

How Can We Quantify Democracy?

Hint: It Requires More than Just Counting Votes

By Matt Leighninger and Tina Nabatchi

What kinds of numbers are helpful for measuring democracy? Traditionally, political scientists have looked at voter turnout and other easily quantifiable indicators of indirect, republican political participation. Those numbers generally paint a dismal picture, showing declines in the number of people who vote, trust government, believe the political system works, and think that public officials are listening to their constituents.¹ What these numbers measure, however, is not the level of democracy but rather the (decreasing) enthusiasm for representative governance.

In the last decade, more direct, innovative, interactive — and democratic — forms of participation have emerged, giving us new sets of numbers to collect and analyze. Dispute resolution practices and practitioners have been integral to many of these democratic innovations, which are a direct response to the failures of purely representative political systems. Increasingly, we can quantify how many people get involved in these new forms of democracy, what kinds of people participate, what they think of the experience, and how these processes affect public learning, decision-making, and problem-solving.² From areas of high democratic innovation in countries such as Brazil and India — which have a more robust recent history of sustained, democratic innovation — we can also quantify the long-term effects of public participation on inequality, public safety, economic vitality, and public health.

In this article, we explore the new forms of democracy, differentiating new types of participation from the older, “conventional” formats for engagement. Drawing on our recent book, *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*, we give examples of how these activities are being measured quantitatively

and describe how this work can be assessed more meaningfully and efficiently in the future. This is not just a scholarly subject: We believe that if you want to help people build consensus, solve problems, or even just conduct a constructive meeting, you must first understand how public engagement happens today.

What Do We Mean by Democracy? ‘Thick’ and ‘Thin’ Participation

While representative governance relies on indirect participation, whereby citizens affect decisions primarily through representatives or other intermediaries, democratic governance is powered by direct forms of participation, whereby citizens are personally involved and actively engaged in providing input, making decisions, and solving problems. People in a wide range of fields and professions — including planning, education, journalism, disaster preparedness, human relations, public safety, community development, conflict resolution, health, and public finance, among others — have developed successful direct participatory tactics. These democratic innovations are sometimes organized as a supplement to official, conventional public meetings, such as planning and zoning hearings, school board meetings, and city council proceedings, but are also organized independently.

Some of these new democratic tactics produce participation that is “thick,” in that it is intensive, informed, and deliberative. Organizers assemble large and diverse numbers of people; give participants chances to share their experiences; present them with a range of views or policy options; and encourage action and change at multiple levels. Two of the most prominent examples of thick engagement are Portsmouth Listens in New Hampshire, which describes itself as “working at the

local level to support civil, public deliberation of complex issues affecting Portsmouth residents' everyday lives," and Participatory Budgeting in Chicago and New York City, organized by local officials with support from the Participatory Budgeting Project, a nonprofit organization whose mission is "to empower people to decide together how to spend public money." Thick participation formats are easily recognizable to practitioners of dispute resolution and consensus building, since they employ some of the same principles and practices.

"Thin" participation is faster, easier, and potentially viral. It encompasses a range of activities that allow people to express their opinions, make choices, or affiliate themselves with a particular group or cause. The defeat of the Stop Online Piracy Act/Protect Intellectual Property Act (SOPA/PIPA) was one of the first high-profile examples of thin engagement; Black Lives Matter is probably the best-known current example.

Thick participation opportunities are more likely to be face-to-face, and thin ones are more likely to happen online. However, many thick processes include both online and face-to-face elements, and some examples of thin participation (signing a petition, for example) certainly existed long before the Internet. The most promising direction for innovation may be to find ways of combining the best features of thick and thin, such as the recent "Text, Talk, Act" process in the National Dialogue on Mental Health.³

Both categories of participation are responses to, and attempts to capitalize on, the new expectations and capacities of citizens. As these innovations proliferate, they are challenging us to think more deeply about what we mean by democracy.⁴ The political scientist H el ene Landemore sees their emergence

“We believe that if you want to help people build consensus, solve problems, or even just conduct a constructive meeting, you must first understand how public engagement happens today.”

as a herald of what she calls, provocatively, "post-representative democracy."⁵

Quantifying Participation: Process Numbers

So what do the numbers say about thick and thin participation? Some of the most significant impacts, such as policy changes, are inherently difficult to quantify. But at this point, enough scholarly research and evaluative work exists to pull together a concise statistical glimpse of the kinds of things these projects accomplish.⁶ Our discussion below draws on the report "Deliberation by the Numbers,"⁷ as well as other empirical research⁸ to quantify the new forms of democracy. We look first at process measures and then at outcome measures.

Who participates?

Perhaps the easiest thing to measure about these democratic processes is how many people participate. Recruitment is always difficult, mainly because of low levels of public trust and citizens' general perception that getting involved in any political activity is futile. But in many instances of thick and thin participation, organizers have used proactive, network-based recruitment strategies to attract large, diverse numbers of people. For example, an evaluation of the "Horizons" project, designed to reduce poverty and achieve economic sustainability in rural communities throughout seven Northwest states, found that 30% of the population in the 283 communities involved — more than 100,000 people in all — participated in that program. Other research suggests that these efforts can be successful at generating the participation of marginalized communities. For example, in "Our Budget, Our Economy," another large-scale project focused on the US federal budget and deficit, 17% of participants were from households earning less than \$25,000 a year.

Because of the viral capacity of the Internet, purely online forms of participation can be much larger (even though examples of a truly viral dissemination are rare and hard to predict). Black Lives Matter, organized after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, is the most prominent recent case, having accumulated 65,000 followers on Twitter and more than 89,000 "likes" on Facebook.

These levels of participation are in direct contrast to those at most official public meetings, where the public is typically either “angry or absent.”⁹ To give one specific example, nearly 80% of all public meetings on how to spend community development block grant (CDBG) funding have an average attendance of zero to 20 people.¹⁰

Do people enjoy participating?

The ability to generate turnout is not only a function of recruitment strategies but also of the fact that people enjoy more interactive, democratic forms of participation. For example, 93% of participants in “CaliforniaSpeaks,” a statewide process focused on health care, said they would participate in a similar event, and 95% of participants in West Virginia’s National Issues Forums, part of a nationwide network of locally sponsored public meetings for conversations about public policy questions, expressed interest in participating in other forums. Similarly, 96% of participants in the Online Town Halls with Members of Congress agreed that they would be interested in doing similar sessions for other issues, and 95% agree that such sessions were “very valuable to our democracy.” Finally, 97% of participants in the 2012 Community Forum on Budget Priorities in Bell, California, agreed that the facilitators provided a fair, safe, and well-managed environment for participants.

Data on citizen satisfaction with thin forms of participation are harder to come by — and in most cases, the experience is so easy and convenient that participants have lower expectations for the results of their engagement. Evaluations of Text, Talk, Act, which combines thin engagement through texting with the thick engagement of a small-group discussion, show that 76% of participants rated the process as “good” or “excellent.”¹¹

“In many instances of thick and thin participation, organizers have used proactive, network-based recruitment strategies to attract large, diverse numbers of people.”

Again, these levels of satisfaction are very different from citizens’ views of conventional public meetings. For example, two studies of conventional public meetings about landfills found that only 41% to 44% of participants were satisfied with the process, that only 5% to 8% thought their opinions would matter in the final decision, and that most left the meetings feeling worse about the situation.¹² Likewise, a survey of California public managers found that most officials believed that public participation actually degraded the quality of decision-making and policy implementation.¹³

Quantifying Participation: Outcome Numbers

Quantifying the outcomes of more democratic forms of participation is possible at many different levels, including: (1) individual level impacts in terms of public learning and civic skills and dispositions; (2) impacts produced by individuals taking action as a result of participation; and (3) long-term impacts on macro-level social indicators.

Does participation generate individual-level impacts?

There are many indications that participation — particularly of the thicker, more deliberative variety — can help people learn and (re)shape their perspectives on issues. For example, an evaluation of National Issues Forums held in South Dakota found that 72% of the participants in these deliberative public meetings reported gaining new insights, 79% reported discussing aspects of the problem they had not considered before, and 37% reported thinking differently about the issue afterward. In “Listening to the City,” a large-scale process about the redevelopment of Ground Zero, 35% of participants said that they had come to agree with practical ideas that they had not thought of previously, and 32% said that they had changed their minds on some of the issues. More evidence comes from the “Our Budget, Our Economy” project. Of the participants, 48% of political “neutrals” and 24% of conservatives became more supportive of raising taxes on the wealthy to reduce the deficit; 49% of political neutrals, 28% of liberals, and 27% of conservatives became more supportive of cutting entitlement programs to reduce the deficit; and 68% of political neutrals, 39% of conservatives, and 19% of

“There are many indications that participation — particularly of the thicker, more deliberative variety — can help people learn and (re)shape their perspectives on issues.”

liberals became more supportive of cutting defense spending to reduce the deficit.

The numbers also show that thick participation can improve civic skills and dispositions.¹⁴ For example, research on the “United Agenda for Children,” a 21st Century Town Meeting organized by *AmericaSpeaks* and held in Charlotte, North Carolina, found that participants’ perceptions of external political efficacy (the extent to which people feel that government is responsive to their concerns) increased by 31%. Similarly, people who took part in the “CaliforniaSpeaks” project were over 55% more likely to agree that they could trust state government to do what is right. Of the participants in Text, Talk, Act, 58% felt the experience made them “better able to reach out to a peer in need,” and 54% said they were “better able to talk about mental health with others.”¹⁵

Does participation generate citizen action?

While some public participation projects are organized with the goal of gathering citizen input on potential actions by government, others catalyze actions by citizens themselves. Research on the West Virginia National Issues Forums found that 88% of participants discovered new ideas for possible actions to take. Often, these new ideas translate into action, both at the personal and political levels. For example, after “CaliforniaSpeaks,” 40% of participants contacted a public official. Likewise, in the “Turning the Tide on Poverty” process, 65% of the post-survey respondents reported that they had volunteered to help with an identified community activity. A subsequent evaluation showed that 81% of respondents who had participated in at least four sessions reported joining an action team; 39% of respondents volunteered after participating in three or fewer sessions. Moreover, 15% of all the volunteers indicated that this was their first time taking action in the community. Finally, an evaluation of the “Horizons” project found

that 63% of participating communities reported more people taking individual actions to help those living in poverty and that 40% of communities were working on systemic poverty reduction efforts (e.g., jobs creation, skills training, micro-enterprise, or business development). Moreover, 34% of participating communities reported that people new to leadership roles have been elected to public office, and in 39% of the communities, more people have joined local boards, clubs, service organizations, or other groups.

Does participation produce long-term, macro-level change?

A critical challenge of assessing the impacts of democratic participation in the United States is that these projects have been, for the most part, temporary; they are stand-alone, one-off processes that are seldom incorporated into any larger engagement plan or system. However, evidence about the link between participation and social outcomes has emerged in the Global South, where some countries have established more durable structures for public participation. Scholars have studied the effects of citizen-driven land-use planning exercises in India, local health councils in Brazil, and ward committees in South Africa.¹⁶ These more sustained forms of participation seem to have stronger impacts on equity, government efficiency, and trust. Tiago Peixoto, a leader at the World Bank’s Digital Engagement Unit, conducted a review of longitudinal studies on sustained engagement.¹⁷ In his research summary, Peixoto finds that:

- Participants are more willing to pay taxes.
- Governments are more likely to complete planned projects.
- Public finances are better managed and less prone to corruption.
- Participants exhibit increased trust in public institutions.
- Public expenditures are more likely to benefit low-income people.
- Poverty is reduced.
- Public health outcomes, such as the rate of infant mortality, are improved.

The quantifiable effects of sustained democratic participation are worth exploring further because

“Strong, ongoing connections between residents, robust relationships between people and institutions, and positive feelings by citizens about the places they live are highly correlated with a range of positive outcomes, from economic development to public health.”

research in the United States underscores the power of social capital and the strength of community networks. Strong, ongoing connections between residents, robust relationships between people and institutions, and positive feelings by citizens about the places they live are highly correlated with a range of positive outcomes, from economic development to public health. For example:

- Cities and towns that have higher levels of “community attachment” have higher rates of economic growth and lower levels of unemployment.¹⁸
- Neighborhoods where people work together and have higher “collective efficacy” also have lower crime rates.¹⁹
- People with stronger relationships to friends and neighbors are at less risk of serious illness and premature death.²⁰

Quantifying Democracy: Numbers for the Future

Two further avenues for quantifying democracy seem particularly fruitful to explore. First, making the data on participation broadly accessible and highly visible may be critical for helping people assess and improve engagement. Tiago Peixoto of the World Bank argues that one reason Participatory Budgeting and other innovative democratic processes have had such strong, positive impacts in Brazilian cities is that the data on inequality, wealth distribution, and other relevant indicators was made public.²¹

Second, giving people easy, simple, technologically enabled ways to rate participation opportunities,

including conventional public meetings as well as thick and thin formats, has great promise. Today we are constantly being engaged by citizen-centered ways of measuring — and improving — many other aspects of our lives. Almost every transaction now comes with the opportunity to rate the product or service you receive, from the customer reviews on Amazon to the link to an online survey on receipts from store cashiers. This same thinking and technology could be applied to democratic participation. Citizens could be assessing all kinds of civic opportunities, from the Facebook page run by the neighborhood association to the app that helps parents interpret their children’s test scores. Rather than tiny, incomplete snapshots of individual processes and tools, this approach to measurement would give us a more comprehensive, holistic, citizen-centered information about local democracy and might spur efforts to improve all kinds of engagement.²²

For advocates of dispute resolution, these ways of quantifying democracy may help expand the meaning and scope of their work. The numbers we have gathered here indicate that people enjoy participating in both thick and thin ways, and they think their engagement makes a difference. By collecting, reporting, and analyzing the numbers of public participation, we can better articulate the power of our work and better ensure that it fits what citizens want.

Endnotes

1 Lara Brown, *Washington Has the Talking Down, Just Not the Listening*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT (Jan. 27, 2014, 10:00 AM), <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/lara-brown/2014/01/27/new-poll-shows-americans-think-washington-doesnt-listen>.

Continued on page 41



Matt Leighninger is vice president for public engagement at Public Agenda and director of the Yankelovich Center for Public Judgment. He can be reached at mleighninger@publicagenda.org. **Tina**

Nabatchi is an associate professor of public administration and international affairs at the Syracuse University Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. She can be reached at tnabatch@maxwell.syr.edu.

settlement agreement. If they do so, the mediator should facilitate a discussion by the parties of the process by which the agreement will be finalized.

If a party is not represented by counsel but intends to engage counsel to review the settlement, it is likewise helpful for the mediator to assist the parties in agreeing upon a process for such review even if the attorney is not present at the mediation.

And most important, given the range of permitted, authorized, or prohibited practices, mediators and attorney representing clients in mediation must review the rules of the jurisdiction.

Endnotes

- 1 Wash. State Bar Ass'n Rules of Prof'l Conduct Comm., Advisory Op. 2223 (2012).
- 2 A.B.A SEC. OF DISP. RES., RES. ON MEDIATION AND THE UNAUTHORIZED PRAC. OF L. (2002), available at http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/directories/dispute_resolution/0118_resolution_mediation_upl.authcheckdam.pdf.
- 3 *Id.* at cmt. 5.
- 4 MODEL STANDARDS OF PRAC. FOR FAM. AND DIVORCE MEDIATION, standard VI (e) (2001).
- 5 FLA. R. FOR CERTIFIED AND COURT-APPOINTED MEDIATORS R. 10.420(c) (2003).
- 6 *Id.* at 10.42 comm. notes; FLA. R. OF CIV. PROC. R. 1.730(b) (2015); FLA. R. OF JUV. PROC. 8.290(o) (2015); and FLA. FAM. L. R. OF PROC. 12.740(f) (2015).

Endnotes continued from *How Can We Quantify Democracy*, page 28

- 2 DEMOCRACY IN MOTION: EVALUATING THE PRACTICE AND IMPACT OF DELIBERATIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (Tina Nabatchi et al. eds., 2012).
- 3 TEXT, TALK, ACT, www.creatingcommunitysolutions.org/texttalkact.
- 4 Matt Leighninger, *What We're Talking About When We Talk About the "Civic Field,"* 10 J. PUB. DELIBERATION 1-5 (2014); Tina Nabatchi, *Addressing the Citizenship and Democratic Deficits: Exploring the Potential of Deliberative Democracy for Public Administration*, AM. REV. OF PUB. ADMIN., 4, 376-399 (2010).
- 5 See HÉLÈNE LANDEMORÉ, <http://www.helenelandemore.com/research.html>.
- 6 For a review of the empirical literature on different forms of participation, see Tina Nabatchi & Lisa B. Amsler, *Direct Public Engagement in Local Government*, AM. REV. PUB. ADMIN. 1, 1-20 (2014).
- 7 Matt Leighninger, *Deliberation by the Numbers*, DELIBERATION DEMOCRACY CONSORTIUM (Aug. 16, 2012, 4:33 PM) [hereinafter *Deliberation by the Numbers*], <http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/index.php/resources/member-posts/183-ddc-fact-sheet>.
- 8 Unless cited otherwise, data comes from *Deliberation by the Numbers* fact sheet.
- 9 Working Group on Legal Frameworks for Public Participation, *Making Public Participation Legal* (2013).
- 10 Donna M. Handley & Michael Howell-Moroney, *Ordering Stakeholder Relationships and Citizen Participation: Evidence from the Community Development Block Grant Program*, 70 PUB. ADMIN. REV. 601, 601-09 (2010).
- 11 Thomas Bogart et al., *Text Talk Act Evaluation Study Report*, UA-SIROW (2015), <http://www.creatingcommunitysolutions.org/sites/default/files/documents/Text%20Talk%20Act%20Evaluation%20Study-Final%20Report.pdf>.
- 12 Katherine A. McComas, *Citizen Satisfaction with Public Meetings Used for Risk Communication*, 31 J. APPLIED COMMUN. RES. 164, 164-84 (2003); Katherine A. McComas, *Trivial Pursuits: Participant Views on Public Meetings*, 15 J. APPLIED COMMUN. RES. 91, 91-115 (2003).

- 13 W. Barnett Pearce & Kimberly Pearce, *Aligning the Work of Government to Strengthen the Work of Citizens: A Study of Public Administrators in Local and Regional Government* (Kettering Foundation 2010).
- 14 Heather Pincock, *Does Deliberation Make Better Citizens? Examining the Case of Community Conflict Mediation* (2011) (published Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University) (on file with Syracuse University SURFACE).
- 15 *Supra* note 11.
- 16 Peter K. Spink & Nina J. Best, *Introduction: Local Democratic Governance. Poverty Reduction and Inequality: the Hybrid Character of Public Action*, 40 Institute of Development Studies 1, (2009).
- 17 Tiago Peixoto, *The Benefits of Citizen Engagement: a (Brief) Review of the Evidence*, DEMOCRACYSPT (Nov. 24, 2012), <http://democracyspot.net/2012/11/24/the-benefits-of-citizen-engagement-a-brief-review-of-the-evidence>.
- 18 *Soul of the Community 2010. Why People Love Where They Live and Why it Matters: A Local Perspective*, Knight Foundation (2010).
- 19 Dan Hurley, *Scientist at Work Felton Earls; On Crime as Science (a Neighbor at a Time)*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 6, 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/06/science/scientist-at-work-felton-earls-on-crime-as-science-a-neighbor-at-a-time.html>.
- 20 Jessica Olien, *Loneliness is Deadly*, THE SLATE GROUP, Aug. 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2013/08/dangers_of_loneliness_social_isolation_is_deadlier_than_obesity.html.
- 21 Antonella Napolitano, *Lessons From Paris: Home to Europe's Largest Participatory Budget*, TECHPRESIDENT (Feb. 12, 2015), <http://techpresident.com/news/25441/paris-experiments-participatory-budget-codesign>.
- 22 Matt Leighninger, *We Need a Yelp for Civic Engagement to get the 21st Century Democracy We Want*, TECHPRESIDENT (Feb. 26, 2015), <http://techpresident.com/news/25463/op-ed-we-need-yelp-civic-engagement-get-21st-century-democracy-we-want>.