

Participatory processes for government: seeking deliberative democracy

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1 Deliberative democracy as a form of democratic participation

Looking at democratic systems, three types of participation are often mentioned: representative, direct and deliberative. Participation in a representative democracy is practised by means of representatives elected to a parliament, to which the citizens delegate functions. In a direct democracy it is the citizens who make decisions and, free of any intermediaries, cast their votes accordingly, in an assembly, a referendum or some other form of ballot. And last of the three, a deliberative democracy is based on reaching agreements through discussion and the exchange of opinions by citizens. In this model decisions are taken by a representative government after discussions have been held with the public. This last type of participation is the most complex, requiring – as we shall see – not just readiness among citizens and authorities to play their parts, but also a methodology that can enable a constructive exchange of opinions.

Deliberative citizen participation is one of the greatest challenges for proponents of open government seeking to enhance the democratic process. It is a concept that offers three main benefits: first of

all, it improves social cohesion. The method followed empowers citizens and makes them participants in public policy and its results, but above all, it gives citizens a much greater understanding of the workings and consequences of implementing one public policy or another. Citizens who participate in a deliberative process, one for instance that is aimed at deciding on the budgets for the local authority, end up with a heightened awareness of not just the cost certain public actions could have, but also of other people's reasons for defending priorities different to their own.

Second, it is a process that helps with the implementation of public policies. A public policy will receive greater support if citizens have been asked to participate and are aware of its reasons. It is sometimes thought that participatory processes delay decisions, but the reality is quite the opposite: these processes shorten decisions because the deliberation comes first, which helps make people aware of both the decision itself and, most importantly, the reasons behind it. It is preferable that different points of view surface in the debating arena before a public policy is applied rather than afterwards, as this may result in conflict, head-on opposition and reduced effectiveness.

And third, deliberative participation improves the decisions themselves. A decision made following deliberation will always be better than one made in isolation by experts or politicians, as it will encompass more points of view, ergo

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greater collective intelligence. More knowledge exists outside public authorities than within, and it is important not only to prize this knowledge, but above all to find ways to channel it.

Deliberative democracy does not aim to replace representative or direct democracy, rather it seeks to complement and enhance them.

The purpose of this article is to offer an overview of the way deliberative citizen participation is being applied and the challenges it currently faces.

2 Characteristics of deliberative citizen participation processes

How can the implementation of deliberative democracy in public authorities be brought to fruition? While attractive, it is complex in equal measure. Initial steps should be taken slowly but surely, choosing which issues should be deliberated.

The norm in deliberative democracy is citizen participation processes. These can be implemented at a local level or on a wider scale, although the latter case often involves only experts or entities representing the affected parties, without making calls to the general public.

There exists a wide range of arenas dedicated to citizen participation, for example well-established forums where citizen representatives meet regularly to keep track of certain particular matters. In this article, however, we are concentrating on participatory processes instigated by public authorities, initiatives which have existed for a number of years and are growing in sophistication.

These are participatory processes of a limited duration that concentrate on a specific public decision needing to be made; this could be a strategic plan, an action plan, a law or perhaps the remodelling of a public space. As such, the idea is not to hold public discussions on generic topics, but to focus the debate on a decision the public authority has to make.

In particular, these processes seek a qualitative participation from citizens. Unlike elections and referendums, where the number of votes is an important element, what counts here is the quality of the contributions. It is not about getting the most votes, but about creating a space for proposals and arguments. In addition to the quality of the contributions, the diversity of contributions also matters. What is important in deliberative participatory processes is the appearance of different opinions resulting from different perspectives on the same situation, which could relate to differences in people's lifestyle or the knowledge they possess. To achieve this diversity among participants, it is often necessary to call upon people with varied profiles,

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as not everyone has the same disposition towards participating.

The method is not to make an open call to the public to come and participate, but rather to ensure a diversity of profiles in terms of the way in which a situation is perceived. In a neighbourhood where the pavements need modernising, different opinions will be held by a parent using a pushchair, a driver needing a parking space and a local trader needing customers. Each person has their own point of view in relation to their position in society.

To ensure the success of participatory processes, the limits to any discussions held must be made clear right from the start. These include limits to the topic to be dealt with as well as the budgetary and legal limits to potential proposals. This is key to avoiding participants having expectations frustrated. Many misunderstandings will be avoided if it is made clear the meeting or process is to discuss, for example, requirements for school classrooms, not to discuss how teachers should run their classes.

For the deliberative process to work, methodological thoroughness is required. A participatory process is normally limited to several weeks and involves different stages,¹ but the aim of this article is not to enter into full detail on all it entails, or the numerous techniques to encourage

1. From the extensive bibliography on methodologies for participatory processes, we particularly recommend Bryson, J. M., Quick, K. S., Slotterback, C. S. and Crosby, B. C. (2013), 'Designing Public Participation Processes', *Public Admin. Rev.*, 73: 23–34. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6210.2012.02678.x

debate and full participation from those involved. However, it is worth noting that a key feature of deliberative processes are the face-to-face workshops, in which it is essential for participants to meet in an environment that engenders participation. It is not about packed assemblies where whoever is the best speaker can spin the story their way, rather it is about structured spaces with small groups of people where ideas can be shared or can emerge, points of view can be explained, and proposals can be agreed upon or prioritised.

Related to this, it is normally recommended that there be professional facilitators in attendance, who understand the topic but fulfil the role of neutral helpers without offering their own views. Rather than expressing any opinion, the facilitators must moderate the discussion, keeping it on track, summarising and proposing a consensus of opinion among those that emerge. The facilitators encourage participation as well as mutual respect between the different opinions.

Lastly, for participatory processes to work it is imperative that two things occur. First, all participants must be given a record of the contributions expressed in the workshops, and second, a global assessment of the participatory process must be made, providing the public with not just the conclusions but a full account of the process.

3 What to make of the results of deliberative processes?

What is the result of a deliberative participatory process? To start with, in many cases the result is a collection of contributions, consisting of a list of comments, proposals or amendments. These cases would not entail a binding participation, rather contributions from citizens to help the public authority to make the best decision.

Another variant – which despite being more interesting is not always more recommendable – is that of a deliberative process to conclude with the making of a decision by consensus among all who participated. This does not mean that it ends with a vote between two options, as this would be direct rather than

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participatory democracy; what it entails is some form of agreement after extensive debate bringing participants' positions together.

But is it always possible to find a consensus? Seeking consensus is what drives the deliberative process, but clearly the inherent difficulties must not be underestimated. Sometimes it is hard to achieve due to the length of time needed for discussions, other times there may be very little compatibility between the initial positions.

However, it is worth citing an excerpt from the Belgian G1000 Manifesto² – one of the most interesting deliberative processes in recent years – for the optimism it expresses towards the challenge:

‘The American researchers James Fishkin and Robert Luskin have convincingly demonstrated that people who are given a chance to talk to each other and can rely on sufficient information are capable of finding a rational compromise in a relatively short time. This has even worked in deeply divided societies like Northern Ireland! Catholics and Protestants who talked more about than to each other, have now managed to find solutions in very sensitive fields such as education’.

Somewhere in between a consensus that satisfies everyone and the need for a vote between starkly opposing alternatives, there is an intermediate possibility whereby the final report for

2. Idea of the G1000. The manifesto: <http://www.g1000.org/en/manifesto.php>

the process details the proposals where there is consensus and those where there is none, also making clear the arguments made by the different parties defending each position and whether any progress towards compromise was made.

4 A dual commitment between citizens and the public authority

For participatory processes to work properly, simply following a good method is not enough. What is needed above all is honesty and a favourable disposition, from citizens but especially from the public authority.

The citizens who participate may confuse participation with freedom of expression. It is very normal for there to be people who attend the participatory workshops in order to defend a set opinion or a private interest. Faced with a general question, for example 'what are the key requirements for our schools?', it is all too common for participants to unfurl a list of accusations and complaints about their school. Spaces must exist for people to express their dissatisfaction, but they are a separate matter. Making sure participants understand the context is one of the most typical tasks the facilitators must tackle.

While it is clear that citizens must attend with a readiness to participate, it is even more important that the same can be said of the public authority. Opening up government processes and decisions is only worthwhile if there is real belief in participation; doing so without conviction





is pointless. The public authority must act in good faith, that is to say it must have a genuine intention towards listening to and conversing with its citizens. Participation must not be a mechanism for political propaganda by which decisions already made are ratified by citizens without proper criticism. There must be a commitment to acknowledging new points of view and, most importantly, to providing accountability, reporting the proposals and saying which were accepted, which were not, and the reasons why.

5 Challenges and current trends

In recent years, deliberative and participatory processes have been on the rise, but there are challenges still to be surmounted and others coming into view. One of the most important challenges is to go beyond deliberative discussions that address strictly local or very specialised matters. There is a great deal of experience of deliberative processes on a local level, but this is harder to apply when it comes to higher levels of government that are further from the public and closer to the centre of power. Experience tells us that to get the lay public to engage in important debates, a huge amount of work must be done on communication and getting people involved, something that is not always within institutions' means.

Next, there is the issue of how these processes tie in with modern online participatory experiences. Recent years have seen growth in online participatory experiences, which are very useful for

allowing citizens to make proposals and take positions on issues, for conducting polls and for calculating support. However, where they are still found wanting is in matching the workshops' discussions involving contrasting opinions. What is more, there is very little evidence to show that online environments allow for the empathy that is required to bring people's positions towards compromise, whereas the face-to-face discussions do allow for this.

Some experts say that within four or five years artificial intelligence will provide the means to moderate online debates between hundreds of citizens, doing the job currently done by a good human moderator, i.e. grouping similar comments, highlighting relevant comments, summarising the current position, and drafting consensus proposals. Current trends generally point towards continuing uses of digital and face-to-face participation to complement one another and in combination.

Lastly, another challenge public authorities face is their flexibility when it comes to welcoming participation that is initiated by citizens, not through any top-down channel prepared from above. When a public authority opens a channel for participation, it may sometimes struggle to find participants. In contrast, when a bottom-up participatory process emerges, the public authority may sometimes not be flexible enough to take the contribution on board, evaluate it or take it into consideration, simply because it has not arrived through one of the administration's own channels.

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6 On the up: citizens' conventions and panels

Among the latest trends in deliberative democracy, the start of the 21st century has seen innovation in formats and the emergence of what are known as citizens' conventions. Various countries have organised major citizens' conventions to debate issues of great political importance through citizens' panels.

Among the cases that have most interested specialists³ are the citizens' assemblies in British Columbia (2004) and Ontario (2006) on electoral reform, the constitutional conventions in Iceland (2010) and in Ireland (2013), and, in particular, the G1000⁴ experience (2011–2012) in Belgium.

While not identical in every respect, these experiences give direct and open backing to medium- and large-scale citizen deliberation, encouraging 'ordinary citizens' to define their outlook on political issues. The goal is not to find members of political parties or NGO activists, but rather 'regular' members of the public who may bring 'common sense' to decisions up till

3. A good summary can be found in the following paper, *We, the People: Constitutional Decision Making Through Citizen-led Deliberative Processes*, Jordan Kroll & Juliet Swann, Edinburgh, July 2015.

4. Vincent Jacquet, Jonathan Moskovic, Didier Caluwaerts and Min Reuchamps 'The Macro political Uptake of the G1000 in Belgium' in *Constitutional Deliberative Democracy in Europe* (2016). The website <http://g1000.org> contains full information and the manifesto can be read in English at <http://www.g1000.org/en/manifesto.php>

then in the hands of politicians. In some cases, such as Ireland, participants for intensive weekend meetings were chosen randomly, through statistical methods to ensure the presence of varied points of view.

These conventions use original debate methodologies that require both time and a high level of commitment from participants, far more than a brief two-hour workshop or a few clicks made from home on a website.

In general, the aim is to gather a relatively large number of citizens in order to reach a consensus on various topics following a 'funnelling' method. This consists of starting the debate with a large number of people separated into small groups who come to initial agreements, then a second stage where there are fewer people and new agreements are reached, until finally, in a group that is smaller still, the definitive agreement is made, comprehending all of the previous debate.

It is interesting to note that, unlike the other participatory processes considered throughout this article, these last cases did not address local matters affecting citizens' everyday lives, rather they dealt with more general matters of major political importance and nationwide significance, such as constitutional or electoral reforms.

In conclusion, deliberative democracy is not just on an upward curve in its ability to influence everyday political decisions – all the while developing and refining its methodology –, it is also making strides towards new and as yet unexplored horizons. ■