Public Engagement in California
Escaping the Vicious Cycle

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California faces a serious problem in the ever-intensifying mistrust that has sprung up between its citizens and its elected leaders. In this essay we discuss a potential remedy involving a new role for civic leaders. In the new model, civic leaders would act as intermediaries between elected officials and the unorganized public. We conclude with a case study of a community where this model has been implemented with some promising results.

A Downward Spiral

In recent years, the average Californian's dissatisfaction with the state's system of governance has intensified to an unprecedented level. The last decade has witnessed severe strains and spectacular breakdowns in the state's energy resources, county bankruptcies and pension fund mismanagement, and the largest budget shortfall in our state's history. The result has been an explosion of citizen anger and mistrust, culminating in the unprecedented recall of a sitting governor.

In 2004 our firm, Viewpoint Learning, with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the James Irvine Foundation, undertook a statewide research project designed to give state and local leaders deeper insight into how to navigate these unsettled waters. By probing the views, values, and underlying assumptions of typical Californians on some of the key issues facing the state, we looked for practical ways to build the public support needed to effectively address important fiscal and policy challenges, and to improve the relationship between citizens and state and local government.

To gain insight into citizen thinking, we conducted a series of intense, daylong dialogues with more than five hundred Californians across the state. They focused on the California that participants want to see for themselves and their children: the kind of services they expect from state and local governments and the choices, tradeoffs, and costs they are prepared to support to achieve those ends.

Interestingly, our research showed that, in spite of all the energy and enthusiasm for change generated by the 2003 recall, citizens' mistrust and alienation are growing more powerful, not less. A scant 12 percent of participants said that they trusted state government to do what was right "most of the time," and they voiced deep and abiding skepticism that elected officials were out to do anything but advance their own interests.

Mistrust and alienation are by no means limited to California. The recent spate of corporate scandals (Enron, WorldCom, HealthSouth, Marsh and McLennan, and others), alleged government malfeasance, and suspected wrongdoing on the part of trusted civil society organizations (the Red Cross, the Catholic Church) have produced a major upwelling of mistrust on a national scale. In fact, this is the third such episode of nationwide mistrust we have seen in the last century. The first coincided with the Great Depression, the second with the Vietnam War and Watergate in the 1960s and 1970s. The earlier waves lasted about a decade; we don't know how long this third wave of mistrust will last.

Though mistrust is widespread throughout the nation, California is unique in that it has mechanisms allowing citizens to act on these feelings in a potent, even earsplitting way. These mechanisms, notably the ballot initiative and the recall, were designed to ensure that ordinary citizens had access to the political process, but in the current climate they have been appropriated instead as instruments of citizen revenge. Every election of

the last twenty years has been rife with examples of Californians supporting measures or initiatives they think will "send a message" to governments and politicians. These messages are usually not subtle—"Lower my taxes!" "Stop wasting my money!" "Do something about illegal immigration!" "Get rid of 'professional politicians'!"—and they are all too often passed with little regard for public policy repercussions.

The people of California and their governments appear to be trapped in a vicious downward spiral, in which the deepening mistrust between citizens and their government sparks a cascade of negative consequences. This downward spiral is illustrated in Figure 1.

Corrosive mistrust is driving citizens and leaders ever farther apart. What citizens want from their leaders is practical solutions to practical problems of housing, schools, jobs, transportation, and land use, to name a few. Our research shows that this strain of pragmatism is one of the most powerful citizen values: when considering a proposal, their first question is not "Does this fit with my political framework?" but "Will this work?" Many Californians have strongly held political beliefs, but they are far more interested in finding workable solutions than in adhering to a particular ideology.
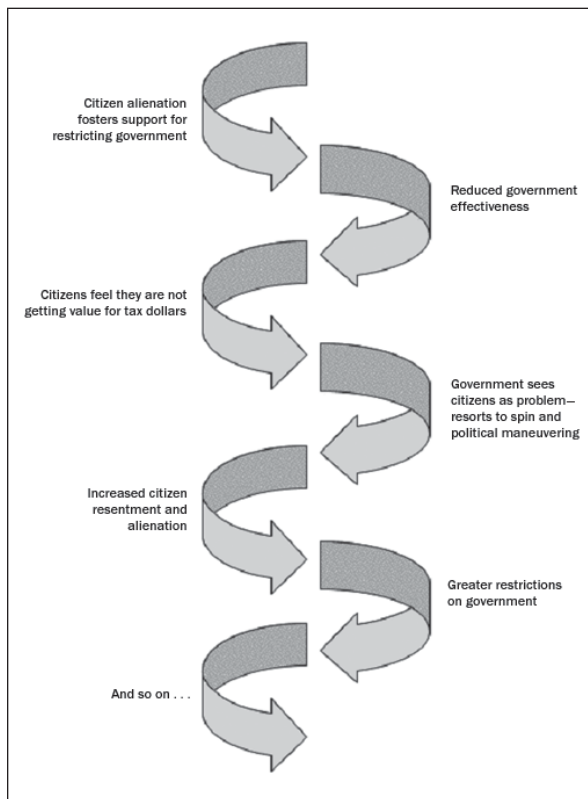
One powerful case in point that emerged from our research was citizens' attitudes toward reforming K–12 education. In our dialogues, we asked participants whether they preferred market-based mechanisms (such as increasing parental choice and vouchers) or community and government-based solutions (such as investing more in neighborhood schools). We found that participants consistently reframed the alternatives into a sequence of steps or priorities that cut across ideological lines: (1) first, do everything possible to improve neighborhood schools; (2) then, to the degree that this action isn't successful, allow parents to move their children within the public system; and (3) then, to the degree

the first two steps don't work, consider allowing parents to move their children outside the public system using vouchers.

Elected officials are guided by a very different concept of pragmatism. For an elected official, a pragmatic solution is one that gets legislation passed. Accordingly, political leaders focus their attention on the deal making and horse trading that allows them to get this done. From this perspective, leaders concentrate on interest groups and organizations that can best help them advance their agendas. In this process, the solution-oriented pragmatism of the public disappears from view.

These divergent conceptions of pragmatism have created a blind spot on the part of many leaders: a conviction that the public, uninformed and

Figure 1. The Downward Spiral of Mistrust

Citizen alienation fosters support for restricting government

Reduced government effectiveness

Citizens feel they are not getting value for tax dollars

Government sees citizens as problem—resorts to spin and political maneuvering

Increased citizen resentment and alienation

Greater restrictions on government

And so on . . .

inchoate, has little of substance to offer the policy-making process. The messages that reach leaders often seem to be wildly unrealistic. When citizens call for better schools, improved transportation, and better public services but insist that they can be paid for entirely by eliminating waste, inefficiency, and abuse, leaders versed in political and budgetary realities tend to throw up their hands. Citizens, they conclude, want it all but are unwilling to pay for it; the temptation grows to disregard the public's input altogether. When public meetings degenerate into venting, incoherent demands—the "usual suspects" singing their usual arias, and there seems no opportunity for learning or dialogue—leaders understandably prefer to avoid them in search of more fruitful use of their time.

As leaders grow less able to hear and understand the public's perspective, the vacuum is filled by groups representing the "organized" public: advocacy and interest groups. They have the advantage of speaking the same language as political leaders, and they share the same legislation-oriented version of pragmatism. Such organizations often do an admirable job of ensuring that decision makers hear and heed the interests of those they represent. But by definition, they represent only a narrow aspect of the general public interest; they do not and cannot represent the unorganized public (and most of the public falls into this category).

Worse, the increasing centrality of advocacy and interest groups in the workings of governance confirms citizens' sense that the political process is designed to exclude them. Californians see themselves as isolated from policy making, with experts and special interests apparently running the show. When they look at how decisions are made in the state, citizens do not see a pragmatic series of deals and negotiations aimed at getting solutions implemented. Instead they see a back-room, black-box approach to decision making, in which decisions affecting their lives are made in a context that lacks visibility, clarity, and accountability. Deals on issues

from electricity deregulation to insurance reform seem to be made through some half-hidden process of negotiation among interest groups and politicians to which voters are not privy. Advocates and interest groups seem to enjoy access and influence completely out of citizens' reach, while ordinary Californians cannot make themselves heard. In an era that highly values citizen engagement, California's citizens feel themselves voiceless, unable to have their views, values, and desires count in any meaningful way.

Such a sense of disenfranchisement intensifies mistrust, and with it Californians become less and less willing to give their leaders the benefit of the doubt. Actions and policies that might have been seen as unexceptional in less contentious times now only

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confirm citizens' worst suspicions. (Gray Davis's ill-fated attempt to raise the state's vehicle license fee is a case in point.) Citizens construe the hallway deal making that characterizes the legislative process as evidence of political self-interest at the expense of the best interests of the state and its residents.

The result has been a dialogue of the deaf between citizens and their governments. With each twist of the spiral, governing elites retreat further into the narrow framework of the governance game, focusing their attention on other policy makers, special interests, and insiders. With each turn of the spiral, citizens feel themselves more excluded from a system operated by others with hidden agendas. They become more alienated, cynical, reactive, and withdrawn, and ever less likely to give leaders the benefit of the doubt.

The effect on state policy has been to confront us with a growing number of gridlock issues: education, immigration, health care, affordable housing and development, taxation and budget. Effective engagement between the public and leaders is essential to finding solutions. But the cycle of mistrust is so powerful that such solutions seem farther and farther away. Something new has to happen to break it.

Enlarging the Role of Civic Leadership

How to break the cycle of mistrust? We cannot expect the public to do it, and elected leaders and advocates seem unable to make a dent.

Fortunately, a solution may be found in an unexpected quarter: a new and more active role for civic leadership. Civic leaders are well placed to act as intermediaries between citizens and the political process, provided they are prepared to expand their role and align themselves somewhat closer to the public. Not only can they take steps toward easing the corrosive mistrust that hamstrings our state; they themselves have much to gain in the process.

Such a suggestion may seem counterintuitive, not least to civic leaders themselves.

For one thing, civic leadership as such does not exist as a coherent, autonomous, self-evident entity. Instead, it is an ad hoc, highly heterogeneous mix of individuals and organizations, usually operating on a local level—business leaders, heads of service organizations, prominent individuals, community activists, university presidents, religious leaders, and so on. Civic leaders see themselves as linked to their respective organizations; they do not necessarily see themselves as part of civic leadership or as a logical conduit for solutions to state or national issues.

Historically, the situation was quite different. In decades past, the prevailing model of civic leadership in cities across the nation could be described as "Establishment, Inc.," a network of insiders whose support and participation was generally understood to be necessary if anything was to get done in the community. The precise composition of the group varied from community to community. In Pittsburgh, nothing could be done without consulting US Steel; in Seattle, certain law firms played a major role; in other places, it might have been a real estate magnate or a prominent banker. Whoever it comprised, Establishment, Inc., was overwhelmingly white and male, and it operated behind closed doors.

Even though this model was often effective, it had serious limitations. Women, racial minorities, and other marginalized groups were rarely at the table; nor was there any accountability or transparency. However, as our political culture changed and civic leadership grew more diverse and transparent, it lost the cohesion that made it such an effective force in the past. Instead of a cohesive cadre of leaders who see their role and responsibility to act in the public's interest, we have wound up with the worst of both worlds: civic leaders who maintain a sense of themselves as the elite and insiders, but whose focus and energy are directed almost exclusively to negotiating with each other. Developers negotiate with housing advocates and environmentalists; labor leaders negotiate with chambers of commerce. The public is treated as an afterthought or ignored altogether.

Civic leaders need to recreate the traditional function embodied by the obsolete Establishment, Inc. in a new way, by aligning themselves with the public. There are powerful structural reasons civic leaders are ideally situated to expand their role and help ease the mistrust.

For one, they have insight into both definitions of pragmatism. On issues that affect them directly, most civic leaders want what the public wants: practical, commonsense solutions. On the political side, the civic leaders' position has given most of them a fairly realistic understanding of how the system works, and greater insight into elected leaders' more process-oriented concept of pragmatism.

In addition, civic leaders have a great deal to gain from aligning themselves with citizens. Ordinarily, civic leaders find that their power and influence is limited when they interface with the political structure. A civic leader who approaches elected leadership with a proposal, no matter how well conceived, can easily be dismissed as someone who speaks only for his or her own interests. However, if civic leaders are at the same time able to act as a conduit for the voice of the unorganized public—and if they can do so articulately and forcefully—they amplify their clout with elected leaders manyfold.

Civic leaders face fewer obstacles in dealing with the public. From the outset, their local credentials stand them in good stead; they are likely to be seen as part of the community and sharing in local concerns. They can also gain in standing with the public. The unorganized public has little opportunity to work through complex issues, let alone communicate its views clearly and effectively. The members of the unorganized public need the opportunity to arrive at considered judgment, as well as an intermediary to help them make those judgments heard at the level of decision makers. Leaders who can help them get the access and results they want gain social capital for other endeavors. With a few simple tools designed to help bring coherence to the public voice (tools that have already been developed by several organizations, including our own), civic leaders can fill this function.

The main shift that needs to happen for civic leaders to start fulfilling this new, broader function is one of self-identity. Civic leaders usually do not see themselves as speaking for anyone other than themselves and their own organizations. Since they perceive their role as that of elites and influentials, not as leaders or spokespeople, their focus is on making sure that their own concerns are heard. Instead of seeing themselves in the role of advocate or important person of substance, they need to see themselves in a broader leadership role as spokesperson for the public as well as for themselves.

The San Mateo Model

An experiment along these lines is ongoing in San Mateo County, where a small group of civic and community leaders have sparked an evolving conversation with the public on thoughtful solutions to that region's housing crisis. This effort represents a useful case in point for the promise of a more expansive role for civic leaders, as well as bringing some of the pitfalls into the open.

A Growing Crisis

In early 2001, San Mateo County's housing problem was rapidly reaching a crisis point. As home prices skyrocketed in response to the Silicon Valley business boom, many members of the middle class, as well as younger workers and people in service professions, found themselves searching farther and farther afield for affordable housing. Some endured a long commute from distant communities (with the attendant traffic woes and strain on family life); others were leaving the county altogether to take jobs in other states. Not only was the housing squeeze posing problems for individuals, it was presenting serious problems for the community at large, as many of the county's businesses and municipalities found it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain a qualified workforce and provide essential community services.

The situation bore the hallmarks of the mistrust dynamic described in the figure. Citizens and elected leadership were effectively stalemated in addressing the problem. Existing government policies, though well intended, had been designed to promote other aspects of economic development, while the public was deeply wary of the prospect of building additional housing. Developers pushed for development, community groups pushed for slow-growth initiatives, municipalities vied to cherry-pick the most lucrative new development while leaving their neighbors to contend with the traffic and housing issues thus created. As all sides dug in, each group jealously guarded its own interests against all others, focusing on its own back yard. One community leader

described it as "a system . . . where people hunker down with their allies for nothing but total victory. Every decision is appealed to the next level." The narrow focus on individual interest threatened to make it impossible to find a workable solution to a problem that was affecting the entire region.

The Nachos

Alarmed by these developments, a group of civic and community leaders convened informally to consider possible approaches to resolving the problem. Self-christened "the Nachos," this group of leaders came from a variety of backgrounds: real estate development, law, county government, health care. All of them had a significant stake in the issue: their own organizations were finding it difficult to attract and retain qualified workers or provide them with community services. In addition, each felt a strong attachment to the region and a commitment to seeing it thrive and grow.

The Nachos set themselves the mission of building a consensus that would address the housing supply crisis. They were advocates of housing supply, but they did not endorse particular solutions or agendas. Instead, their aim was pragmatic in a way that most citizens would recognize: to put a process in place that addressed the issue, not to dictate what the process or the technical specifications of the outcome should be. They decided to focus their energy on developing a regional environment that supports an increase in available housing for all income levels.

The Nachos at first assumed that their best bet was traditional advocacy, but they found limitations in that approach. Existing housing advocacy groups had produced commendable results for their respective beneficiaries in San Mateo County; however, no group existed that advocated housing for the community in its entirety. Instead, the prevailing pattern was win-lose advocacy, with each group jockeying against the others to maximize its own advantage. The underlying assumption seemed to be that hous-

ing was a zero-sum game; any advantage gained by one group would come at the expense of the others. Convinced that the economic health of a community depends on having housing for all sectors—service workers, professionals, young families, and seniors—the Nachos felt they had to look to new methods and approaches.

As they considered their options, the group became convinced that engaging the public was their best option to break the stalemate. Only when an informed and engaged public spoke would elected officials and other influential stakeholders be able to move.

Discerning the Voice of the Unorganized Public

Once the Nachos settled on a policy of public engagement, education, and facilitation rather than traditional advocacy, they brought in our firm to design a public engagement strategy. Our collaboration was grounded in the principle that the general public, not just the advocates and special interest groups, had to be part of any sustainable solution to an issue as complex as land use and the future of San Mateo county. The first step was a series of research dialogues, in which a representative sample of the public worked through the difficult trade-offs inherent in any solution and come to a stable, informed judgment. Our joint aim was to gain insight into how leaders could shape and guide a public learning process that would engage citizens across the county in a search for solutions.

In the spring and summer of 2003, citizens from throughout San Mateo County participated in four "ChoiceDialogues" designed by Viewpoint Learning. In these eight-hour sessions, diverse groups of county residents (thirty to forty randomly selected participants per session) spent the day considering four distinct scenarios for the future of San Mateo County. The choices included a status quo option, a market-based solution, a "smart growth" approach, and creation of a regional authority for all housing-related decisions.

As citizen participants talked through the advantages and disadvantages of the four scenarios, each group developed a vision for the county's future. The citizen groups were remarkably consistent in their vision, the solutions they were willing to accept, and the trade-offs they found acceptable. This vision placed the highest priority on preserving the county's open spaces, and to that end it supported higher-density, mixed-use development and a regional approach that would make it easier to make decisions countywide.

Just as important, over the course of the day citizen participants moved from anxiety and frustration to a sense of accomplishment. Feeling that their opinions mattered and that their voices would be heard did a great deal to ease their mistrust of the "powers that be" and left them with a sense of optimism. In the process, they consistently shifted from a mistrustful, individualist point of view, preoccupied with protecting their own interests, to a view that took the needs of the larger community into account. For some participants, a growing sense of connection with the community translated into willingness to become more engaged and involved in civic life as a whole, by volunteering at a school, participating in community groups, or voting—in some cases, for the first time.

The Nachos were surprised at the consistency and coherence of the public's vision. Two challenges remained. The first was how to take this newly coherent citizen "voice" and represent it to decision makers in a way that facilitated action and bridged the gap created by mistrust. The second was how to help the general public in the county reach the same point of considered judgment as the small sample of participants who had engaged in the facilitated ChoiceDialogue sessions.

A Conduit for the Public's Voice
The Nachos' efforts on the first challenge were quite successful. In the months following the release of the findings from the citizen dialogues, the

Nachos convened a series of briefings and dialogues with hundreds of leaders in San Mateo County. These meetings presented the results of the dialogues, including powerful video of citizens' statements, and in some cases face-to-face meetings with citizen participants. Among these meetings were two daylong "Stakeholder Dialogues" conducted by Viewpoint Learning, which brought county residents who had participated in the previous ChoiceDialogues together with elected officials, civic and business leaders, and advocates for housing and the environment. Taking the citizens' vision as their starting point, participants went further toward defining a set of practical steps that, on the basis of their experience and expertise, would be essential to bringing it to pass.

Stakeholder participants, leaders and citizens alike, found a level of common ground that surprised them. After identifying factors and trends that had contributed to the current crisis along with the likely long-term outlook for the county given the status quo (a rather bleak picture), stakeholder participants refined their vision for the future of the county. Participants (leaders and citizens alike) found these sessions very productive. Together, these groups articulated a common vision that brought the coherent voice of the unorganized public to the table, and they were able to design a series of clearly articulated goals for moving the county in the direction that they envisioned.

Perhaps even more striking, the level of mutual trust between citizens and leaders rose dramatically. Participants on all sides were surprised and pleased by their success in developing a shared vision and by the fact that people from so many sectors were prepared to take steps to move San Mateo County toward that vision. Citizens were impressed at the commitment of local elected leaders, and even somewhat surprised by their willingness to engage with the public and other sectors on these issues of governance and planning.

It wasn't just elected officials who made a good impression. Participants became far more aware of the challenges faced by others in the group, and the complexities inherent in each sector's role in development of housing. In particular, many citizens began the day with a fairly negative view of developers. In the citizen dialogues, participants soundly rejected the scenario that would have made more land available to developers and eased restrictions and regulations that made it more difficult for developers to build housing. They did not trust developers to be good stewards of the natural beauty of the county and felt that they were motivated purely by profit. Having developers directly involved in the stakeholder dialogues (with no particular project at stake) and finding strong common ground with those developers made a powerful impression on citizens and other stakeholders alike.

Scaling up

Work on the second front (scaling up the results of this dialogue to the wider public) is currently ongoing. The importance of scaling up to effect any kind of broad-based change was driven home by the fate of a ballot measure presented to San Mateo County voters in 2004. The proposal, for a smart-growth development project in the county, incorporated many elements of the citizen and stakeholder visions: higher-density, mixed-use development, combined with increased public transit. However, though the participants in the research sample might have reached the point where they would support such a measure, the general public was still largely at the "raw opinion" stage. In the absence of broader outreach and engagement efforts, when a group of residents rallied in opposition to the measure their voices rang louder to the undecided majority, and the measure was voted down.

This led to understandable disappointment and frustration, but there have also been powerful positive outcomes. The Nachos have built up a reservoir of trust and goodwill with the public, and they have enhanced their credibility with local and regional elected leadership. The outcome of the ballot measure is a setback on the road to a better-functioning polity, but this is not unexpected in an effort that most Nachos members expect will take a decade or more to reach fruition.

The Nachos and other groups in San Mateo County are now in the early phases of an effort to test new methods of scaling up the conversation around housing and other issues facing the county. These efforts will draw on techniques that engage both leadership and the public in a broader conversation than has been attempted to date (including issue kits that allow leaders, their representatives, or other groups to conduct dialogues independently; issue and information panels; new kinds of face-to-face meetings; and innovative use of television and online dialogue formats). By broadening the scope of the public conversation, the Nachos hope to build on the initial research phases of their efforts. Through this endeavor, they hope to help create a broad-based social movement in support of improving the county's housing situation.

Conclusion

The state is facing a growing array of challenges, but we are hampered from addressing them by corrosive and pervasive mistrust. Mistrust is a spoiler. It spoils the best efforts of political leaders by predisposing the public against them. It has led citizens to handcuff political leaders with ever-more-confining constraints, from term limits to rigid spending restrictions, making practical solutions elusive and difficult. It has helped to distort—and spoil—California's eighty-year experiment with direct democracy.

If leaders are to make any headway in breaking this cycle, they must make it a top priority to reduce mistrust. Restoring public trust cannot be treated as a fringe benefit of good policy or responsive governance; it must be an objective in its own right.

The public shows considerable alienation and cynicism, but there is some reason for optimism. In our

research, we have found the public's mistrust is more like a crust than an impenetrable wall. Underneath it lies a deep reservoir of goodwill and willingness to engage. Leaders who can break through the crust of mistrust will find the public both able and willing to meet them halfway.

There are many well-known techniques for restoring trust; we have touched on a few of them here. Whatever the specific method, however, the key will be for leaders to adopt some of the public's pragmatic framework as well as their own. Political horse trading and deal making will probably always play a part in the legislative process. It would be naïve to think that interest group politics will go away. Leaders have to broaden their view beyond legislative pragmatism to include the public's solution-based pragmatism. If they do not, mistrust will unravel what legislators have so painstakingly knit together.

Bridges must be built between the public and leaders. In this effort, civic leaders have the opportunity to lead the way.

Building Bridges Between Citizens and Leaders: Ten Rules for Leaders on Heeding the Public Voice

1. If leaders and the public are out of sync, leaders must take the initiative.
2. Frame issues from the public's point of view rather than that of the experts'.
3. Address the public's concerns, not those of the experts.
4. Let the public know that leadership is listening and responsive.
5. Consider only one or two issues at a time.
6. Don't rely on open-ended discussion; formulate a limited number of choices.
7. Highlight the values implicit in choices.
8. Help people move beyond wishful thinking.
9. When values conflict, encourage pragmatic compromises over ideological purity.
10. Use dialogue to build trust.

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