



MPPS Policy Brief

Michigan local leaders report increased confidence in local democracy

By Debra Horner and Stephanie Leiser

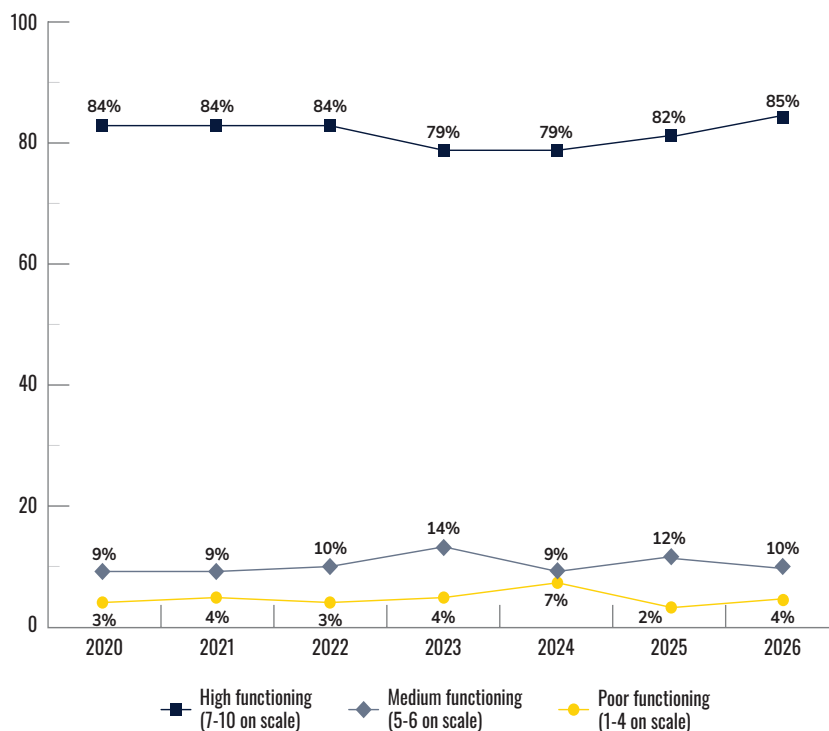
At a time of growing concern about the health of American democracy, Michigan's local leaders continue to report that local democratic functioning in their communities is strong.

Since 2020, the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) has asked local government leaders across the state for their assessments of the overall state of democracy in their own communities, broadly considering factors such as free and fair elections, the rule of law, a free and unbiased press, ethical and transparent governance, an informed and engaged electorate, and more. Local officials rate the state of democracy on a 10-point scale, where 1 represents a total breakdown of democracy and 10 represents perfectly functioning democracy.

After assessments of democracy in local communities dipped in 2023-2024, sentiments have generally improved over the past two years. In *Figure 1a*, scores of 1-4 indicate that democracy is functioning poorly, while scores of 7-10 indicate that it is functioning well. This year, 85% of Michigan local officials report that democracy is functioning well in their communities, up from 82% in 2025 and a low of 79% in 2024. Only around 4% of local officials say democracy is functioning poorly in their communities this year, consistent with most prior years.

Figure 1a

Local officials' assessments of the functioning of democracy at the local level, 2020-2026

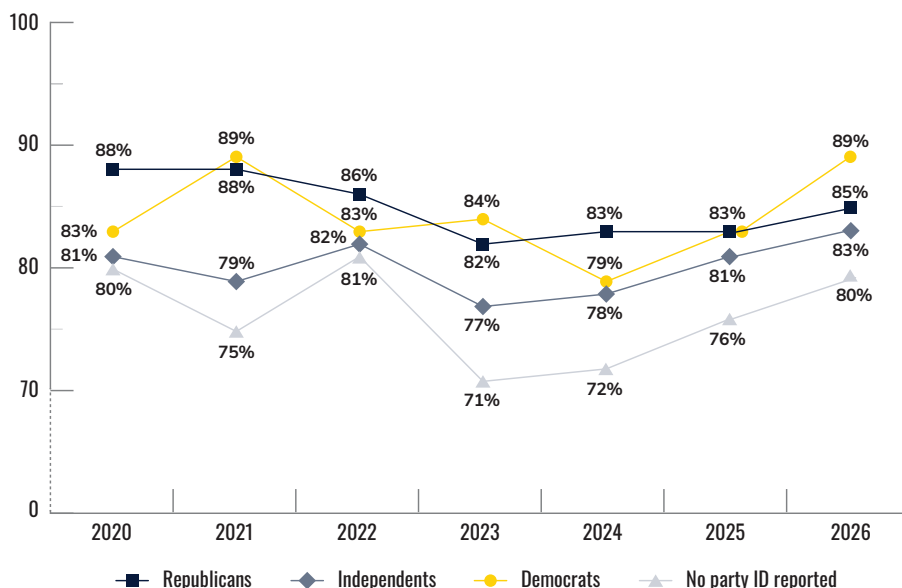


Ratings of local democracy rise across all partisan groups

Confidence in local democracy increased across the partisan spectrum this year. As shown in *Figure 1b*, the largest increase appears among Democrats (from 83% in 2025 to 89% in 2026), but assessments have also risen for Republicans (from 83% to 85%), Independents (from 81% to 83%), and officials who declined to report a partisan affiliation (from 76% to 80%).

Figure 1b

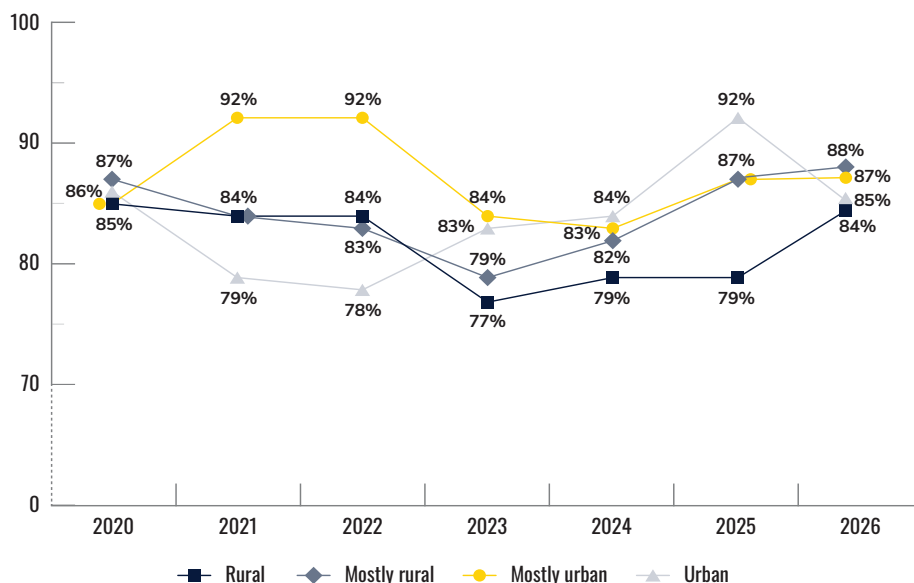
Percentage of local officials rating democracy in their community as “high functioning,” 2020-2026, by partisan self-identification



After ratings of local democratic health diverged between rural and other jurisdictions in 2025, sentiments across more urban and rural communities have evened out. While high ratings among urban leaders have declined from 92% in 2025 to 85% this year, ratings for rural and mostly rural governments have increased (see *Figure 1c*).

Figure 1c

Percentage of local officials rating democracy in their community as “high functioning,” 2020-2026, by urban-rural self-identification



Local leaders are less confident in democracy at the state level, but ratings remain higher than in earlier years

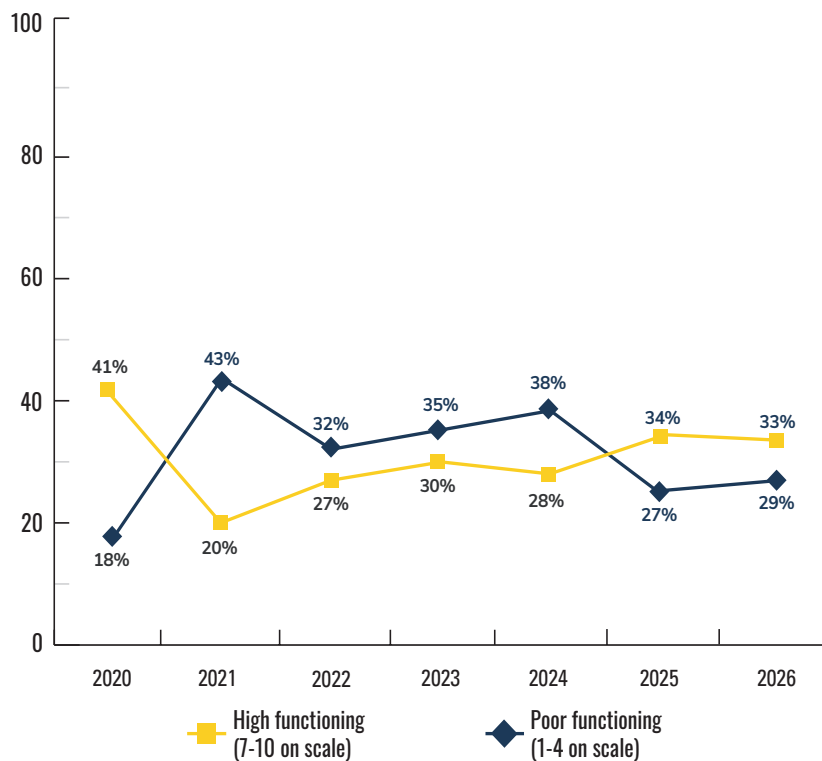
Despite an uptick in confidence about local democracy in communities across much of the state, local officials' assessments of democracy at the state level remain mostly unchanged, if not slightly worse compared to 2025. While one-third of local officials (33%) say democracy is functioning well at the state level, nearly as many (29%) say it is functioning poorly, indicating less consensus about state-level democracy than about local democracy (see *Figure 2*).

The slight decline in state-level ratings from 2025 to 2026 is concentrated among local leaders who identify themselves as Democrats (from 63% in 2025 to 60% this year). Ratings among Republicans, Independents, and officials who did not report a party affiliation either held steady or declined by one percentage point.

Nevertheless, local leaders' ratings of the health of Michigan's democracy in 2025 and 2026 are more optimistic than any survey year since 2020.

Figure 2

Local officials' assessments of the functioning of democracy at the state level in Michigan, 2020-2026



*Note: ratings of medium functioning (5 or 6 on 10-point scale) not shown

Survey Background and Methodology

The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) is an ongoing census survey of all 1,856 general purpose local governments in Michigan conducted since 2009 by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) at the University of Michigan's Gerald R Ford School of Public Policy. The program is a partnership with Michigan's local government associations. The Spring 2026 wave was conducted March 30 – June 5, 2026. Respondents include county administrators, board chairs, and clerks; city mayors, managers, and clerks; village presidents, managers, and clerks; and township supervisors, managers, and clerks from 1,328 jurisdictions across the state, resulting in a 72% response rate by unit. More information is available at <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/mpps-2026-spring>

See CLOSUP's website for the full question text on the survey questionnaire. Detailed tables of the data in this report, including breakdowns by various community characteristics, are available at <http://mpps.umich.edu>.

The survey responses presented here are those of local Michigan officials and residents, 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.