

Democracy Innovations for Better Public Meetings



Democracy
Innovation

In many places, official public meetings no longer work. Most of the official interactions between residents and local governments, school systems, planning boards, and police departments are full of frustration, conflict, and mistrust.

Bad public meetings are damaging because they:

- Reduce public trust and confidence in government, making it harder to implement policies and maintain financial stability.
- Increase frustration and stress for public officials and staff.
- Lead to delays and erratic decision-making, which further erodes trust and wastes public funds.
- Worsen inequities because meeting participants are not representative of the communities most affected by policies.



Better public meetings are possible, sustainable, and measurable.

- There are proven tools and practices that can ensure civil, productive dialogue among people who have different backgrounds and interests.
- These practices can be adopted as part of official public meetings, in full accordance with open meetings laws.
- Before and after public meetings, supplementary tools and practices can reach broader audiences: providing information, gathering input, and reporting on decisions.
- Public satisfaction with public meetings, and the state of local democracy generally, can be measured through digital tools.



Understanding the local context is critical. Local leaders should take stock of the history, social capital, and civic assets of their communities in order to strengthen meetings and the relationship between government and citizens.

Over the past year, the Center for [Democracy Innovation](#) at the National Civic League has worked with three communities to take stock of the local context, gauge resident attitudes, and adopt better civil discourse practices in public meetings. The Center partnered with organizations such as the International City/County Management Association, National League of Cities, and Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation on this work, which was supported by the AAA-ICDR Foundation.



The Center can now apply those lessons and tools in our work with cities to make official public meetings more civil, equitable, participatory, and productive. **Please contact us if you are interested in a partnership that would benefit your community.**



AMERICAN
ARBITRATION
ASSOCIATION®

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
FOR DISPUTE RESOLUTION®

FOUNDATION®

Our approach

Our work with cities features several key elements:

- Working with a **team from the community** to understand the local context and adapt the approach to fit local needs and goals.
- Conducting a **Civic Infrastructure Scan** to explore the factors influencing public meetings and the relationship between residents and local institutions. The scan is a qualitative research methodology that encompasses the recent history of engagement, assets and capacities present in the community, demographic shifts, and the state of democracy in civic associations and digital networks. Each scan consists of semi-structured qualitative interviews with key local leaders from different sectors, media and social media analysis, and review of reports, plans, and other documents related to engagement.
- Using the Center's **Civic Engagement Scorecard** as an ongoing source of data on resident attitudes toward meetings and the community generally. The Scorecard is a quantitative, "user-centered" ratings tool hosted on the Alchemer platform. It gives people an easy-to-use tag-based system to rate the quality of democracy and civic health in their public meetings. It offers various ways to visualize collated data.
- Providing a **set of recommendations** on strategies and tools to use before, during, and after official public meetings, based on the Scan and the ideas emerging from the community team. These typically include new participatory processes, digital tools, and meeting formats.



Please contact us at democracyinnovation@ncl.org if you have questions or want to discuss the future of public meetings in your city.

Democracy Innovations for Better Public Meetings project

Process and timeline

