



Government Oriented

The Watson Writes Portfolio

(These are just a sampling of the dozens of articles written on this subject matter)

How Two Cities Were Guided to Truth Over Public Hysteria

How FlashVote helped two cities make smarter decisions

It was neither the best of times, nor the worst of times, but it was a story about two cities.

Each grappled with a burning question on their respective community centers. The first city was hearing very loud voices demanding that they build a new community center. The voices were loud and getting louder. The city held a town hall meeting, they read Facebook comments, they did an online survey showing 85% of the respondents in support. It seemed hands down that “everyone” wanted to spend many millions of dollars on the new center.

Thousands of miles away, the second city was facing a similar dilemma. They already had a community center, but it was in desperate need of reparation. This time the loud voices were of those opposed to improving their center. The council got hammered at their city council meeting, as well as online over their question about spending \$50 million on repairs. The feedback was entirely negative. Despite the city staff’s brilliant analysis of the good an upgraded center might bring, the deluge of input appeared to loathe the ideas and the expense.

A study of local governments in California and Texas found that 97% of their council decisions were influenced by “only a few local citizens.” The leadership of these two cities each took a wise move instead.

They both hired FlashVote.

FlashVote is the best friend to any city or municipality wanting the truth.

FlashVote establishes a community “panel”. This panel, consisting of many hundred participants, statistically and demographically reflects the total population. The recruitment of the panel focuses on general participation so attraction to a particular hot-bed topic does not sway results. FlashVote methodically keeps questions non-triggering and unbiased through proven and scientific means. It has been used on topics ranging from recycling, land use, housing and communications to COVID and backyard chickens. Any question in front of a local governing authority, and FlashVote has done a report on it. FlashVote captures both direct answers as well open-ended feedback. It gives government officials an authentic portrait of community truth.

Both communities got their answers in 48 hours. The answers were clear. Each community DID have opposing viewpoints on the construction of a community center.

In the first city, it turns out that only 33% of the community wanted the center. 66% did not. A decision not to build saved them \$30 million.

In the second city, two-thirds were highly supportive of new taxes to fund the refurbishment of their center, and only one third was not. Their \$50 million expenditure was going to be a good investment.

They each sought truth, and FlashVote delivered. “It would be great if the noisy few were always pointing the wrong way, because then you could just assume the community wanted the opposite. But, we’re not quite that lucky. Since they are only the opposite about 70% of the time, you need high-quality data all of the time,” states FlashVote CEO Kevin Lyons. “The number one complaint we hear from regular people about their governments is: ‘those guys are just serving special interests, not my interests.’ It is widespread. Residents end up really mad at local officials, even though the officials don’t have bad intent, just bad data. Of course, the officials usually don’t have any idea this is all going on, until it’s too late.”

“You think you know what’s going on out there, but you just don’t.”

Unless you use FlashVote.

How Orange County California “Masked” the Truth!

It seems Orange County California feels driven by anti-maskers. The county's board of education took their cause all the way to the Supreme Court in 2021. Their request, to overturn the state's mask mandate was denied.

The argument had surfaced in the southern California county long before then, however. In mid-2020, fiery Board of Supervisors meetings exploded with angry mask-issue opinions. At a well televised meeting, 100 people lined up to speak about the county-imposed mask mandate. "This mask mandate is ridiculous," they asserted.

Their voices were 100 against mask mandates, and 1 for them. "Conventional wisdom" took "100 to 1" as proportional to the opinion of Orange County's total population. Even if it was not perfectly indicative of the public sentiment, certainly it was an indicator, right? (Spoiler alert: Wrong.)

Supervisor Doug Chaffee had other numbers, however. He reported that those reaching out to the county numbered 10 to 1 IN FAVOR of masked mandates. So, what was that the real indicator? Were the 99 people yelling at the supervisor outnumbered by almost a thousand people who felt differently? That was the real indicator, right? (Spoiler alert two: Wrong.)

The truth is that no one knew what the public really thought. All the leaders of the county just knew emotions were running high. No one took a stand for the true voice of the people, because no one actually knew what that voice would say.

FlashVote could have told them. FlashVote is a patent pending technology and process that recruits and establishes hundreds of county citizens onto an information generating panel. It has a methodology to construct non-agendized questions that solicit un-biased responses, and a technology that captures, analyzes and delivers results in 48 hours.

The Orange County Board of Supervisors could have answered the noisy public quickly and decisively the next day. They could have determined how their community really felt. They did not do that because they did not have the information.

Soon thereafter, their Chief Health Officer resigned under the noise of protesters. Her successor rolled back the mandate.

Now we know what the public actually thought.

Months after this drama played out, Chapman University, a nationally ranked private university, in the city of Orange, did a study. Time consuming, and costly, the study finally told the county what FlashVote could have told them in 48 hours.

The Orange County Board of Supervisors made bad assumptions about their public.

Mike Moddian, a lecturer of leadership studies at Chapman described the population. "Orange County has a long reputation as being the land of John Wayne, the Save Our State initiative, and the John Birch Society; however, the county has changed. OC today is diverse both culturally and politically. Registration numbers for the two major political parties are relatively close, and the county has a significant number of independent voters. OC is increasingly looking for like the rest of the country as opposed to being an ultra-conservative outlier among coastal California counties."

The survey was done with 703 county residents (a similar number to the amount of respondents in a FlashVote inquiry). The survey found that 83% of the population felt that the coronavirus was a real threat. 80% did not feel that it was under control in Orange County.

It turns out that they DID support what the government and county efforts to fight it. 90% appreciated the current rules on social distancing.

Regarding mask mandates: 70% supported it.

That percentage was hugely different than the Board of Supervisor's meeting where those against mask mandates appeared to be a whopping 99%. It also did not support Supervisor Chaffee's observation that those against mask mandates was as low as under 10%. The reality was that 30% were anti-mask. 73% felt the government response was about right or did not go far enough.

Fred Smoller, associate professor of political science at Chapman observed, "In contrast to its reputation as the home of conservative extremists who think the threat posed by the coronavirus is over blown and that efforts to contain it are over the top, data suggest that most Orange County residents believe coronavirus is a serious threat and are supportive of government action to fight it."

Some people were going to be pissed about mandates no matter what, but imagine what the Board of Supervisors could have done had they understood the nuanced picture of their population. Think how they could have answered the angry mob, had they had information on their side.

But how could they have known?

FlashVote.

Could "Nielsen Ratings" Help Local Governments Find Out What Their Community Really Thinks?

Back in the day, home entertainment was so simple that one small booklet a week could tell us everything that was worth watching that week. That magic booklet was called the "TV Guide."

Besides upcoming shows, the TV Guide featured "ratings" of all the shows from the previous week. Loyal fans would dive into the pages to see how their favorite shows were doing... in the eyes of everyone else.

It could be heart-breaking to learn that the show you loved was still "secret" and no one else was watching it. That meant it would not be long for the airwaves.

The big mystery was: HOW DID TV GUIDE KNOW HOW MANY PEOPLE WERE WATCHING?

They seemed to know what "everyone" was doing, but no one you knew ever seemed to be asked about what they were watching.

They had the Nielsen ratings.

Nielsen ratings came from a large sample of representative people with TVs who reported what they watched. Simple and scientific. They did not amplify the loud voiced fans of any given shows. They did not solicit opinions from anyone who wanted to give them. These Nielsen panels provided good data about what regular people were doing.

The Nielsens and the television industry knew that a loud group of fans proclaiming the greatness of a given show does not mean that most people watched it. Just as a loud group of detractors doesn't mean that they don't,

Does this remind you of public input and local governments yet? Getting representative feedback is an ongoing problem for municipal governments. About 97% admit they have been influenced by a few loud voices even while recognizing that those voices may be outliers.

Now imagine you had something like a Nielsen panel of your local residents. Instead of just the noisy few you'd have the voice of the many, instantly available whenever you want.

That's what FlashVote does.

FlashVote builds a custom panel of regular residents who are on call to give you statistically representative community input in 48 hours. Participation is inclusive with web, text and phone call options and all results come with core demographics and location-based filters. So each short survey for residents is like ten surveys worth of data for you.

While the Nielsens provided critical data for the television industry, FlashVote provides critical data for you and your local governments, and just as fast.

The big difference is that you don't have to spend millions of dollars for FlashVote data.

You get the speed, accuracy and deep insights of your very own scientific panel for a fraction of the cost of one traditional scientific survey.

You may not be a Nielsen rated TV star, but with the right data informing your decisions FlashVote will make you a shining star in your community.

Sound Good or Do Good? Six Ways to Make Sure You Don't Sound Bad and Do Bad

Local public officials come in many ethical shapes and sizes. Some come in with a vision of how they want things to run. Some already know what changes they want to make. They do not care if anyone else agrees with them. Those folks don't last long in office.

Others come in believing that they represent exactly what the public desires. Until they have proof to the contrary, they will operate under that assumption.

The best are the ones who arrive on the scene with a sincere hope they can make the right decisions and implement projects that get wide public support and approval.

Here are some tips to effectively both “sound good and do good” rather than “sound bad and do bad.”

1. **Be careful about what you ask**

Many city managers put out a question using a nonscientific means. They harshly discover that they have only succeeded in triggering people who have negative feedback. Is that opinion widely held? Does the rest of the public agree? No one knows. (Studies have shown that 70% of the time, the public does NOT agree.)

2. **Be careful how you ask**

The exact wording of a question is vital. You can taint your results both by revealing too much when permission is asked to get the person’s input, as well as the way the question is phrased.

3. **The three questions to ask about input**

Is it new? If it provides no new information, you are not gaining anything. Is it true? We live in an era of “fake news” and conspiracy theories. The most interesting input is useless until you verify that it is real. Is it for you? If the input is not something you can control or influence, you can’t solve it. Pass.

4. **Ask for input that matches your audience’s level of expertise**

Make sure that the data you are soliciting matches the knowledge, interest, and desires of the audience. It is the pizza analogy. You would ask a group of hungry teenagers what they like on their pizza, the kind of crust and its thickness. You would not ask them to weigh in on what oven to use, how long to bake it and the ideal cooking temperature.

5. **Process your information effectively**

Determine the public problem through a proven information gathering tool. Determine possible solutions based on that information. Evaluate your solutions with experts. Test solution ideas with your community panel. Choose the best solution based on educated and well-informed feedback. Implement it and measure the results.

6. **Don’t call for a community forum or use spot surveys, use FlashVote**

Angry voices at townhalls are wrong two thirds of the time. Online or random email surveys are not much better. The only tool that can provide you with the tested and verified data you need is FlashVote. FlashVote is a patent pending technology and process. Its “secret sauce” is recruiting and establishes a demographically representative and statistically viable panel. The FlashVote methodology constructs non-agendized questions that solicit unbiased responses, and a technology that captures, analyzes and delivers results in 48 hours. Panel participants are engaged without bias on a given issue. They receive the survey results as well, and this helps solidify their involvement and future responsiveness.

A great example of a “sound good and do good” public official is Dan Jordan, the city manager of Duarte California.

Dan states, "I enjoy the range of challenge you face as a city manager. I think one of the pieces we are often missing, in the policy process and the decisions we have to make, is having sufficient data. One of the things I love is anybody who comes along with ways to present more data on the decisions we need to make. Particularly high quality data. It is so hard to come by and so valuable. Having surveys and questionnaires that actually get people to think about public policy problems in that nuanced way, that is really the Holy Grail of where we are as decision makers." He continues, "My background in having a PhD in politics and economics, I can really appreciate when I see great data tools. FlashVote is one of them. To have something that can be deployed so quickly, so efficiently and be brought to bear on decisions that we need to make in the short term or over the long term. I haven't seen anything like it. It is a highly social scientific influenced tool that is so useful that has enabled us to make good decisions. I think FlashVote will make its way into local governments and the public policy process and development more and more as the future goes forward."

Be a Dan. Use FlashVote. You'll get the "best pizza." Intelligence never tasted so good.