

An Agenda for Strengthening our Nation's Democracy Conference Report and Policy Recommendations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What follows is a practical agenda for addressing the increasing loss of peoples' trust in—and sense of connection to—our systems of politics and governance.

In July 2008, 49 advocates, scholars, and thinkers met in Washington, D.C. and came to agreement on the outlines of a broad agenda for democracy reform. In the weeks that followed, the participants broke into workgroups and developed the recommendations outlined in this document.

Our ideas rest on a set of shared convictions about what democracy ought to mean. We envision an America that encourages the maximum levels of voter turnout, practices people-centered governance, and actively seeks and genuinely values everyone's participation. To this end, we must build an infrastructure of participation and governance that welcomes everyone, while also taking steps to ensure that the voices of the powerful are not unduly elevated.

We take up this mission not simply out of principle, but because we are convinced that a more inclusive political process will generate better policies, develop the public knowledge and will to carry them out, and lead not only to a more just society, but to a virtuous cycle of economic, social, and political progress.

We have three sets of recommendations.

A Champion for Expanding Civic Engagement: A "White House Office of Civic Engagement" and More

One of the most important things the next President can do to foster greater civic and electoral participation at the federal level is to create a White-House level Office on Civic Engagement. This office would serve as a focal point of government-wide commitment and provide leadership to a wide range of federal agencies. Related steps the administration should take include:

- Create an interagency network to provide agencies and staff with capacity-building services such as technical support and training in how to engage citizens in policy making.
- Charge Federal agencies to coordinate with each other and with state and local decision makers on behalf of critical local and regional goals.
- Take inventory of existing public engagement practices, in order to assess what works and what's needed.
- Direct new political appointees to become familiar with the Administration's policy in regard to the importance of civic participation, and with their respective agencies' civic engagement activities.
- Provide leadership on an aggressive electoral reform agenda.

National Discussions: Millions of Voices at the Table

The next President should signal a new kind of governance by calling on the American people to take part in a series of national discussions, each engaging one million Americans or more, on the issues of highest public concern, such as the economy, health care, foreign policy, energy and climate change. The national discussions will provide policy makers with an independent, non-partisan means of assessing the informed opinions and collective priorities of the American people and forge a stronger link between Americans and their government.

This initiative could be overseen by a non-partisan working group of citizens appointed by the President and the majority and minority leadership of the House and Senate. The new White House Office of Civic Engagement should manage the national discussion and ensure a strong link to the President and Federal agencies.

A Legislative Agenda for Democratic Reform

The next President should work with Congress to pass an aggressive set of policy reforms to enhance democratic participation – electoral and otherwise.

In the **electoral arena** these reforms should include:

- Committing to universal voter registration for all eligible Americans, beginning with Election Day Registration for all Americans, and full implementation of the National Voter Registration Act.
- Passing meaningful public financing of Congressional elections, and restoring meaningful public financing of Presidential elections.
- Adopting a broad set of voter-convenience measures such as early voting and vote by mail.
- Developing national standards for election administration.
- Supporting ranked-choice ballots and instant-runoff elections as another way to protect voters from unrepresentative outcomes and ensure a fair reflection of voter sentiment.

In the **broader democratic engagement arena**, these reforms should include:

- Passing the Public Engagement Act, to create constructive incentives and requirements for federal agencies to gain full benefit from public engagement activities, consultation and collaborative processes.
- Developing model legislation, new measurement tools and technical assistance programs for states and local governments, to encourage and support their use of participatory practices.

Finally, Congress needs to adopt a series of policy reforms to **encourage and support new residents of America as they enter democratic life**. We offer a series of recommendations to encourage greater access to naturalization and voter registration, and call for adequate funding for the 2010 Census to make sure that new residents are counted and their voices are heard in policymaking and governance.