Where the Rubber Meets the Road

County Officials’ Views on the Economy and Other Issues

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INTRODUCTION

The general election of 2008 brought a profound shift in national leadership and a dramatic focus on the economy as the primary issue facing the nation’s elected leaders. Both major presidential candidates presented themselves as agents of change—promising to bring a new way of doing business to Washington. An October 29 Fox News Poll found that a plurality thought that the most important quality in a presidential candidate was his ability to bring about change,¹ and a CNN exit poll with a similar finding also found that 89 percent of voters for whom “change” was the most important candidate quality voted for Barack Obama.

Despite an unprecedented focus by the media on the national election, there has been little to no attention paid to local elections in aggregate or the impact on local politics and policy at the county level. The National Survey of County Elected Officials—conducted by the National Association of Counties (NACo) and the National Center for the Study of Counties (NCSC) at the University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute of Government—is an effort to help understand the views and opinions of those who have been elected to run America’s counties. Now in its sixth year, this survey continues to communicate the opinions of those elected officials who collectively represent Americans at the local level of government.

From April 27 to May 19, 2009, the NCSC polled a random sample of 500 county elected officials on issues related to the economy, the new Presidential administration, and their use of electronic communication. This year’s survey was conducted as the nation focused on both the economic crisis and the first months of the Obama Administration. The interviews were conducted by telephone by National Research Inc. in Washington, D.C., and the data were processed and analyzed by the Survey Research Unit at the University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute of Government. Any inferences drawn from the data are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of either NACo or NCSC.

The major findings from the 2009 survey include the following:

- While Congress and the White House moved from Republican to Democratic control over the past two years, the party composition in county government (42 percent Republican and 40 percent Democratic), in the aggregate, remains nearly unchanged.

- Two-thirds of all respondents said that the most important problem facing the nation is the economy and jobs, and 44 percent cite the economy as the most important problem facing their county specifically.

For the first time since 2005, the percentage of county elected officials who said that the country is heading in the right direction (48 percent) exceeds the percentage that believes the country is on the wrong track (41 percent).

Half of all respondents (50 percent) rated the national economy as poor, although only 23 percent rated economic conditions in their specific county as poor. Still, respondents are less pessimistic about the economic future in 2009 than they were in the 2008 poll; in 2008, a majority (53 percent) said that economic conditions were getting worse, whereas only 42 percent in 2009 said that economic conditions are getting worse.

Fifty-nine percent of respondents in 2009 said that balancing the most recent budget was more difficult this year than in years past. This is the highest level since the poll started in 2004, exceeding the number in last year’s poll by 10 percentage points. Respondents from the Northeast expressed the highest level of difficulty with the current budget compared with years past.

The policies of state and federal government (17 percent) and the poor economy (15 percent) were cited as the greatest threats to fiscal health in respondents’ counties. Seventy-eight percent of respondents said that their state hinders their ability to collect revenue either significantly (33 percent) or somewhat (45 percent), although 60 percent characterize their county’s overall relations with their state government as cooperative rather than contentious.

Sixty percent of respondents said that their counties have some cooperative purchasing agreements with their state government, but only 30 percent have similar arrangements with municipal governments or school systems, and only 23 percent said that their county takes advantage of national purchasing arrangements.

While 21 percent of the respondents in the 2009 poll said that their county has reduced its portion of employee health insurance benefits, and 17 percent have laid off county employees, only 7 percent have decreased the county’s level of contribution to employee retirement plans.

County elected officials are slightly more likely to approve of the job that President Obama is doing as President in general (51 percent) than approve of the President’s job in handling the economy (45 percent). Nevertheless, a majority (57 percent) expressed some confidence in the President’s ability to turn the economy around.

While half of all respondents said that telephone was their preferred method for communicating with constituents—when the option of face-to-face was omitted—only 19 percent chose e-mail as the preferred option. Twenty-two percent of county elected officials maintain a Web site for communicating with constituents outside their campaigns, and 46 percent maintain e-mail lists for communicating news about county government to constituents.
• Four percent of those polled said that they blog about their county governance, and 11 percent have accounts with at least one online social networking site such as Facebook, MySpace, or LinkedIn.
FINDINGS

Salient Issues for County Elected Officials

The 2009 poll opened with two open-ended questions asking county elected officials what is the most important problem facing the United States today and what is the most important problem facing your county specifically. In both instances, the economy was the most salient issue with county elected officials. Sixty-seven percent of respondents cited jobs and the economy as the most important problem facing the country, and 44 percent cited the economy as the most important problem facing their county specifically.

County elected officials from the South were most likely to cite the economy as the most important problem facing the country, with 72 percent of respondents, while only 52 percent—still a clear majority—of respondents from the West cited the economy. Twenty-two percent of the respondents from the West and 20 percent from the Northeast cited government spending and economic policies as the greatest problem facing the country. This view was more prominent among Republicans (23 percent) than among Democrats (8 percent) and more common among officials from small counties (18 percent) than those from large counties (11 percent).

After the economy generally, the most often cited problem facing one’s county specifically is essentially the impact of the economy on financing the work of government. One third of all respondents (33 percent) cited some issue related to budget or finance of government as the most important problem facing their county specifically. This was actually the most commonly cited issue among representatives from the Northeast, with a majority (53 percent) citing budget or government finance issues as the most important problem facing their county. Very often, county elected officials cited unfunded mandates handed down to the counties from state and local government as the root of the funding and budget issues they face.

These open-ended responses give insight into the “top-of-the-mind” concerns of county elected officials. Clearly, the economic downturn and the broader implications of the economy are the most dominant issues on the minds of those who are elected to govern our counties; all other issues took a backseat to the economy. Only 3 percent cited health care and 2 percent cited infrastructure and energy as the most important problem facing the nation in 2009, despite the fact that these issues consistently were cited by more than 5 percent in the two previous years. For the first time since the start of the poll, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq hardly registered among responses to this open-ended inquiry. This is not to say that these issues—health care, energy, and wars—are no longer salient, but they do not match the perceived immediacy of the economy.
Political Mood of County Officials

Despite the poor economy, county elected officials express a great deal more optimism in 2009 than they did in spring 2008 (see Figure 1), and for the first time since 2005 the percent of county elected officials saying that the country is heading in the right direction exceeds the percent that say the country is on the wrong track. When asked about the direction of the United States, 47 percent stated that it was on the right track, a drastic difference from 2008, when a mere 20 percent of county elected officials believed the country to be on the right track. Also in 2008, 70 percent believed the United States to be headed on the wrong track, a stark contrast to the 41 percent in 2009 who said that the country was on the wrong track. In only one region of the country did the percent of those who believe the country is on the wrong track exceed the percent who said that the country is heading in the right direction; 49 percent of respondents from the West said that the country was on the wrong track, while only 41 percent from this region said that the country was heading in the right direction. Respondents from the Northeast were evenly divided on this question.

When compared with the general population, opinions on the direction of the United States appeared somewhat consistent; a recently conducted CBS News Poll showed that 45 percent of the population believed the country to be headed in the right direction. However, 48 percent of the population stated that the country was headed down the wrong track.²

In keeping with findings from previous years, there are considerable differences in political moods along political party lines. Two-thirds of Republicans (66 percent) and 42 percent of Independents thought the United States is on the wrong track, while only 13 percent of Democrats shared that view. Conversely, about four out of every five Democrats (79 percent) stated a belief that the country is headed in the right direction, with 42 percent of Independents and 21 percent of Republicans sharing this more optimistic view.

Democrats showed a tremendous rise in optimism about the direction of the country over the past year. In 2008, only 9 percent of Democrats said that the country was heading in the right direction, 15 percent in 2007, and 17 percent in 2006. In contrast, the trend of pessimism among Republicans continues to grow. The 66 percent of Republicans who said that the nation was on the wrong track was represents a steady increase from the 54 percent in 2008, 34 percent in 2007, and only 14 percent in 2005.

**County Officials’ Views on the Economy**

The ratings of the economy by county elected officials in 2009 reached a new nadir, with one half of all respondents rating economic conditions as poor and another 43 percent rating economic conditions as fair. While ratings of the economy in 2008 were also low, they dropped considerably in 2009 (see Figure 2). Only 6 percent rated conditions as good in 2009, and no official rated conditions as excellent. For comparison’s sake, a CNN poll of the general public taken at the same time that the national county elected
officials survey was in the field found that 83 percent of the general public cited current economic conditions as either somewhat or very poor.\(^3\)

County elected officials from the West rated economic conditions as worse than did officials from any other region; 69 percent of officials from the West rated economic conditions as poor, contrasted with 53 percent of those from the Northeast, 48 percent from the South, and 46 percent from the Midwest.

**Figure 2. County officials’ rating of the national economy over time**

In 2009, party affiliation had no relevance in a county official’s assessment of the national economy; Republicans (92 percent), Democrats (93 percent), and Independents (92 percent) similarly rated economic conditions as either fair or poor. While Democrats’ views on the economy have not changed much since 2008 (90 percent fair or poor), Republicans rate the national economy far worse than in 2008 (70 percent fair or poor). Only 7 percent of Republicans view current economic conditions as good, a large decrease from the 30 percent who rated it as excellent or good in 2008, and a mammoth decrease from 78 percent who rated it as excellent or good in 2007.

Turning to their own county, 31 percent rated their economic conditions as excellent or good; the ratings of economic conditions in one’s own county have steadily declined since the zenith of 2006, when a majority (56 percent) rated the economy as either excellent or good.

excellent (12 percent) or good (44 percent) (see Figure 3). Conversely, 69 percent rated their county’s current economic conditions as fair or poor in 2009. For the second year in a row, Republicans rated their county’s conditions more favorably than the nation’s, with 38 percent citing their own county’s conditions as excellent or good, which is actually down from 49 percent in 2008 and 57 percent in 2007. Thirty-three percent of Independents and about one-fourth (24 percent) of Democrats rated their county’s economy as excellent or good. In contrast, 77 percent of Democrats and 64 percent of Republicans rated their county’s current economic conditions as either fair or poor.

Figure 3. County officials’ ratings of the economic conditions in their respective counties over time

In general, county elected officials rate the economic conditions in their own county as better than they rate the economic conditions in the nation at large. Figure 4 clearly shows this to be the case. Only 8 percent of all respondents—12 percent of those from the West—rate economic conditions in their own county worse than those in the nation generally. On the other hand, a slight majority (51 percent) rate the economic conditions in their county better than those in the nation generally. This could be read as a sunny side to a dark problem with the economy in that the area which they know most intimately—their own county—is seen as doing better than the rest of the economy, which they likely know through news accounts and prognosticators.
Despite the dismal ratings of economic conditions, 29 percent of the county elected officials surveyed expressed a belief that economic conditions are getting better. At the same time, another 29 percent said that economic conditions were getting neither better nor worse, and 42 percent cited that they were getting worse, which is an improvement from the 52 percent who expressed a pessimistic view in 2008.

There is clearly a partisan factor influencing views of the economy, with Republicans for the first time in our poll expressing a higher level of pessimism than Democrats, although the difference is slight (see Figure 5). Pessimism is defined by the belief that the economy is getting worse. In 2009, Independents are the most pessimistic, but during the years from 2004 to 2008, Democrats expressed the highest level of pessimism in all years but one. Democrats’ pessimism level declined about 20 percentage points from 2008 to 2009, after having set a high of 58 percent in 2008.
Figure 5. Percent responding that economic conditions are “getting worse”

Not surprisingly, a majority of county elected officials (59 percent overall) had more difficulty than usual balancing their most recent budget. Majorities in all regions in 2009 expressed the view that budget development was especially difficult, but the Northeast high the highest level of respondents expressing this view (73 percent). In 2008, 49 percent and in 2007 40 percent of county elected officials said that balancing the budget was more difficult than usual. Only 5 percent cited balancing this year’s budget as easier, down from 6 percent in 2008 and 11 percent in 2007. Figure 6 illustrates county elected officials’ assessment about difficulty in balancing budgets over time.
It is natural that the interests of states and local governments will occasionally conflict. The National Survey of County Elected Officials continues to find that elected counties have more cooperative relationships with municipal governments (83 percent) than they have with state governments (61 percent). In 2009, 31 percent of county elected officials claimed to have a contentious relationship with their state government, and 78 percent of elected officials believed their state hinders their county’s ability to raise revenue either significantly or some. Of those who stated that the local school board was a separate entity from their county government, 82 percent claimed a cooperative relationship with their local school board.

**Responses to Current Economic Conditions**

In these tough economic times, cooperative purchasing arrangements can provide a method to lower costs across government. Only 60 percent of county officials claimed that their government had cooperative purchasing agreements with the state, and 30 percent, with municipal governments or school systems. Only 23 percent said that their government takes part in national purchasing arrangements.

While a minority of counties is taking advantage of cooperative purchasing arrangements, counties are taking a wide array of other actions to deal with declining revenues, which is
often coupled with an increased demand for services. Twenty-one percent of the elected officials surveyed in 2009 said that their county has decreased the county’s portion of employee health benefits, and 17 percent laid off county employees. In addition, 10 percent or fewer respondents said that their county instituted furloughs for some or all county employees, changed to a four-day work week, and/or decreased the levels their county contributes to employee retirement plans. Figure 7 illustrates the percent of counties taking these actions. A majority of counties (58 percent) did not take any of these actions, and 26 took only one of the five listed. Sixteen percent of respondents said that their county took two or more of these actions in response to the economic realities that they faced.

**Figure 7. Actions taken by counties in response to economic conditions or budget stress**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decreased county's portion of employee health benefits</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laid off county employees</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instituted furloughs for some or all county employees</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed to a four-day work week</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased county's contribution level to employee retirement plans</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Financial issues have been a big concern across the United States over the past year, and the mortgage and foreclosure crisis has been at the forefront of this issue, especially for consumers and county governments that depend on property taxes as a revenue source. In this regard, 71 percent of county elected officials stated that they were very concerned (30 percent) or somewhat concerned (41 percent) with the effects of the mortgage crisis on their county’s housing situation. More to the point of county governance, three-fourths of those surveyed said that they were very concerned (32 percent) or somewhat concerned (43 percent) about the effects of the mortgage crisis on their county’s ability to raise revenue through property taxes. Another 78 percent were very or somewhat concerned about the effects on their constituents’ ability to obtain affordable credit.
Because the mortgage crisis affects the county’s ability to raise revenue from property tax, county officials were asked if they were budgeting for a reduction in property tax revenue. A slight majority (51 percent) said that their county was not budgeting for any such reduction, and 6 percent either did not know or would not say. However, 42 percent of county elected officials stated that their county was budgeting for a reduction either in the current fiscal year, the upcoming fiscal year, or both (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Percent of county elected officials who say that their county is planning for a reduction in revenue from property taxes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is county budgeting for a reduction in property tax revenue?</th>
<th>No response, 6%</th>
<th>In current fiscal year, 2%</th>
<th>In upcoming fiscal year, 25%</th>
<th>In both the current and upcoming fiscal years, 15%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No, not budgeting for a reduction in property taxes, 52%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, 42%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those that were planning for reduction in property tax revenue were asked what their county might consider doing in reaction to reduced revenue. Fifty-nine percent were considering a reduction in services, 54 percent were considering dipping into rainy day funds, 41 percent were considering increases in other taxes or fees, 31 percent were considering a combination of raising fees and reducing services, and 23 percent were considering increased property tax rates.

The paradox of savings suggests that when consumers reduce spending in reaction to a slumping economy, the economy gets worse from a lack of economic activity. When consumers cut back, counties that rely on sales tax for funding capital projects also suffer
from reduced funds. In 2009, county officials were asked if any projects or programs had been canceled or placed on indefinite hold due to reduced intake from specific revenue streams; 28 percent of county officials stated that projects and programs funded by LOST had been canceled or placed on hold. LOST projects and programs were the most affected. Fifteen percent said that projects or programs funded by special local option sales tax (SPLOST) were canceled or placed on hold, and another 7 percent stated that projects and programs funded by municipal bonds were affected.

**Count Elected Officials and the New Administration**

The 2009 survey went into the field near the conclusion of the first 100 days in office for the Obama Administration. County elected officials were more likely to approve (51 percent) than disapprove (39 percent) of President Obama’s job performance, but county officials were a little less likely to express approval than was the general public. A Gallup Poll of public opinion conducted during the same period as the National Survey of County Elected officials found that 58 percent of the public approved of the way that President Obama was handling his job, while 35 percent disapproved—a higher level of approval as well as a lower level of disapproval. Figure 9 illustrates the differences between the general public’s and county elected officials’ views of the President’s performance.

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Although county elected officials generally approve of the President’s performance, they are almost evenly split on the President’s handling of the economy—with 45 percent expressing approval and 46 percent expressing disapproval. Despite the ambivalence about the new administration’s handling of the economy, a majority said that they were either very confident (15 percent) or somewhat confident (42 percent) that President Obama will be able to turn the economy around.

Almost three-quarters (72 percent) of the county elected officials responding to the 2009 survey said that they are very concerned about increasing deficits at the national level, and another 22 percent said that they were somewhat concerned. As for tax revenue, survey respondents were slightly more likely to favor than oppose allowing the tax cuts for Americans making more than $250,000 to expire at the end of next year.

**County Elected Officials and Electronic Communication**

The 2009 National Survey of County Elected Officials sought to measure the extent to which county elected officials have adopted new means of electronic communication. With the assumption that most elected officials prefer face-to-face encounters with their constituents, we asked them which is their favorite way to communicate among the following: telephone, mail, or e-mail. Half of all respondents chose telephone, and another 27 percent went outside the bounds of the questions and said “other.” Only 19
percent chose e-mail as their preferred method of communication, and 4 percent chose mail.

While 81 percent of the survey respondents reported that their county maintained a Web site for communicating county information and issues, only 22 percent said that they, in their role as a county elected official, maintained a Web site to communicate with constituents outside of anything used for a campaign. Almost half (46 percent), however, report maintaining a list of e-mails for sending messages to constituents.

Whether or not it is their preferred style of communication, very few county elected officials can avoid communications through e-mail. Twenty-one percent said that they get e-mails from constituents on a daily basis, 24 percent said that they hear from constituents via e-mail at least weekly, and another 15 percent said that they get e-mails at least monthly. Still, about a third of county elected officials get e-mails less than monthly.

Four percent of those responding to the 2009 survey said that they have a blog related to county government or county issues, and about half of them (2 percent of the total sample) blog at least weekly. As for social networking sites, only 11 percent of the county elected officials have accounts on MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, or a comparable site. Lastly, half of all county elected officials are at least familiar with Twitter, although only 3 percent send tweets for their constituents.
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF COUNTY ELECTED OFFICIALS

In 2009, county officials reported having served an average of 11.4 years in county government generally, with an average of 7.8 years in their current position. Seventy-four percent of county officials’ positions are considered part-time, and those in part-time positions spend an average of 22 hours per week in their role as a county elected official. Of those part-time county officials, 55 percent reported having another job, with 33 percent of those owning their own business, 10 percent working for a private company, and 6 percent working in another government job. Full-time county officials were most common in the West (59 percent) and least common in the Midwest (11 percent).

The average age of a county elected official in 2009 is 62, with only 3 percent under age 30 and 8 percent older than 75. As Figure 10 illustrates, the age distribution for county elected officials has not changed significantly over the six years of the poll. The average age has changed only slightly, from an average low of 60 in 2004 to a high of 62 in 2009.

There has been even less change over time in the racial and gender composition of county elected officials, as illustrated in Figure 11. In 2009, the data show that 88 percent of the respondents are white and 83 are male. These figures have not deviated by more than a couple percentage points over the six years of survey data; statistically, the differences
from year to year have not been significant, meaning that these differences can only be attributed to expected sampling errors.

Figure 11. Distribution of race and gender among county elected officials over time

Forty-seven percent of county elected officials in the 2009 survey have a college degree (30 percent) or a graduate degree (17 percent), levels that exceed those of the general public in both categories, as Figure 12 illustrates. It is worth noting that only two percent of elected officials have not attained a high school diploma while 16 percent of the general public over 25 years of age do not have a high school diploma. As with other demographic statistics, these number have not changed notably over the course of six years of surveys.
Despite the fact that the government in Washington has gone from Republican control to Democratic control over the course of the past six years, the partisan balance among county elected officials has changed very little (see Figure 13).

As in past surveys, the number of county officials who self-identify as political conservatives greatly exceeded the number of those who consider themselves to be political liberals. Thirty-one percent considered their political views as middle-of-the-road. In all four regions of the nation, county officials overwhelmingly claimed conservative political views, with 60 percent in the South, 56 percent in the Midwest, and 53 percent each in the Northeast and the West, respectively.

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5 Data regarding the general population is taken from the American Community Survey, 2005–07 three-year estimates, by the U.S. Census Bureau. (Table B15002. SEX BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT FOR THE POPULATION 25 YEARS AND OVER - Universe: POPULATION 25 YEARS AND OVER).
Figure 13. Party affiliation of county elected officials from 2004 to 2009
METHODOLOGY

The sampling procedure for the 2009 poll is identical to the procedure used in the five previous years. NACo provided a nearly complete list of county elected officials from which two separate sampling strata were created: one of elected officials from counties with a population less than 50,000 and another of elected officials from counties with a population of 50,000 or greater. Because 63 percent of all county elected officials in the nation are from counties of less than 50,000, 63 percent of the sample was drawn from that strata; the other 37 percent came from the strata of elected officials from larger counties. Thus, every commissioner in the sample frame (the list provided by NACo) had an equal probability of being selected into the sample, and the final sample was certain to have balance in respect to county size. Sampling elected officials from each stratum was completely randomized within the framework described above.

The 2009 sample was drawn from a database of 18,748 records, each representing a distinct county commissioner. Given the size of the population of commissioners, researchers are 95 percent confident that any frequency figure reported for the entire sample is within 4 percent of the figure for the true population. Of course, sampling error is only one potential source of survey error, but all reasonable precautions have been taken throughout the study to minimize error sources.
The new National Center for the Study of Counties in partnership with NACo is a focal point for the study of practical issues important to county government. It brings together research and outreach activities relating to counties, their governance, and public policy issues of significance to county governments not only in Georgia but nationwide.

The University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute of Government is addressing the changing needs of counties through the National Center for the Study of Counties. This new initiative is the nation’s first university-based center of its kind in the United States.