



## The Functioning of Democracy Across the Urban-Rural Spectrum: Student Paper Series

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# Direct Democracy in Action: Comparing Citizen Engagement efforts across the Urban-Rural Spectrum in Michigan

By Christian Hunter

In American society, citizen engagement is a manifestation of direct democracy at the local government level. Engaging citizens in their community can have positive effects on jurisdictions where it is pursued, but the process can also come with its own set of challenges. Given the current cultural divide between urban and rural areas, this paper seeks to understand the similarities and differences in citizen engagement across the rural-urban spectrum. In particular, this paper compares how rural and urban jurisdictions view current citizen engagement participation, the use of formal vs. informal methods for engagement, and the views on what citizen engagement is for. Findings indicate that current participation trends are similar in both rural and urban areas, but the methods and views of citizen engagement yield more mixed results.

### Key Findings

- Participation rates in citizen engagement activities, including who participated, were fairly consistent in both rural and urban areas.
- When it came to using formal or informal methods for citizen engagement, urban areas were more likely to use formal engagement methods than rural areas, but both rural and urban areas used informal methods.
- When asked to define citizen engagement, respondents in both rural and urban areas agreed on what those at the governing board level would think citizen participation is for, but had different responses when it came to what employees would think.



## Background

In American society, citizen engagement is a manifestation of direct democracy at the local government level. More than the stereotypical idea of public hearings, citizen engagement encompasses a broad array of efforts such as surveys, open houses and brainstorming sessions, and participatory budgeting meetings, among others.

Citizen engagement can have a positive influence on communities. First, robust citizen engagement tends to lead to better outcomes for communities that adopt these practices. For example, Transparency International, a global non-profit focused on anti-corruption measures, notes that citizen engagement can lead to positive benefits in anti-corruption and in promoting good governance.<sup>1</sup> It can also lead to positive efforts to bring new ideas to the table. Research from TEPSIE, a research consortium of European research universities dedicated to social innovation, notes that citizen engagement can bring major social innovations to the community.<sup>2</sup>

However, there are also challenges to citizen engagement that can inhibit some of these benefits. Some of these are related to citizens themselves. The Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas-Austin's list of potential challenges to citizen engagement includes a "lack of civility," "lack of civic and political skills," and "lack of attention to public affairs" as three of five potential barriers for effective engagement.<sup>3</sup> However, barriers to effective citizen engagement can come from failings by the government, as well. For example, a study conducted by *SmartCitiesWorld* and its partners found that over 50% of cities don't believe they do enough to engage citizens—and some of the biggest engagement obstacles they report are that cities cannot deliver what citizens want, a fear that not enough people will participate, or that costs will be too high for engagement efforts.<sup>4</sup>

Given the current cultural divides between rural and urban areas, it is possible that these benefits and challenges, and citizen engagement itself, manifest in different ways between small towns and large cities. As part of this exploration, this paper seeks to understand and uncover a broad understanding of how citizen engagement differs in rural and urban areas across the state of Michigan. It considers both participation rates in citizen engagement activities as well as local government officials' perceptions of the effectiveness of these activities. Given the great heterogeneity of communities across Michigan—both in terms of their citizenry and in the local governments that serve them—this paper aims to understand whether there is an urban-rural distinction in citizen engagement.

## Methods

The main question this paper seeks to evaluate is how citizen engagement may or may not be influenced by the urbanity or rurality of an area. This will primarily be evaluated by looking at local government officials' responses to a series of questions gauging the attitudes, participation, and perceived effectiveness of citizen engagement activities. The data comes from the Fall 2012 Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS), in which the majority of the survey was focused on citizen engagement questions. The selected questions are categorized into three topical areas—the level of participation in citizen engagement activities, the approaches taken towards citizen engagement, and respondent perceptions of the appropriate role of community engagement. The responses to these questions are analyzed based on the four categories of the jurisdictions according to the U.S. Census: totally rural, mostly rural, mostly urban, and totally urban.



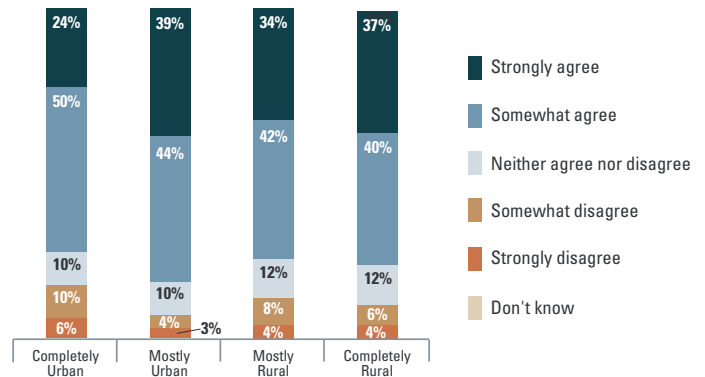
## Participation in Citizen Engagement Activities

When it comes to the current state of citizen engagement, one of the biggest challenges for both urban and rural areas is just getting people out to participate. However, it is not from a lack of trying, at least from the respondents' perspective. Across the rural-urban spectrum, local officials overwhelmingly agreed that their jurisdiction gave opportunities for every citizen to share their voice on issues (see *Appendix A*). However, when subsequently asked whether residents participate, most jurisdictions agreed that citizens did not take advantage of the opportunities made available to them. This held across both rural and urban communities, with 77-82% of the different types of jurisdictions responding they agree with this statement (see *Figure 1*).

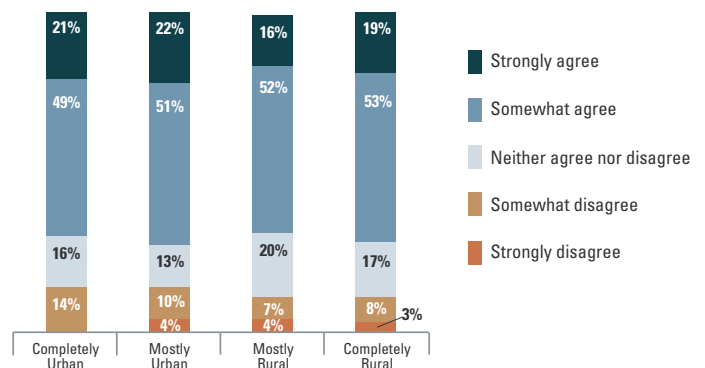
This sentiment of non-participation is similarly reflected in who participates. Rather than bringing in new people, many local officials say that the same people show up repeatedly. When asked whether citizen engagement efforts attracted the same people over and over again, over 70 percent of both urban and rural communities agreed that was the case, as can be seen in *Figure 2*.

These findings are interesting for a few reasons. First, these responses affirm major concerns identified in both the Moody Texas citizen engagement guide and the *SmartCitiesWorld* study about citizens lacking attention and not showing up to engage. And while the *SmartCitiesWorld* study specifically looked at cities, it appears that the issue of non-participating citizens also applies to rural areas as well. Second, because a “vocal minority” tends to show up over and over, decisions made off of citizen engagement may not reflect majority views. Third, because these issues with lack of engagement carry across both the urban and rural spectrum, policies and practices that could encourage more citizens to participate could potentially benefit all communities, rather than just those in rural or urban areas.

**Figure 1**  
Agreement/Disagreement that jurisdiction makes opportunities available but citizens don't take advantage of them



**Figure 2**  
Agreement/Disagreement that jurisdiction's engagement efforts mostly attract the same people over and over



## Formal vs. Informal Engagement

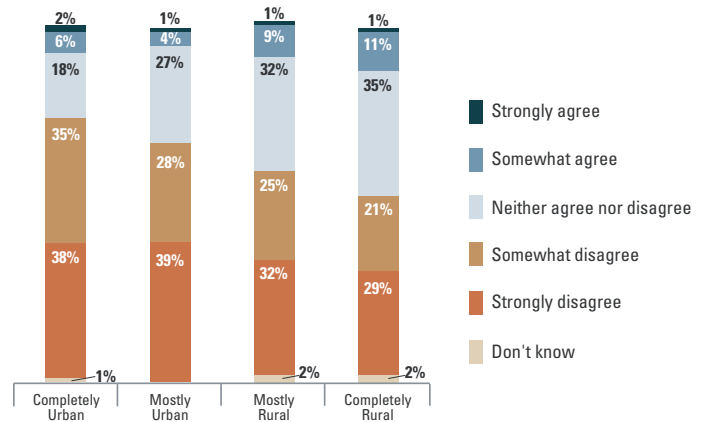
When looking at the approach taken towards engagement, one of the chief differences between urban and rural communities was on their use of informal versus formal citizen engagement efforts. One survey question addressed this issue directly, with local government officials being asked to answer whether or not they agreed with the statement: “We don’t need formal engagement efforts because our local officials already know what the citizens want.” Jurisdictions on the urban side of the spectrum disagreed strongly with this idea, with over 70% of completely urban areas, and about 2/3 of mostly urban areas somewhat or strongly disagreeing. Among other communities, however, there was less disagreement with the statement, and more ambivalence. For example, a plurality (35%) of officials in completely rural areas neither agreed nor disagree with the statement.

This split may be linked to the amount of training in citizen engagement that staff are provided. As can be seen in the results of Figure 4, about a quarter of completely urban areas had staff that received formal training in citizen engagement, while only 11% of completely rural areas had formal training.

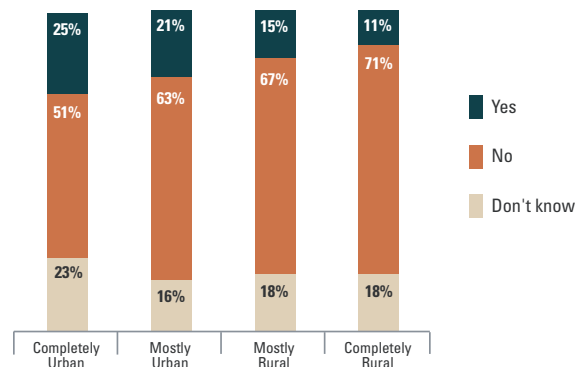
However, just because there is a preference for informal engagement in rural areas does not mean that it is the only place where informal engagement happens. On the survey, respondents were asked to answer whether they agree or not with the statement that *Some of the best engagement with citizens happens informally around the community*. As seen in Figure 5, the answers to this question were overwhelmingly “strongly agree” and “somewhat agree,” which totaled about 2/3 of all respondents. This may not be as surprising in more rural areas, both because they lean towards informal engagement and also because people are perhaps more likely to run into other people they know given lower population density. What was unexpected is that this trend in agreement towards valuing informal engagement also held up in urban areas, especially given that urban jurisdictions disagreed with not needing formal engagement at a higher rate than rural areas. Based on the data, it appears that both urban and rural areas use informal engagement efforts in their communities.

These responses indicate a predisposition towards informal “grassroots” engagement being used in all sorts of communities, regardless of size. The difference is that urban communities are more likely to employ formal engagement efforts in addition to their informal efforts. This overall embrace of informal citizen engagement across all jurisdictions is important to keep in mind when evaluating effective policy and how it might be geared towards formal engagement efforts.

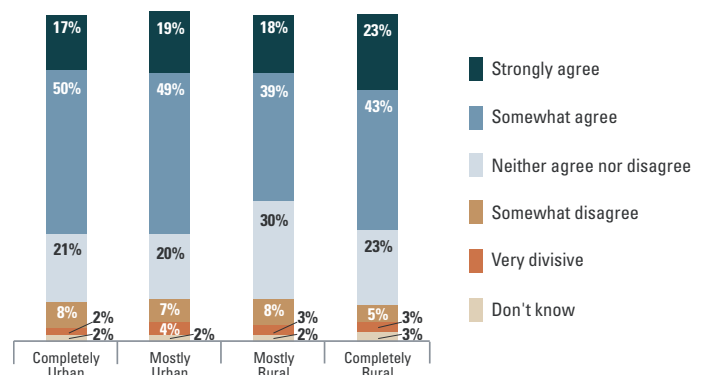
**Figure 3**  
Agreement/Disagreement that jurisdiction doesn’t need formal engagement efforts because local officials already know what the citizens want



**Figure 4**  
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting that personnel recently had formal training in promoting or managing citizen engagement



**Figure 5**  
Agreement/Disagreement that best engagement with citizens happens informally around the community





## The Purpose of Citizen Engagement

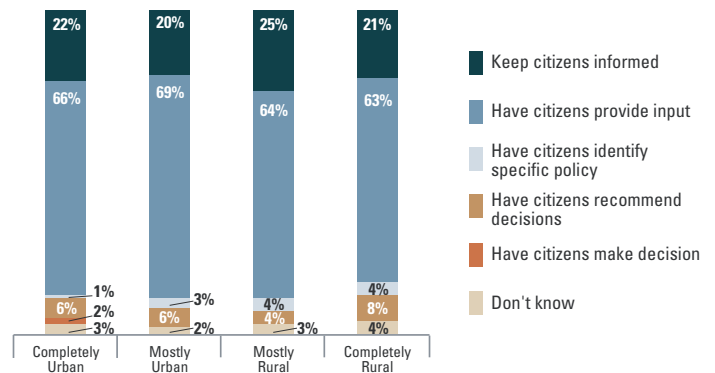
The last component of this research considers similarities and differences in how local government officials viewed the purpose of citizen engagement. Some communities might see it as a way for residents to exercise direct democracy, while others might see citizen engagement more as educating participants. The MPPS survey asked two questions about the role of citizen engagement: the first to understand the views of the local government board/council, and second to understand how employees of the jurisdiction see the purpose of citizen engagement.

Regardless of whether the jurisdiction was rural or urban, respondents largely believe their governing board (i.e., city council or township/village/county board) sees the same purpose in citizen engagement. As shown in *Figure 6*, roughly two thirds of all jurisdictions responded that the elected officials within their jurisdiction see the main point of citizen engagement was to have citizens provide input.

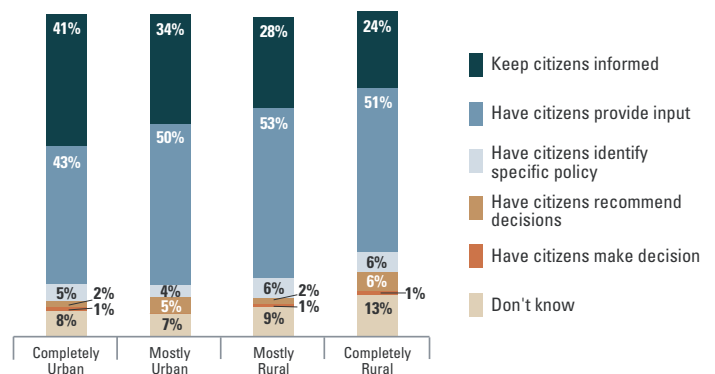
When it came to how employees viewed citizen engagement, responses began to diverge. *Figure 7* demonstrates that local officials in more rural areas similarly believe their employees see the purpose of citizen engagement is to gather citizen input. In contrast, however, respondents from completely urban or mostly urban areas were more likely to report their staffs had differing purposes in mind. About 40% in urban areas and 32% in mostly urban areas thought that the employees of their jurisdiction believed the main role of citizen engagement was to keep citizens informed, but not necessarily have them provide input.

These findings are important for a couple of reasons. First, this points to potential functional differences between urban and rural areas when it comes to community engagement. It may be that given their size or other factors, urban areas need citizen engagement to simply alert the populace, whereas word spreads through other means in rural areas given there are smaller populations to inform. The second reason these findings are important is that they show potential disconnects between officials and employees in urban areas, perhaps pointing to tension between the two groups. They suggest that there may need to be more dialogue and planning between both groups to employ quality citizen engagement.

**Figure 6**  
The Majority of the Jurisdiction Council/Board believe the role of citizen engagement is to...



**Figure 7**  
The Majority of the Jurisdiction Employees believe the role of citizen engagement is to...



### Conclusion

Despite the narratives about an “urban-rural divide,” this research finds that, on the issue of citizen engagement, there are more similarities than differences. These similarities included local officials’ perceptions of participation in citizen engagement activities, the usage of informal engagement methods, and that their boards/councils similarly view engagement as an opportunity for citizens to provide input into the policymaking process. There were some differences, although they were usually additions rather than fundamental base differences. One such example is how urban areas utilized formal engagement more heavily, but that it did not appear to be in lieu of informal engagement but supplemental to it. Overall, the preponderance of similarities suggest that strategies to employ and bolster citizen engagement could benefit both urban and rural areas.

### 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.

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: <https://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.*



## Appendix A

Agreement/Disagreement that any citizen who wants to express an opinion has the chance to do so

	Completely Urban	Mostly Urban	Mostly Rural	Completely Rural
Strongly Agree	80%	84%	78%	83%
Somewhat Agree	20%	13%	18%	14%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	0%	2%	2%	2%
Somewhat Disagree	0%	1%	2%	0%
Strongly Disagree	0%	0%	1%	1%
Don't Know	0%	0%	0%	1%

## Notes

1. Marin, J. (2016). Evidence of citizen engagement impact in promoting good governance and anti-corruption efforts. Retrieved January 3, 2021, from <https://www.u4.no/publications/evidence-of-citizen-engagement-impact-in-promoting-good-governance-and-anti-corruption-efforts>
2. Davies, A, Simon, J, (2012) 'The value and role of citizen engagement in social innovation'. The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe (TEPSIE), European Commission – 7th Framework Programme, Brussels: European Commission, DG Research
3. Anonymous. (2017, January 11). Five obstacles to civic engagement. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <https://moody.utexas.edu/centers/strauss/five-obstacles-civic-engagement>
4. Lodewijckx, I. (2020, August 21). The barriers to citizen participation: Why aren't cities doing 'more'? Retrieved January 7, 2021, from <https://www.citizenlab.co/blog/civic-engagement/the-barriers-for-citizen-participation-why-arent-cities-doing-more/>

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COVID-19 pandemic sparks Michigan local leaders' concerns for fiscal health (December 2020)

The functioning of democracy at the local level: a compendium of findings from the Michigan Public Policy Survey of local leaders (December 2020)

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Local officials say Michigan's system of funding local government is broken, and seek State action to fix it (September 2016)

Michigan local governments report first declines in fiscal health trend since 2010 (August 2016)

Michigan local leaders' doubts continue regarding the state's direction (July 2016)

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Beyond trust in government: government trust in citizens? (March 2013)

Local leaders support reforming Michigan's system of funding local government (January 2013)

Local leaders support eliminating Michigan's Personal Property Tax if funds are replaced, but distrust state follow-through (November 2012)

Michigan's local leaders satisfied with union negotiations (October 2012)

Michigan's local leaders are divided over the state's emergency manager law (September 2012)

Fiscal stress continues for hundreds of Michigan jurisdictions, but conditions trend in positive direction overall (September 2012)

Michigan's local leaders more positive about Governor Snyder's performance, more optimistic about the state's direction (July 2012)

Data-driven decision-making in Michigan local government (June 2012)

State funding incentives increase local collaboration, but also raise concerns (March 2012)

Local officials react to state policy innovation tying revenue sharing to dashboards and incentive funding (January 2012)

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MPPS finds fiscal health continues to decline across the state, though some negative trends eased in 2011 (October 2011)

Public sector unions in Michigan: their presence and impact according to local government leaders (August 2011)

Despite increased approval of state government performance, Michigan's local leaders are concerned about the state's direction (August 2011)

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Local leaders are mostly positive about intergovernmental cooperation and look to expand efforts (March 2011)

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