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AMERICA

June 2023

Building the Democracy We Need for the Twenty-First Century

Hollie Russon Gilman, Grace Levin, Jessica Tang, & Lizbeth Lucero

Political Reform

Last edited on June 21, 2023 at 9:51 a.m. EDT

Acknowledgments

About the Author(s)

Hollie Russon Gilman is a fellow in the Political Reform program.

Grace Levin is a Master in Urban Planning student at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Her interests include the interrelation between civic engagement and the built environment.

Jessica Tang is a Master in Urban Planning and Master in Public Policy student at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and Harvard Kennedy School.

Lizbeth Lucero was a program associate with the Political Reform program at New America.

About New America

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 seeks to develop new strategies and innovations to repair the dysfunction of government, restore civic trust, and realize the potential of American democracy.

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Introduction

Our country is at an inflection point to rethink how we govern. The murder of George Floyd and the devastation of the pandemic served as violent and stark reminders that politics as usual will not lead to a healthy multiracial, multiethnic democracy. Faced with historic social inequalities and distrust in political institutions, there has been growing public demand for sweeping changes at all levels of government.

On his first day in office, President Joe Biden responded to this demand by signing an **executive order on advancing racial equity**. The historic order called for equity impact assessments for the federal government and national government agencies. Two years later, the Biden administration signed a second executive order **reaffirming and updating its promise to advance racial equity** in the federal government. The second order emphasized the importance of partnering with communities early in the policymaking process to deliver better outcomes. During this same time period, Congress passed the *Inflation Reduction Act* (IRA) and the *Infrastructure and Investment Jobs Act* (IIJA), which introduced new funding sources that specifically incentivize local governments to implement meaningful community engagement aimed at creating more equitable policies. For example, under the IRA—which represents the largest climate spending bill in U.S. history—the Environmental Protect Agency (EPA) is **providing states with funding to engage low-income and disadvantaged communities** in the development of climate action plans. Similarly, the IIJA **offers funding for local transportation planning** that supports public participation. Together, these policies call for a sustained commitment to reorient and modernize federal agencies to better serve the needs of communities that have been traditionally underserved by government.

Embedding equity from the beginning of a policymaking process requires that we fundamentally transform our **political structures**. It is not enough to simply mobilize around electoral cycles, rather we need a methodology for building a more inclusive civic voice into the very fabric and design of policy. An ultimate goal of these public engagement initiatives is to understand policymaking itself as a **vehicle for power**, building in hooks and levers which hold decision makers to account while also creating channels for more effective, equitable, and responsive policy. Rather than engaging community members as lip service after decisions have already been made, collaborative governance offers a pre-decisional opportunity for local governments to partner with communities to start the conversation, set the agenda, and build deliberative structures.

Collaborative governance or "co-governance" is one piece of a larger policy framework toward achieving the systemic change this country so desperately needs to build a multiracial, multiethnic democracy. Co-governance refers to a range of models, such as citizen assemblies and participatory budgeting, that

enable people inside and outside of government to work together in designing and implementing policy. These models invite people most impacted by problems in their community to help design the solution. More than a one-off transaction for public input, successful models of co-governance facilitate generational relationships between communities and government building civic power and transform government functions to work for more than just the elite few.

Co-governance models furthermore have the potential to create more equitable structures for governing by building channels for BIPOC and rural communities to impact policymaking from the earliest stages. The historic executive orders **advancing equity through the federal government** over the last two years present an opportunity to explore models of policy implementation and inclusive decision-making at all levels of government. Brookings Metro and the Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy at The New School recently released a report **gauging the progress** that has been made to address social and racial inequality in the United States. The report found that there is a critical need to consider equity not only for assessing policy outcomes but also for assessing how the policy is created in the first place. PolicyLink, a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity, published a **Racial Equity Governing Agenda** that calls for institutions to partner with the people who are often excluded: "To make the government more equitable, federal leaders must engage the very groups that have historically been left out of shaping our government's institutions. This requires building trust, engaging leaders, and ensuring the public has a voice." A co-governance methodology can be one component toward building a **racial equity** governing framework.

With unprecedented federal dollars flowing to communities, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to leverage federal dollars to remake the relationship between people and their public institutions. While participation at the national level presents challenges of scale, the practice of participatory governance at the local and state level has evolved dramatically in the last two decades, and the lessons of participatory and deliberative experiments include participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, and less formalized methods of non-adversarial engagement between organized citizens and agencies of government.

Community organizations, advocates, neighborhood leaders, and local governments from across the United States and abroad have been pushing for and experimenting with models of co-governance ranging from **citizen assemblies**, **participatory budgeting**, **public banks**, and community land trusts, as well as a range of digital tools such as Decidim, Pol.is, Front Porch Forum, and vTaiwan that can be used to support co-governance models. Multiple research initiatives are advancing the conversation on co-governance, including **DemocracyNext's** international action institute dedicated to supporting innovative models of civic participation and Race Forward and Partners for Dignity & Rights' **report detailing co-governance models** from across the

country led by communities of color. These tools and resources are breaking down systemic barriers between government and the people and breathing new life and ideas into civic institutions.

Of course, deploying these models is not easy or automatic. Each case provides lessons for building effective collaboration between communities and politicians and redistributing political power—not only lessons on what works but also what does not. We seek to distill and elevate these lessons and best practices into a toolkit to help local leaders navigate co-governance in their communities.

Drawing from New America's research on collaborative governance and the future of institutions—which includes a series of **case studies** with community organizations and local governments across the country—this toolkit lays out a process for implementing co-governance strategies at the local level.

Who Is This Guide For?

Actor	Levers	Benefits of Co-Governance
Civil Society (community groups, NGOs, labor unions, Indigenous groups)	On-the-ground outreach Organize communities Utilize local knowledge	Build power and representation across institutions
Government (counties, municipalities, or cities/towns)	Draft and implement policy Deploy state and federal funds Distribute public resources and services	Gain trust and legitimacy for more effective policy
Social Sector (foundations, charitable groups, religious groups)	Connect organizations and coalitions Provide resources and technical support	Expand reach through coalitions and leverage role as anchor institutions
Private Sector (businesses, firms, hospitals, etc.)	Invest in community solutions Provide resources and technical support	Better community ecosystem to support innovation and economic growth

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Co-Governance Process Guide

Process Steps	Key Lessons	Goals	Example
Invest in Civic Education	Meet People Where They Are Connect Policy to Everyday Life	Increase Transparency and Participation in Politics	CivicLex
Build Relationships	Commit Long Term Partner with Trusted Intermediaries Breakdown Barriers Between People and Government	Create Trusted Channels Between Residents and Elected Officials	Georgia STAND-UP
Leverage Innovation and Date	Build Data Literacy Hold Government Accountable Blend Online And In-Person Experience	Create More Accountable and Efficient Governing Systems	NYC Public Engagement Unit
Champion Local Leaders	Identify Existing Neighborhood Champions Connect to Leadership Opportunities Invest in Continued Support	Increase Representation and Build Civic Power	Local Progress
Build Shared Power	Find Opportunities for Collective Decision-Making: PB and Citizen Assemblies Institutionalize Processes Grow Civic Institutions	Create Better Policy Processes for More Equitable Outcomes	Puget Sound Sage

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Essential Steps for Effective Co-Governance

Invest in Civic Education

The first step toward meaningful participation is education. Civic education is overwhelmingly lacking across the country, especially given the historic disinvestment in education in BIPOC communities. We need to demystify government processes so more people understand how the policies that directly impact their daily lives are created. Deborah Scott, the Executive Director of **Georgia STAND-UP**, a think tank for working families, **described her experience** working with communities in Georgia: "A lot of people do not vote all the way down the ballot because they feel ashamed by the lack of knowledge about the races and offices listed on the ballot." Information is the most essential key to unlocking civic power; the challenge, then, is to ensure people are equipped with the knowledge and the confidence to participate in democracy.

Critical questions include: What are the formal and informal rules surrounding policymaking? Who are the important government actors, what are their responsibilities, and who are they accountable to? This is not to discount the immense local knowledge that community members already have, but in order to effectively advocate for change, we need to break down the knowledge barriers surrounding our civic institutions.

Key Strategies

Meet People Where They Are

Meaningful outreach is proactive: It creates easy channels for people to engage and learn. The organizations we talked to used multiple strategies ranging from in-person workshops at popular community spots to text messaging campaigns. The most effective education and outreach efforts tailor their approaches to meet different residents' needs rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, recognizing that what works best for some might not work for everyone in the community. For example, social media campaigns may be effective for reaching a younger audience, whereas door-to-door canvassing may be more useful for older residents. The **New York City Public Engagement Unit** (NYC PEU) recognized that they would be more successful reaching out to undocumented residents by partnering with local organizations and trusted intermediaries who already had strong ties in the community. Different residents may also need different types of information. Georgia STAND-UP has created different types of literature to help people vote based on their needs, such as an **Orange Book** with information on where to go to get free voter IDs and a voter guide for residents with a criminal background.

Deborah Scott spoke to us about the importance of having "kitchen-table" conversations that break down complicated and controversial policy topics with tailored framing for different audiences to build common ground and meet residents where they are. Deborah explained to us about conducting outreach around the topic of abortion in the Bible Belt: "When we talk about reproductive justice, we might not use the same framing that other communities use—however, we know our community members can all agree on the need to access safe and affordable healthcare."

Connect Policy Issues to Everyday Experience

Most people have a good understanding of the everyday issues in their community, such as the lack of adequate street lighting on their block. The key is connecting these everyday issues to policy and illuminating the levers of change that residents have to advocate for better outcomes. It is easy for traditional forms of engagement, like public meetings, to be overwhelmed with policy terminology and partisan disagreements that hamper engagement. Making policy relatable and personal can help people feel a sense of ownership and understanding of what is at stake. When the **Delaware Cares Coalition for Paid Leave** organized to pass paid family and medical leave in Delaware they had a limited outreach budget, so they focused on letting residents tell **their own stories**, such as Ernesta Coursey. Coursey was a hairstylist who had to save tips for nine months to cover unpaid time off when she had kids. She became an advocate through storytelling and is now a major community leader.

→ **COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION SPOTLIGHT: CIVICLEX**

CivicLex is a nonprofit civic education organization building civic health through education, media, and relationship building in Lexington, Kentucky. As Executive Director Richard Young explained, education is the first step: "When people don't understand the important issues that are going through city government, they are much less likely to be engaged."

CivicLex operates several civic education programs including a weekly local newsletter that breaks down what's happening in city hall, how to get involved, and when public meetings occur. They also host creative in-person workshops that bring together different residents and elected officials to increase transparency over decision-making. When Lexington was undergoing a redistricting process, CivicLex hosted a "paint and sip" event at a local brewery. Residents were able to paint their own redistricting lines and learn about the process while elected officials learned from residents'

experiences of drawing these boundaries. Other creative events include City Committee Watch Parties, which break down city hall meetings, and boardgame nights that gamify public works. Young **says**, "The hope is that in a year, we will have 30 to 40 people who know when, where, and how to show up to public meetings and advocate for policies."

Build Relationships

Effective co-governance models require a strong foundation of trusted relationships between people inside and outside government institutions. Historic distrust in government undermines an elected body's ability to foster meaningful engagement and partnership with communities. If people are not convinced that their input will be respected and that the government can deliver on promises, there is little incentive for the public to participate. As Adrienne Lever, the Executive Director of NYC PEU, **explained:** "From my background in organizing and campaigning, something I consistently heard from folks on the ground was: 'Government does nothing for me, so why should I vote? Why should I participate?' It can be very hard to motivate people to want to make their voices heard when they don't see the government acting on their behalf."

Reframing government's responsibility involves proactively and consistently showing up to communities long before and after election day, growing a network of trusted community partners, and creating opportunities for people inside and outside government to learn and work together. Part of rebuilding trust with communities is recognizing the repeated harm and violence that government institutions have perpetuated, especially against BIPOC communities. This is not the kind of work that can be repaired with one-off campaign promises, but rather requires committing to deeply rooted partnerships built from long-term investment, collaboration, and demonstrated results.

Key Strategies

Commit Long Term

The local officials and community organizations we spoke with all committed to long-term engagement strategies to build trust with their constituents. This means consistently showing up for communities, not just on election day to ask for votes. Public agencies can move beyond transactional relationships by proactively reaching out to community members, starting a conversation about their everyday experiences, and finding ways to respond and meet their needs on a more regular basis. While building relationships takes time and resources, meeting everyday needs of constituents through small achievements over time,

such as connecting people to mutual aid or organizing park cleanups, can help shift the dynamic between organizations and communities.

The NYC PEU works to reframe the government's relationship with residents through proactive outreach that enables them to understand and anticipate community needs. In other words, rather than going out into communities in reaction to a crisis, they help to avoid the crisis before it happens. For example, they proactively reach out to tenants and landlords before an eviction occurs. As Adrienne explains, "A small amount of outreach can go a long way because stories get shared, people learn about the work that we're doing, we build relationships of trust within the community, and we ultimately build a strong reputation where people can authentically reach out for support."

Partner with Trusted Intermediaries

Partnerships with trusted local leaders are indispensable to successful co-governance. For one, trusted intermediaries can help local governments more effectively scale their outreach by dispersing engagement efforts across community networks. This is especially true for local governments that lack the resources and funding to effectively reach all members of their constituency. More importantly, local partnerships can help outsider organizations and public agencies build relationships within a community and shift engagement away from a top-down approach. Puget Sound Sage, a community-based organization and policy powerhouse in Seattle, consistently partners with local leaders for their engagement and advocacy work, especially as they seek to expand their reach into more rural communities across the state. As Fernando Mejia Ledesma, Co-Executive Director of Puget Sound Sage and Sage Leaders, **shared**, "One of the things that we have collectively learned is the power dynamics that can arise from stepping into communities as outsiders. The challenges we are aiming to address have to be solved by working collaboratively with communities to find bold, practical solutions." Their partners have included labor unions, environmental advocates, philanthropy, business leaders, and faith-based groups. Faith-based groups have been key, they found, because churches and mosques are important community gathering spaces in neighborhoods across the state.

As we learned from our interviews, organizations and public agencies can start building community coalitions by identifying leaders and organizations in the community who will be impacted by policy outcomes and may have broadly shared interests. Partnership must be based on a mutual respect and understanding of roles and responsibilities, while allowing each member to leverage their own expertise. Too often community organizations are pitted against each other to compete for limited resources and funding. Lack of cohesion and communication can lead to fragmented organizations replicating rather than building upon each other's work. Successful partnerships can help

reframe the narrative by building networks of community organizations to strategically deploy resources. For example, when Liz Richards of Delaware Cares was trying to advocate for paid family leave on a limited budget, she thought broadly and creatively about who would be impacted by an economic justice related policy. This led to a broad based network of community groups brought into the fold, each with their own dedicated outreach strategy. The network started with 25 organizations then grew to 50, which helped them apply enough political pressure for a successful policy campaign.

Adrienne Lever from NYC PEU is careful to point out that partnering with trusted intermediaries should complement but not replace the government's responsibility to serve communities. There is a balance between partnership and overburdening local leaders to do the government's job. As Adrienne states, "We navigate making sure that we're being really inclusive of our nonprofit partners in conversations, while also trying to break the narrative that people have to go to other organizations when seeking support. So we work very closely with our partners, and we also work very hard to build direct relationships between the city and New Yorkers in the process."

Break Down Barriers Between People and Government

Creating multiple opportunities for elected officials and the public to collaborate can help break down traditional barriers between the government and the public. Traditional engagement strategies, such as town meetings, too often entrench divides between those inside and outside government institutions and cement existing power hierarchies. Research from **Boston** has found that participants in traditional public meetings are more likely to be older, white, and male. Public agencies and community organizations can play a critical role in shaking up the traditional public meeting and facilitating more inclusive and productive engagement opportunities. Organizations like CivicLex use creative strategies, such as hiring an artist in residence to engage residents and city officials through art and performance installations. They also host city budgeting workshops, where elected officials scenario plan with residents in a casual community environment to help foster a better understanding of government decisions and build authentic relationships.

Events like these can make bureaucracy more transparent by showing the people behind the agencies. It is easy to feel that government agents act as one political monolith, which can make it harder to build human relationships. As Sarah Johnson from Local Progress explained, "I think it's easy to think of the bureaucracy as a singular force when in fact, depending on the size of the jurisdiction, there might be a dozen or a hundred people in the bureaucracy, some of whom might share common goals and objectives as the political leadership, and some of whom might not."

These touchpoints between civic bodies and residents can not only lead to more trust in civic institutions, they can also help community members build relational power, an informal change mechanism for those historically excluded from decision-making.To foster productive and meaningful relationships, organizations must take a holistic approach and build upon civic education efforts to ground conversations in facts, civic knowledge, and local experiences. It is important for both elected officials and community groups to recognize that they are mutually dependent. As one of the leaders of Puget Sound Sage said, "Government and people need each other. There is no way that a progressive elected official is going to be successful unless there is strong community support, and community organizing can't be successful without government support."

→ **COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION SPOTLIGHT: GEORGIA STAND-UP**

Georgia STAND-UP's CEO, Deborah Scott, emphasized the importance of consistently showing up for communities. Georgia STAND-UP moves beyond transactional engagement by regularly checking in with people to ask about everyday issues, how the organization can meet their needs, and thank them for their participation and leadership in the community. As Deborah explained: "If we show up as an outside organization, instead of neighbors, we'll lose their interest because that's what political candidates do. At STAND-UP, we strengthen the civic infrastructure of the trusted leaders that are already in the community."

Georgia STAND-UP was able to use their trust with community members to expand the city's public transit system to reach more communities. The organization was able to form a community coalition that brought together community residents, city, and county officials to design a better bus system and pass a ballot measure for funding. They were able to grow the campaign by focusing on the shared benefits of public transportation across multiple stakeholder groups. The policy win helped Georgia STAND-UP demonstrate to community members that they could achieve collective change in their neighborhood. As Deborah put it, "Our organization is not a transactional organization. One thing I learned is that if you're not at the table, you're on the menu. Our efforts are going to teach our communities how to eat, how to bring food to the menu, to the buffet, and how to hold open the door and bring others along."

Leverage Data and Technology

Technology can help scale outreach, share information, and create new channels for communication between residents and public authorities. On the other hand, technology should not be thought of as a quick-fix for increasing participation in government. Deploying technology without a foundation of trust or a holistic understanding of how power operates in a community can further entrench divides, raise privacy concerns, and cement existing power hierarchies. The public agencies and community organizations we spoke with were thoughtful about using data and technology, often working with community members to implement tools, collect data, and share the results. It is important to understand how technology can be used by both the public and government. Community members can use technology and data to hold the government accountable, and government agencies can use technology and data to more effectively implement policies, track outcomes, and invite people into decision-making. For example, NYC PEU has leveraged city data to identify community members who need help, such as at-risk renters or people without health insurance, to better target outreach and connect people to the services they need. Together, data, technology, and innovation can be an important suite of tools for enabling, driving, and sustaining co-governance.

Key Strategies

Build Data Literacy

Conversations around the importance of open data for governments to promote transparency have become an accepted best practice. Many community organizations and public agencies are advancing their open data efforts by embedding data-sharing within a larger equity framework and committing to a data literacy strategy, so both residents and city departments are equipped with the skills to use data to drive change. Initiatives like **Bloomberg Philanthropy's City Data Alliance** are bringing mayors together to share more equitable data practices. San Francisco's citywide data strategic plan, for example, embeds the city's open data portal within a larger value-driven framework that emphasizes increasing knowledge and skill-building around how to use and share data.

New York City recently published their **Equitable Development Data Explorer**, which allows residents and city agencies to explore demographic, housing, and quality of life characteristics as well as displacement risks across neighborhoods and demographic groups through an interactive website. Beyond just making their data explorer accessible and interactive, the city collected feedback from residents to tailor the tool to community needs and will be holding trainings on how to use the tool.

Puget Sound Sage's research moves beyond data access by utilizing community-based participatory research (CBPR) where community members lead data

collection. To understand climate impacts on low-income communities in South Seattle, the organization worked with local BIPOC leaders from the community to create a grassroots Steering Committee to guide the research process and identify community priorities. As their report states, "As a research mechanism, it challenges traditional academic approaches that have taken data from community without returning benefits. Instead, CBPR is designed to provide research that is useful for the community from which the data and findings originate."

Hold Government Accountable

The purpose of equipping residents with information is to hold government accountable. Tracking policy impacts can allow community groups to hold governments accountable for delivering on campaign promises and ensure that elected officials are making informed, data-driven decisions. Disaggregating data by neighborhood and demographics is one of the tenets of many of the frameworks for policy impact analysis. Understanding disparate outcomes by geography, race, ethnicity, gender, and other demographic characteristics can help identify and monitor inequities and avoid a one-size-fits-all policy approach which ignores different experiences and challenges faced by different community groups. For example, it is important for public agencies to understand who is and is not participating in policy programs and identify where they live. The cities of Los Angeles and Toronto have created and standardized data equity strategies to guide data disaggregation and analysis to monitor public services.

Data disaggregation does come with challenges. In addition to being time and resource intensive, disaggregation raises privacy concerns, especially considering the historical use of data collection by public authorities to oppress Black and brown communities. Richard Young from CivicLex spoke to us about the ethical concerns of data collection. If not implemented and collected in the right way, this process can create ethical concerns which have collateral consequences on public perceptions of government. The organization initially disaggregated the data they collected to the individual level, but because of privacy concerns, they later shifted to disaggregating data by neighborhood clusters. CivicLex recently has been working with the city of Lexington on community engagement for a new comprehensive plan. They track geography down to neighborhood clusters to see how different areas engage with different issues.

One of the most effective ways to evaluate public programs and hold government accountable is to track government spending. This is particularly relevant today given the amount of federal funds flowing to local governments via the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA or the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill). Technology like digital dashboards can help organizers and community groups track how the federal money is allocated. On a national level, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill Dashboard breaks down the

entire spending package, and the Infrastructure Bill Insights Tool helps local governments break down the bill's funding programs to help match spending to community priorities. There are examples from cities across the country, including Lexington, Massachusetts; **Evanston, Illinois**; **Rockland, Maine**; and **Grand Rapids, Michigan**, where local governments have used online tools to gather citizens' input on the allocation of ARPA funds in their communities.

Blend In-Person and Online Experience

Examples from cities around the world show the possibilities that technology brings to rethink civic engagement and facilitate co-governance programs. Online platforms offer new opportunities to invite people into the decision-making process. Taiwan is pushing the boundaries of participatory democracy using an online discussion tool called vTaiwan on the Pol.is digital platform. vTaiwan has successfully brought together elected officials, researchers, business leaders, community advocates, and residents to cut through political gridlock and draft new policies on controversial topics, such as the regulation of Uber. Only four years into this experiment almost half of the country has participated, with 10.5 million active visitors from a population of 24 million. According to the **Brookings Institution**, these consensus-based governance mechanisms have transformed **public trust** in Taiwan, addressing head-on the polarization and partisanship that defined the country's politics prior to 2016.

Digital platforms have also offered new opportunities for participatory budgeting programs. In 2020, New York City became the first municipality in the United States to host a youth-driven participatory budgeting process on Decidim, an open-source civic tech platform used in cities worldwide to promote direct democracy. In this process, young people ages 9-24, regardless of citizenship status, could participate and decide how to allocate $100,000. The New York City Civic Engagement Commission is currently using this platform for a recovery-focused participatory budgeting process in partnership with community organizations and City Council members in the 33 neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19.

The public officials and community organizations we spoke to emphasized that online outreach tools have their limitations and should be used in tandem with in-person strategies based on the target group's specific needs. For example, people experiencing homelessness may not have reliable access to the internet and so could be excluded from an exclusively online strategy.

We spoke with Peggy Flynn, the City Manager of Petaluma, California, who described how Petaluma is using online platforms to complement in-person meetings. Even after COVID-19, the city has maintained hybrid city council meetings to expand access. Peggy explained the reasoning behind keeping the hybrid structure: "Community members can join and weigh in on items while

they're feeding their kids or taking care of other things in the background. We will continue to use hybrid models to accommodate more people in our community—even after the emergency resolution."

→ LOCAL GOVERNMENT SPOTLIGHT: NYC PEU

The New York City Public Engagement Unit (NYC PEU) leverages data to proactively connect low-income residents to city services. The goal is to reshape the city's responsibility to residents and increase trust in government. By using data to identify residents in need of services across a broad range of issues, including transportation, housing, and healthcare, they are able to cut through overly complex bureaucratic systems and reach residents most in need of support. For example, the team leveraged existing city data to identify senior residents enrolled in pandemic meal support and connect them to other resources before the program expired, thus ensuring there was no gap in service delivery and no one was left behind.

NYC PEU also operates a Tenant Support Hotline, which helps residents across the city facing eviction. The hotline has collected data from 100,000 calls to reveal patterns about eviction risk and service delivery across neighborhoods. Executive Director Adrienne Lever explains, "We then reach out to those especially vulnerable zip codes that aren't calling the helpline as frequently to figure out why they're not calling and how to engage with them." Adrienne was then able to share findings from the hotline with the city's Chief Housing Officer to help shape new housing policy. NYC PEU's work demonstrates how data can be used to create more responsive policy: "We've seen, especially with this administration, a real desire to learn from what's happening on the ground and develop a strategic and flexible policy that is responsive to what's actually happening, versus what they think should happen."

Champion Local Leaders

The previous strategies have focused on breaking down barriers between residents and government institutions by increasing knowledge sharing, relationships, and accountability between public and civic bodies. The final two strategies focus on creating civic power for community residents by transforming our civic institutions and shifting existing power dynamics within political systems. An essential step is making sure local representatives are truly reflective

of a multiracial, multiethnic democracy and recognizing and elevating the neighborhood leaders already doing the work in their communities. America's cities, especially suburbs, are undergoing historic demographic changes, becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, and we need leaders at the local level to reflect this change. There has been a sustained focus of local progressive movements to elect diverse and grassroots progressive leaders in cities across the country. The community groups we talked to reminded us that being elected is only the first step toward enacting political change. They provide inspiring examples of taking a long-term approach to leadership development.

Puget Sound Sage is one of the community organizations working to train and elevate the next generation of community changemakers by connecting them to local leadership opportunities. The Program Director of their Community Leadership Institute, Eric Opoku Agyemang, explains the motivation behind the Institute: "My work is guided by the belief that we need to have a say in designing the policies most impacting our communities, and in order to do that, we need a seat at a table. If you're not at the table, then you're on the menu. In other words, if you're not there to speak for yourself, then someone else is going to speak for you."

Key Strategies

Identify Existing Neighborhood Champions

An effective leadership development strategy begins with recognizing the existing local leaders in a community. Organizations and public agencies can notice who continues to show up for events and community meetings and who is being vocal about the change they want to see in their neighborhood. Leaders may come from faith organizations, labor unions, school communities, activist networks, or the people behind small-scale change, like street cleaning on a local block.

Georgia STAND-UP runs a leadership development program that identifies local champions and provides an eight-week training curriculum focused on race, class, and politics in Georgia. They focus on how local decisions get made and what the hooks and levers are for community leaders to be involved in decision-making and drive change. They work with local universities to bring in program facilitators and work with their thought leaders to make sure the training is community specific and tied to current everyday issues, rather than steeped in academic theory. The organization thinks holistically about building a leadership development pipeline and has also implemented youth programming to engage and train local students.

Connect to Leadership Opportunities

Leadership development programs can be even more successful when community organizations can partner with local governments and provide real opportunities for program graduates to enact what they have learned. It is a win-win for communities and public agencies as neighborhood leaders are able to develop their governing skills and influence decision-making to better represent community priorities, while local government bodies can bring in new ideas and perspectives for better policymaking and increase trust with residents they serve.

Puget Sound Sage accomplishes these goals by matching graduates of their leadership development program with positions on boards, commissions, and task forces at the city and county level. The program provides childcare, transportation, stipends, and meals to remove barriers for participation.

Abdirahman Yussuf is one of the graduates of Puget Sound Sage's leadership development program who now works as the Equitable Development Organizer for the organization. He shared his thoughts about the program: "I was able to develop the knowledge, skills, and voice that I have now. The Community Leadership Institute is building a pipeline of emerging leaders and helping to build on strategies and tactics to move the agenda forward."

Invest in Continued Support

Getting local leaders in positions of power is only one piece of the puzzle. Many of the community organizations continue their support of leaders long after election day to ensure effective change. Knowing how to navigate internal bureaucracies and power systems is often a barrier to newly elected leaders and can slow their progress. Community organizations can support their local champions through a variety of forms such as through workshops, mentorship programs, or an alumni network to form a coalition of public servants driven by shared values. Puget Sound Sage organizes a cohort of BIPOC first-time candidates to provide emotional support, peer-to-peer mentorship, and open dialogues with bi-weekly cohort meetings. As Sage's Political Director, Aretha Basu, explains, "This year, our cohort members are women of color, predominantly Black women, which has been amazing. We are providing a space for our group to vent and be themselves. At the same time, it can be challenging to hear some of the experiences they face on a daily basis." The organization continues their support through their Local Elected Leadership Institute, which brings together progressive elected officials from around the state for leadership development training, recognizing that the first few years in office are often the most challenging.

Local Progress is a network of 1300 elected officials working at the city, county, and school board level to advance a racial and economic justice agenda across 47 states. The organization is particularly focused on supporting the leadership of women and people of color in governing roles. Their effort is not only in getting community leaders elected, but continuing their support after election day to drive transformation change in local governments across the country. This support looks like helping their members navigate the formal and informal power dynamics of local bureaucracies, such as who in the organization is key to getting something approved. This year Local Progress convened more than 300 local elected officials and community leaders to discuss effective change-making strategies to enact progressive policies, ranging from what role a city manager can play to how leaders can protect immigrants in a post-Trump era. Sarah Johnson, the Executive Director of Local Progress, shared the vision behind their work: "At Local Progress, we believe the leadership of elected officials is important everywhere and fundamental to the change we need to see in our country." She continued, "I don't think that the answer can just be that we need foundations to fund formal community organizing work in every single community. We need to have a leadership development strategy to bring leadership to scale and use these positions in all kinds of places to build governing power."

Build Shared Power

The status quo of government as usual has led to the deep distrust in government and the partisan divide that we face today. Increased outreach and representation must also be paired with true institutional change of our governing systems that go beyond surface level engagement. Richard Young of CivicLex refers to this kind of systems-level change as civic transformation, which involves altering how local governments function with more opportunities for shared power. A starting point for this work is to reimagine what is possible for our political structures and civic institutions. Cities around the world are experimenting with new models of government that invite more collective decision-making, such as through participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies. These new models of collaborative governance challenge traditional assumptions of what local government can and cannot be and who gets to decide. While structural change is challenging to achieve, elected officials and

community groups can begin by recognizing the hooks and levers at their disposal to invite community members into the decision-making process.

Building shared power is important not only for effecting structural change but also for delivering more equitable and effective policy. Allowing people most impacted by governing decisions to be involved in the design process ensures that the policies match on the ground realities, recognizing the expertise of lived experience that too often elected officials lack. This also provides space for creative solutions from new perspectives, something that we desperately need in face of today's critical challenges such as climate change. In fact, the **EPA's Climate Pollution Reduction Grants (CPRG) program**, which promotes locally based climate mitigation strategies, specifically requires states "to conduct meaningful engagement including with low-income and disadvantaged communities throughout its jurisdiction." As more federal funding sources like the CPRG program become available, states and municipalities will have increased incentives to implement participatory practices. Furthermore, at a time when political tensions are high and trust in institutions are low, a collaborative process built on a real commitment to shared power, more than a one-off surface level transaction, and commitment to real results can go a long way toward rebuilding trust in government.

Key Strategies

Find Opportunities for Collective Decision-Making

From **Evanston, Illinois**, to **Paris, France**, cities around the world are experimenting with collaborative governance models that invite communities into the decision-making process. A collaborative governance process willingly shifts power so both elected officials and local residents work together to design policy and make key decisions. Co-governance models are not without challenges, because they require a solid foundation of trust and shared understanding. This toolkit situates co-governance within a holistic community building framework that sees civic education, relationship building, and leadership development as essential first steps toward an effective and ongoing co-governance process.

Participatory budgeting is an increasingly popular model of co-governance. In traditional participatory budgeting projects, local residents are able to decide how city funds get allocated by voting on a number of community proposals. Participatory budgeting projects can vary to fit a city's context and can benefit from a combination of in-person and online outreach to engage residents. The City of Denver recently launched their first participatory budgeting process to let residents decide how to allocate **$2 million of the city's budget**. They invited residents to participate online and in-person to submit proposals and vote on their favorites. Denver committed to inviting all residents to participate and

hosted outreach events in unconventional spaces, including public parks for people experiencing homelessness, in Denver County Jails for people who are currently incarcerated, and in elementary schools for the city's youth.

Another model for collective decision-making in local government are citizen assemblies. Through the citizen assembly, the local government invites a pool of randomly selected citizens to participate in the policymaking process. We **spoke** with Peggy Flynn, the City Manager of Petaluma, who helped convene a citizen assembly to guide the redevelopment of a publicly owned fairground property. In partnership with Healthy Democracy, the process brought together 36 lottery-selected citizens representative of the city's geographic diversity to decide how the fairgrounds property could maximize the needs and desires of the community.

Peggy spoke about the impetus behind the process: "I knew if we did a traditional engagement process, we were going to hear from the same people we always do. Citizen Assemblies offered a different model." **Healthy Democracy** and the City of Petaluma were intentional about facilitation, including offering hybrid options and hiring people from the community to be translators and facilitators. While the future of the fairgrounds was a controversial topic, the process helped build a sense of shared understanding. As Peggy explained, "There was so much ownership over the process. Even though there wasn't consensus over the proposed projects, people supported one another. In the beginning, people were uncomfortable and scared to participate given the heightened political polarizations, but in the end, we are all still neighbors. The panelists and our community should feel so good about the work we were able to accomplish."

Institutionalize Processes

To drive lasting change and a commitment to shared civic power, local governments and community organizations must look for opportunities to institutionalize shared power and collective decision-making. While pilots and one-off experiments can be helpful to test new policies and garner support, it is important to find opportunities for long-term wins. These can be simple procedural changes. For example, CivicLex worked to change when public input was heard for city council decisions, which allowed community leaders to more effectively advocate for policy changes by voicing their concerns before the final council meeting. Elected officials may have more hooks and levers at their disposal to shift the status quo than they realize. Sarah Johnson, Executive Director of Local Progress, shared, "It can be easy for newly elected officials to see the things that are out of their control and feel discouraged, but they can use levers like appointments and oversight to build new systems of power for communities."

More cities are demonstrating their commitment to lasting change by dedicating city funds for new positions and departments that are dedicated to enabling more people to participate in policymaking. These cities recognize that a meaningful civic engagement process requires time, resources, and dedicated personnel to be effective. Examples range from Mexico City's Ministry of Imagination; Richmond, Virginia's Office of Community Wealth Building; and Lansing, Michigan's Department of Neighborhoods and Civic Engagement, which recently launched a Citizens Academy dedicated to civic education. Staffing and increased funds can be a powerful signal to the community of what a city values and how serious they are about community engagement.

Grow Civic Institutions

To continue building processes and systems for collaboration, it is vital that we begin the process of rebuilding the civic infrastructure of our communities. More than just roads and bridges, civic infrastructure includes the people and places that help build a sense of trust and break down barriers between people inside and outside governing institutions. Civic spaces may be physical libraries, public parks, community gardens, or the online networks of digital platforms like mutual aid groups. Successful civic spaces have the shared effect of bringing different kinds of people together and building relationships that increase our sense of community and resiliency. Too often these spaces and networks are unrecognized and underfunded, leaving communities vulnerable in times of distress, yet this infrastructure is vital for strengthening education, relationships, leadership, and shared power that collaborative governance requires. We have the opportunity to reinvest and reimagine our civic infrastructure with once in a lifetime funding opportunities, including the infrastructure bill, ARPA funds, and environmental justice funds.

At the national level, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' **Our Common Purpose Report** and the Reimagining Civic Commons Project called for building a **Trust for Civic Infrastructure.** The Love Your Block program is one model for how federal governments can allocate funds for local governments to work with communities to rebuild community spaces. Across the country, we are also beginning to see local governments reimagine civic infrastructure in ways that will help build a vibrant, diverse democracy for generations to come. For example, in Akron, Ohio, the city has made a historic commitment to invest in its public parks through a participatory process that invites residents in disinvested neighborhoods to co-create new spaces for community gathering.

→ COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION SPOTLIGHT: PUGET SOUND SAGE

Puget Sound Sage is a community-based organization and policy powerhouse based in Seattle that is dedicated to building community power and leading transformational change on issues around economy, climate, health, and leadership. The organization takes a holistic approach to building community power with programs dedicated to community education, participatory research, leadership development, coalition building, and advocacy. They are building a new wave for civic participation by bringing elected officials and community members together to imagine a better future for the Puget Sound region. In 2019, the organization worked with city council members and local residents to brainstorm creative solutions to environmental justice issues that led to a Green New Deal Ordinance, a tangible policy win. Puget Sound Sage also worked with the city to build a participatory budgeting process with the Black- and Indigenous-led coalition **Seattle Solidarity Budget** in response to the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Fernando Mejia Ledesma, the organization's Co-Executive Director, explained the organization's theory of change: "In order to make the change that we want to see in our society, we have to build power. Power is not about dominance. The essence behind the power is one of liberation. In other words, we use that power as a vehicle to achieve justice for our communities."

Conclusion

Despite high levels of gridlock and distrust in government nationally, everyday local elected officials and neighborhood leaders are coming together to build better futures for their communities. From delivering a bus system in Georgia to funding environmental justice initiatives in Washington, civic advocates across the country are showing that new models of collaborative governance are possible.

Our conversations with civic organizations, local governments, and community changemakers demonstrate the importance of a holistic approach to building civic power at the local level—street by street, neighborhood by neighborhood. Successful collaborative governance models offer more than a quick fix to the deep levels of distrust in our civic, social, and political structures, and the harm that has been inflicted on BIPOC and rural communities throughout this country's history. They commit to a long-term, tailored, multi-pronged approach that invests in places and the people that make them great. From bottom-up and sustained victories at the local level, we can start to build power and momentum to rebuild and reimagine civic institutions at a national scale.

The unprecedented influx of federal funding to communities presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for reimagining the relationship between community residents and their local, state, and national government. Through programs such as the Inflation Reduction Act and the Infrastructure and Investment Jobs Act, which encourage states and municipalities to embrace meaningful community engagement strategies and support community-led projects, new resources and incentives exist for local agencies to implement co-governance strategies in collaboration with community leaders. Local government officials now have the responsibility to ensure federal resources are connected to the communities they are intended to serve. The intention of this toolkit is to help inspire government actors to build community partnerships and center civic power in decision-making and resource allocation.

Collaborative governance requires sustained investment and momentum, best served by a multi-sector approach. Government and civil society can create opportunities for everyday people to engage in shared problem solving. Academia, businesses, and philanthropy all have roles to play in this endeavor. While there will be tradeoffs and tensions, they are part of the opportunity for growth. Building and investing in the relationships and sustainable processes takes time, experimentation, and a willingness to learn from mistakes. Yet, these experiments are necessary to build a vibrant multiracial, multiethnic democracy that centers traditionally underserved communities and can address the large-scale challenges of governance in the twenty-first century. As Richard Young from CivicLex reminds us, "We owe it to the people in our local places and to the people around the world to actually get our houses in order."