

Elected officials and library funding

Understanding the motivations and voting intent of the U.S. population is a critical foundation for developing any initiative aimed at impacting library funding. But an understanding of voter attitudes is only part of the funding environment.

Elected and appointed local government officials play a critical role in determining library funding and their attitudes and behaviors must also be understood. Before residents can vote on a library referendum, elected officials must agree to put the issue on the ballot. And local funding for public libraries is not always decided at the ballot box. In many communities, the public library is allocated a share of the general fund and that allocation is often decided by the locally elected and appointed officials.

Local funding for libraries is not always decided at the ballot box. In many communities public library funds are allocated from general operating funds.

To understand the motivations and behaviors of this important group, elected and appointed officials were also surveyed. Unlike the general population, there are no national survey panels for local officials. A questionnaire for elected officials was administered online and survey participation was solicited via an e-mail sent to subscribers of *Governing* magazine, a monthly magazine whose primary audience is state and local government officials. All qualifying elected officials had some responsibility for making decisions about the local library. The survey was an abbreviated version of the voter questionnaire. Due to the process by which respondents were recruited, they represent a convenience sample that is quantitative but not statistically representative of all local elected officials in the United States.

While the smaller survey data set did not allow for segmentation of elected officials, it did allow for quantified comparisons between elected officials and the public they serve. Eighty-four elected and appointed officials completed the survey.

In addition to the quantitative survey, a number of phone interviews were also conducted with elected officials and political consultants to understand the role the elected official plays in library funding, the attitudes they hold about the library and their perspective on increasing library funding.

The elected and appointed officials surveyed tended to be city managers, city council members or library board members. Most of those who completed the survey were still in office. Half had held their positions for less than five years and expected to remain in their positions for a few more years.

Elected officials surveyed tend to be well-educated males who are employed full-time in addition to their appointed or elected positions. They are long-time residents of their communities and are very involved as members or volunteers in local civic

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organizations. The officials surveyed are fans of their local libraries and report a higher number of annual library visits than average for the total voting respondents. They see the library as a place where anyone, regardless of race, religion or income, can go to get access to information and technology.

Elected officials have views about the library similar to those of the Probable Supporters. They appreciate the added value librarians offer and see librarians as important figures in rallying community support. Elected officials are knowledgeable about libraries and their value, but they often do not see the library as a necessity for the community. The library is seen as a community ‘amenity’ rather than a ‘must have.’

The research indicates that when weighing budget decisions, elected officials are not fully committed to increasing funding for the library, even though they may feel personally connected to the library. The elected officials surveyed all had some responsibility for making decisions about the public library, but when asked about supporting a local library referendum, only 60% indicate that they would *definitely* support putting a funding measure on the ballot.

This chapter provides an overview of the findings from the quantitative survey and the phone interviews, and presents a slightly different set of profile dimensions than the voter segmentation:

1. Demographic profile
2. Professional situation
3. Library visits
4. Public service support
5. Attitudes toward public libraries
6. Attitudes toward public library funding.

The chapter concludes with advice from elected officials on the required components of a successful library funding campaign.

1. Demographic profile

Elected officials surveyed tend to be well-educated males who are employed full-time in addition to their appointed or elected positions.

Demographic profile

Elected officials

	Total Voting Respondents	Elected Officials
18–29	15%	17%
30–39	20%	12%
40–49	24%	18%
50–59	23%	30%
60–69	19%	20%
Female	50%	33%
Less than \$20,000	18%	25%
\$20,000–\$29,999	12%	9%
\$30,000–\$39,999	16%	13%
\$40,000–\$49,999	12%	6%
\$50,000–\$59,999	10%	6%
\$60,000–\$74,999	11%	13%
\$75,000–\$99,999	12%	19%
\$100,000 or more	10%	9%
Demographic tendencies		
Completed some high school/high school graduate	27%	21%
Completed some college/college degree	60%	44%
Completed some post-grad/masters/doctorate/professional degree	13%	35%

Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

2. Professional situation

The elected officials surveyed tend to be city managers, on the city council or on the library board. In most of the communities surveyed, the public library is overseen by a library board.

Most of those who completed the survey are still in office. Half have held their positions for less than five years and most expect to remain in their positions for only a few more years.

Elected officials surveyed tend to be city managers, on the city council or on the library board—most are currently in office

	Elected Officials
Currently holding appointed/elected position	89%
Member of:	
City/town council	24%
Local library board	21%
City manager	17%
School board	7%
Other	31%

Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Half of the elected officials surveyed have held their positions for less than five years and expect to serve only a few years longer

	Elected Officials
How many years have you HELD this appointed/elected position?	
Less than 3 years	26%
3–4 years	27%
5–9 years	31%
10 years or more	15%
How many more years do you EXPECT to hold an appointed/elected position?	
Less than 3 years	27%
3–4 years	31%
5–9 years	14%
10 years or more	27%

Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

In most of the communities surveyed, a library board oversees the public library

	Elected Officials
Have library board that is responsible for overseeing the public library	88%
Library board is responsible for making:	
Financial and budgetary decisions	65%
Policy and programming decisions	84%

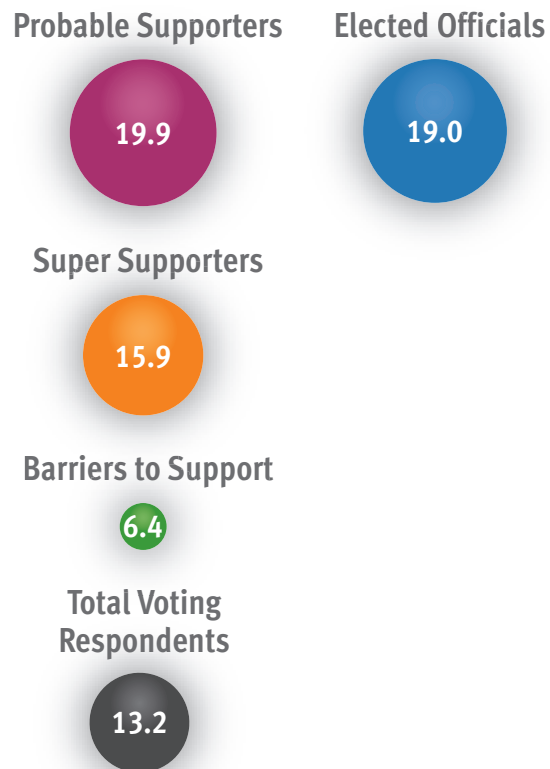
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

3. Library visits

Elected officials report visiting the library more frequently than average for the voting population. They report 19 visits a year, a similar frequency to the average across Probable Supporters (19.9).

Annual library visits

Elected officials report visiting the library more frequently than average for the voting population.



Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

4. Public service support

The majority of elected officials are reluctant to support a tax increase for local services, including the public library. The elected officials' willingness to increase taxes to fund the seven public services surveyed was low; no services reached 50% support.

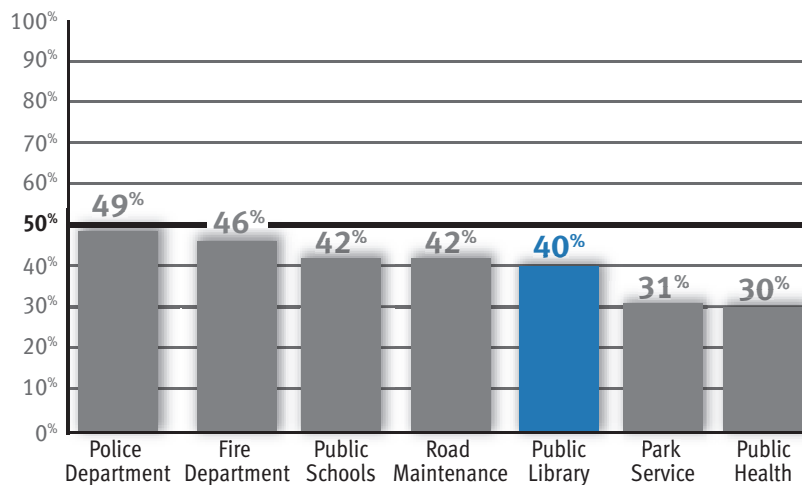
The police department receives the highest level of support with 49% of elected officials agreeing that they would be willing to increase taxes.

The public library ranked fifth on the list, with just 40% of elected officials willing to increase taxes to support their public library.

The library ranks in the lower half of a list of public services that elected officials are willing to support with a tax increase

Elected officials

For each service, please rate how much you agree with the phrase "I'd be willing to pay more in local taxes to better fund this service." Please use a 10-point scale, where a 10 means you 'Completely Agree' and a 1 means you 'Completely Disagree.'



Percentage of elected officials respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

The majority of elected officials are reluctant to support a tax increase for local services, including the public library.

5. Attitudes toward public libraries

Elected officials who participated in the survey are very involved in their local communities. They are also long-term residents of their communities. Local elected officials (68%) are more likely than voters (59%) to have lived in their community for more than 10 years. Elected officials are more likely to be members of a variety of local organizations, including Friends of the Library groups. Forty percent (40%) of elected officials surveyed were members of Friends of the Library, compared to 9% of voters and 11% of Probable Supporters.

Elected officials have a positive opinion of the library, similar to the views held by Probable Supporters. They believe the library plays an important role in the community by providing equal access to information and technology. Elected officials also recognize the positive influence the library has on the community by providing a community gathering place.

Elected officials appreciate the added value the librarians provide to library patrons, and the role librarians play in rallying community support for the library. Seventy-one percent (71%) have a positive impression of the leadership at their local library, yet just half (53%) believe that their local librarian works closely with local politicians and community leaders to find ways to better the community.

Attitudes toward public libraries

Elected officials

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement on a scale from 1 to 10, where a 10 means 'Agree Strongly' and a 1 means 'Disagree Strongly.'

Elected officials are very involved in their communities

	Total Voting Respond.	Probable Supporters	Elected Officials
Have lived in their city/town for 10 or more years	59%	62%	68%
Member of:			
Local nonprofit organization	17%	23%	45%
Friends of the Library	9%	11%	40%
Chamber of Commerce	4%	6%	38%
Local city board	2%	1%	36%
Neighborhood planning association	6%	6%	21%
Local PTA	8%	8%	17%
Rotary club	3%	1%	15%
League of Women Voters	2%	1%	11%
Local park district board	1%	1%	11%

Percentage of elected officials and voting respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Local elected officials have a positive opinion of the public library

	Total Voting Respond.	Probable Supporters	Elected Officials
[Positive] overall impression of the local public library	61%	73%	73%
[Positive] overall impression of the librarians at the local public library	60%	72%	64%
[Positive] overall impression of the leadership at the local public library	—	—	71%

Percentage of elected officials and voting respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
 Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Local elected officials have a positive opinion of the public library.

Elected officials see the library as a key player in providing equal access to information and technology

	Total Voting Respond.	Probable Supporters	Elected Officials
The local public library provides essential resources that some people couldn't otherwise afford	68%	79%	77%
The local public library levels the playing field by providing access to books, technology and special classes for everyone	49%	60%	65%
A lot of people who use the public library in my community don't have Internet access at home	44%	52%	58%
My local public library offers special events and programs that are not offered anywhere else in the community	34%	38%	61%

Percentage of elected officials and voting respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
 Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Local elected officials see the library as a great resource for information technology and activities

	Total Voting Respond.	Probable Supporters	Elected Officials
The public library:			
Offers access to computer programs/software people don't have at home	51%	59%	61%
Offers access to databases not available on the Internet	39%	40%	53%
Offers activities and entertainment you can't find anywhere else in the community	34%	42%	46%

Percentage of elected officials and voting respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
 Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Elected officials recognize the library has a positive influence on the community by providing a community gathering place

	Total Voting Respond.	Probable Supporters	Elected Officials
Public libraries can be a preventative measure against crime by providing kids an alternative to the streets	56%	63%	70%
Having a high-quality public library helps raise property values in the community	45%	56%	57%
The public library is a social hub in my community where people frequently get together	18%	19%	37%

Percentage of elected officials and voting respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
 Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Elected officials appreciate the added value librarians offer patrons

	Total Voting Respond.	Probable Supporters	Elected Officials
The public librarian:			
Really understands how to engage kids with computers and technology	42%	46%	57%
Recommends books that you never would have thought to read otherwise	45%	49%	57%
Develops interesting classes and programs that you can't find anywhere else	34%	39%	49%

Percentage of elected officials and voting respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
 Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Elected officials recognize the library has a positive influence on the community by providing a community gathering place.

Elected officials see librarians as important figures in rallying community support for the library

	Total Voting Respond.	Probable Supporters	Elected Officials
The public librarian:			
Is passionate about making the public library relevant again	53%	61%	64%
Is committed to rekindling the importance of the public library in the world of technology	50%	58%	59%

Percentage of elected officials and voting respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
 Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

6. Attitudes toward public library funding

Elected officials surveyed report positive opinions and attitudes toward their public libraries and librarians. These positive opinions did not directly translate into increased financial support for the library.

All elected officials who participated in the survey had some responsibility for making decisions about the local library. When asked about supporting a local library referendum, 60% indicate they would *definitely* support putting a library funding measure on the ballot.

While elected officials are more likely than the voting public to recognize the financial struggles the library faces, the majority (73%) think the library has enough money for day-to-day operations.

While many of the elected officials report that their local libraries have Friends of the Library chapters (to which many elected officials surveyed belong) they do not feel these groups are effective in raising funds.

Attitudes toward public library funding

Elected officials

73% of local elected officials believe the library has sufficient operating funds.

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement on a scale from 1 to 10, where a 10 means ‘Agree Strongly’ and a 1 means ‘Disagree Strongly.’

Elected officials are more likely than voters to recognize library financial needs; yet 73% believe the library has sufficient operating funds

	Total Voting Respond.	Probable Supporters	Elected Officials
My local library doesn't have enough money for day-to-day operations	14%	10%	27%

Percentage of elected officials and voting respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Elected officials tend to think their communities could afford a tax increase

	Total Voting Respond.	Probable Supporters	Elected Officials
The local government in my community tends to make responsible financial decisions	24%	22%	56%
I support tax increases that will improve my community	37%	38%	61%
I feel like I/my community pays too much in property taxes	41%	31%	33%
People in my community can't afford to have their taxes raised	45%	40%	33%
I feel like there's a lot of waste in local government spending	58%	54%	30%

Percentage of elected officials and voting respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Half the elected officials surveyed believe that librarians work closely with community leaders

	Total Voting Respond.	Probable Supporters	Elected Officials
The public librarian works closely with other community leaders to find ways to better the community	38%	42%	53%
The public librarian works closely with local politicians and community leaders to get public library funding and support	41%	45%	53%
Elected officials in my community strongly support the local public library	30%	31%	43%

Percentage of elected officials and voting respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Over half of elected officials surveyed state that they would *definitely* support putting a local library funding measure on the ballot

	Total Voting Respond.	Probable Supporters	Elected Officials
Would definitely support putting a library referendum, ballot initiative or bond measure on the ballot	37%*	47%*	60%

*Would *definitely* vote yes
Percentage of elected officials and voting respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Elected officials do not view voluntary fund-raising for libraries as effective

	Total Voting Respond.	Probable Supporters	Elected Officials
Public library has a voluntary fund-raising group such as Friends of the Library	49%	57%	81%
Please rate how effective the fund-raising group for your local library is at gaining community and financial support for the public library	—	—	46%

Percentage of elected officials and voting respondents with an agreement rating of 8, 9 or 10
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Advice from elected officials

Elected officials involved in library funding initiatives offered important advice and suggestions for increasing library funding in their communities.

Stress the library's return on investment (ROI) to the community

The elected officials acknowledge and appreciate the public library's value to their community, often referring to this as the return on investment, or ROI, of the library. Officials noted that the library's ROI is often unique to a community and can change over time. This value ranges from keeping children off the street (Salinas, California) to education of residents leading to wealth creation for the community (Boise, Idaho). Officials also speak frequently of the universal and important role libraries play in providing access to technology for the broader community.

Build strategic partnerships

Elected officials interviewed believe that the libraries have a funding challenge, but admit that the library often falls lower in the pecking order for financing than other public services, particularly public safety. Finding opportunities to partner or create joint ventures with other public services and programs increases the level of elected official support.

Be proactive

Although elected officials recognize the need for increased library funding, they are rarely, if ever, the first to push for increased funding support for libraries. The new library projects they mentioned were typically initiated by a passionate and committed library director, a small group of voters or by private groups including Friends of the Library organizations.

Engage voters in the campaign

Elected officials said that they and their colleagues are most likely to be influenced to support an increase in library funding in response to pressure from their constituents. There is an opportunity to influence the elected officials (in the same way as Probable Supporters) by leveraging their recognition of the library's value to the community.

Stress the broad appeal of the library

Elected officials can take on the cause of the library without substantially alienating or competing with another core group of funders or political party supporters. The public library represents a safe, neutral topic on which an elected official could campaign or speak with broad appeal to nonpartisan audiences.

Elected officials on library funding campaigns

Elected officials cited a number of important components required of a successful library funding campaign:

- Messaging that focuses on the broader value of the library to the community, specifically a community gathering place, access to technology and programs for teenagers and other groups
- A passionate, committed and active champion(s) who can rally support among the elected officials and community influencers
- Civic engagement, including a commitment to speak with every relevant group in the community to encourage grassroots support
- A willingness to partner with other public services in a joint effort where strategically advantageous
- The ability to ask for the right support at the right time:
 - Voter turnout is greater for general elections than local elections
 - It is often easier to campaign for a new building than for operating funds.

