

Comparing participatory and deliberative democracy

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This paper draws lessons from newDemocracy's experiences operating various citizens' juries in Australia including, the South Australia Nuclear Fuel Cycle, Democracy in Geelong, and Infrastructure Victoria's 30 Year Plan.

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Comparing participatory and deliberative democracy

What is the question?

The two terms *participatory* and *deliberative* democracy are often used interchangeably, and this can be confusing for policy makers. But are they the same? Is *deliberative democracy* simply *participatory democracy* with a more confusing name? If they are not the same, what are their similarities and differences, what are their strengths and weaknesses? This research note should help a policy maker decide which is the best way forward.

How are they similar?

Participatory democracy has a long history. In the West, it is associated more recently with the activist movements of the 1960s (Pateman 1970): e.g. civil rights, women's liberation and more, when people took to the streets demanding greater participation in government decision making. This can enable a public to help decision makers set an agenda by making their demands clear. Various recent examples of this are: Arab Spring, the Spanish Indignados and France's 'yellow vest' movement.

Deliberative democracy also has a long history. But it has a more contemporary expression that is rapidly growing. The theory gained traction, firstly, through academic literature, starting in the 1980s (e.g. Cohen 1989, Mansbridge 1980) when many of the current approaches first found favour among the conceptually- and empirically-curious (e.g. Barber 1984, Burnheim 1985); writings and conferences on deliberative democracy have proliferated exponentially since then (see, for example, Dryzek 2010).

The main similarity is that both these terms refer to the direct involvement of citizens in political decision making, beyond choosing representatives through elections. Both approaches to democracy, therefore, critique the current democratic system and seek to reform it by strengthening it.

How are they different?

The main differences concern: (a) the numbers of participants; (b) the type of participation; and (c) how participants are selected. This leads to advocating different types of institutions.

Numbers of participants

Clearly, there is a trade-off between large numbers of participants and in-depth participation.

Advocates of *participatory democracy* usually want to involve **large numbers** of people in political processes, ideally the entire citizenry, and its practitioners are ecumenical in their approach. The aim for them is to achieve **breadth**, with many participants - ideally, everyone affected by a particular decision, or all citizens (or residents) in a particular jurisdiction. Many advocates of *deliberative democracy* want to involve relatively small (but representative) groups of people, because it is very difficult to have **deep deliberation** among large numbers of people. Practitioners in this space are wrestling with the challenge of situating deliberation within a wider, deliberative system (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012).

Type of participation

Participatory democrats want more participation, in all aspects of politics (and sometimes in spaces beyond the political sphere, such as workplaces and universities), from all citizens who choose to be involved. They believe this is the essence of democracy—the only way to ensure that the ‘people rule’ is for them to be involved in making the decisions that affect them. Instead of specifying a preferred type of political participation, they embrace and encourage a diversity of opportunities for political engagement.

In contrast, deliberative democrats have a specific view on the type of political participation they want citizens to be involved in: deliberation. Deliberation requires that participants: (a) become well informed about the topic, (b) consider different perspectives, in order to (c) arrive at a public judgement (not opinion) about "what can we strongly agree on?" They consider this to be a superior form of political participation as it leads to more informed and rounded public opinion, and, arguably, better decisions.

Participatory and deliberative democrats therefore also favour different types of institutions and practices to promote these alternative approaches to political participation. For example, many participatory democrats see value in instruments of *direct democracy* which is exemplified by referenda or citizens’ initiatives [LINK *Swiss model*]. It can be further exemplified by participatory budgeting which spread throughout South America, starting with Brazil in 1988 (Wampler & Hartz-Karp 2012) and is now spreading worldwide. Participatory budgets were designed to widen participation for lower socio-economic groups, by allowing them an opportunity to make decisions about a small proportion of a city’s spending. newDemocracy has experimented with deliberative, participatory budgets involving a small number (35-43) randomly-selected participants and a city’s entire 10-year budget (See, [City of Melbourne](#)).

Selection method

Participatory democrats usually favor self-selected participation, in order to enable as many people as possible to share the experience. This enables easy recruitment, can be less expensive, and is seen as equitable. Deliberative democrats tend to favor random selection, in order to assemble a public body that is: representative of the public; able to consider perspectives; and not be vulnerable to being stacked by representatives of powerful interest groups.

Many deliberative democrats believe that there is a trade-off between large numbers of participants and the quality of deliberation. Consequently, a strand of *deliberative democracy* wants to involve relatively small (but representative) groups of people in **considerable depth**. To achieve this, a civic lottery is used (See, [Sample size](#)). Deliberative democracy has found widespread, practical expression through randomly-selected citizens’ juries (See, [Benefits of the jury model](#)), citizens’ assemblies (See, [Integrating Citizen Deliberation—Ireland](#)) and methods which have come to be known generically as mini-publics although deliberative possibilities exceed these methods (See, [Forms of mini-publics](#)).

Large numbers versus high quality deliberation

Participatory processes that prioritise large numbers, such as participatory budgets, certainly can involve more people than would usually be the case within a representative system of government. This gives opportunities to those who have traditionally been silenced or left unheard. An online or postal survey would be a form of participatory democracy as would an extensive system of public meetings or a mobilisation of people in a public square. These

methods can deliver hundreds or thousands of opinions to a decision maker. Since direct democracy is also a form of participatory democracy, referenda, plebiscites and initiatives offer another way to gather public opinion—what people want. All of these methods involve more people beyond elected representatives.

Large numbers are useful for resetting an agenda and compelling the attention and response of a parliament, while deliberative models assist a parliament where there are considerable volumes of information and breadth of sources to consider before being able to make a meaningful contribution for elected decision makers.

Numbers are not everything. *More*, in terms of more *people*, more *responses*, can sometimes translate into *less* because of this tendency toward kneejerk feedback and vulnerability to emotional campaigns. Quality may be forfeited for quantity. newDemocracy considers that critical thinking is essential for deliberating about complex issues (See, [Critical thinking](#)).

A deliberative mini-public, made up of a diverse group of people, a microcosm of a population, is allocated considerable time and information and involves a commitment by a decision maker to act on the group's recommendations. The group is not merely considering what its members *want*, but also what *trade-offs* they can accept. The work is difficult, but citizens have shown the willingness and skill necessary. Three ideals would be prerequisites for a public deliberation (Carson & Hartz-Karp 2005): **inclusion** or representativeness; **deliberation**, during which strengths and weaknesses of various options are considered (See, [Deliberation](#)); and **influence** or impact—the decision makers agree to act on the recommendations or state publicly why they have or have not done so (See, [Poland](#)). Decision makers can be confident that the collective recommendations that they received reflect the views of the wider population, had that whole population had an opportunity to deeply consider the matter.

What are their weaknesses?

Many advocating for deliberative democracy believe that more people means more *opinions*, not necessarily more considered public *judgement* (Yankelovitch 1991). Participatory democracy also runs the risk of replicating existing problems with the most obvious being that of centralised power. For example, an advisory committee or a public meeting or a campaign leader will tend to foreground *the incensed and the articulate*. This can undermine careful, collective decision making.

Deliberative methods also have weaknesses. They take time, are therefore more expensive and rely on decision makers who are prepared to hear whatever arises. Because they involve smaller numbers of participants, the wider population remains unchanged, unless it is combined with other methods. There are examples of this combination, the Irish Constitutional Convention being only one example. (See Irish case study)

A sub-set of participatory democrats (many participatory budgeting advocates, for example) are particularly interested in participation as a strategy for increasing power of marginalised groups. They seek *rights* for participation throughout society in the workplace, civil society and politics in order to combat centralised power. This orientation seems less common among advocates of deliberative democracy although there has been some activity within *sectors* of a population. Examples include mini-publics among the impoverished (Bice 2004), those with disability (Raisio & Carson 2014) and young people (See, [Youth Jury](#)).

Finally...

In summary, participatory democrats tend to care a lot about the numbers, the “breadth” of people who participate, and less about the “depth” of the participation. There may also be a tendency toward establishing political power. Deliberative democrats tend to be very concerned with the quality (deliberativeness) of participation, much less about large numbers, and emphasise the establishment of common ground.

Deliberative advocates are generally more willing to be policy agnostic as the processes are much less susceptible to being steered in a pre-agreed direction. They are process-driven rather than issue-driven.

Because newDemocracy works in decision-making arenas we focus on deliberative methods. We have tested these methods since our first foray—the Australian Citizens’ Parliament in 2009 (Carson et al 2013). With each project, we critically reflect on the experience in order to refine the practice (See, [Our work](#)). Deliberative methods have also been extensively researched and evaluated by others as have participatory approaches (See, [Journal of Public Deliberation](#)).

Next steps

It has been suggested that we should be seeking a combination of participatory and deliberative democracy (Elstub 2018). The combination of widespread participation and focused deliberation can be powerful. Bouricius (2014), and Schechter and Sullivan (2018), have proposed using the two approaches in different stages of policy making – using open, self-selected participation for developing initial proposals, and using mini-public deliberation for reviewing the initial proposals, developing final proposals, and deciding. A Madrid project which is currently unfolding is based on a similar logic, combining self-selected proposal submissions with mini-public review, and also giving the mini-public the power to submit proposals to a public vote (See, [Madrid City Council](#)).

We could imagine a blended approach and think of their valuable differences as strengths, with citizens occupying both *insisted* and *invited* spaces—vocal activists insisting on a place at the decision-making table, and decision makers inviting a diverse group to that table but enabling the insistent voices to be heard as well.

Perhaps, if a one-off mini-public deliberation was part of every policy decision, or at least every major policy decision, there would be opportunities for many more people to participate over time. Another way of thinking about this is a combination of community development or community capacity building, and juries of citizens partnering with governments to make decisions. Deliberative bodies could consider the results of participatory processes and mitigate the worst excesses of them—a powerful combination to explore.

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