



Public Engagement

@ PUBLIC AGENDA

Framing for Deliberation
Engaging for Change
Building Civic Capacity

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Since its beginnings in 1975, Public Agenda has been a pioneer in the practice of public engagement, with hands-on experience in hundreds of communities and on dozens of tough issues.

While always adapted to the task at hand, our work revolves around three fundamental and interrelated practices:

First, we **frame issues for public deliberation** so everyone can enter the public dialogue and participate effectively.

Then, we work with communities to **engage citizens and leaders for democratic problem solving and change.**

Finally, we **build local, civic capacity** for the long term, beyond the life span of any project.

Framing for Deliberation

Engaging for Change • Building Civic Capacity



Transforming the Public Conversation on Tough Issues

Hot Air and Steam: The Sad State of Public Discourse Today

Too often, what passes for public dialogue is a sad substitute for real democratic engagement. A panel of experts tells people what's good for them. A so-called public hearing is offered in which no one gets to hear much of anything except those with the loudest voices blowing off steam. A scripted "town meeting" is staged to manipulate public opinion.

Not surprisingly, events like these yield little more than momentary attention from the media and lip service from politicians. Worse, they increase frustration, apathy and cynicism among the public. Fortunately, the problem is usually not in the people, but in the process.

Productive Dialogue Begins with How the Issue Is Framed

Framing refers to how issues are defined, shaped through narrative or metaphor and presented in order to have certain impacts rather than others. Mostly, framing is utilized by politicians and interest groups seeking a winning edge for their point of view in the court of public opinion.

This framing for persuasion is the only kind many can imagine, and that's unfortunate because it reduces complex, real-world issues to zero-sum, polarizing, black-or-white positions that ignore the compromises and trade-offs that are part and parcel of a democratic society. Persuasive framing rewards experts who live and breathe a particular issue and professionals who have mastered the arts of manipulation; it puts at an unfair disadvantage those who have worthy ideas but lack the training or budgets for slick media presentations.

Framing for Deliberation and the Power of Citizen Choicework

It was the pervasiveness of this persuasive paradigm that led Public Agenda co-founder Daniel Yankelevich, along with a few other pioneers of a more deliberative democracy, to find a better way. Realizing that how choices are framed determines how they are considered, they developed "Choicework" guides that framed issues not for persuasion, but for deliberation. Choices are presented not as an either/or endgame with winners and losers, but as a starting point, with everyone's interests represented and choices weighed for their pros, cons and trade-offs for the public interest.

Framing for deliberation is the first step in Public Agenda's approach to engagement work. It can be considered the "smart software" at the core of Public Agenda's strategic approach and a key to why it works.

"Scientists and the public don't often speak the same language. Public Agenda has proven very skilled at bringing together scientists and citizens for a genuine dialogue on issues of common concern."

— Alan I. Leshner
CEO, American Association
for the Advancement of Science

Framing for Persuasion

- Focuses on winning or losing
- Focuses on fear of wrong choices
- Rewards debating skills
- Favors experts and flashy presentations
- Either/or mentality
- Partisan
- Evidence to support a position
- Choice as end point

Framing for Deliberation

- Focuses on doing what's right
- Focuses on benefits of right choices
- Rewards cooperation and creative thinking
- Levels the playing field
- Seeks compromise and new ways forward
- Nonpartisan
- Evidence to deepen understanding
- Choice as new beginning

Engaging for Change

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“Public Agenda has provided not only a unique service to our schools and students, but one of significant importance to community-based organizations.”

– **Jesse Hamilton**

Executive Director, Crown Heights (Brooklyn) Service Center



“Public Agenda’s help was invaluable in our efforts to engage Nebraska’s citizens and develop an approach to academic standards that was right for our state.”

– **Doug Christensen**

Nebraska Commissioner of Education

Working to Address Real Problems

Community dialogue that brings diverse stakeholders to the table while putting diverse ideas on the table results in more common ground, more clarity about disagreements, more awareness of lingering questions and concerns, and ideas for moving ahead collaboratively on the problem at hand. Moreover, as people from different backgrounds and with very different viewpoints are given the opportunity to work together in their deliberations, it builds mutual respect and deepens people’s sense of common purpose.

Public engagement can take various forms and employ various tools, depending on what’s right for a given situation. In every case, however, Public Agenda employs engagement strategies and tools in such a way that they help citizens and communities tackle tough issues like improving education, managing sprawl or bettering police-community relations.

Focus groups, for example, are a controlled and efficient means to accomplish some, but not all, of the goals of public engagement. Stakeholder dialogues can engage important segments of a community in productive dialogue in order to elicit interest and ideas about how to solve a problem. Broad-based “Community Conversations,” a more ambitious approach to citizen engagement, are moderate- to large-scale public/civic events meant to include all sectors of a community in dialogue about the issue in question. In addition, online engagement strategies can complement and strengthen face-to-face engagement strategies in numerous and important ways.

Whatever form it takes, authentic engagement involves substantive give-and-take with those who have an interest in the decisions that are made. Effective engagement is not about imparting the “right” answer, but rather a matter of creating opportunities and space for citizens from all over the political spectrum to talk, think and work together through the multiple dimensions of an issue in a task-oriented manner.

Building Civic Capacity

Framing for Deliberation • Engaging for Change



“Public Agenda’s assistance played an indispensable role in helping New Jersey citizens grapple intelligently and productively with a complicated and contentious issue—tax reform. With their help, progress may finally be made.”

— **Mark M. Murphy**
Executive Director, the Fund for New Jersey

“The development of community engagement as a standard operating procedure is the most direct outcome of this work. The fact that it continues to be the way that things are done [in Bridgeport, CT] is itself a real impact on relations and organizations.”

— **Marge Hiller**
Executive Director, Bridgeport
Public Education Fund

Building for the Long Term

Far too often, public engagement is viewed as an event rather than as a process. But to have lasting impact, public engagement must move beyond “one and done” events, beyond the “project” phase, and become a set of practices that are embedded in the life of a community. In our approach, civic events like Community Conversations are best understood as points of departure for new forms of individual and collaborative action, community leadership development and further engagement.

Our goal, then, is two fold. On one level, we’re working to help citizens, leaders and communities address immediate, concrete problems where progress has been stymied, such as education, public safety, climate change, housing, health care or jobs. On another level, we aim to foster an ongoing culture of problem solving and decision making in which citizens and leaders share responsibility for addressing problems of common concern.

Practically speaking, this means that capacity should be built at every turn, as local organizations learn to work together to design and organize engagement, local citizens learn to moderate dialogues and local leaders learn to leverage the process to inform and facilitate change. For these reasons, by design we keep our work behind the scenes and our services as affordable and easy to adapt to a variety of circumstances as possible.

A textbook example of building local capacity is told in the Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) publication “Transforming Public Life: A Decade of Public Engagement in Bridgeport, CT.” For other examples of how public engagement works and can become embedded in a community, see our Case Studies in the section “Engagement in Action.”

How Do You Know It Works?

In an independent evaluation by Harvard researchers, Public Agenda's engagement model was seen as strongly effective at both solving community problems in the near term and "embedding deliberation" over time.

As part of a report entitled "Embedded Deliberation: Entrepreneurs, Organizations, and Public Action," Professors Elena Fagotto and Archon Fung examined Public Agenda's work in Connecticut.

Fagotto and Fung found Public Agenda's Community Conversations superior to traditional gatherings such as PTA or school board meetings for their structured approach, the presence of a trained moderator, the inclusion of diverse participants beyond the "usual suspects" and the exposure of decision makers to overlooked needs or resources.

Perhaps the most significant benefit of Community Conversations the professors cite is in follow-up action and long-term results: the translating of deliberation into action and ongoing civic capacity. "Several design elements in conversations aim to produce follow-up actions," the authors write. These elements include devoting ample time to finding common ground and possible action steps, announcing a time and place for reconvening and, where possible, inviting the participation of other organizations and sponsors to build capacity for the long term.

The researchers cite a number of specific examples of positive change that came out of Community Conversations in Connecticut:

In Beacon Falls, a conversation on school safety brought up the problem of bullying on school buses. The school superintendent was informed that the school had a policy on bullying, but bus drivers were not aware of it. The conversation helped identify a problem that could be solved simply by improving communication, and since then every year the school principal meets with school bus drivers to explain the school's anti-bullying policy.

In West Haven, the mayor decided to institute an early childhood commission in response to a conversation.

In Wilton, the first conversation led to the creation of "Vision 20/20," a group coordinating initiatives for youth development. At another conversation, the problems of excessive pressure on students and sleep deprivation were discussed, and it was decided to change the school start time to allow for more sleep.

In Norwalk, the Community Conversation model was adapted to deliberate on local topics, and the process became quite embedded, considering that six conversations were held from 1999 to 2003. In communities like Bridgeport and Norwalk, conversations seem to have become an ongoing mechanism for discerning public opinion and promoting community involvement on various issues.

Fagotto and Fung conclude, "Several elements suggest that Community Conversations are well embedded in Connecticut. First, several communities use conversations as a recurrent tool. Second, in many cases the conversation model is adapted to address local problems. Third, local public institutions... sometimes recur to conversations to gather input from the community or engage the public in collaborative solutions to problems. Finally, state public institutions have also embraced conversations to hear the public's opinion... The Community Conversations' deliberative model has become well embedded in the decision-making processes of several actors, spanning from state and local government to civil society organizations."

In independent research, Peter Muhlberger, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Texas Tech University, documented positive impacts on citizens who participate in Public Agenda engagement processes.

Based on an analysis of survey data Dr. Muhlberger collected from participants in Community Conversations using Public Agenda's model and materials, the process was found to enhance people's civic experience and capacities in important ways. For example, he studied "deliberative citizenship"—that is, "norms of greater engagement with political life"—and found that "the deliberative citizenship scale increased significantly in pre- to post-discussion questionnaires."

Another example from Muhlberger's research concerns what he calls "motivation." Deliberation, he explains, "may have the effect of raising motivation to participate in future deliberative activities. If so, the effect of deliberation on motivation may be a part of a virtuous circle with deliberation stoking motivation, which in turn stokes further deliberation." He found that for participants in the Public Agenda Community Conversations, "motivation significantly improved." In fact, of the four models of public engagement he studied in his research, this effect was strongest for those experiencing the Public Agenda model and materials.

In an independent evaluation by MDRC, Public Agenda's community engagement technical assistance was characterized by end users as "phenomenal" and "terrific."

Public Agenda is a partner of Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national initiative to help more community college students succeed. In an interim report to the Initiative, the respected evaluation research organization MDRC reviewed Public Agenda's efforts to help colleges engage their communities more effectively to improve results for their students:

Respondents reported almost uniform high praise for the assistance from Public Agenda on the Community Conversations. Respondents used words such as "phenomenal," "great" and "terrific" to describe their contribution. The materials from Public Agenda were repeatedly cited as comprehensive and helpfully detailed. A typical comment was: "The materials were terrific. They said everything and were very scripted. Everything you needed was there." The training for the conversation moderators and recorders was rated by most involved as "very good."

Of course, providing quality technical assistance is only as meaningful as the outcomes that follow. Jefferson Community College in rural Ohio offers an example of impacts emerging from our work with colleges and their communities. Working with several local partners, the college organized a Community Conversation that a number of faculty described as the best community event the college had ever been involved with. Afterwards a levy passed with unusually strong support, a health care group that participated in the forum used the Community Conversation model to engage people on elder care questions, and the college and K-12 system developed a strong partnership to work on "college readiness." The college and school system are embarking on a new round of Community Conversation work as a means to move forward on the issue.

Public Agenda's own post forum evaluation questionnaires indicate many strongly positive results for participants.

Typically, more than three-fourths of participants responding to post forum surveys say:

- *they heard arguments against their original positions that they thought were good*
- *they rethought their original positions at least once during the course of the forum*
- *the forum was much more diverse and representative of their community than other public gatherings they had attended*

Most respondents also tell us that the thing they find the most rewarding about the Community Conversation process is talking with different kinds of people "that I wouldn't normally have a chance to meet or talk to."

In addition to these evaluations of our work, we believe the power of our approach is evident in our case studies, available through Public Agenda's Center for Advances in Public Engagement.

Public Engagement Sampler

Examples of our hundreds of public engagement projects:

Statewide engagement initiatives in Connecticut and Nebraska on education and youth issues and in New Jersey on state tax reform.

Public dialogues on global climate change in partnership with "Science Cafés" in Denver and Brooklyn.

Intensive work with the San Jose School District and with the Bridgeport Education Fund on education and community issues.

Partnerships with the American Association for the Advancement in Science on the ecology of Puget Sound and on teaching evolution.

A national Facing Up to the Nation's Finances initiative on the federal debt and budget, partnering with the Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation, the Concord Coalition and Viewpoint Learning.

Achieving the Dream, a national initiative to close achievement gaps at the nation's community colleges (Public Agenda is a national partner for this initiative, specializing in helping colleges engage their communities, students and faculty in efforts to improve student success).

A three-year initiative working with local leaders in the Kansas City region to improve math, science and technology education.

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