


7-1-2014

## Democracy by Design

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### Recommended Citation

Thomas, Nancy L. (2014) "Democracy by Design," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.

Available at: <http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol10/iss1/art17>

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# Democracy by Design

## **Abstract**

Renewing US democracy will require an active and deliberative public, people who can work together to address pressing social and political problems. To engage effectively Americans need an understanding of how American democracy works, its foundations and the complex and sometimes changing dimensions to those foundations. Advocates for increasing active and deliberative citizen engagement need to work with reformers in different areas of democracy's ecological system, integrating public engagement with reform efforts in justice and equal opportunity, knowledge and information development, and government integrity.

## **Keywords**

Public Participation, Democracy, Equal Opportunity, Government Integrity, Justice

Every generation of Americans has been able to point to deep challenges to democracy, as well as to social and political reforms to address those challenges. This Special Issue of the *Journal of Public Deliberation* consists of a collection of insights by practitioners and academics who, for the most part, advocate for a particular reform: increased and improved participation by everyday Americans in public discourse, policy making, and social change. American democracy works better when *all* citizens (referring to residency, not legal status) possess the knowledge, skills, social networks, and inclination, and have the opportunity, to address difficult public problems together.

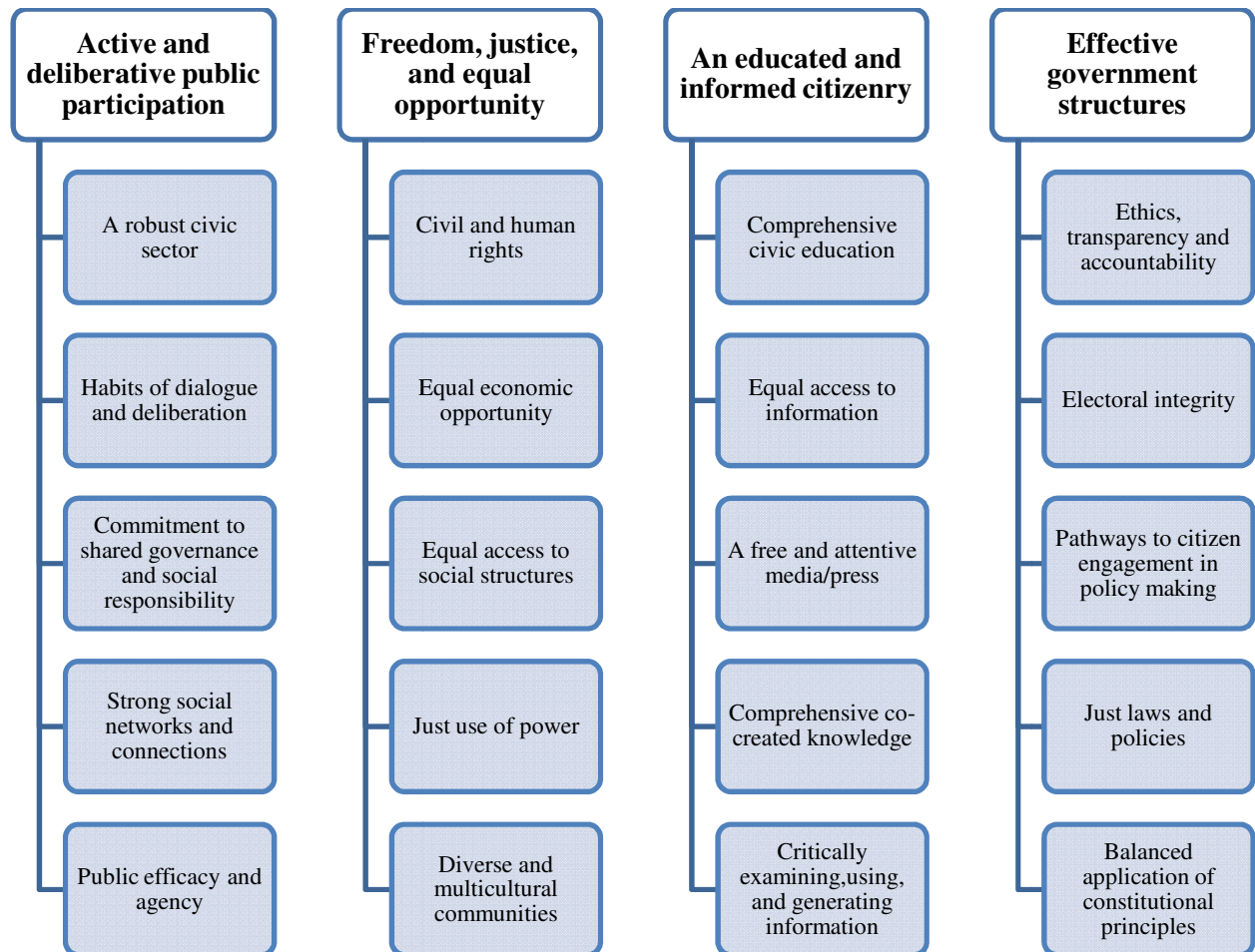
In this essay, I make the case for connecting the kind of public engagement reviewed in this Special Issue with a broader reform agenda, what I will call *Democracy by Design*. It is a pragmatic and relatively simple framework for a robust democracy, consisting of four foundations: active and deliberative public participation; freedom, justice, and equal opportunity; an educated and informed citizenry, and; effective government structures. The language “by design” suggests a framework for democracy, not just disconnected mechanics, intentionally crafted and integrated for positive social consequences. I developed this concept, captured in the graphic below, as a road map for undergraduate education for democracy. Exploiting Thomas Huxley’s adage “learn something about everything and everything about something,” I propose that college students (and *all* Americans) should learn this framework or a version of it to fulfill their obligation to know “something” about how democracy works. And by the time they graduate, college students should know “everything” about at least one dimension of one of the four foundations (one “small box”).<sup>1</sup> Democracy by Design is a work-in-progress, open to discussion, critique, and improvement.

I worry that dialogue and other forms of public engagement can happen without context and without an image of a robust democracy in mind. I also believe that, absent successes in all foundations of the framework, citizen public engagement will work only on a small scale, if at all. The work described in this issue needs to be connected to other dimensions of a robust democracy – the other boxes – to realize its full potential.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to members of the Democracy Imperative (TDI) board, particularly Pat Scully, Peter Levine, and TDI co-director Tim Shaffer, who helped shape this working-version of the framework. I am also grateful to the organizers of gatherings hosted by the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, the Campaign for Stronger Democracy, the Kettering Foundation, Everyday Democracy, CIRCLE, and the New England Resource Center for Higher Education. The topics of this design have been the subject of many discussions and planning groups, all of which helped shape this framework.

**Democracy by Design includes the following:**



**Active and Deliberative Public Participation**

Much has been written about the so-called crisis in civic life and the decline of social capital, those reserves of associations, trust, and norms that enable public problem solving. Robert Putnam’s compelling image of Americans “bowling alone” rather than in leagues captured concerns over declining engagement in faith communities, nonprofits, PTAs, labor unions, and the like. He and many others rallied civic leaders, policy makers, and educators and arguably spurred an industry concerned with measuring and improving civic life. Emerging around the same time were more localized civic renewal efforts, grass-roots problem solving, such as the healthy communities movement and local crime prevention efforts. Old organizations (e.g., fraternal orders and women’s leagues) were replaced with issue-driven coalitions (e.g., child advocates and immigration organizations). Alongside these efforts and deeply embedded in the best of them has been deliberative democracy—informed citizens with diverse life experiences

and perspectives coming together, exchanging viewpoints, deliberating choices, and collaboratively implementing fair solutions, with and without government involvement.

I entitled this foundation “active and deliberative” to highlight both the aspiration and the tensions in public participation. As the authors in this issue note, dialogue and deliberation serve many purposes, including facilitating mutual understanding, building relationships and social connections, identifying possible solutions to public problems, breaking down polarization, and co-creating sustainable solutions for the common good. This approach strives for neutrality or impartiality, allowing for all perspectives to hold merit, for all voices to be heard, which works ... until it doesn't. I am reminded of the US Supreme Court's two-part ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* 50 years ago. *Brown I*, lawyers call it, struck down legal segregation. A year later, *Brown II* suggested that compliance need not be immediate but could be pursued cautiously, “with all deliberate speed.” Today, the promise of equal public education remains unrealized. When deliberative means maintain an undemocratic status quo, a more decisive, action-oriented approach is warranted.

The challenge may be in knowing when to employ more deliberative versus more active approaches, or, stated another way, when to remain neutral. On this point, I would argue that advocates of public participation should *never* be neutral about the foundations of a robust democracy.

### **Freedom, Justice, and Equal Opportunity**

American democracy is premised upon certain principles. Historian Eric Foner wrote,

No *idea* is more fundamental to Americans' sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation than freedom. The central term in our political vocabulary, “freedom” – or “liberty,” with which it is almost always used interchangeably – is deeply embedded in the documentary record of our history and the language of everyday life (1998, xiii).

How true. From an early age, Americans learned that English settlers risked their lives for religious freedom. Students memorize the Declaration of Independence and in doing so learn that they have unalienable Rights, among them Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. Immigrants arriving in New York's harbor were welcomed by the Statue of Liberty, the Roman goddess of freedom, Libertas.

Freedom to prosper and freedom from an overly intrusive government seem well-understood in American society, but I question whether the same holds true for other core American principles of justice and equal opportunity. Granted, students pledge allegiance to a flag that stands for “liberty and justice for all” and the Declaration of Independence leads with “Truths,” among them that all Men are created equal. But the founders of the US Constitution ensured that greater

power rested with land owners and White men, and none believed in equality between rich and poor, much less across gender and race.

At the very least, people should be able to live free from oppression, but we usually think of oppression in terms of unabashed power – the oppressive dictator or abusive spouse. Over the past fifty years, the civil rights movements exposed the most visible discrimination, prejudice, and abuses of power. Yet Tatum (1999), Young (2000), and others have argued that what remains are general patterns of structural inequality that perpetuate and even exacerbate disparities despite ongoing efforts to break them down.

Power dynamics may persist because the dominant culture has projected its particular way of seeing social and political norms and systems so successfully that that view has become the natural order, even by those disempowered by it (Tong, 1989). This problem is stickier than overt oppression, individual bigotry, or discrimination. As a result, well-meaning people maintain the status quo, usually unconsciously, by going about their business without realizing the implications (Adams, et. al. 1997, 11).

We can't be neutral about giving people an equal opportunity to participate in and shape the social, political, and economic systems that affect their lives. Advocates for active and deliberative engagement need to be attentive to power dynamics, structural inequality, and unconscious privilege. If we don't, we risk becoming those well-meaning people who unconsciously perpetuate the status quo.

### **An Educated and Informed Citizenry**

Few people question the value of quality public education, liberal and civic learning, free speech, an impartial press, and an attentive citizenry able to examine and critique information. Unfortunately, our public education system is not educating for citizenship. In 2013, CIRCLE's Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge issued *All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement*, a report on challenges to civic education. According to the report, only nine states require students to pass a social studies test to graduate from high school and just eight states cover social studies in their standardized testing. The NAEP Civics Assessment was canceled by the federal government in 2013 due to budget cuts (16). In addition, students have unequal opportunities for high quality civic education. Civics is taught more in schools in affluent communities than in schools that serve low-income and minority youth, and both class and race correlate with lower scoring on the NAEP Civics Assessment (17).

Deliberation advocates lament their inability to get to scale, to make active and deliberative public participation the norm in American society. Imagine how much easier that task would be if students at all levels learned through discussion. Discussing controversial issues emerged in CIRCLE's research as a high impact practice in civic learning at the K-12 level (Kawashima-

Ginsberg, 2013). And studies show that students learn better through inquiry and discussion (McKeachie, 1994; Hess, 2009, 18). Everyday citizens without expert knowledge are capable of public reasoning. The task of engaging citizens would be easier if Americans developed the habits of active and deliberative citizens while in school and college.

### **Effective Government Structures**

We need to change the way campaigns are financed, restore transparency and accountability to government, and flip power back to American citizens. At a conference in June 2014, Bob Brandon of the Fair Elections Legal Network lamented, “We have a system in which politicians select their voters rather than voters selecting their politicians.” Gerrymandering, long lines, registration problems, poorly formatted ballots, suppression efforts, and money in politics persist despite the tireless efforts of reform advocates. Only about half of eligible voters actually vote in federal elections (roughly 60% in presidential elections and 40% in mid-term elections). Recently, House Whip Eric Cantor lost his almost-certain seat in Congress based on votes by 12 percent of the eligible voters.

Advocates for particular reforms may believe that their solution (More activism! More deliberation! More access! Better education!) is *the best* solution. Not infrequently, I’ve heard advocates for deliberative engagement mutter (and I’ve even said it myself, until recently), “Voting? I don’t really care about voting.” I’ve come to believe that this is a mistake. Among the desired outcomes of structured deliberative processes are “shared governance,” “moving to action,” and “effectuating policy change.” These outcomes will go largely unrealized if we don’t elect people who will listen to their constituents and collaborate for the common good.

Democracy by Design presents an image of connected systems essential to a robust democracy. It has four foundations that, I would argue, should not be changed. Each foundation has multiple dimensions that are subject to discussion, critique, and perhaps substitution as social and political reforms succeed.

With more explanation and many arrows, Democracy by Design might help democracy reformers see the connections among reforms. Dialogue and deliberation can improve teaching. Access to social structures can build strong social networks and connections. Better media can increase transparency and accountability in government. Diverse and multicultural communities can co-create knowledge that leads to just laws and policies.

Perhaps Democracy by Design can help shape higher education’s goals for student political learning and engagement in democracy. The four foundations and their dimensions, in addition to their relationship to each other, are the “something” that all Americans can learn. College students, regardless of their field of study, should learn “everything” about one dimension of a foundation so that they can become active and deliberative participants in processes to ensure that ambitious democratic reforms take hold.

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