

The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy >> University of Michigan

Michigan Public
Policy Survey July 2011

Local government and environmental leadership: views of Michigan's local leaders

This report presents Michigan local government leaders' opinions on global warming and environmental sustainability, and on the role of local government in these domains. The report also identifies actions being taken by local governments to address these issues. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Fall 2010 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS).

>> The **Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)** is conducted by the **Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP)** at the University of Michigan in partnership with the **Michigan Association of Counties, Michigan Municipal League, and Michigan Townships Association**. The MPPS takes place twice each year and investigates local officials' opinions and perspectives on a variety of important public policy issues. Respondents for the MPPS include county administrators and board chairs, city mayors and managers, village presidents and managers, and township supervisors, clerks, and managers from over 1,300 jurisdictions across the state.

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Key Findings

- Michigan's local government leaders are divided in their views about the seriousness of global warming. Overall, 52% say global warming is either a "very serious" or a "somewhat serious" problem, while 39% say it is either "not too serious" or "not a problem" at all.
 - » While MPPS surveys often find local officials' views are correlated with characteristics of their communities, such as population size and region in the state, this is not the case with views on the seriousness of global warming.
 - » There is, however, a strong correlation between views on global warming and party identification among Michigan's local officials: while 77% of Democratic officials say global warming is a very or somewhat serious problem, only 57% of Independent officials and 39% of Republican officials feel the same. This overall pattern is also found among partisans in the general population.
- Despite these differences in opinion, overall, 68% of local officials believe local government has a responsibility to help reduce global warming.
 - » Majorities of Republican (61%) and Independent (66%) as well as Democratic (84%) officials feel this way.
 - » Even among those officials who think global warming is "not too serious," a majority (63%) still believe local government has at least some responsibility to act.
 - » Findings from a partnering survey of Michigan citizens show that 70% of the state's residents also believe local government has a responsibility to take action.
- Regarding wider questions of environmental sustainability, 70% of Michigan's local leaders believe that promoting sustainability is an important aspect of local government leadership.
 - » This belief is found among large majorities of leaders across the state, regardless of region or community size.
 - » While 85% of local Democratic leaders feel this way, so do 66% of Republican leaders, and 65% of Independent leaders.
- In terms of actions being taken at the local level, approximately 23% of jurisdictions report having existing policies to improve environmental sustainability, particularly focusing on energy efficiency in government facilities, changing their work practices (such as regulating thermostats and conserving water), and programs targeted at residents, such as recycling and home weatherization projects. Even larger percentages of jurisdictions expect to initiate these kinds of actions in the coming year.

Michigan’s local leaders are divided about the seriousness of global warming

Issues related to climate change and environmental sustainability appear to be growing in importance at all levels of government, including the local level. For example, the World Bank recently announced financial and technical assistance specifically targeted at major cities to encourage climate change reduction programs.¹ To get a better understanding of how Michigan’s local government leaders view these issues, the Fall 2010 MPPS survey asked a series of questions about global warming, environmental sustainability, and the role of local government in these areas. The opinions expressed by Michigan’s local leaders reveal a wide range of beliefs about these issues.

In terms of the seriousness of global warming, there is no consensus among Michigan’s local government leaders. Overall, 52% of these local leaders say global warming is either a very serious problem or a somewhat serious problem, while 39% say it is either not too serious, or is not a problem at all (see *Figure 1a*).

Previous MPPS studies have often found opinions among Michigan’s local leaders to be correlated with characteristics of their communities, particularly their population sizes and regions within the state. For instance, leaders from large communities often express significantly different opinions from those in smaller communities. And leaders in Southeast Michigan, for example, often express opinions that are different than those of officials from the Upper Peninsula. However, this is generally not the case with views on global warming, which do not appear to be correlated with such community characteristics.

Views about the seriousness of global warming are, however, correlated with the local officials’ party identification, as shown in *Figure 1b*. While 77% of local Democratic officials say global warming is either very serious or somewhat serious, only 57% of Independent officials and 39% of Republican officials feel this way. These partisan differences are not necessarily surprising, as views on global warming tend to divide across party lines among the general public as well.²

Figure 1a
Percentage of officials who believe global warming is a problem

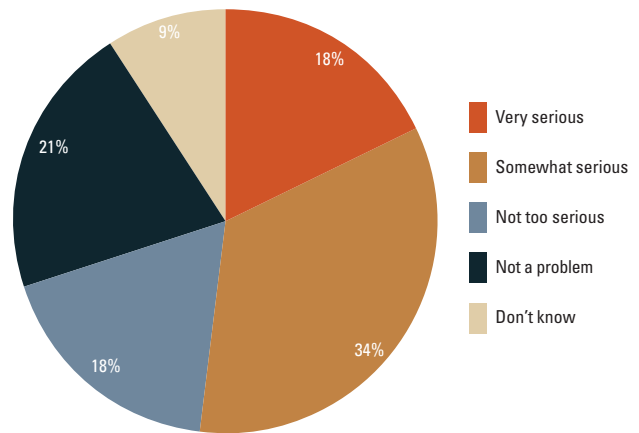
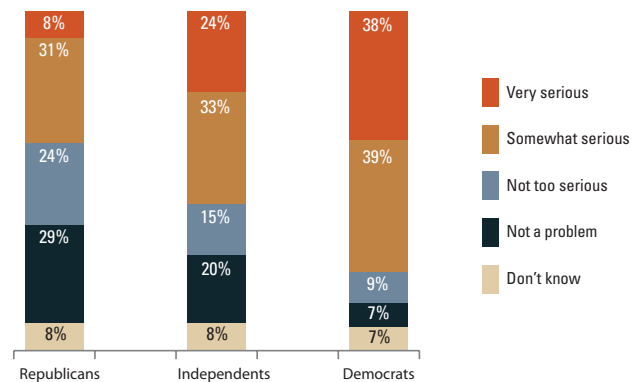


Figure 1b
Percentage of officials who believe global warming is a problem, by partisan identification





Where does responsibility lie for dealing with global warming?

In the United States’ federal system of governance, primary responsibility for particular policy issues can be placed at various levels: the federal government, state governments, or local governments. For example, responsibility for national defense is primarily held at the federal level, while responsibility for education policy has primarily been held at the state and local levels, historically. Since issues of global warming and climate change are relatively new, it is unclear where citizens and their government leaders think their responsibility should lie. It is also unclear whether citizens and their local leaders have common or opposing views about the role of local government in dealing with global warming.

In a unique research endeavor designed to address these issues, the MPPS partnered with the National Survey of American Public Opinion on Climate Change (NSAPOCC)³ to ask similar questions about global warming of Michigan’s local government leaders and of Michigan’s citizens during the fall of 2010. The goal of this effort was to gauge whether there is agreement or disagreement between Michigan’s citizens and their local government leaders in terms of where to place the locus of responsibility for taking action to reduce global warming. Do citizens think their local governments should take action, while their local leaders feel the responsibility lies at higher levels of government? Or, do local leaders believe in taking action at the local level, while their citizens feel the opposite? Or indeed, do citizens and their local leaders share similar opinions on this matter?

Figure 2a illustrates a number of interesting findings. First, Michigan’s citizens and their local leaders largely agree about responsibility among the various levels of government for reducing global warming. For instance, 74% of Michigan’s citizens say the federal government has such responsibility (either “a great deal” or at least “some” responsibility), and this view is shared by 77% of Michigan’s local leaders. Also, 72% of Michigan’s citizens and 76% of their local leaders believe the state government has such responsibility. And most importantly for the MPPS research efforts, 70% of Michigan’s citizens think local government has this responsibility, with a corresponding 68% of the state’s local leaders feeling the same. Thus, Michigan’s citizens and their local leaders appear to share a common view that local government should indeed take action to help reduce global warming, though both groups generally place greater levels of responsibility with the federal and state governments.

Figure 2a
Local officials’ and citizens’ views about government responsibility for reducing global warming

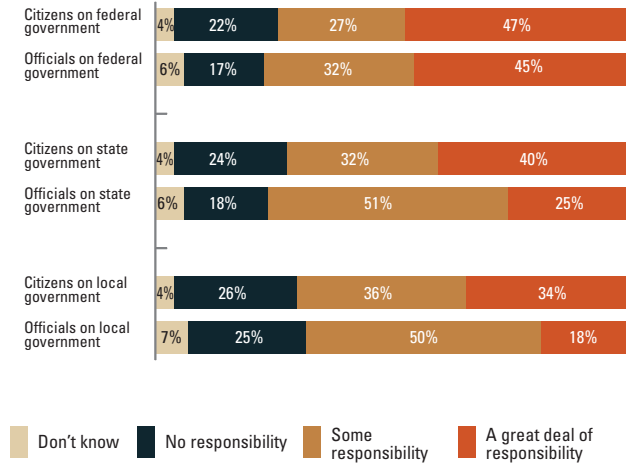
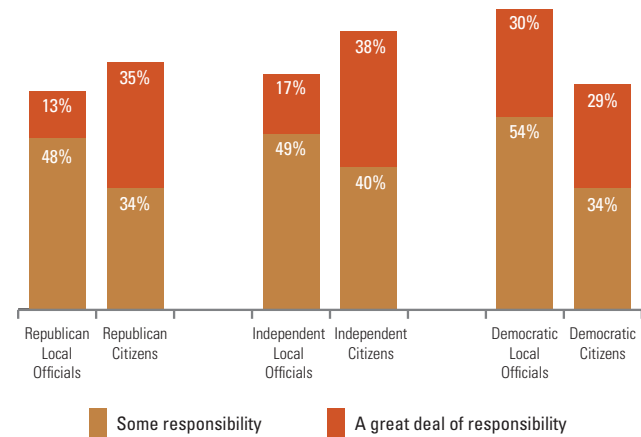


Figure 2b
Local officials’ and citizens’ views about local government responsibility for reducing global warming, by partisan identification



Another particularly interesting finding is that, even though Michigan’s local leaders are divided in their opinions about the seriousness of global warming, still a large majority (68%) believe local government has at least some responsibility to take action to help reduce that warming. This includes 84% of Democratic local officials, as well as 66% of Independent officials, and 61% of Republican officials. Even more surprising: among those local officials who think global warming is “not too serious” of a problem, 63% still believe local government has a responsibility to act.

Digging deeper into the general agreement among citizens (70%) and their local leaders (68%) that local government has a responsibility to act, *Figure 2a* also reveals interesting differences in the *amount* of responsibility each group places at the local level. *Figure 2a* shows that local leaders (18%) are only about half as likely as citizens (34%) to say that local government has a *great deal* of responsibility to help reduce global warming. As shown in *Figure 2b*, this divergence is driven primarily by the low percentages of local Republican and Independent officials who say local government has a *great deal* of responsibility. That is, while 35% of Michigan citizens who identify themselves as Republicans feel local government has a *great deal* of responsibility to act, only 13% of Michigan’s Republican local government leaders feel this way. Similarly, while 38% of Michigan’s Independent citizens feel local government has a *great deal* of responsibility, only 17% of Michigan’s Independent local government leaders feel this way.

Officials express widespread agreement on the importance of local leadership for environmental sustainability

Beyond specific issues of global warming, a large majority of Michigan’s local government leaders (70%) agree that promoting environmental sustainability is an important aspect of local government leadership. Only 10% of local leaders disagree with this view (see *Figure 3a*).

As noted above, previous MPPS surveys have found strong patterns in officials’ policy views associated with their communities’ characteristics such as population size and geographic region. However, this again is not the case with officials’ views on the role of local government in promoting environmental sustainability, where support for local government leadership cuts across all community sizes and geographic regions. For instance, 73% of officials from the state’s largest communities believe in local leadership for the environment, as do 69% of officials from the state’s smallest communities. And while 71% of officials from Southeast Michigan feel this way, 66% of officials from the Upper Peninsula say the same.

As with views on the seriousness of global warming, one factor that does appear correlated with officials’ views on environmental leadership is their party identification (see *Figure 3b*). While 66% of Republican and 65% of Independent officials agree that promoting environmental sustainability is an important aspect of local government leadership, fully 85% of Democratic officials feel this way. Still, even with these differences in magnitude of support, perhaps the most interesting finding is that large majorities of officials within all partisan groups believe in local leadership on the environment.

Figure 3a
Percentage of officials who believe promoting environmental sustainability is an important aspect of local government leadership

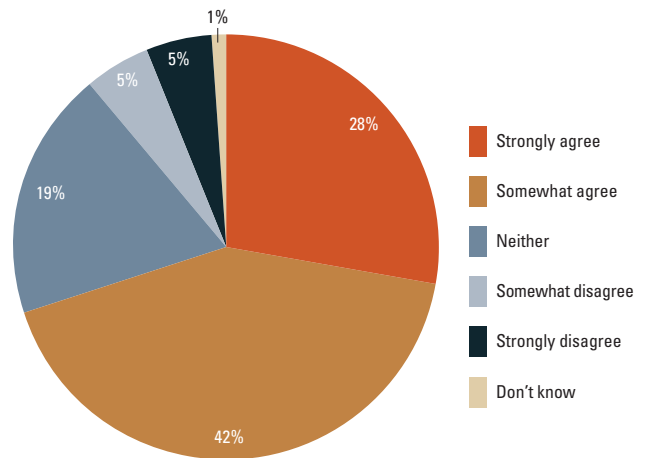
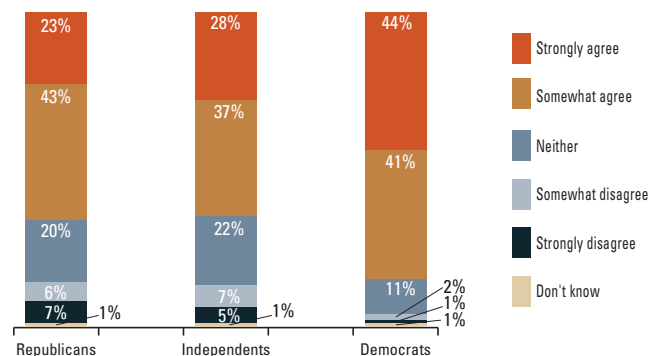


Figure 3b
Percentage of officials who believe promoting environmental sustainability is an important aspect of local government leadership, by partisan identification





What are Michigan’s local governments doing currently to promote environmental sustainability?

The Fall 2010 MPPS asked a series of questions about actions local governments may already have taken or may be planning to take in the next 12 months regarding environmental sustainability. As with many previous MPPS findings, responses to some of these questions do show strong correlations with community characteristics, particularly community population size.

Overall, about a quarter (23%) of all jurisdictions in Michigan report having existing policies and practices to improve energy efficiency in their government facilities through upgrades in lighting, insulation, HVAC systems, and so on. However, this is strongly correlated with community size: the larger the community, the more likely it is to have such policies or practices (see *Figure 4a*). For example, only 16% of the state’s smallest jurisdictions (those with less than 1,500 residents) have such policies or practices in place now, compared to 53% of the state’s largest jurisdictions (those with more than 30,000 residents). It is important to note that many of Michigan’s smallest jurisdictions are staffed only by part-time officials, and that at least some of these units may carry out only the most basic core activities required by law.

A similar pattern holds true regarding jurisdictions’ efforts to change their own workforce practices, for example by conserving water, regulating thermostats, etc. Overall, 23% of local jurisdictions have such policies in place now, though this too is correlated with population size: 18% of the smallest jurisdictions have taken these actions, compared to 40% of the largest jurisdictions (see *Figure 4b*).

And again, findings are similar regarding jurisdictions’ programs targeted at residents, such as recycling and home weatherization efforts. Overall, 23% of local jurisdictions have already initiated such programs, though again this is related to population size. Whereas 17% of the state’s smallest jurisdictions have taken these steps, 44% of the largest communities have done so (see *Figure 4c*).

After those three leading areas of local government activity, two other areas show significantly lower levels of existing activity. Only 5% of local jurisdictions have existing efforts to develop or purchase energy from alternative sources, and only 4% have begun programs targeted as businesses (such as commercial recycling programs, recognition programs for “green” practices, etc.).

Figure 4a
Percentage of jurisdictions with existing policies or practices to improve energy efficiency in government facilities, by population size

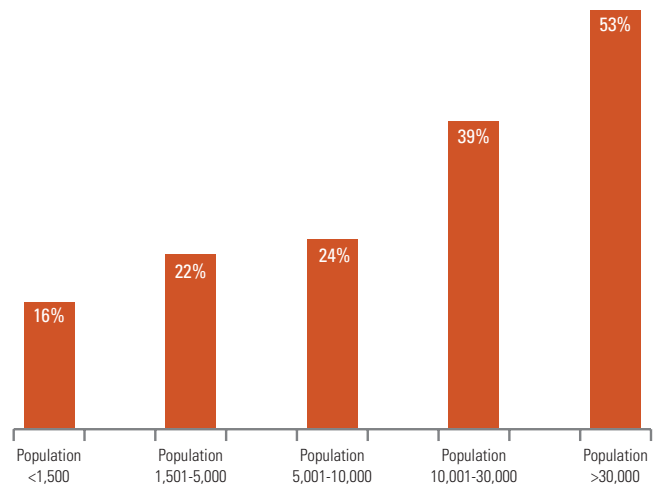


Figure 4b
Percentage of jurisdictions with existing environmental policies or practices targeted at their workforce practices, by population size

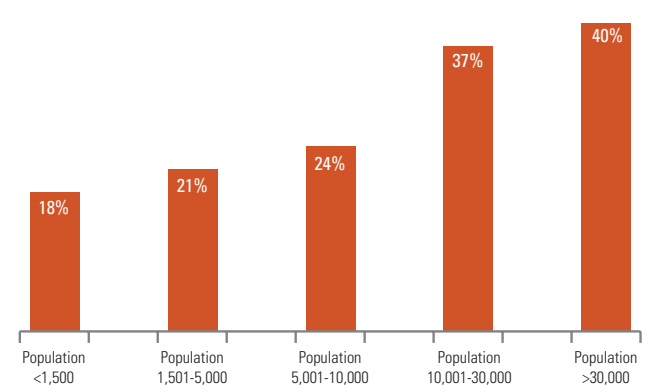
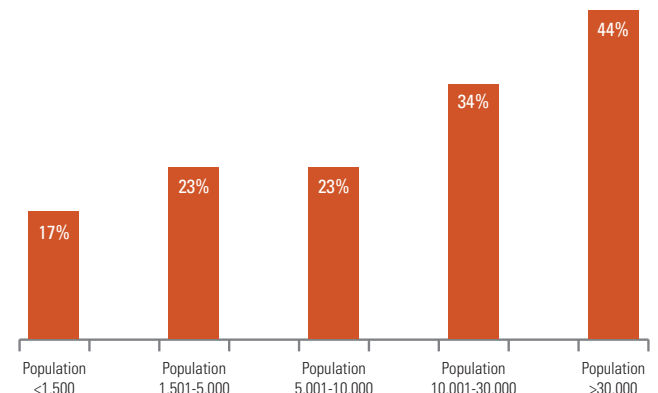


Figure 4c
Percentage of jurisdictions with existing environmental policies or practices targeted at residents, by population size



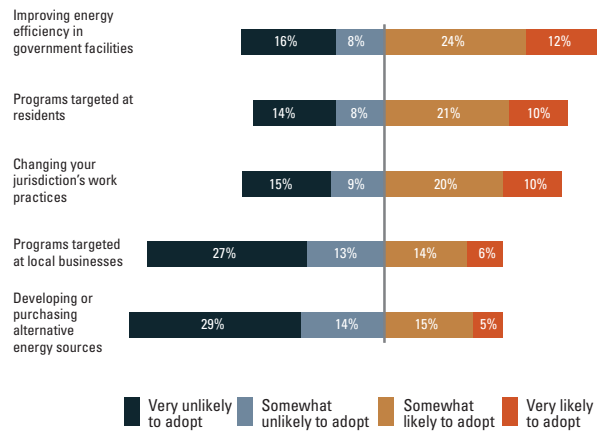
What are Michigan’s local governments likely to do in the near future to promote environmental sustainability?

Meanwhile, looking ahead over the next year, local officials report a significant amount of expected new activity on these types of policies and programs. According to these officials, 36% of local jurisdictions are somewhat or very likely to launch new efforts to improve energy efficiency in their government facilities; 31% are likely to launch new programs targeted at their residents; 30% are likely to change their jurisdictions’ workforce practices; 20% are likely to launch programs targeted at the business sector; and 20% are likely to develop or purchase energy from alternative sources (see *Figure 5*).

Overall, this expected new activity is not tied quite as strongly to community size as are the findings regarding existing programs and policies. For example, while 37% of the state’s largest communities are likely to launch new programs to improve energy efficiency in their government facilities in the next year, 35% of the smallest jurisdictions also expect to do this. While 32% of the largest communities are likely to change their workforce practices to improve environmental sustainability, 27% of the smallest jurisdictions plan these steps too. And while 27% of the largest jurisdictions are likely to launch new programs targeted at their residents, 28% of the smallest jurisdictions report they are likely to do so.

Only in the least common existing types of programs – those targeted at businesses, and those to develop or purchase energy from alternative sources – are there still significant differences by jurisdiction size. For instance, while only 17% of the smallest jurisdictions are likely to launch new environmental sustainability programs targeted at businesses, 31% of the largest jurisdictions say they are likely to do this. And while only 17% of the smallest jurisdictions are likely to develop or purchase energy from alternative sources, 30% of the state’s largest communities report they are likely to take these steps in the next 12 months.

Figure 5
Jurisdictions’ plans for adopting policies or practices in the next 12 months to improve environmental sustainability





Conclusion

Michigan's local government leaders express divergent opinions about the seriousness of global warming, with 52% saying it is a very or somewhat serious problem, but 39% saying it is either not too serious, or is simply not a problem at all. These differences in opinion are correlated with the local officials' partisan identification, with Democratic officials more likely than Independents or Republicans to say the problems are serious.

Despite these divergent views, over two-thirds of local officials overall believe local government has a responsibility to help reduce global warming. Significant majorities of local leaders within each partisan group share this view. Furthermore, their conviction that local government has a responsibility in this domain is shared by the majority of Michigan's citizens, among whom 70% agree with this view. Thus the MPPS finds common agreement among Michigan's citizens and their local leaders that local government has a responsibility to act on global warming. And on issues of environmental sustainability, widespread agreement is found among Michigan's local leaders. Seventy percent of these local officials agree that promoting environmental sustainability is an important aspect of local government leadership. While this view is strongest among Democratic officials, it is also held by two-thirds of Republican and Independent officials.

Finally, while relatively small percentages of local jurisdictions overall have taken action already to promote environmental sustainability, larger percentages are likely to do so in the near future. Existing programs in these areas are found most commonly among the state's larger jurisdictions, but plans for future activities are, in general, about equally likely to be found in communities of all sizes, from the smallest to the largest.

It is important to note that the MPPS survey questions did not ask local officials to identify how high a priority environmental issues are compared to other issues such as economic development or public safety. Instead, the survey questions only investigated whether global warming and environmental sustainability are legitimate policy domains to be addressed at the local government level. Given the strained state of local government finances today, it may be reasonable to assume that environmental issues would take a back seat to more pressing matters.

Still, these findings may provide a strong basis for launching new efforts by those interested in promoting local government's work on these issues. Clearly, the great majority of Michigan's citizens and their local leaders believe that local government should indeed be taking action to reduce global warming and to improve environmental sustainability.

Notes

¹ Barrionuevo, Alexei. "World Bank to Help Cities Control Climate Change." *New York Times*, 2 June 2011, sec. A10.

² Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. May 4, 2011. "Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology." <http://people-press.org/2011/05/04/section-8-domestic-issues-and-social-policy>.

³ Borick, Christopher, Erick Lachappelle, and Barry Rabe. 2011. "Climate Compared: Public Opinion on Climate Change in the United States and Canada." <http://closup.umich.edu/policy-reports/15/climate-compared-public-opinion-on-climate-change-in-the-united-states-and-canada>.

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, 274 cities, 259 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan.

The Fall 2010 wave was conducted from November 9- December 31, 2010. A total of 1,189 jurisdictions in the Fall 2010 wave returned valid surveys, resulting in a 64% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.7%. 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.

The National Survey of American Public Opinion on Climate Change (NSAPOCC) data used in this report were collected from November 15-

December 9, 2010 via using random digit dialing of landlines and cell phones. A total of 413 respondents were interviewed by telephone, with a margin of error for the sample of +/- 4.8%. Data are weighted to reflect population estimates of the state of Michigan. The survey was conducted by the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion in Allentown, Pennsylvania and funded by both Muhlenberg College and the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan.

Detailed tables of the MPPS data analyzed in this report 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—are available online at the MPPS homepage: <http://closup.umich.edu/mpps.php>

The views reported herein are those of local Michigan officials (MPPS) and citizens of Michigan (NSAPOCC) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Michigan.

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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.

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