

**Cultivating a Deliberative Civic Culture:  
The Potential Value of Public Deliberation in  
Mexican Municipal Governance**

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Public deliberation could do much to improve municipal governance in Mexico. Deliberative forums and other practices could educate and empower the general public, reconnect citizens and public officials, and improve the overall quality of local legislation and governance. These optimistic, broad generalizations are based on the significant successes that deliberative experiments have already had, as well as the theoretical foundation that is beginning to take shape beneath day-to-day deliberative practices.

Admittedly, some proposals for political reform sound good in theory but prove unworkable or unrealistic in practice. The imagined success of a new approach to governance may depend on a series of tenuous assumptions about cost, cultural context, administrative competence, and political will. Deliberation comes with its own set of assumptions, but the prerequisites for deliberation are few, and the value of a deliberative approach far outweighs the real costs associated with it.

### **What Public Deliberation Means**

In general terms, deliberation simply means to reflect carefully on a matter, weighing the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions to a problem. Deliberation aims to arrive at a decision or judgment based on not only facts and data but also values, emotions, and other less technical considerations (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2000). Though a solitary individual can deliberate, more commonly deliberation means making decisions together, as a small group, an organization, or a nation. In larger political units, deliberation is often carried out through large institutions, such as the mass media, schools, and the complex network of nongovernmental organizations.

Though there are many varieties of deliberation, in this essay, I focus on deliberation as it takes place in citizen discussions and meetings, often face-to-face, with anywhere from five to five

hundred participants. Deliberation of a different sort takes place in the media (Page, 1996) and in legislatures (Bessette, 1994), but those are not the focus of this essay.

Public deliberation is more narrow in that it refers to deliberation oriented toward making collective judgments about matters of public concern. Examples include large public policy issues (e.g., land reform or energy policy), broad cultural issues that may or may not result in policy change (e.g., public attitudes toward gays/lesbians), and smaller, more specific matters that require public judgment (e.g., deciding who to hire as the new school superintendent).

In this essay, I work with an even more narrow conception of deliberation, which focuses on *democratic* deliberation (Gastil, 1993). By democratic, I mean many things. First, democracy is about self-governance, so democratic deliberation should be connected to public decision making, having real authority or at least being consequential. Second, the process should be inclusive by at least involving representatives from all relevant parties involved in the public issue. Third, participants should have an underlying commitment to the democratic process that tempers disagreements and respects the intrinsic value of deliberative conflict resolution. Fourth, a fully democratic discussion process asks participants to show a modicum of respect for one another. And finally, the participants in a democratic process should attend to the integrity of the deliberation itself by affording one another adequate opportunities to speak, avoiding manipulative discourse, considering what one another has to say, and making sure that all can understand the issues under discussion.

A close cousin of public deliberation is the participatory model of democracy, but there are recognizable differences (Hauptmann, 2001). Participatory conceptions of democracy hold as the highest principle the effective expression of the public's preferences on all matters of public concern. In this view, the volume and intensity of public participation indicate the vibrancy of a

democracy, and deliberation could dilute the strength of public engagement by supplanting citizen influence with quiet discussion. By contrast, deliberative democracy emphasizes the deliberative quality of participation and would, if necessary, sacrifice some quantity of public expression for a more coherent formation and articulation of the public's will.

Another difference is that participatory models downplay the potential for public consensus and stress the importance of all voices entering the democratic choir, even if they refuse to sing in unison. The deliberative approach acknowledges the necessity of majority rule and the value of pluralism but emphasizes the need to complement adversarial politics with a mode of public discourse more likely to discover common ground and promote accord (Mansbridge, 1983).

Modern-day elections illustrate the meaning of deliberation and contrast it with a purely participatory approach. The end of one-party rule by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) signaled the movement toward more inclusive, open, and fair elections in Mexico (Tulchin & Selee, 2003). This transition is certainly making Mexico's elections more participatory, but it will not necessarily result in a very deliberative electoral process. As I have argued (Gastil, 2000), the United States has a long history of participatory elections, yet its elections are far from the deliberative ideal. Voters are woefully under-informed, campaigns are largely manipulative exercises, the media do little to stimulate careful reflection on issues and candidates, and the result is the election (or, more often, reelection) of public officials who are only accountable insofar as they must not run afoul of the non-deliberative public during the next election. The elections themselves are not deliberative exercises, and they result in elected bodies that have little incentive to deliberate on the public's behalf.

Lest I only illustrate deliberation in the negative, a good illustration of a modestly deliberative process is the National Issues Forums (Mathews, 1984). This program gives average

citizens the chance to come together to discuss the most important public issues of the day in small study circles or larger community forums. The emphasis at the Forums is on the public coming to its own understanding of an issue, such as immigration policy or public schools. In some cases, the Forums are integrated more directly into public governance by maintaining an ongoing connection between elected officials and the deliberators, such that citizens and policymakers can educate one another and work in concert (Gastil & Kelshaw, 2000). Far from a unique experiment, the Forums now have a long history in the United States and are one of many similar programs promoting public discussion (Burton & Mattson, 1999; Ryfe, 2002).

### **What Deliberation Requires**

If public deliberation was relatively cheap to produce and had no detractors, its intrinsic value would make it a desirable complement to add to any quasi-democratic government. In reality, deliberation can only flourish when a number of requirements are met.

#### **Authority and Public Space**

For deliberation to be truly democratic, it must (eventually) fit into the public architecture in a way that gives it real authority or influence. This usually means that public officials will need to cede some control to the participants in public deliberation. Otherwise, the deliberation will be effortful but meaningless and could backfire, undermining the legitimacy of a government that sought to win public confidence by promoting deliberation. The most ambitious proposals have suggested creating deliberative citizen bodies that would take authority directly out of the hands of public officials (Threlkeld, 1998) or serve as checks on their authority (Leib, 2004).

Sometimes, however, all that is required of local public officials is that they not obstruct a deliberative process that occurs in the unofficial spaces of civil society. Bringing the public together to deliberate can have an educational, rather than policymaking, purpose. This

aforementioned National Issues Forums normally serve this purpose, and this poses no direct challenge to the authority elected officials. More interesting is the potential for deliberation to increase a political unit's capacity for action by generating public energy, developing a broad consensus, and fostering commitment to seeing ideas to fruition. In this sense, public deliberation can make a municipality more powerful than it was before, complementing rather than diminishing the preexisting power of public officials. To take a relatively mundane example, if public forums created a motivated, engaged public committed to improving their community's attractiveness to tourists, their deliberation will yield more focused hours of public labor (much of it voluntary) than the city government could have hoped to produce simply through spending money from its public works budget to buy labor.

### **Investing in High-Quality Deliberation**

In addition to requiring space in the public sphere, deliberation requires the expenditure of considerable human and financial resources. Whether the costs are borne by civic organizations or public agencies, high-quality deliberative forums require planning, facilities, participant recruitment, and often the cooperation of experts and the gathering of other informational resources to aid the deliberation.

Another example of a deliberative process illustrates how quickly these costs can add up. The citizens jury process has a long history and has been used in various forms in the United States, Australia, Europe, and elsewhere (Crosby, 1995; Smith & Wales, 1999). Modeled loosely after a jury trial, a citizen jury empanels a randomly-selected group of one or two dozen citizens to hear contrasting views on an issue over a five-day period. When not listening to and questioning expert witnesses and partisans, the jurors deliberate among themselves with the aid of a professional facilitator. At the end of their deliberations, they answer a series of questions about

the subject they have discussed. These questions, which are known to all parties at the outset, help generate a coherent set of final public judgments, so the policymakers can clearly understand what the citizen jury recommended after its deliberation.

A single jury might cost anywhere from US\$75,000-\$200,000 to convene, depending on various factors, such as how far the jurors have to travel, whether the proceedings will be videotaped professionally, etc. One of the most important expenses is the payment of the jurors themselves. To ensure that the jurors are a representative sample of the public, when they are first contacted (usually by telephone using random-digit-dial), prospective jurors are informed that they will be paid a good daily wage plus all travel, lodging, and meal expenses for their participation. Without this financial incentive, the participation rate would not be as high, and the jurors would not be as representative of the general public.

Even if one does not pay a random sample to participate, a serious commitment to inclusion is still labor-intensive, if not expensive. For instance, another approach is to devote considerable resources to recruiting people from different socioeconomic and cultural groups within a community. In this model, organizers use their civic network connections in a community to reach out to other organizations and individuals, and the result can be a larger group of unpaid participants that includes at least some members of the relevant sub-publics (Gastil & Kelshaw, 2000). This is not a cost-saving method, however, as it substitutes considerable organizational effort for the cost of random selection and financial inducement.

Just as one can calculate the costs of deliberation, however, so can one put a dollar value on the importance of convening deliberative forums. For example, Ned Crosby and I have proposed that when there are initiatives, referenda, and other measures on the ballot, a random sample of citizens should deliberate and record their reflections and recommendations in the same

official voters guide that is routinely distributed to households before an election (Crosby, 2003; Gastil, 2000). A single ballot measure may ask the public to commit tremendous sums of money to future building projects, public employee salaries, etc., or a measure may suggest ending a tax that generates millions or even billions of dollars in revenue. In 2002, the people of the Seattle, Washington voted by a very narrow margin (less than 1% of the vote) to build a US\$1.3 billion dollar monorail system. Had a citizen panel, costing less than a fraction of a percent of that, deliberated and recommended against the monorail, the voters probably would have rejected the project. Perhaps the monorail project will prove valuable, but when such a large decision is put in the public's hands, it is easy to see the wisdom of investing even a small amount of money in a moment's reflection.

### **Participant Attitudes and Abilities**

Even if the institutional setting is right and resources are available, deliberation still requires participants with the right attitude and abilities to work together effectively (Burkhalter et al., 2002). First, participants need to perceive deliberation as an appropriate mode of public discourse. There are many other ways of speaking, such as adversarial debate (Mansbridge, 1983) and testimonial monologues (Sanders, 1997), and less instrumental, open-ended dialogue (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). And, of course, there is not speaking at all. Any of these alternatives may be more common or conventional in a given municipality, and if the residents invited to deliberate consider it an inappropriate mode of talk, it is unlikely they will choose to participate.

Second, participants are less likely to deliberate effectively if they perceive that common ground is impossible. Common ground, let alone a full consensus, is not required of a deliberative forum, but it is often taken to be the ideal result of a fully deliberative public process (Cohen, 1997). After all, if the residents of a city think that there is no chance for changing each other's

minds, much less any hope for reaching accord, then they will be reluctant to devote the time it takes to deliberate. Voting is a much more efficient means of counting people's private preferences; deliberation requires the faith that from talk might come a new set of judgments, an alteration in how people view themselves, each other, and the issue at hand (Warren, 1992).

Third, public deliberation requires citizens who have the ability to consider carefully a range of views on a public issue. Problem-analysis, reasoning, and information-processing skills are all helpful for this purpose. Emotional maturity and social skills are also necessary to disagree respectfully and empathize with other points of view. In addition, participants need to be able to express their individual points of view effectively, make sound arguments for particular policy options, and hopefully frame those arguments in terms of a common good (Bohman, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). Though deliberation does not require genius and social flair, it is likely that deliberation will fail if few of the participants are well equipped for the exercise.

Finally, participants will not deliberate if they are not motivated to do so. Even if an organizer can bring people together into the same room, lead them through discussion materials, and elicit comments from the participants, if they do not believe that deliberation is a useful activity, they will avoid putting forth the effort necessary to weigh issues, consider conflicting viewpoints, and forge consensus.

### **The Benefits of Deliberation**

That last set of requirements for deliberation may seem particularly daunting, even to a public official who can personally create the institutional space and gather the resources necessary to convene deliberative forums. Fortunately, there is reason to believe that deliberation can cultivate the attitudes and abilities necessary for effective public deliberation. Moreover, deliberation has the potential to transform the larger political culture and, ultimately, create better

public policies and more legitimacy for municipal officials who need public support to govern effectively.

### **The Self-Reinforcing Quality of Deliberation**

Burkhalter et al. (2002) present a more complete account of the connections shown in Figure 1, but the basic argument is that deliberation changes participants in ways that make them more likely to deliberate in the future.

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First, there is a generic aspect of human social interaction that makes deliberation habit-forming. For example, Gastil and Dillard (1999) found that participants in the aforementioned National Issues Forums often “discover that they can deliberate together, rather than arguing against one another.” Gastil (2004) also found that, statistically speaking, participation in those forums reduced participants’ eagerness to dominate talk-time during political conversations. In sum, the habitual experience of deliberating makes it more likely that one will come to see deliberation as appropriate in the future.

Second, deliberation has the potential to transform people from private individuals to public citizens (Dewey, 1954; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Warren, 1992). Because it requires the consideration of multiple viewpoints, deliberation can make a person come to see themselves as part of a larger community, sharing values with people who are very different in other respects. If deliberation also makes people more public-spirited and tolerant, Burkhalter et al. (2002) argue, “It could also have an indirect effect on individuals’ future perceptions of the potential for common ground. After all, one is more likely to presume the possibility of shared beliefs and ways

of speaking when one's self-conception is that of a citizen, a member of a larger political community" (p. 416).

Third, research to date has shown that deliberation can help people develop a broader knowledge base (e.g., Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Luskin, Fishkin, & Jowell, 2002). It is likely that public deliberation also helps develop useful analytic and communication skills, just as it does for elected officials serving in legislative bodies (Bessette, 1994). After all, two of the basic modes of learning are observation and enactment (Bandura, 1986), and public deliberation, whatever its purpose, is always a form of adult civic education that teaches the very skills it requires (Gastil, 2004).

Finally, deliberation is likely to boost participants' sense of individual efficacy—their belief in their own ability to take effective action (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999). Even if deliberation disillusioned some participants, who came into forums with unrealistic expectations about the potential for group action (Gastil, 2004), it still makes participants more confident in their own, personal civic skills. Since people often prefer to do the things they do well, this boost in efficacy may, in turn, motivate participants to deliberate in the future when the opportunity presents itself.

### **Civic Culture and Institutional Legitimacy**

If deliberation has these effects on the people who participate in public forums, it is likely to have a greater, ongoing effect on the character of the larger civic culture. Four decades ago, Almond and Verba (1963) popularized the notion that democracy requires a strong cultural infrastructure—a set of habits, commitments, and attitudes conducive to self-government. More recently, Putnam (1994, 2000) has argued that democracy flourishes only when there is abundant social capital—the rich social network connections and public trust that help a large, diverse

public work together. Deliberation can help shape the civic culture of a city—or even a nation—by teaching citizens a new mode of public discourse.

One reason deliberative forums are an effective means of cultural learning is that they are, for the most part, small. Small groups provide people with a tangible, visible microcosm of the larger society (Giddens, 1984; Schwartzman, 1989). Though not always consciously, people learn and test social norms, rules, and practices in these groups because they are the closest thing to a full society that a person can experience. In families, social groups of friends, workplaces, and other quasi-private spaces, we learn how to function and behave as private selves. In quasi-public spaces, and particularly in special settings such as deliberative forums, we learn who we are as public selves—as citizens.

A concrete example of this is the jury trial, as it is practiced in the United States. Few people recognize that the jury was originally designed not only as a means of producing fair trials but also as a method for securing public legitimacy (Dwyer, 2002). One means by which the jury achieved this was by making plain the public's responsibility for its own decisions. In a jury trial, after all, it is the individual members of the jury who render the verdict or judgment, not the presiding judge. Not only does the jury make clear where responsibility lies, it also teaches the kinds of attitudes and skills citizens need to perform effectively their other civic responsibilities. Gastil, Deess, and Weiser (2002) have found that participation in jury deliberation can have a positive net impact on the future likelihood of voting. Though only future research will reveal the cognitive connections between jury service and voting, one likely explanation is that successful jury deliberation instills confidence in citizens that they are competent and responsible decision makers. This, in turn, triggers the decision to vote when elections are held in subsequent years.

Given the generally low levels of voter turnout in the United States (Miller & Shanks, 1996) despite its relatively strong commitment to jury trials (Vidmar, 2000), it is clear that jury deliberation is no guarantee of a highly engaged and deliberative civil society. It may be the case, however, that the lessons that jury service teaches are some of the most important positive inputs into civic culture in the United States. The jury may be sustaining even modest levels of public participation. Moreover, it has done a great deal to secure public legitimacy for the justice system, with overwhelming majorities of United States citizens expressing confidence in the criminal justice system (Hans, 1993). (Perhaps the lower levels of public support for civil trials are due, in part, to the relative infrequency of juries in civil cases.)

This is not to say that a Mexican municipal government should adopt the jury system, *per se*, for resolving local disputes. Rather, the jury is simply an illustration of an institutionalized form of public deliberation that helps to sustain a larger civic culture by teaching basic civic skills and giving citizens a sense of ownership for their larger system of justice. It is reassuring to think that a truly democratic government can thus bolster its legitimacy by providing citizens the opportunity to be democrats—to govern themselves.

### **Higher Quality Decisions**

In the end, deliberation may be most valuable because it can yield higher quality decisions. In one set of circumstances, deliberation can encourage government agencies to make tough decisions. When public officials watch deliberative processes, they often come away surprised by the quality of public discussion and the robustness of the recommendations that citizens make. In New Mexico, for example, I helped to convene a series of Citizen Conferences on transportation priorities for the state (Gastil, 1997). The New Mexico Highway and Transportation Department needed to understand the public's policy preferences so that it could set the flexible portion of its

budget for the coming years, and it faced a difficult tradeoff between improving the most heavily traveled freeways or maintaining the much larger network of rural highways. The Department had previously conducted telephone surveys, but these did not give a clear sense of the public's preferences, and the Department was not confident that the surveys yielded an informed set of preferences. The six Citizen Conferences, held in each region of the state, provided a clearer picture of the public's preferences. Each conference lasted only one day, but after hearing testimony and deliberating together, each group of citizens reached a clear set of recommendations. Taken as a whole, these favored improving the core road system, and the Department was able to move forward.

When public forums are not directly connected to the policymaking process, there is no guarantee that they will result in better public decisions, even when they offer clear and useful guidance to policymakers. For instance, the January, 2003 National Issues Convention brought together a random sample of the United States public to deliberate on America's role in the world. After a few days of deliberation, the public opinion shift was clearly in favor of a more multilateral approach to Iraq and a less preemptive policy regime. The event went largely unnoticed, and the advice was not heeded ([http://www.pbs.org/newshour/btp/nic\\_main.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/btp/nic_main.html)).

In other circumstances, it is the public that will make the decision directly, such as in the earlier example of the monorail initiative in Seattle, Washington. In these cases, the absence of public deliberation can result in short-sighted, unreflective preferences to dictate the outcome of an election. If a deliberative process can be inserted into such an election, as suggested by Gastil (2000) and Crosby (2004), such elections are likely to produce more prudent outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, the benefits of deliberation tie together to make for a more educated and public-spirited citizenry that is more eager to govern itself competently. That, in turn, is likely to yield more legitimacy for public institutions, as this becomes nothing more than the public viewing itself as the legitimate keepers of the democratic flame.

How deliberation might be fashioned to fit the particular needs of Mexican municipal governance I can not say. It would be ironic for me to tell another public should choose to fashion its democracy, for designing one's public infrastructure is one of the most important processes of self-government. Despite its history of top-down decentralization (Mizrahi, 2004), there is hope that local institutions will be reshaped not by federal blueprint but by spirited and democratic local visions.

Nonetheless, I hope that this essay has offered useful theoretical background, highlighting some of the requirements and potential benefits of deliberation. If they are inclusive, carefully designed, well moderated, and influential, deliberative forums like those I have described might make a valuable contribution to Mexican municipal governments. In turn, those same municipalities might make a tremendous contribution to our understanding of deliberation, as cities are ideal laboratories for developing the democratic innovations that will how we can effectively govern ourselves in this new century.

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Figure 1. *Selected Causes and Effects of Deliberation*

