

When Public Hearings and Open Houses Don't Work: Tools to Address Deep Community Divisions

Heidi Behrends Cerniwey, ICMA-CM
City Manager, City of Ellensburg

Emily Jacobs, Story Quilters Consulting;
Interim Debates Program Manager, Braver
Angels



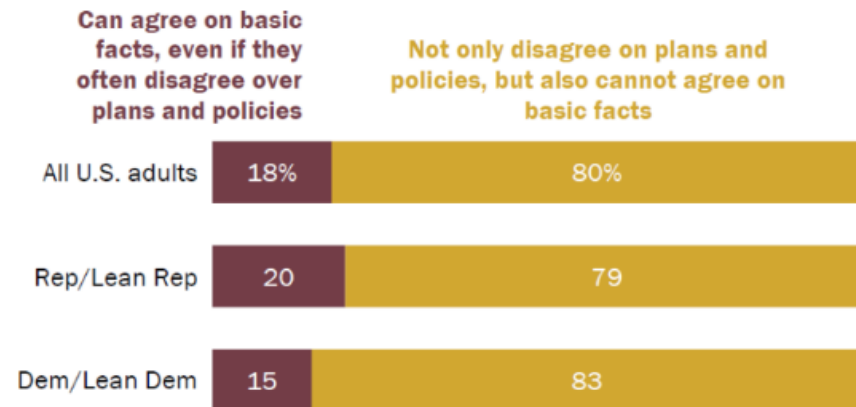
Workshop agenda

- Setting the Stage and Introductions
- Case Study: Ellensburg's Experience/*Introduction*
- Table Exercise: Exploring Traditional Engagement Tools
- Case Study: Ellensburg's Experience/*Conclusion*
- Interactive Table Exercises and Discussion
- Closing Summary

Polarization

Majorities in both parties say Republican and Democratic voters cannot agree on basic facts

% who say when it comes to important issues facing the country, Republican and Democratic voters ...



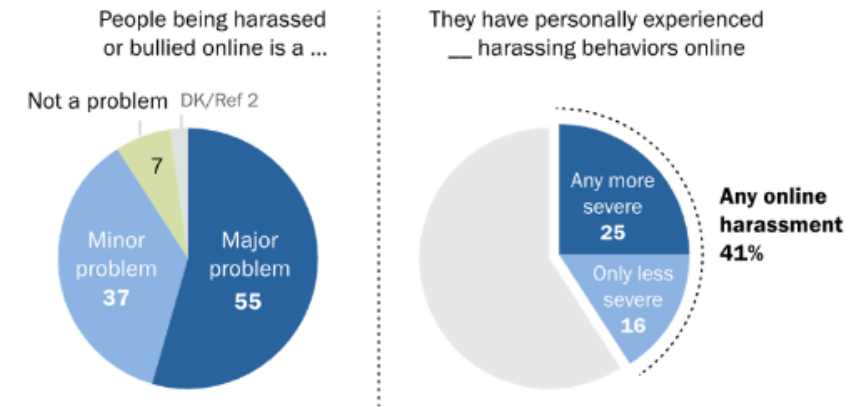
Note: Respondents who did not answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 10-16, 2025.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Civility

Majority say online harassment is a major problem; 41% have personally experienced this, with more than half of this group experiencing more severe behaviors

% of U.S. adults who say the following



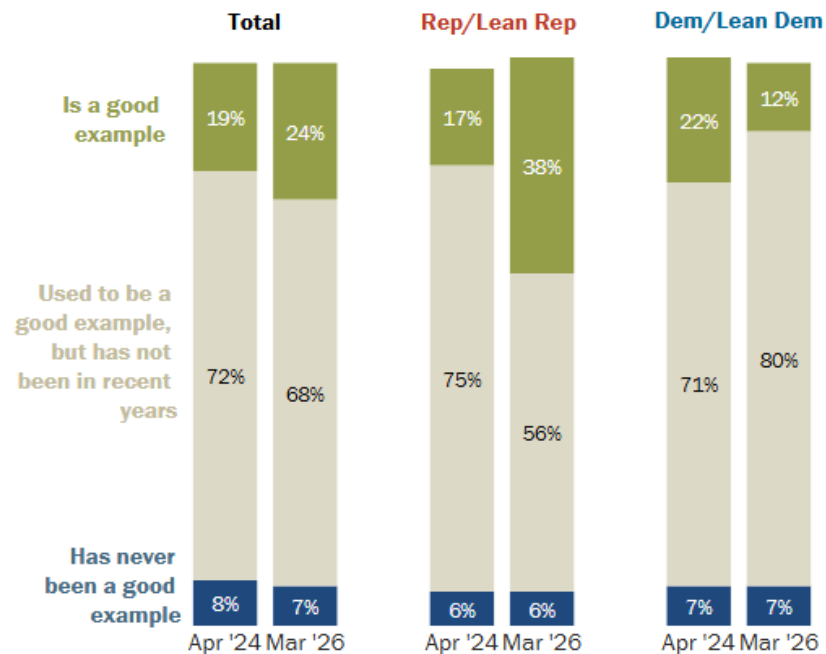
Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Sept. 8-13, 2020.
"The State of Online Harassment"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Democracy

Nearly 7 in 10 Americans say U.S. democracy used to be a good example, but has not been in recent years

% of U.S. adults who say that democracy in the U.S. ...



Note: See [topline](#) for full question wording. Those who did not answer are not shown.

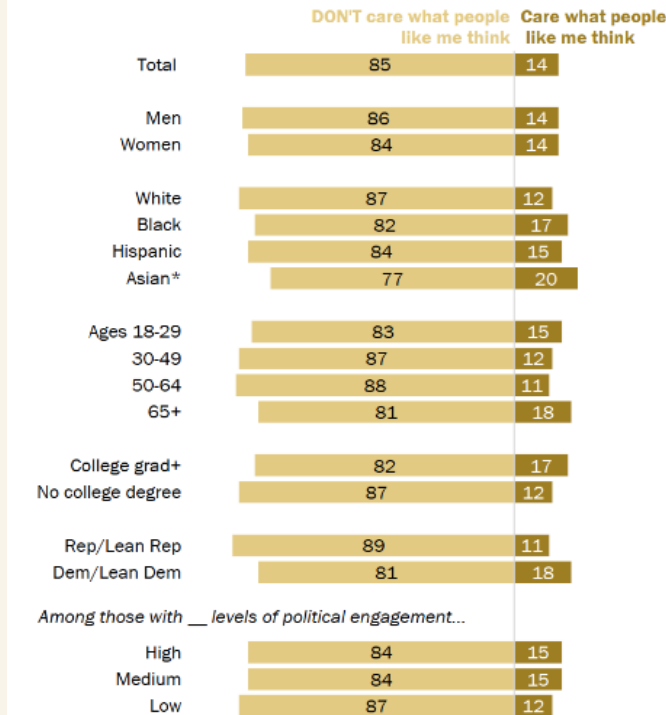
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 23-29, 2026.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Trust in Government

Overwhelming majority of Americans say most elected officials don't care what 'people like them' think

% who say most elected officials ...



* Asian adults were interviewed in English only.

Note: No answer responses not shown. Refer to methodology for full details on the measure of political engagement. White, Black and Asian adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 10-16, 2023.

"Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER





Case Study

In 2025, Ellensburg received over 300 applications to remove the DEI chapter in the Comp Plan during the annual docketing cycle.

- Political
- Regulatory timelines
- Procedural
- Legal
- Misunderstanding and misinformation
- Posturing, taking sides, mobilizing
- Risk tolerance
- External factors



ELLENSBURG CITY COUNCIL

July 21, 2025



CASE STUDY

Exploring Traditional Engagement Tools

Imagine you were on Ellensburg's city staff last summer– **what would *you* do?**

- Look at the tools of engagement on your table
- Select the one(s) you think would most meet the moment
- Be prepared to share which tool you selected



STORY QUILTERS
CONSULTING

Returning to Ellensburg: What we *did*

- Gathering of data
- Community Conversations
 - Understanding points of view
 - Introduced Common Ground workshop
 - Nominated participants
- Common Ground Workshop with Braver Angels
 - Moderators
 - Outcomes





Expanding the Engagement Toolbox

- **Community Challenges**
 - 1-2-4-All Discussion Tool (Liberating Structures)



Expanding the Engagement Toolbox

- *Your Community Challenges*

1. Look at the toolbox of engagement strategies at your table.
2. Pick the tool that feels like it best meets your moment.
3. Discuss these questions:
 1. *When does this tool work well?*
 2. *When does it break down?*
 3. *What kind of conflict does it unintentionally reward?*



STORY QUILTERS
CONSULTING



Expanding the Engagement Toolbox

- *Your* Community Challenges
 - Apply The Tool: Let's use TRIZ
1. What could possibly go wrong?
 2. Is there anything that we are currently doing that in any way, shape or form resembles the worst case scenario?
 3. What's the first thing we can do to fix this?



STORY QUILTERS
CONSULTING



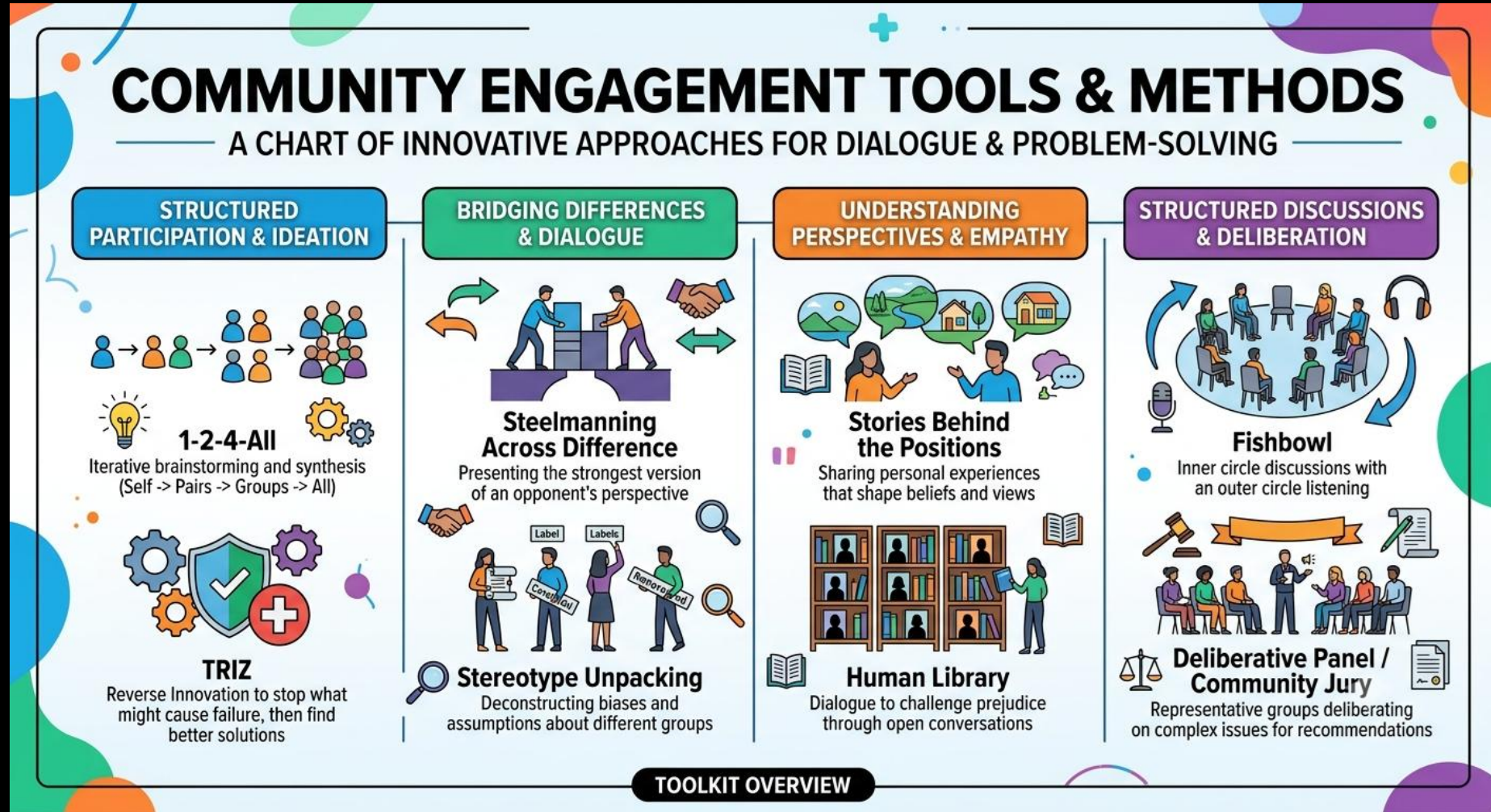
Expanding the Engagement Toolbox

- *Your* Community Challenges
- Apply The Tool: Let's use TRIZ
- What if these tools **don't work?**



STORY QUILTERS
CONSULTING

Other tools to consider:



STORY QUILTERS
CONSULTING

Returning to Ellensburg: What happened since

- Range of community-informed options
- Public Comment Rules
- Adoption of revised “Access, Engagement & Belonging” Chapter
- AAEE Commission
- Council Commitments
- Periodic Update Revisions
- Fees for Comp Plan amendments



Lessons

Intentional methods to engage people in conversation around local issues can be effective

Practice more listening to differing viewpoints

Build trust in the process and people

- Facilitator is important (internal/external; local/regional/national; red/blue)
- Be transparent
- Do what you say throughout

Continue to address lack of understanding government systems and services

Social media is not the venue to host community conversations

Don't discount how outside events (even national ones) can affect the tenor of your engagement
(Charlie Kirk)

Consider the long game, what might feel like a failure at first can have unexpected, positive ripples

Be prepared for the most beneficial outcome to be the conversation itself ("I'll say hi at Fred Meyer")

Be a Civic Engagement Ninja



“Civic Engagement and Public Information Ninja” Beyond the Title: What Makes a Professional City/County Manager Facing challenges, fostering collaboration, and leading with purpose

By Rod Gould, ICMA-CM, Dr. Frank Benest, ICMA-CM & Jan Perkins, ICMA-CM
| Jan 01, 2026 | PM Magazine - Article

Thank you

Heidi Behrends Cerniwey, ICMA-CM
City of Ellensburg
cerniweyh@ellensburgwa.gov

Emily Jacobs
Story Quilters Consulting
emily@storyquilters.com • storyquilters.com

