

# Building the Civic Community in Geopolitically Fragmented Communities

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## Abstract

A constant challenge for every community is to engage residents in the civic life of the community. The challenge is particularly acute in rural environments where geopolitical fragmentation (counties divided into multiple governmental units) often provides barriers to meaningful civic engagement and in urban areas where socioeconomic fragmentation and social anonymity isolate residents from meaningful civic interaction. The program “What Makes This Community Tick?” offers extension educators a good model to draw citizens into the civic life of their communities.

## Introduction

**E**ngaged and informed citizens serve as key indicators of the civic health of a community. An informed, interested citizenry provides the legitimacy and support necessary for effective implementation of any policy under consideration. All too often, we see the disastrous consequence of attempting to engage citizens only after crucial policy decisions have been made. In too many cases, the community must endure a protracted and divisive battle over a policy formed without genuine citizen input.

Against this backdrop, public leaders face the daunting challenge of finding ways to engage citizens in the civic life of their communities. At the heart of the problem is the disconnect that exists between citizens and their government. In rural areas, this disconnect is amplified by geopolitical fragmentation (counties divided into multiple governmental units) that can serve as a barrier to meaningful civic interaction.

One approach to increasing civic engagement is to increase community residents knowledge and understanding of the structure, functions, and operations of their local governments. “What Makes Putnam County Tick?” is a program designed to engage community residents from a rural Ohio county in a structured learning/dialogue program with officials from different local governments. It is modeled after similar programs that have been popular for two decades. Participants in this program are introduced to six different aspects of their community that make it a very “special place.” Each of seven two-hour sessions is led by one or more local officials

who have responsibility for the functions and operations being discussed. The unique features of the program include:

- The design and selection of the program development committee
- The development of a uniform guide for presenters
- The pre- and post-program evaluation data
- Identification of opportunities for residents to participate in the processes and decisions of local government
- A discussion of the hot topics or routine issues that are a part of the community agenda or policy environment.

Without active programs designed to engage citizens in learning about their government, many local residents will continue to sit on the sidelines and be only spectators in the life of their community. “What Makes This Community Tick?” offers educators a valuable opportunity to draw citizens into the civic life of their communities and in the process discover what makes their community special and worth their efforts.

### Citizen Disconnect

Public opinion polls over the last two decades indicate a fundamental disconnect between citizens and government. This disconnect, combined with the intense desire on the part of citizens to be a vital part of the governing process, results in a high level of frustration with government. Complicating this situation further is the complexity of our government. Overlapping jurisdictions and multiple layers of government with blurred lines of responsibility combine to make government, particularly local government, difficult for citizens to understand, let alone participate in fully.

Box (1998), King and Stivers (1998), Skocpol and Fiorinia (1999), Schachter (1997), and Chrislip and Larson (1994) have all examined the phenomena of citizen disconnect from their government and civic life. All agree, that citizen disconnect from government and public life is real and it is damaging to our communities. The report of the Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement (2000) summed up this trend, saying, “By virtually every measure, today’s Americans are more disconnected from one another and from the institutions of civic life than at any time since statistics have been kept.” Voting rates, which often serve as an indicator of citizen disconnect from government, have dropped by 25 percent since the mid-1960s. Voting is not the only civic activity that indicates a decline in participation, however. Other indicators of citizen disconnect include a decline in

attendance at political rallies and public meetings, influencing others to vote, advocating for issues, joining and holding office in civic organizations, writing letters to public officials, and newspaper readership (*Better Together* 2000, 5). Does this disconnect mean that citizens are indifferent to public decision-making processes? Box asserts that citizens are not indifferent and that evidence suggests that “many Americans are exhibiting a desire to move back toward the active end of this continuum after several decades of living at the passive end” (1998, 19).

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If Americans are not indifferent to the civic life of their communities, how can we account for the lack of participation in public life? It can be argued that nonparticipation is a rational response to political reality. Often participation costs more than the perceived benefits accrued from that participation. Participation carries its own set of costs to the individual.

These costs include a commitment of time for meetings, learning about issues, letter writing, and advocating for issues. Other costs include learning about political processes, bureaucratic rules, and how government departments are structured. Additionally, many civic activities demand a level of knowledge that assumes education in or experience with the governing process. Our communities need active, informed citizens to help shape public decisions. In attempting to increase the rate of citizen participation, it is important to understand why citizens do not participate. Public leaders can then devise effective strategies for increased citizen participation. Putnam suggested that we create an effective, fully functioning society through the formation of social capital. He defined social capital as “features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (1993, 1). As he points out, social capital is a by-product of successful, repeated, social interactions; regular interactions based on trust are a precondition for the development of social capital and civic societies or fully functioning, effective communities. Reich elaborates on this concept of community, saying, “Every society possesses a social compact—sometimes

implicit, sometimes spelled out in detail, but usually a mix of both. The compact sets out the obligations of members of that society toward one another. Indeed, its social compact defines a society or culture. It is found within the pronouns ‘we,’ ‘our,’ and ‘us’” (1998, 3). Or as Chrislip and Larson pointed out, “they [citizens] want a sense of community—a sense that all of us are in this together” (1994, 5).

### Participation in Local Governing Processes

With local government as the focal point, Box linked the philosophical underpinnings of the current discussions about the role of citizens in public life to our past, pointing out, “As people turn their attention toward their communities, they return to values that come from the history of community governance” (1998, 3). The core values of community governance are derived from the local control of public policy formation done with the assistance of a small and responsive government and a public manager functioning as an adviser. Box contends that the focus increasingly is on public business done at the local level; the level that is increasingly required to deal with issues that are more complex and issues that most closely affect the lives of citizens (1998, 3). Reich also advocated a focus on the local level of government, stating, “the real job of re-knitting the social fabric has to begin where the threads start. That means getting more people involved in the gritty grimy job of politics starting at the local level . . .” (1998, 7). According to Putnam, a successful community, characterized by high levels of citizen participation in their local government and public affairs, is dependent on social capital formation. Briggs introduces another facet of the value of social capital formation, stating, “Social capital is used for social leverage, that is, to change or improve our life circumstances or ‘opportunity set’” (1997, 112).

We believe that the time to fix the social compact is not during a crisis. Rather, it should be done during calm periods *through a process that increases public knowledge about the operations and functions of local government*. An informed citizenry effectively engaged in public life is one indicator of an effective system of governance. Lack of resources or capacity prove to be significant barriers to full participation in the governmental process on the part of citizens. Indeed, we contend that a lack of knowledge of local government is a fundamental impediment to citizens’ participation in their governmental decision-making processes. The capacity building should not place the burden on citizens to fix the

structures that impede authentic participation. Lappe and DuBois assert, “Social capital cannot be built by scolding citizens to carry the burden of democracy—to care more, to volunteer more; to be more civil. It can best be built as we respond to citizens’ legitimate anger at their exclusion from public decision making and begin to work in all dimensions of public life to build citizens’ capacities to create the society they want” (1997, 128).

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Local governments are called upon to tackle more complex issues than ever before. Effective policy implementation depends increasingly on correct problem definition, program design, and implementation. Citizen input is needed at each of these stages of policy development. It therefore becomes vital to broaden the concept of citizenship from consumers of government services to that of responsible partners in the policy formation process. It is important to consider that citizens are more than voters and local government officials cannot rely on voting as the sole source of legitimacy for local government initiatives. Increasingly, government officials must seek partnerships with citizens in order to enjoy the confidence of citizens and for program implementation.

There is really no accepted model for encouraging and nurturing effective citizen participation in public decision-making processes. This paper focuses on one means to remove one significant barrier to participation: knowledge of local government officials and processes. This capacity building further seeks to overcome the obstacle of geopolitical fragmentation. Geopolitical fragmentation refers to the presence of many government jurisdictions contained in one area. These governmental jurisdictions often have overlapping or unclear program boundaries, missions, and responsibilities.

The “What Makes This Community Tick?” program is a capacity-building program that helps build a bridge between citizens and government. It is one technique that can develop social capital through the sharing of knowledge and building of trust. It helps communities by giving citizens the opportunity to learn about their government.

The issue of the cost of participation is significant and important for us to understand if we are to build social capital in our communities. The “Ticks” program is an investment in social capital formation that can produce impressive results that will make a community function better. However, as Creighton reminded us, “There is really little question that public involvement increases the cost of decision making and is time-consuming. The costs of public involvement are at least in part the costs of beginning to establish a new social consensus” (1981, 20).

From the Saguaro Seminar the authors note that: “We need not only more civic engagement, but also better civic engagement. Every institution must make building social capital a principal goal or core value” (2000, 5). One of the crucial components of social capital formation leading to increased and high-quality civic engage-

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*“One of the crucial components of social capital formation . . . is effective visionary community leadership.”*

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ment is effective visionary community leadership. The concept of collaborative leadership has emerged in public administration literature in the last two decades. Leaders are expected to reach goals using a collaborative process that allows for authentic participation by a cross-section of the affected community of interests. This type of leadership is vital to social capital formation since “Trust and understanding require ties among disparate groups and individuals, built up over time, probably with stutter steps and often with visible leadership by (at least) a committed few” (Briggs 1997, 112–13).

### Role of Extension in Civic Education

The cooperative extension system has a long history of providing civic education/outreach programs. This has come mostly in the form of public issues education and in developing or assisting with processes to educate and facilitate meetings. Extension, by its primary mission of empowerment and use of education for decision making, is a natural vehicle for civic education and plays an important role of filling the void left by inadequate attention to civic education in the K-12 educational complex. Cooperative extension became involved in community issues education shortly after its official formation in 1914. As Rasmussen (1989, 191) notes:

From its very beginning, the Extension Service had an opportunity to work in communities. The House Committee on Agriculture, in its report on the Smith-Lever bill, stated that the [Extension Agent] for each county “must give leadership and direction along all lines of rural activity—social, economic and financial.” Several relevant steps were taken, mainly by state Extension services. A 1915 publication, *Community Development: Making the Small Town a Better Place to Live and a Better Place in Which to Do Business*, was one of the first . . . added [to emphasize civic education and participation programs].

Many extension agents have developed public leadership programs to give emerging community leaders new skills and knowledge and to assist in the development of a better understanding of public issues and policies. Extension’s youth leadership program, 4-H, has developed a local government project to help youth understand the workings of government. Ohio State University Extension continues to provide outreach in civic education through agents in all eighty-eight counties, a cadre of state and regional specialists, and a special public issues team that focuses on key current and emerging issues.

### Education and Democratic Governance

Philosophers and scholars have long recognized the importance and value of education as a primary force to support and sustain a democratic polity (Aristotle 1962; Mayo 1970). Lipset observes that: “an entire philosophy of government has seen increased education as the basic requirement of democracy” (1963, 39). Historically, educational institutions have been the primary source of civic education. Educational institutions, especially higher education institutions, serve as the center “in America where ideas are supposed to be taken seriously as ends in themselves; where . . . ‘theory’ or ‘thought’ is a legitimate enterprise” (Schwartz 1976, 4). Suzanne W. Morse suggests that we need to “build the loom” of new patterns of civic interaction. She states: “There are capacities that exist in every community that hold strong potential for building new patterns of interaction that can renew our sense of responsibility and commitment to each other” (1996, 2).

Certainly one of the important challenges for any local community is to develop and nurture a “sense of community.” From several decades of studies of voting behavior and political socialization



one conclusion is that the structure of democratic cognitions, which would include a sense of community, is characterized by attitudinal fragmentation. Most voting studies refer to the multiple identities that each voter carries into the political decision-making process. When it comes to developing a “sense of community,” voters’ attitudes are often shaped by the geopolitical fragmentation that framed their attitudes during the early years of political socialization. Specifically the reference points for political decision making often center on a village, a small community, or a local public school district. In rural communities, school attendance zones or school districts create especially strong reference and focal points for social interaction. They provide a foundation for later political references, and create the primary basis for a “sense of community.” This geopolitical fragmentation often creates a barrier to broader cooperative problem solving and decision making on issues that encompass the entire county.

Our educational program is designed to address *the problems of geopolitical fragmentation* by bringing together residents from townships and villages into a single educational program that focuses on the larger community—the county. The program exposes participants to the structure and operations of the various layers of government within “the community,” “the county,” and provides an opportunity to discuss common problems and concerns. The primary objective of the program is to lay the foundation for an enlarged sense of community, “the county” that can more effectively address issues that transcend more narrowly defined, highly fragmented geopolitical entities that were creations of historical circumstances where transportation and technology favored such arrangements. The participants for the program were recruited from across the multiple jurisdictions of Putnam County, Ohio.

### Profile of Putnam County

Putnam County is a rural county located in Northwest Ohio. With a population of 35,000, it is one of the least populated counties in the state. The Village of Ottawa is the largest city, with a population of 4,500. One of the most interesting variables in looking at Putnam from a policy formation and programming standpoint is the number of local government units. There are more units of government in Putnam County than of other counties of comparable population in Ohio.



Putnam County Governments			
County	1	Cities	1
Villages	15	Townships	15
School Districts	19		

### Customizing the Program

The “Ticks” program was adapted from other programs that were designed to provide a broader focus on government programs and community issues. However, the local program planning committee decided to customize this program for Putnam County and focus on offices and functions within local governments serving the county. One of the most important tools developed by the committee was the “Speaker’s Guideline.” The committee decided that it would be necessary to structure each presentation so that the information given was consistent and to help level the playing field between speakers. The steering committee did not want the workshop to turn into a campaign platform for very expressive speakers who might use the opportunity to seek votes since the workshop was taking place during a primary election period. Thus, we designed a speaker’s guideline that outlined our expectations for each presentation.

Another adjustment this committee made to the generic model was to organize the program by level of government rather than by function of government. We began the workshop with the county level of government and then proceeded to cities, townships and school districts. This organization focused on the government offices that had the most impact on citizens’ lives. Within the county level of government, we organized the speakers, as much as was possible, according to function. Additionally, we tried to group speakers whose functions required cooperation and coordination. For example, we grouped the auditor and treasurer together in one session since their jobs intertwine.

### Results of the Program

**Impact on Participants:** The impact of this program on its participants was measured through a post-workshop evaluation. Each participant was asked to complete a six-page evaluation. Although this is a long evaluation form, the participants were accustomed to this type of evaluation and cooperated fully with the request. Participants were to answer a series of questions about their knowledge of selected items before and after attending this workshop. The

evaluation also contained a section of open-ended questions, designed to take advantage of the collective wisdom of this particular group.

The results of the evaluation were processed using the Statistical Program for Social Science and clearly show that participants gained knowledge from this program. A statistical comparison of the mean of each pair of questions measuring the level of knowledge before and after the program shows a significant increase. For example, the mean of knowledge of Putnam County before was 3.1 and knowledge after was 4.42.

This evaluation also was designed to gauge subsequent behavioral changes. Participants were asked to determine how likely they were to change selected behaviors. Again, the results demonstrate a willingness to change behavior as a result of attending this program. For example, 75 percent of respondents indicated that they planned to assume a leadership role in the community. (Data furnished upon request.)

***Program Benefits:*** The benefits of this program include:

- Helps public officials explain their jobs to citizens without risk, in a safe environment;
- Removes barriers to citizen involvement in their communities since it shifts the costs of informing citizens and seeking their input away from public officials onto extension educators;
- Shifts logistical costs to extension educators, who can provide a structure, develop parameters for discussions, and bear the costs involved with staging public events, which include:
  - ✧ Arranging for meeting locations
  - ✧ Coordinating schedules
  - ✧ Structuring talks and ensuing discussions
  - ✧ Ensuring a safe, comfortable environment that is conducive to an open civil exchange between citizens and their public representative.

## **Recommendations**

The primary recommendation is to form a strong and representative steering committee of knowledgeable individuals who will be fully committed to this type of programming. Steering committees can be a source of wisdom about community needs and bring diversity to the process that would otherwise be absent.

If possible, exiting community leaders should be the target for the first run of this program. This group will most likely connect with the foundational concepts of the program and be very receptive.

Additionally, they are the most effective advertising for future offerings. Our group has already marketed future offerings of this program to their colleagues.

Allow at least three months to design, implement, and market this program. The marketing strategy should not rely solely upon print methods such as newsletters. The most effective marketing tool used for this program was one-on-one recruiting.

Finally, develop a strong evaluation tool as the first step of program planning. This type of planning provides a strong theoretical base on which to build a program. It also structures the program around specific goals. Additionally, through a carefully designed evaluation process, it is possible to clearly demonstrate the impact of the program. Evaluation takes time, and this time must be built into the program schedule.

## Conclusion

The legitimacy, credibility, and accountability of a government's officials and their public decisions are totally dependent on the faith of its citizens. This faith must be built on a foundation of knowledge and connectedness with government. The "What Makes this Community Tick?" program can help citizens in a community begin the process of connecting to their local government. An engaged, informed citizenry provides the quality leadership that will help ensure a highly functioning community.

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