



Creating a National Citizen Cabinet

The Crisis: Americans Believe Government Isn't Working the Way it Should

Studies show an overwhelming majority of Americans believe our government is not working the way it should. Instead, they see a government dominated by competing special interests, tied up in partisan gridlock and unable to solve the problems our nation faces. Elected leaders from both parties agree the system is broken.

On a more fundamental level, Americans believe we have strayed from the Founders' vision of a republic that serves the common good, guided by the common sense of the people.

'We the People' Need a Greater Voice in Government

Americans believe, as did the Founders, that the common sense of the people can help break through the polarization and gridlock, find common ground, and help government better serve the common good.

An abundance of research says they are right. The American people are far less polarized than Congress and more apt to find common ground. When given correct information, the public as a whole shows remarkable intelligence. And, research shows, most people think about what serves the common good, not just what's in their own interest. Clearly, hearing from the people would help government make better decisions.

However, current systems for giving the people a voice are not adequate.

Telephone calls, emails and letters to Congress, or the handful of people who are most vocal at town hall meetings, do not provide a reliable impression of public opinion. Too often these inputs are generated by organized interests, or extreme voices that are not truly representative. Standard polls too often elicit off-the-cuff responses that can be based on a lack of information or misinformation.

Most citizens do not have the means to effectively engage on the issues. Lots of information is available to the public, but much of it is raw, overly complex, or biased. There is no honest broker that integrates and packages information in a way most people can digest -- clarifying the options, tradeoffs, and competing arguments -- on the policy options Congress is actually considering.

Thus, organized interests are able to dominate the discussion, leaving 'We the People' marginalized and our nation's problems unaddressed.

We Need a Fundamentally New System for Giving the People a More Effective Voice

The Solution: Create a Citizen Cabinet, Inform and Engage the People

VOP seeks to give the American people a greater voice by:

Working with Congress to establish a national Citizen Cabinet, a large standing panel comprised of a representative sample of the American public, to be consulted on current issues, using new online interactive tools to give voice to the people on an unprecedented scale; and

Making these same online resources available to all Americans, so they can get better informed and more effectively communicate their views to their representatives.

How the Citizen Cabinet Will Work

The Citizen Cabinet will be comprised of 275 citizens in every congressional district—120,000 nationwide—scientifically selected to accurately reflect the American people, and connected through an online interface. Each Citizen Cabinet member will serve for 9-12 months, and Internet access will be provided to those who do not already have it, to make sure the entire population is represented.

On a regular basis, members of the Citizen Cabinet will go through an online public consultation on a pressing issue facing the federal government. For each issue, Citizen Cabinet members will:

Get Briefed: Get unbiased background information reviewed by experts and congressional staff from both parties;

Weigh the Arguments: Learn about the policy options that are actually on the table and evaluate the pro and con arguments; and

Make Choices: Choose from a menu of policy options, or go through a more in-depth process that requires making trade-offs (e.g. creating a budget).

Finally, the Citizen Cabinet's recommendations will be broken down by state and congressional district, and reported to each Member of Congress, the President, the news media and the public.

The Citizen Cabinet will be managed, with bipartisan oversight, by a new National Academy for Public Consultation. All of the materials presented to the Citizen Cabinet—the briefing, competing arguments, and policy options—will be vetted by a bipartisan group of experts and available online for anyone to see.

Inviting All Citizens to Get Informed and Engaged

While members of the Citizen Cabinet would be scientifically selected to be a representative sample of the public, VOP seeks to give *all Americans* the opportunity to use these same online interactive tools--getting briefed, weighing competing arguments and coming to conclusions on key policy options. We will also make these tools available to schools, community groups and other organizations.

Citizens will be able to better engage and make more effective recommendations to their representatives, as their input will be more informed and focused on the actual policy choices and tradeoffs Congress is facing.

Americans Support the Citizen Cabinet and Believe it Will Help Government Work Better

An overwhelming majority of Americans support a Citizen Cabinet and believe it will improve the way our government works. They believe if there were a Citizen Cabinet, government would be more likely to:

Show common sense;

Move beyond polarization and gridlock;

Find common ground and resolve political conflicts; and

Serve the common good, rather than special interests.

Using New Technology to Fulfill the Founders' Vision

While the advanced methods and technology we are proposing were not available to the Founders, the Citizen Cabinet model embodies the Founders' vision for our nation. The first three words of the constitution "*We the People*" clarify the Founders' belief that government should be guided by what they called "the sense of the people." By this, they did not mean the people's passions and misinformation; rather, as Alexander Hamilton said, "the calm and deliberate sense of the community...should govern." This is just the kind of sensibility that the Citizen Cabinet process will elicit, and is likely to foster the more civil and reasoned discourse the Founders intended.

How Congress Will Benefit from a Citizen Cabinet

The Citizen Cabinet will:

Give Members of Congress an accurate and objective understanding of their constituents' views, rather than relying on the unreliable impressions they get from town hall meetings, letters and phone calls;

Provide higher-quality input from a better informed public—giving input directly focused on the actual policy choices Members of Congress are facing and helping to counter misinformation;

Help Congress move through polarization and gridlock by giving voice to a public that is not as polarized as the forces that drive our current political climate;

Provide Members of Congress reinforcement for making tough choices--allowing them to counter pressures and do what they believe is right; and

Help restore confidence in government by creating a highly visible forum in which government leaders are demonstrably listening to the people, setting a new model and tone for the relationship between the people and their government.

As the Citizen Cabinet helps get things done and restores public confidence, Members of Congress and their staffs will find their government service more rewarding.

Next Steps - Making it Happen

VOP is working to get Congress to formally establish a national Citizen Cabinet and is engaging citizens, current and former policymakers and other leaders at the national, state and local levels to join with us in this effort.

At the same time, VOP is proceeding to create interim Citizen Cabinets in a limited number of states and congressional districts across the country, to demonstrate the power and effectiveness of this new breakthrough. It will also continue to conduct other consultations on current policy issues at the national level. VOP is actively seeking contributions from individuals and foundations to support these efforts.

“A government ought to [be]... free from every other control but a regard to the public good and the sense of the people.” -- Alexander Hamilton.