

TESTING THE WATERS

In partnership with the
Institute for Local
Government

and

The Davenport Institute
for Public Engagement
and Civic Leadership at
Pepperdine University

Sponsored by
The James Irvine
Foundation

California's Local Officials
Experiment with New Ways
to Engage the Public

Testing the Waters: California's Local Officials Experiment with New Ways to Engage the Public

A Report from Public Agenda by
Carolyn Hagelskamp, John Immerwahr
and Jeremy Hess

Prepared in partnership with the
Institute for Local Government and
The Davenport Institute for Public
Engagement and Civic Leadership
at Pepperdine University

Sponsored by:
The James Irvine Foundation

Available online at:
[http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/
public-engagement-in-california](http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-engagement-in-california)

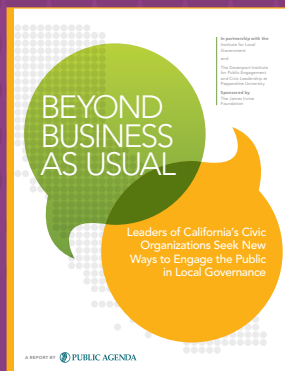
Design: Carrie Chatterson Studio
Copyediting: Kym Surridge

Copyright © 2013 Public Agenda

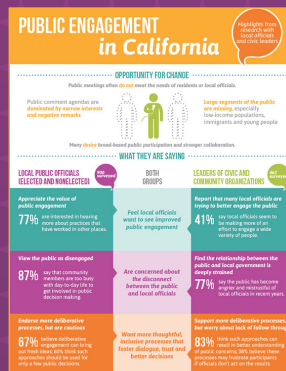
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–ShareAlike 3.0 Unported license. To view a copy of this license, visit [http://creativecommons.org/licenses/
by-nc-sa/3.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, CA 94105, USA.

Public Engagement in California

This report is part of a series that examines the current state of public participation in local government decision making in California. The series also includes:



Beyond Business as Usual
Leaders of California's Civic Organizations Seek New Ways to Engage the Public in Local Governance



Public Engagement in California
Highlights from research with local officials and civic leaders

TESTING THE WATERS

California's Local Officials Experiment with New Ways to Engage the Public

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	5
Main Findings	7
Recommendations	36
Methodology	42
Full Survey Results	44
Sample Characteristics	60
Bibliography.	63
Related Publications	64
Acknowledgements	66

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What opportunities do Californians have to engage with public issues and influence decisions that affect their lives?

What are ways to strengthen relations between communities and their local governments?

This report explores the attitudes of California's local officials toward public participation in local governance. These officials believe that the current models for including the public in local decision making fail to meet the needs of both residents and local officials. Most local officials seek broad-based participation from the public and want to hear more about approaches that have worked elsewhere. Many are already experimenting with more inclusive and deliberative forms of engagement. Overall, this study suggests California's local officials may be ready for newer and more effective ways to engage the public and for stronger collaborations with community-based organizations.

The report also includes concrete recommendations for local officials and their institutions, civic leaders and their organizations, and foundations and other funders. The recommendations can help improve public engagement in local governance throughout California and, we hope, beyond.

Public Agenda conducted this research in partnership with the Institute of Local Government and The Davenport Institute at Pepperdine University. The work was commissioned by The James Irvine Foundation.

Data for this research was collected through a statewide, representative survey of 900 local officials, conducted between July 10 and August 23, 2012, and through additional focus groups and individual interviews with local officials across the state. The study included both elected and nonelected officials.

These are the main findings of this research.

1. Local officials perceive the public as largely disengaged, despite many opportunities for participation.

Local officials see themselves as doing a reasonable job providing ample opportunity for the public to participate in local decision making. Yet they feel that large sectors of the public are disengaged. Most local officials view the public as largely uninformed and increasingly distrustful.

2. Local officials see shortcomings in traditional public engagement approaches.

At the same time, most local officials acknowledge that public hearings and comments are often not conducive to broad-based and thoughtful participation and that these meetings—frequently dominated by narrow interests and negative comments—may not serve the needs and skills of large sections of the public.

3. Among local officials, there is widespread interest in better ways to engage the public.

Most local officials want to learn about new and different ways to engage the public more effectively, and they seek information from various sources to do so. Many local officials also stress that, through experiences and challenges, they have come to appreciate the value of public engagement more, although some seem to have become disheartened with the public over time.

4. There is a growing awareness of deliberative public engagement processes among local officials.

Almost all local officials have participated in public engagement activities that are designed to foster dialogue and deliberation on public issues among a diverse group of residents, and that seek to increase the public's understanding of and impact on public decisions. Nearly all local officials can think of issues that would lend themselves particularly well to these techniques. But they are hesitant to overuse this approach, preferring to limit it to a smaller number of appropriate public decisions.

5. Local officials differ in their views on the benefits and costs of deliberative public engagement processes.

A large number (42 percent) of local officials are already enthusiastic supporters of deliberative public engagement. They believe it has the potential to increase officials' understanding of community concerns, bring about fresh ideas, build public support and trust and lead to more sound public decisions. Only 11 percent reject these benefits. Another large group (47 percent) evaluates the potential promise of deliberative approaches tentatively. Nonetheless, for all three groups, broad-based public participation remains the major concern.

6. Local officials are confident in their capacity to implement a deliberative engagement process.

Aside from the task of ensuring broad-based participation, local officials are quite confident in their ability to effectively implement a comprehensive deliberative public engagement process. Few officials see other major challenges to ensuring a quality process. However, there are some indications that this confidence is not always grounded in practical experience.

7. Local officials use online media and web-based engagement hesitantly.

Local officials are also experimenting with online media and digital technologies to reach out and engage the public—but not always wholeheartedly. While some feel these technologies have improved their relationships with the public, most find it difficult to assess their effectiveness.

8. Local officials report somewhat limited collaborations with community-based organizations.

Even though many local officials say they use community-based organizations and their networks to facilitate communication with the public, they typically work with them only “a little,” and comparatively few list organizations that engage with traditionally disenfranchised groups as regular collaborators in this effort, suggesting that there is potential for more and more diverse collaborations.

9. In rural communities, local officials report less public participation experience and fewer resources.

There are considerable differences across the state in the capacity and interest of local officials to explore new methods of engaging the public. In particular, officials serving rural communities report having fewer resources and less experience with deliberative forms of public engagement than their urban and suburban counterparts.

10. County officials indicate somewhat more experience with deliberative engagement approaches than city officials.

County officials report somewhat more personal experience with deliberative processes and more frequent collaborations with community-based organizations compared with city officials. They are also more likely than their municipal counterparts to believe deliberative engagement processes could lead to better public decisions.

Recommendations for supporting more effective and inclusive public engagement

Based on this research, as well as its companion study with California civic leaders and decades of experience supporting sound public engagement, Public Agenda proposes a number of recommendations for local officials and civic and community-based organizations who seek to improve the public decision-making process by including broad cross-sections of the public in meaningful deliberations, as well as for foundations and other supporters interested in funding these efforts. These are the main ideas in brief:

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR STRONGER PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Local officials and their institutions can gain from:

- Partnering with community-based organizations
- Hiring and training staff to increase public engagement skills
- Networking with colleagues who have effective practices
- Evaluating local efforts



Civic leaders and their organizations can gain from:

- Partnering with local officials
- Hiring and training staff to increase public engagement skills
- Networking and sharing resources with other organizations
- Evaluating local efforts



Funders can make a difference by supporting:

- Partnerships between public officials and local organizations
- Trainings and technical assistance
- Experiments, including use of online engagement tools
- Research, evaluation and knowledge sharing



For more information on this study and its companion study with California civic leaders, visit: <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-engagement-in-california>

INTRODUCTION

What is the state of public participation in local government decision making in California?

What opportunities do Californians have to engage with public issues?

Where, other than at the ballot box, do elected officials hear from the residents they represent?

What stands in the way of more productive dialogues between local officials—both elected and nonelected—and the residents they serve?

To provide some answers to these questions, we conducted a research study that sought the opinions of more than 900 local officials and 500 leaders of civic and community-based organizations in California. We asked these local officials and civic leaders about their efforts to engage the public in decision making, their experiences with traditional public hearings at council and commission meetings and their interests and attitudes toward newer forms of public engagement—especially methods that seek to give broad cross sections of the public the opportunity to deliberate over local issues and weigh the trade-offs of policy decisions that affect their lives.

Local public officials' perspective

This report—the first of two summarizing this research—presents the perspective of California's public officials. Nine hundred local officials from across 370 California cities (77 percent of the total) and 53 California counties (91 percent of the total) replied to a statewide survey conducted from July 10 to August 23, 2012. Respondents ranged from council members, city managers, mayors and county supervisors to directors from various agencies such as Community Development, Public Works, Planning, Parks and Recreation and others. They hailed from rural, urban and suburban communities across the state, with an average of 22 years of experience in public service. In addition to the survey, we conducted a number of focus groups and interviews with local officials across the state. The following page summarizes key characteristics of survey respondents. The Methodology section at the end of the report provides a detailed description of the design of this study, participating officials and the data analysis process.

This report presents findings from the survey, augmented with illustrative quotes from our focus groups and interviews. It concludes with practical recommendations emerging from this study and its companion study on civic leaders' perspectives for how to encourage productive relationships between local officials and the public and expand opportunities for broad sections of the public to meaningfully participate in local decision making.

Companion study: The views of civic leaders and their organizations

Results from our parallel study with leaders of California's civic and community-based organizations are detailed in a separate report, "Beyond Business as Usual: Leaders of California's Civic Organizations Seek New Ways to Engage the Public in Local Governance." Both reports conclude with recommendations for future action and research that draw on insights gained from our work with local officials and civic leaders.

Characteristics of the Survey Sample

900 local officials across California participated in this survey.

The survey was fielded from July 10 to August 23, 2012.

These tables summarize characteristics of participating local officials.

Positions



Administrative Unit



Years in Office



Gender



Types of Officials¹



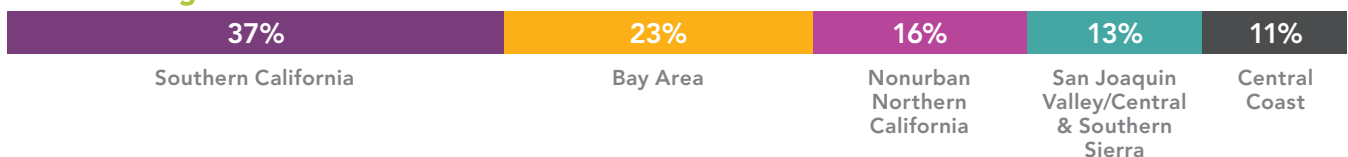
Urbanicity



Political Affiliation



California Regions



¹As self-identified by officials.



MAIN FINDINGS



Local officials perceive the public as largely disengaged, despite many opportunities for participation.

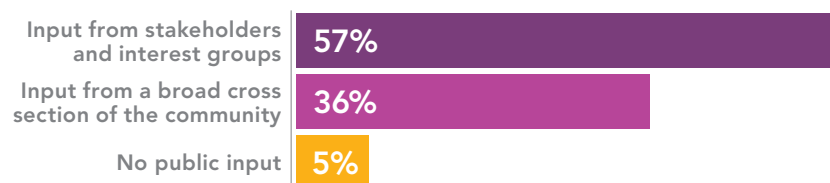
Local officials see themselves as doing a reasonable job providing ample opportunity for the public to participate in local decision making. Yet they feel that large sectors of the public are disengaged. Most local officials view the public as largely uninformed and increasingly distrustful.

88% of local officials feel that **community members have ample opportunity to participate** in local government decision making.

The majority of local officials feel that they are doing their best in providing opportunities for public input and rarely making significant decisions in consultation with experts only. Moreover, most say their public engagement efforts are guided by defined goals and protocols. Many are confident that their typical public meetings are effective in explaining issues to the community and that they give officials a solid understanding of the public's concerns. Only a minority agree that they and their colleagues are isolated from public opinion.

Local officials say they rarely make decisions without public input.

Percent of local officials who say that significant decisions are made by leaders and experts with:



Only a minority (35%) of local officials think that they or their colleagues often become isolated from the residents they serve.



70% say that efforts to engage the public in decision making are guided by defined goals, plans and protocols.

63% say that traditional public hearings and public comments are very effective in explaining issues to the public

59% say that these meetings give local officials a solid understanding of the broad public's concerns and preferences

My door is open. People can come see me. They can come see a council member. There are lots of commissions. We're dealing with issues in a public, transparent manner.

— MAYOR, CENTRAL COAST



However, local officials believe the public remains largely disengaged from community affairs. They see most residents as either not well informed about the issues that affect their communities or as neither willing nor able to make time to participate in public decision making. Local officials feel that instead of participating, community members are only becoming angrier and more mistrustful of local government.

87% say that **community members are too busy** with day-to-day life to get involved in public decision making

72% say **community members do not keep abreast of the issues** that affect their community's well-being

69% believe that instead **community members have become much angrier and mistrustful** of local officials in recent years.

Lots of times they don't want to know. They elect you to make the decision. It would be nice if the electorate really was informed, but they don't have the time, or they don't want to take the time to really get informed, because lots of times it's a very complex issue.

— COUNCIL MEMBER, SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Most of the people who speak Spanish in our community are either from Mexico or their parents were from Mexico, and there's a general distrust of government and a cynicism about being able to impact government.

— PUBLIC COMMISSION MEMBER, CENTRAL COAST

Compared with recent public opinion polling, local officials may be overly pessimistic about the public's mistrust. A September 2012 Gallup poll³ finds that public trust in local officials nationwide is higher than for most other officials (74 percent express a great deal or fair amount of trust in local government, versus 65 percent in state government), and that it has only increased in recent years. And the Public Policy Institute of California finds in a 2012 survey that "on issues as diverse as schools and public safety, Californians express more confidence in local than state government and wish to see even more authority shifted to the local level."⁴ However, this may be truer for white Californians. In some studies African-Americans in California have expressed more trust in the federal than their state and local government.⁵

Full survey results can be found at the end of this report.

³Jeff Jones and Lydia Saad, "In U.S., Trust in State, Local Governments Up," Gallup, September 26, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/157700/trust-state-local-governments.aspx>.

⁴Mark Baldassare, "Improving California's Democracy" (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 2012), http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/atissue/AI_1012MBAI.pdf.

⁵California Forward and the National Conference on Citizenship, "California Civic Health Index 2009 - Hunkering Down: Volunteering and Civic Engagement During Turbulent Economic Times" (Washington, DC: National Conference on Citizenship, 2009), <http://www.ncoc.net/CALIFORNIACHI>.

2

Local officials see shortcomings in traditional public engagement approaches.

At the same time, most local officials acknowledge that public hearings and comments are often not conducive to broad-based and thoughtful participation and that these meetings—frequently dominated by narrow interests and negative comments—may not serve the needs and skills of large sections of the public.

While most local officials view traditional meetings as effective means to communicate with the public, they also agree that these formats of public engagement have serious shortcomings.

The majority of local officials commonly see public meetings and comments hijacked by narrow interests and “professional citizens,” which doesn’t allow for meaningful discussions among ordinary residents.



76% say that public meetings are typically **dominated by people with narrow agendas**



64% say that public hearings typically attract complainers and “professional citizens”; they **don’t give voice to the real public.**



Only **49%** say their typical meetings **generate thoughtful discussion** among ordinary residents and that they **expand participation** beyond the usual suspects.



And **30%** conclude that the **typical public hearings are not effective**; they only do them because they have to.

We have the one-issue people everywhere. What we don’t have are people that have an everyday sense of the whole community. It can’t just be one issue.

— COUNCIL MEMBER, BAY AREA



Many local officials believe that the typical public engagement formats may not serve the needs and skills of large sections of the public, and hence shut out and discourage some residents.

48% of local officials agree that **community members who do not belong to an organized group** that can mobilize them **are often left out** of the public decision-making process.

40% believe that typical public **hearings and meetings do not help ordinary residents** become more realistic about the trade-offs and choices facing local government.

We have done things that have caused mistrust. Often we go to the community, we put a group of experts in the front of the room, we talk at the residents for 40 minutes, and then we say, "What do you think?" That's not civic engagement.

— CITY MANAGER, BAY AREA

66% of local officials named a group of residents that they have found especially **difficult to engage** in the public decision-making process. They listed, especially,

YOUNG ADULTS
WORKING FAMILIES
RACIAL/ETHNIC MINORITIES
LOW-INCOME INDIVIDUALS AND SENIORS
IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Local officials recognize a variety of challenges that may keep these groups disengaged, many of which the typical public hearing does little to alleviate. The challenges include:

- A lack of knowledge about public topics and local government
- Little participatory experience or confidence
- Limited time and resources to get involved
- Limited English proficiency
- Doubt that anything they contribute will make a difference

3

Among local officials, there is widespread interest in better ways to engage the public.

Most local officials want to learn about new and different ways to engage the public more effectively, and they seek information from various sources to do so. Many local officials also stress that, through experiences and challenges, they have come to appreciate the value of public engagement more, although some seem to have become disheartened with the public over time.

77% say they are **interested in hearing more about public engagement practices that have worked in other places.**

Most local officials are interested in hearing about public engagement efforts that have worked elsewhere. Nearly all are receiving information and ideas on activities and strategies for improving public participation from various sources.

They also report that they have a number of **sources of information and ideas** for improving public participation in local government decision making, including:

- Local government associations (76%)
- Agency staff (75%)
- Colleagues in other cities or counties (68%)
- Professional associations such as the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) (51%)
- Consultants (45%)
- Research institutes and think tanks (22%)

These numbers are nearly identical to those reported in the Institute of Local Government's 2007 survey⁶ of California city and county officials, suggesting officials continue to receive information about public engagement from the same sources as and largely to the same extent that they did five years ago.

⁶S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, "Engaging Local Communities: Governance and Public Involvement in California Cities and Counties" (Institute for Local Government, 2008).

Many local officials say that over time and with experience their views of public engagement have changed. In open-ended responses they say that they have come to appreciate the importance of public engagement more.



85% say that **their views on public engagement have changed** since their careers began, and 42% say that their views have changed a lot.

Most of those whose views have changed a lot say that they have come to understand and value public engagement more over time.

I've realized public engagement is critical for making important and fundamental decisions about the community's future. The old style of decision making just doesn't allow for good community participation.

— CITY MANAGER, CENTRAL COAST

I realize how important it can be and how undervalued it is.

— COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR, SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

I have a greater appreciation of the value of public input. It provides a greater range of problem-solving ideas and creates better consensus for decisions.

— CITY MANAGER, SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Just having good intentions does not work. You must get the constituents involved in "process" to make a difference.

— COUNTY OFFICIAL, BAY AREA



Some local officials, however, seem to have become disillusioned by an increasingly angry public and more narrow-minded special interests. And 22 percent say that they are not even somewhat interested in hearing about how public engagement practices have worked in other places.

I believed people were much more engaged, but have come to see how little people participate. They complain a lot, but won't get involved.

— PUBLIC WORKS DIRECTOR, NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

People have become more polarized on issues and unwilling to accept compromises. Policy issues have become a zero-sum game to participants.

— COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR, SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

I am more cynical and tired of dealing with organized groups. The voice of a single resident is lacking now, because it isn't heard over the voices of special interest lobbying groups.

— PLANNING DIRECTOR, SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



4

There is a growing awareness of deliberative public engagement processes among local officials.

Almost all local officials have participated in public engagement activities that are designed to foster dialogue and deliberation on public issues among a diverse group of residents, and that seek to increase the public's understanding of and impact on public decisions. Nearly all local officials can think of issues that would lend themselves particularly well to these techniques. But they are hesitant to overuse this approach, preferring to limit it to a smaller number of appropriate public decisions.



The specific deliberative engagement scenario included these elements:

- Local officials and civic leaders bring together a large and diverse group of residents who meet for several hours to discuss a public issue facing the community.
- Participants break into small discussion groups, each containing a variety of people and perspectives.
- Sessions are led by a facilitator.
- The ideas and preferences emerging from public deliberation are shared with all other participants and the broader community
- Suggestions for actions emerging from public deliberation are presented to appropriate local officials.

Deliberative public engagement

We sought to gauge local officials' views on and experience with nontraditional and more deliberative forms of public engagement.^{7,8} The goal of deliberative public engagement approaches is typically to break down exactly those barriers that many officials agree are standing in the way of productive, broad-based and civil public participation in government decision making. Specifically, it seeks to combat a lack of understanding and public trust, to attract more people to public meetings and to help counter the domination of the loudest voices.



Rather than merely presenting the public with additional information, deliberative strategies are predicated on the idea that one must also help people understand the choices that the community faces in addressing a public problem, including the values underlying those choices and the likely consequences of different choices. And it involves the use of well-designed ways for people to work through those choices and their pros and cons.

Instead of asking local officials about deliberative public engagement in conceptual terms, we probed their attitudes by presenting a specific scenario that entailed some key deliberative features. This scenario is meant not to be prescriptive but to exemplify what a deliberative process may look like, and hence elicit local officials' views on such approaches in general.

⁷For more information on these approaches to public engagement see, for example, "Golden Governance: Building Effective Public Engagement in California" (Davenport Institute, 2011), <http://ncoc.net/GoldenGovernance>, or "Principles of Local Government Public Engagement" (Institute for Local Government), <http://www.ca-ilg.org/PublicEngagementPrinciples>.

⁸For some of Public Agenda's own work on deliberative public engagement, see the "Related Publications" section of this report on page 53, or see Daniel Yankelovich and Will Friedman, eds., *Toward Wiser Public Judgment* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010).

Many local officials have participated in a deliberative public engagement process in the past twelve months.

53% of local officials say that, in the past year, they **participated in a meeting that resembled the deliberative public engagement example** presented here.

Many more report that they have been in meetings that employed at least some core aspect of a deliberative public engagement process in the past year:

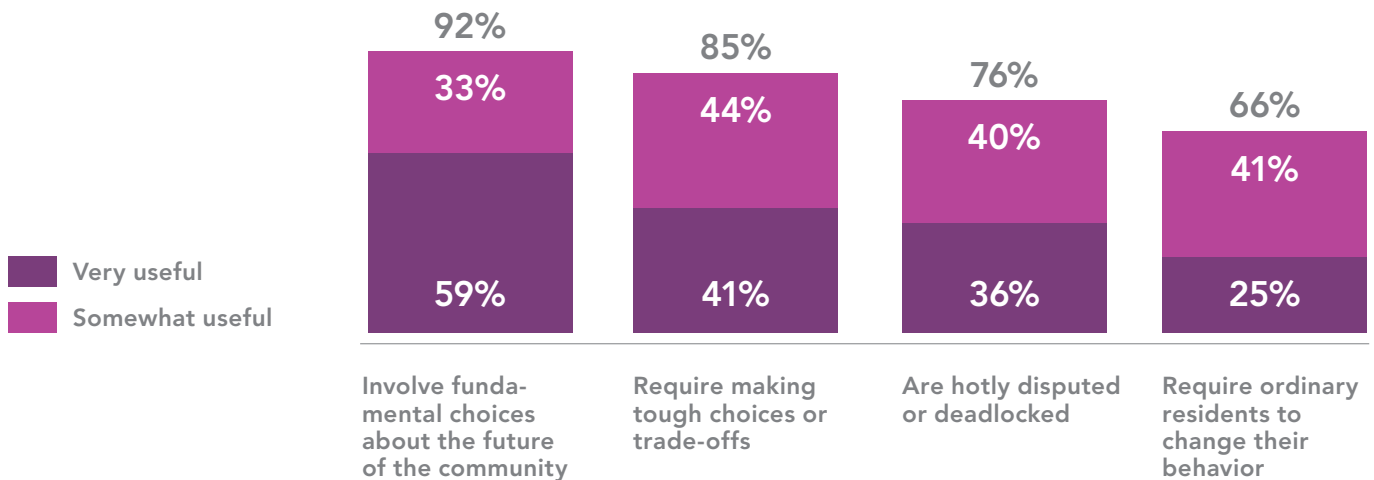
80% have seen preferences emerging from public deliberation that had an impact on final decisions.

70% say they have been part of meetings in which community members discussed trade-offs and costs of different solutions.

Nearly all local officials can think of issues that would be appropriate to address through a deliberative engagement approach.

Yet overall, most seem hesitant to overuse deliberative processes, preferring to limit them to a smaller number of the most appropriate public decisions.

Percent of officials who say a deliberative public engagement process would be at least somewhat useful for **issues that**:







ONLY:

35% say deliberative engagement approaches are useful for issues that already have clear-cut public support

24% say deliberative public engagement is useful for decisions that require immediate action

90% of local officials **suggest a specific issue they think will lend itself particularly well to a deliberative engagement process.**

The most commonly mentioned issues are:

-  **38%** land use, housing and economic development
-  **28%** long-term community goal setting
-  **24%** finances and budgets
-  **18%** community services

Local officials increasingly see benefits in applying deliberative approaches to budgeting decisions. In the Institute of Local Government's 2007 survey⁹, only 16 percent of officials thought that civic engagement in general could be "very helpful" in local budgeting decisions. In the current survey, 24 percent of officials brought up finances and budgeting as "particularly suitable" for engagement, without being specifically probed. That figure may have been even higher had we asked officials explicitly, as the 2007 survey did.

Yet overall, more than twice as many local officials think deliberative engagement approaches should be used for "only a few public decisions," compared with those who want these strategies to be used for "a good number" of public decisions.

Percent of local officials who say that a deliberative public engagement process would be useful to undertake for:



The Public should definitely be involved in major change kind of things, like bringing in a BART train or redesigning a downtown or doing a general plan. However, on the day-to-day kind of decisions that council members have to make all the time, I think it's very hard for the public to have input, unless they really study up and learn. Council members spend years getting experienced enough to make those kinds of decisions.

— CITY MANAGER, BAY AREA

⁹Ramakrishnan, "Engaging Local Communities."

5

Local officials differ in their views on the benefits and costs of deliberative public engagement processes.

A large number (42 percent) of local officials are already enthusiastic supporters of deliberative public engagement. They believe it has the potential to increase officials' understanding of community concerns, bring about fresh ideas, build public support and trust and lead to more sound public decisions. Only 11 percent reject these benefits. Another large group (47 percent) evaluates the potential promise of deliberative approaches tentatively. Nonetheless, for all three groups, broad-based public participation remains the major concern.

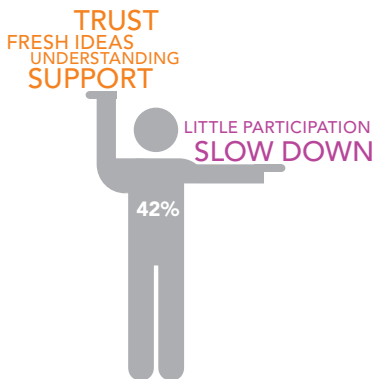
Supporters, Tentatives, Rejecters

We found that when asked about their attitudes toward the potential benefits and costs of a deliberative public engagement process, local officials clearly separate into three groups: **supporters**, **tentatives** and **rejecters**.¹⁰

42% of the sample is made up of **supporters**.

Those local officials are convinced that deliberative engagement approaches bring about a full range of positive outcomes. When asked what would be apt to happen in their community if they implemented a deliberative public engagement process, supporters agreed with every one of the following statements:

- Public concerns would be better understood. ✓
- Support for public decisions would be strengthened. ✓
- Fresh ideas would be heard. ✓
- There would be more trust between community members and public officials. ✓



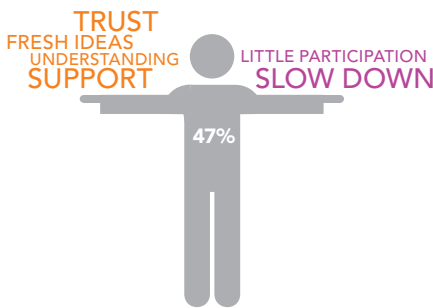
¹⁰These groups were identified through a two-step cluster analysis that included eight categorical variables representing potential costs or benefits of a deliberative public engagement process and local officials' views on whether or not each was likely to happen in their community.

Supporters are not oblivious to potential challenges. Many worry that only a few residents would participate in a deliberative engagement process—but such worries are greatly outweighed by the many benefits this group believes come from deliberative engagement approaches. Two of three supporters had in the past twelve months participated in a deliberative engagement process.

Public engagement used to be hearings. That model doesn't work. Facilitated discussions are better, but we need to go even further in engaging people.

— SUPPORTER

47% of local officials fall in the group of **tentatives**.



Tentatives believe they would see some but not all of these potential benefits of a deliberative approach in their community. For example, 71 percent believe that public concerns would be better understood through a deliberative public engagement process, but only 50 percent believe it would build more trust between community members and residents, and 51 percent expect such a process to generate fresh ideas for public policy. Overall, tentatives seem unsure whether potential benefits can outweigh the challenges associated with public engagement. Only about half of this group had participated in a deliberative engagement approach in the past twelve months.

I see the need to engage the community in order to make difficult decisions. However, the process has become difficult due to stakeholders' taking rigid ideological stands, instead of focusing on finding solutions.

— TENTATIVE

11% of local officials could be classified as **rejecters**.



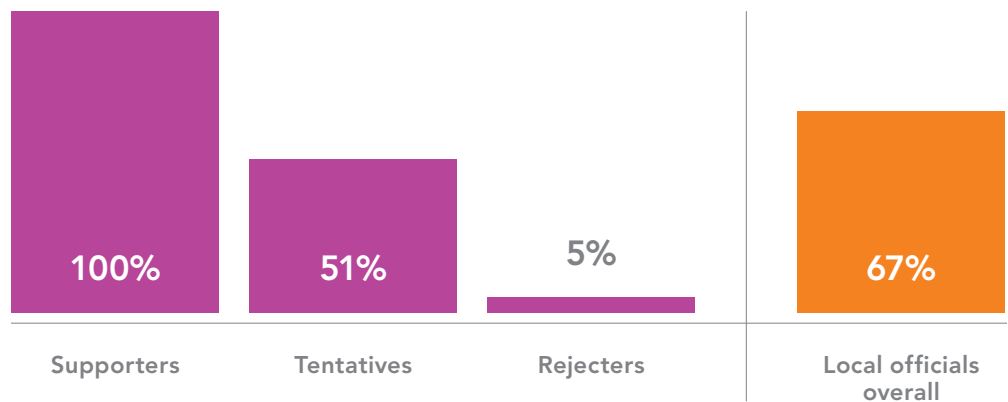
Rejecters are skeptical of any potential benefit that could come out of a deliberative public engagement effort; instead of benefits, they see only challenges and disadvantages to such a process. For example, nearly all rejecters (97 percent) believe few residents would participate in a deliberative engagement process, and virtually no local officials in this group (4 percent) believe that such engagement processes could build trust between residents and local officials. One in three of the rejecters had participated in a deliberative public engagement approach in the past year, presumably with a negative experience.

I used to think that it would be valuable, but the lack of knowledge about government regulations, laws and resources by the general public means that solutions are usually not feasible or able to be accomplished.

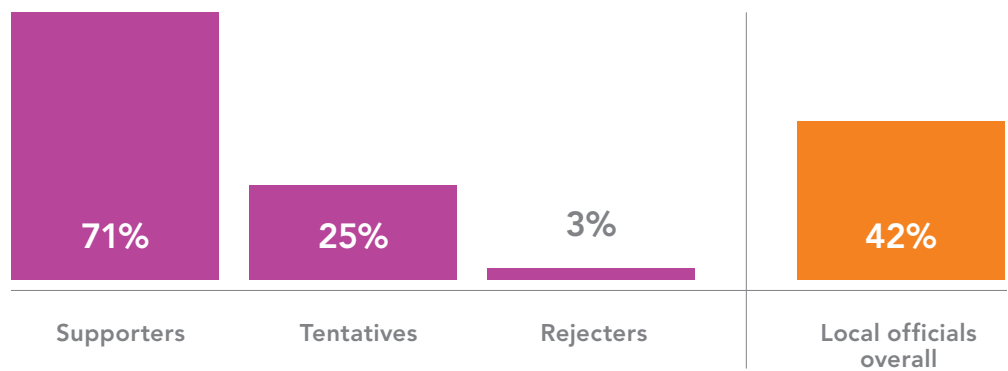
— REJECTER

Can more deliberative forms of public engagement lead to better public decisions? One of the most dramatic differences between the groups concerns whether more deliberative processes actually produce better decisions. The tentatives appear to view such an engagement approach primarily as a way to improve communications with the public, but they don't see it as making a substantive difference in policy making. By contrast, the supporters see deliberative methods as not just a communications strategy but also a tool for better outcomes. Overall, local officials remain uncertain as to whether deliberative public engagement can lead to better decisions.

Percent of local officials who believe a **deliberative public engagement process could bring out fresh ideas:**



Percent of local officials who say **decisions made through a deliberative public engagement process would be more sound.**

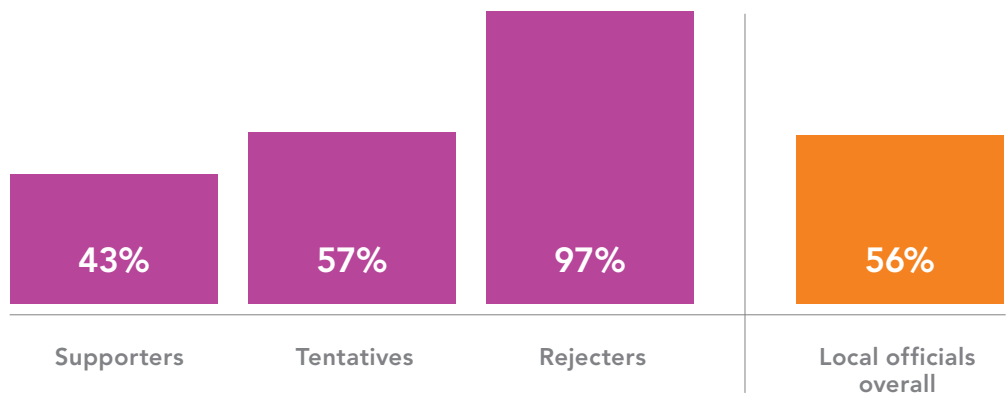


Full survey results can be found at the end of this report.

Comparing these findings to the Institute for Local Government’s (ILG) 2007 California survey, it seems local officials increasingly see public engagement efforts as a way to generate fresh ideas, but the majority remains as uncertain as they were in 2007 that such an approach can lead to better public decisions. **In 2007, only 47 percent of local officials saw their public engagement efforts as an effective means of generating fresh ideas. In our survey, a total of 67 percent of local officials thought so.** However, on related questions, just 47 percent of local officials in 2007 believed their public engagement efforts could bring about solutions to controversial issues; this number is not far off from the 42 percent who in 2012 thought decisions made through deliberative engagement would be more sound. An important question to explore further is what exactly local officials believe constitutes a “more sound” or a “better” public decision.¹¹

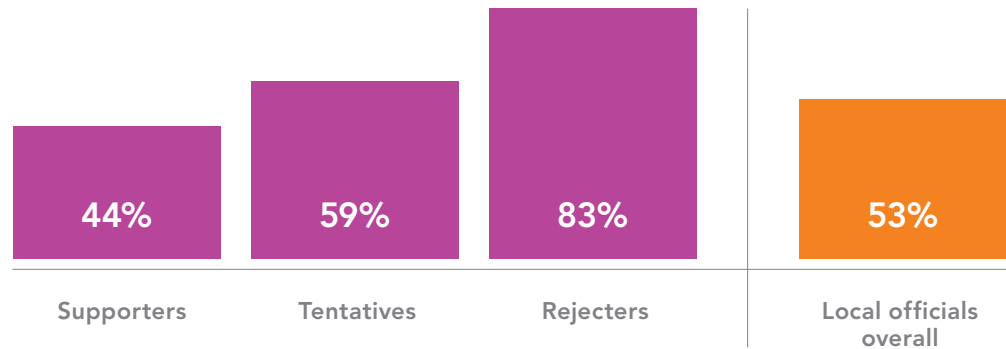
Broad-based public participation remains a major concern. More than half of local officials—including those we identified as supporters—worry that few residents would actually participate in more deliberative processes. Similarly, officials anticipate that the biggest and in fact only serious challenge to implementing deliberative forms of engagement would be ensuring participation “beyond the usual suspects.” And hardly anyone thinks that a deliberative process will necessarily appease all complainers.

Percent of local officials who believe **few residents would participate** in a deliberative public engagement process:

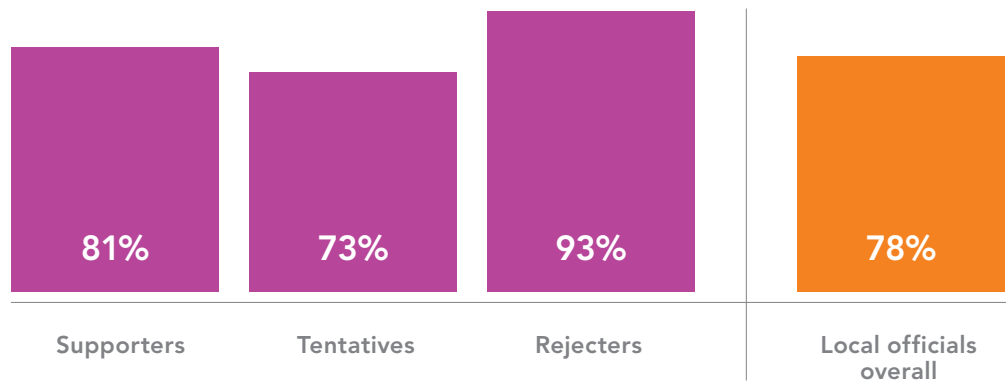


¹¹ The Institute for Local Government’s 2007 survey asked officials whether they thought public engagement processes were a “very,” “somewhat” or “not” important way to “generate new ideas,” “increase trust in local government” and “find solutions to complex issues,” etc. In contrast, our survey asked officials to tick off all the things that they believed would be a likely result of a deliberative engagement process in their communities, including “fresh ideas and solutions would be heard,” “there would be more trust between community members and public officials” and “decisions made this way would be more sound.”

Percent of local officials who believe ensuring **participation “beyond the usual suspects” would be a major challenge** in a deliberative public engagement process:



Percent of local officials who believe that even if they implemented a deliberative public engagement process, **there would still be those who complain they were left out** of the loop:



Once again, these findings mirror ILG’s 2007 data. In 2007, 55 percent of officials were “very concerned” that “it is always the same people that participate” in their public engagement efforts—virtually the same percentage of officials who believe in 2012 that ensuring participation beyond the usual suspects would be a “major challenge.”



Local officials are confident in their capacity to implement a deliberative engagement process.

Aside from the task of ensuring broad-based participation, local officials are quite confident in their ability to effectively implement a comprehensive deliberative public engagement process. Few officials see other major challenges to ensuring a quality process. However, there are some indications that this confidence is not always grounded in practical experience.

The vast majority of local officials see themselves and their offices as capable of helping to implement deliberative public engagement approaches.

Percent of local officials who say they and their office would be very, somewhat or not capable in helping to implement a deliberative public engagement process:



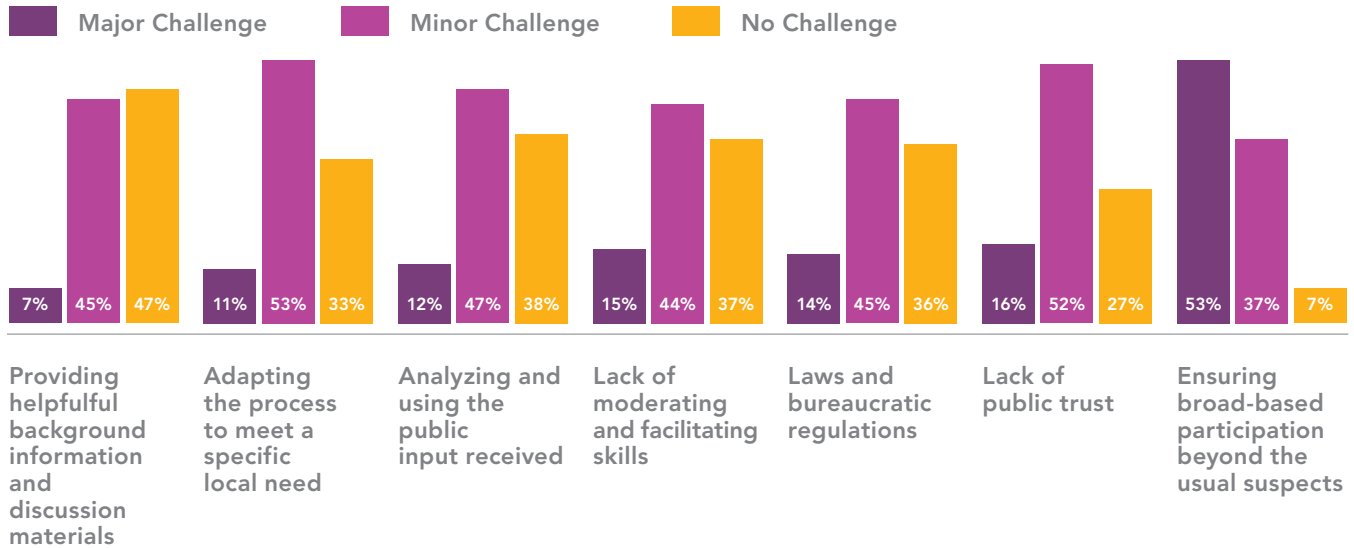
Only **23%** believe they lack the skills and expertise to implement this type of engagement process.

Here, comparisons to the National League of Cities' 2009 nationwide survey¹² of city officials are informative. In that survey, officials were evenly divided on the question of whether they and their colleagues had the skills necessary to conduct inclusive and effective public engagement, with 49 percent saying they did and 48 percent saying they did not. Our finding (i.e., only 23 percent feel they may lack the necessary skills and expertise) may indicate that local officials are more confident when asked to judge only their own, versus theirs and their colleagues' public engagement skills. Alternatively, this finding could mean that California's local officials are significantly more confident than their national counterparts, or that confidence has generally risen in just three years.

¹²William Barnes and Bonnie Mann, "Making Local Democracy Work: Municipal Officials' Views About Public Engagement" (Washington, DC: National League of Cities, 2010), <http://www.nlc.org/build-skills-and-networks/resources/research-reports/research-reports-library>.

Local officials also feel that, aside from the difficulty of bringing in more people, other potential problems are not especially challenging.

Percent of local officials who say the following are either a major, a minor or no challenge:



For most local officials, the major issues in employing a deliberative and inclusive public engagement approach have to do with staff and resources. Cost is also an issue, but it may be less of a concern compared to a lack of staff resources.

69% say a **lack of resources and staff** could stand in the way of a deliberative public engagement approach.

39% say they **have designated staff who work primarily on increasing public participation** in government decision making.

Local officials who say they have designated staff are:

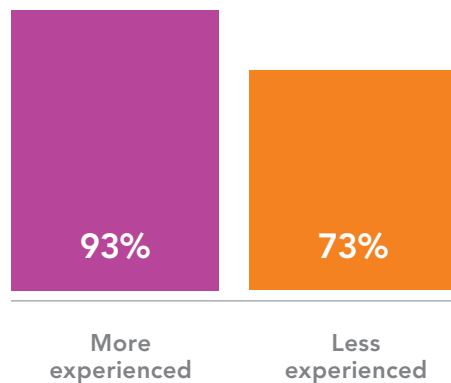
- More likely to have experience with deliberative forms of public engagement: 65 percent versus 46 percent of officials without designated engagement staff.
- More likely to say that their office is “very capable” of implementing such a process (51 percent versus 31 percent) of officials without designated engagement staff.
- Less likely sample to say they lack the expertise (13 percent versus 29 percent) of officials without designated engagement staff.

21% believe the process would be **too costly**.

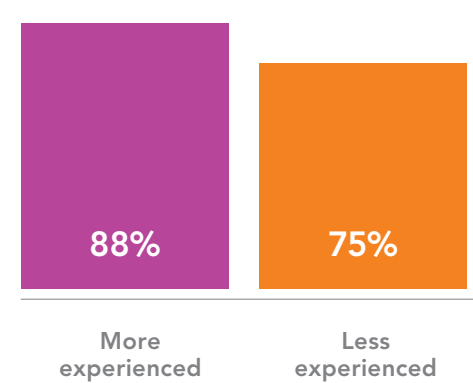
Surprisingly, at least to us, is that even those local officials who say they have little recent experience with a deliberative engagement process do not expect it to be particularly challenging.

Forty-six percent of local officials say that they had not, in the past twelve months, participated in a deliberative public engagement process that closely resembled the example provided in the survey. However, this less experienced group of officials is still generally confident in their capability and expertise to implement such an approach.

Percent of local officials who say they and their office would be **very or somewhat capable in helping to implement a deliberative public engagement process:**



Percent of local officials who see a **lack of moderating and facilitating skills as a minor or no challenge to implementing a deliberative public engagement process:**



Based on our own, long-term experience with public engagement, we believe this finding suggests that local officials may be underestimating the difficulty of implementing deliberative public engagement strategies effectively.

7

Local officials use online media and web-based engagement hesitantly.

Local officials are also experimenting with online media and digital technologies to reach out and engage the public—but not always wholeheartedly. While some feel these technologies have improved their relationships with the public, most find it difficult to assess their effectiveness.

Few local officials use online media other than websites and e-mail to communicate with the public. Most are unsure how effective web-based engagement is.

Almost all of our respondents use websites and e-mail as a means of communicating with the public (with 68 percent saying they do so “a lot”). But only a minority (22 percent) say they use social media (Twitter, Facebook and blogs) a lot as a means of communicating with the public.

Among those officials who say they use online media at least a little:

62% feel that it is **difficult to gauge how effective these methods** are for reaching the public.

62% say that these technologies are **helpful in communicating** with many segments of the public.

20% say these **technologies have vastly improved their relationships** with and connections to the public.



29% feel that social media in particular can **generate a lot of misinformation**.

12% of all officials say they have **participated in an online public engagement forum** that featured interactions between residents and local officials on community issues.

These findings mirror those of ICMA's 2011 national e-democracy survey. ICMA also found that few city and county governments used online media to engage the public in a two-way conversation. Sixty-nine percent said their e-projects and activities mostly involved communications from local government to the citizens, and not the other way around. And just 11 percent said their office had conducted a guided online discussion forum about local issues in the past year, while a mere 4 percent had facilitated or operated a chat room. Nationally, however, local officials seemed more optimistic about the potential benefit of online engagement. Four in ten believed these tools improved their relationship with citizens.¹³

¹³Donald Norris, Christopher Reddick and ICMA, "Electronic Government 2011 Survey" (Washington, DC: International City/County Management Association, 2012), http://icma.org/en/icma/knowledge_network/documents/kn/Document/303564/ICMA_2011_EDemocracy_Survey_Summary.



Local officials report somewhat limited collaborations with community-based organizations.

Even though many local officials say they use community-based organizations and their networks to facilitate communication with the public, they typically work with them only “a little,” and comparatively few list organizations that engage with traditionally disenfranchised groups as regular collaborators in this effort, suggesting that there is potential for more and more diverse collaborations.

Only a third of local officials collaborate with community-based organizations a lot.

Percent of local officials who say they use community-based organizations and the networks they have established:



Most specify using chambers of commerce, homeowner and business associations, churches, rotary clubs and environmental groups as helpful collaborators. Only 20 percent explicitly mention an organization that works with traditionally disenfranchised groups—groups that many officials say they find hard to reach, such as immigrants, ethnic/racial minorities and low-income populations—as a particularly helpful partner.

We called the regular suspects—the Chamber, the Lion’s Club chairman, the people that usually are very active—and said, “Can you bring somebody else?” We had about ten people.

— CITY MANAGER, SJ VALLEY/SOUTH & CENTRAL SIERRA

In our companion study of California civic leaders, we saw a similar pattern of some collaboration between civic and community-based organizations and local officials but with room for growth, especially among the less established organizations and those representing traditionally disenfranchised communities.¹⁴

Most civic and community-based organizations we surveyed (76 percent) had collaborated with a public official in some form over the past twelve months, and 67 percent of civic leaders say that local officials are at least somewhat responsive to requests from their organization.

- However, leaders of civic and community-based organizations that do not receive government funding are much less likely to report responsiveness as compared to leaders of those that do (59 percent versus 78 percent).
- And leaders of somewhat less established organizations—those that have been in existence for fewer than 20 years—report less responsiveness from officials than leaders of more established groups (53 percent versus 71 percent).
- Leaders of organizations that represent traditionally disenfranchised groups—immigrants, ethnic/racial minority populations and low-income populations—are less likely to report responsiveness from local officials (60 percent versus 72 percent).

¹⁴Carolyn Hagelskamp, John Immerwahr, Christopher DiStasi and Jeremy Hess, "Beyond Business as Usual: Leaders of California's Civic Organizations Seek New Ways to Engage the Public in Local Governance" (New York: Public Agenda, 2013).

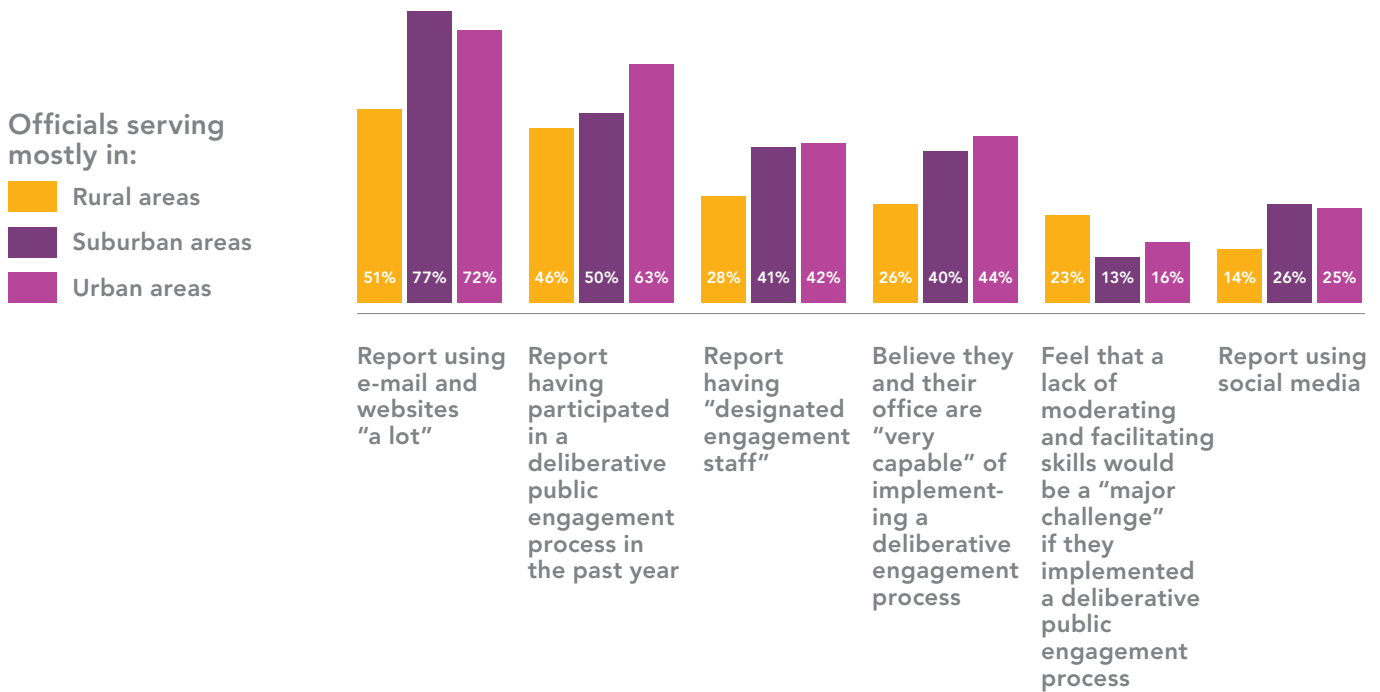


In rural communities, local officials report less public participation experience and fewer resources.

There are considerable differences across the state in the capacity and interest of local officials to explore new methods of engaging the public. In particular, officials serving rural communities report having fewer resources and less experience with deliberative forms of public engagement than their urban and suburban counterparts.

Local officials from rural communities report having fewer resources for public engagement efforts and less experience with deliberative forms of public engagement, compared with officials from suburban and urban communities.

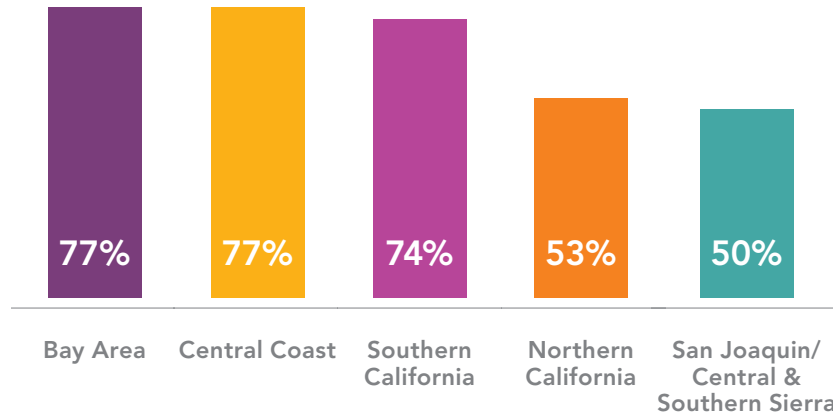
Percent of local officials who:



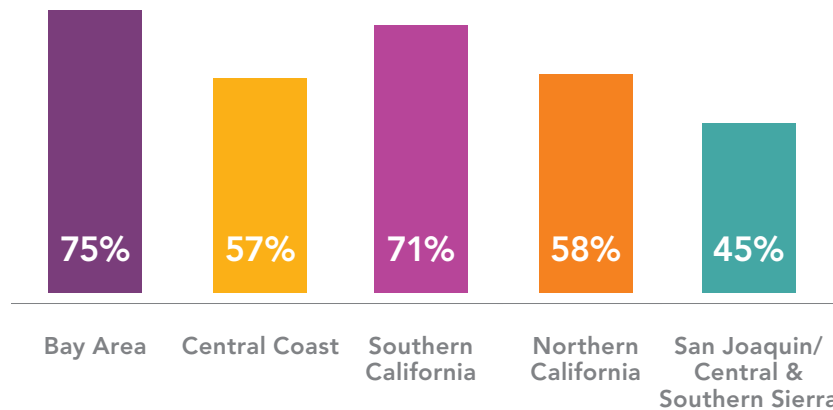


Local officials from nonurban Northern California and those from the San Joaquin Valley and the Central/Southern Sierra region report fewer resources, and somewhat less enthusiasm, for engaging the public.

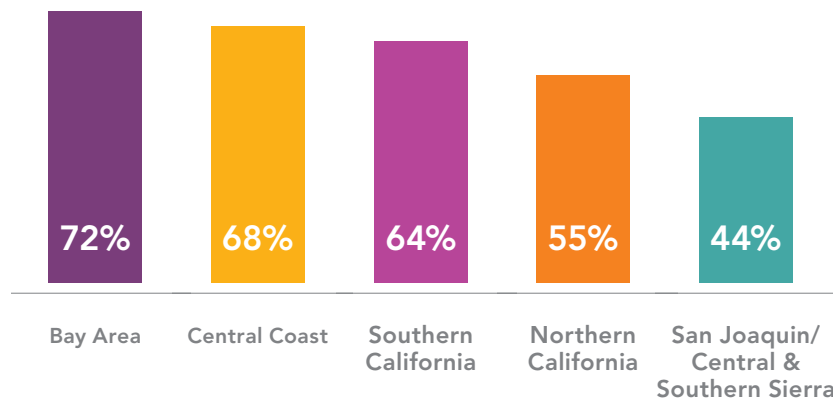
Percent of local officials who **use email and websites** to communicate “a lot”:



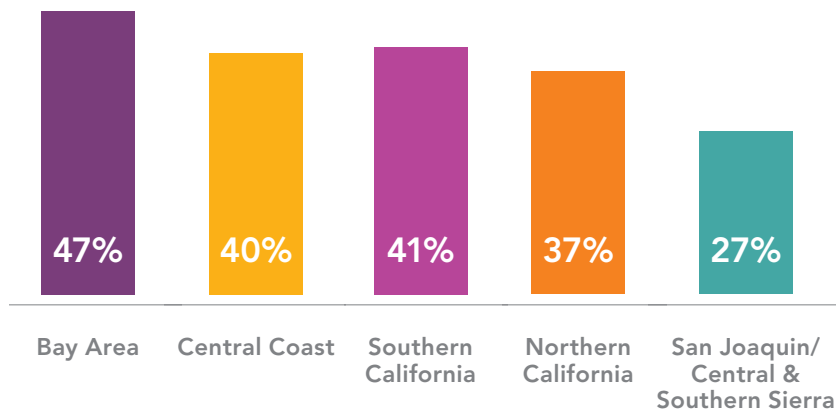
Percent of local officials who **use social media**:



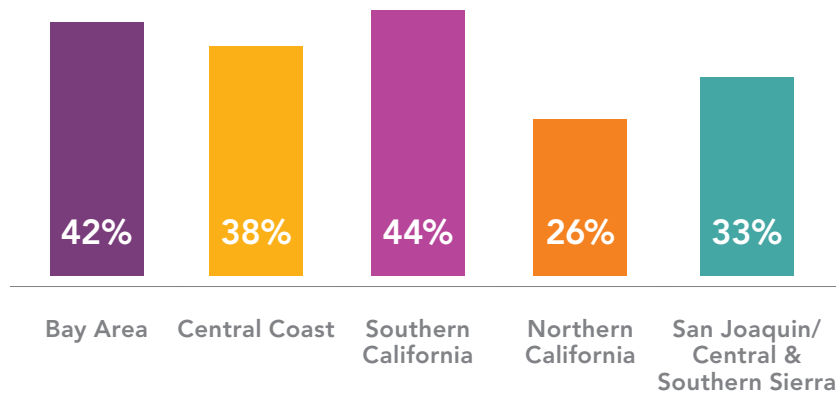
Percent of local officials who say the **internet is helpful in communicating with many segments of the public**:



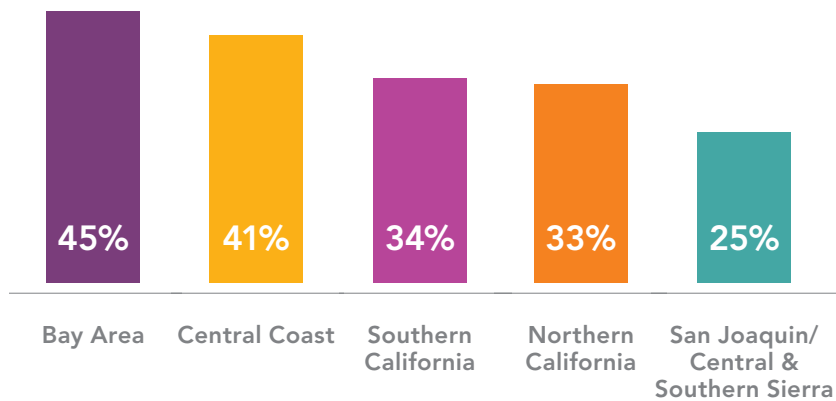
Percent of local officials who say the **internet helps them reach hard-to-reach segments of the public:**



Percent of local officials who report **having designated engagement staff:**



Percent of local officials who are **interested in hearing about public engagement efforts that have worked elsewhere:**



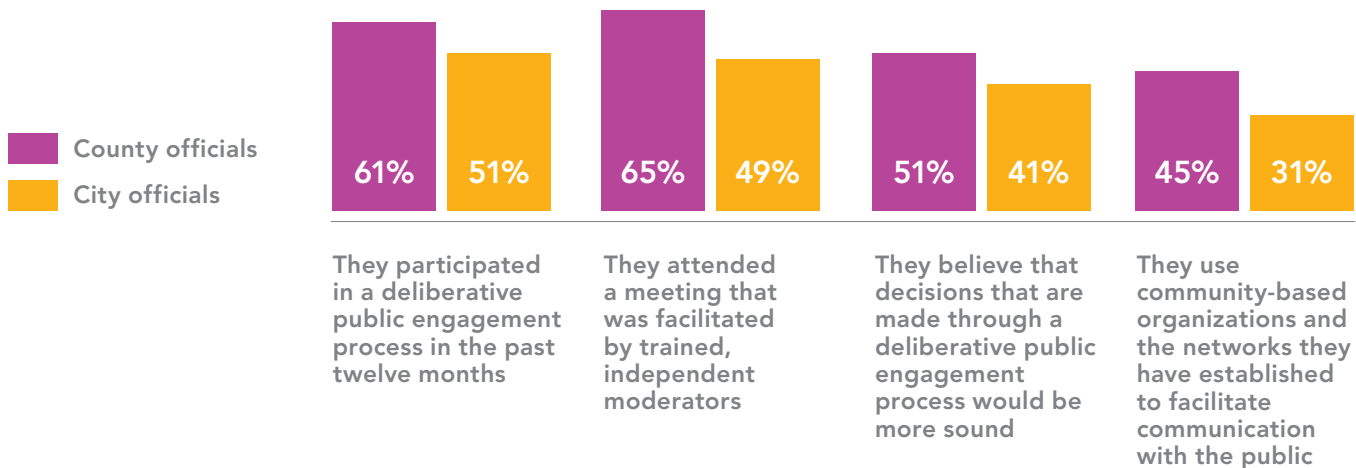
10

County officials indicate somewhat more experience with deliberative engagement approaches than city officials.

County officials report somewhat more personal experience with deliberative processes and more frequent collaborations with community-based organizations compared with city officials. They are also more likely than their municipal counterparts to believe deliberative engagement processes could lead to better public decisions.

Although county and city officials express comparable views on many issues related to public engagement, there are a few notable differences. County officials are more likely to have participated in a deliberative public engagement process and to have worked with independent discussion facilitators in these meetings. Possibly as a result, county officials are less skeptical than city officials that deliberative approaches could lead to more sound public decisions. Moreover, county officials report more frequent collaborations with community-based organizations in an effort to reach a broader cross section of the public.

Percent of local officials who say:





RECOMMENDATIONS

for supporting more effective and
inclusive public engagement¹⁵

¹⁵These suggestions were developed by Public Agenda based on the current research and decades of practical experience supporting sound public engagement.

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR STRONGER PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Based on this research, as well as its companion study with California civic leaders and decades of experience supporting sound public engagement, Public Agenda proposes a number of recommendations for local officials and civic and community-based organizations who seek to improve the public decision-making process by including broad cross sections of the public in meaningful deliberations, as well as for foundations and other supporters interested in funding these efforts. Our point is not that every public official should be using deliberative methods all the time but that these “deeper” approaches should be seen as a “tool in the toolbox” of public problem solving. Our research demonstrates that interest in more innovative processes—compared with, say, a traditional public hearing—appears to be growing, and that this interest can be supported by the right strategies, which we outline in the following sections.



This research revealed the strategies that California’s local officials use and the challenges they often experience when they seek to engage the public in government decision making. Despite hurdles, however, few local officials seem discouraged. Most are searching for better ways to communicate and engage with their constituencies. And many are experimenting with what in this report we call “deliberative public engagement” methods—strategies that are designed to help broad cross sections of the public participate in public problem solving and decision making in thoughtful and meaningful ways.

Almost every local official can identify issues that would be particularly suitable for deliberative public engagement. And overall, officials feel confident that they have or could have the expertise to implement a deliberative public engagement approach; their biggest concern is a lack of staff. Moreover, the majority of local officials see benefits in deliberative engagement practices, including the potential to build greater public trust in local government. These findings suggest that the deliberative public engagement mind-set is moving into the mainstream, even if these methods are not yet widely employed by most local officials.

Here are a number of recommendations for local officials and civic and community-based organizations who seek to include broad cross sections of the public in meaningful deliberations, and for funders who want to support these efforts.

IDEAS FOR LOCAL OFFICIALS:

- **Network with colleagues about better ways to engage the public.** Many local officials are frustrated with the public engagement status quo and interested in exploring alternative means to involve residents. It would likely be fruitful for local officials to engage and learn from each other by comparing experiences, sharing the cost of professional development and exchanging strategies and practical resources. Local officials who have seen community relations and local decision making improve as a result of more deliberative engagement processes could lead these networking efforts and help their more tentative colleagues identify opportunities to experiment with new engagement approaches in their communities.
- **Build ongoing and sustaining capacity through professional development and by making engagement competencies a criterion when hiring new staff.** There are numerous organizations, associations and academic institutions, both California based and national, through which local officials can gain information, resources, training and other tools to support deliberative public engagement. (For instance, the League of California Cities and the California Association of Counties presently support their own Institute for Local Government, which makes public

engagement and other resources available to local officials in California; and the Davenport Institute, at Pepperdine University, is an example of a prominent academic institution that offers local governments and community-based organizations public engagement support and training.) Moreover, auditing existing public engagement skills and knowledge within their departments and agencies will help local officials assess their strengths and weaknesses, which can then be augmented and addressed as new hires are made over time.

- **Evaluate local public engagement efforts.** Ongoing capacity building is also increased by local officials' evaluation of their own engagement experiments. Evaluations should be planned around clearly established goals and expectations. They can be used to tweak ongoing engagement processes as well as to inform future ones. Lessons learned through evaluations also constitute a valuable resource to be shared with colleagues and thus to inform public engagement efforts elsewhere.
- **Reach out to civic and community-based organizations to make them partners in public engagement.** This survey found that most local officials are not effectively accessing the resources and networks of civic and community-based organizations, particularly those that could help them reach traditionally disenfranchised groups. Meanwhile, our companion study with civic leaders suggests that many civic and community-based organizations are seeking stronger relationships and better collaboration with their local officials. Building long-term and trusting partnerships between local government and civic organizations has the potential to improve public participation opportunities and help spread the use of more deliberative forms of engagement across communities.



IDEAS FOR CIVIC LEADERS:

- **Partner with local officials who are interested in finding better ways to engage the public.** Many local officials are frustrated with the public engagement status quo, and they are interested in exploring alternative means to engage residents and others. Now may be the right time to engage local officials more directly in serious discussions about how to improve public participation in local government decision making, and to share stories of successes, build partnerships and establish common expectations and goals. Among the many ways that civic and community-based organizations can support better community engagement are:
 - Codesigning and cohosting forums (which sometimes is appropriate and beneficial to do in partnerships with public agencies and officials)
 - Recruiting and/or training facilitators and recorders
 - Providing venues, volunteers, childcare, food and other ingredients for productive community conversations
 - Supporting the creation of nonpartisan discussion materials and guides
 - Recruiting diverse participants (certainly among the most important roles community-based organizations can play)
 - Playing a role in forum evaluation and follow-up (such as supporting new public-private-civil society partnerships, helping to communicate the results of forums, etc.)
- **Build capacity by networking and sharing resources with other civic and community-based organizations, and through professional development and systematic evaluation of public engagement efforts.** Many civic leaders, we found, feel that their organizations may lack resources and staff to implement comprehensive deliberative engagement processes. Collaborations with other organizations—to share resources and to benefit from each other’s experience and networks—are therefore important. Moreover, there are numerous organizations, associations and academic institutions, both California based and national, through which civic leaders and public officials alike can access training and tools to support deliberative public engagement. Capacity can be further increased by planning for systematic self-assessment and evaluations of engagement efforts. Using and sharing the results of evaluations can build stronger partnerships with local officials and other civic organizations and improve public engagement efforts in the future.



IDEAS FOR FUNDERS:

- **Support local officials and civic and community-based organizations in efforts to build long-term partnerships that expand and improve opportunities for public participation.**

This research points to a lack of strong, ongoing relationships between local government and civic and community-based organizations. Most local officials are not effectively accessing the resources and networks of community organizations, particularly those that could help them reach traditionally disenfranchised groups. And many civic leaders, especially those serving immigrant and low-income communities, seek better relationships with their local officials but also criticize them for not providing adequate opportunities for participation. Supporting the development of long-term and trusting partnerships between civic organizations and local government has the potential to improve public participation opportunities and help spread the use of more deliberative forms of engagement across communities. Sometimes a small amount of seed money to experiment with an early partnership between a public agency and a community organization can result in a long-term relationship that nurtures community growth well beyond a specific instance of public engagement.

- **Sponsor trainings and technical assistance for local governments and communities to build ongoing and sustaining public engagement capacity.** Rather than providing support for single engagement activities, funders could help communities develop the goals, principles and practices to guide the successful and recurring use of public engagement in appropriate instances over time. For example, they could help make available a wide range of existing public engagement-related skills, strategies and tools from which local officials and civic and community-based organizations can benefit, including: public engagement design, participant identification and recruitment, issue framing, process facilitation, communication



strategies, evaluation and the preparation of background and discussion materials. Funders could also sponsor opportunities for shared strategy and skill development for the staff of local governments and community-based organizations, thus promoting relationship building and collaborative experimentation with public engagement processes.

- **Document and share stories of success.** In pursuing any innovation, it is helpful to document and to build on initial successes through compelling stories that encourage replication, especially by those 47 percent we identified as “tentative” local officials. This includes providing opportunities for local officials to respond to these stories, ask questions and get advice from their more experienced peers on how best to replicate deliberative engagement process in their communities.
- **Support experiments with online engagement tools and digital technologies in order to share best practices.** As we all know, the online world is constantly changing, and new platforms and strategies for engaging communities online continually emerge. But most officials still feel that these tools are hard to use effectively and that their impacts are hard to gauge. Experiments and evaluations underwritten by foundations can be one means to support, assess and share what works online.

-
- **Address the engagement needs of rural communities.** This survey suggests that more needs to be done so that officials in California’s rural areas can be equally informed, equipped and supported in their efforts to engage the public. Rural officials are in even greater need of capacity-building assistance than their suburban and urban counterparts. Rural communities might warrant dedicated experiments in online engagement and distance learning.
 - **Support research and evaluation of public engagement methods and publicize best practices.** Funders can be particularly influential in expanding research and evaluation into various public engagement methods, especially approaches that are explicitly designed to overcome challenges common to more traditional engagement formats. To this end, it is important to encourage and support local officials in assessing their own engagement efforts, and to promote independent research that tracks ongoing public engagement trends and impacts. Some of the main questions that need to be answered are: Which issues are most and least suitable for which types of public engagement strategies? Can deliberative methods engage more citizens and address the problems of public anger and mistrust? Do these methods lead to better decisions? What types of technical assistance and capacity building have the greatest impact in helping local officials succeed in their search for more effective methods of dialogue with the public? And how can more inclusive and deliberative forms of engagement shape the political and economic life of a community in the long term?

METHODOLOGY

Summary

The findings in “Testing the Waters” are based on 900 survey interviews with Californian local public officials conducted from July 10 to August 23, 2012, via mail and online, carried out by Social Science Research Solutions Inc. (SSRS). Interviewees were a representative sample of officials in select positions from across the state. The survey was preceded by four focus groups and 12 in-depth qualitative interviews with Californian local public officials.

The survey

Officials were invited to participate in the survey through a combination of mail and e-mail contacts and reminder phone calls. Participants completed the survey either in hard copy (213 respondents) or online (687 respondents). The response rate for this study was calculated to be 20 percent using AAPOR’s RR3 formula. Respondents were considered ineligible if they completed the survey but no longer held the position indicated in the sample file (e.g., retired). The final sample of 900 represented 53 counties (91 percent) and 370 cities (77 percent) in the state.

The survey was restricted to officials holding certain titles (see the sidebar for a list of titles included). City council members were the most common respondents (30 percent of our sample), followed by city managers (14 percent), community development directors (10 percent) and public works directors (10 percent).

Forty-two percent of officials identified themselves as elected; 58 percent said they were nonelected.

Forty percent of officials worked in “mostly suburban” communities, 24 percent were in “mostly rural” communities and 23 percent said they were in “mostly urban” communities.

Thirty-six percent of officials identified as Democrats, 28 percent as Republicans, and 25 percent as Independents.

The final data, once collected, was weighted by SSRS to balance the sample to known population parameters in order to correct for systematic under- or overrepresentation for groups of officials.

Sampling frame: Types of officials surveyed

The sampling frame for the survey was obtained from the Institute for Local Government (ILG), the research and education arm of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties.

We limited the officials surveyed to the following list of titles at the municipal and county levels:

- City Manager/Assistant City Manager/City Administrator
- City Council Member
- Mayor
- Community Services Director (Municipal)
- Community Development Director (Municipal and County)
- Parks and Recreation Director (Municipal and County)
- Human Services Director (Municipal and County)
- Planning Director (Municipal and County)
- Public Works Director/City or County Engineer (Municipal and County)
- Planner (Municipal and County)
- County Administrative Officer/ County Manager
- County Supervisor
- Health Care Agency Director (County)
- Public Health Director (County)

The weighting procedure utilized iterative proportional fitting process, or “raking.” Parameter estimates were drawn from the sample files provided by the Institute for Local Government (see sidebar).

The data was balanced to resemble the sample distribution for California’s local public officials, to the following parameters:

- Region of California: Bay Area, Central Coast, Nonurban Northern California, Southern California and San Joaquin Valley/Central and Southern Sierra
- Administrative division: County or city
- Initial mode of contact: Mail or e-mail
- Phone availability for reminder calls: Known phone number or not

The design effect for the survey was 1.03 and the weight-adjusted margin of error is +/- 3.31. The final weights for individual respondents ranged from 0.68 to 1.56.

As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can affect the results. Steps were taken to minimize these issues, including pretesting the survey instrument and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

Focus groups and qualitative interviews with local officials

Public Agenda conducted four focus groups and 12 individual interviews with local public officials prior to the survey; through these conversations we explored officials’ motivations and perceptions regarding public engagement and became acquainted with the basic issues later confronted in the survey instrument. Quotes from these focus groups and interviews also appear throughout this report to illustrate the views quantified in the survey results. The four focus groups took place in San

Francisco, Fresno, Los Angeles and San Diego. Local officials who were interviewed over the phone hailed from a diverse range of communities across the state. A total of 45 local public officials participated in this qualitative research.

Civic leaders survey

Public Agenda also conducted a parallel survey of 462 “civic leaders”—the heads of nonprofit organizations that are significantly invested in engaging the public around issues affecting their communities, working in diverse fields including social and environmental justice, community organizing and policy research. This survey of civic leaders (as well as interviews and focus groups that preceded it) addressed many of the same questions tackled in the survey of officials. Its report highlights important commonalities, as well as some areas of disagreement, between local public officials’ and civic leaders’ views on the state of public participation in local government decision making in California. For more information, see Public Agenda, “Beyond Business as Usual: Leaders of California’s Civic Organizations Seek New Ways to Engage the Public in Local Governance.” <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-engagement-in-california>

FULL SURVEY RESULTS

“Testing the Waters” is based on 900 survey interviews with Californian local public officials conducted from July 10 to August 23, 2012, via mail and internet. The survey was fielded by Social Science Research Solutions Inc., and the questionnaire was designed by Public Agenda. The margin of error for the complete set of weighted data is plus or minus 3.31 percent. However, it is higher when comparing subgroups or question items that weren’t asked of all respondents.

Survey results of less than 0.5 percent are signified by an asterisk, while results of zero are signified by a dash. Responses may not always total 100 percent due to rounding. Combining answer categories may produce slight discrepancies between numbers in these results and numbers in the report. Finally, note that questions 1-3 were screening questions that have been omitted from the results below.

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
4. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the level of public participation in local government decision making in your community?						
Very satisfied	23	21	29	20	21	25
Somewhat satisfied	46	51	39	46	41	47
Somewhat dissatisfied	23	22	22	28	25	21
Very dissatisfied	7	6	9	6	13	7
No answer/Refused	*	-	1	1	-	*
5. Thinking about significant public decisions that you’ve been involved with, which best describes how this process typically works?						
A. Decisions are made by public officials in consultation with experts.	5	4	4	6	8	6
B. In addition to A, there’s also input from stakeholders and interest groups directly affected by the issue.	57	60	51	54	60	58
C. In addition to A and B, there’s also considerable input from a broad cross section of the community.	36	36	46	39	30	35
Don’t know	1	-	-	-	2	1
No answer/Refused	1	-	-	1	-	1

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
5a. [Subgroup: only those who answered "C" to Q5] In the past year, how often have you seen a public decision made with considerable input from a broad cross section of the community?						
None	1	-	-	4	-	1
Once or twice	15	16	8	21	17	13
Three or four times	25	26	24	21	45	19
Five to ten times	26	17	29	29	24	29
More than ten times	32	39	37	25	14	35
Don't know	1	1	3	-	-	2
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	-	-	1
6. How close does each statement come to describing your TYPICAL experiences with traditional public hearings and public comment at council or commission meetings?						
They are very effective in explaining issues to the broad public.						
Very close	17	13	16	19	16	18
Somewhat close	46	48	46	43	51	45
Not too close	26	26	28	27	23	27
Not close at all	10	12	11	10	9	9
Don't know	-	-	-	-	-	-
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	1	1	1
They give officials a solid understanding of the broad public's concerns and preferences.						
Very close	14	12	13	14	17	14
Somewhat close	45	45	45	40	49	46
Not too close	28	28	29	33	20	28
Not close at all	12	15	11	10	13	11
Don't know	1	1	-	1	-	1
No answer/Refused	1	-	2	2	1	1
They help ordinary residents become more realistic about the trade-offs and choices facing local government.						
Very close	13	12	10	14	17	12
Somewhat close	46	50	49	45	41	44
Not too close	27	29	20	27	28	27
Not close at all	13	9	21	13	13	15
Don't know	*	-	-	-	-	1
No answer/Refused	1	-	1	1	1	1

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
They often lead to gripe sessions.						
Very close	15	12	14	13	17	15
Somewhat close	35	36	29	37	33	36
Not too close	30	30	34	30	28	31
Not close at all	18	19	22	17	21	16
Don't know	*	1	-	1	-	*
No answer/Refused	1	2	1	1	1	2
They take up too much time and delay the decision-making process.						
Very close	5	6	4	5	4	6
Somewhat close	17	11	15	19	23	18
Not too close	32	35	35	33	30	31
Not close at all	44	47	43	42	43	44
Don't know	1	-	1	1	-	1
No answer/Refused	1	1	2	1	1	1
They generate thoughtful discussions among ordinary residents.						
Very close	8	9	7	9	6	7
Somewhat close	41	40	37	44	42	42
Not too close	33	35	35	31	33	33
Not close at all	16	16	19	14	18	16
Don't know	1	1	-	1	-	1
No answer/Refused	1	-	1	1	1	1
They expand participation in decision making beyond the "usual suspects."						
Very close	9	5	10	13	9	9
Somewhat close	40	41	41	40	36	41
Not too close	32	35	27	31	34	30
Not close at all	18	19	20	15	20	18
Don't know	1	1	1	1	-	1
No answer/Refused	1	1	1	1	1	1

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
They are typically dominated by people with narrow agendas.						
Very close	35	34	33	33	35	38
Somewhat close	41	40	43	46	39	39
Not too close	19	21	18	19	18	18
Not close at all	5	5	4	2	8	5
Don't know	*	-	1	-	-	-
No answer/Refused	1	-	1	1	1	1
They are legally required but ineffective—we do it because we have to.						
Very close	7	8	5	8	7	6
Somewhat close	23	22	21	18	31	23
Not too close	29	30	34	33	25	28
Not close at all	39	41	35	38	37	41
Don't know	1	-	4	1	-	1
No answer/Refused	1	-	1	1	-	1
7. How close does each statement come to your own views and experiences?						
Public hearings typically attract complainers and “professional citizens”; they don’t give voice to the real public.						
Very close	25	23	24	27	25	24
Somewhat close	39	40	37	33	41	42
Not too close	25	30	24	28	22	22
Not close at all	11	7	15	12	11	11
Don't know	*	1	-	-	1	-
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	1	-	1
Community members have ample opportunities to participate in local government decisions.						
Very close	47	42	49	49	53	46
Somewhat close	41	45	37	39	39	43
Not too close	9	9	12	10	6	8
Not close at all	3	5	2	2	2	3
Don't know	-	-	-	-	-	-
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	-	-	1

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
When only a few people show up at public meetings it's usually a sign that the community is satisfied.						
Very close	10	6	10	10	7	12
Somewhat close	40	43	43	40	35	40
Not too close	26	23	30	22	37	24
Not close at all	19	22	14	22	18	17
Don't know	5	5	2	6	3	6
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	1	-	1
Most community members are too busy with day-to-day life to get involved in public decision making.						
Very close	47	47	43	42	49	48
Somewhat close	40	39	39	43	38	39
Not too close	9	7	10	10	10	10
Not close at all	3	5	7	3	2	2
Don't know	1	2	1	-	1	1
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	1	-	1
Most residents keep abreast of the issues that affect the community's well-being.						
Very close	4	5	2	3	4	3
Somewhat close	23	24	29	21	17	24
Not too close	43	44	37	44	43	44
Not close at all	29	26	32	31	36	27
Don't know	1	2	-	1	1	1
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	1	-	1
Community members have become much angrier and mistrustful of local public officials in recent years.						
Very close	29	24	30	33	25	32
Somewhat close	40	39	42	41	42	39
Not too close	20	23	19	18	23	17
Not close at all	9	10	8	7	8	11
Don't know	1	3	-	1	2	1
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	1	-	1

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
Too many ordinary residents lack the skills to get involved in public decision making.						
Very close	10	9	12	13	9	9
Somewhat close	27	23	28	28	33	26
Not too close	33	34	34	36	33	32
Not close at all	28	33	25	21	23	31
Don't know	1	1	1	2	1	1
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	1	1	1
With so many groups and voices, the community's preferences can be hard to figure out.						
Very close	8	8	9	7	9	8
Somewhat close	30	30	32	32	33	27
Not too close	44	41	46	48	39	45
Not close at all	17	21	13	11	17	18
Don't know	1	1	-	1	2	1
No answer/Refused	*	1	-	1	-	1
Community members who don't belong to an organizing group that can mobilize them are often left out of public decision making.						
Very close	14	18	14	14	14	11
Somewhat close	34	37	34	33	29	34
Not too close	32	30	34	30	30	35
Not close at all	18	12	18	19	25	19
Don't know	2	3	-	3	2	1
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	1	-	1
Appointed officials and administrators often become isolated from the residents they serve.						
Very close	8	7	8	10	11	7
Somewhat close	27	22	24	33	30	26
Not too close	34	37	40	33	33	33
Not close at all	30	33	27	24	26	33
Don't know	1	1	1	-	1	1
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	1	-	1

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
Elected officials are too quick to do what's popular instead of what's right						
Very close	14	8	14	14	19	16
Somewhat close	33	35	33	31	38	30
Not too close	32	35	33	34	24	33
Not close at all	19	21	20	19	19	18
Don't know	1	1	-	1	-	2
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	1	-	1
8. Some officials say that they hear least frequently from immigrant communities. Has it been a challenge to engage immigrant communities in the public decision-making process in your district, or not?						
Yes	46	54	59	46	44	39
No	29	24	24	24	36	33
There are no immigrant communities in my district	15	13	10	19	11	17
Don't know	9	8	7	12	9	10
No answer/Refused	*	1	-	-	-	1
9. Are there other types of residents or a group of residents who are especially difficult to engage in the public decision-making process, or not?						
Yes	51	58	51	49	48	50
No	33	25	40	33	33	36
Don't know	15	16	8	16	19	13
No answer/Refused	1	2	1	1	-	*
10. Does your city or county have defined goals, plans, or protocols that guide efforts to involve the public in decision making, or not?						
Yes	70	74	73	65	68	70
No	25	22	22	29	26	25
Don't know	5	4	5	6	6	5
No answer/Refused	*	1	-	1	-	*
11. Do you have staff who work primarily to increase public engagement in decision making, or not?						
Yes	39	42	38	26	33	44
No	59	55	60	72	65	54
Don't know	2	3	2	-	2	1
No answer/Refused	*	1	-	1	-	*

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
12. How much do you or your office currently use e-mail and official websites for communication and outreach with the broad public?						
A lot	68	77	77	53	50	74
A little	28	22	23	39	41	24
Not at all	3	1	-	7	6	2
Don't know	*	-	-	-	2	*
No answer/Refused	*	1	-	1	-	-
13. How much do you or your office currently use social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter and blogs) for communication and outreach with the broad public?						
A lot	22	30	17	16	13	26
A little	42	45	40	42	32	45
Not at all	34	24	41	41	49	28
Don't know	2	-	2	1	6	1
No answer/Refused	*	1	-	1	-	*
14. [Subgroup: only those who answered "A lot" or "A little" to Q13] Check off any statements that reflect your views on communicating with the public via e-mail, websites, and social media.						
They enable me to reach hard-to-reach segments of the population.	39	47	40	37	27	41
It's difficult to gauge how effective they are in engaging the public.	62	68	62	57	59	64
They require too much expertise and staff time.	9	8	13	10	14	6
They have vastly improved my relationship and connection to the public.	20	26	20	15	16	20
They are helpful in communicating with many segments of the public.	62	72	68	55	44	64
Social media, in particular, can generate a lot of misinformation and confusion.	29	29	35	22	31	30
No answer/Refused	2	1	-	2	4	2

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
15. In the past year, have you participated in an ONLINE public engagement forum that featured interaction between residents and public officials on community issues?						
Yes	12	17	7	13	11	9
No	88	82	93	86	89	90
Don't know	*	-	-	1	-	*
No answer/Refused	*	1	-	1	-	1
16. How much do you use community-based organizations and the networks they have established to facilitate communication with the public?						
A lot	33	32	41	28	32	33
A little	48	53	43	47	44	49
Not at all	16	12	11	19	22	16
Don't know	2	3	4	5	2	1
No answer/Refused	1	1	1	1	-	1
18. In the past year, have you participated in a public meeting where...						
Community members discussed different policy approaches						
Yes	83	85	86	84	85	81
No	16	15	13	14	15	18
Don't know	*	1	1	1	-	-
No answer/Refused	1	-	-	1	-	1
Trained, independent moderators facilitated the discussion						
Yes	51	56	48	60	41	48
No	48	43	51	38	58	49
Don't know	*	1	-	-	1	*
No answer/Refused	1	-	1	2	-	2
Community members discussed trade-offs and costs of different solutions						
Yes	70	76	70	74	71	63
No	28	24	29	22	28	34
Don't know	1	-	1	-	1	1
No answer/Refused	1	-	-	3	-	1

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
Community members brought very different perspectives and diversity to the table						
Yes	80	83	84	80	79	78
No	18	16	16	17	21	19
Don't know	1	1	-	1	1	1
No answer/Refused	1	-	-	1	-	1
The preferences emerging from public deliberation had an impact on final decisions						
Yes	80	84	88	77	76	80
No	12	11	9	13	13	14
Don't know	7	5	4	10	11	5
No answer/Refused	1	-	-	1	-	2
The next few questions are based on the following scenario:						
Local public officials and community-based organizations bring together a large and diverse group of residents who meet for several hours to discuss a public issue facing the community. Participants break into small discussion groups; each contains a variety of people and perspectives and is led by a facilitator. The small groups report back suggestions for action, and a memo integrating their views is later shared with participants and the community, and it is presented to appropriate local public officials.						
19. How close does this scenario come to describing a meeting in which you have participated in the past year?						
Very close	29	38	36	23	26	26
Somewhat close	24	22	19	29	24	22
Not too close	16	13	23	18	14	16
Not close at all	30	24	20	28	35	34
Don't know	1	1	1	1	1	1
No answer/Refused	*	1	-	1	-	*
20. Would you say that this type of public engagement scenario would be useful to undertake in your community for...						
Almost all public decisions	2	2	2	2	-	2
A good number of public decisions	32	37	34	29	34	30
Only a few public decisions	60	57	63	63	57	60
None at all	4	3	-	4	7	4
Don't know	2	1	1	1	2	3
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	1	-	*

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
21. How useful would it be to invest time and resources in this approach to public engagement, for each of the following issues?						
Issues that are hotly disputed or deadlocked						
Very useful	36	39	46	34	34	33
Somewhat useful	40	40	38	38	43	39
Not too useful	15	13	11	20	12	17
Not at all useful	7	6	5	3	6	9
Don't know	2	2	-	3	4	1
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	1	-	1
Issues that require ordinary residents to change their behavior						
Very useful	25	24	31	26	21	25
Somewhat useful	41	50	39	35	45	38
Not too useful	21	17	19	26	18	22
Not at all useful	9	6	8	6	11	10
Don't know	4	3	1	6	6	4
No answer/Refused	1	-	1	1	-	1
Issues that require immediate action						
Very useful	6	6	6	6	9	4
Somewhat useful	18	18	22	19	24	15
Not too useful	44	49	39	46	38	45
Not at all useful	29	26	33	27	26	32
Don't know	2	1	-	1	4	2
No answer/Refused	1	-	1	1	-	1
Issues that require making tough choices or trade-offs						
Very useful	41	49	45	42	30	38
Somewhat useful	45	38	41	42	58	45
Not too useful	10	10	7	10	7	12
Not at all useful	3	2	4	2	4	4
Don't know	1	1	2	1	1	1
No answer/Refused	*	-	1	1	-	*

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
Issues that already have clear-cut public support						
Very useful	7	8	8	7	6	7
Somewhat useful	28	26	25	24	37	28
Not too useful	42	43	48	42	33	43
Not at all useful	20	21	18	22	18	20
Don't know	2	2	-	2	6	2
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	3	-	1
Issues that involve fundamental choices about the future of the community						
Very useful	58	64	62	58	53	57
Somewhat useful	34	28	33	36	39	33
Not too useful	4	6	2	3	4	5
Not at all useful	2	2	2	1	3	3
Don't know	1	1	-	2	1	1
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	1	-	1

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
22. Here are some possible advantages and disadvantages that could result from using a public engagement process like the one described previously. Please check off the ones that would be likely to happen in your community.						
Public concerns and preferences would be better understood.	77	81	80	74	72	76
Fresh ideas and solutions would be heard.	67	72	70	66	69	62
Support for public decisions would be strengthened.	67	73	73	69	64	62
There would be more trust between community members and public officials.	66	71	69	69	59	64
Decision making would slow down.	56	49	54	57	58	59
Decisions made this way would be more sound.	42	46	45	49	43	36
There would still be those who complain that they were left out of the loop.	78	79	77	76	76	80
Few residents would participate.	56	48	49	57	66	56
This public engagement process would be too costly.	21	18	17	32	24	17
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	1	1	-
23. How capable would you and/or your office be in helping to implement this approach to public engagement?						
Very capable	38	46	40	29	33	40
Somewhat capable	45	41	41	53	46	45
Not too capable	10	7	12	13	13	10
Not at all capable	3	3	2	1	6	3
Don't know	2	3	5	3	1	2
No answer/Refused	*	1	-	1	1	*

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
24. How big of a challenge would each of the following be for your office if you were to implement an approach to public engagement like the one described previously?						
Adapting the process to meet a specific local need						
A major challenge	11	10	11	14	12	9
A minor challenge	53	48	47	54	53	57
No challenge	33	38	40	28	33	31
Don't know	2	3	2	1	1	2
No answer/Refused	1	2	-	3	-	1
Ensuring broad-based participation "beyond the usual suspects"						
A major challenge	53	53	46	57	53	54
A minor challenge	37	34	45	31	36	39
No challenge	7	10	6	8	7	4
Don't know	2	2	4	3	4	1
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	1	-	1
Analyzing and using the public input received						
A major challenge	12	10	17	16	13	9
A minor challenge	47	48	43	47	45	47
No challenge	38	38	39	35	37	40
Don't know	2	3	1	1	4	2
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	1	1	1
Lack of moderating and facilitating skills						
A major challenge	15	12	13	24	14	15
A minor challenge	44	46	44	40	46	45
No challenge	37	39	39	33	36	38
Don't know	2	2	2	1	3	2
No answer/Refused	1	1	1	2	1	1
Providing helpful background information and discussion materials						
A major challenge	7	11	4	13	6	2
A minor challenge	45	42	43	49	41	47
No challenge	47	44	52	37	51	49
Don't know	1	2	1	1	1	1
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	1	1	1

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
Lack of public trust						
A major challenge	16	15	19	17	17	15
A minor challenge	52	50	51	55	56	50
No challenge	27	30	29	24	21	29
Don't know	4	4	1	3	6	5
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	1	1	1
Laws and bureaucratic regulations						
A major challenge	14	8	12	25	17	13
A minor challenge	45	44	42	43	54	43
No challenge	36	42	45	29	25	38
Don't know	4	5	1	2	4	5
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	1	1	2
Other						
A major challenge	8	7	13	5	4	9
A minor challenge	1	2	-	2	-	1
No challenge	1	2	1	-	1	-
Don't know	5	6	7	4	3	4
No answer/Refused	87	84	78	89	93	86
25. [Subgroup: only those who answered "A major challenge" or "A minor challenge" to any of the items listed in Q24] Would (this challenge/these challenges) arise mostly because you don't have the expertise to implement the approach to public engagement or because you lack the necessary resources and staff to do so?						
Don't have the expertise	2	2	-	1	1	3
Lack the necessary resources and staff	48	52	53	56	47	42
Both	21	17	23	26	26	18
Neither	27	27	25	16	21	33
Don't know	2	1	-	1	5	2
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	-	-	1

	Total N=900 %	Bay Area n=206 %	Central Coast n=98 %	Nonurban Northern California n=142 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=119 %	Southern California n=335 %
27. From what sources do you currently receive information and ideas about activities and strategies for improving public participation in local government decision making?						
Agency staff within your city	75	78	71	68	74	76
Colleagues in other jurisdictions	68	72	69	62	68	69
State or national associations of local governments or their affiliates (League of CA Cities, CA State Association of Counties, National Association of Counties, National League of Cities, etc.)	76	74	83	74	78	75
Professional associations (ICMA, etc.)	51	58	49	36	48	54
Consultants who provide public engagement services	45	49	40	38	42	49
Research by academic institutions and think tanks	22	27	19	17	24	20
Other	8	9	10	8	9	8
No answer/Refused	2	1	4	3	1	1
28. How interested would you be in hearing more about public engagement practices that have worked in other places?						
Very interested	36	45	41	33	25	34
Somewhat interested	41	35	36	45	44	42
Not too interested	16	13	16	15	21	16
Not interested at all	6	5	7	4	10	6
Don't know	1	1	-	-	-	1
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	3	1	1
29. How much has your view of public engagement changed since your career began?						
A lot	42	43	54	43	44	37
A little	43	43	34	39	41	47
Not at all	13	14	11	14	11	14
Don't know	1	1	1	1	3	1
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	3	1	1

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

	Total N=462 %	Bay Area n=125 %	Central Coast n=50 %	Nonurban Northern California n=68 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=50 %	Southern California n=169 %
1. Which of the following best describes your current position?						
City Manager	14	14	14	12	13	16
Community Development Director	10	10	11	9	8	12
Community Services Director	4	4	1	2	3	5
Council Member	30	30	27	27	28	32
County Administrative Officer	1	1	2	4	2	*
County Supervisor	6	4	6	18	5	1
Health Care Agency Director	1	1	-	4	1	*
Human Services Director	2	1	-	6	4	2
Mayor	9	10	9	6	10	10
Parks and Recreation Director	7	12	10	4	6	5
Planning Director	7	7	9	6	7	6
Public Health Director	2	2	1	3	3	*
Public Works Director	10	9	10	11	12	11
City/Town/County Planner (general)	1	*	-	-	-	2
Assistant City/Town Manager (general)	1	1	-	1	2	1
Other	3	2	2	2	4	3
No answer/Refused	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Are you elected, appointed, or staff?						
Elected	42	43	39	48	39	40
Appointed/staff (nonelected)	58	57	61	52	61	60
No answer/Refused	-	-	-	1	-	*

	Total N=462 %	Bay Area n=125 %	Central Coast n=50 %	Nonurban Northern California n=68 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=50 %	Southern California n=169 %
3. [Subgroup: only those who answered "Elected" to Q2] Is it a full-time or part-time position?						
Full-time	17	16	24	25	15	11
Part-time	83	84	74	75	85	89
No answer/Refused	*	-	3	-	-	-
31. What type of community do you represent?						
County	15	10	18	37	20	5
City	85	90	81	62	80	95
No answer/Refused	*	-	1	1	-	-
32. How would you describe the community you serve?						
Mostly rural	23	9	21	58	51	7
Mostly urban	22	19	26	13	16	29
Mostly suburban	38	58	24	10	18	50
A mix	16	14	29	16	14	14
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	2	-	-
33. Do you live in the community where you serve/work?						
Yes	71	66	79	86	76	64
No	29	34	21	13	24	36
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	1	-	-
35. How much do you rely on volunteers?						
A lot	33	29	37	29	30	36
A little	48	57	44	47	42	46
Not at all	19	14	19	21	28	18
No answer/Refused	*	-	-	3	-	-
38. Are you...						
Male	72	65	70	71	73	77
Female	27	35	29	27	27	23
No answer/Refused	1	-	1	2	-	*

	Total N=462 %	Bay Area n=125 %	Central Coast n=50 %	Nonurban Northern California n=68 %	San Joaquin Valley/ Central & Southern Sierra n=50 %	Southern California n=169 %
39/40. Combined Race and Ethnicity						
White	82	82	82	86	76	81
Asian	3	6	1	1	1	4
Black	1	1	1	-	2	2
Hispanic/Latino	9	8	11	6	8	10
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1	-	1	1	3	1
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	*	-	-	-	-	*
Something else	4	2	3	5	8	2
No answer/Refused	1	1	-	1	2	-
41. Do you think of yourself as a...						
Republican	28	14	15	29	39	37
Democrat	36	52	49	37	19	29
Independent	25	26	27	23	26	25
Something else	7	5	8	8	14	5
No answer/Refused	3	3	1	4	2	4

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amsler, Terry. "Principles of Local Government Public Engagement."

Institute for Local Government, 2010. <http://www.ca-ilg.org/PublicEngagementPrinciples>.

Baldassare, Mark. "Improving California's Democracy." At Issue: Critical

Facts on Critical Issues. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 2012. http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/atissue/AI_1012MBAI.pdf.

Barnes, William and Bonnie Mann. "Making Local Democracy Work: Municipal Officials' Views About Public Engagement."

Washington, DC: National League of Cities, 2010. <http://www.nlc.org/build-skills-and-networks/resources/research-reports/research-reports-library>.

California Forward and the National Conference on Citizenship. "California Civic Health Index 2009 - Hunkering Down: Volunteering and Civic Engagement During Turbulent Economic Times."

Washington, DC: National Conference on Citizenship, 2009. <http://www.ncoc.net/CALIFORNIACHI>.

Hagelskamp, Carolin, John Immerwahr, Christopher DiStasi and Jeremiah Hess. "Beyond Business as Usual: Leaders of California's Civic Organizations Seek New Ways to Engage the Public in Local Governance."

New York: Public Agenda, 2013. <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-engagement-in-california>

Jones, Jeff, and Lydia Saad. "In U.S., Trust in State, Local Governments Up."

Gallup, September 26, 2012. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/157700/trust-state-local-governments.aspx>.

Norris, Donald, Christopher Reddick and ICMA. "Electronic Government 2011 Survey."

Washington, DC: International City/County Management Association, 2012. http://icma.org/en/icma/knowledge_network/documents/kn/Document/303564/ICMA_2011_EDemocracy_Survey_Summary.

Peterson, Pete, David B. Smith, Kristi Tate and Ashley Trim. "Golden Governance: Building Effective Public Engagement in California."

California Forward, Center for Individual and Institutional Renewal, National Conference on Citizenship and The Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership at Pepperdine University, 2011. <http://ncoc.net/GoldenGovernance>.

Ramakrishnan, S. Karthick. "Engaging Local Communities: Governance and Public Involvement in California Cities and Counties."

Institute for Local Government, 2008.

Yankelovich, Daniel and Will Friedman. Toward Wiser Public Judgment.

Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

from Public Agenda

Beyond Business as Usual: Leaders of California's Civic Organizations Seek New Ways to Engage the Public in Local Governance (2013)

John Immerwahr, Carolin Hagelskamp, Christopher DiStasi and Jeremiah Hess

The companion study to "Testing the Waters" investigates the views of leaders of civic organizations on the state of public participation in local government decision making.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-engagement-in-california>

Don't Count Us Out: How an Overreliance on Accountability Could Undermine the Public's Confidence in Schools, Business, Government, and More (2011)

Jean Johnson, Jonathan Rochkind and Samantha DuPont

This report examines an underappreciated gap between policy leaders' and citizens' views on "accountability" and what it means for leaders to be accountable to the public.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/media/dont-count-us-out>

Toward Wiser Public Judgment (2010)

Will Friedman and Daniel Yankelovich (Eds.)

This book reviews the experiences and insights of several organizations that have developed or adopted public engagement methods in the past few decades.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/toward-wiser-public-judgement>

Beginning with the End in Mind: A Call for Goal-Driven Deliberative Practice (2009)

Martin Carcasson

This paper offers a practical framework to help practitioners of public engagement think through important questions about their work, and explores the goals and purposes of public engagement overall.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/media/beginning-with-the-end-in-mind>

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

from Public Agenda

Democracy, Growing Up: The Shifts That Reshaped Local Politics and Foreshadowed the 2008 Presidential Election (2009)

Matt Leighninger

This brief report reviews a shift in citizens' attitudes and capacity toward democratic governance, which has resulted in new tensions between citizens and government, produced new public actors and problem solvers, and inspired a new generation of civic experiments.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/media/democracy-growing-up>

Public Engagement: A Primer from Public Agenda (2008)

Public Agenda Center for Advances in Public Engagement

This primer provides an introduction to Public Agenda's community engagement method; it also outlines the difference between authentic engagement and "business as usual" approaches.

http://www.publicagenda.org/files/public_engagement_primer.pdf

Transforming Public Life: A Decade of Citizen Engagement in Bridgeport, CT (2007)

Lara Birnback, Will Friedman and Alison Kadlec

This report reflects on the experiences of the town of Bridgeport, which adopted deliberative public engagement practices in the late 1990s and saw the flowering of a robust civic culture as a result.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/index.php?qid=319>

Reframing "Framing" (2007)

Will Friedman

This short paper contrasts the methods and impacts of "framing to persuade" (defining an issue to one's advantage) and "framing for deliberation" (clarifying the range of positions around an issue so that the public can make an informed decision about what it wants).

<http://www.publicagenda.org/media/reframing-framing>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors of “Testing the Waters” would like to thank the following people for their support and contributions to the preparation of this report:

The many California local officials and civic leaders who took the time to share their views and experiences by responding to our surveys, and those we personally consulted, whose insights have informed this project throughout its development;

Our funders and partners at The James Irvine Foundation, especially Amy Dominguez-Arms, for offering us the opportunity to conduct this research and the freedom to explore the issues without constraint or bias;

Our partners Terry Amsler, at the Institute for Local Government, and Pete Peterson, at The Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership at Pepperdine University, for their indispensable input, advice and assistance throughout this research;

Ann Duffet and Steve Farkas, of the FDR Group, for their expert assistance and advice, especially in the early stages of this research;

Social Science Research Solutions, who brought invaluable expertise to their fielding of the surveys;

Allison Rizzolo, Megan Donovan and Michael Rojas—Public Agenda’s communications team—for bringing our work to the attention of a broad audience;

And Will Friedman, president of Public Agenda, for his vision, insight and guidance throughout this project.

About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate complex, divisive issues. Through nonpartisan research and engagement, it provides people with the insights and support they need to arrive at workable solutions on critical issues, regardless of their differences. Since 1975, Public Agenda has helped foster progress on K-12 and higher education reform, health care, federal and local budgets, energy and immigration. Find Public Agenda online at PublicAgenda.org.

Find us online at publicagenda.org, on Facebook at [facebook.com/PublicAgenda](https://www.facebook.com/PublicAgenda) and on Twitter at [@PublicAgenda](https://twitter.com/PublicAgenda).

About The James Irvine Foundation

The James Irvine Foundation is a private, nonprofit grantmaking foundation dedicated to expanding opportunity for the people of California to participate in a vibrant, successful and inclusive society. The Foundation's grantmaking focuses on three program areas: Arts, California Democracy and Youth. Since 1937 the Foundation has provided over \$1.3 billion in grants to more than 3,500 nonprofit organizations throughout California. With about \$1.6 billion in assets, the Foundation made grants of \$68 million in 2012 for the people of California.

For more information about the Irvine Foundation, please visit our website at www.irvine.org or call 415.777.2244.

About the Institute for Local Government

The Institute for Local Government is the nonprofit research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. Established in 1955, the Institute promotes good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California's local officials and their communities. Current work and resources focus on the areas of public engagement, public service ethics, sustainability, understanding local government, and more.

For information, visit www.ca-ilg.org. View the public engagement pages at www.ca-ilg.org/engagement.

About The Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership at Pepperdine University

Since our founding as a multi-partisan, nonprofit organization in 2005, The Davenport Institute (formerly Common Sense California) has worked to engage the citizens of this state in the policy decisions that affect our everyday lives. With a focus on local and regional projects, we support our mission through consulting on public processes, training public sector leaders and grantmaking. It is our firm belief that in today's world of easy access to information and easy connectivity to others, municipal and education leaders are seeking ways to involve the residents of their communities in the important issues they confront. Done legitimately, this new kind of leadership produces better, more creative policy solutions and better, more engaged citizens committed to the hard work of self-governance.

For more information about the Davenport Institute, please visit our website at <http://publicpolicy.pepperdine.edu/davenport-institute/>