



MPPS Policy Brief

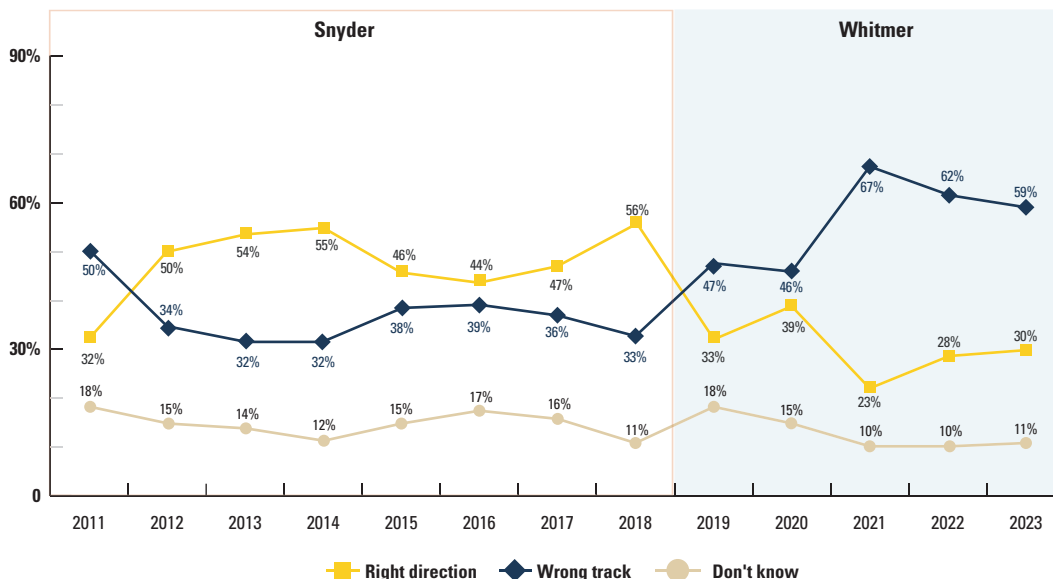
Despite two-year trend of improvement, most Michigan local officials continue to say the state is on the wrong track

By Debra Horner, Thomas Ivacko, and Natalie Fitzpatrick

Statewide, 59% of Michigan’s local government officials say the state is off on the wrong track in 2023 (see *Figure 1*). This is an improvement from 62% in 2022 and from the series high of 67% in 2021, but local leaders’ views still have not recovered to pre-COVID levels. Meanwhile, 30% believe the state is generally going in the right direction, a slight improvement from 28% last year and from the series low of 23% in 2021. Overall, 11% are unsure about the direction the state is headed.

Not surprisingly, the MPPS has found these assessments are linked to local leaders’ partisan identification and whichever party controls the Governor’s office. In other words, Republican local leaders express more support for the state’s direction when a Republican is governor and less when a Democrat is in office, and vice versa in the case of Democratic local leaders’ assessments (as seen in *Figure 2*). Meanwhile, the statewide percentages in *Figure 1* reflect the makeup of the state’s local governments, which include 1,240 townships—most of which are rural, small in terms of population, and led by Republicans—compared with 533 cities and villages which are more often led by Democrats, and 83 counties. Indeed, in 2023, 60% of the MPPS respondents self-identify as Republicans, while 17% say they are Independents, and 23% identify as Democrats.

Figure 1
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the ‘right direction’ or is off on the ‘wrong track,’ 2011-2023

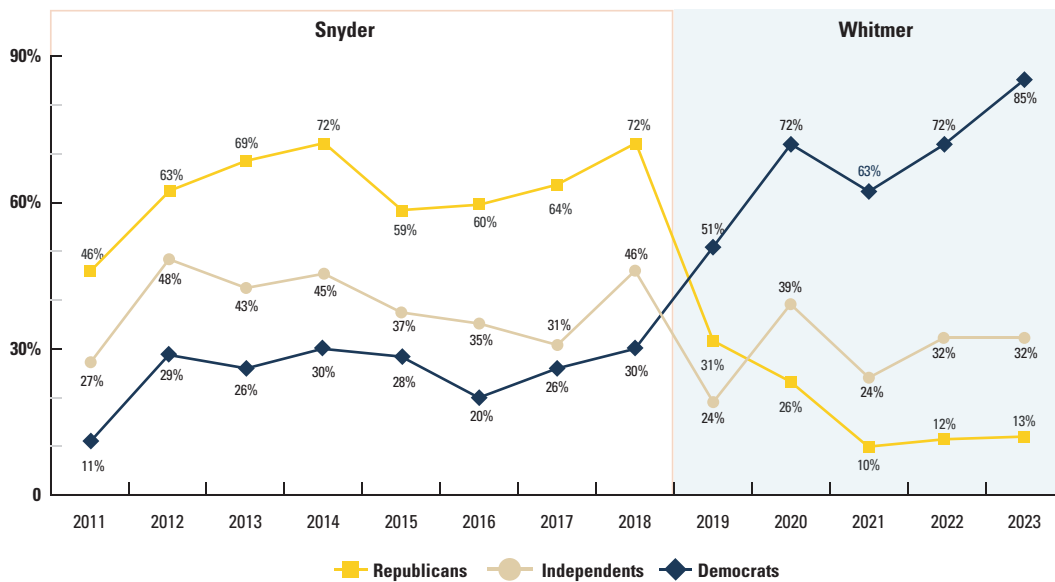


Most Republicans and Independents remain pessimistic about the state's direction, while Democrats' optimism grows

The MPPS has tracked the connection between local officials' partisanship and their views of the state's direction since 2011, and the 2023 survey continues to reveal stark differences in how the partisan groups feel about the state's direction.

With the governor's office currently held by Democrat Gretchen Whitmer, only 13% of Republican local officials say the state is going in the right direction, essentially equivalent to the 12% who said the same last year (see *Figure 2*), and from 10% in 2021. Similarly, optimism about the state's direction among local officials who are self-identified Independents (32%) remained unchanged this year, though it is up from 24% in 2021. By comparison, the percentage of self-identified Democrats who think Michigan is headed in the right direction jumped significantly this year to 85%, from 72% in 2022 and 63% in 2021.

Figure 2
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the 'right direction' in 2011-2023, by partisan identification



Local leaders' assessments of Governor Whitmer's performance closely mirror their views on direction of the state as "poor" ratings decline

The MPPS also asks local officials to evaluate the job performance of the sitting governor, starting in 2009 with Governor Jennifer Granholm, through Governor Rick Snyder's two terms, and now into current Governor Gretchen Whitmer's second term.

In 2023, less than a third (30%) of local leaders statewide rate Governor Whitmer's performance as "excellent" or "good," unchanged from 30% last year, and less than the 34% who say the state is headed in the right direction (see *Figure 3*). Meanwhile, 27% rate the Governor's job performance as "fair," up slightly from 23% a year ago. Over a third (38%) rate her performance today as "poor," a decrease from 44% last year.

As with assessments of the state's direction, these ratings on job performance are also strongly associated with partisanship. As shown in *Figure 4*, 86% of Democratic local leaders currently give Governor Whitmer positive ratings, up from an already high 81% in 2022. Among Independents, her positive ratings (37%) are essentially unchanged from last year.

Meanwhile, just 11% of Republican local leaders rate Governor Whitmer's performance as good or excellent in 2023, also basically unchanged from last year. Although not shown in the figure, this year 53% of Republican local officials give Governor Whitmer's performance a poor rating, a significant drop from the 62% who said the same last year.

Figure 3
Local officials' evaluations of Governor Whitmer's performance compared with previous Governors' performances, 2009-2023

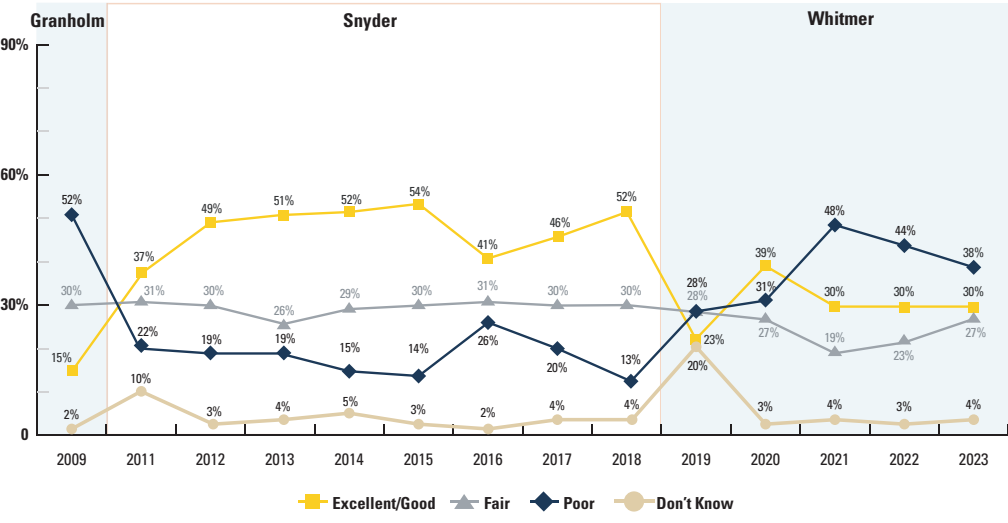
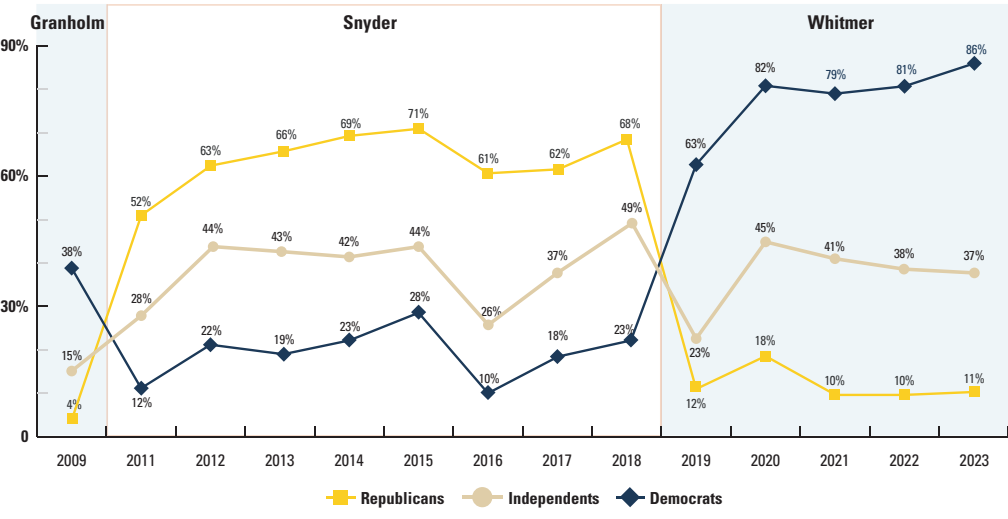


Figure 4
Percentage of local officials who rate the Governor's performance as 'excellent' or 'good' in 2009-2023, by partisan identification



Assessments of the Michigan Legislature shift markedly in partisan direction

Last year, local leaders' assessments of the Michigan Legislature's performance shifted toward the positive. However, in 2023, with the change in partisan control of both the Michigan House and Senate from Republicans to Democrats, sentiments have once more turned downward statewide. Relatively few local leaders overall believe the Michigan Legislature is doing an outright excellent or good job (16%), and ratings of fair dropped from 51% in 2022 to 42% in 2023 (see *Figure 5*). At the same time, the percent who view its performance as poor jumped from 27% last year to 35% today.

By contrast with ongoing partisan-affiliated evaluations of the state's direction and of Governor Whitmer's performance, earlier partisan differences in evaluations of the Legislature's performance had nearly disappeared over the last few years. However, with the change of partisan legislative control after the November 2022 elections, local partisan sentiments have triggered a huge shift in the views of the Legislature's work this year. Although the views of Independents are unchanged, with 13% saying the Legislature is doing an excellent or good job, Republican leaders' positive ratings have dropped from 19% last year to 7% this year, while Democrats' have more than doubled from 20% to 48% (see *Figure 6*). It is worthwhile noting that the MPPS survey ran from early February to early April this year, corresponding with just the earliest days of the new legislative session under Democratic control.

Figure 5
Local officials' evaluations of Michigan Legislature's performance, 2009-2023

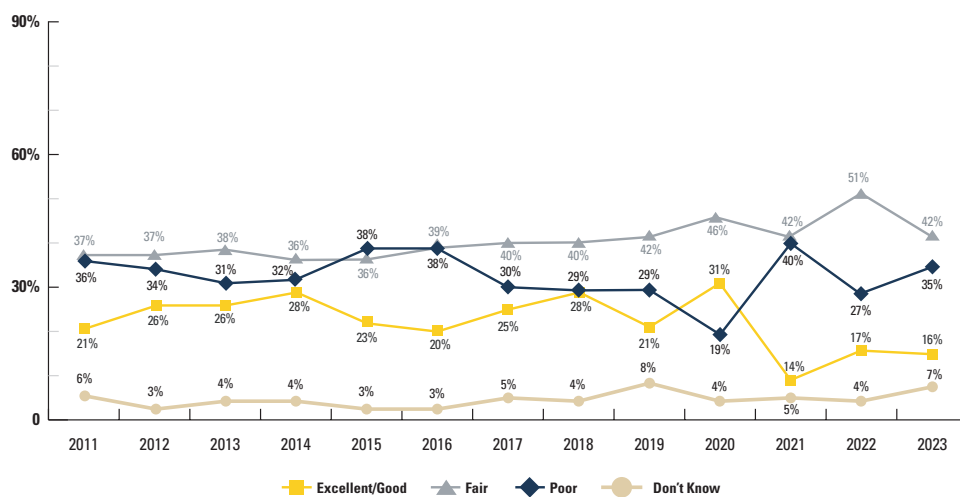
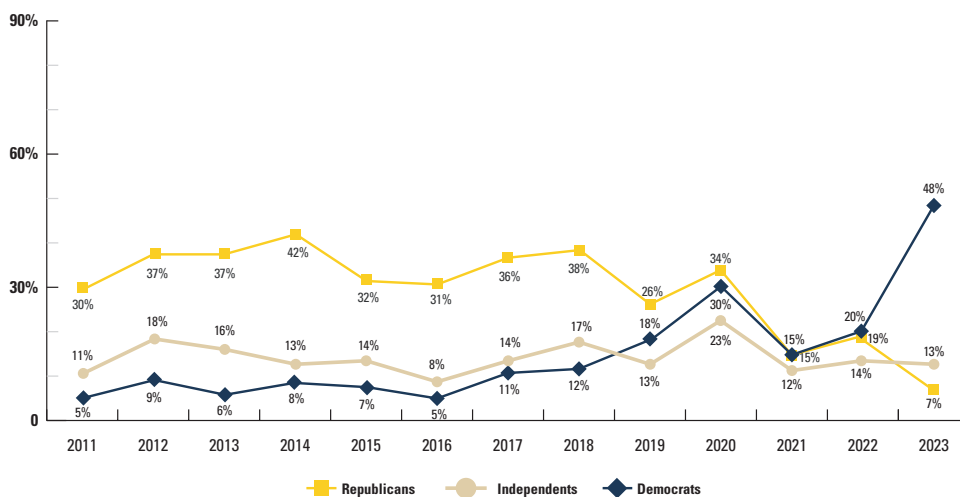


Figure 6
Percentage of local officials who rate the Michigan Legislature's performance as 'excellent' or 'good' in 2009-2023, by partisan identification



Survey Background and Methodology

The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) is an ongoing census survey of all 1,856 general purpose local governments in Michigan conducted since 2009 by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) at the University of Michigan's Gerald R Ford School of Public Policy. The program is a partnership with Michigan's local government associations. The Spring 2023 wave was conducted February 6 – April 17, 2023. Respondents include county administrators, board chairs, and clerks; city mayors, managers, and clerks; village presidents, managers, and clerks; and township supervisors, managers, and clerks from 1,307 jurisdictions across the state, resulting in a 70% response rate by unit. More information is available at <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/mpps-2023-spring>

See CLOSUP's website for the full question text on the survey questionnaire. Detailed tables of the data in this report, including breakdowns by various community characteristics, will be available soon at <http://mpps.umich.edu>.

The survey responses presented here are those of local Michigan officials and residents, 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.



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