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School of Public Administration
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Researching Civic Engagement:

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Some Questions We Might Ask About Civic Engagement

- Why?
- How?
- When?
- Where?
- For whom?
- To whom?
- With what?
- What quality?
- How often?
- By whom?
- At what cost?
- For what benefit?
- Who pays?
- What if we don't?
- What about trust?
- Efficacy?
- Legitimacy?
- Justice?
- Empathy?
- Civility?

Other Questions: International Perspectives

- Are there shared values or normative concerns across nation-states and political cultures regarding the role of citizens with their government?
- Review of random sample of papers presented at two international, cross-disciplinary conferences on democracy
 - 2008 Learning Democracy By Doing, Toronto, Canada
 - 2010 Living Democracy as a Way of Life, Rosario, Argentina

Paper Analysis

- 18 papers coded in total (13% of 2008 papers; 4% of 2010 papers)
- Content Analysis Questions
 - What are the research questions, if any?
 - What are the theoretical lenses applied, if any?
 - What normative values are expressed explicitly or implicitly?
 - What barriers to democratic improvement are identified in the paper's discussion/conclusion?
 - What democratic mechanisms are identified as having potential to overcome barriers or to improve democracy?
 - What other observations are worth noting?

About the Papers: Country Focus

- United Kingdom (2)
- Canada (2)
- Iran (1)
- Mexico (1)
- South Africa (2)
- Argentina (8)
- Colombia (1)
- Germany (1)
- Venezuela (1)
- France (1)
- Italy (1)
- Spain (1)
- Latin America (2)

Research Questions

- Is it possible to build onto an inclusive democracy that is respectful of differences in Latin America?
- Public libraries as enhancers of dialogue and community?
- How does “democracy as a way of life” happen in real scenarios?
- What are the strategies for social inclusion designed and managed by public universities?
- How is citizenship conceptualized in the Ministry of Education’s social studies curricula released in the 20th Century?
- How have student councils formed in elementary schools?

Research Questions (cont.)

- How can higher education promote democracy?
- Does adult education encourage active citizenship? Does adult education help develop citizens that are able to 'probe' and ask questions that challenge oppressive structures?
- How do we make our superficially democratic societies more profoundly democratic? What are the barriers?
- Can workers develop their social consciousness just as a result of their democratic practices in their workplace, or are other conditions necessary?
- How can artists and public arts contribute to challenging unquestioned acceptance of people perceived as "other"?
- Does repeated participation make actors more enlightened and aware of the public good?

Questions I Have Asked Recently...

- At what cost/for what benefit?
 - I have examined this issue from the perspective of social media usage by government agencies
 - “The Costs of Democratization: Social Media Adaptation Challenges within Government Agencies” in *Administrative Theory and Praxis*
 - “Online Public Engagement in the Obama Administration: Building a Democracy Bubble?” in *Policy & Internet*

Recent Questions...

- What Quality?
 - “Public Participation in Regulatory Decision-Making: Cases from Regulations.gov” in *Public Performance and Management Review*
 - “Assessing the Costs of Public Participation: Measuring Two Online Participation Mechanisms in a Single Case” in *American Review of Public Administration*

Recent Questions...

- How? By whom? Where? When?
 - “Toward ‘Strong Democracy’ in Global Cities? Social Capital Building, Action Research, and the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Experience” in *Public Administration Review*

Democratization: Need for Study

- Unknown...
 - What are the costs and benefits (i.e. citizen trust and efficacy) given different conditions of democratization?
- Purpose of this presentation
 - Suggest theoretical and practical concerns regarding democratization if not fully resourced
- Presentation agenda
 - Understanding “Costs”
 - Threat of a “Democracy Bubble”
 - Case examples: regulations.gov, Obama initiatives, social media, and Learning and Design Forum

Balancing Costs of Production and Participation

- Costs of Production
 - In dollar and resource terms, how much does it cost to produce public participation?
- Costs of Participation
 - In dollar, time, and opportunity terms, how much does it cost citizens to participate in participatory processes that are produced?
- Objective: Minimize the costs of participation, to allow for desired levels of participation, but keep costs in check.
- Dilemma: The more participation costs are lowered, the more production costs rise.

Challenge of Lowering Participation Costs & An Additional Cost to Consider

- Standard Objective: Lower costs of participation to allow an increasing number of people to participate.
 - Challenge: Measures quantity of participation, not quality.
- An Additional Cost: Costs of Democratization
 - Making participation easier (or potentially too easy) can result in high *quantity* of participation but low *quality* of participation.
 - Low *quality* of participation in high *quantities* is not meaningful for decision-makers or decision-processes
 - Participating citizens may perceive that their participation is useless; they may lose trust in government; they may lose confidence in themselves; they may disengage further.

Democratization Costs and Benefits Framework: An Adaptation of Fountain's (2001) Technology Enactment Theory

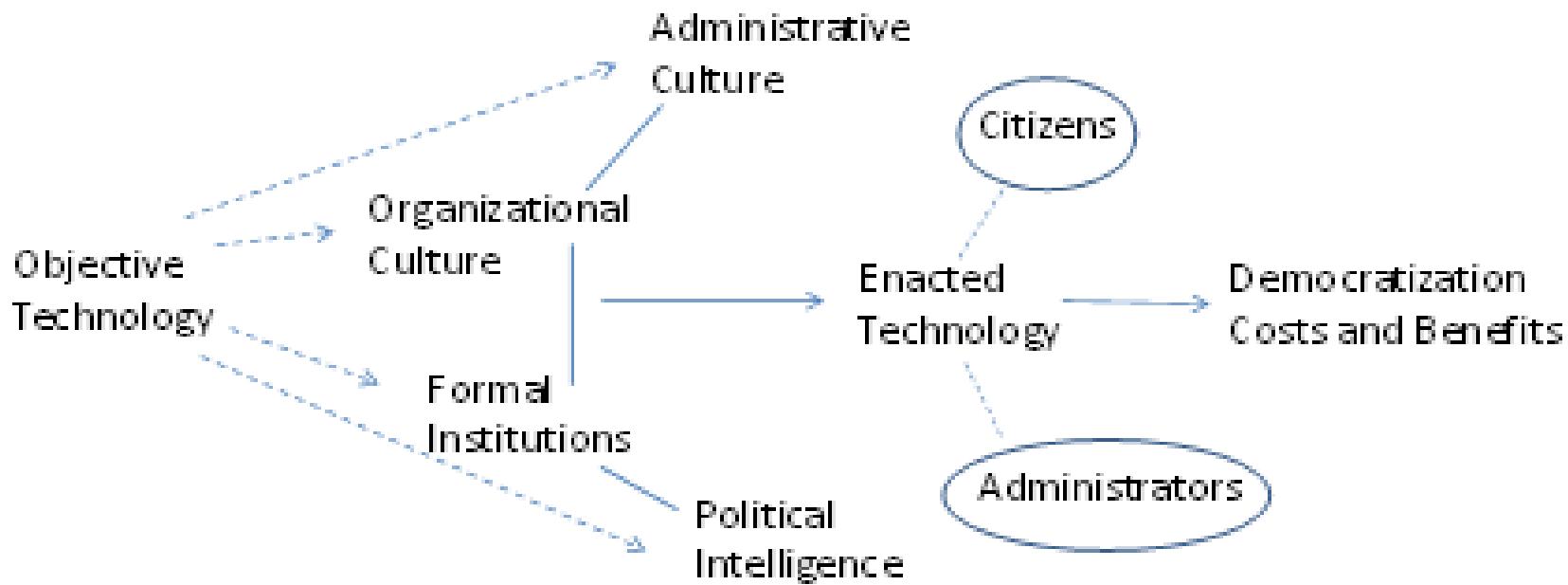
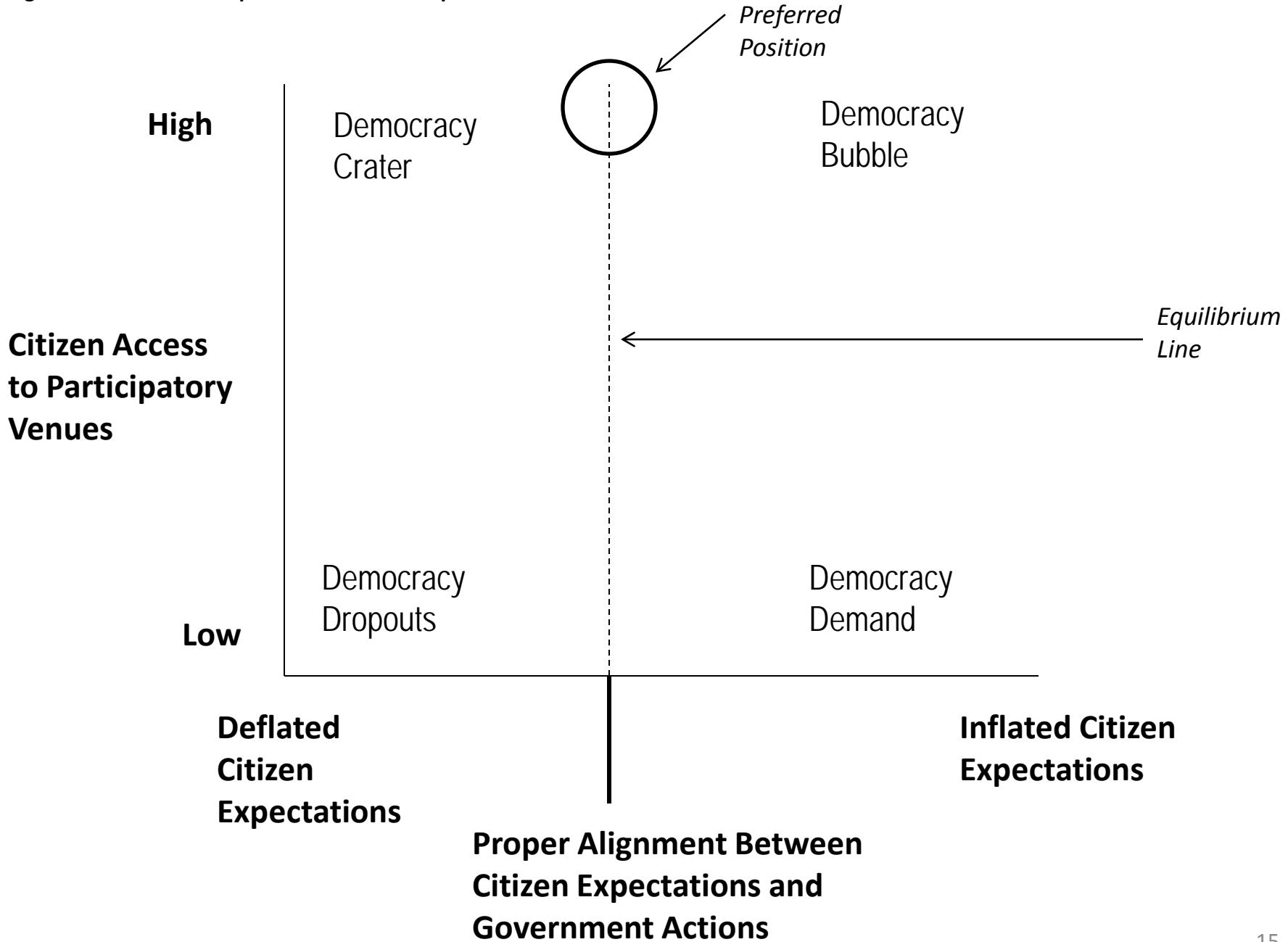


Figure 1—Democratic Equilibrium and Less Optimal States



Case Examples

- Regulations.gov
- Obama Administration Participation Initiatives
- Social Media in Government
- Learning and Design Forum

Regulations.gov

Low Cost Participation:

“Regulations.gov is committed to: (1) Increasing access to and participation in developing regulations and other related documents that can impact you, and (2) Promoting more efficient and effective rulemaking through public involvement.”

Analysis of Proposed Rules: One

- High Salience + Low Complexity
 - HHS Rule: rescission of Bush Administration discretionary rule: “Ensuring That Department of Health and Human Services Funds Do Not Support Coercive or Discriminatory Policies or Practices in Violation of Federal Law”
 - Existing law forbids discrimination in awarding of funds based on conscientious objections, such as for abortions

Analysis of Proposed Rules: One (cont.)

- Call for comment:
 - Information, including specific examples where feasible, addressing the scope and nature of the problem giving rise to the need for federal rulemaking and how the current rule would resolve those problems;
 - Information, including specific examples where feasible, supporting or refuting allegations that the December 19, 2008 final rule reduces access to information and health care services, particularly by low-income women;
 - Comment on whether the December, 19, 2008 final rule provides sufficient clarity to minimize the potential for harm resulting from any ambiguity and confusion that may exist because of the rules; and
 - Comment on whether the objectives of the December 19, 2008 final rule might also be accomplished through non-regulatory means, such as outreach and education

Analysis of Proposed Rules: One (cont.)

- 54,152 comments received
 - 91% somewhat relevant (focus on abortion)
 - 84% no credibility
 - 55% low logic; 37% some logic
 - 72% emotion-based; 26% fact- and emotion-based
 - 96% against rule rescission
- Sample comments
 - “Since when does forcing medical personnel to commit what they consider murder do anything to help anyone? All it will do is drive people of conscience away from medicine—how does it sound to have all the people who have no qualms about killing unborn babies being the only ones left to take care of people’s health?”
 - “Retain the conscience regulations.”

Analysis of Proposed Rules: One (cont.)

- Sample comments (cont.)
 - “Dear President O’Bama, I am sending you this e-mail to let you know that I am against the elimination of the ‘conscience clause’ that protects health care workers who do not wish to be involved in medical procedures they consider immoral.”
 - “Please protect the rights of health care workers to choose not to participate in abortions. This is the United States of America and we still have rights and this is a basic right to choose.”
 - “We voted for change, but not to change people’s religious beliefs. If you insist upon jamming abortion down our throats, you will find your administration aborted in less than four years.”
 - “Dear members of Congress, I will support those that vote against a Nationalize Health care system in the upcoming election.”
 - “Don’t force MY doctors into slavery. They are here to save and protect life not pick and choose.”
 - “When did the government turn to socialism? This decision violates many of the freedoms granted us in a free society!”

Analysis of Proposed Rules: Two

- High Salience + High Complexity
 - EPA advanced notice of proposed rulemaking
 - Summary: Regulation of carbon dioxide is scientifically complex. Should the EPA act under the authority of the Clean Air Act to regulate carbon dioxide, or should Congress write specific legislation to this end?
 - Call for comments contained 167 pages, with three columns of text on each page, and a variety of detailed tables and figures, and detailed statements from five additional federal agencies

Analysis of Proposed Rules: Two (cont.)

- Call for comments
 - Explain views as clearly as possible
 - Describe any assumptions used
 - Provide any technical information or data used that support stated views
 - Provide specific examples to substantiate claims

Analysis of Proposed Rules: Two (cont.)

- 16,414 comments submitted
 - 33% some relevance; 64% high relevance
 - 72% no credibility
 - 51% some logic; 28% low logic
 - 44% emotion-based; 49% emotion- and fact-based
 - 36% blended form/personal letter
- Personal comments written below pasted form letter
 - “I have taught for 35 years.”
 - “We work with many small construction companies, who employee between 10 and 100 employees.”
 - “Ignore Al Gore and his crazies.”
 - “By all means ignore this message and the thousands sent to you, if you wish were our planet to die and our children’s futures to by life in a wasteland!”
 - “IT’S ONLY THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY AT STAKE!”

Analysis of Proposed Rules: Three

- Low Salience + High Complexity
 - NOAA: “Magnuson-Stevens Act Provisions; Environmental Review Process for Fishery Management Actions”
 - Rule proposed by National Marine Fisheries Service to “revise and update “NMFS procedures for complying with the National Environmental Policy Act in the context of fishery management actions developed pursuant to the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.”
 - “These procedures are intended to integrate applicable environmental analytical procedures, including the timeframes for public input, with the procedure for the preparation and dissemination of fisher management plans, plan amendments.”

Analysis of Proposed Rules: Three (cont.)

- 102,305 comments received
 - All comments were form letters generated by the Pew Environmental Group through www.thepetitionsite.com

Regulations.gov conclusion

- Link between “increasing access to and participation in developing regulations” and “more efficient and effective rulemaking” may be tenuous.
- Majority of comments either not relevant or not unique/responsive to comment request instructions.

Obama Public Participation Initiatives

Building a Democracy Bubble?

- *Open Government Plans*
 - *Community Forums*
 - *Electronic Town Hall*

Obama Case 1: Open Government Plans

- Agencies required to develop plan to enhance *transparency, public participation, and collaboration*
- IdeaScale technology to solicit citizen input
 - 2,188 ideas posted; 21,706 votes cast; 3,443 comments offered
 - Department of Education: 109 ideas; 1,396 votes; 209 comments; 77 unique authors
 - HHS: use of blog technology, not IdeaScale

Obama Case 1 (cont)

- Degree of Inclusiveness
 - Open to all citizens, no pre-requisites for expertise (except for off-topic commentators)
- Degree of Power Granted to Citizens
 - Personal benefit with no authority, or possible communicative influence (uncertain)
- Intensity of Involvement Expected of Citizens
 - Express preferences; possibly develop preferences
- Expectation Alignment
 - Administration promises ambiguous; expectations may be varied (thus possibly inflated); no statement of how input will be interpreted or included (i.e. popularity and/or quality of input)

Obama Case 2: Community Forums

- Co-produced engagement in health care and jobs creation
- Health Care
 - 3,276 forums convened December 2008
 - 9,000+ citizens in all 50 states and DC
- Jobs Creation
 - December 2009/January 2010
 - Unknown participation

Obama Case 2 (cont)

- Degree of Inclusiveness
 - Open to all citizens to convene; individual conveners may have applied different requirements for participation
- Degree of Power Granted to Citizens
 - To discuss, to inform—potential for communicative influence
- Intensity of Involvement Expected of Citizens
 - Varied according to individual convener (spectator, preference sharing, preference determining, consensus making)
- Expectation Alignment
 - To discuss, inform as expectations. No/limited use of health care feedback; Administration jobs creation priorities announced soon after invitation to citizens to give input

Obama Case 3: Electronic Town Hall

- Open for Questions
- 92,937 people submitted 103,978 questions and cast 1,782,650 votes in approximately 2 weeks
- Determine what questions the President would answer at the town hall

Obama Case 3 (cont)

- Degree of Inclusiveness
 - Open to all citizens
- Degree of Power Granted to Citizens
 - Explicit to determine questions the President would answer
- Intensity of Involvement Expected of Citizens
 - Preferences expressing
- Expectation Alignment
 - Explicit rules to determine questions for the town hall meeting; implementation was as expected and promised

Obama Conclusions

- Obama Administration presents real change in extending access to citizens through on- and off-line participatory venues
- Risk of creating a democracy bubble that can do more harm than good
- A bursting bubble can lead to a democracy crater and/or democracy dropouts
- Steps should be taken to better manage citizen expectations and institutionalize participatory practices

Social Media in Government

Good Practices:

- *Manor Labs*
- *GPS Photos in Los Angeles*

Questionable Practices:

- *Regulations.gov*
- *Obama Open Government Plan Citizen Feedback*

Social Media Good Practices

- Manor Labs (City of Manor, TX)
 - “Citizens go to a Web site, www.manorlabs.org, to submit proposals and vote ideas up or down. Participants earn 5,000 points for submitting an idea, 150 for commenting and 300,00 if the city implements their idea. Points, known as innobucks, can be spent on police ride-alongs, meals donated by local restaurants, or a chance to serve as mayor for a day. City officials evaluate the suggestions, and every decision is made in plain view on the site.”
- City of Los Angeles
 - Citizens can use an iPhone or other device to take a photo of graffiti, pothole, overgrown tree, etc., send it to City government, who will track the problem using GPS coordinates. Garcetti: “In government, you can’t wait for people to come to you—you need to give residents the tools to empower themselves in the most convenient way.”

Social Media Inhibitive Practices

- Regulations.gov
 - Reviewed above; ambiguous expectations and complex delivery of information
- Obama Open Government Plan feedback
 - Reviewed above; ambiguous expectations and lack of moderation of citizen comments

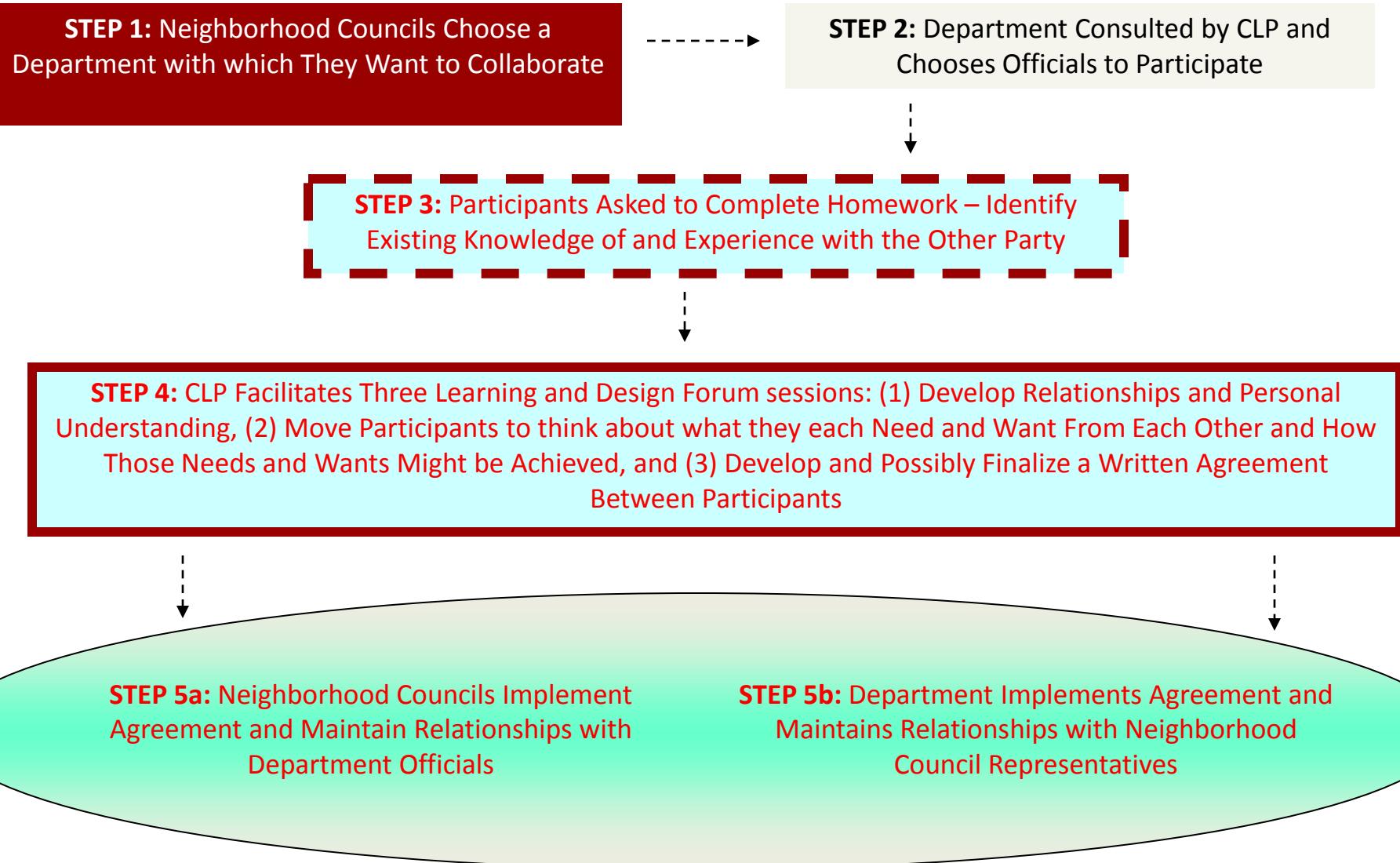
Costs and Social Media (Wang & Bryer, in press)

- The lower the *costs of participation*, the higher the *quantity* of participation and the lower the *quality* of participation
- The higher the *costs of participation*, the lower the *quantity* of participation and the higher the *quality* of participation
- Challenge: Find the target/balance!

Learning and Design Forum in Los Angeles

*Making Citizens Work and
Facilitating Administrator-Citizen Dialogue*

Collaborative Learning Project Process



Learning and Design Forum Conclusion

- Expensive effort for administrators (extra work time) and citizen-volunteers.
- Generates more trusting and competent citizens, more responsive government officials (Cooper, Bryer, and Meek, 2008; Bryer and Cooper, 2007; Bryer, 2009)

Conclusion

- If costs are not accepted to better prepare citizens to be effective participants in the decision making process, then the democratization experiment might best be called for the façade it is and terminated.
 - Create logic systems and quizzes in the regulatory comment process.
 - Prepare administrators to facilitate an influx of citizens both on- and off-line.
 - Make explicit expectations in all cases, even in policy areas where no participatory process is developed
 - Be strategic in the use of technology: (1) Use it, don't force it; (2) Respect privacy but encourage transparency, (3) Promote civility and reduce timidity, (4) Help citizens use technologies, but be open to learn about the technologies, and (5) Facilitate learning through social engagement and interaction.

Current Research

- Experimental design of democratization conditions

Democratization Condition	Resulting Benefits or Costs
Complex presentation of information; clear expectations	No or small improvement in citizen trust and efficacy
Simplified presentation of information; clear expectations	Significant improvement in citizen trust and efficacy
Complex presentation of information; ambiguous expectations	Significant decline in citizen trust and efficacy
Simplified presentation of information; ambiguous expectations	No or small decline in citizen trust and efficacy

Questions? Comments?

If you ask a question or make a comment, I will respond, but I will not necessarily use your idea in further development of my research, even if the audience votes to support use of your idea. If you still wish to exert the energy to make your comment or ask your question, I will most certainly appear to be grateful.

Questions/Discussion

