

# Understanding Local Oversight in Michigan, Survey of Michigan County Canvassers

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# National trends creating local problems

The design of Michigan local governance is especially vulnerable to current national trends

## National Trends

1. Trust in government and institutions is low
2. Partisanship is much more national than local
3. Decline of professionalized local news

## MI Vulnerabilities

1. Hyper localized, township-based
2. Partisan elections
3. Local, party-based oversight written into constitution through boards

## How does local oversight work in this context?

Are county drain commissioners even more powerful?

# Example: Partisanship and Elections

We use local elections to decide who runs our elections.

## Who runs the election? (Hale, Montjoy, and Brown):

- 70% of countries: non-elected appointees of a multi-party commission
- 70% of US States: an independently, locally elected partisan

## How are they selected?

- Most countries: professional bureaucrats
- Most of US: locally elected, untrained, and (often) part-time officials

## Who oversees them?

- Most countries: federated agencies and boards
- Most of US: locally appointed or elected partisans (county commissioners, canvassers)

# Local certification disputes rare, but growing

BROOKINGS

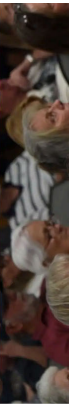
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RESEARCH

The counties that may try not to certify the 2024 election

Norman Eisen and Claire Boone

October 25, 2024



AP

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Politics

Nevada county votes against certifying recount results, a move that raises longer-term questions



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POLITICS

Michigan county refused to certify vote, prompting fears of a growing election threat this fall

By Madeline May  
Updated on May 21, 2024 / 11:24 AM EDT / CBS News

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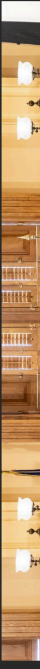
THE POLITICS

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POLITICS

Georgia Election Board approves new 'inquiry' for certifying election results

Voting rights groups oppose giving discretion over election results



**Democracy**

## Some Election Officials Refused to Certify Results. Few Were Held Accountable.

A ProPublica review of local officials who refused to certify 2022 election results found that most did not face formal consequences. Experts explain what that means for the future of American elections.

**2024 ELECTION CERTIFICATION** **ELECTION LAWS**

## ACLU drops preemptive lawsuit after Michigan county canvasser swears he'll certify November election

Robert Froman has agreed he will fulfill his legal obligation to certify the election in Kalamazoo County this fall.

By Hayley Harding | September 10, 2024, 3:28pm EDT

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# Local Certification and Nationalized Party Politics

Local certification grew as localized, intermediary step that limits partisan attempts to change close election results (Miller and Wilder 2024)

**Institutionally:** very important within their jurisdictions, but largely inconsequential for multi-jurisdiction elections vs. state boards.

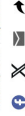
## POLITICS

**Trump recorded pressuring Wayne County canvassers not to certify 2020 vote**



Craig Mauger  
The Detroit News

Dec. 21, 2023 Updated Dec. 22, 2023, 4:41 p.m. ET



**But Politically?** Partisans promote their decisions/actions when in their interest; no consistency (Bush v. Gore 2000 \& Trump v. Biden 2020)

- States like MI/GA sought to change laws to limit/enhance their role. Court case continues in AZ.

# But who are these people? Are they partisan hacks?

## We don't really know

- Hale, Montjoy, and Brown (2015, 22) “found no research on certification”

## Are partisan forces universal?

- Local partisans divides increasingly match national partisan divides (Warshaw 2019), but not uniformly (Anzia 2021)
- Board composition, constituency, and scope of duties **varies a lot by state**

Table 1. Variation in Local Certifying Board Composition by Battleground State

| State          | Certifying Board           | Number     | Selection                                | Partisan Power | Election-specific | LEO Role                               |
|----------------|----------------------------|------------|------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Arizona        | County Supervisors         | 3 or 5     | Elected by County                        | Local majority | No                | Non-voting                             |
| Georgia        | County Board of Elections  | 3 or 5     | Appointed by County Commissioners        | State majority | Yes               | Non-voting                             |
| Michigan       | Board of County Canvassers | 4          | Appointed by County Commissioners        | Local balance  | Yes               | Non-voting                             |
| Nevada         | County Commissioners       | 3, 5, or 7 | Elected by County                        | Local majority | No                | Non-voting, but certifies <sup>#</sup> |
| North Carolina | County Board of Elections  | 5          | Appointed/Approved by Gov. and State BOE | State majority | Yes               | Non-voting                             |
| Pennsylvania   | County Board of Elections  | 3          | Served/Appointed by County Commissioners | Local majority | Yes               | Non-voting                             |
| Wisconsin      | County Canvassing Board    | 3          | Clerk elected<br>Clerk appoints other 2  | Local majority | Yes               | Voting                                 |

# - Nevada county commissioners conduct and finalize the canvass, but the clerk officially certifies the vote of the commissioners. State majorities are based on the party receiving most votes for governor.

# Michigan County Canvassers

## Party Enhancing Factors

1. **Motivation:** battleground state with salient 2020 controversy
2. **Opportunity:** state law mandates local party chairs nominate, grassroots control local party

3. **Balance of Power:** law mandates 2-2 local split

## Party Minimizing Factors

1. **Very Limited Scope:** Just canvass duties
2. **Work Closely with Partisan LEOs:** Most are GOP

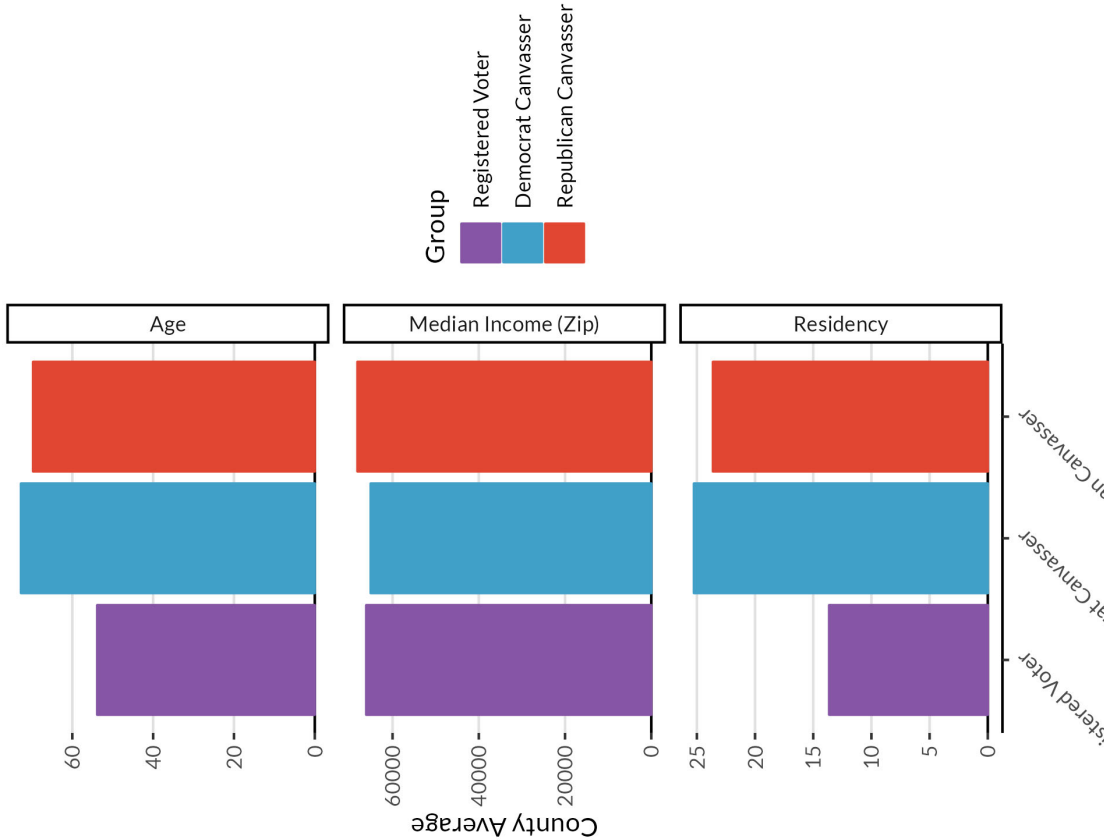
## Survey

### 2025 Voterfile Matching

- 334 canvassers across 83 counties
- 312 identified by county
- 308 matched in voterfile in February 2025, 1 died

- 57 Democrats and 31 Republicans completed mail-to-Web (30% rate)
- Additional 12 mail-to-mail yet to be coded
- Compare items to MI Voters from SPAE

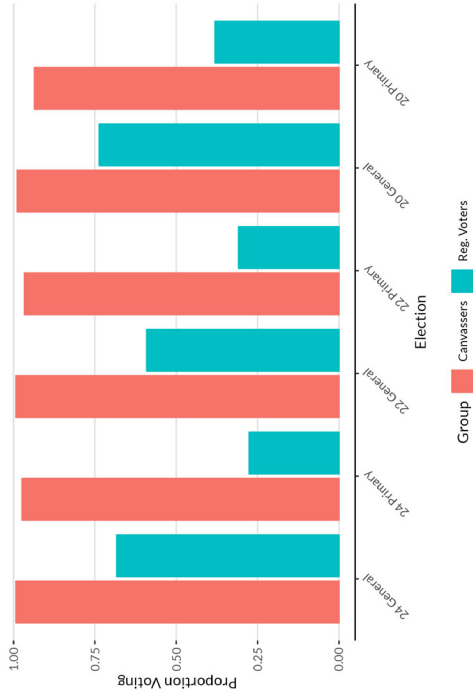




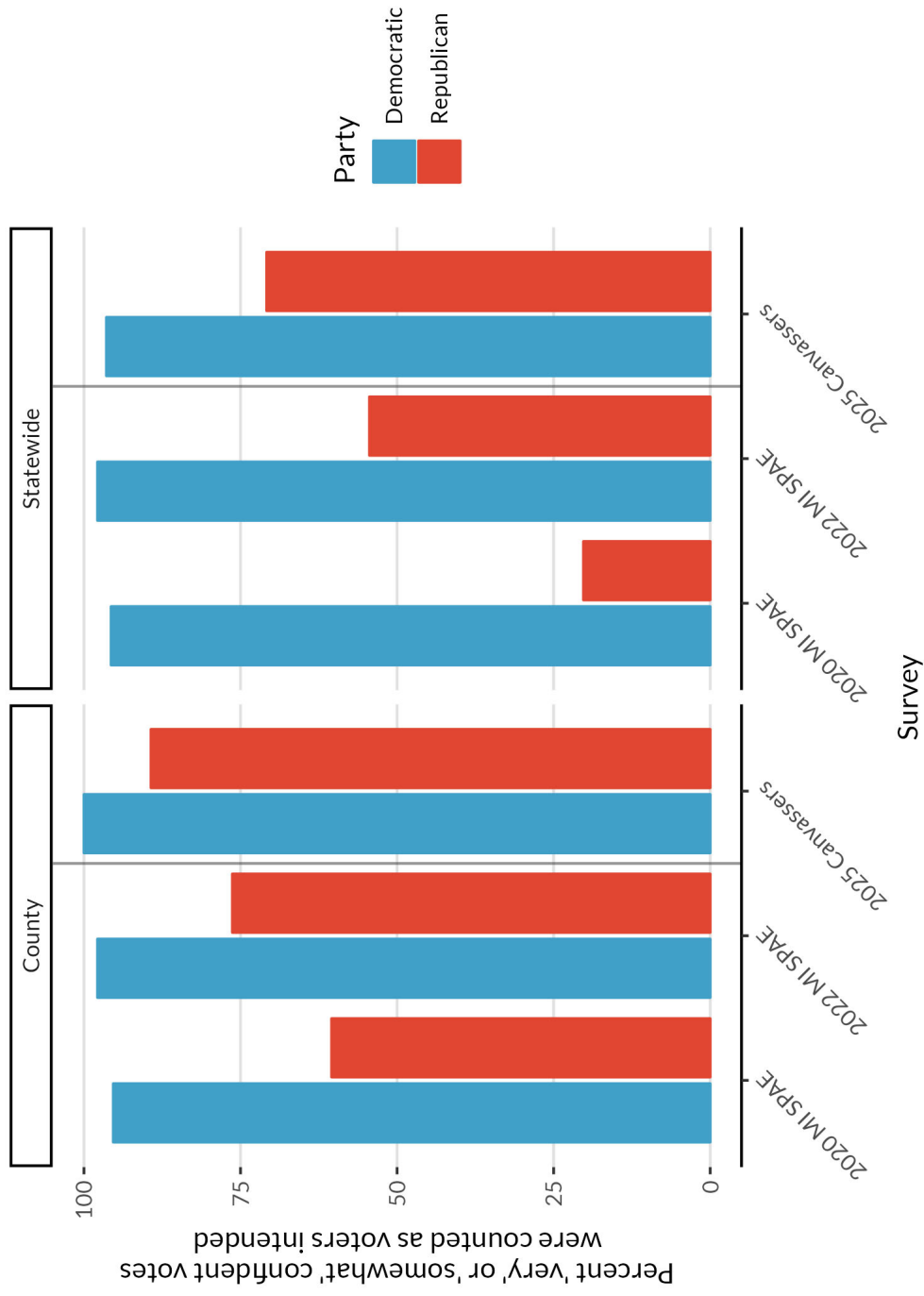
# Voterfile Analysis

Michigan County Canvassers are

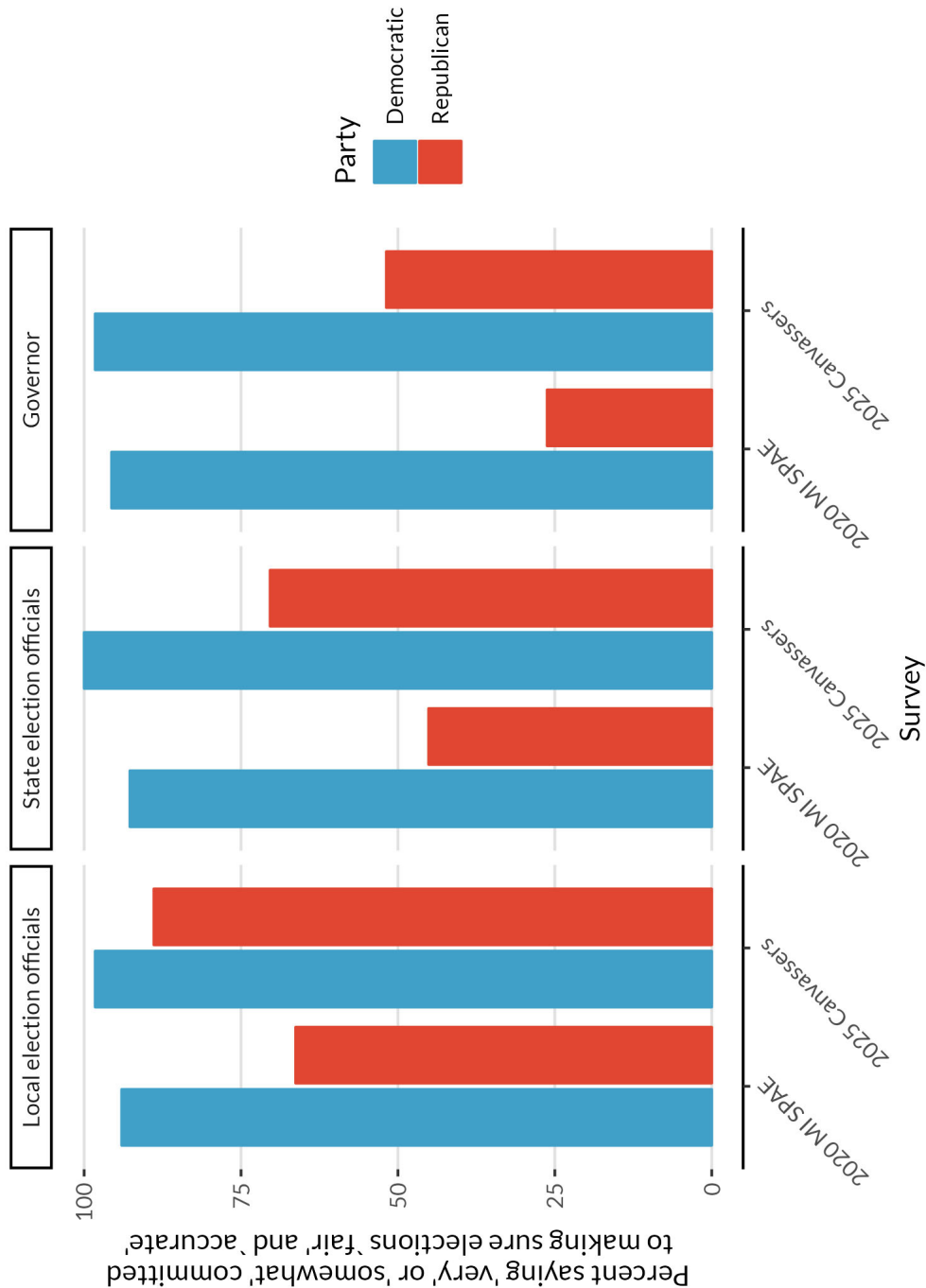
- Female (66%)
- Older (71.2)
- Long-standing community residents (23-25 years)
- Dedicated voters across local and national elections



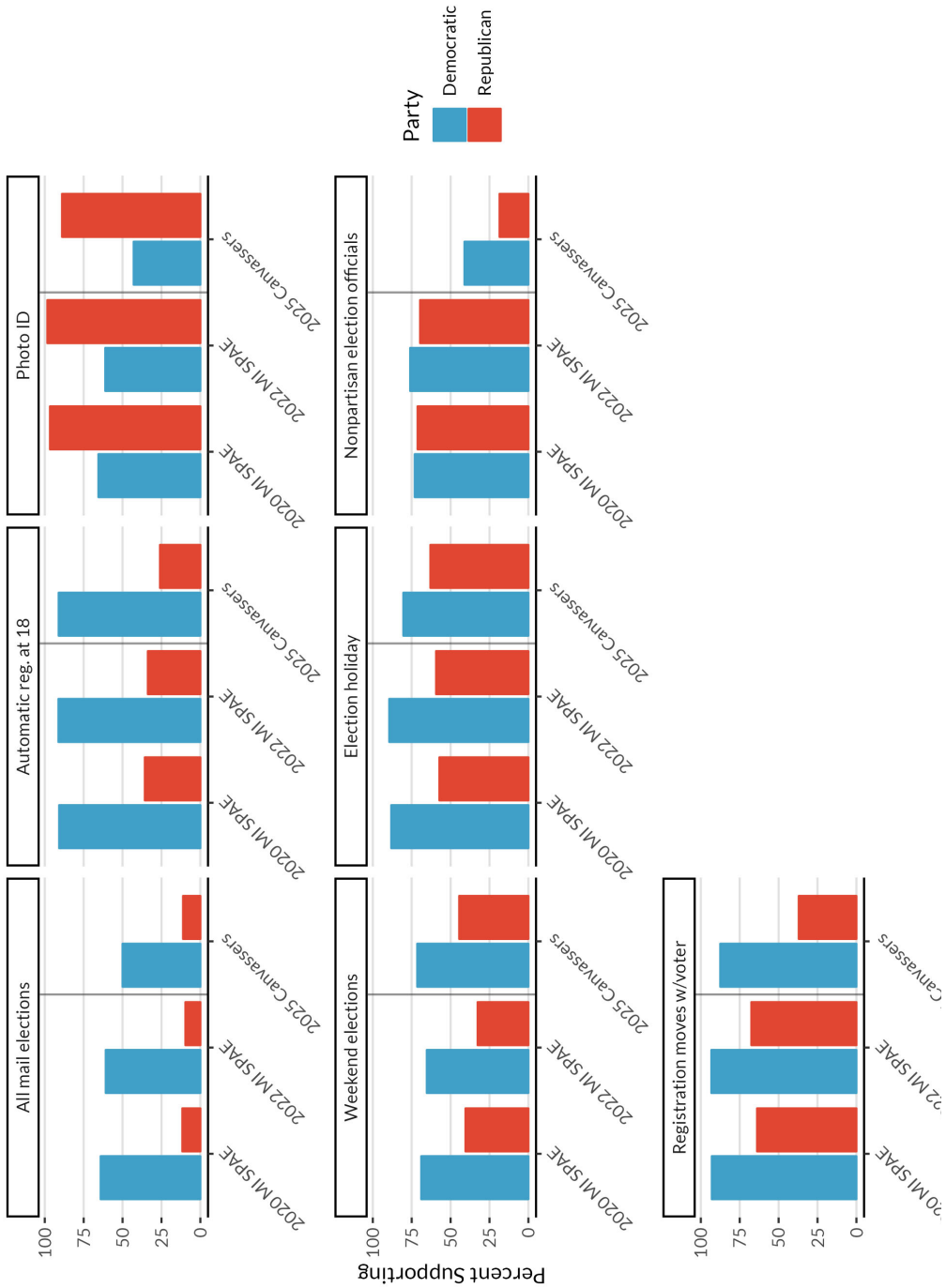
# Slightly more confident in County/State Count vs. Voters



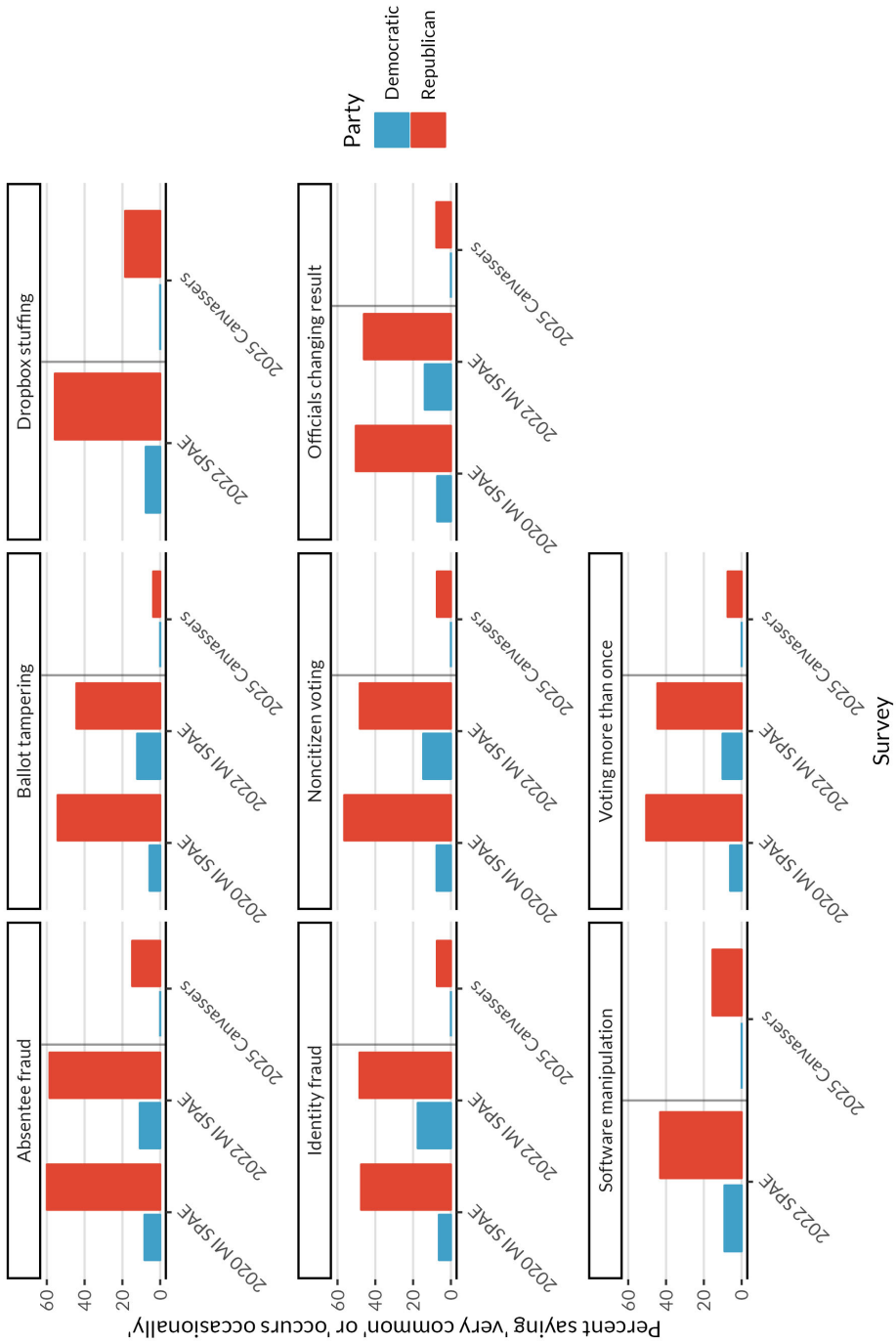
# Similar partisan divide for evaluations of leaders



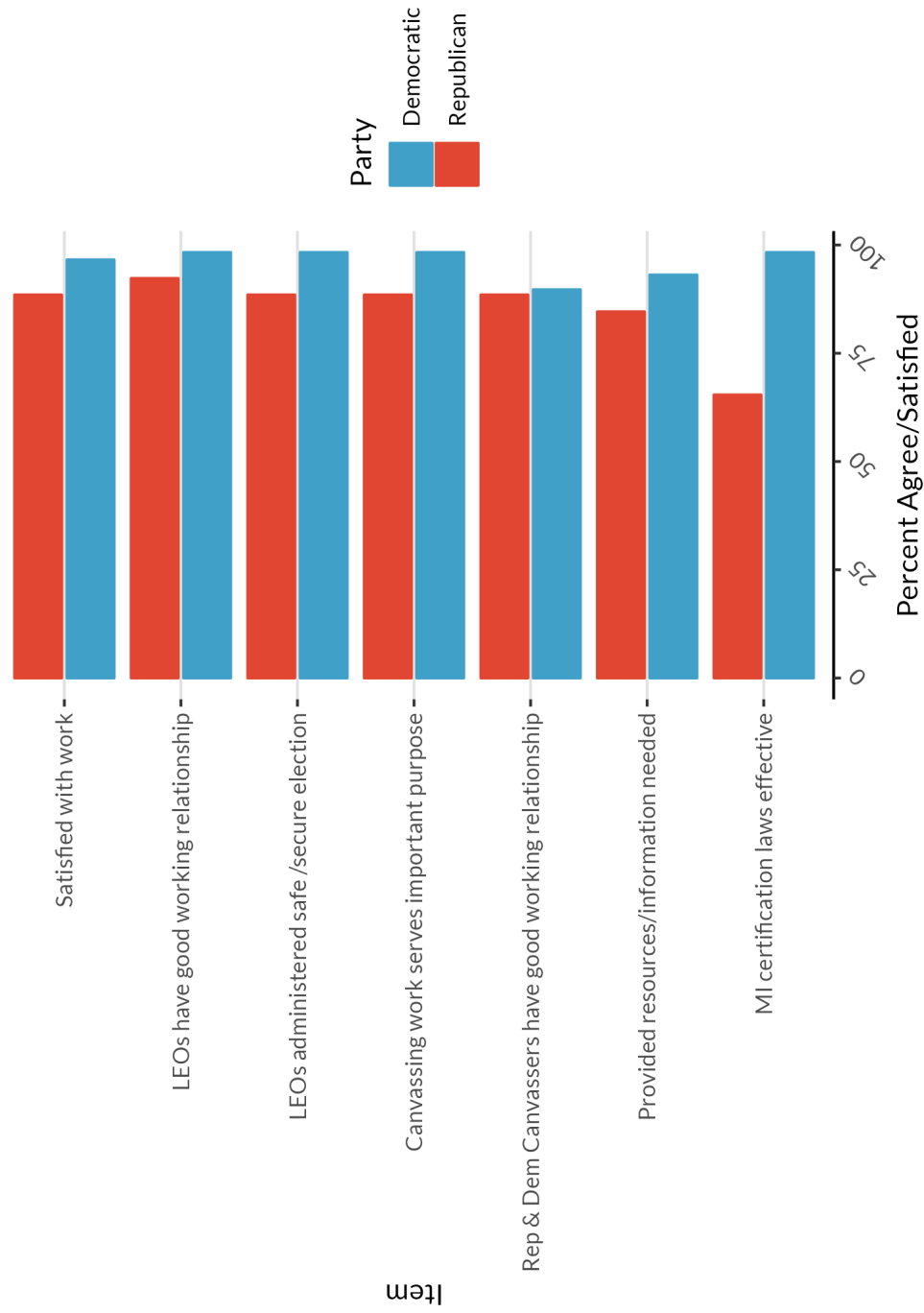
# Same partisan divide for election reforms



# BUT canvassers UNITED in skepticism of local fraud



# Perhaps the work strengthens confidence



## Other findings

### Safety

- About 5-15% harassed, but less than 5% report personal threats

### Prop 2

- Republicans think its implementation made local administration worse
- Democrats think its implementation made it better

# Local certification's obscurity both strength and weakness

1. Michigan canvassers primarily older, community-anchored individuals
2. Reflect state partisan opinion divides outside local context
3. BUT canvassers do not look like voters for local fraud!

## Further plans

- Additional efforts to compare large vs. small counties
- Bring in local partisan context (Blue vs. Red counties)

## Where to go?

1. What matters more for canvassers: Experience, knowledge, or local ties?
2. Are canvassers political actors or civic representatives?



# How MSU/IPPSR can support local Michigan governance

## Office of Survey Research

- OSR can [help you survey your community](#)
- Voterfile-based predictions of turnout in low-turnout elections (May millages, off-year)
- Mail-to-web surveys
- Active surveys in Detroit/Hamtramck currently get >5% response rates.

## Research over Recommendations

- We know you want solutions, but we like to study problems! Tell us about how the system isn't working
- Email: [smidtc@msu.edu](mailto:smidtc@msu.edu)