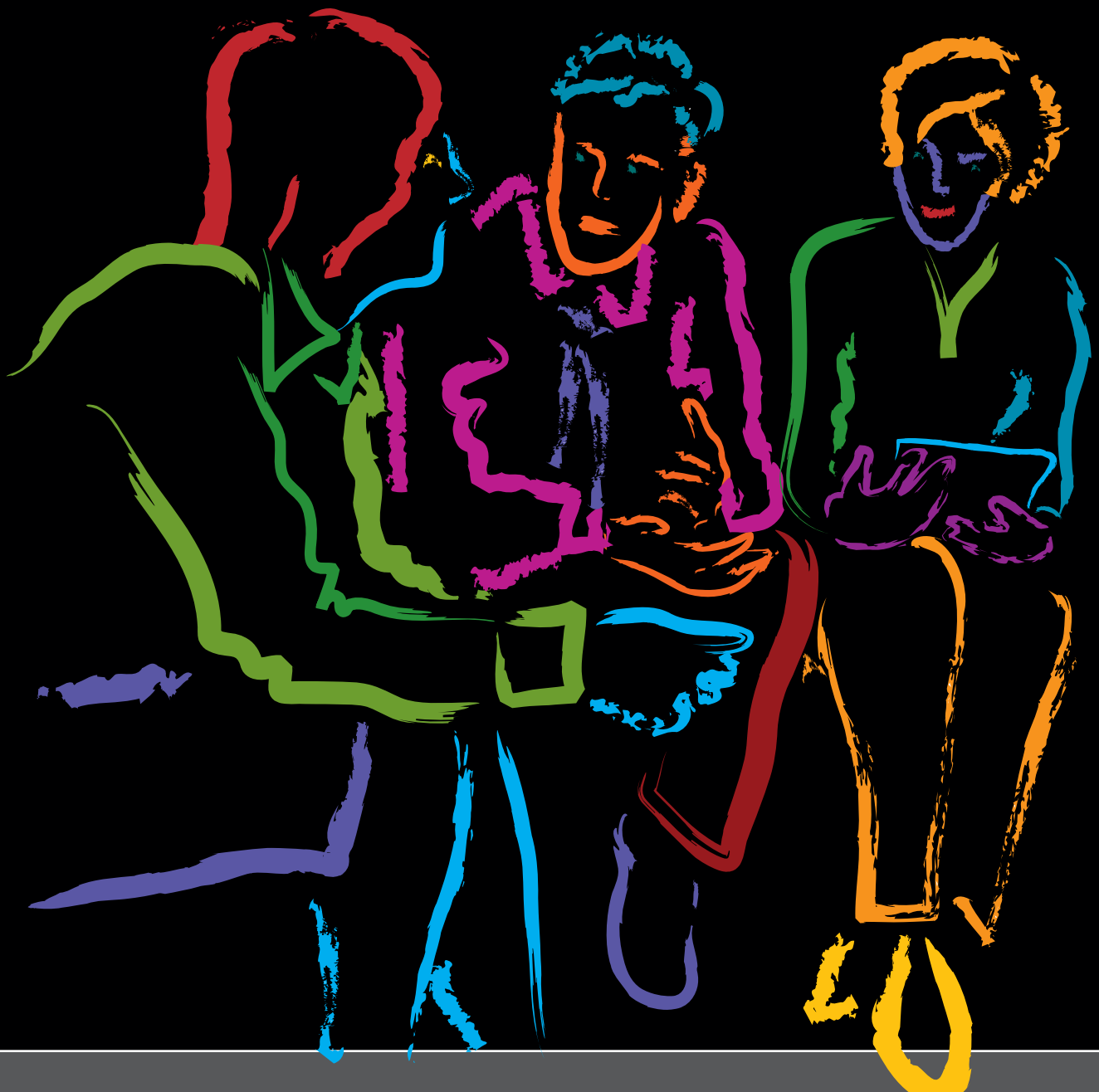
THE CASE FOUNDATION

CITIZENS at the CENTER

a new approach to civic engagement



About the Author

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About the Case Foundation

The mission of the Case Foundation, founded in 1997 by Jean and Steve Case, is to achieve sustainable solutions to complex social problems by investing in collaboration, leadership, and entrepreneurship. The foundation is applying these strategies to expand civic engagement and volunteerism, meet the needs of underserved children and families, create thriving and sustainable economic development for communities, bridge cultural and religious divides, and accelerate innovative approaches to health care. The foundation's work stretches across the United States and around the world.

CITIZENS AT THE CENTER:
A New Approach to Civic Engagement

Is the United States undergoing a civic renewal? Many in the service and civic engagement domain say "yes," pointing to recent data indicating that volunteerism is on the rise, especially among young people.

Those outside this domain, however, aren't so sure, based on equally compelling research indicating that Americans feel more isolated than ever and powerless to do anything about the problems facing their communities and the nation. As a result, they are turning away from civic and public life to engage in activities—including volunteering and charitable giving—that may be less an impetus for deeper civic engagement than attempts to assuage the inchoate yet palpable sense among increasing numbers of Americans that things are spiraling out of control, that there is little connection between people and their public institutions and leaders, and that the country has drifted away from its core democratic values to those emphasizing materialism, celebrity, and "me" rather than "we."

In the summer of 2006, senior staff members from the Case Foundation convened to ask if there is a way to make service and civic engagement a deeper and more entrenched cultural value and ethos—one that reaches a majority of people and that is reflected in their everyday lives, as well as in the civic life and health of their communities.

Working with Cynthia Gibson, an independent consultant, the foundation sought to answer this question by interviewing scores of leaders in the service/civic engagement field, as well as those outside this domain; culling the findings of scholarly research; and synthesizing numerous mainstream articles, websites, and publications. A surprising consensus emerged rather quickly around the perception that service already is a deeply embedded value in American culture, based on the country's strong religious and spiritual traditions that encourage "giving back," its vibrant nonprofit sector, and its consistently high levels of charitable giving and volunteering in comparison to other nations.

What is not a cultural ethos is civic engagement, invoking important questions as to what can be done to use Americans' commitment to service as a springboard for deeper engagement in the civic life of their communities.

While this issue—moving people from service to civics—is hardly new to the service and civic engagement field, the discussion has been predicated largely on using politics, especially voting, as a proxy for civic engagement and, in some cases, has assumed the latter to be an inherently deeper and more developed form of civic engagement. Yet many Americans have turned away from politics and political institutions for the same reasons they have turned away from other civic institutions—a sense that what they do matters little when it comes to the civic life and health of

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Founder and President,
The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

their communities or the country. As Rich Harwood has written, "Americans are walking away from the public square because leaders no longer reflect the reality of the average people's daily lives in their words and actions—a retreat that transcends race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, and even political party. People are angry with the conduct of their leaders at the national and even local level, but feel powerless to do anything about it."[1]

It may, therefore, be time to consider new approaches—beyond voting and volunteering, which are necessary to a healthy democracy but insufficient to embed a sustainable, deep, and broad cultural ethos of engagement. As Carmen Siranni and Lew Friedland write, "Civic renewal entails more than reforming elections and campaign finance, increasing voting, or [encouraging people to volunteer]....[It] entails investing in civic skills and organizational capacities for public problem-solving on a wide scale and designing policy at every level of the federal system to enhance the ability of citizens to do the everyday work of the republic."[2]

What is needed is nothing short of a broader civic renewal movement—one that works across a wide variety of sectors, populations, initiatives, and fields to revitalize our democracy. This requires moving beyond the tactics of civic engagement (voting or volunteering) or outcomes (number of trees planted or people served) to the process of civic engagement—especially the ability and incentive for ordinary people to come together, deliberate, and take action on problems or issues that they themselves have defined as important and in ways they deem appropriate—whether through volunteering, voting, activism, or organizing.

This kind of citizen-centered and citizen-created cultural approach is a subtle, yet powerful, shift from the way in which service and civic engagement are conceptualized and operate. Rather than ask people to "plug into" existing pre-determined programs, initiatives, or campaigns, citizen-centered approaches help people form and promote their own decisions, build capacities for self-government, and develop open-ended civic processes. Moreover, the deliberative process—no matter how messy it can be—is viewed as important to civic engagement as the tactics employed to address problems and concerns. These approaches also view people as proactive citizens, rather than as consumers of services; are focused primarily on culture change, rather than on short-term outcomes, issues, or victories; and include a cross-section of entire communities, rather than parts of them.

When they become patterns of habit, values, and attitudes, these kinds of citizen-centered and citizen-driven approaches have the potential to create or renew local civic cultures. In turn, these new civic cultures lay the groundwork for embedding a deeper ethic of civic engagement across communities so that it becomes part and parcel of everyday life, rather than episodic activities such as volunteering or voting that are squeezed between work or school and family and less important than either.

There is evidence that this approach can work—and is working—to help bring citizens together to

work for the "common good." This paper describes some of these efforts and suggests several ways in which the service and civic engagement field is well positioned to help advance the citizen-centered framework on which they were developed, given the extraordinary progress it has made in raising public awareness of and participation in activities that have benefited millions of Americans across the country. The challenge now is to use this important work as a foundation for broader and long-term civic renewal by promoting citizen-centered approaches aimed at providing all people with opportunities to walk the talk of civic and public life in their communities and beyond—now and well into the future.

Is Service or Civic Engagement a Cultural Ethos?

IF INCREASED BUZZ IS ANY INDICATION, THERE HAS BEEN an upsurge in civic activity during recent years. The number of people who volunteer, especially young people, has risen. Programs to encourage service and civic engagement, including those that are federally supported, are growing and helping millions of Americans channel their desire to "do good" into action that benefits communities across the United States and throughout the world. More private sector companies are implementing policies and activities that encourage volunteering among employees. Faith-based institutions, through which most volunteering and charitable giving occurs, are increasingly welcomed in the public square.

To many in the service and civic engagement field, such activity suggests a civic renewal in America—one whose seeds were planted before the events of September 11 and that grew thereafter. A recent study by the Corporation for National and Community Service, for example, showed that nearly 29 percent of the population volunteered to help charitable causes during 2005—an increase of 6 million people from before 2002.[3] Data culled from the Census Current Population survey for a new national "Civic Health Index," published by the National Conference on Citizenship, indicates that there was an increase in volunteering between 2002 and 2003, especially among young people. From 2002 to 2003, the percentage of young people (ages 18 to 25) rose from 19.49 to 21.4 and continued to increase to 21.58 percent in 2005.[4]

Whether and to what extent the events of September 11 generated widespread, deeper, and sustained involvement in civic and public life, however, is questionable. The Civic Health Index also found that Americans' level of community participation, their interest in joining organizations, their levels of social trust, and their willingness to socialize with other people all continued on the downhill slide they had been on before September 11. These data resemble findings from another, much-publicized survey by Duke University researchers, who found that Americans feel far more socially isolated today than they were two decades ago. One-quarter of Americans said they had no one with whom they could discuss personal troubles, more than double the number who were similarly isolated in 1985.

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Overall, the number of people Americans have in their closest circle of confidants has dropped from around three to about two.[5] *The Washington Post* reported that the Duke study "paints a sobering picture of an increasingly fragmented America, where intimate social ties—once seen as an integral part of daily life and associated with a host of psychological and civic benefits—are shrinking or nonexistent."[6]

In short, while there are millions of Americans, especially young people, who are trying to "make a difference," largely through volunteering, there remains an inchoate yet palpable sense among most people that what they do matters little when it comes to the civic life and health of their communities, states, or the country overall.

In short, while there are millions of Americans, especially young people, who are trying to "make a difference," largely through volunteering, there remains an inchoate yet palpable sense among most people that what they do matters little when it comes to the civic life and health of their communities, states, or the country overall. Americans also express despair over what appears to be the country's drift away from its core democratic and civic values to those that emphasize "winning at all costs," consumerism/ materialism, greed, selfishness, an "us versus them" mentality (particularly prevalent in political discourse), a cult of celebrity, and others that are "eclipsing family, community, and responsibility."[7]

Harry Boyte, co-director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, calls this the "problem that has no name"—a deep sense of unease about the loss of public life and a feeling of powerlessness to do anything about it.[8] As a result, many people have retreated into silence and away from public life, turning instead to things they can control and feel will help make a difference, such as volunteering, giving to charities, and helping their friends. Americans' penchant for volunteering, in fact, may be less a springboard for deeper engagement in civic life and more a temporary panacea to the alienation and sense of being unable to "make a difference" that many Americans feel. As Boyte notes:

> *Volunteering is certainly widespread and in that sense it is an ethos, but it's an ethos that is also an echo. It's like a clump of trees left standing in a once vast forest that has mostly disappeared. It may be expanding, but it is usually marked by a kind of 'bubble culture' pattern that is part of the problem. Our culture has become extremely 'gated,' not only geographically but intellectually and, more broadly, culturally…. Even though people live in bubble cultures, however, most also want a culture shift or culture change (this is especially true among young people). The problem is that there isn't much language of culture change—that 'breaks the silence' about how to talk about the alienation many feel to mention how to do it, without some practice.*[9]

Given these trends, the challenge for those working in the service and civic engagement domain is to find and promote new ways of leveraging Americans',

especially young people's, commitment to *service* as a foundation for inculcating a deeper and more firmly entrenched cultural ethos of *civic engagement*—an ethos that helps give people a sense of public purpose and a belief that their voice matters in larger issues. Such an ethos must also:

- Be able to withstand the vagaries of forces that prevent it from becoming firmly rooted in everyday life;
- Be sustained beyond events such as natural disasters and the terrorist attacks of September 11; and
- Go beyond a relatively narrow self-selected group of actively engaged volunteers, which data indicate are largely white, well-educated, middle-class, and female.[10]

The focus on making "civic engagement," rather than "service," a cultural ethos is deliberate and based on a perception that service already is an important and significant ethic in the United States. Historically, service has had a long and rich tradition in American culture, stemming largely from the country's strong commitment to religious faith and spiritual traditions that encourage individuals to "live" the values of charity, compassion, and stewardship. The country's service ethic is also reflected in the plurality of groups that have emigrated to the United States and who, once here, banded together through voluntary associations to provide services to their brethren.[11] These and other organizations are part of a larger nonprofit sector comprising more than 1.4 million groups, as well as more than 350,000 congregations, that provide mechanisms for self-help and social welfare services to the disadvantaged and offer venues for Americans to pursue an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs.[12] This infrastructure, along with the United States' consistently high levels of volunteering and charitable giving, has become the envy of many countries around the world, including several that have launched initiatives that are attempting to create similar "civil societies."

Are Voting and Volunteering Enough?

IF THE UNITED STATES ALREADY HAS A DEEPLY EMBEDDED service ethic, how can this be used as a foundation for embedding an equally deep ethos of civic engagement across the country? Although this issue—moving people from "service to civics"—has been the focus of much discussion in the service and civic engagement field, much of it has focused on tactics, namely voting or volunteering.

But is voting or volunteering—or any of the other myriad tactics used to promote civic engagement—enough? A small but growing group of scholars and practitioners in the civic engagement field say "no." According to Carmen Siranni and Lew Friedland, professors of sociology at Brandeis University, civic renewal will require more than "reforming elections and campaign finance, increasing voting, or making our system more inclusive of the great diversity of Americans. To be sure, these are unfinished projects that warrant much attention. But civic renewal also entails investing in civic skills and organizational capacities for public problem-solving on a wide scale and designing policy at every level of the federal system to

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enhance the ability of citizens to do the everyday work of the republic."[13] Peter Levine, executive director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), agrees: "Volunteering and other tactics, including civic education and voting, are important parts of civic life, but they are still subcategories of larger civic engagement, which, if it's to become a cultural ethos, needs to be focused less on tactics, 'positions,' and specific issues and more on the quality of the nation's public life over the long term."[14]

While some argue compellingly that volunteering can be a springboard for deeper civic engagement, especially among young people, others disagree, noting that there is insufficient evidence that young people engage in this activity with larger civic goals in mind. Jane Buckingham, president of the Intelligence Group, a market research firm specializing in young people, has found that even among Gen Y's—a cohort that research shows believes strongly in their ability to "make a difference"—the motivation for volunteering is not necessarily related to improving civic life and democracy.[15]

Friedland and Morimoto found similarly that much of young people's motivation to volunteer stems from the desire to improve their applications for college or jobs. They also want to "meet friends."[16] This explanation also surfaced in MTV's recently commissioned study, "Just Cause," which revealed the most commonly cited factor as to why young people volunteered was to "have fun with friends."[17] Buckingham says there is also a sense among young people, "even Gen Y'ers who want to help, about 'what's in it for me?' and 'if it's that important it'll find me or it'll be required.' As a result, they tend to be involved in short spurts and in projects "they can control," rather than larger public or civic initiatives, she notes. Former CNN anchor Judy Woodruff, who is completing a television series for PBS that paints a picture of the perspectives and concerns of a wide and diverse group of young people across the country, agrees: "There are definitely some young people out there who really do believe they can make a difference, and they're doing some really amazing things. But it's certainly not spread across the cohort, especially when it comes to making change in political institutions or processes."[18]

Many argue that the answer is getting people, especially young people, more involved in politics. The reality, however, is that politics, including voting (which is often used as a proxy for civic engagement), is also not necessarily serving as a venue through which people feel they can make a difference, due to their frustration over political processes and institutions that were founded on a notion of democratic participation becoming nearly closed to ordinary citizens. In a recent interview with John Bridgeland, CEO of Civic Enterprises, one former policymaker summarized the problem: "Instead of getting the facts, you get partisan fiction; instead of positioning the center to find common ground, you get a dash to the political extremes; instead of seeing more leaders in government who resist power and reflect humility, you see an insatiable quest for power and gratification of the

ego. Americans want better leadership and because they don't get it, they tune out."[19]

Still others believe that Americans have been crowded out by professionals and other "experts" who increasingly diagnose, define, and propose solutions to public problems without providing space for citizens in those communities to weigh in or, more important, decide for themselves what those problems are and what actions they will take. "As soon as we see a civic deficit," says Bill Schambra, director of the Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal, "we deploy professionals or send them into communities to 'help.'" In recent decades, professionals increasingly have taken over the airwaves, political campaigns, nonprofit organizations, foundations, and myriad other spheres of American life that were once, arguably, more open to the opinions and participation of a more diverse group of citizens. Critics charge that this professionalization is spilling over into the service and civic engagement field, leading it to approach "citizenship as something to be found rather than to be created."[20]

Beyond Voting and Volunteering: Citizen-Centered Approaches to Civic Engagement

THERE IS LITTLE QUESTION THAT VOTING, VOLUNTEERING, AND other strategies such as civic education, community service, and organizing designed to increase civic engagement in the United States are important and have helped to inspire millions of people to become more deeply involved in civic and public life. Whether they can serve to embed a widespread and deeper ethos of civic engagement across diverse groups of people over the long term, however, is unlikely unless there are more efforts to provide ordinary citizens with opportunities to connect with others who feel civically isolated or powerless and work collectively toward the common good.

In short, we need a civic renewal movement—one that works across a wide variety of sectors, populations, initiatives, and fields to revitalize our democracy by linking emerging community-based efforts to engage in what some call "public work," "collective decision-making through deliberation," and/or "collaborative problem-solving."[21] These kinds of citizen-*centered* and citizen-*driven* approaches move away from defining and viewing civic engagement as a set of tactics (voting, volunteering, service or organizing) or outcomes (planting more trees or increasing the number of people who vote). Instead, they focus on ***creating opportunities for ordinary citizens to come together, deliberate, and take action collectively to address public problems or issues that citizens themselves define as important and in ways that citizens themselves decide are appropriate and/or needed***—whether it is political action, community service, volunteering, or organizing.

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Such processes, when they become patterns of habits, values, and attitudes, have the potential to create or renew local civic cultures. These new civic cultures, in turn, lay the groundwork for embedding a deeper ethic of civic engagement across communities so that it becomes part and parcel of everyday life, rather than episodic activities such as volunteering or voting that are squeezed between work/school and family, and less important than either.

What Do Citizen-Centered Approaches Look Like…?

TO ILLUSTRATE THE NOTION OF *CITIZEN-CENTERED ENGAGEMENT*, Peter Levine describes two hypothetical communities. In the first, education is considered primarily the job of professionals who work for the public schools. Citizens participate by voting on bond issues and in school board elections or by volunteering at the schools' request. Adults do most of the volunteering and are the only voters; youth have little to say about the governance of their schools. Professionals assign volunteers relatively easy and episodic jobs, such as raising money in bake sales or helping on field trips. Most of the local debate about education is value-free. Standardized tests for students are created by experts outside of the community and are not debated very much. Occasionally, an explicitly moral issue—such as evolution or sexual education—flares up, but it is usually the concern of ideological activists.

Perhaps the most important measure is whether the community has a culture—a sense of ongoing practices, habits, norms, identities, and relationships—that can sustain engagement against cultural trends going in the other direction.

In the other hypothetical community, education is seen as the way in which the whole population transmits values, skills, habits, and knowledge to the next generation. This is an explicitly ethical task, so there is much discussion about values—not only concerning divisive, hot-button issues, but also subtler, day-to-day questions about what books are best to read, how kindergarten boys should behave on the playground, or whether there are too many cliques in the high school.[22] Adults take personal responsibility for educating youth and others by serving as teachers, members of school boards, volunteers, and coaches. There are also roles for students themselves, not only as volunteers, but also as board members and activists. The community—libraries, parks and recreation facilities, and religious congregations—is seen as both an educator and educational experience.

Importantly, the second community may not score any better than the first on standard measures of civic engagement (e.g., the rate of volunteering and voter turnout), but it reflects a deeper citizen-centered type of engagement that has yet to be fully explored, let alone measured or assessed in public discussions about increasing civic engagement in the United States. The latter tends to be focused on measuring outcomes such as the number of trees planted, volunteers mobilized, or people who voted. Within a citizen-centered framework, the measurement shifts to whether communities have the ability, incentive, and capacity to continue to work collectively with diverse groups of people to address the day-to-day problems of daily life as they move forward into the future. Perhaps the most important measure is whether the community has a culture—a sense of ongoing practices, habits,

norms, identities, and relationships—that can sustain engagement against cultural trends going in the other direction.

...And What Makes Them Distinct?

THERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS IN WHICH CITIZEN-CENTERED approaches differ from others:

They focus primarily on culture change, rather than short-term outcomes, issues, or victories, although the latter can be a foundation for communities to feel efficacious in moving forward with other collective efforts. Often, these approaches start by asking people to envision *end results* or *kinds* of communities that a broad representation of its members want to see—the "common good"—and then works with communities to decide how to get to that point. As Ira Harkavy, associate vice president and director of the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, suggests: "Instead of asking what kind of education do we want for our kids, we should be asking 'what kind of community do we want and then how do we create the kinds of schools that will help us create that kind of community?'"[23] Answering that question will require participation from most, if not all, parts of that community, including institutions that are sometimes overlooked in those discussions and plans such as businesses, churches, schools, neighborhood associations, and public agencies.

They provide opportunities for people to form and promote their own decisions, build capacities for self-government, and promote open-ended civic processes, rather than ask people to "plug into" structured or pre-determined programs, initiatives, projects, or campaigns that offer "training" or "education" to "develop" people. Citizen-centered public work is not planned, structured, or driven by outside experts, professionals, organizations, or those external to the community (however "community" is defined), nor does it attempt to inspire, persuade, or manipulate people to adopt a particular view or position on an issue or agenda. Rather, it promotes deliberative processes that involve a wide cross-section of the *entire* community (not just parts of it) to identify public problems or concerns—no matter how messy or complex they can be—and views this as being as important to civic engagement as tactics employed to address these problems and concerns.

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Associate Vice President and Director of the Center for Community Partnerships, University of Pennsylvania

They are pluralistic and nonpartisan and open to "learning from a wide array of approaches and to collaborating with elected officials of various political persuasions who are willing to problem solve with citizens."[24] This does not mean that people leave their beliefs or passions about particular issues or topics behind when they engage in public problem-solving. Rather, people's individual perspectives become *part* of a larger deliberative process through which people with various beliefs convene to determine how best to address what is best for their communities. As Sirianni and Friedland observe, "...people can be partisan Democrats or Republicans and still collaborate to revitalize civic education in our schools, partner with congregations to revitalize neighborhoods, work with traditional adversaries to restore ecosystems, and engage diverse stakeholders in community visioning for an entire city or region."[25]

They help to transcend ideological silos. On the Right, an open-ended and deliberative approach helps to alleviate the concern that much of what passes for civic engagement is a not-so-subtle attempt to enact an "activist agenda." Unlike efforts to mobilize people to support some progressive cause, citizen-centered politics helps citizens to decide for themselves, in their diverse communities, what kind of action they will take and for what purpose. On the Left, this approach reflects progressives' commitment to inclusion and diversity and making all voices, especially those of under-represented groups, heard on issues they decide are important. For moderates, it represents an opportunity to be involved in issues that may not fall under a cultural or political aegis but may be as simple as citizens coming together to call on their schools to stop holding soccer games on Sundays. The common thread throughout is that no matter what citizens decide, by creating spaces for themselves to deliberate with a wide variety of "voices" in their communities—and on issues that they, rather than outsiders, decide are important—they are actively practicing and experiencing the essence of democracy.

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Executive Director, Study Circles Resource Center

…and the perennial and wearisome debate over which is more important or lacking—"service or politics" that tends to dominate public discussions about fueling civic engagement in the United States. To some, this is a false dichotomy because it fails to recognize that while service and politics are both necessary to ensure a healthy democracy and civil society, neither—alone or in combination—is sufficient. As Martha McCoy, executive director of the Study Circles Resource Center, notes: "There is a vast ground between volunteering and voting that needs to be cultivated. The communities that are bringing hundreds and thousands of people into dialogue and action are cultivating that ground."[26]

They are not just about "talking." It is easy to become enamored with a romantic notion of public deliberation as the "good old days of the town hall meetings" held on the local common—a scenario that is not only nearly nonexistent these days, but also ignores the fact that such meetings were not as inclusive or egalitarian as they are sometimes portrayed. Moreover, the idea that all problems can or should be addressed through "dialogue" or "talking them through," can strike some as naïve, elitist, or simply unfeasible.

Citizen-centered adherents stress that although deliberation, dialogue, and discussion is important to citizen-centered public work, it is not enough to enhance and sustain healthy civic cultures. "If people don't see the results of all this deliberation at one time or another," Ira Harkavy asserts, "it will be difficult to sustain any kind of civic renewal. If people are just engaged in process and not results, it's an empty promise. You have to link the process and outcomes. No democratic process, no democratic results." In other words, "deliberation without work is empty."[27]

They do not replace politics or other democratic processes. Citizen-centered approaches do not presume to replace government or political systems. As David

Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, notes: "Organic, citizen-based democracy is not an alternative form of politics like direct democracy; it is the *foundation* for democratic institutions and representative government" because democracy "operates through the joint efforts that citizens make to solve common problems."[28] Others agree, seeing deliberative public work as integral to the political processes and policy-related decision-making that increasingly have left out ordinary citizens who have become tired of partisanship, infighting, and "clubbiness" that has come to characterize politics in the media age. Although strengthening public deliberation will not necessarily solve all the problems of institutional politics, Mathews adds, the problems of "the institutional system will only get Band-Aids if we don't keep the foundations of self-government intact. And that is what encouraging public deliberation can help to do."[29]

Harold Saunders, president of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue and former assistant secretary of state, agrees. He calls for a new kind of politics—one that moves beyond politics as only what governments, parties, and interest groups do to what *people* say and do and the relationships they have with one another, as well as with larger political institutions. Specifically, he says politics should become a "process of continuous interaction engaging significant clusters of citizens in and out of government and the relationships they form to solve public problems in whole bodies politic across permeable borders…."[30] As a result, politics would become open-ended, in that instead of institutions such as the media, government agencies, or policymakers deciding for people what will be discussed and under what parameters, these institutions and leaders would bring people together to decide what matters to them so that they can determine priorities and actions collectively.

Deliberative processes can also bring together people who feel disenfranchised from traditional politics to explore new ways of "doing politics," and as a result, become civically engaged in the process of larger institutional reform to create political systems that value the voices and participation of ordinary citizens. Today, there are millions of Americans—about one-third of the electorate and half of young people—who see themselves as independents because they have consciously rejected "partyism" and all the constraints that come with it. This is a constituency ripe for becoming more involved in policy discussions and questions free of labels; yet they continue to be viewed by political parties merely as "swing voters." At the end of the day, says one reform advocate, any "political direction that narrows the organizing of independents to party-building as an end in itself misses what [many] Americans are looking for."[31] Independents' historic role as drivers of reform—including the abolitionists, women's and civil rights advocates, and others—also make them a potential force for changing not only a system they see as damaged, but the way and degree to which Americans are engaged.[32]

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"But We Already Do That!"

THE HEADING ABOVE IS A COMMON RESPONSE WHEN SERVICE and civic engagement organizations or initiatives are presented with citizen-centered frameworks. Indeed, most efforts to encourage service and civic engagement are based on a notion of helping people and communities become more vibrant and healthier places to live—now and in the future. Some, also, are built on a notion of empowerment—helping people help themselves or encouraging them to become stronger actors in building stronger communities. Others offer training to develop future leaders, and still others offer those who have never had the opportunity to "give back" a chance to do so through volunteering, mentoring, or other activities.

Although these efforts are important and vital, their primary goal is usually not creating opportunities for public deliberation, goal-setting, and action-taking. Many programs also tend to define problems and solutions in advance, rather than "create open forums, networks, and institutions in which diverse groups of citizens can make their own decisions and act efficiently."[33] Much service and civic engagement work, for example, tends to be episodic, time-limited, or narrowly focused on a pre-determined issue or political agenda. Some volunteering efforts do *for,* rather than do *with* citizens in communities, leaving citizens relatively passive recipients of services or as participants in community projects that may not be addressing the most pressing needs the community believes are most important. Similarly,

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> Focused primarily on culture change, rather than short-term outcomes, issues, or victories, although the latter can be a foundation through which communities achieve a sense of efficacy to move forward toward other efforts collectively.

> Representative of a cross-section of the entire community, rather than parts of it.

> Concerned with the deliberative process to identify public problems or concerns—no matter how messy or complex it can be—as equally as important to civic engagement as the tactics employed to address these problems and concerns.

> Cognizant of the importance of helping people form and promote their own decisions, build capacities for self-government, and promote open-ended civic processes.

Citizen-Centered Approaches Are Not:

> Structured or pre-determined programs, initiatives, projects, or campaigns into which people are asked to "plug in" and participate.

> Focused on providing "training" or "education."

> Planned, structured, or driven by outside experts, professionals, organizations, or those external to the community (however "community" is defined).

> Attempting to inspire, persuade. or manipulate people to adopt a particular view or position on an issue or agenda.

political engagement efforts sometimes decide the issues that need to be addressed with little or no input from communities, deploying experts or professional organizers to "mobilize" communities, or viewing residents as foot soldiers in carrying out actions for pre-determined agendas.

Community organizing is a strategy that traditionally has been associated with citizen-centered approaches, and when done well—with citizens leading the way—it is an effective strategy for advancing cultural change. In a citizen-centered public deliberation frame, however, organizing is a *component* of a larger effort that attempts to involve *all* those in a community who identify opportunities for collective action that emerge from discussions among all participants. This does not mean that citizen-centered public work replaces the other ways in which individuals and groups organize or advocate; instead, it complements them by building relationships among all groups toward the goal of enhancing "public policy for democracy so that the design of policy at every level of the federal system enhances citizens' capacities for responsible self-government, rather than treating them as merely passive clients, aggrieved victims, entitled claimants, or consumers ever-ready to use the exit option."[34]

Auspiciously, there are organizations and efforts that are putting citizens at the center, leaving goals and strategies undetermined until citizens deliberate and make their own decisions, and taking concerted action that is inculcating an ethic of engagement. Among these are the following.

- Faith-based organizing networks such as **PICO** (formerly the **Pacific Institute for Community Organization**), the **Gamaliel Foundation,** the **Industrial Areas Foundation**, and **DART (Direct Action and Research Training Center)**, provide opportunities for people and congregations to translate their faith into action by bringing them together to identify and solve neighborhood problems, as well as weigh in on broader issues at the city, state, and national levels. PICO, for example, emphasizes people coming together "based on faith and values, not just issues or anger" and on active listening through house meetings and larger public deliberative meetings that involve a broad cross-section of communities in public deliberative activities that, eventually, morph into action.
- A new statewide effort, **"Minnesota Works Together,"** is working to improve civic life by building relationships among diverse individuals, organizations, and entire sectors committed to shifting the culture from "me" to "we." It involves students, community groups, and legislators from all over the state who are working collaboratively to solve issues that are important to the larger public, providing a "civic laboratory for the nation." One of the participating organizations, the **Jane Addams School** in St. Paul, has created a path-breaking neighborhood alliance that has seen the entire community claim responsibility for education.

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- **Study Circles,** a national organization that convenes groups of community residents to develop their own abilities to solve problems, has worked in 43 states since 1989 and with 412 communities and engaged thousands of people nationwide. In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for example, circles began when 200 sixth-graders met with 75 community and school board leaders, parents, and business people to talk about bullying in schools. The trust that was developed led to more dialogue and, eventually, to collective action on the issue of school redistricting, which had previously not been touched by the city council. The circles have now become part of developing the city's 10-year master plan, which has incorporated many of the residents' ideas. In Kansas City, study circles have helped to eradicate drug houses in neighborhoods, launch a new tenants association, set up a youth sports camp, create a Spanish-speaking parents association and tutoring service, reduce crime, and boost graduation rates from 50 percent to 70 percent. At the national level, Study Circles has worked with foundations, policy groups, and service organizations to help them include citizen-centered deliberation and action into their efforts.

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- With support from the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation,** the **Youth Innovation Fund** helps to build the capacity of young people to participate as decision-makers and change agents in their communities. In Nashville, Tennessee, for example, young people are working with adults from numerous public and private institutions to design and implement new systems and programs that will help improve the city's public schools. Young people have also taken a leadership role in coordinating youth input and involvement in other local issues that have been identified by the community as important. In Cleveland, Mississippi, young people, through the Cleveland Youth Council, conducted an extensive analysis uncovering increases in teen pregnancy rates and a lack of recreational or after-school programs for young people that became a catalyst for several small town hall meetings to address these issues. As a result, community leaders agreed to establish a community youth center featuring leadership and recreational programs for young people across the city. Currently, young people are working with the Chamber of Commerce and a local university to create a business plan and proposal for the center.
- In Flint, Michigan, the **Harwood Institute** worked with a wide range of groups and individuals to identify and discuss ideas for civic renewal in a community that had internalized a sense of hopelessness that any change was remotely possible, given the deep economic and social turmoil it had been experiencing in recent years. Through the creation of "The Place for Public Ideas," a "school" through which scores of Flint residents could convene and deliberate new ideas and solutions for the problems they faced, Flint was able to increase the number of identifiable community leaders, establish more than three dozen new networks of collaborating organizations, and increase public trust in institutions. The institute,

now housed at the local United Way, also helped to establish "Homes for Civic Engagement" in housing groups, churches, the cultural center, and the business association.

- At the national level, **National Issues Forums** bring people of diverse views together to talk about important issues that concern them through an array of venues—from small study circles held in people's homes to large community gatherings. As structured deliberative discussions, the forums offer citizens opportunities to weigh possible ways to address a problem and then take action. The network is deeply embedded in communities across the country, including West Virginia, through the West Virginia Center for Civic Life; Cincinnati, where more than 150 forums on racial tensions were held after a series of police shootings; El Paso, Texas, where forums have been held for decades and are televised by local public broadcasting stations; and in schools, community colleges, and prisons in several states.[35]
- Also at the national level, **AmericaSpeaks,** a nonprofit that facilitates deliberations around public issues, has convened thousands of people to make their voices heard on everything from rebuilding the World Trade Center site after the September 11th attacks to the future of Social Security. The keys to large-scale deliberations such as these, the organization claims, are diverse participants, neutral materials, table facilitation, participation technology, immediate reporting, and links to decision-makers, which provide the deliberative outcomes with legitimacy and efficiency. Also important, however, is the element of "embeddedness."[36] When organizing these deliberations, AmericaSpeaks partners with local decision-makers, community organizations and institutions, civic groups, and residents, thereby fostering local ownership of deliberative processes, strengthening local structures for public action, and promoting the legitimacy of the outcomes. Ultimately, the organization hopes to embed such practices into national institutions and organizations to support large-scale deliberations at the national level.[37]

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What Can the Service and Civic Engagement Field do to Advance Citizen-Centered Approaches to Civic Engagement?

THE SERVICE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FIELD CAN HELP advance these approaches in several ways:

SHIFT THE FOCUS.

Advancing citizen-centered approaches requires a shift in focus from "What we are going to do to encourage civic engagement, how, with whom, where and for how long?" to:

- What *opportunities* can we provide for people to convene with others who are concerned about issues in their communities, schools, or workplaces to deliberate about problems and issues; define these for themselves; and decide what they will do about them?
- Do we see people as consumers of our services and activities, or as citizens?
- To what extent can we help people feel more empowered to carry out what *they* plan to do about

public problems in ways that *they* believe are most appropriate for them and their communities?

- How can we *facilitate* citizen-driven and citizen–centered engagement so that it becomes deeply embedded in the day-to-day functioning of communities and people in those communities are able to solve the problems of everyday life?
- Are we asking people to "plug into" already existing initiatives or decide for themselves what to do?

START YOUNG.

Young people are disproportionately represented among the civic innovators, those dissatisfied with politics as usual and committed to creating new, constructive, citizen-centered opportunities. But many young people are left out of civic life, partly because their assets (creativity, energy, idealism, and fresh thinking) are overlooked. Civil society has no future unless young people are deliberately taught the skills they need to organize and collaborate, but such instruction must start young, many believe—younger than is now the case. As Jon Zaff, vice president for research at America's Promise: The Alliance for Youth, states, "Lots of civic engagement efforts that focus on young people start way too late, either in high school or later, when research shows that the development of emotional and social skills needed to ensure civic behaviors in adult life are formed much earlier."[38] Among those skills are learning how to listen, think critically, work in groups, and tolerance—all essential to how effectively young people can engage in community problem-solving as adults.[39]

Civil society has no future unless young people are deliberately taught the skills they need to organize and collaborate, but such instruction must start young, many believe—younger than is now the case.

Starting earlier will require new approaches to civic learning that focus not only on civic knowledge, but also civic skills, behaviors, and attitudes. This is far easier to say than do, given that schools are already overburdened and stressed due to testing requirements and demands to meet state standards. There also continues to be division between those who believe that civic learning should focus on government and history and those who view experiential learning as equally important to civic learning. This divide has made it difficult to adopt more comprehensive approaches to civic learning that include both these elements, as well as time for reflection and discussion about public issues and current events—discussions that have been relatively scarce in recent decades because of schools' fears of inciting controversy and/or parents' disapproval.

Civic learning also tends to be focused primarily on high school students, particularly 11th- and 12th-graders, rather than being offered at all grade levels in developmentally appropriate ways. To embed civic engagement as an ethos among young people, says Judy Woodruff, "we need to start as young as elementary schools in helping young people work in their communities, identify problems, and have opportunities to discuss these with their peers so that they develop a sense of ownership about the process." As MTV's "Just Cause" research indicates, young people who are the most involved in their communities got their start, on average, at age 12.

Civic learning and opportunities to practice civic engagement are not limited to school-based activities, however. Families, community organizations, and other institutions are just as important in providing opportunities for young people to learn and practice civic skills—and most important, feel effective as civic actors. As John Minkler, an education consultant, notes, "The more meaningful opportunities [young people] have to practice core democratic values, create learning communities, and express their voice, the more they will become effective citizens and community leaders" and able to work with others in their community to "address the critical problems facing mankind today."[40] This will happen, says Kenny Holdsman, director of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Youth Innovation Fund, only when young people are viewed as partners in collective efforts to improve civic life, rather than constituents or foot soldiers for "adult-driven programs or agendas with pre-determined approaches, tactics, and issue slices."[41]

INVOLVE ALL COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS.

All types of community institutions—faith-based organizations, schools, businesses, and government agencies—should be engaged in providing opportunities for public deliberation and problem-solving. Nevertheless, they often treat people, especially poor and working poor people, "like outcasts or even outlaws" on issues and problems that affect them, writes Ernie Cortés, organizer for the Industrial Areas Foundation. To that end, citizens must begin rebuilding institutions in ways that encourage broader deliberation among diverse groups of people and organizations in communities and, ultimately, help undergird action. "For democratic communities to work," asserts Noelle McAfee, associate editor of the *Kettering Review*, "there need to be longstanding public institutions through which people can come together, institutions that are not shy about standing up for what citizens are coming to, nor of building relationships with officials. These institutions could convene public deliberations *and* serve as venues for public action, convening with officials, and even advocating for the public wills."[42]

"For democratic communities to work, there need to be longstanding public institutions through which people can come together."

Noelle McAfee
Associate Editor, Kettering Review

Schools can serve as central institutions in efforts to bring communities together around common issues and concerns. "By embedding experiential learning institutionally into schools, including colleges and universities, we help embed civic engagement in communities where those schools are located and beyond," says Ira Harkavy. Service-learning, for example, has been instrumental in moving toward this goal by linking classroom-based instruction with community projects that offer students the chance to apply what they have learned to "real-world" situations, as well as how to build collaborative relationships with a wide range of individuals and organizations outside the school. Although service-learning has sometimes been criticized for focusing primarily on "volunteering" and acts of charity, rather than on helping to engage young people in solving social problems, the latter increasingly is being attempted through innovative programs that link students' volunteering and community service with rigorous curricula that include reflection and analysis about these experiences and deliberative discussion about them, and about the larger policy

issues, current events, and political processes affecting communities.

Faith-based organizations have long been central in promoting and advancing an ethic of service and charity in communities, but they are also well-positioned to advance a similar ethic of civic engagement. In Boston, for example, Reverend Eugene Rivers is engaging and mobilizing his congregation—and others—to deal with the gangs, violence, and drugs that have wreaked havoc on the community. Recognizing that volunteering would not be sufficient to address this issue—nor would waiting for policymakers to do something—Rivers worked with his congregation, community residents, companies, other churches, and policymakers to identify and deliberate about the problem and ways to approach it, and then decide themselves the course of action they would take. One approach was to permit young boys to continue to be members of gangs, but to organize the gangs around positive activities, not guns. After having been plagued by a crime wave with many deaths, Boston saw its homicide rate drop dramatically over the next two years.

In Boston, Reverend Eugene Rivers is engaging and mobilizing his congregation—and others—to deal with the gangs, violence, and drugs that have wreaked havoc on the community.

A challenge for the service and civic engagement field is understanding the importance of including faith-based institutions in all civic renewal work, rather than "siloing" it into the separate category of "faith-based initiatives." "A large amount of giving, volunteering, and community work goes on in religious communities," notes Les Lenkowsky, a professor and director of graduate programs at Indiana University's Center on Philanthropy, "but the dialogue about faith-based organizations tends to focus on using them as intermediaries *for* something else that's usually pre-determined by others, rather than on what we can do to help them do what their doing,"[43] including public work and deliberation.

Private-sector institutions also have a key role to play in fomenting more public deliberation and action-taking, especially in the communities where they are located and do business. Such efforts would go beyond the promising and positive steps many corporations have taken to incorporate a social responsibility ethic into their repertoire—such as encouraging volunteering and community service among executives and employees—to include working in partnership with community residents from all parts of the community to discuss public issues and problems. Corporations can also help to provide financing of actions the community has decided are appropriate to implement.

Government and other public agencies also can encourage more public voice in policymaking and other processes, but in many people's eyes, it is more prohibitive, than welcoming of citizens' voices. An unprecedented opportunity to send a different message, says Peter Levine, was missed completely with Hurricane Katrina—an event the federal government could have used to convene citizens to air their concerns and possible solutions to the crisis. "The federal government," Levine says, "should create an infrastructure that is ready to organize public deliberations when needed. This infrastructure would consist of standards for fair

and open public deliberations, a federal office that could coordinate many simultaneous forums and collect their findings, and a list of vetted contractors eligible to convene public deliberations with federal grants."[44]

Carmen Sirianni suggests that agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) could become a "civic enabler of consequence" that builds community capacity and "facilitates partnerships so that civic associations can begin to grapple effectively with a whole host of complex environmental problems that command-and-control regulation alone cannot address." Sirianni argues that, with the exception of national service programs, government's role in civic revitalization has generally been absent in public and scholarly discussions about the issue, despite studies that show that "some of the most robust forms of local participation are those formally recognized and supported by city government on a city-wide basis." He points to the EPA's systematic efforts over several years to provide support that built the capacity of local watershed associations and the intermediaries that worked with them as examples of how such efforts have, in turn, "transformed the behaviors of individual citizens" by educating them about the hazards of pesticides and lawn fertilizers, introducing sustainability practices among farmers and business, forming nature education groups, and undertaking a broad range of participatory restoration and education projects. The grants also enabled national organizations and resources to provide training and other assistance.[45]

Steven Goldsmith, board chair of the Corporation for National and Community Service, and John Bridgeland have proposed that government agencies generate "civic impact statements" in connection with their grantmaking so that government is mindful of and promotes more direct citizen participation in local programs receiving federal support. The idea is to ensure that government policy promotes more civic engagement, rather than discourage it.

USE TECHNOLOGY TO CREATE A NEW KIND OF "PUBLIC COMMONS."

Technology is seen by many as one of the most promising venues for encouraging, facilitating, and increasing citizen-centered dialogue, deliberation, organizing, and action around a wide variety of issues, but it has been relegated to the sidelines in many of the public discussions about service and civic engagement. At the same time, millions of Americans have hungrily grabbed at what technology has to offer to develop social networks and connect with others not only in their geographic communities, but across the country and internationally.

"An unprecedented opportunity to send a different message was missed completely with Hurricane Katrina."

Peter Levine
Executive Director,
Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)

A smaller but growing segment of the population has been working to use this connective power for civic purposes because it is one of the few, if not the only, mediums in the world that allows 200 million people to "take action and be active, rather than reactive, like television and media," says Joe Trippi, former campaign manager for the Howard Dean presidential campaign.[46] He compares the advent of the Internet to the invention of the printing press as one of the most significant events in American history, especially as a tool for increasing civic participation and engagement.

Trippi and others point to the Dean campaign's ability to raise significant amounts of money for his presidential run and also connect strangers with similar interests to work collectively toward common goals as evidence of the power of technology to provide a new venue for connecting people and giving them opportunities to take action. He notes, "If you tried to put up your picture on telephone poles in your neighborhood with the words 'Come to my house and work for Howard Dean tonight at this address,' people would think you were crazy. But that's exactly what the Internet allowed people to do—and 175,000 people showed up in the houses of, in many cases, virtual strangers. The miracle wasn't that this happened with so many people but that we had strangers having serious conversations, which would lead them to engage others the next time." He believes that this trust, which data underscores is essential for public deliberative processes, stems directly from the Internet, which allows people to "say and do things they might not normally say or do initially in public."

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Joe Trippi
Former Campaign Manager for the Howard Dean presidential campaign

Indeed, the Internet has begun to help change everything from journalism (through blogging that challenges the media to go beyond headlines) to education (through open source sites such as Wikipedia and others) and may now have the potential to change our democracy, especially institutions that have increasingly provided little incentive or opportunities for citizens to participate. Recently, for example, hundreds of philanthropists, nonprofits, charities, technology companies, and others gathered to discuss the civic potential of using Web 2.0 technology—a collection of user-oriented technologies such as self-publishing. Organized by Daniel Ben-Horin, executive director of CompuMentor, a nonprofit intermediary, the conference included groups from the Kiwanis Club and the American Cancer Society to Amnesty International and Blogher. Ben-Horin's organization, in fact, developed a set of Web-based tools that organizations and communities can use to self-organize, hoping that these could harness the "same kind of energy that has been mobilized for Wikipedia…to fight AIDS or hunger or homelessness."[47]

These events have occurred almost parallel to the service and civic engagement field, which rarely intersects with the technology sphere. Among the reasons for this are unawareness or "illiteracy" about technology and its capacities and a tendency to view civic work under a more traditional organizational or institutional rubric—one that many in the technology sphere see as increasingly becoming outdated. In traditional organizations, decisions are made hierarchically and then distributed "out" into the world where they are received by people. With technology, people now have the opportunity to weigh in through a more reciprocal process and choose from literally millions of options for information and services to which they previously had not had access.

"When you're open to a citizen-centered framework, your organization becomes much smarter," Trippi asserts. Allison Fine, author of *Momentum: Igniting Social Change in the Connected Age*, believes that technology helps to "break down the walls of

institutions" in ways that promote more collaboration and reciprocity among diverse groups of individuals and groups. It also provides the "grease" for more rapid and efficient social problem-solving. "When you have the ability, even as a single individual, to see a problem like an oil spill on a lake and can tell thousands of people about it instantly, you can mobilize more people faster and more effectively." As a result, the role of organizations shifts from agenda-setting leaders to supporters or diffusers of information and resources across wider networks. The thousands of people who left their offices and schools in early 2006 to participate in immigration marches, Fine points out, were fueled less by formal organizations and more by the buzz created among peers using cell phones, text messaging, and blogs.[48]

Trippi, Fine, and others believe that the next challenge for those interested in civic engagement is developing ways to use these tools in ways that help people engage for the common good, rather than for polarizing purposes or issues, which has turned off many Americans from traditional politics and political institutions. Starting from the larger notion of the "common good" will lead to more participation at the onset and will build trust among diverse groups of people, which, in turn, can lay a foundation for more productive discussions when disagreements about issues do arise. Ultimately, technology holds the promise of turning the entire power structure on its head, empowering grassroots citizens who previously felt voiceless.

It is important, however, to underscore that technology should not be seen as the silver bullet for civic engagement but rather an important tool in it. "Technology gets in the way sometimes of really moving toward our larger goal of participation," says Howard Rheingold, author of *Smart Mobs*, "so you can't start there. You have to start by asking people, 'What interests you? What do you care about? What issues get you interested?' and then help them explore ways to use technology to turn those ideas or desires into action."[49] Rheingold is currently working on developing curricula that helps educators use the technology with which young people are comfortable—such as digital media, blogs, wikis, and podcasts—and their interest in peer social interaction toward activities focused more on civic engagement, including helping young people develop a "public voice" on issues that are important to them.

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It is still too early to tell whether this rapidly changing medium will be a net benefit for civic engagement, especially whether people can address entrenched social problems by associating online. In particular, there is a relative lack of online work that focuses on local, geographical communities—even though many real-world problems are local. It also remains to be seen whether people can develop civic identities online, rather than become active

citizens through their families, churches, schools, and neighborhoods and then use computers as tools. As Deepak Bhargava, executive director of the Center for Community Change, notes, "Technology has been enormously useful in improving the transparency of many of our public institutions and can be an effective tool in distributing information and making connections among people, but it shouldn't ever take the place of face-to-face contact, which is equally important in strengthening the civic and political life of communities."[50]

"Technology can be an effective tool in distributing information and making connections among people, but it shouldn't ever take the place of face-to-face contact."

Deepak Bhargava
Executive Director of the
Center for Community Change

EXPLORE AND CREATE NEW MECHANISMS TO ENCOURAGE THESE PRACTICES.

Inherent in citizen-centered approaches is the conundrum of how to facilitate and encourage these processes in ways that allow citizens themselves to be the drivers. Many people, for example, are not necessarily willing or able to jump into full-blown community discussions, which can dissolve into little more than one or two people holding forth in ways that quell or prohibit other voices or opinions. Moreover, "we don't even know how to talk publicly in groups anymore," Levine notes, because "we've been influenced so much by the loud voices in the media who tend to represent diametrically opposed viewpoints about things with little in-between." Today, instead of idealism, irony is valued, which tends to silence people who do have a vision about the "common good" or what their communities could be, especially in public forums.

Ernie Cortés adds that in this age of "political correctness," instead of engaging in conversations or discussions, we tend to now engage in "station identification," through which we "basically identify ourselves and our predetermined positions, then… pause appropriately while someone else speaks and we think about what we are going to say next. Or we avoid conversation completely.…As a result, the real conversations of engagement—of listening, and particularly of listening to the other person as another, as someone with a different perspective, a different point of view, a different story or history—rarely take place anymore."[51]

New processes, structures, and venues, therefore, need to be developed and diffused across communities in ways that will allow citizens to have free and open forums to deliberate in new ways and that involve wider swaths of populations. Rich Harwood, for example, believes that rather than "coming into communities and facilitating," which is antithetical to a citizen-driven approach, it may be better to work through existing organizations and infrastructure to help these institutions understand the importance of creating opportunities for public problem-solving and then working *with* citizens to do so. As Cortés notes, "people don't have deliberative conversations on their own," but must be supported by mediating institutions such as neighborhood organizations, congregations, families, and workplaces.[52] New ground rules for engaging in such deliberation must also be developed to ensure that respectful and substantive discourse results and is seen as a foundation for collective action over the long term.

CONDUCT RIGOROUS RESEARCH ABOUT THESE APPROACHES.

While considerable research has been conducted on the levels of volunteering, voting, community service, and political participation among numerous demographics, there has been relatively little study about the motivating forces behind such behaviors, especially whether people see them as merely a way to make a difference because they feel that they have no control over the larger issues that affect them *or* as a foundation for all citizens to become more engaged in community problem-solving and civic life over time. There is also a dearth of research that examines whether and to what extent the range of service and civic engagement efforts occurring across the country are citizen-driven. How prevalent are such efforts and what are the circumstances that fuel them? Some believe there are relatively few, but others say there are more, because they simply haven't been defined as such.

Perhaps the biggest question is whether and to what extent citizen-driven and citizen-centered approaches help to embed an ethos of civic engagement in American life. That will require longitudinal research that examines the questions above across various points of time, as well as others such as: How do different communities approach issues? Which are effective and why? Are people more proactive in convening and working collectively to address public problems? Are there different types of "community," and if so, what are they? Is there an increasing demand for this type of engagement? Has it changed institutions or processes in ways that allow for more citizen participation? If so, how?

ENCOURAGE MORE FUNDING FOR THESE APPROACHES.

Despite the interest many funders say they have in enhancing service and civic engagement, there are still relatively few that have made a commitment to supporting citizen-centered public work in communities. Critics charge that this is due to a reluctance among many institutionalized funders to seriously consider the importance of local efforts, preferring to support bigger initiatives, especially those that are driven by professionals or other experts who provide training, services, or resources to people in communities, rather than working in partnership with them to create more vibrant civic cultures. Although some funders may assert that these initiatives "involve community members," Bill Schambra observes, that "often means little more than getting 'input' from them and then doing what funders had planned anyway because they have a map of the problem in their head and a map of the solution so that no matter how open-ended they say they are to community input, that's all it is, is community input."

Citizen-centered work is also incremental, slow, and does not necessarily reap results that are easily measured or benchmarked, which has become increasingly important to funders in recent years. Additionally, it is more focused on the process through which citizens come together to decide for themselves what problems or issues they want to

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address as the way to enhance civic engagement, rather than on a set of pre-determined issues or agendas—a concept that even funders who support community organizing or mobilization can find challenging because it is inchoate and organic. As Robert Sherman, director of the effective citizenry program at the Surdna Foundation and a long-time supporter of these kinds of efforts, points out, "These are important approaches, but there hasn't yet been a great deal of demonstration that communities that engage in deliberation can move effectively from these discussions to action that gets concrete results. There needs to be just as much emphasis on the action that comes out of these processes if we want more funders to pay attention."[53]

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The first step, says Schambra, is to articulate the theory behind these approaches clearly and make sure funders understand the importance and legitimacy of supporting "local, concrete, and gritty grassroots work" that can be the foundation of a more expansive and, ultimately, national ethos that embraces and practices civic engagement on a daily basis. Community foundations, many believe, are engaged in some of the most innovative efforts to support community-based public deliberation and action and need to be involved more integrally in larger discussions about advancing civic engagement than they are currently. Funders also can play a role in helping to link community-based efforts together and bring them into a more dynamic relationship with each other so that all people have opportunities to make their voices heard in addressing the problems and issues that concern them.

EXPLORE AND DEVELOP STRATEGIES TO HELP COMMUNITIES MOVE FROM DELIBERATION TO ACTION.

While deliberation is important and can help strengthen the civic life and vitality of communities, it can and should serve as a means to the end of communities being able to *take action* collectively in ways that reap results that they can see and experience. Deliberative forums, however, "seem to occur only here and there, with little discernible effect," Noelle McAfee observes, suggesting that the real challenge is "to find ways to connect public deliberation to public policy-making, to find some way that public judgment can make its way into law."[54] That will require adequate mediating structures such as churches, schools, neighborhood associations, and others that people themselves put together, oversee, and trust. In turn, these groups can help engage elected officials and more formal institutions in processes that involve people more directly.[55]

Moving Forward

THE EXTRAORDINARY EFFORTS, TALENTS, AND COMMITMENT of those in the service and civic engagement field have been instrumental in raising public awareness of and participation in a number of activities that have benefited millions of Americans across the country. From volunteering and community service to organizing and voting, these efforts reflect Americans' longstanding belief in the value of "giving back."

The challenge now is moving from asking Americans to "plug into" what currently exists—whether through programs, organizations, or initiatives—to helping them create their own efforts that will address public concerns, issues, or problems in ways they see as most appropriate. This kind of citizen-centered and citizen-created cultural approach is a subtle, yet powerful, shift from the way in which service and civic engagement tend to be discussed, at least publicly, and implemented. It will require changing the way in which service and, especially, civic engagement, are defined, assessed, and implemented. It will also require coalescence, interconnections, and momentum coming from many diverse trends and efforts. Finally, it will require letting go and letting citizens themselves take control—perhaps the most difficult challenge of all.

There is evidence, however, that this approach can work—and is working. Fostering deliberation, interconnections, public work together across lines of difference, and the development of a common language for the common good can lead to increased confidence and hope that stems from seeing efforts in particular arenas as parts of a larger whole. In fact, there are encouraging strands of civic renewal to build on across the country and that reflect the citizen-centered framework presented in this paper and that have the potential to serve as a new movement for civic revitalization in the United States.

The service and civic engagement field is also well positioned to advance these approaches by:

- Offering venues for citizen-centered participation and deliberation;
- Diffusing information and resources that help communities, institutions, and people engage in this work;
- Educating all three sectors (private, nonprofit, and public) about this approach and encouraging them to serve as "mediating institutions" in communities to provide free and open spaces for public work;

The challenge now is moving from asking Americans to "plug into" what currently exists to helping them create their own efforts that will address public concerns, issues, or problems in ways they see as most appropriate.

- Devising roadmaps to make clearer the processes and challenges inherent in fomenting such "bottom up" approaches; and
- Exploring ways in which deliberation and public problem-solving can lead to action that leads to positive and clear results for communities.

Above all, the service and civic engagement field can generate new hope that people have the ability and desire to take action to build healthy communities with vibrant civic cultures that are sustainable and reflected in everyday life. To achieve this goal, the field can take the lead in weaving together these various innovations into a "larger tapestry that can enable democratic work to become broader and deeper, as well as more complementary and sustainable in the decades ahead"[56]—work that is essential to "encountering powerful institutional and cultural forces in our society that tend to undermine citizen power and capacity for self-government,"[57] civic engagement, and ultimately, democracy.

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