Public Deliberation:
Where We Are and Where Can We Go?

BY ABBY WILLIAMSON AND
ARCHON FUNG

In this essay, we step back from developments in the emerging field of public deliberation to survey the wider range of activities that constitute public deliberation, particularly the opportunities already incorporated in U.S. government practice. Our research was based upon reviews of the existing literature, assessments of the organizational "field," and our own previous work.[1] We ask three large and general questions about these activities. First, what does intentional public deliberation aim to do? That is, what are the problems and deficits of public discussion and governance that these activities aim to address? Second, how have policy makers and practitioners constructed venues of public deliberation to achieve these goals? Third, which design choices and methods have been effective at achieving these various goals?

The field of public deliberation and our knowledge about this phenomenon is nascent, and much remains uncertain. Rather than attempting definitive answers to questions about the connections between institutional design and deliberative effect, we aim to assess what is known in order to illuminate the most promising courses of future research.

Goals of Public Deliberation

What do venues of public deliberation aim to do, and how do we judge the success of various venues of public deliberation? Though venues and initiatives aim at various goals, at least six dimensions are important.

> What do venues of public deliberation aim to do, and how do we judge the success of various venues of public deliberation?

Character of Participation

All efforts at public deliberation aim to increase the number of individuals who are engaged in discussing and thinking about some issue or problem. Initiatives vary greatly, however, in both the quantity of participation they generate and the degree to which those who participate reflect or represent the interests, perspectives, and backgrounds of the wider body of citizens who do not directly participate.

Quality of Deliberation

Though many theorists have focused upon whether an institution or decision is made deliberatively, there is huge variation in the quality of deliberation within the venues that aim to produce it. Indeed, many venues do not permit citizens to deliberate as such; instead, they create opportunities for them to learn about policies or express preferences. The quality of deliberation is gauged according to the extent to which reasons for various positions are offered and heard, and according to the openness of discussion to diverse perspectives as well as the degree to which relevant information and knowledge is used.

Educating Citizens and Officials

Moving from process to outcomes, most public deliberation initiatives aim to confer information, knowledge, or skills to the citizens or officials who participate in them. In some public meetings, offi-

cials hope to learn more about citizens' opinions and perspectives while informing participants about policies and the reasons for them. Deliberative initiatives vary widely in the extent to which they educate citizens and officials.

Official Accountability

Some public deliberation initiatives also aim to strengthen the links between the desires of citizens and officials' actions. Many do so by compelling public officials to explain their actions (or lack thereof) to citizens who participate—a literal public accounting. Others generate popular pressure on officials or thicken the channels of communication and influence between citizens and officials.

Justice

Some deliberative initiatives are designed explicitly to render policy and policy making more inclusive by furnishing a kind of preferential option for the disadvantaged. Mechanisms such as random selection and recruiting from populations that would be otherwise underrepresented can reduce the socioeconomic bias evident in many forms of public participation. As deliberative norms are enforced, those voices can exert greater influence. Such measures aim ultimately to increase the justice of public action by strengthening the hand of those who are politically weak or disorganized.

> Random selection and recruiting from populations that would be otherwise underrepresented can reduce the socioeconomic bias evident in many forms of public participation.

Sustainability

Many initiatives aim to make public decisions more deliberative and participatory over time. To achieve this goal, they must develop a persistent base of political and financial support.

Design Choices: Who and How?

Deliberative initiatives vary widely in how they attempt to advance these deliberative goals. Those who organize public deliberations must make many decisions: What are the topics that participants will address? How long and often will they gather? What stakes will participants have in the outcomes of deliberation?[2] Two design choices, however, are particularly important, and actual venues of deliberation vary widely on these two dimensions. The first choice concerns *who* is invited to participate in a particular deliberative venue. The second concerns *how* their deliberations are connected to decision making and action. Let's consider them in turn.

Deliberative venues vary widely with respect to the participants that they invite. We classify the possibilities in five categories:

1. *Open.* Many deliberative venues—most public hearings, town meetings, and the like—are completely open to all who wish to participate.
2. *Open and targeted.* Because open venues may attract participants who are especially interested in the topics under consideration, better off, and better educated than the general population, some designers of public deliberation take pains to improve the representativeness of participants. Some initiatives, for example, conduct targeted outreach to deprived communities, while others seek to address concerns that are especially important to those who are less well off. Open venues that make such efforts constitute a second, and distinct, kind of participation.
3. *Random selection.* Some deliberative venues select participants randomly, following the method of public opinion polls and juries in U.S. courts, to ensure a kind of representativeness among participants.
4. *Citizen stakeholders.* Some deliberative venues invite individuals who have, or who come to acquire, a substantial stake in the outcomes of various deliberations. In this fourth category,

participants are typically intended to represent certain perspectives or groups, though they are not themselves professional advocates, politicians, or policy makers.

5. *Elite stakeholders.* In this fifth category (still more exclusive than the other four), participants are leaders of organizations such as industrial associations, professional groups, and interest groups.

Our second major dimension of deliberative design describes how discussions and decisions are linked to authoritative decisions and actions. This axis and its six categories are derived from Sherry Arnstein's seminal "Ladder of Citizen Participation":[3]

1. *Manipulation.* At the low end of the empowerment scale are occasions in which the objective of sponsors is to bring participants around to their position or increase participants' acceptance of policies or decisions. Arnstein illustrates this category with examples of citizen advisory boards used as a rubber stamp or a public relations stunt.

2. *Informational.* The central objective of most forms of public participation is to provide information to participants. In many forms of public deliberation, information flows only from officials to citizens, with no mechanism for meaningful feedback. Public meetings in which officials announce policies and answer questions are informational.

3. *Consultation.* In consultative forms of public deliberation, citizens are asked for their input but with no clear assurance that their advice will be heeded. For example, at some public hearings citizens have the opportunity to speak, although officials have little responsibility for considering citizen comments. Other venues produce reports and recommendations without assurance that policy makers will adopt them.

4. *Partnership.* Less frequently, some venues of public deliberation invite citizens who participate as partners in public decision making and action.

Such arrangements often create an accountability mechanism to ensure that citizen input is not flagrantly disregarded. Some advisory boards, for example, operate with a charter that requires policy makers to take the advice of the board or publicly justify their differing choices.

5. *Delegated power.* Still more rarely, governments sometimes delegate authority over some area of policy making to a venue of public deliberation. Some neighborhood associations, for example, enjoy substantial zoning authority; other such associations sometimes possess budget authority over local projects.

6. *Citizen control.* Some venues of public deliberation exercise authoritative decision-making power over a wide-open agenda of issues. The classic example here is the town meeting in the New England tradition, still practiced in hundreds of towns in the northeastern United States.

Where We Are: Public Venues of Deliberation

Among the industrialized democracies, the United States is distinctive in the extent to which it offers an enormous range of opportunities for citizens to participate with one another and with officials in deliberation regarding public problems and policies. This tradition is centuries old and perhaps began with the New England town meeting. Urbanization in the nineteenth century saw the settlement house movement that presaged the neighborhood governance initiatives of the late twentieth century. The rise of the administrative state in the postwar period brought with it the public participation requirements of the Administrative Procedures Act (1946) and the National Environmental Policy Act (1970). The lose-lose reality of regulatory and political deadlock fueled the growth of the fields of negotiation and alternative dispute resolution and spawned a host of stakeholder deliberations, especially in the environmental arena. Between these landmark requirements of public law and regulation, norms and expectations for public participation in the United States give rise to countless occasions when

politicians and administrators at all levels of government sponsor gatherings for citizens to discuss their perspectives and priorities because, in short, this is what the public often expects.

> The United States is distinctive in offering an enormous range of opportunities for citizens to participate in deliberation regarding public problems and policies.

A full characterization of the many venues of public deliberation stemming from this tradition of open government lies beyond the scope of this essay. Our discussion here is limited to four common types, or venues, of such deliberation deriving from government actions and public law: the New England town meeting, public hearings, citizen committees, and collaborative forums. Here, we describe how these and other design choices render a venue more and less capable of achieving the aims of deliberation laid out in the first part of this essay.

> First held in colonial America in the 1630s, the New England town meeting is the longest-standing institution of public deliberation in the United States.

Town Meetings

First held in colonial America in the 1630s, the New England town meeting is the longest-standing institution of public deliberation in the United States. Residents of New England colonial towns began to govern themselves through informal assemblies of adult males within a few years of their arrival in America.[4] Remarkably, the characteristics of this venue have changed relatively little since its genesis four hundred years ago.[5] Though few political scientists have studied the town meeting, a few specialists, among them Frank Bryan, Joseph Zimmerman, and Jane Mansbridge, have written extensively on the subject, offering some of the most comprehensive information available on a U.S. public participation venue.

The New England town meeting differs fundamentally from other governmental participation venues because it is modeled on the Athenian assumption that all citizens should play a deciding role in governance of their community. Unlike participatory venues in which citizens offer input or discuss plans without making a decision, the town meeting is a citizen legislature, with law-making and allocation authority.[6] Although the jurisdiction of the town meeting is increasingly limited by state statute, citizens in New England towns still have the opportunity to debate and decide on issues ranging from the functioning of the schools to liquor laws and local taxes.[7] The average town meeting generally consists of some combination of components: an opening ceremony with a prayer or salute to the flag, reading of the agenda, election of a town meeting moderator and other town officers, and discussion and decision making on school and budgetary issues. With the moderator overseeing the process, attendees use Robert's Rules of Order to raise issues, make amendments, and decide issues through a voice vote or ballots. As Jane Mansbridge describes, the town meeting tends toward consensus, with frequent unanimous voice votes, but it allows resolution of conflict through deliberation followed by a secret ballot.[8] In general, town meetings include a mix of formal presentations and informal comments, lasting (at least in Vermont) an average of four hours.[9]

In this fashion, registered voters in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island have governed themselves for several centuries. According to Zimmerman, the only other contemporary institution that compares to the town meeting is the Swiss Canton system.[10] With the exception of Rhode Island, more than 80 percent of towns in each of the New England states continue to govern themselves by town meeting, as demonstrated in Table 1.[11] Many towns that practice the

Table 1. Number and Percentage of New England Towns Ruled by Town Meeting						
	ME	NH	VT	MA	CT	RI
Number of towns	497	221	246	312	169	31
Number of town meetings	475	197	230	262	160	20
Percentage of towns governed by town meeting	96	89	93	84	95	65

town meeting are very small, and not all registered voters attend. Nonetheless, each spring tens of thousands of New England voters participate in this deliberative venue.

Participation in town meetings differs across the six New England states, as shown in Table 2.[12] Although participation at meetings may range from less than 1 percent to more than 72 percent of the local population, in none of the states does local participation average much more than one-fifth of registered voters.[13] Moreover, both Bryan and Zimmerman find that town meeting attendance has declined since the 1970s.

Some question whether a town meeting remains a legitimate form of government when a relatively small portion of registered voters participates. Bryan argues, however, that given the costliness of participation in terms of time and the psychic challenges of public participation, attracting one-fifth of the population is a significant accomplishment. In terms of inclusiveness, some argue that a group of "regulars" who may not mirror the town's population in terms of demographics or political views populates the town meeting.[14] Others suggest that interest groups such as teachers or environmentalists "pack" the meetings.[15] In 1996, one Connecticut town official wrote a *New York Times* editorial lamenting the fact that as fewer people attend town meetings, professionally interested participants and vocal activists dominate the proceedings, creating a "hostile atmosphere."[16]

Observers disagree about the quality of deliberation at town meetings. In her path-breaking study of one Vermont town, Jane Mansbridge cautions us about the tendency of town meetings to repress differences of interest and perspectives, favoring those who are more articulate and less socially peripheral. The process can exclude those who are poor or uneducated. Frank Bryan's findings are more sanguine about the equity and inclusiveness of town meetings. He finds almost no connection between a town's aggregate socioeconomic measures and town meeting attendance. In his Vermont sample, a town's wealth or levels of education do not predict attendance.[17] Although he does not have individual-level data, he claims that this relationship holds within towns as it does across towns. A half century of observations leads him to believe that if any bias exists, it is that town meetings attract people in the middle range of socioeconomic indicators, with the ultra-rich and very disadvantaged not participating.[18]

Less is known about the educative effects of town meetings, or their impact on the justice of town policies. In his survey of town clerks, Zimmerman finds they are generally pleased with the town meeting process and generally rate the value of debate there as good or excellent.[19] Town meetings seem to generate some results differing from those that other forms of government or public agencies would produce—such as the proliferation of tiny schools and school districts in Vermont. But such outcomes may reflect a greater sensitivity to local preferences.

Table 2. Average Participation Rate (Percent) of Registered Voters in New England Town Meetings						
	ME	NH	VT	MA	CT	RI
Average participation rate	16	20	20.5	14	9	5

The New England town meeting is the oldest of the public deliberation venues that we review. Though it has played a central role in New England local governance for close to four hundred years, it has seen a decline in recent decades due to population growth (town meetings work best in small communities) and encroachment by states reducing the scope of town powers.

Public Hearings
Unlike the clearly delineated town meeting, the term *public hearing* encompasses a broad array of public participation efforts, from formal federal adjudication hearings to informal local project presentations. In the literature, the terms *public meeting* and *public hearing* are often used interchangeably.[20] Here, we define a public hearing as an open gathering of officials and citizens, in which citizens are permitted to offer comments but officials are not obliged to respond publicly.

The public hearing is perhaps the most widespread venue for public participation in the United States, used by all levels of government for a variety of purposes. If we consider federal environmental hearings alone, throughout the 1990s close to five hundred projects annually required at least one hearing each, with most calling for numerous hearings in the scoping and drafting phases of project development. Beyond the federal level, twenty-seven state governments have similar environmental protection legislation with hearing requirements.[21] Katherine McComas found that in 1998, ostensibly a typical year, the New York Department of the Environment alone held more than 250 public meetings.[22] Beyond the environmental realm, laws such as California's Brown Act allow citizens in several states to comment publicly on agenda items before a legislative body.[23] Evan Berman's survey of city administrators (1997) found that 97 percent of cities nationwide use the hearing as a strategy for involving citizens in decision making.[24] No exact figures exist for the numbers of public hearings held, nor the number of citizens who participate. As the examples given here demonstrate, however, the public hearing is among the most ubiquitous of public participation venues in the United States.

> The public hearing is perhaps the most widespread venue for public participation in the United States, used by all levels of government for a variety of purposes.

The typical public hearing is held to gather comments regarding a particular proposed policy or project. The average hearing consists of presentations by officials followed by time-limited public comments. Recruitment methods differ across levels of government and agencies, but for most procedural hearings the implementing agency must generate a list of interested parties and give these groups drafts and notification, in addition to publicizing hearings in the local media. By definition, public hearings are open to all.

Observers of public hearings agree that this venue fails to draw a representative subsection of the public.[25] Even with adequate outreach, a public hearing is not conducive to broad participation. People attend meetings when they want to learn about a project or when they feel personally affected. As a result, attendance at public hearings is dominated by officials, representatives of special-interest groups, and others with an obvious economic stake in the relevant project. Although we lack definitive data for the rate of participation at actual hearings, Heberlein and others note that most people in the audience do not speak.[26] Generally, those with the most intense feelings attend and participate.[27] As a result, the impression taken from a public hearing may not represent the views of the general public.

Most public meetings are not a deliberative exchange in which reasons are offered for contrasting positions and perspectives. Typically, the early portion of such a meeting consists of technical presentations explaining

the complexities of the relevant policy or project, which may not be comprehensible to a lay audience.[28] Unlike the town meeting, in which citizens have the opportunity to amend the agenda, the public hearing often has a strictly circumscribed focus. For instance, citizens may be allowed to comment only on the technical aspects of the project within the scope of impact that the implementing agency has already defined. When the public comment period arrives, citizens are often limited to two or three minutes apiece to voice their concerns. The room is often arranged so that citizen speakers stand at a microphone facing the assembled officials, with their back to other citizens.[29] Officials have no obligation to respond to citizen comments during the actual hearing. In fact, engaging other citizens and officials in discussion may be prohibited.[30] In interviews with McComas, some public officials who hold hearings admitted that they had trouble really listening to citizens' comments.[31]

Ideally, hearings furnish information to citizens about proposed government action and information to officials about citizen needs and concerns. In fact, hearings are more useful to the officials, in that they alert agencies to opposition while satisfying public participation requirements.[32] Some have described use of public hearings as part of an official strategy to "decide, announce, and defend," rather than allowing citizens to have actual input on a project.[33] Indeed, hearings often come so late in a project or policy development process that crucial decisions have already been made.[34] On the other hand, Adams offers some anecdotal evidence that local government officials use hearings to gauge public support in order to make their decisions. Hearings allow citizens to express the intensity of their concern in a way that does not show through in a poll. As a result, hearings may give local officials a more visceral (though not necessarily more accurate) sense of the political consequences of a decision.[35]

Citizen Committees
Like public hearings, citizen committees take a variety of forms and are used in an array of contexts.

Although it may be called a citizen advisory board, citizen panel, local board, or another name, the generic citizen committee possesses several defining characteristics. Some scholars emphasize that a citizen committee is composed of participants selected on the basis of their characteristics to represent the relevant affected public.[36] Others underline that a citizen committee is a group gathered to address a particular issue or set of issues.[37] Although many citizen committees serve in an advisory capacity, informing officials of citizen concerns, some possess more formal authority. We define a citizen committee here to be a group of citizens who gather regularly to discuss and address a specific public issue or domain.

> A citizen committee is a group of citizens who gather regularly to discuss and address a specific public issue or domain.

At the federal level, laws have frequently made state or local funding contingent on establishment of citizen committees. Since the National Housing Act of 1954, housing and urban development legislation has included clauses mandating local committee formation, ranging from the Community Action Agencies of the 1960s to today's Empowerment Zone boards.[38] Federal agencies have also established committees to help them negotiate such controversial situations as the closure of a military base or decontamination of a Department of Energy site. The 1972 Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) required that membership on committees be balanced in terms of interests; it also opened committee deliberations to public scrutiny. Under FACA, agencies must announce the establishment of committees in the *Federal Register* and inform the public about their function.[39] Federal mandates for advisory committees create abundant opportunity for citizen committee participation nationwide. In but one limited example, the requirement to establish Restoration Advisory Boards in connection with the closure of

military installations led to creation of three hundred committees.[40]

On the local level, Houghton reports that citizen committees exist in almost every U.S. city.[41] In 1988, Kalamazoo, Michigan, for instance, had nine local boards: the Airport Advisory Board, City Planning Commission, Environmental Concerns Committee, Historical Commission, Historic District Commission, Parks and Recreation Board, Pedestrian Mall Advisory Board, Tenant Landlord Council, and Transportation Advisory Board.[42] Today it has twenty-five such local advisory boards.[43] Even New England town meetings increasingly rely on the information presented by local budget and finance committees in making town decisions.[44]

In addition to elected local school boards, public school districts frequently have a less formal citizen committee known as a school council. In 1985, one hundred thousand U.S. citizens served on school boards, with more than a million participating in school councils and advisory committees.[45] School advisory councils first emerged in the early twentieth century and for a time were required nationally following the 1976 Educational Amendments.[46] Chicago has taken a unique approach to citizen governance of the schools, electing local school councils for every school that consist of parents, community members, teachers, and the school principal. In contrast to the average school council, Chicago's local school councils have the authority to approve school budgets and hire or fire principals.[47]

In their extensive case survey, Beierle and Cayford determined that citizen committees are more effective than public hearings in achieving some goals of participation, such as improving decision making and building trust. They also find, however, that as public participation methods become more "intensive"—that is, as they require more ongoing, face-to-face deliberation—they grow more expensive and

often less representative of the public at large.[48] An enduring complaint about committees is that they fail to include disadvantaged and marginalized groups. In 1964, Schaller wrote, "the chief failure of the citizen advisory committees organized in recent years is that few of them have been representative of the citizenry."[49] Obstacles to participation at the time were that meetings were often held during the workday or in upscale settings. Although access to meetings has improved somewhat since that time, with meetings generally held at times and in places that accommodate working people, they still remain dominated by professionally interested participants or special interests.[50] Beierle and Cayford's case survey offers the most damning evidence of the participatory biases of the citizen committee. They find that committee members tend to have greater civic skills and topical expertise than the average public hearing attendee.[51] Moreover, in one-third of their consensus-based committee cases, researchers reported that excluding issues or parties facilitated achieving consensus.[52]

Citizen committees are more conducive to deliberation than public hearings because they usually engage participants repeatedly over time in a less conflictual atmosphere. In committee meetings, people can share ideas more openly because they are slightly removed from the glare of the public spotlight.[53] Beierle and Konisky concur with this view, stressing that the quality of the deliberative process in citizen advisory committee meetings is significantly and positively related to three social goals of participation: "incorporating public values into decision-making, resolving conflict among competing interests, and restoring a degree of trust in public agencies."[54]

Observers differ, however, regarding whether citizen advisory committees succeed in educating citizens and officials. In the ideal, committees offer citizens the opportunity to learn in-depth about a particular project or policy area, while giving officials the opportunity to understand local values and con-

cerns. Unfortunately, the information presented to citizens may be biased by agency views or goals. Houghton stresses that the effective board tends to be one that has access to information from other sources.[55] Other scholars find that although committees enable an exchange of views, citizens may not have sufficient knowledge or experience to offer useful input.[56] Furthermore, many citizen committees fail to increase the accountability of officials or of government more generally. In some cases, citizens may use committees as a pressure group to assert their claims. In other cases, officials use committees as a tool to facilitate implementation of projects, whether by recruiting allies, deflecting blame, or including moderate citizens to mitigate the impact of activists' voices.[57] Arnstein argues that advisory committees offer a convenient way to gain citizens' support without offering them a real role in decision making.[58] Officials may even use a committee as a mechanism to circumvent or undermine existing political checks and balances.[59]

Collaborative Forums

Collaborative forums create opportunities for citizens to gather and address issues through presentation of information and discussion. Unlike public hearings, collaborative forums are intentionally interactive rather than testimonial. Unlike citizen committees, forums do not consist of a defined group of people selected on the basis of their interest or qualification. In recent years, collaborative forums have become more prevalent, particularly in local government. Judith Innes and David Booher predict that because of faults they see as inherent in traditional participation methods such as the public hearing, collaborative forums will eventually come to dominate the public participation process in the United States.[60] The trend toward collaborative forums has introduced a variety of open citizen forums—our focus here—as well as different forms of negotiated stakeholder processes. Many collaborative processes currently in use in the United States are promoted by civic organizations and used only rarely by government.

> Judith Innes and David Booher predict that collaborative forums will eventually come to dominate the public participation process in the United States.

Innes and Booher identify two central elements of collaborative forums: concentration on gathering an inclusive group of stakeholders and insistence on constructive dialogue among the participants.[61] The term *stakeholder* is defined in various ways, but in the most general sense it refers to an individual or institution that is somehow implicated in addressing the issue at hand. Collaborative forums aim to establish an even playing field in which stakeholders can interact, learn from one another, resolve conflicts, and generate new ideas. A collaborative forum generally requires more careful preparation than the average hearing or committee meeting. Organizers must consider how to gather stakeholders, inform participants, and facilitate dialogue. A number of processes have tackled these challenges in a variety of ways.

Two common kinds of collaborative forums in the United States are master planning and visioning processes in local development. In both a master planning process and a visioning exercise, a sponsoring agency organizes a meeting or series of meetings that allow citizens to analyze their community, identify concerns and priorities, and develop a plan for action. In visioning, citizens and planners particularly focus on how citizens want their community to look and feel in a defined number of years down the road. A visioning process aims to enable a large group of citizens to issue a consensus statement about community priorities and hopes. In contrast, a master plan process may include citizens in deliberation, but ultimately plans are produced in a smaller committee or by professional planners.

As a general rule, collaborative forums share the participation bias found in other venues of public deliberation. In her review of two experimental col-

laborative forum processes, Halvorsen finds that participants in both processes were disproportionately older, with higher levels of education and wealth.[62] Nonetheless, one Canadian scholar found that in Ontario participation in visioning processes in certain towns exceeded participation in public hearings.[63] If outreach is done well, visioning and other collaborative forums may have more potential to draw relatively representative participants. Forums may be more accessible than public hearings because citizens do not have to present testimony before hundreds in order to participate in a forum's small-group discussions.

Collaborative forums are specifically designed to promote quality deliberation. Whereas a hearing consists of isolated announcements of individual opinions, a collaborative forum allows citizens to respond to one another.[64] Williams identifies the simultaneous "intensity and informality" of the forum as crucial to well-considered citizen decision making.[65] Plein and his coauthors find that visioning has a unique ability to operate outside of institutional venues, with committees of stakeholders convening the process and professional facilitators running the show. They observe that this trait enables more open and vibrant debate.[66] But forums often fall short of this ideal. In some cases, ineffective facilitation hampers meaningful dialogue. Overemphasis on civility may prevent the airing of important criticisms.[67] In other cases, citizens may lack deliberative skills or otherwise be unprepared to participate. Citizens who mistrust authorities may not participate in good faith.[68]

Proponents of collaborative forums claim that the processes should ease implementation of recommendations because key players have already considered the issues and agreed to a course of action. More often than not, however, recommendations go unheeded. Plein and his coauthors find that even though visioning successfully enables deliberation, it rarely produces policy outcomes.[69] In a survey of planners in Ontario, Shipley found that

seventeen of twenty-two respondents said vision statements were having very little or only moderate impact on their decision making.[70] At least two factors combine to obstruct plan implementation. In some cases, proposals are exceedingly vague or unrealistic. In others, officials lack the resources or commitment to implement citizens' recommendations.

Civic Innovations in Public Deliberation

Alongside these official venues of public deliberation, civic entrepreneurs have developed a range of their own deliberative initiatives. These initiatives include efforts from the Center for Deliberative Polling, Citizen Juries, the National Issues Forums, AmericaSpeaks, the Study Circles Resources Center, the Public Conversations Project, Viewpoint Learning, and many others. Because they are new and operate for the most part out of the penumbra of public law requirements, they involve many fewer people than the venues just reviewed. Nevertheless, these innovations are vital laboratories of public deliberation. Despite their youth, some of them have already illuminated how citizen participation can be organized in ways that better achieve central aims such as inclusive participation, deliberation, education, and public accountability. As long as they remain principally in the civic realm, however, these innovations are likely to engage only a limited number of citizens and have a modest impact upon policy. These innovations show how the many public deliberations that already occur in the American political process can be improved. A highly promising frontier for democratic reform is to apply the lessons of these civic innovators to the broader practices of governmentally organized deliberation. Other essays in this issue of *National Civic Review* explore the details of several of these civic innovations. In this section, we highlight some ways in which civic innovations in public deliberation have improved upon the governmental venues described here, but we also point out several fundamental limitations of these civic venues.

A highly promising frontier for democratic reform is to apply the lessons of civic innovators to the broader practices of governmentally organized deliberation.

Perhaps the clearest area of improvement concerns the representativeness of participation. Unlike most governmental deliberation initiatives, civic innovators rarely rely purely upon the vagaries of self-selected participants at an open meeting to determine the character of participation. They know that such self-selection results in the kind of participation bias (favoring the wealthier and better educated) described earlier. Most civic innovators sponsor forums that are open to all who wish to participate. They take special measures such as publicizing the event and recruiting participants from communities, populations, and organizations who are less likely to participate. A smaller group of civic innovators—those who organize Deliberative Polls and Citizen Juries—actually use random sampling techniques to ensure that participants statistically reflect the relevant populations. When properly implemented, these methods have substantially reduced, and even eliminated, the participation bias commonly observed in most forms of political participation and civic engagement.

Though the evidence is less definitive, there is good reason to believe that civic innovators have also discovered techniques to improve the quality of public deliberation over what is commonly found in governmentally organized venues. First, civic innovators have given careful attention to organizing discussion to encourage participants to talk with, and listen to, one another. The approach varies with the innovator. AmericaSpeaks, for example, favors small-group discussions that are combined with large group encounters—sometimes numbering into the thousands—using sophisticated technology. Deliberative Polls favor small-group discussions combined with larger plenary sessions in which participants address

expert panels. Though innovators disagree about how best to organize a discussion, their methods all go far beyond the typical testimony of public hearings and town meetings. Second, nearly all civic organizers of public deliberation use briefing materials that give participants a common base of knowledge and often rationales for several contrasting positions on a given issue. Third, almost all of the civic innovators insist that participants' discussions be moderated by trained facilitators who guide conversation so as to enhance continuity, information exchange, and inclusiveness. One result of these measures is education: participants seem to gain substantial knowledge about the public issues that they discuss in many of these deliberations.

Despite these successes on the participatory, deliberative, and educative fronts, there seem to be two notable limitations of these civic innovations in public deliberation. Both stem from their status as *civic* innovations that are led by nongovernmental organizations and entrepreneurs who do not benefit from various regulatory requirements for public participation. To ply their trade, these organizations often form partnerships with officials or governmental entities who wish to draw upon their expertise in public participation. Sometimes, civic innovators think of these officials as clients who make funding and access available. It is often these officials to whom the results of public deliberation are addressed. This relationship creates a tension that limits the extent to which civic innovation in public deliberation can hold public agencies and officials accountable. On one hand, most civic innovators would like to convene deliberations in which it is at least possible that the participants will make demands of, or express displeasure at, officials and their policies. On the other hand, these innovators risk alienating their clients and partners if the conclusions of a deliberation depart from their programs and preferences. One of us was taken aback to hear a civic innovator, when asked by a highly placed government official about damage from public deliberation that departs from official policy,

reply that policy makers should simply not organize public deliberations in which the risk is high.

Similarly, many of the civic innovations in public deliberation face a serious challenge to their institutional stability. Town meetings and public hearings are sustained by legal provisions that embed them in structures of democratic governance. Civic innovators of public deliberation, by contrast, must constantly search for enthusiastic political patrons, generous financiers, and hot issues to ply their trade. The key to greater sustainability, and to more inclusive participation and deeper deliberation in our processes of public participation, is to transplant successful techniques in these civic realms to governmental arenas and thus give them scale through institutionalization.

ENDNOTES

1. The analysis that follows summarizes a much longer report, "Mapping Public Deliberation," by the authors, prepared for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The central aim of the report was to highlight gaps in our collective knowledge regarding the practice and impacts of public deliberation.

2. These and other deliberative design choices are discussed in Fung, A. "Recipes for Public Spheres: Eight Institutional Design Choices and Their Consequences." *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 2003, *11*(3), 338–367.

3. Arnstein, S. R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." *American Institute of Planning Journal*, July 1969, 216–224.

4. Zimmerman, J. F. *The New England Town Meeting: Democracy in Action*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1999.

5. Zimmerman (1999).

6. Bryan, F. M. "Direct Democracy and Civic Competence: The Case of the Town Meeting." In S. Elkin and K. E. Soltan (eds.), *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.

7. Mansbridge, J. *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

8. Mansbridge (1983).

9. Bryan, F. *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

10. Zimmerman (1999).

11. Zimmerman (1999), esp. pp. 27, 60, 104, 127, 136; and Bryan (2004), p. 3.

12. Zimmerman (1999), pp. 46–47, 110, 123, 136; Bryan (2004), p. 57.

13. Bryan (2004).

14. Zimmerman (1999).

15. Zimmerman (1999).

16. Gross, M. B. "Political Poison at the Grass Roots." *New York Times,* May 4, 1996, p. 19.

17. Bryan (2004).

18. Bryan (1999, 2004).

19. Zimmerman (1999).

20. McComas, K. A. "Theory and Practice of Public Meetings." *Communications Theory,* 2001, *11*(1), 36–55.

21. Andrews, R.N.L. "The Unfinished Business of National Environmental Policy." In R. Clark and L. Canter (eds.), *Environmental Policy and NEPA: Past, Present and Future*. Boca Raton, Fla.: St. Lucie Press, 1997.

22. McComas (2001).

23. Adams, B. "Public Meetings and the Democratic Process." *Public Administration Review,* 2004, *64*(1), 43–54.

24. Adams (2004).

25. Poisner, J. "A Civic Republican Perspective on the National Environmental Policy Act's Process for Citizen Participation." *Environmental Law,* Spring 1996, pp. 53–94; Chess, C., and Purcell, K. "Public Participation and the Environment: Do We Know What Works?" *Environmental Science and Technology,* 1999, *33*(16), 2685–2692; Heberlein, T. A. "Some Observations on Alternative Mechanisms for Public Involvement." *Natural Resources Journal,* 1976, *16*, 197–212.

26. Heberlein (1976).

27. Adams (2004).

28. Fiorino, D. J. "Citizen Participation and Environmental Risk: A Survey of Institutional Mechanisms." *Science, Technology, and Human Values,* 1990, *15*(2), 226–243.

29. Innes, J. E., and Booher, D. E. "Reframing Public Participation Strategies for the 21st Century." Unpublished manuscript, 2004.

30. Adams (2004).

31. McComas (2001).

32. Fiorino (1990).

33. Mazmanian, D. A., and Nienaber, J. *Can Organizations Change? Environmental Protection, Citizen Participation, and the Army Corps of Engineers*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, Mar. 1979.

34. Fairfax, S. K. "A Disaster in the Environmental Movement." *Science,* Feb. 17, 1978, pp. 743–748.

35. Adams (2004).

36. Beierle, T. C., and Cayford, J. *Democracy in Practice: Public Participation in Environmental Decisions*. Washington, D.C.: Resources for the Future, 2002; Cochran, L. H., Phelps, L. A., and Cochran, L. L. *Advisory Committees in Action: An Educational/Occupational/Community Partnership*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1980.

37. Chess and Purcell (1999).

38. Schaller, L. E. "Is the Citizen Advisory-Committee a Threat to Representative Government?" *Public Administration Review,* 1964, *24*(3), 175–179.

39. Kerwin, C. *Rulemaking: How Government Agencies Write Law and Make Policy*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1994.

40. Santos, S. L., and Chess, C. "Evaluating Citizen Advisory Boards: The Importance of Theory and Participant-Based Criteria and Practical Implications." *Risk Analysis,* 2003, *23*(2), 269–279.

41. Houghton, D. G. "Citizen Advisory Boards: Autonomy and Effectiveness." *American Review of Public Administration,* 1988, *18*(3), 283–296.

42. Houghton (1988).

43. http://www.kalcounty.com/Board/committeesdescription.htm. Accessed Feb. 14, 2004.

44. Zimmerman (1999).

45. Salisbury, R. H. *Citizen Participation in the Public Schools*. Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1980.

46. Cochran, Phelps, and Cochran (1980).

47. Fung, A. "Accountable Autonomy: Toward Empowered Deliberation in Chicago Schools and Policing." Politics and Society, 2001, *29*(1), 73–103.

48. Beierle and Cayford (2002).

49. Schaller (1964).

50. Chess and Purcell (1999).

51. Beierle and Cayford (2002).

52. Beierle and Cayford (2002).

53. Schaller (1964).

54. Beirele, T. C., and Konisky, D. M. Values, Conflict, and Trust in Participatory Environmental Planning. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management,* 2000, *19*(4), 587–602.

55. Houghton (1988).

56. Chess and Purcell (1999).

57. Santos and Chess (2003); Houghton (1988); Schaller (1964).

58. Arnstein (1969).

59. Schaller (1964).

60. Innes and Booher (2004).

61. Innes and Booher (2004).

62. Innes and Booher (2004).

63. Shipley, R. "Visioning in Planning: Is the Practice Based on Sound Theory?" *Environment and Planning*, 2002, *34*(1), 7–22.

64. Innes and Booher (2004).

65. Williams, S. H. "Citizen Participation in City and Regional Planning: Effective American Methodology." *Town Planning Review,* 1976, *31*(2), 349–358.

66. Plein, L. C., Green, K. E., and Williams, D. G. "Organic Planning: A New Approach to Public Participation in Local Governance." *Social Science Journal,* 1998, *35*(4), 509–523.

67. Mattson, K. "A Critical Study of Civic Deliberation and the Political Process." Unpublished manuscript prepared for Kettering Foundation, Aug. 1997.

68. Williams (1976).

69. Plein, Green, and Williams (1998).

70. Shipley (2002).

Abby Williamson is associate director of the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America. Archon Fung is associate professor of Public Policy at Harvard University.