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Michigan Public Policy Survey **July 2013**

Trust in government among Michigan's local leaders and citizens

By Thomas Ivacko, Debra Horner, and Michael Q. Crawford

This report presents the opinions of Michigan's local government leaders regarding their trust in the federal, state, and other local governments, based on statewide surveys conducted in the Spring 2013 and Spring 2009 waves of the Michigan Public Policy Survey. The report also includes comparisons to Michigan citizens' trust in government, based on Michigan State University's Winter 2013 State of the State Survey.

>> The **Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)** is conducted by the **Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP)** at the University of Michigan in partnership with the **Michigan Association of Counties**, **Michigan Municipal League**, and **Michigan Townships Association**. The MPPS takes place twice each year and investigates local officials' opinions and perspectives on a variety of important public policy issues. Respondents to the MPPS this wave include county administrators and board chairs, city mayors and managers, village presidents and managers, and township supervisors, clerks, and managers from over 1,300 general purpose local governments across the state.

For more information, please contact: **closup-mpps@umich.edu**/ (734) 647-4091. You can also follow us on Twitter @closup.

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Key Findings

- Michigan's local government leaders have very little trust in the federal government. Overall, just 6% trust the federal government in Washington, D.C. to "do what is right" nearly always or most of the time, while 59% trust it seldom or almost never.
  - » Local leaders' trust in Washington has declined from the low levels previously found in 2009, when 10% trusted the federal government nearly always or most of the time and 47% trusted it seldom or almost never.
  - » This trust is strongly correlated with officials' partisan identification. As of 2013, Democratic local leaders (12%) express more trust in the federal government than do Independents (7%) or Republicans (4%). Democrats (43%) are also less likely than Republicans (65%) or Independents (63%) to say they trust Washington seldom or almost never.
- Local leaders have somewhat higher trust in Michigan's state government than in the federal government, though these levels are also very low. Overall, 19% of Michigan's local leaders trust the state government in Lansing nearly always or most of the time, while 28% trust it seldom or almost never.
  - » Since 2009, trust in Lansing has increased among Republican and Independent local leaders but has decreased among Democratic local leaders.
- Local leaders of all parties express particularly high levels of trust in other local governments across Michigan, and these high levels have remained consistent since 2009. In 2013, overall, 67% of local leaders trust other local governments nearly always or most of the time, while just 4% trust them seldom or almost never.
- When compared to the state's citizens, Michigan's local leaders are significantly less trusting of the federal government, about equally trusting of the state government, and significantly more trusting of local government in general.
  - » In terms of trust in the state government, overall, 19% of both Michigan's local leaders and its citizens trust the state government nearly always or most of the time. However, while Republican local leaders (25%) and Republican citizens (23%) express similar levels of trust in Lansing, Democratic (6%) and Independent local leaders (13%) are less trusting of the state government than are the state's Democratic and Independent citizens (19% and 22%, respectively).

Background

The issue of trust in government is typically examined from the citizens' perspective, where levels of individual citizen's political trust are found to impact a wide variety of other issues, from political participation to vote choice, citizen compliance with laws, citizen cooperation in society generally, and more.[1]

Studies of public trust toward the U.S. federal government have revealed significant changes in trust over time, with occasional increases and decreases woven into an overall pattern of steep decline since the 1950s.[2] In national surveys, over time, state and local governments have tended to receive somewhat higher levels of trust from citizens, compared to trust in the federal government.[3] This pattern also holds true within the state of Michigan, although citizen trust in Michigan's state government has been on a downward trend since 1995, while trust in Michigan local governments has dipped slightly, but largely held steady.[4]

In addition to understanding *citizen* trust in government, it can also be valuable to examine local government leaders' trust or distrust in government, because of their "insider knowledge" and because of the central role they play, interacting with citizens as well as with officials and agencies at various levels of government. Local officials likely work more closely with all levels of government than do typical citizens, and since many public services rely on multiple levels of government working together for efficient and effective service delivery, understanding the relationships between policymakers at different levels of government is important.

To address these issues, the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) has established a growing body of research on trust in the public sector. The MPPS first asked local government leaders about their trust in government (federal, state, and local) in the spring of 2009, and then expanded research on trust in a new direction by looking at local officials' trust in their citizens as responsible participants in local policymaking in the fall of 2012.[5] Now, the spring 2013 wave of the MPPS repeats the questions from spring 2009, asking local officials about their trust in various levels of government, and thus allowing a comparison of change over time.

In addition, with this new report, the MPPS has partnered with the State of the State Survey (SOSS), a statewide public opinion survey conducted by Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR) since 1994, to provide a better understanding of how Michigan's citizens and their local leaders compare to each other, in terms of trust in government. This unique research partnership provides a rare comparative look at a key aspect of democratic governance in one of the nation's most populous states.

Michigan local officials have very little trust in the federal government

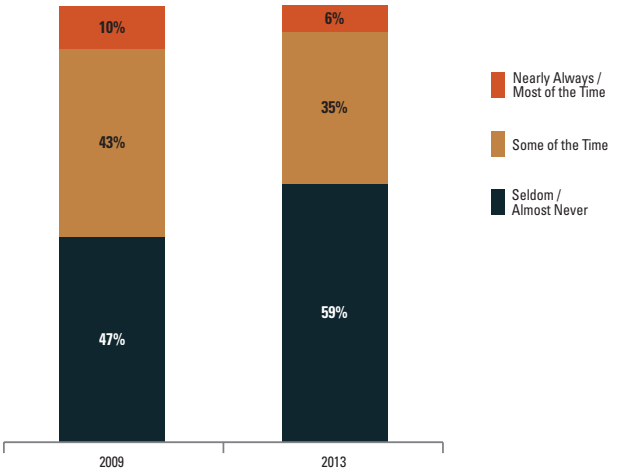
As of spring 2013, just 6% of Michigan's local government leaders say they trust the federal government in Washington, D.C., to "do what is right" nearly always or most of the time, while 35% trust it some of the time, and 59% trust it seldom or almost never (see *Figure 1a*). Local leaders' trust in Washington has declined since 2009 (the last time questions about trust in government were asked on the MPPS). At that time, 10% of local leaders said they trusted the federal government nearly always or most of the time, while 47% trusted it seldom or almost never.

Trust in government can be affected by many factors, such as economic conditions, perceptions of the quality of government service provision, political scandals, media coverage, and more.[6] The MPPS finds some evidence of differences in trust, though not particularly clear patterns, among the state's local leaders based on their age, the population size of their jurisdictions, and other factors. However, basic partisan differences between Republicans, Independents, and Democrats often have strong associations with citizen trust toward government,[7] and they play a significant role among Michigan's local government leaders as well (see *Figure 1b*).

MPPS respondents who trust the federal government nearly always or most of the time include 4% of Republican local leaders, 7% of Independents, and 12% of Democrats. Meanwhile, 65% of Michigan's Republican local leaders trust the federal government seldom or almost never, compared to 63% of Independents, but just 43% of Democrats.

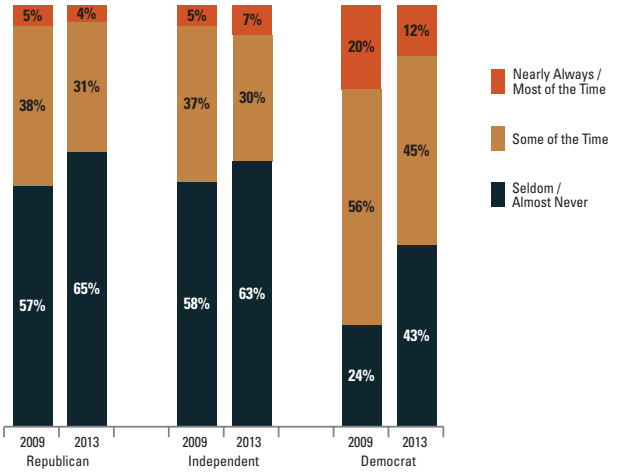
While there are partisan differences in both the 2009 and 2013 MPPS surveys, it is also the case that overall levels of trust in the federal government have declined among all sub-groups of Michigan local leaders, again as shown in *Figure 1b*. The decline in trust toward Washington is most pronounced among Michigan's Democratic local leaders: in 2009, 20% trusted the federal government nearly always or most of the time, while just 24% trusted it seldom or almost never. By 2013, only 12% of Democratic local leaders express high levels of trust in Washington, while 43% trust it seldom or almost never, almost double the percentage from 2009.

Figure 1a
Local officials' trust in the federal government to do what is right



Note: Percentages exclude "don't know" responses

Figure 1b
Local officials' trust in the federal government to do what is right, by partisan identification



Note: Percentages exclude "don't know" responses and responses from third-party identifiers

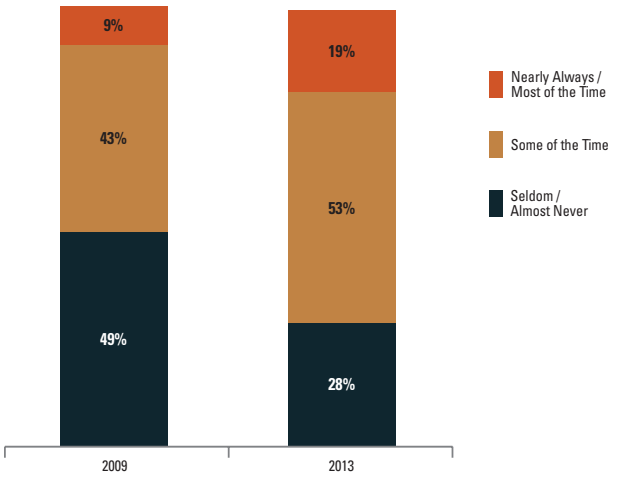
Local leaders have low trust in Lansing, though trust has increased among Republicans and Independents

Overall, trust among local officials toward the state government in Lansing remains low as of 2013, with just 19% trusting the state government nearly always or most of the time, and 28% trusting it seldom or almost never. However, despite continued low trust overall, these figures have improved since the first MPPS survey in 2009, when just 9% of local leaders trusted Lansing nearly always or most of the time, and 49% trusted it seldom or almost never (see *Figure 2a*).

Compared to evaluations of the federal government, partisan-based differences are even more striking in local leaders' evaluations of the state government, as seen in *Figure 2b*. Among Republican local officials as of 2013, 25% trust the state government nearly always or most of the time, while just 19% trust it seldom or almost never. Among Independents, 13% express high trust in Lansing while 37% trust it seldom or almost never. And among Democratic local leaders, just 6% express high trust in the state government, while 50% trust it seldom or almost never.

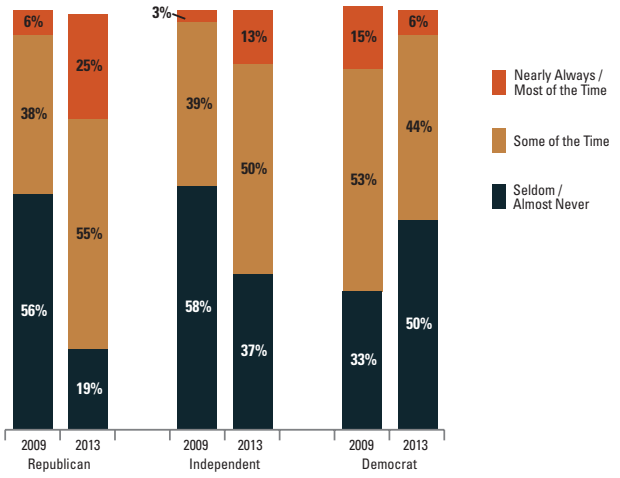
Among Republican and Democratic local leaders, these relative levels of trust in Lansing have swapped places compared to the views in 2009, when Democrats expressed higher levels of trust in the state government than did Republicans. The major contextual change between 2009 and 2013 has been in the partisan makeup of the state government, including the governor's office and the state legislature. Back in 2009, the state government in Lansing reflected divided party control, with a Democratic governor and Democratic majority in the House, and a Republican majority in the Senate. At that time, 15% of Democratic local leaders expressed high levels of trust in Lansing, compared to just 6% of Republicans. In 2013, Republicans control the governor's office and both legislative chambers, and now Republican local leaders express the higher trust in Lansing. Still, it is also worth noting that Independent ("unaffiliated") local officials express higher levels of trust in Lansing today than they did in 2009, including a significant drop in the percentage who trust Lansing seldom or almost never (from 58% in 2009 to 37% in 2013).

Figure 2a
Local officials' trust in Michigan's state government to do what is right



Note: Percentages exclude "don't know" responses

Figure 2b
Local officials' trust in Michigan's state government to do what is right, by partisan identification



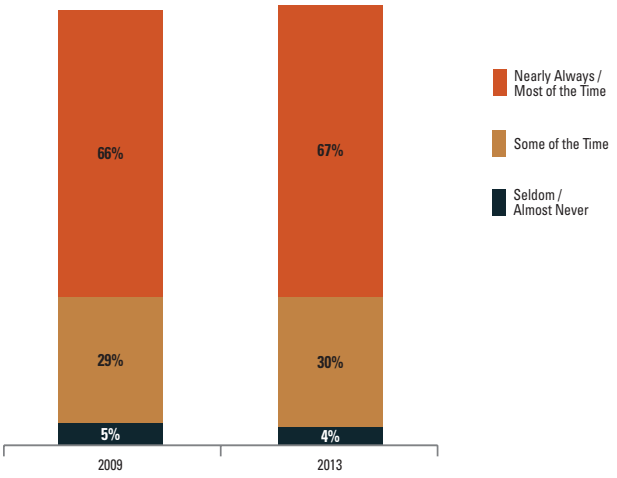
Note: Percentages exclude "don't know" responses and responses from third-party identifiers

Local leaders of all parties continue to express high levels of trust in other local governments

By far, the highest levels of trust reported by local officials are toward other local governments across the state. Overall, 67% of local leaders in 2013 say they trust other local governments nearly always or most of the time, compared to 66% in 2009, while just 4% trust other local governments seldom or almost never in 2013, which is essentially unchanged from the 5% who said this in 2009 (see *Figure 3a*).

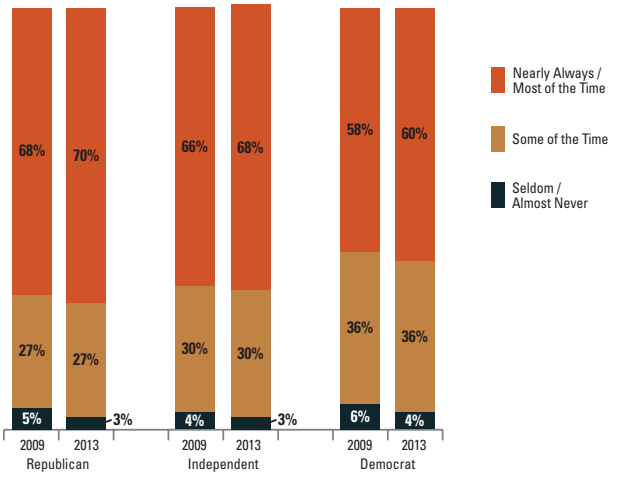
Whereas partisanship plays a significant role in local leaders' trust toward the federal and state governments, its effects are less pronounced in the case of trust in local governments (see *Figure 3b*). For instance, while 70% of Republican local leaders trust other local governments nearly always or most of the time as of 2013, the same is true for 68% of Independents, and 60% of Democrats. Only 3-4% of each sub-group trusts other local governments seldom or almost never.

Figure 3a
Local officials' trust in other local governments to do what is right



Note: Percentages exclude "don't know" responses

Figure 3b
Local officials' trust in other local governments to do what is right, by partisan identification



Note: Percentages exclude "don't know" responses and responses from third-party identifiers

Compared with citizens, local leaders' trust is lower toward the federal government, but higher toward local governments

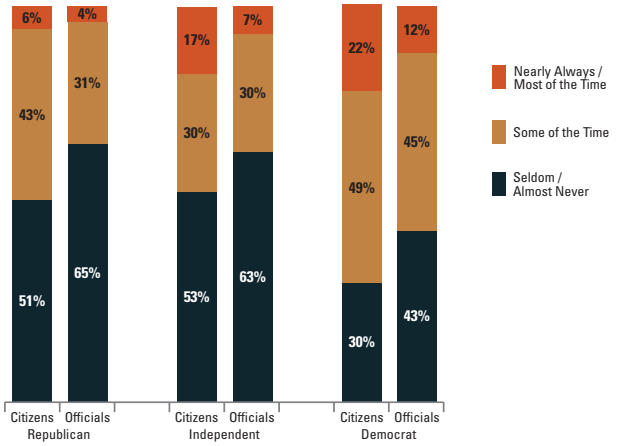
In a unique research endeavor, the MPPS and the State of the State Survey (SOSS) at Michigan State University have teamed up to compare trust in government among Michigan's local leaders and the state's citizens, to identify similarities and differences between these two groups on the fundamental trust issue in democratic governance.

Before presenting the data, there are a few differences worth noting between the two surveys. First, the SOSS survey took place from January 14 through March 4, 2013, while the MPPS survey took place from April 8 through June 9, 2013. While the time frames are slightly different, they are close enough to make comparative analysis worthwhile.

Second, the MPPS sample of local officials overall has a higher percentage of Republicans than are found in the SOSS sample of Michigan's citizens. For example, the overall MPPS sample for 2013 includes 50% Republican local officials, 28% Independents, 18% Democrats, and 4% "something else."[8] By comparison, the overall SOSS related sample includes 21% Republican citizens, 33% Independents, 34% Democrats, and 13% "something else." Therefore, it is important to analyze partisan sub-groups within each survey, in addition to comparing overall percentages.

Finally, the question regarding trust in local governments is slightly different on the two surveys. Whereas the SOSS asks Michigan citizens how much of the time they trust their own local government to "do what is right," the MPPS asks local leaders how much of the time they trust other local governments to do what is right. Despite these wording differences, comparisons across the surveys still provide valuable insights into trust at the local level, in comparison to trust toward governments that are more removed from the respondents at the state and national levels.

Figure 4a
Comparison between citizens' and local officials' trust in the federal government to do what is right, by partisan identification, in 2013



Note: Percentages exclude "don't know" responses and responses from third-party identifiers

Looking first at trust toward the federal government, while both Michigan's local leaders and its citizens express very low levels of trust in Washington, the levels are even lower among the local government leaders than among the citizens. Overall, compared to the 15% of Michigan's citizens who trust Washington nearly always or most of the time, just 6% of Michigan's local leaders feel the same way. Conversely, while 41% of Michigan's citizens say they trust the federal government seldom or almost never, nearly six in ten (59%) of Michigan's local officials report such distrust for Washington. This pattern is true within each partisan sub-group of leaders and citizens.

When drilling down to the partisan sub-groups of citizens and their counterpart local officials (see *Figure 4a*), the largest differences are found between Michigan's Democratic local leaders (among whom 12% trust Washington nearly always or most of the time and 43% of whom trust it seldom or almost never) and its Democratic citizens (among whom 22% express high trust Washington while 30% trust it seldom or almost never).

In terms of trust toward the state government in Lansing, local leaders and citizens express very similar levels of trust overall, with approximately 19% of each group trusting Lansing nearly always or most of the time, and with 31% of citizens that trust it seldom or almost never, comparable to the 28% of local leaders who feel this way.

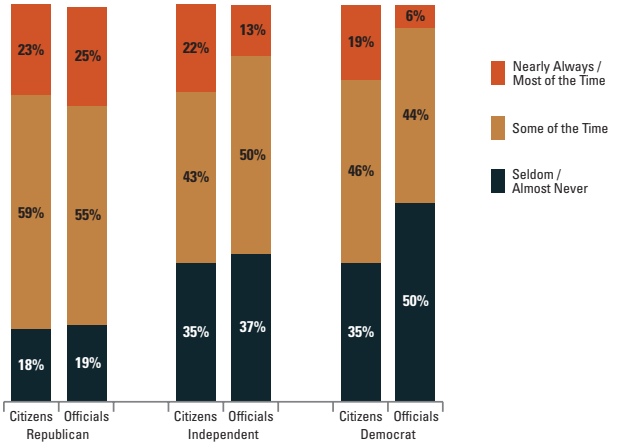
While there are a number of significant differences among the partisan sub-groups of both leaders and citizens, the largest difference is again within the Democratic groups (see *Figure 4b*). Republican leaders and citizens mirror each other quite closely: 23% of Republican citizens trust Lansing nearly always or most of the time, compared to 25% of Republican local leaders. And while the percentage of Independent citizens (22%) who express high trust in Lansing is higher than among Independent local leaders (13%), the percentages that trust the state government seldom or almost never are quite similar (including 35% of the Independent citizens and 37% of Independent leaders). However, differences are somewhat more pronounced among the Democrats. Compared to the 19% of Democratic citizens who express high trust in Lansing, just 6% of Democratic local leaders feel the same. And compared to the 35% of Democratic citizens who trust Lansing seldom or almost never, 50% of Democratic leaders feel this way.

Finally, in terms of trust toward local government, there are significant differences between local leaders and citizens overall, and also within each of the three partisan sub-groups.

Local leaders overall (67%) are much more likely than Michigan's citizens (39%) to express high trust in local government. Similarly, while just 4% of local leaders say they trust other local governments seldom or almost never, the percentage of citizens who seldom or almost never trust their own local government is much higher (21%). These leader-to-citizen patterns hold true among Republicans, Independents, and Democrats (see *Figure 4c*). In each case, the local leaders are much more trusting of local governments than are the citizens.

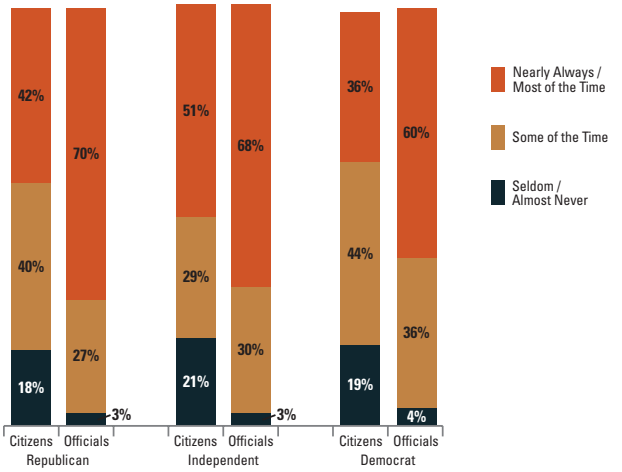
And when comparing partisan breakdowns within the local leaders group, and separately within the citizens group, Republicans and Independents are somewhat more trusting of local governments than are Democrats. There is a 10 percentage point difference between Republican (70%) and Democratic (60%) local leaders who express high trust in local governments, and, similarly, Republican citizens (42%) are more likely to express trust in local government than are Democratic citizens (36%).

Figure 4b
Comparison between citizens' and local officials' trust in Michigan's state government to do what is right, by partisan identification, in 2013



Note: Percentages exclude "don't know" responses and responses from third-party identifiers

Figure 4c
Comparison between citizens' and local officials' trust in local governments to do what is right, by partisan identification, in 2013



Note: Percentages exclude "don't know" responses and responses from third-party identifiers

Conclusion

Citizen trust in the United States federal government has fluctuated since opinion tracking began in the mid-20th century, but overall has been in a long-term decline. By comparison, and depending on variations in question wording, national tracking surveys have generally found smaller fluctuations and some decline, but also higher and more stable levels of trust toward state and local governments, than is found toward the federal government. Meanwhile, within the state of Michigan, since 1994 the State of the State Survey at MSU has also tracked a decline in citizen trust toward the state government, while it has found a relatively steady level of trust in Michigan's local governments.

With the launch of the Michigan Public Policy Survey in 2009, a new source came online for understanding trust in government, examining trust among local government leaders themselves. While the MPPS series is still relatively new, it has begun to track fluctuations in trust among Michigan's local government leaders toward the federal, state, and local levels of government that show some similarities, but also some important differences, compared to citizen trust in government.

Over time, among Michigan's local leaders, the MPPS surveys find:

- low and still declining trust toward the federal government;
- low but growing trust among Republicans and Independents toward the state government, versus low and declining trust among Democrats;
- and, consistently high trust among all partisan groups of local leaders toward other local governments.

And when compared to the citizens they represent, using data from the SOSS, the MPPS finds that Michigan's local leaders in 2013 have:

- lower trust toward the federal government;
- about the same amount of trust toward the state government overall, though this masks lower trust levels among Democratic and Independent local leaders compared to Democratic and Independent citizens, respectively;
- and, significantly more trust toward other local governments.

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Notes

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8. Overall sample party identification percentages were calculated for both the MPPS and SOSS samples based only on the first stage of the party identification questions, thereby categorizing as Independents those respondents who initially self-identified as Independents even if they subsequently noted that they consider themselves closer to either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Survey background and methodology

The MPPS is a biannual survey of each of Michigan's 1,856 units of general purpose local government, conducted once each spring and fall. While the spring surveys consist of multiple batteries of the same "core" fiscal, budgetary and operational policy questions and are designed to build-up a multi-year time-series of data, the fall surveys focus on various other topics.

In the Spring 2013 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 and managers, and township supervisors, clerks, and managers) from all 83 counties, 277 cities, 256 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan.

The Spring 2013 wave was conducted from April 8 - June 9, 2013. A total of 1,350 jurisdictions in the Spring 2013 wave returned valid surveys, resulting in a 73% response rate by unit; a total of 1,513 individual surveys were returned, resulting in a 43% response rate at the individual level. The margin of error for the survey for jurisdiction-level analyses is +/- 1.4% and for individual-level analyses is +/- 1.9%. 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. Data are weighted to account for non-response. Contact CLOSUP staff for more information.

The MPPS 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, Michigan State University and its Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, or of other partners in the MPPS.

The State of the State Surveys are conducted by telephone and are based on stratified random samples of adults age 18 and older living in Michigan. More information about the State of the State Surveys can be found online at: http://ippsr.msu.edu/soss/

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