is extreme risk, and you may choose any number from one to five, how risky do you consider the transportation of low and medium level radioactive material to the WIPP facility to be?

Figure 4 shows that New Mexicans gave a wide range of answers to this question. Only 11% said that they attributed “no risk” to the transportation of materials to WIPP, whereas 23% saw “extreme risk” in such transport. Exactly 21% gave responses that fell to either side of the mid-point of the five-point risk scale, and nearly one-quarter of respondents (24%) gave an answer exactly on the mid-point.

Finally, interviewers asked, “If a statewide vote were held today, and you could vote on whether or not the WIPP facility should be opened, would you vote to open the WIPP facility or not to open the WIPP facility?” A majority (55%) of those surveyed said that they would vote to *not* open the facility.

Demographic and partisan differences in the answers to this question were dramatic: on average, women, Democrats, and His-



panic respondents were much more likely to say that they would vote to not open WIPP. Sixty-nine percent of women said they would vote against opening WIPP, compared to only 39% of men. Fifty-eight percent of Democrats said they would vote against opening WIPP, compared to 46% of Republicans. Sixty-nine percent of Hispanic respondents said they would vote against opening WIPP, whereas 49% of Anglos said they would do so.

A Note to *Quarterly Profile* Subscribers and Readers

This *Quarterly Profile* is the 34th in a series of statewide public opinion profiles produced by the University of New Mexico Institute for Public Policy. Unfortunately, it is also the last in that quarterly series. Due to fiscal constraints, the Institute plans to produce a state profile only twice a year. The *Quarterly Profile* has always been funded by the Institute itself and has received no additional state, federal, or private support. This gave the *Quarterly Profile* the freedom to report objectively on public policy issues, but the cost of conducting and reporting the quarterly surveys has grown to the point where the Institute can only afford to produce two such reports in any given year. These future reports will be called the *Public Opinion Profile of New Mexico Citizens*. In our new format, we will periodically compare New Mexicans' views with national samples. Interested readers will be able to obtain copies by visiting or contacting the Institute about subscriptions. Current subscriptions will be extended to include four reports.

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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.

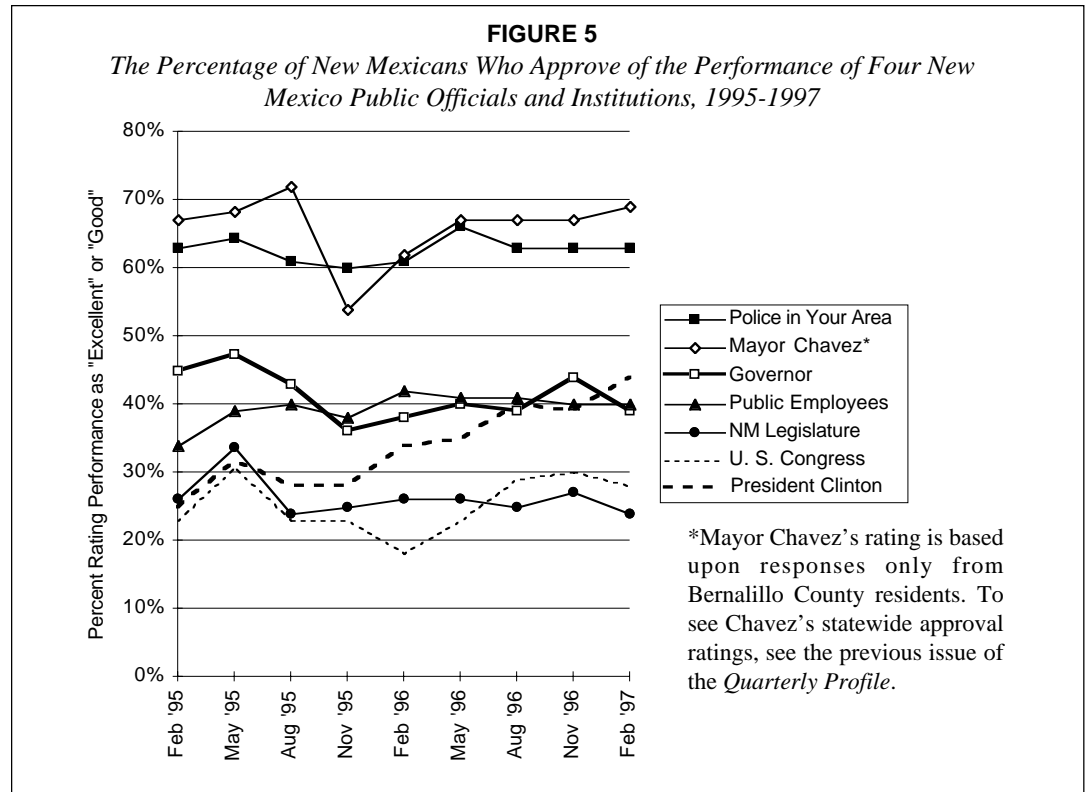
SURVEY DATA

The UNM Institute for Public Policy conducted its survey of New Mexico citizens through telephone interviews with 658 adult New Mexicans in January-February of 1997. The telephone numbers were selected randomly by computer. The results of the poll 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 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

Citizen Approval Ratings

In this most recent *Quarterly Profile*, approval ratings for the legislature, public employees, and the police were relatively consistent with past surveys. Governor Johnson's approval rating dropped back to 39%, roughly where it had hovered for a year until last quarter's jump to 44%. Figure 4 also shows that since February '95, Congress' approval rating has gone up and down, but President Clinton's rating has climbed rather steadily from 25% to 44%.



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