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**Archived Story**

**Montanans favor higher gambling machine taxes, oppose pop tax**  
By CHARLES S. JOHNSON Missoulian State Bureau

HELENA - By a huge margin, Montana voters favor raising taxes imposed on electronic poker and keno gambling machines, but by a smaller margin they oppose levying a nickel tax on each bottle or can of soda pop sold here, a new Lee Newspapers poll shows.

The poll also found voters by a narrow margin apparently support a "big box store tax" on such giants as Wal-Mart and Costco.

They continue to oppose enacting a statewide sales tax unless the proceeds are used to lower property taxes. Voters are narrowly divided - within the poll's 4 percentage point margin of error - whether to use the proceeds from a sales tax to lower income tax or provide more money for schools.

The telephone poll was conducted for Lee Newspapers of Montana by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research Inc., of Washington, D.C., of 625 Montanans who said they were registered voters and voted regularly in state elections. Those surveyed were chosen by the random variation of the last four digits of their phone numbers. A cross-section of exchanges was used to ensure an accurate reflection of the state, with quotas assigned to reflect voter turnout by county.

The poll also noted the state's general fund budget is projected to have a \$191 million budget surplus by mid-2007. Assuming that figure is correct, respondents were given eight choices and asked what their top priority for spending this money was. Here were the responses:

- 32 percent want to spend more on public schools and the Montana university system.
- 26 percent prefer giving property tax relief to homeowners and small business owners.
- 12 percent want to see more money go for human services such as health care and mental health programs.
- 7 percent (tie) favor using the money to lower state income taxes or to raise state employees' pay.
- 4 percent call for saving the money.
- 3 percent support lowering taxes paid by businesses.
- 2 percent call for putting it into building maintenance.

And the remaining 7 percent volunteered other choices or weren't sure.

By an 84 to 13 percent margin, Montanans favor raising taxes on electronic gambling machines, with 3 percent undecided. At present, Montana imposes a 15 percent tax on the total money wagered in the machines, minus the winnings paid out. It is among the lowest state gambling taxes in the country. The gambling and tavern industries have successfully resisted attempted increases in gambling machine taxes.

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Higher gambling machine taxes won the support of 87 percent of women and 81 percent of men, while 10 percent of men and 10 percent of women resisted the idea.

The "big box store tax" drew support from 49 percent of Montanans and opposition from 44 percent, with 7 percent undecided. Fifty-five percent of the women supported the idea, compared with 43 percent of the men. Fifty-three percent of men oppose the idea, joined by 35 percent of women.

Sen. Ken Toole, D-Helena, will make another attempt to impose such a tax on "big box stores."

Voters by a slight margin rejected a proposed tax of a nickel per bottle or can of soda pop. The results showed 49 percent against the idea, while 43 percent are for it, with 8 percent undecided. By gender, 50 percent of women oppose the pop tax joined by 48 percent of men. Forty-seven percent of men favor a pop tax, as do 39 percent of women.

Montana doesn't have a pop tax, although Sen. Don Ryan, D-Great Falls, will make another attempt this year to enact one.

A statewide general sales tax remains a controversial issue in Montana, unless the proceeds would be used to lower property taxes, the poll showed. Montana is one of five states without a statewide sales tax, with voters here overwhelmingly rejecting sales taxes on referendums in 1971 and 1993.

The poll asked whether those surveyed would support or oppose enacting a statewide sales tax in exchange for:

Lower property taxes: 57 percent favored this option,

while 37 percent opposed it, with 6 percent undecided.

More money for schools: 47 percent supported this option, while 46 percent opposed it, with 7 percent undecided.

Lower income taxes: 48 percent opposed this option, while 44 percent backed it, with 8 percent undecided.

On other tax issues, the Lee poll asked those surveyed if they support or oppose repealing the reductions in state income taxes and capital gains taxes passed in 2003 and that take effect Jan. 1. The results were about even and within the poll's margin of error, with 41 percent opposed to repealing the income tax cuts and 37 percent favoring the repeal, with 22 percent undecided.

By gender, 39 percent of women and 35 percent of men favored the repeal of the income tax cuts, while 51 percent of men and 31 percent of women endorsed the tax reductions. Thirty percent of women and 14 percent of men were undecided.

Finally, voters polled, by a 46 to 34 percent margin, favor allowing cities and counties, with voter approval, to levy what are known as local option taxes. Twenty percent of voters were undecided.

By gender, 46 percent of men and women favored local option taxes, while 38 percent of men and 30 percent of women opposed them. Twenty-four percent of women and 16 percent of men were undecided.

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