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School of Public Administration
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University of Central Florida

Doing Civic Engagement:

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Dr. Thomas A. Bryer, Director

thomas.bryer@ucf.edu

Challenges in Democracy

- Trust in government and other institutions
- Disconnected and Disengaged
- Need for Civically Healthy Communities

Trust in Government and Other Institutions

- Trust in government is low
 - This alone may not be troubling, but low trust and even distrust appears more pervasive and generalized (e.g. distrust for a government that does not yet exist)
- Generally, citizens respond more favorably today to “small,” “local,” and “grassroots” rather than “big” (as in “big government” and “big business”)

Disconnected and Disengaged

- Our Government *versus* The Government
- Low levels of civic participation
 - Florida: Ranked around 44th on an index of civic involvement in 2009; Millennials are found to be engaging less than the national average
 - California: 8.3% of citizens report that they work with their neighbors to improve community (national average: 8.8%)
- When “we” (i.e. government) ask citizens to be engaged, we typically ask that they volunteer or act as consumers, but not to be active participants in governance authority

Need for Civically Healthy Communities

“One government failure and apathetic citizen at a time, civic illiteracy is eroding the Golden State.” –

San Diego Union Tribune, January 28, 2011

A **civically healthy community** is one in which participatory processes are inclusive and diverse and in which participants have the skills, tools, and confidence to contribute meaningfully to the social, economic, and intellectual strengthening of communities.

Why Is Democracy Important? For Whom?

- Substantive *versus* Procedural Democracy



Procedural Democracy

- Facilitates social capital, trust, consensus, and procedural justice
- All participants are perceived by all other participants as credible and legitimate actors.
- *Achieve political equality in which all peoples have the opportunity to contribute to decisions about the common good in an equally legitimate way.*

Substantive Democracy

- *Meets the needs of individuals and communities equitably* so that more people, representative of our diversity, can be included in our democratic processes (procedural democracy).



Substantive Democracy (2)

- Extreme social and economic inequalities can lead to democratic instability, enabling tyrannical or oligarchic governance forms to take hold—wisdom dating back to Aristotle.
- *Why is this a problem?* Harmful to classical liberal ideals and communitarian ideals.

What is Our Challenge?

- *How can we as a society through our people, organizations, and institutions promote both procedural democracy and substantive democracy, and individualism and community?*
 - How can we create civically healthy communities?

Those Who Walk Away—Ursula LeGuin



Omelas II (aka—Solivita, Florida)



Citizens Who Walked Away

- Walked away to avoid possibility of paying more taxes to help those outside their gates in the larger community
- Pushed to maintain their happy existence, ignoring the suffering around them; desire for separateness



Citizens Who Engaged

- Engaged to assist community members in need
- Sought to be responsive to needs of future generations; living beyond self
- Desired more control of resource allocation locally



Descriptive Framework of Engagement Reasons

Self-Determination at
What Level?

*Dutiful
Citizenship*

Individual

Greatest Good for Self
(Individualism)

Community

Region

Greatest Good for Most
(Utilitarianism)

Country

*Engaged
Citizenship*

World

Greatest Good for All
(Deontologicalism)



Possible Solutions

- **Government:** Lack of trust presents challenges
- **Faith Organizations:** Excellent training ground for citizenship behavior but potentially “denominationally divided”
- **Universities:** Strong neutral party, can excel in research and convening, but potentially restricted by institutional demands and funding constraints
- **Media:** Clear access point for citizens to acquire information, but not always trusted and different outlets tend to attract audiences with particular biases

Possible Solutions (2)

- **Voluntary Associations:** Internally energized and driven but may lack organizational skill to mobilize on behalf of or through whole communities, and can have good or not so good intentions
- **Giving Circles:** Range from informal to highly structured, they have the potential to marshal resources and to invest strategically, but they may lack expertise and may themselves not be inclusive and diverse
- **Community Foundations:** Independent nonprofit bodies that have the potential to strategically invest and cultivate donors based on informed need, but they may not include diverse populations in investment decisions as a standard practice

From the Executive Perspective...

- Presidents have communicated through both formal and informal means (e.g. executive orders or memos, bill signing statements vs. speeches, press statements) and have used administrative, political and Congressional leadership tools.
- Greater emphasis across time and administrations on *engaged citizenship*; Calls for *dutiful citizenship* more pronounced during time of national need (e.g., energy crisis)
- Democratic administrations more likely to create mechanisms within federal agencies to involve citizens.

Some Pitfalls...

- Democracy Bubbles? Need for clearly stated expectations and goals...
- Costs of Democratization? Citizens might lose trust and efficacy if participation not done well...
- Unanticipated Trouble? Need for strategic design of participatory processes...

Changing Times Require Innovative Partnerships

“In short, government in the 21st Century is not here to tell us what to do, but rather to serve as our partner to help achieve our common goals. The 21st Century public sector leader should act as a convener, catalyst and facilitator of structured discussions in order to solve public problems” — *Golden Governance: Building Effective Public Engagement in California*

Questions/Discussion

