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Keep the public involved, Patrick

GOVERNOR-ELECT Deval Patrick deserves commendation for making civic engagement a centerpiece of his candidacy — and for practicing what he preaches by convening 15 working groups that organized public hearings on critical issues during his transition.

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APPEALS**

ADVICE FOR THE NEW GOVERNOR

The hearings were hastily organized, often rudderless affairs, but thousands took advantage of

that opportunity and the transition team's website to weigh in on matters of importance to them. Nothing like this had ever been attempted before. It was a bold gesture and a constructive exercise toward true participatory democracy.

The challenge now is to identify concrete ways to keep the public involved.

Why not make the working groups and public hearings a permanent feature of the Patrick-Murray administration? Each of the Cabinet secretaries could have a standing nonpartisan advisory committee consisting of knowledgeable citizens who meet regularly to respond to policy initiatives, offer suggestions, and monitor progress. Coordinating and documenting these meetings could be one responsibility of the governor-elect's proposed Office of Civic Engagement.

Furthermore, since voter registration and participation in elections are important measures of civic engagement, an Office of Civic Engagement would surely try to increase both. Useful lessons can be learned here from the Portuguese American Citizenship Project sponsored by the Luso-American Foundation and designed to increase citizenship, voter registration, and civic participation in Portuguese-American communities in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and elsewhere in the nation.

Yet voting itself is neither necessary nor sufficient for true civic engagement. It is not necessary because people younger

than the voting age can and should participate in civic life. And it is not sufficient because true civic engagement requires ongoing involvement in the good of a community. The pursuit of the common good is the alternative to partisan politics.

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For that reason, an Office of Civic Engagement could also take steps to encourage volunteerism in Massachusetts, mount a statewide public relations campaign, provide a clearinghouse connecting communities in need of volunteers with citizens seeking volunteer opportunities, and work with mayors to recognize the contributions of citizen volunteers.

A new civic engagement office should also consider how existing agencies of state government could promote citizen involvement. One obvious example is the Department of Education. Civic education broadly conceived should be reintroduced as a high school graduation requirement. Wherever practicable, service learning should be a component of any civic education program. The governor-elect will find a strong ally for such an effort in Senator Richard Moore, who has been a leader in civic education for decades.

A less obvious example is the Massachusetts Cultural Council, which gives badly needed support to hundreds of community-based arts and humanities organizations across the Commonwealth. Local cultural councils; theater and dance companies; symphonies, choruses and community music schools; art, history, and science museums; libraries, historical and literary societies; and public radio and television stations, among many others — these are places where civic culture evolves and civic life plays out. (I should note that the council provides funding to my group.)

The cultural council has not been well served by recent Republican administra-

tions. In constant dollars, the council's budget is barely more than one-fourth what it was two decades ago. That's a shame, and the governor-elect should seek to reverse that budget trend. The arts and humanities organizations that the council helps provide opportunities for volunteerism, vital connections to a community of shared values, and occasions for citizens to come together to learn about and examine matters of common concern.

As Alexis de Tocqueville noted over a century and a half ago, the genius of American democracy is voluntary association — free citizens coming together to solve problems, celebrate successes, or pursue common passions. In our own time, Harvard public policy professor Robert Putnam has demonstrated how voluntary association has declined precipitously in the past half century and many acute observers have sought the causes of this decline and explored its implications.

During his campaign, Governor-elect Patrick tapped into a pent-up desire among citizens to play a larger role in their civic life. His new administration needs to keep the momentum going.

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