WORKING TOGETHER TO STRENGTHEN OUR NATION'S DEMOCRACY

Ten Recommendations

A report from the second conference on "Strengthening Our Nation's Democracy"

August 2-4, 2009 | Washington, DC

AMERICASPEAKS
Engaging Citizens in Governance

Everyday Democracy
Ideas & Tools for Community Change

Dēmos

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Executive Summary

What follows is a comprehensive set of commitments and recommendations designed to strengthen our democracy by engaging *all* citizens in the selection of their leaders, influencing laws and regulations, and taking public action. These recommendations are rooted in a profound belief that our democratic institutions can rise to the many challenges facing our nation.

Seizing on this unique time in our nation's history when we are faced with public policy dilemmas on every front, experts and advocates for strengthening democracy came together to create new momentum and plans for the critical work that must be done. On August 2-4, 2009, they shared what they have been learning from their work across the country, and rolled up their sleeves to create collective recommendations and action steps.

Participants in this second Strengthening our Nation's Democracy conference came from various parts of the 'democracy reform and civic engagement' community that have not traditionally collaborated: community problem solvers and organizers, deliberative democracy practitioners, election reformers, transparency advocates, e-democracy practitioners, national service advocates, media reformers, educators, and others. Conference participants also benefited from hearing reports presented by international guests regarding both significant progress and challenges they face in their respective countries' efforts to embed more robust public participation in their national governments and societies.

Key leaders from the Obama Administration shared their plans and accomplishments in the area of democratic participation and reform. The participants, in turn, created a set of priorities for advancing democracy reform and open government, which they presented to Administration leaders.

The full conference report provides detailed recommendations for both the Administration and the democracy reform movement itself. The priorities are as follows:

1. Involve the American public in meaningful deliberations about important policy questions
2. Support and promote an electoral reform agenda
3. Improve federal public participation and collaboration
4. Explore lessons from the Open Government Dialogue
5. Recognize and support engagement carried out by traditionally disenfranchised communities
6. Create a report on the health of our democracy
7. Build skills and capacity for public engagement
8. Increase the availability of federal funding for democratic participation
9. Convene an international democracy conference
10. Create an ongoing mechanism for sustaining leadership

Since the conclusion of the conference, work groups have been refining the recommendations and developing plans for implementing these proposals. The conference organizers and participants in the Strengthening our Nation's Democracy initiatives look forward to working with the Administration on these recommendations in the coming weeks and months.

Introduction

The recommendations presented in this report are rooted in a profound belief that our democratic institutions can rise to the many challenges facing our nation. Despite a national political climate in which long-running disagreements about the appropriate role of government are often contested at a fevered pitch, one thing that most Americans agree on is that our shared commitment to the principles and practices of democratic governance provide the best framework for figuring out how our nation can continue to strive for "a more perfect Union."

For close to three decades, growing networks of people and organizations have been working to ensure that our political systems provide *all* Americans with a sense of hope that *our democracy* – and not any one leader or political agenda – will continue to be the best mechanism for addressing the daunting array of challenges facing our society and nation. This emerging movement to strengthen our nation's democracy builds upon the United States' strong constitutional framework and governing institutions, while also striving to strengthen and expand opportunities for citizen participation in elections, decision-making, and problem solving. This work has been taking place throughout American society and, to varying degrees, at all levels of government.

At this time in our nation's history when we face tremendous challenges on every front, we also have a new president who has made the creation of more participatory, collaborative, and open governance a central part of his administration's agenda. In his first six months in office, President Obama committed to create an Open Government Directive for all federal agencies, hosted the first virtual town hall from the White House, directed the Attorney General to develop new guidelines for agency responsiveness to Freedom of Information Act requests, created the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, renamed the Office of Public Liaison and Intergovernmental Affairs as the Office of Public Engagement, and experimented broadly with the use of online technologies to increase transparency and participation. Moreover, the Justice Department has undertaken review and planning toward ramped-up enforcement of laws encouraging voter registration and voting, including the National Voter Registration Act.

Seizing on this unique moment, experts and advocates for strengthening our nation's democracy came together on August 2-4, 2009. Early in the conference, key leaders from the new Administration shared their plans and accomplishments in the area of democratic reform. Participants envisioned what comprehensive reforms should be developed within government and outside of it to strengthen our democracy. Near the close of the conference, participants presented early drafts of the recommendations contained in this report to Administration leaders and received assurances that the final recommendations will be given serious consideration. These proposals are designed to engage all citizens in the selections of their leaders, in influencing law and regulation, and in taking public action.

Participants in this second Strengthening our Nation's Democracy conference came from various parts of the 'democracy reform and civic engagement' community that have not traditionally collaborated: community problem solvers and organizers, deliberative democracy practitioners, election reformers, transparency advocates, e-democracy practitioners, national service advocates, media reformers, educators, and others. Conference participants also benefited from hearing reports presented by international guests regarding both significant progress and challenges they face in their respective countries' efforts to embed more robust public participation in their national governments and societies.

Many champions of participation from within federal agencies also participated. In addition, special guests at various stages of the conference included eight members of the Obama Administration from the following offices:

- White House Office of Public Engagement
- White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation
- US Office of Management and Budget
- Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division
- White House Office of Science and Technology Policy

Harnessing the Resources of the Democracy Movement

The conference provided an opportunity for practitioners from various strands of the nascent democracy movement to share successful and new innovations in election reform, public deliberation, civic engagement, and community organizing among themselves and with government leaders. It also provided a forum for frank and productive discussion of concerns and criticisms regarding the Obama Administration's approach.

Early in the conference, Prof. Archon Fung presented a graphic overview of how various strands of the democracy movement can help our nation make progress on a wide range of public issues, using health care policy as a timely example. (See Figures 1a-e) This was but one of many examples cited at the conference of how government and civic actors are in a strong position to harness the potential of transparency, participation, and collaboration on this and many other contentious public issues.

Building on Recent Collaborative Efforts to Strengthen Our Democracy

The people and organizations attending this conference have worked for years to strengthen our nation's democracy both within and outside government. The following illustrate recent convenings that contributed groundwork for this most recent gathering:

Strengthening Our Nation's Democracy I

The Agenda for Strengthening Our Nation's Democracy was developed by a diverse group of thinkers, advocates, and scholars who met during the Summer of 2008 to outline an agenda for improving democracy in the United States. The Agenda is a set of recommendations to strengthen our democracy that were presented to the presidential candidates, lawmakers, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, think tanks, and individual citizens for endorsement. One of the primary recommendations, the creation of a White House Office of Civic Engagement, has been implemented.

Champions of Participation

In March 2009, federal managers and staff from 23 different agencies and offices across the federal government came together for Champions of Participation II in Washington, D.C. They recommended that the President's Open Government Directive create a new government-wide structure that will transform how the government involves citizens in key decision-making. While most conversation about the President's commitment to open government has focused on transparency and technology, federal managers urged the taskforce spearheading the effort to incorporate reforms that enable meaningful face-to-face participation and collaboration in addition to online involvement. This work was advanced in another convening on May 12, 2009 of senior leaders from 13 federal agencies in which Beth Noveck, the director of the White

House task force responsible for creating the directive, participated in the discussions and responded to participant questions and ideas.

Conference Outcomes

The Strengthening Our Nation's Democracy II conference aimed to achieve the following goals, all of which were met:

1. Create a set of priorities for advancing democracy reform and open government.
2. Develop stronger relationships across the democracy reform field and with the new Administration.
3. Develop the groundwork for a new collaborative platform that can serve as a liaison between democracy reform advocates and the Administration.
4. Identify future collaborative opportunities among the participants.

Work groups formed to continue developing the proposals and recommendations below. Since the conclusion of the conference, the groups have been refining the recommendations and developing plans for implementing these proposals. The co-chairs of the work groups (see page 31) encourage others who would like to help advance and refine these recommendations to contact them.

The conference organizers and participants in the Strengthening our Nation's Democracy initiatives look forward to working with the Administration on these recommendations in the coming weeks and months.

Figures 1a-e: Elements of the Democracy Movement

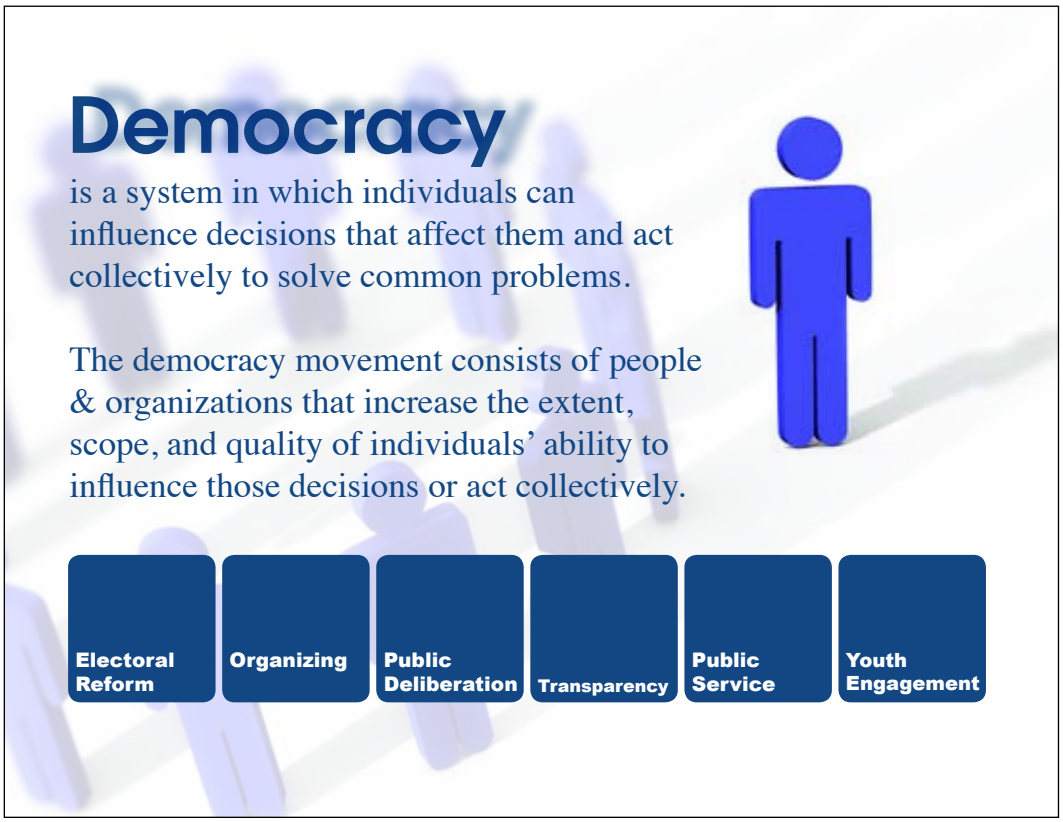

Figure 1a

Figure 1b

Figure 1c

Figure 1d

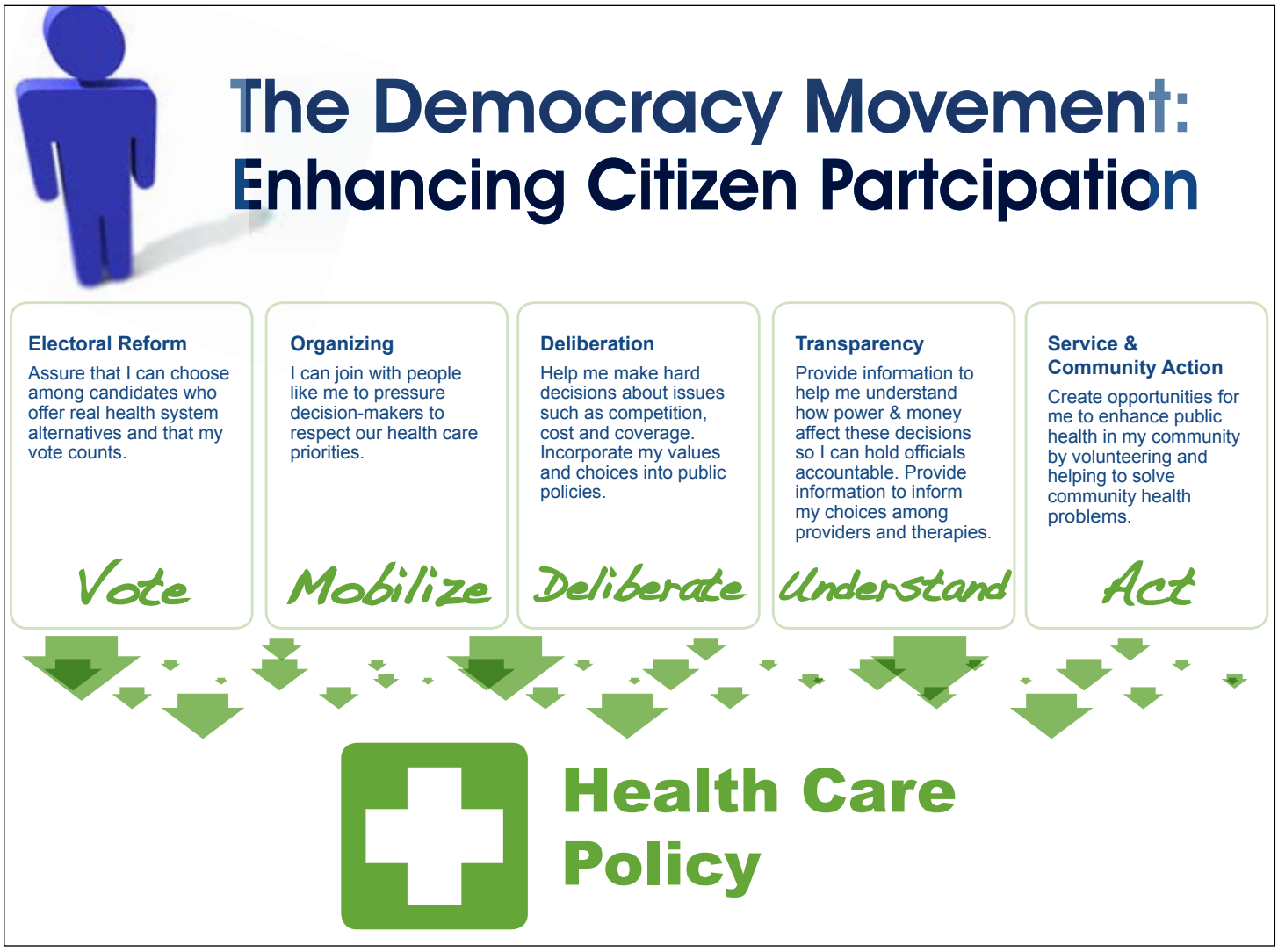

Figure 1e

Preamble

This is a unique moment of need and opportunity to strengthen democratic life in the United States and across the globe. We believe a highly participatory and transparent democracy will enrich the lives of all Americans by creating communities and a society that are equitable and sustainable. All Americans have the right and should have the fullest opportunity to participate and influence the decisions that affect their lives, whether those decisions occur in neighborhoods, cities, states, or nationally. The voices of those with little social and economic power should be amplified so that all are heard as equals.

Collectively, we share a responsibility to enhance and build new institutions and structures of participation that provide a voice for everyone. To achieve this vision, the electoral institutions of the United States should realize the fundamental values of democracy including universal suffrage and equality of voice. Every American should have ongoing opportunities to come together to discuss and resolve common problems, both in partnership with government and in civil society. We recognize that these aspirations depend upon transparent and participatory government, strong community organizations, and informed, activated, and engaged citizens.

Recommendation 1

Involve the American Public in Meaningful Deliberations about Important Policy Questions

Recommendation

Build the capacity and will to involve the American public in regular and meaningful deliberations about important policy questions.

Objective

Demonstrate the value and efficacy of public deliberation by organizing opportunities for a broad cross-section of Americans to deliberate together and express their views on one or more policy issues of national significance.

Problem Statement

Elected officials often express the desire to give citizens a seat at the table. This aspiration cannot be achieved through occasional town meetings, opinion polls, consultation with representatives of particular constituencies, mobilization of ordinary citizens by one party or another, or online surveys of opinion. For the past fifteen years, nonpartisan civic organizations have been developing and implementing methods for engaging the public in deliberative and collaborative processes that enable the public at large to weigh in on difficult policy issues and take action to address those issues. The effectiveness of this approach can be demonstrated, and the methods tested and refined, through carefully designed, organized, and evaluated deliberations that are demonstrably impartial and contribute in a meaningful way to the policymaking process.

Short-Term Activities

1. Convene the public in deliberation(s) on issues of national importance that contribute to the resolution of those policy questions while demonstrating the value and efficacy of engaging the public in the policy making process.

    » One or more issues or projects of importance to the White House, federal agencies or Congress should be identified that would be appropriate for a demonstration of the value of public deliberation.

    » The process must be impartial, recognized as such, and not used to mobilize support for a predetermined agenda.

    » The policy question should have high salience as well as long-term national significance. Examples include immigration policy, youth obesity, the national debt, promoting educational success, making decisions about siting nuclear waste, or addressing food safety.

    » The policy could encompass national, regional, and local levels of government, and involve officials from across agencies. It may focus on solutions that must be addressed by multiple sectors.

» The project design should incorporate a range of appropriate methods, including face-to-face and online engagement.

» The projects should be rigorously evaluated to assess quality and impact, encourage learning and improvement, and facilitate eventual institutionalization.

» Funding should be identified that will not affect the impartiality of the process; e.g., existing streams of public funding that are already targeted for public engagement, and/or philanthropic resources.

Long-Term Activities

1. Create an institutionalized capacity for the American public to be convened regularly in public deliberations on important policy questions that can impact decision making so that they are educated on the issues, can come to their own informed conclusions, and are equipped to take action if they choose to.

Recommendations to the Administration

1. Help identify appropriate issue(s), mechanisms, and funding.
2. Convene relevant executive and congressional personnel to assist in planning.
3. Agree to take into account the results of the deliberation when making public policy.

Our Commitments

1. We will self-organize across areas of expertise to design, raise funding for, and help implement and learn from the deliberation(s).
2. We will reach out to a range of civil society organizations committed to public engagement to ensure a comprehensive and rigorously impartial process.
3. We will document and evaluate the process to help fashion tools and structures for regular consultation with the public and for ongoing collaborative governance.

Next Steps/Follow Up

Pursue discussions with the White House Office of Public Engagement about possible policy contexts for this project. Supply relevant information (including case material) and offer opportunities to observe different approaches and to consider how they might be adapted for this purpose.

Recommendation 2

Support and Promote an Electoral Reform Agenda

Recommendation

Support and promote a comprehensive electoral reform agenda through both executive action (executive orders, agency coordination and Department of Justice [DOJ] enforcement) and active support for federal electoral reform legislation.

Objective

Eliminate unnecessary barriers to voter participation, expand meaningful participation and voter choices in the election process, and promote fair and uniform administration of elections.

Problem Statement

A thriving democracy requires broad participation in voting and elections, yet almost 60 million eligible Americans remain unregistered to vote, often because of antiquated, unfair and unnecessary barriers to registration. Others are prevented from exercising the franchise because of structural failures in election administration or because of deceptive and discriminatory practices. The voices of citizens are often unheard or under-valued, especially when campaigns depend on large private contributions by wealthy special interests and when electoral rules give some votes more weight than others.

Short-Term Activities

1. Take executive action to strengthen participation and fair representation, including:
    - » Expand and enforce the reach of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) as a key tool for ensuring broad access to voter registration;
    - » Issue an Executive Order designating appropriate federal agencies to provide voter registration;
    - » Ensure resources for DOJ enforcement of public assistance agency provisions of NVRA, and issue DOJ guidelines for state implementation; and
    - » Support the reform of Census practices to ensure incarcerated persons are counted as residents of their home community, rather than as residents of their place of temporary incarceration.
2. Promote electoral reform legislation, including the following, several of which are currently before Congress with leadership support:
    - » Voter registration modernization to ensure government databases are used to automatically register eligible voters (including pre-registration of persons reaching voting age), and to maintain registration when a voter's address changes. Same-Day Registration should also be included to ensure all eligible citizens can participate;

» Comprehensive public financing through the Fair Elections Now Act for congressional elections and modernizing the current presidential public financing system;

» Democracy Restoration Act (to enfranchise persons with felony convictions);

» D.C. Voting Rights Act (to provide congressional representation to District of Columbia residents);

» Deceptive Practices and Voter Intimidation Prevention Act (to protect voters against deceptive practices and intimidation); and

» Caging Prohibition Act (to protect voters from *en masse* discriminatory voter challenges).

Long-Term Activities

1. Amend the Constitution to include an explicit, affirmative right to vote.
2. Establish national standards on election administration, administered by a federal agency that has real authority, resources, and functionality.
3. Enact National Popular Vote legislation to ensure popular election of the President.
4. Enact legislation to allow states to use proportional representation and instant runoff voting for congressional elections.
5. Develop programs to promote civic inclusion of immigrants.

Recommendations to the Administration

1. Support and promote a full electoral reform agenda through both executive action (executive orders, agency coordination and DOJ enforcement) and active support for federal electoral reform legislation. The initiatives listed above are intended to highlight important reform and enforcement goals but are by no means exclusive.
2. Continue to engage electoral reform advocates to achieve these reforms, and maintain active dialogue in order to advance voting rights and other electoral reforms.

Our Commitments

We will work with Administration and with each other to implement and promote the electoral reform agenda.

Next Steps/Follow Up

Share detailed proposals and advocacy strategies for achieving short-term goals and develop mechanism for ongoing collaboration with Administration on recommendations.

Recommendation 3

Improve Federal Public Participation and Collaboration

Recommendation

Implement the mechanisms and infrastructure necessary to make permanent improvements in federal public participation, collaboration, and transparency activities through an executive order and legislation.

Objective

Reaffirm and institutionalize participatory and collaborative governance in the federal government.

Problem Statement

Federal agencies have uneven performance in collaborative governance and need more consistent institutional change to embed a culture of public participation, collaboration, and transparency and to encourage practices of citizen participation. Absent deeper structural changes, agency cultures and inertia are barriers to meaningful public participation.

Short-Term Activities

1. Issue an Executive Order to Implement Executive Memorandum

    » Define new terms and recognize those already in use to clarify that agencies should presume they have broad legal authority to use innovative means of participatory and collaborative governance.

    » Recognize the "policy and practice" successes of various federal agency staff that precede this initiative and use them to inform future related work.

    » Designate the President's Management Council (PMC) as the lead mechanism to supervise Executive Order implementation.

    » Create an interagency working group that reports to PMC for agencies to share information, develop standards, and identify existing policies and practices that exemplify and further the objective of the Executive Order.

    » Direct all departments and agencies to appoint a senior level civil service champion with agency-wide authority.

    » Direct agencies to integrate participatory and collaborative governance into their mission and operations, building on agency successes whenever possible.

    » Direct agency human resource offices to incorporate participatory and collaborative governance into competencies, training, assessment, and performance evaluation.

» Direct agencies to develop or enhance at least one demonstration project that addresses a substantial public policy problem for 2009-2010 and to assemble a team from the various ongoing participatory and collaborative projects and programs across the entire agency.

» Direct OMB to require agencies to report annually on the use and impact of both face-to-face and online approaches (including social networking).

» Use Federal Executive Boards and other interagency mechanisms to develop and integrate knowledge, share policy approaches, and implement collaborative governance projects at the regional level.

Long-Term Activities

1. Clarify administrative law to authorize dialogue, deliberation, and innovative means of participatory and collaborative governance.
2. Create a federal institute to serve as convener, provide training, create a clearinghouse, determine best practices and policies, assess impact, and develop knowledge base.

Recommendations to the Administration

1. Adopt Executive Order in 2009.
2. Develop Legislation for 2010.

Our Commitments

1. We will draft suggestions for the Executive Order in collaboration with experienced practitioners within federal government.
2. We will prepare an administrative law briefing paper with a comprehensive review of US Code and Code of Federal Regulations provisions on public participation and collaboration.
3. We will outline the existing but related terms and processes that may now have resonance and history for agency staff.

Next Steps/Follow Up

Provide a Draft Executive Order by 1 September 2009.

Other Notes

Agencies will review their existing policies and practices with multi-disciplinary teams to find opportunities to improve, seek broad understanding, and implement the Executive Order.

Recommendation 4

Explore Lessons from the Open Government Dialogue

Recommendation

Advise the White House and government agencies on best practices for soliciting public input and participation.

Objective

Leverage the knowledge and resources of the participation and information access communities to advise the White House, federal agencies, and other governmental units about how to most meaningfully and effectively solicit public input and participation on key policy questions.

Problem Statement

The recent experimentation with the White House's Open Government Dialogue provides important lessons about how the public should and should not be convened to shape governmental rules, regulations, and policies. As future efforts are put in place to solicit public participation, it will be important to learn from the Open Government Dialogue experience and create systems to support high quality, meaningful participation in the future.

Short-Term Activities

1. Develop recommendations for the White House for future public consultations based on an evaluation of the Open Government Dialogue. To do this we will:
    - » Convene a steering committee of organizations in the participation, collaboration, and information access fields who participated in the Open Government Dialogue.
    - » Convene an expert advisory committee of practitioners in the field of online engagement.
    - » Evaluate the Open Government Dialogue through an online participant survey.
    - » Meet with the Office of Public Engagement to better understand their current thinking around evaluating the Open Government Dialogue and lessons for future consultations.

Long-Term Activities

1. Create an ongoing process to support high quality public participation on important federal policies and regulations through the creation of:
    - » An expert advisory board from the fields of participation, collaboration, information access, and online engagement.
    - » A unit in the Office of Science and Technology Policy or the Office of Public Engagement that can offer technical assistance to federal agencies that are conducting public consultations (especially online).
    - » An online resource of best practices and principles to be available to federal agencies.

2. Work with professional associations of state and local governments to disseminate best practices in public participation through the creation of a Local and State Open Government Commission that will:
    - » Create a resource on best practices and principles for open government.
    - » Offer technical assistance and training to state and local governments.
    - » Create an Open Government Seal of Approval, criteria, and an application process to award the seal to local and state governments.

Recommendations to the Administration

1. Participate in the process of soliciting recommendations based on the experience of the Open Government Dialogue.
2. Create an Expert Advisory Board to support future public consultations and participation.
3. Develop a technical assistance unit in the Office of Science and Technology Policy or the Office of Public Engagement for public consultation and participation.
4. Create a resource of best practices and principles.
5. Convene a Local and State Open Government Commission.

Our Commitments

1. We will organize the feedback process on the Open Government Dialogue.
2. We will serve as experts to form an Advisory Committee and best practices resources.
3. We will support the Local and State Open Government Commission.

Next Steps/Follow Up

1. Complete Survey on Open Government Dialogue.
2. Convene a working group to analyze survey results and prepare a report for distribution to the Office of Public Engagement and Office of Science and Technology Policy.
3. Complete the draft recommendations and circulate for feedback.
4. Prepare a report for the Office of Public Engagement and Office of Science and Technology, and schedule follow up meeting(s).
5. Identify a longer-term advisory group.

Other Notes

As part of this process (maybe linked to other Strengthening Our Nation's Democracy groups), create a more common definition of "public participation" for both best practices and potential legal language to embed in government operations.

Work with Strengthening Our Nation's Democracy group recommendations to disseminate best practices and to create training mechanisms that will allow public officials, government staff, and the public to expect and utilize best practices.

Recommendation 5

Recognize and Support Engagement Carried Out by Traditionally Disenfranchised Communities

Recommendation

Ensure that the engagement practices of traditionally disenfranchised groups are highlighted and supported by governmental organizations and NGOs in their work dedicated to strengthening public participation.

Objective

Learn from and support innovative forms of engagement carried out by under-represented and disenfranchised groups – including but not limited to low-income communities, communities of color, and immigrant communities. This will enable individuals, NGOs, and the administration to build on the civic energy and insights of traditionally disenfranchised communities, and to create more inclusive and effective civic practices and opportunities. This will also build on the important conversation begun by President Obama – via the Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government and the subsequent Open Government Initiative – on how to provide incentives to strengthen and diversify public participation.

Problem Statement

The civic work of traditionally disenfranchised communities is often minimized or overlooked. These oversights may be due to resource disparities and/or lack of sufficient diversity within many civic networks. Without these communities' contributions, civic practices cannot effectively tackle our most serious public problems.

Short-Term Activities

1. Create an interagency working group of program managers to create a census of significant "federal-to-local" programs that support the participation of disenfranchised communities. This working group would identify best practices, foster learning for program administration, and develop policy recommendations for future efforts. This effort should draw on the expertise of practitioners in the fields of deliberative democracy, community building and community organizing, as well as effective civic practices from other nations.
2. Identify a promising new federal-local program being launched by the Administration and use it as a demonstration program for exemplary participatory and collaborative governance practices, including ensuring effective participation by traditionally disenfranchised communities. The Promise Neighborhoods program would be well suited for this.

Long-Term Activities

1. Highlight and evaluate exemplary practices that were identified, begun or strengthened during the short-term activities. Focus on the real-life impact and outcomes of these practices, and develop longer-term indicators of sustainability and effectiveness.

2. Apply practices, lessons, and benchmarks in the ongoing development of federal-to-local programs, and within NGO networks dedicated to civic engagement.

Recommendations to the Administration

1. Adopt policy reforms that
    - » increase power and participation of disenfranchised people through organizing and community organizations that exist outside of government, and
    - » fund the collaborative participation of non-governmental community organizations in public participation processes.
2. Support and enhance federally mandated mechanisms for local, community-led organizing that establish a community "seat at the table" with government in designing and implementing federal programs, such as Education Title I regulations that mandate parent councils in schools.
3. Encourage the participation of community-based organizations in accessing human and financial resources provided by the Serve America Act.
4. Mandate that 25% of organizations and efforts supported by the Community Solutions Fund be led by those who come from traditionally disenfranchised groups, and that their outcomes and best practices be captured by culturally responsive evaluation. This could be determined by a substantial presence (at least 51%) among senior management and boards of directors of people from traditionally disenfranchised groups, similar to policies for minority business development.
5. Require that at least 50% of volunteers funded by the Serve America Act be placed in community-based organizations. A community-based organization would be defined as a public or private nonprofit organization of demonstrated effectiveness that: a) is representative of a community or significant segments of a community; and b) provides education or related services to individuals in the community.
6. Recommend that federally funded programs have mandatory community involvement in their development, implementation and evaluation, with a budget for all these aspects. Community involvement should follow principles that enhance and support the engagement of traditionally disenfranchised communities. Namely, the engagement efforts should be broadly representative of disenfranchised communities, remove barriers to participation, recognize and build on innovative practices, be culturally responsive, and demonstrate tangible outcomes.

Our Commitments

1. We commit to true participation of all parts of the movement including those that represent and are led by under-represented and traditionally disenfranchised communities.
2. We commit to a long-term effort to create full democratic participation, recognizing that this will require changes in underlying power structures, ongoing attention to equity, and personal and institutional learning and leadership.

Next Steps/Follow Up

Convene a follow-up conference call among the working group from the conference.

Recommendation 6

Create a Report on the Health of our Democracy

Recommendation

Create a Health of our Democracy Report.

Objective

Measure the level of civic and democratic health by tracking both hard and soft indicators over time.

Map and document global examples of participatory democratic practices and make them easily searchable and accessible for a wide range of people.

Problem Statement

Currently, there is no consensus on how healthy our democracy is, or how we would arrive at such an assessment. For some, voter turnout rates are the best indicator of democratic health. For others, healthy democracy requires more continuous engagement and civic participation.

Measuring the civic return on investment of participatory democratic practices is impossible without the adoption of a common set of indicators and a measurement of their baseline levels. Moreover, the participatory democracy field does not have a unified location to serve as a clearinghouse and map of the best practices.

Short-Term Activities

1. Convene a working group to assess current metrics of civic participation (including America's Civic Health Index, the Democracy Index, and other domestic and international work) as a means to develop a set of shared indicators that measure the levels of civic and democratic health in communities.
2. Convene a steering committee to assess existing resources such as People and Participation Online, Participedia (Beta), and Democracy Helpline (Beta), and develop a plan for connecting and building on these examples.

Long-Term Activities

1. Continue to collect both public and private data on civic and democratic health indicators to form a trend line and measure causal relationships of specific inputs and programs.
2. Maintain a linked set of online resources that solicit new examples of projects, methods, and organizations (moderated similarly to Wikipedia) to build a worldwide interconnected learning community of practitioners, researchers, and public managers.

Recommendations to the Administration

1. Adopt a set of civic and democratic indicators for government collection (ideally in Census' Current Population Survey).

2. Ensure all government contracts that provide resources for public participation are measured against these same indicators.

3. Use these indicators to guide decisions about which civic practices are appropriate for particular situations, and how they should be supported by federal policies and appropriations.

Our Commitments

1. We will create a working group to develop a specific set of indicators as criteria for civic and democratic health.

2. We will commit to measuring our work against these criteria in everything we do and feeding this data back to a central assessor.

3. We will assume that a variety of civic or "strengthening democracy" practices may best fit the needs of any given community or institution, and we will use the new indicators of civic and democratic health to guide our recommendations regarding appropriate civic strategies and practices.

Recommendation 7

Build Skills and Capacity for Public Engagement

Recommendation

Increase the capacity of the public and of public officials to participate meaningfully in governance. That capacity includes the *skills* necessary for deliberative forms of problem-solving in a diverse society; *knowledge* of politics and civic work; and *expectations* of transparency, participation, and collaboration. Capacity for effective, sustainable, and collaborative participation is needed at the federal, state, and local levels. It is also important to build the capacity of community-based organizations, intermediaries, and other entities in which the public participates.

Objective

Build skills, knowledge, and capacities necessary for the public to exercise democratic practices and participate as partners with government by leveraging resources in federal, state, and local governments, elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, and community-based organizations.

Problem Statement

Effective and sustainable public engagement requires the acquisition of skills and dispositions that make a healthy democracy possible. This requires government entities, nonprofit organizations, and private sector organizations to be receptive, trained, and equipped to embrace and incorporate public engagement. Presently no coordinated or systematic structure is in place to assure that the skills and capacities which foster a healthy democracy are developed in the various sectors of society. Young people and adults lack comprehensive knowledge of civic and governance processes and lack the ability to practice the arts of democratic deliberation, organizing, advocacy, and problem-solving, which would assure a fully participatory and just democracy.

Short-Term Activities

1. Convene a workgroup to articulate the knowledge and skills required to build public capacity for democratic engagement.
2. Connect to existing efforts to improve the democratic and participatory skills of public officials and to build 21st century workplace skills.
3. Identify institutions where civic skills can be developed (e.g., P-16 educational institutions, community organizations, public service programs, federal agencies and programs, and informal education sites such as museums, libraries).
4. Identify specific skills that government managers and public participants need in order to participate in federal public engagement projects, and develop appropriate training opportunities and linkages with collaborative governance mechanisms such as those described in Recommendation #3.
5. Identify federal programs that promote capacity building (e.g., Title I program of No Child Left Behind at the Department of Education, AmeriCorps, various Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention funded programs, forthcoming Promise Neighborhoods program,

Community Development Block Grant program at the Department of Housing and Urban Development) and create an interagency learning community that identifies lessons that can inform standard practices and longer-term policy frameworks.

6. Designate existing "demonstration sites" where models of democratic principles and practices that incorporate democratic pedagogies are underway and can be assessed and strengthened for replication.

Long-Term Activities

1. Use the "Health of our Democracy" report (Recommendation #6) to track outputs of citizens' capacity to practice public engagement and governments' ability to support a more engaged public.
2. Reform federal and state policies to improve and create public and government capacity, and create standards for civic capacity in federal agencies (e.g., DOE, NEH, NEA, NED, NSF, etc.).

Recommendations to the Administration

1. Explicitly advocate for democratic practices and citizen engagement in policy-making and regulatory review, and implement appropriate practices within federal agencies.
2. Explicitly call on all sectors to provide opportunities for Americans to develop civic skills by using the "bully pulpit" of the President, members of the cabinet, and other senior executive officials.
3. Collaborate with organizations and communities that utilize elements of public skill building, especially in longer-term efforts.
4. Convene a White House summit on building public capacity for a healthy democracy.
5. Direct agencies, including but not limited to the Department of Education, to support civic learning and individual skill development.

Our Commitments

1. We will create a working group with the task of identifying and defining public capacity building skills.
2. We will make specific recommendations for implementation at the federal, state, and local levels no later than March 1, 2010.

Other Notes

1. Examples of skills: community organizing, facilitation, relationship-building, working across differences, deliberation, conflict-management, issue framing, innovation, social entrepreneurship, process design, assessment, critical thinking, analysis, decision-making, mediation, voting, poll-watching.
2. Examples of knowledge: understanding of democratic rights and responsibilities, venues and opportunities for participation, processes of social and political change, civic literacy.
3. Examples of expectations: transparency, rights of participation, collaborative governance.

Recommendation 8

Increase the Availability of Federal Funding for Democratic Participation

Recommendation

Identify and make available sources of federal funding that are eligible for engaging the public in planning, policy-making, and collaborative activities.

Objective

Ensure adequate resources for public engagement in federal programs.

Problem Statement

Many federal programs allow but do not have dedicated funding streams for public deliberation and participation, transparency, or collaboration. Further, no central repository for programs exists that directs or allows funds for supporting public engagement activities.

Short-Term Activities

1. Identify existing federal funding eligible for activities that strengthen democratic participation, including public deliberation and participation, transparency (access to information), collaboration, improving electoral participation, and community organizing.
    - » Include federal funding for Tribal, state and local governments, not-for-profit organizations, education, and direct federal activities.
    - » Possible sources of funding include stimulus funds, the Department of Education's Race to the Top, Innovation Fund, Institute of Education Science, Fund for Improvement of Post Secondary Education, Education for Democracy Act (which is currently fully designated), the CARE Program at EPA (which currently is not funded but could be reinstated), NEA, NEH, Serve America Act at CNCS, the Social Innovation Fund, and AmeriCorps Programs.
    - » To understand the range of programs for FY 2010, this information needs to be available by early spring 2010 (March). For the Recovery Act, this information should be available even sooner.

Long-Term Activities

1. Maintain current database of eligible federal programs.
2. Work with Office of Management and Budget mechanisms for demonstrating the business case and identify costs and benefits for these activities as budget items.
    - » The study should look at stand-alone programs, as well as programs that allow for these activities as eligible costs.

- » The study would identify a baseline of current federal funding.
- » These costs should not be considered as overhead or administrative costs, but as part of carrying out programs.
- » The study should include review and feedback from stakeholders to define types of activities that would be and would not be included.
- » The study could look at state-level budgets and engage state budgeting stakeholders (legislative, watchdog organizations, academic, etc.).
- » The study could lead to budget guidance when treating these activities.

3. Support legislation to ensure sustainable levels of funding for these activities appropriate to specific types of programs (regulatory, grant making, science, etc.).
   - » Ensure sustainable funding for public engagement in federal programs.
   - » Make permanent guidance on treating these activities in federal agency budgets.
   - » Continue database.

Recommendations to the Administration

1. Collect information from agencies on existing programs that support public engagement.
2. Provide access to collected information.
3. Update information annually.
4. Assist with the study on the benefits and costs of public engagement in federal programs.
5. Develop budget guidance for federal agencies as appropriate, based on findings from the study.
6. Support legislation as appropriate to ensure sustainable levels of funding for public engagement activities.

Our Commitments

1. We will communicate the availability of collected information to public engagement stakeholders.
2. We will assist with the study on the benefits and costs of public engagement.
3. We will support legislation as appropriate to ensure sustainable levels of funding for public engagement.

Recommendation 9

Convene an International Democracy Conference

Recommendation

Convene an international democracy conference for policymakers and advocates to further democracy at the national, state, and local levels by exposing each other to best practices and innovations.

Objective

Learn about innovative and alternative ways that people are working to strengthen democracy throughout the world. This will advance the president's commitment to creating a global dialogue on democracy.

Problem Statement

Elections officials, democracy advocates, members of government, and citizens worldwide are engaged in many activities to strengthen democracy. Unfortunately, many local and national leaders do not have the opportunity to learn from these experiences, which can inform their efforts.

Short-Term Activities

1. Convene a conference in Washington focused on practices and sharing information about participatory governance, election methods, and election administration, that increase political participation and openness/transparency. This could be simultaneously broadcast as a webinar for those unable to attend in person.
2. Create a website in advance of the event to share information, resources, and case studies.
3. Obtain sponsorship of this conference by the sponsors of the Strengthening Our Nation's Democracy initiative, with assistance from other internationally oriented organizations. Members of the Administration and other branches of government will be invited to participate.

Long-Term Activities

1. Maintain an ongoing dialogue about innovations and ways of strengthening democracy among democracy practitioners from across the world.

Recommendations to the Administration

1. Attend this conference both to learn from policymakers and democracy practitioners from around the world, and to share insights about democracy in the United States.
2. Support our efforts and activities (verbally and in writing) as important and worthwhile.

Our Commitments

We will convene this conference within one year.

Next Steps/Follow Up

Discuss further with conference co-sponsors, explore funding opportunities, learn more about previous and upcoming conferences of a similar nature, and hold an initial conference call with the working group.

Recommendation 10

Create an Ongoing Mechanism for Sustaining Leadership

Recommendation

Create an ongoing infrastructure to ensure that all constituencies of the democracy movement can collaborate and communicate with the Administration and leaders in other branches and levels of government.

Objective

Create a "point" organization for the Administration to use as a sounding board and mechanism to open up an ongoing and deeper conversation on the issues surrounding democracy reform and the involvement of citizens (and others) in self-government. This organization will also facilitate the ability of the various strands of the democracy reform movement to communicate with one another, share best practices, and create a common agenda.

Problem Statement

The democracy reform movement, though sharing common values and goals, has often been fragmented and lacking in a unified voice. Policy makers, as a consequence, have lacked a consistent partner to develop new reforms and programs to strengthen our democracy. A body is needed to facilitate greater communication and cooperation within the democracy reform movement and between the movement and the policy-making community.

Short-Term Activities

1. Work with the working groups to support their individual agendas and to weave the agendas together into a common, shared vision.
2. Inform the broader democracy reform movement of the results of the second Strengthening Our Nation's Democracy meeting.
3. Design a short-term structure for working together and communicating.
4. Design a process to identify and reach out to many other groups from diverse points of view, practices, and communities.
5. Begin to identify short-term funding options and collaborative projects.
6. Follow up with Administration personnel on proposals made by working groups to the Administration.

Long-Term Activities

1. Develop a long-term, flexible structure for working together.
2. Secure long-term funding.

3. Develop a decision-making system for deciding on shared agenda items.
4. Develop a strategy for working with this and future administrations.
5. Develop a communications mechanism for working with a broad range of individuals and groups.
6. Develop a way to continue to bring new and diverse groups into the conversation.

Recommendations to the Administration

1. Commit to communicate regularly with this group.
2. Commit to using this group as an expert resource and sounding board.

Our Commitments

1. We will communicate with the Administration regularly.
2. We will diversify the number and types of individuals and organizations participating in the conversation.
3. We will continue to develop a shared agenda across the various strands of the democracy reform movement.
4. We will work together and with the Administration to design, support, and implement innovative and meaningful ways to engage the public in self-governance

Strengthening our Nation's Democracy
Co-Chairs of Work Groups

The co-chairs of these work groups encourage others who would like to help advance and refine these recommendations to contact them.

1. **Involve the American Public in Meaningful Deliberations about Important Policy Questions**
   Co-chairs: **Cynthia Farrar, Joe Goldman**

2. **Support and Promote an Electoral Reform Agenda**
   Co-chairs: **Eddie Hailes, Brenda Wright**

3. **Improve Federal Public Participation and Collaboration**
   Co-chairs: **Lisa Bingham, Pat Bonner, Carmen Sirianni**

4. **Explore Lessons from the Open Government Dialogue**
   Co-chairs: **Joe Goldman, Cheryl Graeve**

5. **Recognize and Support Engagement Carried Out by Traditionally Disenfranchised Communities**
   Co-chairs: **Martha McCoy, [TBA]**

6. **Create a Report on the Health of our Democracy**
   Co-chairs: **David Smith, Patrick Scully**

7. **Build Skills and Capacity for Public Engagement**
   Co-chairs: **Bruce Mallory, Paul Markham**

8. **Increase the Availability of Federal Funding for Democratic Participation**
   Co-chairs: **David Kuehn, Sean Moulton**

9. **Convene an International Democracy Conference**
   Co-chairs: **John Gaventa, Tova Wang**

10. **Create an Ongoing Mechanism for Sustaining Leadership**
    Co-chairs: **Carolyn Lukensmeyer, Miles Rapoport**

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