

Democracy in Practice: A Report on Innovations in Participatory Governance

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Americans' disconnect from their elected officials has reached crisis levels. What potential do citizens' assemblies and participatory decision-making hold for restoring people's trust in their democracy? This essay explores three case studies of participatory governance at three levels – in California, in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and in Fort Collins, Colorado; virtually and in person – and finds that Americans are ready and willing to participate in well-designed deliberative processes and are willing to accept the outcomes of deliberative bodies. But representativeness and accountability in those processes are essential and not easy to come by. This analysis invites the question of whether these democratic experiments can scale up to where they are needed most: our national politics.

The crisis of trust in American democracy continues to deepen. Surveys consistently document widening gulfs between citizens and their elected representatives, between communities and the institutions meant to serve them. This erosion of trust is not abstract: it manifests in declining civic participation, increasing polarization, and a pervasive sense among ordinary Americans that their voices do not matter in decisions that shape their lives.¹ When citizens believe government operates beyond their influence, democracy itself becomes vulnerable.

In 2020, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship published *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, a comprehensive report addressing this democratic distress.² Among its strategies and recommendations, Strategy 3 focuses on what the Commission calls the Responsiveness Imperative, or the necessity of restoring meaningful connection between citizens and their representatives. The strategy proposed four specific reforms: improving public hearings across all levels of government, requiring members of Congress to interact regularly with constituents on policy issues, experimenting with citizens' assemblies to enable direct public interaction with Congress, and expanding participatory opportunities for citizens to shape policy and budget decisions.

Six years since that report was published, progress on these recommendations has been uneven. Congressional engagement practices remain largely unchanged. Public hearings continue to follow familiar, often frustrating formats. But the latter two recommendations have sparked an explosion of experimentation: citizens' assemblies and expanded participatory decision-making at local and state levels. While the national government has not yet embraced these innovations, communities across America have been building, testing, and refining new models for bringing citizen voice back into governance.

This essay examines three of these experiments. In California, a state-level initiative launched in response to the Palisades Fire crisis created infrastructure for large-scale digital deliberation. In Bowling Green, Kentucky, a mid-sized city facing rapid growth combined face-to-face relationship-building with sophisticated technology to engage 10 percent of its population in shaping its community vision. In Fort Collins, Colorado, a randomly selected citizens' assembly produced recommendations that were then validated through direct public vote – a first in American history.

These cases are not isolated curiosities. They represent a broader movement of democratic innovation happening in dozens of American communities. They matter not simply as interesting experiments but because they directly address the trust deficit that threatens democratic legitimacy. When citizens participate meaningfully in deliberation and see their input genuinely influence decisions, trust begins to return. When communities create processes that transcend traditional interest-group politics and bring diverse residents together in good-faith conversation, possibilities for collective action emerge that seemed impossible through conventional channels.

The focus of this essay on local and state innovation is therefore deliberate. While national-level citizens' assemblies remain aspirational, state and local governments are demonstrating what works, what challenges persist, and how deliberative democracy can be woven into existing governance structures. These experiments are building both practical knowledge and political will – resources that will prove essential if and when citizens' assemblies are seriously considered at the national level.

The three case studies that follow reveal different dimensions of this democratic renewal. They show how scale, technology, and institutional integration can be configured in various ways. They demonstrate both the promise of deliberative methods and the hard work required to make them succeed. And they pose questions about whether innovations proven at local and state levels can ultimately be brought to the national stage, where citizen trust in government is most damaged and most urgently needs repair.

Three American communities – California, Bowling Green, and Fort Collins – have pioneered distinct approaches to bringing citizens back into the democratic process. Each case reveals different dimensions of what works, what

challenges persist, and how technology and traditional engagement can be woven together to restore trust between residents and their representatives.

When the Palisades fires tore through California in early 2025, they left behind more than charred landscapes and displaced families. They exposed a fundamental gap in the state's capacity to engage citizens at scale during moments of crisis. Governor Gavin Newsom recognized that recovery would require not just rebuilding infrastructure but reintroducing community voice in the decision-making process. Out of this urgency, Engaged California was born.

Embedded within California's Office of Data and Innovation (ODI) and directed by Jeffrey Marino, who reports directly to the governor, Engaged California represents the state's commitment to creating permanent infrastructure for large-scale democratic participation. Marino understood that this could not be a top-down initiative. He forged partnerships across sectors – with technology platforms, community organizations, and local leaders – to ensure the legitimacy and reach necessary for genuine citizen engagement.

The fires created an unmistakable imperative: thousands of residents needed to be heard about their priorities for recovery, their visions for rebuilding, and their concerns about displacement and community preservation. Traditional town halls and public comment periods would never suffice. The state needed a platform capable of facilitating genuinely large-scale community conversations.

Drawing inspiration from Audrey Tang, Taiwan's minister of digital affairs who had pioneered online platforms for citizen engagement, Engaged California developed a multiphase strategy designed to move systematically from large-scale listening to focused deliberation to actionable recommendations. The Taiwanese model had demonstrated that digital tools, if designed thoughtfully, could scale democratic participation without sacrificing nuance or depth.

Engaged California created a platform for residents to submit their ideas, respond to others' proposals, and indicate their priorities through voting mechanisms. Tens of thousands of Californians participated in the initial listening phase, creating a vast repository of community wisdom about recovery. But the organizers knew that raw input, however voluminous, does not automatically translate into coherent policy. The second phase involved synthesizing this input – identifying themes, clarifying tensions, surfacing areas of consensus and disagreement – and then inviting participants into deeper deliberation on the most complex questions.

Yet even as Engaged California demonstrated the possibility of deliberation at scale, persistent challenges emerged. Representativeness remained elusive. Despite efforts to reach all communities, digital-access barriers meant that residents without reliable internet connections or digital literacy were systematically underrepresented. The organizers experimented with hybrid approaches – community centers with internet access, printed materials, phone-based participation – but achieving

true demographic representativeness across California's vast and diverse population proved to be an ongoing struggle without a simple solution.

Language translation presented an additional challenge. All the information was available in eight different languages: English, Spanish, Korean, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, and Armenian. Participants could post their comments in their own language, but their comments and comments posted in other languages were not translated. So, while people could participate in discussion using their own language, they could not necessarily read what others posted, which severely limited crosslinguistic deliberation. This issue needs to be addressed in future initiatives.

Perhaps more fundamentally, the question of sustainability loomed over the entire enterprise. Engaged California was launched under a particular gubernatorial administration with particular commitments to participatory governance. Would it survive a change in administration? Would future governors maintain the infrastructure and investment required to sustain large-scale deliberation? Or would it follow the familiar pattern of democratic innovations that flourish under champion leaders only to wither when political winds shift?

These questions about representativeness and sustainability echo through every deliberative democracy initiative across the country. But California's experiment had established crucial precedents, showing that large-scale digital engagement was possible, that crisis could catalyze democratic innovation, and that state government could create dedicated institutional homes for citizen voice. The next question was whether similar approaches could work at smaller scales, where face-to-face relationships still anchored community life.

If California's fires created an urgent need for large-scale engagement, Bowling Green, Kentucky, faced a different but equally pressing challenge: how to manage population and economic growth deliberately, rather than simply allowing growth to happen to the community. The question Warren County Judge-Executive Doug Gorman posed to residents captured the stakes perfectly: *Do we want growth to happen TO US or do we want growth to happen FOR US?*

The Bowling Green community was staring at projections showing that its population would double by 2050. This was not abstract demographic modeling; it was a near-certain future bearing down on a midsized Kentucky city. The question was not whether growth would come but whether the community could shape that growth in ways that preserved what residents valued most about the place they called home.

Community leaders recognized that top-down planning would fail. They learned that lesson from other cities that had experienced rapid growth, where traffic suddenly choked once-peaceful streets, where the character of neighborhoods changed beyond recognition, where longtime residents felt displaced in their own commu-

nities. If Bowling Green was going to grow well, genuine citizen voice would have to drive the planning process from the beginning.

What made Bowling Green's approach distinctive was the public-private partnership at its heart. The BG2050 initiative brought together appropriate city and county agencies with unexpected partners: Google's Jigsaw research unit and the online conversation platform Polis. These two partners would facilitate a month-long conversation with citizens in early 2025, but only after crucial groundwork had been laid.

The organizers studied the earlier iterations of deliberative democracy in the United States in the 1990s and early 2000s. They understood that people have to be invited to engage by people they trust, and they have to be confident that leaders will genuinely listen to what they say. Technology alone could not create that trust. So before any digital platforms launched, trusted local leaders – clergy, teachers, business owners, neighborhood association presidents – sat down in living rooms all over Bowling Green and Warren County. They listened to people of every background, every neighborhood, every demographic. These face-to-face conversations created the foundation of legitimacy that would allow the subsequent digital engagement to succeed.

When the Polis platform opened, participation exceeded all expectations. Nearly eight thousand residents – roughly 10 percent of the community's entire population – engaged with the process. They submitted two thousand distinct ideas about Bowling Green's future. They cast over one million votes on proposals submitted by their neighbors. This was not a self-selected group of usual suspects who attend every public meeting. The participant demographics closely mirrored the community.

The sheer volume of input created a new challenge: how to make sense of two thousand ideas and a million votes without losing the nuance and local context that made them meaningful. This is where Jigsaw's artificial intelligence (AI) tools proved essential. The AI analyzed the input and identified 3,940 unique concepts organized into twelve broad topics and seventy subtopics. But – and this was critical – the AI did not flatten the input into bland generalizations. It captured nuance. It reflected understanding of Bowling Green's physical geography and cultural context.

One example illustrates this capacity for contextual understanding. Jigsaw's AI highlighted a major theme running through the community input: respondents wanted Bowling Green *to build its own identity and not try to be Nashville*. This insight required intimate knowledge of regional dynamics, including the relationship between Kentucky's midsized cities and Tennessee's booming capital ninety miles to the south, the anxiety about losing local character in pursuit of growth, and the desire to learn from nearby examples without simply imitating them. A generic sentiment-analysis tool would have missed this entirely. But the AI captured it, flagged it as significant, and ensured it would inform the recommendations that emerged from the process.

The synthesis of this input – combining the face-to-face conversations, digital deliberation, and AI analysis – produced a comprehensive vision for growth that reflected genuine community priorities. Residents wanted economic opportunity but not at the expense of quality of life. They wanted new housing but with careful attention to neighborhood character. They wanted transportation infrastructure designed to connect communities rather than divide them. They wanted Bowling Green to become more than it was without ceasing to be Bowling Green.

This process gave Gorman and other local leaders something invaluable: a mandate grounded in broad community participation. The recommendations carried legitimacy because they emerged from a process that had genuinely engaged thousands of residents. And critically, those residents knew they had been heard. They could see their ideas reflected in the synthesis. They could trace the connections between what they said in their living rooms, what they submitted on the platform, and what appeared in the final vision for BG2050.

Bowling Green's success highlighted another question relevant to every deliberative process: What happens next? Having created this rich picture of community priorities, how would leaders ensure that subsequent decisions aligned with it? How would accountability be maintained? Would there be mechanisms to return to the community as implementation proceeded, to check whether the reality of growth matched the vision? These questions about closing the loop – about ensuring that deliberation actually influences decisions – would become even more urgent in Fort Collins, where a deliberative process confronted the ultimate test: a public vote.

Both California and Bowling Green demonstrated that deliberative processes could engage citizens at scale and produce substantive recommendations. But neither faced the ultimate question: Would the broader public – including those who had not participated in the deliberative process – trust and support the recommendations that emerged from it? Fort Collins would answer that question directly, in the most democratic way possible, through a ballot measure.

The Hughes Stadium site in Fort Collins had become a wound in the city's civic fabric. A 165-acre plot of public land where Colorado State's Hughes Stadium stood before it was demolished in 2018, it lay at the intersection of passionate, incompatible visions for the city's future. Environmental advocates saw it as crucial open space that should be restored to native habitat. Recreation enthusiasts envisioned trails and sports facilities. Neighbors worried about traffic and noise. Voices citywide argued for uses that would benefit all residents, not just adjacent neighborhoods. Each group had legitimate interests. But traditional politics had produced only stalemate and deepening acrimony.

A citizen-initiated ballot measure in 2021 required the city to purchase the site and rezone it as public open lands but settled nothing about actual use. If anything,

it intensified the conflict. Every proposal triggered immediate opposition. Public meetings devolved into shouting matches. Competing interest groups hardened their positions. City council members faced impossible choices, with any decision bound to enrage a substantial portion of their constituents.

In this context, the Fort Collins city council made a remarkable decision: they would step back and trust everyday residents to find common ground where elected officials and organized interest groups had failed. They commissioned a civic assembly, a small-scale, face-to-face deliberative body that would bring together randomly selected residents representative of community demographics.

Twenty residents were chosen through a sortition (lottery) process designed to create a microcosm of Fort Collins. They ranged in age from their twenties to their seventies. They represented different neighborhoods, different educational backgrounds, and different political perspectives. Most had no strong prior opinion about the Hughes Stadium site. They were not activists or stakeholders with organizational interests. They were simply residents who happened to be selected and who agreed to undertake this work on behalf of their community.

These twenty people committed to thirty hours of deliberation over two weekends. (Given the significant commitment of time, the members of the citizens' assembly were paid a small stipend and had their meals and childcare expenses covered.) They were not asked to compromise between preexisting positions. Rather, they were asked to learn, to deliberate, and to recommend what they genuinely believed would be best for Fort Collins. To support their work, an information committee of twelve residents reviewed and determined what background materials the assembly should receive. Other residents hosted mini-deliberations throughout the city to gather broad input to inform the assembly's work.

The assembly's process was carefully structured but not constraining. Trained facilitators helped the group surface their values and priorities before diving into specific proposals. Expert presentations from city staff, environmental scientists, recreation planners, and community development specialists provided factual grounding. The participants heard from advocates of different approaches but were free to chart their own course. Crucially, they deliberated together rather than merely listening to presentations and voting individually. The conversation itself – the exchange of perspectives, the testing of assumptions, the gradual emergence of shared understanding – was the heart of the process.

The large group learning sessions of the citizens' assembly were held in public and could be observed by anyone in the community interested in attending. The small group deliberation sessions at which delegates worked through options and built consensus were held in private. This is a typical design in citizens' assemblies: small group deliberations require psychological safety; people need to feel free to express uncertainty, to change their minds and freely move back-and-forth among different opinions without being observed by people outside the process.

What emerged was something none of the organized interest groups had proposed: a multiuse vision for the site that wove together recreation, environmental restoration, outdoor learning, and cultural spaces for community gatherings. The assembly's recommendations showed remarkable sophistication. They identified specific areas of the site suited for different purposes. They proposed phases for implementation that would allow environmental restoration to proceed while gradually developing amenities. They addressed neighborhood concerns about traffic and noise while ensuring citywide access and benefit.

The assembly's report carried moral weight because of the process that produced it. Here were twenty ordinary residents, demographically representative of the city, who had given thirty hours to learning and deliberation and had found consensus where experts and activists had found only conflict. The city council received the recommendations with genuine appreciation and began working on implementation.

But the vested interests that had previously fought for single-use visions were not ready to accept defeat. One group gathered enough signatures to place their preferred alternative – a single-use approach – on the November ballot. This created a defining moment for deliberative democracy in America. The city council could have allowed only that single-use measure to appear on the ballot, effectively overriding the assembly's work. Instead, they made a bolder choice: they placed the multiuse recommendation from the assembly on the ballot as well, creating a direct comparison and competition.

The city council asked Fort Collins voters to decide whether to trust the deliberative process. The citywide vote became a referendum not just on the use of the Hughes Stadium site but on the legitimacy of deliberative democracy itself. If the alternative measure prevailed, it would suggest that interest-group politics would always trump citizen deliberation. If the assembly's recommendation won, it would validate the investment in bringing everyday residents into complex decision-making.

The result was unambiguous. Sixty-seven percent of Fort Collins voters supported the civilians' assembly's multiuse vision. The alternative measure garnered 45 percent support. The overlapping support suggested that many voters appreciated both approaches but trusted the deliberative process more. For the first time in U.S. history, the recommendations of a civilians' assembly had been ratified by direct public vote.

The Fort Collins result carried profound implications. It demonstrated that the broader public – including those who had not participated in deliberation – could recognize the legitimacy of deliberative processes and trust their outcomes. It showed that investment in genuine deliberation could overcome the polarization and stalemate of traditional interest-group politics. And it provided a template for how deliberative recommendations could be integrated into existing democratic

institutions, including ballot measures, rather than remaining parallel or advisory processes with uncertain influence on actual decisions.

These three cases represent different scales, different technologies, and different integration points with existing governance. California operated at the state level with tens of thousands of participants and digital platforms. Bowling Green engaged with nearly 10 percent of the city population through a hybrid of face-to-face and digital methods. Fort Collins relied on just twenty residents in intensive face-to-face deliberation that was then validated by citywide vote.

Yet these cases share fundamental insights. First, citizens are ready and willing to participate in well-designed deliberative processes. The myth that Americans are too polarized, too busy, or too disengaged for serious civic work is contradicted by thousands of Californians contributing recovery ideas, eight thousand Bowling Green residents shaping their growth vision, and Fort Collins voters validating a deliberative process. The demand for meaningful participation exceeds the supply of quality opportunities.

Second, representativeness matters profoundly. California struggled with digital divides. Bowling Green invested heavily in face-to-face groundwork before digital engagement. Fort Collins used sortition to ensure demographic representation. Each approached the challenge differently but all recognized that legitimacy depends on inclusion. Deliberative processes that systematically exclude voices – whether due to technology barriers, time constraints, or selection methods – cannot claim to represent community wisdom.

Third, accountability mechanisms are essential. California's challenge is ensuring ongoing, cross-administration influence on policy. Bowling Green's recommendations must shape actual growth decisions. Fort Collins succeeded precisely because the deliberative outcome faced a democratic accountability test. The connection between deliberation and decision-making cannot be assumed; it must be designed into the process. Without visible impact on policy outcomes, these participatory processes risk increasing distrust and further eroding people's sense of civic agency.

Fourth, technology's role must be enabling but not determining. Jigsaw's AI in Bowling Green succeeded because it drew on face-to-face trust-building and captured local context. California's digital platforms struggled with access barriers despite sophisticated design. Fort Collins succeeded without relying on technology at all. The lesson is not that technology should be embraced or avoided but that it should be deployed thoughtfully in service of genuine deliberation, not as a substitute for it.

Finally, these cases reveal that deliberative democracy builds civic capacity in multiple directions simultaneously. Participants gain understanding of complex issues and appreciation for diverse perspectives. Community members who do not

participate directly but observe the process gain trust in democratic institutions. Officials and staff develop new skills in facilitating rather than merely presenting. The infrastructure created – whether California’s Office of Data and Innovation, Bowling Green’s public-private partnerships, or Fort Collins’s deliberative protocols – becomes available for future challenges.

The question these three cases invite is whether their lessons can scale up. What role can deliberative democracy play in national governance? Can citizen voice be brought back to the table where it may matter most and where its absence is most acutely felt?

The innovations documented in California, Bowling Green, and Fort Collins demonstrate once again that deliberative democracy works. Citizens participate when given meaningful opportunities. Diverse groups find common ground through structured conversation. The broader public trusts deliberative outcomes when processes are transparent and representative. These are established facts, proven through dozens of experiments across American communities over many decades beginning in the 1990s.

Yet state and local success cannot substitute for national-level reform. Federal policies set frameworks that shape what states and localities can accomplish in education, health care, infrastructure, environmental protection, and countless other domains. Federal dysfunction – the gridlock, the polarization, the disconnect between Washington and ordinary Americans – undermines trust in democratic governance writ large. If deliberative democracy is to fulfill its promise of renewing American democracy, it must reach the national stage.

The United States has experimented with national-level deliberation before. Between 1998 and 1999, Americans Discuss Social Security (ADSS), led by AmericaSpeaks and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, engaged nearly forty-five thousand Americans across all fifty states in direct discussions about Social Security reform. Participants deliberated on whether to raise the payroll tax ceiling, to invest trust funds in the stock market, and/or to adjust benefit formulas. The initiative demonstrated that large-scale national deliberation was logistically feasible and that citizens could engage thoughtfully with technical policy questions and reach consensus on critical policy options. Subsequently, as part of a larger tax reform package, Congress did raise the cap on payroll taxes, which was supported by ADSS participants in all fifty states and at all levels of income.

A second demonstration on the U.S. national level took place in 2010. “Our Budget, Our Economy” engaged more than 3,400 demographically representative citizens in nineteen cities across the country, connected by satellite television, to respond to the question: How should America grapple with its growing national debt? After a day of deliberation supported by facilitators and subject experts, the participants were able to come to collective agreement on solutions to reduce

the national debt that involved both raising revenues and cutting expenditures. Unfortunately, in the same time frame, the U.S. Congress was unable to reach an agreement and failed to take meaningful action to address the deficit.

Outside the United States, citizens' assemblies have successfully influenced national policy. Ireland's assemblies led to referendums legalizing same-sex marriage in 2015 and liberalizing abortion laws in 2018, with formal processes whereby recommendations went to parliamentary committees that reported to government. France convened a Citizens' Convention on Climate in 2019, which directly influenced its 2021 Climate and Resilience Law. The United Kingdom held Climate Assembly UK in 2020 to deliberate on how to meet the nation's goal of net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Belgium established a permanent citizens' council and citizens' assemblies in its German-speaking community and the Brussels-Capital Region. No two contexts are the same: population size, geography, and political culture help shape receptivity or resistance to deliberate democratic practices. And challenges in ensuring consistent governmental responsiveness have persisted. Nonetheless, these examples demonstrate that citizens' assemblies can operate at national scale and influence significant policy decisions.

The path forward is incremental. Congress could begin with a single pilot project: select one significant but not existentially divisive issue, convene a nationally representative citizens' assembly to deliberate, and observe what emerges. This would test logistical feasibility, build institutional knowledge, demonstrate that diverse Americans can deliberate productively, and generate concrete policy recommendations.

The design matters enormously. The selection process must ensure genuine demographic representativeness across region, race, age, education, and political perspective. Participants need adequate compensation. Information must be balanced and accessible. Expert facilitation is critical – not to steer outcomes but to ensure productive conversation among people with different perspectives.

Technology requires careful thought. California's experience shows that digital platforms can enable participation at scale but also create access barriers. Bowling Green's success with AI synthesis demonstrates that technology can make sense of large-scale input while preserving nuance, if properly designed. A national citizens' assembly might combine face-to-face deliberation among a core group with broader digital engagement, ensuring that technology serves deliberation rather than replaces it.

Transparency is nonnegotiable. Fort Collins succeeded partly because residents could observe the process and judge its integrity. A national citizens' assembly should operate in full public view, allowing Americans to watch the expert testimony, review materials, and evaluate whether diverse voices are genuinely heard. This builds trust and models reasoned, respectful disagreement.

The relationship between citizens' assembly recommendations and congressional action must be defined at the outset. The assembly would be advisory, not

legislative. Congress would retain full authority to accept, modify, or reject recommendations. What Congress would gain is input qualitatively different from polling or interest-group advocacy – recommendations emerging from sustained deliberation by a representative sample of Americans who have studied the issue carefully.

One institutional innovation could address the accountability challenge: the outputs of a citizens' assembly formally requested and endorsed by Congress could go directly to the floor of the full Senate and House, bypassing traditional committee structure. This would create an immediate relationship between collective citizen voice and the legislative bodies with power to act. Rather than disappearing into committee deliberations where they compete with countless other proposals and interest-group pressures, the assembly's recommendations would receive floor consideration and debate. Members of Congress would be compelled to publicly engage with citizen recommendations, explaining their support or opposition. This would not guarantee adoption but would ensure serious consideration and create accountability.

Pathways beyond Congress also merit exploration. Federal agencies could convene citizens' assemblies to inform regulatory decisions. Presidential commissions could incorporate deliberative elements. Research funders could prioritize studies documenting best practices. State and local governments should continue to innovate and share learning. Networks connecting practitioners can accelerate the spread of successful practices. Foundations and civic organizations can provide funding and technical assistance. Each successful local implementation builds the case for national adoption.

The obstacles to bringing deliberative democracy to the national level are real but not insurmountable. Achieving representativeness across a continental nation with 340 million people will challenge even the most sophisticated selection methods. Building trust faces headwinds from pervasive cynicism about Washington. The logistics demand resources and organizational capacity beyond what most local initiatives require. The political incentives for members of Congress to share agenda-setting power with citizens' assemblies are unclear.

But consider what is at stake. American democracy confronts challenges – polarization, distrust, declining civic participation – that conventional reforms have failed to address. Public faith in Congress hovers at historic lows. Political dysfunction persists despite clear public desire for action. The distrust between Washington and ordinary Americans continues to widen. Against this backdrop, citizens' assemblies offer something rare: a reform with proven effectiveness at bringing diverse people together in productive conversation, with demonstrated capacity to generate recommendations that earn public trust, and with potential to rebuild the civic relationships that democratic governance requires.

The experiments in California, Bowling Green, and Fort Collins point toward possibility. They show that the infrastructure exists, that the methodologies work,

that Americans will participate meaningfully when given genuine opportunities. What we need is political will, specifically the willingness of national leaders to experiment, to trust citizens with complexity, and to create space for deliberative voice alongside traditional forms of representation. The question is whether national institutions will respond to what local experience has already demonstrated: that democracy is strengthened and that we come closer to achieving the aspiration of self-governance embedded in our founding documents when citizens have meaningful voice in the decisions that shape their lives.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Kevin Conway, “Marquette Law School Poll Finds Most Americans Are Somewhat Skeptical of Trusting Government, While Confidence in Institutions More Generally Varies Widely,” *Marquette Today*, June 25, 2026, <https://today.marquette.edu/2026/06/marquette-law-school-poll-finds-most-americans-are-somewhat-skeptical-of-trusting-government-while-confidence-in-institutions-more-generally-varies-widely>; Daniel A. Cox and Sam Pressler, “Disconnected: The Growing Class Divide in American Civic Life Findings from 2024 American Social Capital Survey,” American Enterprise Institute, August 22, 2024, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/disconnected-places-and-spaces>; Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Swift Press, 2021); and Jenn Hatfield, “More than 80% of Americans Believe Elected Officials Don’t Care What People like Them Think,” Pew Research Center, April 30, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/30/more-than-80-of-americans-believe-elected-officials-dont-care-what-people-like-them-think>.
- ² American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report>.