UD center conducts survey of European lawmakers

9:21 a.m., July 10, 2009—Legislators in six European countries believe that the current worldwide economic downturn will last for roughly 20 more months, according to a recent survey conducted by Tibor Tóth, an assistant policy scientist at the Center for Applied Demography and Survey Research (CADSR) at the University of Delaware.

In order to track and analyze the changing nature of legislators' attitudes on issues with policy implications, Tóth fielded the survey among legislators from Belgium, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands and Slovakia.

The survey, published in a report entitled “Role of Government 2009,” was sponsored by CADSR, UD’s College of Education and Public Policy, the Center for International Studies and the School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy.

Tóth said he chose the six countries because, as a native of the Slovak Republic, he was familiar with them, and they provided a diverse mix of locations throughout Europe.

“There is a lot of knowledge on what the public thinks should be done, but there is a need to see what legislators think about certain issues because they're the rule makers,” Tóth said.

Questions for the legislators were developed from a recent Role of Government study conducted by the International Social Survey Program, which asked citizens about their governments. Additional questions related to the current economic crisis were added to the survey by Tóth. The survey was distributed between March 9 and May 15.

In order to accommodate the legislators, he sent out the surveys in languages native or commonly used in each nation. Legislators in Belgium, Ireland and the Netherlands received an English version of the survey, while legislators from Hungary received the survey in Hungarian, and legislators from the Czech Republic and Slovakia received it in Slovak. Tóth said he did not have to overcome any language barriers, as he is fluent in all three languages.

Tóth said that legislators' beliefs about the global economy are important because those beliefs will affect their decisions and their votes.

“Since they are the rule makers -- and one would hope they're in the know -- their actions in legislature will affect their country's economic trajectory,” he said. “If they think the downturn will end in three more months, their policies would hopefully be different than if they expect it to last for 20 months.”

Tóth found that legislators from Central and Eastern Europe were more likely to support decreasing the role of the government in the economy than their Western European counterparts. For example, legislators responding from Central and Eastern Europe were more likely to advocate for decreasing regulation of business and cutting government spending.

Also, legislators from Central and Eastern Europe were less likely than their counterparts to the West to say that it is the responsibility of the government to provide a decent standard of living to the elderly or to provide health care to the sick.

Another discovery Tóth found interesting was that even though the countries in Central and Eastern Europe have gone through 20 years of economic reform and democratization, legislators from those nations are more likely to support wire tapping or random street searches.

“In economic reform, these countries have become more pro-market, but they still prefer a strong government hand in assuring safety and security in the country,” he said.

Legislative actions in Hungary have already reflected well on the accuracy of Tóth's survey. In the survey, 81 percent of legislators responding from Hungary thought taxes for the middle income bracket were too high, while 74 percent said taxes for the low income bracket were too high. Recently, the Hungarian legislature passed a resolution to lower taxes for the middle and lower income brackets.

Tóth said the survey served as a pilot to test the feasibility of the electronic means he used to conduct it. He gathered contact
information for the legislators and created a database. Legislators were then contacted by e-mail, and they returned their completed questionnaires electronically.

After receiving responses from 335 of 1,482 legislators, with an effective response rate of 25 percent, Tóth determined that such electronic surveys are feasible and hopes that he will be able to use additional means of communication, if the resources are available, in future surveys.

Tóth said the next step in the process is to complete an article comparing the roles of government in the Eastern and Western European countries involved in the survey and how the countries have arrived at their current legislative situation. He is also working on writing an article about the questionnaire itself, specifically its methodology, design and mode selection.

Additional information on the International Legislator Survey Project and the Role of Government 2009 study is available at the project Web site.

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Photo by Ambre Alexander