Institute of Policy Studies

ENGAGING MINDS, EXCHANGING IDEAS

Digital Frontiers Seminar: Citizen Participation in Policy Development and the "Democracy Machine"

Thursday, 22 June 2017

Seminar Room 2-1, Level 2, Manasseh Meyer Building

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

National University of Singapore

Democracy Machine and Deliberative Engagement

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IPS Digital Frontiers Seminar: Citizen Participation in Policy Development and the "Democracy Machine"

Exploring the present and future of online engagement

June 22, 2017

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National University of Singapore

PennState

THE McCOURTNEY INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY

1. The basic idea

2. Why we need this

3. How it would work

4. The obstacles it faces

The basic idea

The basic idea of a “democracy machine”

- Government and nonprofits need to develop better opportunities for ongoing online citizen engagement and public consultation.
- The “Democracy Machine” would be a web-based database/service that integrates the best digital tools and social media platforms to make a powerful online public space.
- Government consultation fees would pay for the Machine’s continuous development (e.g., adding new tools, improving interoperatibility).

Why we need this

An integrated online platform can help tackle basic problems of self-government.

- Government often has a public participation mandate, but it needs a more reliable and affordable methods for eliciting **reflective and representative public input**.
- Citizens, particularly digital natives, need more compelling online opportunities for civic engagement to sustain **long-term participation**.
- Citizens have become more disconnected from their governments and their political opponents, which undermines **government legitimacy** and citizens' **political self-confidence (or "efficacy")**.

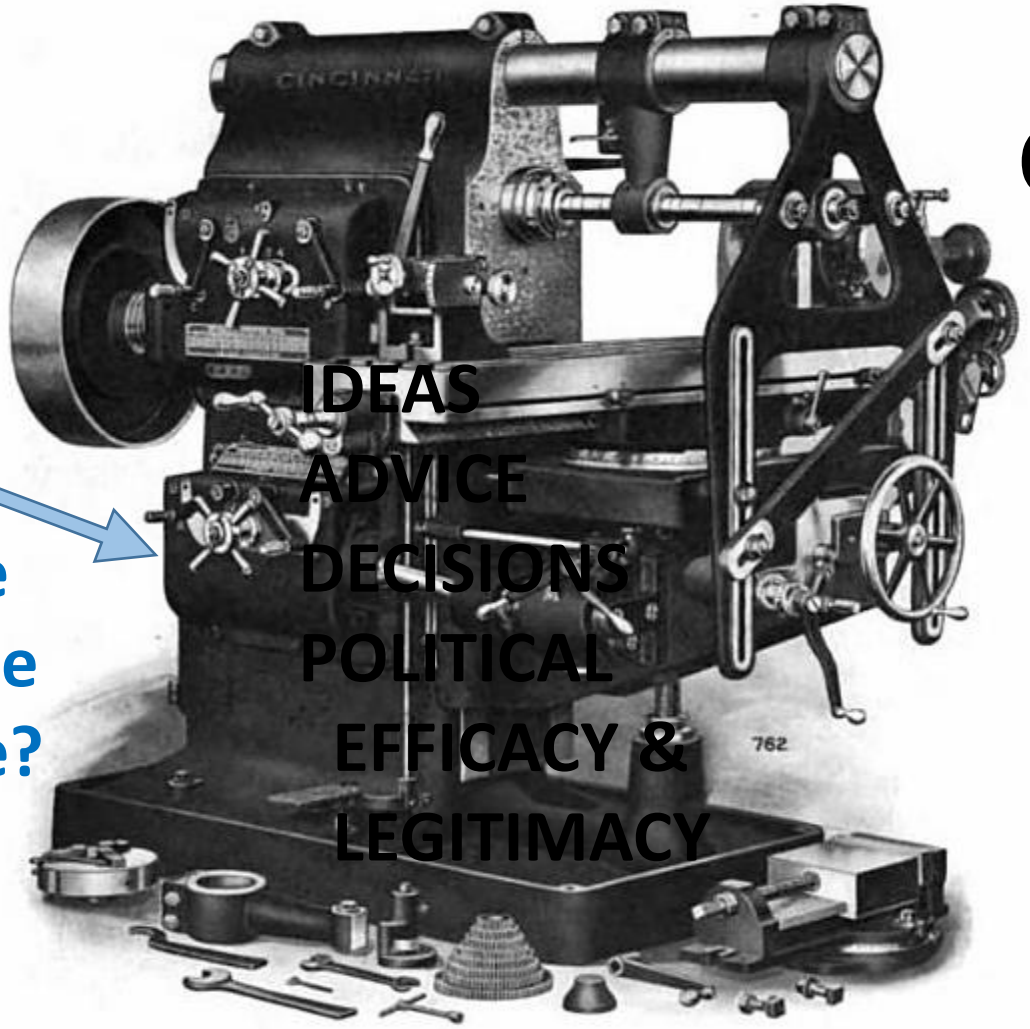
It also addresses less obvious problems.

- Many govt. officials and citizens have lost confidence in traditional consultation methods (e.g., polling and in-person public meetings).
- Dominant social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp) and integrated web services (e.g., Google) will soon build a quasi-civic commons, with an underlying corporate profit motive.
- If government, universities, and nonprofits collaborate to build a stronger civic commons, it could offer better user privacy, transparent code/algorithms, and research opportunities.

How it would work

Democracy Machine inputs and outputs.

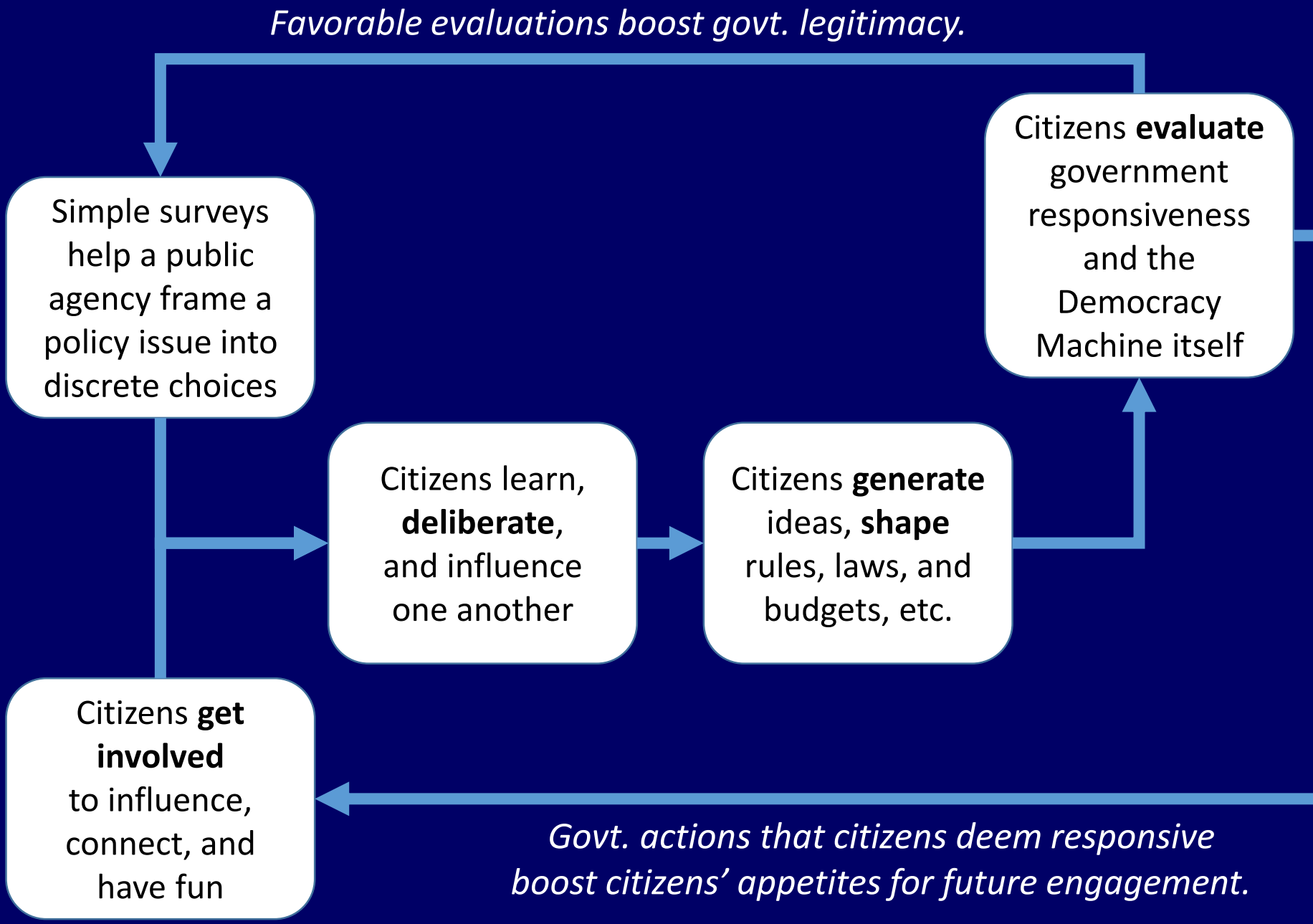
GOVT.

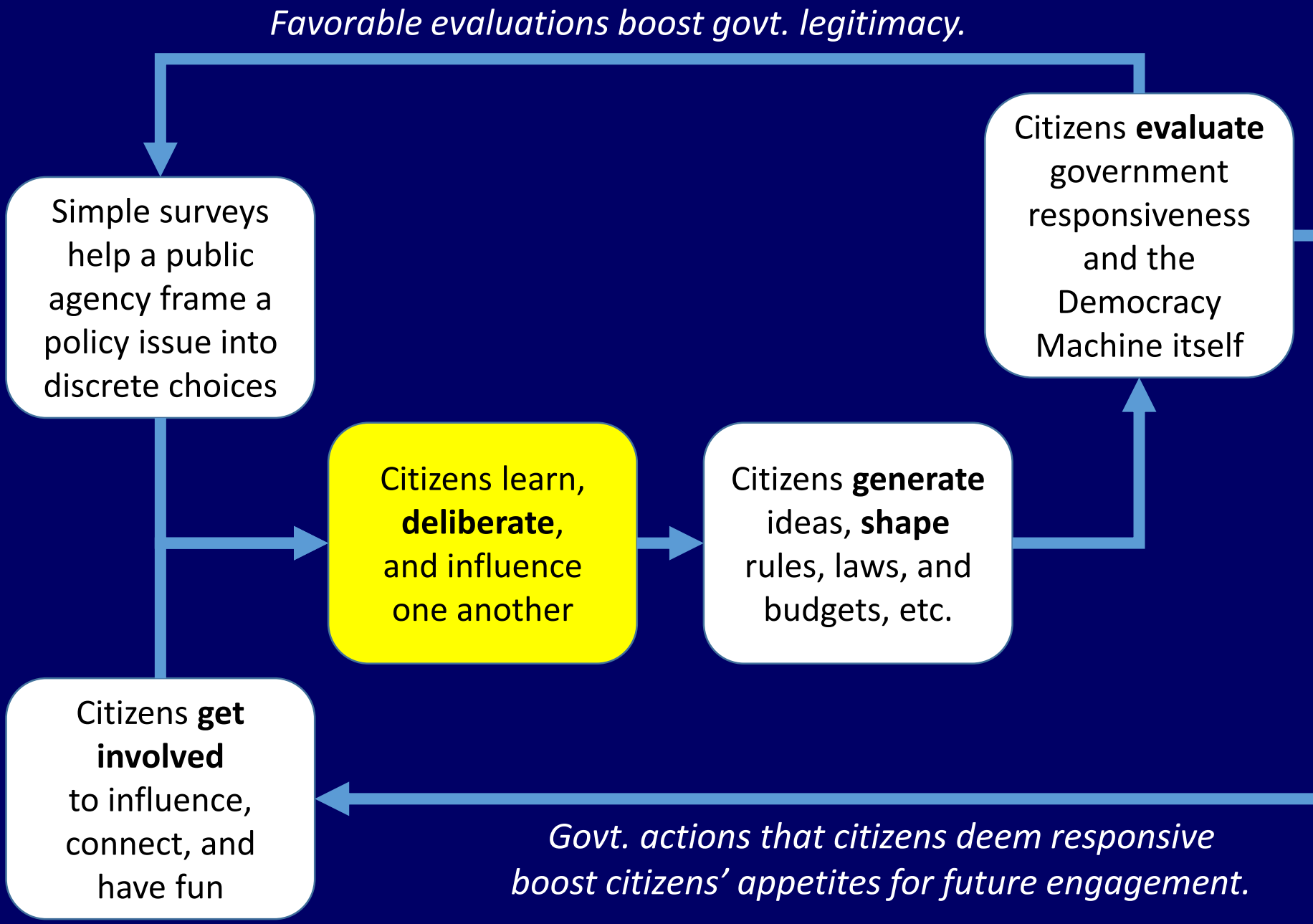


CITIZENS

IDEAS
ADVICE
DECISIONS
POLITICAL EFFICACY & LEGITIMACY

What is the *process* inside the Machine?


Favorable evaluations boost govt. legitimacy.
Simple surveys help a public agency frame a policy issue into discrete choices
Citizens learn, **deliberate**, and influence one another
Citizens **generate** ideas, **shape** rules, laws, and budgets, etc.
Citizens **evaluate** government responsiveness and the Democracy Machine itself
Citizens **get involved** to influence, connect, and have fun
Govt. actions that citizens deem responsive boost citizens' appetites for future engagement.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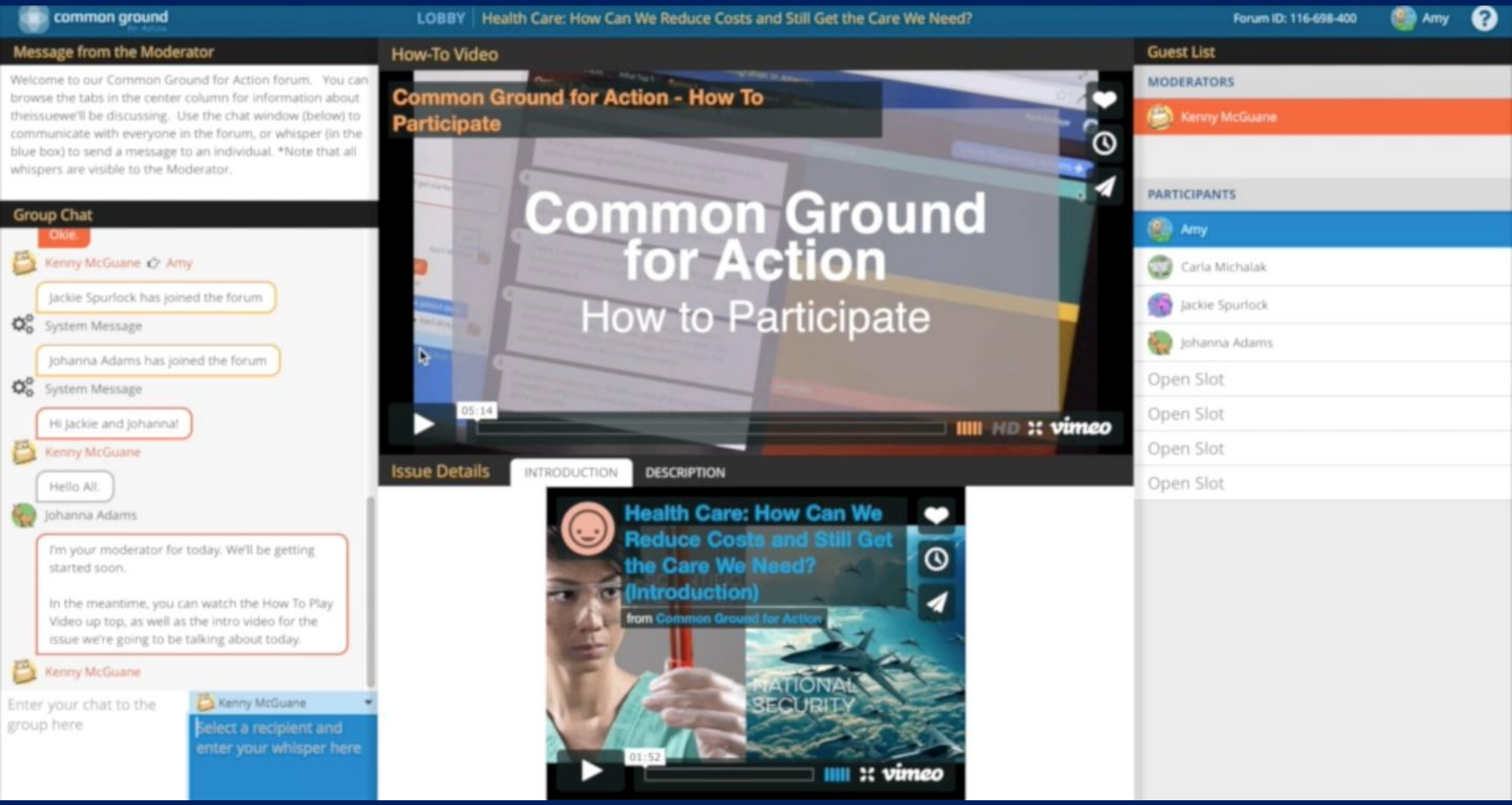

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KETTERING FOUNDATION

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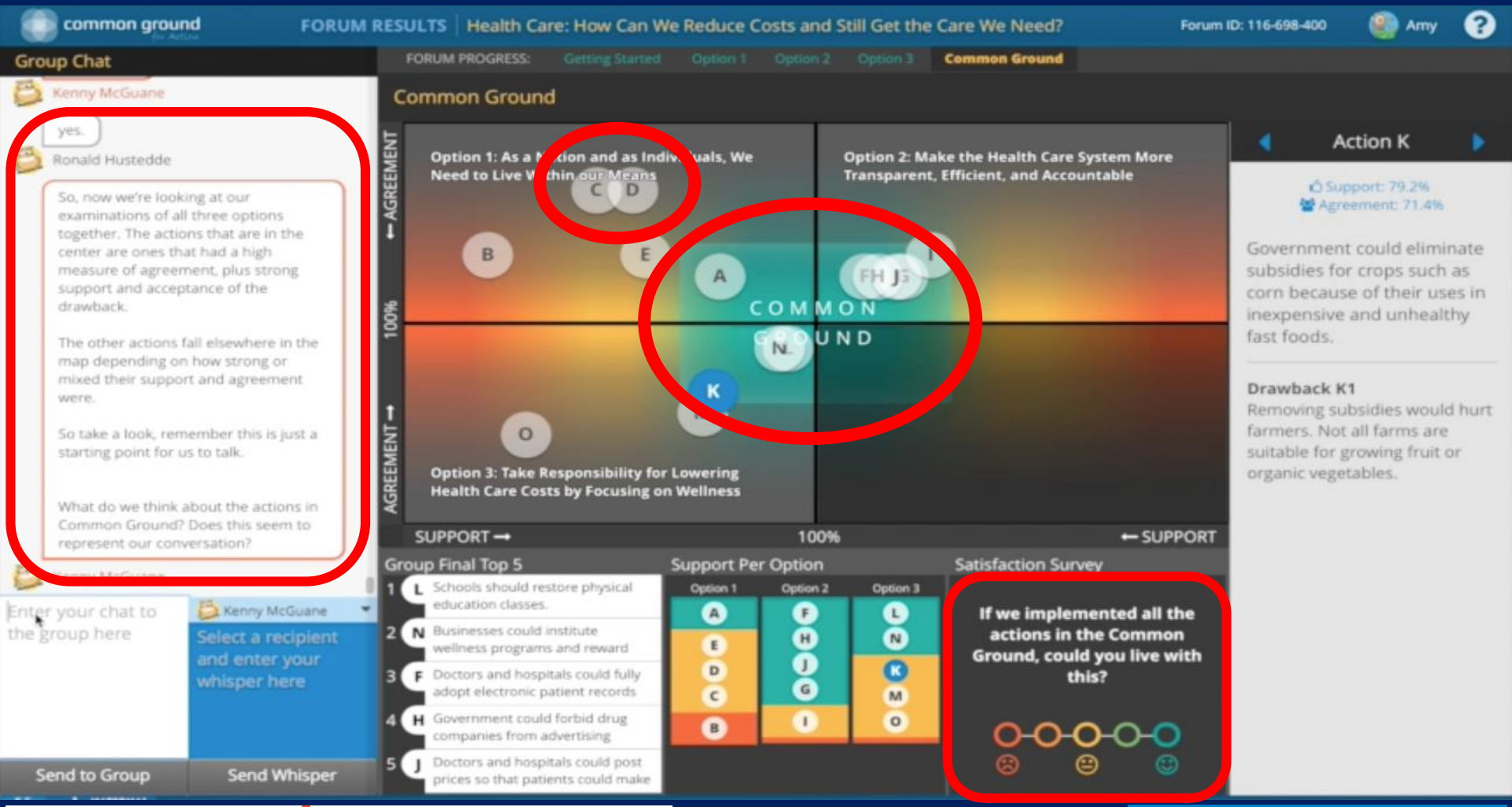

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KETTERING FOUNDATION

Citizens accumulate credits…

Playing collaboration games

Success in prediction markets and quizzes

Thoughtfully completing deliberative surveys on issues, proposed rules/laws

Deliberating with others, esp. when favorably evaluated in diverse groups

…and more. But <u>not</u> purchased/exchanged.

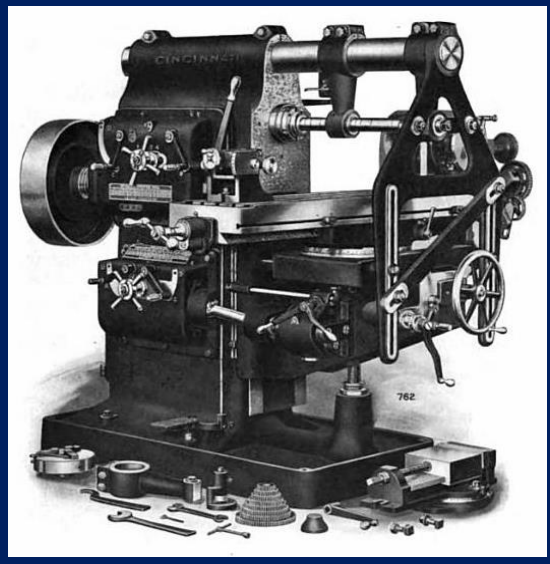
...and spend credits in the Machine.

Voting on proposals

Placing and ranking items on the agenda

Initiating and signing petitions

Allocating Machine surplus



...and more, including
Leveling up

	Requirement	Unlocks activities
1	Registered user account	Games and surveys
2	Credit threshold	Focus groups and deliberations
3	Deliberation threshold	Join an alliance
4	Voter reg. verification	Host deliberations, take impact surveys
5	Hosting threshold	Form new alliances, serve as alliance officer, and recruit/boot new members
6	Recruitment threshold Relinquish anonymity	Forge coalitions among alliances Help to prioritize existing agenda items
7	Credit threshold Local board review	Bring issues to the agenda Help to frame issues on the agenda
8	Nominated by diverse coalition members Peer feedback threshold	Public outreach on behalf Machine Recruit public officials to feed Machine Eligible to serve on local and state boards
9	Randomly selected from Level 8 district members	Eligible to serve on the national board Advise in the Machine's development

Alliances, coalitions, and quests cause citizens to forge complex social ties.

Citizens forge alliances, often with those who share common values and backgrounds.

Quests award credits if citizens can recruit new registrations to diversify their alliance.

Alliances get credit for forging coalitions that bring together divergent alliances.

Coalitions gain even more credit by deliberating together to find common ground.

Additional feedback loops could form.

Favorable citizen evaluation of responsiveness grants agencies discounts on next usage.

Public officials with strong track-records get public endorsements and support.

Citizens will voluntarily invest sweat equity to help local and national projects they chose.

Each project cycle increases our civic capacity (skills, knowledge, empathy, etc.).

A robust online civic sphere could help strengthen the most important offline public spaces.

Obstacles to surmount

Inclusion problems

- Even with paid random samples and demographic weighting, online discussion will never be representative of the larger public.
- The more inclusive, participatory, and flexible the system becomes, the more likely it will produce a non-deliberative "tyranny of the masses."
- There's no realistic way to people make accountable by requiring real identities while still ensuring their personal privacy.
- If forced to use real identities, members of marginalized groups will be more likely to self-censor and skew the results.

Failure to deliberate

- Not even Uber-like incentives can get citizens to listen and show respect to one another during political discussions.
- Partisan tribal affiliations will drive what participants say and do in this space, making deliberation impossible.
- Even the best online interaction spaces lack the strong social cues that spark dialogue and deliberation in face-to-face settings.
- This project will further degrade face-to-face interaction and offline public spaces, such as town meetings and public forums.

Sabotage

- Civic organizations and political parties will work to delegitimize this project if it undermines their existing influence strategies.
- If the project flexes political muscle, special interests and partisan groups will capture it no less than they do any other process.
- Mischief makers and griefers will find a way to undermine this project as soon as it gets on their radar. See: Boaty McBoatface.
- Russia (and others) will hack this project to bits and make public any private data within it. This is why the Internet can’t have nice things.

So, where to begin?

Use existing technology to build the Machine.

Work with experienced and innovative govts.

Start locally, build density, expand.

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