



Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance

Carmen Sirianni

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The health of American democracy ultimately depends on our willingness and ability to work together as citizens and stakeholders in our republic. Government policies often fail to promote such collaboration. But if designed properly, they can do much to strengthen civic engagement. That is the central message of Carmen Sirianni's eloquent new book.

Rather than encourage citizens to engage in civic activity, government often puts obstacles in their way. Many agencies treat citizens as passive clients rather than as community members, overlooking their ability to mobilize assets and networks to solve problems. Many citizen initiatives run up against rigid rules and bureaucratic silos, causing all but the most dedicated activists to lose heart. The unfortunate—and unnecessary—result is a palpable decline in the quality of civic life.

Fortunately, growing numbers of policymakers across the country are figuring out how government can serve as a partner and catalyst for collaborative problem solving. Investing in Democracy details three such success stories: neighborhood planning in Seattle; youth civic engagement programs in Hampton, Virginia; and efforts to develop civic environmentalism at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The book explains what measures were taken and why they succeeded. It distills eight core design principles that characterize effective collaborative governance and concludes with concrete recommendations for federal policy.

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