

Civic Engagement in the Future - Goals, New Online "Power" Choices, Barriers

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Editor's Note: This comes from the blog of the [IBM Center for The Business of Government](#). Drawing from the book, [New Power](#) (by Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms), the premise is that "Participation needs to be much more than a website that allows you to point out occasional potholes in the street; it needs to be a constant and compelling experience that keeps people working together on the things that matter." In their view, "The goal of new power is not to hoard it but to channel it."

- What are the goals of civic engagement?

- What different models exist?
- What is a real-life example of a pioneer in engagement? The example of four initiatives in New York City show the pioneering spirit.
- What could hold back or expand engagement initiatives?

We're glad to share this perspective as part of the Center's "[Envision Government in 2040](#)" sessions.

The precipitous drop in public trust in government over the past decade has been unsettling to many government officials – **but engaging citizens directly may help reverse this trend.**

From its earliest days, American democracy has been rooted in vigorous civic engagement. More recently, there have been fears that increasing distrust in institutions – including government -- will lead to large scale disengagement in civic life. However, some [optimistic observers](#) are hopeful that the Millennial Generation will create a new momentum for civic involvement. But what will that involvement look like in the coming generation – both inside and outside governmental institutions? And importantly, what are the implications for the perceived legitimacy of government action in the society?

According to a new book, [New Power](#), authors Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms observe that "Participation' needs to be much more than a website that allows you to point out occasional portholes in the street; it need to be a constant and compelling experience that keeps people working together on the things that matter." In their view, "The goal of new power is not to hoard it but to channel it."

The IBM Center – as part of its 20th anniversary activities this year- is looking twenty years ahead. It recently held the third in a series of "Envision Government in 2040" sessions, with this session focusing on the role of citizens in government (the first session focused on [the future of work](#) in the public sector; the second assessed the potential [role of artificial intelligence](#)). This small group found itself focused on defining the parameters of civic engagement, and the different models emerging today that, if they scale over the coming twenty years, could significantly re-imagine the roles of both citizens and government.

The session participants were hopeful, seeing more a distributed participatory form of governance, much along the lines expressed in the *New Power* book. The dialog explored four questions:

- What are the goals of civic engagement?
- What different models exist?
- What is a real-life example of a pioneer in engagement?
- What could hold back or expand engagement initiatives?

What Are the Goals of Civic Engagement? “Civic engagement” broadly embraces similar terms such as public participation, citizen participation, and citizen engagement. The group noted that the starting point is for the sponsoring entity for any engagement effort – whether it is bottom-up, self-organizing like the [#March4OurLives](#) campaign or if it is top-down, like the White House’s “We the People” [petition website](#) – needs to have a defined purpose or goal. This will lead to the use of different engagement models with defined roles and methods of engagement. There will be different users and designs for different purposes, such as agenda setting, policy development, service delivery, or program evaluation. The bottom line: approaches to engagement need to be purpose-driven; there can’t be one-size-fits-all model.

What Different Models Exist? The newer models for engagement can be arrayed along a continuum. The *New Power* book describes this as a “Participation Scale:”

- *Complying* – e.g., the traditional mandatory requirements for public hearings.
- *Consuming* – e.g., attending a conference or speech.
- *Sharing* – e.g., taking other people’s content and sharing it with broader audiences, such as via Facebook.
- *Affiliating* – e.g., endorsing or joining a group of like-minded people
- *Adapting* – e.g., remixing or adapting existing content with a new message, again, like Facebook.
- *Funding* – e.g., endorsing with money, such as via Kickstarter.
- *Producing* – e.g., creating content or delivering products or services within a peer community such as via YouTube, Etsy, or Airbnb.
- *Shaping* – e.g., actively shaping or protecting the norms of a new group of like-minded people, such as the curators or editors for Wikipedia.

The trick, note the authors of *New Power* is “Having a structure in place to move people up the participation scale.” Interestingly, New York City is pioneering many of these structures.

New York City: A Pioneer in Engagement. As the futurist [William Gibson](#) says: “*The future is already here — it’s just not very evenly distributed.*” Not unsurprisingly, much of the cutting-edge innovations in civic engagement can be found at the local level, scattered around the country. In fact, the session participants predict that in the long run, all significant engagement efforts will be “local” -- not necessarily exclusively geographically local, but also include non-geographic, affinity-based groups as well.

To foster this, governments are creating structures to catalyze citizens’ ability to “move up the participation scale,” such as the establishment of civic engagement offices, sponsoring open data initiatives, and hosting participatory budgeting initiatives. New York City is pioneering examples of how other cities might engage with their citizens in the future:

- [NYC Service](#). NYC Service is a city agency that “promotes volunteerism and service as a

voice, a catalyst, and a capacity builder.” Its mission is to promote volunteerism, with the goal of increasing citizen participation in volunteer activities from 18 percent to the national average of 25 percent. A [2017 report on volunteerism](#) identified barriers to increased volunteerism and ways to address these barriers.

- **Public Engagement Unit.** In 2015, the City of New York [created a city office](#) that serves as an entry point to city services. It proactively reaches out to citizens door-to-door in targeted grassroots campaigns to connect vulnerable people with benefit programs such as health insurance, anti-eviction legal counsel, workforce training, etc., so they can stay in their homes rather than become homeless. According to the New York Daily News, the unit: “is using a data-driven approach to target New Yorkers in need of services — a proactive version of the city’s 311 help line.”
- **Mayor’s Office of Data Analytics.** This city office calls itself “New York City’s civic intelligence center.” It is used by the mayor’s office to “aggregate and analyze data from across City agencies, to more effectively address crime, public safety, and quality of life issues.” It “uses analytics tools to prioritize risk more strategically, deliver services more efficiently, enforce laws more effectively and increase transparency.” It also makes most of these data available publicly so citizens can also use it.
- **Participatory Budgeting NYC.** The New York City Council sponsors district-level budgeting initiatives that engage citizens directly in how to spend a part of the city’s budget – up to \$1 million. According to the city’s website: “It’s grassroots democracy at its best. It helps make budget decisions clear and accessible.” Early results suggest that this approach works and it results in dialog and tradeoffs among community members. This approach is being used in about 1,500 communities around the world.

Next Steps: Tackling Stumbling Blocks to Engagement Initiatives. The session participants identified some stumbling blocks to greater citizen involvement with government. Addressing these will be important to envisioning a future with greater engagement. These include:

- Proactively managing risks created by hackers and haters. A lesson learned the hard way in recent years is that engagement leaders can’t assume trust and good behavior, upfront.
- Ensuring marginalized communities are engaged and not forgotten in the enthusiastic rush to engage people through specific initiatives.
- Ensuring a secure, on-line identity for participants.
- Providing feedback to participants regarding how their contributions had an impact. This is particularly important for developing the goodwill needed to have people engage again in the future.
- Ensuring access to resources, developing staff and participant capacity, and creating a sense of legitimacy.

Government at all levels needs to provide the overarching organizational structure and legal framework, and serve as a catalyst for engagement. It also needs to ensure lower barriers of entry and fair access. Doing this, according to the authors of the *New Power* book, will change “the way

everyday people see themselves in relation to institutions, authority, and one another.”

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