CIVIC CONFIDENCE SURVEY
COLLEGE OF MANAGEMENT
METROPOLITAN STATE UNIVERSITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the third annual Metropolitan State Civic Confidence Survey. The purpose of the survey is to measure attitudes of residents in the seven-county, Twin City area towards government services. Slightly more than half of Minnesota’s population lives in the region.

The Survey focuses on citizens’ views on government services and employees, ethics of elected officials, major issues facing government, and the regional economy. The Survey gives more attention than most public opinion polls to residents’ views of their local government.

Because 95% of Metro State’s students come from the seven county region, Metro State has been committed to improving the professional and community life of the metropolitan area since the University’s founding twenty five years ago. The Civic Confidence Survey is part of that long-term commitment. It is hoped that both policy makers and citizens can use the Survey’s findings to improve the performance and accountability of public institutions.

Two students in a Public Policy Analyses class in the College of Management first conceived the study several years ago. The students, Todd Ferrara and Wendy Klancher, were frustrated by lack of anything more than anecdotal accounts of citizens’ views of government performance and leadership. As a consequence, for their required final paper the two wrote the initial survey questionnaire and coordinated the first stages of the Civic Confidence Survey.

Metro State plans to continue to conduct this survey in future years. Each year we hope to learn more about the evolving attitudes of Twin Cities metropolitan area residents.

Some of the key finds of this year’s poll are:

* Crime continues to be seen as the metro area’s biggest problem.
* Residents believe education should be top priority for state spending.
* Residents also have a great amount of confidence in their local school districts and are satisfied with their services, though less so in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.
* Reducing class size is the most popular choice for improving our educational system.
* Construction of a light rail network was the most popular choice for reducing traffic congestion.
* Twin Citians are also more trusting of local governments and satisfied with their services, than they are with larger federal and state governments.
Twin Citians this year feel even better about the metropolitan area’s economy that last year and continue to be satisfied with their current economic situation and confident about the future.

BIGGEST PROBLEMS

The metropolitan area’s biggest worry remains crime, though there is less concern this year than two years ago. When asked in an open-ended question what was the area’s most serious problem, 46% of residents ranked crime as the top problem, a significant decrease from two years ago when 68% said it was. These findings are consistent with recent national polls.

Other problems facing the Metro Area were traffic congestion (10%); taxes (5%); education (6%); operations of government (7%); and urban sprawl (6%).

Judging by continued concern over traffic congestion and urban sprawl, there seems to be more worry among residents about maintaining the convenience and livability of the metropolitan area. In fact, 14% say convenience is what they like best about living in the metro areas. It and the availability of cultural and artistic activities were the two features that residents said they liked best about the region. Because of increased concern in these quality of life categories of transportation and urban sprawl, we believe policy makers will need to pay closer attention to them in the future.

Convenience is of course a double-edged sword when it comes to urban life. For example, if you live in a suburb or neighborhood without a mall with the typical entertainment, dining, and shopping options you will likely have to drive farther to do those things and your life will be less convenient. However, when there is a sufficient population mass, or urban sprawl, for those things in your own community, you will confront more traffic and congestion, and thus also have a less convenient lifestyle.

The problem of traffic congestion for policy makers is there is no immediate crisis; instead a slow but very real increase in vehicular crowding is expected to continue over time. For example, the Metropolitan Council projects 200 congested freeway miles by 2020, up from 120 today and 72 in 1984.

TRANSPORTATION

The increased concern about traffic congestion and urban sprawl over the last two years led to a new question in this year’s poll. We asked people to select their first choice for reducing traffic congestion. Construction of a light rail network was the most popular choice, selected by 44% of respondents. The second most popular choice was the construction of more roads (25%), followed by improved bus service (15%), increased use of car pool lanes (10%), and the use of toll roads or other pay-as-you-go systems (6%).

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Light rail was the top choice overall, and it was the overwhelming choice of Minneapolis residents (59% compared to approximately 40% for both St. Paul and suburban residents). Not surprisingly improvements in bus service was the second most popular choice of residents of Minneapolis and St. Paul where bus riding is more common, while building more roads was the second most popular choice among suburban residents who would presumably be the chief users of additional roads.

Though it is not the first choice of many residents, if new roads are to be built, toll roads should be seriously considered at some future point because of the inherent efficiencies of a direct user fee in contrast to general taxes or gasoline taxes.

**SPENDING PRIORITIES**

In order to better determine citizens’ spending priorities, we asked what should be the top priority for spending any future state revenue surplus. 32% of residents preferred education spending; 29% wanted income tax reductions; 19% favored property tax reductions; followed by additional spending on health care (9%), infrastructure (7%), and the environment (4%)

**EDUCATION**

When asked how they would improve education 45% said smaller class sizes, 14% said increased funding for school districts with high percentages of low income children, 13% said increased availability for state funded vouchers, 12% chose a common statewide curriculum, 8% said reduce the power of teachers unions and 8% chose more after school programs. Smaller class sizes was the most popular choice of both city and suburban residents but more suburbanites favored vouchers while more city dwellers favored increased low income funding

Not only do Twin Citians support additional spending on education, they are satisfied with the work of their local school districts and have a great deal of confidence in them. 69% are either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the services provided by their local district. Almost the same percentage, 79%, says they have a lot or some confidence in their local school district. School districts were the only one of the three levels of government that we asked about (also city, county) which a significant number of residents, 35%, believed did not provide enough services.

These are high overall ratings considering that education is the state’s largest and most scrutinized expenditure.

However, residents of Saint Paul and Minneapolis have a more negative view of their local districts than do suburban residents. 24% of residents in the two core cities have no
confidence or not very much confidence in their local schools while only 19% of suburban residents lack confidence in their schools.

In terms of satisfaction, 43% of city residents are either dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with the quality of services provided by their local school district while only 26% of suburban residents feel that way.

It is beyond the scope of this survey to pinpoint reasons for the disparity between the views of inner city and suburban residents. However, in future surveys we hope to obtain more information on these and other differences within the metropolitan area to assist policy makers and government officials.

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Twin Citians are more trusting of local governments and satisfied with their services, than they are with larger federal and state governments.

When asked which level of government Twin Citians trust to do the “right thing” most often, 53% said local government, 35% said state government and 11% replied federal government. When asked about quality of service provided by respective governments, 77% of metro area residents said they were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with city government; 70% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their school district; 76% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with county government; 71% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with state government and 62% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with federal services.

The amount of trust in a government apparently increases with personal contact. 42% said they based their impression of local government on direct experience. In contrast, only 21% based their impression of the federal government on their own experience while 74% based their impression on news media reporting. National polls also show that trust declines with greater reliance on media.

Metro residents hold public employees in reasonably high regard. 69% think they do as good a job as other Twin Cities employees and 8% think they perform better.

A majority (58%) of the region’s residents agrees that government officials are responsive to their needs.

Perhaps due to the Clinton sex controversy, residents think slightly worse of the honesty of elected officials than they did a year ago. In this year’s poll 50% believed they are as honest or more honest than average Minnesotans while 50% believe elected officials are either less honest or actually dishonest. Last year 54% thought they were as honest while 46% thought they were honest or dishonest.
SATISFACTION WITH PERFORMANCE

Delivery of Twin Cities’ public services apparently does not need reinventing. Services such as libraries, garbage/recycling, parks, 911 service, and snow plowing earned approval ratings of over 80% from local citizens. Libraries, parks and 911 service had the highest approval ratings with 96% of residents either fully or somewhat satisfied with those services. Even road repair, that annual curse of Minnesota’s summers, receives full or somewhat satisfaction ratings from 70% of the region’s residents.

Satisfaction with administration of welfare programs is up from 56% in last year’s poll to 63% this year.

In terms of quantity of services, 70% thought their city government provided the right amount of services while 16% said there were not enough and 14% said there were too many. 64% said their county government provided the right amount of services, 19% said not enough while 18% thought it provided too many services. 53% said their local school district provided enough services while 35% said not enough and 13% said too many services were provided.

CRIME

As stated earlier, the metropolitan area’s biggest worry remains crime. The proportion of citizens fearful of crime has remained relatively constant. When asked if there is an area within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night, this year 41% replied yes, the same as last year.

Women are more concerned with crime than men. 51% of women said it was the region’s biggest problem compared to 39% of men. Even more significant is the fear of crime. 50% of women say there are places within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night compared to only 28% of men.

Despite their worries about crime, 87% of the area’s citizens felt law enforcement agencies were doing a satisfactory or somewhat satisfactory job. They also believed local police were honest. 76% felt their local police would not lie or break the law in order to arrest somebody.

Significantly, residents of Minneapolis are less satisfied than residents of St. Paul or suburban communities with law enforcement and less trusting of the honesty of their police. Only 75% of Minneapolis residents felt their law enforcement personnel were doing a satisfactory or somewhat satisfactory job (compared to approximately 90% in St. Paul and the suburbs) and only 54% of Minneapolitans surveyed thought their police would not lie or break the law in order to arrest somebody (compared to over 75% in St. Paul and the suburbs). Likewise, fear of crime was greatest in Minneapolis, slightly less so in Saint Paul and much less so in the suburbs.
ECONOMY

The poll also shows Twin Citians are confident about the metropolitan area’s economy, satisfied with their current economic situation and confident about the future. 52% of the area’s residents say the area’s robust economy is improving compared to 35% last year. 37% say it is staying the same. Only 11% say it is getting worse, the same as last year. 78% say they are either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their own financial situation, roughly the same as in 1997.

When asked if they would be better off in 3 to 5 years than today, 81% said they were confident or somewhat confident they would be better off, the same percentage as a year ago. Also, slightly fewer this year than last have cut back their spending due to uncertainties in the economy.

PERSONAL CIVIC INVOLVEMENT

Only 14% of the region’s residents consider themselves active in civic activities. 28% said they were somewhat active; 14% said they were not very active while 43% said they were not active at all.

Almost half of the region’s residents, 49%, said they had never contacted an elected official; 30% said they seldom contacted one; 15% said they contacted officials somewhat often while 5% said they often contacted officials.

Television was the chief source of news for 46% of the region’s residents; newspapers for 33%; radio 15%; and magazines 2%.
1996-1998 COMPARISON

This is the third annual Civic Confidence Survey. During those years there have been a number of changes in public opinion. There is less concern with crime and more with traffic congestion. Significantly, in other areas, particularly satisfaction with government delivery of services, there has been little change.

DIRECTION OF THE TWIN CITIES METRO AREA

For the first time since the poll’s inception, this year a majority of Twin Citians feel the region is headed in the right direction. 52% said it is headed in the right direction compared to 45% in the last two years. This is consistent with national polls. Both Twin Cities and national results are significant in light of the so-called “optimism gap” polltakers often comment on.

That is, for years polls have shown people feel good about their own lives but pessimistic about society at large. We believe the optimism gap to be at least in part the result of the understandable tendency of people when asked a question like “direction of society” to think about the negatives seen and heard in the media instead of the more positive things being experienced in their personal lives.

CHIEF PROBLEM

The metropolitan area’s biggest worry remains crime, including youth gangs and drug abuse, though there is less concern this year than two years ago. When asked in an open-ended question what was the area’s most serious problem, 46% of residents ranked crime as the top problem, a significant decrease from two years ago when 68% said it was.

Since 1996 there has been a significant increase in the number of residents citing traffic congestion and urban sprawl as the area’s biggest problem. In 1996 8% cited traffic congestion and urban sprawl was not mentioned. By 1998 10% cited traffic congestion and 6% cited urban sprawl. Taken together these two related problems present both a present and future challenge for policymakers.

CRIME

When asked if there is an area within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night, this year 41% replied yes, a decline from 52% in 1996. In 1996 there was little difference between the feelings of Minneapolis, St. Paul, and suburban residents. This is not the case in 1998. Residents of the two core cities have become more fearful of crime while suburban residents are feeling much safer.

There are a number of possible reasons for continued high concerns with crime, despite declining crime rates. The first is that even though crime is decreasing, many people feel there is too much crime. A second explanation may be that it takes time for public opinion to absorb the fact of decreasing crime. A third explanation is that due to the
strong economy, there are simple a lack of other things about which to be concerned. Finally there is the higher priority given to crime reporting in television, the chief source of news of most metro residents, than in other news media.

**ECONOMY**

For the first time since the poll’s inception, a majority of Twin Citians believe the economy is improving (52% in 1998 compared to 28% in 1996). In previous years, more residents felt the area’s good economy was staying the same. In 1996 48% said it was staying the same, last year 54% said it was, while this year 35% said it was. These figures likely reflect a lag in people’s perceptions and the fact that it takes time for the impact of a robust economy to reach most segments of society.

An interesting side bar is that despite these changes in views of the overall economy, personal confidence in the future has remained high and unchanged. In each of the three years of the survey over 80% were confident or somewhat confident that they would be better off in 3 to 5 years than they are now. These higher levels of confidence in personal financial futures than in the region’s future is another example of the optimism gap discussed earlier.

**SATISFACTION WITH PERFORMANCE**

Most Twin Cities’ public services have received very high ratings every year. Services such as libraries, garbage/recycling, parks, 911 service, and snow plowing earned approval ratings of over 80% from local citizens. These consistent high levels of satisfaction are somewhat surprising in view of the need cited by many to reinvent or reengineer operations of government.

The most noticeable change is the satisfaction with administration of welfare programs. This area has improved each year since 1996 when Congress passed the welfare reform law. Two years ago 52% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the administration of welfare programs; last year 56% were; and today 63% are! This is the most significant change in the public’s judgement of government performance that we have seen in the last three years. However, it is also a government service with which most Twin Citians have little personal contact.

**TRUST IN GOVERNMENT**

Twin Citians are more trusting of local governments and satisfied with their services, than they are with larger federal and state governments.

In 1998 when asked which level of government Twin Citians trust to do the “right thing” most often, 53% said local government, 35% said state government and 11% replied federal government. The proportion of people choosing the federal government has
changed little but the rating of the state has improved at the expense of local
governments. In 1996 30% chose the state while 61% chose local government.

The responsiveness of government officials has also improved in peoples estimation. In
1996 54% believed that government officials were responsive to their concerns and
needs. By 1998 this had improved to 58%.

When asked about quality of service provided by respective governments, the ratings of
city governments, school districts, county governments, and state government remained
relatively constant. The performance of the federal government has improved. In 1996
54% were either somewhat satisfied or satisfied compared to 61% in 1997 and 62% in
1998.

POLITICAL PARTY IDENTIFICATION

More people declared themselves as Republican or leaning Republican in 1998 (34%)
compared to 1996 (28%). Fewer people declared themselves as Democrat or leaning
Democrat in 1998 (47%) compared to 1996 (51%). The portion of independents has
remained relatively constant (21% in 1996, 19% in 1998). The growth in Republican
Party identification has come in the suburbs. In 1996, 28% of suburbanites said they
were Republicans or leaning Republican while this year 39% said they were. In 1996,
48% of suburban residents said they were Democrats or leaning Democratic while this
year only 41% said they were.

Facts about the Confidence Survey

Results are based on a Metropolitan State College of Management poll conducted May
11 to May 30, 1998 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.

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