

POLL SURVEYS LIQUOR, GUNS, LEAVITT

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A college poll of Utah voters shows a majority think the state's liquor laws are just fine, that guns should be banned from schools and churches and that Gov. Mike Leavitt's overall performance is average.

These and other election trivia are now being compiled by David Magleby, a Brigham Young University political science professor, who, with the help of students from eight Utah colleges and universities, has conducted statewide exit polls of Utah's 92 voter precincts on Election Day since 1982.

Asked this year if they would support making Utah liquor laws more or less restrictive, a majority of Utah voters -- 53 percent -- said the laws should be "kept the same," while 30 percent said they should be "less restrictive" and 17 percent "more restrictive." Active members of the LDS Church favor making liquor laws more restrictive or keeping them the same (92 percent). Less active LDS members and members of other faiths support less restrictive laws.

The Utah Colleges Exit Poll also showed a majority of Utah voters are pleased with Gov. Mike Leavitt's handling of the I-15 construction project and his opposition to storing nuclear waste on Utah's Goshute Indian reservation.

But about 60 percent of the voters surveyed rate Leavitt's overall performance as average.

This year's poll tracked 11 different races and used five different questionnaires, each about 40 questions in length and tailored to various regions of the state.

The students polled 900 voters on statewide issues and races, giving the survey a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percent. The margin of error was as high as 4 percent on questions of more limited scope. The survey provides a snapshot only of voter sentiment on Election Day.

"In terms of generalizing to the rest of the population, that's a stretch that shouldn't be done without other evidence," said Howard Christensen, chairman of BYU's statistics department, which helped with the survey.

Still, the Utah Colleges Exit Poll has a strong track record.

"Exit polls are probably the most accurate of the election polls taken," said Dennis Guiver, CEO of Valley Research, which conducts surveys for The Salt Lake Tribune. He said such polls gauge actual results rather than predictions of what potential voters say they may do.

The purpose of the Magleby poll is to predict election results. But it also reveals telling information about voter preferences on a number of issues and candidates.

In addition, the college poll is a good source of information on political trends specific to Utah, even different voter districts in the state, not covered by national polls, Burbank said.

As for Leavitt, the poll shows voters gave him average marks for his handling of education and the concealed weapons issue. On the Olympic scandal, 54 percent of Utah voters gave him a less than average score.

To have served eight years and be rated average isn't so bad, said Matthew Burbank, a University of Utah professor, who has helped organize the poll for the past two years.

Leavitt's unflagging popularity clearly contributed to his victory on Nov. 7, but it didn't hurt that Sen. Orrin Hatch and presidential candidate George Bush were on the ballot to draw more Republican votes, Burbank said.

Other preliminary highlights of the poll's results are as follows:

-- More Utahns relied on national TV news programs for information about the U.S. presidential race than any other news source.

-- More than 65 percent of voters polled believe reporting on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by church-owned KSL-TV and the Deseret News is biased in favor of the religious organization.

-- Among Utah's four commercial television stations and two largest daily newspapers, The Salt Lake Tribune is perceived to be most biased (29 percent) against the Mormon church. But the majority of voters polled, 37 percent, say the paper's coverage is neutral.

-- About 70 percent of the voters felt that Sen. Orrin Hatch should not have run for U.S. president.

-- Sixty-six percent of Utahns who do not speak a language other than English voted for Initiative A, which made English the state's official language the initiative. Only 51 percent of those who speak a second language voted for it.

-- Sixty-one percent of voters strongly agreed with the statement, "Concealed weapons should be banned from churches and schools," while only 19 percent strongly disagreed.