



The Functioning of Democracy Across the Urban-Rural Spectrum: Student Paper Series

Elected Officials' Perceptions of Civic Discourse with and among Residents across the Urban-Rural Spectrum

By Kyron Smith

Constructive civic discourse is essential to the productivity of government at all levels. Despite its importance, polarization like that which exists in politics appears to damage constructive discourse and has brought up the question, what contributes to increasingly divisive discourse? This report looks at civic discourse through the opinions of local officials across the urban-rural spectrum to see whether the urbanity or rurality of a community is associated with divisive civic discourse. Existing research explains vital differences in why being urban or rural may contribute to divisiveness. Some of these include polarized political views among residents and the mistrust by residents who believe urban areas are more economically prosperous than rural areas. Using MPPS survey data this report was able to look at the opinions of municipal officials in both rural and urban jurisdictions to see how they perceive the civic discourse throughout their community. The findings suggest that elected officials in urban and rural areas are very similar in how they perceive the state of civic discourse, and their status as urban or rural areas may not be associated with growing divisiveness on state and local levels.

Key Findings

- Urban and rural officials largely agreed on the state of civic discourse in their jurisdictions.
- Officials, both urban and rural, tend to feel civic discourse in their jurisdictions is generally positive.
- Officials, both urban and rural, tend to believe civic discourse is more positive when they are an active part of the discourse.
- Urban areas tend to believe more than rural areas that discourse among residents is growing more divisive.



Background

There are few periods in American history where divisions throughout government are as prevalent as recent times. On a federal level, congress seemingly solely functions through divisiveness. It permeates the federal government not only in action but in their civic discourse. Such discourse however is not exclusive to the national government but exists in both state and local governments. Some instances of divisiveness in civic discourse on a local level are along the urban-rural spectrum, along the political spectrum, and throughout race relations in the US. This paper will analyze civic discourse through the lens of the urban-rural spectrum.

Literature on this topic addresses constructive and divisive civic discourse related to political ideology, geography, economics, and government leadership. Each of these factors play into the way policy makers and political scientists perceive the state of civic discourse. Most of the research on this topic was found internationally. However, many of these cases are applicable in the United States and, more specifically, in Michigan. With a focus on the urban-rural spectrum, the National League of Cities gives a good example of the urban-rural divide. It alludes to divisiveness existing in part because of the term “urban” and its association with economic prosperity versus “rural” and its association with economic struggle.¹ Arguments based on political ideology maintaining this divide are also present within literature. Gimpel and Lay² state that, “In many big cities, republicans are a tiny minority, accounting for less than 10 percent of registered voters in many neighborhoods. In rural and small-town areas, the reverse is sometimes true, with Democrats being at a severe disadvantage.” In further reading, this polarity is credited as a source of the divide seen between urban and rural jurisdictions. In a study that looked at civic discourse for electorates, ideological polarization and major party sorting was identified as a likely contributor to significant division over the last 50+ years.³ Much of the research conducted points to challenges in civic discourse between urban and rural areas due to how politically segregated the two have become. Research largely points out that what many would consider a difference in opinion due to rural versus urban is actually a discrepancy in politics. McFarland’s argument diverges from this slightly in that he believes disagreement roots from rhetoric that misrepresents constituent needs. This rhetoric categorizes them as economically prosperous or struggling based solely on their rural or urban geography, which may not truly reflect their economic needs.

The literature on civic discourse points to challenges between urban and rural areas. Much of it finds that these places have become so politically segregated, urban areas largely being democrat and rural areas largely being republican, that this is a discrepancy of politics. Where McFarland’s findings differ is that there is a difference in perception of one another’s level of economic prosperity, with urban areas being presumed prosperous, and rural areas being presumed struggling. This contributes to division with both believing the other is economically better off because of political misrepresentation and economic preconceived notions.

Literature also points to the distrust of citizens toward public officials at higher levels of government as a key driver in their state of civic discourse. When considering the opinions of rural citizens, Cramer found that, residents perceived state employees and public officials as having urban values and priorities, leading to differences and a lack of respect between residents and these officials.⁴ Rural residents also felt public officials make far too much money and do not work as hard as residents who make less. In turn residents view elected officials’ high salaries as wasted tax dollars. Civic discourse as a result of rural residents viewing elected officials as urban can lead to negative discourse and a greater urban-rural divide.

This is also seen in international literature. A study from South Africa finds that, “community has lost trust on the municipality due to the [mold] of representatives they have.”⁵ In large part this mistrust can be credited to residents not perceiving equity in urban and rural representation. This is also evident in a case from the city of Casey in Australia, a mixed urban-rural jurisdiction, where poor relationships between residents and public officials are found to be a result of poor communication. Residents have stated that, “they lived in ‘neglected’ communities. In large part, this was due to a sense that the City of Casey does not adequately understand local (especially rural) areas and issues.”⁶ Residents here also felt city officials did not live in the city, analogous with Cramer’s observation that rural residents in the US were distrustful of being represented by officials who resided in high government positions.

There is less research on understanding the state of public discourse within a local community. On the one hand there is a generally divisive view of civic discourse. Research by Paffas suggest that disruptive and divisive behavior is on the rise across all levels of government.³ In *Rude Politics*, Herbst argues the dangers of the declining civility narrative, he claims that incivility has been present throughout the history of US politics, and that charging today’s officials and residents to do much better is a difficult



undertaking.⁷ On the other hand, in a report published by the University of Michigan about the functioning of democracy on a local level, it was found that “Michigan’s local officials see their communities’ public discourse to be primarily constructive.”⁸

This paper will add to existing research by gaining a more nuanced understanding of civic discourse at the local level. Using the *Michigan Public Policy Survey* responses by local officials who represent both rural and urban jurisdictions, it will look to see if there are any differences in responses based on where communities sit on the urban-rural spectrum.

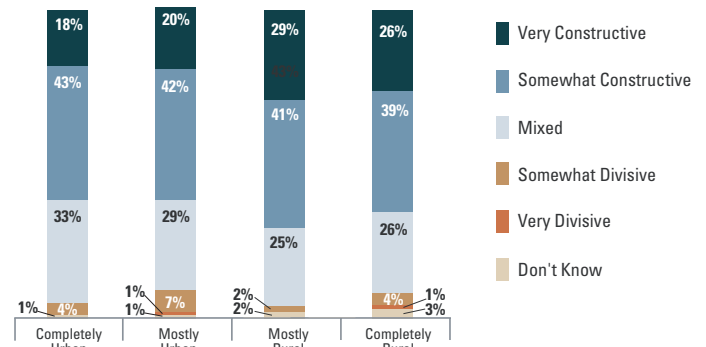
Methods

Survey data was used from the Spring 2018 Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) to determine how elected officials across Michigan perceived civic discourse in their individual jurisdiction. There were two main types of question responses this research focused on, those were descriptions of the relationship between public officials and residents, and descriptions of the relationships among residents. Respondents are categorized on a four- point scale across the urban rural spectrum-- Rural (1), Mostly Rural (2), Mostly Urban (3), and Urban (4).⁹ For all questions analyzed in the survey, a cross tabulation analysis was done and weighted against the urban-rural categorization of each municipality included in the survey.

Discourse Between Elected Officials and Residents

The MPPS asked local officials a series of questions about the tenor of civic discourse in their jurisdiction, asking them to rate it along a 5-point scale from constructive to divisive. As shown in *Figure 1*, a plurality of local officials at each point across the rural and urban spectrum indicate that the discourse between elected officials and residents is positive, and more specifically “Somewhat Constructive”. It can also be observed that rural jurisdictions tend to believe they are a little more constructive than more urban jurisdictions. This is suggested by the greater proportion of more rural survey respondents who described the relationships in their jurisdiction as “Very Constructive”. Urban respondents were more likely than rural respondents to describe discourse as being “Mixed.” Across the political spectrum, very few respondents described their discourse between local officials and residents as being either Somewhat or Very Divisive.

Figure 1
State of Public Discourse Between Jurisdiction’s Elected Officials & Residents



Discourse Among Residents

A second question asked local officials how constructive or divisive they felt civic discourse was among residents. Results suggested that elected officials across the urban-rural spectrum again have very similar views. However, they report civic discourse among residents to be less positive than elected official interactions with residents. This is evident by the plurality of responses being “Mixed”. As shown in *Figure 2*, 40% of rural, 36% of mostly rural, 48% of mostly urban, and 45% of urban jurisdictions’ respondents believe discourse is generally “Mixed” between constructive and divisive. There is also uniformity along the urban-rural spectrum regarding the second highest response given, which was “Somewhat Constructive”.

Notably, where there are still relatively few respondents who indicate discourse between residents in their jurisdiction as “Very Divisive,” there do appear to be additional signs of discord. Roughly 10% of local officials report that interactions between residents is “Somewhat Divisive,” with slightly higher reports of this in more urban areas.

Tone of Discussion Between Elected Officials and Residents Compared to 5 Years Ago

In addition to the questions about the current tone of public discourse, a second set of questions asked about local officials’ perceptions on how the tone of discussion has changed compared to five years ago. *Figure 3* suggests that even when considering change over five years, officials across the urban-rural spectrum largely respond similarly. The plurality in the data states that tone of discussion between elected officials and residents has become “Neither More or Less Civil.” Given that most local officials believed the current tone is at least “somewhat constructive,” this is a generally positive sign. Even more positive: where local officials do note a change in the tone of discourse, more suggested that the tone in 2018 had become “Somewhat More Civil” than it was five years prior. Roughly equal numbers of local officials said that the conversation had become “Significantly more Civil” as said it had become “Somewhat Less Civil.” Very few local officials—whether urban or rural—noted that the tone of conversation between local officials and residents had become “Significantly Less Civil.”

Figure 2
State of Public Discourse Among Jurisdiction’s Residents

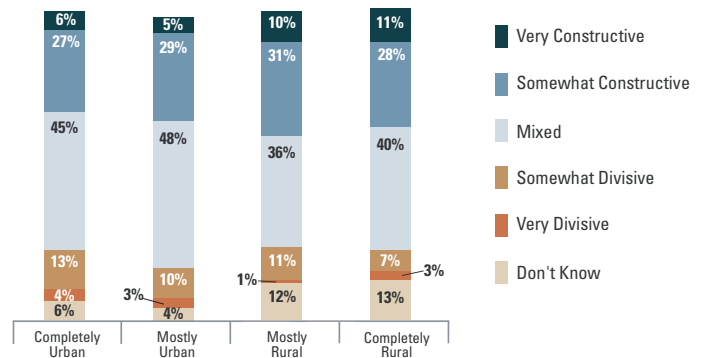
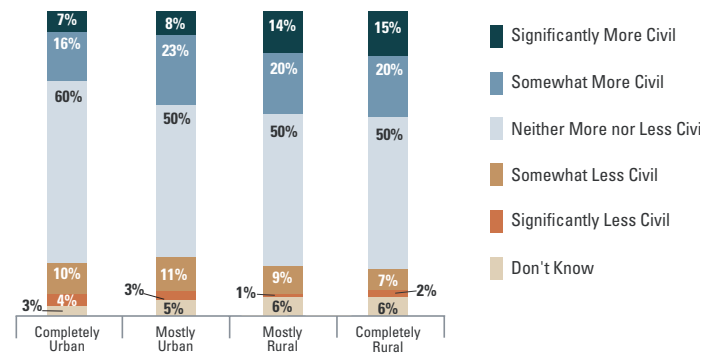


Figure 3
Tone of Discussion Between Jurisdiction’s Elected Officials & Residents Compared to 5 Years Ago



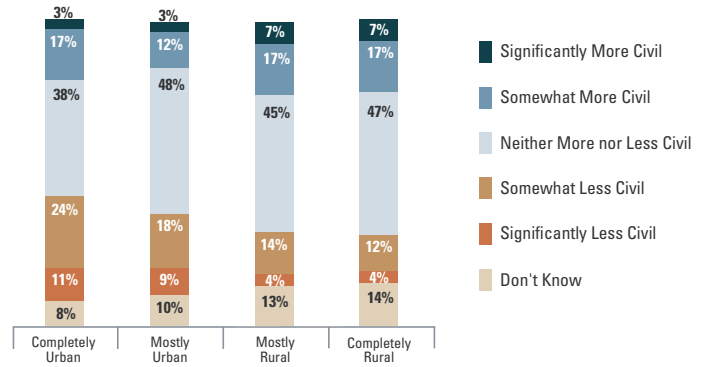


Tone of Discussion Among Residents Compared to 5 Years Ago

When asked about changes to the tone of discussion among residents in recent years, a plurality of local officials at each point across the urban-rural spectrum again suggested that discourse is “Neither More nor Less Civil” (see *Figure 4*). Pairing this with their response about the current state of discourse between residents in a single year (*Figure 2*), suggests local officials believe tone of discussion among residents have been, on average, slightly less constructive than between elected officials and residents.

Even more sobering, though, and where differences emerge between urban and rural jurisdiction, is looking at those who say that the tone among residents *has* changed in the last 5 years. In rural and mostly rural jurisdictions, more local officials reported increased civility rather than decreased civility. By contrast, local officials in mostly urban and urban jurisdictions were more likely to say that the tone of discussion between residents had become “Somewhat Less Civil” over time, than to report it had become more civil. Again, combining this with data from *Figure 2*, where local officials in urban areas reported slightly less constructive current discourse, this suggests that this disparities in the level of civility between residents in urban and rural governments may be a relatively new phenomenon.

Figure 4
Tone of Discussion Among Jurisdiction’s Residents Compared to 5 Years Ago



Conclusion

The findings in this research suggest that elected officials across the urban-rural spectrum think similarly when it comes to civic discourse. Much as was found in earlier research,¹⁰ local officials tend to find public discourse in their community to be generally positive, regardless of whether they represent an urban or rural community. The research presented in this paper adds that while there may be indications of declining civic discourse *between* urban and rural communities nationally, there are no major differences in how local officials across the urban-rural spectrum view civic discourse *within* their communities and that most do not believe the level of civility has changed. This is particularly true in questions about how local officials perceive the tone of their relationships with residents. Across the board, they see more constructive, civic discourse in situations in which they were involved. It would be beneficial, perhaps, to compare this to resident perceptions.

Even so, this research did uncover that there are some slight differences depending on rurality or urbanity, particularly related to local officials' perceptions of interactions between residents. While the plurality of local officials across the urban-rural spectrum see resident interactions as mixed and stable over time, officials in rural jurisdictions were more likely to report more positive current interactions between residents and that interactions had slightly improved over time. In contrast, urban officials were more likely to report less constructive interactions, perhaps as a result of declining civility in the last five years. Future research might consider the extent to which this is the case. Also, more broadly, future research can look into how statistically significant these findings are in terms of contributions of urbanity or rurality to civic discourse, or what outside of whether a place is urban and rural may contribute to civic discourse on a local level.

Survey Background and Methodology

The MPPS is an ongoing survey program, interviewing the leaders of Michigan's 1,856 units of general purpose local government. Surveys are conducted each spring (and prior to 2018, were also conducted each fall). The program has covered a wide range of policy topics, and includes longitudinal tracking data on "core" fiscal, budgetary and operational policy questions and designed to build-up a multi-year time-series.

Detailed tables of the data analyzed in this report broken down three ways—by jurisdiction type (county, city, township, or village), by population size of the respondent's community, and by the region of the respondent's jurisdiction—are available online at the MPPS homepage: <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey>.

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.



Notes

1. McFarland, C. K. (2018). Bridging the urban–rural economic divide. Washington, DC: *National League of Cities*.
2. Gimpel, J. G., & Lay, J. C. (2005). Party identification, local partisan contexts, and the acquisition of participatory attitudes. *The Social Logic of Politics. Personal Networks as Contexts for Political Behavior*.
3. Paffas, C. S. (2019). Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable: Are We Capable of Civil Political Discourse?.
4. Cramer, K. J. (2016). Attitudes towards Public Institutions and Public Employees. In *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press.
5. Shabangu, P. E. (2017). *Stakeholders' perception of the local government stakeholder engagement practices: an exploratory study amongst Bekkersdal township residents* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Johannesburg).
6. Freeman, J., & McCallum, K. (2013). Public connection with local government: Desires and frustrations of articulating local issues. In *Emerging Issues in Communication Research and Policy Conference* (pp. 137-148). News Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.
7. Herbst, S. (2010). The Powerful - if Elusive - Nature of Civility. In *Rude democracy: Civility and incivility in American politics* (pp. 1-30). Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press.
8. Anderson, M., Horner, D, Ivacko, T. (2020). The Functioning of Democracy at the Local Level: A compendium of findings from the Michigan Public Policy Survey of local leaders. *The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy*
9. While other papers in this series are based on a similar 4-point measure appended to survey data from a Census measure, this paper uses data in which the respondents were asked this urban-rural question on the survey itself.
10. Horner, D, Ivacko, T. (2018). The state of community civic discourse, according to Michigan's local government leaders. *The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy*

Previous MPPS reports

- Michigan local leaders' views on state's new approach to electoral redistricting (February 2021)
- COVID-19 pandemic sparks Michigan local leaders' concerns for fiscal health (December 2020)
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- Improving communication, building trust are seen as keys to fixing relationships between local jurisdictions and the State government (May 2017)
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- Local government leaders' views on drinking water and water supply infrastructure in Michigan communities (November 2016)
- Michigan local leaders say property tax appeals are common, disagree with 'dark stores' assessing (October 2016)
- Local officials say Michigan's system of funding local government is broken, and seek State action to fix it (September 2016)
- Michigan local governments report first declines in fiscal health trend since 2010 (August 2016)
- Michigan local leaders' doubts continue regarding the state's direction (July 2016)
- Hospital access primary emergency medical concern among many Michigan local officials (July 2016)
- Firefighting services in Michigan: challenges and approaches among local governments (June 2016)



Most local officials are satisfied with law enforcement services, but almost half from largest jurisdictions say their funding is insufficient (April 2016)

Local leaders say police-community relations are good throughout Michigan, but those in large cities are concerned about potential civil unrest over police use-of-force (February 2016)

Report: Responding to budget surplus vs. deficit: the preferences of Michigan's local leaders and citizens (December 2015)

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Citizen engagement in the view of Michigan's local government leaders (May 2013)

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Local leaders support reforming Michigan's system of funding local government (January 2013)

Local leaders support eliminating Michigan's Personal Property Tax if funds are replaced, but distrust state follow-through (November 2012)

Michigan's local leaders satisfied with union negotiations (October 2012)

Michigan's local leaders are divided over the state's emergency manager law (September 2012)

Fiscal stress continues for hundreds of Michigan jurisdictions, but conditions trend in positive direction overall (September 2012)

Michigan's local leaders more positive about Governor Snyder's performance, more optimistic about the state's direction (July 2012)

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University of Michigan

Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy

Joan and Sanford Weill Hall

735 S. State Street, Suite 5310

Ann Arbor, MI 48109-3091

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