

On Responsiveness

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Responsiveness is a funny rallying cry for a political movement. No one has ever mounted the barricades declaring “Give us quicker response times or give us death!” But in this political moment, we believe there are few more important tests for American democracy than to make it more responsive.

Technology has raised the bar for responsiveness. At the touch of a few buttons, we can access more entertainment and information than our ancestors could dream of. But if it loads too slowly (for many web users, too slowly means more than 3 seconds of waiting), we simply move on to our next distraction.

Unfortunately, it feels like our government is slowing down, even as our technology and culture move faster-and-faster. Too often, there are long lines at the DMV. Government paperwork is overwhelming. Public agencies that should work together instead point the finger at each other to explain why an extra burden is placed on the public.

Thanks to the Internet, we are also used to being able to leave feedback for anyone or anything in real time. This can be positive - helping new mom-and-pop restaurants or new musicians gather buzz. But in the private sector, companies also know the potential long-term impact of a single negative review and go out of their way to navigate concerns on platforms like Yelp and Google.

Again, government couldn't feel more different. At the policy-level, filibusters and gridlock stymie policy change. Fiercely gerrymandered legislative bodies shield policymakers from accountability at the hands of voters.

Precisely because the public has grown so used to responsiveness, it is a threat to the very existence of democracy if we can not make our governmental systems more responsive to the same people for whom they are supposed to work: the voters, the taxpayers, the general public.

Because of our own backgrounds in democracy policy, the Institute for Responsive Government will focus much of our work on the nuts-and-bolts of our democracy - building a system that is convenient for eligible voters and also with the safeguards and transparency that the modern public has come to expect.

We will bring together experienced administrators, user-experience (UX) design experts, and researchers, who have worked in every corner of the United States, to share insight into how to make better policy and run better elections. And we will also push to identify additional policies to strengthen public services, government filings, the safety net, schools, and other systems - because a stronger democracy should mean a government that delivers for its constituents.

Think about that restaurant that gets the great review. It's not just about the quality of the food or the cleanliness of the establishment, it's often about the service. The right - *and responsive* - server suggests the perfect dish, remembers the order perfectly, refills water glasses without request and, crucially, fades into the background when the conversation is lively because responsiveness is as much about appropriately anticipating needs rather than hectoring people with unnecessary questions. They are friendly, thoughtful, and clear in their communications - making sure we know about our options and communicating challenges when the kitchen is backed up. They treat all their customers with respect and friendliness. They are, in short, everything we dream a government interaction could be.

If we can deliver that more responsive government, we can rebuild the public's trust in our own democracy - and continue to serve as a beacon of hope for the whole world.