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# *Citizen Satisfaction with Local Public Services in a Southwestern State*

David R. Morgan  
John P. Pelissero

Indeed, a taxpayer's revolt of sorts is upon us. Proposition 13 in California plus similar efforts approved in several other states confirms this. Certainly many people feel their combined tax load is too heavy, yet citizens in most cases do not want services reduced. To the contrary, a host of surveys reveals that many people want more and better public services. So public officials are under increasing pressure to do more with less, to hold the line on taxes but to keep service levels high. Because local government is more accessible, such pressure is felt more quickly and intensely by community officials. Just how should these officials respond? Should certain services be reduced if necessary to avoid a tax increase? If so, which services? Just how well does the public think services are being provided? Are there certain services that are especially responsive to citizens' needs and demands?

Public officials might turn to several sources to answer such questions. In many locales certain quantitative measures of service can be examined. Complaints can be checked. Municipal department heads can be more carefully queried regarding their service performance. In a very few fortunate communities, public opinion surveys of citizen attitudes toward local services might be available. But in most places such surveys are lacking. The next best thing to

an individual community survey might be an areawide or even state survey regarding local services. In fact, a statewide survey on the quality of life in Oklahoma, which included evaluations of local services, was undertaken in 1976 by the University of Oklahoma's Center for Economic and Management Research.<sup>1</sup> This article will examine the responses to those questions in the survey dealing with citizens' evaluations of community services in the state.<sup>2</sup> It will present information on various service areas and then note any potential variation in response based on racial and social class characteristics and community size.

## Evaluating Local Services

A customary way of eliciting individual perceptions of public services is to ask how the person would rate the service, perhaps on a scale of poor to excellent. Such an approach was taken in the Oklahoma survey for seven local services—schools, police, streets, garbage, parks, ambulance, and services overall. Recently several authors have argued that a useful way of summarizing such service ratings is by constructing a net positive response score or an index of service adequacy.<sup>3</sup> This measure involves subtracting the percentage of negative responses from the

positive responses to yield a single score for a community or group of people. The results presented below used this net positive response measure. In this case, each service was evaluated on a five-point scale—very good, fairly good, neither good nor bad, not very good, and not good at all. The index was constructed by subtracting the combined percentage of not very good and not good responses from the combined very good and fairly good category. The neutral responses were thus omitted.

## The Results in Oklahoma

Table 1 shows the responses of the Oklahoma sample to the questions which asked them to rate a series of locally provided services. The table shows both the net positive response and the variations resulting when the sample was divided by community size.

Note first that garbage and trash service received the highest marks with a net positive score of about 78 percent. Overall services is the next highest rated at 73 percent. Schools are fourth with a positive score of 67 percent, just behind ambulance service. Residents expressed the lowest level of satisfaction with the streets in their communities (with a score of 15.2 percent). Regarding the results from the question asking people how

TABLE 1  
Net Positive Response for Community Services  
and Tax Rate By Size of Place  
Oklahoma  
1976

Service Area	All	Size of Place				Rural Areas
		Metro (Oklahoma City and Tulsa)	Medium (25,000 or more)	Small (2,500- 24,999)	Town (2,499 or less)	
Garbage	78.3	80.6	80.8	79.3	70.0	78.8
Overall	72.9	75.9	77.6	78.9	75.4	61.0
Ambulance	67.8	43.8	55.4	55.6	47.7	41.1
Schools	66.9	61.0	66.0	69.8	72.7	67.5
Parks	56.7	64.9	55.9	55.9	36.1	60.2
Police	52.7	60.4	71.2	54.2	31.5	35.9
Streets	15.2	13.0	16.2	20.3	17.3	6.1
High Taxes <sup>a</sup>	-18.2	-29.1	-17.3	-10.5	-3.1	-22.1
(Max N) <sup>b</sup>	(2686)	(948)	(512)	(443)	(466)	(346)

Note: The net positive response is the difference between the proportion of satisfied and dissatisfied responses. It varies between + 100.0 and -100.0 with positive numbers denoting more satisfaction with services or tax rates.

<sup>a</sup>High taxes refers to the satisfaction with the rate of local taxation among Oklahomans. A negative sign for this measure indicates a higher proportion expressing dissatisfaction than satisfaction with tax levels.

<sup>b</sup>Maximum number of respondents.

satisfied they were with the rate or level of taxation in their communities, the negative sign for the index means that more people thought taxes were too high than too low.<sup>4</sup> Certainly this finding is not surprising. In fact, virtually every survey of citizen attitudes around the country reflects this tendency for people to think local taxes are too high.<sup>5</sup> In Oklahoma, however, local taxes are among the lowest anywhere.<sup>6</sup> Based on this survey, it must be concluded, on the whole, that Oklahoma residents are generally satisfied with the services provided by their local governments, even though they see taxes as too high.

Table 1 also provides information on differences in service evaluation when the sample is divided by community size. Five categories of size are provided with the metro group (Oklahoma City and Tulsa) the largest single category representing about 35 percent of the total. Although any such breakdown is somewhat arbitrary, enough categories were provided so that differences in community size were adequately captured. Note the inclusion of a

separate rural category that isolates those who were living in the countryside from their counterparts living in small towns (less than 2,500). This was done to permit a differentiation between residents of small towns who may receive certain municipal services and those people who live in strictly rural areas without urban services.

For most services, great differences by size of community were not found. In several instances, however, the middle groups supplied the most favorable evaluations. The medium-sized cities (25,000 and up, excluding Oklahoma and Tulsa) or small cities (2,500 to 24,999) provided the highest ratings for all services except schools and parks. The metro area group gave parks the best evaluation, and schools rated highest with small town residents. Some of the ratings were quite close, of course, but generally one can discern a somewhat inverted U-shaped pattern with citizens in the very largest and very smallest areas least likely to be satisfied. This is perhaps most noticeable

with opinions about taxes and streets.

Next, what kind of differences appear when the sample is divided along racial and social class lines? (See Table 2.) Previous research suggests that in larger cities, at least, racial minorities are likely to express more unhappiness with public services, especially the police, than the dominant population.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, little differences are found on the basis of social class.<sup>8</sup> What happened in Oklahoma?

The sample was divided into three racial groups (white, black, and American Indian), since the native American population in Oklahoma seemed large enough to warrant special interest.<sup>9</sup> Somewhat unexpectedly, when overall services are considered, blacks provided a higher net positive response than whites—77.5 percent to 72.7 percent. While this is not a large difference, it represents the opposite situation found normally where blacks typically are more critical of local services. American Indians are considerably less satisfied than

either of the other groups at 59.0 percent. Blacks also provided higher evaluations than whites for schools, streets, and garbage service. As expected, whites are considerably more favorable to the police than either of the other two groups. Native Americans give the police an even lower rating than did blacks. But blacks are especially negative toward the tax burden, while the Indian group actually provided a net positive response of 5.5 percent on this question. Taking just the seven services (including overall) and examining which racial group provided the *lowest* rating for each service results in the following total number of lowest ratings for each of the three racial groups:

White	1
Black	2
American Indian	4

Maintaining city streets is the only activity where whites provided the lowest rating of the three groups. Generally speaking, native Americans are the least pleased with their local services.

Division of the respondents by socioeconomic class (based on in-

come and years of education) produced some unexpected results. The lower socioeconomic group provided a somewhat more favorable rating of overall services, schools, streets, parks, and ambulance service than either the middle or upper socioeconomic groups. Why this happened is unclear. Perhaps this group, which is lower in both income and education, has been conditioned to expect less and thus is satisfied with a lower level of service performance than either of the other two groups. The lower group, however, is considerably more antagonistic toward the level of taxation. As far as the other two groups are concerned, few differences appear except for streets and police. Where such variation occurs the middle class is slightly less content than the upper group.

#### Summary

On balance, most Oklahomans seem reasonably well satisfied with the quality of their community services. Local officials can take a measure of justifiable pride in the

service performance of their governments, especially since local government in the state has never been generously funded. Garbage and trash service and overall services led the list of those perceived as most satisfactory. Schools were rated reasonably well also. But the adequacy and condition of local streets barely produced more positive than negative responses. Certainly this represents an area that requires continuing attention on the part of local officials.

When the survey sample was divided by community size, the middle-sized cities generally were thought to be doing a slightly better job in providing services. Racial and social class division produced some unexpected results. Blacks and whites were quite similar in their service evaluations (except for the lower rating blacks gave the police), while American Indians were more consistently unhappy with the quality of local services. When the respondents were separated by income and education into three social strata, the more favorable service responses were generally forthcoming from the lower class. The other

TABLE 2  
Net Positive Response for Community Services  
and Taxes by Race and Social Class  
Oklahoma  
1976

Service Area	Race			Social Class <sup>a</sup>		
	White	Black	American Indian	Lower	Middle	Upper
Garbage	78.7	79.0	67.9	78.1	78.8	76.9
Overall	72.7	77.5	59.0	78.9	72.7	71.7
Ambulance	52.2	19.8	60.7	53.3	44.6	49.1
Schools	66.8	75.3	42.9	74.4	63.5	67.6
Parks	56.5	51.0	65.4	64.9	55.4	54.5
Police	55.1	36.4	32.7	54.5	49.6	57.3
Streets	13.3	27.8	16.8	32.3	6.8	14.3
High Taxes <sup>b</sup>	-16.9	-39.3	5.5	-34.9	-12.3	-12.6
(Max N) <sup>c</sup>	(2,313)	(239)	(67)	(381)	(932)	(925)

Note: The net positive response is the difference between the proportion of satisfied and dissatisfied responses. It varies between + 100.0 and -100.0 with positive numbers denoting more satisfaction with services or tax rates.

<sup>a</sup>Social class is determined in this study by combining the two five-point income and education variables. The values were added and recoded as follows: 1-3, lower; 4-6, middle; 7-10, upper.

<sup>b</sup>High taxes refer to the satisfaction with the rate of local taxation among Oklahomans. A positive sign for this measure indicates a higher proportion expressing satisfaction than dissatisfaction with tax levels, while a negative sign indicates greater proportions of dissatisfied respondents.

<sup>c</sup>Maximum number of respondents.

two groups tended to provide somewhat similar ratings. In general it might be concluded that no serious local service gaps exist among Oklahoma communities, at least in the minds of most citizens regardless of their race, socio-economic class, or the size of their community.

Most community residents thought taxes were too high, although this feeling obviously is not confined to Oklahomans. Nonetheless, in light of this view on taxation and the generally favorable outlook on services, it is difficult to speculate whether Oklahomans might trade a few less services for a tax cut since no such question was included in the survey. But some evidence on this issue is available. The municipal sales tax in Oklahoma, which has been available only since 1965, must be approved by a vote of the local citizenry. Voters have continued to approve increases in the sales tax levy, so that by late 1978 over 230 communities had approved a two-cent levy, and six cities had a three-cent tax. In all, it appears that Oklahomans have not yet become so fed up with local taxes that they are ready to join the taxpayers' revolt.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The survey questionnaire was administered in face-to-face interviews of 2,715 state residents. The sample was stratified geographically with each of four areas (Oklahoma City SMSA, Tulsa SMSA, the Eastern half of the state and the Western half of the state) sampled proportionately to its population. Because about 63 percent of the respondents were female, the data reported here were weighted to provide a correction for this imbalance between male and female respondents. See Larry Michaelson et al., "The Quality of Life in Oklahoma: Preliminary Results" (Norman: Center for Economic and Management Research, The University of Oklahoma, 1976).

<sup>2</sup>For a more complete report on the way Oklahomans rate their local services, see John P. Pelissero, *Citizen Evaluations of Community Services in Oklahoma* (Norman: Bureau of Government Research, The University of Oklahoma, 1978).

<sup>3</sup>See Wayne Hoffman, "The Democratic Response of Urban Governments: An Empirical Test With Simple Spatial Models," *Policy and Politics* 4 (June 1976): 51-74; and Doh C. Shin, "The Quality of Municipal Service: Concept, Measure and Results," *Social Indicators Research* 4 (May 1977): 207-229.

<sup>4</sup>The question on taxes was worded "Would you say that the local taxes in (name city or county) are very low, low, moderate, high, or very high?"

<sup>5</sup>See "The Tax Revolt" in *Public Opinion*, July/August 1978, p. 29. Also see Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, *Changing Public Attitudes on Government and Taxes 1978* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>According to a recent attempt to gauge tax effort, Oklahoma ranks next to last in the amount of state and local taxes collected compared with the state's "tax capacity." For example, property tax effort in Oklahoma produces only half the nationwide average based on the capacity to raise taxes from that source. An examination of the various tax categories included in this study reveals that Oklahoma's local taxes are generally lower than those levied at the state level. See D. Kent Halstead, *Tax Wealth in Fifty States* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, 1978), pp. 122-123.

<sup>7</sup>See Joel Aberbach and Jack Walker, "The Attitudes of Blacks and Whites Toward City Services: Implications for Public Policy," in *Financing the Metropolis*, ed. John Crechne (Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage, 1970), pp. 519-537; Herbert Jacob, "Contact With Government Agencies: A Preliminary Analysis of the Distribution of Government Services," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 16 (February 1972): 123-146; and Nicholas Lovrich, Jr. and G. Thomas Taylor, Jr., "Neighborhood Evaluation of Local Government Services: A Citizen Survey Approach," *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 12 (December 1976): 197-222.

<sup>8</sup>See Jacob, "Contact With Government Agencies"; Lovrich and Taylor, "Neighborhood Evaluation of Local Government Services"; and Brian Stipak, *Citizen Evaluations of Municipal Services in Los Angeles County* (Los Angeles: Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of California, 1974).

<sup>9</sup>Native Americans constitute about 4 percent of Oklahoma's population. Among the survey respondents, Indians are 2.5 percent of the total. In 1975 the black population in Oklahoma was 7.1 percent. The proportion black among those surveyed was 8.8 percent.