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WHITE PAPER · EPISTEMIC RE-REGULATION ARCHITECTURE

The Ask Is Not the Problem

Why public trust recovery needs an Epistemic Re-Regulation Architecture™ (ERA), not another messaging model

A Links Global white paper. Developed by Links Global from 25 years of field practice and evidence-based research in strategic communication, public engagement, and institutional trust.

For years, public agencies and campaigns have treated hard referendum losses as an information-design problem. Find the persuadables. Segment the audience. Predict sentiment. Simplify the ballot language. Prepare a crisis response. This is the logic of Narrative Stewardship Infrastructure™ (NSI), and it is the logic of most public-engagement practice today.

It cannot explain the cases that matter most: places where a community does not just reject one proposal, but develops a repeatable reflex to reject the institution making the proposal.

Three Cases the Standard Model Cannot Explain

In May 2025, voters in Lewiston, Idaho supported a $25 million water, wastewater, and stormwater bond by **62% to 38%**. It failed anyway, because Idaho requires a two-thirds supermajority for general-obligation bonds. Turnout was about 18%. The need was real; some pipes were a century old. But the city had chosen not to finalize or disclose its downtown construction traffic plan until after the vote. Residents were asked to approve disruption whose practical shape had been deliberately left uncertain. (Spokesman-Review; KLEW-TV)

Anderson County, South Carolina is more decisive. Voters rejected a one-percent infrastructure sales tax in 2006, again in 2024, and again in 2025. The 2024 proposal, about $366 million over up to seven years by the county's estimate, lost with 52.8% voting no. The redesigned 2025 version did not recover. It was rejected by roughly **79%**, with 18,370 no votes to 4,920 yes. (Anderson Independent Mail via Yahoo News; Anderson Observer) The county's earlier diagnosis pointed to ballot complexity and voter confusion. (Yahoo News) A model that says "rewrite the message" has no serious answer for the central fact: after different framings and a re-engineered ask, opposition got dramatically worse.

California's Proposition 3 shows the same failure at scale. In 2018, an $8.9 billion water-infrastructure bond narrowly failed, 49.35% to 50.65%, despite the state's chronic and visible water constraints. (Ballotpedia; Wikipedia) Critics described a closed-door, earmark-heavy, "pay-to-play" process, and

counties that normally favor water bonds defected. (California WaterBlog; League of Women Voters of California) This was not a targeting failure. It was a failure of the process that produced the ask.

These are not three unrelated communications mistakes. They point to a category error. In communities with a history of repeated failure, the public is often not evaluating the proposal first and then deciding whether to trust the institution. The public is deciding first, often before any conscious reasoning, whether the institution is safe enough to evaluate at all.

That is the problem **Epistemic Re-Regulation Architecture™ (ERA)** is built to solve. ERA is Links Global's primary framework for public trust recovery. NSI remains the right approach where trust is intact, and the Links Global Trust Audit™ tells you which situation you are in.

The Diagnosis: A Population Can Be Injured Before It Is Uninformed

ERA begins with a difficult proposition: persistent institutional distrust can operate as a **population-scale neuroepistemic injury**.

This is not a claim that residents are irrational, broken, or incapable of judgment. It is a claim about conditions. When people live through a long, unpredictable pattern of public promises, disappointments, withholding, and surprise, their information environment becomes a threat environment. Their standing expectation shifts from "evaluate this proposal" to "protect yourself from the next institutional violation."

At the individual level, chronic unpredictability is known to change how threat and deliberation are balanced. Reward-prediction-error research shows that the brain responds powerfully to the gap between what it expects and what occurs; unpredictable schedules do not behave like a series of unrelated events. (Schultz, Dayan & Montague, Science, 1997) Predictive-processing theory frames cognition as continuous inference from prior expectations, not a clean slate that reassesses every new claim from zero. (Friston, Journal of Physiology-Paris, 2006)

Under stress, the practical consequence is stark. Amy Arnsten's work shows that uncontrollable stress can rapidly weaken the prefrontal functions involved in working memory and reflective evaluation, while strengthening more reflexive fear responses. (Arnsten, Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 2009; Arnsten, Nature Neuroscience, 2015) In civic terms, a better fact sheet may arrive after the system that would calmly weigh it has already shifted into defensive mode.

That is why Anderson County matters. If the core issue were ballot wording, a materially reworked proposal should have produced some correction. Instead, rejection hardened from roughly 53% no in 2024 to roughly 79% no in 2025. That trend does not prove every causal detail in ERA. It is direct evidence that the old model, independent citizens with stable preferences who respond to a better reformulation, is not enough.

ERA does not say message quality is irrelevant. Clear explanations, honest costs, and usable materials still matter. It says they are **downstream**. In a community conditioned to expect institutional harm or concealment, refining the content cannot be the load-bearing intervention.

Why ERA Is Not NSI With New Language

NSI was designed around the architecture of persuasion: identify audiences, model sentiment, tailor narrative, anticipate crisis, and deliver the right message at the right moment. That approach assumes the institution's job is to improve how an ask is received.

ERA starts one layer earlier. Its job is to repair the **conditions under which an ask can be received without triggering a defensive prior**.

The unit of analysis changes:

- From demographic segments to the local networks through which trust and distrust travel.
- From sentiment at a moment in time to a community's lived history of disclosure, delivery, surprise, and repair.
- From campaign moments to the low-drama periods when an institution proves whether its commitments mean anything.
- From "trust us" to verification that residents and credible local intermediaries can test for themselves.
- From narrative control to a real, observable reduction of uncertainty.

This distinction is not semantic. It changes what a county does on Monday morning, months before it asks voters for anything.

The Five Mechanisms of ERA

ERA is an operating model, not a diagnostic label. Its five mechanisms target the conditions that sustain a public threat state, rather than trying to out-argue its visible symptoms. What follows is the principle behind each mechanism. The operational design, sequencing, and measurement protocols are part of the ERA methodology Links Global brings to client engagements.

1. PREDICTABILITY-FIRST DISCLOSURE SEQUENCING

Make the timing and shape of disclosure reliable before asking the public to trust the content.

The institution commits, at the start of a planning process, to what it will disclose and when, and then keeps that schedule even when the update is "nothing changed" or "we do not know yet." The point is not a bigger document dump. It is the elimination of strategic surprise. Lewiston's unfinalized traffic plan shows the failure mode: people were asked to approve a future whose predictable details had been made unpredictable by choice. (Spokesman-Review) Over time, a kept schedule becomes evidence that the institution can be predicted.

2. DISTRIBUTED, REDUCED-AGENCY SIGNALING

Replace centralized reassurance with independently credible local confirmation.

In a high-threat environment, "trust us" from the institution is not reassuring. It can deepen the sense that one powerful actor is managing the story. ERA builds a factual commons that independent local voices can inspect and speak from without scripted coordination, and it protects their right to disagree in public. This is not influencer outreach. The aim is not a chorus. It is a public record strong enough that trusted network hubs can validate facts without borrowing the institution's credibility wholesale.

3. REINFORCEMENT CONSISTENCY IN LOW-DRAMA PERIODS

Build trust when no vote is imminent, through small promises that are visibly kept.

Trust collapses under intermittent reinforcement: a promise kept, then broken; a process open, then suddenly closed; an update, then silence. ERA changes the schedule rather than staging a grand reassurance campaign. A community does not relearn reliability from a television ad during bond season. It relearns it from months of seeing routine commitments arrive when promised, and failures acknowledged before residents have to uncover them.

4. PRE-ATTACHED, THIRD-PARTY FALSIFIABLE VERIFICATION

Attach independent proof before the ask, not after public doubt has formed.

Residents reasonably rely on trusted intermediaries rather than personally auditing engineering plans and fiscal assumptions. That is not civic laziness; it is how bounded attention works. ERA requires verification that exists before a referendum or rate decision is launched, with genuine authority to inspect and to publish dissent. The design test is simple: could a credible critic falsify this claim using information already available? If not, it is reassurance, not verification.

5. SYNCHRONIZED SHARED-EXPERIENCE REBONDING

Give people a real civic experience of acting together. Do not mistake a presentation for participation.

A community that has learned separation and suspicion will not necessarily recover through argument. ERA uses genuine shared experience to rebuild the social ground on which evidence can travel: residents working on the same evidence at the same time and seeing how their input changes a

documented decision. The experience must be consequential. A staged listening session that changes nothing is another broken promise.

What ERA Is Built On, and What It Is Not

ERA is deliberately tiered. Public trust is too important to launder an emerging theory into a single, overconfident story.

TIER 1: ESTABLISHED SCIENCE THAT ANCHORS THE MODEL

Several load-bearing findings are established outside the civic-trust domain. Stress can impair reflective prefrontal control while heightening reflexive threat responding. (Arnsten) Dopamine signaling encodes reward prediction error, which makes the structure and predictability of experience consequential. (Schultz, Dayan & Montague) Predictive-processing research explains why standing expectations shape how evidence is encountered. (Friston)

Trust is also sensitive to whether a signal appears intentionally offered rather than mechanically transferred; experimental work links intentional trust signals and oxytocin, and separate work found that oxytocin administration increased trusting behavior in a controlled design. (Zak, Kurzban & Matzner, Hormones and Behavior, 2005; APA summary of Kosfeld et al., Nature, 2005) Algorithmic ranking can actively amplify emotionally charged, out-group-hostile material beyond a chronological baseline, rather than simply reflecting what audiences want. (Milli et al., PNAS Nexus, 2025) And human judgments are often order- and context-dependent, which challenges the stable-preference assumption behind predictive sentiment models. (Pothos & Busemeyer, Annual Review of Psychology, 2022)

These findings do not, by themselves, prove ERA. They establish why predictability, perceived intentionality, independent verification, networked information conditions, and threat regulation deserve to be treated as operational variables, not decorative messaging concepts.

TIER 2: PLAUSIBLE CIVIC EXTRAPOLATIONS THAT NEED DIRECT TESTING

ERA's central civic applications remain hypotheses. No study has yet shown that repeated municipal promise-breaking produces the same biomarker profile as individual trauma, or that a civic disclosure history directly causes pre-rational bond rejection. Yehuda and colleagues found associations between parental trauma exposure and altered FKBP5 methylation in Holocaust survivors and their adult offspring; extending that work to multigenerational civic disinvestment would be an extrapolation, not an established result. (Yehuda et al., Biological Psychiatry, 2016)

Network science supports the importance of social topology, but ERA's prediction that distrust clusters through local civic hubs rather than demographic segments must be tested against precinct returns and network proxies. The case for synchronized shared experience as a rebonding mechanism draws

on a substantial social-bonding research tradition, but it needs stronger direct civic-trust validation before it is treated as settled.

The correct posture is neither credulity nor retreat. Use these mechanisms openly as testable design hypotheses, and measure whether they outperform conventional message improvement in the specific repeat-failure conditions ERA is intended for.

TIER 3: DIAGNOSTIC THREAT INTELLIGENCE ONLY, NEVER PERSUASION TOOLS

ERA also recognizes a set of warning signals and adversary tactics. A rise in conspiratorial or folk-explanatory thinking can indicate a population experiencing loss of control and heightened pattern detection. Whitson and Galinsky found that reduced control increased illusory pattern perception, including conspiratorial and superstitious inferences. (Whitson & Galinsky, Science, 2008) ERA treats that rise **only as a symptom to monitor**: it signals that predictability, agency, and verification need urgent repair. It is never an audience segment to target in its own idiom.

Likewise, material on manipulation (love-bombing, coercive-control language, artificial emotional attunement, and other social-engineering tactics) is an adversary threat model only. It helps agencies recognize how bad-faith actors may exploit a distrustful public. It is never a design library.

This is a firm ethical constraint, not a disclaimer. Manufactured trust signals, engineered dependency, or tailored exploitation of fear would reproduce the injury ERA is meant to repair. If discovered, they would confirm the public's most damaging prior: that the institution is managing people rather than changing conditions. Links Global will not operationalize Tier 3 material as persuasion technique.

A Framework That Can Be Wrong Is More Useful Than One That Cannot

ERA is not offered as a closed doctrine. Its signature prediction is clear: in jurisdictions with a history of repeated failure, **the record of disclosure predictability and delivery consistency should predict outcomes better than message quality at the moment of the vote**.

That can be tested now. Reanalyze Lewiston by coding historical disclosure reliability against precinct results and the gap between 62% and two-thirds. Treat Anderson County's 2006, 2024, and 2025 votes as a quasi-experiment: compare changes in ballot framing with the county's delivery and disclosure record on unrelated capital projects. Examine whether Proposition 3's geographic defections track distrust in its closed-door drafting more closely than support for water infrastructure itself.

Then test ERA prospectively: hold the core message constant, implement the five mechanisms, measure predictability, verification uptake, network diffusion, and participation in shared civic experiences, and compare the results with conventional campaign practice. If those measures do not

improve trust or outcomes, ERA should be revised or rejected. That is not a weakness. It is the difference between a positioning statement and a serious operating theory.

The New Assignment for Public Leadership

Public-sector leaders facing repeat rejection do not need another, prettier case for the same ask. They need to stop treating trust as a sentiment score and start treating it as a condition of governance.

Epistemic Re-Regulation Architecture™ (ERA) gives that work a different mandate: diagnose when a community is operating in a conditioned threat state; rebuild predictability before persuasion; distribute credible agency; prove consistency in ordinary time; attach verification before doubt; and create consequential ways for people to experience civic agency together.

This is slower than a messaging sprint. It is also more honest. And in communities where the reflexive "no" has become stronger than the proposal itself, it is the only category of work that meets the problem at the layer where it lives.

Working With Links Global on ERA

This paper sets out the diagnosis, the architecture, and the evidence posture. The full ERA methodology goes further: the seven-dimension Trust Audit™ and its Trust Condition Index, the operational playbook for each of the five mechanisms, the sequencing between ERA groundwork and NSI campaign work described in The Trust Condition Framework, and the measurement protocols that let a jurisdiction see whether the trust condition is actually changing. Links Global works directly with public agencies and campaigns to design and implement that infrastructure, the practical trust-recovery work that must exist before an ask can be fairly heard.

Talk with Links Global about ERA

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