

# WISCONSIN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

SUNDAY, December 16, 2007

## **WISCONSIN RESIDENTS VERY DISILLUSIONED WITH THEIR STATE GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS**

*They Are Very Pessimistic About the Direction of the State and the State's Economy  
A Large Majority Now View Themselves as Political Independents and Strongly Favor Term  
Limits for State Elected Officials*

The views of Wisconsin residents toward their state and political establishments are reaching all time lows in Wisconsin Policy Research Institute (WPRI) polling. Only 11% of Wisconsin residents believe the state's economy will improve over the next year, while just 19% believe their family's economic situation will improve in the upcoming year. Only 34% believe that the state is heading the right direction, while 56% believe it is on the wrong track.

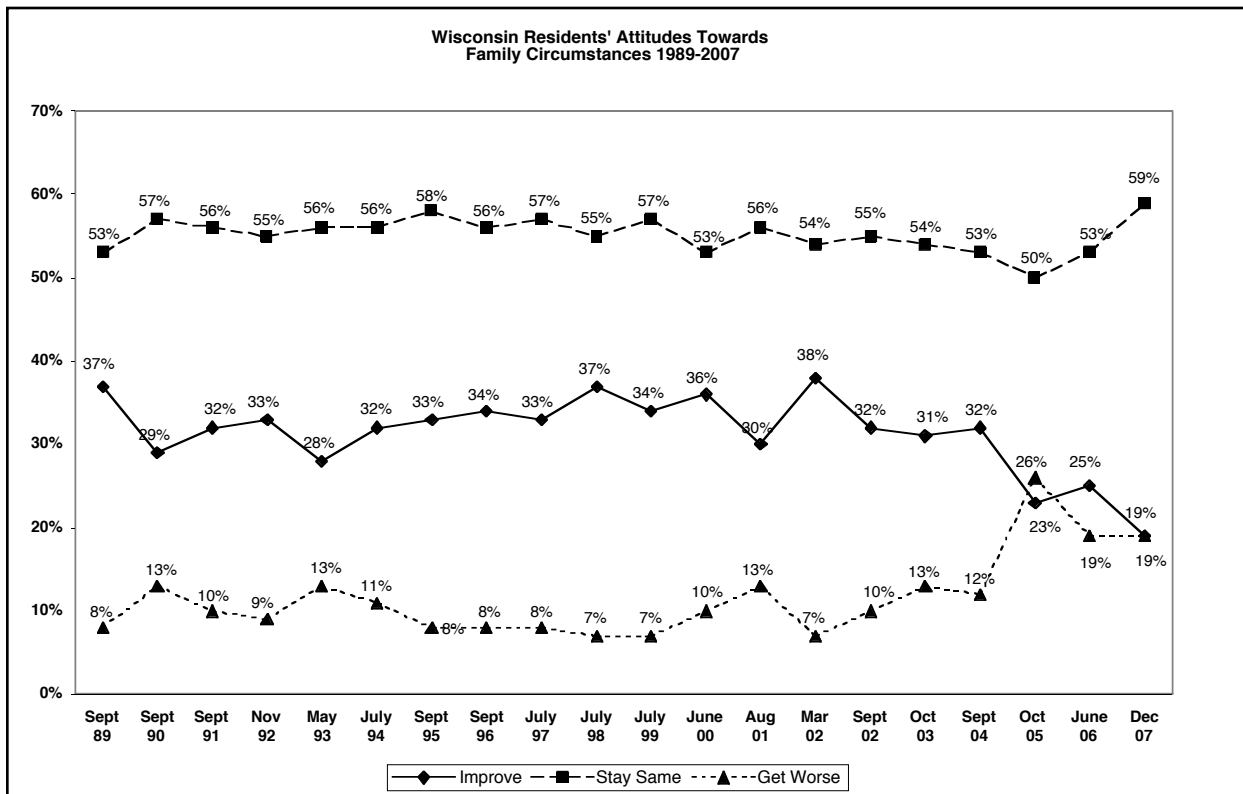
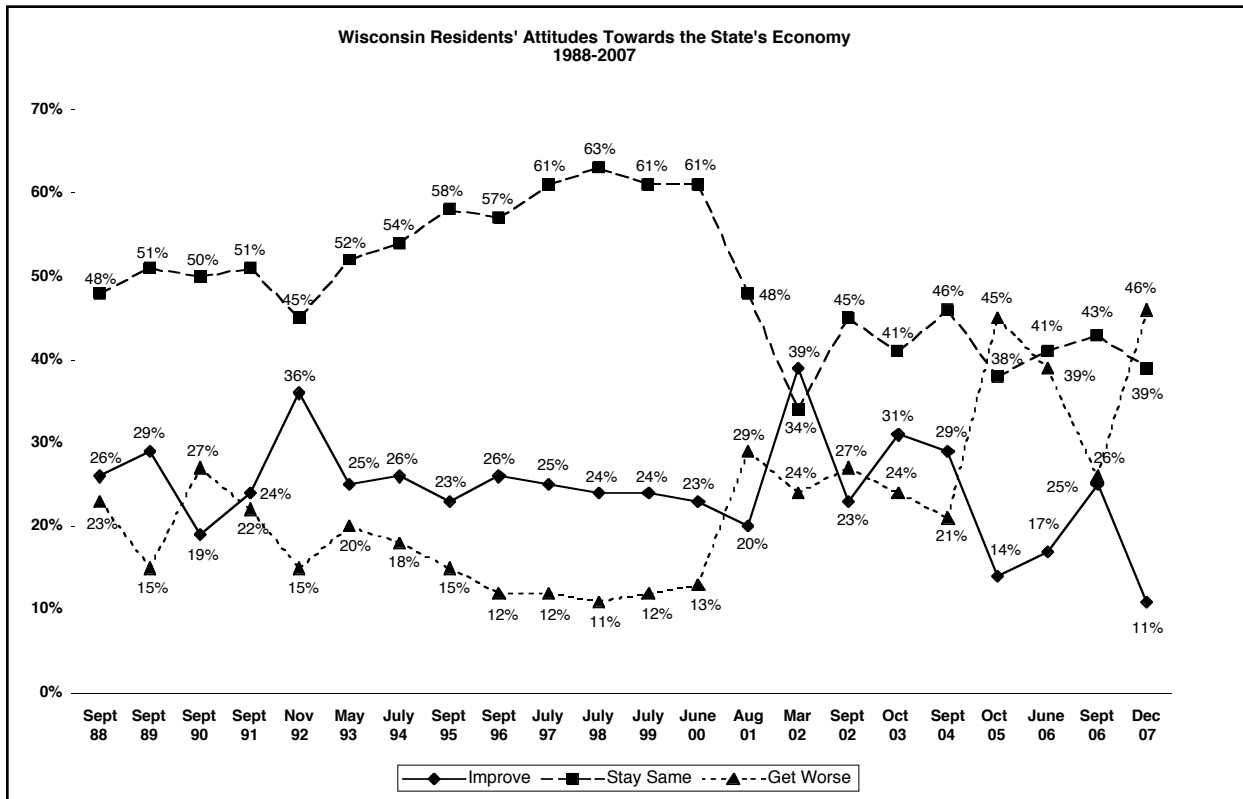
Politically things are even worse: only 30% have a favorable view of George Bush, while just 41% have a positive view of Governor Jim Doyle. These numbers are actually high when one considers survey respondents views on the ethical make up of state government. Only 2% believe they can trust state government to do what is right almost all the time. Just 6% believe that the ethics of the state legislature have gotten better over the last decade. Just 12% believe that voters have the power to determine what their state government spends, 82% believe that it is lobbying groups. Only 7% believe the ethics of state government have gotten better during the last ten years.

Politically 40% of Wisconsin residents now view themselves as Independents, significantly above the 29% who consider themselves Democrats and the 25% who consider themselves Republican. An overwhelming 72% of Wisconsin residents now favor a constitutional change to limit all state elected officials to no more than eight years in office. These are the key findings from the most recent survey of 600 Wisconsin residents conducted by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, Inc. and Diversified Research between December 2 and 3, 2007.

### ***The State's Economy***

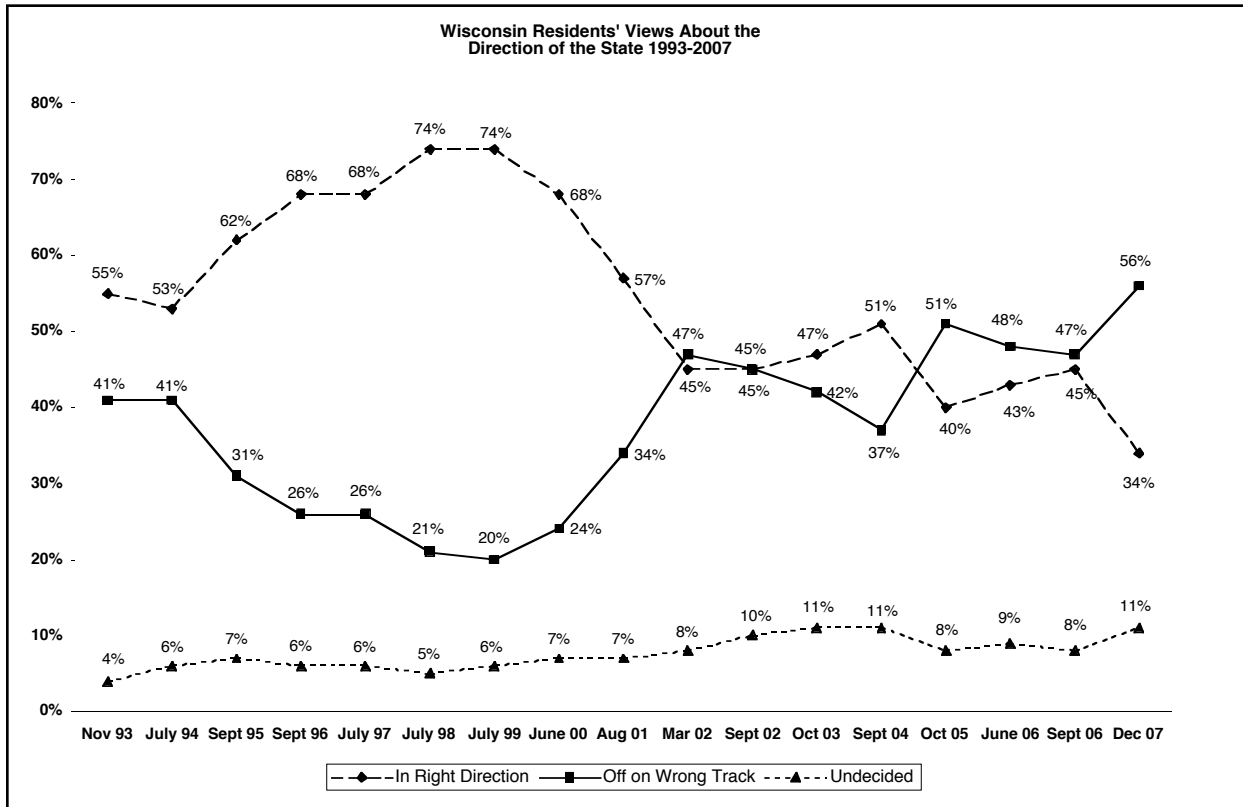
Only 11% of Wisconsin's residents thought that the state's economy would improve over the next year, while 46% said that it would get worse. These are the lowest results in the twenty years WPRI has been polling the state of Wisconsin. Pessimism was greatest in Green Bay, La Crosse/Eau Claire and the Racine/Kenosha area where only 6% of the respondents said the economy would improve, while in Madison only 8% thought the state's economy would improve. Ideologically only 8% of Liberals thought the economy would improve, only 5% of Blacks were optimistic and, perhaps the most startling number, only 8% of women were optimistic about the state's economy improving over the next year compared to 14% of male respondents. Respondent's concerns for their own family economic circumstances over the next year were only slightly better with 19% thinking their family would improve, while 19% thought it

would get worse. These are some of the lowest numbers in twenty years of tracking this poll question. It was lowest in Madison where only 10% were optimistic. In Racine/Kenosha optimism was at 13% and in La Crosse 14%. There was a large split between males and females; only 15% of women thought their family's economic situation would improve over the next year compared to 24% of men.



**Direction of the State**

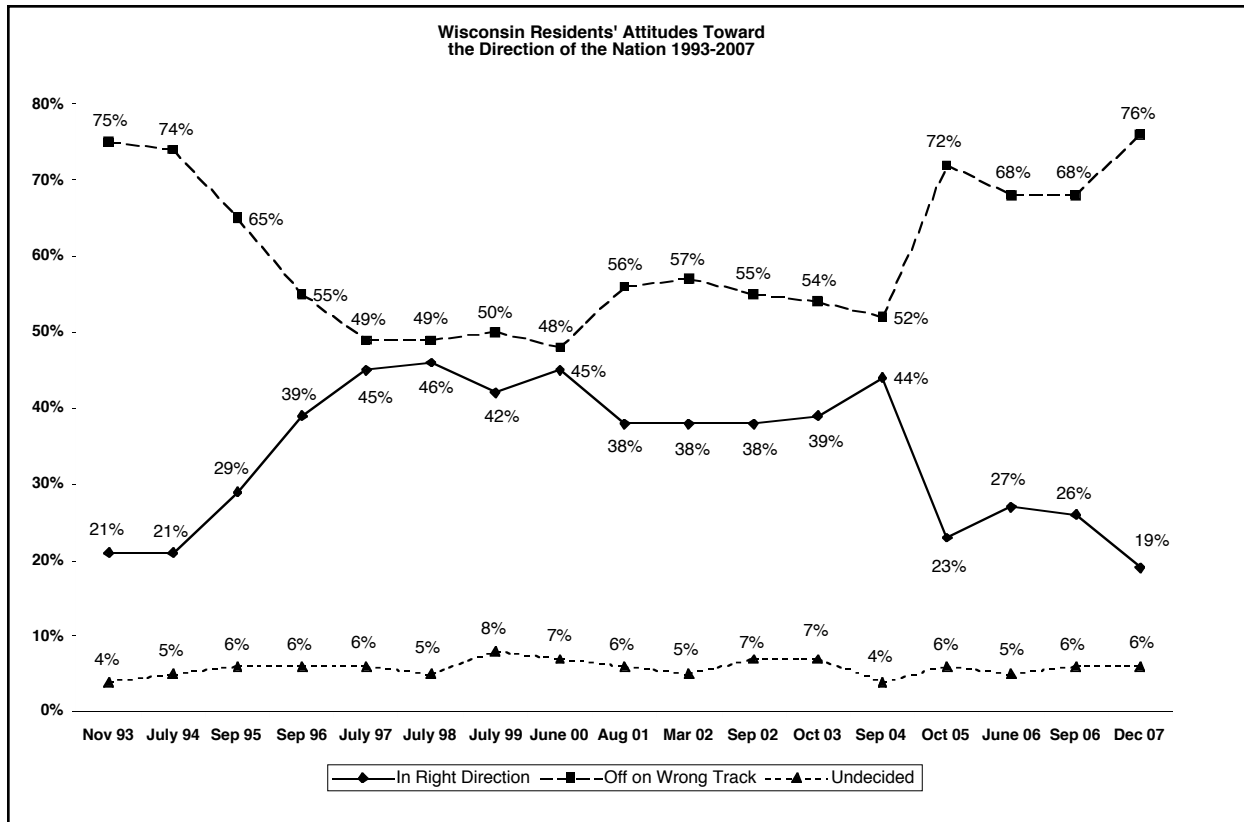
Thirty-four percent of Wisconsin residents believe the state is going in the right direction, while 56% believe it has gotten off on the wrong track. While these numbers are very bad news for the state, they are actually better than Wisconsinites' views about the country. Only 19% thought the country was going in the right direction and 76% thought it was on the wrong track. The Wisconsin right direction numbers are interesting because the most pessimistic people live in the city of Milwaukee where only 22% thought the state was going in the right direction while in the Milwaukee suburbs only 18% thought the state was going in the right direction. The wrong track in Milwaukee was 76% and it was 74% in the Milwaukee suburbs. There was almost no demographic group that thought the state was going in the right direction. It is not surprising that politically the President and the Governor also did not do well in the survey. George Bush's political standing is at an all time low in Wisconsin, only 30% of our respondents have a favorable view of him, while 61% have an unfavorable view. These are the lowest numbers we have ever recorded on the President going back to July 1999. Jim Doyle's favorability is at 41%, while his unfavorables are at 37%. Clearly these are much better numbers than those of President Bush, but they are hardly awe-inspiring.



**View of State Government and State Politics**

We asked one question about state spending. Did respondents think state government spent too much, too little, or just about the right amount of tax dollars? 62% thought they spent too much, only 11% thought they spent too little, and 17% said they thought they spent the right amount. We then asked whether or not they thought Wisconsin taxpayers received good value for the state taxes they pay. 33% thought they received a good value, while 55% thought they received a poor value.

We then asked who had the most power over state government spending? 82% said lobbying groups have the most power to determine what state government spends while only 12% said voters have the most power to determine state spending.



**RESIDENTS' VIEWS OF MAJOR PUBLIC FIGURES 1993-2007**

	May 1993	Nov 1993	Sept 1995	Sept 1996	July 1997	July 1998	July 1999	June 2000	Aug 2001	March 2002	Sept 2002	Oct 2003	Sept 2004	Oct 2005	June 2006	Sept 2006	Dec 2007
<b>George W. Bush</b>																	
Favorable	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	56%	50%	50%	75%	59%	50%	53%	43%	37%	40%	30%
Unfavorable	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	22%	36%	43%	20%	35%	45%	42%	51%	59%	51%	61%
Neutral/Did Not Recognize Name	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	22%	14%	7%	5%	6%	4%	4%	6%	4%	9%	8%
<b>Jim Doyle</b>																	
Favorable	30%	29%	37%	29%	35%	40%	36%	37%	33%	32%	41%	45%	46%	46%	44%	41%	41%
Unfavorable	11%	10%	18%	17%	17%	12%	13%	15%	16%	20%	28%	32%	33%	38%	38%	41%	37%
Neutral/Did Not Recognize Name	59%	61%	45%	54%	48%	48%	51%	48%	51%	48%	31%	22%	21%	16%	17%	18%	21%

N.A.: Not asked

We also asked specific questions about residents felt about the ethics in state government and politics. The question was asked whether residents thought the standard of ethics in Wisconsin state government had gotten better, worse or stayed the same in the last ten years. Only 7% thought it had gotten better, 50% thought it was worse and 38% thought it had stayed the same. We then asked whether the standard of ethics of the members of the state legislature had changed over the last decade. Only 6% thought the standard of ethics of members of the state legislature had gotten better, 44% thought it had gotten worse and 43% thought it had stayed about the same. We then asked respondents whose interests they thought their elected officials represented the most – their interests, special interests or the politicians own interests. Only 10% thought that their elected officials represented the voters’ interests; 43% thought they represented special interests and 42% thought they represented the elected officials interests.

**RESIDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS LOCAL SPENDING AND TAXES**

	Jan 1988	Sept 1988	Jan 1989	Sept 1990	Sept 1991	Jan 1992	Nov 1992	May 1993	Aug 2001	March 2002	Oct 2003	Sept 2004	Dec 2007
<b>State Government Spending of Tax Dollars</b>													
Too Much	53%	53%	52%	47%	N.A.	59%	49%	N.A.	54%	59%	N.A.	59%	62%
About Right	31%	29%	28%	37%	N.A.	21%	27%	N.A.	28%	24%	N.A.	28%	17%
Too Little	6%	5%	7%	7%	N.A.	8%	8%	N.A.	7%	8%	N.A.	6%	11%
<b>Value Received by Wisconsin Taxpayers for State Taxes</b>													
Good Value	N.A.	N.A.	46%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	33%
Poor Value	N.A.	N.A.	41%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	55%
Neither	N.A.	N.A.	7%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	7%
Don't Know	N.A.	N.A.	6%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	5%

N.A.: Not asked.

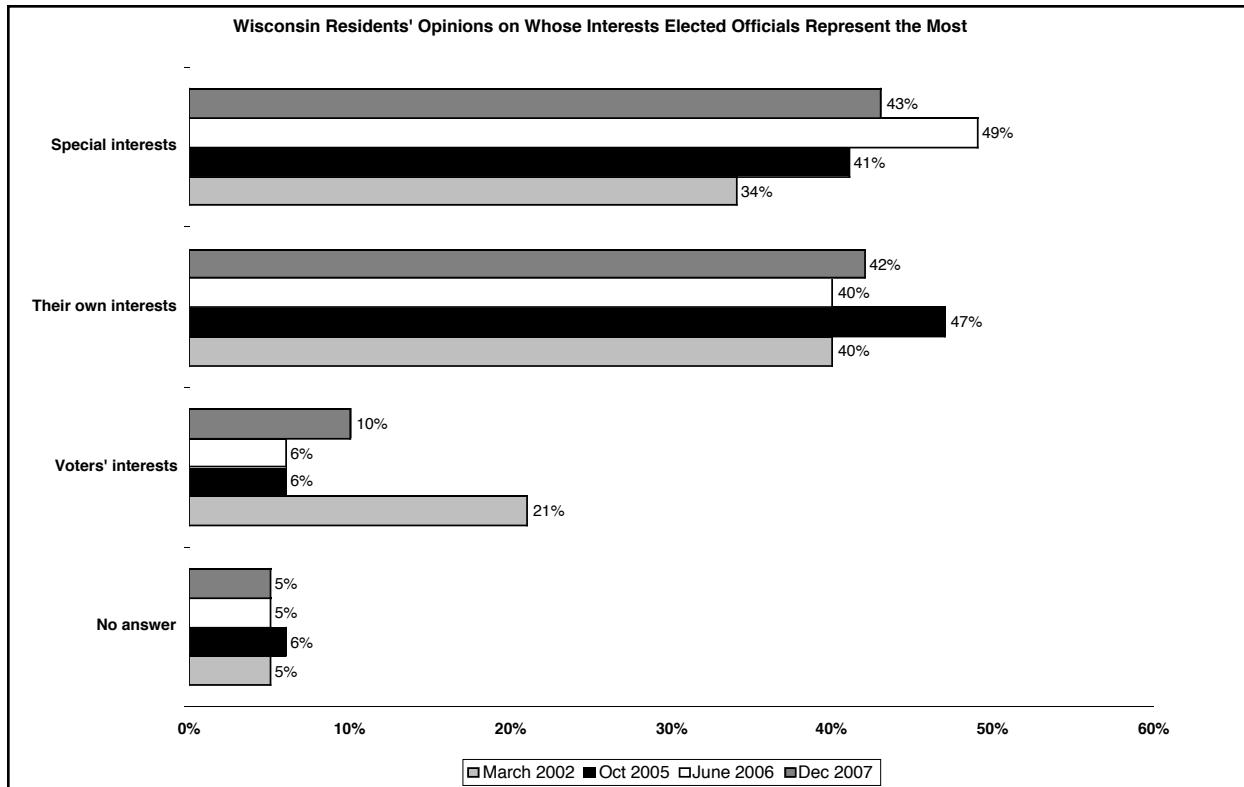
**ATTITUDE TOWARD STATE GOVERNMENT, 1990-2007**

	Sept 1990	Jan 1991	Nov 1991	Nov 1993	Sept 2002	June 2006	Dec 2007
<b>Who Has the Most Power to Determine What the State Government Spends?</b>							
Voters	17%	17%	19%	17%	18%	12%	12%
Lobbying Groups	77%	79%	77%	79%	75%	81%	82%
<b>How Much of the Time Can You Trust State Government to do What is Right?</b>							
Just About Always	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	3%	2%	3%	2%
Most of the Time	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	34%	35%	23%	24%
Only Some of the Time	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	62%	61%	74%	70%

N.A. means question not asked in that year.

**OPINION ABOUT ETHICS OF POLITICIANS IN STATE, 1991-2007**

In Last Ten Years, Standards of Ethics Has. . . .	Jan 1991	Sept 1991	May 1993	March 2002	October 2005	June 2006	Dec 2007
<b>Wisconsin State Government</b>							
Gotten Better	9%	12%	3%	5%	9%	5%	7%
Gotten Worse	31%	30%	29%	29%	46%	51%	50%
Stayed the Same	56%	55%	56%	59%	40%	40%	38%
<b>Members of the Wisconsin Legislature</b>							
Gotten Better	10%	10%	6%	7%	5%	5%	6%
Gotten Worse	25%	23%	18%	18%	42%	52%	44%
Stayed the Same	59%	61%	60%	67%	46%	35%	43%

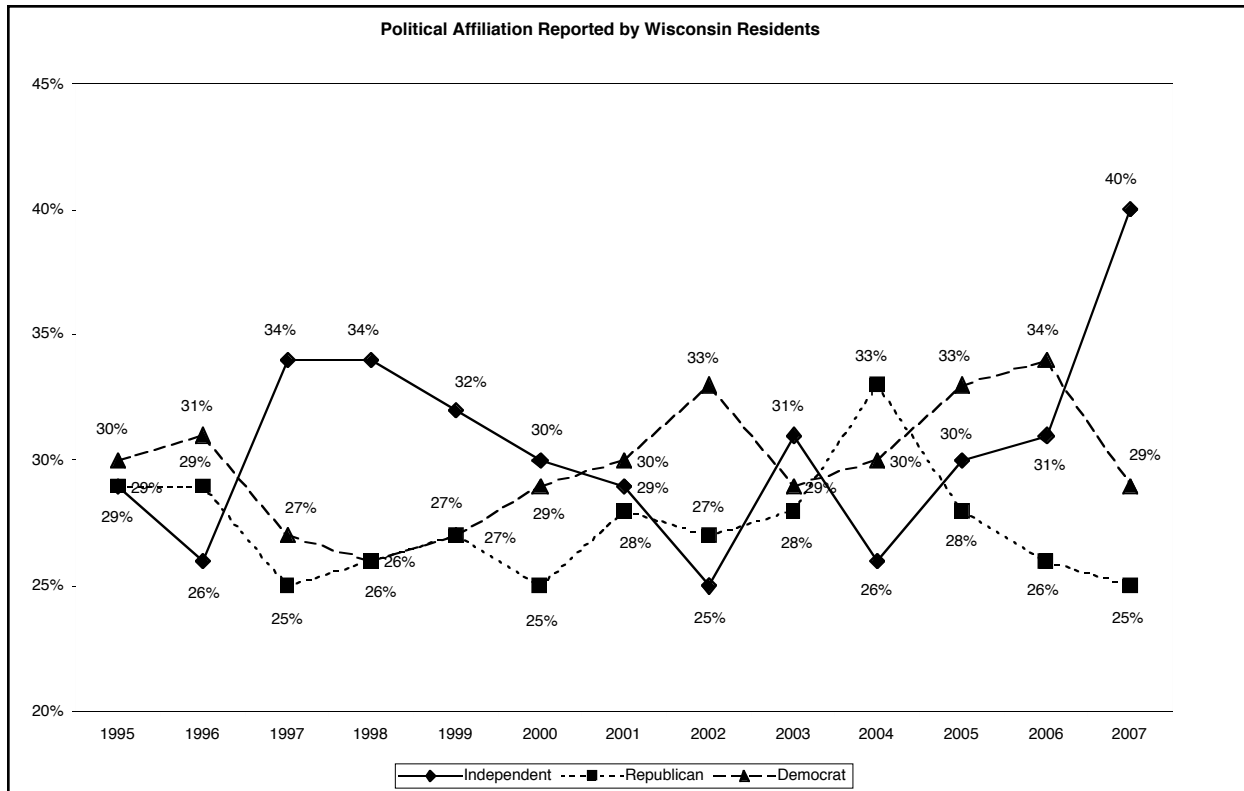


Finally we asked how much of the time do you think you can trust state government to do what is right – just about always, most of the time or only some of the time? Only 2% of the respondents to this survey thought that their state government would do what is right just about always. 24% said most of the time, while 70% said only some of the time.

***Political Identification***

One of the questions asked since 1995 is whether survey respondents identify themselves as a Republican, a Democrat or an Independent. In this survey 40% said they identified themselves as an Independent, 29% said Democrat and 25% said Republican. Since WPRI began tracking political identification these are the highest numbers for Independents. Demographics were very instructive with some interesting splits. In the Kenosha/Racine area 55% of respondents describe themselves as Independent as did 47% of those living in the city of Milwaukee. In the Madison area, as well as out-state Wisconsin, 44% also said they were Independent. The only area of the state where Independents trailed the two parties was in La Crosse/Eau Claire where only 20% said they were Independents. Age-wise there were some interesting groupings. Among young people between 18 and 24, 50% said they considered themselves Independent, while among senior citizens 65 or older 42% said they considered themselves Independent. That was a remarkable change considering that senior citizens are usually not thought of as Independents, but rather as traditional members of either the Republican or Democratic Party. Among various religious groups, 43% of Protestants who responded to the question, as opposed to 35% of Catholics, said that they were Independents. One of the more important parts of the demographic profile was gender – 45% of males said that they now considered themselves Independent while 36% of females considered themselves Independent. However, among females 35% said they were Democrats and 22% said they were Republicans, so that Independents still outnumbered each party among women.

In the twelve years WPRI has been tracking this question in Wisconsin this is the first time that Independents have been higher than either political party, and it is substantially higher as the attached chart demonstrates.

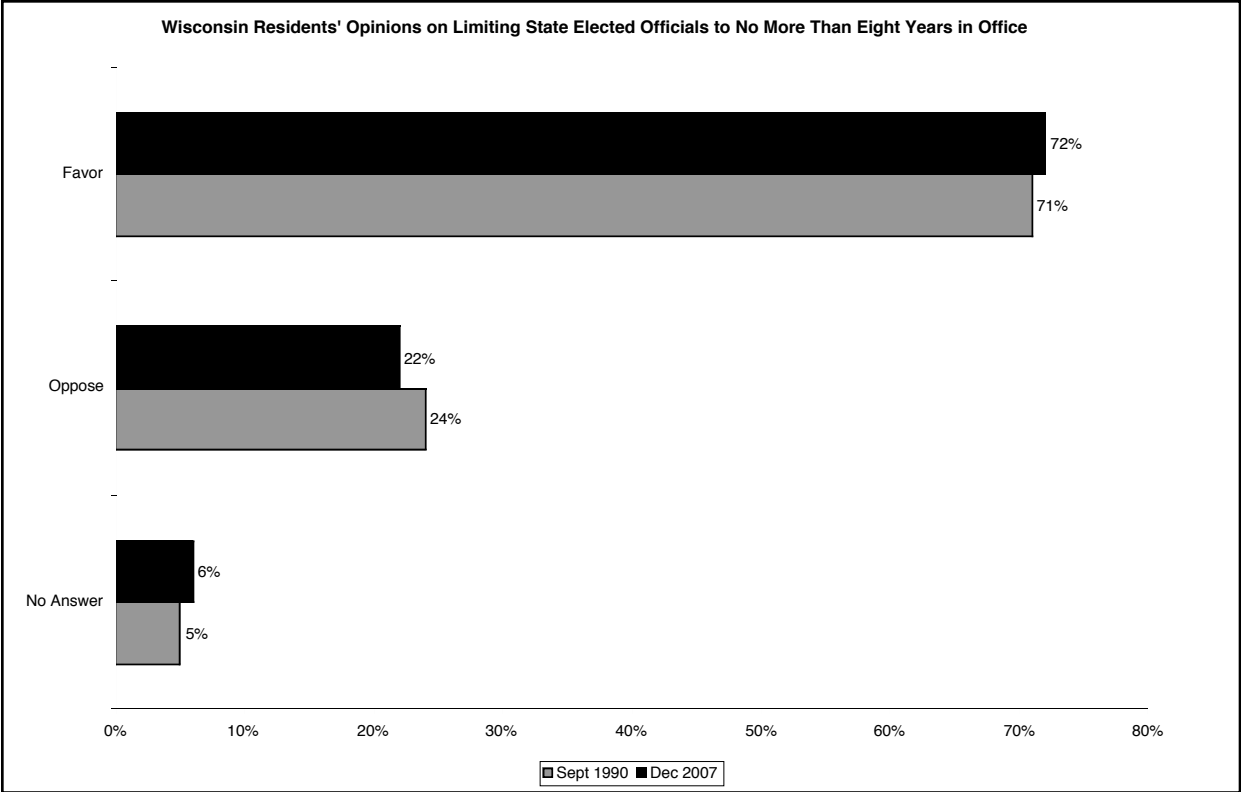


### ***Term Limits***

Finally we asked residents whether they would favor a state constitutional amendment to limit state elected officials to no more than eight years in office. The result was 72% favored this idea while only 22% opposed it. There was no demographic group in the state that did not strongly favor some sort of term limits on our elected officials. There was even support from Liberals, with 58% versus 38% opposing, and Democrats where 66% favored the idea while 38% opposed it. This question was last asked in September 1990 with almost the exact same results. In the 1990 survey 71% favored limiting elected officials to no more than eight years in office and only 24% opposed it. This may be an idea whose time has come.

### ***Summary***

There is little doubt in this poll that something extraordinary is happening in Wisconsin. Years of political neglect by their elected officials are beginning to have a serious toll on the confidence of Wisconsin residents in elected officials and their state government. The lack of optimism is seen in all aspects of life in Wisconsin today, whether it is the state's economy, the ethics of state government and elected officials or the dominance of lobbying in the political process. Wisconsin residents are extremely unhappy and becoming more and more disconnected from their government and the state's politics. The fact that 40% of Wisconsinites identify themselves as political Independents would have been unheard of five years ago. They now see where term limits could be one way of dealing with politicians who seem to have little interest in what their constituents really want or need. The issues of lobbying, state ethics and the state's economy has never been more on the mind of Wisconsin residents. It would not be surprising if, in 2008, Wisconsin voters send a message that will be even louder than the one sent in 2006.



**ABOUT THE STUDY**

This study of 600 Wisconsin residents was conducted by telephone between December 2 and December 3, 2007. A total of 600 Wisconsin residents were interviewed. The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 4% for percentages of the whole sample. For a percentage near 50%, for example, this means that repeated samples would produce results between 47% and 53%, 95 times out of 100.

This study was commissioned by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, Inc. The Institute was founded in 1987, and its mandate is to examine issues of public policy facing Wisconsin, using a non-partisan approach.

Dr. Michael LaVelle, President of Diversified Research, a nationally known survey research company supervised the project. Dr. LaVelle has a Ph.D. and has taught statistics and social research methods at the university level. He has been President of Diversified Research since 1982 and has over thirty years experience in survey research.

**Based on what you know or have heard about the economy of Wisconsin, do you expect state economic conditions to improve, stay the same, or get worse during the next year?**

	Total	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee Suburb	Waukesha County	Green Bay Area	La Crosse Eau Claire	Madison	South East	Rest of State
Improve	11%	18%	11%	16%	7%	6%	8%	6%	15%
Stay Same	39%	31%	34%	40%	41%	30%	43%	52%	38%
Get Worse	46%	49%	55%	44%	51%	47%	36%	40%	43%
Don't Know	5%	3%	0%	0%	2%	18%	13%	2%	4%

**What about your own family's economic circumstances? Do you expect them to improve, stay the same, or get worse during the next year?**

	Total	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee Suburb	Waukesha County	Green Bay Area	La Crosse Eau Claire	Madison	South East	Rest of State
Improve	19%	19%	25%	41%	22%	14%	10%	13%	18%
Stay Same	59%	62%	50%	40%	62%	54%	67%	75%	54%
Get Worse	19%	18%	25%	19%	15%	26%	11%	13%	24%
Don't Know	3%	1%	0%	0%	2%	6%	12%	0%	4%

**Would you say that things in WISCONSIN are generally going in the right direction or do you feel things have gotten pretty seriously off on the wrong track?**

	Total	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee Suburb	Waukesha County	Green Bay Area	La Crosse Eau Claire	Madison	South East	Rest of State
Right Direction	34%	22%	18%	34%	38%	45%	34%	48%	34%
Wrong Track	56%	76%	74%	59%	51%	42%	53%	42%	49%
Don't Know	11%	2%	8%	7%	11%	13%	13%	10%	18%

**Would you say that things in this COUNTRY are generally going in the right direction or do you feel things have gotten pretty seriously off on the wrong track?**

	Total	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee Suburb	Waukesha County	Green Bay Area	La Crosse Eau Claire	Madison	South East	Rest of State
Right Direction	19%	9%	20%	18%	19%	24%	18%	28%	17%
Wrong Track	76%	82%	78%	75%	78%	77%	75%	66%	74%
Don't Know	6%	9%	2%	8%	4%	0%	7%	6%	9%

**In the last ten years, do you think the standard of ethics in Wisconsin's state government has gotten better, worse, or stayed about the same?**

	Total	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee Suburb	Waukesha County	Green Bay Area	La Crosse Eau Claire	Madison	South East	Rest of State
Better	7%	9%	1%	2%	6%	24%	8%	11%	4%
Worse	50%	57%	62%	51%	53%	28%	56%	41%	47%
Stayed the same	38%	29%	36%	42%	37%	43%	33%	47%	39%
Don't Know/No Answer	5%	5%	2%	6%	4%	5%	3%	1%	10%

**Now think about the members of the Wisconsin legislature. In the last ten years, do you think the standard of ethics of the members of the legislature has gotten better, worse, or stayed about the same?**

	Total	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee Suburb	Waukesha County	Green Bay Area	La Crosse Eau Claire	Madison	South East	Rest of State
Better	6%	1%	6%	3%	6%	21%	6%	5%	3%
Worse	44%	40%	40%	43%	43%	32%	58%	48%	44%
Stayed the same	43%	53%	49%	49%	45%	45%	30%	40%	40%
Don't Know/No Answer	7%	6%	6%	6%	6%	2%	6%	8%	13%

**Who do you think has the MOST POWER to determine what the state government spends – the voters across the state, or lobbying groups?**

	Total	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee Suburb	Waukesha County	Green Bay Area	La Crosse Eau Claire	Madison	South East	Rest of State
Voters	12%	15%	13%	19%	1%	18%	16%	9%	14%
Lobbying Groups	82%	81%	79%	75%	91%	82%	73%	89%	82%
Both	1%	2%	0%	2%	1%	0%	2%	0%	0%
Not Sure	4%	2%	8%	5%	6%	0%	8%	2%	3%
No Answer	1%	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%	1%

**How much of the time do you think you can trust the state government to do what is right – just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?**

	Total	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee Suburb	Waukesha County	Green Bay Area	La Crosse Eau Claire	Madison	South East	Rest of State
Just About Always	2%	2%	1%	0%	2%	14%	0%	0%	0%
Most of the Time	24%	22%	18%	14%	18%	34%	26%	31%	30%
Some of the Time	70%	73%	77%	72%	78%	45%	67%	67%	66%
Not Sure	3%	4%	1%	9%	0%	8%	5%	2%	3%
No Answer	2%	0%	3%	5%	2%	0%	2%	0%	1%

**Overall, whose interest do you feel elected officials represent the most - your interests, special interests or their own interests?**

	Total	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee Suburb	Waukesha County	Green Bay Area	La Crosse Eau Claire	Madison	South East	Rest of State
Special interests	43%	38%	48%	43%	46%	45%	34%	54%	42%
Elected official's interests	42%	37%	40%	42%	45%	40%	41%	38%	44%
Voter's interests	10%	14%	7%	10%	6%	14%	18%	6%	8%
Refused/No Answer	5%	11%	5%	6%	4%	2%	8%	3%	5%

**Overall, do you think Wisconsin's state government spends too much, too little, or just about the right amount of tax dollars?**

	Total	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee Suburb	Waukesha County	Green Bay Area	La Crosse Eau Claire	Madison	South East	Rest of State
Too Much	62%	54%	79%	83%	64%	60%	57%	57%	51%
Too Little	11%	16%	3%	0%	3%	24%	16%	15%	13%
The Right Amount	17%	19%	13%	17%	25%	10%	16%	14%	16%
No Answer	11%	11%	5%	0%	8%	6%	11%	15%	20%

**In general, do you think Wisconsin taxpayers receive a GOOD VALUE or a POOR VALUE for the state taxes they have to pay?**

	Total	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee Suburb	Waukesha County	Green Bay Area	La Crosse Eau Claire	Madison	South East	Rest of State
Good Value	33%	18%	26%	38%	37%	43%	40%	38%	30%
Poor Value	55%	75%	71%	56%	48%	37%	39%	59%	54%
Neither	7%	7%	2%	4%	7%	17%	14%	0%	7%
No Answer	5%	1%	1%	2%	8%	3%	7%	4%	9%

**Would you favor or oppose a constitutional change to limit all state elected officials to no more than eight years in office?**

	Total	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee Suburb	Waukesha County	Green Bay Area	La Crosse Eau Claire	Madison	South East	Rest of State
Favor	72%	65%	76%	79%	80%	79%	64%	68%	70%
Oppose	22%	31%	20%	12%	17%	10%	27%	30%	22%
No Answer	6%	4%	4%	9%	3%	11%	9%	2%	9%