CIVIC CONFIDENCE SURVEY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This is the fourth 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. About 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 over 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.

The study was first conceived several years ago by two students in a Public Policy Analyses class in the College of Management. 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:

* Traffic Congestion and urban sprawl is seen as the metro area’s biggest problem.
* Residents strongly support imposing local zoning and land use policies to manage development in the metropolitan area.
* The use of “photocops” to monitor intersections and carpool lanes received widespread support.
* 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.
* A majority of people are satisfied with Governor Ventura’s performance.
* 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 continue to feel confident about the metropolitan area’s economy and are satisfied with their current economic situation and confident about the future.
*Satisfaction with administration of welfare programs has improved for the fourth straight year.

MAJOR PROBLEMS

When asked in an open-ended question what was the area’s most serious problem, traffic congestion was cited by 24 percent of area residents and the related problem of urban sprawl by 9 percent. For the first time since the survey’s inception in 1996 traffic congestion and urban sprawl surpassed crime as the region’s number one problem. Crime, mentioned by 27 percent of Twin Citians, is still a widespread concern, but together traffic congestion and urban sprawl represent the biggest challenge for policy makers.

In 1996 traffic congestion was mentioned by only 8 percent of Twin City residents and urban sprawl was rarely mentioned. By 1998 traffic congestion was mentioned by 10 percent of residents and urban sprawl by 6 percent. During this time, the percent of respondents choosing crime as the chief problem has dropped from 71 percent in 1996 to 27 percent in 1999.

Lack of affordable housing is starting to become an issue. Only 1 percent named this problem in 1998; this year almost 6 percent mentioned this issue, indicating a growing problem.

Other problems facing the Metro Area were education (7%), taxes (6%) and operations of government (4%).

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, 18% say convenience is what they like best about living in the metro areas. Convenience and the availability of cultural and artistic activities are the most popular features of the area. 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.
TRANSPORTATION PROBLEMS

When asked to identify the biggest transportation-related problem, 31% chose traffic congestion, 27% chose traffic bottlenecks, 27% selected the driving habits of others, 9% public transportation and 6% chose road condition.

These results differ slightly from a 1996 Minnesota Department of Transportation survey. In that survey 42% chose traffic congestion, 17% chose traffic bottlenecks, 19% selected the driving habits of others, 17% public transportation and 14% chose road condition.

URBAN SPRAWL

In a resounding show of support, over 72 percent of Twin Citians favor the imposition of local zoning and land use policies to manage development in the metropolitan area. This is undoubtedly a result of the increasing concern about traffic congestion, urban sprawl, and affordable housing.

PHOTOCOPS

Another popular subject is the use of motion-activated cameras (sometimes called “photocops”) to monitor intersections and carpool lanes. 65 percent of Twin Cities residents support using these devices to ticket people for traffic violations.

EDUCATION

Consistent with last year, most Twin Citians are happy with their local school districts and have a great deal of confidence in them. 67% are either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with quality of services provided while 80% have either a lot or some confidence in their public school system. Interestingly, schools were again the only levels of government that 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. 41% of St. Paul residents and 25% of Minneapolis residents have no confidence or not very much confidence in their local schools while only 17% of suburban residents lack confidence in their schools.
In terms of satisfaction, 26% of core city residents are either dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with the quality of services provided by their local school district while only 17% of suburban residents feel that way. Both of these numbers represent a significant improvement (decline in dissatisfaction) from 1998.

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.

**JESSE VENTURA’S PERFORMANCE AS GOVERNOR**

Minnesota’s new governor continues to garner popular support, with almost 62 percent expressing either full or partial satisfaction with Jesse Ventura’s performance as governor.

**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 what is right most often, almost 56% said local government, 35% said state government and 10% replied federal government. When asked about quality of service provided by respective governments, 80% of metro area residents said they were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with city government; 67% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their school district; 81% were satisfied with county government; 74% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with state government and 63% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with federal services.

Metro residents hold public employees in reasonably high regard. 65% think they do as good a job as other Twin Cities employees and 8% think they perform better.

A majority (61%) of the region’s residents agree that government officials are responsive to their needs.

The perception of the honesty of elected officials seems to have rebounded from last year’s decline, surpassing the 1997 level. In this year’s poll 58% believed elected officials are as honest or more honest than average Minnesotans while 42% believe elected officials are either less honest or actually dishonest. In 1998, perhaps due to the Clinton sex scandal, 50% believed they were as honest or more honest than average Minnesotans while 50% believe they were either less honest or actually dishonest. In 1997 54% thought they were as honest while 46% thought they were less honest or dishonest.
SATISFACTION WITH PERFORMANCE

When asked about the quality of services provided by governments, 80% of metro area residents said they were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with city government, 81% with county government, 74% with state government and 63% with federal services. When asked which level of government Twin Citians trust to do what is right most often, almost 56% said local, 35% said state and 10% replied federal.

Twin Cities’ public services continue to earn high marks. Services such as libraries, garbage/recycling, parks, 911 service, and snow plowing earned approval ratings of over 85% 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 80% of the region’s residents.

Satisfaction with administration of welfare programs improved again this year from 52% in 1996, 56% in 1997, and 63% in 1998 to 69% this year.

In terms of quantity of services, 73% thought their city government provided the right amount of services while 14% said there were not enough and 13% said there were too many. 67% said their county government provided the right amount of services, 19% said not enough while 15% thought it provided too many services. 53% said their local school district provided enough services while 35% said not enough and 12% said too many services were provided.

CRIME

Citizens are also less fearful of crime. The proportion of citizens fearful of crime has declined for the fourth consecutive year. When asked if there is an area within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night, 37% said yes compared to 41% in 1998, 42% in 1997 and 52% in 1996.

Women are more concerned with crime than men. 29% of women said it was the region’s biggest problem compared to 24% of men. Even more significant is the fear of crime. 49% of women say there are places within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night compared to only 20% of men.

Despite their worries about crime, 89% of the area’s citizens felt law enforcement agencies were doing a satisfactory or somewhat satisfactory job. They also believed local police were honest. 75% felt their local police would not lie or break the law in order to arrest somebody.
Significantly, residents of Minneapolis and St. Paul are less satisfied than residents of suburban communities with law enforcement. Only 83% of Minneapolis and St. Paul residents felt their law enforcement personnel were doing a satisfactory or somewhat satisfactory job compared to approximately 91% in the suburbs. Minneapolis residents are less trusting of the honesty of their police compared to residents of St. Paul and the suburbs. 61% of Minneapolitans surveyed thought their police would not lie or break the law in order to arrest somebody (compared to over 76% in St. Paul and the suburbs). Likewise, fear of crime was greatest in Minneapolis, less so in Saint Paul and much less so in the suburbs.

ECONOMY

56% of Twin Citians said the region was headed in the right direction, compared with 52% last year and 47% two years ago. People continue to feel confident about the metropolitan area’s economy and the future. 54% said the area’s strong economy is improving, roughly the same as last year’s 52%. Only 6% say the economy is getting worse while 40% say it is staying the same.

The poll also shows Twin Citians are satisfied with their current economic situation and confident about the future. 83% say they are either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their own financial situation, an increase from 78% in 1998.

When asked if they would be better off in 3 to 5 years, 82% said they were confident or somewhat confident they would be, approximately the same as last year’s 81%. Also, fewer this year than last have cut back their spending due to uncertainties in the economy.

PERSONAL CIVIC INVOLVEMENT

Only 15% of the region’s residents consider themselves active in civic activities. 29% said they were somewhat active; 17% said they were not very active while 40% said they were not active at all.

Over half of the region’s residents, 52%, said they had never contacted an elected official; 32% said they seldom contacted one; 12% said they contacted officials somewhat often while 4% said they often contacted officials.
1996-1999 COMPARISON

This is the fourth annual Civic Confidence Survey. Some interesting changes have occurred in public opinion.

CHIEF PROBLEM

Traffic Congestion and urban sprawl is the chief problem facing the Twin Cities metropolitan area. For the first time since the survey’s inception in 1996 traffic congestion and urban sprawl surpassed crime as the region’s number one problem. Crime is still a widespread concern, but together traffic congestion and urban sprawl represent the biggest challenge for policy makers.”

In 1996 traffic congestion was mentioned by only 8 percent of Twin City residents and urban sprawl was rarely mentioned. By 1998 traffic congestion was mentioned by 10 percent of residents and urban sprawl by 6 percent. During this time, the percent of respondents choosing crime as the chief problem has dropped from 71 percent in 1996 to 27 percent in 1999.

Lack of affordable housing is starting to become an issue. Only 1 percent named this problem in 1998; this year almost 6 percent mentioned this issue, indicating a growing problem.

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 37% 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 1999. Residents of the two core cities have remained 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 is simply 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.
TRAFFIC AND URBAN SPRAWL

24 percent of area residents and the related problem of urban sprawl cited traffic congestion by 9 percent. For the first time since the survey’s inception in 1996 traffic congestion and urban sprawl surpassed crime as the region’s number one problem. These two related problems represent the biggest challenge for policy makers.

In 1996 traffic congestion was mentioned by only 8 percent of Twin City residents and urban sprawl was rarely mentioned. By 1998 traffic congestion was mentioned by 10 percent of residents and urban sprawl by 6 percent.

ECONOMY

For the last two years, a majority of Twin Citians believe the economy is improving (54% in 1999 compared to 28% in 1996). For the first time since the survey’s inception, a majority of people has not reduced their day to day spending due to uncertainty or insecurity about their economic future. Since the metropolitan area economy has been strong for several years, this likely reflects 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 in spite of the very strong economy of the last four years, confidence in the future remains high and unchanged. In each of the four 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.

SATISFACTION WITH PERFORMANCE

Many 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.

The most noticeable change is the satisfaction with administration of welfare programs. This area has improved each year since 1996. In 1996 52% were either satisfied or somewhat satisfied compared to 56% in 1997, 63% in 1998, and 69% in 1999.
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 1999 when asked which level of government Twin Citians trust to do the “right thing” most often, 56% said local government, 35% said state government and 10% 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 people’s estimation. In 1996 54% believed that government officials were responsive to their concerns and needs. By 1998 this had improved to 61%. This improvement has been a steady trend that precedes the election of Jesse Ventura as Governor.

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, 62% in 1998, and 63% in 1999.
Facts about the Confidence Survey

Results are based on a Metropolitan State College of Management poll conducted May 1 to May 15, 1999 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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