

# Michigan Township Focus

FEBRUARY 2021

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE MICHIGAN TOWNSHIPS ASSOCIATION

## Closest to the people

Democracy, trust remain strong at the local level



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# Closest to the people

## Democracy, trust remain strong at local level

**R**ecent tumultuous events across our country have put stress on many of our core democratic elements, from elections to the media, the courts, public trust, and much more. Across the U.S., and in your own township, residents may be concerned about the health of our nation's democratic governance. But the headlines tend to focus on the national and state levels, and less attention has been given to governance at the local level. Some good news from Michigan local leaders is that—regardless of what's happening in Lansing and Washington, D.C.—they believe democracy continues to be robust at the local grassroots level.

Over the past 12 years, MTA has been a partner on the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS), from the University of Michigan's Ford School of Public Policy, which gathers the opinions of elected and appointed leaders from Michigan's general purpose local governments statewide, including supervisors, clerks, and managers from all 1,240 of Michigan's townships. During that time, various MPPS survey waves have asked about many topics related to the functioning of democracy and political participation in our local communities. While the surveys have uncovered areas of concern, township leaders in Michigan are—generally—very positive about institutions, relationships and attitudes related to local governance.

### **Citizen engagement in township decision-making**

To start, township leaders are very interested in getting their community members engaged in local governance. The 2012 and 2016 MPPS surveys asked township leaders about what they believe is the proper role for citizen engagement in local governance (**Table 1**). Statewide, 17% of township officials in 2012 thought that citizens should simply be kept informed, and only 11% thought they should recommend (10%) or make decisions (1%). However, in the 2016 survey, only 4% of township leaders said citizens should merely be kept informed, while 28% wanted to give them a say in recommending (25%) and even making decisions (3%) for the jurisdiction.



**Table 1: While it might differ depending on the topic, in general, what do you personally believe is the proper role for citizen engagement in township governance?**

	2012	2016
Keep citizens informed	17%	4%
Have citizens provide input/identify specific policy options	69%	64%
Have citizens recommend decisions	10%	25%
Have citizens make decisions	1%	3%
Don't know	2%	4%

In addition, more than half of township officials reported that their jurisdiction provides “a great deal” of opportunity for citizens to be engaged and almost another half say they provide at least some.

But efforts at encouraging engagement aren’t always successful. The MPPS asked township officials how they would describe citizen engagement in their jurisdictions and found a drop of approximately 10 percentage points between 2012 and 2016 in reported citizen involvement in local issues, and a similar drop in township leaders’ satisfaction with citizen involvement. Over three-quarters of

township respondents in both 2012 (77%) and 2016 (76%) either strongly or somewhat agreed that although their township provides chances for citizens to get involved, the citizens rarely take advantage of these opportunities. And an increasing percentage of township leaders expressed the belief that public officials, rather than citizens, should have final say in making controversial decisions.

Yet local leaders’ trust in township residents is on the rise. Trust in citizens to be responsible participants while engaging with the jurisdictions’ policymaking and operations saw a sharp uptick in 2020 (**Table 2**). Statewide, 55% in 2012 and 57% in 2016 felt they could trust their township citizens “nearly always” or “most of the time.” By 2020, that increased to 68%.

**Table 2: In terms of their engagement in your township’s policymaking and/or operations, how much of the time do you think you can trust the citizens in your community to be responsible participants?**

	2012	2016	2020
Nearly always	11%	12%	17%
Most of the time	44%	45%	51%
Some of the time	31%	29%	21%
Seldom	9%	9%	7%
Almost never	2%	3%	3%
Don't know	2%	2%	2%

## Civic discourse in Michigan townships

There's currently a significant focus on democratic discussion as online platforms like Twitter and Facebook have started banning certain rhetoric as incendiary. While there seems to be decreasing civility in public discourse around a wide range of national issues, is that the case at the local level as well? Although the MPPS questions aren't from this year, the survey did ask township leaders in 2012, and again in 2018, to evaluate the tone of discourse in their community on a scale from "very constructive" to "very divisive." As of 2018, most township leaders say the tone of discussions that take place around local policy issues is somewhat or very constructive among township officials themselves (72%) and between officials and local residents (70%). However, among township residents themselves, fewer than half (43%) of township leaders describe it as primarily constructive, while 38% report it as mixed. Still, only 7% say residents' discussions are primarily divisive.

And, again as of 2018, township leaders were more likely to say the tone of discussions was getting more civil over time (Table 3), compared with those saying it was becoming less civil, although most said it was unchanged.

Township officials also report that partisan conflicts at the national level are generally not trickling down to affect local governance. Statewide, 60% of township leaders in 2018 said national politics have little impact on the relationships among those on their own township board. Only 10% believe national politics are "significantly" or "somewhat" hurting relationships on the board.

## Working relationships within the township

Indeed, the vast majority of Michigan township officials report that they have positive working relationships with other officials and employees in their jurisdiction. Statewide, 82% reported that relationships among elected officials in their townships are either "excellent" or "good." And when asked about their relationships with township employees, the majority (70%) reported positive relationships between elected officials and other local government employees (Table 4). (It is also worth noting that 18% of respondents reported this question to not be applicable to them, reflecting the fact that among many of the smaller Michigan townships, the local government has very few paid employees, with primarily elected board members serving the community.)

## Working relationships with state leaders

On a similar, but less encouraging note, back in 2016, the MPPS also asked township leaders about relations with state government officials. For example, do state officials value local government leaders' input? (Table 5) The results were lukewarm. Only 7% of township officials strongly agreed that state government values their input, while 8%

**Table 3: Would you say the tone of discussion and communication among these groups is more or less civil than it was five years ago? (2018)**

	Among township officials themselves	Between township officials and residents	Among residents themselves
Significantly more civil	17%	16%	8%
Somewhat more civil	20%	21%	17%
Neither more nor less civil	46%	49%	48%
Somewhat less civil	8%	7%	10%
Significantly less civil	3%	2%	3%
Don't know	5%	6%	14%

**Table 4: Overall, how would you rate the relationships among elected officials and with employees in your township? (2018)**

	Among board members	With township employees
Excellent	41%	28%
Good	41%	42%
Fair	13%	10%
Poor	5%	2%
Not applicable	--	18%
Don't know	0%	0%

**Table 5: Thinking about the relationship between state government and local jurisdictions, overall, to what extent do you agree or disagree that Michigan state government officials value input from local government officials? (2016)**

Strongly agree	7%
Somewhat agree	40%
Neither agree nor disagree	21%
Somewhat disagree	21%
Strongly disagree	8%
Don't know	2%

strongly disagreed. Furthermore, approximately two-thirds of township leaders say that state leaders hold local elected officials to higher standards than they hold themselves. And 53% of those surveyed believe that state leaders unfairly favor certain local jurisdictions over others.

### Trust in government

A number of times since 2009, the MPPS has asked local leaders throughout Michigan about their trust in various levels of government to do the right thing (Table 6). Compared with generally declining public trust in government at all levels, the MPPS has found that township leaders' trust in government has been steady or has even slightly increased over that time span. Township leaders tend to have the most trust in other local governments. Statewide, 71% of Michigan township leaders in 2020 said they trusted other local governments "nearly always" or "most of the time," which is an increase from the consistent ratings of 65-67% saying the same from 2009 to 2016.

Trust in Michigan's state government, while lower, also increased slightly in 2020. Overall, 27% of Michigan's township officials said in 2020 that they trust the state government nearly always or most of the time to do what is right. Trust in the state has seen a gradual increase since 2009, when just 9% of township leaders had high levels of trust. Meanwhile, distrust in the state has declined tremendously. While 44% of township leaders said they seldom or almost never trusted the state in 2009, only 18% said the same in 2020.

Lastly, just 14% of township leaders in 2020 believe nearly always or most of the time that the federal government will do what is right, an increase over the low point (6%) in 2013.

Reversing the question, the MPPS asked local officials back in 2016 whether they believed that state government officials in Lansing trusted local governments to do what is right. Only 4% of township respondents felt state government officials trust local government nearly always, while 28% of township leaders said state officials trust them most of the time.

### Government ethics

The expectation of ethical behavior among public officials is a cornerstone of democratic governance. But Michigan's rules regarding public sector ethics lag behind many other states. As recently as 2015, Michigan was rated worst in the nation by the Center for Public Integrity on measures of state government accountability, ethics enforcement and transparency. In 2014, the MPPS asked Michigan's township officials about a variety of issues regarding ethics at the state and local levels (Table 7), including how ethical they believe Michigan's state and local government leaders are, what types of ethics policies are needed, and what types are already in place in their townships.

Unsurprisingly, respondents viewed the elected and appointed officials in their own jurisdictions with the highest ratings, with 90% of township officials believing their

**Table 6: How much of the time do you think you can trust [other local governments/ state government in Lansing/federal government in Washington, D.C.] to do what is right? (2020)**

	Other Local Governments	State Government	Federal Government
Nearly always	9%	1%	1%
Most of the time	62%	26%	13%
Some of the time	24%	53%	45%
Seldom	1%	13%	27%
Almost never	1%	5%	11%
Don't know	3%	2%	2%

**Table 7: We are interested in your general opinions about the state of ethics and integrity in Michigan government. In general, how would you rate [each group] overall in terms of ethical behavior in their official positions? (2014)**

	State legislators	Michigan executive branch	Elected and appointed officials in your jurisdiction	Michigan local elected and appointed officials
Very ethical	6%	14%	58%	17%
Mostly ethical	42%	43%	32%	53%
Equally ethical and unethical	33%	25%	7%	18%
Mostly unethical	9%	9%	1%	2%
Very unethical	2%	2%	0%	0%
Don't know	7%	7%	3%	9%

officials were either "very" (58%) or "mostly" (32%) ethical. Michigan's state legislators were seen as the least ethical by township leaders, with less than half of respondents viewing legislators as very (6%) or mostly (42%) ethical, and one-third of township leaders saying they are equally ethical and unethical.

In terms of their own policies, only 58% in 2014 reported that their township government had a formal code of ethics with guidelines for their personnel. Still, township officials' satisfaction levels with their jurisdiction's ethics practices and policies were high, with 64% saying they were "very satisfied" while another 21% "mostly satisfied."

Finally, the MPPS asked township officials whether they had felt pressured in their official government role to do anything that felt unethical in the preceding five years (2009–2014). Statewide, 88% said they had not ever felt such pressure, while 11% said that they had indeed felt pressured to do something unethical.

## Voting and election administration

The question of whether Michigan elections are fair, accurate and efficient has been under particular scrutiny since the Nov. 3, 2020, presidential election. But when township supervisors and clerks have been asked about their ability to administer accurate elections, including their township’s election security and their county’s ability to complete an accurate recount if necessary, they’ve been adamant that elections in the township are accurate and secure.

In the spring of 2020, the MPPS asked local officials about their expectations regarding election administration in their townships looking ahead toward the November 2020 election. These questionnaire items mirrored questions that were asked retrospectively in spring 2017, looking back at problems they may have experienced in the November 2016 election.

In 2020, nearly all township officials—a full 99%—were “very confident” (89%) or “somewhat confident” (10%)

in their ability to administer an accurate election. Just 1% reported being “not very confident” in their election accuracy.

Similarly, 78% of township officials said they were “very” confident in the ability of their county clerk’s office to conduct an accurate recount, should it be necessary, although this percentage declined by six points between 2017 and 2020.

When it comes to election security issues, large majorities of township officials overall were “very confident” that voting machines (72%), voter rolls (70%), and final vote tallies or results (78%) would not be compromised in the November 2020 election. Confidence in security was even higher among township clerks than among supervisors.

On the other hand, the MPPS also asked about a number of possible problems with election administration, and found growing concerns. Every issue showed township officials expressing more concern in 2020 compared to what was experienced in 2016. Among the most noticeable increases in predicted problems in 2020 compared to 2016 were the cost of administering elections, potential wait times in line to vote, access to reliable internet in order to contact the Secretary of State’s office, and recruitment of enough poll workers (**Table 8**). Clerks were generally more likely to expressed concern over these potential problems than were supervisors.

**Table 8: Thinking ahead to the November 2020 general election, to what extent, if any, do you expect the following will or will not be problems with election administration in your jurisdiction? (2020)**

	Not a problem at all	Not much of a problem	Somewhat of a problem	A significant problem	Don't know
The cost of election administration on your township's budget	18%	36%	32%	10%	4%
Long wait times for any voters	29%	41%	18%	7%	5%
Election equipment failures/malfunctions	22%	49%	15%	4%	9%
Inaccurate voter registration lists	34%	45%	10%	3%	8%
Reliable internet connectivity for communicating with SOS	24%	38%	18%	12%	8%
Disturbances at polling places (i.e., inappropriate campaigning, voter intimidation, etc.)	46%	44%	4%	1%	5%
Recruiting poll workers and other election staff with necessary skills	21%	31%	31%	13%	2%
Recruiting enough poll workers and other election staff (regardless of skill)	20%	34%	32%	13%	2%
Poll worker errors in following election procedures	33%	51%	9%	2%	5%
Intentional disinformation targeted at the township's citizens about voting procedures or other election issues	39%	37%	11%	5%	9%

## The U.S. Census

The U.S. Constitution mandates that a census be completed every 10 years across the country. It is one of the most clearly stated responsibilities of American democracy, but is nevertheless a constant source of controversy, due to its impact on allocation of resources, voting districts and congressional representation. What do Michigan local leaders think about the census, and how have townships supported its operations?

Township leaders' confidence that the 2020 Census would be accurate in their own township, or for the state as a whole declined between the spring of 2019 and the spring of 2020 (Table 9). In addition, although leaders were more confident about the count for their own township than for other communities in the state, few expressed high confidence in either count. In particular, just 5% said they were "very confident" the statewide count would be accurate.

Township leaders were particularly concerned that certain residents in their townships might be undercounted during the 2020 Census. While the national narrative surrounding the census often reflected concerns about accurately counting minority populations with limited English proficiency or without citizenship, Michigan township leaders most commonly cited non-homeowners and those who own a second home as groups who might be undercounted in their communities.

The percentage of Michigan township officials who reported plans to take any particular actions to encourage residents to participate in the census increased by 22 percentage points from the 2010 to the 2020 counts. Many said they were encouraging residents to complete the 2020 Census online, planned direct communications to residents, and collaborated with other organizations on census efforts.

## The functioning of democracy

Finally, as mentioned at the beginning of the article, in a time of growing concerns about the health of American democracy, much of the focus tends to be on national-level institutions and actors. But, of course, American governance operates in a federal system, with equally important aspects at the national, state and local levels. How do Michigan's township leaders assess the overall functioning of democracy in their own jurisdictions, compared with the state and national levels?

The Spring 2020 MPPS asked local leaders across the state for their opinions about the state of America's democracy as a system of government, prompting them to think about such issues as free and fair elections, rule of law, an unbiased free press, balanced relationships between levels and branches of government, ethical and transparent governance, an informed and engaged electorate, etc. Township officials were asked to evaluate the functioning of democracy on a 1-to-10 scale—with 1 as a total breakdown of democracy and 10 as perfectly functioning democracy—for three specific levels of governance: in their own township, in the state of Michigan overall, and in the United States overall (Table 10).

**Table 9: At this time, how confident overall are you that there will be an accurate 2020 Census count in ... ?**

	Your jurisdiction		Statewide in Michigan	
	2019	2020	2019	2020
<b>Very confident</b>	15%	15%	4%	5%
<b>Somewhat confident</b>	65%	60%	55%	52%
<b>Not very confident</b>	11%	13%	27%	26%
<b>Not confident at all</b>	1%	3%	4%	5%
<b>Don't know</b>	9%	9%	11%	11%

**Table 10: On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is a total breakdown of democracy and 10 is perfectly functioning democracy, how would you rate the functioning of democracy today in ...**

	Your township	The state of Michigan	The U.S.
<b>1—Total breakdown of democracy</b>	1%	3%	7%
<b>2</b>	1%	3%	10%
<b>3</b>	1%	5%	11%
<b>4</b>	1%	8%	14%
<b>5</b>	5%	20%	20%
<b>6</b>	4%	17%	13%
<b>7</b>	9%	18%	9%
<b>8</b>	24%	13%	8%
<b>9</b>	33%	6%	3%
<b>10—Perfectly functioning democracy</b>	19%	3%	1%



# cover story

Nearly one in five (19%) Michigan township leaders rated the state of democracy in their own jurisdictions as a perfect 10 on the 1-10 scale. Only 4% rated the state of democracy in their communities as less than a five on the 10-point scale.

By comparison, only 3% of township leaders gave democracy across Michigan a perfect 10. At the other end of the scale, 19% rated Michigan's democracy below a 5 on the 10-point scale, including 3% who rated Michigan at 1 on the scale, that is, experiencing a total breakdown of democracy.

Ratings for democracy at the federal level were even more pessimistic. Among township officials statewide nearly half (42%) gave U.S. democracy a rating lower than five. Around 1% said it is perfectly functioning, and 7% believe U.S. democracy is in a state of total breakdown.

Regardless of their partisan identification, township leaders of all types were highly positive about democracy in their own jurisdictions. Significant majorities among Republicans (87%), Independents (83%) and Democrats (82%) considered their townships to have highly functioning democracy (scores of 7-10). But when it comes to rating the current health of democracy at the state level in Michigan, with a Democratic governor currently at the helm, a majority of Democratic township leaders (60%) said Michigan has high-functioning democracy, compared to just 37% of Republicans and 26% of Independents.

At the federal level, with the U.S. presidency held by then-Republican President Donald Trump, the partisan pattern was reversed. Republican township officials (25%) tended to give higher ratings than Independents (11%) or Democrats (14%) for democracy in the United States as a whole, although these percentages are all quite low.

## A foundation to build upon

In this review of more than a decade of survey research covering a range of topics related to the functioning of democracy, Michigan township leaders express some concerns about the state of democracy at all three levels of our federal system, particularly about state and federal democratic health. But when it comes right down to it, they generally give high marks to local democracy, trust in other local governments, and trust in their own residents. This strength of local governance is a foundation we can build upon.

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*To learn more about the Michigan Public Policy Survey or read reports from past surveys, visit <http://closup.umich.edu/>.*

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