



Local voices Local PERSPECTIVES

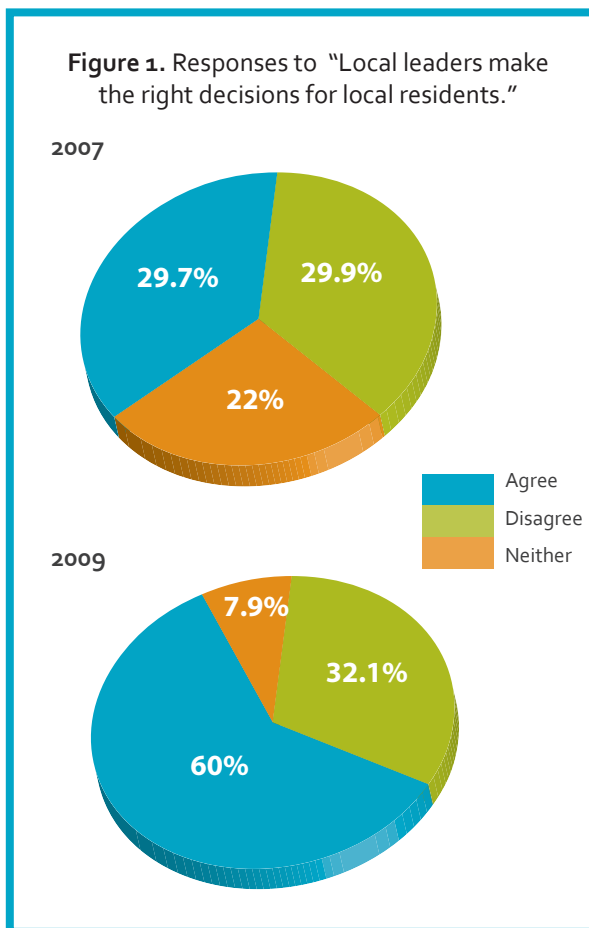
Leadership and Influence in Leflore County, Mississippi

The public's view of leadership and its influence in Leflore County, Mississippi, is the central focus of this brief report. The role that local leaders have in encouraging others to provide input on community decisions and plans is also explored. Among the topics addressed are the amount of trust that people have in their local government officials, the efficiency of officials in handling important community matters, and the degree to which leaders provide an environment that encourages community involvement.

Do Residents Trust Local Leaders?

Critical to maintaining a cohesive community is for local citizens to be able to trust local leaders to make decisions on their behalf. Leflore County residents were asked to respond to the following statement: "Most people in the county trust their local elected officials to make the right decisions for those who live here." 2007 and 2009 survey respondents answered in the following manner (see Figure 1):

- In 2007, there was a nearly equal number of people who disagreed and agreed with this statement. However, slightly more than 1 in 5 persons had no clear opinion on the matter.
- In 2009, the percent of survey respondents who agreed with this statement more than doubled from those in 2007, increasing from 29.7 percent to 60 percent.
- Women surveyed in 2009 were far more likely than men to agree with this statement (71.4 percent versus 47.4 percent). Also, white residents had a greater degree of distrust with local elected officials than African American residents. Over 47 percent of white survey respondents disagreed, while only 27.3 percent of African Americans disagreed.



Do Leaders Keep Local Residents Informed?

Typically, most people want local government officials to be transparent or open about community issues, taking time to communicate their ideas and plans to local residents. When asked to respond to the statement, “Local government leaders do a good job keeping the public informed on issues and how they plan to address these concerns,” the majority of 2007 surveyors disagreed with this statement, while nearly one in three indicated they agreed. See Figure 2.

By 2009, views on this topic had become more positive. In particular, nearly 53 percent of the 2009 survey participants said they believed that local government officials were doing a decent job keeping the public aware of local decisions and plans, an increase of 20 percent from the 2007 study. Individuals in the 2009 study who were most likely to agree that local officials were effective at sharing information on local decisions and plans had less than a high school education, were African American, or were 65 years of age or older.

A related issue that local residents are concerned about is whether leaders in the community genuinely care about them. They were asked to share their reactions to the statement: “The people running my community don’t really care about what happens to me.” See Figure 3.



Most people want local government officials to be transparent or open about community issues.



Figure 2. Responses to “Local government officials share information with the public about decisions and plans.”

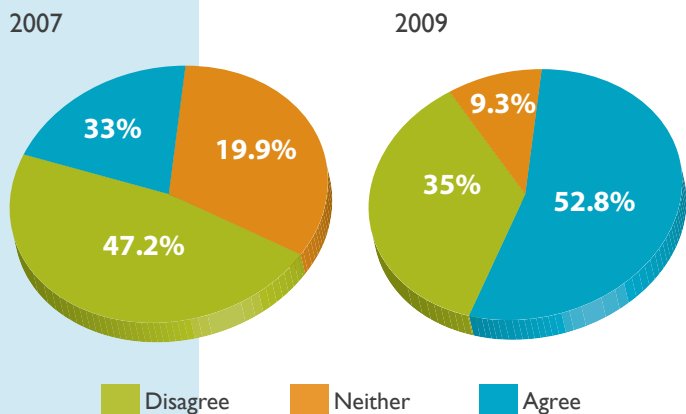


Figure 3. Responses to “People running my community don’t care about what happens to me.”

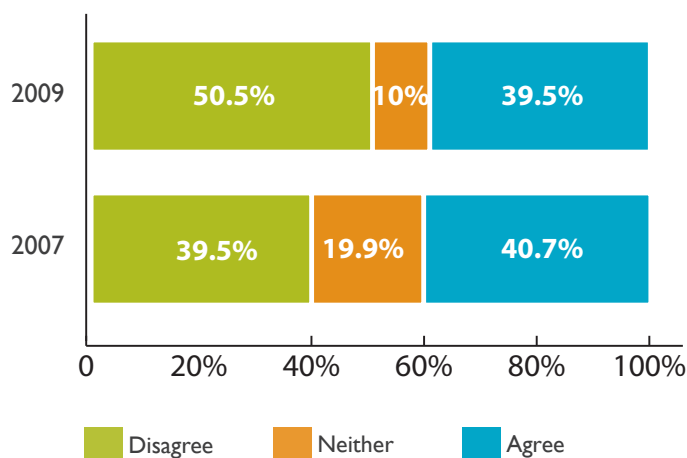


Figure 3 Observations

- Approximately 40 percent of the survey participants in 2007 and 2009 agreed with this statement.
- Those who disagreed with this assertion increased from 39.5 percent in 2007 to 50.5 percent in 2009.

Do Leaders Encourage Others to Become Leaders?

In order for communities to remain vibrant, it is important to continuously expand the number of local residents serving in leadership roles. This does not suggest that current leaders are not effective, but rather that the demands of being a community leader can become burdensome when responsibility is placed upon a select few.

It should be considered, however, that those currently serving in leadership positions in the county are influential in providing the support and encouragement necessary for new people to take on leadership roles. Survey participants were asked to respond to the following statement: "Current community leaders in Leflore County encourage others to become leaders as well." As Figure 4 reveals, approximately 40 percent answered in the affirmative to this statement in 2007, increasing to nearly 61 percent by 2009. The amount who disagreed with this statement remained relatively the same in both surveys at around 30 percent.

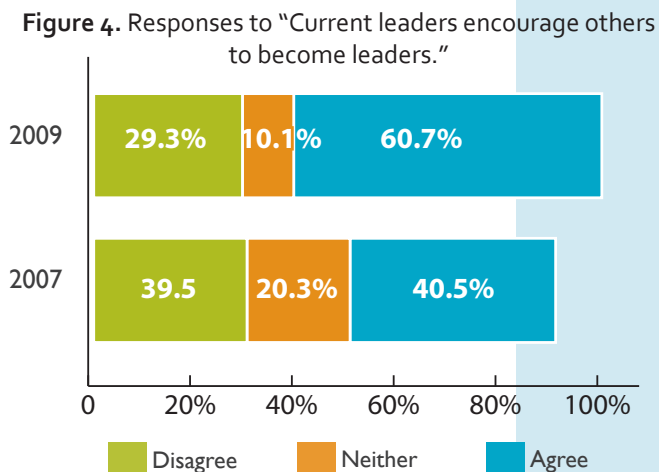


Figure 4 Observations

- Women were more likely than men in the 2009 study to agree that present leaders were supportive of others becoming leaders (67 percent versus 53.4 percent).
- Two of three (66 percent) African Americans agreed, while 46 percent of white respondents agreed.
- Senior citizens showed the largest support for this statement in comparison to those under 65 years of age. Nearly 76 percent of those 65 and over agreed, while support among those 45-64 years of age stood at 56.5 percent.

What Impact do Citizens Have on Local Matters?

It is necessary for local people to have community leaders that they trust to make decisions that are in the best interest of the county. At the same time, strong communities depend on citizens who actively play a role in shaping and guiding decisions on public issues. Yet, in order to take action, community members need to feel they can make a difference. Participants in the countywide surveys were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "Overall, people like me have little impact on important community decisions." See Figure 5 for their responses.



Figure 5. Responses to "People like me have little impact on important community decisions."

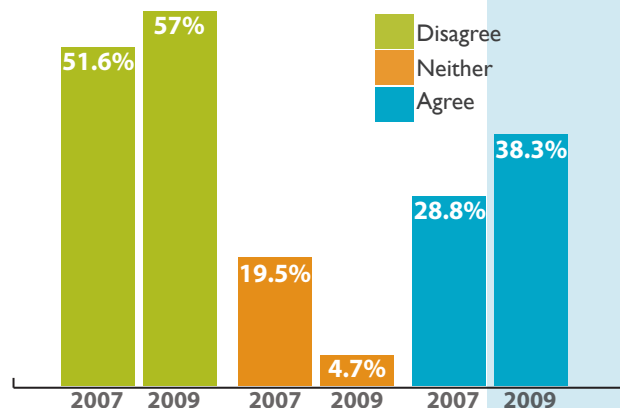


Figure 5 Observations

- Nearly 52 percent of the respondents agreed with this statement in 2007. By 2009, the percent slightly increased to 57 percent.
- Those who disagreed with this statement swelled from 29 percent in 2007 to over 38 percent in 2009.
- Those most likely to embrace the view that they have little influence on local decisions tended to be those with less than a high school education, or in the 45-64 or 65 and over age categories. Notably, 46 percent of respondents 18-44 years of age rejected the notion that they have little influence on important community decisions.

Concluding Comments

Completing two countywide surveys in Leflore County in 2007 and 2009 provided the Center with a rare opportunity to track changes in the quality of



local leadership and the roles that citizens play in influencing community decisions and plans. The results from both 2007 and 2009 suggest that people were relatively confident in the

performance of local government officials and other community leaders. The trust that residents have in local government leaders increased, and they believed that officials were improving their communication of vital information about community issues to the public. Furthermore, the majority of local residents believed their leaders genuinely care about them, though studies revealed that two in five residents did not believe their community leaders had their best interest in mind.

After exploring whether Leflore County residents were encouraged to assume leadership responsibility or express their opinions about local decisions, the results were somewhat assorted. Compared to 2007, more people in 2009 believed that current leaders were receptive and supportive of new individuals assuming

local leadership roles. On the other hand, a majority of residents felt they had little impact on key local decisions.

These results offer three particular recommendations:

- Maintaining the trust of local residents will require efforts by local officials to communicate plans and proposals to these residents regularly. It is important to explore new channels for communicating with citizens, taking full advantage of information technologies and social networking resources that are becoming more accessible to local residents.
- Prior to voting or deciding on important local matters or pursuing community-wide plans, community leaders should host forums, roundtables, focus group meetings, or other appropriate activities in a variety of places and settings in order to attract, engage, and secure input from a wider array of local citizens. In doing so, residents will feel they have been given a chance to weigh in on important community issues.
- Younger people in Leflore County believed they had a key influence on community matters. In order to take advantage of this positive view of their role in the community, efforts to launch a local leadership development program specifically targeted to younger adults could be a good investment that will pay dividends for years to come in Leflore County.



For More Information:
Contact the
Southern Rural Development Center
at 662-325-3207
or visit srcd.msstate.edu.

About these surveys:

The surveys used for this brief were conducted in the fall of 2007 and 2009. Telephone interviews with adult respondents from households in the target counties were conducted using a random digital dialing sampling procedure for telephone numbers.

A total of 400 adult residents took part in the 2007 study and another 400 adults responded to the 2009 survey. The surveys were weighted based on gender, educational attainment, and age groups to ensure they were representative of the adult members of the county (18+ years of age).

Authors: Lionel J. (Bo) Beaulieu and Roberto Gallardo, Southern Rural Development Center, Mississippi State University