

Key Aspects of the Deliberative Democracy Movement

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In a growing number of communities across the globe, individuals are turning to more deliberative and collaborative processes—such as community dialogues, issue forums, stakeholder negotiation processes, and other inclusive public participation efforts¹—in order to address their most important problems. Deliberative democracy is an approach to politics in which citizens, not just experts or politicians, are deeply involved in public decision making and problem-solving. Often working with trained facilitators who utilize a variety of techniques, citizens representing a broad range of stakeholders come together and consider relevant facts and values from multiple points of view; listen to one another in order to think critically about the various options before them and consider the underlying tensions and tough choices inherent to most public issues; and ultimately seek to come to some conclusion for action based on a reasoned public judgment. These processes are being developed and sustained by civically minded individuals involved with a wide variety of organizations, including colleges and universities, non-profit civic organizations, school districts, for-profit firms, public libraries, arts and humanities councils, and local governments. Membership in organizations such as the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD) and the Canadian Community for Dialogue and Deliberation (C2D2) has grown exponentially in recent years, increasing the capacity for these programs to make significant impacts on our communities and provide positive alternatives to partisan political processes that too often lead to polarization, cynicism, apathy, and gridlock.

Those involved with what some have called the “deliberative democracy” movement come to the work from many directions. Some are academics seeking to create stronger connections to their community and more meaning in their work. Some work with municipalities or other governmental institutions, hoping to find better ways of solving problems and working more productively with their citizens. Some are community organizers that have gravitated to more collaborative, nonpartisan processes for engaging communities in problem solving. All essentially believe that “politics as usual” is not sufficient to address the growing diversity in people and perspectives and the increasing complexity of the common problems we face. Together, they fill critical roles as advocates, designers, conveners, facilitators, and reporters of productive collaborative processes. This article outlines fifteen aspects of the deliberative perspective that we view as essential to clarifying its purpose and distinguishing it from alternative means of community problem-solving.

I. CORE PRINCIPLES

TOUGH CHOICES

In a diverse democracy, public problems inherently involve competing positive values. Addressing these problems requires making tough choices—decisions defined by the tradeoffs inherent in situations where multiple legitimate values point reasonable people in conflicting directions. For example, freedom and equality, perhaps democracy’s most quintessential values, are in many ways in tension with each other and oblige us to either seek out an elusive balance between them or find ways to transcend their clash. Too often our other processes for public problem-solving, such as adversarial politics or technical, expert-based research, frame or study issues in ways that ignore these tough choices. Deliberative processes, on the other hand, focus on uncovering them and helping citizens work through such difficult decisions. Often, a critical result of a deliberative project may simply be the clear identification of opposing values underlying a public problem, which can have significant impacts for public knowledge and improved understanding and mutual respect across perspectives.

PUBLIC JUDGMENT

Public deliberation focuses on developing and improving public judgment. Public judgment represents a particular form of public opinion that involves consideration of relevant facts and ethical issues, the weighing of alternatives from multiple perspectives, and an understanding of the full consequences of those alternatives. Public judgment recognizes that some difficult decisions can never be truly settled. Therefore, while good information is certainly critical to decision-making, it is acknowledged that no amount of research can provide clear solutions to complex public issues. Due to the nature of public issues, often the best we can do is make temporary decisions based on the available information and a balance of competing interests. In his book *Practical Politics: Five Principles for a*

¹ For a overview of many of the basic processes, see John Gastil & Peter Levine, (Eds.) *The deliberative democracy handbook: Strategies for effective civic engagement in the 21st century* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2001) or Peggy Holman, Tom Devane, Steven Cady, *The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today’s Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems* (2d ed.) (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2007). NCDD also has a useful short document available online that identifies four particular streams of engagement (exploration, conflict transformation, decision-making, and collaborative action), and highlights a number of specific techniques and processes for each. Available online at http://www.thataway.org/?page_id=1487.

Community that Works, Michael Briand discussed how tough choices and public judgment work together, writing: “The need to choose, both individually and collectively, between good things in conflict lies at the heart of politics. . . . Because the things human beings consider good are various and qualitatively distinct; because conflicts between such good things have no absolute, predetermined solution; and because to know what is best requires considering the views of others, we need to engage each other in the sort of exchange that will enable us to form sound personal and public judgments. This process of coming to a public judgment and choosing—together, as a public—is the essence of democratic politics.”²

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

The deliberative perspective presumes that public problems require engagement and coordination from the entire community—individuals, groups, non-profits, businesses, experts, educational institutions, etc.—not simply the government. The call for this shift from government to governance has been growing from many different voices, and as Harry Boyte has argued, it “has the potential to address public problems that cannot be solved without governments, but that governments alone cannot solve.”³ Often, the very act of coming together to talk can spark new ideas and motivations for action, as well as greater individual and community responsibility for those actions. Broad collaborative efforts that move away from a focus on government as sole problem-solver can work to transcend political partisanship, empower local communities, and lead to more systemic changes that go beyond an ongoing focus on addressing symptoms. Such efforts, however, require productive coordination, which deliberative practitioners are dedicated to providing.

INCLUSIVENESS AND EQUALITY

To be legitimate, deliberative processes must strive to be inclusive and represent the whole community, and participants must be considered equal during the deliberation. No one’s contribution is inherently more valuable than another’s. Deliberation requires true diversity of thought, drawing participants from different backgrounds, ages, ethnicity, political orientations, incomes, occupations, education levels, etc. The importance of inclusion, equality, and true diversity places a heavy burden on the conveners of deliberative events, particularly in terms of addressing inequalities of power, getting beyond the usual suspects, and attracting voices that have not historically been heard. Such concerns can significantly impact process design and facilitation as well.

II. DEFINING ROLES

THE ROLE OF CITIZENS

Re-conceptualizing the role of citizens in our communities is fundamental to a deliberative approach. Deliberation imagines a role for citizens as active and engaged problem-solvers working with others to solve community problems rather than merely taxpayers, consumers, constituents, or voters. It calls for significant efforts that equip citizens and put them in situations where they can work together, overcome conflicts, and help address critical public problems. The deliberative perspective thus places a high burden on citizens, but does so precisely because a diverse democracy cannot function properly without such expectations.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

As the role citizens play evolves, so does that of government. Government certainly remains a key tool for communities to solve problems but not the only, or assumed, tool. Government nurtures deliberation by creating spaces for interaction, convening broad audiences, and supporting the development of deliberative capacity. Local governments, for example, may need to rethink how they communicate with citizens, moving away from a public relations model to a model focused on public participation that utilizes the wide variety of techniques supported by organizations such as the International Association for Public Participation (www.iap2.org) and the National League of Cities Democratic Governance panel (www.nlc.org).

THE ROLE OF EXPERTS

Good information is a critical aid to deliberation, but in the end, research and knowledge cannot provide the answers to the difficult questions that arise in democracies. Democratic decisions involve making tough choices between competing values, and only citizens, not experts, can do such work. Deliberation seeks to avoid the “fact wars” that often dominate and derail public discussions. Instead, it assumes citizens need to cultivate and utilize their wisdom rather than merely acquire more knowledge. Experts, in the end, need to be

² Michael Briand, *Practical Politics: Five Principles for a Community that Works* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), pp. 41-42.

³ Harry C. Boyte, “Reframing democracy: Governance, civic agency, and politics,” *Public Administration Review* 65(2005): 536-546. Also see the National League of Cities, *Strengthening Democratic Governance. Changing the way we govern: Building democratic governance in your community*. Washington D.C.: National League of Cities, 2006. Available online at www.nlc.org. The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the Harvard Kennedy School also have useful resources and case studies, housed at an interactive website <http://www.participedia.net/>

available to support deliberative processes, but they best do so by being “on tap” not “on top.” Experts are used to help develop background material, answer questions that arise during discussions, and respond to conclusions and themes reported out from the processes.

THE ROLE OF MEDIA

The media retain their traditional democratic roles as watchdogs of the powerful, conduits for broad expression, and providers of information. But citizens also need the media to take on more deliberative roles.⁴ A deliberative media would focus more on engaging broad audiences, uncovering the underlying value dilemmas and tough choices inherent to public issues, and providing the public with a clearer understanding of both the relevant facts *and* the relevant tradeoffs tied to key issues. Such a media would shift away from a focus on conflict and politics as a spectacle and take more responsibility for improving the quality of public discussion.

III. PROCESSES

FAITH IN HUMAN NATURE

Deliberation puts considerable faith in human nature, assuming that despite quirks of human nature that can make collaborative problem-solving difficult, people are capable of deliberating when provided productive spaces and processes to do so. Adversarial political processes too often take advantage of and intensify the flaws of human nature, such as selective listening and the inherent impulse to prefer simple “good vs. evil” framings over engaging tough choices. The deliberative perspective, on the other hand, seeks to overcome those flaws and nurture the more positive democratic potentials of citizens. Deliberative processes, therefore, are focused on addressing a specific issue in a more productive manner, but they also tend to help develop civic capacity and democratic habits in the citizenry. The value of this “side effect” of deliberation may, in the long run, be more important than the work on any one specific issue.

THE WISDOM OF CROWDS AND THE CO-PRODUCTION OF PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

Deliberation seeks to take advantage of the wisdom of crowds, while being aware of the potential for crowds to impair good judgment when not supported by well designed processes. Deliberation is based on the premise that many people may have pieces of the answer, and together they can forge new approaches and solutions that could not be developed without engaging broad audiences. Such audiences contribute their experiences, emotions, values, and beliefs to the process, which can be critical forms of information for public decision making when handled well. High quality deliberative practices are specifically designed to tap into this potential wisdom and avoid the negative tendencies of groupthink and polarization often exhibited in poorly designed processes.

INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATION

In order to tap into the wisdom of crowds, deliberation utilizes particular communication practices that are designed specifically to engage people across perspectives. Too many of the communication processes we tend to rely on are either unilateral, or involve people talking *to* or *past* each other rather than *with* each other. Citizens have many opportunities to express their opinion, but too few opportunities involve interacting productively with others in order to learn from each other, refine their opinions, and work through tough choices. Deliberative processes, in particular, involve citizens talking to other citizens and specifically work to counter-act and undo the miscommunication that often occurs in public disputes. Deliberation assumes that misunderstandings and false stereotypes are a significant barrier to high quality public discussion, and seeks to overcome such misunderstandings by having individuals from different perspectives actually listen to each other with a goal of understanding across perspectives. Nurturing deeper listening skills is thus a critical component to deliberative processes.

PASSIONATE IMPARTIALITY

Deliberative processes require safe places for citizens to come together, fair information to help structure the conversation, and skilled facilitators to guide the discussion. Such key components, however, can be rare in a polarized political culture, and may require the development of “passionately impartial” resources. Passionate impartiality is not a dull, detached neutrality. Instead, deliberative practitioners passionately support democracy and the values it entails, such as freedom, equality, inclusion, transparency, trust, and mutual respect. Yet deliberative issue analysts, facilitators, and conveners understand they must strive toward impartiality about the topics under discussion lest participants dismiss the processes themselves are biased and partisan. Due to the importance of passionate impartiality, the recent expansion of nonpartisan civic and academic organizations dedicated to supporting the deliberative perspective and improving its techniques represents a significant development in modern democracy.

⁴ For more resources on the role of the media in deliberative democracy and the potential of “public journalism,” visit the Kettering Foundation’s web site, particularly its pages on Media and Democracy:

http://www.kettering.org/foundation_programs/institutions_and_professions/Media_and_Democracy

IV. IMPACTS

BALANCING INDIVIDUAL INTERESTS AND THE PUBLIC GOOD

A key result of deliberative practice is the refinement of individual opinions that is critical to democratic living. Individuals are not called to give up their own interests or “bracket them at the door,” but they are expected to be open to adjustment and consider the reasonableness of opposing views. Such practices can also help participants conceptualize notions of the public good. This can be in stark contrast to the simple aggregation of interests assumed by more individualistic or consumerist models of democratic decision-making. Too often our public processes have no clear means of considering the public good, and therefore can leave communities civically impoverished. Similarly, top-down governmental impositions on communities in the name of the “common good” may be seen as violations of freedom and cause conflict. In the end, deliberative democrats believe that democratic living requires a balancing of individual and public interests, and believe that inclusive, collaborative processes that allow communities to identify and enact such a balance by more legitimate means are essential tools.

LEGITIMACY

Deliberation is based on the belief that public decisions are more legitimate when produced through inclusive deliberative processes rather than other forms of public decision-making (such as aggregate voting, interest group politics, partisan politics, etc.). Such decisions are also more pragmatic because opponents of the decision are more likely to accept the conclusion if they felt the process was fair, they were heard, and they had a chance to understand all the various perspectives. This legitimacy can be critical when difficult projects shift to the implementation stage, and can work to reduce community apathy and cynicism.

STRIVING FOR AN UNREACHABLE IDEAL

The deliberative perspective is admittedly idealistic. Indeed, it expects much from citizens, institutional decision-makers, and our communities. It is based on a vision of democracy that will never be fully maintained for an extended time. The ideal is that public decisions are a result of a representative group of informed, engaged people coming together, utilizing good information, discussing differences, working through tough choices, uncovering common ground, and coming to a reasoned public judgment for broad collaborative action. Despite its unreachable status, proponents of the deliberative perspective believe that striving toward that ideal is clearly worthwhile. While our communities will never become true deliberative democracies, they can certainly become *more* deliberative. Thousands of democratic experiments tied to the organizations involved with the deliberative democracy movement attest to the value of such processes in helping communities address difficult issues while also building critical civic capacity to solve subsequent problems.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS AND MANAGERS

Public administrators and managers can serve as essential catalysts, conveners, and nurturers of efforts to increase the problem-solving capacity of their communities and improve the quality of their democracies. The deliberative perspective provides a way to re-think traditional roles and develop new capacities. When putting deliberative approaches into practice, public administrators and managers should certainly tap into the networks developing internationally to support this work, particularly the resources focused on assisting local municipalities.⁵ The potential sources are broad, spanning across public, private, non-profit, and educational institutions. Philanthropic organizations and community foundations have also played an important role in helping individual communities cultivate such resources.⁶ Indeed, the very process of identifying, developing, and sustaining resources for deliberative democracy can be a useful collaborative process that benefits communities.

⁵ Resources specific to local government include material from the National League of Cities and the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation (see footnote 3), the International Association of Public Participation (www.iap2.org), and the NCDD, particularly their “Core Principles for Public Engagement” document (http://www.thataway.org/?page_id=1442), The Institute of Local Government also has useful materials focused on Public Participation and Collaborative Governance (<http://www.ca-ilg.org/engagement>).

⁶ Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) is a learning community of grantmakers and donors committed to strengthening democracy by using the power, influence and resources of philanthropy to open pathways to civic and community participation. For more information, go to <http://www.pacefunders.org/>.