

UW-Oshkosh: Whitburn Center releases new report on the meaning of local control in Wisconsin

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The Issue: Wisconsin local governments obtain their power from the state. But, a series of mandates and other legislative actions have continuously shifted powers from the local to the state level. More recently, the concept of local control has been weaponized as a rhetorical device during political debates. The goal of this report is to determine how Wisconsin's local government leaders view local control.

The Method: In this paper we present survey results from a sample of 288 local government leaders. We use the results to determine how local government leaders define local control, whether they agree with their colleagues regarding the meaning of local control, and whether perceptions of local control are predicted by identifiable characteristics.

The Findings: There is widespread disagreement on the meaning of local control in Wisconsin.

- Over half of respondents view local control as active, i.e., being able to use power as defined or delegated, whereas the other 46.55 percent define local control as passive, i.e., through limits placed by higher levels of government.
- City officials are more likely than county officials to feel that local control has decreased over the past five years.
- City executives and department heads are more likely than elected officials to agree that the powers of their government are well-defined in relation to state and overlapping governments.
- Respondents believe the state should be more responsible for public safety and election administration than they are now but also believe both should

remain more of a local or shared function. Respondents believe land use issues, K-12 education, taxation, and higher education decisions should have more local input than they do currently.

- Self-identified conservatives are much more likely to believe there is an imbalance regarding what is and what should be a local responsibility.
- There are significant ambiguities and disagreements among local actors as to where their power lies and how their understanding of local control aligns, or does not align, with colleagues' perceptions.
- Open-ended survey responses reveal a general pessimism regarding local control as a practically relevant governing concept.

The Lesson: Meaningful local action on emerging and fast-moving issues, like the COVID-19 response, is hampered when actors do not coalesce around a common understanding of their powers and responsibilities. Basic governing questions, like who should be doing what and when, need to be answered and agreed upon before effective governance can occur. From a practical standpoint, local governments can incorporate the concept of local control into the strategic planning and onboarding processes for new staff and officials, to create an organizational definition of local control. Such a definition will not eliminate policy disagreements and is subject to change over time, but it will at the very least solidify how municipal leadership understands local control at a point in time.

The full report can be downloaded at: <https://uwosh.edu/-whitburn-center/wp-content/uploads/sites/211/2022/01/LocalControlFinal.pdf>.