Study: low political participation has stymied economic development

Idaho ranks among the bottom five in several measures of political activism, efficacy and satisfaction, and that is hurting economic development, according to the University of Idaho’s Center for Local Government Research and Outreach.

The center used data from the American National Election Study, a survey that polls citizens of every state every other year, to assess how Idahoans viewed federal, state and local governments. It then conducted its own survey of local government officials around the state to identify what problems they observed.

Idahoans reported they felt like their voice doesn’t matter and that politics is an activity solely for the elite. Politicians reported that many people don’t know the duties of an office such as county commissioner, said Florian Justwan, assistant professor at University of Idaho.

"When comparing public opinion between the states we noticed one thing quickly – Idaho is different," Justwan said. "While Idaho isn't always last in these categories it is important to note it is the only state consistently at the bottom.

"There are reasons to believe these findings have strong effects on economic development," Justwan said.

Poor political participation hurts economic development because it erodes trust in others, said Juliet Carlisle, assistant professor of political science at University of Idaho.

Idaho ranked in the bottom five for the number of citizens who are satisfied with democracy in the United States, 46th, and for those who don't feel the federal government poses a threat to them, 45th, according to the latest American National Election Study.

Idaho also ranked low for state and local government participation. Idaho ranked 48th for the proportion of citizens who have participated in a school board meeting, 44th for the proportion of citizens who have donated to a political campaign, and 47th for the proportion of citizens who have donated to a charity. Idaho ranked 49th for the proportion of citizens who believe local elections are conducted fairly, and 48th for the proportion of citizens who feel their voice is heard, according to the study.

The Center for Local Government Research and Outreach conducted its own survey in Idaho. Most of the Idahoans it polled said they believed their cities were fragmented along political lines, that they were dissatisfied with public services such as education and transportation, and that they believed there isn’t discourse in the state and that the government treats governing as an elite affair and isn’t responsive enough.

Some local politicians believe the same things.

"Idaho’s government is an elite affair," said Tom Lamar, Commissioner of Latah County. "It’s a reality, not a perception. It’s unfortunate, but that is how it is."

Low participation in local government can affect economic investment. Many Idaho city and county officials already feel at a disadvantage when trying to attract businesses, said Brian Ellison, chair of politics and philosophy at University of Idaho.

"Last summer we launched a survey across the state for mayors, clerks and county commissioners to list the barriers to economic development
Florian Justwan explains survey results of Idaho citizens concerning political participation, satisfaction and efficacy at the Breaking Barriers Summit. Photo courtesy of Maria Ortega.

The survey results listed three categories of barriers that local governments face when trying to lure businesses. Under economic obstacles were lack of financial tools, property tax ceilings and rules stipulating how urban renewal must be conducted. Under political obstacles were a state prohibition on local taxes, state distrust of local government, the legislative preemption of city efforts to raise minimum wages, corruption, and poor representation. And under social obstacles were an anti-government attitude and the lack of a workforce.

"States treat local governments as just one more interest group to be ignored or placated," Ellison said. "This is in most places though, not just in Idaho. States overly restrict local autonomy."

"Basically if the state would get out of the way, we would do better in a lot of these instances," Lamar said.

The University of Idaho’s Center for Local Government Research and Outreach held a summit Oct. 11 to focus on countering negative political attitudes.

"In the last two years we've added 1,000 high paying jobs and over the last few years we've had $1 billion in investment downtown," said Boise Mayor David Bieter, who spoke at the summit. "In a very real sense, money follows trust. Investment is made where people feel comfortable."

Bieter said the recent growth wasn't always typical in Boise. When he first took office 13 years ago, he was told several aspects of how city government left businesses feeling lost or ignored. One of Bieter's first major initiatives was to change the city's permitting process to make it faster and more responsive to the concerns of businesses.

The move helped businesses feel more comfortable working with city officials, Bieter said. He advised other local officials to look for the areas they have the most control over to foster healthier political participation.

"Economic development is many things, but if you start with what you can control you can get a lot done," Bieter said. "People want to feel welcomed where they choose to live."

City and county officials were asked to seek out ways to better engage the citizens they work with by holding educational presentations about the role of local government offices, looking for ways to partner with nearby cities or counties to grow an area and changing internal processes to be more responsive.

"Something I realized that I need to do is hold county meetings around Latah County outside of just Moscow as an opportunity to reach out to people," Lamar said.

The most successful cities over the last few decades are found in places where the local government took it upon itself to create a culture that would attract new businesses and new residents, Ellison said. Idaho cities need to look for ways to make their locations more attractive and their citizens feel more welcome.

"Local governments create all of our services, produce our quality of life and are more relatable to citizens," Ellison said.

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