The Pace Poll Albany Reform Study:  
If the Problem is Apathy, Who Cares?  

A Pace Poll Survey Research Study  

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The Pace Poll is an independent center at Pace University for survey research on social, political, and economic issues. By routinely measuring regional and national public opinion on both long-standing and timely topics of civic life, The Pace Poll will help public opinion play a more visible role in the open discussion of current affairs. This is an important part of the democratic process, and The Pace Poll will contribute to the public discourse by publishing accurate and meaningful opinion studies on matters of common concern.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although many newspapers, think tanks, and civic groups believe New York State government is in crisis,1 Albany’s incumbents are enormously successful in seeking re-election; of the 202 incumbents who sought re-election, only 30 faced a major party challenger in the general election, and only 3 lost. To explain this apparent disconnect between the political intelligentsia’s disdain for Albany and the voters’ adoration of incumbents, The Pace Poll launched this Albany Reform Study. Our primary questions were these:

1. Do New Yorkers share the elite’s perception that there is something rotten in the State of New York?

2. If New Yorkers think their State government needs to be reformed, do they think this need for reform is greater than, less than, or equal to the need to address the state’s other problems?

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1 When New York University’s Brennan Center for Justice released its report, THE NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS: AN EVALUATION AND BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM by Jeremy M. Creelan and Laura M. Moulton, in July 2004, it sparked a civic firestorm. Using a variety of statistical indices and first-hand accounts, the report’s authors concluded that the New York State legislature was less democratic, less efficient, and less able to counter-balance the State executive branch of government than other states’ legislatures. To remedy those alleged deficiencies, the authors suggested a slew of sweeping reforms to strengthen legislative committees, grant individual members more power vis-à-vis the legislative leadership, and end New York’s “three men in a room” practice of governance. In response to this assessment, politicians and newspapers across the state echoed the call for reform.
3. If residents think New York State government needs to be reformed, do they think so because reforming State government will help solve our other problems or because reforming State government is a moral good? 

4. If residents think New York State government needs to be reformed, what reforms do they support and what reforms do they oppose? 

5. Do New Yorkers think the State’s problems are unique and correctable or universal and inherent? 

6. Do New Yorkers care enough about fixing Albany to risk change, or would they rather just kvetch? 

Although this last question is phrased facetiously, it does capture an important hypothesis about political reform that we wanted to examine, namely, citizens may prefer an imperfect status quo to an uncertain reformed future. To be sure, The Pace Poll did not strike upon this cynical theory of human behavior on its own. To quote the U.S. Declaration of Independence, “…Accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.”

II. A BRIEF NOTE ON DEMOGRAPHICS

To facilitate our discussion, we will use the following terms to refer to several psychographic categories and demographic subdivisions of New Yorkers:

- **Vermonters**
  
  Vermonters are New Yorkers who distrust State government and think New York State government is more corrupt than other States’ governments.

- **Ingénues**

  Ingénues are New Yorkers who trust State government and think New York State government is less corrupt than other States’ governments.

- **Civic Buffs**

  Civic Buffs are New Yorkers who know both that the Democrats run the Assembly and that the Republicans run the Senate.

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2 In this sense, the term “moral good” is meant to signify something of intrinsic worth with a value that does not depend upon its utility.

3 These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive; a person may be both a Civic Buff and an Ingénue.

4 Today, the good people of Vermont have no particular dislike of either their own government or government in general. The use of this trope is an allusion to a historical antipathy to New York’s government. This antipathy arose from New York’s assertion, during the reign of King George III, that New York owned Vermont, and Ethan Allen’s “Green Mountain Boys” were originally founded to fight New York, not Britain. In 1790, Vermont bought its freedom from New York for $30,000.
• **Newshounds**  Newshounds are New Yorkers who read the newspaper every day.

• **Reformers**  Reformers are New Yorkers who believe that reforming State government is more important than other issues and that reform should be our top priority and that reform will do a lot to solve our other problems.

• **Voters**  Voters are New Yorkers who vote in every election.

• **Young People**  Young People are New Yorkers ages 18 to 25.

• **Twenties**  Twenties are New Yorkers ages 26 to 32.

• **Thirties**  Thirties are New Yorkers ages 33 to 44.

• **Middles**  Middles are New Yorkers 45 to 55.

• **Juniors**  Juniors are New Yorkers 55 to 64.

• **Seniors**  Seniors are New Yorkers over 65.

• **Working Class New Yorkers**  Working Class New Yorkers are those living in families earning less than $35,000 a year.

• **Middle Class New Yorkers**  Middle Class New Yorkers are those living in families earning between $36,000 and $55,000 a year.

• **Upper Middle Class New Yorkers**  Upper Middle Class New Yorkers are those living in families earning between $56,000 and $85,000 a year.

• **Upper Class New Yorkers**  Upper Class New Yorkers are those living in families earning between $86,000 and $125,000 a year.

• **Rich New Yorkers**  Rich New Yorkers are New Yorkers living in families earning more than $125,000.
• **Upstate Westerners**

Upstate Westerners reside in the following counties:
Allegany; Broome; Cattaraugus; Cayuga; Chautauqua; Chemung; Chenango; Cortland; Erie; Genesee; Jefferson; Lewis; Livingston; Madison; Monroe; Niagara; Oneida; Onondaga; Ontario; Orleans; Schuyler; Seneca; Steuben; Tioga; Tompkins; Wayne; Wyoming; and Yates.

• **Upstate Easterners**

Upstate Easterners reside in the following counties:
Albany; Clinton; Columbia; Delaware; Duchess; Essex; Franklin; Fulton; Greene; Hamilton; Herkimer; Montgomery; Oswego; Otsego; Putnam; Rensselaer; St. Lawrence; Saratoga; Schenectady; Schuhaire; Sullivan; Ulster; Warren; and Washington.

• **New York City Residents**

New York City Residents reside in the following counties:
New York, Queens, Kings, Richmond, and The Bronx.

• **New York City Suburbanites**

New York City Suburbanites reside in the following counties:
Nassau, Orange, Rockland, Suffolk, and Westchester.

### III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If dissatisfaction with the status quo is the soil in which reform movements grow, the Empire State is fertile ground indeed. New Yorkers are extremely dissatisfied with New York’s current direction; 50% think we are off on the wrong track, while just 28% think we are heading in the right direction. Although this dissatisfaction is widespread, it is concentrated among Vermonter (80%), Civic Buffs (72%), and Reformers (64%).

Yet, for most Knickerbockers⁵ Albany reform is not their top priority. To the contrary, when asked to name their top-of-mind concerns, New Yorkers cite taxes (17%), education (15%), jobs and the economy (15%) and health care (10%), not Albany’s

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⁵ This is not an allusion to the NBA basketball team of the same name; rather, it is a reference to one of our state’s nicknames, popularized by Washington Irving in A KNICKERBOCKER HISTORY OF NEW YORK.
shortcomings. Even assuming that the budget (9%) is a proxy for reform, only 14% of New Yorkers cite either the budget or reform (5%) as their top issue.

Likewise, we asked our respondents to rate nine issues, including Albany reform, on a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 means the issue is something they do not care about at all and 10 means the issue is something they care about a great deal. Based on the respondents’ ratings, we generated a mean rating for each issue; based on those mean ratings, we generated a mean rating for a hypothetical average issue and the standard deviation. By that statistical practice, only the economy (mean rating of 8.69) and health care (8.68) are more important than a hypothetical average issue while only reforming the Rockefeller Drug Laws (7.02) is less important.

More encouraging for reformers, however, is the fact that 72% of New Yorkers think changing New York State government will do a lot to solve the state’s other problems. In large part, New Yorkers find reform’s pragmatic potential to be the most persuasive argument for reform; 50% think that fixing New York State government is important because it will help fix the State’s other problems.

Reform may not dominate New Yorkers’ agenda in part because residents don’t believe Albany plays a uniquely important role in their lives. A plurality (44%) thinks the Federal, State, and local governments have an equally large impact on their lives, and more New Yorkers (24%) think the Federal government has the biggest impact than think the State (14%) or local government (14%) does. Likewise, the public does not pay much attention to news stories relating to governance issues, unless those stories have a clear “pocketbook” element to them. Thus, many New Yorkers follow school funding (27%) and the budget (25%) “very closely”, but few New Yorkers follow the controversy regarding development rights along the Erie Canal (10%) or Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi’s “Fix Albany” campaign (8%). In fact, Attorney General Eliot Spitzer’s war on Wall Street corruption (26%) seems to have captured the public’s attention as much or more than the reform movement’s assault on Albany atrocities.

In addition, reform may not be the public’s top priority because New Yorkers do not consider New York State government to be unusually dishonest. For instance, net trust – defined as the percentage of people who trust the government to do what is right “just about always” or “most of time” – is rare; 27% trust the State, 30% trust the national government, and 35% trust their local government. Net distrust – defined as the percentage of people who think the government will do what is right only “some of the time” or “hardly ever” – is common; 71% distrust the state, 67% distrust the national government, and 63% distrust their local government. By comparison, Americans in general are more trusting of the Federal government than New Yorkers. According to the 2002 National Election Study, 73% of Americans trust the Federal government while just 23% distrust it. By comparison, only 30% of New Yorkers trust the Federal government, while 67% distrust it.

New Yorkers’ favorite proposal for changing Albany is changing its leadership, which they prefer over reforming the way Albany does business by twelve points (52% to 40%).
In addition, 60% of New Yorkers and 65% of New York City residents want the State to shoulder a larger share of Medicaid costs, even if that means the State has to raise taxes.

Furthermore, ending New York’s twenty-year old tradition of late budgets has failed to capture the public’s imagination. A majority (58%) of New Yorkers prefer a late budget that protects important social spending to a timely budget that does not. A majority of Republicans (55%) also support delaying the budget if that’s the only way to preserve important social spending. And even Reformers are split – 48% to 48% – on whether passing the budget on time or protecting social spending is more important. (Of course, our casual attitude towards paying our bills on time would come as no surprise to the Oneida and Cayuga Indian Nations.)

Empire State residents do favor some modest, cautious reforms. We asked respondents to rate eight leading reform proposals on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means the reform would not help at all and 5 means the reform would help a great deal. Based on the respondents’ ratings, we generated a mean rating for a hypothetical average issue. Only two proposals – requiring representatives to be physically present to vote (4.26) and strengthening contracting rules to prevent dishonesty (4.03) – achieve above average ratings while only one proposal – holding a State constitutional convention (2.54) – merits a below average rating.

As a result of the public’s discontent and its cautious approach to reform, the ultimate fate of Albany reform remains unknown.

IV. KEY FINDINGS

A. New Yorkers may be mad as hell, but they are willing to take it some more.

Although there appears to be the sort of widespread anger and frustration that might serve as the foundation for a reform movement, New Yorkers do not yet seem to attribute New York State’s overall troubles to the need to reform State government. For example, New Yorkers are very pessimistic about the state’s current direction; just 28% think we are headed in the right direction while 50% think we are off on the wrong track. Granted, the most disaffected groups also are the most reform minded. For example, Civic Buffs (72%) are the most pessimistic New Yorkers. Thus, to know New York State government is to dislike New York’s current direction.
New Yorkers think things in New York State are headed off on the wrong track; “Civic Buffs” and “Reformers” are even more pessimistic.

Question 4: Generally speaking, do you think that things in New York State are headed in the right direction, or do you think that things are off on the wrong track?

Not surprisingly, Vermonters (80%) and Reformers (64%) think the state is headed in the wrong direction. Of course, this correlation between political knowledge, anti-government feelings, pro-reform sentiment and unhappiness does not establish a clear cause and effect relationship between these variables. It remains unclear whether greater unhappiness with the status quo makes one more likely to be a Vermonter or a Reformer or whether being a Vermonter or a Reformer makes one more likely to be unhappy with the status quo.

Yet, the fact that this dissatisfaction is so widespread casts some doubt on the proposition that demands for reform are driving the public’s dissatisfaction with the status quo; for example, Latinos (61%), Upper Middle Class New Yorkers (61%), Upstate Westerners (61%), Upstate Easterners (58%), Middles (55%) and Juniors (56%) are also unusually pessimistic about New York’s current direction.

Conventionally, this sort of widespread dissatisfaction is presumed to reflect the public’s assessment of the state’s economic outlook, and our poll findings seem to validate the conventional wisdom. Consider the issues New Yorkers cite as their top-of-mind concerns. Taxes (17%), education (15%), jobs and the economy (15%) and health care (10%) are the top four concerns, and, collectively, a majority (57%) of New Yorkers cites one of these vexing issues as top-of-mind. Rounding out the top five is the budget (9%).
Top-of-mind issues include the usual subjects, even for Reformers.

**Question 5:** What do you think is the most important issue or problem facing New York State right now?

Even if we assume that the budget is a proxy for reform, then the budget (9%), political corruption and problems in Albany (5%) are still only the top-of-mind concern for 14% of New Yorkers. In other words, dissatisfaction with the quality of State government may account for some of the widespread displeasure throughout the state, but demands for reform are not sufficiently prevalent or sufficiently salient to account for most of it. Other issues are playing a larger role in befouling the public mood.

Some demographic stereotypes hold true. For example, economically vulnerable groups tend to worry more about the economy than New Yorkers generally; thus, Black men (28%), Young People (23%), and Latinos (21%) are more worried about jobs and the economy than Empire State residents in general (15%). Similarly, demographic groups usually associated with conservative politics fear taxes more than average New Yorkers; consequently, Upstate Westerners (35%), white men (30%), suburban men (29%) college educated men (26%) and men over 45 (24%) are more worried about taxes than Knickerbockers in general (17%). Likewise, traditional liberal groups prioritize education; accordingly, college educated women (24%) and New York City Residents (19%) worry more about education. Also, New Yorkers most likely to be taking care of elderly parents or struggling with their own aging problems worry about health care; thus, women over 45 (16%) and Juniors (15%) are more worried about health care.

**B. Reform is not New Yorkers’ top priority.**

When prompted to consider the reform issue, New Yorkers do not rate it exceptionally high. To wit, we asked our respondents to rate nine issues on a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 means the issue is something they do not care about at all and 10 means the issue is
something they care about a great deal. Ranking those issues based on the mean rating generates New Yorkers’ priority list, which is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Improve New York’s economy</td>
<td>8.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Increase access to affordable health care</td>
<td>8.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Protect New York from terrorism</td>
<td>8.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Improve New York’s public schools</td>
<td>8.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Reduce the cost of a college education</td>
<td>7.96</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Reduce taxes</td>
<td>7.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Pass the New York State budget on time</td>
<td>7.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Fix New York State government in Albany</td>
<td>7.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Reform the Rockefeller drug laws</td>
<td>7.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mean rating for these nine issues is approximately 8.03 with a standard deviation of approximately 0.61; this implies that New Yorkers would rate a hypothetical “average” issue – an issue they deem neither more nor less important than other issues – somewhere between 8.64 and 7.42. By that method, only the economy (8.69) and health care (8.68) are more important than average while only reforming the Rockefeller Drug Laws (7.02) is less important than average.

When we ask New Yorkers to identify the most important of the nine aforementioned issues, 20% choose health care, 19% education, 16% terror, and 13% taxes. Improving the economy (9%), reducing the cost of a college education (6%), fixing New York State government (6%), and passing the budget on time (5%) are runners-up.

Likewise, a majority (54%) thinks that fixing New York State government has either less (11%) or about the same (43%) importance as other issues. Vermonters (58%), Upstate Westerners (55%), and Blacks (52%) are more likely than average New Yorkers (42%) to think reform is more important than other issues. Seven of ten (70%) New Yorkers think fixing New York State government is just one priority among many, while just 27% think it should be our top priority. Blacks (37%) are the most likely to think that reform should be our top priority, and Blacks (82%) – compared to 72% of New Yorkers generally - are the most likely to think that reform will help solve other problems.

Looking at the other issues in a bit more detail, we see that GOP women (76%) and Young People (71%) are disproportionately likely to rate “protect New York from terrorism” a perfect 10. Democrats (68%), Latinos (67%), and Blacks (64%) are disproportionately likely to rate “increase access to affordable health care” a perfect 10. Women under the age of 44 (64%) and Blacks (63%) are particularly concerned about the economy. And Reformers (72%) are the most likely demographic group to rate improving the economy a perfect 10; conceivably, economic distress is a prime motive for these reformers, a theory sure to warm the hearts of NYU Marxists.

Blacks (43%) are the most likely New Yorkers to rate “reform the Rockefeller Drug Laws” a perfect 10, but Reformers (39%) aren’t far behind. This pattern probably
reflects the fact that Rockefeller Drug Laws fall hardest on Blacks, and the fact that Blacks bear this burden probably explains why, besides New Yorkers of color, only idealistic New Yorkers care. (Regrettably, problems disproportionately afflicting the Black community rarely manage to capture the public’s attention as easily as problems disproportionately afflicting the white community.)

“Improving public schools” merits a 10 from women who are likely to be mothers (whose children are likely to attend public schools); thus, the issue scores well among Democratic women (71%), women 18 to 44 (70%), and college educated women (69%). Latinos (79%), Blacks (78%), and New York City residents (71%) are also unusually likely to rate this issue a perfect 10.

“Passing the budget on time” scores best among Upstate Westerners (57%) and Working Class New Yorkers (51%). Additionally, Reformers (61%) worry a lot about the budget; one suspects Reformers’ focus on the budget stems from the fact that the budget is New York’s most visible example of governmental inefficiency.

Everyone hates taxes, but who really hates taxes? Reformers (63%), Upstate Westerners (60%), Republicans (58%) and young people (53%) are the most likely to lead another Whiskey Rebellion.6 In addition to Reformers (64%), Black men (45%), Upstate Westerners (44%), and Civic Buffs (44%) are disproportionately supportive of fixing Albany. Given this overlap between hatred of taxes and disgust with Albany, one suspects that much of the pressure for reform is coming from those who hope that reform will cut their taxes (or people who associate reform ideas with anti-tax crusades).

“Cutting the cost of a college education,” not surprisingly, has the support of Young People (53%) and Twenties (53%). Yet, it’s also unusually important to Blacks (63%), Latinos (60%), women 18 to 44 (59%), and women generally (52%) – all groups that might perceive a cheap college education as their best chance for advancement. Likewise, Democrats (55%) place greater emphasis on this issue than Republicans (37%).

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6 Pardon the Pennsylvania allusion in a report about New York, and a Federal allusion in a report about a state, but The Whiskey Rebellion was a revolt against a Federal excise tax that raised the cost of whiskey.
Terrorism, health care, education, the economy, and taxes seem to matter more than reform issues to New Yorkers overall.

Questions 13-21: Now let me read you some issues other people have mentioned as things they care about. I would like you to rate each issue on a scale from 1 to 10, where one means it is something you do not care about at all and 10 means it is something you care a great deal about.

When we ask New Yorkers to compare the relative importance of reforming Albany and of addressing the state’s other problems, a majority (54%) thinks Albany reform is either less important (11%) or about the same (43%). Nonetheless, a hefty minority (42%) thinks reforming Albany is more important.

Also encouraging for reformers is the fact that 72% of New Yorkers think changing New York State government will do a lot to solve other problems. By in large, New Yorkers find reform’s pragmatic potential to be the most persuasive argument for reform; 50% think that fixing New York State government is important because it will help fix the State’s other problems. Nevertheless, there is support for fixing Albany simply because it’s the right thing to do. For instance, 54% of Young People, 53% of Working Class New Yorkers, and 51% of those with no more than a high school education think reform is important because it’s “just the right thing to do.” Oddly, suburban women (60%) are far more likely than either average Knickerbockers (41%) or suburban men (31%) to favor reform because it’s the right thing.
But reform is still of interest to New Yorkers.

*Questions 23: Compared to other issues, how important do you think it is to fix New York State government in Albany?*

*Questions 24 Why do you think that fixing New York State government in Albany might be important?*

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**The Pace Poll Albany Reform Survey**

**Chart 4**

**C. Much like Sir William Howe, New Yorkers don’t pay much attention to Albany.**

Perhaps fixing Albany is not an unusually high priority for New Yorkers because they do not believe that State government is uniquely important to their lives. A plurality (44%) thinks the Federal, State, and local governments have an equally large impact on their lives, and more New Yorkers (24%) think the Federal government has the biggest impact than think the State (14%) or local government (14%) does.

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7 During the American Revolution, Sir William Howe’s decision to invade Philadelphia, rather than reinforce the British attack on Albany, led to the British defeat at Saratoga; that defeat prompted French intervention and, subsequently, America’s Independence.
Oddly, men ages 18 to 44 (23%) are unusually likely to say New York State plays the largest role in their lives. Statistically speaking, this cohort’s predilection for crime could explain its anomalous Albany focus. That is, this is the age cohort that gets arrested, so the State – and its courts and jails – may play a disproportionate role in their lives. Generally speaking, however, New Yorkers don’t pay much attention to Albany shenanigans. For instance, when asked which party controls the State Senate, New Yorkers are just as likely to identify the Democrats (27%) as the Republicans (29%), and 44% of all New Yorkers do not even hazard a guess. When asked the same question about the Assembly, New Yorkers are only slightly more likely to answer “Democrats” (30%) than they are to answer “Republicans” (23%), while 46% prefer not to guess.

When asked whether they follow particular news stories, New Yorkers tend to avoid those governance issues without a clear “pocketbook” component to them. If one were to combine those who follow stories “fairly” closely with those who follow stories “very” closely, then governance issues seem to capture only a fair amount of the public’s attention. For example, 57% follow the State budget at least “fairly closely.” Likewise, by that standard, 54% follow the court case regarding New York City public school funding, and 51% follow reform of the Rockefeller Drug Laws. At the same time, 51% follow Attorney General Eliot Spitzer’s investigations of Wall Street. In other words, the public only seems to care about governance issues to the extent that they include budget and tax issues. Yet, budget and tax issues seem more readily thought of as “pocketbook” issues than governance issues. Indeed, when we ask respondents about reform issues without a clear pocketbook effect, like Tom Suozzi’s Fix Albany campaign (19%) and the sale of development rights along the Erie Canal (20%), public interest plummets.
Questions 30 to 35: Now I’m going to read you a list of recent news stories. As I read each one, please tell me if you happened to follow the news story very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all.

New Yorkers keep an eye on State governance news stories that effect their pocketbook, but they give them only as much attention as they do Eliot Spitzer’s Wall Street investigations.

- Budget delays
- Court order to increase spending on city schools
- Eliot Spitzer’s Wall Street investigations
- Rockefeller Drug Law reform

Alternatively, we could measure the public’s interest in a particular news story by looking at the percentage of respondents who say they follow a story “very closely.” If we use this stricter measurement, the aforementioned ignorance of governance stories without a pocketbook element is even more pronounced. By this measure, the recent court order requiring New York State to spend more on New York City’s public schools is the top story, with 27% saying they follow it very closely. In descending order from there, Attorney General Spitzer’s corruption probes (26%), delays in passing the budget (25%), and reforms of the Rockefeller Drug Laws (18%) are the next most followed news stories. Criticism of the State’s sale of development rights along the Erie Canal (10%) and Tom Suozzi’s Fix Albany campaign (8%) trail far behind.

Not surprisingly, interest in these news stories varies across demographic groups. Among men, Spitzer’s investigations (34%) and budget delays (31%) are the biggest stories. In what seems like welcome news for Spitzer 2006, suburban men (39%), newshounds (37%), college graduates (36%), Middles (32%), and Voters (32%) named the Attorney General’s Wall Street reform as the top story they followed. For Blacks (40%), Latinos (37%), union households (36%), Democratic women (35%), and Twenties (35%), the top story is the school funding case (35%). For Upstate Westerners (41%), seniors (37%), and white men (36%), it’s the budget. And Latinos (31%) and Blacks (30%) are paying a great deal of attention to Rockefeller Drug Law reform.

D. New York’s Rally Cry: We’re no worse than anybody else!

Contrary to the implications of the Brennan Center’s Report, New Yorkers do not believe that New York State government is unusually corrupt. New Yorkers don’t trust the State to do what is right, but New Yorkers don’t trust any government to do what is right. Net
trust – defined as the percentage of people who trust the government to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time” – is rare; 27% trust the State, 30% trust the national government, and 35% trust their local government. Net distrust – defined as the percentage of people who think the government will do what is right only “some of the time” or “hardly ever” – is common; 71% distrust the State, 67% distrust the national government, and 63% distrust their local government. By comparison, Americans in general are more trusting of the Federal government than New Yorkers. According to the 2002 National Election Study, 8 73% of Americans trust the Federal government while just 23% distrust it. By comparison, only 30% of New Yorkers trust the Federal government, while 67% distrust it.

New Yorkers distrust all levels of government.

Questions 6-9: How much of the time do you think you can trust [Local, State, National] government to do what is right?

- **Local Government**
  - Just about always: 3% (Net Trust: 35%), Net don’t trust: 63% (Net Distrust: 67%)
  - Most of the time: 26% (Net Trust: 41%), Net don’t trust: 41% (Net Distrust: 59%)
  - Hardly ever: 26% (Net Trust: 49%), Net don’t trust: 51% (Net Distrust: 51%)
  - DK/R: 3%

- **State Government**
  - Just about always: 3% (Net Trust: 27%), Net don’t trust: 71% (Net Distrust: 71%)
  - Most of the time: 24% (Net Trust: 49%), Net don’t trust: 51% (Net Distrust: 51%)
  - Hardly ever: 22% (Net Trust: 41%), Net don’t trust: 78% (Net Distrust: 78%)
  - Only some of the time: 49% (Net Trust: 63%), Net don’t trust: 37% (Net Distrust: 37%)
  - DK/R: 3%

- **National Government**
  - Just about always: 5% (Net Trust: 30%), Net don’t trust: 95% (Net Distrust: 95%)
  - Most of the time: 41% (Net Trust: 59%), Net don’t trust: 59% (Net Distrust: 59%)
  - Hardly ever: 26% (Net Trust: 74%), Net don’t trust: 74% (Net Distrust: 74%)
  - Only some of the time: 26% (Net Trust: 74%), Net don’t trust: 74% (Net Distrust: 74%)
  - DK/R: 3%

Of course, distrust is not evenly distributed. Net distrust of State government is particularly high among Upper Middle Class New Yorkers (85%), Blacks (82%), Juniors (79%), and Democratic women (78%). Obviously, Reformers (81%) distrust State government (one presumes they wouldn’t be quite so eager to reform a government they considered honest). Net distrust of the Federal government is particularly acute among Democrats (76%), Upper Middle Class New Yorkers (75%), Blacks (72%), and college educated women (72%).

In terms of its efficacy, more than six in ten Empire State citizens (63%) think New York State government is the same (39%) or worse (24%) than other States’ governments; only 17% think it is better. Upstate West residents (41%), men (32%), white men (35%) and Black men (30%) are more likely than average Knickerbockers (24%) to think New York government.

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8 Funded by the National Science Foundation, National Election Studies produced the NES survey cited above.
State government is inferior to other states’. In fact, there is a glaring gender gap among college educated New Yorkers; 32% of these men think New York State is worse while just 14% of these women think the State is worse. Even though Republicans control the governorship, Republicans (29%) are more likely to be among New York’s detractors than either Democrats (19%) or independents (26%). Sadly, Civic Buffs (46%) are far more likely to think ill of our government than either New Yorkers in general (24%) or Ingénues (22%).

**New Yorkers think their State government is the same or worse than other State governments; Civic Buffs think it’s worse.**

*Question 10: How would you rate New York State government compared to other State governments - better, worse, or about the same as other State governments?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All New Yorkers</th>
<th>Civic Buffs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Better</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Same</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DK/R</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 597

63% Net About the Same/Worse

N = 94

71% Net About the Same/Worse

In terms of its integrity, however, the public perception is more favorable to Albany’s comparative merits. Nine in ten of Black men (90%) and more than three in four of all Knickerbockers (77%) think there is trouble (meaning corruption and dishonesty) right here in Albany City, but only 21% think we are more of an Evil Empire than anyone else. In fact, a majority (57%) thinks New York is no more corrupt than other states. In accounting for this “confidence” in Albany’s comparative corruption, one shouldn’t underestimate the impact of recent scandals in Connecticut and New Jersey on New Yorkers’ assessments of their government’s probity. After all, New York is the only state in the tri-state region where the governor was elected to that office, and the New York media covered the downfalls of Governors McGreevey and Rowland. Thus, it may well be that New Yorkers hold an unusually low opinion of other States’ government at this moment in time. Regardless, cynicism’s hopes are on the rise: 32% of Young People think we’re the baddest around (and they don’t mean that in the good sense).
New Yorkers think there is corruption and dishonesty in New York State government, but a majority think it’s about the same amount as in other State governments.

Question 11: Do you think there is corruption and dishonesty in New York State government?

Question 12: Would you say there is more corruption and dishonesty, less, or about the same amount of corruption and dishonesty as in other State governments?

Unfortunately, there is a racial disparity in New Yorkers’ assessments of their government’s integrity: Black men (45%), Latinos (35%) and Blacks (34%) think State government is unusually crooked. Reformers (34%) think New York is more corrupt than other States’ governments, but Civic Buffs (54%) think we’re about average. In other words, support for reform is less correlated with greater knowledge of State government as it is than with greater expectations for State government as it should be. This suggests that Reformers aren’t so much exceptionally well-informed about the status quo as they are unusually idealistic about the potential for reform.

Again, we find that Republicans (23%) are more skeptical than Democrats (19%). One suspects that Republican mistrust of a GOP administration smacks more of conservatism’s innate distrust of government than any Pataki-specific complaints; that is, those who distrust government are disproportionately likely to be Republicans, and Republicans are disproportionately likely to distrust government. In all fairness, however, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press recently found that Republicans may be abandoning their traditional antipathy towards government. (See generally POLITICS AND VALUES IN A 51%-48% NATION, Pew Research Center for the People and The Press, January 24, 2005.) If so, this would not be the first time that New York Republicans are out of step with their party.

E. Throwing the rascals out is New Yorkers’ favorite reform.

In a potentially ominous sign for incumbents, 52% of New Yorkers think the best way to fix New York State government is to throw the rascals out while only 40% favor changing the way the government operates. Incumbents can take solace, however, from the fact that the desire to defenestrate them is highly prevalent among Young People.
(61%), who – history indicates – aren’t as likely to vote as other demographic groups. Yet, Reformers (61%) and college educated women (60%) share a desire to unleash the political equivalent of a Reign of Terror on incumbents. But the critical point here is that a wide swath of New Yorkers believes that reform is more about who’s in charge than what they are in charge of.

Reform ideas are less attractive than new leadership.

Question 27: Now I’m going to read you two statements about New York State gov’t in Albany. After I read the two statements, please tell me which of these two statements comes closest to your view.

The public’s preference for a change in leaders rather than a change in the form of government illustrates a fundamental barrier to systemic government reform: citizens tend to ignore systemic problems unless they also oppose the current government’s policies. Consider that Great Britain was a hereditary monarchy before it began taxing the colonies, but Americans didn’t oppose hereditary monarchies until they began to oppose King George III’s decisions. In a monarchy, this conflation of the systemic and the immediate may not matter. In a democracy, though, the conflation suggests that pressure for systemic reform will dissipate as soon as a new government comes to power.

Who do New Yorkers trust to reform State government? Only 33% think Governor George Pataki would do either an “excellent” or “good” job fixing State government while 63% think he would do only a “fair” or “poor” job. Using the same standard, the public trusts U.S. Senators Chuck Schumer (56% to 35%) and Hillary Clinton (55% to 41%) and Attorney General Eliot Spitzer (54% to 30%). In contrast, Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno (17% to 44%) and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (18% to 43%) fare poorly. Of course, Majority Leader Bruno and Speaker Silver are not statewide elected officials and are not as well known as the other officials we tested; consequently, their low ratings are more likely the result of a general frustration towards incumbents than any particular animus towards them individually. Indeed, even Tom Suozzi (14% to 30%) – one of Bruno’s and Silver’s chief critics – fares poorly. Since New Yorkers
distrust the current legislative leadership on both sides of the aisle and the current leadership’s chief critic, it seems likely that New Yorkers are annoyed at anyone even remotely associated with Albany unless that person has established a distinct reputation in the public’s mind.

New Yorkers think their U.S. Senators and Attorney General could do the best job fixing Albany.

Questions 36 to 42: Please tell me whether you think the following people would do an excellent job fixing the problems of New York State government, a good job fixing the problems of New York State government, a fair job fixing the problems of New York State government, or a poor job fixing the problems of New York State government.

![Bar chart showing the percentage of New Yorkers who think each person would do an excellent job fixing Albany.]

Now, when we rate Albany’s leading lights in terms of the percentage of New Yorkers who think they would do an “excellent” job reforming State government, the luminaries shine as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Percentage “Excellent Job”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Attorney General Eliot Spitzer</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Senator Hillary Clinton</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Senator Chuck Schumer</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Governor George Pataki</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Attorney General does particularly well among college educated men (35%), Rich New Yorkers (29%), seniors (26%), and Upper Class New Yorkers (26%), while Clinton does unusually well among those Twenties (28%) and Reformers (27%). In fact, Civic Buffs (37%), Reformers (22%), and Republicans (16%) gave the Attorney General the best shot at fixing Albany. In other words, among those who know or care, Spitzer is the right man to fix Albany – even his nominal foes concede that point.

Next, we tested several leading reform ideas.
F. New Yorkers want the State to pay more for Medicaid.

When we ask New Yorkers who should bear the burdens of paying for medical insurance for the poor, 60% of New Yorkers think the State should pay more even if that means raising statewide taxes. Of course, this idea is more popular among New York City residents (65%) than New Yorkers in general (60%), and New York City is likely to get more money from the State out of that arrangement. Still, it’s not wildly more popular in the city than elsewhere in New York. One suspects that property taxes are a bigger issue outside the city because other local governments rely more on property taxes than New York City, which relies heavily on income taxes. The idea to shift more Medicaid costs to the State is also popular among Reformers (70%), Blacks (69%), and Latinos (69%). Indeed, most Republicans (54%) support this reform.

New Yorkers feel the State government should pick up a larger share of Medicaid costs.

Question 43: Which statement do you agree with more?

![Pie chart showing the percentage of New Yorkers who agree with each statement.]

Statement A: New York State government should pay more of the costs of health insurance for poor New Yorkers so that local governments don’t have to raise property taxes to cover Medicaid costs.

- 60%

Statement B: To pay more of the costs of health insurance for poor New Yorkers, New York State would have to raise taxes anyway, and local governments are better at reducing Medicaid costs.

- 26%

G. New Yorkers care more about what’s in the budget than when it’s passed.

The Pace Poll’s survey design modeled the budget debate in Albany by asking respondents whether they preferred the State to pass its budget on time or to pass a budget that protects important social services. A majority (58%) think it’s better late than bad when it comes to budgets. Young People (76%), Upper Class New Yorkers (71%), and women (64%) are the most likely groups to favor a delay in passing the budget to ensure that the budget is done right. Yet, even a majority of Republicans (55%) support delaying the budget if that is the only way to get it done right and preserve important social spending. Tellingly, even Reformers are split – 48% to 48% – on whether timeliness or appropriateness are more important to proper budgeting.
New Yorkers do not want to settle for an anemic budget, even if it means delays in passing it.

**Question 44: Which statement do you agree with more?**

- **Statement A:** The New York State budget should be passed on time no matter what to protect New York’s credit rating and to keep government services running smoothly.
- **Statement B:** The New York State budget should only be passed when we have a good budget that protects important services like schools and health care.

**Chart 13**

**H. New Yorkers tend to favor moderate, cautious reform.**

We asked respondents to rate eight leading reform proposals on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means they think the idea would make no improvement at all and 5 means they think the idea would make a very big improvement. In order from best to worst, here’s how New Yorkers rate these reform ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Require members of the State Senate and Assembly to be physically present in order to cast a vote on a proposed new law.</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Strengthen the rule that require State contracts to be awarded only on the basis of merit.</td>
<td>4.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Give the authority to individual members of the State Senate and State Assembly to put their own proposed laws up for a vote.</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Make elections more competitive by removing the right of the State Assembly and State Senate to draw their own district lines.</td>
<td>3.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Give more power to individual members of the State Senate and Assembly to make changes to proposed laws.</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Give more power to individual State representatives and take away power from both the State Assembly Speaker and State Senate Majority Leader.</td>
<td>3.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Create new opportunities for legalized gambling in New York and use the extra revenue to make up for shortfalls in public school funding.</td>
<td>2.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Hold a state constitutional convention to write a brand new State constitution.</td>
<td>2.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The average rating is approximately 3.33 with a standard deviation of approximately 0.57; this implies that New Yorkers rate an “average” reform between 3.9 and 2.76. As a result, only two proposals – requiring representatives to be physically present to vote (4.26) and strengthening contracting rules (4.03) – achieve above average ratings while only one – holding a State constitutional convention – merits a below average rating (2.54).

Looking at the issue another way, the following chart reflects the percentage of New Yorkers who rate each reform idea a “perfect” 5 and a “dismal” 1 on a scale of 1 to 5.

Among prevalent reform ideas, New Yorkers want legislators present when they vote on bills, and they want stricter rules for awarding State contracts.

Not surprisingly, support for these proposals varies across demographic groups. Voters (65%) are unusually likely to rate the abolition of absentee voting in the legislature a perfect 5. Likewise, they strongly favor cleaning-up State contracting (51%). Civic Buffs tend to favor eliminating gerrymandering (40%) and giving more power over bills to individual members (35%).

And what do Reformers want? In order of preference, they want to end absentee voting in the legislature (80%), a tightening of the State’s contracting rules (55%), an end to gerrymandering (37%), an increase in individual legislators’ power over bills (35%), and a reduction of the legislative leadership’s power (32%).

V. CONCLUSION

The fate of the Albany Reform movement depends upon the answer to several still unresolved questions:
1. Can pro-reform forces persuade New Yorkers to attribute an overall discontent with the direction of the State to Albany’s shortcomings?

2. Can pro-reform forces maintain their momentum towards reform if progress on other issues or changes in the State’s leadership improves New Yorkers’ mood?

3. Can pro-reform forces persuade New Yorkers that State government’s problems are unique and correctable, rather than inherent shortcomings of government?

4. Can pro-reform forces identify significant structural changes that can muster public support?

In conclusion, New Yorkers – and we suspect most people – do not think about government in the abstract as much as they consider government as it effects their lives. For these people, good government is one that makes the trains run on time. Perhaps this conclusion sounds cynical or even condescending; in fact, it simply acknowledges that caution and prudence must temper enthusiasm for ideological abstractions. Ultimately, the Founder’s insight was that idealism unmoored by pragmatism is more likely to lead to the Place de la Concorde than Constitution Hall, and their skepticism created the most effective government reform in world history.

VI. METHODOLOGY

This survey is based on statewide phone interviews of 597 New York State residents between January 27 and February 4, 2005. The findings of the survey are statistically significant within a ± 4% margin of error at a 95% level of confidence. Error margins increase for cross-tabulations. Though The Pace Poll adheres to strict methodological standards, the practical elements of fielding any survey can introduce additional sources of error.

As poll respondents always do in survey research studies, our respondents exaggerated their propensity to vote. For instance, 86% of our respondents claim to be registered to vote, and 63% claim to vote in every election. In fact, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission estimates that only 70% of eligible New Yorkers have registered to vote and that only 32% voted in the last mid-term election; in other words, respondents over-reported registration by nearly 23% and voting in mid-term elections by almost 97%. Respondents over-report registration and voting because both are socially desirable behaviors.

The tendency to overstate one’s conformity to socially-desirable behavior is noteworthy because the phenomenon also may have encouraged our respondents to embellish their support for government reform. This should not minimize either the accuracy or reliability of our poll. To the contrary, we simply note that even if there is an unidentified systematic bias in our poll, that bias would favor reform.
Lastly, we should note the Heisenberg-esque uncertainty inherent to this kind of issue polling: whenever one surveys what may well be a low-priority issue, one cannot avoid raising that issue’s profile among respondents by virtue of the polling act itself. And the possibility that a surveyed sample may not behave like the un-surveyed population is a natural limitation of primary social research.