



Summary of September 2025 Retreat

- **Madison Common Council members participated in a retreat on the topic of “Navigating Complex Constituent Dynamics” on September 13, 2025** designed by Abha Thakkar with Mosaic LLC.
 - The goal of the retreat was to give alders a space to explore the complexity of constituent dynamics, from healthy disagreement to conflict, and to provide tools for alders to develop clarity about their approach to being an elected official so that they can better:
 - Ground their process in their values and priorities
 - Proactively set boundaries and expectations in their public lives
 - Normalize public disagreement
 - Understanding these different aspects and approaches to the job can support alders in communicating their approach more proactively to constituents and therefore set appropriate expectations and shift from “reacting” to “responding” when disagreement arises.
- **The agenda included (see slide deck for details):**
 - **An opening reflection about their own expectations of city government** (themes summarized on page 2).
 - **An exploration of the Spectrum of Constituent Interactions** from Constructive Feedback -> Healthy Disagreement -> Tension & Frustration -> Disrespectful Behavior -> Harassment -> Threats -> Violence
 - **A review of concepts to establish a shared framework:**
 - Levels of Impact (Self, Relational, Institutional, Systemic)
 - Power and its sources
 - The Action / Reaction Cycle
 - A definition of “tension” in public life and the tensions that elected officials have to navigate
 - The spectrum of public to private relationships and the different needs and expectations that can get met in these different spheres.
 - The nature of making change in a democracy
 - The skills of emotional intelligence
 - **An overview and ranking of the different roles played by elected officials:** Constituent Service-Provider, Continuous Learner, Public Educator, Policy Maker, Ethical Compass, Message & Translator, Systems Thinker, Equity Champion, Public Trustee, Public Steward, Democratic Guardian, Bridge-BUILDER, Civic Culture Builder, Descriptive & Substantive Representation, Voice of the People, Responsive Listener, Feedback Looper
 - **An exploration of the specific tension between the delegate and trustee roles,** including a ranking of models that balance that tension in different ways: Trustee, Delegate, Ethical/Relational Leadership, Transformative Representation, Participatory & Deliberative Democracy, Politico Model (Hybrid), Substantive Representation (Shared Interests), and Descriptive Representation (Shared Identity).

Themes From Opening Reflection

| Theme | The ways in which being an alder is similar to what was expected | The ways in which being an alder is different from what was expected |
|------------------------------------|--|--|
| Helping & Advocacy | - Knew the role would involve helping neighbors and serving others - Expected to be able to make an impact - Advocacy and constituent service felt aligned with expectations | - Harder to get things done than expected - Must deal with a lot of small issues along with big ones - Less direct power to solve problems than imagined |
| Community Engagement | - Expected to hear diverse viewpoints and community concerns - Enjoyed hearing what people are passionate about | - Didn't expect how many people would be uninformed, angry, rude, or resistant to facts - Some people don't use data or logic to make decisions |
| Meetings & Workload | - Knew there would be a lot of meetings - Expected ongoing work on many issues at once | - More meetings than expected - Time commitment is much greater than imagined - Constant demands, pressure, and follow-up |
| Learning & Issue Knowledge | - Expected to be learning constantly across many policy areas | - Learning curve for process, procedure, and committee work was bigger than expected - Didn't realize how much behind-the-scenes work it takes |
| Government Structure & Pace | - Understood it would involve a lot of "layers" and procedural steps | - The amount of time it takes for small changes was surprising - Slow pace and bureaucracy felt more intense in practice |
| Compensation / Practical Realities | - "Low pay" was expected and confirmed | - Greater emotional labor and personal toll than anticipated - More pressure not to make mistakes |
| Respect & Human Behavior | - Expected a wide range of viewpoints and requests | - Surprised at how much incivility and polarization they encounter - Some people assume bad intent, don't come with curiosity |
| View of Public Service | - Felt good about being of service and doing meaningful work | - Gained greater appreciation for staff and public servants - Realized how much invisible labor makes government function |

Alder Role Exploration

We then explored the different aspects and roles of being an elected official (see slide deck for description of roles). Each alder ranked the roles in terms of importance (scale of 1 to 5) and their comfort with that role (scale of 1 to 5).

The following table is sorted in order of importance of the roles. The roles that alders indicated the highest gap between importance and comfort were:

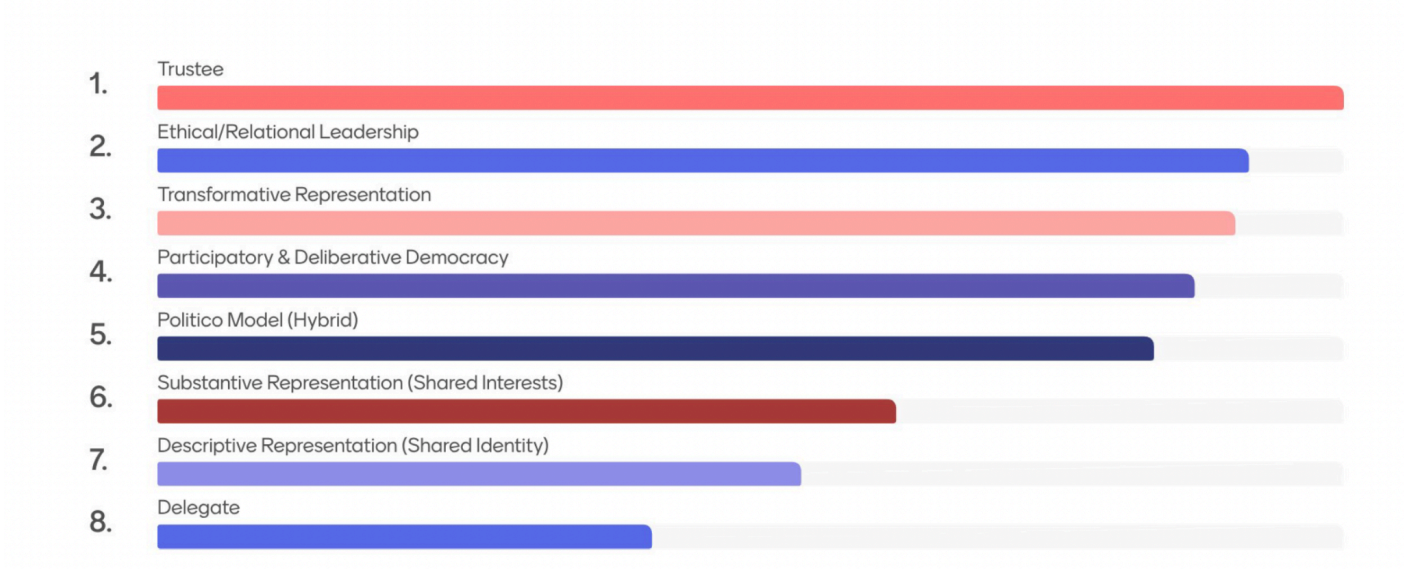
- Messenger & Translator
- Public Trustee
- Constituent Service-Provider
- Descriptive & Substantive Representation

| Role | Importance Score | Comfort Score | Gap |
|--|------------------|---------------|-----|
| Constituent Service-Provider | 4.8 | 3.9 | .9 |
| Continuous Learner | 4.8 | 4.4 | .4 |
| Public Educator | 4.7 | 3.9 | .8 |
| Policy Maker | 4.6 | 3.9 | .7 |
| Ethical Compass | 4.6 | 4.1 | .5 |
| Messenger & Translator | 4.6 | 3.5 | 1.1 |
| Systems Thinker | 4.6 | 3.9 | .7 |
| Equity Champion | 4.6 | 3.9 | .7 |
| Public Trustee | 4.6 | 3.6 | 1.0 |
| Public Steward | 4.5 | 4.1 | .4 |
| Democratic Guardian | 4.4 | 4.0 | .4 |
| Bridge-Builder | 4.3 | 3.6 | .7 |
| Civic Culture Builder | 4.3 | 3.8 | .5 |
| Descriptive & Substantive Representation | 4.3 | 3.4 | .9 |
| Voice of the People | 4.2 | 3.7 | .5 |
| Responsive Listener | 4.0 | 3.8 | .2 |
| Feedback Looper | 3.6 | 2.9 | .7 |

Models of Representation

Finally, we explored various representation models (see next page for description of the models), and alders selected the model that best fits their values and goals. The models of **Trustee, Ethical/Relational Leadership and Transformative Representation** were the most selected models for the kinds of representative alders want to be, though the top 5 selections were closely ranked.

Please rank these based on what kind of representative you want to be.



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Common Council Retreat

Models of Representation

September 2025

Delegate vs Trustee Model

Core Question: Should officials enact the will of the people or use their own judgment?

- **Delegate:** Officials act as a mouthpiece for constituents — they vote and advocate strictly according to the preferences of the electorate.
 - “I’m your voice.”
 - Pro: Honors direct democratic accountability
 - Con: May ignore long-term needs or minority rights
- **Trustee:** Officials are entrusted to use their judgment and conscience for the greater good, even if it contradicts public opinion.
 - “You elected me to lead.”
 - Pro: Allows for ethical leadership and expert decision-making
 - Con: Can feel unresponsive or paternalistic to constituents

Politico Model (Hybrid)

Core Idea: Recognizes that most elected officials blend delegate and trustee roles depending on:

- The salience of the issue
- Their own expertise or experience
- The clarity of constituent opinion

Example: A city council member might act as a delegate on zoning issues (highly local, clear public feedback) but as a trustee on complex budgeting decisions.

Descriptive Representation (Shared Identity)

Core Idea: Representation is also about embodied experience — people should be represented by officials who share their backgrounds, lived experiences, or community identity.

- Important for historically excluded groups (race, gender, disability, income)
- Pushes back on “neutral” expertise-only models of leadership
- Can shape trust, legitimacy, and what issues get surfaced

Substantive Representation (Shared Interests)

Core Idea: Goes beyond identity: officials are effective if they act in the interests of a group, even if they don’t personally belong to it.

- Often used in equity or allyship conversations: “You don’t need to be from my community if you fight for what we need.”

Transformative Representation

Core Idea: Drawn from social justice movements, this framework challenges the status quo of what is considered “representative.”

- Officials should:
 - Challenge oppressive systems
 - Lead for liberation, not just consensus
 - Be accountable to marginalized communities, even when unpopular

“Leadership is not about pleasing everyone. It’s about bending the arc of justice — even when it breaks norms or traditions.”

Participatory & Deliberative Democracy

Core Idea: Representation should be shaped by constant, structured input from constituents — not just periodic elections.

- Emphasizes co-creation, town halls, listening sessions, surveys, participatory budgeting
- Promotes two-way communication and relationship-based politics
- Elected officials are stewards of public dialogue, not just decision-makers

Inspired by scholars like Jane Mansbridge and Iris Marion Young, who argue for inclusive, dialogic approaches to representation, especially across lines of power and difference.

Ethical/Relational Leadership (Contemporary Civic Practice)

Core Idea: Officials lead with their values and relational accountability to community.

Tension is not binary — it’s navigated with humility, ongoing reflection, and structured feedback loops.

- Key concepts:
 - Transparent decision-making
 - Naming your values publicly
 - Holding space for disagreement with dignity
- Often rooted in frameworks like:
 - Adaptive Leadership (Heifetz)
 - Public Narrative (Marshall Ganz)
 - Relational Organizing (PICO, Industrial Areas Foundation)

Possible Next Steps for Practice, Exploration and Inquiry

As Individuals

- **Reflect on the public and private relationship spectrum in the context of your experience as an alder**
 - How do you present in your public life? On social media? Are you comfortable with your public/private boundary?
 - Where are needs and expectations blurred in your life between these domains?
 - Are there some relationships that overlap these spaces - how do you navigate public disagreement and difference in those relationships?
- **Being an alder requires the consistent use of the skills of emotional intelligence.**

Which of these do you feel most comfortable with when faced with disagreement? With conflict? Which skills would you like to strengthen?

 - Identify and have words for feelings
 - Accurately read and interpret emotions in others
 - Regulate one's own behavior and stress response in the face of discomfort and tension
 - Volume Control: Manage expression of strong emotions
 - Develop empathy for others
 - Practice curiosity and a learning mindset
- **Consider the roles inventory** included here. Identify which roles feel most important to you as an alder and how you will prioritize and enhance your comfort with these roles. How will you communicate these priorities to your constituents?
- **Remain mindful of the tension between the “Trustee” and “Delegate” models of representation**, especially when encountering highly polarizing topics. Based on your values and goals as an elected official, are you there to mirror your constituents or to vote your conscience, or something in between? **What happens when you disagree with a majority of your constituents?** And how will you communicate that to your district?

As a Council

- **Reflect on the power (the ability to act and get a reaction) you have as a Council in the system of City government.** Develop consistent messaging to help support public education about the powers of the Council.
- **Normalize disagreement** with each other to better avoid the pitfalls of permanent polarization and model public disagreement for your constituents.

With Constituents

- **Develop a proactive public engagement strategy** that elevates multiple points of view, normalizes thoughtful disagreement, articulates your values and integrates some feedback mechanism after a vote to close the loop.
- **Be aware of the resources** available to help keep you safe when disagreement escalates into more dangerous forms of conflict.

Explore the skills of political persuasion as an antidote to permanent polarization.

Common Council Retreat

Individual Reflection: Values & Boundaries

September 2025

1. What are 3-5 values that guide your public service?
2. Whose voices are you accountable to — and how do you make that visible?
3. What boundaries are non-negotiable for you (keep in mind some of the nuances around the public / private relationship spectrum as well as how far you are willing to compromise on your values).
4. How do you signal your values to constituents even when they disagree?
5. What do you owe your constituents - and what not? (Be sure to consider your relationship with loyalty in your public relationships)

Common Council: Navigating Complex Constituent Dynamics September 13, 2025

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AGENDA: NAVIGATING COMPLEX CONSTITUENT DYNAMICS

| | |
|----------|--|
| 9:00 am | Welcome |
| 9:15 am | Check-In & Group Agreements |
| 9:40 am | Experiences and Expectations |
| 10:00 am | The Spectrum of Constituent Interactions |
| 10:30 am | A Shared Framework |
| 11:00 am | BREAK |
| 11:15 am | Examining Your Role |
| 11:45 am | Key Tension: Delegate vs Trustee? |
| 12:15 pm | Values, Roles & Boundaries |
| 12:30 pm | Designing a Public Input Strategy |

9:30 am

EXPERIENCES & EXPECTATIONS

THE CONSTITUENT EXPERIENCE

- What were some of your feelings, assumptions and experiences about government before you became an elected official?

THE ALDER EXPERIENCE

- In what ways is being an elected official similar to what you expected?
- In what ways is being an elected official different from what you expected?

When you're done, take a moment to read what's on the wall.

GROUP REFLECTION

- Do you see any mismatched expectations, sources for frustration?

10:00 am

THE SPECTRUM OF CONSTITUENT INTERACTIONS

Constructive Feedback →

Healthy Disagreement →

Tension & Frustration →

Disrespectful Behavior →

Harassment →

Threats → Violence

The Spectrum of Constituent Interactions

- Write 2-3 anonymous examples of constituent interactions on post-it notes and place them where they fall

Take some time to read each other's experiences

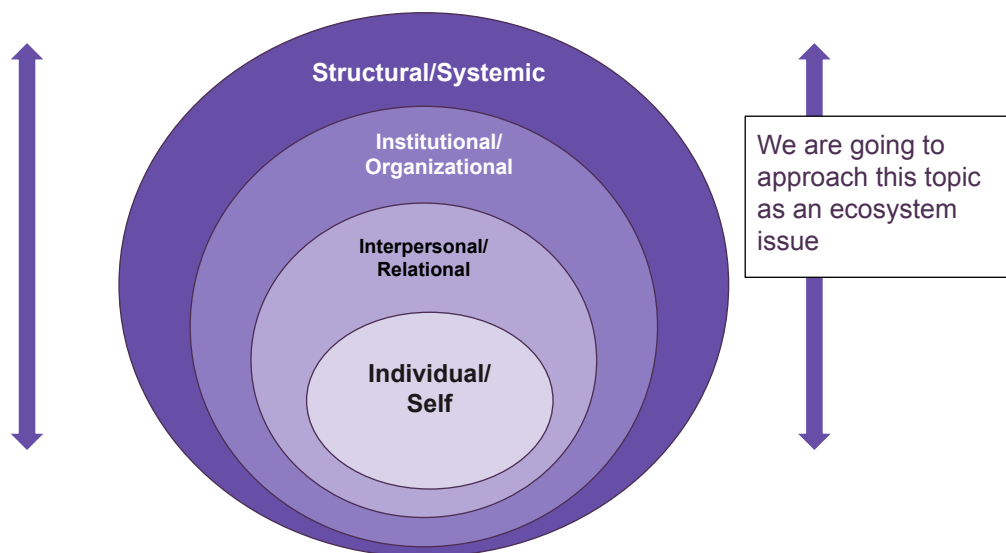
The Spectrum of Constituent Interactions

- What patterns do you see?
- Where do you spend most of your energy?
- What's the difference between discomfort and actual harm?
- What supports do you need and what exists for the hard end of the spectrum?

10:30 am

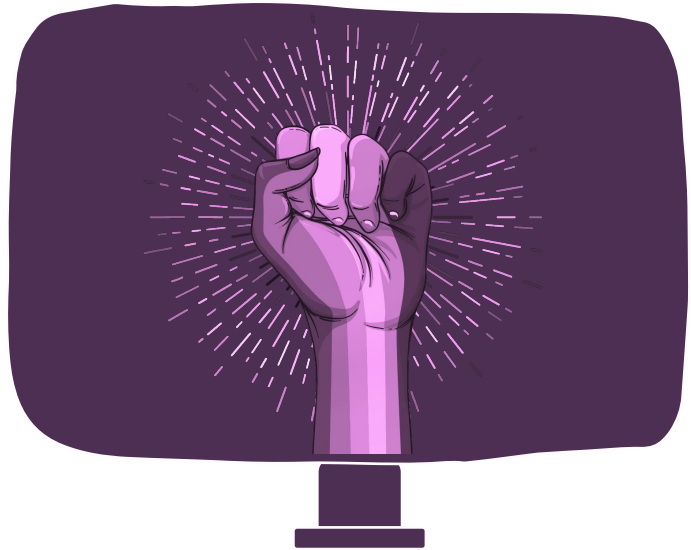
ESTABLISHING A SHARED FRAMEWORK

INTERDEPENDENT LEVELS OF COMPLEX SYSTEMS

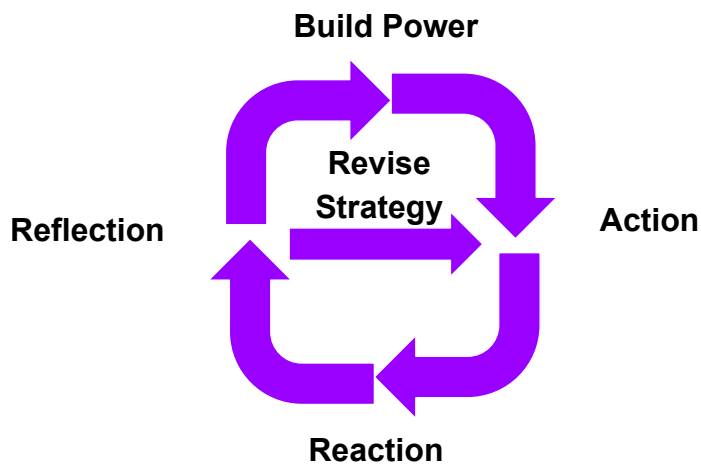


TERMS: POWER

- From the latin word *poder*: the ability to do or act... and get a reaction
- The **size** of the reaction is a measure of your power (equal and opposite).
- The **nature** of the reaction - did it move you towards your goals? - is a measure of the quality of your strategy and tactics



THE ACTION / REACTION CYCLE



SOURCES OF POWER

Power is relative and shifting at all times, depending on who we're with and what we're doing. An awareness of how power works and an ability to use it mindfully is at the heart of being impactful.

Identities & Experience (Intersectionality)

Expectations, socialization related to personality, communication style, learning style, family roles, race, class, age, education level, subculture, heritage/family of origin, health and ability, age, size, etc.

Positionality

What is your functional impact in the world? Your impact can be influenced by your relationships, decision-making power, seniority and expertise, access and control of information and resources, and your ability to direct, reward or punish others.

POWER & CONSTITUENTS

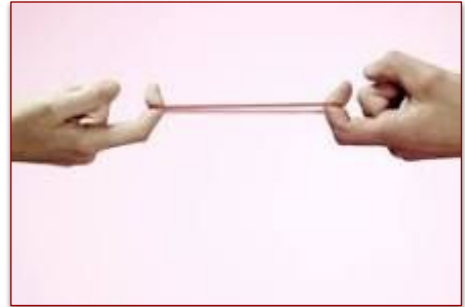
Using this definition of "power as the ability to act and get a reaction,"

- What do constituents think about an alder's power?
- What power does an alder actually have?

A KEY FEATURE OF PUBLIC LIFE IS TENSION

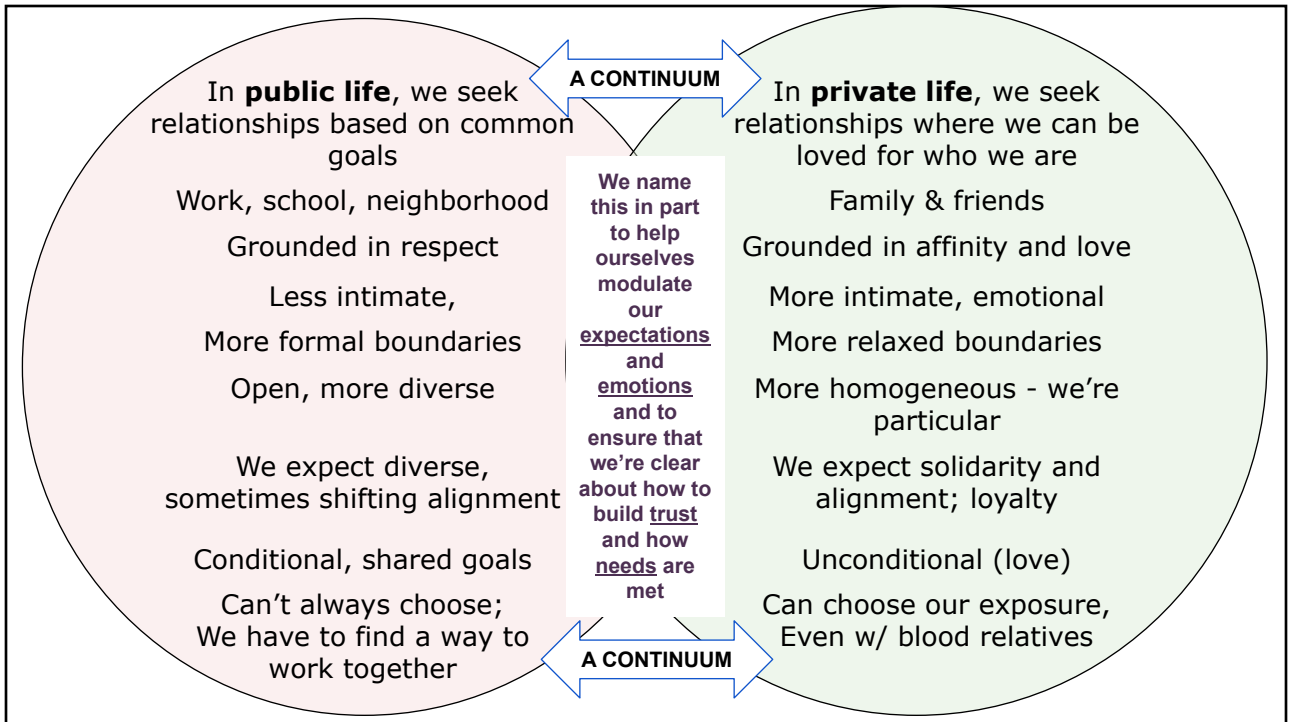
The push & pull of competing
needs and interests

(Not stress or conflict, though
those can be side effects)



THE TENSIONS OF BEING AN ELECTED OFFICIAL

| | | |
|----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| The World As It Is | ↔ | The World As It Should Be |
| Resources Available | ↔ | What People Need |
| Your To Do List | ↔ | Time Available |
| Urgency of Needs | ↔ | Speed of Democratic Process |
| Highly Personal Polarization | ↔ | The Need for Compromise |
| Divisive; Taking Sides on Record | ↔ | Coming Back Together |
| Binary "Yes/No" Voting | ↔ | Nuanced Issues and Impact |
| Loyalty | ↔ | Shifting Alliances |
| Good Intentions | ↔ | Unintended Consequences |
| The Needs of the Many | ↔ | The Needs of the Few |
| Majority Rule | ↔ | Protecting Minority Voice |
| The Isolation of Your Role | ↔ | Being Immersed in Community |
| Voices of Organized Constituents | ↔ | Voices You Don't Hear From |
| Ability to Make an Impact | ↔ | Limits to What City Gvt Can Do |
| Long-Term Strategic Gains | ↔ | Short-Term Alliances & Tactics |



The Nature of Making Change in a Democracy

- Democracy is meant to be slow & incremental
- Democracy is designed to require compromise
- Democracy is more [much more] than voting
- Democracy often involves uniting our allies and dividing our opposition, but **it cannot withstand permanent polarization**
 - Which means no permanent allies, no permanent opponents - but within what parameters?
 - Who are you willing to work with to get things done?
- Democracy is a practice, not a description or a static state

SELF LEVEL: EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional intelligence is a basic requirement for people who hold leadership roles in complex systems of any kind.

Managing all that is going on in the body and brain while reacting to other people is challenging work.

- Identify and have words for feelings
- Accurately read and interpret emotions in others
- Regulate one's own behavior and stress response in the face of discomfort and tension
 - Volume Control: Manage expression of strong emotions
- Develop empathy for others
- Practice curiosity and a learning mindset

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The nature of democratic process requires us to hold complexity at multiple levels:

- Public and private relationships are different on a continuum - we don't get to choose who we work with and there will almost certainly be more diverse opinions and personalities in our public lives than in our private lives
- Tension (conflict, disagreement, balancing irreconcilable needs, scarcity) is a normal part of public life. We learn to live with the imperfect "middle ground."
- Power matters in all of this - who we are and what positions, expertise and information we hold plays a huge role in how we impact others, how others impact us and the tools we have to navigate tension
- Democracy is designed to be a slow, incremental process, often requiring compromise with people we disagree with.
- How we respond and self-regulate in the face of tension involves practicing and deepening our emotional intelligence and holding ourselves accountable to our values WHILE also naming and addressing the conditions at other levels that are impacting us.

11:15 am

EXAMINING YOUR ROLE

WHO DO YOU WANT TO BE AS AN ALDER?

Pass out worksheet.

Score your worksheet based on:

1. How important you think each role is for you
2. How comfortable you are in each role

Elected Official Roles

LEADERSHIP & GOVERNANCE ROLES

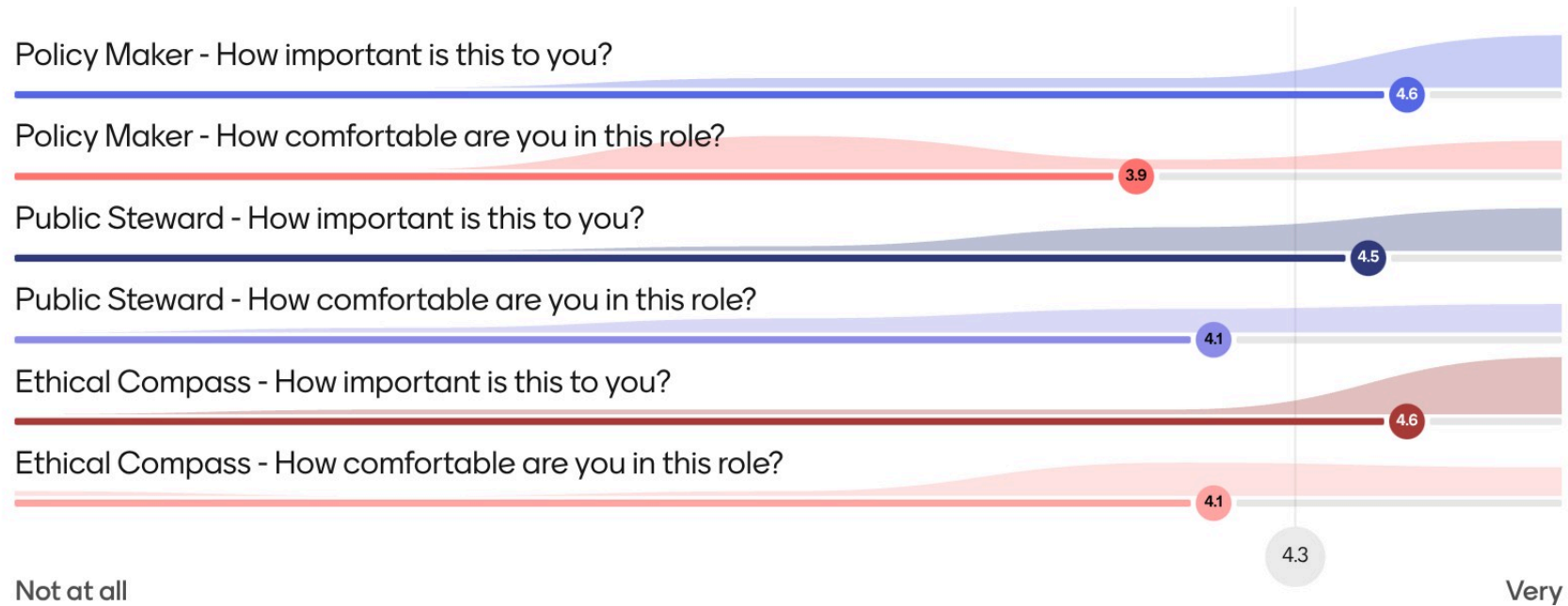
- Policy-Maker
 - Research, debate, and pass laws or ordinances
 - Understand implications and unintended consequences
 - Use data, equity analysis, and public input to inform decisions
- Public Steward
 - Protect public resources and the public trust
 - Prioritize transparency, fiscal responsibility, and accountability
 - Avoid conflicts of interest or self-enrichment
- Ethical Compass
 - Model integrity and courage, especially under pressure
 - Speak out against injustice, corruption, or harmful norms
 - Defend institutions and democratic principles even when unpopular

Elected Official Roles

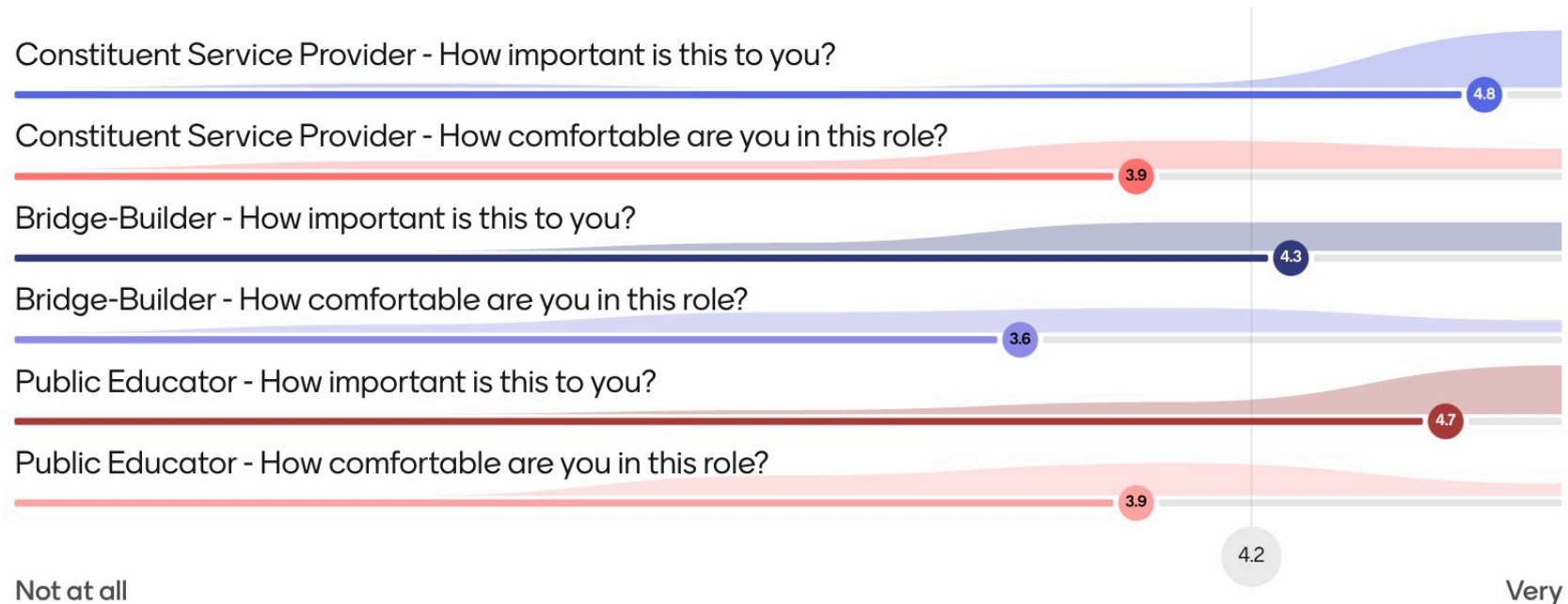
RELATIONAL & COMMUNITY ROLES

- Constituent Service Provider
 - Respond to inquiries, complaints, and requests
 - Help people navigate public systems (housing, permits, transit, etc.)
 - Maintain accessibility through office hours, email, phone, and public presence
- Bridge-Builder
 - Facilitate connection across divides (race, class, ideology, geography)
 - Find common ground while honoring difference
 - Mediate between stakeholders, agencies, or community factions
- Public Educator
 - Demystify policy and process: “Here’s how this works”
 - Explain decisions clearly, with values-based messaging
 - Help set realistic expectations of what government can (and cannot) do

ELECTED OFFICIAL ROLES - Leadership & Governance



ELECTED OFFICIAL ROLES - Relational & Community



Elected Official Roles

COMMUNICATION & ACCOUNTABILITY ROLES

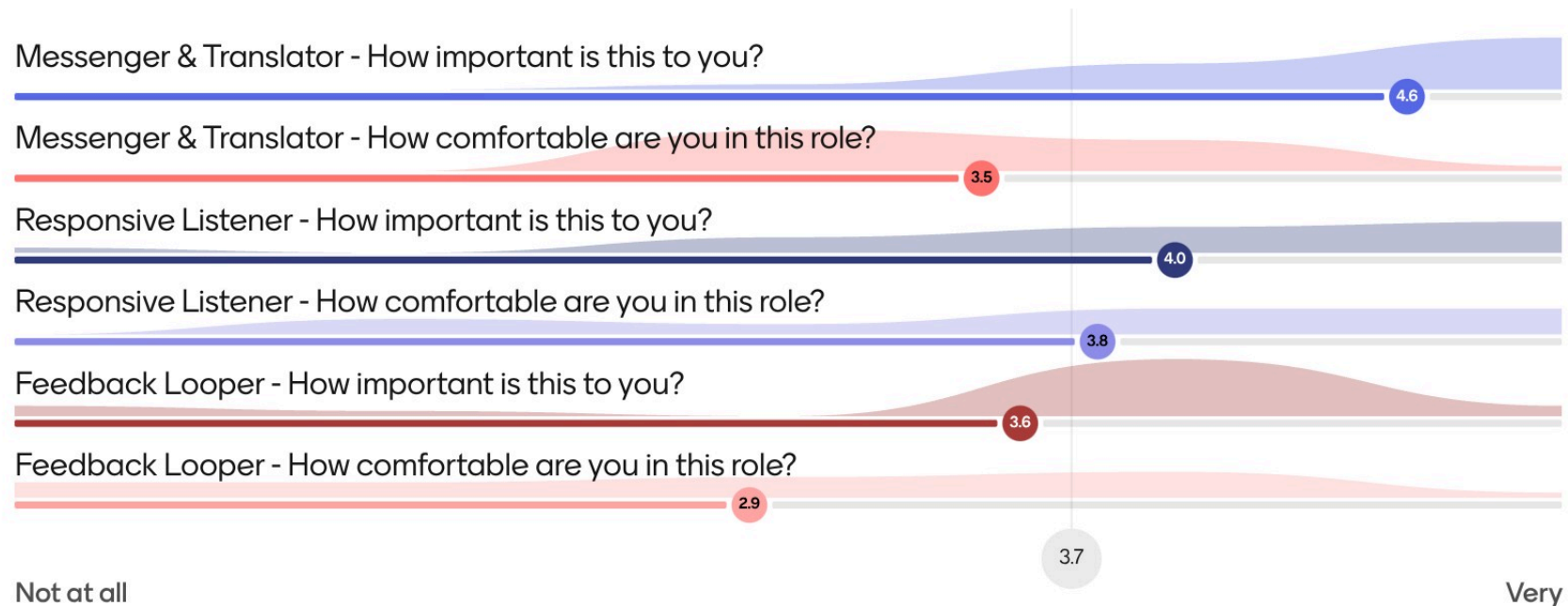
- Messenger & Translator
 - Break down complex issues in accessible, inclusive language
 - Communicate early and consistently — not just during crises
 - Share not just what decisions were made, but why
- Responsive Listener
 - Create predictable channels for input (town halls, surveys, listening sessions)
 - Ensure underrepresented voices are sought out and centered
 - Document, reflect, and report back on what was heard
- Feedback Looper
 - Show constituents how their input shaped decisions (or why it didn't)
 - Update community on implementation and follow-through
 - Close the loop, especially on contentious or emotional issues

Elected Official Roles

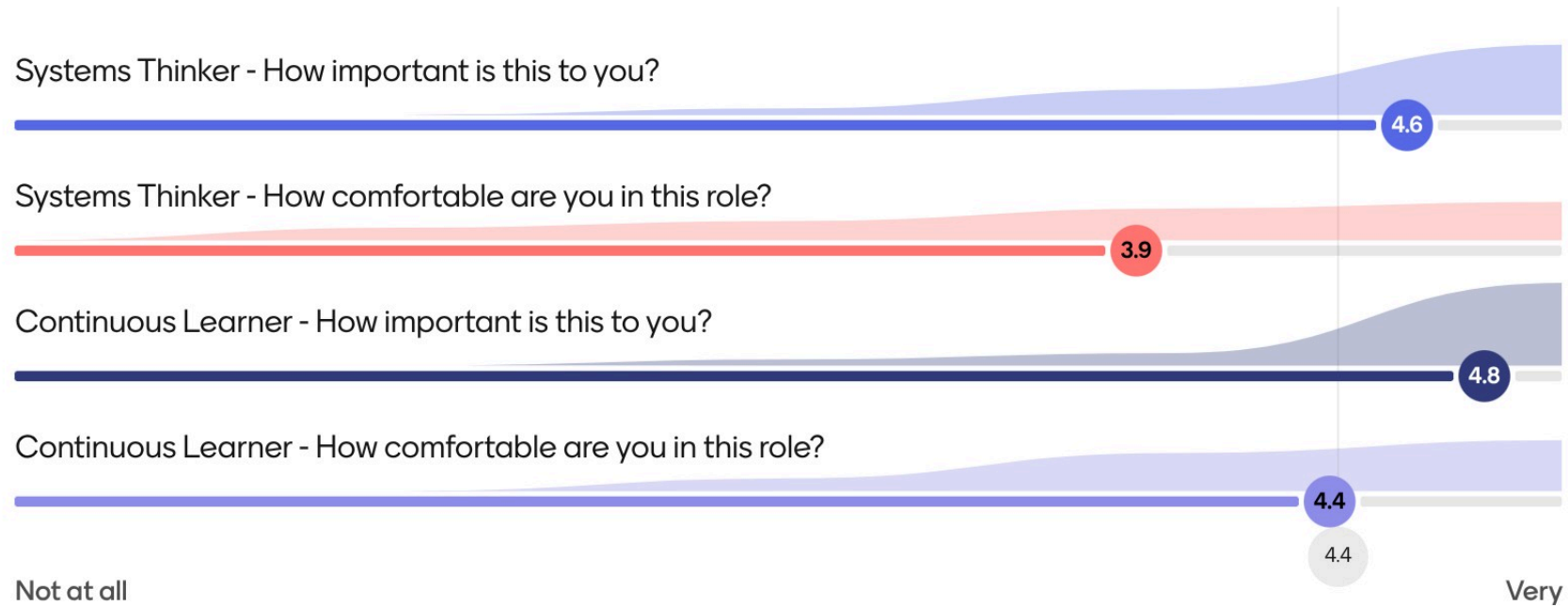
LEARNING & REFLECTION ROLES

- Systems Thinker
 - Understand root causes, not just symptoms
 - Connect the dots across departments, agencies, and policy areas
 - Address complexity with humility and collaboration
- Continuous Learner
 - Stay current on laws, best practices, and local trends
 - Learn from mistakes and welcome feedback
 - Attend trainings, conferences, or peer learning opportunities

ELECTED OFFICIAL ROLES - Communication & Accountability



ELECTED OFFICIAL ROLES - Learning & Reflection



Elected Official Roles

DEFENDER OF DEMOCRACY

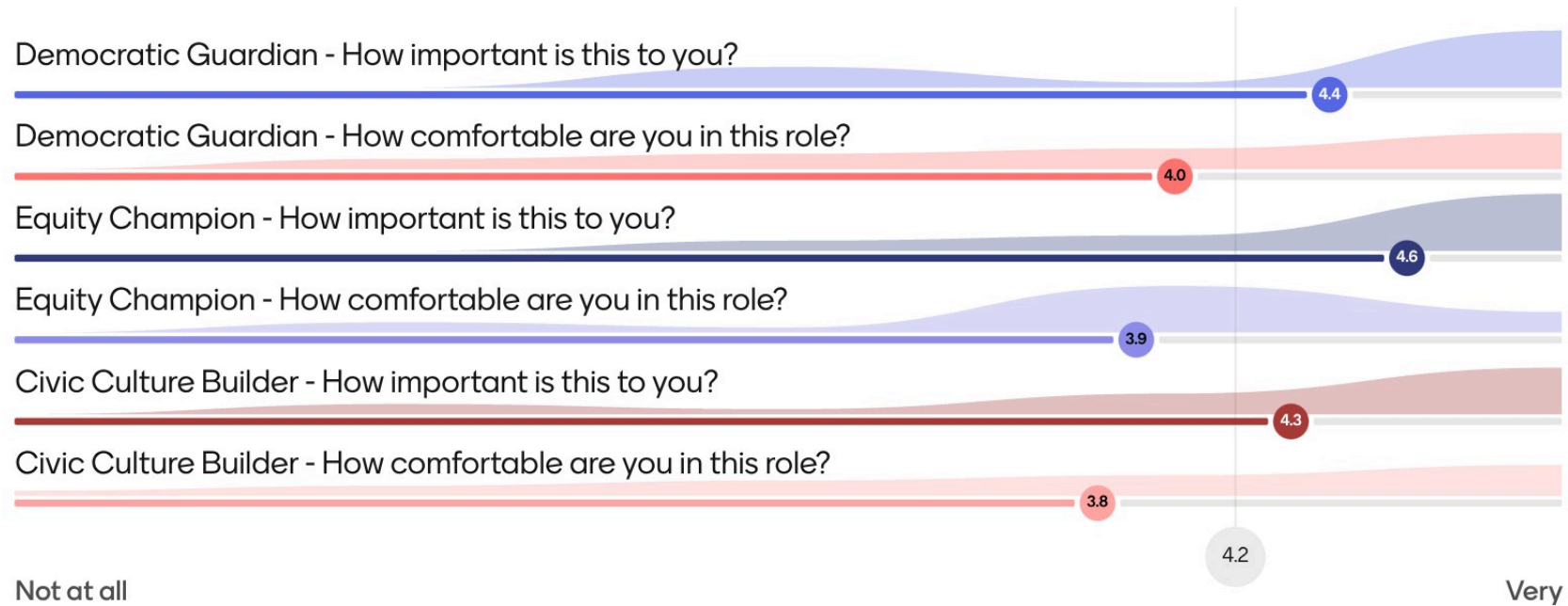
- Democratic Guardian
 - Uphold constitutional principles and rule of law
 - Speak out against authoritarianism, bigotry, and disinformation
 - Protect the integrity of elections and democratic processes
- Equity Champion
 - Recognize historic and systemic inequities in decision-making
 - Advocate for inclusive policies and equitable resource allocation
 - Use data and stories to drive change
- Civic Culture Builder
 - Model respectful disagreement and active listening
 - Celebrate civic participation and community wins
 - Create space for people to believe in government again

Elected Official Roles

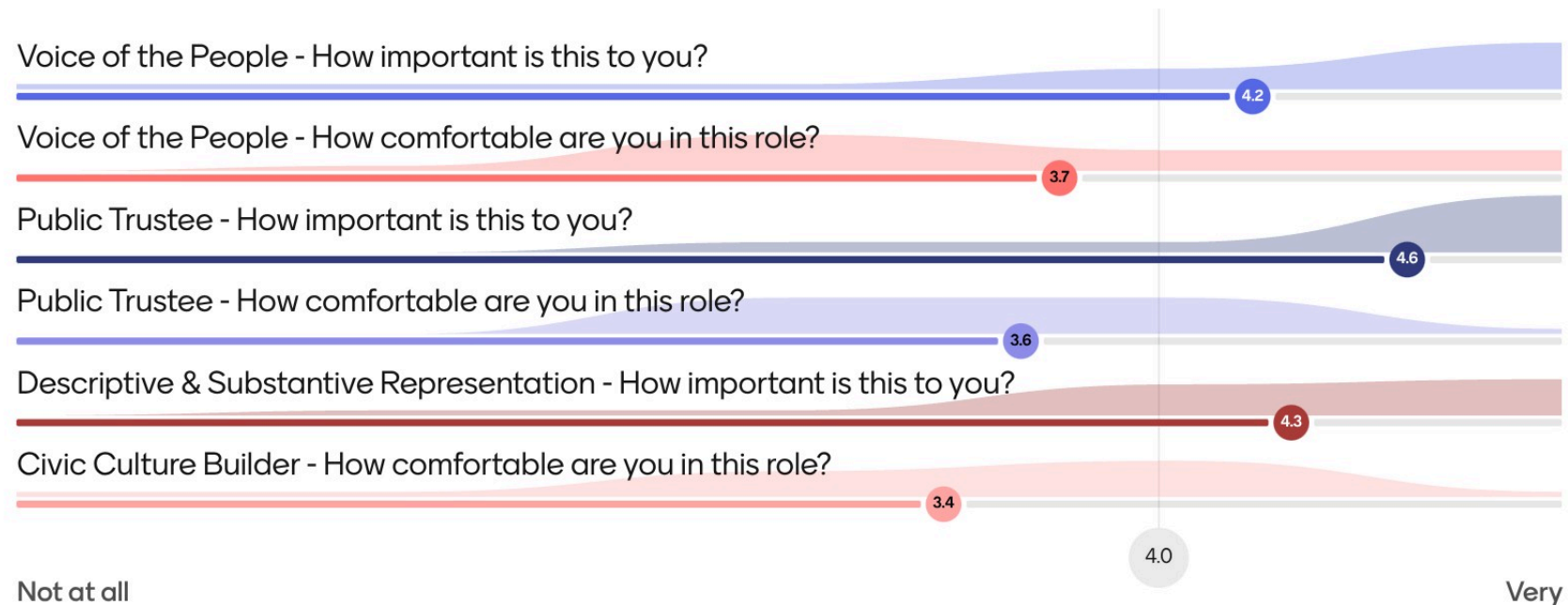
REPRESENTATIVE ROLES

- Voice of the People
 - Listen actively to diverse constituents
 - Understand both majority and minority viewpoints
 - Carry community concerns into the halls of governance
- Public Trustee
 - Make decisions grounded in long-term public interest
 - Use judgment, ethics, and expertise — not just popularity
 - Balance community needs with constitutional principles and laws
- Descriptive & Substantive Representation
 - Reflect the identities, experiences, and realities of the community (descriptive)
 - Advocate for the interests of communities even when not from them (substantive)

ELECTED OFFICIAL ROLES - Defender of Democracy



ELECTED OFFICIAL ROLES - Representative Roles



| Elected Official Roles | Examples of Responsibilities |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Policy Leader | Law-making, oversight, long-term vision |
| Constituent Ally | Accessible, responsive, helpful |
| Communicator | Transparent, values-driven, clear messaging |
| Bridge-BUILDER | Coalition-building, mediating, relational trust |
| Public Educator | Explain processes, build civic knowledge |
| Democracy Defender | Protect institutions, model integrity |
| Equity Champion | Lead with justice, repair historic harms |
| Systems Thinker | Strategic, curious, connects across silos |
| Continuous Learner | Seeks feedback, improves, learns from others |
| Representative | Voice of the people, trustee, equity advocate |

11:45 am

A KEY TENSION:

BALANCING THE DELEGATE

AND THE TRUSTEE

(Handout)

Delegate vs Trustee Model

Core Question: Should officials enact the will of the people or use their own judgment?

- **Delegate:** Officials act as a mouthpiece for constituents — they vote and advocate strictly according to the preferences of the electorate.
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Burke argued famously in 1774: “Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion.”

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- Key concepts:
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- Often rooted in frameworks like:
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 - Relational Organizing (PICO, Industrial Areas Foundation)

EXAMPLES

| Situation | Delegate Role | Trustee Role | Participatory | Transformative |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|--|---|
| A controversial rezoning proposal | Vote how the neighborhood majority wants | Weigh long-term citywide impact | Host a listening session + community mapping | Consider how development patterns reflect racial equity or access |
| Policing policies | Reflect what constituents are asking for (more/fewer resources) | Make a values-based call on safety + justice | Engage in community-led safety planning | Challenge root causes and shift power |

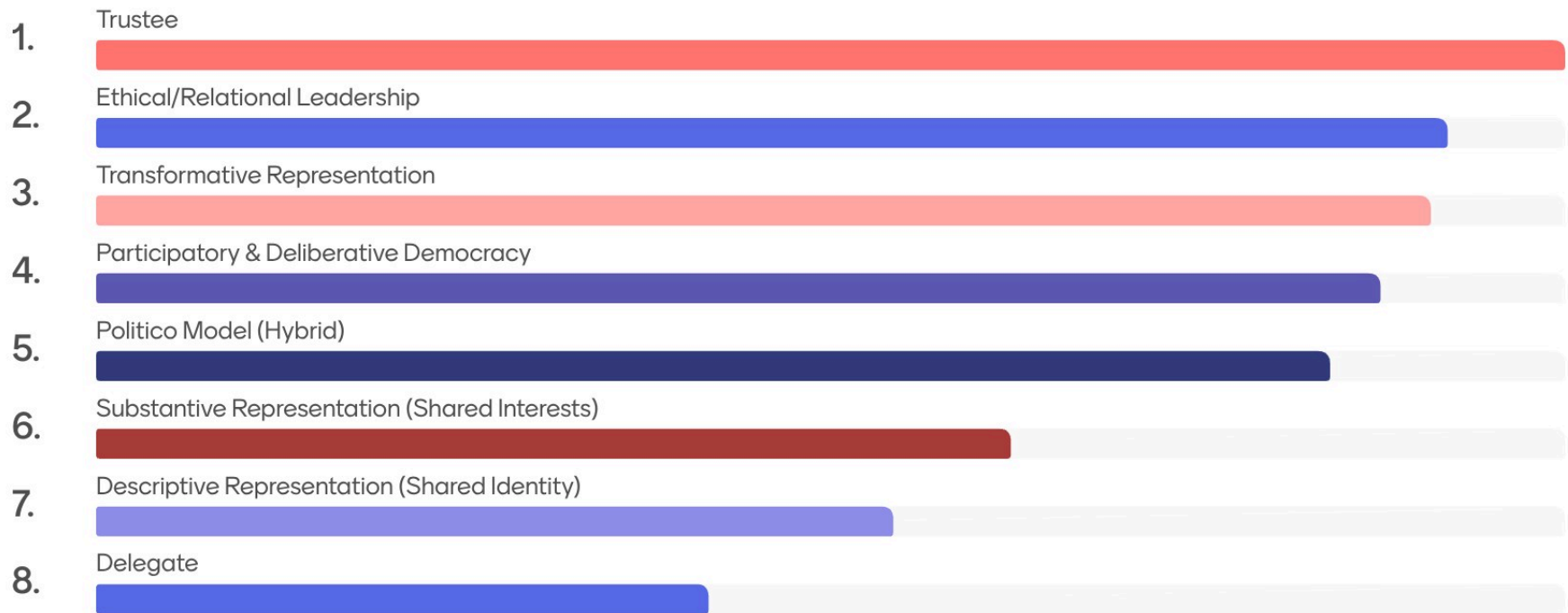
GROUP REFLECTION

- Which of these approaches resonates with you the most?
 - Complete Menti Slide
- When do you feel like a delegate, and when do you lead as a trustee?
- How might these different ways of being an elected official affect council dynamics?

12:15 pm

**VALUES, ROLES
& BOUNDARIES**

Please rank these based on what kind of representative you want to be.



Individual Reflection (Worksheet)

- What are 3 values that guide your public service?
- Whose voices are you accountable to — and how do you make that visible?
- What boundaries are non-negotiable for you?
- How do you signal your values to constituents even when they disagree?
- What do you owe your constituents - and what not?
 - Be sure to consider your relationship with loyalty in your public relationships

Individual Reflection (Back side of worksheet)

What does your ideal relationship with your constituents look like?