

Innovative Engagement Shows Promise

Going beyond conventional practices



by Matt Leighninger, Tina Nabatchi, and Daniel Schugurensky

Kevin Desouza's article "[Citizen Disengagement: The Minority Opinion](#)," published in the March 2015 issue of *PM* magazine, is a thought-provoking piece that contains valuable warnings about citizen engagement.

Desouza points out several reasons why residents do not engage: lack of time, which disproportionately affects the poor and disenfranchised; attention deficit disorder; mistrust of government; and low accountability—residents seldom see the outcomes of their participation. He also notes that residents have a limited view of problems and tend to put their needs above the greater good.

Based on this diagnosis, his recommendation is to "tone down the hype around citizen engagement." To be sure, Desouza's concerns are relevant and have been discussed extensively in the literature on citizen participation.

While we agree with Desouza's statement that engagement is currently "not carefully considered," we also believe that he fails to make a crucial distinction that is relevant to public managers, scholars, and practitioners: the difference between "conventional" engagement and the newer, more innovative, and more successful forms of public participation.

INNOVATIVE PARTICIPATION FORMATS

Conventional engagement is the default mode for official public participation. It is the most common, but also the least liked, form of participation. Typical examples are the meetings and hearings held by school boards, zoning commissions, councils, congressional representatives, state and federal agencies, and other public institutions.

These meetings are often characterized by either silence or noise. By “silence” we mean poorly attended meetings with limited opportunities for meaningful input; residents normally have two to three minutes at an open microphone, and public officials are often prohibited by law from responding to residents’ comments.

“Noise” is likely to occur when a conflict arises in the community. In these cases, shouting matches and name-calling tend to prevail over civil, reasoned, and respectful dialogue.

The conventional formats for participation are frustrating for both public officials and residents, so it is no wonder that negative sentiments about participation prevail. Public officials and participation practitioners have often treated these conventional formats as obstacles to be worked around and avoided when possible.

But it may be a mistake to tolerate them rather than change them. These meetings and processes incur a range of costs, from the time and resources needed to organize them to their long-term impacts on public trust, political accountability, sustainability of public institutions, and democracy itself. Conventional engagement may actually be a destructive force, and not merely an unfortunate obstacle.

Fortunately, over the past 20 years, participation practitioners, democracy reformers, and civic advocates have developed and organized more productive and innovative forms of public engagement to address the issues and criticisms that Desouza raises.

Some of these innovations can be characterized as thin participation: formats that are fast, easy, convenient, and allow individuals to affiliate with a cause, rank ideas, donate money, or provide data or input. Thin participation can occur face-to-face through surveys, petitions, and polls, but it often happens more productively and creatively online through crowdsourcing, crowdfunding, ideation, mapping, social media, and wikis. While each instance of thin engagement might take only a few seconds, the cumulative impact can be considerable.

Other innovations can be characterized as thick participation, that is, forms of engagement in which large numbers of people work in small groups to learn, discuss, decide, and act together. Although thick participation is often meaningful and empowering, it is also labor intensive and time-consuming. Thick participation typically happens in face-to-face settings but as technology advances, online platforms for thick engagement are increasing.

It typically happens in face-to-face settings and is often organized by one or more myriad organizations devoted to such efforts, but as technology advances, online platforms for thick engagement are increasing.

A particularly powerful set of innovative participatory designs combines thick and thin forms of engagement. One example is Text, Talk, Act, which was launched as part of Creating Community Solutions, a nationwide deliberative project on mental health issues.

Text, Talk, Act combines mobile-phone texting applications with face-to-face dialogue. As of March 2015, more than 10,000 people in 250 communities have participated (see www.creatingcommunitysolutions.org).

PROGRESS MADE

Regardless of whether they are thick or thin, the best of these newer formats for participation share common characteristics. They provide factual information to prepare participants to engage in a meaningful way; use sound process techniques; give people a chance to tell their stories and offer their perspectives; provide choices and allow people to decide what they think; give participants a sense of political legitimacy; and support people to take action in a variety of ways.

These characteristics can contribute to citizen education, public decision making, and public problem solving. In short, these newer forms of participation treat residents like adults, and they avoid the paternalistic attitudes so common in conventional participation.¹

Although still far from perfect, these formats have made progress in areas like increasing the number and diversity of participants, improving the quality of discussion and deliberation, equalizing information asymmetries, and expanding transparency and accountability. There are many innovative formats from which to choose.

A decade ago, for instance, in *Beyond the Ballot*, author Graham Smith examined 57 democratic innovations, organized in six categories: electoral, consultation, deliberative, co-governance, direct democracy, and e-democracy.²

Around that time, the National League of Cities also published two reports describing a variety of tools and structures for engaging citizens and building democratic governance.^{3,4} Since then, the field has expanded significantly, with the emergence of many more innovations and the continuous refinement of existing ones. Participedia provides a searchable database of hundreds of processes experimenting with ways to increase and deepen public engagement (see www.participedia.net).

This wave of democratic innovation is growing every year around the world, partly because individuals want more say on decisions that affect them, and partly because government officials are frustrated with the limitations of conventional engagement.

A significant volume of research shows that these newer forms of “good” participation can advance inclusion, quality of deliberation, citizen empowerment, and public action, and otherwise produce many benefits for individuals, communities, policy, and governance.⁵

CONDITIONS FOR PARTICIPATION

While Desouza offers meaningful suggestions to improve public participation, he does not go far enough. Good resident engagement does not occur in a vacuum. It requires certain conditions.

One obvious condition is developing an appropriate design, putting in place particular structures and processes that enable the type of citizen engagement that is consistent with the purpose of the exercise.

Citizen initiative reviews, for instance, require a different architecture than participatory budgets; likewise, a session to brainstorm options requires a different design than a session to make decisions.

A second condition is creating a common understanding of the main purposes for engagement. All participants should know in advance whether they are going to engage in a brainstorming exercise, a consultation, or a decision-making process. A clear understanding of purpose and process from the beginning can avoid misunderstandings and frustrations.

A third condition is inclusiveness, making sure that all those groups affected by the issue are represented at the table, and making outreach efforts to attract those groups that are traditionally excluded from these “invited spaces.”

A fourth condition is promoting good quality dialogue by reducing information asymmetries and encouraging a respectful civil discourse.

Finally, as Desouza correctly observes, participation needs to be validated, not placated. Thus, a fifth condition is follow-up. Citizens must be informed about the result of their participation, that is, whether and how their input was used, and if not, why.

We also need to change our paradigm about participation. We need to move from purely episodic, government-initiated engagement to a more holistic, long-term, and sustained approach that is supported by and involves many different institutions and organizations, not just government.

This kind of embedded citizen engagement is worth pursuing. Research on participatory budgeting, for instance, indicates that Brazilian communities implementing this democratic process of deliberation and decision making have lower infant mortality and school abandonment, as well as higher tax compliance, economic growth, redistribution of resources, citizen engagement, transparency, and accountability.⁶

This and other research on democratic innovations suggest that good, sustained participation can have positive impacts that go far beyond better meetings and smarter decisions.

In sum, while newer democratic and participatory innovations can overcome many of the challenges and shortcomings of conventional participation, they are still imperfect and still have many challenges to overcome. This is to be expected: Democracy is a work in progress.

And, while we agree with Desouza that no engagement is better than bad engagement, we argue that it is desirable to keep experimenting because the goal is to make progress, not to achieve perfection. As John Dewey wisely noted, the cure for the ailments of democracy is more, and not less, democracy.⁷

So, to echo Dewey and rephrase Desouza: We need more innovative and meaningful citizen engagement, and less conventional engagement.

ENDNOTES

¹ For more information on conventional, thin, and thick participation, see Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger. 2015. *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

² Graham Smith. 2005. *Beyond the Ballot: 57 Democratic Innovations from Around the World*. London: POWER Inquiry, <http://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/30511.pdf>.

³ National League of Cities. 2005. *Building Democratic Governance: Tools and Structures for Engaging Citizens*. Washington, D.C.: National League of Cities, <http://ncdd.org/rc/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/demgov.pdf>.

⁴ National League of Cities. 2006. *Changing the Way We Govern: Building Democratic Governance in Your Community*. Washington, D.C.: National League of Cities, <http://www.nlc.org/file%20library/find%20city%20solutions/research%20innovation/governance-civic/changing-the-way-we-govern-gid-nov06-pdf.pdf>.

⁵ For a review of the research, see Tina Nabatchi and Lisa Blomgren Amsler. 2014. "Direct Public Engagement in Local Government." *American Review of Public Administration*, 44(4S): 63S-88S, <http://arp.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/02/10/0275074013519702.abstract>.

⁶ See, for example, Brian Wampler and Mike Touchton. January 22, 2014. "Brazil Lets Its Citizens Make Decisions about City Budgets. Here's What Happened." *The Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/01/22/brazil-let-its-citizens-make-decisions-about-city-budgets-heres-what-happened>.

⁷ John Dewey. 1927. *The Public and its Problems*. New York: H. Holt and Company.

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