

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



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# Citizens

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Matt Leighninger

# CITIZENS

*By Matt Leighninger*

Changes in everyday people's attitudes and capacities have brought great opportunities, and great challenges, to the relationship between citizens and the federal government. The negatives, such as low approval ratings, contentious public meetings, and critical comments online, are currently more apparent than the positives. But better forms of public engagement offer new hope for improving the relationship and tapping the unprecedented civic capacity of 21st century citizens.

## Four Trends Affecting Citizen Engagement Today

**Citizens now have more opportunities and channels to engage.** We are experiencing historically low levels of trust in the federal government. People are more likely to protest against decisions or policies they don't like by using social media and other online venues as well as traditional engagement settings like public hearings and town hall meetings. But the flip side of this trend is that citizens are also making increasingly sophisticated contributions to the governance and improvement of their communities, sometimes with the use of online tools and other times through old-fashioned organizing and sweat equity.

**The shelf life of electoral mandates is shorter.** One common trap for winning candidates and new appointees is to think that elections empower them to enact a certain set of policies. But it is increasingly clear that electoral mandates are short-lived. About six months after an election, citizens usually begin to question the new administration's actions, and it becomes clear that there may not be sufficient political will to enact new policies. It has become very difficult, therefore, to transition from campaigning to governing. Most federal agencies and most members of Congress have weak and uncertain relationships with their constituents.

**Engagement practices have evolved into two main forms: "thick" and "thin."** "Thick" engagement is intensive, informed, and deliberative. It relies on small group settings, either online or offline, in which people share their experiences, consider a range of views or policy options, and decide how they want to help solve problems.

"Thin" engagement is faster, easier, and potentially viral. It encompasses a range of mainly online activities that allow people to express their opinions, make choices, or affiliate themselves with a particular group or cause. Examples of thin engagement have proliferated dramatically, while thick engagement has not grown as quickly.

Thick and thin forms have different strengths and limitations, and they complement each other well—the term "multichannel" is often used to

describe participation that includes both kinds of opportunities. However, there are not many examples of federal agencies using multichannel engagement processes or approaches.

**The hope and high expectations of open government initiatives have not been realized.** Because of the language about citizenship and the engagement used by the Obama 2008 presidential campaign, there were high hopes that the Obama Administration would be a pioneer in using online tools for engagement. Those expectations were raised even further by the initial work on the national Open Government Plan. However, while agencies have shared more data and become somewhat more transparent, “Advances in the arena of public participation have been disappointing,” writes Dr. Tina Nabatchi, an observer of Open Government Initiatives.

In fact, the United States now seems to have fallen behind countries like Brazil and India in the realm of democratic innovation. Brazilian citizens can now use online vehicles like e-democracia, as well as face-to-face engagement opportunities such as their federal policy conferences, to deliberate and make recommendations in a way that feeds into the policymaking process. In contrast, Americans are still limited mainly to thin forms of engagement, such as entering competitions or accessing information from federal agencies. This failure to provide richer opportunities for engagement has led to greater disillusionment among civic technology advocates and among citizens themselves.

## Recommendations for New Political Appointees

**Recommendation One: Think about engagement from the citizens’ point of view.** Most government agencies that try to engage the public have specific goals in mind: the need to inform citizens, for example, or the need to gather input on a particular plan or policy decision. But citizens have their own goals, such as to:

- Share information among themselves
- Suggest new ways for sharing information
- Take action on the issue being addressed
- Participate in decision making

Citizens may also be compelled to participate for a more basic, social reason: An engagement opportunity allows them to meet people, interact with people they already know, and is generally enjoyable. Engagement doesn’t usually work well unless it meets the goals of both the “engagers” and the potentially “engaged.”

**Recommendation Two: In each engagement opportunity, include an invitation to another.** One aspect of moving to a more citizen-centered view of engagement is recognizing that people have diverse interests, and that participating in one venue may inspire them to engage in another. Abhi Nemani, a prominent civic technologist who was the first Chief Data Officer for the

City of Los Angeles, has called for more coherent thinking about systems of engagement, not just isolated meetings or online platforms. He offers the image of Lego blocks that can be assembled to create a stronger infrastructure for public participation. One aspect of this system would be that each civic opportunity a person engages in provides an invitation to another; for example, filling out a survey triggers an invite to an upcoming public meeting. Nemani calls this a “civic upsell” approach.

**Recommendation Three: Build on and help support engagement at the local level.** Agencies, public officials, and other leaders seldom collaborate when trying to engage the public; more often, each group of “engagers” works alone to involve citizens in a relatively narrow set of issues. Collaboration between federal agencies and local governments, school systems, and other organizations is even more rare. Local entities are generally better able to create sustained forums for engagement, both online and offline. By supporting the work of state and local government, federal agencies will have better conduits for reaching citizens.

**Recommendation Four: Raise the level of engagement skill in your agency.** Agency officials and employees who see the merits of engagement often lack the knowledge, skills, and abilities to launch effective and meaningful programs. To help build their capacity, agencies could take several steps, including:

- Identifying a participation “champion”
- Supporting opportunities for training and continuing education
- Creating and sharing engagement materials
- Creating platforms that collect and report engagement examples and innovations
- Supporting communities of practice

## How Will You Know That You Were Successful?

**Citizens are engaging.** Fortunately, there is some good news from recent research on engagement and citizenship. First, it is clearer than ever that people will engage if they think it will make a difference, either in their own lives or by having an impact on public decision making. Recruiting participants is usually the most difficult task in public engagement, because people are busy and because they are not optimistic that their participation will make a difference. There is now a wide range of research and practitioner experiences to suggest that federal agencies can overcome those doubts and bring large, diverse numbers of people to the table.

**Engagement is having well-documented impacts.** This is particularly true of thicker, more deliberative kinds of engagement, which are more time-consuming but also more meaningful and powerful. These impacts include:

- Citizen learning (as well as public official, staff, and other expert learning)
- Greater civility in public discussions

- Higher levels of trust, attachment, and collective efficacy
- Increased elected official accountability
- Greater citizen volunteerism to solve public problems
- New leader development
- Public policies that more accurately reflect what citizens want and enjoy broader public support

There is also evidence from other countries that sustained engagement has other long-term impacts, such as:

- Higher tax compliance
- Lower levels of corruption
- Lower levels of infant mortality and other health indicators
- Higher levels of economic development and lower economic inequality

**Deliberative engagement is having stronger ripple effects than you thought.** Even though engagement and its impacts have been more common at the local level, and practitioners have often despaired at the logistical and political challenges of “scaling up” engagement to the national level, there are some encouraging data to consider. First, participants in well-structured deliberative forums seem to carry their ideas and learning into much broader circles of friends, relatives, and colleagues. Second, voters seem to be swayed by the recommendations (published in voter guides) produced by a randomly selected set of their peers through a deliberative process. There is a stronger basis, therefore, for the notion that we can “aggregate” multiple engagements as part of a national process.

**Combining “thick” and “thin” forms of engagement is having an impact.**

The experience of Creating Community Solutions (CCS), a component of the National Dialogue on Mental Health, demonstrates this point, even though the Obama Administration did not want federal policy questions to be included in the process. CCS has included small deliberative discussions, large deliberative forums, metro-wide action-planning processes, and SMS-enabled face-to-face discussions called “Text, Talk, Act” that have engaged over 40,000 people. It is an example of a multichannel, multilayered national engagement process, with impacts ranging from changes in individual behavior to regional action plans on mental health with extensive political support and millions of dollars in resources.

## Conclusion

Changes in what people expect from government, and what they can contribute to governance, have made engagement both more difficult and more beneficial. The bar is higher than before: Rather than simply informing citizens, engagement efforts must show people how their input will be used, and if possible, tap into citizens’ capacity for public problem-solving. Agencies

should develop long-term plans for engagement that align with their missions and empower the public to help achieve those priorities.

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