



PUBLIC OPINION MONITOR

Politics and the People: Alienation and Anger

by Craig Ruff, President

The people of Michigan are mad as hell . . . but will take it a while longer. *Public Opinion Monitor* finds Michigianians estranged from or highly critical of state government *en masse*, eager to limit terms of office, disgusted by special interest pressures on politicians, antipathetic toward political parties and ideologies, . . . and eager to keep their local state legislator in office. The *Monitor* findings mirror recent national polls that show Americans increasingly and alarmingly cynical toward the political system, the major political parties, and the people in public service.

Limiting Terms

Although the majority of voters like their own state legislator, 63 percent favor limiting terms of office. Only 30 percent oppose the idea. *Monitor* finds support that is uniformly strong throughout the state and crosses party lines. Conservatives are somewhat more likely to back term limitation, but even self-professed strong liberals endorse it by a margin of 54–39 percent.

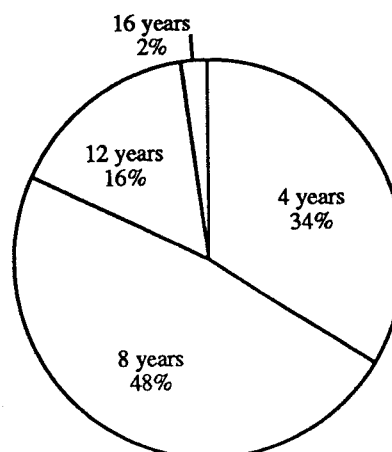
The concept is gaining ground across the nation. Oklahomans enacted limits on state offices in August. Colorado and California voters are likely to approve similar ballot proposals next week. A *Newsweek* poll taken October 11–12 showed 73 percent of Americans support a limit on the number of years a person can serve in the U.S. House or Senate. The same poll revealed that 57 percent approve the way their congressional representative is handling the job. Michigan residents feel much the same way.

What is it about limiting terms that captures interest and support in Michigan? The reason most often given is that “politicians will be less interested in getting reelected and will do what is right.” For many political and media insiders, the main benefit is to insulate politicians from the influence of special interests; since the need to stay in office is lessened, catering to special interests for campaign monies is reduced. Respondents to the *Monitor* view this as a less significant benefit than encouraging legislators to do what is right.

The public wants politicians to do what is right, even if it jeopardizes reelection, but also wants legislators to vote in constituents’ best interest. This creates a Hobson’s Choice for politicians. You can do the right thing, which may not coincide with public and special interest desires, and lose your next election; or you can continue to cater to constituents and special interests, win the next election, and fuel public alienation and support for term limitations.

Among those who favor limiting terms, most lean toward a limit of about eight years. (See Exhibit 1.) The most politically alienated voters are most eager, by a margin of 67–25 percent, to limit terms. But even people who trust politicians to do the right thing nearly all the time, always tell the truth, and keep promises support term limits by a margin of 52–45 percent.

EXHIBIT 1. Limiting Terms



Attitudes toward Officeholders

It should be a basic presumption underlying representative democracy that the people we select to represent us in government are honest and ethical. *Monitor* found one person in four thinks that fewer than 30 percent of Lansing politicians are honest. Only 5 percent believe more than 90 percent of state politicians are honest. It is astounding that so many people question the probity of their public officials. The rules of the political game, from accepting election results to abiding by laws enacted by politicians, depend on some modicum of confidence in the integrity of elected representatives. The *Monitor* findings suggest that a significant number of the public lack this basic confidence.

About one-third of those polled believe that "not very often" do state leaders tell the truth and do the right thing. An even larger number, six of ten, say that state politicians forget their promises once an election is over; 77 percent of Detroiters feel that way. The response to one question dramatically points out the gulf separating the people from the representatives they send to the capitol:

	Agree	Disagree
"It is time for Lansing politicians to step aside in order to make room for new leaders."	67%	29%

A nationwide survey, conducted by the Times Mirror Center for the People and Press in May 1990, found very high levels of alienation among younger and poorer Americans; that study tied rising alienation directly to increasing economic pressures on the lower and middle classes. Election results in economically hard-pressed Massachusetts and Oklahoma this August translated this attitude into rejection of heavily favored, establishment candidates. At the national level, it appears that alienation runs deepest among the most impoverished and economically threatened people, but *Monitor* did not find this the case in Michigan. While political confidence is somewhat higher among people living in the western part of the state and those with high incomes, political disenchantment crosses all economic, racial, geographical, and social lines in the state.

Monitor was able to cluster perceptions along a spectrum of confidence in state politicians. Some people, about 12 percent of the total, are believers; they have faith that their representatives tell the truth, are trustworthy, and keep promises just about always, and they are confident about their own future finances. Another 19 percent are optimists; they, too, have confidence in their economic status but are a little less likely than believers to trust politicians. Critics, who comprise 42 percent of the public, trust politicians only some of the time and are about evenly split between those who think their economic future will get better and those who feel it will get worse. Finally, 26 percent are cynics; they believe that politicians cannot be trusted very often, do not tell the truth, and do not hold to election promises. By an almost 2:1 margin, the cynics believe that their future finances will deteriorate. Critics and cynics combined outnumber believers and optimists by a margin of 68-32 percent.

Critics and cynics come from all partisan and ideological persuasions, racial and socioeconomic groups, and regions of the state. Among Democrats, 61 percent are critics and cynics; 69 percent of Republicans and 76 percent of independents fall into these less confident and trusting groups. Of self-professed strong liberals, 23 percent are cynics, as are 34 percent of strong conservatives. Blacks and whites exhibit no significant difference, and levels of household income do not explain any major differences.

What seems most closely related to alienation in Michigan is age: The older you are, the less you trust government. It should be noted, however, that Medicare and Social Security cuts have been front-page issues in the national budget deliberations, and older persons were surveyed at the peak of media attention to income-threatening budget options. It seems fair to say that political alienation in our state is an equal opportunity embitterer.

Monitor will track over time how Michiganders divide into these four categories: believers, optimists, critics, and cynics. Changes in outlook and confidence should help define and explain the political and economic climates in Michigan. Such changes might suggest, as well, that Michiganders' current cynicism

toward state government may be more closely related to chagrin about politics and policies in Washington, D.C., than in Lansing.

Separating Our Legislator from the Rest

Interestingly enough, distrust of those in power—incumbency—does not spill over into people's image of their own legislator—their incumbent. By a margin of 52–27 percent, people believe that their local state representative should not be replaced with someone else. Voters' animosity toward the governing elite does not prevent them from giving a fairly positive report card to their own legislator. This augurs well for the reelection of nearly all state legislators.

One way incumbents stay in office is through diligent constituent casework, solving problems people have with government. But of the four activities *Monitor* listed for a state legislator (voting in the best interest of constituents, getting government funds for the district, helping constituents with government problems, and being active in getting legislation passed helpful to the district), only 12 percent of Michigianians thought constituent help was the most important. Voting in the best interest of constituents ranked first.

How do we explain the negativism toward politicians but support for the local legislator? First, as Tip O'Neill used to say, "all politics are local." We assess our legislator by what s/he has done for us, how regularly we see him or her, and how sensitive s/he is to our local issues. Second, many people may view their legislator more as a local functionary, protecting local interests, than as the molder of state policy affecting all 9 million Michigianians. Many people may sense what political science textbooks say: that the president or the governor leads policy, and the legislature follows. What the governor proposes, the legislature disposes. Third, the incumbent local legislator, by definition, has been voted by us into office. We are less likely to blame the person we entrusted with authority than the people other voters have sent to Lansing.

It also is interesting that voters, despite their mistrust, look to elected officials rather than other opinion leaders and the media for public policy answers. *Monitor* asked people from whom they could expect straight talk about taxes. Nine options were offered: a couple of newspaper editors, two university leaders, a prominent tax-cutting proponent, the leaders of the state Senate and state House, one's own legislator, and the governor. Fifty percent expect either their own legislator or the governor to give them the straightest answers. Distrust of politicians in general apparently does not extend to one's own legislator and governor.

The *Monitor* findings promise few rewards for politicians who make tough and unpopular decisions. It seems the public does not view legislating as involving partisanship, philosophy or ideology, solving state problems, or exercising leadership by making hard choices. To most people, a good legislator brings home the bacon, cuts through red tape, and votes the way constituents want. It is no wonder, then, that legislators focus on constituent casework, find funds for pet projects in the home district, and change their voting philosophy when public opinion shifts. If they are successful at these, legislators win reelection in the face of fairly overwhelming disenchantment with the political process.

Political Reforms

Monitor asked people whether they favor such political changes as taxpayer-funded legislative campaigns (public financing), abolishing political action committees (PACs), and moving from a full- to a part-time legislature. They support none of these. By a 2:1 margin they are against a part-time legislature and public funding of legislative campaigns. By a margin of 45–33 percent, they oppose abolishing PACs.

It is hard to fashion a change in the way political campaigns are financed that wins popular support, let alone passes constitutional muster. Federal courts, as late as last month in California, have taken a dim view of limiting the right of such associations as groups of businesses or professionals or labor unions to spend money freely in politics. But when confronted with an alternative to private financing, such as using public monies (Michigan's gubernatorial campaigns are funded largely by taxpayer dollars), voters reject

the idea overwhelmingly. Cynics and critics are almost as likely to reject these reforms as are optimists and believers.

Most people believe that PAC contributions buy legislative votes. Incredibly, 86 percent of survey respondents think it is very or somewhat common for special interest political contributions to influence the way legislators vote. Only 9 percent consider it an uncommon practice. The level of cynicism is very disturbing.

According to the *Monitor* findings, the part-time legislature is unpopular across all geographical areas, party lines, ideologies, and socioeconomic strata in Michigan. I speculate that support for a full-time legislature stems from the importance placed by citizens on local constituent, casework, and other services, routinely needed year round. The public may be concerned about who would cut through bureaucratic red tape if the local legislator were on the job only a few months of each year.

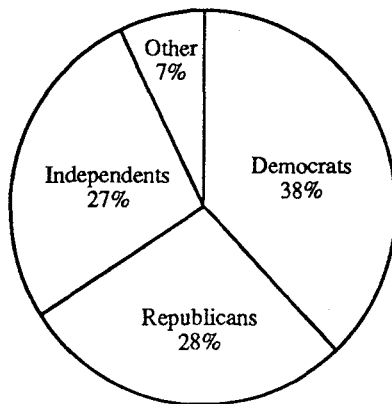
Political Institutions and Parties

The state legislature does not win high approval ratings in the *Monitor* survey. Barely 35 percent approve the legislature's performance; 45 percent disapprove. A national poll by CBS/*New York Times* in early September found that 40 percent of Americans approve the performance of the U.S. Congress, and 44 percent disapprove. Legislative bodies are not faring well in public confidence. But, as mentioned before, the public sees a distinction between the "body of legislators" and their own local representative.

As is the case for the president compared to the U.S. Congress on the national level, the governor fares better in public opinion than does the state legislature; 53 percent approve his performance, and 31 percent disapprove. Not surprisingly, Democrats give Governor Blanchard higher marks than do Republicans, but even 40 percent of the latter approve of the way he is handling his job. Republicans disapprove of the legislature's track record by a 2:1 margin; Democrats, by a margin of 43-37 percent, approve of its performance. Individually, the governor and the legislator who represents a specific district fare about equally in public support. It is the institution of the legislature that slides in public confidence.

Monitor finds that partisanship does not mean a great deal to the public. The two major parties hardly differ at all to 29 percent of the people, and only 24 percent see a great deal of difference between them. After years of identifying far more closely with Democrats than Republicans, the Michigan electorate drifted during the 1980s toward parity between the parties. It appears that Democrats are opening another lead early in the 1990s. (See Exhibit 2.)

EXHIBIT 2. Party Identification

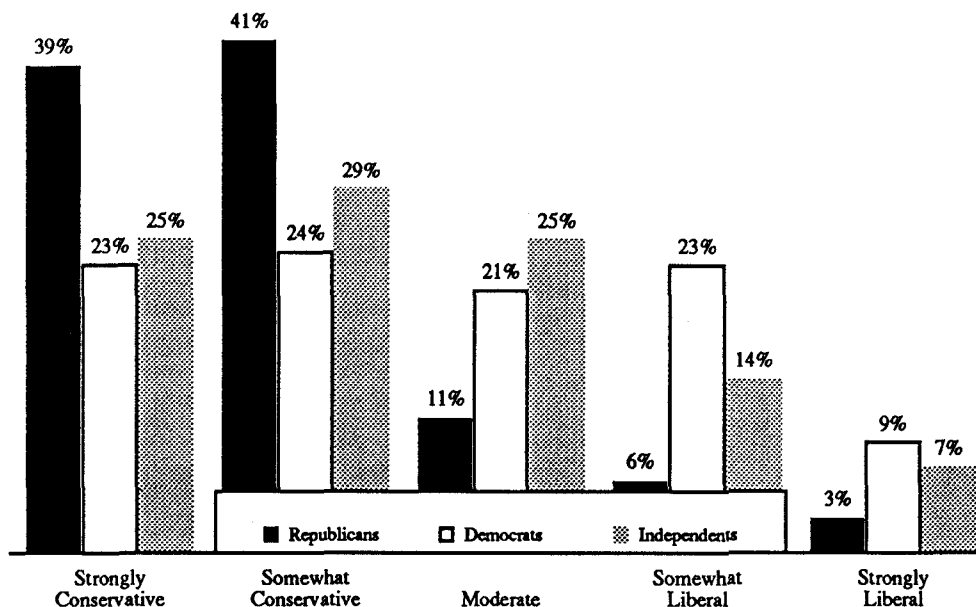


With respect to self-professed ideology, Michiganians are fairly conservative. In fact, 80 percent of Republicans style themselves as such, along with 47 percent of Democrats and 54 percent of independents. (See Exhibit 3.)

Populism and a New "Crown of Thorns"

"You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold," bellowed William Jennings Bryan to the 1896 Democratic national convention. His unmistakable plea for a populist government that redistributes wealth from the upper to the lower classes might play very well with today's electorate. Populism never goes out of vogue for long in U.S. politics. We may see its renaissance if the middle class senses it has more in common with the class beneath it than the one above it.

EXHIBIT 3. Self-Professed Ideology



Monitor finds that 77 percent of Michigianians feel that the rich are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer. This sentiment is shared by a majority in every part of the state but most overwhelmingly in Detroit (87 percent) and Flint/Saginaw/Bay/Thumb (86 percent). This sentiment is not surprising since these areas have suffered the greatest economic declines in the state in the last decade, but the feeling is shared by those making \$50,000–\$75,000 a year! The national Democratic strategy of tying Republicans to tax breaks for the richest Americans is playing to a growing and enthusiastic audience. In the October *Newsweek* survey, 81 percent of respondents said that wealthy Americans are not paying their fair share of taxes.

Anti-Detroit sentiment may be overblown. When *Monitor* asked if Michigan's success is tied to the fortunes of Detroit, people agreed by a margin of 70–28 percent. In every part of the state, most people see the success of Michigan and its largest city as inextricably linked.

Economics, Politics, and Alienation

U.S. history is in some ways a testament to distrust of authority. We invented democracy to stymie it. We abhor tyranny. We deplore the upper classes that traditionally ruled the world's peoples and politics. We associate political power with economic power and power with tyranny. In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that a democratic people's innate paranoia toward power extends both to government and private wealth. As to politics and politicians, Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*:

As the rulers of democratic nations are almost always suspected of dishonorable conduct, they in some measure lend the authority of the government to the base practices of which they are accused. They thus afford dangerous examples, which discourage the struggles of virtuous independence and cloak with authority the secret designs of wickedness. To pillage the public purse and to sell the favors of the state are arts that the meanest villain can understand and hope to practice in his turn.

What is to be feared is not so much the immorality of the great as the fact that immorality may lead to greatness. In a democracy private citizens see a man of their own rank in life who rises from that obscure position in a few years to riches and power; the spectacle excites their surprise and their envy, and they are led to inquire how the person who was yesterday their equal is today their ruler. They are . . . led, and often rightly, to impute his success mainly to some of his vices; and an odious connection is thus formed between the ideas of turpitude and power, unworthiness and success, utility and dishonor.

Tocqueville captured the essence of today's attitudes. The public cannot subscribe to the view that wealth or political power has been fairly earned, that economic or political power is held by agents of the public good, and that public dollars are dispensed incorruptibly. The rage of populism, the paranoia toward and disdain of power in all its forms, recurs throughout our history. It is never far below the surface of public opinion. It again may be raising its head, and political and economic tidal waves will follow.

Putting Politics in Perspective

From the foregoing, readers might think that a revolution is in the offing, a *coup d'état* by the general public, delivering the *coup de grace* to politicians and our system of governance. But when *Monitor* examined the depth of feeling, politics did not register as a burning concern. People expressed anger and alienation, but the ethics of elected officials ranked at the bottom of a list of nine state problems, which included jobs, the environment, abortion, and education (please refer to William Rustem's analysis of issue perceptions). Perhaps people view politics in much the same way they regard teeth cleanings. They do not wake up each morning filled with anxiety about dental hygienists, but when the periodic visit rolls around, they are reminded of the less-than-pleasant encounter. At election time, people become aware of the divergence of their expectations of government from what is delivered, and disenchantment reawakens. Theoretically, democratic elections are intended to give people power over their own governance. They should be elated by feelings of control. Nowadays, however, it seems elections serve to sap public confidence in government. For many, familiarity with politics breeds contempt.

Public Sector Consultants conducted this survey of opinion among Michigan residents between October 10 and October 15, 1990. Eight hundred Michiganders were interviewed by professional interviewers from the Florence Morris Interviewing Agency of Oak Park, Michigan. Participants were chosen from throughout the state using randomly selected telephone numbers. A subsample of the total was validated to ensure that appropriate interviewing techniques were used. Technical assistance was provided by William Sederburg and Harry Moxley.

The sample was "stratified" according to sex (50 percent male and 50 percent female) and by region. This stratification assured PSC of an accurate geographic mix and that a sufficient number of males were interviewed.

A sample of 800 individuals from a population of slightly more than 9 million yields an accuracy rate of plus or minus 3.7 percent. Given the nature of statistics, 95 out of 100 samples will be accurate within the 3.7 percent range. The "sampling error" is slightly greater within subgroups based on the size of each category. PSC is convinced that this poll accurately reflects public opinion at the time of the survey.