



GENERAL BUSINESS

Poll: Decline in Local News Coverage Discourages Civic Engagement

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The decline in local news coverage has left many in New Jersey feeling unprepared to make informed voting choices or to get involved in civic activities, according to a recent Stockton University poll.

Many news outlets struggling against circulation and ad revenue losses and competition on the internet have reduced staff. Fewer reporters are covering municipal and county news as a result. About one in three (34%) New Jersey adults said none of the news sources they consume provide any information about the local area where they live, the poll of 559 adult New Jersey residents found.

Many people consume little news of any kind; almost half (48%) read or watch the news for less than two hours a week, according to the poll conducted by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University. More than one in three get their local news using non-traditional sources that may not provide depth in coverage or even be entirely accurate, with 21% using social media and 14% simply hearing news from their family and friends.

“It’s a vicious circle in which readership and viewership decline, resources are cut and there is less local news content available,” said John Froomjian, director of the Hughes Center. “As local coverage becomes scarce, fewer people consume news.”

When asked how well their news sources inform them about what goes on in their local government, a plurality (40%) gave them a negative rating (1-2 out of 5), 28% gave a neutral rating of 3, and 28% gave them a positive rating (3-4 out of 5).

The lack of coverage may be hurting civic engagement. Half (51%) of New Jersey residents said there is not enough news coverage to help make informed decisions in state and local elections. One in three said the same about national elections.

When it comes to voting habits, those with local news sources regularly vote in local elections at higher rates than those who do not have local news available to them (44% and 34%, respectively). In addition, higher rates of those with local news coverage said they felt informed enough to vote in these races (47%) compared to those without such coverage (27%).

Most people (60%) say the lack of local coverage doesn’t affect how engaged they become locally, but 16% said they are less engaged. One in five said they have become more engaged as news coverage declined, perhaps to find out what is happening in their towns, Froomjian said.

However, residents do feel largely uninformed about what goes on in their area. Asked about how well their news sources inform them about ways to get involved in their community, the majority (57%) gave a negative rating; 20% gave a neutral rating, and 18% gave a positive rating.

A plurality of almost half (49%) believe they don’t have the information needed to get involved in their community while 40% do think the information is available for the most part.

Most residents have not volunteered locally (63%), have not attended or watched a meeting for a local board, council or organization (65%), and have not worked with fellow residents to solve a problem in community (69%) in the past year.

Though civic engagement was low among residents overall, the people who said their news sources do provide local coverage had consistently higher rates compared to those who do not have local news sources, said Research Associate Alyssa Maurice.

“These results make it clear that local news is not only important to having an informed public. It’s vital to the democratic process,” Froomjian said.

Those who find their news sources the least informative, giving negative ratings of coverage of local government or how to get involved in their community, were also less likely to vote in local races, feel adequately informed about elections, attend local meetings, volunteer, or work with residents to solve problems by anywhere from 10-24 percentage points.

The vast majority (72%) have at least some trust in local news media organizations. Of those respondents, 13% said they have a lot of trust and 59% said some trust. Just under 1 in 4 (24%) said they have no trust.

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