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Public Engagement with Government Agencies

By John Dedrick

There is a shared expectation in this country that citizens should have the opportunity to tell government officials what they think about what the government is doing and how well it is doing it. Government of the people, by the people, and for the people requires no less. Voting may be the preeminent act by which citizens communicate their concerns but a number of other means, such as opinion polls, provide a more frequent and varied sounding of the citizen voice. However, as readers well understand, there is a big difference between telling politicians or pollsters what you believe and actually doing the hard work needed to make a change. And it may be that this work is hardest when it comes to dealing with government bureaucracies.

On the one hand, hearings, public-comment periods, and other forms of citizen involvement are commonplace requirements for government agencies. The idea that agencies dealing with public health issues, transportation systems, or the environment will have input from citizens is widely accepted. Such involvement is thought to have the potential to improve government effectiveness, enhance accountability, and increase responsiveness to the public's concerns. But, on the other hand, what participants actually experience tends to fall far short of real engagement. As Dan Kemmis remarks, "Very little hearing goes on at public hearings." This goes both ways of course — just as citizens may feel that officials only pay lip service to their concerns, officials often have reasons to believe that some participants are more interested in venting their feelings than in creating a dialogue. And so the extent to which citizen participation actually results in programs that are responsive to the public remains an open question. At the Kettering Foundation, we want to know what might be learned from research that focuses on the engagement of a public in the work of government agencies.

Engagement involves a long-term commitment to the cultivation of civic skills and habits — like naming and framing issues for deliberation, convening public dialogues, and building networks. It often requires participants to develop new ways of thinking and acting. Engagement requires time and the commitment of resources that are at a premium for both agencies and communities. Public engagement with government agencies leaves open the possibility that administration may be less efficient, at least in the short run. Services that people want may be provided less quickly and new costs will be incurred.

But an engaged citizenry can provide officials with richer understandings of problems, a sense of the range of permissible actions, and ultimately the public will that is required to implement policy decisions that work for a broad mix of people with varied interests and perspectives. For citizens and agencies to take the risks associated with engagement, they need to know how what they do will make a difference. Hearing a public voice is hard work and translating the public's concerns into institutional contexts can be exceedingly difficult. If engagement is to become a habit, citizens will need to know that their work adds up to more than "comment," and agencies will need to know that they have permission to act as they think most appropriate, even if their actions are not approved by everyone. These are not small challenges in a civic culture where citizens have low levels of confidence in their governmental institutions.

As the obstacles to engagement are many, it makes sense to take a thoughtful look at some of the experiments that attempt to bring agencies and citizens into a more public and deliberative mode of engagement. Much might be learned from a careful reading of what is (and is not) working.

For citizens and agencies to take the risks associated with engagement, they need to know how what they do will make a difference.



Consider the following examples from Virginia, Ohio, and California.

In 2001, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) decided to investigate the feasibility of rerouting an increasingly busy and dangerous section of highway in southwest Virginia. Relocating the highway would affect the landscape and economy of the town of Wytheville, and local residents working with the mayor and city manager formed a citizens' committee to advise VDOT in its decision-making process. This committee, in association with Virginia Tech scholars familiar with public politics, decided to engage the entire town in a process to inform the decisions that VDOT and the citizens would make. An issue addressing the future of the town was framed for public discussion, and numerous dialogues were held with stakeholders including students, lawyers, business owners, hospital and local government officials, engineers, and environmental scientists. Through these dialogues the citizens of Wytheville generated valuable information for informing VDOT decisions, and they began to identify actions that they might take as a community. While VDOT has recently suspended its relocations study, the groundwork for a rich engagement between citizens and a major government agency have been laid.

When the smog level in Columbus, Ohio, began approaching EPA limits, the

city's health department decided to form a steering committee to make recommendations concerning what to do. The committee included a range of science, health, industry, and nonprofit groups. In addition to weighing the scientific and economic data, committee members decided to use a deliberative process to get input from citizens. An issue was framed for public deliberation; numerous forums were held; and reports on the outcomes of the deliberations were produced and delivered to the project staff charged with advising the health department. Several steering committee members reported that their support for the recommendations had been influenced by the deliberations. The outcomes of this public engagement should affect the health department's approach to the problem, and the deliberations have certainly had an impact on how the steering committee understands the public's concerns about smog.

With the passage of Proposition 10 in 1998, Californians decided to commit a portion of the state tax revenue from tobacco sales to early childhood development programs. The money is to be distributed to independent county commissions, each of which is required to have citizen involvement in setting priorities for spending the funds. In eight counties, grant-making foundations, nonprofit organizations, and citizens came together under the auspices of the Civic Engagement Project for Children and Families to organize dialogues at the community level. The project used a deliberative approach to making recommendations for using the tobacco-tax revenue. As reported by Scott London,

In addition to weighing the scientific and economic data, committee members decided to use a deliberative process to get input from citizens.



an early evaluation of the project concluded that it had resulted in both a more inclusive planning process and that it had “deepened county commissioners’ understanding and appreciation of the value of citizen participation.”

These are just a few of the efforts that administrative agencies have made recently to engage a deliberative public. They illustrate how a more public practice of politics may be introduced into the interactions among government agencies and citizens. This kind of engagement can strengthen the practice of democratic politics in many ways.

Engagement contributes to the legitimacy of the administrative process and the durability of decisions taken. It can be used to develop a broader ownership of the problem that an agency is attempting to address. Such expansion of ownership may increase the range of actors involved and the scope of the actions taken. A fuller understanding of problems and the responsibilities that a variety of actors have in dealing with them may enhance public accountability and develop the public will to go along with an agency’s decisions, even if they are not to everyone’s preference.

Public engagement also creates “public knowledge” that informs both administrators and citizens. This knowledge comes from considering how a broad range of people see the issues and what they value and what they are (and are not) willing to do. Such public knowledge can complement the technical knowledge possessed by experts, and it can inform the decisions people make about how they will address the problems at hand.

And finally, public engagement may increase the collective capacity to address common problems and create a stronger public culture both among citizens and within agencies. Engagement complements the civic work that many citizens already practice in their communities. This work involves people in naming and framing issues in public terms, convening and moderating public deliberations, shaping specific actions and learning civic practices. Involvement with these practices teaches and reinforces skills and habits of active citizenship that strengthen public life.

The nature of many problems, especially the “wicked problems,” that public administrators must address is such that



engagement with a public may yield programs and projects that produce better results. Thus, inquiry into the practice of engagement between the public and government agencies seems to be an especially promising arena for the Kettering Foundation’s research. Given the range of agencies that already have engagement requirements or that are interested in enhancing the engagement practices they use, research in this area could have wide impact.

Much of the actual practice of democratic politics goes on beyond Election Day and outside of the legislative arena. It involves the tasks of building and administering the programs and projects that have been legislated. This is space where communities and governments interact on an ongoing basis, and it is the space where citizens often practice public politics. This is where they organize to address the problems they face in the communities where they live and work. Thus, research on engagement between citizens and agencies builds on work the foundation has already started.

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Engagement complements the civic work that many citizens already practice in their communities.

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