MASS LBP and Long-Form Deliberation in Canada

Spencer McKay and Peter MacLeod

Abstract: Deliberative forums, such as citizens’ assemblies or reference panels, are one institutionalization of deliberative democracy that has become increasingly commonplace in recent years. MASS LBP is a pioneer in designing and facilitating such long-form deliberative processes in Canada. This article provides an overview of the company’s civic lottery and reference panel process, notes several distinctive features of MASS LBP that are relevant to addressing challenges to democratic deliberation, and outlines possible areas for future research in deliberative democracy applied in both private and public settings.

Keywords: citizenship, civic lottery, deliberation, deliberative democracy, mini-public, political participation, sortition

MASS LBP (Led By People) grew out of work on the British Columbia and Ontario Citizens’ Assemblies on electoral reform in 2004 and 2006, respectively (Rose 2007; Warren and Pearse 2008). Peter MacLeod was part of a team which ran a parallel Student’s Assembly in Ontario and became convinced that these were significant democratic innovations that occurred too infrequently. Worried that the knowledge and experience of organizing citizens’ assemblies might be lost led MacLeod to found MASS LBP in 2007. Since then, MASS has pioneered “the use of civic lotteries and reference panels to engage citizens in tackling tough policy choices” (Kiran et al. 2018). Over the last ten years, MASS has expanded the reach of deliberative democracy in Canada, contacting over three-hundred-thousand households in the process of organizing 32 reference panels across the country, with more than 1250 participants in total (MASS LBP 2017).
The reference panel process begins with a “civic lottery,” which MacLeod describes as an “attempt to embed sortition within deliberative practice.” Invitations are sent out to thousands of randomly selected citizens and about 3-7 percent of those who receive invitations respond. This response rate is consistent with existing research on willingness to participate in similar deliberative processes (Jacquet 2017). According to Vincent Jacquet (2017) and Michael Neblo (et al. 2010), the citizens who chose not to participate in deliberative processes focused more on the private sphere, avoided public meetings, thought they lacked relevant skills, felt politically alienated, or thought the event would have no impact (Jacquet 2017; Neblo et al. 2010). Yet, MacLeod points out that the percentage of those who would in fact like to participate is probably higher than reported, but reduced by other explanations for non-participation, such as scheduling conflicts, an experience that is consistent with earlier findings (Neblo et al. 2010: 573).

For MASS, the response rate also seems to be affected by a number of factors that deserve further study: the time of year, the topic, the duration of the process, and the amount of notice that potential participants receive. Participants in MASS’s reference panels report a wide variety of motivations, such as meeting others in the community, keeping busy in retirement, contributing to public service by giving back to the community, developing new skills and greater local engagement, or because of personal connections to the issue area or policy field. Despite this wide range of motivations, MASS faces the greatest difficulty recruiting participants in their thirties, who are often raising children and establishing their careers (cf. Neblo et al. 2010: 575–577).

After selecting 24 to 36 participants from the pool of respondents—ensuring descriptive representation across age, gender, and geographic area, as well as other topic-specific attributes like housing tenure or indigeneity—MASS facilitates the reference panel. MacLeod describes the logic of the reference panel as a happy medium: “We wanted to come up with a format—the reference panel—that was less costly and wouldn’t be as onerous in terms of the time commitment required by participants while still being more substantive than standard approaches to public consultation or deliberative polling.” These panels normally take place over four to ten Saturdays and culminate in a final report to the client who initiated the process. While reference panels are increasingly in demand in the private sphere, MASS’s clients to date have been almost exclusively public bodies. MacLeod suggests that a successful deliberation should be a serious but also accessible exercise. He puts a strong emphasis on making public policy choices intelligible to the participants without sacrificing the complexity of an issue.
A Business Model for Democratic Deliberation

According to MacLeod, MASS has two distinctive characteristics that allow it to address well-established critiques of small-scale deliberation. First, MASS is a company, rather than a nonprofit or charity, because this provides flexibility and independence that is sometimes a problem for organizations tied to funders. Second, MASS is vertically integrated so it has the capacity to run the lotteries, design and facilitate reference panels, organize the logistical aspects of large-scale event planning, conduct policy analysis and research, and do program evaluation internally. This allows MASS to generate revenue by unbundling the functions that go into orchestrating reference panels, which provides financial stability. These two characteristics give MASS the independence necessary to respond to familiar problems of empowering deliberators, ensuring inclusion, and connecting small-scale deliberation to the broader democratic system. That is, MASS can refuse clients who seek to use consultation as a way of legitimizing predetermined outcomes. Instead, MASS seeks to provide citizens with influence over the final decision through processes of “long-form deliberation.”

MASS refers to reference panels as “long-form deliberation,” rather than the common Dahl-inspired term “minipublic” (see Chwalisz 2017). This is because the prefix “mini-” can be “unintentionally pejorative,” and might be interpreted to mean that participants will have limited influence in decision-making (Jacquet 2017; Neblo et al. 2010) and that the reference panel might serve merely as participatory window dressing for decisions made elsewhere (Fung and Wright 2003: 265; Fuji Johnson 2015; Lee 2014). MASS contends that producing high quality, authentically deliberative processes is in its long-term business interest, because MacLeod anticipates difficulty in securing future contracts if MASS is perceived to simply be a glorified public relations firm. Thus, MASS was designed as an impartial and independent company in order to produce negotiating power and insulate itself from the political pressures facing those who initiate the processes. This makes it possible to scrutinize opportunities to ensure that a reference panel will not “[burden] everyday people with new responsibilities without much empowerment” (Lee 2014: 7). MacLeod suggests that if citizens will not have a credible shot at influence then “it’s a waste of time and public resources, especially when asking thousands of citizens to give up time to participate.” However, having influence is not the same as being empowered to make decisions and MASS clearly expresses to participants that long-form deliberation is an advisory process, rather than an empowered one (Johnson and Gastil 2015; Lafont 2014). In other words, MASS does not treat long-form deliberation
as more legitimate than other democratic institutions, but rather as a complementary representative process that can open policy discussions to a greater number of citizens while leaving the onus for public accountability with elected officials.

Despite such claims about broadening political participation, Edward Walker and his collaborators outline concerns that deliberation might be undermined by socioeconomic inequalities (Walker et al. 2015). Facilitation is one way for MASS to limit the effects of broader inequalities on long-form deliberation (Hamlett and Cobb 2006; Landwehr 2014) by creating a space where all participants can participate as equals. While there are perpetual concerns about “internal exclusion” for those who participate in ways that are unfamiliar to dominant groups, MacLeod finds that participants tend to contribute in a variety of ways that are essential for deliberation (Young 2001). For instance, long-form deliberation is not simply about rational argumentation and policy learning, but about social learning and human development as participants develop a sense of agency, personal efficacy, and voice. MacLeod notes that MASS remains attentive to addressing problems of inequality and exclusion, although he suggests putting critiques of long-form deliberation in perspective by acknowledging that these processes tend to be significantly more representative and deliberative than those found in traditional political institutions, such as the talks held inside political parties or legislatures, and so long-form deliberation remains worthwhile.

One promise for further growth in this “economy of democracy” is that academics have recently become quite invested in the question of how to scale-up what happens in these deliberative forums and to think at a higher, systemic level (Curato and Böker 2016; Dryzek 2016; Felicetti et al. 2015; Mansbridge et al. 2012). MASS’s approach to long-form deliberation as a site of advice casts them as institutions of “supplementary democracy” (Lang and Warren 2012), as part of a larger system in which democratic labor is divided. One of MASS’s long-term goals is to make long-form deliberation a regularized, normal part of democratic systems, rather than as an unusual “democratic innovation” (Smith 2009; see also Niemeyer 2017).

**Studying Long-Form Deliberation**

There is an immense and growing academic literature devoted to deliberative democracy and considerable crossover between academics and practitioners, although MacLeod has a few suggestions for deliberation researchers. First, he encourages more early career academics to gain
hands-on experience in long-form deliberation, by attending or facilitating sessions. A reliance on interviews after the process has led researchers to focus largely on institutional design in a way that obscures key questions about why and how senior decision-makers choose to initiate these processes (cf. Hendriks 2011). Moreover, political scientists may find insights in more ethnographic work, particularly around what happens within long-form deliberations. Lastly, MacLeod suggests that long-form deliberation is also a process of adult education—of making complex subjects understandable while maintaining nuance—and that it would be worthwhile to work with education scholars to examine experiences in long-form deliberation from a pedagogical perspective.

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REFERENCES


