

Civic COLREGs

Eight Rules for Navigating Corruption in Public Life

A practical discussion paper

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About This Document

Version of record and scope

This discussion paper is the version of record for Civic COLREGs Version 1.0. It introduces and establishes the Civic COLREGs instrument: eight shared practices for public judgment.

This Zenodo deposit also includes the **Civic COLREGs Instrument**, the official compact presentation of the eight rules, and the **Civic COLREGs Card**, their official quick-reference form.

The rules are not a legal test, nor a method for making allegations, or a substitute for investigation. Substantive revisions to the instrument will be issued as new numbered versions, with corresponding revisions to its official forms where necessary.

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The rules are intended to be discussed, tested, taught, questioned, and used as a starting point for further civic exploration. You are welcome to develop your own rules and approaches. If you wish to publish a translation or adaptation of Civic COLREGs itself, please contact the author for permission.

The Civic COLREGs are intended to be freely carried, but not silently rewritten.

Companion Research Note

The design rationale, sources, and development record for this instrument appear in Civic COLREGs: A Research Note on Public Judgment, Corruption, and Verification at Speed (Version 1.0): <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21744109>

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Civic COLREGs

COLREGs is the mariners' shorthand for the *International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea*: the “rules of the road” that allow vessels of every size, speed, purpose, and flag to share the open water safely. The rules that follow are their civic cousins: practices for reducing civic collisions—failures of public judgment in which confusion, misinformation, mistrust, or obscured responsibility leave people less able to see what is happening, navigate a shared problem, or coordinate action.

Civic life is also open water. We share it with institutions, officials, journalists, advocates, experts, platforms, bots, neighbors, bad actors, and people acting in good faith on incomplete information. No single vessel controls the sea. No single authority can mark every lane, update every signal, or tell every citizen what to trust in real time.

Corruption in public life is not new. What has changed is the environment in which we try to see it.

Corruption can involve the misuse of entrusted power, position, process, or public resources for improper advantage. Sometimes it is concealed. Sometimes it happens in public but remains difficult to recognize, name, and act upon. Rules change quietly. Conflicts of interest may not only be disclosed but normalized. Exceptions become precedents. Oversight offices close or remain unfilled. Safeguards disappear through ordinary-looking decisions. None of these observations alone proves corruption. They are things citizens need to be able to notice, question, and investigate.

And that has become harder in a strange way: we have more information than ever, arriving faster than any person can reasonably process it.

Documents are online, hearings are streamed, databases are searchable, and public records may be available almost instantly. Claims, interpretations, images, clips, and reactions can travel around the world before most people have had time to check the original source, understand its context, or decide what it means. *The asymmetry matters: information can now be produced and distributed far faster than people can verify, digest, and judge it.*

In that gap, misleading claims and selective interpretations can spread faster than careful verification. A flood of claims and counterclaims can leave people unsure what is true, what matters, and what can be done.

Transparency—bringing hidden things into the open—remains vital. But availability is no longer enough. A fact does not need to be secret to be effectively unavailable; it can simply be buried beneath a mountain of other information. And what gets buried is often the connection *between* facts: the path from what was announced, to who decided, to what was spent, to what actually happened. Each document can be public while the trail through them remains too long, tangled, or costly for most people to follow. And among millions of available documents, one of the hardest things to notice may be what is no longer there.

Available is not the same as visible. Visible is not the same as verified. Verified is not the same as understood. And whether we understand or not, the consequences still arrive.

So the civic question is no longer only, “What source do I trust?” It is also: “What can I trust without verifying? What must I verify before relying on it? And after verifying, what can I honestly say I know?”

This is where the open-water metaphor matters. In open water, safe navigation does not depend on painted lanes. It depends on shared conventions and disciplined attention: keeping watch, checking bearings, signaling clearly, and acting prudently under uncertainty.

Civic COLREGs offer a similar discipline. They do not tell us what to think, whom to support, or what conclusion to reach. They give us shared practices for noticing what is happening, carrying claims carefully, and recognizing changes in the civic environment around us. They help us notice differently, speak more precisely, verify more carefully, and coordinate with others even when trust cannot simply be assumed.

They are tools for orientation: in private judgment, in public conversation, and in the shared civic waters we navigate together.

The Oldest Rule

No rulebook can steer your vessel for you.

Rules matter. They give vessels a common language and make conduct more predictable. But they cannot remove the need to notice, judge, and respond to the situation actually in front of you. The weather may not be of your making. The waters may be difficult, and other vessels may act recklessly or deliberately put you at risk. You still have to navigate the vessel that is yours.

That is the oldest rule: *you still answer for your vessel.*

This does not mean you are at fault for every danger you encounter, responsible for another vessel’s conduct, or equally free to act in every circumstance. Weather, power, risk, and the

actions of others shape what is possible. The oldest rule asks only that we remain answerable for the choices that are actually ours to make.

In civic life, checking a source does not automatically make you right. Disclosing something does not make you honest. And “But I only shared it...” does not remove your part in carrying it onward. You are answerable for what you pass along, in proportion to how far you carried it and how much it mattered.

Being answerable is not punishment, blame, or credit. It means being able to account for your own choices—and when you discover that you carried something false, carrying the correction as far as you carried the mistake.

What This Is Not

Civic COLREGs are not a theory of corruption, a test for identifying corrupt actors, nor a solution for broken institutions. No eight rules could be. They offer practices for the one vessel each of us actually commands: ourselves, navigating the shared waters of public life.

The Eight Rules

The eight rules are written as “rules of the road” for civic engagement and are organized into three habits. The first three rules focus on the habit of staying steady and fair, providing a grounded foundation for the next five. The following three rules guide how you handle claims, and the last two encourage you to observe the subtle changes happening in the system while attention is often diverted.

Keep Your Bearings | Check Before You Carry | Watch the Unannounced
Changes

The First Habit— Keep Your Bearings

Use the same standard for yourself and others. Change course openly when the evidence requires it.

Rule 1: Apply the Same Standard to Your Own Side

A rule isn’t fair if it applies only to those you disagree with. If you call out corruption in your opponents but excuse it in your allies, you’re not upholding a public standard; you’re wielding a political weapon.

Ask yourself: When was the last time I applied this standard to someone I support, and what did it cost me? Was it comfort, agreement, trust, or a debate I wanted to win?

If you can’t identify an example and its cost, take a moment to reflect before applying the standard to others.

Rule 2: Questions Are Not Betrayal

Loyalty can make questions feel like betrayal. Shame can make uncertainty, correction, or disagreement feel like a personal failure. Together, they shift attention from “What happened?” to “What will people think of me—or of us?” That is a powerful means of control. When asking for evidence feels disloyal, or admitting a mistake feels humiliating, scrutiny becomes socially expensive even when no one has made an explicit threat.

Honest checking is different. It asks what happened, what evidence supports the claim, and what repair is needed. It does not require treating uncertainty, error, or changing one’s mind as disgrace. Asking for facts is not betrayal. Changing your mind when the evidence requires it is not weakness. Both are how people and the groups to which they belong remain capable of seeing, and of acting on what they see.

Ask yourself: *Does my perspective require me to believe that everyone who disagrees with me is stupid, dishonest, or dangerous?*

If so, take a step back. Check if you are reacting to a perceived threat rather than considering the evidence. Asking for facts isn’t betrayal; it’s how we protect the people and causes we care about.

Rule 3: State What Would Change Your Mind

A serious opinion must be open to change, otherwise it risks becoming a defense of one’s identity rather than a thoughtful consideration of the issue. Regularly reflect on your beliefs, the evidence that shaped them, and any factors that later influenced your perspective. Better yet, articulate in advance what specific evidence would prompt you to reconsider your most important positions. Changing your mind when warranted by evidence is not a humiliation; it is simply paying attention to the evidence doing its work.

Ask yourself: *What would I need to see or learn to think differently about this? How would I know it was trustworthy?*

By naming your evidence in advance, you maintain consistency and honesty when inconvenient facts arise—which they inevitably will. And, when new evidence changes your view, say so. A correction leaves a trail others can examine, evaluate, and trust.

The Second Habit— Check Before You Carry

Before you repeat, share, or act on a claim, slow down enough to know what you are carrying.

Rule 4: Take Time to Verify

A community can't move safely at the speed of social media posts, headlines, and outrage. It can only progress as quickly as its members can verify what they are being told. A claim doesn't become trustworthy just because it's urgent, popular, or frequently repeated. Those who aim to mislead don't need to convince everyone; they just need to make verification seem too slow, difficult, or risky.

A document, official-looking badge, or familiar name is not verification by itself. Check that the source is genuine, current, and actually responsible for the claim.

Ask yourself: *Did I look for the original source? Is there a document, recording, decision, report, or firsthand account behind this claim?*

If not, treat the claim as unverified, not necessarily false. It is not yet yours to pass along as fact.

Rule 5: Repetition Is Not Proof

Seeing a claim in multiple places can create the illusion of strong support, but it may all trace back to a single source. Ten articles based on one press release don't equal ten confirmations. A hundred posts sharing the same video don't represent a hundred witnesses. A claim can be loud without being true.

Ask yourself: *How many genuinely independent sources support this? Are there records, documents, direct witnesses, or investigators who didn't just get the information from each other?*

One source might be a lead worth pursuing, but it doesn't establish a settled fact.

Rule 6: Where Retaliation Is Credible, Silence Is Not Agreement

When corruption needs silence, fear is how it gets it—aimed at those who might speak out, or at their loved ones. In such situations, silence doesn't mean nothing happened or that no one disagrees; it may simply indicate that speaking out is unsafe.

This doesn't mean you should accept every anonymous claim without question. It means that public disclosure shouldn't be the price of being taken seriously. Look for ways to verify

claims without increasing the risk: independent records, patterns across different accounts, confidential reporting channels, or trusted intermediaries.

Ask yourself: *Before I assume someone's silence means agreement, or that their anonymity is a disadvantage, do I understand what speaking out might cost them? If I don't know, I'm making a comfortable assumption, not an informed judgment.*

The Third Habit— Watch the Unannounced Changes

Look beyond the loud event for the rules, safeguards, and ordinary practices that changed—or quietly stopped.

Rule 7: Look for the Change Behind the Scandal

Scandals can capture all the attention: the shocking quote, the dramatic hearing, the viral accusation. While these events are significant, they can also distract from quieter changes with longer-term consequences. While everyone is focused on the drama, a rule might be weakened, an exception added, or an oversight office left unfilled.

Ask yourself: *What changed in the system while this scandal was in the spotlight? Was it a rule, a budget, a procedure, or an oversight office? What decision or practice changed? Who had the authority to make that change? What reason was given, and who can now question, review, or reverse it?*

Pay attention not only to who behaved poorly but also to what made that behavior possible, and what could make it easier to repeat.

Rule 8: Notice What Has Stopped

Not every warning sign is an event. Sometimes, the crucial fact is that something important is no longer occurring. An audit that hasn't been ordered or that was avoided, a regular report that hasn't been published, or a meeting where dissent has vanished. Records that were once easy to access may now be delayed or incomplete. These absences rarely make headlines, which is why removing a safeguard can be easier than attacking it openly.

Ask yourself: *What are two or three public practices that used to happen regularly but no longer do? What changed, and who benefits from that change?*

If you cannot answer, it doesn't mean you can conclude nothing has changed; it's a reason to investigate further.

What You Now Hold

These rules do not require everyone sharing the water to have the same destination, interests, or intentions. Their value is that they give each of us a more reliable way to navigate our own vessel and recognize departures from shared practice. Once the language is shared, it also changes what becomes possible: we can name what we are seeing, examine it together, and coordinate action without first agreeing on everything.

You establish your bearings before the pressure arrives. If you verify a claim before sharing it, you can defend it when challenged. By setting your standard in advance—when it is easier to do so—you are better prepared to hold it when the situation becomes difficult.

You become harder to manipulate. Misleading the public doesn't require convincing you. It may only require getting you to pass along a claim before you have checked it. When you do the checking, you keep your stretch of the civic trail walkable. You make it harder for confusion to travel through you.

People can rely on you. If you hold the same standard for all sides and clearly state what would change your mind, you become a rare stable point in uncertain situations. Others can use your judgment to guide them, even when they don't agree with it.

You can hold this course without becoming insufferable—and without it becoming unbearable. The only consequence these rules ever name is correction. You carry that correction as far as you carried the mistake. There are no tests of purity, and following them earns you no standing to accuse anyone else. These rules are for how you navigate your daily life. They are not a label for your identity nor validation of claims against others.

What These Rules Can—and Cannot—Do

These rules alone won't make public life honest. They can't ensure that those in power will always act responsibly.

They can make it harder for harmful changes to pass under cover of speed, confusion, loyalty, distraction, and silence. They help us see when public systems are becoming harder to inspect, question, and hold accountable.

No one can verify everything, and no one has to. Each person can check some claims, recognize missing safeguards, ask better questions, and say what would change their mind. Shared rules give those questions somewhere to stand. They turn what is hard to name into something people can point to, discuss, and examine together. They do not tell people what conclusion to reach or what remedy to choose.

When enough people take these steps, public judgment becomes visible: not a single collective opinion, but reasons and evidence that others can find, examine, challenge, improve, and use.

The scarce resource is not information. It is careful public judgment.

No one has to see the whole in order to help make the whole more navigable.

The Author's Log

This document was developed through sustained collaboration with AI language models and human readers across generations. The models served as instruments of thought: offering bearings, generating alternatives, challenging formulations. Some language from those exchanges remains in the final text.

The rules apply the author's prior framework for human functioning under pressure, developed over five decades and published separately. They were tested against maritime navigation practice, the research literature, and the author's own judgment. The author can explain, defend, revise, or abandon every consequential claim here with no machine present. She answers for the judgments this document carries.

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Every claim sent forward from this desk is hers to answer for.

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