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RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATIONS

Midwestern Attitudes on Political Reform

Highlights from a five-state survey

June 2008

In the 2008 Midwest Political Reform Survey, large majorities of Midwesterners continue to distrust their state governments. At the same time, many continue to hold on to an abiding faith in the ability to change state government to be less influenced by moneyed interests and more responsive and accountable to constituents. A large majority (77%) expresses personal interest in an organization that works toward making state government work better by being more honest and accountable, and over half of Midwesterners (54%) are extremely interested.

The 2008 Belden Russonello & Stewart survey for the Midwest Democracy Network (www.MidwestDemocracyNetwork.org) is a random sample telephone survey of adults in five Midwestern states (Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin) on attitudes toward government and political reform. A total of 2,004 interviews were conducted by telephone April 21 through May 4, 2008. The margin of sampling error for the survey is plus or minus 2.2 percentage points at the 95% level of tolerance. For each state, the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 4.9 percentage points at the 95% level of tolerance. Many of the questions in the current survey track attitudes from the BRS-MDN survey on political reform conducted in 2006. This report highlights the main findings of the survey. The survey is funded by the Joyce Foundation (www.joycefdn.org).

Overview

The 2008 survey uncovers five main points on Midwesterners' attitudes toward state government and reforms:

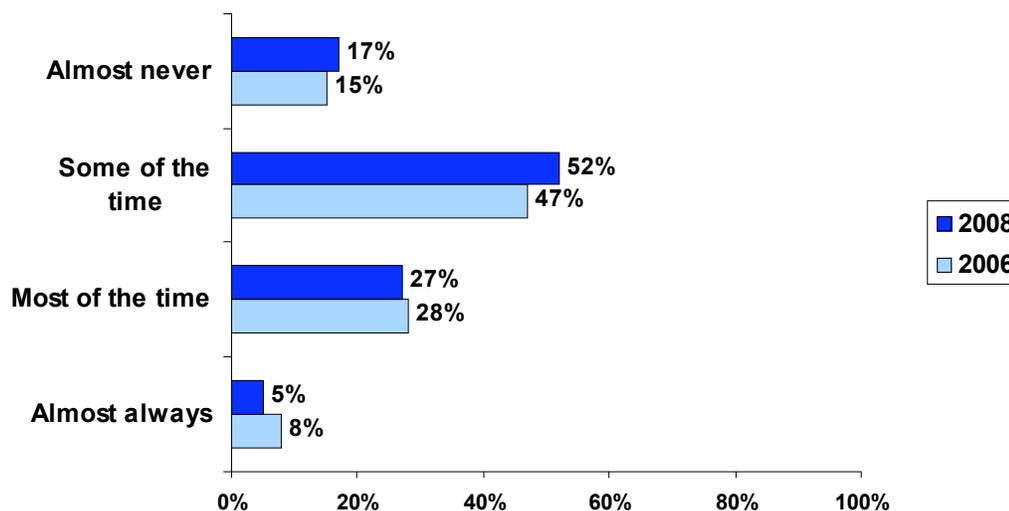
1. Distrust in state government continues to unite Midwesterners and is slightly higher than two years ago, while concern about the influence of money in state politics remains on par with concern about public schools and taxes.
2. Even with their distrust in state government, Midwesterners have not lost hope. Majorities believe it is "worth getting money out of politics" and reject the idea that corruption will always be present in state government.
3. Strong support exists for a range of reform efforts. Large majorities of about eight in ten or more Midwesterners believe each of the reforms tested in the survey will make a difference in helping state government work better.
4. Personal interest in government reform issues is high among Midwesterners. Three-quarters of Midwesterners (77%) express high interest in an organization that focuses on getting their state government to work better. A majority (62%) is also more interested in a political candidate who believes it may not be possible to improve education, create jobs, and cut taxes without first reducing the role of money in politics and the influence of lobbyists, than in a candidate who focuses solely on the issues (35%).
5. As we found in 2006, the top goals for state government to aspire to according to Midwesterners are honesty, accountability, and responsiveness.

Findings

1. Little trust in government; concern about the influence of money in politics

Residents of Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin share a lack of trust in state government. In each state, a large majority of residents (69%, overall) trust government to do what is right “only some of the time” (52%) or “almost never” (17%). Fewer than three in ten (27%) trust government “most of the time” and only five percent “almost always” trust state government to do what is right. Distrust of state government has increased slightly since 2006 when 62% trusted state government “some of the time” or “almost never.”

Trust in Government to Do What is Right

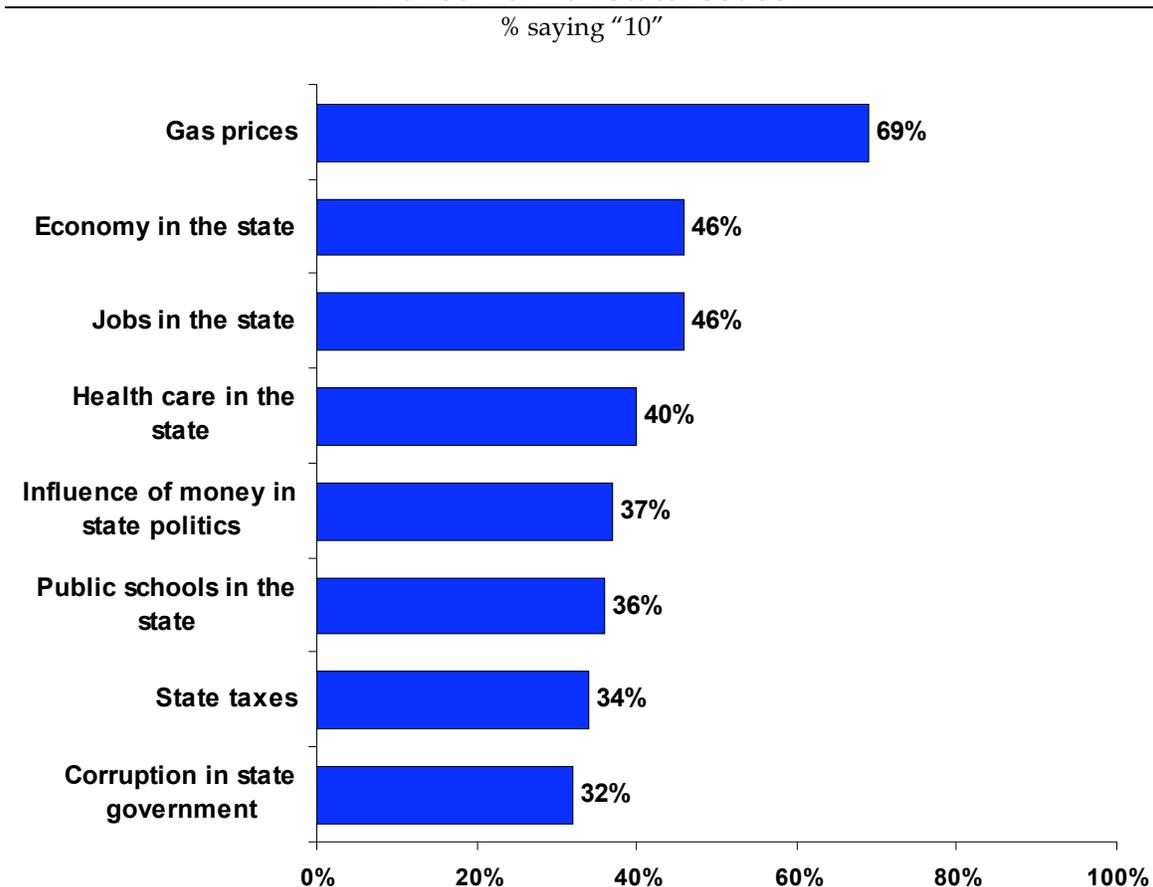


Q5. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in [STATE] to do what is right: almost always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never?

Joyce Foundation Survey conducted by Belden Russonello & Stewart, n=2004 residents of 5 Midwestern states (Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin), April 21 – May 4, 2008

For Midwesterners, “the influence of money in state politics” continues to be a concern; over a third (37%) say they are “extremely” concerned about money in politics. This puts it in the same range as health care (40%), public schools (36%) and taxes (34%), but a lower concern than gas prices (69%), the economy (46%), and jobs (46%).

Concerns with State Issues



On a scale of one to ten where ten means extremely concerned and one means not concerned at all, how concerned are you personally about each of the following issues in your state:

Q12. Gas prices

Q6. The economy in [STATE]

Q13. Jobs in [STATE]

Q7. Health care in [STATE]

Q11. The influence of money in state politics

Q10. Public schools in [STATE]

Q9. State taxes

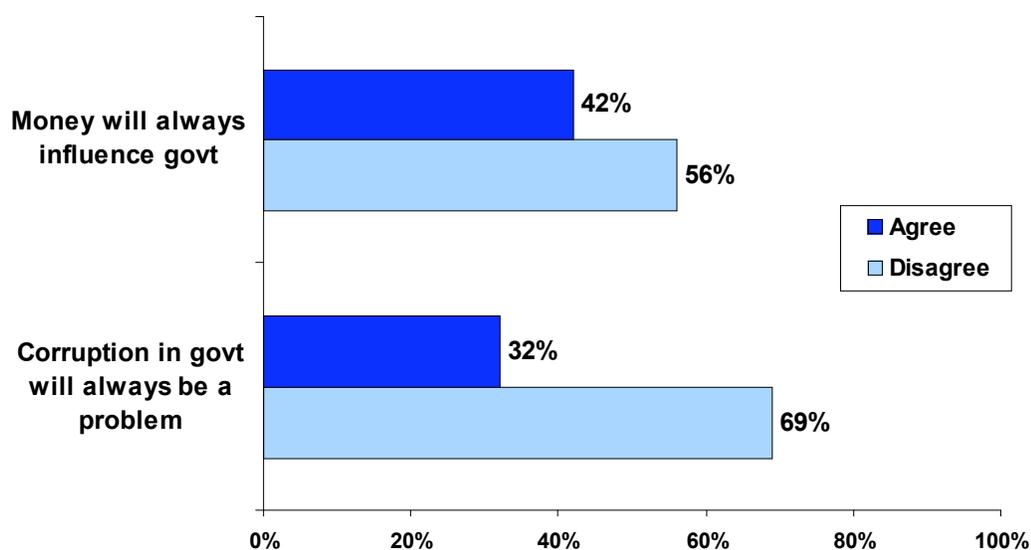
Q8. Corruption in state government

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2. Majority refuses to give up on improving government

Despite their lack of trust in government, Midwesterners have not lost hope for change in state government. A majority (56%) disagrees that “money will always influence government decisions, so it is not worth trying to reduce the amount of money in politics,” while 42% agree. Nearly seven in ten (69%) reject the idea that “corruption in government will always be a problem, so trying to fix it will not make much difference,” while only 32% agree.

Money and Corruption in Government



Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. Is that strongly or somewhat [agree/disagree]? Q34. Corruption in government will always be a problem so trying to fix it will not make much difference Q35. Money will always influence government decisions, so it is not worth trying to reduce the amount of money in politics.

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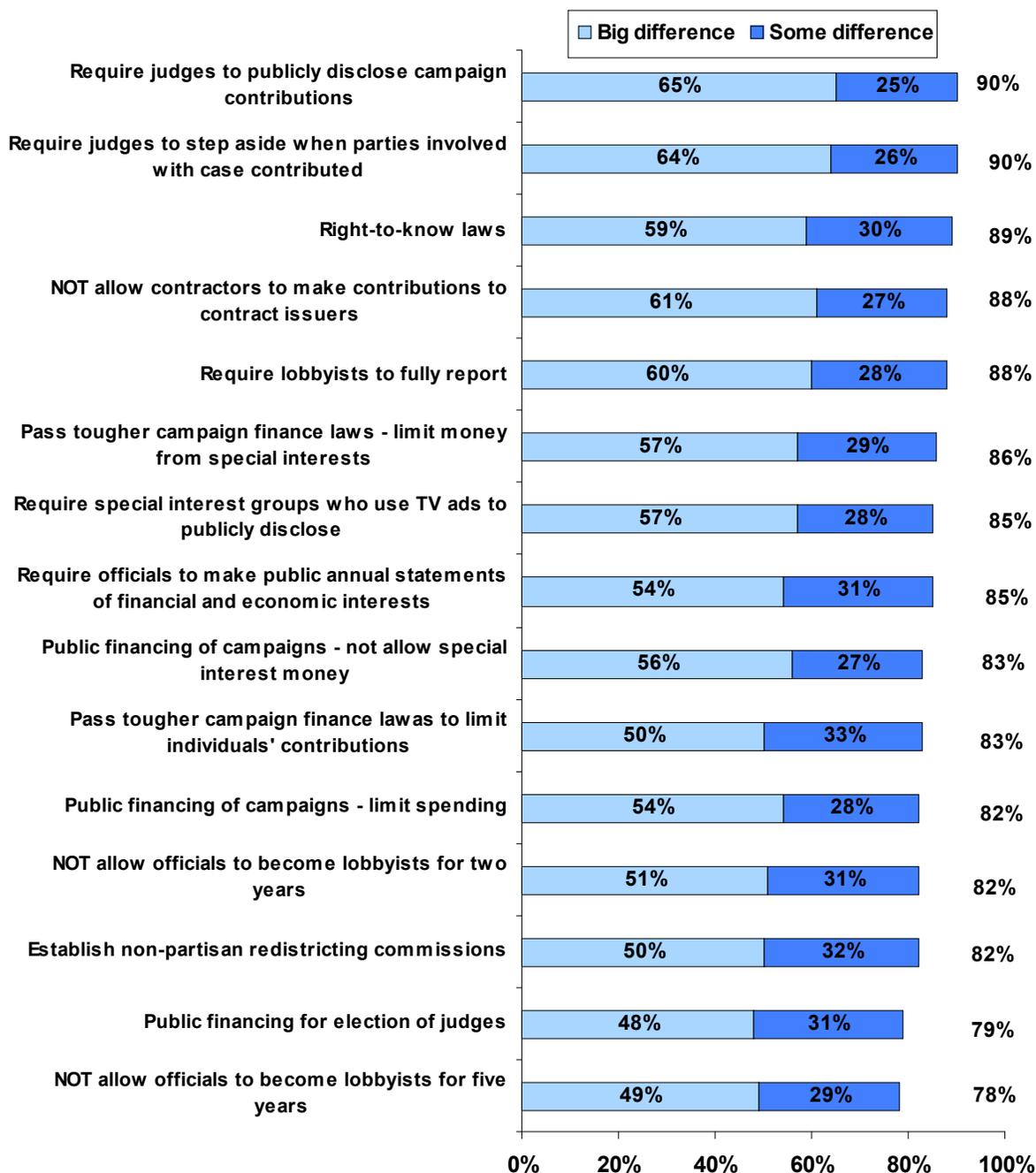
3. Strong support for many reforms

All of the specific reforms tested in the survey garner majorities favoring the policies. Six in ten or more Midwesterners believe the top reforms will make a “big difference” in how their state government works. These reforms involve conflict of interest issues with judges and officials who award contracts and reforms related to openness, including right-to-know laws and public reporting for lobbyists:

- “Require judges to publicly disclose any campaign contributions they received from individuals or groups who appear before them in court” (90% make a difference; 65% would make a “big difference”)
- “Require judges to step aside in cases in which either the lawyers or the parties involved in the case have contributed to their election campaigns” (90% make a difference; 64% “big difference”)
- “Right-to-know laws that give the public more access to state government decisions on spending and programs” (89% make a difference; 59% “big difference”)
- “Not allow state contractors to make political contributions to elected officials who issue contracts” (88% make a difference; 61% “big difference”)
- “Require lobbyists to fully report their clients, what issues they are working on, and the money they spend on lobbying lawmakers” (88%; 60% “big difference”)
- “Pass tougher campaign finance laws to limit the amount of money special interest groups can give to candidates and political parties” (86% make a difference; 57% “big difference”)
- “Require special interest groups that use paid TV ads during elections to publicly disclose where their money comes from” (85% make a difference; 57% “big difference”)
- “Require top state officials to file and make public annual statements of their financial and economic interests” (85% make a difference; 54% “big difference”)

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- “Public financing of campaigns which would use tax dollars to give candidates the same amount of money to run their campaigns and not allow them to take money from special interests” (83% make a difference; 56% “big difference”)
 - “Pass tougher campaign finance laws that limit the amount of money individuals can give to political candidates” (83% make a difference; 50% “big difference”)
 - “Public financing of campaigns which would use tax dollars to give candidates the same amount of money to run their campaigns and limit spending by each candidate” (82% make a difference; 54% “big difference”)
 - “Not allow top state government officials to become lobbyists for two years after leaving state government” (82% make a difference; 51% “big difference”)
 - “Instead of allowing politicians to be in charge of redrawing their own district lines every ten years, establish independent, non-partisan commissions to draw district lines” (82% make a difference; 50% “big difference”)
 - “Public financing for election of judges – that is letting judges use tax dollars to finance their campaigns rather than asking for contributions from lawyers and special interest groups” (79% make a difference; 48% “big difference”)
 - “Not allow top state government officials to become lobbyists for five years after leaving state government” (78% make a difference; 49% “big difference”)

Proposals to Make Government Work Better



Thinking again about state government, please tell me whether each of the following would make a big difference, some difference, not much difference, or no difference at all in making government work better.

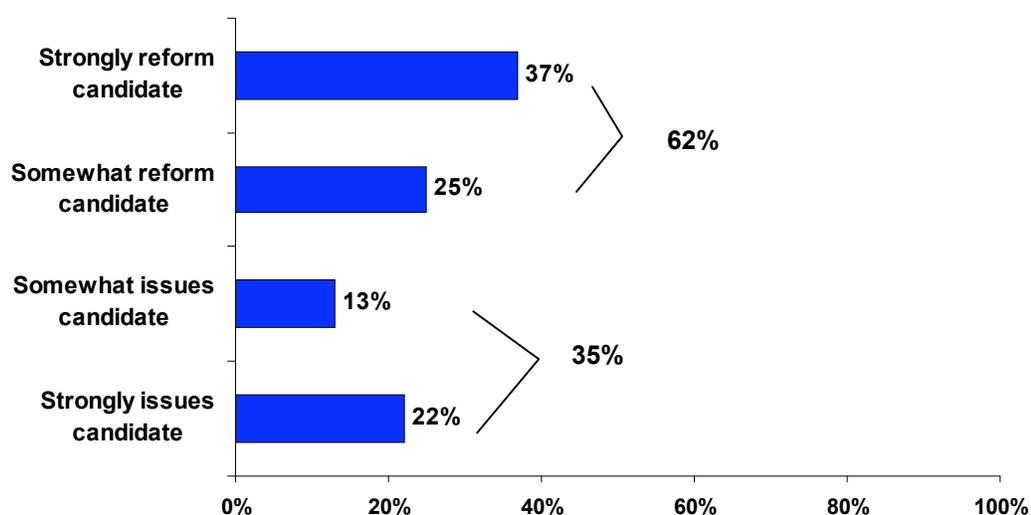
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4. Personal interest in government reform issues is high among Midwesterners

A large majority of Midwesterners expresses interest in an organization that “works toward making state government work better by being more honest, accountable, and responsive” (77%, “8,” “9,” “10” on a ten-point scale), and over half (54%) say that they are “very interested” (“10”).

A majority of Midwesterners (62%) would also prefer a candidate that believes political reform is necessary to make progress on issue priorities (37% “very likely”) over a candidate that focuses solely on the issues (35%).

Support for Reform-focused Candidate versus Issues-based Candidate



Q43. Which candidate would you be more likely to support? The candidate who will focus on improving education, creating jobs, and cutting taxes, OR The candidate who wants to improve education, create jobs and cut taxes but believes it may not be possible without first reducing the role of money in politics and the influence of lobbyists. Strongly or Somewhat?

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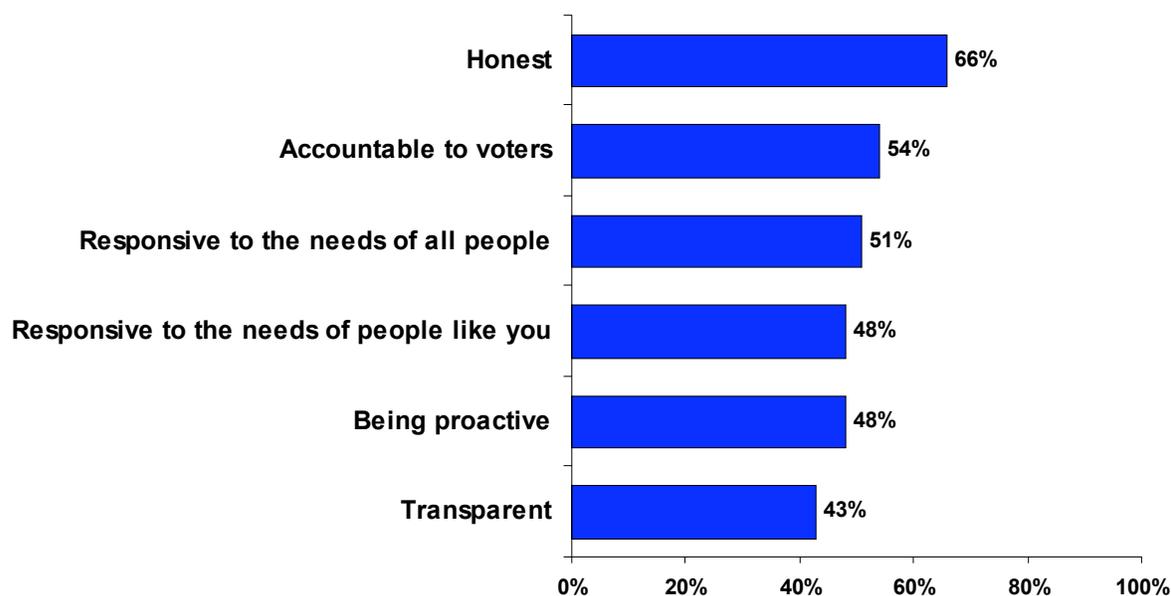
5. Striving for a more honest and accountable government

Honesty is the most important value Midwesterners have for their state government, followed by accountability and responsiveness. Two-thirds (66%) of residents of these states say “honesty” is an “extremely” important characteristic for state government.

“Accountable to voters” (54% say “extremely” important) and “responsive to the needs of all people” (51%) make up a second tier of characteristics Midwesterners desire in their state government.

Important Characteristics in State Government

% saying “10”



Thinking about state government, please tell me how important each of the following characteristics is on a scale of one to ten, where one means not at all important and ten means extremely important.

Q16. Honest

Q17. Accountable to voters

Q15. Responsive to the needs of all people

Q14. Responsive to the needs of people like you

Q19. Being proactive in solving the state’s problems

Q18. Being transparent and open in how government decisions are made

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