

VOICES

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Most Americans today would agree that there is something deeply amiss with the way our democracy is working. Discussions about the problems focus mostly on the electoral process: the extraordinary amounts of money involved, the dominance of special interests, and the low voter turnout in most elections. But there also is growing interest in reforming the ways in which public decisions are made once decision makers are in office.



AmericaSpeaks is a leader in a nascent movement to give citizens a voice in decisions that impact their lives. This movement, called deliberative democracy, recognizes the central role citizens can play in shaping their lives and promotes new tools to engage citizens in decision making. In 2002, more than twenty leading organizations in the field established the Deliberative Democracy Consortium to stimulate the growth and development of the movement.

Deliberative democracy is both a set of political ideas about how democracy *should* work and an evolving set of practices detailing how democracy *can* work. Essentially,

deliberative democrats propose a framework for governance in which citizens work with one another, through dialogue, to come to a judgment about the best course of action on a given public problem. The outcomes from this deliberation should be an important tool in determining public decisions.

Today, deliberation is practiced by thousands of groups around the United States and many more throughout the world. Citizens are being asked for their judgments on almost every conceivable issue, from parole to genetic engineering, from city budgets to Social Security.

Most of the work, however, falls into four broad categories:

- **Resource allocation:** Citizens provide input on local or regional strategic plans and/or budgets.
- **Planning:** Citizens assist in developing city or regional plans that may include environmental, transportation, housing and green-space issues.
- **Policy formulation:** Citizens provide a values framework for, and address trade-offs on, tough public policy issues such as Social Security and healthcare reform.
- **Technology assessment:** Citizens provide a values framework to guide policy making for new technologies such as genetic engineering or genetically modified foods.

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The practice of democratic deliberation grows as decision makers increasingly recognize its advantages, which include:

- Citizens have a great deal of knowledge and valuable perspectives about public issues that go beyond those of experts.
- Bringing citizens into the process can reduce conflict among competing stakeholders, and broad public support makes policy implementation much easier.
- Involving citizens in the process builds public awareness of important issues and has many other long-term advantages such as building trust, promoting political participation and strengthening political institutions.



AmericaSpeaks believes that the practice of deliberation can help revitalize our democracy. To support the movement, we are committed to highlighting the advantages and successes of deliberative democracy to decision makers at all levels of governance. We also seek to advance the practice of deliberative democracy by creating opportunities for nationwide deliberation on critical public issues.