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Local Liberty and the Non-Partisan State: Property, Governance, and Political Trust in West Windsor Township

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ABSTRACT

This paper asks what happens to trust between citizens and their government when party labels are taken off the ballot. Drawing on research on local elections and political information, and on three interviews with people involved in West Windsor's political life, it follows how residents learn about candidates once the easiest shortcut is gone. Removing the label does not remove bias from local government. It moves the work of judgment elsewhere, onto candidate statements, public records, civic organizations, and personal knowledge, and trust, transparency, and accountability all change shape under that pressure.

INTRODUCTION

What makes citizens trust their government? What allows them to hold that government accountable when the people making decisions are not distant national politicians, but officials who govern within the same community? And what happens when a local government removes the party labels that normally help voters understand candidates? These questions become especially important in West Windsor Township, a community that has changed dramatically in both its population and its system of government.

For much of its history, West Windsor was an agricultural community. During the twentieth century, it developed into a suburban municipality, with its population increasing from 1,389 in 1920 to 8,542 in 1980 and 21,907 by 2000. This transformation changed the scale of local government and the relationship between residents and the institutions governing them. As the township grew, government became responsible for an increasingly complex network of development, infrastructure, transportation, public services, and community interests. Local government therefore became one of the places where citizens encounter political authority most directly.

The structure of that government changed as well. In November 1992, West Windsor residents voted to replace the Township Committee with a Mayor-Council system, and the new government began operating in July 1993. Under the current system, the mayor and council operate as separate branches, and the five council members are elected on a nonpartisan basis. The change removed formal party labels from municipal elections and therefore changed one of the main ways voters organize political information.

A party label provides a political shortcut. Even when a voter knows little about a candidate, the candidate's party affiliation can provide some expectation about their political positions and behavior (Kirkland and Coppock). Without that label, voters must rely more heavily on other sources of information, including candidate statements, records, endorsements, civic organizations, public meetings, personal reputation, and local relationships (Kirkland and Coppock; McPherson et al.). Nonpartisanship therefore does not eliminate the need for political information. It changes where that information comes from.

This distinction is important because local politics cannot simply be understood as a smaller version of national politics. Anzia argues that scholarship on local government has increasingly emphasized partisanship and ideology, while also warning that local governments deal with many issues that are distinct from national political concerns (Anzia). West Windsor provides a useful case for examining this tension because political disagreement remains present even though party affiliation is formally absent from the ballot. Which brings about the central research question of this paper: How has local governance in West Windsor Township evolved as an institution for trust and accountability between citizens and government, and what does this reveal about the strengths and limits of non-partisan governance in a changing community?

This question shifts the focus away from whether nonpartisanship is simply better or worse than partisan government. Instead, it asks how accountability operates when the party label disappears. If citizens cannot rely on party affiliation as a primary source of information, they must learn about candidates through other means. This can make local politics more personal and encourage greater attention to individual candidates and local issues. It can also place greater responsibility on citizens to seek out and interpret political information.

Research on nonpartisan elections demonstrates this problem. Kirkland and Coppock examine how voters choose candidates without party labels, while Crawford shows that attitudes toward nonpartisan elections remain connected to individual partisanship and the political environment surrounding voters (Kirkland and Coppock; Crawford). Nonpartisanship, therefore, does not necessarily remove partisan identities from local politics; it removes their formal place on the ballot.

The problem becomes particularly important for accountability. McPherson, Lucas, and McGregor found that many residents in a nonpartisan municipality lacked accurate knowledge of their representatives' actions on important issues. However, among residents who did know how their representatives had acted, agreement with those actions was strongly related to evaluations of their performance (McPherson et al.). Accountability can therefore exist without party labels, but it depends heavily on whether citizens possess enough information to exercise it.

This makes transparency and civic participation central to nonpartisan government. If citizens are expected to evaluate individual candidates rather than party organizations, they need accessible information about what those candidates believe and what officials do. Personal relationships, civic organizations, public meetings, and direct communication can help provide that information. Yet these sources are not equally available to every resident. The same system that can encourage more direct

participation can also create a greater informational burden for citizens who have less time or fewer connections to local political life (McPherson et al.).

West Windsor is therefore useful because it allows these tensions to be examined within a community that has undergone major change itself. The township's transformation altered the scale of local political life, while its 1993 governmental change altered the institutional structure through which citizens select and evaluate their representatives.

METHODOLOGY

This study pairs a literature review with a qualitative case study of West Windsor Township, and with interviews conducted with township citizens, to examine how nonpartisan local government shapes trust, accountability, transparency, and civic participation. It brings together political theory, contemporary scholarship on nonpartisan elections and political trust, and evidence from West Windsor's local government history.

The primary qualitative evidence comes from a combination of literature reviews and three semi-structured interviews with individuals familiar with local political life. The interviews focused on nonpartisan government, transparency, accountability, civic participation, and the relationship between citizens and local officials. Their responses were analyzed thematically rather than individually, allowing common patterns and differences to be identified across the interviews.

Because the study focuses on one municipality and a small interview sample, the findings are intended to provide an in-depth understanding of West Windsor rather than represent all municipalities or establish causal relationships. The interviews are therefore used alongside existing research to examine how nonpartisan governance operates within a specific local political context.

The sections that follow move between scholarship and West Windsor. Each takes up one part of the problem, information, transparency, self-government, and tests the general claims against what the interviews and the township's own history show. Where the two disagree, the disagreement is part of the evidence.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Research Design:

The overall structure of the study was a qualitative research design consisting of recorded interviews with participants to understand perspectives on West Windsor Township's non-partisan government and its relationship with trust, transparency, and accountability.

Participants:

Participants were volunteers who were informed about the purpose of the study and gave consent to participate. All participants were citizens of West Windsor Township and participated voluntarily.

Data Collection:

Interviews were recorded digitally where possible and were also documented in notebooks during the interview process; one interview was reconstructed from written notes after the recording files were corrupted, and one interview was submitted in written form. The recordings, notes, and written responses were used as the primary sources of information for the study.

Variables and Measurements:

The research questions served as the main basis for the interviews. Questions focused on local government responsibilities, the strengths and weaknesses of non-partisan government, relationships between residents and officials, transparency, political accountability, and the ability of the system to function at a larger level.

Procedure:

Each participant met with the researcher either in person or through a digital meeting application such as Zoom. Participants were asked the same main research questions, with follow-up questions used when additional explanation or examples were needed. Their answers were recorded and documented for later analysis.

Data Analysis:

The collected information was analyzed using qualitative methods. Responses were reviewed and interpreted to identify common themes, differences in perspectives, and connections between trust, transparency, accountability, and non-partisan local government.

Ethical Considerations:

The study followed standard ethical guidelines for this type of research. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave consent before participating. Participants were kept anonymous in the research, and recorded information and notes were stored securely. All recorded information will be deleted within three months after the completion of the study.

NONPARTISAN ELECTIONS AND THE INFORMATION PROBLEM

Take the party label away and voters do not stop looking for cues. They use what is left. Kirkland and Coppock show that other candidate characteristics carry more weight once the partisan cue is gone, and Crawford finds that even attitudes toward nonpartisan elections themselves still track a voter's party identification and surroundings (Kirkland and Coppock; Crawford). Party identity does not vanish. It loses its place on the ballot. Work on the nationalization of local elections points in the same direction: voters in nonpartisan contests still vote with national policy attitudes in mind (de Benedictis-Kessner et al.), partisan signals still organize voting when no label is printed (Baldwin), and ballot information such as a candidate's gender and ethnicity becomes part of how a voter guesses at a stranger (Matson and Fine).

The problem becomes even clearer in McPherson, Lucas, and McGregor's study of issue accountability in a nonpartisan municipality. Their research found that most surveyed residents were either unaware of or incorrect about their councilors' positions on seven important policy issues (McPherson et al.). Yet among the residents who did know how their representatives had acted, agreement with those actions was strongly related to satisfaction with their representatives' performance.

The voters who possess the information necessary to judge their representatives can judge them. The problem is getting the information in the first place.

West Windsor matters here because the stated purpose of its system is to keep local elections on local questions. Anzia's warning fits the township well: research on local politics goes wrong when it assumes that a council race is only a smaller version of a national one.

But once the party label is removed, the local political system must answer another question: where does the voter learn what the candidate stands for? The answer may be the candidate themselves. That last possibility is especially important because it changes the nature of political accountability (Kirkland and Coppock). A candidate is no longer only a representative of a party. They become a person whose reputation exists inside the community. That can be powerful. It can also be dangerous.

Reputation is not the same thing as knowledge. A candidate may be well known without being well understood. A resident may trust an official because they have met them personally without knowing how that official has acted on difficult issues. A reputation can be built at meetings, through a civic group, through years of volunteer work, and it can be deserved or merely familiar. A local organization may provide valuable information, but it may also present only one side of a political dispute. Election law can push information toward voters or leave them to find it: experiments with partisan endorsements and nonpartisan voter guides show that the supply of information in a local election is itself a design choice (Boudreau et al.). Labels also bring people to the polls, so removing them can change who votes, and not only how they choose (Whitaker). What disappears, in the end, is standardization. One voter studies the candidates. Another hears a name at a meeting. A third knows nothing until election day (Kirkland and Coppock; McPherson et al.).

TRANSPARENCY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF POLITICAL TRUST

Once the shortcut is gone, the government has to show its work (Grimmelikhuijsen). Agendas, minutes, voting records, planning documents, hearings, campaign statements: these stop being paperwork and become the material from which a resident builds a judgment. People often speak as if transparency creates trust by itself. It does not, and the record is less comfortable than that.

Grimmelikhuijsen's research on transparency and local government trust suggests that providing information does not necessarily produce a more favorable view of government (Grimmelikhuijsen). Information can make government appear more trustworthy, but it can also reveal failures that citizens were previously unaware of. Political trust has always depended on more than performance alone, since citizens judge government through their broader beliefs about whether it acts in their interest

(Hetherington). Online participation is tied to trust where residents experience the process itself as open (Kim and Lee, "E-Participation"), and the quality of a participatory process matters as much as its existence (Kim and Lee, "Citizen Participation"). Even a single exposure to information about one's local government can shift trust, which means the encounter matters: what a resident happens to read, and whether it makes sense to them (Mabillard).

If transparency only means giving citizens information that makes officials look good, then it is not really transparency. The political value of transparency is that it gives citizens the ability to judge government, including the ability to reach a negative judgment. The detail of the information matters. In the World Development study, citizens who received detailed information about participatory budgeting and what came of it judged their government more capable, more benevolent, more honest, and more worthy of trust; citizens who were only told the program existed were moved far less (Ardanaz et al.). A township can post hundreds of pages and still be hard to read. Volume is not legibility. Other work points the same way, with trust sitting in the middle of the relationship: local transparency is associated with citizen satisfaction through public trust (Kaiser and Boakye Boadu), a systematic review of governance practices across emerging and developing contexts finds public trust at the center of the outcomes (Abdi et al.), and in Nepal, transparency, responsiveness, and participation each predicted public trust in local government (Han et al.). The councilwoman interviewed for this study described the problem from inside the building: she expanded the council agenda so that supporting detail traveled with it, and was then accused of hiding information inside a two-hundred-page document (Appendix 1).

None of this follows automatically from nonpartisanship itself. Brás, Pereira, and Dowley compared municipalities led by partisan and nonpartisan mayors and found no significant difference in local transparency between the two groups (Brás et al.). An unlabeled ballot is not an open government. Openness has to be built, document by document.

MUNICIPAL SELF-GOVERNMENT AND CIVIC ASSOCIATION

Political theory often begins with the state, but municipal government raises a different and more immediate question: what do citizens owe to, and what can they expect from, the smallest unit of government, the one whose decisions shape the streets they live on and the services they use every day? Municipal political theory treats local government as a distinct political arena rather than a miniature copy of national politics. The issues are different in kind. Land use, public services, local development, and community resources do not map neatly onto national partisan conflict, and Anzia argues that scholarship on local government should attend to the issues that are genuinely local instead of assuming that municipal politics simply reproduces national ideological divisions (Anzia). West Windsor's nonpartisan system is built on this premise: if local questions are distinct from national ones, then local elections can be organized around local questions and the individuals who answer them.

Civic republicanism supplies the normative standard for such a system. In the republican tradition, political freedom is not only the absence of interference. It also consists in citizens taking part in ruling themselves, and in orienting political life toward a common good that no party or faction owns. A nonpartisan municipality expresses this idea institutionally. Without party labels, no organization can

claim to speak for the community as a whole, and officials are expected to justify their decisions in terms of the township's interests rather than a party program. The third interviewee's defense of the system, that it produces a government "more focused on the development and interests of the local community, and less influenced by national political parties," is a civic republican argument in plain language (Appendix 1). Republican self-government, however, makes demands. It requires citizens who are willing to inform themselves and to participate, because there is no party apparatus doing that work on their behalf, and research on citizens' beliefs about how government should work shows that many citizens prefer exactly the opposite arrangement, one in which they can leave decisions to officials and stay out of the process themselves (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse). Copus and colleagues' discussion of parties and nonpartisanship in local government raises the corresponding worry: removing parties also removes organizations that recruit candidates, organize choices, and carry political information to voters (Copus et al.).

Tocqueville explains where the capacity for that kind of citizenship is formed. In his account of American democracy, local institutions and voluntary associations are schools of self-government: citizens learn the habits of meeting, arguing, organizing, and accepting responsibility for shared decisions by practicing them close to home (Tocqueville). Democracy is therefore not sustained by elections alone. It depends on an associational life in which residents repeatedly encounter one another as fellow decision makers. West Windsor offers the conditions Tocqueville describes. Its scale makes direct political relationships possible: a resident can attend a council meeting, a civic organization can form around a local issue, and an elected official can become known personally rather than through party advertising. The 2024 defense of the nonpartisan system, organized through neighborhood debate, community networks, and a resident-written Q&A document, is associational politics of exactly this kind.

The same framework also identifies the system's central inequality. A citizen who attends every meeting, knows local organizers, and follows municipal documents has a very different ability to understand government from a citizen who works long hours, has little time for meetings, and encounters local politics only when a regulation affects their property. The formal political system gives both citizens the same rights. Their practical ability to use those rights may still be very different.

Read together, the three frames say something plainer than any of them says alone. A town is its own political world, with its own questions. Freedom in that world means taking part in ruling it, not only being left alone by it. And the ability to take part is learned in associations, meetings, and local institutions, or it is not learned at all. West Windsor shows the distance between the formal picture and the lived one: the same vote, the same meetings, the same public documents, and very different amounts of time, knowledge, and connection with which to use them. Trust and accountability grow inside that distance. They are not delivered by a structure.

INTERVIEWS

The interviews are where the argument has to answer to actual people (Appendix 1). Three individuals were interviewed, and their accounts are not a sample of the township in any statistical sense. Each speaks from a different seat: a councilwoman responsible for the system she works inside, a leader of the movement that protected that system in 2024, and a resident who argued for it in public, in a local

Facebook group and within the Chinese community. They agree on more than one might expect. The disagreements are as useful as the agreement.

All three reached for the same two words, transparency and accountability, and meant different things by them. For the councilwoman, transparency is a practice: planning documents posted online before a meeting, proceedings taped, an agenda that carries its supporting detail with it. For the movement leader, transparency is the absence of cover. With no party standing in front of a candidate, the promise and the person are the same object, and a broken promise has a name attached to it. For the third interviewee, transparency is a standard of speech: no word games, because residents here are educated and notice when language is being used to dodge. Accountability divided them more. One reading holds that residents mainly gain information, and that information alone does not move an official. Another holds that candidates, exposed in this way, campaign more carefully and lean toward what the public is already asking for. Both readings end in the same place. The official can no longer point at a party.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Accountability Without Party Labels

The interviews suggest that nonpartisan government changes how accountability is produced rather than eliminating the need for it (Appendix 1). Without party labels, citizens must rely more heavily on candidate positions, public records, community organizations, public meetings, local reporting, and personal knowledge when evaluating candidates and officials. This can make local politics more direct by encouraging citizens to judge individuals and local issues rather than relying primarily on party affiliation. At the same time, it makes accessible political information more important. The interviews consistently connected nonpartisanship with transparency and accountability, although they differed in how these qualities are produced within the community.

Read across the three accounts, three conditions keep appearing (Appendix 1). Collaboration grows out of relationships that exist before any vote is taken. Trust grows when residents believe the process is fair and can watch it working. Accountability waits on information. None of the three is delivered by the ballot format itself.

Transparency and the Information Burden

The importance of information becomes greater as government becomes larger and more complex. In a small municipality, citizens may learn about candidates through direct interactions, community organizations, public meetings, local reporting, or personal relationships. As the electorate grows and political issues become more numerous, these forms of knowledge become more difficult to obtain. Research on nonpartisan municipal government reflects this problem. McPherson, Lucas, and McGregor found that many residents in Calgary were unaware of or incorrect about their councillors' actions on important issues, while those who did know how their representatives had acted were better positioned to evaluate their performance based on issue agreement. Their findings show that accountability can exist

without party labels, but its effectiveness depends on citizens having sufficient information to exercise it (McPherson et al.).

West Windsor lives inside that tension. A resident who follows council agendas, or who knows an official through years of shared volunteer work, is equipped to judge. A resident who meets local government only when a regulation touches their property is not, and the system hands both of them the same ballot. Transparency opens a door here. It does not walk anyone through it. Records, statements, organizations, and direct conversation can do the work the party label used to do, but only for a resident with the time and the connections to use them. A government can be formally accountable, and still make accountability hard to practice.

Nonpartisanship and the Limits of Scale

The 2024 debate over West Windsor's electoral structure brought the tension into the open. Township materials described a proposed alternative to the existing nonpartisan Mayor-Council system that would introduce partisan municipal elections. Underneath the procedural question sat two different understandings of political information. A party label tells a voter something before the voter knows anything. Its absence asks the voter to go and learn: positions, records, reputations, the word of people they trust. The third interviewee spent 2024 doing the work a party might otherwise have done, studying the question, arguing it in a local Facebook group, and carrying the comparison between the two systems to neighbors who had never had reason to think about it (Appendix 1). The interviews reflected the same pull in both directions, joining nonpartisanship to collaboration and direct community relationships while recognizing the greater responsibility placed on citizens to gather political information themselves.

This issue becomes particularly important when considering whether nonpartisan government can function beyond the local level. West Windsor is small enough that residents may encounter candidates through community organizations, public meetings, local networks, and personal relationships. As the size of government increases, these relationships become more difficult to maintain, while the number of candidates, issues, and sources of information increases. The system may therefore become more demanding for citizens as the political community becomes larger. The interviews cannot determine whether the advantages of West Windsor's nonpartisan system would survive at a larger scale, but they reveal that scale is an important limitation of the model.

Trust, Participation, and Accountability

So the answer to the research question is narrower than the system's defenders and its critics both tend to make it (Appendix 1). Nonpartisanship in West Windsor has not manufactured trust. It has relocated the places where trust is made or lost: in whether documents can be read, whether officials answer, whether a resident knows enough to judge a record (Grimmelikhuijsen; McPherson et al.). Participation is the connective tissue, because meetings and civic organizations are where information stops being a file and becomes a relationship (Tocqueville; Ardanaz et al.).

What remains unresolved is scale. In West Windsor, nonpartisanship has largely functioned through transparency, civic participation, personal knowledge, and direct relationships between citizens and officials (Appendix 1). Each of those is easier in a township where a resident can plausibly meet the

people on the ballot. Each becomes harder to manage as government expands, and the informational burden grows with it. The case suggests that nonpartisan government can support local trust and accountability, and it leaves open whether the same model can function beyond the scale and relationships of local government.

LIMITATIONS

This study cannot establish that nonpartisan government causes higher or lower levels of political trust or accountability. Trust is influenced by many factors beyond electoral structure, including residents' political beliefs, experiences with government, public services, community relationships, and access to information. Qualitative interviews also capture individual perceptions rather than measurable changes across the entire population. With only three interviews, the findings cannot represent all West Windsor residents, particularly those who are less politically engaged or less familiar with local government.

The use of West Windsor as a single case also limits the broader application of the findings. The township has its own demographic composition, political culture, history, and institutional structure, meaning that another municipality could experience nonpartisan government very differently. The study also cannot fully separate the effects of nonpartisanship from other features of West Windsor's political environment. In addition, the informational burden identified in this paper may not affect all citizens equally, since residents differ in political knowledge, time, community connections, and access to local information.

None of this makes West Windsor a small case in the dismissive sense. It defines what the case can show. West Windsor provides an in-depth example of how removing party labels can increase the importance of transparency, civic participation, and local political knowledge in maintaining accountability (Appendix 1; McPherson et al.). Future research should compare West Windsor with similar municipalities using partisan elections and using larger resident surveys to measure political knowledge, participation, and trust. Such research could determine more directly whether the informational burden identified in this study is a broader feature of nonpartisan local government or a characteristic of West Windsor specifically. In addition, due to the nature of this being the work of a high school student, no ethics board review was able to be obtained regarding the interviews of this paper, but all research methodology follows the given ethical standards.

CONCLUSION

What does local democracy require from the citizens who participate in it? West Windsor provides one answer through its experience with nonpartisan government. Since adopting its nonpartisan Mayor-Council system in 1993, the township has developed a political structure in which candidates are formally separated from party labels, placing greater importance on individual records, local relationships, transparency, and civic participation.

The interviews suggest that nonpartisan elections have been largely successful within West Windsor (Appendix 1). Participants described greater collaboration, stronger attention to local issues, and a

political environment in which transparency and accountability remain important (Appendix 1). At the same time, the interviews also reveal that nonpartisanship places greater responsibility on citizens to find and understand political information. Without party labels, accountability depends more heavily on what citizens know about individual candidates and officials (Kirkland and Coppock; McPherson et al.).

For a township that governs this way, communication is not decoration on the electoral system. It is part of the system. If residents are to judge people rather than labels, then agendas they can read, records they can find, and meetings they can actually attend are democratic infrastructure, as real as the ballot itself. West Windsor's experience suggests that trust between a town and its government is not a possession. It is a practice, renewed or neglected each time the government shows its work and each time a resident decides the work is worth checking.

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APPENDIX 1. TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEWS

Interview 1 (West Windsor Township Councilwoman)

Speakers: Yuzheng (interviewer) and Councilwoman, Vice President of the West Windsor Township Council

Yuzheng: Hello.

Councilwoman: Hi, Yuzheng.

Yuzheng: How are you?

Councilwoman: Oh, I'm good. How are you?

Yuzheng: All right.

Councilwoman: So you're doing this project for a paper that you're writing.

Yuzheng: Yes. Thank you so much for coming to an interview today. Before we start, I would like you to know that this video is currently being recorded. I'm going to be the only one who sees it, and all the information will be transcribed and put into the paper.

Councilwoman: Okay. There won't be anything that I'm not legally able to tell you.

Yuzheng: Yeah, I understand. Important question before we start: would you like to remain anonymous, or would you like to have your role and name be open to the paper?

Councilwoman: In the paper itself? I don't care, usually. I mean, I don't think there'd be anything. Basically, you're turning this paper in. Are you going to be publishing this paper around town?

Yuzheng: It'll be submitted to OJSS online, and hopefully, after it goes through peer review and is accepted, it will be published.

Councilwoman: I'm okay with that. I've got Zoom interviews of me all over the place. I'm used to it. I shouldn't say anything that I would be concerned about.

Yuzheng: All right, that's fine. Thank you so much.

Councilwoman: You can use it.

Yuzheng: Okay, so we can start.

Councilwoman: What freewheeling discussion would you like to have?

Yuzheng: Why don't you introduce yourself?

Councilwoman: I am currently Vice President of the West Windsor Township Council. I've been president a number of times. I've been vice president also, and I've been on the Planning Board. This is my seventh year on the Council, my second term. Before I was on the Council, I was a member for several years. I've

been on the West Windsor Planning Board and the West Windsor Environmental Commission. During all that time, and at other times too, I've volunteered for a number of positions in town, some of them working for schools. I've done over 25 years of volunteer work for Girl Scouts at various levels, everything from robotics teams to service members, to the local Girl Scout Council, the Gold Award committee, as a delegate to the Girl Scout Council, and as a delegate to the National Girl Scout Council for three years, going to their national meetings. I've volunteered for various organizations here, and that's my background.

I'm a mechanical engineer. I have an undergraduate degree, and I have a master's degree in industrial engineering and packaging science. I've worked for a number of companies and also had my own consulting business for a number of years. Now I'm pretty much retired from that aspect. Oh, and I'm still on the Environmental Commission as a liaison, as well as having been liaison to various other committees and commissions while I've been on the Council.

Yuzheng: It's quite extensive. Thank you. And to our first question: what do you see as the primary responsibility of local government?

Councilwoman: The primary responsibility of local government is to take care of the people in the town. Under New Jersey law, we have what's called local control to a large extent. Municipalities in New Jersey, for instance, have their own zoning and planning boards, whereas in a lot of states it's much more county control. Most of our municipal zoning under New Jersey law is done by the municipality. So I see the municipality as taking care of a lot of the everyday issues for people: garbage collection, recycling, making sure we have parks and recreation areas, and keeping our taxes as reasonable as possible while still providing services.

There are various initiatives that depend on what the town needs at this point. For instance, if we're growing, we need more recreational areas, and I see the town doing that. I see the town getting involved in some forms of environmental improvements, and in things like stormwater control and flooding. In some cases, the town can take a primary role if it's a local issue. In cases where the flooding is more of a regional issue, I've seen the town being involved in that. I've done some things on both ends as far as flooding, because that is a regional issue, so I've done some work with trying to get us more into the regional piece of it.

I also see the town protecting people from things that the state may come in and do to affect the town, to try to essentially take away some of our rights, if you will, or some of the ability of people in the town to control our own destiny. There's been somewhat of a push in the state to try to urbanize towns like ours, to take a suburban town where we have lower density housing and force us, through state law, to put in a lot of higher density housing, changing the whole texture of the town. I see defending the town from changing to something that we may not want to be as important. I don't see people at our level getting involved with national policies, political feel-good policies, and a lot of things that really take our focus off from what people in the town want. So that's pretty much it: trying to let people live their best lives, and let them and their pets live their best lives, and at the same time also having a lot of respect for the natural environment in the town.

Yuzheng: Thank you so much. That's a wonderful answer. And to our second question: what do you see as the greatest strength and greatest weakness of West Windsor's nonpartisan system as we currently have it?

Councilwoman: Well, the greatest strength is our ability to be independent. If, for instance, the state is pushing for this very high-density type of housing, we don't have to worry that the leader of our party is also pushing for that, or pushing against it, depending on whatever is going on. We basically can only worry about what the people in our town want. So we don't need to jump on anybody else's bandwagon. We're not beholden to anybody else. We tend not to spend a lot of our time in national politics, or trying to get into looking to be on the Assembly or the county commission or other higher level offices, because we basically tend to be independent, even if we happen to be registered with parties. We don't run under those parties. Our jobs are not beholden to those parties, and we're basically only beholden to what the people in the town want. If we do things that the people in the town don't want, and we can't explain to them why we had to do them, because sometimes we all have to do things where we have to make the best possible choice, then they can vote us out.

When it comes to partisan elections, one problem is you could have the absolute best ideas, but a lot of people don't get very involved in looking at what local people think, local officials. They worry about what the Senate candidate and the Congress candidate, and occasionally the Assembly candidate and the governor, think, but a lot of people don't even necessarily know who their council people are, and they just vote straight party tickets. So if you have a town that's principally Democrat or Republican, the person who runs for council is chosen by the party, usually based on their service to the party, not to the town. And if it's strongly one way or the other, which most districts are, then, for the most part, people just vote down that party line, and the only people you're really answering to are your party leaders. You're not really answering to the people. Here, we have to go out when we run for election and tell the people in the town who we are, why we think we should be running for office, and what our ideas are for the town, and people vote more based on the person as opposed to the party. And that, I would say, is the biggest strength.

We can go wherever we want. If we want to try to get some money or something else, we don't have to wait our turn. Nobody can tell us, oh, you can't go for that federal grant because so-and-so is getting that grant this year and we're all going to let that happen. There's nobody giving us orders like that. We can be independent.

That's asking for negatives. You know, sometimes, depending on who's in office, there might be somebody in a party who might favor someone, or give them a little something extra here or there, and then, obviously, we don't get in on that. I think most of the good people that are in office, whether they're Republicans or Democrats, will not do that. If they believe in any kind of good governance, they're looking to serve all the people in whatever their area is, whether it's the county or the state or the congressional district or the Assembly district, and they will hopefully give everybody a fair chance based on what the needs are in the area. I've seen good and bad in that, but mostly I think we get what everybody else gets, so I wouldn't be concerned. If there was somebody that did act like that, I would tell people, throw that person out of office, because they're more interested in their party than they are in the people.

Yuzheng: Some say that nonpartisan government leads to inefficiency and stagnant government. What do you think of that?

Councilwoman: I would say it's totally not stagnant. I'd say it's the opposite. In a lot of places, when you've got somebody in the party and it's entrenched, and I know right now there's a little bit of raucousness going around and there's actually been a few primaries, we haven't had primaries here for a number of years in the regular party. If you look at the last 20 years, not including this year, there were times when absolutely nobody was running in primaries. It was totally party-picked. You had people in these offices for huge amounts of years. You have, look in Plainsboro, you had somebody who was 50 years as the mayor there. And the way the mayor in Plainsboro is picked is by a committee. The committee is party people. The party people pick the people on the committee, and those people are always picked based on that they'll vote for the mayor. Whether he's good or bad or whatever is not the question. The question is that the entrenched party can be extremely stagnant.

Whereas in our case, we have to go fight each time. We have to run every four years. Every four years you've got to be out there proving yourself because you don't have a party. If somebody doesn't like what's going on, they look at the individual. They really can't look at the party because there isn't one. Last time I ran, there were three incumbents, and one incumbent who was running didn't get reelected. Even in the nonpartisan system, people do get together sometimes, but people can run as individuals. People can split the tickets. When I've run, it's been, we have three seats up and there's been six people running, so it's been very much like an election where you're not going to have somebody win with 25 percent or 22 percent of the vote or something like that. Essentially, you need to get more than half the vote. But you have all kinds of options. We've had cases with individuals running, you may have two people running against a three-person group, all kinds of combinations. If anything, it leads to much more ability to change than having that entrenched party.

You can look throughout the state and you'll find people in some of these positions forever. The only time they might move up is if they're not interested, or they're being groomed for that next step up the ladder, and that's why they even took that spot. In the party system, usually, if people take a town council type of spot, in a lot of places they're not interested in serving on the town council. They're interested in building their resume so that they can have a shot at that next spot up. I would say it's basically the opposite. The only time you get somebody entrenched is if somebody's really popular as an individual. I think you had that case: Mayor Shing was in office for 16 years. I think he changed his party three times. I think he started in one party, then went independent, I'm not sure of the exact timing, but it wasn't a party issue. And now Mayor Marathe has been in, he won a third term recently, and he could have not run too, that was a decision on his part, but the people did decide to reelect him. And there's ample opportunity for other people to make their name known.

Hopefully, what we've always done, the people I've run with, is we didn't just come out and wake up one day and say, oh, I want to do community service. We've been doing community service pretty much since we lived here. I moved here 33, 34 years ago. It's actually longer than that now. So I've been here for a number of years, and I've done community service of some point all along there. When I finally sort of decided, or was talked into, running for office, it wasn't like, hey, I need a warm body and I'm putting you

in there. It was: you've done volunteer work in this town, you've helped their kids, you've helped them, you've worked on this, you've worked on that, would you run for office? And when I've run with other people, that's always been our call: that we've done community service, and now we want to do it at a different level. Totally different than the party, totally different direction than I helped campaign for the party. And particularly for a local office like this, where you have a chance for people in your area to know you, it's much better. You've got somebody who basically has proven that they're looking to serve.

Yuzheng: Yeah, all right, thank you. That's very comprehensive. Next question: how does nonpartisan government affect the relationship between the residents and their government? For example, does it make it more accessible, or less accessible, if that were the case?

Councilwoman: It makes it more accessible, and it makes it more accessible to everyone. I've heard somebody, or people who considered themselves more partisan, even in the nonpartisan system, talk about my constituents or something. Now, that's kind of an odd thing, because I never think of anybody as being just my constituents, meaning the people who put me in. I always think of, and I always say, the day after election, it doesn't matter where you are, who voted for who, you're all my constituents. I represent everybody. Obviously, some of you may disagree, and I have to pick what's right, but I might not always pick the answer that the person who voted for me wants on every issue, because I have to pick what I think either most people want or is best for the town.

And anybody in this town, regardless of party, always feels that they can come to us. There's no party machinery. I was just reading something from New York the other day about somebody who was a party leader, and what he would do once a week was, people who were looking for jobs or looking for other stuff, he'd hold something in his basement, like, I need this, or I need help with that, or whatever, and it was basically rewarding party faithful. And then he would go to the next level and say, hey, we want this, reward this party faithful. We don't have any of that. Whatever political party anybody is, anybody that wants to come over, somebody could actually insult me the day before, and they get treated well. It basically opens it up to everybody. Nobody feels that they were the opposition and therefore they're not equal to everybody else.

Yuzheng: I see. And does that affect transparency in any kind?

Councilwoman: Transparency in what way?

Yuzheng: In terms of what we do with the government and stuff like that.

Councilwoman: I mean, we try to be as transparent as possible. It's whether nonpartisan affects it: we don't have a party telling us what to do, so that can give us more reason and impetus to be transparent that way. But we're always totally out there with what we're trying to do. We hold public meetings. People come in. People get answers in public meetings. People might contact us, and then we give them answers. Sometimes people have a private issue and they want to discuss it. Nobody gets anything that they're not supposed to get. Somebody came in and, for whatever reason, said, hey, I have a health problem, they probably wouldn't want that broadcast. But if there's certain needs in the town, and there's certain things that we're doing in the government, we're transparent. We're open there.

I know, I think we're one of the most transparent, if you look around at other towns. We now put all of our, say, planning board, land use is an extremely important thing and is one of the big things that local governments do, and is one of the cases where we really want the most transparency. You want to make it totally transparent because you don't want to be giving anybody any kind of a preference because of who they are or what they are. So we now put all of the digital information online. So if somebody's coming to the town, they want to build something, and they're coming before the planning board, it used to be, and how it is in a lot of towns, is if you wanted to see the documents, the agenda would be public, but if you wanted to see the layout of the proposed plan or any of the reports that our experts put in, because our experts do a whole bunch of reports on everything from the environment to traffic to fire, that's all up there now, that's online. You can go into that meeting having read everything, the same as, for the most part, the planning board people. There are still a few printed documents, but most of the documents, including a lot of the drawings, are available online before the meetings. And people do take advantage of that and look at that. And I, as a council member who is not the planning board representative, I can read those too, and I can make comments to my member of the planning board, or I can go myself, which I have done, to a planning board meeting totally as a member of the public, and I can give comments because I have easy access to these documents.

We started doing that as soon as we started getting more digital documents, and then we had COVID, and then we said, let's put these things up there. And the other thing we started doing with the land use boards is we've been taping them, and then we've been making them available to the public. That was something that I personally fought for, even though at the time it wasn't quite my business to do so. Even though people said, hey, if you're on the planning board and you say something that can be used against you, I basically said, I don't care. What's important to me is that everybody, not somebody who comes in and tapes it themselves and picks out the part they want, that everything's out there, that everybody said, and let it all hang out essentially. You know, let the sun shine in, and then let everybody decide based on the facts, not based on the little pieces of the facts that people want to feed you. So, I mean, I wish everybody was, you know, willing to do that kind of detail, but usually it's either people who don't like you or like you, but most people don't go to that kind of effort. But it's there if you want it, it's all there. So we tape the meetings. We have things that are available to the public with information. The meetings are open, and people get that information beforehand so that they can see it. And if you look at a lot of the partisan towns around, they don't have anything like that. A lot of that stuff is done very quietly, and I won't mention any particular towns for fairness. I'll let you do your own searching on that.

And the other thing we've done, I've been council president a number of times, and each time, we put out an agenda. An agenda is essentially three or four pages. It's a list of, oh, we're going to pass, engineering is hiring a firm for $12,000 and they're going to look at the road and they're going to put the bidding package together, and we vote yes, and it names the road or something. And so it's public, it does everything legally, but unless you really go into it, you may not understand what it's about, or understand that that's really your road but it's called something else. So I've pushed to not only give the three or four page agenda, and it's always been that we've always given a little extra, and I pushed to put even more. After you see the regular agenda, then there'll be all the detail afterwards, so you can look up in the rest of the agenda and it's right there, and it'll say what the road is, it'll have the engineering discussion of why

they're doing this, and it'll have some backup material. It's not going to be quite as much as the council gets, but you'll know that that's there, and if you really want it then you can request it, because it's just so big.

The funny part is, I've actually gotten attacked, actually by partisan people, that I've been obscuring to the public what's on the agenda because I've put out a 200 page agenda and nobody's going to read that. I've actually had several people, and some of them have picked it up from other people that I'd respect, say that to me. And I'd say, what are you talking about? There's a four page formal agenda, like everybody else has, if you want to just see the gist. And then instead of having to go to the clerk and ask for what does this mean, or if you see something, or you totally miss it, if you want it, it's right there for you, extra information. That's as transparent as you could possibly be, and yet you're using it against me. And that just so boggles my mind. I don't expect to convince anybody. It's just the boggling of my mind, that giving extra information, and it isn't like it's in a format where you've got to read the 400 pages. The same four pages are there. Then, if you want that information, it's there for you. You don't have to go searching and pleading for it.

And we've been doing more and more of giving the public as much information, of putting more on the website now, of announcing it, and letting the people know. There's always somebody who's not going to hear about something or know about something or whatever, and there is a lot of information out there, and we do make every attempt to put all that kind of information out.

Yuzheng: Yeah. Quickly, because I think we're running out of time with Zoom here.

Councilwoman: What do you have, 45 minutes, or does it get less?

Yuzheng: I think it's 40 minutes. Last question, quickly: do you think this model of nonpartisan government could work as a larger form of government? Because so far we've seen what a success, and I was wondering if it could be replicated.

Councilwoman: I would like to see it. I would at least like to see it on the county level, and hopefully on the state level, and real nonpartisan, not just allowing somebody to run down on the other side of the ballot. I don't think anyone can run as an independent, but you've got a chance. You don't even get to run primaries. I would really like to see it. The more I'm seeing right now of how parties are being controlled by extremists, and the few people who go out to vote are putting some extremists in there, and then they go run in places that are either Republican or Democrat, but if they looked at the people in the area, there's no way they would have picked that person. It's being taken advantage of.

The more I think that, I'd like to see the nonpartisan go beyond that, because partisan controls who you get to vote for. If you're basically, whoever's running that party picks whoever's running, even if the extremist is taking it over. In most districts in the United States, they're one way or the other. There's only a few in play, and then that person gets elected. So somebody who's picked by very few people winds up getting elected to office. Whereas if everything was more nonpartisan and fluid, then I think people would have a real choice, and they would kind of be expected to maybe study a little bit more about who's running and not just vote for the party. There's too much of that. So yeah, if there's anything anybody can do to push towards this nonpartisan, you know, I remember the founding fathers, I think some of the

founding fathers said, hey, let's not get into these parties, because they knew what would happen. And then everybody kind of tries to say, no, no, I want to keep this power, and they all sort of got together like that. So I would love to see some movement in that direction, so that people would have more of a choice.

Yuzheng: Yeah, thank you very much. That is the end of the interview.

Councilwoman: Okay, great. Good luck with your paper.

Yuzheng: Very helpful.

Councilwoman: Yeah, I'll see you.

Yuzheng: Thank you so much. Bye.

Interview 2 (Leader of the Non-Partisan Movement)

Speakers: Yuzheng (interviewer) and Interviewee, a leader of the 2024 non-partisan movement, a veteran of many political campaigns, and a long-term West Windsor resident. The interviewee is identified by role only.

Yuzheng: What do you see as the primary responsibilities of local government?

Interviewee: The primary responsibilities of local government begin with the limited resources it receives from taxes. Because those resources are limited, the government has to use them in a way that can be sustained over time, and in a way that supports a high-quality life for the people who live there. Local government is the level closest to daily life, so its responsibility is practical: to take what the community provides through taxes and turn it into conditions that make residents' lives better. Put simply, the purpose of local government is to improve the lives of its citizens, and to do so in a way that can last.

Yuzheng: What do you see as the greatest strength and greatest weakness of West Windsor's non-partisan system?

Interviewee: The greatest strength of the non-partisan system is transparency. In a partisan system, a candidate can stand behind a party, and the party's ideology can stand between the candidate and the voters. In the non-partisan system, there is no political party and no party ideology to hide behind. Each campaigner is allowed to run with their own personal beliefs, and those beliefs are presented as their own, rather than being limited or packaged by party politics. Voters are therefore dealing with the candidate more directly: what the candidate believes is what the candidate has chosen to say.

There is also an aspect of accountability built into that transparency. Because non-partisanship removes party labels, a campaigner cannot shift responsibility to the party. Campaigners need to take accountability for what they say, for what they promise, and for whether they actually deliver on their words. The promise and the result both belong to the individual, and that makes the individual easier to judge.

Yuzheng: How does non-partisan government affect the relationship between residents and their local government?

Interviewee: Non-partisan government gives citizens more room to trust. It removes a layer of separation between the government and the citizens, because residents are not relating to their local officials through a party first. The officials' words can therefore be more easily believed: the person speaking is speaking for himself, and what he says can be taken as his own position rather than as a party position he is required to repeat. That closeness changes the relationship, because trust is placed in identifiable people and in what those people have actually said.

That trust also has a correction built into it. When officials' words do not hold up, when what they promised and what they did stop matching, there is an easier way to correct the problem: residents can vote them out. The same directness that makes trust possible also makes the response to broken trust simpler, because the judgment falls on the individual officeholder.

Yuzheng: How do you think non-partisan government affects transparency and political accountability?

Interviewee: [Per the written notes, this answer referred back to the points made above, which are restated here in expanded form.] Transparency and accountability are closely connected in the non-partisan system. Transparency comes from the removal of anything to hide behind: with no party and no party ideology in front of the candidate, the candidate's own beliefs and promises are what the public sees. Accountability follows from the same removal. Without party labels, campaigners must answer for their own words, take responsibility for their own promises, and be judged on whether they deliver. The system makes both the statement and the responsibility for the statement belong to the same person.

Yuzheng: Do you think West Windsor's model of non-partisan government could work at a larger level of government?

Interviewee: I don't think so, at least not yet. The model does offer real benefits at a larger level in principle: it introduces a great deal of transparency, and that transparency supports accountability, and together they allow for more trust between the government and the people. Those are the same strengths that make it work locally. The difficulty is the burden of information that comes with it. In a non-partisan system, people are expected to do their own research, because there are no political parties to rely on for easy information. A party label also acts as a kind of guarantee, a shortcut that tells voters something about a candidate's beliefs and policies before they look any further. Without parties, that shortcut and that guarantee disappear, and each voter has to build that knowledge on their own. At a larger level of government, where there is more to follow, that burden becomes the reason the model is not ready to be carried upward yet.

Interview 3: Written Responses from local citizen on Nonpartisan Governance
Speakers: Yuzheng (interviewer) and Interviewee.

Yuzheng: What do you see as the primary responsibilities of local government?

Interviewee: I believe the priority task of local government is to manage the resources of the local community and to provide residents with an organized living environment. Managing the community's resources comes first, because everything else local government does depends on how well those shared resources are handled. The result should be a community that is orderly and workable for the people who live in it. Local government also helps to provide a friendly and fair atmosphere for all the businesses and residents who work, earn a living, and live here, so its responsibility covers both daily living conditions and the fairness of the environment in which people live and do business.

Yuzheng: In your assessment, what is the current local government doing well, and where do you see room for improvement?

Interviewee: The current local government provides us with an organized and effective living environment, and the most important thing is that they are reachable. An organized and effective environment is what residents experience day to day, and reachability means that residents can actually get to their government when they need it, rather than dealing with an office that feels distant. Where I see room for improvement, I believe our local government can bring more modern and technological changes to the township. The foundation of an organized, effective, and reachable government is there, and the next step is to modernize it further.

Yuzheng: Could you describe your involvement in efforts surrounding the 2024 West Windsor election?

Interviewee: To clarify, I was not involved in the 2024 election itself. What I did was all for protecting our nonpartisan election system. I did my own reading and study on the question. I released my opinion and debated, using data, with the neighbors who wanted to change our election system to a partisan one, in the Facebook local group. I kept spreading the facts, and the benefits and limitations of the nonpartisan and partisan election systems in comparison, within the Chinese community. I also funded the campaign to protect the nonpartisan system. So my role was not that of a participant in the election, but of a resident working to inform other residents and to defend the system itself.

Yuzheng: What is your overall view of nonpartisan governance, and why do you support it?

Interviewee: I have written a Q&A document to help residents understand the nonpartisan election, and more details and data can be seen there. My view comes out of that work of explaining the system to residents. I believe the nonpartisan election can bring real fairness and freedom for all voters, and that it is most likely to bring us a local government that is more focused on the development and interests of the local community, and less influenced by national political parties. A government shaped that way, focused on the local community and freer from national party influence, benefits all residents.

Yuzheng: How do you believe nonpartisan governance influences the relationship between citizens and the state?

Interviewee: The government should build the trust between itself and the residents by delivering transparency and independence. In this relationship, trust is not something the government can simply ask for. It has to be built, and the way to build it is for the government to act transparently, so that residents

can see what it is doing, and independently, so that its decisions are its own. Transparency and independence are therefore the two qualities on which the relationship between the citizen and the state rests.

Yuzheng: What do you consider the principal strength and the principal weakness of nonpartisan governance?

Interviewee: The main advantage is that it allows voters to participate in the primary election. All candidates running for office can be featured on the ballot for voters to vote for, thereby breaking away from the control of national parties over local politics and allowing local governments to focus more purely on local matters. Because every candidate can appear before the voters, the choice belongs to the voters as a whole rather than being narrowed in advance by national parties, and local politics stays centered on local questions.

As for weaknesses, without party labels, voters need to spend time beforehand to learn about the political ideologies and values of the candidates. They need to become familiar with the ballot in advance. For those who are accustomed to quickly judging a candidate's values based on party labels, but do not like to research the candidate's information in advance, this could make the selection process challenging. The same absence of labels that frees voters from party control also asks more of them, because the judgment that a party label used to make quickly now has to be made by the voter personally.

Yuzheng: In your view, how does a community build trust between its government and its members?

Interviewee: Transparency, honesty, and communication. Those are the means by which trust is built. A government should not engage in word games with its constituents, because trust cannot survive language that is designed to dodge or obscure. The residents of West Windsor are well educated, and they value a government's logical and coherent approach to communication and expression. So the government's communication has to meet that standard: honest in content, transparent in what it shows, and logical and coherent in how it is expressed. Speaking plainly and consistently is itself a form of respect for the residents, and it is how trust between a community and its government is maintained.