

The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

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

Michigan Public
Policy Survey August 2011

Public sector unions in Michigan: their presence and impact according to local government leaders

This report presents Michigan local government leaders' assessments of their jurisdictions' employee unions. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Spring 2011 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 for 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 1,272 jurisdictions across the state.

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Key Findings

- Most Michigan citizens reside in jurisdictions that have public sector unions. Surprisingly though, only 27% of Michigan's local governments statewide have employee unions, according to local government leaders' reports. The presence of public sector employee unions is strongly associated with the size of the local government: only 5% of the state's smallest jurisdictions have unions, compared to 98% of the largest jurisdictions.
 - » Four in ten local government leaders (40%) in those jurisdictions that do have employee unions believe the unions have been a liability to their jurisdictions' overall performance, while 14% say the unions have been an asset, and 44% say they have been neither a liability nor an asset.
 - » In terms of their impact on their jurisdictions' fiscal health, 56% of local leaders believe the unions have been a liability, while 13% say they have been an asset, and 29% say neither an asset nor a liability.
 - » While Democratic local leaders are somewhat more positive about the fiscal impact of employee unions compared to their Independent and Republican counterparts, a surprisingly high 48% of these Democratic leaders say the unions have been a liability to their jurisdictions' fiscal health.
- Despite concerns about the unions' impact on their jurisdictions' performance and fiscal health, 60% of these local leaders believe that relations between their administration and their unions have been good or excellent over the past 12 months. Only 5% of local officials believe the relationships have been poor.
 - » Interestingly, these opinions do not appear to be strongly correlated with party identification of Michigan's local leaders. For instance, while 65% of local Democratic leaders in jurisdictions with unions say the relations have been good or excellent, so do 58% of local Republican leaders.

Which Michigan jurisdictions have unions?

Public employee unions have been a hot topic in state and local policy debates during 2011. Across the country there have been a series of initiatives to curb employee benefits and in some cases also union bargaining rights. In particular, Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin has aggressively attacked that state’s public employee unions, resulting in a bitter power struggle between pro- and anti-union factions. In Michigan, Governor Rick Snyder has taken a far less confrontational approach to reforming public sector employment, but his efforts have still helped focus debate on union-related issues at the state and local levels. To get a better understanding of the presence and impact of public sector unions at the local level in Michigan, the Spring 2011 MPPS asked Michigan’s local government leaders whether their jurisdictions have employee unions, and if so, whether they thought the unions’ impact had been positive or negative on their jurisdictions.

Most Michigan citizens reside in jurisdictions that have public sector unions. However, the MPPS finds that only 27% of all Michigan local governments report having employee unions. The presence of unions is strongly correlated with community population size: the vast majority of the state’s smaller jurisdictions (93% of those with 1,500 or fewer residents and 79% of those with 1,501 to 5,000 residents) report not having unions. Meanwhile, 98% of the state’s largest jurisdictions (those with more than 30,000 residents) report having at least one employee union (see *Figure 1a*).

With a greater number of distinct unions operating in their jurisdictions, the state’s larger local governments face added complexities, such as contract negotiations with multiple union partners. For instance, among Michigan’s largest jurisdictions, 42% report having two to five employee unions, while another 42% report between six and ten unions, and 13% report having 11 or more unions active among their jurisdictions’ employees (see *Figure 1a*). When looking at the presence of unions by region, Southeast Michigan stands out with 56% of its local jurisdictions reporting one or more unions present. This is more than twice as high a percentage as in any other region of the state (see *Figure 1b*). However, the very high union presence in Southeast Michigan is almost entirely driven by the higher proportion of large jurisdictions in the Southeast compared with other regions of the state.

When looking at union presence by jurisdiction type, the MPPS finds that Michigan’s cities and counties are more likely than its villages and townships to have public sector unions. Among jurisdictions responding to the survey, 100% of counties and 87% of cities report having at least one union representing their employees. By contrast, only 20% of villages and 9% of townships report having unions. (It is important to note that not all Michigan counties responded to the survey, leaving the possibility that the actual percentage is less than 100% among counties.)

Figure 1a
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting they have unions, by community population size

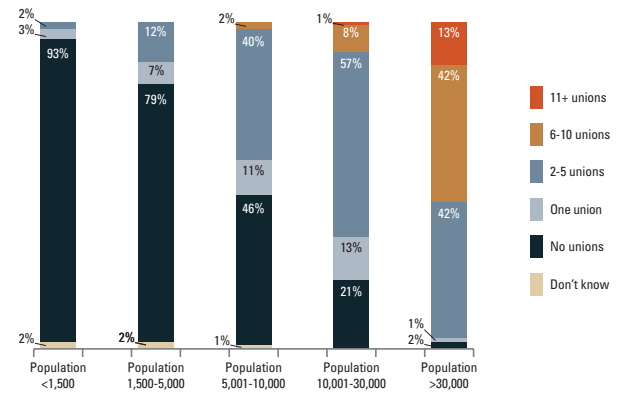
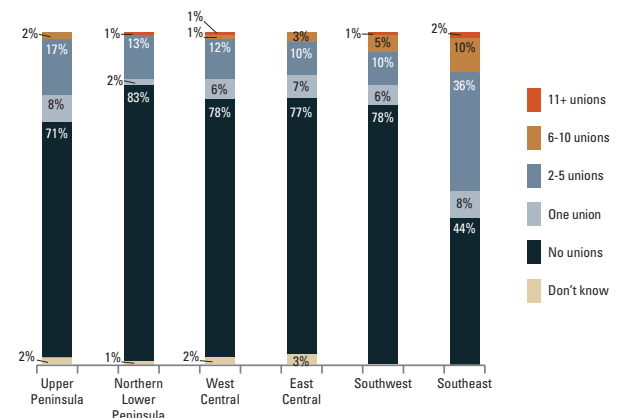


Figure 1b
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting they have unions, by region





Where unions are present, they tend to represent a fairly large proportion of the jurisdiction's employees, even in small jurisdictions. For example, among the smallest jurisdictions that report having employee unions, more than a third (36%) say that unions represent 61% or more of their government's employees. Still, the state's larger jurisdictions with unions have even higher proportions of their employees' unionized. For instance, among the largest jurisdictions (those with more than 30,000 residents) with unions, 77% say that unions represent 61% or more their units' employees, including a third (34%) who say unions represent 81% or more of their employees (see *Figure 2*).

How do local leaders view the effects of employee unions?

When asked about the impact that unions have had on their jurisdictions' overall performance (for those jurisdictions with unions), Michigan's local government leaders give mixed reactions. While only 14% say their unions have been an asset to their governments' overall performance, 40% say they have been a liability. Meanwhile the largest proportion of local leaders (44%) says their jurisdictions' unions have been neither an asset nor a liability (see *Figure 3*) to overall governmental performance. In other words, a majority (58%) of local government leaders do not believe that their jurisdictions' unions have hurt governmental performance.

Meanwhile, compared to that majority of local leaders who report either a neutral (44%) or a positive (14%) impact of unions on government performance, the picture is somewhat worse regarding union impact on jurisdictional fiscal health. While 13% of local leaders say that the employee unions have been an asset to their jurisdictions' fiscal health, 56% say the unions have been a liability and 29% say they have been neither an asset nor a liability (see *Figure 4a*).

Figure 2
Percentage of jurisdictions' employees represented by unions (among those jurisdictions with unions), by community population size

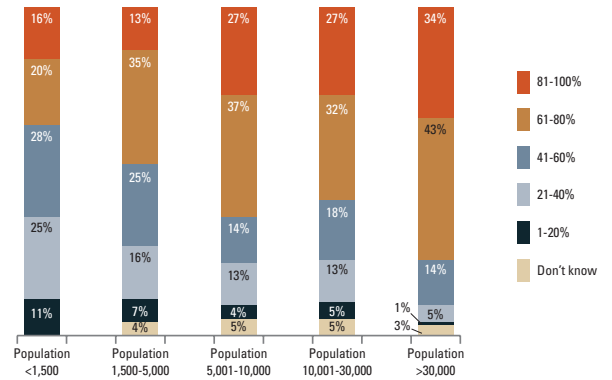


Figure 3
Local officials' assessments of union(s) effects on overall performance (among those jurisdictions with unions)

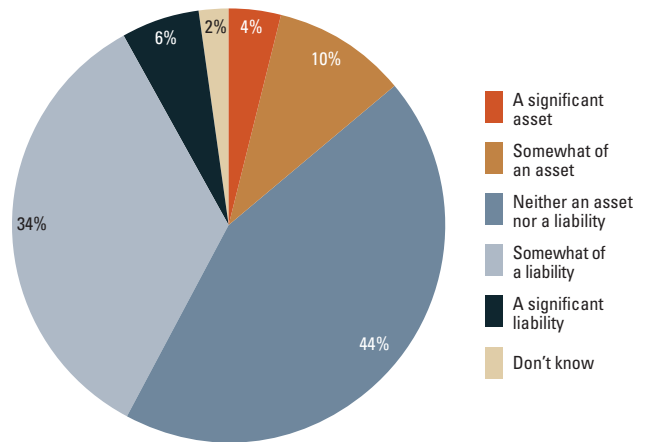
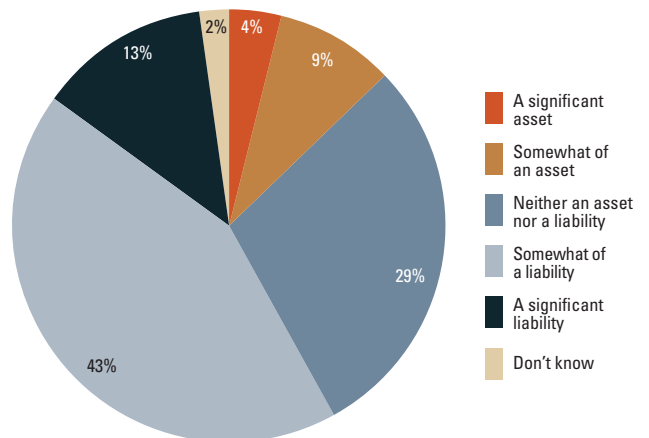


Figure 4a
Local officials' assessments of union(s) effects on fiscal health (among those jurisdictions with unions)



Whereas MPPS surveys often find significant differences based on both community population size as well as regions of the state, this is not the case with local leaders' views about the impact of unions on their jurisdictions' fiscal health. For instance, *Figure 4b* demonstrates that these leaders' assessments regarding unions' impact on local fiscal health are relatively consistent across jurisdictions of different sizes. While there are some minor variations in the percentage of local officials who say they believe their employee unions have been a *somewhat* vs. a *significant* liability among smaller and larger jurisdictions, these differences are not statistically significant.

Given the historical links between Democrats and unions, one might expect to find a strong correlation between the local government leaders' party identification and their views on the unions' impact. While there do appear to be some differences between Republican and Independent officials compared with Democratic officials, the differences are perhaps surprisingly small (see *Figure 4c*). Republican and Independent officials are somewhat less likely to believe that employee unions have been assets to their jurisdictions' fiscal health than are Democratic officials (8% and 7% vs. 22%, respectively). And conversely, Republican and Independent officials are somewhat more likely than Democratic officials to believe employee unions have been a *significant* liability to fiscal health (17% and 15% vs. 5%, respectively). But perhaps the most unexpected finding is that almost half (48%) of Democratic officials say that the unions have been a liability to their jurisdictions' fiscal health overall.

Figure 4b
Local officials' assessments of union(s) effects on fiscal health (among those jurisdictions with unions), by community population size

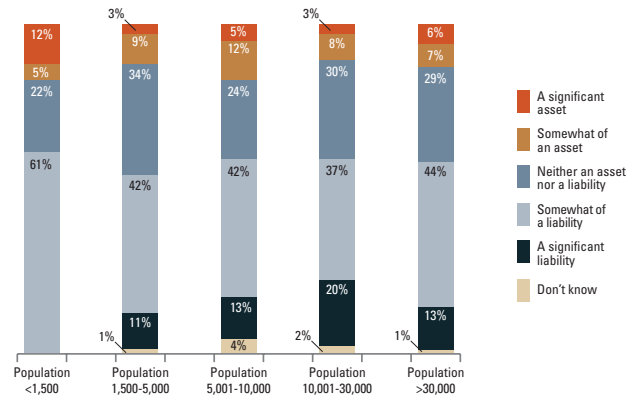
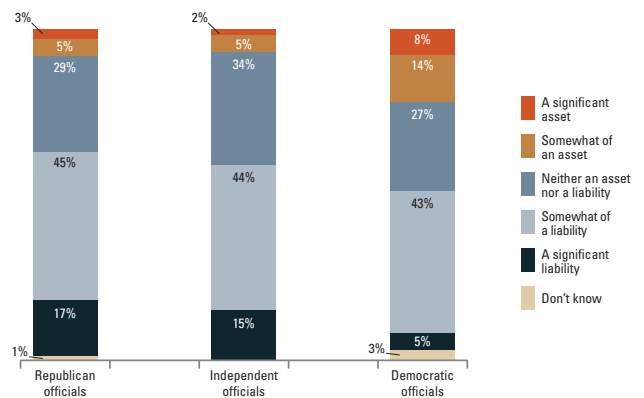


Figure 4c
Local officials' assessments of union(s) effects on fiscal health (among those jurisdictions with unions), by partisan identification





How do local leaders view the relationship between their employee unions and their jurisdictions' administration?

Interestingly, despite the fact that over half of Michigan's local leaders say the unions are a liability to their jurisdictions' fiscal health, 60% of these leaders also report that the relationship between their jurisdictions' unions and governmental administration has been either good or excellent over the past 12 months (see *Figure 5a*). Only 5% of local officials report that this relationship has been poor.

While there are some small differences at the margins, the MPPS found no statistically significant differences in responses about relations between local government administrations and employee unions among jurisdictions of different sizes (see *Figure 5b*), different jurisdiction types, or different regions of the state. Majorities of local leaders in communities of all sizes and in all regions of Michigan believe relations are good or excellent with their jurisdictions' unions.

As with assessments of union impact on fiscal health, differences exist between partisans in their assessments about union relations, but the gap between them is perhaps smaller than might be expected. Democratic officials are more than twice as likely than are Republican officials to say their administrations' relationships with their unions are excellent (22% vs. 10%), but they are also twice as likely to say they are poor (8% vs. 4%) (see *Figure 5c*). And while 65% of Democratic local leaders say the relations are good or excellent, so do 58% of local Republican leaders.

Figure 5a
Local officials' assessments of the relationship between their jurisdictions' administrations and unions (among those jurisdictions with unions)

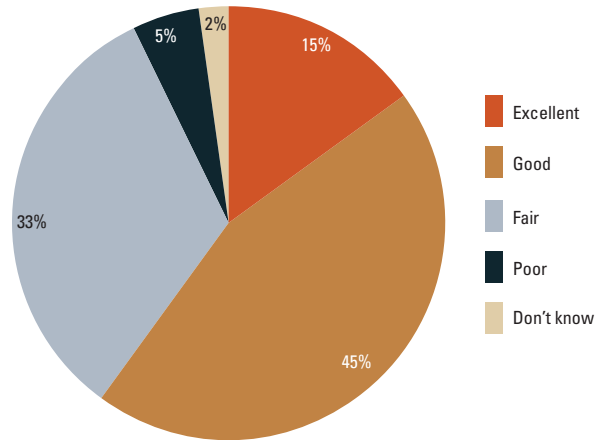


Figure 5b
Local officials' assessments of the relationship between their jurisdictions' administration and union(s) (among those jurisdictions with unions), by community population size

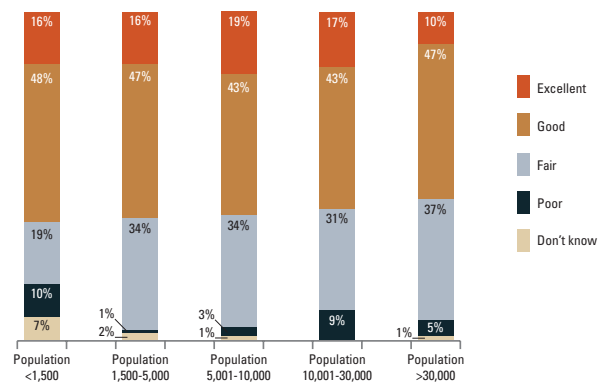
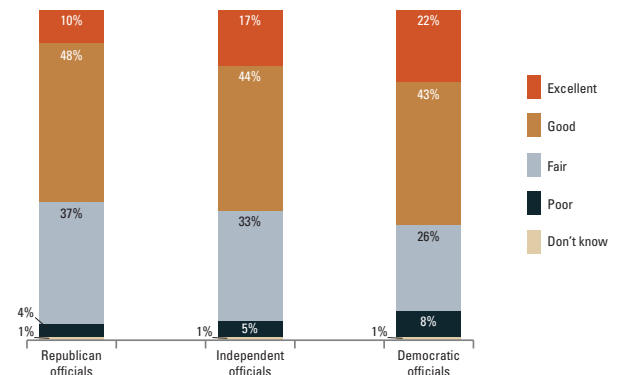


Figure 5c
Local officials' assessments of the relationship between their jurisdictions' administration and union(s) (among those jurisdictions with unions), by partisan identification



Conclusion

As public sector fiscal problems have grown in the last few years, the topic of public employee labor unions has become a high priority for policy debate and efforts at reform in many locations, including across Michigan. The case of Wisconsin has been one of particularly high profile policy conflict, given Governor Scott Walker's aggressive efforts to curtail the power and the rights of unions in that state. To get a better understanding of how Michigan's local government leaders view their jurisdiction's labor unions, the MPPS investigated this topic during the spring of 2011.

Surprisingly few - just 27% - of Michigan's local governments report having a union, though the percentage is strongly associated with community population size. While 98% of Michigan's largest local governments report having unions, 93% of the smallest jurisdictions report not having unions.

Among those jurisdictions that do have unions, local government leaders report overall that the unions have had a mixed impact on their localities. While a majority (58%) of leaders say the unions have had either a neutral (44%) or a positive (14%) impact on their governments' operations, a majority (56%) also say the unions have had a negative impact on their governments' fiscal health. Still, 60% of these leaders say that the relationship between their governments' administration and its labor unions has been positive (either good or excellent) over the last 12 months, even during this period of heightened focus on employee compensation.

It is important to note that this survey did not look at assessments from the view of Michigan's local public sector union leaders. That view might tell a different story. Still, these assessments from the perspective of the state's local government leaders appear to point to a relatively healthy relationship between local government administration and employee unions at the local level. As Michigan's local governments continue to struggle with falling revenues, rising costs, and the simultaneous need to continue providing core public services, the relatively constructive atmosphere in Michigan may itself serve as an asset to finding common ground between labor unions and administrative leadership.

Survey background and methodology

The MPPS is a biannual survey of each of Michigan's 1,856 units of general purpose local government. 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, 274 cities, 259 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan.

The Spring 2011 wave was conducted from April 18- June 10, 2011. A total of 1,272 jurisdictions in the Spring 2011 wave returned valid surveys, resulting in a 69% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.5%. The margin of error may differ for analyses that include only a subset of respondents. Contact CLOSUP staff for more information. 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. Data are weighted to account for non-response.

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 views reported herein are those of local Michigan officials and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Michigan.

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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.

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