

The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

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

Michigan Public
Policy Survey August 2013

Local leaders evaluate state policymaker performance and whether Michigan is on the right track

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This report presents the opinions of Michigan's local government leaders regarding the direction in which the state is headed, and their evaluations of the job performance of Governor Rick Snyder and the Michigan Legislature. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Spring 2013 and Spring 2012 waves 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.

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Key Findings

- Over half (54%) of Michigan's local government leaders across the state now believe Michigan is headed in the right direction, up from 50% who felt this way last year.
 - » However, these views are strongly associated with partisan identification. While 69% of officials who identify themselves as Republicans say that Michigan is headed in the right direction, significantly fewer Independent (43%) and Democratic (26%) officials feel the same.
 - » Compared with 2012, slightly higher percentages of both Independents and Democrats now say the state is on the wrong track.
- Local leaders' job approval ratings for Governor Rick Snyder have largely remained steady over the last year. A majority (51%) say he is doing a good or excellent job, and fewer than two in ten (19%) say he's doing a poor job.
 - » Party identification is strongly linked to evaluations of the Governor. While two-thirds (66%) of Republican local officials think Governor Snyder is doing a good or excellent job, only 43% of Independent officials and 19% of Democratic officials feel this way.
 - » Positive views of the Governor's job performance are most commonly associated with feelings that he "gets things done," brings a business approach to government, is fiscally responsible, doesn't play politics, and is moving Michigan in the right economic direction.
 - » Negative views of Governor Snyder focus most commonly on the belief that he is not straightforward about his political goals, pursues tax policies that hurt middle and lower income citizens, is too close to business and too hard on labor, has cut funding for local government too much, and is moving Michigan in the wrong economic direction.
- Local officials are much more critical of the performance of the Republican-led Legislature than that of the Governor, with just a quarter of all local leaders (26%) rating the Legislature's performance as either good or excellent, and 31% rating it as poor. These percentages are essentially unchanged from assessments in 2012.
 - » Local officials who approve of the Legislature's performance most commonly say that it, like Governor Snyder, makes tough decisions and gets things done, practices good politics, is moving the state in the right economic direction, and is fiscally responsible.
 - » Meanwhile, local officials who give the legislature negative ratings most often mention concerns about it being too partisan, say that it has cut funding for local government too far, indicate that it is moving the state in the wrong economic direction and has the wrong business, labor, and tax policies.

Background

Policy decisions made by state government leaders often have direct consequences for Michigan's local governments, and so local leaders have significant incentives to keep an eye on developments in Lansing. In the past year, Michigan's state government took action on a wide range of such policy issues, with a particular flurry of activity during the lame duck legislative session in late fall 2012 when far-reaching "Right-to-Work" legislation was quickly passed by the legislature and signed into law by Republican Governor Rick Snyder. Other significant developments over the last year included passage of a plan for partial repeal of Michigan's Personal Property Tax, another "on-time" adoption of the state budget, the appointment of several city and school district Emergency Managers, debate over Medicare expansion, and much more.

In addition to new policy initiatives at the state level, Michigan has seen some positive news from a number of economic indicators, including an unemployment rate that was lower in May 2013 compared to a year earlier, and an increase in tax revenues.¹ However, local officials' interpretation of these positive indicators may be offset by other concerns, such as future challenges to local fiscal health under Michigan's current system of funding local governments.²

The Spring 2013 MPPS asked a series of questions of Michigan's local government leaders to assess their feelings about the job performance of both Governor Rick Snyder and the Michigan Legislature, as well as their opinions on whether the state is headed in the right direction or is off on the wrong track.



Growing optimism about the state's direction limited to Republican local officials

The Spring 2013 MPPS asked Michigan's local leaders whether they feel the state is generally going in the right direction, or if they feel things have gotten off on the wrong track. Overall, government leaders from over half (54%) of Michigan's local jurisdictions say the state is now headed in the right direction. This is slightly higher than a year ago, when 50% of local officials thought the state was going in the right direction, and is significantly higher than the 32% who felt this way in 2011 (see *Figure 1a*).

While a majority of local leaders now believe the state is headed in the right direction, these opinions are strongly correlated with the leaders' political party identification. In fact, statistical analysis finds that, when controlling for a wide range of key variables—including differences in jurisdiction characteristics such as government type and population size, or respondent characteristics such as gender and tenure in office—partisanship emerges as the main factor corresponding to assessments of whether or not Michigan is headed in the right direction.

Only 26% of local officials who identify themselves as Democrats believe the state is currently headed in the right direction, compared with 43% of local Independent officials and 69% of local Republican officials (see *Figure 1b*).

Among Republican local leaders, a higher percentage now believe the state is moving in the right direction (69%) than felt this way a year ago (63%). However, assessments among Independents and Democrats have dropped slightly. Among Independents in 2013, 43% believe the state is headed in the right direction, down from 48% who felt this way in 2012. Similarly, while 26% of Democratic officials now believe the state is headed in the right direction, this percentage is down from 29% in 2012.

While partisanship plays a strong role in local leaders' views on the state's direction, previous MPPS research found that another crucial predictor for these views are the local officials' opinions about the job performance of Governor Snyder and the Michigan Legislature.³ Therefore, the MPPS asked these questions as well, including open-ended questions to learn as much as possible of these job performance evaluations.

Figure 1a
Percentage of local officials overall who say Michigan is headed in the 'right direction' or is 'off on the wrong track,' 2011-2013

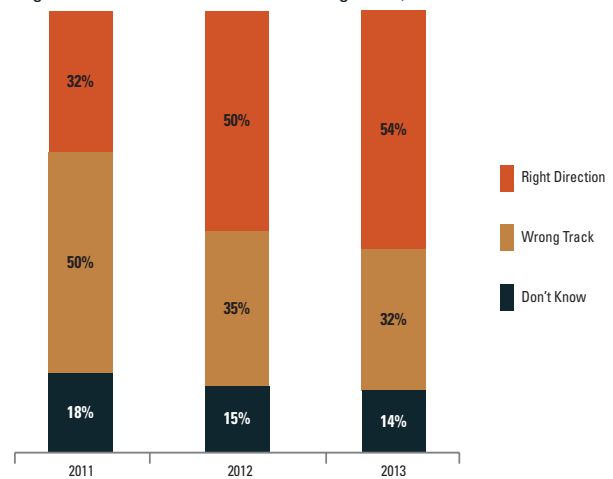
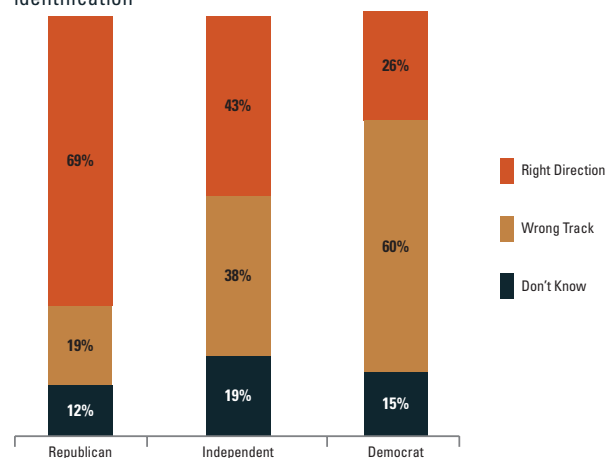


Figure 1b
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the 'right direction' or is 'off on the wrong track' in 2013, by partisan identification



Approval ratings for Governor Snyder’s performance mostly stable compared with last year

Overall, local leaders’ opinions of Governor Rick Snyder’s performance remain quite similar to their views from last year. When asked to assess Snyder’s job performance as governor so far, just over half (51%) of local officials statewide rate his performance as either good or excellent, while 19% rate it as poor (see *Figure 2a*). His positive ratings are mostly stable, compared to assessments from Spring 2012, when 49% rated his performance as good or excellent, and remain higher than at the beginning of his term, when only 37% of local officials rated his performance as good or excellent.

Not surprisingly, the party identification of Michigan’s local leaders is again one of the most significant predictors for their views of Governor Snyder’s performance. While two-thirds (66%) of officials who identify themselves as Republicans think the Republican Governor is doing a good or excellent job, significantly smaller percentages of Independent officials (43%) and Democratic officials (19%) also feel this way (see *Figure 2b*). And while just 9% of Republican officials say the Governor’s job performance so far has been poor, 22% of Independent officials and 45% of Democratic officials rate his performance as poor.

In 2013, the MPPS asked local leaders for the first time why they rate the Governor’s performance the way they do, eliciting a wide range of factors upon which local leaders focus when evaluating their state’s executive. This kind of open-ended question enables local officials to be more detailed and nuanced in their survey responses than a simple check-box allows, and the following descriptions represent the outcome of double-blind coding of all respondents’ comments into discrete categories. While not necessarily representative of the entire MPPS sample, 867 local leaders provided over 1,700 explanations for their ratings of Governor Snyder’s performance.

Many local officials’ comments regarding the Governor’s job performance center on personal characteristics. Among those local leaders who give the Governor high ratings, the most common sets of remarks focus on Snyder’s leadership; for example, that he makes tough decisions or generally “gets things done.” The next most frequent set of comments cite positively his business background and experience, and his approach to running the state government like a business. The third most common set identify beliefs that Governor Snyder is fiscally responsible, has produced balanced budgets, and has addressed the state’s previous structural budget deficit. Fourth are a wide range of comments focusing on what local leaders believe are the Governor’s positive political traits, including that he doesn’t “play politics,” that he does what he says he will do, is honest, and works well with the state legislature. And the fifth most common set describe how local leaders believe the Governor is generally taking Michigan in the right economic direction and is “good on jobs.”

Figure 2a
Local officials’ evaluations of Governor Snyder’s performance, 2011-2013

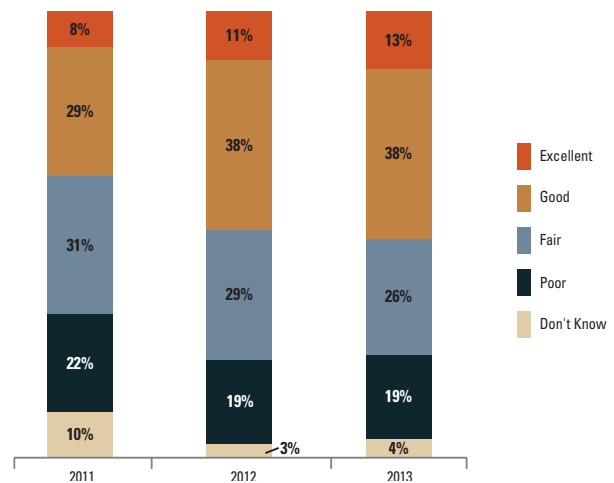
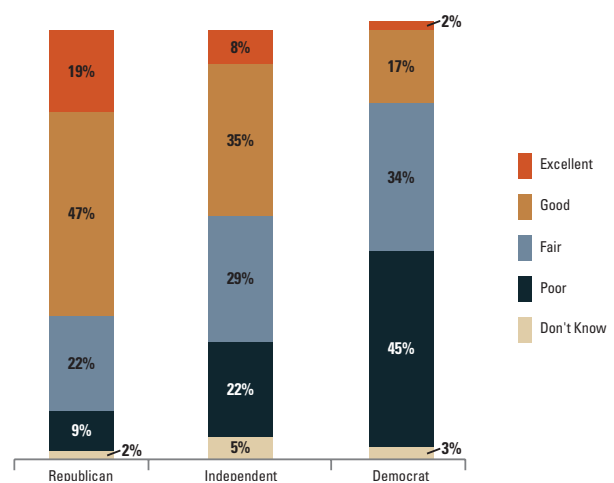


Figure 2b
Local officials’ evaluations of Governor Snyder’s performance in 2013, by partisan identification





Officials who rate the Governor's performance as just fair or poor most frequently mention their negative view of the Governor's approach to politics, including that they believe he is not straightforward about his political goals, that he is too partisan, that he doesn't listen to the people, and that he rams legislation through in a negative fashion. The second most frequent set of comments focus less on personal characteristics and more on the Governor's tax policies, including the state's new pension tax, business tax breaks, a perceived unfair tax burden on the middle and lower classes, and more. The third set of critiques focus on a variety of issues regarding the Governor's business and labor policies, including "Right-to-Work" (RTW), a belief that Governor Snyder is too close to businesses and the wealthy, and other issues regarding labor policies. The fourth most common set focus on the Governor's tax and finance policies as they relate specifically to local government, including cuts in revenue sharing, concerns about the Economic Vitality Incentive Program (EVIP), and the proposed partial elimination of the state's Personal Property Tax (PPT). And the fifth most common set of comments revolve around views that the Governor is taking the state in the wrong economic direction and is "bad on jobs."

Voices Across Michigan

Quotes from local leaders regarding their evaluations of Governor Snyder's performance in office

Among officials who rate the Governor's job performance as excellent or good:

"He inherited a bad situation, tough decisions had to be made, he seems to be doing that. I have found it is easy to complain, but, when it is your job to make tough decisions, and stand by them, that makes a leader."

"The business sense that he possesses and demonstrates is helpful for the difficult and unstable economy in the State of Michigan."

"[He is] taking bold but necessary steps to balance the budget and restore long term fiscal sustainability."

"He is doing what is good for the state, not what is good for him to get re-elected."

"Governor Snyder inherited a broken state in a broken economy. He has been making great strides in rebuilding Michigan and helping small business which is the base for where the economy must turn around."

Among officials who rate the Governor's job performance as fair or poor:

"Gov Snyder has been less than transparent on major legislation issues, i.e. RTW, school funding, tax breaks for businesses, PPT, etc. They were not on his agenda?"

"The governor is too concentrated on eliminating taxes for business at the expense of individuals. This hurts spending power in our community."

"Seems to me that the Governor is anti-union, which I don't think is right for Michigan workers. I'm not exactly a big union supporter, but I don't think we can do without them either."

"Too much emphasis on lowering business taxes and not enough on fixing the fundamental flaw in the way local government services are funded (i.e., property taxes and state shared revenue)."

"The general lack of investment in education, local communities and our infrastructure is going to push Michigan into a second-class state."

Approval ratings for Legislature mostly unchanged; trail Governor's

Compared with their evaluations of Governor Snyder's performance, local officials are significantly more critical of the Michigan Legislature's performance. Only 26% of local officials statewide rate the state Legislature's performance as either good or excellent, while 31% say it is poor (see *Figure 3a*). These proportions are essentially unchanged from assessments in 2012, when 27% of local officials gave the Legislature positive ratings, and 33% rated its performance as poor.

Partisan identification is also a key factor in differentiating respondents' opinions about the Legislature's performance. While few Republicans and no Independents or Democrats rate the Legislature's performance as excellent, Republican officials are significantly more likely to give the Legislature "good" ratings (34%) than are Independent (16%) or Democratic (6%) local officials (see *Figure 3b*). Conversely, nearly six in ten Democrats (59%) and nearly half of Independent local leaders (47%) rate the Legislature's performance as poor compared with just 17% of Republicans.

Again, the MPPS asked local leaders to explain, in their own words, why they view the Legislature's performance either positively or negatively, this time eliciting nearly 1,300 responses, many of which fall into the same categories as outlined above in regard to Governor Snyder.

Among those local leaders who give the state legislature positive approval ratings, the most common set of comments focus on the idea that the Legislature takes on tough issues and gets things done, similar to the most common positive comments for the Governor. The second most common set of comments for the Legislature's performance revolve around issues of politics, including views that it is honest, doesn't "play politics," works well together and with the Governor, listens to citizens, and is transparent and accountable. The third most common set of comments focus on the belief that the Legislature is moving the state in the right economic direction, is making Michigan attractive for business, is good on jobs, and more. And the other major group of common comments for the Legislature articulate positive views of its fiscal responsibility and ability to produce balanced budgets.

When it comes to negative evaluations of the Legislature, "politics" is by far the driving factor. In fact, the distribution of negative comments regarding the Legislature's performance is different from the distribution of positive comments on the Legislature, as well as different from both positive and negative comments regarding Governor Snyder. In each of those other cases, the percentage of comments in the various categories fall within a few points of each other, moving from the most common through the fifth-most common categories. But among local leaders who give the Legislature negative marks, the first set of comments, which focus on issues of politics, is more than twice as common as the second set, which focus on funding of local government.

Negative perceptions of the Legislature's political approaches include views that it is too partisan and won't compromise, is out of touch with the people, lacks transparency, rams legislation through, and more. Meanwhile, the second most common

Figure 3a
Local officials' evaluations of the Michigan Legislature's performance, 2011-2013

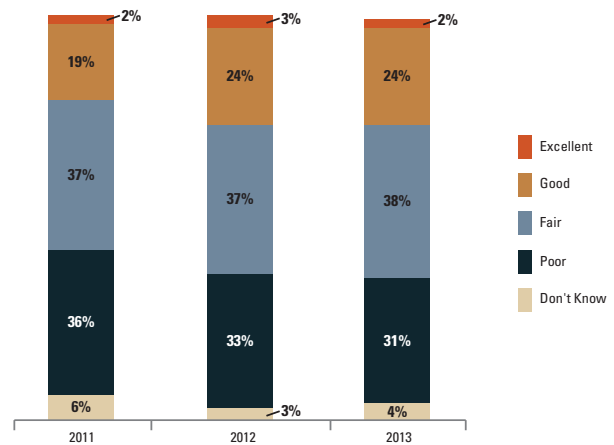
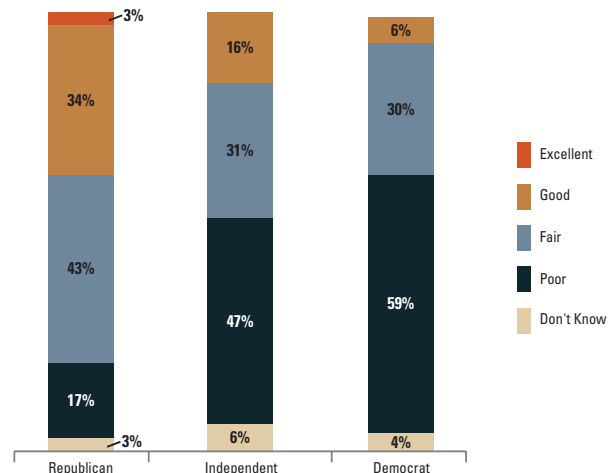


Figure 3b
Local officials' evaluations of the Michigan Legislature's performance in 2013, by partisan identification





set of negative views articulate concerns over revenue sharing cuts, a belief that the legislature simply doesn't respect local government, and concerns about the EVIP program, the PPT elimination, and more. Covering topics similar to the negative views described above for Governor Snyder, the third, fourth, and fifth most common set of negative comments regarding the legislature's performance respectively focus on the state's economic direction, policies specifically impacting business and labor, and finally, tax policy issues.

Based on the thousands of open-end statements provided to the MPPS, it is clear that Michigan's local government leaders, when evaluating both the Governor and the state Legislature, have a very wide range of issues on their minds, from state leaders' personal characteristics, to issues of politics, economic policy, business and labor policy, tax policy, the funding of local government, the treatment of Michigan's citizens, and much more.

Voices Across Michigan

Quotes from local leaders regarding their evaluations of the Michigan Legislature's performance

Among officials who rate the Legislature's job performance as excellent or good:

"The Legislature has stepped up and made the hard decisions that others, including the Congress, have failed to address in a timely fashion."

"It appears to me that this legislature is working to keep Michigan at a balanced level. My legislators in our area are always accessible and invite citizens to share their opinions and suggestions."

"I think this legislature is trying to be good stewards and develop strategies that will benefit business and local government. That is hard to do, but I think they are developing strategy that is good for all Michiganders."

"Budgets are done early—they are trying to get rid of excess regulations—paying down debt. Many positive things."

Among officials who rate the Legislature's job performance as fair or poor:

"While the direction is generally better now, there are still too many tactics being employed, and policies being driven, by motives that defy logic. The partisanship displayed on both sides of the aisle is driven by both parties' respective extremes, as well as the bidding of their large donors, rather than a true direction for the State to improve its position."

"Continue to balance the state's budget on the back of local communities. Continue to use revenue sharing to boost the state's rainy day fund at the expense of the rainy day funds and fund balances of local communities. Continue to take away home rule authority from local units. Continue to place unreasonable unfunded mandates on local governments. Continue to pass poor legislation in a manner that takes into account local issues or concerns, with very little debate, in lame duck sessions, with no transparency."

"Abortion, Voter ID, Right to Work, and Michigan businesses still cannot find talent, schools are not being improved, and the only jobs that grew were auto jobs from the previous concessions granted by both sides in the auto industry. No jobs created from action of the legislature, only adversity."

"I think the legislature is missing the boat on some issues that could really help Michigan's financial health. The amount of money spent on social services is ridiculous and the amount of fraud and misuse is too much."

"They've provided tax breaks to businesses but don't require any documentation to determine if tax breaks are of benefit and what the state is getting for its investment. Governor/Legislature has withheld over \$6 billion in revenue sharing to local communities in 12 years and continually wonders why communities are in dismal financial shape. They have yet to take any responsibility for their part in the deterioration of local communities. They're quick to avoid any discussion about using that \$6 billion to balance the state budget and allow for tax breaks for business."

Conclusion

The Spring 2013 MPPS finds that Michigan's local government leaders overall are increasingly optimistic about the direction in which the state is headed, with over half (54%) of the state's local leaders asserting the state is headed in the right direction (up slightly from 50% in 2012). However, this overall optimism is driven primarily by Republican local officials, who are significantly more likely than Democrats or Independents to give positive evaluations of the state's direction, and of the Governor's and Legislature's performance.

Despite movement by the state government in the past year on a wide variety of potentially controversial policies affecting local government—including Right-to-Work, the Personal Property Tax, and others—evaluations of the performance of both the executive and legislative branches have remained relatively stable since 2012, with Governor Snyder receiving higher marks overall than the Legislature.

Meanwhile, new questions in the MPPS have allowed a more detailed analysis of why officials approve or disapprove of both the Governor's and Legislature's performance, demonstrating that local leaders have a very wide range of factors in mind, from personal traits to political practices, economic and social philosophy, policy positions, and much more.

Notes

1. Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency. (2013, May) *Michigan Economic Indicators*. Retrieved from http://www.senate.michigan.gov/sfa/Publications/Econind/MEI_MAY13.PDF
2. Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy. (2013, January) *Local leaders support reforming Michigan's system of funding local government*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from <http://closup.umich.edu/files/mpps-spring-2012-funding-local-govt.pdf>
3. Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy. (2012, July) *Michigan's local leaders more positive about Governor Snyder's performance, more optimistic about the state's direction*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from <http://closup.umich.edu/files/MPPS-Spring-2012-Right-Track.pdf>

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 Spring 2013 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 Spring 2013 wave was conducted from April 8 - June 9, 2013. A total of 1,350 jurisdictions in the Spring 2013 wave returned valid surveys, resulting in a 73% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.4%. 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. Qualitative data are analyzed using a double-blind coding system with discrepancies reviewed and assigned to a final category by a third independent analyst. Contact CLOSUP staff for more information.

Detailed tables of the data analyzed in this report— 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

- Trust in government among Michigan's local leaders and citizens (July 2013)
- Citizen engagement in the view of Michigan's local government leaders (May 2013)
- Beyond trust in government: government trust in citizens? (March 2013)
- Local leaders support reforming Michigan's system of funding local government (January 2013)
- Local leaders support eliminating Michigan's Personal Property Tax if funds are replaced, but distrust state follow-through (November 2012)
- Michigan's local leaders satisfied with union negotiations (October 2012)
- Michigan's local leaders are divided over the state's emergency manager law (September 2012)
- Fiscal stress continues for hundreds of Michigan jurisdictions, but conditions trend in positive direction overall (September 2012)
- Michigan's local leaders more positive about Governor Snyder's performance, more optimistic about the state's direction (July 2012)
- Data-driven decision-making in Michigan local government (June 2012)
- State funding incentives increase local collaboration, but also raise concerns (March 2012)
- Local officials react to state policy innovation tying revenue sharing to dashboards and incentive funding (January 2012)
- MPPS finds fiscal health continues to decline across the state, though some negative trends eased in 2011 (October 2011)
- Public sector unions in Michigan: their presence and impact according to local government leaders (August 2011)
- Despite increased approval of state government performance, Michigan's local leaders are concerned about the state's direction (August 2011)
- Local government and environmental leadership: views of Michigan's local leaders (July 2011)
- Local leaders are mostly positive about intergovernmental cooperation and look to expand efforts (March 2011)
- Local government leaders say most employees are not overpaid, though some benefits may be too generous (February 2011)
- Local government leaders say economic gardening can help grow their economies (November 2010)
- Local governments struggle to cope with fiscal, service, and staffing pressures (August 2010)
- Michigan local governments actively promote U.S. Census participation (August 2010)
- Fiscal stimulus package mostly ineffective for local economies (May 2010)
- Fall 2009 key findings report: educational, economic, and workforce development issues at the local level (April 2010)
- Local government officials give low marks to the performance of state officials and report low trust in Lansing (March 2010)
- Local government fiscal and economic development issues (October 2009)

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