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# Commonwealth's Choice: Results from the Massachusetts Public Opinion Survey

Barry Bluestone

*University of Massachusetts Boston*

Mary Ellen Colten

*University of Massachusetts Boston*

Thomas Ferguson

*University of Massachusetts Boston*

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The  
John W. McCormack  
Institute of  
Public Affairs

**COMMONWEALTH'S CHOICE:**

**Results From The  
Massachusetts Public Opinion Survey**

*analysis by:*

BARRY BLUESTONE  
MARY ELLEN COLTEN  
THOMAS FERGUSON

University  
of Massachusetts  
at Boston

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RESULTS FROM THE  
MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

Analysis by:

Barry Bluestone  
Mary Ellen Colten  
Thomas Ferguson

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From November 11 through December 4, 1989, the Center for Survey Research of the University of Massachusetts at Boston conducted a random digit dial survey of adults aged 18 and over in Massachusetts. A total of 423 individuals were interviewed in a sampling procedure that yielded a 63 percent response rate. In contrast to most media polls, this survey was carried out over a period of four weeks permitting extensive efforts at locating and interviewing difficult-to-reach, reluctant, or less interested respondents. This survey is likely to be more representative of the true population of Massachusetts than most state polls.

THE KEY RESULTS

- \* Massachusetts citizens are willing to pay for direct services, but are unwilling to pay taxes for additional administrative expenses or bureaucracy. When asked if the state spends too little or too much on individual programs, more than 60 percent feel that too little is being spent on primary and secondary schools and care for the elderly. More than 50 percent feel that too little is being spent on local aid and on roads and highways. More than 45 percent feel the same way about the environment, drug treatment, and about public higher education.
- \* By a margin of 62% to 38%, respondents reject the idea of mainly cutting spending as a solution to the deficit problem. Nearly 60 percent feel that the proper way to deal with the deficit is a combination of cuts in spending and increases in taxes. Only 22% favor no cuts in spending at all, relying on tax increases alone to close the deficit.
- \* Respondents are willing in overwhelming numbers to have their taxes increased if the money were earmarked for the following:

	<u>% YES</u>		<u>% YES</u>
Drug treatment programs	58%	Elementary & high school	
Building prisons and jails	54%	education	89%
Building/maintaining		Local aid to cities & towns	71%
roads/highways	65%	Cleaning up environment	84%
Health care	85%	Nursing homes	84%
Public colleges and		Services for mentally ill	87%
universities	68%	Shelters for homeless	83%

- \* Support for more taxes to pay for public colleges and universities is found among those who describe themselves as conservatives as well as those who describe themselves as liberals. Nearly 58% of conservatives favored more taxes for public higher education; nearly 80% of liberals.

\* Similarly, nearly 74% of those who consider themselves Democrats favored higher taxes to pay for public higher education; 68% of Republicans; and 66% of Independents.

\* Respondents are not willing to pay more taxes for the state legislature, political consultants, state agencies, or the governor's office

	<u>%NO</u>
State legislature	91%
Political consultants	93%
State agencies	62%
Governor's office	96%

\* More than 53% of respondents feel that there is "a lot" of waste and fat in the State budget. However, the amount of perceived waste varies by state program. Public colleges and universities are among the very lowest. Only 21% believe there is a lot of waste in the state's public institutions of higher education. Among seven different state budget categories, the amount of perceived waste and fat in public colleges and universities is second lowest, following mental health.

\* While just about half (50.1%) of the respondents consider that Proposition 2 1/2 and other tax efforts to keep taxes down contributed "a lot" to economic growth in the state, a larger percentage (57.1%) consider the quality of public higher education in the state to have played a large role in the state's prosperity.

\* More than 84% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that "the state should guarantee that every qualified student can attend an appropriate public college or university in the state."

\* Limiting student enrollment in public colleges and universities is a very unpopular method to solve the budget crisis at state institutions of higher education. More than 62% disapprove or strongly disapprove of using this as a solution.

\* Over 90% disapprove or strongly disapprove of paying teachers less in order to cut costs at public colleges and universities.

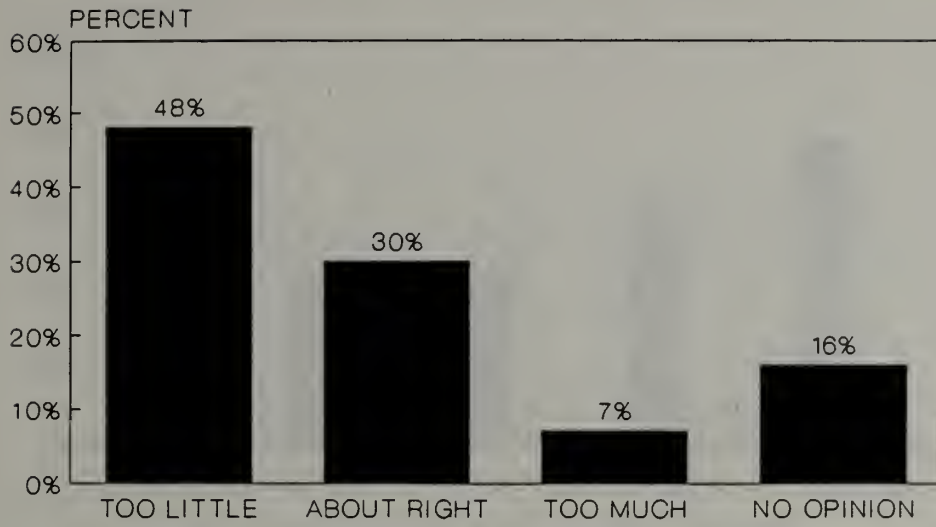
\* More than three-quarters (76%) of the respondents favor the state giving the public colleges and universities more money in order to meet higher education costs.

\* Support for public higher education may be due to the fact that nearly 85% of respondents feel that young adults today have a more difficult time than their parents in affording college or university.

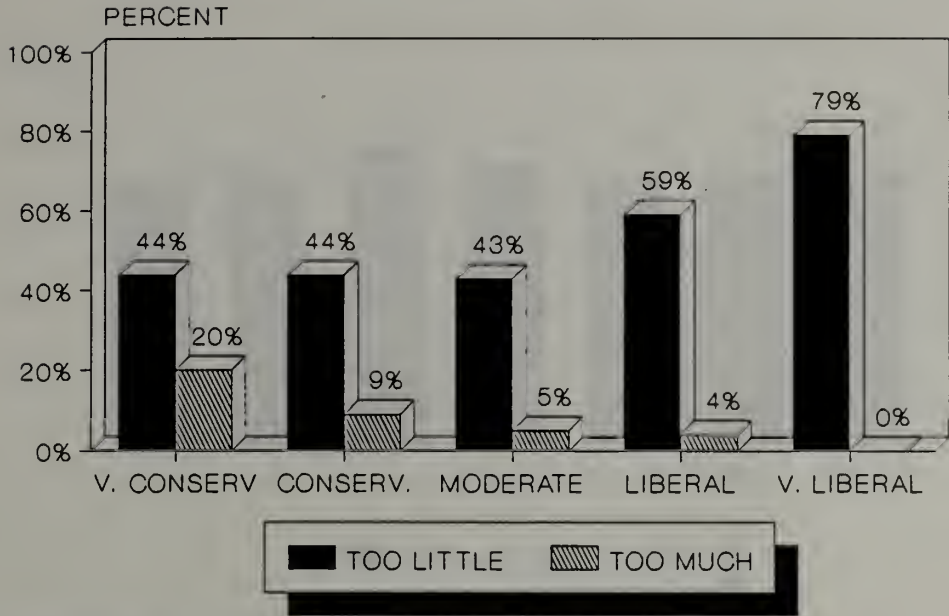
\* More than 81% of those who have children under age 18 living at home think that it is either very likely or somewhat likely that their children will go to a Massachusetts public college or university.

\* Nearly 83% of the respondents in this survey reported that they are registered to vote. More than 75% claim they voted in the last presidential election.

# RATING OF STATE SPENDING ON PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

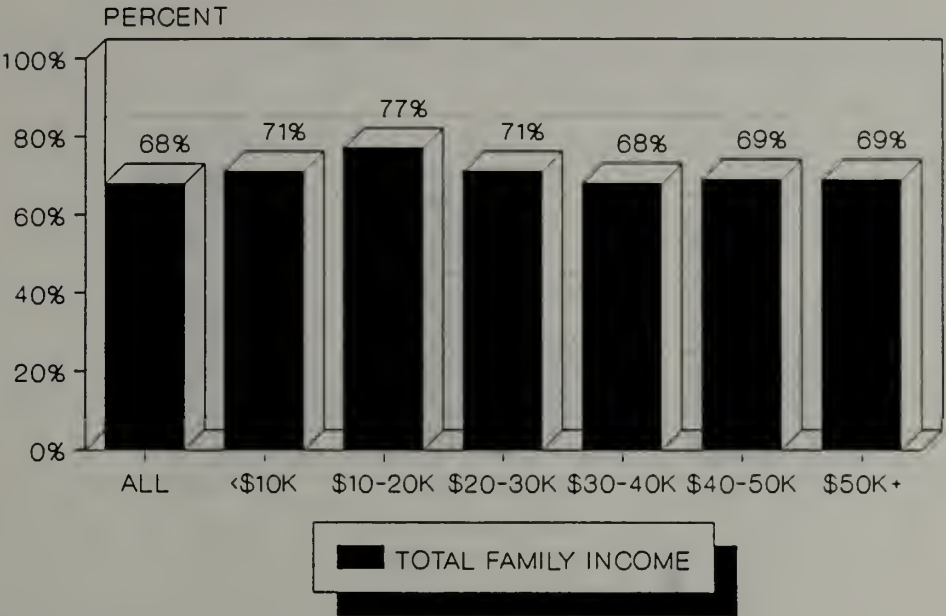


# RATING OF STATE SPENDING ON PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION



Source: Mass Public Opinion Survey

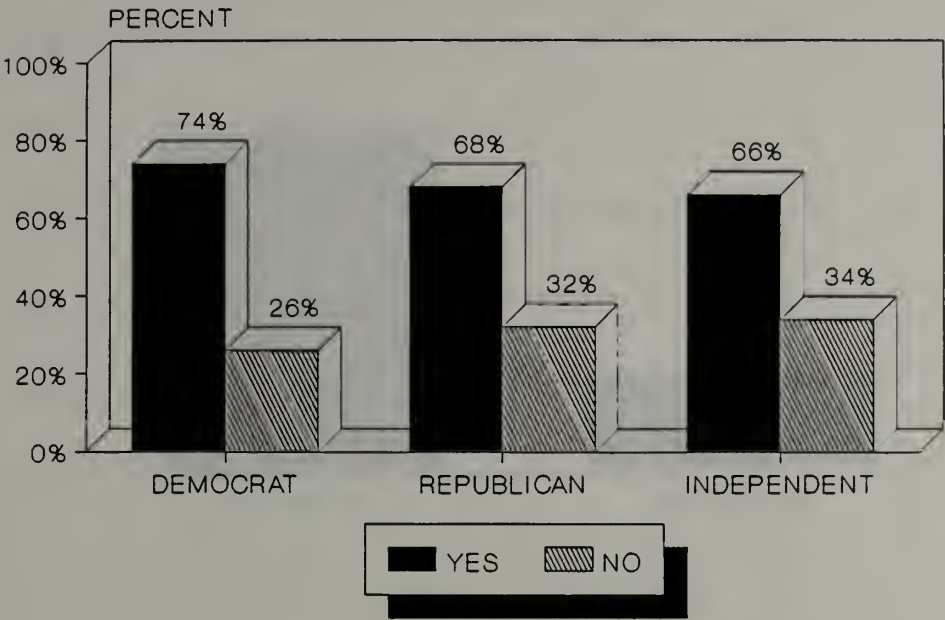
# PERCENT WHO FEEL THAT THE STATE IS SPENDING TOO LITTLE ON PUBLIC HIGHER ED



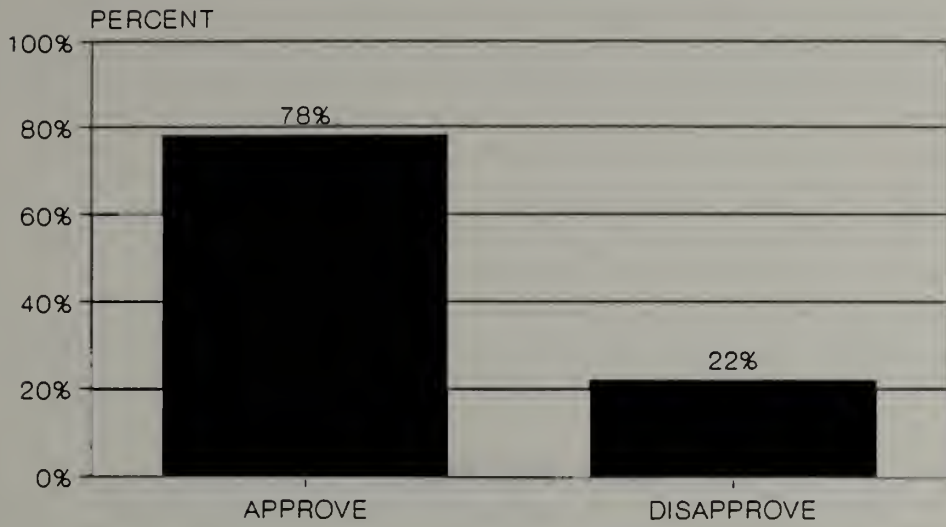
Source: Mass Public Opinion Survey



# ARE YOU WILLING TO PAY MORE TAXES FOR PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION?



# STATE SHOULD GIVE MORE MONEY FOR PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION



# APPENDIX

QUESTIONS FROM  
MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY:

(PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTIONS WITH DATA WEIGHTED  
FOR NUMBER OF ADULTS IN HOUSEHOLD AND NUMBER OF PHONE LINES)

Center for Survey Research  
University of Massachusetts-Boston

(NOTE: DUE TO ROUNDING, PERCENTS MAY NOT TOTAL TO 100%)

1. How much attention would you say you have been paying to the budget crisis in Massachusetts--would you say you have been paying a lot, some, a little, or no attention to information about the budget crisis?

45% A LOT  
38 SOME  
15 A LITTLE  
2 NO ATTENTION

2. How much are you concerned about the effects of the budget situation on state services--would you say you are very concerned, somewhat concerned, not very concerned, or not at all concerned?

58% VERY CONCERNED  
34 SOMEWHAT CONCERNED  
7 NOT VERY CONCERNED  
2 NOT AT ALL CONCERNED

3. How much effect does (READ A) have on how well things go economically in Massachusetts--would you say a lot, some, only a little, or no effect at all?

	<u>A</u> <u>LOT</u>	<u>SOME</u>	<u>ONLY A</u> <u>LITTLE</u>	<u>NO</u> <u>EFFECT</u>
a. the quality of public higher education in the state	57%	29%	10%	4%
b. the level of state spending on job training programs	36	41	19	5
c. the quality of elementary and high school education in Massachusetts	66	23	9	2
d. the quality of education at the University of Massachusetts	40	39	16	5
e. efforts to promote Massachusetts as a good place for high-tech companies	59	28	9	4
f. proposition 2 1/2 and other efforts to keep taxes down	50	27	15	7

4. Now some questions about spending by the State Government. What do you think about what the government is spending on (READ A) -- do you think the state government is spending too much, too little, or about the right amount, or do you have no opinion?

	<u>TOO MUCH</u>	<u>TOO LITTLE</u>	<u>ABOUT RIGHT</u>	<u>NO OPINION</u>
a. the environment	6%	46%	19%	29%
b. public higher education--state colleges and universities	7	48	30	16
c. elementary school and high school education	4	62	21	13
d. local aid to cities and towns	5	56	24	16
e. health care programs	6	58	22	15
f. welfare programs for people who are not working	40	19	25	15
g. care for the elderly	2	65	21	13
i. drug treatment	7	50	23	20
j. building and maintaining roads and highways	10	54	29	7

5. The Governor and the Legislature are taking steps to reduce the deficit in Massachusetts. Do you think they should mainly cut spending, mainly raise taxes, or do a little of both?

39%	MAINLY CUT SPENDING
4	MAINLY RAISE TAXES
57	DO A LITTLE OF BOTH

6. (IF SAID MAINLY CUT SPENDING)

As a last resort, in order to reduce the deficit, would you approve or disapprove of raising taxes?

16%	APPROVE
84	DISAPPROVE

7. Some people say that they would be willing to have their taxes increased if the money went directly to pay for certain things. Would you be willing to have your taxes increased if the money were used in the state for (READ A)?

	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>
a. drug treatment program	58%	42%
b. building prisons and jails	54	46
c. building and maintaining roads and highways	65	35
d. health care	85	15
e. the state legislature	9	91
f. public colleges and universities	68	32
g. elementary and high school education	89	11
h. local aid to cities and towns	71	29
i. political consultants	7	93
j. cleaning up the environment	84	16
k. nursing homes	84	16
l. state agencies	38	62
m. services for the mentally ill	87	13
n. shelters for the homeless	83	17
o. the governor's office	4	96

8. Some people argue that not much fat and waste remains in the Massachusetts State budget, while others say there is still a lot of fat and waste to be cut. What do you think--is there a lot, some, a little, or no fat and waste left in the State budget?

54%	A LOT
32	SOME
9	A LITTLE
5	NO FAT AND WASTE

B9. How much waste would you say there is in (READ A)--a lot, some, a little, or no waste at all?

	<u>A LOT</u>	<u>SOME</u>	<u>A LITTLE</u>	<u>NO WASTE*</u>
a. state services for the poor	24%	32%	20%	24%
b. mental health services	15	35	21	28
c. building and maintaining roads and highways	42	28	15	15
d. public colleges and universities	21	35	21	23
e. the state legislature	61	25	7	8
f. the governor's office	64	22	6	7
g. welfare	42	34	15	9

\*Includes those who say there is no waste at all in the State budget.

10. How much do you agree or disagree that the state should guarantee that every qualified student can attend an appropriate public college or university in the state--would you say you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?

55%	STRONGLY AGREE
29	SOMEWHAT AGREE
11	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE
5	STRONGLY DISAGREE

11. The following are ways for state colleges and universities to cover their costs. What would you say about (READ A)--do you strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of that as a way for state colleges and universities to meet their costs?

	<u>STRONGLY APPROVE</u>	<u>APPROVE</u>	<u>DIS- APPROVE</u>	<u>STRONGLY DISAPPROVE</u>
a. limiting student enrollment	9%	29%	41%	21%
b. increasing tuition so that students pay a larger share of the bill	9	39	34	18
c. giving the colleges and universities more money from the state	23	55	19	4
d. soliciting contributions from former students	26	53	17	4
e. soliciting gifts from corporations	40	52	6	2
f. increasing class size	7	39	45	9
g. reducing administrative costs	24	52	21	3
h. paying teachers less	2	7	55	36

12. How hard do you think it is for young adults these days to afford a college education--is it harder, easier, or about the same as it was in the time of their parents?

85%	HARDER
7	EASIER
8	ABOUT THE SAME

13. How do you think of yourself politically--do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican or Independent?

26%	DEMOCRAT
18	REPUBLICAN
56	INDEPENDENT

14. (IF INDEPENDENT) Would you say you lean more toward the Republican or Democratic side?

53%	MORE REPUBLICAN
47	MORE DEMOCRATIC

15. How would you describe yourself politically--would you say you are very conservative, somewhat conservative, moderate, somewhat liberal, or very liberal?

7%	VERY CONSERVATIVE
30	SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE
38	MODERATE
21	SOMEWHAT LIBERAL
4	VERY LIBERAL

16. Are you registered to vote or not?

83%	YES
17	NO

17. SEX OF RESPONDENT

49%	MALE
51	FEMALE

18. What is the highest grade or year you finished in school? (Did you graduate?)

3%	8TH GRADE OR LESS
5	MORE THAN 8TH GRADE, LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL
32	HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE (FINISHED 12TH GRADE)
3	POST HIGH SCHOOL - TRADE OR TECHNICAL SCHOOL
22	ONE - THREE YEARS OF COLLEGE
25	COLLEGE GRADUATE
10	GRADUATE WORK, HIGHER DEGREE



19. Which of the following best describes your racial or ethnic background--  
White, Black, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian, or  
something else?

91%	WHITE
4	BLACK
2	HISPANIC
2	ASIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER
1	AMERICAN INDIAN

20. In what religion were you raised--Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or  
something else?

28%	PROTESTANT
65	CATHOLIC
4	JEWISH
4	OTHER

21. In what month and year were you born? (AGE)

12%	18-24 YEARS
26	25-34 YEARS
37	35-54 YEARS
25	55 YEARS AND OVER

22. How likely is it that [any of your children under 18] will attend a  
public college or university in Massachusetts--would you say it  
is very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all  
likely?

78%	VERY LIKELY
15	SOMEWHAT LIKELY
5	NOT VERY LIKELY
3	NOT AT ALL LIKELY

23. TOTAL FAMILY INCOME BEFORE TAXES IN 1988:

5%	LESS THAN \$10 K
15	BETWEEN \$10 K AND \$20 K
16	BETWEEN \$20 K AND \$30 K
20	BETWEEN \$30 K AND \$40 K
15	BETWEEN \$40 K AND \$50 K
29	OVER \$50 K

## METHODOLOGY APPENDIX MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

### Questionnaire Design

A standardized survey instrument was developed to tap people's perceptions and feelings about the budget deficit, taxes, and public higher education. By standardized, we mean a questionnaire which could be administered exactly as worded to all respondents, without amendment or elaboration by interviewers. It is by having such an instrument that we are able to interpret differences in responses as reflecting different attitudes and beliefs.

An initial questionnaire was pretested on a small sample of Massachusetts residents by experienced interviewers. Changes in wording and question order were made on the basis of this experience to generate the final survey instrument.

### Sampling

The basic design of the sample was to collect interviews with approximately 400 adults 18 or older. A sample of that size provides an excellent basis for statewide analysis and would provide a sample of 50 or larger for any group that constitutes at least 12 percent of the state's population.

The goal of a good sampling procedure is to give every household in the state the same (or at least a known) chance of being selected in the sample. Because the survey was to be conducted by telephone, the 4 percent of the households in Massachusetts without phones did not have a chance to be in a sample. However, with that exception, the procedures did give each household in Massachusetts the same known chance of selection.

If one were to attempt to draw a sample of households from a telephone book, three groups would be omitted: those without phones, those who have chosen to have unlisted numbers and those who have moved into the state since the most recent directories were compiled. A procedure called Random-Digit-Dialing includes those with unlisted phones and those who are not in the directory at the same rate as all other households in a telephone sample, though of course it cannot include people who have no phones. The particular design used gave every household with a working residential number in Massachusetts the same chance of selection.

### Field Procedures

Interviewing was carried out between November 11 and December 4, 1989, by a team of 27 carefully trained survey interviewers working out of a telephone facility at the Center for Survey Research, located in the downtown campus of the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

The actual interviewing proceeded in three phases. First, interviewers had to identify residential addresses in the sample. When using a Random-

Digit-Dialed sample, there is no advance information about where any particular selected number leads. The interviewer simply dials a number which could be any one of four types:

1. A non-working number
2. The number of business, commercial or other places, not a private residence
3. A public pay phone
4. A residential number in Massachusetts

Interviewers called numbers at random to ascertain into which of the above categories they fell. If someone answered the phone, the interviewers' first task was to find out whether the number did lead to a household. If it did not, the number was simply dropped from the sample.

If no one answered the phone, interviewers called back a minimum of ten times at different times of the day and on different days to try and obtain an answer. If there was no answer, there were three possibilities: the number was residential, but there was no one at home at the times we called; the number was a pay phone; the number was a nonresidential number of some other type that for one of several reasons it was never answered.

When a number was never answered after repeated calls, we made an effort to contact the phone company and ascertain whether or not the number was a working residential number in Massachusetts. In the majority of cases we were able to find out; but in some cases the status was never determined. Those cases are counted as non-responders in the final calculations of response rate.

It is important to note that once the number was selected, no substitutions were made. Every effort was made to reach each selected number.

When an interviewer found a working residential number leading to a household within Massachusetts, his or her next task was to identify the particular adult within the household that was to be interviewed. There was no discretion in this selection, either on the part of respondents or interviewers. Rather, a table stamped on each coversheet provided for a random selection of adults based on the number of adults found to be in a household.

The interviewer first ascertained how many persons 18 years of age or older resided in the household. From that listing, the table designated a specific adult to be the respondent based on age (the oldest adult, second oldest adult, etc.). Once that designation was made, it was the interviewers' task to find a time to reach that particular person and carry out the extended interview. Once again, no substitutions were ever made. At least ten calls were made to reach hard-to-find respondents.

It should be noted that since only one adult per household was interviewed, the probability of any adult being the actual respondent varied with household size. Individuals in single adult households had three times the chance of being the respondent as did the adults in three-adult households. During analysis, it is important to weight answers by the number of adults in a household in order to compensate for this fact.

Once the interviewer reached the designated respondent, the purposes of the study were explained fully. Interviewers also assured respondents that their cooperation was voluntary, that interview responses would be confidential and that respondents could skip any question they did not want to answer.

Once all respondent questions about the study had been answered, the interviewer proceeded to administer the standardized survey instrument. Interviewer procedures included asking questions exactly as worded, probing non-directively in the event that a complete, adequate answer did not result from the initial question and recording answers given by respondents verbatim when respondents were answering in their own words. Adherence to these and other generally accepted survey principles were monitored on a continuing basis throughout the survey data collection process.

### Field Results

The accompanying table shows the disposition of the 674 households that were identified through the telephone sampling process. From these, 423 interviews were completed. The table indicates that we completed interviews in 63 percent of the eligible households in our sample. Twenty-six percent of the sample refused to be interviewed; and another 11 percent were not interviewed for other reasons.

It is worth noting that only 8 percent of the sample was not interviewed because we could not reach the selected respondent, a fact that reflects the effort made to contact eligible respondents. Another 2 percent were those at numbers where we never reached anyone at all (some of which may in fact not be working residential numbers). Thus availability played a relatively small role in non-response.

### Reliability of the Sample

Any sample survey has four different potential sources of error: 1) the sampling strategy does not give everyone in the population a chance of selection; 2) the sample selected varies by chance in certain characteristics from the population as a whole; 3) the people for whom an interview is not completed are different from those who are interviewed; and 4) error occurs within the question and answer process. As with any kind of information, it is important for users to be aware of the kind of error that may exist in the data. This awareness should not produce skepticism of the findings but should insure that the data are not misused or relied on in ways that are not appropriate.

We knew in advance that those households not having telephones would not have a chance to be in the sample. As noted, only four percent of the housing units in Massachusetts do not have a telephone. Those who are single individuals, more transient and who have low incomes are among those most likely not to have telephone service.

Sampling error is the term statisticians use for the kind of error which occurs because information is collected only about a sample of the population rather than every member of the population. If one flips a coin, even if it is a fair coin, it is possible that the number of heads and tails obtained will not be exactly even. This is especially true if only a small number of flips occur. The more times the coin is flipped, the more likely it is that the percentage of heads will be nearly 50 percent.

In essence, each sample selection provides new information about the characteristics of the people who live in Massachusetts, like another flip of the coin. The more selections that are made, the larger the sample, the more likely it is that the sample will have the same characteristics as the population from which it is drawn.

Table 2 is a generalized table that gives some idea of how much error one can expect as a result of sampling. It can be seen that when figures are based on the entire sample on 423 cases, there is a very small margin of error. With 95 percent confidence, percentage figures will be within two to four percentage points of the sample estimates. However, when one wants figures for sub-groups, for example, by income levels, years of education, or party preference, the samples are, of course, less than 423 and there is more potential margin of error around estimates.

A final note of caution regarding sampling error: Because sampling errors can be calculated, it is tempting to treat them as if they were the only source of error in data. However, when sample sizes are relatively large, it is quite common for other sources of error -- such nonresponse or reporting error -- to be much more important sources of error than normal sampling variability. These figures should not be treated as the only or even the main source of error in survey estimates.

Nonresponse is a problem for survey estimates because nonrespondents are likely to be different from those who do respond. In particular, in this survey 26 percent of those persons who were asked to cooperate in the survey refused to do so. It is not unlikely at all that the people who were not interested in answering questions about taxes were somewhat different from the population as a whole. This survey was conducted with repeated call-backs to reduce non-response due to unavailability and with attempts at refusal conversions with reluctant respondents. Thus, the error due to non-response should be less than in typical polls which are conducted over a short time period and with very little capacity to overcome these sources of error.

Finally, it is impossible to assess the amount of response error; that is, the error that comes out of the questions and answer process. However, in interpreting the data from a survey like this, it is important to keep in mind that attitude or opinion questions produce only relative answer, not absolute answers. Appropriate interpretation of such data is an important part of the analysis.

TABLE 1  
 MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

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<u>FIELD RESULTS</u>	
Eligible Sample	674
Interviews	423
Non Interviews	251
Ill	8
Limits	55
No Contact	13
Refusal	175
 RESPONSE RATE	 63%

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TABLE 2  
CONFIDENCE RANGES FOR VARIABILITY DUE TO SAMPLING\*

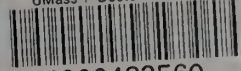
Chances are 95 in 100 that population figure lies in range defined by  $\pm$  number indicated, given percentage of sample with characteristic and number of sample cases on which percentage is based.

<u>Sample Size</u>	<u>Percentage of sample with characteristic</u>				
	<u>5/95</u>	<u>10/90</u>	<u>20/80</u>	<u>30/70</u>	<u>50/50</u>
35	.07	.10	.14	.15	.17
50	.06	.08	.11	.13	.14
75	.05	.07	.09	.11	.12
100	.04	.06	.08	.09	.10
200	.03	.04	.06	.06	.07
300	.03	.03	.05	.05	.06
500	.02	.03	.04	.04	.04

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\* This table describes variability due to sampling, rather than collecting data on every population member. Errors due to non-response or reporting errors are not reflected in this table.

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