Local leaders’ concerns about Michigan’s direction spike, while evaluations of state leaders sink over the past year

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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 2021 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)—conducted between April 5 and June 7, 2021—and tracking comparisons to previous spring waves.

Key Findings

- Statewide, 67% of Michigan’s local government officials say the state has gotten off on the wrong track, the highest level of pessimism reported since tracking began in 2011. Meanwhile, just 23% say the state is generally going in the right direction, a record low number.
  » As in the past, these views are strongly associated with partisan identification, yet declining assessments of the state’s direction are found among all partisan groups. Among self-identified Republican local leaders, just 10% say the state is going in the right direction, down from the 26% last year. Among Independents, 24% believe the state is currently headed in the right direction, down from 39% in 2020. And while 63% of Democrats remain optimistic about the direction of the state, this percentage is also down from last year’s high of 72%.

- Evaluations of Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s job performance have also fallen sharply in the past year. Nearly half (48%) of Michigan’s local officials rate her performance in 2021 as “poor,” compared to 31% in 2020. Just a third (30%) currently rate her performance as either “excellent” or “good,” down from 39% last year.
  » Again, these ratings are correlated with partisanship. Ratings of good or excellent for Governor Whitmer are found among 79% of Democratic local leaders, compared with 41% of Independents and just 10% of Republicans.

- While evaluations of the Michigan Legislature’s performance last year—at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic—were up slightly from prior years, local officials today are significantly more critical. Statewide, a full 40% of local leaders say the Legislature is doing a poor job, compared to 19% who said the same in 2020. Only 14% say its performance is either excellent or good, the lowest such ratings for the Legislature since MPPS tracking began.
  » Although on prior surveys Republican local leaders have been the most likely to give the Legislature positive ratings, these have dropped substantially. Today just 15% of Republicans say the Legislature is doing an excellent or good job, in line with assessments by Independents (12%) and Democrats (15%).
Background

Since 2011, the MPPS survey has asked Michigan's local government leaders whether they feel the state is generally going in the right direction or if things have gotten off on the wrong track. The survey has also annually tracked their opinions on the job performance of the sitting governor and the Michigan Legislature. The following report presents these views among the chief elected and appointed officials who run local governments in every type of community across Michigan—from the largest and most densely-populated urban areas in the southeast, to the smallest, most rural and sparsely-populated areas of the Upper Peninsula—and reviews the changes over a decade, from when communities were just beginning to recover from the Great Recession and extending through the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Just as last year's MPPS wave was launched in late March of 2020, the COVID-19 began to sweep across the state of Michigan. This prompted a subsequent statewide state of emergency and stay-at-home orders that had huge impacts on the state's economy and public health. In the pandemic's initial weeks of April 2020, local officials' assessments of the direction the state was headed and the performance of Governor Gretchen Whitmer and the state legislature were actually more positive than the previous year. However, over the course of May and June 2020, those views shifted as COVID-19 spread across the state, and local leaders reported declines in both “right direction” assessments of the state's direction as well as drops in “excellent” or “good” ratings for state officials.

Over the subsequent year, Michigan has experienced more extraordinary events, including widespread protests spurred by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, a planned kidnapping of the Governor, a second fall surge of COVID-19 cases and additional health orders with restrictions on businesses and schools plus a third surge in the spring of 2021, an election during the pandemic with ensuing controversies, the rollout of vaccines to Michiganders statewide, and more. In the wake of these historic events, local leaders statewide are expressing heightened concern about the direction the state is headed and disappointment in the job performance of both the state's Democratic Governor and its Republican-led Legislature.
Two-thirds of Michigan local officials currently say the state is on the wrong track, with confidence declining among all partisans since last year

During the past year, concerns among Michigan’s local government leaders about the direction the state is headed have skyrocketed, with 67% now saying Michigan is currently on the “wrong track” (see Figure 1a). Meanwhile, just a quarter (23%) believe it is heading in the right direction, the lowest percentage since the MPPS began tracking these views in 2011. At the same time an historic low of just 10% of local leaders say they “don’t know” how to evaluate the direction the state is headed.

![Figure 1a](image)

Partisan identification of local officials—in comparison to the party ID of Michigan's sitting governor—has played a crucial role in assessments of the state’s directions since MPPS tracking began, and responses on the 2021 survey are no exception. Although confidence in the state’s direction has declined among all partisan groups, breaking down the overall percentages by partisanship illustrates the significantly different opinions among Michigan's local officials.

First, Michigan has 1,240 townships—most of which are small and rural—compared with 533 cities and villages and 83 counties, and local governments in the MPPS census survey are most often represented by Republican local leaders. For example, according to responses on the 2021 MPPS, 58% of Michigan local government leaders self-identify as Republicans, while 17% say they are Independents, and 25% identify as Democrats. (By comparison, according to Gallup polling in 2018, 39% of Michigan citizens self-identify as Republicans, 16% as Independents, and 45% as Democrats.4)
Now, looking over time, while Republican Governor Rick Snyder was in office from 2011-2018, Republican local officials consistently expressed more optimism about the state’s direction, compared with Democrats and Independents. However, since the beginning of Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s administration in 2019, the views of Republicans and Democrats have flipped. Today, just 10% of Republican local officials say the state is going in the right direction, down from 26% in 2020 (see Figure 1b). Meanwhile, Independent local officials also report steep declines in optimism, with just 24% saying Michigan is going in the right direction, down from 39% in 2020. By comparison, most (63%) Democratic local officials remain optimistic about the direction of the state, though this percentage is also down from last year’s high of 72%.

Figure 1b
Percentage of local officials who say Michigan is headed in the ‘right direction’ in 2011-2021, by partisan identification
Despite higher concerns about the direction of the state and nation, optimism about individual jurisdictions is high

The MPPS not only asks local officials to assess the direction the state is headed, but also often asks for views on the direction of both the country as a whole, and of their own local county, township, city, or village. While partisan differences are clear at the state and national levels, when it comes to confidence in their jurisdiction’s direction, local leaders are uniformly positive. As shown in Figure 1c, the concerns among Republican and Independent local leaders about the direction Michigan is headed this year are mirrored in concerns about the US overall. Just 13% of Republicans say the U.S. is currently headed in the right direction, and less than a quarter (24%) of Independents say the same. Meanwhile, a similar two-thirds of Democrats are confident in the direction of both the US (66%) and Michigan (63%).

Despite those differences in local leaders’ confidence about higher levels of government, when it comes to gauging the direction of their own local jurisdiction, local leaders tend to consistently give their local communities high marks. Statewide, 92% of both Republicans and Democrats say their own jurisdictions are headed in the right direction, as do 80% of Independents.

**Figure 1c**
Percentage of local officials who say the US, Michigan, and their own jurisdiction is headed in the ‘right direction’ in 2021, by partisan identification
Ratings of Governor Whitmer’s performance decline significantly over past year

Turning back to the state level, in addition to asking questions about the direction Michigan is headed, the MPPS also has asked local officials to evaluate the job performance of the sitting governor. These questions started in 2009 with Governor Jennifer Granholm, ran through Governor Rick Snyder’s two terms, and now refer to Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

As noted earlier, last year Governor Whitmer’s ratings on the 2020 MPPS started high at the beginning of COVID-19’s appearance in Michigan, but they declined precipitously over the course of the survey field period. This year, local leaders remain critical, with nearly half (48%) rating Governor Whitmer’s performance in 2021 as “poor,” compared to 31% who said the same last year (see Figure 2a). Just a third (30%) of local leaders currently rate her performance as either “excellent” or “good,” down from 39% in 2020.

These declines in job evaluations among local leaders generally correspond to a recent drop in Governor Whitmer’s approval ratings among Michigan voters, as shown in a recent poll by a Lansing-based research group.

Figure 2a
Local officials’ evaluations of Governor Whitmer’s performance compared with previous governors’ performances, 2009-2021
Like assessments of the state’s direction, these ratings on job performance are also strongly correlated with partisanship, yet see declines among all groups. As shown in Figure 2b, 79% of Democratic local leaders currently give Governor Whitmer positive ratings, compared to 82% last year. Among Independents, 41% give her positive ratings in 2021, compared with 45% in 2020. Meanwhile, just 10% of Republican local leaders rate Governor Whitmer’s performance as good or excellent in 2021, down from 18% last year. While not shown in Figure 2b, this year 67% of Republican local officials rate Governor Whitmer’s performance as poor, compared to 45% who said the same last year.

Figure 2b
Percentage of local officials who rate the Governor’s performance as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ in 2009-2021, by partisan identification
Michigan Legislature's performance ratings lowest since MPPS tracking began

Typically on the MPPS, changes in evaluations of the Michigan Legislature’s performance have been much less dramatic than those for the governor. However, the past two years have seen significant swings in the Legislature’s evaluations, first in the positive direction in 2020, but now severely negative. Last year, 31% of local officials statewide said the Michigan Legislature’s performance was either excellent or good in 2020, the highest ratings for the Legislature since the MPPS began tracking the measure (see Figure 3a). This year, those positive ratings plummeted to only 14%, the lowest level since tracking began. Meanwhile, though last year just 19% of local leaders rated the Legislature’s performance as “poor,” in 2021 fully 40% say it’s doing a poor job, again the worst ratings since tracking of these views began.

Figure 3a
Local officials’ evaluations of the Michigan Legislature’s performance, 2011-2021
When breaking these evaluations down by partisan identification, sharp declines in positive assessments of the Legislature’s performance are found among Republicans, Independents, and Democrats alike (see Figure 3b). Particularly notable is the decline in Republicans’ evaluations, given their prior trends. Although positive assessments of the Legislature among Independent and Democratic local leaders have often hovered in the teens and single digits, around 30-40% of Republican local leaders have usually given Michigan’s Republican-led legislature positive ratings. However, in 2021, just 15% say the Legislature is doing an excellent or good job, a sharp drop from 34% last year. And while not shown in Figure 3b, a third of Republican local leaders (33%), nearly half of Independents (49%), and a majority of Democrats (56%) currently say the Legislature’s performance is poor.

**Figure 3b**
Percentage of local officials who rate the Legislature’s performance as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ in 2011-2021, by partisan identification
Conclusion

Local government leaders' assessments of where Michigan is headed as a state in 2021 are the most pessimistic they've been since MPPS tracking began in 2011. Views on the state's direction have declined dramatically over the past year, with two-thirds saying the state is off on the wrong track (67%) today, up from 46% last year. Meanwhile, those saying the state is heading in the right direction are at the lowest level since tracking began (39%). Positive assessments of the state’s direction have dropped among local leaders of all partisan stripes, even while they remain widely optimistic that their own individual jurisdictions are headed in the right direction.

Local leaders' ratings of Governor Gretchen Whitmer's performance today have also declined from generally higher levels at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March and April of 2020. Meanwhile, evaluations of the Michigan Legislature's performance also plunged in 2021 after hitting notably high levels the previous year. Republican local leaders joined Independents and Democrats in giving relatively few excellent or good ratings, and statewide 40% overall say the Legislature's current performance is poor, up sharply from 19% last year.

Notes


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, 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. Surveys are conducted each spring (and prior to 2018, were also conducted each fall). The program has covered a wide range of policy topics and includes longitudinal tracking data on “core” fiscal, budgetary and operational policy questions and designed to build-up a multi-year time-series.

In the Spring 2021 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 2021 wave was conducted from April 5 – June 7, 2021. A total of 1,364 jurisdictions in the Spring 2021 wave returned valid surveys (67 counties, 208 cities, 173 villages, and 916 townships), resulting in a 73% response rate by unit. The margin of error 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—will be available online at the MPPS homepage: closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey

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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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)
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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)
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Fiscal health rated relatively good for most jurisdictions, but improvement slows and decline continues for many (September 2015)
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Most Michigan local officials are satisfied with their privatized services, but few seek to expand further (November 2014)
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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)
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Michigan local governments actively promote U.S. Census participation (August 2010)
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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)
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