

AmericaSpeaks: Who Is Listening? Analyzing the Impacts of Town Hall Meetings

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Deliberative democracy processes, such as AmericaSpeaks town hall meetings, are designed to impact both citizens and policy outcomes. Participants in deliberative democracy processes report that the events expose them to new ideas, increase their knowledge of policy, and allow their opinions to be heard by community leaders. AmericaSpeaks forums have enhanced the legitimacy of government activities and impacted whether and how policies were implemented, but input from these forums appears to have little influence on policy content. More empirical study is required, but the existing evidence suggests that deliberative democracy can be used by public managers to pre-empt public opposition to controversial proposals and solicit the opinions of a representative sample of the community to assist with policy formation.

Introduction

Processes to involve U.S. citizens in policy formation have been the focus of increased attention by public administration scholars and practitioners over the past two decades. These efforts to involve citizens developed largely as an attempt to combat feelings of disengagement and disenfranchisement perceived among the American public. Processes for engaging citizens include strategies that emphasize public discourse, such as town hall meetings and citizen panels. These strategies are often referred to under the heading of “deliberative democracy.” This paper will focus on town hall meetings, especially those organized by AmericaSpeaks, a non-profit organization that has worked with local governments around the country to organize citizen discussions on policy issues.

The next section of this paper provides background information on deliberative democracy, including the characteristics, types of designs, and goals of these processes. The discussion of deliberative democracy goals divides them into two categories. The first set of goals focuses on impacting citizens, while the second group is concerned with the influence of deliberative processes on policy outcomes. This section concludes by considering the barriers to citizen participation.

The paper’s third section reviews recent research and case studies to analyze the impacts of AmericaSpeaks town hall meetings, both on citizens and on policy outcomes. There is a very small body of research on this topic, but the existing evidence suggests that AmericaSpeaks is effective in several ways. The process succeeds at educating citizens about policy issues, improving public attitudes about government, engaging diverse groups of citizens in policy discussions, and enhancing the legitimacy of policy proposals. However, the quality of deliberation does

not usually lead to novel ideas that are helpful to policy formation.

The conclusion of the paper considers the implications of AmericaSpeaks effectiveness for public administrators, who are faced regularly with cost-benefit decisions about how to approach citizen participation. There is a need for more empirical research to help public officials make these decisions. The limited information we have now suggests that AmericaSpeaks could be more widely utilized to enhance the legitimacy of controversial proposals and educate citizens about the policy process, and public administrators should be more serious in their efforts to use citizen input from town hall meetings to formulate policies that represent the interests of traditionally marginalized citizens.

Understanding Deliberative Democracy

Characteristics of Deliberative Democracy

Deliberative democracy can be understood as a subset of citizen participation processes that are designed to involve citizens, sometimes in cooperation with public officials, in collaborative problem solving on policy issues. These relatively new processes have emerged in the past two decades in response to the perceived failure of traditional citizen participation methods, which include public comment sessions during government meetings and citizen advisory groups. Many scholars cite declining voting rates as evidence that citizens feel alienated from American government, partly due to the shortcomings of traditional participation processes (Innes & Booher, 2004). Deliberative democracy processes differ from traditional citizen participation methods in several significant ways, including who is involved, when the participation occurs, and the nature of the citizen involvement.

Traditionally, a selected group of citizens with special interests or ties to policy makers has a disproportionate impact on public policy. In the case of citizen advisory boards, for example, they usually are composed of members belonging to higher socioeconomic classes (King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998). Similarly, public hearings are generally dominated by comments from a small number of citizens who have strong opinions about a particular issue, so these processes can present a skewed view of public opinion to policy makers (Innes & Booher, 2004). Bias in citizen participation tends to reinforce the power structures of the status quo, as studies show that people with more education and a higher socioeconomic status engage more frequently in political talk (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Deliberative democracy strives to correct this bias in citizen input by making diverse participation one of its core values. It champions inclusive processes in which all “relevant points of view” are represented (Rosenberg, 2007, p.9). AmericaSpeaks makes concerted efforts to recruit diverse participants for its town hall meetings, with a particular focus on unorganized and unaffiliated citizens, who are least likely to participate in traditional participation activities (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2002). Recruiting tactics include media coverage, grassroots publicity, and outreach by citizen volunteers within their social networks.

Traditional citizen participation and deliberative democracy activities occur at different times and with different frequency within the policy making process. In the traditional model, citizens react to policies that are already formulated by leaders, and they usually have limited time to comment. In contrast, deliberative democracy gives citizens a chance to be part of policy formulation and encourages continuous engagement between the public and decision makers. Furthermore, many traditional methods fail to excite citizens because they focus on routine activities like city council meetings, while deliberative democracy is generally used to get citizen input on controversial choices (Innes & Booher, 2004). The AmericaSpeaks town hall meetings about construction at the World Trade Center site and rebuilding New Orleans following the destruction of Hurricane Katrina are examples of deliberative democracy being employed to generate discussion on topics with high public interest.

Finally, the quality of interactions between citizens and policy makers is very different in deliberative democracy. In deliberative democracy, citizens have an opportunity for dialogue with each other and sometimes with public managers. Conversation in deliberative democracy settings goes beyond the one-way opinion sharing that characterizes traditional participation, and must be based on trust, honesty, and a commitment by all participants to the process (King et al., 1998). Through respectful discussion, participants

escape the type of adversarial, win-lose dynamic commonly seen at public hearings and engage in a process that allows citizens to modify their opinions and possibly reach consensus (D’Agostino, Schwester, & Holzer, 2006). Also, deliberative democracy differs from traditional participation because citizens and public managers mutually share information, rather than information primarily flowing from authority figures to the public (Innes & Booher, 2004).

Types of Deliberative Democracy

In the past 20 years, hundreds of deliberative democracy activities have been held all over the world at the local, state, and national levels (Ryfe, 2002). These activities, though they can all be placed under the heading of deliberative democracy, “vary on a number of salient dimensions, including the degree to which they include the general public, occur in a public space, foster genuine deliberation ... are empowered by government, and have a tangible outcome” (Bingham, Nabatchi, & O’Leary, 2005, p.552).

Fung (2007) splits deliberative designs into four categories which provide a particularly useful framework for understanding the breadth of the deliberative democracy movement. The first category is the “educative forum,” which is organized to allow citizens to express their opinions, share and receive information, and refine their positions on policy issues. This category is the most commonly practiced, and includes the AmericaSpeaks town hall meetings which are the focus of this paper. Two other designs in this classification are the deliberative polling and study circles initiatives (Fung, 2007).

Deliberative polling organizers randomly select a sample of citizens, then educate the group on a particular issue and facilitate deliberations. Finally, a poll records the recommendations of participants for future action and is shared with policy makers to inform their decisions. Study circles involve groups of 10-15 citizens who discuss “an issue of pressing local concern.” The study circles are sometimes organized into networks that can spread the exchange of ideas (Ryfe, 2002, p. 377).

A second type of deliberative design is the “participatory advisory panel,” which coordinates small group discussions and forms relationships between these groups and policy makers “to align public policies with considered preferences” (Fung, 2007, p. 161). An example of this category is the citizen jury model, which works with a group of about 18 citizens who hear testimony, deliberate, and reach a consensus on a policy choice (Ryfe, 2002).

The third category is a “participatory problem-solving collaboration,” which involves an ongoing dialogue between political officials and the public on complex, or “wicked,” problems. Scholars in public administration and related fields have been concerned

since the 1970s with wicked problems, which are generally described as problems that are difficult to define, involve diverse stakeholders across organizational boundaries, and are influenced by factors that are constantly changing, such as resource constraints. Fung (2007) described how the Chicago Police Department has tackled the wicked problem of local crime by holding open monthly meetings in every neighborhood since 1995, drawing thousands of citizens into discussions. “Police officers and citizens deliberate about how to improve public safety in their neighborhood. They set priority problems (e.g. a dangerous park or crack house), develop strategies to address those problems, agree to division of labor between police and citizens, review the success of prior strategies, and revise accordingly” (p.177).

The final category is “participatory democratic governance,” which thoroughly incorporates citizen input into policy formulation. This type of deliberative design is rare in the United States. The most widely cited example is probably the participatory budgeting system in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where more than a thousand citizens gather annually for a comprehensive participatory process that determines the city’s capital budget (Fung, 2007).

Goals of Deliberative Democracy

Just as there are many designs for deliberative democracy processes, deliberative activities have varying goals. These goals fall into two broad categories, described by Tina Nabatchi as intrinsic and instrumental. The intrinsic goals of deliberative democracy focus on impacting citizens, while the instrumental goals are concerned with the influence of deliberative processes on policy outcomes (Nabatchi, 2007). This is not a strict dichotomy, as educating citizens may change the way they view a particular policy and have ramifications for how well that policy can be implemented and carried out. Recognizing that changes in citizen perceptions can influence policy outcomes, the citizen/policy impacts dichotomy summarized in Table 1 provides a helpful analytical structure for reviewing the central goals of deliberative democracy movement.

Table 1
Summary of deliberative democracy goals.

<i>Impact on Citizens</i>	<i>Impact on Policy</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create informed public • Improve trust in government • Enhance legitimacy for specific policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain citizen knowledge • Fairness, diverse output • Formulate new policy ideas • Ease implementation by pre-empting opposition

Advocates of deliberative democracy emphasize the potential of these processes for impacting citizens. One survey of organizations that sponsor citizen dialogues found that a major goal of 45% of respondents was to provide information to the public. This survey and other research suggest that “most of those who champion [deliberative democracy] see citizens, not officials, as their principal beneficiaries” (Fung, 2007, p. 168). Theorists believe that deliberative democracy can be an effective method of civic education, exposing participants to opposing viewpoints, improving reasoning skills, and instilling the desire to identify solutions for the public good rather than self-benefit (Ball, 2004; Nabatchi, 2007). This civic education function may be important to public administrators not only because it matches with the core normative values of a democratic society, but also because an educated and politically sophisticated citizenry may be more capable of helping administrators to devise solutions to wicked problems (Innes & Booher, 2004). Similarly, many public administrators employ deliberative democracy methods with the goals of improving public trust in government or enhancing support for specific policy proposals. Bingham et al. (2005) noted that deliberative processes “may contribute positively to participants’ sense of justice, fairness, and the perceived legitimacy of the institutions involved.” (p. 551)

Proponents of deliberative democracy also believe that increased citizen input can lead to better policy outcomes, both by providing better information during policy formulation and by lessening public opposition so that policies can be implemented more efficiently and effectively. One goal of deliberative processes is to solicit knowledge from a diverse group of citizens that can help policy makers craft more sensible proposals. This type of input is important so that policies will better represent the interests of all community members and will adequately address the complexities of societal problems (Innes & Booher, 2004). Moreover, the deliberation process can improve the quality of information available to policy makers, as it may allow citizens to arrive at more multifaceted recommendations than those typically expressed during traditional forums for citizen input. Scholars acknowledge that the benefits of deliberative democracy for policy formulation depend on context of the deliberative process. For example, Fung (2007, p. 168) notes that “officials are more likely to reap informational benefits when the subject is one in which citizens possess specialized knowledge, or in which their views are divided, opaque, or especially likely to change in the course of deliberative consideration.” Finally, policy makers that can claim to have based their decisions on meaningful citizen input are likely to generate more public support for their actions, allowing them to get cooperation in implementing their

proposals so that these policies are carried out effectively (Nabatchi, 2007).

Barriers to Citizen Participation

Theorists build a compelling case for deliberative democracy, but the field also recognizes that there are several significant barriers to organizing and executing deliberative processes. Barriers include the difficulty of recruiting numerous and diverse participants, time and monetary costs to policy makers, lack of collaborative skills among citizens and leaders, and the danger that recommendations from these processes may not be in the public interest.

It can be challenging to recruit thousands of citizens to participate in a day-long deliberative event such as AmericaSpeaks. One report about the National Issues Forums (Doble, Cody, Kelsky, 2006, p.16), which is a series of deliberative discussions that engaged citizens in conversation about civic involvement, found that even among participants in the forums (who one might reasonably expect to be civic-minded because they showed up to such an event), "People seemed to agree that civic involvement has genuine benefits, but there was broad acceptance of the view that they themselves could not be involved." Citizens at the forums stated that they lacked the time for community involvement, did not know enough about the community, or did not believe their involvement would have an impact (Doble, Cody, & Kelsky, 2006). Citizens' skepticism resulting from experience with poorly managed traditional participation methods may discourage them from embracing new deliberative models, and many citizens believe that decisions have already been made before the public is invited to give input (King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998). Also, citizens may simply lack interest in many aspects of civic affairs, and are more likely to participate in events that focus on highly contentious issues (Innes & Booher 2004). In addition to these general challenges of recruiting participants, there is legitimate concern that it is even more difficult to involve groups whose viewpoints are traditionally under-represented in the policy making process. These traditionally marginalized citizens include people without strong special interests, those who lack in-depth knowledge of public policy, or those who belong to disadvantaged groups, such as people who have low incomes or are members of a racial or ethnic minority. Members of disadvantaged groups may lack the resources to participate in deliberative democracy, such as free time and transportation (Innes & Booher, 2004). Without participation from these marginalized groups, deliberative democracy merely perpetuates the biases inherent in traditional participation methods.

Deliberative democracy not only requires an investment by participants, it also demands that organizers spend significant time and money to set up

the events. For the 4,000-person AmericaSpeaks town hall meeting about reconstructing the World Trade Center site, costs totaled an estimated \$1.6 million. So, it cost about \$400 per person for recruitment, materials, equipment, and staffing (Innes & Booher, 2004). The 18-month Voices and Choices effort in Northeast Ohio, led by AmericaSpeaks, cost about \$3 million, according to several media reports. This is no small amount for a struggling Midwestern region. In general, "the low end of the pre-decision cost of citizen participation groups is arguably more expensive than the decision making of a single agency administrator" (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004, p.58). Injecting deliberative democracy into policy formation can also slow down the decision-making process considerably, which could be problematic in cases where time is of the essence, such as economic development projects where businesses have the option of going to another community if decisions are made too slowly.

The impacts of deliberative democracy depend on the quality of the deliberations and the willingness of political leaders to accept public input. Many citizens and leaders lack the collaborative skills needed to maximize the effects of deliberative democracy (Innes & Booher, 2004). One recent experiment showed that people who took part in deliberative discussions actually had lower satisfaction with the outcomes than those involved in parliamentary procedure, suggesting that they had discomfort with the deliberative format (Morrell, 1999). Research on small group dynamics also indicates that contrary to arguments from deliberative democracy advocates, discussion may not lead to better recommendations on complex topics. Delli Carpini et al. (2004, p. 325) stated that research shows "discussion tends to move collective opinion in the direction of the pre-existing views of the majority." Furthermore, these authors note that the deliberative democracy goal of making use of specialized knowledge from citizens may be difficult to achieve by using small group discussions, because "substantial research on the issue suggests that, left to their own devices, groups tend to use information that is already commonly shared, downplaying unique information held by specific individuals" (2004, p. 328). These problems in small group dynamics may be overcome by development of collaborative skills by citizens. Administrators also need to re-evaluate the way that they approach relationships with citizens, shifting from a power dynamic of top-down authority to a more collaborative partnership (King et al., 1998). This values change would allow public administrators to better solicit and use citizen input, enhancing the policy impact of deliberative democracy.

The final problem with deliberative democracy is that these processes may lead to recommendations that are not in the best interests of the general public, but are difficult for policy makers to ignore. Deliberative

processes have the “potential to ratify selfish decisions that favor the most powerful or persuasive members of the collaborative group rather than the wider public” (Irvin & Stansbury 2004, p. 60). Even if policy makers recognize the shortcomings of citizen recommendations, failing to implement them will lead to resentment by the public and can ultimately undermine the government legitimacy that deliberative democracy intends to enhance (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

Analyzing AmericaSpeaks Impacts

The AmericaSpeaks Town Meeting Model

AmericaSpeaks, a Washington D.C.-based non-profit organization founded in 1995, is committed to involving citizens in the policy making process. Sponsoring organizations such as city governments and community foundations hire AmericaSpeaks to lead town hall meetings and other deliberative activities on a designated issue or set of issues. Examples of AmericaSpeaks events are described in Table 2. Unlike many other deliberative democracy organizations whose main purpose is to educate citizens, AmericaSpeaks links its processes to decision makers who pledge to seriously consider citizen input (Nabatchi, 2007). Indeed, the leaders of AmericaSpeaks identify “building credibility with citizens and decision makers” as one of the seven key components of its methodology, and state that “decision makers must be present, listening, and publicly committed to taking outcomes into consideration” (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2002, p.355).

Table 2

Examples of AmericaSpeaks town hall meetings.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to the City in New York City - 2002
5,000 participants discussed World Trade Center site • Citizens Summit III in Washington, DC - 2003
2,800 participants discussed city priorities • United Agenda For Children in Charlotte, NC - 2004
1,000 participants discussed local youth policy • Regional Town Hall Meeting in Northeast Ohio - 2005
900 participants discussed regional goals & strategies • Community Congress II in New Orleans - 2006
2,500 participants discussed rebuilding plans |
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In addition to influencing policy outcomes, there are several other goals of the AmericaSpeaks process, which the organization has trademarked as the 21st Century Town Meeting. First, AmericaSpeaks seeks to organize deliberations about timely issues that will generate substantial public interest. Furthermore, the

organization tries to formulate strategies that will keep citizens engaged in the issue after the town hall meeting has concluded (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2002). Second, AmericaSpeaks is committed to having diverse participation that approximates the demographic breakdown of the larger community. The organization “examines U.S. Census Bureau data and considers what, if any, special groups may need additional representation ... then uses active, targeted recruitment to ensure that all cross-sections of the community are represented” (Nabatchi, 2007, p.107). In addition to demographic representativeness, AmericaSpeaks works to make sure that a variety of viewpoints are captured by using small group discussions and recording opinions through various technologies, as will be discussed shortly in more detail. Finally, the AmericaSpeaks process attempts to enhance the quality of deliberation by distributing “neutral” educational material to all participants (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2002, p. 355). AmericaSpeaks staff members work with sponsoring organizations to create educational publications that detail the policy options under consideration. These materials are often sent to participants before deliberative events, distributed in public places like libraries and grocery stores, and given out during the town hall meeting (Nabatchi, 2007).

The AmericaSpeaks town hall meeting format relies heavily on networked technology to record participant opinions and communicate information to audiences with thousands of people. The town hall meetings usually are all-day events that alternate between small group discussion and information being presented to the entire audience for voting. Throughout the day, participants sit at tables of 10-12 demographically diverse people, sometimes with a trained facilitator. Each person has a wireless, electronic keypad that is used to collect demographic information and for audience polling. Each table also has a computer that the facilitator or a self-selected participant “recorder” uses to record participant opinions during small group deliberations. The small table computers transmit the information over a wireless network to a central computer, where other trained facilitators compile the information from all small groups into themes. These themes are projected onto large video screens onto the entire audience and eventually used to develop action items that all participants vote on and prioritize using their electronic keypads. AmericaSpeaks Town Hall meetings usually conclude with a review of next steps and comments from listening decision makers. Soon after the meeting, AmericaSpeaks produces a report on its results that is usually distributed over the Internet or sent in paper form to participants and decision makers (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2002). AmericaSpeaks also relies on traditional media sources to publicize the results of the meeting to the general public.

The design of the AmericaSpeaks town hall meetings is impressive, in that it allows small group deliberation and coordinates the formulation of policy recommendations by thousands of people in a very short time. However, it is also important to note the limitations of the technology and process. The effectiveness of the technology in capturing citizen opinions is contingent on the work of participant recorders and facilitators, both at the small tables and at the central computer station. Especially when the small table computers are being run by a self-selected participant, there is potential for minority opinions to get lost in the information collection process and not get incorporated into the final report (Dumas, 2004). Also, there may be concern about how facilitators phrase the final questions for voting, because they may be framed as leading questions that limit the ability of audience members to express their true preferences for policy action. These process concerns highlight the importance of having well-trained facilitators at AmericaSpeaks meetings.

Impacts on Citizens

Most empirical research on deliberative democracy has focused on the impacts of these processes on citizens. Researchers have evaluated these impacts by surveying participants. There are relatively few empirical studies on deliberative democracy processes, and only a handful that evaluate AmericaSpeaks in particular. The following section will describe these studies and their most significant findings about the effectiveness of AmericaSpeaks in meeting three goals of deliberative democracy: citizen education, improving trust in government, and enhancing the legitimacy of specific policies.

In one study, researchers from the Indiana Conflict Resolution Institute interviewed 66 AmericaSpeaks staff, citizen participants, and clients. The interviewees were involved in AmericaSpeaks town hall meetings in Chicago, Cincinnati, and Charlotte, North Carolina. Of the 24 participants interviewed, 92% agreed or strongly agreed that they had a better understanding of the challenges of making policy as a result of the town hall meeting, and 75% agreed or strongly agreed that the meeting gave them a better understanding of community issues. However, only 50% agreed or strongly agreed that they reconsidered or changed their opinions because of the meeting. The responses suggest that these events were generally effective in educating citizens about policy issues. The survey results were less positive for questions relating to the effects of the meetings on participants' views of government. Although 60% of respondents said that they felt their opinions were heard by government, only half said the meetings had a positive impact on the citizen-government relationship (Napoli, Nesbit, & Bingham, 2006).

Another study surveyed randomly selected participants in a 2004 town hall meeting in Charlotte. Using a quasi-experimental design, the study sought to discover whether the AmericaSpeaks town hall meeting had a statistically significant impact on participants' internal and external political efficacy. The author defined internal political efficacy as a "person's feelings of competence to understand and participate in the work of government," and external political efficacy as "beliefs about the responsiveness of government to citizen demands" (Nabatchi, 2007, p.255). The study found that the town hall meeting increased both internal and external political efficacy for participants, but only the external efficacy change was statistically significant. Furthermore, a survey given two years after the meeting showed that the improvement in external political efficacy persisted for participants, and was not found in non-participants (Nabatchi, 2007). The results of this study, in contrast to the Indiana Conflict Resolution Institute research, suggest that AmericaSpeaks meetings are more effective at increasing citizens' trust in government than creating an educated and civically involved public.

A third study of an AmericaSpeaks event conducted half-hour interviews with twenty participants in Citizen Summit III, an AmericaSpeaks meeting in 2003 that gathered citizens to discuss local issues in Washington, DC. Interviewees said that the meeting was egalitarian and inclusive and citizens got a chance to voice their views, but had little opportunity for debate. Similarly, participants reported that while the event as a whole caused people to reflect on policy issues, the small group discussions did not help people critically evaluate their positions. These responses indicate that participants may learn something from AmericaSpeaks meetings, but they do not have the opportunity for the type of in-depth discussion that would build the citizenship skills promoted by deliberative democracy advocates (D'Agostino et al., 2006).

Data and observations from a few other AmericaSpeaks events suggest that the meetings have positive impacts on citizens. When asked whether they learned something through their participation in town hall meetings in Northeast Ohio, 94% percent of respondents said yes (Voices & Choices, 2006). Fung (2007), who studied Washington, D.C.'s Citizen Summit II of 2001, concluded that "citizens are likely to gain substantial knowledge about city government, its plans, and its objectives through these discussions" (p.174). Finally, leaders at the Community Congress II meeting in New Orleans reported that "the diversity in the room enabled meaningful discussions across difference" (Williamson, 2007, p.1).

The research on citizen outcomes from AmericaSpeaks meetings is extremely limited, but we may draw a few tentative conclusions. As a whole, the

findings are mixed but suggest that AmericaSpeaks is effective in educating citizens about policy issues and somewhat effective in improving citizens' views of government. However, the meetings do not seem to encourage most participants to engage in deliberations that allow them to think critically and reconsider their opinions, so the quality of conversation may fall short of the citizenship-building dialogue envisioned by many deliberative democracy advocates.

Impacts on Policy

Although AmericaSpeaks has the explicit goal of impacting public policy through citizen participation, it is difficult to determine the extent to which town hall meetings have influenced decision makers. This section reviews survey results and case studies which suggest that AmericaSpeaks effectively recruits a diverse participant base and educates leaders about citizen concerns, but has had little impact on policy formulation and limited influence on policy implementation.

Demographic information from several AmericaSpeaks town hall meetings shows that the organization's recruitment efforts are successful in getting a participant base that is representative of the community. The Voices & Choices event was fairly representative of Northeast Ohio in terms of race, geography, and age, though it was slightly skewed toward participants with high incomes (Voices & Choices, 2006). In New Orleans, AmericaSpeaks "succeeded in gathering a group that approximated the pre-Katrina demographics" of the city by using telecasts and the internet to involve former residents now living in other cities (Williamson, 2007, p.18). Likewise, the second Citizen Summit in Washington, D.C. had demographics that were representative of the population in the metropolitan area (Fung, 2007). Interestingly, surveys of participants and a non-participant control groups in Charlotte show that not only was the town hall meeting demographically representative, but it attracted citizens who are generally less involved in political activities (Nabatchi, 2007). This diversity at town hall meetings theoretically translates into a more fair policy process that takes into account minority opinions. This appears to be the case, at least in some instances. For example, in surveys of AmericaSpeaks clients by the Indiana Conflict Resolution Institute, 68% agreed that the town hall meetings increased attention on issues important to marginalized groups.

Although AmericaSpeaks successfully involved a diverse group of citizens in its town hall meetings, the survey study of AmericaSpeaks events in Chicago, Cincinnati, and Charlotte presents a complicated picture of resulting policy outcomes. Although only 29% of AmericaSpeaks clients interviewed said that they were looking for specific policy recommendations from the

events, 71% said that the recommendations on the table after the meeting were better than those previously considered. Another somewhat contradictory finding is that 88% of participants interviewed after the meetings agreed that the process produced recommendations in the best interest of the community, but none of them could name specific policy recommendations that came out of the meeting. Participants were similarly unclear about the process for policy implementation, as 54% reported that they knew nothing about whether or how the recommendations would be put into effect. After the meeting, 18% of clients said it was too early to discuss policy implementation, 13% said they knew nothing about implementation plans, and another 11% said there would be little implementation. The study's authors reach the reasonable conclusion that "impacts will depend on follow-through, and right now there is limited evidence of government making concrete use of the plans or agendas from the meetings" (Napoli et al., 2006).

Other case studies show more convincing evidence that AmericaSpeaks events influenced policy implementation. The first Citizen Summit in Washington, D.C. found that citizens wanted more input in neighborhood planning decisions, so the city's mayor created the Neighborhood Services Initiative, which devolved the coordination of city services to the neighborhood level (Fung, 2007). At the Listening to the City event, where citizens evaluated proposals to rebuild the World Trade Center site, participants rejected all six plans put forward by the Port Authority. Though the meeting came up with few positive recommendations for rebuilding, participants effectively vetoed the proposals and officials went back to the drawing board. However, it is unclear how much the AmericaSpeaks event influenced this decision as opposed to other public pressure. One article about deliberative events noted that, "While the organizers of Listening to the City stress its impact, there were parallel debates in the broader public sphere whose tone was equally critical of the plans, so it is hard to determine just how decisive this particular mini-public was" (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006, p.230).

The case of the Community Congress II, the AmericaSpeaks town hall meeting about rebuilding New Orleans, illustrates that deliberative democracy processes can be powerful in enhancing legitimacy and easing implementation of specific policies. The first plan for rebuilding New Orleans was created using a top-down process with limited public input, and its release generated a "firestorm of public opposition," especially because of proposals to replace housing with green space. Political officials responded to the opposition by convening public meetings, including a town hall meeting run by AmericaSpeaks. "Community leaders appeared far more interested in the event as a means to get 'buy-in' than as a means to improve the

actual plan,” and there was no consensus among authorities about the impact of AmericaSpeaks on the plan content (Williamson, 2007, p.23). The AmericaSpeaks event did influence the policy outcome in that it improved public opinion of the plan, and thus earned it support from a wider variety of political leaders.

On the whole, despite the diversity present, citizen input at AmericaSpeaks events does not appear to generate many novel ideas that are considered in policy formulation by decision makers. AmericaSpeaks does not achieve the level of critical deliberation on wicked problems that is theorized by some deliberative democracy proponents. However, AmericaSpeaks meetings do appear to impact policy implementation, especially by vetoing unpopular plans or enhancing the legitimacy of existing proposals.

Conclusion

In an era of increasingly wicked policy problems and wavering public trust in government, public administrators should give more consideration to how they solicit and use citizen input. More empirical research is needed to help public managers analyze the costs and benefits of engaging in deliberative democracy processes, such as AmericaSpeaks town hall meetings. These processes have substantial costs in terms of money and time, and done poorly, they risk alienating the public or creating misguided policy recommendations that may be difficult for decision makers to ignore. More research about the impacts of deliberative democracy on citizens and policy outcomes will help administrators make wise decisions about how to most effectively utilize these processes.

Existing research and case studies about AmericaSpeaks provide some preliminary guidance for public officials. AmericaSpeaks appears to be effective in educating citizens about policy issues and improving their attitudes about government. Another major benefit of AmericaSpeaks is that it effectively recruits diverse participants for town hall meetings, which can help decision makers hear the opinions of traditionally marginalized groups. On the downside, the town hall meetings do not seem to foster the type of in-depth deliberation that allows citizens to develop their policy analysis skills or recommend novel solutions to community problems.

The limitations of the deliberative AmericaSpeaks process provide a basis for the choice of many community leaders to use AmericaSpeaks as a way to legitimize and ease the implementation of policy proposals, rather than a way to gather input for policy formulation. As one pair of scholars notes, “When the political situation is volatile and top-down decision making would be unpopular (if not unworkable), the up-front cost of citizen participation may be worth the

additional funding because the costs of a difficult implementation of policy might be avoided” (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004, p. 58). However, public administrators who are dedicated to serving the entire community should more seriously consider using AmericaSpeaks to help formulate policies that better represent the interests of marginalized citizens. Moreover, as AmericaSpeaks gains more experience and refines its process, it may better harness the knowledge and deliberative skills of citizens and leaders, fulfilling the hope of deliberative democracy advocates that these groups can collaborate to devise better policy solutions to complex societal problems.

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