# Taking Democracy to Scale

## *Large Scale Interventions—for Citizens*

**Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer**
**Steven Brigham**
*America*Speaks

This article explores the large-scale work of America*Speaks* in the public sector, engaging citizens in 21st Century Town Meetings in decisions that impact their lives. It first reviews the differences in practicing large group work in broader social systems versus more bounded organizational systems. It also reviews the core dimensions and principles of the America*Speaks* model followed by an examination of the use of these town meetings in land use planning, resource allocation, and policy formulation projects. Finally, the authors describe America*Speaks*'s intent to institutionalize the practice of national discussions on critical policy issues and highlight the work of other deliberative democracy practitioners over the past decade locally, regionally, nationally, and abroad.

***Keywords:*** town meeting; deliberative democracy; 21st Century Town Meeting; America*Speaks*; Listening to the City; Citizen Summits

> If democracy has lost any accountability to the governed, it is because there is no longer any reliable linkage between citizens and those who hold power.
>
> —William Greider (1992, p. 20)

### INTRODUCTION

More than a decade ago, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* documented an emerging practice in the organizational change field—large group interventions (Bunker & Alban, 1992). Since then, a remarkable proliferation of large group meth-

THE JOURNAL OF APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE, Vol. 41 No. 1, March 2005 47-60
DOI: 10.1177/0021886304272656
© 2005 NTL Institute



Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

ods has begun to change the way we convene people to tackle challenging issues in the organizational realm. Not surprisingly, these social innovations have begun to be adopted in the public and civic spheres as well.

America*Speaks* was founded in 1995 to serve as a counterweight to the influence of special interest groups in affecting public policy. It came to believe fundamentally, and it has found this to be true in its work, that people want to take responsibility for the common good and want to contribute to something larger than themselves. Through its 21st Century Town Meeting™, America*Speaks* began to give citizens voice by taking the traditional New England town meeting to a far larger scale through the innovative use of technology, engaging thousands of people in the decisions that impact their lives. These town meetings provided citizens a chance for direct dialogue with both decision makers and fellow citizens to share ideas and shape decisions. They stand as significant new forays into shaping democratic governance.

In this article, we will explore the core dimensions, principles, and projects of the organization's town meetings; the emerging field of deliberative democracy; and the potential we see for bringing this work to a national scale.

## THE CHALLENGE OF LARGE GROUP INTERVENTIONS IN THE CIVIC ARENA

It is important to look at some key differences between organizational systems and larger social, community, and political systems. Unlike many organizational systems in which leadership, authority, and outcomes are clearer and under greater control, communities are far more complex social systems with a wide range of influences coming from multiple actors and decision makers. Rarely does a single decision maker, agency, or organization control the outcome of a specific issue or set of issues. As a result, change on an issue or problem is caused by an accumulation of decisions and actions across diverse groups, organizations, and individuals.

---

*We would like to thank America*Speaks *staff members and associates, Lars Hasselbad Torres, Ashley Boyd, Elizabeth White, and Daniel Stone, for their contributions to drafts of this article.*

*Dr. Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer is the president and founder of America*Speaks*, now in its 10th year. America*Speaks *is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to engaging citizens in public decisions that impact their lives. From 1997 to 1999, Lukensmeyer was the executive director of Americans Discuss Social Security (ADSS), a $12 million project of The Pew Charitable Trusts. Prior to founding America*Speaks*, Lukensmeyer served as consultant to the White House Office of the Chief of Staff and served as the deputy project director of management of the National Performance Review (NPR), Vice President Al Gore's reinventing government task force. From 1986 to 1991, Lukensmeyer served as chief of staff to Governor Richard F. Celeste of Ohio. She was the first woman to serve as Ohio's chief of staff. Lukensmeyer has a doctorate in organizational behavior from Case Western Reserve University.*

*Steve Brigham has served as chief operating officer of America*Speaks *since January 2001. In addition to managing the organization's operating and financial functions, he serves as project manager on multiple projects. Prior to joining America*Speaks*, he worked for Kaludis Consulting Group and for Group Decision Support Systems (GDSS) doing strategic planning, organization development, and technology-supported facilitation. From 1993 to 1997, he served as director of the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Project at the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE). He has edited several books on quality improvement and published articles in numerous journals, most recently on the America*Speaks *model.*

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

The creation of democratic processes, especially in large group democratic interventions, in broader social systems requires an in-depth understanding of what makes them unique.

*Boundaries are more permeable*. In the public sphere, the boundaries between what is inside the system and what is outside the system are much more permeable than is typically found in organizations. What takes place in the public arena occurs in between organizations, either in loosely knit citizen groups, interorganizational groups, or simply among unorganized citizenry. This lack of clear boundaries can create significant challenges for determining the scope of the issues under deliberation and in determining who actually needs to participate and how to reach them.

*It can be more difficult to ensure participation*. Inside organizations, authority can mandate participation. In most social systems there is little basis for requiring people to actually engage and participate in democratic practices. Therefore, more extraordinary measures need to be taken to motivate people to commit their time, energy, and hope in actually taking part in such deliberations.

*Decision makers are in fact accountable*. A battle cry among executives and managers in many organizations is "This is not a democracy;" there is often little accountability that organizational leaders feel they owe their employees. In the public sector, there remains a genuinely felt belief by citizens within democracies, as battered and cynical as they may have become, that elected officials are supposed to be accountable to those who have elected them. This expectation can be used to help induce public figures to engage in democratic processes and to actually behave in accordance with the guidance that comes out of them.

*The process is inherently political*. There is a far greater political dimension to the larger public and civic social system than found in most organizational systems. Although those in power within organizations often retain substantial control over many of the organs of communication, decision makers in broader social systems must consider that their activities are communicated through a wide set of media prisms not under their direct control. This creates an imperative that the process be conducted in a way that can withstand careful scrutiny. Only in this way will the process and the outcomes be viewed by the public as legitimate.

*The issues are public and communal*. Inside organizations, the range of issues and stakeholders involved are usually much more limited, dictated primarily by the organization's mission. The issues in the public sphere represent the full range of questions facing our modern communities, for example, health, housing, transportation, and jobs. Thus, in broader social systems, there is a need for deliberation among a much larger spectrum of individuals and groups. With larger numbers, the approach must be carefully designed to ensure the participation of many more groups and individuals than usually are involved in organizational contexts. Issues of language, handicap, and other differences also must be effectively accommodated.

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

Although there are likely other important differences between organizational and larger social systems, the few enumerated here provide a context for understanding the challenge of conducting large group interventions in the civic arena.

## A CRITICAL CHALLENGE FOR OUR DEMOCRACY

Most Americans today would agree that there is something deeply amiss about how our democracy is working.[1] Over the past decades, politics has become more partisan, elections more expensive, and policy making more beholden to special interests. Citizens get squeezed out. In a recent national poll (CBS News/*New York Times*, 2000), only 10% of respondents believed that the general public has a say in what the government does a "good deal" of the time.

Although a healthy democracy depends on the ability of citizens to directly affect the public policies central to their lives, the current system has little room for genuine citizen input and influence. There are many myths about the American public, including the following:

- They will not participate in policy making.
- They will not be competent to deal with complex public policy issues.
- They will not be able to rise above self-interest on behalf of the common good.

America*Speaks*'s work over the past 9 years has demonstrated these to be profound myths. Citizens *will* participate, *can* effectively work through the tough issues, and *will* work on behalf of the common good.

The American public does not just want a vote; they want a voice in what happens, an impact on decisions that impact their lives, and a government responsive to their needs, not just those of special interest groups.

The profound disconnect between public citizens and the interlocking "system" of elected officials, government bureaucracy, and special interest groups, such as lobbyists, media, and think tanks that develop public policy, is deepening. The current system assumes that any consensus that emerges from discussions among officials and special interests represents the general commonwealth. Nothing could be farther from the truth. A true consensus cannot materialize until the general public is centrally engaged in policy discussions.

America*Speaks* is just one of a number of organizations that have been examining the possibility of more meaningful, empowered participatory governance, with new emphasis on reasoned public discourse around building a true consensus.

## THE 21ST CENTURY TOWN MEETING— ENGAGING CITIZENS IN GOVERNANCE

Over the past 9 years, America*Speaks* has conducted more than 45 21st Century Town Meetings involving tens of thousands of people in more than 30 states around

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

the country and in the District of Columbia. Meetings have addressed local, state, and national issues ranging from Social Security reform to regional planning. This critical work has helped to restore the citizen's role and influence by giving decision makers access to a diverse group of constituents that counterbalances the domination of special interest groups.

America*Speaks* developed this new town meeting model because the usual strategies for gathering input in the United States do not engage and sustain interest or generate much useful information for decision makers. As the gap between citizens and elected officials widened, we explored how to help decision makers go beyond polling to connect quickly and authentically with citizen voices and to tap into the value of informal citizen conversation and make sure this wisdom was heard and citizen voices respected.

This new town meeting model incorporated not only the latest technologies and meeting design tools but also took deliberation to a much larger scale, involving thousands of citizens simultaneously on public policy issues. In doing so, we hoped to restore the citizen's role and influence and give decision makers access to a diverse group of citizens. The result has been a model that engages large numbers of people in real-time deliberation and that has had real influence on regional planning, local budget decisions, and national policy development. We will explore specific examples later in the article.

## CORE ELEMENTS OF A 21ST CENTURY TOWN MEETING

The 21st Century Town Meeting is more than a single event. It is an integrated process of citizen, stakeholder, and decision maker engagement over the course of many months.

The issue for a 21st Century Town Meeting must be carefully analyzed in numerous contexts before being finalized. Who are the key decision makers, stakeholders, and communities, and what is the nature of their stake in the issue? What are the decision-making processes already underway? How would a deliberation build on previous activity? What information is required for the decision-making process? What is the history and current political climate concerning these issues? The answers to these questions allow for the development of the most effective strategies for convening a town meeting.

These meetings must also establish public credibility. Citizen deliberation has the capacity for significant impact *if* there is a meaningful, transparent link to decision makers and decision-making processes. Partisanship and bias must be absent from the planning and execution of events, participant mix, and discussion materials. Because citizen deliberation can affect the terms and outcome of a debate, the shape and content of policy enacted, or how dollars are allocated in a budget, it is critical that decision makers be present, listening, and publicly committed to taking outcomes into consideration.

Just as it is important to create conditions for dialogue in an organizational large group event, it is even more critical in the civic sphere. The event must be designed to

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

consistently seek and ensure fair and productive dialogue and create a level playing field in which individual citizen voices are equal to those representing established interests. There must be ample time for extensive small group discussion, balanced by time for large group synthesis and recommendations. The space must also be made inviting and intimate, whether through the design of the room, the décor used, or the showcasing of art and music.

Finally, the overall strategy developed for a town meeting must incorporate ways to prompt and track systemic change among decision makers and a renewed sense of agency among participants. There must be an avenue by which a citizen can continue to pursue the issue.

The success of the 21st Century Town Meeting is built on several foundational building blocks. These are described next.

*Diverse participants*. 21st Century Town Meeting participants always reflect the rich diversity of the community in which the meeting is held. Although participants are self-selecting, America*Speaks* assists sponsors in designing extensive outreach efforts to draw citizens of all walks of life, particularly those who feel disenfranchised and do not normally participate in civic activities. Diverse participation gives decision makers the confidence that the meeting outcome reflects the whole community's needs and views.

*Neutral materials*. All participants receive detailed background materials that provide a balance of perspectives on the issue or issues under consideration. These background materials educate participants on the issues and create the foundation for a rich, informed table discussion. In addition to the written materials, issue experts also are available to respond to specific questions generated at tables during the discussion periods.

*Table facilitation*. 21st Century Town Meeting participants engage in small group discussions (10 to 12 participants) that are facilitated by trained, professional facilitators. These table facilitators ensure that everyone has a chance to participate and that the process is democratic and help to keep the day on track by adhering to the overall rhythm and constraints of the day's agenda at individual tables. A lead facilitator directs the program from the stage—introducing discussion questions, leading keypad votes, and reporting outcomes. The lead facilitator responds real time to participant input and adjusts the planned program as needed.

*Participation technology*. Networked laptop computers at each table serve as electronic flipcharts to record the ideas generated during the discussions. The data collected through the computers are instantly transmitted wirelessly to a group, called the Theme Team, which reads through each report and identifies the strongest themes across them. In addition, each participant receives a voting keypad that allows them to cast individual votes. The voting keypads are used to identify participants' preferences among recommendations, make decisions about which topics to discuss further, gather demographic information, and evaluate the meeting. The laptop computers and

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

voting keypads work together to generate a useful combination of quantitative and qualitative data.

*Immediate reporting*. The results from table discussion and keypad voting are displayed to participants, decision makers, and the media almost immediately. Keypad votes are tallied instantly, and the results are displayed on large video screens. The Theme Team reviews table reports as they are sent throughout the discussion period and usually reports back the 5 to 10 strongest themes no more than 30 minutes after the discussion has ended. This timely reporting allows for iterative, in-depth discussions. Every participant, decision maker, and journalist receives a brief report detailing the keypad voting results and themes before leaving the meeting.

*Link to decision makers*. The 21st Century Town Meeting program provides useful, timely information to decision makers. Discussion questions and keypad votes are designed specifically to generate the type of information (in terms of content and specificity) that will best inform the decision-making process. Decision makers in turn pledge to review and seriously consider the input generated by participants.

Three brief projects illustrate our work in democratic governance in land use planning, resource allocation, and policy formulation.

## ILLUSTRATIONS OF OUR WORK

### Planning: Listening to the City

In 2002, America*Speaks* provided thousands of New Yorkers a meaningful voice in the process of rebuilding the World Trade Center site. To help city leaders develop a consensus around plans for the future of the site, America*Speaks* designed and facilitated a groundbreaking citizen engagement effort that included a 21st Century Town Meeting and a 2-week online dialogue in the spring and summer of 2002.

America*Speaks* worked with decision makers from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and the Port Authority and with organizers from a coalition of civic groups, the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Lower Manhattan, to staff a very large-scale project in an extraordinarily short time period—3 months. Because the Alliance had no formal office and no full-time staff, three partners in the Alliance assigned staff to work with three full-time America*Speaks* senior associates, and project areas requiring special skills, including outreach, communications, event management, and registration, were hired out.

Listening to the City engaged 4,500 members of the general public who closely reflected the demographic diversity of the region to solicit input on the site plans. A 2-week online dialogue involved another 800 New York City residents who reviewed the site options in small cyber groups.

When participants in the meeting voiced strong disapproval of several elements of the initial site plans, the decision makers immediately responded. They went back to the drawing board and began an international competition for plans that embodied the

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

public values, development priorities, and spirit that New Yorkers articulated at the meeting. Many elements of Daniel Libeskind's winning design honored these elements and directly responded to public concerns about the first set of plans.

Listening to the City demonstrated that it is possible for thousands of citizens to come together, deliberate difficult issues, and reach consensus within a charged and complex decision-making process. It was praised by many decision makers, the media, and architect and planning leaders as a model for the future. It significantly impacted the outcomes of the rebuilding process and site design.

Several months after the 21st Century Town Meetings, in a speech to the architecture community, New Yorker architecture critic Paul Goldberger (2004) called the meeting "incredible." He said, "Listening to the City would ultimately come to have a powerful, even profound, effect on the Ground Zero planning process, if not on the entire direction of American urban planning itself" (p. 69).

**Resource Allocation: Washington, D.C.'s, Citizen Summits**

Many cities and states today rely on the referendum process to involve citizens in budgetary matters. In the worst cases, this is simply a political maneuver to defuse contentious or difficult decisions politicians must make. At the other extreme, such initiatives risk overinfluence by moneyed special interests. Participatory budgeting on the other hand is a process in which citizens debate, analyze, prioritize, and propose public expenditures and investments to a municipal authority (Torres, 2004). The city of Washington, D.C., has used a variation of participatory budgeting over the past 5 years.

When elected in 1999, Washington, D.C., Mayor Anthony Williams knew that he had to engage the city's residents in a unique, substantive way. Plagued by years of political scandals and fiscal instability, Washingtonians were eager for a new era of transparency and partnership. To address this need, America*Speaks* worked closely with the Williams administration to restore public trust by developing tools to effectively generate and utilize public input in its decision-making processes.

Washington, D.C.'s, large town meetings, called Citizen Summits, have become the centerpiece of the city's citizen engagement strategy. The Citizen Summit process, developed and facilitated by America*Speaks*, offers thousands of District residents an opportunity to directly shape the city's key priorities and spending. Over the past 4 years, more than 13,000 residents have attended six Citizen Summit programs. These participants have included residents of every walk of life who reflect the city's demographic diversity.

During Citizen Summits, residents review and provide feedback on the Mayor's City-Wide Strategic Plan, which lays out the administration's key priorities and sets the stage for the mayor's proposed budget. Based on the input from the Citizen Summit, the mayor and his staff revise the plan and introduce the changes at a large public meeting several months later. In addition, the mayor creates "scorecards" that articulate the goals and measures from the Strategic Plan for which the mayor and his cabinet will be held accountable for by residents.

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

Input from Citizen Summit participants has significantly influenced the administration's priorities. For example, in the most recent Citizen Summit in November 2003, the mayor asked 2,800 citizens for direct feedback on more than 20 concrete policy proposals in education, public safety, housing, jobs, and health. His administration built the final city's fiscal year budget based in large part on the priorities articulated by District residents at the Summit.

By creating a consistent means for public input that is directly linked to formal decision-making processes, the Williams administration has begun to redefine the city government's relationship with its citizens.

**Policy Formulation: Americans Discuss Social Security**

Traditionally, issue organizations have relied on a combination of public opinion polls, focus groups, and lobbying for agenda setting and policy development. They have been slow to use public deliberation for those same purposes.

In 1998-1999, America*Speaks* developed a new model of agenda setting through public deliberation, without advocating for specific positions, through its Americans Discuss Social Security (ADSS) project, which launched a national public deliberation on the future of the Social Security program. This groundbreaking project, sponsored by The Pew Charitable Trusts, demonstrated the value of engaging ordinary citizens in addressing the country's most critical public policy challenges.

In 15 months, ADSS held forums in all 50 states, engaging and informing more than 45,000 Americans. Participants reflected the rich regional, ethnic, and generational diversity of the country. Special efforts were made to engage seniors and young adults, the populations most significantly impacted by the proposed reform options.

The deliberations included

- two 10-city teleconferences (1,000 participants each),
- one five-city regional teleconference (1,000 participants),
- five 1-day town meetings (500 to 750 participants each) in cities across the United States,
- a 7-week online policy dialogue (15,000 participants).

ADSS had an immediate and direct impact on the Social Security debate. The project demonstrated the intense public interest in the future of Social Security reform and showed that Americans had more of a middle-ground approach than special interests or lawmakers had believed. These results were considered credible because of ADSS's neutral stance on the issue, the diversity of participants, and the direct involvement of lawmakers in the process.

At the project's conclusion in 1999, President Clinton reflected in a letter,

> ADSS [has] done a great service in bringing citizen concerns about Social Security to our attention here in Washington and in educating the public about ensuring the financial integrity of the Social Security system for the next generation and beyond. In the process, ADSS has also expanded and refined the models through which citizens can become engaged in public policy discussion.

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

Putting this conceptual framework into action, the 21st Century Town Meeting offers a model for democratic deliberation that is practical, meets needs that are strongly felt by citizens and government officials, and produces compelling recommendations on public policy in a time frame that aligns with a modern cycle of governance and the immediate time demands of the media.

These three projects demonstrate the versatility of these town meetings in addressing the specific and sometimes wide-ranging needs of public officials.

## CHALLENGES TO LARGE GROUP INTERVENTIONS IN THE CIVIC REALM

There are some challenges to practicing the America*Speaks* model worth noting.

*Entry and contracting: Developing commitment to act*. Most potential sponsors become excited about the idea of holding a town meeting once they see it live or see and hear the pictures and news stories from previous events. However, once their initial excitement passes, it can take several months, and in one case more than a year, for a sponsor to finally agree to hold one. Sometimes America*Speaks* remains heavily involved in the internal deliberations of whether to hold one; other times, its contact is only periodic until the sponsor finds the wherewithal and resources to make a decision.

Even with an agreement, it may take weeks or even months before the project is fully launched and the town meeting date announced. These issues require discussion of

- stakeholders to be involved
- size of the meeting
- project budget
- funding sources
- parameters for the content.

All of these can require lengthy discussion meetings and multiple signoffs—whether the town meeting is being sponsored by a coalition of civic groups in conjunction with a government agency or whether the meeting is being sponsored by an elected official, planning commission, or government bureau. These negotiations are necessary to ensure that the right issues get on the table and that the public will be duly heard.

*Political vulnerability of clients*. These projects do not come without risk. In the domestic U.S. political climate of spin/counterspin, in which polls are near universally used to gauge public attitudes, it is not always easy to find public officials willing to opt for a different way. The usual public process is to validate a particular political position by public hearings and then proceed on an already decided path. Town meetings require officials to trust a process that they do not control and to believe that the outcomes will be ones that they can support, all done within the public eye. Politicians

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

have to be open to this kind of public exposure before they agree to this kind of meeting. No official we have worked with has regretted opting for the different path.

*Resource intensive*. Because of the numbers of people and the scale of technology involved, these meetings require significant staff and financial resources. Even meetings as small as 500 can require an organization sponsor to have two to three staff working on the project half time for several months in advance and full-time the final month. Larger meetings demand more staff and time. America*Speaks* designated staff members work half time or more throughout the life of the project. Other contractors may be hired for outreach, communications, event planning, registration, and audiovisual functions. Dozens of volunteers pitch in to support participant recruitment and publicity ahead of time and work on-site to register participants, assist with logistics, or facilitate the deliberations at the tables.

Budgets rise by the size of the project. For meetings of 1,000 or more, the budget is likely to be at a minimum several hundred thousand dollars; meetings of 3,000 or more can approach or even exceed a million dollars. Sponsors must not only devote significant organizational resources to the task but must have access to significant funding sources or be savvy fund-raisers.

Despite these challenges, America*Speaks* has been able to employ this model in a wide variety of situations, and the sponsoring organizations we have worked with have gained enormously from the outcomes.

## DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY: AN EMERGING MOVEMENT

Democratic deliberation, citizens working with one another through dialogue to come to a judgment about the best course of action on a given public issue, is a central part of our democratic tradition. There are multiple forms of democratic deliberation, all seeking to build on traditional models of public participation by advancing richer forms of citizen involvement in governance processes. During deliberation, participants consider relevant facts from multiple points of view, discuss the options presented, develop points of view, and render a public judgment as to the best course of action.

Not all deliberations are large scale. Deliberations can range in size from 12 to more than 4,000, and deliberators come together for a predetermined period of time, typically 1 to 3 days, to explore a specific issue that has been identified by the sponsoring agency. Although there is no agreed-on typology of methods in this nascent field, there are several ways to view the range of practice.

One is to focus on who gets to participate. Deliberations and other forms of public involvement range in their degree of inclusiveness from highly selective to completely open. Some methods, such as deliberative polling and citizen juries, draw their participants from a scientific random sampling process. Other methods, such as study circles, draw their participants from interested, self-selecting participants in the general population.

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

The other is to focus on how connected a deliberative process is to government decision making. Deliberations can range in their level of empowerment in this sphere from having no government agency or official participating in a project to relatively rare cases in which involved citizens actually make decisions that government or other organizations will implement. In between these ends of the spectrum, involved citizens can advise government officials, and government agencies can initiate, sponsor, or participate actively in a deliberative process. Many deliberative methods tend to be advisory in nature, sometimes with and sometimes without government participation or sponsorship.

There are literally hundreds of organizations involved in conducting some form of public engagement activities and more than a dozen that are explicitly focused on more rigorous forms of democratic deliberation. Here is a quick sampling of some of the better-known deliberative methods.

*Study circles,* developed by the Study Circles Resource Center, emphasize community-wide deliberation in diverse small groups of 8 to 12 participants. These groups come together during the same period of time to develop a solution to a common concern. The community-wide study circles culminate in an "action forum" where all participants come together to develop an action strategy to solve a common problem.

*National issues forums,* developed by the National Issues Forums Institute and the Kettering Foundation, involve variously sized groups of citizens who come together to explore urgent public matters. Group members are polled at the end of the forum, and results of the poll are made available to decision makers.

*Citizens juries,* developed by the Jefferson Center, bring together a scientific random sample of 18 citizens who represent the population to discuss in depth a critical public issue. Participants are supplied with background materials, hear testimony from experts in related fields, are asked to weigh different points of view, and render a final decision about the best course of action.

*Deliberative polls,* developed by the Center for Deliberative Polling at the University of Texas, Austin, measure the change in opinion of a random scientific sample of citizens (usually around 280) who have the opportunity to discuss issues in depth. Polled before coming together, the citizens participate in a series of structured small group conversations and question-and-answer sessions with experts. Participants are polled at the end of deliberations, and the results are compared to calculate opinion change. Results provide decision makers with a snapshot of how the public would think if they had the opportunity to become informed about the issues.

The very active experimentation and practice that is occurring in the field of deliberative democracy contributes many new opportunities to reconfigure the formal link between citizens and their governments.

## THE HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Having worked at the local, national, and international levels in support of large group meetings, America*Speaks* has come to believe that the greatest promise and the greatest need for this kind of deliberation is at the national level.

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

Can you picture millions of Americans deliberating about critical national issues such as health care, foreign policy, and the economy on a regular basis? Citizens from Buffalo, Tallahassee, San Diego, and Colorado Springs listening to each other's views and finding common ground? An educated and thoughtful American public guiding the actions of policy makers in Washington?

Building on our work with Americans Discuss Social Security, we believe the time has come to improve democratic participation on a whole new scale and to attempt to engage millions (not just thousands) of Americans routinely in national-level policy deliberations on key issues in which decision makers truly listen to what these millions have to say. Last year, we convened more than a dozen leaders in the field of deliberative democracy to develop a vision and blueprint for doing just that—creating a national discussion. Such a national discussion would demonstrate to the nation that the American public can and should play a meaningful role in the policy-making process.

A national discussion would accomplish what a public opinion poll cannot. It would educate people on critical issues, make them less susceptible to manipulation by special interests, and provide them with a role in the policy-making process. A national discussion would build a constituency for the consensus views that were reached and would give policy makers the political support they need to act on the public's behalf.

At the completion of the national discussion, the public's priorities would be compiled through an online database and reported to Congress. The public would remain involved with the issue through online platforms supported by local organizations. Members of Congress would come to understand that the product of the dialogue is not just another report but rather a statement about what matters to their constituents and a listing of those things for which they will be held accountable.

This vision is ambitious, and it is likely that it will take at least a presidential administration or two before it can come to full fruition. We are hopeful however because of the practical results that deliberative democracy practitioners have delivered in the past decade in their activities at every level of governance here and abroad.

## CONCLUSION

The use of large group methods in the public sector has had a significant impact on a range of local, regional, and national policies. We believe these methods hold great promise for the future by helping to create new processes, like national conversations at a very large scale, that will play an important role in revitalizing the way democracy is practiced.

## NOTE

1. In a CBS News/*New York Times* 2003 poll, only 36% of Americans say they can trust the government in Washington to "do what is right" always or most of the time.

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications

## REFERENCES

Bunker, B. B., & Alban, B. (Eds.). (1992). *Large group interventions* [Special issue]. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *28*(4).

CBS News/*New York Times*. (2000). Retrieved December 23, 2004, from http://www.pollingreport.com/institut.htm#Confidence%20in%20Institutions

Goldberger, P. (2004). *Up from zero: Politics, architecture, and the rebuilding of New York*. New York: Random House.

Greider, W. (1992). *Who will tell the people*. New York: Touchstone.

Torres, L. H. (2004, March). *Putting the "public" back in public administration*. Paper presented at the American Society for Public Administration annual conference, Portland, Oregon.

Copyright 2005. Permission granted by Sage Publications