

# DEMOCRACY

## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TOWN MEETING

AmericaSpeaks' 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting® creates engaging, meaningful opportunities for citizens to participate in public decision making. This unique process updates the traditional New England town meeting to address the needs of today's citizens, decision makers, and democracy.



The growing power of special interests in all levels of governance has eroded a tradition of collaboration between decision makers and citizens. Barraged by organized issue campaigns and professional lobbyists, decision makers find it difficult to gauge how ordinary citizens feel about issues. In turn, “general interest” citizens feel disregarded and less inclined to participate in public life, creating a dangerous cycle.

AmericaSpeaks' 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting restores citizens' voices to the public decision-making process by creating an opportunity for the general public to give leaders direct, substantive feedback on key issues. Each meeting effectively restores the balance of the “political playing field” by engaging thousands of general interest citizens at a time (up to 5,000 per meeting), effectively and quickly summarizing citizen input and widely disseminating the

results through media coverage. AmericaSpeaks' role as neutral convener increases confidence among citizens and decision makers that the content, process and outcomes are fair and balanced.

### FORMAT

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting focuses on discussion and deliberation among citizens rather than speeches, question-and-answer sessions or panel presentations. Diverse groups of citizens participate in round-table discussions (ten to twelve people per table), deliberating in depth about key policy, resource allocation or planning issues. Each table discussion is supported by a trained facilitator to ensure that participants stay on task and work democratically. Participants receive detailed, balanced background discussion guides to increase their knowledge of the issues under consideration.



Technology transforms the individual table discussions into synthesized recommendations representative of the whole room. Each table submits ideas using wireless groupware computers and each participant  
*(over)*

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can vote on specific proposals using a polling keypad. The entire group responds to the strongest themes generated from table discussions and votes on final recommendations to decision makers. Before the meeting ends, results from the discussions are compiled into a report, which is distributed to participants, decision makers, and the media as they leave. Decision makers actively engage in the meeting by participating in table discussions, observing the process and responding to citizen input at the end of the meeting.

The **21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting** marks a dramatic departure from traditional public engagement methods, such as public hearings. Compared to traditional methods, the **21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting** is responsive, transparent, and empowering for citizens, community leaders and elected officials.

## BENEFITS

For citizens who want to participate and decision makers who want to engage their constituents, the **21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting** provides the following benefits:

- The meeting provides an effective way for general interest citizens to have a voice in the public decisions that impact their lives.
- The scale of these meetings attracts substantial attention from the media and political leadership, often increasing momentum and interest in a proposal, process or issue.
- The format gives citizens an opportunity to learn more about important public issues, hear a diversity of perspectives and understand critical trade-offs.
- The use of technology provides an effective, efficient way to measure the degree of public support for proposals.
- The report, distributed at the end of the day, immediately identifies priorities, areas of agreement and specific recommendations.
- The process of developing a **21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting** can significantly increase capacity in effective citizen engagement techniques.

| STANDARD PUBLIC HEARING   | 21 <sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TOWN MEETING™  |
|---|---|
| Speaker-focused   | Participant-focused   |
| Experts deliver information   | Citizens discuss information developed by experts and make recommendations        |
| Citizens air individual ideas and concerns  | Citizens identify shared ideas and concerns and assign them relative priority     |
| Participants share anecdotal evidence   | Participants use detailed, balanced background materials within group discussions |
| Primarily engages the “usual suspects” – citizens already civically active on specific issues | Reaches diverse populations, including citizens not usually active                |
| No group discussion of questions  | Small group discussions led by trained facilitators                               |
| Limited reporting of participant input  | Instant, detailed reporting of participant input                                  |
| Small number of participants  | Large number of participants  |
| Limited media coverage and public interest  | Widespread media coverage and public interest                                     |

## TRACK RECORD

Since 1997, *AmericaSpeaks* has conducted more than forty **21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings** in over thirty states around the country and in the District of Columbia. Meetings have addressed local, state and national issues ranging from Social Security reform to regional planning.

Our nationally-recognized projects include *Listening to the City*, an effort engaging the public on the World Trade Center redevelopment process, and *Americans Discuss Social Security*, a ground-breaking national dialogue on the future of Social Security.