

# Public Comments Re-Imagined:

## How Online Surveys Can Improve Governance

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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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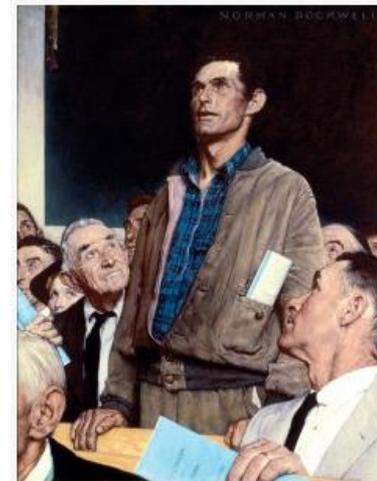
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A challenge for our times:

How can we draw upon ***digital/technological*** power –to compute, connect, store, and retrieve– so as to realign the Aristotelian balance of ***aristocratic (money, expertise)*** and ***democratic*** power requisite to a well-formed political system?

# The Trouble with Public Comments: Democracy Theater is Not Enough

Public comments can call attention to issues and ideas, serve as catharsis for their speakers, and reaffirm the ideal of free speech.



Norman Rockwell (1894-1978), "Freedom of Speech," 1943. Oil on canvas, 45 3/4" x 35 1/2". Story illustration for "The Saturday Evening Post," February 20, 1943. Norman Rockwell Museum Collections. ©SEPS: Curtis Publishing, Indianapolis, IN.

But they provide inadequate input for decision-making.

# A (Live) Case in Point: School Overcrowding in Arlington, Virginia, USA.

- World renowned for “Smart Growth” mass transit planning in second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Now suffering from a shortage of public school facilities as families move in to partake of the high quality of life.
- Activists, through their Civic Associations, campaign before the School Board on behalf of their neighborhoods.
- But the School Board and its staff hear only those activist reactions and demands, not from the entire citizenry.

# A Solution.

## The Online Survey.

Basic versions available free; sophisticated versions at low cost.

Now utilized by reputable polling organizations:  
YouGov, Pew Research (in beta).

Of value to decision-makers as well as  
prediction-seekers.

# Virtues of the Online Survey for Political Decision-Making

- **Less time-pressure** on citizens to participate.
- **Rich media** present detailed questions and nuanced response options.
- **Low costs** make feasible **sequential surveys**, to allow both sponsors and respondents to learn from early results and track preference changes.
- Statistical techniques such as Conjoint Analysis **illuminate democratic priorities** when citizens asked to consider trade-offs and list priorities.

# Example from an Online Survey.

**Rank your top 5 issues with 1 being most important to you and 5 being the fifth most important:**

- Maintaining greenspace that can be used by the community (e.g., sledding, picnics, playgrounds)
- Maintaining greenspace that can be used for Arlington county recreational needs (e.g., soccer, baseball, etc.)
- Minimizing personal vehicular traffic Monday – Friday
- Minimizing personal vehicular traffic Saturday and Sunday
- Having a walkable neighborhood elementary school
- Ability for homeowners to use their on-street parking in front of their homes
- Maintain a community library
- Maintain a Sunday farmer's market
- Minimize additional bus traffic
- Maintain/improve pedestrian safety
- Maintain existing programs and services at the Reed Site (e.g., Integration Station)
- Minimize additional noise and/or light pollution
- Fiscal responsibility across a broad set of investment possibilities
- Recognizing that Swanson has almost no green space on its property (1 soccer field)
- Other

**9. What three Single words come to mind when you think of the possibility of HB Woodlawn moving to the Reed School Site? Write ONE word in each blank.**

**Word One:**

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# A (pre-digital) model: Envision Utah (USA).

In late 1990s, a public-private consortium campaigned to develop a plan so the state could accommodate 1M more residents in the first twenty years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Utah population in 2000: 2.2M; 2010: 2.8M –up 26%, 3<sup>rd</sup> fastest in US.)

1. Surveys.
2. Scenarios.
3. Plebiscite.
4. Follow-up surveys.
5. Civic training sessions on use of planning tools.
6. Local governments and real estate developers targeted as allies.
7. Counties adopted plans.

Source: Xavier de Souza Briggs, *Democracy as Problem Solving* (MIT Press 2008).

Thank You.

## CONCLUSION:

Surveys are not just for predictions.

Digital surveys can be deployed to create a dialogue between experts and citizens that can inform political decision-making and build popular support for the outcome.

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