

Report on the 2025 Gallatin County Employee Survey for the Gallatin County Local Government Study Commission

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Gallatin County Local Government Study Commission (Study Commission) contracted with Social Data Collection and Analysis Services (Social Data) at Montana State University Bozeman to conduct a survey of Gallatin County employees about the structure of government, service delivery procedures, and potential changes. Social Data worked with the Study Commission to construct a questionnaire and then administered the web-based survey by contacting employees via email. The procedure produced a response rate of 44%, with about half of respondents working in elected offices. Most of the responding employees interact frequently with members of the public and with other offices and departments in Gallatin County government.

The major relevant findings from the survey include the following:

- Employees are positive about organizational effectiveness, internal communication, and information concerning policies overall
- Performance in terms of interactions across offices and departments is somewhat more challenging
- Among prepopulated choices, the most common public complaint reported by employees is that decisions or processes take too long
- Most common among "other" public complaints self-reported by employees are: communication issues; online information problems; legal and jurisdictional issues; and cost and financial concerns
- Employees generally think their departments and offices are responsive and accessible to the public but are less likely to see clear channels for public input and feedback and to think public input is meaningfully incorporated into decisions
- While minorities of respondents agree or strongly agree with statements about the ongoing functionality and balance of the structure of Gallatin County government, those figures jump considerably when including respondents who slightly agree with the statements
- Gallatin County employees are less likely to agree with assertions of preferential treatment than is the case with most other items in the questionnaire
- About half of employees (after removing "unsure" responses) think certain positions (Clerk of Court, Clerk & Recorder, Treasurer, Auditor) should be appointed instead of elected
- Strong majorities think all leadership positions should be nonpartisan, and even stronger majorities think all leadership positions should have minimum professional qualifications
- Open-ended comments about potential changes to Gallatin County government emphasize (in descending order of frequency): compensation; staffing; leadership and management; communication; government structure; taxes and budget; and infrastructure and facilities
- Comments more specific to government structure emphasize (in descending order of frequency): appointed vs. elected positions; the County Administrator role; County Commission structure; partisanship in government; and leadership accountability
- Relatively few differences in views emerge between employees in elected offices and those in other roles, though most differences are in the direction of elected office employees being less likely to agree with statements

BACKGROUND

The voters of Gallatin County initiated a 10-year review of the current government structure and operations of Gallatin County under the Montana Constitution. The Gallatin County Local Government Study Commission (Study Commission) includes seven individuals then elected to conduct this review. As stated on the [Study Commission's website](#), its purpose is to "examine the county's existing powers, form of government, and service delivery procedures, and to compare it with alternative structures allowed under state law." At the end of its two years of operation, the Study Commission would add any recommended changes to the November 2026 ballot for voter approval. The Study Commission is focusing its efforts on community engagement and input.

To this end, the Study Commission contracted with Social Data Collection and Analysis Services (Social Data) at Montana State University Bozeman (MSU) to conduct and report on two surveys. The first is a survey of Gallatin County employees and the second is a survey of Gallatin County registered voters. The present report deals only with the employee survey. Social Data, previously the HELPS Lab, has been conducting similar surveys in Montana and beyond since 2015. Social Data personnel met with the Study Commission on multiple occasions to construct and refine the questionnaire and the corresponding survey procedures.

METHODS

The Study Commission decided on distribution of a web-based survey via email, which was feasible given the professional nature of the population of interest (i.e., Gallatin County employees). The County was able to produce comprehensive lists of email addresses for its employees, who had natural incentives to complete the questionnaire. Social Data implemented the survey in Qualtrics software and used the internal software mailer for distribution. As the Study Commission emphasized the importance of anonymity, Social Data created a protocol that shut off IP address tracking and allowed for repeated contacts without linking responses to individuals. Social Data distributed the questionnaire to all 644 email addresses provided, though 3 proved undeliverable. Non-responding employees received a reminder email after a few days. The response rate was 282 of 641, or 44%. Of the 282 respondents, only 2 indicated they were not Gallatin County employees. This suggests the email contact lists were clean and well constructed. The open period for the survey was September 8-19, 2025. Upon closing the survey, Social Data produced a codebook and a summary of the data for the Study Commission. These documents will be made publicly available.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This summary of findings includes eight subsections that correspond to portions of the questionnaire. The first describes respondent characteristics. The second covers satisfaction and morale, while the third investigates performance and effectiveness – including common public complaints. The fourth considers accessibility and responsiveness, while the fifth examines transparency and accountability. The sixth covers fairness and equity. A seventh, more expansive, subsection provides an overview of responses about appointing vs. electing officials, partisan vs. nonpartisan offices, and the need for professional qualifications. The eighth, and final, subsection analyzes a large volume of open-ended responses to a question about what one thing employees would change about Gallatin County government.

Respondent Characteristics

The pool of respondents includes a roughly even split of employees who work in the offices of elected officials (44%) and in other departments (56%). The elected offices, as stated in the questionnaire, are: Clerk of Court, Auditor, County Attorney, Superintendent of Schools, Clerk & Recorder, Sheriff, Justice Court, and Treasurer. Nearly all responding employees interact with members of the public at least daily (73%) or multiple times per month (19%). Similarly, most of these employees interact with other Gallatin County government entities at least daily (55%) or multiple times per month (26%). The respondent pool includes a well-distributed variety of employees in terms of their length of employment with Gallatin County. In all, this means the set of responses covers Gallatin County employees in a well-distributed way and includes many employees who have frequent interactions with the public and with other elements of Gallatin County government.

Satisfaction & Morale

Employees responded to two items about policies and workload. Most (75%) indicate being satisfied with how employees in their position are informed about policies. Only 13% say their workload is way too much, though 35% say their workload is somewhat too much.

Performance & Effectiveness

Employees responded to six initial items about performance and effectiveness. Results appear in Table 1. Chain of command is particularly clear. Effective communication across offices and departments is a more challenging area.

Table 1. Percent Agreeing with Performance & Effectiveness Characteristics

Percent	Characteristic
84	It is clear in the organization for whom I work
73	My office/department is effective in achieving its mission
69	I am empowered to do my job effectively
62	I have sufficient resources to do my job effectively
62	Communication within my office/department is effective
49	Communication between my office/department and others is effective

Notes: The reported number is the combined percentage of respondents saying they "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement. This notably excludes individuals saying they "slightly agree," as such exclusion gives a better sense of differences among the characteristics.

Employees were asked about complaints their office or department typically hears from the public and were able to select multiple options simultaneously. The most common complaint by far was that decisions or processes take too long. Figure 1 displays the responses.

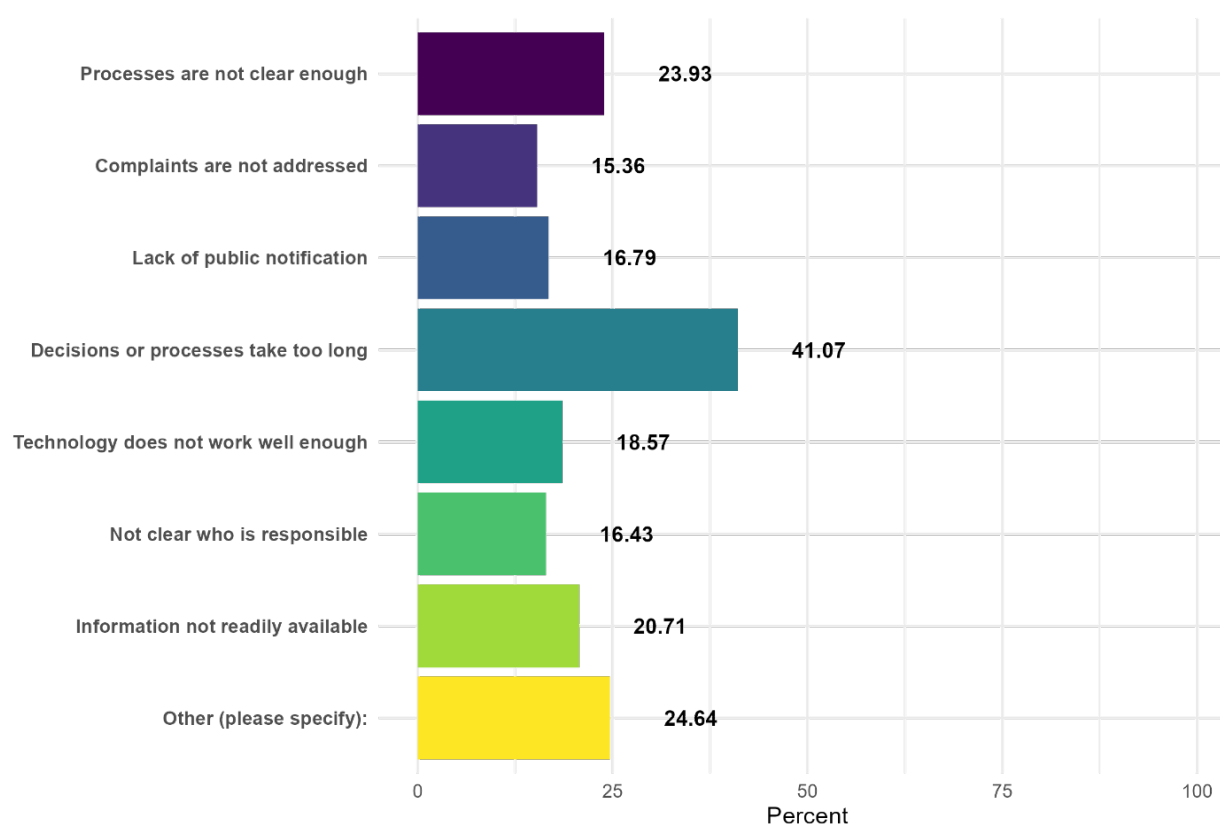


Figure 1. Common Complaints from Public

Employees choosing "other" for public complaints could add text explaining the nature of the complaints. While most of these comments were about public complaints, some were employee complaints about their workplace. Table 2 summarizes the open-ended comments, excluding such workplace complaints. The table also includes the frequency of each category of complaint, examples, and employee quotes for each category. The coding process involved generative artificial intelligence, with enterprise data security protections. The coding used a manual qualitative content analysis approach with keyword-based pattern matching, which is a hybrid deductive-inductive approach.

Table 2. Categories of Public Complaints

#	Category & Examples	Quotes
5	Communication issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inconsistent information - Lack of responsiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “No one answers the phone” • “Receiving different answers from different staff members” • “Telephone messages not returned”
5	Website/online info problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Outdated or missing content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Website is not updated” • “Incorrect information online”
5	Legal & jurisdictional issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Legal boundaries - Records access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Complaints concerning courts” • “Ask for legal advice when we cannot give it” • “Public records requests take too long”
4	Cost & financial concerns <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Service affordability - Taxation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Cost to dump trash is too high” • “Taxes are too high”
3	Staffing & capacity constraints <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understaffing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Shortage of staffing” • “Waitlist for Maternal Child Health home visiting services”
3	Infrastructure & facilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Physical infrastructure - Space limitations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Fix my road, fix my bridge” • “Lack of facilities/space” • “Improved infrastructure”
2	Policy & process clarity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inconsistent application - Bureaucratic barriers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Processes and policies are clear ... application depends on who is involved” • “We didn’t tell them a procedure ... they didn’t know” • “Complaints about red tape”
1	Technology complaints <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tech overload or overuse - Equipment issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Complaints about using too much technology”

Notes: The (#) column is the number of times each theme was counted in the entire body of comments.

Accessibility & Responsiveness

Employees provided responses to nine items about accessibility and responsiveness (see Table 3). As is typical of such surveys, employees have a more positive view of their own organization than

other organizations. They also find working within their organization easier than working across organizations. Further, employees think their departments and offices are responsive and accessible to the public. However, fewer employees see clear channels for public input and feedback – and particularly the meaningful incorporation of public input into decisions.

Table 3. Percent Agreeing with Accessibility & Responsiveness Characteristics

Percent	Internal Characteristic
83	My department/office is responsive to others in Gallatin County government
75	My work directions come from a clear source
74	I can get answers easily within my office/department when I need them
62	My work processes and policies are clearly documented
52	I can get answers easily from other Gallatin County departments/offices
Percent	External Characteristic
89	My office/department is responsive to the public
83	The public can easily access my office/department
65	My office/department provides clear channels for public input and feedback
48	My department/office meaningfully incorporates public input into decisions

Notes: The reported number is the combined percentage of respondents saying they "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement. This notably excludes individuals saying they "slightly agree," as such exclusion gives a better sense of differences among the characteristics.

Transparency & Accountability

Employees provided responses to 12 items about transparency and accountability (see Table 4). Employees largely view their organizations as transparent to the public. They view the accountability of elected and non-elected officials similarly. While a minority (41%) of employees think the current structure of Gallatin County government still functionally meets citizen needs, that number jumps to 69% when adding those who "slightly agree." Similar jumps are apparent for items about the power balance between elected and unelected officials (60%) and checks and balances being adequate (64%). Employees are less convinced about transparency of and communication about decision making.

Table 4. Percent Agreeing with Transparency & Accountability Characteristics

Percent	Characteristic
70	My department/office is transparent in communicating its decisions to the public
69	My department/office is transparent in communicating its policies to the public
49	Gallatin County non-elected officials are appropriately accountable to the public
48	Gallatin County elected officials are appropriately accountable to the public

Table 4. Percent Agreeing with Transparency & Accountability Characteristics

41	The current structure of Gallatin County government still functionally meets the needs of Gallatin County citizens.
38	Gallatin County gov't communicates decisions to employees in transparent ways
36	It is clear to me how policy decisions are being made in Gallatin County government
36	The power balance between elected and unelected offices in Gallatin County government is appropriate
35	The checks and balances in Gallatin County government are adequate
35	Gallatin County government makes decisions in transparent ways
27	It is clear to me how financial decisions are being made in Gallatin County gov't
25	Gallatin County gov't communicates reasons for its decisions to employees in transparent ways

Notes: The reported number is the combined percentage of respondents saying they "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement. This notably excludes individuals saying they "slightly agree," as such exclusion gives a better sense of differences among the characteristics.

Fairness & Equity

The questionnaire included six items about fairness and equity, as shown in Table 5. Gallatin County employees are less willing to agree with assertions of preferential treatment than is the case with most other items in the questionnaire. However, a strong majority (63%) see preferential treatment being given to certain departments or offices when adding those who "slightly agree." The same is true for preferential treatment of certain elected offices (57%). Fewer employees agree that Gallatin County government gives preferential treatment to elements of the public based on political party affiliation, geographic area, economics, or more general considerations.

Table 5. Percent Agreeing with Fairness & Equity Characteristics

Percent	Characteristic
44	Certain departments or offices receive preferential treatment
36	Certain elected offices receive preferential treatment
24	Gallatin County government provides economic advantages to certain groups and members of the public
23	Gallatin County government gives preferential treatment to certain groups or members of the public
18	Gallatin County government gives preferential treatment based on political party affiliation
17	Gallatin County government gives preferential treatment based on geographic area

Notes: The reported number is the combined percentage of respondents saying they "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement. This notably excludes individuals saying they "slightly agree," as such exclusion gives a better sense of differences among the characteristics.

Elected Officials

Gallatin County employees responded to a series of eight items about whether certain positions should be elected or appointed. Figure 2 shows the results of these items, sorted from the highest to lowest percentage of "appointed" responses. While employees could also respond "unsure" to these items, the figure excludes those unsure responses and recalculates the remaining responses out of 100%. Presently all these positions are elected. Responses are split roughly evenly for Clerk of Court, Clerk & Recorder, Treasurer, and Auditor. More employees are convinced that the other four positions – Superintendent of Schools, Justice Court, County Attorney, and Sheriff – should remain elected positions. County Commissioners were not included in this list because proposing that County Commissioners be appointed rather than elected is not an option for the Study Commission.

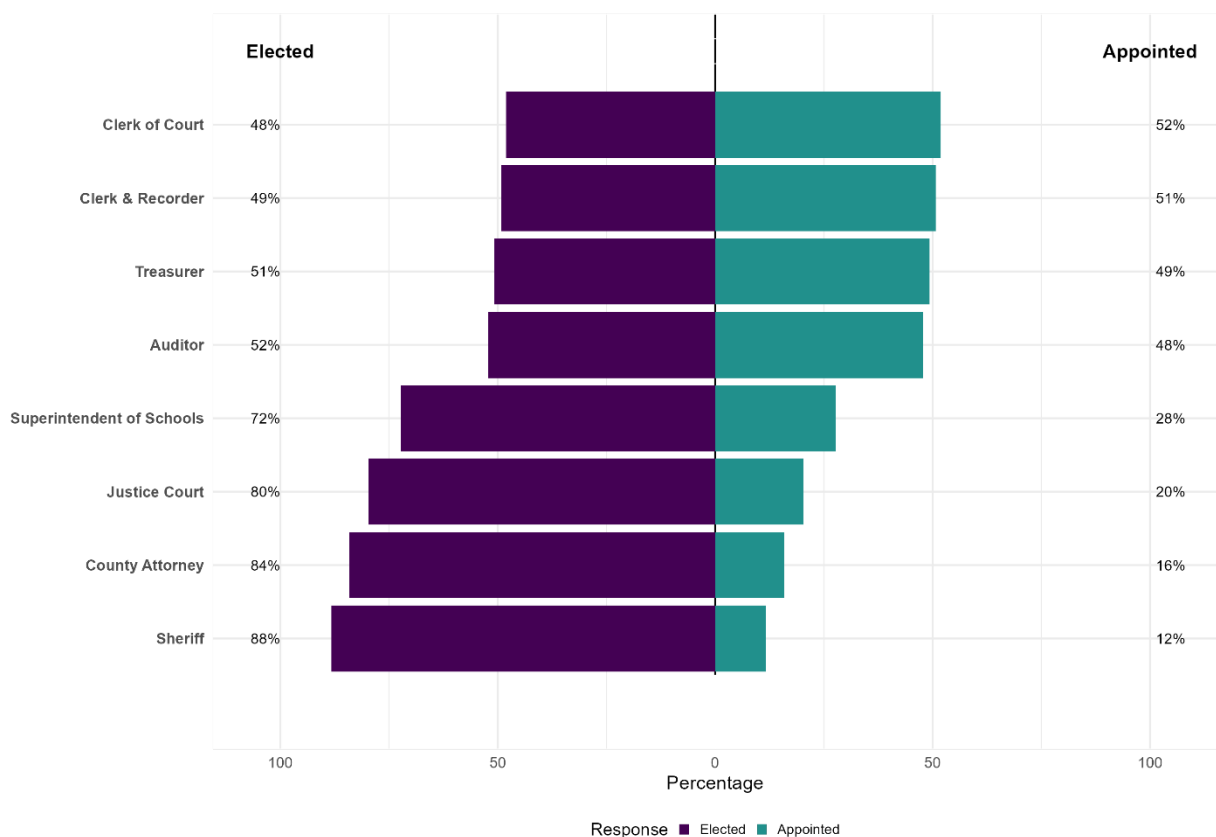


Figure 2. Preference for Appointed vs. Elected Officials

Similarly, Gallatin County employees responded to a series of nine items about whether certain positions should be partisan or nonpartisan positions. Figure 3 shows the results of these items, sorted from the highest to lowest percentage of "nonpartisan" responses. While employees could also respond "unsure" to these items, the figure excludes those unsure responses and recalculates the remaining responses out of 100%. Currently all are partisan positions except for Justice Court. Employees have a strong preference for nonpartisan elections for county officials, though this preference is less pronounced for County Commissioners.

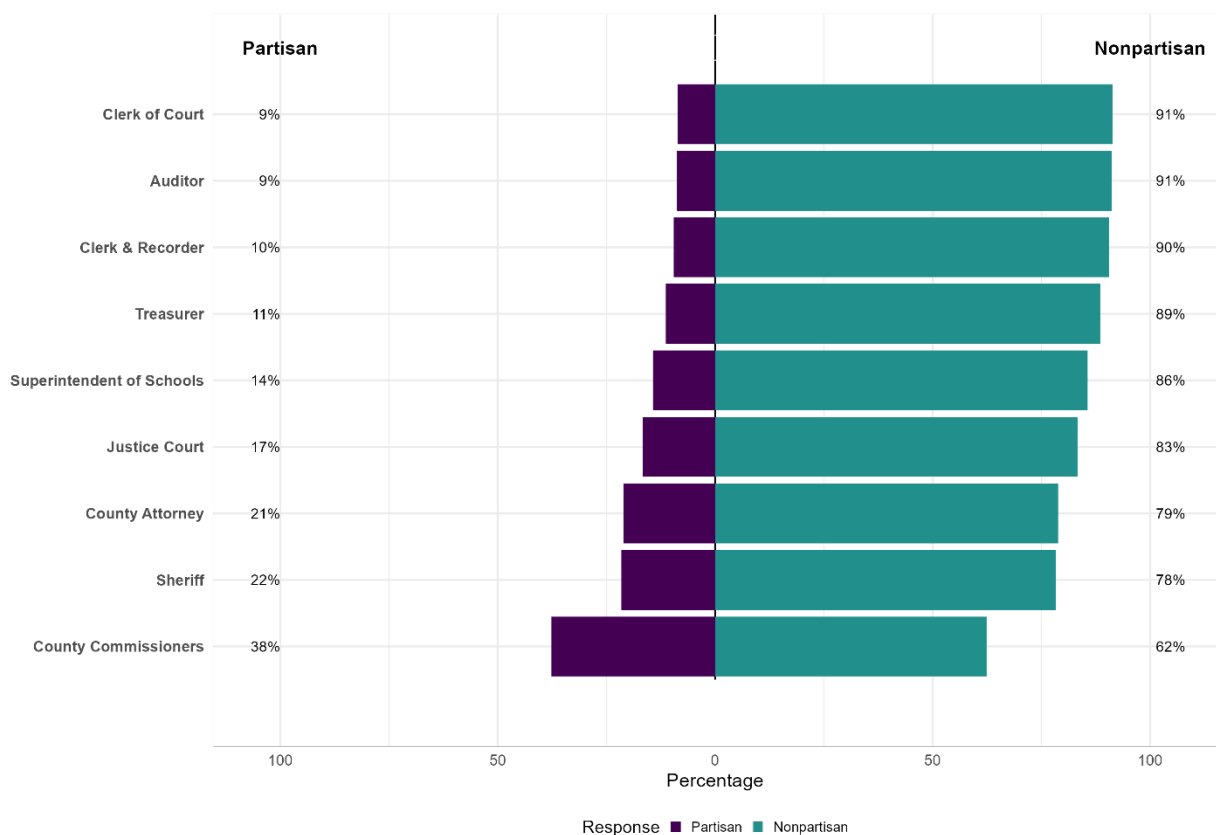


Figure 3. Preference for Nonpartisan vs. Partisan Officials

Finally, Gallatin County employees responded to a series of nine items about whether official positions should require minimum professional qualifications. Figure 4 shows the results of these items, sorted from the highest to lowest percentage of "yes" responses for requiring professional qualifications. While employees could also respond "unsure" to these items, the figure excludes those unsure responses and recalculates the remaining responses out of 100%. Currently the County Attorney and Superintendent of Schools positions have minimum professional qualifications attached. Employees have a strong preference for professional qualifications for county officials, though this preference is again somewhat less pronounced for County Commissioners.

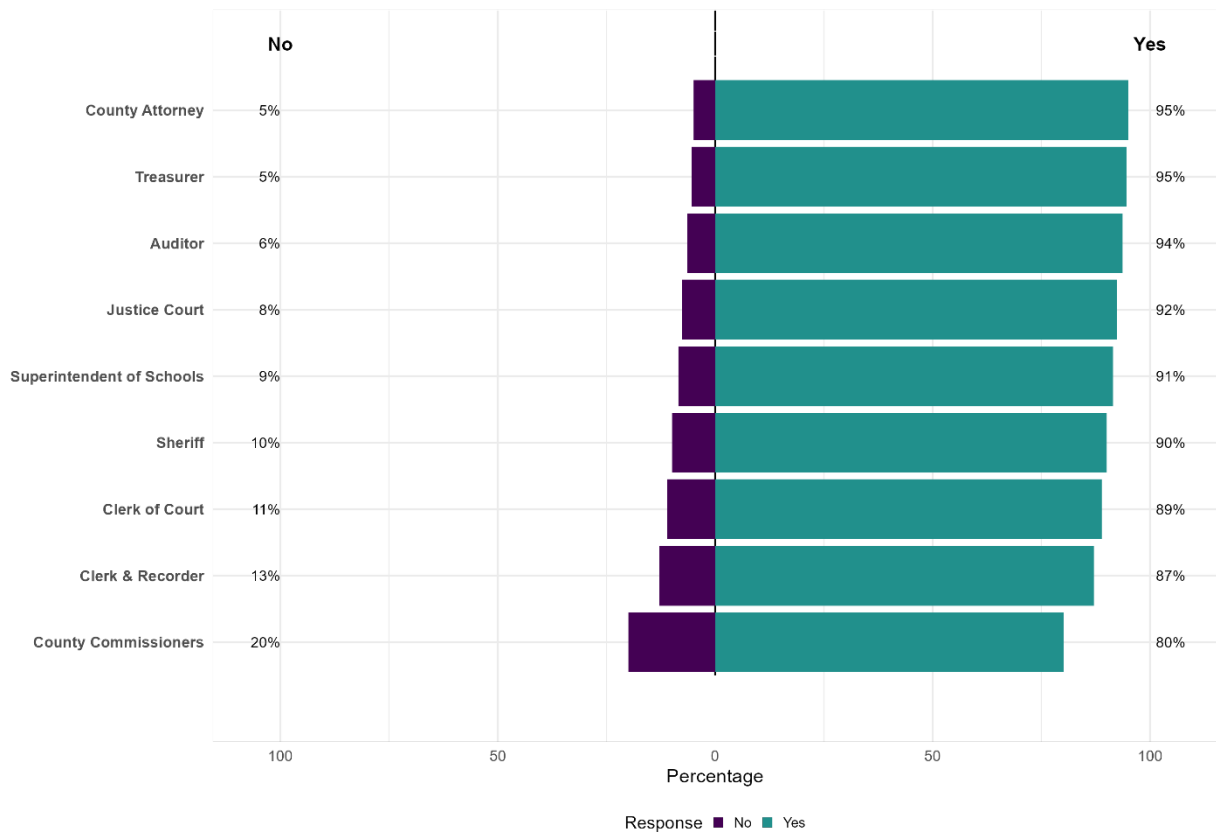


Figure 4. Preference for Minimum Professional Qualifications

Proposed Changes to Gallatin County Government

Finally, employees responded to a question asking them what one thing they would change about Gallatin County government. Table 6 summarizes the open-ended comments. Notably, some of the comments are more complaints than constructive ideas for change, but identifying problems is crucial for change efforts. The table also includes the frequency of each category of complaint, examples, and employee quotes for each category. Again, the coding process involved generative artificial intelligence, with enterprise data security protections. The coding used a manual qualitative content analysis approach with keyword-based pattern matching, which is a hybrid deductive-inductive approach.

Employees most frequently mentioned compensation by a wide margin, with staffing as the second most common area for change. Perhaps most directly relevant for the Study Commission are the "Government structure" and "Leadership & management" categories, which are also common. Comments about government structure echo responses to the previous items, with employees calling for more appointed and fewer partisan positions. Reconsideration of the overall structure also emerged as a common theme.

Table 6. Categories of Proposed Changes

#	Category & Examples	Quotes
64	Compensation - Wages - Cost of living - Pay equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Higher pay because it's getting impossible to live here, in a home/apt. I can barely stay afloat as a county employee." • "Pay your people more money ... because County employees don't make enough money to live in this county." • "Pay increase. I can work for the city of Bozeman doing the same job for a 4 dollar an hour raise ..."
38	Staffing - Burnout - Turnover	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We need more employees. Without increased staffing it is impossible to respond to the public appropriately." • "Staffing has been an issue as of late. It seems that a lot of Gallatin county employees are picking up the slack of vacant positions." • "Retention of employees. It is hard to get higher pay but I have to work multiple jobs to support myself."
33	Leadership & management - Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "All supervisory positions should be audited for competency, effective leadership and non-biased hiring tendencies." • "Better Leadership training for Department Heads. If the same company that is used to train employees it is some of the worst training I have attended." • "Leadership should regularly communicate their major decisions, and reasoning behind those decisions, to employees."

Table 6. Categories of Proposed Changes

30	Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transparency - Internal updates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Clearer communication between departments regarding changes to staff, policies, procedures.” • “Better communication from management with staff. My supervisor does not send emails to the team regarding changes.” • “The communication between the Commissioners & County Administrators to the staff and between all departments is based more on hearsay than formal information.”
27	Government structure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appointing - Reducing partisan influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Eliminate the County Administrator and Deputy Administrator positions. They are ineffective, unnecessary and have no accountability.” • “I would make the following elected positions appointed, or at the very least non-partisan: treasurer, auditor, clerk of court...” • “Reduce the number of elected officials and officially adopt County Manager form of government under 7-3-112 MCA.”
22	Taxes & budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Lower property taxes, the government is constantly raising taxes to support wasteful spending.” • “Spend less, especially on non-profits who are completely unaccountable. Focus spending on planning and infrastructure.” • “Transparency in finances and decision making regarding finances. There’s no reason the county should be low on funds...”
18	Infrastructure & facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “More space in the MVD. Our county is growing so much, and we do not have enough space to accommodate.” • “Providing a larger budget for deferred maintenance. There are so many areas within the county where maintenance is needed...” • “Offices need to have better equipment and the ability to get better chairs that keep employees comfortable...”
15	Policy & procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The use of blanket policies. Some policies are made to address a problem in one department without considering how other departments operate.” • “Employee participation in updates to the employee manual would be helpful. There have been policies enacted that have unintended consequences.” • “Enforcement of policies regardless of position. I have witnessed department heads violate Sexual Harassment and Bullying policies...”
13	Public service & safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “More law enforcement presence at each county building. The public and employees are vulnerable...” • “The large funding Sheriff’s Department receives feels uneven in the balance of the Gallatin County’s budget.” • “The Sheriff’s position should never be partisan... duty is to protect and serve ALL of the citizens.”
9	Mental health & wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “More resources and emphasis on mental health needs and resources.” • “The high cost of living combined with wages that can’t keep up... leads to high burnout which contributes to high staff turnover.”

Table 6. Categories of Proposed Changes

7	Training & development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “More professional training opportunities for employees.”• “Cross-department educational opportunities for employees to learn the process and functions of the Gallatin County government.”• “Better Leadership training for Department Heads.”
6	Technology & systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “The number of digital systems we use for data entry is entirely repetitive.”• “Certain departments should have their own IT person or HR person in house.”

Notes: The (#) column is the number of times each theme was counted in the entire body of comments.

Given the Study Commission's charge, a second round coded only for comments about government structure. The coding process was identical except that the prompt included an explicit instruction about coding for government structure and its sub-categories. Table 7 includes the five major sub-categories and the number of comments associated with each. Under each sub-category are sub-themes and example comments.

Table 7. Categories of Proposed Changes Specific to Government Structure

#1: Appointed vs. elected positions (18 comments)

- Preference for professional qualifications
- Desire to reduce partisanship in technical roles
- Support for county manager or charter form of government

Example quotes:

- “I would make the following elected positions appointed, or at the very least non-partisan: treasurer, auditor, clerk of court, clerk and recorder, superintendent of schools.”
- “Adopt a charter form of government, and in doing so do away with the proliferation of elected offices.”
- “Reduce the number of elected officials and officially adopt County Manager form of government under 7-3-112 MCA.”

#2: County Administrator role (11 comments)

- Elimination or reduction of administrator power
- Concerns about accountability and transparency
- Specific criticism of current County Administrator

Example quotes:

- “Eliminate the County Administrator and Deputy Administrator positions. They are ineffective, unnecessary and have no accountability.”
- “Why do we have a County Administrator? Can’t the Commissioners do the job they were elected to do?”

#3: County Commission structure (7 comments)

- Expansion of County Commission seats
- Concerns about voting blocs and representation
- Political diversity among County Commissioners

Table 7. Categories of Proposed Changes Specific to Government Structure

Example quotes:

- “Expand the number of seats on the Commission to reduce two-person voting blocs.”
- “Add two more County Commissioners. With the growth of the county, I think we need to have more than three people making the decisions.”
- “There should never be three County Commissioners all from the same political party at the same time!”

#4: Partisanship in government (6 comments)

- Desire for non-partisan elections
- Concerns about political bias in law enforcement and administrative roles

Example quotes:

- “The Sheriff’s position should never be partisan.”
- “Non-partisan voting would help keep the focus on community issues.”
- “Current partisan elections make it difficult for qualified individuals to run for office without a party affiliation.”

#5: Leadership accountability (5 comments)

- Need for transparency in decision making
- Calls for meaningful leadership surveys and responsiveness
- Differentiation between true leaders and title holders

Example quotes:

- “Leadership (executive, legislative, and judicial) should regularly communicate their major decisions.”
 - “Leadership surveys must not be symbolic. They should be a meaningful tool for driving change.”
 - “True Leadership vs. Title Holders – We must recognize and empower the former.”
-

Relationships in the Data

This section provides the results of analyses that look for differences in views between employees of elected offices and other employees. Again, the elected offices (excluding County Commissioners) are: Clerk of Court, Auditor, County Attorney, Superintendent of Schools, Clerk & Recorder, Sheriff, Justice Court, and Treasurer. Table 8 shows such differences for all but the final sets of questionnaire statements. Only differences that are statistically significant appear in the table. Employees in elected offices are more likely to say their workload is too much and to say the public can easily access their organization. Such employees are less likely to agree with various other statements, including those about communication and decision making.

Table 8. Differences in Views between Elected Office Employees and Others

Statement	Elected %	Other %	Diff	Z-Score	$p \leq$
Workload is too much	56	43	+13	2.18	0.029
Clear in organization structure for whom I work	78	90	-12	-2.68	0.007
Communication between office/department and others is effective	43	56	-13	-2.21	0.027
Common complaint: lack of public notification	14	26	-12	-2.12	0.034
Public can easily access my office/department	90	79	+11	11.09	0.001
Clear how financial decisions are being made	24	38	-14	-2.65	0.008
Decisions are made in transparent ways	33	46	-13	-2.17	0.030

Notes: The reported percentage is generally the percent of respondents who agree or strongly agree with the statement. The sole exception is the "workload" variable in which case the percentage represents those saying their workload is somewhat or way too much. The statistical test is a difference in proportions tests. Z-scores and p -values are used in tests of statistical significance.

Table 9, on the other hand, shows statistically significant differences for the items about leadership positions. Employees in elected offices are less likely to agree with appointing certain positions, making the sheriff position nonpartisan, and requiring minimum qualifications for certain positions.

Table 9. Additional Differences in Views between Elected Office Employees and Others

Variable	Elected %	Other %	Diff	Z-Score	$p \leq$
Appointed: Sheriff	4	16	-12	-3.09	0.002
Appointed: Justice Court	11	22	-11	-2.19	0.029
Nonpartisan: Sheriff	62	75	-13	-2.19	0.029
Minimum qualifications: Clerk of Court	75	86	-11	-2.24	0.025
Minimum qualifications: Clerk & Recorder	73	86	-13	-2.45	0.014

Notes: The percentages represent the percent of respondents who indicated the position should have the stated characteristic. The statistical test is a difference in proportions tests. Z-scores and p -values are used in tests of statistical significance.