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## A Path to the Next Form of (Deliberative) Democracy

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# A Path to the Next Form of (Deliberative) Democracy

## **Abstract**

Supporters of deliberative democracy must work through complex tradeoffs if we hope to realize the full potential of empowered civic engagement in which citizens employ multiple forms of action and change. In order to sustain citizens' interest, time, and resources in creating a robust civic infrastructure, we need to engage them in more highly empowered forms of civic engagement than is now typical of many deliberative initiatives. Our field's strong emphasis on temporary public consultations diverts a disproportionate amount of time, intellectual capital, and other resources from efforts to improve the ability of citizens and local communities to have stronger, more active, and direct roles in shaping their collective futures. One set of choices facing us centers on tensions between reformism and more fundamental, even revolutionary changes to democratic politics. Other key tensions are rooted in aspirations for deliberative democracy to serve as both an impartial resource and as a catalyst for action.

## **Keywords**

empowered civic engagement, public consultations, civic infrastructure, citizen action, neutrality

## **Acknowledgements**

This essay's title is offered with apologies to Matt Leighninger's *The Next Form of Democracy* (2009). Thank you to Alice Diebel, Martha McCoy and Paolo Spada for the insights and resources they shared as I worked through the ideas in this essay.

“That the struggle for universal suffrage was so long and so difficult is often forgotten today; it is unlikely that the democratization of democracy is going to be any easier.”

Carole Pateman (2012, p. 15)

Those of us committed to the success of public deliberation must make some hard choices if we hope to realize the full potential of democratic, empowered civic engagement. Our field has made great strides over the last thirty years in both theory and practice. Yet despite this impressive growth, some of the most inspiring objectives of deliberative democracy may be slipping away.

My primary concern is that our field’s strong emphasis on temporary public consultations diverts a disproportionate amount of time, intellectual capital, and other resources from efforts to improve the ability of “ordinary” citizens and local communities to have stronger, more active, and direct roles in shaping their collective futures. High-quality public deliberation is necessary, but not sufficient to the creation of empowered citizens and communities. Moreover, the goal of building a strong civic infrastructure is highly dependent on our ability to embed democratic values, practices, and institutions more deeply within our local communities. Doing so, in turn, depends on providing opportunities for citizens to do much more than merely communicate informed public judgments to leaders.

I admit to some ambivalence in having included the word “merely” in the preceding sentence. I do not want to minimize either the central importance of fostering public judgment or of connecting public knowledge to formal systems of governance. It has been over twenty years since Daniel Yankelovich provided us with a usable blueprint for how to operationalize deliberative theory, and fifteen years since he illustrated the power of dialogue as a necessary complement to deliberation (Yankelovich, 1999). While we still have much to learn about how to embed public deliberation into governance, the evolution of deliberative theory and practice now calls for greater attention to the potential for even more empowered forms of participation than we can realize via “public input” processes, no matter how well-grounded they are in quality public deliberation.

Deliberative democracy’s heavy focus on less-empowered forms of citizen participation is reflected in the IAP2 “Spectrum of Public Participation,” which although widely cited, serves the fairly narrow purpose of illustrating degrees of power over decision making allowed to the public by authorities.<sup>1</sup> IAP2’s spectrum says little about the potential for citizens and nongovernmental organizations to create and implement solutions to public problems on their own (although it does imply modest forms of citizen collaboration with government). After decades of intensive focus on the public’s decision-making authority, it is time for our field to invest more resources in understanding the potential for what NCDD’s “Engagement Streams Framework” describes as “collaborative action” in which “people tackle complex problems and take responsibility for solutions they come up with.”<sup>2</sup>

What follows is a reflection on some of the most important tradeoffs our field needs to work through if we hope to realize the full potential of deliberative democracy. I begin with a short list of a few of the many reasons advocates and analysts of public participation give in their support

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.iap2.org.au/documents/item/84>

<sup>2</sup> <http://ncdd.org/rc/item/2142>

of deliberative democracy. Although not mutually exclusive, some of these goals are in tension with one another. I then describe two of the tensions most salient to the impact of our field. I end with a few suggestions for what we need to do if we aspire to strengthen local civic infrastructure and create more empowered opportunities for citizen action.

### **A few of the many things deliberative democrats care about**

All the goals listed below are worthy ones and provide only a partial reflection of the aspirations of deliberative democrats.

1. Connecting informed public judgments to decision making and formal institutional governance at all levels of society.
2. Improving the quality of political communication, both within formal public participation initiatives and in everyday life.
3. Creating “better citizens” who are informed; able to understand and appreciate the beliefs, values, and positions of others; empathic; active; collaborative, and much more (Pincock, 2012).
4. Providing ways for citizens to play more active, hands-on roles in co-creating their personal and collective futures.
5. Building civic infrastructure that embeds democratic values, practices, and institutions more deeply within public life.
6. Learning what kinds of deliberative democratic processes work best for specific problems and issues, for specific goals, under specific circumstances (Fung & Warren, 2011).

### **Two key tensions our field needs to work through**

Efforts to meet these goals reveal numerous tensions about the most effective ways to make progress on the goals of building stronger civic infrastructure and fostering citizen action informed by public deliberation. Of the many tensions among these goals, two of them are particularly important to the impact of deliberative practice

***Tension between reformism and more fundamental, even revolutionary changes to democratic politics*** – Many, if not most, public consultation initiatives are designed to influence institutions, not fundamentally change them. They are “exercises in ‘reformist tinkering’ rather than ‘revolutionary reform’ ” (Fung, 2003, p. 339). There is nothing wrong with tinkering; indeed, it provides the foundation for positive changes in all dimensions of public and private life. Yet as we continue to encourage efforts to realize the difficult goal of embedding public deliberation in systems of governance, it is also essential that we keep our eyes open to possibilities for even more fundamental, systemic changes.

Participatory Budgeting (PB) provides a cautionary tale regarding how the allure of public consultations – combined with the difficulty of creating and sustaining local systems of embedded citizen power – can influence the transfer of deliberative, democratic innovations. Twenty-five years after its birth in Porto Alegre, PB has spread to at least 1,500 cities worldwide. The trend, however, has been for the deliberative public consultation part of PB to remain mostly intact, while PB’s companion elements of local popular control fall by the wayside (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014; Pateman, 2012).

***Tension “between serving as an impartial resource and as a catalyst for action”*** (Carcasson, 2009, p. 11) – Some scholars and practitioners claim that deliberative initiatives can galvanize citizens to play active roles in implementing ideas generated during their civic interactions

(Mathews, 2014). However, detailed analyses of how and when citizen action informed by deliberation occurs (Leighninger, 2006) are scarce as compared to analyses of deliberative public consultations.

There seem to be at least three reasons why this is so. First, some deliberative practitioners fear that including an “action phase” will result in their having to choose sides on divisive issues, thereby undercutting their ability to engage diverse publics in civic work and to strengthen the community’s long-term capacity to address public problems. Second, as difficult as it is to implement high-quality deliberative public consultations, fully engaging the messy world of local community politics is a much more challenging task. Third, from the perspective of researchers, it is far easier to gather and analyze data from relatively contained public consultations than it is to investigate the long-term dynamics of grassroots political action.

### **Why we must begin to reconcile these tensions**

The dual goals of creating opportunities for citizens to have a stronger role in shaping their collective future and of building a robust civic infrastructure will need to advance hand-in-hand. A strong, local community-based civic infrastructure is essential to creating a national civic infrastructure – both in terms of the number of people and places participating in public life, and in our ability to tackle issues as local as safe neighborhoods and as expansive as climate change.

Moreover, for a local civic infrastructure to thrive, it is essential that it be built and controlled not by deliberative practitioners alone, but in collaboration with ordinary citizens who have a strong stake in its success. Yes, it’s important for everyone to have “a seat at the table,” but it is even more important that everyone have an opportunity to help *build* the table.

If we hope to draw and sustain citizens’ interest, time, and resources in creating and maintaining a robust civic infrastructure, we will need to engage them in more highly empowered forms of civic engagement than is now typical of many deliberative initiatives. Doing so necessitates that we try to reconcile some of the tensions inherent in connecting multiple forms of action and change to deliberative civic engagement. The theory and practice of deliberative democracy has achieved a sufficiently mature stage of development to allow it to push the boundaries of “action” and “activism” without undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of less empowered forms of deliberative public engagement. For example:

- It is not enough for so many of us to say that “action” is part of the work of deliberative democracy without putting as much effort into developing advice and tools for post-deliberation action as we expend on crafting discussion materials, training facilitators, recruiting participants, and briefing officeholders.
- We must continue to ask ourselves what it means to maintain a stance of “neutrality” and the implications of that stance for democratic values such as equal opportunity and racial equity
- We must continue to talk with and learn from community organizers, without assuming that the entire field is constrained by confrontational zero-sum approaches to social change.

Let’s talk about this, figure out what we’re going to do next, and get going.

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