

**Friends of Local Government  
Policy Paper Series**

**Communicating with Constituents  
when State Policy and Local  
Jurisdictions Collide**

Patrick Murray, Director  
Monmouth University Polling Institute

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## Preface

This is the eleventh paper in NJLM Foundation's "Friends of Local Government" Policy Paper series. This paper, written by Patrick Murray, the Director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, is entitled, "**Communicating with Constituents when State Policy and Local Jurisdictions Collide.**" The Board of the NJLM Educational Foundation thanks Mr. Murray for this paper and his ongoing contributions to the public dialogue.

We would also like to note the support of the Foundation's Board for this project, as well as staff from the New Jersey State League of Municipalities, including Bill Dressel, Michael Darcy and Matthew Weng.

Michael F. Cerra, Policy Advisor  
NJLM Educational Foundation  
222 West State Street  
Trenton, New Jersey 08608  
[www.njlmef.org](http://www.njlmef.org)

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### About the Author

**Patrick Murray** was named the founding director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute in 2005. In that short time, the *Monmouth University/New Jersey Press Media Poll* has established itself as the Garden State's "poll of record" for its in-depth tracking of public policy and quality of life issues. In 2010, *PolitickerNJ.com* named Mr. Murray "Pollster of the Year" and also placed him at number 43 on its New Jersey Power List of the 100 most politically influential people in the state. He frequently appears as a commentator on state and regional TV and radio, and has been interviewed by national media, including CNN's *The Situation Room* and ABC's *Good Morning America*.

Mr. Murray has more than 18 years experience directing public policy research projects, including prior affiliations with the Eagleton Poll and the Bloustein School at Rutgers University. He has conducted survey research on nearly every issue area affecting New Jersey, including politics and government, transportation, taxes, the environment, health care, human services, employment, criminal justice, and the arts.

The Monmouth University Polling Institute conducts and disseminates public opinion research to foster greater public accountability by ensuring that the voice of the public is part of the policy discourse. The institute's activities include contract research services for government agencies and private organizations to assist with policy planning and assessment. The Polling Institute's research capabilities include: large and small-scale survey projects; telephone, mail, and in-person interview designs; quantitative data analysis; and qualitative research techniques such as focus group facilitation and analysis.

## **Communicating with Constituents when State Policy and Local Jurisdiction Collide**

Mayors and council members hear it all the time whenever a problem with public services arises. No matter which level of government is responsible for that service, it seems like residents turn to their town hall first. This is true even when the policy area involves multiple levels of government, such as property taxes, or when a widespread disaster strikes, like the recent hurricane.

The evidence does indeed support the contention that municipal officials hear more complaints per capita than other elected officials. And that means that local office holders are at the forefront of communicating with constituents on a whole host of issues. Local officeholders must be knowledgeable about these issues and also deft in handling complaints about problems over which they have no direct control. When state policy impacts public opinion of local officials, having a well-established process of sharing information will help alleviate these stresses.

First, let's discuss what New Jerseyans think of their local officials in general. While town council and committee members are important points of contact for constituents, most of the limited public opinion information focuses on mayors. So we will start with that office.

Why are mayors such important points of contact? Quite simply, it's because residents know who they are. A Monmouth University Poll conducted in 2006 asked New Jersey residents to name their mayor. Nearly half – 45 percent to be exact – could do so off the top of their heads without any prompting from the pollsters. Another 20 percent said they knew who their mayor was, but were unable to come up with the name when pressed.

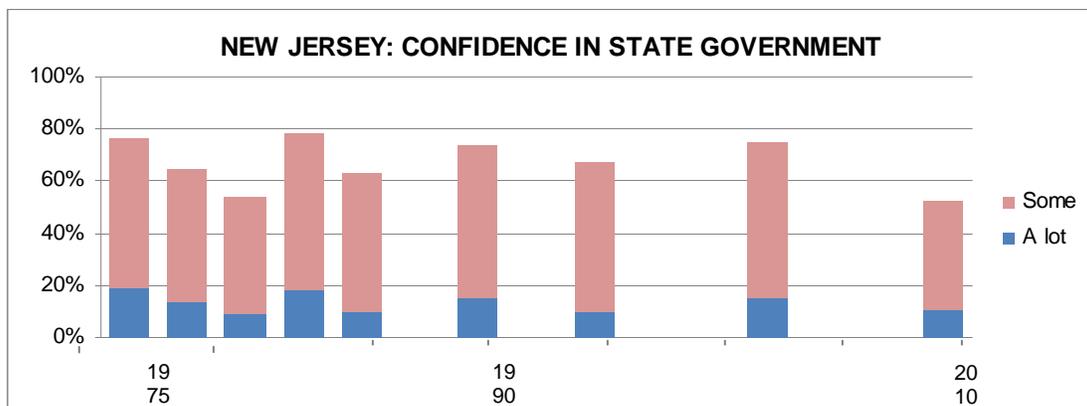
Before thinking that this number seems low, compare it to top-of-mind name recognition for other elected officials. A 2003 Eagleton poll asked residents to name the Governor, and 68 percent could. That means nearly one-third could not (although this number is likely to be much lower for the current incumbent). In 2004, Eagleton asked New Jerseyans to name their U.S. Senators. Only 30 percent could muster the name of at least one of these two statewide office holders, which, at the time, included one who had held office for nearly two decades.

In other words, after the Governor, the New Jersey elected official whose name residents are most likely to have on the tips of their tongues is their mayor; even more than their Congressional representatives or state legislators.

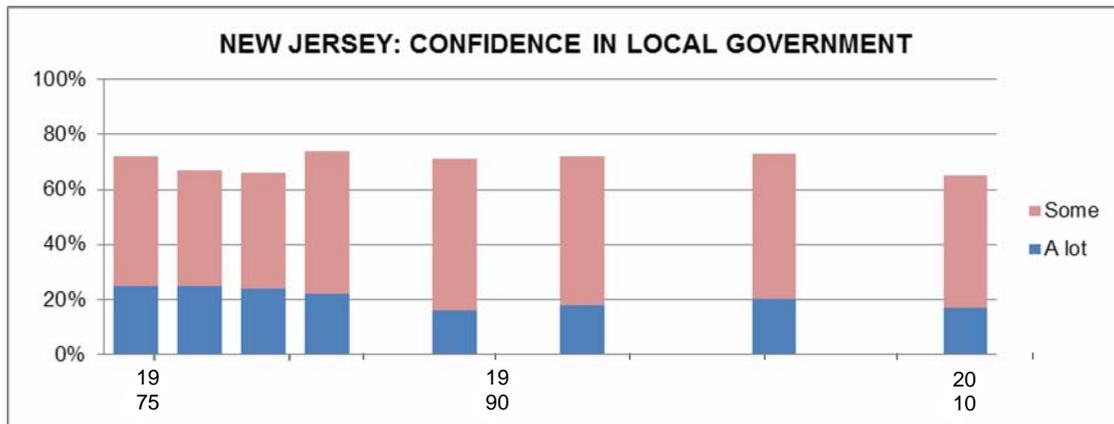
Mayors are generally well-regarded. Opinion on the issue of consolidation and shared services bears this out. We hear a lot about home rule in New Jersey. The evidence suggests that New Jerseyans would be more willing to consider sharing municipal services if they knew that the person calling the shots was someone local. Back in 1998, an Eagleton poll found that 59 percent of residents would be willing to combine their public works department with a neighboring town’s if it was under the oversight of their town’s mayor. Interestingly, support declined, but not by much, to 50 percent if the other town’s mayor was put in charge.

Turning to a slightly different topic, a 2002 poll found that despite widespread support for statewide planning, more New Jerseyans wanted growth and development policy managed by local authorities rather than at the regional level, by a 51 percent to 40 percent margin. In other words, most residents support service consolidation if a local official is at the helm, even if it is not their own.

While mayors tend to enjoy a more positive public standing than other office holders, they are still subject to a good deal of skepticism. Historically, Garden State residents have expressed nominally more confidence in their local government than in state government. But both have been on the decline in the past few years. Currently, 53 percent of New Jerseyans say they have at least some confidence in state government and 65 percent say the same about their local government. It is worth noting that less than 1-in-5 state residents say they have “a lot” of confidence in either level of government. (Please see chart below)



	1974	1975	1976	1978	1980	1984	1991	1999	2010
A lot	19%	14%	9%	18%	10%	15%	10%	15%	11%
Some	57%	51%	45%	61%	53%	59%	57%	60%	42%
Not much	16%	32%	42%	19%	35%	23%	30%	22%	44%
Don't know	9%	2%	4%	2%	2%	2%	3%	2%	2%



	1974	1975	1976	1978	1984	1991	1999	2010
A lot	25%	25%	24%	22%	16%	18%	20%	17%
Some	47%	42%	42%	52%	55%	54%	53%	48%
Not much	22%	27%	30%	24%	26%	24%	24%	32%
Don't know	7%	6%	4%	2%	3%	3%	4%	3%

Declining confidence in government has also had a negative impact on trust in local officials. News about political corruption has been one of the key drivers of this opinion. In the wake of the July 2009 arrests of dozens of public officials in New Jersey, 51 percent of state residents felt that most mayors placed their own financial interests first compared to 42 percent who said most mayors had the public interest at heart. While negative, this result was still more positive than public opinion of state legislators, of whom 63 percent of Garden State residents said put their own interests ahead of the public's (28 percent). (Please see chart above.)

In sum, even at times when residents don't have especially high regard for government, they have a closer connection with – or at least feel they can keep a closer eye on – their local officials. Now, let's turn to how public opinion on state policy affects municipal office holders.

There is no doubt that the property tax is the burning state issue of the day in New Jersey. All polling indicates that this is the most important issue New Jerseyans want their state and local governments to tackle. The current level of public sentiment is more intense than it has been at any other time during the past generation. While this issue is impacted by every level of government from the state to the school board, municipal officials are most likely to feel the brunt of taxpayer complaints.

A recent Monmouth University poll posed this question: "If you had a general complaint about property taxes, who would you contact first?" The poll left the response up to the

individual respondents; they could name anyone they wanted. Fully half identified a municipal official, including the mayor (17 percent), town council or someone else at town hall (27 percent), and local tax official (6 percent). Far fewer named a state official such as the Governor (11 percent) or a state legislator (10 percent). Just 3 percent would go to a county official first and – in what will come as no shock to municipal office holders – only 1 percent would first call their local school district, which is the largest contributor to most property owners’ tax bills.

There is also no doubt that town hall is the point of entry for most residents when dealing with any government concern, even when the municipality is not the responsible party. This is also true for services, such as street maintenance, where residents are unlikely to know whether it is under the aegis of local, county, or state government.

When local officials can’t address the problem, the public’s frustration is likely to increase. This is true even if – and sometimes especially if – the matter is outside of municipal jurisdiction. “It’s out of our hands” is rarely an acceptable response to the constituent in need.

A key to diffusing these situations is to establish an ongoing channel of communication with residents. Providing residents with more access to information about government can lead to a reduction in the number of complaints, and the intensity of those complaints, when state issues become intertwined with local concerns.

[In a 2009 paper for the NJLM Education Foundation](#), Chris Rosica discussed the applications of social media for connecting with constituents. This can be a valuable resource in establishing an ongoing channel of communications, but it is not the only venue that should be employed. And frankly, there’s only so many observational tweets that the typical Garden State mayor can make in a day. The underlying point, though, is that the information age has raised the public’s expectations of how much information they should have access to. Being proactive in meeting those expectations can diminish the number and intensity of negative complaints from constituents.

A 2011 Monmouth University poll of New Jersey residents bears this out. When asked where they would look first to get information about their town government or local services, the top answer was the internet at 41%, with most going directly to their town’s official website. Another 36% said they would visit or call their town hall or a town official. Suffice it to say that

these results would have been very different just a few years ago. This shift in how residents interact with local government poses new challenges for municipal officials.

Local office holders pride themselves on their knowledge of the public mood in their town. It makes sense after all, since more New Jerseyans know their mayor than any other elected official bar the Governor. And because local officials hear from so many of their constituents, it is easy to assume that they are hearing the full range of public concerns. However, this proposition has always been subject to caveats. Constituents who seek out their mayor or council member tend to have very positive or very negative views that they want to convey. The mood of the “middle” can be overlooked.

The pitfalls of the more traditional modes of constituent communication are exacerbated by the move to online information searches. The people who now go directly to municipal personnel with their concerns are increasingly older in age. This has significant consequences for keeping tabs on the mood of the public. Local office holders are now even more likely to hear disproportionately from senior citizens than they were in the past. The concerns of other residents may go unnoticed, with the risk that problems simmer under the surface.

It’s important to deal these unknown concerns proactively. That means local officials must first, understand residents’ unique expectations when they seek out information from electronic sources and second, provide that information at the first point of contact. According to polling, New Jerseyans report searching for a wide range of municipal information online. This includes basic contact information for town personnel, recycling schedules, school information, permitting rules, and tax information to name a few. (For more information, see: [http://www.monmouth.edu/polling/admin/polls/MUP38\\_4.pdf](http://www.monmouth.edu/polling/admin/polls/MUP38_4.pdf)). The extent to which this information is readily available on the town’s website can reduce frustration and enhance constituent satisfaction.

For example, trash and recycling schedules are among the most requested pieces of information. This information should be easily accessible on the municipal websites. If the county provides recycling services, this schedule should also be on municipal websites. Even if trash disposal is not a municipal service, but is contracted privately by individual property owners, this information should also be clearly shown on the municipal website.

School information is another area where municipalities can provide a public service that is both beneficial to residents and local officials who are subject to regular questions about the education system. Having a page on municipal websites that provides responses to frequently asked questions about local schools – or provides links to the school district website – can go a long way in reducing the number of inquiries received at town hall and improving constituent understanding of how local services are provided.

Considering what a volatile issue this is, local officials can use municipal websites to help educate residents about how property taxes work. In addition to providing access to the municipal budget, as required by state statute, town websites can provide an easy to understand breakdown of the tax levy by county, municipality and school district. And given the statewide “property tax cap,” websites could also show the change in the levy compared to prior years. In cases where a tax increase appears to exceed the cap, an explanation could be provided.

This is just one example of how municipal officials can use simple electronic media to communicate with their constituents. It would not only help delineate between the jurisdictions and policies of different levels of government, but can help local officials allay residents’ concerns before they escalate.

The bottom line is that the more information constituents feel they have access to, the easier it becomes for local officials to draw distinctions between municipal responsibilities and the services provided or policies promulgated by other levels of government. And that can only serve to increase residents’ sense that their local officials are working hard in the public’s interest.