



MPPS Policy Brief

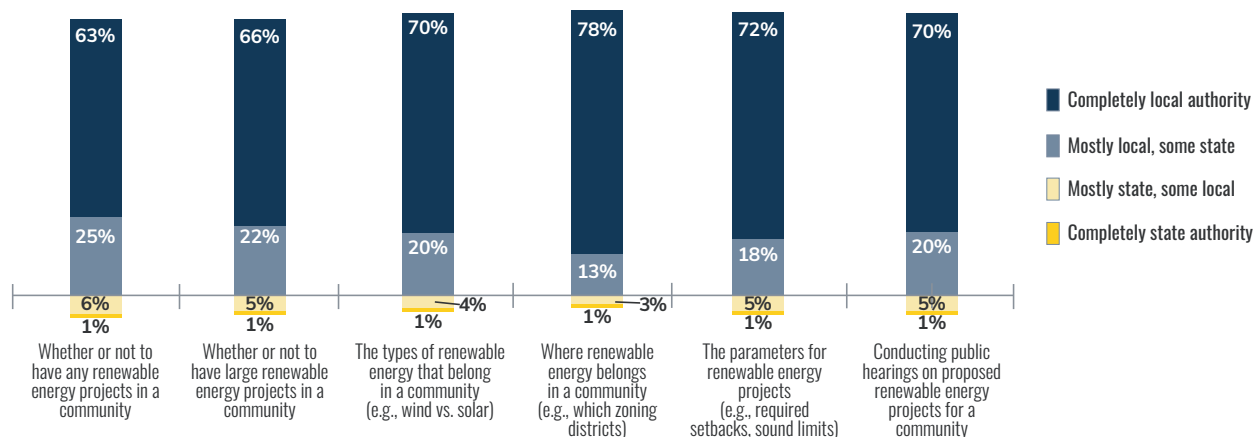
Most Michigan local government officials say control over renewable energy projects should stay local

By Natalie Fitzpatrick, Debra Horner, and Thomas Ivacko

As a series of high-profile renewable energy bills were debated and passed by the Michigan state legislature in fall 2023, the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) was in the field asking local officials statewide about local energy issues, including their views on the division of authority between state and local governments on planning and zoning for renewable energy projects.

The survey asked local leaders to indicate who they believe should have authority over six specific areas related to renewable energy planning and zoning. As shown in *Figure 1*, in each of these areas, a large majority (63-78%) of local officials say authority should be *completely* under local government. Another 13-25% say authority should be primarily local, with some role for the state. Meanwhile, less than 10% say authority should be either mostly or completely with the state government. Local government leaders are most strongly opposed to state involvement regarding where renewable energy projects belong in a community (zoning) and regarding the parameters for renewable energy projects, such as required setbacks from property lines and allowable sound levels. On the other hand, they are more likely to say the state should have at least some authority in determining whether a community should have any renewable energy projects (32%) and whether a community should have large renewable energy projects (28%).

Figure 1
Local leaders' views on the division of authority between state and local governments on renewable energy projects



Note: responses for "don't know" not shown

These findings are consistent with previous MPPS survey results. For example, in spring 2023, before the state legislature took its most recent action on renewable energy, 70% of local officials said the State was taking too much decision-making authority away from local governments.¹ And in fall 2016, when local leaders were asked more generally about authority over land use and planning, 49% said land use and planning should be completely local authority, and another 43% said it should be mostly local authority with some state input.²

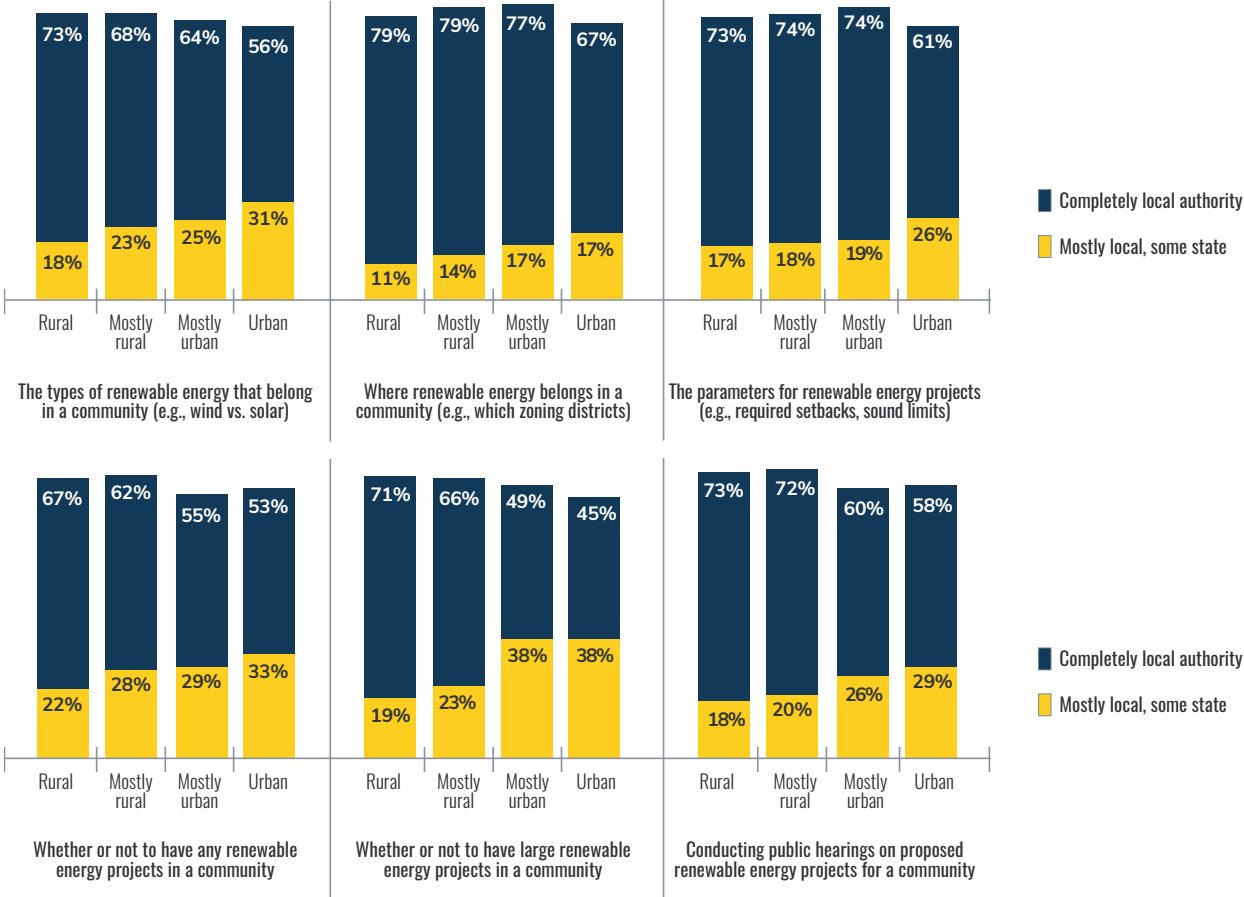
However, it is not the case that local officials want to reserve all authority for themselves in every policymaking area. In fall 2016, there were other domains where local officials said the state government should take the lead. For example, on environmental and natural resources policies, 60% said the state government should have complete or primary authority. It was in the case of land use planning and zoning—traditionally a local responsibility—where local leaders were most firmly committed to local control.

Local officials have different preferences across the rural-urban spectrum and by partisanship, but few prefer a large role for the state in local zoning decisions

The debate about renewable energy siting has sometimes been framed as a conflict between rural areas and more urban communities, as large windfarms and many large solar arrays will be more likely developed in rural areas than in urban communities. However, the MPPS finds more consensus than division between these groups on this issue. Michigan officials who describe their communities as completely rural are indeed the most likely to say local governments should have complete authority in each of aspects of renewable energy planning (see *Figure 2a*). At the same time, a majority of officials from local governments that self-identify as completely urban also say that authority should be completely local for almost every specific area related to renewable energy planning and zoning, while typically one-quarter to a third say this authority should be split between the state and local governments.

As shown in *Figure 2a*, the largest differences between rural and urban local leaders regards who should have authority over whether or not to have large renewable energy projects in a community. On this issue, 71% of officials from fully rural jurisdictions and 66% of those from mostly rural communities say authority should be completely local, compared to 49% of mostly urban and 45% of fully urban jurisdictions. However, it should be noted that even among fully urban jurisdictions, only 11% say the state government should have complete or primary authority. When it comes to authority on the details of renewable energy projects (such as types of renewable energy, zoning districts, and parameters such as setbacks), the differences between rural and urban jurisdictions are much smaller.

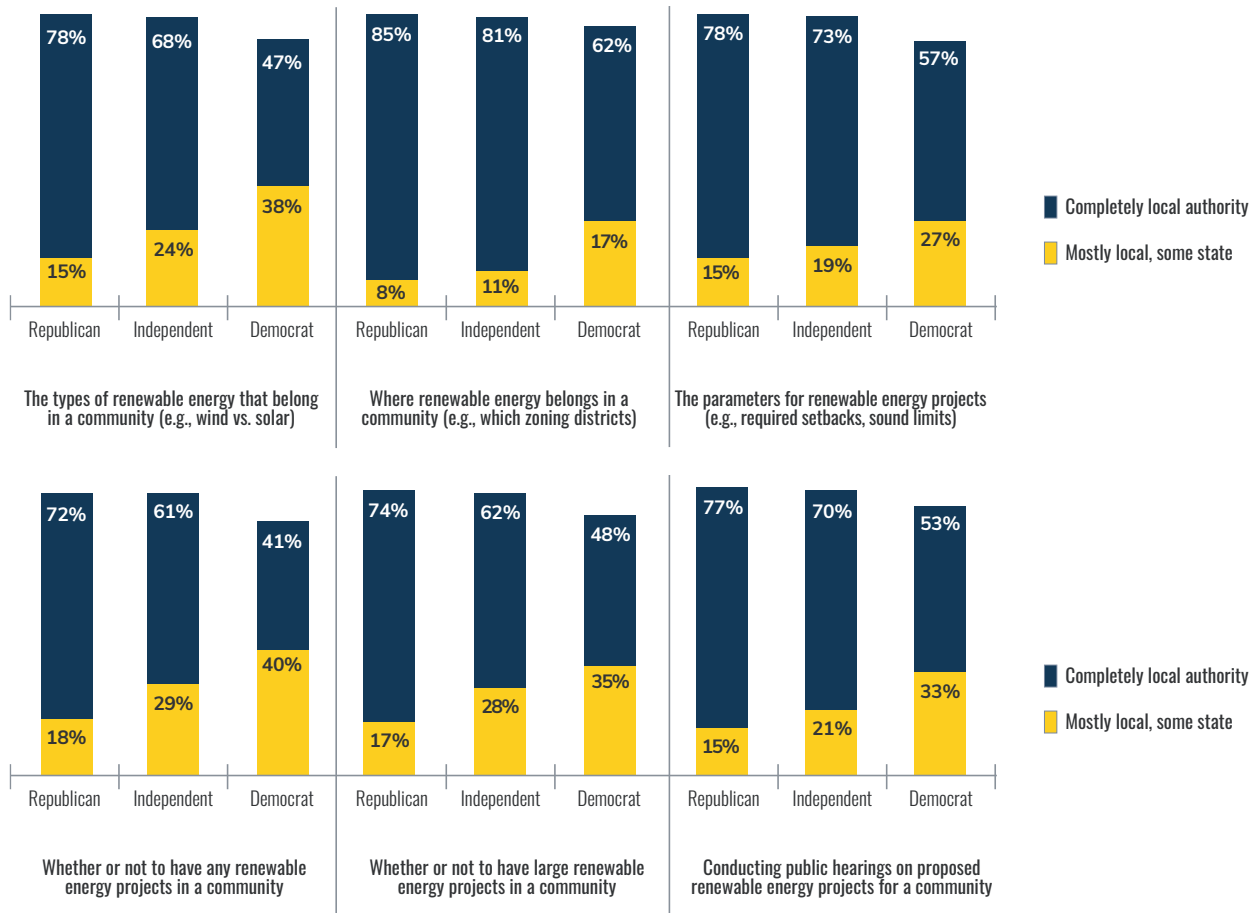
Figure 2a
Percentage of local officials who believe local government should have most or complete authority over particular aspects of renewable energy projects, by urban/rural self-identification



Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are some partisan differences in whether local governments should have *complete* authority over planning and zoning for renewable energy projects. For each of the six issues, local officials who indicate they are Republicans are significantly more likely to say that local governments should have complete authority compared to Independents and Democrats, who are more likely to see some (mostly secondary) role for the state (see *Figure 2b*).

While more than 70% of Republican local leaders say that local governments should have complete authority in each area, along with more than 60% of Independents, there is more variation across the different aspects of renewable energy projects among Democrats. Yet large majorities of Democrats still say all or most control should remain local. Less than half of Democratic local leaders say local governments should have complete authority when it comes to whether or not to have any renewable energy projects in a community, whether or not to have large renewable energy projects, and what types of renewable energy belong in the community. At the same time, less than 15% say the state government should have complete or primary authority in each of these areas. Meanwhile, a majority of Democrats think local governments should have complete authority over the specific zoning (62%) and the parameters (57%) for renewable energy projects, as well as for conducting public hearings (53%) regarding the projects.

Figure 2b
Percentage of local officials who believe local government should have most or complete authority over particular aspects of renewable energy projects, by partisan self-identification



The maps in *Figure 3* display the percentage of Michigan local officials who say authority should be completely under local government, aggregated at the county level. The lighter shades show where fewer jurisdictions within a county say they should have complete authority, while the darker shades indicate a higher number, with the darkest shade of blue representing counties where over 90% of jurisdictions believe authority should rest completely with local governments.

Figure 3
Local leaders' views on the division of authority between state and local governments on renewable energy projects, by county

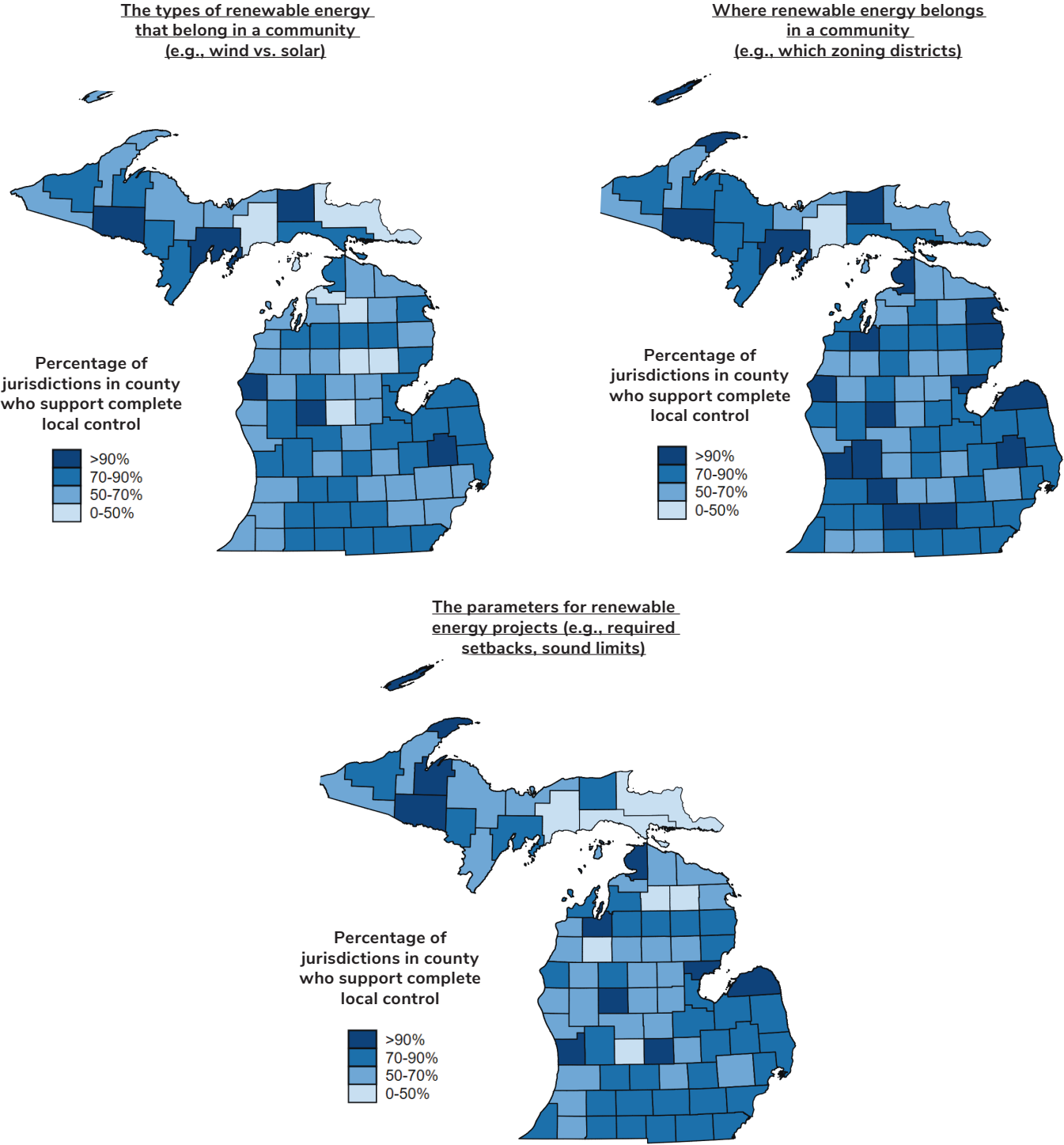
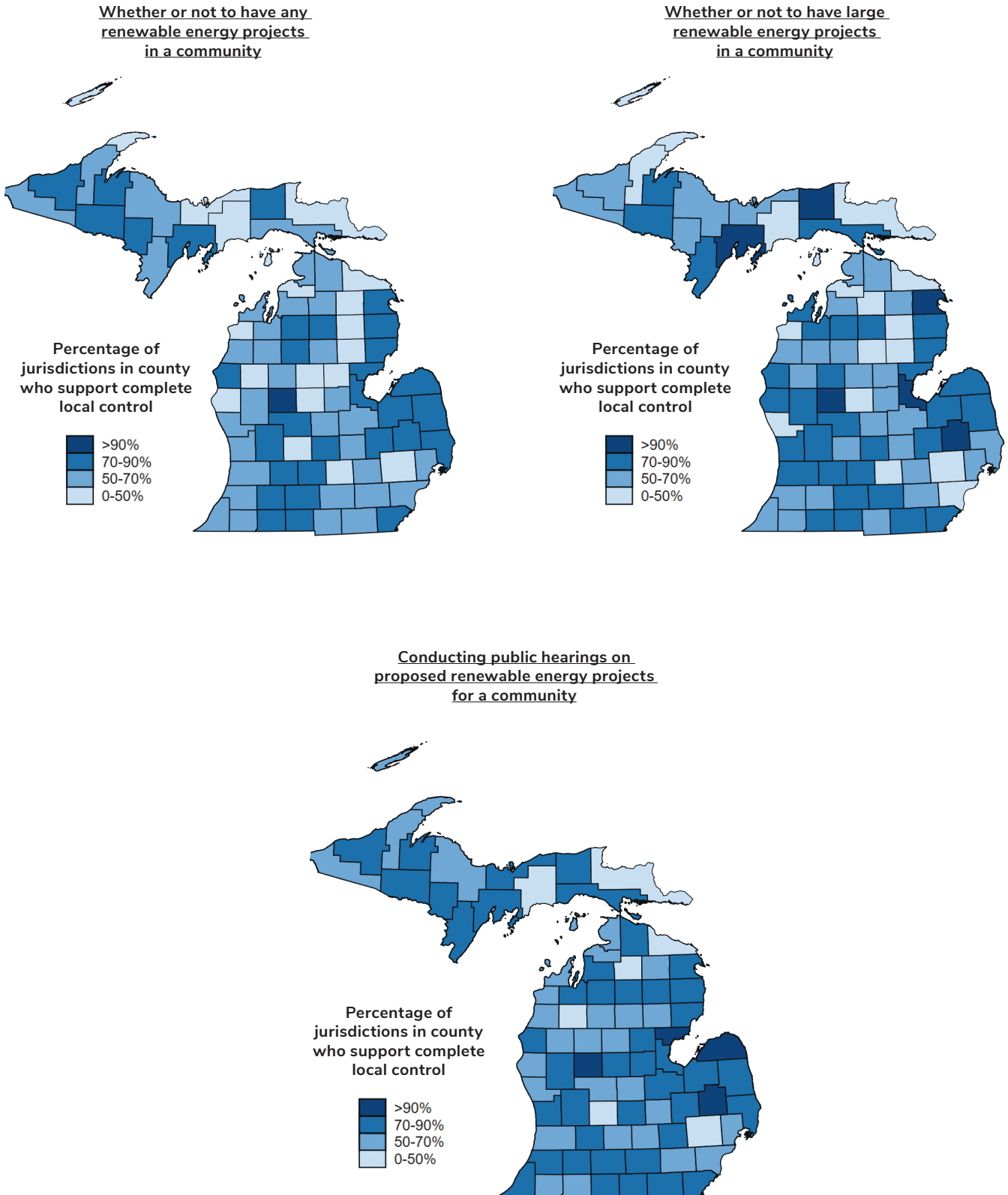


Figure 3, continued

Local leaders' views on the division of authority between state and local governments on renewable energy projects, by county





Notes

1. Fitzpatrick, N., Horner, D. & Ivacko, T. (2023, November). *Challenges continue for state-local relations, according to Michigan local government leaders*. 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/118/mpps-policy-brief-challenges-continue-state-local-relations>
2. Horner, D. & Ivacko, T. (2017, June). *Michigan local leaders' views on state preemption and how to share policy authority*. 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/62/michigan-local-leaders-views-on-state-preemption-and-how-to-share-policy-authority>

Survey Background and Methodology

The data presented in this policy brief come from the Fall 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 Fall 2023 wave was conducted October 2 – December 7, 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 1,315 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-fall>.

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, will soon be 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.

Acknowledgement and Disclaimer

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