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Katherine J. Cramer

University of Wisconsin-Madison, kathy.cramer@wisc.edu

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Equity through Learning to Listen: The Case of Public Discussion on Body-Worn Cameras in Madison, Wisconsin

Abstract

This article analyzes practitioners' attempt to achieve equity in a public input process on a local racial justice issue: whether or not the police department should implement body-worn video cameras. The insights of the two practitioners who led the public input process reveal 4 main lessons. First, equity in public deliberation is achieved sometimes by intentionally excluding some voices. Second, members of marginalized groups are motivated at times by the potential to be heard. Third, the case suggests that for some people public talk is not about achieving democracy; it is instead about life and survival. Finally, the case suggests that in order for deliberation to contribute to greater equity in democracy, people in power need to learn to listen to previously marginalized voices.

Author Biography

Katherine Cramer is Director of the Morgridge Center for Public Service and Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Keywords

Race, Equity, local government, police, public input

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We expect deliberation to achieve many things—better-informed opinions, tolerance, efficacy, well-rounded decisions, and decisions that have legitimacy (e.g., Barabas, 2004; Fishkin, 1995; Gastil, 2000; Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009; Karpowitz & Mendelberg, 2014; Mill 1859 [1956]). Deliberation supposedly enlarges our ability to incorporate moral values into governance (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996); enables an enlightened interpretation of the general will (Mansbridge, 1999); and increases the legitimacy of the decisions reached (e.g., Young, 2001). The expected democratic benefits of deliberation are numerous. But each of those outcomes relies on a particular quality: that a range of people and perspectives be included in the discussion. This means that ideal deliberation should involve equality of access as well as equality of who talks and who gets heard (Mansbridge, 1999; Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000).

But ensuring these things is difficult. As with all political participation, people with resources, particularly income and education, are more likely to show up. Also, people within social networks of politically active people are more likely to be recruited to participate (Jacobs, Cook & Delli Carpini, 2009; Ryfe & Stalsburg 2012; Verba, Scholzman & Brady 1996). Even when people representing a wide range of perspectives are in the room, deliberative processes privilege the views of privileged people (Sanders, 1997; Young, 2001).

Nevertheless, the belief endures that democratic governance is best achieved when people inform the decisions that affect them, and so the field of deliberative democracy continues to strive for ways to incorporate marginalized voices into the process to enable democracy to live up to its promise.

This brings us to the concept of equity. If striving for equality of access, and equality of voice and authority within deliberation is not enough, then perhaps it is time to focus on equity—intentional inequality such that those typically marginalized have the opportunity to voice their preferences and perspectives in all of their complexity, and have those concerns, with all of their nuances, enter into processes of democratic decision-making. Perhaps as a society we are still relatively unskilled at listening to one another. In order to input a wider array of perspectives into the discussions that affect our decisions about how to govern one another, we need to first exclude the voices that typically get heard, and then teach those in power how to listen to that who do not.

This possibility seems particularly acute in the United States with respect to issues concerning racial justice. Race has been a powerful line of exclusion/inclusion in the United States for centuries and these categorizations contaminate deliberative

processes as well (Cramer Walsh, 2007). How then does a community use a deliberative approach to move toward racial equity?

The case discussed in this article suggests some expansions to our current conceptions of equity in deliberation. It is an example of a government-sanctioned process to gather public input for a policy decision about a controversial public issue involving racial justice. I draw on the insights of two practitioners who conducted a public deliberation process in 2015 to gather input for the City of Madison, Wisconsin, on a proposal for the police department to implement body-worn cameras (BWCs). Colleen Butler is the Racial Justice Director for the YWCA Madison. The city hired the YWCA to conduct the public input process. She contracted with Jacquelyn Boggess to conduct most of the focus groups that were a part of this process. Boggess is the Executive Director of the Center for Family and Policy Practice, a national policy advocacy organization located in Madison.

The insights of Butler and Boggess reveal four main lessons with respect to equity in deliberation. First, their insights teach us that equity in public deliberation is sometimes achieved by intentional exclusion. Second, they suggest that members of marginalized groups are not necessarily motivated to participate by the potential to impact policy. Sometimes, the potential to be heard may be enough. Third, the case suggests that as we theorize the role of deliberation in democracy, we should recognize that for some people public talk is not about achieving democracy; it is instead about life and survival.

Finally, the case suggests that in order for deliberation to contribute to greater equity in democracy, people in power need to learn to listen differently. For our deliberative system to achieve equity, we may need public discussion practices that reveal previously disenfranchised voices but also advocacy efforts that compel people to listen to these voices. Without lobbying for policy makers to actually hear what previously marginalized voices have to say, the valuable perspectives revealed through an equitable process may continue to be ignored.

Some definitions are in order here. Deliberation refers to the give and take of ideas in order to arrive at a decision. By deliberative system, I mean the broad range of discussion types that collectively comprise deliberative democracy, including formal deliberation and dialogue focused on voicing perspectives (Cramer Walsh, 2007; Mansbridge, 1999). I use the term 'public discussion' to refer to talk about public problems that is not necessarily intended to result in a decision.

This essay proceeds by reviewing the details of the public debate over BWCs in Madison, and then digests in detail each of the four insights named above. It concludes by noting that the benefit of public discussion is larger than reaching a yes/no decision. Instead, discussion that strives for equity can enhance democracy by revealing unfamiliar and uncomfortable perspectives that are typically marginalized. Decision makers who choose to incorporate public discussion into the policy process can use the outcomes of those discussions to strive toward equity if they remain open to the possibility that those outcomes suggest questions and choices not previously on the table. Even when a public discussion process is created to inform a particular policy decision, the concerns uncovered through that process may suggest that policy makers shift their focus to different questions altogether.

The Case: Body-Worn Cameras in Madison, Wisconsin

The city of Madison, Wisconsin, has long had a reputation as a progressive city. It is home to the state capitol of Wisconsin and the flagship state public university, the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It is also home to the generation of legislation that forms some of the nation's most significant government programs, such as Social Security and the formation of public utilities. Indeed, it was also home to "Fighting Bob" LaFollette, one of the heroes of the Progressive Movement in the early 1900s.¹

However, it is also home to some of the worst racial disparities in the nation. In 2013 the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families published a report called *The Race to Equity* documenting extreme racial disparities between whites and Blacks in the county in which Madison is located in multiple dimensions of life, including employment, health, criminal justice, and education. The report indicated these disparities were the worst among the 72 counties in the state of Wisconsin. They were also among the worst in all of the counties in the entire United States.

Madison had experienced multiple waves of alarm at its racial inequity, followed by calls for public discussion, followed by minimal legislative action. People of color and civil rights activists had been calling for attention to racial disparities in the city for decades. However, when the *Race to Equity* report was published, a variety of factors coincided to keep the issue at the top of the public agenda.

¹ Robert Marion "Fighting Bob" LaFollette Sr. represented Wisconsin in the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate, and also served as Governor of Wisconsin. Originally a Republican, he ran as a Progressive in the 1924 U.S. Presidential election and won 17% of the national vote.

Several months after the release of the report, one of the daily newspapers in Madison published a powerful front-page testimony by a local African-American preacher, the Rev. Alex Gee, Jr., about his personal experience with racial discrimination and injustice in the city (Gee, 2013). Gee had built the momentum from the response to his article into a large and prominent advocacy organization called Justified Anger. During the 2014 city budget cycle, YWCA staff had lobbied the city to implement a racial equity lens when making policy decisions, and the city government had adopted that process.

Issues of racial justice had also gained prominence nationally. The election of Barack Obama to the presidency in 2008 had heightened awareness of both the possibility of racial equity and the extent to which some members of the public regarded such advances as threatening (Potok, 2010; Tesler & Sears, 2010). In 2014, shootings of young Black men by white police officers gained national attention, particularly after the protests following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The spread of smartphones was now putting police violence against racial minorities in front of many people across the United States who had never witnessed such injustices firsthand. The Obama administration responded by making federal funds available for police departments to start using BWCs. The use of BWCs spread quickly across the country.

It was in this context that the issue of BWCs arose in Madison. Several alderpeople on the City of Madison Common Council proposed in late 2014 that the Madison Police Department engage in a pilot of BWC usage. The Common Council president argued in response that the city should first gather community input, particularly from groups who some perceived as having a problematic past history with police, before pursuing this proposal.

City of Madison Mayor Paul Soglin asked the YWCA to conduct a series of focus groups to gather community input on the BWC pilot proposal, because the YWCA had become a main convener in Madison of public discussion about race. Butler was the YWCA Madison staff member in charge of this process. She approached Boggess, a close colleague, about the possibility of conducting the focus groups. Boggess is nationally prominent for her policy work, a former YWCA Madison board member and longtime volunteer, and has a reputation as one of the most skillful facilitators in the city for group discussions about race.

Butler and Boggess recall that when they were first presented with the possibility of running the public input process on the BWC proposal, they admitted to each other that the process might not have an effect on the city council's decision. However, they decided to accept the contract for two main reasons. First, Boggess

and Butler knew that the city would conduct the focus groups regardless of whether or not the two of them accepted the contract, and they wanted to ensure that the discussions were conducted well. Second, during the time they considered accepting the contract, an unarmed young Black man, Tony Robinson, was shot and killed by a white police officer in Madison. The city erupted in protests and calls for change in policing policy. Butler and Boggess accepted the contract based on their awareness that disenfranchised members of the community were hungry to be heard.

When Boggess and Butler met initially with city officials after agreeing to gather public input, they perceived that city officials did intend to use what was said in the focus groups as an important source of information for shaping the resulting BWC policy. It is important for understanding the insights of the two activists, however, that this belief was not the reason that Butler and Boggess accepted the contract. They agreed to take the job because of their perception that people needed to have others hear about their interactions with the police.

Another important aspect of this story is the timeline. When the city passed a resolution in February 2015 asking for “a community and employee engagement process” to contribute to the decision on whether or not to implement a pilot study, it stipulated that the report resulting from these discussions would be delivered by August 4th.² However, when Robinson was killed, the process was substantially delayed. It was not until the end of May that the YWCA received the contract and then contracted with Boggess to conduct the focus groups.

Boggess and Butler had to then quickly decide how to conduct the focus groups and complete the report within the span of 2 months.³ Their goal (and the charge of the contract) was to hear the voices of disenfranchised groups: “communities of color, immigrant communities, crime and domestic violence victims, and the LGBTQ community”.⁴ They perceived that if they merely advertised the focus groups and invited people to self-select into the discussions, they would end up with the “usual suspects.” The usual suspects in this case were the people who regularly participated in activism, volunteerism, and other forms of political and civic participation in the city, which included whites as well as people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Those regular participants were used to speaking

² City of Madison Resolution RES-15-00084, File ID #36838, Retrieved from <https://madison.legistar.com>.

³ The city council eventually voted to extend the timeline, but not until after the focus groups had been conducted.

⁴ City of Madison Resolution RES-15-00084, File ID #36838, Retrieved from <https://madison.legistar.com>.

up and having their voices heard. To try to ensure that they listened to the voices of people whom they had been hired to hear, Boggess and Butler used their relationships with existing nonprofits and activist organizations within each of the disenfranchised communities named above to recruit focus group participants.

This approach undoubtedly meant some people who wanted to participate in these discussions were not recruited to do so, but Boggess and Butler had two justifications. First, they expected that organization leaders with whom they already had relationships would be more likely to successfully encourage their group members to participate. Second, they hoped that existing ties among the group members would make it easier for them to dive right into discussion about policing and BWCs. In other words, they perceived that their recruitment process would allow Boggess to not have to spend valuable time building group trust before getting into the heart of the discussions.

City oversight of the public input process was somewhat ambiguous. At the same time that the city put out a request for proposals for an organization to conduct the focus groups, it was also forming a Community Policing and Body Camera Ad Hoc Committee. The intent of the ad hoc committee was to make recommendations to the Common Council on the framework for the BWC pilot study, and “how to continue to ensure positive relationships and trust between MPD and our citizens” generally.⁵ In addition, in May, after the Robinson shooting, the city also formed a Madison Police Department Policy and Procedure Review Ad Hoc Committee to oversee all police policies. The delays following the Robinson shooting meant that Boggess and Butler had almost completed their work before the Community Policing and Body Camera Ad Hoc Committee began to meet.

Once they completed their report, Boggess and Butler presented it to a variety of city government and community groups. They frequently experienced resistance to their findings. They found that people wanted a yes or no answer to BWCs, and were reluctant to engage with the nuances of the perspectives they had encountered. Some people tried to pull the conversation away from the content of the report toward a definitive yes or no verdict on BWCs. They found that initially, very few people simply said, “We should listen to these typically marginalized voices.” But gradually, the conversation seemed to shift. Boggess perceived one turning point was her presentation at the 2015 YWCA Racial Justice Summit (a large, popular event that drew over 600 people including public officials, activists, nonprofit staff and volunteers, and public employees).

⁵ City of Madison Resolution RES-15-00084, File ID# 36838, Retrieved from <https://madison.legistar.com>.

In November 2015, Boggess presented the results of the study to the Madison Common Council. In the weeks leading up to that presentation, she and Butler presented the results to a variety of city boards and commissions. They encountered resistance to the recommendation that the discussions revealed a more fundamental issue of lack of trust in the police department. In early September, the Community Policing and Body Camera Ad Hoc Committee voted against recommending to the city council that it authorize the pilot study. When Boggess presented to the council in November, she again encountered some resistance. Some white citizens present asked questions about the sampling procedure and other technical details about the study. However, Boggess recalls, as alders sympathetic to the perspectives presented in the report asked her questions, “You could feel in the room that if we don’t listen to this we look really, really stupid. You could feel that in the room.” Later that night, after extensive deliberations, the council voted against the pilot study of BWCs.

Marginalized people may be motivated by the chance to be heard, not the chance to affect policy

This case presents four main lessons. The first pertains to achieving equity in democracy by engaging members of typically marginalized groups. Boggess and Butler faced little to no resistance in their recruitment efforts. Only two groups they contacted to recruit people into the discussions expressed cynicism about the purpose. The other groups they reached out to were very willing to participate, even on short notice. According to Butler (who did most of the recruiting), “Nobody directly said to me that they didn't want to do it because they didn't think the City Council thought that what they thought was important. In fact, I feel like to a group with the exception of [one group] everybody was just glad to have somebody ask them specifically.”

Boggess elaborated:

Often disenfranchised people don't feel like that's what people are asking them when they go to vote. They don't feel like there's ever a situation where people are saying, “There is a policy issue on the table. What’s your perspective on it?” They don't feel like anybody ever asks them that question, in any way, not even through voting. They certainly don't feel like however the decisions are made in the end, it has anything to do with their participation in the social contract.

It is notable that Boggess and Butler are well-respected civil rights activists in Madison, *and* themselves did not expect that the discussions would impact policy.

They did not convince people to participate with a promise that doing so would impact the city's policy decision. Past work has suggested that when deliberation is mere window dressing for a decision already made, it is difficult to encourage people from marginalized groups to participate (Cramer Walsh, 2007; Leighninger, 2006). The opportunity to affect policy does mobilize people to participate in public processes whom prevailing models of participation would not predict would volunteer (Fung, 2004). But this case suggests that in some situations, when the government funds discussions that are conducted in a manner that values the perspectives expressed, the discussions are themselves empowering. Boggess remarked that because she is Black, her race itself was shorthand for "I care, and I am listening." In addition, she actively agreed with people during the discussions at times, validating the views participants were expressing. Boggess and Butler explained that many of the participants were not used to people in power listening to what they had to say. They valued that simple act of being heard.

Equity via intentional exclusion

A second lesson of this case comes from how these practitioners aimed for equity. Boggess and Butler aimed for equity by intentionally excluding some voices. They designed their process specifically to *not* have discussions with people who typically volunteer for such talk in Madison. The result was that people who expected inclusion (almost all of whom were white) were upset about being excluded. Butler describes that the sentiment seemed to be, "I can't believe they are not asking us. I can't believe my voice does not get to be included in the report." One woman called Boggess to insist that Boggess include in the report the woman's experience of being treated poorly during a traffic stop. That and other feedback suggested members of the dominant white community were unfamiliar with stepping back so that previously unheard voices could get airtime.

Also, notice that equity in the overall process was achieved through aiming for homogeneity within each of the groups. Some groups were comprised of African-Americans. Others were comprised of Latinos, and others of members of the LGBTQ community. In this structure, members of a given marginalized group did not have to share airtime with another marginalized group. The design suggests that sometimes deliberative processes can contribute equity to democracy by being intentional about exclusion.

Exclusion is typically seen as something to be avoided in deliberative democracy. Deliberative practitioners often ask, "Which voices are excluded?" and strive to remedy this. But this case draws our attention to the possibility that in order for a

deliberative process to incorporate the views of members of typically marginalized groups, it may be necessary to create spaces in which dominant voices are excluded. This is one way of achieving “deliberate silences” which can productively draw attention to marginalized views (Jungkunz, 2013). It is a reminder that in the practice of democratic deliberation, listening is as important as talk.

Deliberation is not necessarily about democracy but about more fundamental matters

The previous lesson reminds us that public discussion processes can serve different purposes for different people in a democracy. This third lesson suggests that public discussion may be about democracy primarily for the more privileged members of a community. For others, the motivation to participate may be about more basic human concerns.

On a national level, the issue of BWCs has revealed stark differences in the lived experiences of people of different racial backgrounds in the United States. Smartphones have made the killing of young Black men at the hands of police apparent to many whites for the first time; but the fact of such deaths is not a new reality to many people of color.

In a similar respect, the public input process in Madison about BWCs also revealed significant differences in perceptions of issues related to policing. According to Boggess and Butler, the discussion revealed that for people of color the issue at stake was life and survival. For whites, the issue was democratic rights. According to Boggess,

Overwhelmingly, my experience is that... whenever there were white people in any of the focus groups, they all talked about their constitutional rights and how they were being infringed and impeded [such as with respect to privacy]...People of color never talked about their rights, never talked about their rights or how some adversarial institutional question would come out. It was about their liberty or their life that they were talking about...Liberty or life. That's it. The LGBT folks were concerned about, “My life is in danger when [you show my personal life on video].” Immigrants were worried about their citizenship status and their documentation and their deportation and all of that stuff. That’s physical corporal stuff. But white people, almost to a person, it was about their rights.

Boggess said that the discussion for members of marginalized groups was not about debating the political issue of using BWCs or not. “It’s a luxury to be able to think about your political position and your citizenship and your rights.”

When finally given a chance to speak in a state-sanctioned forum, for members of marginalized groups, the topics that are relevant to the discussion include a long history of subjugation. Members of dominant groups may not recognize the need to talk about those histories, and instead may assume that the relevant matters are the more technical aspects of democracy, such as elements of the Bill of Rights, or equal time during discussion.

To illuminate this point during our interview, Boggess used her smart phone to look up a television news story and smartphone video clip about a then-recent (October 2015) incident in a South Carolina high school in which a young Black woman was pulled from her chair and thrown to the ground by a school police officer after refusing to put her cell phone away.⁶ Boggess remarked that the reason such an incident is possible today is that U.S. society still does not acknowledge the legacy of slavery and still does not treat Black Americans as fully human. In this context, for public discussion to be truly equitable, it has to acknowledge the different lived experiences of Black Americans. Until society acknowledges that it has to completely change structures and processes because they have been built upon a faulty premise that some people do not count as much as others, democratic procedures including deliberation are faulty themselves, she explained.

Boggess made a conscious decision to emphasize in the BWC report that the content of the discussions should not be reduced to a yes or no verdict on whether or not to authorize the piloting of BWCs.⁷ In her view, the conversations revealed something far more complex and important: a deep distrust with policing.

Boggess and Butler suggested that the manner in which the Common Council designed the public discussion process conveys a privileged perspective of racial justice. The rushed timeline and intention to make a yes/no decision based on the public input suggests a perspective that any problem can be fixed if addressed

⁶ <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/26/us/south-carolina-spring-valley-high-school-student-video/>

⁷ “Individuals in our community engagement sessions were also eager to weigh in on the practical, technical, and privacy questions of BWV [Body-worn video cameras]. Yet, they tended to talk most about an issue of urgent concern to their families and communities; the mutual fear between people in their neighborhoods and Madison police officers...So, ultimately, we got feedback on the question of BWV, plus a more broad-based analysis of the impact of police activity on the lives of people in Madison”(Center for Family & Policy Practice, 2105, p. 3).

with a plan. In other words, such a structure implies a linear or mechanical assumption of social change: if you put in the right inputs, you will get an acceptable output. In that understanding, if the output or solution does not seem acceptable, the conclusion is likely that the inputs must have been wrong or inappropriate. For example, a common assumption from such a perspective is that if the outcome of a deliberative process is an unwelcome decision, then the procedures used to recruit participants must have been faulty, or perhaps organizers did not provide sufficient information.

In contrast, Boggess and Butler suggested a different perspective for approaching the quest for racial justice: racial inequity is not a “problem” that can be fixed over the course of a summer, and it can not be fixed without first acknowledging policy makers may not even understand what the problem is. It is essential to listen to the voices of disenfranchised members of the community, they argued. But that is just a start. It will not result in *the* solution, and the outcome of the discussion will not be a verdict that tells the entire community what should be done. Public discussion can not “fix it.” Incorporating equity into public discussion may mean acknowledging that the value of such discussions may not lie in arriving at a more enlightened choice on a given policy. Instead, the discussion may reveal the need to subsequently refocus attention onto an even larger issue. When an institution implements a public deliberative process, the perspectives uncovered may reveal the shortcomings of relying on narrow technological solutions to address complex issues such as historical racism and police violence.

However, it may take discussion on a narrowly focused issue to draw policymakers’ attention to the need to address broader, more complex issues. Boggess and Butler said that focusing the questions around BWCs focused the participants’ attention, but did not prevent them from addressing broader issues. The specific policy gave focus to the discussion, and anchored participants’ contributions which might otherwise have led to extremely long conversations.

The insights of Boggess and Butler suggest yet another challenge to our conception of democratic deliberation. If we use deliberative processes in order to bring more equity into public life, we may need to do something completely different than including members of marginalized groups, and we may even need to go beyond excluding typically dominant voices during a dialogue or discovery phase. It may be necessary for dominant voices to remain silent even during a decision-making stage. If equity is about allocating resources unequally so that those who have been left out can now have similar opportunities compared to those who have been previously included in democratic processes, then choices

about reallocation may need to come from those who have been marginalized, not from people whose decisions have perpetuated marginalization.⁸

Achieving equity in democracy may require advocacy as well as deliberation

In the end, at the end of the night after Boggess presented the BWC report to the City of Madison Common Council, the council voted to not implement BWCs. This was consistent with the report's suggestion that BWCs would not solve the larger issue of lack of trust in police. However, Boggess and Butler felt that this decision was reached only because they actively campaigned to ensure that the community members' voices were heard in the months running up to that council meeting. They tried numerous tactics after they began to present the report to various groups and perceived that many people were ignoring the report's nuanced content about distrust with the police. Some examples of this advocacy include Butler calling the Common Council president to express her concern with how the report was being framed. In addition, she and the CEO of the YWCA Madison, Rachel Krinsky, wrote an editorial for an online news site targeted toward communities of color, urging the city to "listen to the voices of the people" (Krinsky & Butler, 2015). Butler perceives that this advocacy was necessary in order for the report to have some impact. Even though the City Council authorized and funded the study, there was no guarantee that they would use the results of the study in their decision-making.

"It was hard," Butler said. "I don't think that the Common Council would have taken the action that it did in the end if Jacquie and I had just delivered the report and did not advocate for close attention to the viewpoints uncovered through our study." The authorizing legislation had stated that the council wanted public input, and was particularly concerned about the viewpoints among members of certain marginalized publics. But it took advocacy as well as deliberation for those viewpoints to affect policy.

Conclusion

⁸ When I asked Boggess and Butler if the participants in these focus groups gave suggestions about how resources should be reallocated, they remarked that such a question is far from the lived reality of the participants. They said that the people in the focus groups were so used to not having their voices heard or getting what they want via conventional democratic processes that the issue did not arise often. They noted that some participants did mention that they wanted to have firefighters and social workers respond to their calls for help, as opposed to members of the police force or other emergency responders who carry guns.

Incorporating equity into the deliberative system requires recognizing that part of what deliberation does for democracies is help us understand the nuances of the perspectives of others. When public discussion is used to inform policy, there is a tendency to want to summarize those discussions in an overly simplistic way, in terms of whether the comments support or oppose that policy. But yes/no votes are not the expressions that are the most valuable outputs of discussion. Public discussion can help increase equity in governance because it has the potential to reveal the complexity of viewpoints. But that will only happen if people in positions of decision-making power actually listen to the viewpoints (Jungkunz, 2013).

If the promise of deliberative democracy is that it incorporates the voices of “the people,” then equality of access to the discussion is not sufficient. As Butler states, “The path to equity is about changing *how people are listened to*, not just changing who is included in the discussion.” It is difficult for deliberative processes to be free from the power imbalances that plague society at large (Mansbridge, 1999). If we wish for deliberative practices to move us toward a more equitable society, then policymakers need to learn to listen to and understand the perspectives that public deliberation reveals.

The tensions Boggess and Butler draw our attention to around policy makers’ vs. participants’ expectations for the outcomes of the public input process, as well as white community members’ frustrations about being excluded suggest that public deliberation practices might benefit from meta-discussions about the deliberations themselves. In a city such as Madison, many residents agree with the principal of equity in theory, but might benefit from an intentional reflection on how discussion might help achieve it in practice.

Striving for equity is a more radical action with respect to deliberative democracy than striving for equality of access. It may be the case that communities that are seeking equity in deliberation are contexts in which active citizens view their community as more progressive than most places. However, it may be those perceptions that are as great a barrier to achieving equity as are existing institutions.⁹ If the culture is such that policymakers assume that they understand the needs and views of residents, and view their local government as highly participatory, they may not readily recognize that it is necessary to take extra steps to listen to the needs of marginalized residents.

⁹ Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) remind us that institutional arrangements such as decision rules can significantly reduce inequalities such as those with respect to gender.

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