HEALTHIER DEMOCRACIES
Lessons from Public Engagement Efforts Around the World

INTRODUCTION 2
Acknowledgements 3

LESSONS LEARNED 7
Lessons from Public Officials and Governments 7
  Engagement Structures 8
  Opportunities for Engagement 10
  Commitment to Engagement 12
  Community Building 14
Lessons from Engaged Communities and Practitioners 16
  International Partnerships and Resources 16
  Local Partnerships and Resources 17
Lessons Learned from and for Engagement Researchers 19

PGI USER GUIDE: What Is the Participatory Governance Index? 21
  Participatory Governance Index 28
  PGI Category Reflection Questions 29
  Glossary 32

CASE STUDIES Click the pins on the map above or visit Healthier Democracies

PUBLIC AGENDA

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Local and state governments face challenges of unresponsiveness, mistrust, polarization, inequality and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which are placing increased pressure on democratic systems around the world. The United States is no exception. Even before the pandemic, Americans were looking for change: The first Public Agenda Yankelovich Democracy Monitor report found that Americans respond enthusiastically to new democratic practices and reforms, especially ones that give citizens a greater voice in the decisions that affect their lives and that promise to establish more equitable, deliberative and collaborative relationships between citizens and governments.

Participatory and deliberative processes offer governments opportunities to increase the legitimacy of public governance by including communities in policy- and decision-making. Innovative forms of citizen engagement have pioneered the way we think about transforming our democracies. Civic engagement has been proven to increase trust in and satisfaction with government, as well as to improve the quality of policy through citizen input, including input that comes via nontraditional political channels.

Deliberative spaces such as citizen assemblies or deliberative polls (in which citizens chosen by lottery respond to pressing societal and environmental issues) are among the most popular engagement tools nowadays. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, over 500 deliberative processes have taken place over the past 20 years, mainly in the Western world. Some processes are even starting to become permanent parts of their democratic systems, as with citizens assemblies in Ostbelgien (East Belgium) and Paris or the National Public Policy Conferences and Citizen Councils in Brazil. But other forms of engagement are growing as well: According to LATINNO, over 2,500 government-led institutions and mechanisms for citizen participation have been created in Latin America alone since the 1990s.

The Healthier Democracies Project was born out of an interest to understand what (and how) forms of government-led participation, deliberation and engagement have a positive impact on the health of communities and democracies worldwide. This project, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, explores what the U.S. can learn from progress being made around the globe to map new pathways to equitable, deliberative, and collaborative relationships between governments and the communities they serve to ensure everyone has a seat at the table.

Healthier Democracies seeks to find actionable ideas to inspire public officials at the local and regional levels in the United States. We researched 15 international examples of systemic and sustained engagement efforts that give people meaningful say in their local and state government decision-making processes. Using a multiple-case study format, we focus on government systems for engagement rather than single processes or institutions. Cases were selected to represent a variety of approaches and institutional designs and to reflect government-led efforts to improve equality.
We approached public officials, researchers and practitioners to ask: How does each government create opportunities for shared decision-making? Which structures are put in place and what methods are deployed to achieve success? How are each government’s commitment to participation and accessibility translated into action? How does the government share information and support community-building? What impact do these initiatives have on communities?

Building on those initial questions, we drew lessons, inspiration and insights from the innovative and complex experiences of our case study territories and communities in order to envision new pathways for public and elected officials to create healthier democratic environments. The cases go well beyond outdated engagement efforts in which governments merely inform or consult the public about governmental decisions. Curiously, they do not share many similarities when it comes to process design, but they do offer myriad creative responses to similar challenges, such as the capacity of governments to connect systems of engagement to the larger ecosystems of participation and citizen mobilization. We believe that the experimentation and critical takes developed in response to these unique challenges have the potential to change the future of collaborative governance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The stories of each of these initiatives and government systems would not have been complete without participant perspectives. Individuals interviewed for specific case studies are cited in the case study bibliographies and the full list of interviewees appears below.

With case studies spanning the globe, translation assistance was needed for our Gdańsk and Seoul research and interviews. The services of Eugenia Scanferla and Juneseo Hwang were of immense support in ensuring accurate representation.

The Advisory Board for this project (listed below) was invaluable in providing guidance and feedback as the project progressed. Drawn from a wide range of engagement in U.S. public life, their wisdom was instrumental in guiding and shaping the work of the research team.

The research team for this project was led by Sara Clarke-De Reza and included Azucena Morán, Melissa Ross, Erin McNally and Mikayla Townsend. The project was initiated by Matt Leighninger and led by Quixada Moore-Vising during their tenures at Public Agenda. David Schleifer was the Principal Investigator for the final stages. Final project management was completed by Parisa Parsa. During the summer of 2021, Mason Arbogast and Lance Rossi supported the project with research and interviews.

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