

## **Strengthening the Public Participation Elements of the Open Government Plan**

Public participation is the area where the Open Government agenda has made the least headway, and that holds the greatest potential benefit for communities and the nation. It is also the realm in which other countries are advancing beyond the United States, turning us from a leader to a follower in democratic innovation.

Planned, structured participation has been shown to have the following benefits:

- Raising the level of civility and trust in public discourse (see <http://bit.ly/swmlfh> or <http://bit.ly/uZlQWj>);
- Reducing government costs through closer public oversight and better understanding of citizen needs and attitudes (<http://bit.ly/sXKq50>);
- Creating more realistic budgets, either by raising “tax morale,” building support for spending cuts, or both (<http://t.co/ZGWDKxN>);
- Generating new policy ideas and tapping the problem-solving capacity of citizens (<http://bit.ly/vSSwzd> or <http://bit.ly/uKT139>);
- Breaking through legislative gridlock on high-profile policy questions (<http://bit.ly/vxco9> or <http://hvr.me/i6DAHC>).

Participation has different benefits and challenges at the local level, which is closest to citizens’ daily concerns and goals, and the state and national levels, where it has a much broader potential impact. Evidence suggests that participation is most compelling to people when it allows them a range of opportunities and reasons to engage, on different issues and different levels of governance. Beginning by “going where the people are” – in neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, on social media, and in existing online forums – is a foundational premise of successful public participation.

But unlike some countries such as Brazil and India, the United States lacks an established national participation infrastructure to facilitate the kind of multi-faceted, citizen-centered engagement that links citizens to local, state, and federal issues. Instead, at the federal level a variety of face-to-face and online tools have been developed and used, usually in a piecemeal fashion. (For a comprehensive assessment of the public participation plans of federal agencies, see <http://bit.ly/oS66Rk>) Local examples of public participation tend to be more robust, but are not linked to one another, let alone state or federal policymakers. Agencies and communities alike need a sustainable, widely supported infrastructure for public engagement that accommodates a range of participation tools and methods (<http://bit.ly/rWeHaU>).

One of the primary weaknesses, therefore, of the Administration’s work in participation is reflected still in this latest call for input: it treats participation as a discrete, federal, agency-delimited activity; it assumes that participation is merely an input-gathering exercise; and it makes no mention of the possibility of cross-agency collaboration or connections between federal and local government.

### **Measuring participation**

The challenge of measuring public participation is complicated by the question of whether an

agency or community is launching a single engagement activity or implementing a well-rounded participation plan. The use of any single participation tool or technology on its own is likely to be disappointing, because there is no “magic bullet” method or app, and because citizen interests are diverse and multi-faceted.

There are some participation indicators that are simple and versatile enough, however, that they can be applied to both single activities and comprehensive plans. The most basic benchmarks track the number and diversity of participants, and the depth of their participation. These indicators include:

- Number of participants;
- Diversity of participants, according to demographic factors such as age, racial and ethnic background, and income level;
- Diversity of participants, according to ideology and party affiliation;
- Number of participation hours spent per participant.

A second set of indicators focuses on the quality of the participation experience; these are more likely to reflect the presence of a broader participation plan (or the absence thereof). These measures include:

- Level of participant satisfaction with the process;
- Extent to which participants took public action of some kind (voting, volunteering, engaging in advocacy, working with others to solve a public problem, running for public office, etc.) as a result of the experience;
- Quantity of interactions between participants, and between participants and public officials and employees;
- Quality of deliberation within the process, including analytical rigor, equality of participation, level of civility, and consideration of values and viewpoints (see <http://yhoo.it/tg9kVp> for a comprehensive example of measuring the quality of deliberation).

The third category of measurement deals with how participation impacted the participants, public officials and employees, the policymaking process, and problem-solving (by both governmental and non-governmental actors) on the issue being addressed. These measures are highly dependent on the presence of a broad array of participation opportunities, and also on the political context surrounding the participation:

- Impact of the experience on participants’ feelings of trust in government, community attachment, interest in public affairs, confidence in their capacity to effect change, and openness to the views of others;
- Impact of the experience on public officials’ and public employees’ feelings of trust in the public, confidence in their capacity to effect change, and openness to the views of others;
- Level of similarity between the recommendations of participants and the public policies eventually adopted;
- Number and ultimate success of new problem-solving efforts (involving citizens, government, non-governmental organizations, or some combination) to emerge from the process.

Perhaps the most significant opportunity in this area is to find ways of involving citizens in the work of tracking, measuring, and analyzing public participation. Just as well-structured participation taps into citizens' capacity to understand and solve public problems, it should capitalize on their ability to improve participation itself. New online tools that allow citizens to gather and analyze data, along with evaluation methodologies such as action research, suggest new directions for innovation.

### **Minimum standards**

Public participation that is poorly planned and structured can waste time and resources, and do more harm than good. The riskiest initiatives are those that:

- Do not utilize a proactive, network-based recruitment process to ensure a large number and wide variety of participants;
- Present a partisan or one-sided view of the issue, and do not allow citizens to consider a range of arguments, background information, and data on the issue being addressed;
- Request policy ideas from citizens that cannot reasonably be implemented by government (particularly if the initiative does not include a plan or procedure for citizens and other actors to help with implementation);
- Produce opinions and recommendations from a divided public, without providing an opportunity for people on different sides of a policy debate to talk with each other and find common ground;
- Fail to build in meaningful opportunities for public managers and other leaders to respond to citizen input, both during the process and farther along in the policymaking cycle.

A comprehensive participation plan can minimize these risks, and raise the overall chance of success, for several reasons: 1) it is likely to employ more than one tool or opportunity for engagement; 2) as a sustained effort rather than a one-off activity, it allows for learning and improvement over time; and 3) it should establish an infrastructure for participation that eliminates some of the duplication and wasted effort of occasional, temporary initiatives.

Over the long term, agencies and communities are likely to be more participatory and effective if they:

- Create cross-sector coalitions of organizations that are committed to the idea of participation, and recognize that the private, nonprofit, faith, and philanthropic sectors have active roles to play in supporting it;
- Provide both face-to-face and online opportunities for participation; Keep the growing use of mobile devices in mind when designing online participation processes.
- Avoid the failed formats of traditional, podium-dominated public hearings and town hall meetings, and ensure that participation opportunities are carefully structured and facilitated so that every participant has a meaningful role to play;
- Assemble a large and diverse critical mass of citizens (in certain situations, a smaller, demographically representative set of people can be convened to serve as a proxy for the larger population);
- Find ways of keeping this critical mass mobilized, through social media networks, neighborhood meetings, or other formats that are convenient and compelling for citizens;

- Give people the chance to compare values and experiences, and to consider a range of views and policy options;
- Give people time to participate and respond - time to think, consider, evaluate, listen, learn, and engage.
- Produce tangible actions and outcomes; these can include policy and planning decisions, changes within organizations and institutions, actions driven by small groups of people, individual volunteerism, and changes in attitude and behavior.

### Effective tools for online engagement

Within the context of a long-range strategic public participation plan, there are different short-term online tactical tools that will make sense in different scenarios. The chart below (reprinted from the IBM Center for the Business of Government report on “Using Online Tools to Engage – and be Engaged by – the Public” at <http://bit.ly/iwjgqn>) presents the most common scenarios in which public managers seek to engage the public, suggests the tactics and online tools that make the most sense for those circumstances, and identifies the situations where face-to-face interaction may be crucial.

## Ten Tactics for Engaging the Public

Tactic	Why Do It?	Online Tools
<b>Collaboration</b>		
1. Develop documents collaboratively via Wikis (Wikis)	You are trying to encourage citizens to take shared ownership of an issue and participate in addressing it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wikispaces, free at basic level: <a href="http://www.wikispaces.com">www.wikispaces.com</a></li> <li>• Wikiplanning,™ fee for service: <a href="http://www.wikiplanning.org">www.wikiplanning.org</a></li> </ul>
2. Create shared work space for citizens (Shared Workspace)	You are trying to encourage citizens to take shared ownership of an issue and participate in addressing it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Google Docs, free: <a href="http://docs.google.com">docs.google.com</a></li> <li>• Dropbox, free at basic level: <a href="http://www.dropbox.org">www.dropbox.org</a></li> <li>• GoogleGroups, free: <a href="http://www.googlegroups.com">www.googlegroups.com</a></li> <li>• Ning, fee for service: <a href="http://www.ning.com">www.ning.com</a></li> <li>• BigTent, fee for service: <a href="http://www.bigtent.com">www.bigtent.com</a></li> <li>• CivicEvolution, fee for service: <a href="http://www.civicevolution.org">www.civicevolution.org</a></li> </ul>
3. Facilitate large-scale deliberation online (Large-scale Deliberation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You are in the midst of a high-profile situation in which people do not agree about what should be done</li> <li>• You are trying to encourage citizens to take shared ownership of an issue and participate in addressing it</li> <li>• You are trying to educate and inform citizens about a particular issue or decision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ascentum Choicebook,™ fee for service: <a href="http://www.ascentum.ca">www.ascentum.ca</a></li> <li>• DialogueApp, fee for service: <a href="http://www.dialogue-app.com">www.dialogue-app.com</a></li> <li>• Zilino: <a href="http://www.zilino.com">www.zilino.com</a></li> <li>• Microsoft TownHall, fee for service: <a href="http://www.microsofttownhall.com">www.microsofttownhall.com</a></li> <li>• IBM MiniJam and InnovationJam, fee for service: <a href="http://www.ibm.com/ibm/jam/">www.ibm.com/ibm/jam/</a></li> </ul>
4. Use “serious games” to generate interest, understanding, and input (Serious Gaming)	You are trying to educate and inform citizens about a particular issue or decision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Second Life, free at basic level: <a href="http://www.secondlife.com">www.secondlife.com</a></li> <li>• Zynga, fee for service: <a href="http://www.zynga.com">www.zynga.com</a></li> <li>• Persuasive Games, fee for service: <a href="http://www.persuasivegames.com">www.persuasivegames.com</a></li> </ul>

## Ten Tactics for Engaging the Public (continued)

Tactic	Why Do It?	Online Tools
<b>Survey Attitudes</b>		
5. Survey citizens	You want the immediate opinions of citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SurveyMonkey, free at basic level: <a href="http://www.surveymonkey.com">www.surveymonkey.com</a></li> <li>SurveyConsole, free at basic level: <a href="http://www.surveyconsole.com">www.surveyconsole.com</a></li> <li>SurveyGizmo, fee for service: <a href="http://www.surveygizmo.com">www.surveygizmo.com</a></li> </ul>
6. Aggregate opinions expressed on social media networks (Aggregate Opinions)	You want the immediate opinions of citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ThinkUp, free: <a href="http://www.thinkupapp.com">www.thinkupapp.com</a></li> <li>CitizenScape, fee for service: <a href="http://www.citizenscape.net">www.citizenscape.net</a></li> <li>Business Analytics, fee for service: <a href="http://www.ibm.com/software/analytics/">www.ibm.com/software/analytics/</a></li> <li>COBRA, fee for service: <a href="http://www.almaden.ibm.com/asr/projects/cobra/">www.almaden.ibm.com/asr/projects/cobra/</a></li> </ul>
<b>Prioritize Options</b>		
7. Gather and rank ideas and solutions (Idea Generation)	You need ideas and information from citizens on a given issue or issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>IdeaScale, free at basic level: <a href="http://www.ideascale.com">www.ideascale.com</a></li> <li>Spigit, fee for service: <a href="http://www.spigit.com">www.spigit.com</a></li> <li>Bubble Ideas, fee for service: <a href="http://bubbleideas.com/">http://bubbleideas.com/</a></li> <li>Delib Dialogue App, free at basic level: <a href="http://www.dialogue-app.com">www.dialogue-app.com</a></li> <li>Google Moderator, free: <a href="http://www.google.com/moderator/">www.google.com/moderator/</a></li> </ul>
8. Work with citizens to identify and prioritize problems that government can fix (Identify Problems)	You need ideas and information from citizens on a given issue or issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SeeClickFix, free at basic level: <a href="http://www.seeclickfix.com">www.seeclickfix.com</a></li> <li>OpenStreetMap, free: <a href="http://www.openstreetmap.org">www.openstreetmap.org</a></li> <li>OpenLayers, free: <a href="http://openlayers.org">http://openlayers.org</a></li> <li>WikiMapia, free: <a href="http://wikimapia.org">http://wikimapia.org</a></li> <li>Twitter, free: <a href="http://www.twitter.com">www.twitter.com</a></li> </ul>
9. Help citizens to visualize geographic data (Mapping)	You are trying to educate and inform citizens about a particular issue or decision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>GoogleMaps, free: <a href="http://www.googlemaps.com">www.googlemaps.com</a></li> <li>Virtual Earth, free: <a href="http://virtualearth.com">http://virtualearth.com</a></li> <li>WorldKit, free: <a href="http://worldkit.org/">http://worldkit.org/</a></li> <li>CommunityViz, fee for service: <a href="http://www.communityviz.com">www.communityviz.com</a></li> <li>MetroQuest, fee for service: <a href="http://www.metroquest.com">www.metroquest.com</a></li> </ul>
10. Help citizens to balance budget and revenue options (Identify Priorities)	You are trying to educate and inform citizens about a particular issue or decision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Budget Simulator, fee for service: <a href="http://www.budgetsimulator.com">www.budgetsimulator.com</a></li> <li>Budget Allocator, fee for service: <a href="http://www.budgetallocator.com">www.budgetallocator.com</a></li> <li>Demos-Budget, fee for service: <a href="http://www.demos-budget.eu">www.demos-budget.eu</a></li> </ul>

### Bringing a diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds to the table

The combination of face-to-face relationships and online connections is critical for recruiting participants with a diverse array of views and backgrounds. A personal, one-to-one appeal from someone you already know is still far and away the most effective means of recruitment, and those relationships are usually based on face-to-face interaction. But because of the growth of social media, it is easier than ever to tap into networks of people who already have these kinds of relationships. Online tools can also help public managers involve people more meaningfully in the planning and publicizing of events and processes.

Successful participation initiatives tend to use these recruitment strategies:

- Mapping the networks of people within the public that managers want to engage – for example, the residents of a particular community, the stakeholders on the issue they are working on, or the people who are likely to be most affected by a certain policy or decision. It is important to consider all the different kinds of online or face-to-face groups and organizations, based on workplace, faith community, ethnicity, or shared interest.
- Reaching out to leaders within those networks, groups, and organizations, and working with them to understand the goals and concerns of their members and constituents. An important question – and one that public managers sometimes overlook – is whether their goals for engaging the public match the public’s goals for getting engaged. Another key question to ask, repeatedly, is “Who is not at the table, who ought to be here?”
- Using conversations to develop a recruitment message that will appeal directly to people’s core interests. Managers should ask the leaders of various groups and networks to recruit participants, using individualized messages – telephone calls, personal e-mails – as much as possible.

### **Effective strategies for ensuring that participation is well-informed**

Most people are visual and experiential learners: they learn better in interactive environments where they can envision how different proposals will affect their lives, and where they can test the strengths and weaknesses of different ideas. There are a wide variety of face-to-face and online approaches that are educationally effective because they take advantage of these aspects of learning. They include:

- Large-scale dialogue and deliberation (either face-to-face or online)
- “Serious games” (again, can be face-to-face or online – and often seem most effective when they utilize both)
- Interactive maps and budgets that allow people to see the consequences of different spending or planning options.

See the chart above for more specific tools and methods to consider. The first of the three strategies has mainly been done in face-to-face formats; the second and third primarily online. However, all three can and have been done both online and offline, and there is significant evidence to suggest that the combination of online and offline communication is more effective than either on its own (see <http://bit.ly/2op5u>).

Informing citizens tends to make them more aware of the pressures and tradeoffs facing public managers, but it also tends to make them more determined to express their preferences to government – so citizen education should never be treated as a one-way transmission of facts, but as a robust two-way conversation.

### **Instructive examples of public participation**

(This section is an excerpt from “A Vital Moment” - see <http://bit.ly/uuGcBd> for link to full article and cites)

There are a number of recent initiatives that provide ideas for advocates of participation. Two of these projects demonstrate new possibilities for ‘scaling up’ participatory strategies to the state and federal levels; the third illustrates the power of a more sustained structure for engaging

people from all walks of life.

The “Horizons” project is one of the largest and most successful participation initiatives to emerge in the last decade. Initiated by the Northwest Area Foundation in 2005, it was intended to help residents of high-poverty rural communities in seven states (Washington, Montana, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa) build civic participation and leadership skills. In partnership with Everyday Democracy and the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, the foundation helped these small towns follow a sequence of deliberative public engagement, a structured community leadership program, and a broad-based action planning phase. To date, 284 small towns, with poverty rates between 10% and 78%, have been part of Horizons, with thousands of residents participating. Most of those communities show sustained impacts of the participation, including more inclusive decision-making processes, participants who won election to public office, and a wide variety of citizen-driven activities. Evaluator Diane Morehouse reports that

“When asked to name the ‘most significant continuing activity,’ [respondents] could seldom confine themselves to one, and named 77 activities they considered significant, including community gardens and farmer’s markets, parks, trails (one with a \$1.2 million grant), and recreational opportunities, community and community resource centers, scholarships for low income children and families for daycare, after school programming and recreation, including Boys and Girls’ clubs, car repair and home maintenance programs, and in (at least) five communities, the establishment of community foundations.”

Poverty reduction plans are being implemented in over half of the communities. It is too soon, in most cases, to begin evaluating the impact of the gains in leadership and participation on economic vitality, but Horizons has already shown that residents of rural, low-income communities can be engaged productively in deliberation and problem-solving. As a poverty reduction effort, the early returns on Horizons are encouraging; as a governance reform, the initiative has already had a significant impact.

A more recent, and high-profile, example of deliberative citizen participation is “Our Budget, Our Economy,” a national effort initiated by several major foundations and implemented by AmericaSpeaks. Over 3,500 people took part, some of them in 19 large town hall meetings and others in 38 smaller community conversations. All of the deliberations took place on June 26th, 2010. Participants were asked to consider a range of options about how to cut spending and raise revenues to reduce the nation’s long term deficit by \$1.2 trillion in 2025. Almost 60 percent of the tables engaged in the discussions across the nation were able to meet this target. At the end of the day, 91% of the participants said they were very satisfied or satisfied with the tone and quality of the discussion.

Because it was much more visible than most participation initiatives, “Our Budget, Our Economy” generated a much higher level of commentary and criticism from both right and left. Many conservatives claimed it was an attempt by liberal funders such as the Kellogg Foundation to press for higher taxes and cuts in defense spending; many progressives accused the conservative Peterson Foundation, another of the funders, of using it to advocate cuts in Social Security and Medicare. The discussion materials, however, were produced with the assistance of

a broad range of political organizations, and the majority of the participants considered the options to be framed and weighted in a nonpartisan way.

It remains to be seen whether and how “Our Budget, Our Economy” will have an impact on the national policy debate on the budget deficit. Because it was focused on a single, daunting federal policy issue – in contrast to the broader poverty reduction frame of Horizons, for example, which encouraged a wider variety of action efforts – the success of OBOE will be measured mainly in terms of how Congress responds. In that sense, it is a much riskier, more ambitious effort than “Horizons,” or any of the local participation initiatives. But OBOE has already demonstrated that the democratic strategies that have been used at the local level can be “scaled up” to incorporate large, diverse numbers of citizen voices in federal policymaking.

A very different kind of example is the Jane Addams School for Democracy, based in the West Side neighborhood of St. Paul, Minnesota. The West Side has been called the “Ellis Island of the Midwest” for its role in the history of immigration in the region. The current wave of immigrants in the neighborhood includes large numbers of Hmong, Latinos, and Somalis. The Jane Addams School, which is a partnership between the neighborhood, the University of Minnesota, and the College of St. Catherine, connects recent immigrants with college students, high school students, and other local residents in ongoing “learning circles” and learning pairs. Two straightforward goals of these activities are to help people learn about each other’s languages and cultures, and help them attain the knowledge and English skills they need to pass the U.S. citizenship exam. However, the discussions have led to a number of other projects and outcomes, as participants compared experiences and generated ideas for improving the neighborhood.

The learning circles are organized according to languages (at least four languages are spoken at the school in any one evening), with English translation in each circle. Bilingual college students serve as language translators and cultural interpreters, to allow people to discuss issues of concern in their native languages. A part of each session is devoted to a more formal cultural exchange where participants discuss current issues, explain cultural traditions, or engage in storytelling. “Valuing the knowledge resources that come from all cultures is key to the Jane Addams School philosophy,” says Nan Kari, one of the school’s founders. “Students and other non-immigrants learn about their own cultures, and new immigrants teach college and high school participants lessons that are not offered in the academic setting.”

The JAS meetings are a model of sustained participation: they have taken place every other week for the last ten years. Hundreds of participants in the neighborhood learning circles have since passed the federal citizenship exam. Participants have also created a community farming project, a mural, a parent involvement partnership with the local schools, a health project, and an annual community-wide celebration known as the West Side Freedom Festival. And even though most of the emphasis of the circles is on improving the local situation, JAS participants have not stopped there. Concerned about human rights abuses in Laos, they successfully petitioned the Minnesota legislature to pass a resolution urging Congress to negotiate with the Laotian government for more humane treatment of the Hmong population. Participants also acted on their concerns with the way the U.S. citizenship test is administered. They forged a partnership with the regional director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), who agreed to

allow English-speaking partners to accompany Hmong applicants during the citizenship exam and interview.