

# PUBLIC OPINION MONITOR

## The State of Public Opinion in Michigan: Setting the Stage for Election '92

By William A. Sederburg  
Vice President and Director, Public Opinion Research Institute

Over the last 18 months, the Public Opinion Research Institute at Public Sector Consultants, Inc., has completed seven major statewide public opinion surveys. These polls covered public attitudes toward government and politics as well as opinions about specific policy issues.

The majority of the surveys were completed as part of the *Public Opinion Monitor* series, surveys undertaken three times per year underwritten by the Michigan Hospital Association. The MHA underwrites the series as a public service in order to promote a better understanding of Michigan's political climate. The *Monitor* surveys 800 Michigan residents stratified by area and gender to ensure an accurate picture of the state is compiled. Data and analysis are available to the public. Changes in approval ratings of government officials and institutions, confidence in the economy, political cynicism, and party affiliation are tracked. In addition, each survey focuses on a specific state policy area.

Public Sector Consultants also conducted two other major statewide surveys: the 1991 Michigan Education Poll and the 1991 Michigan Health Care Poll. The 1991 Michigan Education Poll was conducted in cooperation with the Michigan Department of Education. It was underwritten by a grant from The Upjohn Company. The 1991 Michigan Health Care Poll was underwritten by the Partnership for Michigan Health Care. Eight hundred Michigan residents were interviewed for each of the surveys.

With the general election only five months away, now is an appropriate time to look back at the past 18 months of survey research undertaken by the Public Opinion Research Institute and review public opinion in Michigan.

### THE DISENCHANTED PUBLIC

The candidates for election this fall are facing an electorate in transition. The 1970s were a decade of government activism and liberalism. State and federal budgets grew to finance expanded social initiatives. The 1980s were a decade of conservatism. Federal taxes were cut; state after state enacted tax limitation initiatives. The public demanded less, not more, government.

It is unclear what the public wants from government in the 1990s. E.J. Dionne, in his book *Why Americans Hate Politics*, posits that the public believes that the liberalism of the 1970s and the conservatism of the 1980s failed. He predicts that the 1990s will be a synthesis of both liberal and conservative agendas. According to Dionne, this may be the decade of pragmatism. The public accepts that government should be involved in helping society. It is, however, cynical about how well government is attaining its goal.

Survey data confirm the Dionne hypothesis. Our surveys found strong evidence that the public believes government has a significant role to play in improving society. For example, 43 percent of the public (May 1992 *Public Opinion Monitor*) agreed with the statement that "government and political leaders largely determine what happens to the economy." Only 5 percent of the respondents said government has little or no influence on economic growth and expansion. Yet, 48 percent of the public felt it is likely that they or a member of their immediate family will be laid off during the next year. Seventy-six percent of the public (July 1991 *Public Opinion Monitor*) viewed government as having the moral responsibility to provide food,

clothing, and health care for citizens who are currently unable to afford it. Seventy-seven percent of the public disagreed with the statement that "our social service system helps people get out of poverty" (July 1991 *Public Opinion Monitor*). The public apparently wants a program that works.

Throughout the surveys, we have found support for limited tax increases. In April 1991, 54 percent of the public believed that budget difficulties should be dealt with through a combination of budget cuts and a small tax increase (July 1991 *Public Opinion Monitor*). In our March 1992 *Public Opinion Monitor* survey we found support for tax increases to provide health insurance for the unemployed (62 percent support) and nursing home care for the poor (70 percent support). In contrast, only 35 percent favored increasing taxes to help balance the state budget (July 1991 *Public Opinion Monitor*).

While the public looks to government for assistance in improving society, an underlying cynicism colors attitudes toward government initiatives and is directed at both institutions and politicians. When asked about whether state government's ability to solve problems would get better, get worse, or stay the same in the future, only 9 percent felt that government's ability to solve problems would improve; 23 percent felt it would get worse (November 1990 *Public Opinion Monitor* survey). In March 1992, 61 percent of the public expressed belief that the United States is weak or very weak compared to other industrialized countries in "creating job opportunities."

The public is also cynical toward politicians. An October 1990 *Public Opinion Monitor* survey found that only 5 percent of the public believe that 90 percent or more of public officials are honest and ethical; 23 percent felt that less than 30 percent of state politicians are honest and ethical. In March 1992 only 5 percent of the public felt that you can "just about always" trust state government to do what is right, and 60 percent felt that politicians "forget about their promises once the election is over."

## THE STATE BUDGET

### Background

The April 1991 *Public Opinion Monitor* explored issues related to the state's budget shortfall. It tested the public's support for various budget reduction plans, general attitudes toward state spending, and preferences for spending in various budget areas. The survey found 54 percent of the public favored budget cuts coupled with a small tax increase as the means of dealing with the budget deficit. Only 9 percent wanted to increase taxes to avoid any budget reductions. The governor's proposed elimination of general assistance for the "able bodied" was strongly supported by 61 percent of the public. The least popular budget cut tested was reducing grants to foster parents taking care of needy children (68 percent opposed) and closing mental hospitals (75 percent opposed). The highest funding priorities for the state were K-12 education (50 percent said it was one of the top two priorities) and helping the needing (46 percent said it was one of the top two priorities).

There was a belief among respondents that the state wasted a lot of money. Forty-seven percent said that more than 20 percent of the state's budget is "wasted." (Fifty-six percent of the public felt that current state taxes are either a "little too high" or "much too high.")

### Conclusions

The April 1991 *Public Opinion Monitor* reflected a concerned, "compassionate" Michigan electorate. The public was concerned about the possible effects of the proposed budget cuts. They supported reductions in spending for most program areas tested. They were willing, however, to consider closing some tax "loopholes" (51 percent supported elimination of the exemption from the sales tax of all items purchased outside of the state through catalogs) as a way to raise revenues. While believing that their tax dollars are often wasted, the Michigan electorate expressed its willingness to consider tax increases along with budget reductions.

## INSURANCE REFORM

### Background

The December 1991 *Public Opinion Monitor* focused on Michigan's insurance reform proposals in three areas: auto insurance, health insurance, and medical liability insurance. The responses revealed interesting contradictions. For example, while a majority of the public (52 percent) favored letting market competition establish insurance rates, another stronger majority (80 percent) supported a mandatory 20-percent reduction in rates. Divisions along economic and racial lines were significant, while differences of ideology and gender were not.

Auto insurance was one focus of the survey. When asked to identify the most important reason for increases in the cost of auto insurance, the public named legal and medical care costs as very significant contributors. Asked which reforms would hold costs down, strongest support was given to limiting payments to lawyers in accident lawsuits, followed by prohibiting lawsuits by people who are more than 50 percent at fault in an accident.

Health insurance was another focus of the poll. While four out of five people believed that their current health care was adequate, nearly the same number said they were concerned about affordability in the future. This translated into strong support for requiring businesses to provide coverage for full-time employees and for government to pay for basic health insurance for those who cannot afford it. Seventy-three percent of the public favored a 20-cent-per-pack increase in the cigarette tax to fund health insurance for children and workers without basic coverage.

Respondents were also polled about medical liability insurance. Nearly 90 percent believed that this was a very or somewhat significant contributor to the rising cost of health care. This belief carried over into the concern of 82 percent of respondents that rising liability costs were making it harder to get access to health care in Michigan.

### Conclusions

The December poll reflected the public's concern over the rising costs of insurance in the state, especially the costs of medical liability insurance. While income levels and race were related to differences in opinion about insurance issues, political ideology was rarely a significant factor. While some reforms were supported more than others, the public clearly believes that costs need to be brought down. Economic calculations about whether individuals would pay more or less under different plans were more significant than political party, political ideology, or region of the state.

## EDUCATION

### Background

In 1991 the Department of Education asked Public Sector Consultants for assistance in continuing the annual education surveys begun in 1983 by the department's Project Outreach. With support from The Upjohn Company, PSC undertook the project for the 1991 edition. This poll showed that while the public generally supports the K-12 school system in Michigan, giving it a grade of about a C+, it also believes very strongly that changes are necessary (41 percent favored either abolishing the current system or making very substantial changes). The major driving force for change appears to be the plurality who believe that schools are not improving (43 percent). There was also concern over the competitiveness of local schools with those in other nations.

In response to calls for change, several goals were tested by the survey—President Bush's national education goals and Governor Engler's education reform proposals. The public gave strongest support to Bush's calls to teach every adult to read at a world competitive level (65 percent said the goal was extremely

important) and to require students to demonstrate adequate knowledge of academic subjects before graduation from high school (62 percent said the goal was important). At the state level, there was strong support for choice among schools in the same district and between public and private schools. There was less support for choice across public school districts. A majority also favored requiring high schools to guarantee the skills of graduates and extending the school year to 200 days.

Local schools' management of money emerged as an important issue. Tax increases to finance specific changes in education were generally not supported because a plurality of the public felt that new programs (such as schools of choice) could be paid for through better management of funds. A narrow majority (54 percent) said that their school did only a fair or poor job managing their budgets.

The business community was also evaluated. The public looked to businesses to help define the skills necessary to enter the work force and to provide job guarantees for graduates.

## **Conclusions**

In this edition of the annual education poll, it was clear that the public sees a high correlation between education and jobs. Concerns about adult literacy and minimal academic competency for high school graduates were most important to respondents. The public expects a great deal from the school system and is basically pleased with the results. In the area of school's management of resources, however, the public feels that there is room for improvement. Again, while respondents were basically satisfied with their local school system, they shared concern about the competitiveness of graduates in both the local and international job markets.

## **HEALTH CARE**

### **Background**

The health care poll, commissioned by the Partnership for Michigan Health Care, focused on the public's attitudes toward the nation's health care system. When asked about the major problem facing the state, providing affordable and available health care tied for second with improving education. Concerns about creating more jobs was the major state issue. Nearly two-thirds of the public believed that the biggest problems facing the health care system are the spiraling costs and the affordability of health care. By a ratio of three to one, the public believes that health care will get less rather than more affordable over the next ten years. Interestingly, the higher the income of the respondent, the higher the percentage that believed that affordability will get worse in the future.

It is evident from this survey that controlling health care costs is a significant issue. A large majority of respondents (84 percent) supported providing incentives (such as lowering insurance premiums) to encourage people not to smoke or drink. Seventy-six percent favored limiting the payments made to people in medical liability lawsuits. However, the public is not willing to sacrifice very much to reduce health care costs. Sixty-six percent oppose having patients pay a greater share of the health care burden. Seventy-seven percent oppose reducing the availability of health services.

Three specific reform proposals were tested in the survey. Sixty-one percent of the public favored having the federal government require employers to purchase health insurance for their employees. Support dropped to 43 percent, however, when it was explained that the reform would require an 8-percent tax on wages. A slim majority (54 percent) favored the Michigan Senate's plan to provide tax credits for businesses purchasing employee health insurance. Less than a majority (44 percent) favored the rationing of health care for Medicaid patients.

## Conclusions

Attitudes about health care and the health care system are dominated by economic concerns. The affordability of health care insurance, the high cost of health care, and the ability to take care of elderly citizens reflect economic issues. Finding solutions to the problems of uninsured individuals and the increasing costs of health care will be difficult, especially given that less than a majority of the public support plans that require increasing taxes or paying more out of their own pocket.

## SOCIAL SERVICES

### Background

The July 1991 *Public Opinion Monitor* focused on Michigianians' attitudes toward state social services. The public was very clear in its belief that the state has a responsibility to help the poor. More than three-quarters of the public believed that the state has a moral responsibility to provide food, clothing, shelter, and health care to the less fortunate. The public was equally clear in its belief that the current system is not the best answer. Only 22 percent felt the system helped "a great deal" or "quite a bit" in assisting individuals in getting the skills needed to find employment. Seventy-seven percent agreed "the current system discourages people from getting out of poverty."

In responses that reflect the public's attitude toward recipients, stereotypes of aid recipients were evident; 77 percent believed that recipients of aid remain on the rolls for long periods of time, 48 percent felt people receiving state assistance were lazy, and almost half believed that people are poor because of a lack of effort, while only 27 percent named events beyond individual control as the major cause of poverty.

The major part of the survey focused on proposed reforms of public assistance. A majority of the public (58 percent) supported requiring participation in job training programs as part of any aid package. A large majority (85 percent) supported making participation in child care classes mandatory for anyone to receive aid to families with dependent children (AFDC).

### Conclusions

It is clear from this survey that the public is convinced of the state's moral responsibility to help the poor. This does not mean, however, that they believe the current system works. These two views should provide a climate conducive to change. The abundant stereotypes revealed in the responses in this survey indicate a clear need for the public to become better informed about the circumstances surrounding both those in poverty and the programs available to them.

## THE ECONOMY

### Background

The May 1992 *Public Opinion Monitor* focused on the economy of Michigan. In an open-ended question, 60 percent of the public identified jobs and the economy as the most important issues facing the state. Economic pessimism also was revealed by the survey, as 47 percent of respondents said that it was very or somewhat likely that they or a member of their immediate family would be laid off within the next year. While the leading economic indicators reveal that the twin recessions of 1980-82 were more severe than the current one, by a margin of two to one respondents said they felt this recession was more severe than the last. Blame for the current recession was divided among the Congress, former President Reagan, and big business. In Michigan, corporate greed was named as the number one reason for General Motors' closing of several plants within the state.

The public is looking to government for help, as a plurality of respondents (42 percent) believe that good policy can improve the economy. Only 5 percent believed government and political leaders have little or no

influence. Within the state, job training programs and reducing taxes for the middle class were supported as strategies for getting the economy moving again.

### Conclusions

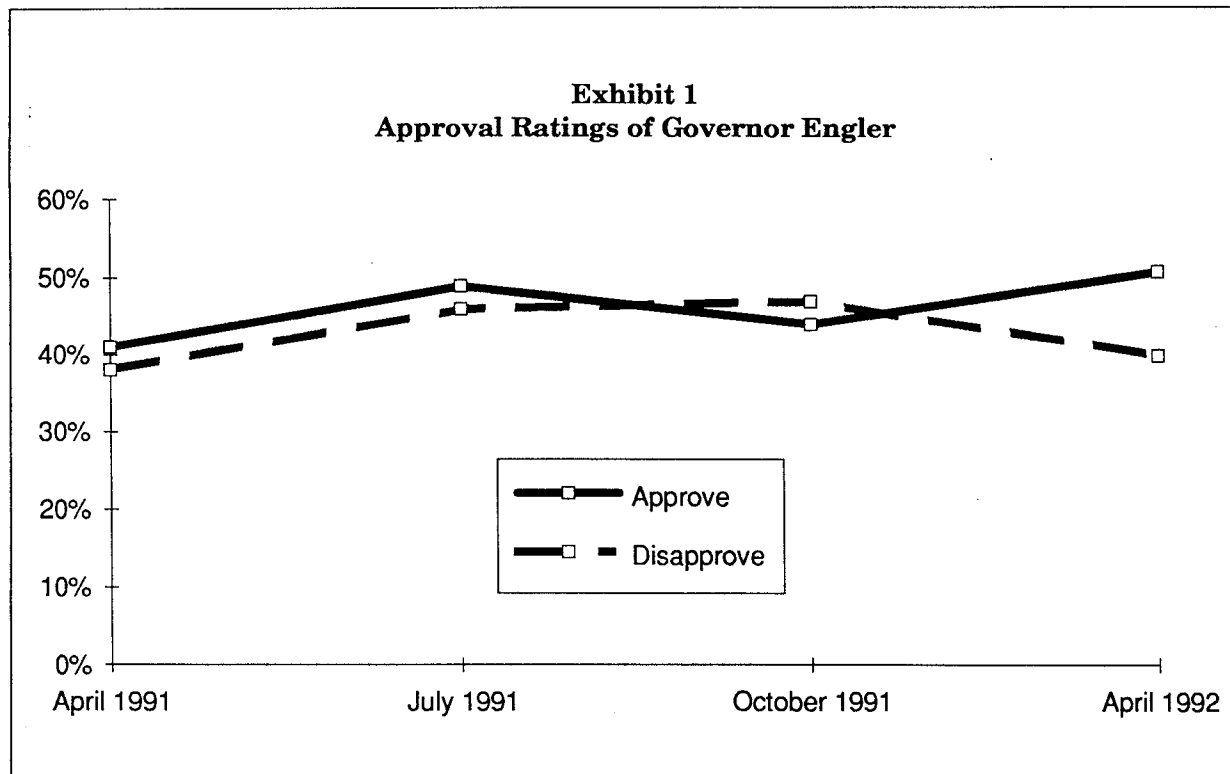
The public is worried about the economy. While they believe it plays a critical role, people see the government as failing to keep Michigan competitive with other states and this country competitive with other industrialized countries. Michigan residents are very concerned about their economic security. This frustration is undoubtedly reflected in public cynicism about politics and politicians.

### TRENDS: POLITICS, APPROVAL RATINGS, AND ECONOMIC CONFIDENCE

#### Background

Jobs and the economy are perceived to be the most important issues facing the state of Michigan today. Also important are problems associated with crime and drugs, the need to improve education, and balancing the state budget.

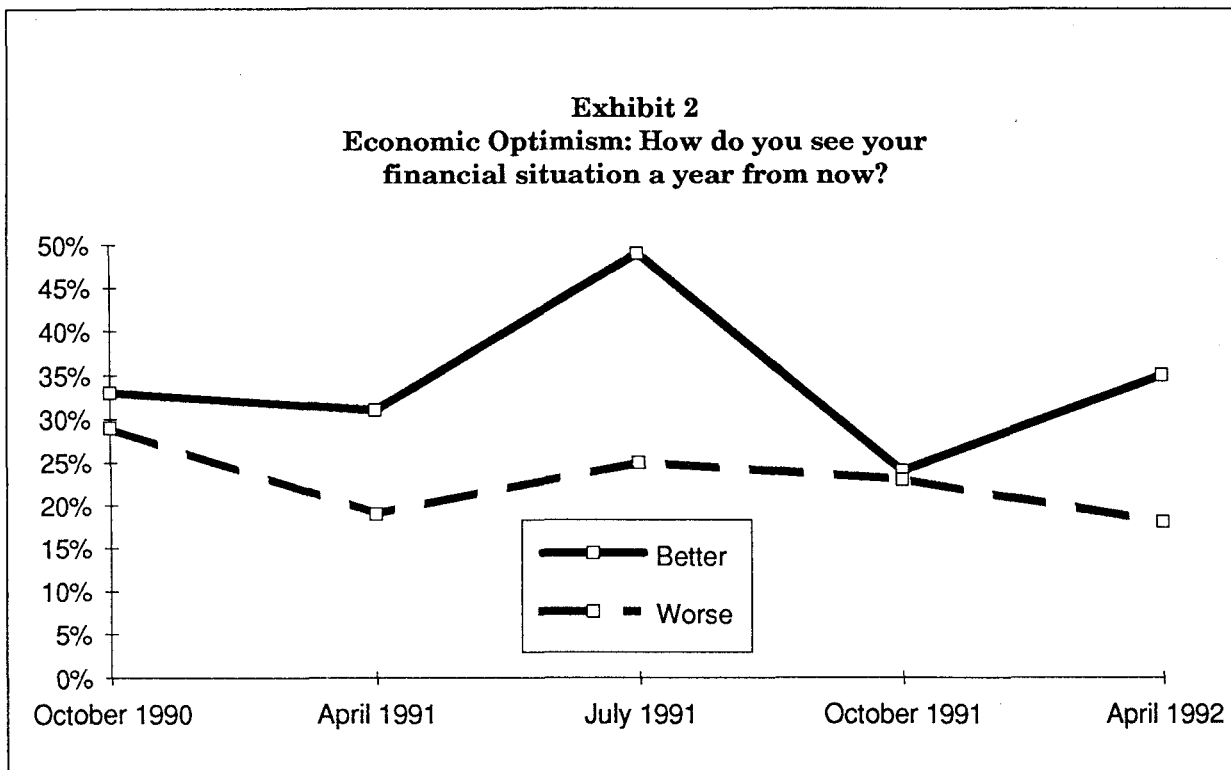
Approval ratings of Governor Engler have improved over the course of the last four *Public Opinion Monitor* surveys from 41 percent in April 1991 to 51 percent in May 1992. The governor has generated polarized responses from the Michigan electorate. Twenty percent of the public strongly approve the job he is doing and 26 percent strongly disapprove (May 1992 *Public Opinion Monitor*). See Exhibit 1.



Approval ratings of the legislature reached a high point at 47 percent in June 1991. Approval ratings have remained consistently at approximately 40 percent in the other three surveys. Residents were more disenchanted with federal politicians. The approval ratings of Congress fell from 29 percent in October 1991 to 20 percent in May 1992. Also significant is the fact that President Bush's approval rating among Michigan residents dropped 10 percent during that period, from 56 to 46 percent.

Public trust of government is clearly low. Nearly one-third of the public said that if they learned their member of Congress had bounced a number of checks, they would not vote for him/her under any circumstance (May 1992 *Public Opinion Monitor*). In addition, 71 percent of the public said they would vote in favor of term limitations (May 1992 *Public Opinion Monitor*).

Economic confidence correlated positively with the state of the national economy. The public was most optimistic in June 1991, when economists were declaring the end of the recession (49 percent of respondents expected to be better off a year from then). Confidence dropped dramatically in the October 1991 survey (24 percent were optimistic) and rebounded slightly in March 1992 (35 percent were optimistic). Optimism about personal economic circumstances was positively related to optimism about future job opportunities, race relations, education, and health care. (See Exhibit 2.)



While economic confidence has fluctuated, the overall impression gained from our questions about the future is that the public is fundamentally pessimistic. In March 1992, 61 percent felt that job opportunities would stay the same in Michigan over the next year or get worse (May 1992 *Public Opinion Monitor*). In October 1991, 84 percent felt that race relations would stay the same or get worse; 86 percent believed that the quality of health care would stay the same or get worse; and 83 percent felt the environment would stay the same or get worse (December 1991 *Public Opinion Monitor*). The Michigan public does not believe things will get better soon.

#### WHERE ARE WE NOW?

As we enter the 1992 election season, the Public Opinion Research Institute and its associated surveys reveal several interesting views of public opinion in Michigan.

*Economic anxiety drives public opinion.* The belief that this recession is worse than the early 1980s recession, concerns about Michigan trailing other states and the United States trailing other industrial countries in providing job opportunities, and the fact that nearly half of the public expects someone in their immediate family to be laid off within the next year describes a public deeply concerned about economic

security. In the 1980s providing opportunity for economic advancement appeared to be paramount. Today, it may be that the public is more interested in economic security than opportunity.

*There is greater awareness of the global aspects of the economy and education.* The July 1991 *Public Opinion Monitor* and the 1991 Education Poll revealed that Michigianians are very aware of the need to be competitive in the global economy. The public believes the Michigan automobile worker is as hard working and competent as his or her foreign counterpart; however, people feel automobile companies' management is not as competent as their foreign counterparts (May 1992 *Public Opinion Monitor*). The education poll found the public believes the ability to compete in a global economy is the most important goal of public education. (See Exhibit 3 for public opinions comparing the United States to other nations.)

*The public is alienated from the political process.* The inability of political leaders to develop policies that work and the partisan battles that comprise much of the state's political landscape are wearing out the public's patience. While most Michigianians believe both in the worth of the political process and the chance for good policy to overcome economic problems, they do not hesitate to blame politicians and politics for the stalemates that exist in the political arena.

*The public is increasingly polarized.* All of the surveys reflect sharp differences in opinions between blacks and whites, residents of western and eastern Michigan, and Democrats and Republicans. Differences were less strong between men and women and conservatives and liberals.

*Michigan residents are pessimistic about the future.* Michigianians are not optimistic about their personal future or that of the state. They see Michigan falling behind other states in providing job opportunities and the United States falling behind other industrial countries. Over time, only about a third of survey respondents have been optimistic about education, health care, job opportunities and race relations.

The elections in 1992 will provide the public with an opportunity to communicate with policy makers about the future of the state and nation. It is our hope that this brief review of public opinion in the state will help the reader understand the starting point of the dialog.

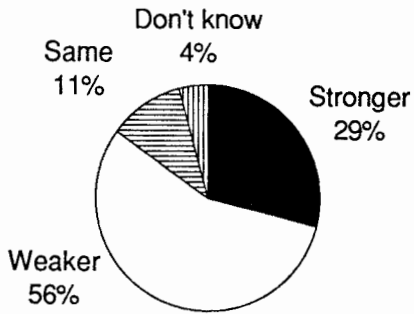
The Public Opinion Research Institute will continue this year with the *Public Opinion Monitor* and other state surveys. We look forward to another year of research and invite any comments or questions you may have about the surveys.



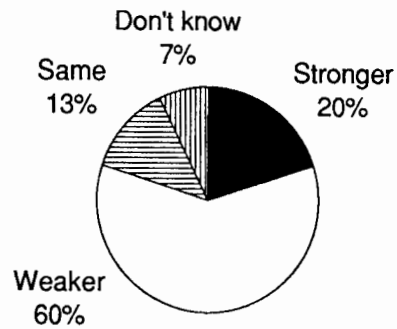
**Exhibit 3**

**If you were to compare the United States with other industrialized countries, would you say that the United States is stronger or weaker compared to other nations with respect to:**

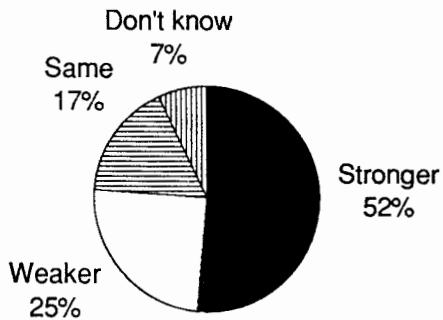
**Our educational system**



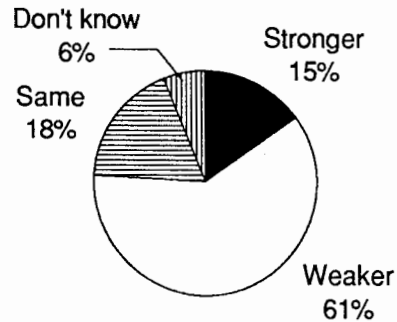
**Our health care system**



**Technology innovation**

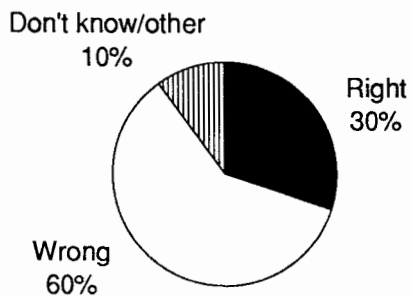


**Creating job opportunities for workers**

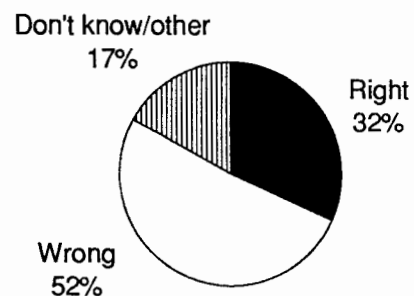


**Is the country generally headed in the right or wrong direction in the following policy areas?**

**Competing with foreign countries**



**Helping people like you get ahead**



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