

How much time do people need for a public deliberation?

29 April, 2020

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This paper draws lessons from newDemocracy's experiences operating various citizens' juries in Australia including the South Australia Nuclear Fuel Cycle, Democracy in Geelong, and Infrastructure Victoria's 30 Year Plan and the City of Sydney's 2050 Citizens' Jury.

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** newDemocracy is an independent, non-partisan research and development organisation. We aim to discover, develop, demonstrate, and promote complementary alternatives which will restore trust in public decision making. These R&D notes are discoveries and reflections that we are documenting in order to share what we learn and stimulate further research and development.*

How much time do people need for a public deliberation?

What is the question?

How much time do participants need to properly learn, deliberate and find common ground?

What is the usual answer, and why is it inadequate?

We ask everyday people for their thoughts or views on a number of issues all the time through the use of opinion polling or focus groups. People willingly share their opinions on social media and in conversations with their friends. While mostly rigorous in terms of harvesting current opinions, polling only accurately draws on the quick reaction or fast-thinking response to a given question.

The problem, then, is that when making complex trade-off decisions, we need to access the considered slow-thinking or collective *public judgement* of everyday people. They require the time to read and consider differing points of view and establish common ground agreement for themselves.

What alternative is there, and why is it better?

The solution is to give people an adequate amount of time to learn about an issue, to deliberate with a mix of others and find common ground in regard to solutions. This is not a fast process and cannot be made fast.

You must start by thinking about what people need to read to make an informed decision on any given issue. Then think about the views of others they should hear and consider. If at any point, the participants feel rushed, it will generate distrust.

How much time do people need?

There is no hard and fast rule of 'how much'. Each process is bespoke and should be tailored to a number of factors that will influence both how much time is available and how much time is needed. Finding the right amount of time is more often a factor of how much time is available than it is having an overabundance and deciding what to do with it.

As a general rule of thumb, newDemocracy recommends that participants have no less than five full days of deliberation (9am–5pm), with at least two weeks intervening between sessions (preferably three). This means that at a minimum, a deliberative process should run for nine weeks.

Ideal processes, for complex topics, might look more like six full days together and two weekends between meetings, bringing the time between start and finish closer to 14 weeks.

Why so much time?

Participants need lots of time to adequately do different tasks.

1. They must *think together*. This requires time before deliberating to get to know each other and to understand the challenge of the task ahead. Dialogue is foundational to deliberation.

2. They must *learn*. This means breaking the learning task into a shared exercise and covering a broad range of sources to a considerable depth. It also requires that the participants are given an opportunity to request their own information sources. They answer: “What do you still need to know, and who do you trust to hear it from?”
3. They *deliberate*. Deliberation takes time. It is a slow process that necessitates giving participants the opportunity to regularly mix, hearing from a range of different people in the room and considering views other than those like theirs. They need time to interrogate expert knowledge and to weigh up various options.
4. They must find *common ground*. Finding common ground isn’t easy. It is more difficult when finding it on complex trade-off decisions that balance pros and cons with justification and evidence. Participants need to make decisions with clarity and support them with solid evidence.

Each of these distinct stages of a deliberation requires sufficient time. If participants are not given enough time to learn and ask for their own sources, they will not have the information or diversity of views to inform their recommendations. If they aren’t given enough time to deliberate, they will not be able to assess the information they’ve been given and properly explore the problem. Consequently, they will find it difficult to find solutions. If they aren’t given the time to find common ground, they will feel rushed to a decision and not feel any ownership over the final recommendations, ultimately undermining the entire process.

What about time in between the meetings?

Time *in* the room is not the only time-factor that is important to deliberations. Almost as important is adequate time between meetings. This time allows a few things:

1. *Government response to information requests*. Gathering responses to requests for additional information takes time. Without a long enough break between meetings, this information cannot be compiled for the participants, reducing the quality of their learning. This applies to information requests from external sources as well. These sources often take longer because they will not have anticipated the request. Similarly, time helps greatly when participants make requests for specific expert speakers who are often not available on zero notice.
2. *Digesting the information*. It is not uncommon for participants to be overloaded with information in their first few meetings. They have their information kit, presentations from sponsoring agencies and external sources as well as the additional information they’ve requested and expert speakers to hear from. Even when properly spreading the load in a shared learning task, participants need time to get across all of this information.
3. *Speaking to the wider community*. Participants in deliberations are reflective of their neighbours and community. They’re asked to think about their own views as well as the views of people like them when contributing to discussions in the room. If they are not given the time between meetings to talk to others, they cannot reasonably do this. Instead, they’re acting on what they *think* others *think*. This is an easy way for people’s assumptions to replace the actual thoughts of others.

Adequate time between meetings is often the difference between *okay* deliberations and *good* deliberations. They enrich the process with more thought and more information for community, experts and government.

What can you do if not much time is available?

It is common that governments need to make decisions quickly. Sometimes, you do not have the right amount of time to properly conduct a long-form deliberation. If you do not, you should not.

We recommend that four days is the minimum standard. If you do not have the time for four full days of deliberation with time between meetings, then you should look to a different kind of community engagement. You should still incorporate principles of deliberation as best you can, but you should not commit to a long-form deliberation. Without the time, they do not work.

However, if you do have the time for a deliberation but not the full five or six days and the time in between that newDemocracy recommends, there are still some options left. The best option is to *reduce the scope*. Ideally, deliberations ask open questions that allow participants a blank page response. Auspicing agencies must be prepared for *any* answer. When short on time, one approach is to reduce the scope of the question you're asking. This narrows the breadth of information and options the participants must consider and focuses their attention and investigation on a specific area of interest. This saves time at the cost of thoroughness. You must be clear about why you're doing this, so participants do not think that you're confining them or distorting the result for any other reason than that you do not have time to consider everything.

What can we learn from processes that have run short?

It is not uncommon for deliberations to run out of time. This happens when, at the conclusion of the final day, participants still feel like they have more work to do or that they would benefit from having more time to properly complete their report. This usually happens for two reasons:

1. Projects are underspecified and as a result are scheduled to run at the shortest length (less run time means less resources and costs).
2. Participants feel the need to include as much detail and reference to the information they heard throughout the process.

We can address the first reason by giving participants the adequate amount of time. This lets them achieve their best quality work. The second reason is due to the nature of the work the participants are doing, they feel an obligation to produce their best material but do not have the luxury of many days to polish their final report. This is a testament to how seriously people take their opportunity but is also the nature of the exercise.

When projects do run short of time, you have a few options available to best complete the work with the involvement of as many from the original group as possible. People have committed their time to a process that has an end point, so if you ask them for more time on short notice, it is likely that not all of them will be available. The most passionate or those with the flexibility in their lives will be able to attend, but there will be people in the group who cannot. You must think of ways to hear from everyone.

One option is to have an additional day scheduled in advance. This won't be used unless needed but allows participants to tentatively plan around it. Another option is to have a number of mid-week after-work meetings that aim for universal attendance, spread out over a number of days. Another option is to ask the group to delegate among themselves

who is responsible for specific parts and communicate online – this is especially made possible with platforms such as Google Docs allowing people to work in parallel on the same document.

If you know you're going to run short of time, you should ask the group to prioritise the work they think is most important. Raising the issue of time with the group will help them focus their attention on simple, clear recommendations first before expanding with supporting documentation.

Working across a weekend is hard

In general, having meetings that run across an entire weekend is not ideal. The time imposition on people has a flow-on effect for who is available and ultimately skews the recruitment more than single-meeting-per-weekend processes. Additionally, it removes the ability for information requests to be processed between meetings. If your process has four meetings, all of which are over entire weekends, then you effectively have one point at which additional information can be presented to the room, compared to three points in a more standard process, not to mention the other issues outlined above.

There are instances where running over an entire weekend is beneficial. If participants are required to travel large distances to meet, you can reduce the amount of travel by hosting two meetings over a weekend. This should be used sparingly though. If you're doing this because you're conducting a deliberation in a regional area and population centres are sparse then you have limited options. However, if you're conducting a national or state-level deliberation, you might want to consider having smaller region-based groups that meet alone before coming together for a final weekend on agreement.

What is still unknown or untested?

Comparative research could help practitioners and decision-makers appreciate the benefits of sufficient time (or question our claims). newDemocracy is unaware of any research that tests the relative merit of shorter or longer time frames.

Finally...

Based on our considerable experience and the experience of others, newDemocracy strongly advocates sufficient time and information as a fundamental principle for public deliberations along with civic lotteries, skilled facilitation and guaranteed influence (See, [Facilitation](#)).