

# Navigating the Politics of Professional Management

WCMA Winter Conference 2026

# Who Am I?

- MPA Professor, Director of the Whitburn Center
- Current member of the Oshkosh School Board, Oshkosh Board of Review
- Former member of the Oshkosh Common Council, Plan Commission
- Former career in public policy as a lobbyist and other roles
- Believer in good government!

# About the Whitburn Center

The Whitburn Center conducts nonpartisan, practical, applied research focused on evaluating and improving governance, professional management, and public policy in Wisconsin and beyond.

Five focus areas:

- High-Functioning Governing Boards
- Administrative Capacity
- Intergovernmental and Intersectoral Cooperation
- Fiscal Sustainability
- Civic Trust and Civic Engagement

# Questions for You

- How many here are city/village admins or managers?
- How many here work for a municipality with an admin or manager?
- Why did you get into it?

# When Tenets Collide

7) **Refrain from all political activities** which undermine public confidence in professional administrators. Refrain from participation in the election of the members of the employing legislative body.

8) Continually improve professional capabilities and those of others while fostering growth and development through ethical leadership and **effective management practices**.

4) **Serve the best interests** of all community members.

# Lessons from our Covid Study

What were your barriers?

- Everything I do is controversial.
- Politics.
- Growing political discord and public divisiveness.
- Misinformation circulating among the citizens.
- Locally we were not able to do a lot in this political environment.
- There is a coalition hell-bent on obstructing.

# Brooks Williams: Attention Tax

- It is an attention tax, a verification tax, an interruption tax.
- Modern ignorance has become insisting on simple answers to complex systems, and then punishing people who tell the truth about the complexity. It is turning public service into a live fact-checking exercise, where the loudest voice sets the agenda and **the professionals are forced to spend their best hours disproving nonsense** instead of building something better.
- When a community rewards unverified outrage, **it taxes competence**. It drains the people who are capable of running the machine, and then it acts shocked when the machine struggles.

# We Cannot Ignore Politics in Professional Management!

- It's here.
- It's disruptive.
- It's getting worse.
  
- You know this if you've been at this for awhile. Newer folks struggle more in my experience (we aren't teaching it well enough IMO).

# The Reality of Government Power

- Government is, at its core, a result of the willingness of us to cede treasure and freedom for the greater good.
- Norton Long argued that power is finite. This concept applies in many ways.

# Political Power

Where does it come from?

- Elections
- Coalition Building
- Results
- Acceptance
- Populism

# Administrative Power

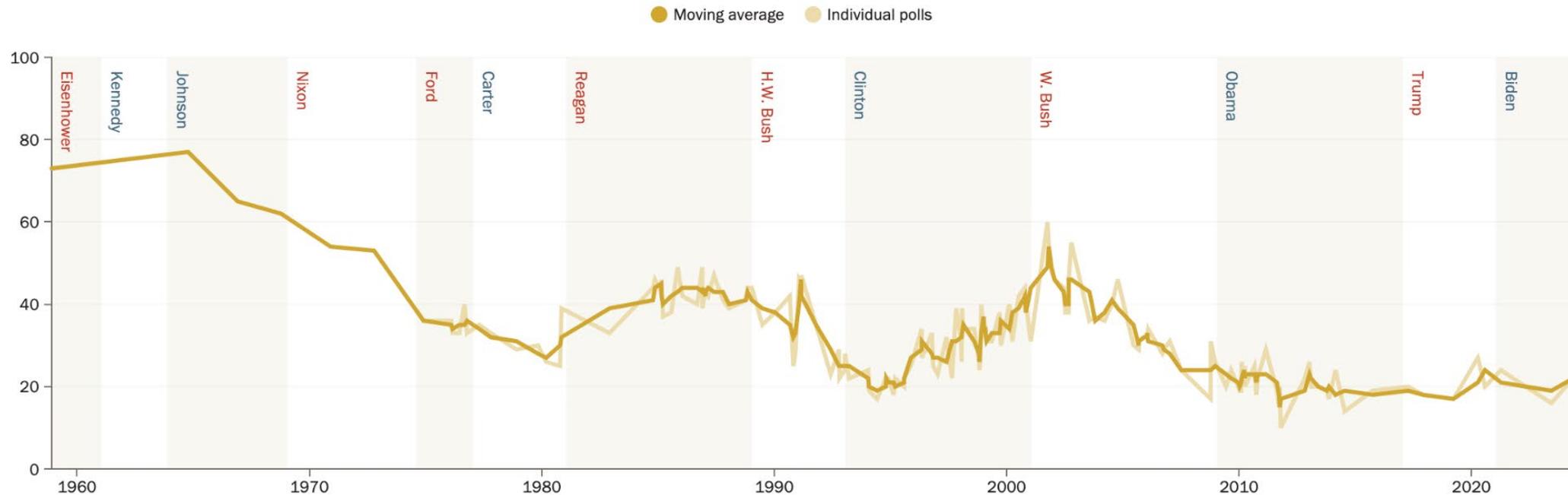
Where does it come from?

- Expertise
- Credentials
- Research
- Acceptance
- Results
  
- Trust!

# Context of Declining Trust

## Public trust in government near historic lows

*% who say they trust the government to do what is right just about always/most of the time*

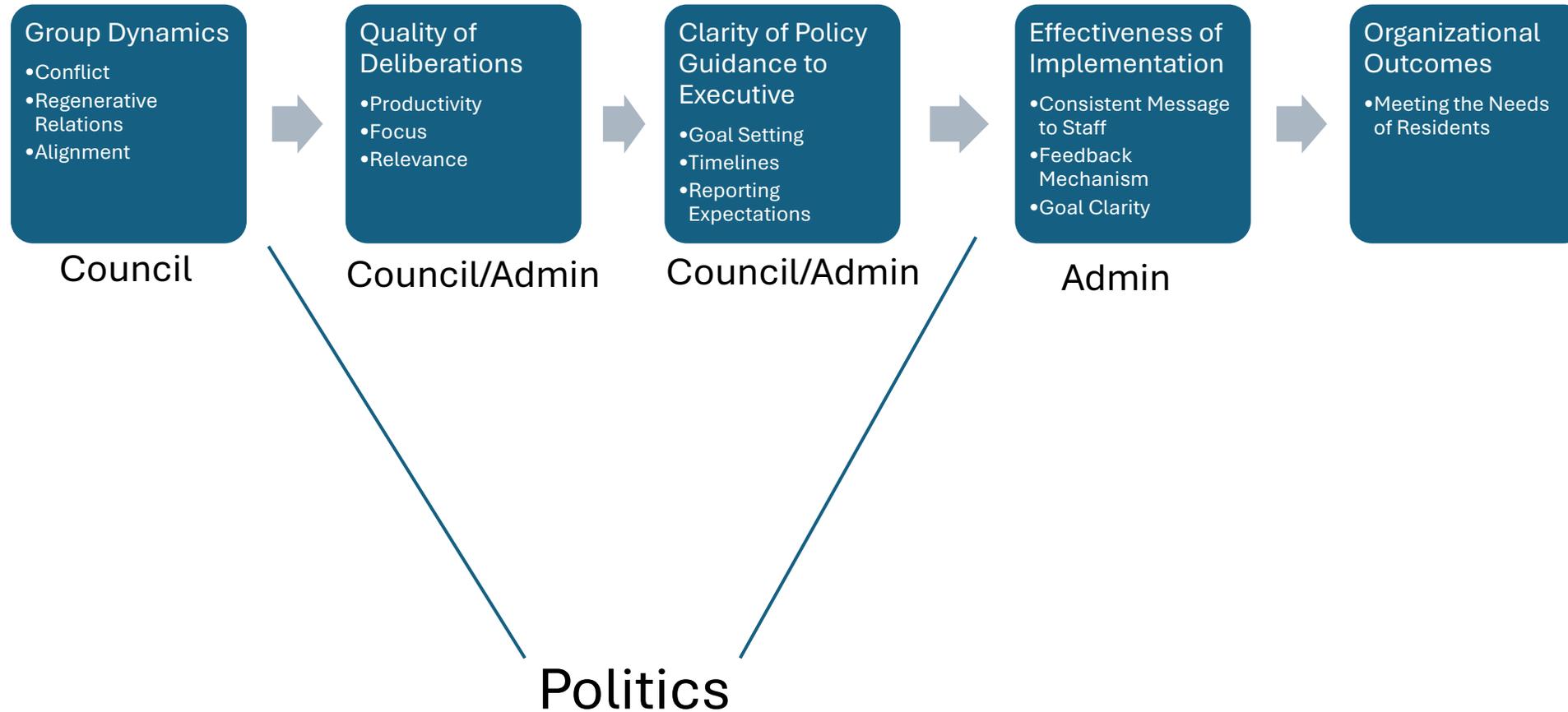


Sources: Pew Research Center, National Election Studies, Gallup, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and CNN surveys.

# Creeping Partisanship Into Non-Partisan Elections

- More of this at the local level. What happens?
  - Boards exhibiting predictable entrenched conflict perform worse than those with other conflict types.
  - When local elected officials take sides on issues based solely on who is and is not on their ideological team, they are separating decision-making from the specific substance of issues.
  - When political party needs take precedent, community needs are at risk of being an afterthought.
  - Risk ignoring what boards actually do!
- In other words: Administrative values are supplanted by political values. And what is the ultimate political value?

# Linkages for a Successful Governance Team



# From Politics as Endgame to Politics as Tool

- We want to create a governing dynamic where politics is a tool for governing and not an end in itself.
- We are not trying to keep politics out, we are trying to contain, manage, and utilize it.
- How do we do it? Create systems!!

# 1) Onboarding for New Members

- Job description
- Role definition
- Alignment statements (How do we define accountability, performance, transparency?)
- Communication rules.

Goal: Make the job clear so members feel empowered on day one.

## 2) Set Policies for Giving Direction

The heart of the board-executive relationship is the direction given from the council/board to the administrator.

- What constitutes direction? Majority voice.
- What is the process for speaking as a majority voice? No ambiguity.
- Be direct when your professional judgement is that the direction is a bad idea.

Goal: Remove agenda-setting politics from the equation.

# 3) Pro-Active Transparency

Fight the attention tax:

- Post the most requested and or misunderstood fiscal and performance data at a highly visible location on your website.
- Create a running FAQ responding to myths that won't die.
- When in doubt post it.

Goal: Clear the deck of easily weaponizable political distractions.

# 4) Provide Some Kind of Policy Analysis

Frame the zone of acceptable options to prevent politically-driven amendments/bad ideas.

- Don't reinvent the wheel: Describe pros and cons of other options you considered.
- Put it in writing in the packet to prevent gotcha-moments.
- Use numbers.

Goal: Keep final decisions with the zone of acceptability.

# 5) External Communications Strategy

A shift in mindset from external communications as a luxury to a core function:

- What is your government doing?
- Why is it doing it?
- Is it doing it well?

Goal: An offensive strategy to build civic literacy.

# 6) Embrace Institutional Neutrality

Create a policy for institutional neutrality.

- Clarify the appropriateness of symbolic resolutions based on relevance to the governance body.

Goal: Prevent non-substantive conflict and activist activities.

# Overall Goals

- Empower your board to govern with focus and role clarity.
  - Educate those you serve on basic functions of local government.
  - Contain non-substantive political conflict.
  - Improve local government performance.
- 
- We can't stop politics, and that is ok. We want to contain and direct it towards substantive purpose.

# Thoughts/Questions/Your Experience

- Please share!