

# RESEARCH BRIEF

on America's Cities

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## Municipal Officials' Views on Public Engagement City Hall, the Public, the Media and Community Groups

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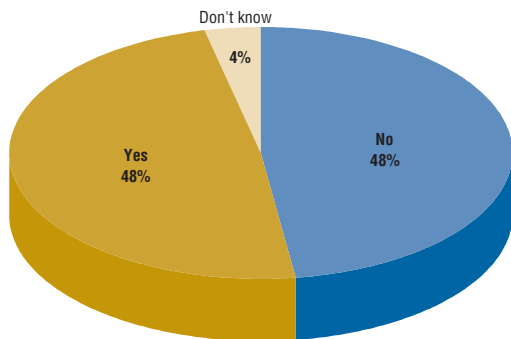
This Research Brief is the second reporting the findings of a survey of municipal officials conducted by NLC in the summer of 2009. Local officials think that many individuals and groups are responsible for contributing to and participating in democratic decision making. City officials seek more and better support from these various stakeholders to enhance public involvement.

This brief outlines local officials' assessments of the contributions and skills of city hall and municipal officials, the public, the media, community institutions and special interest groups in public engagement processes and proactive efforts to deliberate issues and help solve problems in their communities.

### CITY HALL AND MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS

Municipal officials believe that there are important rewards and benefits to public engagement, such as developing a stronger sense of community, building trust between the public and city hall and finding better solutions to local problems.

The previous brief, *Municipal Officials' Views on Public Engagement*, reported that city officials report a wide range and variety of local efforts for public engagement, such as city hall websites, town hall meetings, neighborhood governance structures and interactive online forums. Many municipal officials report that their cities have budgets for staff and funding set aside for public engagement.



**Figure 1:** Do most elected and appointed officials in your city have the skills, training, and experience they need in order to do effective deliberative public engagement?

The survey asked municipal officials to rate the amount of importance they place on a list of factors in contributing to the effectiveness of public engagement activities and processes. The highest rated factors are civil discussion (78%); public receives useful, balanced information about the subject (76%); and people who can answer questions are in the room (73%).

Seven in 10 (72%) respondents are satisfied with the level and nature of public engagement in their city. While nearly all (95%) city officials value civic engagement processes either largely (57%) or somewhat (38%), only one in two (49%) report that they have the skills, training, and experience necessary to facilitate effective deliberative public engagement (see Figure 1).

Municipal officials report improvement over time in their participation in deliberative engagement processes (49%) as well as the participation by the public (32%).

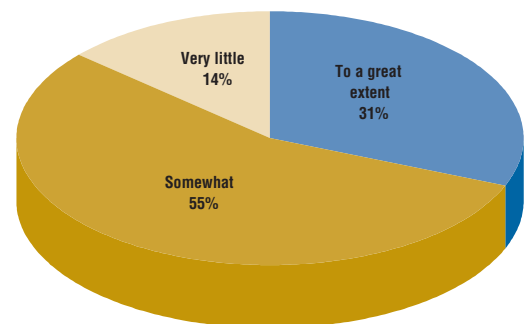
### THE PUBLIC

City officials express clear views about the public and their participation in the civic engagement process.

Eighty-six percent report that these processes are valued by the city's residents either largely (31%) or somewhat (55%) (see Figure 2).

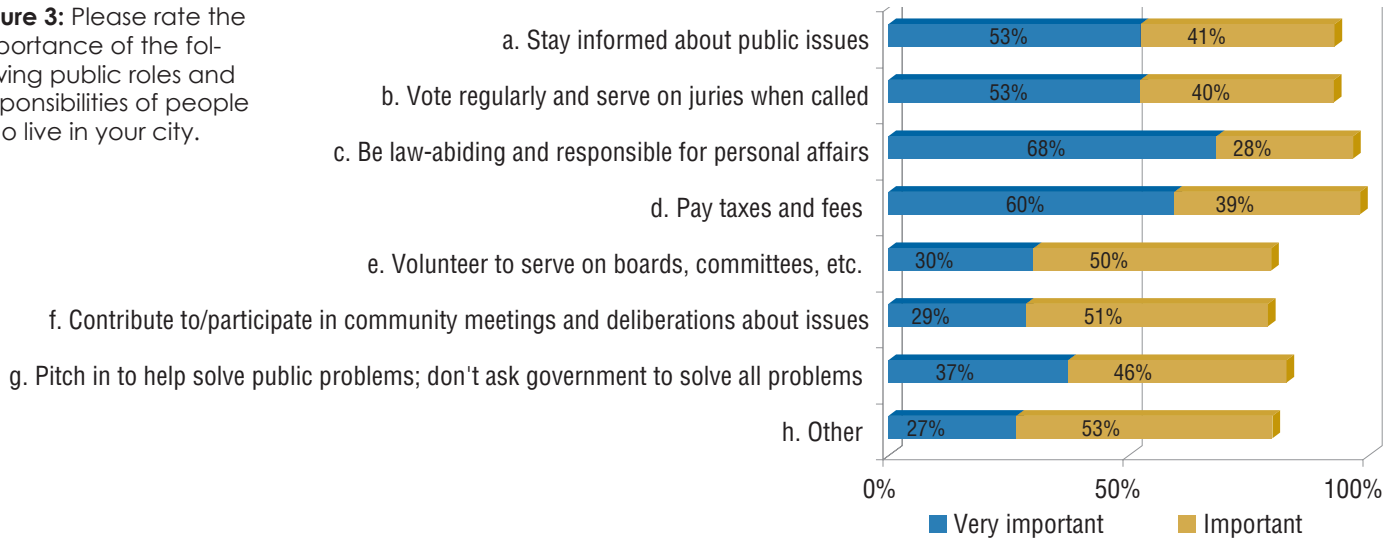
Nearly seven in 10 (69%) local officials report that most people really care about the whole community and are willing to help solve local problems.

There is a strong level of agreement among municipal officials as to which roles and responsibilities are important for the public to participate in to help solve problems (see Figure 3).



**Figure 2:** To what extent are these [public engagement] processes valued by the city's residents?

**Figure 3:** Please rate the importance of the following public roles and responsibilities of people who live in your city.



- Nine in 10 municipal officials report that it is important for the public to stay informed about public issues (53% very important and 41% important).
- Eight in 10 officials believe that it is important for the public to volunteer to serve on boards, committees, etc. (30% very important and 50% important).
- Eighty percent of the respondents expect the public to contribute to and participate in community meetings and deliberations about issues (29% very important and 51% important).

However, additional findings support the view from city officials that the public is not helpful and does not participate in civic engagement processes unless an issue affects them individually. Eight in 10 (81%) respondents agree that the public engagement process typically attracts mostly the same people who complain or promote their favorite solutions. Seven in 10 (69%) think public apathy is a major obstacle to city officials doing a better job with public engagement.

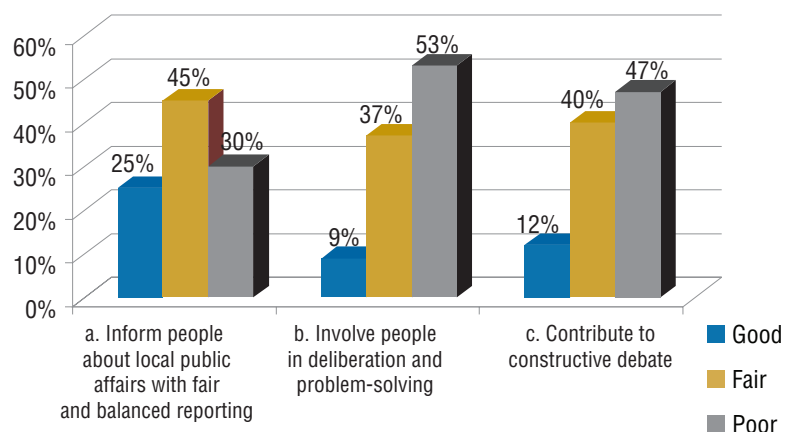
There are several ways that city officials think participation with the public could be improved.

- Sixty-eight percent of municipal officials think that the public could do a better job of making constructive use of participation opportunities.
- Forty-five percent of municipal officials believe that residents need more training so that they can develop the skills and knowledge to participate effectively in civic engagement deliberations.
- Forty-five percent say that City Hall needs to make participation opportunities more readily available and accessible.

## MEDIA, COMMUNITY & CIVIC GROUPS & SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

Municipal officials were asked about their views of how well the media, community groups, and institutions contribute to the local culture and climate of public engagement. It is their opinion that these community partners for public engagement efforts are not performing very well.

- Thirty-nine percent report that the media is an obstacle to greater levels of public engagement.
- Only 25 percent rate the media as being good at informing people and local public affairs with fair and balanced reporting.
- Less than 10 percent think that the media involves people in deliberation and problem solving.
- Forty-seven percent find the media to be poor contributors to constructive public debate (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** Please rate how the local media overall contribute to the local culture of public engagement.

Special interest groups also receive high negative ratings from officials when asked about their contribution to the local culture of public engagement (see Figure 5).

- Nearly two in five (39%) rate special interest groups as poor at informing people about local public affairs with fair and balanced reporting.
- About one in three (34%) city officials believe that special interest groups do a poor job of involving people in deliberation and problem solving.
- Only 7 percent of municipal officials rate special interest groups as good contributors to constructive public debate.

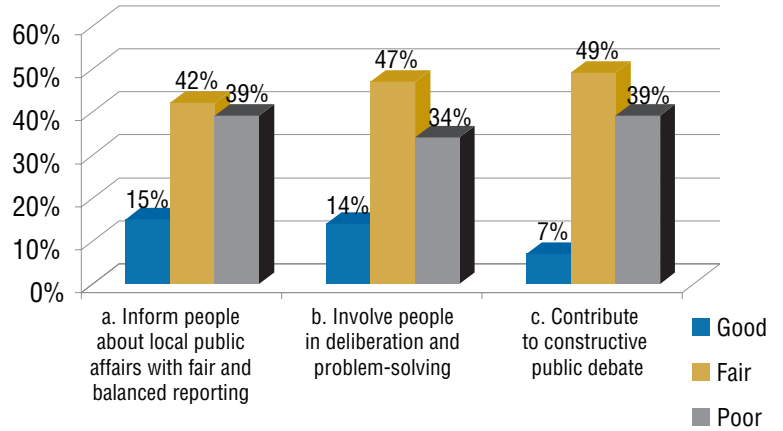


Figure 5: Please rate how **special interest groups** overall contribute to the local culture of public engagement.

Community and civic groups are viewed more favorably by city officials for their overall contribution to public engagement. They receive a fair rating more than 50 percent of the time when asked if these groups inform people about local public affairs with fair and balanced reporting (52% Fair), involve people in deliberation and problem solving (57% Fair) and contribute to constructive public debate (58% Fair) (see Figure 6).

City officials alone cannot promote and ensure civic engagement. It takes a broad range of groups and individuals to organize and sustain these efforts. City officials seek a better understanding about the public and their roles in participating in the deliberative process. They believe that they are not being adequately assisted by community partners with deliberation and problem solving with the public, and they want groups to contribute time and effort toward solving problems. In their view, outcomes will be improved with more training for local government officials and residents.

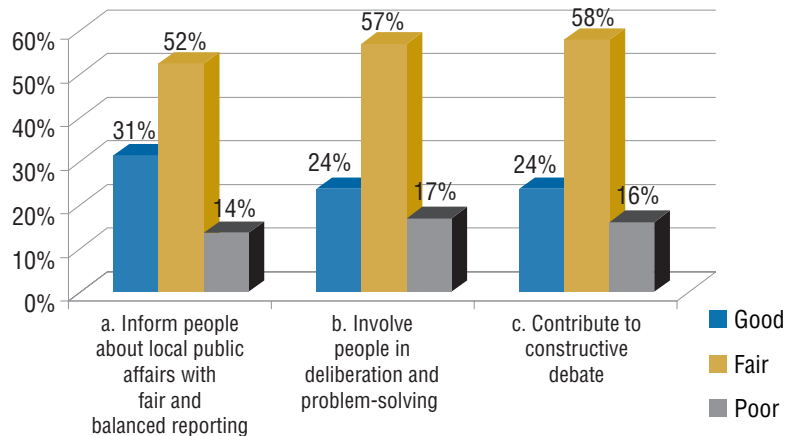


Figure 6: Please rate how **community and civic groups** overall contribute to the local culture of public engagement.

## ABOUT THE SURVEY

This State of America’s Cities survey was sent to a random sample of municipal officials, both elected and appointed, in 1,748 cities across the nation in June 2009. Results are drawn from 313 responses for a responses rate of 18 percent. With this response rate, it can be expected with a 95 percent degree of confidence (i.e., in 95 out of 100 random sample surveys) that the answers to the survey questions would be within 5 percentage points, plus or minus. Thus, in reading the findings, differences of 10 percentage points are needed to identify significant differences. Response rates by population size are provided below.

POPULATION	NUMBER OF SURVEYS SENT	NUMBER RETURNED	RESPONSE RATE
>300,000	47	10	21%
100,000 – 299,999	141	33	23%
50,000 – 99,999	278	52	19%
25,000 – 49,999	486	92	19%
<25,000	796	126	16%

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Bonnie Mann is project manager of democratic governance at the National League of Cities, and William Barnes is director for emerging issues at the National League of Cities.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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### About the National League of Cities

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The National League of Cities is the nation's oldest and largest organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. NLC is a resource and advocate for 19,000 cities and towns representing more than 218 million Americans.

Through its Center for Research and Innovation, NLC provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities, creative solutions to improve the quality of life in communities, inspiration and ideas for local officials to use in tackling tough issues and opportunities for city leaders to connect with peers, share experiences and learn about innovative approaches in cities.