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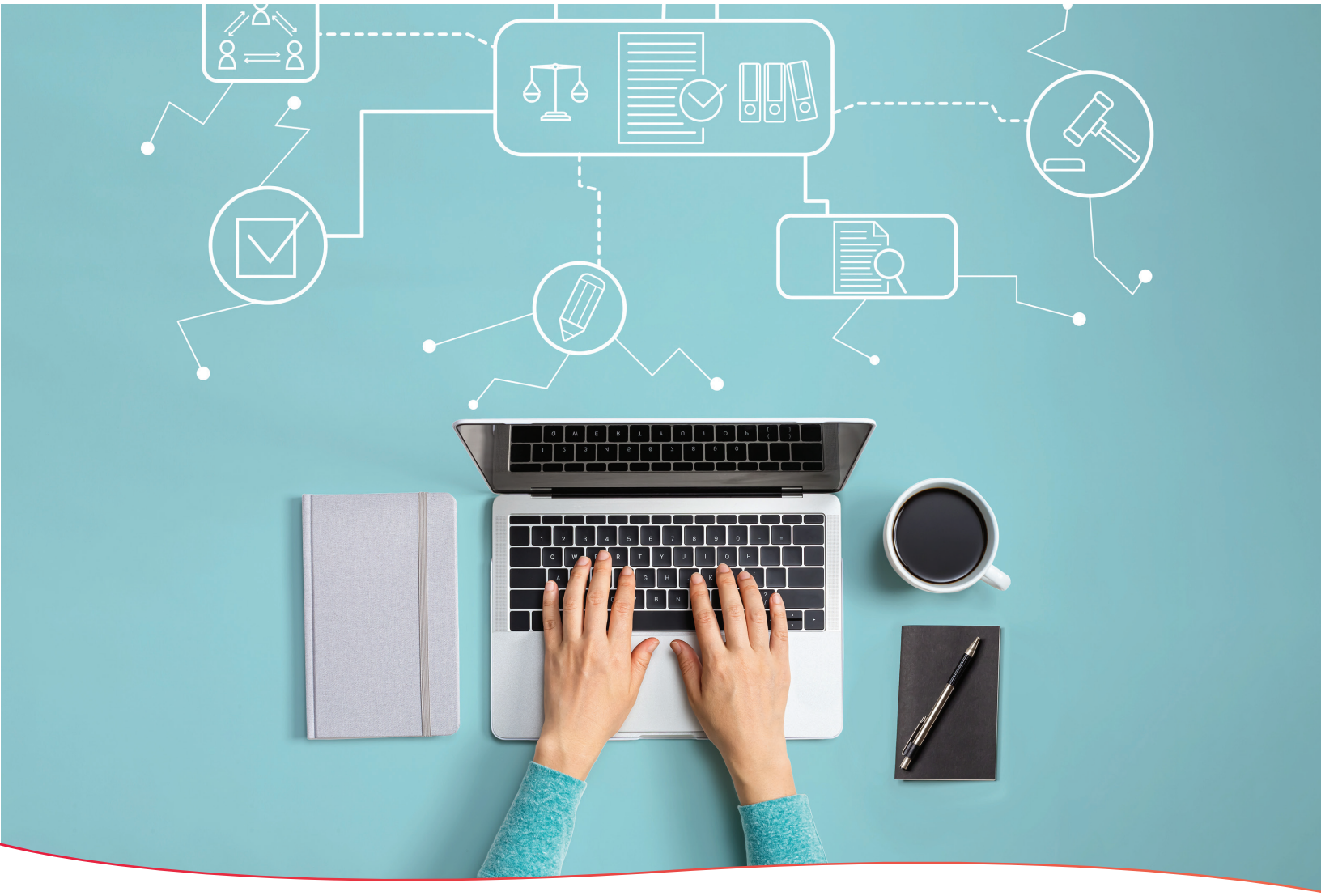

The future of public meetings:

How Public Meetings Can Sustain Public Participation in the Community

By: Sally Hussey

"Town meetings are held in town halls, school auditoriums, movie theaters [sic] — any place that's big enough to house a group of people voting on their lives. The issues are not described so grandly; nonetheless, deciding whether or not to change a zoning law, hire additional teachers, levy a tax or fund a new snowplow is a way of organizing one's future."

— *New York Times, March 8, 1982*

Introduction

Public meetings are one of the most widespread methods of public participation in the United States. While generally employed by all levels of government, most local governments conduct regular meetings to discuss and decide public issues. And yet the relationship between public meetings and public participation hasn't always been effective. Particularly when it comes to the promise surrounding the community's ability to influence public decision-making and policy outcomes. "Despite its widespread use," writes local government scholar Brian Adams, "public hearings are not held in high esteem." [1] That is, although the most frequently used method for involving residents in public decision-making, local meetings don't guarantee participation or engagement.

A survey of city managers and chief administrative officers in 1997 found *97 % of local governments in the United States use some form of local meetings.*

Mandated by law and allowing residents to comment on public issues in a brief window of time – what public participation scholar Matt Leighninger calls "the 'three minutes at the microphone' sort of meeting"– public meetings have been much-maligned for their 'top down' approach and already-reached decision-making. The outdated, inaccessible format, too, sees a large majority of the broader community unrepresented. What's more, while these barriers to participation reveal inequality inherent in public meetings, more critically, they reveal inequity of public meetings. That is, participatory barriers result in inequality that skews policy outcomes. This is particularly salient in recent decades in planning and zoning meetings where new affordable housing developments are at the forefront of Not In My Backyard or NIMBYism.

Weighing into this impasse is the notion that public meetings are enshrined in local politics. As a vehicle for the opinions and values of everyday residents, they have become an essential ingredient of a small-scale momentum — a kind of grassroots democracy. In more recent decades, this coincides with wider power shifts in public decision-making brought about through the rise in public participation and proliferation of public participation models that actively serve to incorporate residents issues and concerns. On the one hand, with the capability for community input, public meetings suggest a symbiosis between community and government. Thereby, providing ways in which communities might influence public meetings (albeit not directly alter policy outcomes).

[1] While public meetings and public hearings are often interchangeable, there is a distinct difference between them. Public meetings imply meetings of any government body – i.e. city council, planning commission. *(Open Public Meetings Act of 1971 requires any meetings of government body is open to the public).* Public hearings specifically enable the public to comment on a particular action or project and can occur as part of public meetings or on their own.

Here, residents provide government officials information on issues that matter to them, provide local knowledge, and give a public voice to contentious issues where greater turnout at meetings indicates local support. In this way, public meetings are a "pulse-check" on community issues. In addition, residents can delay decisions, support (and withdraw support for) elected officials and, in effect, set future agendas. Unlike closed forums such as surveys, public meetings are open forums that allow locals to express diverse views and opinions, and, effectively, highlight the role of public participation.

Stereotypes and Criticisms

On the other hand — and keenly observed in recent times — public meetings have evolved to hyper-localized forums that are dominated by special interest groups. Public meetings have long drawn criticism for attracting extreme views held by special interest groups that crowd out diverse voices. In drawing in unrepresentative cohorts of the community, the nostalgically held parochial view of local or town meetings — a recent mainstay in popular culture *(Schitt's Creek; South Park)* — has been superseded by the notion of meetings that degenerate into rancor, insult-trading, and fearmongering. We might turn to the current 'culture wars' at play in school board meetings across the country regarding pandemic restrictions (mask mandates) and curricula demands (for instance, pandemic-related safety precautions, school library books, sex education, and reading lists). Here, meetings have encountered special interest groups infiltrating local venues and becoming active at local meetings across the country. The overrepresentation of self-interested groups can also work to distort policy outcomes and undermine the opportunity afforded by public meetings for people to connect on decision making on a political scale. As a hotbed of opportunism for idiosyncratic morality and politics, public meetings are marred by problems of underrepresentation, outsized power, and community disconnect.

A broken process: who attends public meetings anyway?

> "Held at times of day that can make it hard for many people to attend without missing work, usually without day care options, and sometimes in locations not favorable to those with disabilities or who rely on transit, these meetings already exclude many groups before they even start. Then there's the matter of format: Experts and officials typically sit behind a table and give speeches and make presentations, with a microphone set up to take comments from neighbors who can spare the time to spend hours waiting for a few minutes on the mic."
>
> *— Patrick Sisson, "Public Meetings are broken. Here's how to fix them" 2020*

Recent data reveals "who grabs the mic at public meetings" is in line with decades-long research. Participation in traditional public meetings is generally indicated by socioeconomic status, education level, and income. That is, white, older, wealthy, homeowners, highly educated, longtime residents, and already involved in government.[2] (Indeed, while Harvard researchers Abby Williamson and Archung Fung trace public meetings back to 1630s New England meetings, they inadvertently link to the exclusions and implicit biases of the assemblies of white males who used town meetings to self-govern while excluding most of the population.) In addition, the aversion to conflict and fear of ridicule has been found to have been a mitigating factor in meeting attendance, particularly among the poorest residents.

But attendance at in-person meetings is not an indication of connection to community. In 2010, a three-year study by the Knight Foundation explored how residents felt across 26 communities across the United States.[3] It found that attending public meetings didn't make residents feel any more connected to community. Revisiting the study in Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy, Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger suggest, somewhat ironically, the research uncovered that "people who had participated in a conventional public meeting had lower levels of attachment to community than people who had not."

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[2] Katherine Levine Einstein, Maxwell Palmer, David M Glick. 2018. "Who Participates in Local Government? Evidence from Meeting Minutes." Perspectives on Politics, pp. 1 - 19. https://doi.org/10.1017/s153759271800213x [3] Knight Foundation & Gallup, "Soul of the Community", released November 15, 2010. Researchers found that attending a public meeting was more likely to reduce a person's sense of efficacy and attachment to community than to increase it.

Decline in attendance at meetings can be a measure of civic attitudes, particularly when they fall short of public problem solving. Unfortunately, the notion that local government is ill-equipped to solve public problems walks hand-in-hand with negative attitudes of residents towards governments, where the "erosion of trust is an everyday headline." Nabatchi further suggests in the interview that the failure of meetings to lead to any satisfaction for elected officials or residents magnifies the wider problem of public meetings as an anchor for democracy: "We know in practice that these meetings are sometimes intense and hostile, and that other times people don't show up. We can identify lots of issues, whether racial and ethnic tensions, education, health, or other areas, where more and better participation can be useful. When you consider how conventional methods of engagement [i.e. public meetings] are such a salient part of our civic infrastructure, you have to consider that the public square is struggling."

Democratizing Access

But, where low attendance at in-person, or traditional face-to-face meetings can be ascribed to scheduling of meetings at inopportune times, and with little notice or access, public meetings are often structured in a manner that hampers engagement. The 2020 study, Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century, released by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, revealed that one in 10 Americans attended a public meeting (i.e. zoning or school board meeting) to discuss a local issue in the year prior. In California, local government officials agreed that traditional public meetings "tend to lead to gripe sessions, fail to generate thoughtful discussion, and reflect the interests of a few well-organized groups rather than the full community." Participants, on the other hand, revealed that, with decisions already made, public meetings "seem to be designed 'for show.'" In effect, the report recommends expanding the role of residents to increase trust and legitimacy in policy outcomes by making public meetings more accessible:

Recommendation 3.1

Adopt formats, processes, and technologies that are designed to encourage widespread participation by residents in official public hearings and meetings at local and state levels.

Calls for a more vibrant local democracy: the inaccessible format of public meetings

Indeed, the backlash against face-to-face or in-person public meetings is multifaceted. Chief amongst this is the inaccessible format. That is, in the 2-3 minutes given over to community members at a podium to have their say. Community members may have travelled some distance and waited in line — sometimes for hours at a time — for their two minutes at the podium. Without doubt, this scenario offers little in the way of authentic engagement. (In 'Making Public Participation Legal', Leighninger argues: in the "three minutes at the microphone in legislative hearings, school board meetings, zoning hearings, and city council proceedings all over the country, democracy is dwindling, three minutes at a time.") To be sure, restrictions on public comments during meetings seek to strike a balance between residents' need to address elected officials, while allowing government entities to manage meetings with efficiency. This relies on the most common form of parliamentary procedure for meeting protocols. Now in its 11th edition since its 1876 inception, Robert's Rules of Order is used to raise issues, make amendments, and decide issues. In general, public meetings consist of a blend of formal presentations and informal comments, averaging around four hours duration.

Yet the format is widely criticized as it represents government official's top-down decision making, in the extreme.[4] In local meetings, government officials and experts are "positioned above citizens, literally and figuratively" – what Leighninger calls the "main trappings of 'parent-child' public engagement." In addition, bringing community in so late in policy life cycle, the format tends to disregard community input, enabling officials to deflect criticism, 'tick-the-box' and proceed with already reached decisions. In this way, as Adams puts it, meetings "are mere democratic rituals that provide a false sense of legitimacy to legislative outcomes." Moreover, viewed through the lens of community engagement, limiting residents' input leans towards the lowest rungs of Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (that is, "manipulation" and "therapy"). It also lends itself to what Cheryl Simrell King, Kathryn Feltey, and Briget O'Neill Susel classified as "inauthentic participation," in which public meetings are "solely symbolic" and residents don't actually impact the issue at hand.

Further, while it dissuades engagement and authentic dialogue, the conventional format of public meetings tends towards bias and misrepresentation that promote polarizing views. That is, the format lends itself to normalizing exclusionary practices. We need only turn to zoning and land-use meetings and the over-representation of homeowners opposed to new housing developments that seek to address housing affordability. Here, celebrities, too, lend their weight to local meetings to obstruct development projects. This, despite the increasing awareness drawn by climate scientists and urban planners who recommend that creating denser cities, is "one of the most impactful ways to slash greenhouse gas emissions." Yet, while the "already privileged" benefit from obstructing their progress, as journalist Patrick Sisson writes, "the opposite tends to happen when marginalized groups want their voices heard."

What's more, these polarizing views exacerbate existing inequalities. In their comprehensive article, "Who Participates in local government? Evidence from meeting minutes," Katherine Levine Einstein, Maxwell Palmer, and David M. Glick complied unique data tracking meeting participation on zoning and housing issues in the Boston metro area between 2015-2017.[5] They reveal meeting attendees tend to be white, older, wealthy, homeowners, highly educated, long-time residents, and already involved in government. Much referenced in literature around the inefficacy and inequality of public meetings, the Boston University researchers analyzed minutes of public meetings and equally found that more than two-thirds of comments delivered during public meetings opposed new housing projects — concluding that "the incentive to show up an oppose new housing are far stronger."

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[4] John Gastil and Todd Kelshaw published a typology for categorizing types of public meetings depending on the initiator of the meeting, direction of communication and the content and purpose of the communication. These seven typologies range from 'vicarious', 'informational' through 'consultive', 'grassroots' to 'collaborative' indicating informational meetings - one way communication to the public - through 'communicating values' through to 'dialogues'. Gastil, John and Kelshaw, Todd, (2008) *When Citizens and Officeholders Meet Part 2: A Typology of Face-to-Face Public Meetings.*

(This despite support of a statewide affordable housing statute that allowed developers to bypass local zoning regulations — where support for multifamily housing at local meetings turned out at a much lower rate). As urban scholar Richard Florida reflects, despite voter confidence in the reform, the analysis reveals otherwise: "Instead of generating a more vibrant local democracy, participation in community meetings skews toward older, more affluent, and more invested groups. As such, meeting commentary presents an incomplete portrait of the opinions of the electorate and serves as a mechanism for reinforcing NIMBYism, suppressing housing development, and exacerbating political and economic inequality."[6]

The ever-increasing need for deeper forms of public engagement

A second major critique of traditional public meetings is "they are a poor mechanism for deliberation." Deliberation "requires weighing up competing arguments around policies and public decisions in a context of mutually civil — and diverse — discussion." 'Can deliberation renew democracy in a digital world?' argues that the legitimacy of democracy depends on a real — and tangible — link between the public and public policies. For "Deliberation helps fill the gap between distrusted political elites and short circuits polarized thinking that arises from angry populism." Deliberative groups or panels, like citizens assemblies, local partnerships, community panels where members are made up to represent the electorate as a whole, highlight a diversity of views, experiences, and knowledge essential to a healthy democracy. Deliberative methods are increasingly embedded in policy making across the developed world in order for governments to make good on their commitment to meaningfully engage communities, especially in relation to climate change and net zero strategies. Contrary to the procedural restrictions limiting public input in public meetings governed by Robert's Rules, deliberative processes offer no guarantee of consensus. Responses represent the diverse opinions across the community and there is also no way of ascertaining how well participants or respondents comprehend issues at hand. For deliberation is weighted towards dialogue and complexity. It also, as sociologist Caroline W. Lee writes, emphasizes "empathetic identification." This not only reveals the "tough choices" often facing decisionmakers, but making residents voices central, positions them as seemingly equivalent in the process of co-creation.

International Journal of Public Participation 01/2008; 2(1):33-54., Available at SSRN: *https://ssrn.com/abstract=2735490* [5] The study compiled unique data on the participants in planning and zoning meetings of 97 towns in the Boston metro area. It tracked 2,800 citizen participants in meetings on issues of zoning and housing from 2015 to 2017. The study focuses on towns across metropolitan Boston that vary in size, scale, density, and types of housing.

Without question, the increasing need for deeper forms of public engagement has ushered in the rise in deliberative processes across developed countries — a need that is contingent upon the continuing erosion of trust in government and public institutions itself at an all-time low. Public meetings' "two minutes at the microphone" appear thin by comparison. Not only in the use of Robert's Rules and the orientation toward consensus, but where the issues of under-representation, hyper-localization, and limitations on public input — the outdated format of traditional face-to-face meetings — are concerned.

Public Meetings Through the Centuries

Yet, intersections between deliberation and public meetings are not new. (Indeed, Williamson and Fung traced contemporary meetings to the Town Hall meetings of 1630s New England precisely through links to deliberative practices.) While it would be misleading to suggest that public meetings are deliberations, they nonetheless offer a way in which opportunities are created for residents to participate in forms of deliberation regarding public decision making. And, as Nabatchi points out in the negative in the above example of "the public square," their widespread application also has a significant role to play in maintaining a democratic system.

It can be argued that they also engender greater public participation. Exploring this nexus, Caroline W. Lee's ethnographic analysis of the flagship dialogue and deliberative organization — the now defunct America Speaks — examines its trademarked "21st Century Town Hall" meeting. Pioneered in the 1990s, the new form of high-tech town hall updated the New England Town Meeting for the digital age. In its remit to increase participation, it enabled large group decision-making through the method of deliberation. Alongside the elaborate recruitment, information, and learning processes typical to deliberative engagement methods, it used connective technologies to allow large numbers of participants across various geographical locations to simultaneously deliberate on the same issue in small groups, often seeing participants numbering into the thousands on any one deliberation. (This compared to the usual small group deliberative processes such as citizens juries and citizens assemblies for example.) Acting as a counterweight to the overreaching influence of special interest groups — and a deep-rooted distrust in government — it sought to modernize public meetings for the digital age. In its remit to increase participation, it worked to overcome typical barriers through meal compensation, childcare, transportation, and translation.

[6] The 2018 study of public meetings in almost 100 Greater Boston cities revealed that white people accounted for 95 percent of participants despite comprising 80 percent of the population in the same area. Analysing of surnames and geographic data from public meetings, researchers argued that "whites overwhelmingly dominate zoning and planning board meetings." Latinos comprised 8 percent of the population in the studied area with 1 percent representation at meetings. While 4 percent of the population is African-American residents, they make only 2 percent of participants. See also commentary at *bit.ly/3jzcuxI*

It also signaled, as Lee puts it, "public deliberation as a new civic form" in the dramatic growth and industry of professional public engagement. But deliberation as practiced in the 1990s and 2000s, as Lee writes, "was both deeply nostalgic and technocratically future-oriented." (Nostalgic for the localism and communitarianism of "centuries tested town meetings" and 1960s and 1970s activism and identity politics.)[7] (Despite achieving large scale participation, over time, responses to the authenticity of AmericaSpeaks deliberations became skeptical — particularly in an era defined by chronic inequalities.) To be sure, today's "thick participation" or thick engagement — that is collaborative and deep participation — can be contrasted with the comparatively thin two-minutes-at-a-microphone model of information exchange and gathering public input at conventional in-person public meetings. With the democratic challenges we face today — the increasing need to emphasize social infrastructure and community well-being, proactive efforts at inclusion, and the increasing impact of public decision-making on lessening economic, political, and social inequalities — the conventional practice of public meetings might seem defunct. And yet, public meetings have become central to addressing democratic challenges since the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, precisely through radical and widespread digitization of government practices across the country.

[7] This blend consisted of a nostalgia for a "Yankee past of centuries tested town meetings", (evoking localism, communitarianism, and humble nonpartisanship), and for "the heady romance of 1960s and 1970s activism" (evoking racial and ethnic diversity, gender equality, personal growth, environmental awareness and radical critique).

The changing face of public meetings

COVID-19 ushered in the necessity of online public meetings as governments-imposed regulations to restrict physical meetings, mobility, and public life in general. Transferring from physical and location-dependent to online interactions forced local meetings such as school board and zoning meetings online. It can be argued that the online makeover of traditional public meetings dates back to 2010, where replacing in-person meetings with video conferencing questioned the re-invention of public meetings for a digital age. But this digital forerunner did not anticipate the drastic and widespread changes in digital practices by governments, where web-conferencing systems like Zoom™ became commonplace.

Indeed, in bridging physical and social distance, Zoom not only emerged as a form of communication that supported nearly all areas of life — homeschooling, working from home, and connecting with families and friends — it became the mainstream as the number of daily meeting participants increased from circa 10 million in December 2019 to 200 million in March 2020.

While allowing remote participation, for some researchers, the online adaptation of face-to-face meetings enabled a tangible test of whether they improve participation. In their 2022 analysis of online housing meetings held on Zoom, Boston University researchers found that "online meetings — despite their ostensible convenience — are no panacea for eliminating participatory inequalities." The researchers whose previous analysis of meeting commentary revealed socio-economic, gender and racial bias in attendees, cited above, analyzed minutes in public planning and zoning board meetings in 97 cities and towns in eastern and central Massachusetts that account for the allocation of new housing. They found the exact same dynamic in online meetings to in-person, despite the seeming lowering of barriers to attendance. Zoom meetings were not representative of broader community and inequality again distorts outcomes in preference of privileged community residents. Given the broader societal concerns around racial injustice that coincided with the rapid uptake of online meetings, "Black, Hispanic, and Asian residents remained essentially unheard."

It's significant to note, too, that since the changes necessitated by the COVID crisis, public meetings look very different to pre-COVID meetings. On the one hand, digital capabilities were not previously possible. (One case in point, Miami-Dade County Public Schools trustees held a 29 hour annual board meeting with 750 community members weighing in.)

On the other hand, shifts in the tenor of public meetings have also had a cultural and political impact. Historically, school boards were perceived as 'backwaters' of local government, but conversations now turn to heated debates about whether sex education, the history of slavery in the U.S., drug and alcohol awareness programs, and certain reading material are appropriate for curricula across the country. Most recently, fears around the introduction of critical race theory to school curricula, are energizing conservative voters and the attendant flurry of state bills aimed at banning the teaching of what are often called "divisive concepts," (that is, as a Rhode Island bill puts it, that "the United States of America is fundamentally racist or sexist"). Disputes, sometimes violent, at school board meetings grace headlines, fueled by divisive views around vaccines, masks, and curriculum, with board meetings, at times, mandating police attendance. Headlines such as the New York Times' 'Schools in Bind as Bitter Feuds Cripple Board,' or the Washington Post's School Board Meetings Used to be Boring, Why Have They Become War Zones?' and the New York Times' podcast 'The School Board Wars,' which centers around the school board meetings in Central Bucks, Pennsylvania, attest to the fact that school board meetings are at the vanguard of "COVID culture wars" in both a charged and changed socio-political climate. As mentioned in the introduction to this ebook, far right and extremist groups attempt to stifle teaching around racism, sex education, evolution, and other hot-button topics. In response, some school boards are seeking to curtail community resident participation by limiting speakers and speaking times, while at the other extreme, some politicians attempt to harness suburban fights over critical race theory to mobilize voters.

Questions, too, abound around whether the changes to online meetings will last. Not only because governments have invested in digital infrastructure. States like Texas, for instance, gave school boards temporary permission to operate online meetings. Yet, laws vary state to state. Public meetings in California are covered by the historic open meeting law, the Brown Act, which requires that all meetings of local government be open to the public and allow for in-person participation.

Building on the momentum created during the pandemic, and shifts to online meetings from March 2020, California has since amended the act with the so-called **Urgency Bill (Assembly Bill 361)**, which will allow local governments to continue online meetings under limited circumstances (i.e., during state-proclaimed emergencies) until 2024.

Dedicated platforms and sustaining public participation in public meetings

However, the optimism for maintaining online meetings can be thought in relation to dedicated digital-first platforms. While simply moving a three-hour zoning board meeting to a Zoom meeting online seemingly doesn't enhance community members' sense of efficacy or interest in participation, it can be argued that dedicated platforms work to mobilize participation gaps.

For a start, they address crucial issues of accessibility. People who face constraints in attending meetings because of such issues as family obligations or health have better access. Residents face many barriers to engagement at the local level. Exclusion of groups exists through the times of day meetings are set, making it hard to attend, or through forced absence from work with no day care options, and through unfavorable locations to people with disabilities or who rely on transit. Livestreaming of meetings provides greater accessibility. People have much more of an opportunity to engage on issues that are relevant to them at their convenience. The format overcomes participatory barriers like meeting times and availability constraints. For instance, juggling needs of work and family life, or in some cases, geographical distances, and other physical barriers such as disability. Hard-to-reach populations — underrepresented and rural populations, for example — are also better able to access participation through the digitization of public meetings. Enabling people to livestream, meetings are duplicated in real time to social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. This taps into the reach social media platforms have while maintaining the integrity of the meeting's purpose (i.e., not relying on a platform that is not designed for public meetings). This also has the potential to involve younger people previously nescient of legislative processes, giving them an opportunity to weigh in on legislative processes.

Given the ability for digital collection of pre-meeting comments, digital-first public meetings also bring community input in earlier in the meeting cycle. Previously, speakers would have to travel to the meeting, request and sign a form, then wait for their turn to speak. Dedicated platforms allow for pre-meeting input by community, short circuiting barriers around hearing from diverse voices within communities. It also has the ability to capture more resident views and feedback overall — increasing the number of people engaged in public meetings.

Public input, then, becomes more of a dynamic interchange, rather than a static few minutes of a prepared statement. In turn, residents could feel more certain that their participation had a chance to make a difference — essential to growing

broader participation and hearing from marginal voices, undercutting the privileged voice that, as we've seen above, crowd out marginal and diverse voices in zoning and planning meetings around affordable housing allocation. It proactively addresses inequalities exacerbated by limited attendance at traditional meetings. Through accessibility and transcending geographical limitations, it also promotes participation and democratic literacy, in effect reinvigorating the "public square." Residents are increasingly wanting to influence public decision making. And public engagement is particularly important if we want public meetings to be inclusive and equitable. For, to support a meaningful democracy, public meetings — to reuse the words of Jane Mansbridge — "require conscious efforts at inclusion." A follow-on effect of dedicated platforms is that resident input also becomes something of value. Some local governments and municipalities have also used engagement platforms to seek community input in meetings and in decisions around the post-COVID continuation of online meetings.

This process of seeking input, however, cannot be thought of as outside the cycle of mistrust in government. Lack of trust in government extends to global challenges such as climate crisis, race, and inequality. As indicated above, racial disparities fare far worse in public participation in planning and zoning processes — especially relevant when the shift to online meetings necessitated by physical distancing required to prevent the virulent spread of coronavirus also coincided with "a growing protest movement over racial injustice." Shifts in participation or lowering of barriers to participation, then, must intersect global challenges. Put differently, global challenges undergird shifts in participation.

Reestablishing Trust

Dedicated digital meeting platforms can provide transparency that builds trust and connection between governments and communities. Recent e-Government trends show that one of the three most studied impacts is the improved trust in communications for residents. Typically, governments are required to publicize meetings in advance and allow the public access and while most record their meetings in some way, there is a wide scope in how those recordings are made available post meetings. Dedicated platforms provide potential of greater cross-promotion through leveraging subscriber lists, cross promotion, and providing multiple notification points. The increased potential for social sharing further brings awareness of public meetings and information to the community. Recording and indexing of meetings, and efficacy of their turnaround to becoming public facing, providing residents with access and searchability, also offers a transparency not available to online meetings such as Zoom. With streaming accessible on social media, automated published minutes, and social sharing of minutes data, government officials become more accountable. Creating greater awareness, reach, and accessibility increases community involvement and civically-engaged residents, which, in turn, leads to community well-being.

Public participation for a new decade

Public meetings don't offer an easy template for twenty-first century democracy. But the modernization of public meetings through democratic innovations in digital technology can address the key issues and democratic challenges we face today. Concerns about the means of public participation — ensuring access and equity — particularly in an era of stark inequalities, are paramount in today's increasingly digitized environment. Without question, the pandemic has created a renewed appreciation for the critical role of community and residents in public decision making. The ability of public meeting platforms to increase participation and democratic literacy, in turn, suggests a renewed appreciation of the public square. As William Keith puts it, "The town meeting has a central place in our political imaginary [sic] because of the close connections between democracy and community."

Digital public meetings have the potential to create new pathways to encourage broader representation across the community, address increased, more inclusive public participation, and bestow value on community input and feedback. They not only present a more reliable portrait of the views and opinions of any one electorate, but generate a more vibrant democracy.

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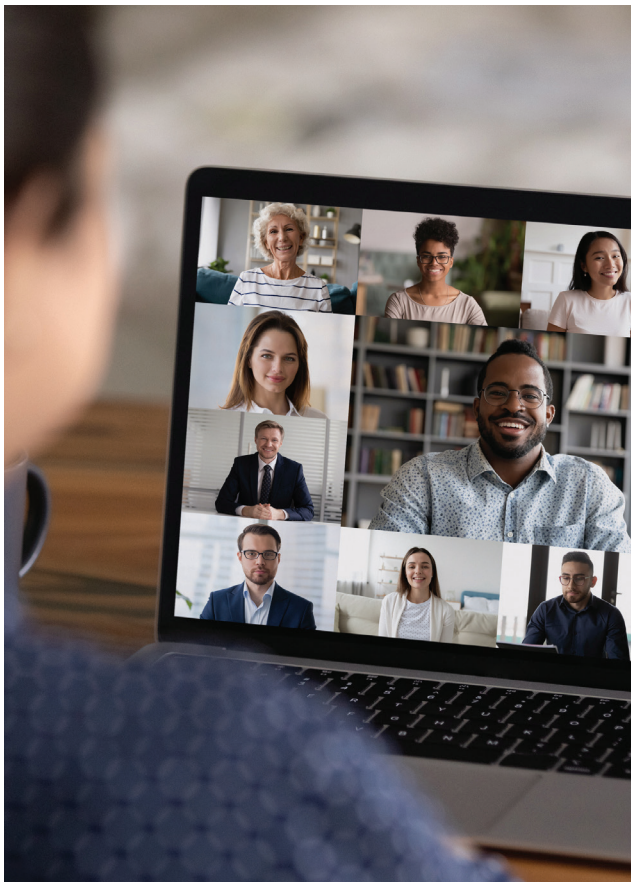

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