

# Public Deliberation: Efforts in Two States to Transform Public Policy Development

*Sue E. Williams, Renée A. Daugherty,  
Ronald C. Powers*

## Abstract

A contemporary vision for a democracy is that it involves those who wish to be involved; the highest expression of human rationality becomes reality when ordinary people speak and reason together on issues of common concern. Public deliberation is a structured dialogue around a challenging public problem. It is a means through which citizens can make tough choices about the basic purpose and direction of their communities and their country. Oklahoma State University and the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation, along with the University of Missouri, incorporated public deliberation into their public policy and community development work. To implement public deliberation, they conducted institutes and academies to prepare extension professionals and community leaders to use this practice in their public lives. Research to determine the impact of public deliberation in these two states indicates that public deliberation is a useful approach to addressing challenging social issues.

## Introduction

The United States has a great deal of experience with democracy. As a country, it has had a democratic government for more than two hundred years. In its most basic form, a democratic government allows all citizens to take part in decisions; everyone's opinion counts. However, as the nation has grown in terms of geographic area, population, diversity, and complexity of issues, the ideal of everyone's perspective being heard in a democratic context has been modified significantly. Some argue that the opinion of the people has been taken over by elected officials who are greatly influenced by the media and special interest groups. White and Williams (2002) identify a variety of contemporary barriers that discourage and inhibit citizen activism and engagement. In response to these barriers, many individuals, groups, and organizations have addressed the importance of meaningfully re-engaging citizens in an increasingly complex political system.

Putnam (2002) conducted a nationwide survey of five hundred Americans after the tragedy of September 11, 2001. He concluded that the level of political consciousness was substantially higher than it had been during the previous year. However, he found a gap between attitudes and behaviors that suggests the potential for renewed civic engagement. He calls this potential civic solidarity, a moral resource, a social good. Unlike a material resource, civic solidarity increases with use and diminishes with disuse. According to Putnam, in the aftermath of September 11, the window of opportunity opened for a sort of civic renewal, resulting in *civic solidarity*; this occurs only once or twice in a century.

Mathews (2002, *i*), in *For Communities to Work*, indicates that the Kettering Foundation has “discovered an unrealized potential for constructive community change—the power of an engaged public.” He goes on to define a public as “a diverse body of people joined together in ever-changing alliances to make choices about how to advance their common well being.” Further, an engaged public is “a committed and interrelated citizenry rather than a persuaded populace.”

Yankelovich (1991) offered a strategy to address the eroding ability of the American public to participate in the political decisions that affect their lives. The strategy proposed is to strengthen a special form of public opinion—public judgment, which involves more thoughtfulness and an emphasis on the normative, valuing, ethical side of challenging social issues. He further suggests that the key to successful self-government in this age of information is to create a new balance between the public and experts.

A contemporary vision for a democracy involves those who wish to be involved; the highest expression of human rationality becomes reality when ordinary people speak and reason together on issues of common concern (Fishkin 1995; Mathews 1999; Wheatley 2002; Yankelovich 1991). This vision is in keeping with the American democratic tradition—let in the light of knowledge to elevate the freedom and dignity of people.

***Civic or democratic engagement:*** Although the meaning of the term varies for the purposes of this article, civic or democratic engagement describes a process of participating in public decisions developed through collective, reasoned arguments oriented toward mutual understanding (Benhabib 1996; Bohman

1998; Cohen 1997; Elster 1998; Gastil 2000). This kind of engagement, whether among average citizens, experts, or both, is an antidote to citizen ignorance and alienation from politics, as well as to political processes that seem to sacrifice the public good to short-term or narrow interests. Democratic engagement requires that individuals: (1) interact peacefully, (2) share knowledge and perspectives on issues, and (3) organize to act publicly on these issues.

***Public policy through democratic engagement:*** One arena for citizen action is involvement in public policy. House and Young (1988) suggest that public policy is an agreed-upon course of action, guiding principle, or procedure considered to be expedient, prudent, or advantageous. Public policy is a settled course of action adopted and followed by the public.

The term *public policy* may make people think that public decision making is such a formal process that they could not become involved in a meaningful way. This is simply not true. Public policy is a set of principles that directs action. Public policy takes many forms: laws, rules, program priorities, funding decisions, even customs and traditions (Williams and Sanders 1995). These forms of public policy require the input and involvement of many sectors of our society: average citizens, institutions, people in positions of leadership, experts, public officials, and the media. There is an important role for everyone in development of public policy.

***Democratic engagement and public deliberation:*** Public deliberation is a way of reasoning and talking together that weighs the views of others, then considers the consequences and the trade-offs associated with various policy directions—framed as three or four approaches—and, most important, respects the perspectives and values of others. It is a way to find common ground for action. It is a means by which citizens make tough choices about the basic purpose and direction for their communities and their country—a way of reasoning and talking through difficult problems. Public deliberation is neither a partisan argument in which opposing sides try to win nor a casual conversation conducted with polite civility.

Mathews and McAfee (2003, 1) state that “Public deliberation is one name for the way we go about deciding how to act. In weighing—together—the costs and consequences of various

approaches to solving problems, people become aware of the differences in the way others see those costs and consequences.” It is, as the same authors state, a “dialogue for weighing, not a debate for winning” (p. 10).

A key objective of public deliberation is to get beyond facts to what is important (i.e., valuable) to people in the common life we have in the community. The current practices of resolving public issues at all levels of society, from neighborhoods to the national level, lean heavily on special interest groups, adversarial proceedings (debates, public hearings, litigation), and ersatz public engagement devices such as advisory committees, listening sessions, and the like. Mathews (2002) notes that the term *public engagement* has been used to describe a form of public relations aimed at gaining popular support for an institution or cause. As we use the term here, it means that community members have decided and acted on their own, rather than being persuaded to take a particular action by others—especially those outside the community.

One approach to public deliberation takes form from the process designed by the National Issues Forums (<http://www.nifi.org>) and is captured in the slogan for the Kettering Foundation’s work in deliberative democracy as “a different kind of talk, another way to act.”

***Implementing public deliberation in a community context:***

Fostering public deliberation, in the context of locally based issue forums, requires individuals who can effectively convene, moderate, record, and report on public deliberative forums. The public work done in such forums, if done appropriately, results in public knowledge (or, as it is sometimes termed, a public voice or public judgment) that policymakers can use to fashion policy that addresses the underlying issue.

There is a substantial body of knowledge concerning the theory and practices associated with effective public deliberation. A considerable portion of the background is included in several Kettering Foundation publications, such as *Making Choices Together* (Mathews and McAfee 2003), *Politics for People* (Mathews 1999), and various articles published in recent years in the periodicals *Kettering Review* and *Connections*. Patterson (n.d.) provides an excellent review of literature on deliberative democracy.

In the early 1980s National Issues Forums, with support from the Kettering Foundation, began a network of institutions

designed to support public deliberation at the community level. Public policy institute (PPI) is the generic label used by the Kettering Foundation for the thirty-three institutional settings within which moderator and recorder development takes place. The curricula of the PPIs are varied, both in content and duration, albeit there is a core of content common to all of them.

Prior to 2000, very little systematic research had been undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness and community impact of PPIs. Typically post-PPI evaluations gain insight regarding participant reaction to the developmental experience, but little has been done to determine how PPI participants have used this experience in their personal and/or professional lives.

***Implementation of public deliberation in two states:*** Prior to 1997, most of the PPIs were not directly linked to the cooperative extension organization within land-grant universities. The implementation of PPIs in Missouri and Oklahoma that involved the extension organizations in both states provided an opportunity to focus on two states that had similar yet different PPI structures and participants.

University of Missouri Outreach and Extension began exploring the possibility of incorporating the deliberative approach to its community development work in 1997. The rationale for doing so was embedded in the findings of a survey of nearly 17,000 Missouri citizens in 1994 (*Powers 1995*), in which nearly all of the “desired community outcomes” were issues that could be addressed only through public decisions and actions. The history and practice of Missouri Outreach and Extension, however, was much more oriented to the expert approach, and a large portion of the faculty had been trained as specialists in specific content areas (*Powers 1995; Powers and Pettersen 2001*). Extension leaders were convinced that many of the public issues, which were of high priority to citizens, would not be effectively dealt with by University Outreach and Extension until a significant number of faculty at the state and local level possessed the required competencies and confidence to become involved.

Through conversations with the Kettering Foundation, a partnership was implemented to create a PPI in Missouri. Initially the PPI focused on preparing people to convene, moderate, record, and report on issue forums using the National Issues Forums model. The primary target audience was University Outreach and Extension faculty—on and off campus—though

other citizens were encouraged to participate. By February 2001, six groups had gone through a three-day PPI workshop, Building Community through Public Deliberation.

During 1999 and 2000, faculty associated with Oklahoma State University's Cooperative Extension Service provided leadership for a study designed and conducted in Oklahoma to determine organizational capacity across the state to support public deliberation. A list of groups and organizations in Oklahoma with missions and/or goals consistent with the concept of deliberative democracy was generated. A telephone survey conducted by the Oklahoma State University Bureau for Social Research reached 88 representatives of statewide organizations and groups and asked 33 questions related to support of public deliberation. Based on survey results, it was concluded that conceptual links did exist across statewide organizations and groups indicating support for public deliberation. Further study revealed a healthy mix of resources available to support a program of citizen engagement through public deliberation (*Williams and Daugherty 2003a*).

In May 2000 the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation (OPPD) was created with the mission of fostering public deliberation in the state of Oklahoma. Membership in the OPPD is open to any organization willing to work on fostering citizen engagement in public decision making through public deliberative forums. Pursuant to its mission and vision, the OPPD has developed a group of "products." One of the mainstays of the OPPD is workshops (PPIs) in which adults and older youth learn skills and strategies to facilitate public deliberation.

Colleagues at Oklahoma State University, University of Missouri–Columbia, and the Kettering Foundation engaged in several conversations regarding the impact of moderator and recorder development (PPIs) on public decision making at the community level. Further, intense discussions of the best methodology for assessing such impacts led to several research studies designed ultimately to assess the impact of public deliberation on public policy formation. The initial effort focused on instrument development, followed by telephone interviews involving Missouri PPI participants and, later, telephone interviews with Oklahoma PPI participants. In this article we compare the impact of PPI on civic engagement in these two states.

## Methodology

The methodology of this study is derived from “utilization-focused evaluation,” defined by Patton (1997, 23) as “the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming.”

In early 2000 colleagues from Oklahoma State University and University of Missouri collaborated to develop an instrument for evaluating the outcomes of PPIs. The intent was to develop an instrument that could be used by other PPIs around the country. The instrument was pilot tested using a national sample of 20 PPI participants in four states: California, Florida, South Dakota, and West Virginia. During May–June 2001 the Oklahoma State University Bureau for Social Research (BSR) contacted Missouri PPI participants and conducted telephone interviews using the instrument (Williams *et al.* 2001). In 2003, BSR conducted telephone interviews using a slightly modified instrument to collect data from Oklahoma PPI participants (Williams and Daugherty 2003b).

The following research questions guided the present study:

1. To what extent did Missouri and Oklahoma PPI participants become involved in local forums?
  - a. Do states vary significantly regarding their involvement in local forums?
  - b. Are there statistical differences by demographic category for either Oklahoma or Missouri?
  - c. In which aspects of a local forum (organizing, convening, moderating, recording, or participating) are PPI participants in each state most likely to become involved?
2. To what extent did Missouri and Oklahoma PPI participants use public deliberation concepts?
  - a. Do states vary significantly regarding their use of public deliberation concepts?
  - b. Are there significant differences in the use of public deliberation concepts by demographic category?
  - c. In what areas of personal or private life are PPI participants most likely to have used the deliberative approach?

3. To what extent did participants find the PPI preparation useful?
  - a. Do the ratings of usefulness for various aspects of the moderator/recorder preparation differ significantly by whether or not an individual has been involved with public deliberation after completing the PPI?
  - b. What aspects of moderator/recorder preparation received the highest/lowest ratings after PPI participants reflected on and used the development experience?
4. Does use of public deliberation (use/not use) vary significantly by demographic category (employment, age, gender)?

**Sample:** The Missouri sample included all participants of the six PPIs conducted 1998–2001. Addresses and phone numbers were provided for 93 different participants. Of the 93, three were found unqualified to complete the interview, two could not be contacted, and one refused without completing the screening questions. A total of 87 individuals completed the interview for an effective response rate of 98 percent. There were 39 males (44.8%) and 48 females (55.2%) in the group. The age distribution indicated a slight negative skew, suggesting that participation in the training appealed more to somewhat older people. Over 65 percent of those that participated were between the ages of 40 and 59, with an additional 24 percent captured in the 30–39 year age range. Since the target audience for Missouri was University Outreach and Extension faculty, it is no surprise that the majority of the respondents (75 of the 87) were employed by the university. Non-university employees were community volunteers, agency representatives, and a newspaper editor.

The Oklahoma sample consisted of 107 PPI participants who attended four PPIs from February 2001 to November 2002. Addresses and phone numbers for 158 participants were available. Of these, 20 were eliminated due to an incorrect or nonworking phone number; another 4 were eliminated because they were out of town or did not complete the PPI. Of the remaining 134, one individual refused to complete the survey and 26 were not reached after 15 or more attempts, leaving 107 participants who completed the telephone survey for a response rate of 80 percent. Sixty-six women and 41 men completed the telephone survey. The age distribution indicated a good cross-section of ages, with approximately 20 percent of the participants under 30 years of age, 20 percent over 60, and the



remainder distributed across age groups within this range. Regarding employment, 35 (33%) of the survey respondents were Oklahoma Cooperative Extension employees, while 72 (67%) were community volunteers and/or represented another organization or agency.

**Data analysis:** Analysis of the data for both Missouri and Oklahoma included frequency calculations to determine the extent to which participants adopted deliberative practices after attending the PPI. Missouri and Oklahoma data were analyzed using cross-classification (crosstabs) with *t*-tests and chi-square tests.

## Findings

**Involvement in local deliberative forums:** Forty or 46 percent of the 87 Missouri survey respondents had organized, convened, moderated, recorded, or participated in a forum during the time between PPI participation and the survey. On the other hand, 69 (65%) of the Oklahoma PPI participants had been involved in local deliberative forums from the time of PPI participation and the survey. Missouri respondents were involved in an average of 2.31 forums, while Oklahoma respondents were involved with an average of 2.43 local deliberative forums. Missouri respondents conducted significantly more forums in small communities of less than 5,000 residents ( $p = .032$ ), while Oklahoma respondents conducted more forums in communities of 20,000 to 50,000 population ( $p = .006$ ). Of the types of involvement listed on the survey, the most common for PPI participants in both states was moderating local forums. For Missouri 32 (80%) of those involved in local forums moderated; for Oklahoma, the number was 44 (63.8%). Missouri had significantly ( $p = .009$ ) more involvement in organizing local steering committees or networks to support public deliberation. Further, Missouri participants convened significantly ( $p = .011$ ) more forums than did Oklahoma PPI participants. No significant differences were found between Missouri and Oklahoma regarding other aspects of local forum involvement (number of forums convened, forums moderated, forums recorded, or forum participation).

Regarding demographic characteristics of those reporting local forum involvement, Missouri non-extension persons are significantly more likely to have organized a committee or network than extension employees ( $p = .046$ ). For Oklahoma, no

**Table A. Involvement in Local Deliberative Forums**

Survey Item	% Yes	
	Missouri (N = 40)	Oklahoma (N = 69)
Have you organized a local steering committee or network to support local forums?	57.5 (p = .009)	31.9
Have you convened a forum since attending the PPI?	70.0 (p = .011)	44.9
Have you moderated a forum since attending the PPI?	80.0	63.8
Have you recorded a forum since attending the PPI?	65.0	56.5
Have you participated in a forum (that you did not convene, moderate, or record) since attending the PPI?	37.5	34.8

statistically significant differences were found regarding involvement in local issue forums and employment category. For purposes of analysis, employment for both states was collapsed into two categories: extension and non-extension.

The only other demographic characteristic that was found to relate to involvement in local issue forums involved the Oklahoma sample. In Oklahoma, those under age 40 were significantly more likely to have recorded a forum (56.3%) than other age groups, while those age 50 and over were more likely than other age groups to have participated in a forum they did not convene, moderate, or record (20.0%).

***Use of public deliberation:*** Telephone interview respondents in both states were asked if they used concepts of public deliberation in their everyday life, including work, family life, civic life, the religious community, or to deal with public issues. An overwhelming majority of respondents in both states used the deliberative approach in their work compared to other aspects of their life: 84 percent of the Missouri respondents and 79 percent of Oklahoma respondents.

There were some significant differences within each state. In Missouri, extension employees were significantly more likely to

**Table B. Use of Public Deliberation in Everyday Life by State**

Use	Missouri	Oklahoma
Work	84%	79%
Family life	53%	55%
Civic life	68%	75%
Religious community	30%	35%
Dealing with public issues	68%	76%

have used the deliberative approach in their work (88%) compared to non-extension PPI participants (58%,  $p = .009$ ). Among Oklahoma PPI participants, those age 40–49 were more likely ( $p = .017$ ) to have used the deliberative approach in the religious community, compared to those under age 40 (19%) and those age 50 and above. Males in the Oklahoma cohort were more likely than females to have used the deliberative approach in the religious community ( $p = .005$ ) and in dealing with public issues ( $p = .005$ ).

**Follow-up of public deliberation:** Significant differences between Missouri and Oklahoma were determined in two areas of follow-up of public deliberation. Missouri organized significantly more ( $p = .049$ ) community task forces or committees (56%) compared to Oklahoma (37%). Further, Missouri had significantly more ( $p = .037$ ) reports that issues addressed during deliberative forums were on the public agenda (75%) compared to Oklahoma PPI participants (53%).

**Usefulness of PPI preparation:** PPI participants were asked to rank the usefulness of various components of PPI preparation on a 1–5 scale, with 1 meaning not useful or practical and 5 meaning very useful or practical. Ranked components were: deliberation—what it is and what it is not; practice in moderating a forum; recording a forum; how to convene a forum; and working with office holders.

All segments of the PPI preparation consistently received high rankings. However, Missouri ranked “practice in moderating a forum” highest and Oklahoma ranked “deliberation—what it is and is not” highest. PPI participants in both states consistently ranked “how to work with office holders” lowest.

**Table C. Follow-up to Deliberative Forums by State**

Type	Missouri	Oklahoma
Community task force	56% (p = .049)	37%
Contact office holders	72%	64%
Participant network	87%	83%
Study group	34%	32%
Additional forums on same topic	45%	44%
Featured in local media	74%	67%
Issue on public agenda	75% (p = .037)	53%

Analysis was done to determine if ranking of PPI components was significantly different for those who used public deliberation after completing the training and those who did not use public deliberation. The only significant differences were found in the Missouri cohort. In Missouri the average rating of “deliberation—what it is and what it is not” for those using public deliberation was 4.51, while those who did not use public deliberation ranked this training component 4.12. This ranking was significantly different at the .034 level. Further, Missouri respondents who used public deliberation ranked “how to work with office holders” 3.94, while non-users ranked that PPI component 3.44 ( $p = .045$ ).

***Characteristics of those who use and do not use public deliberation:*** When data were analyzed across both states to determine if use of public deliberation (use/not use) varies significantly by demographic category, no significant differences were found. Demographic characteristics analyzed were employment status (extension/non-extension), age, and gender.

## Conclusions

The findings of this investigation strongly support the use of the deliberative approach through issue forums in the context of community work. This study supports the ongoing development of moderator and recorder workshops as a means for preparing community leaders and professionals in the application and appropriate use of the deliberative approach. Survey results indicate that the current curriculum, with the exception of “working with office holders,” is useful in meeting the goal of

**Table D: Usefulness of Moderator/Recorder Preparation**

Area of Preparation	Missouri Average Rating	Oklahoma Average Rating
Deliberation—what it is and what it is not	4.29	4.47
Practice in moderating a forum	4.40	4.41
Recording a forum	3.92	4.10
Reporting a forum	3.85	3.86
How to convene a forum	3.96	4.12
Working with office holders	3.66	3.74

**Note: Range of Scale****5 = Very useful/practical, 1 = Not at all useful/practical**

citizen engagement in public decision making at the community level. Outcomes observed in this study warrant the continued use of moderator and recorder preparation to foster a deliberative habit that will transform public policy development. The telephone survey designed and used for this study is an effective and useful methodology for assessing the impact of public deliberation.

### Recommendations

Based on this study, we recommend that programs in the National Issues Forums network use the instrument used for this study and compare findings among the states to determine the impact of moderator/recorder preparation on citizen engagement across the network; the areas of the moderator/recorder curriculum that are the most and least effective in facilitating citizen engagement in public decision making; and why persons who attend moderator/recorder workshops do not use public deliberation. Further, it is recommended that higher education institutions adopt public deliberation as an approach to public decision making on campus and in work with the communities they serve.

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### About the Authors

- Sue E. Williams is a professor at Oklahoma State University (OSU). As an OSU faculty member and Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service state specialist, she is involved with leadership development and family policy programs. Among her varied responsibilities, she works with the Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma, helping citizens develop the skills to enhance the quality of life in their communities. She also provides leadership for the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation to foster citizen involvement in public decision making.
- Renée A. Daugherty is an associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at Oklahoma State University. Her faculty assignment is with the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service as Extension Specialist—Leadership and Educational Methods, where she is involved with educational programs in community leadership development; citizen engagement in public decision making through public deliberative forums, including the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation; and extension teaching methods.
- Ronald C. Powers served as assistant/associate vice president for outreach and extension, University of Missouri, from 1989 to 1999, when he became the director of the Missouri Public Policy Institute. He is now professor emeritus, University of Missouri–Columbia. Ron is active as a public policy consultant and continues active in community development. He is also a resource person for National Issues Forums.