PHILADELPHIA AT THE CROSSROADS

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The findings of the just released Philadelphia Keystone Poll should send shock waves through the city. Philadelphia has become a world class city with its historical and cultural sites, and more recently with its community and center city revitalization projects, but its residents don’t feel first class at the moment. In fact, in a stunning reversal in the attitudes of city residents on key quality of life indicators, the vitality of the city is now threatened.

These quality of life indicators, namely on the direction of the city, on an assessment of the city as a place to live, and on whether Philadelphia has gotten better or worse as a place to live, provide clear and convincing evidence that Philadelphia is a city at an important crossroads. Just four years ago, more than half of city residents believed Philadelphia was moving in the right direction. Today, only about 25 percent do. Remarkably 64 percent now say the city is “off on the wrong track,” a 27 point decline from October 2003. Only 15 percent now say the city is a better place to live than it was four years ago, and more than half believe it has gotten worse, an incredible 32 percent drop from 2003. The consensus on these data is remarkable and runs across what is normally the most significant demographic cleavage within the city, the opinions of white and black residents.

The toll on Mayor John Street’s job performance is predictable. Heading a city administration that is beset with charges of political payoffs and indictments for political corruption, the Mayor’s standing with his constituents plummeted sharply since his reelection in 2003. Only 30 percent say he’s done an excellent or good job compared to 70 percent who rate his performance as only fair or poor, with almost one-third saying he’s done a poor job. But here race matters. Street was elected in 1999 with the overwhelming support of black voters and reelected in similar fashion--though his white vote in 2003 did increase. Blacks continue to be Street’s mainstay as evidenced by the evaluation of his job performance—half of blacks find the mayor doing an excellent or good job, while only one in seven whites do.

What explains Street’s job performance freefall probably lies less in the pay to play political culture long dominant in the city than to the rise of the preeminent issue for the upcoming mayoral election--crime. Residents’ feelings about the city appear driven by crime in all its myriad forms, from homicides to street gangs to drug deals to random violence. Crime has been an issue in Philadelphia elections for many years, but never has it been more salient, with two out of every three Philadelphians citing it as the most important issue confronting the city. Two points are very relevant to an understanding of why that high percentage matters. One is the sudden jump in importance of the crime issue and second is the complete absence of other issues. No other issue polls more than five percent as the city’s most important problem.
All of this speaks to leadership, the most fundamental quality voters assess when picking a chief executive, whether it be a president, governor, or mayor. As one might suspect, the two professional and personal qualities most desired by Philadelphians relate directly to the concerns they have about the city’s future. The first, more typical quality, is the desire for a leader who has demonstrated experience in government and business, who has strong leadership characteristics and a can-do attitude; in short, someone with a record of solving problems. Second, the corruption issue leads them to the conclusion that the next mayor must be a person of honesty and personal integrity.

What this means for the upcoming mayoral campaign seems clear. The voters of the city will respond to candidates that present them with a concrete set of credible proposals to combat crime in the streets and to combat corruption in city hall. While the past several Philadelphia mayoral campaigns have been about the economic future of the city and center city development, this campaign is more likely to focus on the neighborhoods and the quality of life for city folk who live there. This does not mean that education, taxes, and economic development are irrelevant to city voters, just that they will be of secondary importance until city residents feel safe.

The survey data and analysis in this article come from the Franklin & Marshall College Philadelphia Keystone Poll released on August 3, 2006. G. Terry Madonna is the Director of the Keystone Poll and Berwood Yost is the Poll’s Head Methodologist. The survey is produced at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, PA. This article can be used in whole or in part with appropriate attribution. More detailed information and previous research can be found on the web at http://www.fandm.edu/x12196.xml.