The National Center for the Study of Counties, in partnership with NACo, is a focal point for the study of practical issues important to county government. It brings together research and outreach activities relating to counties, their governance, and public policy issues of significance to county governments not only in Georgia but nationwide.

The University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute of Government is addressing the changing needs of counties through the National Center for the Study of Counties. This initiative is the nation’s first university-based center of its kind in the United States.

Local Perspectives
A Report from the National Survey of County Elected Officials, 2008

Richard L. Clark
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Prepared in cooperation with
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INTRODUCTION

County governments are the providers of the basic core services for millions of Americans. While the size, structure, focus, and geographic location of county governments vary across the nation, they all have a common factor: the elected officials are likely closer to the citizens they represent than those elected to serve at the state and federal levels of government. However, little information exists about county elected officials and their views on issues affecting their own counties and the nation as a whole.

The National Survey of County Elected Officials—conducted by the National Association of Counties (NACo) and the National Center for the Study of Counties (NCSC) at the University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute of Government—is the broadest effort to measure the opinions and views of those who have been elected to run America’s counties. This poll, first conducted in 2004 and now in its fifth year, paints a portrait of county elected officials and measures their collective viewpoints on the health of America’s counties and on current issues that affect the lives of the people they serve.

As part of this ongoing effort, NCSC polled a random sample of 500 county elected officials in May 2008. The interviews were conducted by phone by National Research Inc. in Washington, D.C., and the data were processed and analyzed by the Survey Research Unit at the Carl Vinson Institute of Government. Any inferences drawn from the data are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of either NACo or NCSC.

There are several major findings from the 2008 survey:

- A majority of county elected officials view either the economy or fuel prices as the most important problem for the United States. A majority cited fuel and utility costs, along with decreases in federal and state funding and infrastructure, as the biggest impediments to counties’ economic growth.
- The percentage of county elected officials who said that the United States is heading in the right direction is at its lowest point in the poll’s history.
- For the first time since the poll began, there is not a majority of county officials who believe their county’s economic conditions are getting better.
- Optimism about economic conditions at the national and county level has drastically decreased among Republican county elected officials.
- The general public is more likely than county officials to be concerned about the possibility of technical issues affecting electronic voting machines, whether those issues originate accidentally or intentionally.
FINDINGS

Problems Facing the Nation and Counties

High gas prices and a troubled economy are very much on the minds of county officials. Thirty-seven percent of respondents cited the economy as the most important problem facing the United States, and another 21 percent cited energy, fuel, and oil costs as the most important problem. This shows a pronounced shift in the views of respondents, to seeing economic issues as most important in 2008 from concern over national security issues in the 2007 poll. Whereas 43 percent of county officials cited Iraq, terrorism, and national security as the most important problem in 2007, only 9 percent named either Iraq or national security as the most important problem in 2008.

Similarly, the general public is increasingly concerned about the economy. A CBS News poll found that 34 percent of the general population cited the economy and jobs and 16 percent cited gas and heating oil prices as the most important problems facing the nation. However, the general public (15 percent) was more concerned than county officials about the War in Iraq.1

After the economy and fuel prices, no other single issue approached similar levels of importance to county officials. In fact, no other single issue was cited by more than 6 percent of county officials. Along with Iraq, poor healthcare (5 percent) and government performance (6 percent) were the only issues named by 5 percent or more of county officials.

As for problems facing county governments in general, 35 percent named revenue generation and tax issues as the most important. A similar percentage (39 percent) named revenue generation in the 2007 poll. Other important problems for county governments that were named are unfunded mandates by the state and federal governments (16 percent), county budget issues (12 percent), and the economy and jobs (10 percent). No other issues were named by more than 5 percent of county officials.

In identifying important issues affecting their own counties, 23 percent of officials cited the economy and jobs, with infrastructure (19 percent) and revenue generation and tax issues (17 percent) close behind. An additional 13 percent cited county budget issues. It is interesting to note that 16 percent of officials named unfunded mandates as a problem for counties in general, while only 6 percent named it for their county specifically.

The Political Mood of County Officials

“Pessimistic” describes the mood of county officials in 2008, with many of the measures of political mood seeing their most negative results in the poll’s five-year history. For example, 70 percent of county elected officials in 2008 said that the direction of the United States was off on the wrong track, compared with 55 percent in 2007 and 50 percent in 2006 (see Figure 1). In contrast, only 20 percent thought the country was heading in the right direction in 2008. Nonetheless, for the fifth consecutive year, county officials were more optimistic than the general population about the direction of the nation; a CBS News poll found that a mere 14 percent of the general public said that the nation was headed in the right direction, and 83 percent said it was off on the wrong track.2

Previous years’ polls of county elected officials show differences along party lines in terms of political mood, and 2008 is no different. Thirty-four percent of Republicans believe the nation is headed in the right direction, compared with only 9 percent of Democrats and
Among Democrats, 85 percent viewed the United States as on the wrong track, compared with 73 percent of Independents and 55 percent of Republicans (see Figure 2).

Pessimism among Republican officials regarding the direction of the nation continues to grow. In 2008, 55 percent of Republicans believed that the United States is off on the wrong track, compared to only 34 percent in 2007. This is in stark contrast to the 14 percent who thought the nation was off on the wrong track in 2005. A decline in optimism is also present, as 34 percent of Republicans believed the country is heading in the right direction, compared to 56 percent in 2007 and 78 percent in 2005 (see Figure 3).

The Economic Mood of County Officials

As for current national economic conditions, 81 percent of county officials rated the conditions as either fair or poor, which represents a dramatic 33 percentage point increase from 2007 poll results. The percentage of county officials rating economic conditions as fair or poor is similar to that of the general population, where 78 percent considered the current national economy as fairly bad or very bad. When county elected officials are broken out by party affiliation, 70 percent of Republicans rated conditions as either fair or poor, in contrast with 90 percent of Democrats. Conversely, 30 percent of Republicans rated economic conditions as either excellent or good, while only 9 percent of Democrats and 14 percent of Independents shared this view. Once again, Republican optimism is waning. The 30 percent of Republicans citing excellent or good economic conditions in 2008 is down by 48 percentage points from just one year ago, and by 58 percentage points from 2005.

When asked about economic conditions in their own county, 38 percent of officials rated conditions as either excellent or good, a drop from 49 percent in 2007 and 55 percent in 2006. Additionally, more Republicans rated their county’s economy more favorably than they rated the national economy for the first time in the five-year history of the poll.
However, the 49 percent rating their county’s economy as either excellent or good is down from 57 percent in 2007. Twenty-eight percent of Democrats rated their respective county economy as excellent or good in 2008, down from 40 percent in 2007, and Independents rating them excellent or good dropped to 41 percent in 2008 from 50 percent in 2007. However, as Figure 4 shows, county officials’ assessment of economic conditions in their own counties had a much less severe decline than did their assessment of national economic conditions.
Another sign of economic trouble is that, for the first time in the survey's five year history, there was not a majority of officials who believe their county's economic conditions are getting better (see Figure 5). In 2008, 52 percent of county officials said that economic conditions in their respective counties are getting worse, as opposed to only 29 percent in 2007. Only 30 percent believe their county is getting better economically, significantly down from 52 percent in 2007. Taking party affiliations into account, a plurality of Republicans (48 percent) and Independents (46 percent) and a majority of Democrats...
(58 percent) viewed their county economy as getting worse. Black county officials (52 percent) were much more likely than white county officials (29 percent) to say that their county’s economic conditions were getting better. This is interesting because black county officials (93 percent) were also much more likely than white county officials (59 percent) to rate their own county’s economic conditions as fair or poor.

The percentage of officials claiming they had more difficulty in balancing their county’s budget this year than in past years rose to 49 percent, up from 40 percent in 2007 and 37 percent in 2006 (see Figure 6). In addition, 6 percent claimed that balancing the budget is easier than in years past, a decrease from 2007 (11 percent) and 2006 (18 percent). Forty-three percent of county elected officials said that balancing the budget was about the same in terms of difficulty as in years past.

Based on attitudes about the national and county-level economic conditions, it is no surprise that the ratings of county fiscal health declined to a mean of 6.35 (on a scale of 1–10), down from 6.63 in 2007 and 6.86 in 2006—a small but statistically significant difference ($t = 2.875, p < 0.004$). As in 2006, fiscal health was strongest in the Northeast, where 63 percent rated fiscal health 7 or higher, although that number is down from 81 percent. Ratings of 7 or higher in other regions include 56 percent in the South, 50 percent in the Midwest, and 40 percent in the West. It is interesting to note that for both national and county economic conditions, the most pessimistic assessments were offered by officials in the Northeast. Yet officials in the Northeast offered the highest ratings of county fiscal health and were least likely to report increased difficulty in balancing the budget.

When asked to name the greatest threat to county fiscal health, the economy in general (15 percent) was the top response. Growth and increased demand for services, healthcare, and loss of jobs were each cited by 14 percent of respondents, with the cost of energy and fuel prices cited by 11 percent of county officials.
When officials rated their own county’s fiscal health 5 or lower, 52 percent stated that their county had raised taxes and fees, with 40 percent reducing the level of county services, 34 percent reducing the size of government, and 30 percent eliminating some county services. Officials in the South were the least likely to undertake these measures. For those officials rating their county’s fiscal health 6 or higher, 50 percent stated that their county had increased the level of services and 40 percent added new services, with officials in the South and West being most likely to do so.

County elected officials are more likely to have cooperative relationships with municipal governments (80 percent) than with state governments (66 percent), a trend that continues from previous years of this survey. Interestingly, officials in the Northeast were last among the four regions in terms of cooperative relations with the state, but they were first in terms of cooperative relations with municipalities. Among county officials, 80 percent believed that their state hinders the county’s revenue-raising ability either significantly or some. Nearly all officials (96 percent) stated that their county school board is distinct from county government, with 81 percent of officials reporting a cooperative relationship among the two entities.

Economic Issues

County elected officials are only slightly more likely than the general public to characterize the current national economy as in recession. Seventy-four percent of county officials said that the economy is in a recession, with Democrats (89 percent) being much more likely than Republicans (56 percent) to believe that there is a recession (see Figure 7). Meanwhile, 71 percent of the general public shares this view. For those county officials who feel that the economy is in a recession, the most frequently cited cause of recession is the cost of energy (42 percent). Other common responses included the war in Iraq (11 percent), government spending and national debt (10 percent), and unemployment and loss of jobs (9 percent).

**Figure 7. Is the United States in a Recession?**
As for the federal government’s stimulus package, 74 percent of county officials believe that the economic stimulus checks being sent to American households will make no difference in the economy. Similarly, 79 percent of the general public believed the stimulus checks (and tax breaks) will not be enough to avoid or soften the recession.5

More elected officials are likely to view their counties as growing economically (52 percent) than as declining (15 percent), with 33 percent saying that their county is neither growing nor shrinking. Officials in the South and Midwest were more likely to characterize their counties as growing. When county officials were asked about what impedes economic growth, six obstacles were cited by more than 80 percent: high fuel costs (98 percent), cuts in state funding (94 percent), cuts in federal funding (90 percent), high utility costs (88 percent), a lack of needed infrastructure (82 percent), and deteriorating infrastructure (82 percent) (see Figure 8).

The prevalence of these obstacles varied to some degree by region. For example, a loss or decline of key industry, high utility costs, and housing market decline were more of a problem in the Northeast than for the other three regions’ officials, but northeastern officials were less likely than officials in other regions to cite educational challenges as being an obstacle to growth. A lack of needed infrastructure and deteriorating infrastructure were much larger obstacles in the West than in other regions. Officials in the South were more likely than their counterparts in other regions to cite crime as an obstacle.

As for enabling economic growth, 90 percent or more of county officials named four outcomes that will lead to either a great deal of or some economic growth: bringing in new business or industry (97 percent), increased number of jobs (94 percent), cheap and reliable energy sources (93 percent), and improvements to infrastructure (90 percent). Another four outcomes were cited by more than 80 percent of officials: job skills training programs (89 percent) and improvements to educational systems (86 percent), with improvements to transportation systems and reduced healthcare costs cited by 85 percent each (see Figure 9).

The economic situation has placed some financial pressures on county governments. With local taxes as major funding sources for county governments, tax issues are at the forefront of the economic crisis for counties. Nonetheless, 75 percent of officials said that they were not budgeting for a reduction in property tax revenue for FY 2009. Of the 20 percent who responded that they were, options for offsetting property tax revenue reduction include increasing other taxes and fees (46 percent), reducing services (45 percent), dipping into rainy day funds (38 percent), combining tax increases with reduction of services (34 percent), and increasing property tax rates (21 percent).

**Election Issues**

The recent primaries and preparations for the 2008 general election provide a rich opportunity to measure election and voting attitudes of county officials. When asked what level of government is responsible for running general elections, 52 percent of county officials believed it to be the responsibility of local government, with 33 percent citing state government and 13 percent citing the federal level. Fifty-eight percent also believed that local governments ought to be running elections. When asked about the funding of elections, however, 51 percent of county officials said that funding should come from state government, 22 percent said that the federal government should fund elections, and 21 percent said that elections should be funded by local governments. Anecdotally, there have been stories
about the difficulty in staffing precincts on election day, but 67 percent of county officials in our survey reported no difficulty in finding volunteers to work during elections.

The role of local governments in running elections gives county officials a unique perspective on the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002, which attempts to address pressing issues that plagued the 2000 election cycle. When asked how well HAVA addressed these voting issues, 72 percent of county officials said that HAVA did either a fair or poor job, with only 17 percent saying that HAVA has done an excellent or good job in addressing election problems. It is interesting to note that a full 7 percent of county elected officials were not familiar with HAVA.
A major reason for the passage of HAVA was the lack of uniformity in voting mechanisms employed across the nation. Since the election of 2002, many states and localities have moved to electronic voting machines—often replacing punch cards and paper ballots. Among county officials, the preferred voting forms are fully electronic (45 percent) and optiscan paper ballots (35 percent). Nonetheless, county officials are divided as to what form of voting works best, with the sharpest divides seen on a regional basis. Lever machines were viewed as best by 57 percent of officials in the Northeast, with no other region expressing more than an 11 percent preference for this form. Fully electronic machines were preferred by 62 percent of southern officials, with no other region higher than 39 percent. And at 53 percent, midwestern officials were the leading proponents of optiscan paper ballots.

With electronic voting machines come the complexity of technical issues, and advocates and researchers have spent a good deal of energy debating the potential for fraud and unintentional technical malfunctioning with electronic voting systems. The 2008 survey asked county officials to speculate on the likelihood of either problem. Forty-nine percent of county elected officials believe that accidental technical problems are either very likely or somewhat likely to occur, and 39 percent believe that purposeful engineering by hackers or partisans are either very or somewhat likely to occur. In line with the concern for technical problems—either accidental or purposive—79 percent believe that there should be a paper record for electronic voting machines.

When broken out by party affiliation, 56 percent of Democrats compared with 34 percent of Republicans believed that accidental problems will affect electronic voting machines. Additionally, 49 percent of Democrats and 31 percent of Republicans believed that problems caused on purpose will affect electronic voting machines. Among Democrats, 85 percent believed there should be a paper record of electronic voting machines, along with 70 percent of Republicans.
In contrast to the officials, 61 percent of the general public told a CNN poll in late 2006 that accidental technical problems were likely, while 66 percent of the general public said that technical issues created on purpose were likely. Clearly the public is less sanguine about electronic voting than are county elected officials.

With every election season, public officials and scholars raise concerns over declining voter turnout. Although the 2008 general election is predicted to have a high turnout, since 1968 turnout in presidential elections has never exceeded 56 percent of those eligible to vote; turnout in off years is generally much lower. County officials were read a list of possible explanations for low voter turnout and asked to rate each as a major, minor, or no reason for low turnout (see Figure 10). Apathy was cited by 99 percent of county elected officials as either a major or minor reason for low voter turnout. Ninety-five percent said that people do not believe their vote makes a difference. Fewer than half of the survey respondents believe that the limited hours of polling places is a factor in low turnout.

When explanations for low voter turnout are broken out by party affiliation, there are major differences around three reasons. Voter registration and ID requirements was cited by 70 percent of Democrats as compared with 50 percent of Republicans. This issue has become a national debate with the recent Supreme Court decision on the Indiana ID requirement. That people do not believe their vote makes a difference was cited by 79 percent of Democrats, compared with 67 percent of Republicans. In spite of these issues, most county officials continue to believe that U.S. democracy works well and needs either no change or minor changes. In 2008, 78 percent of county officials held this view, a figure similar to what was found in past surveys.

**Figure 10.** County Elected Officials’ Views on Reasons for Low Voter Turnout

![Bar chart showing reasons for low voter turnout](chart.png)
When broken out by race, a number of differences were seen among the reasons for low voter turnout. As an example of the current voter ID debate, 84 percent of black officials cited an undue burden created by registration and voter ID requirements, compared with 58 percent of white officials. Eighty-eight percent of black officials said that people not believing that their vote makes a difference was a major reason for low turnout, while 62 percent of whites said the same. A lack of citizen trust in the voting system was cited by 61 percent of black officials and only 16 percent of white officials.

A number of states also allow voters to cast ballots prior to election day in what is known as early voting. Thirty-four percent of county officials labeled early voting as a necessity, 48 percent said it is a convenience, and 18 percent said it is unnecessary. Democrats (43 percent) were more likely than Republicans (27 percent) to say that it is a necessity. Additionally, black officials (61 percent) were much more likely than white officials (31 percent) to describe it as a necessity.

**DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF COUNTY ELECTED OFFICIALS**

In 2008, county officials have served an average (mean) of 12.4 years in county government generally, with an average (mean) of 8.6 years in their current position. They spend an average of 29.7 hours per week on the job, even though 69 percent of county officials’ positions are considered part-time. Of those part-time county officials, 52 percent reported having another job, with 49 percent of those owning their own business, 16 percent working for a private company, and 14 percent working in another government job. Full-time county officials were most common in the West (50 percent) and least common in the Midwest (17 percent).

As in past surveys, the number of county officials who self-identify as political conservatives greatly exceeded the number of those who consider themselves to be political liberals. In 2007, 58 percent of county elected officials described themselves as conservative, compared with just 12 percent who labeled themselves as liberal. In 2008, 58 percent self-described as conservative, with 13 percent labeling themselves as liberal. Twenty-nine percent considered their political views as middle-of-the-road. In all four regions of the nation, county officials overwhelmingly claimed conservative political views, with 44 percent in the Northeast, 61 percent in the South, 56 percent in the Midwest, and 59 percent in the West. White officials (61 percent) are more much more likely to be conservative than black officials (19 percent), whereas black officials (42 percent) are more likely to be liberal than white officials (10 percent). Thirty-nine percent of black officials claimed middle-of-the-road political views, in comparison to 29 percent of white officials. Men (61 percent) are also more likely to be conservative than women (43 percent). For percentages of 2008 respondents by political affiliation, gender, race, and age, see Figures 11, 12, 13, and 14, respectively.

**METHODOLOGY**

The sampling procedure for the 2008 poll is identical to the procedure used in the four previous years. NACo provided a nearly complete list of county elected officials from which two separate sampling strata were created: one of elected officials from counties with a population of 50,000 and another of elected officials from counties with a population of 50,000 or greater. Because 63 percent of all county elected officials in the nation are from counties of fewer than 50,000 people, 63 percent of the sample was drawn from that strata; the other 37 percent came from the strata of elected officials from larger counties. Thus, every commissioner in the sample frame (the list provided by NACo) had an equal prob-
ability of being selected into the sample, and the final sample was certain to have balance in respect to county size. Sampling elected officials from each stratum was completely randomized within the framework described above.

The 2008 sample was drawn from a database of 19,097 records, each representing a distinct county commissioner. Given the size of the population of commissioners, researchers are 95 percent confident that any frequency figure reported for the entire sample is within 4 percent of the figure for the true population. Of course, sampling error is only one potential source of survey error, but all reasonable precautions have been taken throughout the study to minimize error sources.

After comparing the distribution of sample respondents with the total distribution of county elected officials by the four census regions, the survey data were weighted slightly to obtain a more accurate representation of the population of county elected officials nationally.

**Figure 11. Political Affiliation**

- Democrat 42%
- Republican 42%
- Independent 13%
- Other 3%

**Figure 12. Gender**

- Female 18%
- Male 82%

**Figure 13. Race**

- White 88%
- Black 6%
- Hispanic 3%
- Other 3%

**Figure 14. Age of County Elected Officials, 2008 (Average Age = 61)**

- 45 and under 7%
- 46 to 55 19%
- 56 to 65 38%
- 66 and older 36%
Notes


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