Chapter 8

The Collaborative Project of Public Deliberation

Ron Lubensky

Introduction

In local autonomous settings like trade union meetings or in the past when populations were sparse as exemplified in the 18th century Town Meetings in America’s New England states, whole communities have assembled to talk out problems and consent to solutions. But such directly democratic forums are impractical for large communities and states. Representative democracy offered a scaled-up solution that passes the decision-making power to politicians through the majoritarian aggregation of votes in periodic elections. The representative system worked well when societal change was slow and incremental, culture was relatively homogeneous and communication technologies were primitive.

Now, there is a disconnect between the prescriptions of executive power and the dynamic and increasingly complex needs and demands of the people they serve. The rise of political parties and lobbying have obfuscated the relation between ordinary people and the policies under which they must live. Also, public servants do not typically answer directly to the people except to the extent that their roles are limited by the legislation and regulations sanctioned by elected officials. This is exacerbated when authorities fail to live up to their obligations or misrepresent their constituencies. This *democratic deficit* is the most common motivation cited for increasing public participation in governance.

For several decades political theorists have been advocating a new approach to public policy decision-making under the banner of *deliberative democracy*. This approach is most easily presented by extending the mainstream concept of a *jury*, which draws a microcosm of the community with the binary remit of judging a criminal charge against the presented evidence and the law. But unlike a jury, a deliberative panel is recruited with the more active task of exploring a policy issue and making recommendations for take-up by authority. Such a panel is called a *mini-public*, which indexes both its broad representation of perspectives and interests in the community, and the style of discourse it involves. Many mini-publics are recruited from the citizenry at least in part by stratified random selection to ensure representativeness and inclusion, to
redress the domination of activists and “the usual suspects” in civil matters. Discourse is conducted in small groups who are professionally facilitated to be constructive, productive and to avoid conversational pathologies. Mini-publics range in size from about 20 participants, for example in a process design called a Citizens’ Jury, to large panels like the 160-member British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly for Electoral Reform (BCCAER) to recommend a new electoral system (Warren & Pearse, 2008), and the 150-member Australian Citizens’ Parliament (ACP) to explore improvements to the operation of government (Carson et al., 2013). Participatory Budgeting is occurring in several countries, inviting residents to nominate and then prioritize taxpayer-funded projects in their local region. All mini-publics are invited into deliberation, which includes open and generous exploration of an issue, identification of common ground positions across difference, and agreement on policy approaches and settings that the whole community can live with.

A Citizens’ Jury about a local issue can typically complete its work over two weekends. The larger ACP was engaged online for several weeks, then met for four days in Canberra. The BCCAER took eight months to complete, including monthly meetings in Vancouver and regional consultations with citizens. So deliberative designs occur over a range of time scales, depending on the complexity of their considerations and the logistics of bringing them together. New online platforms developed specifically for dialogue and deliberation are bridging distance and time constraints.

While many mini-publics are facilitated, convened and studied by academic teams, deliberative democracy is an innovation in governance, not a research method for political scientists. Unlike focus groups, mini-publics should be empowered to set the agenda of their proceedings, including reshaping the scope and purpose of their investigation and choosing their sources of information. The processes and dialogic methods are designed and led by a new cottage industry of public participation practitioners and facilitators.1

Opinion surveys are useful for ascertaining the range of attitudes to which residents are predisposed, but often citizens do not have shared understandings or considered beliefs about the questions being asked of them. A question can mean different things to different people. Furthermore, a social survey inevitably carries the framing biases of its authors.

In a mini-public, on the other hand, participants learn from each other and are able to see policy options empathetically from perspectives beyond their

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1 International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) and National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) are membership groups that represent the interests of public engagement practitioners.