

Engaging Local Communities

**Governance and Public Involvement
in California Cities and Counties**

**A report prepared for the
Institute for Local Government**

*The nonprofit research affiliate of the League of California Cities
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by

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Executive Summary

This report focuses on civic engagement in California as it relates to the interface between local governments and their constituents. The responsiveness of government to the interests and preferences of constituents is one of the hallmark features of a democracy. Local governments are especially important to the health of civic engagement in American society: they offer numerous opportunities for participation, and are the level of government that residents trust the most on various matters of public policy.

This report presents findings from a survey of over 1,000 public officials in city and county government in California. This is the first survey of its kind that examines attitudes and practices related to civic engagement and local governments in California, and it provides important baseline information for future data collection efforts. The survey includes responses from over 1,000 city and county officials, including mayors, councilmembers, city managers, county supervisors, and planners.

Our survey assesses the extent to which officials are satisfied with current levels of public involvement, and what they perceive to be some of the greatest strengths and challenges associated with current civic engagement practices. We also have detailed findings about the experience of officials with various civic engagement techniques, and explore the ways in which they seek to inform themselves about civic engagement practices and opportunities.

We find that, while officials are generally satisfied with public involvement in their jurisdictions, they also note several challenges. One of the most significant challenges is ensuring that participation extends beyond the usual set of participants. Related to this concern, many officials note that those who participate in local decision-making are not representative of the demographic makeup of their communities, not just by race but also by age and homeownership.

However, many cities and counties have taken steps to improve the quality of collaborative public involvement in their communities. Nearly one half of city and county officials have participated in “town hall” style public meetings, held smaller discussion groups in various neighborhoods, and conducted surveys of residents. A smaller proportion of them have tried techniques such as televised debates, online dialogues via the Internet, and holding “office hours” on evenings and weekends.

Officials who have participated in civic engagement activities generally have a favorable impression of their usefulness. For some activities such as online discussions, however, challenges remain in making the techniques useful for decision-making at the local level. In order to make the most out of civic engagement techniques, public officials rely heavily on learning from their peers in the region and from statewide associations. These will likely remain important resources for learning new techniques to improve the quality of public involvement in collaborative decision-making.

Introduction

The term civic engagement refers to a broad set of activities, at the individual and collective level, that address issues of public concern. Studies of civic engagement have traditionally focused on individual activities, such as voting and volunteering, and on collective efforts by community organizations, such as providing food for the homeless or advocating for sustainable growth (Putnam, 2000). This report focuses on another important aspect of civic engagement: the interface between governing institutions and various constituent groups in the formulation of policies and practices that affect the common good.

The responsiveness of government to the interests and preferences of constituents is one of the hallmark features of a democratic system of governance. Local governments are especially important to the health of civic engagement in American society. They offer numerous opportunities for participation among residents and other stakeholders, from appointments to boards and commissions to public hearings and participatory budgeting. City and county governments are also the types of political institutions residents trust the most on various matters of public policy, especially when compared to the national government in Washington, D.C. (Baldassare, 2006).

In this report, we examine the current state of civic engagement in California cities and counties as they relate to matters of local governance. We rely on a survey of city and county officials conducted in the second half of 2007, in which we asked questions that tap into: 1) officials' general levels of satisfaction with current levels of public involvement, 2) what they perceive to be some of the most significant challenges associated with public involvement as currently practiced, 3) their experiences with various civic engagement

techniques, and 4) the ways in which they seek to inform themselves about civic engagement practices and opportunities. This is the first survey of its kind that examines attitudes and practices related to civic engagement and local governments in California, and it provides important baseline information for future data collection efforts.

We sent surveys, starting in June 2007 and continuing through October 2007, to the mayors and two city councilmembers from every municipality in California, as well as to all of the state's city managers, city planners, and directors of city community services, city community development, and city redevelopment. We also sent out a survey of civic engagement practices to all of the county supervisors, county administrators, and county planners in the state. Our average response rate was 33%, which is in line with other mail surveys of local government officials (Cooper et al. 2005, Ramakrishnan and Lewis 2005). We received responses from 1,044 city and county government officials, from 51 of 58 counties and from 398 of the state's 478 cities. We are therefore able to say something systematic about the state of civic engagement in California's cities and counties, including the impressions and attitudes of public officials, their experiences with various civic engagement techniques, and their desires and strategies to improve the quality of public involvement in California.

General Impressions on Civic Engagement

Perhaps the most basic measure of how officials perceive civic engagement is the extent to which they are satisfied with the way in which the public is involved. In our first question in the survey pertaining to civic engagement, we asked: "*Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the level of public involvement in local decisionmaking?*" In general, there is a high level of satisfaction with the general level of civic engagement in

cities and counties. As indicated in Figure 1, more than three quarters of officials expressed satisfaction. However, only 25% of officials were “very satisfied” with the current level of involvement, suggesting that there is room for improvement for the vast majority of cities and counties in California.

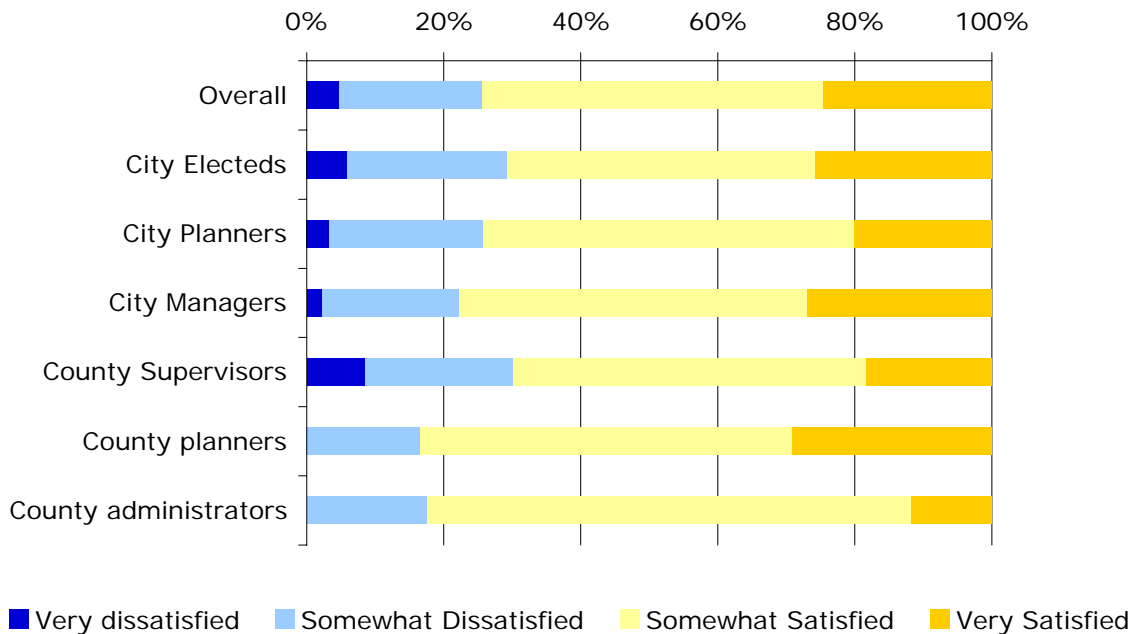


Figure 1: Satisfaction with current levels of public involvement

In terms of differences across different types of officials, we found the highest levels of satisfaction among non-elected officials such as city and county planners and city managers. County supervisors had the highest levels of dissatisfaction, with nearly one third of respondents saying they were dissatisfied with the level of public involvement, and about one in 10 saying they were very dissatisfied. Other county officials expressed levels of satisfaction on par with city managers. Finally, while about 30% of mayors and city councilmembers expressed dissatisfaction with the current level of public engagement, a roughly equal proportion of them indicated that they were very satisfied.

It is quite possible that dissatisfaction with public involvement stems from officials' beliefs that residents have too much say in local decisions. However, we asked in another question later in the survey: "*Thinking beyond elections, do you think residents have too much say in local politics, too little say, or just the right amount?*" Only 5% of our respondents indicated that residents had too much say in local decisions, while a much larger proportion indicated that they had too little say (24%). This was especially true for county supervisors, with only 2 percent indicating that residents had too much say, and about 35% noting that residents had too little say in local decisions.

In addition to asking officials about their overall satisfaction with public involvement, we also probed deeper into concerns they may have about the way that public involvement is practiced. For instance, we asked them the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statement: "*Policy making in my jurisdiction depends too much on a few special interests.*" As Figure 2 indicates, officials were generally more likely to disagree than to agree with that assessment, with 30% in agreement and 42% disagreeing that local politics is dominated by special interests.

However, there are some differences according to the type of official. City planners, who deal with land use issues related to housing and commercial development, are among those most likely to think of local politics as driven by special interests (38%). As we shall see later, their high levels of interaction with businesses and developers may help shape this perception. By contrast, only about one in five mayors and city councilmembers see politics as driven by special interests, and more than one half disagree with that assessment. Finally, about a third of county supervisors see local decisions as

being dominated by special interests, while a smaller proportion of county planners and administrators hold the same opinion.

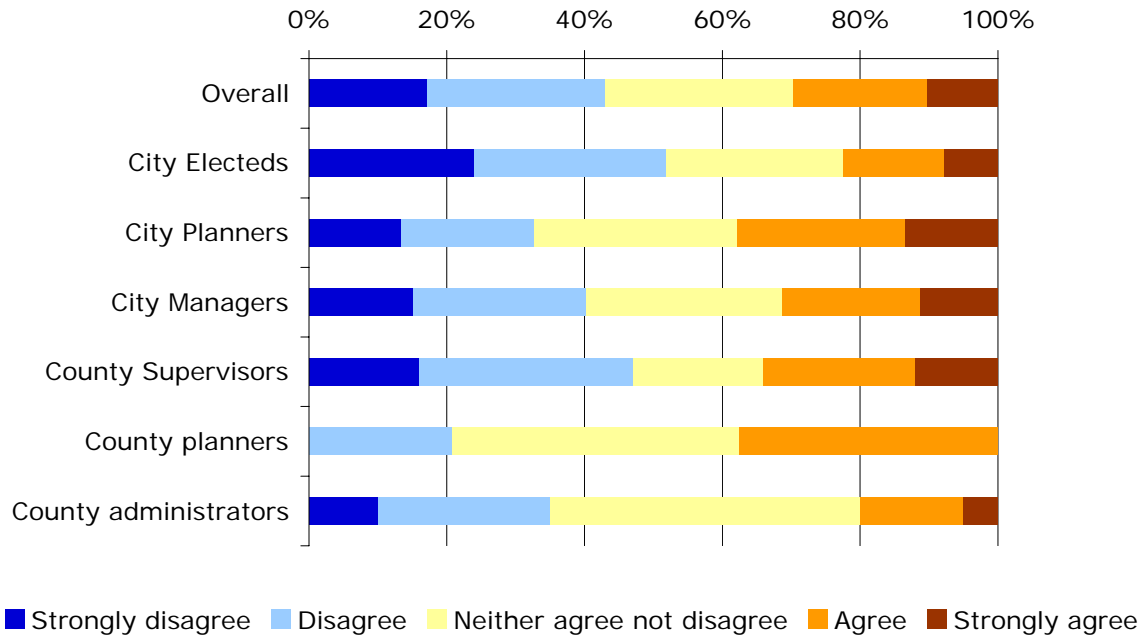


Figure 2: Assessment of whether local policy making is dominated by special interests

Finally, we had other questions in the survey that tapped into the extent to which officials were satisfied with the current state of public involvement. There were high levels of satisfaction on election-related matters ranging from candidate elections to the use of local ballot measures. Looking beyond elections, about half the respondents strongly agreed with the assessment that residents have ample opportunities to participate in local government decisions. County supervisors were more likely to voice concerns about the opportunities available for public involvement. However, they too had high levels of agreement on the issue of opportunities available for public involvement (34% strongly agree and 34% somewhat agree, while 7% strongly disagree and 9% somewhat disagree).

It is also evident, however, that the existence of opportunities does not diminish the challenges posed by inadequate levels of public involvement. We also asked officials

to rank the challenges facing local governments on a scale from 1 (not much of a challenge) to 5 (very serious challenge). Perhaps not surprisingly, they see fiscal and regulation issues as posing the biggest challenges facing local governments. As Table 1 indicates, local officials view revenues and expenditures as the biggest challenge, followed by land use and public safety. However, officials also cite public involvement as one of the more serious challenges facing their jurisdiction, with levels close to other concerns such as maintaining public safety.

Indeed, among the challenges related to local governance, encouraging public participation is seen as the most serious, even more significant than other challenges such as managing social conflicts in the community, or maintaining a productive dialogue on the city council or board of supervisors. Finally, the concern about public involvement is found across all types of public officials, elected as well as nonelected, and at the county as well as the city level.

Table 1. Assessment of challenges facing local governments

	Overall	City electeds	City planners	City managers	County supervisors	County planners	County admins
Ensuring a sufficient revenue base to provide public services	3.91	3.75	3.78	4.15	4.26	4.42	4.47
Managing land use and planning	3.73	3.66	3.56	3.82	4.08	4.13	4.00
Ensuring public safety	3.15	3.07	2.88	3.24	3.71	3.65	4.00
Encouraging participation of local residents	3.12	3.14	3.06	3.09	3.39	3.25	2.95
Managing social conflicts between different groups in the community	2.70	2.61	2.77	2.58	3.12	3.13	2.79
Maintaining a constructive political dialogue	2.67	2.58	2.76	2.72	2.59	2.91	2.74

Note: Responses are on a 1-5 scale (1=Not much of a challenge, 5=Very serious challenge)

Finally, based on their experiences with various types of civic engagement, local officials in California believe that its greatest benefits are to educate residents about complex issues, increase trust in local government, and inform officials about the priorities of residents (Figure 3). They are somewhat less likely to believe that greater civic engagement is important to generate new ideas or settle controversies, but even on these objectives, the majority of respondents believe that civic engagement can achieve such purposes.

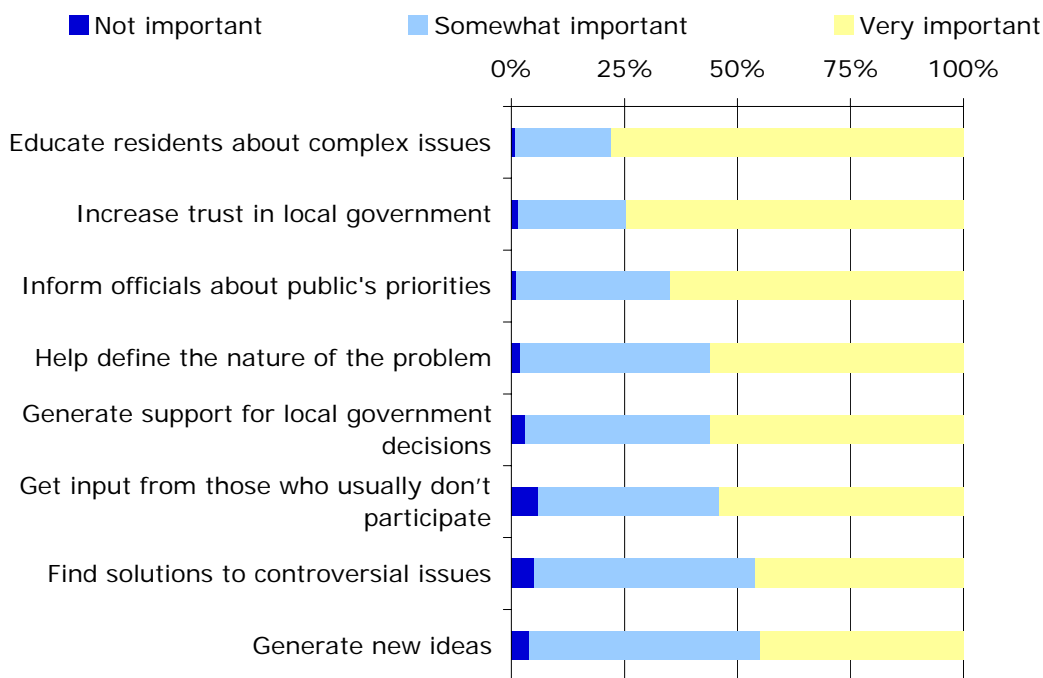


Figure 3. Importance of civic engagement to achieve various objectives

In terms of particular issues, local officials deem civic engagement to be helpful on a range of matters, from land use and planning to housing, transportation, and infrastructure. However, they were somewhat cautious about the role of public involvement in budget formulation and negotiations, with about a third indicating that public involvement is not helpful. This likely reflects the fact that budgeting decisions are typically more complicated, and involving more aspects of local administration, than

decisions involving substantive policy issues such as land use and planning. Still, even on complicated matters such as budgeting, 50% of local officials deemed it to be helpful, and 16% deemed it to be very helpful.

Challenges With Participation

One of the most significant challenges in the practice of civic engagement by local governments is the selective nature of such involvement, with some groups much more likely to participate than others. When we asked officials to rate the seriousness of various challenges related to public involvement in local decisions, the most serious concern was that “it was always the same people who participate,” with 54% of respondents very concerned about the issue. Other challenges, such as not having enough time (18%) or resources (31%) to more fully engage with the public, received far fewer mentions.

To probe deeper into the nature of selective civic engagement as it is currently practiced, we asked local officials to compare the participation rates of various groups by asking: “*In general, how would you rate the involvement of the following constituencies in public hearings, forums, and meetings at the local level?*” with a 1-to-5 scale ranging from “not involved” to “very involved.”

As indicated in Figure 4, the strongest gaps were associated with the race and ethnicity of residents, with nearly a two-to-one difference between white residents, on the one hand, and African Americans and Asian Americans on the other. We also find a nearly 2-to-1 gap in how officials perceive the involvement of homeowners versus renters. Age was also a significant factor, as officials noted relatively low rates of participation among young adults (ages 18 to 35). By contrast, gender was not deemed to be a significant factor in local involvement.

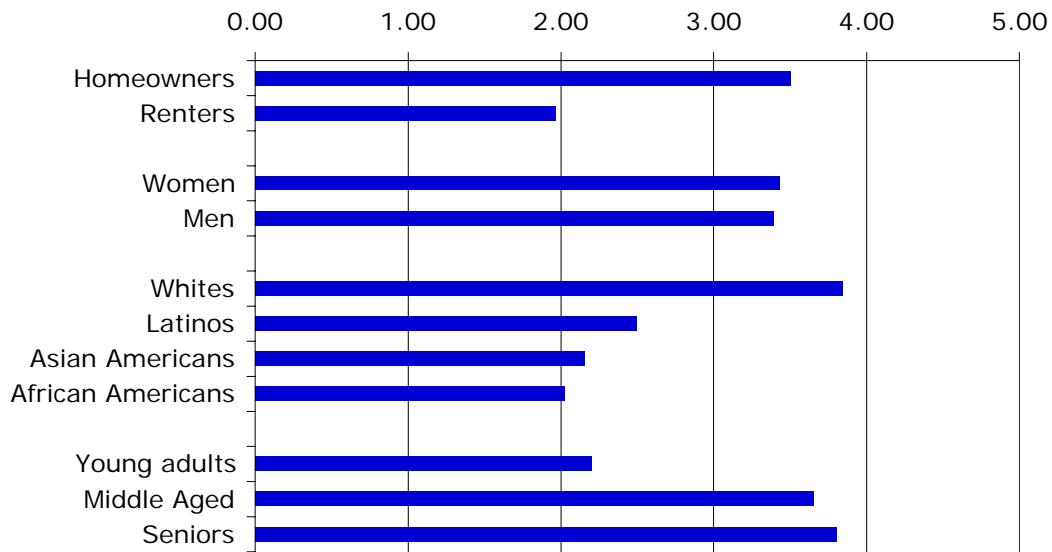


Figure 4. Involvement of various constituencies in public hearings, forums, and meetings
(1=Not involved, 5=Very involved)

Another way to assess disparities in local involvement is across types of groups or organized interests. We asked our survey respondents to note the average hours per week they spend with individual residents and various constituent groups such as businesses and developers, civic organizations, and neighborhood associations. On average, local officials spent about 13 hours a week meeting with residents and various constituent groups, with county supervisors spending the most time (about 15 hours) and the rest spending about 12 hours a week. As noted in Table 2, elected officials spent the most amount of time meeting with individual residents, while nonelected officials such as city and county planners spent the most time meeting with developers and businesses. Among resident organizations, officials spent much more time with civic organizations than with neighborhood associations, suggesting that the former are more prevalent and better organized to interact with local government (Gordon 2006, Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2006).

Table 2. Time spent with various constituent groups (hours per week)

	Overall	City electeds	City planners	City managers	County supervisors	County planners	County admins
Individual residents	3.91	3.68	4.46	3.48	5.86	4.13	2.65
Businesses and developers	3.86	2.63	5.84	4.26	3.85	5.42	3.74
Civic organizations	2.96	3.06	1.86	3.08	4.58	2.83	3.00
Neighborhood associations	1.84	1.85	1.55	1.72	3.23	1.70	0.50

Experiences With Civic Engagement Techniques

There are various techniques to engage with the public on deliberations and decisions, ranging from newer methods such as online chat sessions to more traditional methods such as “town hall” style public meetings. In our survey, we asked officials if they had ever tried one of nine techniques intended to allow more public participation in local decisions, and also allowed for two open-ended responses to capture additional techniques. The nine techniques included:

- 1) *“Town hall” style public meetings* – Unlike formal meetings of the city council or county board of supervisors, town hall meetings are designed to allow ample opportunities for community members to express their opinions on a particular issue. Participants do not need to compete with other items on the government’s agenda and, typically, no official decisions are made at the meeting.
- 2) *Discussion groups held in various neighborhoods* – These are meetings, held outside City Hall or the county administrative building, that are designed to increase participation by residents in particular neighborhoods. There is usually at least one local government official in attendance, and the goals are to generate deliberation rather than official decisions.
- 3) *Televised debates* – Appearing primarily on local cable access channels, televised discussions can include meetings of the city council and county board of supervisors, public hearings, candidate debates, and other policy-relevant meetings.
- 4) *Online dialogues via the internet* – In addition to corresponding with individual residents via email, government officials also have

opportunities to interact with constituents in online forums where participants have the chance to learn from each other, in addition to corresponding with government officials.

- 5) *Surveys of residents* – In addition to listening to the perspectives of those who voice their opinions in government meetings and various other forums, survey interviews (whether by telephone, mail, the Internet, or in-person) enable government officials to easily aggregate opinion and to give equal weight to those who may be reluctant to participate in public forums.
- 6) *Citizen advisory committees* – These are unofficial or semi-official bodies that report on the ongoing concerns of residents to official government bodies such as city councils. Committee members are usually appointed by the larger body to which they report.
- 7) *Neighborhood councils* – These are advisory committees focused on concerns of particular neighborhoods, with representatives usually chosen through some kind of representative process.
- 8) *Ombudsman or similar offices* – Ombudsmen are officials appointed by governments to review complaints from residents about particular agencies. Local governments may instead appoint community liaisons whose task is to open channels of communications between government officials and various constituent groups.
- 9) *Evening “office hours” for government officials* – Most residents are at work at times when local government offices are in operation. Many residents may also be unable to attend official meetings because of work and family obligations. Office hours enable residents to meet with individual elected officials to voice their concerns.

Of the various techniques we mentioned, town hall meetings and citizen advisory committees were ones most commonly used, by about one half of the respondents (Figure 5). Both of these techniques were more common among city planners than among elected officials in either city or county government, although the differences were relatively small (ranging from 49% to 55% in the case of town hall meetings, and 46% to 55% in the case of citizen advisory committees). About a half of local government officials also reported participating in neighborhood discussion groups and having some experience with surveys of residents, whether by mail, telephone, or the Internet.

Other techniques for civic engagement received far less frequent mention. Only about one in five respondents indicated the use of televised debates of meetings and

hearings, and an even smaller proportion of respondents indicated that they had participated in online discussion forums (10%). Other strategies that were of low frequency included the use of ombudsmen, neighborhood councils, and evening “office hours” for government officials, although for the latter two, county supervisors were more likely than mayors and city councilmembers to indicate experience with such efforts.

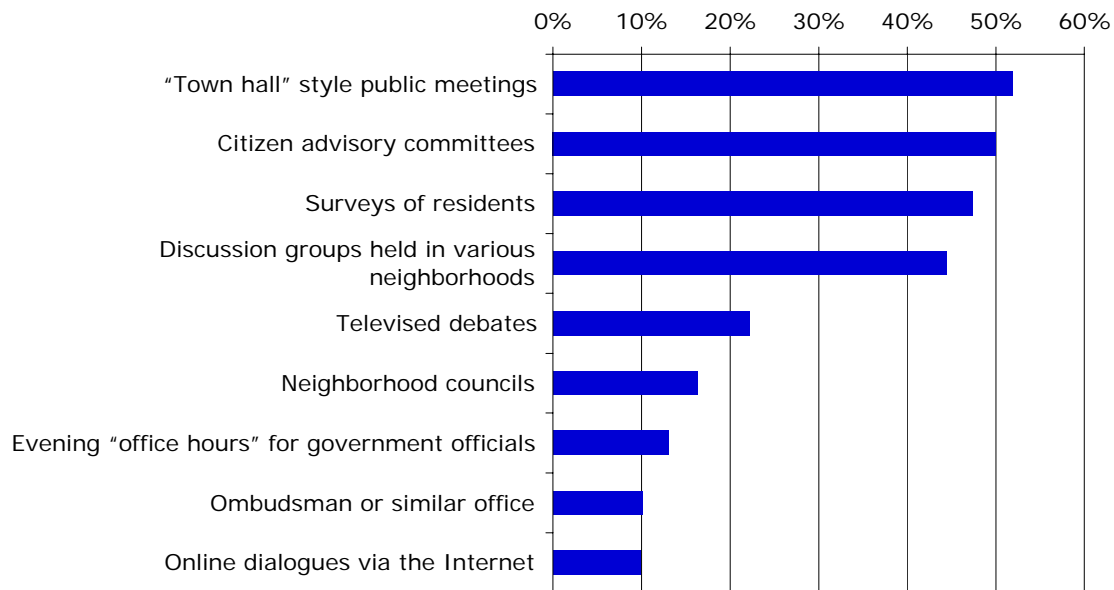


Figure 5. Percent of respondents who have ever tried civic engagement techniques

We also asked respondents whether they believed these various techniques to be useful for local policy decisions. We asked these questions both to those who have tried the particular technique as well as to those who had not. As the results in Figure 6 indicate, those who tried a method or activity were generally more likely to deem it useful than those who had not yet tried the technique. This was especially true for the use of ombudsmen, televised debates, neighborhood councils, and online dialogues. There was less of a difference based on prior experience for the rating of techniques such as town hall meetings, discussion groups, citizen advisory groups, and surveys of residents. All of

these activities were ranked as somewhat to very useful, even among those who had not tried the activity. Finally, there was only a modest increase in the rated usefulness of evening “office hours” among those who had tried it versus those who had not.

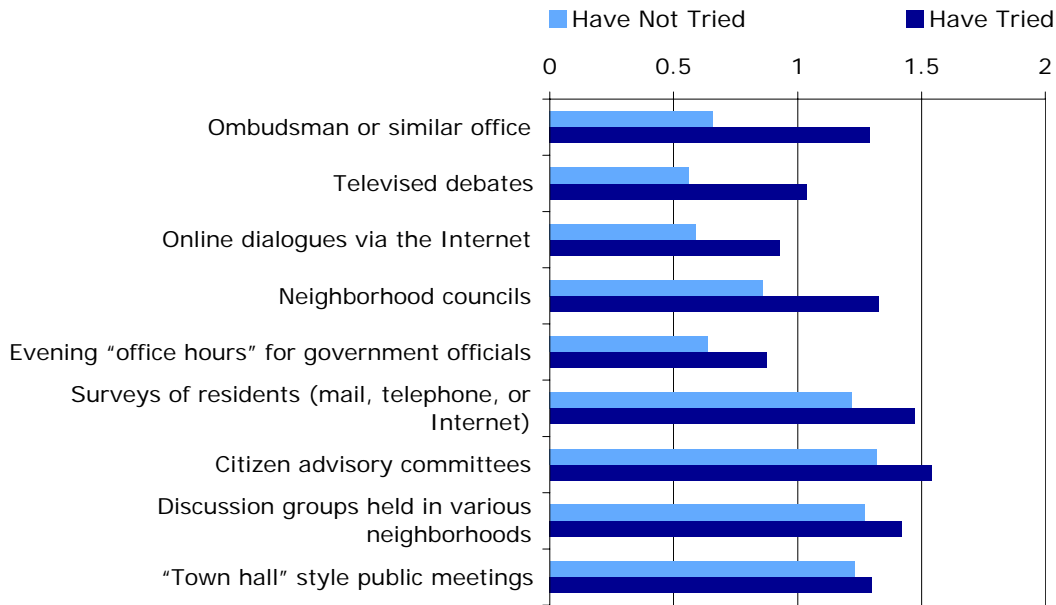


Figure 6. Usefulness of civic engagement techniques, according to experience
(0=not useful, 1=somewhat useful, 2=very useful)

Based on our survey data, it is difficult to say that experience with a particular technique *causes* an increase in its perceived utility. It could also be the case that those who have tried a particular technique were already more predisposed towards finding it useful, and the experience only confirmed their prior beliefs. However, it is important to note that we do find some significant differences in the rating of techniques among those who have tried them. On average, evening office hours and online dialogues were ranked lower by participants than the other activities on our list, earning an average rating below 1, or somewhat useful. By contrast, all of the other activities received a ranking of 1 or greater. Finally, for activities such as conducting surveys of residents and holding special town hall meetings, the high ratings among nonusers suggests that the lack of universal

implementation of such techniques is not due to beliefs that such techniques are unhelpful. As we saw earlier, other factors, such as lack of resources and difficulties in expanding the circle of those who participate, may play a stronger role.

Finally, in addition to the nine techniques we mentioned, we also gave the opportunity for officials to leave up to two open-ended responses for items not already covered. Some of the open-ended responses included variations on items already on the survey, such as electronic townhalls and webcasts of council meetings, and weekend office hours. However, there were several new types of activities, ranging from traditional, one-one-activities such as door-to-door walking, meeting with constituents on the weekends at farmers markets and local coffee shops, and having morning coffee meetings with individual residents. Respondents also noted that, in addition to reaching out to various neighborhood groups and councils, they also attend meetings of community organizations and use their connections to local civic groups to open up channels of communication.

A few respondents noted an increased connection to the public through publications such weekly columns in local newspapers and regular newsletters put out by their city. A few respondents also took the opportunity to mention leadership academies and workshops designed to educate the public about the opportunities and challenges of local governance. Finally, there were a few mentions of specialized ways of generating public input, such as holding focus groups with relevant community members, connecting with residents via online social networking sites such as Facebook, implementing idea-generating forums such as The World Café (<http://www.theworldcafe.com>), and working with youth councils to encourage civic engagement and leadership in future generations.

Getting Informed About Civic Engagement

We also asked officials where they currently receive information about activities and strategies to improve civic engagement. As indicated in Table 3, the most prevalent source was decidedly local—80 percent of local officials pointed to information from agency staff or elected officials within their own jurisdiction. More than two-thirds of local officials also mentioned peers in other jurisdictions as valuable sources of information. Another frequently-cited source of information was statewide membership associations, with about 75 percent of city officials referring to the League of California Cities, about 85% of county administrators and two in three supervisors mentioning the California State Association of Counties. By contrast, national member associations and professional groups were mentioned far less frequently, especially among elected officials. Finally, information from academic institutions and think tanks were cited by only a quarter of local officials in our survey.

Table 3. Where officials currently receive information about civic engagement

	Overall	City electeds	City planners	City managers	County supervisors	County planners	County admins
From agency staff within your city	80%	85%	77%	79%	79%	52%	75%
Information from statewide membership associations (League of CA Cities, etc.)	74%	73%	68%	81%	66%	72%	85%
Information from colleagues in other jurisdictions	70%	66%	70%	82%	67%	72%	65%
From professional associations (ICMA, etc.)	43%	25%	54%	68%	17%	60%	60%
From consultants who provide civic engagement services	40%	37%	47%	40%	32%	48%	20%

Information from national membership associations (National League of Cities, etc.)
 From research by academic institutions, think tanks

31%	26%	39%	30%	38%	24%	30%
24%	26%	16%	25%	34%	24%	30%

The reliance on local information was also evident in our final survey question on civic engagement: “If your jurisdiction were interested in engaging the public, which of the following would you find useful?” Two thirds of respondents mentioned information about practices by peers as the most useful type of information, with practices in the region as being the most relevant (60%), followed by practices from across the state (42%). Examples from jurisdictions in other parts of the country were not deemed to be useful, with the exception of county supervisors, of whom nearly 40% thought that examples from outside California would be helpful.

Table 4. Types of information about civic engagement deemed to be useful

	Overall	City electeds	City planners	City managers	County supervisors	County planners	County admins
More information on what your peers are doing:	65%	64%	68%	64%	61%	72%	70%
-- in your region?	60%	61%	65%	52%	60%	68%	55%
-- statewide?	42%	36%	39%	43%	53%	52%	65%
-- around the country?	22%	19%	20%	24%	38%	4%	15%
Civic engagement case stories on particular topics (e.g., housing, budgeting, etc.)	56%	52%	54%	61%	61%	60%	55%
More information at the conferences and trainings you attend	54%	54%	61%	55%	53%	56%	65%
General “how to” guides	52%	48%	60%	56%	49%	60%	45%
More information from web sites	34%	27%	45%	32%	38%	52%	30%
Civic engagement reports by public sector institutes	34%	31%	34%	35%	42%	44%	20%
Academic research on civic engagement	23%	27%	16%	21%	38%	4%	20%

In terms of the type of information available, local officials in our survey had a slight preference for case studies on particular topics over general “how to” guides, with city planners being the notable exception. Finally, officials found it more useful to receive information about civic engagement practices through conference presentations and training sessions rather than through published reports, regardless of whether they come from academic sources or public sector institutes, or whether they are sent by mail or available for download on the web. Thus, the consistent theme that emerges is that city and county officials prefer to get information about civic engagement that is locally and regionally relevant, and they prefer to get such information in familiar venues such as conferences and trainings they already attend.

Conclusions and Recommendations

City and county officials in California are generally satisfied with public involvement in their jurisdictions, although many of them note several challenges and areas for improvement. One of the most significant challenges is the concern that “it is always the same people who participate,” with more than a half of officials suggesting the need to expand the circle of those who are involved in local decisions. Related to this concern, many officials also note significant gaps in participation in activities such as public hearings and forums. The biggest gaps can be found along racial and ethnic lines, but officials also note significant differences in participation between homeowners and renters, and between young adults and older residents. Thus, one of the biggest challenges related to civic engagement in local decisions is the fact that participants are not representative of the demographic makeup of their communities.

In addition to group differences, city and county officials also expressed concerns about overall levels of public involvement. Thus, nearly five times as more respondents indicated that residents currently have too little say in local decisions than those who believe that residents have too much input. Overall, the problem of encouraging public involvement ranks nearly as high as other important issues such as ensuring public safety.

Despite these challenges, many cities and counties have taken steps to improve the quality of collaborative public involvement in their communities. Officials continue to believe that civic engagement reaps important benefits such as educating residents on complex issues, informing officials about public priorities, and increasing trust in local government. They also find public involvement to be useful for a range of matters, from land use and planning to housing, transportation, and infrastructure. They are somewhat more cautious about the role of public involvement in budgeting issues, although even on fiscal matters, a majority of respondents find civic engagement to be helpful.

In terms of particular techniques of civic engagement, nearly one half of city and county officials have participated in activities such as “town hall” style public meetings, smaller discussion groups in various neighborhoods, and surveys of residents. A smaller proportion of them have tried techniques such as televised debates, online dialogues via the Internet, and holding “office hours” on evenings and weekends. Those who have tried out civic engagement activities have a generally favorable impression of the usefulness of such techniques. Indeed, even non-users give high ratings to particular activities such as holding “town hall” style meetings and conducting surveys of residents, suggesting that more can be done to make such tools available to local governments. However, for some

activities such as holding evening office hours and Internet-based constituent dialogues, significant challenges remain in making the techniques useful for local decision-making.

In order to make the most out of civic engagement techniques, public officials mostly rely on learning from their peers in the region and from statewide associations. Officials rely most heavily on statewide associations for information about civic engagement, much more than from academic research, think tank reports, and marketing information from consultants. They are also most interested in reading about efforts underway in the same county or region, rather than about best practices from other parts of the country. Providing customized solutions to officials based on their region will therefore prove crucial to improving public involvement in local decision-making in California. We also find that the best way to provide this information to officials is through existing conferences and trainings, rather than expecting public officials to seek out such information through published reports and web resources.

There is a significant desire among city and county officials in California to improve the quality of public involvement in local decision-making. These officials see statewide associations such as the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties as important sources of information on techniques and experiences with civic engagement. With a greater emphasis on case stories that are relevant to particular regions, with more training opportunities at state and regional meetings, and more precise information about civic engagement as it relates to particular issues such as land use and budgeting, these statewide organizations can help improve the quantity and quality of public involvement in local decision-making.

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