



Achieving Community Alignment in California Local Government

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About this Report

This report seeks to facilitate the alignment of California’s locally elected officials with their constituents. Drawing on parallel surveys of California residents and their locally elected officials, we assess alignment on two dimensions: policy priorities and constituent communication. By analyzing areas of alignment and misalignment on these two dimensions, the report aims to identify opportunities for improving representation and civic engagement at the local level of governance. Findings can guide strategies for more inclusive and responsive policymaking tailored to the evolving needs of all Californians.

CivicPulse

CivicPulse is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization seeking to promote more vibrant and effective local and state governance in the United States through the provision of publicly available data and research. We bring together the standards of academic research with a focus on producing information that is accessible and relevant for practitioners. We do this through recurring surveys of local and state government officials, administrative data collection, and in-depth analyses. You can see more about our work at www.civicpulse.org.

Blue Shield of California Foundation

Blue Shield of California Foundation supports lasting and equitable solutions to make California the healthiest state and end domestic violence. When we work together to remove the barriers to health and well-being, especially for Californians most affected, we can create a more just and equitable future. The Foundation is funded entirely by contributions from Blue Shield of California, a mission-based, not-for-profit health plan founded by physicians in 1939.

AAPI Data

AAPI Data is a leading research and policy organization producing accurate data to shift narratives and drive action toward enduring solutions for Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities. AAPI Data aspires to transform public and private systems to ensure that all AA and NHPI communities are recognized, valued and prioritized.

Executive Summary

Motivation

Fostering alignment between the priorities of Californians and their locally elected officials is pivotal for effective and responsive governance. By analyzing the areas of convergence and divergence, we aim to illuminate opportunities for improving representation and civic participation. Ultimately, our goal is to spark positive change towards more effective local governance statewide.

Survey Methodology

In August 2023, Berkeley IGS administered a survey designed by CivicPulse of 4,517 California residents.¹ In parallel, from October to November 2023 CivicPulse administered the same survey to a statewide sample of 254 local elected officials in California.² These surveys focused on two key aspects of effective local government: (1) determining policy priorities and (2) efficacy of communication methods for constituents contacting local elected officials. On policy priorities, respondents rated how highly they prioritized each of the following areas:

- Accessible healthcare
- Affordable housing
- Clean air and water
- Jobs and economic development
- K-12 education
- Natural disaster preparedness
- Parks
- Public safety
- Public transportation
- Roads and highways
- Services for residents in need
- Walkability

We assessed constituent communications with two questions. The first asked respondents how effective they believed 6 communication channels were for constituents looking to voice their concerns to local elected officials. The second asked respondents how difficult they think it is for constituents to schedule meetings with local elected officials.

Approach to Analysis

In Part I of our analysis, we explore policy priority alignment between local elected officials and California residents. First, we compare the overall alignment between elected officials and California residents for each of the twelve policies. Second, we compare the alignment between elected officials and different groups of residents (gender, age, and race/ethnicity) for each of the twelve policies. In Part II of our analysis, we compare the overall alignment of California residents and officials on perceived effectiveness of communication tactics and perceived difficulty of scheduling meetings. Formal statistical analyses are provided in the corresponding data book, available for download in the [online version](#).

1) The resident survey was distributed to a stratified random sample of California registered voters. Registered voters in California include most of the voting-eligible adult population in the state. However, it is important to note that this sampling frame does not include undocumented and non-citizen residents. [As of October 3, 2023](#), 82.91% of the eligible voting population in California was registered.

2) Further information on respondents, including demographics and regional segmentation, is available in the corresponding report book.

Key Findings

Part I. Alignment on Policy Priorities

1. *Aligned on top four policy priorities.* Both local elected officials and California residents report public safety, K-12 education, jobs and economic development, and clean air and water as their top four policy priorities.
2. *Residents prioritize healthcare more.* A significant gap exists regarding accessible healthcare, which California residents prioritize more highly than their local elected officials.
3. *Local elected officials prioritize parks more.* Significant misalignment is also present for parks – a policy area that officials prioritize more highly than constituents.
4. *Misalignment is greatest for women, communities of color, and younger residents.* Misalignment is particularly pronounced between elected officials and their constituents who are women, Black/African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, and under 50.

Part II. Alignment on Effective Modes for Constituents Communicating with Local Elected Officials

5. *Aligned on the effectiveness of one-on-one conversations.* Residents and local elected officials agree that one-on-one communication is the most effective method for constituents to express their concerns.
6. *Misaligned on the most effective way for constituents to reach local elected officials.* However, officials generally are more optimistic than residents on the efficacy of constituent communication. For one-on-one meetings, phone calls, emails, letters, and public fora, officials rate efficacy more highly than residents do. Social media is the only platform that residents rate more highly than officials.
7. *Misaligned on the ease of scheduling meetings with local public officials.* There is a substantial mismatch in perceptions around scheduling meetings: local elected officials report that scheduling meetings with them is not difficult, but residents say that it is.

Implications

The findings from our parallel surveys underscore both areas of alignment and key opportunities for improving effective engagement between Californians and their locally elected officials. In Part I, we find a high degree of overall alignment around some of the most pressing issues in California communities. This shared understanding provides a useful foundation for collaborative efforts to tackle these top concerns.

The data reveals misalignment along race/ethnicity, gender, and age lines. Without meaningful efforts to reduce these discrepancies, historically marginalized communities could face further underrepresentation by their local elected officials. Actors involved in fostering local elected official-constituent relationships should center their efforts to improve Californians' experiences with their local elected officials around reducing misalignment along demographic divides.

The findings in Part II illustrate clear opportunities for more effective civic engagement. Encouragingly, both local elected officials and their constituents recognize one-on-one meetings as the most impactful method for communication and dialogue. Despite this, some gaps exist, such as constituents perceiving social media to be more effective than local elected officials. Local elected officials and grassroots organizations can leverage the identified gaps in perceptions of different communication modalities shown in this report to facilitate more effective citizen engagement.

Additionally, the stark contrast in perceived ease of scheduling meetings exposes a critical disconnect that could undermine accountability and trust in local government. Local officials and government communications staff should keep in mind that residents may not know who is best to contact regarding their concerns, which could complicate the scheduling process. Local leaders and staff might be able to bridge this gap by demonstrating to residents how to schedule meetings with them, as well as distributing resources to guide residents on the process.

Part I. Alignment on Policy Priorities

Alignment by Policy Area

Looking at the rank order of different policy issues, both California residents and elected officials share a common understanding of the most pressing concerns facing their communities. The top four priorities—public safety, K-12 education, jobs and economic development, and clean air and water—emerge as focal points for both groups.

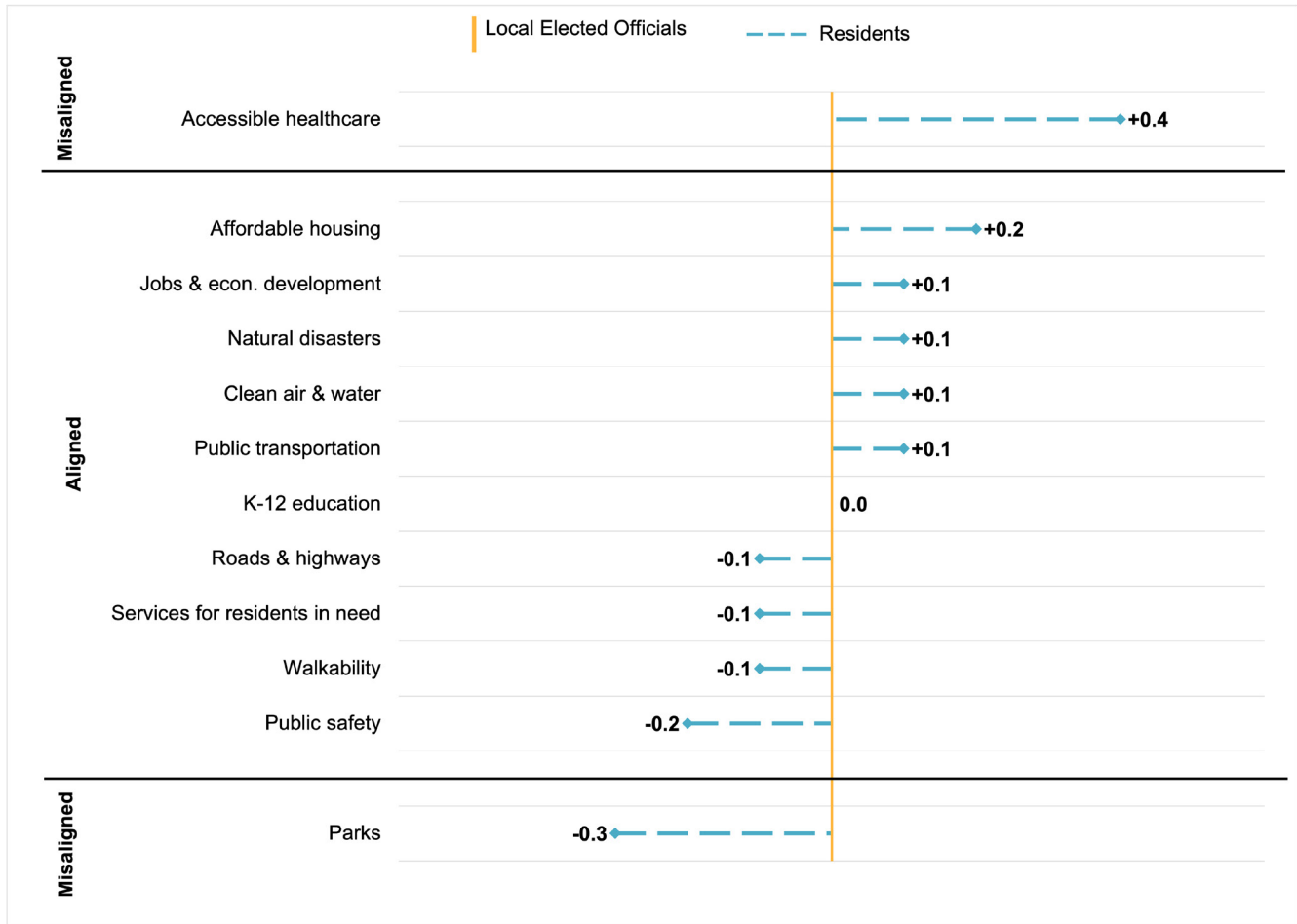
Table 1. Priority Ranking for Residents vs. Officials. Ranking of how highly California residents vs. local elected officials prioritize each policy area presented in the survey. Rank order columns show priority of respondents from 1 to 12. Prioritization columns show the average level of prioritization for each policy area. Respondents could choose not at all a priority (1), very low priority (2), somewhat low priority (3), somewhat high priority (4), and very high priority (5).

Policy Area	Resident Rank Order	Local Elected Official Rank Order	Average Resident Priority Score (1 to 5)	Average Local Elected Official Priority Score (1 to 5)
Public safety	1	1	4.6	4.8
K-12 education	2	2	4.6	4.6
Jobs and economic development	3	3	4.5	4.4
Clean air and water	4	4	4.5	4.3
Accessible healthcare	5	10	4.4	4.1
Affordable housing	6	9	4.4	4.2
Natural disasters	7	7	4.3	4.2
Roads and highways	8	5	4.2	4.3
Services for residents in need	9	6	4.2	4.3
Public transportation	10	12	3.9	3.8
Parks	11	8	3.9	4.2
Walkability	12	11	3.8	3.9

Looking at the prioritization columns in Table 1 provides a more nuanced understanding of variation in prioritization for California residents and local elected officials. We can see that even though certain policy areas have quite different rank orders, prioritization does not fall on opposite ends of the spectrum for any of these policy areas.

Both rank order and prioritization levels show that, for most policy areas, California's local elected officials are doing well with reflecting the policy preferences of their constituents. To better depict this, we transformed the last two columns of Table 1 into Figure 1.

Figure 1. Quantitative Estimation of Policy Priority Alignment Between Officials and Residents. This figure shows the difference between the average California resident’s prioritization of twelve policies and the average local elected official’s prioritization of those policies. Respondents were given five options for each policy: not at all a priority (1), very low priority (2), somewhat low priority (3), somewhat high priority (4), and very high priority (5). Zero represents complete alignment while 4.0 or –4.0 represents complete misalignment.



Misalignment exists for accessible healthcare and parks. Some variation may be attributed to different understandings of jurisdictional responsibilities and the role of local government. Local elected officials likely view their policy priorities through the lens of what issues fall under their direct authority and capabilities as local leaders. In contrast, the priorities of constituents may be influenced more by their life experiences and the issues that most directly affect their daily lives, regardless of whether they fit into the purview of local government.

[Affordable housing](#) offers an opportunity for understanding how jurisdictional regulation may affect local officials’ prioritization of certain policies. Even though local officials put affordable housing lower priority than many residents, most recognize its central importance to the state. An open-ended question on our survey of local officials asked about the most important problem facing their community today. Of the respondents who answered this question (nearly 83% of all respondents), over half referred to housing issues in their communities. However, many local officials also feel there’s little that they can do autonomously on this issue, or as one respondent put it, “their hands are tied.”

Alignment by Resident Demographic Groups

Greater variation in alignment emerges when we look at more specific demographic groups. Below, we compare alignment between local elected officials and residents of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, genders, and ages by averaging across all policy areas. Table 2 shows that local elected officials are most misaligned with Black/African American Californians while they are most aligned with men and Californians over 50.

Table 2. Average Misalignment by Demographic. This figure shows the average level of misalignment between local elected officials and different groups of California residents. For more detailed figures showing misalignment for each group by policy area, see the appendix.

Resident Demographic	Average Misalignment
Overall	0.2
Asian American/Pacific Islander	0.2
Black/African American	0.3
Hispanic/Latino	0.2
White	0.2
Women	0.2
Men	0.1
Under 50	0.2
Over 50	0.1

Race/ethnicity

The greatest misalignment on policy issues appears to be between local elected officials and Black/African American Californians, on average. For nine of the twelve issues, misalignment is greatest for Black/African American Californians (or tied with the misalignment of another group). The second most misaligned group is Asian American/Pacific Islanders, followed by Hispanic/Latinos, followed by Whites (see Table 2).

Gender

Segmenting by gender shows more policy priority alignment between local elected officials and men than local elected officials and women, with officials' priorities more closely aligned with men than women for eight out of the twelve policies. This trend of mismatched representation is present not only in number but also in magnitude. The gap in alignment between the two genders and local elected officials is equally as wide as the gap between officials' alignment with Black/African American and White communities. Furthermore, local elected officials underprioritized eight issues for women compared to only one for men.

Age

Segmenting the population by age resulted in less variation in misalignment with local elected officials than witnessed for race/ethnicity and gender.³ However, Californians over the age of 50 benefit from more alignment with local elected officials' priorities and are the second most aligned demographic group after Californian men. Efforts to work towards parity between local elected officials' alignment with older and younger residents should be made as local elected officials and constituent representative organizations work to reduce overall misalignment.

³) We segmented voters at 50 as this was the median age for respondents. Additionally, AARP – one of the largest lobbyists in the nation with an active presence in California – advocates for residents over the age of 50, potentially leading to changes in how older and younger Californians are represented.

Part II. Alignment On Constituent Communication

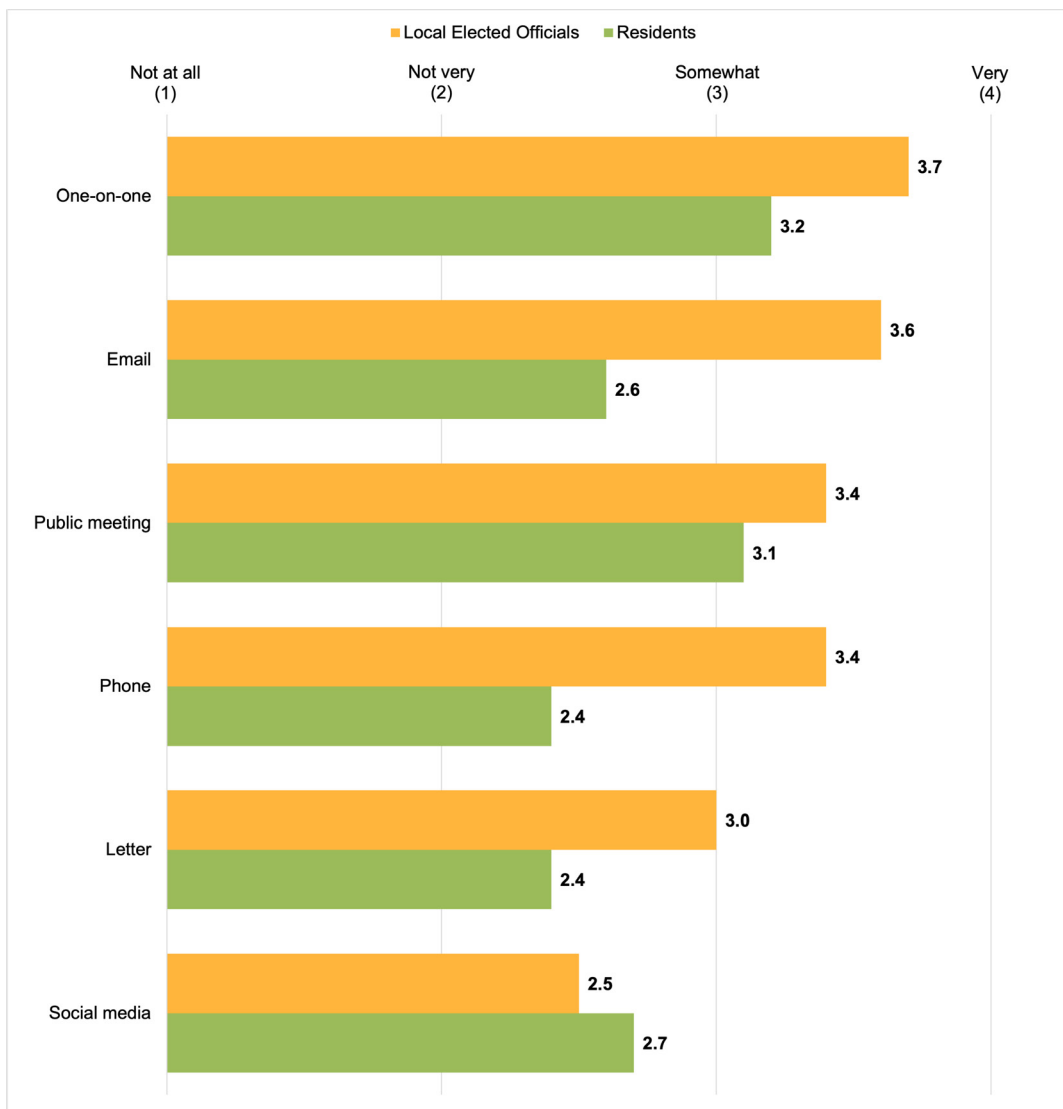
Method of Communication

Improving communication channels for constituents to express their concerns to local elected officials is one of the solutions that could alleviate policy misalignment in California. To understand which channels are working and which are not, we asked both residents and local elected officials their perceptions of six communication methods.

In Figure 2, we explore these findings by converting respondent answers ranging from “not at all effective” to “very effective” to numbers 1 through 4. Using this method, we plot the average level of effectiveness for each modality for officials and residents, respectively.

Figure 2. Alignment of Perceptions about Effectiveness of Different Communication Modalities.

This figure shows the difference between California residents’ perceptions of the effectiveness of six communication channels for communicating concerns to local elected officials and local elected officials’ perceptions of the same. Respondents were able to designate each communication method as not at all effective, not very effective, somewhat effective, or very effective.

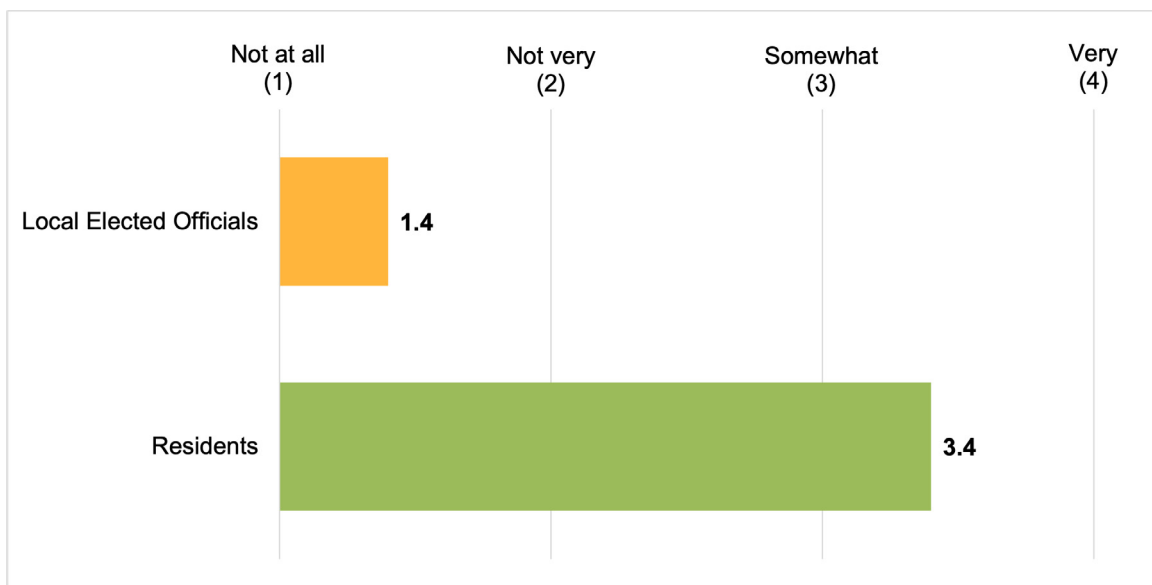


Some general alignment in effectiveness of certain communication channels exists for Californians and their local elected officials. Both local officials and Californians believe that one-on-one meetings are the most effective channels for constituents to voice their concerns to their local elected officials. However, officials generally are more optimistic than residents on the efficacy of constituent communication. For one-on-one meetings, phone calls, emails, letters, and public fora, officials rate efficacy more highly than residents do. Social media is the only platform that residents rate more highly than officials.

Perceived Availability

Conducting one-on-one meetings depends on the availability of local officials. We asked residents and local officials whether they believe scheduling a meeting with local officials is an easy task. Below we show an overview of responses by converting answers that ranged from “not at all difficult” to “very difficult” to numbers 1 through 4. Average perceived difficulty of scheduling is plotted for officials and residents.

Figure 3. Perceptions about Difficulty of Scheduling a Meeting with Officials. This figure shows the difference between California residents’ perceptions of the difficulty of scheduling a meeting with local elected officials and local elected officials’ perceptions of the same. Respondents were able to select: not at all difficult, not very difficult, somewhat difficult, or very difficult.



Stark contrast exists in the perceptions on the ease of scheduling a meeting with a local Californian official: officials believe scheduling is easy, while residents believe that it is not. A two-point gap exists between residents and local elected officials, representing the highest amount of disagreement between these two groups in this report.

Conclusion

The findings in Part I reveal that, despite considerable overall alignment on most policy issues, residents' prioritization of healthcare outpaces that of local elected officials. These findings point to opportunities for local elected officials to either invest greater attention and resources into this area or explain to their constituents why such investments are not being prioritized as high as other areas in local government.

From a demographic lens, we find that misalignment with local elected officials tends to be greater for Californians who are women, Black/African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, and under the age of 50. This affirms longstanding concerns over whether officials' policy priorities reflect those of their constituents in the United States, and points to the need to work harder to ensure local policymaking acknowledges the concerns of all constituents.

Improving constituent-official communications is a key method by which policy alignment may be able to improve for all communities. In Part II, we see broad alignment between local elected officials and residents on how they rank the efficacy of communication modalities, with both groups recognizing one-on-one meetings as the most effective form of engagement. However, we also see some differences. For example, local elected officials say messages on social media are even less likely to influence their decisions than residents may realize. Conversely, residents may be underestimating the efficacy of phone calls and emails, according to local elected officials. Grassroots organizations can leverage the identified gaps in perceptions of different communication modalities shown in this report to facilitate better bottom-up advocacy for policy changes.

Most importantly, while both groups agree one-on-one meetings are important, there is a stark contrast in the perceived accessibility of this option. Constituents believe that scheduling one-on-one meetings with officials would be difficult, whereas officials say it is not difficult. Local officials and government communications staff should keep in mind that residents may not know who is best to contact regarding their concerns, which could complicate the scheduling process. No matter what the underlying cause of this disconnect is, reconciling these different realities should be a focus for improving accountability and transparency between local officials and the communities they serve. Local leaders, government staff, and grassroots organizations might be able to bridge this gap by demonstrating to residents how to schedule meetings, as well as distributing resources to guide residents on the process.

Fundamentally, as California communities continue to evolve, effective governance will hinge on policymakers, government staff, and grassroots organizations' abilities to proactively understand differing viewpoints and directly incorporate resident feedback. This report outlines some challenges that first need to be addressed, as well as some tactics that might be employed to get there. Taken together, this report suggests a pathway to achieving a more effective representative democracy in California and beyond.

Appendix

Methodology

The data underlying this project was collected by conducting parallel surveys of California residents and local elected officials. Both surveys were distributed via email and administered online.

The random sample of California local elected officials comes 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 municipalities and counties with populations of 1,000 or more in California. The survey was conducted in October of 2023. There were 254 completed responses.

The survey of California residents was distributed to a stratified random sample of registered voters in California as part of the Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies Poll in August of 2023. There were 6,030 completed responses.

For detailed quantitative results and further description of the sample, please see the data book. For additional details not included in the [report deck](#), please contact info@civicpulse.org.

Questionnaire

[QUESTION STEM FOR ELECTED OFFICIAL] *The following is a list of issues that local communities in California might face. How high or low of a priority do you think each one should be in your community?*

[QUESTION STEM FOR RESIDENT] *The following is a list of issues that local communities in California might face. How high or low of a priority do you think each one should be in your community?*

Response options: *Very high priority, Somewhat high priority, Somewhat low priority, Very low priority, Not at all a priority*

- *Clean air and water*
- *Improved roads and highways*
- *Improved public transportation*
- *Walkability of your community*
- *Well-maintained parks*
- *Preparing for natural disasters*
- *Services for residents in need*
- *Jobs and economic development*
- *Affordable housing*
- *Public safety*
- *High quality K-12 public education*
- *Accessible healthcare*

[QUESTION STEM FOR ELECTED OFFICIAL] *The following is a list of different ways constituents might communicate their concerns to local elected officials. How effective is each one in communicating with you?*

[QUESTION STEM FOR RESIDENT] *The following is a list of different ways of communicating concerns to local elected officials. How effective do you think each one would be in communicating with your local elected officials?*

Response options: *Very effective, Somewhat effective, Not very effective, Not at all effective*

- *Public meetings*
- *One-on-one meetings*
- *Social media*
- *Emails*
- *Letters*
- *Phone calls*

[QUESTION STEM FOR ELECTED OFFICIAL] *How difficult or easy is it to schedule a meeting with you?*

[QUESTION STEM FOR RESIDENT] *How difficult or easy do you think it would be to schedule a meeting with one of your local elected officials?*

Response options: *Very difficult, Somewhat difficult, Not very difficult, Not at all difficult*

Additional Plots

Figure A1. Misalignment between Local Elected Officials and Californian Asian American/Pacific Islanders. This figure shows the difference between the average Asian American/Pacific Islander in California’s prioritization of twelve policies and the average local elected official’s prioritization of those policies. Respondents were given five options for each policy: not at all a priority (1), very low priority (2), somewhat low priority (3), somewhat high priority (4), and very high priority (5). Zero represents complete alignment while 4.0 or –4.0 represents complete misalignment.

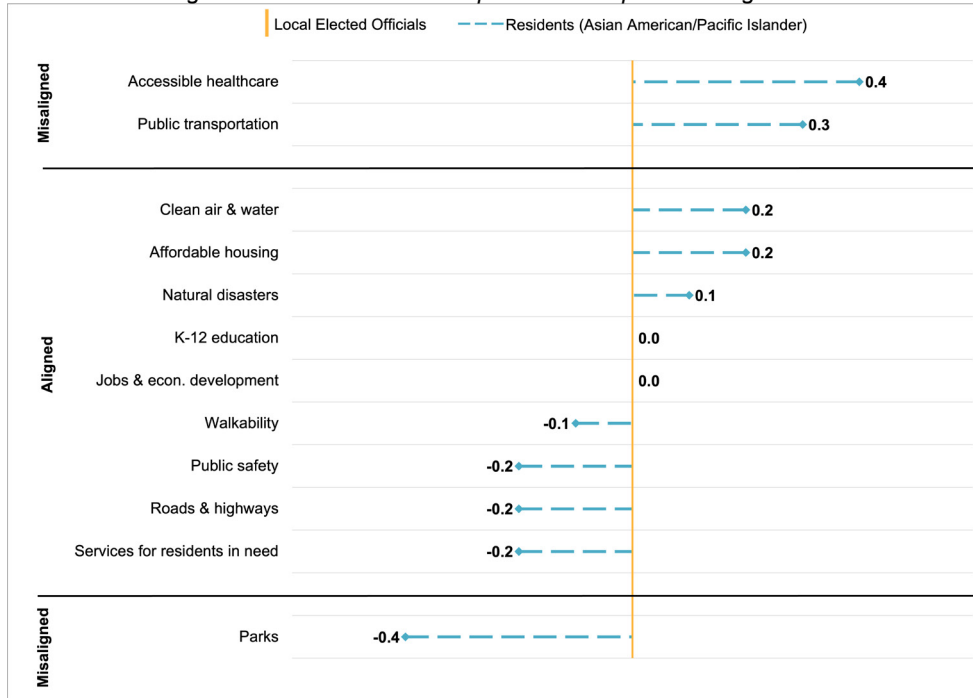


Figure A2. Misalignment between Local Elected Officials and Black/African American Californians. This figure shows the difference between the average Black/African American Californian’s prioritization of twelve policies and the average local elected officials’ prioritization of those policies. Respondents were given five options for each policy: not at all a priority (1), very low priority (2), somewhat low priority (3), somewhat high priority (4), and very high priority (5). Zero represents complete alignment while 4.0 or –4.0 represents complete misalignment.

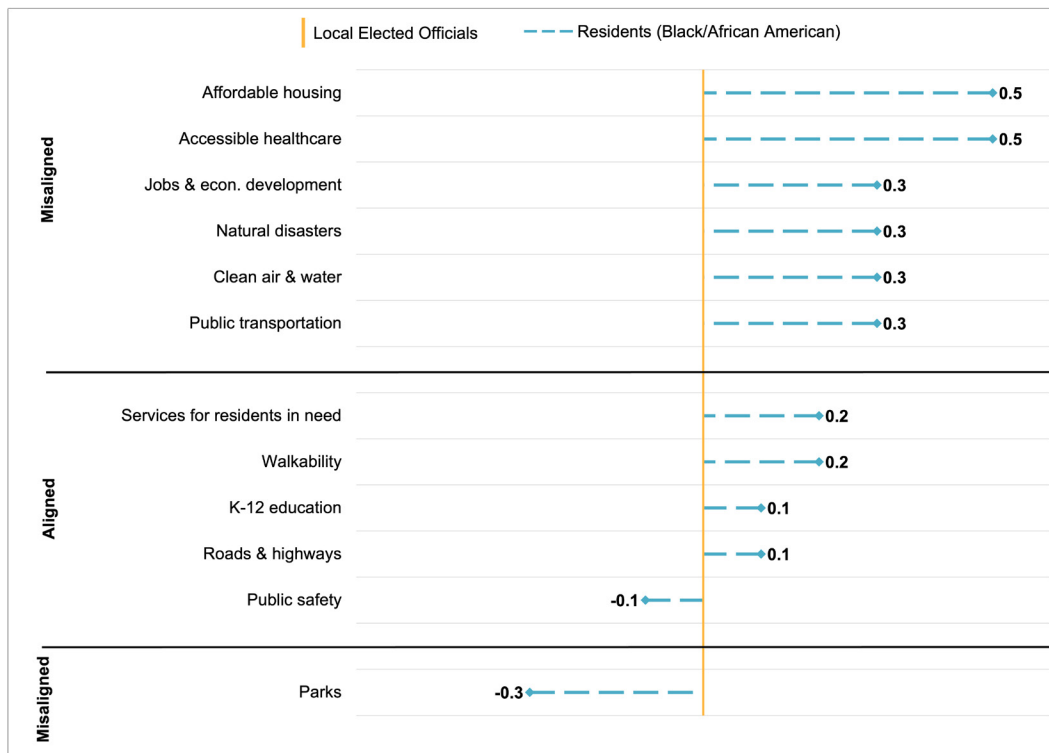


Figure A3. Misalignment between Local Elected Officials and Californian Hispanic/Latinos. This figure shows the difference between the average Hispanic/Latino in California’s prioritization of twelve policies and the average local elected officials’ prioritization of those policies. Respondents were given five options for each policy: not at all a priority (1), very low priority (2), somewhat low priority (3), somewhat high priority (4), and very high priority (5). Zero represents complete alignment while 4.0 or –4.0 represents complete misalignment.

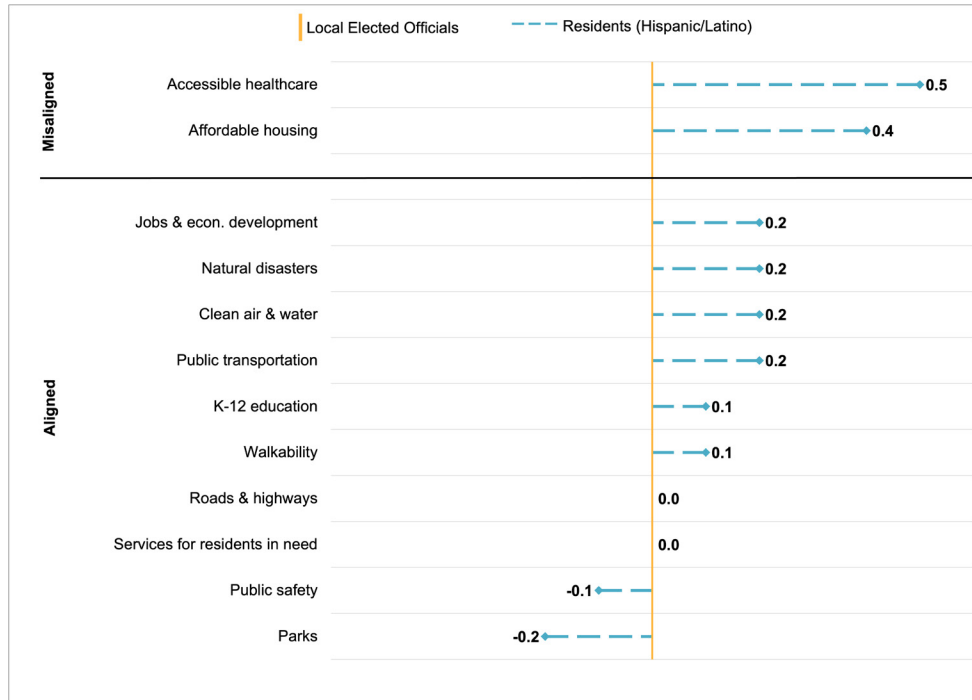


Figure A4. Misalignment between Local Elected Officials and White Californians. This figure shows the difference between the average White Californian’s prioritization of twelve policies and the average local elected officials’ prioritization of those policies. Respondents were given five options for each policy: not at all a priority (1), very low priority (2), somewhat low priority (3), somewhat high priority (4), and very high priority (5). Zero represents complete alignment while 4.0 or –4.0 represents complete misalignment.



Figure A5. Misalignment between Local Elected Officials and Californian Women. This figure shows the difference between the average Californian woman’s prioritization of twelve policies and the average local elected officials’ prioritization of those policies. Respondents were given five options for each policy: not at all a priority (1), very low priority (2), somewhat low priority (3), somewhat high priority (4), and very high priority (5). Zero represents complete alignment while 4.0 or –4.0 represents complete misalignment.

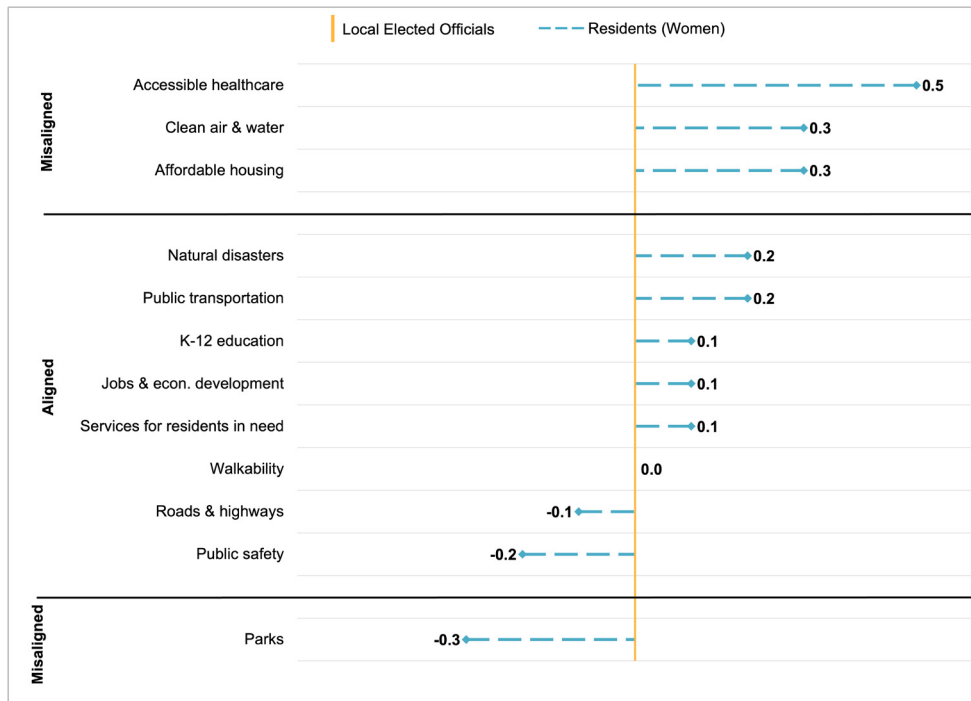


Figure A6. Misalignment between Local Elected Officials and Californian Men. This figure shows the difference between the average Californian man’s prioritization of twelve policies and the average local elected officials’ prioritization of those policies. Respondents were given five options for each policy: not at all a priority (1), very low priority (2), somewhat low priority (3), somewhat high priority (4), and very high priority (5). Zero represents complete alignment while 4.0 or –4.0 represents complete misalignment.

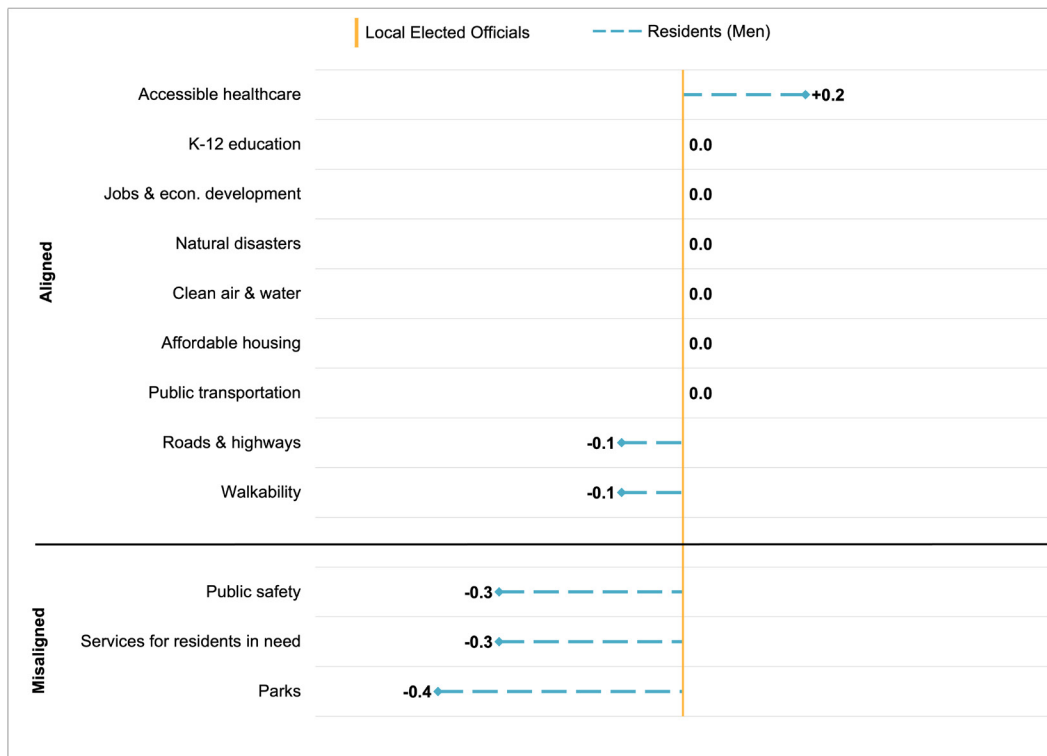


Figure A7. Misalignment between Local Elected Officials and Californians Under 50. This figure shows the difference between the average Californian under 50's prioritization of twelve policies and the average local elected officials' prioritization of those policies. Respondents were given five options for each policy: not at all a priority (1), very low priority (2), somewhat low priority (3), somewhat high priority (4), and very high priority (5). Zero represents complete alignment while 4.0 or -4.0 represents complete misalignment.

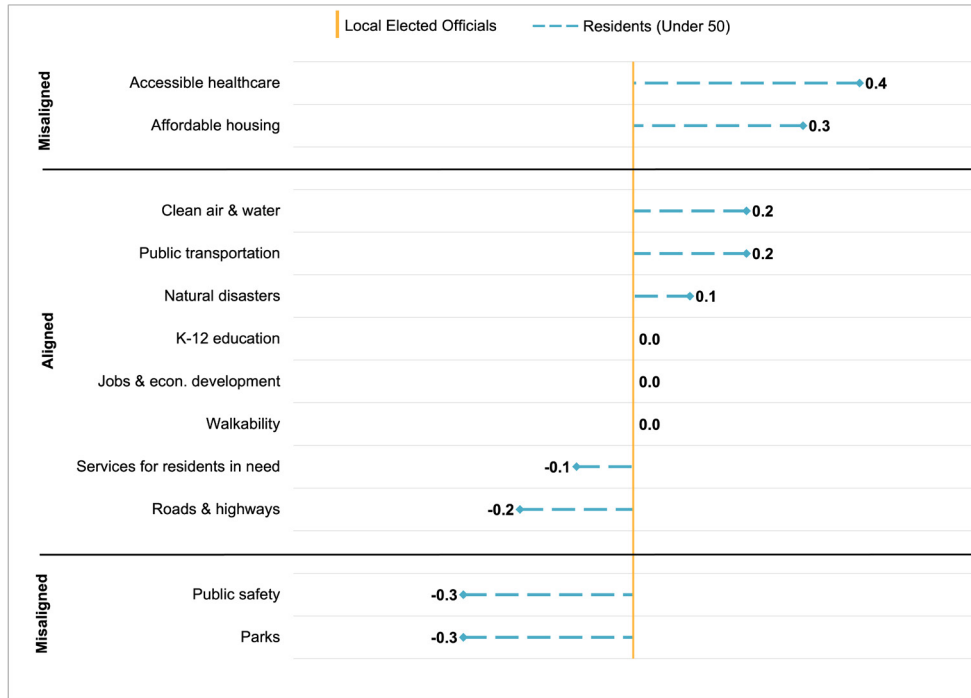
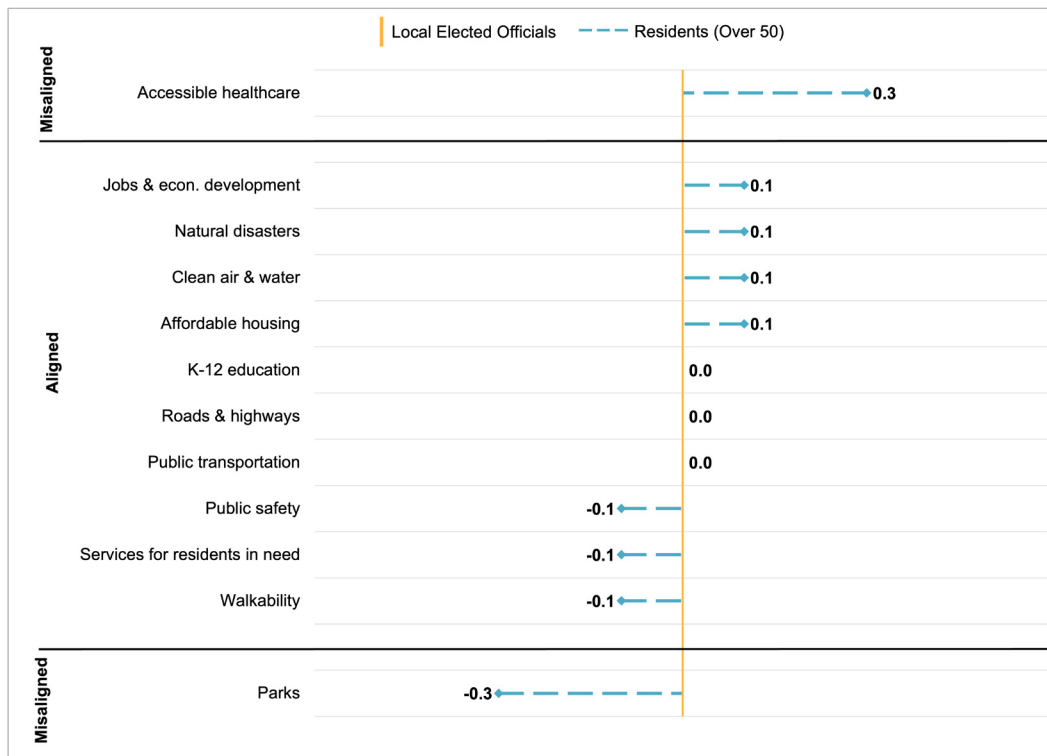


Figure A8. Misalignment between Local Elected Officials and Californians Over 50. This figure shows the difference between the average Californian over 50's prioritization of twelve policies and the average local elected officials' prioritization of those policies. Respondents were given five options for each policy: not at all a priority (1), very low priority (2), somewhat low priority (3), somewhat high priority (4), and very high priority (5). Zero represents complete alignment while 4.0 or -4.0 represents complete misalignment.



Additional Resources

Several organizations have evaluated constituent communication methods for local governments to highlight areas of improvement and suggest improvements to these methods.

- [Guidelines for local elected officials in California](#) to improve equity-centered engagement, particularly at public meetings, are available via Onside Partners and Blue Shield of California Foundation.
- [Public Engagement resources](#) are available via the Institute for Local Government.
- [Community engagement resources – including tips for equity and inclusion](#) – are available via the Municipal Research and Services Center. Although this is a Washington-based organization, many of the links listed are applicable to California governments.
- An [effective constituent communication webinar](#) from the Massachusetts Municipal Association provides comprehensive communication strategies as well as examples of more targeted communication campaigns, such as engaging the public during annual hydrant flushing programs.

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For replication data or questions about our methodology, please email info@civicpulse.org.