Taking Democracy to Scale: Creating a Town Hall Meeting for the Twenty-First Century

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Over the last decade we have watched democracy surge and ebb around the world. With its firm commitment to strengthening democratic movements, the United States has encouraged, directly assisted in, and even led many democratization efforts. Yet to maintain a credible leadership role, we must acknowledge that our own democracy has much room for improvement. A healthy democracy depends on the ability of citizens[1] to affect the public policies that deeply influence their lives, and ours does not currently allow citizens their rightful voice in decision making. Special-interest groups have captured the processes for democratic input. They have skewed the agenda toward extreme positions and alienated many citizens who would tend toward a middle ground.

For this reason and many others, citizens distrust their elected officials, don't vote, and are deeply cynical about government. Conversely, policy makers believe citizens hold fast to uninformed opinions and operate from self-interest. In the end, the gap between people and the decision-making processes that affect their lives continues to widen. Despite this state of affairs, our experience working with citizens in all regions of the country leaves us confident that people want to get involved and change things for the better.

Unfortunately, the traditional methods our government has used for involving citizens give little inspiration for the public to reinvest in civic life. Public hearings and typical town hall meetings are not a meaningful way for citizens to engage in governance and to have an impact on decision making. They are speaker-focused, with experts simply delivering information or responding to questions. Little learning occurs, for citizens or decision makers, because airing individual concerns too often devolves into repetitive ax grinding, grandstanding, or even a shouting match between various stakeholders. In the end, decision makers don't know which points of view have the most salience for

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various groups because there has been no authentic, informed exchange of opinion and no opportunity to build a true consensus.

In short, our usual strategies for gathering input do not engage and sustain citizen interest or generate much useful information for decision makers. As a result, they do little to reinvigorate and expand participation in civic life. Further, in this climate of high distrust between citizens and their government, it is not enough to simply inform citizens. A healthy democracy requires that citizens be able to have an impact on the public decisions and governance processes that most affect them.

We began to imagine the outlines of a response to this situation as we interviewed a broad spectrum of citizens and public officials. How could we help decision makers go beyond polling to connect quickly and authentically with citizen voices? How could we tap into the value of informal citizen conversation and make sure the wisdom was heard and citizen voices respected? How could we deepen the relationship between decision makers and the public so that citizens could have a tangible impact on policy making and resource planning? The 21st Century Town Meeting™ was created to answer these questions.[2] It was created to meet the needs of citizens *and* decision makers—to meet the needs of our democracy.

Decision makers who want to understand and act on the collective wisdom of their constituency are well served by the aggregate power of a large number of citizen voices. Citizens who want to be heard by decision makers desire meaningful in-depth dialogue and tend to thrive in a small-scale setting. The 21st Century Town Meeting serves both of these needs through using the latest information technology. Strategically designed, the model enables thousands of citizens to simultaneously participate in intimate, face-to-face deliberation and contribute to the collective wisdom of a very large group. By engaging a large, demographically representative group in public deliberation, the 21st Century Town Meeting ensures that (1) all voices are at the table (those of the general public and of key stakeholders), (2) the voice of the public gets the attention of decision makers and the media, and (3) a substantial segment of the public supports the results of the forum and has a stake in its implementation.

The 21st Century Town Meeting revives this country's strongly held belief that naturally occurring conversation about important public issues has significant value. It revises the current iteration of the town hall meeting to produce citizen deliberation that is well informed, synthesized, and directly connected to real opportunity for action. This model has proven successful in engaging thousands of citizens around the country in a deliberative process having a real influence on regional planning, local budget decisions, and national policy development. The 21st Century Town Meeting brings large-scale deliberation, with direct links to decision makers, to the continuum of efforts in the citizen engagement field.

The true potential of this model can best be seen in its most recent and largest-scale implementation: a town hall meeting in New York City that drew

more than forty-three hundred people to deliberate over plans for reconstruction of the World Trade Center site. The citizen input gathered at "Listening to the City" has had continuing and significant influence on the plans for rebuilding the World Trade Center and creating a permanent memorial. This article describes the 21st Century Town Meeting model (its innovative elements, theoretical base, and methodology), demonstrates its impact using Listening to the City as a case study, highlights other applications for the model, and frames it among the range of important strategies for reengaging citizens in our democracy.

What Is a 21st Century Town Meeting?

The 21st Century Town Meeting has been in development by the nonprofit organization America*Speaks* since 1995. This model innovatively integrates several important technologies and methods to enable thousands of citizens to come together and develop an action-ready slate of recommendations about complicated public issues, all in one day. These are the technologies and methods:

- *Small-group dialogue.* Demographically diverse groups of ten to twelve participants come together with the support of a trained facilitator for in-depth discussion of values and key aspects of the issue under consideration. The size of the group creates a safe space for participants to learn from one another, react to ideas, use the materials provided to inform their opinion, and ultimately arrive at a collective view that represents the best integration of individual perspectives.
- *Networked computers.* Computers serve as electronic flipcharts, creating an instant record of the ideas generated at tables and ensuring that all voices are heard and no idea is lost. Through a wireless network, they transmit data to a central computer, setting the stage for distillation of themes from every table and for the voting process.
- *Theming.* Members of a "theme team" read electronic comments from all the tables in real time and distill them into key themes or messages. The themes are then presented back to the entire room so participants can respond to and vote on them.
- *Electronic keypads.* Each participant in a 21st Century Town Meeting has a wireless keypad for voting on issues and measuring his or her position with respect to other participants. Keypads also are used to establish the demographics of the event so that participants get a sense of the larger group of which they are a part. Keypad voting yields volumes of demographically sortable data that can be of great value to decision makers, as well as to the media as they develop the story. Keypad voting creates transparency during the meeting and enables participants to see that their voices are being heard.
- *Large video screens.* Large screens project data, themes, and information in real time to the entire gathering. When themes (and the corresponding level

of support in the room) are projected on the screens, thousands of people get instant feedback on how the results of discussion at their table fit with what happened at other tables. With large screens, individuals see the will of the whole as it gradually develops over the course of the day.

Using technology to gather, distill, and project themes and concerns allows a 21st Century Town Meeting to move back and forth between intimate small-group dialogue and the collective work of thousands of people. This back-and-forth between the small-scale and large-scale dialogues can occur as many times as needed to develop recommendations on which decision makers can take action.

What does a 21st Century Town Meeting actually look like from start to finish? The day begins with a welcome from sponsors, and brief opening comments from key political leaders to set the context for the issues under discussion. Participants begin by answering a series of demographic questions using keypad polling, both to get oriented to the technology and to find out who is in the room, by age, gender, race, income, geography, and other criteria relevant to the issue being discussed. Before any deliberation on key content, there is a values-based discussion to allow participants to learn what is important to them regarding the issues at hand. The values identified by participants lay the foundation for the next four to five hours of discussion on key issues. As already described, in each segment of the agenda discussion begins at individual tables, is themed in real time, and is then presented back to the whole for clarification and modification, and finally for voting. The last twenty or twenty-five minutes are to evaluate the day, review next steps, and allow time for decision makers to comment on what they have heard from participants. A report summarizing the outcomes of the day is quickly developed, reproduced, and distributed to participants, sponsors, and officials as they leave. By the end of the day, decision makers and citizens have heard the collective wisdom of a large, demographically representative cross-section of the public. Because decision makers have participated in the event and agreed to act on the recommendations in some way, the voices that come together at a 21st Century Town Meeting have a lasting impact.

The Theory and Methodology of the Model

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. Seven elements (some discrete and some ongoing through the life of the project) make up the theoretical base and methodology of the model.

Selecting an Issue That Affects Policy and Resources for the Common Good. 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.

But whatever the subject matter, disgruntled and disenfranchised citizens are more likely to engage in the political process if they believe they are involved in something with significant impact. The issue selection process should ensure the potential for impact in the real world in a reasonable time frame. The work should be linked to governance processes that already exist so that follow-up action can come quickly. In the end, the processes that govern how the public's work is done must be affected.

Developing the Strategy. The life of a key public issue constantly shifts and evolves. The issue selected for a 21st Century Town Meeting should be continuously analyzed in both the political and the communications contexts. Who are the key decision makers, stakeholders, and communities, and what is the nature of their stake in the issue? How would a deliberation build on previous activity? When would a deliberation be most salient?

Building Credibility with Citizens and Decision Makers. Citizen deliberation has the capacity for significant impact if there is a meaningful, transparent link to an appropriate decision-making process and decision makers. Decision makers must be present, listening, and publicly committed to taking outcomes into consideration. Partisanship and bias must be absent from the planning and execution of events, participant mix, and discussion materials.

Ensuring Diverse Participation. Although the level of civic engagement in general is low, it is lowest among a critical group: unorganized, unaffiliated citizens. Participant outreach must ensure a diverse mix of citizens, with a specific commitment to reaching those who are unorganized and unaffiliated. A target should be set for the number of participants sufficient to demonstrate that the community is active and cares about the issue, and to command the attention of decision makers and the media.

Creating Safe Public Space. The event must be designed to consistently seek fair and productive dialogue and create a level playing field on 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. Technology can be used to make sure everyone is heard and no strongly held idea is lost.

Supporting Informed Dialogue. Important conversations about public issues occur naturally among ordinary citizens and can be significantly enhanced by infusing high-quality information. To counter the perception that citizens hold uninformed views, educational material should offer sufficient context and history on the issues, be neutral and fair to all perspectives, leave room for citizens to create new options, and have credibility with all audiences.

Sustaining and Institutionalizing Citizen Voice. One town meeting does not make a vital public participation process. The issues selected and the overall strategy developed must incorporate ways to seed and track both 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.

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 time demands of the media. A 21st Century Town Meeting can demonstrate the value for governments of including citizens in the decisions that have an impact on their lives; it can position the citizen as a central player in governance and urge a new way of thinking about public dialogue, both in the physical place where it is held and in the social and emotional space created to support it. All of this is part of a process America*Speaks* calls "Taking Democracy to Scale."™

Taking Democracy to Scale: A Case Study of Listening to the City

On July 20, 2002, more than forty-three hundred citizens from New York City and the surrounding area came together for the largest face-to-face town hall meeting ever held. Using the 21st Century Town Meeting model, these citizens deliberated over specific options for redeveloping the World Trade Center site and considered strategies for helping people rebuild their lives in the aftermath of September 11. As a direct result of their deliberation, the participants secured commitment from top officials that development plans would be revised along the lines they suggested. Following the meeting, the governor of New York reiterated the citizens' directives to go back to the drawing board on site design options, develop mixed-use plans, reduce the density of the site, and find new solutions to the issue of commercial space. Three months later, the voices of these citizens were still being heeded as new decisions were made about redeveloping Ground Zero.

Listening to the City was an extraordinary feat of planning, coalition building, staffing, and large-scale application of information technologies. In the end, its success proves unequivocally that the model works. This description of the planning and execution of Listening to the City demonstrates how the 21st Century Town Meeting model is democracy in action.

A Coalition Is Built

A few months after the September 11 attacks, the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York (a coalition of more than eighty-five business, labor, community, and civic groups) was convened. The alliance is a broad umbrella for civic planning and advocacy efforts in support of rebuilding lower Manhattan; it seeks to ensure that a vigorous and productive public discussion takes place. The alliance's principal partners (the Regional Plan Association, NYU/Robert F. Wagner Graduate School, New School University, and the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development) invited America*Speaks* to design a series of public conversations about the city's needs in the wake of

the destruction of the World Trade Center. The first, held on February 7, 2002, brought more than 650 people from throughout the metropolitan area together with experts and regional leaders to discuss the vision and principles that should inform the rebuilding process.

Following this success, the alliance forged a formal partnership with the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (Port Authority) and began planning a second public deliberation, to be held five months later for as many as five thousand citizens. An executive team (composed of leaders from America*Speaks* and the principal partners) went to work determining strategy, developing budgets, hiring outside consultants for a range of tasks (recruitment, communications and public relations, event management, registration), and guiding project leaders and staff.

Outreach Begins

A project of this magnitude required highly skilled outreach on a massive scale. A crack team was pulled together of more than a dozen full-time and part-time field organizers who lived in or had worked extensively within the communities in which they were recruiting participants. The outreach team developed strong relationships within each targeted community and secured assistance and commitment from organizations and leaders to support the event and assist in recruiting. Registrations began to flow in during the first half of June at a rate of about three hundred per week. After the Fourth of July weekend, they arrived at a rate of about three hundred to four hundred per day. As the rolls grew, the outreach team identified which demographic and geographic populations were underrepresented. In the last weeks, ads ran in publications targeted to communities where registration was low, and there was additional street outreach.

Key Decision Makers and the Media Get on Board

From the beginning, Listening to the City was designed in conjunction with New York's official process for redevelopment of Ground Zero. The two principal decision-making stakeholders were the LMDC, created and charged by the governor with the overall planning and revitalization process; and the Port Authority, the owner of the World Trade Center site and the party responsible for transportation infrastructure and management of port commerce facilities and services. The LMDC played an active role in Listening to the City, not only as a significant financial sponsor but also in planning content. The Port Authority played a quietly supportive role until the final weeks, when it became a more visible partner. Importantly, both LMDC and the Port Authority endorsed and partially financed the event; this strengthened confidence that the voices and collective judgment of the participants would be heard by those with decision-making authority.

Media interest in Listening to the City—critical to securing participation as well as legitimacy in the public eye—emerged gradually. In the first couple of months, coverage was slow. Outreach efforts focused on engaging neighborhood newspapers and local radio stations, and as momentum built the major media began to take an interest. In the end, more than two hundred media outlets—including all of the major networks; dozens of major newspaper dailies from around the country; and media from across Canada, Europe, and Asia—covered the event.

The Critical Staff Structure Comes Together

Managing a town meeting of forty-three hundred required a crew of about one thousand volunteers and staff, including hundreds who were specially trained and selected for four functional areas fundamental to the success of the event:

- *Table facilitators* with a strong background in small-group facilitation as well as the experience and confidence to work an intensive day-long program were assigned to each of the five hundred tables. The key tenets of a 21st Century Town Meeting (creating a safe space for real dialogue, equalizing participants, ensuring responsiveness to all viewpoints) could not be upheld without productive table deliberation, for which skilled facilitation is critical. More than eight hundred individuals volunteered to be table facilitators, willing to travel and participate at their own expense. In the end, the table facilitators represented all fifty states plus Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, Colombia, and Denmark—a testament to the power of the event.
- *Theme team members* (as noted earlier) read ideas that were generated at the tables and sent to them through a wireless network. They distilled the comments into key themes or messages and presented the themes back to the room to validate what was discussed and allow further refinements. The theme team is the component of the model that makes the meeting immediately responsive to citizen views and input; it enables final recommendations for action to go directly to decision makers.
- *Issue experts* answered participants' substantive questions. The 21st Century Town Meeting's ability to take a large number of citizens through complex, multifaceted issue deliberation derives from the model's emphasis on using meticulously crafted informational material that is politically neutral, highly substantive, and accessible. The availability of issue experts during this event further served the goal of maintaining high-level issue discussion.
- *Constituency service representatives* from city, state, and federal agencies linked to the rebuilding process were stationed outside the room to answer questions not pertinent to the day's agenda. By helping participants with their concerns, these volunteers supported the model's emphasis on creating a safe space for productive dialogue. Their work helped keep table discussions on task, making sure the group could get through a complex agenda in a short time.

In addition to these groups, hundreds of volunteers took on other tasks leading up to and during Listening to the City: calling all registrants to remind them of the meeting time and give them last-minute details; stuffing five thousand participant folders with guides, worksheets, and other background materials and dropping additional printed materials on all five hundred tables; registering participants on site; serving as greeters and escorts; managing meal distribution; delivering any printed material missing at an individual table; helping people with special needs such as grief counseling; troubleshooting, supporting facilitation at the tables, answering questions, obtaining material, and finding on-site experts when needed for consultation; and handling software, hardware, or computer operation questions.

The Day Arrives

Once forty-three hundred participants were in their seats and had answered demographic questions about themselves on their wireless keypads, everyone saw that the room looked much like a microcosm of the New York region. There were roughly equal numbers of men and women, with a good mix of age groups, except for youth (who, as it turns out, had much greater representation in the two-week online dialogue that followed the event). Racial diversity did not match the regional census precisely but was still notable, with 14 percent of participants identifying themselves as "mixed racial heritage" or "other," 12 percent Asian, 10 percent Hispanic, 7 percent African American, and 67 percent Caucasian.[3] Forty-six percent of the participants were from Manhattan; 32 percent from the other four boroughs; and 22 percent from New York State, New Jersey, and Connecticut, or any other location in the United States or abroad. There was also socioeconomic diversity: 17 percent of participants reported household income at or below $25,000, while 13 percent were at or above $150,000. Finally, there was solid representation by those with a personal connection to the events of September 11. Roughly one in five identified themselves as survivors of the attack, more than 40 percent worked in lower Manhattan, and more than 20 percent lived there.

Listening to the City began with values discussions, which identified shared hopes among the forty-three hundred participants. On the basis of these collective values, the two issue discussions that followed assessed the six site options and developed a specific agenda for revitalizing the downtown and surrounding areas. On the first issue, participants voiced strong objections to elements of all six site options. More than a third said the proposals were not ambitious enough. Most favored more open space and a memorial that is inspirational, serene, and integrated into the plan for the entire site. In terms of revitalization directives, citizens expressed a desire for affordable and middle-income housing for all ages, and to see lower Manhattan become a more diverse, livelier community. They advised expanding transit service (including bringing commuter trains directly downtown and affording better access to

nearby neighborhoods such as Chinatown) as well as improving existing systems and reducing traffic congestion. Participants also wanted more business diversity without diluting the character of Lower Manhattan as a financial district. Finally, they urged creation of job and training programs, particularly for those most affected by the terrorist attack.

At the close of Listening to the City, representatives from LMDC, the Port Authority, and the mayor's office confirmed that the day's events would have a profound impact on the rebuilding process. They agreed to go back to the drawing board, develop mixed-use plans, reduce the density of the site, and find new solutions to resolve the main leaseholder's rights. As participants and decision makers left the hall, they received a written report summarizing the key findings and recommendations.

Following the event, an online dialogue brought an additional 818 people into the deliberation through twenty-six small discussion groups that "met" over the next two weeks. The online dialogue fostered thoughtful interaction by (1) engaging participants in the discussion when it was convenient to them; (2) allowing people to explore the issues more thoroughly by extending the time frame; and (3) permitting participants to monitor discussion in all the other groups, and use this information to develop their own views more fully. In two weeks, as many as ten thousand messages were exchanged; satisfaction with the online dialogue was consistent with the experiences of the "in person" participants. Interestingly, almost half of the online deliberators reported it was their first experience with such dialogue. In the end, messages from the online dialogue confirmed and added value to the work undertaken by the original group.

The Recommendations Take Hold

A few weeks after Listening to the City, LMDC announced that it would open the planning process to six new design teams from around the world. Of the $21 billion in federal money promised to New York City, $4.55 billion was earmarked for a Lower Manhattan transit hub, a key recommendation from the meeting. The Port Authority also expressed real willingness to move commercial development from Ground Zero to other locations in lower Manhattan. Three months after Listening to the City, officials took further action that was directly responsive to citizen recommendations. They agreed to reduce by 40 percent the amount of commercial space that must be included in the site designs and allow expansion of hotel and retail space.

Did Listening to the City Take Democracy to Scale?

The Listening to the City event met or exceeded expectations in terms of participation; smooth implementation; and the strength, clarity, and consistency of the citizenry's voice that emerged. But did it actually take democracy to

scale? Did it create a process by which a significant number of citizens had a discernible impact on policy making and governance, and lay the groundwork for sustained civic involvement among its participants?

We think the answer to these questions is yes. Listening to the City brought thousands of unaffiliated citizens together to deliberate in a safe and neutral space. The event supported informed dialogue and confirmed citizens' ability to wrestle with complicated issues and come to cogent and realistic recommendations. The finely orchestrated combination of facilitated face-to-face dialogue, massive information processing, and instant communication gave participants the opportunity to be heard by an intimate group as well as by thousands, including those making the decisions. The active participation of key stakeholders and their public commitment to change meant the event was openly and meaningfully linked to a decision-making process. Since that process was under way but still in an early stage, it was ripe for input. In the end, citizens' voices were heard, and their recommendations were heeded.

Other Applications for This Methodology

Potential applications for a 21st Century Town Meeting are numerous, but the America*Speaks* experience demonstrates that there are three kinds of public work (whether local, regional, or national in scope) that may be most appropriate for this methodology: planning, resource allocation, and policy formulation.

Planning. City, state, and regional planning efforts are complex enterprises involving weighing and prioritizing a range of substantive issues (from economic development to the environment, from housing to education), while balancing trade-offs between short-term and long-term investments. The 21st Century Town Meeting can take a large group of people through such a planning maze. The model's carefully developed participant guides and dialogue questions combine with the instant voting technology and theming capacity to enable participants to rank-order choices against a set of agreed-upon criteria and values. The model is well-suited to large-scale planning deliberation.

In January 2002, in Hamilton County, Ohio, America*Speaks* facilitated a 21st Century Town Meeting that enabled more than one thousand citizens to comment on elements of a comprehensive regional development plan (the first in thirty-five years), ratify a regional vision, set priorities, and offer strategies for action. Citizens offered specific suggestions for taking action in four priority areas: ensuring economic prosperity, building collaborative decision making, embracing diversity and equity, and balancing development and the environment. Action teams were established to turn the citizens' suggestions into specific action steps.

Resource Allocation. A second juncture at which the methodology can be particularly useful is when there are significant resources to be allocated—when elected officials must establish budget priorities and make tough choices.

Public budgets have enormous bearing on the quality of people's daily lives. Yet because needs consistently outpace available resources, there are always winners and losers in budget decision making. The 21st Century Town Meeting model levels the playing field. No organized group can take over the deliberations; everyone who comes participates in the same agenda, and all voices are equal. The design of the event ensures that the outcomes of the day are the collective wisdom and judgment of everyone present. Applying this very public and highly transparent process to budget decision making increases the likelihood of resource allocation reflecting the common good rather than the priorities of the most vocal special interests. It also creates a natural constituency for the budget as it moves through the political process.

In November 1999, America*Speaks* worked with the Washington, D.C., mayor's office to hold a series of 21st Century Town Meetings to help set the District of Columbia's strategic priorities. The strategic priorities determine how local tax dollars are allocated. The largest of these meetings drew more than three thousand participants, and a Youth Summit brought together fourteen hundred young people aged fourteen to twenty-one. In the end, citizen input led to redirected spending priorities for FY2001 in a number of areas. Among other things, some $70 million was added to the education budget, $10 million in new funding was allocated to improving senior services, one thousand new drug treatment slots were financed, new neighborhood-based supermarkets were approved, and funds were allocated for continued neighborhood-based planning and participation in governance. Three years later, more than fifteen hundred D.C. citizens have remained involved in an intensive way in the strategic "neighborhood action" work going on throughout the city. The FY2003 budget allocates another $2 million toward sustaining citizen involvement.

America*Speaks* also worked with the mayor's office to develop a comprehensive governance process. Every two years, citizens help to create a strategic plan that drives development of the city's budget, performance contracts for city employees, and a public scorecard that measures how well the city lived up to its commitments.

Policy Formulation. The 21st Century Town Meeting is particularly appropriate when critical public policy decisions are pending: whenever the current landscape is up for grabs, or when a cross-section of the American public has a real stake in the issue, or when polling data indicate that citizens believe they can reach consensus even if partisan positioning means politicians cannot. A 21st Century Town Meeting is ideal for working through contentious terrain because the model equalizes the voices of all participants and follows a design that intentionally builds consensus by using values-based questions to arrive at concrete decisions. Difficult issues such as health care reform, whether or not to undertake unilateral military action, or gun control are examples of issues that would be well served in this format.

In 1997–98, the Pew Charitable Trusts' "Americans Discuss Social Security" project (ADSS) used a combination of 21st Century Town Meetings, video

teleconferencing, and small-scale local forums to bring more than forty-five thousand citizens in all fifty states into direct conversation with policy makers in Washington about addressing problems facing the Social Security system. By the end of the project, ADSS demonstrated that Americans agreed on three specific reform options: collecting payroll taxes on earnings above the salary cap, reducing benefits for people with high retirement income, and permitting workers to direct a share of their Social Security contributions toward private investment.

Whether in the area of planning, resource allocation, or policy formulation, a 21st Century Town Meeting is a particularly desirable methodology whenever decision making on a local issue directly informs national policies—or, conversely, when local decision making is in need of policy making at the national level. For example, local communities around the country that serve as gateways to national parks face similar concerns related to sprawl, congestion, and cost and revenue sharing. A 21st Century Town Meeting (using satellite video teleconferencing technology) can efficiently facilitate simultaneous multisite information sharing and deliberation. Such interaction is likely to improve the quality of local discussion and also may quickly raise key issues to national attention, potentially securing helpful action from decision makers.

In considering applications for the 21st Century Town Meeting, availability of infrastructure and resources is always an important consideration. The methodology is labor-intensive and costly. Yet even though the cost of putting on a 21st Century Town Meeting is substantial, it is sure to be comparable to (if not even less than) what is routinely spent by politicians and elected officials on public opinion polls and public relations strategies. In addition, authentic engagement of the public on controversial issues can mitigate the likelihood of expensive controversy and delay later on. Unfortunately, financing a large-scale public deliberation will continue to seem too costly until this country establishes an ethic that real-time citizen engagement is as important as polling.

The Emerging Field of Deliberative Democracy

Across the country and around the world, deliberative democracy is emerging as an exciting field of practice. At the heart of this work is the firm belief that our broken governance processes can be fixed. Innovative organizations are experimenting with a variety of new and better ways for citizens to participate in government decision making and help resolve public problems. In scattered pockets, citizens are learning about issues and engaging with the diversity of their communities—and their voices are making a difference.

This emerging field shares a set of values. We believe that the diversity of a community must be engaged. We are committed to informed deliberation that lets all participants be heard. We know that face-to-face dialogue is an experience that can change people's lives. We believe that public deliberation can and

should make a difference. At the same time, several critical differences distinguish the various models under development: the scale of engagement, the level of governance in which change is sought, the kind of issue being addressed, and the strategies for using the results of deliberation to create change. For example:

- Although America*Speaks* engages thousands of people at one time in its 21st Century Town Meetings, the Study Circles Resource Center engages multiple groups of twelve to eighteen people several times and then later brings all of the groups together.
- The Center for Deliberative Polling conducts dialogues among a statistically reliable random sample of up to six hundred participants and measures resulting opinion changes.
- The Public Conversations Project seeks to create change by building understanding between communities in conflict.
- The National Issues Forum produces reports to Congress that represent opinions generated through forums across the country.

The approaches in this emerging field are many and varied.

In a different vein, a handful of groups (such as Web Lab, e-thePeople, and Information Renaissance) are experimenting with asynchronous online dialogue, which can take place over multiple weeks and engage a large or small group of citizens in discussion of policy issues. The dialogue may include a roundtable that brings together issue experts, public officials, and advocacy groups, or it may be composed of small groups of unaffiliated citizens. These groups are advancing the field by testing the possibility of real, informed deliberation among citizens by way of the Internet.

All of these efforts (and this is not intended to be an exhaustive list) are building an emerging field of practice. We believe the America*Speaks* 21st Century Town Meeting brings unique value to the work. The size and demographic diversity of our meetings captures the imagination of the media and decision makers in a way that is difficult to achieve on a smaller scale. The size and diversity also create a significant constituency that can keep pressure on decision makers to follow through. Because the events are linked to existing governance processes, it is possible to ensure that actions taken are highly visible and that accountability can be maintained.

As the deliberative democracy field develops, it becomes increasingly important for us to further distinguish the available citizen engagement strategies—to understand their strengths and weaknesses, and be able to match them to local capacity and substance areas. We must find creative ways to coordinate and collaborate with each other so the field is defined by a shared mission to create a healthier democracy. We must ensure that the collective power of citizens' voices is an integral part of governance and decision making.

Into the Future

A nascent movement is afoot to give citizens their due voice in decision making—in short, to reinvent American democracy. The time has come for those who care about the values and spirit of democracy to take up the banner of this movement. We know our democracy is broken, but we also know the will is there to fix it. Over the past six months, America*Speaks* has partnered with more than twenty organizations to create the Deliberative Democracy Consortium. The consortium will bring the best models together to develop shared strategies to achieve a healthier democracy.

In the years ahead, the deliberative democracy movement faces three principal challenges. First, we must transform how Americans think about themselves as citizens—how they conceptualize their role, responsibility, and relationship to their government. In short, we must help Americans understand what it can mean to be a citizen. Second, we must develop the nationwide infrastructure that is needed for citizens to participate in governance at all levels. Such an infrastructure must include everything from public space for citizens to come together in their community to a national network of facilitators who can support ongoing dialogue. It must support recruitment of citizens to participate in public dialogue and make available adequate mechanisms to educate citizens about issues that are addressed. Third, and most important, this nationwide infrastructure must connect citizens to decision makers and cycles of governance and management.

We believe America*Speaks* can play an important role in this movement. As we look to the future, we challenge ourselves to find ways to sustain citizen participation over time. We will do more to make sure that our process adequately reaches out and gives voice to those who are most disempowered in their community. We will learn how to better institutionalize this work and build capacity within the community to maintain it.

We are hopeful for our democracy. The values are there, the strategies are there, the people are there. It is simply up to all of us to make it happen. *New York Daily News* columnist Pete Hamill was at Listening to the City and saw citizens working hard to do just that:

> We came to the vast hangar at the Javits Center expecting the worst. Put 5,000 New Yorkers in a room, charge them with planning a hunk of the New York Future, and the result would be a lunatic asylum. . . . None of that happened. . . . From 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. they were presented with basic issues about the rebuilding of those 16 gutted acres in lower Manhattan. At each table they debated in a sober, thoughtful, civil way. They voted, offered comments, and moved on to the next item on the agenda. . . . And because the process was an exercise in democracy, not demagoguery, no bellowing idiots grabbed microphones to perform for the TV cameras. . . . In this room, "I" had given way to "we." Yes, the assembly was boring to look at, too

> serious, too grave, too well-mannered for standard TV presentation. And it was absolutely thrilling. . . . We have a word for what they were doing. The word is democracy.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, the term *citizen* is meant to be inclusive of citizens and noncitizen residents.
2. 21st Century Town Meeting is trademarked by America*Speaks*, a national nonprofit organization. For purposes of readability, the trademark symbol is used only at the first appearance of the term in this article.
3. Percentages add up to more than 100 because participants had the option of identifying themselves in more than one category.

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