PACE

COMMENTARY

Voters Want More of What They Won't Pay For—Stronger Higher Education

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The latest PPIC survey on higher education in California was released last month, and the findings will bring no cheer to our state's public colleges and universities. On the bright side, most respondents affirm that a strong higher education system is important for California's future, and they agree that recent budget cuts are causing significant harm to both colleges and students. At the same time, a substantial majority of respondents is unwilling to pay higher taxes to support post-secondary education, and a similar majority rejects the idea that students should pay more for their education than they already pay.

These findings should come as no surprise. Annual PPIC surveys on higher education since 2007 have produced almost exactly the same results, and PPIC surveys on K–12 education share the same headlines. All of these polls show that most Californians don't like cutting expenditures on things they like (including schools, colleges, and universities), but most also don't believe that people they like (themselves, their children) should have to pay more in the way of taxes and fees to protect the things they like from budget cuts. Thus, when it comes to post-secondary education, Californians want the state to support excellent public colleges and universities, but only if no one has to pay. What accounts for this?

The survey finding that matters most is not from PPIC, but from a recent Gallup poll. On average, Americans believe that 51 cents of every dollar the federal government spends is wasted. The numbers for state and local governments are slightly better, but not much. In the view of most Americans a free lunch is sitting right behind the bar, guarded by venal politicians and greedy bureaucrats. If public officials would stop wasting money on things that don't matter, there would be plenty of money for the things that do. Holding this view makes it easy to demand increased funding (or smaller cuts) for the public services that make a difference to us, secure in the confidence that cuts elsewhere won't do any real harm.

Parents seek to defend K-12 schools against reductions in state support. Students at UC and CSU protest rapidly increasing fees. Health workers mobilize to reverse cuts in Medi-Cal payments, and hikers demand that state parks remain open. Meanwhile, ballot initiatives lock up new tax revenues to fund widely approved programs like preschool (and perhaps, some other recent polling suggests, K–12 schools) outside the general budget. When voters believe that half of every dollar is wasted, the argument that the state should generously fund all of these programs, and more, is a very hard sell.

There are two obvious problems with the belief that half of all government spending is wasted. The first is that all available evidence suggests that it's not true. Governors since Ronald Reagan have come into office with a mandate from the voters to eliminate "waste, fraud, and abuse" in public spending, but once elected they have been hard-pressed to find much waste to cut. The axes they promised to bring to Sacramento turned out to be nail files. The second problem is that while the nail files did their work on wasteful spending, the budget axe fell—and continues to fall—on things that matter a lot for California's quality of life and

economic future, including the state's colleges and universities.

Two-thirds of respondents in the PPIC survey believe that California's colleges and universities are heading in the wrong direction, and three-quarters believe that the state should provide additional financial support to turn them around. As long as voters remain convinced that their government is wasting much of the money it spends, though, we're bound to continue down the same track.

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