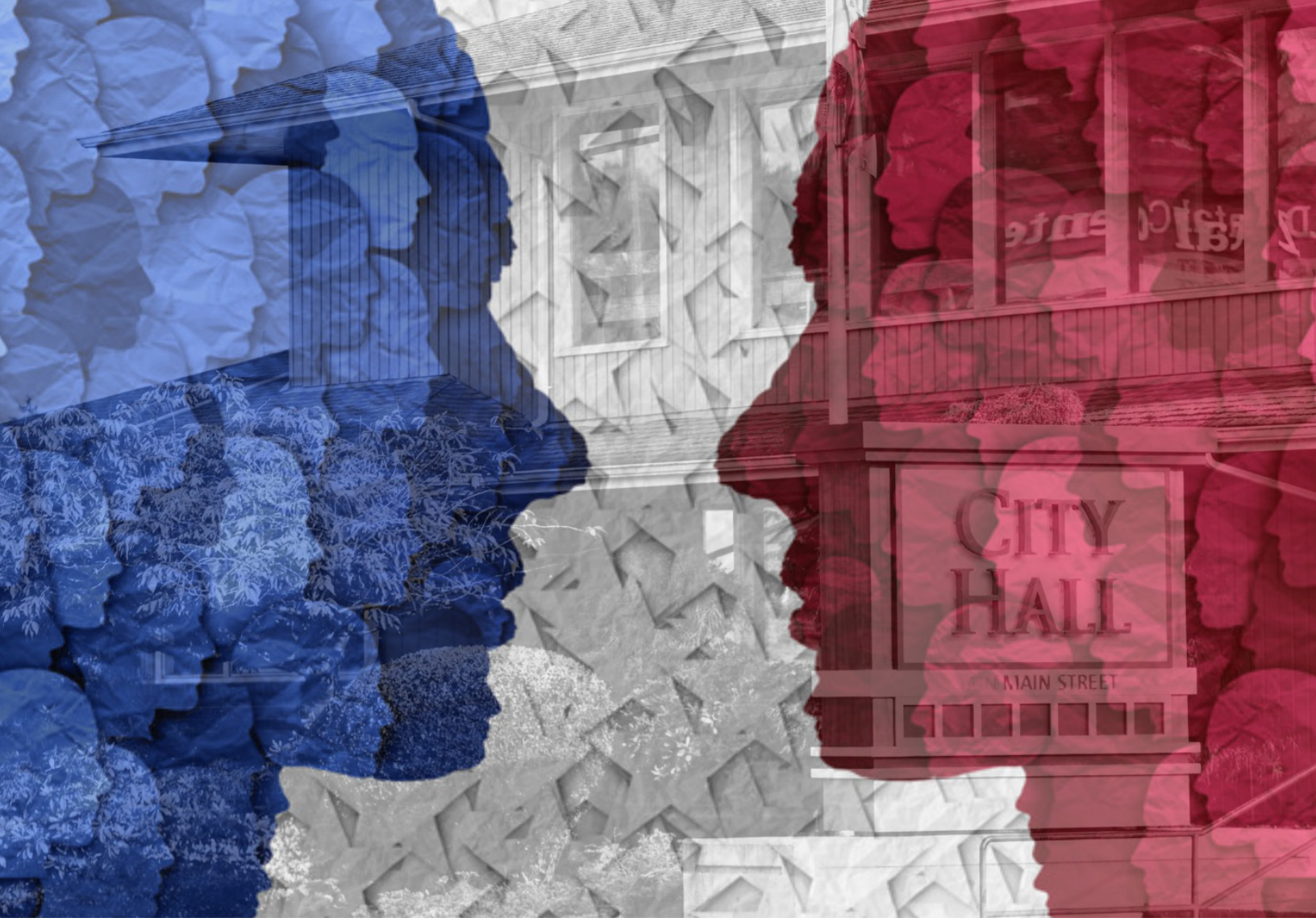

Polarization in America: Survey of Local Government

October 2024

This report is the first of a three-part series.

CivicPulse

Carnegie
CORPORATION
OF NEW YORK

This report was commissioned by the philanthropic foundation Carnegie Corporation of New York to assess political polarization as experienced by local government officials; find solutions that reduce division; and share these findings to help strengthen communities.

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About CivicPulse

CivicPulse is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to enhancing local and state government in the US by conducting representative surveys of public officials, producing actionable research, and facilitating practitioner-researcher dialogue.

About Carnegie Corporation of New York

Carnegie Corporation of New York was established by Andrew Carnegie in 1911 to promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding. Today the foundation works to reduce political polarization through philanthropic support for the issues that Carnegie considered most important: education, democracy, and peace. @CarnegieCorp

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary....4

I. Introduction....6

II. Background....7

III. Quantitative Findings....8
- Polarization's Impact on Local Communities....8
  - Finding 1: Closer to home, farther from division....9
  - Finding 2: Communities below 50,000 are especially resilient....10
  - Polarization's Impact on Relationships in Local Government....11
  - Finding 3: Polarization is more often seen in relationships with and among constituents....12
  - Finding 4: Local elected officials maintain functional relationships in red, blue, and purple communities....13

IV. Qualitative Findings....14
- Polarization's Influence on Local Government Operations....14
  - Finding 5: Divisive rhetoric about federal elections leads to hostility against local government....15
  - Finding 6: State-level partisan gridlock hampers reliable funding....16
  - Finding 7: Hot button national debates create flashpoints at the local level....17
  - Finding 8: Local news deserts lead to misinformation and inflamed rhetoric....18
- How Local Officials Overcome Challenges of Polarization....19
  - Finding 9: Participating in local activities buffers ideological differences....20
  - Finding 10: Focusing on concrete needs helps depolarize local politics....21
  - Finding 11: Reducing emphasis on political parties leads to better day-to-day governance....22

V. Conclusion....23

List of References....24

Appendix....26
- Survey Methodology....26
- Sample Composition....26
- Sample Representativeness....27
- Questionnaire....27
- Qualitative Methodology....28
- Interview Protocol....28

Executive Summary

In this report we explore how political polarization impacts governing at the local level using a mixed-methods approach of close-ended survey questions, open-ended survey questions, and follow-up interviews of local government officials serving municipalities, townships, and counties from across the United States. Our research reveals that most local governments are insulated from the harshest effects of polarization.

Polarization's Impact on Local Communities (Quantitative Findings)

1. **Closer to home, farther from division.** A majority (87%) of local government leaders believed political polarization negatively affects the country as a whole "a lot" or "a great deal;" less than one third (31%) perceived the same negative effect within their local communities.
2. **Communities below 50,000 are especially resilient.** Reported negative impact of polarization was 28% for communities of less than 10,000 residents; 29% for communities between 10,000 and 50,000; and 46% for communities above 50,000.

Polarization's Impact on Relationships in Local Government (Quantitative Findings)

3. **Polarization is more often seen in relationships with and among constituents.** Thirty-six percent of respondents thought polarization negatively affected relationships among constituents, and 25% said so about relationships between constituents and elected officials. By comparison, 23% and 11% said the same about relationships among elected officials and government staff, respectively.
4. **Local elected officials maintain functional relationships in red, blue, and purple communities.** Significant negative impact of polarization on elected leaders' relationships was reported in 20% of Republican-majority communities, 24% of Democratic-majority communities, and 21% of communities with a balance of Republicans and Democrats.

Polarization's Influence on Local Government Operations (Qualitative Findings)

5. **Divisive rhetoric about federal elections leads to hostility against local government.** Respondents cited how local officials receive the brunt of constituents' anxieties, given their role in administering federal elections.
6. **State-level partisan gridlock hampers reliable funding.** Local leaders on both sides of the aisle said party divisions within state government reduce access to funding for critical local projects.
7. **Hot button national debates create flashpoints at the local level.** Local officials repeatedly mentioned how the intersection between local government and national "culture war" topics, such as LGBTQ+ programming, children's literature, and racial equity, can cause conflict and division.
8. **Local news deserts lead to misinformation and inflamed rhetoric.** Local officials lamented how the lack of quality local news often leads to misinformation about what's happening in local government and an overreliance on social media.

How Local Officials Overcome Challenges of Polarization (Qualitative Findings)

9. **Participating in local activities buffers ideological differences.** Local officials pointed out that, because they live in the same community and participate together in local events, they're more able to recognize their shared interests and values.
10. **Focusing on concrete needs helps depolarize local politics.** Respondents highlighted the importance of focusing on tangible community needs and services such as infrastructure maintenance and disaster response to overcome partisan differences.
11. **Reducing emphasis on political parties leads to better day-to-day governance.** Respondents said that measures to deemphasize party affiliations, such as keeping candidates' parties off local ballots, help foster an environment where community-focused decision-making transcends partisan boundaries.

I. Introduction

Since the 1970s, political polarization has become a defining feature of national politics and, more recently, of state politics. However, Americans are governed not just by Washington D.C. and their state capitals, but also by a vast network of local governments that directly shape their daily lives. As of 2022, there were 3,031 county governments, 19,465 municipalities, and 16,144 townships in the United States (US Census of Governments, 2022).

Americans are far more likely to interact with local government than state or federal government. They are also much more likely to work in local government or run for office locally (US Census Bureau 2024). In short, local government represents the frontline of democracy in America. Consequently, the extent to which polarization is affecting local government is a critical question in understanding the broader scope of polarization's impact on America today.

This report presents novel insights on this question. We leveraged CivicPulse's recurring surveys of local elected policymakers and civil service leaders to ask both close-ended and open-ended questions about polarization. We focused on what challenges polarization presents for local government leaders in managing their communities, how local officials overcome these challenges, and what the rest of us can learn from their experiences.

The survey, conducted between August and September of 2024, consisted of 685 local elected policymakers (e.g., mayor, city councilmember, county commissioner) and 727 local civil service leaders (e.g., city manager, county administrator, police chief, parks director). We also conducted 10 follow-up interviews with randomly selected survey participants who consented to being contacted.

While national discourse often paints a picture of deeply divided, dysfunctional lawmaking, our survey reveals a different story about local government. While not immune to polarization, local governments appear to be navigating these challenges more successfully than their state or federal counterparts. Ultimately, we find that local governments are not merely weathering the storm of polarization but are uniquely positioned to address and mitigate its effects.

This report proceeds as follows:

- Section II presents a brief summary of the academic research on polarization as it relates to local government.
- Section III presents the quantitative findings from the survey, with a focus on the perceived impact of polarization on local communities and on different types of local relationships (both inside and outside of government).
- Section IV presents the qualitative findings from the open-ended survey responses and in-depth interviews to provide a deeper understanding of how polarization manifests on the ground and how local leaders are responding to these challenges.
- Section V offers a conclusion to the report, with a discussion of local government's distinct potential to combat polarization.
- Lastly, the Appendix includes information about our survey methodology, sample composition, sample representativeness, methodology for coding open-ended responses, and methodology for our follow-up interviews.

II. Background

A large body of research has documented how polarization has become a defining feature of the U.S. federal government. Since the 1970s, polarization has increased in Congress (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016). This is also true of state governments, which have been polarizing rapidly since the mid-1990s (Shor and McCarty 2011). At both the national and state levels this has undermined cooperation between parties, decreasing the passage of new laws and increasing the occurrence of budgetary delays (Binder 2004; Birkhead 2016; Hicks 2015).

A more recent line of research has taken up questions of polarization as it relates to local government. This research is more ambivalent about the extent to which polarization is impacting local government operations. On the one hand, scholars have found evidence that national party allegiances are increasingly reflected in local voting behavior as well as the policy positions of local officials themselves (Hopkins 2018; Lee, Landgrave, and Bansak 2023). Whether a local government is led by a Democrat or a Republican has become an important predictor of how that government spends money (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020; Gerber and Hopkins 2011).

On the other hand, the fact that local officials have differences that follow national party lines may not translate into the same divisiveness that we see at the state and national levels. Even if local leaders align with their parties on “hot topics,” they tend to spend more time focused on local concerns that are less subject to polarization (Das et al. 2022). Similarly, there seems to be significantly more room for agreement between members of the public affiliated with opposite parties when asked about issues that fall within the jurisdiction of local government. This may provide more opportunities for local officials with partisan differences to cooperate (Jensen et al. 2021).

Taken together, existing research leaves us uncertain about the extent to which polarization is, or is not, negatively impacting local governments and their communities. This report helps fill that gap.

III. Quantitative Findings

Polarization's Impact on Local Communities

We asked local officials their views on how much polarization was negatively impacting the country as a whole versus their own communities. Findings 1 and 2 are based on these questions (shown below).

Relevant Survey Questions

In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting **our country**?	In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting **your local community**?
(Not at all <--> A great deal)	(Not at all <--> A great deal)

Finding 1: Closer to home, farther from division.

When asked about the country as a whole, the overwhelming majority (87%) of officials said that political polarization was negatively affecting things “a lot” or “a great deal” (Figure 1). However, when asked more specifically about their own communities, less than one third of respondents (31%) perceived similar negative effects.

87% *of local leaders said our country faces substantial negative impacts of polarization compared to...*

31% *saying the same for their communities.*

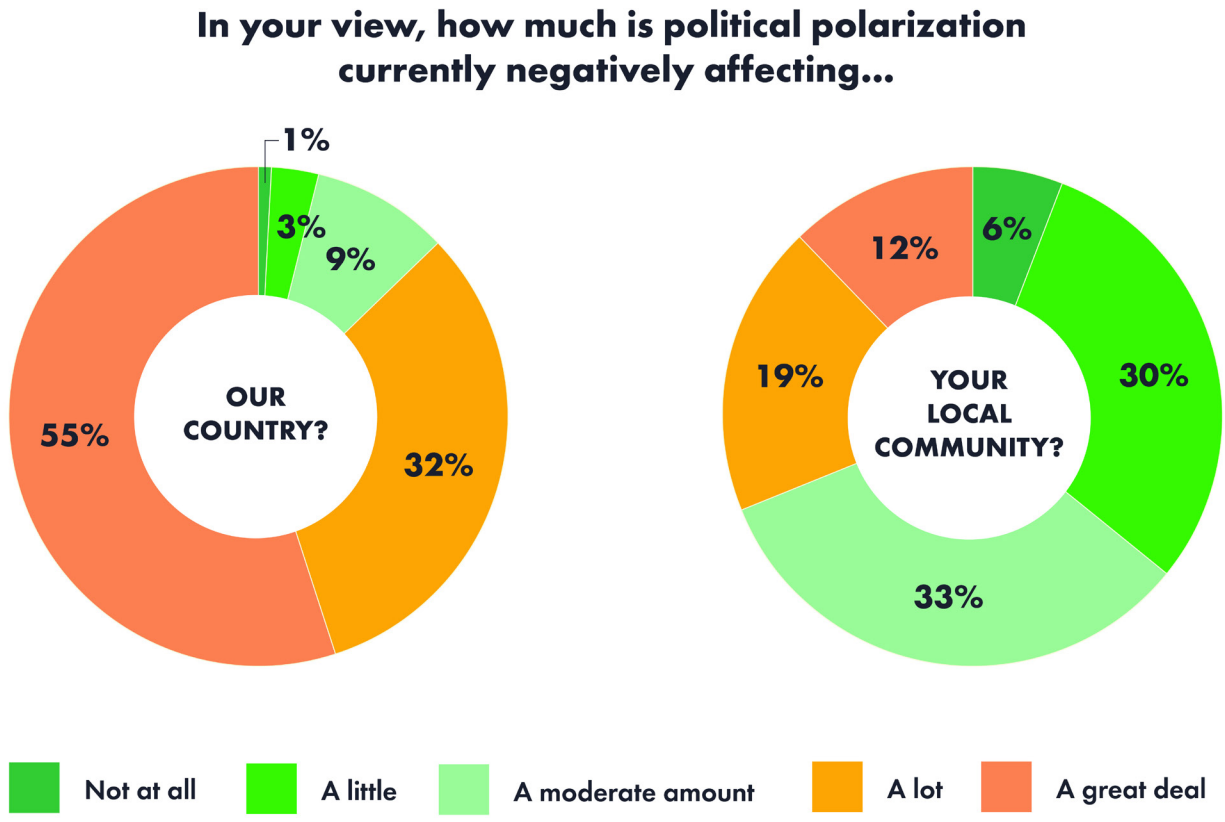

Figure 1: *The distribution of responses to the question ‘In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting our country?’ (left) and ‘In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting your local community?’ (right). Data come from a CivicPulse survey of local government leaders in communities of 1,000 or more (n = 1,412).*

Finding 2: Communities below 50,000 are especially resilient.

One factor that appears to shape the extent of polarization's impact is the size of the community. Only 28% of officials leading communities of fewer than 10,000 felt polarization was negatively impacting them a "great deal" or "a lot," and 29% of officials leading communities between 10,000 and 50,000 thought the same. But in communities of greater than 50,000, almost half (46%) of officials reported substantial negative impacts. This jump indicates a potential tipping point, where larger communities may be more prone to polarization-induced challenges.

46% *of local leaders for communities of 50,000 residents or more reported substantial negative impacts of polarization.*

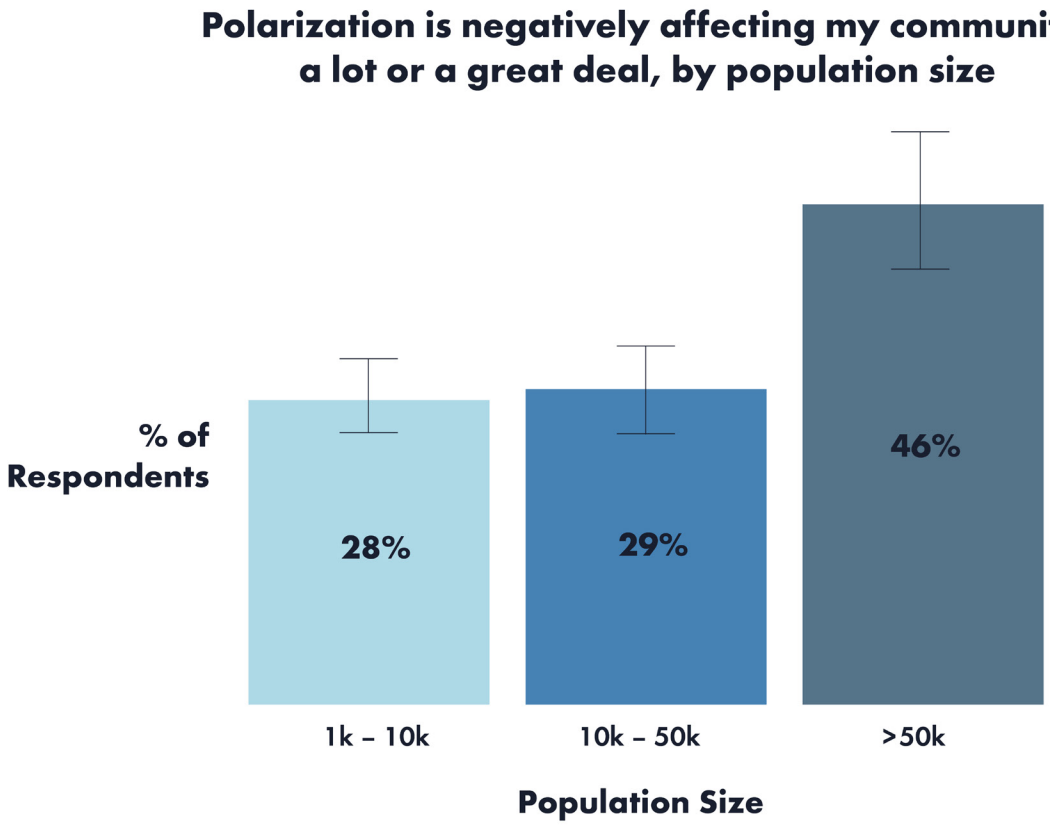

Figure 2: *Proportion of respondents saying polarization is negatively affecting their community "a lot" or "a great deal" by population size of the community. Data come from a CivicPulse survey of local government leaders in communities of 1,000 or more (n = 1,412). Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals and are as follows (from left to right): ±3%, ±4%, ±6%.*

Polarization's Impact on Relationships in Local Government

We asked local officials how much polarization was negatively impacting different types of relationships both internal and external to government. Findings 3 and 4 are based on these questions (shown below).

Relevant Survey Question

Please evaluate how much polarization negatively affects each type of relationship in your community and/or government.

- Relationships among elected officials
- Relationships between elected officials and government staff
- Relationships among government staff
- Relationships between elected officials and constituents
- Relationships among constituents
- Relationships between government staff and constituents

(Not at all <--> A great deal)

Finding 3: Polarization is more often seen in relationships with and among constituents.

According to local leaders, negative impacts of polarization on relationships within local governments are limited. As shown in Figure 3, fewer than one-quarter of respondents (23%) view polarization as negatively affecting relationships among elected officials "a great deal" or "a lot," while 15% view polarization as negatively affecting relationships between elected officials and staff. Even fewer respondents (11%) view polarization as negatively affecting relationships among staff members.

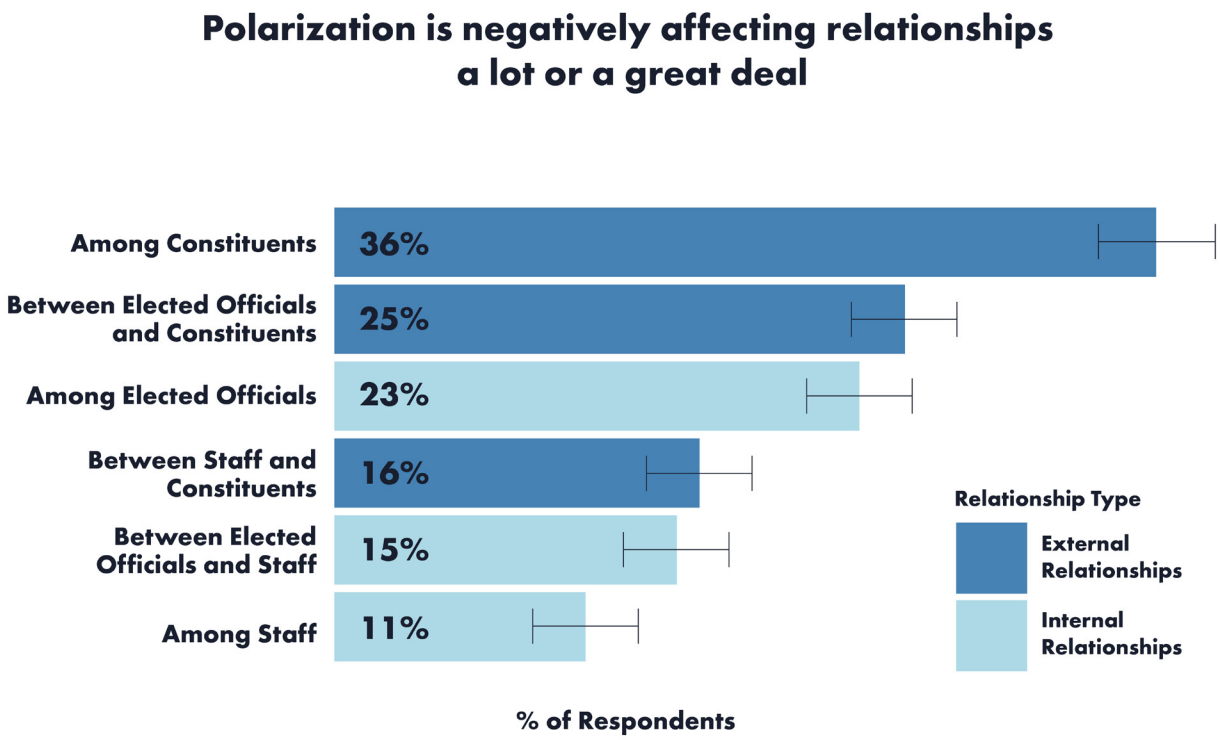

Figure 3: *Proportion of respondents who felt polarization is negatively impacting relationships between and among elected officials, constituents, and staff "a lot" or "a great deal." Data come from a CivicPulse survey of local government leaders in communities of 1,000 or more (n = 1,412). Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals and are as follows (from top to bottom): ±3%, ±2%, ±2%, ±2%, ±2%, ±2%.*

Respondents were more likely to report substantial negative impacts of polarization on relationships involving constituents, with 25% reporting negative impacts on relationships between elected officials and their constituents and 36% reporting negative impacts on relationships among constituents.

Finding 4: Local elected officials maintain functional relationships in red, blue, and purple communities.

One might expect that communities with a more even mix of Republicans and Democrats experience more divisive relationships among elected leaders. However, that is not what our survey reveals. In fact, the limited impact of polarization on elected officials' relationships is consistent across Republican-majority communities, Democratic-majority communities, and communities that have a similar number of Republicans and Democrats (Figure 4).

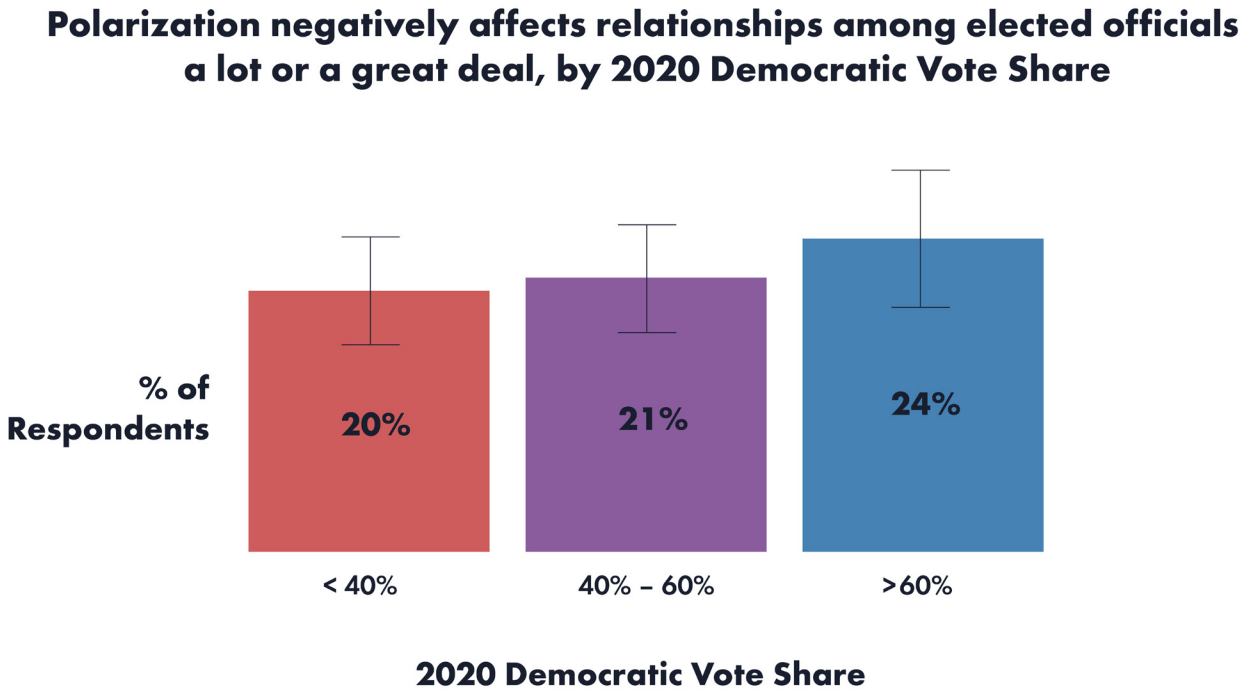

Figure 4: *Proportion of respondents who felt polarization is negatively impacting relationships between elected officials "a lot" or a "great deal", broken up by the Democratic vote share of the community in 2020. CivicPulse survey of local government leaders in communities of 1,000 or more (n = 1,412). Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals and are as follows (from left to right): ±4%, ±4%, ±5%.*

Twenty percent of officials in the most Republican communities reported polarization negatively impacted elected officials' relationships "a lot" or "a great deal," and 24% said the same in the most Democratic communities (Figure 4). In purple communities (40-60% Democratic vote share), the percentage of respondents reporting negative effects was 21%. The similarity between these numbers suggest partisan composition is not an important factor in determining the extent to which polarization negatively impacts relationships within local government.

IV. Qualitative Findings

Polarization's Influence on Local Government Operations

We asked local government officials to provide examples of how polarization can negatively affect local governments and their communities. Findings 5 through 8 are based on the answers to this question (shown below), supplemented by insights from follow-up interviews.

Relevant Survey Question

Please describe a time where liberals or Democrats and conservatives or Republicans in your community or government engaged with each other in a **polarizing** or **divisive** way.

Finding 5: Divisive rhetoric about federal elections leads to hostility against local government.

Many survey respondents indicated that elections are heightened times of polarization for their communities. Locales of all sizes feel the strain of polarization when the polls are open due to election implementation occurring at the local level.

Such polarization has led to skepticism regarding the security of local election processes, sowing distrust in methods that could make elections more accessible. One elected board member from a small county (less than 10,000 residents) in Pennsylvania illustrated this by stating:

> "At the height of the pandemic, there was a lot of polarization at both the national and regional level surrounding the idea of mail-in voting. Polarizing statements lead to a lot of mistrust between constituents and county election offices across the Commonwealth. While election integrity is certainly a valid concern, information regarding election policies should be shared in an unbiased, non-partisan way in order to foster better relationships between voters and election officials, as well as constituents and their elected officials."

Partisan divides not only lead to practical issues but also result in outright hostility toward local election staff. In Michigan, a councilmember representing a small municipality (less than 10,000 residents) stated that polarization emerges in their community "during Early Voting and on Election Day. Voters make negative comments to election workers and other voters."

"Polarizing statements lead to a lot of mistrust between constituents and county election offices."

- local elected official, PA

Connection To Other Research

Consistent with our findings, researchers have shown that more than 1 in 3 election officials experience threats, harassment, or abuse (Brennan Center for Justice 2024). CivicPulse has also been tracking, in partnership with the Bridging Divides Institute, the incidence of insults, harassments, threats, and attacks against local elected officials since August 2022 (CivicPulse 2024).

Finding 6: State-level partisan gridlock hampers reliable funding.

Polarization in state governments can have substantial, multifaceted effects on local governance, even when local officials themselves work well together. These impacts manifest in various ways, creating concrete operational challenges and complicating the political landscape within which local governments must operate. This can be frustrating for local governments, who find unity across the aisle at city council meetings but experience division when interacting with state legislators.

The impact of these strained relationships can be particularly acute when the partisan composition of local and state governments is mismatched. This was witnessed by the Head of Economic Development from a small Texas municipality (less than 10,000 residents) situated within a county that has a partisan composition at odds with that of its state government. The respondent maintained that:

> "Our County is mostly Democrat and our State is Republican. We are constantly encountering hurdles whereby there is hesitation to promote and support projects in our County."

"Get the work done regardless of political majorities in a particular area."

- local elected official, MI

A similar sentiment was implied by an elected official from a small, more conservative municipality (less than 10,000 residents) in Michigan, where (at the time we administered our survey) the Democratic party holds the governor's office and majorities in both chambers of the state legislature. The survey respondent expressed a desire to prioritize efficiency and effectiveness over partisan concerns, saying states should "get the work done regardless of political majorities in a particular area." They went on to express frustration with the process of resources being allocated on the basis of party affiliation, stating that the legislature should "quit funneling monies to the areas of cities or states that have like party affiliations."

In addition to complicating relationships between state and local governments, party politics and polarization within state legislatures disrupts funding streams and resource allocation to local governments. A board member from a mid-sized municipality (between 10,000 and 50,000 residents) in Wisconsin made a point about how party politics at the state level tie up funding, which also has negative effects on public perceptions of local government:

> "Property taxes are a huge issue in Wisconsin as they pay for schools and local government services. Shared revenue from the state is held up by partisan gridlock and antiquated funding formulas. Most constituents don't understand this and accuse local elected officials of mismanagement."

Finding 7: Hot button national debates create flashpoints at the local level.

The open-ended survey responses suggest that national-level hot button debates are increasingly common at the local government level, creating new rifts that affect policy decisions and community programs. Local officials now face the challenge of navigating these sensitive topics while still maintaining effective governance and community services.

Public libraries seem to be at the forefront of such local debates, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ programming and children's literature. The Head of Communications for a large municipality (more than 50,000 residents) in Wisconsin stated:

> "Conversations about LGBTQ+ programming have become more of an inflection point in the past four years, especially within our library programs. Conversations about immigration and diversity initiatives have also taken a more polarized tone."

Meanwhile, one Republican policymaker from a small municipality (less than 10,000 residents) in Michigan cited an instance where their city council rejected a library board appointment "because of his progressive views on children's literature," indicating that polarization may also be influencing personnel decisions in local government.

Additional hot button issues like those related to the environment, race and equity, and homelessness were cited by local officials as polarizing subjects for their communities.

Connection To Other Research

Consistent with the findings from the survey, research has shown how, in local politics, attention to national issues has displaced attention to local issues. Hopkins (2018) argues this is a consequence of voters becoming more engaged with and knowledgeable about national politics at the expense of state and local politics.

Finding 8: Local news deserts lead to misinformation and inflamed rhetoric.

Local officials consistently mentioned how either having poor quality local news or no local news whatsoever leads to partisan misperceptions about local government.

"Even when you do try to stay up to date, stay informed, it's just not always the clearest picture."

- local elected official, NJ

One councilperson from a small borough (less than 10,000 residents) in New Jersey lamented how social media has become a primary source of information for residents. The councilperson expressed concern that complicated governance structures are often too simplistically analyzed, indicating that commentors "just confidently say" how government works when the full picture is more complex. This simplification of local government is a "pretty major" source of misinformation and tension on the New Jersey borough's local social media pages. The councilperson went on to explain:

> "People just don't exactly know what the facts are. Our local reporting is very poor, we [barely have] a newspaper, and it does not really ever give you a full picture. Even when you do try to stay up to date, stay informed, it's just not always the clearest picture."

In addition to reducing the quality of accessible information for residents, the decline of local journalism coupled with the rise of social media has led to proliferation of polarizing narratives in online content. Respondents often cited the role of social media in fueling polarized discourse. A Head of Economic Development for a mid-sized municipality (between 10,000 and 50,000 residents) in Ohio explained:

> "Social Media seems to be the devil in these kinds of situations. In person, it's much more difficult to say the things that "Keyboard Warriors" do via Social Media channels and outlets. I hope that we don't devolve into a society where that in-person filter disappears."

A Deputy Top Appointed Executive in a mid-sized municipality (between 10,000 and 50,000 residents) in Alaska elaborated on the distorting effect social media has on political discourse, where "both extremes of the political spectrum appear to be (they're not, but they appear to be) dominant voices" who have already reached the "pre-defined conclusion that their echo chamber mandates." The official explains that this behavior "hamstrings our ability to engage effectively in that medium. [It is] easier to deal with it at in person public meetings, but still a challenge."

Connection To Other Research

Consistent with the findings of this survey, researchers have shown how news deserts can lead to misinformation. Abernathy (2020) describes how more than ¼ of the country's newspapers disappeared between 2005 and 2020. CivicPulse's past research has shown that 1/3 of local government board meetings have no reporters present (CivicPulse 2023). The information gap left by the loss of local newsrooms is typically filled by social media, where partisan echo chambers can amplify misinformation (Rhodes 2022).

How Local Officials Overcome Challenges of Polarization

We asked local government officials to give examples of when they or others they observed effectively navigated the challenges of polarization. Findings 9 through 11 are based on the answers to this question below, supplemented by insights from follow-up interviews.

Relevant Survey Question

Please describe a time where liberals or Democrats and conservatives or Republicans in your community or government engaged with each other in a **constructive** way.

Finding 9: Participating in local activities buffers ideological differences.

Local officials pointed out that because they live in the same community and participate together in local events, they are better able to recognize their shared interests and values.

As one elected councilmember from a mid-sized municipality (between 10,000 and 50,000 residents) in California stated:

> "Everyone gets involved in local activities, groups, clubs and their local government. The more one interacts with folks with divergent views, the more one realizes we are all human beings with more in common than not. Hard to scream at someone and wave a flag (or gun) in their face when you just sat next to them at a Lion's Club function."

Both scheduled and unscheduled interactions among local government officials and staff create opportunities to identify commonalities and build mutual respect that foster effective policymaking. One elected official for a mid-sized municipality (between 10,000 and 50,000 residents) in Idaho provided an example:

> "The mayors and county commission chairs [in] my county and the neighboring county get together every month for lunch. This group represents diverse political views but has worked well together on common challenges such as growth management, public safety, advocacy at the state legislature on city related topics."

"The more one interacts with folks with divergent views, the more one realizes we are all human beings with more in common than not."

- local elected official, CA

Remarks from a councilperson representing a small borough (less than 10,000 residents) in New Jersey highlight how the intimacy of local communities can foster a more pragmatic, less antagonistic approach to political differences. They pointed out that people may have a difference of opinion on things but at the end of the day "we all live here in one square mile. We're not going to get away from each other."

For example, the mayor of the town is of a different party affiliation as the councilperson, and they disagree on many things. Despite this, they typically have to interact several times a week. The respondent summed up their relationship like this: "I kind of got to go along with her here, you know, I can deal with that. I don't think she's a ghoul or anything."

Connection To Other Research

Scholarly work focused on depolarization typically points to the importance of having experiences that facilitate empathy, perspective taking, and meaningful conversations with people with opposing views (Warner and Villamil 2017; Druckman and Nelson n.d.). Our survey suggests these types of experiences are part of the job of working in local government.

Finding 10: Focusing on concrete needs helps depolarize local politics.

Local officials believe that their ability to focus on issues where the connection to community well-being is clear is a powerful force in reducing polarization.

Respondents repeatedly highlighted the importance of focusing on tangible community needs and fostering cooperation based on shared local interests rather than national political ideologies. As one elected official from a small municipality (less than 10,000 residents) in New Jersey wrote:

> "Locally, we view our challenges here by what we think is best for the town and a political affiliation and its underlying philosophy doesn't play a meaningful role. For example, a sewer problem and the solution or a replaced road doesn't define itself along party lines and the municipality is rarely divided over the best approach."

A pragmatic approach also extends to more complex social issues as well. A department head for a large municipality (more than 50,000 residents) in California noted that even when it comes to challenging topics, conservatives and liberals have opportunities to look for areas of agreement. They opined that "everyone agrees that we want to lower the impact of homelessness, so let's talk about different ways to accomplish that."

Finally, the power of framing issues in local terms was emphasized by several respondents. The Head of Communications in a large municipality (more than 50,000 residents) in Wisconsin recommended reorienting the conversation to a place of community, saying that "we have far better results using local community examples when discussing contentious issues. It frames the conversation more productively than using higher-level, abstract language." This approach of grounding discussions in local, concrete examples serves multiple purposes, including making issues more relatable and immediate to community members and separating local concerns from more divisive national narratives.

By concentrating on tangible local needs, finding common goals, and avoiding topics outside of their purview, local government leaders demonstrate how political differences can be navigated productively.

"We have far better results using local community examples when discussing contentious issues. It frames the conversation more productively than using higher-level, abstract language."

- head of communications, WI

Finding 11: Reducing emphasis on political parties leads to better day-to-day governance.

Local officials believe that the nonpartisan nature of many local government procedures and institutions are useful when it comes to governing in today's polarized landscape.

Several survey respondents expressed beliefs that, whether during local elections or day-to-day proceedings of government, deemphasis on party affiliations helps foster an environment where practical problem-solving and community-focused decision-making take precedence over partisan politics.

The head of zoning for a mid-sized municipality (between 10,000 and 50,000 residents) in Colorado, stated:

> "For our smaller community, party affiliation is less a part of the identity of our elected leaders. This actually helps as a model where leaders, constituents and staff can discuss the issues themselves and problem-solve issues more specifically as they arise instead of being influenced by the one-size-fits-all [identity] of party affiliation."

The tax assessor for a small municipality (less than 10,000 residents) in Maine remarked that they felt it was helpful that their community's elected positions were non-partisan and that while their political leanings may show up in some circumstances, they "try to keep those away from addressing city-wide issues."

In an interview, the Community Relations Director for a large municipality (more than 50,000 residents) in Texas expressed concerns about a bill filed in their state legislature that would require all candidates for local office to declare a party affiliation. They warned of the potential consequences, saying:

> "If cities become partisan, they will become polarized. If they become polarized, they become inefficient. That pothole sits there for three weeks while people debate whose fault it is right? And once that happens, you're going to see the level of public trust for local government plummet."

Connection To Other Research

While partisan election systems are used nearly universally at the state and national level, approximately 70% of local governments use nonpartisan election systems where candidates' party affiliation is not listed on the ballot (Bledsoe and Welch 1987; Svara 2003). Proponents of nonpartisan elections maintained that local government is best served when political parties are absent from the process (Davidson and Fraga 1988). In contrast, proponents of partisan elections argue party labels are useful when it comes to mobilizing and organizing the electorate (Primo and Snyder 2010; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001).

V. Conclusion

Based on our national survey of 1,412 local officials, we see that local governments across the country form an essential bulwark against polarization in America today. In Section II, we showed that local governments and the communities they represent remain largely insulated from the most pernicious impacts of polarization. However, as illustrated in Section III, polarization does present specific challenges for local officials in day-to-day governance.

Local government officials also demonstrate themselves as capable of overcoming the challenges presented by polarization, as seen in Section IV. Because local government leaders are embedded in their own communities, their work is buffered by frequent humanizing interactions, a concrete sense of common purpose, and an emphasis on local relationships over national party affiliations.

Combatting polarization ultimately relies on the ability to have groups that disagree with each other forge relationships based on a sense of shared humanity. By providing a space for collaborative problem-solving, local government presents opportunities for forging these kinds of relationships. In turn, these relationships provide the foundation for effective compromise.

In short, in an era where compromise is all too rare, local government offers a critical medium by which the hard work of depolarization can occur.

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Appendix

Survey Methodology

The officials invited to participate in the survey were drawn randomly from a dynamically updated comprehensive list of all top elected officials (e.g., mayor, county executive), governing board members (e.g., council member, county legislator), top appointed executives (e.g., city manager), and department heads serving townships, municipalities, and counties with populations of 1,000 or more. The survey was conducted from August to September of 2024. Participants were recruited over the course of 6 weeks via email with a link to the online survey. There were 1,412 responses.

Sample Composition

Table A1: Distribution of respondents by role type.

Role type	Proportion of respondents
Civil Service Leader	0.51
Elected Policymaker	0.49

Table A2: Distribution of respondents by government type.

Government type	Proportion of respondents
County	0.18
Municipality	0.60
Township	0.22

Table A3: Distribution of respondents by political party.

Political party	Proportion of respondents
Democratic	0.29
Republican	0.38
Democratic-leaning Independent	0.10
Republican-leaning Independent	0.11
Independent (no lean)	0.12

Table A4: Distribution of respondents by ideology.

Ideology	Proportion of respondents
Very conservative	0.14
Somewhat conservative	0.28
Moderate, middle of the road	0.29
Somewhat liberal	0.19
Very liberal	0.09
Not sure	0.02

Sample Representativeness

Table A5: Characteristics of the median jurisdiction represented in survey sample versus sampling frame.

Type	Number of residents	Proportion of college-educated residents	Proportion of residents who voted for Biden in 2020	Proportion of non-white residents	Household income of residents
Sample	10,170	0.20	0.48	0.18	71,010
Sampling frame	4,470	0.16	0.39	0.14	67,180

Table A6: Proportion by Census region for survey sample versus sampling frame.

Type	Midwest	Northeast	South	West
Sample	0.32	0.25	0.26	0.18
Sampling frame	0.34	0.24	0.30	0.12

Questionnaire

There is a lot of talk about political polarization in America now. For the purposes of this survey, consider political polarization to be defined as divisive attitudes or behaviors between liberals or Democrats, on the one hand, and conservatives or Republicans, on the other.

1. In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting our country? (Not at all, a little, a moderate amount, a lot, a great deal)
2. In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting your local community? (Not at all, a little, a moderate amount, a lot, a great deal)
3. Please evaluate how much polarization negatively affects each type of relationship in your community and/or government. (Not at all, a little, a moderate amount, a great deal)
    - Relationships among elected officials
    - Relationships between elected officials and government staff
    - Relationships among government staff
    - Relationships between elected officials and constituents
    - Relationships among constituents
    - Relationships between government staff and constituents
4. Please describe a time where liberals or Democrats and conservatives or Republicans in your community or government engaged with each other in a polarizing or divisive way.
5. Please describe a time where liberals or Democrats and conservatives or Republicans in your community or government engaged with each other in a constructive way.
6. If you had one practical recommendation for addressing political polarization in the United States, what would it be?
7. Is there anything else you'd like the American public to know about how things are going for you, your government, or your community?

Qualitative Methodology

Our qualitative approach relies on thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses and follow-up interviews. The thematic analysis process was carried out in the following way:

1. Organize and familiarize. Three researchers each read all of the open-ended responses as well as the transcribed interviews. During this time, researchers identified potential themes and keywords and agreed on a preliminary list for each.
2. Code. Each researcher was randomly assigned to code approximately one third of the responses. During this stage, three new variables were coded:
    - Substance: coded as '0' if response did not contain useful information (ex: "I don't know"), coded as '1' if response contains useful information.
    - Keywords: based on suggestions from Step 1, but allowing researchers to create new keywords during the process, as needed. Coding was limited to responses where Substance was '1'.
    - Category: based on suggestions from Step 1, but allowing researchers to create new categories during the process, as needed. Coding was limited to responses where Substance was '1'.
3. Review. One researcher then reviewed all open-ended responses and coding assignments for accuracy and consistency. Key themes – based on the most frequent categories and keywords – were identified.
4. Synthesize. Key themes drove report content and relevant quotes from open-ended responses and interviews were identified, ensuring that these were representative of the viewpoints of respondents across multiple states, government types, community sizes, and political parties.

Interview Protocol

At the end of the survey, we asked participants if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Of the participants who agreed, we randomly selected ten to schedule interviews. These interviews were conducted via Zoom or by telephone and were recorded and later transcribed using a mix of Zoom's automated transcription feature and human transcription by CivicPulse research staff.

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on surfacing experiences of each official using five sequential questions, each of which could branch depending on initial responses:

1. Can you tell me what your position is and what a typical day looks like for you?
2. When you hear the word "polarization," what does this mean to you?
3. In your role, how do you experience polarization, if at all?
4. What do you think are the root causes of polarization?
5. Do you think local governments are well-positioned to address polarization?

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For replication data or questions about our methodology, please email info@civicpulse.org