



**TO:** Interested Parties

**FROM:** Amy Simon and John Whaley, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research

**RE:** How Mainers View the Economy and Welfare System: Key Findings

**DATE:** August 11, 2016

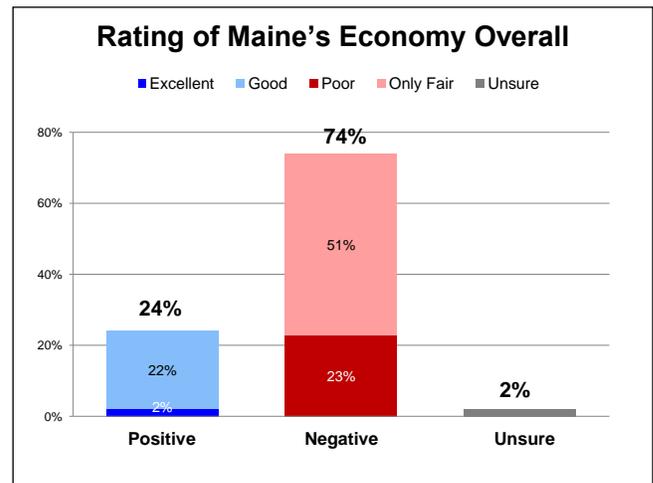
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*This memo provides an overview of key findings in our analysis of how Maine people view the economy and the welfare system. The findings are based on twelve focus groups conducted in the fall of 2015 among “unaffiliated” Maine voters across the state; a four-day online bulletin board conducted in March 2016 among 26 “unaffiliated” Maine voters; a May 2016 online survey of 600 likely November 2016 Maine voters; and a June 2016 telephone survey of 602 likely November 2016 Maine voters. This research was conducted by Goodwin Simon Strategic Research (GSSR) on behalf of Maine Voices Network and Maine Equal Justice Partners. Both the online and telephone survey have a margin of error of +/-4.0%; higher for subgroups.*

### **The Past Few Years Have Been Very Tough On Mainers**

Just over a third (37%) of Mainers say Maine is heading in the right direction, while 49% say things have gotten pretty seriously off track. Wrong track perceptions are especially high among liberals (64%), those age 55 to 64 (59%), and men (54%), including both non-college educated men (55%) and college-educated men (53%).

The vast majority of Mainers (74%) view the state’s economy in negative terms, compared to just 24 percent who say it is positive.



### **Economic issues to address**

Mainers see the state facing numerous economic challenges. The biggest of all, according to our June 2016 survey, is the drug addiction crisis, with 58% of respondents saying it is an extremely big challenge. Another extremely big challenge is the declining manufacturing base, especially when coupled with the recognition that Maine has no vision of how to replace it. Other

daunting economic challenges include Maine’s high cost of living, the lack of jobs, and jobs that provide low pay and few benefits.

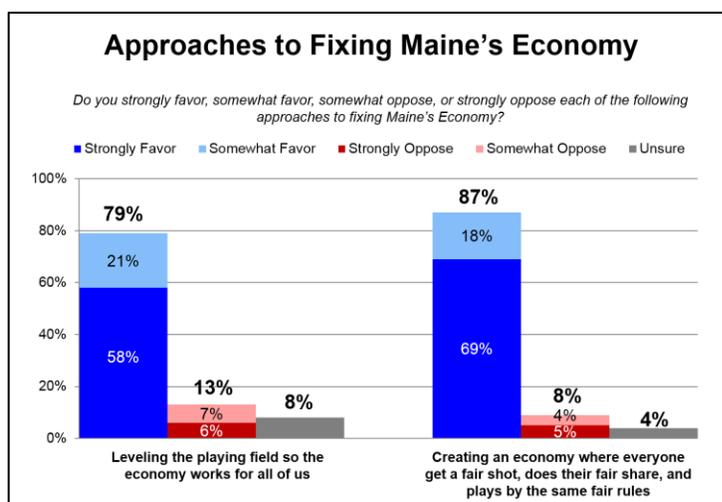
### **Yet Mainers Express Optimism That the State Can Turn Things Around**

People believe Maine and Mainers are blessed with important characteristics to turn things around, including Maine’s natural beauty and abundant natural resources, its high quality of life and reputation for high quality products, and its legacy of success in manufacturing. There is also a widespread belief that Mainers embody many important qualities and widely-shared values, including independence, self-reliance and resourcefulness, responsibility and personal accountability, hard work and a “can do” spirit, community, and neighbors helping neighbors. Mainers also have confidence that scientists and academic experts at Maine’s universities exhibit similar qualities, and can help Maine tackle its most intractable problems.

### **Mainers Agree On Economic Approaches**

We see widespread support for two complementary approaches to fixing Maine’s economy:

- Creating an economy where everyone get a fair shot, does their fair share, and plays by the same fair rules; and
- Leveling the playing field so the economy works for all of us.



Mainers also agree on other approaches to improving Maine’s economy. For example, 96 percent of Mainers agree that Maine needs good employers who pay fair wages and provide adequate benefits. We also see widespread support for investments in education and more flexible and family-friendly jobs so that people can care for loved ones both young and old (see table below).

<i>Ranked by Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Total Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
We need good employers in Maine who pay fair wages and provide adequate benefits. Maine should attract and support good employers that invest in their employees’ long term success and contribute to their local communities.	96%	83%
Maine has a proud history of being a leader- in shipbuilding, in fisheries, in forestry- and we in Maine can take the lead once again. With leadership, investments in companies that commit to train Maine’s workers and innovate, and a renewed commitment to education, community colleges and skills training, we can help communities and businesses grow and create the kinds of skilled jobs with good wages we need to grow once again here in Maine.	96	78

Maine has an aging population and aging workforce. Mainers need jobs that are more flexible and family-friendly, so that people can care for loved ones both young and old. We also need to expand our workforce by creating opportunities for young people to stay in Maine, and attract newcomers who want to contribute to our communities.	92	71
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In addition, we see strong support for proposals that would make Maine families more secure, such as providing Maine families with better access to quality, affordable childcare; increasing affordable housing options for struggling Maine families; and requiring Maine companies to implement flexible and fair scheduling policies in the workplace and provide employees with paid Family Leave (see table below).

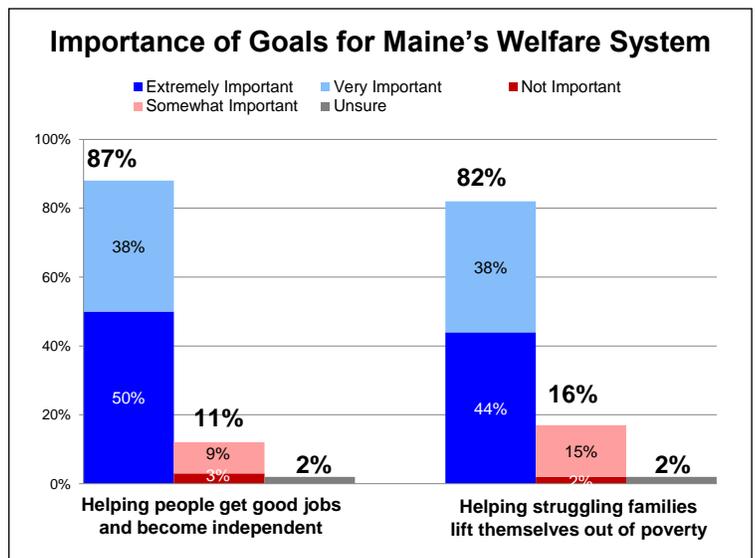
<i>Proposal</i>	<i>Strongly Support</i>	<i>Total Support</i>
Provide Maine families with better access to quality, affordable childcare	68%	90%
Increase the amount of affordable housing options for struggling Maine families	62	86
Require Maine companies to implement flexible and fair scheduling policies in the workplace	57	81
Require Maine companies to provide employees with paid Family Leave	56	78

The vast majority of Mainers (83%) also support accepting existing federal health care funds to expand Medicaid to provide critical health care to low income Mainers, such as drug addiction treatment, mental health services, preventive care, and services for Maine’s aging population.

**Helping People and Families Are Key Goals For Maine’s Welfare System**

More than four in five Mainers say helping people get good jobs and become independent and helping struggling families lift themselves out of poverty are very important goals for Maine’s welfare system.

Mainers also express a strong belief that welfare reform should help struggling families lift themselves out of poverty, while at the same time creating opportunities for people to find good jobs, take care of their families, and be productive members of their communities.



**Mainers Want “Real” Welfare Reform**

Only five percent of Mainers think recent efforts to reform Maine’s welfare system have made things much better. In that context, Mainers support “real” welfare reform, including a common sense overhaul that demands accountability from everyone, and that focuses first and foremost on creating an effective path out of poverty for Maine families who are living on the brink. Mainers also support ending Maine’s one-size fits all approach to welfare, doing a better job coordinating services across state agencies, and holding government officials accountable when the system isn’t effective.

Mainers also favor a reform approach centered on the shared value of neighbors helping neighbors. They believe Maine’s welfare system should be smart, tough, and fair, and should provide a path forward that helps families put food on the table, oil in the furnace, and shift people into stable, good paying jobs.

**Mainers See a Connection between Welfare Reform and Maine’s Economic Troubles**

The problems affecting Maine’s welfare system do not occur in isolation. Rather, they are symptomatic of larger economic forces such as the lack of decent jobs. More than four in five Mainers agree with the statement below, with over 60 percent *strongly* agreeing.

*We all know we need to reform welfare, but that won’t address the core problem-which is that too many Mainers today lack good jobs and lack hope. Most people are trying to find good jobs with decent wages, but they lack the education or job training needed to get those jobs. They are often working more than 40 hours a week for low wages and still need to turn to welfare just to make ends meet. Reforming welfare is important, but in order to do that we also need to create more decent paying jobs and opportunities for education and training, so people can get a good job and move out of poverty.*

**Policy Approaches to Welfare Reform**

Most Mainers also favor three specific policy approaches to improving the welfare system, including fixing the “welfare cliff,” providing transitional jobs programs, and requiring government officials to demonstrate how well welfare programs are actually working (see table below).

<i>Ranked by Total Favor</i>	<i>Total Favor</i>
Fix the “welfare cliff” that now penalizes people who increase their work hours or wages by cutting their assistance. Instead, use a tiered approach to phase out assistance for low-wage workers over time as they increase their earnings and work toward independence.	85%
Require people who can work to look for work as a condition of receiving welfare assistance. Or, if they can’t find work, give them a chance to participate in a transitional jobs program. This will give them the opportunity to earn a paycheck, while also getting crucial job experience to improve their chances of finding a good job for the long-term.	84
Require government officials to demonstrate how well welfare programs are actually working. Currently, state officials do not track what happens to people who have received welfare, such as	77

<p>whether they transitioned into a stable job, found a safe and decent place to live, or can afford to put enough food on the table. Hold welfare officials accountable by requiring them to meet goals and present evidence to an oversight board made up of Maine citizens who would ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent more effectively.</p>	
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**Conclusion**

Despite the challenging political climate, deep-seated frustration with the economy, and other struggles facing so many Mainers today, clear pathways exist to put Maine on a more positive and productive track.

In particular, Mainers support and want to see real welfare reform that helps people get good jobs and lift themselves out of poverty, and that address underlying problems in the larger economy. By contrast, they respond negatively to reforms focused primarily on cutting Maine’s welfare system, and the resulting impacts of those cuts on Maine families. Particularly distressing for Mainers is the idea that the number of children living in extreme poverty has increased significantly over the past few years, and that Maine now has the third highest rate of hunger in the nation. Mainers are also tired of the political attacks and rhetoric they hear from state officials in Augusta.

What Mainers really crave are specific proposals and ideas to fix Maine’s economy and welfare system. And details matter: they want to know “how” these solutions will work so they feel able to judge for themselves if these proposed approaches are realistic, affordable for taxpayers and the state, and likely to make a genuine difference. Fortunately, numerous policy solutions – solutions to reform both Maine’s welfare system and the larger economy – appear to fit that bill for Mainers.