

# Metropolitan State University



## CIVIC CONFIDENCE SURVEY

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

APRIL 2009

#### Project Directors

David O'Hara Ph.D.  
Professor  
Economics  
david.ohara@metrostate.edu  
612-659-7260

Roger Israel DPA  
Professor  
Public Administration  
roger.israel@metrostate.edu  
612-659-7286

Francis J. Schweigert Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Public Administration  
francis.schweigert@metrostate.edu  
612-659-7296

**2009 CIVIC CONFIDENCE SURVEY  
COLLEGE OF MANAGEMENT  
METROPOLITAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Metropolitan State Civic Confidence survey measures attitudes toward government services of residents in the seven-county Twin Cities area, where more than half of Minnesota's population lives. This is the tenth Civic Confidence survey since 1996.

The survey focused on citizens' views of government services and employees, ethics of elected officials, major issues facing government, the regional economy and community connections. It gave more attention than most public opinion polls to residents' views of their local government.

The Civic Confidence survey is part of Metropolitan State's long-term commitment to improving the professional and community life of the metropolitan area since the university's founding 38 years ago. The majority of Metropolitan State's students come from the seven-county region. It is hoped that both policy makers and citizens can use the survey's findings to improve the performance and accountability of public institutions in this area.

Metropolitan State plans to continue to conduct this survey to learn more about the evolving attitudes of Twin Cities metropolitan area residents. As in previous surveys, we have added a few new questions about current issues we believe will be important for years to come. This year, new questions related to the ability of government bodies to address community problems. We also repeated the questions that were introduced in the 2007 survey concerning traffic problems, voting accuracy and election campaign reform.

Some of the key findings of this year's poll are:

- Not surprisingly, the economy was identified as the metro area's biggest problem for the first time since the poll's inception with 30% citing job losses, the poor economy, and home foreclosures. However, almost a quarter of Twin Cities residents said they strongly believe that the country is in a better position to face significant challenges ahead. Given the dramatically increased economic challenges facing the nation since the 2007 survey, the fact that almost three times as many residents as in 2007 feel this way is quite significant.
- Traffic and transportation, the second-most-frequently cited concern, continues to be seen as a major problem in the metro area.

- Only 15% of Twin Cities residents are very sure that their votes and those of other residents are being accurately recorded and tabulated. More than 10% are not at all sure that votes are being accurately recorded.
- Twin Cities residents continue to have a great amount of confidence in their state and local governments and their local school districts. They are quite satisfied with the quality of public services they receive.
- Twin Cities residents report a high level of satisfaction with the responsiveness of their government officials, higher than in 2007 and consistent with the pre-2007 pattern.
- Public employees continue to be held in high regard by Twin Cities residents, who view them very favorably in comparison with their private sector counterparts.

## **MAJOR PROBLEMS**

When asked in an open-ended question what the area's most serious problem was, 31% of respondents cited the economy and 25% cited traffic congestion. This was a dramatic change from previous surveys. The economy had never been mentioned by more than 10% of residents and never come close to approaching the level of concern of crime and traffic congestion. Crime had been the number one problem from 1996 through 1999. In 1996, crime was mentioned by 72% while traffic congestion was mentioned by only 8% of residents and the economy by only 2%. As concern about crime declined, traffic congestion emerged as the top concern in 2000 and remained the chief problem until 2007, when crime reemerged as the most common choice. Given the dramatic economic events of the past year as well as the amount of media coverage devoted to the deteriorating national and local economies, this year's results are not surprising. Between declining real estate and investment portfolio values and rising unemployment, the effect of the current recession is widespread and reflected in this year's responses.

## **ECONOMY**

There was an expected dramatic change from past surveys in the views of Twin Cities residents about the region's economy and their personal financial situation.

People feel much less confident about the metropolitan area's economy and their personal financial situation. Almost 80% of the region's residents said they believe the Twin Cities economy is getting worse, an almost four-fold increase from 2007. On a personal level, only 16% were satisfied with their personal financial situation, 48% were somewhat satisfied, 24% were somewhat dissatisfied and 13% were dissatisfied. This is by far the lowest level of satisfaction in the history of the survey. Fewer households with school children (57%) were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their financial situation than households without school children (68%), a consistent result from 2007.

Surprisingly, we did not observe a significant increase from 2007 in the percentage of area residents who have cut back their spending due to uncertainties in the economy. This year only 29% said they had cut back spending a lot or somewhat compared to 41% who reported cutting back a lot or somewhat in 2007.

Residents reported slightly less confidence in their personal future from 2007. This year, 25% were confident and 49% somewhat confident that they would be better off three to five years from now. This compares to 36% and 39% respectively in 2007. However, there was an increase in the number of people who felt that the Twin Cities area is usually or always headed in the right direction, 60% in 2009 compared to 53% in 2007.

### **WORST TRAFFIC PROBLEM**

In 2007, we introduced a question asking people to identify the worst traffic problem in the Twin Cities area. In both 2007 and 2009 “drivers using cell phones” was selected by 36% of residents. “Too much traffic on the road” was also chosen by 36%, up from 27% in 2007. Poorly laid out highways/intersections was again the third most popular traffic problem followed by speeding, road rage and driving too slowly.

### **TRAFFIC CONGESTION SOLUTIONS**

Since traffic congestion has consistently ranked as a major problem, we repeated a question from 2007 and 2005, and results were similar. When asked to select their first choice for reducing traffic congestion, respondents said light rail was the most popular choice (45%) with construction of more roads second (30%), followed by improved bus service (17%). These results were a marked contrast to the 2000 and 2001 surveys, when construction of more roads was the most popular choice, followed by construction of a light rail network and improved bus service.

More residents of Minneapolis favored expansion of light rail and improved bus service, whereas suburban and Saint Paul residents were more inclined to build additional roads.

## **VOTING/ELECTION REFORM**

We repeated two questions that were new to the 2007 survey related to elections and campaign reform. However, the 2009 responses were a stark reversal from 2007. When asked how sure they were that the votes of Twin Cities residents were accurately counted, only 15% of respondents were “very sure” (compared to 42% in 2007) and 44% only “somewhat sure” (compared to 40% in 2007.) In 2007, 10% of Twin Cities residents were “somewhat unsure” and 8% were “not at all sure” about the accuracy of voting results. In 2009, these responses zoomed to 30% (“somewhat unsure”) and 12% (“not at all sure”.)

As in 2007, we asked Twin Cities residents about their ideas for improving the quality of election campaigns. The top two reform strategies were “limiting campaign spending” (37% compared to 29% in 2007) and “limiting the duration of campaigns” (32% versus 21% in 2007).

## **EDUCATION**

Consistent with the past seven surveys, most Twin Citians said they were happy with their local school districts and had a great deal of confidence in them. 76% were either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the quality of services provided, while 86% had either a lot or some confidence in their public school system. These are high overall ratings considering that education is the state’s largest and most scrutinized public expenditure.

## **TRUST IN GOVERNMENT/SATISFACTION WITH PERFORMANCE**

This year’s results continued the historical pattern of being generally supportive of government services and employees at all levels.

A rebound from 2007 is the fact that 58% of Twin Cities residents now “agree” or “somewhat agree” that most government officials are responsive to their needs and concerns. In 2007, this number had dipped to 44%. The 2009 result is consistent with a pattern in the upper 50s and low 60s throughout the survey’s history. The high points were 65% in both 2000 and 2001.

Another rebound is the perception of elected officials’ honesty. This year 59% of Twin Cities residents said they believed that elected officials were “more honest” or “as honest” compared to average Minnesotans. This is a return to the historical levels seen in earlier polls and reflected a rebound from the low 43% result in 2007.

Twin Cities residents continued to give high marks to the quality of public services they receive, especially from local and state governments. Support for the quality of local government services (“satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied”) remained quite high in 2009: 74% for city government and 73% for county government. These are very similar to the results in the past few surveys. Support for local school district services remained

consistent at 76% in 2009. In terms of state government, satisfaction with the quality of services declined, from 66% in 2007 to 58% in 2009, the lowest level since the survey began in 1996. Satisfaction with the federal government returned to its traditional level, at 56% in 2009, up from 49% in 2007.

When asked which level of government they trusted to do what is right most often, 62% said local government, 23% said state government and 16% said the federal government. This compares with, respectively, 55%, 35% and 10% in 2007. In 2002, the trust level in terms of the federal government reached an all-time high of 18%, probably reflecting unusually strong public support in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. But since 2002, this level of support has returned to the more typical level of 8 to 12% as the war on terrorism becomes an ongoing effort led by the federal government, with mixed results so far.

Metro residents continue to hold public employees in reasonably high regard. 83% think they do as good a job as other Twin Cities employees, and 2% think they perform better, for a combined total of 85%. The comparable figures in 2007 were, respectively, 72% and 5% for a combined total of 77%.

## **CRIME**

Concern about crime as the metro area's biggest problem receded to third place in 2009, behind the economy and traffic congestion. Since the inception of the survey in 1996, crime had always been the first or second most popular response. 16% of respondents rated it as the #1 regional problem, the lowest level since the 11% of 2001. When asked if there were an area within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night 34% said "yes," which is consistent with the responses from 1999 through 2005 and lower than the 42% of 2007.

Fear of crime was greatest in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, and much less so in the suburbs. There continued to be substantial differences in the fear of crime among men and women. In 2009, 39% of women agreed that there were areas within one mile of their residences in which they would not walk alone at night; only 29% of men thought so. Although this gender differential is very consistent with the results of previous surveys, it is notable that there was a significant decrease in "yes" responses for women, from 51% in 2007 to this year's 39%.

## **CONFIDENCE IN SOCIAL SECURITY**

Reform of Social Security continues to be a significant national public policy debate. We repeated a question from 2007 and 2005 concerning people's confidence in their future Social Security benefits. When asked how confident they were that Social Security would still be providing benefits when they reached retirement age, 40% were completely or very confident (compared to 45% in 2007 and 32% in 2005) while 60% were just somewhat confident or had no confidence (compared to 55% in 2007 and 65% in 2005). Just as in 2007 and 2005, younger respondents were much less confident. The only

people who were “completely confident” were born before 1950. One third of those born in the 1960s and later expressed no confidence.

### **INCREASED OPTIMISM**

Since 2005, we have asked Twin Cities residents if they felt the country were coming together to face challenges ahead of us. The 2009 responses indicated more optimism than the 2005 and 2007 results. This year, 22% strongly agreed that the country is now in a better position to face the significant challenges ahead of us, compared to only 8% in both 2007 and 2005. 55% somewhat agreed that we were in a better position, compared to 34% in 2007 and 36% in 2005.

### **IMMIGRATION/POPULATION DIVERSITY**

Twin Cities residents continued to say they believed that the growing population diversity of our region is a “good thing,” with 78% favorable in 2009, 75% favorable in 2007 and 78% favorable in 2005. However, in a question we introduced in 2007 and repeated this year, 47% of residents reported being concerned that recent immigrants posed a threat to our security. This was identical to the 2007 response. However, only 7% indicated they were “greatly concerned,” a significant decrease from 13% in 2007.

### **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

This year’s survey results yielded a slight increase in residents’ level of civic engagement; i.e., their active involvement in civic organizations. 40% reported no activity at all, and 26% identified themselves as “not very active”. The comparable figures in the 2007 survey were 51% and 21%. However, those who described themselves as “active” had steadily decreased since 2001 (18%) to this year’s 7%.

### **SUB-REGIONAL DIFFERENCES WORTH NOTING**

While sub-regional data are available from the survey, the accuracy of results is stronger at the regional level because the sample is larger.

There is an interesting pattern of results for residents of growth areas of the metropolitan area (defined as outside the I-494/694 beltway for this survey) compared with those residing in older, more stable areas (i.e., within the I-494-694 beltway). People living in growth areas of the Twin Cities feel less confident about the metropolitan area's economy than residents of older, stable areas. 85% in growth areas said they believed the area's economy is getting worse compared to 74% in stable areas. 14% in growth areas said they believed the Twin Cities economy is staying the same compared to 21% in stable areas. Perhaps this result reflects the fact that many growth areas have been hit harder by the sub-prime mortgage crisis than the stable communities.

Residents of growth areas also indicated a higher level of satisfaction with the quality of services provided by their city government (79% satisfied or somewhat satisfied) and

their local school district (81% satisfied or somewhat satisfied). This compares to ratings of stable area residents of 70% for city government services and 72% for local school district services.

When asked if there were an area within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night, 46% of stable area residents said “yes” compared to only 20% of growth area residents, a finding consistent with 2007.

The responses to some survey questions indicated differences between city and suburban residents. More Minneapolis and Saint Paul residents (21% and 22% respectively) cited crime as the region’s chief problem than suburban residents (14%). Many more Minneapolis (63%) and Saint Paul (67%) residents identified an area within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night compared to suburban residents (25%).

**Facts about the Civic Confidence Survey**

Results are based on a Metropolitan State College of Management poll conducted February 17 to March 2, 2009, by telephone with 500 randomly selected adults in the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area. The margin of error in the poll is 4.5% or less, for results based on all interviews in the poll. Margins of sampling error for smaller groups in the poll are larger. In addition to random error, as with any public opinion survey, other forms of error may be inadvertently introduced by question order, wording and practical difficulties in conducting the poll, including events that may have occurred during the interviewing period. The Metropolitan State Civic Confidence survey is directed by David O’Hara, Professor of Economics (612-659-7260, [david.ohara@metrostate.edu](mailto:david.ohara@metrostate.edu)); Roger Israel, Professor of Public Administration (612-659-7286, [roger.israel@metrostate.edu](mailto:roger.israel@metrostate.edu)) and Frank Schweigert, Assistant Professor of Public Administration (612-659-7296, [francis.schweigert@metrostate.edu](mailto:francis.schweigert@metrostate.edu)). Copies of the executive summary are available from Shana VonRuden ([shana.vonruden@metrostate.edu](mailto:shana.vonruden@metrostate.edu), 612-659-7290) and at <http://www.metrostate.edu/msweb/explore/com/news/civicsurvey.html>.