

21st Century Town Meeting®

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Tool summary

The 21st Century Town Meeting®³ as the name suggests, is a modern-day version of the traditional public forum that brings together a large number of people, organizes them into small discussion groups, and uses the latest technology to provide instant feedback. Developed in the United States of America in 1995, the process can be tailored to tackle issues of local, regional, or national scope. Its success lies in meticulous planning and organization, which facilitates increased citizen involvement, generates media attention, and increases the participation and commitment of decision-makers.

.What is it?

The 21st Century Town Meeting is a trademarked process developed by the non-partisan, non-governmental organization *AmericaSpeaks*, based in the USA. It is a public forum that links technology with small-group, face-to-face dialogue to allow hundreds or even thousands of people to deliberate simultaneously about complex public policy issues and express a shared message to decision-makers. The 21st Century Town Meeting should not be confused with a town hall meeting as the latter is an informal public meeting which gives the members of a community an opportunity to get together to discuss emerging issues and to voice concerns and preferences for their community.

Through a combination of keypad polling, groupware computers, large screen projection, teleconferencing and other technologies, 21st Century Town Meetings enable people to simultaneously participate in intimate discussions *and* contribute to the collective wisdom of a very large group.

The 21st Century Town Meeting aims to create a level playing field on which citizens can be fully engaged with each other in policy and planning discussions that are directly linked to decision-makers and real governance processes.

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³ 21st Century Town Meeting is trademarked by AmericaSpeaks. For purposes of readability, the trademark symbol is used only at the first appearance of the term in this article



As each meeting begins participants talk about why they attended. They also use their keypads to provide demographic information, thus indicating how accurately the target population is represented. A representative group of participants is important to ensure the results are legitimate to the community and decision makers.

Over the course of the day participants sit at roundtables of ten and participate in substantive small group discussions led by trained volunteer professional facilitators. Each table has a laptop computer that serves as an electronic “flip chart.” These computers allow participants to quickly record ideas and responses to discussion questions.

Each table’s submissions are sent to a central computer and reviewed, real-time, by a group of issue experts and community leaders known as the Theme Team, which identifies the key messages and themes coming from all 300 tables in the main hall. Each participant also has his/her own wireless polling keypad that allows them to vote anonymously on key concerns and issues. Results of each vote are displayed instantly on large projection screens visible to everyone in the hall.

A professional facilitator leads the program from a large stage at the front of the hall ensuring that all tables are working on the same agenda. She/he clarifies tasks and discussion questions, helps to synthesize the results from each discussion that creates continuity throughout the day, and ensures that, where citizens find agreement on important issues, the decision makers responsible for these topic areas are present in the room and publicly respond to what they’ve heard from the public.

Throughout the day a writer stationed at the Theme Team tables, composes a short summary of themes, messages, and quotes from each discussion period. At the end of the day, a three-page summary report is prepared and copies are distributed to each participant by volunteers before the participants file out of the convention hall.

By the end of the day, decision-makers hear clearly from citizens about their priorities for action. In closing comments, speakers from the decision-making bodies are expected to talk about how the day's events will guide their actions. Participants have an opportunity to consider their own next steps and connect with other participants who want to collaborate on implementing the meeting outcomes.



How is it done?

The 21st Century Town Meeting developed by AmericaSpeaks operates on six key principles:

1. *Diverse representation* ensures the community is accurately represented in the process. Tailored outreach strategies are developed to recruit participants who match the demographic characteristics of the local population.

2. *Informed participation* provides participants with highly accessible materials that frame the issues neutrally and provide a baseline of data upon which participants could begin their discussions. The meetings are designed to balance information sharing, discussion, and immediate feedback cycles on key policies and priorities.

3. *Facilitated deliberation* makes sure that citizens play an active role in the deliberations. Skilled table facilitators are recruited to ensure high quality dialogue at each table. The town meeting agenda is designed to help participants work through the complex policy issues or other issue areas and to help develop a common agenda for action.

4. *Shared priorities* are the endgame of each of these meetings. 21st Century Town Meetings foster a high level of agreement on common priorities among participants. Ideas from discussion tables are entered into networked computers, then “themed” into a list of ideas that were most frequently mentioned. Keypad polling prioritizes these ideas and is also used to measure the group’s overall support for proposed policies and actions.

5. *Link to action* is the goal of these citizen deliberations. Involvement of decision-makers and key leaders throughout the project is central to the success of these initiatives. Convening a meeting on a large scale (500 to 5,000 participants) enables the outcomes to have greater visibility and credibility with other policy-makers, the media, key stakeholders, and the public at large.

6. *Sustaining citizen engagement* in the policy-making process develops civic leadership and enhances implementation of public priorities. The process of organizing a public engagement meeting is a starting point for on-going support, tools and opportunities for citizens to take effective action on issues they care about. The town meeting method can be extended to multiple sites in which all participants are linked via satellite or web-cast and participate in the meeting simultaneously regardless of location. This technological feature helps cover a very large geographic area such as an entire state or a region, or strategic locations around the country. There are instances in the past where projects have linked as many as 10 sites by satellite and 16 sites through web-cast.



Preparation for a 21st Century Town Meeting is a monumental task. The planning is often done in very tight time frames within which complex tasks must be coordinated between multiple vendors, competing priorities continuously juggled, and decisions made expeditiously. A minimum of two months is needed, but five months is optimal. Fundraising for such a project must begin many months in advance.

There must be a meaningful, transparent link to an appropriate decision-making process and decision-makers. Decision-makers must be present, listening, and publicly committed to considering the outcomes and taking them forward. Partisanship planning and execution of events, the participant mix, and the discussion materials must be insulated from partisanship and any kind of bias.

Once an issue has been identified, the scope and focus for deliberation is determined by a team whose composition is balanced in terms of both the issue experts and stakeholders. The key choices and their tradeoffs are also outlined. Neutral and accessible materials are then developed to provide key information to all participants.

An Event Planner/Manager works closely with Project Managers to ensure effective coverage and management of computer and keypad technology, vendors (such as for catering, equipment rental, A/V and multi-media, security, emergency services, coat check, and signs/banners), facility, audio-visuals, volunteers, registration, and translation and other additional services.

Managing a large-scale town meeting literally involves a crew of dozens to hundreds of staff and volunteers. In the days before the meeting, for example, phone bankers call all registrants to remind them of the meeting time and provide last minute details. On the day of the town meeting several volunteers are required for on-site registration of participants; greeting and escorting the participants; managing long line of participants at the breakfast counters; distributing lunch bags to tables; delivering missing materials to discussion tables; helping people with special needs; and coordinating the arrival and departure of shuttle vans and buses.

Table Facilitators serve at individual tables because they have a strong background in small-group facilitation and can handle an intensive day-long program. Facilitators receive a two-hour orientation in the days leading up to the event and a final briefing early in the morning of the meeting day. Their job is to follow a very detailed facilitator guide provided ahead of time, supplemented by instructions from the lead facilitator during the day.



Two other types of volunteers require special selection. Theme Team Members must have strong ability to synthesize large number of ideas; work quickly and efficiently; collaborate in a team environment; and represent a diversity of organizations from the community. Area Facilitators troubleshoot throughout the town meeting and support table facilitators, and must be able to solve problems on the spot as best they can.

To increase the impact and engage people across distances, meetings can be held simultaneously in multiple locations by:

- Using satellite video / web-cast to share live programming and feature local meetings via participant interviews.
- Networked laptops and handheld voting devices allow participants in all meeting sites to be heard as one voice.
- Web-casts enable those citizens that are unable to attend the meeting to view the program. Online tools provide avenues for discussing the issues, taking action and registering priorities.
- Community-organized parallel meetings tune in to the web-cast and participate in their own facilitated-discussions and submit their views online in real-time
- Public television viewers follow the programmes from their homes

Benefits

- Strengthens the public's voice in decision making by creating an opportunity for the general public to give those in leadership positions direct, substantive feedback on key issues.
- Ensures all voices are at the table
- Town meetings helps: ensure that: reallocation of public funds and resources are determined by public priorities; generate shifts in public policy; shape official plans; and create community agendas that are driven by multi-sector implementation bodies.
- Independent evaluations of this process have shown that participants of *AmericaSpeaks*' projects gain an appreciation of other points of view, learn new information, change their opinions, have increased trust, and change their personal behaviour.
- Increases public support for the results of the process and more people feel they have a stake in its implementation.
- This form of citizen deliberation results in a better informed more involved population and creates the sense of a real opportunity for action.

Challenges and lessons

- Given its technological features and an elaborate preparatory process, the 21st Century Town Meeting is a resource intensive process. Those organizations without access to financial resources would not be able to replicate the method in their local settings.
- On account of past and perhaps futile or fruitless experiences with traditional methods of government consultation, many participants may feel sceptical about the outcomes. Overcoming this deep rooted distrust between citizens and their government is often not an easy task.
- Some of other crucial challenges include providing adequate information as fairly represented and as unbiased as possible; dealing with the complexity of political environments and policy regimes; gaining support of political leaders owing to the criticality of their involvement and commitment; being watchful of special/vested interest groups occupying the center stage and subverting the process; and implementing a well targeted outreach plan to ensure a diverse mix of participants with special reference to those who are generally marginalized..

Key resources

AmericaSpeaks

<http://americaspeaks.org>

- ☞ AmericaSpeaks' mission is to reinvigorate American Democracy by engaging citizens in the public decision-making that most impacts their lives. Being the pioneers of the 21st Century Town Meetings, their website contains the most invaluable resources for this tool.

AmericaSpeaks: Video Resources

<http://www.americaspeaks.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.viewPage&pageId=665&parentID=663&nodeID=1>

- ☞ This link of AmericaSpeaks website provides access to several short videos on the 21st Century Town Meeting Process.

AmericaSpeaks: Report of *We the People* – AmericaSpeaks 21st Century Town Meeting held in Owensboro, KY on November 10, 2007

http://www.wethepeopletownmeeting.org/_documents/wtp_full_report.pdf

- ☞ This 209 page report is a complete documentation of the process of the 21st Century Town Meeting covering discussions on various community assets and options pertaining to health, education, employment, environment etc.

AmericaSpeaks (2007): *Public Impacts: Evaluating the outcomes of the CaliforniaSpeaks statewide conversation on health care reform*

http://www.americaspeaks.org/_data/n_0002/resources/live/CaSpks%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf

- ☞ This is a report of CaliforniaSpeaks, a project initiated and led by AmericaSpeaks. It describes how 3,500 Californians from across the state came together on August 11, 2007 to evaluate health care reform proposals being considered by state leaders and to send a clear message to negotiators in Sacramento about the conditions under which the public would support the proposals.

AmericaSpeaks: The 21st Century Town Meeting®

http://cs.eona.dc.gov/frames/pdf/town_meeting_overview.pdf

- ☞ A nice overview of the methodology with photographs



Lukensmeyer, C.J. *21st Century Town Meeting*® in Participatory Methods Tool Kit - A Practitioner's Manual. Eds. Stef Steyaert and Hervé Lisoir. Jointly published by King Baudouin Foundation and the Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment (2005)

http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/KBS-FRB/Files/EN/PUB_1540_Toolkit_1_21stCenturyTownMeeting.pdf

☞ This is an extract of the publication “Participatory Methods Toolkit.- A practitioner’s manual” which contains detailed description of 13 participatory methods and brief descriptions of about 50 other methods. The article by Carolyn Lukensmeyers is perhaps one of the best and the most concise description on the process and methodology of 21st Century Town Meeting

Lukensmeyer, Carolyn: *21st Century Town Meetings*, a presentation at the seminar on Public Participation in Nanotechnology and nanoscience, May 30-31, 2006

http://www.nano.gov/html/meetings/p2/uploads/16Lukensmeyer_2.pdf

☞ This presentation is a very useful one with photographic and case study illustrations on 21st Century Town Meetings

Lukensmeyer, C.J & Brigham, S. *Taking Democracy to Scale: Creating a Town Hall Meeting for the Twenty-First Century*. Chapter 6 in National Civic Review vol. 91, no. 4, Wiley Periodicals, Inc. Winter (2002)

http://www.americaspeaks.org/data/n_0001/resources/live/takingdemocracy.pdf

☞ This is a crisp and concise introduction to the tool also replete with case studies

Lukensmeyer, C.J & Brigham. *Taking Democracy to Scale: Large Scale Interventions—for Citizens*. In The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, Vol. 41 No.1, NTL Institute March (2005)

http://www.americaspeaks.org/data/n_0001/resources/live/largescale.pdf

☞ This article explores the large-scale work of AmericaSpeaks in the public sector, engaging citizens in 21st Century Town Meetings in decisions that impact their lives. It reviews the differences in practicing large group work in broader social systems versus more bounded organizational systems

Lukensmeyer, CJ & Torres, L.H. *Public Deliberation: A Manager's Guide to Citizen Engagement*. IBM Centre for the Business of the Government (2006)

http://www.americaspeaks.org/data/n_0001/resources/live/IBMpubdelib.pdf



- ☞ This is a useful resource on tools for citizen engagement in general with a special emphasis on online modes of engagement and perhaps explains the theoretical underpinnings of the 21st Century Town Meeting

Lubensky, Ron: *21st Century Town Meeting mixed bag -5 comments*
<http://www.deliberations.com.au/2007/05/21st-century-town-meeting-mixed-bag.html>

- ☞ Lubensky, a deliberation practitioner based in Melbourne, Australia provides a critique of the 21st Century Town Meeting with five comments

Participedia

http://participedia.net/wiki/21st_Century_Town_Meeting

- ☞ Created in September 2009, Participedia is an online toolbox based on wiki platform and aimed at creating and gathering public knowledge to deepen democracy and participatory governance throughout the world.. The overview of 21st Century Town Meeting is short but crisp.

People and Participation.net

<http://www.peopleandparticipation.net/pages/viewpage.action?pagelId=18219166&showChildren=false&decorator=printable>

- ☞ The description provides a brief overview of the 21st Century Town Meeting

Reynolds, Lenora: *How does technology used at a 21st-Century Town Meeting affect the meeting and its outcome?*

<http://www.helium.com/items/984783-how-does-technology-used-at-a-21st-century-town-meeting-affect-the-meeting-and>

- ☞ This online article discusses the implications of technological aids for the outcomes of a 21st Century Town Meeting

The Change Management Toolbox

<http://www.change-management-toolbook.com/mod/book/view.php?id=74&chapterid=133>

- ☞ The Change Management Toolbox is a premium online resource for all change management related information. It is a place to network with other change practitioners numbering over 15,500 registered users, and tap into, and contribute to a growing resource base. The toolbox's description of 21st Century Town Meeting is short and concise.



21st Century Dialogue, Australia

<http://www.21stcenturydialogue.com/index.php?package=AboutUs&action=Index&static=1>

- ☛ 21st Century Dialogue is a boutique business, specializing in community engagement that maximizes opportunities for inclusiveness and deliberation through small group interaction and high technology. 21st Century Town Meeting is one amongst the other methods described on their website

Case studies

Your Health, Your Care, Your Say, United Kingdom

Global Voices, the international arm of AmericaSpeaks, partnered with Opinion Leader Research, a UK based firm, to organize and facilitate a 1,000-person national citizens' forum on health care in United Kingdom. Called "Your Health, Your Care, Your Say"

The 21st Century Town Meeting, sponsored by the National Health Service, was part of an extensive citizen input process to improve the UK's national health care system. "Your Health, Your Care, Your Say" sought guidance on how health services could be better aligned with the realities of people's everyday lives.

After viewing the results from the town meeting, Prime Minister Tony Blair committed to make sure the National Health Service: worked with doctors to increase office hours; improve local access to treatment options; provide for additional in-home care; gave physicians greater control of the Service's budget; and established a new emphasis on prevention, among many other commitments.

Source:

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4138622

Listening to the City, New York

Soon after the World Trade Centre attacks in New York City in 2001, stark differences over the future of the site began to divide survivors, business leaders and residents. Civic leaders and members of the general public feared that business and political interests would prevail unless a broad public consensus emerged and shaped the redevelopment effort.

To address this need, the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York asked AmericaSpeaks to develop a project that would transcend these differences and provide decision makers with areas of agreement about the redevelopment of the site. Participants were asked to give their thoughts about six preliminary concepts for the Trade Center site, which the Port Authority of NY and NJ and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation unveiled days before the meeting. Participants criticized the design plans as too dense, too dull and too commercial. The poor reception of these concepts by the participants sent the sponsors back to the drawing board. A contest among architectural firms was initiated using the vision and principles that emerged during "Listening to the City".



Testimony: "I would be tempted to call it a turning point in the story not only of the World Trade Center, but of American planning in general. ... Thousands and thousands of people talking seriously about urban design is something I never thought I would see." Paul Goldberger, New Yorker Magazine architecture critic.

Source: www.americaspeaks.org/casestudies/ltc

Unified New Orleans Plan: Rebuilding New Orleans

The Unified New Orleans Plan was developed in just five months and after a number of other unsuccessful planning attempts by bringing thousands of citizens together with planners and officials in an unprecedented effort that engaged the full diversity of the city. AmericaSpeaks played a critical role in securing robust and diverse participation in the Unified Plan. Citizens living in New Orleans – and those dispersed by the hurricane to 21 other cities – were brought together to participate in a truly city-wide conversation. The process ensured the public's role was substantive, representative, and intrinsic to the final product.

In June 2007, the New Orleans City Council and Louisiana Recovery Authority approved the Unified New Orleans Plan, saying "The Unified New Orleans Plan represents a citizen-driven recovery vision for the entire city of New Orleans which has been developed with unprecedented participation and representation from every part of the city including displaced citizens. The process generated broad-based citizen input and a clear collective voice about the recovery and rebuilding priorities and strengthened the level of public accountability.

Sources:

www.americaspeaks.org/casestudies/unop

http://www.americaspeaks.org/_data/n_0001/resources/live/citizenpartstudy1.pdf

