

Deliberation Where You Least Expect It: Citizen Participation in Government

By Archon Fung

Innovations in democratic engagement have helped to mend political rifts, restore legitimacy and public trust in government, and tackle wicked urban problems.

Bureaucracy — with its rigid rules and procedures, impenetrable forms, experts, waiting lines, and drab concrete buildings — strikes many as the very antithesis of civic participation and deliberation. Yet in areas as diverse as public education, public safety, environmental regulation, and city planning, officials are opening up the machinery of government to genuine citizen involvement.

Unlike most readers of *Connections*, these officials usually have no great love for civic engagement for its own sake. Instead, they turn to citizens for help in addressing problems they cannot resolve on their own. Some of these problems arise from heated political conflicts in which opposing sides effectively stalemate the policy process. Or official agencies, because of ineptitude or corruption, may suffer legitimacy deficits and need to invite citizen participation to regain the public trust. And sometimes, complex and “wicked” public problems simply outstrip the capabilities of public agencies and leave them incapable of handling the tasks assigned to them.

In general, two kinds of response have been advocated to these situations. Some favor replacing the broken parts of government with private sector, market-based solutions such as vouchers and privatization. Others, notably the “reinventing government” cadres of the Clinton administration, have prescribed new public management techniques to cure these ills. But more recently, a less-noticed and potentially more significant response to these challenges has emerged. Innovations in democratic engagement have helped to mend political rifts, restore legitimacy and public trust in government, and tackle wicked urban problems. Recent experiences from New York City and Chicago illustrate how complex issues

or crises in official agencies can create opportunities to deepen public deliberation and participation in the very bureaucratic institutions that seem so inhospitable to such practices.

The City Listens: Repairing the Public Trust

Few urban planning processes have received more scrutiny than the effort to rebuild lower Manhattan after terrorist attacks killed almost 3,000 and destroyed several acres of commercial and residential property on September 11, 2001. While most development projects draw the interest of only narrow circles of businessmen, planners, and residents, the structures that replace the World Trade Center towers will have to respect the pain and hope of not just New Yorkers but those of all Americans as well. And in addition, the statement made by what is built there will have global significance as a symbolic response to international terrorism.

In the official planning process, two regional agencies — the Port Authority and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation — were charged with leading the effort to rebuild the World Trade Center site. But multiple and conflicting goals and visions — such as commercial versus residential interests, speedy reconstruction versus deliberate and inclusive consultation, and the desires of the families and friends for the victims to be appropriately honored — made it impossible for these agencies to proceed by using routine processes.

The two development agencies joined with several civic organizations to sponsor open public deliberations about the future of lower Manhattan. They brought the Washington, D.C., organization AmericaSpeaks to orchestrate what would be a one-day electronic town hall meeting





Thousands of New Yorkers and others gather at the Jacob Javitz Convention Center to discuss options for rebuilding at Ground Zero.

with more than 4,300 participants to discuss what should be done. AmericaSpeaks publicized the meeting among many diverse communities in New York City to attract a broadly representative group. Recognizing from the outset that this issue was not just of local concern, AmericaSpeaks attracted participants and volunteer facilitators from all 50 states and more than 20 nations. These public engagement efforts culminated in a meeting held at the Jacob Javitz Convention Center on July 20, called “Listening to the City.”

Many of those who attended this daylong affair must have expected the conventional talking-head series of presentations or perhaps some kind of hearing in which a lucky few approach the open microphone to address decision makers. Instead, they found something like an enormous, high-tech, dinner party. The main floor of the Javitz Center contained 500 tables with 10 seats each. One person at each table relayed the discussions via computer to a central bank of computers, where a “theme team” organized this content into general perspectives and concerns. In addition to having their conversations relayed, each participant at the tables had his or her own “polling keypad” through which

votes and straw polls were recorded throughout the day. This technology allowed a form of public deliberation to take place that combined the benefits of small-group discussion — in which every single person can speak, exchange views, and explore issues in depth, with the power of numbers — thousands of people gathered in a single place to be heard.

Much of the discussion focused on six plans for the site that a contractor had drawn up for the two agencies. As they considered each plan, participants gave voice to several deep and widely shared criticisms. Most of the participants felt that the plans lacked architectural courage, that they emphasized commercial interests at the expense of all other priorities, that they failed to address serious concerns about the quality of residential neighborhood life, and that the most important priority — designing an appropriate memorial to those who died — was left as an afterthought in the official process.

Perhaps because the event was widely covered by regional and national media, officials had no choice but to respond to these criticisms. The agencies in charge reduced the amount of commercial space required in the

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replacement scheme by 40 percent, and they commissioned a new set of architectural and land use plans that would incorporate the concerns that were raised at the Listening to the City event.

On December 18, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation revealed nine new plans. “Unlike the initial group of proposals released by the agency last July,” wrote *New York Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp, “these plans throb with energy, imagination, intelligence and the sheer thrill of contributing to a battered city’s rebirth.”¹ It was less clear, however, how well the plans responded to participants’ calls for mixed-use neighborhoods and affordable housing. Still, all sides claimed that these new plans resulted from, were and therefore in some measure legitimated by, the innovative public process at the Jacob Javitz Center. While a public deliberative process was not used to make the final determination of the architectural plan, it is clear that the Listening to the City event had a significant influence on shaping the overall decision making.

Community Policing and Public Education: Wicked Problems

Public deliberation cannot only confer legitimacy on official actions, it can also be used to create partnerships that enable officials and individuals

in a community to solve problems that neither could solve alone. In the late 1980s and mid-1990s, the public school system and police department of Chicago reorganized themselves in ways that created substantial avenues of citizen participation and deliberation at the neighborhood level.

In 1988, in the aftermath of a long teachers’ strike and on the heels of blistering evaluations of the quality of the Chicago public school system, parent and civic organizations turned to democratic participation as a strategy for education reform. The Illinois Assembly devolved control over many school decisions to an elected council (at each school) composed of six parents, two teachers, two community representatives, and the principal. These councils are empowered to hire and fire the school’s principal and allocate discretionary funds in school budgets. Importantly, councils develop — ideally through deliberative processes — medium-term school improvement plans that lay out individualized visions for each school, analyses of strengths and weaknesses, and strategies for utilizing capacities and overcoming liabilities.

In 1994, the Chicago Police Department independently embarked on a similar course of reform. Realizing that many conventional strategies were ineffective in addressing chronic urban crime problems, police reformers and

Photo by Jacqueline Hemmerdinger/AmericaSpeaks



Participants engage one another in discussions around the table about what should be done to remember and rebuild.

community organizations pursued a series of organizational reforms to enable the department to engage in neighborhood-level “problem-oriented policing.” For example, police officers were assigned to specific neighborhoods for extended periods so that they could learn about the area’s distinctive characteristics and challenges. Monthly community meetings are now held in each of the city’s 280 police beats. In these meetings, residents meet with police to discuss their area’s crime and safety problems, to agree on priority issues, and to jointly develop strategies to address those issues. Similar to the school improvement plans, these neighborhood deliberations are captured in “beat plans” that become mission documents for police officers and residents who are involved. Between 5,000 and 6,000 residents attend community policing meetings across Chicago each month.

The participation of ordinary Chicagoans in the workaday operations of these two crucial agencies may offer several important benefits. Residents and parents, because they are on the receiving end of official actions, may know more about what’s working and what’s not than the street-level officials serving them. By developing strategies and action plans through deliberation, novel ideas may emerge from the interaction among professional and resident perspectives. Residents may bring capacities and resources that are unavailable to police and educators. Finally, regular and structured interactions can create channels of accountability in which citizens monitor local officials and press them to do their jobs.

Has injecting citizen participation and deliberation into the schools and police helped these agencies or the citizens that rely on them? Test scores have improved and crime rates have dropped in Chicago since the reforms were instituted. But it would be premature to attribute that success to these democratic initiatives because other cities without these reforms have also experienced similar improvements. Still, there are many neighborhood schools and police beats where collaborations between local officials — police, principals, and teachers — and Chicago residents have yielded innovative solutions to complex problems.

But these programs are not without their blemishes. Participation requires

officials to share power, and officials sometimes resist what they consider to be interference from citizens and community organizations. For much of the 1990s, for example, the central management of the school system fought trench wars with many local school councils over the details of local school governance. In community policing, tensions between the department and a community-based group that was central to the original reform caused a break that greatly weakened the role of civic organizations.

Conclusion

These developments in New York and Chicago are good examples of how some public agencies are opening up to allow citizen deliberation and participation. They are typical in both their promise and incompleteness. Engaging ordinary citizens in empowered deliberations about the operations of government can increase legitimacy, bring crucial local knowledge to bear on public action, add resources, and enhance public accountability. However, democratizing initiatives often encounter resistance from officials who are reluctant to share authority or subject themselves to additional public scrutiny. Despite these difficulties, the administrative processes of government can be a promising site for civic deliberation and engagement. Deepening democracy within the state itself is the most direct way to ensure that public deliberation reaches beyond discourse to generate action and change.

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Resources: For more information about participatory and deliberative innovations in government, see Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance (edited, Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, Verso Press, 2003) and Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Governance (Archon Fung, Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2003).

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1. Herbert Muschamp, “Visions for Ground Zero: An Appraisal; The Latest Round of Designs Rediscover and Celebrate the Vertical Life,” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2002.