We understand civic engagement to mean people participating together for deliberation and collective action within an array of interests, institutions and networks, developing civic identity, and involving people in governance processes.

Civic engagement has emerged in recent years as one of the yeasty topics in the current literature of a number of academic fields, including our own. The Civic Engagement Initiative (CEI) in the School of Policy, Planning, and Development at the University of Southern California (USC) is one expression of this broad interest. The CEI represents a logical extension of research on the Los Angeles system of neighborhood councils that has been under way since 1996 through the USC Neighborhood Participation Project. As our research agenda and research team have expanded with the growth of this emerging institutional innovation in democratic local government, we have found ourselves driven to examine the larger context in which citizen engagement with government occurs.

As we studied the roles of neighborhood associations, block clubs, neighborhood watch groups, community beautification organizations, racial and ethnic associations, businesses, faith-based organizations, homeowners’ associations, and many other groups in the development of the new, official system of neighborhood councils, we began to view the larger web of civic relationships in which the new system was taking root with increasing interest. Among other approaches, we explored the broader context of civic engagement through a series of conferences involving scholars, practitioners, and community activists. Very early in our work, in 2000, we conducted a conference for 150 neighborhood council leaders, followed by a second conference that brought together 50 academics, city officials, and neighborhood leaders in 2002. This was followed by an invitational conference for scholars cosponsored with the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics, along with a few public officials and neighborhood leaders, in 2003.

In October 2004, we again teamed with the Unruh Institute to present a small invitational conference of about 50 participants. This event brought together 15 leading scholars on civic engagement from around the nation to assist us in shaping “A Scholarly and Practical Agenda” on civic engagement. From this conference, we hope to develop a network of civic engagement scholars that will extend across the United States and beyond.

The conference was organized around three plenary sessions and five panels. The themes of the panels were civic leadership and governance, institutions for civic engagement, citizen engagement and representative democracy, incorporating new actors in governance and participation, and trends in civic participation. We intentionally cast a broad net to capture cutting-edge thought in a wide range of areas.

The five articles published here were selected from those presented at the conference as particularly outstanding contributions on topics of interest to the public administration community, including both practitioners and scholars.
Another excellent set of articles will be published in a different venue that is more oriented to politics and political communication.

Harry Boyte leads off this series of articles with the broadest perspective in “Reframing Democracy: Governance, Civic Agency, and Politics.” He views the current emphasis on governance instead of government as “a paradigm shift in the meaning of democracy and civic agency.” It requires thinking of politics “as the interactions among citizens of roughly equal standing but diverse views and interests, in horizontal relationships with each other, not simply in vertical relationships with the state.” Governance is meaningful only within the context of empowered citizens who “reclaim politics as the free, deprofessionalized activity of ordinary citizens.”

In “The New Governance: Practices and Processes for Stakeholder and Citizen Participation in the Work of Government,” Lisa Bingham, Tina Nabatchi, and Rosemary O’Leary discuss the tools and processes for civic engagement through governance. They argue that these take place “through networks of public, private, and nonprofit organizations.” These tools and processes include “deliberative democracy, e-democracy, public conversations, participatory budgeting, citizen juries, study circles, collaborative policy making, and alternative dispute resolution.” They examine the legal support for participatory efforts by citizens and public administrators and call for greater attention by the field of public administration.

In “Democratizing the Administrative State: Connecting Neighborhood Councils and City Agencies,” Pradeep Kathi and Terry Cooper examine the need to democratize the administrative state if civic engagement is to be meaningful. The article discusses action research by the USC Collaborative Learning Project using “learning and design forums” to facilitate written agreements between neighborhood councils and municipal departments for more effective service delivery. The goal is to create collaborative partnerships between citizens and public administrators.

Jeffrey Berry, in “Nonprofits and Civic Engagement,” focuses on the role of not-for-profit community-based organizations as key instruments of civic engagement if practitioners were better informed about the laws governing nonprofit political participation. He considers the potential of the more than 800,000 nonprofits in the United States “to engage their clients and members in community affairs and public policy making.” He finds that, unfortunately, these organizations are so regulated by the federal government that their members are discouraged from becoming actively involved in the policy process. He maintains that “federal law works against the participation of the most disadvantaged in society.”

“Civic Engagement and Sustainable Cities in the United States,” by Kent Portney, considers more than 40 cities that have adopted sustainable cities programs during the last 10 years. Public participation stands out as central to the development and implementation of these programs. Portney examines different approaches to citizen participation in these cities and suggests that future research take a hard look at the potential and the pitfalls of involving more city residents in sustainability efforts.

Throughout these articles, one can discern a decidedly different approach to civic engagement compared to the citizen participation efforts of the 1960s and 1970s. Citizen participation, several decades ago, usually meant programs contrived by government to provide opportunities for citizens to have input into the public policy process. Now, there is more initiative from the grassroots and more attention to collaboration and deliberation. The articles collected here reflect this broader notion of civic engagement, paying attention to both the civic engagement activities that precede participation in governance—such as the development of civic identity and the building of horizontal bonds among citizens through community organizations—and engagement with government and business in the governance process. The relationship between civic engagement and governance is unclear. One might well conclude that the “new governance” is one instance of a much larger process of civic engagement—or at the very least, they are overlapping arenas of activity. As our working definition advanced at the beginning of this essay indicates, we believe civic engagement involves both the development of civic identity and participation in governance.