



The Case for a Citizen Cabinet

Voice Of the People is launching a state-of-the-art campaign to pass legislation establishing a national Citizen Cabinet: a new system to tap the common sense of the American people and give it a greater voice in government decisions.

The Crisis: The American people believe, and our leaders agree, our democratic system isn't working the way it should.

The American democratic system today is in crisis. Polls show that overwhelming majorities of Americans share the perception that the system isn't working because of all the fighting and gridlock. Americans see a government so polarized that it cannot perform its most basic functions such as making a budget, much less solve other major problems. Brinkmanship has become almost standard operating procedure.

Public confidence in government has reached historic lows. Most Americans perceive government as failing to act with common sense, failing to find common ground and failing to serve the common good.

Leaders on both sides of the aisle agree. They regularly bemoan how the government is broken and gridlocked. Exasperated, some Members of Congress are choosing not to run again.

There's something wrong with our politics that we need to fix.

- President Barack Obama

Washington is broken.

- Governor Mitt Romney

We are in a gridlock.

- Senator John McCain

The People's Demand: Re-anchor American democracy in its founding principles by giving 'We the People' a greater voice.

So what can be done to move beyond the gridlock of the American system today? What force in American society has the legitimacy to break the logjam? An overwhelming majority of Americans say that what is crucial is that the people should play a more influential role in government decisions.

The first three words of the Constitution "We the People" clarify how the nation's Founders saw the will of the people as the foundation of the Republic. While they favored a representative democracy, they believed government should be guided by the common sense of the people. As Alexander Hamilton said, "A government ought to [be]... free from every other control but a regard to the public good and the sense of the people."

Americans believe that elections are not enough—that elected leaders should consult the people on an ongoing basis as they make decisions. Most significant, 4 in 5 believe that if the people had more influence, the government would more effectively serve the common good.

The Opportunity: Upgrading democracy using 21st Century tools to give the people a voice.

Fortunately, new tools have been developed to consult the people--tools that were not available when the Founders established the American system. These include:

- the scientific methods used in survey research, by which a representative sample is carefully selected to be a microcosm that reliably reflects the views of the whole population;
- the Internet, which provides the ability for large numbers of citizens to efficiently *receive* information and to respond.

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- advanced survey methods that go beyond standard polls, which can elicit responses that may be only superficially considered or based on misinformation. Rather, respondents are given enough information, and an opportunity to evaluate key arguments on all sides of an issue so that the conclusions they come to truly reflect their values. This also opens up the possibility of exploring policy issues on which respondents are not well enough informed to have a formed opinion.

These are the types of deliberative tools that can now be used to give “We the People” a greater say and help move past the polarization that has plagued the Congress.

The Plan: Create a national Citizen Cabinet—a scientifically selected sample of 100,000 Americans connected by the Internet—to advise the government.

A new proposal has been developed at the University of Maryland that draws on these new tools to allow government leaders to consult the common sense of the people, especially on issues that have been difficult to resolve. Elected officials often have a ‘kitchen cabinet’ made up of various experts, industry and community leaders to act as informal policy advisors. The idea is to now have a Citizen Cabinet to enable the people to advise their elected officials.

The Citizen Cabinet will be operated by a new National Academy for Public Consultation, with a bipartisan oversight board of prominent leaders in government and academia. Here is how it will work:

The Academy scientifically selects at least 250 Americans from each congressional district—over 100,000 for the whole country—to accurately mirror the population in each district and State, as well as the country as a whole. They are invited to be a member of the Citizen Cabinet for nine months. Internet access is provided to those who do not already have it.

On a regular basis, members of the Citizen Cabinet receive information about a current issue facing the federal government—primarily over the Internet, but in some cases through in-person assemblies with discussion groups. They are presented the full range of arguments on all sides of the issue.

Finally, they are presented a broad spectrum of policy options and asked to make their recommendations. These recommendations are then summed up and reported to Members of Congress, the President, the news media and the public. They are also broken out so that members of Congress and their constituents can get a report on the views in their district or State. Everything is publicly available online. Running such a national Citizen Cabinet would cost no more than 25 cents per taxpayer per year.

Americans overwhelmingly support creation of a Citizen Cabinet

In a recent poll, the design of a Citizen Cabinet was explained to a representative sample of Americans:

- 75% favored it including 73% of Republicans, 82% of Democrats and 68% of independents. Support was overwhelming despite the fact that they were told that it would cost up to a dollar per taxpayer per year (a number in excess of what is actually needed).
- Asked if they would be willing to make the time commitment to participate in the Citizen Cabinet, 78% said they would. Two-thirds said they would be willing to take active steps to promote it.

About Us

Voice Of the People’s Campaign for a Citizen Cabinet has a bipartisan advisory board of former elected officials and other leaders across the political spectrum. Founder and President, Steven Kull, is a prominent public opinion expert who has worked for two decades with U.S. government policymakers to facilitate their understanding of the views of the American people. He is director of the Program for Public Consultation, a joint program of the Center on Policy Attitudes and the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland. Executive Director, Richard Parsons, is a seasoned public affairs professional with more than 25 years of public policy experience, both inside and outside of government.