



Make Informed Decisions with Confidence

Your guide to solving the community engagement puzzle



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Why Community Engagement Matters



Government officials need accurate and representative input from community members to make good decisions. Informed decision-making is why resident outreach is always part of conscientious leaders' planning processes. But not all community engagement is created equal.

Traditional town halls present time-consuming barriers that prevent most residents from attending. Instead, the conversation is often dominated by the vocal few. Social media platforms encourage arguing and paint a distorted view of a more moderate sentiment. And some engagement services do not follow the scientific research methods necessary to collect valid data.

When done right, online civic engagement can represent all groups, cut through polarization, and provide solid numbers to back up planning and budgeting.

In this e-book, you will learn:

- How to create a civil online environment with step-by-step tips that will lead to a more collaborative community
- How to differentiate high-quality vs. low-quality surveying with ten markers of good data
- Two simple steps to create a culture of engagement in your community

With the potential of modern data collection and tech, there is a clear path to a more representative and true democracy. Accurate information informs confident decision-making, reduces the risk for leaders, and creates a better world for everyone. The first step is connecting with your community.

Effective Solutions to Polarization



Local government leaders are not strangers to polarizing events. Issues that impact communities can be very personal and make people feel very passionate.

Many online engagement platforms intend to get neighbors together to solve community problems and collaborate. However, often these platforms become the very opposite of civil.

“Even though we have good intentions, it doesn’t always turn out civil or productive when we don’t understand the best ways to get folks together to collaborate,” said Michelle Kobayashi, Senior Vice President of Innovation at Polco.

How can we use technology to reduce the polarization gap, decrease tensions, and find optimal solutions that appeal to a broad range of residents?

Extend the Table

“Some would argue that the protests in recent history relate to the fact that we have resident groups who feel like their voices are not heard,” Kobayashi said.

In local government, we need to think about who we invite to the table and who feels empowered to participate. A big part of engagement is trying to get those folks who are not the typical respondents involved in discussion.

To do this, you should be intentional and have a plan.

“Until you make it an organizational priority, it likely will not happen. Those folks have eluded you for years. They will continue to elude you unless you make it a priority,” Kobayashi said.

Part of the plan should include connecting with partners underrepresented communities trust, hiring people from diverse backgrounds, and translating materials.

“But at the same time, we need to do more than translation,” Kobayashi said. “It’s really about understanding the culture and having authentic relationships with groups who are traditionally not part of local government decision-making.”

Lower Barriers to Participation

There are very few people who can attend a three-hour council meeting two Tuesdays a month. In fact, fewer than 25 percent of residents ever attend a public meeting in a given year.

By reducing those barriers to participation so people don’t have to worry about transportation or their schedules, local governments can increase reach and representation.



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Capitalize on Tech

One of the best ways to lower barriers to participation is to embrace technology.

“At Polco, we use technology to make it much easier for people to have their voices heard without needing to step outside of their comfort zones,” said Amanda Baker, former Product Manager at Polco.

It’s crucial to protect confidentiality. Residents should feel comfortable expressing their opinions without worrying about revealing their identity without consent.

With tech, decision-makers have access to rich data they can act on right away.

Be Data-focused

Using data in public meetings can help focus conversations, bring in the voices of both the loud and quiet, and help to identify common goals.

“When we are data-focused we can shift the attention from anecdotal fights about what people think to actual data. Starting with data makes meetings so much more efficient and also more civil,” Kobayashi said.

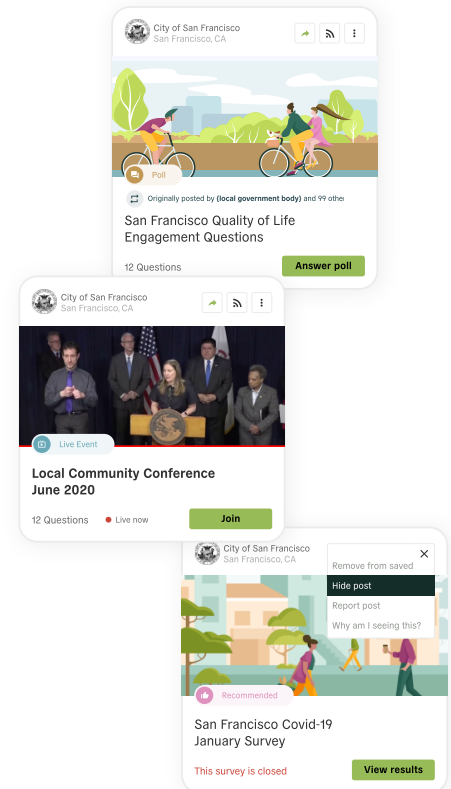


Set Parameters

“A lot of social media today is very unstructured, which can sometimes be a good thing. However, adding in some parameters can help increase stability and accuracy,” Baker said.

It’s also important to set up a verification process so you can ensure responses come from people who live in your community, rather than random internet trolls. Verification helps provide better quality data. For example, you may want to see how people living in your city want to spend tax dollars. Other times, you may want to see a broader picture of opinions.

Traditional social media can sometimes devolve into personal attacks and end up off topic. To avoid a downward spiral, limiting the amount of comments can facilitate a productive conversation.



Stay the Course

“Civil, civic engagement comes with building relationships. The more we know each other and interact with each other to solve problems, the more connected we become,” Baker said.

Consistency is key when building a following. This allows respondents to continually engage with local leaders on important topics. This means local governments get feedback from the same people over time and constantly increase their number of followers. Plus, understanding the demographic makeup of who’s involved shows you where you might need to do more outreach to get a more representative sample of your community.

“Relationships are strained across the nation. That said, the disruptive nature of the pandemic helped us to find new and innovative ways to collaborate and interact with our communities,” Kobayashi said.

Build a Culture of Engagement

When you think about local governments engaging their communities, you might picture a public meeting. Yes, this can be a useful way to communicate to residents. But alone, traditional meetings are not enough to help you engage the community in a convenient way.

After all, only about 25 percent of US residents say they have ever attended a local government meeting. In-person meetings are even more inaccessible or undesirable to most people. Plus circumstances seem to be shifting constantly these days. You need feedback from residents in real time to move your community forward faster.

With people online more than ever before, now is a perfect time to think about how to reach your residents where they are. And with so many challenging decisions to make, now is the time to figure out how to reach residents regularly.

Truly making engagement part of your culture requires commitment to giving residents a chance to share feedback about issue that matters to them. That sounds like a lot. But with the right strategy and tools, you can be very successful without extra burden.

Here are two ways your local government can deepen a culture of engagement.



What Makes Data Accurate and Reliable?

Elected politicians do what citizens want to get their vote. Businesses provide what shoppers want to make money. Government managers deliver services the public wants because it's their job to create a thriving community. None of these leaders can be sustainably successful without an accurate assessment of public opinion.

These days, everyone with access to software that “engages the public” or dials a phone can call themselves a surveyor. But leaders need to feel confident that the public opinion they pay for embodies valid results.

It can take a real aficionado to distinguish top quality data from elaborate promises, and few leaders are connoisseurs of survey research. So there are shortcuts that leaders rely on to determine if the survey they commission will give accurate findings. Local governments may ask: is this a “scientific” survey? Does the survey report a margin of error? Does the firm use the latest technology to collect the data?

Those inquiries are a start, but you can do much better. Here are 11 clues to look for in quality surveying.

Validity

Real survey scientists don't refer to quality surveys as “scientific.” The term is too broad and really refers to a way of looking at the world that is systematic and methodical. Bad surveys can be both, following ill-conceived systems and bad methods. But the term “scientific” is used by good and bad survey researchers mostly because it is a phrase we all know that clients think stands in for “accurate.” As a consumer, it's better to say you want a “valid” survey.

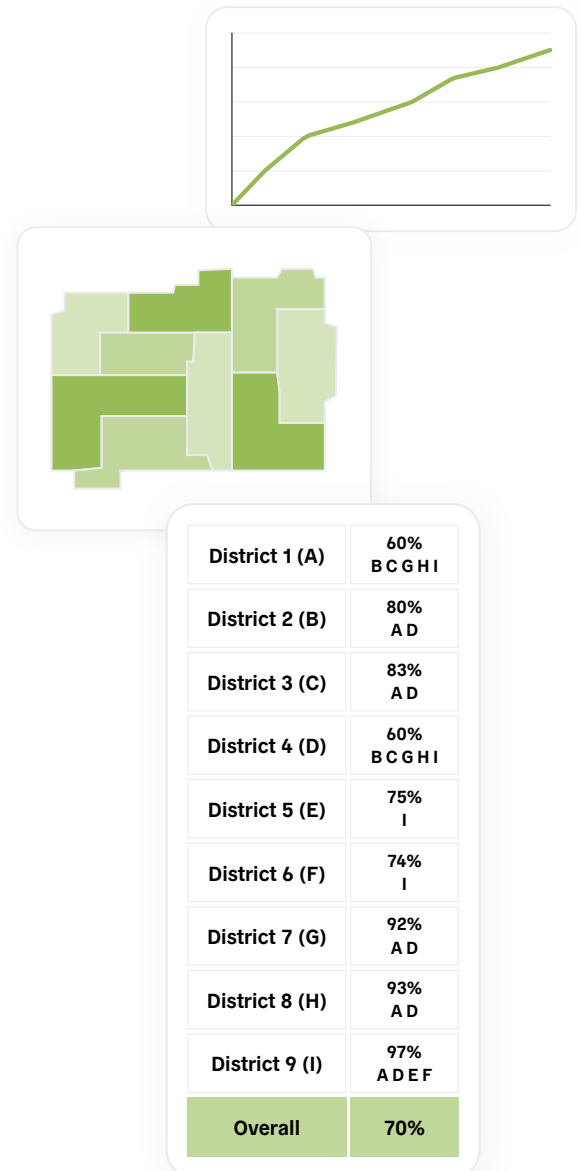
Inclusivity

Surveys by mail and phone get to more than 90 percent of U.S. households in every state. The US Postal Service delivers to just about every household in America. Internet access, by contrast, is active in only 84 percent of homes on average across the county. So an inclusive community survey is one that is accessible to the largest number of residents.

Furthermore, inclusivity requires giving potential respondents multiple chances to participate so those who are too busy or less involved have a better chance to take the survey. Opinions of those who respond after a second reminder can have different demographic characteristics than those who respond at the first prompt. Inclusivity may also mean surveying in multiple languages so that those who are reluctant to respond in English can still voice their opinions.

Representative Results

A valid survey represents the demographic and social profile of the public as a whole. If the survey results are based mostly on homeowners' opinions but most of your residents are renters, it's fair to be suspicious.



Weighted Data

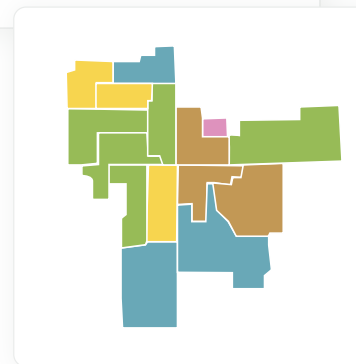
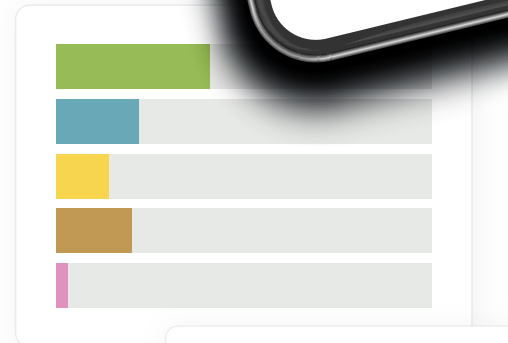
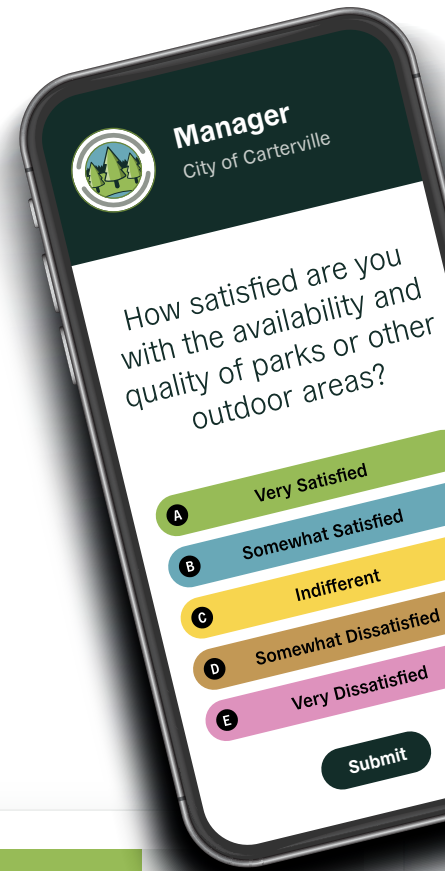
With representative surveys, rarely do the demographics of survey respondents mimic those of the public at large. Survey respondents more often are homeowners, older, and white. A representative survey requires statistical weighting that modifies the respondents' demographic profile to match more closely with what is known about the community's makeup.

Recognizable Results

A survey with too many surprises may have missed the mark. Your own experience of your community often should be the touchstone of a survey's validity. It may seem paradoxical that you need a survey to tell you what you already know, but surveys offer a precision and quantification that give you the ability to track changes that your intuition cannot. This is not to say that there should not be any surprises at all.

Unbiased Questions

In principle, it's easier to acknowledge that a survey should be unbiased than it is to author questions that are balanced, fair, and do not embed local jargon. Many stakeholders are suspicious of organizations that evaluate themselves with an in-house survey. So questions without slant, often created by outside parties, are important demonstrations of fairness.



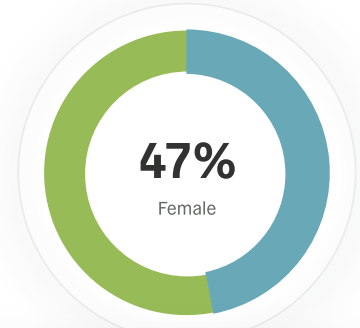
“Invited” Respondents

Invitations should be delivered “probabilistically,” giving all residents living in community households a known chance to participate. For example, Polco researchers systematically select households without bias to respond to a community survey, thus every resident has a specified probability to be invited to take the survey. Results of surveys with probabilistic data collection are reported within a range of uncertainty, since the survey participant responses are stand-ins for a broader public whose opinions cannot be completely known for certain. This range is referred to as the “margin of error.”

Non-probability surveys have their place, but their strengths and limitations should be understood before focusing too much on their typically lower price.

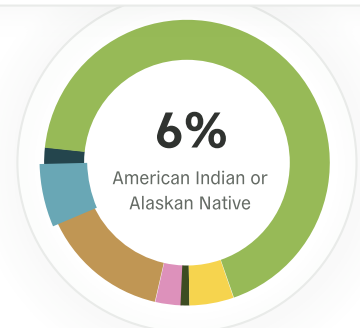
Engagement Is Not Research

“Outreach” and “input” offer important opportunities for residents to participate in local government, but merely opening the door to resident ideas is not the purpose of rigorous survey research. Daily public engagement activities should serve different goals than what a valid resident survey is designed to achieve.



Race as reported by respondent

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- A race not listed
- More than one race

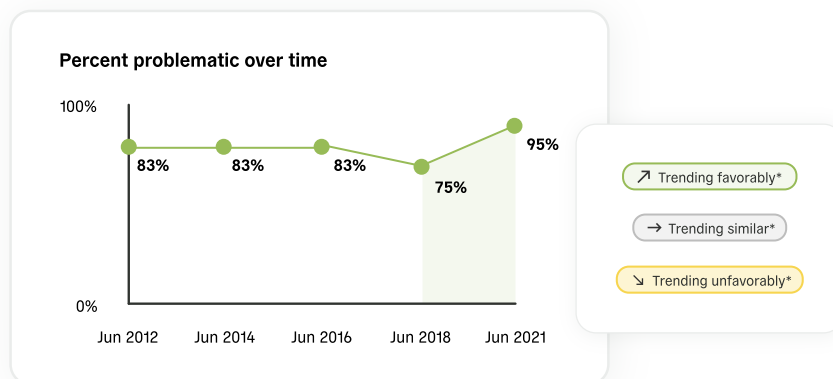


Survey Mode Matters

When it comes to giving the most accurate results, survey mode matters. Telephone surveys and web surveys have response rates typically in the single digits. Web-only surveys don't cover all segments of the community equally. Phone surveys are expensive and garner unduly sunny evaluations. Mailed surveys can create probability samples, get more candid responses, and are less expensive than phone surveys. Mailed surveys also have response rates usually two to four times higher than phone. So, there definitely are times to choose data collection by phone or web, but local governments should consider mail first.

Transparent Methods

Too many survey researchers fail to follow the national guidelines for divulging the way they conduct their surveys. Not only is this failure a clue that the researcher may not be the right one for your job, but without well-described methods, the client has less flexibility in creating a new survey intended to show trends across time. And when it comes time to confidently act on the survey results, local governments especially need a survey with methods they can refer to, trust and make publicly available.



Put a Plan Into Action



Engaging your residents won't happen by randomly reaching out and hoping people get back to you.

“Creating a thoughtful and holistic community engagement plan will help you to reach more of your residents more successfully,” Kobayashi said. “It’s definitely worth putting thought into how you are engaging your residents.”

A good engagement plan answers: how will you gather continuous and reliable feedback? Who do you want to hear from? How will you analyze and put the data into relevant context? How will you take action from your results?


Once you have your plan written down, think about what tools you will need to get the job done.

Collaborating on community engagement across different departments shows your residents that the entire local government cares to listen. Coordinating your outreach helps you get the word out to more folks about all your different surveys and polls. This inclusive approach also helps you hear from a wider, more diverse range of people.

As a local government leader, you see how the work of different city departments are entwined. So why not share survey data? This helps you to connect the dots and understand the forest from the trees.

For example, the Chamber of Commerce could ask questions about workforce skills, jobs in the area, as well as what jobs residents want brought to the region. School leaders from the district level to the classroom level can use this information to help prepare their students.

“When you work hard to break down silos across departments, your whole community benefits. And your residents will notice,” Kobayashi said.

 **Ask**  **Analyze**  **Act**  **Adjust**



How We Can Help



Community engagement is not easy to do on your own. But without it, government leaders face criticism and backlash, and community members don't feel heard. Polco makes it easy for local government leaders to gather and evaluate accurate and reliable resident feedback. That data is comparable to hundreds of other jurisdictions nationwide. And collected over time, governments can weigh resident input against performance data and take action based on results.

Solving the puzzle of community engagement with Polco means you will:

- Build trust: Initiate public participation and forge connections with your stakeholders.
- Maximize ROI on public resources: Optimize your budget with thoughtful, informed planning.
- Drive satisfaction: Take action and improve the quality of life in your community.

Find a full range of community engagement resources from surveys created by data scientists to live polls and more. We make it easy for local governments to collect and dissect data. We provide context so you know what the numbers mean and provide simple breakdowns so you can see the differences between certain areas, race, age, and other demographics. Learn about the platform thousands of leaders trust to make decisions with confidence.

Restore transparency, trust, and civility to public discourse.

Connect with Polco today