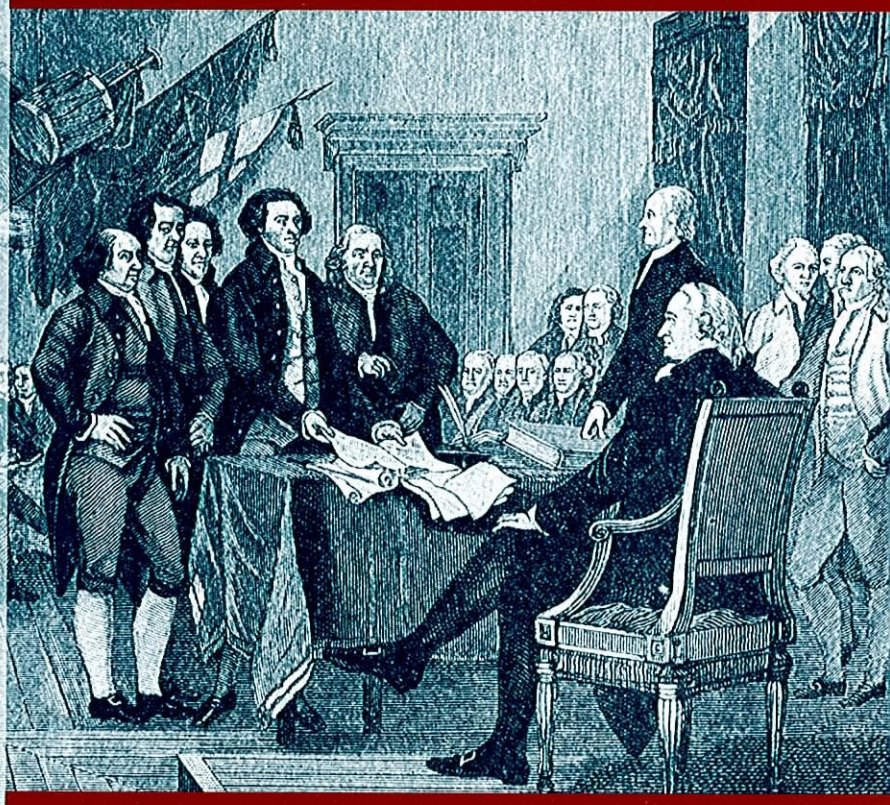
Americans across the country care deeply about the state of our nation. The gap between individuals and institutions, the widening chasm between those with and without power, and the growing tear in our social fabric are mobilizing citizens from coast to coast. Citizens of every walk of life are in dialogue with each other and civic leaders as we work together to create the communities we want. Americans are finding that we can revitalize the aspirations so clearly set forth in the foundations of our nation's birth. AMERICA*SPEAKS* is dedicated to supporting, convening, and championing these authentic citizen initiatives for healthy democracy at every level, at every phase, and at every stage of governance. AMERICA*SPEAKS* invites you to join in taking responsibility for the health and future of our nation's democracy.



Designing for Democracy

A Wingspread Conference

AMERICA*SPEAKS*

ENGAGING CITIZEN VOICES IN NATIONAL GOVERNANCE

Who and How

Who we are

The Principles of Healthy Democracy reflect the work of 45 American citizens who came together from across the country to consider the vitality and vision of their individual communities and our shared democracy. The "Designing for Democracy" conference was created by AMERICA*SPEAKS* and sponsored by the Johnson Foundation at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. Three regional teams from the Central Carolinas, Kentucky, and Puget Sound and people from eight other states joined AMERICA*SPEAKS*' national network to explore the ways pluralistic groups can work together in practicing healthy democracy.

At Wingspread we recognized that the common ground we created was made possible through a set of deeply held beliefs, values, and principles that are at the core of our shared American experience. We found these connections to be more profound than any official document, more vital than any formal institution, and more hopeful than any political promise. Born of mutual trust, crafted in community, and presented as an evolutionary creation, these are our Principles of Healthy Democracy. (See opposite page.)

How we worked

Below is an exercise similar to our process at the "Designing for Democracy" conference that can guide your group through an exploration of democratic principles.

Put yourself in the role of citizen. Think about the following questions and write down your answers.

- **What are the two or three key issues facing your community right now? What is your highest concern?**
- **What is your vision of our society regarding your highest concern if we were the best we could be?**
- **What image or symbol captures for you what it means to be an American? Be specific—a place, a thing, a picture, a scene.**

Now share your thoughts with the person next to you. After a few minutes share your key symbol(s) with the whole group. Next think about what makes a healthy democracy. Take at least ten minutes and write down your answers to the following questions.

- **What is the most democratic aspect of our nation right now? What is the least?**
- **What is the most democratic aspect of the community in which you live? What is the least?**
- **What is the most democratic aspect of the group in which you are now meeting? What is the least?**
- **What is the most democratic aspect of how you operate—your attitudes, behaviors, feelings? What is the least?**
- **List five characteristics of a healthy democracy.**

Divide into small groups and share your answers. Have one member of the group write each person's thoughts on flip chart paper which is visible to everyone. Do not challenge each other's comments; you are listening and learning where others are coming from. Now go around the table and have each person list their five characteristics of a healthy democracy.

Reconvene as a large group and post the flip charts. Fully discuss the principles and come to consensus on your group's principles for healthy democracy. Note which of the principles named are captured by the AMERICA*SPEAKS* list; circle the remaining items.

Discuss the circled items. Which principles does the group **unanimously** agree should be added to the AMERICA*SPEAKS* list?

Email your list, with the additions highlighted, to amerspeaks@aol.com. We will collect all input and provide you with a report at the end of the year.

Principles of Healthy Democracy

Our times compel us to reaffirm the principles of democracy and take action. We recognize there will always be a gap between the aspirational ideals of democracy and our ability to live it every day. We will use these principles as inspiration to achieve the highest possible expression of democracy as individuals, communities, institutions, and society as a whole.

Shared power

Equality of access. Citizens set the agenda. People and communities believe they have—and actually have—power and influence over the decisions that affect their lives.

A journey not a destination

Dynamic, evolving, and constantly renewing through corrective action. Adaptive, responsive, and builds learning. Integrated into everyday life.

Inclusive and compassionate

Champions the rights and voices of all. Recognizes and encourages diversity and interdependence.

Shared responsibility

Being informed, participating, and learning. Commitment to the common good. Take action and evaluate.

Thoughtful deliberation

Public, safe, and respectful space and time for sharing and deliberation.

Public trust

Responsibility and integrity of leadership. Leaders are stewards. Citizens are leaders; leaders are citizens.

Freedom of expression

Everyone choosing to be heard is heard and understood.

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