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## What We're Talking About When We Talk About the "Civic Field" (And why we should clarify what we mean)

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# What We're Talking About When We Talk About the "Civic Field" (And why we should clarify what we mean)

## **Abstract**

The field of public engagement is experiencing a harmful identity crisis. While advocates of public participation may all agree that our work relates somehow to democracy, we have not established or articulated a common vision of what that really means. This lack of clarity has dire consequences, producing rifts between academics and practitioners, community organizers and deliberative democrats, civic technologists and dialogue practitioners, policy advocates and consensus-builders. Worst of all, the lack of clarity about democracy provides no help to people who are trying to create sustainable, participatory political systems in Egypt, Thailand, Ukraine, and many other countries. None of the participatory tactics and assets we have developed will reach their full potential if we don't admit, to ourselves and the world, their true significance: these aren't just props for conventional processes, but building blocks for new political systems.

## **Keywords**

deliberation, democracy, civic life

**de·moc·ra·cy**

[dih-mok-ruh-see]

*noun, plural* de·moc·ra·cies.

1. government by the people; a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system.
2. a state having such a form of government.
3. a state of society characterized by formal equality of rights and privileges.
4. political or social equality; democratic spirit.
5. the common people of a community as distinguished from any privileged class; the common people with respect to their political power (dictionary.com).

I have just celebrated my 20<sup>th</sup> year in this field, and I am justifiably proud of what we, collectively, have accomplished. However, I am puzzled, dismayed, and a little ashamed that we still aren't sure what to call ourselves. The names we most often use – public deliberation, civic engagement, public participation – are dry terms that refer to dull-sounding activities, and it is often unclear what people mean by them.

This is a point of confusion, but it is more than just a language problem or a marketing challenge. The real issue is that while we may all agree that our work relates somehow to democracy, we have not established – or, at least, we have not articulated – a common vision of what that really means.

To the rest of the world, and perhaps to ourselves, we seem to be engaging citizens within the confines of a primarily representative system, in which almost all of the decisions continue to be made by elected officials. But aren't we in fact trying to create a political infrastructure that provides citizens with meaningful, powerful opportunities to help make decisions and solve problems? Fundamentally, do we want a system that is small 'r' republican, or one that is also small 'd' democratic?

Our dry activity-terms, like participation, engagement, and deliberation, imply the former, but the successes and limitations of our work point us toward the latter. Our work demonstrates that all kinds of people are ready for meaningful opportunities to make public decisions and solve public problems (Hoene 2013, Leighninger 2006). It shows the practicality of a political system where the "supreme power is vested in the people," where citizens have both formal and actual equality, where power can be "exercised directly" by "common people." Our work also demonstrates that primarily republican systems of government are largely inadequate for responding to and capitalizing on that new citizen energy.

As a generator of quality public input to republican government, our field has failed to break through – not because the input is of poor quality, but because the political system generally can't accommodate it (Gaventa 2010, Nabatchi 2011). As a demonstration of how people and public institutions can relate humanely, equitably, and productively, our field is a source of lessons, ideas, and hope (Fagotto 2009).

This lack of a clear vision about the relationship between our work and the political system has dire consequences. It has produced rifts and misunderstandings between academics and practitioners, community organizers and deliberative democrats, civic technologists and dialogue practitioners, policy advocates and consensus-builders. It divides people on the left from those on the right, and the supposedly ‘advanced’ countries of the Global North from the more democratically innovative nations of the Global South. It helps perpetuate official processes that claim to uphold democratic governance but in fact hamper and discourage it. Worst of all, the lack of clarity about democracy provides no help to people who are trying to create sustainable, participatory political systems in Egypt, Thailand, Ukraine, and many other countries (Benhabib 2013, Gaventa 2010).

### **‘Thick’ and ‘thin’ participation: Democratic tactics in search of a democratic system**

Our inability to articulate the end goal of our field is made more challenging by the fact that we have so many different starting points. People in a wide range of fields and professions – including public management, planning, education, journalism, disaster preparedness, human relations, community development, conflict resolution, health, and public finance – have developed successful tactics for helping citizens make decisions, solve problems, and build community.

Some of these tactics produce participation that is ‘thick’ in that it is intensive, informed, and deliberative. Organizers assemble large and diverse numbers of people; give participants chances to share their experiences; present them with a range of views or policy options; and encourage action and change at multiple levels. Two of the most prominent examples of thick engagement are Portsmouth Listens in New Hampshire and Participatory Budgeting in Chicago’s 49<sup>th</sup> Ward.

‘Thin’ participation is faster, easier, and potentially viral. It encompasses a range of activities that allow people to express their opinions, make choices, or affiliate themselves with a particular group or cause. The defeat of the Stop Online Piracy Act/Protect Intellectual Property Act (SOPA/PIPA) is perhaps the best-known example of thin engagement (Fung 2013).

Thick participation opportunities are more likely to be face-to-face, and thin ones happen more often online. But most thick processes now include both online and face-to-face elements, and there are certainly examples of thin participation (signing a petition, for example) that existed long before the Internet.

Both categories of participation are responses to, and attempts to capitalize on, the new expectations and capacities of citizens (Leighninger 2009). The most promising direction for innovation may be to find ways of combining the best features of thick and thin – the recent “Text, Talk, and Act” process in the National Dialogue on Mental Health is one example (Leighninger 2013).

These are all democratic tactics. Perhaps their most fundamental – and encouraging – impact is on the participants themselves: people enjoy them. They value these opportunities to be heard, to belong, to make a difference. Both thick and thin participation tactics have achieved significant policy outcomes when there are sufficiently large and diverse numbers of people involved, and when the timing is right in the policymaking process.

But these democratic tactics are out of place in our primarily republican systems. They are rarely sustained or embedded. Public officials are often not willing or able to implement the policy recommendations they generate. Thick and thin participation practices are demonstrations of the virtues of democratic organizing and communication – but they do not by themselves “democratize democracy,” as Carole Pateman (2012) has put it.

The result of this mismatch between tactics and system, compounded by our inability to articulate the full meaning of our work, is that our field is misunderstood even by our potential allies:

- The “civic technologists” who have pioneered most of the new online forms of thin participation have repeated some of the same mistakes we have made, producing innovative apps and tools that often falter because they have not been incorporated in a larger plan or infrastructure for participation.
- Some scholars continue to equate “deliberative democracy” with exorbitantly expensive, highly facilitated processes in which a small, scientifically assembled microcosm of the public spends many days deliberating on a policy issue before issuing recommendations to public officials.
- Many people who describe themselves as community organizers see our field as simply an alternative form of advocacy – one that emphasizes friendly, urbane conversations and suppresses questions of power. Ironically, when I interviewed leading community organizers, I found they had the same frustrations about the limitations of their work, and the same zeal to transform systems, as I do (Leighninger 2010).
- Participation advocates and practitioners in the Global South, who have pioneered Participatory Budgeting and many other dynamic (and in some cases, sustained) forms of participation, do not sense a similarly democratic energy in the countries of the North – and many of us in the North do not realize how much we can learn from civic innovations in the South.
- People on the right often see participation processes as stalking horses for a Progressive, ‘big government’ agenda; they do not realize that our work upholds the problem-solving capacity of citizens. People on the left do not realize – or are not comfortable with – the fact that our work challenges the expert orientation to governance that took over during the Progressive Era a century ago.

Our conversations with these potential allies tend to focus on tactics. We should instead be focusing on strategies and systems – not because we are likely to agree on every aspect of the democracy we want, but because the dialogue is more likely to be clear, constructive, and consequential.

### **Fake democracy: The corrosive effect of conventional participation processes**

Meanwhile, even though the work of our field has proliferated and diversified, the most conventional, outdated forms of public participation still predominate at every level of government. For most people, most of the time, the only ways to take part in public decision-making are public hearings, advisory committees, and 30-day public comment periods.

Unlike the more productive forms of participation, these conventional processes are not supported by proactive, network-based recruitment. They typically do not allow people to be heard, except in three-minute increments at an open microphone during a public meeting. They tend to frustrate both citizens and public officials (Pearce and Pearce 2010).

In our work, we have typically thought of conventional participation as a necessary hindrance; we have often organized deliberative meetings as a way to augment or work around the official ones. But conventional participation processes are far more damaging and costly than we realize. Because they require time and resources to organize, they divert public officials and employees from more productive pursuits. Because they erode trust and communication, they make public problem-solving more difficult. And because they damage the relationship between citizens and government, they may also have an impact on tax revenues and the financial sustainability of public institutions.

Furthermore, because these conventional processes are so much more common than the more productive forms of engagement and deliberation, and because in many cases they are required by law or at least entrenched in the way governments function, they dominate people's perceptions of terms like "public participation."

So as we struggle as a field to describe our work, the continuation of conventional participation makes citizens less receptive to any interaction with public institutions, and erodes their faith in democracy – because, ironically, the "democracy" they've experienced isn't actually democracy at all (Peixoto 2014, Anderson 1998).

Similarly, the "democracy" we attempt to export to other countries follows this same, weak, primarily republican formula of elections, hearings, and committees. It does not sustain the participation, enthusiasm, or power of Egyptians, Thais, or Ukrainians any more than it appeals to Americans.

Authoritarian regimes have repeatedly been toppled by the commitment, ingenuity, and self-sacrifice of people who use democratic tactics – both thick and thin – to mobilize their neighbors and fellow citizens. But these democratic movements seldom produce democratic systems: in most of these new regimes, the main opportunity for participation is at the ballot box. People who had a range of options for deliberation, negotiation, and public work while they were trying to overthrow the government are confined to the conventional formats once their revolution succeeds. Our romantic view of democratic movements like the Arab Spring is that protesters become citizens; in fact, what happens is that citizens become protesters.

### **What kind of democracy do we want?**

In a sense, we have already done the hard part: as a field, we have established that large, diverse numbers of people have the capacity and appetite for genuinely democratic experiences. We have a wide variety of successful methods and processes (both thick and thin), and a good sense of the essential skills in public participation. From both academic research and anecdotal experience, we know why people will, and will not, participate in public life (Neblo 2010).

We even have some of the elements we might need for a more durable democratic infrastructure: model ordinances for participation (*Making Participation Legal* 2013), online mapping platforms that allow people to take stock of their civic assets (Pollak 2011), youth councils that tap into the capacity of young people to be engagement leaders (Carlson 2010), and crowdsourcing platforms (Patel 2013), neighborhood mini-grant programs (Diers 2008), and other tools for supporting collaborative public work.

We are also aided by the fact that citizens are more connected than ever to one another and to the places where they live. Steve Clift estimates that over 15% of Americans belong to some kind of hyperlocal online forum, ranging from simple listservs and Facebook groups to platforms set up by groups like NextDoor and e-democracy.org. These online, geographically based networks represent a tremendous and so far mostly untapped civic asset.

But none of these tactics and assets will be put to their best use if we don't admit, to ourselves and the world, their true significance. These aren't just props for conventional processes, but building blocks for new political systems.

Yes, we are advocates of deliberation, engagement, and participation, but in what? Let's think more carefully, and talk more clearly, about our answers.

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Matt Leighninger is the Executive Director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC), an alliance of the major organizations and leading scholars working in the field of deliberation and public engagement. His first book, *The Next Form of Democracy*, traces the recent shifts in the relationship between citizens and government, and examines how these trends are reshaping our democracy. Two of his main accomplishments in the last year: leading a working group that produced a model ordinance on public participation; and developing a new tool, "Text, Talk, and Act," that combined online and face-to-face participation as part of President Obama's National Dialogue on Mental Health.