

# PUBLIC OPINION MONITOR

## The Public Mood: Concerns and Issues

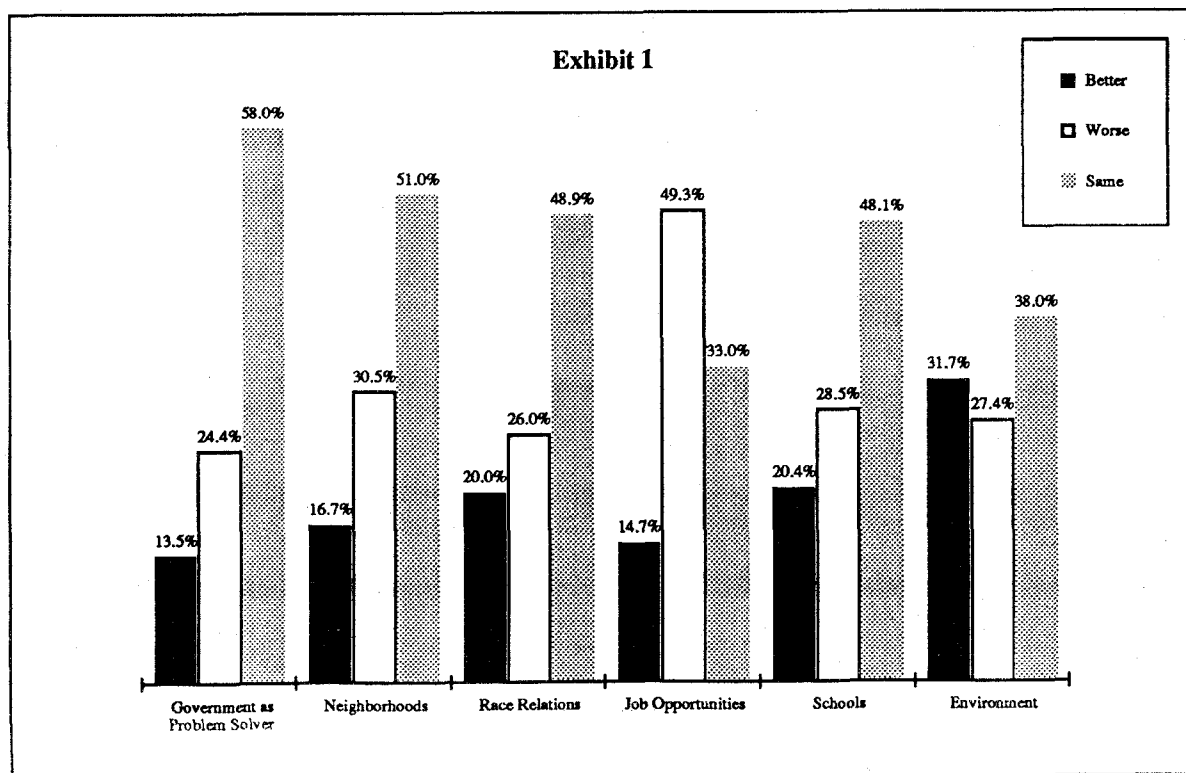
by William R. Rustem, Senior Vice President

*Thou, too, sail on O Ship of State!  
Sail on O Union strong and great!  
Humanity with all its fears,  
With all the hopes of future years,  
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!*

Those words, penned by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow shortly after the U.S. Civil War, express an abiding optimism in the ability of a democracy to resolve human problems and make life better for its people. Written at a time when there seemed to be no limits to what a government empowered by ordinary citizens could accomplish, they reflected confidence, hope, and faith in the great experiment of democratic institutions.

In 1990, Michiganians are far less buoyant or confident about their future, and their faith in the ability of democratic institutions to improve the human condition has been badly shaken. This is the principal finding of the first *Public Opinion Monitor*, a statewide survey designed to take the pulse of Michigan. The state's residents view the future with trepidation and fear. They are not confident that government can solve societal problems, and many believe that tomorrow will be worse rather than better.

Exhibit 1 summarizes the *Monitor* findings about expectations.



- Half of those polled believe that job opportunities in the state will be worse a year from now; of the remaining half, seven in ten anticipate no improvement.
- Eight in ten Michigianians expect our school system to show no improvement in the next year, and three of those eight believe it will get worse.
- Sixty-five percent of those polled expect no improvement in environmental quality.
- Although some people believe that state government will be better at solving problems a year from now, twice as many believe it will be worse.
- Almost one-third of those polled believe neighborhoods will deteriorate in the coming year.
- One in every four persons expects racial tensions to increase.

Democrats are slightly more optimistic about government's ability to solve problems than are those identifying themselves as Republican or independent. The most optimistic on nearly every issue are those aged 18–24, while the most pessimistic are residents of Detroit; nearly half expect job opportunities, schools, the quality of the environment, race relations, and neighborhoods to get worse in the coming year. Such pessimism in Detroit is particularly unnerving because of its importance to the state. Indeed, 70 percent of those surveyed (nearly 50 percent in outstate areas alone) believe that Michigan's success is tied to that of Detroit. Based on the *Monitor* findings, it appears that if more attention is not paid to urban areas—and specifically to Detroit—in the next several years, Michigan's future may be bleak.

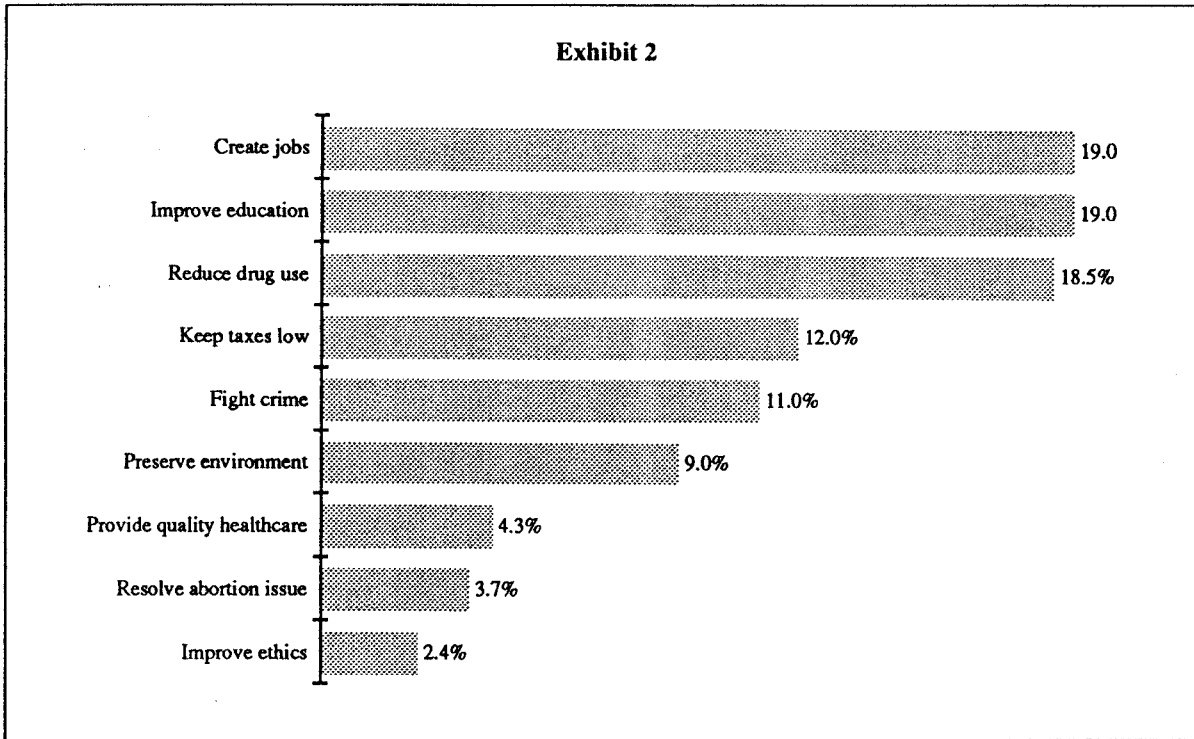
### The Issues People Care About

*Monitor* asked those polled to select the most important problem confronting the state in the coming year. Respondents were to select only one issue from a list that included the following: create more jobs, preserve a clean environment, reduce drug usage, fight crime, improve education, resolve the abortion issue, improve the ethics of elected officials, keep taxes low, and provide quality health care. Exhibit 2 shows the results. Improving education and creating jobs are given top priority by Michigianians. Reducing drug use ranks third, followed by keeping taxes low, fighting crime, preserving a clean environment, providing quality health care, resolving the abortion issue, and improving the ethics of elected officials.

The *Monitor* findings suggest that in the past several years the media and elected officials may have paid too much attention to the abortion issue. Only 3.7 percent of respondents ranked it as the most important problem in need of resolution. The issue was not among the top three identified by any age group. When Michigan is divided into seven geographic regions, abortion is among the top three only in the West, where it ties for third place with reducing drug use, cleaning up the environment, and keeping taxes low.

It is noteworthy that the ranking of important issues varies widely among age groups and geographic regions. Those aged 18–24, for example, rank reducing drug use, improving education, and keeping taxes low as their top three priorities. In the 25–34 age category, improving education, reducing drug use, and preserving a clean environment are the choices. Those aged 35–44 choose improving education, creating jobs, and keeping taxes low as the most important issues. The age group 45–54 identifies improving education, creating jobs, and low taxes as most important. Creating jobs, reducing drug use, and keeping taxes low rank highest among those 55–64 years old. Finally, those over age 65 select reducing drug use, creating jobs, and fighting crime as the most important problems in need of resolution in Michigan.

Overall, the top three issues for those identifying themselves as Democrats are creating jobs (22 percent), reducing drug use (18 percent), and improving education (17 percent). Among Republicans the priorities are improving education (19 percent), creating jobs (18 percent), and keeping taxes low (15 percent). Independents want improved education (22 percent), reduced drug usage (20 percent), and more jobs as well as better controls on crime (15 percent each).



Issue rankings also vary considerably among geographic areas in the state. In the City of Detroit, reducing drug usage is considered by nearly one in three people (31 percent) as the most important issue. It is closely followed by reducing crime (29 percent) and creating jobs (19 percent). Detroit is the only one of the seven geographic areas in which reducing crime is among the top three priorities. Outstate, people are far more concerned about "quality of life" issues, particularly education. A whopping 37 percent of all those surveyed in central Michigan, for example, cite improving education as the most important priority. Keeping taxes low is one of three top issues only in northern Michigan (where it ranks third behind improving education and creating jobs) and in the West (where, as noted above, it tied for third).

## Conclusion

In the future, Michigan's governor and legislature face an enormous task in restoring public confidence in the ability of government to solve human problems. Michiganders are cynical about the future and even more cynical about government itself. The negativity of the current campaigns may prove successful to individual candidates, but it also has served, in the judgment of this writer, to drive the seeds of that cynicism even deeper into the minds of the state's residents. Politicians may be winning the battles for votes at the ballot box, but they are losing the war for confidence among the electorate.

People are looking for leaders who lead, for statesman rather than politicians. We need elected officials who will tell us what we need to know rather than what we want to hear.

The challenges before us in improving education, reducing drug usage, creating jobs, and preserving a clean environment are monumental. Only time will tell whether state government in Michigan will be able to change sufficiently to address the issues that people want addressed, or whether the electorate will decide to change the system.

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