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"Citizens As Analysts" Redux: Revisiting Aaron Wildavsky on Public Participation

Abstract

In 1979, Aaron Wildavsky published a lengthy paper called "Citizens as Analysts" in which he developed his thoughts on public participation. For today's scholars and practitioners from the health sector, this paper is intriguing and attractive. It is intriguing because the author is clear that the ultimate goal of public participation is not the exercise of direct political authority, but instead the development of better policies and more sustainable institutions. While people don't need to participate in every single decision to comply, they need to feel that overall, the process has been designed to take their interests into account. Wildavsky's paper is also attractive because its author dealt upfront with the normative aspects of public participation research. In his view, public participation is one example of a teleological social process, defined by its ends rather than by its initial conditions. Contrary to some current approaches to public deliberation, we are invited to pay more attention to the outcomes of the process than to the process itself.

Keywords

public participation, policy, citizen engagement

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“We shall start. But start what?”

Jean–Luc Godard, *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967)

For policy analysts educated in the twentieth century, the name of Aaron Wildavsky is forever attached to the political analysis of the budgetary process (Jones and McCaffery 1994). Aaron Wildavski is also one of the founders of the discipline of policy analysis, as it exists now, with its unique mix of economics, political science and philosophy, and its relatively serene attitude toward normative issues. During his entire career, Wildavsky insisted that policy analysis is a craft more than a science and never succumbed to the sirens of scientism and the claim that academic research is the only valid representation of social reality. He was among the first experts to notice that most policy initiatives end in failure and to suggest that we can and actually should learn from these experiences – a helpful antidote against the field’s obsession with so-called *best practices*.

In 1979, he published a lengthy paper called “Citizens as Analysts” (quoted here as “Citizens”), in which he developed his thoughts on public participation (Wildavsky 1987, 252-279). These thoughts had been on his mind for a while and it is noteworthy that a portion of the paper and some of the ideas had already been presented in his 1964 essay on *Leadership in a Small Town* (Wildavsky 1964). Like many of his contributions, the paper is overflowing with concepts, intuitions and other observations. Wildavsky has explained elsewhere how he wrote his innumerable books and papers, dictating most of them before seeing them in draft, cutting and pasting, adding and subtracting, hearing out the critiques and suggestions of his many friends and students (Wildavsky 1993).

For today’s scholars and practitioners from the health sector, Wildavsky’s seminal paper on public participation is both intriguing and attractive. It is intriguing because the author is clear that the ultimate goal of public participation is not what he called, tongue in cheek, a “permanent revolution,” the exercise of direct political authority. Shelly Arnstein’s 1969 famous paper on the “ladder” of public participation, with its focus on the exercise of political power, has enticed an entire generation of researchers to look at citizen engagement from this unique but narrow viewpoint (Arnstein 1969; Forest et al. 2003). Wildavsky’s approach, without being in any way politically naïve, opens the way to a more just and nuanced vision of public participation. And the paper is still quite attractive because Wildavsky dealt up front with the normative aspects of public participation research. As he stated rather bluntly: “Whatever else policy analysts may be ..., they should be advocates of citizen participation” (“Citizens,” 255). While some may find this relationship between research and advocacy too close for comfort, Wildavsky viewed it is a healthy and unavoidable characteristic of social and political analysis in this area.

Consultations in the health sector

Over the past few decades, health policymakers have turned to “public deliberation” to inform the development of ethically charged policies related to complex issues such as pandemic planning, health technology assessment, and other controversies in bio-ethics and health policy. In Canada, governments have made extensive use of public engagement on health topics, for instance, establishing Royal Commissions to debate whether to enable assisted human reproduction using reproductive technologies as well as to examine health care funding and

health care delivery reform (McTeer 1999; Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada 2001). National public consultations were conducted in each case to take the pulse of public sentiment before developing recommendations that might lead to a new policy approach. Several Canadian provinces have adopted legislation that directs health policy makers to consult with stakeholders and the broader public, resulting in the creation of new citizen deliberation bodies to inform pharmaceutical policy decisions (in Ontario) and the assessment of health system performance (in Quebec). The use of a “Citizen Council” by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) in the English NHS has been widely studied and replicated (Fung 2010).

In their succinct analysis of the effectiveness of citizen engagement in the health field, “The Future of Public Deliberation on Health Issues,” Abelson and colleagues (2012, 15) contend that the successful implementation of transformative, values-based decision-making is most likely to occur under very specific conditions: “Just as there are windows of opportunity for pushing certain policy proposals to the fore, there are also more or less ideal circumstances in which public deliberation might be encouraged and promoted.” They conclude that “their influence is likely to be greater in situations where policy-makers are interested in public opinion that is more ‘authentically’ connected to citizens’ interests and values – as often happens in the development of local health system programs and policies.”

The benefits of public participation

The arguments in Wildavsky’s “Citizens” rest on the combination of two distinct analytical threads. One is the assertion that public policy benefits from public participation: “Many policies stand a better chance of success ... if citizens have real choices and the right to choose” (“Citizens,” 255). The other is the assurance that a better citizenry emerges from the experience of policy engagement. The paper is built on the premise that one is not necessarily born a citizen, but must develop into one. Wildavsky insists that citizenship requires autonomy, a sense of reciprocity and “the ability to test and alter preferences,” all qualities that public participation might enhance.

The notion that public programs cannot succeed, nor public institutions survive, without the active collaboration of “ordinary people” is not something one often finds in the literature. This gap arises, in part, because we prefer to conceive policies in terms of *needs* rather than *wants*. Needs are better defined by experts, on the basis of knowledge and data, whereas wants are perceived as ever-changing, subject to the influence of political campaigning and media manipulation. Recently, a new field of behavioral economics has flourished, arguing that good public policy must in fact make us want what we *really* need and that it should, therefore, *nudge* us into doing what is good for ourselves, from proper eating to picking the right health plan (Thaler and Sunstein 2008; Oliver 2013; Forest 2013).

It won’t surprise anyone to hear that the experts and the public sometimes conflict over a policy issue. In North America, it has become a trademark of conservative parties to characterize liberal policies as the creation of self-serving experts, ignorant of the wishes of ordinary citizens. On the left, although everyone is favorable in principle to the values of deliberation and participation in the name of democracy, doubt persists that the “mere” expression of opinion can be a substitute for the informed analysis that precedes good decision-making. As the French

philosopher René Descartes stated long ago in his *Fourth Meditation*, once reason has properly established the right course of action, why would there be any need for choice?

The debate is not without interest. Daniel Yankelovich has written brilliantly on the need for policymakers to reconcile experts and citizens before coming to any major decision and has designed his own approach to public “dialogue” precisely to achieve this outcome (Yankelovich 1991; 1999). But Wildavsky had his sights set on a different problem. Following a strong tradition in policy analysis, he insisted on the importance of public involvement in policy implementation and posited that participation in the original decision was in fact a condition for compliance. Consent is an important aspect of any system of social action, especially in an open democratic society, and it is best achieved through consultation and engagement.

More recently, researchers have come to a quite similar conclusion, although by a different route (Abelson et al. 2003; Forest et al. 2004). Studies have established that citizen participation contributes to the legitimacy of public institutions because it helps develop an essential sentiment of “ownership.” People don’t need to participate in every single decision to comply, but they need to feel that, overall, the process has been designed to take their interests into account. Theories of political representation have tried to capture this idea for centuries: citizens do not necessarily expect to actively rule themselves, but want their “voices, opinions, and perspectives” to be an integral part of any deliberation that may affect them (Dovi 2006). Governments attempting to overhaul well-established policies or to initiate new programs without taking this into account would often experience a drop in their legitimacy.

A lifecycle approach to public engagement

A point raised by Wildavsky in relation with this question is worth mentioning. In a unusually amusing passage, he mocks a fictional couple – “Mr. and Mrs. Model Citizen” – for their total devotion to public engagement, which makes them neglect everything else in their life, from educating their children to ensuring their own economic welfare: “To sacrifice private life on the altar of citizen participation seems excessive; helping society by contributing to its social problems seems odd” (“Citizens,” 257). Indeed, no one should be expected to participate in every debate, all the time. On the contrary, the “normal” expectation, outside of participation in elections and other formal political processes, should be of limited engagement, for limited periods of time, and on specific issues. The rest of the time, democratic mechanisms that provide representation and accountability ought to be sufficient for most people.

We hear every day about citizens temporarily mobilizing to protest the closure of a hospital or a factory or to oppose the construction of a maligned public facility in their “backyard.” Wildavsky likely would not have been surprised to learn that a given individual, rather than committing forever to health or community planning, for example, would express instead only transient interests, reflecting changing priorities over a lifetime.

In reality, the expectation that citizens will devote themselves constantly and exclusively to one domain or one set of issues – health, education, public safety, urban design, etc. – might well be one of the worst fallacies in this field of practice. When it holds sway, it causes decision-makers and their helpers to underestimate the participants’ determination to actually engage in a

meaningful exercise and to undervalue their preparation for doing so, as they may come with skills and abilities acquired in another sector.

An argument could even be made that, in theory, a participant might well have a better understanding of the difficult trade-offs between different valuable public goods than the people directly involved in a particular field. Most public engagement exercises are by necessity quite focused, and the organizers of such exercises face a dilemma that is not unlike the centuries-old problem faced by geographers when they design maps (Becker 2007, 94-95). Because it is not possible to eliminate all the distortion in any given projection, one tries as much as possible to minimize it where it counts, at the expense of more distortion “in a region of or off the map where distortion is less important” (Snyder 1993, 1). Usually, a consultation on resource allocation in health care will not seriously consider how the options under discussion impact other sectors. “Ordinary” citizens might know better.

The vision of a citizen educating him- or herself in different areas of collective action is probably a little too optimistic. In real life, some people “stick” to one domain, while others never pursue the experiment beyond the one problem that mobilized them in the first place. Wildavsky would agree that many people do not have any kind of interest in public issues:

Individuals in the United States can get wonderful jobs, marry, have happy families, and do creative work without ever taking an interest in the public realm. Primary satisfactions for most citizens do not ordinarily lie in political life; basic needs are met or thwarted on the job, in the home, among friends, and the like. (“Citizens,” 253)

This viewpoint goes against a long philosophical tradition that conceives of public participation as an irresistible human drive. For centuries, it has been accepted that engagement in the public sphere is a necessary condition for accomplishment as a citizen, if not as a human being – aren’t we supposed to be “political animals,” as Aristotle reputedly asserted? But if there is no such fundamental impulse, as Wildavsky seems to believe, if civic activity is just one among many, the perspective is quite different. It implies that public engagement has to be made attractive and worthwhile to successfully compete with other important human activities. It also means that participants must have some preparation to ensure they can meaningfully engage in the process, from basic civic education to specialized information about the issues at stake.

Education and information

The attractiveness of public engagement probably has less to do with technology and colorful widgets than with respect and openness. As Bernard Crick aptly put it, in the context of a discussion of civic education: “Academic debate about the concept of citizenship almost always assumes the mantle of democratic principles and institutions and the practices of a free citizenry” (Crick 2002, 495). Wildavsky was not immune to this particular bias, of course, but he insisted that public engagement and citizenry develop together.

Authentic engagement should bring some awareness of the consequences for other fellow citizens of one’s choices and preferences. Reciprocally, educated citizens are better prepared to engage in debates about policy options, if only because they are able to go beyond their

immediate interests. There is empirical evidence in support of this approach. Public engagement processes that are designed to facilitate dialogue and mutual learning truly enhance participants' understanding of other people's perspectives. The same processes also encourage participants to coalesce around solutions that are more balanced and more inclusive. In effect, methods and approaches that do not include a feedback mechanism should probably not qualify as authentic public participation processes. Instead, they belong to a universe of polls and surveys, dominated by "public opinion" – which is in essence atomized, artificial and shortsighted – rather than by "public judgment" (Bourdieu 1973; Yankelovich 1991).

One essential difference between Wildavsky's conception of public participation and most current approaches is the role he ascribed to participants with regard to information: what they must know before entering the discussion on a given issue. He was so serious about the notion of citizens as "analysts" that he actually devised a process by which participants could acquire sound and relevant knowledge on their own, independently of any parties to the policy debate. While policy analysts agonize about the depth and breadth of the information provided to participants, not to mention its objectivity, Wildavsky imagined that it was up to the participants themselves to prepare for the discussion: "For there are few issues (and none of primary importance, in my opinion) that cannot be mastered once the citizen has discovered the relevant literature" ("Citizens," 258).

Years before the so-called Age of the Internet, this confidence in the capacity of ordinary citizens to inform themselves on difficult technical issues is no less than stunning. In other publications (Wildavsky 1995; 1993; 1991), Wildavsky even took the time to explain where he thought a potential participant should go to find the appropriate documentation (literature reviews and specialized indexes), what he or she should read (scientific papers), and to what purpose: "Your task is to use the knowledge you have accumulated to help yourself and your fellow citizens to improve their judgments about what ought and ought not be done" (Wildavsky 1989, 153). There was a middle-class bias attached to this vision, no doubt, but the underlying message is still very relevant.

The challenge today is not ensuring that the public has adequate access to information; with the Internet, that is a given. The problem lies in what information citizens seek and how it is used. Wildavsky was writing at a time when the quest for information required the use of index cards and the support of a qualified librarian, sensitive to what we now call "the hierarchy of evidence." After roughly 15 years of experience with web searching, it has become apparent that many people seek out only the information that validates their existing beliefs. As one example, those convinced that vaccines cause autism can find a host of web domains where like-minded individuals share their views and exchange purported facts to justify refusing to immunize their children. No amount of contradictory scientific evidence, available on reputable health information websites, will dissuade them from their conviction that vaccines are evil and to be avoided at all costs. Similarly, those who fear potential brain damage from the use of cell phones or the deleterious health effects of living in close proximity to electrical grids can find confirmation of their beliefs on numerous bloggers' sites.

One common objection to public participation is that the options that are presented somehow hinder the discussion, as if participants were limited in their deliberations to the information provided by the organizers (Weinstock 2003). But it is an error to believe that

participants enter into a debate without any form of preparation; on the contrary, they sometimes demonstrate real sophistication, especially if the issue is a central or essential common good like health or education.

A further aspect of Wildavsky's conception of public participation is worth mentioning in the context of this discussion of information and participant preparation. He was adamant that such an investment of time and effort, taking people away from other essential endeavors, could not be expended indefinitely. As a matter of principle, citizens should be spared intervening in a policy decision unless it concerned "fundamentally important changes" ("Citizens," 264). This category includes decisions that are irreversible or involve massive transfers of resources. More interestingly, it also includes decisions that radically alter "the pattern of relationship between participants."

The examples given by Wildavsky – privatization of the postal service, establishment of a national health service in the USA, and generalization of a voucher system for public schools – are quite telling in that regard. The three cases imply real choices and a very different deal for participants, depending on the outcome.

Participation is serious business

Well-prepared citizens will not engage lightly. They know beforehand that the issue at stake is complex and multi-sided. They are aware of the potential consequences of any decision and they have weighed how alternate courses of action may differently impact their communities. They are ready to argue, but they are also prepared to listen and to compromise, especially if their viewpoint is taken seriously. In the very first "Citizens' Dialogue" on the future of the Canadian health care system in 2001, an argument developed in the senior team around the use of the word *equity* in the material presented to participants, because some members were convinced it was "too abstract" or, worse yet, "too academic." Inevitably, the first participant to raise her hand that morning was a diminutive elderly woman who used the word "equity" in her very first sentence and developed a subtle argument on accessibility of primary care (Maxwell et al. 2003).

We all know of public engagement exercises that are neither public nor engaging. Hearings are held during working hours, on weekdays; participants are required to table a written summary in advance of their presentation or might be subjected to questions from insiders or stakeholders. We also know of consultations made well after the decision has been set. It is a familiar experience to observe experts contemptuously lecturing citizens who have expressed an opinion that goes against received knowledge. And most of us have participated, more or less willingly, in the design and organization of processes that we knew would have no impact other than a broad reference to public consultation and support somewhere in the introduction of a report.

Clearly, all these examples are a travesty of citizen engagement. If it is the case that sound and truthful participation encourages public ownership of institutions, the opposite might even be truer: bogus engagement fosters alienation and diffidence. In a democracy, as Wildavsky would have insisted, this has deep consequences. When public preferences are ignored, when policy-making is abandoned to "technicians" ("Citizens," 265), it becomes more and more difficult to

detect failures and correct errors. It is also much less probable that policies requiring consent and individual commitment will succeed.

How can it be determined whether a given process is serious? Or that a particular opportunity to engage is authentic? Wildavsky's suggestion is that participants be allowed to discuss both objectives and resources. Real choices imply real preferences, and real preferences, by definition, require judging the objectives of a given decision. This is quite an exacting condition. Most organizations enter the consultation phase of the policy development process once the objectives have been defined. Anyone who questions the objectives runs the risk of being cast as an "opponent," unable to contribute anything positive or "constructive" to the process. It is more or less the same every time someone wants to question the proposed allocation of resources, or more accurately, the general direction in which public spending is supposed to go, as this is usually taken as a given by bureaucrats. In a recent example in the Canadian province of Ontario, this is how one official from a regional health care organization justified the decision to exclude the public from board meetings it was entitled to attend: "Clearly, you don't want to have a meeting about two- and three-per-cent cuts when, in fact, they won't come to pass" (Tam 2010).

The test for the seriousness of citizen participation should have more to do with what happens when the deliberation is over and a conclusion has been reached than with the process itself, although Wildavsky's notion of preparedness and arguments about citizens' right to question everything they deem important is intriguing. When decision-makers ask the public a question about a policy or the future of an institution, they must be ready to listen to the answer – however unpleasant or incorrect it might sound – and committed to act according to the recommendation. When citizen engagement is framed in this manner at the beginning of the process, chances are that participants will be better prepared, that intelligent questions will be asked, that reasonable options will be presented and that a thoughtful compromise will be formulated.

Public participation is one example of a teleological social process, defined by its ends rather than by its initial conditions. This explains why low-cost experiences in which the process is more or less improvised by its organizers sometimes succeed where sophisticated approaches backed by cutting-edge technology sometimes end up with platitudes and impractical solutions.

Analysis as moral development

Aaron Wildavsky thought and wrote that policy analysts should promote public participation as a means to achieve better policy. This was a far cry from the usual stance on analytical neutrality favored by the profession, not to mention the claims of scientific objectivity overheard from time to time in academic political science and economics departments. For Wildavsky, analysts are not neutral and should not be. On the contrary, they must engage in making public participation meaningful, efficient and fruitful.

Overall, this position is not unheard of in epistemic debates in the social sciences and the humanities, where social responsibility has been a traditional stance, especially on the left or liberal side of the political spectrum. In fact, studying public participation is not so very different

from studying voting and electoral behavior, one of the three or four original domains of political science when it was established as a discipline.

The point has already been made a few times (Gunnell 1988; Ricci 1984) and reinforced by Eric Landowski in his analysis of the work of the French political scientist André Siegfried, the founder of “electoral geography,” as the longitudinal study of voting patterns was first known (Landowski 1979). To put things simply, we cannot understand the significance of an election if, in the first place, each individual vote has no meaning by itself – for example, as an expression of religion, race, social class, gender or even mere economic self-interest. It is because the voter is performing a meaningful gesture that the analyst can say something about the aggregated effect of many voters behaving in the same manner, using the ballot box as a vehicle for expressing their expectations, hopes and grievances. In the same time, importantly, the same analyst must admit that political power effectively proceeds from the popular vote. Bringing legitimacy to a particular political practice or institution is a normative endeavor and it is intrinsic to the analysis of voting and elections.

A similar reasoning holds true for public participation. If it is meaningless, as some of its critics argue, not much can be said about it. At best, someone may try to assess the degree of manipulation supposedly involved in the exercise. But if the process is meaningful, if participants engage for real, one cannot but find him- or herself compromised in defending the principle at the same time he or she attempts to understand the process and to evaluate its outcomes. Studying citizen engagement implies the recognition that ordinary citizens are competent to judge public issues, that they can express themselves efficiently and truthfully, and that they are able to consider the consequences of a particular option for others, as well as the costs and benefits for them. The study of public participation is intrinsically a celebration of citizenship.

It is probable that Wildavsky had even more on his mind when he wrote that policy analysis should be conducted as a “moral development” (“Citizens,” 271). For example, he insisted that the analyst should not retreat from questioning values and objectives:

If we can reason about means but not ends, if humanity is doomed to apply reasonable means to nonrational (that is, uninspectable) ends, there can be no policy analysis because the analysis involves changing preferences as well as potential actions. To commend a program means to recommend a new combination of both means and ends. (“Citizens,” 272)

While good public policy (which is a normative concept in itself) is clearly the product of facts and evidence, it is just as clear that it is primarily built on values. It is the intentional structuring of the Romanow Commission to insure that public values and scientific evidence will converge that explains the large consensus around the final report (McIntosh and Forest 2010). Therefore, far from being an inconvenience or a mere by-product, normative assessment of policy options is a central feature of policy analysis. In the same way that “real” participation entails citizens debating policy objectives, “real” analysis implies that the values underlying decisions must be properly identified and, if necessary, subject to assessment and revision.

Interaction as a social contract

In fact, although citizens are perfectly apt at debating preferences, including value preferences, it might be argued that normative analysis of public policy is better left to professional judgment. To borrow a term from Howard Becker (2007, 133), value orientations can be “insidious,” imposing themselves by stealth on policies and institutions. Facts, for example, do not exist independently of theories and frameworks and should not be “used” without precautions. It would be irresponsible to expect members of the public – even well prepared citizens – to be fully aware of the way, valid or otherwise, those facts were produced. In fact, it might even be irresponsible to expect experts to know all the tricks or to be able to challenge the validity of every datum. As social scientists established some time ago, even a skeptical scientist still has to accept most facts, methods and instruments as a given, a collection of “black boxes” that one dare not open (Latour 1987).

Wildavsky likely envisioned something like a collaborative relationship between ordinary citizens and analysts, with each side providing its own particular type of expertise, but with everyone sharing the same basic trust in democracy and collective decision-making.

Citizens are not “analysts” in isolation. They become such when they enter into a structured relationship with fellow participants, based on (moral) norms such as respect for knowledge, attention to others and willingness to learn. Furthermore, while it is essential to take citizen experience and preferences seriously, it also very clear that more formal strains of evidence cannot be ignored or dismissed. Wildavsky’s position was a call for the constitution, through participatory processes, of knowledge-based decision-making communities, not a plea for “folk wisdom.”

When the goal is to make good collective decisions, sound public choices, it matters that real evidence, based on a deep understanding of causes and consequences, be made available. It also matters for experts to be aware of the social and political context in which the issue is, by necessity, embedded. Hence, what is suggested is a sort of social contract to give science and politics a chance to communicate.

Public participation should never become an occasion to oppose general opinion and evidence. On one hand, there is a need to recognize that citizens are able to understand technical (or scientific) matters and discuss technical (or scientific) matters. But on the other hand, it is as important to understand that being capable of an informed *interaction* is not the same as actually contributing to the advancement of science and technology: it is only a particular type of expertise, valid but limited (Collins & Evans 2007).

Public deliberation *and* democracy

To quote Wildavsky once more:

The temptation of the analyst is to treat citizens as objects. By depriving people of autonomy in thought (their consciousness is false, their experience invalid), it is possible to deny them citizenship in action. (“Citizens,” 277)

It is helpful to remember that the notion of citizenship embraces conscious, deliberate (public) action. In a democracy, citizenship cannot be limited to the right and practice of deliberation; it must include the capacity to act, directly or not, in accordance with what has come out of the deliberation. But, undoubtedly, the most important word in that quote was “thought.” Inviting citizens to engage in policy-making is to create “a space that allows thought” (Kingwell 2008).

Mark Kingwell has been “defending the political virtue of civility in spaces both academic and popular, public and private, for almost fifteen years” (Kingwell 2010, 26). Like Wildavsky, he sees a relationship between civility and citizenship. Citizen engagement without civility might be a necessity sometimes (Forest 2013b). But in most cases, it would look and sound like the public consultations held in the United States prior to the health reform; or like what the French experienced when their government invited them to debate national identity; or like what we have to endure in Canada every time religion and liberties are associated (or not) in a single sentence, from Quebec to British Columbia.

Deliberation won’t cure society of incivility, any more than it can resolve structural injustices and inequalities, or restore a state of affairs in which decisions reflect not only general opinion (which is easy) but also the common good. In effect, to become *analysts* who participate on an equal footing in decisions that affect their lives and the future of their communities, citizens need a social and political environment where trust, tolerance and respect already exist to a good degree. In brief, to use an expression with a lot of currency in today’s world of public policy, meaningful public participation requires a *strong* society.

Revisiting Wildavsky’s “Citizens as Analysts” underlines that we expect both too much and too little from public participation. We expect too much, especially when we agree to engage, as experts or as participants, in processes that have no real endpoint. The notion that we might be able to pull a society out of its misery by its proverbial bootstraps just because we collectively get into a conversation is preposterous at best. When debated in the public arena, a wide number of issues, from abortion to assisted suicide, and from vaccines to the surgical treatment of cerebrospinal venous insufficiency, tend to generate more rather than less polarization.

Deliberation without decision is often a farce and, in some cases, a tragedy, fostering the alienation it was supposed to combat (Kettering Foundation 2010; Matthews 1999; Blacksher et al. 2012). We expect too little because we give in too easily to the fallacy that citizens cannot be effective unless we hold their hands, or that they come to the discussion naïve and unprepared. Let us assume instead that they know *where* to start.

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