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# Survey: State lawmakers can't keep no-tax promise

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AUSTIN — Despite repeated vows by Gov. Rick Perry and legislative leaders to bridge a \$9.9 billion revenue gap without raising taxes, almost three-fourths of Texans don't believe them, the Scripps Howard Texas Poll indicates.

Most Texans, according to the survey, also doubt that the Legislature will replace the controversial school finance law during its regular session this spring. Respondents, however, overwhelmingly believe that Perry should call a special session, if necessary, to tackle school funding.

Perry and other state leaders have held firm, at least publicly, to campaign promises against higher taxes, even in the face of state employee layoffs and projected deep cuts in health, education, criminal justice and a host of other programs.

But 72 percent of people responding to the winter Texas Poll said they were not very confident or not confident at all that a new state budget could be drafted without raising taxes.

Only 26 percent were confident the governor and legislators could keep their campaign pledges, and 2 percent didn't know.

Sixty-one percent of Texans, meanwhile, don't believe the Legislature, before this session ends on June 2, will significantly change the so-called "Robin Hood" school finance system, which forces wealthy school districts to share tax revenue with poorer schools.

But 76 percent of the survey's respondents said Perry should call a special session on school finance if lawmakers fail to act this spring.

The House Public Education Committee acted quickly last month to approve a bill that would repeal the Robin Hood law on Sept. 1, 2005. But the measure has stalled in the Calendars Committee because financially strapped lawmakers have been unable to agree on a replacement.

If higher taxes become necessary, an increase in the state cigarette tax drew the strongest support — it was favored by 45 percent of respondents — followed by an increase in the sales tax, favored by 24 percent.

A state income tax remains unpopular. It was favored by only 7 percent of respondents, but drew slightly more support than an increase in local property taxes, which was favored by 2 percent.

In a separate question, 53 percent of respondents said they would oppose an income tax, even if it lowered their property taxes and was used to generate revenue for the public schools. Forty-one percent liked such a tradeoff.

University of Texas government professor Bruce Buchanan said the poll results could be interpreted "as a signal to the Legislature and the governor that it's OK that we confront the need for taxes."

"It's a green light from the public, in a sense. But it remains to be seen whether (state) leaders view it that way," he added.

Michael Quinn Sullivan, a spokesman for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank that opposes higher taxes, viewed the responses differently.

He said Texans' lack of confidence that a tax bill can be avoided reflected a distrust of political promises.

"Hopefully, this Legislature will prove them (doubters) wrong. The reality is that the Legislature

can take care of our budget problems without raising taxes," he added.

Doubt about the Legislature's ability to avoid higher taxes or resolve the school finance dilemma this spring crossed partisan lines, although Democrats (79 percent) and independents (80 percent) were more doubtful than Republicans (61 percent) on the tax issue.

Poll respondents, however, expressed significant partisan differences in support of the Robin Hood school finance system.

Overall, 50 percent said they agreed with the share-the-wealth law, and 41 percent said they

opposed it. But 66 percent of Democrats said they supported the law, compared with only 37 percent of Republicans and 51 percent of independents.

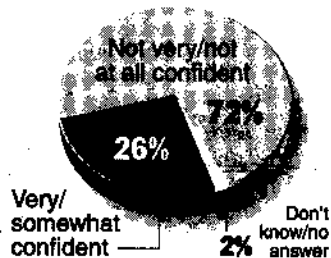
Most of the state's 1,100 school districts receive money under the law. But many of the wealthier districts forced to share tax revenue are in suburban areas that are heavily Republican.

The telephone poll of 1,000 Texans was conducted Feb. 6-28 by the Scripps Data Center. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

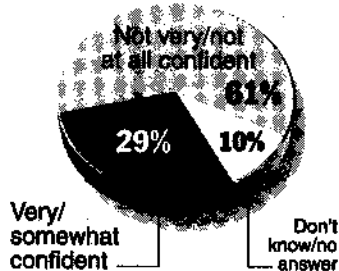
## THE TEXAS POLL

A sampling of questions about Texans' views on state taxes:

**Q** State lawmakers are facing a projected \$9.9 billion budget shortfall. The state constitution requires them to balance the budget. How confident are you that lawmakers will be able to balance the state budget without raising taxes?



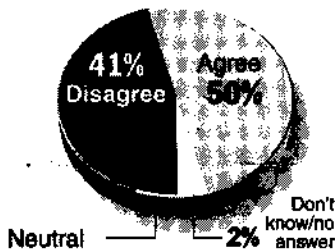
**Q** How confident are you that the Legislature will reform the way public schools are financed during this session, which ends June 2?



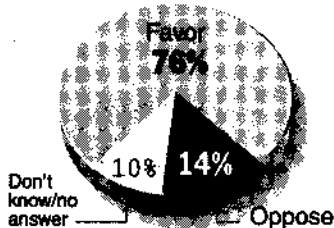
**Q** If Texas has to raise taxes, which ONE of these would you prefer:

Cigarette taxes	45%
Sales taxes	24
Create an income tax	7
Property taxes	2
Gasoline taxes	2
A combination of these	9
None of these	8
Other	1
Don't know/no answer	2

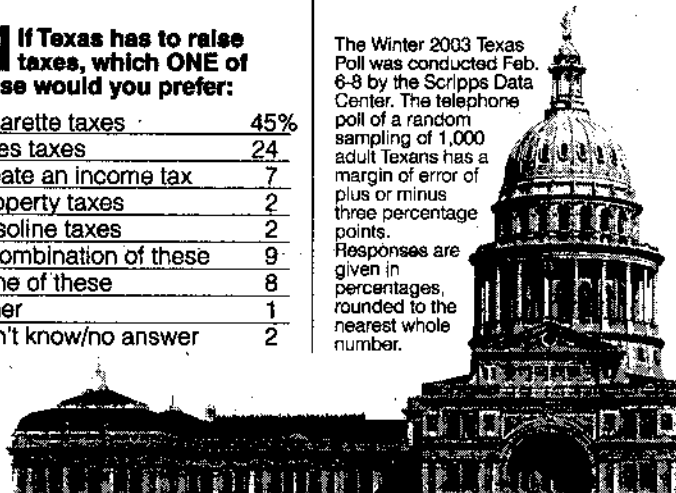
**Q** In order to equalize school funding in Texas, the state requires property-rich districts to send money to property-poor districts. Do you agree or disagree with this system, which is referred to as Robin Hood?



**Q** If lawmakers don't reform the public school finance system during the regular session, do you favor or oppose Gov. Perry calling a special session for lawmakers to address the issue?



The Winter 2003 Texas Poll was conducted Feb. 6-8 by the Scripps Data Center. The telephone poll of a random sampling of 1,000 adult Texans has a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points. Responses are given in percentages, rounded to the nearest whole number.



Robert Dibrell / Chronicle