

Trust Runs Through the Budget

Hand residents the same constraints their leaders face — and solve problems together.

Every time a citizen pays a tax, they are performing a small, but effectively involuntary, act of trust. Each purchase, paystub, or property-tax bill is a reminder of their obligation to government. But when residents don't understand or support how those dollars are used, that trust can sour.

At first the effect may just be that they dismiss the value of government, but in our polarized nation it can quickly morph into irritation, then anger and even deeper polarization. This is a solvable problem. Over the last decade, enormous improvements in both the technology and methodology for budget engagement have created new possibilities — engagement that not only satisfies procedural imperatives, such as opportunities for comment and transparency, but also makes an entirely new, solution-focused type of relationship possible. This type of engagement invites residents into the budget process not as spectators or complainers but as **problem-solvers** — seated where decision-makers sit, wrestling with real tradeoffs under real constraints, hearing how their neighbors weigh the same choices, and arriving at considered judgment. It yields a new kind of information: not what residents say they want in the abstract, but what informed residents would actually *do* in the seat of the person who has to choose.

DON'T BURY THE MONEY CONVERSATION. LEAD IT.

Money is the hardest conversation in any relationship. Researchers who study marriage find that finances are at once the most avoided topic between partners and the most common source of conflict. Yet the couples who come through the money conversation stronger are not the ones who happened to agree. They are the ones who discovered they could disagree honestly, understand each other's values, and still decide together.

The same mechanism operates between residents and their government. Decades of procedural-justice research show that people will accept decisions they disagree with — and trust the institution more afterward — when they have had a genuine voice in a process they perceive as fair. **Trust does not require agreement. It requires being honestly included in the hard choice.**

The budget is government's version of that money conversation: its most contentious topic, and the one most institutions instinctively minimize. That instinct is the mistake. Approached deliberately, the conversation government most wants to avoid becomes the one that rebuilds trust.

OPINION IS NOT JUDGMENT

But the standard tools cannot facilitate that conversation. Public hearings arrive too late, after decisions are effectively made. Surveys capture opinion — top-of-mind reactions, unconstrained by cost. Ask residents to rate the importance of services and they will

rate nearly all of them highly, because nothing forces them to choose. Data that looks representative but reflects uninformed preference can be worse than no data at all: it hands officials false confidence about “what the public wants.”

Daniel Yankelovich, a pioneer of modern public-opinion research, warned of this. Public opinion is the raw reaction a poll captures. Public judgment is the considered position a resident reaches after weighing competing claims, encountering other perspectives, and accepting real constraints. A resident asked “Do you want better parks?” says yes. The same resident asked “Here is the general fund — show us what you would cut to pay for the parks, or what tax you would raise” gives a different, more useful answer. **Constraint produces judgment.** The input officials can actually put in front of a council and defend is judgment, not a wish list.

SIMULATION: THE PROVEN FIRST GENERATION

The methodology did not arrive all at once. Its first line of work is interactive simulation: placing residents inside the same tradeoffs decision-makers face, with the actual numbers, and requiring them to choose. Chris Adams founded Balancing Act in 2014 and went on to found Weigh In, building both around the **Three C's** — the foundation needed for engaging a hard tradeoff:

The Three C's	the foundation needed for a hard tradeoff
Context	what each program is and why it exists
Cost	specific enough that relative value can be evaluated
Consequences	what happens if a program is funded, reduced, or eliminated

This discipline has powered **more than 200 deployments** across public agencies of every size and type. Over a decade of practice, simulations established three things: residents engage with constrained-choice exercises in numbers no other format can match; the input they generate is far higher quality than traditional engagement produces; and residents who wrestle with real tradeoffs come away with a different posture toward the people who have to choose. Someone who has struggled to balance the budget herself is far less likely to conclude that officials who chose differently are incompetent — or worse, acting in bad faith. Simulation earns empathy for the difficulty of the job. That is the first installment of the trust dividend.

Recent research puts a number on the payoff. David Mitchell and colleagues (*Public Finance Journal*) found that enhanced engagement increased budget reallocation at *every* stage of the cycle — and at the highest-leverage stage, where residents prioritize programs against community goals, jurisdictions that moved beyond inform-only engagement reallocated roughly **4x** as much.



— FROM SIMULATION TO DELIBERATION

Simulation alone is enough for many jurisdictions. But the individual experience is solitary — a resident sits with the tool, makes private choices, submits private results. Social learning does not happen in isolation. It happens when residents encounter neighbors who see the same choices differently.

James Fishkin at Stanford has spent three decades documenting what happens when ordinary citizens deliberate under structured conditions: they grow more informed, more nuanced, and measurably less polarized.

In one nationally representative project, the partisan gap narrowed on **20 of 26** highly polarized questions. More recently, his team showed that online deliberation — run on light-touch automated platforms — produces the same effects at a fraction of the cost.

The depolarization is not a side effect. It is the trust dividend at civic scale. Partisan gaps narrow because residents hear one another out — the same “disagree honestly, still decide together” dynamic that rebuilds a marriage, now operating across a whole community.

— IMMERSIVE DELIBERATION

Together, simulations and deliberation can be combined into what Weigh In calls **Immersive Deliberation (ID)**: the integration of forced-choice simulation with structured online deliberation. A ten-minute simulation seats residents inside the tradeoffs government leaders face. Participants then convene in small online groups to discuss the choices they made, hear each other’s reasoning, and revisit their initial positions. The reporting captures both the individual experience and the community pattern — creating an environment that supports making hard choices.

The first large-scale deployment, **Colorado Tradeoffs**, demonstrates the method at state scale. Ahead of Colorado’s November 2026 ballot, it places voters inside the actual fiscal tradeoffs embedded in ballot measures: real program data, real revenue constraints, real consequences. The output is not a poll — it is a documented record of what an informed Colorado electorate would choose, produced before the vote, in time to matter. It is a partnership that includes the University of Colorado School of Public Affairs, local media outlets, philanthropy and Weigh In.

With or without community partners, ID is replicable by any city, county, or district building trust through the money conversation.



— THE NEW QUESTION

The decisions in front of local government — on budgets, revenue and the ballot measures that will shape fiscal futures for a decade — will be made one way or another, with an informed public alongside or without one. The field has spent twenty years assembling the research, the theory, and the evidence; the technology and practitioner methodology to match it now exists.

It answers two needs at once. It gives officials defensible input they can cite with confidence — considered judgment, not opinion. And it turns the conversation government has historically wanted to avoid into the one that rebuilds trust and lowers the temperature across political divides.

For a decade, the question was whether government would ask residents what they’d *do* with hard choices — not just what they want. The new question is whether it will use the best available technology and methodology to build that **trust dividend** and help residents solve the problem together.

THE EVIDENCE BASE

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Fishkin, James. *Democracy When the People Are Thinking*. Oxford University Press, 2018. Three decades of evidence on deliberative polling and its effects on polarization and nuance.

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weigh in

Weigh In is a public benefit corporation providing public engagement strategy, methodology, and technology to local governments, school districts, newsrooms, and civic organizations. The full white paper, with extended case material and complete citations, is available on request.

START THE CONVERSATION

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