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# Citizen Evaluations of West Virginia Government: Stability and Change, 1992 to 2005

Thomas K. Bias, Richard A. Brisbin, Jr., and Kevin M. Leyden

How do West Virginians view their state's political system? In what ways do they participate in politics? Have changes in their political views, affiliations and activity occurred in recent years? To answer these questions and provide a portrait of political behavior in the Mountain State, the Institute for Public Affairs, with support from the Department of Political Science, Division of Public Administration, and Office of the Dean of the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences at West Virginia University, conducted a telephone survey of 501 randomly selected West Virginia residents in June 2005. The administration of the survey questionnaire replicates a study of the political attitudes of 517 West Virginia residents conducted by the Institute in June 1992. *The Public Affairs Reporter* previously published the results of the 1992 survey (Brisbin and Dilger 1993). The surveys have a margin of error of plus or minus 4.5 percent. An important concern of the 2005 survey has been its comparability to the 1992 study. Therefore, this article is largely focused on examining continuity and change in the values and opinions from those measured by the 1992 survey.

The survey was designed to determine West Virginians' political knowledge and interest in West Virginia's politics and government, their opinions concerning the performance of West Virginia's elected officials, and their trust in government. The respondents were also asked to identify the most important issues facing the state and which level of government they thought was best suited to deal with these issues.

The surveys revealed several noteworthy changes in West Virginians' political attitudes during this time period. There is a slight improvement in the perception of the honesty of state officials. Second, perceptions of the performance of the governor and state Legislature have improved. Third, the

respondents less frequently cited the economy and jobs as the primary issue facing state politicians. Now, they are more willing to believe that a federal rather than a state governmental response will best address this issue. Fourth, there appears to be a movement of independent voters into the ranks of Republican Party identifiers. This movement is an indicator of a higher level of party competition in West Virginia. Finally, there is a slight sharpening of the ideological divide between liberals and conservatives.

At the same time, both surveys reveal that West Virginians have a relatively low, albeit improving, opinion of state and local governments' job performance. Few respondents rated the performance of state or local government as excellent. Large percentages of West Virginians are still convinced that the state Legislature is controlled by special interest groups (38.2 percent), that the state's political institutions are run by a few big interests looking out for themselves and not for the benefit of the people (57.2 percent), and that state government can only sometimes (58.6 percent) or almost never (13.2 percent) be trusted to do what is right. Thus, our comparison of 1992 and 2005 shows both improved public opinion about government in West Virginia in some areas and substantial negative feelings in others.

## The Performance of Elected Officials

West Virginia's residents were asked to rate the job performance of the governor, state Legislature, state judges, and local government officials as excellent, good, fair, or poor. As indicated in Table 1, in both surveys most West Virginians assessed the performance of the governor, the state Legislature, state judges and local government officials as either fair or good. Relatively few West Virginians rated any of their political institutions as doing an excellent job. For example, only 8.4 percent rated the governor as excellent and less than 2 percent rated the legislature as doing an excellent job. There is, however, some positive news. The governor and legislature both received significantly more good and fewer poor ratings in 2005 than in 1992. The governor's excellent and good ratings combined increased from 26.1 percent to 53.2 percent of respondents and the legislature's excellent and good ratings from 16.5 percent to 29.9 percent. The rating of local officials also got slightly better. In contrast, the performance of state judges slipped slightly with poor responses going from 8.1 percent in 1992 to 14.2 percent in 2005. In 2005, unlike 1992, the survey also asked respondents to rate the job performance of Senator Robert C. Byrd as excellent, good, fair or poor. In contrast to state officials, the Senator received 34.0 percent excellent, 32.4 percent good, 17.6 percent fair, and only 10.4 percent poor ratings. In other words, 66.4 percent of those surveyed thought Senator Byrd was doing an excellent or good job.



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**Kevin M. Leyden, Director/Editor**

*The West Virginia Public Affairs Reporter* is a refereed journal of the Institute for Public Affairs. Each issue addresses topics of concern to West Virginia's state and local government officials. The *Reporter's* content is written by public officials, faculty, research associates, and others familiar with West Virginia affairs. In all cases, the views of the authors are not necessarily those of the Institute for Public Affairs nor of West Virginia University.

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**Table 1**  
**West Virginians' Ratings of Elected Officials' Performance (in percentages) - Change from 1992 to 2005.**

Category	Governor		Legislature		Judiciary		Local Government		Senator Byrd 2005
	1992	2005	1992	2005	1992	2005	1992	2005	
Excellent	2.5	8.4**	1.0	1.6	1.9	3.4	0.8	2.4*	34.0
Good	23.6	43.8**	15.5	28.3**	36.6	29.0**	30.0	35.4	32.4
Fair	46.0	28.6**	56.9	55.1	39.7	38.6	53.6	46.4*	17.6
Poor	23.2	5.4**	23.2	10.4**	8.1	14.2**	11.8	12.8	10.4
No response	2.1	13.8	3.5	4.6	2.1	14.8	10.6	3.0	5.6

N=517 (1992), 501 (2005) p-values are the results of a two-tailed t-test of proportional significance for change from 1992 to 2005.  
 \* p < .05 \*\* p < .01

**Trust in Government**

In 1992, a national survey revealed that only 27.6 percent of Americans trusted the federal government to do what is right always or most of the time. By 2002, this number had grown to 56 percent of the population (National Election Studies, 2006). Similar to the national trend, albeit not as pronounced, the West Virginia surveys revealed an increase in trust in government. As in the national survey, West Virginians were asked to indicate how often they could trust West Virginia's state and local governments to do what is right: most of the time, some of the time, or almost never. As the information in Table 2 illustrates, from 1992 to 2005 trust in state government to do what is right most of the time increased from 18.7 percent to 26.0 percent and the almost never category decreased from 24.8 percent to 13.2 percent. Trust in local government decreased slightly, but not enough to be statistically significant.

**Table 2**  
**West Virginians' Trust in Government to Do What is Right (in percentages) - Change from 1992 to 2005**

Category	State Government		Local Government	
	1992	2005	1992	2005
Most of the time	18.7	26.0**	29.4	24.9
Some of the time	53.8	58.6	52.2	54.7
Almost Never	24.8	13.2**	16.6	17.8
No Response	2.7	2.2	1.7	2.6

N=517 (1992), 501 (2005) p-values are the results of a two-tailed t-test of proportional significance for change from 1992 to 2005.  
 \* p < .05 \*\* p < .01

The surveys also examined perceptions about honesty of state officials. Respondents were asked "Do you think that West Virginia's state governmental officials are very honest, honest, dishonest, or very dishonest?" An examination of changes from 1992 to 2005 reveals an increase in the perception that state officials are honest. In 1992, the majority of the respondents, 54.2 percent, said honest and 1.7 percent of the respondents said very honest. In 2005, this number had risen to 63.2 percent honest and 1.0 percent very honest. Although a combined 33.5 percent said state officials were dishonest or very dishonest in 1992, only 24 percent gave those two responses in 2005. The increased sense of honesty of officials might be associated with temporal distance from the scandals of the administration of Governor Arch Moore.

**Influence Over Government**

Do West Virginians feel their voices are being heard by those elected or appointed to represent them? West Virginians' assessment of the representative nature of the state's political institutions was reflected in the responses to the question, "Would you say that West Virginia's government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of the people?" In 1992, more than three-quarters of the respondents (76.8 percent) indicated that West Virginia's government was run by a few big interests looking out for themselves. Only 16 percent of the respondents indicated that it was run for the benefit of the people. Seven percent of the respondents did not answer the question. In 2005, a majority of respondents again thought that West Virginia state government was run by a few big interests, but the percentage had slipped to 57.2 percent. Those who thought it was run for the benefit of the people increased to 29.2 percent, with 13.6 percent not responding. Although these results are still troubling, they indicate some improvement over perceptions documented in 1992.

**Table 3**  
**Influence over Government (in percentages) - Change from 1992 to 2005**

Category	1992	2005
Few Big Interests	76.8%	57.2%**
Benefit of the People	16.0%	29.2%**
No Response	7.2%	13.6%**

**Influence over State Legislature**

Category	1992	2005
Governor and his staff	20.1%	20.0%
Media	13.2%	11.0%
Special Interest Lobbyists	34.6%	38.2%
Voters	11.6%	8.4%
Other legislators	10.6%	11.2%
No Response	9.9%	11.2%

N=517 (1992), 501 (2005) p-values are the results of a two-tailed t-test of proportional significance for change from 1992 to 2005.  
 \* p < .05 \*\* p < .01

A second survey question was asked to further investigate the extent to which West Virginians feel they are being represented. The questionnaire asked, "Who has the most influence on your state legislators in Charleston?" Respondents were asked to choose from a list that included the governor and his staff, special interest lobbyists, the media, the voters who elected him or her, and other legislators. More than one out of every three respondents in 1992 indicated

special interest lobbyists (34.6 percent), followed by the governor and his staff (20.1 percent), the media (13.2 percent), the voters who elected him or her (11.6 percent) and other legislators (10.6 percent). The remainder (9.9 percent) did not respond to the question. In 2005, the number of respondents who thought special interest lobbyists had the most influence over state legislators increased to 38.2 percent but the influence of the voters decreased to 8.4 percent. This change was not statistically significant. Respondents' assessments of the influence of the governor and his staff (20.0 percent), the media (11.0 percent), and other legislators (11.2 percent), did not shift much. An additional 11.2 percent did not respond in 2005.

### Political Participation and Community Service

In 2000 and again in 2004 West Virginia became a competitive swing state in the race for President. Among other factors, this competitiveness was expected to boost voter turnout as it had across the nation in 2004. Indeed, as Table 4 indicates, respondents in 2005 reported more political participation than in 1992. During the last four years, West Virginians were most likely to report that they voted in the most recent presidential election (from 70.0 percent in 1992 to 85.0 percent in 2005), followed in order by working with others in their community to try to solve some problem (from 40.0 percent to 47.6 percent), attending political rallies, meetings, dinners, speeches or other things in support of a candidate (from 17.6 percent to 32.4 percent), donating money to a candidate for political office or to a political party (from 12.8 percent to 25.4 percent), and working or doing errands for a candidate for political office (9.7 percent to 17.0 percent).

Because the respondents' self reporting of voting is much greater than actual turnout (a common finding in national surveys), there is reason to be skeptical of the accuracy of their reporting of all categories of behavior. Nonetheless, in light of other studies of participation, the ranking of activities is still a useful measure. The least frequent and easiest form of participation, voting, is the most common (85.0 percent). The most partisan and time-consuming activity, working in a campaign, is the least common (17.0 percent).

**Table 4**  
**Reported Political and Civic Participation in West Virginia**  
**During the Previous Four Years (in percentages) –**  
**Change from 1992 to 2005.**

Category	1992	2005
Vote in Presidential Election	70.0	85.0**
Donate Money to Candidate or Party	12.8	25.4**
Work for Candidate	9.7	17.0**
Attend Political Events	17.6	32.4**
Community Service	40.0	47.6*

N=517 (1992), 501 (2005) p-values are the results of a two-tailed t-test of proportional significance for change from 1992 to 2005.

\* p < .05 \*\* p < .01

In 2005, several interesting relationships between forms of participation and other socioeconomic characteristics of the population appeared. These are described in Box 1.

### Box 1 Political Participation in West Virginia

- Persons who reported voting in the presidential election were more likely to follow state politics most of the time (92.0 percent) than nonvoters (69.2 percent).
- Democrats (88.7 percent) and Republicans (91.6 percent) reported voting in the presidential election more than other persons (68.1 percent).
- Voters were more likely to have more years of education (91.4 of persons with an advanced degree, dropping to 60.9 percent with less than a high school diploma).
- Males (89.0 percent) reported voting in the presidential election more than females (83.5 percent).
- Higher income persons voted more than those in lower income groups (100.0 percent of persons earning more than \$100,000 a year, dropping to 76.2 percent of persons earning less than \$25,000 a year).
- Persons over 45 years old voted more frequently in the presidential election (90.4 percent) than persons under age 30 (68.6 percent) or between 31 and 45 (77.5 percent).
- Persons who followed state politics most of the time were much more likely to give money to a candidate or party (33.6 percent) than those who hardly ever followed state politics (5.5 percent).
- Persons who give money to a candidate or party were more likely to have more years of education (52.9 of persons with an advanced degree, dropping to 8.7 percent of persons with less than a high school diploma).
- Men were more likely to give money to a candidate or party (35.6 percent) than women (18.7 percent).
- Higher income persons were more likely to give money to a candidate or party than those in lower income groups (47.6 percent of persons earning more than \$100,000 a year, dropping to 13.3 percent of persons earning less than \$25,000 a year).
- Persons over 45 years old were more likely to give money to a candidate or party (30.8 percent) than younger persons (15.8 percent).
- Persons who reported they worked or did errands for a candidate for political office during the past four years were more likely to follow state politics most of the time (24.7 percent) compared to other individuals (10.9 percent).
- Persons who reported they worked or did errands for a candidate for political office were more likely to have incomes between \$50,001 and \$75,000 (27.7 percent) than persons with greater or less income.
- Persons who reported they worked or did errands for a candidate for political office were more likely to be between 45 and 65 (21.4 percent) than in other age groups.
- Persons who reported they attended political rallies, meetings, dinners, speeches, or other things in support of a political candidate in the past four years were more likely to follow politics most of the time (39.7 percent) compared to other individuals (26.7 percent).
- Democrats (36.2 percent) and Republicans were more likely to attend political rallies, meetings, and similar events than persons not reporting a party affiliation.



**Box 1 (continued)**

- Liberals (40.7 percent) were more likely to attend political rallies, meetings, and other similar events than conservatives (33.8 percent) or moderates (30.3 percent).
- Men (39.3 percent) were more likely to attend political rallies, meetings, and other similar events than women (27.7 percent).
- Persons with an advanced degree were more likely to attend political rallies, meetings, and other similar events than those with less education (54.9 percent of persons with an advanced degree, dropping to 23.9 percent of persons lacking a high school diploma).
- Persons who reported they attended political rallies, meetings, and other similar events were more likely to have incomes between \$50,001 and \$75,000 (49.4 percent) than persons with greater or less income.

**Partisanship**

In West Virginia, Democrats significantly outnumber Republicans among registered voters. Our surveys, however, indicate that the gap between those identifying with one party over the other may be narrowing some. Most noteworthy in the 2005 survey is the increase in the percentage of Republican identifiers. In 1992, 26.5 percent of those surveyed identified with the Republican Party while in 2005 this number had jumped to 38.2 percent. Although we cannot be certain because of data limitations, we suspect that many of these new Republican identifiers most likely came from the ranks of independents whose numbers dropped nearly half from 1992 to 2005. What also is striking, as revealed in Table 5, is the growing numbers of strong Democrats and Republicans. Between 1992 and 2005, the number of strong Democrats increased from 21.7 percent to 24.8 percent and the number of strong Republicans increased from 9.9 percent to 24.6 percent. Yet, the numbers of weak Democrats and Republicans both declined and the number of independent voters fell by about half. This increasing partisan divide mirrors a national trend (Bartels 2000).

<b>Party Identity</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>2005</b>
<b>Democratic</b>	<b>47.6</b>	<b>42.6</b>
Strong Democrat	21.7	24.8
Not a Strong Democrat	25.1	15.2**
Other response	1.7	2.6
<b>Republican</b>	<b>26.5</b>	<b>38.2**</b>
Strong Republican	9.9	24.6**
Not a Strong Republican	16.1	13.6
Other response	0.5	0.0
<b>Independent</b>	<b>21.1</b>	<b>11.4**</b>
Closer to Democratic Party	8.9	5.0*
Closer to Republican Party	7.7	3.3**
Close to neither party	8.7	3.0**
Other party and No response	4.8	7.8*

N=517 (1992), 501 (2005) p-values are the results of a two-tailed t-test of proportional significance for change from 1992 to 2005.  
\* p < .05 \*\* p < .01

The 1992 to 2005 change in political ideology, as expected, trends in a more conservative direction. Indeed, ideology was significantly associated with party identification, with Republican identifiers being largely very strong or strong conservatives and Democrats much more likely to identify themselves as liberal. Overall, the percentage of very strong liberals increased slightly from 2.3 percent to 3.6 percent. However, in this period the total percentage of liberals decreased from 21.8 percent to 18.6 percent and the percentage of moderates decreased from 32.5 percent to 26.4 percent. All conservatives increased from 33.1 percent to 42.2 percent of all respondents. Other studies have noted the same shift has occurred in West Virginia (Brace et al. 2004).

**The Most Important Issues Facing the State**

When the 1992 survey was taken, West Virginia had one of the highest unemployment rates at 11.5 percent and one of the lowest labor participation rates in the nation (Workforce West Virginia, 2006). As a result, it was not surprising to find that more than half of the respondents to the survey (54.7 percent) indicated in response to an open-ended question that the state's economy and lack of jobs (combined into one category) was the most important problem facing West Virginia's state government. In 1992, public education (6.6 percent) and state finances (5.6 percent) were the next most frequently cited issues of greatest concern. In 2005, with the unemployment rate at 4.3 percent, the economy and jobs was still far and away the most important problem identified by respondents, but those persons citing it as the most important problem dropped to 37.6 percent of the sample. In 2005, the problem receiving the next most responses was "high taxes" at only 5.4 percent. The other responses, all mentioned by less than 2.0 percent of the sample, ranged over 49 different problems.

**Which Level of Government Can Best Resolve Public Problems?**

The Institute's surveys included a series of questions that were designed to determine which level of government respondents felt might best solve West Virginia's specific policy problems. The survey results suggest that West Virginians have more confidence in their state government than in either the federal government or local governments to solve most problems. There is evidence, however, of growing support for federal solutions to some policy problems. The surveys asked what level of government federal, state, or local is best suited to (1) solve West Virginia's economic problems and provide jobs and (2) improve public education. As Table 6 indicates, from 1992 to 2005 there is a marked shift toward the view that the federal government is best able to solve the state's economic problems. Attitudes since 1992 about which level of government is best suited to improve public education also saw a minor shift, this time away from state government. There was a slight shift from 61.7 percent of those surveyed believing state government was in the best position to solve education problems to 53.2 percent. The other changes with regards to education policy were not significant. Only one in ten West Virginians continue to believe that the federal government can best solve problems in public education.

**Table 6**  
**Level of Government Best Suited to Solve Policy Problems**  
**(in percentages) – Change from 1992 to 2005**

Issue	Economy and Jobs		Education		Environment	Healthcare
	1992	2005	1992	2005	1992	2005
Response						
Federal	14.3	34.4**	10.3	10.6	33.5	34.4
State	56.7	43.2**	61.7	53.2**	43.9	43.2
Local	11.6	7.8*	17.0	21.6	8.1	7.8
No response	17.4	14.6	11.0	14.6	14.5	14.6

N=517 (1992), 501 (2005) p-values are the results of a two-tailed t-test of proportional significance for change from 1992 to 2005.  
 \* p < .05 \*\* p < .01

Additionally, the 1992 (but not the 2005) survey asked West Virginians: “What level of government, federal, state, or local, is best suited to improve the environment and provide clean air and water in West Virginia?” The most frequent response in 1992 was state government (43.9 percent), followed by the federal government (33.5 percent) and local government (8.1 percent). The remaining 14.5 percent of the respondents did not answer this question. Instead of asking about the environment, the 2005 survey asked: “What level of government, federal, state, or local, is best suited to improve health care in West Virginia?” Of the respondents, 34.4 percent said the federal government, 43.2 percent said state government, and 7.8 percent chose local government with a 14.6 percent no response rate.

### Conclusions

The 2005 study finds some improvement in the level of trust West Virginians have in their state officials and in their perceptions of the performance of the governor and legislature compared to 1992. These changes are not huge but they indicate greater trust; in 2005 26.0 percent of the citizens surveyed felt that they could trust the state government to do what was right most of the time as opposed to only 18.7 percent in 1992. We also find West Virginians are more likely to report increased levels of political participation, such as voting, donating money to campaigns, working for candidates, attending political rallies and doing community service. Finally, as evidenced by the increased percentage of West Virginians identifying with the Republican Party, West Virginia seems to be developing a competitive two-party system.

Large percentages of West Virginians are still convinced, however, that the state Legislature is controlled by special interest groups (38.2 percent), that the state’s political institutions are run by a few big interests looking out for themselves and not for the benefit of the people (57.2 percent), and that state government can only sometimes or almost never be trusted to do what is right (58.6 percent only some of the time and 13.2 percent almost never).

Despite some negative feelings, West Virginians still believe that their state government ought to take the lead in addressing major public problems (See Table 6). Across all categories, the state government ranked as the highest when asked which level of government is best suited to solve policy problems. This said, there has been some slight shift away from the belief that the state should address some policy issues. For example, those who believed the federal

government should take the lead role in economic policy rose from 14.3 percent to 34.4 percent from 1992 to 2005. In summary, the 2005 survey indicates several positive changes since 1992. It appears that West Virginians want and expect their state government to lead and provide positive policy outcomes. More work needs to be done, however, to earn their long-term trust and confidence.

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**Institute for Public Affairs Awarded Grant  
to Promote the Local Government Leadership Academy**

This Spring, the Institute for Public Affairs was awarded a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and the West Virginia Development Office to recruit public officials from ARC designated distressed counties to attend the Local Government Leadership Academy. These public officials were contacted by a variety of means and those eligible were offered scholarships to attend the Academy's April 22-23 meeting in Morgantown, WV. Participants were invited to attend a variety of core and elective workshops on topics such as financial management, economic development, land-use planning, brownfield clean-up and redevelopment, and leadership skills, just to name a few. This is part of a broader effort to enhance leadership and governing skills through partnerships with the West Virginia Association of Counties, the County Commissioners Association of West Virginia and the West Virginia Municipal League.

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