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Fishkin: Given time, people decide

Deliberative poll finds Mich. residents will pay taxes for services

Across the country, states are struggling with declining revenues and increasing demands for services. Without the option of running budget deficits available to the federal government, they face stark choices - potential shutdowns, tax increases, employee furloughs and possible cuts in essential services.

In Michigan, a scientific sample of the entire state was surveyed about these issues and brought to a single place in Lansing for a weekend of discussion. The more than 300 residents represented the state in demographics, but even more remarkably in attitudes. Sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, "Hard Times, Hard Choices" engaged these residents in small group discussions and they were able to pose questions to policy-makers and experts.

The results of this dialogue, with survey responses before and after deliberation, were recently broadcast in a MacNeil/Lehrer Productions documentary, "By the People."

Former Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema, a Republican, was asked what it would take to get the politicians to listen to the people. His answer was instructive:

"I will respectfully disagree that the problem is not politicians not listening. I think what's happening is they're listening all the time to everybody. And the real problem is they're afraid to say 'no' to some of the people they're listening to."

Sikkema said that one party responds to intense constituencies that oppose any rise in taxes; the other party responds to intense constituencies that oppose any decrease in benefits. The result is "paralysis."

After a weekend of deliberation, the scientific sample offered a different picture of public opinion. The participants in this Deliberative Poll wanted to raise the taxes that cause them palpable pain - income (support for increases rose from 27 percent to 44 percent) and sales taxes (support for increases rose from 36 percent to 51 percent) - and they wanted to lower taxes whose effects they feel only indirectly, income taxes for business. Support for cutting income taxes for business rose dramatically by 27 points from 40 percent to 67 percent.

In one policy area after another, these Michiganders wanted to hold the line on essential services and were willing to pay for them with increased taxes. There was an increase from 50 percent to 55 percent agreeing that "the state government should spend more money on programs like education, health care and pensions even if this means increasing taxes."

Anne Mosle of the Kellogg Foundation attended the deliberations and found that, "The public is willing to sacrifice, willing to invest, willing to pay the cost. However they demand transparency, accountability and different results."

In other Deliberative Polls of this sort, politicians have found the results provide legitimacy for unpalatable solutions. They can provide "cover to do the right thing." Consulting the people does not have to mean a populism of angry voices. It can actually provide a road map to solutions.

Additional Facts

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is author of "When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation" and academic adviser to the "Hard Times, Hard Choices" documentary by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. He works at the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University.
