



***MAKING ROOM FOR THE UNAFFILIATED CITIZEN IN A POLARIZED WORLD:  
LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY AND PUBLIC FORUMS***

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## Preface

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The Kettering Foundation makes the case that politics is more than just the behavior of traditional institutional actors. Rather, politics is the product of the interactions that take place between a wide array of actors, including citizens, in a political ecosystem.

One important interaction that takes place in this ecosystem is between citizens who gather together to publicly deliberate and make decisions about the common problems they face. Too often though, studies of public deliberation are divorced from the larger context in which political decisions take place.

In a real step forward, this study carefully sketches the political ecology in which public deliberation on a particular issue took place. At issue here is a highly contentious, highly polarized, environmental problem facing a community. The political ecology here includes business, local institutions, federal institutions, advocacy groups, and citizens, unaffiliated with any of the aforementioned groups, but concerned with the issue nonetheless. This study chronicles how, through public deliberation, these unaffiliated citizens might find a way to be meaningful participants in the decision making on this issue. Through public deliberation, these unaffiliated citizens are able to develop considered judgments on the complicated issue at hand. However, what becomes of sound public judgment in a political ecosystem where institutional actors and advocacy groups see little value in a deliberative public voice?

This study provides further evidence in support of the notion that public deliberation can be a powerful and transformative experience for those who participate. Most important though, this study furthers our understanding of where public deliberation fits within the larger political ecosystem and how this ecosystem might help or hinder the cultivation of a deliberative public voice.

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## Introduction

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For nearly 20 years, public policy experts and officials have called for the inclusion of public values in the development of public policy (Fiorino 1990; Jasanoff 1989). Understanding and including the values of nonexperts are considered especially important in policy decisions about issues that pose a risk to the public or the environment (Stern and Fineberg 1996). Despite this plea, public policy debates continue to be dominated by special interests. Ordinary citizens, unaffiliated with any special interest, comprise the majority of the public. Yet, this majority feels disenfranchised from the decision-making process and believe their values are not reflected in public policies (Mathews 1999; Yankelovich 1991).

Too often, the input of the unaffiliated public is limited to public opinion polls or public hearings in which citizen views are based on media sound bites from polarized sources (Crenson and Ginsberg 2004). Such approaches have frustrated and disenfranchised citizens unaffiliated with a “side,” reducing them to “spectator” status as highly polarized battles between interests play out in the media.

Decision makers are also unsatisfied. They lament what they view as a lack of interest on the part of most ordinary citizens to participate in their public involvement programs. They are disappointed by the superficial quality of the citizen input they receive despite considerable investment of resources.

Advocates of deliberative democracy, such as Daniel Yankelovich, argue that decision makers should facilitate the kind of public participation that leads to development of informed “public judgment” rather than invest resources in collecting uninformed public opinions. Such public judgments exhibit “(1) more thoughtfulness, more weighing of alternatives, more genuine engagement with the issue, more taking into account a wide variety of factors than ordinary public opinion as measured in opinion polls, and (2) more emphasis on the normative, valuing, ethical side of the questions than on the factual, informational side” (1991, 5).

Many public engagement approaches do not provide the unaffiliated citizen with an appropriate space to move toward an informed public judgment. An “appropriate” space would afford citizens the opportunity to work together through the tensions and

trade-offs inherent in policy alternatives and examine how their values come into play (Yankelovich 1991). It would also encourage them to consider the impact policy alternative has on themselves and others.

Deliberative discourse practices, such as National Issues Forums (NIF), facilitate citizens coming together to collectively explore the impacts of a series of policy alternatives. By working together, people learn how and why others think differently than they do. By accepting the impact of the alternative on someone else, one's values are clearer and conscience is invoked allowing the citizen to move beyond self-interest.

This article presents an empirical study of the forces that prevent citizen engagement, and the power that citizens—unaffiliated with special interests—can offer to public policy decision making. The cleanup of dioxin-contaminated soils along the Tittabawassee River in Michigan provides the public policy decision-making context.

## Method

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The authors received research funding from the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to test the effectiveness of public issue forums as a mechanism for empowering local citizens in addressing contaminated sediment cleanups (Diebel 2005; Michigan State University 2005). The remediation case chosen for the research was the dioxin contamination of sediments and floodplain soils of the Tittabawassee River in central Michigan. One component of the study examined the perceptions of the various actors regarding the role of citizens in public decision-making processes in cases such as the Tittabawassee cleanup.

**Data Collection and Analysis.** Fifty-three unaffiliated local residents from middle and lower socioeconomic neighborhoods in the vicinity of the floodplain participated in the study. Participants were asked to read an issue guide that set forth the local dioxin issue and several possible courses of action. They then participated in facilitated small group discussions to further examine the issues and reach a public judgment. The effect of the method was evaluated through empirical and qualitative methods involving pre- and post-testing (Diebel 2005; Michigan State University 2005).

To examine perceptions of the role of unaffiliated citizens in cases such as the Tittabawassee cleanup, interviews were conducted with representatives of each of the key actors in the dioxin debate. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of federal (USEPA Region 5), state (Michigan Department of Environmental Quality [MDEQ] and Michigan Department of Community Health [MDCH]) and county (health departments) agencies, Dow Chemical, local governments in the study area, environmental organizations, and citizen groups formed specifically because of the dioxin issue (i.e., Tittabawassee Voice, Tittabawassee Watch). These stakeholders had some form of standing in the debate over the dioxin cleanup. In greater or lesser degrees, they were insiders to the decision-making process. In addition, 24 of the 53 citizens who participated in the issue forums agreed to a follow-up interview. Unaffiliated with any of the recognized actors in the decision-making process, the forum participants were outsiders to the decision-making process.

In total, 63 individual interviews were conducted (see table). With the permission of the interviewees, the sessions were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Interview data were analyzed for themes in a style guided by Miles and Huberman (Miles and Huberman 1994).

**Table: Interviews by Affiliation**

Category	Affiliation	Interviews
Government	• State regulatory agencies (MDEQ, MDCH)	6
	• County health departments	4
	• Local government (township and city)	8
	• Federal (EPA Region 5)	4
Industry	• Dow	4
Environmental	• Local	3
	• Regional	4
Issue-specific citizen groups	• Tittabawassee Voice	2
	• Tittabawassee Watch	4
Issue forum participant	• None	24
<b>Total</b>		<b>63</b>

**Context.** The Tittabawassee River, a hazardous waste cleanup site near Midland Michigan, provided the public policy decision-making context. The city of Midland has the nickname "Dow town" as it is home to the global headquarters of the Dow Chemical Company (Dow), one of the world’s largest chemical manufacturers. During the first part of the 20th century, prior to environmental regulations, the river was contaminated by dioxins<sup>1</sup> discharged from the Dow Chemical Company in Midland as a by-product of chemical manufacturing. Dioxins are classified by the International Agency for Research

<sup>1</sup> “Dioxin” is the name given to a group of more than 210 chlorine-based chemicals that are similar in how they form and behave. Dioxins tend to be very persistent, or long-lived, in the environment and many are toxic even in small amounts.

on Cancer as probable carcinogens (International Agency for Research on Cancer 1997) and maintain their toxicity in very small quantities for decades.

In the case of the Tittabawassee River, seasonal flooding has exacerbated dioxin contamination. Floodwaters transport dioxin-contaminated sediments from the Tittabawassee onto floodplain properties. The spread of the dioxin is uneven with some locations on the floodplain showing relatively low readings while others are very high. Environmental managers declared the Tittabawassee River contaminated as long ago as the late 1960s and a fish consumption advisory for dioxins was in place by 1978 (Maltby 2003).

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality has set 90 parts per trillion (ppt) as Michigan's standard for dioxins in those cases with potential for residents to be exposed to contaminated soils or sediments. Since 2000, several government testing efforts revealed high dioxin levels in sediments and soils on residential and agricultural properties along a 20-mile stretch of the Tittabawassee River and floodplain between the cities of Midland and Saginaw. MDEQ soil testing found dioxin levels as high as 7,300 ppt on a farm field near the confluence of the Tittabawassee and Saginaw Rivers (MDEQ 2003). Out of the 16 locations on the floodplain tested in 2002, 9 revealed dioxin readings above 90 ppt (MDEQ 2004).

In 2003, Dow's Midland Plant was issued a 10-year Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) Operating License by the MDEQ. The license includes requirements for corrective action for dioxin contamination along the Tittabawassee River and floodplain. While the federal government (EPA) has oversight responsibility for the cleanup, the MDEQ was delegated legal authority to manage the cleanup work. At the time of our study, the MDEQ was in the process of reviewing Dow's proposed approach to the remediation process.

Not unlike many other contaminated sediment cases, the Tittabawassee dioxin issue has proven to be contentious. The main point of debate is the level of risk posed by the dioxin contaminated sediments and soils. The responsible party, Dow Chemical, argued that the MDEQ's 90 ppt dioxin standard is unreasonable and that there is no scientific evidence that people and wildlife are being hurt by the dioxin. Dow argued that if left undisturbed, the dioxin is not harmful because it adheres tightly to soil and will not

be bioavailable. Thus, even though dioxin is present, it does not pose an unacceptable health risk. They proposed a monitoring program but no disturbance of the contaminated soils. The Lone Tree Council, a local environmental group, argued the risk of chronic exposure is too great given the chemical's toxicity and advocated dredging the river.

The MDEQ provided the local community with information regarding practical steps to reduce their risk of exposure to the dioxins. They also formed a local multistakeholder Citizen Advisory Panel (CAP) to help inform the negotiation process between Dow and MDEQ. The advisory committee initially consisted of state regulators, representatives of the Lone Tree Council, and local government officials. Two local citizen groups comprised of local landowners soon emerged and joined the advisory committee. Positions quickly became polarized, little progress occurred, and CAP disbanded after about a year. There has been extensive local media coverage of the protracted debate over the dioxin cleanup.

There were few opportunities for unaffiliated citizens to participate and grapple with the issue. The regulator, local governments or Dow sponsored a number of public meetings. These meetings focused on arguments between experts about the health risk the dioxins posed. The community largely relied on conflicting sound bite messages in the media that usually reported the most sensationalistic statements. From one side of the debate, the community heard that soil testing had found contamination levels 80 times the level considered safe. From the other side they were told the contaminated soils posed less of a health risk than eating a chargrilled hamburger (Carrington 2004).

## Stakeholder Perceptions: Views from the Inside

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Early on in almost all interviews with the recognized actors in the decision-making process, there was an expression of support for the concept of public involvement and a citizen's right to be heard. Yet, beneath the veil of motherhood-and-apple-pie statements, there was little advocacy for the type of citizen involvement promoted by advocates of deliberative discourse.

**Public Officials.** While they view public involvement as a basic democratic right, public officials also see it as an administrative hurdle to be cleared and use the public hearing as the method of choice. Few believe it generates significant agency benefits when compared to the resources required. Overall, there were low expectations of the public's ability to make a meaningful contribution to the dioxin debate. Adjectives such as self-interested, short-sighted, obstructionist, emotional, and uninformed were used to describe the public.

The following is an excerpt from an interview with a federal administrator:

*So often they [citizens] are just complaining. I think what drives me everyday is the belief that everybody has a stake in their community and a right to be involved and a right to know. It is a double-edged sword.*

*It is useful just to hear from citizens and get their perspective. Rarely do you get information from them that is useful. Sometimes [you do] though, like information from 40 years ago.*

*The guidelines will say that you have a better cleanup as a result of community involvement but I don't think it is.*

Some officials of regulatory agencies expressed frustration with the emotional response of the public at public meetings. The following individual advocated less citizen emotion and more rationality:

*You have the people who have no idea what it is about and they're the ones doing the screaming. And you know the old saying, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. . . . And what we've got to do is be a little more rational.*

The following local government official shares the citizens' sense of frustration with the uncertainty and fear that drives the emotion:

*[The] average citizen talks emotionally, "What are you doing? Why aren't we doing something about it? How harmful is it? What can I do? What can't I do? Do I have to wear baggies on my shoes? Can I walk in the dirt and come back in the house?" You know, and the answer is, well, you know, "We'd recommend if you do walk in the dirt that you wear baggies and be totally covered. If you're out there for any amount of time with direct contact, we would discourage." You know, it just goes on and on. There's no good answer.*

There were expressions of empathy for the circumstances citizens face but also frustration in what they view as citizen input of limited value and the emotional burden officials must carry in working with the public. From one official:

*So it's at the public meetings where you get much more the emotional responses. Why are you doing this? Either we don't want you here, go away, leave us alone. Or why are you allowing my child to be sick? So, you get a lot of those emotional statements being made. Less informed questions. People less interested in answers than in a forum to express their opinion. . . .*

*It's important that people have that forum. We try to look at them and see if there are things we can do; are there places we can insert ourselves here that will help? Is part of it education? Is part of it something we can actually do something about? And some of it is. Eventually, if people understand that we are working towards an actual remedy that will affect*

*change, we can do that. If somebody doesn't want to hear us or listen, then you're not going to insert yourself there.*

*I mean, you sympathize and you empathize with these people. If I was in their situation and had been living, especially along the floodplain, in a situation where your property is seriously contaminated. It's been so for years, for as long as anyone can remember and there's really no end in sight right now, that's very difficult. And so we're very sensitive to that. You know, that's one of those, "For the grace of God go I." It could be you standing there worried about your child, and I don't discount their worry. We don't know. So that is very difficult. But the other side of it is that this isn't going to happen overnight. We're doing our job; we're doing the best we can. We care, or we wouldn't be here. So to be accused of not caring—if it was just to get a paycheck, I sure wouldn't be here. I don't need that.*

Some, such as this local government official, felt their status as an expert was not respected by an uninformed public:

*The problem—you know how it is from my position—whenever I go talk to a resident about an issue, this may sound—you'll think I'm really cynical—they are the absolute expert. It's as if I know nothing about the issue, or nobody. They're telling me, and we know—and I know—how engrossed I have been in this dioxin issue. There's no way they . . . I had a farmer try telling me something the other night that was totally wrong. I'm not going to say anything, but no, I think they're very, very uneducated on the issue. Very, very uneducated; as we all are, on many issues that just aren't in our faces every day.*

Many state officials had a more generous view and saw public participation as an opportunity to gain local information to help a cleanup effort:

*I think [the citizens], in a number of cases, have helped us to do a much better job. . . . There were things we found out about in terms of how people are being exposed, how the river's being used. . . . For example, there's a number of nonofficial public gathering areas along the river where kids get together to play in the river and drink beer and fish and things like that. And, you know, if you're sticking signs, "Do not eat the fish," basically in the parks or something like that you might be physically missing a whole population that may be significant.*

However, beyond contributing some local knowledge, there was little expectation of meaningful input to the decision-making process. The idea that unaffiliated citizens could arrive at an informed public judgment was foreign territory for most public officials. Most failed to see the public in a judgment role. As one public official explained:

*Because really, when you get down to it, the decision should be made on what's going to clean up the environment and bring the river back and be protective of these people. It's not like, well, "How many people want dredging?" [Holds up hand.] How many people want monitored natural attenuation? Okay, it's monitored natural attenuation, there we go. . . . I get really uncomfortable with, "we're going to let public opinion shape what remediation is going to occur," and at that point it becomes: who's better at manipulating public opinion. That may be okay if everyone is fully educated, balanced, seeing both sides of the issue, and everything, but that's probably not going to happen with something like this.*

One local administrator was an exception, offering a positive example of how their city administration had involved its citizens in charting a course of action to resolve budget problems. The administrator indicated that by citizens coming together to deliberate the issues they were able to recognize that multiple perspectives existed and gained a better appreciation of the challenges facing the administration:

*We had a very successful one about five or six years ago that we're going to replicate. We were facing some budget problem. . . . We were either going to have to increase property taxes 30 percent or cut services. So we set up 3 four-hour forums and invited [city] citizens to participate, and we had like 200 or 300 people show up, which is really good.*

*We spent the first hour with the staff—kind of a Budget 101: here's how it all works. And then the facilitators took it from there and put the staff over in the corner and said you're not to say anything unless I ask you and let the citizens sit down and talk about the issue. It was really interesting—the dynamic of that was watching citizens inform each other about things, you know. Many citizens think that all other citizens share their view and they don't realize until they get into a larger group that there are other citizen viewpoints, and then once they see that there's a lot more sympathy for the council and what the council's trying to do and they become more cooperative in seeking a solution where I think the perception many times is that the public has a position and the council for whatever reason is just ignoring them instead of realizing there are multiple variables involved with the issue and the council members have to balance those. So that's worked really effectively.*

Some of those interviewed believed a lack of information was a key reason that keeps local citizens from engaging in the dioxin debate:

*Johnny Q Citizen is not banging down the doors. Johnny Q Citizen is one of two things, fed up with them all, the sensationalism in the press. And two, they don't really have enough information to make a decision—concrete information. And most people, believe it or not, don't make decisions until they've got some information. That's when you've got to watch it.*

Nor was it believed that citizens have any information of value to contribute to the discussion:

*No, I don't think they give any information that helps. . . . Nope. Now, and it's been a while since we've heard ordinary citizens, I mean. It's been, seriously, I think some of them are disenfranchised with the whole system, with the whole process.*

Interestingly, some local government officials saw themselves not as insiders to the process but as outsiders like other members of the community:

*Yeah, they have rules that require public hearings—big deal. I don't think that means anything. I think it's whatever Dow's—I mean, they are a big state government agency too. I mean, let's be honest. Us at the local level, we don't have many positive experiences with the DEQ. They may think that they try to and their customer service and all this. We do have some, obviously we have some, but most of the time it's not in the best of situations. We're always trying to work out an issue. They say they've got this law or rule or something they've got to go by. Okay. You know, there's no flexibility in negotiating a settlement it doesn't seem like, and I think that's a problem. But will the residents be heard? Will the average resident be heard in all this? No. I mean, I can't think of the forum where they would be heard.*

Some local government officials reflected feelings of powerlessness similar to their constituents:

*We've attended any number of hearings at . . . and some of the small groups offered by Dow and things like that. But we've tried to be careful with that because we have no authority, and we don't want to give the perception that we have authority or give people the thought that we might actually be able to have some ability to affect the outcome.*

**Activists.** Activist groups viewed public participation with caution. They would like more of it if it met their agenda. In this case, activist groups formed on both sides of

the dioxin cleanup issue. They tended to use strong rhetoric and stereotyping to make their points and reinforce groupthink:

*She's been working on Dow issues since 1980. Has a phenomenal history. Was married to a Dow corporate pilot, was a typical Dow "Stepford Wife" as we like to call them. And now she's working a minimum wage job, she's divorced, and she committed her life to getting Dow to clean up their dioxin.*

In public hearings activists on both sides used emotional comments to make their points. Activists made strident comments in public venues, too:

*Some people at public meetings equated the DEQ with Nazi Germany. These were pro Dow people. They were angry and frustrated. People don't think much about what they say. I do that too sometimes. I called the assistant director of the DEQ a white collar terrorist worse than Osama bin Laden.*

Unlike public officials, the activists found emotion to be a benefit. This activist reflected on the benefit of emotional discourse:

*Well, first and foremost, I think it's important for government to validate people's emotions. I mean, we're still operating in this—is it left brained?—idea that only rational analysis makes for good problem solving. You know, whether it's about the environment in particular or decisions affecting their life generally, people have rightful and important emotions. I mean, environmental protection to me begins with a gut feeling, not with a cost-benefit analysis. You get to the cost-benefit analysis later. So if people are upset because they have dioxin in their yard, that's okay. I mean, they should be allowed to be upset, and it should be taken into account by government. People should listen to that.*

*I've been surprised—not surprised—impressed by friends of mine for over 20 years by the fact that a lot of people start out with a very emotional*

*concern and they become very informed and articulate advocates. Not all, maybe not even the majority. Most people will go back to their lives once their concerns are addressed, but a lot of people become very competent at these processes. They may, understandably, get frustrated and pull out at some point. If you're emotional, you might say well this is leading nowhere just sitting around at meetings and so forth. But if you give people the feeling that their views are being taken into account and taken seriously, then they will participate.*

However, some of these behaviors repelled others. An activist reported behavior from a public hearing:

*Oh, it was horrible. The people from the river watch just got up and screamed they were so emotional and they demanded an apology from [Dow's] Sue Carrington and she got to the mic and said I'm very sorry that you are so concerned and they screamed that's not the kind of an apology we want. And one of our friends got up and said I have always considered Dow a good neighbor and a good employer and I've lived on the river all my life and I'm sitting here. And someone yelled, I don't know what they yelled . . . something at him and he turned around and he says, "I'm 83 and I'm still alive." But they're very, very emotional, they do all . . . and then there's a woman whose husband works for Dow chemical company who said some horrible things. And they just feel you can't touch the site, you can't walk, you can't cut your grass, you can't play baseball, um, but they were just horrible to the people at Dow Chemical Company.*

The activists viewed themselves as quite apart from the average citizen. They saw themselves in an expert role and were willing to express their commitments, conclusions, and solutions strongly with emotion and conflict. Policy issues are portrayed in black-and-white terms rather than in shades of grey. Some activists viewed unaffiliated citizens as naïve, unaware of how public policy decisions are really made. For citizens to become

competent participants in the decision-making process, citizens need to go through a “loss of innocence” and a process of consciousness raising.

The activists did not see much benefit from the involvement of ordinary citizens—except to further their own agendas. They did not seek large numbers of citizens to support their causes but preferred a small group of committed people to create an opposition force. As one activist explained:

*Everybody gets to the same point eventually, but they don't start out at the same point. But . . . in terms of their analysis of the problem I find that they generally arrive at the same place. But they're still unwilling to really be out there and be, you know, safe from things that could be considered conflict, causing conflict and making things emotional, but you don't. You know there are different theories of change. There is the Saul Alinsky—make people choose sides in a fight, create sides and make them choose sides. It doesn't even matter how many people are on your side in many ways, it just needs to be clear to people that there are sides and that you have to choose them.*

Activists on one side of the issue felt they were more enlightened than those on the other side:

*But I think we get more in our food chain and things like that, that will do more harm to more people than the dioxin that's in that river. Besides we can't do anything about it. It's going down the river now, you know, if it can get a hold of us, distributing. But out here in like in the yard here it settles down. . . . And we understand it is not in the water it is in the soil and the sun kills what's on the surface. And so all these people that are so afraid of cutting grass and walking, we don't think that they are informed.*

**Industry.** Informants from industry felt they had the scientific information that people needed to arrive at the right decision. They believed citizens would be able to make up their own minds about the risk from dioxin if they were given information. The

paraphrased comments of one Dow informant who declined to be recorded reflected this sentiment:

*It's a small group of citizens that are angry. The majority of the community is like a deer in the headlights, that they just don't know what to do, which way to go, but the citizens . . . living in a facility<sup>2</sup> has created quite a bit of anger, and some of that anger is directed toward the government.*

Industry informants saw the benefit of meeting with the public as a way to build trust and convey accurate, scientifically sound information:

*I don't have a concern about dioxin per se. The concern I have is the lack of education. People I think don't understand how they get exposed to it, what it does. I think it's more than just a lack of knowledge is probably the biggest concern I have about the issue in general. It's just education of the people and we already struggle with what's good science, what's bad science. And everybody has opinions on that. And what you propose you may think is good science, someone else says is bad science. So it's really a dialogue to develop a trust that when you're talking about issues the credibility is there. And I think that's the biggest concern. With lack of credibility in the public from Dow and from the agency and from the public. They don't know who to trust, and everybody has their biases, and that's my concern about dioxin. It's an issue we have to address, but actually from a health and safety standpoint I've seen nothing that says I'm concerned about it personally from that aspect of it.*

Besides presenting information, Dow wanted to understand the affected citizens' concerns. Industry wanted to convey a less emotional message and they believed they could do so through small, private meetings. Thus Dow held meetings in private homes in the floodplain to listen to citizen concerns and share information:

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<sup>2</sup> MDEQ, under RCRA regulation, declared all sites contaminated with dioxin from Dow were part of Dow's facility, and thus Dow's responsibility for cleanup.

*I mean, that's what you want to hear from. And what's your activity is to try to get the real people . . . a dialogue going with them. I think that's very important. That's what our intent was with these community meetings we had is to get the people who won't go to a public meeting to talk to us in a less confrontational setting so we can have a dialogue and hear what they're saying. Not try to sell you something, but hear you. And if we promise you something, get back to you, and I think it was fairly effective. It was poor attendance, but again people have other activities, it shows they're not concerned or else they don't want to be out in public talking to people and saying things they normally say in private. We're all the same way.*

Strong emotion did not work in industry's favor. Holding these meetings in private homes prevented a public display of emotion and avoided activist challenges to the information. One Dow informant said, "It's in the DEQ's interests to keep the citizens angry." Another Dow informant indicated a different purpose for the private meetings, indicating that citizens at these small meetings wanted to express their emotions, and this format provided an environment for them to do so safely:

*People want information, and a lot of people did not want to go to the big DEQ meetings because they felt intimidated. The activists tend to shout citizens down. People started to go to those, but then quit attending because of the activists. There's been an increasing percentage of DEQ and Dow people at these meetings and a smaller number of citizens participating. We held community meetings up and down the floodplain by invitation only. And what happened at these meetings was that people were able to vent their frustration and to ask questions. . . . The purpose of these meetings was to explain why the situation is confusing and to address uncertainty issues; and it was informational.*

For the industry representatives, the purpose of meeting with the public was to educate and allay concern:

*I think we get a better understanding of what their concerns are . . . but it's more just trying to understand what their concerns are and so if we go forward we can try to address from an educational standpoint, you know, try to alleviate their concerns that we are taking action, that we have things underway, we're trying to solve the problem. But it's more trying to understand what their issues are, what they need from us as we go forward, and we hear a lot about we need information, we don't understand what's going on. We don't understand: is there a risk to me and my family? and can I eat the deer? can I eat the turkey? So those are part of the things, you know, can we get information to put their mind at ease or identify, is there a problem or not?*

Dow indicated it wanted to hear from the people who do not typically participate. They thought people did not participate because the meetings were skewed toward the regulators, and that the regulators benefited from vocal activists. However, the style of these public meetings worked against the unaffiliated citizen, as expressed here:

*People you want to talk to don't go. . . . And the people that go are the people you read about in the paper next day and the websites. So that's unfortunate.*

*I: Mmhmm. So they become contentious? Have you found that to be the case?*

*I think they're . . . the contentious I think is all one sided. I think the environmental groups have got an agenda. I think the state's letting them. I think there's no balance . . . from what I'm seeing and reading, there's no balance in it. And that's why people along the river don't go because they get beat up. When I went to the one on the Scopes of Work back last October or so, those giving us support get yelled down and abused verbally by the activist groups. Now why would I come back for that? It's just . . . that's not the intent. So they see that, they hear that. I'm not going back. . . . It's just one sided. But people aren't going. The people who go really aren't going to speak up—aren't allowed to speak up. They had one that wanted to speak up and they wouldn't let her. The DEQ wouldn't let*

*her—it was not a public meeting, it was the DEQ CAP, but the public can't speak. They were told that.*

*I: Oh. At a CAP meeting?*

*Yeah. We had a guy that was going to speak there. He was not allowed to talk. So that sort of shapes your perception.*

The informants from Dow wanted their industry to be seen as the voice of reason and science. Dow used consistent rhetoric to make its points by offering the same messages in public meetings, in interviews with informants, and in their own publications. The messages offered reassurance that dioxin in small quantities was not harmful: “You would get more dioxin from eating one cheeseburger every week than you could get from your soil. And if you lived on soil with 90 ppt of dioxin, you would get 20 times more dioxin from that same cheeseburger than you could from your soil” (Carrington 2004). Dow did not benefit from emotional expression and tried to keep potentially emotional conversations private.

## Views from the Outside: Unaffiliated Citizens

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Most participants in the issue forums had never previously involved themselves actively in a community issue. They may have followed a debate in the media, talked with family and friends, but they had not participated in any organized event such as a public meeting or public hearing. Interviews with these unaffiliated citizens revealed a number of reasons why this was the case.

Moving toward public judgment is challenged by the self-fulfilling prophecy held by citizens, and reinforced by the insiders, that they can't make a difference. Interviews with forum participants revealed the nuance to the well-recited self-perception that "I can't make a difference." Power had a significant impact on this self-perception. The power of information, scale, and identity all influenced unaffiliated citizens' willingness to actively participate in civic life.

**Information.** If "knowledge is power," then participant interviews revealed that citizens felt hampered by a lack of information. Just as actors on the inside viewed citizens as largely uninformed, the unaffiliated citizens felt uninformed as well. Citizens reported getting most of their information about the dioxin issue from the media: newspapers and television, although they did not entirely trust the information they got from the media. They were also skeptical of information provided by the recognized actors in the dioxin debate:

*[I] get a little scared, you know, ignorance of something is always kinda scary and, you know, people have motives for giving one-sided information and the other-sided information and you wonder what's correct. Unless you really research it yourself.*

Even though federal regulations required that administrators inform the public through notices, repositories, and meetings, citizens reported not knowing when or where meetings were held, who convened meetings, or whether they were welcome:

*I'm not like a city chairman or something like that. I don't, and I don't know when they have these meetings . . . if the public's allowed to go, you know, but I didn't know if you have to be a certain person, like involved in*

*like the local schools, or you know some political thing. . . . Because you know they only have so much room. I don't know how many people that are allowed to go to those things.*

Most found government-distributed information too technical and difficult to understand. One forum participant explained how this limited his willingness to participate:

*Some of the stuff that I've gotten in the mail was so hard to decipher what it meant and, you know, from the EPA or whoever sent it. It was hard to read. It was very difficult unless you had your attorney next to you, you couldn't figure out what it meant, or what they are trying to say. And it's just so different what people believe. I think they make up their own minds before they can even, you know, read the data, or inform themselves enough to make a legitimate decision. And that's why I've been on the fence the whole time, you know. I'm not going to say to you, I'd rather, I'd rather you think I'm stupid than open my mouth and prove it. I'd rather just see what happens and if it comes out that it's a problem then I'll deal with it at that time.*

Other forum participants said that an emphasis on risk numbers, such as parts per trillion of dioxin, was difficult to comprehend and lacked real meaning. Citizens saw the certainty reflected in numeric arguments as invalid, as this informant expressed:

*Because what they say right now I'm thinking's been changed three times. So it makes you wonder on what's the level that's safe? What's the level that kills? What's the level that maims or injures a person, you know? I mean they tested rats for marijuana, or mice, and they did that on monkeys but the only problem with that was when they said, well see the monkey can't even stand up. That's when I'm saying yeah, but your test showed me that you made the monkey smoke its weight in marijuana. . . . Well you can always take a study which is good intentions but blow the study out of proportion so it favors one way or the other.*

Information from interest groups was approached with even greater caution. For example, information from Dow was not discounted entirely but was viewed with suspicion. Informants had little experience to judge the credibility of the science, so vetting the source became the most important criterion for evaluation:

*The woman who brought literature from Dow, how did you feel about the literature from Dow? How much credibility or weight do you give that?*

*Not really a whole lot, you know, it's like with everything else in life, you have to consider the source. If, um, well with this president thing, everything one guy says, you know, he says about the other guy badly, you know? So it's, you have to consider your source in every situation. So no, um, they're going to paint their picture a little rosier than it is, I'm sure.*

*But it still has some value?*

*Oh yeah. It was interesting to find out that they don't really think they have a problem, you know? It was interesting.*

Citizens resented the use of rhetoric over straight talk and efforts to manipulate them through information. One man complained:

*It's kind of like it solidifies my opinions of the corporation and, uh, and the governmental branches. The fact that they're bumping heads already and you can see the ones that are fighting not to do something and the ones that are fighting to do something. . . . And the, uh, you keep telling the people—keep telling them what you want them to know and pretty soon they are going to believe it. And it's a form of brainwashing. . . . The impact is to control the populous so, the longer they keep saying the more they get sold.*

Many citizens felt ignorant about the dioxin issue and were hesitant to put themselves in a position in which they might have to face powerful others, such as the government or corporations:

*You know people are afraid to get involved. Nobody wants to go up against Dow or you know or the government you know. Everybody wants to stay low-key. . . . Mind your own business you know.*

*What do you think is behind the fear?*

*Um, lack of knowledge for one. You know ignorance is always a big reason for it here. Um, ignorance and, you know, like I said, people sit in their homes and think, “What can I do? What can one little person like me, how can I go up against Dow? How can I fight the government?” So I think feeling outnumbered and ignorance I think is one of the main things.*

*Well, we’re all afraid of the unknown. So, um, like I hear, me for example, I hear about dioxin, concerned about it, I know it’s not a good thing, that’s about all I know. If I had more knowledge and knew, if they’d tell us more, how much is in our soil? How much is in the river? You know, how much does it take to affect us? Things like that um . . . maybe if we had more knowledge it could ease some of our fears, some of the questions we have, you know things we’re worrying about when we don’t have to worry about it. I think the more knowledgeable you are you know, then the more power you have to fight to do whatever you have to do.*

**Scale.** Both the government and Dow were perceived as powerful organizations that citizens should avoid confronting. People were worried about government intrusion if they got involved in an issue. Others were worried about the power Dow had over jobs in the area, as illustrated by this citizen’s concerns:

*Then you got a million-dollar Dow industry that’s going to be like, “so what, who cares,” you know, that could just up and leave and move somewhere else and give other people thousands of jobs, and Midland’s*

*worried about that, so. Most people are just going to sit in their seat and not get up, and stand, and do something, because there's a lot on the line when it comes to a serious issue like this. But, um, yeah, I would go to a meeting, like I said, thing is, if Dow would cooperate—them being a big corporate—and then people that are afraid of losing their jobs and stuff, you know, something that would happen if we started getting in their face.*

Issues of scale raised concerns about accountability. The unaffiliated citizens felt powerless to act against large institutions they viewed as unaccountable. Industry was not accountable to government, and government was not accountable to the people, they perceived. These individuals did not see themselves as powerful enough to demand accountability. Some felt it was government's job to hold industry accountable—not theirs:

*They pretty much hold all the keys. Money and the power. I really don't see where a normal person could do much of anything other than stage a big protest or something like that and raise a big fuss. But other than that, no. I don't see where a normal person could do much of anything.*

**Identity.** A diminished sense of self, of ability, had previously inhibited forum participants from getting involved. They self-identified as not good enough to participate. They believed they were not smart enough, not rich enough, not technical enough, and not part of the “in group” that holds the power. They thought they had something to offer, but they did not think the “others” in power would take them seriously. They lacked confidence in their own ability.

While some identity issues reflected socioeconomic class, many identity issues were not restricted to lower-income neighborhood participants. Identity issues were related to feelings of powerlessness based on sensitivity to difference.

One participant described how cronyism and elitism could rear its head at public meetings and frustrate the efforts of unaffiliated citizens to participate:

*I just feel like sometimes they don't let people tell their whole opinions because they're up there they might be educated, down here you got maybe just the high school educated, and they cut 'em off sometimes because they don't think they know what they're talking about or they disrespect 'em a little bit for some reason or another. I'm not sure why they don't treat everybody the same, but you know if you're my friend I might let you talk for 10 minutes but this guy over here I don't know very well might speak 2 or 3 minutes, and maybe he knows more than that guys but you just don't know him so . . .*

Also forum participants did not believe that those with more money or power would respect their contributions:

*Um, I'm the type that'll sit when I first come to a meeting. I'll sit in the back and I kind of survey the room, the feeling, the attitude, the atmosphere, the crowd to see whether or not you dare open your mouth. I mean if it's going to be a room full of lawyers I won't open my mouth, you know. That type of a thing. If it's a room full of people that are sitting there with their arms crossed wearing designer clothes and alligator purses, things like that, um, I'm probably going to talk 'til I'm blue in the face and no one would hear it, you know if they are close-minded typed people. So it would vary, it would vary. I look before I leap.*

The prospect of having to interact with more articulate individuals was daunting and posed a barrier to participation:

*I guess . . . I don't like to be confronted too much. I don't have a very big vocabulary.*

Some forum participants admitted they were out of practice in thinking through problems but enjoyed the opportunity presented at the issue forum:

*I've enjoyed this so I, uh, I like having opportunities to think, you know? [Laughs.] . . . You sit and watch Seinfeld all day and it's mind numbing, you know?*

*[Laughter.] But, um, no, I enjoyed this. This was good, it got me thinking again. You gotta exercise your brain.*

## Value of Public Deliberation

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Many of the recognized actors in the dioxin debate viewed unaffiliated citizens as emotional and misinformed, and the participating public as driven by self-interest and inflexibility. The typical approaches to dealing with the public were to provide opportunities for listening to the public “vent” and to provide information. But the results of listening sessions and information sessions are not satisfying to the citizens. They feel like outsiders. The forum created a safe and appropriate place for citizens to participate, and afterward, citizens viewed participation differently.

The NIF approach to citizen deliberation minimizes the persuasive or expert point of view, by offering alternatives—with their associated trade-offs—so participants can develop their own opinions more reflectively. By focusing on *alternatives* for actions, their initial *opinions* about the issue become less important. It was easier for forum participants to think beyond self-interest when they were given alternatives and trade-offs rather than a single solution or perspective for approval or disapproval.

**Weighing Alternatives.** In the interviews following the issue forums, participants painted an optimistic picture. Contrary to the concerns of public officials, participants believed they were open minded enough to consider alternative information and views:

*Like I said, I don't want to say that I'm an expert on this issue that I have all the answers that I know all the information. I'm going by what I know and with my own life experience and how I feel as a person and a taxpayer and a resident in this city and county. I'll voice my opinion and if someone can prove or convince me that something else is a better idea or a better option or a better method than I'm not too close-minded to think that my way's right and I know all the answers.*

They realized that few problems have only one or two possible solutions: *I think it's very rarely an either-or; there are a lot of solutions. Some of them you might not think about unless someone brings it up and then it's, "gee I didn't think about that," and away you go, and that's what this*

*was. . . . There's more than two solutions. I mean really. Except for politics where there's only Democrat and Republican.*

They also recognized that their preferred solutions are likely to include some limitations. Weighing alternatives as a process is valuable to citizens. By working through the trade-offs, catastrophes of uncertain solutions may be anticipated and maybe even avoided. People can help each other “punch holes” in the arguments in a way that is helpful. Participants recognized that all the alternatives had flaws—and those flaws needed to be worked through. If there were a perfect solution, there would be no controversy. To help develop one’s own opinion (judgment) with greater clarity and wisdom, one participant described the importance of considering the perspectives of others:

*Once we started talking and relating, and feeling each other's concerns about the issue, and each other's opinions about it, because you know, it's not like anybody was trying to knock anybody down or anything like that, it's just that, you know, we all had good ideas, but our ideas also had flaws in them. All of our ideas had flaws in 'em. But once we start digging into those ideas and researching our flaws and checking them out and then like, um, this is a factor, made us think.*

**Moving Beyond Self-Interest.** They were able to consider how possible solutions might affect other parties and factor that into their thinking about the alternatives. They moved beyond self-interest:

*I think the others [group members] are also very concerned about their children. And I'm thinking they should be, and—I don't know if they can afford to move, but maybe people like them should be helped to move to get their children away from that contamination. I would feel really bad if they were forced to raise their children in the floodplain knowing it could be contaminated when they felt so hemmed in because of lack of money to get out and that they were just stuck there. Stuck there. And that would be really sad. I don't have kids now so, you know, that is not that important to*

*me. I've already had my kids, and if I get contaminated at my age, it's not nearly so big a deal as it would be to see a child damaged.*

This forum participant valued the opportunity to step outside his self-interest and really weigh alternatives. This kind of weighing can help build trust and encourage public thinking beyond self-interest toward a public good:

*I like the fact though that you had the pros and cons. I love the fact that it was a nonbiased thing. That the interview was a nonbiased thing. We weren't going into this thinking it was going to be, "Okay. We need to do something about this." It was an impartial, "Should we do something about this?" And that I thought was good. That I think is something that you're definitely doing right. Because a lot of times agency's either for or against. . . . There's not necessarily a problem, but there could be a problem. We could do this, but in the flipside it could cause this. I like that. I'm always very much of a . . . I try to stay impartial. I like to step out in the third person and talk about myself even in those kinds of situations.*

**Thinking Publicly.** Yankelovich's model of public judgment (Yankelovich 1991) offers hope that group deliberation can create the opportunity to develop a shared understanding of the issue. Yankelovich draws heavily on Habermas, who argued that deliberation and shared understanding create change. There is hope that understanding, empathy, and movement can occur by truly trying to understand someone else's position. Group work offers the advantage that the people in the room will hear one another and, even if they disagree about some aspects, they will understand the issue differently by virtue of hearing another's perspective. The interviews with forum informants lent support to these theories; participants felt less alone in grappling with the issue and felt that there was agreement that a problem existed that was worth addressing:

*Well there's other people out there that got the same problem as I do, the same problem, the doubt. And these people are out there asking the same questions or refusing to ask the same questions that I'm asking, so you feel*

*a little more comfortable if there's somebody else out there that's concerned about whether or not it's good or not.*

The shared understanding does not imply that positions were changed. Some participants came to the forums with fairly well-fixed opinions. One participant came to the forum believing the dioxin issue was all about lawyers making money—a view that remained clear in the postforum interview. However, forum-style deliberation did provide an opportunity for opinions to shift. The discussion stayed away from the either-or fixed positions typical in polarized debate. Some participants indicated in their interviews that their opinions about the issue did not change, but their opinions about the solution did, reflecting movement toward common interests:

*I'm still, you know, pretty sure of what I believed to begin with. Um, both with like the severity and the different types of things that should be looked at into being done to correct the problem too. . . . There [were] a few of the solutions that I hadn't thought as deeply into. So I think maybe if anything I think I have a little bit more open perspective of the type of options that are out there and how they are going to affect or not affect, in some cases, regular ongoing life at home with it going on around you.*

This forum participant's comment reflects on the importance of mutual respect to her positive experience at the issue forum:

*Everybody listened, and that was the big thing for me. I thought, like I said, I thought it was going to be all talk, talk, talk, you know, my way or the highway. But we listened to each other, we discussed things, we discussed options, we discussed problems, negatives, positives, you know. . . . I don't know for me personally listening is just part of respecting other people, you know. . . . I just think it has a thing to do with respect. We're all there for a common purpose trying to resolve a problem that we all agree needs to be resolved, so it was just a respect thing, I think.*

These public forums also began to break down some of the information, scale, and identity barriers to participation, and increased confidence in citizens' ability to participate. The informants felt they had something to offer and appreciated the opportunity to think through the issue and offer their voice—something they did not feel they could do in other venues. Participants had alternatives to weigh, making the scale seem approachable; they had access to quality, credible information from a university source they considered neutral; and they had an opportunity to talk with their neighbors in small groups, people like themselves. The barriers to participation that were created by perceptions of identity melted away in most of the forums. They saw the forum as an opportunity to listen and arrive at a shared understanding, to develop judgment, and to participate in an atmosphere of respectful engagement. Furthermore, participation gave them hope and created a sense of empowerment or agency.

**Breaking Barriers. Information.** Several things contributed to forum participant perceptions that the information was credible. First, they felt the university was a trusted, neutral source of information. They also felt the issue guide was comprehensible. It offered large headings, photographs, and summaries for people who did not want to wade through the entire 26 pages of text. The issue guide was designed to avoid persuasive language, leaving readers to develop their own opinions based on the information, their intuition, and the values underlying the alternatives. As one participant said:

*I don't think it was leaning one way or the other I guess. I think it just dealt with the facts.*

The book also focused on major concepts and did not bog down in technical or legal terminology. This informant found the book descriptive and relevant to the local context:

*I like the way you put it together. I like the photography. I've been to these parks, all these places. They are places that I hung around I could identify with them. . . . Yeah and then these things amaze you because I worked around heavy construction, and I was thinking about how it would work, and it just seems like, "wow" that's got to be a whole project to think you could actually do that.*

Scale. Presenting several cleanup alternatives in the forum helped reduce the scale of a problem. By breaking down a large problem into realistic parts, it seems possible to solve. Laying out alternatives for consideration makes the problem tangible, building realistic hope. It becomes a shared problem, rather than one affected citizens must endure alone. Thus, consideration of alternatives in the style of NIF has the benefit of reducing the scale of a big problem to something manageable.

Deliberating together can build hope that the difficult problems can be addressed. Believing that problems are too big or too entrenched disenfranchises people from taking action at all. It creates hopelessness. However, forum participants perceived that coming together as a group had value just on its own to help build hope that something *can* be done. This informant articulated the hope that deliberating with others brings:

*I think that this discussion, that they wanted to hammer out something, but they really knew what the limitations were, we're just common folks. . . . You know I have no idea what any end result was going to be or what . . . I have no idea. But that is a hopeful result, not the end result, but a hopeful result. But I think that if the other 8 meetings were as good as that one I think let's see, 80–100 people, all went away with an idea that someone cares. And I'm not alone in the boat, so somebody else has got another paddle somewhere in this boat, see, and we are going to get across the river.*

Identity. The opportunity to engage with one another in respectful discussion was important to participants' self-identities. They found the small-group deliberative process an important way to build confidence, listen respectfully, and reason together on a problem. This process differed from the typical public hearing process, where there is outrage, grandstanding, or nonparticipation. Even the physical set-up of the room and the small group size may have influenced how comfortable participants were participating verbally.

These meetings were comprised only of unaffiliated citizens. And while everyone had an opinion on the topic, they were not strongly positioned enough to join an interest group. Thus, the unaffiliated citizens allowed the conversation to move away from polarized bargaining or arguing. This freedom to shift one's thinking is an important component of the group's ability to develop respectful, reasoned engagement, as this informant described:

*Everybody listened, and that was the big thing for me, I thought, like I said, I thought it was going to be all talk, talk, talk, you know, my way or the highway. But we listened to each other, we discussed things, we discussed options, we discussed problems, negatives, positives, you know. . . . I don't know for me personally listening is just part of respecting other people, you know. . . . I just think it has a thing to do with respect. We're all there for a common purpose trying to resolve a problem that we all agree needs to be resolved, so it was just a respect thing I think.*

Getting together with strangers of different views was important as a way of breaking down identity barriers. One young woman with tattoos and multiple piercings attended and spoke articulately about her concerns during the forum. In an interview after the forum, she said she was surprised that people actually listened to what she had to say. She indicated she typically felt like an outsider in her community:

*I: Do you feel like people listened to what you had to say?*

*Yeah! I was really surprised at that because at first it was, "Nah—whatever." And then after that it was, it kinda changed tone—like uh, maybe she also had something valid to say, so.*

A gentleman from the same forum changed his perception of her. His change in perception demonstrates the power of deliberation in forums. Respectful deliberation on an issue can open people's eyes to the "other":

*I think the one girl with all the . . . piercings and tattoos and when she opened her mouth and talked I was amazed. She was highly intelligent.*

*She really was. And the old, I don't remember people's names, so some of the other fellows shared their thoughts and so on.*

These unaffiliated citizens saw the deliberative forums as an opportunity to learn and be heard on an issue that affected them. For many of them, the idea of compiling the results of all the forums to help decision makers was a logical—and important—conclusion to their participation. They welcomed the opportunity and saw real value in learning from each other—people like themselves—rather than from experts. They recognized that they were not experts, but they were quite clear that this problem required more than expert knowledge. These informants thought that people in power would benefit from their participation because they offered their values, creative ideas, balance, and provided a human face on the issue:

*That's because [ordinary citizens] can think of it from ways they didn't learn at engineering school, that they didn't learn in design school, whatever, you know, that they didn't learn from 20 years of biochemistry. It's, it's almost a type of opinion you get from a child in standpoint. Where a child is so unbiased when it comes to a lot of things. They can bring a whole unique perspective that you just never thought about. Not saying that your everyday people are ignorant, well, I should say they are ignorant, they're not stupid. They're ignorant to the problems, to how to solve the problems. And if they can bring a unique perspective it might be just the thing that the government needs. . . . Sometimes coming in with a fresh perspective can completely change the face of whatever you're doing.*

Citizen informants saw the great value of this kind of deliberation to their own capacity as citizens. Many theorists recognize this value, but to see the kind of transformation that can occur from this work by itself is reason to continue to create small-group deliberative approaches within society:

*But see, I don't think I did it right like you and [the recorder] did it you know? In helping us relate and grasp the concept. Like, how you say, my convictions and my change, and how I go about my life. . . . You know, it's*

*just like I said, I still need to be educated, and how to opinion, how to voice my opinion.*

*I: Did this help you learn how to do that at all?*

*Well, yeah, I would say yeah, because as far as me, and even my wife and other family members, when I say something, you listen, and what I say, that's it. That's how it is. And my wife, she won't challenge me. She'll challenge me sometimes. But when I say, that's what I said and that's what I mean, and it's over. That's it.*

*I: Was this different?*

*So now I got a more, how you say, mannerable uh, about myself. You know, because like I said, I don't know, maybe I might have been a little rough on the edges, 'cause I'm still rough on the edges. . . . I've still got to smooth out the edges.*

## Conclusions

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The campaigns to offer education about the dioxin cleanup were clearly necessary, given these citizens' perceptions of being uninformed. Yet these citizens rejected the official literature, the industry literature, and the educational meetings. Based on the positive outcomes of the forums, we believe that citizens need a different kind of participation. They need to work through how they think about the problem and the meaning the issues have for their lives and communities, a style of knowing that comes from deliberating with one another that blends reason and emotion (Belenky, Clinchy, et al. 1986; Mezirow 2000; Ryfe 2003). Without the opportunities for these conversations, educational formats by themselves are insufficient methods of engagement.

We have seen that power in the context of information, scale and identity has had a significant impact on citizen participation. First, forum participants felt inadequately informed to participate effectively. Information was hard to come by and hard to understand. Second, citizens felt the problem was too big and the large organizational players too impenetrable to ordinary citizens. They believed government and industry were not accountable to the public good and some were actually fearful of the consequences of taking on these big institutions. And finally, citizens were intimidated by the power of cronyism and elitism. Together, these factors created a self-identity of inadequacy; not only could they not make a difference, but also they felt they were not powerful enough or good enough to participate.

They self-identified as not-good-enough. This deeply ingrained perception is similar to the quiescence that Gaventa (Gaventa 1980) described in Appalachia—that people would not speak up for themselves because they fully believed the strong, powerful messages that they were incompetent to participate.

Young described different forms of identity, one of which is “social group and personal identity” (Young 2000, 100). This kind of identity is the set of characteristics that constrain an individual's freedom to be something different, in this case a participant in civic life. She describes this identity as a source “of both possibilities of action and constraint.” The ability of the individual to exert influence or take action on their own behalf (agency) is enabled or constrained by this social identity position. Some use identity as a strength, such as working class people determined to get ahead, while others

are constrained by their identities, accepting a social position as unchangeable. Dialogue and deliberation offer the opportunity to shift that personal identity and loosen constraints on participation.

Unaffiliated citizen's view of themselves as public participants is constrained by the expectations of the insiders and outsiders alike. The perception that citizens can't make a difference becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1968) reinforced by a drumbeat of voices all around. Affiliated stakeholders interviewed for this study were not interested in broad public participation if they thought it would get in the way of their interests. Nor did they value what the public might offer or gain from citizen participation. Stakeholder disinterest in cultivating a deliberative public impacts citizens' self-perception of powerlessness. People tend to avoid participation because they believe their voice won't make a difference (Mathews 1999); affiliated groups and insiders would likely disagree.

Public officials valued citizen participation when it met several criteria: citizens were informed about the issue, citizens had access to good local information, and they helped do some of the work (such as posting signs or educating neighbors). The instrumental value public officials place on citizen involvement leads public administrators to convene advisory committees of the informed public, knowledgeable enough to contribute. Certainly this work is useful to the social welfare, but it is on the government's terms and excludes the majority of unaffiliated but affected citizens.

Alternatively, public officials offer educational programs to the uninformed. However, providing educational programs does not build a deliberative public. Education is clearly an important piece of public involvement but it places the citizens in a receiving role—rather than as contributors to solving a shared, challenging problem. For the public to become engaged and develop informed opinions, they need to seriously weigh the trade-offs among alternatives.

The affiliated stakeholders that informed this research expressed a lack of value for public participation. They view the public as emotional, uninformed, or malleable. Interviews with stakeholders revealed a persistent view of the value of participation: engagement efforts do not produce the results *they* need. These viewpoints help explain why efforts to include people who are outside organized interest groups are

unimaginative or half-hearted. In general, efforts to include unaffiliated citizens are weak and rarely attempted. When there is no response to an attempt, stakeholders can blame apathy or disinterest. Activists assume no response indicates consensus (Williams and Matheny 1995). These half-hearted or self-serving approaches to engagement push citizens away. Not recognizing citizens as having anything to offer reinforces the citizens' self-perception.

This research suggests it is not in the best interest of any of these groups to encourage deliberation among a public that is uninformed and unpredictable and that may not support the group's agenda. Instead, persuasion, rhetoric, and education are currently the primary tools of engagement. Affiliated stakeholders do not believe developing partnerships with citizens as equals is considered valuable—or possible.

However, through interviews with unaffiliated citizens who participated in the local issues forums on this issue demonstrated that citizens are interested but avoid participation because of issues of mistrust of information, the sense of scale brought about by a lack of viable alternatives, and feelings of intimidation from sensitivity to issues of power. Citizens respond negatively to the very methods the affiliated stakeholders use to engage: persuasion and education. However, the citizens in this study responded very positively to the forum experience as a way to clarify the issue, find common ground, develop a shared meaning, and have a respectful, unpretentious conversation. Participants began to see the issue from the perspectives of strangers who held different viewpoints from theirs and, subsequently, to reassess what is important and identify things they can let go.

When problems are claimed by experts as theirs to solve, there is no room for ordinary citizens to weigh-in (Mathews 1999). The confident voice of expertocracy (Fischer 2000) in the culture of technical control (Yankelovich 1991) has reinforced the citizen self-perception that they have nothing of value to contribute to the decision-making process. Citizens have become customers in every aspect of democracy (McKnight 1995) rather than the active participants democracy requires. In a society that is increasingly managed by experts (Fischer 2003; Skocpol 2003; Yankelovich 1991), public judgment gets forgotten when it is needed most: when considering what uncertain

risks and impacts are reasonable to bare when addressing technical environmental problems (Jasanoff 1989).

The actual solutions that emerged from the forums were interesting, but not the key focus of this research, nor the main purpose of such deliberative, public forums. Understanding how citizens waded through the tensions and trade-offs of a series of alternatives illuminates what is important to the participants and to others listening in. They recognized the uncertainty involved and did not polarize the alternatives into black-and-white boxes. This willingness to accept some of the risk and responsibility for solving the problem along with Dow and MDEQ reflects public judgment based on deeply held values—and would be valuable to policymakers.

By putting the limits of deliberative democracy to the test by using issues forums on highly technical issues, this research demonstrated that deliberative democracy has a role in nearly all public sectors, if for no other reason than to provide the space for citizens to develop their own understanding of the problem and why it is challenging to solve. A shift in public clarity of values on difficult issues may well lead to greater correlation between policy and values and policymakers' response.

These findings do not fully resolve one of the durable concerns about deliberative democracy. One of the purposes of representative democracy is to develop mechanisms (regulations) to protect the rights of people who hold minority viewpoints or minority positions in the population. Issues of inclusion at the deliberative decision-making table are important to fairness, and while this research reached a group that typically does not participate, only 53 unaffiliated citizens attended the forums. There were many more affected persons in these communities who, though invited, did not attend the forums. The self-fulfilling prophecy worked against our attempts as well. It is important to find ways to increase fair participation if deliberative democracy is going to supplement representative democracy. Continuing to ignore declining participation does not seem a viable alternative to this problem of inclusion.

Nationally, protection of the minority view is ever dwindling as powerful interests gain increasing influence over policy. Deliberative democracy is an important approach to counter the influence special interests have over the discourse and decision making at the expense of seeking public judgment. When interests are powerful or elitist, their

influence diminishes the value of regulations to protect minority views. Deliberative democracy encourages public judgment that moves beyond self-interest in a public way that can build or rebuild civil society.

There is need for a new relationship between unaffiliated citizens and their governments. Traditionally government spends the bulk of its public participation time and attention on the affiliated stakeholder groups, keeping unaffiliated citizens at arm's length. It is important to be clear that completely abdicating all decision-making power to citizens is not what public judgment suggests. Citizens can offer a different "take" on the policy problem—their values. Learning how to listen to the public and how to create and adjust policies according to well-formed, reasoned public judgment is a task for government if it truly wants more acceptable policies based on public values.

Unaffiliated citizens have a power of their own that is unrealized and suppressed by the influence of experts over citizen self-identity. Expert technical and regulatory talk reflects a level of certainty that is unwarranted in situations involving risk, and that style of talk can be intimidating and even misleading. Weighing alternatives in an environment of uncertainty warrants attention and focus on the values that are at stake when the consequences of the alternative become reality (Fiorino 1990; Jasanoff 1989). Fair consideration of values is lost in the discourse between actors holding extreme positions.

The power of unaffiliated citizens, engaged as deliberative democrats, can change the nature of the discourse. The deliberative conversation among unaffiliated citizens can help develop a clearer sense of the public's interest rather than lopsided self-interest. When the unaffiliated consider the consequences of an alternative, they do not have to worry about losing ground against an opponent; instead they seek common ground. Citizens have the capacity to move beyond self-interest in a way that the affiliated groups are less able or willing to do.

Unfortunately, this capacity is unrecognized and undervalued by public officials. Currently public participation is heavily imbalanced, with most of the effort focused on stakeholders who advocate polarized positions. Public officials who balance their efforts by genuinely engaging the unaffiliated may be able to mitigate the power of affiliated groups. The deliberative democracy approach can help public officials create a

responsive, accountable government rather than one that appears to be beholden to polarized special interests.

The power of unaffiliated citizens needs to be nurtured. Public deliberation can help develop the civic nature of citizens by changing their identity from the voice that does not matter toward one of importance and value. To accomplish this transformation, concerted effort to find, engage, and consider the unaffiliated voice needs to become a priority for a democratic society to flourish.

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