

# The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

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

Michigan Public  
Policy Survey October 2020

## Michigan local leaders say local democracy is strong, as their trust in government and citizens rises

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This report presents local government leaders' views regarding the functioning of democracy in their jurisdictions, the State of Michigan, and the United States as a whole, as well as their levels of trust toward the federal, state, and other local governments. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Spring 2020 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS), conducted between March 30 and June 1, 2020. It also contains comparisons to opinions expressed in the Spring 2009, Fall 2012, Spring 2013, and Fall 2016 waves of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS).

>> The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) is a census survey of all 1,856 general purpose local governments in Michigan conducted by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) at the University of Michigan in partnership with the Michigan Municipal League, Michigan Townships Association, and Michigan Association of Counties. The MPPS investigates local officials' opinions and perspectives on a variety of important public policy issues. Respondents for the Spring 2020 wave of the MPPS include county administrators, board chairs, and clerks; city mayors, managers, and clerks; village presidents, managers, and clerks; and township supervisors, managers, and clerks from 1,342 jurisdictions across the state.

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## Key Findings

- Michigan's local leaders are significantly more positive about the functioning of democracy in their jurisdictions than they are about democracy at the state or federal levels today.
  - » On a ten-point scale—where 1 means a total breakdown of democracy and 10 means a perfectly functioning democracy—84% of local leaders rate democracy in their jurisdiction at 7 or higher, compared to just 41% for democracy in Michigan overall, and just 21% for democracy across the U.S.
  - » Partisan identification plays a larger role in assessments of the functioning of democracy at the state and national levels than locally. For local democracy, Republicans (88%) are just slightly more likely than Democrats (83%) or Independents (81%) to give high ratings. However, for Michigan's democracy overall, Democrats (59%) are more likely to give it high ratings than Republicans (42%) or Independents (32%). And for democracy across the U.S., just over a quarter (26%) of Michigan's Republican local officials give high ratings, while the same is true of only 14% of Independents and 11% of Democrats.
  - » Similarly, there are few differences in assessments of local democracy across the urban-rural spectrum, with bigger differences regarding democracy across Michigan and the U.S. For instance, 57% of urban leaders rate democracy across the state of Michigan as high functioning compared to just 39% of leaders from rural places. Meanwhile, 55% of leaders from "mostly urban" places rate democracy in the U.S. as poorly functioning, compared to just 33% from fully urban places.
- When it comes to trust in government, there is a similar pattern in attitudes among local leaders, with high levels of trust in other local governments (72%), followed by much lower trust in the state government (25%), and finally least trust in the federal government (12%).
  - » The 72% of Michigan local leaders with high trust in other local governments is up from 65-66% saying the same on previous MPPS surveys from 2009 to 2016. High levels of trust in the state government have also risen over time, from 9% of local leaders in 2009 to 25% today. Trust in the federal government has been more stable, rising slightly from 10% of local leaders in 2009 trusting the federal government to 12% today.
  - » Local leaders who identify as Independents are less likely in 2020 to indicate high levels of trust in other local governments (65%) or the state government (16%) compared with Democrats (74% and 25%, respectively) or Republicans (75% and 37%). And regarding the federal government, Republican local leaders (18%) are three times as likely to express high trust, compared with Democrats or Independents (6% each).
- To round out assessments of trust, the MPPS also asks local leaders how much they trust their citizens to be responsible participants in local governance. Here, levels of trust have also risen slightly over time, with 63% trusting their residents nearly always or most of the time today, up from 53% in both 2012 and 2016.

## Background

The health of democracy in the United States and around the world has been a topic of significant concern in recent years. Headlines across the U.S. have been filled with stories on challenges to core democratic institutions, from protests,<sup>1</sup> to the media,<sup>2</sup> the courts, the ballot box,<sup>3</sup> and more. Political observers are increasingly focused on the current health of democracy in the United States, and many have concluded that America's system of governance is in decline.<sup>4</sup>

Concerns about the functioning of American democracy are not new,<sup>5</sup> but in recent years, throughout President Donald Trump's tenure, they have spread to a wide variety of different facets and measures. In 2016 the Economist's annual "Democracy Index" downgraded the U.S. from "full democracy" to "flawed democracy" as the result of a decade of declining ratings on a number of the 60 different indicators they track.<sup>6</sup> Surveys of political scientists<sup>7</sup> and scholars who specifically study democratic decline<sup>8</sup> sound similar alarms about the decline in a variety of American democratic institutions and norms.

These concerns are not limited to national politics, but among the states as well. The March 2019 Bright Line Watch survey of experts found just 15 American states rated at higher than 75 on a 100 point scale assessing the quality of state-level democracy.<sup>9</sup> And although Michigan's nickname as "The Arsenal of Democracy" dates to World War II, it has experienced its own recent successes and challenges. For example, on one hand, the state's voters have recently amended the state constitution to expand voting access and also to end partisan gerrymandering by handing the redistricting process to a new independent citizens redistricting commission.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, as recently as 2015, Michigan scored worst in the nation on measures of state government accountability, ethics enforcement, and transparency.<sup>11</sup>

With much of this discussion of democratic decline centered on the national and state levels, much less attention has been given to governance at the local level. How well is democracy functioning at the grass roots? Over the past decade, the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) has explored many issues related to the functioning of democracy and political participation in local governments statewide. For example, based on reports from local leaders in 2012 and 2018, the MPPS found more positive than negative evidence about the state of civil civic discourse in Michigan communities, including how constructive or divisive it is among citizens, between citizens and elected officials, and among the local officials within the jurisdiction's government.<sup>12</sup> MPPS has carried tracking questions about trust in government since 2009 and has found that local leaders of all parties express particularly high levels of trust in other local governments across Michigan.<sup>13</sup> And leading up to the November 2020 elections, local township, city, and county clerks and other officials report widespread confidence in the security and accuracy of Michigan elections.<sup>14</sup>

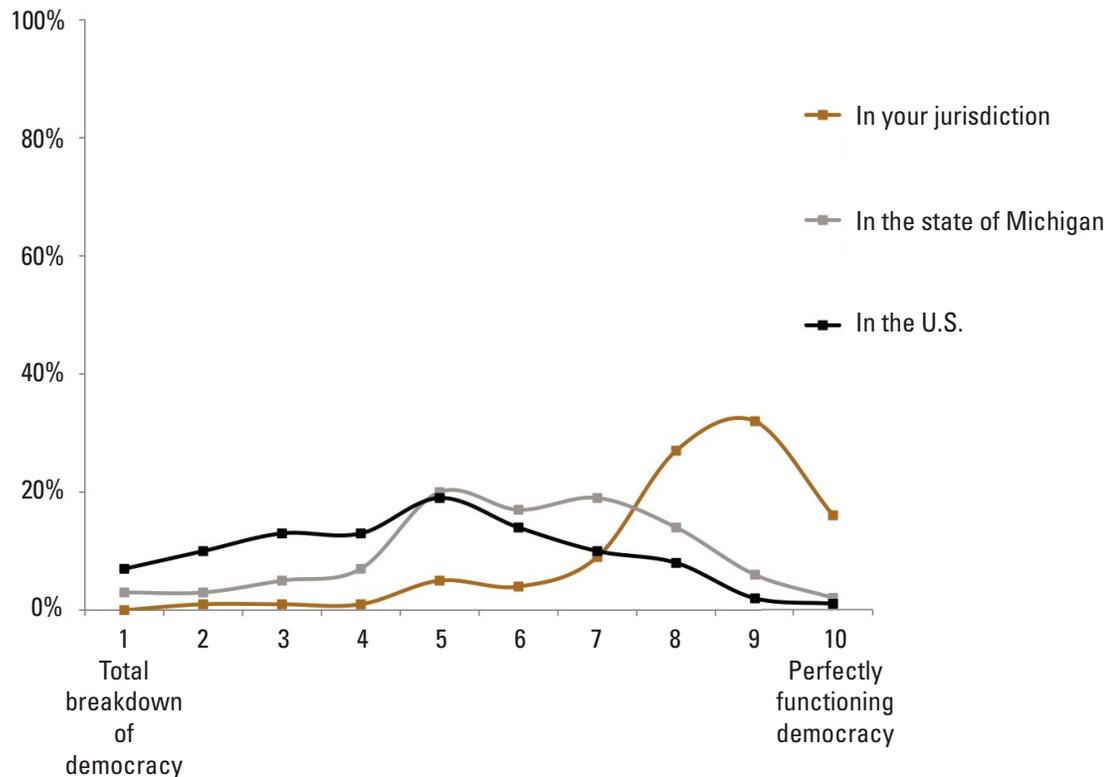
The Spring 2020 MPPS also introduced a new, overarching question to local leaders about their assessments of the current functioning of democracy that combined many of these issues into one index-style metric. On the questionnaire, the functioning of democracy was defined to include basic issues such 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." In addition, local leaders were once more asked about their levels of trust in government at the local, state, and national levels, as well as in their own citizens, to turn the table and get a 360-degree perspective of democracy.



## Local leaders are much more optimistic about functioning of democracy locally than at either state or national levels

**Figure 1**

Local officials' assessments of the current functioning of democracy in their jurisdictions, in Michigan, and in the U.S.



The Spring 2020 MPPS asked local leaders for their opinions about the state of our 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. Local 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 jurisdiction, in the state of Michigan overall, and in the United States overall.

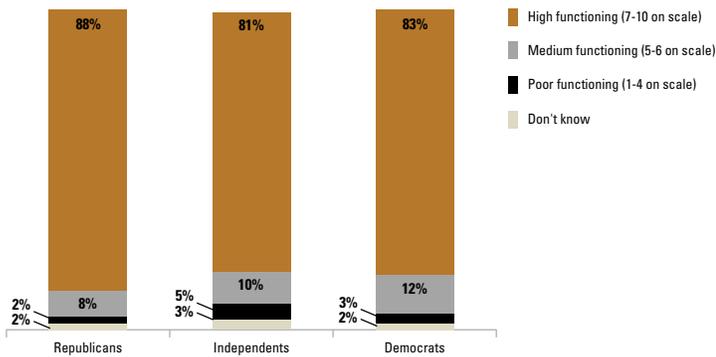
As displayed in *Figure 1*, local leaders are significantly more likely to rate the state of democracy in their local jurisdiction as high. In fact, nearly one in six (16%) of local leaders rate the state of democracy in their own jurisdictions as a perfect 10 on the 1-10 scale, and the mean assessment statewide is 8.2 out of 10. Only 3% rate the state of democracy in their communities as less than a 5 on the 10-point scale.

By comparison, the mean assessment on the 10-point scale for democracy in the State of Michigan as a whole is 6.1, and only 2% of local leaders give Michigan democracy a perfect 10. At the other end of the scale, 18% rate Michigan's democracy below a 5 on the 10-point scale, including 3% who rate Michigan at 1 on the scale, that is, experiencing a total breakdown of democracy.

Ratings for democracy at the federal level are even more pessimistic. Among officials statewide, the mean rating of the current state of democracy in the U.S. is below the halfway point of the scale, at 4.8, with nearly half (43%) of Michigan local officials giving U.S. democracy a rating lower than 5. Fewer than 1% say it is perfectly functioning, and 7% believe U.S. democracy is in a state of total breakdown.

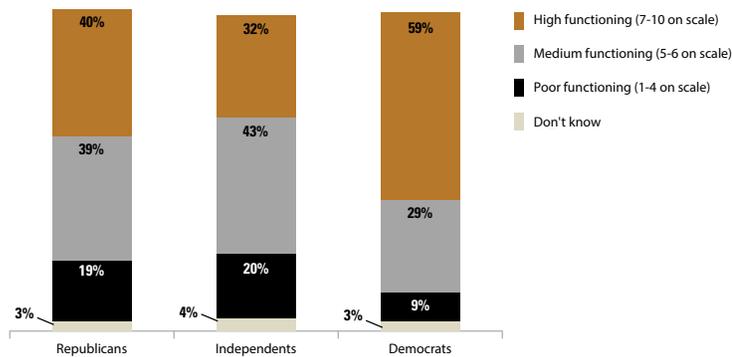
## Little difference among partisans regarding strength of local democracy

**Figure 2a**  
Local officials' assessments of the current functioning of democracy in their own jurisdiction, by partisan identification



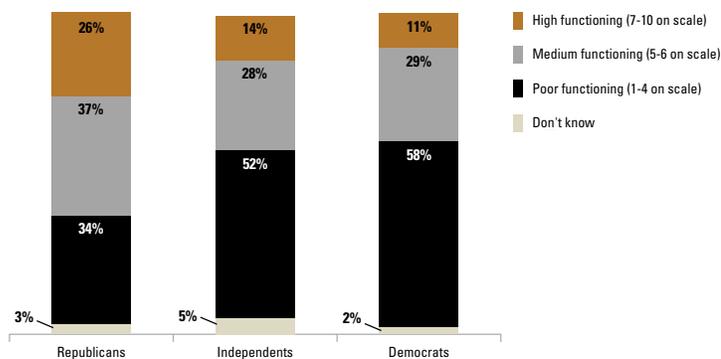
The partisan identification of local officials is much less strongly associated with assessments of local democracy than for the state and federal levels. Partisans of all stripes are highly positive about democracy in their own jurisdictions. As shown in *Figure 2a*, just 5% of Independents, 3% of Democrats, and 2% of Republicans rate the functioning of democracy in their own jurisdictions as poor (at 4 or lower on the 10-point scale). Meanwhile, significant majorities from each partisan category consider their jurisdictions to have highly functioning democracy (scores of 7-10), with Republicans (88%) being most likely to give their jurisdictions these high ratings on the state of local democracy.

**Figure 2b**  
Local officials' assessments of the current functioning of democracy in Michigan, by partisan identification



By contrast, there are significant differences by partisanship when it comes to rating the current health of democracy at the state level in Michigan. Among local leaders who identify themselves as Democrats, a majority (59%) say Michigan has high functioning democracy (see *Figure 2b*). However, among Republican local officials, fewer than half (42%) believe Michigan's democracy is high functioning, and less than a third of Independents (32%) say the same. At the other end of the scale, 19% of Republicans and 20% of Independents rate democracy across Michigan as poorly functioning, compared to 9% of Democrats. This is consistent with patterns on other MPPS questions about state government performance, where local officials' assessments often appear tied to whether or not the current Governor shares their own partisan affiliation.<sup>15</sup> With Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer holding the top office in Michigan during the Spring 2020 MPPS wave, and Republican officials leading both the state House and Senate, local officials who identify as Independents are currently the least optimistic about the health of Michigan democracy.

**Figure 2c**  
Local officials' assessments of the current functioning of democracy in the United States, by partisan identification

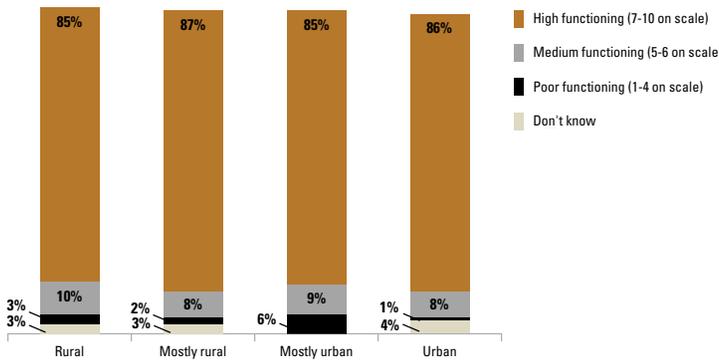


At the federal level, with the U.S. presidency held by Republican President Donald Trump, the partisan pattern is reversed. As shown in *Figure 2c*, Republican local officials tend to give higher ratings than others for the state of democracy in the United States as a whole, although these percentages are still quite low. While just over a quarter (26%) of Michigan's Republican local officials say democracy in the U.S. is functioning well (7 or higher on the 10-point scale), only 14% of Independents and 11% of Democrats say the same.



## Leaders from urban jurisdictions more positive about democracy across Michigan, suburban leaders most pessimistic for the U.S.

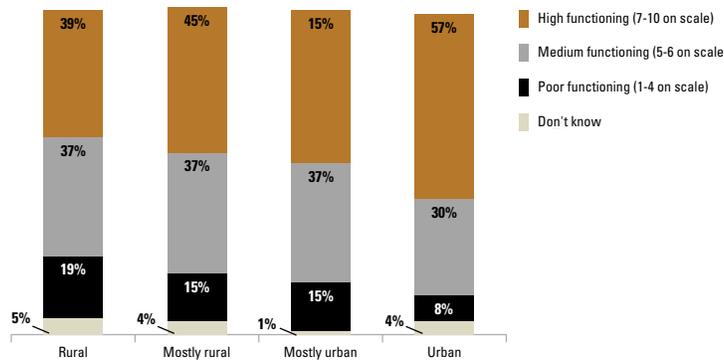
**Figure 3a**  
Local officials' assessments of the current functioning of democracy in their own jurisdiction, by urban-rural self-identification



Although partisanship has a particularly strong connection to assessments of the health of democracy at the state and national levels, statistical regression analysis shows that urban-rural differences also have a strong relationship with ratings of the functioning of democracy, unrelated to local leaders' partisanship.

Beginning in the Spring 2017 wave, the MPPS introduced a question asking local officials to characterize their jurisdictions on an urban-rural spectrum: rural, mostly rural, mostly urban, or urban. And when it comes to the functioning of local democracy, assessments are high across this spectrum, with 85% or more of officials from each group providing high marks (see *Figure 3a*).

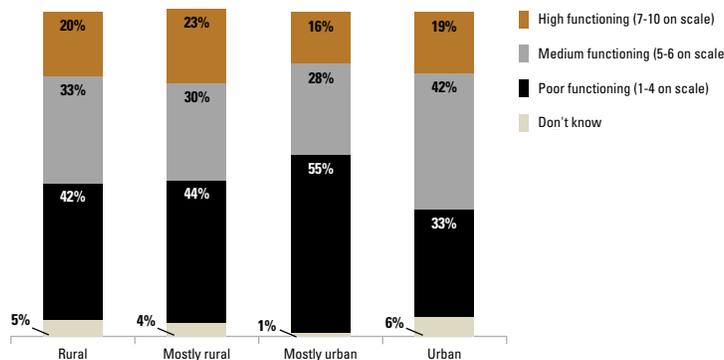
**Figure 3b**  
Local officials' assessments of the current functioning of democracy in Michigan, by urban-rural self-identification



When it comes to the functioning of democracy across the state of Michigan, a majority (57%) of local officials from urban jurisdictions say it is high functioning, compared with 47% from mostly urban places, 45% from mostly rural communities, and 39% from fully rural jurisdictions (see *Figure 3b*). Local officials from rural jurisdictions (19%) are the most likely to rate Michigan's democracy as poor today.

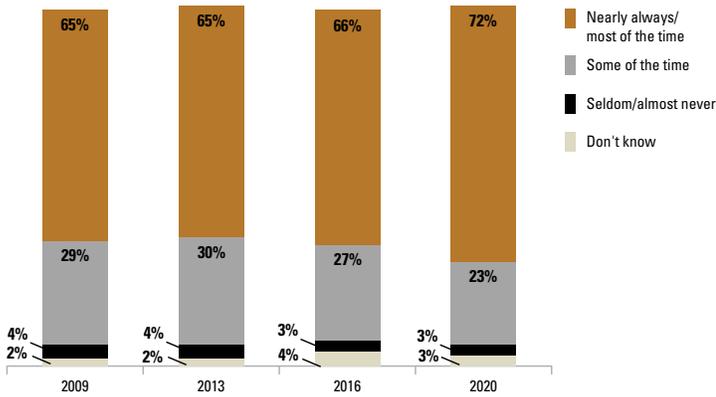
Local officials from mostly urban jurisdictions (55%) stand out in their ratings of democracy at the federal level as poor, compared with 42-44% in rural and mostly rural jurisdictions, and only 33% in fully urban jurisdictions (see *Figure 3c*). Officials from mostly rural jurisdictions give the highest ratings to the functioning of U.S. democracy, though this is still less than a quarter (23%) of these officials rating it at 7 or higher on the 10-point scale.

**Figure 3c**  
Local officials' assessments of the current functioning of democracy in the United States, by urban-rural self-identification

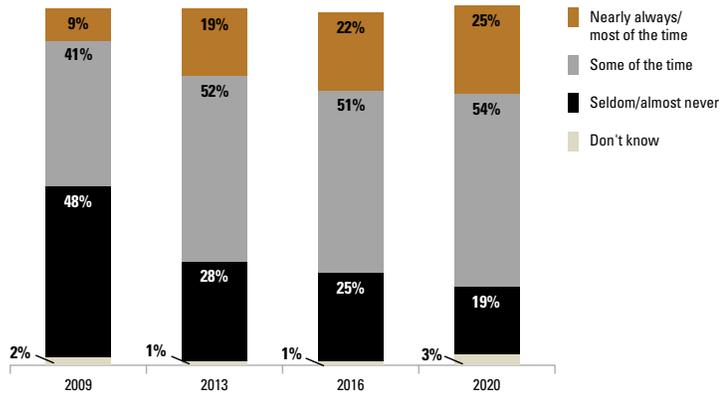


## Local leaders' trust in other governments increases slightly

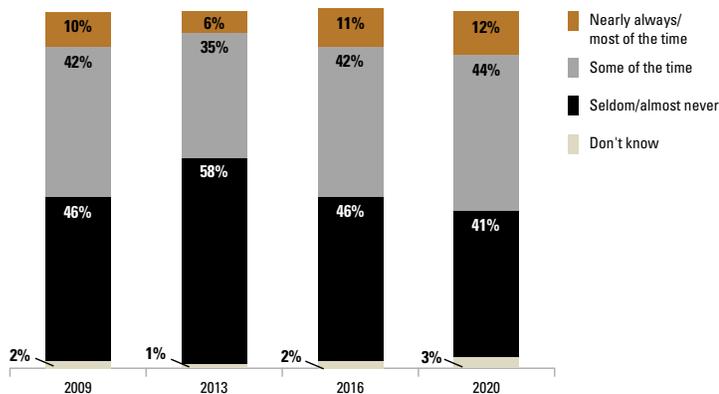
**Figure 4a**  
Local officials' trust in other local governments to do the right thing, 2009-2020



**Figure 4b**  
Local officials' trust in the state government to do the right thing, 2009-2020



**Figure 4c**  
Local officials' trust in the federal government to do the right thing, 2009-2020



Public trust in government among citizens nationwide has been in long-term decline since its modern peak in the mid-1960s, and currently sits at near record lows.<sup>16</sup> The MPPS has been tracking local leaders' trust in government for more than a decade, but contrary to seeing a decline, it has tracked steady or even slightly increased levels of trust over that time span.

As with their assessments of the state of democracy today, local leaders' trust is highest in other local governments, compared with the state or federal governments. Statewide, 72% of Michigan local leaders today trust other local governments "nearly always" or "most of the time" (see *Figure 4a*). Meanwhile, 23% trust other local governments some of the time, and just 3% say they seldom or almost never trust other local governments. The 72% with high levels of trust is an increase from the consistent ratings of 65-66% saying the same from 2009 to 2016.

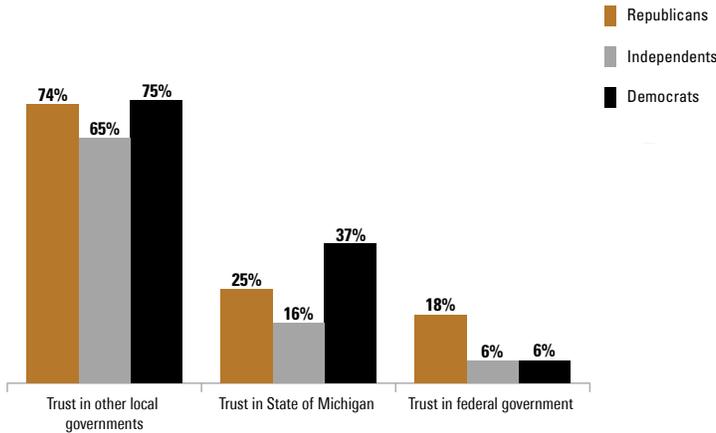
Trust in Michigan's state government among local leaders has also seen a statistically significant, if somewhat smaller, bump in 2020. Overall, a quarter (25%) of Michigan's local officials currently trust the state government nearly always or most of the time to do what is right (see *Figure 4b*). Trust in the state government has gradually increased since 2009, when just 9% of local leaders had high levels of trust. Meanwhile, *distrust* in the state government has declined precipitously. Where nearly half (48%) of local leaders seldom or almost never trusted the state in 2009, only 19% say the same today.

Trust in the federal government among Michigan's local leaders remains very low. Currently, just 12% statewide nearly always or most of the time believe the federal government will do what is right, an increase over the low point in 2013, but relatively unchanged since 2016 (see *Figure 4c*). Distrust in the federal level also saw its highest point (58%) in 2013, while this year 41% of local leaders seldom or almost never trust the federal government.



## Trust in other governments by partisanship and urban-rural status

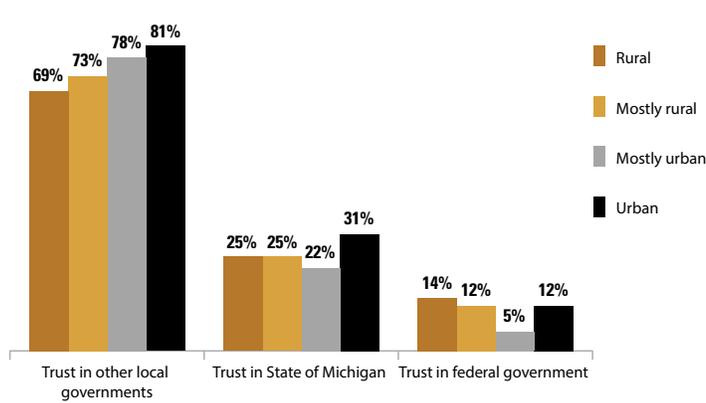
**Figure 5a**  
Local officials' trust in levels of government to do the right thing "nearly always" or "most of the time," 2020, by partisan identification



Looking at differences in trust by partisanship, local leaders who identify as Independents are the least likely to indicate high levels of trust in other local governments (65%) or the state government (16%) today (see *Figure 5a*). Meanwhile, Democrats (6%) and Independents (6%) are less likely than Republican local leaders (18%) to express high trust in the federal government currently. A majority of Democrats (53%) and Independents (62%) seldom or almost never trust the federal government today, compared with just 29% of Republicans.

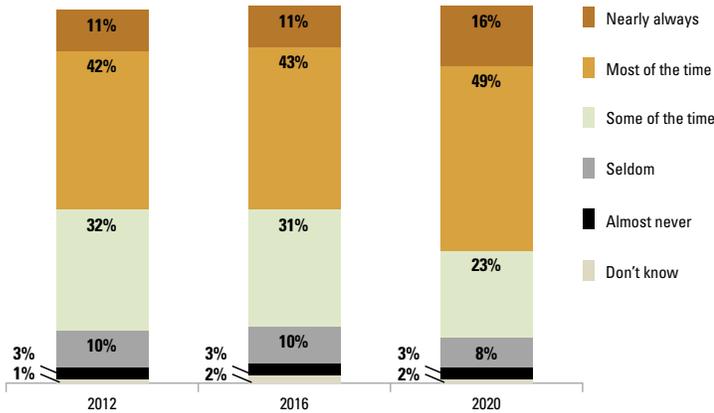
Trust in other local governments increases on a stepwise progression, looking at leaders from the most rural through the most urban communities (see *Figure 5b*). Urban leaders are also the most likely to express trust in the state government (31%), while local officials from mostly urban jurisdictions (5%) are the least likely to report high trust in the federal government today.

**Figure 5b**  
Local officials' trust in levels of government to do the right thing "nearly always" or "most of the time," 2020, by urban-rural self-identification



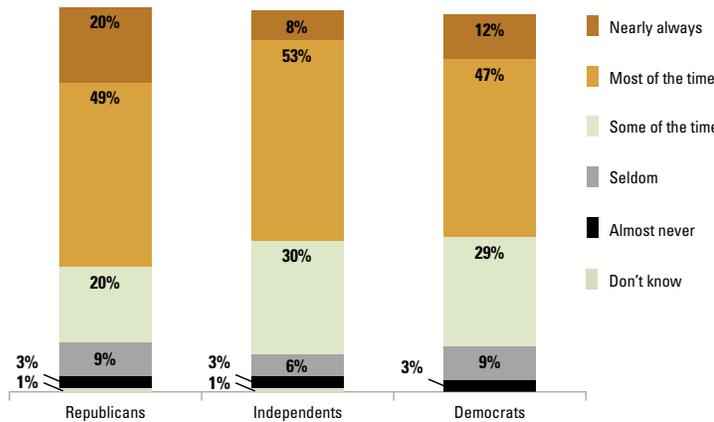
## Trust in jurisdictions' own residents also increases in 2020

Figure 6a  
Local officials' trust in their community's citizens to be responsible participants in local governance, 2012-2020



Whereas most surveys on trust focus on how much citizens trust the government, the MPPS has turned the tables, asking local government leaders how much of the time they trust their community's citizens to be responsible participants in local governance. As shown in *Figure 6a*, in 2012 and again in 2016, over half of local leaders statewide trusted their local citizens to be responsible participants in governance nearly always (11%) or most of the time (42-43%). Now those levels have risen further, with 16% of local leaders trusting their residents nearly always and another 47% trusting them most of the time.

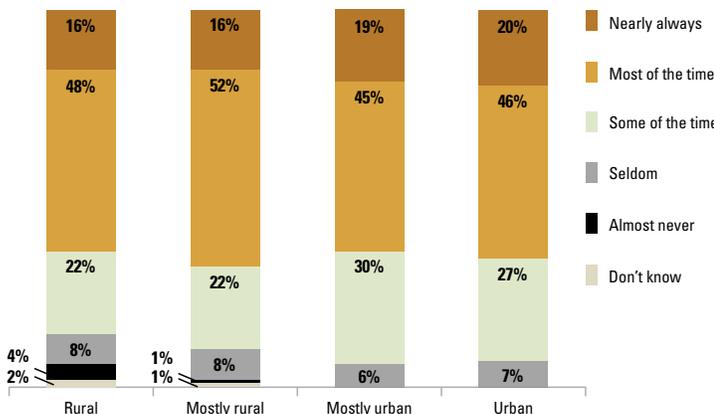
Figure 6b  
Local officials' trust in their community's citizens to be responsible participants in local governance, 2020, by partisan identification



When looking by partisan identification, compared with Independents (61%) or Democrats (59%), Republican local leaders (69%) are more likely to trust their citizens to be responsible participants in local governance nearly always or most of the time (see *Figure 6b*). Meanwhile, among all three groups, only 3% almost never trust their citizens.

And unlike other topics where the MPPS finds differences across the urban-rural spectrum, when it comes to trust in citizens these local leaders are quite similar to one another. Among local officials from mostly rural jurisdictions, 68% trust their citizens nearly always or most of the time. Meanwhile, 66% of urban local officials say the same, as do 64% of both rural and mostly urban local leaders (see *Figure 6c*).

Figure 6c  
Local officials' trust in their community's citizens to be responsible participants in local governance, 2020, by urban-rural self-identification





## Conclusion

Despite growing concern about the health of democracy in the U.S. and across the world, local leaders in Michigan give high marks for the functioning of local democracy in their communities, and this year even report increases in how much they trust both other governments and their own citizens.

While there are some differences when looking at these views by the local officials' partisan identification, and the rural-to-urban status of their communities, the MPPS finds relatively high marks for local democracy, trust in other local governments, and trust in their own citizens across the state.

Local leaders' assessments of in the functioning of democracy across Michigan as a whole are substantially lower, as is their general trust in the state government to do what is right. And when it comes to the federal level, both ratings of the functioning of U.S. democracy and trust in the federal government are even more pessimistic, with nearly half (42%) of Michigan local officials giving the functioning of U.S. democracy a rating lower than 5 on a 10-point scale, and 41% of local leaders saying they seldom or almost never trust the federal government while just 12% trust it nearly always or most of the time.

## Notes

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## Survey Background and Methodology

The MPPS is an ongoing survey program, interviewing the leaders of Michigan's 1,856 units of general purpose local government. Surveys are conducted each spring (and prior to 2018, were also conducted each fall). The program has covered a wide range of policy topics, and includes longitudinal tracking data on "core" fiscal, budgetary and operational policy questions and designed to build-up a multi-year time-series.

In the Spring 2020 iteration, 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, clerks, and managers; and township supervisors, clerks, and managers) from all 83 counties, 280 cities, 253 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan.

The Spring 2020 wave was conducted from March 30 – June 1, 2020. A total of 1,342 jurisdictions in the Spring 2020 wave returned valid surveys (59 counties, 216 cities, 163 villages, and 904 townships), resulting in a 72% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.41%. The key relationships discussed in the above report are statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level or below, unless otherwise specified. Missing responses are not included in the tabulations, unless otherwise specified. Some report figures may not add to 100% due to rounding within response categories. Quantitative data are weighted to account for non-response. "Voices Across Michigan" verbatim responses, when included, may have been edited for clarity and brevity. Contact CLOSUP staff for more information.

Detailed tables of the 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/michigan-public-policy-survey>.

*The survey responses presented here are those of local Michigan officials, while further analysis represents the views of the authors. Neither necessarily reflects the views of the University of Michigan, or of other partners in the MPPS.*



## Previous MPPS reports

Energy Issues and Policies in Michigan Local Governments (October 2020)

Michigan local leaders expect increased challenges for the 2020 election, but are confident about administering accurate elections (October 2020)

Michigan Local Energy Survey (MiLES): Intergovernmental collaboration on sustainability and energy issues among Michigan local governments (September 2020)

Confidence in the accuracy of Michigan's 2020 Census count among local leaders was not very high, slips further (August 2020)

Michigan local leaders expect mixed impacts from expanded voter registration and absentee voting reforms (July 2020)

Local leaders' evaluations of Michigan's direction and Governor's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic's arrival (July 2020)

The initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Michigan communities and local governments (June 2020)

Energy policies and environmental leadership among Michigan's local governments (January 2020)

Mixed signals continue for Michigan local governments' fiscal health, while future outlooks worsen (December 2019)

Michigan local officials' views on the next recession: timing, concerns, and actions taken (October 2019)

Michigan local government preparations and concerns regarding the 2020 U.S. Census (September 2019)

New Governor, new evaluations of the direction Michigan is headed among local leaders (August 2019)

Positive working relationships reported among Michigan's local elected officials (June 2019)

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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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