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## Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Scope

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# Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Scope

## **Abstract**

This article addresses the challenges of scaling up deliberative democracy beyond the level of individual communities. It begins with a general discussion of the problems that scope poses for deliberative democratic practice. It then proceeds to look critically at a range of initiatives that have, in recent years, attempted to overcome these problems in the American context. The concluding sections suggest guidelines and concepts aimed at helping practitioners approach large-scale public engagement more strategically, as well as areas that research and theory should explore.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## I. Introduction

*My most earnest wish is to see the republican element of popular control pushed to the maximum of its practicable exercise. I shall then believe that our government shall be pure and perpetual.*

Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Isaac H. Tiffany, August 26, 1816

Throughout his political life, Jefferson argued that democracy demands an active citizenry, one that would participate energetically in governance and thereby contribute, and develop a commitment, to the public good. “The whole is cemented,” he argued, “by giving to every citizen, personally, a part in the administration of the public affairs” (Jefferson, 1816, p. 214).

He also argued that such active citizenship could best take place in small communities, where the limited scope to be “administered” could be readily grasped and engaged by citizens with strong connections to place and one another. His vision was of a polity of agrarian townships where citizens would be closely bound to one another, with vibrant public squares.

This vision, appealing as it is, was bound to be left behind. Jefferson could not keep small town agrarian America in place simply because he thought it was, democratically speaking, a good idea. Economic, technological and social evolution overtook that notion and turned it into something quaint. Now, local issues bounded by neighborhoods and townships, while still vitally important, exist in tandem with just as demanding regional, national and international problems that governance must confront. Meanwhile, modern communications and mobility make civic identity far more expansive and multi-layered than that of Jefferson’s yeoman farmer, if often more amorphous as well.

A contrast to Jefferson’s democratic vision was offered by fellow founder James Madison, who argued (in the Federalist Paper #10) that the vast scope of the nation would, rather than making democracy harder, help sustain it. Size, he surmised, would protect the nation from the worst extremes of factionalism and tyrannical majorities. And, arguably, the very size and complexity of the United States has helped counter narrow provincialism, spawned diversity of interest groups, and demanded shifting coalitions throughout our history. In these ways it has indeed contributed to the stability of our democracy, as Madison had predicted.

But if Jefferson’s vision did not prevail, he was still correct about the challenges to an engaged and deliberative citizenry that a polity of great scope would pose. Civic participation today—marked by low voter turnout, pointless pundit-speak, and empty political spectacle—pales in comparison to the robust ideal of civic engagement and debate of small town life that Jefferson promoted as the way by which residents could best learn to be citizens.

Madison could be sanguine in the face of this dilemma. For him and his democratic vision, the quality of engagement by most citizens was not a core concern. For, while he agreed that deliberation was important to the American political process, he viewed it as something that could and should occur among the people's representatives, not the people themselves. The people's job was to *pick* the deliberators, not to *be* the deliberators.

This position, however, has its own critical flaws. If citizens cannot deliberate effectively between elections in order to develop opinions that connect them in meaningful ways to the issues of the day, on what basis are they to decide come election time who ought to lead? Are they suddenly to become informed and wise? Unlikely. Should they decide by party loyalty alone? That era is gone. Should candidate personality (or, more realistically, *image*) guide their vote? That is a recipe for demagoguery and manipulation.

Beyond the selection of who governs, the successful *functioning* of representative government is well served by an engaged citizenry. When done well, it helps perfect policy by providing input from those who it is meant to serve; it legitimizes policy by giving citizens a chance to weigh in and be heard; and it builds the active support policy needs for its effective implementation and long-term success.

Moreover, there is the reality that in a democracy people have the right to participate in public affairs between elections, they will do so at their pleasure, and it therefore behooves the nation to help them do it effectively and constructively. Public participation *will* occur. The question is, will it primarily be the most powerful, the angriest and most extroverted that are heard from in policy deliberations, public hearings or talk radio? Or, can forms of participation be created that include more diverse and comprehensive participation in more productive ways?

The question calls for greater deliberative engagement by citizens, as Jefferson would have it. But we then return to the question of how to make that so in a nation whose size and complexity has dwarfed even Madison's vision of a nation of formidable scope. As Benjamin Barber has it, "[T]he old problem of scale, the bugaboo of direct democracy that had led the American founders to hitch their constitutional wagon to the brilliant but costly device of representation," continues to perplex us today (Barber, 2003, p. xiv).

"The old problem of scale" certainly continues to perplex today's deliberative democracy movement, whose practitioners have made great strides in learning to create the conditions for civic deliberation and engagement on the level of local communities, but continue to struggle with how to bring it to greater

scale.<sup>1</sup> (This includes my own efforts as director of public engagement at the nonprofit, nonpartisan Public Agenda.) This essay aims to make some headway with respect to better understanding the challenges that scope poses for deliberative public engagement and how to overcome them, focusing primarily on the American case. It begins, in Section II, by considering some of the social and political factors that make scaling up so challenging. Section III examines a number of significant recent attempts to “cope with scope,” highlighting their strengths and speaking frankly about their limitations. Section IV suggests a number of guidelines that I believe can help us become smarter in our efforts to scale up deliberative democratic participation. Section V concludes the essay by reconsidering some of the larger socio-political dynamics hindering public engagement first discussed in Section II—to which we now turn.

## II. Scaling up is hard to do

Several interacting factors make large-scale deliberative democracy difficult to achieve.

First, deliberative democracy requires a good deal of attention by citizens, who have many other demands on their time. This is not to say that most citizens *can't* deliberate and participate in governance—that's an entirely different controversy that I'm leaving aside for purposes of this essay, except to say that the presumption here is that *under the right conditions* citizens can engage issues quite effectively. But even if we accept that citizens are, under favorable circumstances, *capable* of effective deliberation, we are still left with the problem that the number and complexity of issues demanding attention tends to surpass the time and energy that citizens can readily devote to them.

Second, factors that support effective deliberation by citizens are weak in American public life, while those that inhibit it are strong and abundant. The former include nonpartisan, user-friendly information about issues, opportunities to enter into productive dialogue with fellow citizens on the pros and cons of various approaches to addressing them, meaningful and rewarding avenues of collective action, and open lines of communication and mutual accountability between citizens and leaders. The latter (the conditions that inhibit citizen deliberation) include political spectacle and manipulation, and the over-insulation of real decision making from public influence. What this means is that the conditions that support deliberative public participation do not flourish naturally, they need to be created through know-how, sweat and resources.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the section on “Scaling Deliberation Up and Out” in Levine, P., Fung, A., and Gastil, J. in “Future Directions for Public Deliberation” (Journal of Public Deliberation, Vol. 1, Issue 1, Article 3, 2005, pp. 4-5).

Third, it is easier to create such favorable conditions for civic deliberation in small communities than in vast regions or across the nation—which simply restates the problem this essay sets out to confront. The general pattern is that as you increase the numbers who are deliberating and the geographical area you are attempting to cover, you tend to decrease the intensity and coherence of the deliberation you can effectively support.

Fourth, in the natural course of things, there is too little incentive to create the conditions for effective civic engagement by those with the most resources and natural opportunities to do so, specifically government, the private sector and the mainstream media. Indeed, if these entities *did* have strong incentives to promote deliberative democracy, the problem of scope would, most likely, already be solved.

Expanding on the last point: Few of the political and bureaucratic leaders who control the government (especially at the national level) invest time and energy in authentic public engagement that can actually affect policy. They might make empty *gestures* towards it (as in pro-forma public hearings or pre-scripted town hall meetings) but that, of course, is an entirely different matter. The private sector shows no inclination to make resources available for civic engagement except, perhaps, in the occasional idiosyncratic situation in which the corporate image payoff is great while the cost to the bottom line is negligible. And the mainstream media, while flirting occasionally with “public journalism,” seems happier to perfect the art of shallow, sensational infotainment.

It is certainly possible that government, business and the mainstream media could be persuaded to do more to support deliberative participation by citizens, but a Catch-22 prevails. These institutions and actors, which are so well placed to foster deliberative public engagement, would have greater incentives to invest in it once it has become a strong habit and established practice of American democracy. That is, if citizens were more deeply engaged in deliberative participation in public life, and began demanding and rewarding more honest talk and responsiveness from leaders, these sectors would more likely play ball. But since the practices of participatory and deliberative democracy are *not* well established, demand is low and leaders can ignore it without peril. Which raises the question, how do we get there from here?

The upshot is that other sources of support and innovation will be needed to establish more deliberative “habits of the heart” among average citizens and leaders alike. Again, the hopeful possibility is that if deliberative democratic practices were more firmly established in the American political process and culture, government, business and the media would have the incentives to maintain it. In the meantime, the current situation would seem to leave things most squarely in the hands of several complementary actors to support the evolution of public engagement in society. There is the *philanthropic sector*—or

those members of it who are convinced of the importance of broad-based civic engagement and have decided it is worth investing in. There are *local institutions* (such as schools, the occasional municipal or state agency, and various kinds of community-based organizations) that have concluded that the public should play a larger role in our representative system. And then there are *democratic entrepreneurs*, typically based in nonprofit organizations and academic centers, researching and experimenting with new forms and strategies of public engagement.

None of these actors have a limitless capacity, which suggests that for the foreseeable future resources for this work will be relatively scarce. Therefore, if we are to succeed in significantly broadening the practice of civic engagement, we will do well to figure out how to get the best return on our democratic investments. As a step in that direction, the next section reviews a number of current attempts to scale up deliberative democratic practice, with an eye toward identifying both their strengths and weaknesses.

### **III. Current Attempts to Cope with Scope**

#### **“Human-Scale” Public Engagement**

For quite a while, a number of organizations, theorists and practitioners have been hard at work perfecting the art of civic engagement on the community or neighborhood level. Call it “human-scale” civic engagement. Those that have done significant work in this arena include the Kettering Foundation and its National Issue Forums, Study Circles, AmericaSpeaks, the National Civic League, the Public Conversations Project, the Harwood Institute, and the organization I work for, Public Agenda—among others.<sup>2</sup>

While there continue to be advances and refinements, it’s fair to say that there is a solid foundation of know-how as far as this level of civic engagement is concerned. We now know quite a bit about organizing deliberative public engagement at the local level that can include hundreds, even thousands, of people in reflection, dialogue and action on important issues, especially those with strong local resonance such as school reform, land use, and police-community relations. This is a major achievement and an extremely important step toward a more deliberative democratic process that can help counteract today’s cheapened public discourse and constrained forms of public participation.

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<sup>2</sup> Public Agenda, Kettering and the National Civic League are among the organizations that have been at this for many years. In the past decade or so a great many more civic engagement organizations have come on the scene. Good places to gain an overview of the field include the National Coalition on Dialogue Deliberation ([www.thataway.org](http://www.thataway.org)) and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium ([www.ddc.com](http://www.ddc.com)).

But if a good deal of hard-won expertise has been achieved with respect to the principles and practices of community-level, human-scale engagement, there are still a number of critical challenges confronting the field. One is the problem of *sustainability*. (It is one thing to set a productive process of community engagement in motion to serve near and mid-term purposes, it is quite another thing to anchor and sustain public engagement in a community's civic and institutional life for the long-term.) Then there is the problem of *impact and power*. (Even the best designed public engagement processes run up against the difficulties of effecting meaningful change in the face of entrenched interests and long-standing power arrangements.)

While each of these challenges deserves its own treatment, they will at least be touched upon here from time to time as they relate to the chief present concern, the problem of *scope*. This paper's main concern, once again, is how to scale up deliberative public engagement beyond the local level, to include more people and larger regions—even, in some sense, the nation itself—to tackle big national and international issues. Such attempts to cope with scope have been diverse in their strategies and mixed in their results. A review—meant to be illustrative rather than comprehensive—will provide a foundation for considering new possibilities.

### **Aggregate multiple “human-scale” engagements**

This is perhaps the most typical approach to scaling up: Conduct deliberative public engagement on a common theme on a manageable “human” scale across a number of communities and then aggregate the results and amplify the impacts.

An example from Public Agenda's experience is a project we worked on in partnership with the State Board of Education in Nebraska in 1997.<sup>3</sup> Nebraska's regionally elected State Board of Education was split on whether the state should have a policy of academic standards that applied to all schools, and if so, what those standards should look like. The Board attempted a process of public input through a series of “listening sessions” held in various venues across the state, but had little luck engaging a broad cross-section of the public. Instead, these sessions tended to be dominated by a roving group of activists with strong local-control views.

To allow the general public to vet the idea of statewide standards more fully, and to gain more input from a variety of perspectives, the State Board asked Public Agenda to help local communities organize public conversations on the topic. Board members sometimes observed these sessions, or they learned about

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<sup>3</sup> If I use Public Agenda's work for illustrative purposes, it's simply because I know it intimately, not because it is necessarily better than examples that could be gleaned from the efforts of other organizations.



them through reports. But as they were not always in attendance, and were never so as authorities on a dais, these sessions did not tend to attract as much attention from outside interest groups. Instead, they provided good opportunities for broad-based local public discussion and input. As a result, the Board was able to craft an approach informed by how Nebraska citizens viewed statewide standards—or at least a fair sampling of them from across the state (Friedman, 1997; see also Friedman and Saxman, 2004).

Such aggregated local work can be an effective way to broaden engagement and amplify its impact. It also demonstrates to leaders who observe and benefit from the process that citizens can, under favorable conditions, deliberate constructively and effectively, which plants seeds of democratic optimism among leadership that should not be discounted in its potential to improve the political culture over time. Finally, at least as practiced by some organizations, a strong emphasis is placed on working via local leadership and institutions and building their capacity for ongoing public engagement, beyond the issue at hand.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, these initiatives are still limited in the numbers of citizens they reach. In the Nebraska example described above, the numbers were in the hundreds in a population of over 1.5 million. For a number of reasons (some of which are discussed in Section IV) it was enough to move policy, but it is still well short of the vision of a widely engaged and deliberative citizenry.

### **“Deliberation Pods”: Supporting Many Small Informal Deliberations**

Another strategy now being employed to scale up democratic deliberation is to encourage and support informal discussions via book clubs, “Meet-ups” and even one-to-one encounters. Let’s call it “deliberation pods”—as in pod-casting—for these are downloadable (or otherwise easily disseminated) “meeting-in-a-box” concepts, designed for broad distribution and varied application.

As an example, Public Agenda’s *First Choice* guides were created for the 2004 election season to “help you decide *what* you want before you decide *who* you want.” They were (and remain) available for free download from Public Agenda’s website, were often used in schools as well as by specific initiatives such as web-organized Meet-ups connected to MTV’s Choose or Lose and Rock the Vote election year activities. Another attempt to employ this strategy is organized by *Let’s Talk America*, among others.

This is a difficult strategy to assess, as its application is by nature highly dispersed and likely to vary greatly from one instance to another. I know of no evaluation that tells us what kinds of impacts this strategy might have on those

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<sup>4</sup> On building local capacity for long-term public engagement, see, e.g., Will Friedman, *Changing the Conversation on Education in Connecticut* (Public Agenda, 2004) and Julie Fanselow, *What Democracy Looks Like: Kuna, Idaho* (Study Circles Resource Center, 2004).

involved, let alone the policy process. Nonetheless, providing such tools and materials to individuals, groups, institutions and networks appears to be a sensible strategy with the potential for widening participation and seeding, so to speak, the political culture with deliberation.

### **Deliberative Opinion Research as a Proxy for Broader Public Engagement**

As practiced by James Fishkin, in his “deliberative polls” (Fishkin, 1991) and Viewpoint Learning’s Choice Dialogues ([www.viewpointlearning.com](http://www.viewpointlearning.com)) this approach asks what public opinion would be like if people had an opportunity to seriously deliberate.

The basic procedure is to collect a sample of the public that reasonably reflects the overall population. Then there is generally a pre-test to ascertain the public’s starting point on the issue at hand, followed by nonpartisan information, opportunities for discussion, and time for reflection. The final step is to see if and how people’s views have evolved.

This clever strategy is a hybrid of representative and direct democracy. In this case, rather than the representative being an elected leader, a representative sample of the public is formed to deliberate on behalf, so to speak, of the wider public. These are interesting, useful and important experiments with the potential to open up new directions in political and policy debates. But deliberative research, like all current strategies, is limited as a solution to a democratically engaged citizenry.

There are a number of purposes that public engagement can serve, a topic that will be discussed in Section IV in some detail. For now I will simply point out that deliberative research is most squarely concerned with one of them, that of informing policy-makers about the public’s concerns and preferences. In this it is like traditional public opinion research but with an interesting twist, as it explores not just *actual* public attitudes but—and this especially—*potential* public attitudes, the attitudes and thinking people might develop as they are able to deliberate effectively.

If influential individuals and groups are receptive to this information, it can open up important possibilities for their leadership. If deliberative research, for example, indicates that the public, upon careful consideration, were willing to accept certain kinds of pain rather than others in exchange for a stabilized social security system, it could indicate important directions for policy development.<sup>5</sup> Viewpoint Learning, moreover, makes a point of mapping out how the public

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<sup>5</sup> In this regard it is very much like in-depth qualitative research via, for example, focus groups (albeit in an expanded and elaborate form) which can also be used to explore “what-if” scenarios and the effects of giving people the opportunity to consider information and engage in dialogue. Fishkin and others involved in these deliberative research methods are attempting to not only expand this research strategy (by adding more time and information to the process), they are often

moves from initial, knee-jerk reactions to a more considered perspective, and to deduce from that how leaders can help the public to do so.

The phrase at the head of the previous paragraph (“if influential individuals and groups are receptive”) is the sticking point here. Practitioners of deliberative research sometimes seem to assume that its results will transform leadership, which will in turn transform public opinion; that leaders, once exposed to the views of citizens who have deliberated, will decide to lead in new ways that elevate the policy debate. A number of leaders may indeed pay attention to deliberative research—some out of sincere commitment to democratic principles and others, probably, for the photo-op. But the missing ingredients here are always the political safety and incentives for them to actually *act* in new ways.

I would hypothesize that these ingredients for actual change among leaders are missing for two main reasons. One is that deliberative opinion research is still restricted to a relatively small number of citizens. The other factor, possibly even more important, is that those who do participate are acting as research subjects rather than as citizens. They are paid to attend; they do not do so as an act of civic will and commitment.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, deliberative research talks about public opinion under ideal circumstances, but it does little, by itself, *to create those circumstances in the wider polity*. If leaders only see a scientific sample of the public changing in a kind of laboratory setting, in isolation from the political life of the community, there is no particular incentive for them to change how they interact with the public. And not only is there no incentive, there’s very little protection and momentum to support their efforts should they strike ahead anyway, with or without incentives. Having a knowledge of what people are likely to think if they have good opportunities to deliberate will do little if the “real” public is in the same old place, expecting the same old thing from leaders, and still vulnerable to the same old manipulations by special interests. No new constituency and dynamic for change has been created, and if politicians were to start to talk about new ideas in new ways, they are still going out on a limb—where they are, of course, not wont to go.

This limiting dynamic is less likely to occur in those rare cases where leadership signs on to and supports deliberation by a sample of the public,

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adding a *quantitative* dimension as well. It is not clear to me at this stage that a quantitative approach, with formal before and after surveys, is the most valid and powerful way to capture and communicate these kinds of results—but again, these are important experiments worth exploring further.

<sup>6</sup> I suspect that well-constructed public forums with diverse participants in which citizens attend *voluntarily* are more influential on leadership—and, for that matter, on other citizens—than comparably sized deliberative research initiatives, the difference being the political, as opposed to experimental, nature of the participation. This, at any rate, has been my experience and is a question that research can address.

committing *publicly and before the fact* to abide by the outcomes, and providing ample opportunities for wider public input to the process. Such was the case with the Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform in British Columbia. (See [www.citizensassembly.bc.ca](http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca) for details.) In such instances deliberative research becomes deliberative politics and the difficulties discussed above tend to disappear.

None of this is to say that deliberative research is not an important tool in the quest to improve the democratic process. It most likely can complement traditional polling as well what I am terming "political" public engagement in interesting and potentially powerful ways. I suspect one important application will be with respect to issues that are clearly brewing but are as yet of little concern to the general public. The reason for this is simply that in cases where there is little natural public "urgency" about an issue (at least for the time being) it is hard to set serious public engagement processes in motion. As deliberative research respondents are paid to participate, this problem is circumvented.) The point here is that deliberative *research* cannot wholly substitute for more broad-based public engagement as an answer to the deliberative, participatory needs of American democracy.

### **The Deliberation Day Proposal**

Perhaps recognizing the limitation of deliberative research as the whole answer to the need for a more engaged citizenry, James Fishkin and collaborator Bruce Ackerman have recently proposed "Deliberation Day"—a new national holiday to replace President's Day, to be held two weeks before major national elections. As they explain,

Registered voters would be called together in neighborhood meeting places, in small groups of 15 and larger groups of 500, to discuss the central issues raised by the campaign. Each deliberator would be paid \$150 for the day's work of citizenship. (Ackerman and Fishkan, 2004, p. 34. For a fuller treatment, see their recent book, *Deliberation Day*.)

One problem here is that, as already noted, paying people to participate might well dilute the civic power of the process. Another is that the overall cost of the initiative (estimated by the authors at \$1,206,741,000 per four year cycle for 30 million participants) makes it, well, let's just say highly unlikely in the real world. And that doesn't even take into account the proposal's formidable logistical challenges in a nation that is having enough trouble competently conducting even straightforward elections. Then there's the questionable cultural assumption that Americans would be comfortable giving up their traditional holiday honoring Washington and Lincoln. Interesting idea, and both Fishkin and

Ackerman have made vitally important contributions to the deliberative democracy movement, but practitioners would be making a mistake to hold their collective breath while waiting for this idea to come to fruition.

### **Technological Solutions, 1: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Hall Meetings**

One of the more interesting strategies in recent years to bring more people to the deliberative democracy table has been the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Hall Meeting” devised by the civic engagement organization *AmericaSpeaks*. These are large-scale civic events that can involve thousands of diverse citizens at a time in deliberative forums. In some ambitious applications these participatory events can be simultaneously linked via teleconference. Thus this strategy can bring together relatively large numbers of citizens within localities and link these across a region or, potentially even the nation.

The best-known example of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Hall Meeting has been *Listening to the City*, in which close to 5,000 citizens in a single day and location engaged issues around rebuilding downtown New York City in July, 2002, almost a year after the 9/11 attacks. As the report of the proceedings explains,

Participants...held 10-to-12-person roundtable discussions, each led by a trained facilitator...A network of laptop computers recorded ideas generated during the discussion. Each table’s input was instantly transmitted to a “theme team” composed of volunteers...that identified the strongest concepts from the discussion and reported them back to all participants...[and] quickly developed a set of priorities and questions that were posed on large screens throughout the meeting hall...Each participant used a wireless polling keypad to vote on these questions and the results were immediately displayed. (*Listening to the City: Report of the Proceedings, N.D., p. 5*)<sup>7</sup>

This strategy seems best suited to addressing the same public engagement purpose that was discussed earlier with regard to deliberative research: that of creating a situation in which the public can express concerns and preferences to policymakers. In the case of *Listening to the City*, the impact was narrow but significant: It helped to clarify and amplify the public’s dissatisfaction with the crop of designs that were on the official table at the time and led to reconsideration.

It did little, however, to clarify new directions that the rebuilding ought to follow. That is, the event turned out to be more effective at *rejecting* the

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<sup>7</sup> My comments on *Listening to the City* are based on my personal observations as well as the report—as a native New Yorker as well as an interested professional I decided to attend the session.

rebuilding proposals that were then being put forth than it was at defining the values and choices the new ones ought to express. But with a little bit of redesign (e.g., in the kind of information provided, and in the amount and crafting of the questions posed) it could have done the latter as well as the former. Perhaps more to the point, the process surrounding the rebuilding of lower-Manhattan has recently been criticized, as being much less inclusive than it should be. Indeed, a *New York Time's* article referred to “the mix of secrecy, self-interest and paranoia that have enveloped the site from the outset,” calling for a process that would allow “the architects to talk with one another and the public they serve” (Ouroussoff, 2005, p. E1).

This turn of events is symptomatic of another weakness of the big, electronic town meeting strategy: It is a quite expensive and extremely complex undertaking. The problem here isn't on the scale of Deliberation Day, whose price tag is such that it is almost unimaginable that it would ever be met. Rather, the problem is that the cost and complexity is such that the process is *extremely difficult to pass along to local leaders to continue the work over time*—at least in this form.

One way to say this is that the 21<sup>st</sup> century town hall addresses the problem of scope much more effectively than it does the problem of sustainability, but as the two are interrelated it enters our present concerns. For one of the keys to scaling up public engagement is having enough capacity in enough places that linked regional initiatives become more possible. Only methods that build local capacity for engagement will leave behind the ability for localities to plug into regional and national deliberative conversations.

Thus, when it is fundable, this method effectively creates noteworthy civic *events*, but appears to be less strong at building capacity for *ongoing processes* of civic engagement that can carry on after the money and technology leave the scene. Eventually this is likely change simply because technology becomes cheaper and easier to use over time, which ought to make this form of engagement more transferable.

So there are some weaknesses in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting approach—as with all of the methods discussed. But as an example of public engagement's potential to inject the public's voice into a policy situation, *Listening to the City* was an exhilarating, touchstone event in the deliberative democracy movement that did have a significant impact on the policy debate at the time.

## Technological Solutions, 2: Mass Media Connections

There are several variations on this theme, and in some incarnations they are among the more notable efforts to date to expand the scope of deliberative democracy.

### *Piggy-Backing on Mass Media Products*

One way in which mass media connections can scale up engagement is to attach a deliberation dimension to a mass media product, such as a documentary film, television program or a book. Roundtable is one outfit that specializes in this. They describe themselves as “a production company that uses high-visibility media projects to help build...‘social capital’ by ensuring that popular media projects reach deeply into communities.” For instance, they have organized forums in cities across the nation to engage in dialogue on the implications of major PBS documentaries. (See [www.roundtablemedia.com](http://www.roundtablemedia.com).)

Yet another version of this approach has used the arts as a spur to civic dialogue and deliberation. The work of Anna Deveare Smith offers one example, as does the varied projects supported and studied by the Animating Democracy Initiative ([ww3.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy](http://ww3.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy)).

While promising, piggy-backing on mass media offerings, such as major documentaries, is dependent on many stars aligning: A great film (for instance), a major public engagement initiative, funding, and the historical moment so that the film resonates, takes off and becomes a strong peg for wide-spread engagement. All of this can happen, but certainly not easily.

Another attribute of this strategy is that it seems likely to lead to fairly diffuse public discussions. The spur to dialogue in these cases is generally quite complex, hits lots of issues and pushes lots of buttons. In contrast to the nonpartisan dialogue guides produced by organizations like Public Agenda, Kettering or Viewpoint Learning (designed to help people consider the various sides of a particular theme or issue) a fine-arts presentation or a documentary is a much broader stimulant. This can certainly produce fruitful dialogue that enriches the political culture surrounding an issue, and it may spur various sorts of civic action by inspired citizens and groups, but it is probably harder to focus on a specific policy arena with this strategy in comparison to using more targeted discussion stimuli.

### *Public Journalism*

“Public journalism” refers to initiatives and practices by the news media geared toward “helping reengage people in public life” (Merritt., 1997, p. 29). An example took place in Charlotte, NC, where the local paper, the *Observer*, created “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” in the early-to-mid-90s. This project placed an unusually large emphasis on how local residents (as opposed to experts)

perceived and defined crime in their neighborhoods, and, notably, what they could do about it by becoming involved in the issue on the grassroots level (e.g., through intermediary institutions in their neighborhoods—see Friedland, 2003).

Unfortunately, public journalism has so-far failed to find a hook and incentive structure to spread within the existing world of journalism, and as a movement it seems to have lost momentum in recent years. The trends in news—away from in-depth reportage, toward predictable controversy and mindless spectacle—make it unlikely that it will pick up steam anytime soon. That said, the news media, both traditional and new, could obviously play a major role in fostering more widespread deliberative democratic processes, at least in theory.<sup>8</sup>

### *Proxy dialogues*

Another idea that is gaining some currency is the notion of “proxy dialogue.” Dan Yankelovich may have been the first to talk about this in his *Magic of Dialogue*, where he proposed it as a means to confront our topic, i.e., the challenge to deliberative democracy posed by “the issue of size and scale [which] is likely to grow ever more serious as the American population grows larger and more diverse.” He points to Bill Moyer’s PBS series on the Book of Genesis, and the Congressional debate on the first Gulf War, as instances in which unusually authentic, compelling and deliberative dialogues were broadcast with significant impacts on the viewing public (Yankelovich, 1999, p. 160).

Proxy dialogues thus attempt to share the process and fruits of face-to-face dialogue with a larger audience. As such, they have promise for enlarging the circle of participation. There are also, as ever, challenges. The Gulf War situation, for instance, was a rarity—congressional debate is not typically so authentic, educational and stimulating. Such anomalies, when they occur, must be exploited on short notice, but how to do so remains a problem.

One way in which proxy dialogues are being conceptualized in some quarters is to capture face-to-face forums on film and edit them into a presentation that shows people engaging in dialogue and deliberation on an issue. By including participants from all backgrounds and with varying points of view, various audience members will (theoretically) be able to see their own views represented, identify with the process, and, in some manner, feel represented and become engaged. More experimentation and research is certainly warranted on these kinds of strategies, but this is likely going to remain a process with limited application. The simple truth is that *engaging* in dialogue and deliberation tends to be extremely satisfying for participants, while *watching others engage* in it tends to be much less gripping—if not downright tedious. This means that it will be hard

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<sup>8</sup> The Center for Social Media at American University was recently founded to study these possibilities ([www.centerforsocialmedia.org](http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org)).



to get this form of proxy dialogue aired on a mass-media basis, and, once aired, to gain much of an audience for them. Perhaps not impossible, but certainly difficult.

There is another, more sure-fire use for well-made productions that capture the dynamics and outcomes of face-to-face dialogue: They are excellent vehicles for bringing the public's deliberations to the attention of leadership. More powerfully than a written report, they can convince leaders that typical citizens really *can* (under favorable conditions) deliberate effectively—news to many leaders. Moreover, it can be a useful stimulant for *leadership* dialogue. Kettering's *Public Voice* initiative uses edited video of deliberative forums in this way, and Public Agenda has done so as well by creating such products as a spur to dialogue at conferences and public hearings. In these applications they may not have a profound effect on the scope of engagement by the general public (they may not reach vast new numbers of citizens), but they can have some impact over time by affecting leadership attitudes, debate and actions.

### **Technological Fix, 3: The Internet**

Finally, the Internet obviously holds great promise for scaling up deliberative democracy. Of particular note are the ways in which the Internet was employed in the last presidential election, especially by the Dean campaign and the RNC, to organize grassroots action. Blogs, Meet-ups (local affinity groups organized through the web) and “smart mobs” (collective action quickly organized through mobile and online communications) are among the more notable recent Internet-based innovations.

These developments suggest exciting new possibilities, and are already having dramatic effects on how a growing number of individuals and groups are engaging politics and public life. They are speeding things up, empowering individuals and organizations through low-cost information and networking capabilities, encouraging organizations to push “power to the edges” (become less centralized), and the like. (See, e.g., Smith, Kearns and Fine, 2005).

That said, the question remains as to how all of this relates to the problem of injecting more public deliberation into the political process. For despite the web's ability to reach millions of people quickly, it still butts up against many of the same challenges that face-to-face strategies do when it comes to *deliberative* public engagement, especially getting large numbers of diverse people productively involved in careful consideration and dialogue of public issues.

Indeed—and here is the main point for our discussion—innovations in internet-based engagement, exciting as they may be, appear so far to be *employed most often in the service of traditional partisan politics*. They are, in other words, mostly amplifying the capacities of parties and interest groups to wage old wars in

new ways. As such, they appear to be leading us toward a kind of partisan arms race, at least until truly new, more transformative, applications develop.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, to date the Internet is a wonderful means to get information *out* to people, but it has done much less to help them deliberate on that information. It is very good at networking like-minded people, but is less frequently successful at linking together people with very different starting points. And when it does manage to bring people with very different perspectives together, it is not very good at providing them the means to better understand and learn to accommodate their differences enough to move forward on an issue.

A few organizations have made some headway on these questions, such as WebLab ([www.weblab.org](http://www.weblab.org)), and research, such as Muhlberger's Virtual Agora Project, promises insights about them in the future (Muhlberger, 2005). But the fast changing online world suggests that there are many more possibilities and that the exploration of the Internet's potential with regard to *deliberative democracy* (as opposed to interest group and electoral politics) has barely begun. How can the Internet be used to link up, not just affinity groups, but *unlike-minded* people in dialogue and deliberation? Can it provoke democratic conversations and open up the political imagination to new solutions that break out of the old predictable dichotomies? Can it connect diverse organizations in new and surprising coalitions that serve the common good? Can we move online from "smart-mobs" to wise polity?

#### **IV. Thinking Strategically about the Scope of Public Engagement**

So far we've examined a range of recent attempts by deliberative democracy practitioners to cope with scope, valiant efforts across the board, and each with its own set of strengths and weaknesses. One natural conclusion might be that combining several of these strategies will bring us to a more powerful way to scale up public engagement than any of them can offer by itself. This, of course, makes some sense, and it is essentially the approach taken by

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<sup>9</sup> This point comes across clearly in Smith, Jillaine and Fine's (2005) "Power to the Edges," which describes the "trends and opportunities in online civic engagement" in exciting detail, every one of which is in the service of electoral or interest group politics. (See also, in Stephen Coleman and John Gotze's 2001 article, "Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation.") Similarly, at the 2005 Personal Democracy Forum in New York City Mark Heiferman, founder of Meetup.com, described his website as a powerful new tool for organizing and empowering "*interest groups*." Finally, Beth Simone Noveck's recent essay, "A Democracy of Groups" suggests that "No one has figured out how to go [online] from a parochial, small group of neighbors discussing local issues to widespread ongoing deliberation on a national scale" (First Monday, November, 2005). Again, my point is not to say that recent online developments are not valid, important and exciting—they are all of those things. My point is that so far they seem to speak more to traditional political activity than to deliberative public engagement.

AmericaSpeaks in their recent paper “Millions of Voices: A Blueprint for Engaging the American people in National Decision-Making” (AmericaSpeaks, 2004).

“Millions of Voices” does a good job of beginning to imagine how several scale-up strategies might be combined to reach a larger number of participants than any could do by itself. What it does not do is look critically at the weaknesses, as well as the strengths, of these methods, attempt to provide guidelines for thinking about how much scope is enough, or address why one might want to emphasize certain strategies in situation A and others in situation B. But if, as I argued earlier, it is going to be critical to the growth of the field to figure out how to get the most civic return on our investments, that is exactly the kind of analysis we need to start making.

This section aims to make some headway on these questions on the level of specific initiatives to scale up deliberative public engagement. The following and concluding section will suggest some larger societal dynamics that need attention over time in order to create the background conditions that will make scope less of a problem. In all of this I have no simple recipes to offer, which may never be possible and are surely premature at this stage in the field’s development. But I do think there are several questions and themes that, when thought through, can help to spur theory and guide practice, beginning with the purposes that public engagement can serve.

### **Purposes of Public Engagement**

Given the sorry state of public discourse, high levels of political cynicism, low levels of civic participation, and the general disconnect between leaders and the public, the position that more public engagement is a good idea is a reasonably easy argument to make. And this appears to be the simple, understandable impulse behind much of the movement to scale up deliberative public participation.

In this section I suggest that a more detailed analysis of the purposes that public engagement can serve can refine practice. Simply put, in order to figure out the level and type of civic engagement most appropriate with respect to a given issue at a given time, we should think as clearly as we can about our purposes and goals. For the same kind and breadth of engagement may not be needed in every instance.

The following are among the purposes that civic engagement can serve:

- Informing policy
- Legitimizing policy
- Freeing a paralyzed policy process
- Helping citizens move toward “public judgment” on specific issues
- Promoting a healthier democratic culture and more capable citizenry

- Building community
- Catalyzing civic action

These various purposes overlap and interrelate, to be sure, but in practice some will be more central than others in a given situation. They are therefore worth teasing apart.

### *Informing Policy*

One purpose of deliberative public engagement is to improve the policy process around a given issue at a given time. This is based on the idea that policy makers will do a better job of crafting public policy if they take the public's values, preferences and concerns into account. Doing so can help policy makers craft programs, laws and regulations that are less likely to run into resistance, less vulnerable to political manipulation, more likely to elicit stable public support, and—no small point—more likely to actually solve public problems.

The last point is especially true with respect to issues that are closest to the lives of citizens, such as schools, crime, housing and transportation, the theory being that those who live and work the issue every day generally have insights that those who only study or manage the issue from afar may not. (This doesn't mean that those closest to the issue have *all* the answers, just that they can often offer critical pieces of the puzzle.)

### *Legitimizing Policy*

If informing policy were all we were trying to accomplish, it could also be accomplished through opinion research techniques. Public engagement adds another critical element that can make a world of difference to the policy process. To the extent it creates a public and political (and not just a research) process by which people can weigh in on an issue, and to the extent that process proves to be—and is perceived to be—open, fair and authentic, it helps to legitimize new policy directions that emerge from the process.

This is exactly why we see so many instances these days of tightly controlled and staged “town hall meetings.” Politicians are trying to create the patina of public legitimacy through processes of pseudo-engagement. The danger here is not just that people will be deceived by such political spectacle. This can happen, but people are often smarter than that. The problem is also that it makes it that much harder for those trying to create authentic engagement opportunities. In other words, while the public necessarily becomes more skeptical in order to armor itself against the marketing maelstrom of today's political and special interest machines, this creates yet another layer of mistrust that authentic engagement must penetrate if it is to be successful.

### *Freeing a Paralyzed Policy Process*

Practically speaking, the purposes I have discussed so far can often be viewed as elements within another driver of public engagement: a deadlocked or otherwise paralyzed policy process. A number of the case examples discussed in this paper speak to this purpose, from Public Agenda's work on school reform in Nebraska<sup>10</sup> to AmericaSpeaks 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting on rebuilding lower Manhattan.

### *Helping Citizens Move toward Public Judgment on a Specific Issue*

Following Dan Yankelovich's seminal work in *Coming to Public Judgment*, another important purpose of engagement is to help citizens come to terms with issues—in a very real sense, to help public opinion mature.

Briefly, Yankelovich describes seven stages through which the public moves from unstable, knee-jerk reactions to relatively stable and reflective judgment. Practically speaking, this means helping the public become more knowledgeable and realistic about an issue and to move toward a working consensus—or at least a workable understanding—about the values and general direction that the community or nation ought to move with respect to it. Deliberative public engagement, where citizens encounter nonpartisan information and have opportunities for fair and honest dialogue, is probably as powerful a way to help public judgment evolve as has been devised.<sup>11</sup>

Doing so can also help inoculate the public against crass political manipulation. As people arrive at hard-won judgment, they are less prone to be swayed by easy answers, “scapegoating,” political spectacle or the myriad other excesses of our over-heated political culture. As such, it also contributes to the next purpose.

### *Promoting a Healthier Democratic Culture and More Capable Citizenry*

Perhaps most broadly, deliberative public engagement serves a purpose beyond any single policy or issue area. It can be intended to generally strengthen democratic culture and practice in the long-term by upgrading democratic practice, improving the public debate and promoting collaboration. It can, in other words, help create new public habits of deliberation and participation. Initiatives and methods that open the democratic imagination and build the civic capacity and efficacy of the general public and leadership alike serve this purpose.

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<sup>10</sup> On Nebraska, see footnote 6. A public engagement initiative on tax reform in New Jersey that Public Agenda worked on offers another relevant example—see *Let the People Speak: Report on the Citizen's Tax Assembly*, which may be downloaded at [www.njcpag.org](http://www.njcpag.org).

<sup>11</sup> Dan Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment* (Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1991).

### *Building Community*

Public engagement can be a powerful mechanism through which communities organize themselves, strengthen their civic infrastructure and increase social capital. This process is seen most clearly in locally-based, “human-scale” engagement activities, such as those discussed at the beginning of Section III. But more scaled-up possibilities exist, such as the online world’s version of community building, as well as regional and national “conversations” that promote greater coherence of collective vision and action.

### *Catalyzing Civic Action*

Public engagement also serves the purpose of catalyzing new civic collaborations and citizen action. As people learn about and deliberate on an issue, a good many naturally want to act on it as well. A critical purpose of engagement thus becomes informing and organizing civic action. This can include the independent action of individual citizens, collective action by organizations and groups, and collaboration across organizations and groups. Such action can develop either in close coordination with leaders and representatives or as largely grassroots initiatives and movements.<sup>12</sup>

This purpose also circles back to the first one—that of informing policy—and does so in a powerful way. For once citizens begin to bridge from deliberation to action, leaders learn about the public’s values, concerns and preferences not just from what people think and say about policy, but from what they are willing to actually *do* about it.

### *Connecting Method to Purpose*

Now here’s the connection to the earlier discussion on the range of methods for scaling up deliberative public engagement: Some methods serve some purposes of public engagement more effectively than others. Becoming clearer about our purpose in a given instance can thus help us determine the methods we might employ.

For example, the strategy of “piggy-backing” engagement on cultural products to create dialogue and deliberation opportunities probably does a better job of catalyzing civic action and strengthening democratic culture in general than it does of informing and legitimizing a very specific policy initiative. Large-scale, high-tech civic forums such as AmericaSpeaks’s “21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings” can help with the latter purpose, and can probably do so more quickly than smaller, more low-tech community conversations that have been among the

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<sup>12</sup> Examples of a variety of civic actions stemming from deliberative public engagement may be found in (among many other places) Will Friedman, *Changing the Conversation on Education in Connecticut* (Public Agenda, 2004).

specialties of Study Circles, Public Agenda and several other organizations. The latter, however, are probably better able to promote grassroots civic action. Moreover, as they are much more transferable to local leaders, they make a particular contribution to community building and to promoting healthier democratic practice and culture over time. Internet-based engagement can complement many of these purposes, depending on how it is employed. And so on.

### **Other Strategic Factors**

Beyond the various purposes that public engagement can serve, several other considerations can help us think more strategically about the problem of scope.

#### *The Public's Starting Point*

Is an issue barely on the public's radar screen, like, say, the rising power of China? Is it something that's a long-time public concern, like school reform? Is it a more complex case, with some segments of the public quite concerned while others are unaware that anything is even at issue? Does the public have critical misperceptions about the issue at hand, or are people generally unaware of critical pieces of information that could change their thinking?

All of these scenarios will affect one's strategic thinking about public engagement and how to scale it up. Public opinion research, of course, can clarify the public's starting point and this is only one reason why it can be a worthwhile investment as a prelude to public engagement.

#### *Leadership's Starting Point*

At least two leadership factors are worth taking into account in confronting the problem of scope. First, what is the state of the leadership debate? Is the issue already on the agenda of policy, opinion and political leaders? Is there a consensus that it is an important issue to address but that there is no politically safe way to address it? Are leadership groups strongly polarized? Each of these conditions creates different obstacles and opportunities for setting public engagement in motion and for enlisting leadership to the cause.

Second, how open is policy leadership to public participation? The basic rule of thumb here is this: When leadership is relatively open to public participation, less engagement is needed to have an impact on policies and events. When leadership is relatively closed to public participation, more of it is needed to move the needle on an issue.

Unfortunately, it is also the case that when leadership is relatively closed to public participation, not only is more public engagement needed in order to have an impact, it is harder to set that engagement in motion simply because there

will be less leadership cooperation and resource allocation to the cause. (Nobody said this was supposed to be easy.) This is why it is so important to make the case for public engagement to opinion and policy leaders, and, generally, to find ways to change the incentive structure to make leaders more open to it. If leaders begin to view deliberative public engagement as rewarding and avoiding it as problematic, it will be much easier to scale it up.

### *The Nature of the Issue*

Some issues may be more amenable to some kinds of engagement strategies than others. For instance, not every issue would work well as the subject of a general release documentary as a peg for public engagement, so the “piggy-backing” strategy discussed in Section III will work better in some instances than in others. I similarly suspect that proxy dialogues shown on television will work best with very compelling issues, rather than relatively dry ones, simply so the broadcast presentation has a better shot of pulling some viewers away from a *Friends* rerun.

As yet another example, I noted earlier that one of the potentially more useful applications for deliberative research might be with respect to issues that are *less* compelling to the public, issues that are relatively dry and technical, and where there is no great sense of public urgency. In those instances it is less likely that broad-based public engagement will be terribly successful anyway, at least until something stirs up a significant dose of public concern.

### *Levels of Engagement, the Concept of Critical Mass and the Strategic Objectives of Large-Scale Initiatives*

We’ve talked about the purposes that large-scale public engagement can serve and several factors (the public’s and leadership’s starting point and the nature of the issue) that can inform our choice of strategies. It is also useful to develop more ways of thinking about the strategic objectives that can orient our work as we strive to scale-up engagement around complex national and international issues. This section suggests two concepts that can be useful in helping us conceptualize strategic objectives—levels of intensity of engagement, and the notion of critical mass.

Levels of Engagement. First, we should recognize and plan for the fact that in large-scale engagement the *depth and intensity* will not be the same for all who participate. For example, with respect to online and face-to-face modalities, “The relationship between online and offline citizen engagement requires a constant back and forth that balances the need for scale with the need for the intensity and personal connection that comes from in-person gatherings and activities” (Smith, Kearns and Fine, 2005). This statement argues, correctly in my view, for finding a good balance and relationship between differing levels of



engagement intensity. Some will be more intensive, in-depth and face-to-face, and some will be less intensive as people are drawn in to the issue and process of deliberative participation in other ways (whether through the Internet or other means). Practically, the former will require more “high-touch” facilitation, while the latter must work with a less hands-on approach.

Thus, we might distinguish:

- *Deep engagement* in which some citizens consider in depth a public issue and its potential solutions, engage in dialogue with those who do not necessarily agree with them, work toward public judgment, and have very direct and active ways of getting involved in the issue, such as by joining or forming groups dedicated to it.
- *Moderate engagement* in which some citizens engage the issue enough to understand that there *are* alternatives and tradeoffs involved—that there are no easy answers—and begin to see how different solutions and tradeoffs connect to or depart from their values and preferences. This can lead to people becoming involved with an issue in more or less active ways, perhaps through direct action, perhaps by writing letters to representatives, voting with it in mind or contributing to organizations that are dedicated to the issue.
- *Light engagement* in which people come to understand that this is an important issue deserving attention, begin to follow it more closely in the news, and begin to talk about it more with friends and colleagues. This would be a kind of gestation phase prior to moderate or deep engagement, should the issue continue to heat up.

I’m not sure the above is the ideal way to parse the concept of differing levels of depth and intensity of public engagement, but hopefully it begins to suggest a useful way of looking at the question.

Critical Mass. Another useful concept for developing strategic objectives in public engagement is that of critical mass or “tipping points.” Recall, for example, the discussion of moving the public toward judgment as one of the purposes that deliberative engagement can serve. This may seem like a reasonable, if ambitious, goal on the level of a community-based initiative. For instance, it can be reasonable to say we are working to create a general sense of public judgment in a single community on the tradeoffs involved in giving a permit to Wal-Mart to build a store.

On the national level, however, where public opinion changes slowly and mysteriously, this is harder to envision. But even on a vast scale there are ways of conceptualizing the task that makes it reasonable to attempt. Here, it makes more sense to think about trying to achieve a *critical mass* of public judgment rather than a broad-based maturation of opinion across the American population. This

can mean, for instance, enough judgment by enough people to begin to change and improve the climate of opinion on an issue, diminish political paralysis, and allow the policy debate to evolve. An example is an initiative on the budget deficit that Public Agenda is planning in partnership with the Concord Coalition, the Heritage Foundation, the Brookings Institution, and Viewpoint Learning. *Straight Talk on the Nation's Finances* will, if fully funded, employ a multi-faceted strategy combining online engagement, community forums, traditional and deliberative opinion research, and leadership engagement. The goal is less to show measurable change in national opinion than to inform and engage enough of a critical mass of members of the general public, local leaders and national leaders that a realistic policy debate on the budget and deficit becomes more possible. We are trying, in other words, to help public and leadership opinion mature to the point at which the issue is effectively removed from “third-rail” status, and leaders can suggest innovative and bold proposals without fear of being destroyed as a result.

I hope that the principles and puzzles discussed in this section will be useful as guides to the practice of large-scale public engagement. Experience and research will help us to understand these factors more fully and undoubtedly suggest others we need to take into account. The final section moves on to briefly consider the larger social and political context in which these efforts occur.

## **V. The Social and Political Context of Deliberative Public Engagement**

Previous sections have focused concretely and practically on the challenge of creating large-scale opportunities for citizen engagement in relationship to important public problems. But if one of the ways to increase and improve public engagement is to become more skillful and strategic in how we do it, another is to address the problems in our social and political system that make public engagement harder than it need be in the first place. In conclusion, then, I'd like to return briefly to the broader themes that were raised in Section II (“Scaling Up is Hard to Do”) where I suggested several such “contextual” issues that make it difficult to move from “human-scale” engagement within communities to larger-scale engagement across communities and the nation itself.

### **The Problem of Citizen Time and Energy**

One of the constraints noted in Section II on why scaling up is hard to do is that citizens lack the time and energy to address all the issues that need addressing. Part of the answer to this dilemma is what we've been examining throughout this paper: Creating better opportunities by which people can engage

the issues of the day. The more competent we become at creating the conditions, mechanisms and processes of public engagement, the more efficiently and effectively will we increase the number of citizens who will be able to meaningfully participate in governance.

That said, the nation will never become so skilled at, and committed to, public engagement that all citizens will be able to engage every issue that faces their community and nation. Fortunately, that is not a reasonable or desirable goal to begin with.

To say that people want to have a real voice and active role in many of the issues that are important to them is not to say that they want to get involved in every aspect of public decision-making. Surely it is more accurate to say that most citizens want to get involved in some issues, and then only some aspects of those issues. They also want to delegate many questions and issues to leaders and experts, as well as to fellow citizens with a greater interest in a particular problem.

The challenge, then, is not that of *total* civic participation in *all* issues, which would ground governance to a halt (and deprive children of their parents) if it were required or attempted. Rather it is to increase and upgrade the ability and opportunity for citizens to get involved in the issues that are most important to them.

Benjamin Barber's formulation here is a good one. "Strong democracy," he writes, "tries to revitalize citizenship without neglecting the problems of efficient government by defining democracy as a form of government in which all of the people govern themselves in at least some public matters at least some of the time" (Barber, 2003, p. xxxiv). As a practitioner with a practical streak I might amend the latter part of the statement to "all of the people *have excellent and equal opportunities to govern themselves* in at least some public matters at least some of the time, *and the vast majority do so.*" But whatever the precise theoretical formulation, this general approach to parsing the problem of democratic participation can help us come to terms with the problem of citizen time and energy. Our goal should not be 100% participation in direct democracy, but enough participation to meet the kinds of purposes discussed in the last section, and enough to allow all citizens excellent and equal opportunities to participate in at least some issues.

### **Changing the Norms, Expectations and the Incentive Structure of Leaders and Institutions**

I also argued in Section II that a major impediment to broad-scale public engagement is that those who have the greatest resources and position to promote it (political, business and media leaders and institutions) do not have strong incentives to do so. Therefore, how to change the norms, expectations and incentive structures for these powerful entities is very much at issue. There is no

one answer to this dilemma, and I mostly put forth a few thoughts in this section in the hopes of provoking more discussion in the field.

### *Channeling Citizen Frustration*

It is not news that many citizens are mistrustful of leaders and rather disgusted with the political process. The question is, how will citizens end up channeling their frustration? Will they withdraw into enclaves and give up on the common good? Will they join movements in which they link in a brotherhood of bitterness and vent their frustration at scapegoats? Or will they find new, meaningful and hopeful ways in which to engage public life? Can public dissatisfaction, in other words, be channeled toward demands for a more authentic political process that gives people a real voice in the decisions that affect their lives and the direction in which their country is moving?

### *Leadership Incentives*

Channeling citizen frustration toward a demand for a more authentic political process implies a threat toward leadership to bring them into line with more democratic processes of decision-making. If that's the stick, what's the carrot? Here the question is, are there ways in which political and policy leaders can score victories for themselves and their causes through authentic public engagement?

Policy and political leaders do not naturally tend to be deliberative democratic leaders as well. They do not typically have the time, inclination, or temperament for opening up ideas with the public. They are trained, and tend to succeed, based on their ability to make things happen and to persuade people that their solutions are the right ones.

But every once in a while, political and policy leaders do turn to the public for help, input, legitimacy. This is not the pseudo-engagement that I discussed earlier, but authentic efforts to include the citizenry in public problem-solving. They become willing to give up some of their normal control over "message" and "process" in order to get the public more fully involved in an issue. Those who would like to see more deliberative public engagement need to understand more fully why leaders occasionally break set and embrace it, for doing so may well suggest ways in which to encourage more of that kind of thinking and behavior.

Beyond this research agenda, political and policy leaders who do "resort" to public engagement should be rewarded for their efforts. They should be recognized, applauded, voted for, funded, sent candy-grams—whatever works to get them to keep on doing it.

### **Changing the Larger Context by Changing Democratic Practice, Community-by-Community**

Finally, the success of individual public engagement initiatives—the subject of most of this paper—can chip away at the bigger, contextual issues over time. They will tend to change the structure of expectations and positively provoke the public imagination among the general public and leaders alike.

Thus, among the most important things we can do to transform the social and political context for deliberative public engagement is to continue to do more and better public engagement work. This is true of the larger-scale efforts and possibilities that we have been examining here. But it is just as true of community-level, “human-scale” public engagement.

It would be a mistake to conclude from this essay that local, community engagement is less important than big-ticket item, large-scale initiatives. I decided to tackle large-scale engagement not because it is *more* important than “human-scale” engagement, but because it is *also* important while being harder to do. Community level work may be less glamorous, but it remains critically important.

For as we create richer democratic experience, practice and expectations community-by-community, we are accomplishing several important things at once. We are strengthening communities, developing more capable citizens, and laying a foundation for richer democratic expectations and practices *beyond* the local community itself. Ultimately, the strengthening of, and linkages among, local, community-based “nodes” of deliberative democratic practice will be a critical element in scaling public engagement up so that it includes many more people and is better able to tackle the great national and international issues of the day.

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