Polarization in America: Survey of Local Government

May 2025

This report is the second in a three-part series.

CivicPulse

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About This Report

This report is the second in a three-part series 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.

Acknowledgements

CivicPulse wishes to acknowledge its Academic Advisory Board for their input on survey development.

More Information

More about our Polarization in America series can be found here. Media inquiries can be sent to Victoria Starbuck, Research Director, at victoriastarbuck@civicpulse.org. Requests for associated data files can be made here. For any other questions, please email info@civicpulse.org.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

This is the second report in a three-part series CivicPulse is conducting to identify effective solutions from local leaders to address political polarization. Our first report, released in October 2024, was based on a nationwide survey of local government leaders in the United States and fielded earlier that year between August 13th and September 26th (Q3 2024). It focused on scoping the problem of local polarization, providing key benchmarks for understanding how local communities are faring in the face of nationally polarizing politics.

This report, released in May 2025, is based on a second survey of local government leaders fielded between January 15th and March 9th (Q1 2025). It provides updates to the key benchmarks from the October 2024 report, in light of possible changes that may have occurred since the presidential election and the transition to a new administration. Furthermore, we identify and explore five potential solutions that many local leaders indicate are effective in mitigating political polarization in their communities.

Below are the key findings for this report, divided into three parts: (I) an update to the state of local polarization, (II) promising solutions leaders can implement within government, and (III) promising solutions involving community interventions.

I. STATE OF LOCAL POLARIZATION: SPRING 2025 UPDATE

Update 1: The Non-effect of the Election. Local polarization has not substantially changed since the presidential election. 31% of local leaders reported substantial impacts of polarization in their communities—identical to the percentage who said the same in the Q3 2024 (Aug-Sept) survey. This observed stability of local polarization over time suggests it is more determined by slower-moving social and institutional structures than by any particular political event. [p. 7]

Update 2: National Strife, Local Resilience. Local communities remain relatively resilient to political polarization, compared to the nation as a whole. 83% of local leaders said our country faces substantial negative impacts of polarization, compared to the 31% saying the same for their communities (see Update 1). Although perceived national polarization fell slightly since the Q3 2024 survey, the size of the gap between national and local remains quite similar to before (87% and 31%, respectively). [p. 8]

Update 3: The Importance of Population Size. The larger a community, the more likely it is to experience polarization. Among officials who represent communities of more than 50,000 residents, 40% reported their communities face substantial negative effects from polarization, compared with the average across all populations of 31%. This discrepancy has persisted since the Q3 2024 survey, although it has declined modestly since then (46% and 31%, respectively). [p. 9]

II. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS: STRATEGIC GOVERNANCE

Solution 1: Topic Selection. Local leaders can choose to focus on topics more likely to transcend polarization. 48% of local officials reported that they considered the challenges of polarization when choosing where to focus their time. Officials serving municipalities, townships, and counties most commonly mentioned infrastructure as the best topic for overcoming polarization, while school board officials most frequently mentioned student wellbeing & safety. [p. 10]

Solution 2: Topic Framing. Local leaders can reframe potentially divisive topics to mitigate the negative effects of polarization. Even if they don't have the luxury of choosing which topics to focus on, our survey shows that local leaders can reduce polarization by strategically choosing how they *frame* the work they are doing. 57% of local leaders reported that they considered the challenges of polarization when choosing how to communicate about their work. The most commonly reported successful strategy is what we call the "community benefits" frame—where one focuses on the universal benefits to the community of a policy or program. [p. 13]

III. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS: COMMUNITY INTERVENTIONS

Solution 3: Hosting Community Events. Local leaders can host community events to reduce polarization. While local leaders said that a variety of resident engagement methods can help mitigate polarization, hosting community events shows the most promise. 46% of respondents indicated that hosting events can be effective (compared with 41% who don't think it makes a difference and 13% who believe it makes polarization worse). Our survey also finds that hosting community events is widespread: 94% of respondents indicated that it is a normal practice for their local government. Consequently, any improvements to this practice could have a large impact. [p.16]

Solution 4: Long-term Volunteering. Extended volunteer experiences can lead to enduring perspective changes and improved social cohesion. 44% of local government leaders told us that long-term volunteering can reduce polarization (compared with 46% who don't think it would change things and 10% who believe it would make things worse). However, access to such opportunities—especially full-time ones with financial support—is limited: only 9% of local officials reported the presence of long-term, paid volunteering opportunities in their communities. Furthermore, many of these tend to focus on part-time involvement in community boards and commissions. [p. 19]

Solution 5: Civics Education. Civics classes can provide a pathway for mitigating polarization through increased youth political participation. 38% of school board officials think civics classes help with polarization (compared with 49% who don't perceive an effect and 13% who believe it makes things worse). While civics classes are widespread among high schools (84%), they are less widespread among K-8 schools (48%). [p. 23]

Introduction

This is the second report in a three-part series CivicPulse is conducting to identify effective solutions from local leaders to address political polarization. Our first report, released in October 2024, was based on a nationwide survey of local government leaders in the United States and fielded earlier that year between August 13th and September 26th (Q3 2024). It found that polarization is typically far less divisive locally than it is nationally, though it is worse in localities with communities of 50,000 or more (CivicPulse 2024).

This report, released in May 2025, is based on a second survey of local government leaders fielded between January 15th and March 9th (Q1 2025). It provides updates to the key benchmarks from the October 2024 report, and in particular, shows that despite the national tumult accompanying the transition from the Biden Administration to a second Trump Administration, the degree of polarization in local communities is remarkably steady since before the election. Furthermore, we identify and explore five potential solutions that many local leaders indicate are effective in mitigating political polarization in their communities.

Conventionally, scholars' proposed solutions to polarization have centered around actions that cannot be immediately implemented, such as deliberative democracy and electoral reforms (Anders 2024; Foley 2024; Levendusky and Stecula 2021). But more practical and immediate solutions are needed. Given that both of our reports show that polarization is generally less prevalent in local government, we turn to local government officials to find out how polarization is navigated locally to identify solutions that may scale.

We chose our focal areas for solutions based on three criteria. First, we relied on what we learned from local leaders in our first report. Second, we focused on solutions that local leaders may have plausible jurisdiction over. Finally, the solution areas we present have been identified by scholars as areas where more general benefits from these actions have been witnessed.

Our solutions are divided into two types: those that leaders can implement within their governments and those that involve community interventions. For each solution, we looked at how effective local leaders believe these solutions are and how many local communities are implementing them.

The key sections of the report are previewed below:

- "State of Local Polarization: Spring 2025 Update," presents our latest findings on how polarization is impacting local communities. This section is based on questions that we repeated from our Q3 2024 survey.

- "Potential Solutions: Strategic Governance," presents solutions to local polarization that can be implemented within local government.

- "Potential Solutions: Community Interventions," presents solutions that involve activities or programs in the community.

- This is followed by a conclusion, a list of references, and an appendix. The appendix includes background literature, a complete summary of survey results, and descriptions of the methodologies employed in this study.

State of Local Polarization: Spring 2025 Update

We asked local government officials their views on how much polarization was negatively impacting the country as a whole versus their own communities, matching two questions we asked local leaders in our first survey. Findings in this section are based on the key survey questions shown below.

Key Survey Questions

In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting <u>our country</u>?

(Not at all <—> A great deal)

In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting <u>your local community</u>?

(Not at all <—> A great deal)

The Non-effect of the Election

Key Findings

Local polarization has not substantially changed since the presidential election.

- 31% of local leaders reported substantial impacts of polarization in their communities—identical to the percentage who said the same in the Q3 2024 survey.
- This observed stability of local polarization over time suggests it is more determined by slower-moving social and institutional structures than by any particular political event.

Polarization in Local Communities over Time

While changes may have been witnessed by individual communities, the election did not alter the national experience of local polarization. In both our Q3 2024 and Q1 2025 surveys, 31% of officials said that polarization was negatively impacting their community "a lot" or "a great deal."

Figure 1. **Negative effect of political polarization on local communities over time**
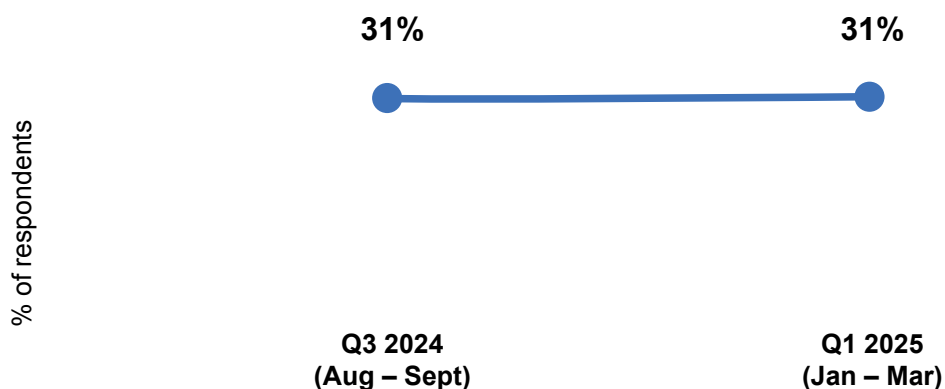
Note: Percentage of respondents answering, "a lot" or "a great deal" to the question, "In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting your local community?" Data comes from a Q3 2024 (Aug-Sept) CivicPulse survey of 1,412 local government officials and a Q1 2025 (Jan-Mar) CivicPulse survey of 1,274 local government officials. Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals and are as follows (from left to right): ±2%, ±3%.

The stability observed in Figure 1 indicates that local polarization may be influenced more by slower-moving social and institutional structures than any unique political event. Local communities that successfully abate or avoid polarization may hold solutions that could scale to other local communities.

National Strife, Local Resilience

Key Findings

Local communities remain relatively resilient to political polarization, compared to the nation as a whole.
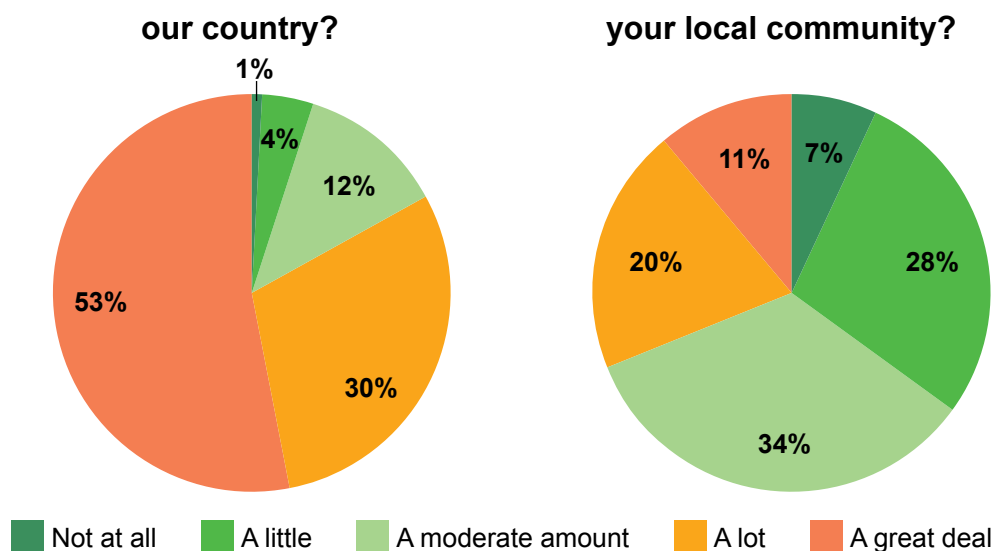
- 83% of local leaders said our country faces substantial negative impacts of polarization, compared to the 31% saying the same for their communities.
- Although perceived national polarization fell slightly since the last survey, the size of the gap between national and local remains quite similar to before (87% and 31%, respectively).

Perceptions of Polarization in the Country vs. Local Communities

When asked about the country as a whole, the overwhelming majority (83%) of officials said that political polarization was negatively affecting things "a lot" or "a great deal" (Figure 2). However, when asked more specifically about their own communities, a little less than one third of respondents (31%) perceived similar negative effects.

Figure 2. **Perceptions of polarization's negative effects**

In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting…

our country?

1% 4% 12% 30% 53%

your local community?

7% 28% 34% 20% 11%

■ Not at all   ■ A little   ■ A moderate amount   ■ A lot   ■ A great deal

<u>Note</u>: 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 comes from a CivicPulse survey of 1,274 local government officials.

Comparison with the Q3 2024 Survey

We also asked these two key questions on our Q3 2024 survey. Although perceived national polarization fell slightly since the last survey, the size of the gap between national and local remains quite similar to before the election. Through the Q3 2024 survey, we found that 87% of local leaders believed that political polarization was negatively affecting the country "a lot" or "a great deal" while 31% said the same for their community (CivicPulse 2024).

The Importance of Population Size

Key Findings

The larger a community, the more likely it is to experience polarization.

- Among officials who represent communities of more than 50,000 residents, 40% reported their communities face substantial negative effects from polarization, compared with the average across all populations of 31%.
- This discrepancy has persisted since last year's survey, although it has declined modestly since then (46% and 31%, respectively).

Polarization in Local Communities, by Population Size

40% of officials representing communities with more than 50,000 residents said that polarization was negatively impacting their communities "a lot" or "a great deal." Comparatively, only 24% of officials representing communities with fewer than 10,000 residents, and 31% of officials representing communities between 10,000 and 50,000 residents said the same.

Figure 3. **Negative effect of polarization on local communities, by population size**
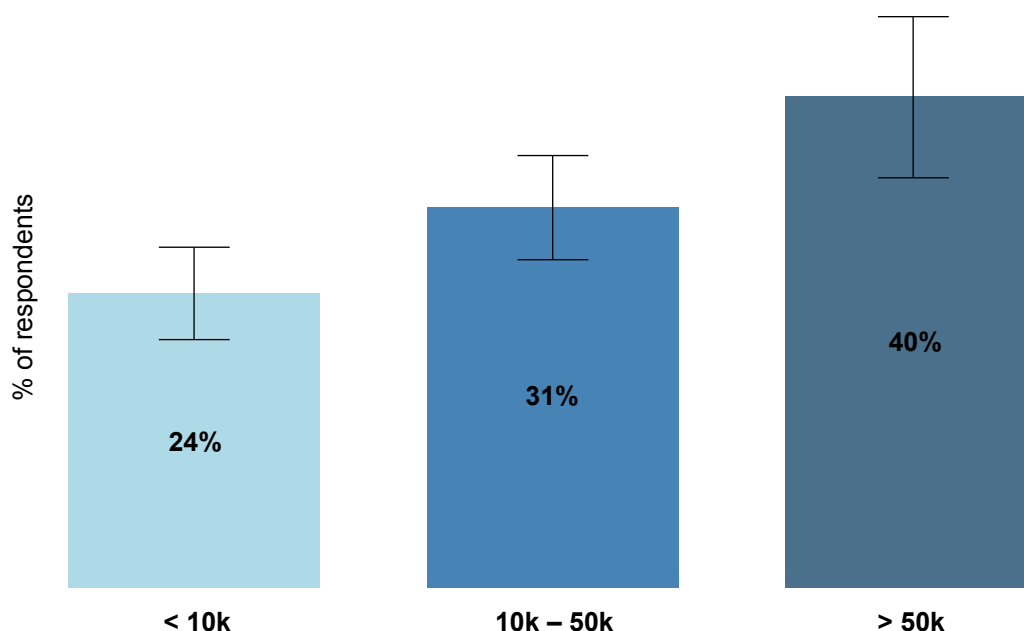
Note: Percentage of respondents answering, "a lot" or "a great deal" to the question "In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting your local community?" by population size of the community. Data comes from a CivicPulse survey of 1,274 local government officials. Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals and are as follows (from left to right): ±3%, ±4%, ±7%.

Comparison with the Q3 2024 Survey

Community size continues to shape the extent of polarization's impact, despite a modest decline in the discrepancy. In the first report, we described how 46% of local leaders serving communities of more than 50,000 experienced significant negative impacts of polarization. Comparatively, only 28% of leaders serving communities with less than 10,000 and 29% of leaders serving communities of 10,000 to 50,000 said the same (CivicPulse 2024).

Potential Solutions: Strategic Governance

Our update to the state of local polarization indicates that local government officials representing the full range of community sizes may be taking steps to mitigate polarization's harshest effects. In this section, we identify two potential solutions to polarization that can be implement within local governments.

Solution 1: Strategic Topic Selection

Key Findings

> Local leaders can choose to focus on topics more likely to transcend polarization.

- 48% of local officials reported that they considered the challenges of polarization when choosing where to focus their time.
- Officials serving municipalities, townships, and counties most commonly mentioned infrastructure as the best topic for overcoming polarization, while school board officials most frequently mentioned student wellbeing & safety.

Frequency and Common Topics

Topic selection is an important aspect of local government officials' work because it determines not only what they talk about but also how they choose to spend a large portion of their time. Research indicates that elected officials often engage in strategic topic selection, focusing on certain issues to influence policy outcomes and public discourse (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). However, the use of strategic topic selection as an intentional tool for addressing political polarization has not been widely examined, so we asked officials to tell us.

Our survey shows that strategic topic selection is a common practice with nearly half (48%) of all local government officials "always," "frequently," or "sometimes" strategically selecting topics in order to transcend polarization.

Since so many officials are strategically selecting topics, we wanted to know more about the types of topics they are selecting. We asked officials to provide examples of times they've chosen topics to transcend polarization in their communities (see Key Survey Question below). Table 1 displays the most commonly mentioned topics by role.

Key Survey Question

> If relevant, please provide an example of <u>a topic you have strategically chosen</u> to transcend political polarization in your community.

Table 1. **Topics most commonly selected to transcend local polarization**

Rank order	Municipal/county/township officials	School board officials
1	Infrastructure	Student wellbeing & safety
2	Housing	Academics & achievement
3	Public safety	Budget
4	Economic development	Facilities
5	Health & wellness	Extracurricular activities
6	Zoning	Career readiness
7	Public services	–
8	Parks & recreation	–

Note: Most commonly selected topic categories for municipal/county/township officials and school board officials, respectively. Categories are based on responses to the question "If relevant, please provide an example of a topic you have strategically chosen to transcend political polarization in your community." For complete information on the categorization and coding process, see Section A5 of the Appendix. Data comes from a survey of 1,274 local government officials (municipal/county/township officials = 664, school board officials = 610).

Municipal/county/township officials

Officials serving municipalities, counties, and townships strategically select topics at a slightly higher rate (52%). They most frequently mentioned infrastructure- and housing-related topics (13% and 10%, respectively), but they brought up a wide range of topics, representing the array of issues that they typically cover.

Municipal/county/township officials' responses to the open-ended question enhance understanding of each category. For example, a range of things fall under the infrastructure category. A council member representing a Utah city with 30,000 residents explained, "We tend to keep our focus on things like roads, storm drains, and similar infrastructure."

Community type might influence what gets addressed by municipal/county/township officials. Rural communities may be more likely to focus on infrastructure needs that are already present in more urban regions. As a mayor serving a 1,000-resident municipality in Texas shared, "We have tried to bring our services and day-to-day operations into the 21st century."

School board officials

School board officials select topics in order to transcend polarization at a slightly lower rate (44%). They most commonly mentioned topics related to student safety and wellbeing as well as academics and achievement (13% and 10%, respectively). These topics fall within their core duties as well as the needs of their districts.

One school board member serving a district of about 100,000 residents in Arizona provided us with insight to their motivations for selecting different topics to transcend political polarization. This school board official shared, "My primary focus is on serving students, parents, and the broader community by prioritizing policies that enhance education, uphold parental rights, and ensure transparency. While political polarization is a reality, I strategically select topics that emphasize common-sense solutions, student success, and community values rather than divisive ideological battles."

A school board member representing a district of about 20,000 in New Jersey shared similar sentiments with us writing, "We focus on addressing the needs of our students and our staff. We look to provide students the best environment so that they can thrive."

Key takeaways

With about half of all local officials intentionally selecting topics to transcend polarization in their communities, topic selection is a clear pathway towards stronger, more unified communities. The topics that officials are selecting revolve around the core duties of their positions. However, there is no one-size-fits-all topic for municipal/county/township officials or school board officials. Instead, a web of topics central to the needs of the people officials serve can help reduce local polarization. Further research is needed to understand which communities benefit the most from strategic topic selection and the conditions under which it is most beneficial.

Solution 2: Topic Framing

Key Findings

Local leaders can reframe potentially divisive topics to mitigate the negative effects of polarization.

- 57% of local leaders reported that they considered the challenges of polarization when choosing how to communicate about their work.
- The most commonly reported successful strategy is what we call the "community benefits" frame—where one focuses on the universal benefits to the community of a policy or program.

Frequency and Common Strategies

Elected officials are experts in strategically framing their ideas to shape how others interpret issues (Oxley 2020). While there is some evidence that strategic framing can influence public opinion (Peterson and Simonovits 2018), the use of this strategy to mitigate local political polarization has not been extensively examined.

Our survey findings show that 57% of local government officials "always," "frequently," or "sometimes" strategically frame their ideas or plans in order to transcend political polarization in their communities. To better understand how they are doing this, we asked officials the following question:

Key Survey Question

If relevant, please provide an example of how you have strategically framed an idea or plan in order to transcend political polarization in your community.

Despite the variation in topics that emerged by role type, the strategies for talking about ideas or plans were similar. By far, the most commonly mentioned framing strategy was framing in terms of community benefits (22% overall)—where one focuses on the universal benefits to the community of a policy or program. At a much lower rate, officials mentioned using outcomes-focused framing (7% overall), neutral language (6% overall), and evidence-based statements (6% overall).

Table 2. **Communication framing strategies most commonly used to transcend local polarization**

Framing strategy	Overall	Municipal/county/ township officials	School board officials
Community benefits	1	1	1
Outcomes-focused	2	4	2
Neutral language	3	3	3
Evidence-based	4	2	4

Note: Rank order of most commonly used framing strategy categories overall and for municipal/county/ township officials and school board officials, respectively. Categories are based on responses to the question, "If relevant, please provide an example of how you have strategically framed an idea or plan in order to transcend political polarization in your community." For complete information on the categorization and coding process, see Section A5 of the Appendix. Data comes from a survey of 1,274 local government officials (municipal/county/township officials = 664, school board officials = 610).

Municipal/township/county officials

60% of officials serving municipalities, counties, and townships said they strategically frame their ideas or plans in order to transcend polarization. They ranked community benefits as the top strategy (18%), followed by evidence-based statements (7%), neutral language (6%), and outcomes-focused framing (5%).

For a better understanding of what these framing strategies look like on the ground, we turn to officials' responses to this section's key survey question. A township supervisor for 20,000 Michigan residents detailed how they frame one of the most commonly selected topics stating, "When people discuss affordable housing, we focus on the factors that lead to housing being expensive, and what we can do about that."

School board officials

53% of school board officials reported that they opt to strategically frame their ideas or plans in order to transcend polarization. Like municipal/township/county officials, school board officials ranked community benefits as the top priority (26%). All of their rankings align with the overall order of Table 2: 10% reported using outcomes-focused framing, 7% said they opt for neutral language, and 5% described implementing evidence-based statements.

In some instances, strategic framing of ideas or plans can help navigate tensions that arise from outside the community. One school board member for a 30,000-resident Ohio district shared that, "In Ohio, there have been a number of legislative actions that are impacting schools. We've had to change our language and methods to continue doing what we believe is best for students. We have to find ways to communicate to the public our continuing process to deliver the type of education our students need without becoming a lightning rod for pushback."

Key takeaways

A local government official's framing strategies can become the determining factor in whether their ideas or plans succeed. This is particularly true for officials whose communities are facing higher levels of polarization: one poorly framed topic could catapult them or their community into a negative spotlight regionally, at the state level, or even nationally. Conversely, focusing on the universal benefits to the community of a policy or program can alleviate tensions that may emerge. More research is needed to understand if local leaders are using framing in a proactive or reactive manner.

Potential Solutions: Community Interventions

The solutions presented in the preceding section can help reduce local polarization through small, yet powerful changes within local government. In this section, we turn to potential solutions that can be implemented by local leaders through community interventions.

Solution 3: Hosting Community Events

Key Findings

Local leaders can host community events to reduce polarization.

- 46% of respondents indicated that hosting events can be effective.
- 94% of respondents indicated their governments have hosted such events in the past.

Perceived efficacy

Resident engagement has long been viewed as a cornerstone of effective local governance. Research highlights that well-designed engagement practices—those that are inclusive and transparent—can build trust and foster stronger community relationships (Bassler et al. 2008, Barnes and Schmitz 2016). However, resident engagement for addressing political polarization has been less widely investigated.

We asked officials to tell us more about the types of public engagement they are involved in and their perceptions of its effects on polarization (see Key Survey Question below).

Key Survey Question

For each of the following public engagement practices, please indicate whether you think it increases or decreases the negative effects of polarization in your community.

- Resident feedback mechanisms (e.g. scorecards, surveys, feedback forms)
- Participatory budgeting/planning
- Resident advisory committees or task forces
- Informal office/coffee hours
- Townhalls/public meetings
- Hosting community events

(Strongly increases <—> Strongly decreases, Not applicable)

When presented with a variety of resident engagement methods, local government officials were most likely to say that hosting community events decreases the negative effects of polarization in their communities. Among officials with public engagement practices in their communities, 46% said that hosting community events "strongly" or "somewhat" decreases the negative effects of polarization. Meanwhile, 38% of officials said that hosting community events "neither increases nor decreases" polarization and 13% said hosting community events "strongly" or "somewhat" increases negative effects of polarization in their communities.

Figure 4. **Perceived impact of resident engagement practices on reducing polarization's negative effects**
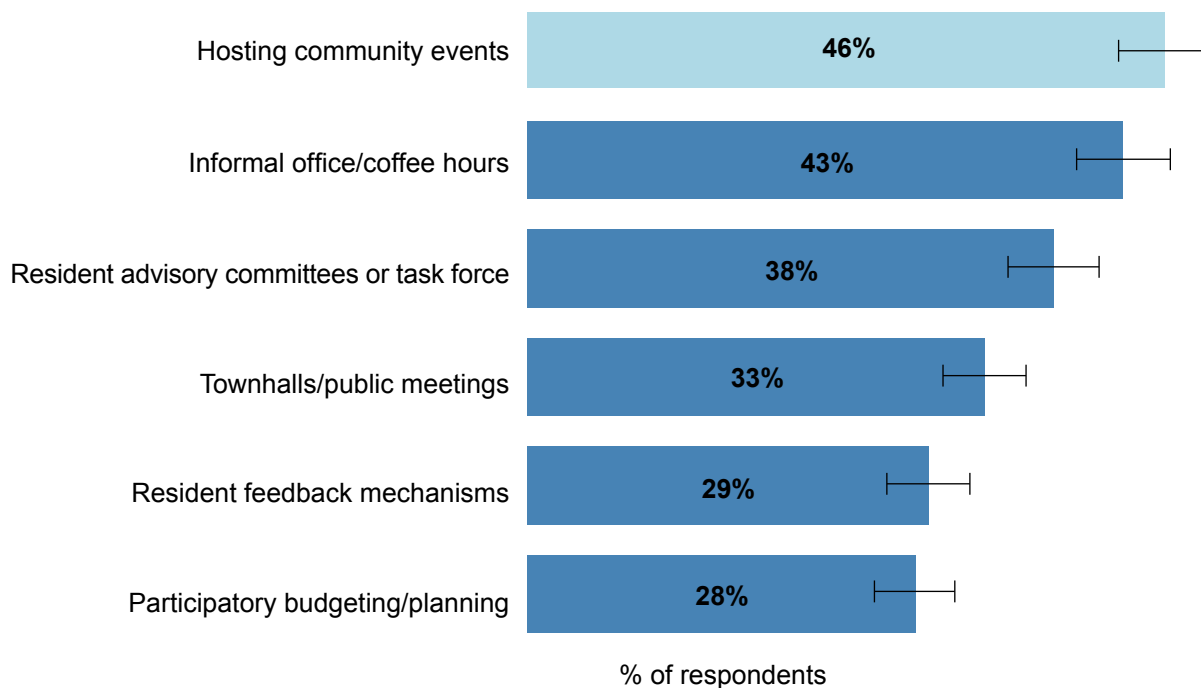
% of respondents

<u>Note</u>: Percentage of respondents saying that each of the six resident engagement methods "strongly" or "somewhat" decreases the negative effects of polarization in their communities. Data comes from a CivicPulse survey of 1,274 local government officials. Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals and are as follows (from top to bottom): ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%.

Municipal/township/county officials

Officials serving municipalities, townships, and counties said that hosting community events is the most effective public engagement method we asked about. 47% of municipal/county/township officials believe hosting community events decreases the negative effects of polarization. Furthermore, improvements to community events could have a large impact: 92% of municipal/township/county officials indicate that hosting community events is a normal practice for their government.

Officials used open-ended responses to tell us more about the impacts of resident engagement. A council member for a municipality of about 125,000 in Michigan shared, "I hosted a listening session where some community members just needed to get things off their chests. Afterwards, there seemed to be a renewed sense of dedication to working together."

School board officials

School board officials also ranked hosting community events as the most effective resident engagement method we presented in this section's key survey question. 46% of school board officials believe hosting community events decreases the negative effects of polarization. This practice is widespread among school districts, with 95% of school board officials indicating their district hosts community events.

A school board member representing a 40,000-resident district in New York shared how district-hosted events can reduce polarization saying, "We have long held multicultural nights, which bring in numerous residents with their children. When adults see how much the kids love each other and how much they have in common, it helps soften their views."

Key Takeaways

Local government officials can employ a combination of the resident engagement methods shown in Figure 4 to reduce polarization in their communities, since all six of these engagement methods proved to be more beneficial than harmful. As a township trustee representing about 100,000 Illinois residents put it, "more community involvement in affairs related to the community has always helped show that we are all in it together, despite our political leanings." Further research could be conducted to identify the conditions under which each resident engagement method yields the most promising results.

Solution 4: Long-term Volunteering

Key Findings

Extended volunteer experiences can lead to enduring perspective changes and improved social cohesion.

- 44% of local government leaders told us that long-term volunteering can reduce polarization.
- However, only 9% of local officials reported the presence of long-term, paid volunteering opportunities in their communities.

Perceived efficacy

Scholars have shown that volunteering opportunities provide natural settings for intergroup contact (Campbell 2024; Levendusky 2023). It follows that extending these volunteer opportunities over time could further bolster intergroup cohesion. To verify this claim, we asked local officials to tell us what they think about the potential of long-term volunteering to reduce polarization (see Key Survey Question 1 below).

Key Survey Question 1

Do you believe that having more long-term opportunities for community service would generally increase or decrease the negative effects of polarization?

- Would strongly increase negative effects of polarization
- Would somewhat increase negative effects of polarization
- Neither increase nor decrease negative effects of polarization
- Would somewhat decrease negative effects of polarization
- Would strongly decrease negative effects of polarization

Local officials are much more likely to believe that long-term volunteering will reduce the impacts of polarization than increase them. 44% of local government officials believe that incorporating long-term volunteering opportunities could "strongly" or "somewhat" decrease the negative effects of polarization. Comparatively, only 10% of local government officials said such volunteering opportunities would "strongly" or "somewhat" increase the negative effects of polarization while 46% believe volunteering has no effect on polarization (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. **Perceived impact of long-term volunteering on the negative effects of local polarization**

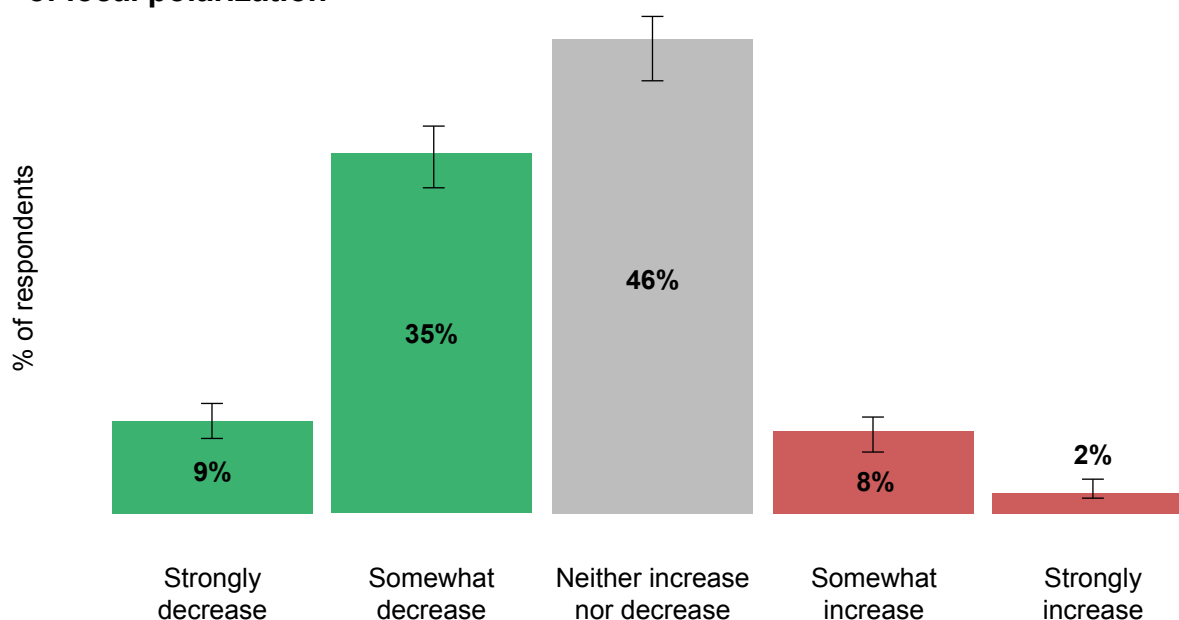Note: Distribution of responses to the question, "Do you believe that having more long-term opportunities for community service would generally increase or decrease the negative effects of polarization?" Data comes from a survey of 1,274 local government officials (municipal/county/township officials = 664, school board officials = 610). Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals and are as follows (from left to right): ±2%, ±2%, ±3%, ±2%, ±1%.

Municipal/township/county officials

40% of municipal/county/township officials believe that long-term volunteering "strongly" or "somewhat" decreases the negative effects of polarization. Comparatively, only 11% of municipal/county/township officials said that long-term volunteering would "strongly" or "somewhat" increase the negative effects of polarization and 49% said such volunteering would "neither increase nor decrease effects."

We also asked local government officials to tell us about all the types of volunteering opportunities that their government facilitates (see Key Survey Question 2 below). Officials representing municipalities, townships, and counties most often mentioned volunteering on a board or commission (62%, see Table 3 for ranked list).

School board officials

50% of school board officials said that long-term volunteering "strongly" or "somewhat" decreases the negative effects of polarization. This shows continued positive support for long-term volunteering as only 9% of school board officials said that long-term volunteering would "strongly" or "somewhat" increase the negative effects of polarization and 41% said it would have no impact.

When asked about the volunteering opportunities their government facilitates (see Key Survey Question below), school board officials were most likely to say that their district offered parent-teacher organizations (32%) or classroom volunteering (32%, see Table 3 for ranked list).

Key Survey Question 2

> If relevant, please provide examples of the types of volunteering opportunities your *local government/school district* facilitates for residents.

Table 3. **Volunteering opportunities most commonly facilitated by local governments**

Rank order	Municipal/county/township officials	School board officials
1	Boards & commissions	Parent-teacher organizations
2	Community events & festivals	Classroom volunteering
3	Parks & recreation	School event support
4	Community clean-up initiatives	Sports programs
5	Social services & community support	Social services & community support
6	Emergency & safety services	Mentoring & tutoring
7	–	Arts & music programs

Note: Most commonly facilitated volunteering categories for municipal/county/township officials and school board officials, respectively. Categories are based on responses to the question, "If relevant, please provide examples of the types of volunteering opportunities your *local government/school district* facilitates for residents." For complete information on the categorization and coding process, see Section A5 of the Appendix. Data comes from a survey of 1,274 local government officials (municipal/county/township officials = 664, school board officials = 610).

Improving volunteer numbers

Although officials show confidence in the efficacy of long-term volunteering, the number of hours each volunteer commits post-pandemic is on the decline. Additionally, overall numbers of volunteers have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels (Schlachter and Marshall 2024). As a board member from a 2,000-resident town in Massachusetts told us, "I don't think there's a general decline in the culture of wanting to contribute, but it's just harder to contribute sometimes." Scholars have shown that individual factors and community context, including but not limited to local and national economic conditions, impact residents' decisions to volunteer (Nesbit et al 2024).

Given that economic factors can dissuade volunteers, offering compensation could boost long-term volunteering. However, only 9% of local government officials reported the presence of any paid, long-term volunteering opportunities in their communities. Furthermore, the opportunities officials mentioned were either national programs that are at risk of defunding, like AmeriCorps (Kavi 2025), or part-time options like commissions (see Table 3) or volunteer firefighting. Those local governments that do compensate part-time, long-term volunteers tend to offer tax reduction, longevity programs, utility assistance, or stipends.

Existing literature indicates that political participation improves when paid, long-term volunteering is full-time. For example, scholars demonstrated that participation in Teach for America increases political ambition among women (Mo et al 2019). Together, our findings and existing scholarship point towards the positive impacts that an expansion of paid, full-time volunteering could have on polarization.

Key takeaways

Implementation of paid, full-time volunteering will likely need large-scale interventions to succeed. While local governments may be unable to fund full-time programs themselves, officials can reach out to funding bodies, like their local community foundation, partner with state or federal agencies, or find creative ways to compensate volunteers.

In the meantime, residents who are interested in engaging in long-term volunteering opportunities—whether paid or unpaid—may eventually find themselves volunteering directly for their local government. As a council member from a 30,000-resident New Jersey municipality put it, "Residents can serve on boards to better understand and help shape the direction of the local government." In fact, many of the local public officials we surveyed serve in a voluntary capacity themselves. In light of this, residents who get involved in community volunteering may ultimately end up leading their own local governments.

Solution 5: Civics Education

Key Findings

Civics classes can provide a pathway for mitigating polarization through increased youth political participation.

- Looking at the subset of the sample that was just school board officials, 38% of respondents think civics classes help with polarization.
- While civics classes are widespread among high schools (84%), they are less widespread among K-8 schools (48%).

Perceived Efficacy

Officials responding to our recurring surveys on threats and harassment have told us that they believe civics classes could help reduce the amount of vitriol that they face. Because of this, we wanted to know whether civics could reduce polarization more generally. Turning to existing scholarship, we learned that scholars believe civics can foster civic engagement. For example, civics classes in K-12 education may increase political participation when those classes incorporate active learning (Willeck and Mendelberg 2022). And despite some focus on civics as a partisan issue, nearly all Republican and Democratic US residents believe that students should learn how their government system works (Saavedra et al 2025).

Although broader understanding of the impacts of civics education exists, little is known about the effects that civics can have on addressing polarization in local communities. To find out, we presented school board officials with a question to gauge how civics classes are impacting local polarization (shown below).

Key Survey Question

Do you believe that civics classes generally increase or decrease the negative effects of polarization in your community?
- Strongly increase negative effects of polarization
- Somewhat increase negative effects of polarization
- Neither increase nor decrease negative effects of polarization
- Somewhat decrease negative effects of polarization
- Strongly decrease negative effects of polarization

School board officials are much more likely to say that civics classes decrease the negative effects of polarization than increase them. School board officials clearly indicated that civics classes do more good than harm. 38% of all school board officials shared that civics classes can "strongly" or "somewhat" decrease polarization while 13% expressed belief that civics classes would "strongly" or "somewhat" increase the negative effects of polarization in their communities and 49% believe civics has no impact on polarization (Figure 6).

Figure 6. **Civics education's impact on the negative effects of local polarization**
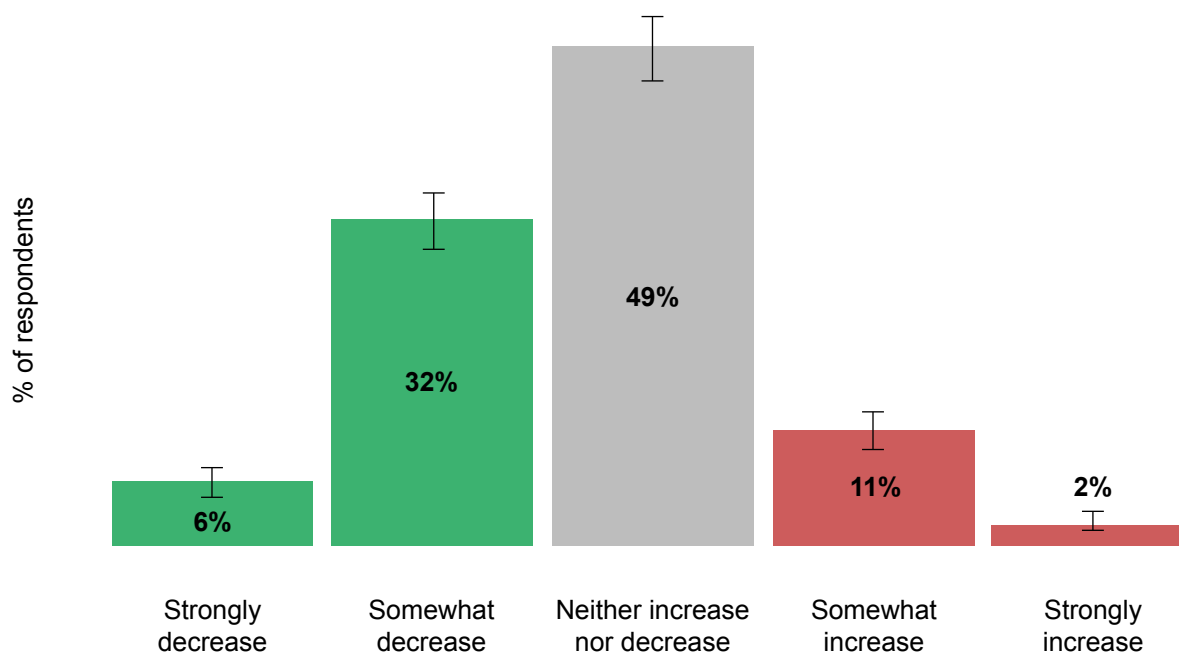

Note: Distribution of responses from school board officials to the question, "Do you believe that civics classes generally increase or decrease the negative effects of polarization in your community?". Data comes from a survey of 1,274 local government officials (municipal/county/township officials = 664, school board officials = 610). Figure shows results for school board officials only. Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals and are as follows (from left to right): ±2%, ±4%, ±5%, ±3%, ±1%.

In response to open-ended survey questions, school board officials told us that civics classes have impacted polarization in their communities by fostering student engagement. A school board president for a 15,000-resident district in New Hampshire stated, "We have had a pretty savvy group of high school students who have come to our meetings and made statements backed by logic and evidence." And in California, a school board member for a 60,000-resident district reported that polarization was affected, "by adding student board members to the board!"

Looking at Figure 6, one might be curious to know how civics classes increase polarization's negative effects. Anecdotal evidence from responses to open-ended questions indicate that civics can exacerbate polarization through increased understanding of government among young residents. As a councilmember for a Massachusetts city of about 100,000 residents told us, "When debate began on banning cell phones in the schools, students who understood the role of local government through civics classes became polarized on this issue."

How civics classes are offered

In general, civics education serves as a somewhat accessible pathway through which school board officials can encourage the reduction of polarization in their communities. 91% of school board officials told us that their district offers civics classes to students in *either* grades K-8 or 9-12. Comparatively, 41% of school board officials said that civics classes are offered to students in *both* K-8 and 9-12.

These lessons can take a variety of formats, but they most commonly appear as embedded components of another course like social studies (77%), followed by stand-alone courses (47%). Although a large percentage of districts have implemented civics courses of some kind, school board officials wishing to support the expansion of civics in their districts may face barriers, such as state regulation of curricula. But civics education can still have beneficial effects on the community when it is offered outside of a structured course setting. Several school board officials responding to open-ended questions told us that civics classes are offered in their district through workshops, field trips, clubs, and projects.

Key takeaways

Getting students engaged with local government through civics education in primary or secondary school can lay the groundwork for them to engage with local government throughout their lives, wherever they may go. Having an understanding of how government works can help students make informed decisions when they partake in civic duties like entering the voting booth, serving in jury duty, attending local government meetings, or even running for office.

Conclusion

Since the 1970s, polarization has emerged as a defining feature of the national American landscape. This report shows that, overall, local communities are shielded from polarization's harshest effects (Figure 2) and that any particular political event may be less likely to influence local polarization than slower-moving social and institutional structures (Figure 1). However, nearly a third of local communities still witness significant impacts of polarization (Figure 1). This is especially true for larger communities (Figure 3).

Through our survey and follow-up interviews, we surfaced five solutions that local leaders can implement to try to reduce the negative impacts of polarization on their communities. Our next report on local polarization will examine if these solutions can be scaled to other local governments, especially those serving larger populations. This could ultimately have implications for the potential of these solutions to be scaled to the state or national level, thereby reducing the negative impacts of polarization on America at large and potentially leading to greater unity.

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Appendix

A1. Background in Academic Literature

Polarization has become a defining feature of American politics at the national and state levels, where it has deepened since the 1970s and increasingly obstructed bipartisan cooperation, legislative productivity, and timely budgeting (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016; Shor and McCarty 2011; Binder 2004; Birkhead 2016; Hicks 2015).

In recent years, scholars have turned their attention to local governments, where the picture is more complex. Research shows that national partisanship increasingly shapes local elections and policymaking (Hopkins 2018; Lee, Landgrave, and Bansak 2023; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020; Gerber and Hopkins 2011), but it remains unclear whether this has led to the same kind of gridlock and division seen at higher levels of government. Many local officials continue to focus on practical, place-based issues that are less subject to polarization (Das et al. 2022), and members of the public may also find more common ground on local matters (Jensen et al. 2021). Our previous report built on this body of research, examining the extent to which polarization is present in local government (CivicPulse 2024).

In this report, we turn to solutions. Scholars have identified a range of strategies that could help reduce polarization and foster cooperation, particularly in environments where partisan divides threaten to undermine collaboration. One promising approach is the implementation of deliberative democracy. This approach emphasizes structured, inclusive dialogue among individuals with differing political views, aiming to promote mutual understanding and collaboration. Research has shown that when citizens engage in deliberative settings, such as citizen assemblies, they are more likely to find common ground and reduce polarization (Anders 2024; Foley 2024; Levendusky and Stecula 2021).

Another category of proposed solutions focuses on changing how policymakers are elected. Electoral reforms, such as ranked-choice voting, encourage candidates to appeal to a wider range of voters, thus diminishing extreme partisan rhetoric (Foley 2024). Proportional representation, which ensures more accurate reflection of diverse political views, has been proposed as a means of countering the dominance of two-party systems (Wegman and Drutman 2025). Additionally, open primaries and other structural reforms can reduce partisan extremism by fostering competition across party lines (Kleinfeld 2023). Evidence from democracies where coalition governance prevails shows that such reforms facilitate collaboration among a range of political perspectives (Horne, Adams, and Gidron 2022).

In addition to structural reforms, cultivating a superordinate identity—focusing on shared values and unity—can also help reduce partisan divides. By emphasizing what unites citizens rather than what divides them, this approach seeks to promote broader solidarity (Kleinfeld 2023; de-Wit, Van Der Linden, and Brick 2019). Research indicates that shared national experiences, such as collective responses to crises, can temporarily reduce partisan divides and foster cooperation (Carlin and Love 2018). Furthermore, priming national or issue-based identities can help strengthen cross-party unity and collaboration (Levendusky 2023).

Finally, research on intergroup contact suggests that positive interactions between individuals from different political or social groups can reduce animosity (Levendusky and Stecula 2021; de-Wit, Van Der Linden, and Brick 2019). Employers, trusted highly by their employees, are well-positioned to facilitate intergroup contact (Bersoff 2024). Structured online platforms for cross-party discussion have been shown to improve understanding and cooperation (Combs et al. 2023). Additionally, volunteering opportunities and community events provide natural settings for intergroup contact (Campbell 2024; Levendusky 2023).

While scholars have increasingly examined how polarization manifests and proposed some solutions, far less attention has been paid to what can be done at the local level. This report fills a critical gap in the literature by highlighting specific strategies that local government officials can adapt to fit their unique communities.

A2. Survey Methodology

Data Collection

Municipal, county, and township 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) and governing board members (e.g., council member, county legislator) serving townships, municipalities, and counties with populations of 1,000 or more. School board officials invited to participate in the survey were drawn randomly from a nationally comprehensive list of all K-12 school board members. The survey was conducted from January 15th to March 9th of 2025 (Q1 2025). Participants were recruited over the course of 5 weeks via email with a link to the online survey. There were 1,274 responses.

Sample Composition

Table A1. Distribution of respondents by role type

Role type	Number of respondents
Municipal/county/township officials	664
School board officials	610
Total	1,274

Table A2. Distribution of respondents by government type

Local government type	Number of respondents
County	106
Municipality/township	558
School district	610
Total	1,274

Sample Representativeness

Table A3. Characteristics of the median jurisdiction represented in survey sample versus sampling frame

Type	Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Number of residents	Proportion of college-educated residents	Proportion of residents who voted for Trump in 2024	Number of residents	Proportion of college-educated residents	Proportion of residents who voted for Trump in 2024
Sample	10,000	0.20	0.54	16,710	0.19	0.55
Sampling Frame	4,610	0.17	0.60	9,110	0.17	0.63

Table A4. Proportion by Census region for survey sample versus sampling frame

Type	Municipal/county/township officials				School board officials			
	Midwest	Northeast	South	West	Midwest	Northeast	South	West
Sample	0.38	0.24	0.23	0.15	0.34	0.29	0.16	0.21
Sampling Frame	0.40	0.25	0.25	0.10	0.36	0.22	0.23	0.19

Weighting

Survey weights are based on a post-stratification raking procedure using Census and presidential vote share variables for the county, municipality, township, or school district. This procedure follows the methodology outlined in DeBell and Krosnick (2009) for the American National Elections Study (ANES).

Census variables include the population of the community and the proportion of the community's population over the age of 25 with a bachelor's degree or higher. These variables come from the 2019-2023 US Census American Community Survey. The presidential vote share variable comes from the *New York Times* 2024 Precinct-Level Election Results and is the proportion of votes for Donald Trump, rolled up to the local government level.

Two survey weights are calculated for each respondent. One weight is calculated for each unique person. Another weight is calculated for each unique local government. If a government exists in the data multiple times, this weight is apportioned across the number of responses associated with that government.

A3. 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 divisions between more liberal and more conservative individuals or groups.

1. In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting our country?
   Response options: 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?
   Response options: Not at all, A little, A moderate amount, A lot, A great deal

3. In your work as a {*local policymaker/school board official*}, to what extent do you strategically select topics in order to transcend political polarization in your community?
   Response options: Never, rarely, sometimes, frequently, always

4. If relevant, please provide an example of a topic you have strategically chosen to transcend political polarization in your community.

5. In your role as a {*local policymaker/school board official*}, to what extent do you strategically frame your ideas or plans in order to transcend political polarization in your community.
   Response options: Never, rarely, sometimes, frequently, always

6. If relevant, please provide an example of how you have strategically framed an idea or plan in order to transcend political polarization in your community.

7. To the best of your knowledge, which of the following groups of students are offered civics classes in your local public school(s)? Check all that apply.
   Response options: K-8 students, 9-12 students

8. In what format are civics classes offered in your local public school(s)? Please select all that apply.
   Response options: Standalone course, Embedded component of another class (e.g., social studies), Workshops, Other (please specify):

9. Do you believe that civics classes generally increase or decrease the negative effects of polarization in your community?
   Response options: Strongly increase negative effects of polarization, Somewhat increase negative effects of polarization, Neither increase nor decrease negative effects of polarization, Somewhat decrease negative effects of polarization, Strongly decrease negative effects of polarization

10. If relevant, please tell us about a time that civics classes affected political polarization in your community.

11. For each of the following public engagement practices, please indicate whether you think it increases or decreases the negative effects of polarization in your community.
    Response options: Strongly increases, Somewhat increases, Neither increases nor decreases, Somewhat decreases, Strongly decreases, Not applicable

    Grid rows:
    - Resident feedback mechanisms (e.g. scorecards, surveys, feedback forms)
    - Participatory budgeting/planning
    - Resident advisory committees or task forces
    - Informal office/coffee hours
    - Townhalls/public meetings
    - Hosting community events

12. If relevant, please tell us about a time that public engagement was effective in reducing the negative effects of polarization in your community.

13. Does your {*local government/school district*} facilitate any opportunities for residents to volunteer in their community?
    Response options: Yes, No, Other (please specify):

14. If relevant, please provide examples of the types of volunteering opportunities your {*local government/school district*} facilitates for residents.

15. Are you aware of any programs offered in your community where individuals receive financial support for making a long-term commitment to community service (e.g., 6 months or more)?
    Response options: Yes, No

16. If relevant, please provide any examples of these community service opportunities.

17. Do you believe that having more long-term opportunities for community service would generally increase or decrease the negative effects of polarization?
    Response options: Would strongly increase negative effects of polarization, Would somewhat increase negative effects of polarization, Neither increase nor decrease negative effects of polarization, Would somewhat decrease negative effects of polarization, Would strongly decrease negative effects of polarization

18. In general, do you think of yourself as:
    Response options: Very conservative; Somewhat conservative; Moderate, middle of the road; Somewhat liberal; Very liberal; Not sure

19. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a…
    Response options: Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other party (please specify):

20. As part of this study, we are interested in conducting follow-up interviews with some respondents to find out more about their experiences. Are you willing to have your survey responses and contact information shared with our interview team? They may or may not contact you regarding a follow-up interview.
    Response options: Yes, I consent., No, I do not consent.

A4. Summary of Survey Results

State of Local Polarization: Spring 2025 Update

Table A5. Perceptions of polarization's negative effects on the country. *"In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting our country?"*

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Not at all	1%	±1%	1%	1%	±1%	1%	1%	±1%
A little	4%	±1%	5%	5%	±2%	3%	4%	±2%
A moderate amount	12%	±2%	11%	11%	±2%	13%	14%	±3%
A lot	30%	±3%	31%	32%	±4%	29%	29%	±4%
A great deal	53%	±3%	52%	51%	±4%	55%	53%	±4%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A6. Perceptions of polarization's negative effects on local communities. *"In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting your local community?"*

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Not at all	7%	±1%	8%	9%	±2%	7%	8%	±2%
A little	28%	±2%	31%	32%	±4%	24%	25%	±3%
A moderate amount	34%	±3%	33%	33%	±4%	35%	34%	±4%
A lot	20%	±2%	16%	16%	±3%	24%	23%	±3%
A great deal	11%	±2%	11%	11%	±2%	10%	10%	±2%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Potential Solutions: Strategic Governance

Table A7. Prevalence of strategic topic selection to transcend polarization. *"In your work as a local {policymaker/school board official}, to what extent do you strategically select topics in order to transcend political polarization in your community?"*

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Never	26%	±3%	24%	24%	±3%	29%	31%	±4%
Rarely	26%	±3%	24%	25%	±3%	27%	28%	±4%
Sometimes	26%	±3%	26%	25%	±3%	26%	25%	±4%
Frequently	17%	±2%	20%	19%	±3%	13%	12%	±3%
Always	5%	±1%	6%	6%	±2%	4%	4%	±2%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A8. Topics most commonly selected to transcend local polarization. *"If relevant, please provide an example of a topic you have strategically chosen to transcend political polarization in your community."*

Rank order	Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Topic	% of respondents	MoE	Topic	% of respondents	MoE
1	**Infrastructure**	13%	±4%	**Student wellbeing & safety**	13%	±5%
2	**Housing**	10%	±4%	**Academic & achievement**	10%	±4%
3	**Public safety**	8%	±4%	**Budget**	6%	±3%
4	**Economic development**	6%	±3%	**Facilities**	5%	±3%
5	**Health & wellness**	5%	±3%	**Extracurricular activities**	4%	±3%
6	**Zoning**	4%	±2%	**Career readiness**	1%	±1%
7	**Public services**	4%	±2%	–	–	–
8	**Parks & recreation**	3%	±2%	–	–	–

Note: Percentage of respondents mentioning examples by topic category for municipal/county/township officials and school board officials, respectively. For complete information on the categorization and coding process, see Section A5 of the Appendix. Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A9. Prevalence of strategic framing of ideas or plans to transcend polarization.
"In your role as a {local policymaker/school board official}, to what extent do you strategically frame your ideas or plans in order to transcend political polarization in your community?"

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Never	23%	±2%	20%	22%	±3%	26%	28%	±4%
Rarely	21%	±2%	20%	20%	±3%	22%	22%	±4%
Sometimes	27%	±3%	25%	24%	±4%	29%	28%	±4%
Frequently	20%	±2%	22%	22%	±3%	16%	16%	±3%
Always	10%	±2%	13%	12%	±3%	7%	6%	±2%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A10. Framing strategies most commonly used to transcend local polarization. *"If relevant, please provide an example of how you have strategically framed an idea or plan in order to transcend political polarization in your community."*

Framing strategy	Overall			Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Rank order	% of respondents	MoE	Rank order	% of respondents	MoE	Rank order	% of respondents	MoE
Community benefits	1	22%	±4%	1	18%	±5%	1	26%	±5%
Outcomes-focused	2	7%	±2%	4	5%	±3%	2	10%	±4%
Neutral language	3	6%	±2%	3	6%	±3%	3	7%	±3%
Evidence-based	4	6%	±2%	2	7%	±3%	4	5%	±3%

Note: Percentage of respondents mentioning examples by framing category overall and for municipal/county/township officials and school board officials, respectively. For complete information on the categorization and coding process, see Section A5 of the Appendix. Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Potential Solutions: Community Interventions

Table A11–A17 show grid row responses to the following question *"For each of the following public engagement practices, please indicate whether you think it increases or decreases the negative effects of polarization in your community."*

Table A11. Perceived effects of hosting community events.

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Strongly increases	2%	±1%	3%	3%	±2%	1%	1%	±1%
Somewhat increases	11%	±2%	12%	12%	±3%	9%	9%	±3%
Neither increases nor decreases	41%	±3%	38%	40%	±4%	43%	46%	±5%
Somewhat decreases	32%	±3%	31%	29%	±4%	34%	31%	±6%
Strongly decreases	14%	±2%	16%	15%	±3%	12%	12%	±3%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A12. Perceived effects of informal office/coffee hours.

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Strongly increases	2%	±1%	2%	3%	±1%	2%	2%	±1%
Somewhat increases	7%	±2%	8%	9%	±3%	6%	7%	±2%
Neither increases nor decreases	47%	±3%	43%	45%	±5%	52%	54%	±5%
Somewhat decreases	33%	±3%	36%	34%	±4%	31%	29%	±5%
Strongly decreases	10%	±2%	10%	10%	±3%	9%	8%	±3%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A13. Perceived effects of resident advisory committees or task forces.

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Strongly increases	3%	±1%	3%	3%	±2%	3%	2%	±2%
Somewhat increases	15%	±2%	17%	17%	±3%	12%	13%	±3%
Neither increases nor decreases	44%	±3%	44%	46%	±5%	45%	48%	±5%
Somewhat decreases	30%	±3%	28%	27%	±4%	32%	29%	±5%
Strongly decreases	8%	±2%	8%	8%	±3%	7%	7%	±3%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A14. Perceived effects of townhalls/public meetings.

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Strongly increases	7%	±2%	7%	7%	±2%	6%	6%	±2%
Somewhat increases	22%	±3%	21%	21%	±4%	22%	22%	±4%
Neither increases nor decreases	39%	±3%	40%	41%	±4%	37%	39%	±5%
Somewhat decreases	26%	±3%	24%	23%	±4%	29%	27%	±4%
Strongly decreases	7%	±2%	8%	8%	±2%	6%	5%	±2%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A15. Perceived effects of resident feedback mechanisms.

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Strongly increases	4%	±1%	5%	6%	±2%	3%	3%	±2%
Somewhat increases	17%	±2%	18%	17%	±3%	16%	16%	±4%
Neither increases nor decreases	50%	±3%	49%	50%	±5%	50%	53%	±5%
Somewhat decreases	23%	±3%	22%	21%	±4%	24%	22%	±4%
Strongly decreases	6%	±2%	6%	6%	±2%	6%	6%	±2%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A16. Perceived effects of participatory budgeting/planning.

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Strongly increases	5%	±1%	6%	6%	±2%	3%	4%	±2%
Somewhat increases	15%	±2%	18%	18%	±3%	12%	12%	±3%
Neither increases nor decreases	52%	±3%	48%	50%	±4%	56%	58%	±5%
Somewhat decreases	22%	±3%	21%	20%	±4%	23%	21%	±4%
Strongly decreases	6%	±2%	6%	6%	±2%	6%	6%	±2%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A17. Public engagement practices considered not applicable.

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Hosting community events	6%	±2%	8%	8%	±2%	5%	5%	±2%
Informal office/ coffee hours	16%	±2%	17%	17%	±3%	14%	15%	±3%
Resident advisory committees or task forces	13%	±2%	14%	14%	±3%	12%	13%	±3%
Townhalls/ public meetings	4%	±1%	5%	5%	±2%	4%	4%	±2%
Resident feedback mechanisms	11%	±2%	15%	15%	±3%	6%	7%	±2%
Participatory budgeting/planning	7%	±2%	7%	7%	±2%	6%	6%	±2%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A18. Prevalence of local volunteering opportunities. *"Does your local {government/ school district} facilitate any opportunities for residents to volunteer in their community?"*

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Yes	84%	±2%	83%	81%	±3%	85%	83%	±3%
No	13%	±2%	13%	16%	±3%	12%	12%	±3%
Other	4%	±1%	3%	3%	±2%	4%	4%	±2%

Note: Weights are calculated for each unique local government. Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A19. Prevalence of paid long-term community service opportunities. *"Are you aware of any programs offered in your community where individuals receive financial support for making a long-term commitment to community service (e.g., 6 months or more)?"*

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Yes	9%	±2%	11%	11%	±3%	7%	7%	±2%
No	91%	±2%	89%	89%	±3%	93%	93%	±2%

Note: Weights are calculated for each unique local government. Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A20. Volunteering opportunities most commonly facilitated by local governments. *"If relevant, please provide examples of the types of volunteering opportunities your local {government/school district} facilitates for residents."*

Rank order	Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Volunteering opportunity	% of respondents	MoE	Volunteering opportunity	% of respondents	MoE
1	**Boards & commissions**	62%	±6%	**Parent-teacher organizations**	32%	±7%
2	**Community events & festivals**	20%	±5%	**Classroom volunteering**	32%	±7%
3	**Parks & recreation**	17%	±4%	**School event support**	24%	±6%
4	**Community clean-up initiatives**	14%	±4%	**Sports programs**	19%	±6%
5	**Social services & community support**	12%	±4%	**Social services & community support**	18%	±6%
6	**Emergency & safety services**	7%	±3%	**Mentoring & tutoring**	16%	±5%
7	**–**	–	–	**Arts & music programs**	5%	±3%

Note: Percentage of respondents mentioning examples by volunteering category for municipal/county/township officials and school board officials, respectively. For complete information on the categorization and coding process, see Section A5 of the Appendix. Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A21. Perceived effects of long-term community service opportunities. *"Do you believe that having more long-term opportunities for community service would generally increase or decrease the negative effects of polarization?"*

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Would strongly increase negative effects	2%	±1%	2%	2%	±1%	3%	3%	±2%
Would somewhat increase negative effects	8%	±2%	9%	9%	±2%	6%	6%	±2%
Neither increase nor decrease effects	46%	±3%	50%	51%	±4%	41%	43%	±5%
Would somewhat decrease negative effects	35%	±3%	33%	32%	±4%	38%	37%	±5%
Would strongly decrease negative effects	9%	±2%	7%	6%	±2%	11%	11%	±3%

<u>Note</u>: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A22. Prevalence of civics classes. *"To the best of your knowledge, which of the following groups of students are offered civics classes in your local public school(s)? Check all that apply."*

Response option	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
K–8 students	48%	47%	±4%
9–12 students	84%	82%	±3%

<u>Note</u>: Distribution of responses for school board officials only. Data comes from a survey of 1,274 local government officials (municipal/county/township officials = 664, school board officials = 610). Weights are calculated for each unique local government. Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A23. Formats of civics classes offered. *"In what format are civics classes offered in your local public school(s)? Please select all that apply."*

Response option	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Standalone course	48%	46%	±5%
Embedded component of another class	80%	79%	±4%
Workshops	4%	5%	±2%
Other	6%	5%	±2%

Note: Distribution of responses for school board officials only. Data comes from a survey of 1,274 local government officials (municipal/county/township officials = 664, school board officials = 610). Weights are calculated for each unique local government. Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A24. Perceived effects of civics classes. *"Do you believe that civics classes generally increase or decrease the negative effects of polarization in your community?"*

Response option	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Strongly increase negative effects	2%	2%	±1%
Somewhat increase negative effects	11%	11%	±3%
Neither increase nor decrease effects	49%	51%	±5%
Somewhat decrease negative effects	32%	31%	±4%
Strongly decrease negative effects	6%	5%	±2%

Note: Distribution of responses for school board officials only. Data comes from a survey of 1,274 local government officials (municipal/county/township officials = 664, school board officials = 610). Weights are calculated for each unique local government. Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Demographics

Table A25. Political ideology of respondents. *"In general, do you think of yourself as..."*

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Very conservative	12%	±2%	13%	15%	±3%	11%	12%	±3%
Somewhat conservative	23%	±3%	23%	24%	±4%	23%	24%	±4%
Moderate, middle of the road	27%	±3%	27%	28%	±4%	27%	27%	±4%
Somewhat liberal	22%	±3%	22%	20%	±4%	22%	22%	±4%
Very liberal	15%	±2%	13%	12%	±3%	17%	14%	±3%
Not sure	1%	±1%	1%	1%	±1%	1%	1%	±1%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

Table A26. Political party affiliation of respondents. *"Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a…"*

Response option	Overall		Municipal/county/township officials			School board officials		
	Unweighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE	Unweighted %	Weighted %	MoE
Democrat	37%	±3%	37%	34%	±4%	37%	35%	±5%
Republican	33%	±3%	35%	37%	±4%	30%	33%	±4%
Independent	26%	±3%	25%	26%	±4%	27%	27%	±4%
Other party	4%	±1%	3%	3%	±2%	5%	5%	±2%

Note: Margins of error are based on 95% confidence intervals.

A5. Additional Methodologies

Open-ended Coding Methodology

To analyze open-ended responses from our survey, we developed a structured, manual coding process aimed at identifying common themes and strategies. Across three types of solutions, members of the research team reviewed written responses and applied predefined category codes based on detailed guidelines and definitions.

To inform the development of these categories, we used a large language model (Claude) to assist with identifying recurring themes across responses. These AI-generated suggestions were then reviewed and refined by the research team before being finalized for use in the manual coding process.

For each analysis, coders were provided with respondents' answers to one or more open-ended survey questions. Coders were instructed to read the relevant text fields carefully and apply a '1' to all applicable categories based on the definitions provided. If a category clearly did not apply—or if the respondent explicitly said the strategy or topic was ineffective, avoided, or irrelevant—it was marked as '0'.

Each set of open-ended responses was coded using tailored category definitions appropriate to the specific solution type. Responses could be assigned to multiple categories, where appropriate. Coders focused on the primary question most relevant to the solution type of each analysis while also reviewing secondary open-ended responses for added context or in case the respondent addressed the primary question in a different field.

Below are the primary and secondary questions analysed, the number of responses analysed, and category definitions for each manually coded solution type.

Strategic Topic Selection

Primary question:

- "If relevant, please provide an example of a topic you have strategically chosen to transcend political polarization in your community."

Secondary question:

- "If relevant, please provide an example of how you have strategically framed an idea or plan in order to transcend political polarization in your community."

Table A27. Strategic topic selection responses by respondent type.

Respondent type	# of respondents who answered a primary or secondary question	# of respondents matching at least 1 category
Municipal/county/township officials	236	87
School board officials	199	51
Overall	435	138

Table A28. Topic categories and definitions for municipal/county/township officials.

Category	Definition
Infrastructure	roads, highways, water, sewer, public works, streets, bridges, sidewalks, utilities, transportation infrastructure
Housing	housing affordability, homelessness, residential development, rental issues, home ownership
Public safety	policing, fire services, emergency response, crime prevention, first responders
Economic development	business growth, attracting new businesses, commerce, downtown or main street revitalization, job creation, economic stability
Health & wellness	public health, healthcare access, mental health services, clinics, wellness initiatives
Zoning	zoning, land use, smart growth, managed growth
Public services	social services, senior programs, youth support, family services, child welfare, transportation services
Parks & recreation	parks, recreational spaces, community centers, playgrounds, trails, green spaces

Table A29. Topic categories and definitions for school board officials.

Category	Definition
Student wellbeing & safety	mental health, social-emotional support, counselling, overall student welfare, school security, resource officers, emergency preparedness, student protection
Academics & achievement	academic performance, test scores, literacy, student success, core educational subjects such as reading, writing, math, science
Budget	school funding, financial resources, tax levies, bonds, budget allocations
Facilities	school infrastructure, renovations, construction projects, maintenance
Extracurricular activities	after-school programs, sports, athletics, clubs, music, arts, enrichment opportunities
Career readiness	vocational training, workforce preparation, job skills, technical certifications

Strategic Framing

Primary question:

- "If relevant, please provide an example of how you have strategically framed an idea or plan in order to transcend political polarization in your community."

Secondary question:

- "If relevant, please provide an example of a topic you have strategically chosen to transcend political polarization in your community."
- "If relevant, please tell us about a time you or a colleague did something to help reduce any negative effects of political polarization on board operations."
- "If relevant, please tell us about any procedures or norms your board has that prevent or reduce any negative effects of political polarization."

Table A30. Strategic framing responses by respondent type.

Respondent type	# of respondents who answered a primary or secondary question	# of respondents matching at least 1 category
Municipal/county/township officials	278	89
School board officials	248	103
Overall	529	192

Table A31. Strategic framing categories and definitions.

Category	Definition
Community benefits	This strategy involves explicitly articulating how proposals, decisions, and initiatives serve the community's interests. Leaders frame issues in terms of shared values, common goals, and collective wellbeing, highlighting how actions benefit residents or students
Neutral language	This strategy involves consciously selecting terminology and framing that avoids triggering partisan associations or ideological reactions. Leaders use language that emphasizes shared values and universal principles while deliberately avoiding politically charged terms, partisan labels, or divisive rhetoric.
Evidence-based	This strategy centers discussions around objective data, research findings, and verifiable facts. Leaders explicitly ground their arguments in evidence, using empirical information to build a shared understanding of issues.
Outcomes-focused	This strategy emphasizes concrete results, practical applications, and tangible improvements. Leaders focus discourse on specific goals, measurable outcomes, and effective solutions that deliver observable benefits, directing attention toward what works.

Volunteering

Primary question:

- "If relevant, please provide examples of the types of volunteering opportunities your school district/local government facilitates for residents."

Secondary question:

- "If relevant, please provide any examples of these community service opportunities."

Table A32. Volunteering responses by respondent type.

Respondent type	# of respondents who answered a primary or secondary question	# of respondents matching at least 1 category
Municipal/county/township officials	278	251
School board officials	182	148
Overall	460	399

Table A33. Volunteering categories and definitions for municipal/county/township officials.

Category	Definition
Boards & commissions	Serving on formal boards, committees, and advisory bodies that inform local government decisions.
Parks & recreation	Volunteering related to public parks, recreational facilities, and outdoor spaces.
Community clean-up initiatives	Organized efforts to clean and beautify public spaces and neighborhoods.
Community events & festivals	Supporting public events, celebrations, and gatherings that enhance community cohesion.
Social services & community support	Providing assistance to vulnerable populations through food banks, shelters, youth/senior programs, and other community support services.
Emergency & safety services	Volunteering with fire departments, emergency services, police auxiliaries, and safety-related programs.

Table A34. Volunteering categories and definitions for school board officials.

Category	Definition
Parent-teacher organizations	Involvement in formal parent-school or parent-district partnership organizations that support school activities.
Classroom volunteering	Direct assistance in classrooms, helping with student learning and in-class activities.
School event support	Assistance with special events, field trips, and other school functions.
Arts & music programs	Supporting school arts, music, theater, and creative activities.
Mentoring & tutoring	One-on-one or small group academic support outside of regular classroom instruction.
Social services & community support	Providing assistance to vulnerable populations through food banks, shelters, youth/senior programs, and other community support services.
Sports programs	Supporting school athletics through coaching, booster clubs, and event assistance.

Interview Methodology

At the end of the survey, we asked participants if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. We then reviewed the open-ended survey responses of officials who agreed to a follow-up interview to (a) identify if their responses garnered further discussion and (b) what solutions would be best to discuss during the interview. Additionally, we ensured that the final 10 interviewees represented a range of political beliefs, community sizes, and role types.

Interviews were held between February 7 and March 3, 2025. These one-hour interviews were conducted via Zoom and were recorded and transcribed using Zoom's automated transcription feature. CivicPulse research staff wrote internal interview summaries to identify key themes discussed.

The interviews were semi-structured and began with an initial question aimed at better understanding the officials' response that we were most interested in hearing more about. The conversation then evolved, often without us covering the other open-ended questions we had identified for potential discussion. At the end of each interview, we asked officials if they had anything else they wanted to tell us about.