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Martin Kearns

“ We need to move away from the idea that democratic conversation and debate are the karaoke of the political elite, wherein words and issues are sung without passion or connection, but simply by rote and mainly for show. ”

Most normal people don't want to be politicians. They might like to solve a problem or two, but they are not going to make a life of it. We should design our government to accommodate the wisdom of our crowd and lower the barriers and disincentives to participation. We should design a system where Web 2.0 meets governmental management that provides new leadership, protects the privacy of citizens, enables them to participate, and provides easy-to-use and free tools to scale local participation.

If I was in charge of reshaping our democratic system, the first thing I would do is make it more ad hoc. People should not have to be involved in the process for years on end to make a difference in politics and governance. I would encourage fewer leadership positions and

design support staff, committees and offices to be flexible enough to support the leaders of the moment.

I would focus on providing stability through redundancy rather than through perfection. Our governmental system is designed to identify one right leader at a time, one person who will stay in power for years at a time, solving our problems for us. People have moments of greatness; they are just not great most of the time. We are living in a time that allows for large networks of people to work together to solve problems, where we can all lead when our gifts and expertise are needed most.

Government should mimic what is going on in the non-profit and advocacy worlds. New leaders and new activities are springing up to address specific concerns but then dissipating again. We saw this with the groundswell of support for Amber Alerts and the movement for a Airline Passengers' Bill of Rights. The more we remove barriers to entry into the political leadership process the more innovation and experimentation we will see.

Contrary to much of the current debate, I am not advocating a more participatory democracy focusing on referenda and constant live voting. I am calling for rolling admissions throughout more of the committees, administration, agencies, staffs in government and Congress. I am not suggesting term limits either, but rather a dedicated focus on changing the barriers to entry and participation in civic life. Ironically, in today's culture, the first step to increasing participation may be reclaiming the right to refuse it.

The original Constitutional Framers may not have believed that everyone was capable of leading government, but history has proven them wrong. The fact that we can download more information in a day than Thomas Jefferson had access to in a lifetime changes the equation of who can lead and how we should think about the paths to leadership. We need to shrug off our cultured system of elitism and the

protected bureaucracies that politicians have created to keep power in the hands of the few. No one leader, bureaucrat or office staff can see and understand all the complexity America is forced to address. We should create much more churn and transition of our leadership.

The barriers to participation are considerable, and worsened by the aggregation and scouring of our private data by public and commercial interests. Our data storage Big Brother can now store and mine a lifetime of comments, facts, deliberations, photos, purchases, votes or lack of votes. Anyone can buy data on the credit scores, contributions, magazine subscriptions and social networks of friends or foes. People refuse to join and engage in efforts online because they are afraid they cannot get off lists. Barriers to exit have become barriers to entry.

The first step to opening the gates to a new generation of participants and leaders is to establish a DO-NOT-DATA-MINE-MY-FAMILY list. The government should establish a right to privacy, a right to reinvent oneself, a right to change opinions, even a right to disappear from the grid of data storage. People should have the right to see all of the data stored on him or her or accessed about them by any public, political or civic engagement institution. The public should have a right to examine the data held about them and opt out of any database at any time.

Processes that require registering and leaving comments are fine, but all comments should not be able to be associated with a particular person and searched forever. The public should be able to prevent institutions they are at odds with from tracking any information on them or their families. For instance, military families should be able to oppose a war then delete their electronic history of opposition in the future.

We need to move away from the idea that democratic conversation and debate are the karaoke of the political elite, wherein words and issues are sung without passion or connection, but simply by rote and mainly for show. Once we have reinvigorated the capacity of everyday

and everywhere Americans to step in and out of public participation, we should then focus on the core issues of civic participation at the local level. Scores of tools and services aimed at increasing participation exist and can be provided easily and without cost. We should offer free conference calling and technical support for civic gatherings. We should redesign the notion of the town hall to fit the schedules of people who don't want to choose between family, babysitters, costs and participation in civic life. If you've ever gone to a government meeting you would see in attendance retirees, students, those with the means to take time from their work and those whose work it is to influence government decision makers. That leaves out a huge swath of working people with no real voice in governance. We need to move away from the idea that democratic conversation and debate are the karaoke of the political elite, wherein words and issues are sung without passion or connection, but simply by rote and mainly for show. We'll be serious about public participation when we have kiosks asking for feedback and input on government decisions and public policy located in malls, airports, hotels, and libraries —as ubiquitous as lottery ticket venders.

We should create new ways to participate in public hearings via tools such as Skype, chat and e-mail, and allow people to express themselves with text, voice or art. The public should have the opportunity to create daily briefings on key public events on wikis and blogs. We should encourage creative participation in the very management process of every agency (think YouTube debates meet functioning government).

The true power of democracy is its passion and connection with the citizenry. We should seek to recapture these feelings in our discourse and leadership. If we are able to reduce barriers to participation, open new pathways to leadership and support the efforts of real people who

want to wrestle with difficult public problems, we will create a redundancy of leadership, a check and balance to a system (not to a leader) and, ultimately, we will have an America that is even more exciting and democratic than it has been in the last 200 years.

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*About the Author*

Martin Kearns is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Green Media Toolshed. Previously, Kearns founded the Georgia River Network, a state-based conservation group solely dedicated to the conservation of Georgia's rivers. Kearns also served as Executive Director of the Georgia River Network. Kearns has been a political fundraiser for candidates for the US House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate.