



# Strengthening Models of Civic Engagement: Community-Informed Approaches to Inclusive and Equitable Decision-Making

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July 2022

# Strengthening Models of Civic Engagement

Community-Informed Approaches to Inclusive  
and Equitable Decision-Making

Archon Fung, Hollie Russon Gilman, & Mark Schmitt

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## **About the Author(s)**

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We are dedicated to renewing the promise of America by continuing the quest to realize our nation's highest ideals, honestly confronting the challenges caused by rapid technological and social change, and seizing the opportunities those changes create.

## **About Political Reform**

The Political Reform program works towards an open, fair democratic process, with equitable opportunities for full participation, in order to restore dynamism and growth to the American economy and society.

## **About Co-Governance Project**

The Co-Governance Project at New America is identifying the best innovations in democratic revitalization by engaging activists, city officials, residents, philanthropists, nonprofits, and businesses to see what kinds of institutions, organizations, and policies promote the genuine empowerment of communities.

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# Strengthening Models of Civic Engagement: Community-Informed Approaches to Inclusive and Equitable Decision-Making

## Introduction

For too long the federal policymaking process has been mysterious and inaccessible to everyone but the most sophisticated, elite stakeholders. Not only has this made the policymaking process exclusive to long-standing players with connections and resources, but it has also made it extremely difficult for most Americans, especially those from underrepresented communities, to be engaged in authentic ways with federal agencies and institutions.

The costs of such exclusion are evident: Federal policies created and implemented without meaningful input from local leaders and residents are less efficient, less effective, and more likely to perpetuate the very systems of injustice they are often designed to disrupt or reverse. In contrast, inclusive engagement demonstrably increases the efficacy and legitimacy of federal policy, triggering a virtuous cycle of feedback and trust between government and the people.

When the Biden-Harris administration took office, one of their very first acts was to issue an executive order to **advance equity** and racial justice throughout federal agencies and institutions. This was quickly followed by orders intended to **transform the experience** of interacting with government, **modernize the federal regulatory process**, and **strengthen tribal consultations and nation-to-nation relationships**. Together, these efforts push the executive branch to improve equity and racial justice through more inclusive policy processes.

Since the release of these executive orders, the federal government has made significant strides toward promoting equity and inclusion of underrepresented and underserved communities. As the Executive Branch continues advancing these efforts, we have an opportunity to reimagine civic engagement in governance and the federal policy process. We are fortunate to have a resource for this reimagination, in the expertise and lessons from communities that have constructed new relationships with local and state governments. We see a need to create spaces and opportunities for community-led practitioners across civil society and local government to share their experience with federal agencies and institutions — and to learn from community-grounded leaders who are already doing the work.

In this spirit, New America's **Political Reform program** and Harvard University's **Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation** hosted

a series of listening sessions to help government officials identify methods of stakeholder engagement among traditionally underrepresented and marginalized communities to inform policy even beyond the current administration. The first two of these sessions addressed how people **engage with the federal regulatory process** and how agencies **structure their policies or award federal dollars**.

These sessions reinforced the importance of hearing from practitioners about best practices for effective and equitable engagement. In a third convening in April 2022, local organizers and government officials shared their experiences and perspectives on partnering with intermediaries, organizations that connect government and community in **collaborative governance**. These intermediaries include civil society groups and grassroots advocacy organizations to public decision-making institutions.

Successful practices of co-governance vary across communities, and particularly between urban and rural communities. The issues at play are different, as are the modes of interaction and organizing among residents. To capture the full range of urban/rural variation, and to better inform federal policy, this session featured two pairs of discussants, one urban and one rural, and voices from government as well as civil society responsible for implementing policies that affect both urban and rural communities.

**Our panelists highlighted best practices for effective and authentic community engagement around federal policy.** These included communicating in accessible language, involving trusted intermediaries and community leaders in policy decision-making, and allocating federal dollars to fund civic engagement efforts.

Panelists also flagged a number of opportunities to reduce existing barriers to engagement, such as building community engagement into the budget and evaluation process. Their stories were particularly instructive for agency efforts to ensure, per the Executive Order on **Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities**, that programs and policies reach underserved communities. This brief showcases three major takeaways and policy recommendations for key stakeholders.

## Key Findings

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*(1) By emphasizing the relevance of federal policies to daily lives and community values, local, trusted intermediaries can elevate government's policy communications beyond general accuracy, consistency, and accessibility.*

Experienced policy advocates often contend that the messenger matters more than the message itself. Indeed, our panelists stressed the importance of

communicating policy through trusted intermediaries, including faith leaders, leaders of community-based organizations, local officials, and other individuals with social capital. These intermediaries not only deliver information from the federal government, but also help cultivate an atmosphere of safety and trust through their social roles and relationships.

But the message still matters, and in different ways. At a minimum, government agencies that deliver information that is accurate, consistent, accessible, and translatable are more likely to have an effective communications campaign. When materials use complex or confusing language, intermediaries are left to interpret on behalf of local residents and the government's key points could stray from their original essence.

At a deeper level, crafting effective policy communications could benefit from more consultation with intermediaries who have local expertise that can better shape messages into relatable frameworks for different communities. This relatability could take two forms: (1) communities are potentially more receptive to messaging if they are able quickly grasp the relevance of policies to their own lives; and (2) aligning policy communications and implementation with communities' needs and values can enhance effectiveness.

Multiple panelists addressed a disconnect between the federal government and affected communities about how policies impact residents' daily lives. On any given policy, residents should be able to answer three key questions: *What is this about? Why does it matter to me and my community? What action do I need to take, if any?*

These questions were critical for the **New York City Mayor's Public Engagement Unit (PEU)**, created in 2015 to proactively connect New Yorkers to essential city services, including child welfare benefits, Section 8 housing, and FEMA relief. As an intermediary that is also a government agency, the PEU served and continues to serve as a central hub for New Yorkers to understand where and how to receive vital services that they may not know of otherwise. Not only does the PEU help fulfill the government's baseline of delivering information accurately and accessibly (e.g., by translating materials to address native language barriers), it also highlights how specific programs are relevant to residents. During the COVID-19 outbreak in New York City, the PEU connected New Yorkers with emergency resources and tools to target their most pressing needs, including rent and tenant support, healthcare, and the COVID-19 vaccine rollout. The PEU communicated directly with residents to help them navigate the plethora of programs available and understand their eligibility for enrollment. One **result** of these efforts was the PEU's Tenant Support Unit ability to reach tens of thousands of New Yorkers with rent-related assistance provided through the state's COVID Rental Program.



In addition to bringing immediate, day-to-day relevance to the forefront, intermediaries are more attuned to a community's underlying needs and values. Factors like high distrust in government and an increasingly polarized and misinformation-fueled media environment have made it increasingly difficult for residents, particularly those who are traditionally marginalized and underserved, to absorb critical information about policy changes and advocacy. Clarity and consistency from the beginning to end of a messaging campaign indeed help enhance trustworthiness. However, to maximize the chances of breaking through to hard-to-reach residents with what was originally intended to be communicated, messaging on new policies and their implementation could be more effective if customized to resonate with a given community's needs, values, and histories. Some local governments and local civil society groups have recognized the need for such customization. In an attempt to close perceived value gaps that might hinder the effectiveness of government communications, these local intermediaries have pursued initiatives that craft and disseminate tailored, community-centered messages to residents.

One messaging strategy is to recognize reasons for residents' valid, commonly held skepticism about a new policy, and then work with intermediaries and potentially community members themselves to mitigate this skepticism. For example, in New York City, community organization intermediaries advocating for completing the 2020 Census recognized that many residents were not only unaware of the Census's purpose, but also suspicious of the government's motives for collecting their personal data. Communities might deeply value representation and participation in civil society just as the government does, but are also understandably wary of being taken advantage of, as some communities historically have been, through careless implementation and follow-up on data collection and dissemination. In the case of the Census, it was not enough for community-based groups to explain what they were doing, however clearly, accurately, and consistently. These groups also needed to explain why the Census needed to be completed, broadening its importance to address communities' past experiences and current interests.

From working on the ground, intermediaries often have the capacity, knowledge, and trust to raise awareness about policy's relevance to residents' daily lives and collective values. Thus, involving intermediaries in the design and review of government communications from the outset can be critically useful for effective policy communications. Rather than disseminating cut-and-paste, standardized messaging and waiting for complaints or other negative reactions from the ground to filter back up, federal agencies can — and should — engage dedicated local government departments (e.g., the PEU) and other community-focused or -based organizations during the communications campaign planning stages. In practice, federal agencies can first provide materials to intermediaries, who can consider how these messages perform in a variety of scenarios that residents experience and with recognition of the histories they have lived or inherited. This scenario testing with intermediaries' expertise gives agencies the opportunity to

address any messaging that could be easily misinterpreted or perceived as out of touch, elitist, or harmful to the receiving community. By bringing in people who are closer to the ground during the campaign-building process, as one speaker put it, we don't lose time and we don't lose traction in reaching critical populations about policy changes that may impact them.

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*(2) Intermediaries are critical to government bureaucracies in implementing policies, plans, and goals, while engaging communities more broadly and for the long-term.*

A key lesson from the discussion, and one that has come up repeatedly throughout this series, is the make-or-break role of trusted intermediaries in implementing policies, especially when dedicated community engagement and feedback processes are involved. These trusted intermediaries build necessary connective tissue between the public and the government — not only by pooling resources to get things done but also by conveying important federal information to residents and providing feedback to the federal government on how to refine engagement strategies for residents around both policy design and implementation. As one speaker noted, these intermediaries are often more important for community engagement than government bureaucracies are themselves.

Trusted intermediaries help bridge the gap between governments and communities in delivering information and services, boosting participation, and other functions. **The first step is for governments to identify and incentivize intermediary people and organizations best suited to reach residents, which can be particularly challenging for the federal government.**

Intermediaries can be one or many. One panelist, representing local government, highlighted their positive experience partnering with the U.S. Department of Commerce's (DoC) New York regional office to deliver FEMA relief and COVID-19 resources over the past few years. On multiple occasions, this local-federal partnership proved crucial for getting New Yorkers the information, resources, and services they needed during major crises periods. While not every federal policy design or implementation process will call for local government to participate, this panelist's story ultimately illustrates the benefits of coordination beyond the federal level, even if it is only with one intermediary. This cultivation of longer-term relationships with federal agencies can be combined with working with networks of on-the-ground stakeholders that are capable of implementing federal projects and outreach efforts with relative ease.

Among these on-the-ground stakeholders, federal agencies may choose to use a tripartite model in which they partner with a non-profit organization and a private, community-based business entity. This model continues to rely on initial identification of intermediaries that have the trust and relationship-building ability to improve communities' access to and understanding of federally-

provided services. An example of the model in action is when the federal government distributed personal protective equipment across the country: A federal agency (e.g., Occupational Safety and Health Administration or OSHA) partnered with an intermediary non-profit organization (e.g., Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies or FPWA), which in turn partnered with a private (local) business entity (e.g., nail salons and their workforce), to ensure that the equipment reached those in need. As one participant reported, this model not only helped get physical materials into the hands of the public, but also incentivized community members to invest time in engagement and feedback activities, such as participating in focus groups, to better surface insights about the most effective ways to design outreach strategies and approaches for that particular community. In this way, intermediaries help the government achieve both operational and civic goals. Additionally, because intermediaries are often longstanding, the tripartite model rests on ongoing and evolving processes instead of one-time transactions to meet local communities' needs. Authentic engagement is achieved when systems are in place that value communities and other stakeholders' priorities in a long-term process, beyond fulfilling a checklist item. Involving the intermediaries that frequently show up in residents' lives is one way in which the federal government can demonstrate their commitment towards this authentic engagement.

Trusted intermediaries are especially important in rural communities because they fulfill a specialized role that many intermediaries in major cities do not. As one of our panelists emphasized, rural communities have a unique sense of pride and patriotism that is often at odds with their experiences with and perceptions about the federal government. Rural communities tend to view themselves as the backbone of the country, yet feel as though the government does not make an adequate effort to meet their needs and values. In the past, local newspapers served rural communities, keeping residents informed about community events and national politics and government events alike. But as many local news outlets have been consolidated into suburban hubs, the informational ties between rural communities and government have frayed, making it harder for remaining intermediaries to operate successfully. One panelist talked about placing ads in surviving local rural papers to reach older people and combat growing disconnects.

Another example is the **Daily Yonder**, a digital platform that covers rural news and showcases contemporary local voices, bridging the gap between rural and urban communities. The platform serves as a tool to keep rural residents involved, engaged, and informed not only with local government, but also with policies developed at the federal level. It has combated misinformation and distrust by providing communities with accessible and reliable information, tailored to their specific needs and interests. As the current federal government places more emphasis on community engagement in policy development and implementation, intermediaries like print newspapers and the Daily Yonder

become even more critical for identifying ways to develop civic spirit in rural areas across generations, **races, and nationalities**.

The federal government has also recognized the importance of involving sub-level government intermediaries. As described in the conversation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is working to establish a unique and authentic rapport with tribal and rural communities on issues concerning the environment, water, energy, housing and overall quality of life. The designated **Office of Tribal Relations (OTR)**, under the USDA, serves as a contact for tribal issues. Consultations are a major way through which outreach is conducted, where policy and implementation leaders within tribal communities discuss the potential effectiveness of federal programs and policies. Consultations are opportunities for the federal government to be proactively inclusive during program development, highlighting tribal communities' perspectives and valuing their interests in an organized manner. Conversely, consultations are opportunities for tribal communities to work collectively, sharing knowledge and discussing short-term and long-term priorities well before the federal government takes action on broad, sweeping policies. The consultation sessions are set up to be several days long, when tribal causes and intermediaries, such as the **Native American Financial Officers Association (NAFOA)**, **National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development (NCAIED)**, **Native CDFI**, **National Congress of American Indians (NCAI)**, and others, engage with one other prior to working directly with the USDA.

Trusted intermediaries help the federal government get things done, from distributing resources swiftly during national crises to cultivating the public's civic interest and investment. Whether these intermediaries are state or local agencies, media outlets, or community institutions both big and small, a federal government that pursues an inclusive multi-stakeholder model allows communities to provide the local feedback and suggestions necessary for more equitable public policy development. In this case between government, intermediaries, and community members, provides an opportunity for community leaders and intermediaries to work alongside government to provide feedback and suggestions for more equitable public policies.

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***(3) Ahead of implementation, build community engagement into budgets and evaluation processes.***

The final takeaway from this discussion: There is ample room for budgets and evaluation processes to more explicitly support the work of intermediaries, particularly in the stem of community engagement. Governments seldom directly fund community engagement efforts. Indeed, government-sponsored efforts often adhere to well-established limits on what administrative budgets can be used for and do not consider community engagement as a core programmatic deliverable. Consequently, civic engagement efforts are less likely

to be prioritized — especially when providing services and information to local communities.

It's not enough to simply add community engagement as part of program deliverables. Allocated funds need to accompany this prioritization, providing intermediaries with tangible resources to conduct engagement alongside local, state, and federal governments. As mentioned by one of the panelists, nonprofits, community colleges, and urban extension colleges have great ideas for collaborative governance based on research and established initiatives. However, many of these ideas remain nascent as they are excluded from consideration for federal funding to expand capacity.

Leveraging multi-sector actors can be one essential tool in fostering an ecosystem to sustain stakeholder engagement in under-resourced communities. Providing local institutions and intermediaries access to federal dollars allows community engagement to occur both in greater depth and at a much larger scale. These federal dollars would amplify existing efforts, as many nonprofits and community established institutions have already developed relationships and trust that are essential for engagement. Their first-hand knowledge of communities' needs and direct relationships with members in and throughout the community can be more systematically operationalized with tangible financial support.

As intermediaries work to deliver equitable access to services and resources to reach historically underserved communities, federal funding to enhance community engagement would extend opportunities for local communities to properly and effectively receive important services provided by the federal government. In addition to the tangible benefits in service delivery, the positive effects of comprehensive engagement strategies around policymaking and implementation include a) higher trust in government b) less misinformation, and c) greater civic participation in our democratic processes.

Ultimately, making engagement a priority in federal grant reporting requirements and funding opportunities establishes a feedback loop for government and local communities to achieve inclusivity and equity together. When engagement is institutionalized, organizations and leaders then have stronger incentives to ensure that policymaking includes adequate opportunities to engage underserved communities.

Iterative metrics and data are needed to demonstrate why engagement is a core part of policy making processes. Although we know intuitively that community engagement has broad individual and societal benefits, specific impacts are still difficult to categorize and quantify. We explore these challenges in the [blueprint](#) to modernize cost-benefit analysis. Justice, fairness, individual autonomy, and dignity are just some examples of values that need to be made measurable. The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) has a [Civic Health Index](#) (CHI). As

we rethink the use of traditional metrics, local communities and intermediaries need to be involved in self-identifying what success means to them and how they want to track growth in these values. Perception and use of language matters, as the Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) has noted in their **Civic Language Perceptions Project**. Generating and capturing data on civic engagement is key not only for making the case right now for investing in more civic infrastructure, but also for illuminating and closing disparities as more standardized reporting is required for long-term evaluation.

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## About the Discussion

### *Participants*

**Archon Fung**, Winthrop Laffin McCormack Professor of Citizenship and Self-Government, Harvard Kennedy School (moderator)

**Phil Thompson**, Associate Professor, MIT and former Deputy Mayor for Strategic Policy Initiatives for New York City under Mayor Bill de Blasio

**Jennifer Jones Austin**, CEO, Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies (FPWA)

**Dee Davis**, Founder and President, Center for Rural Strategies

**Edyael Casaperalta**, Senior Policy Advisor, USDA's Rural Utilities Service (RUS)

### *Agenda-Setting Questions*

- When thinking about the design process of engaging people, how would you begin to think about best practices to solicit input, feedback, and advice from traditionally marginalized communities? In your experience, what kinds of measures work particularly well to engage (i) marginalized people and (ii) organizations that represent the interests of marginalized communities?
- Can you offer a specific example working with people in government or civil society, respectively, around the American Rescue Plan implementation (COVID relief, health insurance, rent/housing relief, food, job security, etc.) and advancing equity as it pertains to federal policies in local communities?
- Can you offer specific examples in which resident and affected communities have been especially effective in harnessing federal policy processes (or, examples of success from state and local decision-making

processes might offer helpful lessons for federal processes)? For example, how to connect stakeholder engagement to enhancing resident input in the federal regulatory process?

- Conversely, what sorts of practices of engagement make participation less accessible — for instance by being off-putting — to marginalized communities?
- When examining engagement examples from one large city to a small rural community, what are the key governance and civic engagement design insights and opportunities?
- What are the types of transparency mechanisms that could allow for individuals and organizations to access information that they need to participate effectively? What are the systematic mechanisms that would allow for transparency? This is especially important with the influx of federal dollars into communities. How can we better ensure equitable allocation and impact?
- Allowing citizens to participate in a policy-making process is an important part of the decision-making process, but participating effectively and exercising authentic decision-making power is an exemplary standard. Based on your experiences at the local level, what process designs and tools would empower residents to exercise great influence in federal decision making and regulations.

## Notes





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