

# The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy >> University of Michigan

Michigan Public  
Policy Survey December 2018

## The state of community civic discourse, according to Michigan's local government leaders

By Debra Horner and Thomas Ivacko

This report presents the opinions of Michigan's local government leaders regarding the state of public discourse in their communities, including how constructive or divisive it is among citizens, between citizens and elected officials, and among the local officials within the jurisdiction's government. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Spring 2018 and Fall 2012 waves of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS).

>> The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) is a census survey of all 1,856 general purpose local governments in Michigan conducted by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) at the University of Michigan in partnership with the Michigan Municipal League, Michigan Townships Association, and Michigan Association of Counties. The MPPS investigates local officials' opinions and perspectives on a variety of important public policy issues. Respondents for the Spring 2018 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 1,372 jurisdictions across the state.

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## Key Findings

- The MPPS asked local leaders' opinions regarding the tone of civic discourse on local policy issues in their communities among residents, as well as among local elected officials, and between residents and elected officials. While national political discourse may be becoming increasingly hostile, Michigan officials have generally positive views of local discourse, though some concerns do emerge, especially in the state's largest communities.
- When it comes to discourse *among local elected officials*, assessments are quite optimistic. Only 8% statewide say the general state of discourse among their jurisdiction's elected officials themselves regarding local policy issues is divisive, while 71% say it is constructive, and 20% say it is mixed (i.e., sometimes divisive and sometimes constructive).
- Regarding discourse *between residents and elected officials*, assessments of tone are again quite positive. Just 5% of local leaders overall describe discourse with residents as divisive, while 67% describe it as constructive and 26% it is mixed.
- However, when it comes to the tone of discourse on local policy issues *among residents*, local leaders are less optimistic. Overall, 38% statewide say it is constructive, 11% say it is divisive, and 39% say it is mixed.
- In all three cases, local leaders from Michigan's largest jurisdictions – those with more than 30,000 residents – are more likely to describe the discourse as divisive, compared with those from smaller communities. In addition, appointed officials—such as city and village managers, township managers, and county administrators—are more likely than their elected colleagues to say the discourse is divisive. And, independently from jurisdiction size or administrative position, officials who self-identify as either Democrats or Independents are also more likely to say the discourse is divisive, compared with Republican local leaders.
  - » The most worrisome breakdown is in regards to discourse among residents in Michigan's largest communities, among whom just 28% of local leaders say discourse is constructive, while 20% describe discourse among residents as divisive.
- Looking at changes over time, most local leaders' assessments of civic discourse regarding these three types of community dialog have not shown substantial changes since 2012. However, where there have been shifts, it is typically those local leaders who self-identify as Republican who tend to report increases in constructive discourse over the past few years; by contrast, Independent and Democratic officials tend to report increases in mixed or divisive discourse. In addition, appointed officials are much more likely than elected officials to report declines in constructive discourse among all groups.

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### Background

Civility in American politics appears to be in retreat, especially when it comes to national issues. People on opposing sides of political issues used to be seen as opponents, yet increasingly they seem to be treated as enemies, particularly when it comes to politics in Washington, D.C. While some political historians are quick to point out that that incivility has long been a mainstay of American politics,<sup>1</sup> others have tracked a steady rise in acrimonious political discourse over the past 30 years or more.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, studies of political discourse have found that people's experience with incivility can lead to reduced trust in government, lower opinions of institutional legitimacy, and less respect for opposing views.<sup>3</sup>

As national politics appear to have become increasingly corrosive, concern has also begun to filter down to the sub-federal level. In Michigan, for example, the question of civility in political discourse has become a topic of increased interest. Governor Rick Snyder recently partnered with a wide collection of other leading public and private figures to promote "An Open Letter about Civility in the Public Discourse" which notes "...with increasing frequency across all political spectrums, we are seeing a complete decline in decorum within public discourse. We've witnessed threats and calls for violence against those that simply have a differing opinion on public policy matters. This alarming development should be of great concern to all of us, regardless of your own positions or philosophical leanings."<sup>4</sup> At the same time, other local observers argue that today's calls for civility in Michigan from those in power can also be seen as thinly veiled efforts to shut down protest amid a growing "resistance" movement.<sup>5</sup>

But while much of the concern about incivility in public discourse focuses on Washington, D.C. and state capitals such as Lansing, it is less clear if incivility has also infected civic discourse at the local level regarding local issues. Tracking surveys from the Pew Research Center have found that Americans typically have stable, mostly positive views toward local government, and they feel more favorably toward local than either their state or the federal government.<sup>6</sup> And in Michigan,<sup>7</sup> as is the case nationwide,<sup>8</sup> citizens are more likely to say they trust local government than either the state government in Lansing or the federal government in Washington, D.C. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, when it comes to local officials themselves, leaders have even higher levels of confidence that local governments are trustworthy.<sup>9</sup> Do these favorable attitudes toward local politics translate into an environment of greater civility in political discourse as well?

To help answer this question, the Spring 2018 MPPS sought to explore local government leaders' views about the tone of discourse on local issues in their jurisdictions, to see whether the alarms over incivility are also ringing in Michigan's counties, cities, villages, and townships.



## Little divisiveness reported in discourse among local elected officials

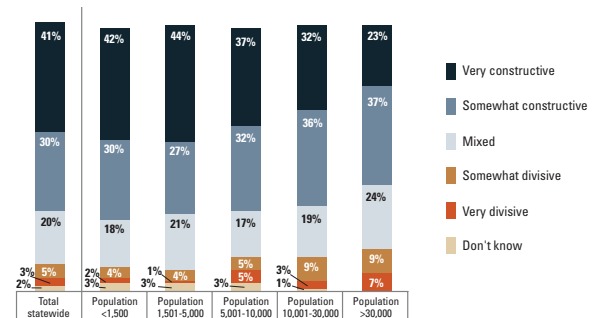
The Spring 2018 MPPS asked local leaders to characterize the general tone of discussion and communication that takes place around local policy issues in their communities, among and between various groups, including among local officials themselves. While political discourse has seemingly become quite hostile recently around the U.S. regarding national issues, the MPPS finds little evidence of similar problems when it comes to policy discussion among Michigan's local elected officials. Overall, just 8% of local leaders say discourse among local elected officials is very (3%) or somewhat (5%) divisive, while 71% say it is somewhat (30%) or very (41%) constructive (see *Figure 1a*). Meanwhile, 20% say this discourse is mixed, sometimes divisive and sometimes constructive.

There are some differences in reports of divisiveness over local policy issues when broken down by the population size of Michigan's communities, with larger jurisdictions being more likely than smaller ones to report such challenges. For example, as shown in *Figure 1a*, among Michigan's largest local jurisdictions (those with more than 30,000 residents), 16% of local leaders say discourse among elected officials is generally divisive, while the same is true among only 6% of leaders from the smallest jurisdictions (those with less than 1,500 residents).

While not shown in this figure, the same types of patterns are found when breaking the data down by other jurisdiction characteristics that correlate with community size. For instance, discussion is described as more divisive in places with high population density compared to place with fewer residents per square mile; more divisive in urban places than in rural places; and more divisive where there is greater rather than lesser racial diversity. In other words, places that are larger, denser, and more heterogeneous tend to have less civil discussion. This may be driven in part simply because there are likely to be a greater variety of viewpoints, and hence more opportunities to disagree, in places that are larger and more diverse.

**Figure 1a**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues among elected officials, by jurisdiction size



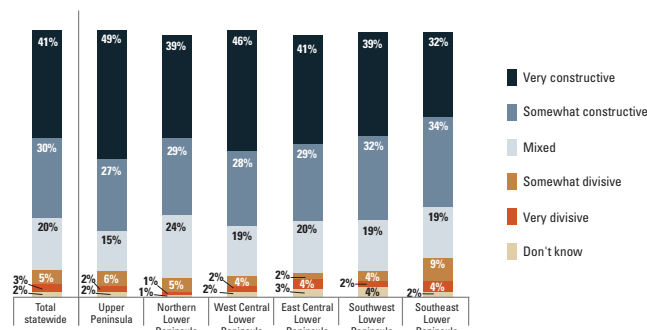
By region, as shown in *Figure 1b*, officials from Southeast Michigan are somewhat more likely than those from other parts of the state to report divisiveness among local elected leaders. For example, while just 6% of leaders from the Northern Lower Peninsula report generally divisive discourse, this increases to 13% in the Southeast region. And while 76% of leaders in the U.P. say this discourse is generally constructive in their jurisdictions, the same is true among 66% in Southeast Michigan.

After using regression analysis to examine a wide range of potential factors correlated with these views, another difference that stands out is the partisan identification of the MPPS respondents. Independently of other factors, nearly three-quarters (74%) of local leaders who self-identify on the MPPS as Republicans say that the tone of discussion among elected officials in their jurisdiction is constructive compared to 64% of Independents and 65% of Democrats (see *Figure 1c*).

Additionally, once again separate from these and other factors, a local official's position as elected or appointed also corresponds to his or her assessments of local policy discussion. Only 6% of local elected officials believe that discussion among themselves is primarily divisive, while 73% say it is constructive (see *Figure 1d*). By comparison, appointed local officials—such as city and village managers, township managers, or county administrators—are twice as likely to report that discourse among their community's elected officials is divisive (12%) and significantly less likely to say it is constructive (61%).

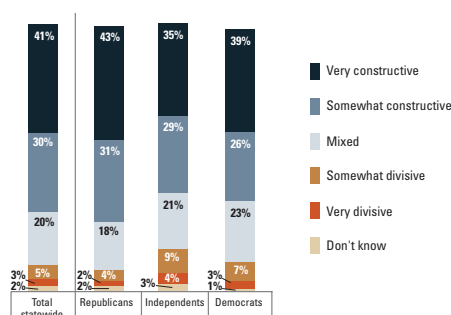
**Figure 1b**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues among elected officials, by region



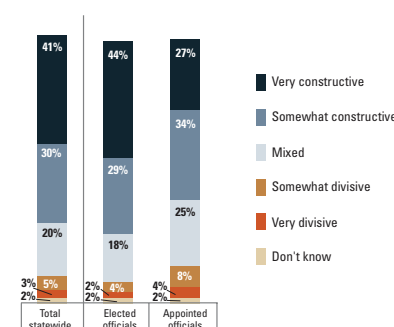
**Figure 1c**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues among elected officials, by partisan identification



**Figure 1d**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues among elected officials, by elected and appointed officials





## Statewide, little change in assessments of divisive discourse among local leaders

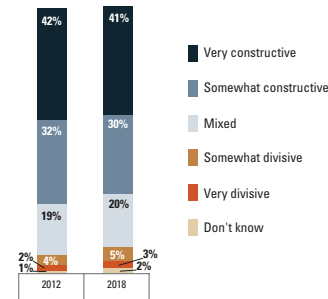
The MPPS asked similar questions about the tone of local political discourse back in 2012, which allows for a look at changes over the past six years, a period of increasing concern that discourse across the country has become more hostile and divisive, at least in terms of national political and policy issues. When it comes to locally-focused discourse among local elected officials in Michigan, however, there does not appear to be much change in tone.

In 2012, 74% of local leaders statewide described discourse among elected officials on local policy as constructive while 6% said it was divisive (see *Figure 2*). In 2018, 71% say such discourse is constructive while 8% say it is divisive, marking just a very slight decline in civil discourse.

Although there does not appear to be a great deal of change at the statewide level between the 2012 and 2018 surveys, there are some interesting differences among sub-groups. For example, when looking regionally, assessments of constructive discussion among elected officials have dropped significantly in communities in the Northern Lower Peninsula, from 80% in 2012 to 68% today (see *Table 1*). In terms of partisanship, decline in reports of constructive discussion among elected officials comes primarily from self-identified Independent and Democratic local officials, while Republican officials' reports have changed less between 2012 and 2018. And appointed officials have seen a decline in constructive discussion on their Boards and Councils, while elected officials themselves report little change since 2012.

**Figure 2**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues among elected officials, 2012 vs. 2018



**Table 1**

Percentage of officials that say discussion around local policy issues is primarily constructive among elected officials, 2012 vs. 2018

	Population size		Region						Partisan Identification			Position	
	Less than 30,000 residents	Greater than 30,000 residents	Upper Peninsula	Northern Lower Peninsula	West Central	East Central	Southwest	Southeast	Republicans	Independents	Democrats	Elected	Appointed
2012	75%	60%	72%	80%	77%	69%	74%	70%	77%	72%	71%	74%	69%
2018	72%	60%	76%	68%	74%	70%	71%	66%	74%	64%	65%	73%	61%

## Discourse between officials and residents also reported as generally constructive

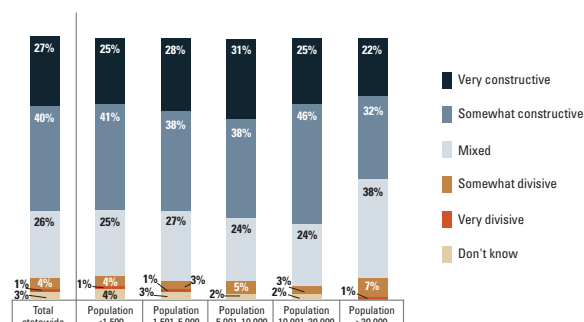
Another place to look for increasing incivility in the current political era is communication between elected officials and their constituents. However, from the perspective of Michigan local leaders, the discourse between elected officials and residents in their communities raises few red flags overall. Statewide, just 5% of local leaders describe it as divisive, including only 1% that say it is very divisive, while 67% report this discourse as constructive, and 26% say it is mixed (see *Figure 3a*). But again, there are some differences by community size. Compared with officials from all other jurisdiction sizes, those from Michigan's largest communities are significantly more likely to say that discussions on local policy issues between officials and residents are mixed (38%), and are much less likely to say it is generally constructive (54%).

And, as noted earlier, similar to patterns based on community size, discourse between officials and residents is reportedly more divisive in denser, more urban places with greater racial diversity, compared with places that are more sparsely populated, rural, and less diverse.

When assessments of discourse on local policy between officials and residents are broken down by region, no area of Michigan stands out as being particularly worrisome (see *Figure 3b*).

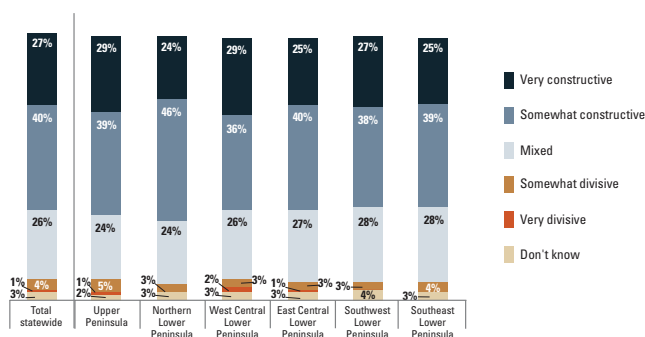
**Figure 3a**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues between elected officials and residents, by jurisdiction size



**Figure 3b**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues between elected officials and residents, by region



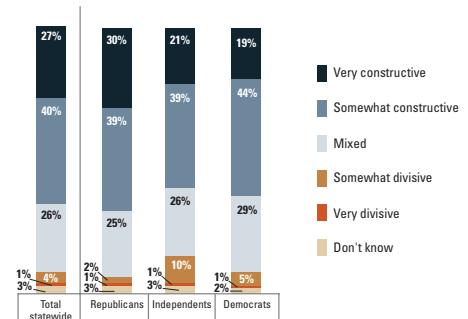


Again, when broken down by the partisan identification of the MPPS respondents, Republican local leaders are the most optimistic about the tone of discussion with residents, with only 3% saying it is divisive and 69% reporting it is generally constructive (see *Figure 3c*). By comparison, Independent (60%) and Democratic officials (63%) are somewhat less likely to report that discourse between local elected officials and residents is generally constructive.

And even more so than in the earlier case of communications among elected officials themselves, when it comes to communications between elected officials and residents, appointed officials again stand out as less optimistic about the tone of the discourse compared with the views of their elected colleagues. While a bare majority (51%) of local appointed officials say discourse between elected leaders and residents is generally constructive, 69% of elected officials themselves make that assessment (see *Figure 3d*).

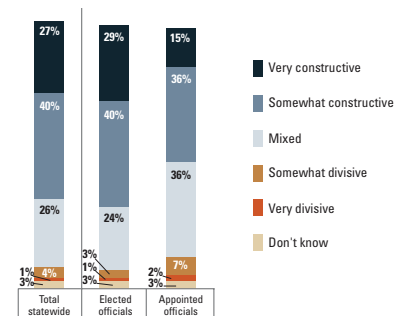
**Figure 3c**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues between elected officials and residents, by partisan identification



**Figure 3d**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues between elected officials and residents, by elected and appointed officials



While there is little change overall, assessments of constructive discourse between elected officials and residents have declined since 2012 among Independents and Democrats as well as appointed officials

Between 2012 and 2018 local leaders report only a slight decline in the tone of discussions around local policy issues between officials and residents. Whereas 70% characterized this discourse as generally constructive in 2012, that dropped by just 3 percentage points to 67% in 2018 (see Figure 4).

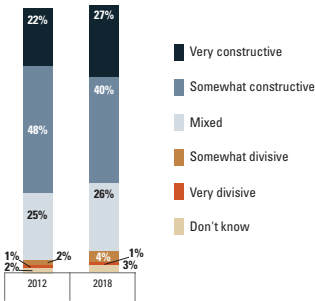
But while there is relatively minor change over time when looking at all jurisdictions combined, differences do emerge again when looking at reports among certain groups of communities and local officials. As shown in Table 2, although assessments of discourse between officials and residents worsened between 2012 and 2018 among all partisan groups, Independent local officials are the most likely to report significant change, followed by Democrats. For example, while 72% of Independent local officials reported constructive discourse between officials and residents in 2012, this dropped by 12 percentage points, to 60% today. Meanwhile, the corresponding declines were 7 percentage points among Democrats, and 3 points among Republicans.

And differences are also seen, again, when comparing reports from appointed versus elected officials. Reports by elected officials of generally constructive discourse between elected officials and residents declined by just 2 percentage points, from 71% in 2012 to 69% today (see Table 2). By comparison, the corresponding decline according to appointed officials is 15 percentage points, from 66% in 2012 to 51% today. It is unclear why local appointed officials have such a different assessment compared with elected officials. At first blush, one might assume it has more to do with appointed officials being more likely to be found in Michigan’s larger communities (which, as shown above, also tend to report more divisiveness compared with small places). However, regression analysis shows that these responses, based on the MPPS respondents’ status as elected versus appointed officials, is a factor independent of the type of community they represent.

Table 2  
Percentage of officials that say discussion around local policy issues is primarily constructive between local officials and residents, 2012 vs. 2018

	Population size		Region						Partisan Identification			Position	
	Less than 30,000 residents	Greater than 30,000 residents	Upper Peninsula	Northern Lower Peninsula	West Central	East Central	Southwest	Southeast	Republicans	Independents	Democrats	Elected	Appointed
2012	71%	58%	71%	72%	74%	67%	67%	69%	72%	72%	70%	71%	66%
2018	67%	54%	68%	70%	65%	65%	65%	64%	69%	60%	63%	69%	51%

Figure 4  
Officials’ assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues between local officials and residents, 2012 vs. 2018







## Discourse among residents themselves much less likely to be described as constructive

When asked to characterize discourse among their jurisdictions' residents regarding local policy issues, just 38% of Michigan's local leaders say it is generally constructive (see *Figure 5a*). This is significantly lower than the percentages that say discourse is generally constructive among officials themselves (71%), and that say it is constructive between officials and residents (67%). Still, just 11% of local leaders describe discourse among residents in their jurisdiction as "somewhat" (2%) or "very" (9%) divisive. Meanwhile, the largest proportion of local leaders (39%) says that the tone of residents' discourse with each other is mixed, sometimes constructive and sometimes divisive. It is also worth noting that more local leaders express uncertainty about the tone of citizen discourse (12%) than is the case for discourse involving local officials.

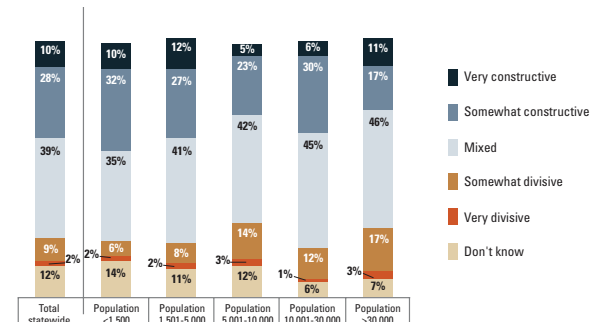
Again, there are differences in local leaders' assessments of residents' political discourse based on the size of the community. Discourse on local policy issues is reportedly more divisive among residents in large communities than in small ones. Among the state's largest jurisdictions, 20% of local leaders say this discourse is generally divisive, compared with just 8% in the smallest jurisdictions who say the same. Meanwhile, 28% of officials in the largest jurisdictions characterize their residents' political discourse among each other as mostly constructive, compared with 42% in the smallest jurisdictions.

And again, while not shown in the figures, local officials are more likely to report divisive discourse among residents in communities that are dense, urban, and with greater racial diversity, compared with low population, rural, more homogenous communities.

When looking at different regions of the state, as shown in *Figure 5b*, Southeast Michigan (14%) and the U.P. (13%) are the most likely areas to describe divisive discourse among residents, while the East Central (7%) and Southwest (8%) regions are the least likely to do so.

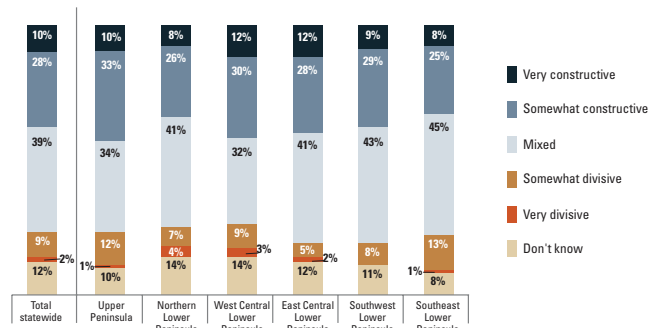
**Figure 5a**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues among residents, by jurisdiction size



**Figure 5b**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues among residents, by region

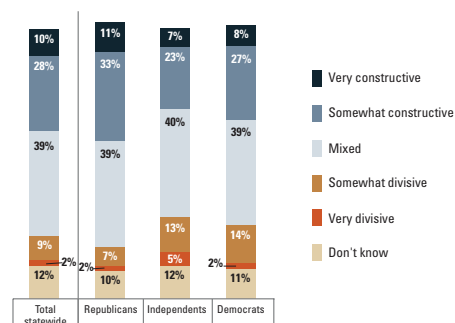


Partisanship once again is correlated with these views. Among Republican local officials, just 9% report that discourse among residents in their communities is divisive while 44% say it is constructive (see *Figure 5c*). However, both Independents (30%) and Democrats (35%) are significantly less likely to report constructive discourse among their residents.

And, following the pattern previously established, elected officials have more positive assessments of the tone of citizen discourse compared with appointed officials. When asked about residents' discussion of local policy issues, 41% of elected officials say it is somewhat or very constructive, compared with just 27% of appointed officials that say the same (see *Figure 5d*).

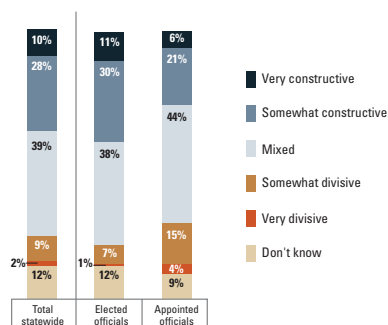
**Figure 5c**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues among residents, by partisan identification



**Figure 5d**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues among residents, by elected and appointed officials





## Surprising improvement over time in assessments of residents' tone of discussion on local policy issues, driven primarily by Republican officials

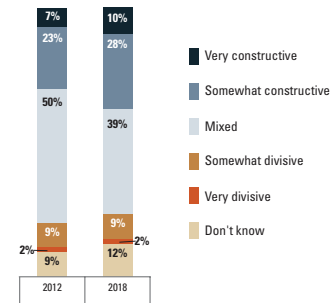
However, in a surprising twist, even though the tone of discourse about local policy issues is reportedly worse among residents themselves than it is among elected officials, or between officials and residents, nonetheless responses from local leaders in 2018 show an improvement in inter-resident discourse compared with the 2012 MPPS survey. Whereas 30% of local leaders described discourse among their residents as generally constructive in 2012, that increased to 38% in 2018 (see *Figure 6*). And while 61% reported it as either mixed, or generally divisive in 2012, that dropped to 50% in 2018.

Again, after looking at a variety of factors that could be correlated with these changes over time, the partisan self-identification of the MPPS respondents stands out. In 2012, 30% of Republican local leaders said their residents' tone of discourse about local policy was constructive, but by 2018 that percentage jumped to 44% (see *Table 3*). Among Independent local officials, by contrast, slightly fewer (30%) say they see constructive discourse among residents on local policy issues now compared with 2012 (31%). Finally, Democratic local officials are more likely than Independents, but less likely than Republicans to report an increase in constructive resident discourse, from 30% in 2012 to 35% today.

And separately from issues of partisanship, there are again also differences based on whether the reporting local leader is an elected or appointed official. As shown in *Table 3*, among elected officials, significantly more say that residents' discourse on local policy is constructive today (41%) compared to 2012 (31%). However, among appointed officials—such as city and village managers, township managers, and county administrators—there has been a slight decline from 29% in 2012 to 27% today saying residents' tone of discourse is constructive.

**Figure 6**

Officials' assessments of the tone of discussion around local policy issues among residents, 2012 vs. 2018



**Table 3**

Percentage of officials that say discussion around local policy issues is primarily constructive among residents, 2012 vs. 2018

	Population size		Region						Partisan Identification			Position	
	Less than 30,000 residents	Greater than 30,000 residents	Upper Peninsula	Northern Lower Peninsula	West Central	East Central	Southwest	Southeast	Republicans	Independents	Democrats	Elected	Appointed
2012	30%	28%	31%	33%	30%	26%	28%	34%	30%	31%	30%	31%	29%
2018	39%	28%	43%	34%	42%	40%	38%	33%	44%	30%	35%	41%	27%

### Conclusion

Overall, the MPPS finds more positive than negative evidence about the state of civic discourse in Michigan communities when looking at reports from local leaders in 2012 and 2018. On one hand, most local leaders report that discourse is generally constructive among elected officials (71%) and between officials and residents (67%). And despite a national environment of increasingly hostile partisanship, neither of those statewide assessments have worsened significantly over time.

On the other hand, local leaders are somewhat less optimistic about the state of discourse among their jurisdictions' residents themselves. Just 38% report this discourse as generally constructive today, significantly below the assessments regarding discourse among officials, and between officials and residents. And most worrisome, in Michigan's largest jurisdictions just 28% report that resident discourse is generally constructive, while 20% say it is divisive. Still, these somewhat more discouraging assessments of inter-resident discourse are, surprisingly, an improvement compared with views in 2012.

While extreme partisanship and hostile political discourse may be increasing around national policy issues, in Michigan at least, reports from local leaders show that civic discourse around local policy issues is not facing an urgent crisis. Discourse among local officials, and between officials and residents appears to be relatively healthy and constructive, although there are some signs that communications may be somewhat more divisive in large, urban, dense communities. If there is any place in particular that early warning signs may be seen, it would appear to be primarily in regards to civic discourse among Michigan's residents themselves, especially in the state's largest communities.



## Notes

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## 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.

In the Spring 2018 iteration, surveys were sent by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) via the internet 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.

The Spring 2018 wave was conducted from April 9 – June 8, 2018. A total of 1,372 jurisdictions in the Spring 2018 wave returned valid surveys (65 counties, 237 cities, 177 villages, and 893 townships), resulting in a 74% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.35%. The key relationships discussed in the above report are statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level or below, unless otherwise specified. 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. Quantitative data are weighted to account for non-response. "Voices Across Michigan" verbatim responses, when included, may have been edited for clarity and brevity. Contact CLOSUP staff for more information.

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: <http://closup.umich.edu/mpps.php>.

*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.*

## Previous MPPS reports

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