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Ratings of So Cal Local Government Lukewarm

INTRODUCTION

Public opinion surveys can play an important role in decision making as they gather information that complements data from standard sources such as the Decennial Census and Current Population Survey. This Fact Sheet presents findings from a recently completed survey of Southern California residents (those living in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura). Details of the survey can be found in the appendix. The information from the survey can help better inform elected officials about the public's concerns and priorities, such as how residents feel about local government. For instance, a majority of Southern California residents have some degree of confidence in local government, although they have less confidence in local government's ability to solve the problems that most affect them. Whites have more confidence than other ethnic groups do. Regionally, Inland empire residents have lost considerable confidence in local government since last year. Overall, ratings of local government performance vary by issue area, but most residents rate performance as neither adequate nor inadequate but somewhere in the middle. However there is greater polarization in opinion on government performance in 2006 than we found in 2005.

BACKGROUND ON TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Overall Americans' trust in government has been declining since the 1950s. The Pew Research Center has found that distrust of the federal government is strongly linked to how people feel about the state of the nation, or the "national mood." Both of these measures dropped sharply during the 1960s and early 1970s during Vietnam and Watergate, and remained low throughout the rest of the 1970s, an era of high inflation and unemployment. Trust and ratings of the state of the nation increased slightly during the Reagan era, but then dropped again after the Iran-Contra Scandal. Both measures have fluctuated since then, but have not nearly returned to the levels of the early 1960s (Pew, 1998).

In a 1992 national poll taken by the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR),

local government received higher ratings than state or federal governments, although all three levels had lower ratings than in 1987. Those expressing "a great deal" of trust and confidence in local government had dropped by 10 points, to 6 percent, while those expressing "not very much" trust and confidence in local government increased by ten points, to 26 percent. This was still much lower than the 41 percent who expressed "not very much" trust in the federal government and the 36 percent who answered the same in regards to state governments (ACIR 1992). A 1997 Poll by the Pew Research Center asked which level of government respondents had the most trust and confidence in to handle certain problems. The only issue on which respondents chose local government over state and federal was fighting crime. For other issues, such as administering services to immigrants, implementing job training, providing early education and welfare, or protecting civil rights, most respondents chose the federal or state government (Pew, 1997).

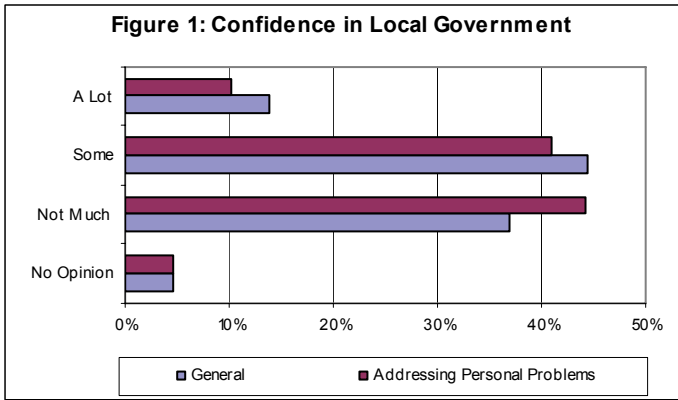
The California Field Poll indicates that confidence in local government did not change between 1984 and 1997. In those years respondents were asked whether they had "a lot of confidence, some confidence, or not much confidence" in their local government. The percent stating they had a lot of confidence in local government was 18.7 percent in 1984 and 19.6 percent in 1997. Those who stated "not much confidence" increased from 19.8 to 22.2 percent (not a significant increase given the margin of error) while those respondents stating "some confidence" remained at 58 percent.

CONFIDENCE IN SO CAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT

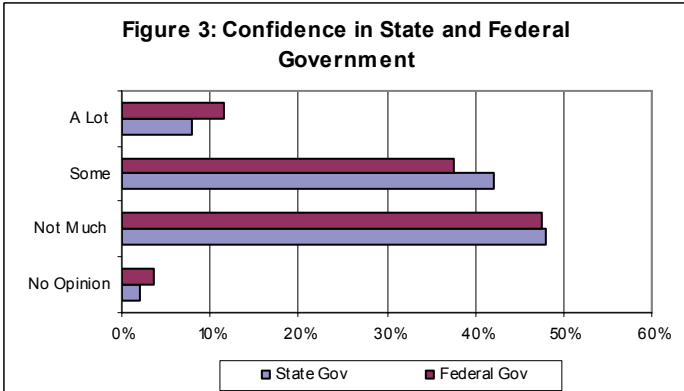
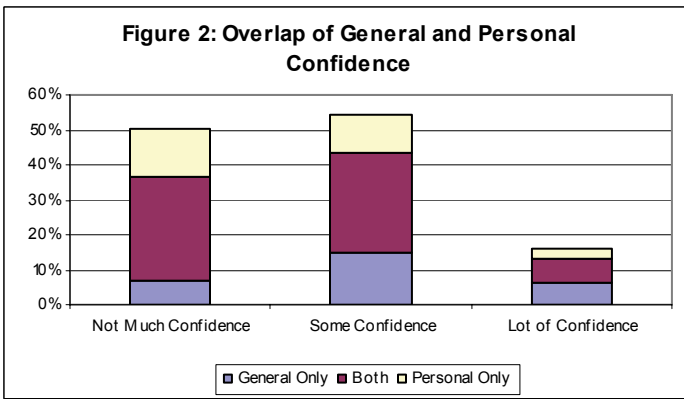
The SCS asked residents about their level of confidence in "your local government." Figure 1 displays the results. The two questions were about general confidence and confidence in local government's ability to solve the problems that most affect "your own household or family." Southern California residents tend to have

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

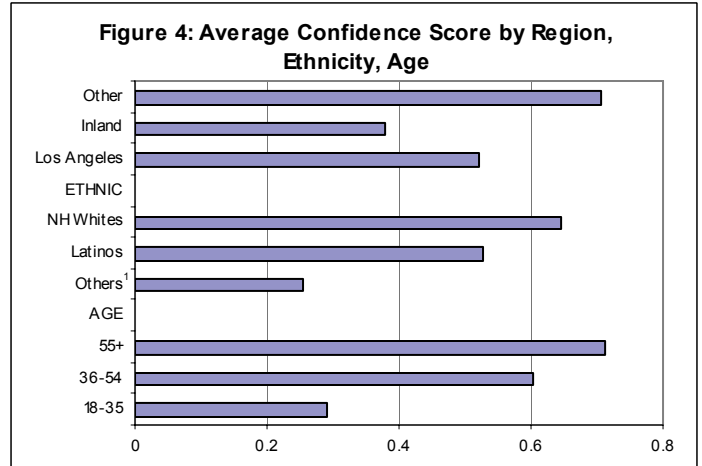
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higher levels of general confidence in local government than in its ability to solve problems that affect them personally. About 58 percent of respondents have at least some confidence in local government generally, as opposed to the 51 percent who report some degree of confidence in solving problems that affect them. Figure 2 displays the overlap between levels of general and personal confidence in local government. For comparison, Figure 3 illustrates the percent of respondents who have confidence in the state and federal government. The data show low levels of confidence here as well. More respondents indicated “not much” confidence in the state and federal government (48% and 47% respectively) than in local government (37%).



To compare confidence levels among demographic groups and in different areas in the region we calculated confidence scores for each respondent based on the responses to both of the confidence questions. Figure 4 displays the average confidence score by ethnicity, age,

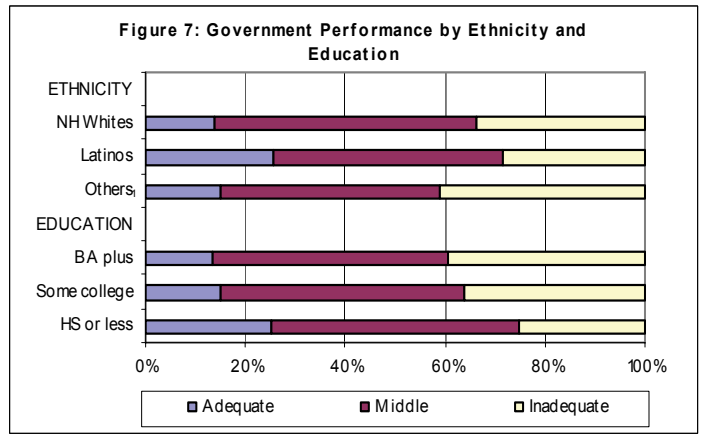
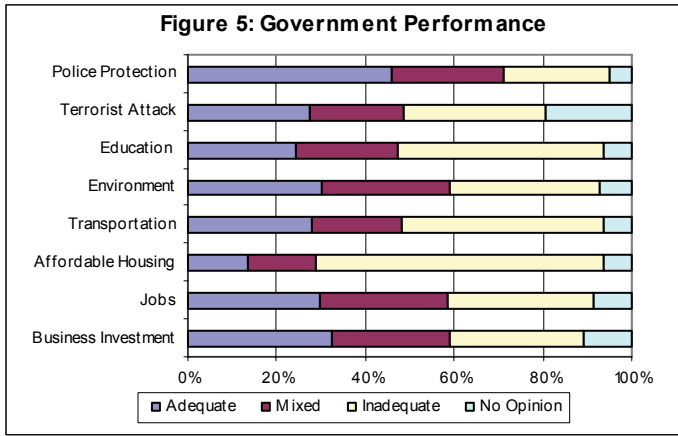


and region. Whites had higher confidence scores (.64) than Latinos (.53) or other groups (.26), but the scores for all three ethnic groups have dropped since last year. As for age, there were much higher confidence levels among residents 55 and older versus those in the 18-35 group. While older residents averaged a confidence score of .71, younger respondents averaged only .29. Scores also differed widely by region. While last year the Inland Empire and other (Ventura, Orange counties) regions both had scores around .90, (much higher than Los Angeles), this year the Inland Empire confidence score dropped to .38, significantly lower than the Los Angeles region score (.52) which remained about the same as last year. For the Other region the score dropped slightly to .71.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE

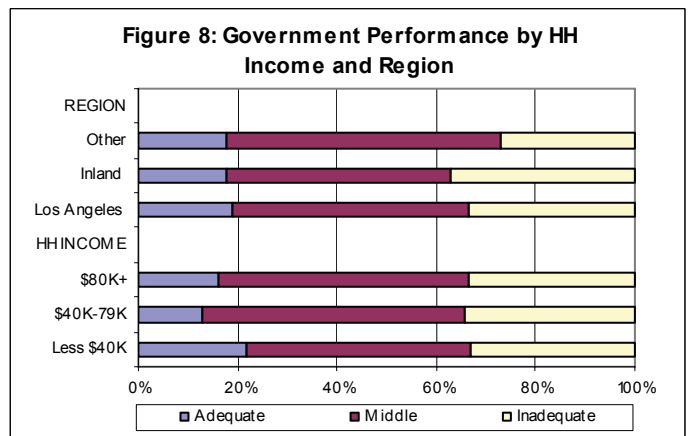
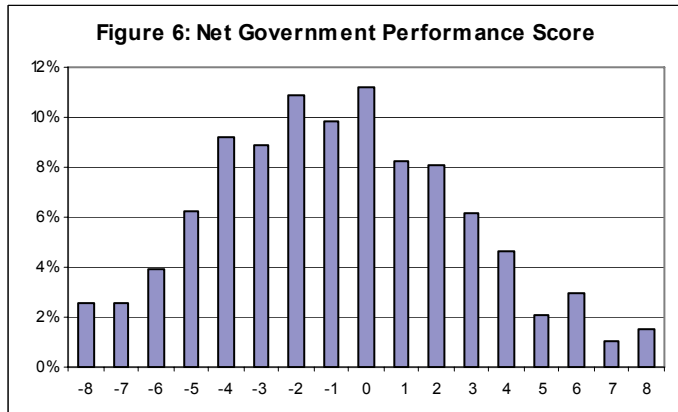
The survey also asked respondents whether the performance of Southern California’s elected officials in several different issue areas has been generally inadequate, mixed, or adequate. Residents are most satisfied with elected officials’ performance on police protection, with almost 50 percent of respondents indicating that local government is performing adequately. There was also relative satisfaction with protecting the environment, keeping and attracting jobs, and maintaining business investment in the region; over 50 percent of respondents indicated that performance on these issues was adequate or mixed. Respondents were slightly less satisfied with performance on improving transportation and education, and preparing for a terrorist attack, while very dissatisfied with performance in providing affordable housing in the region (Figure 5).

For an overall indicator of local government performance we created a score based on responses to each of the performance questions. Each adequate response received a “1” and each “inadequate” response received a “-1”. (The mixed response did not receive a score).



Then we subtracted the “inadequate” scores from the “adequate” scores. If a respondent answered “adequate” on all eight issues areas their net score would be an 8. Conversely, if they responded “inadequate” on all eight issues areas their net score would be a -8. The range of scores is indicated in Figure 6. Although almost half of responses (48 percent) are in the “middle” range of -2 to 2, there are almost twice as many scores on the low end of the scale (indicating inadequate), as there are on the high end of the scale (adequate).

Looking at government performance ratings by income indicates that those in the lowest income group are more likely to give an “adequate” response than others, although they are also about equally likely to respond that government performance is “inadequate” (Figure 8). Here too we see increasing polarization on views of local government. To look at views of local government by region of southern California we broke the area down into Los Angeles, the Inland Empire, and Other, which includes Orange and Ventura counties. While last year Los Angeles area residents gave the most “inadequate” responses, this year the Inland areas proved the most dissatisfied. “Inadequate” responses jumped from 21 percent last year to 37 percent this year for Inland residents, while the “adequate” responses increased only 2 percent, to 18 percent. By age group we see younger respondents are most likely to give local government good marks. The 18-35 age group gave the most “adequate” responses while the 36-54 age group gave the most middle range responses and the 55 and older group were most likely to answer “inadequate.”



GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE RATINGS BY DEMOGRAPHICS

This section examines how opinions on government performance vary by demographics and geography. The differences are generally slight. The most variation we see is by education and ethnicity. Those with the lowest levels of education tend to give more “adequate” ratings and fewer “inadequate” ratings than those with higher levels of education (Figure 7). As for ethnicity, Latinos are significantly more satisfied with elected officials than are whites and other ethnic groups. In fact the Latino percentage of “adequate” ratings increased from 18 percent last year to 25 percent this year, while for other groups the same percentage rose only two points. However all groups displayed a rise in “inadequate” ratings as well. For whites and other ethnic groups, “inadequate” ratings rose ten percent over last year.

The overall picture here is that the majority of respondents, regardless of demographic group, offered a middle range response score to the questions about government performance, indicating that most residents lack strong opinions one way or the other. However the number of middle range responses has declined significantly from last year, indicating stronger feelings about local government performance in 2006 than 2005.

APPENDIX: SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY, 2006

The 2006 Southern California Public Opinion Survey is supported by the UCLA Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies and is designed to gather the views and opinions of Southern California residents on critical public policy issues in this region. The survey was developed with input from the campus and community organizations. UCLA partners include the UCLA Anderson School, as well as professors J.R. DeShazo and Arthur Winer. Public agencies include the Air Quality Management District (AGMD) and the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation (LAEDC).

The 2006 Survey gathered basic demographic data and covered four topical areas: 1) major issues facing the region, 2) the efficacy of local government, 3) globalization and 4) the environment. When possible, questions were worded to parallel existing questions from other surveys.

The Survey was conducted in English and Spanish during the months of January, February, and March 2006 using random digit dialing, and the data were collected by The Social Science Research Center at California State University, Fullerton. There are 1502 completed surveys for the five counties: Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura. The sample is divided proportionally by county household population. The characteristics of the sample by age, ethnicity, income and home ownership categories are consistent with the 2004 March Current Population Survey and the 2004 American Community Survey. There is a sampling error of +/- 2.5 percent at the 95 percent confidence level for the full sample. (Sampling error may be larger for subpopulations).

¹ Other² includes Asians, African-Americans, and mixed ethnicities, as well as respondents who did not indicate their ethnicity on the survey.

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