A Comprehensive Approach to Evaluating Deliberative Public Engagement

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Executive Summary

This essay addresses the challenges faced when evaluating deliberative public engagement projects. It provides a clear definition of citizen deliberation and suggests broad categories for evaluation, including design integrity, sound deliberation and judgment, influential conclusions/actions, and other secondary benefits (e.g., positive changes to individual participants’ civic attitudes and improvement in local political practices). Evaluation methods are identified for measuring each of these evaluation criteria, and summary recommendations consider how to conduct a thorough, integrated project assessment with a small or larger evaluation budget.

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Introduction

Turning the clock back just twenty years, one would have difficulty finding a person in public office, academia, or civil society talking about the virtues of “citizen deliberation.” At that time, there did exist a few innovative public deliberation programs, such as the Citizen Juries in the United States and Planning Cells in Germany, but these existed in an unfortunate kind of isolation, sometimes overlooked even by those who would go on to develop deliberative programs of their own in the coming years.¹

The landscape could not be more different in the present day. A proliferation of deliberative practices has coincided with a growing interest in citizen engagement, such that we now have the wonderful problem of choosing among different methods. Some of the most popular contemporary approaches to deliberation even have their origins in modern Canadian practice, such as the Citizen Assembly model developed in British Columbia.²

With different agencies and organizations deploying different approaches to deliberative citizen engagement, it has become more important than ever to take seriously the evaluation of these varied processes. It is not pessimistic to say that we currently have no systematic comparisons of alternative deliberative methods, though many civic reformers, researchers, and agency officials have ideas about when to use one process over another.³ To improve our knowledge of deliberation and upgrade the practice of citizen involvement, we must begin to evaluate the design, process, and outcomes of our civic engagement activities.
In this essay, I aim to provide the tools necessary for doing so. I begin by clarifying the meaning of deliberative public engagement and discussing broad evaluation categories. I then review each evaluation criterion and suggest measurement tools and conclude with a summary recommendation for conducting evaluations.

**Defining Deliberative Public Engagement**

It is imperative that references to “deliberative public engagement” convey a sufficiently specific meaning that we can distinguish it from generic public involvement processes, such as formal hearings or informal consultations. For the purpose of this essay, I define this term as an official or quasi-official process whereby policymakers, policy/scientific experts, and lay citizens work together on a public problem or concern, with the citizens carefully examining a problem and seeking a well-reasoned solution through a period of informed, inclusive, and respectful consideration of diverse points of view.4

Breaking this down, the players in a deliberative public engagement need to include (a) appointed or elected officials with some degree of authority, (b) persons with content-relevant expertise, (c) lay citizens, whether randomly selected or otherwise recruited in a fashion that seeks diverse members of the general public. The citizens are at the heart of the process, but public officials typically serve as the catalyst for initiating the deliberation and facilitating the implementation of its findings. The experts play a role behind-the-scenes (e.g., preparing briefing materials) or as personal resources that citizens can call on in the course of their deliberations (e.g., as key witnesses). Together, the interplay of these participants constitutes a public engagement process.
For such a process to be *deliberative*, it must meet a higher standard for the quality of the dialogue, debate, discussion, and other talk in which citizens take part. Table 1 shows a definition of a deliberative public meeting that I have found helpful. First, a deliberative meeting involves a rigorous analytic process, with a solid information base, explicit prioritization of key values, an identification of alternative solutions (sometimes pre-configured beforehand, but often still subject to amendment), and careful weighing of the pros and cons. (Research on group decision making has found that of these analytic elements, careful consideration of *cons* is often the key to a high-quality process, and the emphasis on “hard choices” and “tradeoffs” in many deliberation processes reflects this.\(^5\))

Exclusive focus on problem-solution analysis, per se, would make our conception of deliberation overly rationalistic and overlook the social aspect of deliberation. One might say that the social component of deliberation is what makes it *democratic* deliberation by requiring equal opportunity, mutual comprehension and consideration, and respect. The social requirements also make clear the implicit emphasis on inclusion and diversity in deliberation.\(^6\)
Table 1. Key Features of Deliberative Public Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytic Process</th>
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<tr>
<td>Create a solid information base.</td>
<td>Combine expertise and professional research with personal experiences to better understand the problem’s nature and its impact on people’s lives.</td>
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<td>Prioritize the key values at stake.</td>
<td>Integrate the public’s articulation of its core values with technical and legal expressions and social, economic, and environmental costs and benefits.</td>
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<td>Identify a broad range of solutions.</td>
<td>Identify both conventional and innovative solutions, including governmental and nongovernmental means of addressing the problem.</td>
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<td>Weigh the pros, cons, and trade-offs among solutions.</td>
<td>Systematically apply the public’s priorities to the alternative solutions, emphasizing the most significant trade-offs among alternatives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make the best decision possible.</td>
<td>Identify the solution that best addresses the problem, potentially drawing on multiple approaches when they are mutually reinforcing.</td>
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<th>Social Process</th>
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<td>Adequately distribute speaking opportunities.</td>
<td>Mix unstructured, informal discussion in smaller groups with more structured discussion in larger groups. Create special opportunities for the reticent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ensure mutual comprehension.</td>
<td>Ensure that public participants can articulate general technical points and ensure that experts and officials are hearing the public’s voice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consider other ideas and experiences.</td>
<td>Listen with equal care to both officials and the general public. Encourage the public to speak in their authentic, unfiltered voice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respect other participants.</td>
<td>Presume that the general public is qualified to be present, by virtue of their citizenship. Presume officials will act in the public’s best interest.</td>
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General Evaluation Criteria

The question of whether a process even aspires to approximate deliberative citizen engagement precedes any serious attempt at evaluation. After all, one can justify the considerable effort evaluation requires only if the process being examined claims to be (or has some reasonable expectation of being) related to the particular ideals of public engagement
and deliberation. Presuming that deliberative engagement program, project, or event aspires to these ideals, then the following four evaluative criteria are appropriate for assessing its overall quality on these terms.\(^7\)

When implemented, a deliberative public engagement process should be evaluated on its own terms. That is, the best way to judge the effectiveness of such processes is to assess the extent to which it achieves the goals such a process strives to achieve. Because deliberative engagement programs share some common ideals, however, they do share a concern with (1) design integrity and (2) sound deliberation and judgments. After all, such programs fail immediately if their design or the ensuing deliberation do not meet basic requirements, as described below.

In addition, these engagement processes can be assessed in terms of the outcomes their public events engender. Here, more variation occurs between different programs, and the third criterion thus requires (3) influential conclusions and/or actions. For some processes, it will be enough for deliberation to yield recommendations that carry influence, whereas other programs will emphasize taking direct action, whereby citizens not only talk but work together to exert their influence.\(^8\)

Finally, the greatest variation in purposes comes from the wide range of (4) additional benefits for public life that deliberative engagement processes hope to realize. Herein, I will consider methods for evaluating a range of these, from beneficial effects on individual citizen
participants to broader impacts on the community or even the larger political culture. I call this final criterion “secondary benefits” because it reaches beyond the immediate purpose and impact of citizen deliberation, but nearly every deliberative enterprise carries ambitions that extend outward in this way.⁹

The sections that follow consider these four criteria in greater detail and suggest the effective means whereby one might assess the accomplishment of each.

**Criterion 1: Design Integrity**

A high-quality deliberative engagement process gains its power partly from the integrity of its development, design, and implementation. This criterion can be broken down into three more specific sub-components:

a) *Unbiased framing.* The process by which issues are framed for deliberation should be transparent, subject to open criticism by all interested parties. The resulting issue frame should be a fair representation of conflicting views and arguments. Even when the organizers imagine that they have an undefined, “open” issue frame (e.g., “political reform,” without specifying any options), it’s still the case that they *selected* that issue and generated language to *describe* it.

b) *Process quality.* The deliberative procedures themselves should be developed in consultation with (or at least subjected to comment from) interested parties, particularly those with different points of view on the issue-at-hand, and the resulting process should be consistent with the best practices for deliberation (e.g., rigorous
analytic process for studying the problem and generating and evaluating solutions, along with respectful and egalitarian relations among participants).

c) Representative. The selection of citizen participants should give broad opportunity to all potentially interested parties (excluding only those with public offices or unusually high personal/financial stakes in an issue). The resulting body of citizen participants (hereafter called simply a “citizen panel”) should prove representative of the general population and, in particular, include representatives from any permanent minorities (i.e., groups for whom public policy consistently goes against their interests) and even smaller-numbered culturally relevant identity groups (i.e., sub-publics or communities who seek visible representation in any public deliberative body).

One can assess these design features through direct inspection of relevant event and design records, along with interviews with organizers and interested third-parties. Specifically, I recommend the following evaluation methods:

a) Evaluating the issue frame. Whenever possible, the issue-frame’s fairness should be evaluated before the deliberative body convenes and reaches its conclusion. This way, evaluations will not reflect reactions to the outcomes. A neutral third-party (e.g., unaffiliated university researcher or program evaluation specialist) can evaluate independently, through inspection of project documents and procedures, whether the framing process was neutral and transparent, but ideally, this process is evaluated by interested parties from all relevant perspectives. The latter approach offers a more
varied perspective on the procedure’s fairness to the particular concerns of different interest/advocacy groups.

b) Evaluating process quality. This follows the same basic protocol as issue frame evaluation, with two exceptions. It is useful to get preliminary process assessments before deliberation begins, but whenever possible, it is helpful to complement these with assessments during and after deliberation. The actual implementation of the deliberative procedures may shape the final evaluations thereof. To ensure commensurate evaluations, it is also important to discuss with each evaluator—including interested parties—the conception of deliberation underlying the process design. (This parallels the present essay’s effort to carefully define deliberation.)

c) Assessing representativeness. The final body of citizens who attend the event (versus those who register or pledge to attend) should be surveyed to determine their relevant demographic and ideographic (attitudinal) characteristics. These characteristics can then be compared against relevant census and survey data for the targeted geographic/political region. This can be more expensive when the target area does not have a readily-available census or survey profile, as in the case of a watershed, transit-area, “biozone,” or other non-standard region.

**Criterion 2: Sound Deliberation and Judgment**

Beyond their process features, deliberative civic engagement programs should show signs of high-quality judgment. Thus, they should produce the following outcomes:

a) Manifest disagreement. Public deliberation should include periods of debate among the citizens (hereafter called “panelists,” as in the instance of a “citizen panel”) on both
questions of fact and more fundamental moral issues. The absence of such clash would suggest excessive consensus-seeking among citizens who surely have genuine differences in experiences and values.

b) *Supermajorities.* Deliberative groups should be able to work through their differences and often reach broad agreement when assessing initiatives. Narrow majority views should sometimes grown into large majorities, and minority viewpoints should sometimes prevail.

c) *Informed and coherent judgments.* Citizens’ judgments should develop in light of the information presented, the views put forward, and the careful, honest discussions among participants. As a result, participants should demonstrate more informed and coherent views on initiative-related issues after participating in panel discussions. Participants should be able to give reasons for their views, and they should be able to explain the arguments underlying alternative points of view.

One can assess these outcomes through direct observation of the deliberative process, complemented by systematic surveys and interviews with participants, event moderators, and other interested observers.

a) *Assessing disagreement level.* Systematic coding of an audio (or preferably video, for ease of transcription) record of the deliberation can establish whether disagreement took place. This can be complemented with interviews of participants to determine whether they subjectively experienced such disagreements and whether there were any
potential disagreements that they chose not to bring forward (i.e., internally
censored).¹⁰

b) Assessing supermajorities. This is assessed directly from the event records when formal
votes are taken by the citizen deliberators. In all cases, it helps to survey the participants
afterward, to find out the degree to which they (privately) supported any final
recommendations.

c) Evaluating judgments. The citizens’ final judgment should be evaluated by a neutral
third party, as well as interested parties, to obtain their varied assessments of its
soundness. In these cases (and those where no final judgment is reached), it is also
helpful to combine an analysis of the deliberation with a survey of participants, so that
one can assess the degree to which the information and perspectives provided in the
event shaped citizens’ individual views on the issue. In particular, post-deliberation
citizens should be more knowledgeable, have better correspondence between their
views and relevant facts, and understand the cons of whatever recommendation they
ultimately made.

Criterion 3: Influential Conclusions/Actions

Once implemented, successful deliberative processes should show clear evidence of their
influence on the policymaking process or on the actions of the wider public. Depending on
whether they emphasize policy recommendations and/or direct action, effective deliberative
citizen engagement should produce the following results:

a) Influential recommendations. Deliberative engagement processes should prove to be an
effective mechanism for making a policy proposal succeed or fail in light of the citizens’
recommendations. Specifically, when a clear majority of panelists favor a particular policy initiative, its chances of prevailing should increase, and the reverse should be true when citizens oppose a policy.

b) **Effective, coordinated action.** Deliberative bodies that attempt to generate change through direct action should be able to coordinate their post-deliberative efforts to thereby change the relevant voluntary actions taken by the larger public, which may indirectly spark policy changes (depending on whether the citizens’ action plan involves public policy change).

One can assess these outcomes through institutional, policy, and sociological analysis, which involves a history of the relevant policies and public actions through examination of records and interviews with officials, activists, and lobbyists.

a) **Assessing influence.** This is a tricky undertaking, because it is often difficult to establish baseline-probabilities of policy outcomes. The most effective approach is probably employing a third-party evaluator who combines all relevant documentation with interviews, preferably both before and well-after a deliberative event. Long-term assessment, in particular, could determine whether the influence of the deliberative engagement builds (or erodes) over time.

b) **Assessing action effectiveness.** The same basic methods apply to action as to policy, with the emphasis shifting from policy-analysis to sociological investigation. The latter should entail large-scale longitudinal surveys to assess public behavior.
Criterion 4: Secondary Benefits

If deliberative processes are implemented and the evidence shows that they are reaching sound and influential judgments and/or transforming public action, that would be enough to warrant their widespread adoption. Nonetheless, it is important to examine other potential outcomes because many deliberative civic engagement programs stress the impact they have on the participants themselves, the wider public, or macro-level political processes. To give a sense of the range of these secondary benefits in relation to governance, herein I describe and suggest evaluation approaches for three: transforming public attitudes and habits, changing public officials, and altering strategic political choices.

a) Transforming public attitudes and habits. In the long term, deliberative panels could transform not only their participants but also the larger public. Those participating in, engaged with, or captivated by the panels should report stable (or rising) levels of public trust and signs of reduced civic neglect. Voter turnout in elections might increase, and citizens should develop political beliefs (e.g., a sense of political self-confidence) conducive to varied forms of public participation (e.g., attending public meetings, using public affairs media).

b) Changing public officials’ attitudes/behavior. Citizen deliberation could also change how public officials think and behave in relation to the larger public. Government officials could develop more favorable views of the judgments that citizens make during deliberative events. Officials should also demonstrate an awareness of the importance of citizen deliberation and come to respect panel judgments. As a sign of improved leadership, elected representatives (and agency officials) could also begin to step away
from conventional public opinion on initiatives in anticipation of deliberative panel judgments to the contrary.

c) **Altering strategic political choices.** In addition, the public deliberation could change the strategic choices made by political campaign professionals during initiative campaigns. Panels will have succeeded in transforming the electoral environment if initiative and policy campaigns begin to focus more of their energy on addressing the issues raised by deliberative panels (e.g., holding debates focused on panel issues) and incorporating deliberative panel results into campaign advertising. A more far-reaching effect of the panels could be the emergence of routine pilot-testing potential initiatives with low-cost varieties of “deliberative polling,” trying to understand how the public will view the initiative after deliberating.\(^\text{13}\)

The methods of evaluation used to assess these secondary outcomes would be as varied as the potential impacts themselves.

a) **Measuring shifts in public attitudes and habits.** One can assess impacts on participants and the larger public through survey research and inspection of election records (in those countries where voting is not mandatory). Examples abound for what to include in such surveys and how to assess it, but the best examples include longitudinal assessment (to establish change over time), comparison groups (to differentiate deliberation’s impact from those effects of other social/political forces), and a wide variety of measures (e.g., breaking down efficacy into multiple sub-components, such as self-efficacy versus collective efficacy (i.e., a sense of effectiveness when acting in a group).\(^\text{14}\)
b) *Measuring changes in public officials’ attitudes/behavior.* To assess changes in public officials, survey methods likely will fail, owing to poor response rates conventionally obtained among elites. Instead, one should assess these outcomes through interviews with public officials and in-depth, longitudinal legislative and policy analysis that compares processes before and after the deliberative civic engagement, in light of other changes in the political/legislative environment.

c) *Detecting shifts in strategic political choices.* One can assess these outcomes through interviews with public officials, lobbyists, campaign officials, and political activists. This can prove especially challenging, as it requires accessing internal strategic decisions (or documentation thereof) within organizations whose interests may not be well-served by such investigation. If one can obtain such data, however, it is possible to detect signs of the deliberative process exerting its influence. For instance, policy initiatives that fail to pass muster in trial runs (i.e., in the mock deliberative polls described above) are subsequently withdrawn, this can indicate that *anticipation of the eventual deliberative citizen engagement process* is causing more careful vetting of the proposals such a group might put before policymakers and the general public.

**Conclusion: Integrating Evaluative Methods**

Table 2 summarizes the preceding discussion and breaks down evaluative methods into two columns. The first describes a “basic evaluation”—those methods most readily deployed on a modest budget and within a narrower time-frame. The second column then augments these basic methods with additional assessment tools, which may require more labor, money, and time. Whether one’s evaluation requires more than a basic method depends on one’s resources
and goals, but it is important to recognize the limitations of the basic evaluation approaches in terms of their reliability and validity.

In conclusion, it is important to consider how one integrates these various evaluation metrics. That is, how does one move from separate assessments of each criterion (or sub-component) to an overall evaluation of the deliberative citizen engagement process as a whole? This depends, again, on one’s conception of the project, but the following approach will apply to many such programs.

Each of the three elements of Design Integrity count as pass-fail elements, and a sub-par evaluation on any one of these yields a negative summary evaluation of the entire process. That is, if any aspect of the design failed to meet basic standards for integrity, the other outcomes of the process are all suspect.

The three elements of Sound Deliberation and Judgment should be viewed as parts of a coherent whole, such that one arrives at a single assessment of Deliberation/Judgment in light of each element. The third of these might be most important (i.e., the coherence and soundness of the group’s judgments), but this should be weighed by how rich the disagreement was and how effectively the group could move toward a supermajority. Outstanding performance on two of these criteria might obviate lower-performance on another, but outright failure on either the first (disagreement) or third (quality of judgment) should yield an overall assessment of program failure.
Table 2. Summary of evaluation Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Basic Evaluation</th>
<th>Additional Evaluative Method</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Design Integrity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unbiased framing</td>
<td>Third-party document inspection prior to deliberation.</td>
<td>Inspection by interested parties, as well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process quality</td>
<td>Third-party inspection of procedure instructions and direct observation of process.</td>
<td>Inspection by both third-party and interested parties before, during, and after deliberation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>Compare citizen participant demographics with census data</td>
<td>Conduct detailed survey of citizens and target population to check for differences in both census and attitudinal variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sound Deliberation and Judgment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manifest disagreement</td>
<td>Direct inspection of deliberation for signs of disagreement</td>
<td>Survey participants to judge their subjective experience of disagreement and check for self-censorship of potential disagreements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supermajorities</td>
<td>Check final vote tallies</td>
<td>Survey participants to learn their degree of private support for their public recommendations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed and coherent judgments</td>
<td>Third-party assessment of the citizens’ final judgment in light of available information</td>
<td>Inspection by interested parties, as well, and survey of participants’ relevant knowledge/perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Influential Conclusions/Actions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influential recommendations</td>
<td>Third-party assessment of policy impact</td>
<td>Take longer-term assessments to capture gradual/eventual impact (or detect erosion of influence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective, coordinated action</td>
<td>Third-party assessment of impact on public behavior</td>
<td>Inclusion of large-scale, longitudinal population surveys</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary Benefits</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transforming public attitudes and habits</td>
<td>Post-deliberation survey of participants</td>
<td>Longitudinal survey (and analysis of voting records) for both deliberation participants and wider public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing public officials’ attitudes/behavior</td>
<td>Interviews with public officials</td>
<td>Legislative and institutional policy analysis, as well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altering strategic political choices</td>
<td>Third-party assessment of changing political climate</td>
<td>Intensive interviews and strategic document analysis within policy-relevant interest/advocacy groups</td>
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</table>
The Influential Conclusions/Actions criteria are different, in that some programs will emphasize only one—or even *neither*—of these criteria. All deliberative citizen engagement programs, however, should orient toward one or the other to at least a degree, lest deliberation become seen as “merely” discussion, disconnected from action. Even then, however, poor performance on a program’s relevant influence criterion does not impugn the entire exercise; rather, it suggests the need for improving the component of the program that leverages influence.

Finally, Assessment of Secondary Benefits stands apart from all these other criteria, in that program success may not require evidence of these impacts. If a program is well-designed, deliberative, and influential, these become “bonus” effects, not strictly necessary for justifying the citizen engagement program, per se. In the long-run, however, these secondary benefits could be of tremendous value for a public and its political culture. A more engaged public, legitimate institutions, and responsible, deliberative politics could dramatically increase the capacity for shared governance and public action and, ultimately, yield much better public policy. Such potential impacts should be assessed, for evidence of these changes could increase the estimated value of deliberative citizen engagement, thereby warranting the time and resource expense it requires.

**Endnotes**

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1 For the history of a variety of deliberative public engagement practices, see John Gastil and Peter Levine (Eds.), *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005).


3 Examples of such process-choice charts include those produced by McMaster University ([http://www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook/compareparticipation.pdf](http://www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook/compareparticipation.pdf)) and the International Association for Public
Democracy: Stephanie polling (Nashville, The National Issues Forums is one such process that stresses tradeoffs (http://www.nifi.org).

5 Mark Orlitzy and Randy Y. Hirokawa, “To err is human, to correct for it divine: A meta-analysis of research testing the functional theory of group decision-making effectiveness,” Small Group Research, 32 (2001), 313-341. The National Issues Forums is one such process that stresses tradeoffs (http://www.nifi.org).


7 After all, nothing is learned when one’s research simply establishes that a program intended simply to “inform” the public does not engage citizens in a meaningful dialogue. Similarly, little is gained when a program with no clear values or intentions—but clearly no deliberative element in its design—turns out, on closer inspection, to indeed lack deliberative features.


9 Leighninger (note 8 above) stresses such impacts. For a readable account of the wider aims of deliberative democracy, see Amy Gutmann and Dennis F. Thompson, Why deliberative democracy? (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).


