

PART ONE

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public



Introduction

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Local officials seem to have reached a critical threshold in their work to strengthen local democracy. Reacting to a combination of factors, local governments are exploring ways to move from temporary public engagement efforts to more stable, durable foundations for democratic governance. NLC defines democratic governance as “the art of governing a community in participatory, inclusive, deliberative, and collaborative ways.” Key Questions to Ask About How to Engage the Public lays out some of the key questions you might ask about democratic governance in your city – questions that will help you decide how to create a much stronger, more productive long-term relationship between citizens, local government and other organizations in the community.

For some time, local officials have been faced with a kind of ‘Catch-22’ dilemma: public trust in government has declined steadily, while the active support and engagement of citizens has become increasingly critical for solving public problems. Today’s citizens are simply more vocal, knowledgeable, diverse, skilled and skeptical than the citizens of a generation ago. There are a number of macro-level trends at work here – rising levels of education, different attitudes toward authority, the emergence of the Internet – but it all adds up to a basic shift in what citizens expect, and what they can contribute. “As a public servant, I need to understand what people want and need,” says Rodney Locks, a Councilmember in Brevard, North Carolina. “It’s not the city’s agenda that we’re promoting – it’s the people’s agenda.”

To address these new expectations, and take advantage of new citizen capacities, local officials have developed more proactive, intensive forms of public engagement. (This work has many labels: in addition to “democratic governance” and “public engagement,” “citizen involvement,” “public participation,” and other terms are used to describe it. These efforts have mobilized large numbers of people to take part in public decision-making and problem-solving. In order to engage a diverse critical mass of citizens, local leaders have employed targeted, network-based recruitment. In order to ensure that the meetings are productive, they have employed group process techniques like impartial facilitation, small-group discussions, and guides or agendas that lay out a range of policy options. In some cases, they have inspired and supported citizens to give their own time and effort to community improvements, in addition to making recommendations for the city to implement.

These democratic governance initiatives – even the most successful ones – also have some key limitations. They have primarily been temporary, and limited to a particular issue, plan or policy question. Because they are usually focused on city-level decision-making, they do not necessarily have an impact at the neighborhood or regional levels. So while they have proliferated dramatically, and have often had many beneficial outcomes, in most cases they do not seem to have produced long-term changes in the way that communities operate.

Meanwhile, in just the last few years, cities have been buffeted by a number of shifts that affect how local officials interact with the public. The recent recession has plunged many cities into fiscal crisis, and prompted local officials to engage citizens in thorny questions about how to balance revenues and services. At the same time, cities are sharing more local government data with citizens, who are better able to use and assess the information. Finally, the explosion of social media has meant that citizens have new venues to connect around their concerns and articulate their views about local politics. These pressures present new challenges, but also new opportunities.

Local officials are starting to think more seriously about how to combine hard-earned engagement lessons with innovations. They are reaching out to other leaders and organizations and trying to develop more productive, dynamic and long-term strategies and structures for democratic governance. The “Spectrum of public engagement” lists the main kinds of engagement activities now going on in cities today, in the form of a spectrum that ranges from the most basic (circulating information) to the most advanced (deciding and acting).

There are fourteen questions that local officials and municipal staff should consider in order to begin laying stronger foundations for local democracy:

1. There are many types and levels of public engagement – do you have a process for deciding which approach to use when?
2. How effective are your public meetings and other official interactions between citizens and local government?
3. How well do your key allies reflect and represent the full diversity of the community?
4. How well are neighborhood associations and other grassroots groups serving their neighborhoods?
5. Are there segments of the community that have historically been ignored or excluded?
6. In what ways are recent immigrants connected, or disconnected, from the rest of the community?
7. How well are you supporting young leaders and tapping into their potential?
8. Have there been any deliberative public engagement initiatives, led by local government or by other organizations, recently in your city?
9. How are you and your citizens using social media to connect with neighbors, solve problems and discuss local issues?
10. Is local government data available online and how effectively does it complement and inform public engagement?
11. How much is the city spending – and saving – on public engagement annually?
12. How are engagement activities and initiatives evaluated and assessed?
13. What are the legal mandates and restrictions on how you interact with the public?
14. Do local officials and city employees have the skills, cultural awareness and organizational support to work productively with citizens?

This is a comprehensive set of questions – and more may emerge as you take stock of the strengths and weaknesses of your local democracy. But not all of them may apply to your community; some can be answered easily, while others may deserve a closer look, including research that is more intensive. This guide is designed to help you make those choices, and give you suggestions about how to delve further on the questions that offer the greatest opportunity for understanding and innovation.

Each assessment question provides in-depth information, additional questions to ask, further actions to consider, and in some cases, a city practice example.

You are probably not the only leader in your city who is asking these questions. In most places, a wide range of leaders and organizations are dealing with new citizen expectations and capacities, and trying to find ways to engage people productively in decision-making and problem-solving. People working in foundations, school systems, universities, neighborhood associations, civic groups, service clubs, county governments and other organizations may be partners for you in your efforts to improve local democracy. Many of the bulleted “Potential next steps” listed throughout the guide suggest key allies you might work with on a particular question.