



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Creating Deliberative Publics: Governance After Devolution  
and Democratic Centralism

Archon Fung

The Good Society, Volume 11, Number 1, 2002, pp. 66-71 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/gso.2002.0006>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/12229>

# Creating Deliberative Publics: Governance After Devolution and Democratic Centralism

Archon Fung

## 1. The Persistent Problem of the Public

In the *Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey lamented the stagnancy of democratic political forms in the face of a rapidly changing economy and society.<sup>1</sup> Citizens in pre-industrial America may have been able to keep abreast of public affairs and express their will through the machinery of parties and elections, but these institutions had proved woefully inadequate to the challenges of modern governance with its large scale, diversity, and technical complexity. The problem of the modern public—and the cause of its incoherence—was that citizens, alone and together, were for the most part bewildered when they contemplated affairs of state. Effective democratic publics consist of citizens who feel the actions of government on them, understand the relationship of politics to these effects, discuss the connections between these ends and means, and in turn are connected through democratic arrangements to a state that respected their discussions. In contrast to this ideal of democratic engagement, he thought that available social and political institutions did not enable citizens to organize themselves into publics capable of understanding, responding to, and directing their state, and so governance was cut loose from the tether of democratic guidance. The spheres of state and society had lost their reciprocal linkages. His reflections on the symptoms of this disjunction ring eerily familiar to the contemporary ear: low voter turnouts, distrust toward government, and a cynical sense that “the whole apparatus of political activities is a kind of protection coloration to conceal the fact that big business rules the government roost in any case.”<sup>2</sup>

Over the 70 years since Dewey penned these apprehensions about modern democracy, the problem of the public remains unsolved. Indeed, it has grown more intractable as complexities and barriers compound. The electoral machinery of democratic engagement remains, in its essentials, unchanged from the forms that Dewey criticized and seems even less capable of constituting coherent publics. While Dewey and others in his age held the technical capacities of the state and its experts in high regard, contemporary critics focus as much on the debilities of bureaucratic agencies as on their democratic consequences. Partially

as a result of this additional difficulty, contemporary reform debates skirt the problem of constituting pragmatic publics. Improving governance, for example, has largely focused on administration rather than democracy; in many modern treatments, this in turn means increasing the satisfaction of clients as consumers of government largess.<sup>3</sup> Various liberalisms shun the notion of popular democratic direction<sup>4</sup> or have focused on

the principles and rather static conditions of justice and equality rather than searching out alternative institutions that would advance the more demanding requirements of democratic direction. Others have targeted the erosion of civil society and its discourses as a problem for effective governance (administration)<sup>5</sup> on one hand and legitimation on the other, but they have not for the most part offered new, more fit-

ting, political institutions to shore up civil society and reconnect its citizens to one another and to their state.

Under the radar of these theorists and practitioners, a number of recent innovations have responded to practical failures by reorganizing agencies and constituting capable publics. In the course of addressing limits to popular control and technical expertise, some reformers have developed institutional strategies to address the problem of the public that Dewey pointed out so long ago. These political reforms, occurring in areas such as public education, community policing, and ecosystem management, both create and depend upon active citizens with a depth of knowledge and experience that enables them to act with, and on a par with, professionals and officials. Empowered and engaged citizens in these reforms contribute resources and contextual information to solve governance challenges on one hand and, on the other, steer it when they make their priorities known and monitor state actions. Thus far, these reforms have been isolated and engaged limited numbers of citizens. But they are nevertheless important guideposts for those interested in regenerating democratic publics, not least because that project presently possesses so few tools in its arsenal.

The basic elements of this public-creation approach are straightforward. Its first principles are participation, deliberation, empowerment, and equality: invite citizen participation in

*The problem of the modern public—and the cause of its incoherence—was that citizens, alone and together, were for the most part bewildered when they contemplated affairs of state.*

the direct determination of state action, organize that participation through deliberation between both citizens and directly involved officials, empower them by harnessing state action to the results of these deliberations, and assure that all citizens have equal opportunities to deliberate, participate, and exercise power in this way.

## 2. Democratic Centralism and Devolution: Rational Ignorance, Parochialism, and Local Domination

Before examining this participatory road, consider the fundamental difficulties of two more familiar paths. One obvious route to regenerating democratic publics would be one that reinvigorates familiar centralized democratic political arrangements: the canonical contest for official power that occurs through election of political leaders and interest group dealing. If there were some way of inducing citizens to form themselves into publics that discussed the promise and success of general party platforms or crucial interest group positions and ramifications, solving the problem of the absent public would require no deep modifications to the venerable political forms that Dewey thought so misfit to modern governance challenges. When a political center is charged with issuing decisions that affect multitudes, however, the challenge of engaging those multitudes in informed reflections about the effects of past decisions and implications for what ought to be done next—the task of creating a public—presents potentially insurmountable difficulties that have been long pointed out by critics of strong democratic forms.

Famously, Schumpeter pointed out the folly of viewing electoral democracy as, or wishing for it to be, a system in which ordinary citizens form coherent opinions about what their government ought to do. For, he wrote, “the typical citizen drops to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests.”<sup>6</sup> One intuition behind this view, sensible enough and entirely consonant with Dewey’s view, is that the objects of state action and its effects are far from the direct experience of most citizens, and so difficult for them to cogitate. Rational ignorance<sup>7</sup> further decreases the political intelligence of citizens. For when power is democratically centralized, the actions of any particu-

lar citizen has negligible impact and so he or she has little incentive to expend the energy or resources necessary to form prudent perspectives. These two timeless factors are further compounded by increases in the scope, diversity, and technical complexity of problems that modern governments must solve. Specific electoral reform strategies such as disciplining political parties,<sup>8</sup> introducing third parties into two-party systems,<sup>9</sup> or campaign finance reforms might vastly increase political competition and even political equality, but they have more limited resources to address these fundamental concerns about the incentives and cognitive limitations of individual citizens. These obstacles to public formation in the context of centralized political power seem daunting.

If administrative insulation and political centralization are necessary to render the state effective, perhaps concerns about the capacities and coherence of democratic publics should be subordinated to these practical considerations. In at least some areas of state action and in some places, we need not face this impossible choice. Throughout public regulation and public service delivery, centralized administrative and political authority has itself suffered mounting criticisms on the very ground of its inability to produce satisfying outcomes. Critics argue that forces at the center impose incoherent or poor rules on subordinates that constrain them, those subordinates ought to be author-

ized to respond to local exigencies or changing circumstance, or that where conditions vary across space the uniform solutions generated by central powers cannot be very effective.

One common response to these performance concerns has been to decentralize state operations through combinations of marketization, administrative devolution, and political decentralization. In their pure forms, none of these is very promising as a strategy to constitute citizens into effective publics. Whatever its other merits, imposing market organization on state agencies such as schools and other services designs away the need for cognizant citizens to act collectively. The question of what the state should do is answered by citizens in their capacity as consumers through prices and purchasing and not through any public deliberation. Administrative devolution<sup>10</sup>—authorizing lower agencies and levels within agencies to make decisions that were previously determined from higher-up—also holds no special promise for re-creating the democratic public. Such reforms may empower street level officials and those officials may even tend to be more responsive to public concerns than their superiors.

*When a political center is charged with issuing decisions that affect multitudes, however, the challenge of engaging those multitudes in informed reflections about the effects of past decisions and implications for what ought to be done next—the task of creating a public—presents potentially insurmountable difficulties that have been long pointed out by critics of strong democratic forms.*

But because they do not alter political forms or create new avenues of engagement, the situation for citizens and the prospects of public formation are largely the same as in centralized forms. Political decentralization—for example the devolution of power and responsibility from national to state or state to local governments—may seem to offer more promise for publics because it shrinks the scale of the state and brings it closer to the felt lives of citizens.<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of a citizen, however, the actions of even a medium-sized city government are likely to escape her perceptual horizon; the still substantial size of the electorate there does little to allay concerns about rational ignorance.

One hybrid form, the combined decentralization of political and administrative power, seems more promising for the public. Consider programs of *participatory devolution*, such as neighborhood government,<sup>12</sup> in which officials close to the implementation of state decisions enjoy substantial latitude and citizens near them participate in the exercise of this public power. Under such arrangements, citizens are close enough to state actions to feel its effects and understand the chains of causation that led to them. When they have real input into common decisions whose results they suffer or enjoy, they have strong incentives to learn and think hard about the problems they face and how to address them. Participatory devolution, then, may spur the formation of citizens into effective publics.

Two general difficulties, however, plague this approach. The first, drawn by Madison and many others after him, is the tendency of small polities to be dominated by oligarchs and factions. Whether some local notable dominates by virtues of his status wealth or office, some entrenched small group from its special knowledge or position, or even a majority through of its numerical force, domination destroys publics. A public, after all, is made up of citizens who come together to reflect upon collective affairs and state actions in to jointly discover and create new, more effective approaches and possibilities. Domination and exclusion preclude such open consideration. This tendency for small groups that begin as open publics to degenerate into local tyrannies or oligarchies lodges a forceful objection to participatory devolution as a strategy for creating effective and modern publics.

A second problem with participatory devolution concerns effectiveness rather than democracy. Compared to centralized arrangements that operate at larger scale, devolved governance institutions may be much less able to address technically complicated and variegated public problems. With tasks like con-

trolling toxic substances, managing delicate ecosystems, educating children, and maintaining public health or order, isolated action units may not be able to incorporate useful discoveries and innovations that originate outside of themselves or be constrained by relatively poor pools of skill and leadership. Where problems overlap between jurisdictions, localized arrangements, no matter how internally democratic and transparent, may lack the institutional wherewithal to band together. Beyond these intractabilities, the distribution of capacities, resources, and luck is likely to be very uneven across local units in any particular application of participatory devolution. Since these factors figure centrally in the competence of local units, their performance of public tasks is likely to be uneven as well. The system over-

all, then, may generate substantial inequalities and thus further advantage those who are already well off while leaving the worst-off behind.

### 3. Solving the Problem of the Public through Bottom-Up, Top-Down Governance

Sometimes consciously responding to these administrative and democratic dilemmas, a new architecture of governance that cuts a middle path between the dichotomy of devolution and democratic centralism has emerged in diverse areas of public action. Elsewhere, I have called this approach “Accountable Autonomy”<sup>13</sup> or “Empowered Participatory Governance”.<sup>14</sup> Its institutional design is simultaneously bottom-up and top-down. Vulnerable to the problems of remoteness, rational ignorance, local domination, and parochialism discussed above, neither decentralization or concentration of public power offer very promising strategies constituting the kinds of democratic publics and informed, active citizens that Dewey imagined. A novel recombination of local autonomy with centralized support is more promising.

In its bottom-up moment, Empowered Participatory Governance recognizes that for an increasing number of social problems, citizens have become frustrated with the outcomes of received technocratic solutions. In many of these areas, participatory and decentralized decision structures offer substantial practical advantages over top-down hierarchies mentioned above: the potential to utilized local knowledge, ingenuity, and opportunities and the latitude to tailor public action to suit diverse circumstances and particular priorities. Decentralizing authority and creating opportunities for public participation in these issue spaces can draw intelligent, reflective, and sustained citizen engagement. Citizens who engage in such reforms increase their

*Sometimes consciously responding to these administrative and democratic dilemmas, a new architecture of governance that cuts a middle path between the dichotomy of devolution and democratic centralism has emerged in diverse areas of public action.*



understandings of intricacies facing public action, gain skills of deliberation and problem solving, and, to the extent that they address urgent problems, acquire allegiance to these institutional arrangements. In this way, opening participatory avenues for citizens to address practical concerns can help to overcome the problems of remoteness and rational ignorance.

But, as discussed above, decentralization and participation generate their own problems of parochialism, inequality, and local domination and exclusion. Empowered Participatory Governance grapples with these through its top-down moment. Whereas devolution effaces hierarchical authority and bureaucracy aggrandizes it, Empowered Participatory Governance attempts to both recognize the limitations and exploit the benefits of centralized power. Empowered Participatory Governance fundamentally alters the relationship of central authority in relation to local actors and groups in two ways. First, centralized support and supervision should check the tendencies toward parochialism and inequity that accompany dispersion of power. Within localities, external supports will often be required to build capacities for effective public problem solving. External checks can also insure that local elites do not control ostensibly democratic processes and that marginalized groups can participate. Whether the context is neighborhoods within a city or states in a nation, central action is also necessary to address the inequalities of resources and power between localities. Second, devolution triggers parallel processes of practical local governance and problem solving that yield rich, field-tested experiences. Through various monitoring activities, central office staff can potentially pool these diverse experiences and reflect upon them to draw actionable lessons.

The organizational form of Empowered Participatory Governance, then, might be drawn as the pyramid of hierarchy turned on its head. Instead of a compact directorate at the top, the bulk of the power is exercised by its numerous local units, or field offices. In the ideal, authority to define tasks lies with those who execute them: “street-level” officials such as front-line social service staff, field biologists, teachers, principals, and police beat officers. As with participatory variants of devolution, these officials are joined by proximate citizens whose welfare depends upon the quality of public action or whose knowledge and support impel its success or failure. Groups of officials and citizens together would then constitute micro-polities tasked to advance various public ends through familiar deliberative techniques of collaborative planning and problem solving.

*Practical deliberation, understood as the mutual commitment to give, take, and be bound by public reasons and arguments directed toward common goals, is central to the notion of democratic publics in which citizens engage not simply to press their preconceived interests, but to discover what works, what is right, and even what they want.*

As we move downward in the organization chart, the tree narrows, funnel like, to the regional or central offices that serve local units and connect them with one another. In this design, the main purpose of ordinarily commanding bodies such as downtown headquarters of a school system or police department, city hall, or the regional office of a federal agency, shifts from directing field units to assuring the fairness and effectiveness of their internal creative processes. These functions are activities that local units cannot, or likely would not, provide for themselves such as support, accountability, and institutional learning.

Robust democratic publics, then, require both of these bottom-up and top-down moments. Consider three crucial features of contemporary democratic publics: participation, deliberation,

and effective problem-solving. On the first, decentralization creates the possibility for deep and concrete participation, while centralized accountability insures openness and equality of opportunity for participation. Practical deliberation, understood as the mutual commitment to give, take, and be bound by public reasons and arguments directed toward common goals, is central to the notion of democratic publics in which citizens engage not simply to press their preconceived interests, but to discover what works, what is right, and even what they want. Decen-

tralization across geographic and issue spaces makes the subjects of deliberation tractable for professional and lay participants alike. However, weakness of capacity and will frequently prevents people and groups from doing what they say they will do, and so external accountability can enhance the quality and effect of deliberation. Similarly, the constructive tension between devolution and central power can enhance the effectiveness of these problem-solving efforts. Devolution invites local knowledge and information, allows solutions to be tailored to particular circumstances, and facilitates innovation and parallel experimentation. Centralized support, in turn, can provide training and other supports often necessary for local actors to exploit these opportunities, discipline to keep them on track, and connections across localities to diffuse innovations and spur learning.

#### 4. Two Illustrations

Consider, very briefly, two public sector reforms that illustrate how this bottom-up, top-down strategy of reform contributes to the creation of democratic publics capable of addressing wicked public policy problems.

Several cities in Brazil, most notably Porto Alegre, have implemented directly democratic provisions for the formulation of

their municipal budgets since the early 1990s. The reform is called participatory budgeting.<sup>15</sup> Instead of determining budgets through legislative wrangling or executive fiat, municipal priorities are the subject of wide-ranging public debate and direct determination. The participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, for example, provides for the bottom-up determination of neighborhood priorities. Residents and representatives of community organizations in each neighborhood meet to specify the urgency of local needs—for example sanitation, water, paving, education—and determination of local projects. These priorities are aggregated upward through the city's districts and finally determine in large part the city's capital budget. Beyond aggregating local priorities, the executive offices of city hall provide extensive training to participants to allow them to read and formulate budgets. Furthermore, they attempt to balance inequalities across different parts of the city by favoring areas of greater population and need.

In recent years, up to 10 percent of the adult population has participated in some stage of Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting. In doing so, they debate neighborhood priorities and the performance of local government in relation to their very concrete needs. In terms of its effect, the pace of urban infrastructure development has rapidly increased since the program's inception. Many observers have further claimed that the participatory budgeting has reduced corruption and weakened patronage relationships in the city by exposing budgeting decisions to widespread public scrutiny and debate.

A second example comes from attempts to improve public education in the United States. While much of the debate about how to improve education has focused on consumer choice and market mechanisms on one hand, and on standards-based reform and testing on the other, jurisdictions like Kentucky and Chicago have pursued a strategy that relies upon the creation and efficacy of democratic publics like those outlined above. A 1988 state law affecting the city of Chicago, for example, devolved substantial authority to site-based school councils. There are some 560 school councils, one for each elementary and high school in the city. Each is composed of eleven members, six parents, two community members, two teachers, and the principal. All but the principal are elected every two years by their respective constituencies. School Councils are empowered to hire and fire principals, determine many aspects of school operations, allocate discretionary finances, and formulate long-term "School Improvement Plans."

As with Porto Alegre's participatory budget, reform in

Chicago retains robust roles for central authorities in school governance. One cluster of roles involves providing various kinds of supports such as training for local school council members, assistance in developing and reviewing school improvement plans, and the like. Another set of roles involves accountability. While the initial impetus of reform was to devolve local control, the school councils and staff of many schools were unable to exploit that autonomy to improve their schools. Now, one major function of the CPS central staff is to monitor the performance of schools and intervene in ones that continue to perform poorly. Sometimes, this intervention takes the form of intensive tutelage for staff and council members, but it can also be a kind of receivership for the worst performers.

Rather than relying solely upon the wisdom of experts or upon the individualized forces of the marketplace for school improvement, many reformers in Chicago have seen the problems of its school system as the problem of a phantom public. The city has sought to transform its schools in part by developing institutions to foster responsive, informed, and empowered publics composed of citizens and street level bureaucrats.

Presented so briefly, these two illustrations raise more questions and doubts than they answer. Some of these questions have to do with the relationship between the administrative parts, about whether such structures will degenerate into an aggrandized center or fragmented localities. Others concern the sustainability, quality, and inclusiveness of participation and deliberation, and so the character of resulting publics, in these cases. These worries are serious and merit deeper investigation to establish whether, and how, empowered participatory governance might generate stable institutions and desirable democratic publics. Finally, some readers may suspect that these two illustrations, drawn from contexts with very little in common, are so anomalous that they offer no broader lessons. On this last question, similar attempts to address public problems through the reinvigoration of democratic publics can be found in areas like endangered species protection and industrial toxics reduction,<sup>16</sup> policing and public safety,<sup>17</sup> seventeen and economic and social development.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, the problem of the public is as urgent and unsolved now as it was when John Dewey posited the problem some 70 years ago. The possibility of creating publics may, however, be greater now than they have been since he posed the problem. Flagging support for the received, non-participatory solutions to public problems—technocratic hierarchy and the marketplace—may open a window of opportunity for policies and political pro-

*In sum, the problem of the public is as urgent and unsolved now as it was when John Dewey posited the problem some 70 years ago. The possibility of creating publics may, however, be greater now than they have been since he posed the problem*

grams that create democratic publics. Traversing this intensively democratic path, less well worn than expert-driven or economic trajectories, will require institutional innovation and imagination. Theoretically minded critics might explore the twists and byways on this path by taking Empowered Participatory Governance as a point of departure or by rejecting it in favor of a more incisive lens. Concrete institutional innovations such as the Chicago school reform or participatory budgeting offer rich materials for empirically oriented scholars to help map the path whose origin was marked in the *Public and Its Problems*. But the most crucial travelers along this path are of course citizens themselves, those who might constitute themselves into coherent and sensate publics by inhabiting new institutions that connect disparate citizens into reflective collectivities. Such institutions will only be built upon their insistence, and can only flourish through sustained participation. In this sense, the solution to Dewey's conundrum requires devising governance institutions that are more immediately by the people, of the people, and so for the people.

Archon Fung is an assistant professor of public policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

### Endnotes

1. John Dewey. *The Public and Its Problems*. Athens, OH: University of Ohio Press, 1927, esp. Chapter 4.
2. Ibid., 118.
3. See, for example, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*. (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1992).
4. See Riker William, *Liberalism Against Populism: A Confrontation between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*. Prospect, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1982) and George Kateb, "The Moral Distinctiveness of Representative Democracy," *Ethics* 91 (April 1981): 357–74.
5. See the recent work of Robert Putnam, especially *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993 and "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America" *The American Prospect* v. 24 (Winter 1996), pp. 34–48.
6. Joseph A. Schumpeter. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1950: 262.
7. See, for example, Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1957.
8. For one highly noted proposal, see Committee on Political Parties, "Toward a More Responsible Two Party System," *American Political Science Review* (supplement) 44, no. 3 pt 2 (September 1950): 1–98.
9. See Theodore Lowi, "Toward a More Responsible Three-Party System," *PS/Vol.16* (Fall 1983), pp. 699–706.
10. For example, see Herman Goldstein, *Problem Oriented Policing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).
11. Robert Dahl, "The City in the Future of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 61, no. 4 (December 1967): 953–70.
12. See Milton Kotler, *Neighborhood Government*. New York: Bobs-Merril, 1969.
13. Archon Fung. "Accountable Autonomy: Toward Empowered Deliberation in Chicago Schools and Policing" in *Politics and Society*. Vol. 29, No. 1 (March 2001).
14. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright. "Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance" in *Politics and Society*. Vol. 29, No. 1 (March 2001).
15. See Gianpaolo Baiocchi. "Participation, Activism, and Politics: The Porto Alegre Experiment and Deliberative Democratic Theory" in *Politics and Society*. Vol. 29, No. 1 (March 2001).
16. Edward P. Weber, "The Question of Accountability in Historical Perspective: From Jacksonian to Contemporary Grassroots Ecosystem Management," *Administration and Society* 41, no. 4 (September 1999): 451–94. See also Charles Sabel, Archon Fung, and Bradley Karkkainen. *Beyond Backyard Environmentalism*. Forward by Amory and Hunter Lovins (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).
17. Fung (2001).
18. T.M. Thomas Isaac and Richard Franke. *Local Democracy and Development: People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning in Kerala*. New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2000.