

**The Great Disconnect, Circa 2006**  
**How Public Confusion Impedes Political Solutions to Some of Our Biggest Problems**  
**[Or The Perfect Storm of Public Opinion]**  
**Adam Davis, Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall, Inc.**  
**City Club Speech**

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Good afternoon everyone. It's a pleasure to be here.

I think a lot of you know my partner, Tim Hibbitts. I met Tim almost 30 years ago at PSU and we began working together in 1977. I'm the partner who wears a tie more often. I'm also the partner with the easier last name to spell—D-A-V-I-S versus H-I-B-B-I-T-T-S—the two t's fool everyone. So what do Tim and I do three years ago—we make Su Midghall a partner. Easy name, yeah, right. Sue Mitchell. No, no—Su Midghall. So you have someone today with an easy first name—Adam—and an easy last name—Davis. Adam Davis, and I'm happy to be here today.

Everyone, you can't take the polling out of the pollster. So, I would like to start out with a few questions of all of you and I'll help the radio audience out there by estimating what numbers I see. As I tell my focus group participants, I want to get to know you. So, three questions. First of all, a show of hands, how many of you are new to the state of Oregon during the last 10 years? [Estimate-25% raise their hands.] How many of you are younger than 35 years of age? [Estimate-about a third raise their hands.] And, finally how many of you are registered to vote? [Estimate-nearly all.]

Another thing I do at the beginning of my focus groups is to lay down some ground rules and expectations for the research, and I want to do that with all of you right now. First of all, I'm not going to make any predictions about next week. Second, I'm going to focus on Oregon and not what's going on nationally. Third, you're going to hear me make reference to numbers, yes. But, I'm also going to be talking about qualitative or focus group research.

Our firm is unusual in this sense. We do as much focus group research as we do survey research. This gives us an opportunity to not only learn how people are feeling about things, but why they are feeling that way. I want to share with you the motivations that underlie a lot of the attitudes we are hearing about in our telephone and online survey research.

Finally, I am going to be talking about the *general public's* opinion. I'm not talking about what you are usually reading in newspapers regarding public opinion which is mostly about voters, and in most cases about only motivated voters. These are folks who voted in three or four out of the last four elections. If you do the math, you will realize the newspaper articles about surveys are really only talking about 50% or less of the general population.

Furthermore, I want to focus on how the bell on the bell-shaped curve of the general public's opinion is feeling about major issues today. So many of us only hear from the shrill ends of the opinion spectrum. I'd like to share with you my specific take on the general public opinion

climate in which I contend there is a large disconnect between business and community leaders and the general public. It concerns both core values and beliefs and some key issues.

Now, many of you have heard about the Perfect Storm. Sebastian Junger wrote about it and George Clooney starred in a movie about it. It's about five conditions that came together—two low-pressure areas, warm air coming up from the south, cold air down from the north, and moisture being fed by the Gulf Stream. It all came together over the North Atlantic to form the “Storm of the Century.” Many lives were lost and damages were in the billions of dollars. What I contend is that we have five conditions coming together at this moment, forming the perfect storm of public opinion in the State of Oregon. I want to address those five conditions with you today.

Let's start off first with **public cynicism, negativism, and skepticism about government – that's Condition #1**. We are seeing the highest levels of cynicism, negativism, and skepticism in 30 years of doing quantitative and qualitative research in Oregon. When we ask people about credibility and trust, government is now at the bottom of the list. It is right down there with politicians. Government—Politicians. We used to see some differences between levels of government. We used to see people be more positive about local government than about state government, and more positive about state government than the federal government.

We're no longer seeing big differences. All of government is lumped together and has sunk right down to the bottom of the list of institutions that people trust. Less than 20% of the general public will rate any level of government as doing a very good job. Why? There are the usual reasons you know and hear about – waste, inefficiency, malfeasance. But there's something else too. What we hear about a lot is government is just not getting the job done. We hear about in-fighting – the Multnomah County Commission comes up quite a bit. We hear about the Oregon Legislature—Democrats and Republicans fighting like cats and dogs.

So it's waste, it's inefficiency, but it's also great frustration that things are just not getting done. In my opinion, this is resulting in lower voter turnout and people tuning out government and politics altogether. It's fueled every day by real-life headlines in the paper like:

- “Ward Weaver, Pond & Gaddis: ‘Workers put on leave over handling abuse reports’”
- “Use of county cars revs debate”
- “Outlaws go free, warrants pile up”
- “Stink still rises in city sewer deal”
- “Dirty dealings mar clean money law”
- “Few watched over City's till while it was emptied”
- “Police chief's judgment is now on trial”
- “The city that isn't quite working”

Over and over people are being exposed to this and it's having an impact on their attitudes toward government and politics. That's Condition #1 – negativism, cynicism, and skepticism about government.

**Condition #2 is decreasing awareness and knowledge about government.** Awareness and knowledge levels about the A-B-C's of government are low and getting lower. About 30% of the general public cannot name a single tax that is used to help pay for public services. Think about that for a moment—they can't name property tax, income tax, or even a sales tax. They do not know how our public services are paid for.

Oregonians feel the state pays too much on services they consider far less important than education, public safety, healthcare, and services to seniors. But 70% cannot tell you what percentage of the state budget goes to those services, and those who offer up a percentage come in at 32%. In fact, education, public safety, healthcare, and senior services – services the public think are very important – make up over 90% of the state general fund budget, leaving very little to cut in other areas.

How about a little Politics 101? How many of you know personally or know someone who knows personally one of the US Senators? How many have worked with the office of either US Senator? I'm sure most of you have some kind of connection. Are you ready for this? More than four out of ten – that's 43% of Oregonians – don't know that Oregon has two US Senators. Ask them if they can name Oregon's two US Senators, and 74% cannot do it.

Related to this is the fact that many Oregonians don't associate government services with the quality of life they have in their neighborhoods. I'll never forget a focus group where I asked them to name some government services that contribute to the quality of life in their neighborhood. I did the silent probe to give them a chance to think. Finally I couldn't stand it anymore and asked, "What about police?" "Oh yeah, police." More silence. "What about fire?" "Oh yes, fire and emergency medical." "Nothing else?" No. But this makes the point that many do not know the A-B-C's of government, nor how government affects the quality of life we enjoy in this state.

I'm often asked by public sector clients, "We want to know how people feel about the quality of service we provide." I tell them that we also need to ask if they even know who provides their service. There's a great deal of confusion over who's even providing these services.

I see very little indication that this will change. Why? Are they learning it at school? No. Are they learning it around the dinner table? No. Are they learning it from the politicians? No. If anything, politicians are taking advantage of this ignorance and making it worse. Candidate after candidate is making promises, saying it's all about waste and inefficiency. They cater to these low awareness and knowledge levels, they get into office, and then they can't deliver on the promises they made to the voters because of the realities of the public finance system. This leads to expectations not being met and public opinion continues to sour, so they're just feeding it. So that's Condition #2 – Oregonians seemingly knowing less and less about how government works.

**Condition #3 is increasing anxiety about personal economic security.** This is important. Su, Tim, and I are hearing more about this both quantitatively and qualitatively. A big part of this involves the sandwich generation. A lot of us are dealing with being concerned financially with

not only our children, but also our grandchildren, our parents, and our grandparents. The crunch is on this generation. A lot of you in this room are experiencing this.

But there are other serious concerns, including the rising cost of healthcare. Two-thirds of the general population believe major change needs to be made to the healthcare system in this nation, and we have been seeing concern about healthcare costs in Oregon go up and up in our research. We also hear about not having enough money for retirement. Add to this the rising cost of fuel not only for our automobiles, but also to heat our homes. The bottom line? More people are telling us that they want to vote for a tax to support something that they care very deeply about, but they just can't because of the economic realities they deal with daily. And that's Condition #3.

So, **Condition #4--widening institutional negativity.** I spoke earlier about the beating that the public sector, and government specifically, is taking in terms of favorability ratings. For so long we heard from survey respondents about needing to turn to corporate America for leadership; that we need to run government more like a business. We're not hearing much about that now. \$400 million executive retirement packages, fraud, tax evasion, and other illegal activities from Wall Street to corporate headquarters here in Portland have sunk large business in terms of favorability ratings and credibility with the public. Then what about the media? No way. There are very few sources left that enjoy any credibility with the public. Which again adds to the climate we have in this city and in this state.

Finally, the **5<sup>th</sup> element of this perfect storm? It's something I call values disconnect** between a lot of you who are community and business leaders and the bell on the bell shaped curve of public opinion. We all feel strongly about certain things including civic involvement, our jobs, family, and religion and spirituality. But what we are seeing in our research are differences in emphasis and weighting between business and community leaders and the general public.

Leaders tend to emphasize career and job opportunity and civic involvement more, while the general public tends to place more emphasis on family and religion and spirituality. My friends, the Republicans figured that out a lot earlier than the Democrats (if they have even figured it out by now). So what, you might ask? It comes down to communication. These two groups--both very important to the health of a community--are not very good at communicating with each other. We earlier talked about disconnect in the form of awareness and knowledge levels of government and politics. The other disconnect is this different emphasis on core values and beliefs – Condition #5.

So, there you have it. The Perfect Storm in public opinion. The five converging conditions are all public opinion-related and don't even include demographic and economic changes that have and will continue to have an impact on our state, region, and city, as well as on politics in this state.

I want to talk about some issues now. What do Tim, Su, and I hear from that bell on the bell shaped curve of public opinion? Some more disconnects.

You would think by looking at the newspaper and listening to groups of business and community leaders that it is all about education—that that is the premier issue that we need to address. Friends, for many Oregonians, education is not on their radar screen. *There is no one single issue that enjoys majority support as the issue that Oregonians want to see something done about.* Rather than education, many Oregonians would say rising healthcare costs, or the economy, or population growth—is the most important issue. So again, some disconnect.

Want to hear another one? How about population growth. Fascinating. I go to meetings involving community and business leaders and I hear about the importance of population growth. We need to grow our economy and we can't grow our economy without population growth. I can tell you right now that Oregonians know population growth is coming, but they don't like it at all. When we do trend work, we see ratings of “very undesirable” given to population growth. Then when we ask them the specific question “Do you need population growth to grow the economy?” The answer is NO! Two-thirds of Oregonians are telling us that.

Do you know what we need to do to improve the business climate? This is a classic. Many business and community leaders say we need to cut taxes and roll back those environmental regulations. You ask Oregonians what should be done to help the economy in Oregon and they say instead invest in healthcare and education. If you want to turn this state around, to make this state attractive to businesses, you do that. You continue to protect our environment—that's why we moved here. And as far as taxes are concerned—listen, everyone would like to have reduced taxes, but I think you would be surprised at how realistic Oregonians are.

What about schools and wasteful administration? I hear so many business and community leaders saying it is all about the amount of money being spent on administrators. If we could just turn this around, we could get them to support more funding for schools. Wrong. When they are talking about waste and inefficiency, and this is the value of focus group research, they are talking about other things as well. One thing being missed in this discussion is curriculum. You have a lot of folks who are unhappy about what is and is not included in the curriculum. I may ruffle some feathers in this group, but what we hear about over and over again is the lack of values-based education. I'm just the messenger here—I'm just telling you what I'm hearing. What these Oregonians want in our public schools is something that will result in students who graduate with a stronger work ethic and a greater level of civility.

Finally, party affiliation. It's always about Republicans and Democrats—Democrats and Republicans. Let me tell you, as far as the public is concerned, they're all bums. They're all bums. And the clearest example of that is how quickly the registration of Independents has increased. Self-identification with a major party is at the lowest level we have seen in 30 years.

We also have the influence of daily newspapers declining. All of you live and die by what is printed in *The Oregonian* every day, but fewer and fewer people are reading daily newspapers. That makes the challenge of meaningful communications that much more difficult. What are the ways to communicate with the public today? I just want you to take into consideration the disconnect—the emphasis a lot of you put on reading the daily newspaper and where the general public is.

Finally, I want to end on one of the most serious examples of a disconnect and that is how so many business and leaders have missed this Meth drug problem that permeates the state. We have validated this through our research. The Meth problem has for the first time eclipsed education as a problem in this state when presented as an option in a closed-ended question.

Think about this for a moment. This is a problem that many people who have a good education, have good jobs, have a good household income, and live in a city like Portland don't really understand. This is a problem that is out there in so many corners of Oregon, ripping households and communities apart. And the ripple effect is incredible. I just wanted to share another example of disconnect and remind you that while we're out there chasing our tails over education, there are other issues that Oregonians are concerned about and feel very strongly about.

So, where does this leave us? Is the glass half full or half empty? I suggest that this public opinion climate means we cannot continue to do business as usual – that we must turn to political and institutional change. People say that it takes a crisis to bring about change, and arguably this perfect storm of public opinion is part of such a crisis. Is it all bad news? Is there anything hopeful in what we're hearing?

I would argue that my glass of water over there is actually half full. I'd like to offer up some beacons of hope.

The first reason why I'm feeling optimistic – they're coming! Who's coming? The seniors, or soon-to-be seniors, are coming! They're coming by the thousands and they're going to be interested in re-engaging in our communities, making contributions of time and money in the classroom, community, and non-profit sector. This is a terrific asset, and we as a community need to have the mechanisms in place ready to accommodate these people.

Second, the non-profit sector has answered former Governor Neil Goldschmidt's call. Yes, I mentioned his name you all, and in a positive way. He challenged the non-profit sector to step up and play more of a leadership role, and it has answered his call. Foundation for a Better Oregon, consisting of the Meyer Memorial Trust, Collins, Jeld-Wen, Ford, and Oregon Community Foundations, is an example. These Foundations are actually setting an example nationwide. States are coming here to see how this very diverse set of Foundations has come together to try to provide leadership in Oregon that, for reasons we've discussed, the government can't provide. Another project is Oregon Involved. Take a look at that—an effort that will start next week that will make it easier for citizens to be involved in non-profit organizations.

Awareness and knowledge issues are being addressed through projects like Chalkboard's OpenBook\$ Project. How many of you have heard of this project? It is something that will allow Oregonians to go to a website and look at how their school district spends money and compare it to other similar school districts. Another example is the Kid's Balancing Budget project, put together by Citizens for Oregon's Future. An outstanding project, it takes budgeting exercises into the classrooms and exposes students to information about public finance.

I'm liking what I see in terms of experimentation with alternative delivery models for public services, including financing. A couple that come to mind are the Charter School experiments that are being done within the public schools arena. I also like what I'm hearing about tolling related to paying for transportation system improvements. Four or five years ago, we were picking up the potential that toll charges represents. We were telling clients at the time that considering the options, you had better wake up and smell the coffee. When I see that all of a sudden there is consideration of some of these options for providing and paying for public services, I'm encouraged.

Government itself is also trying harder and harder to be more responsive and efficient. I'm seeing more E-Government. I'm encouraged that it is not only informational, but transactional as well. The public sector has been so slow to take advantage of the technology—you can talk about the reasons all you want, but the truth of the matter is that it is way, way behind. I think the work that PSU and George Beard are doing in this area is very important and needs to be encouraged.

Another reason to be somewhat optimistic about political change is the open primary. I think this is a very important initiative and I hope it enjoys your support. The work the Public Commission on the Oregon Legislature is doing is very important as well. I like to hear about concepts like a non-partisan legislature and annual and shorter sessions.

And more and more folks in the public sector are beginning to question ways of doing public involvement. Oh, Lord, if we could have all the money back for wasted public involvement efforts we would be better off as a community and a state.

And the final thing that makes me very happy to hear about are City Club memberships — that's the key everyone!!! Get young people involved. Give them a membership. Really, talk to your children, talk to your grandchildren, talk to graduates. Get them to join an organization like City Club and it will make a difference. Spend time with your children and grandchildren, your nephews and your nieces, talking with them about the public sector, how public services are financed, and how they contribute to the wonderful quality of life we have here in Portland and in the State of Oregon. I think more and more people are doing this. And that is why I'm encouraged.

Thank you.

For More Information  
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