



### MPPS Policy Brief

## Michigan local government leaders' assessments of democratic functioning improve from 2021 low, but first signs of trouble at local level emerge

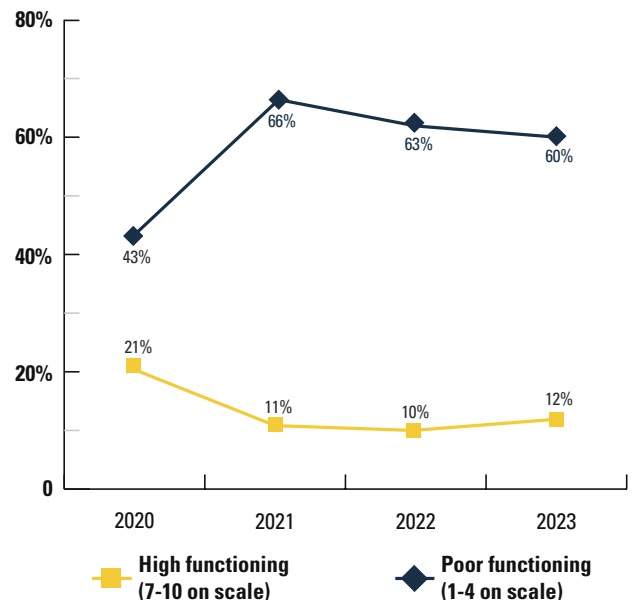
By Debra Horner and Thomas Ivacko

Since 2020, the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) has asked local government leaders across the state for their assessments of American democracy as a system of government, based on factors like free and fair elections, rule of law, an unbiased free press, ethical and transparent governance, an informed and engaged electorate, and more. Local officials evaluate the functioning of democracy on a 10-point scale—with 1 as a total breakdown of democracy and 10 as perfectly functioning democracy—for their own jurisdiction, for the state of Michigan overall, and for the United States overall. Assessments of 1-4 on the scale signify low or poor assessments, while those from 7-10 signify assessments of highly functioning democracy.

Figure 1 shows Michigan local leaders' assessments of democracy at the national level, from 2020 through 2023. Most noticeable is the deterioration between 2020 and 2021, with a sharp increase in "poor" assessments (from 43% of officials in 2020 to 66% in 2021), and a corresponding sharp decline in "high functioning" assessments (from 21% to just 11%). Factors that may have impacted assessments in 2021 include the COVID pandemic which began in spring 2020, as well as the actively disputed 2020 elections, and the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol.

However, since 2021, these assessments have now improved marginally for two years in a row, largely due to fewer officials rating American democracy at the national level as poorly functioning, from 66% of officials in 2021 to 60% today.

**Figure 1**  
Local officials' assessments of the functioning of democracy at the national level, 2020-2023



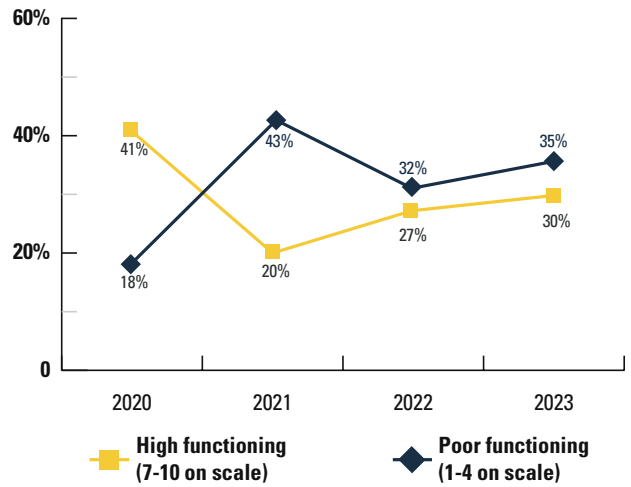
Similar patterns are found in assessments of how democracy is functioning in the state of Michigan overall, with a sharp worsening between 2020 and 2021, followed by some improvement in the following two years (see *Figure 2*). In this case, however, there was significant recovery in assessments between the 2021 and 2022 surveys on both ends of the spectrum, with sharply declining negative assessments and significantly improving positive assessments, followed by continued marginal improvement between 2022 and 2023 in “high functioning” evaluations.

However, a different pattern emerges in assessments of the functioning of democracy in local government officials’ own communities, as shown in *Figure 3*. First, there were no changes in these assessments overall between 2020 and 2021, even while views of democracy at the state and national levels were in sharp decline. According to local officials, despite challenges at the state and national levels, American democracy was resilient at the local level. However, between 2022 and 2023, local officials’ assessments of democracy in their own communities declined for the first time—although only marginally so—from 84% with positive assessments in 2022 to 79% today.

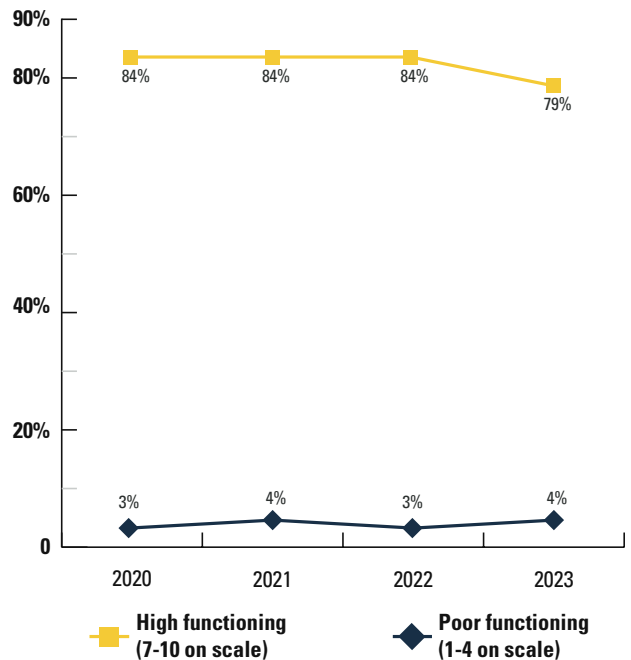
While this is a relatively small change, it does stand out somewhat in the MPPS time-series of surveys, which typically find local officials giving very high marks to various aspects of governance in their own communities. It is worth noting that previous MPPS reports, however, have documented various concerns of local leaders regarding local issues, particularly including concerns about the local impacts of the increasingly hostile state of national partisan politics,<sup>1</sup> and the fact that 53% of local officials report harassment, threats, or even violence (including property crimes) from members of the public targeted against at least one member of the local government in the last few years.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these early warning signs, Michigan’s local leaders continue to say that local civic relationships in their communities remain positive,<sup>3</sup> and *Figure 3* shows the overwhelming majority continue to believe democracy is functioning quite well in their communities today.

**Figure 2**  
Local officials’ assessments of the functioning of democracy at the state level in Michigan, 2020-2023



**Figure 3**  
Local officials’ assessments of the functioning of democracy at the local level in Michigan, 2020-2023



# Declining assessments for local democracy are concentrated among particular sub-groups

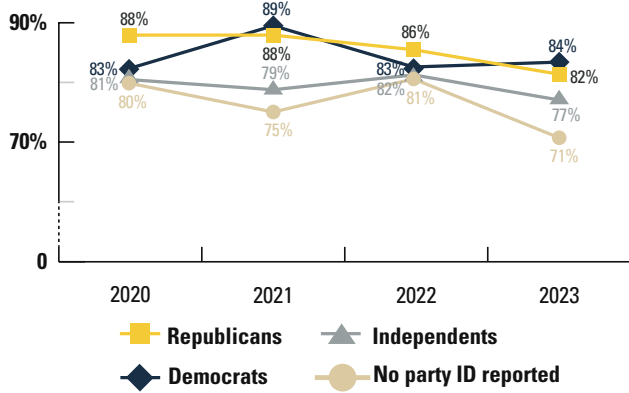
While this year’s statewide decrease in “high functioning” evaluations for local democracy is relatively marginal at only 5 percentage points, the decline is particularly concentrated among a few sub-groups of respondents, as seen in *Figures 4a–4c*.

Looking at differences by self-identified political partisanship, only Democratic local officials’ assessments of the functioning of democracy in their own community appear to have improved between 2022 and 2023, from 83% to 84%. This is within the survey’s margin of error and likely signifies no real change. Meanwhile, the largest drop in assessments is among those who declined to provide their partisan identification (or don’t have one). Among this group, just 71% rate democracy in their communities highly in 2023, down from 81% a year earlier, and significantly lower today than their peers who identify as Independents (77%), Republicans (82%), and Democrats (84%).

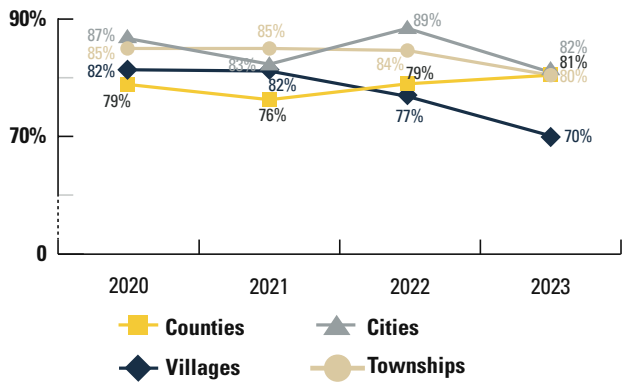
By jurisdiction type, only Michigan’s county leaders offer improving assessments of the functioning of democracy in their own county. Although the change from last year is within the survey’s margin of error (from 79% to 81%) they now report a two-year trend of improvement (up from 76% in 2021). Meanwhile, city and township leaders are less likely this year to give their local communities high ratings for the functioning of democracy. Michigan’s village leaders have both the largest decline in these positive assessments (from 77% in 2022 to 70% in 2023), and the lowest comparative level outright this year.

And by the population size of Michigan’s communities, the largest places with more than 30,000 residents report improved assessments of local democracy this year (at 80%, up from 77% in 2022). Meanwhile, sharp drops in positive assessments stand out especially among mid-size places with 5,001-10,000 residents (from 95% to 81%), as well as in larger communities with 10,001-30,000 residents (from 89% to 82%) and in the smallest places with fewer than 1,500 residents (from 82% with positive assessments last year to 74% today).

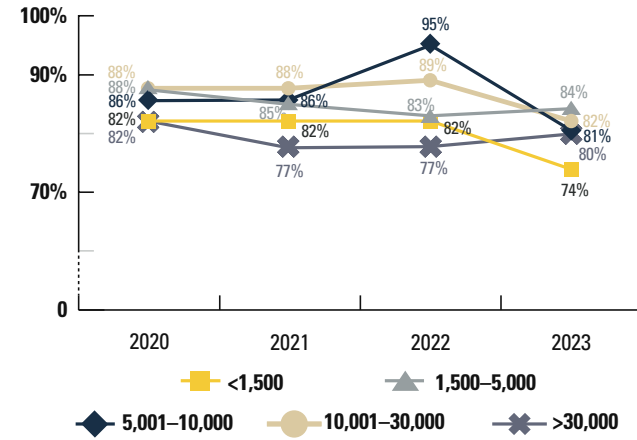
**Figure 4a**  
Local officials’ ratings of high functioning democracy (7-10 on scale) at the local level, 2020-2023, by partisan identification



**Figure 4b**  
Local officials’ ratings of high functioning democracy (7-10 on scale) at the local level, 2020-2023, by jurisdiction type



**Figure 4c**  
Local officials’ ratings of high functioning democracy (7-10 on scale) at the local level, 2020-2023, by jurisdiction size



## Notes

1. Horner, D. & Ivacko, T. (2022, January). *Michigan local leaders report little change in the tone of civic discourse in their communities, but are concerned about local impacts of increasingly hostile national partisan politics*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/97/michigan-local-leaders-report-little-change-tone-civic-discourse-their-communities>
2. Fitzpatrick, N., Horner, D. & Ivacko, T. (2022, September). *Statewide survey finds a majority of Michigan local governments experiencing harassment or other abuse*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/103/mpps-policy-brief-statewide-survey-finds-majority-michigan-local-governments-experiencing-harassment-abuse>
3. Fitzpatrick, N., Horner, D. & Ivacko, T. (2022, October). *Michigan local government leaders say civic relationships and civil discourse remain healthy, despite worsening national politics*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/105/michigan-local-government-leaders-say-civic-relationships-and-civil-discourse-remain-healthy>



## Survey Background and Methodology

The data presented in this policy brief come from the Spring 2023 Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS). The 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 2023 wave was conducted February 6 – April 17, 2023. 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 1,307 jurisdictions across the state, resulting in a 70% response rate by unit. More information is available at <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/mpps-2023-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 jurisdiction characteristics such as community population size, region, and jurisdiction type, are available at <http://mpps.umich.edu>.

*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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