

The Six Principles of a Healthy Democracy

Developed by America Speaks*

- **Democracy occurs in communities.**

While the citizen is the fundamental unit of a democracy and the family is the core of our society, democracy exists and thrives only within the interactions among citizens. While individual expression is essential, democracy is not really about solitary processes such as voting. Citizens in dialogue, articulating the values they share and understanding their differences, reaching conclusions which are acted upon—that is the core democratic image we must nurture.

- **Shared responsibilities.**

Each community member must recognize the part he or she plays in the health of the community's democratic condition. Rather than becoming involved to fight a "not in my backyard" issue, participation can be motivated by an understanding that we sink or swim together. This awareness that our society is the sum of each of our actions moves the community beyond factionary interest politics.

- **Public trust.**

The only way a healthy democracy can be sustained is through public trust. Trust depends upon inclusive processes overseen by leaders acting as stewards, who articulate and deliberate citizen concerns and brings all views to the table. It is such processes—managed by leaders serving as stewards, not as career politicians—that evoke the public's trust and are the foundation of the true authority of leaders in a democratic polity.

- **Healthy struggle.**

We believe that creative tensions are embedded in society's most contentious issues. These tensions are the heart of democratic struggle and are the wellspring of a vibrant, vigorous society; they must be worked out in public, in direct processes that engage citizens and leaders in open dialogues.

- **"Both—And" Relationships.**

The capacity to find common ground amongst, and incorporation of, diverse solution must be restored sanctioned and preserved. The processes that yield to accommodation and integration must be strengthened and pushed to meet the healthy challenges of diversity in America.

- **Thoughtful deliberation.**

Supporting the five foregoing principles is the capacity for thoughtful deliberation. The necessary skills include listening, inclusion, mediation, dialogue, reflection and closure, each of which is recognized as a fundamental tool for strong and effective governance.

Conclusion

Citizens feel less connected to their leaders and institutions than ever before. Across the nation and at all levels of society, the public is losing interest in American governance. Citizens lack and authoritative voice in too many communities, have a deepening sense of insecurity in the face of the monumental changes afoot, and have disengaged from the political process at all levels.

**America Speaks outline for democratic renewal is premised upon partnership. We intend to help create networks of shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making among elected official, business interests, non-profit leaders and citizens to strengthen the civic infrastructure of communities across America. We encourage leaders in government to begin the search for new processes and enduring structure that engage citizens in the healthy, rewarding exercise of self-governance.*