

## **Does the Meeting Style Matter?**

The Effects of Exposure to Participatory and Deliberative School Board Meetings

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Abstract: Would public meetings incite more civic engagement if they were structured in ways that are simply more engaging? I address this question by conducting an original survey with an oversample of racial-and-ethnic minorities and individuals from low-income households. The survey features a randomized experiment in which each study participant is shown a short clip of an actual school board meeting that is either: 1) a standard meeting with no public participation 2) a meeting with public participation or 3) a meeting with deliberation (public participation *and* a reasoned response from the school board). I find that the experience of viewing the more participatory and deliberative school board meetings leads to increased trust in school boards and a stronger willingness to attend school board meetings in the future. This study has significant implications for civic engagement, local politics, and public-school governance.

**Keywords:** public meetings, deliberative democracy, school boards

Would local public meetings incite more civic engagement if they were structured in ways that are simply more engaging? When political scientists are identifying and measuring political participation, they regularly list public meeting attendance alongside activities like voting, volunteering with a campaign, and donating to campaigns as indicators of a vibrant democracy (Verba and Nie 1972; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Putnam 2000). Public meeting attendance, however, is noticeably distinct from the other major forms because, while it impacts election outcomes the least, it provides the greatest opportunity for an individual to directly observe, or even impact, policy decisions. This opportunity for efficacy is particularly available at the local level, where school boards and city councils govern within reach of the citizenry.

Despite its promise, very few studies in political science focus on public meeting attendance at the local level. The few recent studies that do focus on this topic highlight the characteristics of Americans who are more likely to attend these events (Oliver 2000; Einstein et al. 2019; Schaffner et al. 2020), but few studies focus on the role of *institutions* when attempting to understand patterns of public meeting participation. As a result, questions remain as to what techniques and strategies local officials can employ in order to increase public participation, especially amongst marginalized groups whose policy needs often go unrepresented.

I attempt to fill this gap by testing the extent to which randomly exposing individuals to public meetings that are more engaging (versus typical administrative meetings with few opportunities for participation) influences people's trust in local officials and their stated propensity to attend a school board meeting in the future. I draw upon the literatures on participatory and deliberative democracy to add nuance to conceptions of participation and engagement. Specifically, I look at the effects of attending participatory meetings or meetings that feature other citizens participating directly (without a response from a public official)

(Pateman 1970). I also measure the effect of meetings that feature public deliberation, defined as citizen participation with a reasoned response (Cohen 1989). In this case, the reasoned response comes directly from local officials. I am particularly interested in the effect that seeing this type of environment has on members of social groups that local governments tend to be unresponsive towards (Hajnal 2010; Trounstein 2018). More specifically, this study focuses on individuals of low socioeconomic backgrounds and members of historically marginalized racial- and-ethnic groups. Ultimately, by embedding clips of school board meetings into a survey experiment with an oversample of respondents who are low income and/or are people of color, I find that exposure to more engaging public meetings leads to increased trust in local officials and a greater propensity for attending public meetings in the future.

### **The Role of Public Meetings within Local Democracy**

In theory, local public meetings have the potential to be hubs for participatory democracy. School boards, city councils, and other municipal institutions routinely convene and decide policy-related matters. Sunshine laws, which have been in place since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, obligate these local institutions to make meetings accessible to the general public in most states (Pupillo 1993). Concretely, these laws: require advance access to meeting agendas, guarantee that individuals can be present during public hearings and public portions of regular business meetings, and allow the public opportunities to provide direct comment to decision-makers. It is this opportunity for direct input at public meetings that moved Alexis de Tocquville (1835, 128) to long ago decree “local assemblies” as “the strength of free nations,” because of how they “bring liberty within people’s reach.”

In reality, local public meetings often operate far below the imagined ideal. Most observational studies of local politics reveal public meetings as sites for explosive disagreement

and contention (Mendelberg and Oleske 2000; Henig et al. 1999; Hochschild and Skvronick 2003; Einstein et al. 2019; Morel 2018; Nuamah 2020). The most optimistic studies seem to describe them as spaces for technocratic business-as-usual exchanges between elected officials (Wirt and Kirst 1997; Stone 2001; Fung 2006). Unsurprisingly, such meetings typically attract very low public attendance (Putnam 2000). Residents who do attend tend to be White, middle-income homeowners with a clear perceived stake in the decision outcomes (Einstein et al. 2019). Similarly, the local governing board members presiding over the meetings tend to be racially-and-ethnically and/or socioeconomically unrepresentative of their constituents, particularly in large urban cities (Hajnal 2010). Under this lens, public meetings are simply events where a select few show up to fight for narrow specialized group interests, even at the expense of a greater good. Meanwhile, the majority sits home disinterested in the affairs of local government. From this outlook, one could very much argue that local public meetings are actually *illusions* of democracy.

While criticisms of public meetings mound, few have questioned whether the disinterested majority remain in their homes because of the actual structure of meetings. This is a problem that is much less prevalent within the voting literature. With voting behavior, we know that structural barriers like election timing help explain low participation rates (Hajnal and Trounstein 2005; Anzia 2013; Collins et al. 2020). However, we remain largely uncertain as to how structure impacts public meeting attendance, particularly for those on the margins. We know that uneven meeting participation favors the already dominant groups; uneven participation in public meetings leads to unequal policy representation (Schaffner et al. 2020). However, we do not know how much of the uneven participation is a function of the overly technocratic and professionalized meeting structure.

This is a challenging question to answer. After all, public meetings are extremely understudied in political science for a number of reasons. For instance, because of the typically low attendance, it is difficult to accrue a large enough of a sample size for statistical comparisons (Mansbridge 1980). To the extent that comparisons are possible, they largely focus on residents of a single city, which makes it difficult to establish external validity beyond the context of the specific community of interest. Lastly, public meeting attendance is difficult to study, particularly if one has interest in the effect that meeting participation can have on participants, because it requires surveying a sample of attendees pre-and-post meeting. Beyond sampling concerns, one of the largest circular problems that confronts researchers interested in the study of public meetings is that the overall structure of meetings tends to feature limited opportunities for citizen participation, and it is the limited opportunity for engagement that deters members of the public from participating (Adams 2004). Without meeting attendees, studies do not have the participants whose behavior we need to observe.

This study initiates a test of the effects of manipulating public meeting structure. The ideal research design would involve coordinating with a large number of local boards and councils and randomly assigning some boards to incorporate aspects of public deliberation, while motivating representative samples of local populations to attend the meeting. However, before going through the lengths required to round up public boards and ask them to systematically change their meeting structure, we should know whether there is some promise in this idea. By employing the use of video clips, I can more efficiently expose a national sample of Americans to public meetings that feature the standard format, participatory behavior, or public deliberation. The success of this virtual manipulation, then, establishes precedent to encourage actual local boards to alter their structure.

## **Participatory Democracy, Deliberation, and Public Meeting Participation**

The question operating in this study is whether attending more participatory and deliberative styles of school board meetings actually factors into how individuals view and respond to local institutions. This is a question that intersects with three areas of inquiry: local politics, deliberative democracy, and the politics of education. From the standpoint of U.S. local politics and local public administration, studies of town hall meetings in Vermont suggest that opportunities to be a part of environments where there is direct communication between citizens and public officials strengthens the ties of representation (Zimmerman 1999; Bryan 2004). Beyond the New-England town hall, studies of aggregate trends in local meeting participation (Fung 2004), of specific cities (Mansbridge 1980; Mendelberg 2000 & Oleske), and of meeting minutes (Karpowitz & Mendelberg 2014; Frasure 2018; Einstein et al. 2019) all reveal similar trends – public meetings help deepen democracy. While much of this work does highlight the notion that opportunities for voicing concerns encourage meeting attendance, scholars also make it clear that without some sort of structural intervention, participation in these meetings tend to be very unequal. This leaves open the possibility that presenting meetings to people in ways that seem like public engagement is a priority will help not only increase meeting attendance but also create better balance in who attends. Citizen participation and public deliberation are concepts that show that commitment.

The idea that attending meetings featuring citizen participation and public deliberation could matter comes from a debate that has been happening in the literatures on participatory democracy and deliberative democracy, respectively. For participatory democrats, public meetings are critical sites for facilitating direct citizen participation. For instance, participatory budgeting, a widely used design that started in Brazil, largely relies on public meetings at the

community level to scavenge public preferences (Wampler 2007). Similarly, studies focused on participatory initiatives in the U.S. rely on accessible and transparent public meetings, whether held by decentralized councils at the community level (Fung 2004) or bureaucratic commissions at the federal level (Moffit 2014). Participatory arrangements, though, do not *de facto* guarantee that the public will be able to directly contribute to – or even observe – the decision-making process. While participatory initiatives demonstrate interdependence between citizen involvement and public meetings, they tend to be agnostic to the decision-making mechanism used to turn public preferences into policy. However, in order to enhance the democratic nature of the process, most participatory models rely on public deliberation to some degree.

On the other hand, the deliberation literature speaks to the utility of public meetings as well, albeit in a different way. The larger disagreement amongst deliberation scholars is whether deliberation is best served as tool for mini-publics to formulate policy preferences through information-based reasoning or a means through which to generate the transparent monitoring of public officials (Chambers 2009; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). Much of the empirical research on deliberation focuses on the effect of direct citizen-participation in specific types of meetings like citizen juries (Smith & Wales 2000), face-to-face small group discussions (Gastil & Dillard 1999; Luskin et al. 2002), and forums both in-person (Karpowitz & Raphael 2014) and online (Wright & Street 2007). These special deliberative meetings tend either involve small mini-publics or be large-scale one-off initiatives, where deliberation results in policy recommendations that *may* eventually land on the desks of public officials for their consideration (Fung 2007).

A criticism of these studies, however, is that deliberation in the context of a representative democracy should involve (if not exclusively entail) the voices of public officials

(Parkinson 2006). After all, what is a democratic process without the voices of those with the decision-making power? To this critique, studies of legislative discourse have provided evidence that more deliberative bodies produce more responsive policy agendas (Steiner et al. 2004; Parthasarathy et al. 2019). Bridging the gap between direct citizen participation and representative democracy, recent research has provided evidence that opportunities for citizens to have deliberative conversations with elected officials carries many of the same benefits as small-group citizen-only discussions (Neblo & Esterling 2018). Still, as a whole, the deliberation literature is unclear on what the nature of lay-citizen participation should be. However, what it does tell us is that, like participatory democracy, public meeting spaces are where the magic happens. The remaining challenge, from the democratic theory perspective, is to more clearly illustrate how we bring democratic innovation to the typical public meeting space.

In terms of applying democratic innovations, school board meetings provide the ideal environment. Public education is routinely cited as one of the primary policy issues about which Americans care deeply.<sup>1</sup> The issue area offers a unique advantage in that it is the only policy area with its own governing institution, school boards, that focus solely on making education policy. Much of the recent work on local political participation examines its effect on housing policy (Enos 2016 Hankinson 2018; Trounstein 2018), which is a highly salient issue with direct implications for the local tax revenue used to fund schools as well as the demographic composition of student enrollment. Meanwhile, more specific to education, there has been a

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<sup>1</sup> See. “Public’s 2019 Priorities: Economy, Health Care, Education and Security All Near Top of List.” *Pew Research Center*. Jan. 24, 2019. <https://www.people-press.org/2019/01/24/publics-2019-priorities-economy-health-care-education-and-security-all-near-top-of-list/>



steady stream of research looking at participation in school board elections (Kogan et al. 2016; Payson 2017; Henig et al. 2019) and the larger capacity for school boards to be spaces for democratic governance (Hochschild 2005; Berry & Howell 2007; Flavin & Harney 2017). Yet, few studies focus specifically on school board meetings.

The work that does examine school board meetings uses deliberative politics as the lens through which to evaluate participation and decision-making (Tracy 2011; Karpowitz & Mendelberg 2014; Asen 2015; Collins 2019). While these studies provide clear insight into the utility of deliberative strategies in school board meetings, the majority rely on case studies and correlational analyses, which leave lingering questions of causality. This study, while focusing less on the nature of discourse and speech in meetings, establishes the potential causal effect that deliberative and participatory elements have on the legitimacy of the local institutions and their ability to attract public participation.

### **The Effect of Participation and Deliberation on Public Meeting Attendance**

A prevailing claim from the empirical literature in democratic theory is that, when ordinary citizens are granted opportunities for direct participation or to deliberate with fellow citizens, we see outcomes indicative of a deepened and strengthened democracy (Fung & Wright 2003; Fishkin 2011). When individuals get the opportunity to actively engage in deliberations with peers, they become more knowledgeable about specific policy issues. Their preferences become more aligned with their fellow participants. They develop deeper levels of trust (either in fellow citizens or in government), and they become more likely to engage in more civic behaviors in the future (Carpini et al. 2004).

The effects of deliberation are largely estimated based on designs where subjects are recruited to participate in structured discussions (Gastil 2018). These individuals are typically

given information to review beforehand. At the actual deliberation events, respondents are divided into small groups with fellow citizens – usually through random assignment. The tight control over the designs enables researchers to assess the true effects of direct participation. Whether they be mini-publics, deliberative forums, or deliberative polls, these events largely lead to positive outcomes. However, the question that lingers is: what about the people who *do not* get an opportunity to participate in meetings that involve stakeholder participation and public deliberation? In other words, what about the people whose primary option for participating is a traditional local public meeting?

The structure of the typical deliberation design, however, does not provide us with an understanding of the behavior of individuals who do not get opportunities to engage in structured deliberations. What further complicates this gap is that, especially when thinking about local government and public meetings, the modal person is someone who does not get the opportunity to participate in any kind of forum or meeting, whether it features citizen deliberation or not. Taking the problem a step further, when we think about residents of urban cities, you have a significant number of individuals who are less likely to physically attend public meetings and forums because they lack the additional time, resources or social capital needed. They either cannot physically make way to a meeting, or they simply do not believe that they belong at one.

Instead, the typical public meeting features active participants. These are individuals who are a part of the more privileged racial-and-ethnic and/or socioeconomic groups. They also tend to be connected to civic organizations or specialized interest groups. The urban and local politics literature consistently tells us that local officials are overly responsive to the preferences of these active and privileged participants (Moe 2011; Warshaw 2019). However, local democracy at its best should be equally responsive across racial-and-ethnic and socioeconomic cleavages. A key

to balancing responsiveness is to generate a more equitable distribution of active participants. I argue that this process can begin by transforming non-participants to into what I call a “passive” meeting attendees or attendees, who do not actively participate by voicing concerns; they merely observe. Archon Fung (2006, 68) already speculates that the vast majority of people who appear at public meetings are passive attendees or people who “participate as spectators.” Can the behavior of this literal silent majority be changed?

I argue that institutions can convert non-participants to passive attendees by restructuring public meetings to be more engaging. Again, there are two different elements of meeting style that I distinguish between in this study: one purely participatory element and one element that features citizen participation *and* public deliberation. Carole Pateman (2012, 8) draws this distinction saying, “deliberation, discussion, and debate are central to any form of democracy, including participatory democracy, but if deliberation is necessary for democracy it is not sufficient.” Pateman (2012, 10) goes on to underscore the educative nature of direct participation; how individuals “learn to participate through participating.” This idea that some individuals attend meetings as passive observers of their fellow citizens participating takes Pateman’s claim a step further. This type of passive participation should “educate” those who are observing participation on the benefits of engaging with local institutions. Borrowing from Pateman’s logic once more: passively attending a more participatory meeting should signal that the authority structure – which is the school board in this instance – is indeed committed to behaving democratically.

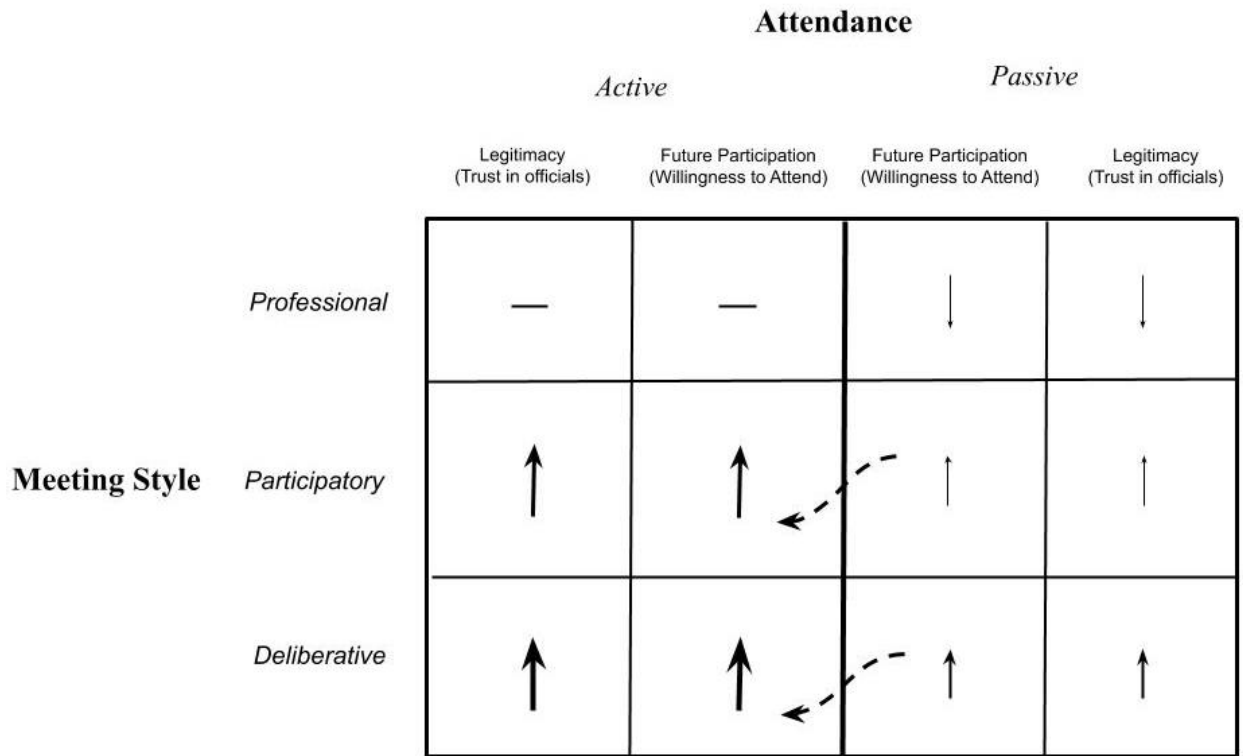
Passive attendance at meetings featuring elements of deliberation should also help resolve this problem. Again, Pateman draws the distinction. Joshua Cohen (1989, 345) adds further clarity in defining deliberation as a process through which decisions impacting the public

proceed through “public argument and reasoning among citizens.” Through having reasoned-based public dialogue, the institutions should be seen as more legitimate in the eyes of the citizenry. Furthermore, the ability to participate in the dialogue reinforces their positioning as free and equal. Observing this dynamic of public deliberation should, therefore, lead to higher levels of trust in local institutions due to the reasoned argumentation aspect. Moreover, through passive attendance, observers should receive a signal that the meeting space is a site for stakeholders to exchange reasons freely. This signal should motivate interest in future participation. Therefore, passive attendance at public meetings featuring public deliberation should help address the illusionary aspects of local public meetings. Meetings incorporating public dialogue become more inclusionary, which should strengthen trust and invite future participation.

In other words, meetings with elements of participatory democracy and public deliberation, respectively, should have similar effects on both active and passive attendees. The two central theoretical expectations in this study are that attending school board meetings in which there is either direct stakeholder participation or public deliberation between stakeholders and local officials should lead to: 1) increased trust in school boards and 2) a stronger motivation for attending school board meetings. The participatory democracy and deliberation literatures provide evidence that active meeting attendance has these effects (Figure 1; Columns 1 & 2). This study makes the case that passive attendance at school board meetings that feature direct active participation and deliberation should increase legitimacy and future participation (Figure 1; Columns 3 & 4). As the size of the arrows in Figure 1 illustrate, the “spectator effect” from passive attendance cannot be expected to generate effects with the same intensity as in-person involvement, but more engaging institutions are still appealing regardless of the degree to which

one can directly interact. Moreover, by exposing non-participants-turned-passive-attendees to the more engaging meetings, we should increase their likelihood of becoming active participants in the future (See Figure 1; dotted arrows).

**Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Meeting Attendance**



Notes: Figure illustrates conceptual diagram of how different meeting styles impact legitimacy (trust) and future participation.

I expect for passive attendance at meetings featuring public deliberation to have a more pronounced effect than that of meetings with citizen voice but no response from officials.<sup>2</sup> However, there is reason to suspect that just passively observing participation will have smaller yet comparable effects. Even in the absence of a full back-and-forth deliberation, observing an environment where there is more active public participation should generate some of the same

<sup>2</sup> This conceptual distinction is illustrated in Figure 1 by the larger arrow sizes in row 3 compared to row 2.

positive effects, just lower in magnitude. The aforementioned studies of participatory budgeting have illustrated that opportunities for direct citizen participation have strengthened trust in institutions (through transparency) and actual citizen participation (through empowerment) (Baiocchi 2005; Baiocchi & Ganuza 2014). Therefore, passively observing a participatory environment should still strengthen trust in local institutions because, even without a spoken response from the officials, individuals see government leaders *allow* the public to actively hold them to account, which generates similar notions of transparency. Furthermore, seeing others actively participating in school board meetings should motivate observers to want to participate in the future; seeing participation should be “educative” and empowering. However, seeing participation should *not* have as strong of an effect as exposure to deliberation because, without the direct response, the local officials are not acknowledging the agency of the participants. Thus, as I expose individuals to meetings with citizen participation – but *without* any kind of deliberation, it should not have quite have the same impact as seeing citizen participation that occurs within a public deliberation. This is because, in the latter, government officials acknowledge members of the public as equal peers.

### **Effect of Attendance for the Most Marginalized**

Arguably the most important assertion of this study is that meeting attendance – featuring either stakeholder participation or public deliberation – should be particularly impactful for members of marginalized subgroups. The technocratic and hyper-professional environment of the standard meeting is alienating to those who are not accustomed to norms of such environments (Hess 2011). Events like school board meetings tend to be littered in jargon, acronyms, and parliamentary language. Individuals from low-income backgrounds and/or from non-White households are likely to be less familiar with the meeting proceedings and less

comfortable with the language used during the meetings themselves (Orr and Rogers 2011). Furthermore, there is a clear line of evidence highlighting the fact that governments frequently ignore their policy preferences (Lerman and Weaver 2014; Michener 2018; Schaffner et al. 2020). As a result, attending more engaging meetings with participation and deliberation should be particularly empowering and instructive for people of color and individuals in lower income households.

The notion that cultural difference across socioeconomic and racial divides manifests into barriers to political engagement is far from new. There has been consistent evidence that socioeconomic differences as well as differences in psychological resources – like political efficacy and trust in government – explain why people of color participate in politics at lower rates (Leighley 2001; Bobo & Gilliam 1990; Verba et al. 1993; Tate 2003; Barreto 2010; Frasure 2015). Meanwhile, racial segregation and discrimination have negatively impacted the proclivity for people of color to establish social and political connections with outgroups, which can leave them ostracized from the American political system (Orr 1999; Hero 2007). Furthermore, language also operates as an additional barrier for American migrants. Resistance to Spanish language, in particular, has been deployed as a tool to suppress Latinx political participation (Garcia-Bedolla 2005). Restructuring public meetings to center mass participation and public deliberation cannot be expected to remove the deep structural barriers to marginalized group participation. However, it should help reduce the impact of these obstacles, particularly the psychological barriers: namely trust and the motivation to attend.

Differences in social and cultural background result in different levels of political participation and different orientations to the American political system. Conceptually, meeting attendance at environments with participatory and deliberative activity should be most impactful

for the individuals who are least predisposed to the outcomes of interest: trust in officials and future meeting attendance. In other words, individuals with low levels of trust in public officials should be the most positively impacted by attending to more engaging meetings. Similarly, individuals who have never attended public meetings before should be the most likely to want to attend meetings in the future, after being thrust into attending a meeting with citizen participation or public deliberation. The reasons differ slightly. For a political attitude like trust, there is a ceiling effect in that individuals who have already formulated the positive attitude (trust) cannot express an even *more* positive attitude (further increased trust) (Shapiro & Page 1983). However, for the propensity for a political behavior like attending meetings, having experience engaging in that behavior, especially within a conventional environment (the traditional meeting), could prevent someone from accepting the unconventional environment (participatory or deliberative meeting) as a legitimate representation of the environment more broadly (public meetings) (See Figure 1; Row 1). Thus, predisposition should play an important mediating role in the overall impact of exposure, particularly for members of marginalized groups. Thus, again, those without prior experience attending meetings should be impacted at higher rates.

### **Research Design**

In this study, I test whether exposure to board meetings that are more participatory and deliberative, respectively, lead individuals to think differently about school boards. I perform this test by fielding an original survey that features an embedded randomized experiment. My



experiment follows most of the basic procedural principles outlined by Gaines et al. (2007).<sup>3</sup> To provide deliberative content for the experiment, I leverage recorded meetings from the Burbank Unified School District (BUSD) in southern California. Unlike the vast majority of school districts, BUSD embeds school board responses to public comment into their meeting agendas, which increases the frequency of meeting behavior that resembles public deliberation. To generate examples of participatory and non-participatory exchanges, I use recorded meetings from the South Pasadena Unified School District (SPUSD). SPUSD follows the standard meeting protocol outlined by California state law and represents the modal school board, which leaves room on agendas for public comment without making additional effort to solicit public input. Furthermore, when there is public comment, the board members do not respond directly.

I watch all of the video recordings for both districts during the 2015-16 academic school year and identify meetings that are focused on the same topic but differ in style. Through this process, I narrow the pool to three meetings held by the two districts (two SPUSD meetings and one BUSD meeting) that all focus on the issue of teacher pay. I condense the videos into short clips ranging between 1.5 and 3 minutes in length. Figure 2 provides image frames from each video treatment. If assigned Meeting 1 (no participation, no deliberation), survey participants are shown a clip of SPUSD's board reciting the agenda item for discussion - teacher salary negotiations – before the board asks if there is public comment and, with no commenters present, they precede to the next agenda item. If assigned Meeting 2 (participation, no deliberation),

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<sup>3</sup> Gaines et al. (2007) emphasize the role of randomization on establishing causality. However, they stipulate the importance of having a true control group an experiential treatment that draws participants into the test scenario.

participants see the SPUSD school board reciting the same agenda item (but at a future meeting), and they also see snippets of teachers providing comments on the issue followed by a non-response from the board. If assigned Meeting 3 (participation with deliberation), respondents see BUSD's school board open the floor for comments on the agenda item, snippets of teachers giving comments, and snippets of both the superintendent and a school board member responding to those comments.

These clips are embedded into the middle of an original online survey I call "Assessing Opinions of Public Education and School Governance." The survey was fielded in March 2020 through Amazon Turk to a total of 4,115 respondents. Within the sample, I embedded an oversample in the recruitment mechanism to target members of social groups that are statistically less likely to have their preferences represented in local government decisions. Again, recent studies of local politics show us that local governments are less likely to show responsiveness toward the preferences of people of color and low-income residents (Flavin and Hartney 2017; Trounstein 2018; Schaffner et al. 2020). In order to satisfy the oversample, survey respondents receive a series of screener questions followed by preliminary questions about public education before they are prompted that they will be shown a short video of an actual school board meeting. The language in the prompt reads as follows:

"You will now be shown a condensed clip of an actual school board meeting from a district in Southern California. In the clip, board members are holding a public hearing to work through salary negotiations with teachers. Please make sure that the sound on your device is turned on."

As respondents proceed, the survey instrument randomly assigns them to view 1 of the 3 video clips. Post-treatment, respondents are given another round of questions assessing trust in school

boards and willingness to attend a future meeting.<sup>4</sup> On average, respondents included in the final sample spent 9 minutes and 52 seconds completing the full survey.

In order to help ensure that I estimate differences in effects based on respondents who actually received the treatments, I remove observations with missing data. More specifically, I purge all observations in which participants completed the survey in under 1 minute or failed to answer the last question in the survey. Respondents with missing data “completed” and/or who completed the survey in under 1 minute took average of only 32 seconds to finish. Eliminating these cases reduces the sample size to 2,185. Because of the oversampling described above, my final sample includes respondents who are 49% non-white and 48% low income or individuals who have annual household incomes lower than \$50,000.

A concern is that the differences in the meeting environments between BUSD and SPSD may bias the potential effect of exposure to deliberation. The two boards are similar in terms of demographics of the board members and public commenters, but there are differences. In terms of race-ethnicity, both boards are 100% White. The gender dynamics are similar as well, with SPUSD comprised of 60% women (3 of 5), while 40% BUSD board members (2 of 5) are women. In terms of the demographics of the speakers, there is a similar pattern; SPUSD commenters were both all White and female (3 of 3), while BUSD speakers were also all White (2 of 2) and 50% female (1 of 2). The unrepresentativeness of the board members and the speakers relative to sample of study participants is also a concern, but, if anything the lack of racial and ethnic diversity should suppress the effectiveness of the treatments, as opposed to

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on the handling of participants see Appendix A, and for information on the distribution of the participants see Appendix B.

providing any beneficial bias. Moreover, if the treatments are effective without representative boards, this likely suggests that co-ethnic board members facilitating more engaging school board meetings would generate even stronger positive effects amongst people of color (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Barreto 2010).

**Figure 2. School Board Meeting Video Treatments**

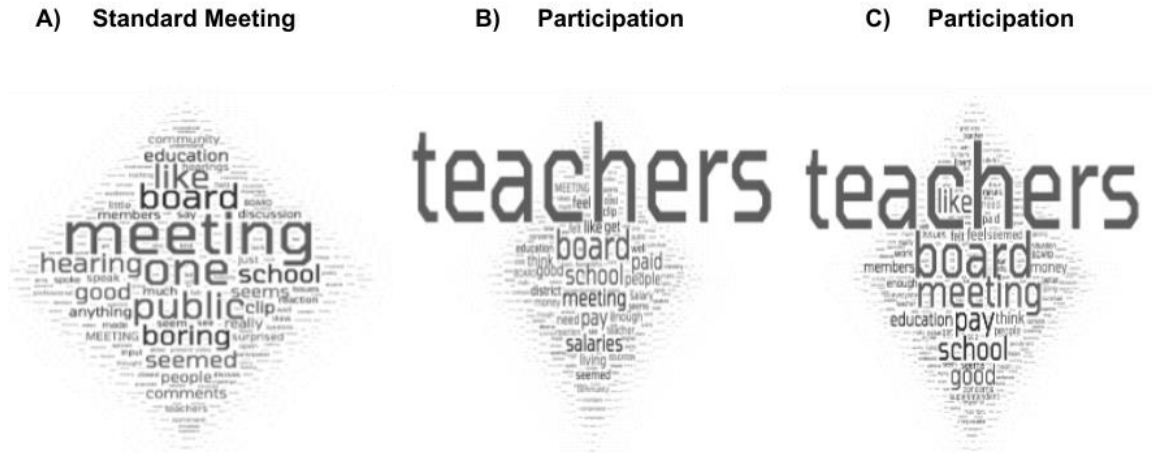


Notes: Images for Treatment 1 and Treatment 2 are image stills from school board meetings held by the South Pasadena Unified School District. Images for Treatment 3 are still images for a school board meeting held by the Burbank Unified School District.

Still, I confront the issue of the potential differences between the BUSD and SPUSD environments by collecting open-ended responses immediately post-treatment. Specifically, respondents are told: “In no more than two sentences, provide your reaction to the clip.” I analyze the frequency of words used in the open-ended responses as a robustness check on the treatments in search of evidence that study participants are focusing on the intended mechanism (the discourse) as opposed to unintended stimuli like characteristics of the board members or the

meeting environment. Figure 3 displays word clouds produced based on the frequency of words used to describe each meeting clip post-treatment.

**Figure 3. Frequency of Words Used to Describe the Meetings Post-Treatment**



Notes: Word clouds are derived based on the frequency of words used in post-treatment open-ended question.

The frequency analysis seems to provide strong evidence that participants are indeed focusing on the discourse. For the standard meeting, respondents use more general words in reaction to the clip such as: “meeting,” “public,” and “board.” More related to the nature of the study, one of the primary words used to describe the standard meeting is “boring” (see Figure 3a). However, amongst both the participation (Figure 3b) and deliberation (Figure 3c) treatments, “teachers” is by far the most frequently used word for both, which indicates a focus on the issue at the center of the discourse as well as the positionality of the speakers. Moreover, the prevalence of words like “salaries” in the participation treatment, “money” in the deliberation treatment, and “pay” in both groups suggests that respondents attention is primarily on the issue. The frequency analysis, therefore, creates sufficient confidence that the differences between the two school boards (SPUSD and BUSD) are largely not being detected by the participants.

I also include covariates in the survey that allow me to test for factors that might bias potential effects. For instance, a concern is that participants may be responding to the issue of

teacher pay itself – a concern that is amplified by the differences in the frequency of words used to describe the standard meeting compared to the participation and deliberation treatments.

Therefore, pre-treatment I ask participants to select what is, in their view, the most important issue facing public schools between: lack of school funding, lack of quality teachers, low teacher salaries, low test scores, lack of safety, lack of school choice, or segregated schools.

Distinguishing between respondents who prioritize funding and teachers' salaries over the other issues helps test for potential issue bias.

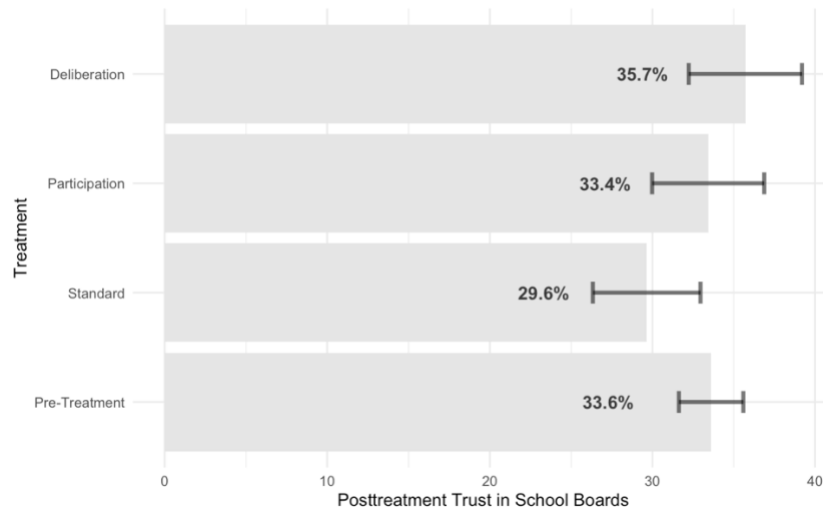
I also include covariates that assess respondents' orientation to their own schools and school district, which they could be projecting into their reactions to the treatments. This includes measures of: school satisfaction, personal involvement with schools, perceptions of how well their local school board facilitates community engagement, and perceptions of how well their board facilitates dialogue with the public. I also assess, pre-treatment, whether participants have attended a school board meeting before as well as how much they trust local officials to do what is right. The covariates allow me to test for any pre-treatment biases that may impact the potential effects of the treatment.

### **Exposure to Different School Board Meeting Styles and Trust in School Boards**

So, does the experience of observing more participatory and deliberative styles of public meetings impact how people view local institutions? I begin with an analysis of the potential impact of meeting styles on trust in public officials. Figure 4 shows the percentage of respondents who expressed high levels of post-treatment trust in school board officials disaggregated by assignment group with the level of trust pre-treatment included as a baseline. While the bottom bar indicates the measurement for the full sample pre-treatment (34%), the figure suggests that, overall, individuals who received the standard meeting treatment (no

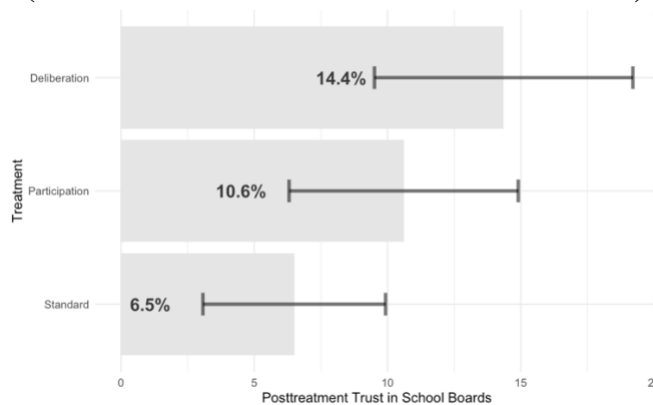
participation; no deliberation) became slightly less likely to express trust post-treatment (30%). Meanwhile, respondents who received the participation treatment (participation; no deliberation) on average expressed trust at the same level as the full sample pre-treatment, and those who received the deliberation treatment (participation & deliberation) became slightly more likely to express trust (35%). At the surface, it appears that the treatments had little effect outside of exposure to the standard meeting leading to a slight decrease in trust.

**Figure 4: Trust in School Board Members by Group Assignment**



Notes: Difference of means for posttreatment trust in school boards: F test = 3.111 (p = 0.045).

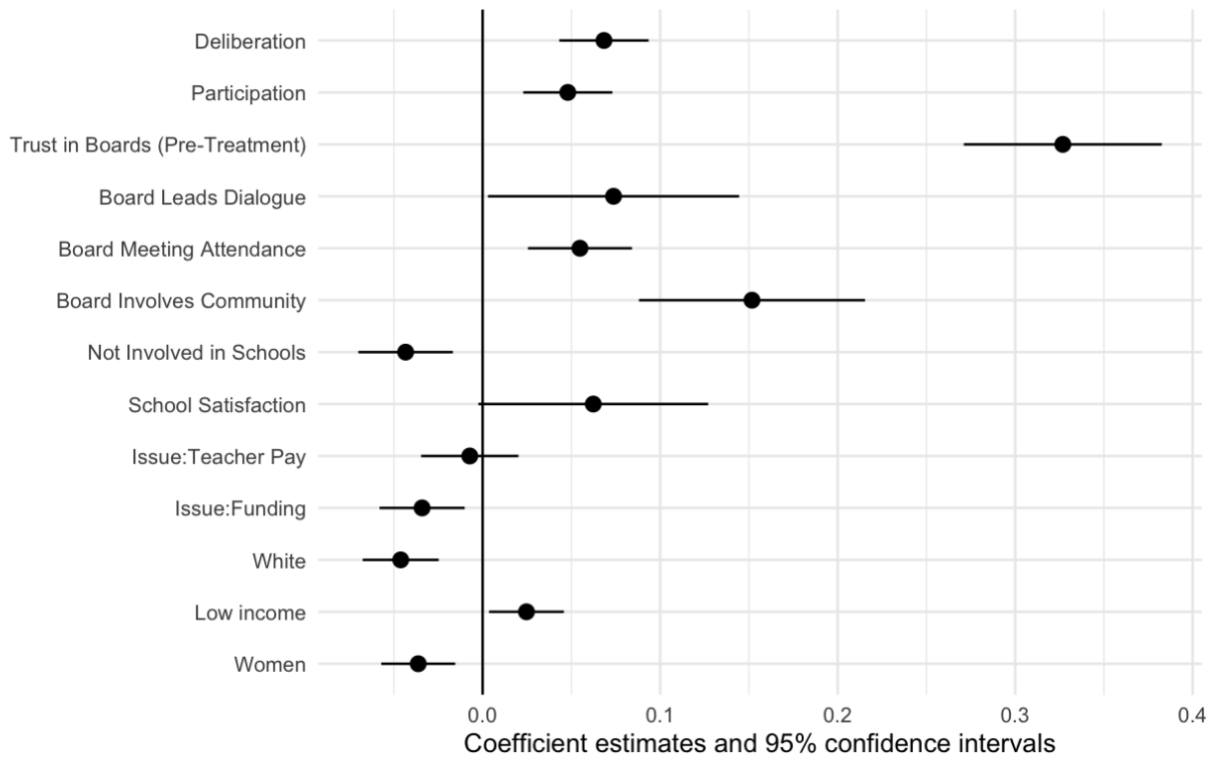
**Figure 5: Post-Treatment Trust in School Board Members by Group Assignment (Low Pre-Treatment Trust in Board officials)**



Note: Difference of means for posttreatment trust F test = 3.322 (p = 0.037).

The question that emerges, though, is: how much of the trust, post-treatment, is merely a carry-over from pre-treatment attitudes? I, therefore, disaggregate the data to examine differences in trust across treatment groups for only respondents who reported to have “none” or only “a little” trust in government pre-treatment (n= 1450; 66% of the full sample). As Figure 5 illustrates, significant differences emerge. While 7% of the low trust sub-sample expressed high trust post-standard-meeting-treatment, that number climbs to 11% amongst respondents who were randomly assigned the participation treatment and 14% for low-trust respondents who were randomly assigned the deliberation treatment.

**Figure 6: Modeling Post-Treatment Trust in School Boards**



Notes: Dot-and-whisker plots represent estimates from an ordinary least squared (OLS) regression model. Trust in school boards operates as the dependent variable. Estimates in which the bar crosses the bold line =  $p < 0.01$ . 99%.



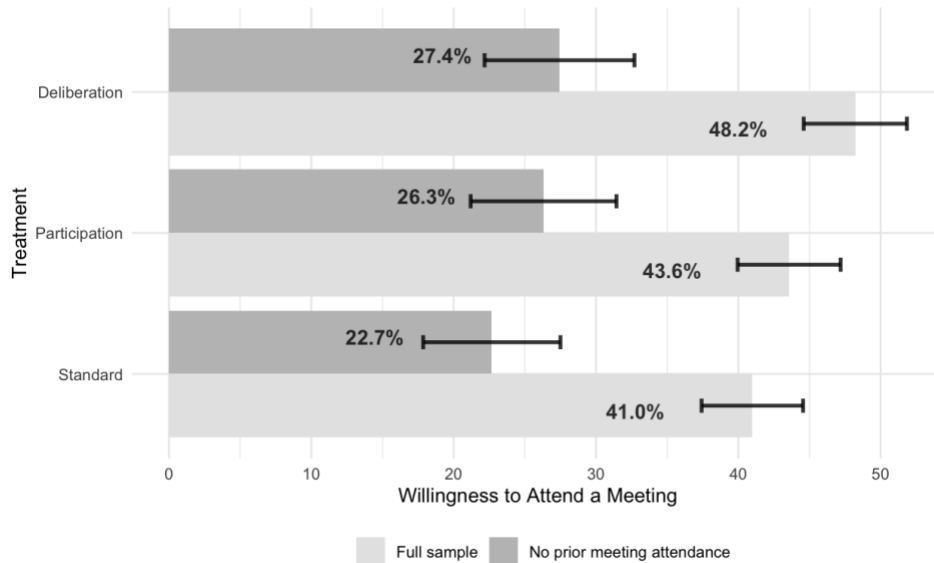
When I incorporate other relevant covariates and run a multi-linear regression model, the same trend emerges. As Figure 6 displays, respondents who were assigned the deliberation treatment were more likely to express trust in school boards post-treatment, an estimation that is statistically significant at the 99% confidence-level. The same holds true for respondents, who were assigned the participation treatment, although the effect size is lower in magnitude. Furthermore, the effects of exposure to the participation and deliberation treatments, respectively, sustain while controlling for a range of pre-treatment measures: trust in school boards, perceptions of how well their own board engages their community, school satisfaction, their own level of involvement in schools, whether they view either teacher pay or school funding as the most important issue facing schools, and differences in personal background.

### **Exposure to Different Types of School Board Meetings and Willingness to Attend Meetings**

The effects of the treatments on respondents' trust in school boards largely reappears when examining respondents' willingness to attend public meetings post-treatment. Figure 7 shows overall post-treatment differences. While 41% of respondents who were assigned the standard meeting treatment expressed willingness to attend a public meeting in the future, the rate climbs to 44% for those assigned the participation treatment, and the number ascends to 48% if they received the deliberation treatment. Contrary to theoretical expectations, however, the treatment was less effective amongst individuals who had no prior meeting attendance. To test this, I disaggregate to examine the post-treatment effects for respondents who had never attended a school board meeting (n = 853), and amongst this sub-group, only 22% of respondents expressed a willingness to attend meetings post-standard-meeting-treatment. Meanwhile, 26% of respondents assigned the participation treatment expressed willingness to attend a meeting in the future, and 27% of the respondents from the deliberation treatment group expressed that same

willingness. The results suggest that prior attendance has a strong effect on future attendance, and the desire to attend meetings amongst past participants is further augmented by seeing meetings that feature stakeholder participation and public deliberation.

**Figure 7: Post-Treatment Differences in Willingness to Attend a Meeting in the Future by Group Assignment**

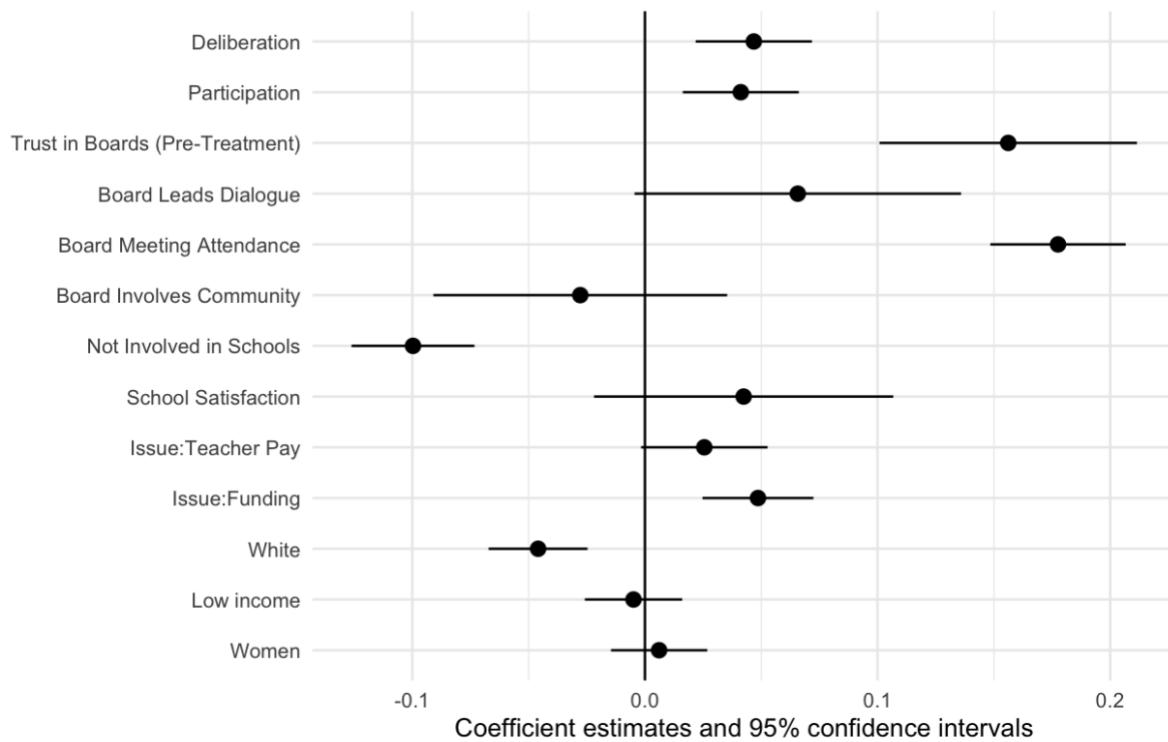


Note: Difference of means for posttreatment willingness to attend a meeting for full sample F test = 3.991 ( $p = 0.019$ ) and for no prior meeting attendance F test = 0.932 ( $p = 0.394$ ).

Still, the effect of exposure to participatory and deliberative meetings is consistent. When incorporating covariates into a regression model (see Figure 8), the effects of the participation and deliberation treatments are both positive and statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. So, respondents who received those treatments were, on average, more likely say that they'd be willing to attend a public meeting in the future, and the ones who received the deliberation treatment, in terms of effect size, were slightly more likely (0.049 vs. 0.045 standardized units per more likely) than the respondents who received the standard meeting treatment. While substantively slight, the robustness of the results hold, despite adding controls for relevant covariates. Overall, previous board meeting attendance and pre-existing trust in

school boards were the strongest predictors of the respondents' willingness to attend school board meetings in the future, but even when holding those factors constant, exposure to more participatory and more deliberative school board meetings also generated a distinct shift in behavioral intention.

**Figure 8: Modeling Willingness to Attend a Meeting in the Future**

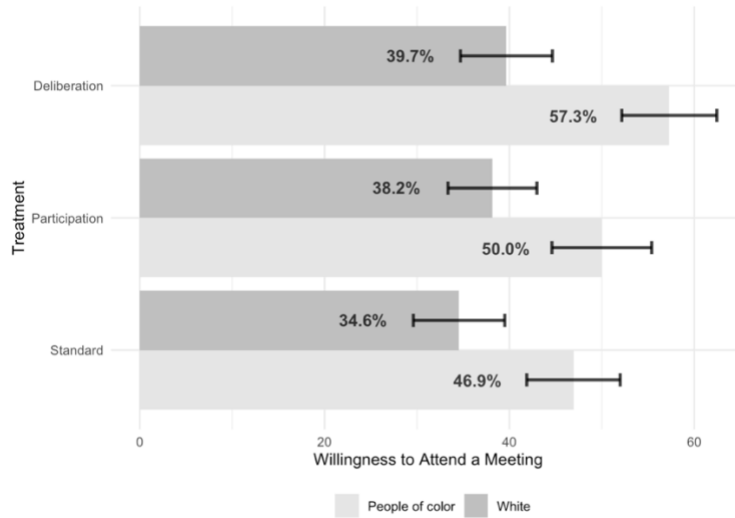


Notes: Dot-and-whisker plots represent estimates from an ordinary least squared (OLS) regression model. Trust in school boards operates as the dependent variable. Estimates in which the bar crosses the bold line =  $p < 0.01$ . 99%.

The trends occurring alongside the participation and deliberation treatments add clarity to the larger picture. Low-income participants were statistically no more or less likely to be willing to attend meetings in the future regardless of which meeting type they were shown. Meanwhile, people of color, on average, expressed a stronger motivation for attending meetings, and this was, again, regardless of meeting type. A deeper look into these separate trends, though, shows

the magnitude of the racial differences remain consistent across treatments (See Figure 9). Between White respondents and People of Color, the standard meeting led to the lowest interest in attending a future meeting (35% for Whites and 47% for People of Color). For White participants, it increases to 38% for those who received the participation treatment and 40% for the deliberation treatment. However, for People of Color, 50% of them in the participation treatment wanted to attend a future meeting, as did 57% who received the deliberation treatment. So, while there are consistent differences between White respondents and People of Color across groups, the magnitude of those differences suggest that People of Color respond particularly well.

**Figure 9: Post-Treatment Differences in Willingness to Attend a Meeting in the Future by Group Assignment Comparing White Respondents to People of Color**

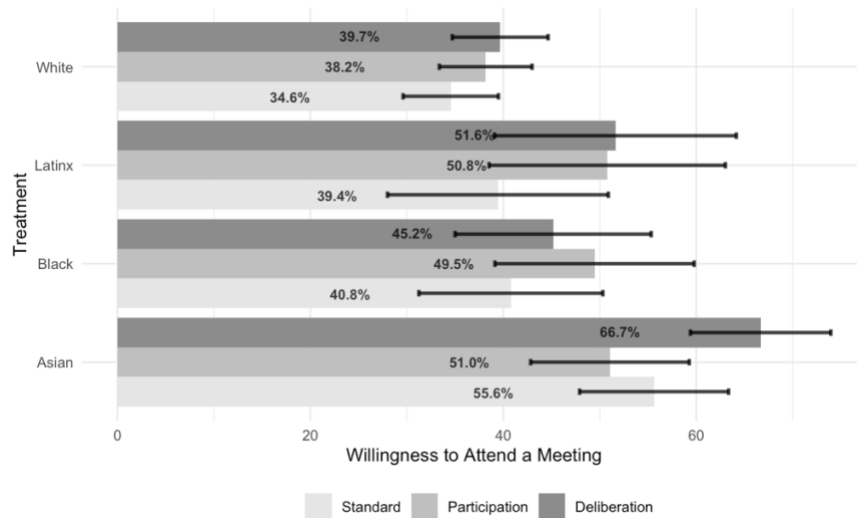


Note: Difference of means for posttreatment willingness to attend a meeting for Persons of color: F test = 4.130 (p = 0.016) and for White people: F test = 1.074 (p = 0.342).

Differences across racial and ethnic groups – beyond the White-POC dichotomy – suggests that members of different groups have distinct responses to the treatments (See Figure 10). Latinx Americans are the most responsive in terms of sheer effect size (12%-point increase), but for that

group, the deliberation treatment is no more effective than the participation treatment. Asian Americans, as a group, show the strongest intention to attend a meeting in the future.

**Figure 10: Post-Treatment Differences in Willingness to Attend a Meeting in the Future by Group Assignment by Race-Ethnicity**



Note: Difference of means for posttreatment willingness to attend a meeting for White Americans: F test = 1.074 (p = 0.342), for Black Americans: F test = 0.731 (p = 0.482), for Latinx Americans: F test = 1.262 (p = 0.285), for Asian Americans: F test = 4.149 (p = 0.016).

However, while the deliberation treatment has an 11%-point estimated effect, they are the only group who is least likely to attend a meeting when seeing the participation treatment. Black Americans demonstrate an almost opposite pattern; they are the only group more responsive to the participation treatment (7%-point increase) than the deliberation treatment (only a 3%-point increase).

The results suggest that, amongst People of Color, different groups harbor different types of skepticism. One can interpret the results for Black Americans to be in an indication that, on average, they may be more skeptical of how genuine the responses from local officials really are. This skepticism may be heightened by the descriptively unrepresentative nature of the school board they were shown. Meanwhile, Asian Americans, on average, appear to be more unsettled

by the notion of participation without the bureaucratic order from the standard meeting or the institutionalized deliberation component. However, Latinx Americans seem to respond well to the idea of engagement, regardless of whether there are elements of deliberation or not. Thus, while People of Color as a whole demonstrate higher levels of change post-treatment, there are group distinctions that show different reactions to the treatments in very important ways.

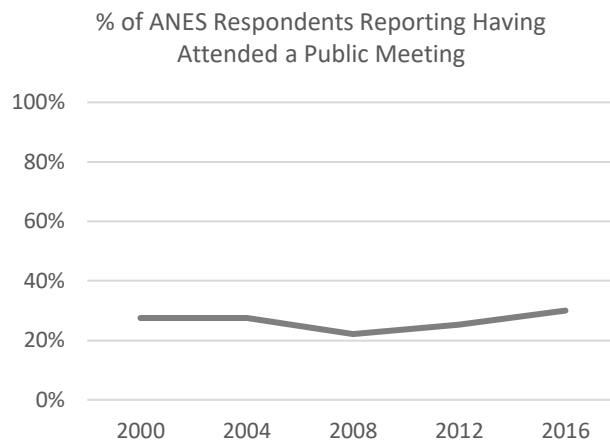
There are also other patterns in who found meetings more appealing that illustrate why engaging meeting treatments (particularly the deliberation treatment) were so effective (See Figure 8). Individuals, across meeting types, were more likely to want to attend meetings if they: held high trust in school boards pre-treatment, believe that their actual school board engages in public deliberation, believe that their school board involves the community in decision-making, and their primary issue of concern is related to funding. Meanwhile, the treatments provide images of relatively discursive school board meetings that center the issue of teacher funding, and the treatments prove to have increased trust. In other words, all of the other factors associated with future attendance speak directly to why the experience with the treatments seemed to impact how respondents viewed school boards and public meetings.

## **Implications**

Public meetings are a critical component to American democracy. Of the most utilized types of political participation, attending a public meeting is the only one that allows for citizens to have direct contact with policymakers in real-time. As Brian Adams (2004, 43) states, “[public meetings] can facilitate citizen participation and the development of good policy by assisting citizens in achieving their political goals.” Public meetings create proverbial windows of transparency, which allow for citizen oversight over the legislative behavior of political elites. Despite their utility to American democracy, public meeting attendance, as a form of political

participation is underutilized. Since 2000, the American National Election Study (ANES) estimates that, in each year that the survey has been administered, between 20% - 30% of Americans report having attended at least one meeting over the course of previous the year prior to survey response (See Figure 11). This means that over 70% of Americans, in a given year, never attend a public meeting at all. If federal elections experienced such consistently low levels of participation, we would consider American democracy to be in deep crisis.

**Figure 10: Self-Reported Public Meeting Attendance Over time**



**Notes:** One instrument asks about attending meetings around an election campaign, while the other asks about meeting attendance within the context of community/schools. Data comes from the American National Election Survey. Percentages do not include post-election drop-off respondents and non-responses.

The threat that low and uneven public meeting attendance creates for American democracy has long been a concern for political scientists. “The town meeting has certainly lost a great deal of the power it once had, and attendance has declined,” writes Mansbridge (1980, 127). This study provides implications for how public meetings can generate more participation and help deepen trust in local institutions, especially school boards. Again, I find evidence that exposing individuals to public meetings that feature direct citizen participation and public

deliberation, respectively, directly lead to increased trust in local officials and an increased willingness to attend public meetings in the future. The upshot here is that vibrant, engaging meetings can be what begets active, well-attended meetings.

This study merely pierces the surface of implications for just how effective more engaging types of public meetings can be. There are aspects of the design that actually suppress the magnitude of the effects. The most obvious constraint is that study participants are shown a video clip instead of having an opportunity to attend in-person. A secondary limitation is that the survey respondents do not get an opportunity to participate in the actual meeting. Previous experimental work tells us that these types of experiences are slightly more impactful when they feature face-to-face interaction than when online (Min 2007), and the opportunity to actually participate in the discourse does add motivation to attend a political event be it face-to-face (Gastil 2000) or online (Neblo et al. 2010). This is also a very light amount of exposure to citizen participation and deliberation (90-second-to-150-second clips). So, theoretically, I would expect even stronger effects to emerge should study participants receive multiple doses of the treatment to where the deliberation treatment, in particular, can potentially become normalized. Existing research suggests that establishing deliberative governing norms can strengthen local representation (Collins 2018; 2019).

This study also deepens important questions for the study of local politics and the politics of education. To the former, it addresses the lingering question of how to increase local participation and feelings of trust toward local officials. This study also suggests that individuals of low-income households and People of Color react positively to ideas of accessible mass participation and direct responses from local government officials, although in varying ways. Again, there are studies suggesting that public meetings are biased towards the most privileged



groups, but this study provides evidence that variation in structure could help reduce some of the inequity. Similarly, studies of the politics of education highlight how undemocratic education decision-making has become, and perhaps institutionalizing deliberation could be a tool that helps reverse that trend as well.

Increasing citizen participation and institutionalizing deliberation are by no means singular cures to the citizen engagement woes occurring across the United States. Simply changing the structure of meetings on its own is unlikely to be the single mechanism that transitions local board meetings from no participation at all to a civic engagement utopia. People of different cultural backgrounds have different relationships with local power, which create different reactions to democratic innovation – some positive; some negative. More simply: those who are used to being powerless will expect powerlessness, even when there is public deliberation. However, changing meeting structure could be a beneficial way for local institutions to begin breaking the cycle. When done in concert with crafting policy agendas that speak to the needs of the most vulnerable, meetings that feature public deliberation could be extremely impactful. In sum, changing public meeting structure is not the single strategy to cure ailing local democracies, but this study suggests that it could be a useful tool.

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## **Appendix A. Research Method Details**

This study features an experimental design. It involves embedding stimuli into an online survey. The stimuli are short video clips of actual school board meetings. This study was conducted with an official exemption from the Brown University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Consistent with the IRB protocol, this study leads with an official consent agreement that was approved as a part of the exemption. Participants are only allowed to take part in the study upon providing explicit consent. This project does not engage in any kind of deception.

Participants are told that they will be shown a short clip of an actual school board meeting and asked a series of questions following. Participants are not misled or misinformed in any way.

Participants are also compensated for their participation. Specifically, they are \$0.25 for completing a survey that took up to 10 minutes to complete. Participants completed surveys in an average of 7.2 minutes. This results in an average hourly pay rate of \$2.1 per hour. The pay contribution and rate are higher than the typical compensation level for an Amazon Turk study.

## Appendix B. Descriptive Statistics of the Sample

### Supplemental Materials: Summary Statistics (Amended)

	Standard		Participation		Deliberation	
	N=732		N=723		N=730	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Trust in Boards (pre-treatment)	0.516	0.254	0.518	0.273	0.513	0.256
Trust in Boards (pre-treatment - high)	0.327	0.469	0.346	0.476	0.336	0.473
Trust in Boards (post-treatment)	0.452	0.303	0.497	0.286	0.520	0.274
Trust in Boards (post-treatment - high)	0.296	0.457	0.334	0.472	0.357	0.479
Trust in Boards (pre-treatment - low)	0.273	0.446	0.275	0.447	0.278	0.449
School Satisfaction	0.670	0.228	0.647	0.252	0.676	0.236
Board Leads Dialogues	0.662	0.244	0.640	0.263	0.666	0.258
Board Involves Community	0.626	0.262	0.610	0.278	0.625	0.272
Board Meeting Attendance	0.436	0.403	0.445	0.409	0.453	0.405
Not Active in Schools	0.254	0.436	0.266	0.442	0.239	0.427
Issue: Teacher Pay	0.194	0.396	0.213	0.410	0.184	0.387
Issue: Funding	0.302	0.459	0.297	0.457	0.316	0.465
Low Income	0.488	0.500	0.455	0.498	0.490	0.500
Female	0.522	0.500	0.524	0.500	0.527	0.500
Willing to Attend a Meeting	0.635	0.288	0.674	0.258	0.690	0.257
Willing to Attend a Meeting (high)	0.410	0.492	0.436	0.496	0.482	0.500
White	0.487	0.500	0.544	0.498	0.512	0.500
Latinx	0.097	0.296	0.090	0.286	0.085	0.279
Asian	0.219	0.414	0.198	0.399	0.222	0.416
Black	0.141	0.348	0.126	0.332	0.128	0.334