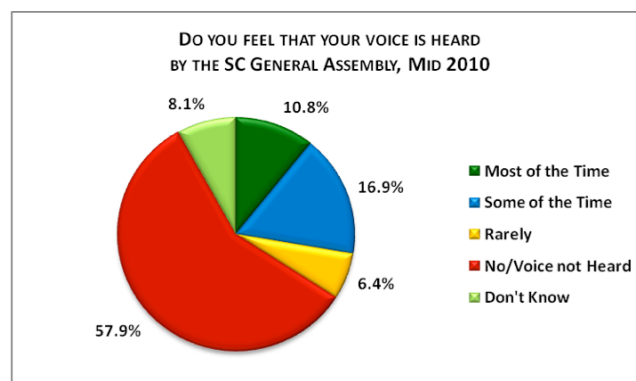


Citizen Engagement in South Carolina

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Citizen input and advice have become necessary requirements for the success of community decision making and planning endeavors.¹ One of the important benefits of civic engagement in the democratic process is based on the variety of views on issues that affect peoples' daily lives. In recent years, there has been a growing demand from citizens for greater involvement in decisions that affect their homes and their future. At the same time, engaged citizens assist public officials in identifying assets and needs that enhance community decisions.

In *The Magic of Dialogue*, Daniel Yankelovich contends that engagement expands citizens' understanding of the assets and strengths of their neighborhoods. Participatory asset mapping is one approach where public officials and community members identify neighborhood resources and design ways to enhance the identified assets in order to tackle community challenges and social injustice in addition to building public support.² In *Civic Participation and the Promise of Democracy*, Craig McGarvey (2004) discusses human capital, social capital and community capital as the interconnected and measurable outcomes of civic engagement that actually prompt social change.³ Having established the importance of citizen engagement in the policy process, it makes sense to ask if South Carolinians feel that their voice is incorporated in state level deliberations and if they trust their state and local government.



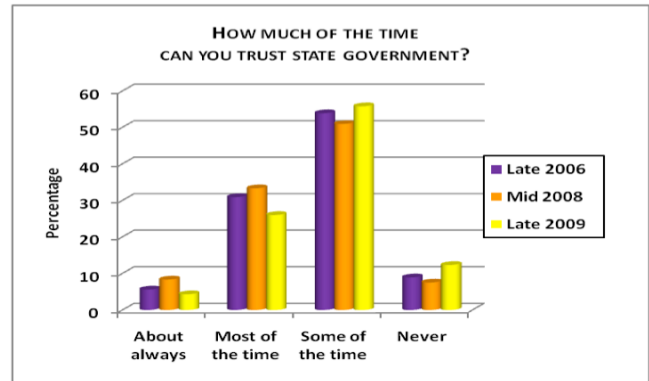
Since late 2006, the *Self Portrait: How Are We Doing in South Carolina?* surveys have been conducted twice every year (one in late spring and another in late fall). A collaborative effort between the Jim Self Center on the Future at the Strom Thurmond Institute at Clemson University and the Research Survey Laboratory at the University of South Carolina, the surveys ask South Carolina residents to assess how they are doing in light of political, social and economic change.

¹ "Communities in action: a guide to effective projects". *Rotary International* publications (2000).

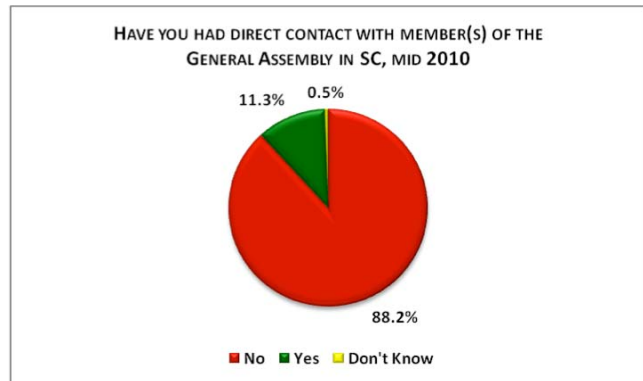
² Daniel Yankelovich (1999). *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation*. Simon & Shuster: New York

³ Craig McGarvey (2004). *Civic Participation and the Promise of Democracy*. Center for Religion and Civic Culture, University of Southern California

Between 2006 and 2009, the question “how much of the time do you trust the state government” was asked three times and over that period, respondents who said they ‘never’ trust state government increased from 8.9% in the late 2006 survey to 12.3% in the late 2009 survey. Meanwhile, participants who said they trust the state government ‘just about always’ went from 5.6% in the late 2006 survey and peaked in mid 2008 at 8.3% before dropping to a low of 4.3% in the late 2009 survey. A further look at the three survey periods show that *Self Portrait* respondents who said they trust state government in South Carolina ‘some of the time’ were more than those who trust government ‘most of the time.’



A recent *Self Portrait* survey asked if respondents have had direct contact with members of the South Carolina General Assembly. Respondents who have not had direct contact (88.2%) were eight times more than those who have had some contact (11.3%) with the General Assembly.



The implications of these responses indicate that efforts to engage citizens of the state can and should be increased and that public officials have opportunities to enhance dialogue with citizens on policy and priority setting in government. Evidence for this position is based on the number of *Self Portrait* survey respondents who indicated that they are interested in state political issues. Over two-thirds of respondents to the question “how interested are you in South Carolina political issues” said they are either ‘very’ (36.3%) or ‘somewhat’ (42.4%) interested with less than one percent of all respondents to the question saying they were ‘not too’ interested in South Carolina political issues.

The development of relationships built on a foundation of trust and understanding of the perspective of the involved individuals will open the door for an informed citizenry that can contribute to planning and activities that have a bearing on citizen livelihoods. One mechanism that is sometimes used to increase public input in policy development is the public advisory committee. Public advisory committees are forums that provide advice from the citizens’ perspective on issues and initiatives. Information and communication technology evolution continues to make Robert Putnam's concept of 'social capital' as the value of the people we know and what we do with those relationships relevant today. In today’s

environment, public officials can expand on this concept by employing technology tools such as Facebook, Twitter and other interactive websites in addition to traditional media and town meetings that highlight the citizen and their interests, concerns, values and expectations.

From the public official's perspective, there is value in obtaining citizen or community input on strategic directions and priorities before they are put into practice. Early stage involvement provides the opportunity to test or fine tune ideas before they become actual policies, strategies or programs. As citizens increase their knowledge on procedures and initiatives, they are able to contribute in a more meaningful way to community life.

As with many community issues, there is the frequent conflict between short and long-term efforts and when citizens do not see immediate results, they may wonder about the effect of their input. Again, resource and time invested into early citizen involvement, education and understanding about the realities of public policy development can provide long-term benefits for sustainable and supported policy. In this time of fiscal retraction, state and local public officials have a responsibility to use the resources at their fingertips. With the citizenry desiring more involvement and wanting to know more, officials have the opportunity to learn, teach, and build relationships based on South Carolina's most important asset, its' people.