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The traditional after Labor Day campaign kick offs have been so quiet that we decided to go into the field with a tracking poll to check on what South Carolina voters are thinking. Our 300 sample survey of active South Carolina voters was conducted by telephone September 16<sup>th</sup> by live operators. The margin of error for the results is plus or minus 5.5%.

### **Sanford ticking up -**

Plagued throughout the year by mediocre job performance ratings, Governor Sanford appeared vulnerable as the 2006 election cycle began. After turning in a lack luster performance during the legislative session, shrugging his shoulders at a souring economy and beating back a quixotic challenge from an attractive new face from within his own party Sanford looked every bit like a weak incumbent. In April only 39% of all voters said they would vote to re-elect the governor. During that same period Sanford's overall favorability ratings dropped into the low 50's.

Since the primary, Sanford has been on the air reminding voters of his outstanding accomplishments and unique brand of leadership. With plenty of money and the air waves all to himself, Sanford appears to be strengthening his position within his party's base. In fact Sanford's overall favorability ratings now eclipse President Bush's ratings. Among all voters, Sanford's favorable ratings are at 66% (up 11 points in one year) compared to Bush's overall favorability rating of 57%. Among Republican voters, Bush still holds a slight edge with 93% of all Republican voters rating him as very to somewhat favorable. Sanford follows close behind with 89% of all Republican voters giving him a very to somewhat favorable rating. Both Bush and Sanford's strong showing among their faithful voters raises a strategic question about how Democratic statewide candidates will fare in November? If the Republicans stay home and support their candidates Democrats are going to have to strongly turnout their base and hope that their message finds favor with split ticket voters in the key swing counties.

### **Trouble at home -**

Even as feelings for the Republican Governor improved among GOP voters the Republican Lt. Governor lost some important ground. Although Bauer's Democratic

opponent, Robert Barber, is known by only 20% of the state's electorate, Bauer is losing to Barber in the head to head match up, 37% to 34%. Bauer is losing because only 57% of Republican voters currently support him. Barber does significantly better with his party's base receiving 74% of the vote from all Democrats. After narrowly surviving a bitter primary and having to atone for a less than stable lifestyle, Bauer has some major repair work to do inside his own party.

### **The big one that got away -**

In a question and answer session with senior citizens recently Governor Sanford said the Legislature lacked the will to take on regulating or eliminating the pay day loan industry. Acknowledging the industry line that some people have no alternative but to turn to the pay day loan option the governor said little would be done in the near future to reign in the industry. In high profile newspaper ads the pay day loan industry has recently touted how they are performing a needed financial service for a predominately middle class consumer market. The problem is the voters aren't buying it. When voters were asked if the pay day loan industry provided a needed service to South Carolina consumers 67% of all voters said no. When asked if the payday loan industry should be regulated like banks and other consumer loan companies, 80% of all voters said yes. A strong majority of middle class voters – the very people the industry claims to help the most - felt that pay day loans did not provided a need service and should be better regulated. Clearly the public has the will to see that something is done to control the payday loan industry - all that is needed is some leadership among elected officials.

### **So what else is new -**

The fact that the public opinion is coalescing in one direction on the pay day loan industry is no assurance that things will begin moving in the legislature. Support for developing a lottery polled in the 60's for a decade before the legislature moved to implement a program. A couple of other issues which have broad public support but have yet to get the nod from the legislature are:

**Q. Would you support or oppose increasing the state's cigarette tax in order to fund needed healthcare programs.**

**71%- Support      24%- Oppose      5%- Undecided**

**Q. Would you support or oppose passing a statewide smoking ban for bars, restaurants and other public places?**

**60% - Support      35%- Oppose      6%- Undecided**

**Tax relief – well maybe for a few.**

At the center of many statehouse elections this year will be a lot of flag waving about cutting property taxes. Reacting to voter concerns about rising property taxes the legislature passed a complicated program to raise a tax in order to lower a tax. Views of the program have been very mixed about what impact the plan will actually have on reducing tax burdens. Voters also seem to be unclear on what impact the new plan will have on their tax bills. Only 25% of all voters said their property taxes would be lowered by the legislature's plan.

**Q. This year the state passed a property tax reform bill which will increase the sales tax in order to roll back property taxes for homeowners. Do you think this property tax reduction plan will lower your overall local tax burden? <>**

**25% - Yes**

**58%- No`**

**17%- Not Sure**

**School Vouchers –**

No matter how you phrase the question the issue of school vouchers - or tax relief for private school tuition - divides voters across the state. The school voucher plan promoted by the Governor and a fraction of Republican members of the House and Senate found little support in the legislature this past year. But as a campaign issue, opposition to a school voucher plan maybe just the glue Democrats need to forge a winnable statewide coalition of voters. It is hard to find another issue that puts Democrats, moderate Republicans and Independent voters in the same column.

**Q. Would you support or oppose passing a law which would allow parents who send their children to private schools to deduct the school tuition they pay on their state taxes?**

**38%- Support**

**52%- Oppose**

**10%- Undecided**

**It's back -**

Video poker is back. After a few years of polling in the 30's support for bringing back video poker is now almost an even bet with votes. The popularity of gaming as an alternative source of revenue has always increased during marginal or tough economic times. As gaming flourishes around the southeast, SC will eventually have to address the issue because of the issue's growing connection to tourism. As Mississippi repairs the Gulf Coast there will be bigger and better casinos. Gaming has grown in Alabama and the Cherokee Nation in North Carolina is anxious to move to a more Las Vegas style of

operation. All of these factors will put pressure on South Carolina's golf market and adult tourism markets.

**Q. Would you support or oppose legalizing video poker in South Carolina if the tax revenues were used to help improve educational programs across the state?**

**45% - Support**

**46% - Oppose**

**9% - Undecided**

**REMEMBER - If you'd like to know how South Carolinians feel about a specific issue, you can tag a proprietary question onto the SCIndex without having to do an expensive poll. Call Wil Brown at 803-206-0901 for more information.**

*The SCIndex is a quarterly survey of South Carolina voters. The sample size for the September 2006 survey was 300 active South Carolina voters. The margin of error for the September 2006 SCIndex is plus or minus 5.5%.*

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