Leadership and Influence in Phillips County, Arkansas

In this information brief, the Southern Rural Development Center focuses on the public’s view of local leadership in Phillips County, Arkansas. The information provided is from two countywide surveys of more than 400 adults in Phillips County conducted in the fall of 2007 and two years later in 2009. Among the topics discussed are the degree to which residents trust local elected officials as well as the role leaders take in encouraging others to offer input concerning important community issues.

Do Residents Trust Local Leaders?

Trusting the decisions that leaders make on behalf of local citizens is critical to maintaining a cohesive community. Local 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.” Below are the survey respondents’ reactions to this statement. See Figure 1.

- In 2007, nearly 45 percent of residents disagreed/strongly disagreed with this assertion, while one third agreed/strongly agreed.
- The percent of survey respondents who agreed/strongly agreed with this statement increased from 32.5 percent in 2007 to 45.6 percent in 2009. On the other hand, residents who disagreed/strongly disagreed increased from 44.6 percent in 2007 to 47.8 percent in 2009.
- Women surveyed in 2009 were more likely than men to agree with this statement (47.9 percent versus 41.9 percent). White residents had a greater level of distrust with local elected officials than did African American residents. Specifically, more than 70 percent of white survey respondents disagreed, while only 30 percent of African Americans disagreed.
Do Leaders Keep Local Residents Informed?

It is safe to say that most people want local government officials to be straight-forward about public issues that are being discussed and to communicate their ideas and plans with 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 respondents (54.4 percent) in the 2007 survey disagreed with this assertion, while nearly 27 percent stated they agreed/strongly agreed. See Figure 2.

By 2009, views concerning this topic had improved. Residents that agreed/strongly agreed with this statement increased from 27 percent in 2007 to almost 42 percent in 2009. The proportion who stated they disagreed, on the other hand, remained fairly stable (54 percent in 2007 to 52 percent in 2009). Also, more than half of the residents in 2007 and 2009 felt that the local elected officials did not do a good job keeping the public informed about key decisions and plans. Individuals who tended to be the most critical of these officials were those with less than a high school education or were African American.

A related issue is whether those who are involved in running the community truly care about their fellow residents. Local residents were asked to share their reactions to the statement, “The people running my community don’t really care about what happens to me.” Just under 48 percent of participants in the 2007 agreed/strongly agreed with this statement, and by 2009, this figure had risen to 57.7 percent. Those who disagreed/strongly disagreed with this assertion increased slightly between 2007 and 2009 – from 31.5 percent to 34.1 percent. See Figure 3.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do Leaders Encourage Others to Become Leaders?

In order for communities to remain vibrant, it is important to 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 the degree to which existing leaders seek to encourage others to assume leadership roles is highly influential. Current leaders have the power to either impede the emergence of new leaders or provide an environment welcoming to them. Thus, survey participants were asked to respond to the following statement: “Current community leaders in Phillips County encourage others to become leaders as well.” As Figure 4 displays, nearly 39 percent answered in the affirmative on this item in 2007, with this figure improving modestly to 46.1 percent by 2009. However, those who disagreed with this statement increased from 38.6 percent to 49.3 percent.

What Impact do Citizens Have on Local Matters?

It is necessary to have local leaders who can be trusted to make decisions that are in the best interest of the community. At the same time, strong communities depend on citizens who feel they can play an active role in shaping and guiding decisions concerning the public issues that are most important to them. 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.” The table to the right depicts their responses. See Figure 5.

Figure 4. Responses to “Current leaders encourage others to become leaders.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4 Observations
- Residents with less than a high school education were more likely than those with a bachelor’s degree or more to agree that present leaders are supportive of others becoming leaders (56.5 percent versus 34.1 percent).
- More than half of African Americans (51.3 percent) agreed with this statement, while only 38.3 percent of white residents felt this way.
- Senior citizens were more likely than those between 18 and 44 years old to agree that present leaders are supportive of others becoming leaders (68.4 percent versus 38.3 percent).

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5 Observations
- Over 46 percent of the respondents agreed with this statement in the 2007 survey. In the 2009 study, the proportion of people who felt this way increased dramatically to 72.2 percent.
- On the other hand, the percent that disagreed with this statement slipped from 29 percent in 2007 to 24 percent in 2009.
- Those most inclined to believe they have little influence on local matters were 18-44 years of age, white residents, and those with lower levels of education (that is, less than high school or a high school education only).
Concluding Comments

Completing two countywide surveys in Phillips County in 2007 and 2009 provided the Center with a unique opportunity to track changes in the perceived quality of the local leadership and the roles that citizens feel they are playing in influencing community decisions and priorities. The results suggest that people felt better about the performance of local government officials and other community leaders in 2009 than they did in 2007. At the same time, a notable portion of residents (47.8 percent) still did not fully trust decisions that local elected officials were making in the county.

The trust that Phillips County residents have in their local government leaders had improved, along with the belief that elected government officials were doing a better job communicating vital information on community issues to the public. However, a significant percent remained skeptical about local leaders. Nearly half said that local elected officials could not be trusted to make the right decisions for the community, while an even larger percent (over 52 percent) believed that officials were failing to keep local residents informed of key decisions and plans. To make matters worse, nearly 58 percent in the 2009 survey felt that those running the community did not really care about local residents. Without question, the surveys captured an undercurrent of discontent regarding the leadership of Phillips County.

When exploring whether the climate in Phillips County encouraged people to take on leadership responsibilities or to have a say on important local decisions, the results continued to present reason for concern. Almost half of those taking part in the 2009 survey believed that current leaders were not receptive or supportive of new individuals taking on local leadership roles. At the same time, more than 72 percent felt citizens were not likely to have any impact on key local decisions. Responses to these two topics suggested that people felt alienated from the local decision-making process and most felt powerless in their capacity to do anything about it.

After analyzing these results, the Center has offered two recommendations:

• Local officials should examine outlets to build stronger ties with local residents, and enhancing communication activities with these individuals would be an important first step. Most people are concerned with what is going on in the community and desire the opportunity to weigh in on important local issues. Perhaps having a series of community/neighborhood roundtables, focus groups, or citizen forums would be effective venues for residents to provide input.

• A significant percent of residents did not believe new people were getting the encouragement needed to become leaders in Phillips County. Finding avenues to build the new generation of leaders in the county is important. If leadership programs exist in the county now, it may be worthwhile reaching out to a broader array of people to be part in the program. If community leadership programs are not in place, trying to get one off the ground may be worthy of serious consideration. But other avenues for getting people involved in the community should also be explored. Exploring the use of citizen forums would be a fruitful outlet for expanding the involvement of local citizens in analyzing, deliberating and acting on local issues that concern them.

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).

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