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Bridgewater's Institute for Regional Development

Barbara Apstein
Bridgewater State College

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Il seven phones in the Political Science Department's new Telephone Research Center were in continual use during the evenings of October 12, 13, 14 and 15, 1998, as students from Professor Michael Ault's "Political Science Research Methods" class asked selected voters to share their thoughts about the approaching election. Using a random sample of households in 42 southeastern Massachusetts cities and towns designed by Political Science Professor Victor DeSantis, the students conducted a total of 370 interviews with registered voters. They gathered responses to such questions as the following:

- What issues are important to you in this year's election?
- Whom are you going to vote for?
- Have President Clinton's problems had any impact on your voting plans?
- What do you see as the positive and negative qualities of gubernatorial candidates Cellucci and Harshbarger?

This pre-election poll served both as a class project and as the fulfillment of a contract between the College's Institute for Regional Development and two area newspapers, the Brockton Enterprise and the Quincy Patriot Ledger. About 830,000 people, 14% of the Massachusetts population, live in Plymouth, Norfolk and Bristol counties, the area covered by the poll. Both newspapers published the results of the poll on October 23.

Area voters' preferences turned out to be fairly close to those of the majority of voters in the state as a whole. The poll showed Paul Cellucci's lead over Scott Harshbarger to be stronger locally than it proved to be in the rest of the Commonwealth. In the poll, Cellucci led by a margin of 46.2% to 34% (with 17.5% undecided), whereas the election result was much closer, Cellucci squeaking by with 51% of the vote while Harshbarger received 47%. The poll also revealed that Cellucci attracted more support than his rival from unenrolled voters, who make up half the electorate state-wide. Cellucci appealed to many registered Democrats; 28% of the Democrats polled expressed a preference for him, but only 2% of registered Republicans said they planned to vote for Harshbarger. While Cellucci won high approval for the state's strong economy, one-third of those polled said they were troubled by his personal debt.

In other campaigns, too, area voters supported the candidates who ultimately won the election: for Treasurer, they favored Whitman resident Shannon O'Brien and for Attorney General, Thomas Reilly.

When asked about issues, the respondents identified education as the top concern, with 87% listing it as "a very important" matter for the governor to deal with and another 11.2% considering it "somewhat important." When asked what they considered the single most important issue for the next governor and legislature to tackle, 51.8% said education. Health care and the economy were the two other issues which proved to be most important to local voters.

The poll also addressed national issues. Close to 80% of respondents decisively rejected the idea of impeaching President Clinton, a significantly wider margin than in the nation as a whole. Almost as many local voters (77%) favored ending congressional hearings on the impeachment report of independent counsel Kenneth Starr. Of those voters, 33% wanted the matter dropped completely and 44% wanted the hearings to end but the president to be censured.

The poll also revealed that 53% of area voters feel that the public has the right to know at least "a little" about a candidate's private life. More than 15% of the respondents said the public should know "a lot," while 31% said the public should know nothing about the private lives of the candidates.
RESEARCH ON CURRENT ISSUES

The Institute has undertaken a number of other projects since it was established in 1996. As Professor DeSantis, who is Coordinator of the Institute, explains, service to our region is an important part of the College’s mission. His goal is to discover creative ways to utilize the resources of the College and the talents of the Bridgewater faculty to improve the quality of life in southeastern Massachusetts.

Undertaking research on current problems and issues is one way in which the Institute hopes to serve our region. In 1996, the Institute undertook a study of quality of life in southeastern Massachusetts, exploring the public’s perception of such issues as health care, public schools and the environment. A Town Meeting Study conducted by Professor DeSantis in 1997 collected data from town clerks to answer questions about how their town meetings operate, the number of people who attend, and whether or not the meetings are televised. Students enrolled in the College’s Masters of Public Administration program were involved in another study, sponsored by the town of Millford, focusing on the programs and policies used by the town to stimulate industrial development.

MEETINGS AND CONFERENCES

Making College facilities available for meetings and conferences is another aspect of the Institute’s work. The Southeastern Massachusetts Welfare Reform Task Force, which meets three to four times a year, is one of several groups hosted by the College. This Task Force includes welfare professionals from Departments of Transitional Assistance in Brockton and Taunton, the Brockton Coalition for the Homeless and Helpline, as well as representatives from Bridgewater’s Social Work and Political Science faculties and graduate students in Social Work. Professor of Social Work Cindy King-Frode serves as facilitator.

The meetings provide State Commissioner of Transitional Assistance Claire McIntire, who is also a member of the Task Force, with an opportunity to talk informally with grassroots bureaucrats who work with welfare clients on a day-to-day basis. With the two-year benefit limit running out for approximately 12,000 Massachusetts welfare families, recent meetings have focussed on the barriers to gaining employment which this group faces. These barriers include lack of fluency in English for recent Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants, the difficulty of finding child care and lack of transportation. Task Force members discuss, often heatedly, ways of addressing these problems.

In addition, the Institute has sponsored training events, including workshops in computer applications for economic developers and the Massachusetts Municipal Management fall conference.

Bridgewater’s Institute for Regional Development is continuing to develop creative projects which contribute to the intellectual life of southeastern Massachusetts.