

Sirianni, C. (2009). *Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

### Review by Lionel J. Beaulieu

By watching cable news networks, listening to radio talk shows, and reading national surveys of adult residents, one could easily conclude that Americans are becoming increasingly disillusioned about key decisions being made in the chambers of U.S. Congress or in state capitals across the nation. Certainly, the emergence of the Tea Party movement, with its anti-government rhetoric and fiscal conservatism platforms, has struck a favorable chord with a growing number of Americans. It could be argued that such a movement is a visible symbol of an increasing desire by citizens to be heard on decisions having direct bearing on their economic and social well-being. So, does the Tea Party movement signal a rebirth of civic activeness in the United States?

If a recent national survey is correct, the answer is an unqualified “no.” Released by the National Conference on Citizenship in 2009, the study finds that investments by individuals in the civic health of their communities is waning, a finding that is consistent with those reported by Putnam (2000, 2007), Barker and Brown (2009), and Skocpol (2002). The National Conference on Citizenship (2009) report concludes that Americans are suffering from “civic foreclosure”—a propensity to disinvest time and resources in community-minded organizations, or in activities that are intended to improve local conditions.

In light of the ongoing debate regarding the civic strength of communities, it is welcome news to find a recently published volume that seeks to create a culture of civic involvement in a variety of government-led and community-based venues. Written by Carmen Sirianni, *Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance* embraces the central premise that “the vitality of our democracy ultimately depends on our willingness and ability to find productive ways of working together as citizens and stakeholders of our republic, despite our many differences” (p. x). In Sirianni’s view, the spark for promoting substantive and meaningful roles for citizens in problem-solving and policy activities is government—be it at the local, state, or federal level.

Certainly, the belief that government should be the key catalyst for promoting an active citizenry could be easily dismissed by those who are disenchanted with the current performance of government leaders. Sirianni, however, offers a compelling argument regarding the necessity of government operating as the centerpiece of efforts

to spur a civic renewal in our nation. As he states in Chapter 1, despite the good intentions of community-minded associations and philanthropic organizations, these entities lack the staying power, the long-term commitment, and the level of resources needed to create a milieu in which civic democracy emerges as the cultural fabric of local and extralocal initiatives. It is strategic investments by government, he argues, that offer the best hope of revitalizing the civic infrastructure, and of advancing the capacity of a diverse and broad-based corps of citizens to solve the tough, complex, public problems facing our communities and nation.

In Chapter 2 Sirianni articulates the eight core principles of collaborative governance, elements that “empower, enlighten, and engage citizens in the process of self-government.” Using observations from his own empirical research and that of several others, Sirianni makes clear that a vibrant civic democracy does not require the presence of all eight elements. Rather, it depends on employing the right mix of principles that best fit the context and the unique policy problems being addressed.

Sirianni advances eight elements as the nucleus of collaborative governance and policy design.

1. *Coproduce public goods*: Policies should be the product of ordinary citizens working in tandem with public servants and other professionals on the development of such policies.
2. *Mobilize community assets*: The talent, skills, and resources of people and groups needed to solve problems are present in the community already, but are too often overlooked, unrecognized, or unappreciated; taking the time to identify and mobilize these underutilized assets is crucial.
3. *Share professional expertise*: Individuals serving in public administrative or other professional roles should empower citizens to be key actors in problem solving and should embrace the knowledge that citizens bring to the table.
4. *Enable public deliberation*: Involvement of a wide array of people in a careful and reasoned examination of tough issues should be promoted via the use of deliberative or study circles approaches; elected officials and public administrators can benefit from the unique

insights and perspectives generated by the public as a product of these activities.

5. *Promote sustainable partnerships:* Establish ties with individuals, organizations, and other stakeholders to build trusting relationships and establish important partnerships; work together to promote better policy activities and outcomes.
6. *Build fields and governance networks strategically:* Government should seek to broaden the sets of players who can work in a complementary fashion to solve complex public problems.
7. *Transform institutional cultures:* The mindset of institutions and organizations should be modified to ensure that citizens are embraced as full partners and coproducers of strategies for solving problems.
8. *Ensure reciprocal accountability:* The full spectrum of actors—stakeholders, elected officials, public administrators, and ordinary citizens—should promote collaboration and mutual accountability for actions designed to tackle key issues.

The most impressive aspect of Sirianni's treatment of these eight principles is the way he draws from a wide array of theoretical and empirical studies to shape them. Among the research literature he taps is the social capital framework proposed by Putnam (especially the focus on the bridging components of social capital), the asset-based community development concepts advanced by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) as well as the public deliberative process advocated by the Kettering Foundation (<http://www.kettering.org>), and Everyday Democracy (<http://www.everyday-democracy.org>).

The next three chapters in *Investing in Democracy* detail case studies, with Chapter 3 giving focus to neighborhood empowerment in Seattle, Washington; Chapter 4 to youth civic engagement in Hampton, Virginia; and Chapter 5 to efforts by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to carry out its role as a civic enabler. These chapters document the unique manner in which the eight core principles detailed in Chapter 2 have played out in these three settings. Chapter 3 offers a fascinating portrayal of Seattle's efforts to invest in civic work in more than a dozen neighborhoods. Sirianni paints a detailed picture of the major advances by the city to give voice to a broad array of people and localities,

and the setbacks that occur when a new wave of local government leaders, with less passion for collaborative governance, takes office. He discusses the creation of the Department of Neighborhoods, the establishment of district councils, the launching of a neighborhood matching fund, the establishment of community gardens, the role of neighborhoods in developing the city's comprehensive plan, the funneling of resources to neighborhoods to help implement aspects of that plan, and efforts by city government to strengthen the decision-making capacity of neighborhood residents. As Sirianni notes, "Seattle's neighborhood system of district councils, matching funds, community gardens, and neighborhood planning embodies the core principles of civic policy design" (p. 106).

Equally impressive are the efforts undertaken by Hampton, Virginia, to develop a milieu where youth are seen as legitimate actors in community improvement activities (showcased in Chapter 4). For nearly two decades, Hampton has had the goal of empowering local youth. Sirianni does a superb job of depicting the range of activities undertaken by the community in its quest to create a vibrant "youth civic engagement system." He describes the impressive array of actions that young people have spearheaded as members of the Hampton Youth Commission, as partners with the local planning department, and as members of the superintendent's and principals' youth advisory committees. Critical to the success of these efforts has been the belief held by local government officials, school leaders, civic groups, and nonprofit organizations that youth are their "partners, co-producers, and stakeholders."

The final case study (Chapter 5) examines efforts by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to transform itself from a "command and control" entity to a "community-based environmental protection" agency. In this chapter, Sirianni showcases the efforts by the EPA to spur citizens and local communities to play central roles in the development of watershed conservation and management plans, and in guiding the Superfund and environmental justice programs. Sirianni comments that the "EPA has invested strategically to ensure that citizens and civic groups have an ample toolbox appropriate to the task at hand, not just the regulatory hammers . . . but also the civic levers and linchpins, the clamps and the couplings; not just the hardware but also the software to enhance civic and professional intelligence for collaborative work" (p. 165). As the author makes clear, such a transformation is not simply a matter of encouraging local people and groups to have a voice on important environmental issues; it is also necessary to give

them the understanding and skills needed to engage in collaborative governance with the EPA.

Sirianni outlines the ups and downs associated with the EPA's efforts to serve as a civic enabler. This is both the strength and weakness of this chapter. Given the complexity of the EPA's programs and activities, as well as the number of administrative players, staff members, and working groups, the reader can easily lose sight of the central points that Sirianni seeks to convey. Thus Sirianni's penchant for detail obfuscates his key message about the diversity of the EPA's civic work.

Sirianni's final chapter affirms his belief that government can serve as the principal enabler of effective civic problem solving and engagement. He proposes three federal government initiatives that are needed to revitalize our democracy: (1) establish a White House Office of Collaborative Governance, an office that promotes the development and effective implementation of a civic mission within all federal agencies; (2) implement, via executive order of the president of the United States, the requirement that all federal departments and agencies develop a civic mission and take steps to implement such a mission; and (3) expand investment in the Corporation of National and Community Service so that it can work in tandem with federal departments and agencies to implement their civic missions, goals, and strategies. As he asserts, the crisis of democracy cannot be stemmed or reversed without government as a critical partner.

Although Sirianni is sincere in his belief that the three macro-level strategies he outlines in Chapter 6 can reverse the unhealthy state of America's civic activeness, I wonder if such strategies can have much impact on the civic vitality of our nation. In my humble opinion, the seeds of civic capacity are more likely to bear fruit when they are planted, cultivated, and nourished at the local level—in the urban, suburban, and rural communities that dot the landscape of our nation. Sirianni's final chapter gives limited attention to the front lines of civic engagement: efforts by local governments and communities to promote collaborative governance. It is an unfortunate shortcoming of an otherwise excellent volume.

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