

Civic COLREGs Instrument

Version 1.0

Official compact presentation of the eight rules

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About This Instrument

Civic COLREGs are eight shared practices for navigating possible corruption in public life. They are not a legal test, a method for making allegations, or a substitute for investigation. They are practices for public judgment: noticing, questioning, verifying, and acting more carefully in shared civic waters.

The rules apply first to the vessel each of us commands: ourselves. They should be applied consistently, including to people and causes we support.

The Oldest Rule

No rulebook can steer your vessel for you.

You are not at fault for every danger you encounter, responsible for another vessel's conduct, or equally free to act in every circumstance. Civic COLREGs ask us to remain answerable for the choices that are actually ours to make.

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

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.

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This document is the official compact presentation of the eight Civic COLREGs.
The discussion paper, Civic COLREGs: Eight Rules for Navigating Corruption in Public Life,
is the Version 1.0 version of record.