Public Engagement Experiences in Local Road Systems Decision-Making in Minnesota

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Overview

- Research questions
- Policy context
- Research methods
- Evidence and explanations of changing minds
- Implication
- Areas of Additional Exploration
What is at stake?

Deliberation transforms participants’ understanding of the problems, issues and interests.

They:
• Become more informed about policy issues
• Develop empathy with others
• Gain enlarged view of the public nature of problem
• Generate new options through exchange

Learning is why deliberation is valuable for good policy outcomes, not just for democratic accountability and community building.
Studying how people change their minds

We have:

- Normative theories that deliberation should change minds
- Pre- and post-survey data demonstrating that deliberation does change minds

Existing studies of how people deliberate are few and:

- Do not go far enough to do justice to the learning they promote
- Ignore non-argumentative forms of persuasion
Research Questions

How do participants come to change their minds through deliberative processes?

• In what ways do they change their minds?
• How do they account for the changes?
Policy Context

The challenges of sustaining local road systems

- Declining resources – inflationary price increases
- Deferred maintenance – declining fiscal resources
- Changing demands – increases in vehicle weight, traffic volume and movement patterns, decreasing fuel consumption from more efficient vehicles and reduced overall travel

... this is just to preserve, no consideration on upgrading
A previous project – Beltrami County, MN
- Large county (2517 sq. mi.) – over 50% of land is non-tax
- County responsible for 702 miles (301 miles gravel)
- $80 million backlog of major repair and reconstruction due to deferred maintenance
- New county engineer + increasing public complaints + new management → desire for public deliberation to explore policy options
Policy Context - Current

• A number of agencies and policy research groups have shown that transportation funding is well below what is needed to maintain the transportation infrastructure in all levels (cities, state, nation, etc.)

• Political impasse on revising the source of these funds

• Public’s understanding of these issues is understandably lacking as it is very complex and highly interconnected with other economic activities
Engaged, mixed methods (observations, interviews, media content analysis) in order to:

- Scope issues regarding transportation policies and finance
- Stakeholder ID & outreach
- Facilitate focus group of 3 population-specific groups, culminating in full, mixed-group policy roundtable (N=45)
- Pre- and post-deliberation surveys of attitudes & preferences (n=24)
- Post-deliberation interviews with participants (n=12)
Evidence and Explanation of Changes

Studying how people change their minds

- Orange bars show the survey results of *pre*-deliberation attitudes
- Blue bars show the survey results of *post*-deliberative attitudes
- These are the results of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strong no" 1.0 to "strong yes" 5.0 on different attitudes
- The surveys show shifts in attitude
Post Deliberative Comments

I came in here opposed to the sales tax. I now recognize the fairness of it and I recognize the need.

I was kind of against the sales tax, too, but it looks a little more like it might be better because you get everybody contributing to it that’s doing business in the county.

Well, I wasn’t supporting that half percent at all when I came in here today. But as I heard everybody talking and everybody explain stuff to me and picked up this and picked up that, it’s not just such a bad deal. I mean, we’ve got to do something about this.
# Accounting for Changing Minds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information</strong></td>
<td>Learned more about the extent of the problems and about the options, saw the needs differently</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fairness</strong></td>
<td>Preferred [½ cent sales] tax because those who use pay and it is a solution for the whole county</td>
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<td><strong>Seriousness of problem</strong></td>
<td>“We have to do something, and this [½ cent sales] is not such a bad deal”</td>
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<td><strong>Pragmatism</strong></td>
<td>Taxes are not popular, but doing nothing is not popular either. Passing a tax is a way to sustain the commitment despite what happens during elections</td>
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<td><strong>Empathy / enlarged view</strong></td>
<td>Hearing from residents of rural areas of county, school bus drivers and emergency responders → we need to help them too. It’s not just my road that needs attention; we need a system-wide solution</td>
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Ways Participants Changed Their Minds

• Opportunities to hear from, question, and dialogue with public officials increased trust in them
• Non-experts knowledge of the policy problems become more nuanced
• Many participants recommended more public communication, they suggested that others would change their understandings and preferences the same way they did

Implications

• Participants’ accounts complement and support existing theories about whether, why, and how participants change their minds through deliberation
Areas of Additional Exploration

- Deliberation and learning to seek alternative to meet challenges faced by long-term revenue constraints
- Metrics for decision-making evaluations
- How trust-building mechanisms interact in deliberation
- Additional cases with other counties and cities employing the same research design of deliberative interventions, data collection instruments, and analysis
Areas of Additional Exploration

- Deliberation and learning where there are no viable alternatives to system shrinking and decline
- Negotiation over metrics for decision-making
- How trust-building mechanisms interact in deliberation
- Additional cases employing the same research design of deliberative interventions, data collection instruments, and analysis in additional jurisdictions of Minnesota are underway to further explore deliberative processes in transportation policy decision-making
Continuing Work

• Project funded by LRRB “Stakeholder Attitudes, Knowledge and Engagement in Local Road Systems Planning Decision-Making” (2014-2016)
• Continuing evaluation of the work done with Beltrami county to examine the long term impact of deliberative intervention described above
• Expanding this work to other jurisdictions, including cities, which have different mechanisms to fund their local roads and often facing even greater challenges to fund these.
Thank you

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