

ARE NEWSPAPERS VALUABLE TO YOUR MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS?

RJI SURVEY REVEALS RESIDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS, NEWSPAPERS' COVERAGE OF THEM

by Scott Swafford

Missouri residents believe that municipal elections are important, and that newspapers are a valued source of information about them, according to the results of a recent survey conducted by the Insight and Survey Center at the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute.

The results also show that residents favor in-depth, issue-based coverage of elections, stories that test the assertions candidates make during campaigns for local office, and reporting methods that allow side-by-side comparisons of candidates. They find information that comes directly from candidates – through websites, social media or campaign mailings – less helpful, according to the research.

The survey was conducted by the RJI Insight and Survey Center under the direction of Ken Fleming and Sarah Samson in November and December 2013. Its purpose was to gauge Missouri residents' attitudes about municipal elections and their local newspapers' coverage of them. Some of the surveys were completed online by subscribers of three participating Missouri newspapers, the *Branson Tri-Lakes News*, the *Sikeston Standard Democrat* and the *St. Joseph News-Press*, while others were conducted by telephone through random-digit dialing. More than 1,200 people were surveyed, with at least 400 coming from each of the newspapers' readership areas.

Here's a rundown of some of the most interesting and important findings:

DEMOGRAPHICS

The average age of respondents was 54.4, and 49 percent were women. On average, they had lived at their present address for 15 years, and 84 percent reported owning their own homes. Education level was pretty evenly distributed.

Here's where it gets interesting.

Ninety-five percent of the respondents said they were registered to vote, and 72 percent said they cast a ballot in the April 2013 municipal election. That's a remarkably high number, given that actual county turnout in our three communities ranged from a high of about 16 percent to a low of less than 12 percent. So, either our sample skewed heavily toward residents who are politically active, or our respondents as a group exaggerated their participation.

Seven percent of our respondents said they had been a candidate for a local political office, and 30 percent said they had contributed to a political campaign. Among the latter, most reported contributing to federal and state candidates more than local candidates.

KNOWLEDGE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

We asked a couple of simple questions to get a feel for our respondents' basic knowledge of local politics.

Nearly one in five said they were not sure when we asked whether their city or town is governed by a city council or by a board of trustees or

aldermen. More than half said they didn't know the term of office for a town council or board member, or for a local school board member.

IMPORTANCE OF MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

The results indicate that overall, people feel that elections on local bond issues or tax proposals are most important. We offered a series of statements to residents and asked them to rate them on a scale of 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). (See Figure 1.)

Residents rated school board elections as slightly more important than city council or town board elections. They were neutral on whether the outcome of local elections has more impact on them than those for state and federal offices.

In all, 83 percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that voting in local elections is important, and 69 percent said they try their best to stay informed about them. Less than 70 percent agreed or strongly agreed that voting in school board and town council races is important, while 91 percent

| Description of statements | Average score |
|---|---------------|
| Elections on local bond issues or tax proposals are important to me. | 4.34 |
| Voting in municipal elections is important to me personally. | 4.17 |
| Elections for school board seats are important to me. | 3.78 |
| I do my best to stay abreast of information about municipal elections. | 3.70 |
| Elections for city council or town board seats are important to me. | 3.68 |
| Elections for other local boards are important to me. | 3.61 |
| The outcome of municipal elections has more impact on me than the outcome of state and federal elections. | 3.04 |

Note: Responses to the questions were coded on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree."

Figure 1

agreed or strongly agreed that voting on local bond issues and tax increases is important.

VALUE OF NEWSPAPER ELECTION COVERAGE

Our respondents indicated that the print edition of the local newspaper is the most valuable of the information sources we asked them to consider. It's worth noting that the surveys did not seek residents' opinions about television and radio news and advertising. Those were left out largely for the sake of brevity.

Conversations with other community members were second behind the newspaper, followed by political forums and newspaper websites. (See Figure 2.)

Political advertising and information that comes from candidates for the most part rated poorly. That might be good news for those of us who are wringing our hands worrying that candidates will sidestep the newspaper in favor of delivering their messages directly to voters. (See Figure 3.)

TYPES OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE

The people surveyed indicated strongly that they want substantive coverage of elections. Information about candidates' stances on issues rated most important.

The respondents indicated they favor in-depth news stories about community issues in the election, question-and-answer pieces with candidates' verbatim responses and charts or grids that compare candidates' positions. Photographs ranked low. We suspect that would change if newspapers did more documentary-style election

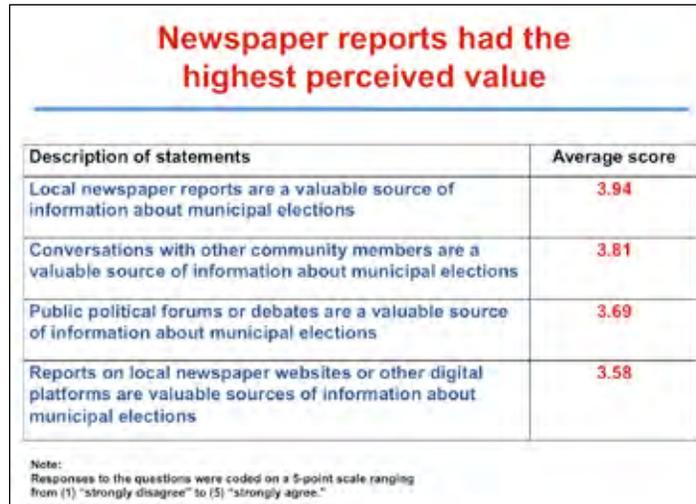


Figure 2

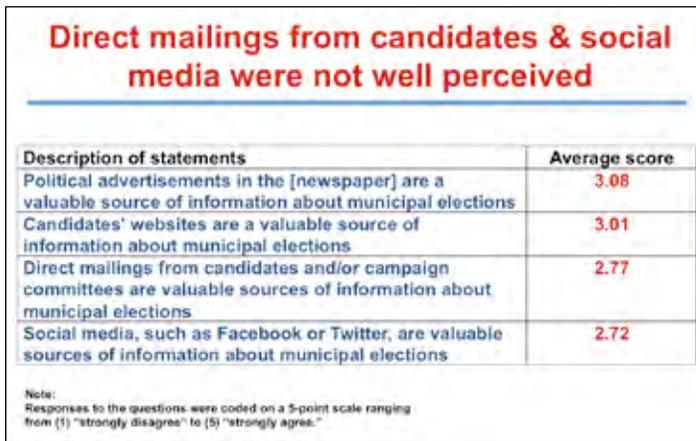


Figure 3

photography. (See Figure 4.)

So, what's next? Now that we've done the first wave of research we'll be encouraging the Sikeston, Branson and St. Joseph newspapers to do their best to take these findings to heart and to improve their coverage of local elections. We hope they'll experiment with candidate profiles, with in-depth

explorations of issues and with attempts to engage their readers in the election conversation. We hope they'll try bringing documentary photography into the mix and that they'll publish a voters' guide shortly before the election to synthesize their campaign coverage.

When we come back with a second survey after the April election, we hope to find that residents noticed and appreciated the newspapers' efforts. If we also can show that better election reporting prompts more people to go to the polls, we truly will have contributed to down-home democracy. □

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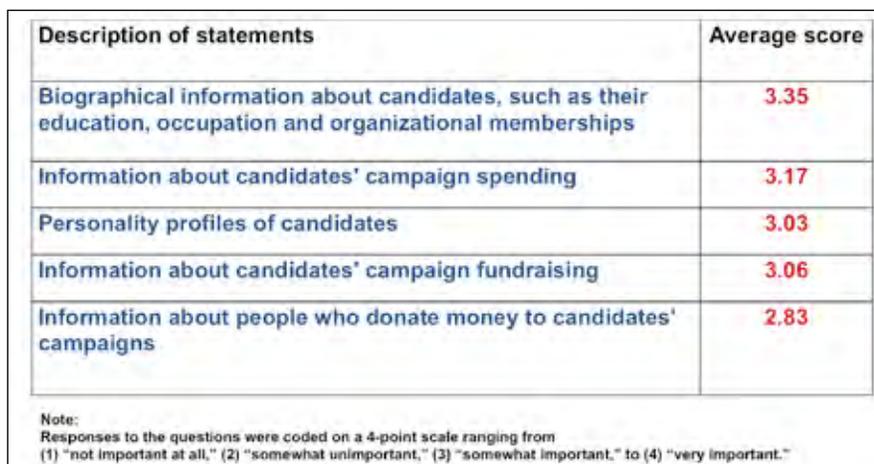


Figure 4