

# DOCE Beats DOGE: The Case for Meaningful Government Transformation Through Citizen Empowerment

**Jon Alexander**

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MAY 2026



HARVARD Kennedy School

**ASH CENTER**  
for Democratic Governance  
and Innovation

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## About the Author

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# Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
What DOGE Got Right: The Necessity of Transformative Change.....	2
What DOGE Got Wrong: Technological Efficiency Is Not Transformation.....	5
DOGE in Context: The Collapse of the Consumer Story.....	5
Reclaiming Citizenship: A Note on Language.....	6
A Citizen Story: Taiwan’s World-Beating COVID-19 Response.....	7
Citizen Empowerment as an Agenda for Meaningful Government Transformation.....	8
Citizen Empowerment as an Emerging Agenda.....	10
Participatory Budgeting.....	10
Citizens’ Assemblies.....	11
Relational Public Services.....	12
Community Wealth Building.....	12
The DOCE Proposal: Driving Meaningful Government Transformation.....	12
The Big-Ticket Intervention: DOCE x IRA.....	13
The Boring Revolution: DOCE Day-to-Day.....	15
Conclusion.....	17
Notes.....	18

## Executive Summary

This report proposes the creation of **Departments of Citizen Empowerment (DOCE)** at all levels of government, from the local to the federal, in the United States and around the world.

These departments would act as transformation units, working toward a step change in government effectiveness and legitimacy. The goal is to reimagine government institutions as facilitators of collective intelligence and civic resources as opposed to their current primary role as service providers or agents of control.

This case is framed in significant part through a comparison with the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). While DOGE's popularity demonstrates a public appetite for ambitious, far-reaching government transformation, its fundamental failure highlights the need for a transformation agenda that goes far beyond technology-driven efficiency.

	DOGE	DOCE
Goal of Reform	Efficiency	Effectiveness and legitimacy
Means of Reform	Artificial intelligence	Collective intelligence
Primary Role of Government	Service provider	Facilitator/assistant
Outcomes	Accepts existing	Redefines through participation
Delivery Model	To and for citizens	With and for citizens

The report's key objectives are:

1. To inspire and equip administrations to adopt a "citizen empowerment" agenda.
2. To outline the work of DOCE transformation units in implementing this agenda.

The report begins by reframing the challenge facing governments today through an analysis of **what DOGE got right and wrong**. The desire for a dramatic intervention in government function is taken to be right; however, the focus on efficiency was wrong. It failed to first address the need for a fundamental challenge to the current underlying idea of government's role and purpose. While the DOGE promise to cut federal costs by \$2 trillion was initially popular—and continues to be replicated around the world—federal costs actually increased by \$190 billion in the first four months of 2025.

By putting **DOGE in context**, through a deeper understanding of our current moment in time, it becomes clear that this was a **failure of imagination rather than execution**. The primary challenge for governments is to reimagine their fundamental role to ensure **effectiveness and legitimacy** in achieving outcomes; only then can they seek to fulfill that role **efficiently**.

**The citizen empowerment agenda** is then defined and explored, not only as a framework with the potential to deliver a true government transformation, but also as one that is already emerging across the United States and abroad. To be effective and legitimate in achieving desirable outcomes, administrations need to step away from the role of service provider—and the idea that governments can or should deliver outcomes **for** people—and into a role that empowers, supports, and equips citizens to achieve those outcomes themselves.

**The DOCE proposal** then illustrates how these transformation units would operate in practice, beginning with a thought experiment: imagining the Biden administration's Inflation Reduction Act as a DOCE-led initiative. This model would deploy crowdsourcing and participatory processes similar to

those employed in major political successes in Taiwan, Wales, and Texas. The focus then shifts to the details of implementing a citizen empowerment agenda within the daily operations of government at all levels, drawing from a wide range of examples.

The report concludes by highlighting the critical juncture we find ourselves at and calling for bold action and investment from all levels of government. The citizen empowerment agenda offers a credible path to reversing the decline of democracy and the rise of autocracy. While the agenda is being adopted, it is moving too slowly and in too few places. And time is running out.

## What DOGE Got Right: The Necessity of Transformative Change

Within hours of taking office on January 20, 2025, President Donald Trump established the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), led by Elon Musk, with a mandate to “[modernize] Federal technology and software to maximize governmental efficiency and productivity.” The move had been widely trailed during the election campaign, with Musk promising to cut \$2 trillion from annual government costs. At the time, these costs were projected to reach \$7.57 trillion by the end of 2024. Soon after his appointment, Musk famously celebrated his appointment by wielding a chainsaw on stage at the Conservative Political Action Conference.

DOGE is archetypal of an approach being replicated across the world and across the political spectrum. In Argentina, Javier Milei’s presidency prefigured both the symbolism of Musk’s chainsaw rallies and the nature of his attacks on government systems. Across Europe, right-wing Eurosceptic parties are increasingly vocal about the idea of a DOGE-inspired unit within the European Union. Similarly, the Trump-style Reform Party in the U.K. has been following the DOGE recipe in local administration, having gained control of several local and regional councils in the latest round of elections. Even in a nation where “Trumpist” governance has been rejected, a group called Build Canada—which bills itself as a “non-partisan civic movement” of entrepreneurs and other “high-agency individuals”—is organizing in the spirit of DOGE, from outside government.

The focus on efficiency in government reform has also gained traction on the progressive side of the political spectrum. For example, Sir Geoff Mulgan, an advisor to multiple U.K. Labour governments, recently proposed “DOGE Done Better.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson’s influential book “Abundance,”<sup>2</sup> while positioned as an agenda for effectiveness rather than just efficiency, operates in practice as little more than a DOGE-esque call to remove bureaucratic red tape.

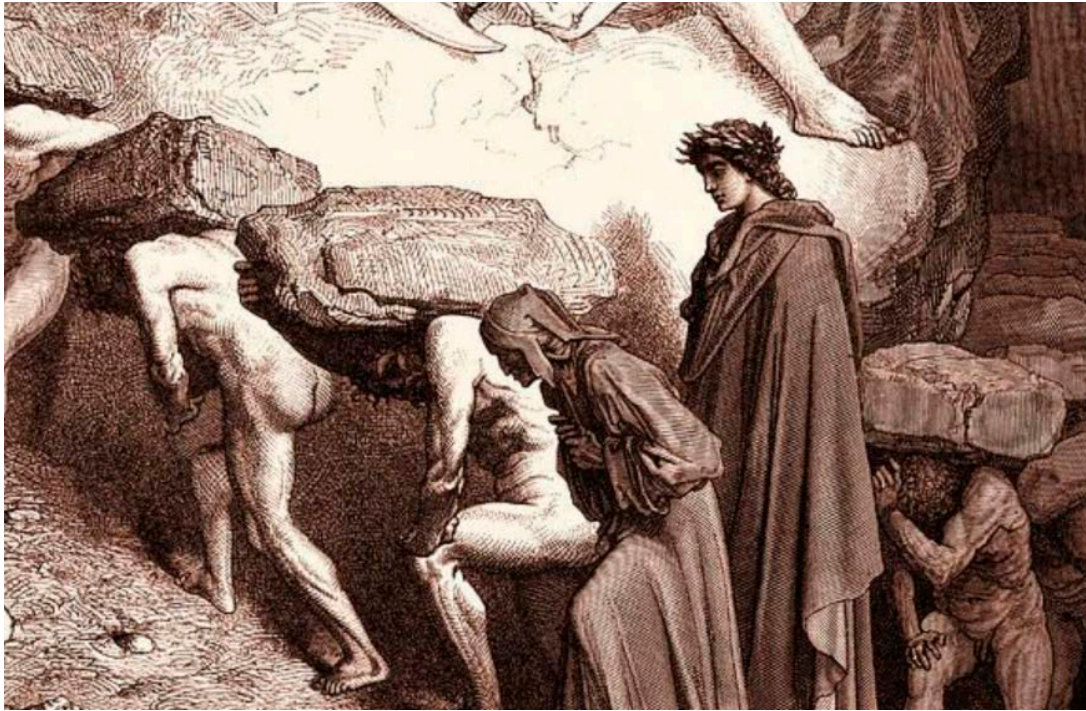
The reason for DOGE’s initial popularity is that it felt like a rare commensurate response to a major phenomenon of our time: the fact that people worldwide are deeply frustrated with their governments. They want drastic change, and they struggle to see where it is going to come from. In a 2025 study of 25 countries, the Pew Research Center found that a median of 69% of respondents believe their political systems need either “major changes” or “complete reform.” Furthermore, a significant majority of these people lack confidence that such change is actually possible.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, the Pittsburgh-based Worthy Strategy Group conducted extensive research into the American mindset under both the Biden administration in 2024 and the Trump administration in 2025. Researchers invited participants to find, share, and discuss images that reflect their understanding of their own lives and of the state of the nation. Under Biden, the images that arose depicted isolation and fear, and included people drowning and walking a tightrope above certain death. Under Trump, this had shifted to see people being crushed by the boot of government, or carrying heavy burdens under the eye of a cruel overseer.<sup>4</sup>

Musk’s chainsaw resonated in this context because it felt commensurate with the scale of public anger and frustration. DOGE was popular because unleashing radical transformation across government, led



A selection of the images representing the state of American life and the role of government under the Biden administration in 2024 as understood by participants in Worthy Strategy Group research. Credit: Worthy Strategy Group



A selection of the images representing the state of American life and the role of government under the Trump administration in 2025 as understood by participants in Worthy Strategy Group research. Credit: Worthy Strategy Group

by a team and a man unfettered by conventional rules of engagement, seemed to meet the moment. The public felt a need for drastic action, and this was—or at least appeared to be—something drastic.

## What DOGE Got Wrong: Technological Efficiency Is Not Transformation

DOGE has not succeeded. In fact, it hasn't even failed. It has been a catastrophe from the beginning.

Musk halved his stated goal the moment he arrived in office, reducing the target to \$1 trillion. That ambition was later scaled back again to \$160 billion—a mere 8% of the original pledge. Ultimately, when the rubber hit the road, government spending did not decrease at all. It actually rose—and by an amount that exceeded Musk's claimed cuts. From January through April 2024, in the Biden administration's final year, official U.S. Treasury figures show that total federal spending was \$2.39 trillion. During the same four-month period in 2025, it was \$2.58 trillion—an increase of \$190 billion.<sup>5</sup> This is before even considering the wider consequences of DOGE's activity on people's lives in the United States and abroad.

What matters here, however, is not the fact of DOGE's failure but its fundamental nature.

Most commentators, even the more progressive ones, have seen DOGE as a failure of **execution**. In "DOGE Done Better," for example, Mulgan explicitly accepts that "the questions DOGE asks are valid ones even if the answers it offers are poor."<sup>6</sup> Under this view, DOGE simply needed to be administered more carefully and scientifically. Using technology to maximize efficiency is the right approach, but it was undertaken in a manner that was overly ambitious and dramatic—"more like theatre than engineering."<sup>7</sup> This argument is based in data suggesting that wasteful government spending is the core issue; one recent poll found that 76% of Americans think the federal government "spends too much money," with 85% saying increases in spending over the last decade have either made no impact (43%) or reduced their quality of life (42%). Notably, the survey found that Americans believe the government wastes 59 cents of every dollar it spends.<sup>8</sup> Similar figures, though less extreme, appear in surveys globally. From this perspective, the rise of artificial intelligence is understandably perceived as a new dawn, even if we would be well advised to set the chainsaw aside.

However, this report argues that such a response underestimates the depth of public frustration as well as the corresponding depth of change required. To accept efficiency as the goal and technology as the means is fundamentally wrong, and to dismiss the theater represents another installment of a classic progressive mistake: seeking to rationalize what is a fundamentally and necessarily emotional reaction. When people see government as a giant boot stamping on them, the response cannot be simply to make the boot less expensive—or to put that boot on the foot of a robot.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that the necessary strategy is not efficiency "done better," but something fundamentally different: a reimagining of the role and function of government. This approach must serve the outcomes people actually want, delivered in ways they trust. In other words, government must be **effective and legitimate**, not just **efficient**. Identifying what this looks like begins by stepping back to interrogate the wider context.

## DOGE in Context: The Collapse of the Consumer Story

In a landmark essay written 25 years ago, Donella Meadows, the pioneer of systems thinking, proposed that societies cling to "mindsets" or "paradigms," which she described as "shared social agreements about the nature of reality . . . the deepest set of beliefs about how the world works." They are, she argued, "the sources of systems."<sup>9</sup> More recently, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild has sought to better understand U.S. communities through their "deep story"—a "subjective lens" through which they see the world.<sup>10</sup>

These ideas can help us clarify the true nature of the current government crisis, defining the context for the necessary transformation. The “deep story” that spread across the world over the last 80 years is collapsing, and because that story is the foundation of our political systems, those systems are doomed to fail—unless we can shift the underlying logic.

We can think of this failing deep story as the “consumer story.”<sup>11</sup> It goes like this: our role as individuals is to pursue our own self-interest, on the assumption that doing so will aggregate into the best outcomes for society. In this narrative, we define ourselves through competition. Along the way, our choices represent our power, creativity, and identity—they make us who we are. As a result, our corresponding story of organizations and institutions, from businesses to nonprofits to government, is reduced to providers of products and services.

The current crisis results from this story collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions because we cannot resolve today’s challenges using the logic that created them. We cannot address crises of mental or physical health through a story that defines us as independent, isolated individuals with machine-like bodies; **that story created the crises**. We cannot face rampant inequality, where tiny minorities of individuals and nations hold disproportionate power, through a story that claims that competition drives the best outcomes for all; **that story created the crises**. And we cannot solve ecological crises through a story that tells us we are separate from nature, measuring individual and societal success in terms of material standards of living; **that story created the crises**.

This is the underlying context for both the appeal and the failure of DOGE. When the logic used to build our institutions fails, people feel deeply unsafe and insecure, yet institutions and leaders have nothing commensurate to offer in response. In the absence of anything better, a plan to rip apart these failing institutions with a chainsaw has great appeal.

In truth, DOGE is not that radical at all. It too arises from the logic of the consumer story. It responds to failure by repeating the same strategy but harder. The logic is that if humans are best understood as consumers, governments are service providers, so the greatest achievement is to deliver those services as efficiently as possible. Understood in this context, DOGE is perhaps most analogous to the tourist abroad who, rather than attempting to learn the local language, tries to make himself understood by speaking more slowly and raising his volume.

## Reclaiming Citizenship: A Note on Language

The central argument of this report is for a move beyond the logic of the consumer, and into that of the citizen. However, the language of citizenship often raises concerns in contemporary political discourse, where it is widely used to divide people based on legal status. According to this idea of citizenship, some are citizens, while others are non-citizens. Some argue that this means we should find a different vocabulary.

However, this report uses the concept of citizenship differently, returning to the word’s etymology. The words “citizen,” “city,” and “civilization” all derive from the Latin prefix *co-* (together) and the verb *vivere* (to live). As such, “citizenship” is more accurately understood as “the practice of living together,” and “citizens” as “those who live together”—humans defined by their fundamental interdependence. The shift from a noun to a verb—from a status to a practice—is also important. Performing artist and political commentator Baratunde Thurston has pioneered this expression in his “How to Citizen” podcast, insisting that “citizen is a verb.” Considered in this way, as a practice rather than a status, citizenship is available to anyone—indeed, it is often from those who lack the legal status that we can learn most about the practice.

Ultimately, using the language of citizenship in this inclusive, practice-focused way is not just possible but vital. If those seeking to build this kind of society do not use the language of citizenship, it will not lie idle. Instead, it will only be used by those who wish to divide and exclude. Words this important must be contested and fought for.

## **A Citizen Story: Taiwan’s World-Beating COVID-19 Response**

By the beginning of March 2020, when very few of the world’s governments had even acknowledged the existence of the COVID-19 crisis, Taiwan took a very different approach. They launched a coordinated response, brought the immediate emergency under control, and took steps to share their findings. On March 3, they published a list of 124 specific actions they had taken in an English-language journal, offering their chosen path as a blueprint for the rest of the world.<sup>12</sup> The data showed their confidence was justified: with a population of 23 million, they had registered just six deaths and 429 confirmed cases by the end of April—despite recording their first cases as early as January 21. In contrast, during a U.K. press conference on April 30, 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that 26,711 deaths and 171,253 confirmed cases had been registered in a population of 66 million, despite the first case occurring more than one month later, on February 28. On April 29 alone, 674 U.K. citizens had lost their lives to the virus.<sup>13</sup>

Taiwan tried its utmost to share its lessons with the rest of the world. Its strategy was to crowdsource its pandemic response, tapping into the ideas, energy, and resources of every citizen. This approach was based on a fundamental understanding that “everyone will always be smarter than anyone.”

From the outset, Taiwan’s government sought not only to keep its citizens fully informed but to actively enlist them—an approach distinct from other models that were more widely discussed in the global media. The Taiwanese did not try to push through and sustain their economy like the Swedish, nor did they instantly impose and maintain draconian restrictions as in Australia and New Zealand. Instead, the government framed the pandemic as the hardest challenge the country had ever faced, publicly acknowledging that it was likely to exceed the SARS epidemic of the early 2000s. Still, they asserted, the national strategy would be to make this a team effort, sharing the work and getting everyone involved. The government introduced restrictions quickly, but only as necessary, and with a clear focus on sustaining personal freedom for its citizens. It also provided as much information as possible, as accessibly as possible, and it created numerous opportunities for its citizens to contribute to the collective effort, driving the response. This strategy was summarized in the three guiding principles: “Fast, Fair, and Fun.”

Crucially, much of Taiwan’s strategy focused on leveraging the latest technology, but in a way that contrasts starkly with the DOGE proposition. The Taiwanese government engaged the country’s civic technology community, offering prizes to encourage the creation of open-source apps. These fulfilled critical needs, such as monitoring the availability and distribution of personal protective equipment, including facemasks, and developing a track-and-trace mechanism to enable citizens to retain ownership of their personal data while sharing the information necessary to contain the disease. This became the basis for Taiwan’s “participatory self-surveillance”<sup>14</sup> approach, which enabled the nation to avoid a full lockdown throughout the entire crisis.

Taiwan’s response stands in stark contrast to much of the world, where a poisonous combination of harsh restrictions and data harvesting by governments and big technology companies arguably planted the seeds of distrust and disinformation that have since torn apart our social and political fabric. The DOGE approach today represents a continuation of the same destructive trend: a technology-driven push for efficiency aimed at doing things for people, rather than challenging that mindset. Audrey Tang, the

minister without portfolio responsible for Taiwan’s digital affairs during the COVID-19 crisis, was a leading figure in the response. She advocates for “assistive intelligence” over “artificial intelligence,” arguing that we must use technology to harness humanity’s true superpower: our collective intelligence.

Viewed through this lens, technology is not defined solely by advanced computing power. For instance, the Taiwanese government also established a national telephone hotline featuring a recorded message from the president herself. She invited any citizen to call to propose ideas to strengthen the national response; the daily press conference was then used to celebrate and publicize these contributions. Among the callers was a young boy who was concerned that his classmates did not want to wear their regulation-issue pink face masks because they were “girly.” He suggested the national baseball team be enlisted to help make them popular. Just a few days later, six of Taiwanese baseball’s biggest names joined a press conference, resplendent in their pink masks.

Taiwan is a relatively small nation that was better prepared for COVID-19 than most, having been heavily affected by the SARS outbreak in 2003 and H1N1 in 2009. However, these advantages should take nothing away from the fact that Taiwan’s response demonstrates that transforming government in this way delivers outcomes people want, in a way they trust.

Most importantly, the response was effective, saving tens of thousands—if not hundreds of thousands—of lives. And while GDP growth is a blunt measure of national success (and one that will not survive long in a citizen paradigm), Taiwan’s economy still grew by 3.4% in 2020, while the U.S. economy and global economy shrank by 2.2% and 2.9% respectively. If the U.S. economy had grown at the same rate as Taiwan’s that year, it would have been worth an additional \$1 trillion in 2020 alone.

As to legitimacy, Taiwan successfully squared the circle of public health and public liberty. As a result, the nation is an outlier on the global stage in seeing trust in government increase on a sustained basis since 2014. By 2024, trust levels had risen to 70%—more than double the level in the United States.<sup>15</sup>

### Annual GDP Growth Rate (%) by Region: 2017–2022

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Taiwan <sup>16</sup>	2.8	3.1	<b>3.4</b>	6.5	2.4
U.S. <sup>17</sup>	3	2.6	<b>-2.2</b>	6.1	2.5
Global <sup>18</sup>	3.3	2.7	<b>-2.9</b>	6.4	3.4

## Citizen Empowerment as an Agenda for Meaningful Government Transformation

Taiwan’s pandemic response is an expression of a profound transformation in the role of government—one fundamentally rooted in an agenda this report defines as citizen empowerment.

The distinction between this agenda and one of government efficiency is the difference between a genuinely transformative, qualitative shift, and an incremental, quantitative one—however extreme its application. An agenda of technological efficiency accepts the role of government as service provider, delivering for people-as-consumers as cheaply and efficiently as possible. But we need to accept that such “deliverism,” however well-intentioned and efficiently executed, is dead.<sup>19</sup>

By contrast, a citizen empowerment agenda reimagines government as a vehicle for enabling people-as-citizens to achieve outcomes they actually want, individually and collectively, in a way that builds trust in both directions. Such an agenda is rooted in a core design principle of putting more



A selection of the images representing the ideal state of American life and role of government as understood by participants in Worthy Strategy Group research. Credit: Worthy Strategy Group

power in more people's hands. In the words of Taiwanese Minister Without Portfolio Audrey Tang, "We don't want people to trust government. What we want is for government to trust people."

There is strong evidence that a citizen empowerment agenda would be hugely popular in the United States and beyond. The same research company that elicited images of people drowning and being crushed to represent government's existing role also asked respondents to bring images that reflected their ideal government and society. Participants almost universally desired a government that acts as "an assistant to the individual and collective success of Americans." Orchestras, rowing crews, and the Knights of the Round Table were cited by Democrats and Republicans alike, accompanied by explanations such as, ". . . in an orchestra, everybody works together. Everybody has a different job . . . but you're all together . . . You all have a place and a value." Another person said, "When all is well, each one is rowing and helping, they're using whatever assets and resources they have to accomplish the task."<sup>20</sup>

Survey data points in a similar direction: people want a role to play and the support to play it. In fact, 85% of Americans surveyed agree with the statement: "We must invest in America because Americans are worth it. When you invest in Americans, our potential is limitless." But when asked how much they felt like they mattered in America today, 65% answered "not so much" or "not at all." Neither statistic varied significantly by partisan affiliation.<sup>21</sup> More broadly, a 2024 study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on the drivers of trust in public institutions found that "giving people opportunities to have a say in what the government does is essential in building a trusting relationship." The study found strong evidence across its 38 member countries that those who feel they lack a political voice have low trust in government.

However, this is not to say that efficiency is not necessary. A government focused on citizen empowerment will still need efficient systems and processes. There will always be work of this kind to do, and global government operations are certainly outdated. But efficiency is nowhere near sufficient as an agenda for government transformation because a prior question remains. Before you try to do something efficiently, you must ask whether you are doing the right thing at all.

## Citizen Empowerment as an Emerging Agenda

The case for a citizen empowerment agenda is not just a theoretical argument for what should happen; it is also an evidence-based argument, drawing on what is already happening. Taiwan's COVID-19 response is just one example of a kind of government transformation that is emerging across the world—and across the United States, albeit just beneath the surface. The rapid global spread of four citizen empowerment processes demonstrates this rising tide.

### Participatory Budgeting

The participatory budgeting process sees cities (and in one case, a nation) allocating a portion of their annual budget to projects proposed and directly selected by citizens. If elections position citizens as consumers choosing between a fixed set of options to delegate their voice in collective agenda-setting and resource allocation, this process puts a portion of that power back into their hands.

Originating in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in the late 1980s, participatory budgeting now takes place in over 11,000 municipalities around the world. As the process spreads, it demonstrates a vastly underestimated capacity for citizens to organize and exercise sound judgment. Consequently, the amounts of money involved are also increasing. Mexico City now distributes \$50 million a year through the process, Barcelona \$35 million, and Paris \$115 million euros. In 2018, Portugal launched the world's first national-scale participatory budget, building on established processes in municipalities across the country. It is not just Europe and Latin America; Chinese cities from Wenling to Chengdu now run

significant annual budgets this way. Furthermore, it is starting to take hold in the United States: Seattle's People's Budget recently allocated \$27.25 million to projects directly proposed by citizens.

### Citizens' Assemblies

Citizens' assemblies are perhaps best understood in comparison to the well-known "town hall" meeting. While they are similar in some ways, they introduce two important refinements. First, town halls are open to whoever wants to attend. As a result, the loudest voices and the same actors tend to dominate, leading to what some call "turn-up-ocracy." By contrast, participants in a citizens' assembly form a mini public. Invites are sent out at random to many people, then participants are selected from respondents to match the demographics of the wider population. So, if 10% of the population are white men, they will make up 10% of the assembly. As you may realize by picturing images of elected politicians from around the world, this creates a group that's significantly different from other "representative" democratic structures.

Second, town hall meetings have little formal structure. The participants in a citizens' assembly, however, work through three clear phases. First, they learn about the issue, hearing from expert witnesses on all sides (and, in best practice, having the opportunity to call their own). Then, they deliberate with one another. Finally, they put forth their recommendations, which are usually decided upon by elected politicians.

Just like participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies have proliferated across the world. Over the last decade, over 1,000 citizens' assemblies have been held, with countries and cultures as diverse as Japan, Colombia, Ireland, and France leading the way. "Citizens' assemblies are how Ireland gets hard jobs done," says Art O'Leary,<sup>22</sup> a senior civil servant who has been integral in establishing the assembly as a key structure of Irish democracy in recent years. Ireland has developed a constitutional refinement process that convenes an assembly to review and propose changes on a specific issue. These proposals are discussed by the Irish parliament, and then put to a national confirmatory referendum. This has led to the legalization of abortion, the confirmation of marriage equality, and the development of world-leading commitments on biodiversity and climate, all in a traditionally conservative country.

In France, Paris has taken these concepts a step further at the municipal level. The city now hosts a standing citizens' assembly that operates similarly to the upper house of a bicameral parliament, with 100 randomly selected citizens serving 18-month rolling terms to hold the elected council accountable. These citizens have agenda-setting power as well, allowing them to commission citizen-led inquiries into issues of their choice each year. This structure exists with one of the most ambitious participatory budgeting programs in the world, with 100 million euros now allocated annually to projects proposed and selected by Parisian citizens through direct vote.

The United States is not yet a leader in developing citizens' assemblies as new democratic institutions, but in some ways, it's not far off, and the potential is clearly there. Full citizens' assemblies have been constituted at the municipal level across the country. The state of Oregon has established an assembly-like process as part of its Citizen Initiative Review, which convenes a randomly selected group of citizens to draft voter information on ballot options during each election cycle. What's more, in 2019, Dallas, Texas, hosted "America in One Room," arguably the world's largest and most ambitious demonstration of the potential for random selection and deliberation. The event brought together 526 U.S. citizens, randomly selected to represent the national population across all key demographics, for four days of deliberation on 26 policy proposals reflecting the biggest issues of the day. These included the environment, health care, the economy and taxes, foreign policy, and immigration. On 22 of the 26 proposals, those identifying as politically partisan came closer together; perhaps even more significantly, levels of polarization reduced significantly across the group.

### Relational Public Services

Citizen empowerment is not just about democratic innovations like participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies. Turning to public health and safety—and the intersection between the two—the growing field of “relational public services” is quietly transforming bloated and ineffective welfare systems. Today, more than 80 administrations across the world—from the United Kingdom to the Mexican state of Jalisco—are taking steps toward this model.<sup>23</sup>

Conventional transactional approaches in these fields see individuals as service users or consumers, government as the service provider delivering those services, and politicians and civil servants as managers who set targets for speed, cost, and efficiency. By contrast, this work centers on the introduction of one-to-one case workers trained to stand beside individuals and unlock the contributions they can make to their communities (aka citizens).

Local programs using this approach have reduced the annual cost of serving individuals experiencing severe and multiple disadvantages—defined as at least three factors among homelessness, mental ill-health, substance misuse, and violence and abuse—by an average of \$70,000 per person annually.<sup>24</sup> If adopted across all government bodies in England, the potential savings are estimated at \$50 billion.<sup>25</sup> While a smaller portion of these costs falls on the public sector in the United States, a significant share of potential savings lies in reduced prison occupancy. With annual spending on U.S. public prisons and jails exceeding \$80 billion each year across and increasing rapidly, there is a clear case for the value of similar interventions here.

### Community Wealth Building

A citizen empowerment approach can also benefit economic development. Community wealth building seeks to keep money circulating in local economies to the greatest extent possible, promoting local economic resilience and self-determination. Across sectors, local “anchor institutions”—businesses, schools, and hospitals—prioritize other local organizations in their procurement decisions, with a particular focus on cooperatives and other stakeholder-owned, rather than shareholder-owned, structures. The economic argument is less about the absolute amount of wealth generated and more about the “multiplier effect” this model creates, with every dollar worth up to five times more to the local economy than money spent with an organization owned outside the community, such as a multinational corporation.<sup>26</sup>

The government's role in community wealth building is twofold, bridging practice and policy. Government bodies act as anchor institutions, and administrations create incentives and structures that encourage others to do the same, supporting the emergence of more local businesses to meet demand. The approach has been championed by the Democracy Collaborative, a nonprofit based in Cleveland, Ohio, and Washington, D.C. Since it first launched in Cleveland in 2008, it has gradually gained traction across the United States and beyond. The most ambitious work is taking place in Scotland, where the government has recently passed the world's first Community Wealth Building Bill, appointed a minister for community wealth, and given all of its 32 local municipalities a mandate to develop bespoke community wealth building action plans. Several other countries across the world are also promoting this approach, most notably South Korea.

## The DOCE Proposal: Driving Meaningful Government Transformation

In contrast with efforts focused on efficiency, a citizen empowerment agenda offers true transformation. As this approach begins to take hold in the United States and abroad, however, DOGE can still provide useful inspiration. Its scale of ambition, sense of mission and purpose, and structure as a

cross-government unit licensed to intervene across federal infrastructure wherever its teams see fit provide a strong framework. Along with its dramatic public visibility, these attributes can be directed into the real work of designing Departments of Citizen Empowerment (DOCE). These transformation units have the potential to drive genuine, meaningful government transformation, rather than just into shouting “EFF-ICI-EN-CY” louder and slower (while wielding a chainsaw). So, what would DOCE do in practice?

### The Big-Ticket Intervention: DOCE x IRA

The progressive critique that DOGE was “more like theater than engineering” repeats a classic mistake. The drama matters, and it must not be dismissed. In practice, embracing this drama and putting it in service of citizen empowerment suggests a thought experiment: what if a DOCE transformation unit had driven the creation and implementation of the Inflation Reduction Act, arguably the single biggest government intervention in the world since the COVID-19 crisis?

At the core of the Act was a truly massive investment: \$783 billion for energy and climate response, marking the largest investment to addressing climate change in U.S. history. DOCE would have involved the entire U.S. population in this intervention, making it an investment that Americans can build on and around. Just as the Taiwanese treated their COVID-19 response as a crowdsourced national effort, the United States would have leveraged \$783 billion in starter capital. For inspiration, in taking a citizen empowerment approach to the IRA, we might look to two places: the nation of Wales—a small country that, in the words of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “kicks like a mule”—and the U.S. state of Texas.

#### *Inspiration 1: Wales’ Wellbeing of Future Generations Act*

For many decades, Wales’ economic system was dominated by coal mining. Then, in the early 2010s, a group of civil society organizations initiated a wide-ranging national conversation called “The Wales We Want.” They created a series of flagship events alongside a set of tools and resources that enabled individual citizens and community groups to adopt and lead the conversation in their own way. As they did so, these dialogues fed into the bigger, collective exercise of imagining the future of the country. This created the political space for the Welsh government to pass the pioneering Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, paving the way for new political infrastructure in the form of the Commissioner for Future Generations.

Since the Act passed in 2015, every policy emerging from the Welsh Senedd—Wales’ devolved parliament—has been held publicly accountable for its impact. Rather than focusing only on immediate economic growth, the government measures legislation against the health and prosperity of future generations, using seven outcomes derived directly from “The Wales We Want.” Although Wales’ devolved power is limited, with many decisions still made by the U.K. government in Westminster, the Act has enabled the country to diverge significantly from the rest of the United Kingdom. For example, Wales has shaped a national curriculum with ecological stewardship as a core principle, maintained mutual ownership of its water systems while the rest of the U.K. shifted toward private ownership (with disastrous consequences), and prioritized infrastructure such as railway electrification at the direct expense of new road construction.

#### *Inspiration 2: Texas’ Renewable Energy Revolution*

While not widely known, the spiritual home of Big Oil has also become a leader in renewable energy. As of 2020, Texas generated one-quarter of all U.S. wind power; if it were an independent nation, it would rank fifth in the world for wind generation.<sup>27</sup> The story of how this came about is very similar to what happened in Wales. It begins in the late 1990s, when Texans were given the opportunity to engage with the core questions of energy production and consumption over a two-year period—and made it very clear that they were ready for change.

Between 1996 and 1998, eight separate “deliberative polling” studies took place, each involving between 800 and 1,500 citizens randomly selected to represent the state’s key demographics. For each study, participants received a briefing pack approved by a committee representing a cross-section of stakeholders, ranging from fossil fuel executives to environmental campaigners. Then, the entire group convened for a weekend to discuss the issues in facilitated sub-groups of between 12 and 20 people. By the end of the exercise, not only was there a clear mandate to shift investment from fossil fuels to renewables, but citizens also expressed a notable willingness to pay more to make the transition possible. What’s more, their enthusiasm for energy efficiency measures, which would require direct behavioral changes, increased so dramatically that these efforts became even more popular than investment in renewables.

These exercises created the necessary political space for a bipartisan effort involving then-Republican Governor George W. Bush, the Republican public utilities commissioner, and the Democratic leadership of the state senate. Together, they transformed the state’s energy system, making Texas the renewable superpower it is today.

With these inspirations in mind, alongside the four emerging processes of citizen empowerment, we can now turn to the task of revisiting the Inflation Reduction Act.

First, the Act should have been rebranded as the Future Generations Act, building on the success of the Welsh model rather than hiding its power behind an economic frame that purported to prioritize growth above all else. We should not allow the current political climate to convince us that this stance would have been unpopular. According to the Pew Research Center, 69% of the U.S. population favored former President Biden’s goal of carbon neutrality by 2050, while 67% said they would prioritize renewable energy, such as wind and solar, over expanding fossil fuel production.<sup>28</sup> Climate and energy intervention does not need to be hidden behind the language of inflation reduction; it can be loud and proud.

With this foundation, the U.S. Future Generations Act would have challenged the nation to collectively recalibrate the U.S. energy system, or perhaps even reimagine the nation as a whole, through a distributed conversation called “The U.S. We Want.” Then, by merging the deliberative polling in Texas with the structure of Paris’ citizens’ assembly, a randomly selected assembly would have been integrated into the federal governance structure of the Act, working in alliance with a Welsh-style Commissioner for Future Generations.

At the level of states and municipalities, a significant portion of the budget would have been directly allocated through participatory budgeting in each city and state. Local administrations would have been encouraged to supplement these federal funds with their own budgets and to procure goods and services locally to build community wealth. Citizens could also have been offered the opportunity to contribute directly to local initiatives. In the U.K., for instance, a growing wave of “local climate bonds” allow residents to invest money in their local councils to be ringfenced for ecological projects, from rewilding to energy efficiency.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, the focus would have shifted back to the “drama”—specifically, how to launch the Act to the public. Rather than the classic signing ceremony on the Hill, a DOCE-led launch would have introduced the U.S. Future Generations Act through simultaneous events at existing climate and energy sites across the country. By highlighting grassroots initiatives like Minnesota’s Community Solar Gardens and the Sunset Park Solar in New York City,<sup>30</sup> the launch would have celebrated citizen-led action while providing others with an inspirational roadmap to follow.

### The Boring Revolution: DOCE Day-to-Day

Major political moments like the Inflation Reduction Act hold tremendous power to reinforce or alter the direction of society. But they are not sufficient on their own. DOCE units would also need to invest in transforming the daily rituals that threaten to pull government back into the consumer story—the minute-to-minute experiences of every public employee and citizen. The theater and the big-ticket moments matter, but commentators like Geoff Mulgan are not entirely mistaken: the engineering matters too. This is part of what architect and systems thinker Indy Johar calls “the boring revolution.” From this perspective, it becomes clear, too, that there is a strong case for DOCE not just as a national structure but as a model to be replicated at every level of government, from federal and state to city and borough. With that in mind, the search for day-to-day inspiration stretches from Taiwan on the global stage to a deep dive into Decatur, Georgia, a small city on the edge of the Atlanta metropolitan area.

#### *Inspiration 1: Taiwan’s Transformation*

Taiwan’s COVID-19 response did not come out of nowhere; it was the natural progression in a journey to embed participation into the day-to-day culture of government. By the time the crisis hit in early 2020, this transformation had already been underway for several years. It first began in 2014, in the aftermath of student protests, when each central government minister agreed to take on a “reverse mentor” to help them better connect to the next generation. The only criterion for these roles was that the person be under the age of 35, with the minister committing to meet with them at least once a month.

This scheme soon led to other small but significant interventions across government departments. The Ministry of Education, for example, had previously measured national educational performance using the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a framework where literacy and numeracy serve as the benchmarks of success. Now, the Ministry transitioned to a very different model, the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), designed to provide internationally comparable measures of young people’s civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and engagement. At the same time, it established civic education as a mandatory class for all students under age 17. Taiwan now tops the ICCS rankings, and its diplomats regularly champion the model in other countries.

Perhaps most significantly, Taiwan established a new senior civil service role across every government department and agency, known as participation officers. Simultaneously, they actively cultivated the Participation Officer Network as a cross-government community of practice. On its public-facing website, the network lists the three core skills for a participation officer: “Facilitate, Translate, and Record.” They act as a bridge between government and the public, opening up policymaking processes, ensuring all materials are intelligible and accessible, and leading the national commitment to radical transparency, which mandates that every government meeting be on the record by default. Alongside their departmental work, the cohort has collaborated on Taiwan’s annual Presidential Hackathon since 2018. During this event, teams from across the country compete to address a challenge based on the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals, with the winning team receiving funding and resources. In 2020, the participation officers developed many of the key aspects of Taiwan’s COVID-19 response.

#### *Inspiration 2: Decatur’s Deep Commitment*

Decatur, Georgia, is a small city with a population of around 25,000, situated on the northeastern edge of the Atlanta metropolitan area. Like most cities across the United States, its central business district was hit hard in the 1970s, as grocery stores and retailers moved out to newly built suburban malls. At the same time, the construction of a new underground rail station heavily disrupted businesses around the historic Courthouse Square. Like many other cities, Decatur management commissioned a redevelopment plan rooted in economic logic. It proposed demolishing most of the existing historic buildings

around the square and constructing several high-rise office towers in their place—and there the similarity to other cities ended. The community responded with so much outrage that the mayor was hospitalized due to stress.

The plan was thrown out in favor of a new process that sought to crowdsource the vision for Decatur directly from its citizens. This was achieved through an extensive series of town meetings and deliberative “charettes,” a particular deliberative format that brings together opposing views in search of consensus. The designers of citizens’ assemblies have taken significant inspiration from this process, and Decatur has never looked back. With the popular 1982 Town Center Plan as an anchor point, the city retained its buildings and its heritage as it developed. Furthermore, Decatur has regularly revisited the processes involved throughout the years.

In the early 1990s, the Decatur Round Tables channeled citizen input to shape the city’s approach to the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. Additionally, widespread participation influenced the city’s 2000 and 2010 Strategic Plans, and in 2015, the Decatur City Commission created the Better Together Action Plan and corresponding advisory board. Today, the advisory board assists city staff with public outreach and acts as a bridge between city administration and community members—similar to Taiwan’s participation officers. Ten years on, it continues to hold open meetings every month, consistently attracting a strong turnout, with attendees enjoying a mood more akin to a block party than a council meeting.

Decatur publishes a monthly magazine, *Focus*, and has just launched a podcast, “Decatur Minute Live,” which both celebrate community events and activities. The widely publicized Volunteer! Decatur program connects citizens with opportunities in schools, parks, nonprofits, special events, and more. Several times a year, the city runs its eight-week Decatur 101 program, which puts 60 citizens at a time through a structured program to learn “how the City of Decatur works, who does what, and how they can make a difference in their community.”<sup>31</sup> Places are allocated on a first-come-first-served basis, and the program fills up every time. An annual award exists to “honor a public employee who helps strengthen the bond between government and the community.”<sup>32</sup> It is named for city attorney Thomas O. Davis, who played a major role in the 1982 Town Center Plan and “embodied these attributes every day of his distinguished career.” Following his death in 2000, his family were the first recipients of the award.

What can we learn from these examples? Procurement strategies, measurement frameworks, job titles, internal awards, and even media—monthly magazines and podcasts that people actually want to read and listen to—represent the foundational work of building a culture of participation. By embedding the citizen story into every aspect of government, these initiatives rewrite the passive consumer narrative. And there is a wealth of further inspiration that DOCE units at every level can draw on to cultivate the involvement of citizens of all ages, backgrounds, and capabilities.

Indeed, the list of possible DOCE interventions could go on forever, from structural shifts in how we measure societal success to simple, proven tactics that could be adopted almost instantly. There is a credible case for a Citizen Confidence Index as a new economic indicator, based on the connection between an individual’s perceived agency and their economic productivity. In Mexico, the state of Nueva León created an Open Infrastructure platform in 2020. Powered by open data, the system was designed to make it easier for new suppliers to bid on public contracts while enabling citizens to hold those suppliers accountable. As a result, the number of new suppliers rocketed and corruption plummeted.

To return to the central contrast between DOGE and DOCE, the true opportunity of our time is that there is no limit to the potential we can tap into when we embrace the ideas, energy, and resources of everyone. By doing so, we can save money, reclaim our agency in relation to technology, and actually stand a chance of facing our most pressing challenges. The transformation of government that people want and need is not about technology-driven efficiency. It is about citizen empowerment.

## Conclusion

“We lost this election eight years ago . . . There is a straight line between our failure to address the culture and systemic failures of Washington and this election result.”

—Michael Slaby, Barack Obama’s Chief Technology Officer

“I’m pro-life, pro-gun, pro-freedom to live our own lives as we see fit so long as we don’t hurt others. And I’m anti-big government. Our government is way too big, too greedy, too incompetent, too bought, and it’s not ours anymore.”

—Mike Schaff, Tea Party Activist

Both these quotes date from 2016. In the first, Michael Slaby, Barack Obama’s chief technology officer in his 2008 election campaign, reflects on the failure of the administration to move from participatory campaigning to participatory government. The second is from Tea Party activist Mike Schaff, a self-declared Cajun from Louisiana, quoted in sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s “Strangers in Their Own Land.” Schaff, Hochschild discovers, is a passionate environmentalist, active member of his local community, and loving father and husband. He participates as much as possible but comes to feel it has no impact. And so, he turns to the Tea Party—and to the necessity of tearing down “big government”—in a manner that leads us directly to DOGE.

When I discuss these ideas with people in positions of power and influence, it swiftly becomes clear that the greatest barrier to embracing a citizen empowerment agenda is not practicality or process, but cynicism. Too many leaders cling to the lazy story that this would be a perilous path, ultimately seeing citizens as stupid and dangerous. They disguise this skepticism with deliverism: the argument that they just need one more chance to make things happen for people, under the assumption that people have no real desire to be involved. As the cynical saying goes, “Government is like a toilet; it just needs to work.” Then there is that other classic of the consumer story: “It’s the economy, stupid.” But if any of this was ever going to work, it would have worked somewhere in the world by now. Instead, almost every country is at some stage of the same journey of democratic decline. More importantly, such a cynical view is both fundamentally disrespectful of citizens and factually wrong.

Those in positions of power must begin this journey by recognizing the potential in the public and reimagining their role as catalysts who unleash it. One powerful way to signal this shift is to create a Department of Citizen Empowerment and launch it with the fanfare it deserves.

Departments and offices that could act as transformation units already exist around the world, and more are being created, especially at the sub-national scale. Zohran Mamdani’s new Office of Mass Engagement is the most visible effort in the United States, representing a huge opportunity to build on the already existing work of the city’s Civic Engagement Commission. Mexico hosts some of the most interesting examples to date, with Nueva León’s Secretariat of Citizen Participation and Jalisco’s Electoral and Citizen Participation Institute both having real teeth in state governance. The city of Bologna, Italy, has taken arguably the most creative approach to date with its Office of Civic Imagination.

However, none of these existing models seem designed to take on a full citizen empowerment agenda. For the most part, current departments in this field function as additional verticals within government structures, with remits running in parallel to conventional departments like health, education, and transportation. In contrast, DOCE is proposed as a set of cross-administration transformation units. Furthermore, existing offices tend to be restricted to participatory democracy initiatives; while

these are vital, they do not represent the full extent of citizen empowerment as demonstrated by the examples in this essay. There is a very real risk that this results in such teams and departments being reduced to glorified communications units, with the gravitational pull of the old way trapping them in a cycle of tokenistic consultations while the machine of government carries on as before.

Administrations seeking to embrace citizen empowerment should draw direct inspiration from the horizontal structures of DOGE and Taiwan's Participation Officer Network. DOCE units should operate across the administration, working together as a virtual team but spending most of their time interacting with any—and ideally every—department of government. Leaders should make a major, visible commitment to this agenda, providing support in terms both hard (significant budget and resource) and soft (platforming this work at every opportunity).

If this sounds like a major, high-risk intervention, remember the role DOGE and Elon Musk played in the 2024 Presidential Election and the reasons for their popularity. The institutions of government are crumbling, with trust ebbing fast. At this point, incremental investments to test the water are pointless.

Governments need to change, and people need to see and feel that change. Fast.

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