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Poll: Support for higher sales tax up in Michigan

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Michigan residents' support rises for higher sales and state income taxes, and for cutting business taxes, goes up significantly when they're informed about the effects those changes have on the state economy, a new poll shows.

There's strong support for raising taxes on beer and wine. But support for raising the minimum wage drops.

The poll – called a deliberative poll – was conducted with 314 Michigan adults from around the state who gathered in Lansing in November. The poll is a joint project of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions and the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University with a \$770,000 grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

The three-day session is the subject of a documentary, called "Hard Times, Hard Choices," that will air on Michigan public television stations on Jan. 18.

The respondents were polled for their views on taxes, aid to the poor, alternative energy and other issues. They then received information packets on the issues and spent a day discussing them with the help of expert panelists ranging from liberal to conservative.

The participants were then polled again on the same questions.

The second poll showed that after the daylong discussions:

- Support for raising the state sales tax to an unspecified rate increased by 14 percentage points, to 51%.
- Support for raising the income tax to an undetermined level rose 18 percentage points to 45%.
- Support for cutting business taxes shot up 27 points, to 67%.
- Support for more state spending on education, health care and pensions increased 5 percentage points to 55%, even if it means raising taxes.
- Support for more unemployment benefits increased by 8 points to 53%.

The change in opinions, especially support for lower business taxes, were dramatic, said James Fishkin, of the Center for Deliberative Democracy, who led the study.

"People were willing to raise the very taxes that produce palpable changes in their lives, the income and sales taxes," Fishkin said, "and they wanted to lower taxes they feel indirectly, such as taxes on businesses."

Fishkin said Michigan is the first place in the U.S. for the elaborate survey, and the state was chosen for because it is "ground zero of the economic crisis."

He said the 314 participants represent a microcosm of Michigan, and that politicians ought to pay attention to the results.

"This can provide some cover for them to do the right thing" when it comes to cutting government services or raising taxes," Fishkin said.

A second group of 300 state residents were polled once and did not participate in the weekend sessions. Fishkin said their responses closely reflected the results of the first round of answers from the 314 who took part in the issue discussions.

The results showed that people are willing to invest time to learn about issues, said Anne Mosle, vice president of programs for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

"What we heard loud and clear was the public is willing to sacrifice, they're willing to invest, willing to pay the cost," Mosle said. "However, they demand transparency, accountability and different results."
