PAR

Public Administration Review

Supplement to Volume 70

ASPA

Advancing Excellence in public service ...

Looking Into the Future of Public Administration

New approaches and tools for a changing governance landscape.

This special issue of PAR is sponsored by Howard G. and S. Louise Phanstiel and the Maxwell School of Syracuse University.
Special Issue Editors: Rosemary O'Leary and David M. Van Slyke

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Learning from the Past, Committing to the Future: A Practitioner's View of Our Democracy

Part VI: The Past as Prelude: Were the Predictions of Classic Scholars Correct?

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American democracy is at a pivotal moment: electoral dysfunction, low levels of participation, divisive politics, and power imbalances dominate governance and impede our ability to resolve critical issues facing the nation. In this environment, the author argues, our ability to be the representative system of government we claim is in question. Using Harold D. Lasswell's 1942 essay "The Developing Science of Democracy" as a vehicle for reflection, the author reviews progress and challenges in democratic practice today along four dimensions: information delivery and knowledge building; accurate capturing of citizens' views; conducting democratic conversations; and maintaining balances of power. Among the reforms necessary to address persistent challenges in each of these areas, explored in depth is the institutionalization of citizen voice in governance. Seven elements of an infrastructure to achieve such an institutionalization are reviewed: a mandatory legislative framework; designated physical spaces; specific technological, human, and organizational capacity; a trustworthy media; and a recommitment to civic education.

There is substantial value for human beings in understanding how history's critical thinkers assessed the state of their society, as well as what they predicted for the future. These insights help us see with greater clarity the evolution and complex mechanics of our current social and political dynamics; they remind us of the durability of certain aspects of our condition, both positive and negative; and they provide comfort and inspiration by putting us in the company of great minds.

Indeed, it can also be entertaining to select a quotation from the past that fits the present and then engage others in pinpointing the era in which it was spoken. Unfortunately, these exercises can prove sobering if they reveal how little progress has been made in critical areas. For example, one political scientist had this to say about the relationship between the media and the people: "the public at large depends upon the symbol-manipulators who control the mass media, and the picture is a confused jumble of complacency, exasperation, and recrimination." This very apt description of today's media-saturated and -controlled national narrative was, in fact, written in 1942 by Harold D. Lasswell in his essay "The Developing Science of Democracy."

Going beyond this "parlor game," Lasswell's essay provides a fascinating window onto the evolution of democratic practice in the United States over the last 70 years. Published in public administration historian Leonard D. White's volume *The Future of Government,* Lasswell's essay reinforces for us what constitutes democracy at its most fundamental level. He also provides an assessment of our democratic function across several key dimensions, such as the way in which power is balanced, citizens' level of access to objective information, and the ability of the system to maintain a "focus of attention" on critical issues. In these and other areas, Lasswell offers specific steps for refinement and growth in a field that he finds to be steadily progressing as a result of the application of emerging scientific research methodologies.

By virtue of the truly astounding technological advancements that have been realized since 1942, some of the concerns that Lasswell identifies have been largely resolved—or at least have the potential to be resolved. For example, the Internet and significantly expanded sources for television news give many citizens easy access to great quantities of information about critical issues of the day; digital technologies allow us to much more closely observe, analyze, and understand democratic activities such as debates, caucuses, town hall meetings, and voting.

Despite these advances, there are a number of critical areas in which we have made very little progress—areas in which Lasswell's descriptions of democracy's shortcomings in 1942 match our realities in 2010 with painful accuracy. Specifically, we continue to show a lack of overall civic competence (Intercollegiate Studies Institute 2008; Lane 2008), our electoral system is corrupt and dysfunctional (U.S.

Commission on Civil Rights 2001), we have low levels of democratic participation (U.S. Census Bureau 2009a, 2009b), and significant power imbalances persist (Domhoff 2010). As a result of these and other problems, our government repeatedly struggles and/or fails to pass the legislation we need on core issues such as fiscal sustainability, health care, climate change, and immigration (Mann and Ornstein 2006).

This, then, is the significance of an analysis of Lasswell at this point in time: nearly 70 years after he offered his views, we continue to face many of the same challenges in our democracy. Lasswell's discussion is still relevant today and should serve as a reminder that we have failed to make sufficient progress. His work also remains expository—the dimensions of democracy he explores continue to suggest a reasonable path forward.

Through a close analysis of "then" and "now," this essay details some of the persistent challenges in our democracy as well as the progress we have made in overcoming them. The essay then suggests a further course of action: a true institutionalization of the role of citizen voice in governance. While only one of many reforms needed in our democracy, focusing on this element of our democratic function will, in this practitioner's view, better position the nation to address the many critical issues we face today.

The State of Our Democracy in 1942 . . . and Today

From Harold Lasswell's vantage point in 1942, the state of democracy in the United States was evolving hand in hand with its science. With advances in the ability to bring scientific methods of data gathering, assessment, and analysis to the study of democracy, he argued, we had the potential to create a system that was "moral," "strong," and "not blind." Lasswell identified a number of critical dimensions of democratic capacity and then assessed the country's functioning against them. Four of these dimensions will be explored here: (1) our ability to deliver information to citizens and build their knowledge; (2) our ability to accurately capture citizens' views; (3) our ability to conduct democratic conversations through which these views can be delivered to policy makers; and (4) our ability to maintain a balance of power in the operations of our democracy. As will be discussed, these four dimensions remain entirely relevant today, making it not only historically interesting, but also instructive to reassess them against our current performance.

Delivering Information to Citizens and Building Their Knowledge

Throughout his essay, Lasswell describes a range of deficits in the public's knowledge about issues of the day, their lack of reliable access to information, and, as a consequence, their inability to participate fully in the nation's democracy. Citizens need to know enough to have something useful to contribute, Lasswell argues, and they need regular access to balanced information in order to possess this knowledge. "Democracy will die if opinions are not worth expressing," he says.

Lasswell offers a handful of specific strategies for achieving greater knowledge among citizens, such as "Public Attention Days" on which "the most influential agencies of government and the largest private corporations could report to the public." He also suggests regular "Citizen's Reports . . . ten-minute daily summaries of what is important to know about society . . . a means of making news of what is important as distinguished from what happens to be arresting."

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Fast-forward to 2010. Although "what happens to be arresting" continues to dominate the public media, our capacity for information sharing and knowledge building has been revolutionized to an extent unimaginable for an observer and social commentator from 1942. The virtual explosion in communication methods and devices—and the competition for attention this has created—has made information delivery to citizens a national passion. Ordinary people have some degree of access to the inner workings and daily efforts of nearly every organization and person that affects their lives—from the grocery store around the corner to the office of their U.S. congressman.

Some of our newfound communication capacity is, in fact, being harnessed for the very purposes that Lasswell imagined. For example, in 2007, a nonprofit organization called the State of the USA was launched to develop and make available, on an ongoing basis, data on a set of national indicators that measure key conditions and trends in the country. According to Derek Bok of Harvard University, "understanding our nation's progress toward widely accepted goals is imperative in an age where most of us know far too little about the problems and opportunities we face. Supplying such information requires a trusted, nonpartisan source, with scientifically credible and useful data. The State of the USA affords America its best chance to receive such information, and it deserves the support of all leaders who care about creating a new level of public discourse to meet the needs of a mature and healthy democracy" (see http://www.stateoftheusa.org/).

The State of the USA's first offering is a report and analysis of 20 critical health indicators developed by the Institute of Medicine at the National Academies. It describes and quantifies our nation's health outcomes (e.g., mortality, life expectancy), our health behaviors (e.g., smoking, obesity), and our health systems (e.g., insurance, hospitalizations). In coming years, this will be followed by publication of similar yardsticks and information in 15 other areas.

In another example, the U.S. government, under the Barack Obama administration's Open Government Directive , has taken some significant steps toward government-wide information sharing and transparency aimed at increasing citizens' ability to participate in their democracy. As part of the directive, the administration launched http://www.data.gov so that citizens can access executive branch data sets. To monitor, support, and encourage full utilization of this and other new information resources, my organization, the national nonprofit America*Speaks*, has recently launched a blog called *Open Government*

Directions (http://opengovernmentdirections.org) that will analyze trends in Open Government activity, assess progress, and provide a national forum for discussion of best practices.

Innovations such as these are important. However, when it comes to the total evolution of information sharing since 1942, it seems we are often taking two steps backward for every one step forward. For example, despite extraordinary advances in information delivery capacity, our reliance on a technological infrastructure that is governed by competition means that significant portions of our society will continue to have very limited access to information, intensifying their disenfranchisement from democratic processes. While we may have to wait for the 2010 Census data before we can precisely quantify the digital divide in America, it is safe to say that the "democratization of information" is, as yet, very incomplete (Knight Commission 2009).

Further, the excess of information has exacerbated ongoing concerns about its quality. Lasswell described the media in 1942 as "symbol-manipulators" who create "a confused jumble of complacency, exasperation, and recrimination" in the minds of citizens. A few years later, the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press sought to respond to this problem by promoting a code of social responsibility for the media. Following on this effort, in 1967, the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television raised concerns about media quality. The next year, the Kerner Commission's National Report on Civil Disorders was particularly critical of the media's failure to provide a balanced—especially racially balanced—perspective on current events. Most recently, in 2007, the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy was launched, according to the mission statement published on its website, "to maximize the availability and flow of credible local information" (http://www.knightcomm.org). For nearly 70 years, we have been seeking (rather unsuccessfully, one could conclude, given the repeated efforts) to ensure that information flowing to citizens is reliable and unbiased—to resolve what Lasswell called "a chaotic state of affairs."

Another example of the two-steps forward, one step back phenomenon as it applies to the evolution of information sharing since 1942 can be seen in the way factual information provided by the government for citizens is often utilized, instead, by special interest groups. This problem first emerged during the implementation of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act in the 1960s. While the act required "maximum feasible participation" for the poor in poverty program planning, the avenues for information access that it created were, in the end, used *most* effectively by special interest groups and members of later administrations seeking to dismantle the very programming the act was intended to support (Flanders 2004). Subsequently, Cigler and Loomis report, "Congressional reforms that opened up the legislative process during the 1970s have provided a much larger number of access points for today's lobbyists. Most committee (and subcommittee) sessions, including the markups at which legislation is written, remain open to the public, as do many conference committee meetings. More roll call votes are taken and congressional floor action is televised. Thus, interests can monitor the performance of individual members of Congress as never before" (1998, 27).

Similar concerns have been raised today about whether increased transparency and the availability of massive amounts of information provided under the Open Government Directive may ultimately be used more effectively by special interest groups than by the citizens for whom the information was intended. Writing for the IBM Center for the Business of Government, Paul Posner, director of the master of public administration program at George Mason University (2010), said, "past studies of 'open government' initiatives have shown that they are often exploited not by the 'people,' but by organized interests who have the resources to pay attention. . . . Various interest groups will not be shy about highlighting those data that support their views . . . Churchill's quote of some 60 years ago is more than true today: 'A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.'"

Our failure to ensure that advances in information sharing fully benefit citizens has, in my view, stymied efforts by our country's leaders to make the necessary progress on critical, highly complex issues (such as health care reform and climate change). If citizens are unable to use information to form an opinion "worth expressing," as Lasswell says, our ability to make progress in key areas of policy will remain limited. This link is explored more fully later.

Capturing Citizens' Views

Building knowledge among citizens is not, according to Lasswell—and equally true today—a sufficient end in itself, but rather a necessary precursor to their active and meaningful participation in democracy. The second dimension of democratic capacity identified by Lasswell is our ability to accurately capture citizens' views and then transmit them to decision makers. Lasswell focuses on two areas in which our democracy in 1942 struggled to achieve this: in the methodological observation and gathering of data, and in effectively securing the attention of decision makers on the issues at hand. Both of these areas of democratic practice remain problematic today.

Methodological observation and gathering of data on citizens' views. Lasswell says it quite succinctly: "we cannot take the attitudes of our fellows into consideration unless we know what they are." He then goes on to advocate for "new procedures for the observation of reality" and "the use of carefully prepared questionnaires or polls given to representative groups" as well as the application of scientifically based mechanisms for assessing the information that is gathered.

Nearly seven decades later, it would appear that we have the requisite polling methodologies and technologies at hand, with such advances as live and text response via home and cellular telephones, e-mail and web-based voting and response, and purchase-based registration of consumer preferences and behavior. These various avenues enable ever-larger numbers of citizens to give a "thumbs up" or a "thumbs down"—or offer more detailed opinions—on any issue, idea, or product. And they are used quite extensively. The Council of American Survey Research Organizations estimates that the U.S. "market research" market in 2008 was a staggering $9 billion (DeAngelis 2009); federal agencies spent almost $110 million on marketing research and public opinion polling in 2009 (Fedmine 2010).

Despite the proliferation of opinion polling, veteran democracy practitioners such as Daniel Yankelovich (1991), Jim Fishkin (2010), and others have long understood this to be a decidedly ineffective mechanism for citizen participation. Pollsters, they argue, claim a level of insight into the public's views that they cannot truly have. Further,

most polls do nothing to help individuals grasp and then wrestle with an issue's complexity; they do not help people understand their fellow Americans' views; nor do they provide an opportunity for citizens to develop creative, common-ground solutions to public problems. Finally, polls fail to energize the public to stand by their opinions or to do their part toward supporting the common good.

Tough decisions . . . require a strong public constituency. Because today's policy makers primarily rely on polling data to understand where the public stands, they do not have a strong enough foundation from which they can act boldly.

Although he was naive to what the future of polling would hold for our democratic system, even in 1942, Lasswell identified a need for a deeper understanding of citizens' views and behavior. "In our own time," he writes,

> The discovery of ways of studying human response . . . need[s] skilful observers of the total reality of personal and cultural development, if we are to know the facts about the prevalence of democracy. One long step toward reality is to accept no general sentence as a complete communication until we know how it is related to definite observational standpoints.

In my view, a public that has no opportunity to deeply engage with an issue (and can only register its opinions in snap judgments made to pollsters) will always be a ripe target for manipulation and undue influence. The dramatic swings in public opinion about health care reform—both in the early 1990s and again today—prove the point. In 1993–94, the Health Insurance Association of America spent $14 million ($20.4 million in today's dollars) on the highly influential "Harry and Louise" television ads (Singer 2009). In the health care tumult we have just witnessed, 3,300 lobbyists worked the issue—equal to six lobbyists for every member of Congress—and $263.4 million was spent on these efforts during the first six months of 2009 alone (Salant and O'Leary 2009). Buffeted by scare tactics and spin from lobbyists and special interest groups, both then and now, the public has been largely unable to reach a stable judgment about health care reform (Rivlin and Rivlin 2009; Teixeira 2009). The result? In 1993–94, the issue was simply removed from the policy agenda. In 2009–10, legislation was passed that will extend health coverage to an estimated 34 million Americans, reform aspects of the insurance market, and potentially slow cost growth. However, the deeper systemic reforms that are needed to bend the curve on health care costs did not happen, and, even without that level of change, the law is already the subject of 20 state lawsuits (*Atlanta Business Chronicle* 2010).

Tough decisions, such as those inherent in an issue like health care reform, require a strong public constituency. Because today's policy makers rely primarily on polling data to understand where the public stands, they do not have a strong enough foundation from which they can act boldly. In 1991, Yankelovich noted this phenomenon, arguing that when people of diverse opinions deliberate together and reach a stable opinion, a policy maker can then count on this going forward. Yet despite his and others' efforts to bring real content and deliberation to the formation of public opinion, we have not achieved this on an ongoing, large-scale basis.

Securing the attention of decision makers on vital issues. In addition to an assessment of observational techniques, Lasswell discusses at length the importance, for the practice of democracy, of securing what he calls a "focus of attention on public questions as a means of reaching wise decisions." He is concerned about leaders and decision makers—as well as the general public—being able to sift through "the contents of the channels of mass communication [which] come to the notice of millions of people." Jump ahead to 2010, and a "focus of attention" for decision makers remains a vital concern.

Just as the information explosion and its putative "democratization" can overwhelm citizens (and thereby diminish their ability to form reasoned, stable views about important issues), this same glut of available data can make it difficult for policy makers to discern the true voice of the citizenry and focus on what is important. In such a crowded marketplace, the voices of stakeholders or special interest groups tend to be those most effectively elevated to decision makers. In my view, there is ample evidence of a skewed "focus of attention" in the fact that our politics and electoral processes are often sidetracked by incendiary issues that, while important, directly affect small numbers of people (e.g., abortion, gay marriage, English-only), while the larger, core issues facing the country as a whole (e.g., fiscal sustainability, health care, climate change, education) languish on the sidelines or fall prey to the deliberate oversimplification and polarization that eventually results in insufficient action being taken.

In both the methods we use to gather information on citizens' views, as well as our ability to effectively secure the attention of decision makers on key issues, we have not demonstrated sufficient progress from Lasswell's time.

Conducting Democratic Conversations

The third dimension of democratic capacity that Lasswell explores is our ability to conduct democratic conversations through which citizens' views can become, as he says, "worthy" of decision makers' attention. The field of practice surrounding democratic conversations is both broad and deep. Academics and practitioners around the world are testing a range of methodologies that have utility in a variety of settings and circumstances. The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation has developed a useful framework for understanding the breadth of approaches in the field (Heierbacher 2008). This framework identifies four streams of dialogue and deliberation and, for each, the explicit purpose and "the most well-known and well-tested methods." These are as follows:

1. Exploration

Primary purpose: To encourage people and groups to learn more about themselves, their community, or an issue, and possibly discover innovative solutions

Methods: Conversation Café, Intergroup Dialogue in the classroom, Wisdom Council, Wisdom Circles, Open Space, Appreciative Inquiry, Bohm Dialogue, Socrates Café

2. Conflict Transformation

Primary purpose: To resolve conflicts, to foster personal healing and growth, and to improve relations among groups

Methods: Sustained Dialogue, Intergroup Dialogue in communities, Victim-Offender Mediation, Public Conversations Project Dialogue, Web Lab's Small Group Dialogue, Compassionate Listening

3. **Decision Making**
Primary purpose: To influence policy decisions and improve public knowledge

Methods: National Issues Forums, Citizens Jury, Deliberative Polling, 21st-Century Town Meeting, Citizen Choicework, Consensus Conference

4. **Collaborative Action**
Primary purpose: To empower people and groups to solve complicated problems and take responsibility for the solution

Methods: Study Circles, Future Search, Appreciative Inquiry, Charrettes

Despite the proliferation of proven techniques, it often seems that decision makers elect methods of "dialogue" or "engagement" that are actually neither. One example of this is the ongoing use of the traditional town hall meeting. While billed as an opportunity to discuss an issue and learn what a community thinks, in my observation, these events tend to be speaker focused, with experts delivering information lecture style. Frequently, the time is dominated by the airing of individual concerns and devolves quickly into repetitive ax grinding, grandstanding, or even, more recently, shouting matches between various stakeholders. Finally, targeted invitation lists and limited outreach for these events tends to make them into "reverberation chambers" in which participants and decision makers simply hear and reaffirm their own views rather than consider opposing opinions.

Commenting on the quality of democratic conversations in 1942, but presaging the state of affairs today, Lasswell noted,

> No doubt we need greatly to improve democracy's methods of conducting discussion . . . One guiding principle is the nullification of the non-rational, which means the balancing of such factors as prestige and skill of participants. There is need, too, of maintaining respect for the capacity of talk to achieve results by disciplined progression . . . The democratic ideal includes a decent regard for the opinions and sensibilities of our fellows. To the end of facilitating this process, we may introduce a new role—that of the clarifier—into public discussion and relegate lectures to some classrooms and oratory to the theater.

Maintaining Balances of Power

The fourth dimension of our democratic capacity explored by Lasswell is the concept of power and the way in which it is apportioned in our society. As Lasswell notes, "the power of individuals and groups is measured by the degree of their participation in the making of important decisions . . . and the importance of decisions is measured by their effect on the distribution of values." Further, he asserts, we have not distributed power equitably: "our own society has not yet worked out clear standards of power in relation to many zones of life, notably the market."

The exceedingly strong hand of money in both politics and governance today makes clear that the power imbalances observed by Lasswell in 1942 were but the beginning of a trend. In my observation, in the 68 years since Lasswell wrote his essay, one of the biggest sociostructural changes we have seen in the world has been the increasingly large and codified role of the corporate sector in governance. Ten years ago, the Institute for Policy Studies found that of the world's 100 largest economic entities, 51 were corporations and 49 were countries (Anderson and Cavanagh 2000). There can be little doubt that the balance has tipped even more toward corporations since then. In this environment, governments no longer have the actual authority, or even the level of clout necessary, to restrain corporate activities, to regulate how money moves around the world, and/or to solve some of the most significant issues facing individual countries, and facing us collectively. The January 2010 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court allowing corporations to spend as much money as they want on political campaigns (*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission,* 558 U.S. 50) is only the most recent example of the extent to which we have ceded power in our democracy to the private sector.

As government's oversight over corporate activity diminishes, so too does individual citizens' ability to influence that sector—with the notable exception of how we exercise our choices as consumers. Further, because many people spend the majority of their waking hours securing the basic resources they need to live, notions about exerting power over large-scale corporate interests understandably take a backseat. As a result, the various manifestations of economic injustice in our world—such as disproportionate unemployment in minority communities and poverty—end up dictating whether people collectively organize themselves.

However, when citizens do come together in large numbers, they have enormous potential to influence the way government establishes and maintains appropriate balances of power. Since the early 1980s, the innate human desire for freedom, dignity, and justice has shown itself to be resurging worldwide. Humans have been collectively moving to throw off oppressive and dictatorial governments, with bloodless revolutions in the Philippines, Estonia, and Czechoslovakia, to mention a few; the fall of the Berlin Wall; the collapse of the Soviet Union; and the end of apartheid in South Africa. We have lived through three decades in which the human spirit's demand for a larger democratic space has been successful—without war. Many would have said this was not possible, so there is reason to believe that we can, in fact, generate widespread, connected citizen participation that can help restore the imbalances in power we see around us.

Across four dimensions of democratic capacity—delivering information to citizens and building their knowledge; accurately capturing citizens' views; conducting democratic conversations; and maintaining a balance of power—our functioning shows insufficient growth and progress in the last 70 years. This reality, as illustrated through the lens of Lasswell's assessment of his own time, should inspire renewed efforts to address the challenges that our democracy faces.

A Path Forward

Our nation was founded on a vision of democracy that we continue to espouse: Americans value self-governance; we seek governing systems that are "of the people, by the people, and for the people." Within the context of this vision, it will be a complex and

multifaceted task to revive what has become a deeply challenged democracy. The degradation of public space in our country—epitomized by the manipulated town hall meetings held during the summer of 2009,—show us the extent of the challenge.

Lasswell says, "we must be skilful enough to perfect democracy." The skill set, it would seem, would begin with the ability to accurately pinpoint the critical areas in which reforms are necessary. We are in need of a broad-based, systemic democracy reform movement that will, for example: significantly improve our voter registration policies and practices; depoliticize redistricting; ensure publicly financed campaigns; reform congressional rules and procedures that can impede lawmaking, such as the filibuster (Klein 2009); and embed citizen voice in governance. A thorough review of each of these is well beyond the scope of this essay. I choose to focus here on the institutionalization of citizen voice in governance because it is a fundamental tenet of the founders' vision for our country. Further, this has been my own area of professional practice and experience for the last 15 years. And, it flows most directly from the issues raised by Lasswell and discussed here.

My conceptualization of the "institutionalization of citizen voice in governance" is that a range of participatory processes are fully embedded into the routine operations of our country; simply put, when our leaders need to know what large numbers of citizens *really* think about a critical issue, they have a reliable way to find out. We will know we have achieved this when we regularly see leaders making tough but necessary policy choices based on the authentic, collective voice of citizens.

One Promising Model of Practice

The large-scale citizen engagement efforts of my organization, America*Speaks,* work to achieve these goals. Our 21st Century Town Meeting is a public forum that integrates a range of information and communication technologies with small-group, face-to-face dialogue to engage large numbers of demographically representative people—up to 10,000 at a time—in deliberations about complex public policy issues. Through an innovative combination of keypad polling, groupware computers, large-screen projection, videoconferencing, and other technologies, these forums enable people to simultaneously participate in intimate discussions *and* contribute to the collective wisdom of a large group. Leaders who are central to the issue under discussion are engaged in the development and execution of the Meeting.

The 21st Century Town Meeting is particularly attentive to the importance of capturing a full set of data on the views of citizens and continually integrating this information into the discussion process. During the meeting, as participants engage in small, representatively diverse, facilitated discussions, networked laptop computers operated by volunteer note takers at each table serve as electronic flipcharts to record ideas. These ideas are then sent to a central "Theme Team" that identifies commonalities and presents them to the whole assembly for modification and voting. The back and forth between small- and large-scale dialogues occurs as often as needed to develop recommendations.

By convening thousands of people at a time, a 21st Century Town Meeting shines a very public spotlight on important concerns, and gives decision makers both the information and constituency they need to execute the public's will. The model is unique in the deliberative democracy field in the scale of engagement, the immediacy of its impact, the representativeness of participation, and the explicit link to decision makers and governance processes.

The 21st Century Town meeting is one viable mechanism among many for achieving an institutionalization of citizen voice in governance. And, more routine use of it and other methodologies would build on the important participatory mechanisms we already have in this country, such as mandated opportunities for public comment under the Administrative Procedure Act of 1946 (P.L. 79-404) and the Negotiated Rulemaking Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-320).

However, while these engagement methods and laws are important components, they do not—individually, or even taken together—create a deep institutionalization of citizen voice in our governance. To achieve that, four additional factors will be necessary: (1) wide acceptance of a set of common principles for citizen engagement; (2) the success of current efforts to further embed public participation in administrative practice; (3) a willingness to address some of the critical challenges facing the field today; and (4) a commitment to building the infrastructure necessary to support regular, small- and large -scale citizen involvement. A discussion of each follows.

Establishing Common Principles for Engagement

To help ensure that equity and effectiveness as new mechanisms for bringing citizen voice into governance are put into place, a set of agreed-upon principles for these activities will be important. There is no need to reinvent the wheel in this regard. Broad-membership democracy organizations both in this country and internationally—such as the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2001), the International Association for Public Participation (2010), and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (Leighninger 2009)—have developed and vetted principles that address issues such as establishing clear links to decision-making processes, including affected constituencies, giving voice to all participants, and providing the information needed for effective participation.

Building on Current Efforts in Public Administration

During the 2008 recent U.S. presidential election, candidates across the ideological spectrum talked about the need for Americans to once again own their government; they acknowledged the distance we had traveled from our founding philosophy (Reason Foundation 2007; Sciencedebate.org 2008; Stirland 2008a, 2008b). The consistent expression of this view felt like a palpable change in the national zeitgeist—a recognition that increasing angst and anger among the public had to have an institutional response. President Obama's inauguration brought a sense of hope in this regard—a belief in a renewed and authentic role for citizens in the governance of the country.

The challenge to the new administration was how to go about it—particularly in a time of war and economic crisis, when administrative and managerial changes would be quick to become secondary priorities. It was especially significant, therefore, that the first act of the new Obama administration was an executive memorandum that called for government to be not only transparent, but also participatory and collaborative. The memorandum tasked the Office of

Management and Budget with issuing an Open Government Directive that would operationalize these objectives across the federal government.

The moment the executive memorandum was announced, many organizations in the United States began to collaborate on a unified message to the administration about how to implement it. In the summer of 2008, four organizations—America*Speaks*, Demos, Everyday Democracy, and the Ash Institute at Harvard University—co-hosted such a discussion for leading thinkers and practitioners in electoral reform, deliberative democracy, and community development. The resulting *Agenda for Strengthening Our Nation's Democracy* (Comstock-Gay, Goldman, and Scully 2008) offered a series of innovative and specific recommendations in three areas:

- Establishing a White House Office of Civic Engagement and making an institutional commitment to greater participation
- Convening regular national discussions to provide the public with a greater voice in national policy making
- Implementing a unique set of policy reforms to increase participation in public life with a focus on the right to vote, elections financing, and measures to ensure higher-quality local and federal public participation

Achieving full institutionalization of citizen voice in governance will require addressing a series of issues that challenge the deliberative democracy field today. These include effectively using the Internet, achieving the scale necessary to maximize impact, engaging all citizens, and working across existing jurisdictional boundaries.

Following on this work, over the next six months, America*Speaks* twice brought together senior federal agency leaders, managers, and staff in forums aimed at providing the White House with the distilled wisdom of those who had been doing public participation work for decades.

After nearly a year of stakeholder and public input, on December 8, 2009, the Obama administration issued the Open Government Directive, which requires that executive departments and agencies take specific actions to implement the principles of transparency, participation, and collaboration that were initially set forth (Orszag 2009). The impact of this effort on the functioning of the U.S. government, and on the role of citizen voice in that government, should be demonstrable across a number of dimensions.

Greater access to government data. The Obama administration has undertaken significant efforts to "democratize" government data by providing more—or improving existing—access points (e.g., data.gov, USAspending.gov, individual agencies' Open Government webpages); committing to the publication of high-value data sets by all government agencies; and providing new participation platforms and simplifying electronic access to government services, among other initiatives (Huang 2010).

Agency-level participation opportunities. Public participation in governance in the United States has had a limited federal-level framework on which to rely. The new open government policies require every federal agency to create its own strategic plan for democratic participation, with public participation key to the development of these plans.

Removal of structural barriers to participation. A high-level group will be tasked with solving framework and legal problems that federal managers commonly experience as they do participation work. For example, while the Federal Advisory Committee Act was established, in part, to make transparent the influence of special interest groups, compliance with the letter of the act has had some "chilling effects" on public involvement (Long and Beierle 1999).

Addressing Key Challenges in the Field

Achieving full institutionalization of citizen voice in governance will require addressing a series of issues that challenge the deliberative democracy field today. These include effectively using the Internet, achieving the scale necessary to maximize impact, engaging all citizens, and working across existing jurisdictional boundaries. Each of these is discussed here.

Use of the Internet. Given its extraordinary reach, it is natural to assume that the Internet is key to engaging large numbers of citizens in governance. Practitioner experience strongly suggests, however, that without yet to be discovered refinements, current Internet-based engagement tools tend to lose individual and collective citizen voice in a "mass debate" (OECD 2003). Over the next decade, it will be essential to build Internet platforms that can support true democratic deliberation.

As we do this, it will be equally important to maintain our commitment to face-to-face engagement. While our founders recognized a natural and fundamental distrust between citizens and institutions, it is paradoxically also true that a well-functioning democracy requires significant trust between people, as well as between people, their leaders, and institutions. This trust is often most easily built, in my experience, through direct, one-on-one contact. Consequently, going forward, the democracy community should seek to maintain a judicious balance between online and face-to-face engagement methods. As Lasswell said, "so many decisions are to be made in a complex civilization that we must assume the desirability of providing for many different patterns of participation."

Achieving scale. While there are times when small-scale participatory efforts are necessary and sufficient, large-scale efforts tend to have the greatest potential for impact. For example, world leaders who gathered at the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen were respectful of the comments they received from 8,000 citizens. But individual countries also chose to handle the information in their own ways, creating, in essence, 40 different country-level conversations. If, instead, democracy practitioners worldwide had collaborated to implement a truly global dialogue before the conference—a conversation among 8 million people, as opposed to 8,000—the collective decisions of the world's citizenry likely would have captured the full attention of the media and had far greater potential to move leaders across their cultural and political divides. This level of citizen engagement could have created, for instance, enough pressure to pass a cap and trade bill in the United States; it could have pushed leaders from China, India, Brazil,

and South Africa toward a more meaningful and binding treaty to enforce the emissions accord that President Obama negotiated with them (Broder 2009).

As a democratic community, we must keep pushing the envelope on scale. We need to advocate for ever-larger numbers of people being given regular opportunities, through multiple methods and modes, to express their collective voice.

Engaging all citizens. In my observation, an emerging trend of concern in the deliberative democracy field is that governments are increasingly limiting the focus of their engagement efforts to stakeholders (i.e., individuals openly aligned with a particular organization, agenda, or view). While advocacy by nongovernmental organizations and other stakeholders has an important role, new and creative solutions to the most challenging issues of the day can, and should, also come from those not already identified with a specific outcome. By engaging large numbers of general interest citizens—and distilling their collective will—leaders have the support they need to take actions that might be perceived as politically risky. Consequently, although nonaligned citizens can be a hard group to reach, it is critical that we do so. And it is especially important to engage those subgroups that have been marginalized for historical, cultural, or economic reasons. In a democracy, all voices must be heard.

Crossing jurisdictional boundaries. In my experience, government leaders tend to conceptualize problems and solutions along traditional jurisdictional lines: federal, state, regional, or local. Yet on most major issues that we face—health care, climate change, budget priorities—significant interdependencies exist between and among the various levels of government. Democracy practitioners can improve the utility of information that flows from citizen deliberations to decision makers if we ask questions about, and analyze, cross-jurisdictional issues and effects. If national or state-level action is the goal, what will be the differential impact on local jurisdictions? If the effort is local, what aspects of the national framework will also need to be changed to accomplish citizens' goals? Critical questions such as these are not asked often enough, and even more seldom are they answered.

Building the Necessary Infrastructure for Deliberation

As noted earlier, the field of practice surrounding democratic deliberation is both broad and deep. A range of methodologies have been, and are being, used by localities, states, regions, and even the federal government on particular issues at particular moments. For example, in 2009, Harrisonburg, Virginia mayor Kai Degner used Open Spaces for a 200-person summit on the environment and renewable resources (Jones 2009). Also in 2009, Deliberative Polling was used in Michigan to engage more than 300 residents in discussions about the state's economy and budget choices (Center for Deliberative Democracy 2010). Leaders across sectors in Indiana are currently bringing large numbers of citizens together in a series of discussions aimed at establishing a long-term vision for a 10-county region (Northeast Indiana Fund 2010). And in June 2010, America*Speaks* developed and facilitated a 3,500-person, 19-city National Discussion on our Federal Budget using the 21st Century Town Meeting methodology. Each application of a deliberative method helps individual groups refine and improve their work, demonstrates impact, and suggests potential future uses.

In the end, however, a piecemeal approach such as this will not result in the broad-based and lasting changes to democratic practice that are necessary to revitalize our democracy. This is true for two reasons: (1) it will not embed an expectation of participation in large numbers of citizens or decision makers; and (2) it requires that the infrastructure and systems necessary to undertake citizen deliberations be recreated over and over again, at significant cost. For example, in America*Speaks*' practice, for each new deliberation that we produce, we generally must develop the physical space needed to accommodate large numbers of people coming together; bring in the technology that can capture, distill, and disseminate their views; and pay local organizations to temporarily shift their work to citizen outreach so that we can ensure representativeness in the process. Democracy practitioners around the country build such temporary deliberative infrastructures over and over again, scraping each time for philanthropic or government dollars to get the work done.

As a leading deliberative democracy practitioner for the last 15 years, I have often reflected on what it would actually take for people, communities, and a country to operate democratically on a *consistent* basis. Often, the answer to this question seems to focus on how to get people to behave differently (i.e., to vote, join a local organization, or participate in a deliberation). Equally important, however, is putting in place the systems and structures that will support new behaviors and expectations. To achieve a deep change in our democratic practice—one in which millions of Americans regularly discuss and inform key policy decisions—an embedded infrastructure, comprising seven key elements, will be necessary. These elements are: a mandatory legislative framework, designated physical spaces, specific technological, human and organizational capacity, a trustworthy media, and a recommitment to civic education. Each is discussed briefly here.

A mandatory legislative framework. To truly embed national discussions in governance such that they are a routine part of our democratic practice, large-scale citizen engagement—and the activities necessary to support it—must be legislatively mandated. Public participation laws, required executive sponsorship of (and response to) citizen deliberations, and mandatory congressional hearings on the results of deliberations would be initial elements of such a mandatory framework (Comstock-Gay, Goldman, and Scully 2008).

Codifying such practices would not be unprecedented. For example, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service was established in 1947 to help federal, state, and local government agencies across the country (and internationally) resolve disputes, design and build capacity for conflict management, and strengthen interagency and public–private cooperation. Today, the service has field offices in more than 50 cities throughout the United States. A federal "Office of Public Participation," with local capacity across the country, would be analogous.

Designated physical space. As noted earlier, large-scale democratic processes require equipped public spaces in which citizens from diverse backgrounds feel welcome and safe to deliberate on challenging issues. In my experience, in many U.S. communities, if a space like this exists, the business model governing its use tends to identify it as a profit center, not as a public asset. This has not always been the

case. In the 1960s and 1970s, convention center space was routinely made accessible to mayors and other decision makers for important municipal gatherings. As a graduate student in Cleveland, Ohio, in the aftermath of the rioting that followed Martin Luther King's assassination, I participated in large community meetings organized by Mayor Carl Stokes that were held, at no charge, at the Cleveland Convention Center.

Most major cities have a large space of one kind or another; in other localities, public libraries and universities may have the requisite facilities. We should return to a model in which these entities presume some level of public use of their spaces. On a limited basis, this should not create undue economic hardship for the owners, and it could significantly increase our capacity to foster democratic participation across the county.

Technological infrastructure. To participate in democracy, citizens need rapid and reliable access to accurate and neutral information about pressing issues. As noted earlier, because much of the technological infrastructure in this country is governed by competition, we have enormous and persistent gaps in access. In fact, the United States is the only industrialized nation in the world without a national Internet access policy (Ahmed 2009), and the OECD ranks the United States fifteenth among 31 nations in broadband penetration rates (OECD 2009). Exacerbating this problem are recent budget cuts to public library systems across the country (ALA 2010; Damron 2010; Humphrey 2010; Linehan 2010; Linthicum 2010). Reduced hours, weekend closures, and other cutbacks in services mean that one of our primary public access points for Internet use is diminished.

Human infrastructure. Informed, high-quality democratic dialogue requires strong facilitation. Such facilitation makes it possible for people of diverse opinions to air their differences and conflicts—while maintaining a level of civility and respect—and come to shared views. This is an area in which there is a wealth of existing resources. To cite just a few examples: America*Speaks* has a national network of more than 5,000 trained facilitators; the International Association for Public Participation has more than 1,000; Everyday Democracy regularly provides training and technical assistance to communities across the country needing facilitators for citizen engagement. Despite these resources, substantial proliferation of deliberation opportunities will necessitate development of an even larger "bank" of facilitators.

Organizational infrastructure. Successful democracy practice hinges on mediating organizations and structures that have the public's trust and confidence. Organizations affiliated with a particular agenda or candidacy are not well suited, in my view, to host a neutral discussion about an issue. In addition to advocacy nongovernmental organizations, we need a strong network of locally based organizations whose job it is to enhance citizen voice in democracy, to bring a representative group of nonaligned citizens to the table, to provide reliable information about a critical issue, and to help foster discussion that discovers shared views.

In some communities, the organizational infrastructure necessary to support such an undertaking already exists or is emerging. A recent example from America*Speaks*' work in Columbia, South Carolina: in preparation for a large-scale citizen deliberation, the Central Carolina Communities Foundation's board of directors was able to quickly tap into more than 30 organizations whose combined networks reached into every subpopulation of the community. Networking capacity like this is vital.

Trustworthy media. The media has a key role to play in providing the neutral, trustworthy information people need to act democratically. Unfortunately, our media remains largely, ideologically driven and divided despite repeated national-level efforts over the years to address this problem. To be a core participant in our democracy, the media must embrace its role as neutral public educator.

Civic education. Americans' knowledge of basic civics is notoriously low (Lane 2008). This not only reflects a weak national commitment to a critical aspect of our education system, but also is likely responsible, in part, for our low rates of voter turnout. In the absence of strong civic education, democracy advocates expend much time and energy "pushing" people to get engaged and become good citizens. In my view, rather than building demand, these advocates should be employed at the other end: delivering opportunities for the widespread and large-scale deliberations that will help renew our democracy.

Building the Will

Our founding fathers and founding documents imagined a system of self-governance with more direct links between people and decision makers than had ever been attempted. This aspiration has since occupied a near mythic place in our imaginations—we rely on it to describe our sense of what is right and fair, and to organize our work, our play, and our family lives. And yet, there has also been a persistent gap between these aspirations and the actuality of our democracy. Our repeated disenfranchisement of different groups of citizens over the course of our history has been but one manifestation of this gap. Lasswell describes it as the difference between "symbol and practice":

> Official records may show whether elections are held at the time prescribed in the Constitution, and . . . report the number of eligible voters who go to the polls. But even if these statements are accepted at face value, they do not reveal the state of intimidation or the degree of public confidence in the genuineness of democratic processes.

Despite some progress between 1942 and 2010 (perhaps most notably, the accomplishments of the civil rights movement), Lasswell's point remains far too legitimate today. We were excited, as a nation, about increases in voter participation in 2008, and yet 39 percent of eligible citizens did not register or vote in that election (McDonald 2010). Further, we lag behind many nations in our efforts to resolve the gap between our aspirational and actual democracy. While America has been a hotbed of innovation in developing methods and processes for increasing citizen participation, the

While America has been a hotbed of innovation in developing methods and processes for increasing citizen participation, the majority of participatory democracy work in this country is done by nongovernmental organizations pushing from the outside.

majority of participatory democracy work in this country is done by nongovernmental organizations pushing from the outside. By contrast, governments around the world are making substantial commitments to ensuring that citizen voices are part of governance processes. For example, in Canada, consulting with citizens has become an expectation across all federal departments, as well as part of the Management Accountability Framework. The "Citizen-Focused Service Delivery" mandate stipulates that policies and programs must be developed from the "outside in," and partnerships are encouraged and effectively managed (Moreland 2010). In another example, over the last decade, the European Union has funded more than 35 eParticipation research projects with a total budget of over 120 million euros (Panopoulou, Tambouris, and Tarabanis 2009).

It is happening all around us, and we, too, know what to do. But we must muster the will to make it happen. The visible dysfunction in American democracy today may be what finally creates the necessary momentum. It feels as though almost daily, we are inundated with notions like this:

> What really defines our political era . . . is not the polarization of Americans but the polarization of American government. In the country at large, disputes are real but manageable. But in Washington, crossing party lines . . . has become excruciatingly rare. . . . 62% of Americans say most members of Congress do not deserve re-election, up 10 points from 2006. Public skepticism about the Federal Government and its ability to solve problems . . . is greater today than it has been in at least a decade and a half. (Beinart 2010)

Can this really be our American democracy? A generation from now, when Lasswell's article is reviewed again, will this still be the way we characterize who we are as a nation? It is time for a broad-based democracy movement to make itself heard.

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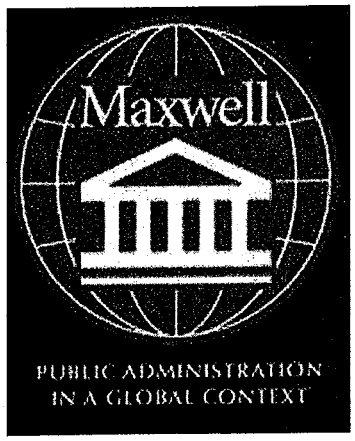
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