



Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

 | Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy

# The Health of Michigan Democracy: Insights from Township Officials

Findings from the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)

April 26, 2022

Michigan township officials statewide have mostly good things to say about civic life at the township level, but outlooks about state and national politics are bleak.



# Presentation Outline

- Brief introduction to the Michigan Public Policy Survey
- Overview of Michigan township leaders' views regarding the functioning of democracy in their jurisdictions
- A statewide look at resident engagement and public participation in Michigan township decision-making



# The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)

- **A census survey** – all 1,856 Michigan counties, cities, villages, & townships
- **Online and hardcopy**
- **Wide Range of Topics** – examples include fiscal health, government operations and budget policies, elections, energy, roads, poverty, public safety, economic development, water infrastructure, intergovernmental cooperation, employee policies, labor unions, housing, environmental sustainability, Great Lakes, and much more.
- **In the field right now!**



# What makes the MPPS unique?

- 70%+ response rates
- Transparency
  - All questionnaires online
  - Pre-run data tables online
  - Sharing of (anonymized) datasets with other researchers
- Research partnership with MI local government associations
  - MAC, MML, & MTA
- Consulting expert advisors from across Michigan and matching content to national-level sources such as NLC and ICMA



# What does the MPPS aim to do?

- **Improve understanding** of local government to help improve policymaking and quality of life
- **Inform local leaders** about peers across the state: challenges and responses
- **Inform state policymakers** and other stakeholders with data about local level issues and views not available from any other source
- **Build a longitudinal data archive** to allow tracking of fundamental changes (such as economic and technological transitions, rural/urban dynamics, etc.)
- **Foster academic research and teaching** on local government issues



# How many townships responded to the Spring 2021 MPPS?

916 townships total (74% of all statewide)

## By Population Size

348 townships <1500  
392 townships 1500-5000  
86 townships 5001-10,000  
66 townships 10,001-30,000  
24 townships >30,000

## By Region

101 in the Upper Peninsula  
189 in the Northern LP  
188 in the Central West  
172 in the Central East  
132 in the Southwest  
134 in the Southeast



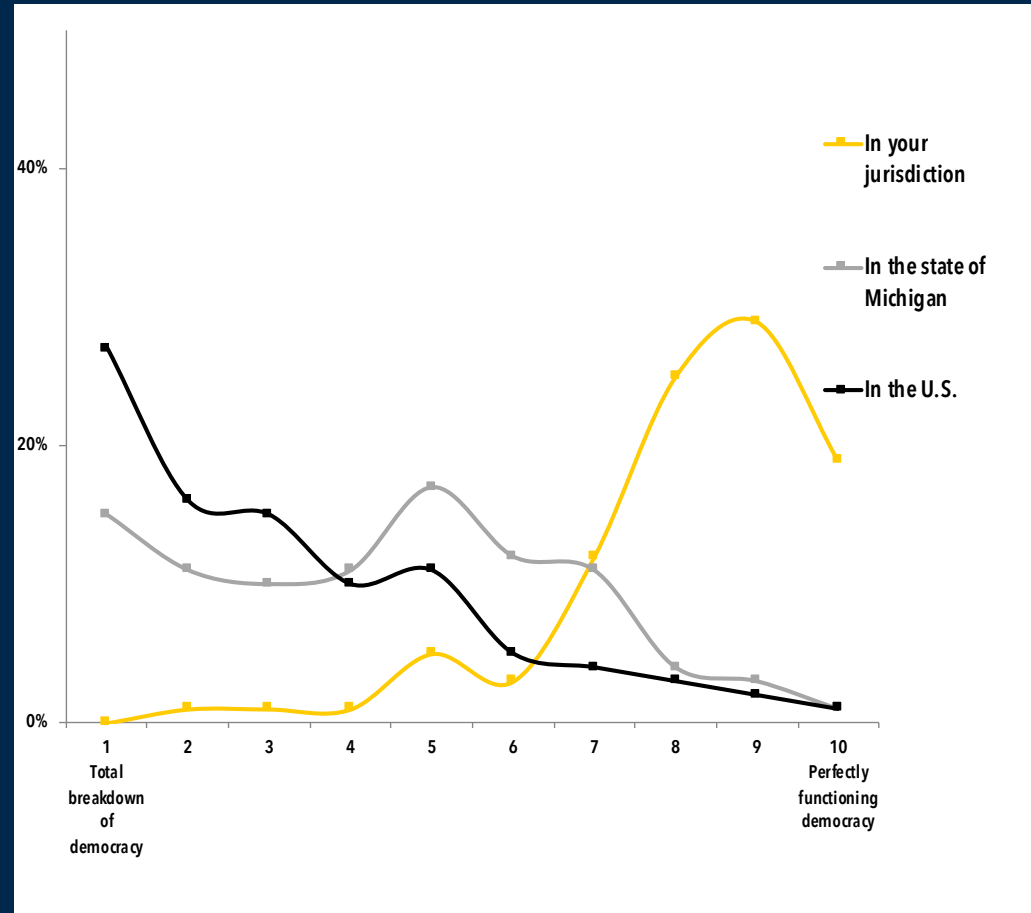
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Township leaders are much more optimistic about functioning of democracy locally than at either state or national levels.

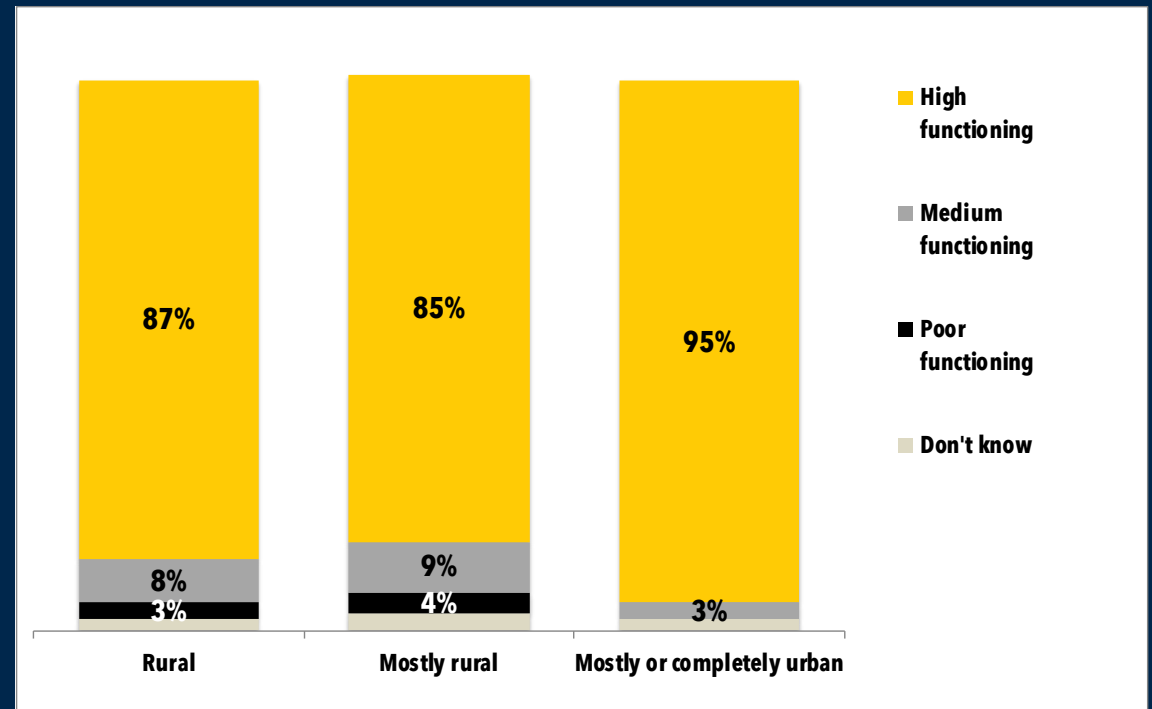


Spring 2021



There are few differences among rural and urban township leaders about strength of local democracy compared with views on democracy ...

Functioning of democracy your township

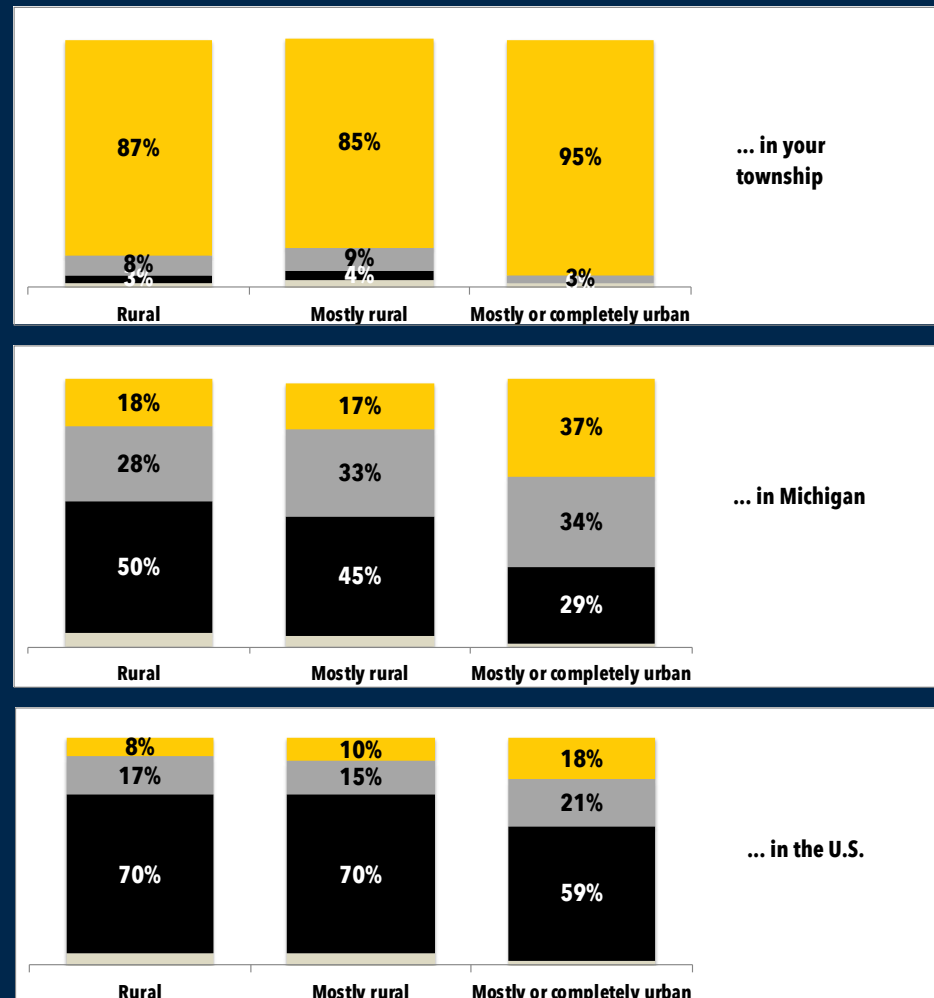


Spring 2021



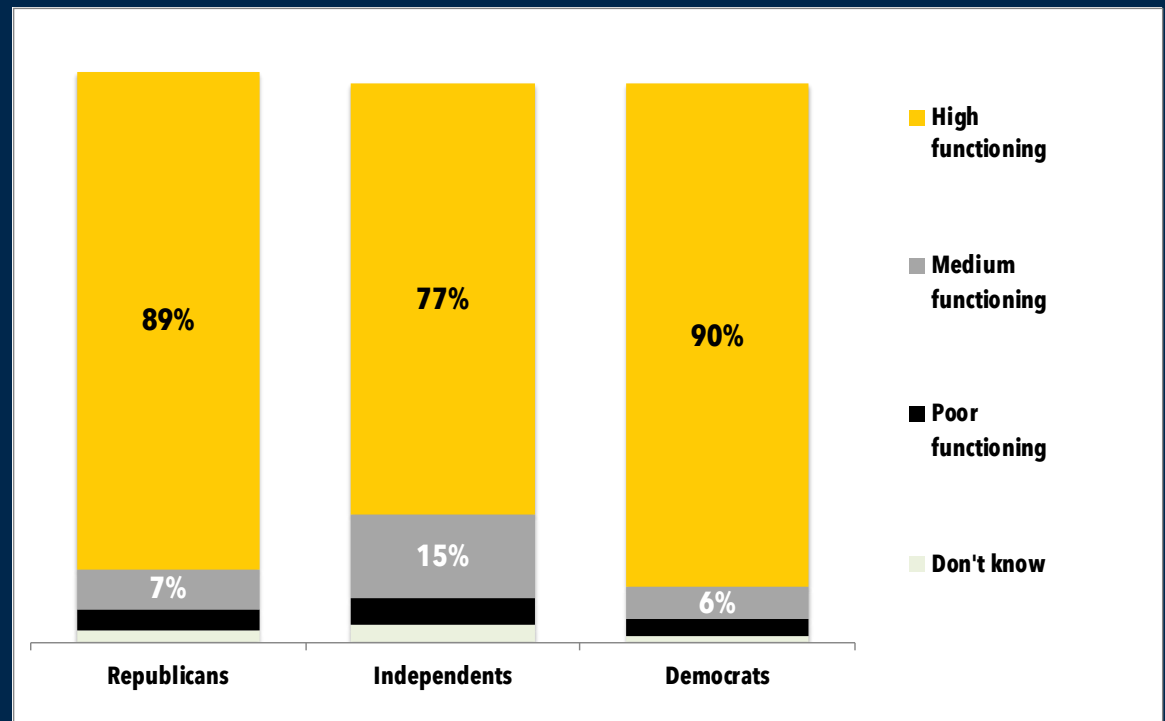
There are few differences between rural and urban townships regarding strength of township democracy...

... especially compared with views about state or national levels.



There are also few differences among partisans regarding strength of township democracy...

Functioning of democracy your township

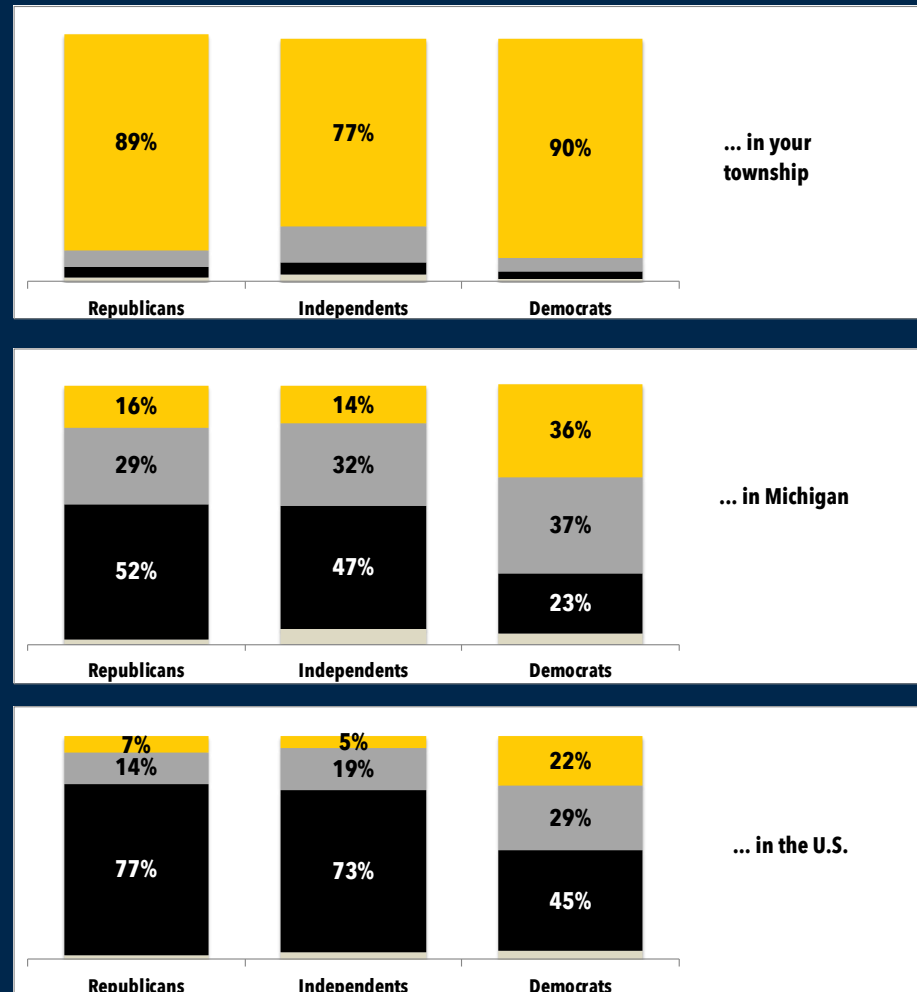


Spring 2021

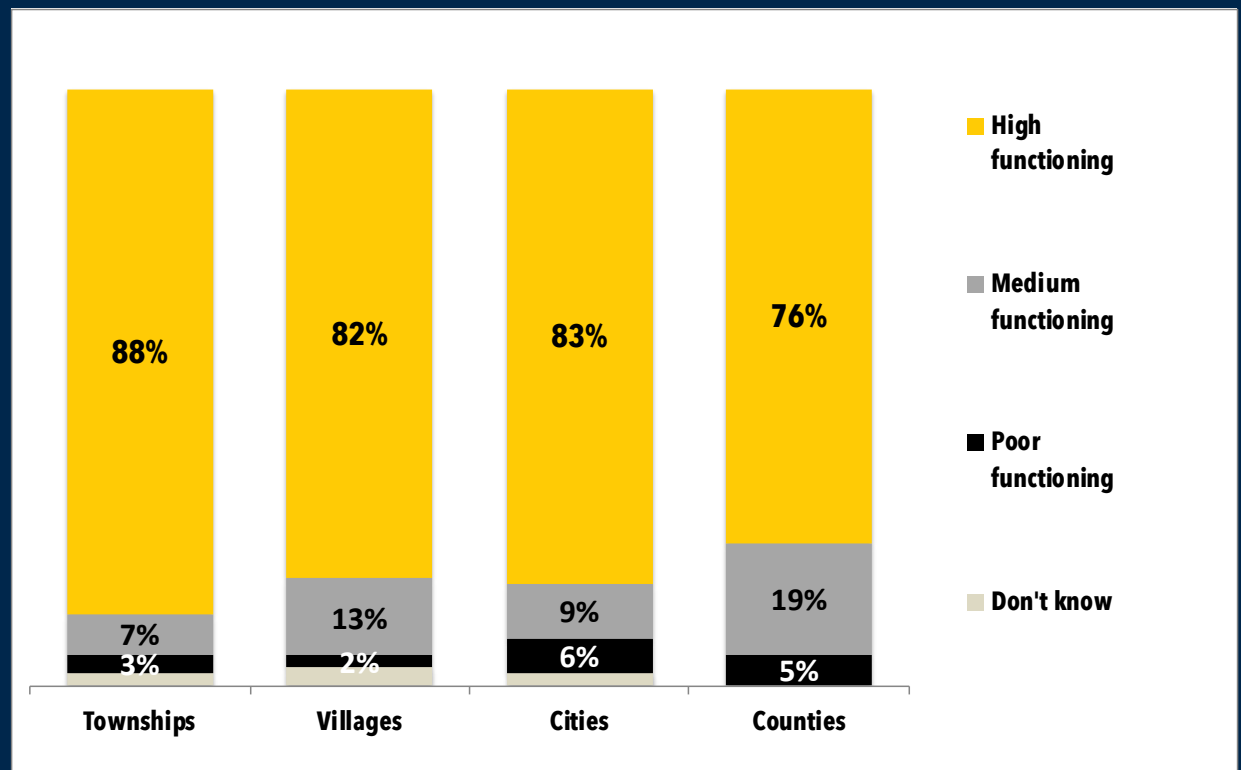


There are few differences among partisans regarding strength of township democracy...

... especially compared with views about state or national levels.



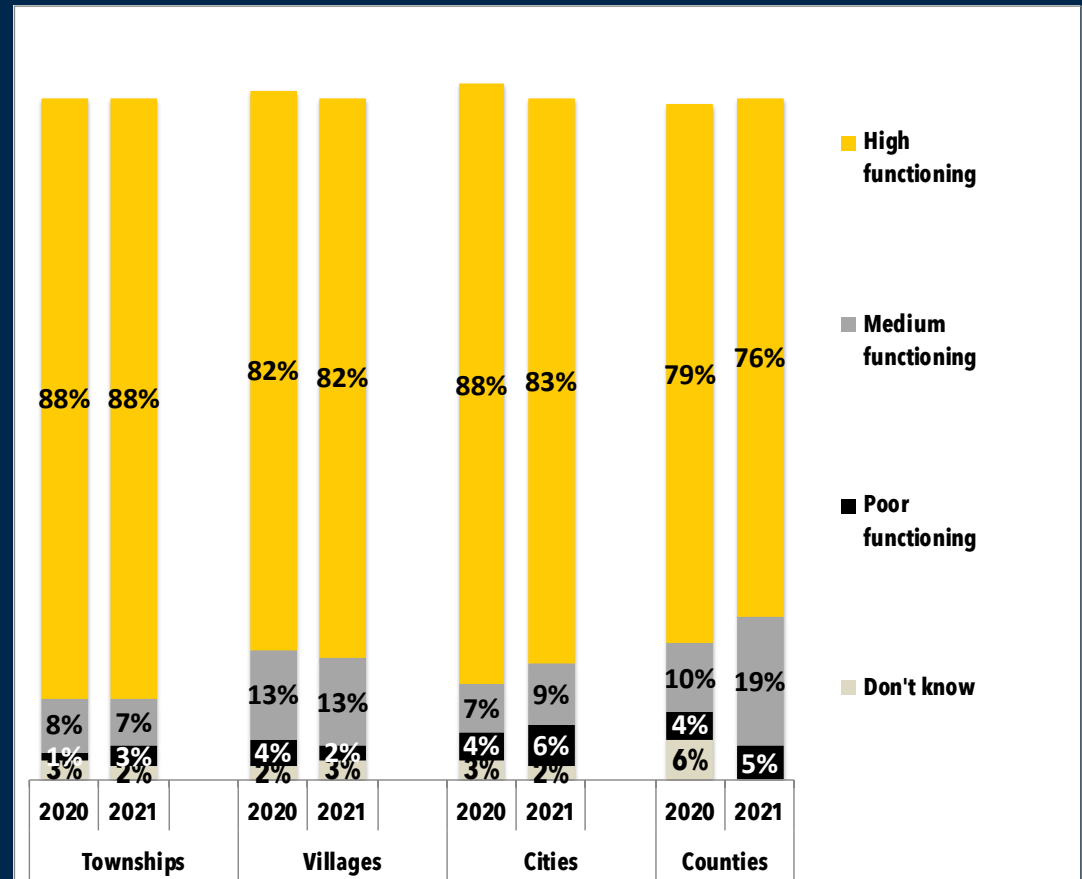
Township officials overall are more positive about the health of local democracy compared to county or municipal leaders.



Spring 2021



And although assessments of health of state and federal democracy are in severe decline, township officials remain positive about their own communities.

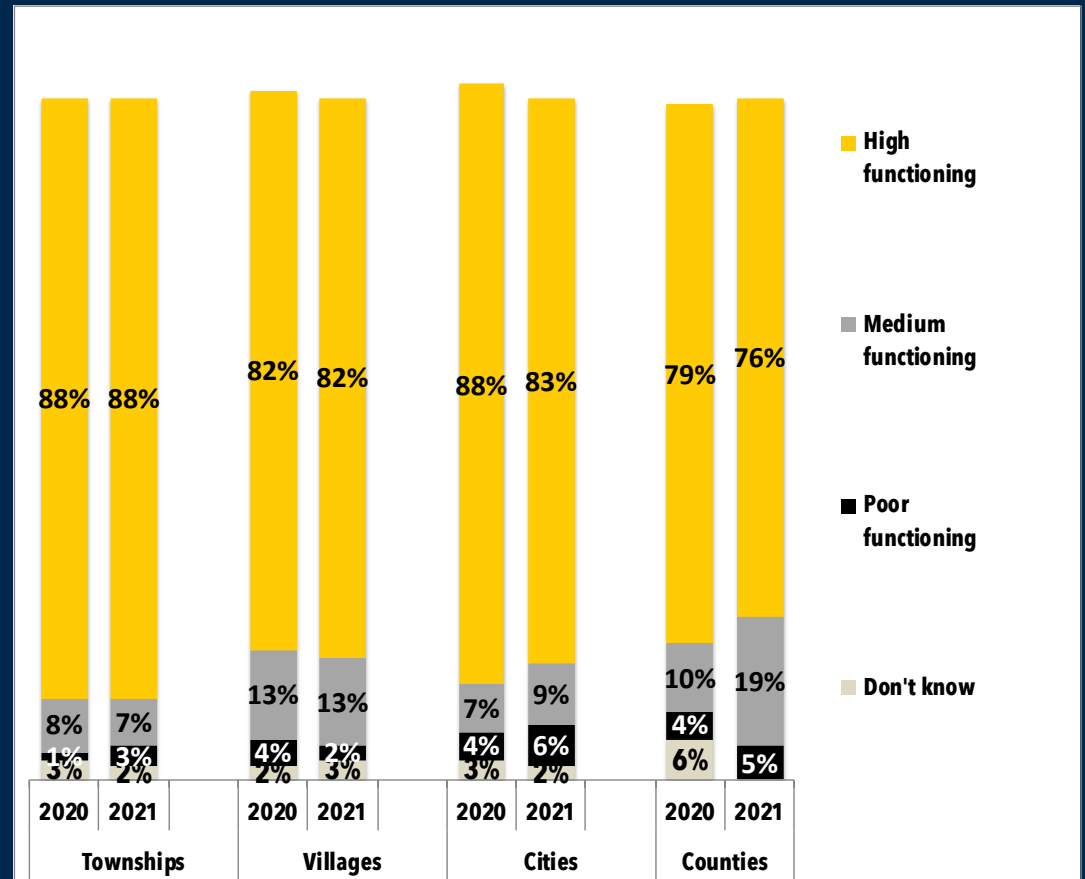


Spring 2020-2021



And although assessments of health of state and federal democracy are in severe decline, township officials remain positive about their own communities.

How would you rate things in your township?



Spring 2020-2021





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- ***A statewide look at resident engagement and public participation in Michigan township decision-making***



What is the role of residents in local government?

Who should decide key policy issues?

Can residents be trusted to be good partners in local policymaking?

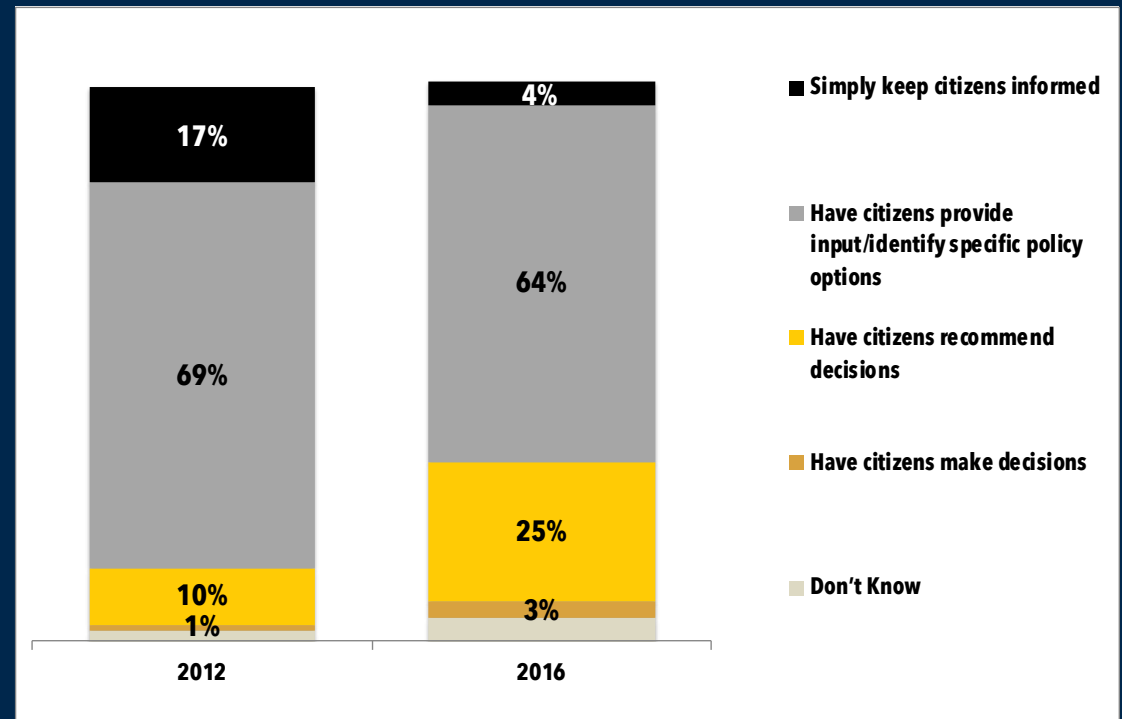
What is the current tone of local political discourse?

Who provides their residents with opportunities to participate?



Generally, Michigan township leaders say they'd like their residents to provide input into local policymaking.

Also, officials' overall interest in residents recommending decisions has increased.

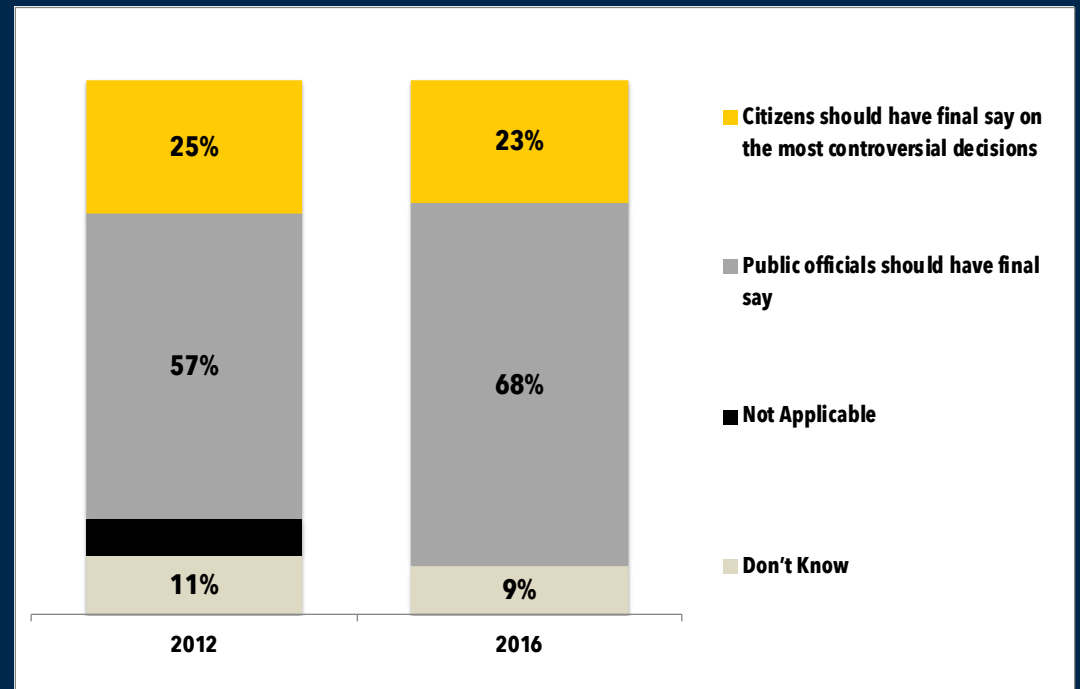


Fall 2012/16



And when it comes to making decisions about the most controversial issues in the community, one in five township leaders think the final say should belong to citizens...

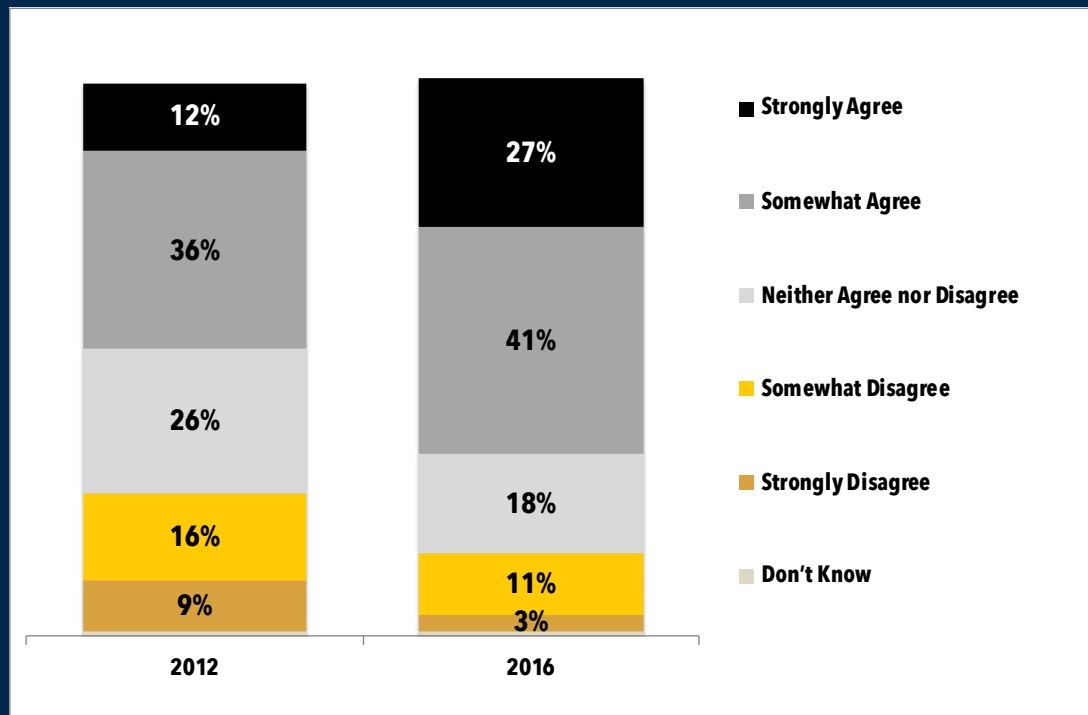
(however, this view decreased between 2012 and 2016).



Fall 2012/16



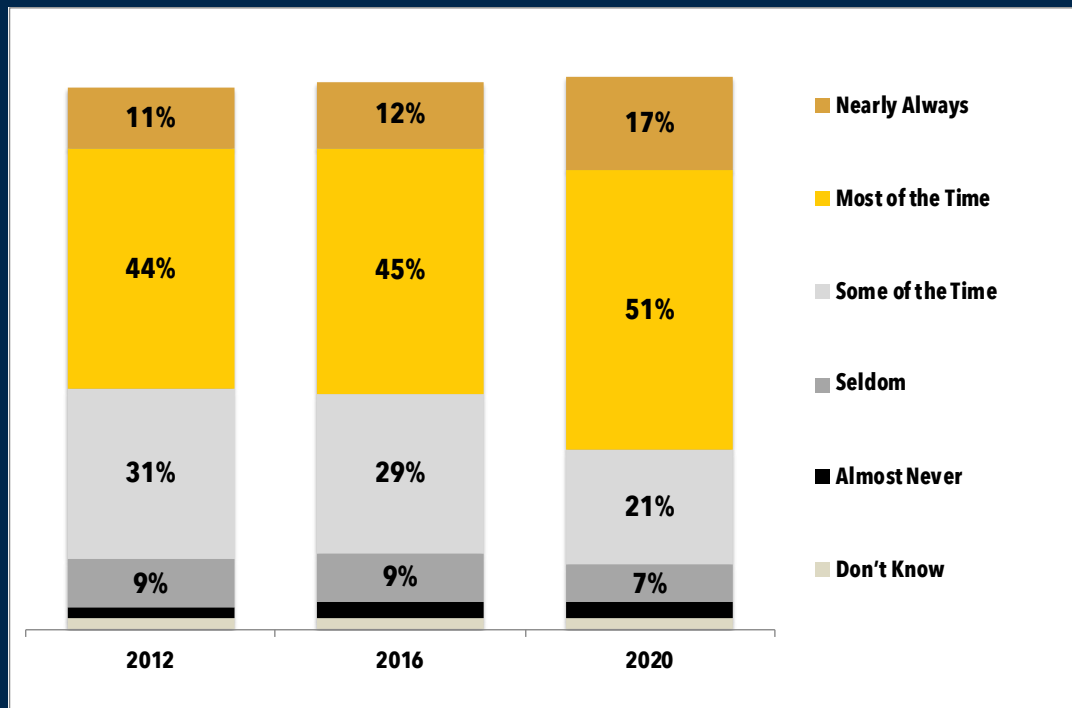
On one hand, township officials are likely to agree that the residents they tend to hear from are more interested in complaining than in finding solutions.



Fall 2012/16



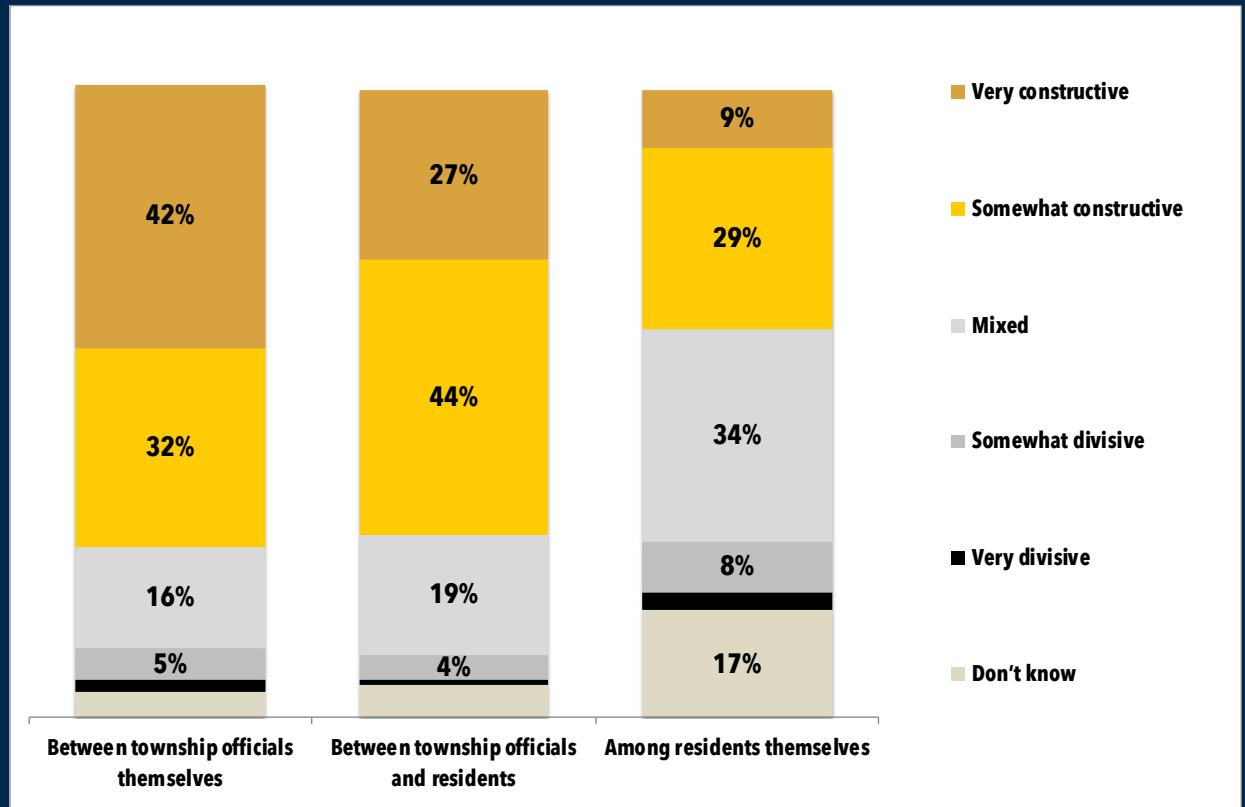
On the other hand, township officials increasingly say they **generally** trust the citizens in their community to be responsible participants in the township's policymaking.



Fall 2012/16 & Spring 2020



Fortunately, Michigan township leaders generally report that the tone of discussions about local policy issues is more constructive than divisive.



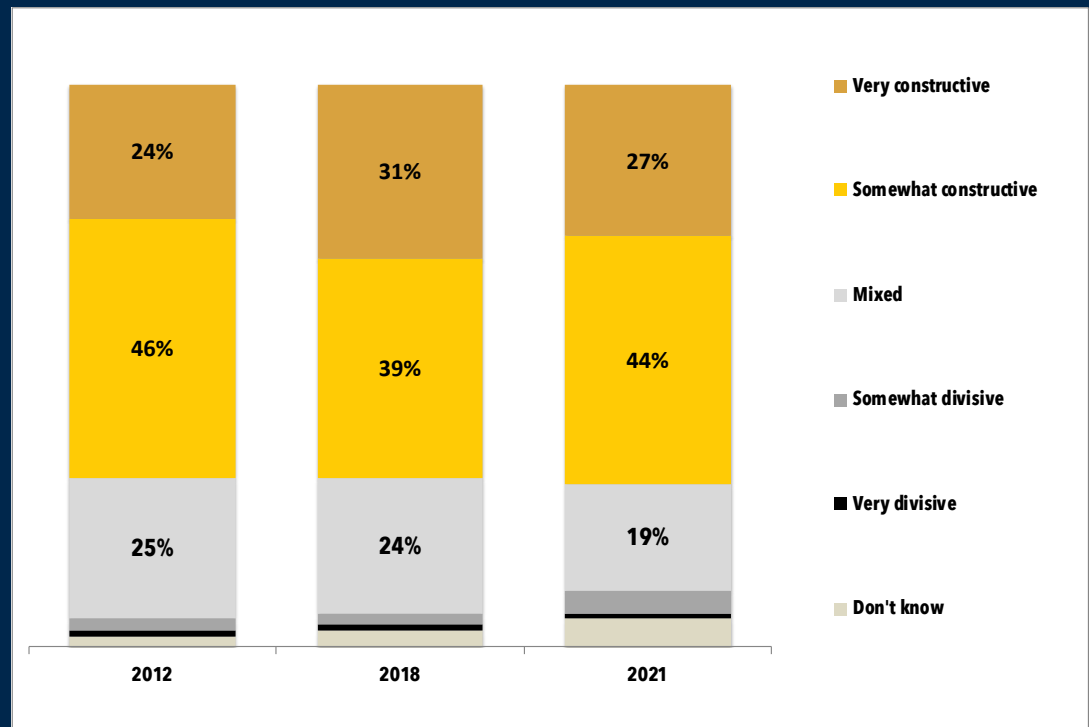
Spring 2021



Fortunately, Michigan township leaders generally report that the tone of discussions about local policy issues is more constructive than divisive...

And that hasn't changed all that much since 2012.

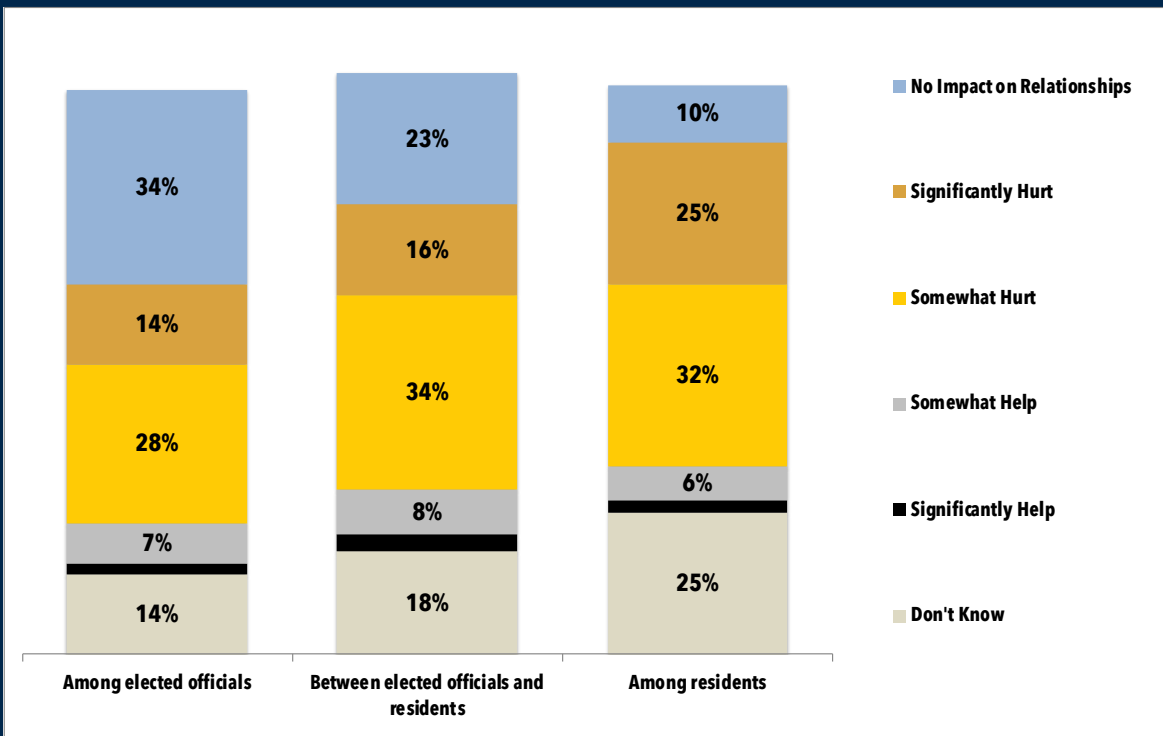
The state of public discourse between public officials and residents within your township



Spring 2021





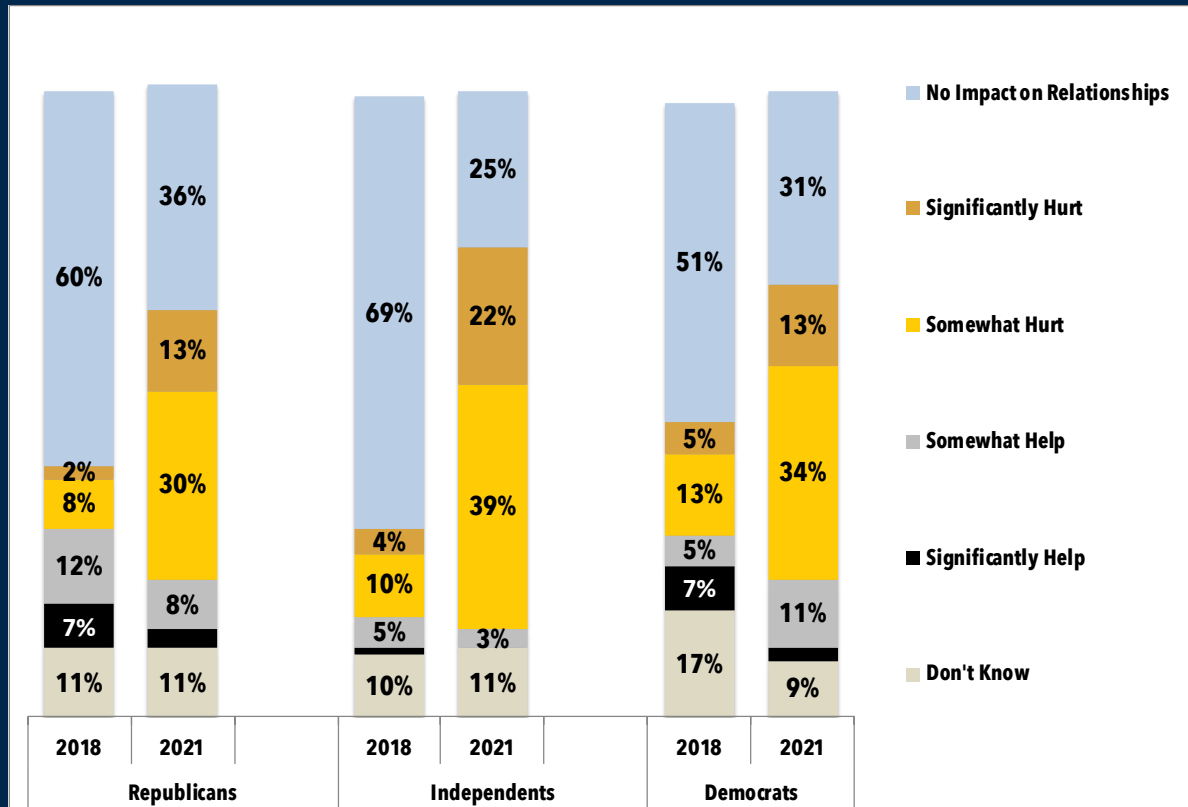


Unfortunately, Michigan township leaders are expressing growing concerns over negative local impacts of national partisan politics.

Spring 2021



## Working relationships among Township Board members



Unfortunately, Michigan township leaders are expressing growing concerns over negative local impacts of national partisan politics.

Spring 2018 / 2021



On the current Spring 2022 MPPS, we're asking specifically about experiences with and impacts of harassment and threats.

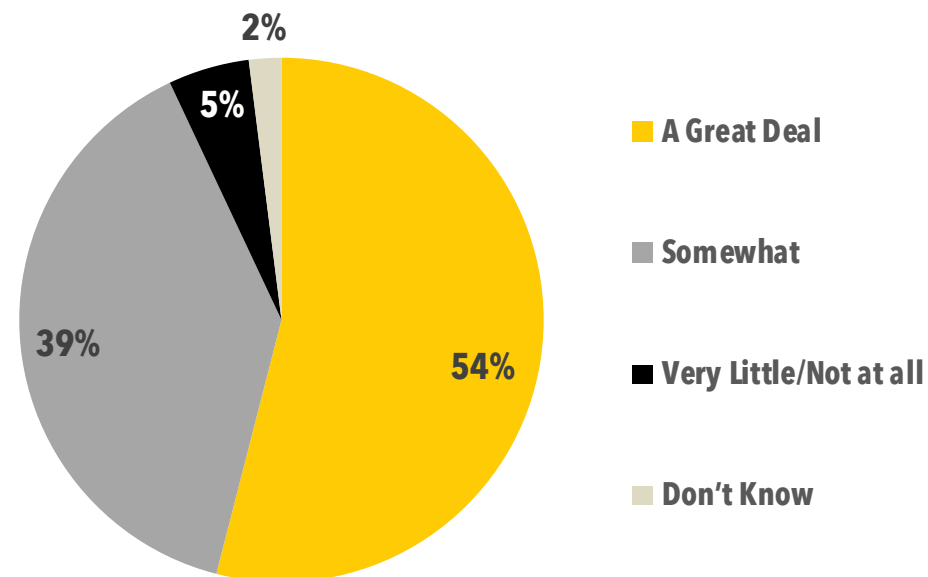


On the current Spring 2022 MPPS, we're asking specifically about experiences with and impacts of harassment and threats.

How is the tone of discussion in your township?



A majority of Michigan township leaders reported that their jurisdictions offer a great deal of opportunities for residents to engage with their township government...

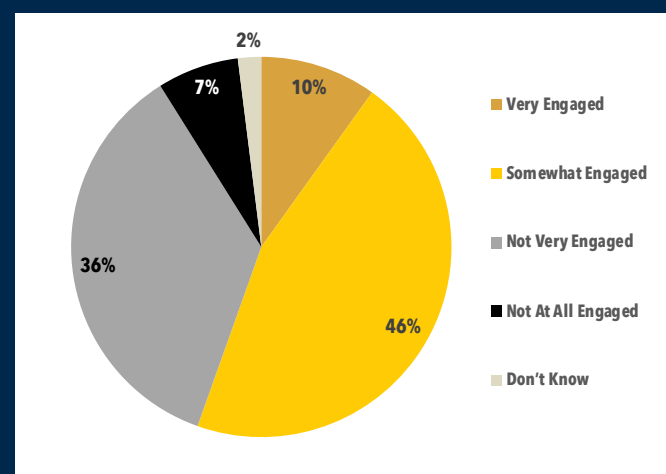
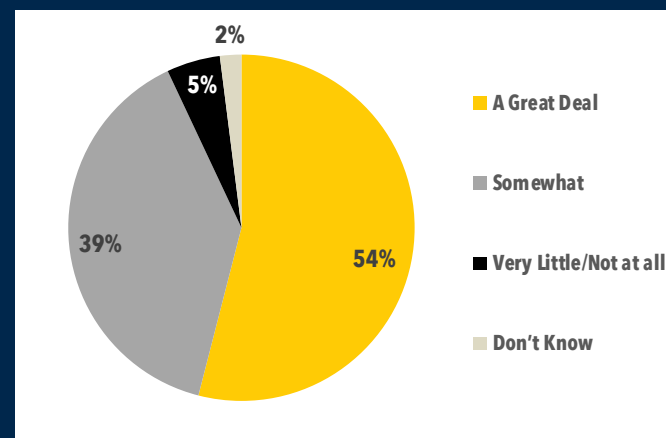


Fall 2016



A majority of Michigan township leaders reported that their townships offer a great deal of opportunities for residents to engage with their government...

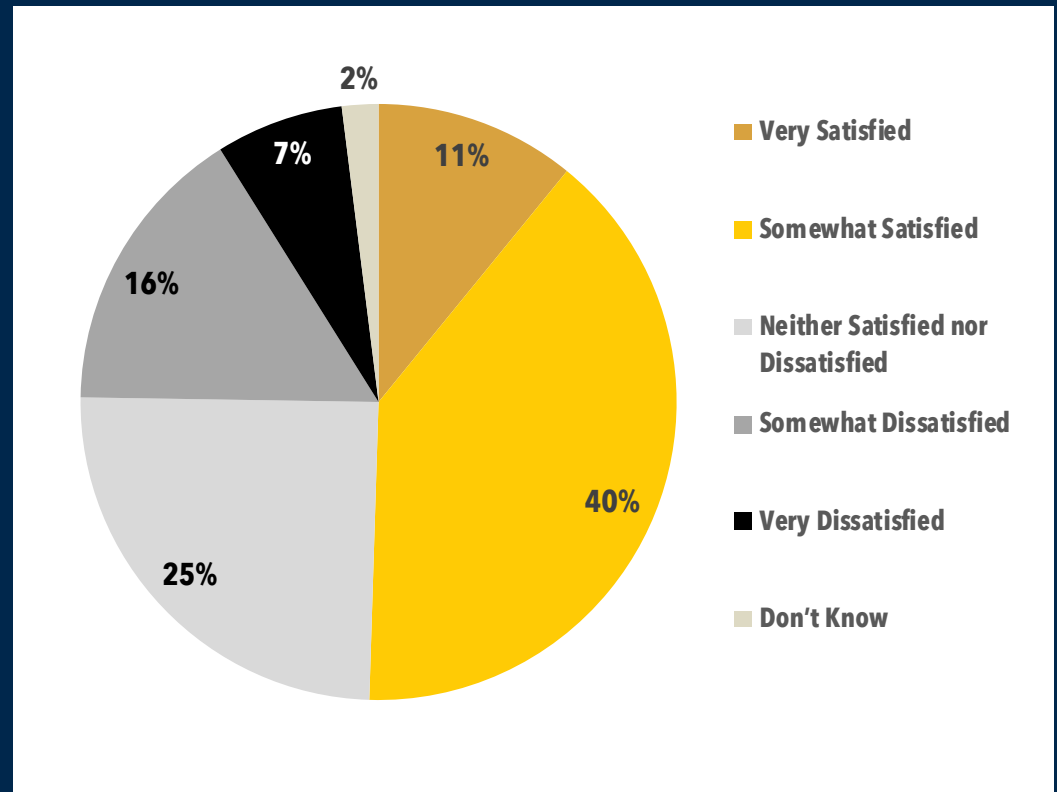
and 56% said their residents are very or somewhat engaged.



Fall 2016



Ultimately, only about half of Michigan township leaders say they very or somewhat satisfied with their residents' engagement in their township's policymaking and/or operations.



Fall 2016



What are some actions you can take to boost (positive) resident engagement?

What about in your township? What are some things, if any, that your township has done lately to encourage residents to take part? What hasn't worked so well?





Is there any way we  
can repair state and  
national politics  
using some of the  
qualities that make  
local democracy so  
(relatively)  
successful?



## Previous MPPS findings: recap

## New MPPS findings for 2022:

- \* confidence in election administration
- \* incidence and impacts of harassment
- \* updates to the functioning of democracy tracking

*(data available this summer!)*



# CLOSUP

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