The State of County Councils in South Carolina

County councils play an important role in governance in South Carolina, but the public, politicians, and academics know little about how county council members feel about participation in local government, the problems facing their counties, and the nature of state-county government relations. To understand more about these topics, the Institute for Leadership and Public Policy (ILPP) at Coastal Carolina University put out a short survey to county councils to get a sense of how county council members felt about these and other topics.

Based on the 79 surveys that were returned, either by mail or via an online survey site, it was found that:

- Respondents were unanimous in stating that the county receives too little funding from the state to handle local issues (78 respondents).
  - However, only 46.8% (36 of 77) said the same about funding for their own district when it came to funding from the county (33.8% said the right amount, 17.9% said it was “Not Applicable,” and 2.6% said too much).

- Additionally, 52.6% of respondents (41 of 78) answered that most state lawmakers do not care about county governments. Only 20.5% (16 of 78) said that they did, with an additional 26.9% saying either maybe or not sure (21 of 78).

- This might help to explain why 70.5% of respondents (55 of 78) believed county governments should be given more control over policy in the state.

- Yet, 49.4% (48 of 77) responded that state government relies too much on county governments (and their agencies) when implementing policy; 39% (30 of 77) felt that counties were used too little in implementing policy.

- When asked how to improve how government operates in South Carolina, the majority of those who wrote a response cited a need to a.) eliminate unfunded mandates and/or b.) emphasize Home Rule.
  - Other concerns raised included eliminating partisan ballots for county offices, the nature of county elections (single member- versus multimember-districts), and the size of county councils.

- The four most pressing policy concerns for county governments, identified from a list provided in the survey, were the economy, followed by education, and crime and taxes (tied).
Finally, 84.8% of council members would like residents to be more active in county politics, even though 70.9% of council members believe the public pays either some (33 of 79) or a lot (16 of 79) of attention to county government. The primary way that residents contact council members is via the telephone (75.9% of members said this, or 60 of 79).

What do these findings suggest?

County council members, regardless of political party, seem to want either a.) more state money to help finance state-level mandates and/or b.) fewer unfunded state mandates. Yet, the council members were more divided when it came to the state using county governments and agencies to implement policy; a strong minority believed that counties were used too little. Therefore, it appears that county council members are conflicted over the best solution to the problems concerning the relationship between state and county governments. At the very least, many of the comments either implicitly or explicitly called for better communication, and perhaps even mandatory meetings, between state and county officials. In light of the concerns raised in this survey, and the majority believing that state government does not care about county governments, better channels of communication are needed between elected officials at these two levels.

Additionally, county council members would like to see more active participation on the part of the public, especially since most council members believe that the public pays at least some attention to county government. One council member suggested more community meetings, with the goal of explaining the political process to the public and providing information about where money comes from to fund projects. This appears to be, in some ways, like the concern above: doing better jobs of communicating with the public and with state lawmakers are seen as critical to improving the perceptions citizens and politicians have of county governments in the state.

(For more information about the survey’s administration, please see the Appendix that is posted to the website at [INSERT LINK HERE] or Dr. Adam Chamberlain at achamber@coastal.edu.)