Since the 19th century, the dominant model of a just and effective state has been that of a representative government populated by professional politicians and civil servants. This is an ideal of government that is by the people in the sense that representatives must stand for popular election, and for the people, when as public servants, they devise and implement laws and policies that advance the public interest. However, it is not yet government of the people in the sense that in this image, the political role of most individuals, most of the time, is relegated to the occasional and minimal role of voting for representatives.

Several trends, however, have conspired to cause public sector and civil society innovators to rethink this division between government and citizens, and to find ways to thicken the engagement of citizens in reflecting upon public problems and policies, in making collective decisions, and in carrying out various kinds of public action.

The first of these trends is the growing social gap between citizens on one hand, and politicians, political parties, and government, on the other. Without speculating on the causes of this gap, its manifestations include declining citizen trust in government agencies, declining party membership in many countries, low rates of voting turnout in many countries, and the sense of powerlessness and alienation of citizens with respect to their “democratic” governments. A second trend is the evident incapacity of government, relying only upon its own resources and authority, to accomplish many public objectives such as elementary education, public safety, environmental stewardship, and economic development. Third, a large number of initiatives—a few of them very well known, such as the Participatory Budgeting program of the Workers Party in Porto Alegre, Brazil, but many more obscure initiatives—have demonstrated the possibility and power of citizen engagement, participation, and even deliberation.

The potential of innovations that increase the quantity and depth of citizen participation hold out enormous promise to enhance and harness what some have called the “wisdom of the crowds.” When citizens engage in deliberation with one another, and with public officials, about thorny social problems and public priorities, they transform ill-informed and sometimes contradictory gut reactions into better informed judgments (in the language of Daniel Yankelovich). In situations in which the law and policy making process have been captured by some set of powerful interests, perhaps politicians themselves, organized citizens can demand accountability and justice. Where state
capacities are insufficient to serve the public interest, the energies, resources, and ingenuity of citizens can augment and amplify.

But efforts to enhance and deepen citizen participation face many perils. Nonprofessional, part-time citizens may be unable to grasp the complexities of many social problems. When government opens avenues of engagement, those who utilize these opportunities may be a select and unrepresentative group; those who are educated, highly interested, assertive, and members of dominant groups may be more inclined to participate than the least advantaged. When participation is associated with profitable stakes, citizens may assert their own narrow interests rather than taking broader and more other-regarding perspectives. Professional politicians and public managers frequently resist sharing power and authority in citizen participation initiatives.


For more information see: www.archonfung.net and www.transparencypolicy.net.