



### MPPS Policy Brief

## Michigan local government leaders' concerns about the health of democracy edge upward, including at local level

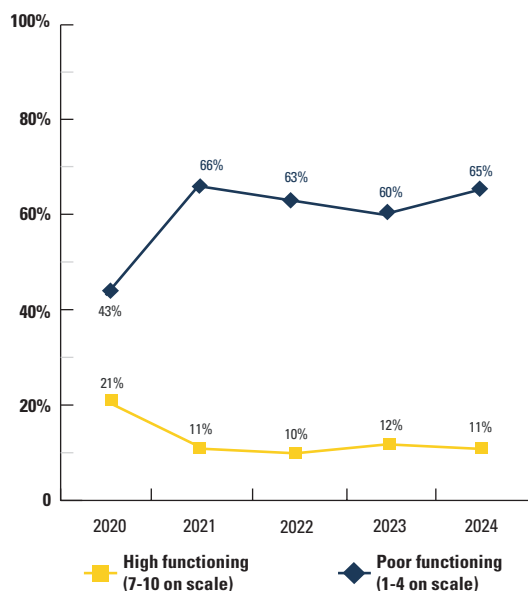
By Debra Horner and Natalie Fitzpatrick

Since 2020, the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) has asked local government leaders across the state for their assessments of American democracy as a system of government, based on factors like free and fair elections, rule of law, an unbiased free press, ethical and transparent governance, an informed and engaged electorate, and more. Local officials evaluate the functioning of democracy on a 10-point scale—with 1 as a total breakdown of democracy and 10 as perfectly functioning democracy—for the United States overall, for the state of Michigan overall, and for their own jurisdiction. Assessments of 1-4 on the scale signify low or poor assessments, while those from 7-10 signify assessments of highly functioning democracy.

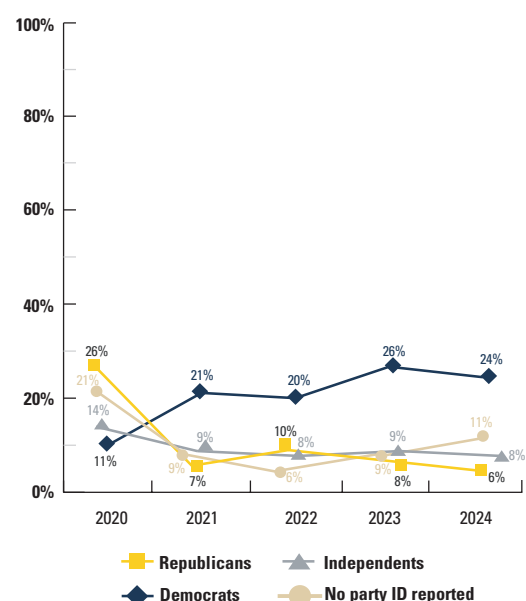
Figure 1 shows Michigan local leaders' assessments of democracy at the national level, from spring 2020 through spring 2024. Although assessments of civic health at the national level improved marginally from 2021-2023, this year ratings of "poor" shift higher, from 60% in 2023 to 65% this spring. Only 11% of Michigan local leaders currently say U.S. democracy is functioning at a "high" level, with a quarter of self-identified Democrats (24%) saying it is currently high functioning and all other groups significantly more pessimistic.

**Figure 1**  
Local officials' assessments of the functioning of democracy at the national level, 2020-2024

Local leaders statewide:



Percent rating U.S. "high functioning," by partisanship:



Local leaders' assessments of how democracy is functioning here in the state of Michigan have also declined slightly this year among all groups except for self-identified Independents.

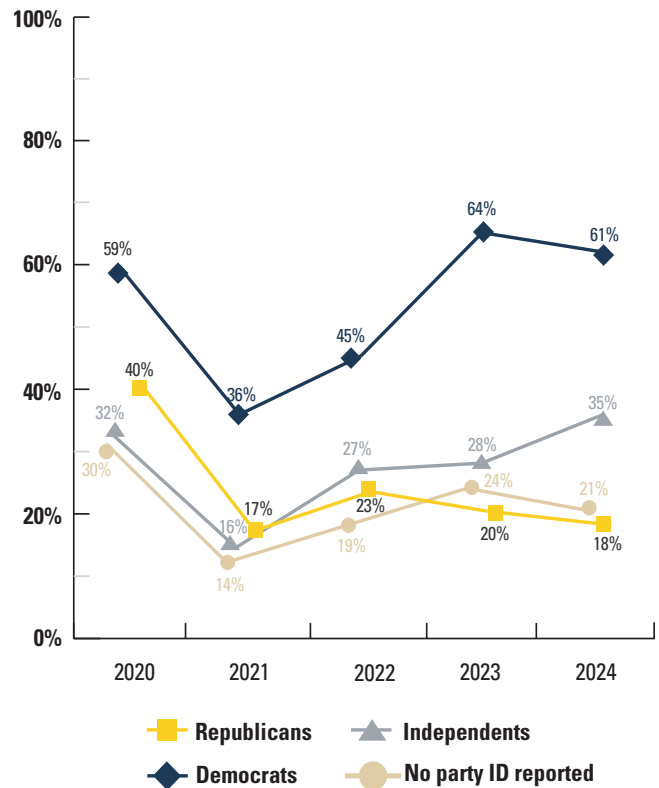
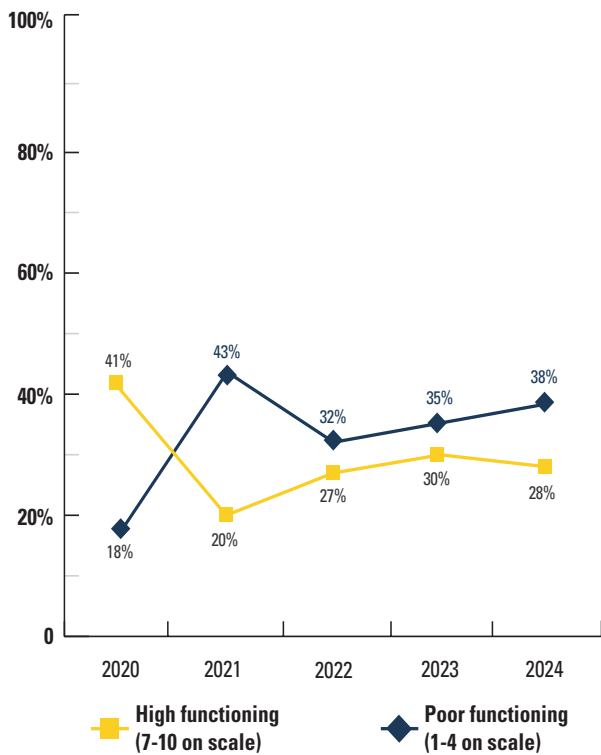
Overall, the percentage who view the functioning of democracy in Michigan as high dipped slightly from 30% in 2023 to 28% this year, while the percentage who view it as poorly functioning rose from 35% to 38% (see *Figure 2*).

Republicans (18%) and Democrats (61%), as well as those local officials who did not provide a party I.D. (21%) all report lower assessments of the health of Michigan's democracy in 2024. Only Independents (35%) saw an increase in the percentage who rate the functioning of democracy in Michigan as high.

**Figure 2**  
Michigan local officials' assessments of the functioning of democracy at the state level in Michigan, 2020-2024

Local leaders statewide:

Percent rating Michigan "high functioning," by partisanship:



# One in five local leaders statewide indicate concerns about the functioning of democracy in their communities

Last year, local officials' assessments of democracy in their own communities declined for the first time since the MPPS started tracking these ratings, from 84% with positive assessments in 2022 to 79% in 2023.

This year, the percentage of Michigan officials statewide who say they have highly functioning civic health in their local communities stayed the same at 79%, but the percentage who view it is poorly functioning inched upwards from 4% to 7% (see *Figure 3*).

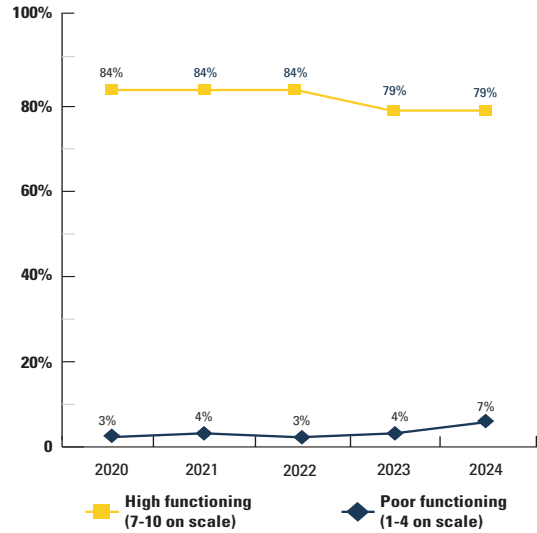
A decline in positive assessments can be found primarily among local leaders who identify themselves as Democrats, who went from 84% last year saying their local community has a highly functioning democracy to 78% in 2024.

This continued lower rating of local democracy is only a small change, but it stands out somewhat in the MPPS time-series of surveys, which typically finds local officials giving very high marks to a wide variety of issues in their own communities. It is worth noting that previous MPPS reports have documented various concerns of local leaders regarding local governance, particularly including concerns about the local impacts of the increasingly hostile state of national partisan politics,<sup>1</sup> and the fact that 53% of local officials report harassment, threats, or even violence (including property crimes) from members of the public targeted against at least one member of the local government in the last few years.<sup>2</sup>

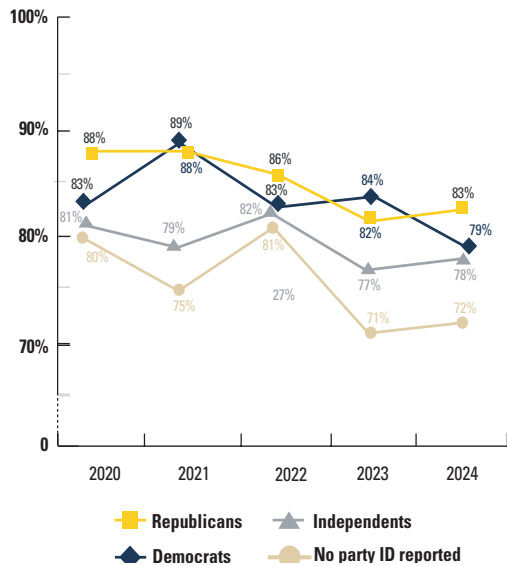
That said, Michigan's local leaders continue to say that local civic relationships in their communities remain positive<sup>3</sup> and that debate in their communities on contentious local issues like planning and zoning remains mostly constructive rather than divisive.<sup>4</sup> Although assessments of local democracy have not improved this year, *Figure 3* still shows the overwhelming majority of local leaders continue to believe democracy is functioning quite well in their communities today.

**Figure 3**  
Local officials' assessments of the functioning of democracy at the local level in Michigan, 2020-2024

Local leaders statewide:



Percent rating their community "high functioning," by partisanship:



## Notes

1. Horner, D. & Ivacko, T. (2022, January). *Michigan local leaders report little change in the tone of civic discourse in their communities, but are concerned about local impacts of increasingly hostile national partisan politics*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/97/michigan-local-leaders-report-little-change-tone-civic-discourse-their-communities>
2. Fitzpatrick, N., Horner, D. & Ivacko, T. (2022, September). *Statewide survey finds a majority of Michigan local governments experiencing harassment or other abuse*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/103/mpps-policy-brief-statewide-survey-finds-majority-michigan-local-governments-experiencing-harassment-abuse>
3. Fitzpatrick, N., Horner, D. & Ivacko, T. (2022, October). *Michigan local government leaders say civic relationships and civil discourse remain healthy, despite worsening national politics*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/105/michigan-local-government-leaders-say-civic-relationships-and-civil-discourse-remain-healthy>
4. Horner, D. & Fitzpatrick, N. (2024, July). *Michigan local governments' planning and zoning on energy policy*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/124/Michigan-local-governments-planning-zoning-energy-policy>



## Survey Background and Methodology

The data presented in this policy brief come from the Spring 2024 Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS). The 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 2024 wave was conducted April 1 – June 10, 2024. 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-2024-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 jurisdiction characteristics such as community population size, region, and jurisdiction type, will be available soon at <http://mpps.umich.edu>.

*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.*



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