

# A Broader, More Inclusive Vision of Democracy

WHY [PARTISANS, LEFT (Progressives) & Right (Conservatives)] DON'T GET DEMOCRACY — AND WHY THEY SHOULD

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### Description:

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### Stakeholder(s):

#### Tina Nabatchi :

*Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* / Co-Author

*collective intelligence and volunteer capacity of citizens would help them best serve their communities and their country.*

#### Citizens :

*I've spent my whole career helping cities, states, and countries engage citizens in more democratic ways. (By "citizens" I mean all of us, whatever passports we hold, and I use it to honor our contributions to democracy and civic life.) When I tell people about my work, most Americans expect that resistance to these practices comes mainly from conservatives.*

*It doesn't. Some of the strongest opposition to democracy comes from progressives, particularly people in positions of influence and authority.*

#### Progressives :

*To succeed politically—and, more importantly, to make a greater contribution to American society—progressives should take a closer look at what democracy means, why it really matters, and how innovations in democracy offer a much more productive debate about our future as a country.*

*Why are progressives so uncomfortable with democracy? Because, from its beginnings, progressive philosophy didn't give citizens a central role in public life.*

*The core ideals of progressivism were established in the early 20th century, as a reaction to the main challenges of the times. Back then, American cities and towns were beset with corruption, poverty, and illiteracy.*

#### Cities

#### States

#### Countries

#### Peggy Merriss :

*Twenty-five years ago, a city manager looked at me gravely and said, "I'm not a big fan of unbridled democracy." I had just suggested ways that she could engage large, diverse numbers of people in a deliberative process to plan the future of her city. She was skeptical.*

*Why? Because all my ideas about giving citizens a voice in decision-making went against the grain of her training and outlook on how public life is supposed to work. As a highly competent administrator and expert, she was used to a system where citizens elect officials and get out of the way. Then, those elected officials hire managers and experts, and they get down to the business of governing.*

*Peggy Merriss, the city manager I spoke with 25 years ago, just finished an illustrious career as one of the most innovative city managers in the country. Decatur, Georgia, the city she led, is firmly established as a participatory local democracy and steadily improving its quality of life. The Georgia Municipal Association inducted her into the Local Government Hall of Fame.*

*What changed for Merriss? She participated in projects like the Decatur Roundtables, which engaged residents in discussions about land use, race, and education. She was involved in Decatur Next, a large-scale community planning process. "I participated, but I had no more influence than anyone else," she said. Her experience working directly with residents in these settings reassured her that citizens can, in fact, be reasonable, open-minded, and capable of compromise.*

*To govern more effectively, progressives should follow Merriss' lead. This is an emotional transition as much as it is an intellectual one: People in positions of authority need to realize that they were not elected or appointed to make every decision and solve every problem. Creating situations that tap the*

*In response to those problems, Progressive-era reformers helped create a new set of public-facing professions, including city management, social work, and modern policing. Expertise in these areas promised to improve public health, end child labor, rein in organized crime, and solve many other problems. Free and fair elections, combined with transparency in public decision-making, helped combat the political "machines" that dominated the cities.*

*For the most part, it worked. Progressive expertise helped us survive the Great Depression. But it also isolated these experts, as well as elected officials, from the people they ultimately serve. Many professionals came to see citizens as rank amateurs at best, obstacles at worst.*

*Conservatives also put government above citizens. But progressives want officials to govern proactively, while conservatives believe they will "govern best by governing least." Neither approach is satisfying to citizens today. Those early-20th-century institutions and professions have lost the trust of most Americans.*

*The reverse is also true. Progressive public officials and experts have become more mistrustful of their constituents—and thus more skeptical about democracy. One reason for this mistrust is that they hear only the loudest, angriest voices. This is true online and on social media, but it's also true in most public meetings and hearings, which operate according to an old formula where people get a few minutes to speak at the microphone. Angry constituents dominate these meetings, and there is very little meaningful exchange. Many progressives associate these kinds of horrible public meetings with "democracy," and it makes them less and less enthusiastic about interacting with citizens.*

*Political polarization makes this worse. Most progressives now think of conservatives as uneducated, racist, mindlessly anti-government, and manipulated by Fox News. Why give those people a meaningful say in public decisions?*

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*Stakeholders (continued)*

*Before 2016, many Democrats as well as Republicans were voicing frustration with politics and advocating systemic change. But since Donald Trump's version of systemic change basically amounted to demolishing the system entirely, he provoked an understandable knee-jerk reaction from Democrats defending government.*

*Now, progressives are increasingly fearful—for good reason—that Trump and his allies are poised to make voting much harder and are even preparing to steal the next election. Progressives are urging us all to “save democracy”—but by democracy they mean voting, and only voting.*

*This is a weak vision of democracy, and it is a losing message for progressives.*

*These days, most people vote not out of enthusiasm for their preferred candidate, but out of fear, and a desire to keep the other side from causing harm. Some Americans think their votes aren't being counted, others think that voting fails to produce the policy changes they support. Asking Americans to pin all their hopes for change on voting seems like a doomed strategy.*

*By putting all their emphasis on voting, progressives continue to push the idea that governance should be left entirely to the experts and elected officials. Progressives risk coming across as dismissive, condescending, and pedantic—a recipe for defeat.*

*Progressives are missing an opportunity. When citizens are presented with practices and reforms that would give them a more meaningful say in public decisions, they respond with enthusiasm. In one national opinion poll, Americans were asked about a list of possibilities for participatory democracy. There's been strong support for these ideas—including participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies, which allow everyday people to contribute to policymaking—without significant differences between Republicans and Democrats. Giving power to citizens is a message that seems to translate well on the campaign trail.*

*There is no reason why progressives can't advocate for a broader, more inclusive vision of democracy, one that actively engages people of different backgrounds in making decisions and solving problems together (and voting too).*

*Engaging citizens this way has another advantage: It works.*

**Michael Allman :**

*In 2018, Republican Michael Allman ran to represent California's 52nd congressional district, which includes parts of San Diego and its suburbs, with an unusual promise: He would use an online platform to let constituents tell him exactly how they wanted him to vote on legislation.*

*I met Allman because I work on democracy innovation: ideas and practices for engaging citizens in public decision-making and problem-solving. (By “citizens” I mean all of us, whatever passports we hold, and I use it to honor our contributions to democracy and civic life.) He read my work on digital tools for public participation, and was exploring ways to give people the information they needed to make smart decisions about public policy.*

*Allman's approach seemed to be a natural fit for the world of civic technology as well as the philosophy of modern conservatism. He wanted to do support a stronger free market of views within the realm of governance.*

*But Allman didn't win his congressional election, and his ideas do not seem to be rising up in the conservative movement. In*

*fact, some of the strongest opposition to ideas like his comes from conservatives, particularly people in positions of influence and authority.*

*Several years after our first conversation, Michael Allman is now serving on a school board in northern San Diego County. He has made “community collaboration” a core part of his message and style of leadership, and he cites community engagement as “one of the fundamental pillars of our school system, ensuring that our students are prepared to become responsible citizens and lead purposeful lives.”*

*Allman uses social media platforms, surveys, and other collaboration tools to obtain a sense of where his constituents (in this case, parents and students in the school district) stand on various issues.*

*To govern more effectively, conservatives should follow Allman's lead. They should follow the natural conservative inclination to uphold individual freedom and initiative, allowing people to make their own choices and participate directly in government. They should ensure that when citizens have a chance to vote directly on issues, they are given good information about the policy options as well as opportunities to talk with and learn from people on different sides of an issue.*

**Conservatives :**

*To succeed politically—and, more importantly, to make a greater contribution to American society—conservatives should take a closer look at what democracy means, why it really matters, and how innovations in democracy offer a much more productive debate about our future as a country.*

*The American conservative discomfort with democracy stems from its beginnings: their philosophy didn't give citizens a central role in public life.*

*The core ideals of modern Conservatism were established in the middle of the 20th century, as a reaction to the Progressive movement, which raised up government as the solver of public problems like corruption, poverty, and illiteracy. Conservatives saw this expansion of government as a threat to individual liberty.*

*Conservatives have won over many voters with arguments like the one made by Ronald Reagan: “Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” But conservatives have not created alternatives to government as the main problem-solver. In both theory and practice, conservatives have assumed that simply by going about their daily business, individuals, corporations, and other entities will make decisions and take actions that benefit society.*

*Like progressives, conservatives have upheld the role of elected officials. But the main difference is that progressives want officials to govern proactively, while conservatives believe they will “govern best by governing least.” Neither approach is satisfying to citizens today. Seventy years after modern conservatism was born, public officials have lost the trust of most Americans.*

*The reverse is also true. Conservative public officials have become mistrustful of their constituents—and thus more skeptical about democracy. One reason for this mistrust is that they hear only the loudest, angriest voices. This is true online and on social media, of course. But it's also true in most public meetings and hearings, which operate according to an old*

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*Stakeholders (continued)*

*formula where people get a few minutes to speak at the microphone. Angry constituents dominate these meetings, and there is very little meaningful exchange. Many conservatives associate these kinds of horrible public meetings with “democracy,” and it makes them less and less enthusiastic about interacting with citizens.*

*Political polarization makes this worse. Most conservatives now think of progressives as condescending, hypocritical, “woke,” mindlessly pro-government, and manipulated by MSNBC. Why give those people a meaningful say in public decisions?*

*Before 2016, many Democrats as well as Republicans were voicing frustration with politics and advocating systemic change. But Donald Trump has twisted a large, diverse populist movement around his finger, robbing it of substantive ideas and turning it into a cult of personality. Rather than encouraging ways to make government more responsive to citizens, Trump seems to want government to serve his interests alone.*

*By failing to articulate a meaningful role for citizens in public life, conservatives are ceding the conversation about democracy to progressives, and to the narrow idea that “democracy” means nothing more than voting.*

*In one of his most famous speeches, on the 40th anniversary of D-Day in Normandy, Ronald Reagan said, “You all knew that some things are worth dying for. One’s country is worth dying for, and democracy is worth dying for, because it’s the most deeply honorable form of government ever devised by man.” In contrast, conservatives today seem to downplay democracy entirely, asserting that the U.S. is a republic where we merely vote for representatives to do all the governing.*

*This is a weak vision of democracy, and it is a losing message for conservatives. These days, most people vote not out of hope and enthusiasm for their preferred candidate, but out of fear, and a desire to keep the other side from causing harm. Some Americans think their votes aren’t being counted, others think that voting fails to produce the policy changes they support. Asking Americans to pin all their hopes for change on voting seems like a doomed strategy.*

*By embracing Trump’s authoritarian message, conservatives continue to push the idea that citizens have no role in governance. Conservatives risk coming across as elitist, uncaring, and unresponsive—a recipe for defeat.*

*Conservatives are missing an opportunity. When citizens are presented with practices and reforms that would give them a more meaningful say in public decisions, they respond with enthusiasm. In one national opinion poll, Americans were asked about a list of possibilities for participatory democracy. There’s been strong support for these ideas—including participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies, which allow everyday people to contribute to policymaking—without significant differences between Republicans and Democrats. Giving power to citizens is a message that seems to translate well on the campaign trail.*

*There is no reason why conservatives can’t advocate for a broader, more inclusive vision of democracy, one that actively engages people of different backgrounds in making decisions and solving problems together (and voting too).*

*Engaging citizens this way has another advantage: It works.*

## Vision

Engaged citizens

## Mission

To advocate for a broader, more inclusive vision of democracy

## Values

**Democracy**

**Inclusion**

**Engagement**

## 1. Polarization

### *Bridge and deliberate differences*

First of all, efforts at bridge-building and deliberation can succeed despite partisan polarization. Most of these efforts rely on paired or small-group discussions; they include the wave of participatory processes that emerged 25 years ago, the “Text Talk Act” discussions of the National Dialogue on Mental Health nearly 10 years ago, and the digital America Talks process of the last two years. When people meet in these kinds of settings, where they have the chance to share experiences and interact on a human level, they are more likely to empathize with one another, find common ground, and understand the reasons for their disagreements.

#### 1.1. Interaction & Experiences

*Share experiences and interact on a human level*

#### 1.2. Commonalities

*Find common ground*

#### 1.3. Understanding

*Understand the reasons for disagreements*

## 2. Deliberation

*Create candid, productive discussions on issues of race and difference*

Second, these deliberative processes have a long track record in creating candid, productive discussions on issues of race and difference, the kinds of sincere conversations that don't seem to happen inside the Republican or Democratic Party.

### 3. Skills & Capacities

*Tap into the skills and capacities of 21st-century citizens*

**Stakeholder(s)**

**Citizens**

Third, engaging people taps into the skills and capacities of 21st-century citizens. Regular people, volunteering their time, improve their communities and country in all kinds of ways—they plant trees, mentor young people, share information online, raise money for important causes.

Whether they are big or small, these actions matter:

#### 3.1. Change

*Engage people in making basic changes in their daily lives*

Confronting most of the daunting public challenges we face, from climate change to the pandemic, will require millions of people to make basic changes in their daily lives...

**Stakeholder(s):**

**Progressives**

#### 3.2. Decentralization

*Diminish the role of government*

and they provide excellent fodder for conservatives who want to diminish the role of government as the main solution to public problems.

## 4. Expertise & Accountability

*Leverage expertise while making government more accountable to citizens*

### 4.1. Accountability

*Make government more accountable*

#### Stakeholder(s):

##### Conservatives :

*Fourth, democracy makes government more accountable. When citizens have a say in policymaking and budgeting, questionable decisions by officials and experts are more likely to be exposed. When they have a say through ballot initiatives and referenda, they can constrain government in ways that conservatives favor.*

##### California Voters :

*Proposition 13, passed by California voters in 1978, limited property taxes and helped propel Reagan to the White House.*

##### Ronald Reagan :

*Conservatives should remember another Reagan quote: "Either you will control your government, or it will control you."*

### 4.2. Expertise

*Strengthen expertise*

#### Stakeholder(s):

##### Progressives :

*Fourth, democracy doesn't threaten expertise, but strengthens it. As everyday people work with officials in more intensive ways, they gain greater respect for the expertise of the professionals. Citizens who work with city staff in participatory budgeting projects, parents who partner with teachers to improve schools, and patients who talk with their doctors all gain greater respect for those institutions.*

##### Citizens :

*Giving citizens a say is not an all-or-nothing proposition.*

##### Professionals :

*Most people want professionals to continue making most public decisions; they just want a voice in the ones that set the overall direction of governance, and that affect their lives most directly.*

## 5. Networks & Connections

*Strengthen community networks and connections*

### Stakeholder(s)

#### Communities

Finally, research from a range of fields shows what may be the most significant value of these citizen-centered forms of democracy:

### 5.1. Progressive Values

*Promote public health, economic development, racial equity, environmental resilience, and student success*

They strengthen community networks and connections, which has positive impacts on public health, economic development, racial equity, environmental resilience, and student success—all things progressives care about.

### Stakeholder(s):

#### Progressives

### 5.2. Conservative Values

*Promote public safety, economic vitality, local control, and fiscal responsibility*

They strengthen community networks and connections, which has positive impacts on public safety, economic vitality, local control, and fiscal responsibility—all things conservatives care about.

### Stakeholder(s):

#### Conservatives

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