

The upsizing of public deliberation has downsized citizen expectations

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*Citizens are increasingly being asked to weigh in on decision-making processes, creating a strong sense they are being consulted over big decisions. But **Caroline W. Lee** argues that although public deliberation has indeed shifted political culture in meaningful ways, its long-term effects are more demobilising than liberating. She writes that if empowerment is just about allowing people to make hard choices, without giving them a say in the issues that have precipitated those choices, it is questionable as to whether democracy is being effectively “deepened”.*



We live in [the conversation age](#). The last two decades have seen an explosion of more deliberative forms of public engagement around the world. Gone are the days of stale public hearings attended by the usual suspects. Now, everyday citizens are besieged with invitations from their governments, employers, and community organisations to “[join the discussion!](#)” and “[get involved!](#)” On the one hand, participatory evangelists celebrate these changes—[deeper citizen engagement has to create a new kind of politics](#), right? On the other, critics argue that such processes are just shallow window-dressing for politics as usual. Neither is quite right—public deliberation has indeed shifted political culture in meaningful ways, but its long-term effects are more demobilising than liberating.

In order to get beyond the hype about civic empowerment, [I studied the public engagement industry increasingly tasked with running actual dialogue processes](#). I argue that many of the questions that critics raise about deliberative democracy—Are participants really empowered? How do engagement consultants resist cooptation by their powerful sponsors?—are somewhat beside the point. Deliberation consultants are extremely careful to produce authentic participatory processes customised for local communities, and they worry deeply about commodification and superficial appropriation of participatory techniques and deliberative software. Public engagement practitioners’ skills lie in their ability to pursue inclusive dialogues, and they are rightly proud of them.

Engaging in an extended public discussion, whether online or off, is typically much more time-intensive, educative, and interactive than voting, signing a petition, or emailing a representative. When they work best, public dialogues might catalyse those activities too, and prompt discussion with neighbours or some further action, such as exercising or litter pickups. That’s expecting a lot from a busy public, and often participants exceed these expectations in exciting ways, especially given hand-wringing about civic apathy and the shallowness of digital

participation. Those who do spend a day engaging in discussion with diverse others, for instance, are glad they participated and generally rate the experience very highly immediately after.

But I also find that the larger context of public engagement matters. Citizens are invited to have their say in an atmosphere of austerity. Public engagement is typically used for “tight times” and “tough choices”—for urban redevelopment in the face of capital flight, for child development so that poor youth are not hindrances to economic growth, and for workplace reorganisations after layoffs. In a lot of these cases, such as community congresses on rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, participants aren’t so much “attracted” to these discussions as scared of getting left out of important decisions. Once they do engage, there are subtle biases in contemporary public engagement against collective protest or systemic critique and toward individualised action and “appreciative” or asset-based thinking, [all of which can help the bottom line](#).

By placing participants in the roles of decision-makers trying to balance tight budgets, public deliberation processes encourage empathy for administrators and raise tax morale. Talk may be cheap, but for sponsors, “conversation is cost-effective,” by [limiting expensive litigation on controversial issues](#) and encouraging camera-friendly forms of voluntarism. Deliberating about “hard choices” soothes the pain of retrenchment by aligning cuts with participant preferences, which is better than the alternative—but if empowerment is just about empowering people to make hard choices, without giving them a say in the issues that have precipitated those hard choices in the first place, that’s a pretty skimpy version of “deep” democracy.

In contrast, hosts of public dialogues are framed as fellow stakeholders who can help promote the individual actions participants should take, as in [childhood obesity forums](#) where agribusiness and food industry sponsors are encouraged to engage in social marketing to promote healthy eating and exercise. Regulation or taxation of powerful corporations are off the table. Public engagement creates an appealing form of politics that demands a lot of investment from participants and comparatively little from big organisations.

In doing so, these processes shift participants’ expectations of the institutions they rely on and of the scale at which it is reasonable to make change. Even when public engagement is not oriented to dire decisions and is intended to mobilise stakeholders for collective action, I find that participants tend to feel better about civic life, to see the local level as the only reasonable place for political action in a complex society, and to leave the larger politics of public life up to institutional sponsors. We face such challenging, systemic problems in contemporary democracies that we can’t afford for the ambitions of citizens to be defined down in this way.

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