

Connecting citizens to power

Connect.Reflect.Act Talk by Alberto Alemanno, Professor, NYU School of Law, co-founder The Good Lobby

Abstract

Although in 2025 there will be a record breaking number of individuals with higher education, participation and engagement is continually a challenge. With high levels of educational attainment, it is clear that individuals have so much to give; "each of us, all together, as a society" have something to offer. Yet, increasingly there is a trend to be a spectator rather than an engaged actor. There are two common options often suggested to become involved: vote and second run for office. However, both options have limitations and may be out of reach for some. An alternative option for participation is The Good Lobby. The Good Lobby provides a foundation where anyone can be a lobbyist prompting the idea of "lobbying by the citizen for the citizen". Furthermore, this platform matches individuals with NGO's and implements a 'lobbying toolbox' in order to voice concerns louder. Working through an interdisciplinary approach side-by-side with academics, pro bono lawyers, and other professionals, this model delivers projects and is considered a community within itself. Good lobbying is critical as citizens' happiness is at stake: "The reason why citizens should engage more in society is because what is at stake is our own happiness." The Good Lobby helps citizens to engage and participate to work towards an inclusive and happier society.

Everyday people

Jamila is a professional who works as a consultant. As a child she wanted to become a teacher. Hert, worked for the government for 30 years and is now retired. Now he has a lot of free time. Benjamin wanted to become a graphic designer, but ended up studying law. He still has a lot of time... These stories are not uncommon.

They could give much more to society than they currently are allowed to. This is something that should resonate with many of us: feeling restrained

by our job description. As the world professionalises, this dilemma increases. We lose engagement and fail to mobilise our full capacity. We have so much more to give, each of us, all together, as a society. We are increasingly becoming spectators and not actors of life, consumers rather than providers.

Reaching our potential

By the end of the day we feel constrained in our social and political system. This is leading us to a paradox. By 2025 higher education is going to double. This is the largest acceleration in literacy we have ever seen. Yet, we have very easy ways of engaging but thus far this does not translate into full engagement.

The one 'Like' click on Facebook is the beginning of participation and should not be the end. This is because we have so much more to give; each and everyone one of us in our society has something to give. Let's face it, today we are becoming spectators and not engaged. But how do we fix that?

Right now we hear two major options for engaging. First, you can vote. Second you can run for office, and be co-opted with a political party. However, both of these options are limited. Voting requires little effort and running for office is, for most of us, out of reach.

The Good Lobby model

Imagine different forms of engaging into societal activities? The answer is lobbying – lobbying is expressing preferences to make sure what you want. And we know we do not want lobbying to be overtaken by corporations. The good news is that lobbying is no longer solely an option for big corporations.

The fact is, anyone can be a lobbyist. We believe anyone can become a citizen lobbyist: "lobbying by the citizen for the citizen". What we see is doing more and this looks like writing and monitoring politician's behaviour on social media. It is what he calls the "lobbying toolbox".

In the EU, the toolbox is powerful and underused. Only 60 European citizens' initiatives were registered. However, we have many opportunities to equalise the policy process. All these have crowd sourcing expertise in common.

The Good Lobby is a skill-based matching organisation, which brings together people with expertise and knowledge (experts, academics and students) with civil society and NGOs. This matching is done confidentially. In our model: we listen, what the needs of the NGO and then try to connect with the right people and then the Good Lobby team will deliver the project.

The Good Lobby is also a community. Our toolbox is massive online course (on Coursera) and survey – it is ongoing to identify what are the major needs of civil society involved in the EU decision-making process. Basically, we want we do is confidential matching because we don't want to disclose what our NGO projects want to do.

Lobbying for happiness

Why should we lobby? At the end of the day, what is at stake is our own happiness. The major determinants of well-being, is not wealth or status, but making a difference for others and developing a sense of community and belonging. More inclusive societies tend to be happier societies with happier individuals. It is our mission is to make sure that everyone has a seat at the table.