ENHANCING THE PROSPECT FOR DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY:

THE AMERICASPEAKS MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Engaging citizens in the deliberative process is essential to overcoming participatory apathy, cynicism toward government, and the apparent disconnect between citizens and decision-makers. AmericaSpeaks developed an electronic town meeting (ETM) designed to reconnect citizens and government. Ideally, the ETM affords citizens a means by which they can impact the policy-making discourse. This paper examines the extent to which AmericaSpeaks' ETM enhances the prospect for deliberative democracy. Thirty minute structured interviews were conducted with twenty participants from Citizen Summit III, an ETM held in the District of Columbia in November 2003. The interview data suggest that AmericaSpeaks' ETM, to some measure, enhances the prospect for deliberative democracy insofar as it cultivates a broadly inclusive and autonomous dialogue.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, citizen participation, electronic town meeting (ETM), AmericaSpeaks

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INTRODUCTION

While citizen participation is fundamental to democratic governance, there is a clear separation between elected representatives and the citizenry, one that is evidenced by declining voter turnout, decreased levels of civic participation, and widespread cynicism toward political institutions (Hudson 2001; Putnam 2000; Berman 1997; Avey 1989; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba and Nie 1972). In contemporary democratic society, traditional structures of policy formation and decision-making often minimize citizen participation. Traditional means of representation, such as town hall meetings and public hearings, have proven to be ineffective.

Engaging citizens in the deliberative process is essential to overcoming participatory apathy, cynicism toward government, and the apparent disconnect between citizens and decision-makers (Weeks 2000). Technological optimists and deliberative democracy advocates are hopeful that information and communications technologies (ICTs) will facilitate direct interactions between citizens and government, thereby altering the dynamic of the policymaking process by giving citizens a means of voicing their opinions and concerns regarding specific policies (O'Looney 2002; Dahlberg 2001; Docter and Dutton 1998; Guthrie and Dutton 1992; O'Sullivan 1995).

AmericaSpeaks is a non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing citizen participation in the public policy process through the application of ICTs. AmericaSpeaks developed the 21st Century Town Meeting, an electronic town meeting (ETM) designed to reconnect citizens and government. Ideally, this model affords rank and file citizens a means by which they can impact the policymaking discourse.

The purpose of this research is to examine the AmericaSpeaks ETM in the context of promoting deliberative democracy. Specifically, the following question is posed: does the AmericaSpeaks model enhance the prospect for deliberative democracy? Given that deliberative democracy has been championed as a means of remedying what Weeks (2000) refers to as the "ills of democracy," it is necessary that we examine its feasibility beyond our traditional institutions of government

LITERATURE REVIEW

Citizen Participation

In an effort to address the apparent disconnect between government and citizens, scholars advocate increased citizen participation in government (Box 1998; King, Feltey, and Susel 1998; Schachter 1997; Thomas 1995). The reasons for this disconnect are numerous and complex. Americans have typically held negative opinions of politicians, apathy has always been a part of American politics, and citizens are not participating simply because they are satisfied (Harwood 1991). Yet, citizens have a clear idea of their responsibilities and want to be part of the political process (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998; Harwood 1991). The Americans citizenry desire a place in politics. They are willing to accept responsibility for fully engaging in the political process, but only under the appropriate conditions. Currently, citizens feel politically impotent and this feeling is a consequence of political disconnection.

Research suggests that increased citizen participation decreases the gap between citizens and government (Berman 1997). Scholars believe that by increasing citizen involvement, citizens will be better informed, and therefore they will be more capable of making decisions (Callahan 2002; Ebdon 2002). The decision-making process is afforded greater legitimacy when citizens are included (Callahan 2002), as citizens see themselves as more than simply consumers of government (Schachter 1997). However, according to Innes and Booher (2004), the available modes of participation (e.g. public hearings, citizen panels, and citizen advisory committees) may contribute to further aggravating the situation instead of remedying it. For example, Innes and Booher (2004) argue that public hearings present "distorted communicative action" given the absence of multi-way dialogue and inequalities in the treatment of speakers.

However, citizen participation is perceived as time consuming, costly, and burdensome (Mitchell 1997; Timney 1998; Box 1998; Thomas 1993). There is inherent conflict between the values of citizen participation and the structure of government, which creates obstacles in allowing for meaningful citizen participation (Callahan 2002). Although some believe in the virtue of popular sovereignty, they remain skeptical of participation (Gruber 1987). For instance, it has been argued that a more open process can engender poor decisions given that citizens are, by and large, out of touch with political and economic realities (Innes and Booher 2004).

Deliberative Democracy

According to Weeks (2000), there are inherent problems with our civic discourse. That is, the manner by which we discuss societal problems is flawed. Deliberative democracy is thought to re-energize the body politic and revitalize the public discourse, which may help to engender the political will to address pressing societal problems. From the perspective of Bohman (1998, 400), "the attraction for deliberative democracy for many was precisely its promise to go beyond the limits of liberalism and to recapture the stronger democratic ideal that government should embody the 'will of the people' formed through the public reasoning of citizens." The notion of deliberative democracy is synonymous with an Aristotelian model of politics, participatory democracy, communicative action, as well as practical reason and critical reason (Dryzek 1990).

The deliberative turn of democracy is a renewed concern for authentic democracy, the embodiment of which is communication that causes individuals to reflect upon their preferences within the context of arriving at a collective decision (Dryzek 2000).

A cornerstone of the deliberative process is the nature of the communication involved. Contrary to debate, participants strive to rise above a win-lose exchange (Adams et al. 2002; Roberts 2002; Yankelovich 1999). Deliberation is a process of "social learning about public problems and possibilities" (Reich 1990, 8). Participants in deliberative processes are expected to be open to changes in their attitudes, ideas, and positions (although change is not a required outcome of deliberation). It is a process of fostering citizen growth both in the context of practical judgment and in the art of coexisting despite disagreement (Roberts 1997; Ryfe 2002; Walters et al. 2000; Waugh 2002; Weeks 2000; Zifcak 1999).

Deliberation has long been considered an important element of true democracy, and it is central to public realm theory (London 1995). Scholars such as Arendt (1958) and Habermas (1989) regard the public sphere as "both a process by which people can deliberate about their common affairs, and as an arena, or space, in which this can happen naturally" (London 1995, 33-55). Habermas (1989) provides a historical description of European social institutions throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. He conveys the importance of social institutions as mechanisms by which private individuals passed judgment on public acts. The English coffee houses, the literary societies of Germany, and the salons of France are examples of such institutions, and they proved extremely egalitarian in the sense that "the bourgeois met here with the socially prestigious but politically un-influential nobles as 'common' human beings" (Habermas 1989, 35). The institutions of deliberation (e.g. coffee houses, literary societies, and salons) served to revive public opinion as a mechanism for shaping policy or influencing government in a meaningful and reasonable manner. The salons, literary societies, and coffee houses brought together generic intellectuals, creating forums for opinions regarding the state of society. According to Habermas, the ideal public arena fosters inclusive and voluntary citizen participation within the context of influencing how government power is wielded.

According to Innes and Booher (2004), most of the citizen participation literature has focused on discussing its problems, improving its techniques, or being more culturally sensitive, instead of confronting the conventional outlets through which people participate. Innes and Booher propose collaborative participation models as a new approach to participation. The key characteristics of this model are authentic dialogue, networks, and institutional capacity. Collaborative participation is a multi-dimensional model; that is, it involves multiple stakeholders in a dialogue and a learning process. After presenting and arguing the benefits of a collaborative participation model, Innes and Booher acknowledge that a framework for significant participation depends on overcoming specific obstacles, such as limited time, officials' fear of losing authority, and lack of skills. However, there are possible solutions to overcoming such obstacles, which include training, funding, or creating forums and arenas where dialogues can take place (Bryson and Crosby 1993; Hajer 2004, as cited in Innes and Booher 2004).

King, Feltey, and Susel (1998) conducted interviews and focus groups to explore how best to cultivate an effective and satisfying participation process. Their findings demonstrate that while the desire for participation is strong and that the participants recognize its importance, there are barriers that cause citizens to feel isolated from the decision making process. In order to improve public participation there must be movement away from the traditionally "static and reactive" process and movement toward a more "dynamic and deliberative process." In pursuit of this effort, they define effective participation as "real or authentic." Specifically, "authentic participation is deep and continuous involvement in administrative processes with the potential for all involved to have an effect on the situation" (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998, 320). Further, it is an "on-going, active involvement, not a one-shot deal, not just pulling the lever…it needs to go out and reach out to every part of your community however defined" (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998, 320).

In the effort to achieve authentic democracy, King, Feltey, and Susel (1998) suggest that the public administrator become a cooperative participant, one who assists citizens in examining their interests while working together to arrive at decisions by engaging them in open and authentic dialogue. However, there are obstacles that must be overcome, including "the nature of life in contemporary society" (i.e. time, transportation and family life), administrative processes (i.e. one-way communication) and current practices and techniques of participation (i.e. public hearings). In an effort to overcome these barriers to authentic participation, they suggest empowering and educating citizens and re-educating citizens. In sum, their findings indicate that authentic participation necessitates not only finding the right tools and techniques, but also rethinking the roles and relationships between public administrators and citizens.

Weeks (2000) views deliberative democracy as a possible way of getting "out of the quagmire of civic estrangement." He describes a model of deliberative democracy that offers an opportunity for all citizens to participate, defining deliberative democracy as the "informed participation by citizens in the deliberative process of community decision making." According to Weeks, public participation must be: (1) broad, (2) informed, (3) deliberative, and (4) credible. Weeks concludes that it is possible to convene a large-scale public deliberative process that enables local government to take effective action on previously intractable issues. Success, however, depends on the standards used. For example, regarding universal participation among completely informed citizens, the efforts fall short. Recognizing that tools for deliberative democracy are still in their infancy, he suggests that his model can be further strengthened by: (1) creating more effective strategies for recruiting citizen participation, (2) developing ways to represent policy problems in a manner where options can be evaluated, and (3) finding ways to shorten the interval between dialogues.

Enhancing Traditional Means of Representation: The AmericaSpeaks Model

Traditional means of representation seemingly marginalize citizen participation. Even though town hall meetings and public hearings allow individuals to voice their opinions regarding specific issues, these participatory mechanisms are flawed insofar as they preclude a meaningful exchange among citizens and decision-makers (Uchimura 2002). According to

Lukensmeyer and Brigham (2002, 351), "public hearings and typical town hall meetings are not a meaningful way for citizens to engage in governance and to have an impact on decision-making. They are speaker focused, with experts simply delivering information or responding to questions." Still, AmericaSpeaks developed the 21st Century Town Meeting for the purpose of engaging citizens in a deliberative process. Carolyn Lukensmeyer, founder and president of AmericaSpeaks, maintains that citizens are locked out of the policy-making process, which has been increasingly dominated by the political elite and special interests. In simplest terms, the AmericaSpeaks 21st Century Town Meeting is a means by which large numbers of citizens can be brought together through ICTs, and this model may serve to overcome the shortcomings of traditional means of participation (Parasie 2003).

The AmericaSpeaks model is centered on seven elements: (1) content, (2) citizen voice, (3) developing a strategy, (4) credibility, (5) creating a public space, (6) having an impact, and (7) engaging the community. Content underscores the importance of diverse views and values. Citizen voice coincides with altering the traditional role of citizens regarding the formulation of public policy by educating decision-makers and creating structures and processes that foster human connections and relationships. Developing a strategy refers to assessing the readiness of an issue, its political context, and the communication context, in addition to establishing a neutral and honest broker role and identifying partners. Credibility refers to an effort to make the process transparent in order to demonstrate that all perspectives have been included and that the endorsement of community leaders has been obtained. Creating a public space coincides with cultivating an environment where people feel part of a group and that they can make a difference. Having an impact is synonymous with influencing the decision making process. Finally, engaging the community recognizes that the rank and file can offer sound judgments regarding public policy issues, as most individuals desire what is best for government.

The 21st Century Town Meeting brings together thousands of people through the use of networked computers, electronic keypads, and large video screens. Small group dialogues are a central component of the meeting. Demographically diverse groups of ten to twelve people are convened to discuss various issues. Each small group dialogue is guided by a trained facilitator, which helps ensure that the dialogues are focused and that all participants are heard. Networked computers are used to record and transmit each group's viewpoints to a central computer. Experts code the viewpoints into themes, and each individual (within his or her respective group) uses an electronic keypad (which resembles a television remote control) to vote on each of the themes presented.

In November 2003, approximately 2,800 residents from the District of Columbia participated in a 21st Century Town Meeting known as Citizen Summit III. A diverse group of participants were asked to discuss three of the most important challenges facing the District: providing quality education, making neighborhoods safer, and expanding opportunities for residents. Participants were recruited through an organized outreach effort conducted by Neighborhood Action, which included phone calls, flyers, direct mailings, coordinators attending civic meetings, and cable access television advertising.

In collaboration with AmericaSpeaks, Mayor Williams initiated Neighborhood Action to engage the public in governance through discussions of the city's strategic plan and identification of spending priorities. The mission of Neighborhood Action is "to ensure that District residents have a voice in setting city and neighborhood priorities and providing high quality services to every neighborhood" (refer to http://neighborhoodaction.dc.gov/), and with AmericaSpeaks it developed the Citizen Summit process beginning in 1999, which is a two-year management cycle that offers citizens the opportunity to set priorities for the District. The priorities as expressed by citizens contribute to the formation of the Citywide Strategic Plan. After the city budget is adopted, the input from the Citizen Summit meetings are used to set goals for city departments, and the department are then held accountable for implementing those priorities through public scorecards (Citizen Summit III: Real Challenges, Real Choices 2004).

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were used to determine the extent to which the AmericaSpeaks electronic town meeting (ETM) enhances the prospects for deliberative democracy. Thirty-minute structured interviews were conducted with twenty participants from Citizen Summit III, an ETM held in the District of Columbia in November 2003. Interviewees were selected from a database maintained by AmericaSpeaks. In the course of those interviews, Citizen Summit III participants talked about their experiences, the nature of the discourse, in addition to the impact of the technology used. We then conducted a content analysis of the transcribed interviews, isolating and interpreting recurring themes that appear throughout key articles in the deliberative democracy literature, a summary of which is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Deliberative Democracy Themes

Theme	Characteristics
Broad Inclusion (Dahlberg 2001; O'Looney 2002; Weeks 2000; Habermas 1984; 1989)	▪ Environment is egalitarian. ▪ Participants prevent one point of view from silencing less favorable or minority viewpoints. ▪ Diversity of viewpoints
Reflexivity (Dahlberg 2001; Dryzek 2000)	▪ Participants critically evaluate their values, assumptions, and interests in the context of arriving at a collective decision.
Two-Way Exchange (Dahlberg 2001; O'Looney 2002; Weeks 2000)	▪ Participants engage in a two-way critique of normative positions. ▪ Differences among participants are recognized.
Autonomy (Dahlberg 2001; O'Looney 2002)	▪ Discourse is citizen driven. ▪ Participants are free from manipulation or coercion.

This paper examines whether the AmericaSpeaks model enhances the prospect for deliberative democracy, which is defined within the context of broad inclusion, reflexivity, two-way exchange, and autonomy (Table 1). The interview data suggest the following findings:

Broad Inclusion

1. The AmericaSpeaks Electronic Town Meeting (ETM) cultivated an egalitarian and inclusive environment.

The vast majority of those interviewed indicated that Citizen Summit III was broadly inclusive, which is to suggest that the Summit furthered a diverse marketplace of ideas. The Summit environment was thought to be egalitarian, as a minority of participants and their respective views did not dominate the small group discussions. Respondent 13 described the ETM as "inclusive in terms of the views expressed," while Respondent 18 thought that the small group discussions were "useful in the sense of the diversity of the folks that were there…it was useful to hear the different voices." Citizen Summit III exposed its participants to a wide range of perspectives. It further underscored the inherent value of bringing together an eclectic group of people, which was conveyed by a number of respondents; in particular, Respondent 3 stated: "I think people, at least at our table, did really listen to other people. We had a variety of ages and economic levels, and I think people really came away learning a great deal about how other people live." Respondent 19 stated: "It was good to hear perspectives from other parts of the city and learn about their issues of concern…there were people who had pet interests, special expertise in certain areas, whether it was mental health for seniors or working with the youth…it was good to see a lot of the positives, the challenges, and different issues."

The broadly inclusive nature of AmericaSpeaks' ETM was arguably a function of participants taking responsibility for ensuring that the group dialogues were not dominated by a few individuals. Specifically, Respondent 5 remarked: "within our table, there were a couple of people who dominated most the discussion…but they were pretty quickly reigned in [by other people at the table]." Respondent 2 echoed similar sentiments, feeling as though "the table [participants] did a good job of brining most folks into the discussion." Finally, Respondent 20 credits ETM participants with effectively "drawing out the people that weren't speaking so much."

2. The ETM, to some extent, may have over-emphasized consensus building at the expense of minority viewpoints.

In spite of the broadly inclusive nature of the small group dialogues, some believed that the ETM placed too much emphasis on consensus building, which consequently marginalized minority viewpoints. More specifically, when asked whether the discussions were useful for examining questions and ideas, Respondent 15 replied that the discussion "limited minority voices at the table just because the way they held the discussion, they would present items, you would discuss them at the table and then essentially come to an agreement, or a majority opinion at the table, and then submit those ideas." Similarly, while the technology proved beneficial in terms of arriving at a consensus, some believed that minority points of view were seemingly lost.

Respondent 14 indicated that the technology "hides as much as it tells you," which implies that the technology over-aggregates individual opinions to the point where minority views are silenced. Respondent 20 expressed similar concerns, contending that the technology reduced issues to the "lowest common denominator."

Reflexivity
3. The ETM cultivated a semi-reflexive environment.

The majority of respondents indicated that the small group dialogues did not foster reflexivity. That is, the interview data suggest that participants, by and large, did not critically evaluate their values, assumptions, or positions regarding specific issues. However, nine of twenty respondents felt as though Citizen Summit III caused them to reflect upon their respective beliefs. For example,

Respondent 3 remarked, "there are some things that maybe wouldn't have been high on my list [of priorities]. But, listening to people at the table who live in different neighbourhoods, I could agree with them and say 'yes' these are certainly priorities." Similarly, Respondent 15 recalled, "I know there were a number of points that other people brought up regarding issues, such as reserving housing for low income residents. It certainly did make me think about my points of view." While some participants did critically reflect upon their positions, the key element missing was reflection within the context of collective decision-making. A lack of reflexivity is attributable to the fact that traditional structures of participation (e.g. town hall meetings and public hearings) are not designed to foster a reflexive environment. And as such, citizens are not accustomed to thinking in this manner. This can be overcome, in part, by changing the culture of how we participate.

Two-Way Exchange
4. The ETM was seemingly less successful in terms of cultivating two-way exchange.

Six of twenty respondents indicated that the ETM allowed one to engage in a dialogue of normative positions, whereby the differences among participants were recognized. Specifically, Respondent 18 noted that her expectations were met by being given "the opportunity to have a dialogue with folks." Moreover, Respondent 19 remarked, "[Citizen Summit III] was a good overview of major issues…it was really nice to see the turnout and to meet people from all over the City, and talk about our shared and different experiences," while Respondent 5 felt that there was a "good give and take about prioritizing [city] issues." Respondent 14 remarked: "I think the value of this process is that it provides in an organized, fairly sprightly way for 3,000 citizens, many of whom do not participate on a regular basis in these discussions, to hear about what's going on from those who are leading the process for the City, and then to add discussions with other citizens that help sharpen their views a bit by hearing people talk about the same topics." Respondent 6 indicated that the ETM allowed people to not only gain a sense as to the most pressing issues facing the city, but also "what issues are most important to other people."

A few respondents maintained that the Summit served as a means by which people could voice their frustrations or vent. Venting, however, implies that some ETM participants may have

been more concerned about being heard or trumpeting their respective causes rather than being part of a two-way exchange. Highlighting this point, Respondent 13 stated, "I would say that it [the ETM] provides a venue for people to vent. It provides a venue that people can voice some of their issues and concerns and feel like the Mayor and his administration are actually hearing what they are saying. But, it terms of effectiveness, in terms of people walking away feeling empowered, I cannot say that." Further, Respondent 8 conveyed reservations regarding the lack of two-way exchange: "It's hard to get a group of activists in a room with all of those egos floating around, and that everyone wants to assert their own view with the greatest amount of volume." This perhaps best explains why the small group dialogues were, by and large, perceived as less than dialogical. Improving two-way exchange could perhaps be accomplished through improved group moderation, in addition to allocating more time for citizens to express their views by decreasing group size.

Autonomy

5. The ETM's small group dialogues were citizen driven and without coercion or manipulation.

The interviews suggest that Citizen Summit III was autonomous. A relatively significant number of those interviewed believed that average citizens, as opposed to government officials or specialists, drove the discourse. Underscoring this point, Respondent 2 remarked that the Town Meeting and its use of technology "did a pretty good job of creating a process whereby experts don't dominate." Respondents 6, 10, 11, 14, 16, 18, 19, and 20 made a point of emphasizing that the small group dialogues were citizen driven.

A small number of respondents, however, were seemingly skeptical of the Citizen Summit process. In particular, some believed that the ETM was manipulative insofar as it served to pacify the citizenry and reduce opposition to the Mayor and his vision. In other words, some would characterize Citizen Summit III as a technologically sophisticated public relations tool. Respondent 7 stated, "my own perspective on this Town Meeting is that it was organized to diffuse citizen opposition to the things that the Mayor does or doesn't want to do…they would like to get their message out and gain support for it." In spite of such criticism, District residents drove the ETM and there was little, if any, indication of manipulation.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to examine the extent to which the AmericaSpeaks process enhances the prospect for deliberative democracy. AmericaSpeaks' ETM represents an alternate means of policy deliberation, one that serves as a forum for debating public policy. The ETM increases the breadth of citizen engagement and enriches the depth of citizen participation, serving as a direct mechanism for citizens to interact with government and possibly influence the public policy process. The interview data support the premise that AmericaSpeaks' ETM enhances the prospect for deliberative democracy insofar as it cultivates a broadly inclusive and autonomous dialogue. The ETM fostered an egalitarian and inclusive environment, whereby District residents could engage in a discourse that was without manipulation or coercion from the power elite.

King, Feltey, and Susel (1998) maintain that education may help citizens to overcome the obstacles to participation. As a civic exercise, the ETM is a very powerful tool in that it allows one to better conceptualize the inherent complexity and difficulty of setting priorities and making public policy decisions, which was conveyed by a number of respondents. For instance, Respondent 14 stated, "Helping [people] understand how complicated the decision making process actually is…for me, that's what this [the ETM] is about…more so than asking people to express a clear judgment about a current policy dilemma." Respondent 2 remarked, "Even though they may not agree with the ultimate decision that the public official makes they may understand the nature of the trade off and the other pressures and understand the context better and may be willing to cut the public officials some slack."

Some, however, expressed dissatisfaction given the lack of citizen input regarding the agenda setting process. That is, the basis of the ETM's discourse was pre-determined by experts and the power elite, which precluded participants from raising issues that were not part of the Summit's scripted agenda. Citizens presumably played no role setting the agenda. Specifically, Respondent 3 declared: "You're dealing with a subset of issues and ideas…it's a predetermined set. It's a set that the government that the Mayor and his cabinet have picked. These are the major initiatives that [the Mayor and his administration] are thinking about doing for next year, and that's not necessarily what I feel they should be doing…" Such criticism, however, does not ostensibly reflect upon the deliberative nature of the ETM's small group dialogues.

The ETM serves as a means of reconnecting citizens and government, which may help to reduce cynicism toward government and reaffirm the importance of citizen participation as a uniting communal experience. The AmericaSpeaks model, given its emphasis on cultivating a pluralistic discourse and re-establishing ties between government decision-makers and citizens, may serve as a means of getting "out of the quagmire of civic estrangement" (Weeks 2000). Several participants acknowledged the virtue of bringing people together citizens and government leaders. Underscoring this point, Respondent 1 stated, "it [the ETM] made me feel more vested living in the District. It was nice to go there and have it explained to me bit by bit exactly what was going on in the city and what choices we have to make as citizens"

Cynicism toward government is largely a function of trust and social capital (Putnam 2000; Berman 1997). The relationship between government and its citizens has been strained. First, some citizens cynically feel as though government officials abuse their powers in the interest of self-aggrandizement; second, citizens often feel disconnected from government; third, government service delivery is frequently portrayed as inadequate. Administrative strategies to reverse these perceptions typically emphasize the benefits of government and improved service delivery. Some go further, offering individuals a means of participating in a deliberative process, as opposed to traditional structures and cultures of policymaking that minimize citizen input. We must ultimately work to identify and implement mechanisms that allow citizens to participate in the public policy process, and AmericaSpeaks' ETM makes a broader contribution toward achieving such goals. While AmericaSpeaks' ETM is designed as an egalitarian policy-making tool, this research has merely touched upon the deliberative nature of the process itself. Future research should examine the ETM's importance in terms of policy outcomes.

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