

Should We Open Up? Our National Survey of Local Government Officials Shows We May Not Have A Choice

A CivicPulse Special Issue COVID-19 Report

In partnership with RIT Department of Public Policy

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CivicPulse is a nonprofit organization that runs a national survey platform of local government officials. Our mission is to promote information-sharing between local governments and elevate the voice of local governments in national civic discourse. To learn more about our work, please visit civicpulse.org. To download the data used in this report, please visit: civicpulse.org/data.

As governors weigh whether to open their states up, one important question remains unanswered: how long will local communities go along with COVID-19 restrictions if we *don't* open up? Local policymakers are uniquely positioned to answer this question. Whatever policy decisions are made at higher levels, local officials are the ones who have to persuade or enforce compliance in their own communities. To better understand the realities of community compliance going forward, CivicPulse conducted a nationally representative survey of over 1,000 local policymakers across all 50 states.

We uncovered a startling truth: the vast majority of local government officials across the country, regardless of the partisanship of their communities, predict that voluntary compliance with COVID-19 restrictions will decline if the situation continues as it is.

We asked local officials the following question: “In general, if the situation stays the same for another three months, how will people’s compliance with these [COVID-19] guidelines change?” 69% of respondents answered that compliance would worsen. And this perspective was not limited to Republican localities: in Democrat-leaning counties, 65% of local officials predicted compliance would worsen, compared with 70% in Republican-leaning counties (Figure 1).

COVID-19 Compliance in 3 Months

% of local policymakers who believe that community compliance will...

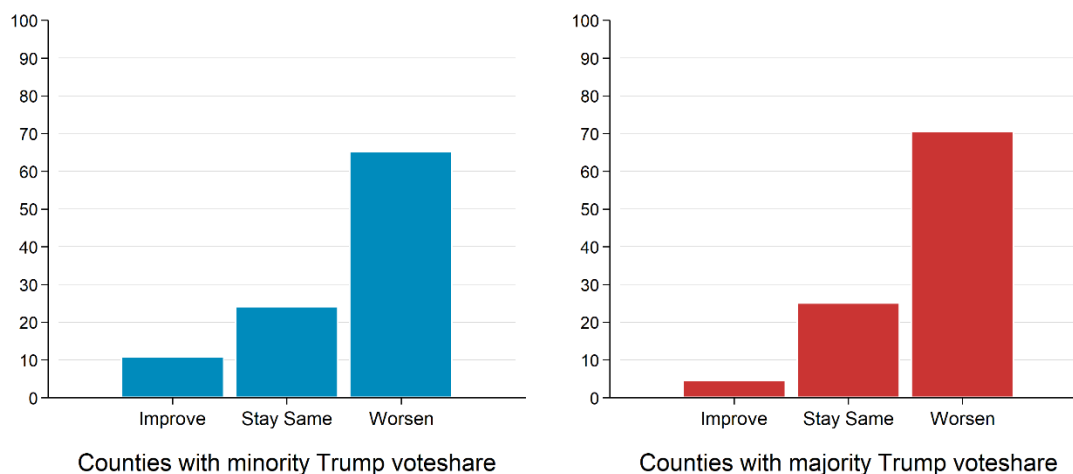


Figure 1: *In general, if the situation stays the same for another three months, how will people’s compliance with [Covid-19] guidelines change?* In counties with a minority Trump voteshare, 11% of respondents expected compliance to improve, 24% thought that it would stay the same, and 65% expected it to worsen. In counties with a majority Trump voteshare, these numbers were similarly 5% (improve), 25% (stay same), and 70% (worsen).

But what if voluntary compliance begins to slip, as our survey suggests it will? Could local governments maintain high compliance coercively? Unlikely. We asked local policymakers how they have been implementing COVID-19 policies (Figure 2). The dominant mode of implementation has been through *encouragement* (e.g., signs, announcements), not *enforcement* (e.g., policing, fines). County public health departments have limited ability to force businesses or individuals to comply with restrictions, and, notably, law enforcements officials have [decidedly mixed views about stepping into this role](#).

Even in cases where law enforcement officials have stepped in, they simply don't have the personnel to police their entire communities for all COVID-19 restrictions. For example, when asked what additional resources would improve compliance, one councilmember in Minnesota told us, "Our police force is stretched...They are working overtime. The city budget is taking a big hit."

How Local Governments Implement COVID-19 Measures

Local officials, %

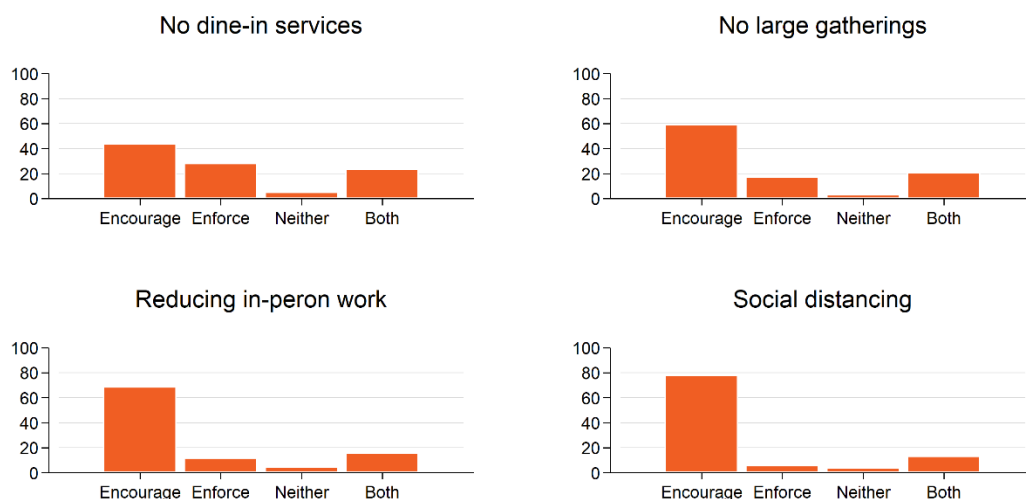


Figure 2: Which, if any, of the following types of actions has your local government taken to increase compliance with these four guidelines? For each of the four measures, a plurality of local officials said they were relying exclusively on encouragement (e.g., signs, announcements) rather than enforcement (e.g. policing, fines). Specifically, this number was 44% of local officials for dine-in services, 59% for large gatherings, 68% for in-person work, and 78% for social distancing.

Local governments are on the frontline of navigating this pandemic in their own communities. While current community compliance with COVID-19 restrictions remains remarkably high (see Figure A1), local officials' perspective on future compliance is unequivocal: regardless of partisanship, voluntary compliance will deteriorate over time. Furthermore, if and when this happens, local governments may not have the coercive capacity to stop it. As state and federal policymakers begin answering the question of when to open up, they must work closely with local governments to make sure their policies reflect this reality on the ground.

Appendix

Table of Contents

About CivicPulse	6
Description of Methodology	7
Survey Questionnaire.....	9
Current Compliance in Local Communities	10
Additional Analyses by Subgroups	11

About CivicPulse

We generate insights about local government through national surveys of local officials, often partnering with researchers and other experts. Our surveys consistently sample a diverse representation of leaders from all 50 states and from small towns to large cities. We're proud that our commitment to generating useful knowledge, and our respect for the officials who participate, have led over 80 percent of first-time survey participants to agree to join our ongoing survey panel. CivicPulse also produces academic papers and policy reports on critical issues facing local governments, and works diligently to deliver these insights back to local governments and their communities. In doing so, we also seek to bring greater attention to local government within our nation's civil discourse.

Description of Methodology

CivicPulse uses Power Almanac's dynamically updated contact list of the appointed and elected officials associated with all townships, municipalities, and counties in the United States with populations of 1,000 or more (98% coverage). Each survey includes a random sample of officials from this list. In this survey, we collected 1,025 responses between March 31 and April 26, representing local governments from all fifty states. Table A1 breaks the sample out by government position, Table A2 by the type of local government, and Table A3 by the 2016 presidential vote share of the respondent's county.

Table A1. Survey Respondents by Position.

Position	Respondents
Governing Board Member	783
Top Elected Official	242
Total	1,025

Table A2. Survey Respondents by Type of Government.

Type of Government	Respondents
Township	221
Municipality	644
County	160
Total	1,025

Table A3. Survey Respondents by 2016 Presidential Voteshare of County.

Party Affiliation	Respondents
Majority voting Trump	620
Minority voting Trump	403
NA	2
Total	1,025

To characterize the geographic representativeness of our surveys, CivicPulse geocodes all respondents using the FIPS system and subsequently matches these respondents to the U.S. Census and the 2016 presidential election results by county. We include these data in our publicly available data file, along with survey weights. All of our reported findings are consistent with or without survey weights. In addition, below we provide readers the opportunity to examine these findings broken out by different features of the local communities included in our survey.

The subsequent section includes the complete survey questionnaire. Every respondent was asked about the community’s compliance with COVID-19 measures, while about half of them were asked about “government actions” and the other half about “future compliance.” Table A4 summarizes the total sample size responding to each set of questions.

Table A4. Sample Size by Question Asked

Question	Respondents
Government Action	567
Compliance	1,025
Future Compliance	447

Survey Questionnaire

1. GOVERNMENT ACTION

Which, if any, of the following types of actions has your local government taken to increase compliance with these four guidelines?

“Encouragement” actions include posting signs, announcements, etc.

“Enforcement” actions include issuing fines, policing, etc.

- 4 ROWS: Avoiding large gatherings/Avoiding in-person work except for essential businesses, Eliminating dine-in at restaurants/“Social distancing” in public (e.g., staying 6 feet apart)
- 3 COLUMNS: Encouragement/Enforcement/Both/ Neither

2. COMPLIANCE

Below are four guidelines relating to COVID-19. To what degree do you think people and businesses in your community are voluntarily complying with these guidelines?

- 4 ROWS: Avoiding large gatherings/Avoiding in-person work except for essential businesses, Eliminating dine-in at restaurants/“Social distancing” in public (e.g., staying 6 feet apart)
- 3 COLUMNS: High compliance/Moderate compliance/Low or no compliance

3. Future Compliance

In general, if the situation stays the same for another three months, how will people’s compliance with the kinds of guidelines previously mentioned change?

- Compliance will increase
- Compliance will decrease
- Compliance will stay about the same

What if the situation stays the same for another six months?

- Compliance will increase
- Compliance will decrease
- Compliance will stay about the same

You can find additional questions from this survey, including the raw data, at civicpulse.org/data.

Current Compliance in Local Communities

Compliance with COVID-19 Measures

Local officials, %

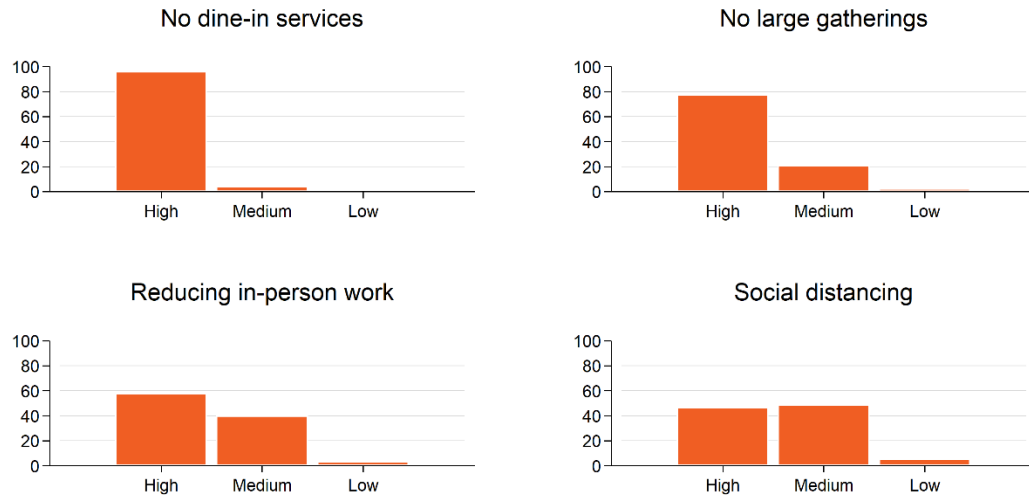


Figure A1: *To what degree do you think people and businesses in your community are voluntarily complying with...?* 96% local officials rated compliance with restrictions on dine-in services as “high.” This number was 77% for large gatherings, 56% for in-person work, and 46% for social distancing.

Additional Analyses by Subgroups

The analyses below report the main findings by different features of the local communities included in our survey. Those features are:

- **Population Level** splits respondents into equal terciles depending on the population size of their locality: Low, Medium, or High.
- **Urbanicity** divides respondents into two equal groups depending on the urban coverage of their location: Less Urban or More Urban.
- **Government Type** distinguishes the level of government of the official's office: County government or Sub-county government (township or municipality).
- **Unemployment Rate** splits respondents into equal terciles depending on the unemployment rate in their locality: Low, Medium, or High.
- **Vote share by County** divides respondents into two groups depending on whether or not a majority in their county voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election.
- **COVID-19 Cases per capita by County** splits respondents into equal terciles depending on the rate of COVID-19 cases per capita in the county in which they reside: Low, Medium, or High. (The data were recorded on April 22, 2020, to match the timing of the survey. *Source: New York Times.*)
- **Census Region** divides respondents into the four major census regions: Midwest, Northeast, South, or West.

The findings that are broken up by these features are:

- COVID-19 Compliance in 3 Months
- Current Compliance with Reducing In-person Work
- Current Compliance with Social Distancing
- How Local Governments Implement Reducing In-person Work
- How Local Governments Implement Social Distancing

Analysis by Population Level

COVID-19 Compliance in 3 Months

% of local policymakers who believe that community compliance will...

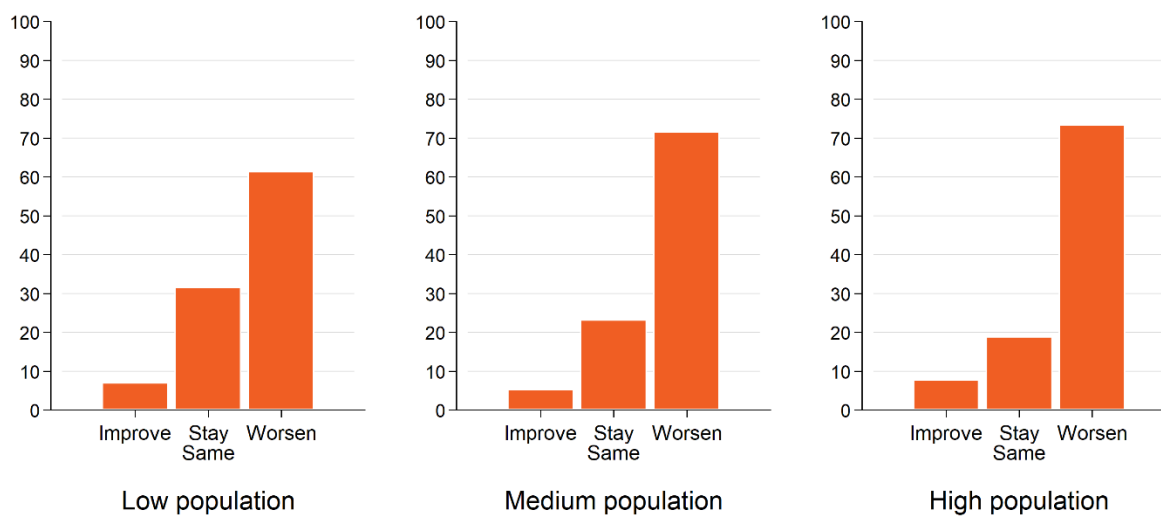


Figure A2.1

Current Community Compliance with Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

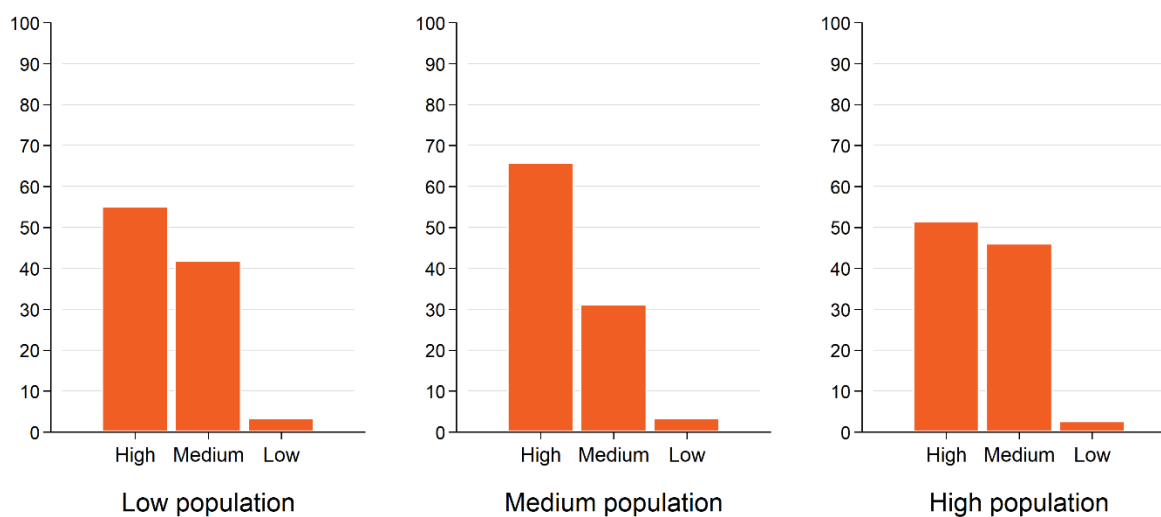


Figure A2.2

Current Community Compliance with Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

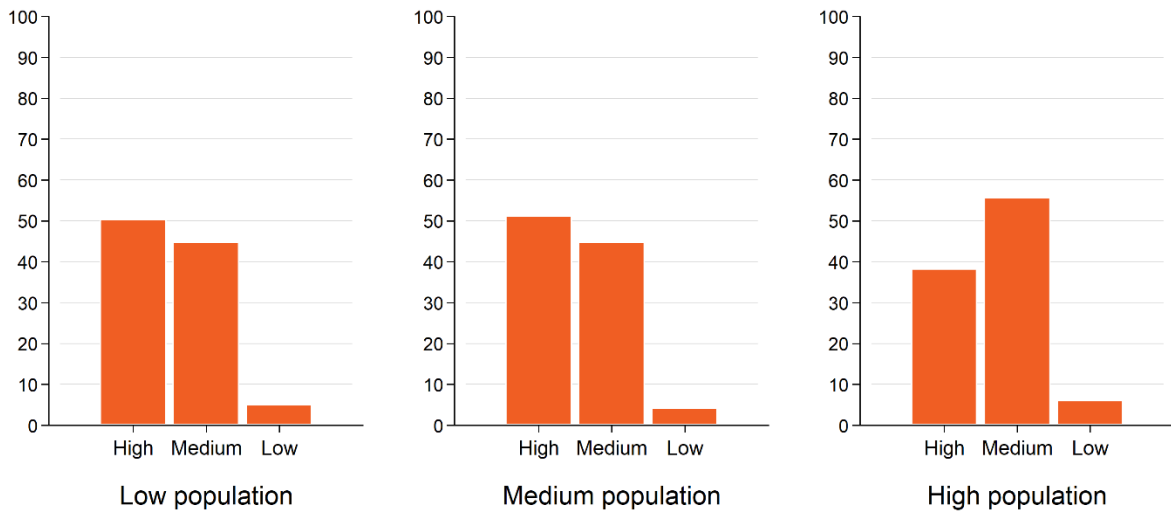


Figure A2.3

How Local Governments Implement Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

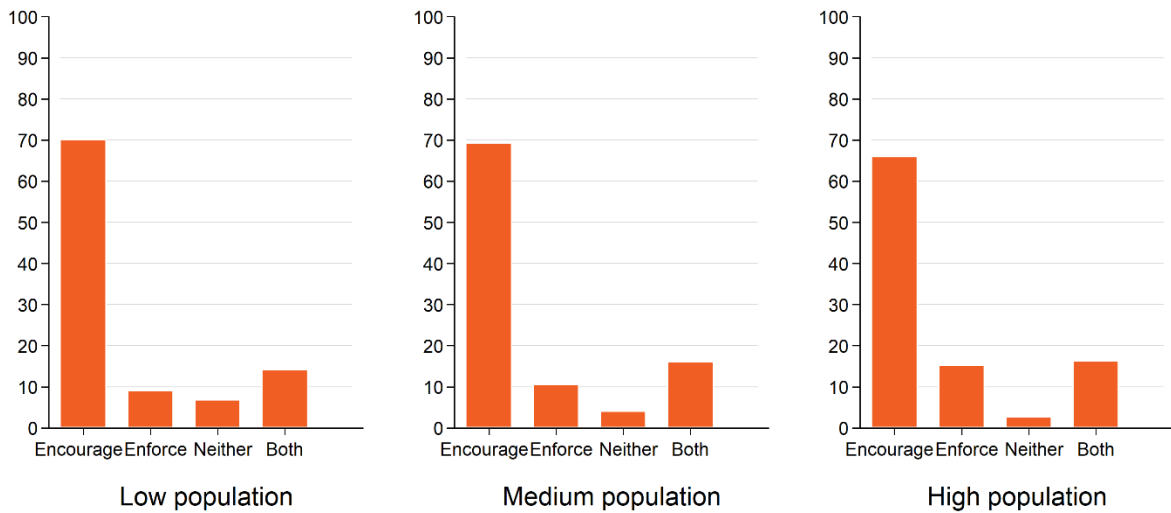


Figure A2.4

How Local Governments Implement Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

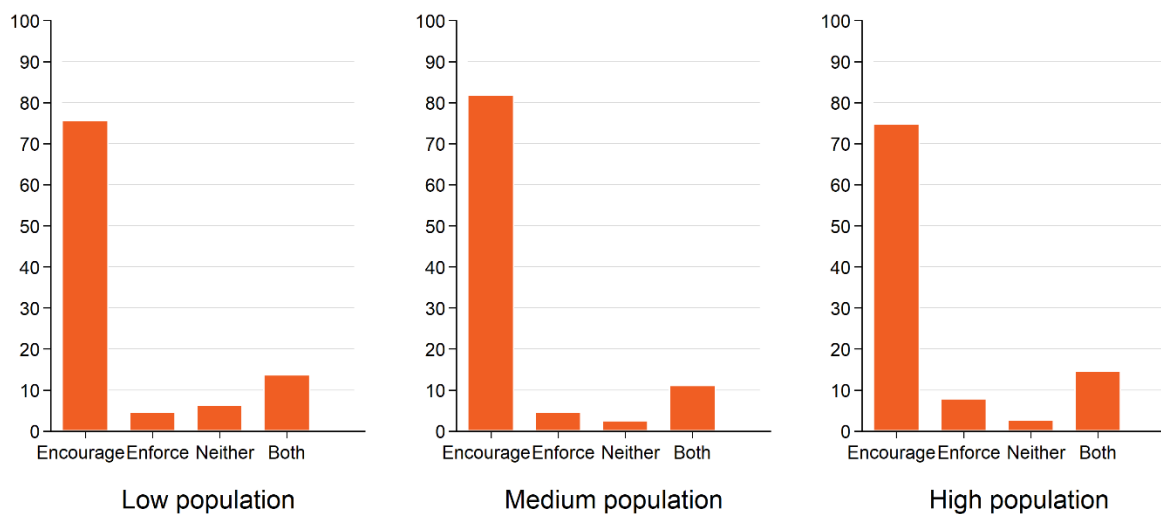


Figure A2.5

Analysis by Urbanicity

COVID-19 Compliance in 3 Months

% of local policymakers who believe that community compliance will...

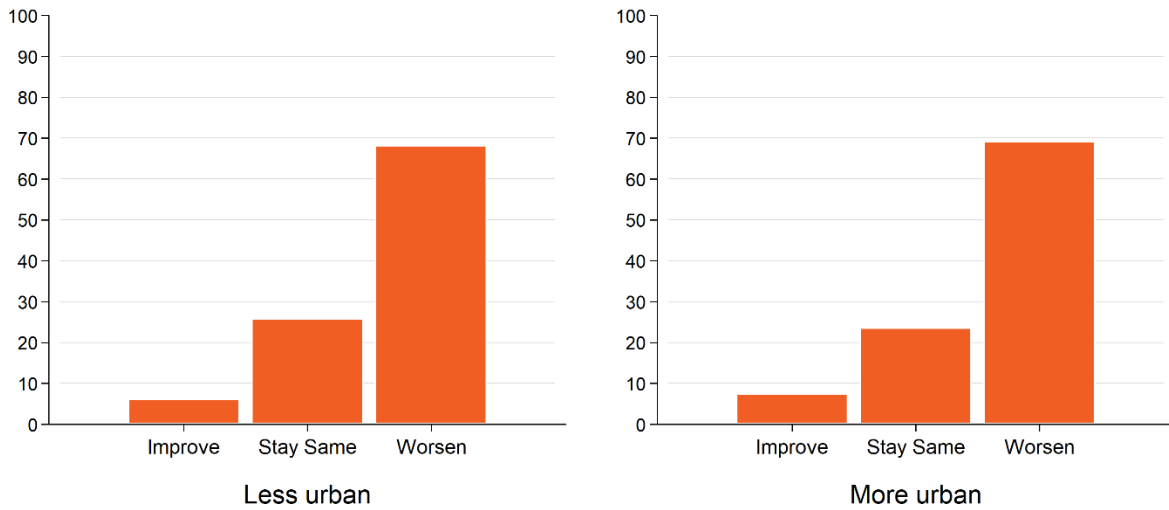


Figure A3.1

Current Community Compliance with Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

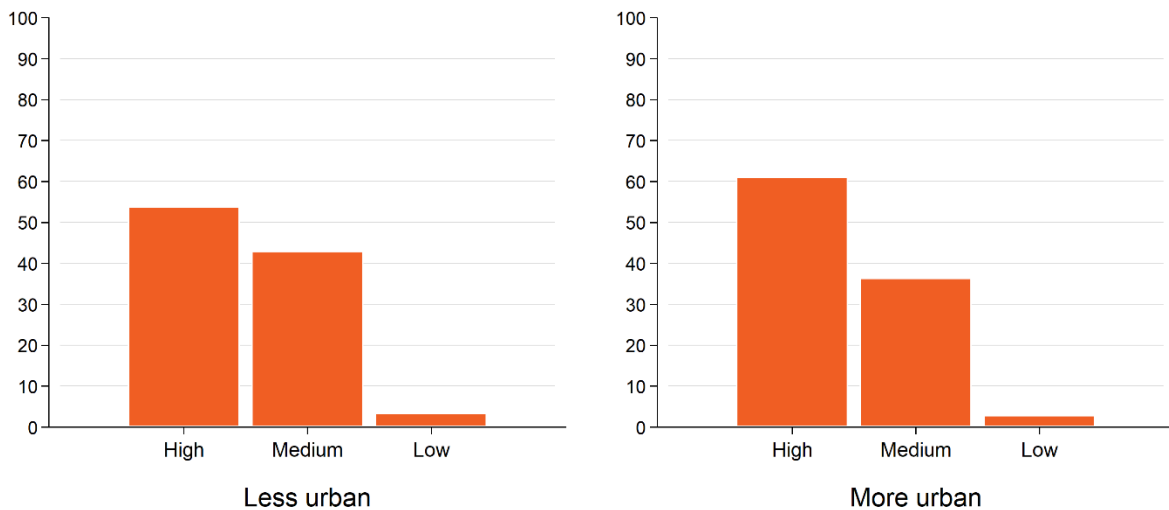


Figure A3.2

Current Community Compliance with Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

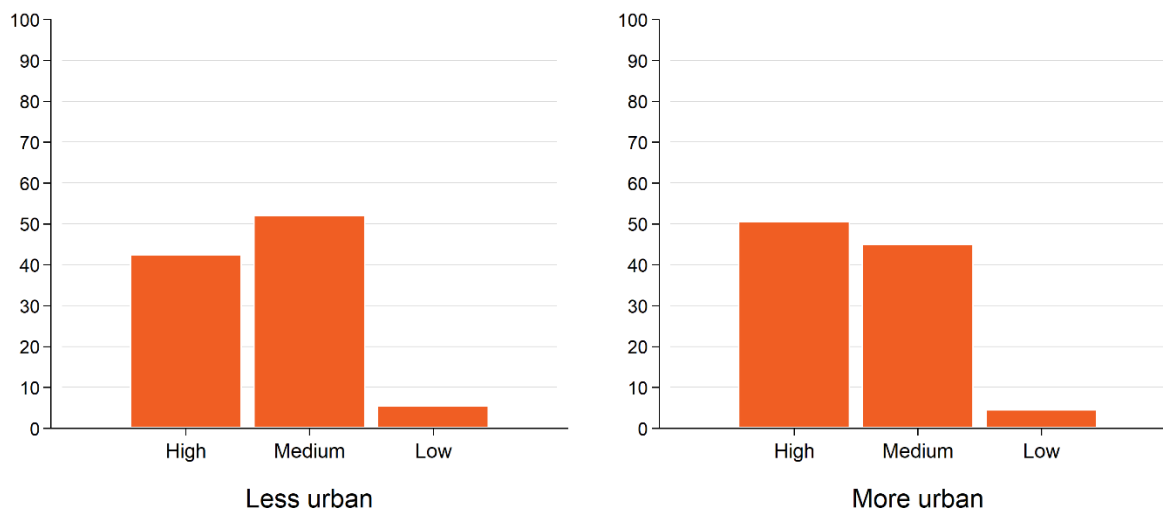


Figure A3.3

How Local Governments Implement Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

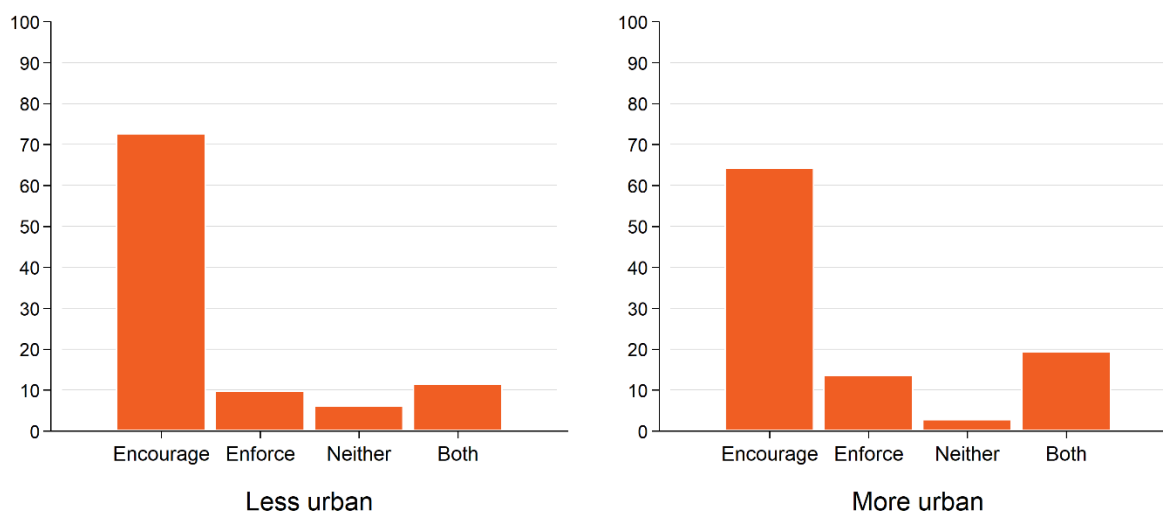


Figure A2.4

How Local Governments Implement Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

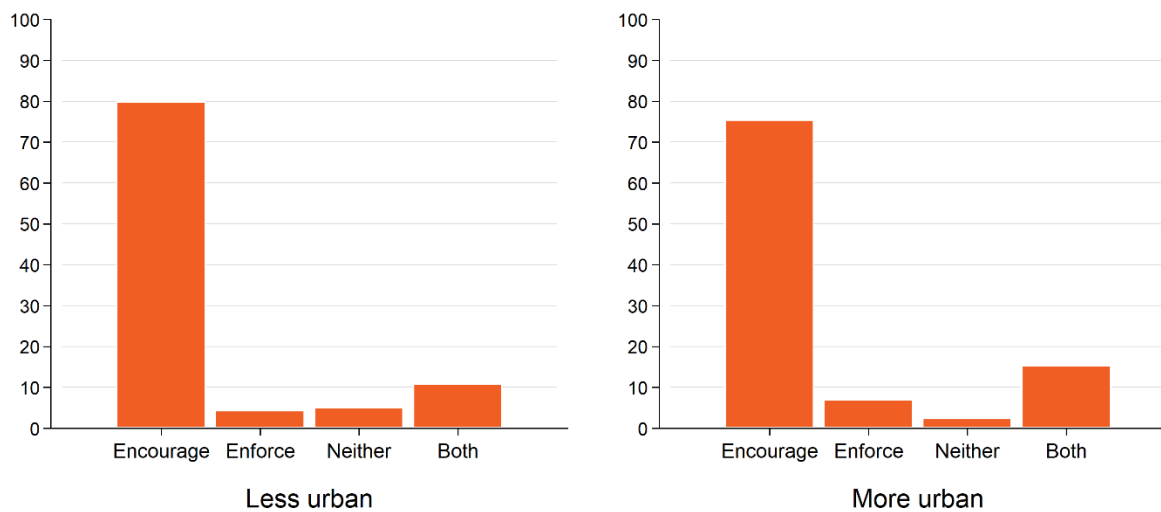


Figure A3.5

Analysis by Government Type

COVID-19 Compliance in 3 Months

% of local policymakers who believe that community compliance will...

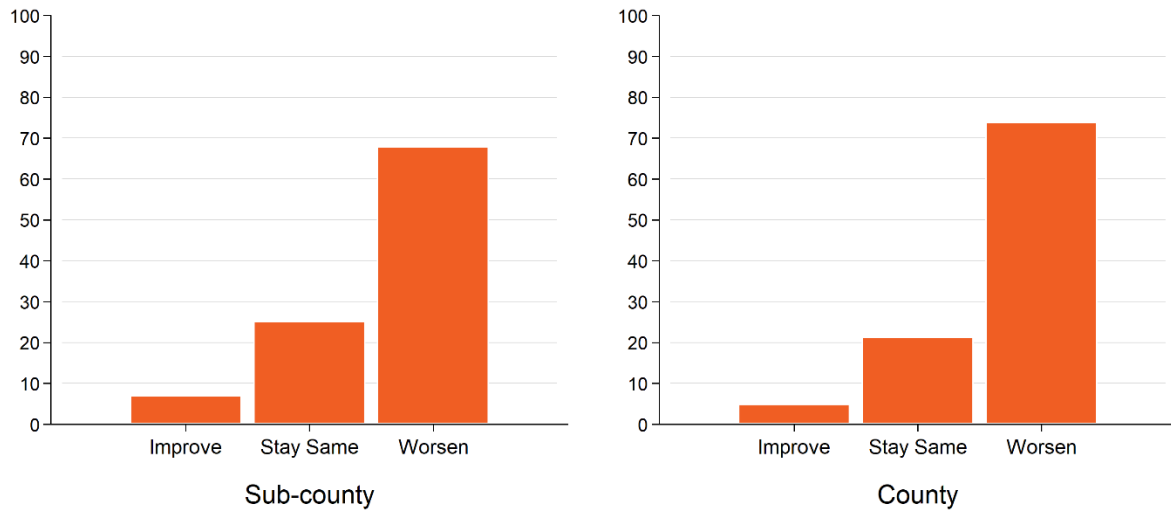


Figure A4.1

Current Community Compliance with Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

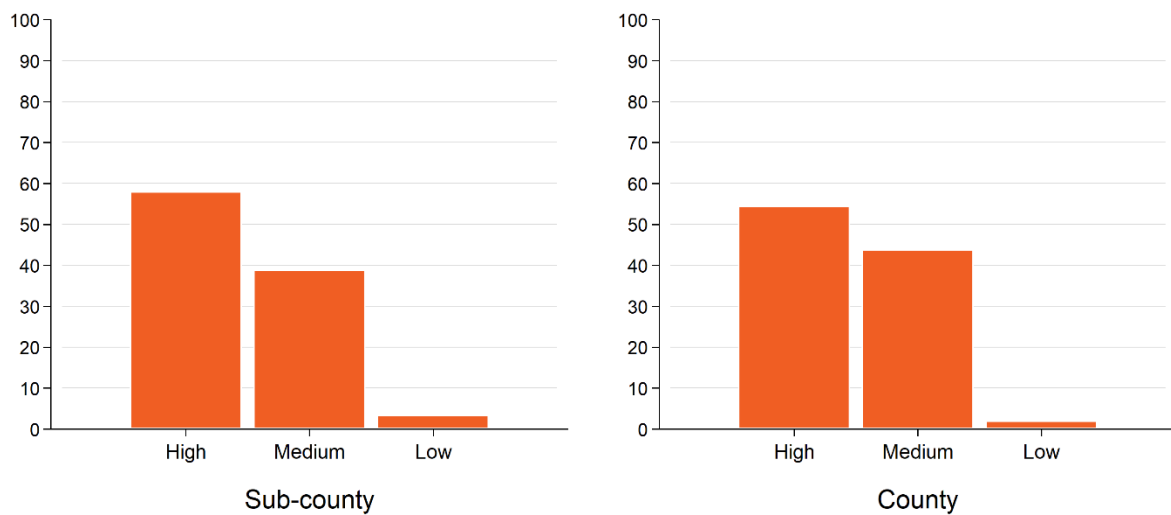


Figure A4.2

Current Community Compliance with Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

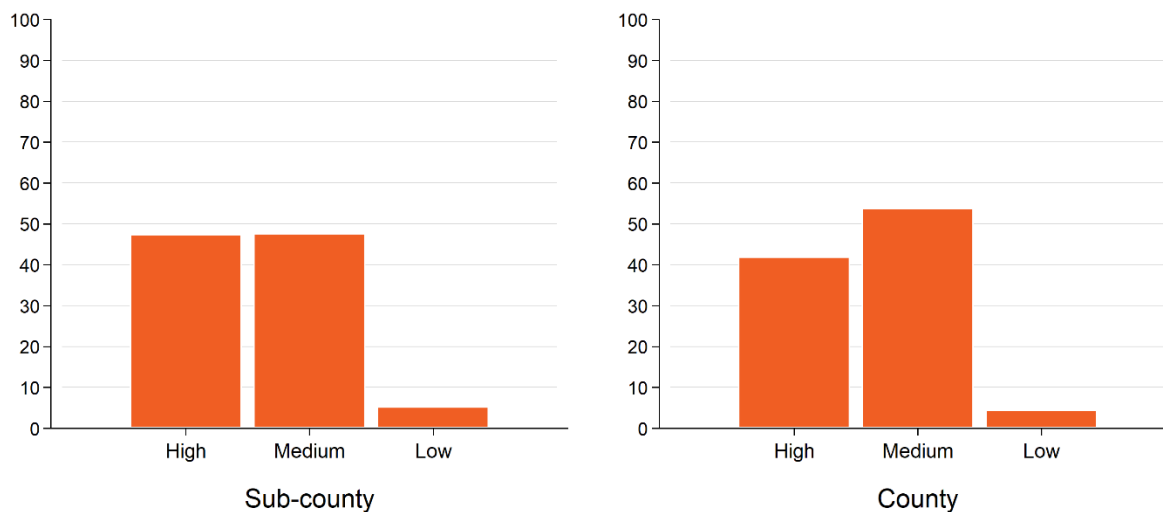


Figure A4.3

How Local Governments Implement Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

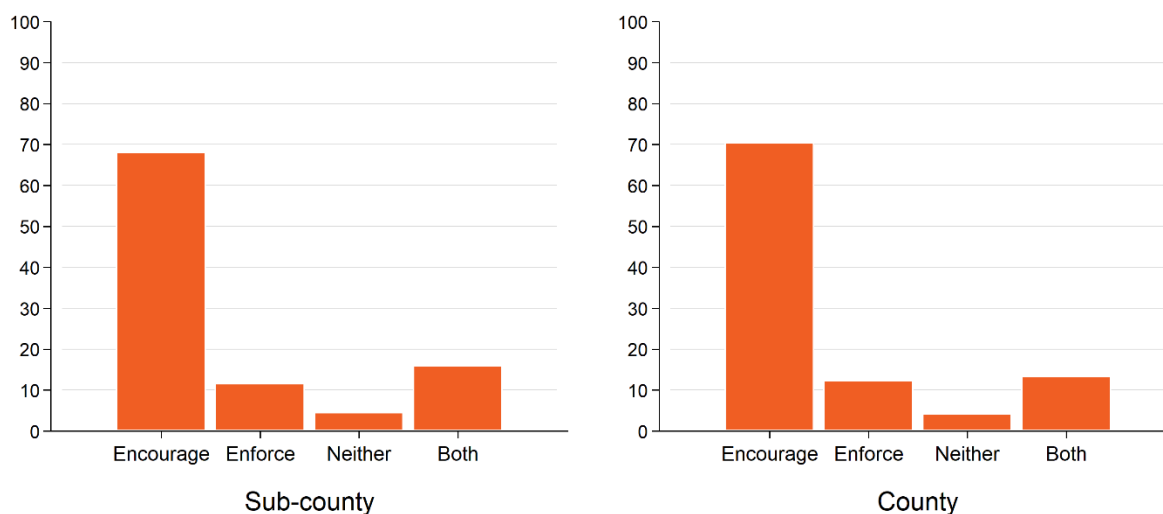


Figure A4.4

How Local Governments Implement Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

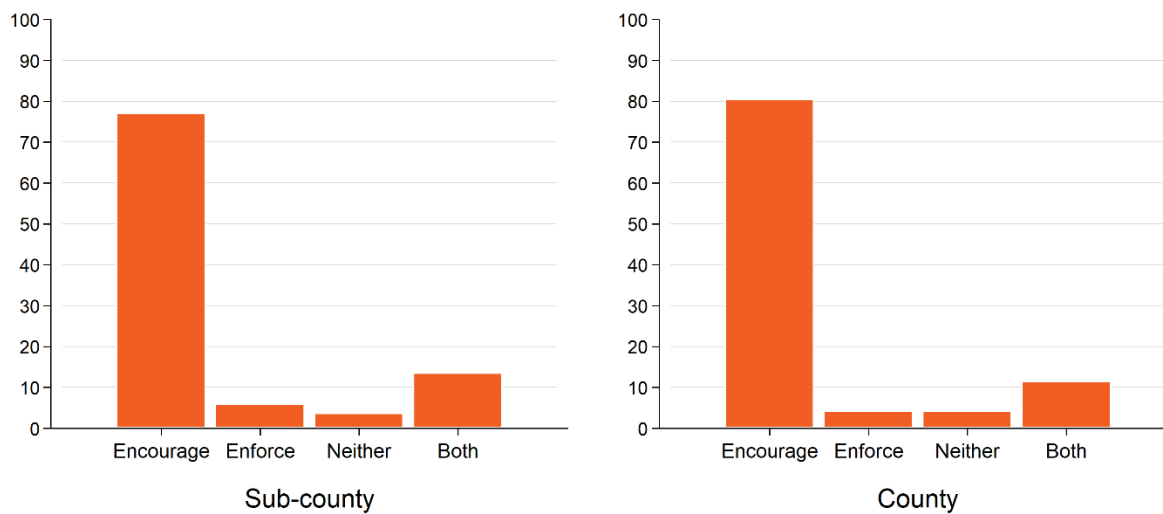


Figure A4.5

Analysis by Unemployment Rate

COVID-19 Compliance in 3 Months

% of local policymakers who believe that community compliance will...

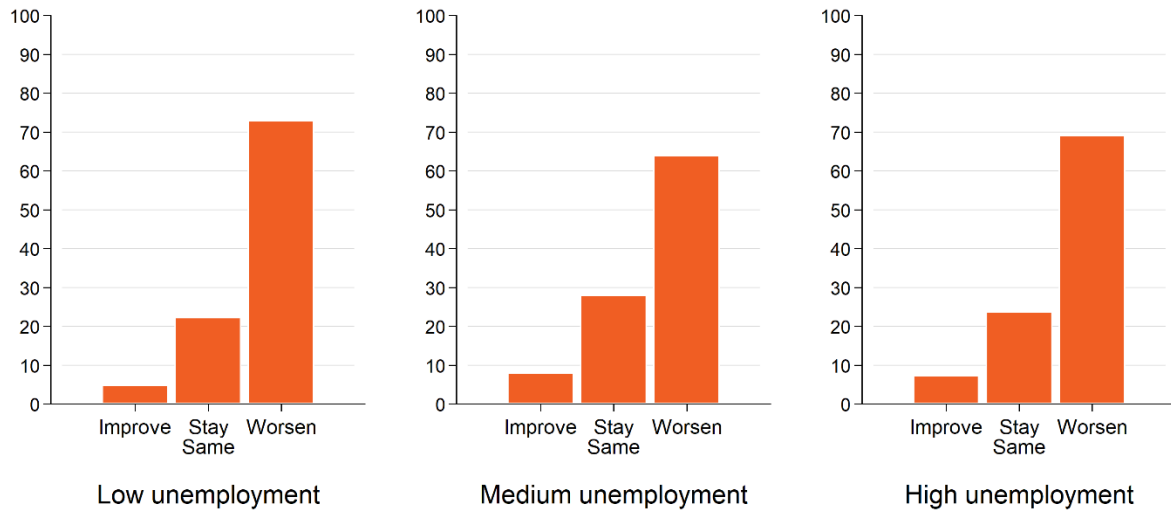


Figure A5.1

Current Community Compliance with Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

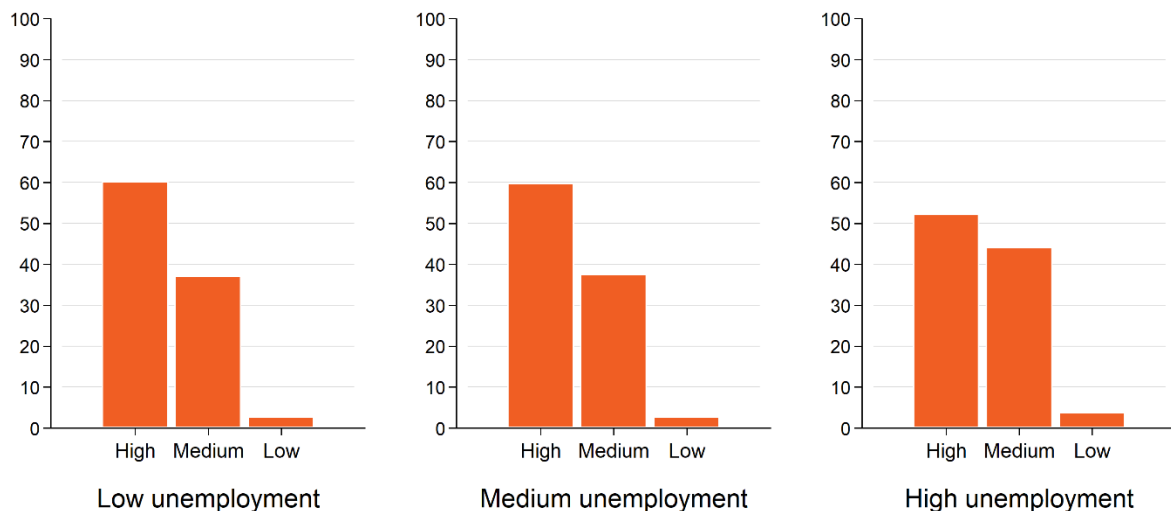


Figure A5.2

Current Community Compliance with Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

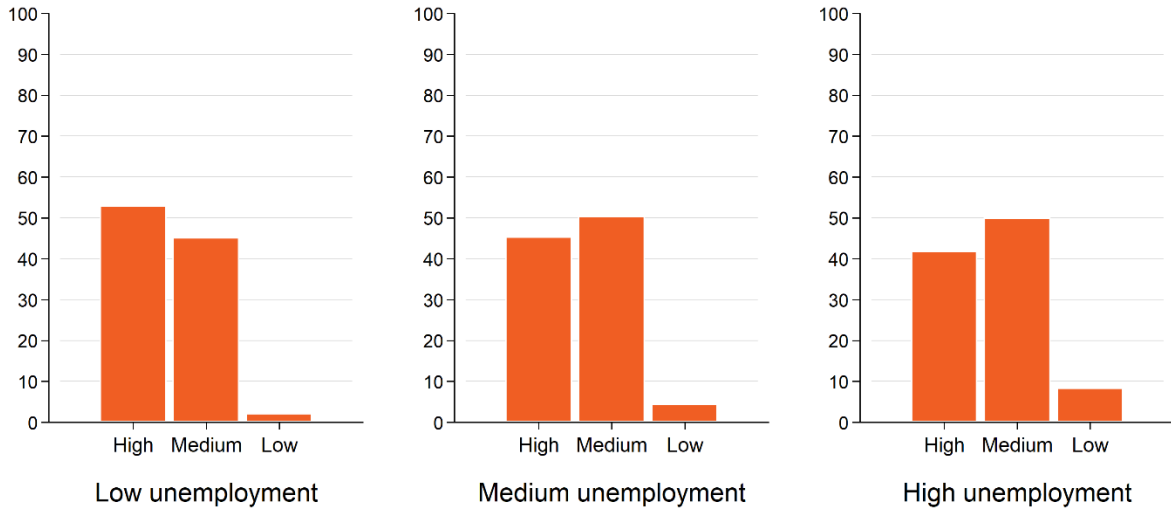


Figure A5.3

How Local Governments Implement Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

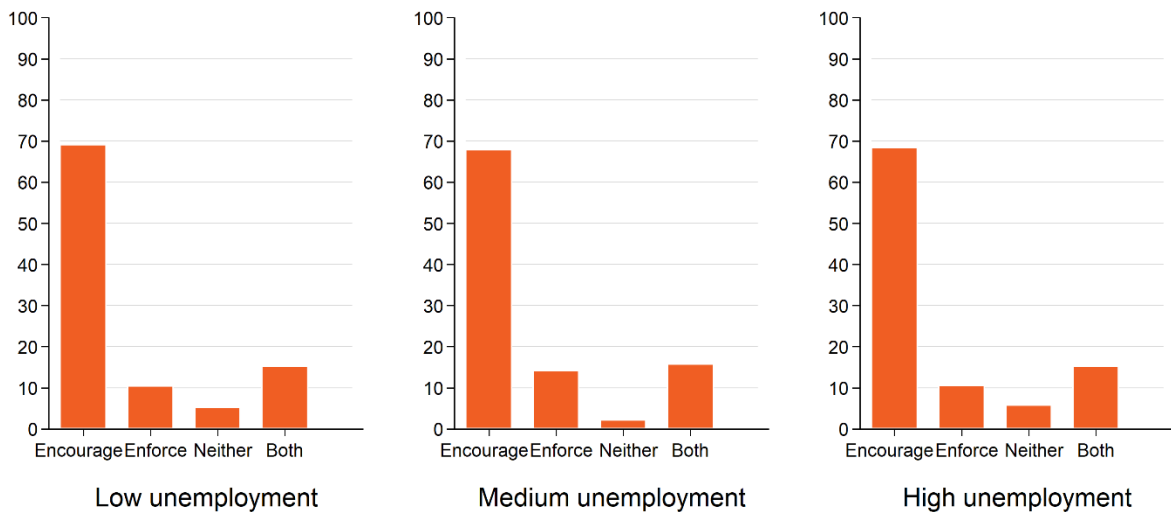


Figure A5.4

How Local Governments Implement Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

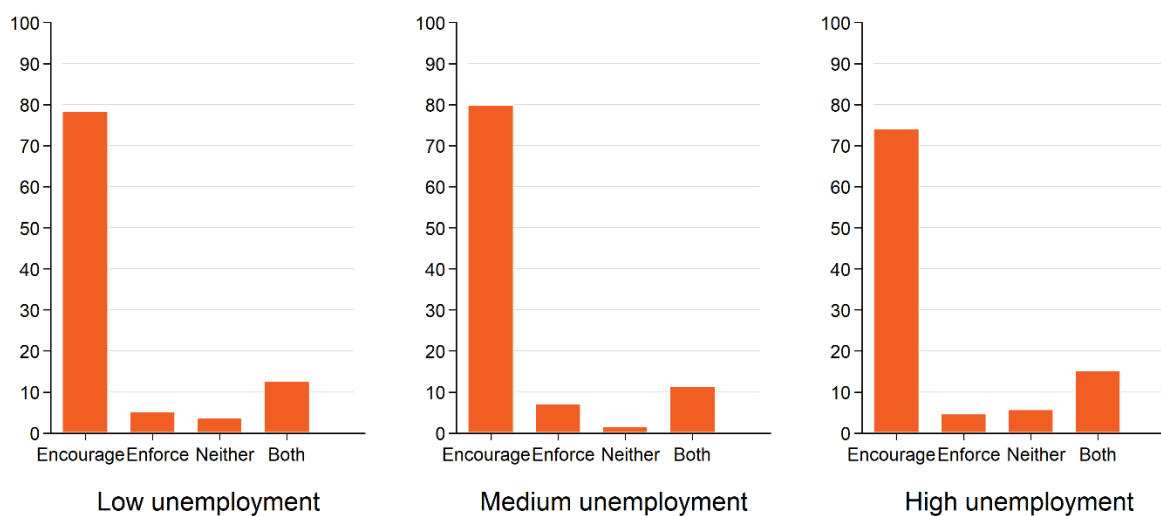


Figure A5.5

Analysis by Presidential County Voteshare

Community Compliance with Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

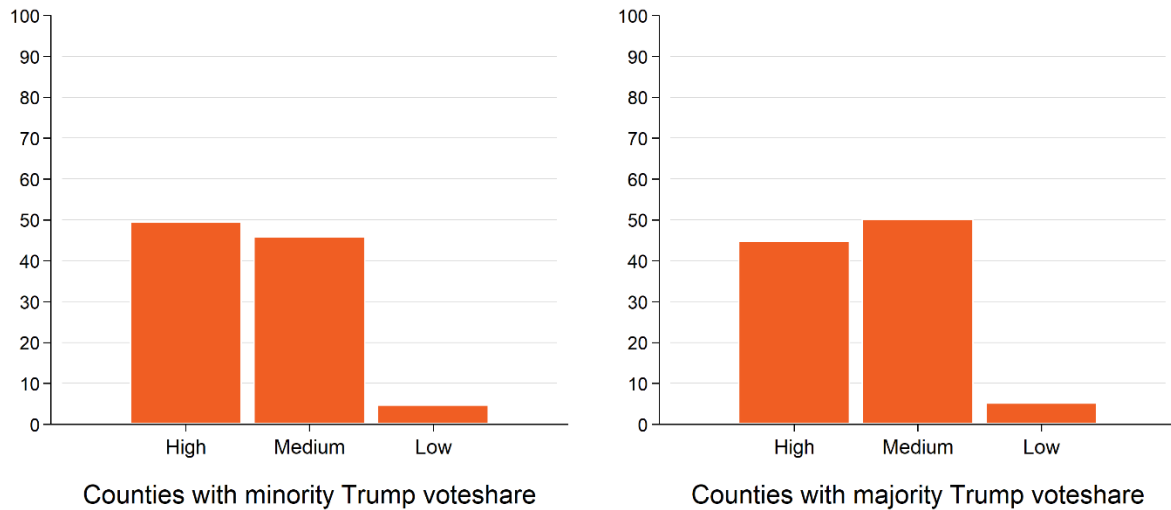


Figure A6.1

Current Community Compliance with Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

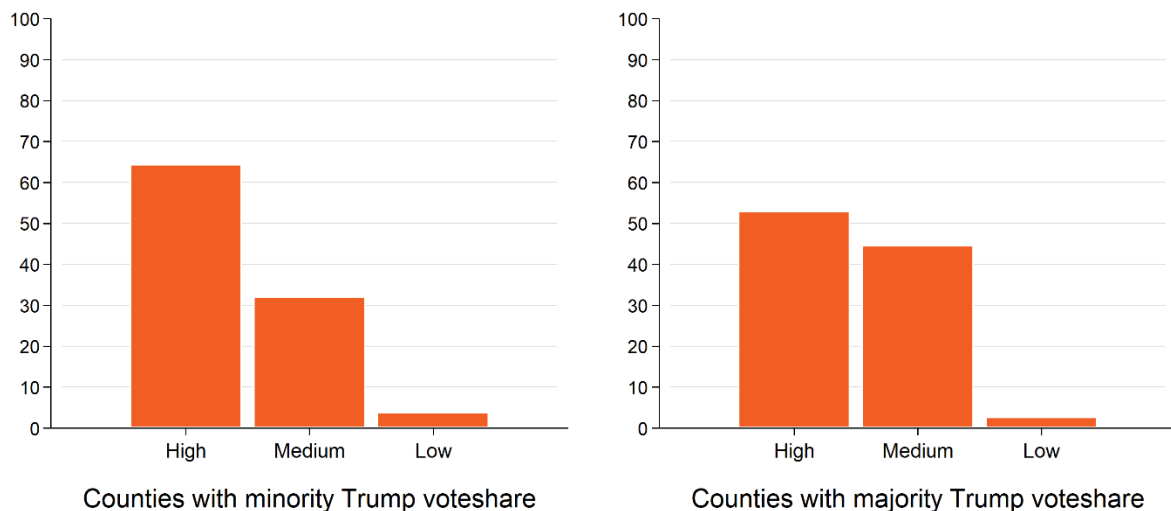


Figure A6.2

Current Community Compliance with Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

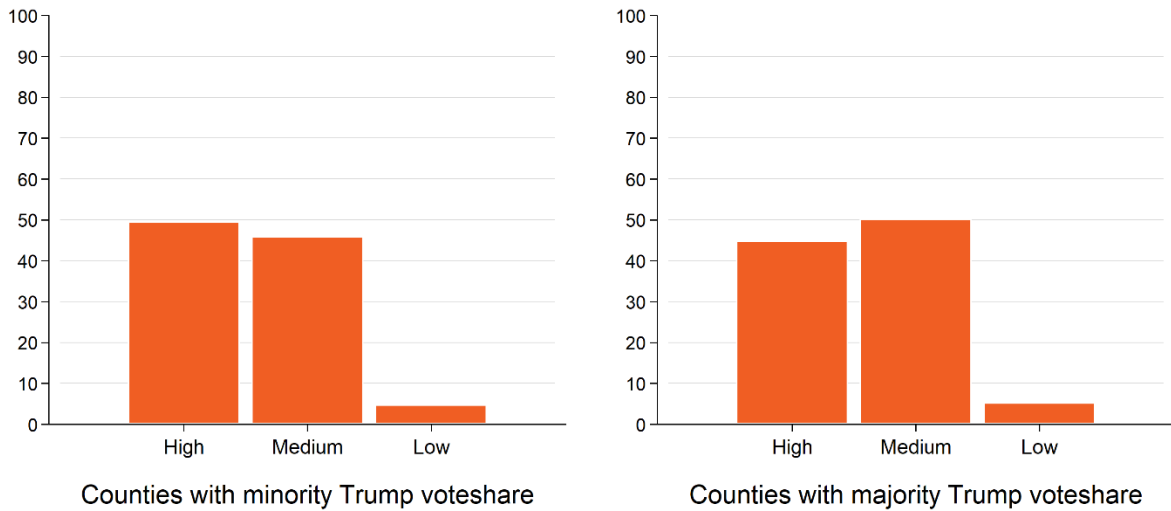


Figure A6.3

How Local Governments Implement Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

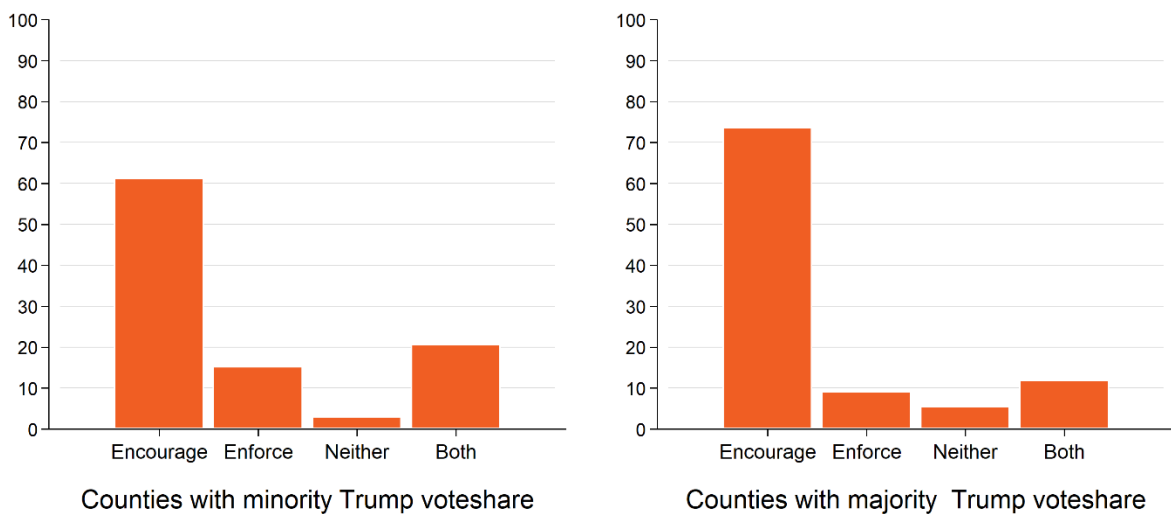


Figure A6.4

How Local Governments Implement Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

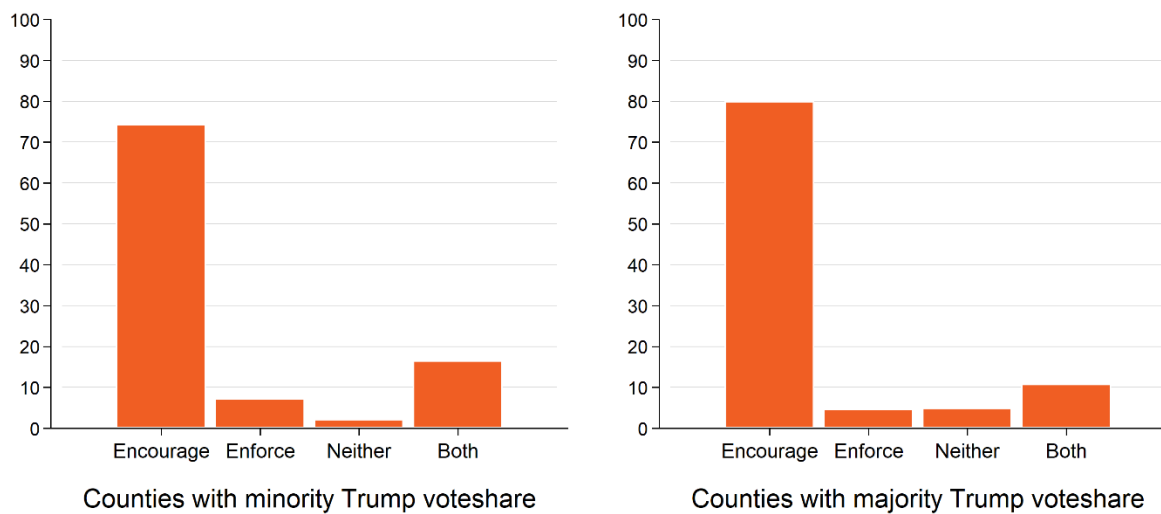


Figure A6.5

Analysis by COVID-19 Cases

COVID-19 Compliance in 3 Months

% of local policymakers who believe that community compliance will...

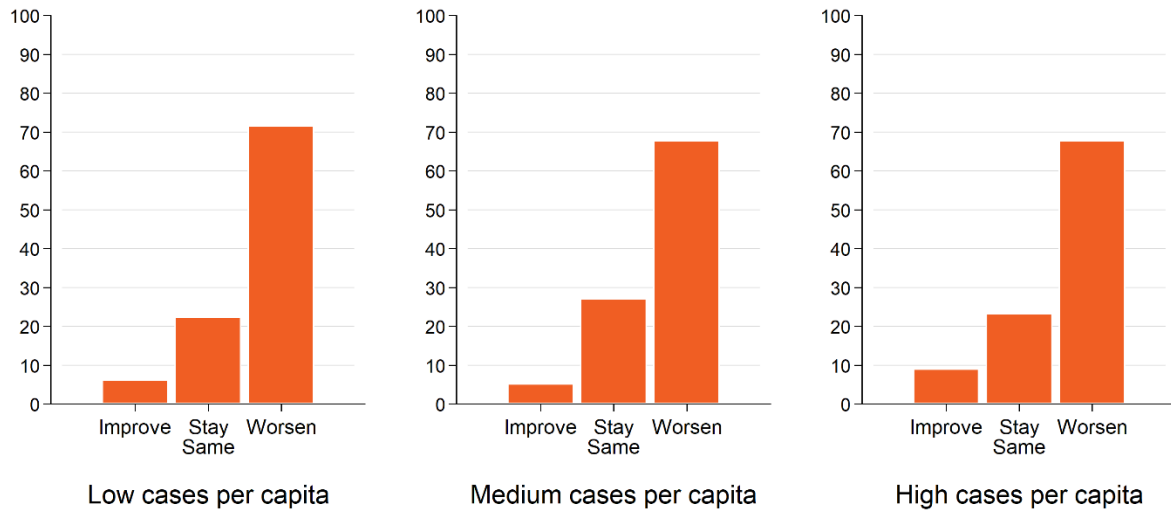


Figure A7.1

Current Community Compliance with Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

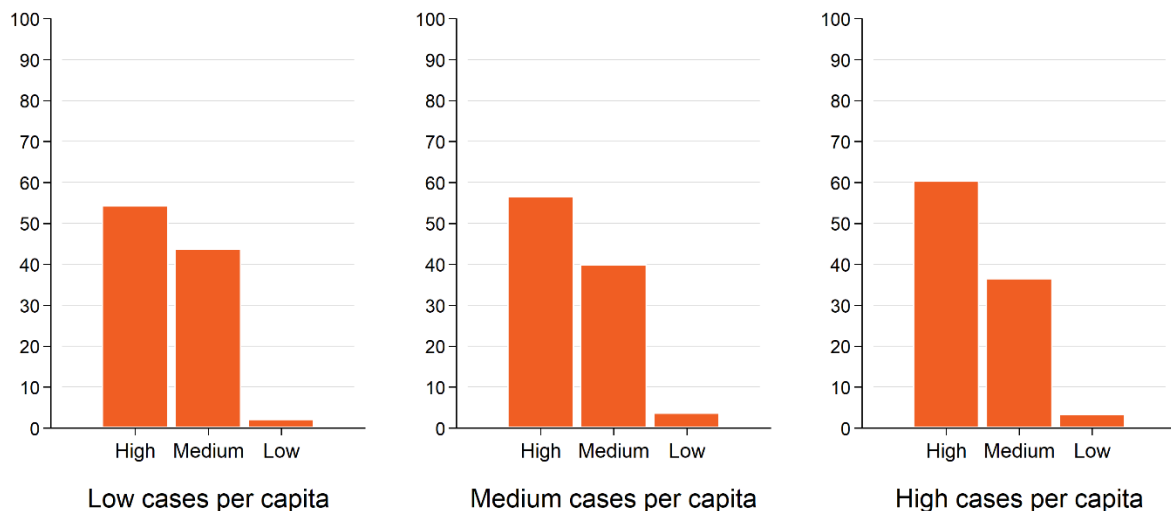


Figure A7.2

Current Community Compliance with Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

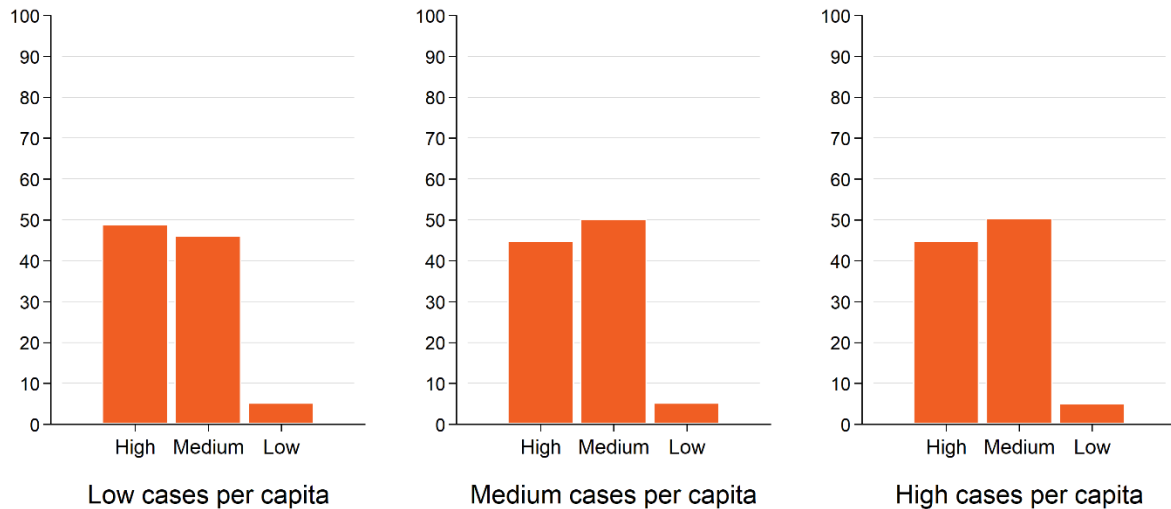


Figure A7.3

How Local Governments Implement Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

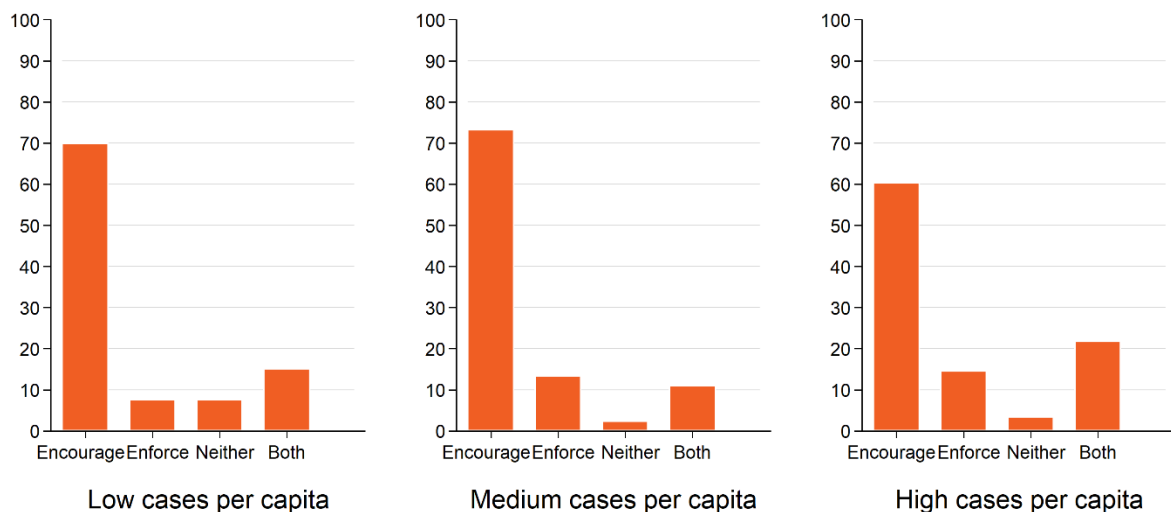


Figure A7.4

How Local Governments Implement Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

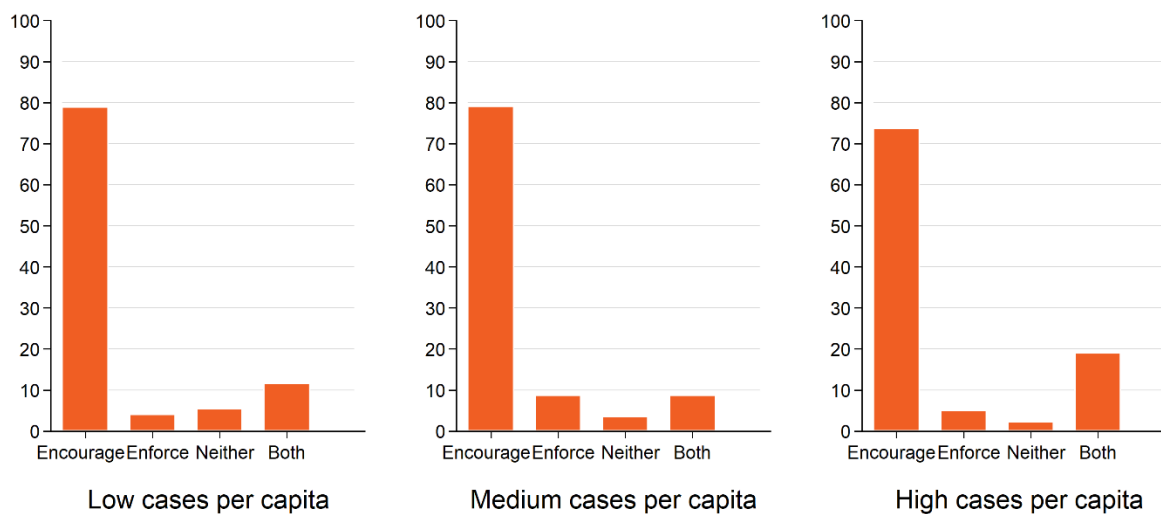


Figure A7.5

Analysis by Census Region

COVID-19 Compliance in 3 Months

% of local policymakers who believe that community compliance will...

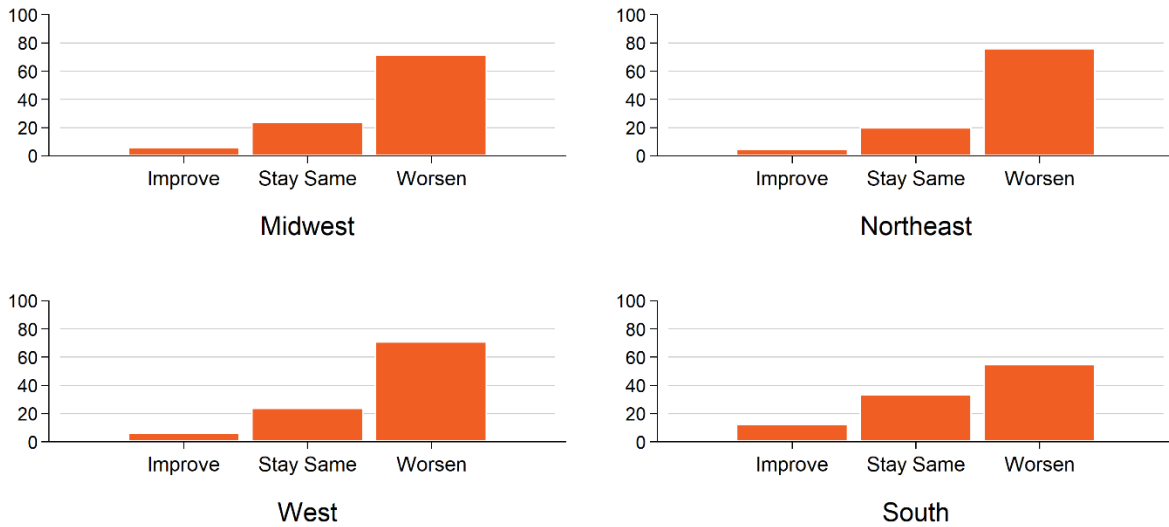


Figure A8.1

Current Community Compliance with Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

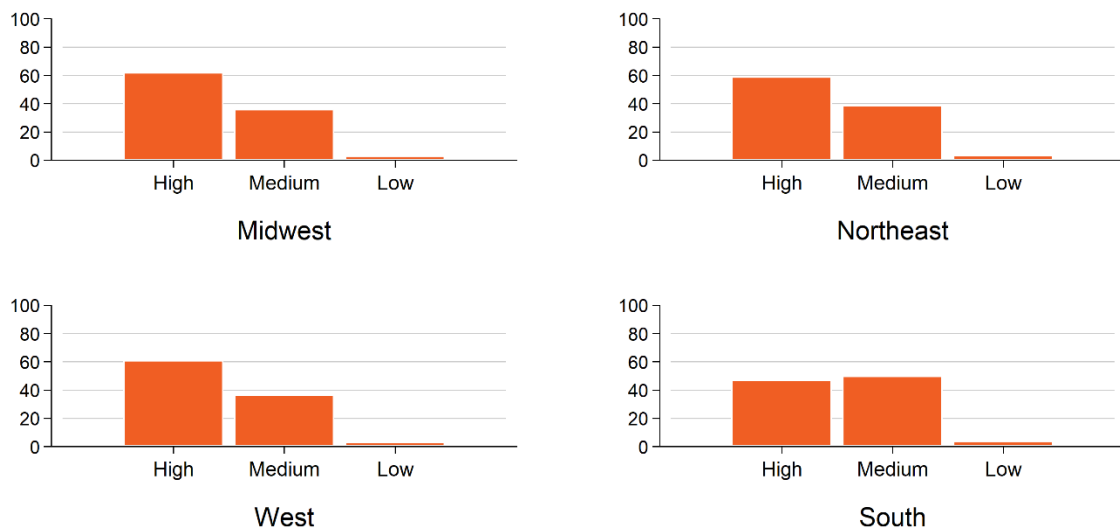


Figure A8.2

Current Community Compliance with Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

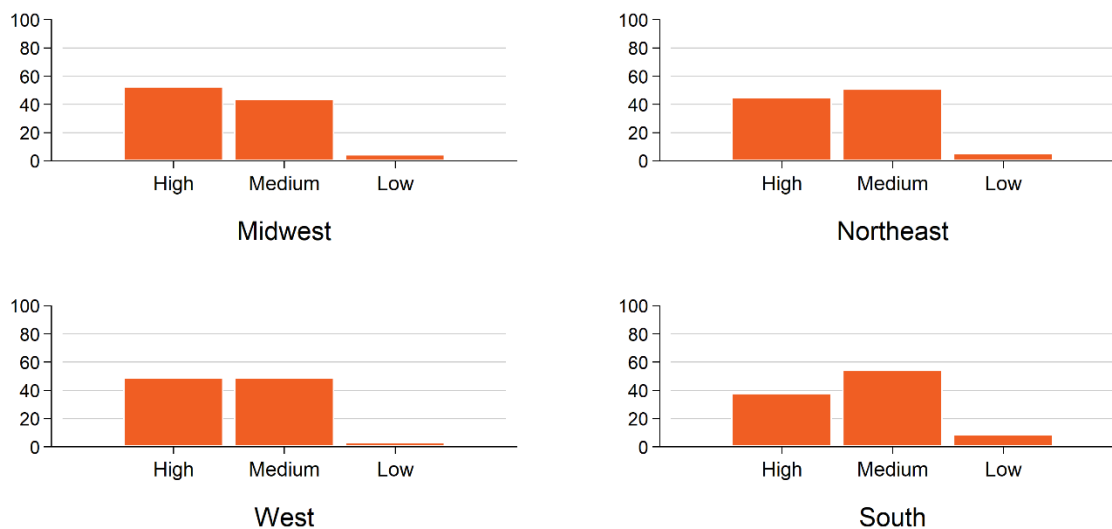


Figure A8.3

How Local Governments Implement Reducing In-Person Work

Local policymakers, %

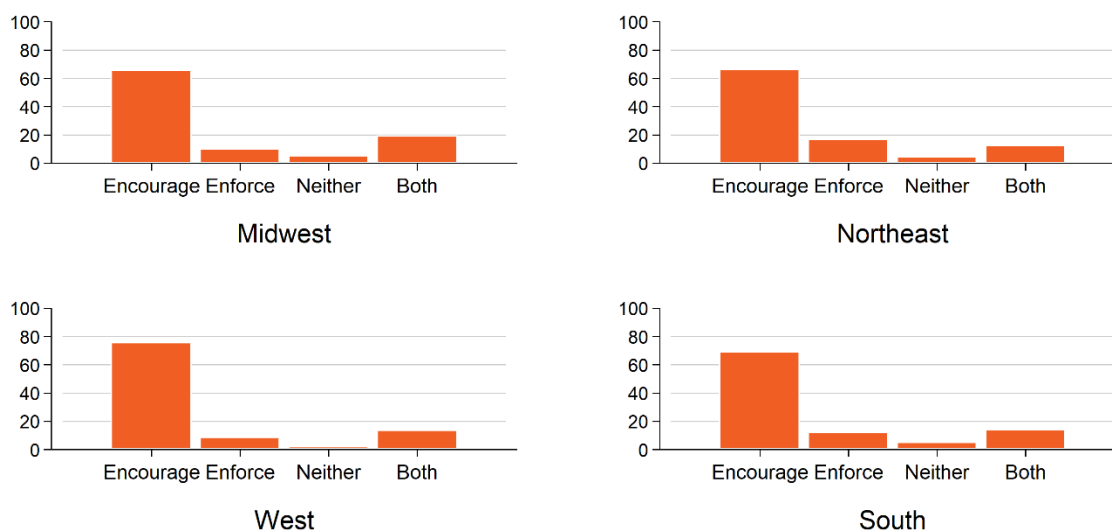


Figure A8.4

How Local Governments Implement Social Distancing

Local policymakers, %

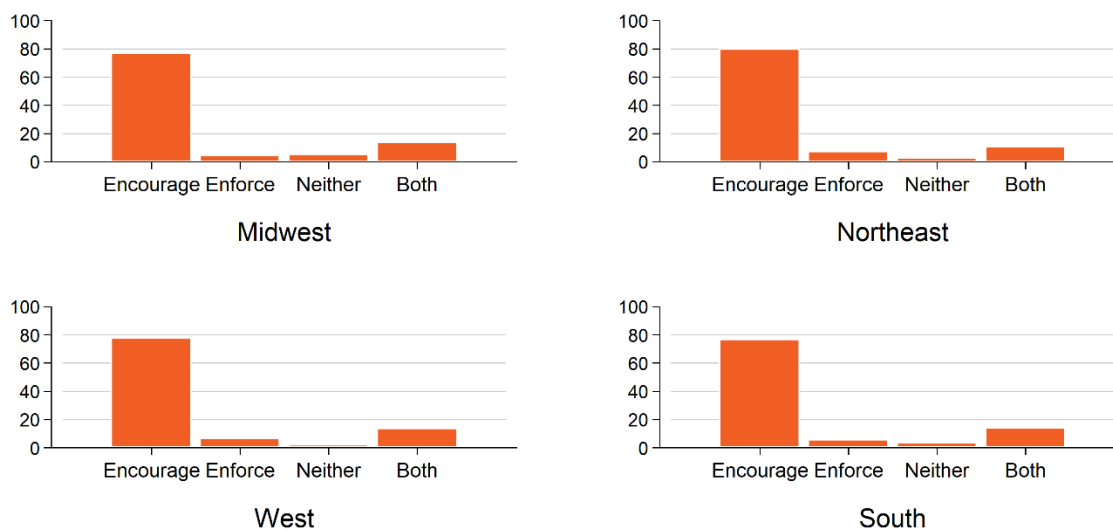


Figure A8.5