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Poll finds half surveyed favor tax hike

Focus group votes 51 percent to raise state tax; 36 percent of general public supports idea

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New survey results show about half of Michigan residents support increasing the state's sales or income taxes, but that's only after they give the matter a lot of thought.

In what's called a deliberative poll, more than 300 people from across the state last November participated in a three-day discussion of major issues facing Michigan.

When it was over, 51 percent of discussion participants supported increasing the sales tax. In a sample of respondents that did not participate in the discussion, only 37 percent favored increasing the tax.

Support for raising income taxes was 45 percent among discussion participants, 18 points higher than those who did not participate.

James Fishkin, director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, said the methodology used shows "what the people think if they were really thinking."

"One of the most interesting findings of the event is that after being informed and deliberating, these individuals wanted to raise taxes that impact their lives directly -- like the income and sales taxes -- and cut taxes they only see indirectly, like the business tax," Fishkin said. "If people want to raise taxes, you know they're really thinking about the benefits as well as the costs."

Results of the survey, which was sponsored by the Battle Creek-based W. K. Kellogg Foundation, were released Thursday. A documentary about the poll will air Monday on Michigan PBS television stations and later on stations around the country.

Participants in the deliberative poll also showed stronger support for making Michigan's economy greener and increasing incentives for businesses to produce environmentally friendly products and services.

The deliberation process involved 314 randomly selected participants who took part in moderated discussions on the state's economy and policies.

In some cases, the deliberations caused support for policies to decrease or change very little.

For example, support for increasing the minimum wage fell 6 percentage points, presumably because of arguments about the impact on employment, the poll report notes.

Fishkin acknowledged that getting the wider population to thoughtfully debate issues is a challenge, but he said he hoped the survey would encourage more discussion between the public and lawmakers.

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