

# Seeking a New Relationship with Communities

How Local Elected Officials Want to  
Bridge Divides, Distrust, and Doubts

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COMMENTARY BY  
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The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that equips people, organizations, communities, and networks with the tools to bridge divides, build capacity, and tackle shared challenges. The Harwood Institute's work is rooted in a philosophy of Civic Faith and the practice of Turning Outward. Founded in 1988, the Institute partners with some of the world's largest nonprofits, and its approach has spread to all 50 states across the US and 40 countries around the world.



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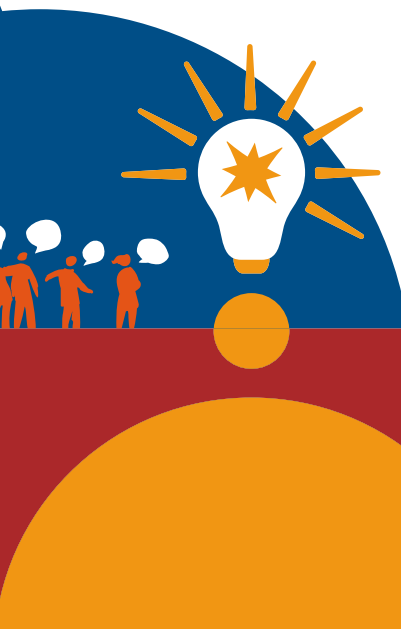
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# INTRODUCTION

In a city neighborhood laboring under economic decline and uneven opportunity, a mayor was just leaving a young man's home when she turned around. She had promised to help the 19-year-old father find work, but she had forgotten to get his phone number. Approaching his door, she saw that he too was suddenly walking back toward her. "I didn't give you my number," he said.

The mayor had stopped at the house during a community survey, and at first the man had declined to participate. "He had looked at me reluctantly," she recalled, "as if to say, 'Please don't waste my time.'" She explained the survey was to help the city allocate its resources, and once they began talking, she asked what his hopes were for the future.

He told her his greatest hope was to be around to see his two-year-old son grow up. She said to him, "Let me help you get a job." That's why she had come back to his door. To make sure she made good on the promise. And that's why he had taken the time to follow her when it looked like she forgot.

She took his number, and in her words, "We got him a job." She heard the news later from the outreach worker who helped him. "She called me," said the mayor. "She said, 'I just want you to know that he was crying, because he didn't believe that you were really going to come back.'"

## Time for a New Relationship

The mayor is one of 36 leaders The Harwood Institute interviewed to learn how local elected officials view and feel about their interactions with community members. While our focus was not on community surveys or jobs programs, the mayor's story, of fragile trust and extra care, has the same contours as dozens of the stories we heard about the tenuous rapport between local officials and the people they serve and, more specifically, the state of outreach and engagement between them.

Our interviews revealed a dynamic between officials and the public that is uncomfortably strained by distrust in government. According to the leaders we interviewed, people harbor deep doubts about their leaders, and those leaders are seeking a new footing to help them reach past those doubts and past the fatigue and limitations that surround traditional outreach and engagement methods.

Taken together, these interviews suggest a deep-seated concern among officials about their standing with the public, an emerging desire to seek more authentic ways to engage, and an assertion that elected leaders will need to take a new path forward. The officials we spoke to:

1. **Seek a deeper relationship with their communities—they believe trust is the medium in which they must work to succeed;**
2. **Harbor worries about the barriers to deeper community relationships and about a diminished climate of civic spirit;**
3. **Are experimenting with a number of approaches to break down the barriers with their communities and to deepen engagement by deepening connection;**
4. **Assert they must “enter the room differently” with their communities if they want to make deeper connections.**

## Rooted in a Deep Calling

The business of governing is often *transactional*, with a built-in focus on budgets, legislation, programs, campaigns, and public services, but for the officials we spoke to, the core of their collaboration with the public is *relational*. Officials see relationship—with individuals and with communities—as both a tool for governing and an end in itself.

The resulting report details the hopes, challenges, and perspectives of local elected officials as they engage with communities. One shared characteristic among these officials was an underlying belief that public life is to be guided by a mission. Most of these women and men say they are driven by a vision of leadership as service. Many of them see this service as a personal calling, and nearly all are seeking to affirm or reaffirm local elected leaders as trustworthy brokers of safety, opportunity, and hope.

## Methodology of Report

This research consisted of in-depth individual interviews with 36 local elected officials comprising three groups: state legislators; county officials (including commissioners, sheriffs, and auditors); and municipal officials (including mayors, city council members, and city managers).

The local elected officials represented 30 communities from 25 states across the United States.

Each interview lasted 45 minutes. The interviews focused on such areas as:

- officials' motivations for public service
- the tone of the collaboration between government and community members
- aspirations and challenges for officials' relationship with communities
- approaches to collaboration with communities
- lessons and future hopes for engaging with communities

## Organization of Report

This report is organized around our four central findings regarding elected officials' search for a stronger connection to their districts and communities. We explore the most notable aspects of each finding and present interview highlights that allow officials to speak in their own words about their motivations and challenges, the myriad approaches they are taking in the effort to engage more deeply, and the emerging understanding that they must "enter the room differently" than they have in the past if they want to be effective and in stronger relationship with the public.

We conclude with a commentary section by Richard C. Harwood, president and founder of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation.

A brief appendix compares and contrasts the findings from Harwood's 1989 report for the Kettering Foundation, *The Public's Role in the Policy Process*, with today's findings.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1

## Officials are seeking a relationship with the people who call their cities and states home.

Officials are compelled today by a particular sense of urgency as they witness anxiety among individuals and communities and a strained tone between people and government. For the officials we spoke to, the instinct to create trust—and to follow through—is a defining feature of their self-image as leaders. They see a strong relationship with people and communities, as both a longstanding calling and a mounting necessity.

**Officials are motivated—and moved—by a sense of responsibility to their communities. Underlying the drive to connect, there is a guiding principle of service.**

“I believe public service is honorable,” one mayor said. “I know that’s not a popular notion in this day and time.” Another said serving others is “the thing that motivates me the most. ... It’s just the value system I’ve got.” When asked about their reasons for holding office, most leaders spoke not merely about opportunities for development or about the needs of their communities. They spoke in terms of values and beliefs.

“There’s no job in public service where you can make a larger daily impact in the lives of people than being mayor of your hometown,” said one Midwestern mayor. “That’s what attracted me to public service and public service at the local level in particular.”

Leaders talked about the rewards of service—of serving—and about public impact and impacts on people’s lives. They had a straightforward attitude about their reasons to serve and their measures of success. One mayor said he ran for office because the city was “stagnant” under the previous mayor. “There wasn’t anything happening. There was no imagination. I decided that I would either have to stop complaining or do something,” he said. “I run because we get things done. It’s a rewarding position when you’re able to move the needle by working together with some people.”






A city councilperson said he will stay in politics, “for as long as I can do the job on my terms, which is not taking bribes, not getting involved in corruption.” He said elected officials do a better job when they spend “more time with their constituents and less time fundraising. It’s hard to do a bad job if you’re spending time in the community.”

While it may be easy to declare service as a guiding principle, officials acknowledged that it is a hard principle to live by these days. One state senator said this generation must wrestle with the challenge of “making civics work again.” Among the hurdles he listed were, “trying to get people to talk to one another, realizing that compromise is not a dirty word, realizing that civic engagement is virtuous, and not constantly denigrating the institutions of government.”

Many officials echoed this sentiment: that their hope to serve and their sense of the public are not in alignment. In today’s climate, the challenges of leadership include people’s resistance to the idea of civic engagement. After two decades on a town board, one city manager says that recently she’s found herself more frustrated by some neighbors because, when it comes to public decisions, “their scope is very narrow ... so a little cynicism has crept into my service.”

**Officials say a climate of public resentment and anxiety hinder the connection they seek, but they also believe those barriers can be overcome.**

Leaders aspire to connect with people in their districts and communities, but they do not kid themselves about the barriers. In fact, most officials indicated resignation to the idea that the current state of civic life is a challenge in part because life is challenging for individuals and for their families and communities. Officials temper their expectations of the public with a nuanced understanding of the public’s hopes and frustrations.



“The atmosphere is not easy,” a county chairwoman said, “and there’s a heightened anxiety in the community.” A mayor said he “grieves” the lack of civility in local “relationships and communications.” But, noting this atmosphere, another mayor speculated, “what must be going on for people is that they’ve become so acclimated to this negativity that they’re not even noticing themselves doing it.”

Officials had various explanations for trends in public “negativity” and “incivility”—from economic insecurity and the national media climate to age-old resistance to neighborhood changes—and we discuss these dynamics in a later section. But their concerns were balanced by a belief that genuine engagement can make a difference. “I would argue,” said the same mayor, “at the local level you can still have a conversation. You can still work with people if you’re willing to make the effort.”

“People either let their ego get in the way or they’re just too hell-bent to hold a position,” said a county commissioner. “You gotta be willing to wade into the lion’s jaws and sit down with them and say, ‘I don’t see the world through your lens. Explain to me how you got there.’”

Leaders believe that behind the anger they face from the public lies disappointment, frustration, and a hunger for a greater sense of humanity. And they reveal the same impulse toward empathy in their hope for stronger relationship and partnership. A county auditor said he is constantly working to understand what people are feeling and experiencing. “I guess spending time in those communities and talking with stakeholders in those areas gives you some sense. I do that on a regular basis. I don’t know that I ever feel 100% confident that I know what people are thinking. I don’t know that you ever really know until Election Day.”

A city manager said the size and relative isolation of her town has positively influenced the tone in her community. “I guess we already decided working together was important,” she said, “more important than party politics or age or gender and all that. We’re not a real fancy people.”

A small-town mayor said she is often surprised at people’s willingness to apologize for uncivil behavior. “I have called people out in council chambers,” she said. “I have called people out in email correspondence, just reminding them, and I’ve been surprised, because a lot of people have written back with an apology. So when I say call people out, actually what I’m really trying to do is call people up.”

## **Beneath their hope for connection, officials are fueled by a deeper calling still: to uphold a spirit of mutual faith between leaders and those they serve.**

One state senator said, “The civic space starts with a reverence for each other, for the whole. It’s like a civic cathedral.”

A city councilman staked his continued service on faith in the voters and, in a larger sense, all members of his community. With a dose of cynicism, he said, “I am hoping for a moment where I lose faith in the electorate and I don’t have to keep serving because they made the wrong choice. But if they continue to surprise me, I will continue to serve.”

An African American mayor said he wanted to “be part of moving our city in a positive direction,” for black people and for the city as a whole. “I felt that if people got to know each other they would create this equality. That we would do business together, and that the city would be greater for it.”

“I grew up in an era of community service,” said a county leader. “My father was very involved. They used to have neighborhood meetings at my house. So I just learned from there that you can make a difference if you want to get involved. And you’ve got to step forward and look at the benefit of the overall community.”

A city manager said that for local leaders, “our main job” is to confront “narrow interests, and often stated angrily” and make “an argument for the common good.”

**“I would argue, at the local level you can still have a conversation. You can still work with people if you’re willing to make the effort.”**

## 2

# Local elected officials harbor worries about the barriers to deeper community connection and about a diminished climate of civic spirit.

**T**he leaders we interviewed are concerned about people’s assumptions when it comes to government. They face anxiety and animosity in their communities, fueled partly by partisan rancor but also by disinterest in conventional ideas of cooperation and by a fundamental skepticism about government as a source of positive change.

Leaders devote time and resources to building trust—and they are unanimous that the results are worth the climb—but the specter of diminished civic spirit hangs over their work.

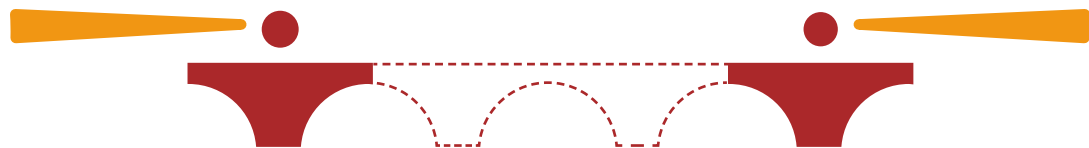
### **Leaders see more self-interest than civic spirit in their encounters with community members.**

“Some constituents are going to conclude that you’re just not listening when you make decisions that are contrary to them,” said one former mayor. “Even if you had listened, if you’re mayor, somebody’s going to be telling you that you’re not listening. That just comes with the territory.”

A city manager was dismayed by the attitudes among many neighbors and constituents. “They would say stuff like ... ‘I don’t want a sidewalk outside my house because people will see in my picture window,’” she complained. “They wouldn’t say, ‘I can see that there are children in my neighborhood walking in the street and the city’s trying to build a public walkable infrastructure.’ They never say that.”

Few officials used the term *NIMBYism* (the often-used phrase—“Not In My Backyard”—to describe people’s resistance to local efforts), but many talked about a resistance to change among “incumbent” and older residents. “Older incumbent residents don’t appear to be flexible thinkers,” another mayor said. “They don’t appear to be curious or interested in how we might get to a solution that might work for everybody or for more people, they really seem to be digging in.”

The former mayor said, “Your oldest, roughest, toughest, they were pretty hard on me.” He went on to discuss how people need to see themselves as



parts of a larger whole. “They were not supposed to have the last word,” he said. “A neighborhood is part of a bigger city.”

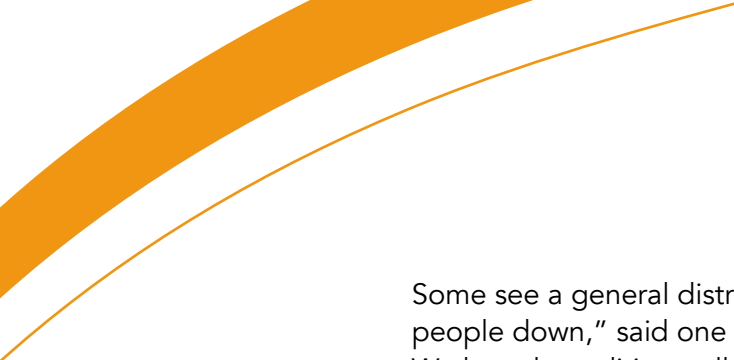
Leaders were widely concerned about the influence of organized interests and “usual suspects,” small constituencies focused more on self-interest than a common good. Many cited town halls as a prime example of where this trend routinely plays out. “More often than not,” said one state senator, town halls “can be uncivil ... an unnecessarily confrontational setting. I don’t know why. We should be able to disagree without yelling at each other.”

“How do you get out and gauge the opinion out there without getting knocked down by the vocal minority?” a county commissioner asked. But instead of avoiding “town halls where you get ambushed,” his advice to colleagues was, “Go for it. You know what? As long as people can be respectful, I don’t have a problem wading into the lion’s den. Oftentimes we find that they’re dealing with half the facts or you don’t have all the facts.”

A city councilman said he can understand the frustration of many community members. “You can get through most of life without ever having to call an elected official,” he said, “without ever having to deal with the bureaucracy of government. When there’s a problem, you interface with government and if your problem is solved, you stop engaging with government. If your problem isn’t solved, you still disengage.”

## **Leaders are concerned that distrust and resentment of government are blocking stronger relationships with communities and more mutual understanding between officials and people.**

While officials were nearly unanimous about the rise of self-interest as a barrier to engaging or collaborating with communities, they were more varied in their concerns about distrust and resentment toward government. However, nearly all those we spoke to complained about some version of this public alienation.



Some see a general distrust in leaders and government. “I think we have let people down,” said one sheriff, “whether it be infrastructure or other things. We have let politics really become a distraction to service.”

These leaders seek to put themselves in other people’s shoes when confronted by anger. “Oftentimes,” said a councilperson, “you’re interacting with somebody in their greatest moment of pain. They’ve exhausted all administrative options, they’re angry and upset, and you are the only human in a large bureaucracy for them to share their frustration.”

“The public doesn’t always feel like they have access to elected officials,” another county officer said. “So, when they actually have one at their disposal, it’s carte blanche. Whatever complaint, whatever’s on their mind, whether that’s part of your duties or not. They don’t see a distinction between what we do and what some other official does.”

State senators in particular were concerned about people’s lack of knowledge of government and governing processes. “Most don’t even know the difference between a state senator and a U.S. senator,” one state official said. “Even educated folks. It’s like they think I’m a Congressman. I’m real concerned about this level of civic knowledge in our educational system.” Another state representative said that, with constituents, “a lot of the time we spend is spent on me just educating them about the process.”

“There’s a lack of information sometimes,” another local legislator said, “about the work that’s done at city hall, or county courthouse, or the statehouse, whereas people know excruciating details about what happens in Washington.”

One West Coast mayor was more blunt: “I try to remember,” she said, “number one: most people have no idea what’s going on, or care.”

At worst, leaders feel thwarted by outright resentment, even nastiness, from their community members. They bemoan people’s comfort with hostile rhetoric and the politics of blame, and say they are disheartened by how quickly people turn on them when public decisions don’t go in their favor. For too many people, a state senator said, “it seems to be ‘me versus everybody else.’”

“That actually was one of the most difficult times I’ve had,” another senator said, describing a dispute with disappointed voters, “and the messages that were posted on social media were very vicious. It was very painful just how attacking and persistent it was.”

One legislator described fending off regular attacks from a group of, “I would say, older white guys” who “charged at her” with “very conservative rhetoric.

“The public doesn’t always feel like they have access to elected officials, So, when they actually have one at their disposal, it’s carte blanche. Whatever complaint, whatever’s on their mind, whether that’s part of your duties or not. They don’t see a distinction between what we do and what some other official does.”

Very accusatory. Very blaming. But invariably I had other constituents who would turn to these people and say ‘That’s no way to talk to this lady. This is our representative.’”

“They want to be heard,” another representative said about their angrier critics, “but they don’t necessarily want to engage in a conversation. They just want to leave a voicemail and tell me what a sorry SOB I am.”

But officials are putting these attacks in context. They say, for instance, that people don’t always understand the governing process and that feelings of confusion—even powerlessness—fuel people’s anger. They say, too, that not every outburst requires them to change their behavior or their decisions. “You got 100 people in the commission chambers that want to throttle you,” said a county commissioner, “and you gotta decide do they represent the entire county? You’re not supposed to be yielding to some vocal minority.”

Most of all, they’re aware, in one mayor’s words, that “politics works on a very emotional level.” It may frustrate them, or even hurt them personally, to be subject to occasional or undeserved scorn, but leaders were more than resigned to constituent attacks, they were circumspect. They expressed empathy for the pain of disappointment, the confusion when there seemed to be nowhere to turn for help or redress. “People are always feeling like they’re being left out,” said the same mayor. “That’s just the way it is.”

### 3

## Officials are experimenting with a number of approaches to break down the barriers with their communities and to deepen engagement by deepening connection.

Leaders at every level of government—and at the municipal level in particular—believe that their work listening to communities and their more formal public engagements are mutually reinforcing. They seek to engage community members in order to discover and understand local needs, to collaborate in public decisions, to explain or justify policies, to maintain their availability as representatives, and to enlist constituents, critics, and the disengaged as participants in public work.

They are using new and longstanding methods to engage people and communities in the business of governing—to listen, to consult, and to decide—but they are driven by a heightened consciousness of the need to rebuild connection.

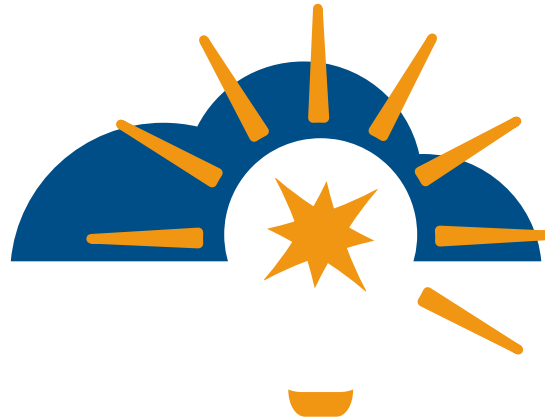
### **Officials are cultivating a range of stronger, citizen-focused listening processes and opening their doors wider in order to make themselves directly available to people.**

Dissatisfied with more traditional input channels like town halls and email comments, officials are seeking to experiment with a wide range of options to listen, to interact one-on-one, and to meet people where they are, figuratively and literally.

For instance, many praise local festivals and neighborhood association picnics as chances to “see people in the raw,” even if it “sounds trite,” as one city manager put it. Local events like street fairs are “the time when you really need to connect and listen to them,” one mayor said. “Listening, it’s a skill.”

For city officials in particular, daily life offers more opportunities to see and be seen up close. Many local leaders also mentioned the chance encounter at a restaurant or a market—and emphasized the importance of those moments, especially, as one official said, “after you voted against their street





improvement.” She said, “We talk about that when I orient new members” of city leadership. “Don’t turn the other way in the grocery store. Say hello and see what happens.”


“The best way that I build relationships,” one state representative said, “it’s done one-on-one. I always go door to door. I love that.”

Another said, “Connection is everything to me. So that influences my leadership style. I’m out and about, I try to attend as many functions as I can.” They called it “management by walking around,” or “inviting with inviting behavior.” The result, they said, “is people then want to approach me.”

Some leaders seek chances to listen by taking to the streets, while others are investing in local programs designed to create deep exchanges between decision-makers and residents.

In a West Coast county with a history of tension between communities and law enforcement, the current sheriff has established a range of programs with titles like “Community Forums” and “Impact Workshops.” These events are designed specifically “to establish the kind of relationship where we’re listening to each other,” he said. “We had one around relationships between police and communities of color, where we had 600 people extremely emotional. People really just had to tell their story about their interactions with the police. It’s a time for us to be quiet and listen.”

One mayor hosts “pop-up democracy” sessions in rotating locations around their town. “I will pick a place and a topic, so anyone can come and we talk about that for about an hour. It’s my own personal program. It’s not the city’s program.”



“We really worked to have our antenna up,” a former mayor said, describing a large scale “youth and family” listening initiative involving moderated groups, interpreters for ESL residents, and a process for compiling results and inaugurating a “youth and family congress” to contribute to future program development.

In another large city, the mayor said that street-level listening tours have been a vehicle to “hear it directly” from people in neighborhoods and to build trust in city government. “It’s not me sending people out to do a listening tour,” they said. “I’m out there on the listening tour with them, so I get to feel and hear from people what their needs are. What people are seeing is that we’re out there with them. Some people, you know, initially are pessimistic, and then they’re more optimistic when they see you there, and they know you’re there.”

While these approaches are informal, elected officials made it clear that it requires a great deal of skill to do informal interaction well. As one mayor told us, “It’s not a natural thing to go up to a complete stranger and, from a dead stop, engage them in a confident, thoughtful, engaged conversation, especially somebody that doesn’t live on your street, doesn’t go to your church, doesn’t look like you, doesn’t speak your language. You come up to them cold and immediately engage them in a conversation that makes them feel at ease and comfortable. Not everybody can do that.”

And listening does not need to go easily to go well. When one city offered a major public works plan for public discussion, it was, in the mayor’s words, “just brutalized at the town hall meeting.” That negative reception, regarding a plan that had already “failed five times already in the previous 50 years,” led officials to halve the scope of the project and conduct a new round of listening, involving “volunteer engineers and experts who went through and told us what was good about it, what wasn’t.” The final plan was approved, and the mayor attributes its success to those cycles of outreach and response. “Having that public discussion and the initial feedback,” they said, “it’s almost like getting your teacher to grade your test for you before you turn it in.”

To open their doors wider, officials are making themselves available through regular office hours and by cultivating more informal and semi-formal settings for listening. One big-city councilperson holds “First Fridays,” a monthly availability that is promoted heavily to tens of thousands of district residents. “We generally have 10-20 people show up,” he said, “about 10 regulars, and 10 people who say, ‘This was great. I’ve never met my elected official before. Thank you.’ My thought was, if people knew that I had open office hours once a month, that was a way of communicating that I was available to them.”

The public relations value of availability is not lost on him either, with people stopping him on the street to say they keep meaning to attend the First Friday meetings. “It just creates a situation where folks feel they have complete access to

me.” He added ruefully, “It f—s up my fundraising like nobody’s business.” A county auditor uses “informal review periods” to create trust and transparency about property valuation, providing “opportunities to meet with us on an informal basis. We’ll have 12 or 15 different sites around the county where people can meet one-on-one to discuss their property.” The goal of this successful program is not to facilitate property audits, but also, “to keep them informed and educated and an active participant in the process.”

In one statehouse, a few legislators invite the public to “just come and meet with us and have coffee and tell us what you’re thinking and we’ll answer questions.” The state senator we spoke to says the model has been so successful “that they’ve had to move to a little bigger place. They were just meeting in coffee shops. Now they’ve had to make sure that they have a big enough coffee shop to get everybody in.”

“You make a choice to show up,” another mayor said, “be out there and be part of the greater community. It doesn’t count if you just go to your church. I’m a Methodist. You’ve got to go to the Episcopalians. You’ve got to go to the Catholic Church. You’ve got to go to the black churches. You’ve got to go to the small churches outside the city. You’ve got to go.”

To be available sends a message to the public. It sets a tone. And more informal approaches offer elected officials the chance not only to relate informally but also to listen informally, in a setting where harder and more personal truths are more likely to emerge. However, this intimacy comes with a risk. As leaders explain in a later section, an official who listens but takes no action is breaking faith with the people who confided in them, whether those confidences were wishes or complaints.

## **Officials are enlisting community members as partners in the processes.**

Even the deepest listening and the most nimble engagement can’t add hours to the day or staff to a government team. A big-city councilman told us, “I only have a staff of seven,” while a small-state legislator explained that he and his colleagues don’t even have statehouse offices, just “a drawer and gas money.” These capacity limitations are one of the reasons that many officials seek to engage communities as partners, not just supporters.

But there is a deeper reason. Leaders are aiming for partnership not through one-off inputs, complaints, or protests, but through more engaged participation over time. They are trying a range of methods to bring more community members further into civic life. In this way, officials are serving as brokers of engagement, even seeking to turn critics and “trolls” into collaborators.

No matter what brought a person to them, officials are hoping to draw them into collaboration or at least to show them what they can accomplish together. "I don't let them get away," one state representative said. "Once they learn there's a reason to be interested, I want them to remain interested and become part of the solution. I just want them to know that, with me, their voice does count."

"We hold constituents accountable too," said the city councilman. When people come with a request, "it is very easy, very convenient to 'yes' somebody—to promise somebody to death," he said, "to make them happy in that moment, but not do anything to help them. I'm honest with constituents. I bring them into the problem-solving process. Some constituents are not happy about it, but I have found that others are incredibly empowered and we've worked with them to revitalize our neighborhood, creating new neighborhood associations and organizing the community around issues they've never organized around before."

One mayor created a "Call to Action" group. "When I got elected," she told us, "I said to the community, 'I can't do this work by myself. I can't re-create neighborhoods by myself. I can't create jobs alone. So I need everybody to take some form of responsibility. I need you in the work.'" These groups continue to meet years after their creation. The lesson, she said, is "everybody has value. I've learned to be most collaborative."



Another mayor set up a program “empowering people to help us make better decisions.” Facing limited funding for new staff with data expertise, the city “put out a notice that anybody who had data analytics experience and would like to help give back to the city, could come to this meeting. I thought we would have five or six people show up. We had over 60 people. We’ve had over 100 people participate in the program since then. These aren’t billionaire philanthropists,” the mayor added, “and yet they have this really unique skill set they could use to help make their community a better place.”

In myriad ways, officials are upholding the importance of individuals in the governing process. Leaders from West and East Coast cities each mentioned programs that extend the city’s ability to engage people through, for instance, “liaisons” recruited from the same communities and neighborhoods where they knock on doors to gather concerns and recommendations from other residents. And a state legislator described the deference traditionally afforded to regular citizens who come all the way to the statehouse to support a bill: “Every chairman of the committee that I’ve served on has made it clear, at the start of a session, that you are particularly to pay attention to the citizens who come in. And we treat them differently than we would treat the lobbyists. You show most respect to people who take time out of their own lives to come testify before us.”



## 4

# Officials assert they must “enter the room differently” with their communities if they want to make deeper connections.

**F**acing a climate of diminished civic trust, officials see a pressing need to lead with their values as they seek new approaches. This humble, service-centered spirit is a common thread linking the attitudes of many of the officials interviewed for this study, and shaping how they step into their roles as listeners, mediators, and ambassadors of civic engagement.

**In their focus on the importance of follow-through, leaders revealed their hope to revitalize accountability. “Your word is your bond,” as one mayor said.**

Although many officials discuss the spiritual element to leadership, they are fiercely pragmatic about how to instill faith in their communities and constituents. They expect to be judged by whether they make good on their commitments, and they know that by upholding faith in their own leadership, they are also bolstering faith in government itself. For them, this is a key part of “entering the room differently.”

A big-city mayor said nothing beats the power of doing what you promised. He said, “When you can tell them, ‘You know that conversation we had about what the streetcar was going to do for the city? Look at what its doing now.’ When it’s recognized that what you were trying to get done has been successful, then the next time you go talk to people they’re more willing to listen.” He attributes his respect from the community to “trust and expectation and accountability. We didn’t just come out and make political statements. We aren’t trying to be politicians. We’re trying to be leaders.”

In some cases, being honest about the reasons why you were unable to do what was promised can be just as effective. A state senator complained that partisans on the left and the right “think that if you compromise at all, you’re



abandoning your values. No, I'm not. My values are just the same. But if I have a goal, and I can get partway instead of no way, I will take partway. I'm not a patient person at all, but it turns out, it's often a good way to go. Sometimes those smaller steps are, in the end, much more productive."

Another mayor remembered the amazement of parents and students during a summer education program. As she was leaving a packed gymnasium, "one of the administrators came running out and said, 'I need you to come back... I need you to see the parents and children. They're crying, because they never thought they would have this opportunity.'" She continued, "When you say you're going to do something for people, then you've got to do it. That gives them faith, trust, and belief that change can come."

"Get out in the community and listen and perform," a county executive said. "It's real simple to go out and listen, but if you don't come back and follow up, people just don't believe in you."

**In their cultivation of new listening approaches, officials are demonstrating an emerging awareness that listening is not only good for policy making but also an important practice in itself. Listening is an act of showing up.**

To build relationship, leaders are going deeper to discover the concerns of their communities, deeper into each neighborhood and deeper into individuals' lived experiences through more intensive listening. So-called outreach to communities is a natural part of politics, but officials are recognizing that a listening posture is an essential component of trust and that authentic listening is in many ways an end in itself.

One county officer called it “trying to establish the kind of relationship where we’re both listening to each other. Hopefully we’ve created the kind of climate where we can honestly give each other feedback, or say ‘I just don’t understand. Help me understand what we’re trying to do here.’”

A state representative said that if the phone rings late at night, he will pick it up if the call is from his district area code. “It’s funny because inevitably they expect to leave a voicemail. They want to yell at somebody,” he said, “but what you find is, some people will be interested in engaging with you in a conversation. I’ve had people call me angry and then after a civil conversation, we may still disagree on the underlying issue, but we at least established a civil level of rapport. Who knows, maybe one constituent at a time, you can make a difference that way.”

The “civil habit” of listening to each other can improve the dynamics even in a controversy, a city manager said, reflecting on a message received after an unpopular decision. “We listened, we did all this stuff, and we put in sidewalks against their protests. And a lady emailed us and thanked us for taking what she felt was a difficult and right position.” Admittedly, the manager said, “that was just one person out of probably 40 or 50 who spoke to us,” but she said it was “because we looked like we knew what we were doing and we made a decision deliberately and in a civil way.”

In the end, said another state official, “it still comes down to: ‘Do people feel they can trust you?’ If they don’t feel that you’re listening, then they fire you. That’s the way it should be.”

### **In their efforts to settle grievances and mediate disputes, leaders are working to make disagreements safer and to help people channel their frustrations into engagement.**

With rampant discord in the public sphere and pervasive narratives of alienation over issues from social inequality to climate and economic and national security, public officials know that every debate invites discomfort.

“I try to be honest with people about entrenched issues,” said one state representative from the South. When a veterans’ families group approached him to argue against the removal of Confederate statues, he attempted to “carve out some common ground.” And though the statues were removed in the end, one man from the group reached out later, on a different issue, because, as he told the official, “I really appreciate even though we don’t agree, I feel like you listened.” For the official, that was a big win. It showed that “at least that door was open.”

Another legislator said he tries “to appeal to common principles, and facts, as a way of moving beyond kind of rhetoric and heat. ... Let them feel heard even



if you're going to disagree with them." Citing his legal background, the same official also described negotiation tactics that have helped him argue toward common ground with constituents, finding ways to make extremes sound marginal and "just thinking about how to structure their perspectives so that they see what I see."

As they work to manage disputes and mitigate between extreme views, officials inevitably take on the role of recruiter or guide, inviting people with ideas or complaints to "channel that energy" into participation, as a city councilman put it. A Midwestern mayor described a person who was "extremely critical" of a new program: "Didn't like the plan, didn't like the governance structure, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. What we did was, we took him into the governance structure and said, 'If you don't like it, change it. Get in there and do it.' And when he got in there and started working on it, he kind of moved back towards our position, because it started to make sense. And he admitted that. He's still in the governance structure now."

A state representative said officials should do more to help the public see their importance in the process, that they can have a role beyond "writing a check for taxes and complaining."

### **By seeking working relationships across partisan lines, leaders believe they must improve decision-making and fix a broken narrative about partisan gridlock.**

Officials believe there will be more trust and an ability to engage in civic life if they can get beyond partisan concerns and get past the media focus on national conflict. One mayor asked, "What is the Republican way of removing snow versus the Democratic way?"

Several leaders said that, in their particular legislature or city, bipartisan cooperation is not altogether unusual.

"People are very fed up with what they see in Washington," a small-state lawmaker said. "We continually reiterate that we're more than willing to collaborate and cross party lines when need be. And I think people like that." In one example, he and a colleague across the aisle "shocked everybody" by cosponsoring a successful worker's compensation bill. He said, "Going forward, I would like to see more of it in the house, and within my own district. It's a hard thing to get across to people, that you can disagree and disagree vehemently, but it doesn't have to be personalized."

Another lawmaker from a different region echoed this frustration. "I just love working across the aisle," he said, "but then I get in trouble with my base. We know each other really well in these chambers and we like each other as

people.” He said state legislatures could be the place to break with partisan habits, at least in states that are “not like Congress, where they don’t know each other and are off raising money all the time. We can do better,” he said. “I mean we can. I just think the key is that we as leaders really stand up to our respective bases and say, ‘Enough already.’”

One state official has even led trainings to build a more “civil discourse” between colleagues from opposing parties. “How do you get adult legislators in a room and have them play games to get to know each other?” she asked. “Well, we did it. And people had fun and the leadership that was there said, ‘We should be doing this more often!’” She said the event set the stage for a legislative session “which was far more civil, a little tamer, certainly less adversarial and contrary than they have been in the past. I keep saying, it doesn’t have to be this way, folks, it could be *this way* instead.”

For officials at the municipal level, the question of crossing partisan divides was less fraught—or at least more balanced between dismay over national rhetoric and confidence, even some satisfaction, that cities are a place where cooperation often trumps tribalism.



A city mayor attributed his current bipartisan support to the nature of his campaign, which broke with a history of partisan local politics. When, as mayor, he sought to engage people in civic life, he said, “We had people on both sides of the political spectrum, or all sides of it, eager to assist.” He also credited his administration’s focus on closing disparities in life expectancy and “being a city that aimed high” nationally and globally, “not getting bogged down in national divisions, and focusing locally on working together first and foremost.”


Almost every city official agreed that cities are a better place than Congress for getting things done. “We build buildings,” said one mayor. “We fix roads. We trim trees. We cut grass. We chase dogs. We educate kids. They talk.”

And most city officials were passionate about local leadership as the best form of public service. A city councilman said that every time he speaks to his own member of Congress, she tells him, “You have the job that I loved. It was the best job in the world. You are the closest to the people, and you can get the most done.”



## COMMENTARY

By Richard C. Harwood



**T**his report comes at a time when our politics and society can be highly polarized, divided, and acrimonious. At every turn, and in every way, people are losing faith in public institutions, civic organizations, and leaders of all sorts. A deadened sense of trust grips us. Frayed relationships abound. Gridlock prevails.

And yet here are local elected officials who are providing a decidedly different view of what is possible. Yes, they talk about current problems with politics and society and their deep frustrations with them. But amid these laments, or possibly because of them, they emphasize a distinctive notion of how they can—and should—relate to the communities and the people they serve. They suggest an enlivened and enriched role for citizens in our shared lives and an evolved role for elected officials in relationship to communities.

These elected leaders do us all a big favor by providing a vital chance to examine and generate a path of possibility and hope for the relationship between elected leaders and citizens. This is essential today: for we must restore a sense of trust in our politics and public and a sense of belief that we can get things done together.



## Pathways Forward

Here are four important openings emerging from this study that can lead to new, more hopeful pathways forward.

### OPENING | 1

## Engage elected leaders to rediscover their sense of calling and purpose.

Perhaps this sounds too soft for our hardened times. But nothing could be more important. This research suggests there is a critical opportunity to engage officials in reconnecting with the very reasons why they initially sought elected office, which in our rough-and-tumble politics nowadays can get caked over, distorted, even forgotten over time. The research suggests that, through the prism of their personal passion and motivation, elected officials can come to articulate what it means to forge stronger relationships with community members. This opening can be the foundation for any and all efforts to bring about more trust, more opportunities for shared understanding, and more policies and initiatives that better reflect what matters to people.

## OPENING | 2

### **Create new “standards” for what it means to be an effective elected leader.**

In our current environment, winning arguments and winning elections can be the main standards for judging an effective elected leader. But this research suggests different standards: listening deeply, forging relationships, and creating trust, among others. Perhaps it is time for like-minded elected officials and allies to offer these factors as alternative—or, at least, complementary—standards of what it means to be an “effective.” This is reminiscent of The Harwood Institute’s Political Conduct Barometer, which was created over a decade ago; while that spread throughout the nation, the appetite for setting new standards is far greater today. Such new standards are critical for providing an alternate language and perspective; without that, it is difficult to seek a different path forward.

## OPENING | 3

### **Better equip elected leaders to “enter the room differently” in search of deeper connections with those they serve.**

Reaching the threshold of an alternate vision for elected official-citizen relationships is imperative, but actually changing those relationships will require more. If elected leaders are to act on their calling and purpose, then they will need to “enter the room differently”. According to this research, down payments will include listening more deeply, fulfilling their pledges, helping people move from frustration to engagement, and bridging partisan divides, among others. But how can elected officials best be equipped to do these things? Two related elements are required:

1. elected officials must get really clear and concrete on how they will shift the choices they make and the behaviors associated with them, and
2. elected officials must adopt new practices to implement these changed choices and behaviors.

## Promote new experiments in how elected officials and citizens engage.

The danger when one argues for greater experimentation in forging new elected official-citizen relationships is that a slew of overly formal, at times overly complex, approaches will be created. The emphasis will be on techniques and processes. But, listening closely to what these elected officials are saying, we can hear a desire to connect with citizens as human beings, to promote and generate more genuine interactions, to reduce perceived power dynamics and have more real conversations, and to enable people to have a chance to speak without being dominated by a few vocal individuals or select groups. “Process,” of course, can be an important part of all this, but what we must see is that these officials are seeking to tear down the filters and mediating structures between them and citizens. We must experiment with designs that bring officials’ desire for real and meaningful relationships to life.

### Keeping It Real

Beyond these four points, it’s worth stating something that is self-evident, but sometimes lost in conversations about officials and their communities: Elected officials by definition want to get re-elected. It is the very nature of their job—their endeavor. Moreover, they face enormous pressures from all corners of life, from seemingly endless competing interests and from the demands of allocating scarce resources amid significant needs. Nothing is easy or simple.

When dealing with elected officials today, the reality of politics—and of our current societal conditions—cannot be assumed away or swept under the rug as if they don’t exist. We must find ways for elected officials to strengthen their relationships with communities *and* recognize their desire to get re-elected.

# A COMPARISON OF HARWOOD REPORTS

FROM 1989 TO 2018

Harwood's 1989 report for the Kettering Foundation, *The Public's Role in the Policy Process*, reflected how public officials see themselves as decision-makers, educators, and convenors, among other roles in the civic process. *Seeking a New Relationship with Communities* is an update of that earlier report. All the roles mentioned in 1989 were also noted during the 2018 conversations, but the strongest present-day theme is that they see themselves as stewards of public decisions and as ambassadors of the very idea that the people have a place in public life.

The 1989 report—based on interviews with nearly three dozen county commissioners, state legislators, and mayors, along with five city managers—concluded that policymakers had an interest in engaging “constituents” in the policy process, but they drew a clear distinction between their role and the role of the public. They saw themselves as the decision-makers. Their ambivalence about a more consultative partnership with the public stemmed from “an inherent tension” between their presumed role as leaders and an assumed loss of authority and effectiveness if they were to “follow” the whims of an uninformed public. They had a basic interest in engaging with communities but struggled with whether and how “to give people ownership over the process.”

Today, the ways elected officials frame their work has fundamentally changed. Many now see collaboration and convening as a central component of their role. In addition, the role described as “educator” in 1989 has changed and expanded. Many elected officials now see themselves as stewards of engagement and as brokers of a more trusting, dynamic relationship between public servants and their communities.

There were also similarities between the responses from officials in 1989 and 2018. Both groups saw public distrust in government as an obstacle, though the 2018 respondents report a more virulent strain of distrust and rancor toward leaders. Both groups complained that most residents won't get involved “until their taxes go up or it's next door to them” (to quote one commissioner from 1989), though 2018 respondents put greater emphasis on the selfishness of some residents and the resentment they face from people disappointed in their decisions.





1989

2018

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### **Leading or following (with nothing between)**

Policymakers see themselves as decision-makers with the responsibility to “lead” the public or to settle for “following” a relatively uninformed populace. Policymakers see limited potential for productive engagement.

### **A call for partnership**

Officials see partnership with their communities as both a tool for getting things done and a value in its own right. They are realistic, even a bit cynical, about the lack of trust or expertise among the people, but those challenges do not deter them from seeking relationship with their communities. If anything, the challenge makes them feel that a partnership approach is more necessary.

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### **Outreach to secure support**

Policymakers focus on outreach as an exercise in securing support and permitting interested parties to have their say about policies. They consider these efforts earnest and important, but with limits.

### **Outreach to collaborate**

Officials are working to open up public decisions to public view and to public participation. They focus on outreach as an opportunity for collaboration with community members—and they see that collaboration as a necessary component of their work.

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### **Policymaker as “decider”**

Policymakers emphasize that “they themselves bear the responsibility of judgment and decision-making” for the people. They play a limited role as a convener of public meetings and lack both resources and faith in such processes.

### **Elected official as convener**

Officials actively seek tools and forums to connect with community members (from low-cost digital methods to major programs for neighborhood outreach) and seek expertise and license to operate from the public.



1989

2018

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### **Uninformed public, unhelpful media**

Policymakers feel strongly and consistently that the members of the public don't know enough to be effective participants in policy processes. It is not seen as an appropriate role. They blame the media—in part—for being inaccurate and itself uninformed. They also observe distrust from the public that government can be helpful.

### **Angry public, harmful media**

Officials are more concerned about the anger and distrust of the public than they are about the public's lack of information about policy issues. They blame public distrust on social and economic struggles and rising self-interest, rather than focusing primarily on the influence of the media.

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### **The burden is on the public**

Policymakers suggest that the burden is on the public to understand issues better, support the decisions their leaders make, or seek their leaders out proactively if they have concerns.

### **The burden is on public servants**

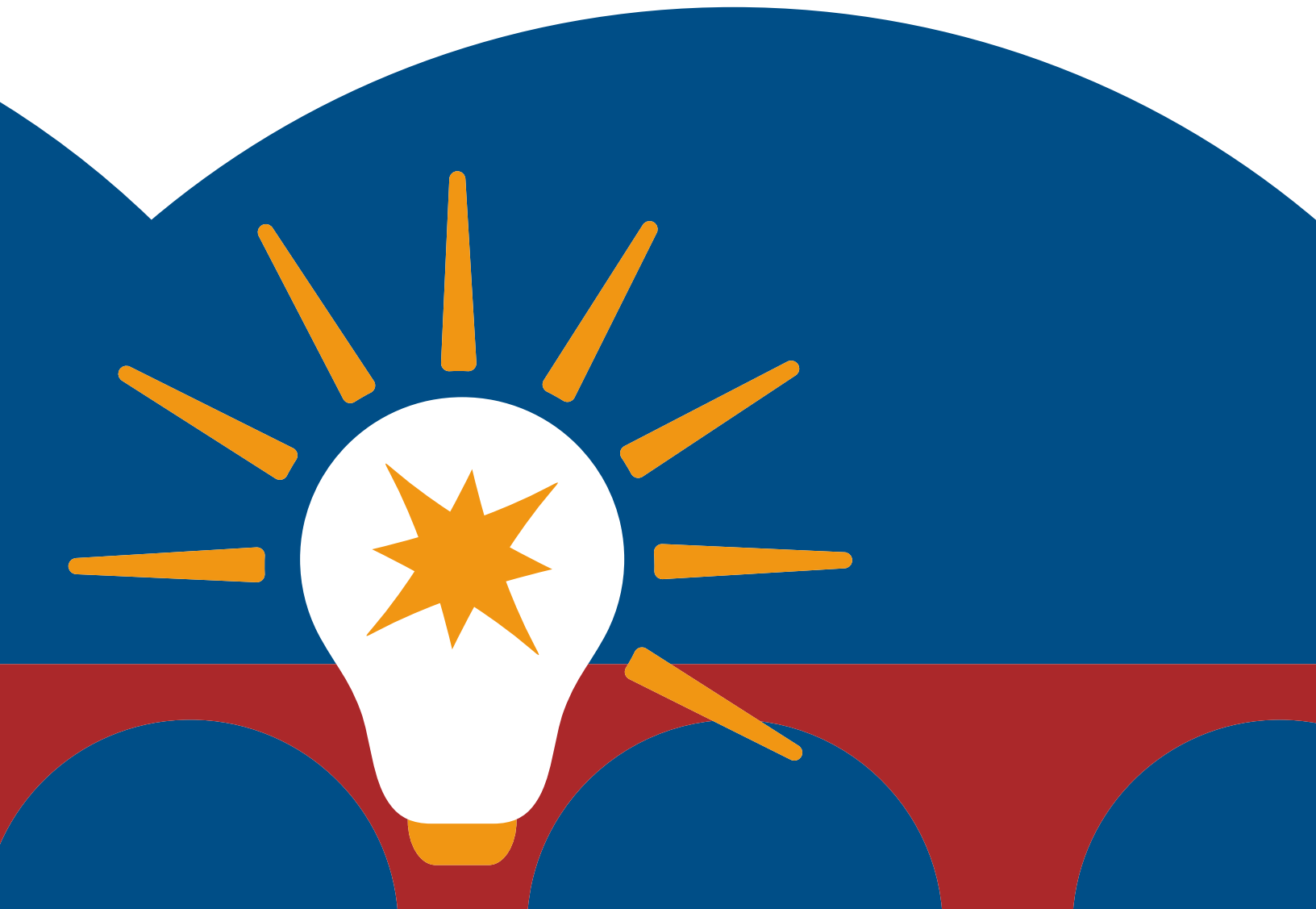
Officials indicate a sense of responsibility to make public decision-making more inclusive, to bridge gaps in public knowledge, and to earn the trust of the public by listening well and being people of their word.

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### **The 1989 leaders wished for a public that could participate.**

### **The 2018 leaders wish for a public that can believe.**





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