

# 2012 National Survey of County Elected Officials: Opinions from the Front Lines of Local Government

July 2012



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## Overview of Survey

A recent report from the Pew Research Center shows that partisan differences have dramatically increased within the general public over the past decade. The authors write, “As Americans head to the polls this November, their values and basic beliefs are more polarized along partisan lines than at any point in the past 25 years.”<sup>1</sup> Given this finding, it would not be surprising to see partisanship thriving among county elected officials as well—and indeed, we do. While it was once common for local government officials to see local issues apart from partisan differences, it is becoming increasingly more common to see national partisan debates played out at the local level.

In addition to partisan pressures, counties are also facing major changes to county structure due to the fallout from the economic downturn that began in late 2008. A NACo report finds, “As this slowdown drags on, counties have made increasingly more severe – or long term in nature – budget adjustments to try to adopt balanced budgets and still maintain mandated service deliveries. As a result, counties appear to be settling into the ‘new normal’ of revenue, staffing and service delivery levels.”<sup>2</sup> Counties have had to adapt to the “new normal” according to this study. Combined, these factors – partisanship and fiscal constraints – may be reshaping county government and county elected officials for the long term. This report explores the viewpoints of county elected officials today to understand how these leaders feel about the changing circumstances.

From June 1 to June 18, 2012, the ninth iteration of the National Survey of County Elected Officials polled a random sample of 501 county elected officials on issues related to the economy, budgets, and politics. The survey instrument was developed at the Castleton Polling Institute, in coordination with the Carl Vinson Institute of Government and the National Association of Counties (NACo). The interviews were conducted by telephone by National Research, LLC, in Washington, D.C., and the data were processed and analyzed by the Castleton Polling Institute, Castleton, Vermont.

### **The major findings from the 2012 survey include the following:**

- Two-thirds of county elected officials believe that the political direction of the United States is generally on the wrong track.
- Views of the national economy remain largely unchanged since 2009, although views of the local economy have steadily improved over the past two years, and individual assessments of counties’ fiscal health are at their highest rating since 2006.

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<sup>1</sup> Kohut, Andrew, et al. “Trends in American Values: 1987-2012: Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years.” A report from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. June 4, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Byers, Jacqueline. “Coping with the New Normal: An Economic Status Survey of Counties.” A report from the National Association of Counties. October, 2011.

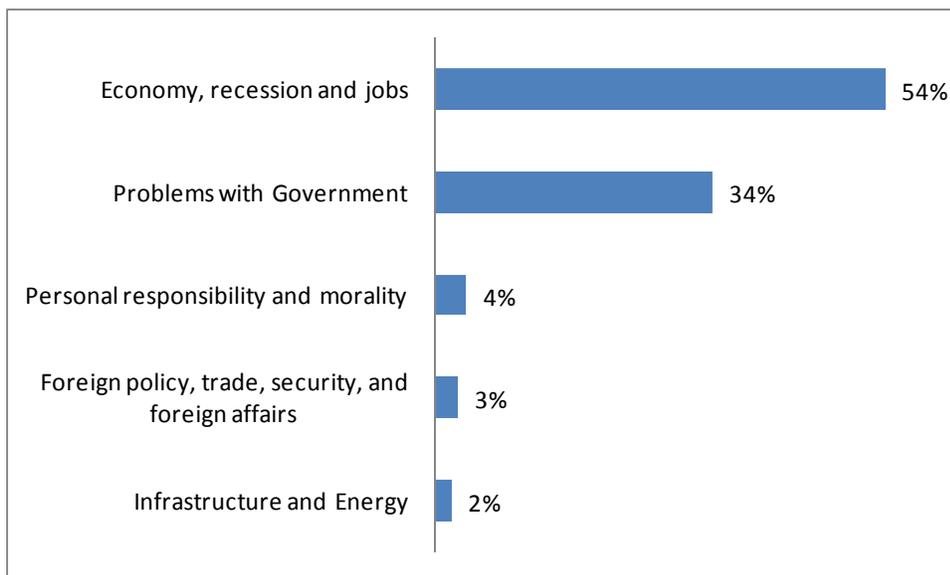
- Although a plurality of county elected officials does not believe that fees-for-service is an appropriate model for funding county services, a larger majority favors providing services through contracts with private sector firms.
- County officials seem generally upbeat about careers in county government. While they are divided about how concerned they are that they will be able to replace the skills of retiring county employees, a vast majority say that they would encourage young adults to seek careers in local government.
- In general, county elected officials believe that their constituents understand some, but not a lot, about county government, and they give public schools poor marks for educating students about civics and the role of local government.
- While there is a growing sense that partisanship is a greater problem at the national level today than in the past, a majority believe that partisanship among county elected officials is not a problem.
- County elected officials have become more Republican over the past 5 years, from 40 percent in 2007 to 52 percent in 2012.

This report looks in detail at the responses to the 2012 National Survey of County Elected Officials. While the reporting is based on the collected data, all inferences and interpretations thereof are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of NACo or other partners.

## Views of the Nation

County elected officials see the economy and joblessness as the most important problem facing the nation today, with concerns about the national government's ability to function effectively close behind. Fifty-four percent of those polled in 2012 referenced the economy, jobs, or the recession in response to an open-ended inquiry about the most important problem facing the United States today. In the South, that percent was 61 percent.

Figure 1. County Elected Officials' Responses to the Most Important Problem Facing the Nation



Concern about government ineptitude was greatest, not surprisingly, among Independents (42 percent), although it was the second most often response from both Republicans (39 percent) and Democrats (24 percent) as well. In many cases, the failure of government was attributed to gridlock, partisanship, or a general inability of the national government to rise to the challenges facing our nation. One county elected official—a Democrat from the Midwest—stated it this way: “Parties are too partisan. Unless we come to work as a team we cannot fix the problems we have.” For some Republican respondents, the problem with government rested squarely with the President, while other respondents cited Congress or the federal government in general.

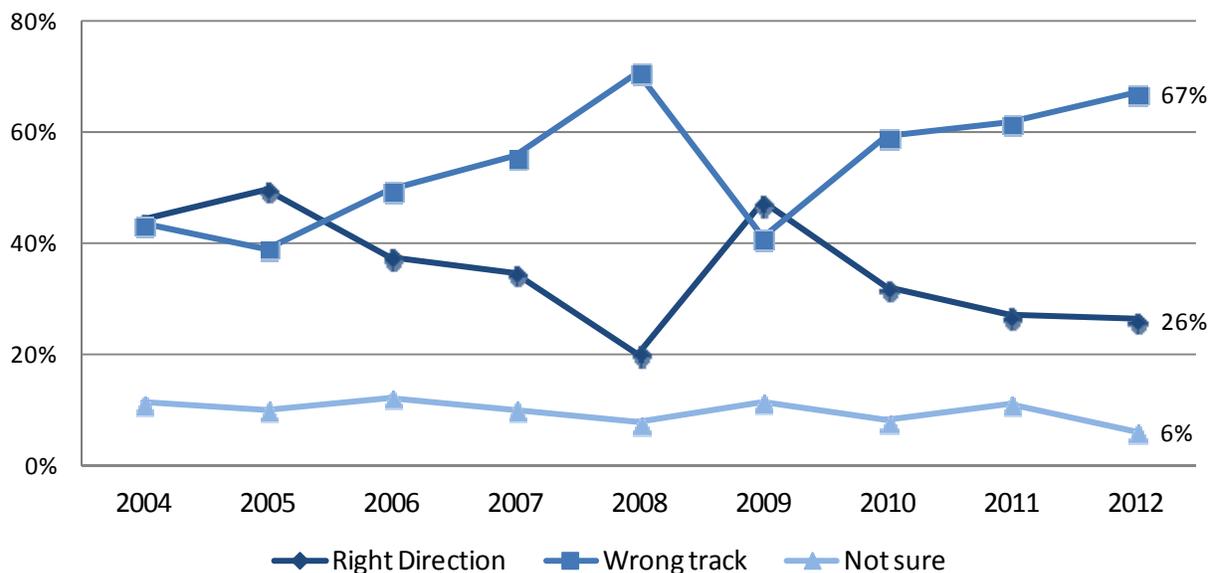
As far as the most important problem facing one's county specifically, the struggle to raise sufficient revenues to meet county needs was at the root of a plurality of responses (25 percent), followed by a lack of jobs (19 percent) and the economy in general (19 percent). However we code the responses to this open-ended question, it is clear that issues stemming from economic conditions are paramount, whether county elected officials focused on the lack of jobs or the resulting lack of tax revenue to pay for the increases in services demanded by constituents. One respondent from a county of nearly 40

thousand residents expressed the spiral of issues, stating, “We've had a couple of plants close down. When they close down they don't pay real estate taxes, people leave the county. They don't buy, sell, and trade, and I'm sure it's that way everywhere.”

Apart from economic issues and funding services, 11 percent expressed a concern about declining infrastructure. Said one respondent, “Our biggest problem right now is maintaining roads, in the middle of an oil boom. Keeping roads maintained. You budget for a specific maintenance schedule. We've got ten times more traffic on the road ... than 10 years ago.”

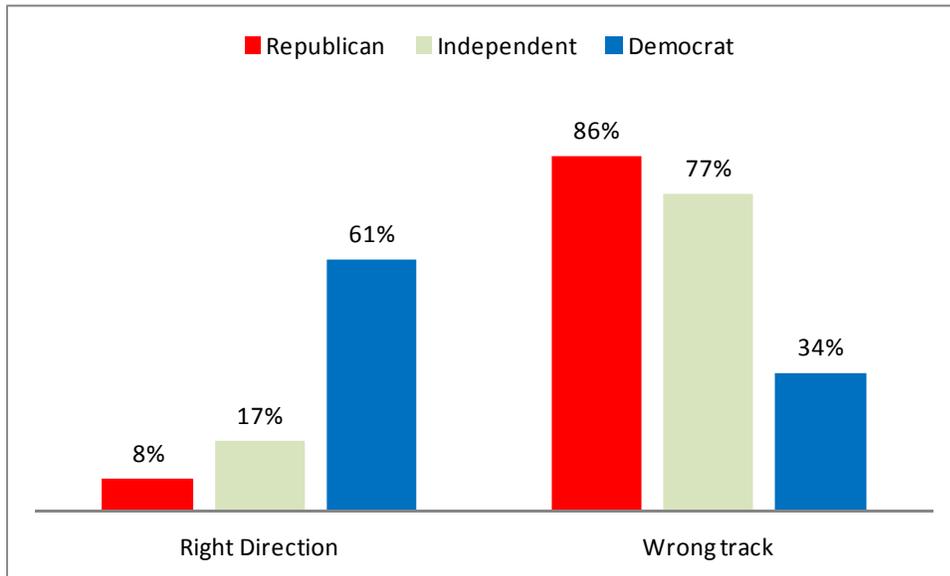
Two-thirds of the county elected officials polled in 2012 said that things in the United States are off on the wrong track; only 26 percent said that things are heading in the right direction. The percent of county elected officials holding the opinion that the nation is on the wrong track is the highest it's been since 2008, at which time 71 percent said things were on the wrong track, and the recession soon followed.

**Figure 2. County Elected Officials' Views of the Direction of the Nation, since 2004**



One's view about the direction of the nation is highly correlated with party affiliation. Only 8 percent of Republicans and 17 percent of Independents, compared with 61 percent of Democrats, believe the nation is heading in the right direction.

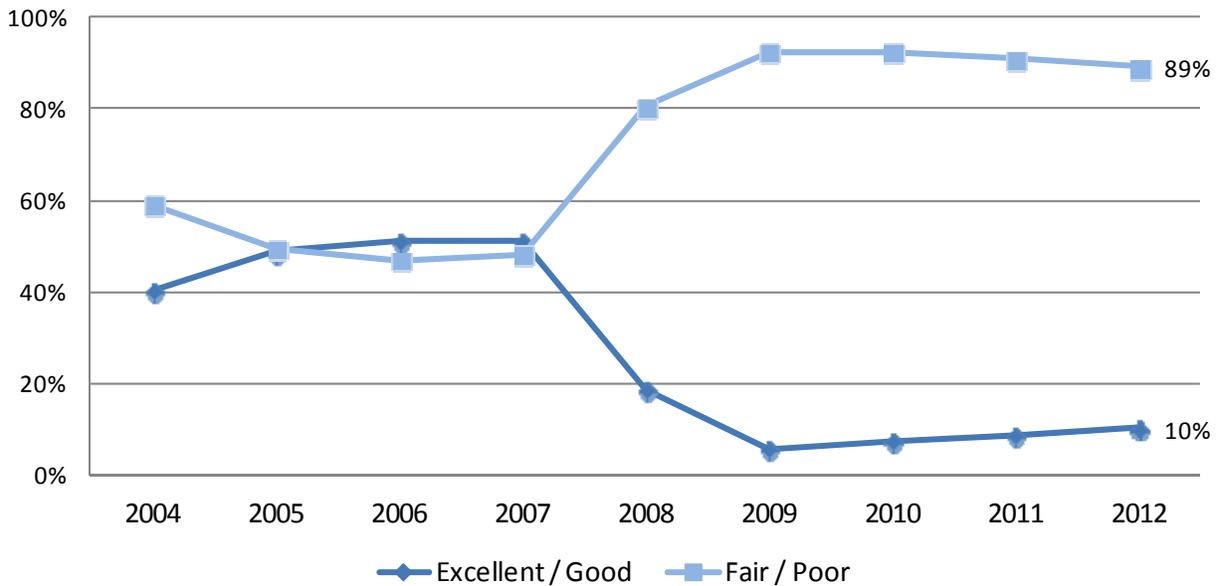
Figure 3. County Elected Officials' Views of the Direction of the Nation, by Party



## Views of the Economy

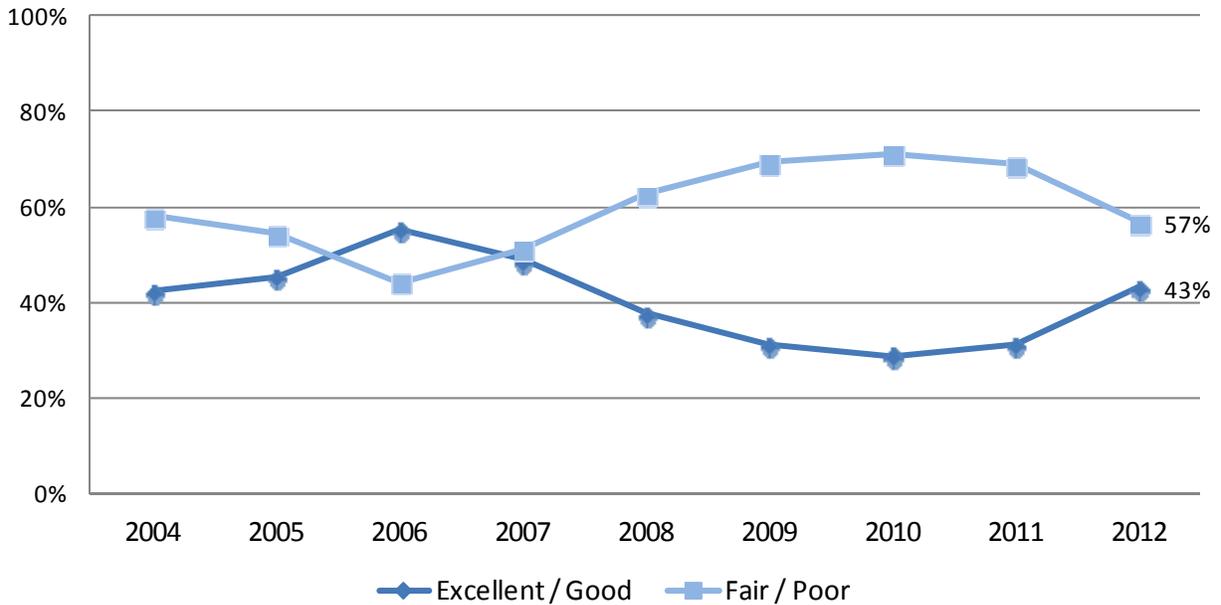
County elected officials' assessments of the current economy have not significantly changed since 2009 (see Figure 4). This negative assessment of the national economy mirrors that held by the general public, according to a Pew Research survey conducted at about the same time as the 2012 National Survey of County Elected Officials. In both surveys, 89 percent of respondents rated the economy as either fair or poor. Only 9 percent of the general public and 10 percent of county elected officials rated national economic conditions as good.

Figure 4. County Elected Officials' Assessment of the National Economy since 2004



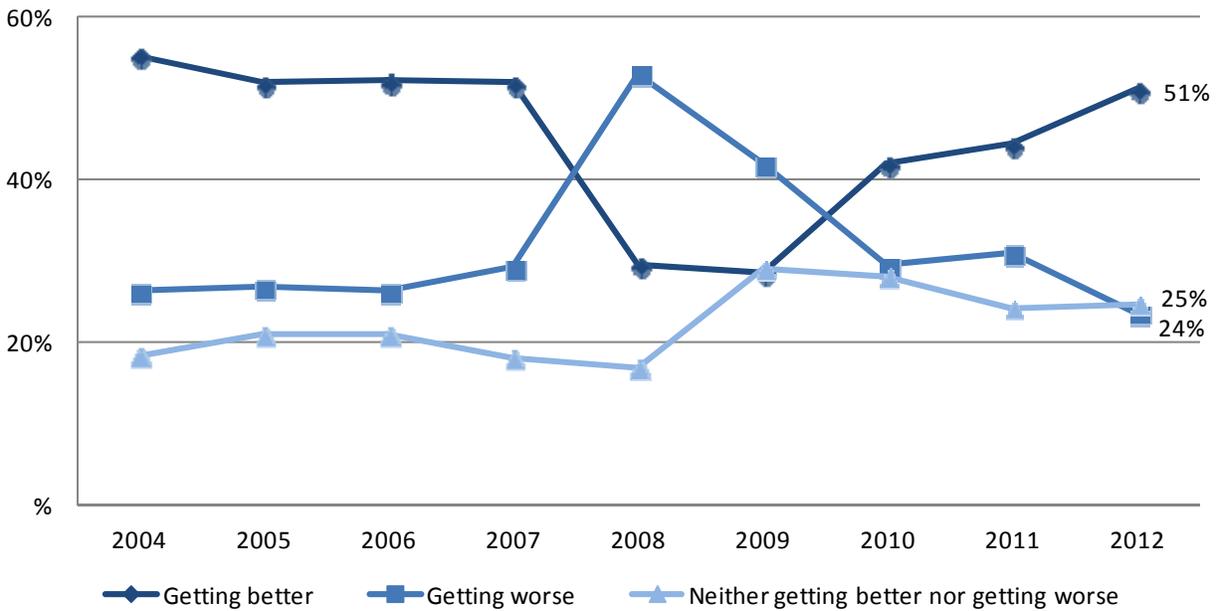
When asked about economic conditions within their respective counties, however, the assessments from county elected officials brighten somewhat; 5 percent rate the economic conditions in their county as excellent, and another 38 percent rate county economic conditions as good. Looking at this question over time, we see that assessments of county economic conditions continue to improve marginally since a nadir in 2010 (see Figure 5). Still, a majority of county elected officials (57 percent) rate economic conditions in their county as either fair (39 percent) or poor (18 percent). Not since 2006 have positive assessments outnumbered negative assessments, but the trend is improving.

Figure 5. County elected officials' assessment of economic conditions in their county, since 2004



While assessments of county economic conditions are improving, so is a sense of optimism that economic conditions are getting even better. In fact, for the first time since 2007, a majority of county elected officials (51 percent) say that economic conditions in their counties are getting better. Meanwhile, the percentage of those who believe that economic conditions at the county level are getting worse has declined to 24 percent – the lowest level since the poll began in 2004. This trend is illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6..County Elected Officials' Expectations of their County's Future Economic Conditions since 2004



Democrats are much more likely than Republicans or Independents to say that economic conditions in their county are getting better (61 percent compared with 47 percent), but affiliates of all parties are more likely to say that economic conditions are getting better than they are to say that they are getting worse. This level of optimism also spans across all regions of the country.

Among the 38 percent who rate economic conditions in their county as good, 64 percent say that it is even getting better, while among the 18 percent who rate economic conditions as poor, only 26 percent say that those conditions are getting better. It appears that optimism is tied to some sense that things already look better. It also appears that there is a weak, but statistically significant correlation between economic optimism and one's sense that the country is heading in the right direction ( $r = .299, p < 0.01$ ).

## County Budgets and Service Delivery

On a scale of 1 to 10, county elected officials rated their respective county’s fiscal health at 6.70 on average. This average rating is significantly higher than the rating of 6.4 in 2011. Twenty-eight percent gave their county a rating of 5 or below, while 40 percent rated their county’s fiscal health at 8 or above. The 2012 rating is the highest recorded since 2006 and the second highest recorded overall (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Average Ratings of Fiscal Health on a Scale of 1 to 10**

Year of survey	Average rating	N	Std. Deviation
2004	6.53	499	1.917
2005	6.50	500	1.893
2006	6.86	499	1.915
2007	6.64	500	1.735
2008	6.29	500	2.098
2009	6.40	500	1.911
2010	6.19	500	2.102
2011	6.40	508	1.928
2012	6.70	501	1.907
<b>Average across all years</b>	<b>6.50</b>	<b>4507</b>	<b>1.945</b>

County elected officials see the greatest threat to fiscal health as insufficient revenues, cited by 21 percent of respondents. Other major threats include the poor economy and unemployment. Other threats cited were unfunded mandates (13 percent), health care and an aging population (7 percent), and the weather or natural disasters (3 percent).

A plurality of respondents (45 percent) said that the challenge of balancing the county’s budget most recently was about the same as in years past, although 40 percent said that this year’s budget process was more difficult than in past years. Those in the Northeast were the most likely to say that the challenge this year was more difficult. Only 12 percent said that the process this year was easier than in years past.

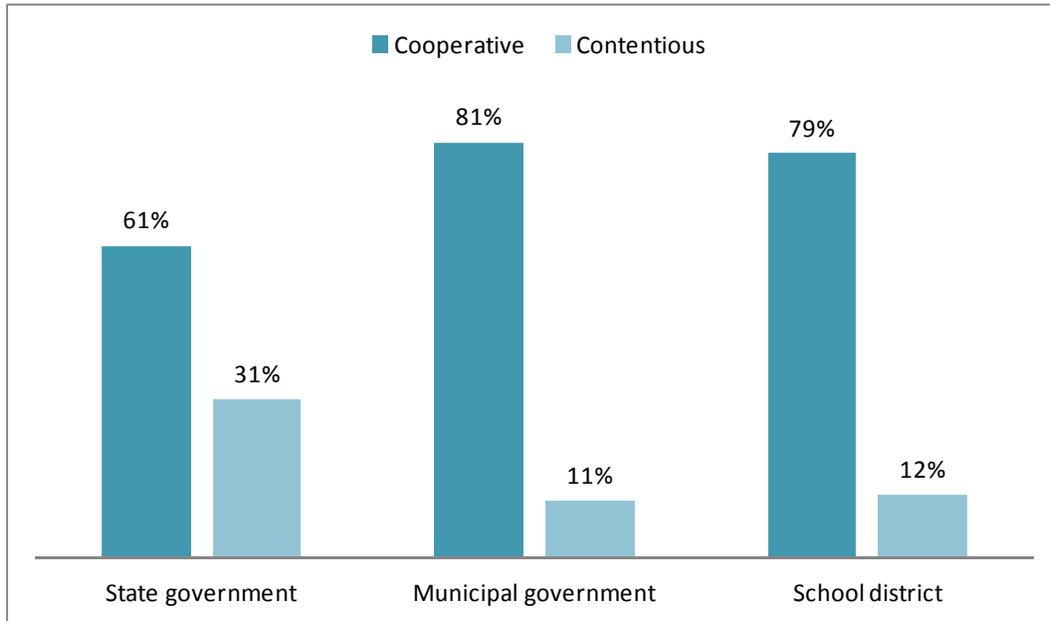
While 31 percent of respondents, overall, said that their state significantly hinders their ability to raise revenue, 59 percent of those from the Northeast held this view.

Of all respondents, 46 percent said that the state hinders their ability to raise revenue some, and another 19 percent said that the state hinders them very little. Only 3 percent said that the state does not hinder them at all from raising revenues.

County elected officials are much more likely to characterize relationships between counties and state government—as opposed to relationships with municipalities and school districts—as contentious (31 percent). Still, they are also more likely to characterize the relationship between county and state

governments as cooperative than as contentious by 2 to 1. Figure 7 illustrates how county elected officials characterize relationships with other governments.

Figure 7. County Elected Officials' Characterization of Relationships with Other Governments



Democrats are less likely than Republicans and Independents to characterize relations with state government as cooperative (55 percent, as compared to 65 percent and 62 percent, respectively). In addition, Independents are less likely to characterize relations between county and municipal governments as cooperative than are Republicans or Democrats (68 percent, as compared to 83 percent and 82 percent, respectively). Relations between state and county governments seem most cooperative in the South, based on responses from county elected officials.

Cooperative arrangements for purchasing and service delivery seem more common in the Northeast than in other regions of the country. Overall, 62 percent of county elected officials, and 79 percent of those from counties in the Northeast, state that their county has a cooperative purchasing agreement with the state government. In addition, 76 percent of the respondents from the Northeast claim that their county has cooperative purchasing agreements with other local government entities, as compared with only 43 percent of respondents overall. As for service delivery, 64 percent of county elected officials said that their county has some formal agreements with other local government units for delivery of services; 83 percent of respondents from the Northeast said that they had service delivery agreements, while only 58 percent of those from the South said that their counties had any such arrangements.

Three quarters of the county elected officials polled in 2012 said that managing their county's fiscal affairs is more difficult today than it was two decades ago. Of those who said that it is more difficult now, almost half (48 percent) attribute that to fiscal stress related to the current economy, although about a third (34 percent) attribute the difficulty today to the changing political environment. Officials from the Northeast were far more likely to attribute the difficulty today to economics (74 percent) than to politics (13 percent).

A slim majority of those polled (53 percent) believe that the way counties deliver services to residents is changing irreversibly. Other officials were of the opinion that the changes are temporary (22 percent) or that the way services are delivered is not changing at all. These views did not alter much by the respondent's party affiliation or by region, although officials from larger counties were somewhat more likely to say that the way services are delivered is changed forever.

## Counties' Changing Landscapes

The county elected officials polled in 2012 were almost as likely to believe that the organizational structure of counties is changing (51 percent) as to believe that it is not (48 percent). Of the 51 percent who believe that the organizational structure of counties is changing, nearly 4 in 5 (78 percent) believe that the changes are permanent, and more than half (56 percent) believe that the changes make county government more relevant rather than less relevant (16 percent).

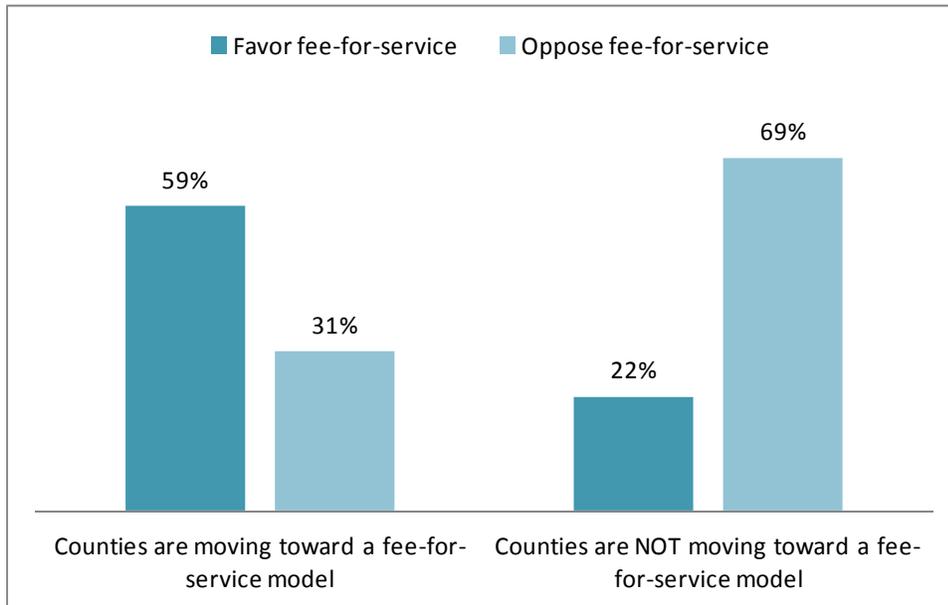
Nearly all respondents believe that it is very important (66 percent) or somewhat important (30 percent) for county officials to possess an entrepreneurial attitude. Democrats were a little less likely than Republicans or Independents to believe that being entrepreneurial is very important, and nearly one in ten Democrats believe that it is not too important or not important at all.

A slim majority of respondents (52 percent) believe that counties are likely to move more toward a fee-for-services model of financing. This view is slightly more common among those from larger counties (57 percent) than from smaller counties (48 percent); it is also more common in the Midwest and West (58 and 59 percent, respectively) than in the Northeast or South (45 and 47 percent, respectively).

Regardless of whether or not they thought that counties were moving toward a fee-for-service model, a plurality of 48 percent believe that it is not an appropriate model for local governments. While only 34 percent of Independents believe that the fee-for-service model is not appropriate, 55 percent of Democrats feel this way. Republican are largely split on the issue, with 44 percent believing that counties ought to move toward fee-for-services while 45 percent believe it is not an appropriate model for local governments.

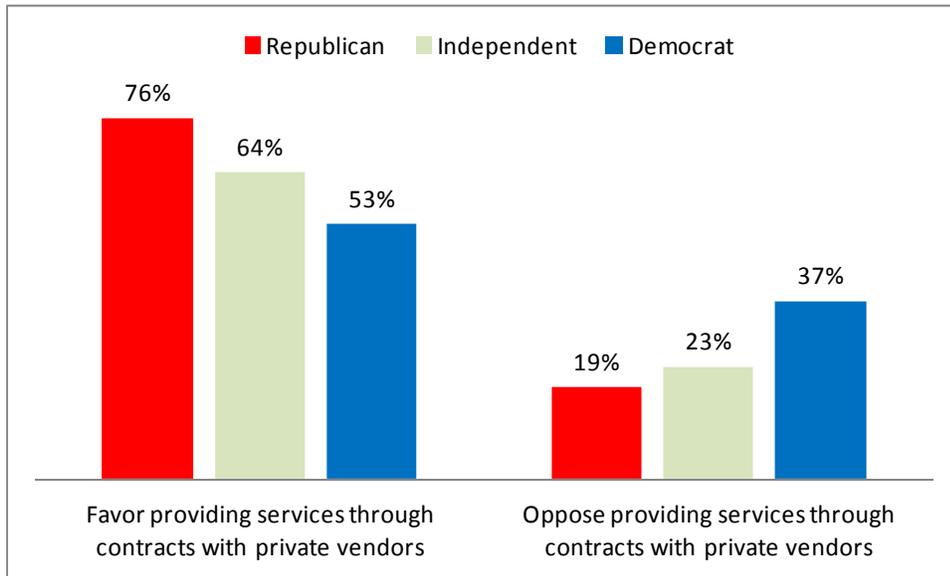
A majority of those who believe that the fee-for-service model is becoming more prevalent also tend to favor such a model, whereas those who believe that the fee-for-service model is not increasing in prevalence likewise tend to oppose the model, as illustrated in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8. County Elected Officials' Views on Fee for Service



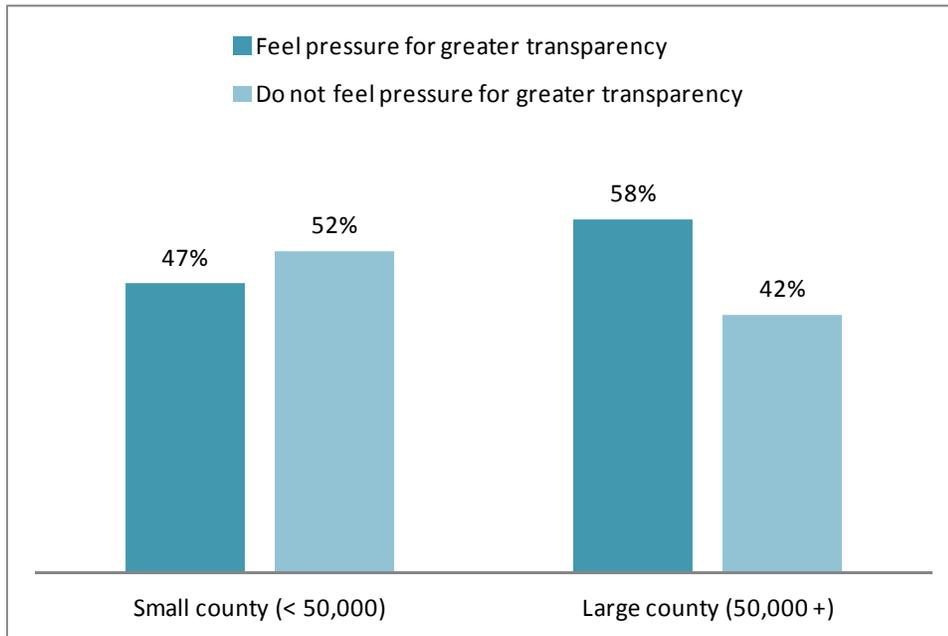
Another option for counties providing services today is by contracting with providers in the private sector. Nearly two-thirds of county elected officials (66 percent) favor contracting with private sector firms in order to provide county services; 26 percent oppose such contracts. About three-quarters of Republicans (76 percent) favor contracting with private sector providers and only 19 percent oppose it. Although Democrats are not as enamored of this model as are Republicans, still a majority (53 percent) favor contracting with the private sector and 37 percent oppose it. The views of Independents on this issue fall almost evenly between those of Republicans and Democrats (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. County Elected Officials' View of Providing Services through Private Sector Contracts, by Party



Only about half of the county elected officials (51 percent) say that they feel pressure from constituents for greater transparency in conducting county business. Officials from the Midwest were least likely to feel pressure for greater transparency (44 percent), whereas those in the South were most likely (57 percent). Officials from larger counties feel more pressure for transparency than those from smaller counties, as illustrated in Figure 10.

Figure 10. County Elected Officials' Feelings of Pressure for Transparency in Conduct of Government Business, by County Size



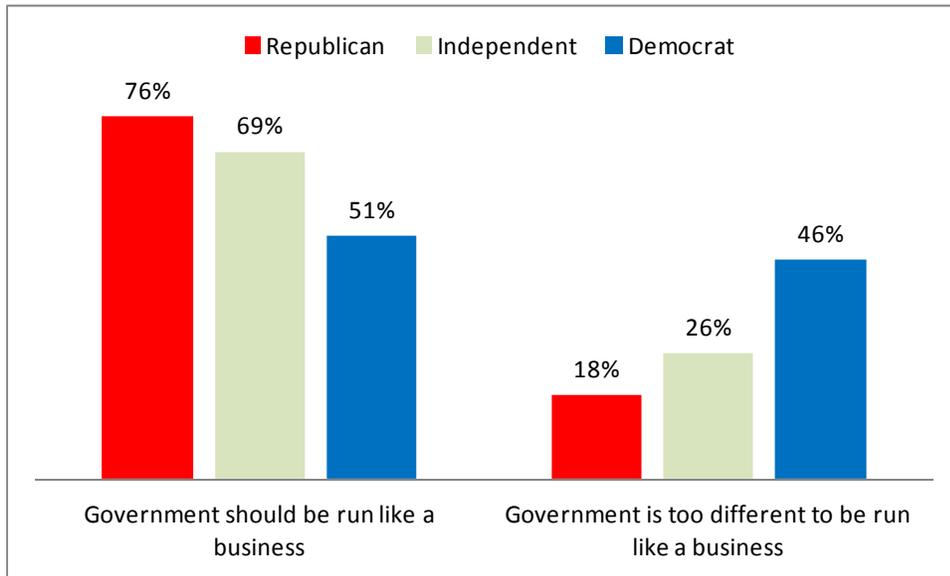
Regardless of pressure from constituents, county elected officials tend to favor maximum transparency in the conduct of county governance. The 2012 National Survey of County Elected Officials asked respondents which of the following two statements comes closer to one's own opinion:

1. Government business sometimes needs to be conducted behind closed doors in order to reach good decisions.
2. Government business almost always should be conducted in the open and as transparent as possible.

Nearly four out of five county elected officials (79 percent) agreed more with the second statement than with the first—88 percent of those from the West agreed that maximum transparency should be the rule.

About two-thirds of the respondents (66 percent) believe that government ought to be run like a business; 29 percent agreed more with the idea that government was too different in terms of its mission to be run like a business. The idea of running government like a business is much more accepted among Republicans (76 percent) than among Democrats (51 percent); these differences are illustrated in Figure 11.

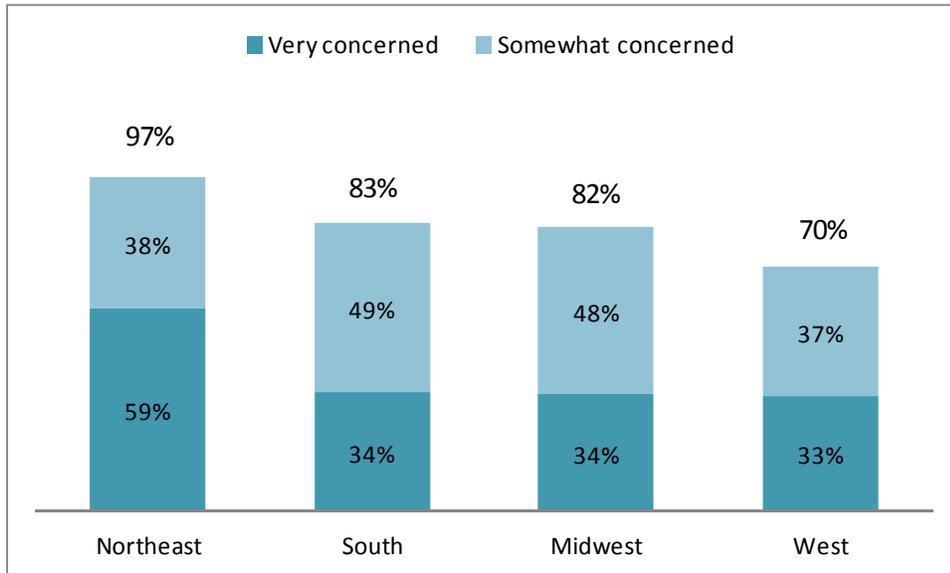
Figure 11. County Elected Officials' Attitudes about Running Government as a Business, by Party



## Addressing Demographic Changes & Partisanship

When county officials were asked how concerned they are that the needs of the retired population in their county will outpace the ability of their county to provide services, a vast majority (83 percent) said they are either very concerned (36 percent) or somewhat concerned (47 percent) about this trend. Officials from Northeast counties expressed the highest level of concern, with 59 percent very concerned and an additional 38 percent somewhat concerned. Although there are some regional differences (see Figure 12), the level of concern about the growing needs of the retired population is not related to party affiliation or county size.

Figure 12. County Elected Officials' Level of Concern that the Needs of Retirees Will Outpace County's Ability to Provide Services, by Region



A majority of respondents in the 2012 survey said that they are not too concerned (35 percent) or not concerned at all (16 percent) about their county's ability to replace the skills of retiring county employees. Representatives from smaller counties expressed a slightly higher level of concern about replacing skilled workers than did those from larger counties, and Democrats expressed a significantly higher level of concern than did Republicans. There was not a lot of regional variation.

Regardless of budget concerns and relatively low concern about losing the skill sets of retirees, 81 percent of the officials polled said that they would encourage young adults to seek a career as an employee in local government. Surprisingly, there is no difference in response between Democrats and Republicans on this matter despite differences in how the parties perceive the role of government.

When looking even further into today's political climate, officials were asked if it encourages the best people to run for county offices, discourages them, or makes no difference. The majority (66 percent) said that it discourages the best; only 9 percent overall said it encourages the best to run for office, and 22 percent said it makes no difference.

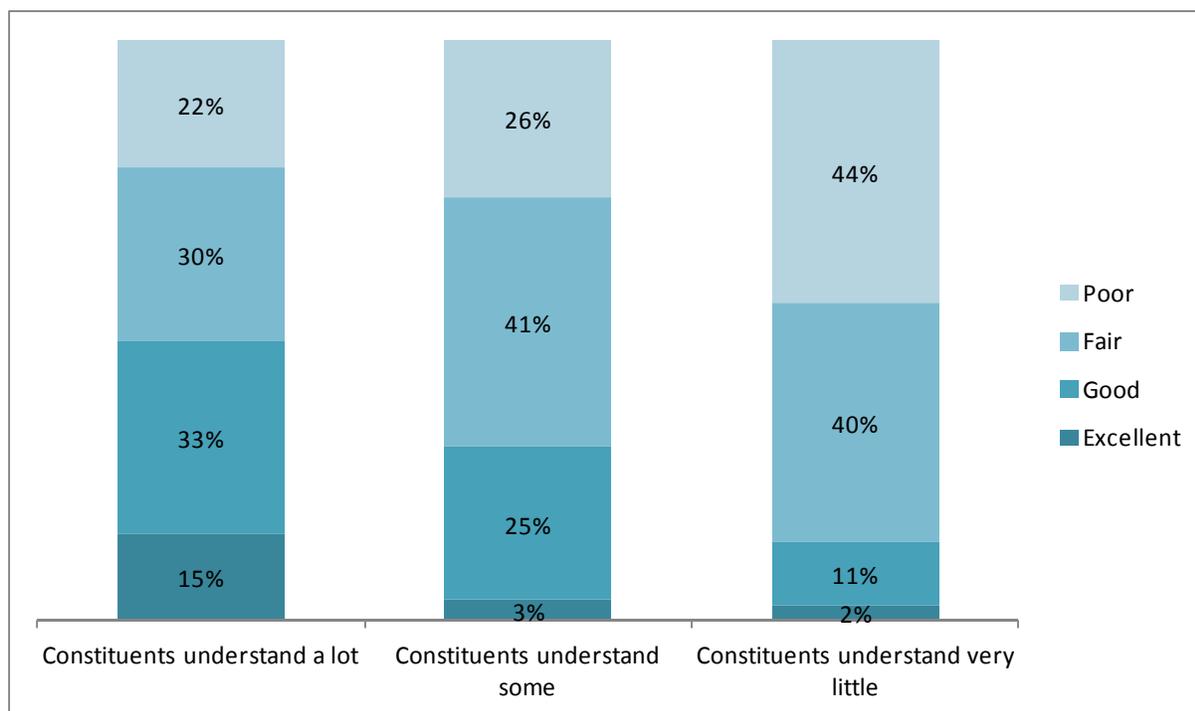
Overall, county elected officials are remarkably optimistic about the trust that their constituents have in county government. Eighty-nine percent of respondents expressed the belief that their constituents have either a great deal (34 percent) or a fair amount (55 percent) of trust and confidence in county government's ability to handle local issues. By contrast, the Gallup Poll in September 2011, found that 68 percent of the general public has either a great deal (19 percent) or a fair amount (49 percent) of

trust and confidence in local government – which puts it well above state and federal government.<sup>3</sup> There is very little difference regionally or by party on this issue, except that Independents have a slightly lower assessment of their constituents’ confidence in county government.

The National Survey of County Elected Officials asked those who said that their constituents held a relatively high degree of trust and confidence whether or not that trust is deserved, and 95 percent said that it was. Of those who said that their constituents had little or no trust and confidence (10 percent of the total sample), two-thirds said that constituents had good reason to have little or no trust.

Taken together, county elected officials believe that their constituents largely have an accurate assessment of how well they can trust county government, based on those officials’ own assessments of county government. In spite of this, 41 percent of county elected officials say that their constituents understand very little about county government, and it appears that they attribute this to failings of public schools to teach adequately about civics and the role of local governments. Figure 13 illustrates the correlation between ratings of the public schools and assessments of the public’s knowledge about county government.

**Figure 13. County Elected Officials' Views on Public Schools Success in Teaching Civics and Local Government, by Assessment of Knowledge about County Government**

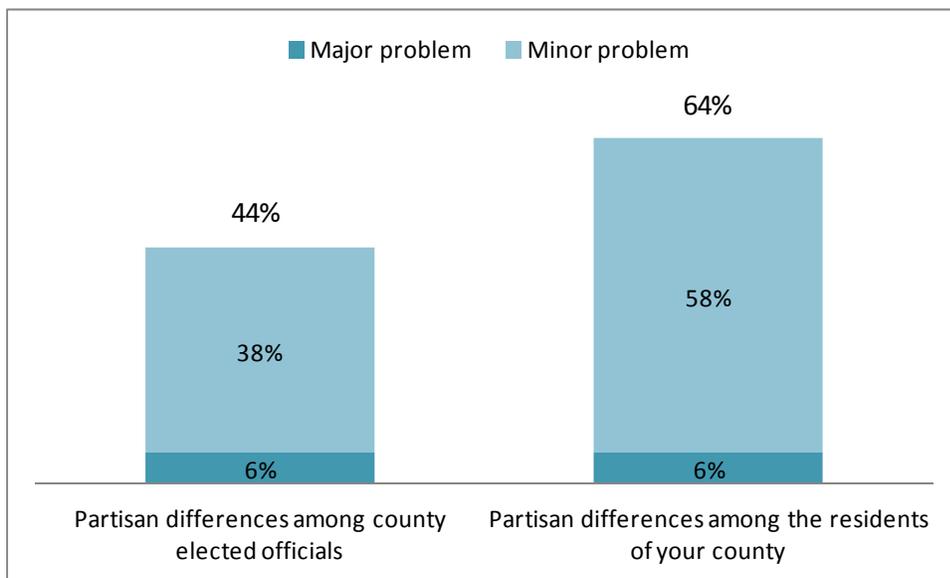


<sup>3</sup> Gallup Poll. “In U.S., Local and State Governments Retain Positive Ratings.” October 3, 2011. Accessed on line on July 2, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/149888/Local-State-Governments-Retain-Positive-Ratings.aspx>

As noted at the outset of this report, the Pew Research Center has found that partisan differences have dramatically increased within the general public over the past decade. The 2012 National Survey of County Elected Officials asked respondents to assess the political climate in Washington, DC, today in terms of partisanship. An overwhelming majority (80 percent) said that partisan differences are a greater problem today than in the past. Among the four Census regions, the West (84 percent), Midwest (83 percent), and South (81 percent) highly agreed that partisanship is a greater problem today, compared to only 59 percent of those from the Northeast who agreed that it was greater problem.

Although county elected officials expressed a great deal of concern over partisan battles in government, they are less likely to say that those battles hinder them at the level of county government. While a majority sees partisan differences among residents in their county as either a major problem (6 percent) or a minor problem (58 percent), only 44 percent see partisanship as a problem extending into county government; in fact, 57 percent say that partisan differences among county elected officials are no problem at all. It may be the case that many county boards are ideologically homogeneous even while a vocal opposition exists in the minority of many counties.

**Figure 14. County Elected Officials' Assessment of the Degree to which Partisan Differences are a Problem among County Residents and among Themselves**

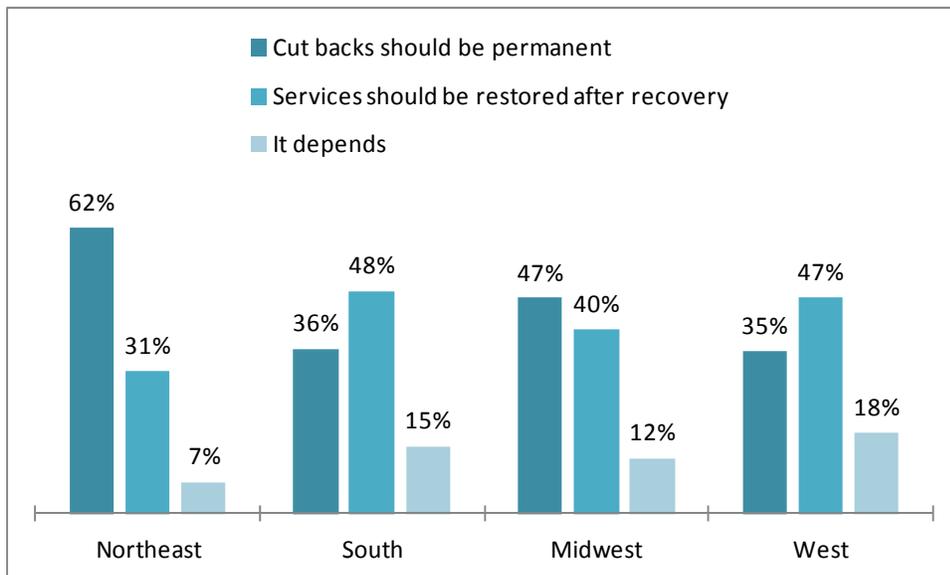


The downturn in the economy that began in late 2008 gave rise to a stimulus program at the federal level, staving off major cutbacks in the counties, but as the stimulus funds dried up, counties needed to tighten their budgets; reports from the 2010 and 2011 National Survey of County Elected Officials discuss the rate and nature of cutbacks made by counties in response to this situation. In 2012, we asked respondents if they thought the cutbacks made by counties would be permanent or would they

be restored as the economy improved. In addition, the 2012 survey asked county officials whether they thought that the cutbacks should or should not be reversed, despite whether or not the official thought that they would be.

In response, a plurality of county officials (47 percent) expressed the belief that the cutbacks are permanent; this view is most prevalent in the Northeast region, where 66 percent believe that the cutbacks are permanent. A similar proportion (42 percent) of county officials also believe that the cutbacks *ought* to be permanent, although a slight plurality (44 percent) believe that what has been cutback *ought* to be restored. The degree to which county officials believe that the cutbacks should be permanent is largely influenced by party affiliation: 55 percent of Republicans, contrasted with only 22 percent of Democrats, believe that cutbacks should be permanent. There is also a clear regional difference in the views about whether cutbacks should be permanent or not, with the Northeast the most likely to favor keeping the cutbacks in county government (see Figure 15).

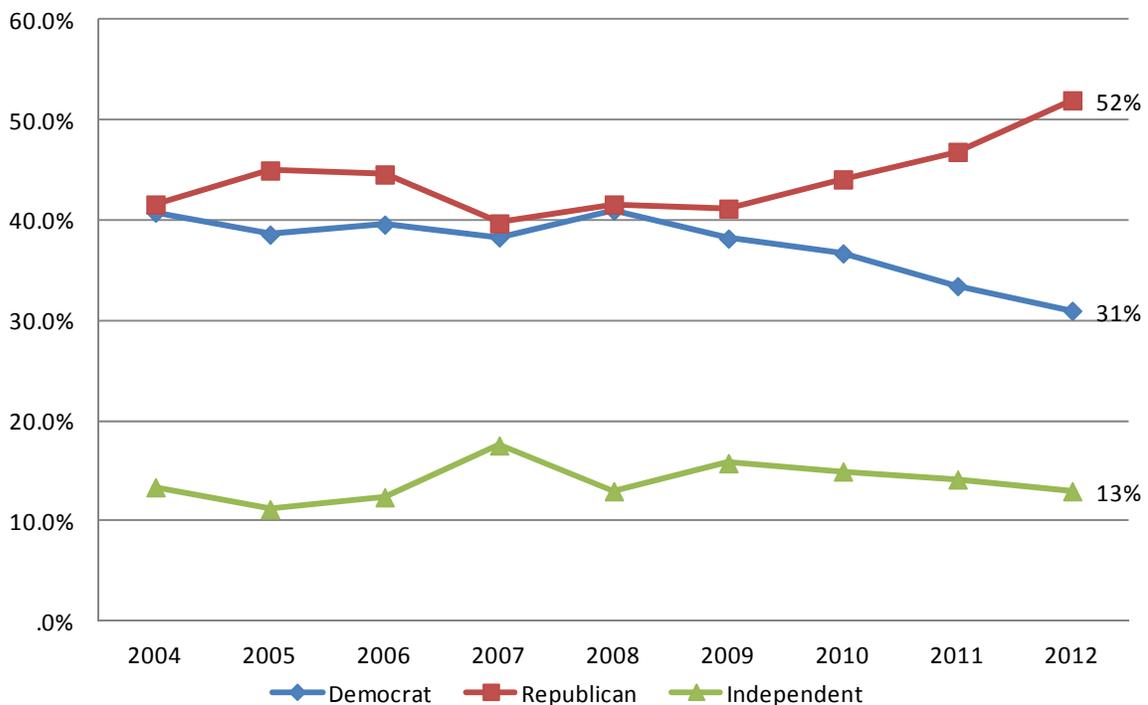
**Figure 15. County Elected Officials' Views as to Whether to Retain Cutbacks Made to County Government after Economy Recovers, by Region**



### Demographics of County Elected Officials

Since 2004, the National Survey of County Elected Officials has collected information on the demographics of the county elected officials participating in the survey. These data provide the best available picture of those elected to run the nation’s counties. While the demographics remain relatively stable from year to year, it is clear that the proportion of county elected officials who identify with the Republican Party continues to rise to the point where Republicans are now in the majority, as illustrated by Figure 16. The Republican gains have largely come at a cost to Democrats, while the number of Independents has diminished only very slightly.

Figure 16. Party Affiliation of County Elected Officials, Since 2004



As the following figures illustrate, the individuals representing Americans in county government are mostly white, male, and above 50 years of age. In addition, nearly half of the sample of elected officials has at least a Bachelor’s degree, and they tend to place themselves on the conservative end of the ideological spectrum. These figures represent the data from the 2012 survey, although because they differ only modestly from survey to survey, going back to 2004, we are confident that these data represent an accurate reflection of the true population of county elected officials.

Figure 17. Race and Ethnicity Reported by Respondents in the 2012 National Survey of County Elected Officials

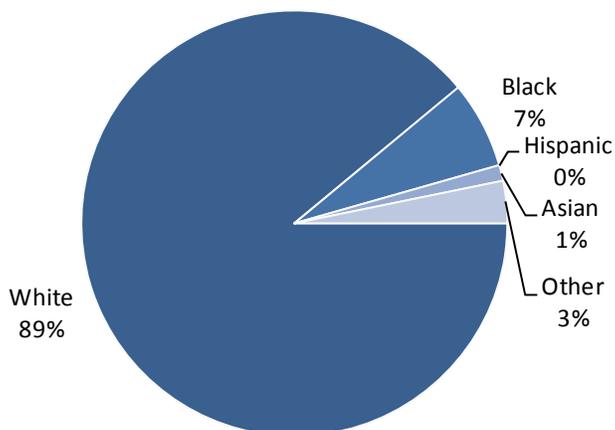
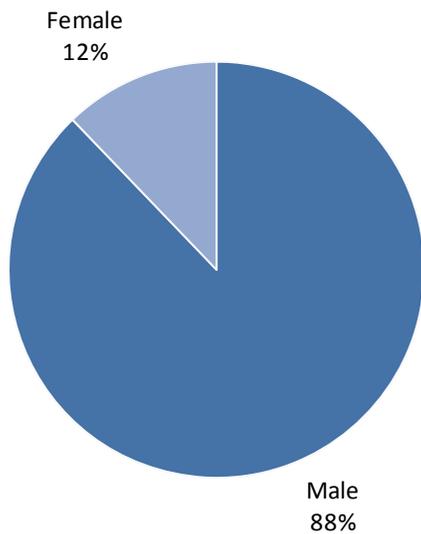


Figure 18. Gender of Respondents in the 2012 National Survey of County Elected Officials



It is worth noting that the average age of respondents (60 years of age) in the 2012 survey is modestly lower than the average age in 2011 (62 years of age), but that difference is statistically significant ( $t=2.002, p<0.046$ ).

Figure 19. Age Reported by Respondents in the 2012 National Survey of County Elected Officials

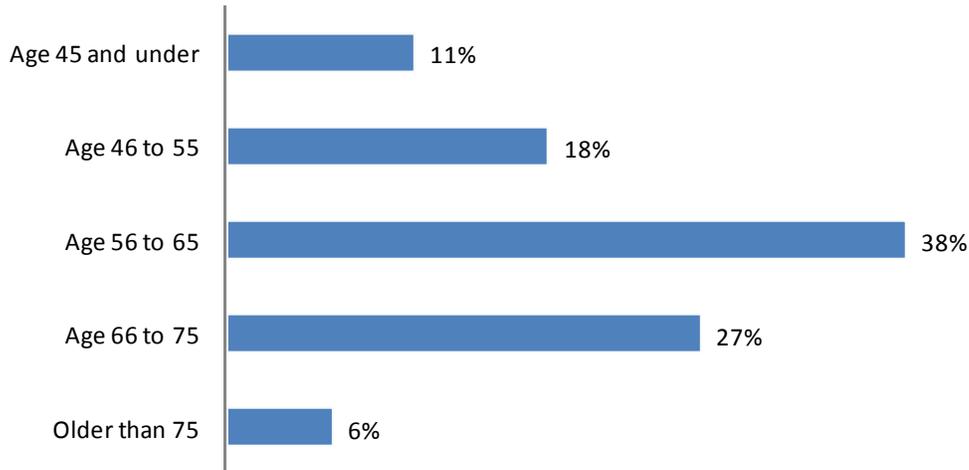


Figure 20. Highest Level of Education Reported by Respondents in the 2012 National Survey of County Elected Officials

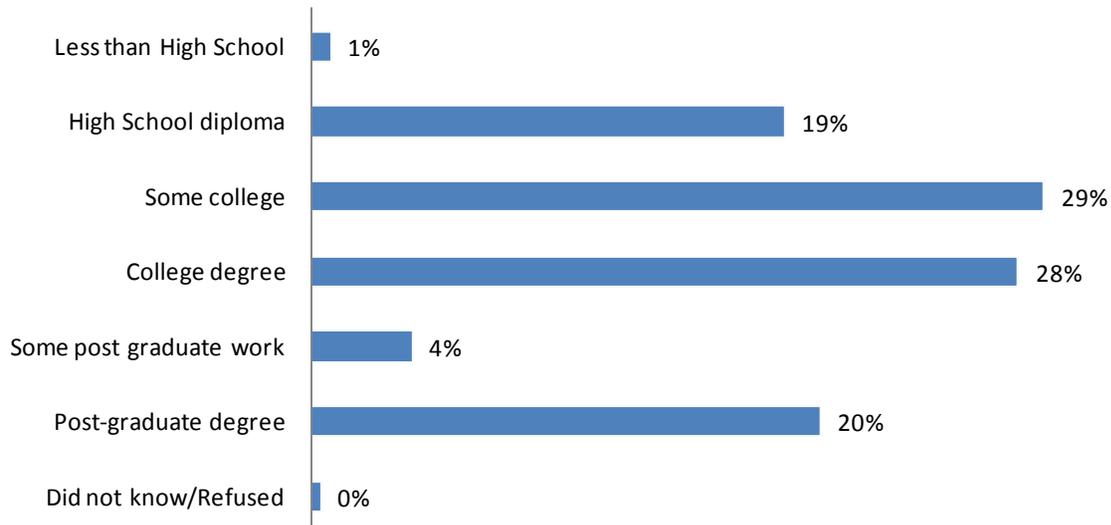
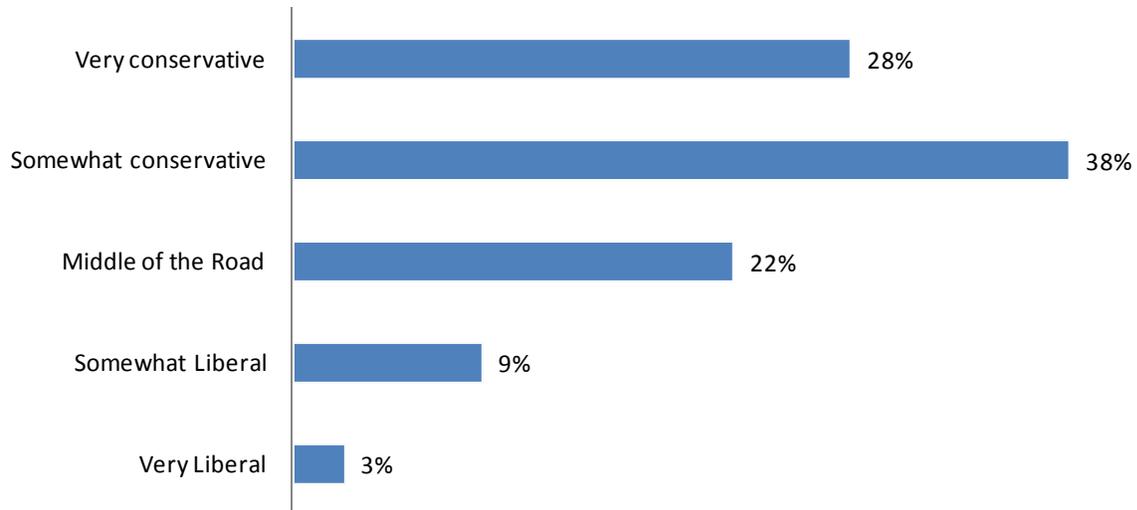


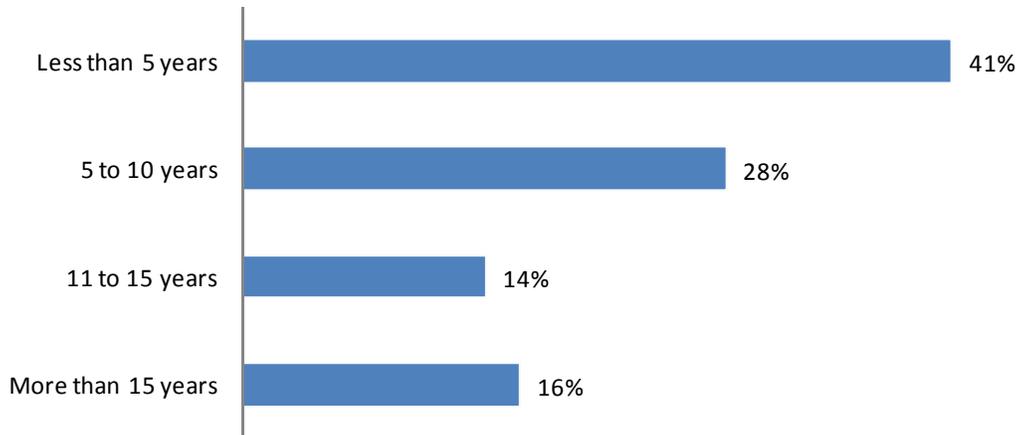
Figure 21. Ideological Position Reported by Respondents in the 2012 National Survey of County Elected Officials



Seventy-one percent of county elected officials hold posts that are considered part-time positions, and on average, part-time officials put in 22 hours a week while full-time officials work an average of 41 hours per week. There is no statistical difference in the number of hours worked by officials from smaller counties and those from larger counties.

The county elected officials in the 2012 survey have worked in county government, in some capacity, an average of 12 years. They have been in their current role for an average of just over 8 years, although a plurality (41 percent) have served less than 5 years, as illustrated in Figure 22.

**Figure 22. Number of Years in Current Position Reported by Respondents in the 2012 National Survey of County Elected Officials**



## Survey Methodology

The sampling procedure for 2012 is consistent with the procedures used since this annual survey began in 2004. At the outset, 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 less than 50,000 and another of elected officials from counties with a population of 50,000 or greater. Because 61 percent of all county elected officials in the nation are from counties of less than 50,000, 61 percent of the sample was drawn from that strata; the other 39 percent came from the strata of elected officials from larger counties, those with populations of 50,000 or more. Thus, every commissioner in the sample frame (the list provided by NACo) had an equal probability 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 data reported in 2012 are weighted to adjust for small discrepancies in the expected response distribution by the four Census regions. In the unweighted data, the Northeast is under-represented by 2.5 percentage points and the Midwest is over-represented by a comparable level. The weighting variable applied corrects for those small misrepresentations.

The 2012 sample was drawn from a database of 18,889 records, each representing a distinct county elected official. Given the size of the population of commissioners, researchers are 95 percent confident that any estimate reported for the entire sample is within 4 percentage points of the true population statistic. Of course, sampling error is only one potential source of survey error, but all reasonable precautions have been taken throughout the study to minimize all error sources.