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TRUST | THE MONITOR'S VIEW

Listen up, wise up: Forums that inspire trust

New types of civic spaces for civil dialogue, such as citizen assemblies, are showing promise in “bringing to light a truth.”



A citizen in Sauk City, Wisconsin, listens during a town hall meeting at the local library, March 6,

By the Monitor's Editorial Board

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A big challenge for democracies today is a decline in trust. The share of Americans who trust government, for example, has fallen from 77% to 22% since 1964. Throughout the West, similar trends are apparent.

Figuring out how to address this can be complicated. One helpful perspective lies in the seminal work “Democracy in America,” by 19th-century French political observer Alexis de Tocqueville. He marveled at how “Americans of all ages, all stations of life and all types of disposition are forever forming associations.” Yet a more recent observer, Robert Putnam of Harvard University, has found a decline in interconnectedness – or the tendency to join local groups or shared activities.

The latest attempt to build trust in the United States is a new online, state-run public forum called Engaged California. The effort aims to prompt, gather, and synthesize conversations about the state’s response to the Los Angeles wildfires into reforms. Longer-term goals are broader and more ambitious. When Taiwan began a similar program in 2014, approval for the government was below 10%. Within eight years, it was 70%, although other factors contributed.

The idea of designing civic spaces for civil dialogue has been best expressed in citizen assemblies. Two decades ago, for instance, British Columbia’s premier wanted to reform the electoral system but knew few people would trust the government to do it. So he recruited a wide-ranging group of citizens, asking them to devise a solution after listening to a diversity of experts.

Think of it like jury duty but for politics, or a next-generation town hall. Or what de Tocqueville called the “equality of condition” in a context of freedom.

Citizen assemblies have helped build mutual trust, found Stephen Elstub, professor of democratic politics at Britain’s Newcastle University. “Because [they] require participants to listen to each other’s views and debate in an informed and reasonable way,” he wrote in a blog post, “they can improve the quality of democracy.”

These assemblies have been used worldwide, most notably to help Ireland navigate fraught topics such as abortion. Before they worked in such groups, 72% of participants were dissatisfied with how democracy was working, according to a study by NORC, a nonpartisan research center. Afterward, dissatisfaction dropped to 54%.

No one solution will reverse the trend. But de Tocqueville might have argued that the rekindling of common bonds relies first on individuals extending trust to each other. “The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens,” he wrote.

His greatest insight could be that the ultimate goal of trust-building is wisdom: “If it is a question of bringing to light a truth or developing a sentiment with the support of a great example, [Americans] associate.”



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