

# Collaborative Governance and Civic Empowerment

## A Discussion of *Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance*

**Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance.** By Carmen Sirianni. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009. 304p. \$26.95.

Whether as a solution to problems of political legitimacy or social mistrust, as a way of involving civil society, or as a method of crafting more effective “third way” policies, collaborative governance has been a topic of renewed interest for political scientists and policy intellectuals. Carmen Sirianni’s *Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance* (Brookings, 2009) is an important new book that raises many of these issues. *Perspectives on Politics* is a forum for raising questions of interest to a broad range of political scientists. In this symposium, we have asked a number of prominent political scientists and policy analysts to assess the book and to address two broader questions: in what ways does the book draw from and add to political science scholarship, and in what ways does political science scholarship help to shed light on the book’s core themes?

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For at least two decades, concern over the health of American democracy has generated a wealth of research among political scientists. Studies have documented widespread civic disengagement, lackluster electoral participation, the dominating role of money in politics, the coarsening of political discourse, hyperpartisanship, and patterns of participation that amplify the voice of the well-to-do, along with persistent mistrust of government. Although a variety of solutions has been proposed for each of these ailments, collaborative governance stands out as an approach that practitioners and policy analysts have embraced as a strategy for reknitting the fabric of democracy, even as it promotes more effective government. By involving citizens in collaborations to address the problems in their own communities, collaborative governance promises to build a Tocquevillian democratic political culture of constructive engagement from the bottom up. But what can we realistically expect of collaborative governance and under what conditions? How can collaborative governance hold its own in a political

world that seems to run on the exact opposite principles? And what can it do to influence that broader political world?

In *Investing in Democracy*, Carmen Sirianni makes the case for collaborative governance, but with a distinctive twist. He suggests that significant civic engagement toward public ends does not arise spontaneously; instead, he argues that government must actively promote collaborative governance. The book offers an incisive distillation of the principles of successful collaborative governance, providing a vivid portrait of these principles in action. Through in-depth analysis of three successful cases—neighborhood involvement in Seattle, a system to promote youth participation in Hampton, Virginia, and environmental engagement sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency—Sirianni shows what government did to help promote, guide, and sustain civic engagement in each of these domains. He also reveals what some of the broader benefits can be. In particular, when residents are responsible for coproducing public goods, they become more aware of the trade-offs inherent in any policy choice, and they gain a better understanding of the costs of fulfilling public purposes. In short, collaborative governance works against the combination of disengagement and shrill partisan rhetoric that characterizes much of American politics.

The book is situated in the rich literature on social capital and trust. It has much to contribute to this work by stressing the critical role that government plays in setting

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the rules of the game for civic engagement and providing the resources that keep this process-intensive, relationship-building approach to policy afloat. The author's case studies show how government-structured and supported collaboration around public projects, such as community gardens or watershed management planning, can bring unfamiliar groups into contact with each other, help opposing interests find common ground, and build on initial steps over time by drawing in more participants. Sirianni demonstrates the key role that government plays in ensuring that collaborations include the groups that are least likely to participate. In each of his cases, such groups, including low-income residents, renters, and immigrants, became engaged only as a result of the government-initiated, targeted recruitment efforts. This attention to the ways that government can promote inclusive collaboration in the public interest is a welcome corrective to the widespread assumptions of other collaborative approaches: that civic engagement occurs spontaneously and that all groups are equally likely to participate.

Its focus on local engagement and the role of government means that *Investing in Democracy* makes another important contribution to political science scholarship: It highlights innovations in policy implementation and spotlights the actors that play crucial roles in implementation. Once a lively area of research, policy implementation has received little attention from political scientists over the past several decades (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). But given the deep concerns about democracy and government effectiveness, there are good reasons for political scientists to take a new look at this set of issues. The last round of scholarship on implementation focused on government-to-government relations across the federal system. But today, implementation means something entirely different. In many policy areas, a new world of nonprofit and for-profit organizations is responsible for implementing policy. This transformation in the key actors responsible for policy implementation raises important new questions for which Sirianni offers significant insight. How can we build networks among disparate actors? What conditions promote policy learning, and how can government ensure accountability in this new setting? He also draws attention to the way that new technologies alter the scope for public engagement in policy implementation and in public monitoring of policy. By making information more widely available and by using new tools, such as mapping and Internet technologies, government can offer citizens a vivid picture of what is at stake in policy choices and, at the same time, supply them with new tools for direct involvement.

Yet we are left with the question: What does all of this local collaboration add up to? What kind of return can we expect from this approach to investing in democracy? The portrait of civic engagement that Sirianni gives us is curiously lacking in attention to the interests and conflicts

that always impinge on collaboration. Without more emphasis on the struggle for political advantage on the part of those engaged in or on the fringes of civic ventures, we cannot grasp how civic engagement of this sort can even begin to transform American democracy. To consider this problem requires exploring several issues that Sirianni touches on but pursues only tangentially. These include assessing the preconditions for establishing collaborative governance processes, their scope of authority, and their durability. These concerns bring us back to basic political science questions about the role of power and conflict in setting the rules of the game. They also highlight the way backdoor politics can undermine collaboration as groups seek to alter the rules through venue-shopping the federal system to achieve their goals.

The basic precondition for collaboration is the presence of politicians or bureaucratic leaders who initiate it. This is implicit in Sirianni's work, but he gives us little guidance for understanding why some politicians and bureaucrats embrace collaborative governance and others show little interest in it. He proposes that government take the lead in making collaboration possible, but government is not an abstract benevolent entity, nor is it loaded with politicians or bureaucrats whose highest goal is effective policy implementation. These caveats suggest that implicit threats lie behind many a successful collaboration. The threat of a lawsuit, a protest, or electoral reprisal has been essential for launching many efforts that eventually result in constructive collaboration. Examples include the Seattle neighborhood-planning effort that Sirianni considers, as well as other initiatives he discusses, such as the Industrial Areas Foundation's community work in Texas and the activists who used the Community Reinvestment Act to engage bankers in lending in low-income communities (Dreier 2003; Warren 2001).

The scope of authority for collaborative efforts is a second issue around which questions of power emerge. The war on poverty drove home the lesson that participation without power provides potent fuel for disillusionment and cynicism. Moreover, when collaborative processes command insufficient authority, engagement can be a diversion from the real political campaigns that need to be directed toward legislatures or city councils. Yet many collaborative-governance efforts do not have sufficient authority to influence the outcomes they hope to achieve. For example, among Sirianni's own cases, the collaboration on watersheds lacks authority over land use, one of the major factors affecting pollution of watersheds (p. 162; see Lund et al. 2007). Launching a collaboration with insufficient authority may not be fatal, but supporters of collaboration need strategies for expanding the scope of authority over time. Indeed, they must be prepared to ensure that their authority does not shrink over time. Collaborative efforts do not exist in a political vacuum: When powerful interests view collaboration as a challenge to their

authority, they can use their power to enter legislative venues, such as state and federal arenas, where related policy decisions can render local collaborative efforts largely meaningless (Weir, Rongerude, and Ansell 2009). Successful local collaboration requires building multilevel political power to defend and expand the scope of authority for collaboration. Without access to levers of power, collaboration is simply a diversion.

Finally, issues of power emerge when we consider the durability of collaborative enterprises. Sirianni shows that widespread support for the planning efforts helped to elect a sympathetic mayor in Seattle in 1998, and perhaps more impressively, to pass bond measures needed to implement the planning process (pp. 99–100). In 2007, however, Seattle elected a new mayor who had little interest in promoting the model of decentralized collaboration that Sirianni documents and, accordingly, downgraded the effort (pp. 106–16). Chicago community policing, a case that the author cites as a model of collaborative governance, lost much of its capacity for autonomous civic engagement when the police department withdrew support for the independent organizing that had begun to rattle local politicians.<sup>1</sup> These setbacks suggest that collaborative processes are quite vulnerable to political rollback. Unless those engaged in collaboration have the political power to defend the structures and resources that make collaboration possible, they can be scaled back or eliminated in the face of tightening budgets, unfavorable elections, or shifting fashions in public administration.

These concerns underscore the ways that politics can intrude on collaboration. Collaborative processes do not suspend the battle among contending interests and the struggle for advantage in policymaking; at their best, they constrain and direct these forces while engaging them with a broader set of ordinary citizens. But collaborative processes are always vulnerable to defectors who venue-shop to get a better deal and to politicians who see no advantage in supporting collaboration. This vulnerability suggests that durable collaboration requires the backing of governmental power in the form of regulation, participatory requirements, and ongoing political action to defend and expand its domain. Political vulnerability also highlights the limits of collaboration: Where collaborative efforts have insufficient authority and no plan for expanding their reach, they are a diversion from the hard work of political engagement.

If politics intrudes on collaboration, how might collaborative processes intrude on political processes? Does collaboration filter out into the larger political system, providing new pathways to engagement, improved political discourse, or deeper trust in the political system? These are critical questions for assessing the payoff from this type of investment in democracy. One area of paramount importance that Sirianni touches on is political socialization. After a decade of building the system of youth involve-

ment in civic affairs, he reports that the youth vote in Hampton Virginia, was 18.5% higher than the national average in 2000 and 28.7% higher in 2004 (p. 154). Further research should investigate the impact of collaborative governance on youth political engagement and on the political involvement of immigrants who participate in collaborative governance, such as those in Seattle. If collaborative processes can promote political socialization and stimulate broader political participation, especially among those who are poised to acquire a lifelong pattern of participation, they may exert a significant and positive impact on the ills of American democracy. Additional research into the relationship between collaborative governance and participation more broadly—as well as the size and durability of any political socialization effect—will help illuminate this potentially important channel for revitalizing American democracy.

The exploration of the pathways through which collaborative governance influences politics raises a fundamental question about collaborative endeavors: Do they aspire to serve as a substitute for regular political channels or do they aim to reform the political system? In California, the dysfunctional state government has sparked broad interest in collaborative processes. But at the end of the day, decisions about resource allocation are political decisions. Unless supporters of collaborative governance recognize this reality, their efforts will remain small, vulnerable islands of engaged civility within a sea of apathetic, polarized, unequal politics dominated by big money interests. Even worse, enthusiasm for collaborative processes may encourage a focus on the issues most amenable to collaboration, rather than on conflict-provoking legislative measures that are essential for addressing many problems. Financial literacy, a collaborative initiative that Sirianni points to, provides a case in point. While it is certainly important for low-income people to learn how to manage their money, build assets, and limit their chances of getting caught in the web of the credit card companies, is it not more important to regulate those firms whose business model requires them to prey on ordinary Americans?

Sirianni's argument that government needs to structure, promote, and provide ongoing resources for collaborative governance is a refreshing and invaluable departure from the purely voluntarist approaches to civic engagement. But we must not lose sight of the fact that politics will always impinge on collaborative ventures and that government is never a neutral problem solver. Governments are controlled by parties and politicians who support distinctive goals and purposes; moreover, the American political system provides many opportunities for losers in the collaborative process to seek advantage elsewhere. Collaboration promises a path to overcome dysfunctional, litigious, unresponsive governments. Yet it is important to identify the conditions under which collaborations are likely to achieve these goals and to remain attentive to the danger

that collaborative governance can also divert energies away from connecting popular participation to the levers of power.

#### Note

1 Fung 2004, 92.

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In *Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance*, Carmen Sirianni argues that policy-makers should be doing more to engage citizens in "public work." Drawing on theory and research about deliberative democracy, community organizing, and other fields, along with three lengthy case studies of efforts at collaborative governance, he maintains that carefully designed and managed government initiatives can foster high levels of civic activity which contribute not only to achieving policy objectives, but also to producing more educated and capable citizens. The result, claims Sirianni, would be to strengthen democracy as well.

This is hardly a novel argument. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville linked the involvement of Americans in civic life to the successful operation of the American political system. Many subsequent observers have done the same. However, with some notable exceptions, such as Skocpol,<sup>1</sup> they have generally seen associational life as developing separately from government, creating the kind of civic culture that teaches the skills and fosters the attitudes citizens need to participate in self-government. Indeed, by enabling them to provide services that government could (or should) not offer, or to hold public officials accountable for their actions, the independence of civic groups has often been viewed as an advantage, if not their most important characteristic.

Sirianni, however, would like to see closer collaboration. To be sure, especially since the 1960s, public policy in the United States has been relying extensively on non-governmental groups to deliver services.<sup>2</sup> But Sirianni seems to regard such relationships more as a one-way street than a two-way partnership, with government essentially paying a variety of organizations (including businesses) to carry out its programs. He also criticizes government help to people to pay for higher education, medical care, and other services for treating them more like "consumers" than "citizens." What he envisions instead are arrangements that would give civic groups real authority over important aspects of public life, along with the tools and training they need to exercise it responsibly for shaping "public work." In this way, he believes, power would be more broadly shared between government officials and ordinary citizens, with each contributing in their own, complementary ways, to addressing issues of mutual concern.

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