Summary Comments: Plenary Discussion
“Civic Engagement in the 21st Century,”
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Juliet Musso
University of Southern California
musso@usc.edu

Juliet Musso is Associate Professor of Public Policy and a principal investigator of the Neighborhood Participation Project, where she leads research on the evaluation of the Los Angeles neighborhood council system. Professor Musso has expertise in urban policy and federalism, with specific research interests in community governance, intergovernmental fiscal policy, and local institutional reform. She has written on the political economy of municipal incorporation, and currently is researching the development of neighborhood councils in Los Angeles. Other research topics include local government use of advanced telecommunications technologies to improve participation and service delivery, and intergovernmental fiscal relations in California. Professor Musso has extensive professional experience in policy analysis, including work for the California Legislative Analyst's Office and for the United States Office of Management and Budget. Dr. Musso holds a Ph.D. in public policy from the University of California, Berkeley.
The comments made at the plenary discussion centered around three themes: (1) the need to understand the problems/issues emerging with respect to democratic practices in global cities; (2) a call for systematic interdisciplinary research into institutions and practices of civic engagement; and (3) a broader set of questions about the implications of research for a “praxis of citizenship” in the 21st century.

Understanding the “problem” and developing shared values. A number of scholars at the conference pointed toward particular problems or failings with democratic practices. Harry Boyte expressed general concern that American public policies and institutions erode democratic practices, while Jeffrey Berry argued that 501C3 non-profit organizations have a chilling effect on political involvement on the part of constituents. Dan Yankelovich pointed to what he called a “will/skill” deficit on the part of citizens, many of whom have neither the motivation nor the expertise to address a mounting number of gridlock issues. Others focused on issues around lack of information, issues of authenticity that arise in “denatured” institutions for deliberation, or clashes of culture that may lead to misunderstanding or alienation within civic organizations. There are also broad issues of justice that thread through the critique given the challenges of getting diverse citizens involved in democratic practices and class- and culture-based biases in many of the institutions of democracy. From these notions of the problem a useful next step is to develop a set of shared values that can function to cement relationships in a network of scholars interested in promoting democracy.

Interdisciplinary research on institutions and practices. Many of the conference papers and much of the plenary discussion considered the emergence of new forms of civic institutions and democratic practices. (Schudson, Fung, Anderson, Cramer Walsh, Lichterman, Eliasoph) These include formal (rule-based) institutions as well as informal institutions (cultural practices). There is a diverse array of places, spaces, and sites for engagement, which in turn may influence the political practices and civic interactions associated with them (representative; aggregative; integrative; dialogic; everyday politics). Some of these practices may be state-centered; others may be centered in the civic sphere, again with implications for the nature of discourse and for the way individuals understand their roles as civic actors.

It is important to identify innovative models for engagement, and to consider how one might compare across these various forms and understand them in cultural context. In this context it is particularly important to develop the theory/praxis linkage. What practices and institutional innovations are “models?” How can one develop teaching innovations in civic education and public policy and administration curricula that lead to less denatured and livelier learning around democracy and governance?

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School of Policy, Planning, and Development
von KleinSmid Center 372 • Los Angeles, CA 90089-0626
213.821.3181 • www.usc.edu/sppd/cei
It was agreed that it was particularly important to understand the influence of the media and emerging communication technologies on evolving institutions and civic practices.

Effective comparative research on institutions and practices of civic engagement needs to be interdisciplinary and multi-methodological. There is a need to avoid disciplinary balkanization and understand how a variety of disciplines—sociology, political science, law, public policy and administration, planning and education may contribute to our understanding. This interdisciplinary research needs to be networked and dialogic; it needs to practice what it is preaching and it needs to do and learn by acting. It should be transnational and comparative. An array of methodological approaches can provide complementary lenses: ethnography, action research, qualitative analysis, network analysis, and survey research.

*Implications for citizenship.* People also raised a number of broader philosophical implications of research on civic engagement for the meaning and understanding of citizenship in global cities. These include questions about what constitutes citizenship and civic engagement; understanding how citizens attach meaning to their actions; illuminating the roles of attitudes, emotions, and beliefs in sustaining involvement and informing actors’ political choices. There are also questions about new actors. How should reforms structure civic institutions to include a more diverse array of groups and to build citizenship among new arrivals? A related question is how to understand the manner in which people are incorporated into democratic institutions: who is doing the incorporation and what does that mean for those who are incorporated? There is a need to develop education and consultation around citizenship development, and to develop dialogical approaches that reach beyond the usual suspects to develop authenticity, honesty, and autonomy in civic actors.

In his presentation, Bob Luskin characterized the discourse of the conference as being “less rapturous, more sober and reflective” than he had observed at other conferences on democratic participation. As we move forward we need to be honest about the challenges to improved democratic practice, and hopeful yet modest in our aims regarding theory and praxis in civic engagement.