

DEMOCRATIC NORMS TO DELIBERATIVE FORMS: MANAGING TOOLS AND TRADEOFFS IN COMMUNITY-BASED CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Deliberative democracy derives its moral urgency from universal ideals, but relies on tools that pose practical tradeoffs stemming from the particularities of place and time. I argue for transcending a technique-oriented mindset focused on single methods, using examples from a foundation project to engage lesser heard voices into policies for young children and their families. Case study data from eight California counties are analyzed to identify frequently used civic engagement tools and their strengths and limitations. Drawing on this evidence, and on democratic and administrative theory that envisions citizens and experts as co-creators of public work, I develop strategic understandings for improving deliberative practices. The managerial wisdom needed has less to do with being au courant with the latest promising technique and everything to do with learning how to coordinate multiple civic engagement tools amidst organizational complexity and cultural diversity, while nurturing citizens as partners in policy making.

INTRODUCTION

Deliberative democracy derives its moral urgency from universal ideals, but relies on tools that pose practical

tradeoffs stemming from the particularities of place and time. In moving from democratic norms to deliberative forms, the literature often emphasizes single, time-limited techniques such as issue forums (Matthews, 1994), deliberative polls (Fishkin, 1991; 1995), citizen juries (Crosby, et al. 1986; Kathlene & Martin, 1991; Renn, et al. 1993), representative survey panels (Weeks, 2000), participatory budgets (Baiocchi, 2001), and a deliberation day during every presidential election year (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2004). While useful for particular ends, these innovations can divert attention from a broader array of everyday civic engagement practices that are less touted but more widely practiced in communities. The variety of these tools, their promise in promoting deliberative ideals, and the assumptions they make about citizen and expert roles are receiving increased scrutiny (Lee, 2007; Thompson, 2008).

To advance this research agenda, I draw lessons from an ambitious attempt to wed public dialogue principles to real time civic engagement practices. The setting was the Civic Engagement Project for Children and Families, a partnership between eight local Commissions in California created by the passage of Proposition 10 in 1998 and five foundations interested in civic investing.¹ Proposition 10 was a statewide California initiative passed in November 1998. It disburses tobacco tax revenues to county-level Commissions to use for the benefit of children

¹ The five foundations are: David and Lucile Packard Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, Miriam and Peter Haas Fund, Peninsula Community Foundation, and Walter and Elise Haas Fund. The eight county Commission partners were selected by the foundations and are not representative of all California counties, as detailed later in the methods section. Since our field research was completed, the local Commissions have been renamed as First Five Commissions. Throughout this paper, we will refer to them simply as “Commissions,” and to the foundation backed Civic Engagement Project simply as “Project.”

ages zero to five. The local Commissions—appointed by, but independent of, County Boards of Supervisors—are charged to “create and implement a comprehensive, collaborative and integrated system of information and services to promote, support and optimize early childhood development from the prenatal stage to five years of age.” The Project sought to engage lesser heard voices in the formulation of Commission policies and programs, initially by using public dialogue techniques to support local strategic plans. Later, Project sponsors altered their strategy to support a diverse array of community-based experiments while retaining a focus on the deliberative ideals of inclusive participation, civil dialogue, and policy influence.

Along with an adult education specialist, the author led a University of California research team that observed Project activities and related outcomes and produced two yearly evaluation reports for the sponsoring foundations.² The evaluation provided a unique vantage point for understanding how civic engagement tools are selected, deployed, and managed over time in complex community settings. Drawing on theory that envisions experts and ordinary citizens as co-creators of public work (Boyte & Kari, 1996; Forester, 1999; Kemmis, 1990; Schmidt, 1993; Schon, 1983), I develop recommendations for improving the practice of deliberative democracy.

² The sponsoring foundations contracted with the California Communities Program at UC Davis to evaluate the Civic Engagement Project. In addition to the author, other members of the research team included Joan Wright at UC Davis, University of California Cooperative Extension Advisors Shelley Murdock in Contra Costa County, Martha Weston and Pat Margolis in San Diego County, Gloria Brown and Faye Lee in San Francisco/San Mateo County, Estella West and Fe Moncloa in Santa Clara County, and Rebecca Carver in Yolo County. Also assisting the team were Sue Pierce, a Public Health Nutritionist in Santa Cruz County, and Yvonne Rickets, a child development consultant in Monterey.

As Guy Peters (1996) notes, the problem for would-be reformers is not a shortage of tools but “too many ideas and not enough systematic thinking about which ones were applicable to particular situations and whether the ideas were compatible with one another” (p. 128). Our literature review and data analysis aim to: 1) understand the practical and normative tradeoffs associated with particular civic engagement practices, as shaped by political cultural context and real-time constraints; 2) to analyze the degree of fit between the various practices and a theory of citizenship as public work; and 3) to draw conclusions about strategies and approaches to deliberation that better enable citizens to work alongside experts as co-creators of public policy. The potential payoff is an enhanced deliberative capacity in increasingly complex community settings marked by linguistic and cultural diversity, class disparities, competing values and objectives, and lingering disillusionment from previous engagement efforts.

BEYOND A TECHNIQUE-CENTERED MINDSET

When holding the ideals of deliberative democracy up to empirical scrutiny, researchers often seek to document the outcomes of particular deliberative tools, either to endorse (Gastil & Levine, 2005) or debunk (Thiess-Morse & Hibbing, 2005). But in a comprehensive literature review, Thompson (2008) concludes that the overall findings regarding specific tools are “mixed or inconclusive” because “the success or failure of deliberation depends so much on its context” (p.499). His (Thompson, 2008) critique—identifying inherent tradeoffs and tensions—is instructive:

There is a tendency, evident in much of the work cited above, to treat deliberative democracy as a cohesive set of values that are jointly realized or

jointly fail to be realized...We miss the complexity and power of deliberative democracy if we do not recognize the possibility that its elements may conflict with one another, that not all the goods it promises can be secured at the same time, and that we have to make choices among them (p. 511).

For example, research in settings around the world identifies a persistent tradeoff between the ideal of inclusive participation and that of well-reasoned, effective decisions (Baiocchi, 2001, p. 49; Bessette, 1994; Crosby, et al. 1986, p. 170; Fishkin, 1995, p. 142; Hauptman, 2001). As Nagel (1992) notes in describing the public participation process in Oregon's health care reform planning, "One part of their program was deliberative but not representative; the other was representative but not deliberative" (p. 1980). These tradeoffs are not likely to disappear simply with better tools because they stem from deep-seated democratic dilemmas. As the preeminent democratic theorist Robert Dahl (1994) writes: "In very small political systems a citizen may be able to participate extensively in decisions that do not matter much but cannot participate much in decisions that matter a great deal; whereas very large systems may be able to cope with problems that matter more to a citizen, the opportunities for citizens to participate in and greatly influence decisions are vastly reduced" (p. 28).

Research calls into question public participation strategies that place too much stock in particular techniques at the expense of underlying relationships and roles. As King, Felty, and Susel conclude (1998): "Our findings indicate that effective, or authentic, public participation implies more than simply finding the right tools and techniques for increasing public involvement in public decisions...[it] requires rethinking the underlying roles of, and relationships between, administrators and citizens" (p.

317). Writing from a very different corner of the social sciences, McGee (2002) laments a “blindness to context, leading to mechanistic applications of participatory techniques” (p. 107). For Lee (2007), the preoccupation in the field with formal models and techniques slights the important role informal communication plays in deliberative processes and threatens to turn “participation” into another expert dominated industry:

Because civic engagement and citizen participation have been promoted to counter the perceived disempowering effects of expertism and professionalized interest group advocacy, it is particularly ironic that the solutions now being offered emphasize the necessity of technical knowledge in public participation. Not least, the demands of professionalization might cause increasing formalization of participatory methods, if only so that they can be commensurated, trademarked, and sold (p. 91).

Lamenting the overreliance on formal, deductive knowledge and scientifically based techniques at the expense of practical judgment, informal processes, and improvisation, Scott notes (1998): “What is perhaps most striking about high-modernist schemes, despite their quite genuine egalitarian and often socialist impulses, is how little confidence they repose in the skills, intelligence, and experience of ordinary people” (p. 346).

CITIZENSHIP AS PUBLIC WORK

To counter these trends requires that we re-envision the relationship among citizens and experts and between science-based expert knowledge and alternative forms of knowledge rooted in the everyday experience. Among

contemporary democratic theorists, Harry Boyte (Boyte & Kari, 1996; Boyte 2004) has championed the idea of citizenship as public work. In contrast to the typical pattern in which people “demand that experts fix things” for them, he argues that “effective citizenship thus depends on people thinking of themselves as productive: people who can build things and do things, people who come up with ideas and resources; people who are bold; people who are accountable” (Boyte & Kari, 1996, p. 24). The shift in orientation he posits has important implications for the formulation and implementation of public policy, particularly on issues which directly touch the public such as crime, schools, or—as in the case I examine—young children. The point is not to denigrate professional expertise, but to set in motion a broader, more inclusive process in which the insights and participation of the community “bring to the forefront new resources for problem solving” and “strengthen institutional capacities for collaborative effort” (Boyte & Kari, 1996, p. 24).

Arguing in a similar vein, Daniel Kemmis (1990) contrasts local policy making processes in which citizens engage directly in face-to-face problem solving with the more typical pattern in which citizens are allowed to voice opinions but not expected to listen and learn from one another, nor to infringe on the decision making authority of elected officials and bureaucrats. Recalling the older community traditions such as barn raising along with contemporary examples, he calls for “inhabitory practices” in which neighborly citizens adapt solutions specific to their locale:

Places have a way of claiming people. When they claim very diverse kinds of people, then those people must eventually learn to live with each other; they must learn to inhabit their place together, which they can only do through the development of

certain practices of inhabitation which both rely upon and nurture the old-fashioned civic virtues of trust, honesty, justice, toleration, cooperation, hope, and remembrance (Kemmis, 1990, p. 118-119).

The need for professional expertise does not disappear in this strain of democratic theory, but it is significantly recast. Writing for public planning professionals, John Forester (1999) articulates an approach grounded in careful and imaginative listening to the stories told as publics gather. Echoing Kemmis, he argues that deliberative practice is not just about who gets to speak but who listens, how mutually, actively and imaginatively, and with what degree of sensitivity to the underlying emotions, values, and meanings surfaced by the public encounter. Writing to advise public and private managers, Donald Schon (1983) provides the most forceful articulation of the view that achieving good policy and implementation requires more than adherence to expert-derived “best practices.” As Dunne (1993) summarizes, Schon “draws attention to a considerable mismatch between an entrenched picture of the kind of science-based knowledge which successful practitioners are *supposed* to possess and the knowing-in-action which their practices actually embody” (p. xiii). Whether termed “metis” (Scott, 1998), “phronesis” (Dunne, 1993), “thinking in time” (Neustadt & May, 1986), “reading the situation” (Patton, 2002), or “deliberative practice” (Forester, 1999), this type of context-sensitive judgment is necessary to introduce deliberative democracy into complex, non-routine community settings.

Reconceiving citizenship, policy making, and public administration as craftsman-like public work requiring an intuitive, on-the-ground feel for threats and opportunities can seem a romantic notion to many. But as Mary Schmidt (1993) reminds us in recounting the story of

a dam that failed, organizations that silence or ignore bottom-up knowledge can invite disaster. At issue is how to devise public policy processes that honor alternative forms of knowledge, particularly by taking advantage of the intimate, context-specific, and first-hand knowledge possessed by the citizens whose lives policy seeks to improve.

Because it was animated by precisely this aim, the Civic Engagement Project is an ideal setting to examine the practical challenges faced in bringing to life a more broadly based and deeply deliberative citizen politics. The theorists we have reviewed often write lyrically, but the real-time, real-world public work to which they point proceeds in fits and starts. Using the Civic Engagement Project data as illustrative, the remainder of this article examines demands and tensions inherent in the work, including: 1) locating deliberation in political and cultural context; 2) shaping deliberative practice in real time; and 3) the tradeoffs inherent in particular civic engagement tools. The findings are organized into three sections under these headings. The next section describes the methods used in our research, followed by the three sections of analysis and then by a concluding section that draws on the analysis to suggest theoretically and empirically informed strategies for the field.

CONTEXT AND RESEARCH METHODS

Policy and Project Setting

Between fall 1999 and spring 2002, a UC Davis research team documented and analyzed the civic engagement tools and practices deployed by Children and Families Commissions in Contra Costa, Monterey, San Diego, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and Yolo counties. The Commissions control the local portion (apportioned by birth rate) of a multi-billion-dollar

state revenue stream dedicated to improving the health and school readiness of children ages 0-5. The foundation-sponsored Civic Engagement Project sought to influence how these decision makers went about obtaining state-required public input as well as their subsequent policy and program choices. The stakes were high: several Commissions used the occasion to implement major new programs such as fiscal subsidies for child care workers, guaranteed health insurance for children, or universal pre-school. The Project's three guiding principles—communicated to participants via documents and trainings—were drawn from the public deliberation literature, in particular from the Kettering public issue forum model (Matthews, 1999; Matthews & McAfee, 2003). Table 1 provides a capsule summary of these principles, drawing on the statements of Project staff at meetings our research team observed and on interviews with project participants.

The three principles were viewed as working in concert. For example, without civil dialogue that builds bridges, diverse participation might simply create a cacophony of different voices with no sense of shared purpose or ability to cooperate to get things done.

Early in the Project, staff trained local partners in convening, framing, and facilitating public dialogues, distinguishing exploratory dialogue that is more general in nature from deliberative dialogue that is oriented to specific decisions. An August 2000 Project document identified the “three essential elements of dialogue that distinguish it from other public discussions and needs assessment processes” as: *Convening*—the “who” and “where” that creates a mix of participants that is representative of the county in an accessible and comfortable setting; *Framing*—the “what” that identifies the relevant issues facing the Commission from a public perspective; *Facilitation*—the “how” that allows diverse participants to develop trust and

mutual understanding so they can work through the issues together. The role of the facilitator was deemed particularly critical, supporting the group in moving from “what I want” to “what we want” and “what are we going to do”—grappling with differences to generate common ground.

Table 1. Civic Engagement Project Goals and Practices

Project Goal	Through Practices That:
Inclusive participation/ Wide Spectrum of Community Involvement	• create diverse participation; • insure that “lesser heard” voices are involved; and • value diversity in geography, ethnicity, income, language, family characteristics (e.g., children with disabilities, homeless families, gay and lesbian parents), professional disciplines, organizational affiliations, and sectors (government, nonprofit, for-profit).
Civil dialogue/ Bridging Communities	• create ongoing discussion that builds bridges between and within diverse groups and individuals; and • create mutual understanding, respect, and a sense of common ground and shared commitment.
Policy influence/ Impact on the Commission and Community	• link public voice to outcomes; • make the Commission and its “organized publics” an advocacy force; and • encourage citizens to invest their own time and resources.

The sponsoring foundations provided the eight Commissions with \$60,000-\$100,000 per year and Commissions used the funds to hire a local civic engagement coordinator; engage temporary consultants (e.g., bilingual translators, media consultants); develop outreach materials; cover food, childcare and other costs of

community meetings; and in some cases provide stipends for community participants.

Research Questions and Methods

Our research used a variety of qualitative research methods to answer three primary questions: 1) What civic engagement tools or approaches did local Commissions deploy? 2) What were the strengths and limitations of the respective tools in light of the Project's deliberative aims? and 3) What lessons can be drawn from the Project's results to inform the practice of public deliberation in complex community settings? The team included local observers who provided background information on each community and took notes on local civic engagement activities using common protocols. We also employed interviewers to conduct retrospective interviews with public participants in Commission meetings and activities. Across the eight counties the combined team observed 148 public meetings, and conducted 340 semi-structured interviews with Commissioners, funders, Project leaders, local Commission executive directors and civic engagement staff, and public participants (35 conducted in Spanish). In addition we analyzed Project and local Commission documents, and related materials relevant to the statewide implementation of Prop 10. The local examples used in this analysis survived intensive scrutiny by Project leaders and local Commission civic engagement staff, who were provided an opportunity to review our findings.

LOCATING DELIBERATION IN POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Each Children and Families Commission was appointed by the county Board of Supervisors and functioned as an autonomous, quasi-public entity with independent decision-making authority. Commissioners

described Proposition 10 as a rare occasion in which they received a large infusion of new state funds with few restrictions on local use (as opposed to the oft-decried unfunded mandates). However, in many respects the Commissions operated like typical bureaucratic agencies, facing constraints such as state statutory requirements, budgetary uncertainty, unpredictable time pressures, and lobbying efforts by organized constituencies (e.g., child care workers, established agencies).

The soil in which citizen participation seeds were planted was far from uniform. Differences in funding, demography, and political culture played key roles (see Table 2). Counties with larger populations faced the challenge of reaching more children and families, but could draw on their larger state allocations to supplement the foundation grants. They hired linguistically or culturally attuned outreach workers and in general had an easier time attracting and retaining qualified civic engagement staff. Counties also varied in the number of sizable non-English speaking groups they must address. For example, Santa Cruz could confine its bilingual work to its large Hispanic community, while Commissions in Contra Costa, Yolo, and Santa Clara had to consider 10 or more linguistic sub-populations, such as Cantonese, Vietnamese, Mien, Laotian, Russian, and users of American Sign Language.

More than just direct translation was at issue in navigating cultural dynamics. In some cases it became clear that the concept of deliberation was interpreted through distinct cultural lenses. For example, San Mateo's Commission partnered with the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center to conduct over 91 public dialogues with 500 citizens regarding early childhood issues. Their avowed purpose was not to impact Commission decisions directly, but to engage a key target audience—Latino women with little if any previous history of connection to public affairs. Civic engagement staff spent time cultivating

trust and personal relationships in one-on-one encounters. They made no apology for not engaging these women more

Table 2. Demographic comparison of the cases

COUNTY	Per Capita Income (\$/rank)	Child Poverty Rate	# of non-English Speaking groups	County Pop.	Prop 10 Funds (Total to 6/01)
Contra Costa	33,869 (5)	14%	12	932,000	31,140,230
Monterey	25,747 (14)	24%	3	390,900	16,999,448
San Diego	24,965 (17)	20%	4	2,883,500	109,005,064
San Francisco	40,357 (2)	21%	9	797,200	20,586,262
San Mateo	39,989 (3)	9%	9	727,300	25,377,875
Santa Clara	37,856 (4)	14%	10	1,717,600	66,705,793
Santa Cruz	29,406 (9)	19%	1	253,400	8,822,544
Yolo	23,188 (20)	22%	11	158,900	5,349,521
State Avg.	26,314	23%	8		

Sources:

Per Capita Income: 1997, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. Personal Income and Per Capita Personal Income by County, 1995-97.

Per Capita Income Rank: County Ranking of all 58 California counties by per capita income. 1997, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. Personal Income and Per Capita Personal Income by County, 1995-97.

Child Poverty Rate: Estimated percentages of people under 18 in poverty in California. 1998, U.S. Census Bureau from income reported in the March 1999 Current Population Survey (released 12/01).

Languages Spoken: Number of languages other than English spoken by 1% or more of the English-learners in the California public schools. 1999-00, California Department of Education. English Learners in California Public Schools, by Language and Grade.

Population: July 1999, California Department of Finance, Demographic Research Unit. County Population Estimates and Components of Change, 1998-99.

Prop 10 Funds: 2000-2001 amounts from Children and Families Commission Annual County Reports for Fiscal Year 2000-2001 and from the California Children and Families Commission under County Fund Distributions under Annual Reports and Fiscal Issues at: www.ccfc.ca.gov.

directly with the Commission, since in their understanding “a dialogue is an intense personal encounter with someone you trust,” rather than a deliberation in public. The San Mateo experience was consistent with the findings of a University of California study of Latino community engagement, which found that most Latinos were as active in their communities as other adults, but often preferred to work in small teams of families and friends on collective projects, rather than assuming traditional positions of leadership in formal organizations (Gregory, et. al., 2006).

Based on interviews and on the local knowledge of research team members with long experience in their respective counties, it was apparent that civic engagement work was shaped in important ways by local political traditions and ideological orientations. Democratic-leaning San Francisco drew on a rich history of bottom-up political participation and a strong ethic of inclusivity in government programs. By contrast, Republican-leaning San Diego was being governed with a strong managerial and entrepreneurial mindset, with the public more likely to be viewed as consumers of services than as citizen co-creators of plans. Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and Yolo combine the cosmopolitan influence of university towns with small, isolated rural communities. Each has a highly participatory civic culture, in contrast to Monterey and Contra Costa, where suspicion of government runs high. San Mateo’s wealth and geography, and its enviable ratio of fiscal resources to community needs, has made it a popular destination for government leaders and social services administrators. The long tenure of many of these leaders is both a benefit in terms of experience and a source of anxiety for those who feel new blood and ideas are needed.

SHAPING DELIBERATION IN REAL TIME

Different deliberative tools carry different assumptions about the stages of the policy process in which citizens will play roles (agenda setting, formation, implementation, evaluation; see Arnstein, 1976; Epstein, et. al. 2000) and about how much time is required to obtain desired results. The appeal of techniques that gather input efficiently and take citizens “as they are” is understandable and often valuable (Friedman, 2005). On the other hand, many leading theories of civic engagement pre-suppose longer timeframes, in no small part because they rest on the promise of transforming citizen self-conceptions and/or relationships. The trust and networks on which Putnam’s (2000) theory of social capital relies take time to build; the civic infrastructure that Skocpol (1999) and colleagues see as vital to democratic deliberation will only work if citizens have more than a checkbook relationship with mediating institutions; the forms of public work that Boyte and Kari (1996) celebrate take root when citizens have time to build things in common, learning as they do to act in more public-regarding and less narrowly righteous and aggrieved ways. As Richard Sennett (2008) argues, the passage of time and the ability to engage in staged reflection play critical roles in this type of work, which like other forms of craftsmanship progresses through repetition and revision.

Beginning with Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen participation, research has noted the relative ease of engaging citizens in a token fashion that supports system legitimacy and elite prerogatives. By contrast, inclusive, effective participation requires elites willing to share power and citizens willing to invest their time, energy, and responsibility—conditions that are not routinely met.

How and why the foundation Project evolved

Project leaders faced the challenge of adapting the dialogue framework to rapidly changing circumstances and conditions. Three main phases of the Project are discernible. Phase one (roughly November 1999-August 2000) marked the initial engagement with local Commissions. Most Commissions had hired consultants for their strategic planning. They used Project funds to broaden its outreach and hear a greater diversity of voices. Phase two (roughly August 2000-July 2001) marked the period immediately after each county's strategic plan was complete. Project leaders adapted their ideas to local Commissions that were at very different stages of development and different levels of comfort with public dialogue concepts. With local civic engagement staff in place, the Commissions began to develop their own strategies and tools, while Project leaders looked for ways to integrate public dialogue practices and principles into these approaches. Phase three (from August 2001 until February 2002) brought a turnover in the Project director position and a heightened emphasis on cross-county sharing and learning. The original emphasis on technical assistance to reinforce dialogue concepts and practices was replaced with openness to seeing what forms of civic engagement local partners would develop. A wide range of civic engagement tools were deployed (Table 3).

Staging and Sequencing Deliberative Activities

In addition to how the arc of time shaped the overall Project, time considerations were central to a number of the practical dilemmas facing local Commissioners and their civic engagement staff. A very basic choice was whether to make continuous/integrated engagement of the community the goal or simply to make use of episodic

Table 3. Forms and Tools of Civic Engagement

Advisory committees: the most common form of engagement, these vary according to who they advise, what they advise about, their composition, and their power and influence. Community conversations: episodic meetings involving public input and/or dialogue that are designed to attract parents and community members (for example by providing child care, food and translation). Community capacity building: leadership and organizational development initiatives designed to develop local partners with independent assets and resources to help achieve Commission objectives or to support young children and families in other ways. Mini-grants: setting aside funds for small grants to parent groups, neighborhood organizations, or other non-traditional grant recipients. Program design teams: giving parents/community members roles in the design of funded programs. Citizen proposal review panels: giving parents/community members roles in reviewing funding proposals. Outreach workers: individuals hired to connect the Commission with particular community segments. Requiring parent participation in funded programs: requiring Commission grantees to involve parents in the design, implementation, and/or evaluation of the services their children are receiving. Community events and public relations: keeping the Commission in the public eye to encourage community awareness and involvement. Providing tangible incentives for participation: providing public recognition, training, special access to decision makers, or financial rewards to encourage or reward public participation.
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engagement (e.g., “tell us what you need and then we’ll go about providing it”). Some Commissioners questioned the relevance of civic engagement to the ongoing work of their Commissions while others proclaimed that civic engagement was central to everything they did.

Another decision was whether to subcontract/ collaborate with existing community organizations or to develop the Commission’s own civic engagement programs. The former choice sped implementation, since these organizations had staff in place while it took Commissions many months to hire their own. On the other

hand, there was a tendency for the subcontractors to be more distant from the workings of the Commissions and focused on long-term community capacity building rather than on immediate policy relevance. For example, a San Diego contractor provided in-depth leadership training over many months to individuals identified as promising community activists. Their rationale was to patiently build a cadre of well-mentored citizen leaders that could impact early childhood issues for years to come.

TRADEOFFS INHERENT IN SINGLE TOOLS

The civic engagement tools local staff deployed were internally complex, presenting nested sets of puzzles, questions, and challenges. As Salamon (2002) reminds us, no single governance tool is sufficient for all purposes—“the choice of tool depends heavily on the problem it is intended to solve and the context within which it operates” (p.606-7) such that “tool choices need not be either-or decisions.” Salamon is making a broader point about the tools of government, but his logic is directly applicable to the subset of those tools that deal with civic engagement. To illustrate, I identify five of the most common tools deployed during the Project, noting the strengths, weaknesses, and paradoxes associated with their implementation (see Table 4). This approach—detailed in the following sections—mimics that used in Arnstein’s (1976) volume on citizen participation in transportation planning, though in a necessarily more abbreviated form.

Advisory Committees

This is a familiar form of citizen participation, but because recognized expertise is a qualification for selection it typically elicits participation from those already engaged at the expense of lesser-heard voices. The Project prompted

Table 4. Strengths, Weaknesses, and Paradoxes of Civic Engagement Tools

Tool	Strength	Weakness	Paradox
Advisory Committees	Potential for substantial influence over decisions	Elicits participation of recognized experts rather than lesser heard voices	Formal structures have power, but are less inviting to lesser heard voices; Less formal structures are inviting but lack much power
Outreach Workers	Effective at overcoming language and cultural barriers	Connection with the community often comes at expense of influencing elites	Few outreach workers are comfortable and conversant in both community culture and bureaucratic culture
Community Conversations	A non-threatening space to share information, listen, and build relationships	Efforts to make meetings non-threatening often preclude serious, substantive debate	Inclusiveness often comes at the expense of deliberation that works through conflict and educates public
Mini-grants	Community groups can innovate to complement what public agencies do	Difficult to implement given contracting regulations	Successful mini-grant programs may divert public attention from the arena of decision making and power
Program Design Workgroups	Highly deliberative and gives citizens real power over major public expenditures	Places high demands on staff who must recruit, motivate, train, and manage citizen participants	The rich get richer—more likely to be used where government is already devoting significant resources to civic engagement

experiments to move beyond this status quo, altering the nature, composition, and functions of particular advisory groups. For example, local partners devised two strategies to insure that San Diego's formal Technical and Professional Advisory Committee—whose 15 members represent well-known service providers—was informed by citizen voices. First, one meeting per quarter was rotated among different regions of the county and ended with an open “community conversation” where citizen concerns were aired.

Second, staff developed a separate layer of advisory structures called “leadership teams” made up primarily of parents. These teams operate less formally since they

report to the Commission executive director and not the Commission itself, thus avoiding formal constraints imposed under the Brown Act (California's open meeting law). In San Diego and across the eight counties, we found a consistent paradox: the more formal the advisory structure, the more power it tends to have and the less likely it is to invite the regular participation of parents and community members. Conversely, less formal advisory structures are more likely to provide a welcoming setting for diverse participants but have less influence on decisions.

Outreach Workers

Typically, Commissions hire outreach workers with previous community involvement to build relationships with particular segments of the community—ethnic, class, neighborhood, or special interest. For example, eight outreach workers in Santa Cruz, most bilingual Spanish-speakers, conducted intercept interviews at locations like migrant housing units, pre-schools, shopping malls, and grocery stores. Contra Costa deployed a Spanish speaker to work in the heavily Hispanic east county area and a popular black pastor to work in the predominantly African-American Richmond area. Santa Clara hired 15 outreach specialists to reach specific groups such as the faith community or gay and lesbian parents, effectively overcoming language and cultural barriers and promoting more inclusive participation in Commission-sponsored events.

On the other hand, we observed a lack of connection between outreach work and the deliberations of local Commissions. Civic engagement staff described themselves as being caught between two very different worlds, one heavily bureaucratic and formal and the other idiosyncratic and dependent on trusting personal

relationships. Few staff were comfortable in both these worlds or had arrived at a strategy for bridging the two.

Community Conversations

This tool consists of episodic meetings designed to provide an accessible entry point into the work of the Commissions for diverse parents and community members. The conversations succeeded in promoting inclusiveness and civil dialogue, but did less well in forging consensus or influencing decisions. For example, Contra Costa's Commission convened a series of regional community conversations centered on the question, "How can we make Contra Costa a better place for families with young children?" Commission staff arranged childcare and dinner at all meetings and simultaneous English-Spanish translation. Outreach techniques included invitations (in English and Spanish) to those on the Commission mailing list; articles in local Mothers' Club newsletters; asking community agencies, child care centers, and other associations to recruit participants; advertising in the community calendar section of the local newspaper; and connecting with existing email networks.

The meetings demonstrated the value of exposing citizens to occasions where broad participation is encouraged and everyone is listened to with respect. Participants we interviewed mentioned how they became aware of previously unknown programs or services and of the concerns of parents whose social circumstances are different. These cross-class encounters could be jarring, as when two women we interviewed from wealthy neighborhoods felt thoroughly out of place at a meeting dominated by concerns over unsafe parks and drug dealing. At another meeting, an African-American and a white woman sparred over whether certain support services were, or were not, accessible to all families. Overall, however, the high energy meetings exhibited what Button and

Mattson (1999) describe as “the inherent joy of gathering together in mutual discussion with fellow citizens” (p. 631). As in the policy settings those authors describe, the default mode in these dialogues was to gain more information about the issues and to build community understanding, rather than to directly engage differences by differentiating areas of consensus and conflict.

Local civic engagement staff found that using community conversations as a tool created one recurring choice: whether to convene homogenous or heterogeneous groups. Contra Costa was the exception in attempting to gather diverse publics; most local staff opted for working with groups that shared a history of working together, or some bond of ethnicity, culture, or language. They justified this choice as more appropriate when attempting to engage individuals with little familiarity with public meetings, including immigrant populations.

Mini-grants

Four counties set aside a small portion (less than 10 percent) of their Prop 10 allocation for mini-grants. These awards of \$500-\$10,000 go to non-traditional recipients, such as parent groups, small neighborhood organizations, or home-based childcare providers. For example, the San Francisco Commission Parent ACTION (Achieving Change Together in Our Neighborhoods) Grant program solicited grants for “parent initiated and parent led projects that help improve the lives of young children 0-5, either by strengthening parents/ caregivers’ ability to support their young children, by building relationships among parents, linking parents to services, supports and activities in the city, or by making neighborhoods young child and family friendly” (*staff report to the San Francisco Commission*, 8/01/01). The idea of parent grants had emerged from earlier community conversations and the program provided concrete evidence that the Commission was listening to

citizens. The Commission granted a parent selection board the authority to recommend which proposals to fund and the funded programs were widely perceived as representing the diversity of San Francisco's population in terms of race, ethnicity, language, and neighborhoods.

Although the mini-grant programs primarily engage the public in direct action, the program also catalyzed goal-directed conversations among parents and service providers, enabling community-based groups to complement the service delivery activities of public agencies. On the downside, these programs are time-consuming to implement and may divert public attention from more significant Commission policy decisions.

Program Design Workgroups

This tool involves citizens directly in the design of Commission-funded programs, rather than deferring to experts. For example, Santa Clara established several Community Design Work Groups consisting of about 50 persons selected to represent various facets of the county's population. The work groups generated questions for focus groups and used the resulting suggestions to recommend program designs for Commission funding. Participation in the design teams was limited to a relatively small number of citizens and 51 percent of the membership had to be parents and non-agency affiliated community members rather than representatives of service providers. The teams were granted autonomy to create a community-based plan to spend up to \$2 million over three-years. This form of citizen participation was the most ambitious and difficult to manage, but engaged the public in meaningful deliberation directly linked to Commission funding decisions.

Tool-based Assumptions about Citizen and Expert Roles

Underlying the five deliberative tools are competing understandings of what it means to be a citizen and the nature of the relationship between citizens and experts. The tools conceived of citizens in a variety of guises: rationally informed participants (e.g., advisory committees), citizen problem solvers (e.g., mini-grants), customers giving feedback on services received (e.g., requiring parent participation in many funded programs), and simply as parents—the de facto “front-line service providers” most responsible for the education of the state’s future citizens. Implicit in the choices local leaders made among various tools were assumptions about the citizenry: whether they are better engaged in talk (community conversations) or action (mini-grants); whether to use civic engagement mainly to increase public support of Commissioner decisions or to change the status quo; or whether it was more important to deploy outreach staff by geography, by community sector (e.g., faith, business), and/or by ethnicity and language.

Since it bears directly on how and when citizens and experts interact, we were interested in how staff communicated citizen views to Commissioners. The methods tried included staff reports, presentations by community members at Commission meetings, and inviting Commissioners to be present at civic engagement meetings or public events. None of these methods was judged to be very satisfying by civic engagement staff or Commission executive directors. Commissioners we interviewed put the most stock in occasions where they heard stories directly from members of the public, particularly encounters that opened their eyes to social realities from which they are distanced in their day-to-day work lives. From their vantage point, being an expert carried the accompanying cost of myopia and the stories of parents or other community members served as a way to empathetically

reconnect (see Eckstein & Throgmorton, 2003). Even here there are tradeoffs, since the most meaningful encounters for the public managers and officials we interviewed were ad hoc and not scripted, but these are by definition not as sustainable as having a regular, ongoing structure for citizen-expert interaction.

In at least one important arena, Commissions relied exclusively on experts. Charged with using Prop 10 funds to promote systems coordination and integration, Commissions instinctively sought the advice of experienced administrators who knew where opportunities existed to backfill services recently lost to budget cuts or where service duplications might be eliminated. While representatives of well-connected nonprofit organizations could participate in this level of discussion, civic engagement staff did not even attempt to engage lesser heard citizens in this conversation.

Observing Prop 10 decision making, one could reasonably conclude that members of the pre-existing planning networks (insiders) got access to the decision-making process which determined how millions of dollars would be spent, while ordinary citizens got well-facilitated “meet and eats” (as the community conversations were called in some sites) and a chance to compete for a small pool of mini-grants funds. Both Project staff and their local partners were skilled in introducing into public life the norms of personal sharing and community caring; they were less effective in demystifying the system and helping citizens influence existing public processes.

CONCLUSIONS

A variety of civic engagement tools can contribute to deliberative democracy, but no single tool or approach is without limitations. That is the general lesson I draw from the trajectory the Civic Engagement Project followed from

its start as an experiment in public dialogue to its conclusion as a festival of home grown civic engagement practices. Project examples illustrate the open-ended nature of deliberative forms and the tradeoffs inherent in particular civic engagement tools. On the one hand, the evidence does not lead easily to a set of best practice recommendations, nor would these be in keeping with the emphasis on context-specific judgment in the theories of citizenship and public management undergirding our analysis. On the other, the evidence does point to some strategic understandings that might inform the field, embodied in four recommendations: 1) episodic, single tool strategies should be nested within a long-term approach to nurturing the capacity of citizens to do public work alongside policy makers; 2) in giving voice to diverse community members there should be clarity about the purposes for which diverse participation is being sought; 3) there should be greater attention paid to the role of emotions within deliberative processes; and 4) the training of public managers should emphasize skills—such as convening, facilitating, and familiarity with a variety of civic engagement tools—that support public deliberation and citizen development. The following sections discuss each of these four strategic understandings.

Nesting short-term tools within a long-term citizenship development strategy

If citizens are to be co-creators of public work, rather than simply consumers of expert shaped policies, deliberative processes need to nurture their latent capacities and develop the various skills necessary to participate in public life. As such, public managers need to be conversant in multiple civic engagement tools. The managerial wisdom called for has less to do with being au courant with the latest promising technique and everything to do with learning how to coordinate multiple tools amidst

organizational complexity and in a contextually responsive fashion. Some tools do better at promoting inclusive participation; others do better at promoting thoughtful deliberation. Some attempt to build community trust in an open-ended fashion; others give citizens explicit power within formal decision-making processes. The trick is to juggle multiple strategies on multiple fronts to achieve deliberative aims.

Among the tools and methods I have surveyed, mini-grants and program design workgroups are more likely to provide substantive roles for citizens than the other tools. Both give citizens some direct responsibility for constructing problems and their solutions, along with various forms of financial or staff support. Both presume some form of ongoing citizen engagement rather than simply a one-time encounter. Both cast citizens in an active, constructive role rather than simply as spectators or critics of existing policy and programs. Because they are smaller-scale and more accessible to a broader range of the public, mini-grants might be considered an easier way to promote the goal of inclusive participation and to open the public process to diverse cultural groups. This in turn might be a step toward creating a cadre of citizens with interest in investing greater time in a more intensive process like a program design workgroup.

Tools that create episodic encounters cannot stand alone; they should be used judiciously within a longer-term, multi-faceted approach to developing the citizenry. This work—more akin to what we normally label community building or community organizing—is not just about hearing from a broader range of citizens, it is about getting beneath the opinions that often dominate public participation processes. Needed are more sensitivity to the values that drive opinions, more occasions where deliberation changes minds about what is important, and more clarity about what public achievements are possible

when *we work together*. While this might come about by repeated exposure to a particular deliberative tool—such as a public issue forum—it more likely will result from accumulated experience with different aspects of public work. The general point is that short-term, decision-centered deliberative tools are only as effective as the civic relationships on which they stand.

Getting clear about the purpose served by diverse citizen engagement

Linguistic and cultural diversity is the norm in contemporary communities and targeted outreach was a common strategy in the eight cases. The cases underscored the need to be clear about the specific policy-related purposes for which citizen input is being sought, both to focus the efforts of those fostering deliberation and to avoid misleading public participants. Rather than treating diversity as simply an end in itself, public managers might tie their tactics more closely to one or more of the following potential purposes:

- Determining whether groups have distinct agendas: e.g., different types of services desired, different modes of service delivery required, or different ideas about the relative priority of funding community-based projects rather than programmatic services delivered by traditional institutions;
- Clarifying areas of conflict and consensus, among and between prominent segments of the population;
- Building a sense of common identity and purpose that can be shared across cultural distinctions;
- Increasing the legitimacy of public decisions in all segments of the community;
- Identifying barriers to accessing existing services and ensuring greater use of funded programs by the entire intended recipient population; and
- Building interest in community “do it yourself” efforts.

Depending on the specific ends desired, different tools can be chosen. If the goal is identifying the agendas of distinct groups, it may be sufficient to conduct outreach and meetings with discrete groups one at a time. But if the goal is to create a common identity and purpose, or to clarify areas of conflict and consensus, some way must be found to bring distinct groups together in a setting that supports the sharing of diverse perspectives and the resolution of disagreements. As Karpowitze and Mansbridge (2005) and Lee (2007) have argued, many deliberative processes fail precisely at this point, in part because they work within time frames that are not sufficient to forge consensus. With its emphasis on action-oriented work among diverse individuals, the theory of citizenship as public work represents a different and more promising route to forging common purpose than that found in approaches emphasizing talk alone.

Attending to citizen emotions

Somewhat more speculatively, our research suggests that greater attention be paid to the emotions that are evoked within deliberative processes. The reticence of the Latino mothers in San Mateo about taking part in public meetings, the anxiety provoked by cross-class encounters in Contra Costa community conversations, and the anger and resentment we heard everywhere when citizen input did not appear to make a difference are not deviations from the norm but part and parcel of what meaningful civic engagement brings to the surface. As Forester (1999) has noted, listening for and attending to emotions is essential to public planning, much as it is to building relations among friends. Less clear is what public managers can and ought to do to evoke, process, or learn from these emotions.

Many public meetings we witnessed seemed based in the implicit presumption that sympathy for one another's

feelings is necessary in order to act in public—which Sennett (1974) criticizes as a rather too transient basis on which to ground sustained public action. On the other hand, deliberative democracy advocate William Sullivan (2000) argues that “mutual recognition is...the ignition point of genuine democratic life,” (p. 36) and emphasizes the importance of social bonds as the first step toward more robust civic partnerships. From this perspective, one can look more sympathetically at the decision of many local civic engagement coordinators to emphasize the building of trusting relationships with citizens at the expense of educating them to participate in Commission processes. Whatever evaluative lens one uses, the Project showed that in a social environment riddled with inequality and ethnic distinctions the negotiation of social meanings, identities, and emotions is part of the transaction subtext in any public participation and deliberation process.

Implications for training public managers

At the community level, the work of civic engagement is labor intensive, non-routine, and dynamic. It requires local knowledge, clarity about purposes, sensitivity to diverse populations, the ability to both listen and lead, and a thick skin, among other skills and talents. Critical factors include how many staff are employed full-time, how well they are paid and supported, how much experience they have, and how well their interpersonal style and backgrounds fit in the local context. The finely tuned combination of relationship building and orchestration skills required of successful practitioners resembles raising a child more than cooking with a recipe (Patton, 2006). If engaging citizens is part of the everyday responsibility of public administrators, as advocates of the New Public Service argue (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003), then it will be important to think more systematically about

how to select and train managers who can pursue this intellectually and emotionally demanding work.

This analysis supports the call to diversify the public administration workforce, since the cultural and linguistic sensitivities of staff are integral to building public relationships in increasingly diverse communities. In addition, the interpersonal and emotional skills I have identified would seem to be better learned by apprenticeships in a variety of local government settings than solely by traditional classroom instruction, although curricula emphasizing in-class role playing and service learning opportunities can also contribute. Finally, our observations underscore the critical need to educate public managers in a more robust notion of citizenship. The theorists on whom I have drawn maintain a crucial distinction between policy discussion that may be quite participatory but relatively trivial, and a significant effort to recast experts and citizens as co-creators of public goods, including public policies and their implementation. As public managers navigate among particular civic engagement tools and their inherent tradeoffs and limitations, this understanding of citizenship can serve as a reliable compass, pointing the way forward.

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