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Deliberative Civic Engagement in Public Administration and Policy

Abstract

This article explores deliberative civic engagement in the context of public administration and policy. The field of public administration and policy is seeing a resurgence of interest in deliberative civic engagement among scholars, practitioners, politicians, civic reformers, and others. Deliberative processes have been used to address a range of issues: school redistricting and closings, land use, and the construction of highways, shopping malls, and other projects. Additional topics include race and diversity issues, crime and policing, and involvement of parents in their children's education. Finally, participatory budgeting, which has been used with success in Porto Alegre, Brazil since 1989 and has been employed in over 1,500 cities around the world, has been one of the most promising forms of deliberative civic engagement. Finally, the article suggests what we must do to build a civic infrastructure to support deliberative civic engagement, including government, but also practitioners and scholars.

Keywords

Deliberative Civic Engagement, Participatory Budgeting, Public Administration, Public Policy

Within the context of public administration and policy, *deliberative civic engagement* refers to a wide variety of processes through which members of the public, often in concert with policymakers and stakeholders, come together to engage in constructive, informed, and decisive dialogue about important public issues. The field of public administration is seeing a resurgence of interest in deliberative civic engagement among scholars, practitioners, politicians, civic reformers, and others. The reasons for this growing interest are many. For example, some believe that deliberative civic engagement is a potential remedy for the philosophical and practical shortcomings of current governmental practices, including the limitations of voting, the deteriorating ties among citizens and between citizens and government, and the apparent inability of government to address systemic policy problems (Nabatchi and Munno 2014).

Thousands of deliberative civic engagement processes are initiated across the United States and around the world each year. Although some conveners espouse laudatory goals, such as promoting the transparency, legitimacy, and fairness of policy making processes and public decisions, more often deliberative civic engagement is used to achieve concrete goals such as generating support or closure on a challenging issue and making tough decisions (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014). The majority of deliberative civic engagement processes are convened at the local level by elected officials, agency officials, individual groups or organizations, and consortiums of interested groups and organizations (Leighninger 2012). For example, deliberative processes have been used to address a range of difficult and persistent local issues, such as school redistricting and closings, land use, and the construction of highways, shopping malls, and other projects (Leighninger 2006), race and diversity issues (Walsh 2007), crime and policing (Fung and Wright 2003), and involvement of parents in their children's education (Friedman, Kadlec, and Birnback 2007). Likewise, participatory budgeting, which has been used with success in Porto Alegre, Brazil since 1989, has spread to over 1,500 cities around the world. In the United States, participatory budgeting is now being used in several cities, including Chicago, Illinois, New York City, New York, St. Louis, Missouri, and Vallejo, California, among others (see <http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/>). There are also state and federal policy examples. Participation initiatives helped shape prison reform legislation in Oklahoma, the Unified New Orleans Plan adopted in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina, and the flu vaccine policy of the Centers for Disease Control (for more examples, see Leighninger 2006; also see the growing online resource, www.participedia.net). In these and other examples, one can find numerous positive outcomes and benefits from deliberative civic engagement for individuals, communities, and policy and governance (see generally, Nabatchi, Gastil, Weiksner, and Leighninger 2012).

Despite growing interest in and use of deliberative civic engagement, such processes are typically one-off experiments that occur within the confines of a single issue over a short period of time (Leighninger 2012). Several factors contribute to the episodic use of deliberative civic engagement, including weak or inadequate legal infrastructures that prompt government officials to seek compliance with the explicit minimal standards for participation; the challenges of reaching scale and creating processes appropriate to the size of the political body; the need to overcome elements of the political system and political culture that are resistant to public engagement; and the lack of "civic assets" that connect citizens to one another, and to their public institutions (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014).

Many hoped that the Obama Administration's Open Government Initiative, which required federal agencies to be more transparent, collaborative, and participatory, would bring watershed changes to the use of deliberative civic engagement in public administration and policy. However, while progress has been made around issues of transparency and data sharing, advances in deliberative civic engagement have been disappointing. In part, this is because realizing the promise of public deliberation requires making challenging, substantive changes to our administrative infrastructure. First, we need to update the laws that govern that use of public participation; most of our current laws are over thirty years old, pre-date the internet, and use a narrow definition of public participation. This reality often leaves agency staff wondering whether participatory, and particularly deliberative, innovations are legal. Second, we need to address the laws, rules, and regulations that limit agencies' ability to collect and use data for evaluating participatory programs. Finally, we need to cultivate agency officials' knowledge, skills, and abilities to launch effective and meaningful participatory and deliberative processes and programs (Nabatchi 2013; PARCC 2013).

Of course, embedding the practice of deliberative civic engagement in public administration and policy is not only the responsibility of government. Practitioners and scholars must also take action. First, we must address the rhetorical problems of deliberative civic engagement, paying attention to the language we use to advance our cause. We need to move away from academic jargon to terms that people can understand, and we need to articulate our efforts in ways that will appeal to both those who are "liberal" or "left-leaning" and those who are "conservative" or "right-leaning." Second, we must also work together to better address the challenge of size and the concomitant challenge of cost. While information, communication, and other technological advances are rapidly making large-scale deliberative civic engagement cheaper and more viable, the field must embrace and capitalize on emerging technologies to bring processes to scale.

Finally, we must build the civic infrastructure needed for citizens to participate effectively in governance at every level. Such an infrastructure must include the creation of viable public spaces where citizens can meaningfully discuss issues; the cultivation of civic assets; and the building of a national roster of conveners, facilitators, and other experts who can organize and support ongoing dialogue. In addition we need to ensure that our civic infrastructure educates citizens about important issues; connects citizens to civic leaders, government officials, and other decision makers; addresses the full governance cycle, from policy making to implementation to evaluation; and makes room not just for deliberation and decision making, but also for consistent, expedient, and purposeful action. Building such a civic infrastructure will be hard, but the major elements of it already exist, including a robust network of groups and organizations dedicated to deliberative civic engagement, thousands of trained facilitators, and a rich body of knowledge about what works where, when, and how (for discussion about these and other issues, see Nabatchi and Munno 2014; Weiksner, Gastil, Nabatchi, and Leighninger 2012).

If we are able to address these issues, then we will be better able to keep alive our current "deliberative moment" and better embed the practice of deliberative civic engagement in public administration and policy. Such work is particularly important now because deliberative civic engagement processes, if properly understood and implemented, could help effectively address the most complex social, political, and economic challenges of our time.

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