

Mapping Public Deliberation

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, political theorists have expended considerable energy defining and debating the ideal of public deliberation and its importance for democracy. In parallel, a growing number of civic organizations have been experimenting with new forms of public deliberation. For many scholars and practitioners, the deliberative process, in which citizens carefully weigh alternatives in order to identify the best decisions, is the centerpiece of democratic governance. Despite all the energy devoted to promoting the deliberative ideal, surprisingly little effort has been directed to determining how existing public participation opportunities approximate this ideal.

As one step toward rectifying this imbalance, this project set out to create a map of existing opportunities for public deliberation in the United States. The project aims to describe the distribution and frequency of opportunities for deliberation in the U.S., analyze the strengths and weaknesses of these deliberative venues based on their design features and outcomes, and identify promising practices. Because few scholars have comprehensively analyzed particular venues for participation, the project also identifies gaps in existing knowledge and sets the agenda for further research.

The results presented here are based on a classification of public participation organizations affiliated with major deliberation-related professional associations, followed by a literature review of the most prominent and representative organizations identified in the scan of organizations. The two stages of research clearly revealed that the vast majority of public participation organizations and venues exist due to legislative requirements for “public involvement.” Although these requirements may allow some citizens to hold officials accountable, in general they do not encourage public deliberation.

Public deliberation may represent the some theorists’ and practitioners’ ideal, but for the most part it is not an ideal that governmental institutions successfully emulate. While the majority of governmental public participation venues fail to support deliberation, more and more civic organizations are devoting themselves to promoting citizen deliberation and dialogue. Some of these organizations believe that involving citizens in meaningful discussion and decision-making offers the best hope for revitalizing civic engagement in America. Others promote citizen deliberation as a way to resolve conflicts, build community, or achieve social change.

In rare cases, governmental bodies have taken the initiative to establish participation programs that allow public deliberation, with the belief that they can make government work more effectively. In other cases, governments have partnered with civic organizations to meet expectations for public involvement in ways that enable deliberation. These efforts offer promising examples of how the menu of public participation opportunities might be transformed to more closely approximate the ideal of citizen deliberation. Rather than recreating the wheel, we can learn a great deal about effective ways to promote public deliberation by analyzing the design and consequences of existing public participation venues.

This paper discusses governmental venues for public participation and the ways in which they achieve and fall short of public deliberation. It then reviews some of the more prominent civic

efforts at public deliberation, describing their strengths and shortcomings. In the final section, I assess what the comparative analysis of participatory venues teaches us about opportunities for public deliberation and suggests in terms of policy interventions. In closing, I consider what more we need to know in order to more effectively merge the reality of citizen participation with the ideal of public deliberation.

METHODOLOGY

The project took place in two major stages, a scan of organizations in the field, followed by in-depth analysis of several selected venues.

Stage One

To approximate the lay of the land in terms of public participation opportunities in the U.S., I first examined the rolls of professional associations and networks dedicated to civic participation, spoke with experts, and extensively surfed the Internet. Through this scan, I developed a list of 430 U.S.-based and focused organizations involved with public participation. The list is not exhaustive and has a few biases worth noting; nonetheless, it succeeds in portraying a general topography of public participation organizations in the U.S. Classifying these organizations based on their goals, connection to government, and degree to which they promote deliberation, gave further shape to the field.

The sample consists of organizations that belong to three major umbrella associations: the National Coalition for Deliberation & Dialogue (NCDD) (70 organizations), CIVICUS (39 organizations), and the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) (243 organizations) as well as 78 others I identified in the course of research. Because IAP2 members represent more than 60 percent of organizations in the sample, my analysis of the shape of the field is highly influenced by the characteristics of IAP2 members. Although no other similar consortium contained as many members, I cannot conclusively prove that the characteristics of IAP2 organizations are as over-represented in reality as they are in the sample I constructed.

To the extent possible given the information available on the Internet and in available print resources, I classified these organizations along three major dimensions.

- *Fit with Public Deliberation Criteria*

I attempted to ascertain whether the organizations met three criteria for a public deliberation venue. Namely, a particular example must constitute an intentional effort to establish a **public space** for **deliberation** on issues of **crucial public concern**.

I classified organizations as meeting the criteria if any of their activities fit the criteria. I attempted to classify their efforts based on these deliberative activities rather than on their overall organizational focus.

- Deliberation – Dialogue aimed at weighing alternatives for what should be done.
- Public Concern – Deliberation focuses on issues related to the public good, rather than private interests.
- Public Space – Open invitation, and/or space for deliberation is actually public.

- *Purpose*

I classified the organizations based on the stated or implicit goals of their participatory efforts. Eleven reasonably distinct goals emerged in the analysis, which I have since condensed to five major goals of civic public deliberation venues and four other categories.

- **Conflict Resolution** – Main focus of deliberative projects is resolving specific conflicts.
 - **Community Building and Mutual Understanding** – Main focus of deliberative projects is bringing people together to encourage the formation of relationships and cooperation with goal that diverse parties that have failed to communicate effectively in the past understand one another.
 - **Civic Engagement/Giving Voice** – Main focus of deliberative projects is to foster active citizenship, ensuring that citizen voices are heard.
 - **Social Action/Problem-Solving** – Main focus of deliberative projects is to identify concrete actions to address a problem.
 - **Opinion-formation/Civic Education** – Main focus of deliberative projects is to enable citizens to interact and form their own ideas about public issues.
 - **Visioning** – Main focus of deliberative projects is to identify a shared vision/long-term plan for the future of a community or organization.
 - **Project Facilitation** – Main focus of deliberative projects is attempting to facilitate public involvement in and approval of projects, often as a contractor to a government agency or a staff member of a private engineering firm.
 - **Making Government Work** – Main focus of deliberative projects is improving government functioning by improving communication, generating better information, engaging citizens in change, etc.
 - **Research/Resource** – Main focus of projects is to provide resources or research deliberative projects.
- *Connection to Power*

I also classified the organizations based on their relationship with any level of U.S. government.

 - **Empowered** – Citizens involved in deliberative process make decisions that government and/or other organizations implement.
 - **Advisory** -- Citizens involved in deliberative process advise government and/or other leaders.
 - **Government Initiated** – Government agency or official originated and spearheaded project.
 - **Government Sponsored** – Government agency or official provided at least some financial, in-kind, or technical assistance to the project.
 - **Government Participation** – Government agency or official participated actively in deliberation.
 - **No Government Role** – No government agency or official participated in the project in an official capacity.

Of the 430 organizations in the sample, 21 could not be classified based on the information available on the Internet. An additional 36 organizations did not appear to have any relevant participatory projects.

Project Facilitation

The analysis in Table 2 below reveals that 62.2 percent of the categorized organizations in the sample fall into either the “Project Facilitation” or “Making Government Work” categories. This

bias can be attributed to the scale and focus of the IAP2. The IAP2, which has members from 274 organizations in the U.S., focuses primarily on government agencies required to do public participation through the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 or other similar legislation, along with the private contracting organizations that support government projects.¹ Some project facilitation organizations are engineering firms that offer public involvement services along with their construction and design services. A larger portion consists of firms that offer specifically public relations and public involvement services.

Of the 121 project facilitation organizations, only nine described their function in citizen deliberation terms. Most organizations described their functions in terms of “public involvement” and “outreach” in expediting project approval and implementation. For 91 percent of project facilitation organizations, I could not determine whether their participatory projects were deliberative. Because most describe the traditional public hearing and citizen comment period as their form of participation, I suspect that most of these organizations do not enable citizen deliberation. Since NEPA and other legislation require holding public forums, most project facilitation organizations conduct their citizen participation in public spaces.

Making Government Work

Nearly 30 percent of the sample falls into the “Making Government Work” category. This category is comprised of two main groups: (1) federal and state agencies that do public participation in order to comply with relevant legislation and (2) municipalities that have taken the initiative to involve citizens in advising local policy-making. Nearly all agencies in the latter group of neighborhood association programs, master planning, and visioning efforts, meet with the three criteria for public deliberation venues.

In the former group, it is unclear whether the agencies practice deliberative participation in their public hearings. In several cases, agencies such as national laboratories have deliberative “site-specific advisory boards,” composed of self-nominated and officially appointed citizen representatives. The extent to which these boards represent a public space for deliberation is unclear as most citizen appointees are professionally interested in the boards as city planners, environmental advocates, etc.

¹ Only 243 of the 274 organizations are included in the sample because internationally-focused organizations were eliminated from the sample.

Table 1. Percentage of Organizations by Category

Categories	Number of Organizations	Percentage of Sample	Number of Organizations Meeting the Criteria	Percentage Organizations in Category Meeting Criteria
Project Facilitation	121	32.44%	9	7.44%
Making Government Work	111	29.76%	34	30.63%
Community Building/Mutual Understanding	39	10.46%	11	28.21%
Research/Resource	20	5.36%	10	50.00%
Conflict Resolution	17	4.56%	5	29.41%
Visioning	17	4.56%	11	64.71%
Social Action	16	4.29%	5	31.25%
Giving Voice/ Civic Participation	21	5.63%	20	95.24%
Opinion-formation	11	2.95%	11	100.00%
TOTALS	373	100.00%	116	

Community Building/Mutual Understanding

Of the 39 community building organizations in the sample, only 11 (28.1 percent) meet with the three criteria. Dialogues held by these organizations tend to be about individual emotions and experiences, rather than focusing on what should be done about social problems. A few organizations are deliberative, but fail to meet the public space criteria because they conduct small group discussions in private homes.

Research & Resource

Of the 20 research and resource organizations in the sample, half meet with the three criteria. That is, half do research related to public deliberation or provide support to such efforts.

Conflict Resolution

Of the 17 conflict resolution organizations in the sample, five (or nearly 30 percent) meet with the three criteria. Most mediation and conflict resolution organization employ deliberation in their work. For a large portion, however, it is unclear whether they invite the broader public to their forums.

Visioning

Of the 17 visioning organizations in the sample, 11 (or nearly 65 percent) meet with the three criteria. Several organizations fail to meet the criteria because their visioning process is unclear.

Social Action/Problem-Solving

Of the 16 social action organizations in the sample, only 5 organizations (or 31 percent) meet with the three criteria. Social action organizations hold dialogues with the aim of enhancing productivity and developing a specific plan of action to combat a problem. Some organizations that fail to meet the criteria involve only experts in their discussions, while for others the extent of deliberation is unclear.

Giving Voice/Civic Engagement

More than 95 percent of organizations in this category meet the criteria.

Opinion-formation/Civic Education

All 11 opinion-formation organizations meet with the criteria.

Analysis of Connection to Power

My classifications along the “connection to power” dimension can be divided into two sub-dimensions; namely the organization’s level of empowerment (empowered, advisory, or neither) and the organization’s connection to government (government initiated, sponsored, participation, or no government role). If an organization had any projects with connections to government, I classified them based on these projects. Thus, an organization classified as “government initiated” may have many projects, some of which are not government initiated. For 15 percent of organizations, both categories of “connection to power” are unclear from available information.

If a deliberative effort was empowered, it was also advisory and involved government initiation, sponsorship, and participation. Likewise, in most cases, if a deliberative effort was advisory, it also involved government initiation, sponsorship, and participation. A few organizations claimed an advisory role in terms of producing reports or providing information to the media, but did not involve any official government role in the process.

Empowered

Three organizations qualified as “empowered” in my analysis, along with an additional four that may prove to be empowered with further information. Of these organizations, five were neighborhood association programs that offer citizens substantial influence in local policy-making. The other two were non-governmental organizations that facilitated this type of program. Six of the seven organizations fell in the “Making Government Work” category, while the other fell in the “Visioning” category.

Advisory

Forty-six additional organizations qualified as “advisory.” Of these, six were research or opinion-formation organizations that did not involve government as a sponsor, initiator, or participant, but issued reports to advise officials after the fact. Most visioning, giving voice, and opinion-formation organizations could be classified as advisory, as could a number of project facilitation and making government work organizations. In contrast, very few conflict resolution, community building, mutual understanding, civic engagement, social action, and research & resource organizations could be classified as advisory.

Conclusion from Stage One

This analysis found that the vast majority of organizations involved in public participation include the public due to legislative requirements for “public involvement.” Most of these efforts do not involve public deliberation. In fact, only 31 percent of the 373 organizations classified meet with all criteria for a public deliberation venue.

Of the 95 deliberative venues I was able to classify according to connection to power, 85 percent have at least some degree of government involvement. Only seven percent, however, come even close to empowered deliberation. These figures cannot be considered conclusive since 15 percent of the total sample could not be classified by connection to power based on available information. These findings suggest that the landscape of participatory efforts is biased toward legislatively mandated hearings and public comment periods, with empowered, deliberative efforts occupying but a small portion of the foreground.

Stage Two

Using this information, I developed a list of participatory venues – places and practices that offer the possibility of deliberation because they bring citizens together in connection with issues of public concern. I then conducted a literature review, attempting to find information on each venue’s defining characteristics, distribution and frequency, and potential as a deliberative forum.

Not all possible public deliberation venues are profiled in this report. Public deliberation occurs in informal conversation, on talk radio, and over the Internet. In this paper, however, I have chosen to focus on forums convened for the purpose of face-to-face participation or interaction. Recognizing the split identified above, between governmental and civic venues for public deliberation, I selected the most prominent examples of venues in each category, while covering all of the major purposes of deliberation I identified in my earlier scan.

The government-sponsored venues listed in the left-hand column of Table 2 below represent the most prevalent government-sponsored forms of public participation. Although each of these participatory venues continues to be employed frequently, the venues are organized in the approximate order in which they came to prominence. The civic venues listed in the right-hand column are among the most prevalent civic deliberative efforts. Like the government venues, these civic processes and organizations generally can be classified based on the type of process they employ for deliberation.

Table 2. Public Deliberation Venues Profiled

<p><u>Government-sponsored Venues</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New England Town Meetings • Public Hearings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ NEPA hearings ○ City council meetings • Citizen Advisory Boards <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Site-specific advisory boards ○ Local committees • Neighborhood Associations • Collaborative Forums <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Visioning processes ○ Community policing • Closed Stakeholder Processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Habitat conservation plans ○ Negotiated rulemaking ○ Watershed preservation councils 	<p><u>Civic Venues</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative Forums <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Small Group: Conversation Cafés ○ Larger Group: National Issues Forums ○ Large/Small Group Interface: AmericaSpeaks ○ Large/Small Group Interface: Study Circles • Closed Stakeholder Processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Deliberative Polling ○ Citizen juries ○ Public Conversations Project
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Of course, any review of public deliberation venues is hampered by limitations in the existing scholarship on the topic. Relatively few scholars have comprehensively studied a particular deliberation venue with the aim of understanding its deliberative quality.² Scholarship on governmental venues for participation is particularly lacking in this regard because these venues generally are not considered potential havens for deliberation.

Beyond the specifics of deliberative quality, evaluation in general is lacking in the field of public participation. Because citizen participation has many varied goals, scholars employ differing criteria in their assessments of deliberative venues. Where evaluations do exist, they tend to focus on process indicators (i.e. how many people came, how much the process cost), rather than outcome factors (i.e. how did the process affect decision-making). Any evaluation of deliberative venues is complicated by the fact that the value of the venue has much to do with how effectively the model is implemented. Finally, much of literature is out of date given that the vogue of studying public hearings and citizen advisory boards followed soon after their proliferation in the 1970s-1980s.

Despite these limitations, a review of existing literature proved a useful exercise. To the extent possible given available information, I discuss the following in each of the profiles of venues below. First, I consider the defining characteristics of the venue: how it recruits participants, what the deliberation is about, the organization of deliberation, the period over which it occurs, and the relationship of the citizen deliberation to government officials. With these design features in mind, I consider the quality of deliberation the venue produces. In particular, are participants diverse and representative of their community? Is the tenor of discussion civil and

² The only clear exception to this rule is Frank Bryan’s lifetime of devotion to studying the New England town meeting. (Bryan, Frank. *Real Democracy*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 2004.)

respectful? And does the event even the playing field for participation and influence? Finally, I consider the outcomes of these design choices and the quality of deliberation. Namely, I ask:

- Educating Citizens and Officials: Do citizens and officials learn in the process?
- Official Accountability: Does the process enable citizens to hold officials accountable to citizen concerns?
- Justice: Does the process of deliberation result in more just policymaking procedures and practices?
- Popular Mobilization and Spillover Citizenship: Does the process motivate action and/or on-going civic activity from groups and individuals?

Finally I touch on practical considerations about political and fiscal support for the process. I close each profile by exploring the particular venue's transformative potential as a model for reform.

Two important dimensions for mapping public deliberation emerged from the literature review: the degree of citizen power and the degree of inclusivity. In brief, two of the most meaningful ways of describing public deliberation venues are based on who is allowed to participate and what they are allowed to accomplish.

DIMENSIONS AND DESIDERATA

In reviewing the literature on public deliberation venues, the clearest and most crucial dimensions of variation that arose were the degree of citizen power and the degree of inclusivity. With the goal of giving shape to the field, I plotted seven governmental and seven civic venues profiled in this report along these dimensions.³

Process

In Figure 1, on the following page, I plotted the venues based on my impression of what constituted a generic representation of the venue based on the literature. Figure 2 below uses dashed circles to demonstrate my impression of the realm of possibility for how the venue could be implemented.

The diagrams do not map the quality of deliberation that takes place within a particular venue. They merely suggest that some processes may be particularly suited to achieving certain aims. For instance, one would not want to use an advisory board structure in a case where the goal of deliberation was solely to inform citizens. An advisory board might be better suited to a process that uses deliberation to partner with government agencies. As a result, the upper right corner of the diagram is not necessarily the best place on the diagram to be.

Diagram Key

Based on Arnstein’s famous 1969 article on the ladder of participation, I have condensed her eight categories to six, omitting therapy from between manipulation and informing and placation from between partnership and delegated power. Below, I explain the definitions used to classify the venues.

- Manipulation
 - Participation used solely for the purposes of granting legitimacy to a decision-making process
 - *Example:* No venue in and of itself can be called manipulative. Arnstein uses the example of citizen advisory boards used as a “rubber stamp” or a public relations stunt.
- Informing
 - Participation in which information flows only from officials to citizens, without mechanisms for meaningful feedback.
 - *Example:* A public forum is held to debate an issue, but no mechanisms exist to draw policymakers’ attention to the results.
- Consultation
 - Participation in which citizens are asked for their input with no clear assurance that their advice will be employed

³ “Visioning” is used on the diagram as a proxy for community forums and “watershed councils” and “negotiated rulemaking” are used as proxies for closed stakeholder processes.

- *Example:* A public hearing in which citizens are given the floor to speak, but officials have little responsibility for considering citizen comments.
- Partnership
 - Participation in planning and decision-making with accountability mechanisms that ensure that citizen input will not be flagrantly disregarded.
 - *Example:* An advisory board in which the charter specifies that policymakers must take the advice of the board or justify their different choices.
- Delegated Power
 - Participation in which government cedes decision-making power to citizens who engage in a particular process.
 - *Example:* A neighborhood association that conducts participatory budgets, which are implemented by the city.
- Citizen Control
 - Participation in which the people govern.
 - *Example:* A town meeting in which citizen decisions become the law of the town.

Based on my reading of the secondary literature on deliberative venues, I classified degree of inclusivity in the following manner.

- Open refers to participatory venues in which all are welcome to participate.
 - Open & Defies SES Bias: The process typically either attracts participants that include citizens of low socioeconomic status or makes a concerted effort to do so.
- Selective refers to venues in which only a selected few may participate
 - Random Selection: The process attempts to create a microcosm of the relevant population through random stratified sampling.
 - Stakeholders: The process includes particular parties intended to represent certain views or groups.
 - Elite Stakeholders: The process includes the leaders of organizations, industries, and professional associations.

Diagram Findings

In Figure 1, we see that venues listed in the upper right corner of the diagram tend to be used by local governments. Not surprisingly, it is easier to be inclusive when issues take place on a smaller scale. Venues listed in the lower right corner tend to be used by regional and federal governments. When a huge population is affected, it may make more sense to use a selective process than to hold an open call.

Figure 1 also shows that civic organizations are not moving beyond partnership with government agencies. Because civic partnerships with government tend to be circumstantial, rather than institutionalized, civic venues tend not to allow for citizen power or control. The diagram clearly shows that those venues with legal accountability mechanisms are the most empowered.

In examining Figure 2, in which the range of possible placements are revealed, it appears that the venues most susceptible to manipulation are those where it is possible that information is given to citizens without independent variation, and/or citizens do not have alternate sources of political power.

