



THE COMMONWEALTH POLL

VCU Center for Public Policy

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Virginians Put Education at Top of Wish-List

Richmond, VA— Education tops the list of priorities that Virginians set for Governor-elect Mark Warner and the General Assembly next month, according to a new poll conducted by Virginia Commonwealth University. The Commonwealth Poll was conducted November 30-December 6 with 793 adults in Virginia. The margin of error is +/- 4 percentage points. Despite the growing budget concerns facing the state, more citizens put progress in education, jobs and health care above handling the state budget shortfall as top priorities for state government this year. Better than seven in 10 Virginians think improving education should be a top priority. Fifty-seven percent think jobs should be a top priority, and about as many (56 percent) cite improving health care as a top priority. Just 31 percent cited ending the car tax as a top priority; fewer Virginians thought the car tax should be top priority than any of the seven other options.

Priorities for Governor-elect and General Assembly

	TOP PRIORITY	IMPORTANT BUT NOT TOP PRIORITY	NOT TOO IMPORTANT	NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT	DON'T KNOW/ NO ANSWER
Improving education	72%	26%	2%	0%	1%
Improving the job situation in the state	57%	34%	7%	1%	1%
Improving health care	56%	35%	7%	1%	1%
Handling the state budget shortfall	49%	39%	7%	1%	4%
Increasing public safety	48%	41%	9%	1%	0%
Protecting the environment	43%	43%	10%	2%	2%
Improving transportation	39%	39%	18%	2%	1%
Ending the car tax	31%	33%	22%	12%	2%

These questions were asked in randomized order and read, "I'd like to ask you some questions about priorities for the governor-elect and the General Assembly this year. Tell me if you think the item I read should be a top priority, important but not top priority, not too important, or not at all important. ..."

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There was wide agreement on education and jobs as the two most commonly cited top priorities among both men and women, whites and African-Americans. Regional differences in the state were evident in the relative priority for jobs and transportation, however. In the western part of the state (including Roanoke, Lynchburg and Danville) where jobs have been scarce in recent years, 71 percent said jobs should be a top priority. Those in Northern Virginia were less likely to cite jobs as a top priority; just 43 percent of Northern Virginians did so. Instead, nearly six in 10 Northern Virginians (59 percent) think transportation should be a top priority. Just 21 percent of those in the west think transportation should be a top priority. A clear majority of Virginians from all regions agree, however, that improving education should be a top priority in the coming year.

Top Priority for Governor-elect and General Assembly

	WEST	NORTHERN VIRGINIA
Improving education	69%	71%
Improving the job situation	72%	43%
Improving transportation	21%	59%

When asked about the most important problem facing Virginia, concerns about the economy were dominant, though education and transportation often came to mind as well. Thirty-five percent mentioned either the economy, jobs, state budget issues or taxes. The next most frequently given response was education (13 percent) followed by transportation (11 percent).

What do you think is the most important problem facing Virginia right now?

Economy	10%
Jobs/Unemployment	11%
State budget/State funding	8%
Taxes/Car tax	6%
Education	13%
Transportation	11%
Security/Terrorism/Bioterrorism	7%
Crime	3%
Other responses	11%
Don't know/No answer	20%

Cary Funk, Ph.D., director of the Commonwealth Poll, noted, “While Virginians are clearly concerned about the broader economic situation—especially in terms of jobs—they still want to see progress in other areas, particularly in education.”

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Things Have Changed for Jim Gilmore

With his signature car tax issue at the bottom of public priority lists for state government and the growing budget crisis in the state, it’s not surprising that ratings of how well Jim Gilmore is handling his job as governor have slipped since earlier in his term. Five months into his term as governor, in May 1998, nearly two thirds of Virginians gave Gov. Gilmore a job approval rating of either excellent or good. At the tail end of his term, the balance has swung to the negative side, with 45 percent rating his job as excellent or good and the majority, at 55 percent, citing his job as fair or poor.

Governor Gilmore Job Performance

	RATED	NOT RATED	EXCELLENT OR GOOD	FAIR OR POOR
Dec. 2001	86%	14%	45%	55%
May 1998	75%	25%	64%	37%

“How would you rate the job Jim Gilmore is doing as governor? Do you think that he is doing an excellent, good, fair, or poor job as governor?”

Slippage in public opinion of Gov. Gilmore’s performance comes from Virginians of all partisan stripes. While Gilmore retains positive ratings from nearly two thirds of his fellow Republicans (64 percent), both independents and Democrats are more likely to see his performance in negative than positive terms. Four in 10 independents rate Gilmore as doing an excellent or good job compared with six in 10 who say his job is fair or poor. A third of Democrats give Gilmore an excellent or good rating, while two-thirds consider his performance negative or poor.

December 2001 May 1998

	EXCELLENT OR GOOD	FAIR OR POOR	EXCELLENT OR GOOD	FAIR OR POOR
Republicans	64%	36%	78%	23%
Independents	40%	60%	60%	40%
Democrats	33%	67%	55%	44%

Method of the VCU Commonwealth Poll
 Nov. 30-Dec. 6, 2001
 Number of respondents: 793

The Commonwealth Poll is an omnibus public opinion survey of Virginia residents. Each survey covers a variety of topics. The survey is conducted by telephone with a randomly-selected sample of adult Virginians.

Interviewing for The Commonwealth Poll was conducted by telephone from the facilities of the Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. The interviewing is conducted by a staff of professionally trained, paid interviewers using computer-assisted telephone interviewing software.

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The sample of telephone numbers was prepared by Genesys Sampling Systems of Ft. Washington, PA, and was designed so that all residential telephones, including new and unlisted numbers, had a known chance of inclusion. The cooperation rate for the survey was 44%. Using the CASRO response rate calculations, interviews were obtained with respondents in 38% of the known or assumed residential households in the sample.

The data were weighted to adjust for unequal probabilities of selection due to multiple telephone lines and multiple adults living in the household. In addition, the data were weighted on sex, race, age and region of residence to reflect the demographic composition of the Virginia adult population. Percentages reported in the text and tables are weighted, while the number of cases shown in the tables for various subgroups is the actual number of respondents.

Questions answered by the full sample of adults are subject to a sampling error of plus or minus approximately 4 percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence. This means that in 95 out of 100 samples like the one used here, the results obtained should be no more than 4 percentage points above or below the figure that would be obtained by interviewing all adult Virginians with telephones. Where the answers of subgroups are reported, the sampling error would be higher. Because of nonresponse (refusals to participate, etc.), standard calculations of sampling error are apt to understate the actual extent to which survey results are at variance with the true population values. Surveys are also subject to errors from sources other than sampling. While every effort is made to identify such errors, they are often difficult or impossible to measure. Readers making use of the results are urged to be mindful of the limitations inherent in survey research.

Further information is available on request from the director of the Commonwealth Poll, Dr. Cary Funk, at (804)827-1430 or clfunk@vcu.edu. More information on the Commonwealth Poll can be found at <http://www.vcu.edu/commonwealthpoll/>.

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