

How Generation X is Shaping Government

Overshadowed by baby boomers on one side and millennials on the other, it's Generation X that's actually shaping the way government and citizens interact.

BY: [Rob Gurwitt](#) | May 2013

A couple of months ago, the city of San Mateo, Calif., finished a small experiment. Planning to renovate the playground at one of its most popular community parks, it put a set of proposed designs online for a month and invited public comments. Some 130 people from around the city batted ideas back and forth, remarked on what they liked and didn't like in the designs, and made suggestions. The playground needed shade, they agreed, and water fountains reachable by little kids.

The city's Parks and Recreation Department was thrilled. Before trying the online approach, it had convened a public meeting to solicit feedback. Eight people had bothered to show up.

What stood out most in the online forum was who the participants turned out to be. Almost 60 percent of them were between the ages of 35 and 45. The average age was just shy of 42 -- noticeably younger than the demographic typically drawn by public hearings in San Mateo. "This was the target audience we'd been trying to get but were not getting" through conventional hearings, says Abby Veesser, a senior management analyst in the parks department.

In other words, Generation X was checking in.

And not just in San Mateo. In Phoenix, the city's Planning and Development Department has logged thousands of responses to its online request for citizens to contribute their thoughts to a new master plan. The average age of respondents? Again, 42.

[Read the May issue of *Governing* magazine.](#)

Meanwhile, for nearly a year the city of Palo Alto, Calif., has been making its trove of data available online. It began with budget and financial data, expanded to salaries and benefits for all city employees, and is pushing on

to specific program data. The idea is to make information that was always public -- but for which residents had to ask -- much more easily available. The initiative has been pushed by a cohort of younger managers who consider transparency vital to citizen engagement. "Nothing against the [baby] boomers," says Assistant City Manager Pamela Antil, "but I think Gen Xers are way more comfortable with transparency and open data initiatives. We're learning in government that people are interested in this information and that they're willing to put it into a meaningful, useful format that benefits other people in the community."

Local governments are in the midst of a sea change when it comes to public participation and citizen engagement. Forced by the recession and recovery of the last five years to make dramatic cuts to their budgets, they've reached out to try to understand better what their residents value most. Presented with a new and ever-evolving array of technological tools - Facebook, Twitter, text messaging and public-participation sites like MindMixer, Peak Democracy and Nextdoor -- they're using them to publicize their own concerns and, increasingly, to draw out public sentiment. They've discovered the "civic technology" movement, with its groups like Code for America and events like next month's National Day of Civic Hacking, which encourage citizens with tech skills to use government data to build apps useful to residents, neighborhoods and cities.

What may be most interesting about all this, however, is that it's occurring precisely as another momentous shift is taking place: As they go through their 30s and 40s, members of Generation X are moving into more active roles as citizens and into upper management ranks in local government. While it's too much to say that this generational change is the force driving local governments' more expansive view of public engagement, the blending of the two trends is no coincidence. It shouldn't be surprising that this generation, which long ago shook off its disengaged-slacker stereotype to become known for its entrepreneurialism, DIY ethic, skepticism about bureaucracy and comfort with collaborating over far-flung networks, would now be pressing local government to think in new ways about the work of democracy.

"A lot of people in their 30s and 40s now are focused on families and schools and parks and public amenities," says Matt Bronson, San Mateo's assistant city manager, who at 38 falls squarely into the demographic. "They want to play a role and not just a one-time listening role. As a

generation, they want to have a chance to provide ongoing feedback, and when the time and opportunity are right, to help make collaborative decisions on the direction of their communities.”

For the last two-and-a-half years, ever since the first baby boomers started to hit 65 -- which they will continue to do at a rate of 10,000 a day for another 16 years or so -- media attention on generational change has tended to focus either on them or on the socially tolerant, liberal-leaning politics of 20-somethings, or millennials. Generation X has been an afterthought. Which pretty much figures, given how its members have always viewed their inattentive treatment by society at large. Yet it is members of Generation X who are coming into full maturity and thus leaving their stamp on community life.

Just who makes up Generation X is open to some debate. The typical starting point, based on the commonly agreed-upon end of the baby boom, is 1965. But using cultural markers, renowned generational thinkers Neil Howe and William Strauss put the start date at 1961; so does the Longitudinal Study of American Youth at the University of Michigan, which for more than two decades has been studying a cohort of Gen Xers. Ending points vary, too, from 1978 to 1982.

There is little disagreement, however, on the forces that helped shape members of the generation. The short version, says Howe, is that the “first wave” of Xers spent their childhoods watching the country fall apart and their adolescence and early adulthood in the “Morning in America” glow of the Reagan years. “They have no memory of anything before everything started going crazy: long, hot summers and riots and peace movements and the family going to hell and the Me Decade,” he says. “At the same time, they were there at the ground zero of the deregulation, tax-cut, free-agent rebellion against the system, only for them it was in the economy as opposed to the culture. That economic liberation was defining for first-wave Xers.”

So, too, were a variety of social trends. They watched their parents’ marriages struggle and sometimes fall apart -- the divorce rate hit its high in 1981. Their mothers joined the workforce in unprecedented numbers, which meant that many of them had no one waiting at home when they returned from school. “They were latchkey kids, and institutions were crumbling as they came of age,” says Rebecca Ryan, a generational

consultant who often works with local governments. “They had to be fighters and learn to speak for themselves.”

And they developed an overwhelming skepticism about large institutions. They sat in the back seat while their parents waited in long gas lines, watched the Challenger shuttle explode and followed the American hostage crisis in Iran. They hit the schools as public education began to fall apart, a fact confirmed for them, as Howe points out, by the 1983 “A Nation At Risk” report and its memorably scorching preamble: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

In the private sector, the savings and loan crisis began in 1985, just as Gen Xers would have been turning to banks as young adults. The recession of the early 1990s, the dot-com bust, the stuttering engine of lower- and middle-class advancement, the Great Recession -- all have left their mark. A 2007 study by the Economic Mobility Project, spearheaded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, found that people in their 30s in 2004 had a median income on average 12 percent lower than their fathers’ three decades before. “This suggests the up escalator that has historically ensured that each generation would do better than the last may not be working very well,” the report commented. The Census Bureau, measuring the effects of the recession on householders, found that the largest decrease in median net worth between 2005 and 2010 belonged to those 35 to 44. Their net worth dropped by 59 percent, compared to 37 percent for those under 35 and 13 percent for those 65 and older.

So it’s probably no surprise that there is a widespread sense within Generation X that the government structures that worked for earlier generations do not work for them. As with any generational description, it is easy to oversimplify. But it’s notable that some of the most nationally prominent members of the generation -- U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, who is 43, and Govs. Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, 41, Scott Walker of Wisconsin, 45, Nikki Haley of South Carolina, 41, and, if you use Howe’s definition of who’s in Gen X, 50-year-old Chris Christie of New Jersey -- are Republicans who have built their careers on pledges to rewrite how government works. “There is a Reaganite bent to this generation, the idea that government and its rules are often a problem,” Howe says.

In truth, Xers as a whole are divided politically. Exit polls showed those in their 30s going decidedly for President Obama in the 2012 elections, while those born before 1973 leaned toward Republican challenger Mitt Romney. A 2011 Pew Center study found that about 47 percent of Gen Xers favored smaller government, while 45 percent preferred a bigger government. Meanwhile, a study by Florida State University sociologist Elwood Carlson for the Population Reference Bureau found a healthy plurality of Gen Xers - 43 percent -- identifying as independents, more than any generation before them.

Want more management news? [Click here.](#)

The streak of self-reliance that marks many Xers has been amplified by a key belief that government won't always be there to help. "One thing that was really hammered into our heads, going back to the late '80s and on into today, is that the celebrated, major government programs like Social Security and Medicare would not be around for us," says Pete Peterson, who runs the Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership at Pepperdine University. "So there's a feeling that you'd better get this done on your own, that you're going to have to take care of this yourself."

That go-it-alone attitude may help explain why Xers have for so long been characterized as disengaged from and cynical about public life. But that is ending, Peterson argues, as they build families and settle into neighborhoods. "If you've never believed that government was that important," he says, "when you have kids is the time you reconnect -- and as you sink in roots and pay taxes and care about things that happen on a more local basis, you become more civically aware." But the same forces that have pushed Generation X toward self-reliance and questioning the institutions around them, he says, will also produce a younger citizenry filled with "people who believe, 'I don't have to put up with this bureaucracy. There's got to be a better way to do this.'"

In particular, localities have come to understand that if they hope to reflect the concerns and priorities of the public they claim to represent, they have to rethink their entire approach to public participation, says Karen Thoreson, president of the Alliance for Innovation, a joint project of the International City/County Management Association and Arizona State University. "Folks have finally admitted out loud that the ways local

governments have traditionally engaged the public don't work, are broken and are unpleasant for everybody."

Or as Anne Ambrose, the 43-year-old director of public safety and community relations for Palmdale, Calif., puts it, "The expectation that public life occurs in front of the council dais is a dying concept."

To get a sense of what might replace it, it's worth remembering that the hyperconnected, technologically adept, just-do-it world that moves at lightning speed to meet consumers' needs took shape as Generation Xers were growing up. It has molded their expectations not just of the private sector, but of government, both in their roles as citizens and among those who've become government officials. In a society in which you can amass Twitter followers and run your own blog and opine on Facebook and become a YouTube sensation overnight, it stands to reason that Gen Xers don't have much patience for showing up to a public meeting on a Thursday night where they might get two minutes during a perfunctory "public comments" period -- and that Gen X city officials would be sympathetic. But as the online experience of cities like San Mateo and Phoenix has shown, they're ready to participate if they're offered a meaningful way to do so. "It's part of how Generation X is wired," Bronson says. "We're focused on practicing collaborative decision-making."

So the frontiers of public participation are expanding as Gen Xers move into management roles in government. "There have been some real breakthroughs by managers of all ages, including boomers who said, 'Let's try something different,'" says Thoreson. "But the whole electronic side of it, and being able to engage the public through forums or crowdsourcing or whatever, has been led inside local government by 30- and 40-year-olds, been picked up by citizens in that age group and now is being picked up by citizens of all age groups."

There are about as many different iterations as there are communities interested in exploring new forms of participation. Nadia Rubaii, an associate professor of public administration at Binghamton University in New York, believes that localities are feeling their way through the transition, as younger boomers and older Gen Xers within government find a way to bridge the old and new worlds. "There's an affinity for Generation X, but also an appreciation for how things get done through structure and bureaucracy," she says. "So what governments are doing and people in

this 'bridge' stage are helping facilitate is adding layers to civic engagement, but not necessarily scrapping entirely the older ways of participation, as later members of Gen X might prefer."

For instance, in Edina, Minn., 49-year-old city manager Scott Neal has for the last decade been writing a blog about his experiences and about the issues the Minneapolis suburb faces. He makes sure his department heads all do the same. "In my own small way I'm trying to build some trust and empathy for government again," he says. The city still relies mostly on traditional public meetings and hearings, but the blog gives citizens another point of entry. "I've had a hundred instances over the years," he says, "where people have approached me out of nowhere and said, 'Hey, I read what you wrote about manhole covers and I'd never thought about that.' It allows people an oblique way to approach someone they might not ordinarily approach."

In Phoenix, the MindMixer site on the general development plan took shape after the city's 43-year-old mayor, Greg Stanton, wondered what it would take to get residents to participate in a calm citywide conversation about its future, rather than proposing to put a freeway down the middle of a neighborhood, as he put it, just to get them to turn out. For all its success, though, "it's just one piece of the puzzle as far as outreach," says Joshua Bednarek, a city planner who helped create it. "For some people, the site just isn't the best way to engage them -- so we might be better off having a cup of coffee at a senior center to get feedback."

Meanwhile, Philadelphia planners have been using a program called Textizen to elicit public comment. Designed with the help of Code for America volunteers, the department uses advertisements on bus shelters and inside public transit to pose questions on which it wants feedback, like how to improve transit, say, or how people use recreation centers, or whether they shop in their own neighborhoods or go elsewhere. Residents then text the department their responses. "We felt that in a city like Philly, where there is wide usage of cellphones but more inconsistent access to the Internet, text messaging would be more equitable and universally understood," says Clint Randall, the 29-year-old city planner who helped develop the project.

For all the growing interest in finding new ways to engage citizens, there's still a long way to go. It probably won't truly take off until there's a

generational change in the top ranks of cities around the country -- which may be a while. Not only are boomers delaying retirement, but their numbers remain overwhelming. In 1971, points out Rob Carty, the International City/County Management Association's director of career services and next generation initiatives, 71 percent of city managers were 40 or younger. By 2009, 87 percent were older than 40.

There's also the question of what local governments will do with what they learn from their citizens. "This could go really well if, say, someone shows up with a new app and government says, 'Wow! Thank you for helping!'" says generational consultant Rebecca Ryan. "But it could go really badly if government pats them on the head and says, 'That's very nice, but we know better.'"

To avoid that, local governments have to develop ways of managing citizen input and incorporating it into their own internal processes, says San Mateo's Bronson. "We're just feeling our way now."

Finally, as online engagement takes off, Binghamton University's Rubaii argues, communities will face a technical challenge. "Given the potential to generate so much more rapid-fire participation," she says, "they will need to have computer-based ways of sorting through it. Someone will have to come up with how to analyze and interpret all the various [participatory] feeds."

Millennials, are you listening?

This article was printed from:
<http://www.governing.com/topics/mgmt/gov-how-generation-x-shaping-government.html>