CHAPTER FOUR

ELECTORAL DELIBERATION AND PUBLIC JOURNALISM

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On a sunny Saturday in May 1999, citizens streamed into an auditorium on the University of Pennsylvania campus, wending their way around television trucks and a maze of wires. Inside, seated on a stage, were the five candidates for the Democratic nomination for mayor of Philadelphia. The debate that was about to begin had produced some real buzz. This race to succeed the wildly popular Ed Rendell as mayor was generating tremendous interest and anxiety. Rendell had rescued the city from bankruptcy and near despair in the early 1990s, restoring a sense of forward civic momentum. Now, from the glass towers of Market Street to the row houses of Bustleton, a sense of urgency bubbled.

The candidates on stage were a diverse, accomplished group: two city council members; a state legislator; a former state and city cabinet member; and a rainmaking lawyer who'd been part of the inner ring of the legendary Frank Rizzo. Three were black, two white. Four men, one woman. None was a clear front-runner, a political fact that had forced all of them to accept dozens of invitations to appear at candidate forums and debates. This evening's event was one none dared shirk—a live televised debate cosponsored by the city's dominant newspaper, *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* and its dominant news station, WPVI-TV, the ABC affiliate.

The questioners this night would not be the usual blow-dried television anchors and print journalists in scruffy shoes. They would be citizens, clutching index cards in their hands. On each card was written a question that represented the

fruit of four months of public deliberation involving over six hundred citizens and reaching into every corner of a city that is famed as a mosaic of neighborhoods.

It was time for the first question. Sidney Toombs, a short, shy security guard from Southwest Philadelphia, rose. His question concerned Philadelphia's public schools, a topic the Citizen Voices had chosen as the most important facing the city. That choice rewrote the conventional priority list dictated by the pollsters and consultants, which put crime first. Toombs spoke into the microphone: "Our group was divided over which is the bigger problem in the city schools. It's either (a) the schools don't have enough money to do the job, or (b) the schools misuse too much of the money they get. In your view, which is the bigger problem, and how, specifically, would you go about solving it?" The first candidate to reply launched into his set piece about his school plan, as if reading from an index card. Marc Howard, a WPVI anchor hosting the debate, turned back to Toombs. "Did that answer your question?" Toombs paused, swallowed, and said, "Well, not really. No, it didn't get at our question at all." A ripple of laughter washed over the auditorium. The candidate flushed; the other candidates exchanged glances, eyebrows raised. This would not be your usual televised debate.

The 1999 Philadelphia mayoral election was to end in a near dead heat between Democratic city council president John Street and Republican businessman Sam Katz. Street won, by the slimmest margin since 1911. The margin of victory would be provided by some of the usual pyrotechnics of urban politics: television attack ads financed by a record $27.5 million in overall spending; a late rousing visit by President Clinton to spur turnout for Street by reanimating entrenched racial divisions between black and white voters. Despite all that, the campaign struck observers as the most issues-oriented, forward-looking, and *civil* Philadelphia mayoral campaign in memory. Some credit for that goes to the political circumstance—an open seat sought by a large field of serious candidates. But much credit should go to a broad-based effort in the community to insist that the candidates present themselves all over the city, in a variety of formats, to talk substantively about what needed to be done and how they would do it. This insistence was conveyed by the business community, civic and neighborhood groups, and the media. The Citizen Voices project was a major component of that effort, but its success can only be weighed within that larger context.

Origin and Design of the Citizen Voices Project

Citizen Voices was one newspaper's attempt to engage a cross section of a diverse city in a yearlong civic conversation that was modeled on the National Issues Forums and aimed at amplifying the voice of the grass roots in the midst of a noisy,

expensive political campaign.[1] From January through October, over six hundred citizens, recruited through a combination of polling, media announcements, and civic mapping, took part in a series of public forums. (The recruiting techniques are described in more detail later in this chapter.) More than sixty forums were held throughout the region. The forums—a combination of small local forums and larger regional sessions—were designed to help citizens work together to name the issues that mattered most to them in the election, to frame those issues as a set of richly detailed political choices, to deliberate about those frameworks, and to use their deliberations as a springboard for questioning the candidates.

Two televised candidate debates were held in conjunction with the local ABC affiliate, WPVI—one in the spring, before the primaries, and one in the fall, before the general election. The project acquired a second media partnership with the public radio and television station WHYY. WHYY broadcasted excerpts of the citizen deliberations from the issues conventions, expanding and broadening the listening audience for the discussions. WHYY twice broadcast town meetings after the debates, at which participants in Citizen Voices discussed what they'd heard from the candidates and how that meshed with their concerns. The station incorporated Citizen Voices participants as commentators on its election night coverage. No media outlet, though, derived more benefit from the Citizen Voices input than the *Inquirer.*

Civic journalism (also called *public journalism*) was a reform movement that sparked to life in the early to mid-1990s. Two of its early major institutional proponents were the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, which owns the *Inquirer,* and The Pew Charitable Trusts, an activist philanthropy that is based in Philadelphia. Civic journalism[2] was based on the following logic: public life in America was broken; voting and volunteerism were down; apathy, cynicism, and alienation from electoral politics were rising. (Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* was a sacred text for civic journalists advancing this argument.)[3] Journalists were complicit in the problems of public life; their habitual focus on conflict rather than solutions and on elitist framing of issues left ordinary citizens cold. Thus, journalists had a duty to repair their ways and try more explicitly to help the nation's public life go well. If this meant breaking venerable journalistic rules against advocacy and entangling alliances, so be it. If this meant changing old habits about how to frame and present issues, so be it.[4]

Civic journalism was controversial within the business, to say the least. Traditionalist journalists derided civic journalists as shallow and reckless. Civic journalists returned fire, calling traditionalists arrogant and out of touch, clueless as to why they'd lost the respect and trust of their audiences. Despite its corporate parent's enthusiasm, the *Inquirer* was an early critic of civic journalism. The paper was a bastion of elite journalism and the winner of eighteen Pulitzer Prizes in the

previous twenty-five years; most of its journalists were skeptical about civic journalism to the point of outright hostility. Added to that was the staff's feeling of embattlement in the face of cost-cutting pressure from Knight-Ridder. Among the staff of the paper, Knight-Ridder's advocacy of civic journalism was viewed as just another corporate "flavor of the month" that was being promoted by executives who were looking for ways *not* to fund serious journalism. So it was only in one small corner of a large newsroom—the editorial board—that such experiments took place, and even then, they were never acknowledged under the rubric of civic journalism.

The journalists on the editorial board, noticing the declining impact of the opinion pieces they wrote, were looking to refresh their work through closer contact with the citizens they sought to persuade. The editorial board had begun the Citizen Voices program of public forums in 1996, emulating the National Issues Convention organized by professor James Fishkin of the University of Texas and MacNeil/Lehrer Productions (see Chapter Three). This was the first collaboration between two of the authors of this chapter, Chris Satullo, then deputy editorial page editor (now editor of the page), and Harris Sokoloff, a professor at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. That year, the editorial board convened local forums on national issues, using the materials that had been developed for Fishkin's National Issues Convention. The next year, Citizen Voices returned with an expanded, yearlong effort that focused on the New Jersey governor's race. That time, instead of using off-the-shelf materials as a framework for deliberation, the project experimented with having citizens name the key issues and develop their own issue frameworks.

By 1999, Citizen Voices had gained some notice in the community and some credibility among the newspaper staff. At the instigation of Robert Hall, the publisher of the paper, the editorial board developed a Citizen Voices project on the Philadelphia mayoral race. A budget of more than $100,000 was set, and Michelle Charles, the other author of this chapter, was hired to work with Satullo to coordinate the project, including community outreach.

The project gained an immensely important ally when Kathleen Hall Jamieson, then dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, offered to partner with Citizen Voices. She was devising a project on the mayor's race, jointly funded by her school and by The Pew Charitable Trusts, called the Philadelphia Compact, whose intent was to promote a civil and issues-oriented mayoral campaign.[5] Jamieson, to avoid reinventing the wheel, asked Citizen Voices to partner with the Philadelphia Compact on the citizen engagement piece of the project. After some careful negotiations to ensure that the *Inquirer* did not directly receive any funds from two institutions (Pew and Penn) that it covered as major newsmakers, the deal was struck.

It was clear that the credibility of the project, in a city divided by race and in a campaign that would eventually pit a white Republican against a black Democrat, would hinge on how representative of the city the Citizen Voices group was. In 1999, Philadelphia was 48 percent white, 41.5 percent black, 6.8 percent Hispanic, and 3.4 percent Asian American. As for other meaningful criteria of diversity in an election, the city's registration breakdown was about 80 percent Democratic and 20 percent Republican, and the number of people without a college education far outnumbered those with degrees.

Recruitment began with a Satullo op-ed column explaining the project and accompanied by a registration coupon, which drew more than four hundred responses. Like the readership of the paper's opinion pages, this group skewed whiter, older, more affluent, and more educated than the city as a whole. To help repair that defect of diversity, Annenberg did a ten-minute phone survey of 2,300 Philadelphians asking baseline questions about issues in the coming election. The telephone survey recruitment effort produced a list of three hundred potential participants that was closer to a valid random sample of the city. Even then, however, the roster of possible participants was still not as diverse as it needed to be. Thus, the patient, hands-on work of civic mapping began.

Civic mapping is an effort to see the connections that create community across the various levels of people's lives. In 1999, the people working on this project were not fully conversant in the theory of this activity, but their efforts to diversify the sample took them willy-nilly into the field. In one view of civic mapping, there are five layers of civic life: the official (political); the quasi-official (well-organized associations and groups); third places (sites where people gather for specific purposes such as houses of worship, parks, recreation centers); the incidental (locations where people run into one another informally such as parking lots, storefronts); and the private (people's homes).[6] Philadelphia is a city of small communities, each with its own identity, which is often ethnically based. It is not unusual for communities to be isolated from one another, even when they are separated only by a back alley or street, nor is it unusual for members of one group to avoid a community meeting held at a site they perceive to belong to another group. Thus, the project's main recruitment challenge was to find the trusted "go-to" people and institutions in each neighborhood and across the layers of civic life. These people and places were the brokers who could relay our invitation to participate in effective ways; their sponsorship could overcome any distrust of the convening institutions or their motives. Civic mapping was vital to connecting with these brokers and to finding meeting places in twenty-two different neighborhoods for the first round of forums. The city's Human Relations Commission provided valuable advice in that effort. Efforts to use foreign-language media to promote the forums yielded disappointing results. Organizers learned to rely on

personal contact as the only effective tool, but even then, results were spotty. Eventually, the list of locations included a Latino community center, a Korean Presbyterian Church, and several historically black churches. Contacts with local high schools and colleges were usually productive, providing enthusiastic participants.[7]

In planning the first round of forums, organizers were keenly aware of two potential pitfalls—one general and one a matter of local culture. The general concern was that some critics of the National Issues Forum–style deliberation (described in Chapter Three) view such forums as overly intellectualized and accessible only to middle-class, college-educated groups. The concern about the local culture was that Philadelphia has a reputation for being "Negadelphia." The desire to avoid those pitfalls led organizers to invent "The Oprah Show," an optimistic visioning exercise that was seeded with humor and theater in order to be inviting to people of all backgrounds and to coax them into thinking about solutions as well as problems.[8] An imaginary version of "The Oprah Winfrey Show" was going to do a show on a remarkable urban renaissance; the job of the group was to paint a detailed portrait of what a livable city looked like and what had been done in the last decade to get it there. In the final portion of the evening, a few of the citizens would serve as "expert panelists" and be questioned about the Philadelphia miracle by "Oprah" (the moderator), while the rest of the citizens, serving as the "studio audience," would chime in with their questions.

By the end of January 1999, "The Oprah Show" had elicited a rich, textured mix of observations and ideas from the citizens. Five issues had clearly risen to the fore: education, jobs, neighborhoods, public safety, and reforming city hall, in that order. A sixth issue, race, percolated through the other five. Unsure how to keep that topic from exploding in its face, the project team decided not to address it directly just then.

In February and March, the second round of forums asked citizens to draft a National Issues Forum–style discussion framework for the first five issues. Then, in May, about 250 citizens gathered at the University of Pennsylvania for an issues convention, each taking part in a deliberative forum on the issue of his or her choosing. Each forum used one of the frameworks drafted in February and March as the basis for a discussion. Then each group reviewed detailed position papers that the mayoral candidates had submitted to the Citizen Voices project. The citizens used the comparison of their deliberation and the candidate's positions to frame their questions for the May 8 debate.[9]

Throughout the year, Citizen Voices remained a frequent presence on the *Inquirer*'s opinion pages. Essays by Citizen Voices participants that flowed out of the forums were published on commentary pages. The editorial board framed its editorials on the campaign around the five issues picked by the Citizen Voices. (By the end of the project, there were six issues; the issue of race was added to the

final mix as a result of a series of well-attended forums held between the primaries in the spring and the general election in the fall to discuss how race relations had complicated Philadelphia's effort to address its problems.) The issue frameworks were all published on the commentary page in striking full-page layouts. Candidates were asked to respond on the commentary page to questions on issues that were drafted by citizens.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

The first question often asked about civic engagement projects is whether they increased voter turnout. In our view, that is the wrong question. Declining turnout is a complex phenomenon that has developed over decades; no single project, no matter how ambitious or well-meaning, can turn that trend around in one election year. Turnout in the mayoral election of 1999 was 44.5 percent—higher than in 1995, about the same as in 1991. By the end of the campaign, a civic consensus emerged that this had been an issues-oriented campaign that dealt intelligently with real problems. It had also been less nasty and racially divisive than feared, although such elements certainly appeared in the final weeks of an extremely close race.

Inside the *Inquirer,* there is no doubt that the Citizen Voices project deepened the journalism that was done by the editorial board on the mayoral race. The objective journalists in the newsroom began 1999 with an arm's-length attitude to this experiment, which we view as appropriate in light of the traditional wall between news and opinion at a newspaper. Some reporters covering the election never warmed to Citizen Voices, but by the fall, others were eagerly asking for information, insights, and sources churned up by the project.

But listening to citizens is a not a substitute for expert knowledge; it does no good merely to substitute the flawed wisdom of the masses for the flawed wisdom of the experts. The goal that the Citizen Voices program has pursued is a fruitful marriage of citizen *values* and expert knowledge. Citizens, by and large, do not naturally talk about issues in the same way that experts do, and they do not like to be forced to use expert discourse. Public talk is going to be driven as much by personal anecdote and values as by statistics, facts, and rational analysis. If more facts need to be introduced into the discussion, moderators should find ways that don't seem pedantic and lecturing. They should ask citizens what facts they feel they need to have a good discussion. Usually citizens will ask for everything the organizers wish they would, plus some interesting information that no one thought of beforehand.

An Annenberg study found encouraging, though by no means conclusive, evidence that taking part in the forums had made low-income participants more

confident in their political views and more willing to express them.[10] Even in a city notorious for booing Santa Claus, hundreds of citizens responded enthusiastically to an invitation to think optimistically and productively about their city. Citizens care.

The project's main shortcoming occurred after the election. The concluding step in this project was supposed to be a handoff of "ownership" of the Citizen Voices franchise from the paper to the citizens themselves. Citizen Voices would then draft a citizens' agenda to present to the new mayor and city council. Despite an effort to bring in a new sponsoring institution for the citizens' agenda, this effort collapsed. Citizens mourned the loss of the *Inquirer*'s involvement and could not agree among themselves on whether Citizen Voices should live on as a citywide discussion forum or as a more activist advocate. Citizens are prone to wanting to move too quickly from deliberation to action, but the role of a convener is to figure out how talk can lead to action. Sometimes the convener must first force citizens to slow down and build up the muscles needed to forge consensus around workable solutions. But be clear on this point: citizens are not content to let talk be an end in itself. You don't want to get citizens excited and engaged and then leave them with what might be called the Peggy Lee moment: "Is that all there is?"

The Citizen Voices project did not transform politics or voter turnout in Philadelphia, yet it still had more impact than the project team could have hoped for when they started out. It gave some journalists a new set of tools for understanding urban issues that remains useful to this day. It created a new civic expectation of what the role of a major newspaper would be in an election. Nowadays, when a high-profile election rolls around, Satullo gets calls from citizens and other media representatives, asking, "Are you guys doing a Citizen Voices on this one?" Most important, the project found a way to reinvigorate individuals' sense of commitment to their roles as citizens and voters. As Darcell Caldwell, a regular participant in the 1999 project, said about it: "It's one of the few times I've had even the smallest sense of feeling empowered. It was one of the few times in my life that I felt like a true citizen."

Notes

1. For more on the National Issues Forums model of deliberation, see www.nifi.org.
2. See, for example, Rosen, J. (2001), *What Are Journalists For?* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001.
3. The original piece was an article entitled "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," which appeared in the *Journal of Democracy*, July 1995. Putnam (2000) extended the argument and answered many of his critics in a book entitled *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
4. Jay Rosen, one of the lead theoreticians and researchers of civic journalism, has argued that "every institution has within it an image of the public and that if you change that image

you change the mind of the institution" ("Where Has the 'Public' Gone and Why? Can We Have Institutions Without a Public?" Presentation by Jay Rosen to the Center for School Study Councils at the University of Pennsylvania, Sept. 2, 1998). The Citizen Voices project was founded on an image of citizens as capable of defining what issues they think most important and how those issues should be discussed. It is an image of a public capable of grappling with complexity, of identifying and perhaps building common ground across differences and the difficult trade-offs required by real-world solutions. These capacities of the public are enacted when individuals come together and work through different perspectives together. This working through can only happen when individuals come together in a public space to do this work. In the case of the Citizen Voices project, the goal of public engagement was to create a reciprocal relationship between journalists and citizen readers.

5. For a quick introduction to the Philadelphia Compact, see a brief article by Treglia, S. P. (1999, Dec.). "The Philadelphia Story." In *Campaigns & Elections, 19.* [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2519/is_10_20/ai_60087722/print].

6. Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. (2000). *Tapping Civic Life: How to Report First, and Best, What's Happening in Your Community.* (2nd ed.) College Park, Md.: Pew Center for Civic Journalism. Each of these layers of civic life consists of valuable but often undervalued human resources—citizens who act formally and informally with one another in community. These cycles of interactions are what ultimately influence journalists' choice of stories to cover.

7. Phyllis Kaniss, at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, directed the project. See Kaniss, P. (1999, Sept.–Oct.). "Making Their Voices Heard." *Pennsylvania Gazette, 98(*1), 50-54; also available on the Web at http://www.upenn.edu/gazette/0999/kaniss.html.

8. The first round of "The Oprah Show" was an adaptation of a group technique entitled "History of the Future" that was developed by the Center for Applied Research (CFAR). See Gilmore, T. N., and Shea, G. (1997, Summer). "Organizational Learning and the Leadership Skill of Time Travel." *Journal of Management Development, 16*(4), 302–311. For more on CFAR, see www.cfar.com. Moderators for all of the forums in this project were trained through the Deliberative Democracy Workshops, the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's adaptation of National Issues Forums (NIF) training. We provided additional training to link the NIF training to the "History of the Future" technique. For more information on the University of Pennsylvania's NIF training, see the on-line conference brochure at http://www.gse.upenn.edu/cssc/conference.php.

9. For the general election in the fall, the issues convention was essentially repeated, producing questions that were posed to candidates in two broadcast debates. The one difference was that race was added as an issue for deliberation.

10. Dutwin, D. (2003). "The Character of Deliberation: Equality, Argument and the Formation of Public Opinion." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 15,* 239–264.

THE DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY HANDBOOK

Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century

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This edited volume is a project
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