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Key Challenges Facing the Field of Deliberative Democracy

Abstract

Deliberative Democracy has proved its value as an alternative to governance dominated by special interests, but its use in governing remains inconsistent. Overcoming this challenge will require the field to focus its energy on 1) building a cadre of elected leaders and public officials who understand deliberative democracy's value and how to do it, 2) engaging with the media so that it becomes an effective partner for the field and a more productive part of our democratic system, and 3) continuing to embrace opportunities – like *Creating Community Solutions* - to work in unique partnerships, build national infrastructure to support high-quality deliberation, and innovate across methodologies and models.

Keywords

deliberative democracy, capacity building, democratic infrastructure

For more than 25 years, the field of Deliberative Democracy has built the capacity to engage the public in meaningful dialogue on critical issues. All the major practice models (deliberative polling, National Issues Forums, dialogue-to-change, 21st Century Town Meetings, participatory budgeting, among others) have consistently demonstrated that when you bring diverse groups of the public together, provide factual information and design the deliberative environment to support high-quality discussion, people will come to collective decisions that are more inclusive, fair and just – and more reflective of the common good – than existing policy and budget frameworks. Further, people so engaged want to stay at the table and help implement their shared vision. Numerous independent evaluations of deliberative practice by eminent social scientists have found these outcomes to be highly reliable.¹

In short, the Deliberative Democracy field no longer needs to demonstrate its capacity and its efficacy. Instead, we must now recognize and take on the next challenge: bridging the gap between our proven methods and their consistent use in the governance of communities, states, regions and the nation. It is a sad truth that despite deliberation's demonstrated value to the work of effective governing, it is the exception rather than the rule. What we too-often see instead is governance that is distorted by the voices of special interests; rancorous public discourse; and the inability to put needed policies and reforms in place. Why? Two key reasons are that the impetus and infrastructure to support routine public engagement is spotty, and the political will to incorporate it is just not there. In addition, a primary institution — the media — is working at cross-purposes. To move past these obstacles, and embed high-quality deliberative practice in governance, our field needs to focus its collective energies on meeting these challenges.

Here are two actions we must take:

- Broadly educate elected leaders and other public officials about the value of deliberation and how to do it; and
- Engage with and support the media in regaining its central role in a well-functioning democracy.

Educating Elected Leaders and Other Public Officials

While there are many compelling examples of leaders using public deliberation to advance critical agendas, the number who do so is insufficient to create the sea change our democracy so desperately needs. Members of Congress, governors, mayors, city councilmembers, and public managers at all levels must be helped to understand how well-researched these processes are, and the significant value they bring to governing. To efficiently lodge this work in the repertoires of *large numbers* of public officials, it must be built into professional development; compelling practice opportunities must be “sold;” and there must be leadership from the top. Each of these ideas is explored briefly below.

¹ For example, more than 20 reports documenting the impact of *AmericaSpeaks*' deliberative work can be found here: <http://americaspeaks.org/democracy-lab/research/evaluating-reporting-on-impact/>

Build it into professional development

Robust partnerships are needed between deliberative democracy practitioners and the many organizations that orient, train and support elected officials, such as the National Governors' Association, the National Council of State Legislators, the Council of State Governments, the International City/County Management Association, the National League of Cities, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and the Congressional Research Service. It is equally important to embed the curriculum in university-based executive and legislator training programs, such as those at the Harvard-Kennedy School of Government, Syracuse University, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Southern California. One promising example is the National League of Cities' Democratic Governance Panel's aggregation and showcasing of successful city-level civic engagement practices. We need more of this. We also need hands-on technical assistance for public officials and strong exhortations by the leadership of these organizations to take-up the practices.

"Sell" compelling practice opportunities

Deliberative democracy practitioners should identify policy areas where states or regions have gotten stuck, bring together decision-makers and stakeholders on all sides of the issue, and show them how engaging the public in deliberation can get them "un-stuck." For example, multiple states in the southwestern U.S. face the potential crippling impact of extended droughts. Yet the wide range of possible solutions tends to polarize lawmakers, stakeholders and the public, paralyzing any action. It is an ideal scenario for public engagement that builds consensus views across constituencies, localities and states. But elected leaders and public managers must first be helped to see the value of this strategy.

Lead from the top

The Obama Administration recently convened city officials, nonprofit leaders, academics, funders, government officials and international experts to consider ways to expand participatory budgeting in the United States. This promising practice originated in Brazil and other Latin American countries in the late 1980's, and began migrating here in 2009. The White House could similarly use its convening authority to promote public engagement and deliberative practice on the major policy issues stymied in gridlock. In fact, when 140 advocates and scholars in Deliberative Democracy and associated fields convened in 2008-9 to consider strategies for "Strengthening Our Nation's Democracy," one of the principal recommendations was to hold national discussions on major policy issues.² Think how different the national narrative on health care reform would be if a million Americans had participated in fact-based deliberations on the policy options.

Engaging the Media

The media is the primary source through which citizens get neutral, fact-based information. It not only provides a vital service to the public, but is imperative to a healthy democratic society. Not surprisingly, Democracy practitioners have repeatedly observed that the success of a local, state, or national deliberation hinges in significant ways on the media's role in disseminating a narrative on the issue that can

² http://americaspeaks.org/wp-content/_data/n_0001/resources/live/strengthening_democracy.pdf

become commonly-held. Yet distressingly, while the Deliberative Democracy field has been building public engagement methods and capacity, our media environment has been moving in the opposite direction. Over the last three decades, media have become increasingly fragmented; less fact-based and more ideologically-driven. Too often they are merely an echo chamber reaffirming and entrenching existing beliefs.

A critical challenge for the Deliberative Democracy field is to partner with the media (new and old) so that it will bring forward the stories and collective decisions of deliberative processes. When *AmericaSpeaks* held its national *Our Budget our Economy* discussions, 3,500 demographically and ideologically representative people figured out together how to cut \$1.2 trillion from the deficit: conservatives agreed to raise taxes and liberals to cut entitlements as they quickly discovered this was the only way to solve the problem. These groundbreaking results were utilized by the President's Fiscal Commission, but they did not penetrate the public's awareness because, although there was local coverage, the work never became a national story. For the country to move forward on key issues like this, millions of people must understand the trade-offs and see the possible solutions. The only way to achieve such scale is through the media, yet the media's current business model drives it instead to keep the public focused on conflict and hyper-partisanship.

There have been notable efforts recently to recapture the foundational role of journalism as a credible purveyor of information and a positive common narrative. To name a few: the Solutions Journalism Network, On Being's Civil Conversations Project, the Center for Investigative Reporting, Ezra Klein's *Vox* and NBCNews.com's "Make the Case." Democracy practitioners can and should seek to partner with, and extend, such efforts.

Building a Community-Based National Infrastructure

The dual challenges of educating elected leaders and other public officials and collaborating productively with the media are critical components of a broader objective for the Deliberative Democracy field. That is, to develop the full infrastructure needed to ensure that communities across the country — and the nation as a whole — can engage citizens in deliberation in a timely way, whenever a pressing public matter arises. The field recognizes this need. And, drawing from diverse experiences, Democracy practitioners have conceptualized varying frameworks for such an infrastructure. For example, in *Bringing Citizen Voices to the Table* I lay out seven core elements:

- A legislative mandate for participation;
- Safe, accessible physical spaces for deliberation;
- Broader access for the public to information technology;
- Sufficient facilitation infrastructure;
- An organizational infrastructure that can support routine deliberation;
- A trustworthy, fact-based media; and
- Robust civic education.

While each of the infrastructure frameworks currently proposed has value in its own right, there has yet to be an opportunity to build a shared view across them. Just as over

the past decades we have come to agreement on the principles underlying quality deliberation, we must now invest the same care and focus on finding agreement about the infrastructure necessary to support widespread democratic practice.

A Unique Opportunity Demonstrates Progress

In December, 2012, 20 children and six teachers and staff of Sandy Hook Elementary School were murdered in Newtown, Connecticut. The gunman also shot and killed his mother and committed suicide at the school. Among the many commitments in the Obama Administration's rapid response to this horrific massacre was the call for a national discussion on mental health – for communities across the country to come together and talk openly about the serious challenges facing people with mental and behavioral health problems. In late February 2013, leaders of several of the major Deliberative Democracy organizations collaboratively built a strategy for responding to this call. The *Creating Community Solutions* (CCS) initiative was designed to engage many thousands of Americans from every walk of life in developing community and policy changes, while also demonstrating the power of diverse deliberative dialogue approaches.

Since then, CCS has pursued large-scale conversations in six lead cities and two states, and created a robust website and the necessary resources to support any community in initiating its own conversation. More than 150 such local conversations have taken place and, altogether, more than 3,000 people have participated. CCS has also launched a highly innovative, large-scale engagement process to bring young people into the discussion. “Text Talk Act” combines text messaging, social media, and face-to-face dialogue. In its second engagement (on April 24, 2014), it achieved 4.5 million impressions and 2,290 tweets; more than 850 youth participated.

The work of CCS is convincingly demonstrating that local conversations *can* be linked together to create a national discussion on an issue of pressing importance. Equally vital, CCS has proven that the field is now capable of collaborating across organizations and methods. CCS will continue to provide important lessons for the field as it seeks to make large-scale public participation in governance both replicable and routine. At the same time, we must all set our sights on some of the specific challenges that stand in our way. Here I have focused in particular on educating and inspiring elected officials, returning the media to its rightful role in a democracy, and building consensus on deliberative infrastructure. Continued leadership, innovation and experimentation will be critical to meeting these goals.

Author Information

Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer is the Executive Director of the National Institute for Civil Discourse and founder of *AmericaSpeaks*. Under Carolyn's leadership, *AmericaSpeaks* has earned a national reputation as a leader in the field of deliberative democracy and democratic renewal. The organization has successfully applied its 21st Century Town Meeting® to a number of health care-related topics, including, state-wide health care

reform in California and Maine, and the national childhood obesity epidemic. Prior to founding *AmericaSpeaks*, Carolyn served as Consultant to the White House Chief of Staff from November 1993 through June 1994, as the Deputy Project Director for Management of the National Performance Review (NPR), Vice President Al Gore's reinventing government task force, and as Chief of Staff to Governor Richard F. Celeste of Ohio from 1986 to 1991. She also led her own successful organizational development and management consulting firm for 14 years. In this capacity, she worked with public and private sector organizations on four continents.