



Michigan local leaders trust residents less, but say that local democracy remains strong

By Natalie Fitzpatrick, Debra Horner, and Stephanie Leiser

This report presents Michigan local government leaders' trust in their residents and their assessments of the tone of discussion in local politics, as well as their views regarding the overall functioning of democracy in their jurisdictions. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the spring 2025 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) with comparisons to survey waves from 2012–2024.

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). Respondents for the Spring 2025 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 1,328 local jurisdictions across the state.

Key Findings

- **Trust in residents:** Statewide, local leaders' trust that their jurisdiction's residents can be responsible participants in local policymaking is declining. Less than a majority (40%) currently trust their residents nearly always or most of the time. Meanwhile, 21% say they seldom or almost never trust residents to participate responsibly, the highest level since the MPPS started tracking these sentiments in 2012.
- **Tone of discussion and communication:** Assessments of the tone of civic discourse involving residents have also deteriorated.
 - » Michigan local leaders are significantly less likely this year to say discourse about local policy issues *among residents themselves* is primarily constructive (30%) compared to 2022 (42%), while 18% believe discussions among their residents are mostly divisive.
 - » Currently, 59% of local officials report primarily constructive discourse *between elected officials and their residents*, down from 66% in 2022 and 70% in 2012.
 - » By contrast, assessments of the tone of civic discourse *among local elected officials themselves* have remained stable over time, with 69% in 2025 saying discourse is constructive, and just 7% saying it's divisive.
- **Functioning of local democracy:** Declines in assessments of trust and discourse are not the whole story. After two consecutive years of falling ratings of local democratic health, this year the percentage of Michigan officials statewide who say they have a highly functioning local democracy ticked slightly upward from 79% to 82%, while the percentage who report poor functioning dropped from 7% to 2%.
 - » Across rural and urban communities last year, local leaders had relatively similar ratings of local civic health (79%–84% “high” functioning). In 2025, assessments in rural communities remained flat at 79% while mostly rural (87%), mostly urban (88%), and urban (92%) communities saw substantial increases.

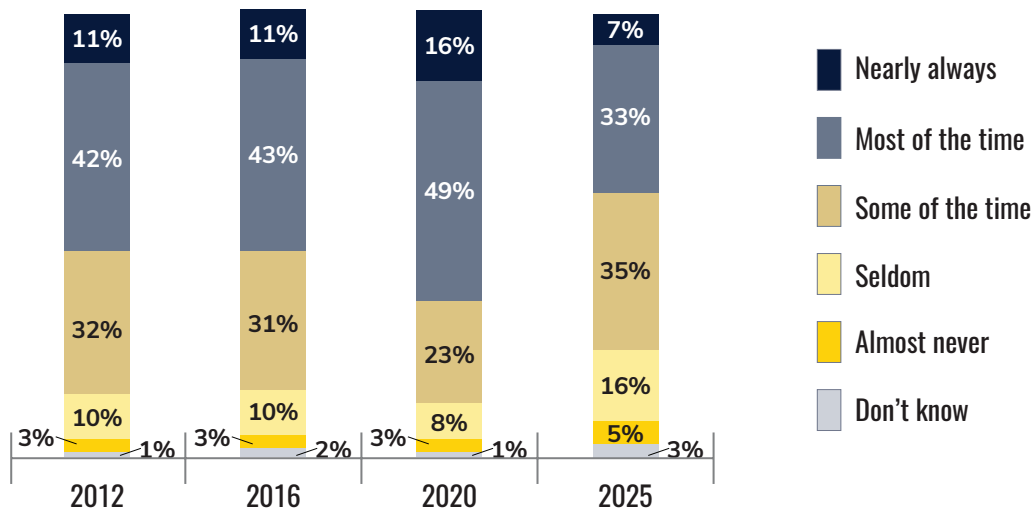
Michigan local leaders' trust in their residents declines significantly

Public opinion surveys regarding political trust usually focus on how much individuals trust various government entities.¹ The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) turns this question around, asking local government leaders how much of the time they trust their community's residents to be responsible participants in local governance.

As shown in *Figure 1a*, in both 2012 and 2016, over half of Michigan local leaders statewide trusted their local residents to be responsible participants in governance either nearly always (11%) or most of the time (42-43%). In 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, those percentages rose substantially, with 65% of leaders trusting residents nearly always or most of the time.

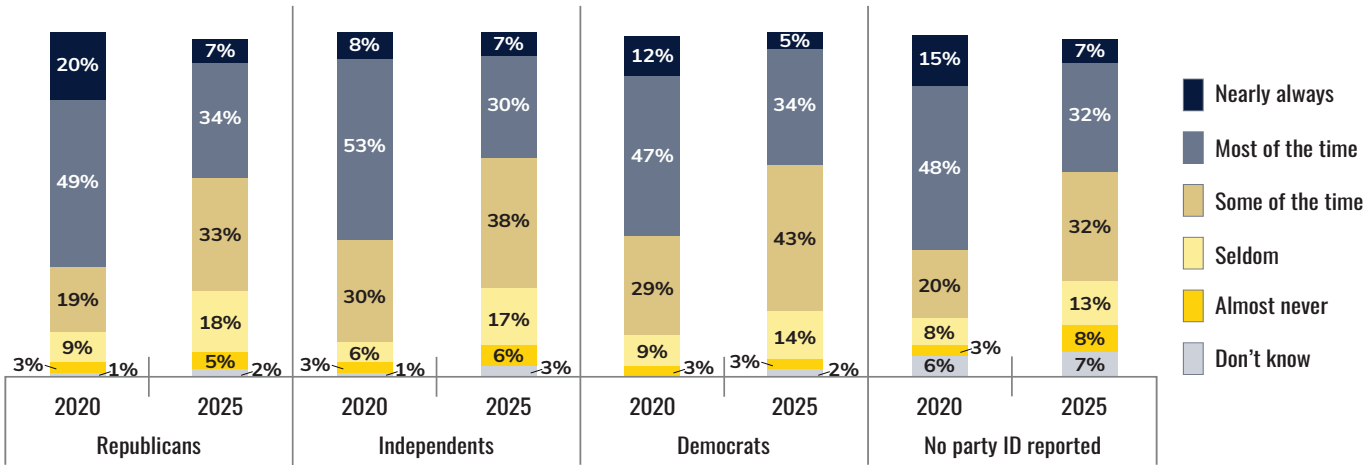
In 2025, however, local leaders' trust in their residents has plummeted to below pre-pandemic levels. Now, just 7% trust their residents nearly always, and another 33% trust them most of the time. Over a third (35%) say they only trust their residents some of the time, while 21% say they seldom or almost never trust them, representing the highest levels of mistrust since the MPPS began tracking these sentiments in 2012. This decline in trust has been accompanied by increasing dissatisfaction with the level and quality of residents' engagement with the government.²

Figure 1a
Local officials' trust in their community's citizens to be responsible participants in local governance, 2012-2025



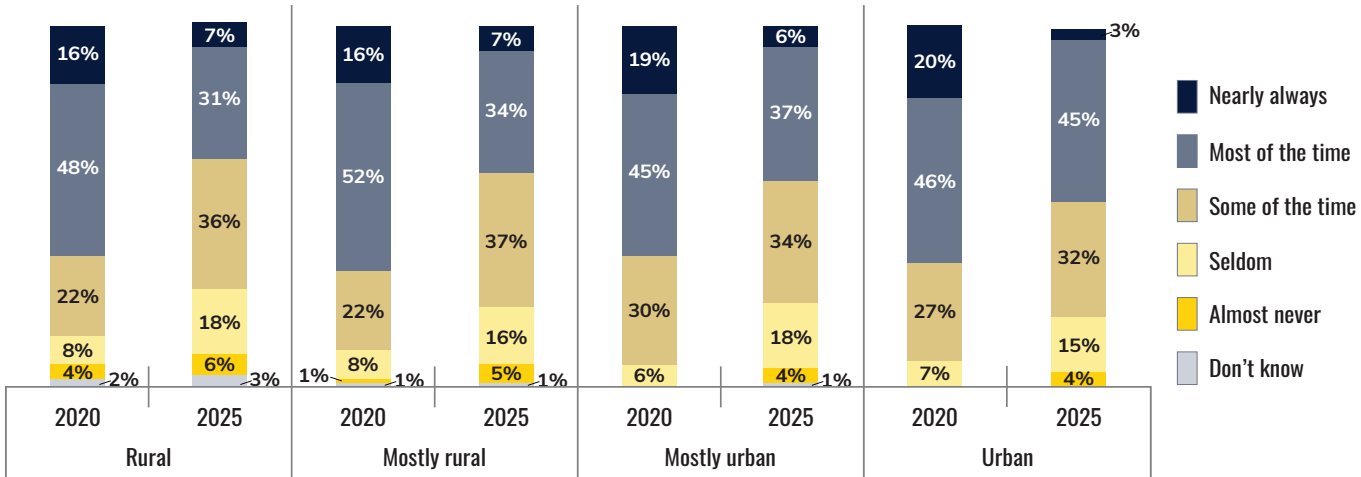
As shown in *Figure 1b*, this decline in trust among local government leaders since 2020 has occurred across all partisan identifications. In 2025, local leaders who identify as Independents report the lowest levels of trust, with 37% saying they trust residents nearly always or most of the time, compared to 44% of Republicans and 41% of Democrats. About one quarter of Independents (23%) and Republicans (23%) seldom or almost never trust their residents, along with 17% of Democrats.

Figure 1b
Local officials' trust in their community's citizens to be responsible participants in local governance, 2020 vs. 2025, by partisan self-identification



Significant drops in trust are also found in jurisdictions across the rural-urban spectrum. In particular, local leaders who describe their communities as “rural” report the lowest levels of trust, with just 38% saying they trust their residents to be responsible participants in policymaking nearly always or most of the time, and 24% saying they trust their residents seldom or almost never (see *Figure 1c*).

Figure 1c
Local officials' trust in their community's citizens to be responsible participants in local governance, 2020 vs. 2025, by urban-rural self-identification



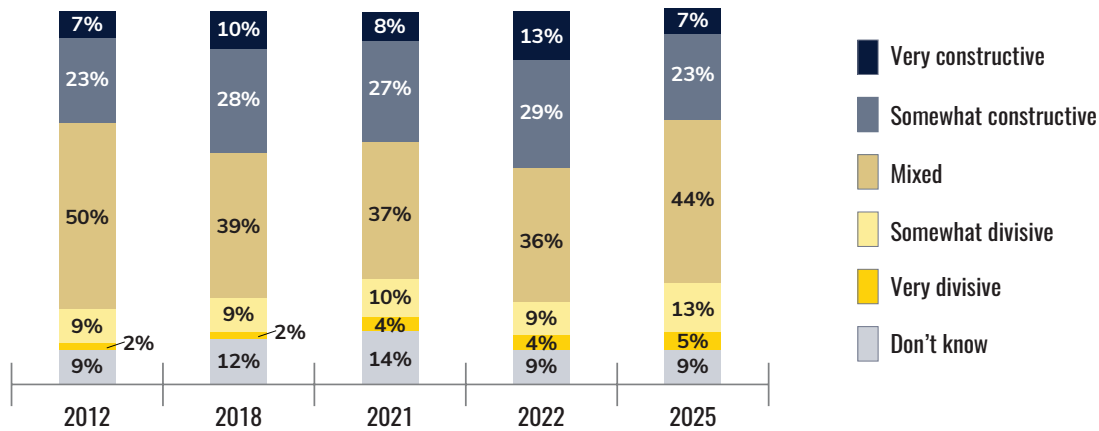
See *Appendix A* for other breakdowns by population size, officials' position, and region.

Substantial deterioration in tone of public discourse among residents

The MPPS also asks local leaders to characterize the general tone of discussion and communication that takes place around local policy issues in their communities in three contexts: among residents, between residents and elected officials, and among elected officials.

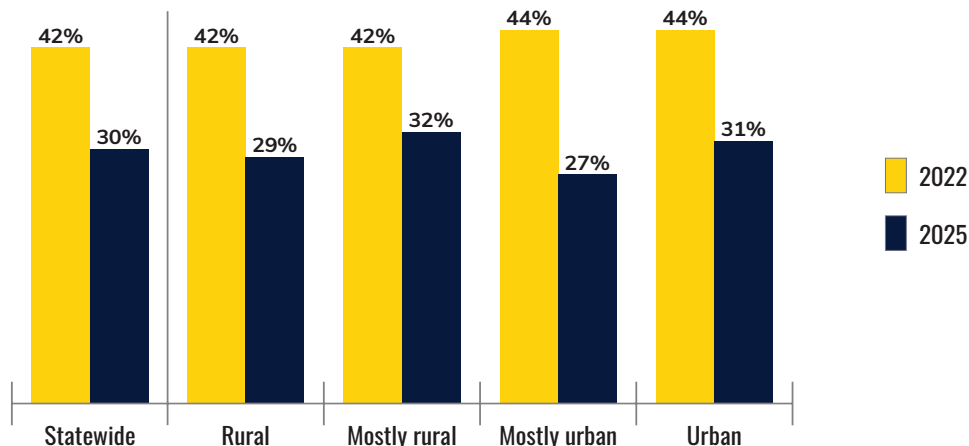
Looking first at local officials' reports of the tone of discussion among residents, after an improvement in 2022 (42%), this year, Michigan local leaders are significantly less likely to say discourse is primarily constructive (30%), as shown in *Figure 2a*. The 18% who believe discussions among their residents are mostly divisive is the highest proportion since the MPPS began measuring it in 2012.

Figure 2a
Local officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues among residents, 2012-2025



The more negative assessments of discourse among residents come from all community types. For example, just over a quarter (27%) of local officials from mostly urban communities say the tone of discussion about local policy issues among residents is constructive, down from 44% in 2022 (see *Figure 2b*).

Figure 2b
Percent who rate tone of discussion among residents as “constructive,” 2022 vs. 2025, by urban-rural self-identification

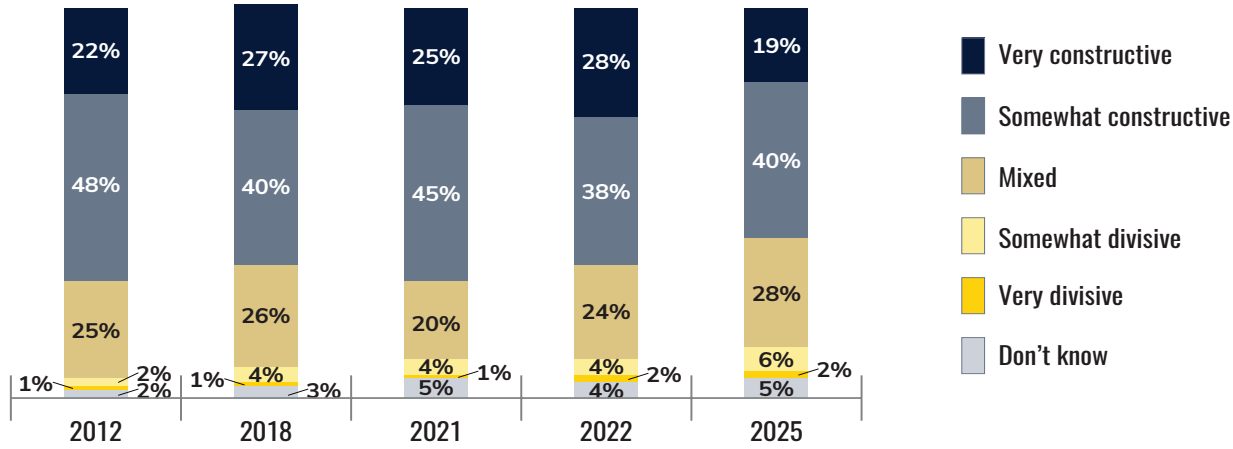


See *Appendix B* for other breakdowns by population size, officials' position, partisan self-identification, and officials' trust in residents.

Continued decline of constructive dialogue between elected officials and residents

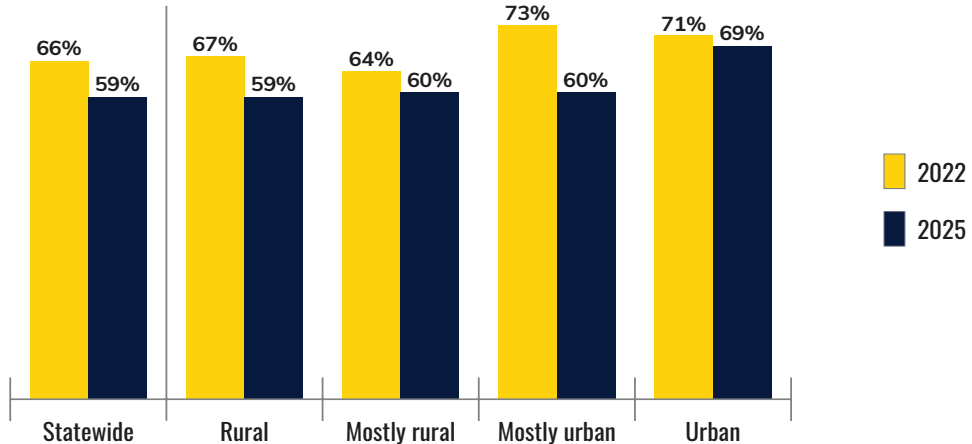
Assessments of the tone of discussion on local policy issues between elected officials and residents have been gradually declining over several years. As shown in *Figure 3a*, a majority (59%) of local officials currently report primarily constructive discourse between elected officials and their residents, but this is down from 66% in 2022 and 70% in 2012. Only 19% say this discourse is very constructive, also a substantial decrease from prior years. Meanwhile, over a quarter (28%) say discourse between residents and elected officials is “mixed” in 2025, and 8% say it is generally divisive.

Figure 3a
Local officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues between elected officials and residents, 2012-2025



Declines in constructive dialogue between residents and elected officials are also found across the rural-urban spectrum, with officials in self-described “mostly urban” areas experiencing the most significant drop, down fourteen percentage points compared to 2022 (see *Figure 3b*). Officials from urban communities are currently the most likely to report discourse as primarily constructive, a reversal from previous years.

Figure 3b
Percent who rate tone of discussion between elected officials and residents as “constructive,” 2022 vs. 2025, by urban-rural self-identification

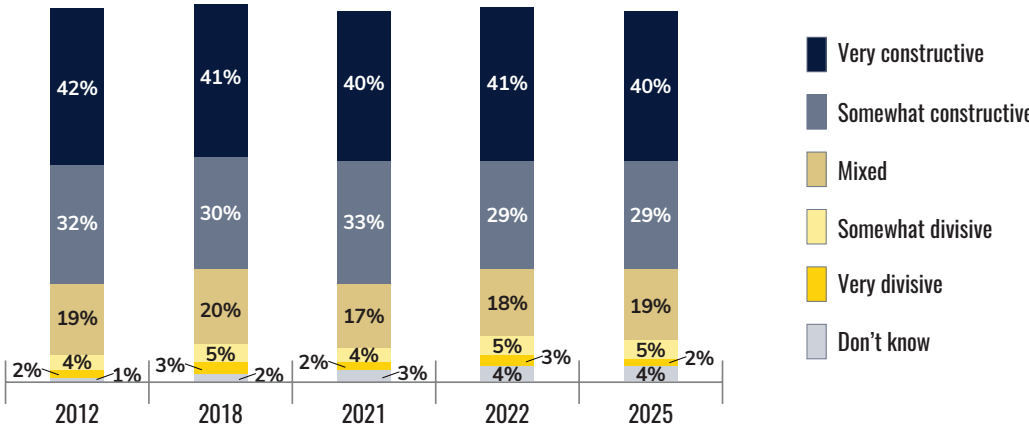


See *Appendix C* for other breakdowns by population size, officials' position, partisan self-identification, and officials' trust in residents.

Discourse among elected officials on local Boards and Councils remains largely constructive

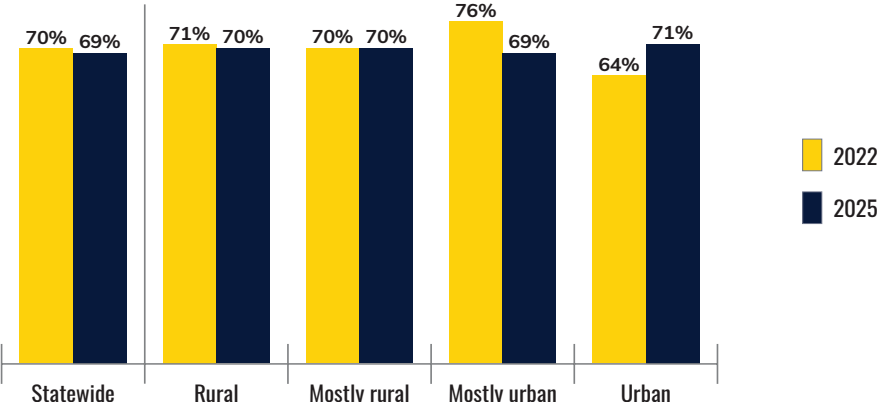
In contrast to increased concerns about interactions involving residents, a large majority (69%) of local leaders describe discourse among their jurisdiction’s elected officials as mostly constructive (see *Figure 4a*). These assessments have generally been stable over the last decade, ranging between 70% and 74% since 2012. Meanwhile, the percentage of those who say discussions among elected officials have been primarily divisive has ranged between 6–8% since 2012. This year, 5% of local leaders say their discussions are somewhat divisive, and just 2% say they are very divisive.

Figure 4a
Local officials’ assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues among elected officials, 2012-2025



Although there have been relatively few changes in statewide assessments of elected officials’ discourse over time, some interesting differences emerged this year along the rural-urban scale. For example, compared to 2022, there are declines in civility of discourse among local elected officials in self-described “mostly urban” jurisdictions (see *Figure 4b*). At the same time, there has been a significant improvement in ratings among urban jurisdictions, from 64% constructive in 2022 to 71% in 2025. This represents a big shift in urban places, as historically they have been among the least likely to report constructive discourse among elected officials on their Boards or Councils.

Figure 4b
Percent who rate tone of discussion between elected officials and residents as “constructive,” 2022 vs. 2025, by urban-rural self-identification



See *Appendix D* for other breakdowns by population size, officials’ position, partisan self-identification, and officials’ trust in residents.

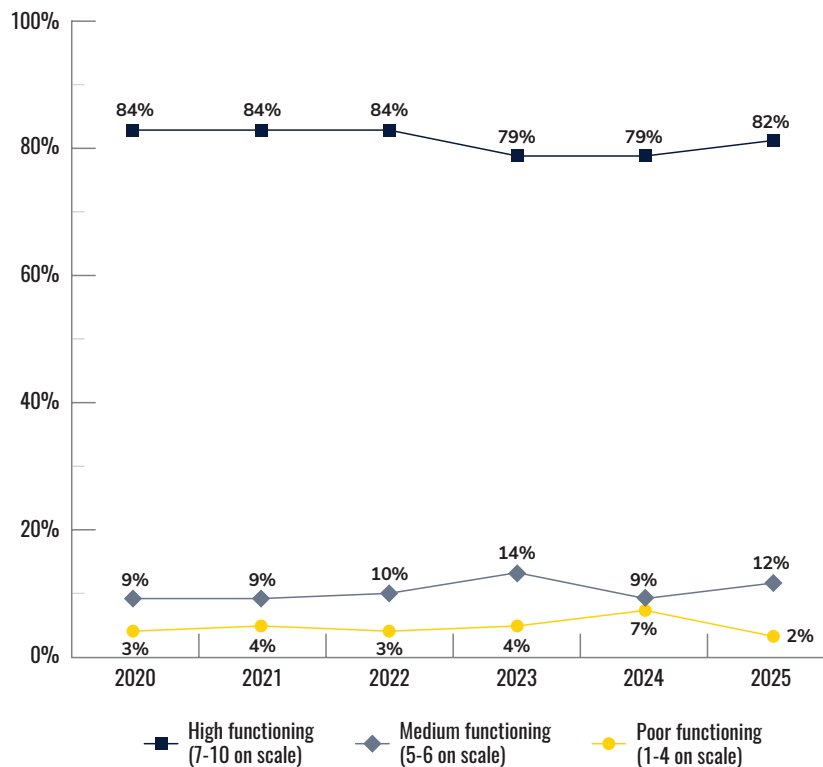
Despite concerns about the tone of public dialogue, local leaders slightly more optimistic about overall health of local democracy

Declines in assessments of trust and discourse are not the whole story of local democracy in 2025. Since 2020, the MPPS has asked local government leaders across the state for their overall assessments of democracy as a system of government in their own community, considering factors such as 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 a perfectly functioning democracy. Scores of 1-4 on the scale signify low or poor assessments, and scores of 7-10 signify a highly functioning democracy.

After two consecutive years of a dip in assessments of democracy in local communities, this year the percentage of Michigan officials statewide who report highly functioning local civic health ticked slightly upward to 82%, while the percentage who view their local democracy as poorly functioning dropped from 7% to 2% (see *Figure 5a*).

This improvement in the rating of local democracy is only a small change, but it is a hopeful sign about the resiliency of democracy in local governments, despite the declines in trust and discourse described earlier, as well as recent MPPS findings on concerns about resident engagement and reports of harassment of local officials.³

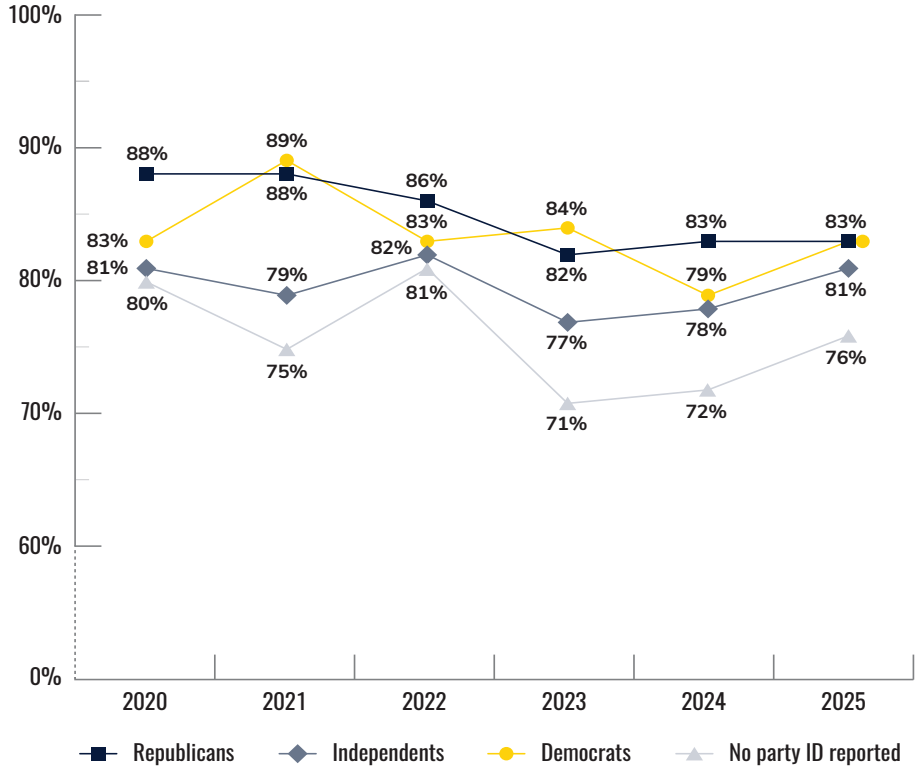
Figure 5a
Local officials' assessments of the functioning of democracy at the local level in Michigan, 2020-2025



There are relatively few partisan differences in these assessments of local democratic function, especially compared with the wide partisan gaps in local leaders' ratings of democracy at the state and national levels.⁴ As shown in *Figure 5b*, local leaders who identify themselves as Republicans or Democrats are generally more likely than Independents or others to say they have highly functioning civic health in their local communities.

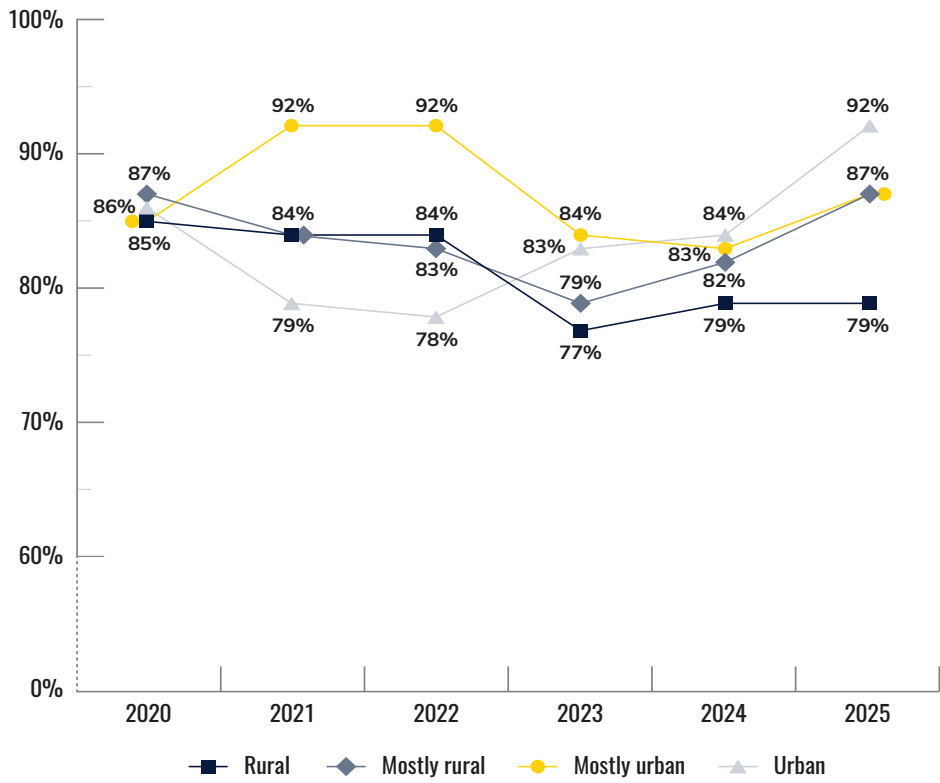
Increases in positive assessments this year are found among Democrats (from 79% to 83%), Independents (from 78% to 81%), and those who declined to identify a partisan affiliation (from 72% to 76%). Sentiments among Republican local leaders have held steady at 83%.

Figure 5b
Percent of local officials rating democracy in their community as “high functioning,” 2020-2025, by partisan self-identification



Ratings of local democratic health have diverged this year between rural and other types of jurisdictions. As shown in *Figure 5c*, in 2024, officials from jurisdictions across the rural-urban spectrum had relatively similar ratings of local civic health, with rural areas at the low end (79% “high” functioning) and urban places slightly higher (84%). However, in 2025, assessments in rural communities remained flat at 79%, while assessments in all other groups improved. The largest gains appear among local leaders from urban jurisdictions, with 92% now saying they have a high-functioning democracy in their communities.

Figure 5c
Percent of local officials rating democracy in their community as “high functioning,” 2020-2025, by urban-rural self-identification



See *Appendix E* for other breakdowns by population size, officials' position, partisan self-identification, and officials' trust in residents.



Notes

1. Pew Research Center. (2024, June 24). *Public Trust in Government: 1958–2024*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024>
2. Fitzpatrick, N., Horner, D. & Leiser, S. (2025, October). *Michigan local leaders report alarming declines in resident engagement*. 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/136/mpps-michigan-local-leaders-report-alarming-declines-resident-engagement>
3. 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>
4. Horner, D. & Fitzpatrick, N. (2024, August). *Michigan local government leaders' concerns about the health of democracy edge upward, including at local level*. 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/125/Michigan-local-government-leaders-concerns-about-health-of-democracy-edge-upward>

Survey Background and Methodology

The MPPS is an ongoing survey program that interviews the leaders of Michigan’s 1,856 units of general-purpose local government, conducted by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) at the University of Michigan, in partnership with the Michigan Municipal League, the Michigan Townships Association, and the Michigan Association of Counties. 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 is designed to build up a multi-year time series.

In the Spring 2025 iteration, surveys were sent by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) via email 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. More information is available at <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/mpps-2025-spring>.

The Spring 2025 wave was conducted from April 7 – June 12, 2025. A total of 1,328 local jurisdictions returned valid surveys (72 counties, 208 cities, 162 villages, and 886 townships), resulting in a 72% response rate by unit. Quantitative data are weighted to account for non-response. 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. “Voices Across Michigan” verbatim responses, when included, may have been edited for grammar and brevity.

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, are available 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, nor of other partners in the MPPS.

Appendix A

Local officials' trust in their community's citizens to be responsible participants in local governance, 2012-2025

	Population size		Official's Position		Region					
	Fewer than 30,000 residents	Greater than 30,000 residents	Elected Officials	Appointed Officials	Upper Peninsula	Northern Lower Peninsula	West Central	East Central	Southwest	Southeast
2012	54%	47%	54%	48%	52%	49%	56%	56%	50%	54%
2016	54%	56%	55%	50%	57%	52%	57%	56%	51%	54%
2020	65%	60%	67%	55%	67%	65%	59%	74%	64%	49%
2025	40%	41%	42%	34%	43%	43%	39%	36%	34%	51%

Appendix B

Percent who rate tone of discussion among residents as constructive, 2012-2025

	Population size		Official's Position		Official's Partisan Self-Identification			Trust in Residents	
	Fewer than 30,000 residents	Greater than 30,000 residents	Elected Officials	Appointed Officials	Republicans	Independents	Democrats	Nearly always or most of the time	Rarely or never
2012	30%	28%	31%	29%	30%	31%	30%	40%	13%
2018	39%	28%	41%	27%	44%	30%	35%	na	na
2021	36%	17%	36%	28%	38%	29%	29%	na	na
2022	42%	35%	45%	33%	49%	34%	32%	na	na
2025	30%	23%	33%	20%	34%	24%	26%	51%	7%

Appendix C

Percent who rate tone of discussion between elected officials and residents as constructive, 2012-2025

	Population size		Official's Position		Official's Partisan Self-Identification			Trust in Residents	
	Fewer than 30,000 residents	Greater than 30,000 residents	Elected Officials	Appointed Officials	Republicans	Independents	Democrats	Nearly always or most of the time	Rarely or never
2012	71%	58%	71%	66%	72%	72%	70%	82%	50%
2018	67%	54%	69%	51%	69%	60%	63%	na	na
2021	70%	65%	71%	69%	73%	66%	72%	na	na
2022	66%	65%	68%	61%	72%	55%	66%	na	na
2025	59%	58%	61%	50%	62%	57%	57%	77%	39%

Appendix D

Percent who rate tone of discussion among elected officials as constructive, 2012-2025

	Population size		Official's Position		Official's Partisan Self-Identification			Trust in Residents	
	Fewer than 30,000 residents	Greater than 30,000 residents	Elected Officials	Appointed Officials	Republicans	Independents	Democrats	Nearly always or most of the time	Rarely or never
2012	75%	60%	74%	69%	77%	72%	71%	83%	60%
2018	72%	60%	73%	61%	74%	64%	65%	na	na
2021	74%	67%	73%	74%	77%	67%	79%	na	na
2022	70%	68%	71%	68%	75%	63%	69%	na	na
2025	69%	62%	72%	61%	69%	71%	72%	79%	60%

Appendix E

Percent rating democracy in their community as “high functioning,” 2012-2025

	Population size		Official's Position		Official's Partisan Self-Identification			Trust in Residents	
	Fewer than 30,000 residents	Greater than 30,000 residents	Elected Officials	Appointed Officials	Republicans	Independents	Democrats	Nearly always or most of the time	Rarely or never
2012	75%	74%	74%	69%	77%	72%	71%	na	na
2018	72%	73%	73%	61%	74%	64%	65%	na	na
2021	74%	73%	73%	74%	77%	67%	79%	na	na
2022	70%	71%	71%	68%	75%	63%	69%	na	na
2025	82%	81%	80%	84%	83%	81%	83%	88%	77%

University of Michigan

Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy

Joan and Sanford Weill Hall

735 S. State Street, Suite 5310

Ann Arbor, MI 48109-3091

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.

web: www.closup.umich.edu

email: closup@umich.edu

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