

Midwesterners consider state government reform

Highlights from a five-state survey

August 2006

Even as residents of the Midwest tell us they distrust their state's government, many also hold an abiding faith in the ability to change government to be less influenced by moneyed interests, more open to honest candidates, and more responsive and accountable to constituents. Midwesterners express a high level of concern about the influence of money in politics and link money's influence to their own lives. Seven in ten (71%) 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."

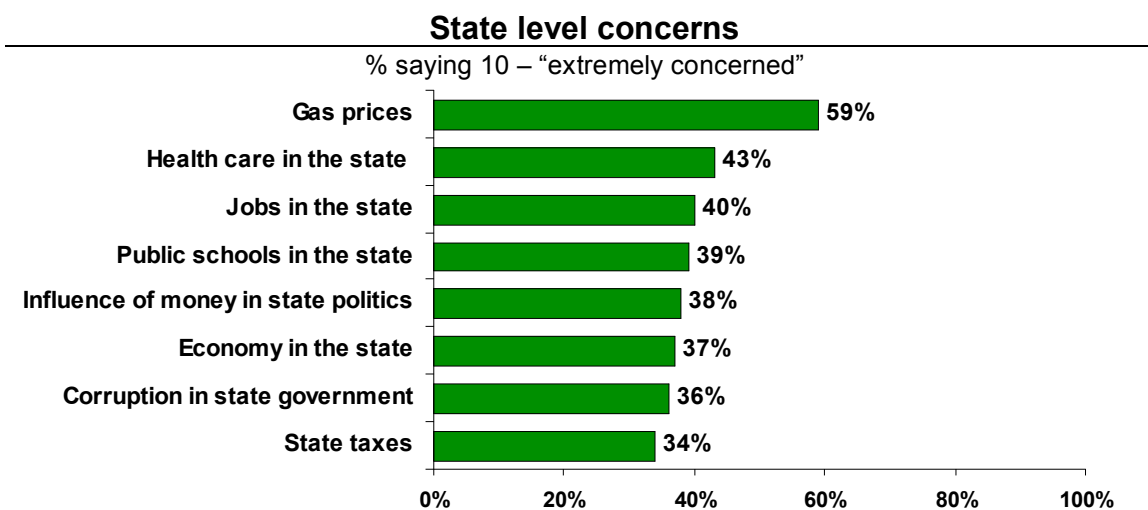
The 2006 Belden Russonello & Stewart survey for the Joyce Foundation is a random sample survey of adults in five Midwestern states (Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin) on attitudes toward government and political reform. A total of 2,040 interviews were conducted by telephone June 14 through July 6, 2006. 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.

The 2006 survey uncovers five main points on the public's attitude toward state government and reforms:

1. Concern about the influence of money in state politics is on par with concern for schools and taxes.
2. Midwesterners see the impact of money on the choice of candidates available to them and politicians' ability to keep their promises on issues that matter to them.
3. Lack of trust in state government unites Midwesterners, but they have not lost hope. A majority rejects the idea that corruption in government will always be a problem, so trying to fix it will not make much difference; and a majority expresses personal interest in getting state government to work better.
4. Strong support exists for a range of reform efforts, especially those that work to reduce the influence of money in state politics.
5. Midwesterners' goals for state government include honesty, fairness, responsiveness, and accountability.

1. Concern about money in politics is on par with schools, economy

For Midwesterners, “the influence of money in state politics” is a high level concern; nearly four in ten (38%) say they are “extremely” concerned about money in politics and another 36% are “extremely” concerned about corruption in state government. Concerns about money and corruption are on par with concerns about public schools (39%), the economy (37%), and taxes (34%), but lower than gas prices (59%) this summer.



Q. 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: [RANDOMIZE Q6-Q13]

12. Gas prices

7. Health care in [STATE]

13. Jobs in [STATE]

10. Public schools in [STATE]

11. The influence of money in state politics

6. The economy in [STATE]

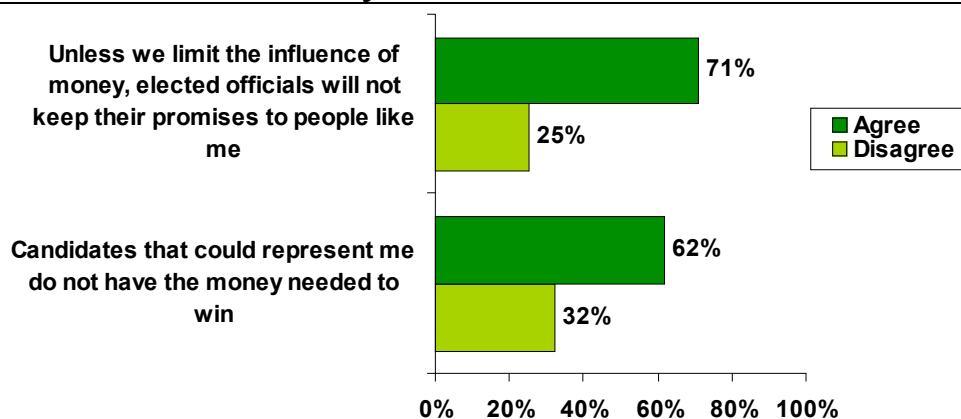
8. Corruption in state government

9. State taxes

2. Impact of money in politics felt in choice of candidates and politicians' actions

Midwesterners clearly identify negative effects of money's influence in politics. Seven in ten (71%) 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." Another six in ten (62%) agree that "candidates that could represent me do not run for office because they do not have the money needed to win."

Money's Influence in Politics



Q. Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. Is that strongly or somewhat [agree/disagree]?

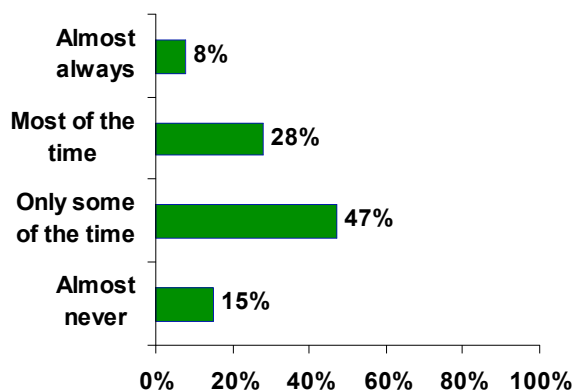
33. Unless we limit the influence of money in government, elected officials will not be able to keep their promises on issues that are important to people like me.

34. Candidates that could represent me do not run for office because they do not have the money needed to win.

3. Lack of trust in government, majority refuses to give up on improving government

Residents of Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin share a lack of trust in state government. In each state, a majority of residents trust government to do what is right “only some of the time” (47% overall) or “almost never” (15%). Fewer than three in ten (28%) trust government “most of the time” and only 8% “almost always” trust state government to do what is right.

Trust Government to Do What is Right



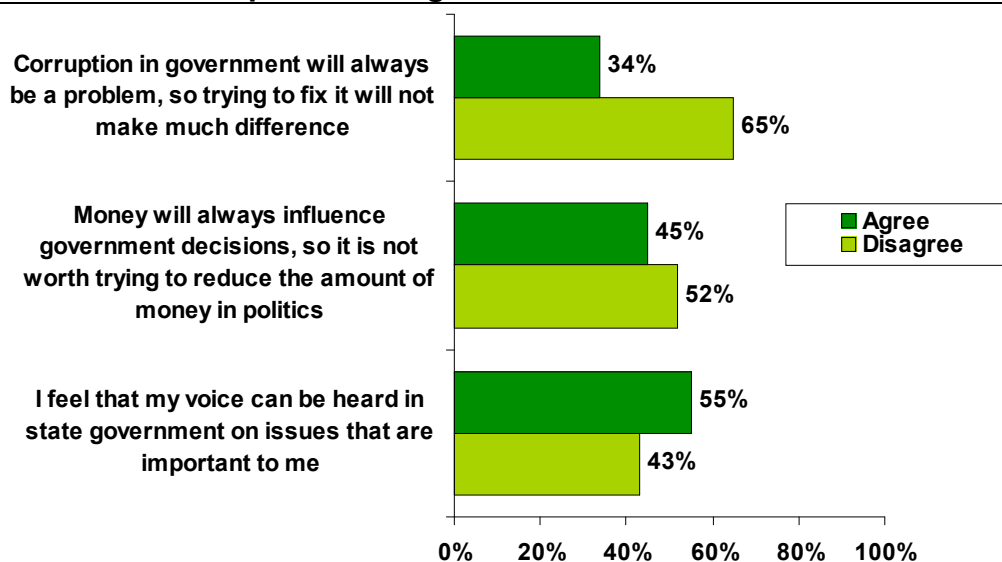
Q5. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in [STATE] to do what is right: almost always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never?

Despite their lack of trust in government and concerns about money in politics, Midwesterners are not ready to give up hope for change in state government.

- Nearly two-thirds (65%) reject the idea that “corruption in government will always be a problem, so trying to fix it will not make much difference,” while only 34% agree.
- A majority (55%) agrees that “I feel that my voice can be heard in state government on issues that are important to me,” while 43% disagree.
- A majority (52%) disagrees that “money will always influence government decisions, so it is not worth trying to reduce the amount of money in politics,” while 45% agree.

However, we find that a sizable minority of 45% of Midwesterners do believe that the influence of money is so pervasive that it is not worth trying to do something about it. Therefore, while Midwesterners are likely to believe there is hope for making government work better, there are some lingering concerns among a minority of residents.

Hope for Change in State Government



Q. Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. Is that strongly or somewhat [agree/disagree]?

31. Corruption in government will always be a problem, so trying to fix it will not make much difference.

32. Money will always influence government decisions, so it is not worth trying to reduce the amount of money in politics.

38. I feel that my voice can be heard in state government on issues that are important to me.

When asked about their personal interest in “the issue of making state government work better,” nearly six in ten (58%) express a high level of interest, and a third (34%) say they are “extremely” interested.

Those more likely to say they are “extremely” interested in making state government work better include:

- People over 60 (47%);
- Democrats (40%) – though liberals (34%) and conservatives (36%) are very similar;
- Those who regularly listen to local talk radio (40%); and
- Those who in the last twelve months have actively worked for a political party or candidate (47%), called into a talk radio show (44%), or contacted a state agency about a problem (44%).

4. Strong support for many reforms, especially relating to the influence of money

Many of the specific reforms tested in the survey garner significant support from the public.

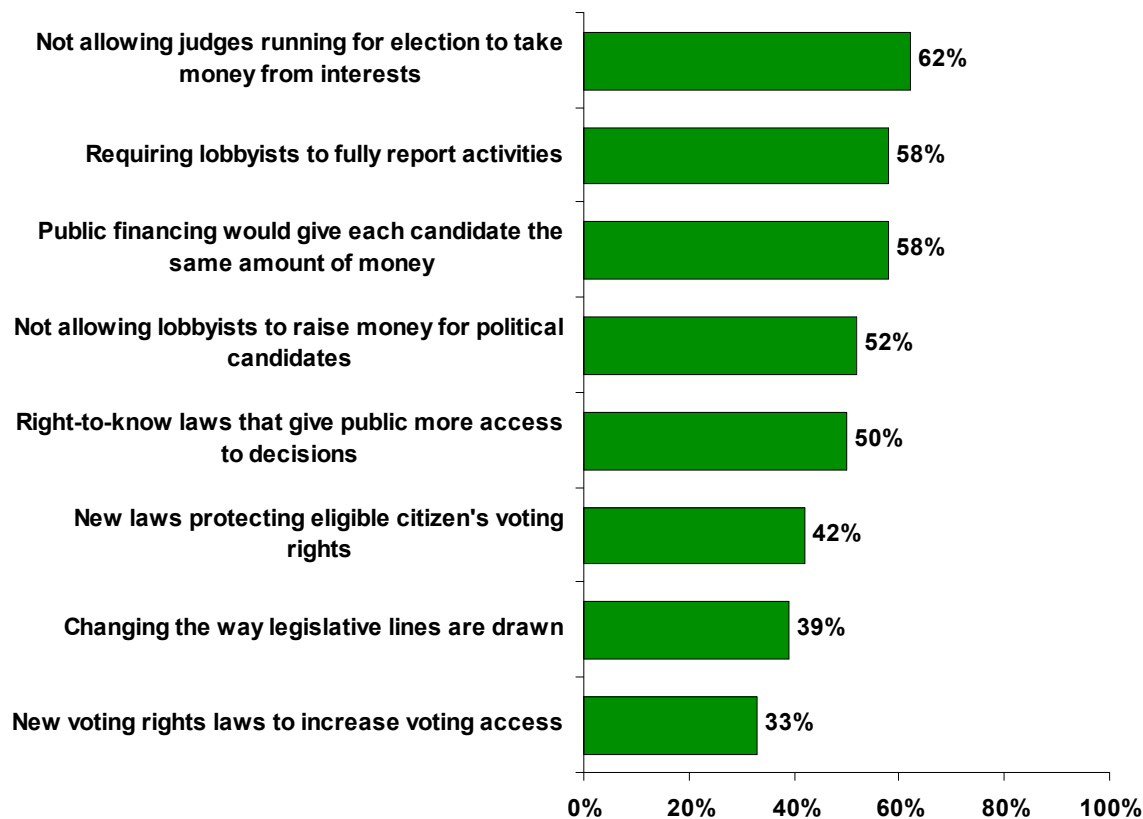
Reforms relating to the influence of money in politics are seen as having the most impact in making government work better:

- 62% 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;”
- 58% say “public financing of campaigns, which would give each candidate the same amount of money and limit spending by each candidate” would make a “big difference;”
- 58% say “requiring lobbyists to fully report their lobbying activities such as their clients, what issues they are working on, and the money they spend lobbying lawmakers” would make a “big difference;” and
- 52% say “not allowing lobbyists to raise money for political candidates” would make a “big difference” in making government work better.

A third to a half of Midwesterners also say that a number of other reforms would make a big difference in making government work better: “right-to-know laws that give the public more access to state government decisions on spending and programs” (50%); “new laws protecting every eligible citizen’s right to vote” (42%); “changing the way legislative district lines are drawn so that it is easier for a candidate to run against current office holders and so new candidates from the community have a chance to win” (39%); and “new voting rights laws to increase access to voting” (33%).

Proposals to Make Government Work Better

% saying "big difference"



Q. 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. [RANDOMIZE Q21-Q28]

21. Public financing of campaigns which would give each candidate the same amount of money and limit spending by each candidate
22. 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
23. NOT allowing lobbyists to raise money for political candidates
24. Requiring lobbyists to fully report their lobbying activities such as their clients, what issues they are working on, and the money they spend lobbying lawmakers
25. Changing the way legislative district lines are drawn so that it is easier for a candidate to run against current office holders and so new candidates from the community have a chance to win
26. New voting rights laws to increase access to voting
27. New laws protecting every eligible citizen's right to vote
28. Right-to-know laws that give the public more access to state government decisions on spending and programs

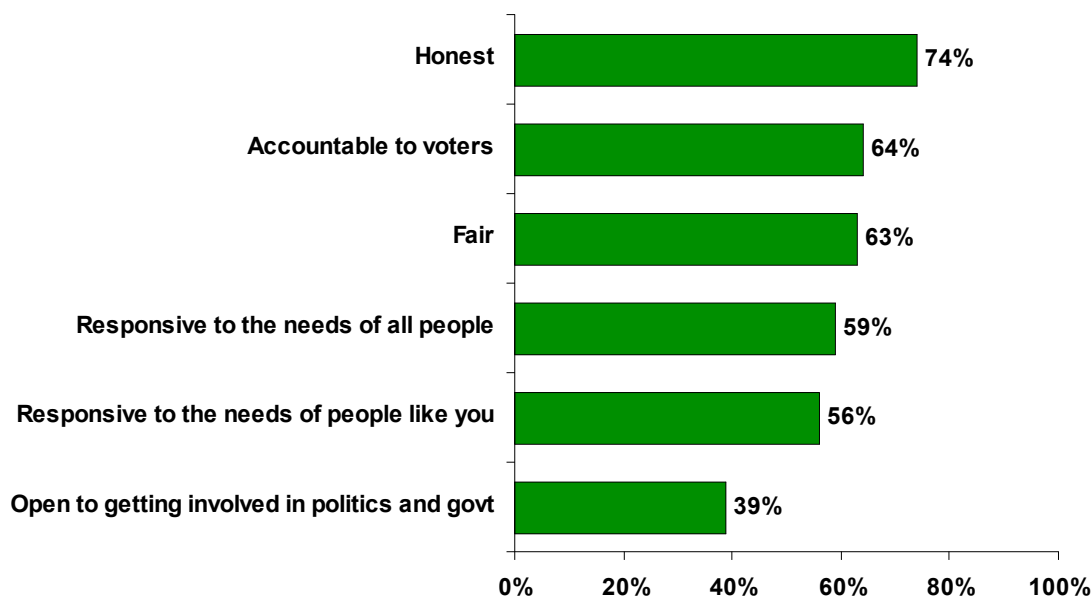
5. Honesty is top quality state government should have

Honesty is the most important value Midwesterners want from their state government, followed by fairness, accountability, and responsiveness. Three quarters (74%) of residents of these states say “honesty” is an “extremely” important characteristic for state government.

“Accountable to voters” (64% say “extremely” important), “fair” (63%), and “responsive to the needs of all people” (59%) make up a second tier of characteristics Midwesterners desire in their state government. State government being “open to getting new people involved in politics and government,” (39%) is less important.

Characteristics of State Government

% saying 10 – “extremely important”



Q. 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. [RANDOMIZE Q14-Q19]

14. Responsive to the needs of people like you
15. Responsive to the needs of all people
16. Honest
17. Fair
18. Accountable to voters
19. Open to getting new people involved in politics and government

Midwesterners think of better government in terms of the results it produces in policy as well as in terms of values like honesty. When presented with a choice between a candidate “who will focus on making government work better by reducing the influence of money in politics and limiting the role that lobbyists play in government,” and a candidate who will focus on “improving education, expanding job opportunities, and cutting taxes,” three in ten Midwesterners (28%) choose reform while nearly two-thirds (64%) choose the candidate focused on issues. This suggests that Midwesterners find the process of reform efforts less compelling than the hope that reforms will lead to a more responsive government on issues they care about such as education, jobs, and taxes.

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