

# The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

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



Michigan Public  
Policy Survey March 2013

## Beyond trust in government: government trust in citizens?

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This is the first of several reports on the opinions of Michigan's local government leaders regarding citizen engagement in their jurisdictions.

This report focuses on the levels of trust local officials feel toward their citizens as responsible participants in local governance. Subsequent reports will explore local jurisdictions' policies that foster citizen engagement, including the use of technology. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Fall 2012 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS).

>> The **Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)** is conducted by the **Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP)** at the University of Michigan in partnership with the **Michigan Association of Counties, Michigan Municipal League, and Michigan Townships Association**. The MPPS takes place twice each year and investigates local officials' opinions and perspectives on a variety of important public policy issues. Respondents to the MPPS this wave include county administrators and board chairs, city mayors and managers, village presidents and managers, and township supervisors, clerks, and managers from over 1,300 general purpose local governments across the state.

For more information, please contact: [closup-mpps@umich.edu](mailto:closup-mpps@umich.edu) / (734) 647-4091.

## Key Findings

- More than half of Michigan's local leaders (53%) say they trust their citizens to be responsible participants in local governance "nearly always" or "most of the time." However, almost a third (32%) feel they can only trust their citizens "some of the time," and small percentages feel they can trust their citizens "seldom" (10%) or "almost never" (3%).
- Regarding potential factors tied to leaders' trust levels, officials who feel that their citizens are engaged with their local government are more likely to say they trust their citizens to be responsible participants. Eighty percent of officials who say their citizens are very engaged report high levels of trust in their citizens, compared with only 39% of those who say their citizens are not very engaged.
- Trust among local leaders also corresponds to other beliefs they express about their citizens, including:
  - » whether citizens are willing to work for the common good, rather than just their own benefit;
  - » whether citizens are interested in finding solutions, rather than in just complaining;
  - » whether citizens are willing to take the time to become well informed on issues facing the jurisdiction;
  - » and, whether the tone of political discourse between citizens and officials as well as among citizens themselves is constructive rather than divisive.

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## Background

The Fall 2012 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) examined a range of issues regarding citizen engagement in local government, including the issue of political *trust*. While discussion of political trust usually refers to citizens' trust in governments and the officials who represent them, the MPPS took an unusual approach, asking instead whether local leaders trust their citizens as responsible participants in local governance.

Political trust is important, given that local leaders' trust in their citizens may influence how local officials and administrators define the scope of problems, evaluate alternatives, interpret citizen input, and take action. Conversely, citizen trust in government is important to governments' legitimacy—that is, their authority to make, implement, and enforce laws. When levels of citizen trust in government are high, government officials may be able to engage in greater risk-taking, such as pursuing innovative solutions to difficult problems. But when citizens' levels of trust are low, the authority and abilities of governments can be undermined.<sup>1</sup> For example, citizens with higher levels of trust are more willing to support a local government's power to make zoning decisions, while less trusting citizens may be more likely to oppose zoning authorities.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, it has been found that citizens' trust in the federal government has declined markedly over time in ongoing national surveys by the University of Michigan's American National Election Studies, as well as by Gallup and the Pew Research Center and in state-level studies such as the Michigan-specific State of the State Survey (SOSS) by Michigan State University. And while citizen trust tends to be somewhat higher toward state governments—and highest toward local governments—these levels tend to be low, as well.<sup>3</sup> Persistently low and shrinking levels of citizen trust toward all levels of government represent an area of significant concern about the health of democracy in the United States.<sup>4</sup> A 2007 study by the National League of Cities found that, nationwide, 58% of elected city officials said “lack of trust and degree of disengagement between residents and government is a big problem in the nation generally.”<sup>5</sup>

But again, these studies generally do not address the reverse relationship of whether government officials trust their citizens as participants in democratic governance. We know substantially less about this dimension of trust, both nationally and within individual states such as Michigan. This represents a significant gap in our understanding of a potentially crucial consideration for effective governance, and also raises the larger issue of whether or not government officials accept any consequential role for the general citizenry.

A better understanding of this relationship may be vital to any effort to engage the public in governance roles beyond mere symbolism. For instance, one of the few existing studies looking at government leaders' trust in citizens found that the more that local leaders trust their citizens, the more likely they are to foster citizen engagement.<sup>6</sup> At least in theory, local leaders have a wide variety of reasons to foster higher levels of public engagement. These may include firm commitments to core principles of democratic governance, but also with an eye to some of the practical outcomes of greater citizen engagement in policymaking, including improved organizational function within the local bureaucracy,<sup>7</sup> community economic development,<sup>8</sup> and finding better solutions to local problems.<sup>9</sup>

The MPPS's new questions on local leaders' trust in their citizens are intended to improve understanding of this relatively understudied aspect of political trust.



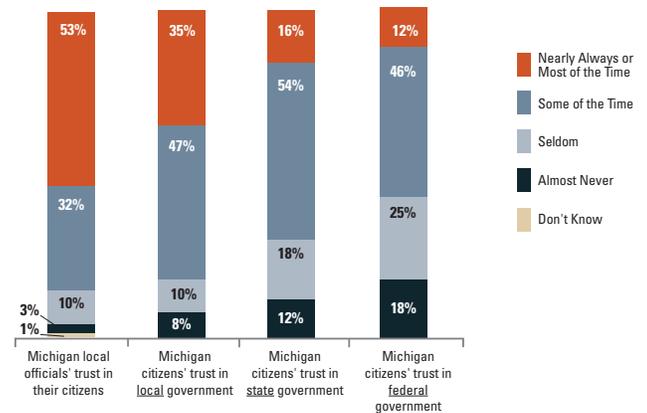
## Local government leaders are more likely to trust their citizens than citizens are to trust local governments

The MPPS survey asked Michigan’s local leaders how much of the time they can trust their citizens to be responsible participants in their jurisdictions’ policymaking and/or operations, and found that officials express considerable levels of trust in their citizens. More than half (53%) of these local leaders say that they trust their citizens to be responsible participants “nearly always” or “most of the time” (see *Figure 1*). However, a third (32%) say they can only trust their citizens “some of the time.” Relatively small percentages of Michigan’s local leaders believe they can trust their citizens “seldom” (10%) or “almost never” (3%).

Due to wording differences, the new MPPS questions on local leaders’ trust in their citizens do not directly correspond with the existing questions on citizen trust in government posed by national-level surveys or by the SOSS surveys of Michigan residents (see discussion of these in *Background* section). But they do allow for some comparisons. For instance, while the MPPS asks local leaders how much of the time they can trust their citizens to be responsible participants in local governance, the SOSS asks citizens how much of the time they can trust their governments to “do what is right.”

The Winter-Spring 2012 SOSS survey found that just 12% of Michigan citizens trust the federal government to do what is right “nearly always or most of the time,” while 16% trust the state government similarly. By comparison, the SOSS found that 35% of Michigan citizens said they can trust their local government to do what is right “nearly always or most of the time.” On the other hand, 47% of Michigan citizens said they can only trust their local officials “some of the time,” while 10% said “seldom” and 8% said “almost never.”<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1**  
Comparison of local leaders’ and citizens’ levels of reported trust



Sources: The Fall 2012 MPPS for officials’ trust in citizens and Winter-Spring 2012 SOSS for citizens’ trust in local, state, and federal governments

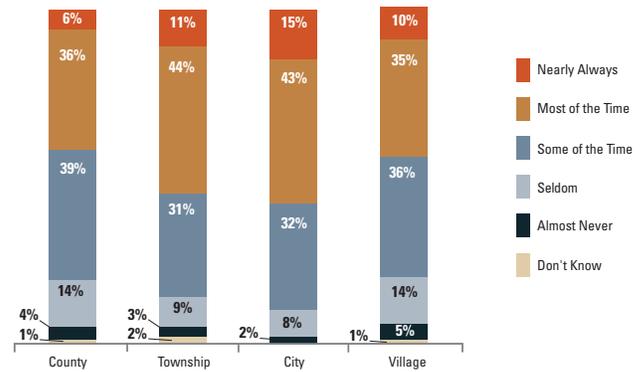
Given that so little prior research has examined leaders’ trust in their citizens, the MPPS begins at the ground level in identifying factors tied to this trust. Are differences in trust based on jurisdiction-level characteristics, personal characteristics of the local leaders themselves, a combination of these, or something else?

When looking at the jurisdiction level, data collected by the MPPS often reveal substantive differences between jurisdictions of varying population sizes. In the case of leaders’ trust in their citizens, one might assume that levels of trust would differ between small communities, where leaders and citizens are more likely to know each other personally, and big cities, where these relationships are less personal. However, statistical analysis finds that, even when controlling for a wide range of key variables, no significant patterns emerge by community population size. For instance, 52% of leaders from the state’s smallest jurisdictions trust their citizens nearly always or most of the time, while the same is true for 47% of leaders in the state’s largest jurisdictions.

In addition to common differences found by community size, MPPS surveys also often find significant differences across Michigan’s widespread geographic regions. Again, however, no particularly strong differences emerge across these regions in the case of local leaders’ trust in their citizens. From the Upper Peninsula (52%) to Southeast Michigan (57%), leaders from regions across the state give fairly similar responses when asked whether they trust their citizens to be responsible partners in policymaking.

However, statistically significant differences in levels of trust in citizens are reported by officials from different jurisdiction types. City and township officials are more likely than either county or village leaders to say they trust their citizens to be responsible participants in their policymaking and/or operations. Among cities, 58% of officials say they trust their citizens “nearly always” or “most of the time.” Similarly, 55% of township officials say they trust their citizens as responsible participants “nearly always” or “most of the time.” By comparison, village leaders (45%) and county officials (42%) are less likely to report trust in their citizens “nearly always” or “most of the time” (see *Figure 2a*). It is not clear why these differences exist, and so this may identify an opportunity for further research in this field.

**Figure 2a**  
Local leaders’ trust in their citizens to be responsible participants in policymaking, by jurisdiction type

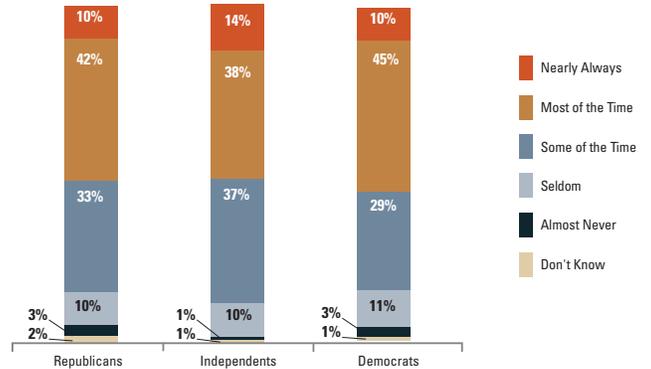




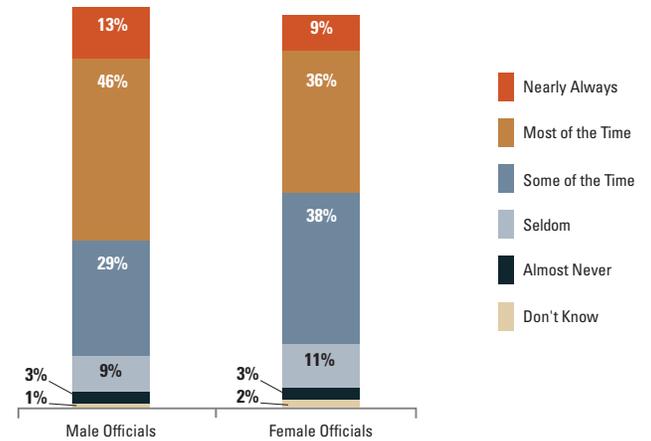
One might also expect to see differences in levels of trust toward citizens from officials with different demographic characteristics such as their age, level of education, or partisan identification. However, few of these individual characteristics appear to impact levels of trust. For example, as shown in *Figure 2b*, Republican, Independent, and Democratic local officials all report similar levels of trust in their citizens to be responsible partners in local policymaking.

The only demographic characteristic examined by CLOSUP that stands out as particularly strongly related to leaders' levels of trust is their gender. Among Michigan officials, female local leaders report being less trusting of their citizens than are their male counterparts (see *Figure 2c*). Interestingly, this pattern contradicts some prior academic research on differences among male and female city administrators, which found that female administrators were more likely to say they trust citizens,<sup>11</sup> and that they put greater emphasis on incorporating citizen input and concern with community involvement.<sup>12</sup> However, the explanations for gender differences in those studies rely on research several decades old, and the divergent findings in this wave of the MPPS could present a unique opportunity for further research into gender-based differences in local officials' trust of their citizens.

**Figure 2b**  
Local leaders' trust in their citizens to be responsible participants in policymaking, by officials' partisan identification



**Figure 2c**  
Local leaders' trust in their citizens to be responsible participants in policymaking, by officials' gender



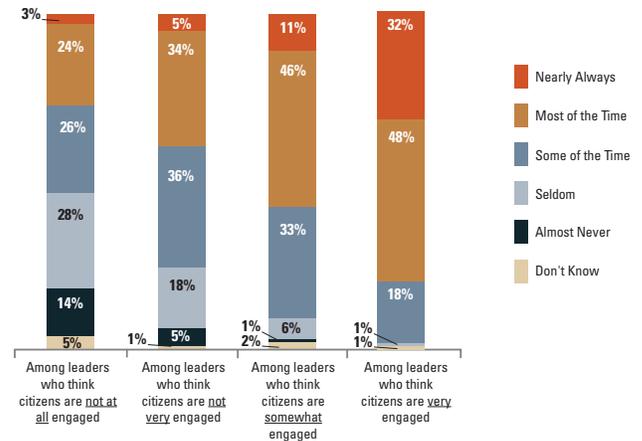
## Leaders' trust is linked to citizens' amounts of engagement: the more, the better

Beyond jurisdiction-level and personal characteristics of Michigan's local leaders, the MPPS finds evidence that these leaders' trust in their citizens corresponds strongly to their perceptions of how active and engaged their citizens are with the jurisdiction.

The Fall 2012 MPPS asked local leaders to estimate their citizens' overall levels of engagement with the local jurisdiction itself. Overall, 10% of Michigan local officials say they believe their citizens are very engaged with their local governments and 55% feel their citizens are somewhat engaged, while 31% say their citizens generally are not very engaged and 3% believe they are not at all engaged. Among those officials who say their citizens are very engaged, 80% feel they can trust their citizens to be responsible participants in the policymaking process "nearly always" or "most of the time" (see *Figure 3*). By contrast, in jurisdictions where officials believe their citizens are not very engaged, only 39% of local leaders say they trust their citizens most or all of the time. And in jurisdictions where leaders think their citizens are not at all engaged, only 27% express these high levels of trust in their citizens.

**Figure 3**

Local leaders' trust in their citizens to be responsible participants in policymaking, by reported levels of overall citizen engagement





## Trust is also linked to *how* citizens engage, and to their perceived goals for engagement

In addition to the influence of some jurisdiction-level and personal characteristics of local leaders, as well as leaders' views of citizens' engagement levels, the MPPS finds strong correlations between leaders' trust of citizens and their views of how and why their citizens are active in local governance. Local officials appear to consider such factors as, whether citizens are willing to take the time to become well-informed on local issues, whether citizens are primarily focused on registering complaints as opposed to finding constructive solutions to problems, and whether citizens pursue the common community good as opposed to their own particular benefits. The MPPS addressed all three of these factors.

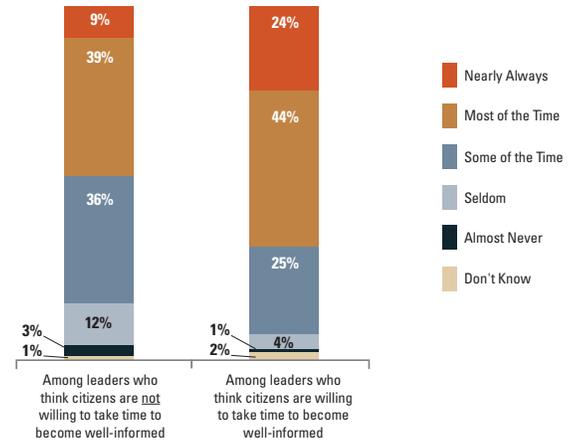
First, the MPPS asked local leaders whether they think that citizens in their communities are willing to take the time to become well informed on issues facing the jurisdiction. Among local leaders who believe their citizens are generally *not* willing to take the time to become well informed, only 48% express trust in their citizens (see *Figure 4*). By comparison, among local leaders who believe their citizens are indeed willing to take the time to become well informed, 68% express trust in their citizens.

Second, the MPPS asked local leaders whether or not the citizens they tend to hear from are mostly interested in just complaining, or are interested in finding solutions to problems. Among leaders who agree that their citizens are mostly interested in just complaining, only 39% express trust in their citizens (see *Figure 5*). But among leaders who think their citizens are more interested in finding solutions, 77% express trust in their citizens.

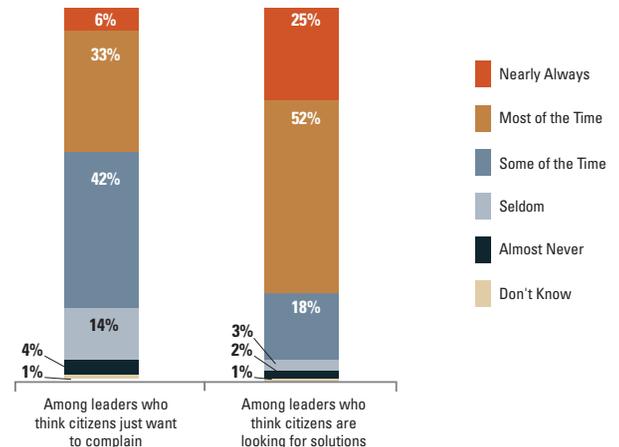
And third, the MPPS asked local leaders whether they believe those citizens who are engaged in their jurisdictions are primarily looking out only for themselves or whether they are looking out for the benefit of the community overall. Among local leaders who think their engaged citizens are “in it” only for themselves, just 11% express trust in their citizens. By comparison, among those who think their engaged citizens are “in it” for the benefit of the community overall, 72% express trust in their citizens (see *Figure 6*). Since government leaders are generally responsible for maximizing benefits for their communities overall, it would make sense that they have greater trust in citizens who take the same approach when they are engaged with the jurisdictions' efforts.

These findings appear to show that local leaders are looking for their citizens to live up to the democratic ideals of responsible citizenship in terms of engaging for the greater good, working toward positive outcomes, and being well-informed in order to help produce those positive outcomes.

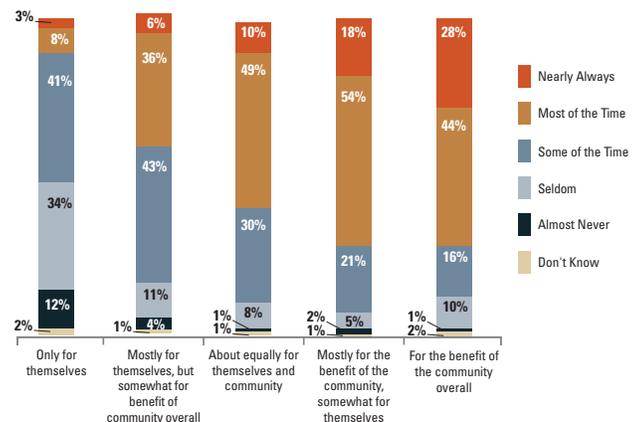
**Figure 4**  
Local leaders' trust in their citizens to be responsible participants in policymaking, by perceptions of citizens' efforts



**Figure 5**  
Local leaders' trust in their citizens to be responsible participants in policymaking, by perceptions of citizens' attitudes toward engagement



**Figure 6**  
Local leaders' trust in their citizens to be responsible participants in policymaking, by perceptions of citizens' goals for engagement



## Local officials are more likely to express trust in citizens when civic discourse is constructive rather than divisive

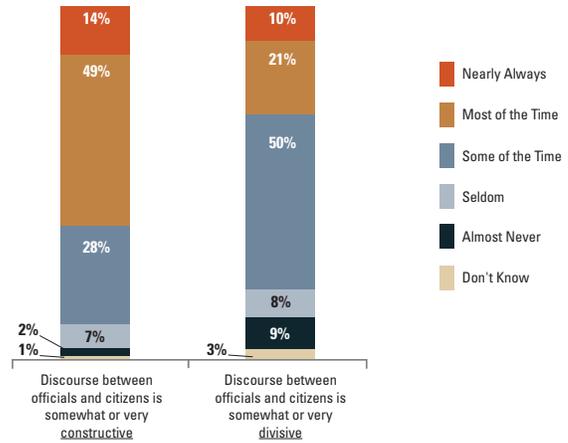
Finally, local leaders’ feelings about the tone of civic discourse in their jurisdictions—whether such discourse is generally constructive or divisive—is another key element connected to leaders’ trust in their citizens.

Most local leaders (70%) report that the tone of policy discussions between public officials and citizens in their jurisdictions are either somewhat or very constructive. Just 3% believe the tone of discussions is generally divisive, while 25% say it is mixed. Among leaders who think the discourse is generally constructive, nearly two-thirds (63%) say they can trust their citizens “nearly always” or “most of the time” (see *Figure 7*). By comparison, among leaders who think the discourse is generally divisive, fewer than half as many (31%) say they can trust their citizens to be responsible partners in policymaking.

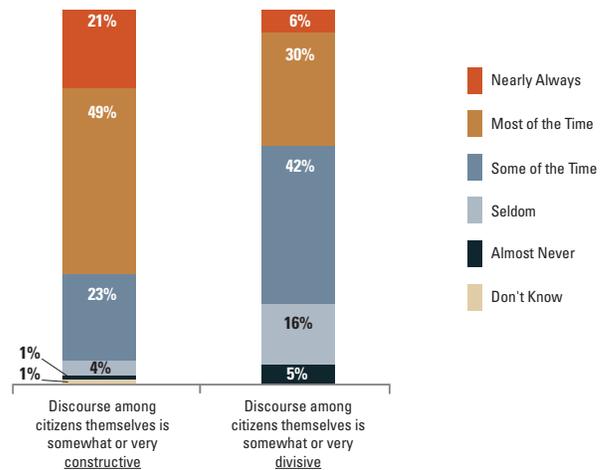
Unfortunately, local leaders are much less likely to report that the tone of public discourse between the citizens themselves in their jurisdictions is constructive. Overall, just 30% of local leaders say the tone of discussions is constructive between citizens themselves in their jurisdictions, while 11% say it is generally divisive, and 50% say it is mixed. Among those leaders who say this discourse is constructive, seven in ten (70%) believe they can trust their citizens (see *Figure 8*). On the other hand, among leaders who say their citizens’ discourse is generally divisive, only 36% feel they can trust their citizens.

These findings may reinforce the point identified above that when leaders feel their citizens are working toward positive community outcomes, they are more likely to trust their citizens as responsible participants in local governance efforts.

**Figure 7**  
Local leaders’ trust in their citizens to be responsible participants in policymaking, by assessments of the tone of discourse between public officials and citizens



**Figure 8**  
Local leaders’ trust in their citizens to be responsible participants in policymaking, by assessments of the tone of discourse between citizens themselves





## Conclusion

Many would argue that trust is a fundamentally important issue in democratic government. This holds true whether the topic is citizen trust in the government itself, or the trust that government leaders have in their citizens. Low levels of citizen trust in government today raise troubling concerns such as the legitimacy of decisions made by governments in the eyes of their citizens, whether citizens will support decisions made by their government, and whether citizens will be politically engaged to help produce better outcomes. Meanwhile, public officials' mistrust of their citizens may make leaders less likely to foster citizen participation and therefore to realize the benefits it can help deliver.

In one of the few research efforts undertaken to date on government leaders' trust in their citizens, the MPPS finds mixed messages. On one hand, the MPPS finds that a majority of Michigan local leaders express trust in their citizens. This may be encouraging given prior research that suggests leaders' trust may in turn help produce a more engaged citizenry. On the other hand, significant percentages of local leaders express low levels of trust in their citizens, and this may raise the opposite concern that citizen engagement in those communities may suffer partly as a result of this lack of trust by their leaders.

This MPPS research finds a few intriguing correlations for which we do not have good explanations. For instance, it is unclear why leaders from cities and townships are more likely to trust their citizens than are leaders from counties and villages. Similarly, it is unclear why male leaders express more trust than do female leaders. On the other hand, the MPPS also finds correlations in trust that may be easier to decipher, such as leaders expressing more trust when they think their citizens are engaged for the common good, are seeking positive solutions instead of just complaining, and are willing to take the time to become well-informed on local issues, and engage in constructive civic discourse with their government leaders and with their fellow citizens.

One particularly promising finding for those looking to boost citizen engagement is that those local leaders in Michigan who report high levels of citizen engagement in their communities are much more likely to report that they trust their citizens. From this perspective, the more that citizens are engaged with their local governments, the stronger local democracy may be in terms of leaders' trust in their citizens.

## Notes

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## Survey background and methodology

The MPPS is a biannual survey of each of Michigan's 1,856 units of general purpose local government, conducted once each spring and fall. While the spring surveys consist of multiple batteries of the same "core" fiscal, budgetary and operational policy questions and are designed to build-up a multi-year time-series of data, the fall surveys focus on various other topics.

In the Fall 2012 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 and managers, and township supervisors, clerks, and managers) from all 83 counties, 277 cities, 256 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan.

The Fall 2012 wave was conducted from October 8-December 11, 2012. A total of 1,328 jurisdictions in the Fall 2012 wave returned valid surveys, resulting in a 72% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.43%. However, the margin of error may differ for analyses that include only a subset of respondents. 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. Data are weighted to account for non-response. Contact CLOSUP staff for more information.

Detailed tables of the data analyzed in this report are available online, 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. See 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.*

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