

SOLVING PUBLIC PROBLEMS

*A Practical Guide to Fix Our
Government and Change Our World*



BETH SIMONE NOVECK
DIRECTOR OF THE GOVERNANCE LAB

Yale University Press
For review purposes only

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AUTHOR'S NOTE For review purposes only

On January 6, 2021, a systematic, relentless campaign of grievance and falsehood, led by former President Donald Trump and stoked by members of the Republican Party in Congress and right-wing media, culminated in a violent attack on the Capitol. The incompetently planned but nonetheless deadly coup attempt counted among its leaders White supremacists, neo-Nazis, and devotees of the paranoid conspiracy theory QAnon. Yet support among Americans for the insurrection went way beyond the far-right fringe. According to YouGov about 45 percent of Republicans said they backed the attack on the Capitol, while 74 million Americans voted for Trump in 2020, despite his undisguised contempt for democratic institutions and decision-making both during the campaign and over the four years of his presidency. Watching these events, one could be forgiven for thinking that American democracy was reaching its final hours. I have written this book in the firm belief that this is not so.

The tools to solve the deepest problems of our democracy are in our own hands. Even during the past long year of COVID, when it seemed the whole world had come apart, I have seen countless examples of activists, community leaders, public servants, and changemakers—many of them young people from several countries—working with their governments to solve real problems, and overcoming strong political disagreement as they did so. I am not alone in my optimism: in the United States, 57 percent of

adults believe that Americans can find a way to solve their problems, according to Pew Research. A majority also remains staunch in its belief that government and public institutions have a major role to play in addressing our big public challenges.

The way to deal with these challenges is, first and foremost, to involve citizens in the way we solve them. That means turning more power over to ordinary people. It means transforming the way we govern ourselves.

That task is now urgent, even existential. Within a generation, trust in government has declined to historic lows. With an uptick during the pandemic, until recently only 3 percent of Americans said they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always.” Widening levels of inequality, stagnant wages, lack of social mobility, and a decline in life expectancy and quality have led many to feel that government is neither listening to nor working for them. The effect, says comedian Bill Maher, is that “America is full of fed-up, unhappy people, who just want to break shit.”

Blaming the public sector for all the ills of America would be grossly unfair. Nevertheless, too often our government is indeed sclerotic and ineffective. We suffer from what Larry Lessig, a law professor at Harvard and an activist on electoral and campaign finance reform, calls “institutional corruption.” Relentless media focus on demagogic personalities and the horse race between political parties—on political rather than governance outcomes—obscure the fact that there are far better ways to govern, and as this book shows, in hard times they are beginning to emerge.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, some public institutions in this country and overseas did things differently. They collaborated across government and with external organizations. They responded to difficult problems by consulting the citizens directly affected by them and through the use of rapidly increasing quantities of data and predictive analytics. They took advantage of ordinary people’s insight, passion, and power. They showed how successful government *could be* at improving people’s lives if such novel ways of working were the norm.

For example, the urgency of the pandemic motivated the cities of Accra, Bahir Dar, Kampala, Kano, and Mutare, with the support of the United Nations Development Programme and The Governance Lab, to turn in 2021 to their citizens for help in tackling three big challenges: improving waste generation and management, building urban resilience in slums and infor-

mal settlements, and growing and supporting their informal economies. Asked to participate in this multi-city challenge, citizens contributed almost 300 detailed and practical proposals for solving these problems with a handful currently being chosen for implementation. Also in 2020, five cities in northern Mexico collaborated with residents in a separate multi-city challenge. These cities are now implementing citizen-designed projects to address urban mobility, post-pandemic economic relief, and the digital divide. They include a novel initiative to introduce new plantings into communal areas in Monterrey to absorb pollutants and a design for eco-friendly bike stations to reduce traffic in Hermosillo.

Examples of responsive institutions—those working *with* people to solve problems—exist around the world. In Taiwan, more than 200,000 people have collaborated in crafting 26 pieces of national legislation in an initiative known as vTaiwan. They have drafted laws on telemedicine and the digital economy. vTaiwan is just one example of the burgeoning “crowd-law” movement, in which legislatures are turning to the use of new technology to engage their publics in lawmaking.

Innovation in government can also be found in the United States. In the past decade, even the U.S. Federal Government has been running a little-known program to source solutions to public problems from people across and outside government. Over a hundred federal agencies have used the website Challenge.gov to tap the intelligence and expertise of ordinary citizens. Right now, the Health Resources and Services Administration is asking for help on how to increase pediatric preventive care. The Department of Energy is running a competition for college students to design and build innovative buildings powered by renewable energy.

Where institutions are using more data and tapping the experience, know-how, and wisdom of ordinary people, they are able to do extraordinary things, create effective solutions to problems, and strengthen participatory democracy. Focusing only on people’s opinions, which are often corrupted by misinformation and prejudice, can merely inflame divisions. Discovering and focusing on what people know and can do helps to overcome partisanship and produce powerful outcomes. These changes, in turn, increase people’s faith that government can be made to work for them.

Such a transformation to new ways of working will not happen by itself. The African and Mexican city leaders who ran the multi-city challenges all went through eight training sessions. In Taiwan, Audrey Tang, the na-

tion's digital minister, and a leading proponent of civil society-government collaboration, has set up a training program to educate government officials and turn them into "participation officers." U.S. federal agency officials have a community of practice in which they teach one another how to design and run a challenge on Challenge.gov.

The Biden-Harris Administration must complement its policy initiatives by training public servants in new ways of working. The White House must invest in upskilling, using new technology to ensure that political leaders and public servants learn better ways of solving public problems, and make that education available for free to state and local governments. To reverse the erosion of trust, the Biden Administration needs all public servants, not just small pockets of technologists or data scientists, to possess the innovation skills that foster more effective, agile, and responsive governing. As we learned during COVID-19—especially from our failures—the Administration can do better by working with citizens and with data to implement innovative solutions.

But it is not enough to train people inside institutions. If we want to tackle the acute challenges of our time—the immense strains on our system of government produced by the pandemic, economic recession, climate change, and systemic racism, among other problems—we need to democratize access to experiential and lifelong learning in public problem solving. We need to give tools and methods that will enable all people, but especially the young, to turn their passions into practical outcomes.

We must invest in teaching people how to design and lead social change, how to collaborate with communities, including marginalized and vulnerable groups. For if we create institutions that know how to listen, we still have to raise a next generation of leaders who know how to speak up. For example, instead of training students only in *business* entrepreneurship, universities and schools need to respond to students' demands to learn *public* entrepreneurship. We can support what the late congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis called "committed and determined people" who want to make a difference in their communities by helping them to acquire the skills needed to take projects from idea to implementation.

Too often, the gap between idea and implementation is a chasm. With all the tools and skills we now have at our disposal, it no longer needs to be. We can break intractable issues into manageable problems. We can use

data and collaboration to understand those problems. We can partner with others to implement a shared solution.

This book provides a practical, how-to guide that uses these skills to achieve social change. It is written in the belief that with the widest possible deployment of these skills, we can, in the words of youth poet laureate Amanda Gorman, “raise this wounded world into a wondrous one” and move beyond the current woes of our politics to build a new confidence in the power of government and civil society to dramatically improve the lives of ordinary citizens. We may even, in our lifetimes, get a chance to play our part in honoring the “I Have a Dream” words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and “hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope . . . to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony.”

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