

Public Sector Communication and Democracy

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Introduction

This chapter explores the various ways that citizens communicate with the state, and the relationship of these forms of communication to the theory and practice of democracy. I say “*to* democracy” rather than “*in* democracy” because communicative practices do not simply follow from the type of government or public sector, but rather are inextricably intertwined with it; as much cause as result. This mutual dependence is what John Dewey had in mind when he wrote that people “live in a community in virtue of the things they have in common and communication is the way they possess things in common” (1916, p. 7). Because of this, the relationship between communication and democracy is as relevant to non-democracies and emerging democracies as to established ones.

The central argument of this chapter is threefold. First, that citizens’¹ primary role in the public sector is a discursive one; that is, to communicate with the state. Second, that states vary dramatically in the authority granted to citizens’ public sector voices. And third, that the substance, participants, and structures that shape public sector communication define how more or less democratic a state is.

To make this argument, the chapter begins by defining the “essentially contestable” concepts (Gallie, 1955) of “the public sphere,” “the private sphere,” and the “sphere of public authority,” and their connections to “the public sector.” The next two sections then define “public sector communication” and the distinction between democratic public sector communication and public sector communication in a democracy. The chapter then turns to the ways that citizens’ public sector communication can indirectly and directly influence the policy-making process. This is followed by a closer look at the relationship between citizens’ *discursive participation* in the public sphere and in the public sector, and the important role of institutions in facilitating this relationship, using the United States as a case study. Finally it concludes with thoughts on the relationship between the public sector, citizens, and democracy, and suggests avenues for future research.

¹ I use the term *citizens* and *the public* interchangeably in this chapter, though by *citizen* I mean more than those with legal status within a state.

Defining and Distinguishing the Public Sector

What is the *public sector*? How does it differ from the *public sphere*? In Habermas's (1989) conception, the public sphere is a "discursive space" (Hauser, 1999, p. 61) simultaneously distinct from and encompassing both the private sphere of civil society and the "sphere of public authority" (Habermas, 1989, p. 30) embodied in the state. As defined by Habermas, the public sphere is a place (in both the physical and metaphysical sense) that, "through the vehicle of public opinion... put the state in touch with the needs of society" (p. 31). While public spheres exist in politics of various stripes, the normative assumption underlying most public sphere theory is that the legitimacy of the state depends on whether it listens and responds to views that are formed and expressed in the public sphere (Benhabib, 1992).

The Habermasian conceptualization of the public sphere allows us to distinguish it from "the public sector," with the latter defined as the institutions of "public authority," "the state," or most simply, "government." It is within the public sector that the policy process—that is, the identification of public issues, the consideration of alternative ways of addressing these issues, the selection, design, and implementation of specific policies, and their monitoring, evaluation and revision—takes place.

In addition, the ambiguity in Habermas's theory regarding whether the public sphere is distinct from and/or encompassing of the state and the private sphere can prove useful, in that, as Vilma Luoma-aho and Maria-Jose Canel make clear in their introduction to this handbook, the lines between public and private have always been, and are increasingly, blurred. The notion of the public sphere as a discursive space for the formation and expression of public opinion also foregrounds the crucial, even defining, role of communication, both among citizens and between citizens and the state. Lastly, the normative dimension of public sphere theory allows us to distinguish the larger concepts of the public sphere and public sector from more specific conceptualizations of a *democratic* public sphere and/or public sector; that is, one in which citizens have the opportunity to engage each other (in the public sphere) and the state (in the public sector, or in Habermas's term, the sphere of public authority) in the formation and expression of public opinion about pressing societal issues, and in which the state is responsive to these opinions. On this latter point, however, it is important to keep in mind the numerous critiques that problematize the notion of a single public sphere through the concept of "counter-publics" (Fraser, 1990). These critiques remind us that normative assessments of state legitimacy require a nuanced understanding of the distinct dominant and subaltern publics (and notions of the public good) that inevitably exist in a polity.

Defining Public Sector Communication

What constitutes public sector communication can be understood by focusing on three dimensions: substance, participants, and structures. By substance is meant the issues or concerns being talked about. By communicators is meant who is speaking and who is listening. And by structures is meant the institutions, processes, and norms through which this communication occurs.

Substance

Adapting David Easton's (1965) definition of politics, public sector communications is defined here as those about the "authoritative allocation of goods, services, and values by the state." This definition is intentionally broad in that the specific goods, services, and values that are deemed open to state involvement can vary widely over time and across political cultures. Key to distinguishing public sector communication from private or public sphere communication, however, is the notion that it is about "authoritative allocation" "by the state."

Participants

To be “public sector communication” it is also necessary that one of the participants be the state. The specific role played by the state, as well as the specific state officials or entities involved, can vary, however. In any system there needs to be communication within and across the various people and organizations that comprise the state (most simply, the institutions of government, the elected and appointed leaders of those institutions, and the large number of public sector employees who do the bulk of the state’s work). While obviously important, this intra- and inter-organizational communication is not the main focus of this chapter. More central is communication to and from the state by dominant and subaltern publics. Here as well the public’s specific roles, and the segments of the public that are involved, can vary. At a minimum, the public serves as consumer, receiving information, suggestions, requests, and commands from the state. In contrast is the public as producer, with the state receiving citizens’ information, suggestions, requests, and commands. Of course just as communication can occur within and across various state actors, so too can it occur among various segments of the public. Such communication, especially when it is about public issues or services, is clearly relevant to the public sector. Without state involvement, however, this citizen-to-citizen communication is best seen as important to, but distinct from, public sector communication.

Building on the distinctions between the public sphere, the private sphere, and the sphere of public authority, “public sphere communication” is defined here as citizen-to-citizen exchanges about the authoritative allocation of goods, services, and values by the state, “private sphere communication” as citizen-to-citizen exchanges on other topics of conversation and debate, and “public sector communication” as exchanges between citizens and the state. While the focus of this chapter is “public sector communication,” it is important to note that the boundaries distinguishing these three discursive spheres are porous. Indeed, one of the most interesting and important aspects of communication writ large is the ways in which certain topics and speakers migrate across them (Hallin, 1986, pp. 115–118).

Structures

Communication does not occur in a vacuum. At a minimum it requires a medium (from the air that carries our voices to the Web). It also requires informal norms and formal rules. And it requires institutions and organizations that, to varying degrees, facilitate or hinder communication. In the case of public sector communication, these structures and processes can be determined by the state (as part of its authoritative allocation of goods, services, and values), or emerge from other segments of the public and even the private spheres. They can also vary over time and across polities. But regardless of their form, they are instrumental in determining the discursive relationship between the state and the public.

Democracy and Public Sector Communication

While there are numerous models of democracy (Held, 2006), all are based on the notion that the authority to allocate goods, services, and values ultimately (even if indirectly) resides with citizens; that citizens have the opportunity to engage each other (in the public sphere) and the state (in the public sector) in the formation and expression of public opinion about pressing societal issues (again, even if indirectly); and that the state is, by design, responsive and accountable to these opinions. It follows that in a democracy, the public sector provides and/or encourages the institutional structures that allow citizens to be information producers in the interactive processes by which goods, services, and values are authoritatively allocated.

In their introduction to this handbook, Vilma Luoma-aho and Maria-Jose Canel unpack the complicated concept of “publicness,” noting that, especially in the contemporary era, the lines between public and private, and the public sector and the public sphere, have become increasingly blurred. As a result they treat these terms as endpoints on a series of continua rather than as fixed and mutually exclusive spheres. This insight can be extended to the relationship between democracy and the public sector. Politics can be more or less democratic. It follows that so, too, can public sector communication. In this regard it is useful to distinguish democratic public sector communication from public sector communication *in* a democracy. The former can be found, in theory and to varying degrees, in any form of government, but need not be a constitutive part of the public sector, as it is *by definition* in a democracy. While the presence of free and fair elections is often used as a demarcation line, how much and in what ways the public is sufficiently involved in the authoritative actions of the state to be considered a democracy is inherently contestable. There is no simple “tipping point.” Nonetheless, we can identify and assess core structures of a state, the substantive issues it authoritatively addresses, and the extent to which the public is a meaningful participant in this process.

Public Sector Communication and the Policy-Making Process

Simplifying, the policy process involves six stages (Linsky, 1986): setting a policy agenda, developing, and debating policy alternatives, selecting among these alternatives, implementing the chosen policy, monitoring and evaluating its intended and unintended consequences, and making adjustments as needed. Public sector communication (both within the state and between the state and the public) is critical at each of these stages, though the public’s active involvement varies across issues, stages, and politics.

Determining both the broad parameters and the specific issues of public sector intervention—i.e., identifying “problems” and adding them to the policy agenda—is one of the primary responsibilities of the state. However, with few exceptions, what constitutes legitimate areas for state involvement can vary across politics, as well as within them over time. These choices are as much an issue of culture and politics as of objective significance. Consider, for example, how issues such as abortion, sexual preference, health care, retirement security, workplace safety, environmental protection, immigration, and so forth vary in their “locations” in the private sphere, the public sphere, or the public sector across politics and time.

At a minimum, states must communicate enough with their publics to identify issues of import (something more akin to surveillance than dialogue in totalitarian regimes) and to inform and/or direct citizens as to which issues are now subject to government action. There is, of course, no guarantee that the state’s agenda will match that of the public’s in such systems. In representative democracies, periodic elections serve as the primary mechanism by which the public influences the policy agenda. Candidates and parties campaign on more or less developed platforms identifying their priorities. Other organized political actors work to influence these priorities in exchange for their support. Public opinion polls serve as an indirect voice of the people, articulating their central concerns and interests as well as how these concerns and interests translate into support for those vying for office. Much of this exchange occurs through the legacy and newer forms of digital and social media, with both serving, to varying degrees, as conduits, public spaces, and political actors with interests of their own (Protest & McCombs, 2016). Elections are also relevant to the evaluation stage of the policy process, in that it is here that citizens reward or punish incumbents for their performance (Fiorina, 1981; Kousser, 2004).

But campaigns and elections are indirect, blunt, and often unreliable (Conley, 2001; Healy & Malhotra, 2013; Stokes, 2001) and inequitable (Gilens, 2012) forms of public engagement in the policy process. In addition, the real work of policy-making occurs between elections,

when specific policy alternatives are developed, debated, selected, implemented, and monitored. At these stages “experts” and “advocates” (both within and outside of the public sector) take center stage. The public can, of course, still be engaged, but doing so requires avenues for communication, and how democratic this communication is depends on the structures and processes through which it occurs, and the participants engaged in it. In nondemocratic regimes, the involvement of “average citizens” is typically limited to unlawful protest and resistance, and the risks associated with them. In more democratic regimes, citizens are provided with enough protections of speech, the press, and assembly to voice their preferences to the state without fear of reprisal. More democratically still, the state *provides* citizens with institutionalized channels of communication that are integrated in meaningful ways into the policy-making process.

Such institutionalized channels can be indirect as in the periodic elections mentioned above, as well as through lobbying (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Leach & Kimball, 2009; Berry, 2015; Coen & Richardson, 2009), the use of public opinion polls (Burstein, 2003; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Page & Shapiro, 1983), and the media (Linsky, 1986; Wolfe, 2012). Or they can be more direct, as in the use of initiatives and referenda (Kaufmann & Waters, 2004; Matsusaka, 2015; Zimmerman, 2014), public hearings (Adams, 2004; Cole & Caputo, 1984), and more innovative techniques such as citizen panels, various types of deliberative forums (Fiorino, 1990; Fishkin, 2009; Gastil & Levine, 2005; King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998), and even the use of digital technologies and social media for crowdsourcing (Noveck, 2015). It is to these more direct—and arguably more democratic—approaches that I now turn, focusing specifically on those that involve citizens’ discursive engagement with the state.²

Citizens’ Discursive Engagement in Public Sector Policy-Making Processes

As Stivers (1990, p. 88) notes, “A key question in the history of the U.S. administrative state has been the extent to which the administration of a representative government can accommodate citizens actively involved in public decision making.” While, as Stivers makes clear, the idea of public involvement in the development, implementation, and assessment of public policy is not new, the extent and nature of this involvement has evolved in advanced democracies, becoming more direct, deliberative, authoritative, and state-facilitated. As Roberts (2015), building on the question asked by Stivers observes:

What makes this question even more intriguing for administrative theory and practice is the “social experiment” that has been underway over the course of the last century, especially since 1950. Citizen participation has been mandated in many public policies and programs. Citizens have been included more directly (either by law or administrative discretion) into administrative practice (U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, 1979).... Although the federal government did not pursue one policy toward participation (Stenberg, 1972), through its interventions, direct citizen participation became more of a feature in urban renewal, juvenile delinquency, poverty, manpower training, model cities, neighborhood health centers, and community mental health programs. There appeared to be a two-level process: The national level provided funds and guidelines and the local level executed plans and programs. The locus of implementation was in the neighborhood with ordinary citizens exercising varying degrees of control depending on the community and its citizens.

² Of course, citizens can engage in ways that bypass the state entirely, through such mechanisms as neighborhood watch groups or voluntary associations that directly take on the task of authoritatively allocating goods, services, and values. However, such forms of participation, while clearly important, would not, by my definition, constitute “public sector” engagement or communication (instead being more representative of the public sphere), since it does not directly involve the state.

This trend was compatible with the ever-broadening power of the citizen in the electoral process through political parties and their conventions, the direct primary, initiatives, referenda, and recalls, boards and commissions, and public opinion polls that are considered to be unofficial referenda in the minds of elected officials. (Roberts, 2015, pp. 4; 9)

The question raised by Stivers and elaborated on by Roberts has become even more pressing as new forms of digital technologies have increased the ability of citizens to engage in both public sphere (i.e., citizen-to-citizen) and public sector (i.e., citizen-to-government) communications, and to do so at unprecedented volume and speed (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). These technologies also afford public sector institutions new ways to include citizens in the policy-making process (Macintosh, 2004; Noveck, 2015). And similar state-facilitated or sanctioned “experiments” addressing an expanding range of local, national, regional, and global issues can be found in other countries. Unsurprisingly, most of these efforts to increase citizens’ discursive involvement have occurred in advanced democracies (see, e.g., Goldfrank, 2007; Hadzi-Miceva-Evans, 2010; Lewanski, 2013; Peters & Savoie, 1998; Worthington, Rask, & Minna, 2013). But citizen engagement initiatives can also be found in emerging democracies, and even in politics considered otherwise undemocratic (see, e.g., Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2003; Chugunov, Kabanov, & Zenchenkova, 2016; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Helbig, Dawes, Dzhusupova, Klievink, & Mkude, 2015; Heller & Rao, 2015; King & Hickey, 2016; Kornreich, Vertinsky, & Potter, 2012; Youngs, 2015).

These public sector efforts to increase direct citizen involvement in policy selection, implementation, and assessment vary widely in their ambition, form, and success. Nonetheless, collectively they share several overarching characteristics (or more accurately aspirations) that distinguish them from more common communications among citizens in the public sphere, as well as from other forms of state-citizen communication found in the public sector (e.g., constituent letters or protests). First, they are state-sponsored or sanctioned; that is, they are designed as formal parts of the policy process. Second, they are structured; that is the goals, roles, responsibilities, communication channels and other supporting infrastructures, timelines, resources, etc., are institutionalized by and within the state (though often in partnership with public sphere organizations). Third, they are dialogic and deliberative; that is, outcomes are not (in theory at least) preordained, but are expected to emerge from the process of citizen-to-citizen and, ultimately, citizen-to-state interactions. Fourth, they are instrumental; that is they are designed to identify and address specific, tangible problems through state policy-making. And fifth, they are authoritative; that is the decisions reached through citizen-state interactions are intended to at least influence and ideally determine subsequent state action.

Of course, not all forms of citizen engagement in the policy-making process align perfectly with these characteristics, not all achieve their goals, and some are arguably designed to provide a democratic veneer on less than democratic institutions. Why is this the case? As Roberts (2015) reminds us, “Citizenship participation is the cornerstone of democracy, but there is a deep ambivalence about citizens participating *directly* in their government” (p. 3). This ambivalence has roots in doubts about citizens’ individual and collective ability and motivation to discern what is in their own and the public interest (see, for example, Achen & Bartels, 2016; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), as well as in skepticism regarding the ability and motivation of those in power to share it with the public in meaningful ways. At their worst, efforts to increase the direct involvement of citizens can be little more than placebos, devolve into problematic forms of populism, and/or lead to the “democratization of inequalities” (e.g., Lee, McQuarrie, & Walker, 2015).

These critiques are sobering, and suggest the need for being careful in designing ways for citizens to discursively engage, being pragmatic in deciding when such efforts are appropriate, and being realistic in one’s expectations regarding outcomes. But they also suggest that to be effective, efforts to increase the meaningful engagement of citizens may ultimately require a more holistic approach, involving the democratization of both the public sector and the larger public sphere.

The Public Sphere Foundations of Public Sector Engagement: The US Case³

What should be clear is that regardless of its particular form, citizens' engagement in both the public sphere and the public sector are fundamentally communicative acts. In the public sphere such "discursive participation" (Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009) can take many forms—from brief exchanges over the phone, via e-mail, or on social network sites; to informal conversations at work or home; to participation in online or face-to-face public forums. As noted earlier, these citizen-to-citizen exchanges are conceptually and pragmatically distinct from public sector communication, which by definition requires participation by representatives of the state. But the former are relevant to the latter in three important ways. First, public sphere exchanges allow citizens to develop their own individual and collective policy priorities, preferences, assessments, and so forth. Second, they can create a political culture that encourages and models citizen engagement in public issues. And third, they can encourage and even become part of more formal mechanisms connecting citizens and their views to the state, linking the public sphere to the public sector through, for example, state-sponsored or endorsed initiatives designed to authoritatively address specific issues of public concern. A democratic public sphere is not *sufficient* for guaranteeing a democratic public sector. Nor is it *necessary* in order for a state to engage in specific experiments with democratic public sector engagement. However, it is hard to imagine a sustainable democratic public sector without an equally sustainable democratic public sphere.

Of course sustained and meaningful engagement in the public sphere and/or public sector can be costly, requiring individuals who are willing and able to deliberate collectively with each other (and, in the case of the public sector, with representatives of the state), to devote time and effort to addressing sometimes complex issues, and to interact with individuals who may not understand or support their views. And a good deal of research suggests that citizens lack the motivation, ability, and opportunity to pay these costs, perhaps even more so today than in the past (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2003). But how then do we explain findings (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2009) indicating that, despite these individual and organizational constraints, a substantial percentage of Americans regularly engage in some form of deliberation about public issues? The answer lies in part in institutions designed to increase the opportunities and lower the costs of discursive participation.

Consider the US case. A variety of institutions exist that provide opportunities for citizens to engage in formal and informal discussions about public matters. Many are traditional community organizations that act locally and independently of each other (Leighninger, 2006). These associations have been a mainstay of American political culture since its founding (De Tocqueville, 2003), but in recent decades their influence has arguably waned, raising concerns about the state of American public life (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2003). In response, a loose network of government and nongovernmental organizations, designed to encourage, facilitate, and revitalize the deliberative aspects of the public sphere and its relationship to the public sector, has emerged. This network is motivated by a belief in the importance of citizen's discursive involvement in public life, both as an instrument to achieve other goals (i.e., to promote policy change) and as an end in and of itself (i.e., to enhance the civic and democratic fabric of society). It also includes the emergence of a profession devoted to the participation of ordinary citizens in discussions of issues affecting their local, national, and global communities. As such it serves as an organizational infrastructure that provides citizens with the ability, motivation, and opportunity to engage discursively with each other and with representatives of the state about public issues. It also serves as a gateway linking the private and public spheres with the public sector.

³ This section is based in part on an updated version of portions of Chapter 7 of Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009.

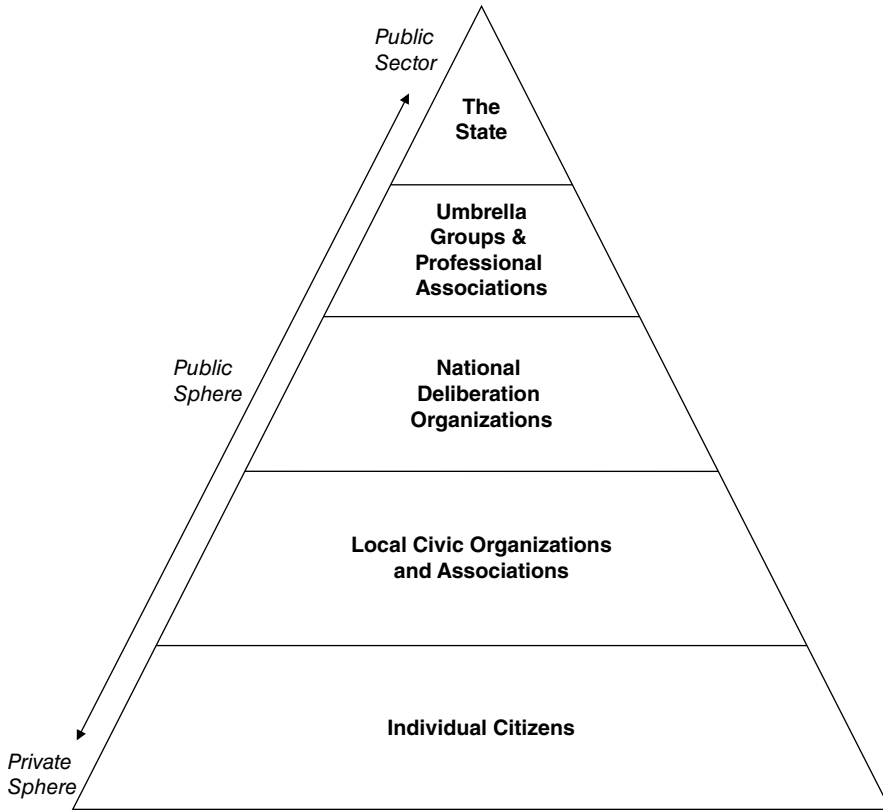


Figure 1.1 The organizational infrastructure of public sector engagement.

Simplifying, this network consists of five layers (see Figure 1.1). At the base are individual citizens, interacting with each other in informal and unstructured ways on issues of private concern. Of course these individual citizens can also engage discursively with each other about matters of public import (i.e., enter the public sphere), and even communicate directly or indirectly with the state (i.e., enter the public sector), but doing so as atomized individuals in a way that is sustainable and effective is difficult. One layer up are the thousands of local organizations such as church groups, civic associations, businesses, schools, libraries, and the like that encourage, facilitate, and structure this more public-oriented communication, acting as bridges between the private and public spheres, and—to varying degrees—between the public sphere and the public sector.

In some cases these are free-standing entities with no formal affiliations to regional or national organizations (e.g., a local reading group); in others they are connected to regional, national or international organizations (e.g., a local chapter of a union, voluntary association, or political party). Some have long-standing presences in their respective communities (e.g., a Rotary club) while others are more spontaneous and/or ephemeral (e.g., an ad hoc group organized in response to a recent racial incident or a community development plan). Some engage in a wide range of issues and activities (e.g., a local library) while others are more issue specific (e.g., a neighborhood crime watch association). Despite this variation, however, they share a common feature—they are all nongovernmental entities with the local social capital and grassroots connections to bring members (of an organization or the larger community) together to address public issues.

One layer above are a smaller number of national organizations, some of which (e.g., national political parties, unions, or religious institutions) have long if arguably shrinking traditions of facilitating public engagement (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2003). But others have formed more recently to explicitly encourage and facilitate community dialogue and deliberation (see Ryfe, 2002), most often by working with the local institutions (and at times government agencies and offices) described earlier. These more recent national organizations tend to be supported by foundations, are steeped in various and often competing theories and practices of dialogue and deliberation, and are centrally committed to the *processes* of public participation rather than to particular issues or communities.

One example of such an organization is the National Issues Forums (NIF), begun in 1981 and supported by the Kettering Foundation.⁴ NIF is “a network of civic, educational, and other organizations... whose common interest is to promote public deliberation in America.” The organization

does not advocate specific solutions or points of view but provides citizens the opportunity to consider a broad range of choices, weigh the pros and cons of those choices, and meet with each other in a public dialogue to identify the concerns they hold in common.

NIF forums, led by trained moderators, have been organized around dozens of public issues, including health care, immigration, social security, ethnic, and racial tensions, education, sustainable growth, and energy use.

A similar organization is Everyday Democracy (formerly the “Study Circles Resource Center”) founded in 1989 with the support of philanthropist Paul Aicher.⁵ Everyday Democracy describes its mission as helping “communities work equitably and inclusively in order to build a strong democracy and improve the quality of life for everyone.” Like NIF, it organizes deliberative gatherings of citizens on a host of topics. And like NIF, its goal is to help “local communities create and sustain equitable and inclusive public dialogue that leads to positive change,” and that ultimately can serve as “the cornerstone of a vibrant national democracy.” However, in recent years, Everyday Democracy has become more explicit than NIF in linking these deliberations to the formal policy-making process,⁶ serving as a bridge not only between the private and public spheres but also between the public sphere and the public sector. This additional bridging function is clear in Everyday Democracy’s description of the kind of local and national democracy they envision, in which “elected officials have many opportunities to hear from everyday people,” and “people have ways to work with decision-makers to create public policy.” This bridging function is also clear from their explicit goal of building a “civic infrastructure” that provides “routine opportunities for people of many backgrounds to dialogue with each other *and with public officials, and to have a voice in decision making.*”⁷

The fourth layer of this organizational infrastructure consists of umbrella groups or professional associations. Members of these groups and associations include national organizations such as the NIF and Everyday Democracy, as well as numerous organizations, firms, and individual consultants that specialize in facilitating public deliberation projects. Importantly, they also include mid-level government employees tasked by law to include citizen participation

⁴ All descriptions and quotes drawn from the NIF website over the past 10 years: <http://www.nifi.org/>.

⁵ All quotes and descriptions drawn from the Everyday Democracy website over the past 10 years: <http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Index.aspx>.

⁶ In recent years even NIF has been exploring ways to link its public deliberations to the state, either through dissemination of its reports or by including government officials in their deliberative processes.

⁷ All italics included in direct quotes in this section have been added by the author for the sake of emphasis.

in the development and/or implementation of public policy initiatives, and, to a lesser degree, researchers interested in the issue of public deliberation from a more scholarly perspective.

One such umbrella association is the National Coalition for Deliberative Democracy (NCDD). NCDD emerged from the Hewlett-funded 2002 National Conference on Dialogue & Deliberation.⁸ Starting from the premise that “dialogue and deliberation are powerful group processes that help people bridge gaps, make better decisions, take collective action, resolve conflict and become more active citizens,” the purpose of the NCDD is to address “a growing, vibrant, but inchoate field of public deliberation in which practitioners are versed in completely different terminology, techniques and resources, and emphasize different outcomes—despite the similarity of their basic values and principles.”

To address these concerns NCDD: (a) “brings together people and groups who actively practice, promote, and study inclusive, high quality conversations;” (b) works to develop “a common knowledge base in the dialogue and deliberation community;” (c) provides practitioners and researchers with “important resources, information, news and tools;” (d) initiates and runs “collaborative projects with other dialogue and deliberation programs to build knowledge in the field;” and (e) provides “members of the dialogue and deliberation community with the means to collaborate on projects.” One of the most important tools used by NCDD is its website, which contains “3,000 carefully described and referenced resources (discussion guides, methods, evaluation tools, articles, books, videos, etc.)” as well as “more than 2,000 posts about funding and job opportunities, events and trainings, new articles and tools.” As of 2015, NCDD had nearly 2,200 organization and individual members, and over 35,000 email subscribers.

A second example of an umbrella association—the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC)—has an even clearer and more explicit focus on public sector communication as defined in this chapter.⁹ Founded in 2002, DDC’s mission is “to bring together practitioners and researchers to support and foster the nascent, broad-based movement to promote and institutionalize deliberative democracy *at all levels of governance* in the United States and around the world.” Composed of more than 50 member organizations, DDC’s goals include: (a) giving “*local government managers and other leaders* the big picture of public engagement and help them start to make plans and decisions on engagement;” (b) “*help[ing] public leaders* find the examples and resources they need to engage citizens;” (c) “*integrat[ing] research and practice in the field,*” (d) “*integrat[ing] online and face-to-face approaches [to deliberation];*” and (e) “*help[ing] to build a permanent infrastructure* for deliberative democracy.” To achieve these goals, the DDC engages in a number of activities, including the promotion “of the philosophy and methods of deliberative democracy *to all levels of government.*”

A third example, and one that, like the DDC, is explicit in its goal of connecting citizens to government and the policy-making process, is the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2).¹⁰ Founded in 1990, IAP2 seeks “to promote and improve the practice of public participation in relation to individuals, *governments*, institutions, and other entities that affect the public interest in nations throughout the world.” It has over 4,000 organization and individual members (including many from within government) from 26 different countries, and 16 worldwide chapters that provide professional training and other services. It also cosponsors (with DDC) the *Journal of Public Deliberation*.

The IAP2’s first goal is promoting citizen and stakeholder participation both as a value in itself and as “*indispensable input for decision makers.*” The Association’s assumption is that “those who are affected by a decision have a *right to be involved in the decision making process*” and to

⁸ All quotes and descriptions are drawn from the NCDD website over the past 10 years: <http://www.thataway.org/>.

⁹ All quotes and descriptions are drawn from the DDC website over the past 10 years: http://icma.org/en/results/management_strategies/leading_practices/civic_engagement/deliberative_democracy_consortium.

¹⁰ All quotes and descriptions are drawn from the IAP2 website over the past 10 years: <http://www.iap2.org/>.

“influence the decision.” IAP2 links its efforts to stimulate public participation in community decisions with a commitment to *“educat[ing] decision makers* about the value of public participation.” Its devotion to helping “the public play an effective role in public participation processes” is reflected in the Association’s awards to local and city governments for seeking out the “community’s shared views,” and in its efforts, as demonstrated in a collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, to “bridge the gap between the public and formal institutions of government.”

The IAP2’s second, related goal is to “encourage and enhance the professional development of people working in public participation,” including those within government. To do so, the Association offers certified training programs in the tools and skills needed to organize and facilitate the process of public participation. Through 2015 IAP2 had trained over 17,000 individuals from the private and public sectors in public participation methods.

Finally, the uppermost layer in Figure 1.1 is “the state,” here defined as the institutions and people of government. The state plays three key roles in the public sector communication process: informing citizens; listening to citizens; and responding to citizens. How they do this, and the authoritative role that citizens play, determines how democratic the process is. For example, legislation that requires meaningful public input in policy development, implementation, or assessment is evidence of a more democratic process. So too are agency websites that encourage public input, or government participation in deliberative forums organized by non-state organizations.

In sum, connecting the private sphere, public sphere, and sphere of public authority (i.e., the public sector) requires efforts that enhance the motivation, ability, and (most importantly) the opportunity to do so. In the United States, this occurs through a network of civil, civic, and governmental efforts, some long-standing and others more recent in their formation. It is important, however, not to overstate either the extent, embeddedness, cohesiveness, or influence of this public engagement network. Structured deliberation about policy issues (among citizens and between citizens and the state), while more common than sometimes realized, are still atypical of the policy formation, making, and implementing process. Organizations dedicated to deliberative processes often struggle to support themselves, as demonstrated by the recent closing of *AmericaSpeaks* (a national organization that had directly engaged hundreds of thousands of people in deliberation) after 20 years in operation. Too often citizens’ voices in the public sphere remain disconnected from the public sector. And outcomes—whether in terms of increases in citizens’ ability and motivation to engage in policy debates, the creation of a culture of public engagement, or the quality and perceived legitimacy of policy decisions—remain something of an open question. Nonetheless, there are lessons to be learned that are instructive to our understanding of the relationship between the public sphere, the public sector, and democracy.

Concluding Thoughts: From Democratic Public Sector Communication to a Democratic Public Sector

All governments authoritatively allocate goods, services, and values—that is, make public policy—and doing so requires that they communicate with their citizens. This is true regardless of the form of government. What differs is the substance of what is communicated, who communicates it, how and when it is communicated, and ultimately what role this communication plays in the policy process. Public sector communications become more democratic as citizens move from passive givers and receivers of information to active and authoritative participants in the selection of public issues to address, the debate over and selection of solutions to public problems, the implementation of chosen solutions, and the assessment and reconsideration of these solutions. This more active role for citizens in the work of the public sector can occur

sporadically, as when less than democratic regimes “experiment” with public engagement in some aspect of the policy process (e.g., the use of deliberative polling to decide which of thirty infrastructure plans should be implemented by a local city government in China. See Fishkin, 2009). Or it can be integrated more fully and deliberately (in both senses of the word) into the policy-making process writ large (e.g., the explicit inclusion of “community participation” in the “construction, implementation, and evaluation” of local development planning in the South African constitution. See Williams, 2006). It is in the latter cases that one can begin to speak meaningfully about a democratic public sector, as opposed to isolated acts of democratic communication.

This definition of democracy is both different from and more stringent than the more typical yardsticks based on the ability of citizens to monitor the actions of the state, and to periodically reward or punish its representatives through elections (Schudson, 1998). It is also more suspect, given the demands it places on citizens and doubts about their ability and motivation to meet these demands. To be sure, the decision to engage with fellow citizens in the public sphere, and with the state in the public sector, is ultimately made by individuals, and personal resources and traits play an important role in this decision. Individual choices to participate are shaped, however, by the broader organizational context of discursive practice, and the opportunities or roadblocks this context provides. It is here that the structure of both the public sphere and the public sector become important. The presence of institutions—both within and outside of the state—designed to promote and facilitate meaningful and informed public participation, can lower the costs and increase the benefits to both individuals and the publics of which they are a part.

The brief case study of efforts to maintain such an institutional structure in the United States reveals a complex, interactive mix of independent and coordinated activities led by a coalition of local, regional, and national foundations, civic groups, nongovernmental organizations, mid-level civil servants, academics, and professional associations; a “bottom up” and “top down” effort that is linked to a growing number of local, state, and national requirements for public input into the policy process. And while this case study focuses on the United States, similar efforts are occurring, to different degrees and in ways tailored to different contexts, across the globe (see, e.g., Cornwall & Coelho, 2007, for examples drawn from Brazil, Bangladesh, India, South Africa, Canada, Argentina, Angola, and the United Kingdom).

That said, it is important not to romanticize these initiatives. While a good amount of research exists (largely in the form of descriptive case studies or normative arguments), many questions remain unanswered. How extensive are formal initiatives to include citizens in the policy-making process? What conditions lead to their formation? Have they taken enough root to become stable features of public life? What factors help immunize them from abuse? Can they counteract the more pernicious effects of a deteriorating public sphere evident in many advanced democracies? And ultimately, are they effective mechanisms for improving the substance, effectiveness, and perceived legitimacy of the public sector and the policies produced by it? These are crucial questions best answered through a combination of a systematic inventory or meta-analysis of existing research; more comparative research (across cases as well as across politics); greater collaboration among deliberative and public administration scholars, as well as among scholars and practitioners; greater attention to the affordances provided by digital technologies; and, perhaps most importantly, more systematic and generalizable research on the impact of different forms of public sector and public sphere communications on both public attitudes and on public policy.

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