

# Cover Story



## Vox Populi: A report card on Michigan's local governments

In the aftermath of an unsuccessful initiative by some state policymakers to dismantle township government, MTA's Board of Directors recognized that while the debate over consolidating townships tended to focus on political and economic impacts, missing from the public policy debate was the all-important question, "What do the people of the state of Michigan want?"

Do citizens think as highly of township government as do the people elected to serve as township officials? Are Michigan's citizens of a mind that Michigan, as some pundits have tried to claim, has "too many local governments"?

To answer these questions, the MTA Board commissioned a statewide citizen survey to establish some benchmarks on the contemporary perspectives of Michigan citizens regarding the performance of township government. The survey results not only shed light on policy preferences of Michigan citizens regarding radical local government reform, the data gleaned from the survey is also being studied by the MTA Board to determine, evaluate and re-establish long-term Association goals.

The survey revealed that Michiganders do not share the lust of some policymakers to ration local democracy, and the more that

respondents know about local government, the less likely they are to support reducing the number of Michigan local governments. Coupled with data from various sources that document that consolidating local governments will not produce any great cost savings, one would think that the enthusiasm of lawmakers to attack townships would be slackened.

Currently, the Lansing rumor mill is free of any township buzz, but experienced Capitol-watchers know that no idea, misinformation or misunderstanding is ever dead with a term-limited legislature.

The MTA survey, conducted by Lansing-based Marketing Resource Group (MRG) in December 2008, polled 600 randomly selected Michigan residents on a variety of questions important to townships and other local governments. The survey sampling size results in a margin of error plus or minus 4 percent, meaning that there is high confidence that the survey reflects reality as accurately within four percentage points more or less than the survey numbers.

Let's take a look at some survey questions, and what they revealed.

## WORRIES AND HOPES

*How do Michigan residents feel about things generally?*

In a word, pretty poorly. Not surprisingly, a whopping 83 percent of Michiganders believe things statewide are on the wrong track. The pessimism is pretty widespread, but respondents in northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula were more sanguine about the Michigan condition (only 53 percent in northern Michigan and 61 percent of the Upper Peninsula declared Michigan “on the wrong track”). This may result from the higher percentage of retirees living in these areas who are less concerned with the dire Michigan economy and loss of jobs.

*And what about things in their local areas?*

The statewide malaise is reflected in a general perception that things are going in the wrong direction locally as well. Overwhelmingly, the economy, including potential loss of jobs, eclipses all other local concerns. Statewide, the local economy and jobs are the most important problems facing respondents’ local areas (78 percent), overshadowing other perennial concerns like taxes (9 percent), crime (7 percent) and roads (6 percent). Other economic-related concerns surfaced as well, including housing foreclosures, property values and the government budget, which together accounted for 14 percent of respondents’ top local worries. As these top concerns are closely linked, the survey clearly reveals that the economy is the overwhelming local concern.

### The survey revealed that Michiganders do not share the lust of some policymakers to ration local democracy, and the more that respondents know about local government, the less likely they are to support reducing the number of Michigan local governments.

In comparison with the 83 percent of Michigan residents who worry things are off-track statewide, 51 percent of the respondents feel that, in their local areas, things have also been heading down the wrong track. Detroit residents, who are most concerned about the direction of their local area (89 percent negative response), help drive a considerable amount of the local negativity, while west Michigan and the balance of Wayne County outside of Detroit are somewhat more comfortable with their local circumstances.

Senior citizens over age 65 appear to be less concerned about their local communities’ condition. There was virtually no difference in responses between township and city dwellers, but after factoring out the Detroit respondents, the data suggests that township residents are more concerned with local matters than their city counterparts. Some 42 percent of city residents (excluding Detroit residents) feel things in their local area are generally going in the wrong direction, while 52 percent of township residents feel their local area is going in the wrong direction.

*Whose fault is it?*

When addressing the poor Michigan economy, citizens split their blame between the federal government (37 percent) and state government (34 percent). Only 4 percent blame their local government (city/village or township). Northern and western Michigan tend to place more blame on the state, while Detroiters tend to blame the federal government. The Upper Peninsula blames everyone pretty equally. Disparities may reflect political affiliations—with predominantly Democratic communities blaming the Bush administration and Republican communities tending to blame the Granholm administration.

*Of the following, whom do you hold MOST responsible for the loss of good paying jobs in your area?*

| Level of Government | Statewide Total | Detroit   | West Michigan | Northern Lower Michigan | Upper Peninsula |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Federal             | 37%             | 61%       | 28%           | 20%                     | 22%             |
| State               | 34%             | 11%       | 46%           | 43%                     | 33%             |
| County              | 1%              | 3%        | 2%            | 2%                      |                 |
| <b>Local</b>        | <b>4%</b>       | <b>5%</b> | <b>4%</b>     | <b>7%</b>               | <b>6%</b>       |
| All/none            | 15%             | 21%       | 22%           | 28%                     | 33%             |

*\*22 percent of Upper Peninsula respondents blame all equally*

*Note: Other geographic area data mirrored statewide total.*

*When things go wrong, who you gonna call?*

While Michigan residents clearly do not blame local governments for the cause of the state’s economic woes, they look to local governments to be part of the solution. Which level of government—federal, state, county or local (city/village/township)—do Michiganders trust most to create a business-friendly atmosphere to attract jobs and improve the economy? Our poll responders answered the state mostly, but their local governments are a close second. The Thumb area (27 percent) is somewhat less trusting of local government, as are Detroiters. Oakland County residents split their trust among the state (36 percent), local government (22 percent) and county government (19 percent). The Upper Peninsula is more trusting of their local governments to attract jobs (50 percent), followed by Macomb County (40 percent). The Upper Peninsula is also more trusting of counties to restore jobs (17 percent) than was generally the case elsewhere.

*Which level of government do you most trust to create a business-friendly environment and improve the economy?*

| Level of Government | Statewide Response | City Residents | Township Residents |
|---------------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| State               | 36%                | 37%            | 35%                |
| <b>Local</b>        | <b>31%</b>         | <b>30%</b>     | <b>32%</b>         |
| County              | 12%                | 10%            | 13%                |
| Federal             | 7%                 | 7%             | 8%                 |
| None                | 8%                 | 8%             | 8%                 |
| Don’t know          | 7%                 | 8%             | 5%                 |



### Vox Populi: How well do local governments serve Michigan? *(Continued from page 19)*

*That darn property tax.*

An article in the February 2009 issue of *Governing* magazine entitled “A Break in the Levy,” focusing on declining property tax revenues nationwide, points out that “voters may rant about the property tax—it ranks first on the list of most-hated levies.” Michigan residents do not disappoint in joining property taxpayers nationwide in complaining that property taxes are “too high.” Among the surprising findings in the MTA survey is that Macomb County, where strong anti-tax sentiment is quite organized and vocal, is where the public seems most comfortable with their levies. Not surprising, Detroit ranks high in residents believing that property taxes are too high. In spite of township levies statewide being considerably less than levies in cities, there was virtually no difference between respondents living in townships compared to cities in terms of their perceptions as to whether property taxes are too high or too low.

*Do you approve or disapprove of the way your local government is handling its job?*

It should be gratifying to local government officials—and instructive to policymakers at the state and federal level—that Michigan residents give local government boards, councils and commissions high marks for the jobs they do (see Figure 1). Even in a time of overall cynicism toward government officials, an impressive 66 percent of all respondents gave their local government overall approval scores, compared to only 22 percent who disapprove.

Township boards generally scored somewhat higher than city councils and commissions statewide, but once the hypercriti-

cal, cynical Detroit responses are backed out, township and city governing boards are pretty much held in the same high regard. Local governments received the highest scores in the communities surrounding Detroit, perhaps because the recent Detroit debacle makes other governments appear downright saintly. Yet on the other hand, communities in the Detroit Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) score a bit lower than the state average. The data does not disclose what might drive those numbers down, and in fact, resident displeasure in one or two large entities could account for the difference.

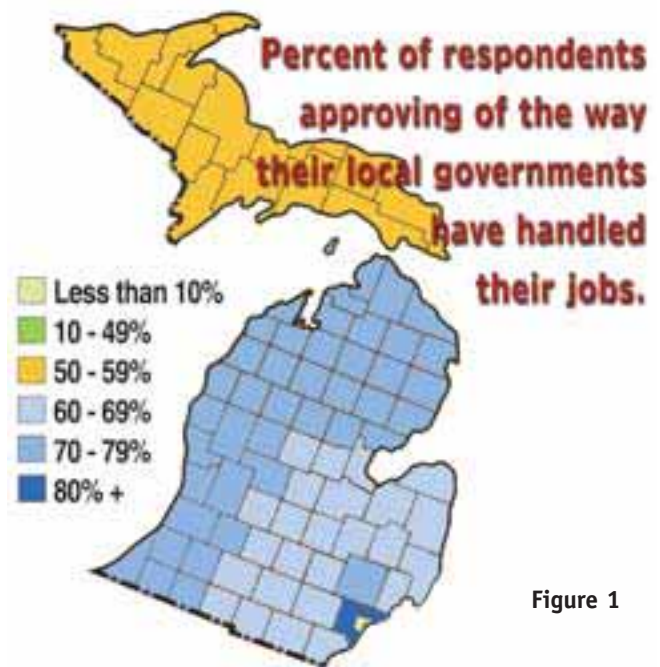
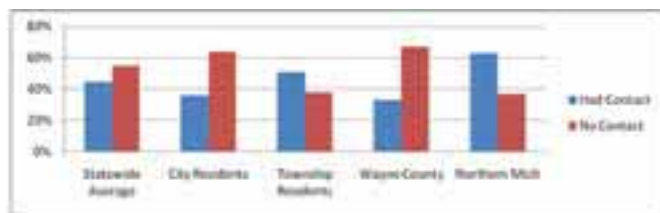


Figure 1

Voters who identify themselves as Republicans tend to give their local governments a bit higher scores than do those who identify themselves as Democrats, with Independents holding close to the statewide average responses. Homeowners more strongly approve of their local governing boards than do renters, and there is a strong correlation between income levels and approval for local governing bodies.

## TRUST & RESPECT

*Have you ever contacted or visited with any of your local government officials with an idea, question or concern?*



*When you contacted your local government officials, did they or their staff:*

- quickly identify the problem or issue?
- appear knowledgeable and competent?
- help you understand the cause and/or solution to your problem or issue?
- handle your problem or issue with courtesy and professionalism?
- speak to you or respond quickly and handle your issue promptly?

Township residents were much more likely to have contact with their local government officials than was the case for city residents. Some 51 percent of township residents reported contacting their township officials, while only 36 percent of city residents had direct interaction with their local officials, thus illustrating a primary value of grassroots government. In contrast, 19 percent of all respondents had contact with county officials, 24 percent with state officials and 11 percent with federal officials. These numbers did not vary much between township and city residents.

Overall, respondents indicated very favorable reaction to their interactions with local government (see Figure 2). At 62 percent, townships again scored generally higher than cities (55 percent) but the responses are not significantly different when Detroit scores are eliminated (65 percent). Townships scored somewhat higher in the category of explaining the causes or solutions to their problems, and townships also scored a bit higher in having officials and staff who were knowledgeable and confident. Cities and townships had identical scores in courtesy and professionalism.

When we asked respondents to compare their experience with county, state or federal government officials with their experiences with local officials, 36 percent said the contact with local government officials was a better experience, and these numbers were the same for city and township respondents.

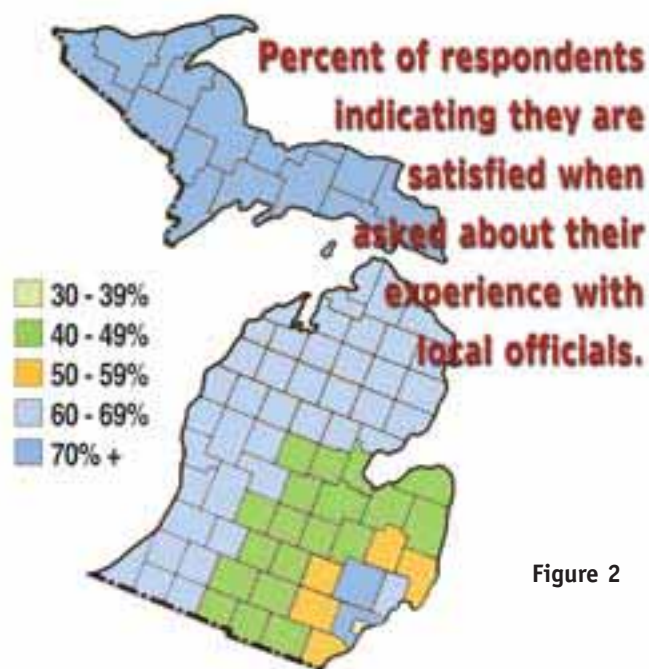


Figure 2

Fifty-seven percent of the city respondents said the experience was the same, while 41 percent of the township respondents reported that the experience was the same.

*Which level of government do you generally trust and respect most?*

Democracy flounders when there is a lack of trust and respect of citizens toward their government institutions. In terms of which level of government is most trusted and respected, our polling numbers mirror those of other polls that have posed this question. Consistently, local government scores the highest.

Statewide, local government is the most trusted and respected by 47 percent of the respondents; counties follow with 11 percent, then the state with 10 percent and the federal government at 7 percent. Township government again scores much higher than cities, but controlling for the Detroit effect narrows the margin to 51 percent for townships and 47 percent for cities. ▶

Which level of government would you trust most to handle each of the following:

- A: Creating a business-friendly atmosphere to attract jobs and improve the economy
- B: Providing valuable services that give you a strong return on your tax dollars
- C: Being responsive to your family's needs and concerns
- D: Having officials and staff who are helpful and well respected by the community
- E: Keeping your family safe
- F: Being fiscally responsible with your tax dollars
- G: Keeping a high standard of ethics
- H: Providing a great quality of life for residents in our community

| Level of Government | A          | B          | C          | D          | E          | F          | G          | H          |
|---------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| State               | 36%        | 23%        | 13%        | 12%        | 10%        | 17%        | 13%        | 11%        |
| <b>Local</b>        | <b>31%</b> | <b>35%</b> | <b>54%</b> | <b>58%</b> | <b>56%</b> | <b>39%</b> | <b>43%</b> | <b>61%</b> |
| County              | 12%        | 12%        | 9%         | 12%        | 12%        | 9%         | 8%         | 14%        |
| Federal             | 7%         | 13%        | 9%         | 5%         | 10%        | 11%        | 13%        | 3%         |
| None                | 8%         | 9%         | 10%        | 6%         | 7%         | 15%        | 12%        | 7%         |
| Don't know          | 7%         | 8%         | 6%         | 8%         | 4%         | 8%         | 12%        | 5%         |

With the exception of one responsibility—creating a business-friendly atmosphere to attract jobs and improve the economy—respondents overwhelmingly give their highest level of trust to their local officials. The state nudges out local government, 36 percent to 31 percent as most trustworthy to fix economic woes.

There were no statistical differences between cities and townships regarding these responsibilities, except for B, D and E, shown below:

**B.**

| Level of Government | Statewide Responses | City Responses | Township Responses |
|---------------------|---------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| State               | 23%                 | 19%            | 26%                |
| <b>Local</b>        | <b>35%</b>          | <b>40%</b>     | <b>32%</b>         |
| County              | 12%                 | 10%            | 14%                |
| Federal             | 13%                 | 17%            | 11%                |
| None                | 9%                  | 7%             | 9%                 |
| Don't know          | 8%                  | 8%             | 8%                 |

**D.**

| Level of Government | Statewide Responses | City Responses | Township Responses | City Responses w/o Detroit |
|---------------------|---------------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
| State               | 12%                 | 14%            | 10%                | 13%                        |
| <b>Local</b>        | <b>58%</b>          | <b>59%</b>     | <b>57%</b>         | <b>64%</b>                 |
| County              | 12%                 | 7%             | 15%                | 7%                         |
| Federal             | 5%                  | 6%             | 3%                 | 6%                         |
| None                | 6%                  | 5%             | 6%                 | 5%                         |
| Don't know          | 8%                  | 7%             | 6%                 | 7%                         |

**E.**

| Level of Government | Statewide Responses | City Responses | Township Responses |
|---------------------|---------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| State               | 10%                 | 7%             | 12%                |
| <b>Local</b>        | <b>56%</b>          | <b>63%</b>     | <b>52%</b>         |
| County              | 12%                 | 6%             | 16%                |
| Federal             | 10%                 | 12%            | 9%                 |
| None                | 7%                  | 7%             | 7%                 |
| Don't know          | 4%                  | 5%             | 4%                 |

After factoring out Detroit, there was no difference between city responses and township responses except for three of the queried responsibilities where township respondents still give their local government higher trust scores than any other level of government, but not as high as the scores city residents give their local governments. Township respondents also tend to score their counties higher in these categories than do city residents.

When it comes to providing valuable services that give a strong return on their tax dollars, city residents ranked local government first at 40 percent, while township residents scored local government first at 32 percent. The expanding prevalent and expanding township practice of intergovernmental contracting and creation of joint authorities could account for a disconnect in the minds of township residents between the full scope of services received for their tax dollars. Smaller governments tend to engage in intergovernmental contracting and joint services more than do the larger entities, which may account for township residents not fully recognizing the scope of services they receive. Township officials might need to do a better job educating their constituents on the scope of services that the township provides. City residents also scored the federal government higher (17 percent scored the feds first) than did township residents (11 percent) regarding trust to provide valuable services that provide good value for their tax dollars.

City residents give their local governments higher marks, compared to township residents, for having officials and staff who are helpful and respected in the community (64 percent for cities, excluding Detroit, compared to 57 percent) for townships. Comparably less enthusiasm for local government having helpful and respected officials and staff was reported in the tri-cities, which includes many suburban and rural townships, the Thumb areas as well as northern lower Michigan, geographic areas that are also dominated by township governments. A scandal involving township officials in northern Michigan may have directly impacted on the survey results, while the lower scores in the other areas are not easily explained. Perhaps the part-time nature of smaller townships reduced the perception of some respondents as to how helpful are their township officials.

City respondents report higher trust in local government to keep their families safe (63 percent of city residents ranked local government first, while 52 percent of township residents ranked local government first). The comparably lower scores likely reflects fewer township police departments compared to city-run law enforcement agencies. Compounding the perception could also be the prevalence of townships contracting with sheriff departments; these arrangements are often poorly recognized as a township service. In areas where there is less need for a strong law enforcement presence, basic police protection is handled at the county and state level rather than by local government, and this arrangement is overwhelmingly the case in rural townships. The phrasing of the question may have caused respondents to focus on police protection and diminished the connection to township-run fire departments as a component of keeping one's family safe.



## Vox Populi: Does Michigan Have Too Much Local Democracy?

*Government “fragmentation” a figment of imagination?*

With political pressure on state policymakers to reform government, a whisper campaign emerged a couple of years ago that townships could be the sacrificial lambs on the government reform alter. The irony was lost on many that townships embody the principles of limited government often espoused by those who were most stridently demanding reform. Nonetheless, the ensuing policy debate highlighted two things that township critics had overlooked: first, that township officials were not going to take undue criticism laying down, and secondly, that several academic studies refuted the simplistic notion that creating bigger local governments through consolidation would save a ton of money.

After a moderately public debate, what does the Michigan citizenry think about getting rid of local governments? Without first providing any background information or policy arguments, a plurality of respondents (42 percent) thought that the current number of local governments was “about right” (see Figure 3). Forty percent thought there were too many. After the respondents were given information about the number of Michigan residents and the number of Michigan local governments, the number of respondents holding to the view that there are too many local governments shrank to 30 percent. Of those who thought there are too many governments, there was a virtual tie between perceptions that there are too many cities compared to townships. Most significant, the number of respondents targeting cities, townships or counties for elimination was virtually nil. Out of the entire survey, only 6 percent

avored reducing the number of townships. About half of the respondents who thought there are too many governments could not identify a specific type of local government to reduce in number. Southeast Michigan, where there is allegedly the highest incidence of local government “fragmentation,” was the geographic area where respondents were most likely to consider the current number of local governments “about right.” The tri-cities area and Thumb, along with mid-Michigan, were more critical of the current number of local governments.

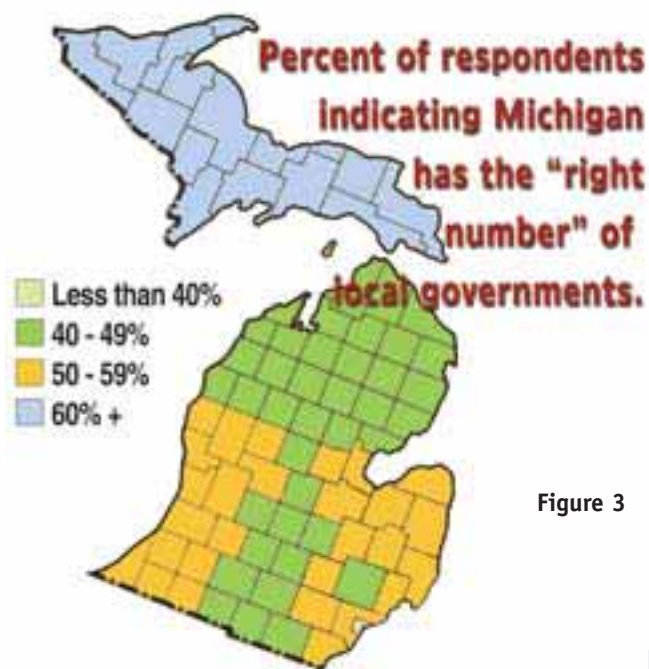


Figure 3

Given Michigan's population and the actual number of local governments, would you say that there are too many, too few or about the right number of local units of government in Michigan?

| Responses                       | Statewide Percent |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| Too many local governments      | 33%               |
| Too few local governments       | 4%                |
| <b>About the right amount</b>   | <b>52%</b>        |
| Don't know or refused to answer | 14%               |

Would you support or oppose a proposal to eliminate township governments and assign all duties to county governments? When respondents were asked if they would support eliminating townships and transferring all duties to the counties, only 30 percent expressed support (see chart 1). When given a number of reasons why eliminating townships is a bad idea, the support dropped to 18 percent (see chart 2).

### “Eliminate Townships” No Background Information



Chart 1

### “Eliminate Townships” After Hearing Impacts

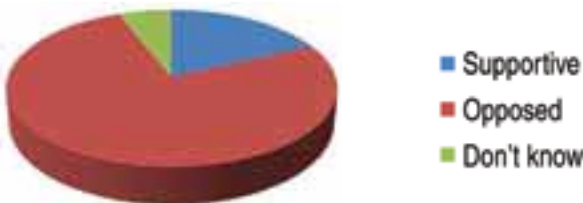


Chart 2

Is a Constitutional Convention on the horizon? In 2010, Michigan voters will be asked to authorize a Constitutional Convention. The convening of a Constitutional Convention is of interest to township government because the entire structure of Michigan state and local government is once again open for debate. Since the adoption of the current Michigan Constitution in 1963, voters have twice overwhelmingly turned down the proposal to write a new constitution.

There are a number of Lansing pundits who think Michigan is overdue for another Constitutional Convention to address what they believe are a number of provisions that they believe ill-serve the state. At the last Constitutional Convention, the continuation of township government was a particularly contentious issue, and if a “Con-Con” is convened following the 2010 election, township government would likely again be debated.

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Without prompting responses with the various reasons frequently suggested to convene a Con-Con, respondents were asked if the election were held today, would they support a ballot question to convene a Constitutional Convention. With no effort to “push” a particular response, “no” received 45 percent of the responses while “yes” was favored by 38 percent. If Michigan’s economic condition continues to deteriorate and government dysfunction appears to contribute to the cause (or stymie recovery), support for a Con-Con could grow.

On the other hand, if Michigan voters look at the price tag for a Constitutional Convention, which some estimate to be close to \$100 million, the sticker-shock could sufficiently dissuade voters from approving a Con-Con. Illinois voters recently turned down a Con-Con proposal in their state, in part due to the estimated \$100 million price tag, and Michigan’s electorate could follow suit.

*This telephone survey was conducted among a random sampling of 600 registered voters in Michigan. The statistical margin of error is plus or minus 4.1 percent, using a 95 percent degree of confidence. The sample was stratified by voter turnout in Michigan to represent the current voting population in the state. Conducted between Dec. 1 and Dec. 6, 2008, by Lansing-based Marketing Resource Group, the survey consisted of 600 eight- to 10-minute telephone interviews.*

*To read the poll in its entirety, along with the aggregate responses, visit MTA’s “White Papers and Resources” Web page at [www.michigantownships.org/whitepapers.asp](http://www.michigantownships.org/whitepapers.asp).*

## INTERPRETING VOX POPULI

MTA has been saying for years that people value and trust government that is closest to them, and our poll strongly supports the conclusion that, while the 21st century may be different in many ways from the last millennium, other levels of government still cannot begin to approach the levels of trust and respect given to local government. In fact, compared to other research, the state and federal government continue to fall in terms of respect and trust. In their haste to check off the “reformed government” box on their term-limited to-do list, policymakers need to pay close attention to what the people are saying.

Ignoring the voice of the people is no way to restore trust and respect, as much needed by all levels of government—even in these challenging times—as more cash. But government cannot expect more cash unless it restores trust and respect from those holding the purse.

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**Larry Merrill,**  
MTA Executive Director

