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Political leaders and public engagement: the hidden world of informal elite-citizen interaction

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Keywords: political leaders, politicians, citizen engagement, public participation, deliberative democracy

ABSTRACT

To date practical and scholarly work on participatory and deliberative governance has focussed on supply side issues, such as how to engage citizens in public policy. Yet little is known about demand for public engagement, particularly from those authorised to make collective decisions. This article empirically examines how political leaders view and value public input. It draws on 51 in-depth interviews with senior national ministers from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. The interviews reveal that leaders value public input because it informs their decisions, connects them to everyday people, and ‘tests’ advice from other sources. Their support for participatory governing is, however, qualified; they find formal consultation processes too staged and antagonistic to produce constructive interaction. Instead leaders prefer informal, spontaneous conversations with individual citizens. This hidden world of informal elite-citizen interaction has implications for the design and democratic aspirations of public engagement.

Keywords: political leaders, elected officials, politicians, elites, public engagement, citizen engagement, deliberative democracy, public deliberation participatory governance

1. INTRODUCTION

Worldwide there is growing interest in providing opportunities for public engagement in modern politics. Citizens and affected groups are increasingly being invited to ‘have their say’ and ‘engage’ in governance matters to inform policy design and delivery, and to build public legitimacy for reforms, for example by participating in community meetings, deliberative forums, and online consultations (Fung and Wright 2003; Nabatchi et al 2012).¹ Alongside developments in practice there is growing scholarly interest in participatory and deliberative forms of governing, particularly on procedures aimed at engaging everyday citizens (Gastil and Levine 2005; Geissel and Newton 2012; Grönlund et al. 2014; Smith 2009). While significant gains have been made on the supply side of public engagement – how to bring citizens into governance – this has come at the expense of understanding demand for public engagement, particularly from those authorised to make collective decisions.

Remarkably little is known empirically about how political leaders view and value public engagement. Both supporters and sceptics of participatory and deliberative governing make assumptions about why leaders might (or might not) value public input. Advocates assume that public engagement produces policy inputs that are valuable to decision makers (e.g. Fung 2006; Fishkin 2009), despite research showing many participatory forums have limited direct influence on political decisions (e.g. Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Johnson 2015; Michels 2011; Hajer 2009).² Contrasting assumptions are made by sceptics of public engagement who

¹ An international team is archiving many of these initiatives on www.participedia.net

² We recognise that many participatory processes influence politics indirectly, for example on public debate (see Karpowitz and Raphael 2014), but our point here relates to their limited capacity to influence decision makers.

contend that politicians are not interested in interacting directly with citizens, unless it helps generate false legitimacy, or wins votes (e.g. Coleman 2005; Lee et al 2015). Others make assumptions on more pragmatic grounds by suggesting that there is little or no space for public engagement in contemporary governance because political leaders operate in ‘elite cocoons’ surrounded by tight networks of policy advisors and experts (Torfing and Ansell 2017; Rhodes 2011).

This article injects empirical insights into this discussion by examining how political leaders themselves view and value public engagement in their decision making work. To this end we adopt an interpretive approach where the research focus is on understanding how people make sense of their particular context or situation (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012 p. 46).³ The specific goal of our study was to examine how public engagement is understood and interpreted by leaders in national governing roles. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 51 senior ministers across five countries including the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. In each interview, political leaders were asked if and how they value public input when governing, how they envisage an ‘ideal’ participatory process, what challenges public engagement poses to them in practice, and do how they work around these challenges.⁴

³ Interpretive political research focuses on meaning, rather than measurement. It is particularly well-suited to empirical studies of how the ideas and institutions of public deliberation are understood and enacted in real world contexts (see Ercan et al 2017).

⁴ In the interviews, the term ‘public input’ was used rather than ‘public engagement,’ firstly because as a more generic term there was more scope for political leaders to express their perspectives on all kinds of input from the public, and secondly because this also emphasised our interest on input into their decision making, as opposed to just engaging or talking with the public. We thus use both terms public engagement and public input interchangeably in this article.

This is ground breaking empirical research on a number of fronts. First, this is the first comprehensive cross-national qualitative study of the views of senior political leaders on public engagement. Our data is not limited to a specific case study or country, but draws on the perspectives and experiences of over 50 political leaders across five countries. Second, we offer rare insights into the participatory preferences of those governing at the national level, who can be notoriously difficult to access (Richards 1996). Third, our study offers original and important findings on the kinds of public input political leaders prefer when making decisions. We look beyond electoral and representative aspects of the relationship between politicians and citizens (e.g. Fenno 1978; Crewe 2015) and explore how those tasked with executive government view public engagement and what forms they find most valuable.

We begin by surveying existing assertions in the relevant literature about why political leaders might (or might not) value public engagement. Next we present the findings of our empirical research into what public input means for contemporary political leaders in five different nations, and the forms they find most useful. We then discuss core themes emerging from the interview data and unpack some apparent contradictions and tensions in the research findings. In the final sections we discuss the mixed democratic implications of our research findings, and discuss how they inform debates on participatory and deliberative governing.

2. EXISTING IDEAS ON HOW POLITICAL LEADERS VIEW PUBLIC INPUT

There are diverging views in the scholarly literature on participatory and deliberative governing on how political leaders view and value public input. At the most optimistic extreme are deliberative democrats who make implicit assumptions in their theories and institutional designs that decision makers are willing recipients of public input.⁵ At its heart deliberative democracy is a normative theory of collective decision making that views decisions as legitimate to the extent that the views of those potentially affected have been considered through a process of public reasoning (Dryzek 2010; Thompson 2008).

Deliberative democrats conceptualise this process of public reasoning variously (for an overview, see Dryzek 2017). For some deliberation takes place in structured institutional forums, such as courts, legislatures or mini-publics where deliberators receive various policy inputs and perspectives, and then weigh up reasons (Bessette 1994; Cohen 2007; Fishkin 2009). However, for many deliberative democrats public deliberation is conceptualised as a broader-societal process, where ideas and discourses from the public sphere are ideally transmitted to, and considered consequentially by those empowered to make collective decisions (Habermas 1996; Dryzek 2010). Scholars working within this broader view increasingly refer to a ‘deliberative system’ to capture the multiplicity of public deliberation in modern polities; it occurs in various sites (not just in discrete forums or legislative chambers), and comes in diverse communicative forms (deliberative and non-deliberative) (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012).

Regardless of whether public deliberation is viewed as a forum, societal-wide process or a complex system, the democratic burden of deliberative democracy rests on there being an

⁵ Deliberative democrats are a varied and growing group of theorists, empirical scholars and practitioners (Curato et al 2017; Ercan and Dryzek 2015).

effective communicative process between decision makers and potentially affected publics (Parkinson 2012, p. 164). In other words, legitimate collective decisions are reached when “there are high quality public debates about what citizens want, need, or care about that inform the legislative process” (Chambers 2012: 70). In general deliberative thinkers paint a simplified picture of this communicative process: elected officials passively and willingly receive public input (whether from their constituents, a public forum, or the public sphere), which they deliberate on and then make decisions. Herein lie two important assumptions that deserve unpacking for our purposes. First, that decision makers value public input, and second that they are receptive to public input.

The first assumption – that decision makers value public input – is something that most deliberative democrats do not explicitly articulate, but inferences can be made from their normative arguments. For example, decision makers might value (deliberative) public input on epistemic grounds, because it offers more informed decisions (Estlund 1997), or on democratic grounds because it can boost the inclusivity, representativeness and legitimacy of decisions (Parkinson 2006; Dryzek 2010). Practically inclined deliberative democrats are more explicit about what public input can offer decision makers. For example, some authors argue that participatory forums involving citizens (e.g. mini-publics) can be used to thicken the communication between constituents and their representatives (Fung 2006); to guide decision makers on how an informed public would vote (Fishkin 2009); and to supplement existing forms of representation (Urbinati and Warren 2008).

The second assumption – that decision makers are receptive to public input – relates to democratic listening, which is a topic that deliberative democrats have largely neglected (see Dobson 2014). We know from practice that public talk and input is not always accompanied

by political listening, particularly for sensitive or difficult issues (e.g. Aris et al 2004; Thill 2009). And as scholars of listening have argued, receptivity, just like speech, can be susceptible to distortions and distractions (Bickford, 1996; Lacey 2013). Moreover, the capacity of political leaders to listen to public input is constrained by the realities and dilemmas of contemporary governance where they have to process and make judgements on diverse and conflicting inputs in complex decision-making processes (Murphy et al 2017; Pierre and Peters 2005). In sum deliberative democrats are especially optimistic, and arguably unrealistic, about the value of public input for decision makers, and their willingness and capacity to be receptive.

A more sombre picture of the value of public input to decision makers is painted by empirical studies of public engagement. Research on participatory forums finds that in many cases decision makers fail to take up and directly act upon citizens' recommendations (e.g. Goodin and Drzyek 2006; Johnson 2015; Michels 2011; Rose 2009). Some scholars argue that politicians do not value public input because it challenges their traditional representative role (Hartz-Karp and Briand 2009; Gaynor 2009). Others suggest that they only engage in consultation for public relations purposes or to back up pre-determined decisions (Bayley and French 2008; Johnson 2015). Alternatively politicians are viewed as willing listeners who lack the relevant authority to take action (Button and Mattson 1999).

At the most pessimistic extreme are scholars who are deeply sceptical of the willingness and capacity of political leaders to engage with the public. These arguments seek to bring a kind of 'realpolitik' to the naïve utopianism of advocates of participatory and deliberative forms of governing (e.g. Shapiro 1999). Sceptics of participatory forms of governing contend that leaders will only consult and engage with the public to booster their popularity, to win

elections or earn revenue (e.g. Coleman 2005; Lee et al 2015). Others, such as elite commentators in the media, often put forward the case that leaders use participatory mechanisms to avoid making tough decisions or to evade their representative responsibility (see Boswell et al 2013).

Observers of contemporary governance suggest a slightly different relationship between leaders and public engagement. Some, for example, argue that political leaders are unable to connect with citizens because they are so bound up in complex and elite governance systems where communication is professionally managed and highly mediated (Cairney 2007; Hajer 2009; Rhodes 2011). A more generous explanation is that modern governance inhibits participatory leadership because politicians are locked into a dependency on policy advice from senior civil servants or elite policy networks (Torring and Ansell 2017).

Overall existing literature offers a collage of reasons why political leaders might or might not value public engagement. Leaders are variously painted as willing, passive, disinterested or duplicitous recipients of public input. But what do political leaders tasked with decision-making in contemporary politics think of public input? What value, if any, does public input offer to them when making real world collective judgements?

To date there has been very limited empirical research that speaks to these questions, with most studies relying on interviews with government staff instead of politicians (e.g. Frederickson 2009; Offenbacker and Springer 2008; Ray et al 2008). To our knowledge studies of how multiple politicians themselves view different forms of public input are rare. One notable exception is an empirical study by Nabatchi and Farrar (2011) who studied the views of 11 state legislators (as well as 13 senior advisors to federal legislators) in the United

States on citizen engagement in public policy, particularly deliberative forms. This research found that many elected politicians are high skeptical of the viability of deliberative forms of citizen engagement – especially their political feasibility (Nabatchi and Farrar 2011). Elected officials were particularly concerned about the capacity and willingness of citizens to engage in complex policy debates. In contrast some case-based research suggests that elected officials are far more supportive of inclusive and deliberative forums with citizens once they have observed one in action (e.g. Hendriks 2016; Gastil et al 2012). These studies represent useful starting points, however they provide little scope for political leaders to articulate in their own words how, when and in what form, public input is valuable to them. Moreover, the focus on discrete forums also sits at odds with the shift to understand public deliberation as a broad communicative system involving a variety of public talk (Jacobs et al 2009; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012).

3. AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY OF HOW POLITICAL LEADERS VIEW PUBLIC INPUT

The research presented in article was specifically designed to explore how political leaders themselves view and value public input. Through semi-structured interviews we asked leaders whether they value public input, why, and in what forms. We intentionally explored these themes in general terms, rather than seeking leaders' views on specific forms of public engagement, as others have done (e.g. Nabatchi and Farrar 2011). Our bottom-up interpretive approach lends itself to rich and nuanced insights into whether leaders making collective judgements value engaging with the public, and if so, how.

Empirical data on these themes were generated through 51 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2013 and 2014 with political leaders from the Harper, Cameron, Obama, Key and Rudd/Gillard governments (a full list of interviewees is provided in the Appendix). Ministers and Secretaries of State (or people of equivalent seniority) were chosen because they typically enjoy enough discretion to be able to craft policy, allocate significant budget, and authorise decisions.⁶ This data was collected as part of a larger research project exploring the role of public input in contemporary political leadership (Lees-Marshment, 2015). In this article we concentrate on questions pertaining to how leaders view and value public input in their decision-making work.

Our interviewees were chosen purposively; the sample included a diverse group of political leaders in terms of political ideology, gender, seniority, portfolio and levels of experience. Ideologically, 65% were conservative and 37% more progressive, reflecting the partisanship of incumbent governments at the time. 39% of interviewees were in a current ministerial position, while 61% were former (but recent) ministers. Of the 51 interviewees, 22% were from the UK; 20% Canada; 23% Australia; 29% New Zealand and 6% the US. As is reflective of a typical gender imbalance in government, only 16% of interviewees were women.

All interviews were transcribed and the text data analysed inductively to explore political leaders' perspectives on public input. As part of the inductive analysis emerging themes were identified, classified, and grouped, and then the data was reorganised and synthesised into the different perspectives identified from the data in relation to their views on and preferences

⁶In the US, the sample included secretaries and deputy secretaries who, whilst not elected, are the most appropriate equivalent to ministers in other countries.

for public input. Interview quotes were also colour coded by country to enable consideration of any cross-country differences. Whilst this was a qualitative not quantitative analysis, this made it possible to discern if, for example, certain points made were largely supported by quotes from one country/colour in particular.

To be clear the empirical research presented here examines the perspectives of political leaders on public engagement, rather than analyses their actions. Thus, we did not examine if, and how, political leaders act on public input in final policy decisions, or whether public preferences matched policy outputs (cf. Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Enns and Wlezien 2011). While we acknowledge that the actions of political leaders may differ from what they say are their preferences, we argue that there is significant value in understanding how leaders make sense of public input in executive decision making.

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS ON HOW POLITICAL LEADERS VIEW PUBLIC INPUT

Before presenting the detailed findings we reiterate that our interpretations emerged inductively through the data. This process generated some results that were as surprising to us as they would be to any sceptic of public engagement. We had anticipated hearing comments that affirmed the scepticism of leaders towards public input as indicated by Nabatchi and Farrar (2011), for example. However, what we heard consistently was that leaders value public input in their decision making work especially more constructive and interactive forms. Their support for public engagement, however is qualified, and there are some contradictory tendencies in the data which we unpack in the Discussion further below.

In presenting our findings we make use of relevant quotes to bring forward the voices and exact expressions of the political leaders we interviewed. While our interviewees are not anonymous, we have intentionally chosen to label quotes with an identifier (e.g. PL1 to PL51) rather than use interviewee names to reduce immediate reading bias. This is not a study of particular governments or politicians and thus using generic labels aids a holistic reading of the data and our interpretations.

In terms of comparative findings, our analysis did not reveal any distinguishable variations across the data with respect to country, gender, time in office, former or current minister apart from differences so minor they could not be determined to be more than speculative. For example, the importance of constructive, deliberative conversations was conveyed least by Canadian politicians in a quantitative sense, this did not mean the research could conclude Canada was non-deliberative because Canadian interviewees provided many examples of discussing the value of public input. No difference was found in terms of ideology, with, for example, the New Zealand National (i.e. conservative) Government providing some of the most notable examples of integrating public input.

4a. Do leaders value public input, and why?

All leaders we interviewed believe that public input is a valuable part of their executive decision making. In communicating this perspective leaders referred to diverse types of public input including highly visible public events, formal consultation, stakeholder committees and roundtables, road trips, market research, meetings with group representatives, users, members of the public, and informal conversations out and about at markets, sports fields, and schools.⁷

⁷ Interestingly, only 2 of the 51 interviewees referred to personal letters, email or social media.

Some leaders preferred to talk about public input in more generic terms, with references to particular metaphors. For example, one leader articulated how public input is part of the information that one absorbs when governing (PL45):

‘As a politician you are a giant sponge.... your job is to soak up information, process it, and order it in a way that makes sense, so you make sense of a problem.’

Others used the metaphor of an ‘instrument’ to describe public input (PL13):

‘It is a tool that can help leaders understand what their community wants and thinks...’ and with this knowledge leaders ‘can understand where they need to take [their community] and how to do that.’

Regardless of its form, the analysis of the interview data revealed four main reasons why leaders value public input. First, and foremost, leaders value public input as a means to gather information, to ‘feel the community pulse’ and to be on top of issues. In other words, public input offers leaders access to more information and perspectives, and this helps them make informed decisions. By engaging with the public, leaders explain, they gain a deeper understanding or appreciation of issues, and they source new ideas (PL43). Public input also informs what questions leaders pose to their advisers and stakeholders (PL45):

‘You have to be able to work off people, to talk to people. That’s your greatest ... political asset...It means that you can get advanced notice of a problem. That’s the first advantage. But it also means that you are better informed when someone’s trying to bullshit you. I’d say “hang on a minute, that doesn’t make sense.” It informs the questions that you ask. And the quality of your work is often dependent upon the questions that you’ve asked.’

Our finding here is not so much that leaders say they ‘follow’ public input, but rather that leaders say they integrate aspects of what they learn from the public into their decision making. Consider the following reflection from one political leader who explains how he reshaped his perspectives and decision on a particular policy after a personal meeting with an indigenous elder (PL35):

‘One of the most influential things that’s ever happened to me was when as Environment Minister... Some of the aboriginal men got me away from the department, away from my personal staff, and took me to part of Uluru (Ayers Rock) that was fenced off for men only...sitting in the grass waiting for me was a very elderly man...he took me to a part of Uluru and showed me particular things - they wanted a place to be able to keep them safely. Now his entire presentation to me was in a language I don’t understand...but it was passionate, there was dignity, there was conviction, and I reframed the entire program to make sure they could get their keeping place.’

Here we see how public input can influence some political leaders in profound yet subtle ways. They may not necessarily directly ‘follow’ the public, but they may reframe policies, or find different directions based on the public perspectives they hear.

Second, leaders also value public input because it helps them connect to everyday people. A common theme we heard here was that public input gets leaders out of their ‘elite bubble’ into the public realm. As one leader described (PL25):

‘Some of the most valuable input is what you get just from being out in the community. So you can be in that Wellington bubble, where politics is filtered through the media. And you really need to balance that with getting out and going to the rugby club and

wandering up to the supermarket and actually people come up and tell you what they think.’

When leaders get outside ‘the bubble’, they are better placed to access the personal stories of people living the realities of public policies. As one leader explained (PL29):

‘So often when you’re designing a policy, particularly as a minister, there’ll be a huge number of people that will be affected. And to be able to...really understand those practical parts of the policy and how they might affect people and how you might need to tweak it [is] why I think often those personal stories are very important.’

Relatedly leaders explained how public engagement creates opportunities for them to get beyond the usual performances, the ‘clutter’ (PL31) and the ‘headlines’ (PL33). Leaders discussed how they value sitting down and talking to people, or actively going to where communities or publics themselves meet (PL8/PL23). A common metaphor evoked here was that of a filter, for example (PL51):

‘I found there's nothing more effective than door to door...I’d do that in my constituency a number of times through the year. And another way of getting unfiltered access to what people are thinking is simply sitting by a booth at a farmers market or a trade fair and people can just walk up and give you their views unsolicited, unfiltered.’

Leaders especially value opportunities to get beyond experts and their advisors, so they can connect and talk to ‘real’ people. Consider the following reflection from Minister recalling a recent public road trip (PL31):

‘On the road we meet with a series of different people ... we’re hearing different voices. I don’t let officials come with me generally because I think that changes the

conversation. So I just try to put some checks and balances in place so that I can hear and get through clutter or barriers that can sometimes be set up around you to stop real people getting in and talking to you.’

Third, leaders value public input because it enables them to ‘test’ other policy inputs. Here public engagement is viewed as a mechanism through which leaders can check the facts ‘on the ground’ and hear the evidence from the source, rather than the experts (PL21/ PL22/PL23/ PL37). As one leader explained (PL13):

‘One of the risks for ministers is they become captives of their departments; that the only advice and information they get is from the public service - that’s a real risk. And that’s why good ministers go out and seek alternative points of view to challenge the advice that they’ve been given, test it. One way is through general public input.’

Similarly another leader describes how he uses public input to validate formal research (PL23):

‘If someone’s going to tell me that research tells us this, then I want to check that out with people on the ground floor.’

Fourth, leaders value public input because it helps build stakeholder and broader public ‘buy in’. This theme was less about generating democratic legitimacy, and more about how public input can assist in policy implementation, as one leader explained (PL39):

‘When you give people a stake in not only identifying the problem, but in solving the problem, then you really get the kind of action that you need....many of these people are the ones who carry out the solution.’

Overall leaders appear to value public input for predominantly epistemic and instrumental reasons, rather than democratic ones. Leaders engage with the public because it informs their judgements, establishes connections, supplements and ‘test’ other inputs, and aids policy reform and implementation. A few, did, however mention the value of hearing forgotten voices, and the importance of gaining insights into the views and experiences of underrepresented or marginalised perspectives (PL4, PL31, PL16). On this particular theme, a few interviewees talked about the importance of leaders asking critical questions about public needs. For example, one leader described how he used to ask (PL11):

‘What are the underserved needs? And what’s not being met? And trying to listen to the voices that are there, but also trying to hear voices that you don’t usually hear.’

Apart from these, most political leaders we interviewed saw public engagement as a means to ensure that there are enough diverse views on the table before decisions are made, rather than as a process of sharing power with the public. In the words of one leader, public input is about ‘listening but not about joining hands and moving together’ (PL12).

4b. How do political leaders envisage ideal public engagement?

When we asked leaders what an ideal form of public engagement might look like, to our surprise many suggested procedural norms that that resonate with the ideals of participatory and deliberative governance. For example, many articulated preferences for forum-based processes where different perspectives can come together into the one room (PL37, PL1,) so that arguments and ideas could be tested amongst peers (PL45). Some suggested a town-hall style meeting where people with diverse views exchange positions (PL7, PL37), rather than just presenting their spiel and going through the motions (PL47, PL21). In sum, for many political leaders we interviewed, public input in an ideal world would bring different views together in a process of face-to-face reason giving.

A number of leaders also described ideal attributes of participants in participatory processes. Several interviewees stressed the importance of participants being diverse; it is crucial to get beyond one perspective (PL39) and canvass views from a mix of practitioners, academics, and industry (PL45). Others emphasised having participants who are informed (PL4):

‘The more informed the public is, the better the government's chances of having good political leadership will be. So the more we can inform, the more we can engage, the more we can debate, the more we get to understand perspectives.’

Others described the importance of participants on all sides being reasonable (PL38), and focussed on arguments rather than on symbolism, rhetoric and emotions (PL7, PL37). Similar remarks were made about the importance of having people who are interested yet unattached to outcomes, with one political leader explaining (PL34):

‘So in my ideal world you’d have a lot more empirical feedback from people who are interested but not so exercised that they’re literally either opposed to an issue on principle or in favour of an issue on principle’.

Similarly, a few leaders envisaged a participatory world where the media and interest groups were less centre stage, with one commenting that ‘there is a real difficulty with interest groups dominating the debate...I would probably go back to the old Greek tradition and just have an ongoing forum of senators and members of the public’ (PL7). This resonates with some of the underlying motivations in many deliberative forum procedures, such as mini-publics, where participants are selected through stratified random sampling in order to get

beyond the partisan and adversarial nature of interest group politics (Smith 2009; Fishkin 2009).

A number of leaders discussed a desire for public input to be constructive (PL7, PL31, PL21). One political leader described an experience at a public meeting where people were scowling, protesting, and held a coffin from behind his head and started calling out “put him in it.” He recounts that this had no influence or use for him in his decision-making. He contrasts this experience with another far more constructive and conversational public meeting on the same issue which did influence him and led to him choose a different, more expensive option to suit community concerns (PL35).

Part of this notion of ‘constructive’ public input was a desire for the public to better appreciate the constraints and pressures under which governments operate. As one interviewee explained (PL11):

‘...having a conversation where you actually have some exchange and you’re able to communicate what your limits are and what your constraints are together with whatever sympathies you have. And here sometimes you can find a path.’

4c. What participatory challenges do political leaders face in practice?

Despite the support political leaders conveyed for public input, in their experience public engagement can suffer from a number of challenges. First, leaders acknowledged that sometimes public input can be uninformed and low quality. To be clear this concern was not about the irrationality of the public or their lack of capacity to understand or contribute to complex issues. On the contrary, many leaders spoke of how ordinary people are often underestimated (e.g. PL21). Instead the concern was more about acknowledging the need to

reflect on the natural biases and individualised interests that inevitably shape what people have to say. For example, leaders noted that opinions are slanted or biased, and that they recognise that everyone has an agenda and a particular interest – thus they have ‘got to be aware of the biases in any inputs that you use’ (PL35). On this issue leaders talked of the need to test and reflect on the nature of public input that they receive, to check and evaluate its validity, and to weigh up its quality and even seek alternative sources of information to ‘make sure you’re exposed to the conversation’ (PL35).

The second participatory challenge that leaders identified was the concern that public input can be unrepresentative of the broader population. One leader summarises this challenge as follows (PL34):

‘The people that are going to involve themselves in the consultation process have very strong views. So one of the harder things is how you define what the “normal” people – those who are not exercised sufficiently – what do they think?’

Relatedly some leaders talked about the specific challenge of working out who are affected by policies and “who else do I need to be talking to?” (PL6). The art here for leaders is both recognising what is not being said (PL17), and keeping an eye on the whole picture so that they can determine what is not being shown to them (PL48). In some cases, leaders face the challenge of making decisions on issues where there is little or no public opinion, as one interviewee explains (PL41):

‘Sometimes it's quite hard to talk about public opinion because sometimes there's really no public opinion, and what you can sometimes do in public life is alert people to the benefits of a particular set of initiatives and actually build up public opinion which was previously indifferent.’

A third challenge that leaders identified was that public engagement can often be overly formal and structured. On this theme leaders explained that in their experience highly structured participatory mechanisms are not particularly constructive in practice.⁸ For example, several interviewees lamented the dysfunction of highly staged public meetings. As one leader explained (PL30):

‘In the formal consultation stage you are inevitably in a much more juridical sort of process that's liable to judicial review’ (PL30).

It appears that for many leaders the formality and structured nature of many participatory processes provide little or no space for them to form constructive connections with everyday citizens. According to one interviewee, people are ‘increasingly complaining that in many cases consultations are “more formal than real” ’ (PL30).

Others described how structured participatory forums become spaces for venting, performing and antagonism, rather than dialogue, even if formal spaces of public input can be important for building legitimacy and policy ownership. Consider the following reflection from one leader (PL35):

‘When you get outside an office context the conversation changes fundamentally. And for the public generally it’s making sure you do your big grand stand public consultation meetings were they can come along formally but that you are also are spending time in lounge rooms having cups of tea... You need to do the formal because the people themselves need to feel that that’s happened... But realistically it’s the informal where you’re going to really change things.’

⁸ Most interviewees for this research had had little or no exposure to innovative participatory processes, such as mini-publics (e.g. Smith 2009; Grönlund et al. 2014), and so their comments relate to frustrations with conventional participatory processes.

Overall we learn here how leaders themselves are frustrated with the failure of political practice to realise their participatory ideals. In their experience public input can often be uninformed, biased, dominated by loud interest groups, staged, over-structured, formal and ‘unreal’. Many of these challenges speak to well-known participatory failings that plague the practice of public engagement (see Innes and Booher, 2004). However, whereas scholars and practitioners typically seek to remedy these participatory shortcomings through procedural innovations (e.g. Smith 2009; Gastil and Levine 2005), leaders take a more pragmatic approach and seek out informal interactions with the public – as we now discuss.

4d. How do political leaders work around participatory challenges in practice?

To satisfy their desire to connect with ‘real’ people leaders step around the limitations of conventional public engagement processes by turning to more informal and personal ways of interacting with the public. These qualities of public input were described variously by interviewees as face-to-face, conversational, direct contact, or one-to-one. Leaders explained that when public input is more personal they can probe deeper into issues and access ‘on the ground’ perspectives. Consider the following comments from one leader on why personal public interactions are especially useful (PL33):

‘You can actually unpack what it is that people are saying and why they’re saying it and what the values and sentiments behind the headlines. So you understand what the real concerns are. If it’s about immigration and you can may, see if underneath that’s actually really about the insecurity with the jobs market.’

For some leaders this ‘personal’ dimension of public input is about engaging directly with people to learn about possible impacts of their political decisions. As one leader put it (PL11):

‘Sitting down and talking to people face-to-face provides the most useful kind of information...hearing their perspective on the way what government does affects their lives or government can do to change things is the most useful.’

For other political leaders, personal connections with the public can come from sharing experiences, rather than through talk or dialogue. Reflections from several political leaders convey the value of these experiential discussions, for example one explains (PL31):

‘It’s important to be connected to what you colloquially hear called the barbeque kind of conversations or the water cooler conversations so that you know what people are thinking....You’re hearing people’s thoughts and their feelings and how they feel things are going...this is gold, really.’

Through informal interactions political leaders are able to converse with ordinary people and hear their views, but it is particularly important that such interactions are casual and conversational (PL18):

‘You’re getting every angle. You’re getting the perspective of a business man who comes around and says, “Why don’t you pass policies to help my business?” You then want to hear the other stakeholder as you call them, the customers, the common sense, the tax payers, the ordinary person in the street, the person who’s going to benefit, the person who is going to lose. You want their sort of judgement, which you can only get in casual conversations’.

Another political leader explains that sometimes it is the spontaneity of these informal public encounters that can be the most persuasive of all (PL35):

‘Whatever is conversational is the most valuable. So the more formal it is the less useful it is...the real impact is made when they’re engaging you in a conversation rather than presenting you with a conclusion...those little side conversations that you have that are far more powerful than the more formalised lobbying where it’s a “here’s our set piece.”... and they’re the moments when your mind is most likely to be changed.’

5. DISCUSSION

This study reveals that contemporary political leaders view public input as an important ingredient for making informed political decisions. On the whole they value public input for epistemic and instrumental reasons: it enables them to get beyond their elite circles to hear from everyday people potentially affected by their decisions. Public input also provides opportunities for them to test arguments and to strengthen the implementation and legitimacy of policy reforms. A few interviewees explicitly celebrated the democratic principles of public engagement, such as inclusion, greater diversity and representation, interactivity, dialogue, and informed reasoning.

Although leaders generally support the virtues of public input, our study reveals that they are well aware of the many challenges that participatory processes face in practice, such as bias and limited representativeness. They are also not passive recipients of public input; they have participatory preferences, especially when it comes to the forms of public input they find most useful in their decision making. Leaders prefer constructive interactions with the public, and seek these out through informal conversations with individual citizens that occur behind the scenes, after an event, in a meeting, or in everyday public settings such as a local market.

In these more informal public encounters leaders are better able to connect with everyday people and hear ‘real world’ stories. The corollary of leaders’ preferences for informal public engagement is that at the top level of government decision makers expressed an aversion to structured forms of public engagement, such as public meetings, which they find too staged and antagonistic.

There are some contradictions and tensions in the findings that deserve consideration. Indeed there is a notable discrepancy between the forms of public input that leaders identify as *ideal* (e.g. structured group-based participatory forums) and the forms they find *valuable* in political practice (e.g. informal interactions with individual citizens). We suggest that this apparent ‘participatory dissonance’ represents a pragmatic response by leaders to the deliberative and participatory failings of conventional consultative procedures where zealous group representatives come together to vent and battle, rather than to reason. What we learn from this research is that decision makers get around these participatory shortcomings by turning to personal and informal interactions with the public. These one-to-one exchanges offer leaders a chance to tap into some of the epistemic benefits of public input, without the politics and interest group battles that accompany more structured, formal, group-based forms of public input.

Another tension uncovered in the research is that leaders want to give a wider section of the public a chance to influence policy through informal discussions but that does not mean they want to relinquish power to that same public. Leaders want to interact and engage informally with the public to gather information and to inform their own decision-making, but not to share it. While political leaders may not be handing over explicit power, they are keen to

connect personally and informally with affected publics and they seek out constructive conversations with everyday people to hear ‘real’ stories and listen to ‘everyday’ judgements.

Personal or ‘home style’ connections have long been identified as important for political elites in the context of electoral politics (Fenno 1978), but this research reveals that political leaders also seek out informal connections with citizens when they govern. We find that when in executive roles political leaders are especially keen to step away from the demands of advisors, interest groups and parties in order to connect with everyday people. This points to a largely hidden world of informal public engagement taking place between executive governments and citizens. In deliberative democratic terms our findings suggest that some of the most important communication between decision makers and the public may be taking place in the more informal and often hidden spaces where elites and citizens interact.

Our findings are consistent with the rising trend towards more informal modes of governance within the machinery of government (Christensen and Neuhold 2012). Scholars argue that a prevalent coping strategy for decision makers in complex policy contexts is to turn to informal processes where the rules are variable and non-codified, the settings secluded and memberships exclusive (Reh 2012). Our research shows that political leaders also have informal preferences when it comes to how they relate and engage externally with the public.

Informal modes of governing may provide faster and more efficient pathways for decision making, but they carry democratic risks (Reh 2012). One of the most obvious risks of informal interactions between decision makers and individual citizens is that they often occur outside the public spotlight where the potential to privilege private over public reason is greater (Chambers 2004). More problematically is that informal (more individualised) forms

of public input have limited capacity to generate the kind of broad public legitimacy that deliberative democrats have in mind (e.g. Parkinson 2006). According to the ideals of deliberative democracy decision makers ought to consider perspectives and inputs that emerge through mass public deliberation (Mansbridge et al 2012) and publically justify their arguments (Chambers 2004). Informal conversations between elites and everyday citizens also risk being highly exclusive; some actors have louder voices and greater access to decision makers than others (Verba and Nie 1987; Enns and Wlezien 2011).

While acknowledging these democratic dangers, we suggest there are reasons to be more optimistic about the democratic potential of more informal interactions between political leaders and the public. Our research finds that leaders are particularly discerning about who they choose to listen to in the process of receiving and digesting public input. On the whole leaders value informal interactions with citizens precisely because they want to get beyond the demands of zealous individuals and organised groups in order to hear the perspectives and experiential knowledge of everyday people. Political leaders particularly welcome the opportunity to get beyond their policy advisers and the confines of technocratic-policy making to hear fresh ideas. Having identified political leaders are open to public input, future research could usefully explore the nature and democratic implications of informal modes of public engagement, identifying ways to maximise their potential benefit whilst limiting potential downsides.

6. CONCLUSIONS

‘Politicians are much more connected to the people than anyone else I know. So if you are an academic you live in a bubble, if you’re a journalist you live in the bubble. A politician doesn’t live in a bubble. They’re the least bubbled people I’ve ever met.’ (PL 43)

Improving the way the public engages in collective issues has long been an aspiration of scholars and practitioners of participatory and deliberative governance. Much of their focus has been on supply side issues such as the design of mechanisms for citizen engagement. In this article we have shifted the analytical gaze onto the demand side of public engagement to consider how political decision makers view and value public input. Drawing on interviews with 51 leaders with executive governing experience, we find that contemporary political leaders place a high value on public input when making collective decisions. Contrary to much of the sceptical literature on participatory governing, our data reveals that leaders want to connect with the public to inform their understanding of policy issues, and to help them move beyond ‘the bubble’ of elite, professionalized and mediatised politics.

We are not claiming that politicians always listen to or follow public views: they have their own policy preferences and listen to other sources of input from civil servants, advisors, stakeholders and their party. Nevertheless our research makes clear that many political leaders at the top level of government want to connect and interact with the public. Their support for participatory governing is, however, qualified; in their experience formal consultation processes such as public meetings do not produce the kind of constructive and usable public input they need to inform their collective judgements. For this kind of public input they rely on informal, spontaneous interactions with individual citizens. In practice leaders appear to adopt a twined approach to public engagement: they use informal

spontaneous interactions with the public for information, while formal participatory processes help build official legitimacy, and occasionally ownership. Further empirical research could usefully tease out these dual preferences for informal and formal modes of public engagement.

The empirical findings in this article have mixed implications for advocates of participatory and deliberative democracy. On the one hand the participatory future looks far brighter with evidence that many political leaders are more supportive of participatory governing than previous studies assume (e.g. Johnson 2015; Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Nabatchi and Farrar 2011). Indeed the finding that political leaders value public input in their decision making work signals there is a potentially huge ‘market’ within executive government for more interactive and deliberative forms of public engagement. Yet on the other hand the finding that leaders mostly value the epistemic aspects of public input may be unwelcomed news to those committed to the democratic promise of public engagement. Moreover the pragmatic preferences of leaders for more informal and individualised interactions with citizens pulls in the opposite direction to dominant thinking in participatory and deliberative design that effective and inclusive public engagement requires well-structured processes with rules about who participates and how (e.g. Smith 2009; Fishkin 2009; Geissel and Newton 2012).

This research signals that the practice of public engagement would be better served if it offered informal dialogical spaces where citizens *and* decision makers can interact. To be clear we are not suggesting that participatory design abandon structure and procedural norms. On the contrary we value the importance of structure and processes for facilitating inclusive and deliberative public input (e.g. Dryzek and Hendriks 2012). Our particular recommendation here is that informal interactions between political leaders and citizens be

‘designed in’ in and around structured participatory processes. We contend that those making political decisions are more likely to engage in, and be responsive to, participatory processes (and their recommendations) if they are given opportunities to connect informally with citizens. Practically the idea of ‘designing in’ informality would be an extension of what happens within many public engagement exercises where smaller more interactive spaces are interspersed between larger plenary-style sessions. Creating participatory spaces where decisions makers engage informally and productively with citizens would go a long way to addressing the central message of this study: that contemporary political leaders want constructive conversations with citizens, not staged participatory performances.

7. REFERENCES

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APPENDIX: Political leaders interviewed from the Rudd/Gillard, Harper, Key, Cameron and Obama governments 2013-2014

- PL1 Alan Griffin, former Australian Minister for Veteran Affairs, Canberra, 2013.
- PL2 Andrew Mitchell, former UK Secretary of State for International Development, London, 2013.
- PL3 Baroness Neville-Jones (Pauline), former UK Minister of State for Security & Counter-Terrorism, London, 2013.
- PL4 Brendan O'Connor, former Australian Minister for Immigration and citizenship and Home Affairs, by phone 2013.
- PL5 Caroline Spelman, former UK Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, by phone 2013.
- PL6 Cheryl Gillan, former UK Secretary of State for Wales, London, 2013.
- PL7 Chris Evans, Former Australian Minister for Immigration and Citizenship by phone 2013.
- PL8 Chuck Strahl, former Canadian Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities by phone 2013.
- PL9 Craig Emerson, former Australian Minister for Competition Policy & Consumer Affairs by phone 2013.
- PL10 David Emerson, former Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, by phone 2013.
- PL11 David Ogden, former US Deputy Attorney General, Washington 2014.
- PL12 Gary Grindler former US acting Deputy Attorney General, Washington, 2014.
- PL13 Jason Clare, former Australian Minister for Home Affairs and Justice by phone 2013.
- PL14 Jean-Pierre Blackburn, former Canadian Minister of State for Federal Economic Development, by phone 2013.
- PL15 John Banks, New Zealand Minister for Regulatory Reform and Small Business, by written answer, 2013.
- PL16 John Boscawen, former New Zealand Minister of Consumer Affairs, Auckland, 2013.
- PL17 Lindsay Tanner, Former Australian Minister for Finance and Deregulation, by phone, 2013.

- PL18 Lord Howell (David) Former UK Minister of State (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), London, 2013.
- PL19 Lord Green (Stephen), UK Minister of State for Trade and Investment, by phone 2013.
- PL20 Lord McNally (Tom) UK Minister of State (Justice), London 2013.
- PL21 Minister Bill English, New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister/Minister of Finance, by phone 2013.
- PL22 Minister Candice Bergen, Canadian Minister of State for Social Development, by phone 2013.
- PL23 Minister Chester Borrows, New Zealand Minister for Courts, Wellington 2013.
- PL24 Minister Craig Foss, New Zealand Minister of Commerce Wellington 2013.
- PL 25 Minister Jonathan Coleman, New Zealand Minister of Defence, by phone 2013.
- PL26 Minister Judith Collins, New Zealand Minister of Justice, Auckland 2013,
- PL27 Minister Michael Woodhouse, New Zealand Minister for Veterans Affairs and Immigration, by phone, 2013.
- PL28 Minister Murray McCully, New Zealand Minister for Foreign Affairs, Auckland, 2013.
- PL29 Minister Nikki Kaye, New Zealand Minister of Civil Defence, by phone 2013.
- PL30 Minister Oliver Letwin, UK Minister for Policy, by phone 2013.
- PL31 Minister Paula Bennett, New Zealand Minister for Social Development, Wellington 2013.
- PL32 Minister Pita Sharples, New Zealand Minister for Maori Affairs, Auckland 2013.
- PL33 Minister Simon Bridges, New Zealand Energy and Resources, by phone 2013.
- PL34 Minister Steven Joyce, New Zealand Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment, Auckland, 2013.
- PL35 Minister Tony Burke, Australian Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Canberra 2013.
- PL36 Minister Tony Clement, Canadian Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario by phone 2013.
- PL37 Monte Solberg, former Canadian Minister for Citizenship & Immigration by phone 2013.

- PL38 Peter Kent, former Canadian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs by phone 2013.
- PL39 Ray La Hood, former US Secretary of Transport, by phone 2014.
- PL40 Rob Merrifield, former Canadian Minister for Transport, by phone 2013.
- PL41 Robert Debus, Former Australian Minister for Home Affairs, by phone 2013.
- PL42 Robert McClelland, former Australian Attorney-General and Minister for Emergency Management, Canberra 2013
- PL43 Rodney Hide, former New Zealand Minister for Local Government and Regulatory Reform, by phone 2013.
- PL44 Secretary Vincent Cable, UK Secretary of State for Business Innovation and Skills, by phone 2013.
- PL45 Senator Kim Carr, former Australian Minister of Innovation, Science and Research; and Human Services, Canberra 2013.
- PL46 Sharon Bird, former Australian Minister for Higher Education and Skills, by phone 2013.
- PL47 Simon Crean, former Australian Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, Canberra 2013.
- PL48 Sir Gerald Howarth, former UK Minister for International Security Strategy, London 2013.
- PL49 Sir Nick Harvey, former UK Minister of State for the Armed Forces, London 2013.
- PL50 Steven Fletcher, former Canadian Minister for Democratic Reform and Transport, Ottawa 2013.
- PL51 Stockwell Day, former Canadian Minister for International Trade, Emergency Preparedness and Asia-Pacific, by phone 2013.