

The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

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

Michigan Public
Policy Survey August 2019

New Governor, new evaluations of the direction Michigan is headed among local leaders

By Debra Horner and Thomas Ivacko

This report presents the opinions of Michigan's local government leaders regarding the direction in which the state is headed, as well as their evaluations of the job performance of Governor Gretchen Whitmer and the Michigan Legislature. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Spring 2019 wave and tracking comparisons to previous spring 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 2019 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 1,364 jurisdictions across the state.

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Key Findings

- In the first year under a newly-divided state government with a new Democratic Governor and a Republican legislature, Michigan's local government leaders are themselves divided about the direction the state is headed. Overall, nearly half (47%) of local officials say the state has gotten off on the wrong track, while 33% say the state is generally going in the right direction.
 - » As in the past, these views are strongly associated with partisan identification. In 2019, among local officials who self-identify as Republican, only 31% say the state is going in the right direction, a steep decline from the 72% who said the same last year. Among officials who identify as Independents, only 24% believe the state is on the right track, down from 46% last year. Conversely, among Democratic local officials, just over half (51%) say that Michigan is going in the right direction, an increase from 30% who said so in 2018.
 - » These views on the direction Michigan is headed are even more strongly correlated with local officials' evaluations of the job performance so far this year of the Governor and of the Michigan Legislature.
- Although local officials took this survey just a few months into the new Governor's first term, many are skeptical in their initial evaluations of Governor Gretchen Whitmer's job performance so far. Overall, 23% rate her performance in 2019 as good or excellent, but 28% say it is only fair and 28% rate her performance as poor. Another 20% say they don't yet know how to rate Governor Whitmer's performance.
- Again, these ratings are correlated with partisanship. Positive ratings for Governor Whitmer are found among 63% of Democratic local leaders. By contrast, only 23% of Independents and 12% of Republicans rate Governor Whitmer's performance as good or excellent so far. These ratings are nearly the exact reverse of those given by local leaders to Republican Governor Rick Snyder in his first term back in 2011.
- Job evaluations of the Michigan Legislature's performance remain lukewarm. Statewide, local officials are most likely to say the Legislature's performance in 2019 is just fair (42%), similar to last year (40%). Meanwhile, 29% of local leaders rate the Legislature as "poor," essentially unchanged from 28% who said the same last year. And fewer than a quarter (21%) of local officials say the Legislature's performance is good or excellent, down from 28% in 2018.
 - » Positive ratings for the Legislature are found among 26% of Republican local leaders, compared with 13% of Independents and 18% of Democrats.

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Local officials' confidence in Michigan's direction declines, strongly tied to partisan identification

The start of 2019 has seen significant changes in Michigan's state government, with unified Republican control ending via the election of Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer. This year, as it has in each of the past eight years, the 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. The survey has tracked these sentiments since 2011, which was the last time Michigan saw a change in the party leading the executive branch. And, for the first time since 2011, more local leaders express concern that the state is off on the wrong track than say it is heading in the right direction.

Looking statewide, 47% of local government leaders say the state has gotten off on the wrong track, a substantial increase from the 33% who said the same in 2018 (see *Figure 1a*). This level of concern is slightly below that found in Republican Governor Rick Snyder's first term (when 50% said "wrong track"), which was in the early wake of the Great Recession, in 2011. Meanwhile, 33% of local officials in 2019 believe the state is now going in the right direction. This is down 23 percentage points from the 56% of local leaders who were optimistic about the direction of the state in 2018.

As might be expected, key differences in these assessments can be found by partisan identification. Breaking down the overall percentages by partisanship is crucial, because the bulk of local government officials in Michigan come from rural townships, which are most often represented by Republican local leaders. For example, according to responses on the 2019 MPPS, 58% of Michigan local government leaders identify themselves as Republicans, while 19% say they are Independents, and 23% identify as Democrats. By comparison, according to Gallup polling in 2018, 39% of Michigan citizens identify themselves as Republicans, while 45% self-identify as Democrats, and 16% identify as Independents.¹

Partisanship plays a key role for interpreting the trend-line in assessments of the state's direction, and this has been the case throughout the MPPS tracking. Republican local officials expressed more optimism when a Republican was governor, while Democratic local officials are more optimistic when a Democrat is in office. Today, with a new Democratic governor, local Democratic officials report feeling more optimistic, while both Republicans and Independents say they are significantly less optimistic than they were last year, leading to the overall decline from 2018. As shown in *Figure 1b*, just 31% of local officials who identify themselves as Republican say the state is going in the right direction, down

Figure 1a
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the 'right direction' or is off on the 'wrong track,' 2011-2019

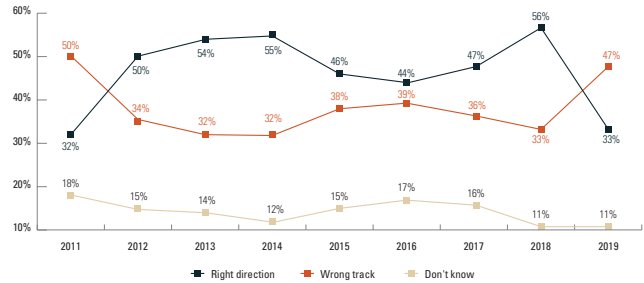
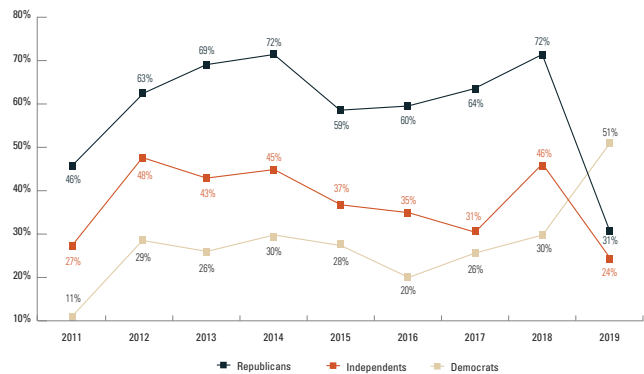


Figure 1b
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the 'right direction' in 2011-2019, by partisan identification





sharply from the 72% who said the same last year. This is the first year since 2011 that a minority of Republican officials believe the state is headed in the right direction. And among officials who identify as Independents, only 24% believe the state is on the right track, down from 46% last year. Conversely, Democratic local officials have increased optimism compared with last year. A majority (51%) of local leaders who identify themselves as Democrats now say that Michigan is going in the right direction, an increase from 30% who said so in 2018.

When looking at assessments of the state’s direction by jurisdiction population size, the declines can be found in every group. From the state’s smallest jurisdictions (those with fewer than 1,500 residents) to the state’s largest (those with more than 30,000 residents), local leaders’ sentiments about the direction the state is headed have dropped back to almost exact same levels found in Governor Snyder’s first term (see *Figure 1c*).

Beginning in spring 2017, the MPPS began asking local officials to characterize their jurisdiction on a spectrum of rural, mostly rural, mostly urban, and urban. Only officials from urban jurisdictions report increased levels of optimism in 2019, with 46% saying Michigan is headed in the right direction, compared with 43% in 2018 (see *Figure 1d*).

Figure 1c
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the ‘right direction’ in 2011-2019, by population size

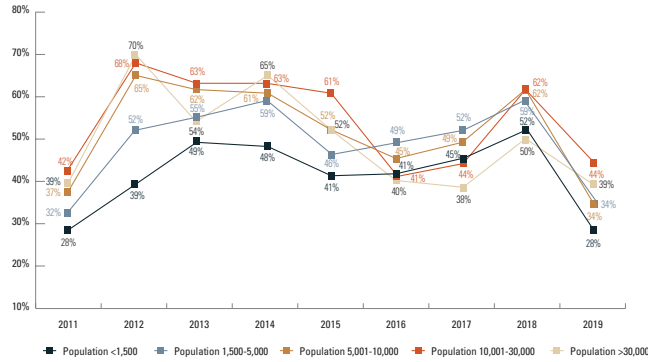
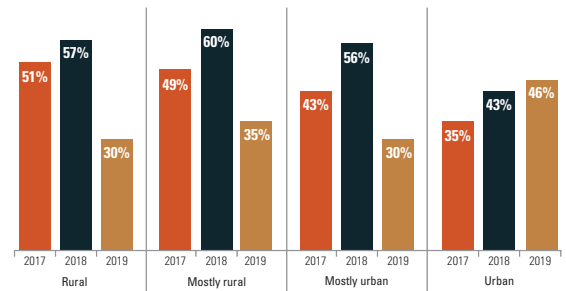


Figure 1d
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the ‘right direction’ in 2017-2019, by urban-rural self-assessment



Note: calculation for “urban-rural self-identification” does not include county responses.

The MPPS also provided local leaders an opportunity to share additional information about their views on the direction the state is headed through an open-ended question. Over 600 local officials offered additional feedback about their assessments. Among those local leaders who say the state is off on the wrong track, many voice concerns about the new Governor generally and about partisan divisiveness among state leaders over any potential increase in taxes (particularly a gas tax), of the overall need for local government finance reform, and about the state's lack of investment in both infrastructure (water, roads and bridges, etc.) and education. Meanwhile, among those who believe the state is heading in the right direction, many reference positive views about jobs and the economy, the renewed focus on improving roads, environmental protection and clean water, and that either they have hope for less partisan fighting or that they believe divided state government can be a good thing.

Voices Across Michigan

Quotes from local leaders regarding their evaluations of the state's direction

Among officials who say the state is off on the wrong track:

"Higher taxes and more regulation will suppress the growth of business and individual prosperity that we have enjoyed for the past 8 years."

"Partisan and divisive nature of the political environment. Decisions are being made due to their perceived political impact rather than sound, rational logic and what is good for our State. Decisions are being made based on their short-term political impact rather than on addressing sound, difficult long-term needs."

"Losing ground to other states in providing services to citizens and attractions to recruit and provide opportunities to live in Michigan. Lack of partnership between state and local units to work together on issues and funding. Lack of communication and dialogue with state leaders and local leaders to solve issues."

"The newly elected governor and the attorney general's liberal agenda is going to have a negative impact on financial growth. The notion to keep raising fees and taxes is going to set us back and particularly the gas tax is going to put a greater burden on rural communities and take the few extra dollars out of our already struggling residents."

"Lack of dedicated funding for basic infrastructure and services, including public safety. Lack of adequate funding for public schools... inability to adequately support social service programs to address such issues as the opioid crises and domestic violence. Lack of vision/leadership to retrofit for the 21st century."

Among officials who say the state is heading in the right direction:

"The past Governor had made some sufficient changes in our economy, giving us a good long-term foundation. Our current governor seems to have good solid ideas to improve Michigan."

"The business and job growth, unemployment numbers, and different types of new businesses coming to Michigan show that we are back on the right track."

"New state-level leadership seems committed to paying for infrastructure, funding education, and protecting the environment, etc. Remains to be seen what they will be able to accomplish."

"Even though I have not agreed with several of Governor Whitmer's initiatives early on in her term, I am very impressed with her dedication to the principles of cooperation and collaboration and listening. I am very confident that her heart is in the right place and therefore I have no concerns regarding her ability to lead our State productively."

"If both [parties] work towards truly solving those issues than we should get close to actually doing something to solve them. Both sides will have to come off political hard stands and make a deal to move the needs of the state forward."



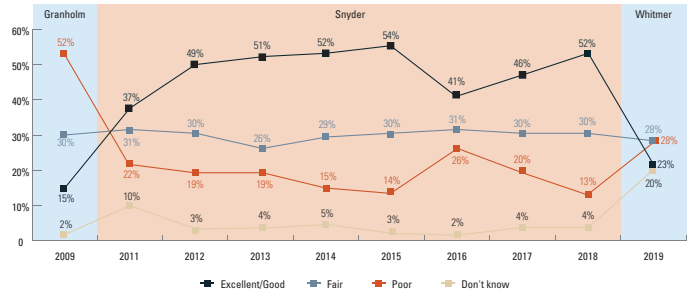
Ratings of Governor Whitmer’s performance also tied to partisanship, with some local officials uncertain in early evaluations

Statewide, local leaders’ initial assessments of Governor Whitmer’s job performance are more negative than any expressed during Governor Snyder’s tenure. Although it is only the beginning of Governor Whitmer’s first year, among those local leaders who have an opinion of her performance so far, just 23% give her ratings of excellent or good (see *Figure 2a*). Another 28% say she’s doing a fair job, while 28% rate her performance so far as poor. However, one in five local leaders (20%) are still withholding judgment, saying they “don’t know” what rating to give her.

By comparison, during his first year in 2011, Governor Snyder received his weakest ratings from local officials, when 37% rated him as excellent or good and 22% said poor. Meanwhile, Governor Jennifer Granholm was given lower ratings than either Governors Snyder or Whitmer, with only 15% statewide giving her high marks and a majority (52%) rating her performance as poor, in 2009 (Granholm’s last year in office, and the MPPS’ first year in operation).

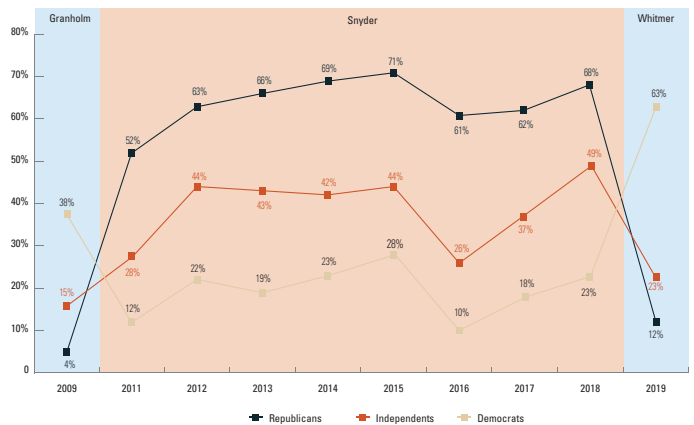
Once again, the key to understanding these assessments is to separate out local leaders by political party affiliation. Governor Whitmer’s co-partisans, Democratic local leaders, give her strong evaluations out of the gate, with 63% rating her performance so far as excellent or good (see *Figure 2b*). By comparison, in Governor Snyder’s first year, 52% of Republican local leaders gave him excellent or good ratings. Among Independents, 23% of local officials today give Governor Whitmer excellent or good ratings, slightly lower than the percentage who said the same about Governor Snyder in his first year (28%). Finally, only 12% of Republican local leaders give Governor Whitmer an initial rating of excellent or good today, the exact percentage of Democrats who said the same of Governor Snyder in his first few months.

Figure 2a
Local officials’ evaluations of Governor Whitmer’s performance compared with previous Governors’ performances, 2009-2019



Note: the survey question on Governor’s job performance was not asked in 2010.

Figure 2b
Percentage of local officials who say the Governor’s performance is “excellent” or “good” in 2009-2019, by partisan identification



Note: the survey question on Governor’s job performance was not asked in 2010.

Declining evaluations of the Michigan Legislature’s performance, particularly among Republican local leaders

As has generally been the case during MPPS’s tracking over time, changes in evaluations of the Michigan Legislature’s performance are much less dramatic than those for the Governor. Local officials continue to be generally unimpressed by the job performance of the Michigan Legislature in 2019. Statewide, 21% of local leaders say the Legislature is doing an excellent or good job, down from 28% last year (see *Figure 3a*). Another 42% believe the Legislature is doing a fair job, a slight uptick from 40% last year. Meanwhile, 29% call the Legislature’s performance this year poor, essentially unchanged from 2018.

When looking at these assessments by partisan identification, the largest change this year is found among Republican local leaders. Although control of the Legislature remains in Republican hands in 2019 as it was in 2018, assessments of the Michigan Legislature’s performance have declined the most among GOP local leaders, with only 26% saying the performance is excellent or good, a significant drop from 38% last year (see *Figure 3b*). Positive evaluations among Independent local leaders also declined slightly to 13% from 17% in 2018. Interestingly, Democratic officials’ assessment of the Legislature’s performance slightly improved from 12% last year to 18% this year, making them more positive than Independents about the Legislature’s job performance in 2019.

Figure 3a
Local officials’ evaluations of the Michigan Legislature’s performance, 2011-2019

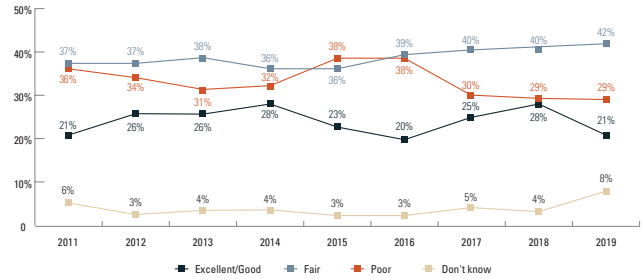
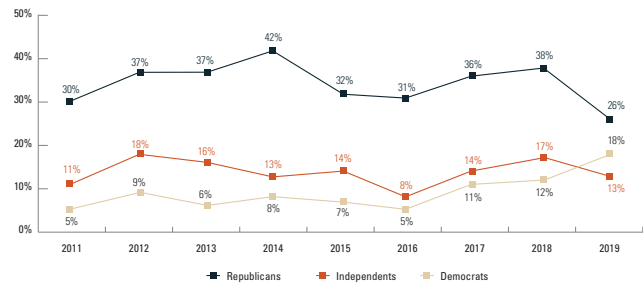


Figure 3b
Percentage of local officials who rate the Legislature’s performance is “excellent” or “good” in 2011-2019, by partisan identification





Conclusion

Partisanship continues to inform local leaders' assessments of both Michigan's direction as well as their ratings of the Governor's and Legislature's job performance.

In 2019, local officials overall expressed increased concern about the direction the state is headed. Nearly half (47%) of local officials say the state has gotten off on the wrong track, a jump from the 33% who said the same last year. Meanwhile, today 33% say the state is generally going in the right direction, down from 56% in 2018. This corresponds closely to officials' self-identified partisan leanings. Since the change of hands in the executive branch this year from a Republican to a Democratic Governor, assessments of the state's direction among local leaders have declined sharply among Republicans and Independents and increased substantially among Democrats.

In these first few months of Governor Gretchen Whitmer's time in office, one in five local leaders (20%) say that as yet they "don't know" how to rate her performance so far. Among those who voice an opinion, just 23% give her ratings of excellent or good, while 28% say she's doing a fair job, and 28% rate her performance so far as poor. When looking by partisanship, the ratings for Governor Whitmer are generally similar to those given to Governor Rick Snyder by co-partisans and opponents in his first term back in 2011. By contrast, local assessments of the Michigan Legislature have seen much less change over time. Statewide, local officials are most likely to say the Legislature's performance in 2019 is just fair (42%), similar to last year (40%).

Notes

1. Gallup Organization. (2018). 2017 Democratic States Exceed Republican States by Four in 2018. Washington, D.C.: Gallup Organization. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/247025/democratic-states-exceed-republican-states-four-2018.aspx>

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 policies designed to build-up a multi-year time-series.

In the Spring 2019 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 2019 wave was conducted from April 8 – June 10, 2019. A total of 1,364 jurisdictions in the Spring 2019 wave returned valid surveys (68 counties, 225 cities, 186 villages, and 885 townships), resulting in a 73% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.37%. 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/michigan-public-policy-survey/mpps-data-tables.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

- Positive working relationships reported among Michigan's local elected officials (June 2019)
- Community poverty and the struggle to make ends meet in Michigan, according to local government leaders (March 2019)
- The state of community civic discourse, according to Michigan's local government leaders (December 2018)
- Despite sustained economic growth, Michigan local government fiscal health still lags (November 2018)
- Michigan local government leaders' views on medical and recreational marijuana (September 2018)
- Rising confidence in Michigan's direction among local leaders, but partisan differences remain (July 2018)
- Michigan local government officials weigh in on housing shortages and related issues (June 2018)
- Approaches to land use planning and zoning among Michigan's local governments (May 2018)
- Workforce issues and challenges for Michigan's local governments (January 2018)
- Local leaders' views on elections in Michigan: accuracy, problems, and reform options (November 2017)
- Michigan local government officials report complex mix of improvement and decline in fiscal health, but with overall trend moving slowly upward (October 2017)
- Michigan local leaders want their citizens to play a larger role in policymaking, but report declining engagement (August 2017)
- Michigan local leaders' views on state preemption and how to share policy authority (June 2017)
- Improving communication, building trust are seen as keys to fixing relationships between local jurisdictions and the State government (May 2017)
- Local leaders more likely to support than oppose Michigan's Emergency Manager law, but strongly favor reforms (February 2017)
- Local government leaders' views on drinking water and water supply infrastructure in Michigan communities (November 2016)
- Michigan local leaders say property tax appeals are common, disagree with 'dark stores' assessing (October 2016)
- Local officials say Michigan's system of funding local government is broken, and seek State action to fix it (September 2016)
- Michigan local governments report first declines in fiscal health trend since 2010 (August 2016)
- Michigan local leaders' doubts continue regarding the state's direction (July 2016)
- Hospital access primary emergency medical concern among many Michigan local officials (July 2016)
- Firefighting services in Michigan: challenges and approaches among local governments (June 2016)
- Most local officials are satisfied with law enforcement services, but almost half from largest jurisdictions say their funding is insufficient (April 2016)
- Local leaders say police-community relations are good throughout Michigan, but those in large cities are concerned about potential civil unrest over police use-of-force (February 2016)
- Report: Responding to budget surplus vs. deficit: the preferences of Michigan's local leaders and citizens (December 2015)
- Michigan's local leaders concerned about retiree health care costs and their governments' ability to meet future obligations (October 2015)
- Fiscal health rated relatively good for most jurisdictions, but improvement slows and decline continues for many (September 2015)
- Confidence in Michigan's direction declines among state's local leaders (August 2015)
- Michigan local government leaders' views on private roads (July 2015)
- Few Michigan jurisdictions have adopted Complete Streets policies, though many see potential benefits (June 2015)
- Michigan local leaders have positive views on relationships with county road agencies, despite some concerns (May 2015)
- Michigan local government leaders say transit services are important, but lack of funding discourages their development (April 2015)
- Michigan local leaders see need for state and local ethics reform (March 2015)
- Local leaders say Michigan road funding needs major increase, but lack consensus on options that would raise the most revenue (February 2015)
- Michigan local government leaders' views on employee pay and benefits (January 2015)
- Despite increasingly formal financial management, relatively few Michigan local governments have adopted recommended policies (December 2014)



Most Michigan local officials are satisfied with their privatized services, but few seek to expand further (November 2014)

Michigan local governments finally pass fiscal health tipping point overall, but one in four still report decline (October 2014)

Beyond the coast, a tenuous relationship between Michigan local governments and the Great Lakes (September 2014)

Confidence in Michigan's direction holds steady among state's local leaders (August 2014)

Wind power as a community issue in Michigan (July 2014)

Fracking as a community issue in Michigan (June 2014)

The impact of tax-exempt properties on Michigan local governments (March 2014)

Michigan's local leaders generally support Detroit bankruptcy filing despite some concerns (February 2014)

Michigan local governments increasingly pursue placemaking for economic development (January 2014)

Views on right-to-work legislation among Michigan's local government leaders (December 2013)

Michigan local governments continue seeking, and receiving, union concessions (October 2013)

Michigan local government fiscal health continues gradual improvement, but smallest jurisdictions lagging (September 2013)

Local leaders evaluate state policymaker performance and whether Michigan is on the right track (August 2013)

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)

All MPPS reports are available online at: <http://closup.umich.edu/mpps.php>

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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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