

# INNOVATE

## ABOUT AMERICASPEAKS

*AmericaSpeaks* engages citizens in the most important decisions that impact their lives.

Citizens expect and deserve to be involved in the public decisions that most significantly impact them. Democratic deliberation – citizens working with one another, through dialogue, to come to a judgment about the best course of action on a given public issue – is a central part of our democratic tradition. And today's decision makers are increasingly interested in the vital knowledge, perspectives, and support citizens can offer.

*AmericaSpeaks* develops innovative deliberative methods that work for both citizens and decision makers. These tools give citizens an opportunity to have a strong voice in public decision making within the increasingly short timeframes required of decision makers. As a result, citizens can impact decisions and those in leadership positions can make more informed, lasting decisions.

Since its founding in 1995, *AmericaSpeaks* has worked with citizens and decision makers in over forty communities around the country.

*AmericaSpeaks* stands for reasserting people's place in our democracy of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Sadly, citizens have largely lost their rightful role in public decision making. The dramatic growth and power of special interest groups has both constrained

leaders and squeezed ordinary citizens out of the decision-making process. As a result, many citizens feel alienated, and decision makers have lost touch with people's true concerns.



*AmericaSpeaks* is seeking to reverse this dangerous trend by using the latest technology and meeting design tools to create large-scale citizen engagement processes. Involving thousands of citizens simultaneously on public policy issues takes democracy “to scale,” helps restore the citizen's role and influence, and gives decision makers access to a diverse group of citizens.

*AmericaSpeaks* increases citizen voice through its large-scale citizen engagement projects, research, innovation, and collaboration, both nationally and internationally. Our core initiatives include:

### The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting

In 1997, *AmericaSpeaks* developed the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting®, a dynamic forum that combines small group, face-to-face dialogue with technology to engage citizens in discussions on planning, resource allocation, and policy formulation.

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These forums update the traditional New England town meeting by engaging thousands of people in simultaneous conversation. State-of-the-art technology allows citizens to provide immediate, substantive feedback to decision makers while trained facilitators at each table support the authentic, face-to-face deliberation.

### The Democracy Lab for Research and Innovation

*AmericaSpeaks* is building an institutional home that will allow deliberative democracy practitioners to experiment with new ideas, stimulate innovation and support research in civic engagement. Just as AT&T's Bell Labs developed new products and technologies that helped to revolutionize telecommunications, the Democracy Lab develops new, effective civic engagement tools designed to improve democratic practice. The Lab's activities include developing methods to conduct large-scale national policy discussions, creating effective online deliberation platforms, introducing new institutional mechanisms for sustained democratic practice and developing effective evaluation tools.

### The Deliberative Democracy Consortium

*AmericaSpeaks*, a leader in the field of deliberative democracy, convened more than twenty other leading organizations to form the Deliberative Democracy Consortium in 2002. The Consortium promotes the philosophy and methods of deliberative democracy as well as raises the visibility and credibility of this nascent field in the U.S. and around the world. Consortium members work together to conduct research in the field and to design and experiment with innovative deliberative practices.

*AmericaSpeaks* is leading the development of a national infrastructure for democratic deliberation that institutionalizes the links between decision makers and citizens in determining public policy.



To ensure that the general public has an impact on important decisions, *AmericaSpeaks* is working to create an infrastructure that can provide an ongoing platform for engaging citizens.

To make this national infrastructure a reality, we are:

- Developing partnerships with other organizations to create coordinating institutions
- Recruiting and training a national network of volunteers and facilitators
- Developing public outreach processes to ensure diverse and representative participation
- Increasing legislators' knowledge of and commitment to public deliberation
- Developing appropriate technologies to facilitate effective deliberation
- Designing new public spaces for deliberation and dialogue

With a national infrastructure in place, public deliberations could be organized quickly to generate citizen deliberation on an important issue.