

Exploring Deliberative Democracy: Tribal Membership Meetings Under Indian Reorganization Act Constitutions

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Abstract

This was a qualitative study of deliberation and participation in a tribal government setting. The results of this study identified high levels of deliberation and participation with a need to focus on improving the aspect of showing respect towards others. Improving deliberation can result in a more networked community, identification of a greater number of solutions, and greater acceptance of the solution selected.

Problem

Strong membership authority has a significant impact on programming and budgeting of the Tribe. Tribal governments with strong membership meetings that do not formally review the actions within those meetings are missing opportunities to improve or better facilitate deliberation and participation.

Deliberative forums require ongoing review and improvement of the processes and forums in order to meet the community needs. There is a recognition of the difficulty of measuring deliberative democracy in either scientific and real world settings (Neblo, 2005).

This study is intended to fill a gap in the literature regarding the study of Tribal governments. There are 500 Tribal nations engaging in typical local and state governmental functions affecting members and residents of those Reservations.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify a practical research tool that can be utilized by a tribal government to identify the types of deliberation and participation occurring and to track those changes over time.

The results of this study will provide additional information regarding real-world application of deliberative democracy in large group settings making community based decisions for the Tribal government.

Relevant Literature

Habermasian foundation of deliberative democracy contains the following elements.

- No limitation on space or time
- No limitation on topic, reason or information
- Everyone has equal opportunity to participate
- No coercion (Rostbøll, 2009).

Deliberative democracy develops more networked communities, stable decisions, greater number of alternative solutions (Guttman & Thompson, 2004; Neblo, 2005).

Recognition of the limits of deliberative forums, that large groups cannot meet all of the above elements (Goodin, 2005).

Research has identified nine common elements of deliberative democracy.

Reason giving	Disagreement
Equal time or ability to speak	Respect for others
Public issue	Action taken
Binding decision	Public discussion
	Topic identification

Research Questions

RQ1. What does the discussion used by members in membership meetings, as identified in transcripts of those meetings, indicate regarding the level of participation and deliberation occurring at the meetings?

Sub1. What indicators of participation occur, based on the DQI category of participation defined as *interrupted or not interrupted*?

Sub2. What indicators of opinion- and reason-giving are present, based on the DQI category of level of justification set at four levels (ranging from *no reasons* to *sophisticated reasoning*)?

Sub3. What indicators of acceptance of others' opinions and reasons are present, based on the DQI category of respect set at three different issues (*respect for group levels, others' demands, and counterarguments*)?

Sub4. What indicators of decisions made for the common good are present, based on the DQI category of content of justifications (set at levels ranging from *neutral* to either *greatest good for greatest number* or *common good for least advantaged*)?

Procedures

One Tribe's general membership meetings were audio and video recorded. Transcripts of meetings were utilized if created by the Tribe, if not, transcripts were created from audio recordings of the meeting. As a member of the Tribe the information was more easily accessible.

The **Discourse Quality Index (DQI)** (Steenbergen, et al., 2003) measures 7 elements of deliberation and participation.

- Participation - interrupted
- Content of justification – community based
- Justification offered - reasoning
- Constructive politics - solutions
- Respect for counterarguments
- Respect for demands
- Respect for groups

An additional element, **agenda type**, was added to capture differences between types of subjects discussed at the meetings.

Data Analysis

The DQI was applied by analyzing each speech to determine which elements were present. A description sheet was created to explain in non-technical terms, the application of each DQI element for use by Tribal staff when the programming and information was transferred to the Tribal government for ongoing use.. DQI elements were then analyzed based on individual meeting and aggregate meeting data.

Findings

Coded for every speaker

- 75% of the participation was uninterrupted speech.
- A community-based opinion was more likely than not offered by speakers.
- 88% of the time some level of justification was given for an expressed opinion.

Coded only in response to others

- A mediating solution was offered 80% of the time.
- Equal chance responses to counterarguments would be positive or negative
- More likely that demands would be responded to positively or indifferently.
- 61% chance that responses to groups would be negative.

Limitations

This study was limited to a single Tribe and a single year.

2 of the 7 scheduled meetings were not included because no recording existed to transcribe.

This Tribal government provides a stipend for attending meetings, which assures a quorum to conduct the meeting and may create different attendance and participation issues.

Conclusions

General membership meetings have a high indication of deliberation and participation. **Findings** identified some areas of interest that suggest further study or action.

- During a 4 hour meeting only about 2 hours are spent deliberating – is it possible to increase the amount of time deliberating?
- Focusing on respect toward groups can increase the overall deliberative qualities of the meetings.
- Do the rules limit the overall negative aspects of the “respect” categories?
- Does payment of a stipend have an effect on discussion and decision making?

Social Change Implications

Information from this study contributes to the empirical knowledge of deliberative democracy theory.

Regular use of the DQI can provide greater understanding of what is occurring in general membership meetings.

Tracking the deliberative and participation qualities in general membership meetings can result in improvements in those forums increasing community networking and creating greater acceptance of decisions.