

AN AGENDA FOR

STRENGTHENING OUR NATION'S DEMOCRACY

Conference Report & Policy Recommendations



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What follows is a practical agenda for addressing the increasing loss of peoples' trust in—and sense of connection to—our systems of politics and governance.

In July 2008, 49 advocates, scholars, and thinkers met in Washington, D.C. and came to agreement on the outlines of a broad agenda for democracy reform. In the weeks that followed, the participants broke into workgroups and developed the recommendations outlined in this document.

Our ideas rest on a set of shared convictions about what democracy ought to mean. We envision an America that encourages the maximum levels of voter turnout, practices people-centered governance, and actively seeks and genuinely values everyone's participation. To this end, we must build an infrastructure of participation and governance that welcomes everyone, while also taking steps to ensure that the voices of the powerful are not unduly elevated.

We take up this mission not simply out of principle, but because we are convinced that a more inclusive political process will generate better policies, develop the public knowledge and will to carry them out, and lead not only to a more just society, but to a virtuous cycle of economic, social, and political progress.

We have three sets of recommendations.

A Champion for Expanding Civic Engagement: A “White House Office of Civic Engagement” and More

One of the most important things the next President can do to foster greater civic and electoral participation at the federal level is to create a White-House level Office on Civic Engagement. This office would serve as a focal point of government-wide commitment and provide leadership to a wide range of federal agencies. Related steps the administration should take include:

- » Create an interagency network to provide agencies and staff with capacity-building services such as technical support and training in how to engage citizens in policy making.
- » Charge Federal agencies to coordinate with each other and with state and local decision makers on behalf of critical local and regional goals.
- » Take inventory of existing public engagement practices, in order to assess what works and what's needed.
- » Direct new political appointees to become familiar with the Administration's policy in regard to the importance of civic participation, and with their respective agencies' civic engagement activities.
- » Provide leadership on an aggressive electoral reform agenda.



National Discussions: Millions of Voices at the Table

The next President should signal a new kind of governance by calling on the American people to take part in a series of national discussions, each engaging one million Americans or more, on the issues of highest public concern, such as the economy, health care, foreign policy, energy and climate change. The national discussions will provide policy makers with an independent, non-partisan means of assessing the informed opinions and collective priorities of the American people and forge a stronger link between Americans and their government.

This initiative could be overseen by a non-partisan working group of citizens appointed by the President and the majority and minority leadership of the House and Senate. The new White House Office of Civic Engagement should manage the national discussion and ensure a strong link to the President and Federal agencies.

A Legislative Agenda for Democratic Reform

The next President should work with Congress to pass an aggressive set of policy reforms to enhance democratic participation—electoral and otherwise.

In the **electoral arena** these reforms should include:

- » Committing to universal voter registration for all eligible Americans, beginning with Election Day Registration for all Americans, and full implementation of the National Voter Registration Act.
- » Passing meaningful public financing of Congressional elections, and restoring meaningful public financing of Presidential elections.
- » Adopting a broad set of voter-convenience measures such as early voting and vote by mail.
- » Developing national standards for election administration.
- » Supporting ranked-choice ballots and instant-runoff elections as another way to protect voters from unrepresentative outcomes and ensure a fair reflection of voter sentiment.

In the **broader democratic engagement arena**, these reforms should include:

- » Passing the Public Engagement Act, to create constructive incentives and requirements for federal agencies to gain full benefit from public engagement activities, consultation and collaborative processes.
- » Developing model legislation, new measurement tools and technical assistance programs for states and local governments, to encourage and support their use of participatory practices.

Finally, Congress needs to adopt a series of policy reforms to encourage and support new residents of America as they enter democratic life. We offer a series of recommendations to encourage greater access to naturalization and voter registration, and call for adequate funding for the 2010 Census to make sure that new residents are counted and their voices are heard in policymaking and governance.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The year 2008 has witnessed a renewed excitement about our democracy. Candidates on all sides have inspired voters across the country. Millions of new voters have registered, including vast numbers of young people who are engaging in electoral politics for their first time. These are positive signs that our democracy is dynamic and evolving.

Yet at the same time, American democracy has fallen on hard times. In one public opinion survey after another, Americans express feelings of profound disconnection from the officials and institutions of national government. Only 24 percent of Americans now expect Washington to “do what is right” most of the time.¹ Only 34 percent believe that government generally “cares about what people like me think.”² Regardless of where people lean on this or that particular issue, most Americans are dismayed by the heightened partisanship that so often seems to block all possibility of agreement or action. And the recent economic crisis has bred a new round of cynicism.

Policymakers, for their part, find it increasingly difficult to govern. They describe a political process defined by shallow media coverage, narrow-minded lobbying, and a continual need for campaign funds. Special-interest campaigns and polls have become substitutes—very poor substitutes—for robust electoral participation, thoughtful deliberation and citizen input. In this poisoned environment, it is all but impossible for elected leaders to find common ground and serve the public interest.

There are plenty of reasons for the breakdown of trust and civic engagement, and loss of engagement in our political system that we have seen in recent decades. But there is also very good reason to believe that it can be reversed. Building on the recent surge in political engagement, the time has come—and the means are at hand—to take America’s ailing democracy in our hands and enable citizens to breathe life back into it.

Vision of a New Democracy

In July 2008, 49 advocates, scholars, and thinkers met in Washington, D.C. to consider these issues. Over two days of stimulating discussion and debate, we came to agreement on the outlines of a broad agenda for democracy reform.³ Our specific proposals, some focused on the election process, others on a broader concept of deliberative democracy and new forms of community-building, are spelled out in the subsequent sections of this report - our blueprint for a stronger democracy.

Our policy ideas rest on a set of shared convictions about what democracy ought to mean. It should not be a battle of contending factions and their moneyed backers; the public should not be satisfied to see one “side” get its way. All Americans, we believe, should expect to benefit from the exercise of their political rights; indeed, that expectation creates the common ground on which democracy is built. Expert knowledge, by the same token, cannot be enough to meet our challenges. We need to seek out everyone’s vote, voice and participation.



We must eliminate barriers to voting, the most basic form of political participation. We must build an infrastructure of participation and governance that provides a voice for everyone in the policy making process. But we will have to do more than just invite all people to take part. True democracy requires steps to ensure that the voices of the powerful are not unduly elevated. Public, open and participatory processes are essential. We envision an America that encourages the maximum levels of voter turnout, practices people-centered governance, and actively seeks and genuinely values everyone's participation. From increased levels of voting to new forms of public deliberation and collaborative decision-making and problem-solving—this is the America we seek.

As our systems of governance embrace these practices and principles, we foresee higher and higher levels of engagement:

- » The proportion of people voting in America will increase and the electorate will be a diverse and accurate representation of our society as a whole.
- » Public service, whether elected, appointed or voluntary, will be open to all Americans and will create a political system that is a diverse and accurate representation of our whole society.
- » We will change the way Americans view their government, and the way government views the people. No longer will ordinary people be merely consumers of government services. We will be active partners with government and with each other.
- » The routines of our public life will change. It will be a regular occurrence for officials and the public to listen to each other, and for citizens to find ways to work together.
- » The quality of our lives will be improved, as the people know their voices are heard, and as the partisan fragmentation of society lessens.
- » This newly empowered definition of what it means to “have a voice” will make it more likely that many people, of all backgrounds, will use their voices and energies to make a tangible difference.

We take up this mission not simply out of principle, but in the faith that when we all have meaningful ways to be informed, engaged, and heard - when all our voices are valued - neighborhoods and communities will be stronger, and our government will make better decisions. A more inclusive political process, we are convinced, will generate better policies and lead to a virtuous cycle of economic, social, and political progress.

A CHAMPION FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: A WHITE HOUSE OFFICE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND MORE

The Federal government has no government-wide commitment to the goal of greater civic participation. Nor does any government-wide agency have the responsibility for serving as a steward and champion of the quality and reach of our democracy—either at the voting booth or in our community life. Existing activities are largely confined to a small range of Federal agencies, and best practices are not readily shared across agencies and programs. Although many statutes explicitly call for civic engagement, some administrative legislation, such as the Federal Advisory Committee Act, actually make civic engagement more difficult. Within certain agencies, there is bureaucratic and political resistance to greater involvement because it is perceived as impeding the discretionary actions of agency leaders.

There is nothing new about the idea of Federal government action to support civic engagement.⁴ For over 40 years, individual Federal agencies have been engaged in efforts to catalyze and, in some cases, mandate engagement, both in policymaking and implementation, at the national, state, and local levels. Among the agencies that have recently engaged in some of the most innovative work are the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Maternal and Child Health Services unit of the Department of Human Services, and the Department of Transportation.

Unfortunately, support for these efforts has been fitful, partly because the responsibility has fallen to individual administrators who, in some cases, have questioned either the readiness and interest of citizens and other key civic partners, or the value of civic engagement itself. Some agencies, moreover, have not been given the resources for more than a symbolic effort.

Now is the time to broaden and deepen this commitment. Federal agencies and officials should reach out to citizens and include them in policy making, strategy development, and service delivery. This is not only important to the health of our democracy; it strengthens our country's capacity to solve important public problems. Greater engagement and inclusion will improve decisions, reduce the risk of political gridlock on difficult questions, and increase the legitimacy of government action.

Elements of a Federal Commitment To Civic Engagement and Democratic Participation

To foster greater civic participation at the Federal level, the next President should carry out the following initiatives:

1. CREATE A WHITE HOUSE-LEVEL OFFICE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

Such an office could serve as a focal point of government-wide commitment and provide leadership to a wide range of Federal agencies. The existing Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives could be a useful model. Potentially, we envision the new White House Office:



- » Serving as a coordinator and champion for a network of agencies that will foster civic participation in their agencies' policy making and programs;
- » Helping implement existing civic participation laws and requirements;
- » Identifying existing barriers within the Federal government to advancing civic participation and developing strategies to overcome these barriers (e.g., statutory, regulatory, and bureaucratic culture);
- » Fostering improved civic engagement by Federal agencies by identifying best practices, offering trainings, building agency capacities, and linking to other related networks among Federal agencies, like the networks for alternative dispute resolution and customer service measurement;
- » Leading or piloting government-wide, innovative approaches to engaging the public, like national dialogues and online input on agency rule making;
- » Encouraging civic engagement efforts by local, state and regional governments through best practices, trainings and mechanisms for improved communication and collaboration;
- » Including an external advisory council and liaisons within relevant agencies that will champion civic engagement in the Federal government;
- » Acting as a focal point for a new Federal commitment to ensuring the right of every American to vote and participate in the electoral process.
- » Championing a Public Engagement Act, described in the policy section below.

The White House Office could also be a leader in the following:

2. BUILD AN INTERAGENCY NETWORK.

Agencies should create departmental centers of citizen engagement and designate staff to serve in the network (e.g., beginning with the existing network of career officials engaged in public participation programs and affiliating as appropriate with the present Alternative Dispute Resolution network). The network would provide agencies and staff with capacity-building services such as technical support and training in how to engage citizens in policy making. It would share best practices as well as monitor the government-wide public participation efforts (including reporting and feedback mechanisms).

3. CHARGE FEDERAL AGENCIES TO COORDINATE WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH STATE AND LOCAL DECISION MAKERS ON BEHALF OF CRITICAL LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOALS.

Until the early 1980s, the Federal government maintained regional councils to coordinate among agencies and with state and local decision makers. At present, no mechanism exists to compel agencies to systematically collaborate with state and local agencies on cross-cutting issues such as reducing greenhouse gases, youth

development, or reducing concentrated multi-generational poverty. A pilot effort that begins with a small number of agencies could generate vital learning and the opportunity to phase in more comprehensive coordination over time. An Executive Order could establish and refine the Federal Regional Council model to better foster coordinated place-based strategies.

4. TAKE INVENTORY OF EXISTING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES, IN ORDER TO ASSESS WHAT WORKS AND WHAT'S NEEDED.

The last such scan was done thirty years ago, and was not sustained. No current record exists of the full range of engagement practices employed by the Federal government. This complicates the effort to identify the most promising opportunities to strengthen public engagement and cross-agency coordination, and retards the growth of a community of practice around public engagement strategies. Such an analysis could be achieved through a directive memo, perhaps from OMB, with the support of the CIO Council, the National Academy of Public Administration, and the General Services Administration.

5. DEVELOP EXPECTATIONS FOR NEW POLITICAL APPOINTEES.

The President should direct that, in the orientation process, new political appointees become familiar with Administration's policy in regard to the importance of civic participation, and with their respective agencies activities, enabling them to reinforce the President's level of commitment. The orientation should provide resources and ways for individual officials to take personal action to promote effective civic engagement.



CONVENING NATIONAL DISCUSSIONS: MILLIONS OF VOICES AT THE TABLE

A healthy democracy needs the capacity to involve its citizens in key decisions. Government cannot be left to leaders, experts, and pundits with the public only weighing in on election day. People from all walks of life should be encouraged to wrestle with tough questions, seek common ground, and develop and articulate their views. Policymakers should see themselves as part of this larger process, not as a world unto themselves.

The next President should call for regular national discussions of one million Americans or more on the issues of highest public concern, like foreign policy, energy, taxes, health care, and jobs. Every citizen should have a seat at the table. National Discussions could be one of the signature initiatives of a new civic engagement agenda that signals a new way of governing. We see them as a way to:

- » Provide policy makers with an independent, non-partisan means of assessing the informed opinions and collective priorities of the American people
- » Help public officials - and the nation - get past instinctive (and often adversarial) positions on difficult questions
- » Dilute the influence of special interests and build political will for policymakers to act in the common good
- » Stimulate local and regional action on national problems by public agencies, private businesses, nonprofits and citizens themselves
- » Forge a stronger link between Americans and their government, while providing policy makers with positions that command wide public support

More than 80 percent of the respondents in a recent survey expressed support for the idea of organized national discussions on critical issues. The sentiment was bipartisan: 60 percent of Republicans and 70 percent of Democrats described themselves as “strongly” in favor of the idea.⁵

Millions of Voices

National discussions will use a variety of methods to ensure that more than one million Americans can take part in a meaningful way. Some people will weigh in by participating in massive national town meetings that link gatherings around the country together by satellite, so that Americans in Buffalo can speak with Americans in San Jose, Boise, Birmingham and other communities around the nation.

Others will host their own conversations in their homes, places of work or community centers. In small groups, they will wrestle with the challenges facing our nation and then submit their ideas over the Internet. Still others who cannot attend the national discussion in person will join the process online, where they will work with a small group in a virtual discussion space before registering their priorities.

Each National Discussion will engage Americans from every walk of life and every corner of the nation. By providing so many people with a meaningful voice, we can help restore public trust in our governing institutions and energize the civic spirit of America.

Making it Happen

Taking public deliberation to a national scale will not be easy. While a broad array of non-governmental organizations can facilitate the process, the Federal government must play a pivotal role. The most realistic way to begin, we believe, is through executive sponsorship. We envision the President taking the first step by identifying an issue of high concern and calling on the American people to take part in a national conversation in order to form and communicate a set of conclusions.

This initiative could be overseen by a non-partisan working group of citizens appointed by the President and the majority and minority leadership of the House and Senate. The working group could be modeled after the Citizens Health Care Working Group, created by the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003. The new White House Office of Citizen Engagement should manage the national discussion and ensure a strong link to the President and Federal agencies.

The following elements are crucial to the credibility and utility of a National Discussion:

- » **Scale and diversity.** A diverse group of more than one million Americans, reflecting the rich diversity of the nation, must be recruited for each national discussion.
- » **Balance and context.** Participants should receive balanced, accessible educational materials to ensure that everyone begins with adequate context to come to informed judgments.
- » **High-quality deliberation.** A national network of skilled, neutral facilitators should support high-quality deliberation among participants.
- » **Report and feedback.** Following the national discussion, a summary of the considered views and priorities of the participants should be conveyed to Congress and the President.
- » **Congress and the President should provide regular information** about their response to the public's input..
- » **Local and Regional Action.** Recognizing that sustainable solutions to our nation's problems require action by the public and private sectors, as well as by local, state and Federal policy makers, the national discussions should be designed to identify actions that can be taken by multiple sectors and at every level of government. Where possible, discussions should be designed to encourage citizens to take action, and for communities to build local and regional capacity for continued public engagement.
- » **Link to Policy-Making.** After delivery of the report, the committees of jurisdiction in the House and Senate should be required to hold hearings, and the President should be required to issue a written response.

Once we have demonstrated the possibility of conducting meaningful National Discussions, the long-term challenge will be to develop a national infrastructure that can support people coming together to deliberate about policy issues on a regular basis. With such an infrastructure in place, National Discussions could be quickly convened when pressing issues arise. A National Discussion of terrorism and foreign policy might have occurred, for example, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks.

While it may be some time before we have the capacity to support regular deliberations of this kind, even a single National Discussion would do much to demonstrate the value and efficacy of the idea and to set the stage for future discussions.

A LEGISLATIVE AGENDA FOR DEMOCRATIC REFORM

In addition to executive branch initiatives, a stronger democracy will require real leadership from Congress. What follows are a series of policy reforms that will be required to improve the ability of citizens to participate in elections and to play an active role in our communities and policy making processes. Together, these constitute a legislative agenda with enormous promise.

Implement Electoral Reform

The integrity of our electoral system is a fundamental pillar of democracy. We must guarantee the reliability of the primary mechanism through which citizens determine their leaders. The President and Congress should take the following steps.

- » Move toward universal voter registration for all eligible Americans. To help get there, we should, first, adopt Election Day Registration for all Federal elections; and, second, ensure that the Department of Justice fully enforces the National Voter Registration Act, notably Section 7, which mandates voter registration through public assistance agencies.
- » Protect our electoral system from the distorting effects of money and empower ordinary citizens within the political process, through public financing of Congressional as well as Presidential elections. The Durbin/Spector bill is the model to follow for Congressional elections, while the Feingold/Collins bill goes in the right direction for Presidential candidates. Both systems amplify the power of small donations and increase the ability of voters to hold their elected officials accountable.
- » Make elections easier through broad adoption of voter-convenience measures such as early voting and vote by mail.
- » Develop national standards for election administration, so that voters anywhere in the country have a similarly simple experience, with a similarly high degree of confidence that their votes will be counted fairly and accurately. This will require funding. The process could be overseen by the White House Office of Civic Engagement.
- » Support ranked-choice ballots and instant-runoff elections as another way to protect voters from unrepresentative outcomes and ensure a fair reflection of voter sentiment. This is a reform favored by both of the 2008 Presidential candidates.

These policy reforms have been recommended and drafted by a variety of election reform organizations. Details about them can be found in the resources section at the end of the document.

Increase Democratic Participation

There are a number of policies beyond election reform that will both expand democratic participation, and ensure that a broad diversity of voices are heard.

PASS A “PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACT.”

The Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA), while created as a safeguard against corruption, has come to pose major bureaucratic barriers and imposes perverse incentives on agency coordinators. New legislation or executive guidance should be issued to create constructive incentives and requirements, allowing Federal employees to take real advantage of public consultation. FACA reform needs to involve Congressional committees (Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee, House Oversight and Government Reform Committee), OMB, and the GSA, which controls the FACA disclosure database. A new public participation law should: a) provide broad authority for agencies to use a variety of models for civic engagement, including innovations in public deliberation, online public involvement, and dialogue; b) require that agencies appoint a collaborative governance specialist to build expertise and capacity and provide training; and c) authorize networks of public, private, and nonprofit stakeholders to collaborate and provide for their accountability and transparency through civic engagement.

This legal framework would be one of the building blocks of a robust infrastructure—mechanisms, processes and governing structures that place citizens in a meaningful and on-going role in policy development in the federal government.

ENABLE STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO IMPROVE THEIR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES THROUGH MODEL LEGISLATION, NEW MEASUREMENT TOOLS AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE.

The Federal Government sometimes supplies viable models of legislation to state and local governments, which often lack the capacity to develop their own carefully researched models. A Federal directive memo could call for a scan of current practices followed by the development of model legislation, comparable to a Public Engagement Act for Federal agencies.

Welcome New Residents Into Democratic Life

As the country welcomes more and more people from other countries, and with other experiences, we want to make sure we are welcoming them into full participation in our democratic processes. For new citizens, and for residents on their way to full integration, we need to open the doors to American democracy. Among our recommendations to Congress and the President:

- » Authorize voter registration to take place in conjunction with naturalization ceremonies and authorize the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service to provide information on voter registration to newly naturalized citizens.
- » Endorse Clinton-Honda civic integration bill, enlist supporters for this and other integration, literacy, and naturalization initiatives pending or in development in Congress.
- » Create a citizenship foundation to facilitate private gifts and donations to contribute to the work of the Office of Citizenship.

- » Establish a program that provides Federal funding for naturalization promotion, education, and assistance by community organizations with experience and expertise in working with newcomers. Services that could be funded include outreach and education activities, legal services and application assistance.
- » Adequately fund the 2010 Census to make sure that new residents are counted and their voices are heard in policymaking. This can be achieved through appropriation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF KEY RESOURCES

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- » European Commission, “Your Voice” initiative: http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/index_en.htm
- » European Commission’s Interactive Policymaking Initiative: http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/ipm/index_en.htm
- » UK 2007 Review of the Government’s Consultation Policy: http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/newsroom/news_releases/2007/070614_consultation.aspx
- » White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives:
 - General: www.fbc.gov
 - Executive Orders: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbc/executive-orders.html>
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ENDNOTES

1. CBS News/NYT Poll, July 9-17, 2007.
2. March 2007 poll by The Pew Charitable Trusts.
3. A participant list is attached. Notwithstanding the broad agreement on the recommendations that follow, not all participants are able to endorse formally the entire package, because of organizational reasons.
4. A number of other countries provide strong institutional commitments to civic participation. The European Union invests nearly €100 million a year on such activities. The United Kingdom has strong citizen-participation requirements when the government develops new policies. Canada has a robust framework for engaging its citizens in government.
5. “2008 Civic Health Index: Beyond the Vote,” National Conference on Citizenship, p.12, <http://www.ncoc.net/pdf/civichealth2008-web.pdf>.

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