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Sac State study: Californians aren’t savvy about local politics, issues

In the first survey of its kind to examine these dynamics in detail, Sacramento State researchers have found that Californians are poorly informed about local politics and have unrealistic expectations when it comes to government spending in their communities.

*Civic Engagement and Local Fiscal Attitudes: 2013 Survey of Californians,* a newly released study from the Policy, Evaluation and Research Consortium at Sacramento State (PERCSS), examines citizens’ understanding of municipal budgeting and how it relates to their attitudes toward taxes and government spending. [Full study](#)

“The Center for California Studies (CCS) commissioned this report to shed some light on a provocative question: Is increased political participation always a good thing? This report reveals that many who participate at the local level don’t have a good understanding of local finance,” says Steve Boilard, the center’s executive director.

“This suggests that the efforts to increase political participation could do more harm than good without equal efforts to increase public understanding of basic budgeting and fiscal issues,” he says.

The CCS commissioned the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at Sacramento State to develop a questionnaire, design a sampling procedure, conduct interviews and analyze the response patterns.

ISR researchers used computer-assisted telephone interviewing techniques to randomly dial 938 adults living in cities and towns across California. The average respondent was 50 years old, had resided in his or her community for two decades, had “some” college experience and earned $49,000 a year. More than half were women, and 53 percent were non-Hispanic whites.

The report’s primary authors are David Barker, ISR director; and Kim Nalder, director of the Project for an Informed Electorate (PIE). CSR, ISR and PIE all are part of the University’s Policy, Evaluation and Research Consortium.

“The lack of policy understanding among the American public has been well-documented at the national level,” Barker says. “Some have suggested, though, that
citizens pay more attention to events closer to home. Our results draw the opposite conclusion, which raises questions, of course, about the functioning of our democratic republic.”

Some of the survey’s more interesting findings:

- Most citizens favor municipal spending on public safety, infrastructure and, to a lesser extent, public enrichment. Far fewer see the value in spending on public employee benefits or economic development.
- In the abstract, about half of the respondents say that balancing the budget is more important than keeping taxes low or services high.
- However, when asked about specifics, 58 percent want increased spending, on balance – but only 4 percent think local taxes are too low.
- Only 1 percent correctly identified all of the following: their community’s approximate sales-tax rate, the biggest-ticket item on which their city or town spends money, whether their city or town has a balanced budget, whether California carried a deficit last year, and whether the state’s budget has improved recently. A full 67 percent got at least three of the items wrong.
- By contrast, 67 percent say they voted in the most recent general election, and 20 percent claim to have contacted a public official in the past 12 months.

Another finding that stands out is the lack of public knowledge regarding municipal spending. In particular, citizens don’t understand the spending responsibilities for each level of government. They were asked to choose which of the following services their city or town spends the most on: public safety, food stamps, Medi-Cal or aid to other California cities.

In fact, public safety is the only municipal responsibility. Just 25 percent of respondents got it right.

“If a majority of the population is confused about the basic division of responsibilities between local, state and national government, as our results show, the expectations and demands made on policymakers may be unrealistic,” Nalder says.

In addition to Barker, Boilard and Nalder, the following individuals contributed to the survey and its analysis: Edward “Ted” Lascher Jr., interim dean of Sac State’s College of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies and a professor of public policy and administration; ISR research analyst Michael Small; and ISR graduate research assistants Kelly Nelson, Theodore Ryan, Meredith Melnick and Paul Bianchi.

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