Michigan’s local leaders more positive about Governor Snyder’s performance, more optimistic about the state’s direction

By Thomas Ivacko and Debra Horner

This report presents the opinions of Michigan’s local government leaders regarding the direction in which the state is headed, as well as their evaluations of the job performance of Governor Rick Snyder and the Michigan Legislature. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Spring 2012 and Spring 2011 waves of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS).

Key Findings

- Overall, local leaders’ positive job approval ratings for Governor Rick Snyder have increased over the last year. While 37% of local leaders rated his performance as good or excellent in 2011, that has risen to 49% of local officials in 2012. Fewer than two in ten (19%) say he’s doing a poor job.

- Compared to the growing approval rates for Governor Snyder, local officials’ assessments of the Michigan Legislature remain relatively low. Only 27% of officials statewide rate the Legislature’s performance as either good or excellent, while 33% rate it as poor. These are only slight improvements from assessments in 2011, when 21% gave the legislature positive ratings and 36% said its performance was poor.

- Half (50%) of Michigan’s local government leaders now believe the state is headed in the right direction. This is a significant increase over the same time last year, when just 32% thought the state was headed in the right direction. Similarly, the percentage of local officials who think the state is on the wrong track has dropped from 50% in 2011 to 35% in 2012.

- Opinions about the direction in which the state is headed are closely tied to assessments of both Governor Rick Snyder’s and the Michigan Legislature’s job performance.

- In addition, these views are also associated with partisan identification--officials who identify themselves as Republicans are more likely to say that Michigan is headed in the right direction compared to either Independent or Democratic officials. However, officials from all three groups now express increased levels of optimism compared with last year.
Background

Significant policy changes enacted in Lansing starting in early 2011 have begun to reshape the relationship between Michigan’s state and local governments. Among the biggest such changes adopted last year were the “Emergency Manager” law (Public Act 4), and the Economic Vitality Incentive Program (EVIP), which replaced the former statutory revenue sharing program with an incentive-based funding model designed to foster local government reform. While the pace of change has slowed in 2012, much of the state-level debate throughout the spring focused on potential reforms to the state’s Personal Property Tax, which provides significant levels of funding for many of Michigan’s local governments. This debate had many local governments on edge, concerned about further reductions in funding when many have already lost significant funds due to property tax declines and prior revenue sharing cuts by the state.

Another recent change in Lansing has been the early adoption (compared to previous years) of the State’s upcoming fiscal year budget. This has likely made it somewhat easier for local jurisdictions to plan their own fiscal year budgets as well.

In addition, the Michigan economy has been improving in recent months, with the state’s unemployment rate decreasing to 8.3% in April 2012, nearly two percentage points lower than the same time in 2011.1

The Spring 2012 MPPS asked a series of questions of Michigan’s local government leaders, to assess their feelings about the job performance of both Governor Rick Snyder and the Michigan Legislature, as well as their opinions on whether business conditions in their communities are improving or not, and whether the state is headed in the right direction or is off on the wrong track.

Approval ratings for Governor Snyder’s performance are higher than last year

More than a year into Governor Rick Snyder’s administration, local leaders’ opinions on his performance have improved compared with their views of his performance last year. When asked to assess Snyder’s job performance as governor so far, almost half (49%) of local officials statewide rate his performance as either good or excellent, while 19% rate it as poor (see Figure 1a). His positive ratings have increased compared with assessments from Spring 2011, when 37% rated his performance as good or excellent.

Evaluations of Governor Snyder’s performance differ widely by the local leaders’ political party identification. While nearly two-thirds (63%) of officials who identify themselves as Republicans think the Governor is doing a good or excellent job, significantly smaller percentages of Independent officials (43%) and Democratic officials (22%) also feel this way (see Figure 1b). And while just 9% of Republican officials say the Governor’s job performance so far has been poor, 23% of Independent officials and 40% of Democratic officials feel this way.

Still, positive evaluations of Governor Snyder’s performance have risen over the past year among officials from all three groups: Republicans, Independents, and Democrats.
Legislature’s approval rates grow slightly from last year, but trail Governor Snyder’s

Compared to their evaluations of Governor Snyder’s performance, local officials are significantly more critical of the Michigan Legislature’s performance. Fewer than a third of local officials (27%) statewide rate the state Legislature’s performance as either good or excellent, while 33% say it is poor (see Figure 2a). These proportions are only slightly improved compared with assessments from 2011, when just 21% of local officials gave the Michigan Legislature positive ratings, and 36% rated its performance as poor.

Partisan identification is again a key factor in differentiating respondents’ opinions about the Legislature’s performance. With both houses of the legislature controlled by the Republican party, Democratic and Independent local officials are more than twice as likely as Republican officials to give the Legislature poor ratings (see Figure 2b).
Growing optimism about the direction in which Michigan is headed

Compared with a year ago, local officials are now more optimistic about the direction in which the state is headed. The Spring 2012 MPPS asked respondents whether they felt the state was generally going in the right direction, or if they felt things have gotten off on the wrong track. Overall, government leaders from half (50%) of Michigan's local jurisdictions say the state is now headed in the right direction. This is a substantial shift compared with a year ago, when half of local officials (50%) thought the state was on the wrong track and only 32% said Michigan was going in the right direction (see Figure 3a).

Opinions on the state's direction are again correlated with the party identification of Michigan's local leaders. Only 29% of local Democratic officials believe the state is currently headed in the right direction, compared with 48% of Independent officials and 63% of local Republican officials (see Figure 3b).

However, as with their evaluations of state policymakers’ job performance, local officials' opinions about the direction of the state have improved within each partisan grouping. Higher percentages of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents now express increased levels of optimism about the direction of the state, compared with assessments from the same time last year.
View on the state’s direction closely correlated with assessments of state policymakers’ job performance

Local officials’ views on whether the state is heading in the right direction or is off on the wrong track could be associated with any number of factors, including their partisan identification (as noted above), gender, age, education, region of the state, jurisdiction population size, and so on. Other factors might include the officials’ perception of general economic conditions, the ability of their own jurisdictions to meet financial needs, and state financial support for local governments. After testing these and other factors in multivariate analysis, the strongest correlation for local officials’ views on whether the state is heading in the right direction is found with their assessments of the job being done by the State’s policymakers in Lansing.

For example, increasing economic optimism may play some role in these assessments, but it does not appear to be a particularly strong factor. Among those local leaders who believe business conditions will be good in their communities in the next year, 63% also believe the state is headed in the right direction. However, even among those who think business conditions will be bad, nearly 43% still believe the state is headed in the right direction (see Table 1).

Meanwhile, among those who believe the Michigan Legislature’s recent job performance has been excellent, 98% believe the state is headed in the right direction. By comparison, among those who say the Legislature’s performance has been poor, only 27% believe the state is headed in the right direction.

And finally, the starkest contrast is found in relation to local officials’ views on Governor Snyder’s performance. Among those who believe the Governor’s performance has been excellent, 95% believe the state is headed in the right direction and only 2% believe the state is off on the wrong track. By contrast, among those who think the Governor’s performance has been poor, only 5% believe Michigan is headed in the right direction while 87% believe it is on the wrong track. This general relationship holds true regardless of the party affiliation of the local officials.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Snyder’s job performance is excellent</th>
<th>Snyder’s job performance is poor</th>
<th>Legislature’s job performance is excellent</th>
<th>Legislature’s job performance is poor</th>
<th>Local community will have good times</th>
<th>Local community will have bad times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State is going in right direction</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State is off on wrong track</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Table does not display all response categories*
Conclusion

The state-local government relationship in Michigan has experienced significant change since the beginning of Governor Snyder’s term in January 2011. Major actions in Lansing that have affected local governments include the enactment of the Emergency Manager law (Public Act 4), which provides sweeping powers to state-appointed emergency managers, and revenue sharing changes that introduced incentives for local government reform. Recent debate in Lansing to reform the state’s Personal Property Tax also portends significant additional changes that may yet impact local jurisdictions across the state. Meanwhile, the state government has established a new track record for completing upcoming fiscal year budgets by early summer, well ahead of the timeline experienced in recent years. This timely adoption of the state budget has likely made it somewhat easier for local governments to carry out their own fiscal planning.

Meanwhile, Michigan’s general economic conditions have been improving recently, with the state’s unemployment rate in April 2012 dropping to levels not seen in nearly 4 years.

In the context of all these changes, the Spring 2012 MPPS finds that Michigan’s local government leaders overall are increasingly optimistic about the direction in which the state is headed, compared to findings from the early months of Governor Snyder’s administration in 2011. Half of the state’s local leaders now believe the state is headed in the right direction (up from 32% in 2011).

Improving economic conditions and the party identification of Michigan’s local leaders are both somewhat correlated with this increased optimism. But by far, the strongest correlations are found with local officials’ views of the job performance by Michigan’s state-level policymakers, especially regarding Governor Snyder, whose job approval ratings have improved much more than have those of the Legislature.

Notes


Survey background and methodology

The MPPS is a biannual survey of each of Michigan’s 1,856 units of general purpose local government. Surveys were sent by the Center for Local, State and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) via the internet and hardcopy to top elected and appointed officials (including county administrators and board chairs, city mayors and managers, village presidents and managers, and township supervisors, clerks, and managers) from all 83 counties, 277 cities, 256 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan.

The Spring 2012 wave was conducted from April 9 - June 18, 2012. A total of 1,329 jurisdictions in the Spring 2012 wave returned valid surveys, resulting in a 72% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.43%. The key relationships discussed in the above report are statistically significant at the p>.05 level or above, unless otherwise specified. Missing responses are not included in the tabulations, unless otherwise specified. Data are weighted to account for non-response.

Detailed tables of the data analyzed in this report that are broken down three ways—by jurisdiction type (county, city, township or village); by population size of the respondent’s community; and by the region of the respondent’s jurisdiction—will be available online at the MPPS homepage: http://closup.umich.edu/mpps.php

The views reported herein are those of local Michigan officials and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Michigan.
The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP), housed at the University of Michigan’s Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, conducts and supports applied policy research designed to inform state, local, and urban policy issues. Through integrated research, teaching, and outreach involving academic researchers, students, policymakers and practitioners, CLOSUP seeks to foster understanding of today’s state and local policy problems, and to find effective solutions to those problems.

www.closup.umich.edu >> 734-647-4091