

## The Role of Citizens in the Legislative Process

### Issue Map

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## The Role of Citizens in the Legislative Process

The United States is a republic and a representative democracy. It is a nation that does not have a hereditary head of state and is a system in which laws are enacted by elected representatives who hold their offices for a limited period and who can be replaced by voters explained Dr. John Usera in the Summer 1998 issue of the Chiesman Quarterly. To ensure good governance, citizens must be well informed, and engage in civic practices. One civic practice involves citizens coming together in a forum to look closely at an issue.

The Role of Citizens in the Legislative Process forum is a nonpartisan way to examine and learn about how our state and federal government works. Participants will deliberate on what they feel is working about their government and what, if anything, can and needs to be changed or improved. Not about an individual legislator or a particular issue, this forum looks at the *process* of lawmaking.

A deliberative discussion opens doors for deeper understanding of oneself and others. Jane Mansbridge, in her article Self-Interest in Deliberation

in the Winter 2007 issue of the Kettering Review, states that, "...self-understanding and mutual understanding increase when participants can discuss their own and others' interests directly. Honest talk about these matters can help members discover more accurately and deeply what they themselves really want and need. In the process, they may also come to understand better what others want and need."

Using several approaches as a framework for the deliberation, and guided by a neutral moderator, forum participants will express their opinions and values in a safe environment, and will listen for understanding to the points of view of others. Each viewpoint is valued and encouraged.

Participants in these forums will learn about the lawmaking process. In the spring of 2009, a report will be published reflecting the opinions of the forum participants. Participants, lawmakers, and other stakeholders can consider and may choose to act on the thoughts of South Dakota citizens on the lawmaking process.



## Approaches for Deliberation

### 1. Citizen as learner.

If citizens don't know how government works, how can they be involved? This approach says citizens need to be responsible for their own learning about government operations and timely issues.



#### Steps

→ Citizens can educate themselves about the history and processes of our democratic republic through print media, the internet, radio and television. Proponents of this approach advocate watching programs such as C-SPAN and legislative session coverage broadcast on South Dakota Public Television.

→ Volunteering for school projects such as Mock Election and Kids Voting can give people a chance to learn about and teach the next generation the responsibility of participating in elections. Research shows that Kids Voting increases adult voter participation as much as 15%.



### 2. Legislators and officials as collaborators.

Legislators and other government officials need to welcome citizen input and provide constituents with information about policies under consideration. Under this approach, the advantages of more citizen involvement in the legislative process are recognized.

#### Steps

→ Taking advantage of technology, more legislators can develop websites and use email to seek their constituents' opinions on issues.

→ The opinions of citizens should be sincerely considered and valued by legislators and officials. Proponents of this approach point to the non consideration of public sentiment in an FCC (Federal Communication Commission) decision in 2007 approving media consolidation despite public opinion to the contrary.

### 3. Citizen as participant.

This approach says citizens have plenty of opportunity to be active participants in their government if they just take advantage of it. How can legislators respond if they don't know how their constituents feel?

#### Steps

→ Testifying or observing at a legislative committee hearing is a way to let legislators understand the positions of citizens on a proposed bill. Attending legislative crackerbarrels can serve the same purpose.



→ Lobbyists can educate legislators on the needs of specific groups or individuals. In 2007, there were 924 registered lobbyists in South Dakota. Proponents of this choice note that diverse organizations, from AARP (American Association for Retired Persons) to NCAI (National Congress of American Indians), have been successful in getting legislation passed for the benefit of their members.

## Reflections on the Forum

- ⇒ How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this forum?
- ⇒ Was there a consensus about the lawmaking process?
- ⇒ Are there trade-offs you are willing or not willing to make to increase citizen participation in government processes?
- ⇒ How can we use what we learned about ourselves in this forum?