

NOTE: Additional survey materials can be downloaded at www.joycefdn.org

Despite distrust of state government, Midwesterners still believe political reforms possible, worth pursuing

Five-state survey finds Midwesterners connect the dots: getting money out of politics will make government work better on issues that matter

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 14, 2006

Contact: Jeff Valenzuela
P: 312.573.5495
C: 414.405.1023

CHICAGO – Although they generally don't trust state government to do what is right, Midwesterners believe political and government reforms will make elected officials more responsive on key issues such as education, health care and jobs. And they are motivated to change the status quo: their concern about the influence of money in politics ranks on a par with concerns about schools, taxes and the economy.

These are among key findings of a landmark new survey of public attitudes toward political reform in five Midwestern states, most of which are seen as key electoral battlegrounds in presidential elections: Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Illinois and Minnesota.

The survey finds that residents of the five Midwestern states have a practical, bottom-line view that clearly understands the link between reform of campaign finance and lobbying laws and achieving a government better equipped to take action on issues that affect them personally. More than 70 percent of residents in the five states believe that "unless we limit the influence of money in government, elected officials will not be able to keep their promises on issues that are important to people like me."

The survey was commissioned by Chicago's Joyce Foundation, one of the nation's leading philanthropies in the area of political reform, in collaboration with leading reform organizations in the five states. The random survey of 2,040 adults was conducted by Belden Russonello & Stewart, an independent research firm in Washington, D.C. Interviews were conducted by telephone June 14 through July 6, 2006. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.2 percentage points.

"We were surprised both by the level of interest in reform among these Midwesterners and by their ability to see reform not as some civic ideal but as a practical means of making government do a better job of solving their problems," said Kate Stewart, partner at Belden Russonello & Stewart.

"While there are clear challenges on the road to reform in these states, those who believe government can and should work better ought to be encouraged by these findings," Stewart added.

Among key findings of the five-state survey:

- When asked how often they expect government in their state to do “what is right,” 62 percent say “never” or “some of the time;” only 36 percent say “always” or “most of the time.”
- Honesty is the most important value Midwesterners want in their government, with 74 percent saying it is “extremely important.” The next most important values are “accountable to voters” (64 percent) and “fair” (63 percent).
- Midwesterners rate “the influence of money in state politics” (38 percent “extremely concerned”) on a par with jobs (40 percent), public schools (39 percent), the state economy (37 percent) and state taxes (34 percent).
- Reforms relating to the influence of money in politics are seen as having the most impact in making government work better: 62 percent say “not allowing judges who are running for election to take money from interests such as business groups and labor unions that may have cases in their courts” would make “a big difference.” And 58 percent of residents say two other reforms also would make a big difference: using public funds to finance campaigns, with each candidate limited to spending the same amount of money; and greater disclosure by lobbyists about money they spend to influence policy on behalf of clients.
- Midwesterners clearly identify the negative effects of campaign contributions and of spending by lobbyists: 71 percent believe elected officials won’t be able to keep their promises on important issues without limiting the influence of money; 62 percent believe “candidates that could represent me do not run for office because they do not have the money needed to win.”
- Residents of these states reject the idea that they are powerless to change government: 65 percent disagree with the statement that “corruption in government will always be a problem so trying to fix it will not make much difference.” And a majority, 52 percent, disagrees with the statement that money “will always influence government decisions so it is not worth trying to reduce the amount of money in politics.”
- When it comes to informing citizens about important issues, the survey echoes findings in other surveys that local tv news remains the dominant source of information: 69 percent of Midwesterners in the five states say they regularly watch their local news. Fifty-eight percent say they regularly read a daily or Sunday newspaper; 32 percent regularly use the Internet to get news and information about local issues; and 30 percent listen to local talk radio.

Notwithstanding these findings, the survey also underscores the challenges ahead for those leading reform efforts. While 52 percent disagreed with the statement that you can’t keep money out of politics, a solid block of citizens – 45

percent – say the influence of money is so pervasive that it’s not even worth trying to do something about it.

The survey also finds more limited support for reforms to increase access to voting or change the way legislative district lines are drawn to make races more competitive. And, by a margin of 64 percent to 28 percent, Midwesterners say they would be more likely to support a candidate focusing on issues such as jobs and education versus a candidate focusing on making government work better.

Cynthia Canary, director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform and spokesperson for a coalition of Midwestern reform groups, supported by the Joyce Foundation, said the overall survey findings are encouraging while also laying out the challenge ahead for those advocating reform.

“This survey tells us that Midwesterners make the link between money and policy-making, and that’s welcome news. Now it’s our responsibility as reform organizations to actively engage voters in a conversation about how breaking that connection will make a difference on the bread-and-butter issues most important to them,” said Canary.

“While this poll points out some of our challenges, it clearly suggests that a growing number of citizens understand that if you clean up government, you’ll get a better result,” she added.

Lawrence Hansen, vice president of the Joyce Foundation, said that the survey findings would give new energy to reform groups in the region.

“These findings show that people haven’t given up on the political system, but a lot of voters feel let down and left out by the way things are running today,” Hansen said. “People understand that big money gets in the way of addressing real public needs. They want a government that is honest – both in its political process and in how it faces up to our challenges. Clearly we have serious work to do in this region to make that happen.”

Based in Chicago with assets of \$830 million, the Joyce Foundation funds groups working to strengthen public policies and improve the quality of life in the Great Lakes region. Its Money and Politics program supports efforts to promote a well-functioning representative democracy with open and accountable government, informed citizen participation, competition of ideas and candidates, fair and equal application of the laws, a high level of public trust and protection of fundamental rights.

The Foundation’s grant-making priorities in this area are:

- Improving federal and state campaign finance laws.
- Promoting media and communications policy reforms to ensure informed citizen participation in civic life.
- Protecting the independence and impartiality of the state courts.
- Increasing electoral competition through fair, nonpartisan redistricting.

- Strengthening the capacities of state-based coalitions and groups in the Midwest to develop and promote broad political reform agendas tailored to their states' needs.

Other grant making areas for the Joyce Foundation are education, employment, the environment, gun violence prevention and culture.

Additional materials related to the survey are available at www.joycefdn.org.

Individual State Contacts:

Following are media contacts in the individual states for follow-up.

Illinois

Cindi Canary
 Illinois Campaign for Political Reform
 Phone: 312.335.1767
 Cell: 773.301.7163
 Email: CPRCanary@aol.com

Michigan

Rich Robinson
 Michigan Campaign Finance Network
 Phone: 517.482.7198
 Cell: 517.896.2246
 Email: robinson@mcfn.org

Anne Magoun
 League of Women Voters of Michigan
 Phone: 517.484.5383
 Cell: 231.632.6233
 Email: president@lwvmi.org

Minnesota

C. Scott Cooper
 Phone: 651.641.6199
 Cell: 651.260.9950
 Email: cscott@takeactionminnesota.org

Ohio

Catherine Turcer
 Ohio Citizen Action Education Fund
 Phone: 614.487.7880
 Cell: 614.479.5509
 Email: cturcer@ohiocitizen.org

Jerolyn Barbee
 League of Women Voters of Ohio
 Phone: 614.469.1505 ext. 14
 Cell: 614.783.7784
 Email: jbarbee@lwvohio.org

Wisconsin

Mike McCabe
Wisconsin Democracy Campaign
Phone: 608.255.4260
Cell: 608.334.4392
Email: mccabe@wisdc.org

Jay Heck
Wisconsin Common Cause
Phone: 608.256.2686
Email: ccwisjwh@itis.com

Andrea Kaminski
League of Women Voters of Wisconsin
Phone: 608.256.0827
Email: kaminski@lwvwi.org

Joyce Foundation

Mary O'Connell
Phone: 312.782.2464
Cell: 773.425.0341
Email: moconnell@joycefdn.org

* * * * *