

Electing Our Future: A Healthy, Wealthy & Wise Indianapolis

A Summary Report

Courtesy of Indiana University



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INTRODUCTION

Low levels of voter participation correlate with low levels of civic knowledge. Only 36 percent of Americans can name the three branches of government and 27 percent know it takes a two-thirds vote of the House and Senate to override a presidential veto.¹ Fewer than one-half (38 percent) of 8th grade students can correctly identify a current Presidential responsibility not in the Constitution (such as granting pardons, appointing Supreme Court justices, and commanding armed forces), and only seven percent can correctly describe America's system of checks and balances.²

ELECTING OUR FUTURE FORUMS

In 2015, the Center for Civic Literacy (CCL) convened a group of partners to sponsor a series of community forums to offer Marion County residents an opportunity to learn more about navigating Indianapolis' governing structures and to recognize the impact of local government on their daily activities. The primary goal of the forums was to increase

¹ Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2014.

² National Assessment of Education Progress, 2014.

informed engagement in the civic life of our city, including voting in the November 2015 election and greater citizen participation and volunteering between elections.

Electing our Future partners included:

- Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee
- Indiana Bar Foundation
- Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center
- Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce
- Indianapolis Public Library
- Indianapolis Urban League
- IUPUI
- League of Women Voters of Indiana
- NUVO
- Institute for Civic Leadership & Mayoral Archives, University of Indianapolis
- WFYI

Three forums were held in September and October 2015 around each of the follow topics:

- 1) **How does Indianapolis work?** How does our governing structure/Unigov differ from that of other cities? How do we finance our city?
- 2) **What are the issues we face?** How does the city deal with change? What do citizens need to know to make informed decisions on quality of life issues: environmental, public health, education, transportation, arts and culture, civic life? How

do we identify and allocate dwindling resources—with resources broadly defined to include civic, corporate and religious organizations and nonprofits, sources of expertise, and civic energy. Why is low civic knowledge a barrier to a more robust civic life?

- 3) **What do we want Indianapolis to look like 5, 10, 15 years from now?** If we want a city that is healthy, wealthy and wise, how do we get there? Great Indianapolis Progress Committee shared insights from their Plan 2020 project.

Overall, 175 individuals attended the forums.

Electing Our Future Participant Surveys

Survey Methodology

CCL designed a set of surveys with questions covering forum-specific topics, as follows:

- Forum one questions were formulated around the City of Indianapolis structure (Unigov), expenses faced by the city, identification of city departments, levels of satisfaction with local government, and access to city information.
- Forum two questions examined specific issues faced by the City of Indianapolis as well as overall satisfaction with government and perceptions of accountability.
- Forum three questions centered on the Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee's *Plan 2020* effort and general knowledge about this plan. Other questions were intended to gauge respondents' feelings of inclusiveness and efficacy in future decision making for the City of Indianapolis.

All surveys included a brief section intended to gather respondents' demographic information. Surveys were distributed via email to forum registrants at least one week prior to each forum. Paper copies of the surveys were provided to forum participants who did not complete an online version and were collected before each forum began (Table 1).

Electing Our Future Survey Results

Forum participant perceptions of local government

When asked to respond to the question “Our local government decisions and actions are transparent and accountable,” 47 percent of forum attendees strongly disagreed (12 percent) or disagreed (35 percent) with the statement (Figure 1). Nearly one-third of survey respondents were neutral on the issue. While nearly one-half of attendees felt government decisions were not transparent and accountable, 51 percent of attendees strongly agree (9 percent) or agreed (42 percent) that citizens were given a voice and represented in local government. When asked if residents felt empowered to make a change in their city, over one-half (54 percent) of those surveyed either strongly agreed (24 percent) or agreed (30 percent) with the question (Figure 2).

Forum participant perceptions of Indianapolis

Despite survey respondents feeling empowered to make a change in their city, very few felt involved in actual decision-making for the future of Indianapolis. Fifty percent of survey participants indicated they felt highly uninvolved (11 percent) or uninvolved (39 percent) in decision-making regarding the future of Indianapolis (Figure 3).

Table 1. *Electing Our Future: Surveys distributed and completed, by forum*

| Forums | Number of surveys distributed | Number of surveys completed |
|--|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. How does Indianapolis work? | 74 | 50 |
| 2. What are the issues we face? | 58 | 38 |
| 3. What do we want Indianapolis to look like 5, 10, 15 years from now? | 58 | 31 |

Figure 1. Our local government decisions and actions are transparent and accountable. Citizens are given a voice and representation in our local government.

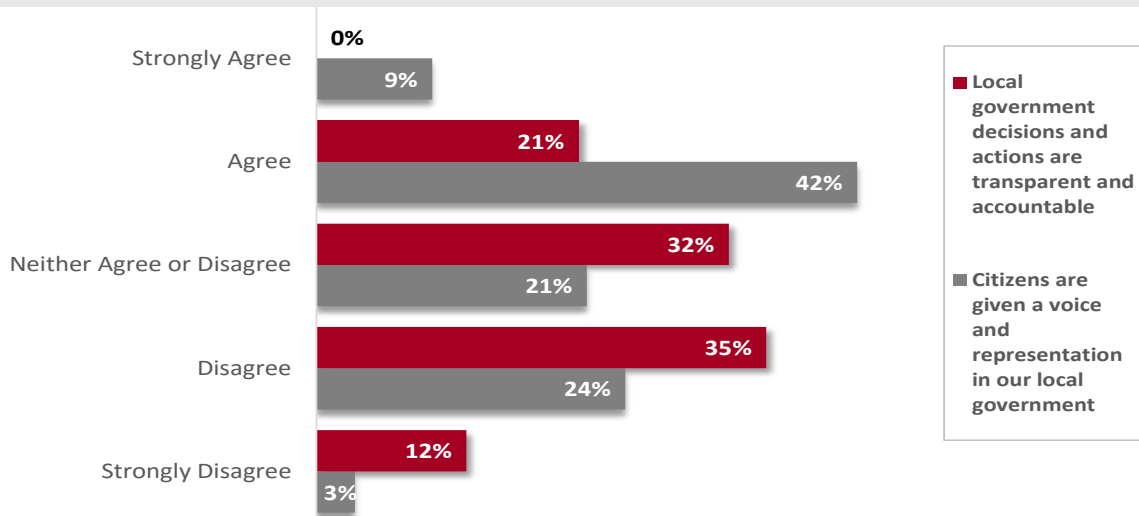


Figure 2. I feel empowered as a citizen to make a change in my city.

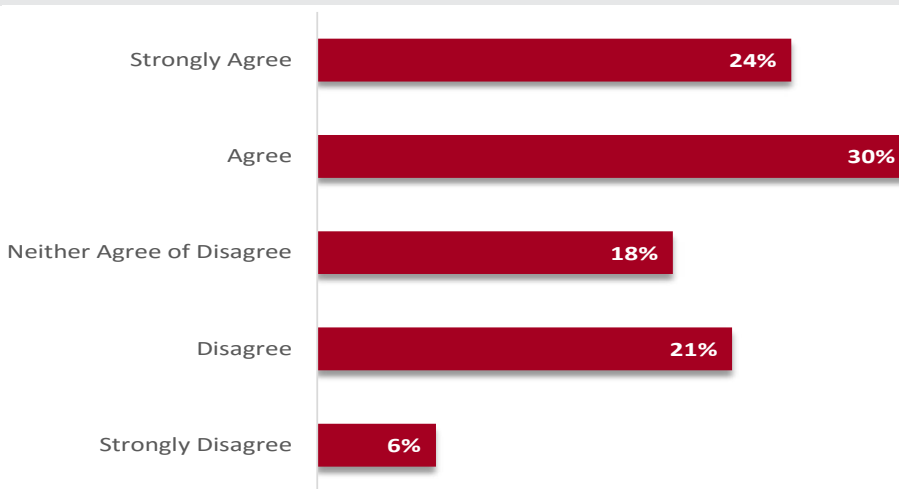
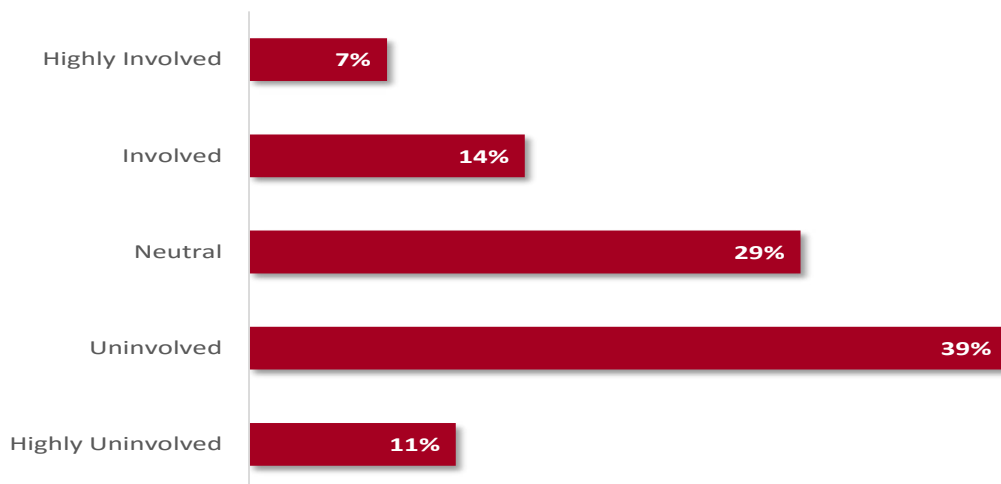


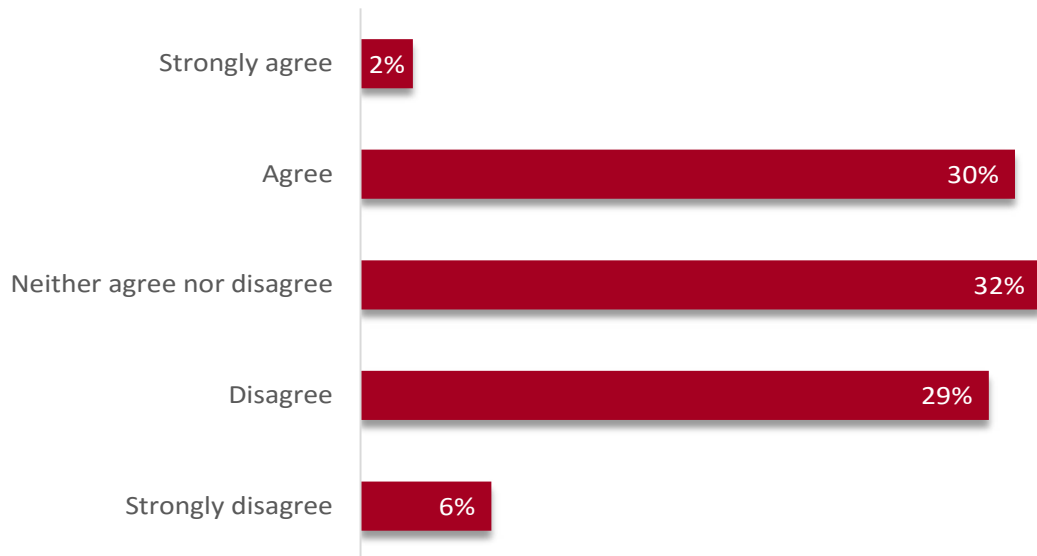
Figure 3. How involved do you feel in the decision-making for the future of Indianapolis?



When respondents were asked whether they felt that the City of Indianapolis was able to properly provide the services and amenities that contributed to their

overall quality of life, results were split. Thirty percent of respondents agreed with this statement, 32 percent remained neutral, and 29 percent disagreed (Figure 4).

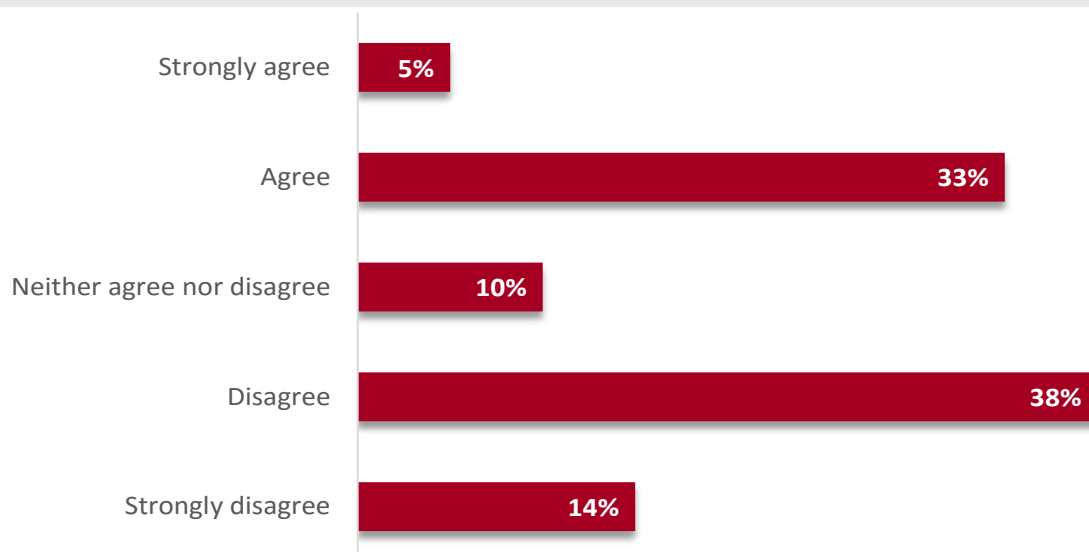
Figure 4. I feel the City of Indianapolis (Marion County) properly provides adequate services and amenities that improve my quality of life.



Responses to questions designed to determine whether participants felt they had adequate knowledge of where to go for city problems were mixed. One-third of respondents agreed that they possessed sufficient

knowledge about city programs, services, and who to contact about problems, such as potholes and zoning issues. Thirty-eight percent of survey participants disagreed with the statement (Figure 5).

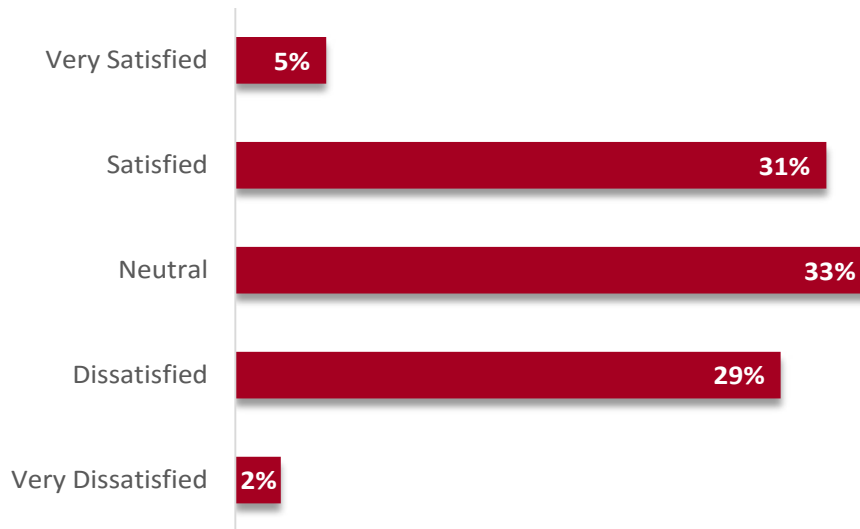
Figure 5. I have sufficient knowledge about city programs, services, and who to contact (i.e. where to go for problems such as potholes, zoning, etc.).



When respondents were asked whether they were satisfied with the current performance of the city and its ability to provide services, responses were also

split. Thirty-one percent of respondents were satisfied, 33 percent remained neutral, and 29 percent were dissatisfied (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Overall, how satisfied are you with the job the City of Indianapolis (Marion County) is doing to provide services?



Forum participant civic knowledge

UNIGOV

Former Indianapolis Mayor Richard Lugar proposed a series of changes to state law in the late 1960s that restructured city government. Under Unigov, as these changes were called, the city limits expanded to the county limits and many functions of city and county government were consolidated. Though Indianapolis is the only city in the state with the Unigov framework, Unigov is itself a set of state laws that automatically apply to any city that reaches the total population of 600,000. Unigov expanded the City of Indianapolis’ city limits to include all of Marion County, with the only exceptions being the Excluded Cities of Beech Grove, Lawrence, Southport, and Speedway. Many different functions of city and county government were consolidated into a new municipal entity called the Consolidated City of Indianapolis. This consolidation was called unified government, hence the name “Unigov.”³

When asked questions intended to gauge knowledge of Indianapolis’ Unigov systems, survey participants did best when answering questions about basic elements of government. For instance when asked about law

enforcement and school systems in townships , the majority (88 percent) of respondents were able to correctly indicate that the townships had retained their own law enforcement and school systems (Figure 7).

Figure 7. The cities excluded from Unigov have their own police and school systems.



³ League of Women Voters of Indianapolis, 2011.

Comprehensive City of Indianapolis *Plan2020*

Plan 2020 is a “strategic planning initiative forging a compelling future for Indianapolis. The plan is a collaboration between the Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee, Department of Metropolitan Development, Department of Public Works, the Indy Chamber, and community leaders to make Indianapolis a better place to live, work and visit.”⁴

When asked about familiarity with *Plan 2020*, 48 percent of respondents felt they were very familiar (3 percent) or familiar (45 percent) (Figure 8). Despite respondents feeling familiar with the *Plan2020* effort, very few were able to correctly answer specific questions related to the effort. Forty-one percent of respondents answered that *Plan 2020* was an effort to update zero existing city plans when the correct answer was 6 city plans (Figure 9).

⁴ Plan 2020: The Bicentennial Plan for Indianapolis, 2014.

Figure 8. How familiar are you with the comprehensive City of Indianapolis plan, "Plan 2020"?

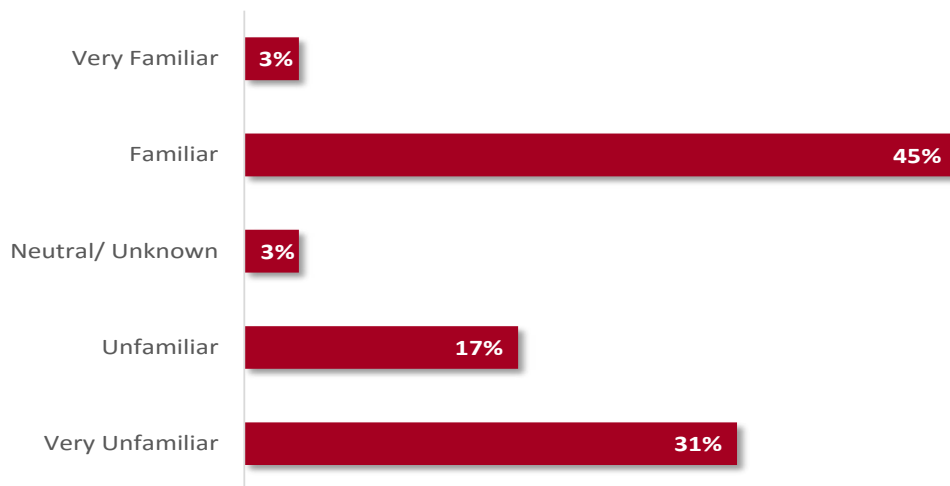
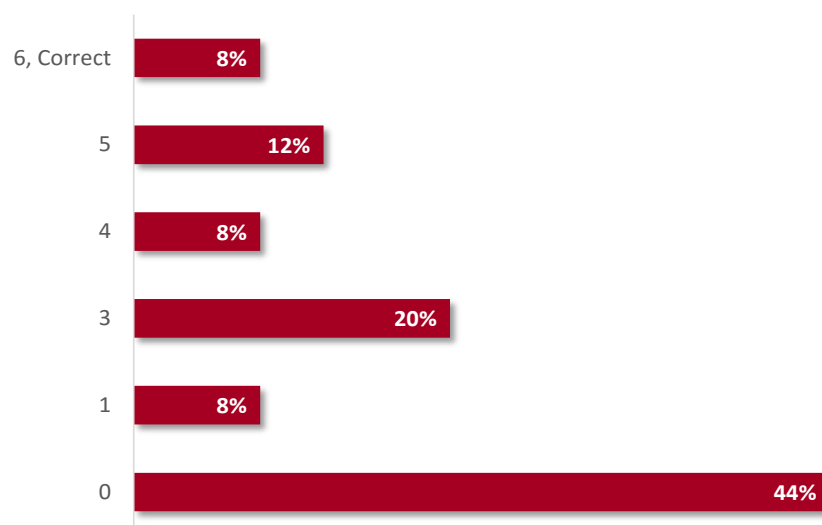


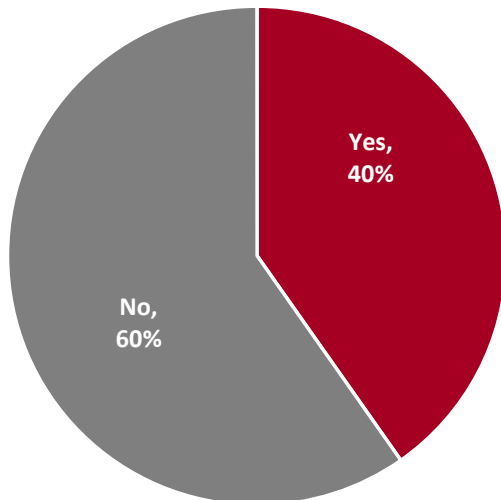
Figure 9. "Plan 2020" is working to update how many existing City of Indianapolis (Marion County) plans?



Citizen engagement

According to an article from the IBM Center for The Business of Government, citizen engagement is referred to, “as a commitment from government to cultivate deeper levels of knowledge among citizens generally about the issue at hand and potential

Figure 10. In the past 12 months, have you attended a public engagement activity sponsored by the City, such as a public meeting?



solutions, and to provide opportunities for citizens to exercise that knowledge in service of policy and program development in a regular and ongoing basis.”⁵ Citizen engagement is crucial to the operation of democratic processes. As shown in Figure 10, only 40 percent of survey respondents indicated that they have attended a public engagement activity sponsored by the City, such as a public meeting, in the past 12 months.

Forum Participant Profile

Questions regarding respondents’ demographic information were included at the end of each forum survey. The age range of attendees tended to be on the higher end, with 53 percent above the age of 40. Only 28 percent of participants were between 18 and 34 years old (Table 2). Generally, forum participants were highly educated, with over three-quarters of survey respondents holding a Bachelor’s (44 percent) or Master’s degree or higher (37 percent). Nearly one-half of respondents reported being employed full-time and one-quarter were retired. As shown in Figure 11, when asked how long respondents had been residents of Indianapolis, 60 percent said 11 or more years, with the majority (49 percent) having lived in Indianapolis for more than 20 years.

⁵ Lukensmeyer & Torres, 2006, p. 8.

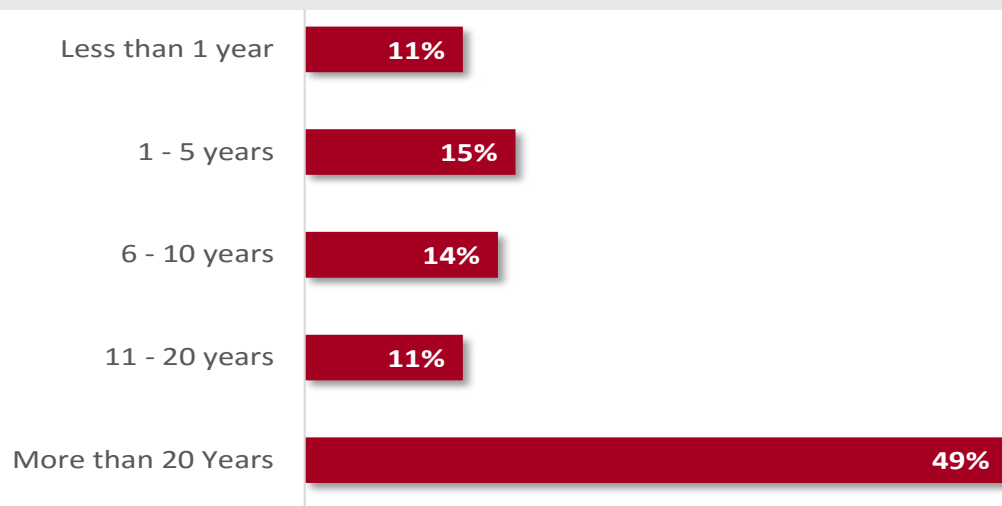
Table 2. Electing Our Future: Forum participant demographics

| Age category | Count | Percentage | Employment status | Count | Percentage |
|--------------|-----------|-------------|--------------------|-----------|-------------|
| 18-24 | 8 | 10% | Employed full-time | 39 | 49% |
| 25-34 | 15 | 18% | Employed part-time | 4 | 5% |
| 35-44 | 15 | 18% | Self-employed | 8 | 10% |
| 45-54 | 9 | 11% | Retired | 18 | 23% |
| 55-64 | 25 | 30% | Full-time student | 4 | 5% |
| 65+ | 10 | 12% | Other | 7 | 9% |
| Total | 82 | 100% | Total | 80 | 100% |

| Educational Attainment | Count | Percentage |
|---|-----------|-------------|
| High school graduate, diploma or equivalent | 3 | 4% |
| Some college or Associate's degree | 13 | 16% |
| Bachelor's degree | 36 | 44% |
| Master's degree or higher | 30 | 37% |
| Total | 82 | 100% |

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Figure 11. How long have you lived in Indianapolis?



CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Electing our Future survey results indicate that most respondents felt government decisions are not transparent, government is not accountable, and they do not feel involved in the decision making process for the future of Indianapolis. Respondents felt empowered to make change but lacked information on where and how to get involved. It is worth noting that respondents were not representative of Indianapolis' citizenry. The majority in attendance were highly educated, and had lived in Indianapolis for many years. It is interesting that even this group of relatively empowered individuals felt disconnected from municipal governance.

Electing our Future forums can educate residents on how their government works and empower them with the appropriate tools in order to make change. Better informed residents are more effective conversation partners in the many other venues where politics are discussed. It is difficult to quantify the value of an informed population and the contribution that information can make to our political environment, especially given the likely ripple effect. We are encouraged, however, by the number of attendees who told us that they found the forums valuable, and hoped we would continue the effort.

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ABOUT THE CENTER FOR CIVIC LITERACY

The Center's mission is to increase public understanding of civic deficit and its effect on democratic decision making, and to identify and promote the use of effective tools to help educators and others correct the problem. The Center will fulfill its mission through: Scholarly research and publication, public teaching, and community-based partnerships.