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FINDINGS FROM THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY (SCS)

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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. A majority of Southern California residents have some degree of confidence in their local government, although they have less confidence in local government's ability to solve the problems that most affect them. Whites and Latinos have more confidence than other¹ ethnic groups, and Los Angeles County residents have less confidence in local government than residents of other areas of Southern California. Ratings of local government performance vary by issue area, but overall, residents seem to rate performance as neither adequate nor inadequate but somewhere in the middle.

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 Research Center, 1998).

In a 1992 national poll taken by the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR), local government got higher ratings than the state or federal governments, although all three levels had lower ratings than in 1987. The percentage of respondents expressing "a great deal" of trust and confidence in local government had dropped by 10 points, to 6 percent, while the percentage 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 was for fighting crime. For other issues, such as providing services to immigrants, providing job training, providing early education and welfare, or protecting civil rights, most respondents chose the federal or state government (Pew Research Center, 1997).

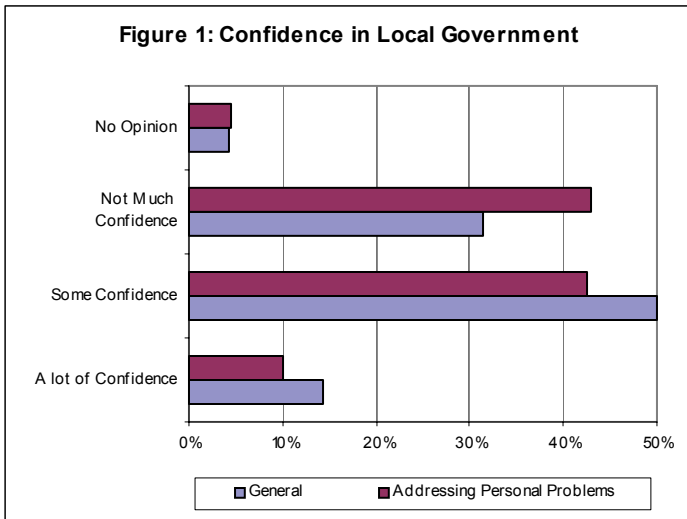
The California Field Poll indicates that confidence in local government did not change between 1984 and 1997. In those years respondents were asked whether they had "a lot of confidence, some confidence, or not much confidence" in their local government. The percent stating they had a lot of confidence 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.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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CONFIDENCE IN SO CAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Figure 1 displays the responses to two questions about confidence in “your local government.” The SCS asked about general confidence and confidence in local government’s ability to solve the problems that most affect the respondent’s own household or family. Southern California residents tend to have higher levels of general confidence in local government than in its ability to solve problems that affect them personally. Almost two thirds of respondents have at least some confidence in local government generally, as opposed to just slightly over half who report some degree of confidence in its to solve problems that affect them. Figure 2 displays the overlap between levels of general and personal confidence in local government.

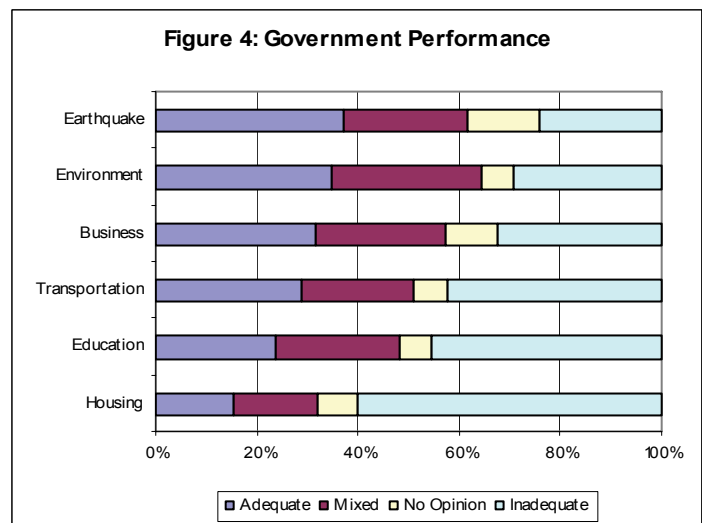
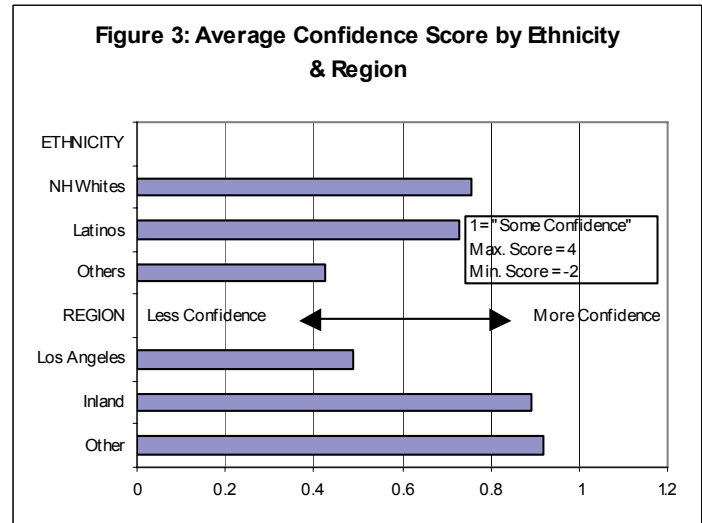
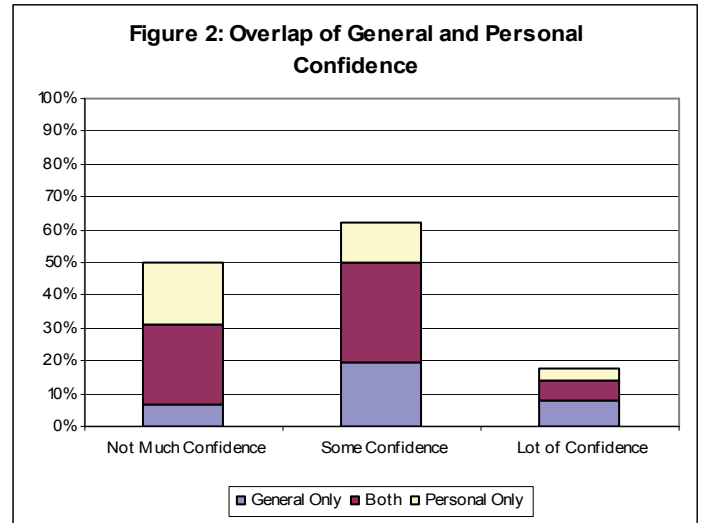


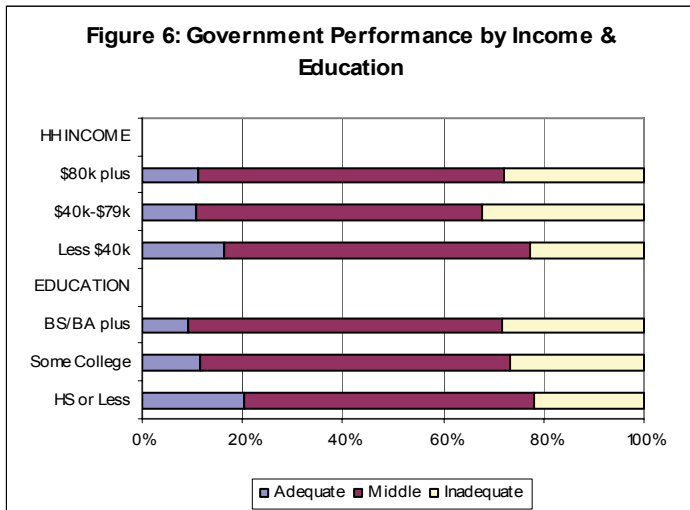
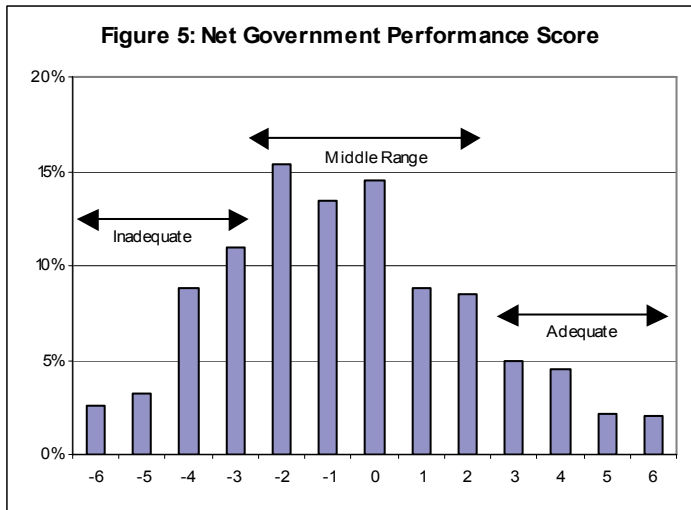
To compare confidence levels among demographic groups and different areas in the region we calculated confidence scores based on the responses to both of the confidence questions (-1 for “not much,” +1 for “some,” and +2 for “a lot”). Figure 3 displays the average confidence score by ethnicity and region. (Differences in average confidence score for education, income, and age were not significant). Whites and Latinos have higher confidence scores than those in other¹ ethnic groups. Los Angeles County residents have lower confidence scores than those in the Inland Empire (San Bernardino and Riverside counties) and other areas (Ventura and Orange counties).

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 earthquake prepared-

ness, protecting the environment, and keeping and attracting business; over 50 percent of respondents indicated that performance on these issues were adequate or mixed. Respondents were slightly less satisfied with performance on improving transportation and education, and very dissatisfied with performance in providing affordable housing in the region (see Figure 4).

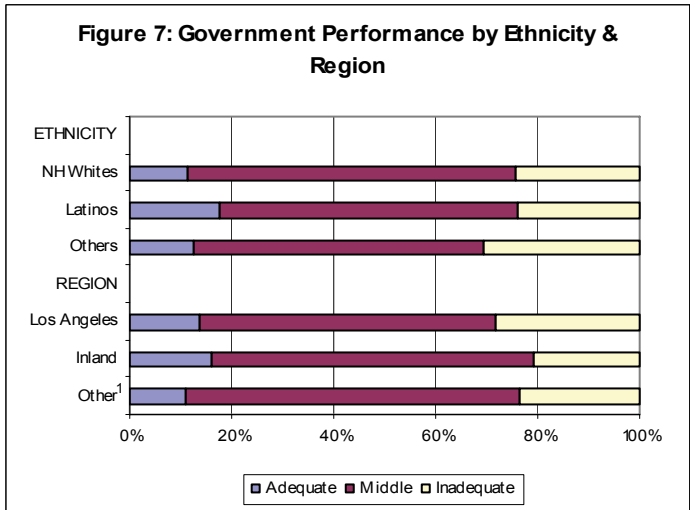




For an overall indicator of local government performance we created a score based on responses to each of the performance questions. Each adequate response received a +1 and each “inadequate” response received a -1. (The mixed response did not receive a score). Then we subtracted the “inadequate” scores from the “adequate” scores. If a respondent answered “adequate” on all six issue areas their net score would be a +6. Conversely, if they responded “inadequate” on all six issues areas their net score would be a -6. The range of scores is indicated in Figure 5. Although the majority of responses (60 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), than there are on the high end of the scale (adequate).

GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE RATINGS BY DEMOGRAPHICS

We also broke down the government performance scores by demographics and geography, to see if opinions of government vary. The differences are slight. The most variation we see is by education. Those with the lowest levels of education tend to give more “adequate” ratings and fewer “inadequate” ratings than those with higher levels of education (see Figure 6). The same pattern is true for income, but the differences here are even smaller. Latinos are slightly more satisfied with elected officials than are white and other ethnic groups (see Figure 7). Residents of Los Angeles County were more likely to give their local officials an “inadequate” rating than those in other counties, while those in the Inland Empire were most satisfied with local government, with the smallest percentage of “inadequate” ratings and highest percentage of “adequate” ratings (though not by much).



The overall picture here is that the majority of respondents, regardless of demographic group, came out with a middle range response score to the questions about government performance, indicating that most residents lack strong opinions one way or the other. In other *Fact Sheets* we’ve found that residents do have strong opinions on what the problems are in the region (Haselhoff, et al., 2005), so it is interesting that they lack the same intensity of views on government performance. Perhaps residents lack enough information on what local government is doing to offer more extreme responses.

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

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DISCLAIMER

Neither the University of California, the School of Public Affairs nor the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies either support or disavow the findings in any project, report, paper, or research listed herein. University affiliations are for identification only; the University is not involved in or responsible for the project.

APPENDIX: SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY, 2005

The 2005 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 units include the Center for Communications and Community, the Institute for Transportation Studies, the Center for Civil Society, and the Anderson School of Management. Three public agencies participated in the process, the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), the Metropolitan Transportation Agency (MTA) and the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation (LAEDC). Several UCLA faculty provided valuable input: Professors Vickie Mays, Michael Stoll, Brian Taylor, Amy Zegart, Frank Gilliam, Helmut Anheier, Chris Thornberg and Ed Leamer.

The 2005 Survey gathered basic demographic data and covered seven topical areas: 1) major issues facing the region, 2) the efficacy of local government, 3) transportation, 4) the state of the regional economy, 5) housing, 6) civic engagement, and 7) major disasters. 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 and February 2005 using random digit dialing, and the data were collected by The Social Science Research Center at California State University, Fullerton. There are 1544 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. There is a sampling error of +/- 2.6 percent at the 95 percent confidence level for the full sample. (Sampling error may be larger for subpopulations).

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