Developing Deliberative Practice: Argument quality in public deliberations
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy (ICDD) research associates studied the argument quality and civility of deliberative forums as compared to public hearings and online message boards. The study asked: Does the quality of public argument vary by public forum type? The forum topic—public smoking ban—emerged from a hotly contested public policy considered by the Manhattan, Kansas, city commission. Furthermore, the proposed smoking ban received considerable attention in local election campaigns.

DESIGN

A content analysis was conducted to determine how participants’ forum contributions compare with public hearing testimony and entries posted to online message boards. We analyzed three modes of communication discussing the same local political issue, a ban on public smoking, from May 2005 to May 2007. In sum, nearly 200 comments were analyzed for this study. We hypothesized that arguments advanced in deliberative forums will differ from the other two events; in that, forums will generate arguments more concerned with other participants’ contributions. In addition, the forums will produce a brand of argument that is more civil and open to diverse opinions.

KEY RESULTS

- Participants on message boards show less respect for other people and others’ demands than participants in public hearings and deliberative forums.
- Public hearing and forum participants both generally show greater respect for opposing ideas and groups than disrespect.
- In terms of argument quality, public hearings are composed of more sophisticated arguments (more than one argument); whereas, deliberative forums are composed of more qualified arguments (a single argument).
- Both public hearings and deliberative forums employ personal narratives sparingly and tend to address counterarguments.
- Participants in public hearings forums justify their arguments on the grounds of a special interest much more than participants in deliberative forums.

IMPLICATIONS

1. The research suggests that deliberative forums and public hearings alike offer vibrant and civil spaces for public argument. This suggests that citizens, despite their non-expert status, have the capacity and disposition to create and evaluate policy positions.

2. The smoking ban topic was a “hot” issue in the community with a lot of interest and diametrically opposed positions. Yet in the facilitated forums people participated in a civil manner. People argued their points and respected the views of others without interruptions occurring.

3. The research also suggests that people in deliberative forums are more willing to share power, for discussion participants are not tied to predetermined solutions or self-interested advocacy positions. The evolution of discussion in forums provides a space for more alternative and mediating solutions to emerge; whereas, in public hearings people typically speak from rehearsed and rigid positions that they personally “own.”
Theorists and activists increasingly frame their preferred politics as “deliberative democracy” (Dryzek 1990, 2000; Gastil and Keith 2005). Understanding citizen deliberation as political action is neither a new idea nor exclusive to Western political systems. The earliest human civilizations created a language describing a process of citizens coming together to make collective decisions.1 Likewise, ample evidence from early Greek city-states (Ober 1991) reinforces a historical tradition for citizen deliberations. In addition, a precedent for community deliberations exists in the United States—during the 1930s the American Forum movement organized community discussions on a national scale (Keith 2007). These histories offer a language and organizational structure indicating that deliberation has been a way of doing politics throughout human civilization.

Deliberative democracy, coined in the 1980s (Dryzek 2000, 2), provided the linguistic hook to focus theorists on scholarship addressing the normative conditions and efficacy of discursive politics. What deliberation ought to be and what it should yield are imperative questions that have generated a wide range of defining characteristics and outcomes. Barabas (2004) summarizes deliberative ideals as seeking consensus on a contested issue while simultaneously enlightening participants. Consensus and enlightenment align with a Habermasian notion of discourse ethics wherein the ideal speech situation consists of open participation, justification of assertions, consideration of the common good, respect of other participants, and a rationally motivated consensus (Habermas 1985; Steenbergen et al. 2003).

While important theoretical work has articulated what ought and should be deliberation, there is little clarity about what actually happens when people gather together in hopes of making good collective decisions. Steiner et al. (2004) frame the contemporary research on deliberative democracy in this manner: “The controversies surrounding the deliberative model cannot be resolved at the level of theoretical speculations and that research needs to go beyond illustrative anecdotes” (2004, 42). The authors acknowledge that empirical research will never “determine whether deliberation is a good thing in itself”; yet, empirical research can serve as a “helping hand” in controversies of democratic theory.

Calling for empirical studies is not to suggest that deliberative scholars have failed to produce significant research (see Carpini et al. 2004). Multiple studies examine the ideal conditions of deliberation compared to actual outcomes (Ryfe 2007). This research includes surveying participant attitude change (Ackermann and Fishkin 2002), behavior modification, and influences on public policy. While these studies are effective in testing theoretical assertions, they do little to describe what occurs during deliberations. As David Ryfe states, “What transpires between participants in the forums themselves remains something of a mystery” (2006, 73). Ryfe calls for research focused on the actual happenings of deliberations—the form of communication participants employ. We agree with Ryfe’s assessment and answer his call with a quantitative study focused on forms of communication expressed in public deliberations. We ask the research question: does the quality of public argument vary by public forum type? We answer this question by analyzing the quality of argument in three forms of public deliberation using the Steiner et al. (2004) Discourse Quality Index (DQI).

Steiner et al. created the Discourse Quality Index—a tool to measure deliberation—in response to a lack of “quantitative investigations with reliability tests” (2004, 53). While there are studies that analyze the quality of deliberation in local forums, these investigations typically employ qualitative methods (Steiner et al. 2004). Steiner et al. contend that

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1David Mathews, president of Kettering Foundation, outlined linguistic roots of the language of deliberative democracy in a lecture presented at Kansas State University, March 28, 2008.
qualitative studies are important for discovering the subtleties of deliberative practice; whereas, quantitative studies can speak to audiences (e.g., economists) who prefer different forms of data to be convinced. Ultimately, the DQI was created to bridge political theory and empirical research.

The DQI was formed and tested by analyzing deliberations in parliamentary bodies. The index assumes that deliberation occurs on a continuum ranging from “no deliberation” to “ideal deliberation” (Steiner et al. 2004). The index categories closely follow Habermas’ discourse ethics, which advocate these principles: 1) open participation in deliberation—this principle of deliberation provides participants with space and freedom to advance ideas. The underlying values here are inclusivity and protection against the inequality often experienced in public discourse; 2) justification of assertions and validity claims—this principle signifies the importance of reason giving in weighing decisions. Habermas and the DQI privilege rationality as a condition for healthy deliberation; 3) consideration of the common good—this principle contends that self-interest must be tempered for collective decision making to occur; 4) treatment of other participants with respect—this principle makes a distinction between deliberation and bargaining. Respect is not necessary in bargaining, as mere acceptance results in getting one’s end of the bargain; however, in deliberation explicit respect for another’s ideas or personhood signifies a willingness to engage in deliberation; 5) arrive at a rationally motivated consensus—this principle reveals that deliberations are acts of constructive politics whereby reasonable policies emerge that satisfy participants’ concerns (Steenbergen et al. 2003, 43-73).

Each of these principles, important in their own right, together compose an ethic of deliberation from which we can analyze the quality of argument in deliberations. The DQI offers a coding schema that includes each of the above principles as they occur in participant deliberations. In this way, the DQI provides a method to analyze the communicative elements of actual participants in deliberative forums.

The DQI was created in part, to study parliamentary debates, because parliaments are recognized as legitimate deliberative bodies. While the researchers encourage other applications of the DQI, they are silent on how other types of deliberative forums might be analyzed, particularly those deliberations consisting of non-expert citizens. For this study, we are most interested in analyzing how citizens deliberate on local policy issues they consider important. This includes analyzing various types of public deliberation that occur in public decision making. In our community—Manhattan, Kansas—deliberation occurs in citywide public hearings, deliberative forums, and online message boards. Comparing and contrasting these three types of deliberations, all addressing the same public issue, can provide additional clarity as to what deliberation is and where it occurs.

To expand a fuller spectrum of speech acts, reflecting both formal and informal deliberations involving experts and non-experts alike, we supplemented the DQI coding scheme with these categories: 1) narrativity, 2) humor, 3) types of humor, and 4) learning. We included narratives to examine whether people used personal stories to communicate their demands. Research suggests that non-experts deliberate via narratives (Ryfe 2006), while experts and professional organizations employ traditional argument forms. We also were interested in examining whether humor was used to mediate the difficulties associated with deliberating with neighbors and strangers. Furthermore, the function of the humor is equally important to determine whether it is used as a constructive device or to diminish opposing positions. Finally, we were interested in measuring the degree that deliberation contributes to learning. Barabas (2004) claims that enlightenment is a product of deliberation; by examining the degree to which questions are asked and answered, we can point to communicative elements of deliberations that reflect the presence of a learning process.
DATA AND METHODS

CASE SELECTION OF DELIBERATIONS

In 2005, the city of Manhattan, Kansas, proposed a citywide ban on smoking in all public places, including restaurants and bars. For the next two years, people in the community were actively engaged in both public and private discussions of the ban itself. The city commission held public hearings on November 29, 2005, and May 9, 2006. A total of 66 Manhattan residents spoke at the two events, some in support (n = 38) or opposition (n = 27) to the ban. In addition, a discussion thread emerged on an “unedited” message board in the local newspaper, the Manhattan Mercury. Residents contributed new posts about the smoking ban to the message board from March 11 to March 31, 2007. A total of 28 Manhattan residents posted messages to the board either supporting (n = 11) or opposing (n = 17) the ban. Most people in Manhattan do not smoke, yet their personal habits regarding smoking itself did not necessarily correspond with their position on a citywide ban.

The Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy sponsored a series of public deliberations on the issue, inviting anyone in the public to join. Participants were recruited through advertising in the local newspaper, distributing flyers around the Kansas State University campus and town, and soliciting the cooperation of church pastors, restaurant and bar owners, and others with access to Manhattan residents. All of the deliberations were moderated by a trained facilitator and followed a National Issues Forums (NIF) format. In that format, all citizens were provided with a pamphlet, written and published by ICDD, which explored the regulation of smoking through three frames: public health, pocketbook impact, and personal decision. The pamphlet explored arguments for each frame and compared them without taking sides on any. The function of the pamphlet was to assist participants in organizing their thoughts according to commonly expressed frames of reference. In addition, a short video produced by ICDD introduced participants to the three frames that were summarized in the book. During the discussion, however, discussants typically realized that the frames were not exhaustive and that no solution, satisfying all discussants, can be devised from any single frame.

Transcripts were produced for each of the three types of public forums, and our research compared each type on the quality of the arguments produced in three venues. The “sample” was nonrandom; the participants were not chosen by the researchers. In the case of the public hearing, those people with a vested interest in the outcome and activist-oriented citizens contributed. With the deliberative forums, participants voluntarily attended in response to publicity generated by ICDD. The venues—a church and a bar—generated a participant group diverse in age, education, and socioeconomic status. Because of the anonymity associated with message boards, it is difficult to determine participant composition. What we can conclude is that online deliberators were motivated to contribute because of newspaper coverage of the proposed smoking ban.
UNITS OF ANALYSIS

The DQI unit of analysis is the speech act: that is, an utterance from start to finish in a deliberation. A separate analysis begins each time a participant speaks. A deliberation then consists of a sequence of speech acts. If a person speaks multiple times during a deliberation, then each is coded separately and independently. If someone is interrupted, the interruption is coded separately.

For each speech act, including interruptions, the DQI includes only those parts contained within the framework of a demand. A demand is a proposal that is under consideration by everyone involved in the deliberation. Talk about demands specifically relates to what interlocutors believe should or should not be done. Those parts of a speech act that do not contain a demand often consist of questions, small talk, or comments not related to the issue under discussion. Steiner et al. (2004) believe that the salient feature of any deliberation is the discussion surrounding the demand.

CODING CATEGORIES

The DQI provides a way to quantify content analyses of deliberations. Working from a transcript of a deliberation, coders examine five elements that have been identified as essential to rational discourse: equal opportunity for participation; a high level of justification for arguments, in which justifications rest on references to the common good in their content; respect for groups, demands, and counterarguments; and constructive politics. In addition to the above categories, the authors added four more elements: the amount of narrativity, attempts to learn, the presence of humor, and types of humor. The definitions are given below.

PARTICIPATION

(0) Speaker is interrupted.
(1) Speaker is able to complete his or her speech without interruption.

LEVEL OF JUSTIFICATION

(0) No justification: A claim is made that some X should or should not be done, but no reason Y is given.
(1) Inferior justification: A claim is made that some X should or should not be done, but the reason is incompletely linked to X. This code also applies if a conclusion is merely supported with illustrations.
(2) Qualified justification: A claim is made that some X should or should not be done and one complete reason Y is given for X.
(3) Sophisticated justification: A claim is made that some X should or should not be done and more than one complete reason Y is given for X, or multiple claims are provided, each of which has a complete reason.

CONTENT OF JUSTIFICATION

(0) Explicit statement concerning self-interest or a particular group interest: Someone, or some group, has a vested interest in the outcome of the deliberation.
(1) Neutral statement: A morally neutral justification is provided; there are no specific references to self or group interests, or to the common good.
(2a) Explicit statement of the common good in utilitarian terms: Some mention of the greatest good for the greatest number of people is made explicit.

(2b) Explicit statement of the common good in terms of the difference principle: Some mention of helping the least disadvantaged in society is made explicit.

**RESPECT FOR GROUPS**

(0) No respect: Only negative statements are made about groups.

(1) Implicit respect: No explicitly positive or negative statements are made about groups.

(2) Explicit respect: At least one explicitly positive statement is made about a group.

**RESPECT FOR DEMANDS**

(0) No respect: Only negative statements are made about someone’s demands.

(1) Implicit respect: No explicitly positive or negative statements are made about someone’s demands.

(2) Explicit respect: At least one explicitly positive statement is made about someone’s demands.

**RESPECT FOR COUNTERARGUMENTS**

(0) Counterarguments are ignored: Speaker ignores counterarguments, mediating, or alternative proposals.

(1) Counterarguments are stated but degraded: Counterarguments, mediating, or alternative proposals are explicitly degraded.

(2) Counterarguments are stated: Counterarguments, mediating, or alternative proposals are only mentioned.

(3) Counterarguments are stated and valued: Counterarguments, mediating, or alternative proposals are explicitly valued.

**CONSTRUCTIVE POLITICS**

(0) Positional politics: Speakers sit on their positions. There is no attempt at compromise, reconciliation, or consensus building.

(1) Alternative proposal: A speaker makes a mediating proposal that does not fit the current agenda, but belongs to another agenda.

(2) Mediating proposal: Some proposal that mediates the current debate is made.

The following are additional categories that we included, not found in the DQI.

**NARRATIVITY**

(1) No personal narrative: No reference is made to the speaker’s personal experience.

(2) Personal narrative: Speaker makes reference to his or her personal experience.

**ATTEMPTS TO LEARN**

(0) No questions asked.

(1) Questions are asked, but no answer is given.

(2) Questions are asked and answered.

**HUMOR**

(0) No humor is present.

(1) Humor is present.

**TYPES OF HUMOR**

(1) Self-denigration: Speaker humorously puts himself or herself down.

(2) Personal attack: Speaker ridicules another person in a humorous fashion.

(3) Issue-centered humor: Speaker makes a joke about the issue under discussion.
CODING RELIABILITIES

Inter-coder reliability was assessed using several different indicators (see Table 1 below). The ratio of coding agreement (RCA) consists of the percentage of agreements observed between two coders (Holsti 1969). Cohen's kappa (K) attempts to remove chance agreement from the percentage of cases in which coders agree. Where ordinal indicators occur in the DQI (i.e., level of justification and respect indicators), the Spearman correlation and Cronbach's alpha (α) were additionally computed to judge inter-coder reliability.

The inter-coder reliabilities reported in Table 1 below are similar in magnitude to the ones reported in Steiner et al. (2004). The authors concluded that adequate inter-coder reliability had been achieved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>RCA</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>Rank Correlation</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.84</td>
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<td>2nd Content of Justification</td>
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<td>3rd Content of Justification</td>
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</table>

RESULTS

The five indicators of the DQI appear on the following page in Table 2, along with a breakdown of the number of messages either supporting or opposing the smoking ban and three additional variables covering narrativity, attempts to learn, and humor.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mode of Communication</th>
<th>Public Hearings</th>
<th>Moderated Deliberation</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support ban</td>
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<td>39.3</td>
<td>38</td>
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Data analysis proceeded with the chi-square test to determine whether the cross-classified variables, shown in Table 2, were independent of each other. The presumption of independence was rejected when a chi-square value reached statistical significance at $p \leq .05$. Ancillary analysis of the adjusted residuals (see Haberman 1978) was performed to more clearly show where the model of independence broke down. The analysis compared the observed frequency with expected values to find which attributes contributed the most to the chi-square. Because the adjusted residuals are approximately normally distributed, they can be compared with the percentiles of the normal distribution. A value equal to or greater than 1.96 was selected to indicate a relationship in the population.

Virtually all of the demands in the various modes of deliberation either supported or opposed the smoking ban. Occasionally, messages contained no demands and were merely statements of information, not arguments. We chose to analyze the distribution of demands across the three modes of deliberation. The overall chi-square yielded a significant value ($\chi^2 (4, N = 186) = 20.603, p < .001$). The adjusted residuals revealed that moderated deliberations had more messages containing no demands than either the public hearings or message board deliberations. Finally, the moderated deliberations had a nearly equal distribution of supportive messages for the ban as opposing messages. However, the message board had fewer messages supporting the ban, while the public hearings had more messages supportive of the ban. Because 19 messages contained no demand, they were excluded from further analysis using the DQI.

The bulk of the coding scheme centered on the DQI and the next five elements cover variables related to that scheme. The first element of the DQI examined the extent to which participants in the deliberations interrupted one another while deliberating. Of course, it would not be possible for anyone to interrupt another participant on the newspaper's message board, but the editors of the newspaper could delete a message from the board. Such an occurrence would have the effect of preventing participation on the board. We were told that the editors had not deleted messages from the board. The chi-square for this indicator was not significant ($\chi^2 (2, N = 167) = 2.544, p = .280$). So, participation was generally uninterrupted during deliberation in all three modes of communication.

The second indicator focused on the level of justification found in the arguments during deliberation. In deliberation, a demand could be presented without a justification, with an inferior justification, or with a qualified or sophisticated justification. The chi-square for this variable was significant ($\chi^2 (6, N = 167) = 55.438, p < .001$). None of the communication modes deviated from expectation with regard to speech acts without justifications. The message board, however, had more inferior justifications than any other communication mode. Next, public hearings produce fewer qualified justifications, but moderated discussions produced more. On the other hand, public hearings had more sophisticated justifications, but moderated discussions produced fewer.

Next, arguments were examined for the content of their justifications. The chi-square was significant for this variable ($\chi^2 (4, N = 167) = 31.053, p < .001$). Ancillary analysis of the residuals revealed differences only between the public hearings and the moderated deliberations. The public hearings fostered a greater number of appeals to special interests and the common good than both message boards and moderated deliberations. On the other hand, the moderated deliberations made few references to constituency/group interests or to the common good. The message board did not deviate from expectation.
Three indicators attempted to measure the level of respect for others in a deliberation. One indicator was the level of respect participants have toward different groups and it was significant ($\chi^2 (4, N = 167) = 48.861, p < .001$). The message board had more comments showing disrespect for others and fewer comments revealing implicit respect for others. On the other hand, both the moderated deliberations and the public hearings had fewer disrespectful comments about other groups. In addition, the moderated deliberations displayed more implicit respect for others, while the public hearings exhibited greater explicit respect for others. Last, while the moderated deliberations showed greater implicit respect for one another, deliberants tended not to explicitly show their approval for others (e.g., "I thought that was a good point").

The next indicator was respect for demands of others which was also significant ($\chi^2 (4, N = 167) = 49.979, p < .001$). Again, the message board had more comments exhibiting disrespect for the demands of others, while moderated deliberation had fewer of such comments. The message board also showed less implicit respect for the demands of others, while moderated deliberation showed more implicit respect for the demands of others. The public hearings did not deviate from expectation.

The last indicator was respect for counterarguments. An opponent raises these arguments to contradict one's own reasons for a demand. Because the chi-square was not significant ($\chi^2 (6, N = 167) = 6.711, p = .348$), no differences surfaced among the various modes of deliberation.

Constructive politics was the fifth and final indicator in Steiner et al.'s coding scheme. Although the chi-square was not significant at the .05 level, it was significant at the .10 level ($\chi^2 (4, N = 167) = 8.034, p = .090$). It should be noted that 19 messages contained no demand and therefore were not counted within the context of constructive politics. Because the bulk of the remaining messages in all three modes of communication constituted positional politics, the authors believed that a small effect size might be overlooked, given the small number of proposals stated in the deliberations.

If the significance level was set at .10, moderated deliberations produced more alternative proposals, while the public hearings generated more mediating proposals. The message board did not deviate from expectation.

In addition to the DQI, four more coding categories were added to capture elements of discourse expected to arise in the political talk of non-expert participants. They were amount of narrativity, number of attempts to learn, and amount and type of humor occurring in the deliberation. Narrativity was designed to capture the personal experiences of ordinary people as they discuss political matters. The overall chi-square was significant ($\chi^2 (2, N = 186) = 10.456, p = .005$). The arguments in the public hearings produced more personal narratives, while moderated discussions produced fewer personal narratives. The message board did not deviate from expectation.

The “attempts to learn” indicator examined the messages for the frequency of questions asked during the deliberations. The overall chi-square was not significant ($\chi^2 (4, N = 186) = 4.711, p = .318$). Most people, most of the time, did not ask questions during the deliberation.

The last indicator was humor. First, the sheer amount of humor observed in the deliberations was counted and the overall chi-square was significant ($\chi^2 (2, N = 186) = 8.034, p = .090$). More instances of humor occurred within the message board than the other deliberation modes. Interestingly, significantly less humor was broadcast in the moderated deliberations, while the public hearings did not deviate from expectation.

Second and last, the type of humor directed at the deliberations was also counted. Most humor fell into three categories: self-denigration, personal attack, and issue-centered humor. The overall chi-square was not significant ($\chi^2 (2, N = 22) = 8.00, p = .07$). Though it is not significant at .05, the chi-square is significant at .10. If we consider that to be significant, then it should be noted that personal attacks only occurred in the message boards and that self-denigration only occurred in the public hearings. All communication modes contained some issue-centered humor.
The results indicate that there is much variance between message boards and moderated deliberations. Message board posts are more likely to explicitly not respect other groups and their demands compared to moderated deliberations. In addition, these same online posts degraded counterarguments much more frequently than comments made in moderated deliberations or public hearings. To further support the trend that message board deliberations tend to lack respect, humor was employed online in the form of personal attacks and issue-centered jabs. While humor was used sporadically in public hearings, it was nearly nonexistent in deliberative forums. The lack of respect displayed on message boards confirms a general sentiment that online spaces lack civility, in part because participants can choose to remain anonymous, thereby eliminating the chance of direct confrontation by others.

An unexpected finding was that moderated deliberations contained the least amount of humor. Citizen deliberations are often characterized as informal “talk” where people employ narratives to communicate their life experience. Because of the non-expert status of participants, we expected more humor and small talk to be peppered throughout the discussion. The results indicate the opposite: humor and small talk were largely absent, suggesting that participants viewed the deliberation as a serious activity of argument exchange.

The study also revealed that participants in moderated deliberations infrequently frame their comments in narrative form. Contrary to Ryfe’s (2006) findings that narratives and stories structure moderated deliberations, this data suggests the opposite. Only one in five comments from moderated deliberations employ a narrative structure, whereas public hearing participants were twice as likely to use narratives. This significant finding is of interest, considering that the majority of public hearing participants deliver expert testimony or have major stakes in the issue at hand, while the moderated deliberations are composed of a wide range of community members without formal expertise or a vested interest in the topic. Here again, the expectation was that experts would rely less on narrative and more on traditional forms of rational argument than everyday citizens participating in a moderated deliberation. This analysis does not support these characterizations. We interpret this to mean that non-expert participants have the capacity and desire to deliberate much like their expert counterparts.

The results do indicate that public hearings generate the most sophisticated arguments compared to moderated deliberations and message boards. This means that participants advance multiple claims or they advance multiple justifications for a claim when putting forth a demand. However, moderated deliberations are not void of argument; in fact, a proportionate number of participants justified their argument in moderated deliberations compared to public hearings. The difference is that qualified arguments are employed in moderated deliberations. This signifies that participants in moderated deliberations support a demand with one argument and justify that claim with a single line of argument. We attribute this finding to procedural and structural differences of public hearings and moderated deliberations. In the case of the former, expert participants typically testify in front of a board with remarks partially prepared in advance. In moderated deliberations, participants are seldom speaking from script; thus, they are developing single arguments and justifications as the topic arises. Public hearing arguments are extemporaneous—they involve some preparation and practice—while moderated deliberations are impromptu speech acts. Furthermore, there is a sense of decorum in moderated deliberations that establishes a conversational norm of give and take between all parties present, thereby delimiting the duration of a comment. In public hearings, participants typically speak for multiple minutes as if they are delivering abbreviated speeches.

In addition to respect, humor, narrativity, and argument form, the results indicate some variance in constructive politics. In public hearings, participants were more likely to offer a mediating proposal that functions similarly to a compromise, while moderated deliberations produced more alternative
Where we found civil and healthy deliberation occurring in public hearings and moderated deliberations, we found incivility characterizing many of the online message board posts. We attribute much of this to the absence of a board moderator and the lack of established norms regarding comment style and content. Unlike more mature message boards where moderators and established participants reinforce a more civil and sophisticated exchange, message boards that develop as a response to new stories are inferior to other forms of deliberation.

The results from this study add an enhanced sense of legitimacy to citizen deliberations. Moderated deliberations play a role in the heavy lifting of weighing decisions via argumentation that has typically been reserved for expert-laden deliberative bodies. To better project this image of moderated deliberation as serious policy work, the dichotomous typology that associates narrative with the talk of common folk and argument with serious expert bodies needs to be questioned. While there are differences regarding the formality and telos of deliberations, citizens have the ability and disposition to advance quality arguments.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to better understand the argument quality of various forms of deliberation. Answering the call for more research, we focused on the communicative “guts” of deliberations by conducting a content analysis of speech acts advanced in message boards, moderated deliberations, and public hearings. Our findings are hopeful, particularly for those deliberative democrats who contend substantive rational exchanges occur in moderated deliberations. This study indicates that citizens employ arguments to evaluate policies that require collective decision making. This suggests that citizens, despite their non-expert status, have the capacity and disposition to create and evaluate policy positions in a civil manner.

The study also suggests that people in deliberative forums are more willing to share power, for discussion participants are not tied to predetermined solutions or self-interested advocacy positions. The evolution of discussion in forums provides a space for more alternative solutions to emerge; whereas in public hearings, experts and the self-interested typically speak from rehearsed and rigid positions that they personally "own."
**Question:** What is the nature of the relationship between deliberative forums and community politics?

Overall, we consider the work of ICDD to be nonpartisan, although it certainly does contribute to the political process. Our goal is not to influence any particular policy; rather, it is to improve the process by which the policy was created. In an evaluative manner we ask: were voices of all citizens heard? Did people have a chance to participate in the process? Were minority opinions provided a safe space to be articulated and heard? In this way, we see our role as “impartial facilitator” for citizens and elected officials yet we are convenors and information gatherers, which are vital to politics and the political process, but are not “political” in the partisan sense of the word.

Community politics as shared decision making;
deliberative forums as shared public learning

Community politics can too often be perceived as an undisclosed process of competition among cliques. From the formation of positions on policy decisions (conducted internally among members of special-interest groups) to final deliberations by elected officials, there may be insufficient opportunities for a public learning experience, unless punctuated with public deliberative forums.

What is there to learn from a deliberative forum? In the life of a policy formation, many positions are far more fluid than their holders want to admit. In the advance toward decision making, more pressure is on representatives of special interests to define and defend their “solid” positions, than to explore the parameters of alternative positions. Learning secondhand what competing interest groups offer as policy alternatives often does not involve examination, but conjecture, of what reasons surround those choices. Inclusive deliberation encourages firsthand disclosure of these reasons, and a full inventory of reasons associated with policy preferences gives everyone an opportunity to learn about the perspectives, information sources, and goals that motivate the community on the issue. This constitutes community self-knowledge, which should be essential to effective self-governance.

In deliberation, full disclosure of reasons may produce some that even resonate among participants with competing preferences, based on different reasons. This might influence participants to 1) alter their own preferences to some extent, 2) to at least acknowledge the validity or plausibility of the reason, or 3) to develop greater understanding of those who base their policy preferences on that reason.

Reasons can also be exposed as purely self-serving and impossible to justify for public action. Effective deliberation is not only an inventory of the perspectives, information sources, and goals, but a critical scrutiny and comparison of them by all participants. Multiple voices can simulate the weighing of options that will ultimately occur when elected officials voice their votes on the issue. The right to be exposed to all reasons and to contest them puts each participant temporarily on the same level, with the same responsibility, as elected representatives.

As the process of policy formation solidifies into selected options for a vote, the tension between deliberative and representative democracy can be heightened. If public deliberation has demonstrated a prevailing preference that elected officials ignore with their votes, the result can be a questioning of the utility of deliberation, or of the legitimacy of the decision. This is a challenge for deliberative democrats, who are frequently asked for concrete evidence of the decisive influence of public deliberation on participants as well as on elected officials’ decision making. In such a case, if the deliberative experience sufficiently heightened participants’ dedication to the issue, they may follow such a defeat by using other tools available, such as putting an issue to popular referendum, lawsuits, and the replacement of elected officials in subsequent elections. Awareness of these tools and other means of public engagement in self-governance need to be part of the learning that takes place in deliberation.
This same associate reflects that she has seen many public forums that are not sufficiently "deliberative" and can easily be dismissed as NOT effectively political, so the question about their role in self-governance is an important one. Many ICDD facilitators think that moderators should articulate the role of deliberation at the outset of a forum and allow participants to evaluate the session(s) with regard to their impact on the larger process of policy formation. The problem is, the results are not immediate and may be hard to track or detect.

We are also interested in the role that information in deliberation plays in subsequent decision making. How much exposure to topical information is needed to support an individual's confidence in deliberation? In an era when non-specialists can easily feel snowed by technical data, what is the role of "education on the issues" in public forums? Should we make a clear distinction between forums designed to informally educate the public and forums designed to solicit the public's perspectives and potential policy preferences? Alternatively, looking at the unique information created through deliberation: could documented forums contribute to the finding of fact that commissioned reports have customarily offered to elected decision makers? How can we effectively digest and report from deliberations so they can be sited with the same kind of authority that surveys are?

**Question:** Under what conditions do convenors, moderators, and participants come to understand public deliberation as a political act, or as a part of a political process?

- When the timing of the forum occurs at a critical stage in policy formation, e.g., pending legislation
- When a deliberative forum introduces community members to one another who discover common cause
- When deliberative forums are called for or convened by government employees or elected officials
- When the forum discussion concludes with resolutions to convene again for specific steps in engaging others, promoting specific solutions, forming action plans
- When recorded results of deliberation are cited as testimony during proceedings involving elected officials

In the case of one ICDD associate, she was drawn to deliberation by a three-year experience observing and participating in a community movement to rezone neighborhoods as a means of resolving tensions between resident homeowners and apartment owners. The history of the effort went through various phases, with a high degree of interaction among the competing interest groups, thanks to effective conversation brokering by city staff themselves, who also conducted research and brought information from other communities to the table. She first recognized the importance of well-conducted public forums then, as a means of exposing all of the stakeholders and their arguments to one another.

**Question:** And further, through your research, how did those you work with (convenors, moderators, and so on) come to understand their political role?

Part of ICDD's work is moderator training. Our moderator training sessions promote the idea of "neutral facilitation." We believe that the best facilitator is one who can guide a group through discussion, without infusing the meeting with his or her own beliefs or politics. Our institute is based on the belief that in "organic politics," citizens feel valued, and our work centers around the idea that this involvement of citizens from "the ground up" is vital to communities. We promote the idea of bringing "all voices to the table." For example at the beginning of every moderated forum, the moderator lays out Principles of Civic Discourse:
Our first action was to refine the research question and analysis to contribute to the scholarship in argumentation that addresses public deliberation. Our refined manuscript was published in 2009 as Steffensmeier, T., and W. Schenck-Hamlin. “Argument Quality in Public Deliberations.” Argumentation and Advocacy 45.1 (2009): 21-36.

In terms of scholarship, the project helped initiate research activity within the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy. In the Spring of 2010, ICDD researchers became interested in the pedagogical merits of deliberation in the classroom. These interests led to a deliberative poll being conducted with an undergraduate class. The results of that poll are available as a white paper on the ICDD site entitled, “Employing Deliberative Polling™ in a University Classroom; Results of a Pilot Test.”

The project also served as a stepping stone to being invited as coinvestigators on a substantial National Science Foundation grant focused on climate change education for rural stakeholders. Our role in the two-year project has been to design and facilitate 35 public meetings with community members, agriculture educators, and agriculture producers. As with our original project, we are interested in the question of argument quality within public deliberations.

In addition, the project helped form our views and approach in a successful application to become the editors of the Journal of Public Deliberation (JPD). In November 2010, ICDD became the editorial home of the journal, with Tim Steffensmeier and David Procter serving as coeditors. JPD, an online international journal started in 2004, aims to synthesize the research, opinion, projects, experiences, and theories of academics and practitioners in the emerging multidisciplinary fields of public deliberation and public participation.

As for teaching practices, the work has influenced a course in Leadership Communication that focuses on facilitation skill building. Here, students are asked to facilitate deliberations that generate new policy possibilities regarding civic leadership.

- Establish ground rules
- Recognize and appreciate cultural differences
- Provide everyone with opportunity to speak
- Focus on issues
- Listen respectfully to difference in perspectives
- Value evidence variety
- Seek common ground
- Avoid personal attacks
- Avoid ideological sloganeering
- Seek understanding, not persuasion

These moderators we work with appear to understand their political role in two ways: 1) as a counterweight to partisan politics, by perceiving that they can bring normal adversaries into constructive face-to-face conversation and 2) as an activist, in the sense of empowering citizens who would not normally assert their preferences in any way publically other than by voting for elected officials. We assume they came to understand this as their role by being attracted to successful models or examples, or by experiencing success themselves.

**UPDATE**

**IMPACT ON RESEARCH AND TEACHING**

The Kettering project we conducted on argument quality and civility in deliberative public forums has influenced our practice and teaching in public deliberation in multiple ways, including a published research article, grant-funded research, an editorial position, and teaching applications. It has also influenced the development of the Institute of Civic Discourse and Democracy.
REFERENCE LIST


Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others.

*Developing Deliberative Practice: Argument quality in public deliberations* reflects the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.
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PRESENTED TO THE KETTERING FOUNDATION APRIL 2, 2008