

Examining Board Relations:

Township Officials' Views from the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)

Presented at the
2019 Michigan Townships Association
Annual Educational Conference
April 3, 2019

Presentation Outline

- Overview of MPPS survey program
- Findings on township officials' views on Board Member relationships (from the Spring 2018 Wave of the MPPS), including...
 - ✓ Assessments of the overall relationships among Board members, as well as between Board and employees
 - ✓ Various factors that help and hurt Board relationships
 - ✓ Assessments of Board effectiveness on a variety of metrics
 - ✓ Suggestions for how to improve relationships

The Michigan Public Policy Survey

- **Census survey** – all 1,856 counties, cities, villages, and townships
- **Respondents** – chief elected and appointed officials
- **Administered** – online and via hardcopy
- **Topics** – wide range, such as fiscal health, budget priorities, roads, public safety, economic development, intergovernmental cooperation, service privatization, employee policies, labor unions, environmental sustainability, Great Lakes, citizen engagement, much more.

MPPS is not a typical opinion poll

- **70+% response rates**
- **Transparency**
 - Questionnaires online
 - Pre-run data tables online
 - Sharing of (anonymized) datasets with other researchers
- **Expert advisors on questionnaire content**
- **Research partnership with Michigan local government associations**
 - MAC, MML, & MTA
- **Borrowing from other proven sources such as NLC and ICMA**

What does the MPPS aim to do?

- **Improve understanding** of local government to help improve policymaking and quality of life
- **Inform local leaders** about peers across the state: challenges and responses
- **Inform state policymakers** and other stakeholders with data about local level challenges and responses not available from any other source
- **Build a longitudinal data archive** to allow tracking of fundamental changes (such as the economic transition, aging population, etc.)
- Foster **academic research and teaching** on local government issues

How many townships responded to the Spring 2018 MPPS?

72% of all statewide - 893 townships total

By Population Size

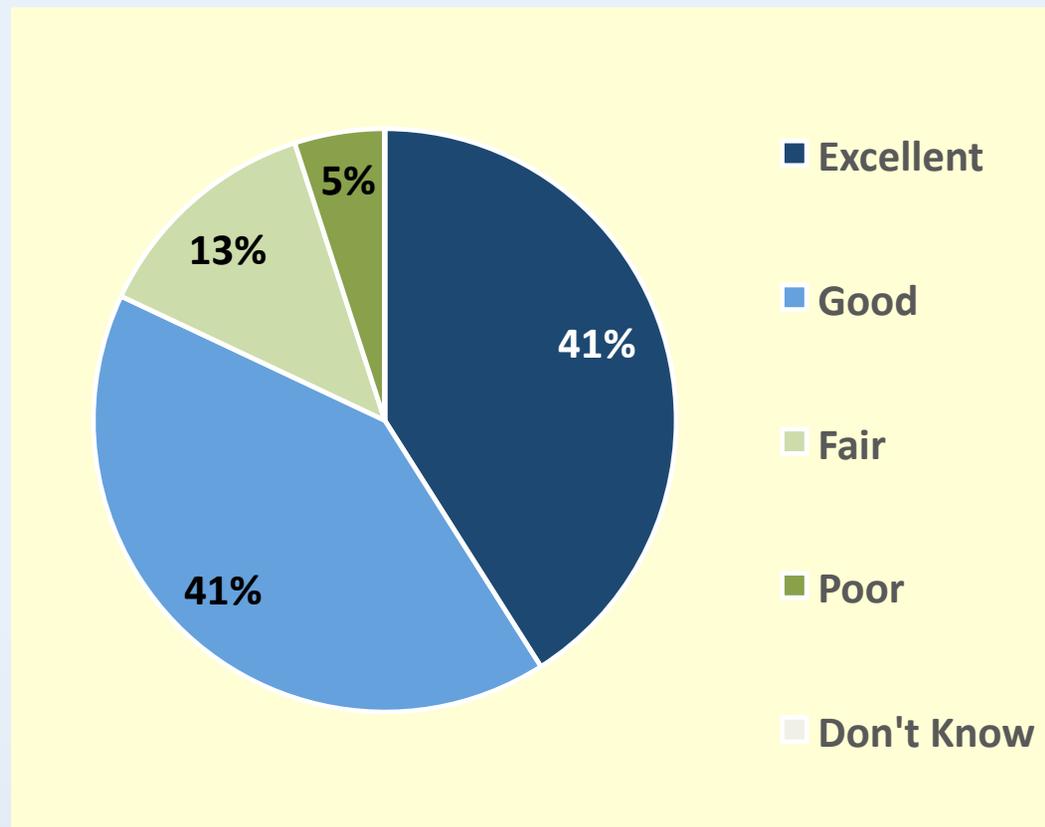
67% of townships <1500 – 327
72% townships 1500-5000 – 395
79% of townships 5001-10,000 – 84
85% of townships 10,001-30,000 – 64
92% of townships >30,000 – 23

By Region

70% in the Upper Peninsula – 104
71% in the Northern LP – 174
71% in the Central West – 175
67% in the Central East – 162
76% in the Southwest – 144
78% in the Southeast – 134

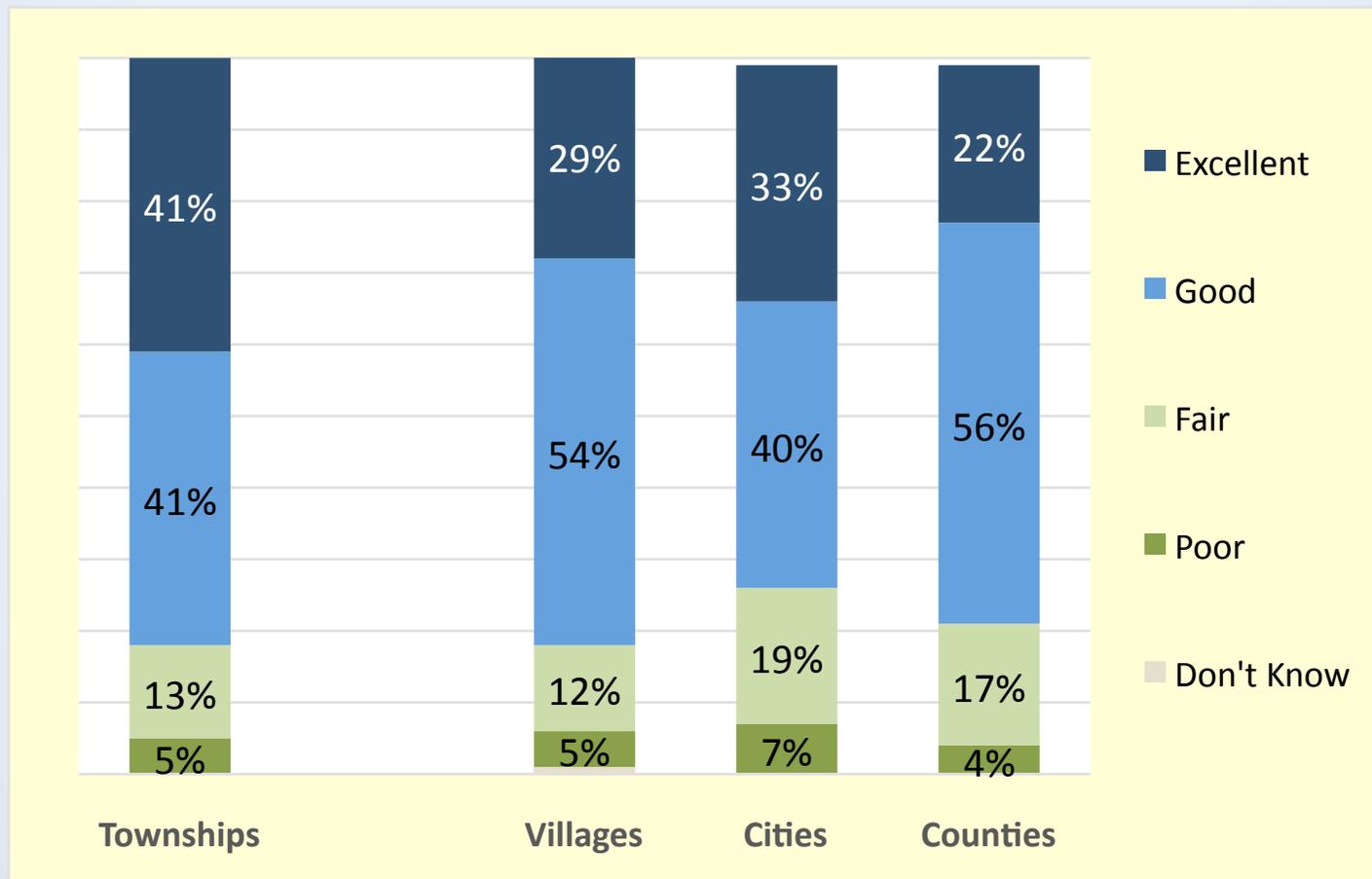
How do township officials rate Board relations?

Overall, how would you rate the relationships **among elected officials** in your township?



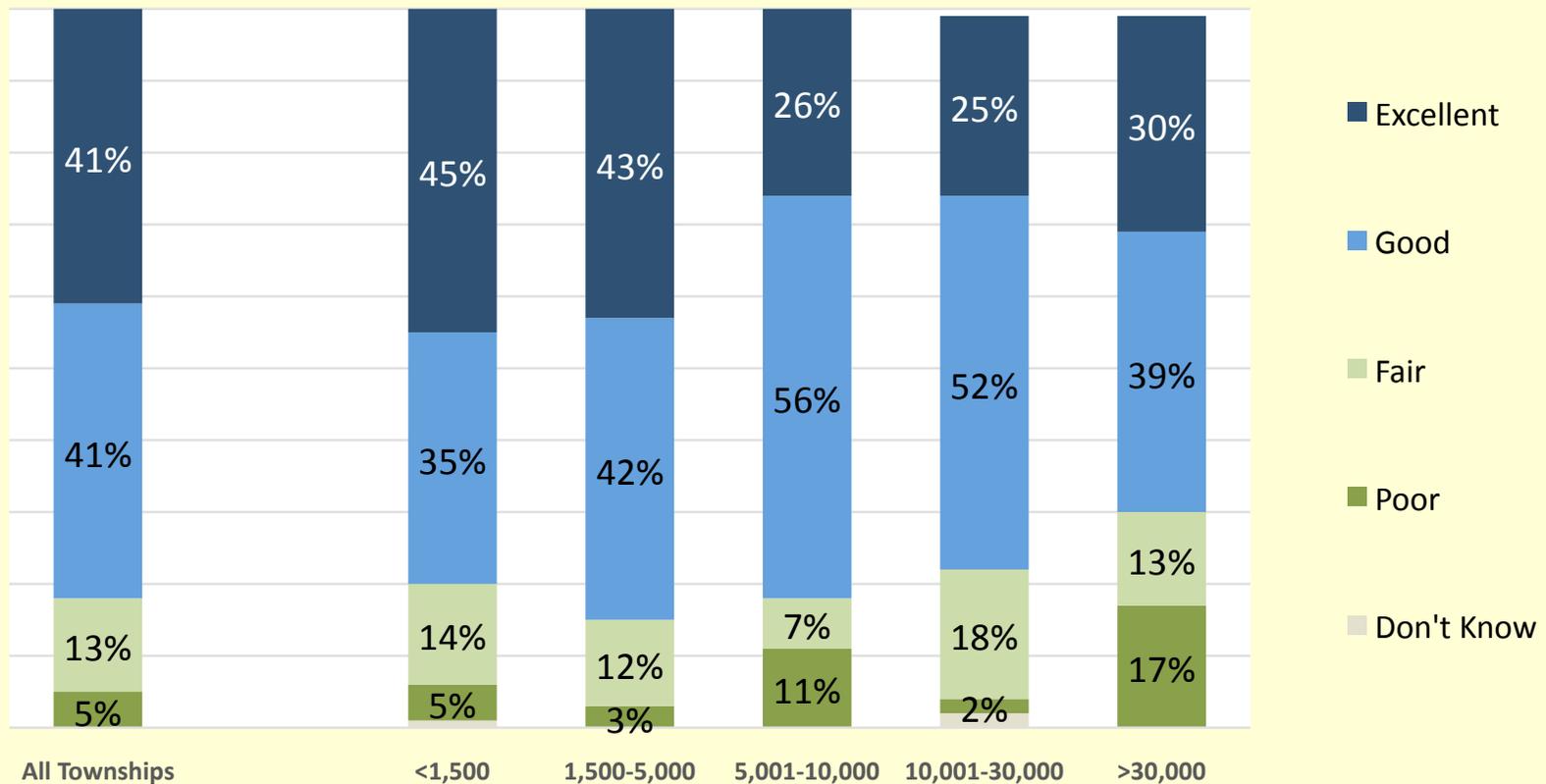
How do township officials rate Board relations?

Overall, how would you rate the relationships **among elected officials** in your jurisdiction?



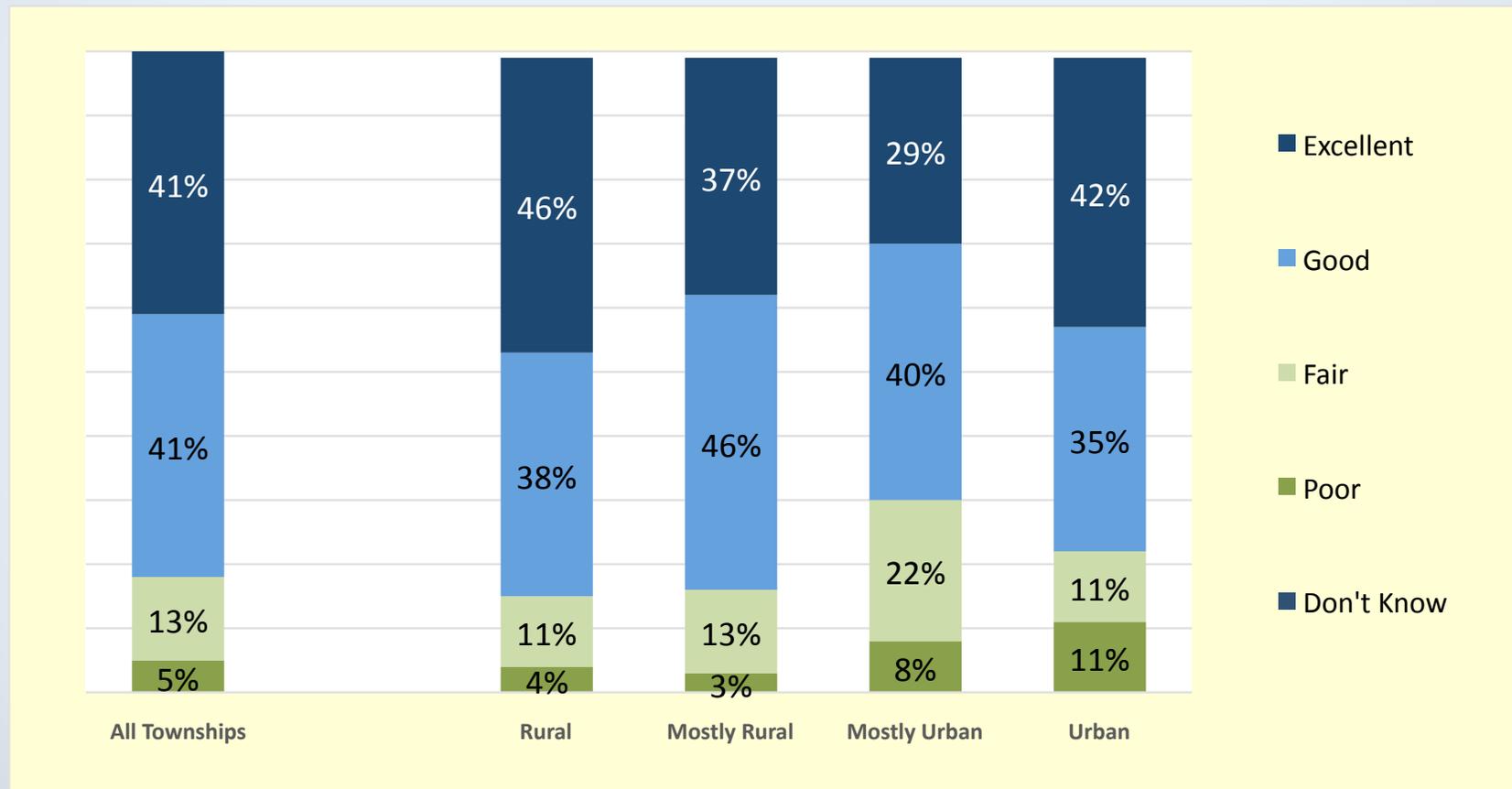
How do township officials rate Board relations?

Overall, how would you rate the relationships **among elected officials** in your township?



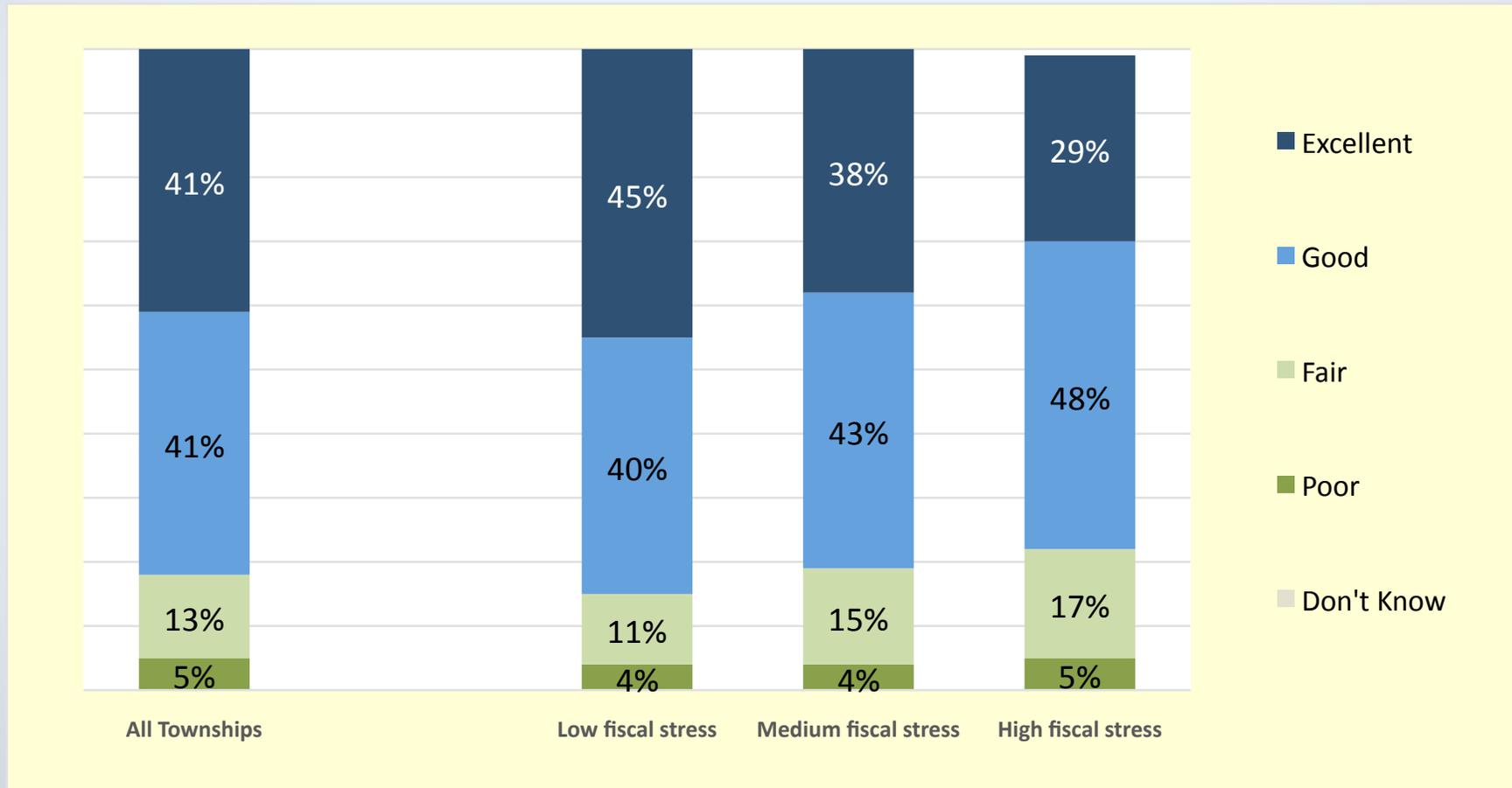
How do township officials rate Board relations?

Overall, how would you rate the relationships **among elected officials** in your township?



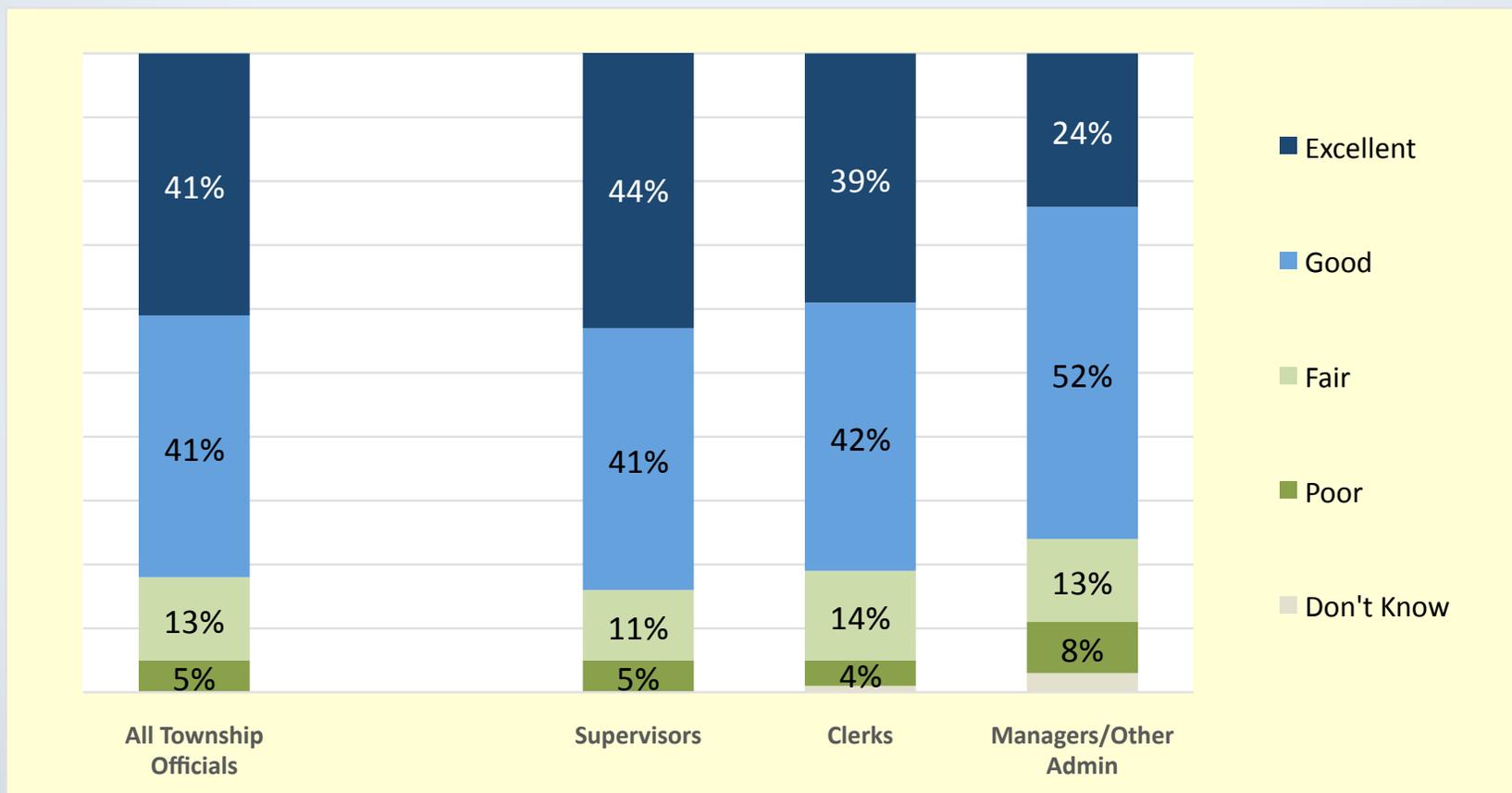
How do township officials rate Board relations?

Overall, how would you rate the relationships **among elected officials** in your township?



How do township officials rate Board relations?

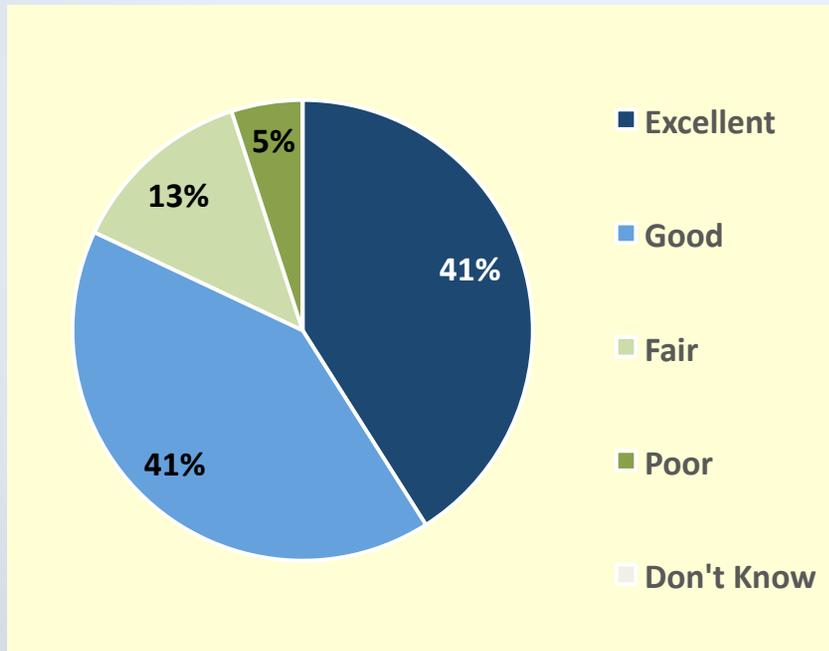
Overall, how would you rate the relationships **among elected officials** in your township?



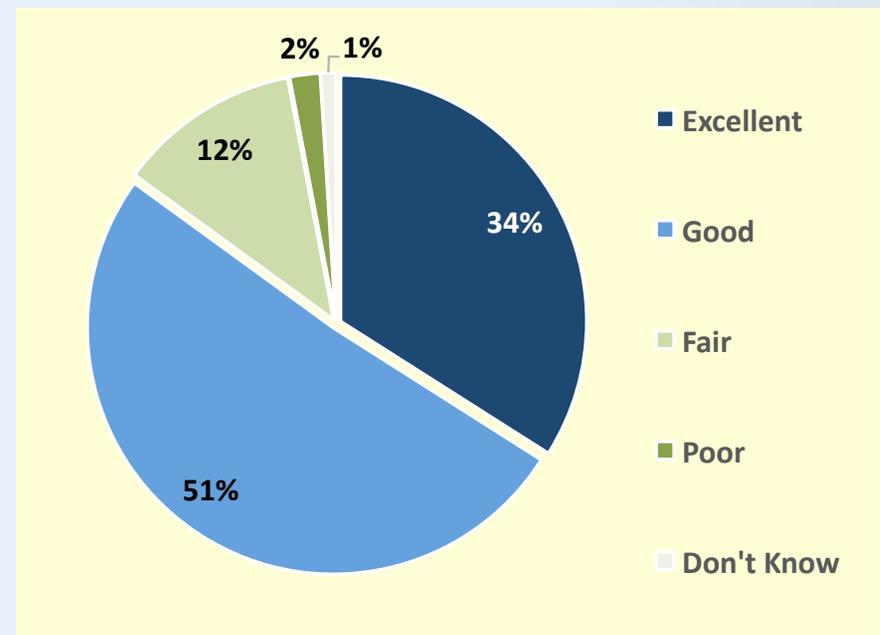
How are relations between Board and employees?

Overall, how would you rate the relationships **among elected officials** and **other employees** in your township?

AMONG BOARD MEMBERS:



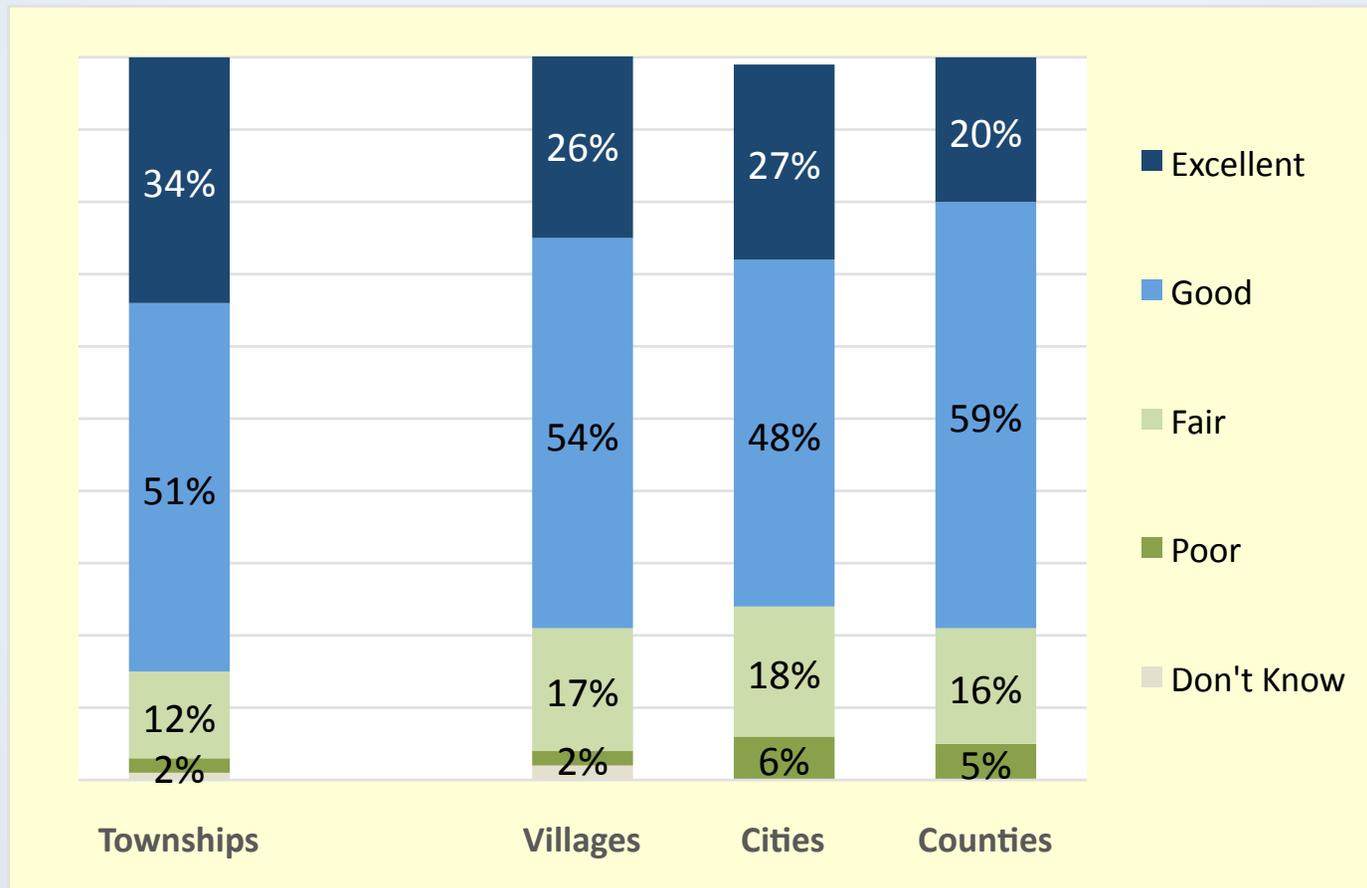
BETWEEN BOARD & STAFF:



(in townships that have employees)

How are relations between Board and employees?

Overall, how would you rate the relationships **among elected officials** and **other employees** in your jurisdiction?

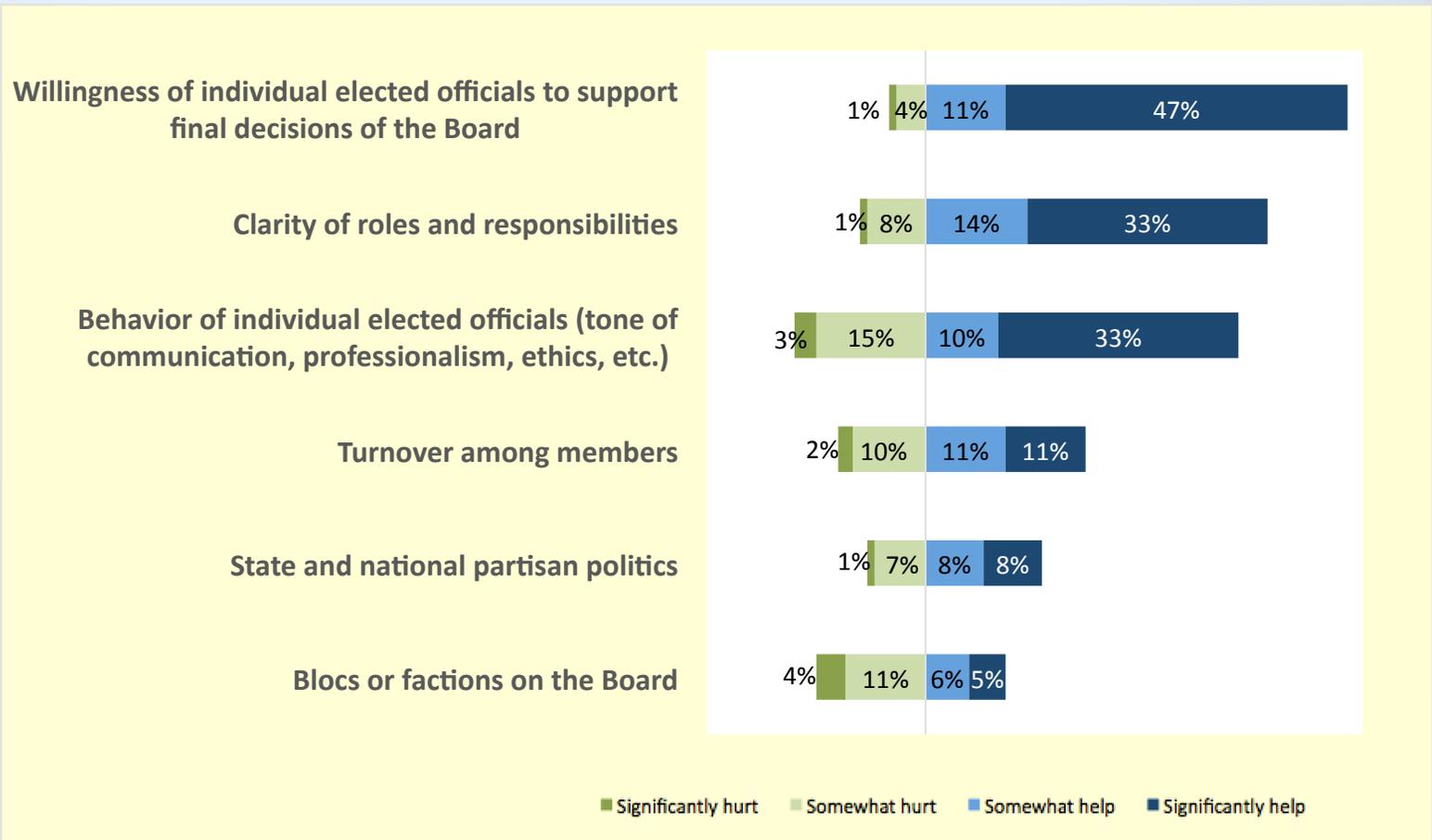


(among jurisdictions that have employees)

What helps Boards with positive relationships?

To what extent, if at all, would you say overall the following **factors help or hurt relationships** among the members of your Board?

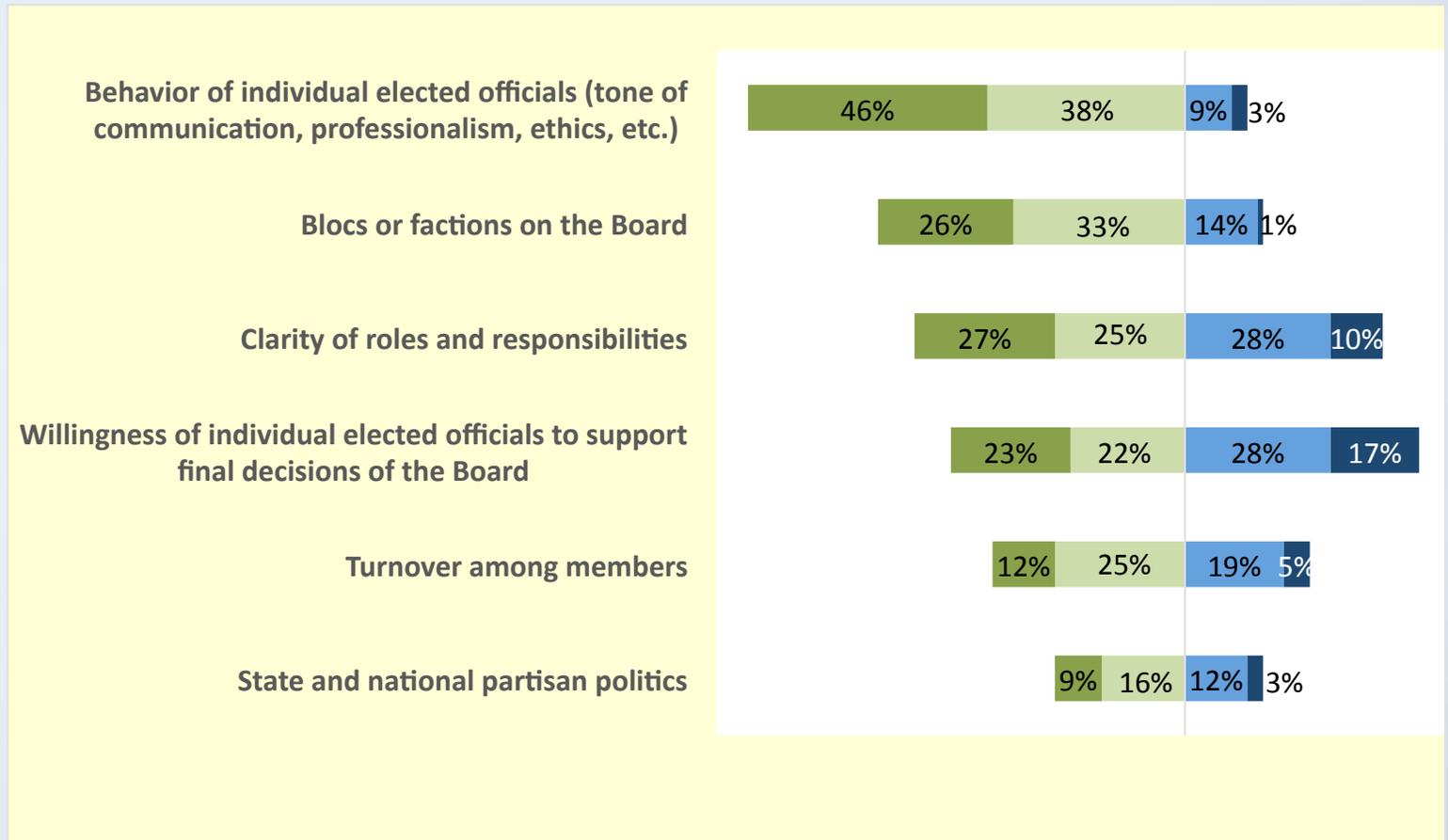
In townships that say Board relations are **“excellent”** or **“good”**



What hurts Boards with negative relationships?

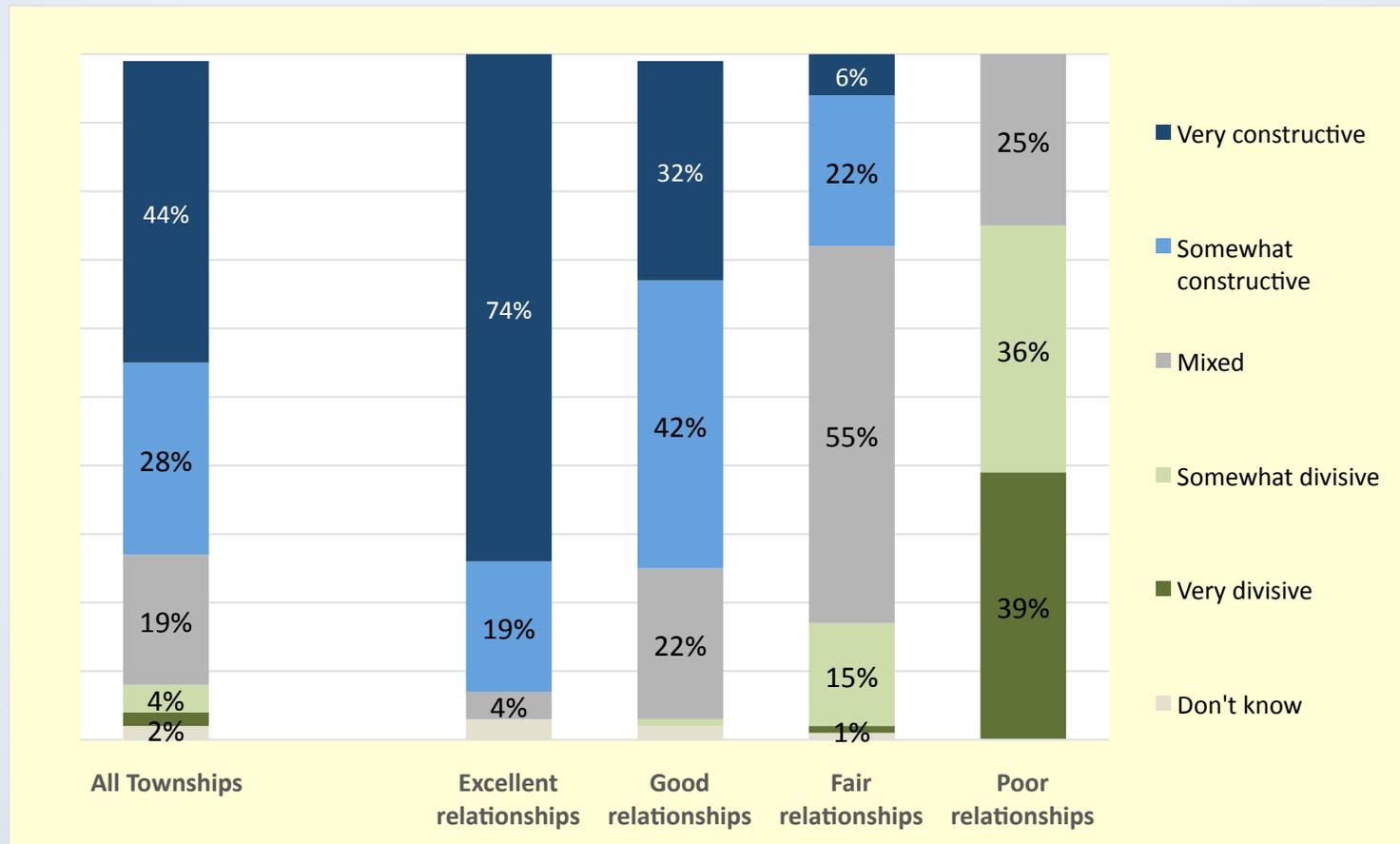
To what extent, if at all, would you say overall the following **factors help or hurt relationships** among the members of your Board?

In townships that say Board relations are "fair" or "poor"



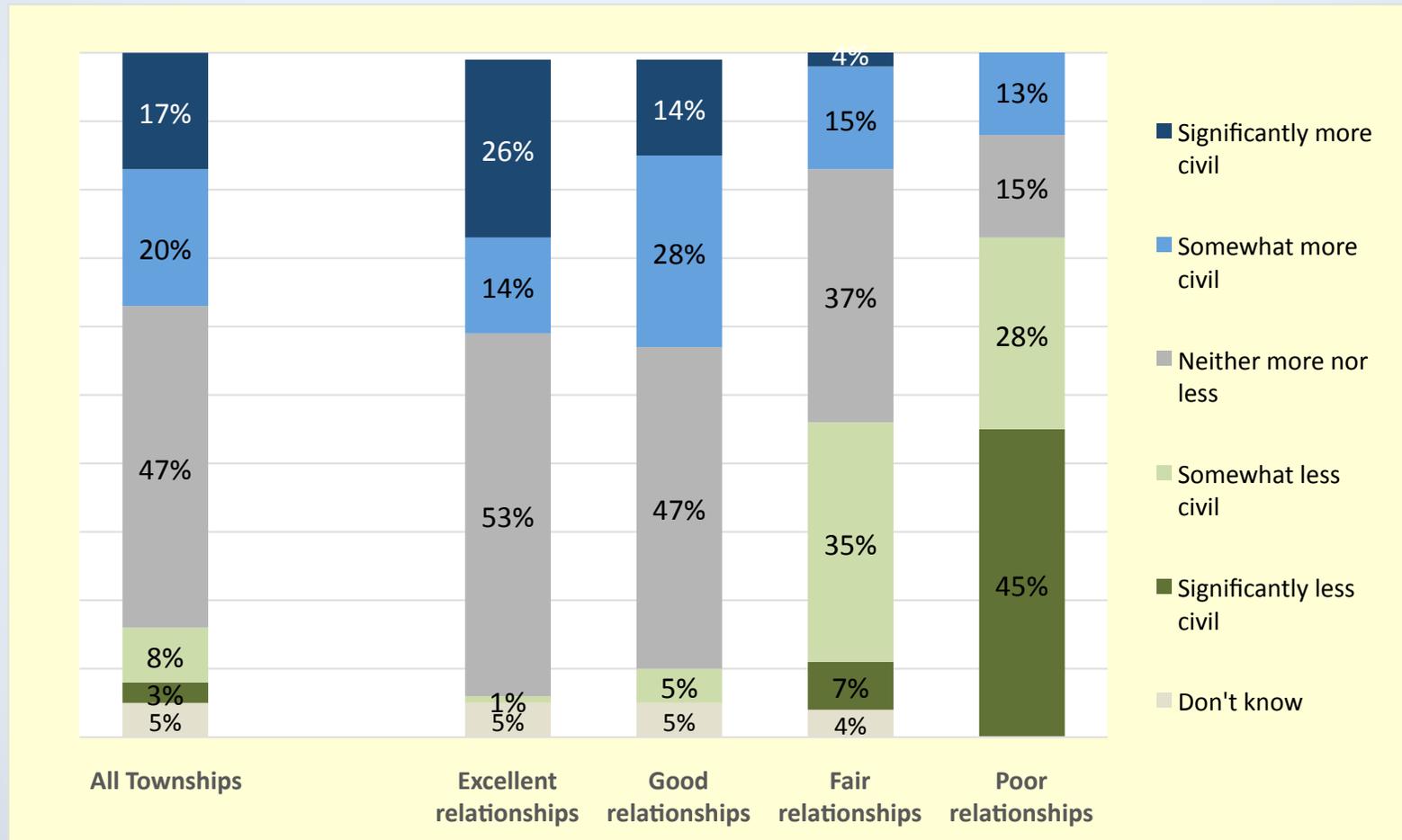
Is tone of discussion on the Board important?

Thinking more generally about the **tone of discussion and communication** that takes place around local policy issues, how would you describe the general state of public discourse **among elected officials themselves**?



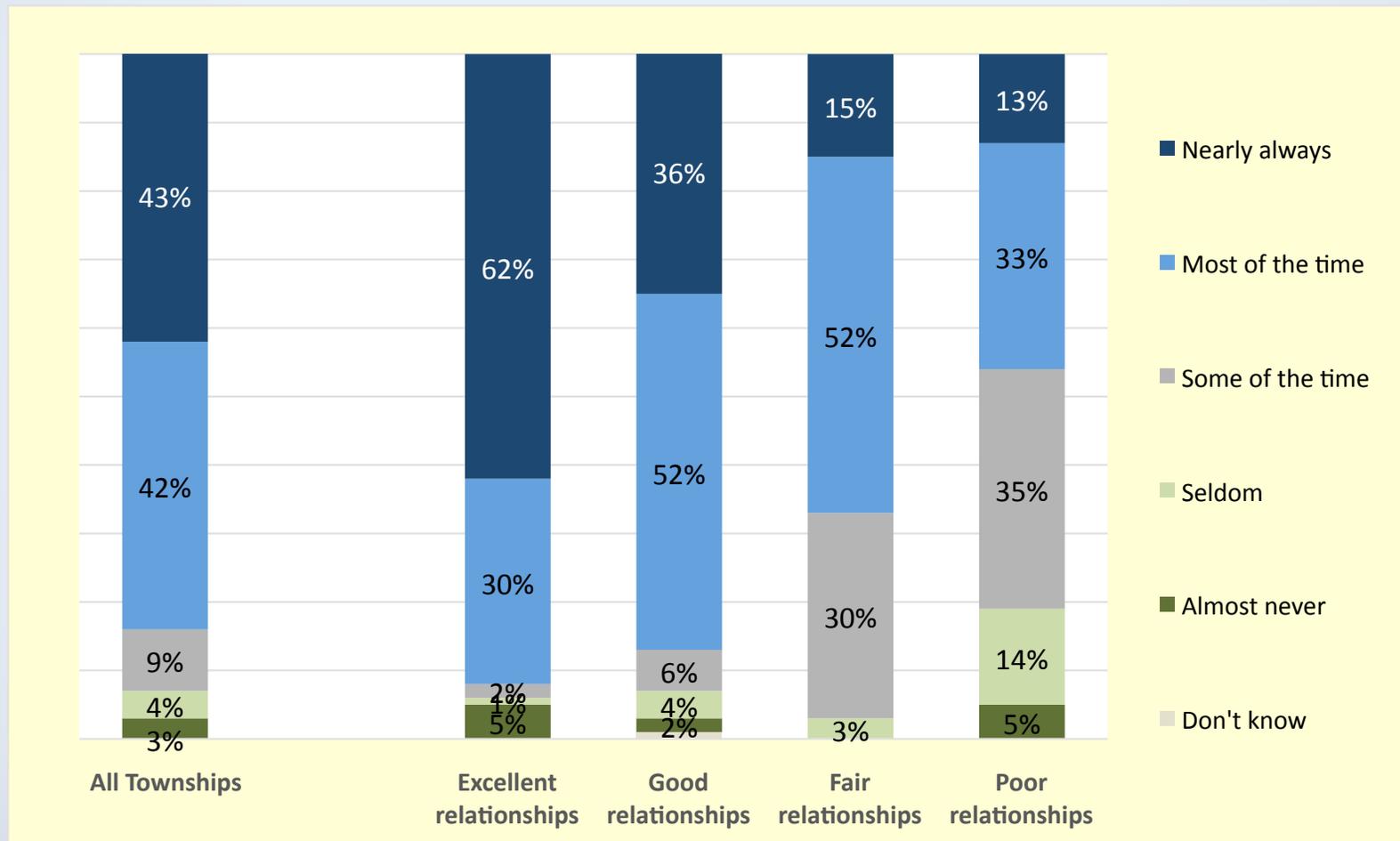
Has Board's tone of discussion changed recently?

Would you say the tone of discussion and **communication** among elected officials is **more or less civil** than it was **five years ago**?



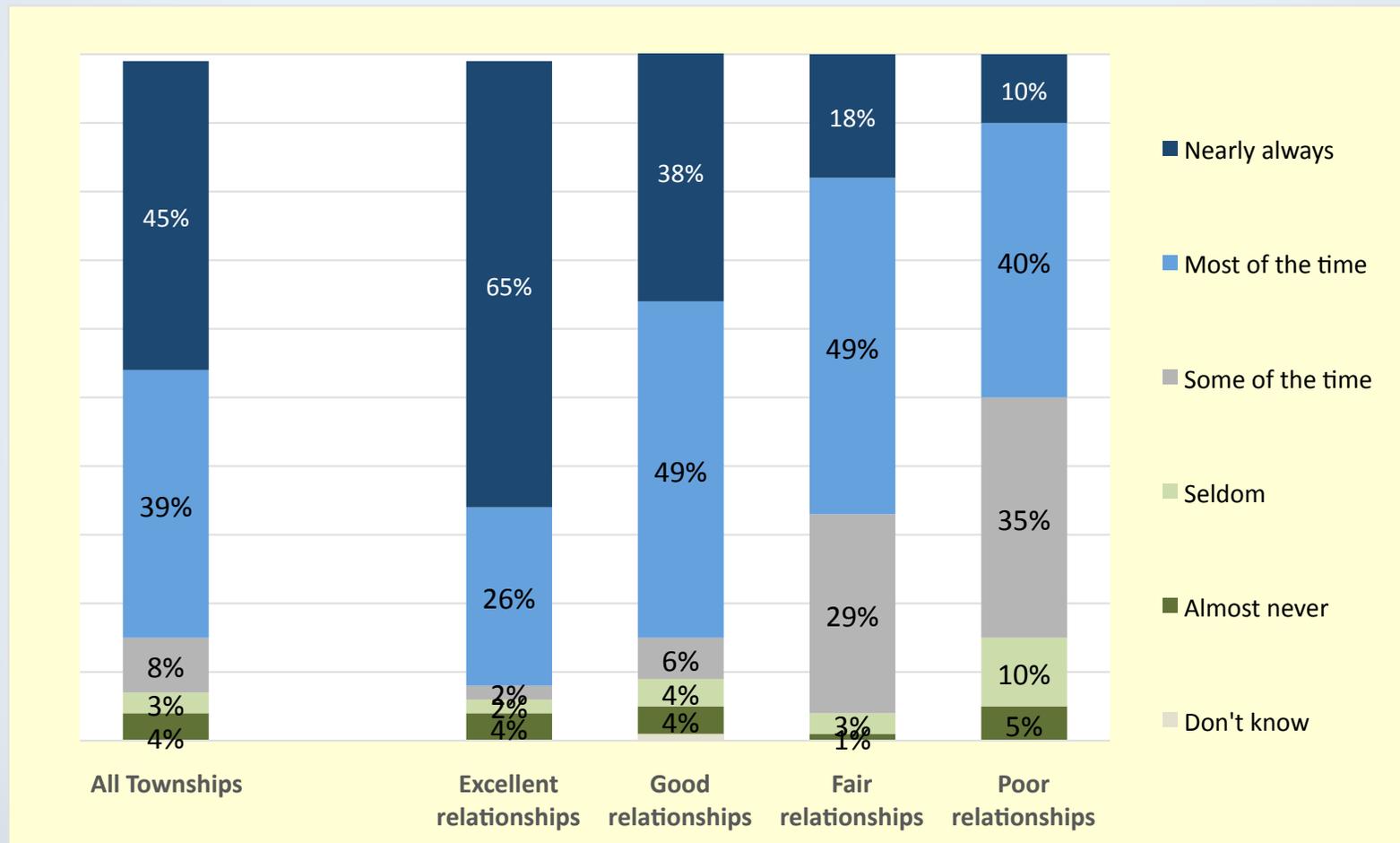
Is it difficult to reach consensus on the Board?

In your best estimate, **how often is there consensus** among Board members regarding **routine decisions facing the township?**



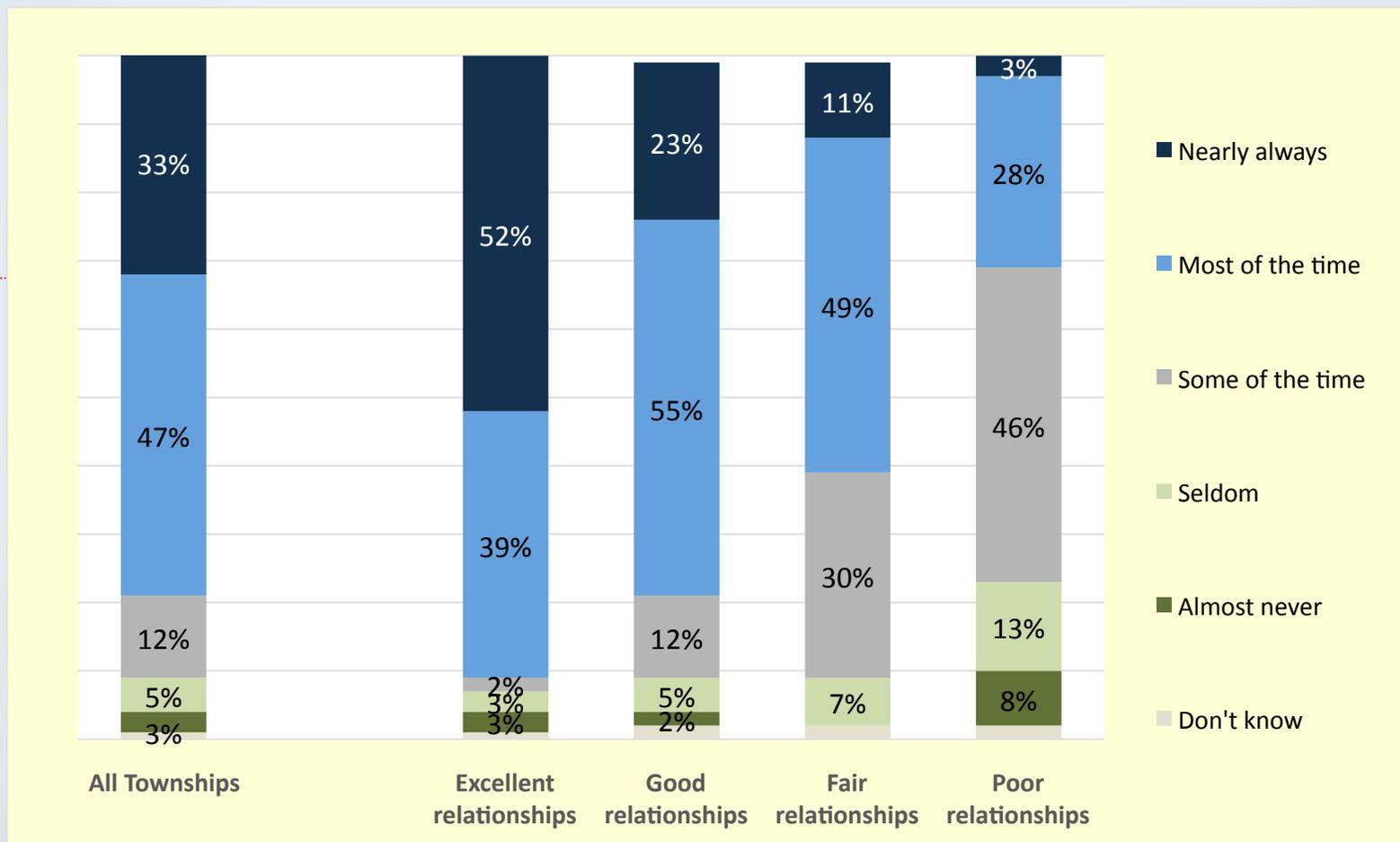
Is it difficult to reach consensus on the Board?

In your best estimate, **how often is there consensus** among Board members regarding votes on **budgeting and fiscal policy**?



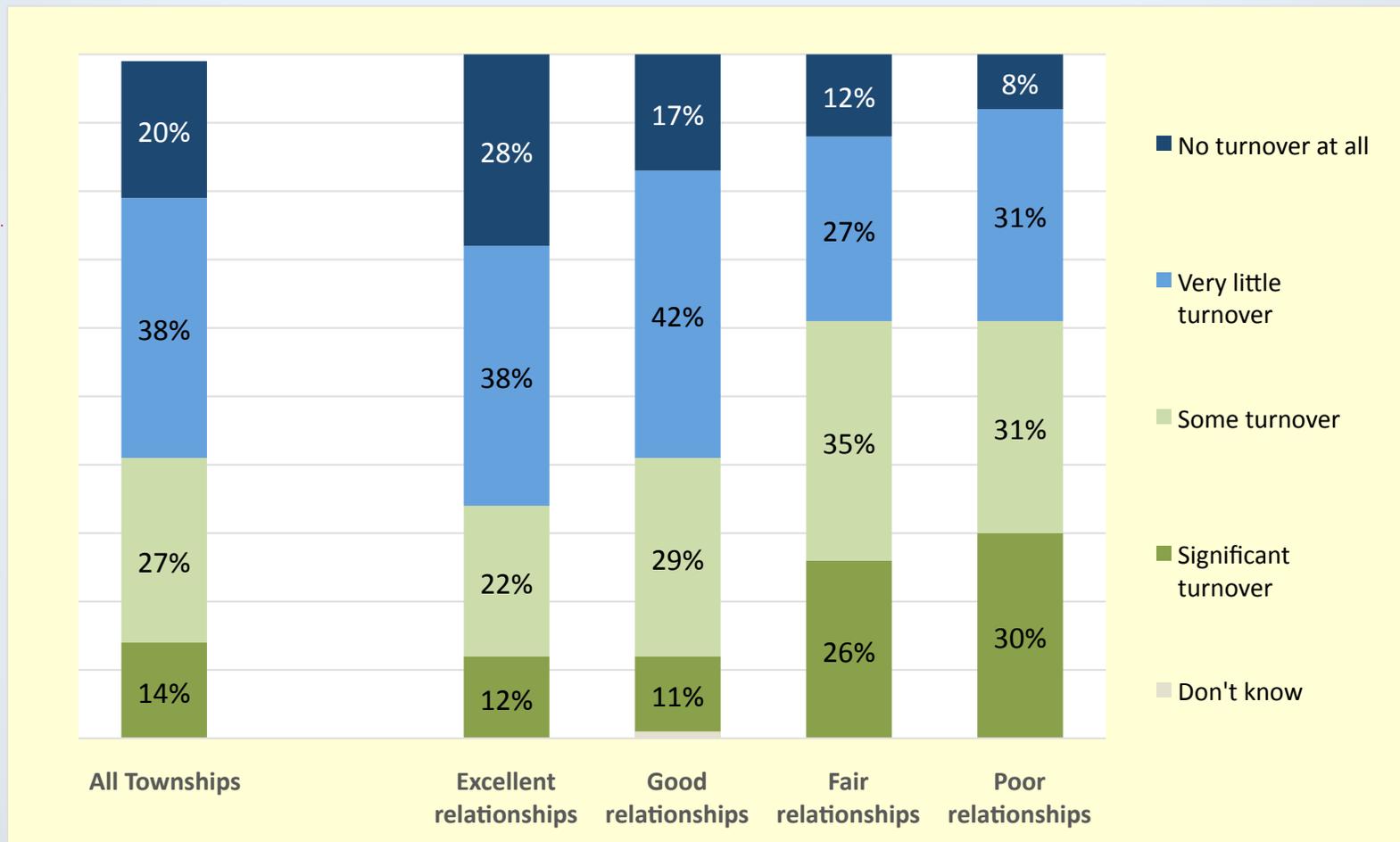
Is it difficult to reach consensus on the Board?

In your best estimate, **how often is there consensus** among Board members regarding votes on **development issues?**



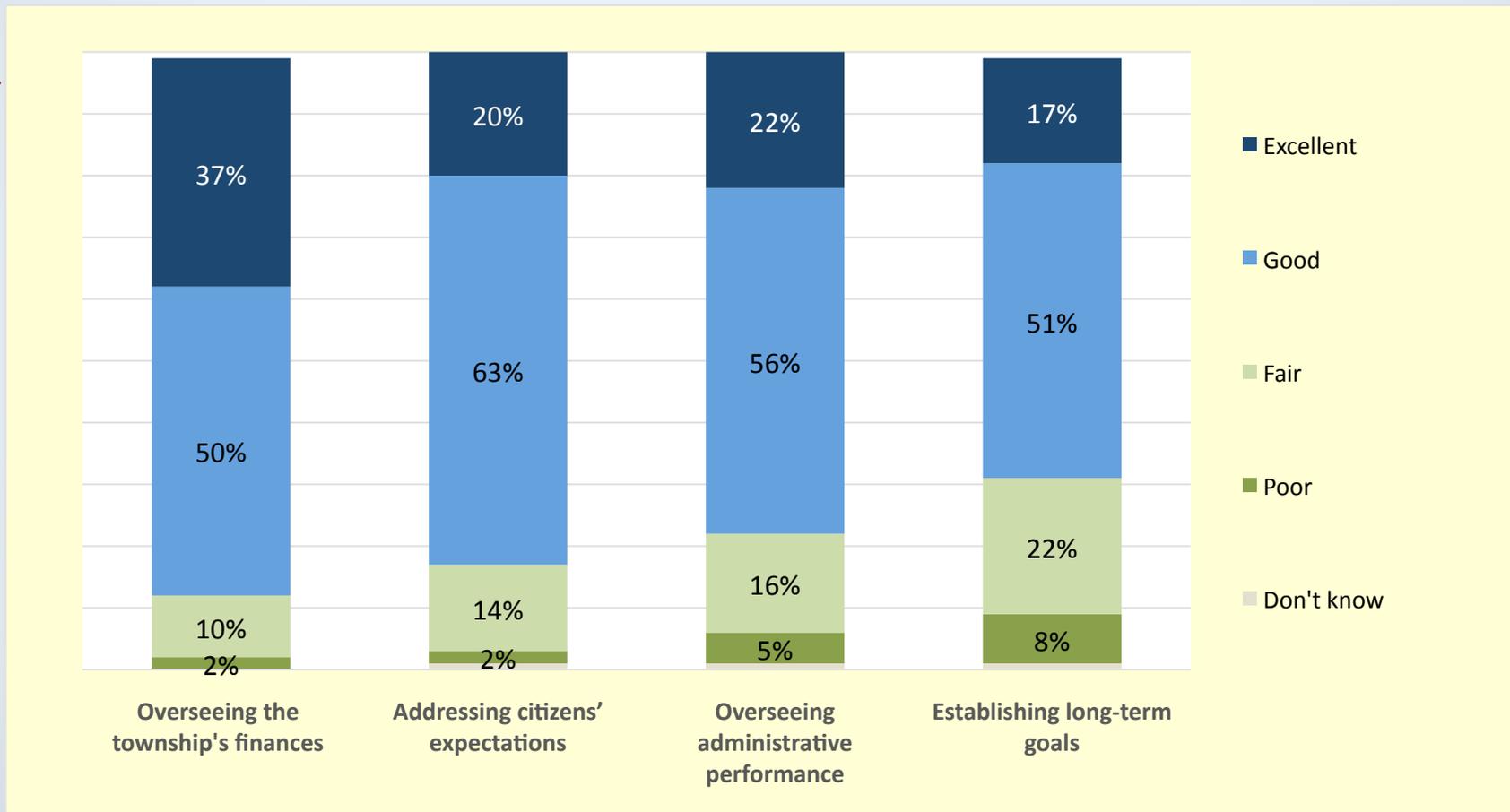
How does turnover correlate with Board relations?

In the past **five years or so**, to what extent has there been **turnover among members** of your township's Board?



What do officials think of Board effectiveness?

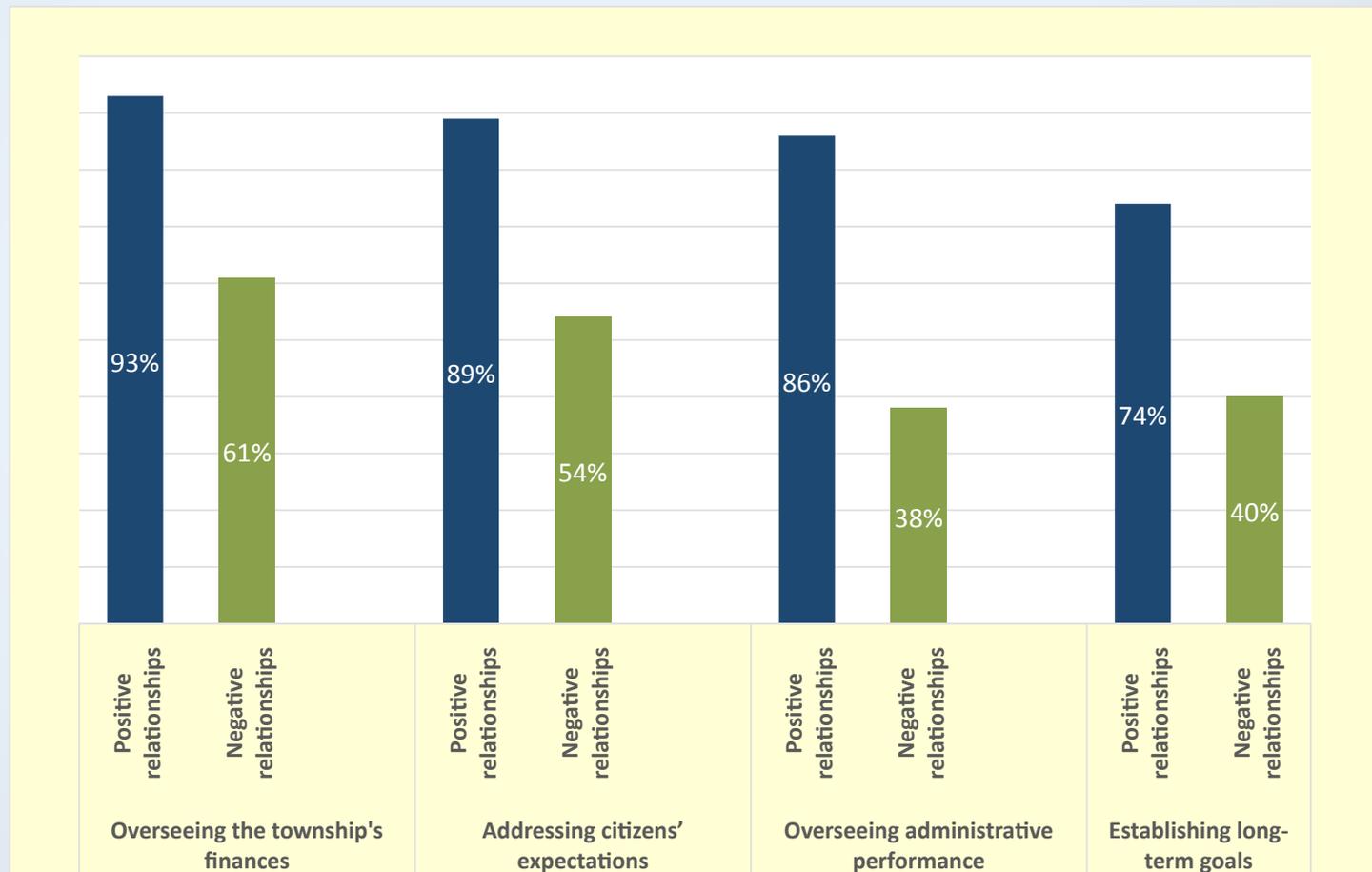
Thinking about your Township Board, how would you **rate its effectiveness** in performing the following functions?



What do officials think of Board effectiveness?

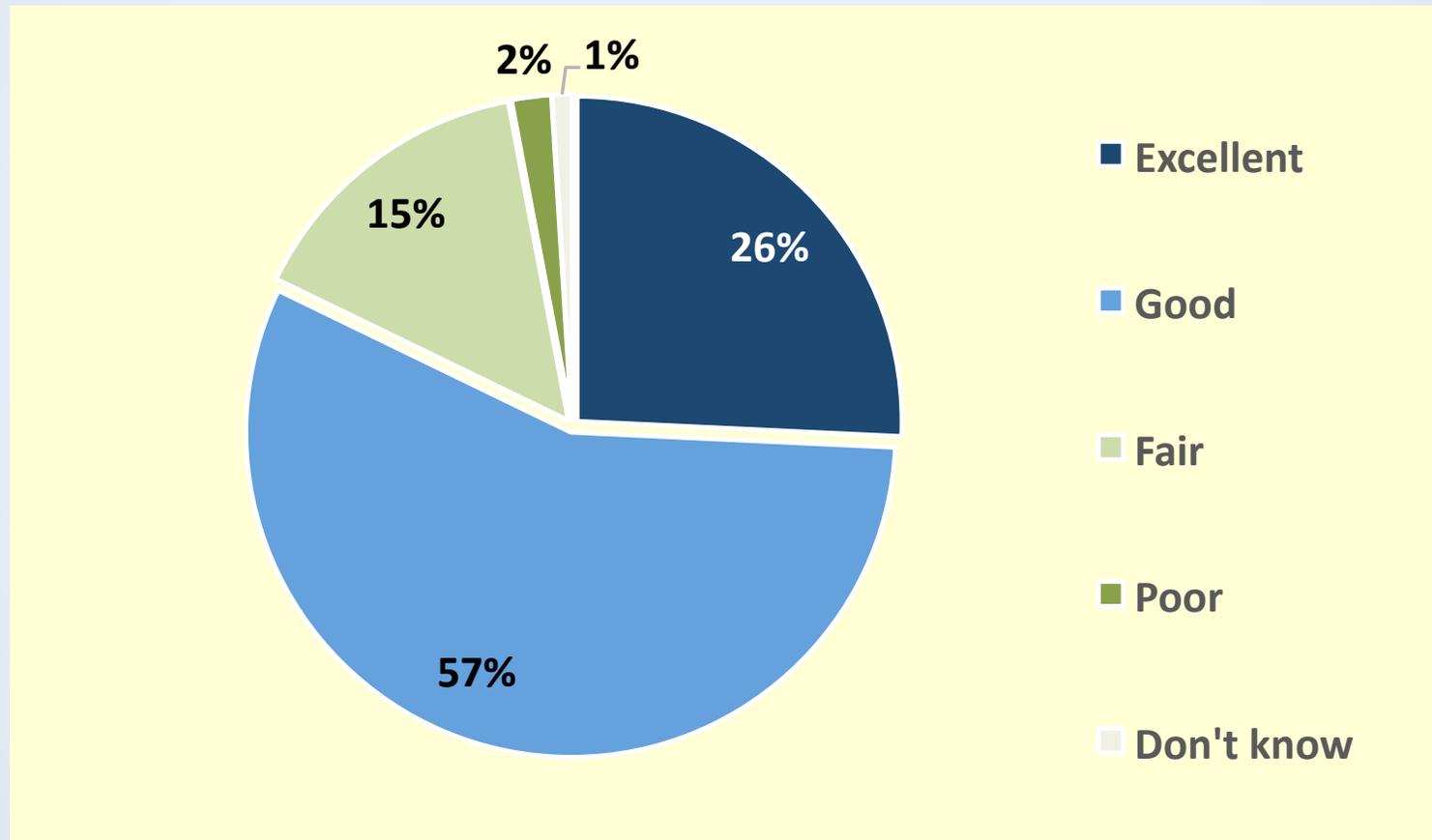
Thinking about your Township Board, how would you **rate its effectiveness** in performing the following functions?

% who say Board effectiveness is excellent or good



How do officials rate Board effectiveness?

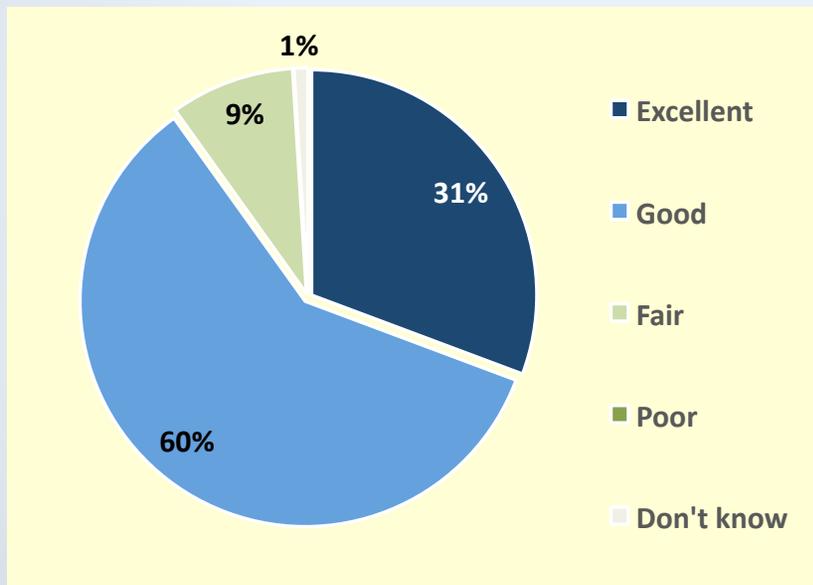
Thinking about your Township Board, how would you rate its **effectiveness overall?**



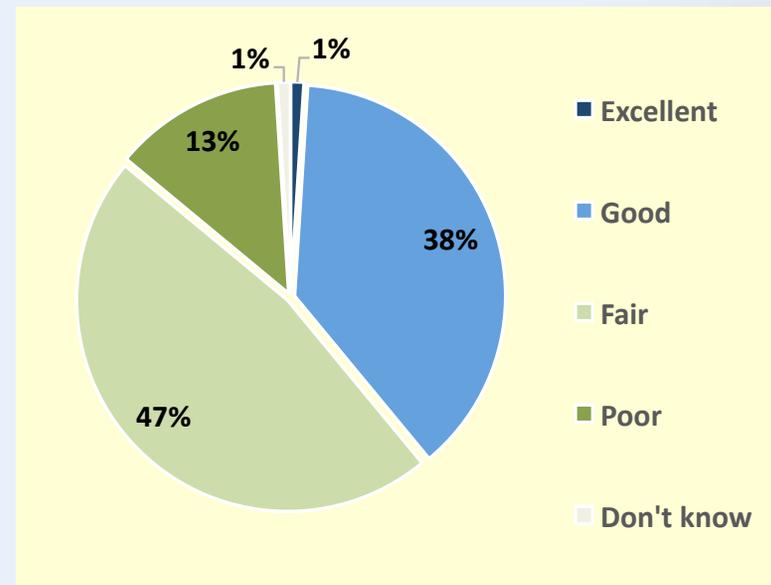
How do officials rate Board effectiveness?

Thinking about your Township Board, how would you rate its **effectiveness overall?**

Boards with positive relationships:



Boards with negative relationships:



Local officials say communication is one key to improved Board member relations

- **No surprises:** *“All board members need to make sure to keep the lines of communication open at all times and provide agenda items to the supervisor prior to meetings so other board members are not surprised by any topic of discussion.”*
- **Set aside time to talk about relationships:** *“We held a special meeting a few weeks ago to go over council conduct. So far it has helped but not enough time has passed to see if these changes will help long term.”*
“More time in social settings to allow relationship building.”
“Some way to have more time for frank discussion among council members, without necessarily making decisions, that would not violate Open Meetings laws.”
- **Share information:** *“As a 72-year-old supervisor my greatest communication tool is the FORWARD button for emails I receive to keep my Board in the loop.”*

Local officials say training is another key to improved Board member relations

- **Provide relationship strategies:** *“An improvement in people skills learned in a program such as Dale Carnegie. We have some insecure personalities on the board and some very sure of themselves, that being said, the insecure tend to over exert their authority to make up for their deficiencies.”*
- **Focus on part-time members to make sure they are fully trained:** *“Additional training for Board members that are not as active “full time” in the office. Our Trustees are not full time employees of the Township and that makes it hard to communicate and keep them informed.”*
- **Clarify roles:** *“We hosted several trainings about council's roles which helped a little bit. We have also had several brainstorming sessions which helped show that the commissioners all want similar things and we can focus on common ground issues.”*

Local officials say respect is another key to improved Board member relations

- **Be straightforward**: *“Do not talk about others when they are not present.”*
- **Be present**: *“Better communication face to face instead of comments from other sources.”*
- **Demand preparation**: *“The Board members have to read their packets and be prepared.”*

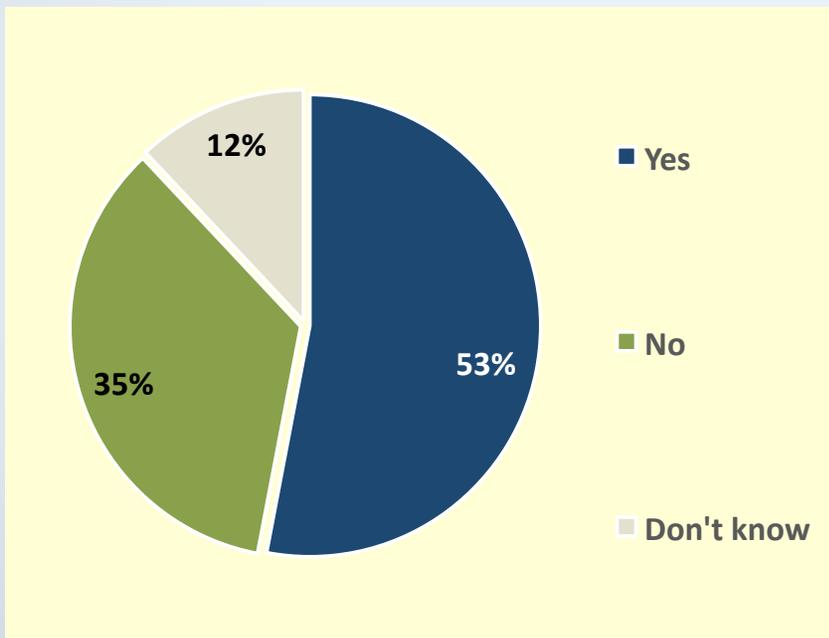
Local officials say communication is the key to improved Board-employee relations

- **Formalize relationship efforts:** *“We have recently created a Employee Relations Committee in the hope to better the relationship between the Township Board and its staff.”*
- **Intentional outreach:**
“Attend employee's union meetings. Spend some time with them.”
“I think it would be eye opening for the Trustees to spend some time with each department to see what happens on a daily basis. I understand that for many it wouldn't be possible because of their other jobs and responsibilities.”
“I think the relationship between our board members and staff is excellent. We work at this with a monthly meeting with the township's office staff to review the prior monthly board meeting and pertinent comments regarding the agenda items. Then we ask each staff member if they have anything to mention. I value this meeting and I know the staff appreciates it. We have this an hour before we open and the employees are paid for the extra hour each month.”

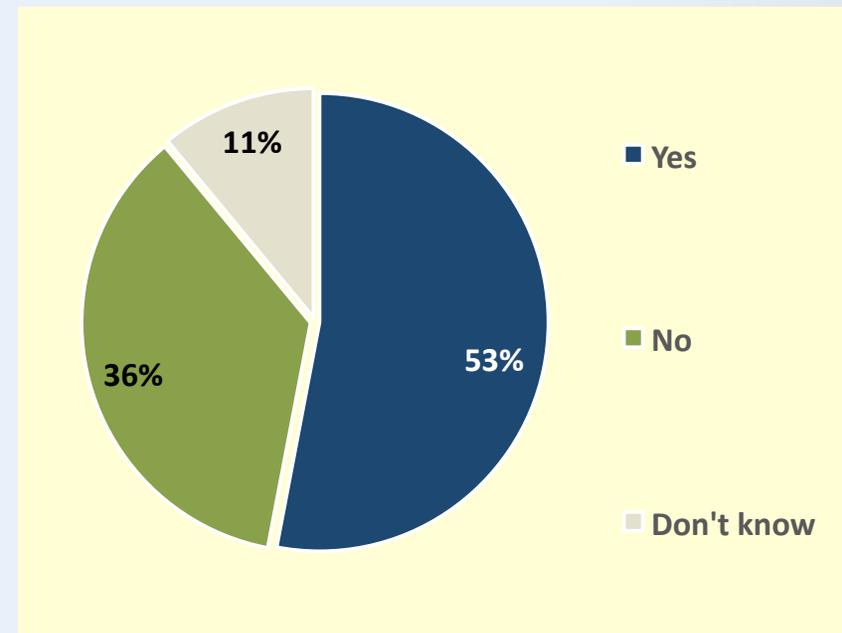
Who currently has policies on conduct?

As far as you know, does your jurisdiction currently have a **formal set of rules** (e.g., a code of conduct, charter provision, ordinance, or policy) concerning appropriate Board behavior and/or Board interactions with administration or employees in your township?

Policies on Board behavior:

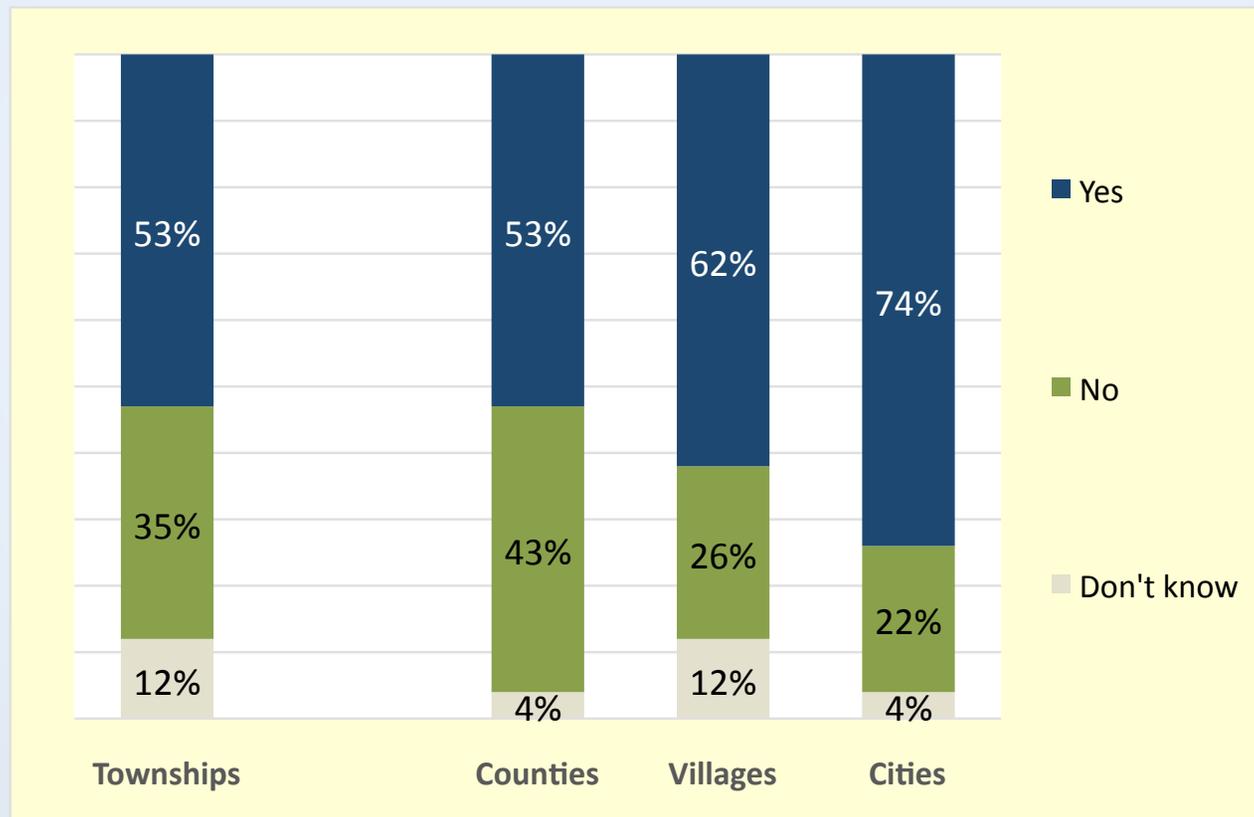


Policies on Board-employee interaction:



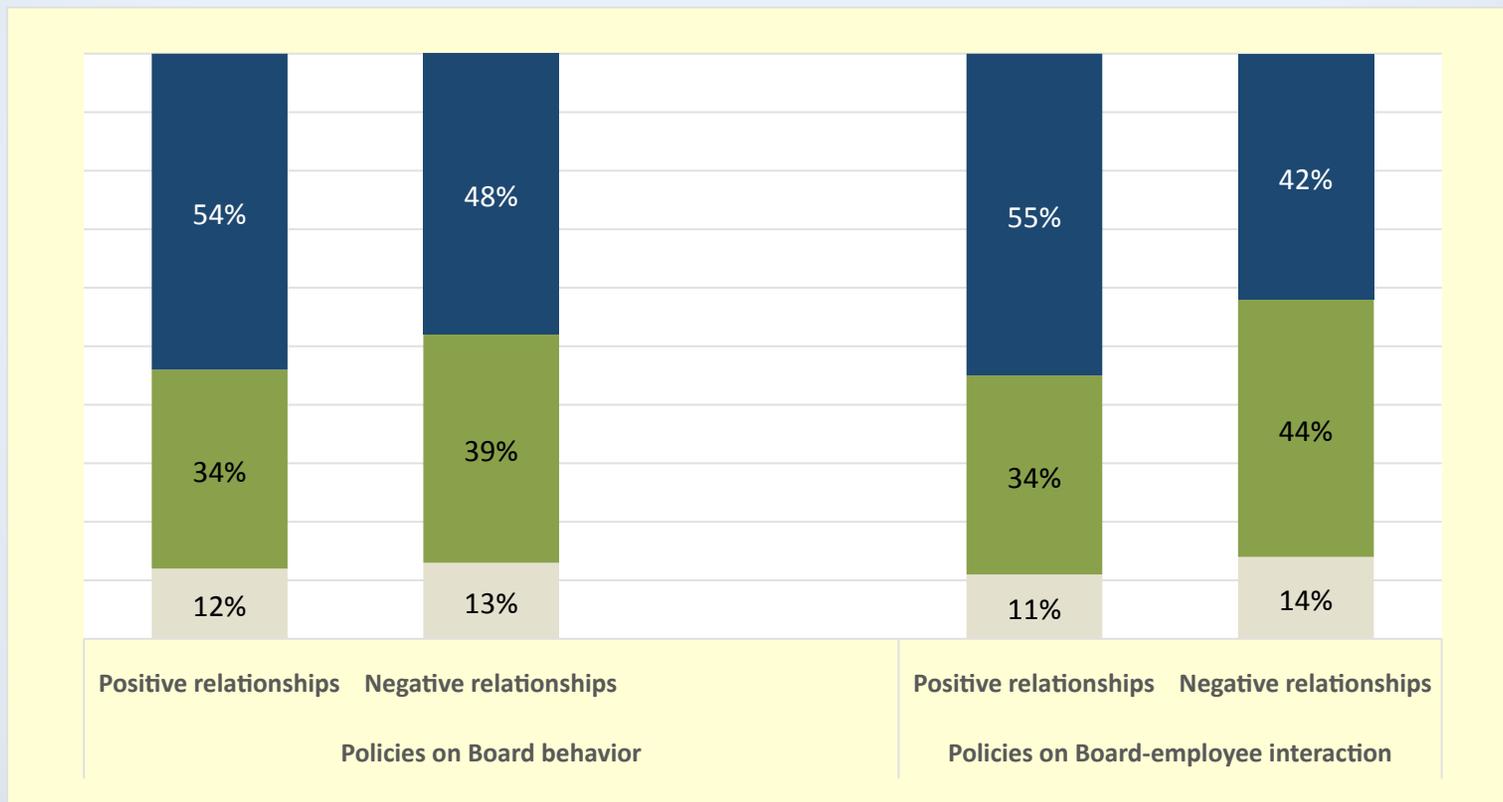
Who currently has policies on conduct?

As far as you know, does your jurisdiction currently have a **formal set of rules** (e.g., a code of conduct, charter provision, ordinance, or policy) concerning appropriate Board behavior?



Who currently has policies on conduct?

As far as you know, does your jurisdiction currently have a **formal set of rules** (e.g., a code of conduct, charter provision, ordinance, or policy) concerning appropriate Board behavior and/or Board interactions with administration or employees in your township?



Officials' Views on Township Relationships

Summary

- Township officials' overall assessments of Board relationships and those between Board and employee are very positive.
- Factors that help in those places with excellent or good relationships:
 - Willingness to accept decisions of the Board; clarity of roles; positive tone of communication, professionalism, and ethics
- Factors that help in those places with only fair or poor relationships:
 - Negative tone of communication, lack of professionalism or ethics; factions on the Board; lack of clarity of roles
- Suggestions for action:
 - more formal training and opportunities for informal interaction; making the time for outreach to staff; codify roles and appropriate behavior

The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)

Web: www.closup.umich.edu

Email: closup-mpps@umich.edu

Twitter: [@closup](https://twitter.com/closup)