

Citizens Strengthening Democracy

Democracy is fluid and dynamic, and its roots are deepened through the active participation of its citizens; not just when it comes time to vote, but all the time. Revitalizing democracy in America is not just a possibility—it's already happening. Innovative approaches to civic participation are making sure that citizens have a greater voice in public decisions across the United States and around the world.

Increased participation in democracy is a critical solution to the disconnectedness that many Americans feel from their officials and institutions of national government. Only 19 percent of Americans now expect Washington to “do what is right” most of the time.¹ Only 38 percent believe that government generally “cares what people like me think.”² Americans are dismayed by the heightened partisanship that so often seems to get in the way of effective governance. They want their elected officials fighting against our greatest challenges, not each other.

Policy-makers, for their part, find it increasingly difficult to govern. They describe a political process defined by shallow media coverage, narrow-minded lobbying and turn to special interest campaigns and polls as a poor substitute for input from their constituents.

But, there is also very good reason—with proven means—to believe that civic engagement can be renewed. City budgets, disaster recovery plans, public policies and regional land-use plans have all been transformed by tapping the public's wisdom for better decision-making.

⋮ Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer
⋮ AmericaSpeaks

“So many different folk came together and shared their voice. We felt someone was actually listening. That is really what is important, not just having a voice, but having your voice heard.”

➤ Participant of an AmericaSpeaks meeting

Connecting citizens and decision-makers throughout the policy-making process helps ensure these and other public decisions are made for the common good.

By convening the public at an appropriate scale and within the context of an actual decision-making process, it is possible to link policy-making, free of corrupting influences, with the will of the people. We know that citizens are eager to participate in public life and do have the ability to make informed judgments on complex policy issues, if they believe the government will listen.

Participative Democracy in Action

Even the most complex policy conversations, such as healthcare reform or disaster recovery, benefit from the guidance of thoughtful, informed input from a representative group of citizens. In fact, public participation can develop new solutions, increase public understanding of the issue and generate broad support for implementation.

Citizens Plan New Orleans' Recovery

Four thousand New Orleanians helped shape the city's recovery plan after Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans residents who had returned home, and those displaced

to 20 other locations around the nation, participated in simultaneous, interactive, video-connected meetings. Participants represented the city's pre-Katrina demographics by income, age, race and geography: 64 percent of participants of the Community Congress were African American, and 25 percent had annual household incomes below \$20,000.

Participants successfully grappled with issues of flood protection, investments in education, land use and more. The Unified New Orleans Plan incorporated these public priorities, and at the end of the deliberations, 92 percent of participants agreed that the plan should go forward. The Unified New Orleans Plan was the first to get approval by all levels of local and state government, releasing over \$200 million in much needed recovery funds.

A County Renews Its Future

Civic leaders in Owensboro-Daviess County, Kentucky, engaged citizens in developing—and implementing—solutions for the toughest questions facing their community.

A demographically representative group of 650 residents participated in a day-long meeting to discuss

Current and displaced residents of New Orleans met simultaneously in 21 locations to develop a unified plan for rebuilding the Hurricane Katrina ravaged city.





Photo courtesy AmericaSpeaks

Demographically representative participants discuss key issues at small, facilitated discussion tables.

their community's pressing issues in economy, government, the environment, healthcare and education. The mayor, the county judge, all city commissioners, a state senator and two state representatives attended the We the People 21st Century Town Meeting and deliberated with citizens.

Action items were prioritized by participants, leading to public responses from elected and community leaders. Within weeks of the meeting, workgroups met to take action on these priorities, in which more than 300 area residents participated. More than 1,000 residents stayed informed about the process through regular communications and updates.

The community-led work groups continue to meet monthly, more than two years after the kick-off meeting, to work toward the community's vision. For example, the Region of Opportunity Action Group partnered with the city and county government to prepare a master plan for downtown, with unprecedented levels of public participation. The Healthy and Caring Community Action Group is expanding proven techniques to reduce substance abuse and coordinated a two-month volunteer program to help low-income families sign up for low-cost health insurance.

Healthcare Reform

Thousands of Californians came together at a day-long non-partisan conversation on healthcare reform to weigh in on critical policy options being considered by state leaders. Participants from every walk of life joined simultaneous conversations in eight locations across the state, all linked together by satellite. State lawmakers, including Governor Schwarzenegger, joined participants at the meeting.

“A gathering like this “reminds leaders of who they’re leading” and how citizens’ expectations of their leaders are changing.”

➤ Local organizer of AmericaSpeaks meeting

As a result of the meeting, healthcare reform moved closer to the shared priorities of these citizen participants on three-quarters of issues in debate and strengthened the ultimate outcomes. For example, the two cost containment approaches that were most important to participants (prevention and wellness, with 62 percent support, and, streamlining administrative procedures, with 51 percent support) correlated with a stronger focus in these areas in the final compromise bill than was present in previous proposals. A cap on insurer profits was supported by 58 percent of participants, which had originally only been in the governor's proposal but was then embraced by other legislative leadership in the compromise bill.

Participants had more positive attitudes about state government, a greater belief in their own ability to be heard and make a difference and were significantly more likely to take political action on healthcare compared to those who did not attend. Policy-makers hailed CaliforniaSpeaks for bringing in fresh public perspectives and generating a sense of urgency for bipartisan change.

Participatory Budgeting

Municipal budget spending priorities are being determined with the input of residents in a process called participatory budgeting. Now used in cities around the world, a pioneering example of participatory budgeting was developed in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Since 1989, Porto Alegre has held neighborhood, regional and citywide assemblies where residents suggest, deliberate and decide on spending priorities. The resulting budget is binding, although the council can suggest changes and the mayor can veto the budget (although there is no record yet of this happening).

Importantly, participants are from diverse economic and political backgrounds, to ensure city spending helps address a severe inequality in living standards between the one-third of residents who live in slums and other residents with better access to public amenities.

A World Bank study shows that participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre has led to an increase in sewer and water connections, from 75 to 98 percent of households.



Photo courtesy AmericaSpeaks

Involving hundreds, or thousands, of people in a public meeting enables the outcomes to have greater visibility and credibility with policy-makers, the media, and the public as a whole.





Photo courtesy Matt Apps Photography

Participation in national discussions on critical policy issues can be—like jury duty and voting—a **normal part** of every American’s civic life.

Wisconsin residents gather at their state capitol to protest a controversial bill put forth by the governor.

We now have an opportunity to transform the business of government so that citizens and residents are at the table.

The number of schools quadrupled, and the health and education budget increased from 13 percent to almost 40 percent.³

Successes in both large- and small-scale public participation projects, achieved over the past few decades, provide a road map for building a democracy in which citizens from every walk of life regularly meet and wrestle with tough policy questions, and then articulate their views to decision-makers.

This should not be a distant dream. Participation in national discussions on critical policy issues can be—like jury duty and voting—a normal part of every American’s civic life. Our Founders created a system of governance that was brilliant in its simplicity—those who are governed must participate and give their consent. It is time to recapture that vision so American democracy can fulfill its aspirations.

Opening Our Government

On his first full day in office, President Barack Obama issued a Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government that calls for a new system of transparency, participation and collaboration. Later that year, the Obama administration issued an Open Government Directive to all federal agencies that specifies the steps they must take to become more open. President Obama has taken a first step to bring the American people closer into the public decision-making that most affects our lives.

We now have an opportunity to transform the business of government so that citizens and residents are at the table—collaborating on framing key policy issues, working through tough decisions and creating the future we want for our communities and our country. People are interested, they are capable and have growing expectations that government is listening.

If we will transform government in a way that is not episodic, that really changes the system at all levels, then it is imperative that all levels of government make an institutional commitment to greater citizen participation. A successful commitment to public participation in government requires a mandate in all levels of government, allocating sufficient funds, training and supporting staff, as well as a culture of experimentation that encourages innovation.

Citizens, too, carry deep responsibility for renewing our democratic system. Greater participation will require an increased public capacity to collaborate across difference, make commitments to action, stay informed and hold decision-makers accountable.

Reforms like these will ensure a more inclusive political process, which in turn will generate better policies, develop the public knowledge and will to carry them out, and lead not only to a more just and strong society, but to an upward cycle of economic, social and political progress.

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Dr. Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer is an innovator in deliberative democracy, public administration and organizational development. She is Founder and President of AmericaSpeaks (www.americaspeaks.org), a US-based non-profit that develops and implements innovative deliberative tools. AmericaSpeaks provides citizens a greater voice in local, regional and national decision-making on the most challenging public issues of the day. Over 150,000 people have participated in AmericaSpeaks’ meetings where participants wrestle with complex issues, uncover shared priorities and offer recommendations to shape next steps. Lukensmeyer was Consultant (1993-1994) to the White House Chief of Staff and Chief of Staff (1986-1991) to Governor Celeste of Ohio. Lukensmeyer is author of numerous publications, including Public Deliberation: A Manager’s Guide to Citizen Deliberation, Institutionalizing Large-Scale Engagements in Governance: A Link Between Theory and Practice and Beyond e-Government and e-Democracy: A Global Perspective (2008).

