NEW JERSEY: THE BLOSSOMING OF STATE IDENTITY AND PRIDE

DRAMATIC CHANGES IN HOW GARDEN STATE RESIDENTS VIEW THEIR STATE

The times are changing in New Jersey, and doing so in dramatic fashion.

The state long dwarfed by neighboring New York and Philadelphia is emerging from the shadows to establish its own identity. The state reportedly suffering from an "inferiority complex" has served notice that it will no longer be the butt of jokes, as affirmed by a substantial growth in feelings of state pride over the past few years. According to those in the best position to know—people who call the Garden State home—the quality of life in New Jersey has been improving. In short, people feel their state has become a better place to live, suggesting a fundamental change in the state's culture and image of itself.

These are some of the main findings of a report released today by the Eagleton Institute at Rutgers University. The 114 page report profiles the quality of life in New Jersey as experienced by its residents—how they feel about their state, their government and their lives. The findings are based on public opinion surveys conducted by telephone with 1,230 state residents last fall. The study, titled "Images III" was funded through contributions from 15 public and private organizations, headed by New Jersey Bell and the State's Office of Management and Budget. Eagleton conducted earlier "Images" studies in 1977 and 1980.

Viewed through the eyes of those who live here, it is clear that the state's image has undergone a major change over the past few years. Favorable evaluations of the state—the percentage rating New Jersey
"excellent" or "good" as a place to live--rose slightly from 62 percent in 1977 to 68 percent in 1980. But state boosterism climbed sharply between 1980 and 1984; 80 percent offered favorable ratings of New Jersey in the most recent survey. Almost 30 percent described the state as an excellent place to live on the current survey, up from only 16 percent in 1977. Moreover, this positive change in how the state views itself is broad based; about the same amount of movement occurred in all social and demographic groups.

The 1984 sampling also finds evidence of a growing sense of pride in the state. Garden State residents were asked whether they thought their state was a better or worse place to live "compared to most other states." Just under half--46 percent--claimed New Jersey was better, compared to only 11 percent who said it was worse. The remaining 43 percent said New Jersey was about the same or expressed no opinion. These figures represent a startling change from just four years ago. In 1980, only 27 percent championed New Jersey as being better than most other states, while 13 percent said it was worse and most--59 percent--said New Jersey was neither better nor worse than others.

Eagleton officials said it was not possible to attribute the changing image of the state to any one reason. They caution that the state's current economic health has probably contributed to the feelings of goodwill, but believe there are other factors at work as well. They point to the development of the Meadowlands and the gambling industry in Atlantic City as concrete points around which state identity and pride were able to rally. Both attractions are widely used and favorably viewed. Three of every five New Jerseyans have been to the Meadowlands, with a similar number having tried their luck in the casinos on at least one occasion.

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As in the earlier Images studies, the two attributes of New Jersey
life valued most highly by state residents are the state's central
location, which affords easy access to recreational and cultural
activities, and the state's environment--the shore, mountains and open
land--which is a precious resource to its citizens. However, much as
the natural environment is a source of pleasure and pride, the man-made
environment is a source of dissatisfaction and anxiety. New Jerseyans
see pollution--air, water and toxic wastes and population density--
overcrowding and congestion--as the two elements that most detract
from the quality of life in their state.

In fact, among the highly positive character of the general findings,
"the environment" stands out like a sore thumb. Recent surveys show that
New Jersey residents believe the quality of their air and water has been
deteriorating. Eagleton surveys taken over the last five years find
heightened concern over toxic wastes, which have come to be widely viewed
as a direct threat to personal health. Given New Jerseyans' appreciation
of the natural environment and deep concern over pollution it is easy to
see why many view the protection and improvement of the environment as the
paramount issue in the state.

Environmental concerns aside, a comparison of identical questions
asked in 1977 and 1984 makes it clear that New Jerseyans believe the
overall "quality of life" in their state has improved. The vast majority
of residents remain satisfied with the course of their lives, family
income and available leisure time. Positive evaluations of shopping,
cultural, entertainment and recreational activities have increased at both
the state and local levels. Yet while these trends are in a favorable
direction the report also notes that the overall level of satisfaction
with some features, such as the availability of cultural activities, is

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not high; that people are far less satisfied with such opportunities in their home areas than statewide; and that a significant number of younger New Jerseyans are pessimistic about the chances of owning their own home.

In addition to general quality of life concerns, the study also finds that New Jersey residents have become more satisfied with the quality of public services in a number of areas. Favorable evaluations of the state's public school system, local schools and institutions of higher education have continued to increase, as has generally been the case over the last five years. Parents with children currently in the public school system remain the most positive in their assessments. While views of the public transportation system are decidedly mixed, this represents a significant improvement from 1977, (before the state established New Jersey Transit). Also, New Jerseyans now feel more secure in their homes and communities than in the past. Fewer believe crime to be a very serious problem; more say they feel safe going out in their neighborhoods at night. However, it should also be noted that New Jersey's urban and minority residents live in much greater apprehension than others.

And it is not only on issues of crime and safety that urban residents are less satisfied. In almost every area of questioning the "Images" survey documents a dramatic difference between the quality of life as experienced by urban and non-urban New Jersey. Residents of the state's urban areas give their state, municipalities and neighborhoods much lower ratings as "places to live" than others. Approximately 40 percent of those living in the state's central cities say they would move if given an opportunity. Urban residents are less satisfied than others with their social and physical environment, with the delivery of public services in general, and with the quality of their local schools in particular.

As has been true in the past, New Jerseyans are not greatly attentive to state affairs. They are less interested and knowledgeable about state -more-
government and politics than residents of other states, attributable in part to the state's dependence on television news stations oriented towards New York and Philadelphia. While positive ratings of the quality of state government have increased sharply since 1980, New Jerseyans continue to feel they are being more heavily taxed than residents of other states—particularly with respect to the property tax. While the great majority continue to feel they do not get their money's worth from the taxes they pay, this viewpoint has become slightly less severe from 1977 to the present.

While expressing only a modest amount of trust in government to spend their tax money wisely, Garden State residents support an active role for the state in promoting economic development. Yet at the same time they have become increasingly insistent that development not come at the expense of the environment. This concern may be one of the factors responsible for the strong public endorsement of plans to expand the high-tech component of the state's economy—a clean industry—although it should also be noted that knowledge of the state's commitment to a high-tech future is far from universal.

The general impression of the business community in New Jersey is decidedly positive. Residents give highly favorable ratings to major corporations and businesses in their local areas. The vast majority feel these establishments try to be responsible community citizens, care about the people they serve and pay their fair share of taxes. There is a high level of satisfaction with the everyday services people use; over 80 percent report being satisfied with their bank, phone service, utility company and neighborhood merchants, among others.

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BACKGROUND MEMO--IMAGES III, NJP55-1—TUESDAY, MARCH 5, 1985

This release is the first in a series and presents an overview of the general findings of the entire Images study. As noted in the "Study Design and Methodology" section of the report (pp. 5-8), the "Images III survey" was actually three separate polls--two 500 person cross-sectional surveys of the general public, and a third survey which interviewed an additional 230 persons living in urban areas. The first cross-sectional survey was conducted between October 23 and 28; the second between November 15 and 25. Interviews with the urban supplement were conducted between December 17 and 27.

The full text of questions can be found in the report's methodological appendix. Copies of the full report are available from Eagleton free of charge upon request. The appendix also contains a listing of sample sizes for the various population subgroups and a delineation of how individuals in different groups were classified.

The total budget for the Images project was approximately $35,000. Funding came from a consortium of 15 sponsors, each of whom contributed between $1,000 and $4,000. All questions were drafted by Eagleton. The sponsors, listed below, exercised no editorial control over the report:

Eagleton Institute of Politics
New Jersey Bell
Public Service Electric & Gas
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First Jersey National Bank
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AT&T

The full report has six data sections:

1. Views of the State
2. The Quality of Life in New Jersey
3. The Quality and Evaluation of Public Services
4. The Economic Climate in New Jersey
5. Citizens and Their Government
6. A View of Life in New Jersey's Urban Areas
Eagleton will issue detailed news releases reporting the specific findings of each section on a weekly basis. The releases will be distributed at the State House as per usual procedures. The entire report, however, is now in the public domain. News organizations may develop stories based on the report as they see fit. A story based on the Images III study will appear in this month's New Jersey Reporter.

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RATING OF N.J. AS A PLACE TO LIVE

1977
1980
1984

POOR
FAIR
GOOD
EXCELLENT

PERCENT

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