Counties officials say nation still on wrong track but express optimism for local economic future

WASHINGTON, D.C. – In a new survey, county elected officials say the country is on the wrong track, yet that their local economic conditions are improving. Still, after years of difficult budget cuts and seeking innovative ways to do more with less, county elected officials say adequate revenue and service delivery to residents remain great concerns.

This summer, the National Association of Counties (NACo) conducted its ninth annual National Survey of County Elected Officials, a random sample of 501 county elected officials on issues related to the economy, budgets and politics.

Two-thirds of the county elected officials polled (67 percent) said the country is on the wrong track, while only 26 percent said that the country is on the right track. The percentage of county elected officials holding the opinion that the nation is on the wrong track has been steadily increasing since 2009 – 41 percent in 2009, 59 percent in 2010, and 62 percent in 2011 – while the percentage of county elected officials saying that the nation is on the right track has been declining – 48 percent in 2009, 32 percent in 2010, and 28 percent in 2011. (See figure 2 on page 4 of the survey).

Trending in the opposite or optimistic direction, however, is county elected officials' assessment of economic conditions in their local county. This year, 57 percent categorized their local economic condition as “fair” or “poor” – down significantly from 72 percent in 2010 and 68 percent in 2011 – while 43 percent this year said “excellent” or “good” – up from only 28 percent in 2010 and 31 percent from 2011. (See figure 5 on page 7 of the survey).

Despite the expressed local economic optimism, county elected officials see the greatest threat to fiscal health as insufficient revenues, cited by 21 percent of respondents. Other major threats include the poor economy and unemployment. Other threats cited were unfunded mandates (13 percent), health care and an aging population (7 percent), and the weather or natural disasters (3 percent). (See page 9 of survey).

Other key survey findings:

- Although a plurality of county elected officials does not believe that fees-for-service is an
appropriate model for funding county services, a larger majority favors providing services through contracts with private sector firms.

- County officials seem generally upbeat about careers in county government. While they are divided about how concerned they are that they will be able to replace the skills of retiring county employees, a vast majority say that they would encourage young adults to seek careers in local government.
- In general, county elected officials believe that their constituents understand some, but not a lot, about county government, and they give public schools poor marks for educating students about civics and the role of local government.
- While there is a growing sense that partisanship is a greater problem at the national level today than in the past, a majority believe that partisanship among county elected officials is not a problem.
- County elected officials have become more Republican over the past five years, from 40 percent in 2007 to 52 percent in 2012.

The National Survey of County Elected Officials was developed at the Castleton Polling Institute, in coordination with the Carl Vinson Institute of Government and NACo. The interviews were conducted by telephone by National Research, LLC, in Washington, D.C., and the data were processed and analyzed by the Castleton Polling Institute, Castleton, Vt.

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*The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation’s 3,068 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public’s understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit [www.naco.org](http://www.naco.org).*