



January-February 2009 Print Issue
December 12, 2008 Web

REVITALIZING DEMOCRACY; More Than the Vote

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Democracy, it has been said, is something a nation does rather than something it has. If that's true, Americans did a remarkable job of democracy this year. More than 130 million Americans voted, more than have ever done so in our nation's history. More Americans made contributions to campaigns than have ever done so before--over 3 million of them to the [Obama campaign](#) alone. The numbers of volunteers for the many campaigns are hard to count. But there's no doubt that the candidates--Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Ron Paul, Mike Huckabee, and even vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin--inspired thousands to get involved.

The question is, what next? It will be tempting to pat ourselves on the back for being good citizens and to turn our attention quickly away from the electoral process toward the pressing questions of the economic crisis, health care, and national security. But for people who care about the health of our democracy, this is a moment to seize and to understand. Without a sustained effort, 2008 could easily be a onetime miracle. This year's unprecedented turnout and extraordinary excitement were the result of exceptional circumstances. One (the first African American nominee of a major party) is unrepeatable. Another (a record-breaking level of public disapproval

for the direction the country is heading) we hope won't be repeated. A third (the insistence of both the electorate and the media that the campaign stay focused on real issues) cannot be taken for granted.

Beneath the surface, American democracy is still in trouble. Some of its problems were strikingly evident in this election. Lines at some early voting sites and on Election Day lasted four, five, six hours, and longer. Some people turned away and presumably never did vote. Untold numbers of registrations were lost, consigning voters to troublesome provisional ballots. Voting machines in many states again proved problematic. And too often, poll workers were not adequately prepared and provided faulty information to would-be voters. Fortunately, the election was not close and the electoral majority did not depend on states such as Virginia and Missouri where the problems were most extensive.

The energy of 2008 can form the basis of a long-term movement for democracy reform. We need to move toward universal voter registration. We need meaningful campaign-finance reform. We need national standards for how elections are run. Now is the moment to enlarge our understanding of democracy to include new forms of civic engagement and political

deliberation. Recent history strongly suggests that, in the long run, elections cannot be meaningful unless they exist alongside other effective channels of political action, engagement, and communication.

In recent years, democracy has come to be defined very narrowly, in terms of elections and the right to vote. But America also has a strong belief in participatory democracy--where people help make the decisions that affect their lives beyond Election Day. Today, these two concepts are often separated. They are the subject of different reform communities, different legislative efforts, different constituencies. But to invigorate democracy, they must be coupled. People need a means to become involved in the decisions that affect their lives. We must also lower barriers to meaningful elections and inspire people to cast their votes.

THE DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT

After his retirement, Thomas Jefferson realized that one of our founders' greatest oversights was failing to provide an institution through which citizens could take part in everyday democracy. Jefferson belatedly proposed that the nation be divided into "wards," units small enough to give every citizen a tangible role in self-

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government. He envisioned the wards as places where "the voice of the whole people would be fairly, fully, and peaceably expressed, discussed, and decided."

The conviction that democracy should mean more than casting a ballot--that being a citizen should involve active participation in the governance process--is as old as our nation. The New England town meeting is one of the best examples of citizens having a greater voice in public decisions. Unlike the faux "town halls" of today's presidential campaigns, in which selected citizens shout questions at politicians, town meetings are citizen legislatures where people debate issues and make decisions on behalf of the community. While unworkable in large cities, these institutions play a vital role in hundreds of New England towns.

Over the past two centuries, experiments from the local to the national level have attempted to give Americans greater voice in public life. In the 1930s, the Department of Education created the Federal Forum Project, which sponsored forums around the nation to educate the public and develop a cultural habit of democratic talk. By 1938, according to William Keith of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, more than 1 million Americans per year were participating in weekly forums. President Lyndon Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 included a now infamous call for "maximum feasible participation" in the War on Poverty. Later, the National Environmental Policy Act

of 1970 introduced the use of publicly critiqued environmental-impact statements for federal programs.

About 20 years ago, a new movement emerged to celebrate, cultivate, and articulate public engagement in the governance process. Scholars and civic reformers variously refer to this movement as deliberative democracy, public participation, civic renewal, community building, or collaborative governance. But by any name, it has the same three core convictions.

First, many of the problems facing our communities cannot be solved by any one sector. More often than not, sustainable solutions require collaboration across sectors and active public involvement. Second, political polarization has left elected officials without a mandate to act on behalf of the common good. New techniques are needed to identify common-ground positions that provide leaders with the will to act. Third, new processes must be found to rebuild the public's trust in our governing institutions and to create a more robust civic life for our nation.

The movement for greater participation in public decision-making has no single source or driver. And in a variety of fields, increased participation seems to have arisen somewhat independently. In the 1980s, for instance, some urban planners began experimenting with public participation to develop plans that were driven by a shared vision of the future. Early innovators like

Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Roanoke, Virginia, found that citizen participation helped to create and sustain momentum for passing and implementing development plans. These experiences inspired thousands of cities and regions across the nation to try similar participatory processes. Most recently, thousands of citizens convened at large 21st-century town meetings to shape plans for Ground Zero in New York after September 11 and to create the recovery plans for New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

In the field of education reform in the 1980s and 1990s, experts began to observe that students were more likely to succeed when their parents were involved in their schooling. In *The Next Form of Democracy*, Matt Leighninger writes that once they were invited in, "many parents realized that they wanted more of a say." Community consensus on school finances led to the successful passage of bond measures in places like Reno, Nevada, South Kitsap, Washington, and Delaware, Ohio. In other places, like Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Decatur, Georgia, community involvement helped to pass highly contentious redistricting plans.

Public officials and civic leaders have found that community involvement contributes to creating better, more sustainable solutions. The growth of the deliberative-democracy movement has been further advanced by a handful of committed national organizations like *AmericaSpeaks*, *Everyday*

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Democracy, **Public Agenda**, and the Center for Deliberative Democracy that have demonstrated the impact of citizen engagement, documented it, and pressed it on government agencies.

Regrettably, most public engagement in government has been episodic. Though the success is demonstrable, the challenge is to institutionalize these practices. In the 2008 presidential campaign, candidates began to acknowledge this challenge. John Edwards included in his government-reform platform a proposal to convene 1 million or more Americans for biennial national discussions of top public concerns. Similarly, [Barack Obama](#) proposed using online tools for public comment on new legislation. The Democratic Party platform included a lengthy section on community, highlighting these and other ideas.

THE ELECTORAL REFORM MOVEMENT

Alexis de Tocqueville made it sound so simple. Let people have even a taste of democracy, he said, and they will clamor for more. "The further the limit of voting rights is extended," he wrote, "the stronger is the need felt to spread them still wider; for after each new concession the forces of democracy are strengthened, and its demands increase with its augmented power." With this in mind, the voting-rights arm of the democracy movement is animated by three broad issues: full enfranchisement, universal registration, and smoothly run elections.

The first hundred years of election-reform work in the U.S., from the 14th Amendment through the Voting Rights Act, focused on the right to vote. On that count, real progress was made. Most Americans today would agree in principle that all adults should be entitled to vote, and we should remember that in earlier days, Americans argued about whether people of color, women, and the poor should have the right to vote. (Yet there is still work to be done. Michael McDonald of George Mason University points out that only about 92 percent of America's voting-age population is actually entitled to vote. The other 8 percent includes felons or ex-felons in some states, non-citizens, and mentally disabled people.)

The election-reform movement of the last quarter-century has instead focused on the ability to cast that vote. In 1928, Harvard professor William Munro captured the disdain among many for "uneducated" voters, when he wrote, "About twenty percent of those who get on the voters' list have no business to be there." That sentiment, along with still powerful racial animus, has provided sustenance to many schemes to prevent eligible voters from casting their ballot. It wasn't until the 1960s that the poll tax was struck down and the Supreme Court issued its "one person, one vote" rulings, ensuring that a small minority could no longer dominate elections.

With those victories achieved--at least in the law--election reformers began working to expand the ranks

of eligible voters. In 1973, the 800,000 residents of D.C. finally got the chance to elect their own local government--though they still have no voting representative in Congress. And in 1974, the Supreme Court ruled that states could no longer limit voter registration to brief periods during the year. The passage of the National Voter Registration Act in 1993 was an attempt to thwart those who would erect new barriers, by putting government at the center of voter registration--whether at motor-vehicle agencies or in social-service agencies. The law was a tremendous victory, but the battles continue.

America remains one of the few democracies with an "opt in" voter-registration process. Eligible voters risk disenfranchisement if they miss the deadline or fill out the form incorrectly, if they don't have proper photo identification, if they go to the wrong line, or if they register under a slightly different name (middle initial versus full middle name, for instance). Voters who live in densely populated poor neighborhoods are more likely to see administrative confusion lead to their effective disenfranchisement.

Over the past decade, many election-reform efforts have been focused on the state level, in large part because the prospects for meaningful reform by Congress--and the president--have been bleak. But given our new president and Congress, it is probable that state-level work will be re-energized and supplemented with a stronger push from the federal government.

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A REFORM AGENDA FOR A STRONGER DEMOCRACY

To create a fully inclusive democracy, the new administration needs to tap the widespread enthusiasm for change we saw in the recent election. The movement for democratic reform needs to start considering a wider range of reform topics, while linking them both intellectually and practically. The agenda that follows is a beginning. This agenda was developed in a two-day conference over the summer at a gathering of 49 advocates and scholars from across the democracy movement--including representatives of electoral-reform, deliberative-democracy, and community-development organizations. It is not a comprehensive democracy agenda, nor is it meant to be. For example, this agenda does not include discussions of media reform or the right to organize, to name just a few. But this agenda, which has already been endorsed by over a dozen organizations representing election-reform, deliberative-democracy, and community-development fields, is a start.

Begin with a federal champion. A White House Office of Civic Engagement could spur better democratic practices at all levels of government. The office could push an aggressive electoral-reform agenda and inspire new models of democratic engagement, including 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. Much exciting work is being done to engage people through new uses of technology--this office could bring the government into that world.

As president, Obama should signal a new kind of governance by calling on the American people to take part in a series of national discussions, each engaging 1 million Americans or more, on the issues of highest public concern, such as the economy, health care, foreign policy, energy, and climate change. These national conversations will provide policy-makers with an independent, nonpartisan means of assessing public opinion and priorities, and forge a stronger link between Americans and their government. This initiative could be overseen by a nonpartisan 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.

Congress and the White House should pass an aggressive set of policy reforms to enhance democratic participation--electoral and otherwise. This should include a commitment to universal voter registration for all eligible Americans, beginning with Election Day registration across the country. Other important electoral reforms include full implementation of the National Voter Registration Act, passage of meaningful public

financing of congressional elections, and restoration of meaningful public financing of presidential elections. We should adopt a broad set of voter-convenience measures such as early voting and voting by mail. It's time also for clear national standards for election administration. And we should pursue alternative election systems such as ranked-choice ballots and instant-runoff elections as a way to ensure a fair reflection of voter sentiment.

In the broader democratic engagement arena, these reforms should include passage of a Public Engagement Act, which would create incentives and requirements that allow federal agencies to gain full benefit from public-engagement activities, consultation, and collaborative processes.

Finally, to tap the wealth of energy and commitment of the millions of new residents of this country, Congress and the president need to adopt a series of policy reforms to encourage and support new American residents as they enter democratic life.

DEMOCRACY'S MOMENT

Voter enthusiasm is the highest it has been in our lifetime. Young people are knocking on the doors and are ready to get involved. New technologies allow engagement in ways unimaginable even 15 years ago. The economic crisis, the drastically reduced standing of the U.S. in the world, and the desperate needs of the American people indicate that this is the time for change. And we have something



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else we've never had before: an appreciation of the cause and support for change from the very top. This is a moment that comes perhaps once in the lifetime of a democracy, a moment to rediscover its strengths and renew the principle of government by the people.