Deliberation and Public Policies[*]

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The Public's Role in Public Policy

- The public can:

    - Decide policies = *direct democracy* (referenda)
    - Decide who makes policies = representative democracy
    - Make volunteer input, by letter-writing, demonstrations, etc.
    - Make solicited input by public consultation

The Dilemma of Public Consultation

- The whole public is largely ignorant

- The relatively knowledgeable are do not represent the whole public

- The tradeoff = representativeness vs. quality

More Precisely, ...

Most people, on most policy issues, are:

- Ignorant (or, less frequently, misinformed)

- Irreflective

- Insular (what with homophily, selective exposure & disclosure)

In practice, policy-makers seeking public input either:

Conduct high quality surveys, getting representative but ill informed (and irreflective and insular) input

Or

Hold public forums, getting more knowledgeable but unrepresentative input (the more so, to the extent that the sides mobilize unequally)

A Possible Improvement: Deliberative Forums

The Basic Idea

Set a manageably small subset of the public to *deliberating* (learning, thinking, and talking about the issues), *then* harvest their views.

Common Species

Deliberative Polling
Consensus Conferences
Citizens Juries

Deliberative Forums: Possible Flaws

NB: The appeal of this solution depends on the extent to which the participants' post-deliberation views are *both*:

> *Higher quality*: better informed. more thoughtful, less insular

> *and*

> *Reasonably representative*—of the views the whole public would hold if every could go through the same process.

More precisely, …

The *higher quality* depends on the extent that *the deliberation* is:

- *Effective*, getting the participants to learn and think more—and more broadly.

- *Substantively neutral*, not steering the participants in any direction, not even toward greater consensus or dissensus.

The *representativeness* depends the extent to which the sample can be presumed to be representative of the whole public, pre-deliberation.

DP Design

- Topic = questions of action, not fact, sometimes salient, sometimes not
- Goal/Product = Post-Deliberation Distribution of Opinion, whatever it may be (moving toward this position or that, toward greater consensus or dissensus)
- No conscious, collective decision
- Random Sampling
- Random assignment to small groups
- Minimalist moderators
- Carefully balanced and vetted briefing materials, presenting arguments and embedded facts

DP Design (cont.)

- Plenary Sessions, in which participants question carefully balanced panels of policy experts, with a moderator ensuring that the responses are kept short and that given questions receive multiple responses

- Interviews/questionnaires before and after

- Honoraria for those interviews who attending the event

- For non-local events, all travel and lodging expenses paid

- Measurement only by confidential, anonymous questionnaire (no votes, no shows of hands)

- Often, quasi-control group(s), post-deliberation and sometimes pre- as well

Countries where DPs have been held (a non-exhaustive list)

Transnational

- EU (all the then 27 member-states)

National

- US
- Britain
- Australia
- Denmark
- Japan
- Bulgaria

Local/Regional

- US
- China
- Canada
- Italy
- Hungary
- Japan
- Brazil

Advantages over Other Deliberative Forums

- Scientifically defensible sampling

- Honoraria and other incentives to maximize attendance

- Random assignment to small groups ensures right average amount of within-group attitudinal and demographic heterogeneity

- No forced consensus

- More detailed information about the whole distribution of post-deliberation opinions

- More natural, organic discussions, thanks to minimalist moderation

- Pre- as well as post-deliberation measurements, to document changes of opinion

- Frequent quasi-control groups, guarding against "history"

Who is/should be interested in DPs for Public Consultation?

- Elected bodies of government—when they have the flexibility to follow considered opinions over actual ones (Bulgaria, Japan, e.g.)

- Still more so, unelected bodies of government, when they are interested in what the public would think if it know and thought more, and more inclusively, about the issues (Vermont and Texas in the U.S., the EU, e.g.)

What do you get?

- Information about what proportions of the public favor or oppose each option, both before and after deliberation

- Information about who (in terms of attitudinal and demographic characteristics) tends to for or oppose each option

- Information about the bases of any changes—what arguments seem to have been influential, what facts seem to have been important to learn

- A public demonstration of responsiveness